

JESUS - a new vision

A series of Papers based on the work of leading scholars

PAPER 1

(September 2011)

THE JEWISH BACKGROUND TO JESUS' MINISTRY

based on

The New Testament and the People of God

Part 3 – First century Judaism within the Greco-Roman world

by

N T Wright

SPCK (1992)

Introduction

In this Paper, N T Wright paints a vivid picture of the 'thoughtworld' of Jewish, first century Palestine, the context in which Jesus was to conduct his ministry. The stark mismatch between Jewish expectations and Jesus' 'message' will become clear from the Paper which follows. Wright's reconstruction, as he explains, has become possible only within recent decades owing to major developments in the way that historians 'do history'.

Ever since the Protestant Reformation in the mid-sixteenth century, scholars have preferred to pick over the New Testament texts to extract general ethical principles, what N T Wright refers to as 'the timeless truths', which could be used by church leaders to keep folk in the churches on the right path. For the reformers, the events of the life and ministry of Jesus were inconvenient details which were simply irrelevant to their contemporaries living so many hundreds of years later, whilst the fact that Jesus himself was a first-century Jew, directing his ministry to his fellow Jews was a positive embarrassment; how could such a background be used as the foundation for a faith which claimed to have universal application?

This climate of opinion among the scholars continued for some three hundred years. Then, in the nineteenth century, interest in the historical Jesus began to develop. But, as Wright recounts, the historical facts, as given in the gospels, were often quoted piecemeal, selected to provide support for one philosophical or theological idea or another. This was not 'doing history', says Wright, as it should be done. Moreover, 'the facts' which some scholars were using as the basis for their theories, were subject to a thoroughgoing scepticism on the grounds that the evangelists, writing some fifty years after the time of Jesus, were addressing their own contemporaries with their own ideas and preoccupations. The events the evangelists described simply could not be taken as reliable historical data concerning the life of Jesus., in the view of the sceptics.

And so matters rested within the scholarly 'academy' right up until the mid-twentieth century and beyond. Then, in the 1980s, a new historical approach emerged, dislodging the ruling idea that the defining influence in any given culture was a set of ideas or principles, and proposing instead, that cultures in general are, and have been, more influenced by the stories they tell about themselves than about ideas. Telling stories, or narrative, became the key to unlock the understanding of peoples and cultures of the past, and indeed the present, too.

Within this new climate Wright sets his two volumes which are the subjects of the first three of our present set of Papers: *The New Testament and the People of God* and *Jesus and the*

Victory of God. It should be noted, however, that this 'new climate' has emerged within the lifetime of the majority of Christians alive today, replacing a frame of mind stretching back not just to the Protestant reformers, but to the ancient Greeks. There are unprecedented opportunities, therefore, for reappraisal of received interpretations of the Scriptures. Wright describes the historical method he has evolved in the light of the new climate in the early chapters of *The New Testament and the People of God*. He goes on to relate the genesis of the new critical thinking in the opening section of *Jesus and the Victory of God*. Wright himself suggests that readers may prefer to skip these introductions and proceed at one to the 'meat' (not his word) which follows. But he warns that in doing so, readers may find themselves asking questions about method and provenance which the introductions deal with. In the present set of Papers, we have placed the introductory material last, ie to form the third of our three Papers. This way, the reader does not have to feel obliged to tackle what is probably the most difficult aspect of Wright's work before proceeding to the main substance of the two volumes.

Any adequate rethinking of the interpretation of the Bible, Wright insists, requires the application of a thoroughgoing historical method, as distinct from the approaches used in the previous era. But his method requires foundations in the disciplines of Literature Studies and Theology as well. In *Jesus and the Victory of God*, (our Paper 2), Wright re-examines the life and ministry of Jesus in this light but, significantly, he does so against the backdrop of life and thought in first century Palestine. This backdrop forms the substance of *The New Testament and the People of God* (the present Paper). This yields results which one may fairly describe as dramatic, for we are accustomed to studying the gospels as freestanding texts without reference to the context in which Jesus actually worked and taught. Our two volumes are thus designed to complement each other. Jesus' background, discarded as virtually irrelevant to the sixteenth century reformers, thus comes centre stage in the new era, whilst the 'embarrassment' of his Jewish roots now sheds a powerful new light on the nature and thrust of his ministry.

