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Jesus and the Victory of God
N. T. Wright
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RÉSUMÉ

L'ouvrage de Wright est considérable et important. Il fait partie d'un projet visant à retracer en plusieurs volumes les origines du christianisme. Dans un premier volume il avait exposé en détail le cadre dans lequel se situait l'histoire de Jésus. Il en fait maintenant le récit d'une manière intéressante, accessible et stimulante, en s'appuyant solidement sur la tradition de savants tels que Glasson et Caird. Quels sont les points principaux de son argumentation? Au temps de Jésus, Israël se considérait comme en exil, à cause de l'occupant étranger. Il attendait que YHWH revienne lui rendre justice. Jésus incarne ce retour par son action et sa parole. Il est celui qui représente véritablement Israël, mais aussi, il redéfinit Israël et ses symboles—y compris le temple—autour de sa personne. Avec Jésus, l'histoire d'Israël atteint un moment crucial, en particulier parce qu'il prend le contre-pied de ses attentes et de ses symboles nourris d'hostilité envers Rome. Dans ce sens son message et son ministère sont apocalyptiques. Ce terme ne doit pas être compris dans le sens que lui donnent Weiss, Schweitzer et d'autres théologiens allemands, c'est-à-dire l'attente de la fin du monde matériel. Il s'applique au nouvel ordre mondial introduit par Jésus en redéfinissant Israël autour de sa personne. Le genre apocalyptique de Marc 13 (et les textes parallèles) n'a jamais été destiné à être compris littéralement. Schweitzer avait raison de voir dans l'apocalyptique le centre à partir duquel il convient de comprendre Jésus, mais il se trompait totalement dans sa conception de l'apocalyptique elle-même. Le message de Jésus sur le retour du roi, et l'affirmation de son partage du trône de YHWH ont une grande importance A cause de l'influence qu'ils ont eu sur le développement de la christologie dans l'Eglise ancienne. Wright est conservateur dans son optique théologique fondamentale, radical (dans un sens positif) dans son analyse historique et très stimulant par ses déclarations sur Jésus. Ces déclarations ne sont pas vraiment nouvelles, mais elles avaient besoin d'àtre réaffirmées avec autant d'adresse, de minutie, de solidité et de conviction pour figurer dans le champ académique. Il devient à ce jour périlleux d'étudier la vie de Jésus et le royaume de Dieu sans consulter cet ouvrage. Il n'a pas seulement une immense importance pour les lecteurs britanniques ou américains, mais particulièrement aussi pour les spécialistes de l'Europe continentale—tant libéraux que conservateurs—qui partagent encore la compréhension de l'apocalyptique du Dr. Schweitzer.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Wrights Buch ist von beträchtlichem Format, sowohl hinsichtlich seines Umfangs als auch hinsichtlich seiner Bedeutung. Es ist Teil von Wrights mehrbändigem Projekt zu den Ursprüngen des Christentums. Nachdem im ersten Band der Hintergrund der Jesuserzählung auf detaillierte Weise beschrieben worden war, widmet sich dieses Buch der Erzählung selbst. Es bietet eine provokative und ausgesprochen lesbare Darstellung, die fest in der Tradition von Gelehrten wie Glasson und Caird gegründet ist. Worin besteht Wrights grundlegende Argumentation? Israel erlebte zur Zeit Jesu ein starkes Gefühl des Exils, insofern als es von einer fremden Macht beherrscht wurde und Jahwes Rückkehr zu seiner Verteidigung erwartete. Jesus verkörpert diese Rückkehr sowohl in seinen Taten als auch in seinen Worten. Er ist derjenige, der Israel wahrhaftig repräsentiert. Doch er definiert Israel und seine Symbole—einschließlich des Tempels—neu in bezug auf seine eigene Person. Jesus bringt Israels Geschichte zu ihrem Höhepunkt, nicht zuletzt dadurch, daß er die zeitgenössischen antirömischen Symbole und die dahinterstehende antirömische Einstellung unterminiert. In diesem Sinn sind seine Botschaft und sein Dienst voll und ganz apokalyptisch. Doch dieser Begriff sollte nicht so verstanden werden, wie von Weiss, Schweitzer und den sich an sie anschließenden deutschen Wissenschaftlern vorgeschlagen wurde, d. h. als ein Terminus, der die Erwartung des Endes der physischen Welt bezeichnet. Statt dessen meint er die neue Weltordnung, die durch Jesu neue Definition Israels in bezug auf seine eigene Person heraufgeführt wird. Die apokalyptische Gattung, wie wir sie z. B. in Mk 13 (und den Parallelen) finden, zielte nie darauf, wortwörtlich verstanden zu werden. Schweitzer verlagerte die Apokalyptik zu Recht ins Zentrum der Jesusforschung, doch hinsichtlich seines Entwurfs derselben lag er vollkommen falsch. Jesu Verkörperung der Rückkehr des Königs sowie sein Anspruch, an Jahwes Thron Teil zu haben, sind aus christologischer Sicht

