

N. T. WRIGHT'S *JESUS AND THE VICTORY OF GOD*: A REVIEW ARTICLE

ROBERT H. STEIN*

This work is the second volume of a planned six-volume series entitled "Christian Origins and the Question of God." The first volume, *The New Testament and the People of God*, was published in 1992. The present book, published in 1996, is even larger than the first and consists of 662 pages, not counting the appendix, bibliography, and various indices.¹ The book is divided into four parts. Part 1 is entitled "Introduction" and consists of four chapters dealing with a succinct and extremely useful survey of research into the life of Jesus. In it Wright talks about the importance of such research and divides the history of Jesus research into two main camps. The "Wredebahn" or "Wredestrasse" is typified by a great skepticism as to whether we can know anything about the historical Jesus, because the Gospels are seen as reflecting the concerns and situations of the early church rather than the historical Jesus. The second camp is the "Schweitzerbahn" or "Schweitzerstrasse." It argues that a great deal can be known about the historical Jesus and that one must understand Jesus in the context of apocalyptic Judaism, that is, from an eschatological perspective. Wright clearly sides with Schweitzer. He believes that "first-century Judaism . . . can be understood only within a climate of intense eschatological expectation" (96). However, he believes that the apocalyptic language used by Jesus and first-century Judaism should not be interpreted "in a crudely literalistic sense" (24) but as metaphorical language to describe this-worldly events.

Wright argues that the original quest for the historical Jesus was "an explicitly anti-theological, anti-Christian, anti-dogmatic movement" (17). After a period of the "no quest," dating roughly between the two World Wars, a new quest for the historical Jesus arose in the 1950s initiated by Ernst Käsemann. Wright divides this new search into two camps, the "New Quest" and the "Third Quest." The "New Quest" is a continuation of the skepticism of the "Wredestrasse" and is represented by the Jesus Seminar. In his analysis of the "New Quest," Wright gives a brilliant and devastating critique of the Jesus Seminar. The non-Jewish cynic philosopher of proverbs and aphorisms of the Jesus Seminar is "(w)rightly" criticized and its absurdity "(w)rightly" pointed out. The non-Jewish Jesus of the Jesus Seminar is

* Robert Stein is professor of New Testament interpretation at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2825 Lexington Road, Louisville, KY 40280.

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ludicrous. The Jesus Seminar “has radically and consistently underplayed the specifically Jewish dimension both of [Jesus’] culture itself and of [his] agenda for it” (58). Wright even raises the question if such a view is essentially anti-Jewish and cites the analogy of the Nazi scholars in the 1920s and 1930s who sought to eliminate the Jewishness of Jesus (79 n. 233). In his critique of the “New Quest” Wright also examines the views of Burton Mack, J. Dominic Crossan, and Marcus J. Borg. In contrast to the “New Quest,” Wright sides with the “Third Quest” which, he argues, takes seriously Jesus’ Jewish background and lacks the theological and political agenda of the New Questers. This “Third Quest” seeks to answer such questions as: “How does Jesus fit into the Judaism of his day? What were his aims? Why did he die? How did the early church come into being, and why did it take the shape it did? and, Why are the Gospels what they are? (90).

Wright then concludes this first part by positing a criterion that he calls the criterion of “double similarity and double dissimilarity” (131–33). Double similarity seeks to discover how Jesus fit within first-century Judaism and how such a Jewish Jesus could explain the rise of early Christianity. Double dissimilarity seeks to explain why Jesus was rejected by Judaism and how the Gospel traditions, because of their dissimilarity, could not have originated within the early church. Thus his main tool is far more comprehensive than the much more limited “criterion of dissimilarity.”

