

What the modern prophets are saying

The Wright Papers

The New Testament and the People of God (1992)

And

Jesus and the Victory of God (1996)

N T Wright

S P C K

NT (Tom) Wright's monumental twin volumes, *The New Testament and the People of God* (1992) and *Jesus and the Victory of God* (1996) are works of rigorous scholarship which run to a total of 1150 pages. Enough said already to put off the general reader, perhaps. But Wright's style is down to earth and informal and what he has to say, though indeed addressed in the first place to fellow scholars, also presents an almost revolutionary way of reading and interpreting the gospels which, once understood, would offer the whole Christian community, and indeed the world at large, a powerful new insight.

Hence the inclusion of these two volumes in the set of theological texts offered in Part 2 of the website project *Engaging the Powers*. My version of the texts on the website amount to 25 pages of A4 which disposes of the biggest disincentive to reading the originals - their length! I aim in this reduced version to convey the main thrusts of the author's arguments along with sufficient supporting detail to make a convincing case for the general reader. How far I have succeeded is a matter of judgement. The present, even shorter paper, is no more, perhaps, than a 'tasty morsel' to indicate the attraction of tackling the longer website version of these texts.

Wright's position

Wright begins by placing himself at a particular juncture in the evolution of biblical criticism. For many years up to the mid-twentieth century, it was held amongst scholars that the gospel stories were fatally limited in their capacity to illuminate a Christian readership on account of what used to be called 'the scandal of particularity'. Surely, texts which were embedded in a bygone age which bore littler no resemblance to the present time couldn't possibly demonstrate their relevance to current day readers? On top of that, if one applied the critical standards which emerged in the eighteenth century towards the process of doing history, the evangelists failed the test and their evidenced could not be relied on.

As a consequence, says Wright, the practice amongst scholars and church leaders grew up of looking in the New Testament for material which didn't rely on its historical context but which could be abstracted as of universal application - surely, the right criterion for the writings of faith which was indeed universal. The likelihood is that many practising Christians today will have been brought up in this 'thought world', probably not through explicit argument but simply through 'taking in' unconsciously pastors' lack of interest in the actual stories of the gospel and their enthusiasm for discovering quotations which identified universal values, or what Wright refers to, rather dismissively, as 'universal truths'.

Wright's argument

Wright will have none of this. At the time he produced these two volumes, literary study was beginning to discover the value of narrative and to play down the importance of searching for grand, overarching ideas, Wright asserts the centrality of the story of Jesus as the best, the only way, to enhance our understanding and valuing of the life, work, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

In *The New Testament and the People of God* (NTPG), Wright conjures up a vivid picture of the thought world or 'world view' - as Wright himself calls it, of the Jews in first century Palestine. Their views, he claims, were fairly basic:

We may takeout that the majority Jews in Palestine during the Roman period kept more or less to their biblical laws, praying to their ancestors daily, and regulating 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)

They were, however, deeply affected by their own 'story' which they heard on a regular basis in the course of their formal worship. Thus, the miraculous exodus from Egypt, the eventual arrival in 'the promised land', the stories of the prophets and kings, were all part of a shared mental furniture. The story breached its climax with the building Solomon's Temple and the account in 1 Kings that when it was 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'...Shekinah!

After that there was only anti-climax; a succession of kings - 'mostly a bad lot', says Wright - led Israel and Judah on a downwards path. The divided kingdoms lost their independence to a succession of conquerors, in particular the Babylonians who took off the leading Jews to exile in Babylon.

Alongside this narrative stands the story of God's Covenant which Wright introduces thus:

There is one god who made the entire universe, and this god is in covenant with Israel. He has chosen her for a purpose; she is to be the light of the world. (p.247)

From this, the first-century Jews understood that their exile in Babylon was a punishment for failing to follow God's commands. Their eventual return to the chosen land should have indicated their restitution but, as Wright tells us, all was not well. They may have returned to their territory but they didn't rule it; it was in the hands of conquerors and a puppet king who, though Jewish, was not a descendant of King David. Plainly, according to some Jewish opinion, the way to win back God's favour was to follow the details of the law even more rigorously than before; the Pharisees were of this opinion. But another group saw matters more simply: 'Let's just get rid of the Romans'.

