Redeeming History: A Response to Murray Rae's *Resurrection and Renewal*

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Murray Rae's *Resurrection and Renewal* represents an ambitious attempt to navigate between the Scylla of fundamentalist apologetics and the Charybdis of reductionist scholarship. Rae, who serves as Professor of Systematic Theology at the University of Otago, brings considerable sophistication to questions that have occupied Christian theology since the Enlightenment. He is clear from the outset that "the purpose of this book . . . is not to enter into an argument about whether the resurrection really happened but to explore what has changed and what may be affirmed as true in light of the fact . . . that it *has* happened."[1] And his central contention—that "the resurrection constitutes the utterly new starting point for our understanding of what is going on in the world" (116)—shapes a project that seeks to demonstrate how this event transforms a Christian conception of God, humanity, history, ethics, and the cosmos itself.

The book's strengths are immediately apparent. Rae demonstrates how careful attention to Scripture is requisite for formative theological work. His observation that recognition of the risen Christ depends not on clever historical deduction but on divine self-disclosure—in Scripture, among other places—sets an important theological tone: "Only God can enable our human apprehension and recognition of the risen one as the beloved Son of God" (79).

Equally conspicuous is Rae's emphasis on the resurrection as revealing God's creative and redemptive purposes for the entire cosmos, not merely for individual human persons. His chapters on creation made new and on the resurrection's ethical implications demonstrate how thoroughly the resurrection reorders an understanding of reality. When Rae writes that "the resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the utterly consistent outworking, repetition, and eschatological fulfillment of the divine declaration 'Let there be light'" (27), he captures something essential: that God's raising of Jesus represents not an arbitrary intervention but the faithful and determined continuation of the creator's

1. Murray A. Rae, *Resurrection and Renewal: Jesus and the Transformation of Creation* (Baker Academic, 2024), xii. All in-text references refer to this book.

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life-giving purposes. This cosmic scope rescues Christian hope from the Gnostic temptation to regard salvation as escape from materiality rather than its transformation. Rae articulates it beautifully: "No part of God's good creation, expansive in time and space, can be consigned to the dust heap of history. Only those things that, in virtue of their complete contravention of God's purposes for creation, never had any life in them will finally be done away with" (166–67).

Rae's fourfold approach to Jesus's identity—historical, eschatological, soteriological, and trinitarian—is particularly helpful. On the historical level, he writes: "The point at issue is whether the true Jesus of history can be discovered only by setting aside the church's faith that God has raised Jesus from the dead, or whether instead the historical Jesus appears most distinctly precisely in the light of that faith" (71). This challenges the assumption that faith necessarily obscures historical understanding, suggesting instead that faith may be the condition of more properly seeing what has happened. On the eschatological level, Rae cites Ingolf Dalferth's claim that in Jesus Christ, "the eschatological kingdom *has already* dawned and no longer needs to be merely hoped for and expected"[2] and follows up with the confession that Jesus's resurrection "provides decisive confirmation of this reality" (72). This insight reorients one's understanding of time itself: Jesus's resurrection is not one event among others in a linear sequence but the event that reveals what history, in the providence of God, has been moving toward all along. On the soteriological level, Rae emphasizes that "Resurrection . . . is the firstfruits of a harvest that will be completed with the homecoming of prodigal humanity" (74), locating individual salvation within God's broader purposes for creation. And on the trinitarian level, he clarifies that "the resurrection confirms and reveals the *eternal* relation between Father and Son; it does not establish that relation in some adoptionist fashion" (79), showing how the Easter event illuminates rather than constitutes Christ's divine identity. Each of these insights is pregnant with material for further theological wrestling and peregrination.

