

**Murray A. Rae. *Resurrection and Renewal*. Baker Academic, 2024. 208 pp. \$28.99 (pbk).**

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As with many published books, Murray A. Rae's *Resurrection and Renewal* comes tagged with an assortment of superlative-laden blurbs on its back cover. One, in particular, stands out: Alan Torrance's headlining testimonial. It reads, "This is the most important and, indeed, exciting book on the resurrection to have emerged in half a century." As "the internets" say, this is "big, if true." While I do agree with the topic of the book—viz., that because of the resurrection of Jesus, "[t]he whole course, and indeed the very nature, of human history has been radically transformed," and that "all of history . . . is but the terrain upon which God is drawing humanity, indeed the whole creation, into reconciled communion, overcoming the deadly consequences of" humanity's rebellion against God (xi)—the book itself is not all that exciting. In fact, I am sorry to say, insofar as it is supposed to be an academic text, it is not clear to me why it was published at all. As I will explain below, it carves no new territory for the topic. It does not, it seems to me, present any (to use that old academic phrase) "contribution to knowledge." And, at best, it serves merely as a summary of some of the biblical-theological conclusions from over the last 25 years.

This may seem overly harsh, I admit. And, maybe it is, though it is not meant to be. In fact, I have very few significant gripes with the content of the book, some of which I will mention below. The good news, I think, is that my major concerns with the book could be easily overcome with a change of both marketing and message: Couch this book as a concise, one-volume synthesis of some of the biblical-theological conclusions reached by others, particularly as it pertains to the interplay between Jesus's resurrection and cosmic renewal. If it were pitched in this way, I would say it excels. Rae has written an exceptionally clear book, one that tells the gospel story that shines a light on what is, to my mind, the fulcrum around which the *telos* of creation begins to be brought to bear, viz., the resurrection of Jesus. The issue, then, is the book's categorization. It should not be presented as an academic monograph that breaks new ground on the topic. For there are already *many* books that shine a light on this exact topic with nearly the exact same conclusions about the topic interwoven through the lot of them.

Here is a list of just a few (only one of which is cited by Rae, which also is problematic): Wright (2000, 2008, 2011, 2019); Beale and Kim (2014); Middleton (2005, 2014); Gladd and Harmon (2016); and Brannon (2022). Notice that these authors are in the domain of biblical theology. We could add works in systematic and analytic theology on top of this (e.g., Turner 2019, 2021). But, to restate, I think this problem is easily remedied. Couch it as a work that unites in one book threads that are well-established and conclusions that are well-worn in various and sundry places in the literature. I should note, just here, that there is a bit of a wrinkle in my "easy remedy," viz., as it stands, he does not interact with a host of the literature whose threads he is (whether he is aware of this or not) tying together.

With these complaints out of the way, let me touch briefly on one major conceptual complaint and one minor conceptual quibble. To get a grip on my major conceptual complaint, consider that part of Rae's project seems to be to restate a Barthian thesis about the effectiveness of rational demonstration of theological truths and one's submission to those truths over against the effectiveness of proclamation of the gospel and one's direct encounter with the risen Jesus effectuating a hearer's submission to theological truths (cf. xiii and the whole of chapter 1). To wit, Rae is clear that the purpose of his book is not an apologetic for the truth of the resurrection of Jesus (xii). Instead, it is a proclamation of its fact, and an explanation of what results follow from it (xii). I take from his first chapter (and elsewhere) that he thinks that, when it comes to the truth of the resurrection, there is an implied exclusive disjunction: Either (a) one comes to believe in the resurrection—and its consequent theological implications for one's life and the purpose of the cosmos—through proclamation of the gospel and encounter with the risen Jesus, or (b) one comes to believe through rational demonstration. The reader, however, is not given an argument for the truth of this implied claim. Moreover, there does not seem to me to be any principled reason to think it is not a false choice. I want merely to reply: Why not both? Surely God can, and has, used the apologetic/historical work of Gary Habermas (2021, 2024a, 2024b, 2025) or the historical work of N. T. Wright (2000) to convince people of the resurrection in a way to effect repentance in the *metanoia*—transformation of one's mind—sort of way that the New Testament (and Rae [2024, 5, 117]) speaks about. And if this has not happened—or there is some principled reason to think it has not—one needs evidence that it has not or some other argument to the conclusion that this sort of thing is not possible (and, indeed, not actual).