The Setting of the Story

Wright sets the scene, employing, as we have to expect, the language of the historian rather than the devotional commentator 'We are looking for the self-understanding, the beliefs, the hopes of an embattled little nation at a particularly tense and fateful moment in its history', (p.151), Wright says, thus capturing the fretful, almost neurotic tone of the times for the first century Jews.

A little later, we will learn that the sense of 'embattlement' was not just to do with the fact that the (promised) Land was currently occupied by the Romans but also that the pervading culture of the Middle East at that time derived from the earlier conquest of the region by the Greek emperor, Alexander. Greek was a common, shared language for the peoples of the region and Greek ideas and culture, including paganism and pagan images, were to be found everywhere. Against this background, the Jews fought (mainly metaphorically) to retain their national identity, and this, as we shall frequently see in what follows, was a cardinal feature of the Jewish world of the time.

After commenting on his sources, Wright plunges into the history. The Babylonians, he tells us, destroyed the first Temple and took the Israelites captives to Babylon in 587BC. Some 70 years later, Babylon in turn, was overthrown by the Persians and the Israelites returned to their land.

But

When the great moment had come, and Babylon had been destroyed, Israel did not become free, mistress in her own land; first the Persians...became their overlords, and then, in the wake of Alexander's conquests, the Greeks. (pp.157/8)

Subsequently Egypt and then Syria took control of the area and in 167BC, says Wright, the megalomaniac Syrian ruler, Antiochus Epiphanes...took over the Temple, deliberately desecrating it and establishing worship of himself there instead.

This dire event, in Jewish eyes, led to the revolt of Judas Maccabaeus who drove out the tyrant and cleansed and reconsecrated the Temple. But all was not well.

A great vindication had occurred...but by no means all Jews were happy with the new situation. Getting rid of the tyrant and his idolatrous practices was one thing, but was the new Hasmonean regime what the covenant god really wanted? Was it not, in its turn, heavily compromised with Hellenism and riding roughshod over the sensibilities of the Jewish people...(p.159)

Then the Romans arrived with the conqueror, Pompey, repeating the performance of the former Syrian tyrant. He desecrated the Temple by entering the Holiest of Holies – the area where only the High Priest was allowed, and then only once a year. Pompey was reportedly nonplussed by finding nothing there. The Jews were outraged:

But no new Judas Maccabaeus arose to lead Israel's faithful heroes in another holy war. Instead, his heirs and successors compromised with the faithless and played their political game...the Temple became de facto the cultic shrine organised by those who had made a somewhat unsteady peace with Rome, whilst the rigorists looked on in impotent anger. (p.160)

Granted this mood, it was perhaps inevitable that Herod the Great (37 – 4BC) would never be accepted as the genuine king of the Jews. He made every effort to legitimate himself...above all (he) set in motion the rebuilding of the Temple, as the true coming king was supposed to do.

Herod was a Jew, but a Hasmonean, not of the house of David; moreover he was a client of the Romans. In general, then:

A mood of revolt was not far below the surface...revolution remained in the air during the early years of the new century...

Like any good historian, Wright is able to evoke the 'thoughtworld' of episodes from the past so that the lay person can enter into the way that people thought and felt, which brings the period to life in a way that a mere recital of facts does not.

Worldviews

Wright works by means of what he calls a 'worldview'. In this case, he is able to evoke with some certainty the way that first century Jews are likely to have thought and felt since we have all the evidence of the Jewish Scriptures (ie the Old Testament) as evidence. Moreover, we know that these scriptures were familiar to ordinary Jews, not just to a small, educated elite; ordinary folk heard the scriptures read on a regular basis as part of their worship and the written words were supported by a strong oral tradition.

Nations, says Wright, tell stories about their own past and these stories are the cement which binds them together as a people. This is the element of *narrative*, the importance of which has already been emphasised in these papers.

