

Christian Origins and the Question of God

The New Testament and the People of God

Part I: Introduction

Wright identifies four methods of reading the New Testament: pre-critical, historical, theological, and postmodern (7-9). Each developed as a corrective to the perceived failings of the method that preceded.

A particular problem emerges from this sequence, however: 'the tension between a reading that seeks to be in some sense normatively Christian and that which seeks to be faithful to history' (9). Christians have not dealt with this tension especially well. On the one hand, what has been conceived as a defence of orthodox Christianity against Enlightenment rationalism may in fact be merely the defence of a pre-critical worldview that is "no more specifically 'Christian' than any other". On the other, we have failed to understand how the Enlightenment critique of Christianity may lead to the recovery of authenticity:

Here is the paradox that lies at the heart of this whole project. Although the Enlightenment began as, among other things, a critique of orthodox Christianity, it can function, and in many ways has functioned, as a means of recalling Christianity to genuine history, to its necessary roots. 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 its own image. Equally, much Christianity is afraid of scholarly learning, and in so far as the Enlightenment programme was an intellectual venture, Christianity has responded with the simplicities of faith (10).

Wright proposes an approach to reading the New Testament that combines the four methods: the pre-critical emphasis on the authority of the biblical text; the Enlightenment interest in history and theology; and the postmodern concern with the relationship between the reader and the text (11-28).

Part II: Tools for the task

A critical-realist theory of knowledge

The basic argument I shall advance in this Part of the book is that the problem of knowledge itself, and the three branches of it that form our particular concern, can all be clarified by seeing them in the light of a detailed analysis of the *worldviews* which form the grid through which humans, both individually and in social groupings, perceive all of reality. In particular, one of the key features of all worldviews is the element of *story*. This is of vital importance not least in relation to the New Testament and early Christianity, but this is in fact a symptom of a universal phenomenon. 'Story', I shall argue, can help us in the first instance to articulate a critical-realist epistemology, and can then be put to wider uses in the study of literature, history and theology (32).

Wright sets out his 'critical-realist epistemology', as distinct from *positivism*, on the one hand, and *phenomenalism*, on the other. These alternative theories of how we know things are broadly 'the optimistic and pessimistic versions of the Enlightenment epistemological project. Positivism asserts that there are at least some things 'about which we can have definite knowledge' (32). Phenomenalism is less confident about our knowledge of the external world: all we can be certain of are the sensations of the knowing subject (34-35).

Over against both of these positions, I propose a form of *critical realism*. This is a way of describing the process of 'knowing' that acknowledges the *reality of the thing known, as something other than the knower* (hence 'realism'), while also fully acknowledging that the only access we have to this reality lies along the spiralling path of *appropriate dialogue or conversation between the knower and the thing known* (hence 'critical'). This path leads to critical reflection on the products of our enquiry into 'reality', so that our assertions about 'reality' acknowledge their own provisionality. Knowledge, in other words, although in principle concerning realities independent of the knower, is never itself independent of the knower (35).

This dependence of knowledge upon the knower is a matter not merely of the individual's point of view: it also brings into play both the worldview and the community or social context of the perceiver. Wright stresses, therefore, that 'critical realism... sees the knowledge of particulars as taking place within the larger framework of the story or worldview which forms the basis of the observer's way of being in the world' (37). He goes on to argue at some length that stories are constitutive of our worldviews and of human life generally (38-44). He concludes that a critical-realist theory of knowledge i) is essentially relational, and in that respect overcomes the traditional dualism of subjective and objective knowledge; ii) "acknowledges the essentially 'storied' nature of human knowing, thinking and living, within the larger model of worldviews and their component parts" (45).

Literature, story and the articulation of worldviews (47-80)

Wright next attempts to describe a 'critical-realist account of the phenomenon of reading' (61). He takes the view that conservative models of reading the Bible which emphasize the immediate personal relevance of the text to the reader and ignore the historical dimension are, ironically, little different from postmodern approaches:

The devout predecessor of deconstructionism is that reading of the text which insists that what the Bible says to *me, now*, is the be-all and end-all of its meaning; a reading which does not want to know about the intention of the evangelist, the life of the early church, or even about what Jesus was actually like. There are some strange bedfellows in the world of literary epistemology (60).

The critical-realist position is differentiated from the positivist or naïve realist stance, on the one hand, which assumes that the text stands in a straightforward relationship to the world, and the reductionist stance, on the other, which entirely disallows the common-sense assumption that the text expresses the thoughts of its author and refers to objects in the real world. At this point Wright suggests a rather surprising solution to the problem of reference: a hermeneutic of love. Just as love 'affirms the reality and otherness of the beloved' rather than attempt to 'collapse the beloved into terms of itself', a *hermeneutic* of love 'means that the text can be listened to on its own terms, without being reduced to the scale of what the reader can or cannot understand at the moment' 64).

A theory of literature is required that secures both the public or historical relevance of the text and the dynamic of private or personal address. We examine the text 'in all its historical otherness to ourselves as well as all its transtemporal relatedness to ourselves, and being aware of the complex relation that exists between those two things'. The importance of the public dimension lies particularly in the fact that by means of the 'historical otherness' of the text a worldview is brought to birth. 'By reading it historically, I can detect that it was always intended as a subversive story, undermining a current worldview and attempting to replace it with another. By reading it with my own ears open, I realize that it may subvert my worldview too' (67).

At this point Wright briefly introduces structuralist analyses of narrative (Propp, Greimas), arguing that such approaches force us to attend more carefully to the story that is being told (69-77). He suggests that the basic charge that the early church levelled against Judaism was a failure to listen to the story of the Old Testament. More importantly: 'It might also be suggested that a similar failure on the part of contemporary Christians is widespread, and is moreover at the root of a great deal of misunderstanding of the Christian tradition in general and the gospels in particular' (70). To address the question of Christian origins, in Wright's

view, is fundamentally to engage in the discernment and analysis of first-century stories and of their relation to the larger stories and worldviews of which they form a part (78-79).

History and the first century (81-120)

A critical-realist theory of history recognizes, first, that history is always constructed from a particular point of view. 'All history... consists of a spiral of knowledge, a long-drawn-out process of interaction between interpreter and source material' (86). Wright makes some comments about here about the capacity of ancient historians to differentiate facts from the interpretation or distortion of facts (84-85). But this does not mean, secondly, that there can be no factual basis for history. A critical-realist approach must take into account the impact of perspective and bias on the recording of events, but we are not, for that reason, obliged to assume that the events described did not actually take place (88-92).

Wright then considers the long-standing reluctance on the part of scholars to read the gospel narratives as authentic history. He suggests some reasons for this: i) there is the natural distrust of miracle stories; ii) many critical methods 'were devised not in order to do history but in order *not* to do history: in order, rather, to maintain a careful and perhaps pious silence when unsure where the history might lead'; and iii) there has been a concern that contingent historical events cannot have universal relevance (92-95). Wright argues against this position that 'it is appropriate for humans in general to listen to stories other than those by which they habitually order their lives, and to ask themselves whether those other stories ought not to be allowed to subvert their usual ones'. This appeal is not addressed only to the modernist sceptic: it is often precisely the ordinary old-fashioned conservative or fundamentalist Christian 'who needs to be open to the possibilities of ways of reading the New Testament, and ways of understanding who Jesus actually was, which will call his or her previous stories into serious question' (97).