Part 2 is entitled “Profile of a Prophet.” It consists of six chapters. In Chapter 5, entitled “The Praxis of a Prophet,” Wright argues that the best category for classifying Jesus is that of an “Oracular and Leadership Prophet” (162–68). Chapters 6, 7, and 8 are titled “Stories of the Kingdom” and are subtitled “Announcement”; “Invitation, Welcome, Challenge and Summons”; and “Judgment and Vindication.” Chapter 9 is entitled “Symbol and Controversy” and discusses Jesus’ actions and teachings concerning the symbols of Jewish identity, that is, Sabbath, Food, Nation, Land, and Temple. Wright then discusses Jesus’ own symbols concerning the kingdom which involve the return from exile. These are: a restored land and people; a redefined family; a redefined Torah; and a rebuilt temple.

Part 3 is entitled “The Aims and Beliefs of Jesus” and consists of three chapters: “Jesus and Israel: the Meaning of Messiahship”; “The Reasons for Jesus’ Crucifixion”; and “The Return of the King.” In “Jesus and Israel” Wright argues that Jesus had a clear “messianic self-consciousness” and that his cleansing of the Temple was an overt messianic act. In “The Reasons for Jesus’ Crucifixion” he argues that the cause of Jesus’ death is complex. A different answer is forthcoming according to whether one is dealing with the Jewish leadership, Rome, or Jesus’ own self-understanding. He was crucified by Rome, because, even though Pilate knew that Jesus was not guilty of any charge worthy of death, he felt he dare not resist the pressure of the Jewish leadership. The Jewish leadership is responsible in the sense that it saw Jesus as a dangerous political liability who defied, minimized, and spoke against such Jewish identifying symbols as the law, food, Sabbath, and temple. Jesus is the source of his death in the sense that he saw himself as fulfilling the role of suffering as a righteous prophet who through his death would take upon himself the judgment due to the nation and thus

redeem Israel from her exilic oppression. In Chapter 13, "The Return of the King," Wright argues that Jesus saw himself as Yahweh's special agent and that his going to Jerusalem was in reality Yahweh's coming to Zion. Here Wright's realized eschatology comes out clearly. Jesus "*saw his journey to Jerusalem as the symbol and embodiment of YHWH's return to Zion*" (639; Wright's italics). There is no "consistent eschatological" dimension left unfulfilled. All the promises concerning the "return from exile" are completed in Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and in the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. It should be noted that in his discussion of the aims and beliefs of Jesus, Wright is not interested in the esoteric, inner goals and thinking of Jesus. Rather, he is seeking to uncover from Jesus' public deeds and teaching what he reveals concerning his aims and goals.

The book ends with Chapter 14, Wright's conclusion, which is entitled "Results." Such a simplistic overview, as I have given, cannot do justice to this work. I did want, however, to share at least something of an overview of Wright's work for those who have not read it. This is a massive work, and a discussion of any of a score of issues Wright raises would require a book in itself.

I. A WORD OF APPRECIATION FOR WRIGHT'S *JESUS AND THE VICTORY OF GOD*

There are many things that I appreciate and admire about Wright's book. For one, I am amazed at Wright's mastery of both the primary and secondary materials involved in the search for the historical Jesus. Wright is truly a giant among giants. One cannot read this work and not marvel over his comprehensive understanding of the Biblical and extra-Biblical materials as well as the past and current discussions concerning historical Jesus research.

Second, I appreciate the clarity and style of his writing. Wright writes with wit and perception, and one seldom, if ever, asks, "What does he mean here?" My only criticism is that I think he tends to be verbose and repetitive. Nevertheless, the reading of his book is never tedious, even if his constant repetition of the terms "subversive" and "revolutionary" to describe Jesus' actions and teachings becomes tiring.

Third, as already mentioned, his critique of the New Questers, and especially those associated with the Jesus Seminar, is both succinct and penetrating. Some quotations: ". . . the evidence for a Cynic presence in Galilee is slight to the point of invisibility . . ." (40); "The existence of Q Christians, like that of Thomas Christians, may well turn out to be a modern myth: a story told, without basis in real history, to support a particular way of construing reality" (64); concerning what the Jesus Seminar considered and voted for as authentic: "The main reason why these sayings are considered 'authentic' is clearly not that each one has been tested individually against some abstract criteria, but that they have been judged to fit into the picture of Jesus *which has already been chosen*" (33; Wright's italics).

