

JESUS - a new vision

A series of Papers based on the work of leading scholars

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PAPER 2
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THE CHALLENGE OF JESUS TO THE JEWS

Based on
JESUS AND THE VICTORY OF GOD
Chapters 5 – 9
by
N T Wright
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Introduction

Our Papers 1 and 2, based respectively on N T Wright's *The New Testament and the People of God*, and his *Jesus and the Victory of God*, go together. The first provides the background for Jesus' ministry in first century Palestine. The second portrays his life and teaching, the 'message' of Jesus. The scriptural data for the latter is, of course, familiar to us. But traditionally it is presented in isolation. Now, and this is new, we can see what he did and said against the background of the hopes and expectations that the Jews had regarding the one who would come to rescue them from the 'exile' in which they still saw themselves even though they had returned from the physical exile of Babylon centuries before. What emerges is a far more divisive figure than the iconic Jesus on whom most of us were brought up. What, we may want to ask, are the implications of this for Christians today.

The Hope of Israel

In *The New Testament and the People of God* (our Paper 1) Wright tells the story the first century Jews were telling themselves: their creator God had delivered them from the Babylonian captivity but it was not like their earlier deliverance from the Egyptians, as told in the Book of Exodus. They had not returned to a promised land overflowing with milk and honey. Instead they had been overrun by a succession of rulers, ending with the Romans; their temple was being rebuilt and their priesthood restored, but the restoration was in the wrong hands. The ruling Hasmonian dynasty was corrupt and, in any case, did not belong to the royal line of David. The scriptures were not being fulfilled.

What was wrong? The creator God had withdrawn his favour which, it was concluded, could only be because of the sin of his chosen people. The sin, in this context, was not the transgressions of individual Jews; that was not a dominant concern. What mattered was the corporate failure to follow God's commands by the people as a whole. What was to be done? Two dominant solutions emerged: one was to observe the prescribed rituals and rulings laid down in the Laws more strictly. The other was to use force to get rid of the Romans and, indeed, to banish the corroding and all-pervading influence of pagan, Greek culture. The Jews of Jesus' time were not a happy people, says Wright. Revolt was never far below the surface.

The Jews themselves spoke of their aspirations and hopes as 'the coming of God's Kingdom'. As Wright puts it at the conclusion of our Paper 1:

'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 (the Law) 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.... (NTPG p.302)

Christians today are also familiar with the idea of 'the Kingdom of God' and will probably be rather taken aback by the very literal, down-to-earth meaning that the first century Jews attached to the phrase. Traditionally, for today's Christians, 'the Kingdom of God' refers to the rewards that await faithful people when they die, ie. the kingdom of heaven. This interpretation is not warranted by the scriptures, Wright tells us, and, as we will now see, when Jesus uses the phrase, which he frequently does, his meaning is far removed from that which either the first century Jews attached to it, or that which traditional 20/21 century Christians often attach to it today.

The Kingdom of God

Jesus was a Jew and his Ministry was, in the first place, to his own people. He did not come with a new message, out of the blue but, as Wright explains, he takes the stories and concepts with which the Jews are familiar and turns them round to provide a new meaning. Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in his handling of the idea of 'the Kingdom of God'. As Wright puts it:

Jesus was announcing that the long-awaited kingdom of Israel's god was indeed coming to birth, but that it did not look like what had been imagined. The return from exile, the defeat of evil and the return of YHWH to Zion were all coming about but not in the way Israel had supposed. (p.201)

And

Jesus, then, was offering a long-awaited renewal and restoration, but on new terms with new goals. He is telling the story of Israel, giving it a dramatic new twist, and inviting his hearers to make it their own, to heed his warnings and follow his invitation. (p.173)

'Warnings' and 'invitation'. We will proceed by looking at Jesus' Ministry under these two headings. First 'Invitation':

The invitation of Jesus' Ministry

First of all, Jesus called his people to repentance.