Plainly, a new leader was needed and it was often assumed that his task would be to oust the Romans by force. Sometimes, though not invariably, as Wright points out, the looked-for leader was referred to as 'Messiah', but the term was not clearly defined in the written scriptures. Nevertheless, there were expectations of a new leader to solve the problem.

Wright's retelling of the story

Wright has set the scene for the background into which Jesus was born and in which he carried out his ministry. The life and ministry of Jesus is now set not as a vague story of a god-like person floating around an indeterminate background and spending this time doing good works and articulating words of wisdom which could be described as 'universal truths', as much traditional writing would have it, but of a prophet-like person who called God 'Father', and who claimed that he had come to inaugurate 'God's Kingdom'.

Wright frequently draws attention to Jesus's rhetorical method of beginning to retell a familiar scriptural story but then giving it a sharp turn in an unexpected direction. For instance, the phrase 'the kingdom of God' already had a powerful meaning for the Jews:

The idea of YHWH's being king carried the particular and revolutionary connotation that certain other people were due for demotion. Caesar, certainly, Herod quite possibly, the present high-priestly clan pretty likely. When YHWH became king, Israel would be ruled properly, through the sort of rulers YHWH approved of, and would administer justice for Israel and judgement on the nations. (JVG p.203)

Jesus proceeds to retell the traditional story in respect of the captivity in Babylon being the consequences of the Israeli nation's failure before God. He recognises that the return from Babylon and its disappointing outcome indicates that all is not well. But so far from confirming traditional expectations about the ways to regain God's approval, he announces that he himself has come to inaugurate God's new Kingdom and that the new Kingdom brings with it the forgiveness of Israel's sins.

This was revolutionary because forgiveness of sins, as Jesus presented it, applied not only to those 'in-Jews' who observed the complex teaching about what could be eaten and who it could be eaten with, but 'outsiders' who were despised, by the Pharisees in particular, for their non-observance. And non-observing 'outcasts' included the poor who could not afford to pay the traditional Temple taxes in addition to those levied by the Roman government. Jesus also presumed to forgive sins himself, whereas according to Jewish law, only the priests in the Temple had that power.

Saya Wright:

The point is that Jesus was offering the return from exile, the renewed covenant, the forgiveness of sins - in other words, the kingdom of God. And he was offering the final blessing outside the official structures, to all the wrong people, and on his own authority. (JVG p.272)

Moreover:

The question was not about sinners, or the moral or theological niceties of whether they had repented... it was about the scandalous implied redefinition of the kingdom itself. Jesus was replacing adherence or allegiance to Temple...with allegiance to himself. Restoration and purity were to be had, not through the usual channels, but through Jesus. (p.274)

These morsels for Wright's text are hopefully sufficient to indicate the revolutionary and subversive power of Jesus's announcement of God's Kingdom.

Wright's perspective

Wright's actual treatment is panoramic. The New Testament, he says in the substantial early chapters of NTPG, necessarily involves three conventional disciplines, theology, history and literary criticism, particularly in its post-modern manifestation. He examines the contribution of all three, but in the end -

The New Testament must be read so that the stories, and the Story, which it tells can be heard as stories, not as rambling ways of declaring 'unstoried' ideas. (NTPG p.6)

A little later, he observes:

Much Christianity is afraid of history, frightened that if we really find out what happened in the first century our faith will collapse. But without historical enquiry there is no check on Christianity's propensity to remake Jesus, never mind the Christian God, in our own image. Equally, much Christianity is afraid of scholarly learning, and insofar as the Enlightenment programme was an intellectual venture, Christianity has responded with the simplicities of faith. But granted that learning

without love is sterile and dry, enthusiasm without learning can easily become blind arrogance. (NTPG p.10)

Throughout these two volumes, Wright insists that the New Testament story, including the material concerned with the emergence of the early church, needs to be considered as a whole; chopping it up into bits, as we hear it on a Sunday, does nothing for our comprehension of its overall 'message' - the significance of which he describes in the final page of his project:

We must not back away from history, ,or seek to put the theological handbrake on to prevent history running away with us. A truly first-century Jewish theological perspective would teach us to recognise that history, especially the history of first-century Judaism, ,is the sphere where we find, at work to judge and save, the God who made the world. (JVG p.662)

**Hamish Preston
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