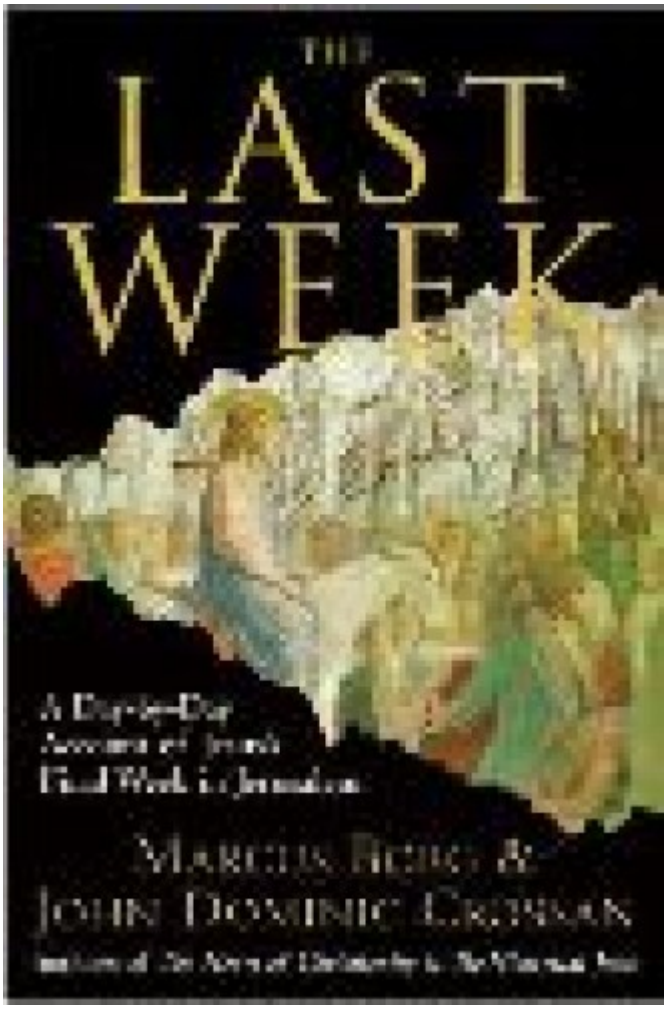
Altar call

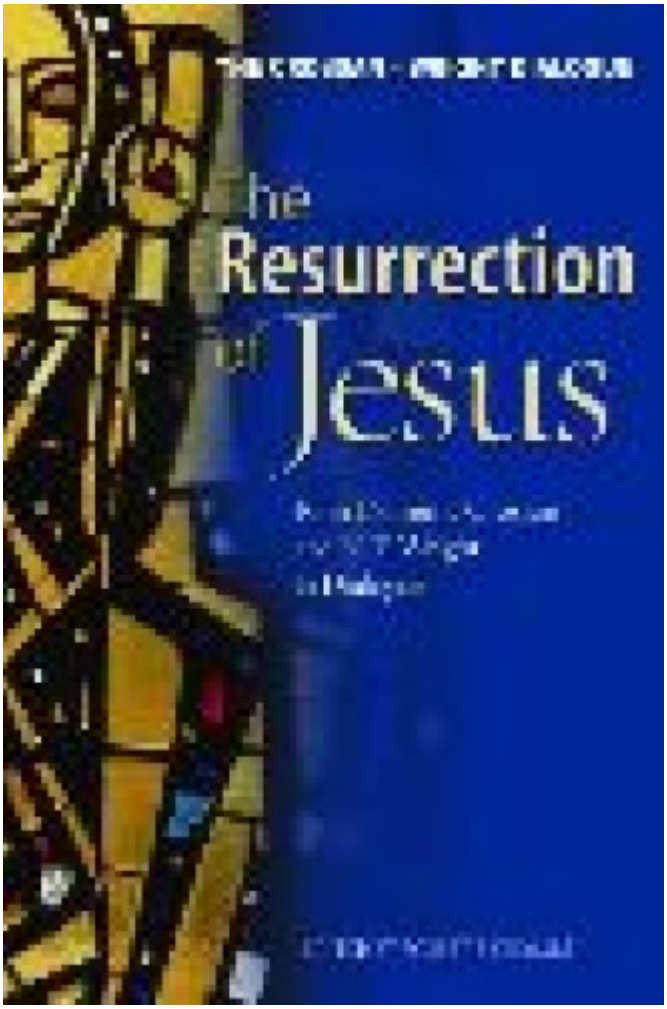
By Mark Allan Powell in the April 18, 2006 issue

In Review



The Last Week: A Day-by-Day Account of Jesus's Final Week in Jerusalem

Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan
HarperSanFrancisco



The Resurrection of Jesus: John Dominic Crossan and N. T. Wright in Dialogue

Robert B. Stewart, ed.
Fortress

Ash Wednesday saw the release of two volumes from prominent historical Jesus scholars on the death, possible burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. One is a collaboration, the other a parley.

Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan have been colleagues since their high-profile involvement in the 1990s with the Jesus Seminar; N. T. Wright has been perhaps their most trenchant and consistent critic. *The Last Week* affords Borg and Crossan an appealing format for presenting some key insights. *The Resurrection of Jesus* provides Crossan and Wright an equally winsome opportunity for discussing their divergent views in a public forum.

The Last Week offers day-by-day reflections on Holy Week, with one chapter devoted to each day, beginning with Palm Sunday and concluding with Easter. Borg and Crossan depart somewhat from their usual interest in historical reconstruction to focus on Mark's version of the Passion. However, rather than providing verse-by-verse biblical commentary, they emphasize the social-historical realities and theological concerns that lie behind the text. Thus, for example, the Palm Sunday procession allows for extended commentary on Roman rule with its imperial processions and on Jesus' counterclaims concerning the arrival of God's kingdom.

