What, if anything, does Jerusalem, as the center of the earliest Christian movement, have to do with Athens, as the center of western philosophy? Do they share purposes? Do they share means to achieving their purposes? Do they share anything significant at all? The latter three questions demand yes answers, if only because Jerusalem and Athens both aim to achieve truth, and they aim to achieve truth via knowledge of truth. These two factors are significant in terms of what defines Jerusalem and Athens. So, Jerusalem and Athens do share something significant, however much they differ.

Still, the fact that Jerusalem and Athens aim for truth via knowledge of truth does not set them apart from many other movements. The later natural and social sciences, properly understood, aim for truth via knowledge, but they are not native citizens of Jerusalem or Athens. The philosophy definitive of Athens aims for a kind of truth whose discovery did not wait upon the later investigations of the natural and social sciences. As a result, Plato proceeded with his philosophical work even though the natural and social sciences were at best immature. Likewise, the theology definitive of the Christian movement in Jerusalem did not wait for the development
of the natural and social sciences. Its theology of Good News went out to the wider world in a manner independent of the natural and social sciences. Thus, the original philosophers and theologians from Athens and Jerusalem did not need to consult the natural or social sciences to launch and develop their respective enterprises of seeking truth via knowledge.

An illuminating question is: what distinguishes Jerusalem from Athens? Speaking generally, we may say that Socrates and Plato launched a wisdom movement whereby they aimed to characterize humans as cognitive and moral agents in pursuit of the good life. The wisdom movement of Socrates and Plato assumed that “… those who really apply themselves in the right way to philosophy are directly and of their own accord preparing themselves for dying and death” (*Phaedo* 64a). Death, they held, is the release of the soul from the body, whereby the soul can, without bodily distraction, attain to truth and clear thinking. The person of wisdom (i.e., the philosopher) thus welcomes death as an opportunity for intellectual purification from the physical toxins of the present world. Plato’s *Phaedo* is the founding manifesto for this intellectual-enlightenment philosophy characteristic of ancient Athens.

Jesus and his follower Paul of Tarsus, in contrast, promoted a Good News movement that offered people bodily, moral, and spiritual redemption by God (see, e.g., Luke 24; 1 Cor. 15). Their promise of divine redemption included a promise of bodily resurrection, which is not to be confused with resuscitation of a dead person or with immortality. Socrates and Plato hoped for immortality but had no place for bodily resurrection; the body would only obstruct purification as intellectual enlightenment. Jesus and Paul, however, taught in the tradition of Genesis 1-2 that God’s creation of the physical world was good, and not a mere impediment to our intellectual purification. They embraced God’s promise that the people of God would be raised from the
dead, even bodily; otherwise, they assumed, human redemption would be gravely incomplete. Resurrection, in their eyes, included embodiment. Jerusalem thus goes against Athens, and the two will not be reconciled in their attitudes toward the physical world and what humans need.

In *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, N.T. Wright examines “the way in which ‘resurrection’, denied by pagans but affirmed by a good many Jews, was both reaffirmed and redefined by the early Christians...” (pp. xvii-xviii). Now, whatever else they were, “the early Christians” were a mixed bag in terms of their beliefs and practices, and we know this from the New Testament epistles, particularly Paul’s letters to the Corinthian Christians. So, given our historical evidence, we are always well-advised to speak of “some” or perhaps “most” early Christians rather than “the” early Christians. It would be amazing indeed if all of the early Christians shared a definition of ‘resurrection’. In any case, we have no historical means to show that they all shared a definition of ‘resurrection’, as our evidence about early Christians does not extend to how *all* early Christians understood resurrection. Wright’s book does not adequately incorporate this lesson.

Wright offers an elaborate exposition of death and the after-life in some ancient Greek and Roman writers, in some Old Testament writers, in some post-biblical Jewish writers, in the apostle Paul and some other New Testament writers, and in some early post-New Testament Christian writers. Regarding the New Testament writers surveyed, Wright contends that two beliefs are historically secure in terms of being widely held by early Christians: the belief that the tomb of Jesus was empty on the first Easter, and the belief that the resurrected Jesus had appeared to some people. He holds that neither belief is individually sufficient for the emergence of the early Christian belief that Jesus was resurrected. He writes: “Nobody in the pagan world
would have interpreted an empty tomb as implying resurrection; everyone knew such a thing was out of the question. Nobody in the ancient Jewish world would have interpreted it like that either; ‘resurrection’ was not something anyone expected to happen to a single individual while the world went on as normal” (pp. 688-9). So, evidence that goes beyond an empty tomb was needed to underwrite early Christian belief that Jesus was resurrected. In the absence of such evidence, the dominant belief would have been that his body was removed from the tomb by some natural process.

Experiences of meeting with the risen Jesus were also insufficient to give rise to early Christian belief that Jesus was resurrected. Such experiences would have been interpreted in various ways by first-century Christians, according to Wright, including as mere visions or as visitations by angelic beings. Experiences of meeting with the risen Jesus would have to be supplemented with evidence that the experience is of a real body, such as a body that had left an empty tomb. So, Wright contends, belief that the tomb of Jesus was empty and belief that people had met the risen Jesus are “insufficient to generate early Christian belief” that Jesus was resurrected. “Bring them together, however, and they form in combination a sufficient condition” (p. 692).