This was not simply the 'repentance' that any human being, any Jew, might use if, aware of sin, they decided to say sorry and make amends. It is the single great repentance which would characterize the true people of YHWH at the moment when their god became king. (p.251)

As Wright has already theorized, Jesus was retelling the Jewish story in a new and radical way. Jesus' call to repentance was a case in point:

The crucial thing, of course, is that for Jesus, repentance, whether personal or national, *did not involve going to the Temple and offering sacrifice...* Jesus offered membership in the renewed people of the covenant god *on his own authority and by his own process*. This was the real scandal. (p.257)

Jews of Jesus' day (were not, of course) opposed to forgiveness, love, grace and so forth, but...they were not expecting these gifts to be available outside the context of Temple and cult. It came down to this: if the story which Jesus was telling by his words and actions was true, the climactic moment of Jewish history had arrived in person, and was behaving in a thoroughly unprincipled manner.

No wonder the religious leaders started tearing their clothes and shrieking 'blasphemy' when they heard of Jesus' claims.

Wright later describes the function of the Temple in these terms:

The Temple, in conception was a dwelling place on earth for the deity of ancient Israel...the symbolic nature of the Temple...depended on a series of features which, if taken together, established the sacred precinct as being located at the centre of the universe, as the place where heaven and earth converge and thus from where God's control over the universe is effected. (p.407)

In particular

It was the place where the forgiveness of sins on one hand and cleansing from defilement on the other, were believed to be effected. (p.408)

Even more to the point, given Jesus' claim, forgiveness and cleansing were carried out by the priests; no one else was entitled to do this.

By offering forgiveness of sins, Jesus was denying the centrality of the Temple to the whole Jewish system and ignoring the privileges of the priestly caste. Instead, he was claiming that he and only he had the power before God to forgive people their sins. These were words of unparalleled offensiveness; they were also deeply subversive and dangerous. Who was this man? Who did he think he was?

The Pharisees, as we know, were sticklers for the strict observance of the Jewish laws. Non-observers, including, for example, those who were too poor to pay the tithes due to the Temple authorities on top of the taxes compulsorily levied by the Romans, were classed as outcasts. Others included the disabled whose physical defects were taken as signs of God's displeasure, and those who worked for the Romans such as tax collectors. For the observant Jew, influenced by the Pharisees, the world was sharply divided between insiders and outsiders. And it went without saying that insiders certainly did not sit down to eat with outsiders. Ritual purity had to be upheld.

Yet, Jesus extended his invitation to everyone, insiders and outcasts alike.

He ate and drank with all sorts and conditions of people, sometimes in an atmosphere of celebration. He ate with 'sinners', and kept company with people normally on or beyond the borders of respectable society – which, of course, in his day and culture, meant not merely social respectability but religious uprightness, proper covenant behaviour, loyalty to the traditions and hence to the aspirations of Israel. This caused regular offence to some of the pious. (p.149)

A New Covenant

There is a strong sense in Wright's account that Jesus was well aware that he was fulfilling the prophecies to be found in the Scriptures.

For example:

The days are coming, says YHWH, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt...But this is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says YHWH: I will put my law within them, and I will write it in their hearts; and I will be their god, and they shall be my people...I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sins no more. (Jer.31:31-4) (p.269)

And

A new heart will I give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you...

In the light of such prophecies, says Wright, Jesus was offering nothing less than a New Covenant which signified the true return from exile for which the Jews yearned. But what sort of behaviour would the New Covenant require? Not a new set of ethical practises, says Wright, but a renewed heart.

In and through his own work Israel's god was doing a new thing, or rather, *the* new thing for which Israel longed. And when that happened everything would be different. Torah could regulate certain aspects of human behaviour, but it could not touch the heart...When the promises of scripture were fulfilled, the heart itself would be changed, and the supreme position of Torah would in consequence be relativized. (p.380)

But

Jesus' zealous contemporaries would have said: Torah provides the litmus test of loyalty to Israel's god and to his covenant. Jesus said, what counts is following me. (p.381)

(For a brief note on Torah, see Paper 2 (Symbols as Flashpoints))

Warning and Vindication

Turning straight away to Wright's text:

If Jesus was telling a story...he must have had some idea where it was going to end...When we examine Jesus' proclamation with this in mind, two clear lines emerge. First, there are warnings of impending national disaster; a coming political, military and social nightmare, as a result of which Jerusalem will be destroyed. Second, there are assurances that those who follow Jesus will escape; they are challenged to be ready to do so at the opportune moment. (p.320)

When we read through the synoptic tradition (and John for that matter) we find a great deal of warnings of coming judgement...and all pointing in one direction. Jesus, I shall now argue, predicted that judgement would fall on the nation in general and on Jerusalem in particular. (pp. 322/323)

Wright goes on to cite relevant instances from the gospel accounts of which the parable of the wicked tenants may be taken as a good example. Nothing could be clearer, however, than Jesus' denunciations found in Matthew 23/Luke 11, beginning:

The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; so practice and observe whatever they tell you, but not what they do; for they preach but do not practice. They bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders ; but they themselves will not move them with their finger.

