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Ancient Dying and Rising Gods: An Analysis of Physicality, Similarity, and Causality

Abstract

Cook, John Granger. *Empty Tomb, Resurrection, Apotheosis* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018) xvi +717 pp. ISBN 978-3-16-156503-8, 164,00 €. (=WUNT 410)

Keywords

John Granger Cook, Mohr Siebeck, Empty Tomb, Resurrection, Apotheosis

Cover Page Footnote

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John Granger Cook's recent *Empty Tomb, Resurrection, Apotheosis* is an example of a magisterial command of wide-ranging ancient texts that may be expected to have lasting value for many years to come. The reason for his arrangement of such a vast array of ancient texts and ensuing linguistic, historical, and other analyses is to test two hypotheses. Cook's overall conclusion in this work is: First, "there is no fundamental difference between Paul's conception of the resurrection body and that of the Gospels; and second, the resurrection and translation stories of the Greco-Roman Antiquity probably help explain the willingness of Mediterranean people to gradually accept the Gospel of a crucified and risen savior" (1-2).¹ In testing these hypotheses, Cook evaluates, with great depth and expertise, the language used for resurrection throughout the ancient world.

Especially given the length of this volume, we will seek in this Review Article initially to present a synopsis of a few of Cook's major conclusions. This will be followed by an analysis of several key ideas and arguments, especially related to physicality, similarity, and causality.

Summary

In his Introduction, Cook begins by defining a "physical resurrection" as one in which the "body of a dead individual returns to life *in some sense*" (2, emphasis added; cf. 144 where Cook notes that this definition is "somewhat fluid"). While resurrection could refer to a temporary return to life (i.e., resuscitation) or to immortal life, Cook rightly notes distinctions between resurrection, immortality of the soul, and translation accounts. He then proceeds to examine the Hebrew semantics of *yqs*, *qys*, *qûm*, and *hyh*; the Greek semantics of ἀνίστημι and ἐγείρω, as well as ζοπιέω and ζάω; and, lastly, an assessment of various Latin words (*resurgo*, *resuscito*, *resurrectio*, etc.) associated with resurrection (7-53). In this chapter, the author raises a very significant factor, namely that, "One can confidently assert that ἐγείρω never occurs in classical or Jewish literature, in the context of resurrection, with ψυχή as the object (or subject) of the verb" (30, see also 35, 36, 466, 573, 619 622).² Cook points out that this language was "stable until the reaction of the Gnostic interpreters in the second century and later" (quote from 574, but see also 36, 575-6, 591, 594-595,

¹ References to *Empty Tomb, Resurrection, and Apotheosis* will typically be in the body of the text.

² Cook adds the following nuance, "It is undeniable, however, that the verb appears in some contexts in which the soul is stimulated or roused" (30). One example he provides is that of Diogenes the Stoic referring to music stirring the motionless soul.

619, 622). In other words, the linguistic evidence is clear that these verbs refer to the resurrection of a body, while notions of resurrection concerning a soul do not begin until the second century AD with several Gnostic movements.

Chapter one (56-144) opens with some methodological considerations (56-69) before examining the accounts of nine ancient figures, including the “fates of Dumuzi, Baal, Osiris, Adonis, Attis, Melqart/Heracles, Dionysus, Asclepius/Eshmun, and Mithras with the goal of ascertaining whether or not some of them experienced a vicissitude analogous to bodily resurrection” (56). Cook’s initial methodological considerations are a prerequisite for this chapter since he is seeking to highlight analogies (similarity) and not genealogies (influence) in testing his second hypothesis noted above. The subsequent analysis of the aforementioned figures is thoroughly detailed with original texts and their translations. Regarding the “Resurrection of Divinities,” Cook concludes that Osiris is the “closest analogy to the resurrection of Jesus, although Osiris remains in the netherworld” rather than showing himself to his followers. Horus is a “clear analogy”; Dionysus is a “fairly close analogy”; Heracles/Melqart are “strong analogies”; and Dumuzi, Baal, and Adonis are “less useful,” but “their power to overcome death is an important analogy to the NT” (143). Though Cook does note that there are differences, his point is to highlight the similarities (“analogies”) in order to substantiate his second hypothesis.