Now, Rae does offer some passing reasons to think that apologetic or rational argument is not going to bring a person to repentance/*metanoia*. He explains that resurrection, and the actuality thereof (especially as an explanation of Jesus's empty tomb), is not within the realm of human logical explanation. In fact, he claims that “faultless human logic could offer no other explanation” than that someone stole the body (or otherwise took it) out of the tomb (4–5). This is, of course, empirically false. There have been other theories about how Jesus's tomb was found empty besides the idea that Jesus's body was stolen or taken, some of which are not consistent with resurrection (e.g., that Jesus did not really die on the cross, he merely “swooned” and so pushed the stone away himself and walked out [Habermas 1996, 69ff]) and some of which are (here there is a vast amount of literature in the philosophy of religion on the subject). To imply that Jesus's bodily resurrection defies human understanding and rational justification just is to assume with the non-believer that resurrection is, by the best canons of human reason, nonsense. But various philosophers of religion and analytic theologians have been at pains to show that it is *not* nonsense, that it can be rationally explained and defended. And, it can be rationally explained and defended in such a way that even those who have not had a *metanoia* can admit its rationality (even if they think, in the end, the arguments are unsound or else have false conclusions).<sup>1</sup>

It is interesting to note that Rae's second chapter—about the promise of resurrection and New Creation as shot through the whole of the Old Testament—seems at odds with the previous contention, viz., that resurrection falls outside the realm of rational demonstration. Why? Well, I take it that chapter 2's content (all of which is quite clear and well-stated—even

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, van Inwagen (1978), an article I understand to have been written by van Inwagen prior to his conversion to Christianity.

true) presents rational *evidence* for the resurrection. The implied point of the chapter is that resurrection *should* have been a live option for the apostles because it was being promised all throughout the Old Testament, the apostles's Scriptures (24). Rae explains that it was not a live option because they lacked the conceptual resources to understand what had happened to Jesus, until they had an encounter with Jesus (e.g., on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24) (Rae 2024, 23–24). Suppose we grant Rae's point: The disciples did not have the conceptual resources available to them to recognize the risen Jesus when he was staring them in the face. What follows that makes good on chapter 1's thesis that resurrection is categorically at odds with human logic? As far as I can tell, nothing follows to make good on this claim. In fact, Jesus's *demonstrating* to his human followers from the Old Testament on the road to Emmaus that resurrection is possible and actual (in Jesus right in front of them) seems rather to entail that it *is* within the bounds of human logic. No sense, by definition, can be made of sentences that do not trade on logical laws (for example, contradictory claims and claims about the metaphysically impossible). Instead, what the disciples are given is a new way to interpret the biblical data *logically*. They were not given an *illogical* way of interpreting it. I worry that Rae's Barthian assumption that the gospel is somehow incongruous with human logic rests on outmoded Kantian reasoning, that there is something in principle impossible about getting at metaphysical truths via human reasoning (one of which is the truth of bodily resurrection and the possibility thereof).

I worry further that there is an unnecessary assumption that human reasoning ever can come apart from God's revelatory action in and through his Scriptures and the creation, generally. Just like I think a Hobbesian "state of nature" is impossible—because God necessarily exists—so too I think that reasoning apart from God's upholding the reasoner is impossible. In other words, I think it is just trivially true that no one can reason entirely independently of God to *any* truth whatever. But that's just because I take it as trivially true that no one can *exist* entirely independent of God's sustaining activity.

I note too that Rae's chapter 6 also seems out of joint with the claim that resurrection outstrips human logical consideration. He argues—rightly, in my view—that historians and theologians fail in their seeking the truth when they begin from a position of methodological naturalism, a methodological view that assumes a false *a priori* metaphysical commitment (viz., that divine agency in the world is ruled out) (107). But this just is to argue that the failure of some to be convinced of the resurrection is in part due to holding a faulty metaphysics, where metaphysics is understood to be a branch of philosophy and a method of philosophical inquiry. So, the problem of resurrection skepticism might well be—for the historian *qua* methodological naturalist—a failure of metaphysics, not a failure of human reason or rational capabilities as such (contra chapter 2).

Finally, a minor quibble. Perhaps this is merely a personal bugbear, but it does annoy me that, yet again, we have a theologian failing to clarify terms/phrases like "part of the divine identity" and "identity" (e.g., 48, 66, 72–73).<sup>2</sup> I take it that part of chapter 4's aim is to use the resurrection of Jesus to shed light on *who* Jesus is. But that means that, in the first place, we want to know whether we are given an explanation that explains Jesus's relation to God as one of familial identity (he's part of God's family), whether he is a part of God's story (i.e., "narrative identity": how Jesus thinks of himself, for example), or whether Jesus is

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<sup>2</sup> On p. 48, Rae cites approvingly Douglas Campbell's remark that Richard Bauckham "puts it carefully" that "Jesus is . . . part of the divine identity." I submit that this is *not* careful. What does the word "identity" mean in this context? Is it numerical identity? Is it narrative identity? He does not say, neither does Campbell, neither does Rae.

numerically the same God as God the Father. Nothing Rae does in chapter 4 helps answer these questions or sheds new light on what others have said before him.

The resurrection of Jesus and its implications for the whole of God's creation remain, to my mind, among the most exhilarating truths of Christian faith. I am grateful that Rae shares this enthusiasm and addresses these themes with admirable clarity. Yet despite the way the book is pitched, *Resurrection and Renewal* offers little that breaks new ground on this vital subject.

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