The passage comes to a crescendo with these words:

You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell? Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will crucify, and some you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from town to town...Truly I say to you, all will come upon this generation.

The climax of Jesus' warning to his contemporaries comes in Mark 13 and its parallels in Matthew and Luke. Known as 'The Little Apocalypse' this chapter is traditionally assumed to be announcing the imminent end of the space-time world. Since that event manifestly didn't happen as forecast, some scholars, including Albert Schweitzer, have concluded, simply, that Jesus got it wrong. Other scholars identify the chapter as one that did not originate from Jesus himself, but was an interpolation by the evangelists portraying the dramatic events of AD69/70 when the Romans under Titus crushed the Jewish rebellion sacked Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple – events which had already occurred when the evangelists were writing.

Wright has this to say:

As far as the disciples, good first century Jews as they were, were concerned, there was no reason whatever for them to be thinking about the end of the space-time universe. There was no reason, either in their background or in a single thing that Jesus had said to them up to this point, for it even to occur to them that the true story of the world, or of Israel, or of Jesus himself, might include either the end of the space-time universe, or Jesus or anyone else floating down to earth on a cloud...Had Jesus wished to introduce so strange and unJewish an idea to them he would have had a very difficult task; as we often find in the gospels, their minds were not exactly at their sharpest in picking up redefinitions, even of ideas with which they were already somewhat familiar. (p.345)

No. Mark 13, in Wright's considered view, represents a very this-world forecast of events that would occur unless the present generation of Israel turned from its present path and followed the teaching of Jesus instead. True, the chapter is couched in dramatic, metaphoric terms, but this was a familiar way of emphasising the importance of the pronouncements concerned.

As for the disciples:

(They) were very interested in a story which ended with Jesus' coming to reign as king. They were looking for the fulfilment of Israel's hopes, for the story told so often in Israel's scriptures to reach its appointed climax. And the 'close of the age' for which they longed was not the end of the space-time order, but the end of the present evil age and the introduction of the age to come – in other words, the end of Israel's period of mourning and exile and the beginning of her freedom and vindication. (pp.345/6)

The disciples were pressing Jesus to give them details of his plan for becoming king, as David had become king...They were longing for their own version of the great event for which all Israel had been on tiptoe...

What had Jesus to say to them? Well, first of all there was the urgent practical advice to be found in Mark 13; when the calamitous day came, there was not a moment to lose. Faithful people must quit Jerusalem as fast as possible.

But further:

So everyone who acknowledges me publicly, I will also acknowledge him before my father who is in heaven; but who denies me publicly, I will also deny before my father who is in heaven. (Mt.10.32/ Lk 12.8) (p.337)

Or

If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life shall lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it...For the son of man is to come with his angels in the glory of the Father, and then he will repay everyone for what he has done. (Mt.16.24-8 and parallels)

In other words:

Those who had abandoned all in order to follow Jesus would receive back far more than they had lost. Israel's god would speedily vindicate his elect; those who acknowledged Jesus would themselves be acknowledged on the great and terrible day. (p.338)

Later, of course, justification came with the coming to pass of the terrible events foretold in Mark 13. The great and ultimate vindication, though, was of course the Resurrection itself.

The Sermon on the Mount

An important aspect of Wright's consideration of the Sermon on the Mount, and particularly of the 'five antitheses' (Mt.5:21-48), is Jesus' agenda for peace. Referring to the Beatitudes, Wright comments:

Israel longs for consolation...but YHWH has in mind to give her, not the consolation of a national revival, in which old wounds will be healed by inflicting wounds on others, but on the consolation awaiting those who are in genuine grief. Israel desires to inherit the earth; she must do it in Jesus' way, by meekness. Israel thirsts for justice; but the justice she is offered does not come by way of battles against physical enemies. It is not the way of anger, of a 'justice' which really means 'vengeance'. It is the way of humility and gentleness. (p.288)

But Wright makes a particular point about the last two 'antitheses' that follow the Beatitudes. It is quite specifically, a political issue.