In the next section Wright examines how hypothesis and verification function within an appropriate historical method and how they may be applied in the case of New Testament history (98-109). His central contention here is that in the field of the historical study of Jesus scholarship has reached the point where we may assert a coherent hypothesis that accommodates all the data about Jesus and so is able to make sense of the gospels 'as they stand' (106-107).

Finally, to the idea that history is knowledge of what happened we must add three further levels of historical understanding. First, history must encompass *human intentionality*: we are concerned not only with the 'outside' of an event but also the 'inside' (109-112). Secondly, the task of the historian is not merely to record isolated facts but to describe the *narrative* that connects and makes sense of the facts: 'a great many people within the guild of New Testament specialists have written very little history as such' (113). Finally, we may inquire as to the *meaning* of historical events. 'The meaning of an event, which... is basically an acted story, is its place, or its perceived place, within a sequence of events, which contribute to a more fundamental story; and fundamental stories are of course one of the constituent features of worldviews' (116).

Theology, authority and the New Testament (121-144)

Wright summarizes the aim of this chapter: 'to suggest what might be involved in a 'theological' reading that does not bypass the 'literary' and 'historical' readings, but rather enhances them; and to explore one possible model of letting this composite reading function as normative or authoritative' (121).

After some general remarks on worldview and theology (122-131) Wright addresses the question of how to do 'a specifically *Christian* theology', which must include a normative element: not only what *is* believed but also what *ought to be* believed (131). He describes two traditional approaches: one which attempts to systematize 'timeless truths or propositions', another which 'seeks actively to engage with current concerns in the world, whether through confrontation or integration'. Wright proposes, instead, a 'narrative theology' with a strong historical orientation (132) on the basis of the preceding analysis of how worldviews work:

- i) Christian theology tells a coherent story about a creator and his creation;

ii) this story provides a set of answers to four central worldview questions: Who are we? Where are we? What is wrong? What is the solution?

iii) the worldview 'has been given expression in a variety of socio-cultural symbols, both artifacts and cultural events';

iv) the Christian worldview 'gives rise to a particular type of praxis, a particular mode of being-in-the-world' (132-134).

In the last section Wright proposes a rather creative model for a normative biblical theology. He rejects both a pre-critical 'biblicistic proof-texting, as inconsistent with the nature of the texts' and the modernistic dissociation of descriptive and normative readings of the Bible. Instead he argues for a narrative model for linking what is and what ought to be:

Suppose there exists a Shakespeare play, most of whose fifth act has been lost. The first four acts provide, let us suppose, such a remarkable wealth of characterization, such a crescendo of excitement within the plot, that it is generally agreed that the play ought to be staged. Nevertheless, it is felt inappropriate actually to write a fifth act once and for all: it would freeze the play into one form, and commit Shakespeare as it were to being prospectively responsible for work not in fact his own. Better, it might be felt, to give the key parts to highly trained, sensitive and experienced Shakespearian actors, who would immerse themselves in the first four acts, and in the language and culture of Shakespeare and his time, *and who would then be told to work out a fifth act for themselves* (140).

A good fifth act will show a proper final development, not merely a repetition, of what went before. Nevertheless, there will be a rightness, a fittingness, about certain actions and speeches, about certain final moves in the drama, which will in one sense be self-authenticating, and in another gain authentication from their coherence with, their making sense of, the 'authoritative' previous text (141).

He takes the argument a step further by suggested that the first four acts correspond to creation, fall, Israel, Jesus; the writing of the New Testament constitutes the first scene of the fifth act and provides hints (Rom.8; 1 Cor.15; parts of Revelation) as to how the play should end.

To sum up: I am proposing a notion of 'authority' which is not simply vested in the New Testament, or in 'New Testament theology', nor simply in 'early Christian history' and the like, conceived positivistically, but in the creator god himself, and this god's story with the world, seen as focused on the story of Israel and thence on the story of Jesus, as told and retold in the Old and New Testaments, and as still requiring completion. This is a far more complex notion of authority than those usually tossed around in theological discourse. That is, arguably, what we need if we are to break through the log-jams caused by regular over-simplifications (143).

Part III: First century Judaism within the Greco-Roman World

The third part of the book consists of a survey of first century Judaism. Rather than summarize this very detailed historical overview of historical setting, social groupings, worldview, beliefs, and eschatological expectations, I will simply highlight what appear to be the most salient observations.

The developing diversity

Wright defends himself against the charge that he is reading Christian ideas or modes of thought back into Judaism by pointing out, among other things, that this project will have the effect of *correcting* certain Christian misconceptions: "Many 'Christian' readings of the gospels have screened out the political overtones of Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom; a fresh examination of the Jewish background will put that straight" (149). He insists that first century Judaism and Christianity have a central worldview-feature in common: 'the sense of a story now reaching its climax. And, most importantly, *it is the same story*. It is the story... especially of exile and restoration - or rather, of puzzlement as to whether the exile was really over or

not.... It is here that fundamental continuity is to be sought; and this legitimates the attempt to study Judaism in such a way as to shed light on emerging Christianity' (150).

The impact of the Maccabean crisis (167-164 BC) on Jewish identity and life is highlighted (158, 167), not least because it was the prototypical revolt against oppression:

From our review of the historical situation in the previous chapter it appears that the pressing needs of most Jews of the period had to do with liberation - from oppression, from debt, from Rome. Other issues, I suggest, were regularly seen in this light. The hope of Israel, and of most special-interest groups within Israel, was not for *post mortem* disembodied bliss, but for a national liberation that would fulfil the expectations aroused by the memory, and regular celebration, of the exodus, and, nearer at hand, of the Maccabean victory. Hope focused on the coming of the kingdom of Israel's god (169-170).

This leads to a survey of the main groupings within first-century Judaism (170-214): movements of revolt against Rome; the Pharisees; the Essenes; priests, aristocrats and Sadducees; and 'ordinary Jews'. While this section is of general importance inasmuch as it describes the immediate religious and political context within which we must make sense of the story about Jesus, two particular emphases stand out. The first is the now quite well established view (associated especially with Sanders) that Pharisaic religion was not 'the system of self-salvation so often anachronistically ascribed to them by Christians who knew little about the first century but a lot about the Pelagian controversy' (189). 'Their goals were the honour of Israel's god, the following of his covenant charter, and the pursuit of the full promised redemption of Israel.' Secondly, the point is made that within the context of first-century Jewish belief the idea of resurrection had more to do with the hope of national restoration than with speculation about life after death for the individual (200, 211).

Story, symbol, praxis: Israel's worldview

Chapter eight considers how story, symbol and praxis together constitute Israel's worldview. Wright argues that the great story of the Hebrew scriptures would have been read in the second-temple period as 'a story in search of a conclusion' (217). 'This ending would have to incorporate the full liberation and redemption of Israel, an event which had not happened as long as Israel was being oppressed, a prisoner in her own land.' How fundamental this was to the Jewish worldview is demonstrated by the fact that the inconclusiveness of Israel's story expressed itself not only through narrative but also through religious symbolism and praxis. Of particular importance in this regard was Torah observation. Wright again insists that at issue here is not some legalistically motivated attempt to *earn* salvation but the overriding need to 'maintain their god-given distinctiveness over against the pagan nations' (237). He underlines the significance of this distinction for New Testament theology:

This conclusion, as we shall see later, is a point of peculiar significance for understanding both Jesus' controversies and Pauline theology. The 'works of Torah' were not a legalist's ladder, up which one climbed to earn the divine favour, but were the badges that one wore as the marks of identity, of belonging to the chosen people in the present, and hence the all-important signs, to oneself and one's neighbours, that one belonged to the company who would be vindicated when the covenant god acted to redeem his people. They were the present signs of future vindication. This was how 'the works of Torah' functioned within the belief, and the hope, of Jews and particularly of Pharisees (238).