bedeutsam, da sie die Entwicklung der frühchristlichen Christologie unmittelbar beeinflußten. Wright ist konservativ in bezug auf seine theologische Grundhaltung, radikal (im positiven Sinn) in bezug auf seine historische Analyse und ausgesprochen provokativ hinsichtlich seiner Jesus betreffenden Thesen. Diese Thesen sind nicht vollkommen neu, doch bedurfte es einer mit solchem Geschick, solcher Ausführlichkeit, Zuverlässigkeit und Überzeugung vorgetragenen Neuformulierung, um sie auf die wissenschaftliche Tagesordnung zu setzen. Von jetzt ab wäre es unverantwortlich, Jesus und das Königreich Gottes zu untersuchen, ohne dieses Buch zu konsultieren, das von immenser Bedeutung ist, nicht nur für die britische und amerikanische Wissenschaft, sondern vor allem für europäische Gelehrte auf dem Kontinent, die noch immer das Schweitzerische Verständnis von Apokalyptik teilen.

To call this book 'substantial' would be the understatement of the month—it is magisterial, both in terms of size and importance. Not that its insights are all entirely new (cf. Glasson, Caird and Borg among others who wrote similar things long before Wright), but the way in which they are assembled is impressive and immensely helpful and coherent. There is no doubt in my mind that this book is as important as volume 1 (*The New Testament and the People of God*) which prepares the ground for this one, not least by offering one of the best available introductions to first century Judaism. Admittedly there is even more repetition in volume 2. (yes, Jesus embodies YHWH's return...) than in volume 1 (yes, Josephus thought God had gone over to the Romans...). Nonetheless Wright is a gifted communicator, so this not as big a problem as it might be with most authors. The real problem with too much repetition is that it uses up space that is badly needed elsewhere, in this case a treatment of the resurrection—which is missing. A book on Jesus and the victory of God without a discussion of the resurrection may seem odd, to put it mildly, but the author assures me that the resurrection has only been postponed, not cancelled. Presumably this means that what was supposed to be a five volume project (*Christian Origins and the Question of God*) now ends up comprising six volumes (?). It would probably be unfair to remind ourselves at this point that Jewish scrolls must have focused the mind wonderfully. This book may be massive, but it is extremely readable and relevant—especially for those who suffered at the hands of Weiss, Schweitzer, Bultmann etc. (ch. 1) and/or the so-called Jesus Seminar (ch. 2).

The main benefit readers can expect from this book is an up-to-date and coherent portrayal of Jesus of Nazareth against the backcloth of first century Judaism. Wright is not only thoroughly familiar with present scholarship, he is himself one of the leading authorities on Jesus world-wide. If a scholar's reputation is to be judged on the basis of his ability to integrate credibly and coherently large quantities of diverse primary evidence, Wright's excellent reputation is very much justified. So who was this Jesus whom he describes and how did he relate to his environment? The obvious starting point is one established in volume 1: at the time of Jesus Israel still experienced a strong sense of exile. If YHWH is Israel's God, how is it that the Romans are in charge? As long as pagan oppression continues, the exile cannot really be over. When it does come to an end, God will have established his rule—God's kingdom. It is the major contribution of the Gospels to describe the inauguration of this climax of Israel's history. They portray Jesus as both the representative of Israel and the embodiment of YHWH's promised and long awaited return. In short, Jesus re-defines Israel and all her symbols around himself. More than that, he claims to share in God's throne, thus compounding what in the eyes of many of his contemporaries was blasphemy. With his actions and words he subverted Israel's misguided values and sought to re-direct her agenda away from an anti-Roman stance to one of spiritual renewal. God's judgement would befall those who were opposed to such renewal, in fact, Israel's most treasured possession, the Temple, would become the epicentre of God's wrath. It had been misused by the authorities as a symbol of arrogant nationalism, religious segregation and a power base for self-preservation. Yes, it would form the starting point of God's revolution, but not in the way envisaged by most—its destruction would be the clearest sign of the inbreaking kingdom: God had indeed returned. Talk of the end of the world is typically apocalyptic (in the sense of genre) and therefore ought not to be literalised. The coming down of the Berlin Wall too was 'earth shattering', but hardly in the literal sense. Jesus' apocalyptic scenario (Mk 13 and parallels) was a thinly veiled allusion to the defeat Israel was going to suffer by the Romans, not because of inferior military power, but because their contemporary