Rae devotes an entire chapter to "Resurrection and History," in which he seeks to establish that proper historical inquiry into the resurrection requires openness to divine agency as a causal category. He argues that methodological naturalism—the practice of bracketing divine action when investigating past events—inevitably distorts our understanding of what is reported to have occurred on that first Easter morning. Rae's concern is understandable. If God truly raised Jesus from the dead, then historical methods that exclude divine agency a priori cannot give an adequate account of what happened. He appeals to Thomas Kuhn's notion of paradigm shifts to argue that the resurrection

2. Ingolf U. Dalferth, *Crucified and Resurrected: Restructuring the Grammar of Christology*, trans. Jo Bennett (Baker Academic, 2015), 126.

constitutes an anomaly requiring historians to reconstruct their field from "new fundamentals" (111). The resurrection, he suggests, should prompt a methodological revolution comparable to the Copernican shift in astronomy. The challenge with this proposal concerns how we might speak about this occurrence. Rae assumes proper speech about the resurrection requires that historians, qua historians, be prepared to say "God raised Jesus from the dead" as the explanation for the empty tomb and the appearances. Without this willingness, he suggests, historical scholarship inevitably produces distorted portraits of Jesus shaped by naturalistic assumptions rather than the reality of divine action, that is, "the facts" (115).

But herein lies "the rub," as Hamlet put it,[3] which relates to the first of my two (hopefully constructive) quibbles with the book. One would expect that Rae's commitment to taking history seriously would extend to history's particulars, such as location, as does his superb book on architecture.[4] But his work in this book seems to emerge from nowhere, addressing no particular community's questions within no specific tradition of practice. Clifford Geertz reminded us that "shapes of knowledge are always ineluctably local, indivisible from their instruments and their encasements. One may veil this fact with ecumenical rhetoric or blur it with strenuous theory, but one cannot really make it go away."[5] If Geertz is right, then theologians must be prepared, as Carlo Ginzburg and Carlo Poni put it, to recognize "the decisive importance of those traces, those clues, those details previously overlooked, which upset and throw into disarray the superficial aspect of the documentation."[6] As Kuhn himself argues, it is the cases at the margins—the ones that do not quite fit—that bring established theories back under scrutiny and help generate newer, more comprehensive frameworks. These exceptional instances offer glimpses into aspects of reality that routine documentation tends to overlook.[7] Rae navigates between

3. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. John Dover Wilson (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 3.1.65.

4. *Architecture and Theology: The Art of Place* (Baylor University Press, 2017). See also Murray Rae, "The Subversive Theology of Rua Kēnana," in *Mana Māori and Christianity*, ed. Hugh Morrison, Lachy Paterson, and Brett Knowles (Huia, 2012), 223–42.

5. Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (Basic Books, 1983), 4.

6. "… l'importanza decisiva di quelle tracce, quelle spie, quelle sviste che scompigliano, disordinandola, la superficie della documentazione." Carlo Ginzburg and Carlo Poni, "Il nome e il come: Scambio ineguale e mercato storiografico," *Quaderni storici* 14, no. 40 (1979): 188. The article appears in translation in Carlo Ginzburg and Carlo Poni, "The Name and the Game: Unequal Exchange and the Historiographic Marketplace," in *Microhistory and the Lost Peoples of Europe*, ed. Edward Muir and Guido Ruggiero (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 1–10.

7. See Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (University of Chicago Press, 1996).

various schools of thought with a rare skill, engaging postliberal theology, historical criticism, philosophical hermeneutics, and systematic theology with equal facility. Yet where does this theology speak *from*? What concrete communities of practice ground and test these interpretive claims? And are these to be exhausted by their ecclesiological expression?

This absence becomes particularly acute given Rae's insistence that "it is the stuff of creation as we know it, in all its materiality, that is the object of [Jesus's] redemptive and transformative work" (95). If this is so, then theology grounded in the divine economy must be deeply and inescapably contextual—"the more . . . concretely, the better, the more Christian!"[8]—attending to the specific ways that resurrection addresses, disrupts, disorganizes, and transforms particular histories. One longs also to see more ink spilt on how the resurrection relates to significant evils of our time: environmental devastation, colonization, sexism, unbridled capitalism, refugee crises, domestic violence, totalitarianism, racism, poverty, and so forth. While Rae occasionally brings his subject into conversation with concrete contexts (see 55–56, 95, 97), these remain brief illustrations rather than sustained engagements. He notes that "the resurrection . . . *leaves traces in the fabric of time and space*" (14, italics mine). This reader hoped to see more of such traces recognized in this book.