You have heard it said, 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'. But I say to you, do not resist one who is evil...(Matt.5.38-39)

You have heard it said, 'You shall love your neighbours and hate your enemies'. But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. (Matt.5.43-44).

In particular, it emerges in the final two antitheses, Jesus' followers were not to make common cause with the resistance movement, those whose 'zeal for Torah' took a militant turn. The command, 'Do not resist evil' is not to be taken simply to refer to personal or village hostilities. The word 'resist' is *antistenai*, almost a technical term for revolutionary resistance of a specific military variety, the activity for which the militant zealots plotted, and which Jesus now indicates is to be emphatically avoided.

Saviour of the Nations

The Jews believed that they were called to be the saviour of the nations. On this topic, Wright restates what he said in NTPG:

The fate of the nations was inexorably and irreversibly bound up with that of Israel....The point is of the utmost importance for the understanding both of first-century Judaism and of emerging Christianity. What happened to the gentiles is conditional upon, and conditioned by, what happens to Israel...The call of Israel has as its further objective the rescue and restoration of the entire creation. Not to see this connection is to fail to understand the meaning of Israel's fundamental doctrine of monotheism (there is one God only, and he is the God of creation) and election (Israel is God's chosen race). (NTPG p.268) (p.308)

Given these deeply held convictions, says Wright, Jesus' contemporaries would have assumed that his announcement of 'the kingdom' would have involved 'the nations' by means of their subjugation in some form to Israel. What Jesus had in mind – that 'Israel would be the light of the world so that the nations, seeing it, could come and glorify the god of Israel' (pp.309/310) – was very different, says Wright.

(Jesus) was holding out a deeply subversive wisdom and was inviting his followers to make it their own. (p.310)

The Return of the King

All of our text, so far, comes from Part 2 of Wright's book, entitled *Profile of a Prophet*. What follows belongs to Part 3 *The Aims and Beliefs of Jesus*.

Did Jesus understand himself to be the Messiah? Wright is quite clear about this:

I shall argue that Jesus saw himself as the leader and focal point of the true, returning-from-exile Israel. He was the king through whose work YHWH was at last restoring his people. He was the Messiah. (p.477)

But before proceeding with his supporting argument, Wright reminds his readers that the Jewish Scriptures provided no single picture of the Messiah. Two things, however, were clear: there was no indication or expectation that the Messiah would have divine status but what was generally expected was that he would be the king-figure who would lead the victorious battle against Israel's

enemies. This meant, of course, that any claimant – and there were plenty; Jesus was but one of a bunch - who was executed by the occupying forces was not, after all, the true Messiah.

This single perception puts into stark relief the sense of desolation and disillusion that Jesus' followers must inevitably have experienced when the climax of the trial and crucifixion were reached. It also illuminates their corresponding sense of joy and vindication when the fact of the great Resurrection event eventually sank in; an example of the claim Wright makes in the general introductory remarks about his work, that the historian, so far from undermining the beliefs of the faithful, as opponents fear, sheds a constructive light which aids and supports faith.

In his chapter *The Return of the King*, Wright immediately cuts short any expectation that he will speculate on whether or not Jesus was, in fact, divine: He will limit himself to asking about Jesus' own sense of vocation. How Jesus saw himself, Wright argues, was firmly rooted in the Jewish Scriptures. In the final chapter of Exodus, Moses took the Ark of the Covenant and placed it in the Tabernacle...

Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud abode upon it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.

In a later event of equal significance:

...And they brought up the ark of the Lord...and King Solomon and all the congregation of Israel who had assembled before him were with him before the ark...Then the priests brought the ark of the Covenant of the Lord to its place in the inner sanctuary of the house, in the most holy place...And when the priests came out of the holy place, a cloud filled the house of the Lord so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord. (1 Kings.8)

But there had been no clouds of glory when the Jews returned home from Babylon. YHWH had not returned to Zion; the story still awaited completion. Wright argues that Jesus believed it was his particular vocation to bring about the longed for return to Zion prophesied particularly by Isaiah. However, he was not content to announce the event, Wright contends, he was determined to enact it, which he did, riding on a donkey.