Here is Wright's account of the worldview of the Jews of first century Palestine:

The foundation story of Judaism...was, of course, the story of the Bible. Israel had told this story, one way or another, pretty much as long as she had been Israel...Seen from the perspective of the first century Jew...the basic story concerned the creator god and the world, and focused on Israel's place as the covenanted people of the former, placed in the midst of the latter. (p.218)

Thus, the call of the patriarchs was set against the backcloth of creation and fall...The descent into Egypt and the dramatic rescue under the leadership of Moses formed the initial climax of the story, setting the scene of liberation as one of the major motifs...The conquest of the land and the period of the Judges that formed the backcloth to and preparation for the next climax, the establishment of the monarchy...David was the new Abraham, the new Moses, through whom Israel's god would complete what was begun earlier...David's successors were (mostly) a bad lot, the kingdom was divided, the prophets went unheeded and Judah eventually went into exile. Promises of a new exodus arose naturally in such a context and led to the ambiguous new beginnings...The story still needed to be completed.

There were various subsequent bids to effect a completion. One of these was that of the Maccabees:

They hi-jacked the storyline of Israel's future hope and claimed this hope had been achieved through them. The ambiguities inherent in their regime were enough to cause other groups to retell the story differently; the Hasmonean regime was corrupt, and Israel's god would overthrow it and set up a right one instead. (pp.217/8)

Wright concludes

On virtually all sides there is a sense that the history of the creator, his world, and his covenant people is going somewhere, but that it has not yet arrived there. The creator will act again as he has done in the past, to deliver Israel from her plight and to deal with the evil of the world. (p.219)

The Covenant

Central to any understanding of the Jewish outlook is the Covenant – the covenant, recorded in Genesis between the creator god and Abraham, father of the Jewish nation. According to the Jewish scriptures, God chose the Jewish nation to remedy the catastrophe of the Fall, the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. In return for their obedience, He would lead them to a land of their own and make them a great nation so that they could lead the whole world back to its rightful place under God's law. Wright sums up the essence of the Covenant with a quotation from Deuteronomy, the book which he describes as 'the major work of covenant theology'; (Chapter 26):

Look down from your holy habitation, from heaven, and bless your people Israel and the ground that you have given us, as you swore to our ancestors – a land flowing with milk and honey.

Today YHWH has obtained your agreement: to be his treasured people, as he promised you, and to keep his commandments; for him to set you high above all nations that he has made...and for you to be a people holy to YHWH your God, as he promised.
(p.261)

Wright continues:

The basis of the Covenant was, of course, the set of promises to the patriarchs (set out particularly in Genesis 12, 15, 17, 22 etc), chief among which were 'blessings' whose overtones concerned especially the Land and its prosperity. The compilers of the Pentateuch saw the initial fulfilment of the covenant in the events of the exodus...The book of Deuteronomy is the major work of covenant theology which stands at the head of a long line of subsequent writings on this theme...The emphases throughout are on the promises made to Abraham, blessing as the consequence of covenant fidelity, the Land as the gift of Israel's god to his people, and Israel as holding the place of honour among the nations. (p.260/261)

In some passages of scripture, the Jews view of their favoured status in the eyes of the one, creator god, is expressed in, to us, alarmingly literal form:

Again and again in the Pentateuch (*), the psalms, the prophets and subsequent writings which derive from them, the claim is made that the creator of the entire universe has chosen to live uniquely on a small ridge called Mount Zion, near the eastern edge of the Judean hill country. The sheer absurdity of the claim, from the standpoint of any other worldview...is staggering. The fact that Assyria, Egypt, Babylon, Persia, Greece, Egypt again, and Syria, and now Rome has made implicit mockery of the idea did not shake this conviction but only intensified it. (p.247/8)

(*) *Pentateuch – see note at the end of the paper*

However,

If the creator god had entered into a covenant with this particular nation, then why were they not ruling the world as his chosen people should?...What was the creator and covenant god up to? And within this, a further question: what should Israel be doing in the present to hasten the time when he would act on her behalf...(p.268)

Answering 'worldview' questions

Earlier, in discussing 'worldviews', Wright has suggested that four questions will be embedded in any worldview: 'Who are we?', 'Where are we?', 'What is wrong?' and 'What is the solution?'. Now he gives the answers implicit in the case of the Jews of first century Palestine:

1. *Who are we?* We are Israel, the chosen people of the creator God.
2. *Where are we?* We are in the Holy Land, focused on the Temple, but paradoxically, we are still in exile.
3. *What is wrong?* We have the wrong rulers: pagans, on one hand, compromised Jews on the other, or half-way between, Herod and his family. We are involved in a less than ideal situation.
4. *What is the solution?* Our god must act again to give us the true sort of rule, that is, his own kingship exercised through properly appointed officials (a true priesthood; possibly a true king) and in the meantime, Israel must be faithful to her covenant charter. (p.243)

In short, the burning question was, 'How can we persuade the creator God to restore us to his favour?'