Resurrection theology cannot be done from nowhere. It requires particularity, embodiment, vulnerability—immersion in communities oriented to practices of truth-telling and reconciliation. It must emerge from and return to concrete social, political, and communal practices. Yet for all Rae's emphasis on the resurrection as the "decisive clue to what is going on in the world" (97)—his insistence that what the resurrection opens up "involves not an escape *from* history but the redemption *of* history" (167) and his conviction that "the world is changed" (81) because of the resurrection—that very world receives very little attention beyond ecclesial contexts.

What does the resurrection hope of which Rae speaks mean for those, human and other, whose bodies remain broken, whose communities have been destroyed, whose lives have been marked by violence and loss? The question concerns how we speak about this hope in ways that neither sentimentalize present suffering nor postpone consolation entirely to a future eschaton. What does resurrection mean *now*? Rae avers that "the eschatological realization of God's purposes for creation involves the gathering up and redemption of the whole of human history . . . the kingdom cannot come without all the cries of history's victims being heard" (174). But how does the presence of Jesus's scarred and resurrected body shape our understanding of what redemption means for

8. Karl Barth, "No Boring Theology! A Letter from Karl Barth," *The South East Asia Journal of Theology* 11 (1969): 5.

particular bodies and communities—human and other—that continue to bear the marks of history's violence?

And so, to my second quibble. Does Rae's approach risk collapsing the space between the resurrection as an event and our capacity to master it through explanatory frameworks, including theological ones? What makes the resurrection decisive is not that it provides us with better historical explanations but that it establishes a presence that exceeds and reorders our explanatory schemes altogether. The risen Christ is not discovered through refined historical method but is encountered through his own self-giving. Rae himself acknowledges this when discussing how the first disciples came to recognize Jesus—not through inference from evidence but "through encounter with the risen Christ himself" (15). Yet his subsequent argument about historiography seems to downplay this insight.

The point becomes clearer when we consider Rae's treatment of the gospel narratives. He repeatedly notes that the disciples' recognition of the risen Jesus was neither immediate nor obvious—Mary mistakes him for the gardener, the Emmaus pilgrims fail to recognize their companion, and Thomas questions the others' testimony. Whatever evidence may have been at hand, understanding required something more than better observation or argumentation. What transformed the disciples' perception was not that they suddenly gained access to a new explanatory category ("resurrection") that made sense of the data. Instead, Christ himself opened "their eyes . . . and they recognized him, and he vanished from their sight" (Luke 24:31 NRSV).

This pattern suggests that the resurrection's intelligibility finally depends not on our capacity to accommodate it within our frameworks—whether naturalistic or theistic—but on Christ's continuing presence with and among us. However sophisticated our hermeneutical tools, the resurrection cannot be domesticated into any historiographical method precisely because it establishes that God's ways with the world exceed the bounds of human knowledge. This is not because the resurrection is irrational, but because it reveals that history itself is more than we could imagine.

One might, therefore, wish for greater attention to how the resurrection actually disrupts history, as theologians attentive to its apocalyptic character have emphasized. The resurrection confronts us with the one we have killed, and this confrontation is inherently disruptive—it unveils the violence that structures our world. To grasp the full scope and cost of our violence, and not to be paralyzed by it, is what the resurrection offers: "memory restored in hope."[9] This restoration happens only through radical disruption, through the dissolution of the ego's defensive structures.

9. Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel* (Darton, Longman & Todd, 2002), 36.

Rae gestures toward these themes, but his methodological tidiness risks muting the apocalyptic shock. He notes that the disciples' recognition was not immediate, that the risen Jesus appeared strange and unrecognizable. But what does this strangeness mean *theologically*? What work might it do? The empty tomb presents not resolution but radical discontinuity, a void that challenges our longing for neat explanations. The familiar friend returns as a stranger who will not be domesticated within our expectations.

Rae comes closest to recognizing this in his discussions on ethics and ecclesiology, where he emphasizes that the Christian life consists in participation in Christ's resurrection life rather than in conformity to abstract principles. His observation that "the task of Christian ethics . . . is simply to describe the content of that new life as it is made known and made possible in Christ" (127–28) rightly locates moral reasoning not in universal principles but in the form of life established by the risen one. Here, Rae demonstrates how theological speech can be both concrete and humble—attending to the realities of Christ's resurrection without claiming to master or explain it.