agenda was misguided and because God/the Son of Man would allow it to happen. It is hardly surprising that this impending end of Judaism (AD 70) as it was known would be described in similar, though perhaps stronger, apocalyptic tones as the exile before, or even the desecrations of the Temple committed by Antiochus Epiphanes and Pompey a century or two earlier. Schweitzer, Bultmann, Käsemann and others (including most conservative commentators—strange bed fellows indeed) throughout this century radically misunderstood apocalyptic. Wright exposes this misunderstanding for what it is and states quite categorically: Jesus did not predict the end of the physical world; but he did predict the end of a world order, i.e. one which centred around the nation of Israel and specifically the Temple in Jerusalem. The new world order is based on an Israel which is defined around the person of Jesus. Schweitzer was entirely justified in making apocalyptic the centre of Jesus' thinking, but he was 100% wrong in what he understood this to mean. In response to volume 1 one commentator (B. Witherington) expressed his hope that Wright would confirm in volume 2 that he does not 'deny that Jesus and others believed that at the end of human history there would indeed be cosmic events, a literal return of Christ, a final judgement and a new heaven as well as a new earth'. Given that Witherington, among others, understands these notions strictly literally, he will (predictably) be disappointed with this volume. But was there ever a basis for a literalistic understanding of, say, Dan. 7.13, a verse alluded to repeatedly by Jesus? In any case, Dan. 7.13 does not refer to a return, let alone one to earth.

There is an astonishing mixture in Wright's discussion of the revolutionary (certainly as far as Schweitzer's heritage among liberals and conservatives alike is concerned) and the conservative. He consistently refutes allegations that sayings or episodes are secondary inventions by the early church. His most potent argument here is one of coherence: if it can be shown that a saying makes sense within a plausible historical reconstruction of Jesus' ministry, it becomes unnecessary to ascribe it to the second generation of early Christianity. In his own terminology, we need to employ criteria of double similarity and double dissimilarity. Put differently, when something is credible within Jesus' contemporary Jewish and Christian context, yet subversive or paradoxical enough not to have been invented in either, then we are likely to be in touch with the earliest layers of tradition. It is striking that Wright does not (want to?) rely on redaction critical tools very much. This is partly due to the fact that for him the overall picture matters most. He prefers to use what one might call a sharply modified and conservative version of form criticism. This is usually quite effective, for instance when he shows how the Son of Man sayings, far from being secondary, fit in well with the first century environment as reconstructed on the basis of our STJ (Second Temple Judaism) sources. Wright's conservative approach is equally evident in his discussion of Jesus' messianic self understanding, which he affirms. Jesus regarded himself as in the line of the Prophets, but more than that, as YHWH's embodiment, both positively (concern for Israel) and negatively (oracles of judgement). The term 'messianic' can mean many things to many people. Wright is careful to avoid the impression that Jesus's self awareness was somehow congruous with the 'high christology' of later orthodoxy. This caution is justified not least on the basis of Jesus' own preferred self designation: Son of man, not Christ. In other words, rather than to use the slippery terminology of contemporary political expectation, Jesus prefers to reveal his mission gradually and initially tacitly, but with ever increasing clarity and scope for confrontation. This development goes in tandem with Jesus' approach to Jerusalem. It is not until the High Priest puts him on the spot that Jesus agrees, yes he is the Christ indeed. The High Priest's display of disgust that follows, however, is to be explained not primarily on the basis of someone claiming to be the Messiah, but in the light of Jesus' allusion to Daniel 7, which implies his sharing of God's throne. That must be true blasphemy—or the truth.