The beliefs of Israel

The Jewish worldview was constructed around a narrative core that consisted of three basic elements: monotheism, election and eschatology:

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. Faced with national crisis (and the story of second-temple Judaism is, as we have seen, one of semi-permanent crisis), this twin belief, monotheism and election, committed any Jew who thought about it for a moment to a further belief: YHWH, as the creator and covenant god, was irrevocably committed to further action of some sort in history, which would bring about

the end of Israel's desolation and the vindication of his true people. Monotheism and election lead to eschatology, and eschatology means the renewal of the covenant (247).

Monotheism: first-century Jewish monotheism is creational, providential, and most importantly covenantal, because this is the means by which the problem of evil is addressed: 'The creator calls a people through whom, somehow, he will act decisively within his creation, to eliminate evil from it and to restore order, justice and peace' (251-252). Jewish belief in monotheism had nothing to do with 'the numerical analysis of the inner being of Israel's god himself. It had everything to do with the two-pronged fight against paganism and dualism' (259).

Election and covenant: covenant theology functions on three levels: i) the creator 'has not been thwarted irrevocably by the rebellion of his creation, but has called into being a people through whom he will work to restore his creation'; ii) Israel's own sufferings are the consequence of infidelity to the covenant but holds that 'our god will remain faithful and will restore us'; and iii) the sufferings and sins of individual Jews are met with forgiveness and restoration (260). Wright also maintains that 'Israel's covenantal vocation caused her to think of herself as the creator's true humanity' (262). But the implications of this belief for Israel's relation to the nations are ambiguous. On the one hand, Israel was to be a light to the nations (cf. Is.49:6): 'When Zion becomes what her god intends her to become, the Gentiles will come in and hear the word of YHWH.' On the other, when Israel was oppressed by the nations, the thought is more that of resisting and destroying the forces that oppose the true god and his people (267).

Covenant and eschatology: here we come to the central argument that Jews of the second-temple period, despite the physical return of the people to the land and the rebuilding of the temple, regarded themselves as being still in 'exile'. The present age, therefore, remained an 'age of wrath': 'until the Gentiles are put in their place and Israel, and the Temple, fully restored, the exile is not really over, and the blessings promised by the prophets are still to take place' (270). This problem is often defined in second-temple literature in terms of the covenant faithfulness (ie. 'righteousness', *tsedaqah*) of god: 'when and how would Israel's god act to fulfil his covenant promises?' Wright underlines the extreme importance of this formulation of the problem for Paul's theology.

The biblical prophets consistently articulate a two-fold motif: 'Israel's exile is the result of her own sin, idolatry and apostasy, and the problem will be solved by YHWH's dealing with the sin and thus restoring his people to their inheritance.' It must be emphasized, therefore, that to the first-century Jew the phrase 'forgiveness of sins' would most naturally apply to the nation as a whole, not to the individual. Wright argues that the sacrificial system should be understood 'as a way of enacting and institutionalizing... the belief that Israel's covenant god would restore the fortunes of his people' (275). He then suggests that the national experience of exile may be interpreted not only as punishment but also as a sacrifice, a 'righteous bearing of sin and evil'. The quite common belief that a period of intense suffering ('birthpangs') would precede the inauguration of the new age should also be brought into view here: 'Israel will pass through intense and climactic suffering; after this she will be forgiven, and then and thus the world will be healed' (278).

A clearer distinction probably needs to be maintained here between the punishment of the nation and the suffering of a righteous individual or group within the nation.

The hope of Israel

Wright begins by considering the nature of apocalyptic writing. The most important observation is that Jewish apocalyptic language cannot be read in 'a crassly literalistic way' to signify the end of the world; rather the 'metaphorical language of apocalyptic invests history with theological meaning' (284). 'Far more important to the first-century Jew than questions of space, time and literal cosmology were the key issues of Temple, Land, and Torah, of race, economy and justice' (285). The result of the literalist reading, which has dominated both modern popular Christian thought and modern New Testament scholarship, is a 'dualistic belief in the unredeemableness of the present physical world' that is in fact closer to Gnosticism than to biblical apocalyptic.

Central to Jewish apocalyptic literature is Daniel 7. Wright argues that 'those who read this (very popular) chapter in the first century would have seen its meaning first and foremost in terms of the vindication of Israel after her suffering at the hands of the pagans' (292). In other words, the 'Son of man' would generally have been understood as a representative figure only in a literary sense. The interpretive context is provided by Daniel 1-6: 'Pagan pressure for Jews to compromise their ancestral religion must be resisted: the kingdoms of the world will finally give way to the everlasting kingdom of the one true god, and when that happens Jews who had held firm will themselves be vindicated' (294).

In the context of first-century Jewish expectation 'salvation' is to be understood not as the enjoyment of a non-physical, 'spiritual' bliss following the destruction of the space-time universe but as national restoration. 'The age to come, the end of Israel's exile, was therefore seen as the inauguration of a new covenant between Israel and her god' (301). This restoration is part of what it meant for Israel's god to become king (307).

From a survey of Jewish beliefs regarding the messiah six conclusions are drawn: i) expectation was focused primarily on the nation; ii) under certain circumstances this expectation could be narrowed to a particular individual; iii) in this case the portrait of the individual messiah could be redrawn to fit the situation or person involved; iv) the main task of the messiah was 'the liberation of Israel, and her reinstatement as the true people of the creator god'; v) the messiah will be the agent of Israel's god, not an independent transcendent figure; and vi) there was no expectation that the messiah would suffer (319-320).

Wright argues that belief in resurrection arose in conjunction with 'struggle to maintain obedience to Israel's ancestral laws in the face of persecution...; it is what will happen after the great tribulation' (331). But this belief also functions *metaphorically* as an expression of the hope of eventual national renewal following the continuing experience of exile. "As such, 'resurrection' was not simply a pious hope about new life for dead people. It carried with it all that was associated with the return from exile itself: forgiveness of sins, the re-establishment of Israel as the true humanity of the covenant god, and the renewal of all creation" (332).

Finally, in a similar fashion, the word 'salvation' is defined as the gift of Israel's god to the whole people; individual Jews would find their own salvation within the context of national liberation and restoration, through membership of the covenant community. 'The first-century question of soteriology then becomes: what are the badges of membership that mark one out in the group that is to be saved, vindicated, raised to life (in the case of members already dead) or exalted to power (in the case of those still alive)?' (335).

Part IV: The first Christian century

In the fourth part of the book Wright outlines a history of the early church - a 'quest for the kerygmatic church' analogous to the well-established programme of a 'quest for the historical Jesus. He begins by plotting a spectrum of scholarly opinions regarding the constitution of early Christianity: at one end of the scale, there is the view that the early church quickly became a Hellenistic movement (also incorporating Gnosticism); at the other, the view that the church emerged as 'a Jewish messianic sect, going out into the world with the news that the god of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had now revealed himself savingly for all the world in the Jewish Messiah, Jesus' (344). Currently the debate is quite finely balanced. 'Many scholars are now of the opinion that the main problem in describing the origin of Christianity is to account fully *both* for the thorough Jewishness of the movement *and* for the break with Judaism that had come about at least by the middle of the second century.'