Wright also sees Jesus' action in the Temple when he came to Jerusalem, and the Last Supper which followed it, as symbolic enactments. To the action in the Temple, traditionally assessed at face value as an expression of outrage at the presence of money-lenders in God's house, Wright attaches a deeper significance; it was a sign that the rule of the Temple was finished, overthrown. It was not the centre of God's universe.

Towards the end of the chapter, Wright expounds on the significance of the parable of the talents. When God's kingdom comes...

It will be as when a man going on a journey called his servants and entrusted to them his property; to one he gave five talents, to another, two, to another one, to each according to his ability...

...He also who had received the one talent came forward saying, 'Master, I knew you to be a hard man...so I was afraid and I went and hid your talent in the ground...But his master answered him, "You wicked and slothful servant!...You ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. For to everyone who has will be given more...but for him who has not, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth. (Matt.25.14 – 30)/Lk19. 11-27)

Wright has this to say:

In both Matthew and Luke, then, the coming of the master/king in judgement on the faithless servant is best read as referring to YHWH's return to Zion, and to the devastating results that this will produce...Jesus' parable is, as it were, an expansion of Malachi 3. 1-3: the Lord whom

you seek will suddenly come to his Temple...but who can stand before him at his appearing?
(pp.636/7)

Israel's god is at last returning to his people, to his Temple. But the hope of Isaiah 40-55 must be tempered with the warning of Malachi 3. That is the force of the parable in Matthew and Luke...The only people vindicated when their god returned, to act in fulfilment of his promise, would be those who responded to the divine summons now being issued in Jesus' kingdom-announcement.

He continues:

I propose that this parable should be seen as a key explanatory riddle for Jesus' own action. He saw his journey to Jerusalem as the symbol and embodiment of YHWH's return to Zion. (p.639)

Jesus, then, was on his way to Jerusalem: and he intended this journey to be seen in terms of the master coming back to the servants, or the owner to the vineyard. Those who did not read the sign of the times, who did not repent, who did not embrace his way of peace, and of reconciliation with 'the adversary', would be courting disaster. (p.641)

But who was the master of the servants, the owner of the vineyard? It was, of course, YHWH himself. Following this logic, Wright emphasises repeatedly in Part 3 that Jesus was not only announcing the coming of God's kingdom. He was not simply a herald. He symbolised and embodied in his person the promised return from exile, the defeat of evil and the return of YHWH to Zion.

Focusing on the trial of Jesus before Caiaphas, Wright, points to the following passage from Mark 61/62:

Again, the high priest asked him, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" And Jesus said, "I am; and you will see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of Power and coming with the clouds of heaven".

In this short statement, Jesus quotes two passages from scripture the significance of which Caiaphas will have been fully aware:

The Lord says to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand, till I make your enemies your footstool" (Psalm 110.v.1)

And from Daniel chapter 7 where Daniel recounts his dream: "I saw in my vision by night and behold four winds of heaven were stirring up the great sea. And four great beasts came out of the sea..." At the end of his description Daniel writes:

And behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like the son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him.

This was verbal dynamite. The extreme reaction of Caiaphas, and the swift condemnation of Jesus that followed were inevitable. Wright explains: Jesus is saying that what Caiaphas was about to witness was imminent events...

Which would indicate beyond any doubt that Israel's god had exalted Jesus, had vindicated him after his suffering, and had raised him to share his own throne. (p.643)

Finally, on the subject of Jesus' prophetic vision, Wright says:

His messianic vocation included within it the vocation to attempt certain tasks which, according to scripture, YHWH had reserved for himself. He would take upon himself the role of messianic shepherd, knowing that YHWH had claimed this role as his own. He would perform the saving task which YHWH had said he alone could achieve. He would do what no angel, no messenger, but only 'the arm of YHWH', the presence of Israel's god, could accomplish.

As part of his human vocation, grasped in faith, sustained in prayer, tested in confrontation, agonized over in further prayer and doubt and implemented in action, he believed he had to do and be, for Israel and the world, that which according to scripture only YHWH himself could do and be. (p.653)