If there remains a question about the book's overall framework, it concerns whether Rae has fully reckoned with the resurrection's resistance to being fitted within any of our existing categories, whether naturalistic or theological. The resurrection does not merely require that we revise our historiography, our ethics, or our eschatology. It establishes a presence that continually exceeds our grasp, a presence that perturbs all our best efforts of coherence.

This is to suggest that any resurrection theology must somehow incorporate its own subversion, must remain vulnerable to the apocalyptic disruption it announces. It must remain strange and disturbing and deeply familiar, questioning and redirecting our knowing, loving, and desiring, and resisting smooth settling into our theological constructions. Any theology adequate to this reality must maintain the tension, the disorientation, the shock. It must speak from within communities and bodies learning painfully to enact the reconciliation it announces. The Gospels' emphasis on the stranger, the unrecognizable Jesus, the collapse of familiar frameworks, the judgment that precedes restoration—all of this preserves the resurrection's unsettling character. The empty tomb confronts us first with absence and disorientation: "He is not here." Or, as T. S. Eliot put it: "And what you thought you came for / Is only a shell, a husk of meaning / From which the purpose breaks only when it is fulfilled / If at all."[10] The resurrection purges our imagery, refuses our attempts at consolation, and drives us back to the painful recognition that we are complicit in the violence that structures our world. Only through this disorientation do we discover that grace meets us not as confirmation of our righteousness but

10. T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding," in *Collected Poems, 1909–1962* (Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963), 201.

as the return of our victim. For those seeking the perspicuity that something like analytical theology mistakenly strives for, Rae reminds us that "there is no future judgment that will make things any clearer than they have been made already by the events of that day when darkness came over the face of the earth and Jesus breathed his last" (174).

These observations should not obscure the book's considerable achievements. Rae has produced a work of serious theological scholarship that takes the resurrection seriously as the foundation of Christian faith and practice. His careful attention to the Bible and to Christian doctrine, and his concern to demonstrate the resurrection's implications for dimensions of Christian existence, make this a valuable contribution to contemporary theology. The book successfully challenges reductive approaches that would dissolve resurrection either into mythology or bare historical fact divorced from theological significance.

Moreover, Rae's emphasis on the resurrection's cosmic scope and communal character offers welcome correctives to individualistic and spiritualized versions of Christian hope that too often plague Western theology. In an era when Christian identity is often reduced to personal belief or moral stance, Rae's vision of a people formed by participation in Christ's death and resurrection through baptism and Eucharist is to be welcomed, along with his naming the fact that practices of hospitality, care for the poor, peacemaking, and justice-seeking all serve to locate Christian existence firmly within the life of the Body, and of bodies. But what of situations where such practices prove impossible? The lived reality of churches involves irreconcilable differences and persistent alienation. How does resurrection theology speak to these failures? Does it simply urge us to try harder, or does it have resources for understanding irredeemable rupture? Rae leaves readers to work these matters out for themselves.

The book models how theological reflection can be informed by and engage thoughtfully with critical scholarship without being determined by it. Rae demonstrates familiarity with contemporary biblical studies, historical Jesus research, and philosophical debates about historiography. Yet he refuses to grant these disciplines determinative authority over theological judgment. This methodological independence allows him to pursue theological questions on their own terms while remaining in conversation with other scholarly approaches.

One further achievement and challenge arising from Rae's work is that he reminds us how Christian theology's task may be less to explain the resurrection than to learn how to speak and live appropriately in its light. This involves both historical testimony (bearing witness to what the first disciples remember seeing and hearing, and how they subsequently interpreted these things) and theological discipline (learning the grammar that allows us to speak truthfully

about the one who died and lives). It also requires a fundamental humility before the mystery of God's action, a recognition that we approach the resurrection not as masters seeking to explain it but as those who are ourselves being disrupted and transformed by it.

Rae's book makes a significant contribution to these ongoing theological tasks. My quibbles do not diminish the value of what he has accomplished. *Resurrection and Renewal* deserves serious consideration from anyone concerned with how the church might speak truthfully about the event that stands at the center of Christian faith.

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