Fourth, I appreciate Wright's and the Third Questers' insistence that Jesus must be understood in the light of first-century Judaism and within

the framework of Jewish apocalyptic. I also appreciate in this regard that he sees the need of interpreting apocalyptic language metaphorically, that is, as “an elaborate metaphor-system for investing historical events with theological significance” (96). Having said this, I do want to add that Wright is too extreme in this and has little room for any literal dimension in apocalyptic literature. In this respect he is clearly following in the footsteps of C. H. Dodd and G. B. Caird. Yet, I am afraid that even more so than Dodd and Caird, he maximizes a “realized” eschatological understanding of Jesus’ teaching to such an extent that he has no room for a “consistent” or unrealized dimension.

Fifth, I appreciate Wright’s willingness to challenge “political correctness” in the interpretation of the life of Jesus. He acknowledges that “. . . in so far as there is any consensus within the Third Quest at the moment, it is that Jesus was handed over to the pagan rulers by the official Jewish authorities” (109). In this respect one is reminded of Raymond E. Brown’s *Death of the Messiah* where Brown forthrightly argues this same position.

Sixth, Wright has many helpful comments concerning the variation we find in various sayings and parables of Jesus.

The fact that Jesus was an *itinerant* prophet meant, clearly, that he went from village to village, *saying substantially the same things* wherever he went. Local variations would no doubt abound. Novelty would spring up in response to a new situation, or a sharp question or challenge. But the historical likelihood—and it is very likely indeed—is that if he told a parable once he told it dozens of times, probably with minor variations. . . . My guess would be that we have two versions of the great supper parable, two versions of the talents/pounds parable, and two versions of the beatitudes, not because one is adapted from the other, or both from a single common written source, but because these are two out of a dozen or more possible variations that, had one been in Galilee with a tape-recorder, one might have “collected” (170).

Finally, I commend Wright for his attempt to provide an overarching, comprehensive interpretation of the life of Jesus. Such an undertaking inspires a kind of awe. Most scholars do not have sufficient mastery of the materials to attempt such an undertaking. Others do not have the skills to do so. Wright bravely, some would say “naively,” attempts to do so. His attempt to fit all the Biblical and extra-Biblical material into his overarching scheme, however, raises questions at various points. To this I shall now turn.

II. SOME CRITICISMS OF WRIGHT’S *JESUS AND THE VICTORY OF GOD*

In this section I shall begin with some general criticisms and proceed to the more significant ones.

First, as with any overarching theological system, when Biblical texts get in the way, they tend to be squeezed to fit the system. Wright’s “system” is no different, but Wright time and time again forces various texts to fit his system, and this weakens his argument. Some examples are:

- Jesus’ teaching that when struck on the right cheek one should turn the left also refers primarily to his followers not becoming part of the resistance movement against Rome (291).

- Making friends with one's accuser before going to court is understood not as advice for individual believers but advice that Israel should make peace with Rome lest she be handed over to the judgment and destruction of AD 70.
- Jesus' warning about building one's house on rock and not sand refers to the coming destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and its replacement by Jesus as the true temple (334).
- The warning concerning the danger of possessions refers to the Jewish people's love for the land of Israel. Jesus' sayings concerning selling one's possession involves the need of the Jewish people to renounce their nationalistic and idolatrous (331) hopes concerning the land of Israel (403–4).
- The saying about having faith enough to cast a mountain into the sea refers to the Temple (422). Yet it is said on the *Mount of Olives* where the cursed fig tree, which triggers the discussion, is located. In Matt 17:20 the saying is associated with the *Mount of Transfiguration* (cf. 17:9).
- The parable of the rich man and Lazarus is interpreted primarily as a call to Israel to repent of their revolutionary zeal and violent nationalism (246–58).
- The parable of the soils “*tells the story of Israel, particularly the return from exile, with a paradoxical conclusion, and it tells the story of Jesus' ministry, as the fulfil[ment] of that larger story, with a paradoxical outcome*” (230; Wright's italics). The seed is interpreted as the “true Israel, who will be vindicated when her god finally acts . . .” (232). Yet in the interpretation the seed is the “word of God.”
- The parable of the prodigal son is the story of Israel's exile and restoration. This is the main theme.