Chapter two assesses Greek and Latin accounts of resurrection in just over one hundred pages (144-246). This chapter is an extraordinary catalogue of resources containing around three dozen distinct reports. Of particular interest among these accounts are those of Heracles, Alcestis, Asclepius, Lucian, and Apollonius of Tyana. Here, too, there were differences and contrasts, as well. Cook concludes this chapter by noting that in these texts there is an “enduring theme” of the *impossibility* of the resurrection, but that nevertheless there were several stories of resurrection and, thus, “the concept of resurrection was widely available to elite Greco Roman authors” (246).

The third chapter (247-321) evaluates accounts “Tombs and Post-Mortem Appearances” in such a way that distinguishes empty tombs with appearances (seven cases), occupied tombs with appearances (two cases), and empty tombs with no appearances (six cases). Cook points out that, technically, most of these accounts are translations (247),³ but that there are nevertheless some points of *conceptual* similarity to the Gospels. He finds Aristean and Romulus to be the

³ For Cook, translations are different from resurrections because the “individual is transported to another thisworldly or otherworldly [sic] location either before or after his or her death. In a translation there is no necessity for a post-mortem epiphany” (56-57. See also his discussion on 322, 329-330, 411, 413).

better analogies, and that Callirhoe's account also has some "close affinities with the Gospels" (321).

Chapters four (322-412) and five (413-454) consider the translations and apotheoses of heroes and emperors respectively. Between these two chapters over fifty different figures are examined. Legendary and historical figures are also distinguished within chapter four (329-407), while emperors and funeral practices (including wax images) are discussed in the fifth chapter. For Cook, the concept of "an immortal and incorruptible body" that is described here can be analogous to the resurrected bodies discussed in Jewish and Christian texts, while the disappearance of translated heroes resembles the disappearance of Jesus' body (411). The emperors, according to Cook, had analogous components in that they could claim to have witnesses, though this was not necessary, to see the emperor ascend to the gods. He finds this similar to witnesses seeing Jesus' ascension, but notes key differences as well (454). Examples of the latter include Jesus being considered divine by Luke prior to the ascension, and that it was Jesus' *body* that ascended rather than his soul, as with the Roman Emperors.

Chapter six is the longest chapter in the book (455-569) and examines a wide variety of Jewish sources. Similar to the chapter of Greek and Latin accounts, Cook again provides an extensive catalogue of references that are helpfully divided into dozens categories and sub-categories. In addition to the standard Jewish texts, he also identifies various inscriptions and frescoes that may shed light on the discussion. He concludes by saying while there were competing views of afterlife in these texts, "there was a very strong tradition of bodily resurrection" with Daniel being the clearest example (568). When it comes to resurrection belief specifically, Cook concludes, "Spirits or souls do not rise from the dead in ancient Judaism, people do" (569).

In the seventh chapter (570-618), Cook seeks to utilize all of the material from the previous chapters in order to illuminate the NT texts that discuss the empty tomb and resurrection. Returning to the initial conclusion stated at the outset of this review article, it is an "unavoidable" conclusion for Cook that "Paul could not have *conceived* of a risen Jesus whose body was rotting away in the tomb" (591, emphasis in original). Cook then briefly presents six possible objections to this conclusion but finds each one insufficient (591-593). Regarding Mark, Luke, and the Q passages, Cook finds these accounts to be conceptually consistent with those found in Paul (618).

In his brief Conclusion (619-624), Cook summarizes each chapter, reiterating the fact that the Greek words used for resurrection were not applied to souls or spirits until the second century Gnostic movement. As a result, there are several examples from the ancient world which have some degree of analogy with the NT accounts, while occasionally noting differences. Further, Paul meant something fundamentally similar to the Gospel writers regarding Jesus'

resurrection, while the early church could appeal to certain points of overlap of Jesus' resurrection with conceptions found within the wider culture (419-424).

An Analysis of Cook's Volume

In this truly remarkable, well-researched, and thorough text, Cook provides many compelling arguments throughout many areas. As such, the work provides an incredible systematic array of sources (and accompanying discussions), that it will undoubtedly provide an essential resource for academic researchers. At the same time, some specific areas remain open for dialogue and critique.

Physicality: A Strict Analogy

As noted above, Cook seeks to highlight analogies between Jesus' resurrection and those of other ancient Jewish and pagan narratives. He states that "one can discern patterns in the pagan narratives of resurrection that are clearly analogous to resurrection in ancient Judaism and early Christianity" (56). We also noted that at the end of the chapter that Cook writes that a variety of pagan narratives are analogous to the resurrection of Jesus (143).