The need for this restoration is seen in the second-temple perception (*) of its own period of history. Most Jews of the period, it seems, would answer the question 'where are we now?' in language which, reduced to its simplest form, meant, we are still in exile. They believed that, in all the senses that mattered, Israel's exile was still in progress. Although she had come back from Babylon, the glorious message of the prophets remained unfulfilled. Israel still remained in thrall to foreigners; worse, Israel's god had not returned to Zion. Nowhere in the post-exilic literature is there any passage corresponding to 1 Kings 8:10f, according to which, when Solomon's temple had been finished, 'a cloud filled the house of YHWH, so that the priests could not see to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of YHWH filled the house....' Instead, Israel clung to the promises that one day the Shekinah, the glorious presence of her god, would return at last. (pp.268/9)

(*) *The second temple – see note at the end of the paper.*

Symbols as flashpoints

An important aspect of Wright's concept of worldview is the symbol. Symbols are objects or institutions which act as powerful focal points; to attack the identity-marking symbols of a race, a religion or a nation is deeply unacceptable and disturbing. Even in the secularised UK of today, to tear down or deface the union flag would cause deepest offence and an

exemplary prison sentence would be called for. In first century Palestine, three symbols of particular importance were the Temple, Torah and the Land.

The Temple

The Temple was regarded as the place where YHWH lived and ruled in the midst of Israel and where, through the sacrificial system...he lived in grace, forgiving them, restoring them and enabling them to be cleansed of defilement and so continue as his people. (p.224)

It was a focus of controversy, however.

Dissatisfaction with the first-century Temple was fuelled by the fact that, although it was certainly amongst the most beautiful buildings ever constructed, it was built by Herod. Only the true king, the proper successor to Solomon the original Temple builder, had the right to build a Temple, and whatever Herod was, he was not the true King...(pp.225/6)

Torah

The Torah was the current charter of Israel as the people of the covenant god. Temple and Torah formed an unbreakable whole: the Torah sanctioned and regulated what happened in the Temple and the Temple was the practical focal point for observance of Torah, both in the sense that much Torah observance actually consisted of Temple ritual and in the sense that the Temple was the major place for teaching and study of Torah. (p.227)

Compiler's Note:

What exactly is the Torah?

It consists of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible, plus the rabbinic commentaries upon it. As Wright says, these commentaries consist significantly of detailed instructions about Temple ritual and about food laws. In the second century AD the commentaries which had been handed down orally, were collated in written form in the Mishna.

The Land

This, of course, was the Land promised by YHWH to the descendants of Abraham in Genesis 12; the Land to which Moses led his people before dying within sight of it (Deut.34). A major theme in the Jewish story.

The fortunes of the Land, obviously expressed the whole theme of exile and restoration... The Land shared the ambiguity of the Temple; that is, it had been repossessed by those who returned from Babylon, but its repossession had been partial and Israel did not in fact rule it herself except as a puppet...Control and cleansing were what was required and as long as Rome was policing and polluting YHWH's sacred turf it was obvious that neither had happened. (p.227)

Solutions to 'worldview' questions

Wright now examines how the Jews faced up to the perplexing situation at the time of Herod the Great and, indeed, at the time of the Ministry of Jesus only a few years later.

We have already seen that the Hasmonean regime (the descendants of Judas Maccabaeus) did not carry universal assent amongst the Jews. They were not descendants of King David and they were insensitive to the finer points of Torah observance. Different groups reacted in different ways:

For instance:

The Pharisees worked within the system but constantly reminded those in official power of the ancestral traditions which they were in danger of flouting...There were dark rumblings of discontent which come through to us from surviving tracts, denouncing the Hasmonean regime in stern, apocalyptic language and imagery

Wright points out that the Pharisees held no official positions; they were essentially a pressure group, but a highly influential one on account of their popularity. After considering the Pharisees, Wright turns to consider various other influential groups in first century Palestine.

