
The Power of Resurrection: Foucault, Discipline, and Early Christian Resistance. Patrick G. Stefan. New York: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2019. Pp. 298

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The swift rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire remains something of a mystery, even given new historical methods and approaches.¹ The enigma is only increased when we realize the spread was perpetuated under the sign of a crucified criminal. We all too often forget just how truly abhorrent crucifixion was. As now, here at our far end of history, the symbol of the crucifix appears everywhere, on Bibles, lunchboxes, jewelry, tattoos, a dead metaphor no matter how reverently held. But, as Martin Hengel ably reminds us, crucifixion was not merely a manner of execution, but was rather for “breaking the will of conquered peoples.”² It was

1. See Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity: How the Jesus Movement Became the World's Largest Religion* (New York: Harper One, 2011); *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1997); *Cities of God: The Real Story of How Christianity Became an Urban Movement and Conquered Rome* (New York: Harper One, 2007). These three works by Rodney Stark introduced statistical and sociological analysis that, while at a popular level, proved to display some unique (albeit not uncontested) conclusions about early Christian success. For a summary of Stark in comparison with other attempts at understanding Christian origins, see the brief work of Jan N. Bremmer, *The Rise of Christianity Through the Eyes of Gibbon, Harnack, and Rodney Stark* (Netherlands: University of Groningen Press, 2010). For an effective “history of ideas” approach, see the recent study by Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), which throttles back on the assumed speed by which Christianity spread, and focuses on the success of the movement by way of the Christian virtue of patience.

2. Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross* (London: SCM Press, 1977), 46. See also Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and*

a gruesome spectacle, one whose instruments pierced bodies, to be sure, but also souls. It is even more remarkable then that such atrocities were, to use Friedrich Nietzsche's terminology, "transvalued" for the sake of the Christian gospel. Intrepid academics brave enough to tackle the initial spread of Christianity as their topic not only have to explain how and why this marginal sect of Judaism flourished, but at the same time locate its triumph by way of the very mechanism meant to quell such multiplication at all. All of this is quite apart from the equally hoary questions surrounding the historicity of Christ's resurrection, Jesus' divinity, self-understanding, the nature of the incarnation to the Trinity, and the litany of other questions leading up through pro-Nicene agreements and beyond.³

To coordinate Christian origins with the cross, at any rate, is the sizeable task Patrick G. Stefan has set for himself in his book *The Power of Resurrection*. Resurrection did not simply speak against Roman power and injustice, it undermined it by reversing the judgment so horrifically (and quite literally) pinned to Jesus, doing so by subtly "embedding that subversive critique into the ways by which Christians moved throughout the empire" (11). To the great commission given by Matthew, for example, we must also understand that "the counter-imperial complications of the resurrection of Jesus' body became instantiated in material and

Criticism of Christian Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), who rightly and at length chastises modern theologians for being too susceptible to the anesthetized and anemic force of the cross.

3. Though Stefan rightly brackets these other theological issues, two particularly good monographs on Christ's resurrection were recently published that prove themselves excellent companions to the present volume under review. See Dale Allison Jr., *The Resurrection of Jesus: Apologetics, Polemics, History* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2021); Matthew Levering, *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead? Historical and Theological Reflections* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

social forms and thereby shaped the lived existence of early Christians through it” (13).⁴

Stefan’s work is not unique in its focus upon Christ’s apocalyptic confrontation with the powers on the cross, or the vindication of resurrection that leads to Christian resistance against empire. Indeed, that Christianity offered up political critiques of the Roman empire has itself become something of a cliché in biblical studies to the extent that many have rightly called for a moratorium on such talk until stricter methodological guidelines have been implemented.⁵ Stefan is totally aware of this, and cites an extensive list of literature. In fact, far from unearthing some secret in pointing to resurrection, he notes that “resurrection naturally lends itself to a counter-imperial message,” precisely because it has taken death away as the prime Roman tool of submission, but also has pronounced a reversal of Rome’s declaration that Christ was a criminal whose place was mere sport for crows outside the city gates. The specific contribution he hopes to make is, rather, *how* resurrection functions as a subversive idea. “Foundational to my thesis is the claim that previous scholarship has merely declared resurrection to be subversive without a substantive explanation of how an idea can subvert a living emperor” (36–37). For example, specifically targeting N. T. Wright, he notes that “his 817-page tome on the resurrection of Jesus [...] repetitiously makes the point *that* the resurrection declares Jesus as Lord and implies that Caesar is