Babylon had taken the people into captivity; Babylon fell, and the people returned. But in Jesus' day many, if not most, Jews regarded the exile as still continuing. The people had returned in a geographical sense, but the great prophecies of restoration had not yet come true. What was Israel to do? Why, to repent of the sin which had driven her into exile, and to return to YHWH with all her heart. Who would stand in her way, to prevent her return? The mixed multitude, not least the Samaritans, who had remained in the land while the people were in exile. But Israel would return, humbled and redeemed: sins would be forgiven, the covenant renewed, the Temple rebuilt, and the dead raised. What her god had done for her in the exodus . . . he would at last do again, even more gloriously. YHWH would finally become king, and would do for Israel, in covenant love, what the prophets had foretold. (126–27)

Even more confusingly he states, “Those who grumble [represented by the older brother in the parable] at what is happening are cast in the role of the Jews who did not go into exile, and who opposed the returning people. They are, in effect, virtually Samaritans” (127). Wright himself acknowledges that this interpretation flies in the face of the entire history of this parable's interpretation. Yet it does not keep him from offering this unlikely interpretation of the parable.

- The saying about fearing not those who kill the body but the one who can cast a person into Gehenna refers not to God but to Satan. The one who can kill the body is Rome, but the real enemy to be feared is Satan (454–55).

- In the cleansing of the Temple Jesus says that God's house had become a den of robbers (*lēstēs*). Wright interprets this as meaning that the Temple had become a den of revolutionary zealots and brigands. His main support for this is that the term "robbers" (*lēstēs*) often refers to brigands or bandits. Yet the reason this term is used is because Jesus is quoting Jer 7:11 where the term is found and the context involves Jesus' overturning the tables of the moneychangers and those selling sacrificial animals! These people were far from revolutionaries. They were part of the establishment who sought to maintain the status quo.

These examples are but a sampling of the way that Wright interprets various texts. One gets the impression that Wright is obsessed with his thesis, and all texts are squeezed to conform to it. I personally think that he has weakened the weight of his argument by trying to make too many texts fit his thesis. I think that his case would have been better argued by concentrating on the particular texts that best support his thesis. His intense dislike of the idea that Jesus could ever have taught "timeless" truths has harmed his case.

This one-sided view of Jesus' ministry, second, also shows up in his discussion of Jesus' call to repentance and his announcement of the forgiveness of sins. Contrary to E. P. Sanders, Wright emphasizes the importance of repentance in Jesus' message. However, he understands this as referring less to individual than to national repentance. The nation is to repent of its revolutionary desire for war and the overthrow of Rome (317). Yet Jesus, in justifying his eating with tax-collectors and sinners, states that he has come to call sinners to repentance (Luke 5:32). Surely one would not associate a revolutionary desire to overthrow Rome with tax-collectors. These were collaborators. Whereas we may tend to err in neglecting the corporate nature of many Biblical texts by emphasizing the need for individual response, Wright so emphasizes the corporate nature of many of these texts that he neglects (or at least minimizes) their individualistic dimension.