Wright explains his thesis further:

The combination of empty tomb and appearances of Jesus was clearly not sufficient for the rise of Christian belief in everyone who heard about it....

Granted that those who found the empty tomb and saw the risen Jesus were second-Temple Jews, most of whom had followed Jesus and were hoping he
would turn out to be Israel’s Messiah, the two pieces of evidence would be sufficient to make most of them conclude that he had been raised from the dead.... The doubts of some at the time, and the refusal of others later on to believe the witness of Christian preachers, do not substantially affect this point. (The fact that, because of poor weather or ground conditions, or indeed reckless or hostile action by other parties, not all first-rate planes flown by first-rate pilots make it safely to land does not affect the general point.) (p. 693).

Wright’s story becomes murky here. We now have the refined claim that the evidence regarding the empty tomb and the appearances of Jesus was sufficient only for some, and not for all, first century Jews directly familiar with Jesus to believe that Jesus was resurrected. What exactly is the relevant evidential difference between those who believed and those who did not believe? Without an answer, we may plausibly suppose that some unidentified factor plays a crucial role in the emergence of early Christian belief that Jesus was resurrected.

It does not explain much, if anything, to say that those who did not believe faced “poor weather or ground conditions, or indeed reckless or hostile action by other parties.” We need to know specifically what constitutes such “poor” conditions and such “hostile” action. Otherwise we will not understand the relevant difference between the two groups with regard to their receiving and handling available evidence.

The first-century Jews who came to believe, on the basis of their evidence, that Jesus was resurrected held that God had raised Jesus from the dead to an exalted status with God. Resurrection, then, was inherently theological (that is, God-driven) for them. These Christian
Jews had an understanding of God according to which this was a live option regarding God’s action toward Jesus. In contrast, the first-century Jews who refused to believe, on the basis of their evidence, that Jesus was resurrected may have had an understanding of God according to which this was not a live option regarding God’s action toward Jesus. God, they may have held, would not act in this way toward Jesus, given who God is and what God has planned. Paul of Tarsus was one such first-century Jew, until his understanding of God was significantly reoriented, somewhere and somehow along the road to Damascus. Paul could have written off the appearance of Jesus to him as an illusory experience (owing, say, to missionary exhaustion), but his newly altered understanding of God allowed him to hold that the appearance was truly that of the risen Son of God, viz., the resurrected Jesus. Paul’s transformation is indeed mysterious in some ways, but it clearly includes a reorientation of his understanding of God relative to Jesus, the crucified Galilean.

We do not have anything like an algorithm for what determines one’s understanding of God, even relative to the resurrection of Jesus. Even so, the crucial role of one’s understanding of God is undeniable. As long as my understanding of God is inimical to God’s raising Jesus to an exalted status, I will be closed to belief that God resurrected Jesus from the dead. Paul himself held that one’s response to God’s Holy Spirit plays a crucial role in whether one acknowledges Jesus as having been exalted by God: “no one can say that Jesus is (risen) Lord, except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:3). Wright fails to give adequate attention to the explanatory role, including the evidential role, of the Holy Spirit in early Christian belief about Jesus as risen Lord. This is a serious deficiency in his account, and it puts the account at odds with some remarks in the New Testament itself.
Wright extends his position to a claim about a necessary condition: “... the bodily resurrection of Jesus provides a necessary condition for these things [viz., the tomb being empty and the Easter and post-Easter ‘meetings’ with Jesus taking place]; in other words, ... no other explanation could or would do” (p. 717). Wright’s claim about a necessary condition seems to be: If the tomb of Jesus is empty and the ‘meetings’ with Jesus took place, then Jesus has been resurrected from the dead by God. Everything here depends, of course, on what we mean by “meetings” with Jesus. If we have in mind possibly merely subjective experiences (to avoid begging a key question about the veracity of the appearances), the claim to a necessary condition fails. In that case, we could imagine that the body of Jesus was stolen by thieves and some of the disciples had extensive and shared illusory experiences of Jesus after his death. So, the resurrection of Jesus is not a logically necessary condition for the tomb being empty and the ‘meetings’ taking place. Wright’s language is confused regarding a logically necessary condition for a proposition, \( P \), and a necessary condition for a good or best explanation of \( P \). His main concern seems to be an inference to “the best explanation” of the tomb being empty and the ‘meetings’ taking place, and he recognizes that such a process is abductive and probabilistic rather than logically demonstrative (p. 716).