We must look more closely at this matter of christology and significance. For Wright it is pivotal that Jesus understood himself as a prophet. As such he encoded his own language in terminology reminiscent of his Old Testament precursors. Particularly important in this connection are numerous allusions to and quotations from Daniel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Zechariah. They largely revolve around exilic traditions. Wright demonstrates convincingly how the co-texts and original contexts of these passages more often than not contribute to the force of their reappropriations by Jesus. The implied message is clear: inescapably Israel's history repeats itself, but this time it is moving towards a resolution tied

up with the Son of man. Coupled with this terminological interplay there are Jesus' actions and stories which repeatedly invoke Israel's hope for YHWH's past actions and hoped for return. The clearest example is the entry into Jerusalem. But the parables belong here too. They are subversive (and in that sense apocalyptic) re-tellings of Israel's history, climaxing in the return of her God. In contrast to majority opinion, the implied hearer is located at the end of the story (i.e. looking back over Israel's history), not at the beginning (i.e. looking ahead to the church's epoch). The parables are in the first instance reviews, not previews. There is another important insight here: the parables are characterised by a progressive degree of clarity—the closer Jesus gets to his final destination in Jerusalem, the more overt his parables become. Initially not even the disciples understood—now even the religious authorities know exactly what is meant (and take hostile action). One might call this progressive subversion. This combination of an increasingly overt subversion of Israel's contemporary values by Jesus and his equally progressive evoking of imagery suggestive of YHWH's return lies at the heart of the synoptics' christology. It climaxes in his reference to his sharing of God's throne, a point which, Wright suggests, is likely to have formatively influenced NT christology, particularly the notion of Jesus' divinity. I do not need to stress that there is a lot here which will be regarded by many as highly provocative and I must confess I look forward eagerly to the more detailed responses this book will attract from various quarters. As part of this review I can only suggest one or two of the most pertinent questions to put to Wright.

It is not difficult to predict that there will be those who regard Wright's construal of the synoptics' eschatology as perhaps applicable to Mark and Luke, but not Matthew. After all, does Matthew not employ parousia terminology? And does he not report the parable of the virgins and the sheep and the goats etc.? Does this not show clearly that the eschatological discourses have in mind rather more than the events of AD 70? Personally I think that these questions can be answered within Wright's framework (cf. Glasson). Having said that, I do think that Wright's treatment of the ascension and return motif (cf. Acts 1:11) is uncharacteristically evasive ('It looks much more like a post-Easter innovation than a feature of Jesus' own teaching') and needs further clarification. However, the issue I wish to focus on now is that of salvation. If in the first century Jewish setting God's kingdom and forgiveness are essentially ways of referring to the absence of exile, it is not surprising to find Wright urging his readers against any dehistoricizing abstractions of such terms. On a national level forgiveness means end of punishment at the hands of foreigners. On the individual level it means restoration to the covenant community. Forgiveness is not an idea, it's a fact—at least for those whose agenda is Jesus. Jesus' communion words are not about abstract atonement, but about the historical rescue of God's people from their exilic plight. In a footnote Wright admits that with the increasing gentile mission, the specifically Jewish echoes of forgiveness become fainter. In response, one wonders what the hermeneutical controls for such contextualisation of the gospel might be. Does this issue not deserve more than a footnote to complete what is otherwise an excellent discussion of forgiveness in Jewish thinking? Where, if Wright is correct, does personal piety come into the Christian equation? What does it mean in non-abstract terms to refer to 'Israel's destiny to save the world'? Wright's interpretation of the Beatitudes against the backcloth of Jewish-Roman relations is inspiring because it is radically historical and in that sense non-abstract. But what do we make, for instance, of Matthew's addition to the communion words 'for the forgiveness of sins'? As Wright takes Sanders' understanding of Jewish restoration theology further, new questions emerge in the process. They need to be addressed and no doubt will be in one of the remaining volumes.