Wright makes the same error when he speaks of the forgiveness of sins. He states, "From the point of view of a first-century Jew, 'forgiveness of sins' could never simply be a private blessing, though to be sure it was that as well, as Qumran amply testifies. Overarching the situation of the individual was the state of the nation as a whole . . ." (271). For Wright, "*Forgiveness of sins is another way of saying 'return from exile'*" (268; Wright's italics). Clearly, however, this is at best an overstatement. There is much in the Gospels concerning the great joy in heaven over one sinner who repents and receives forgiveness (Luke 15:7, 10). It is difficult to see in Jesus' forgiving the paralytic's sins (Mark 2:1-12), in his forgiving of the sinful woman (Luke 7:36-50), in the story of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10), and in all the accounts of the forgiving of sinners the theme of the return of the nation from exile as being more central than the forgiveness of these individuals. Furthermore, what do we do with such references as Pss 25:18; 32:1, 5; 38:18; 51:2-3; 103:3, 10; 130:4, that speak of individual forgiveness, and the individual sacrifices for forgiveness described in Lev 4:26, 31, 35; 5:10, 13, 16, 18; 6:7; 19:22 and Num 15:27-28.

It is likewise difficult to understand the question of the rich young ruler concerning what he must do to inherit eternal life (Mark 10:17) as a question about the restoration of the nation. It is rather a question concerning how he, as an individual, might ensure his own destiny in the age to come. Similarly, Jesus' words to Nicodemus about being born again do not involve the restoration of the nation but the requirement for personal entrance into the kingdom of God, which is a synonym for possessing "eternal life" (cf. John 3:3 and 16; see also Mark 10:17 and 23).

A third criticism that must be directed against Wright's thesis is his interpretation of the "coming of the Son of Man." He argues that "The 'coming of the son of man' is thus good first-century metaphorical language for two things: the defeat of the enemies of the true people of god, and the vindication of the true people themselves" (362). At this point the question can be raised as to the relationship of Jesus' teaching concerning the Son of Man with that of the Gospel writers. Clearly the Gospel writers see the "Son of Man" as a title describing Jesus. The saying that the Son of Man came eating and drinking (Matt 11:18–19) can only be understood as referring to Jesus of Nazareth. This is also true concerning the "Son of Man's" authority to forgive sins upon the earth (Mark 2:10) and of his not having a place to put his head (Matt 8:20). Jesus' question of who the "Son of Man" is in Matt 16:13 is understood as a question concerning who Jesus is.

It is, furthermore, extremely difficult to interpret all the sayings of the Son of Man returning to judge the world in the abstract manner that Wright does. The sayings are clearly understood by the Gospel writers as referring to a second coming of the Son of Man at the end of history. The return of the Son of Man with the holy angels in Mark 8:38; his separation of the goats from the sheep into eternal punishment in Matt 25:31–46; the return of the Son of Man in the new world in Matt 19:28; the removal from his kingdom of all evil and the casting of the weeds into the furnace of fire where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth in Matt 13:41–42; the question of whether the Son of Man will find faith when he comes in Luke 18:8; etc. cannot be demythologized into being a metaphorical reference to the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. Luke understands the return of Jesus, the Son of Man, as being visible and personal in Acts 1:11. There the angel states, "This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." The prayer *Maranatha* (1 Cor 16:22) or "Come, Lord Jesus" (Rev 22:20) indicates that at the heart of the early church's faith and longing lay the blessed hope of the personal return of Jesus, the Son of Man. It may be that Wright distinguishes Jesus' own understanding of the return of the Son of Man from that of the evangelists. We shall have to await Wright's later works to see how he deals with this issue. He does say, however, that the "idea of Jesus' return (the so-called 'second coming') . . . looks more like a post-Easter innovation than a feature of Jesus' own teaching" (635). He also states that whereas the parable of the pounds found in Luke 19:11–27 presently speaks of the delay in the coming of the kingdom (and thus the "so-called 'second coming'"), originally it was meant as a warning of its imminence (637).

I shall just mention briefly a fourth criticism. This involves Wright's understanding of the Jewish people in the first century. It appears to me that Wright is constructing a new version of a "normative Judaism." Whereas George Foot Moore characterized this Judaism as essentially a Pharisaic and Rabbinic Judaism, Wright portrays it as a "return from exile hoping" Judaism. I think that such generalizations were wrong in Moore's day and they are wrong in ours. We must remember that Judaism was quite diverse and scattered. Probably less than twenty percent of the Jewish population lived in Palestine and perhaps only around ten percent lived in Judea. The Jews of Babylon, Egypt, and the rest of the diaspora cannot be confined to a single theological mindset. Even in Judea the existence of Pharisees, Sadducees, the Qumran community, and the masses cannot be squeezed into a single "return from the exile hoping" community.