Wright sets out nine historical fixed points, in reverse chronological order, for an investigation of the development of the early church up to the middle of the second century: i) the martyrdom of Polycarp around AD 155/6; ii) Pliny's letter to Trajan between AD 110 and 114 regarding the treatment of the illegal sect of Christians; iii) the letters of Ignatius written during his journey to Rome to face martyrdom under Trajan (AD 110-117); iv) the interrogation of certain blood-relatives of Jesus by Domitian around AD 90, recounted by Hegesippus and record in Eusebius' *History*; v) the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70; vi) Nero's scapegoating of Christians in Rome after the great fire in AD 64; vii) the stoning of 'James, the brother of Jesus who was called the Christ' in AD 62, recorded by Josephus; viii) the activity of Paul in the first

half of the 50s; and ix) Suetonius' evidence for the expulsion of the Jews from Rome because of 'continuous disturbances a the instigation of Chrestus' around AD 49.

As with the history of first-century Judaism, Wright proposes to begin not with particular writings but with the elements that made up the early Christian worldview: praxis, symbols, questions and answers, and, most importantly, the characteristic stories told by early Christians (358).

Under praxis he examines mission, sacrament (baptism and eucharist), worship with reference not only to God but also to Jesus, 'a strong and clear ethical code', the non-performance of animal sacrifices, and a willingness to suffer martyrdom for the sake of Christ (359-365). The early Christians constructed their world view around rather subversive alternatives to the regular symbols of both Judaism and paganism: the highly offensive symbol of the cross, supplemented by the symbolic status of Christian martyrs; mission to the whole world in place of the Land and ethnic identity in the Israel's symbolic universe; the person of Jesus instead of the temple - a transfer of symbolism that "was forcing them to articulate the meaning of the word 'god' itself in a new way"; creeds and baptismal confessions as the new 'badges of community' membership instead of circumcision, kosher laws, and sabbath (365-369). Early Christians also, naturally, had a different set of answers to the four worldview questions (369-370): Who are we? Where are we? What is wrong? What is the solution?

Stories in early Christianity fall into two categories: large and small. Wright first considers the large stories told by the major writers of the New Testament: the Gospel writers, Paul, and the author of Hebrews. The central contention here is that in each case the overarching story about Israel is retold and subverted. So, for example:

Paul's theology can... be plotted most accurately and fully on the basis that it represents his rethinking, in the light of Jesus and the divine spirit, of the fundamental Jewish beliefs: monotheism (of the creational and covenantal sort), election, and eschatology. This theology was integrated with the rethought narrative world at every point (407).

Much of chapter 14, which considers the place of smaller stories within early Christianity, has to do with the description of an appropriate method of *form-critical* analysis especially in reaction to the traditional form-critical assumption that the stories in the Gospels "reflected the life of the early church *rather than* the life of Jesus, in that the early church invented (perhaps under the guidance of the 'spirit of Jesus') sayings of Jesus to address problems in their own day' (421). There are also some important remarks here about the nature of 'mythological' language: 'the language of myth, and eschatological myths in particular (the sea, the fabulous monsters, etc.), are used in the biblical literature as complex metaphor systems to denote historical events and to invest them with their theological significance' (425). Wright also addresses here the question of the sayings sources, Q and the Gospel of Thomas, and refutes the modern hypothesis (cf. Kloppenborg, Downing, Mack, Crossan) which asserts that Q and Thomas bear witness to a primitive conception of Jesus as 'a teacher of aphoristic, quasi-Gnostic, quasi-Cynic wisdom' (437).

Part four concludes with a 'preliminary sketch' of the early Christians:

Aims: the motivating force behind early Christian mission is found in 'the central belief and hope of Judaism interpreted in the light of Jesus'. Added to this belief that Israel had now been redeemed and that, therefore, the time of the Gentiles had come, was the experience of the divine spirit:

...the overwhelming sense of being sustained and driven on by a new kind of inner motivation, which they could only attribute to the outpouring of the divine spirit, compelled the early Christians to the conclusion that the strange events concerning Jesus that they had witnessed really did constitute the fulfilment of Israel's covenant expectations, really were the end of exile and the beginning of the 'age to come' for which Israel had longed (446).

By themselves, however, this new belief and new experience were not enough to account historically for the development of early Christianity. We must also take into consideration the context of the new community within which belief and experience functioned.

Community and definition: community is defined in the first place sacramentally by baptism and eucharist, both of which 'draw the eye up to the most striking feature of the life of the early community: the worship of Jesus' (448). This worship was not 'a sign that the community was moving away from creational or covenantal monotheism, but rather a sign of a radical reinterpretation within that monotheism'. The common life of the church, centred sacramentally on Jesus, 'functioned from the first in terms of an alternative family'. It also entailed a 'new socio-political orientation', which meant that the church was somewhat alienated from Jewish and pagan society and inevitably suffered persecution.

Development and variety: Wright identifies a number of axes along which early Christian diversity was expressed: various aspects of Jewish-Gentile diversity; salvation-historical continuity with Israel or an ahistorical faith with a 'vertical eschatology'; flexible or fixed forms of ministry; literalist or metaphorical interpretations of apocalyptic imagery; low christology or high christology; the cross made central or marginal to a doctrine of salvation; charismatic enthusiasts or 'early catholics' (455). What held this diversity together was that the early Christians told consistent form of Israel's story 'which reached its climax in Jesus and which then issued in their spirit-given new life and task' (456).

Theology: 'Early Christianity was monotheistic in the sense in which Judaism was monotheistic and paganism was not; that is, the early Christians embraced *creational*, *covenantal* and hence *eschatological* monotheism' (457). The doctrine necessarily entails two central dualities: of the creator and the creation, and of good and evil. The early Christians addressed these themes on the basis of the Jewish sources, but they consistently reorganized them around the fixed points of Jesus and the spirit. So for example, to the question, How is the creator active within the creation? they gave the answer: 'this creator god had acted specifically and climactically in Jesus, and was now acting through his own spirit in a new, Jesus-related way'. To the question, How is the creator dealing with evil within his creation? they reaffirmed the original answer, which was that God intended to address the problem of evil through Israel, with two amendments: first, that through Jesus God had dealt with the problem of the evil that was within Israel; and secondly, that it was the people of Jesus, as a 'continuation of Israel in a new situation', who were to 'fulfil Israel's vocation on behalf of the world' (458). Finally, the church took over the Jewish doctrine of salvation and transposed it to a law court setting so that it becomes fundamentally a question of the 'righteousness of God'.

The major underlying difference between the Christian and the Jewish views at this point was that the early Christians believed that *the verdict had already been announced* in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Israel's god had acted decisively, to demonstrate his covenant faithfulness, to deliver his people from their sins, and to usher in the inaugurated new covenant.

Hope: 'Precisely because Jesus' resurrection was the raising of one human being in the middle of the history of exile and misery, not the raising of all righteous human beings to bring the history of exile and misery to an end, there must be a further end in sight.' This 'further end' consists of four elements, each of which is a 'rereading of Jewish hopes in the light of Jesus and the divine spirit' (459). i) Jesus will be vindicated as a divine prophet when Jerusalem and the temple are destroyed. ii) The kingdom of Israel's God will spread into the whole world. iii) Christians believed that Israel's God would 'physically recreate those who were his own, at some time and in some space the other side of death' (460). iv) Finally, there was a expectation of the return of Jesus. This is not the subject of texts which speak of the 'coming of the son of man on a cloud', which have to do rather with his vindication through resurrection and exaltation and through the destruction of Jerusalem. The return of Jesus belongs instead to the renewal of the whole created (462).