Borg and Crossan say that the Maundy Thursday meal, with its soon-to-be traitors and deserters, is best understood in light of prior meals with misfits and outcasts. This connection between Jesus' life and his death is established by way of a clever pun: the "passion of the Christ," these authors maintain (with obvious reference to the Mel Gibson film), can be understood only in light of what the Christ was passionate about. It was Jesus' passion for the distributive justice of God's rule that brought him to the passion of punitive justice that is definitive of most human civilizations.

The story, however, is not a tragedy. Jesus views his cross as the cost of liberation (that is, as a ransom), and he calls us to follow him, entering a new way of life by dying to an old one. Thus, if Jesus' death is a sacrifice, it is not substitutionary; it requires our participation to become meaningful.

The Last Week is beautifully written and thoroughly engaging, and its authors are well informed. The reflections not only elucidate matters that are potentially difficult to understand but explain the significance of such matters for Christian life. What is at stake, the authors maintain, is an understanding of Christianity as a way of life in this present world as opposed to simply a means for gaining access to a world to come. A biblical understanding of Holy Week views Easter both as testimony to Jesus' continuing presence and as vindication of his claims. With that in mind, the authors close their volume with a virtual altar call, inviting readers to accept this vindicated Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior and to accept him as their *political* Lord and Savior as well.

Much of *The Last Week* finds Borg and Crossan operating in a relatively noncontroversial vein. Christians from a wide spectrum of perspectives may appreciate the devotional aspect of the authors' reflections and benefit from their careful and accurate elucidation of scripture. Nevertheless, many Christians will

have trouble with a central contention of the last chapter, that the *mode* of Jesus' resurrection, whether literal or metaphorical, does not matter so long as the *meaning* is recognized. That claim is at the heart of the dialogue between Crossan and Wright announced in the subtitle of the second volume.

The Resurrection of Jesus presents materials that were originally part of the inaugural Greer-Heard Point Counterpoint Forum hosted by New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary in March 2005. The program was billed as an opportunity for "an evangelical scholar and a nonevangelical scholar to come together for a night of dialogue." Wright does not usually describe himself as an evangelical scholar, and Crossan certainly does not describe himself as a nonevangelical one, but the forum did prove to be an enlightening model of civil discourse.

The dialogue between Crossan and Wright takes up only 31 pages of the book. The rest of the volume comprises essays by other scholars addressing a range of topics pertinent to the Crossan-Wright debate. The essayists—William Lane Craig, Craig Evans, R. Douglas Geivett, Gary Habermas, Ted Peters, Charles Quarles, Alan Segal and Robert Stewart—write in a formal academic style that contrasts sharply with the conversational style of the main event. All of the essays are worthy contributions, but they seem addressed to a different audience. For example, Quarles's analysis of the apocryphal Gospel of Peter assumes familiarity with the text of that document and makes extensive use of untranslated Greek.

Crossan and Wright's own contribution is fully accessible to any nonspecialist with an interest in this subject. The oral banter that marked the original event is preserved: the dialogue is laced with humor and grace as both scholars lay out their positions in language that is succinct, clear and free of pretension.

Wright maintains that the resurrection faith of the early church is a unique historical mutation in six significant ways, and that the empty tomb and the resurrection appearances of Jesus constitute "necessary and sufficient" conditions for explaining these novel developments in religious thought. Crossan does not think Jesus was even placed in a tomb (he believes that the body was left unburied and probably devoured by beasts), and he treats the appearances as apparitions.

In their 31 pages of dialogue a hypothetical compromise is envisioned: while an occupied tomb would be an insurmountable obstacle to resurrection faith, a nonexistent tomb might not be, provided the appearances were palpably real. In

short, if Crossan were right about the tomb and Wright were right about the appearances, the resurrection faith of the church might be explicable. Both scholars almost agree to this hypothetical projection, but the near-compromise is moot. Crossan is not ready to accept appearances of the sort that might have been captured with a camcorder, and Wright thinks the historical evidence for the burial of Jesus is so compelling as to make the suggestion of a nonexistent tomb a desperate option.

More promising points of continuity surface elsewhere. Crossan convinces Wright that his argument might be strengthened by the inclusion of a “collaborative eschatology” (in which humans cooperate with God in bringing about the eschaton) as a seventh unique aspect of the mutated faith that warrants explanation; he further convinces him that his argument could be clarified by explicit citation of Jesus’ proclamation of God’s reign as a third “necessary and sufficient condition” for the rise of resurrection faith in the church (Wright admits that he had presupposed this).

As near as I can tell, Wright does not convince Crossan of anything, but he does press several points that Crossan might want to sharpen or reconsider. He pushes Crossan to provide more nuanced definitions of *literal* and *metaphorical* and manages to extract a clarification that the terms are not meant to be synonymous with *concrete* and *abstract*. But what then?

The dialogue also prompts Crossan to reveal his motive for focusing exclusively on the meaning rather than the mode of Jesus’ resurrection. Why would a historical scholar be so dismissive of a historical question? Crossan admits that if all Christians found literal conceptions of the resurrection conducive to faith, he would not even raise the issue. He promotes the possibility of metaphorical understandings on behalf of the thousands of Christians who are not happy with a literal conception, that they too might share in resurrection faith. In short, his motivation is explicitly—if, in this case, ironically—evangelical.