The problem with Wright’s abductive approach is twofold. First, even if the resurrection of Jesus figures in the best explanation of the tomb being empty and the ‘meetings’ taking place, how does this consideration underwrite that Jesus is now risen as Lord? What reason do we have to believe that the resurrected Jesus continues to live and reign as Lord? For all our historical evidence indicates, he could have ceased to exist at some time in the distant past. So, there is a chasm, a chronological chasm, in Wright’s account. Second, even if the resurrection of Jesus
figures in the best explanation of the tomb being empty and the ‘meetings’ taking place, how does this consideration yield nonprobabilistic knowledge that Jesus is now risen as Lord. The kind of knowledge suitable to faith as trust in Jesus seems not to be just a matter of probabilistic belief. Kierkegaard made much of this point, and it finds no firm response in Wright’s abductive approach. Aside from such pressing epistemological problems, Wright’s book offers an encyclopedic overview of many ancient approaches to death and life after death, including Christian approaches. It offers a kind of conceptual precision at many points that goes beyond typical theological writing.

The resurrection of Jesus looms large in many Christian approaches to redemption. The collection The Redemption, however, is very thin on the place of the resurrection in Christian redemption. Its fourteen essays cover some biblical questions about redemption, some patristic and medieval approaches to redemption, some philosophical issues about redemption, and some treatments of redemption in literature, art, music, and preaching. None of the essays, however, offers a sustained treatment of the place of resurrection in Christian redemption. This is a notable deficiency, but it is typical in much Christian thinking that separates the cross (or, atonement) of Jesus from his resurrection.

The apostle Paul offers a different approach: “...Jesus... was delivered up (to death) for our trespasses and was raised (from the dead) for our justification” (Rom. 4:24-25; cf. Rom. 5:10). In other words, God’s raising Jesus from the dead is, according to Paul, causally involved in our being justified before God. Theologians in the western church (Augustine being an exception) have almost universally neglected Paul’s assumption that the resurrection of Jesus is causally involved in the justification of people before God. Given Paul’s assumption,
justification and thus redemption cannot be understood solely in terms of the death of Jesus. The essays in *The Redemption*, for all their wide-ranging contributions to the idea of Jesus as redeemer, do not illuminate this important area of Paul’s thought about redemption. My own diagnosis of this deficiency is that western Christian scholars typically neglect the role of divine power in redemption, and focus instead on such notions as reconciliation, atonement, and justification.

The apostle Paul, in contrast, thought of the earliest Jesus movement as a Good News power movement. The Good News of God’s revelation in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, according to Paul, is “the power of God for salvation for everyone who trusts (God)” (Rom. 1:16; cf. 1 Cor. 1:18). Paul thought of the obedient death-by-crucifixion undergone by Jesus and the resurrection of Jesus from the dead as two inextricably related moments in a single life-giving power movement by the one true God of heaven and earth. The resurrection was so central to Paul’s understanding of salvation as redemption from evil and death that he could say: “If Christ has not been raised (from the dead), your faith is in vain and you are still in your sins” (1 Cor. 15:17). In addition, he speaks of the kind of “knowing Christ” that is essential to salvation as involving our knowing “the power of his resurrection” (Phil. 3:10). Paul, in short, was a theologian of the cross because he was also a theologian of the resurrection.

We thus see that the power central to the Good News movement of Jerusalem is not only morally significant but also cognitively important. Paul would say that he knows the risen Jesus on the basis of his knowing firsthand the power of Jesus’s resurrection. Redemption, according to Paul, consists in knowing firsthand and being transformed by the power of Jesus’s resurrection. The Holy Spirit of God supplies both the needed power of resurrection (Rom. 1:4)
and the needed knowledge of this power (Rom. 8:15-16; cf. Rom. 5:5). Such an approach to knowledge is altogether foreign to modern ways of epistemological thinking. As a result, this approach is almost universally overlooked in contemporary philosophy of religion and theology. The two books under review take no account of this approach to knowledge of God and redemption. They thus leave us at the level of probabilistic historical assessment. At this level, we cannot make adequate sense of the revolutionary Good News movement launched by Jerusalem. Such a person-transforming revolution is never anchored in mere historical assessment.

What, then, does Jerusalem have to do with Athens? Athens yields an intellectual-enlightenment wisdom movement that holds out no hope or even desire of lasting life via bodily resurrection. Contemporary philosophy, for the most part, follows suit. Jerusalem offers a Good News power movement of redemption as deliverance by God from both evil and death into lasting life, including bodily resurrection. Jesus is offered as the first fruits of this revolutionary movement of God’s Spirit. The movement is all about the intervention of a Power that brings life even in the face of death. This life includes moral and spiritual renewal, and, in the future, bodily resurrection.

The pressing question from Athens to Jerusalem is, as always, cognitive: how could one possibly know that the promise of the Good News movement is true? The answer from Jerusalem is clear but widely neglected: only by knowing firsthand the Promise-Giver, via the power of Jesus’s resurrection; that is, only by means of one’s willing participation in the power of God’s life-giving and life-transforming Holy Spirit. The question from Jerusalem to Athens, then, is, as always, volitional: are we truly willing to participate in God’s life, that is, to give up
our self-promoting lives for the sake of lasting lives in God’s *agape*, in the power of the risen Jesus? We now await an answer from Athens.

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