Jesus and the Victory of God

PART I: INTRODUCTION

The book begins by setting in place the two poles of 20th century New Testament scholarship, Schweitzer and Bultmann, who in radically different ways demonstrated that the fundamental puzzle of the New Testament was an historical one (5).

The legacy of these 'giants' has been a split between history and theology that has dominated recent western Christian thought: either the writing of New Testament history is made subservient to theological presuppositions or it is undertaken with the expectation that orthodox theology will be undermined. So write insists:

The underlying argument of this book is that the split is not warranted: that rigorous history (i.e. open-ended investigation of actual events in first-century Palestine) and rigorous theology (i.e. open-ended investigation of what the word 'god', and hence the adjective 'divine', might actually refer to) belong together, and never more so than in discussion of Jesus. (8)

Wright's aim, therefore, is to reconnect history and theology - the 'Jesus of History' and the 'Christ of faith'. He likens historical study to the prodigal son of Jesus' story, who is in the process of being rehabilitated but who is not always welcomed by the various 'elder brothers' of Christian orthodoxy (9-10).

Wright then outlines the various 'quests' for Jesus that have been undertaken throughout the history of New Testament theology.

1. The primary interest of the reformers was in the death of Jesus as a saving event that, in practice, had very little to do with the historical circumstances of his life: "The reformers had very thorough answers to the question 'why did Jesus die?'; they did not have nearly such good answers to the question 'why did Jesus live?'" (14). In short, they were much more interested in theology than in history.

2. The critical movement, beginning with Reimarus (1694-1768), the 'great iconoclast', reacted against theological orthodoxy and sketched a supposedly 'historical' Jesus in keeping with the ideals of rationalism - a 'timeless teacher of eternal verities' (20). For Schweitzer, on the other hand, Jesus could only be understood against the backdrop of a thoroughly Jewish apocalypticism: he believed that God was about to bring the world to an end. 'When this did not happen, and the great wheel of history refused to turn, he threw himself upon it, was crushed in the process, but succeeded in turning it none the less' (19).

3. Schweitzer's critique of the old 'quest' for Jesus was so devastating and his own solution so disturbing that New Testament theology again lost its historical nerve and recentred itself around the Christ of faith. Bultmann translated eschatology into existentialism. The 'personality' of Jesus could not be recovered from the documents and was in any case irrelevant for theology. The stories found in the gospels, purporting to be historical, were in reality faith-statements about the risen Christ and provided evidence only for the faith of the early church. Moreover, to have any value for the church today, they would have to be stripped of their mythological trappings - demythologized. The next change of tack came with Käsemann's famous lecture on 'The problem of the Historical Jesus' in 1953, in which he argued, in Wright's words, that 'if Jesus was not earthed in history then he might be pulled in any direction, might be made the hero of any theological or political programme' (23). This 'new quest', however, has proved less successful than we might have hoped, chiefly because it failed to shake off 'the outdated view of apocalyptic as meaning simply the expectation of the end of the world, in a crudely literalistic sense' (24).

Wright concludes that 200 years of research has 'put the historical question firmly and irrevocably on the theological map, but without providing a definite answer to it'. The great works of modern systematic theology, and especially christology, have indicated the

importance of the question of the historical Jesus, but Wright maintains that at no point has 'the full impact of the historical evidence been allowed to influence very much the dogmatic conclusions reached' (26).

The 'New Quest' renewed: Jesus seminar, Mack, Crossan, Borg

1. Wright regards the 'Jesus Seminar', founded by Robert Funk in 1985, as essentially a reinvigoration of 'post-Bultmannian study of Jesus' (29). He levels two principle charges against the project. First, it has relied on a positivistic methodology that is 'quite out of place in serious historical scholarship'. Secondly, 'the way the system operates... demonstrates simply that a certain swathe of modern American scholarship has opted, largely *a priori* in terms of the present exercise, for one particular way of understanding who Jesus was and how the early church developed' (31-32). Wright concludes:

What is afoot, at least in the 'results' available thus far, is not the detailed objective study of individual passages, leading up to a new view of Jesus and the early church. *It is a particular view of Jesus and the early church, working its way through into a detailed list of sayings that fit with this view.* Once this is recognized, it should also be seen that the real task, still awaiting all students of Jesus, is that of major hypothesis and serious verification, not pseudo-atomistic work on apparently isolated fragments. (33)

2. Burton Mack argues for a two stage development in early Christianity: the Q material in Matthew and Luke casts Jesus as a Cynic sage telling subversive stories; Mark, however, invents a myth about Jesus as the innocent son of God who announces the end of the world, which forms the basis for the later Hellenistic Christ-cult (35-36). Wright suggests that Mack's rejection of the apocalyptic Jesus had more than a little to do with a widespread academic reaction against Reaganism in the 1980s. He also offers a critique of the Jesus Seminar's reliance on Q for developing a portrait of Jesus and the relegation of the apocalyptic material in the gospels to a secondary stage of theological reflection (40-44).

3. Wright regards Crossan's book *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* as a brilliant piece of inventive scholarship but 'almost entirely wrong' (44). The heart of Jesus' activity, according to Crossan, is a highly subversive combination of 'magic and meal'. On the one hand, miracles were 'what the Kingdom looked like at the level of political reality'; on the other, the sharing of meals represented 'a strategy for building or rebuilding peasant community on radically different principles from those of honor and shame, patronage and clientage' (57-58). Wright's objection to this vision is not that it gives Jesus' ministry a social and political slant but that 'in grasping the way in which Jesus' programme cut against the normal social expectations of Mediterranean peasant culture, Crossan... has radically and consistently underplayed the specifically Jewish dimension both of the culture itself and of Jesus' agenda for it' (58).

4. A section is devoted to the view held widely by proponents of this renewed 'New Quest' that the Jesus material has much in common with Cynic philosophy. Wright admits the possibility of a superficial similarity between Christianity and Cynicism but insists that the core of the Jesus tradition is not the timeless challenge of the Cynic but 'the very specific note that Israel's god, the creator of the world, is bringing Israel's and the world's history to an awesome climax, so that urgent action is called for if Israel is to escape cataclysmic judgment' (72).

5. Wright locates Marcus Borg between the Jesus Seminar and the "post-Schweitzer 'Third Quest'". Borg follows Schweitzer in setting Jesus within Jewish apocalyptic but argues for an historical and political interpretation of apocalyptic language. He depicts Jesus as a rather complex, multilayered figure: religious ecstatic, healer, wisdom teacher, social prophet, and movement founder (76). Wright's main criticism is that Borg's Jesus uses the language of eschatology to express 'the essentially timeless truth that God is always available to human beings, and requires compassion rather than exclusive and oppressive ways of life' (77).

In conclusion, Wright lists the main weaknesses of the New Quest: i) an over-reliance on the sayings of Jesus; ii) the failure to develop a large historical hypothesis; and iii) a flawed

account of Christian origins. He summarizes the difference between the renewed New Quest and the Third Quest:

The 'Jesus Seminar' has rejected Jewish eschatology, particularly apocalyptic, as an appropriate context for understanding Jesus himself, and in order to do so has declared the Markan narrative a fiction. The 'Third Quest', without validating Mark in any simplistic way, has placed Jesus precisely within his Jewish eschatological context, and has found in consequence new avenues of secure historical investigation opening up before it. (81)

The 'Third Quest'

With the shift to the 'Third Quest' certain basic questions arise:

Jesus' message is evaluated, not for its timeless significance, but for the meaning it must have had for the audience of his own day, who had their minds full of poverty and politics, and would have had little time for theological abstractions or timeless verities. The crucifixion, long recognized as an absolute bedrock in history, is now regularly made the centre of our understanding: what must Jesus have been like if he ended up on a Roman cross? (85)

Wright identifies five major questions that set the agenda for the Third Quest, 'with a sixth always waiting in the wings'.