However, in what sense these accounts are analogous is not often clear as one would hope. Making this aspect more explicit and/or specifying what is not being argued often clarifies arguments and avoids confusion. This is especially the case given that this has been a rather difficult subject for scholars to discuss due to the variety of historical challenges and the often-contentious nature of the topic.⁴ As a result, the reader may be forgiven for confusing some particular issues and thinking that there are stronger analogies, parallels, or that even genealogical concepts have perhaps slipped back into the discussion when this, in fact, is *not* meant to be the case.

Here it should be noted that the point of analogies is that they can be made between almost anything and, as such, it does *not* mean that there are strong parallels let alone genealogical (causal) relationships.⁵ While Cook is explicitly clear that he is not making a genealogical argument in the immediate context (56), it would have been helpful had he also been explicit in what aspects he thinks are

⁴ Bart Ehrman gives a concise summary of both issues (and others) in Bart D. Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 221–30.

⁵ For a straightforward example of how analogies can be properly applied between two disparate things or concepts, a pen and a car can both be red and therefore analogous (similar) in the sense of their color but different in most respects.

analogous.⁶ We get an idea of what aspect or aspects Cook finds analogous when he writes, “The *concept* of bodily resurrection was clearly available to the Greek and Latin authors of pagan antiquity” (620, emphasis added). In other words, what Cook finds analogous is primarily the *concept* of a bodily afterlife in some sense.⁷

An uncritical reader may come to Cook’s conclusions in Chapter One and begin to think that all of these analogies are somehow strong parallels or genealogies, when Cook’s point is to stress the physical/bodily component. Thus, regarding Osiris, which Cook finds to be the “closest analogy” to Jesus’ resurrection (143), is to be understood as the “closest analogy” in that both understand that a concept of physicality involved. This is also consistent with Cook’s primary theses as well as his Introduction.

Ultimately, while Cook finds the Osiris narrative to be the closest analogy to Jesus’ resurrection because of its conceptions of physicality, Cook would likely agree with Jonathan Z. Smith’s comment that, “In no sense can Osiris be said to have ‘risen’ in the sense required by the dying and rising pattern. . . . The repeated formula ‘Rise up, you have not died,’ whether applied to Osiris or a citizen of Egypt, signaled a new, permanent life in the realm of the dead.”⁸ He would also likely agree with T. N. D. Mettinger who states that, “He both died and rose. But, and this is important, he rose to continued life in the Netherworld, and the general connotations are that he was a god of the dead.”⁹ Cook could maintain his claim regarding the analogy between the physicality of Osiris in the Netherworld with that of the physical body of Jesus on earth *while also affirming* Bart Ehrman’s comment that, “The key point to stress, however, is that Osiris does not—decidedly does not—return to life. Instead he becomes the powerful ruler of the

⁶ As noted above, Cook finds aspects of Luke’s ascension accounts analogous to some apotheosis narratives. Though here he also highlights some of the differences (454).

⁷ One should also recall Cook’s definition of physical resurrection noted above (2. Cf. 144). Here he, as is often overlooked, includes cases which many today might consider a resuscitation (someone who was raised, but dies again later) as part of his definition of a physical resurrection since the same term was used for those who would die again as well as those who would never die again. This highlight another aspect of physical components being analogical, whereas other aspects are not (e.g. immortality).

⁸ Jonathan Z. Smith, “Dying and Rising Gods,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones, 2nd ed., vol. 4 (Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference, 2005), 2538.

⁹ Trygve N. D. Mettinger, *The Riddle of Resurrection: “Dying and Rising Gods” in the Ancient Near East*, Reprint, Coniectanea Biblica Old Testament 50 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 175. See also 178, 215.

dead in the underworld. And so for Osiris there is no rising from the dead.”¹⁰ The reason for this is, again, because Cook is trying to argue for a specific connection of physicality that is associated with the NT terms for resurrection as well as the concept of bodily afterlife in the wider culture and *not* for parallels or genealogical connections.¹¹