Another criticism of Wright involves his frequent affirmation that "no Jews whose opinions are known to us thought that their god was about to bring the space-time world, including land and Temple to a sudden end" (513). At times Wright even belittles and ridicules those who believe this. He states concerning the belief in the visible and personal return of the Son of Man, "This monstrosity, much beloved (though for different reasons) by both fundamentalists and would-be 'critical' scholars, can be left behind. . . . The truly 'apocalyptic' 'son of man' has nothing to do with such a figure" (517). Yet we do know that the Pharisees and their followers strongly believed in the resurrection of the dead. Surely this is not the kind of event that can fit in the normal space-time continuum of ordinary life. The Sadducees in their question about the resurrection (Mark 12:18-23) presume this. The resurrection hope of the Maccabean martyrs in 2 Maccabees 6-7 also cannot be fulfilled in a simple continuation of the present space-time world of ordinary life. Wright himself, in his earlier work *The New Testament and the People of God*, sees this as occurring in a continuum of space-time that involves a renewed physical world with a new physical, resurrection body (328-34, 336, 338). This seems to me to be quite different from a normal space-time continuum.

My sixth criticism involves Wright's choice of the expression "the return from exile" to describe Jewish hopes in the first century and the core of Jesus' teaching and ministry. Why choose a term not used by Jesus to describe his teaching and ministry when Jesus himself uses the expression "kingdom of God" over eighty times? Wright acknowledges that Jesus saw himself as inaugurating the kingdom of God (197), but Wright's favorite expression is "the return from exile." He uses this expression to describe the realization of the unfulfilled prophetic promises and hopes and not just the return of the people from Babylon associated with Zerubbabel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Malachi, etc. He argues that most Jews—at times one gets the impression he means "all Jews"—believed that the exile had not yet come to an end because the promises God made to his people were not yet fulfilled.

If, for the sake of simplicity, we refer to the exile by the date 587 BC, were there not unfulfilled promises before that time? Were there not promises God made to Abraham and the patriarchs, to David and Solomon, and

to others before 587 BC that were still awaiting fulfillment? For example, what about the pre-exilic promises in Isaiah 11 of the coming branch from Jesse and the idyllic reign that would result, which is repeated in Isa 35:8–10 and 65:25? How appropriate is the expression “the return from exile” for describing these pre-exilic prophecies? Surely the expression “the coming of the kingdom of God” is a more appropriate one, for it involves the fulfillment of all God’s promises concerning the future kingdom, whether they were made immediately before or after the exile or centuries before. The use of the expression “the return from exile” seems terribly anachronistic when used to speak of the fulfillment of hopes and promises made hundreds of years before the exile.

Finally, I want to raise some questions as to the central importance placed by Wright and E. P. Sanders on Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and his cleansing of the temple. According to Wright this is the “most obvious act of messianic praxis [found] within the gospel narratives” (490). “His riding on a donkey over the Mount of Olives, across Kidron, and up to the Temple mount spoke more powerfully than words could have done of a royal claim” (490). The Jewish authorities “saw [Jesus’] Temple-action as a blow against the central symbol not only of national life but also of YHWH’s presence with the people” (551). This is why “the trial opened, as it was bound to do, with the question about the Temple” (644).