1. How does Jesus fit into Judaism? Was he a thoroughly Jewish type, indistinguishable from other figures of his time? Was he quite out-of-place in his culture, an alien? Or does he confront and challenge Judaism, seeking to recover 'a key part of the Jewish heritage itself' (93)? This is Borg's argument: Jesus comes into conflict with the Pharisees 'not because Judaism is the wrong sort of religion; it is because Israel has forgotten her vocation'. Wright summarizes at this juncture the argument of *The New Testament and the People of God* about apocalyptic language, which he characterizes as 'an elaborate metaphor-system for investing historical events with theological significance' (96). Jesus' warnings about imminent judgment, therefore, 'were intended to be taken as denoting (what we would call) socio-political events, *seen as the climactic moment in Israel's history*, and, in consequence, as constituting a summons to national repentance' (97). This has the implication, finally, that Jesus' theology was thoroughly 'political', if by 'politics' we mean 'the concern about the structure and purpose of a historic community' (Borg).

2. What were Jesus' aims? The traditional pre-critical view is that 'Jesus came to die for the sins of the world, and/or to found the church'. The Old Quest, and to a large extent the New Quest, regarded Jesus as essentially a teacher. Most Third Quest writers start with the assumption that Jesus' purpose had to do with the kingdom. Three questions need to be addressed: i) Did Jesus change his mind at any point in his life? ii) Did he go to Jerusalem with the intention of dying there? iii) Did he believe that he had a special or unique role in the kingdom?

3. Why did Jesus die? Wright carefully differentiates between historical and theological answers to this question and then sets out the range of possible answers to the historical question. He suggests, however, that the Third Quest has tended to focus in particular on Jesus' attitude towards the temple as a primary reason for his death (108). This sort of investigation, however, does not disqualify the theological question because the theological interpretation ('Christ died for our sins') was applied to his death very early in the Christian tradition.

4. How and why did the early church begin? In first century Judaism the execution of a messianic or revolutionary leader usually led to the defeat or disappearance of his followers. This did not happen following the death of Jesus. So the question arises:

why and how did the early disciples, shattered as they had been by the crucifixion of their master, regroup and go out to face persecution for declaring that in him the hope of Israel had quite literally come to life? Why did they then organize themselves and act in the way that they did, and, in particular, why (granted their abiding commitment to Jewish-style

monotheism) did they begin very early on to *worship* Jesus, and to include him in Jewish-style monotheistic formulae? (111)

5. Why are the gospels what they are? This question goes beyond the scope of the current book, but it remains a test of any historical hypothesis about Jesus that it is also able to explain why the gospels are what they are (112-113).

The sixth question: “How does the Jesus we discover by doing ‘history’ relate to the contemporary church and the world?”. Wright reiterates the point that theology has often regarded historical research as a threat: ‘To put it bluntly, if one locates Jesus in first-century Palestine, one risks the possibility that he might have little to say to twentieth-century Europe, America or anywhere else’ (117). There are two particular areas of interest here. The first is a perceived tendency in modern scholarship to want to correct older ‘anti-semitic’ theologies. The second is the sensitive question of christology: ‘Is it possible to proceed, by way of historical study, to a portrait of Jesus which is sufficient of itself to evoke, or at least legitimate, that worship which Christianity has traditionally offered to him?’ (120) The difficulty of reconciling the historical and theological readings of the gospels is illustrated with reference to three writers (Schillebeeckx, Harvey, and Witherington) who have not been altogether successful in their attempts to move from the Jesus of history to the Christ of faith.

Wright suggests, in conclusion, that history may result in a new perspective on theology: “when the New Testament writers speak of their encounter with Jesus as an encounter with Israel’s god, they are redefining what ‘god’ (or even ‘God’) means at least as much as they are redefining who Jesus was and is” (123).

Prodigals and paradigms

Wright returns to the parable of the ‘prodigal son’ and makes a remarkable interpretive proposal - that it should be understood fundamentally as ‘the story of Israel, in particular of exile and restoration’ (126). Israel went into exile ‘in a far country’ because of her own folly and is now returning ‘simply because of the fantastically generous, indeed prodigal, love of her god’. The retelling, however, is subversive in that the ‘real return from exile, including the real resurrection from the dead, is taking place, in an extremely paradoxical fashion, in Jesus’ own ministry’. The parable, according to this reading, encapsulates perfectly the shape of Jesus’ ministry and his place within the story of Israel. By associating with sinners Jesus acts out ‘the great healing, the great restoration, of Israel’; he is ‘reconstituting Israel around himself’ (130-131).

This approach points to a ‘basic hypothesis’ that will address the five questions outlined in the previous section. Wright’s overview of this process is worth quoting at length:

- (1) Jesus fits believably into first-century Judaism, retelling its stories in new but thoroughly comprehensible ways. He speaks and acts, and is perceived to be speaking and acting, prophetically, challenging his hearers to recognize that in him the new thing for which they have longed is, however paradoxically, coming to pass.
- (2) He believes himself, much as John the Baptist had done, to be charged with the god-given responsibility of regrouping Israel around himself. But this regrouping is no longer a preliminary preparation for the return from exile, the coming of the kingdom; it is the return, the redemption, the resurrection from the dead. As a result, it is also a counter-Temple movement, and is perceived as such. It also puts Jesus in a different position to John.
- (3) For all these reasons, it will arouse hostility. During the course of Jesus’ ministry, this may well come from the Pharisees. If the message is ever to be spoken or acted in Jerusalem itself, hostility will come from the Temple authorities. If the Romans hear of a major renewal movement among the Jews, they too will want to stamp it out.
- (4) If this proclamation were to end simply with the shameful death of its proclaimer, that would be that: a beautiful dream, with all the charm, and the brief life-span, of a butterfly. But if it were vindicated after that shameful death, there would be every reason

to continue to believe that the kingdom had indeed arrived, in however paradoxical a fashion.

Every reason, too, for the all-embracing welcome then to be extended in a new way to Gentiles; and (5) for a writer like Luke to retell the original story with an eye to this new, but theologically consistent, setting. Thus, in a nutshell, the parable of the prodigal father points to the hypothesis of the prophetic son: the son, Israel-in-person, who will himself go into the far country, who will take upon himself the shame of Israel's exile, so that the kingdom may come, the covenant be renewed, and the prodigal welcome of Israel's god, the creator, be extended to the ends of the earth. (132-133, paragraph breaks added)

Wright moves on to discuss the role of stories in peasant society, drawing especially on the work of Kenneth Bailey and his description of '*informal and controlled oral traditions*' (134). This is part of his argument against the renewed New Quest: 'the narrative form is unlikely to be a secondary accretion around an original aphorism: stories are fundamental' (136).

Finally, in this introductory part of the book, Wright discusses some methodological issues relating to 'worldviews' and 'mindsets'. He describes a cyclical analytical process: a person's *actions and words* give rise to a characteristic *praxis*, in the light of which the actions and words are seen to tell *stories*, generate *symbols*, and address the deep *questions* that all worldviews attempt to answer. This plotting of a person's worldview/mindset provides the basis for an analysis of *beliefs* and *aims*, and of *consequent beliefs* and *intentions*, which brings back to the starting point of *actions and words* (142).