Genealogical and Methodological Considerations

As Cook notes, a primary issue concerns the very concept of dying and rising gods. Having introduced influential scholar Mark Smith’s four characteristics of the concept (57), it was somewhat disappointing to observe that Cook preferred to “dispense” with the third and fourth markers (58). That is, of course, his prerogative. But given the differences between Cook and Smith, this could have been a crucial consideration in solving some of the chief riddles in the discussion of both the nature and purpose of these ancient stories, not to mention the perennial question of their extent as analogies and/or genealogies in relation to Christian accounts in the NT.¹² For instance, Smith’s fourth characteristic, the lack of ritual and cultic elements in these myths, persuades him towards the interpretation that these accounts were actually about death and funeral traditions rather than rising to life again.¹³

But more specific discussion on both sides of the issue could be deemed quite helpful, such as how close these comparisons and parallels were to each other, along with the earliest dates of each of the major texts. For Smith these

¹⁰ Bart D. Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth* (NY: HarperOne, 2012), 228.

¹¹ It may be a minor point, but it seems reasonable *prima facie* that cultures would envision various conceptions of afterlife in ways that are analogous to everyday human life (i.e. physically/bodily). Additionally, it may be helpful to note a distinction between “analogy” and “parallels” here. As indicated above, it would seem odd to say that just because two things are analogous in one aspect, it does not necessarily follow are parallels or have parallels. Thus, Cook’s use of analogies appears more accurate than A. J. M. Wedderburn’s use of “parallel” regarding the physicality associated with Osiris’ in A. J.M. Wedderburn, *Baptism and Resurrection: Studies in Pauline Theology against Its Graeco-Roman Background*, WUNT Vol. 44 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1987), 199. Concerns regarding propriety of drawing parallels have been raised in Samuel Sandmel, “Parallelomania,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* Vol. 81 (1962): 1–13.

¹² Mark S. Smith, “The Death of ‘Dying and Rising Gods’ in the Biblical World: An Update, with Special Reference to Baal in the Baal Cycle,” *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament*, Vol. 12 (1998), 259, 282, 310, with other references throughout pertaining to these considerations.

¹³ Smith, “The Death of ‘Dying and Rising Gods’ in the Biblical World,” 282, 311-313.

aspects reoccur constantly.¹⁴ However, Cook's leaving these details out is somewhat understandable since his volume is largely a linguistic and philological analysis.

As a penultimate comment, the NT texts were for Cook a central theme and goal in support of the overall objective of providing comparative analogies between pagan, Jewish, and Christian ideas of resurrection, including Jesus' resurrection (for examples, 6-7, 56, 69, Chapter 7). However, this last chapter appeared more like a brief summary rather than a detailed study, and was not treated in the same amount of depth as the rest of the volume. The finer aspects such as the likely dates and extent especially of the exceptionally early creedal data in 1 Corinthians 15:3-7 (573-576), or its relation to other such creedal texts were moved through rather quickly. Given the hundreds of pages on the pagan accounts, since those earlier analogies served throughout as the comparisons to the NT teachings regarding Paul and the Gospel narratives of Jesus, more NT exploration and explication might have been expected. While discussions of Christian beliefs were mentioned throughout the volume as well, there still was not an overall sense of justice being done to the relevant NT texts.¹⁵

Some Additional Genealogical Considerations

Lastly, many major researchers who have commented on these matters have additionally devoted substantial space in their own works to dissecting historical comparisons and contrasts between the pagan, Jewish, and Christian cases, especially as juxtaposed with that of Jesus in the NT. These general comments usually took the direction that the historical treatments in earliest Christianity were from the outset developed quite clear historical markers and are worlds apart from the ancient mythical stories. These observations included the exceptional closeness of the reports to the claimed events themselves, that the persons involved are historical individuals, the disciples' post-death experiences emphasized the language of sight rather than internal convictions alone, the death and resurrection of Jesus being taught clearly and often as opposed to mutilated

¹⁴ Smith, "The Death of 'Dying and Rising Gods' in the Biblical World," 279, 282, 288, 310-313.