Yet why then does the issue of the “Temple-action,” that is, of Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and the cleansing of the Temple, not come up at Jesus’ trial? Nothing is said at Jesus’ trial by either the Jewish leadership or Pilate concerning these events! Instead we find that a number of false witnesses testified against Jesus, but their testimony did not agree. Matthew and Mark then point out that other false witnesses said that Jesus spoke of destroying the Temple and building another, but even here their witness did not agree. Why, if the Temple-action is the key messianic claim that led to his death, are the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ trial silent about this? Exactly what took place when Jesus entered Jerusalem on the Palm Sunday is much debated. It seems clear, however, that it did not involve in the mind of the Romans a messianic claim or action. We know this because of their complete ignoring of it on Palm Sunday as well as at the trial before Pilate. Similarly, the cleansing of the Temple is not a clear messianic and revolutionary act in the mind of the Romans, for again they did not do anything to stop this, even though the Fortress of Antonia overlooked the Temple area. Neither of these “Temple-actions” were brought up at Jesus’ trial before the Jewish leaders or before Pilate.

John 12:16 states that the disciples “did not understand this [i.e. the meaning of the Palm Sunday entry] at first, but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that this had been written of him and had been done to him.” What happened on Palm Sunday is probably best understood as a planned messianic act of Jesus in which he intentionally prearranged for a virgin colt to be prepared for his entrance into Jerusalem. This gives to the event great Christological significance. Yet its Christological significance was only later understood by the disciples, and neither the Jewish authorities

nor the Roman officials interpreted this as an openly messianic act. The welcome of Jesus into Jerusalem was seen by the crowds as the entrance of a famous and beloved prophet who was greeted like other pilgrims (only more enthusiastically) with a Pilgrim Psalm. Pilate's hesitancy in condemning Jesus is unexplainable if Jesus openly presented himself as a messianic deliverer in the way that Wright claims.

III. CONCLUDING QUESTIONS

I would like to finish my brief critique of Wright's *Jesus and the Victory of God* with two concluding questions. The first is the question, "How does the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 vindicate Jesus?" Wright's reply is that "[Jesus], and his people, would be vindicated when Jerusalem, having rejected his message of peace, chose war and suffered the consequences" (324) [i.e. when Jerusalem was destroyed]. "So closely do [Jesus' Messiahship and his prediction of the destruction of Jerusalem] belong together . . . that the destruction of the Temple . . . is bound up with Jesus' own vindication, as prophet and also as Messiah" (511). "When [Jesus'] prophecy of its destruction comes true, that event will demonstrate that he was indeed the Messiah who had the authority over it" (511). The destruction of Jerusalem for Wright serves as a vindication of Jesus' message, since he spoke of its destruction. Like the OT prophets, Jesus' verification as a true prophet would come through the fulfillment of his prophetic message. "As a prophet, Jesus staked his reputation on his prediction of the Temple's fall within a generation; if and when it fell, he would thereby be vindicated" (362). Yet exactly how this would vindicate him as not just a prophet but as the Messiah is not altogether clear, since the prophecies of all true prophets were fulfilled.

The NT does not place the vindication of Jesus in AD 70. Rather, it sees this as taking place in his resurrection. Paul states that Jesus was "designated Son of God in power . . . by his resurrection from the dead" (1:4). It is because of Jesus' resurrection from the dead, not the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, that Peter says, "Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified" (Acts 2:36). Nothing is said here concerning AD 70. Jesus, himself, when asked to give a sign to vindicate his claims said, "No sign shall be given to [this sinful and adulterous generation] except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so will the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matt 12:39-40). It is clearly the resurrection of Jesus that is the vindication of his message and claims. The followers of Jesus were not waiting in some sort of limbo for forty years until the fall of Jerusalem in order to discover if God would vindicate Jesus' claim to be the Messiah. The almost complete absence of any mention of AD 70 in Acts, Paul, and the rest of the NT, together with the church's central teaching that, "If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Rom 10:9), indicates that the church saw Jesus' vindication in the resurrection, not the fall of Jerusalem.