This analytical structure will shape the programme for the remainder of the work:

The aim of the next Part of the book will thus be to plot Jesus' distinctive mindset within the Jewish worldview of his day. We shall first set out the basic material we know, by more or less common consent, about Jesus; this leads directly to the praxis which his contemporaries regarded as characteristic of him, which we shall study in chapter 5. We shall then examine the stories Jesus told, including of course the parables (chapters 6-8); his attitude towards the symbols of Judaism, and the conflict which this brought about (chapter 9); and the answers he gave to the basic worldview questions (chapter 10). Once we have thus completed the four quadrants of the worldview, we will be able, in Part III, to explore the beliefs and aims in which this found particular expression, and so see our way back towards the particular consequent beliefs and intentions which generated the central actions through which his public career gained its particular shape and came to its particular conclusion. In the course of this we will look in particular at Jesus' own sense of vocation and identity, and his attitude to his own approaching death. (142-143)

PART II: PROFILE OF A PROPHET

The praxis of a prophet

Wright suggests that the best initial model for understanding Jesus' praxis is that of a prophet: 'more specifically, that of a prophet bearing an urgent eschatological, and indeed apocalyptic, message for Israel' (150). This, he believes, makes best sense in relation to Judaism generally, popular movements within Judaism, and the activity of John the Baptist. Both John the Baptist and Jesus fit the type of the 'leadership popular prophet' (drawing on Webb's classification, 153) who not only announces a message from Israel's god but also enacted through dramatic symbolic actions elements of an eschatological narrative - 'a story in which Israel's long night of suffering and misery would soon be over, and the new day would dawn in which Israel's god would act, at last, as king of all the world' (155).

In the first place, Jesus regarded himself, and was seen by others, not as *the* prophet (eg. the prophet spoken of in Deut.18:15) but as *a* prophet: 'a prophet like the prophets of old, coming to Israel with a word from her covenant god' (163). Wright suggests that "he was announcing a prophetic message after the manner of 'oracular' prophets, and that he was inaugurating a renewal movement after the manner of 'leadership' prophets. He was, in fact, to this extent very like John the Baptist, only more so" (163). There are, moreover, strong indications

throughout the gospels that Jesus modelled his ministry on a range of Old Testament prophets, with Elijah being the most important. Wright concludes: 'it should be clear that Jesus regarded his ministry as in continuity with, and bring to a climax, the work of the great prophets of the Old Testament, culminating in John the Baptist, whose initiative he had used as his launching-pad' (167).

Jesus, like John, combined the roles of 'oracular' prophet and 'leadership' prophet but extended the model in three ways: i) he was itinerant, which incidentally has important implications for the development of the synoptic traditions; ii) he gave extensive teaching; and iii) he 'engaged in a regular programme of healing'. These last two points are explored in some detail.

Jesus' teaching

1. The authority of Jesus' teaching lay in the content of his proclamation - an exceptional and provocative message from Israel's covenant god:

For this reason (among others), the old picture of Jesus as the teacher of timeless truths, or even the announcer of the essentially timeless call for decision, will simply have to go. His announcement of the kingdom was a warning of imminent catastrophe, a summons to an immediate change of heart and direction of life, an invitation to a new way of being Israel. Jesus announced that the reign of Israel's god, so long awaited, was now beginning; but, in the announcement and inauguration itself, he drastically but consistently redefined the concept of the reign of god itself. In the light of the Jewish background sketched in *NTPG* Part III, this cannot but have been heard as the announcement that the exile was at last drawing to a close, that Israel was about to be vindicated against her enemies, that her god was returning at last to deal with evil, to right wrongs, to bring justice to those who were thirsting for it like dying people in a desert. We are bound to say, I think, that Jesus could not have used the phrase 'the reign of god' if he were not *in some sense or other* claiming to fulfil, or at least to announce the fulfilment of, those deeply rooted Jewish aspirations. The phrase was not a *novum*, an invention of his own. It spoke of covenant renewed, of creation restored, of Israel liberated, of YHWH returning. It can be reduced neither to a general existential state of affairs, unrelated to Israel's national hope, nor to a hypothetical 'parousia' hope (which the early church first invented, then cherished, then projected back on to Jesus, and then finally abandoned), nor to the offer of a new type of private spirituality. (172)

Jesus' 'moral teaching' must be understood in relation to the proclamation about the kingdom of God, not as a universal ethic or instruction for the life of 'the church':

If we take seriously the public persona of Jesus as a prophet, the material we think of as 'moral teaching', which has been categorized as such by a church that has made Jesus into the teacher of timeless dogma and ethics, must instead be thought of as *his agenda for Israel*. This is what the covenant people ought to look like at this momentous point in their long story. (174)

2. The underlying mode of Jesus' teaching was the retelling of the story of Israel. In particular he used parables to draw his hearers into '*a new way of understanding the fulfilment of Israel's hope*': 'The struggle to understand a parable is the struggle for a new world to be born'; indeed 'Jesus' telling of these stories is one of the key ways in which the kingdom breaks in upon Israel, redefining itself as it does so' (176).

Wright suggests that the closest parallel to the parables is 'the world of Jewish apocalyptic and subversive literature'. Like the visions of apocalyptic writings the parables "encourage those who 'have ears to hear' to believe that they really are the true Israel of the covenant god, and they that will soon be vindicated as such - while the rest of the world, *including particularly the now apostate or impenitent Israel*, is judged" (178).

3. Oracles of judgment form another major component of Jesus' teaching:

In the sad, noble, and utterly Jewish tradition of Elijah, Jeremiah and John the Baptist, Jesus announced the coming judgment of Israel's covenant god on his people, a judgment

consisting of a great national, social and cultural disaster, ultimately comprehensible only in theological terms. At the heart of the disaster would be the ruin of the Temple. (185)

Jesus' miracles

Wright is careful to distance himself both from the older liberal repudiation of the miraculous and from the pre-critical appeal to the miracles as evidence for Jesus' divinity or the truth of the Bible. In place of the rationalist and apologetic interests of the enlightenment period he posits a 'sharper-edged question, historically': "should we then think of the deeds of Jesus as in some sense 'magic'?" (189) He picks up on Crossan's argument that Jesus should be regarded as a 'magician' insofar as magic is 'subversive, unofficial, unapproved, and often lower-class religion', and accepts that the miracles possess 'exactly the same kind of troubling ambiguity that characterized Jesus' whole career'. But he argues that Jesus' followers would have interpreted these works within the context of the overall proclamation about the kingdom of God.

The 'mighty works' are to be understood as signs of covenant renewal. The healings should be seen as 'bestowing the gift of *shalom*, wholeness, to those who lacked it, bringing not only physical health but renewed membership in the people of YHWH' (192). The multiplication of the bread in the wilderness and the stilling of the storms, which echo themes from the exodus, are also fundamentally signs of covenant renewal. There is also a cosmic dimension: Jesus' power over the natural order is a sign that not only Israel but also the whole creation will be restored.

Stories of the kingdom (1): announcement

There are three chapters dealing with the 'stories of the kingdom', categorizing them as follows: announcement; invitation, welcome, challenge and summons; and judgment and vindication. The overview of these chapters will be somewhat cursory in places.