¹⁵ It should be noted that the authors of this review article are not saying that Cook necessarily has an easy solution to this problem. After all, the book is lengthy (over 700+ pages) and complaints that one could have included x, y, or z can be easily made (and easily done uncharitably). However, our point here is that the brevity gives the work a feeling of imbalance, especially given the depths and details of the previous chapters.

manuscripts, lacunas, and the differences between the NT and reports regarding non-historical “super-heroes.”¹⁶

The most striking examples of this last point are that perhaps the two most prominent proponents of the nineteenth and early twentieth century *religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, namely Wilhelm Bousset and Otto Pfliegerer, both acknowledged freely the exceptional historical differences between these dying and rising accounts in ancient mythology and the specific accounts of the disciples’ experiences of the risen Jesus in the NT. In particular, both Bousset¹⁷ and Pfliegerer¹⁸ distanced significantly the NT accounts of Jesus’ resurrection from the mythological stories, noting that the disciple’s experiences could not be explained away by the existence of the ancient pagan texts. Ernst Troeltsch added helpful comments on this subject as well.¹⁹

Historical considerations such as those mentioned above also provide explanations of the cases mentioned in Cook’s Chapter 3 regarding the ancient stories of empty tombs and subsequent appearances. These accounts are a mixed lot of fictional tales as in early novels, very little underlying history, with many even core elements of these stories that vary quite widely from writer to writer.²⁰ Further, they are characterized by reports that are without specific connections of

¹⁶ A few of the many examples include Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 67-68, 85-115, 117-121; Günter Wagner, *Das religionsgeschichtliche Problem von Römer 6, 1-11* (Zürich: Zwingli Verlag, 1962), 122, 283-284, 297-298; Bruce M. Metzger, *Historical and Literary Studies: Pagan, Jewish, and Christian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968), particularly 6-24; Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* [Cleveland: World Publishing, 1963], 98-99, 174-175, 460-465; Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist*, 222-230; Edwin M. Yamauchi, “Tammuz and the Bible,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 84 (1965), 283-290; popularly, Yamauchi, “Did Christianity Copy Earlier Pagan Resurrection Stories?” in *The Harvest Handbook of Apologetics*, ed. by Joseph M. Holden (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2018), 152-155.

¹⁷ Bousset, *Kyrios Christos: A History of the Belief in Christ from the Beginnings of Christianity to Irenaeus*, trans. by John E. Steely (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970; reprint of 1913 German version), 49-52, 56-59, 191-194.

¹⁸ Otto Pfliegerer, *The Early Christian Conception of Christ: Its Significance and Value in the History of Religion* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1905), 157-158; also 102.

¹⁹ Troeltsch, *The Christian Faith*, ed. by Gertrud von le Fort, trans. by Garrett E. Paul (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991; trans. from the 1925 German version), 96; also 88. This volume was based on Troeltsch’s lectures in 1912 and 1913.

²⁰ Cook provides a long and very helpful list of many of these conundrums and other questions that he treats in detail in this chapter (*Empty Tomb, Resurrection, Apotheosis*, 250-255, 258-259, 263, 272, 279, 284, 287, 290, 321).

historical provenance, data, early evidence, or other markers of any measurable or observable sort. While some of these stories may still serve as analogies to show the linguistic argument for bodily conceptions of afterlife (with specific connections to the words for resurrection), genealogical or causal connections between them and the death and resurrection of Jesus are not in view here. As stated repeatedly by Jonathan Z. Smith, “analogies do not yield genealogies.”²¹ In fact, virtually no specialized scholars, including Cook or Mettinger,²² even argue that these dying and rising tales inspired and/or led to the NT accounts of Jesus’ death and resurrection.²³

Nevertheless, in spite of some concerns such as those mentioned here, Cook’s volume is very valuable for those interested in the dying and rising literature in antiquity as well as the linguistic evidence on resurrection. This lengthy volume is a literal treasure-trove that deserves exceptionally careful study. Highly recommended.

²¹ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 104; also 112-113.

²² Cook, *Empty Tomb, Resurrection, Apotheosis*, cf. 568-569. See also Cook, “Resurrection in Paganism and the Resurrection of Jesus Christ,” in *The City* (a publication of Houston Baptist University), Vol. 9 (Spring, 2016), 86, 89, 93-94; Mettinger, *The Riddle of Resurrection*, 221.

²³ Besides scholars such as Cook, Mettinger, Bousset, and Pfeleiderer, compare also Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 113-114, 118; Mark Smith, “The Death of ‘Dying and Rising Gods’ in the Biblical World,” 312-313; Wagner, *Das religionsgeschichtliche Problem von Römer 6, 1-11*, 283-288, 297-298; Metzger, *Historical and Literary Studies*, 11-13, 18-19, 23-24; Yamauchi, “Did Christianity Copy Earlier Pagan Resurrection Stories?” 154-155.