Wright seems to agree at times that it is the resurrection that vindicates Jesus. He states, "the resurrection would declare that he had in principle succeeded in his task . . ." (660). In *Jesus & the Restoration of Israel* (ed. Carey C. Newman, 1999) he states,

The early church clearly believed that Jesus had been vindicated by the resurrection: "God has made him [Jesus] both Lord and Messiah" (Acts 2:36). "[Jesus Christ] was declared to be the Son of God [i.e., Messiah] . . . by the resurrection from the dead" (Romans 1:4). Jesus had already been vindicated. The resurrection was more important to them than any other single event. . . ." (269).

He then points out that AD 70 involves Jesus' future vindication. In *Jesus and the Victory of God*, however, the vindication of Jesus in AD 70 receives, I believe, greater emphasis than the resurrection. I am glad to see this clarification, but I still see very little in the NT which speaks of the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 as an important vindication of Jesus.

My second question is somewhat lengthy, but it involves Wright's understanding of first-century Judaism. He writes,

. . . would any serious-thinking first-century Jew claim that the promises of Isaiah 40–66, or of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, or Zechariah had been fulfilled? That the power and domination of paganism had been broken? That YHWH had already returned to Zion? That the covenant had been renewed, and Israel's sins forgiven? That the long-awaited 'new exodus' had happened? That the second Temple was the true, final and perfect one? Or—in other words—that the exile was really over (xvii–xviii)?

This is one of the ways in which Wright seeks to establish his view that Judaism almost universally believed that it was still living in the exile. Compare also the following quotation:

If, then, someone were to speak to Jesus' contemporaries of YHWH's becoming king, we may safely assume that they would have in mind, in some form or other, this two-sided story concerning the double reality of exile. Israel would 'really' return from exile; YHWH would finally return to Zion. But if these were to happen there would have to be a third element as well: evil, usually in the form of Israel's enemies, must be defeated. Together these three themes form the metanarrative implicit in the language of the kingdom (206).

Wright states, however, that "Jesus was articulating *a new way of understanding the fulfillment of Israel's hope*. He had radicalized the tradition" (176; Wright's italics). "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" (201).

The question is *not*, did "kingdom of god," for Jesus, still mean "Israel's god, the creator, at last asserting his sovereign rule over his world," with the connotation of the return from exile, the return of YHWH to Zion, the vindication of Israel by this covenant god, and the defeat of her enemies? That simply was its basic, irreducible meaning with first-century Palestine. The question is, *in what sense* did Jesus affirm this meaning, and how did he redefine the concept in such a way as to give rise to the meanings that emerge among his earliest followers? (224; Wright's italics).

Wright argues that Jesus' reinterpretation of this Jewish hope involved a "scandalous implied redefinition of the kingdom" (274). How scandalous this redefinition is can be seen in the following quotations: "The destruction coming on YHWH's chosen city would be like that which fell on Babylon. The exile was coming to an end at last" (340). Elsewhere Wright states, "When Jerusalem is destroyed, and Jesus' people escape from the ruin just in time, *that will be* YHWH becoming king, bringing about the liberation of his true covenant people, the true return from exile, the beginning of the new world order" (364).

My question is, "In light of the Wright's own definition of first-century Jewish thinking about the 'return from exile,' would this alleged interpretation of Jesus' teaching make any sense at all to his contemporaries?" Wright does say that Jesus' definition is a radicalization of this thinking, but is it only a "radicalization," or is it a complete repudiation of such thinking? Using a twentieth-century analogy, would it make sense to say that the Jewish survivors of Nazi death camps and the Holocaust are "YHWH becoming king, bringing about the liberation of his true covenant people, the true return from exile, the beginning of the new world order"? (364). Yet AD 70 was just that—a first-century Holocaust! Let me quote what Wright says about the idea of a literal return from heaven of the Son of Man. "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" (345). If Wright sees the traditional understanding of the return of the Son of Man from heaven as being "a very difficult task" for a first-century Jew to fathom, how much more difficult would it be to understand the first-century Holocaust of AD 70, the expulsion of the Jews from the promised land, and the continued domination and persecution of God's people by Rome, as "the return from exile"! I would argue that it would have been (and still is) impossible.