I should also mention a few points of detail. The first concerns the 'renewal of the heart' and the Romantic (and liberal Protestant) ideal of religion which separates the inward from the outward, regarding the inward as good and the outward as irrelevant for spiritual life. Wright suggests that to understand this distinction in such terms is wide off the mark as far as first century Judaism is concerned. There, the inward *and* the outward can *both* be good or bad. Israel at the time of Jesus illustrated the latter. Consequently Jesus offered the renewal of what he considered a badly flawed contemporary Jewish agenda. An important text here is Mk 7.14ff/Mt 15.10ff. What matters is not the food that enters a body, but the thoughts that emerge from the mind. For Wright this illustrates Jesus' belief that YHWH desires to recreate human beings as wholes and that the

time for fulfilling this had arrived. I have no problem with the view that Jesus regarded his own time as that of eschatological fulfilment, but is the 'liberal Protestant' interpretation of this particular text not the most straightforward reading after all? It is one thing to demonstrate that 19th century liberal ideas of personal religion fall far short of reflecting first century concepts of practical piety. But to have demonstrated this hardly means that all liberal ideals—including the distinction between outward and inward piety—are biblically unacceptable. That would have to be established separately.

A related issue is that of the timing of the kingdom. One of the things that mark out Christian texts about the kingdom from other second Temple Jewish texts is the combination of present and future components. A short-hand way of saying this would be: there is the present kingdom of the Christ and there will be the future kingdom of God (Eph 5.5?). It would be tempting to argue at this point that Christ's kingdom consists of the church. But, Wright reminds us, Jesus did not go around promising people a church. What he did promise was the imminent fulfilment of his kingdom (eg. Lk 17.20f). The question now has to be this: if the events of AD 70 are the sole referent, or fulfilment, of the so-called eschatological discourses, what further fulfilment of Jesus' 'now but not yet' time frame is to be expected after that date? This temporal matter combines with the earlier discussion of ethics and personal piety. If, as Wright argues, personal piety in its traditional understanding of de-historicized private dealings with God are not at the heart of Jesus' preaching, on what basis will any further judgement, i.e. after AD 70, take place? Further, how might first century piety (properly understood in a thoroughly historical way) be contextualized for later generations? It will be interesting to see how Wright deals with such questions in later volumes.

Related to this matter of the timing of the kingdom is the question of fasting. Jesus' admonition not to fast while the bridegroom is present (Mk 2.18–20) makes sense on the assumption that the bridegroom embodies the return of YHWH, thus signalling the end of 'exile' (of which fasting was a symbol). However, in Mk 2 Jesus goes on to say that there will be a time for fasting after the bridegroom's departure. How does this fit into Wright's eschatological framework? Does this period of fasting subsequent to the return of YHWH (in the shape of the bridegroom) and the rebuilding of the (spiritual) temple through Jesus refer to the Son of man's judgement on Jerusalem (Mk 13—AD 70)? Is the exile not really over until that judgement has been exercised? Further clarification is needed at this point.

Finally there are two areas which are probably deserving of greater coverage than given by Wright. (1) How should passages like Lk 11.37–54 and parallels ('Woe to the Pharisees and Scribes') be read given some recent scholarship in the wake of E.P. Sanders? How far is Wright prepared to follow Sanders' analysis? I am here thinking of such issues as ideology and historicity in the Gospels accounts. (2) There is an eleven page section on Jesus' subversion of contemporary interpretations of the major Jewish symbols of the kingdom (Land, Family, Torah, Temple). Unfortunately Jesus' redefinition of the Torah only gets a third of a page. This does not do justice to the importance of the topic and there is no discussion of such important texts as Lk 16.16–18 and parallels. It may be right to point out that it would be unhelpful to start with 'tough, gritty aphorisms' (p225) and then to work towards some sort of synthesis on this matter, but this hardly deterred Wright from dealing very intelligently with other such aphorisms elsewhere. It seems that not to have done so in this case is a genuine omission.

To conclude, I need to emphasise that whatever points of criticism one might wish to make in detail, this is a superb and vitally important book. Clearly it will not be truly complete until a supplementary discussion of the resurrection (and related accounts such as those of the transfiguration) is published. Despite a degree of unnecessary repetition of detail, the book has been a pleasure to read and re-read. I very warmly recommend it to the widest possible readership, academic or otherwise. For the former it is a 'must'.

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