The Sadducees, mainly aristocrats, were 'yes' men for the Romans and did very well out of the occupation. They were less scrupulous than the Pharisees and did not share their discontents. The Essenes, as we know from the Dead Sea scrolls rather than from the Old Testament, opted out from the current tensions by removing themselves from mainstream life and continuing to practise the Jewish observances rigorously but in isolation. Whilst the Pharisees continued to centre their observances on the Herodian Temple, albeit with reluctance, the Essenes refused to have anything to do with it.

In answer to the question 'How are we to restore ourselves to the favour of the creator god?' there were, Wright explains, two distinct ideas: to redouble efforts to observe Torah and to get rid of the polluting pagan powers, not just the Romans but the cultural influence of the Greeks as well. To commit to either of these two ideas was to be 'zealous for Torah'. Pharisees, says Wright, might subscribe to either or both of these proposals. Those who favoured the use of force, particularly open rebellion, are by some authorities labelled as 'zealots'. But Wright makes clear that, if speaking about the time of Jesus, the label is an anachronism. A group defined as 'zealots' by their contemporaries did not appear until the eve of the war of 69/70AD which ended so disastrously for the Jews.

Another group, not to be forgotten, were 'ordinary' Jews:

We may take it that the majority of Jews in Palestine during the Roman period kept more or less to their biblical laws, prayed to their ancestral deity, and regulated their lives so as to emphasise the regular feasts and fasts of the calendar. They were not likely to have been deeply reflective theologians...(p.214)

Sin, restoration and God's kingdom

Wright emphasises that for the first century Jew, sin was not so much the sin of individuals, as it naturally applies to modern and post-modern Western Christians, but the collective sin of the whole people.

Throughout both major and minor prophets there runs the twin theme: Israel's exile is the result of her sin, idolatry and apostasy, and the problem will be solved by YHWH's dealing with the sin and restoring his people to their inheritance. Exile will be undone when sin is forgiven...If her sin has caused her exile, her forgiveness will mean her national re-establishment. This needs to be emphasised in the strongest possible terms: the most natural meaning of the phrase, 'the forgiveness of sins' to a first century Jew is not, in the first instance, the remission of *individual* sins, but the putting away of the whole nation's sins. And since exile was the punishment for those sins, the only sure sign that the sins had been forgiven would be the clear and certain liberation from exile. This is the major, national context within which individual dealing-with-sin must be understood. (p.273)

Wright reminds us what the main hope of Israel was to the first century Jew:

If there is one creator god, and Israel is his people, then that god must act sooner or later to restore her fortunes. Israel is still in a state of 'exile' and this must be put right... (p.280)

But

...If this was to happen Israel's god had to deal with her sin. The end of exile, in fact, would be seen as the great sign that this had been accomplished... The age to come, the end of Israel's exile, were therefore seen as the inauguration of a new covenant between Israel and her god...And in a phrase pregnant with meaning for both Jews and Christians, it would be, above all, 'the kingdom of god'. Israel's god would become in reality what he already was believed to be. He would be King of the whole world. (pp.300/301)

Wright continues:

'The kingdom of god' historically and theologically considered, is a slogan whose basic meaning is the hope that Israel's god is going to rule Israel (and the whole world), and that Caesar, or Herod, or anyone of that ilk, is not. It means that Torah will be fulfilled at last, that the Temple will be rebuilt and the land cleansed...This will certainly mean (from the point of view of the Pharisees, Essenes, and anyone loosely described as Zealots) a change in the high priesthood. In some writings, it also means a Messiah, though one striking feature of the period is how comparatively infrequent and completely unsystematized, expectation of a royal figure seem to be. (p.302)

NOTES

Pentateuch

The first five books of the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament), traditionally held to have been written by Moses.

The second temple

In a footnote (p.147) Wright explains:

The period regularly known as 'second temple Judaism' indicates the time roughly from the fourth century BC to the second century AD (even though the second Temple itself had been destroyed in AD 70).