4. In addition to the more theological questions regarding, say, incarnation, Stefan also brackets the so-called “Bauer-Ehrman Thesis,” regarding the movement from a (supposedly) legitimate Christian pluralism into the narrowness of a newly defined “Orthodoxy” marked out by a power grab (be it through Constantine, or some other manner).

5. Christopher Heilig, *Hidden Criticism? The Methodology and Plausibility of the Search for a Counter-Imperial Subtext in Paul* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015).

not, [but] never reveals *why* it is a subversive message or *how* this statement of belief works subversively” (33).

In other words, instead of introducing new data into the field of early Christian studies, Stefan wants rather to be able to view and organize it in a new and hitherto unimagined way to bring neglected elements to the fore. To unpack the mechanism of the *why* and the *how* he finds so wanting in other scholarship, then, Stefan turns – perhaps unexpectedly – to the work of philosopher Michel Foucault. In particular, what is utilized is the philosopher’s complex and often misunderstood notions of power, subversion, imitation, and the like, which follows a chapter on the notion of empire and resurrection in Paul. As such, in turning to Foucault’s analysis of power distribution, Stefan argues that “Foucault’s complex description of the ways by which underlying disciplinary mechanisms,” helps us understand “the successful spread of the early Christian movement” insofar as “the idea of resurrection unintentionally tapped into the disciplinary mechanisms of power” as described by Foucault (52–53). For Foucault, disciplinary power is a contrast to the centrality of sovereign power in that the former “is centered not on the body, but on the soul” and so indicates a shift to the question of knowledge production where the inner life of the soul and the self are produced by the act of power instead of being acted upon in a top-down manner (58–60). In other words, “For discipline to take root, a soul must first be born [read: produced], upon which the instrument of observation can operate” (86). For, as Foucault put it, reversing the typical Platonic formula, the “soul is the prison of the body,”⁶ forming and shaping it, disciplining it but in a manner that is no longer direct but has reproduced the very mechanisms of reproduc-

6. Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977* trans. and ed. Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, Kate Soper (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 30.

tion within an “internal self” distinct from, but united with, the body.

What follows is a theological analysis of why resurrection displays such a fitting example of this Foucaultian analysis (85–160). It would be impossible to reproduce the analysis here, but needless to say that it is both provocative and extremely helpful in addressing the questions of the continuity and change of identity reflected in the realities of early Christianity. The typical caricatures of a Platonic body-soul dualism displacing a more “Hebraic” somatic holism has no place here – and Stefan rewards the careful reader with some incredibly detailed analysis regarding the differentiation and interrelation of body, soul, and how meaning was made from their friction and unity. “Second and Third century articulations of the resurrection began [...] to chart a path that understood the vital importance of the body (to which the flesh is pinned), alongside the immortal existence of the soul. The internal and external self are independent, yet deeply intertwined so that they need one another for the pending judgment” (95). Indeed, while many of the narratives were yet to be fully formed, “narrative and theological articulations of the resurrected Jesus perform the work of individualizing the operations of power and construction of knowledge of the self” (96), which in turn created a cohesion amongst the diversity of early Christian expression and life by not only creating and inscribing individual souls, but also marking out how Jesus was thought to play a role in the daily lives of Christians (100–101).

While some Christians may have reservations about enlisting Foucault, Stefan’s use of his analyses are not only fruitful but mesh well with the recent rediscovery of how religion – even theology – functioned in Foucault’s work. It seems only appropriate

in turn that his insights should bear fruit within Christian discourse. Stefan has provide a complex look at how the theology of resurrection functioned in early Christianity, and the result of his study, both rich and rewarding, cannot be ignored. It is not only a demonstration of the strength that interdisciplinary work can bring to the table, but also allows theological tropes that may no longer seize us because of their familiarity gain a new timbre and heft that was always there but that had been left unexamined for too long.