Wright's aim in these chapters is, at the level of theory, to challenge the view that the non-parabolic teaching of Jesus is something other than 'story', and at the level of content, to put forward a new reading of what Jesus meant by Israel's god becoming king. This 'new reading' of the story relies on two main contentions:

first, that when Jesus spoke of the 'reign' or 'kingdom' of Israel's god, he was deliberately evoking an entire story-line that he and his hearers knew quite well; second, that he was retelling this familiar story in such a way as to subvert and redirect its normal plot. (199)

At this point Wright summarizes the argument of chapters six to ten:

First (the present chapter), Jesus' announcement of the kingdom is best seen as evoking the story of Israel and her destiny, in which that destiny was now rapidly approaching its fulfilment.

Second (chapter 7), the story therefore summoned Israel to follow Jesus in his new way of being the true people of god.

Third (chapter 8), the story included a great, climactic ending: judgment would fall upon the impenitent, but those who followed the true path would be vindicated.

Fourth (chapter 9), the story generated a new construal of Israel's traditional symbols. Like all readjustment of worldview-symbols, this was seen as traitorous, and involved Jesus in conflict with those who had alternative agendas, both official and unofficial.

Fifth (chapter 10), this retelling of the story, and readjustment of the symbols, betokened Jesus' fresh answers to the key worldview questions. Behind his conflict with rival agendas, Jesus discerned, and spoke about, a greater battle, in which he faced the real enemy. Victory over this enemy, Jesus claimed, would constitute the coming of the kingdom. (200, paragraph breaks added)

We are also offered a 'preliminary version' of the full narrative that results from Jesus' subversive retelling of the basic Jewish story:

We may anticipate here the completion of this Part, and set out a preliminary version of the full narrative that results from it all. 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. The time of restoration was at hand, and people of all sorts were summoned to share and enjoy it; but Israel was warned that her present ways of going about advancing the kingdom were thoroughly counter-productive, and would result in a great national disaster. Jesus was therefore summoning his hearers to *be* Israel in a new way, to take up their proper roles in the unfolding drama; and he assured them that, if they followed him in this way, they would be vindicated when the great day came. In the course of all this, he was launching the decisive battle with the real satanic enemy - a different battle, and a different enemy, from those Israel had envisaged. The conflicts generated by his proclamation were the inevitable outworking of this battle, which would reach its height in events yet to come, events involving both Jesus himself and the Temple. (201)

The rest of this chapter considers Jesus' announcement of the kingdom in relation to Jewish expectations regarding the kingdom of God, the use of the term in the early church, and modern views on the matter, both scholarly and popular.

1. Jewish expectation consisted of three basic elements: Israel would 'really' return from exile; YHWH would return to Zion; and Israel's enemies would be defeated. Wright here repeats the argument about apocalyptic: many of Jesus' contemporaries were expecting a major upheaval in the world and a radical change of circumstances, but not 'cosmic meltdown' (Borg's phrase). Eschatology in this context has in view 'the climax of Israel's history, involving events for which end-of-the-world language is the only set of metaphors adequate to express the significance of what will happen, but resulting in a new and quite different phrase *within* space-time history' (208). The view of Mack and Crossan that Jesus proclaimed a non-apocalyptic, Hellenistic sapiential 'kingdom' is dismissed.

2. In the early church the phrase 'kingdom of God' retained the major features that it had in Judaism, but 'a substantial redefinition has taken place *within* this basic Jewish framework' (215). Wright lists four main modifications: i) the kingdom is now said to belong not only to God but to the Messiah; ii) a significant alteration in the chronology appears here in that the kingdom of the Messiah is already established while the kingdom of God is yet to come; iii) Judaism never came to the belief that the kingdom was already present; and iv) at the level of worldview 'the regular Jewish *symbols* are completely missing. The explanation for this last point lies in the fact that a new phase or 'Act' has been introduced into the story that makes the old markers in appropriate.

Specifically, the new Act self-consciously sees itself as the time when the covenant purpose of the creator, which always envisaged the redemption of the whole world, moves beyond the narrow confines of a single race (for which national symbols were of course appropriate), and calls into being a trans-national and trans-cultural community. Further, it sees itself as the time when the creator, the covenant god himself, has returned to dwell with his people, but not in a Temple made with hands. Once we understand how the whole story works, we can understand how it is that the actors have been given new lines to speak, that new praxis is now deemed appropriate, and that new symbols have been generated which perform, *mutatis mutandis*, the equivalent functions within the new Act to those performed by the former symbols within the earlier Act. (219)

3. Some consideration is given to the views of other scholars (Schweitzer, Bultmann, Dodd, Jeremias, Ladd, et al.) regarding politics, timing, distance, christology and ecclesiology as focal points in the debate over the meaning of 'kingdom of God'.

Wright concludes this section first by noting the particularity and contingency of the summary announcements of the kingdom of God in the gospels, then by demonstrating how many of the parables should be understood as a retelling of the story that is implicit in the summaries. So, for example, he argues that the parable of the sower (Mk.4:1-20) does two things:

Using imagery and structure which evoked 'apocalyptic' retellings of Israel's story, the parable *tells the story of Israel, particularly the return from exile, with a paradoxical*

conclusion, and it tells the story of Jesus' ministry, as the fulfilment of that larger story, with a paradoxical outcome. (230)

Three pieces of evidence are given to support the argument that this parable is a retelling of the story of Israel: i) its narrative mode is apocalyptic (the particular parallel is with Dan.2); ii) there is a 'fairly close parallel' with the parable of the wicked tenants; and iii) within second-temple Judaism the 'seed' is a figure for the 'remnant' who will return when the exile is finally over. So a story about the sowing of the seed is a story about a remnant that is now returning. The sowing of the seed creates the true Israel: it is the word described in Is.55:10-13, which will cause the people to be 'led back in peace' (Is.55:12). Much of the seed will go to waste, many people will remain in exile - like the wicked tenants, subject to judgment; but the eventual harvest will be abundant.

Wright offers a similar treatment of the shorter parables in Mark 4:21-34, arguing that they should also been seen as dependent upon the larger narrative structure of Jesus' retelling of Israel's story (239-243).

Stories of the kingdom (2): invitation, welcome, challenge and summons

1. Invitation: the call to repent and believe. The call to repentance is not a matter of an 'ahistorical or individualist piety' (249) but is to be understood in relation to the underlying narrative: it is 'what Israel must do if her exile is to come to an end' (248); it is the turning or returning to YHWH that precedes restoration. Repentance, however, may also be understood as a call 'to abandon revolutionary zeal'. This is supported with reference to an appeal that Josephus made to a brigand chief: 'I would... condone his actions if he would show repentance and prove his loyalty to me.' Wright suggests that this is functionally equivalent to Jesus' 'repent and believe in me' (250-251). The call to repentance, therefore, was both eschatological and political. The point is illustrated from a number of gospel texts (252-258).

Belief and faith are likewise not abstract religious virtues but must also be set within the general eschatological framework: they constitute 'the distinguishing mark of the true people of YHWH at the time of crisis' (260). The faith to which Jesus called people carried two particular overtones: i) "Israel's god was to be seen as the 'father' of his people" in anticipation of a coming deliverance; and ii) Jesus called people to trust him in much the same way that Josephus urged the brigand chief to trust and follow him.

2. Welcome: sinners and forgiveness. Forgiveness of sins, Wright maintains, is "another way of saying 'return from exile'". The exilic prophets regarded the exile as punishment for Israel's sins. 'It should be clear from this that if the astonishing, unbelievable thing were to happen, and Israel were to be brought back from exile, this would *mean* that her sins were being punished no more; in other words, were forgiven' (268). The point is illustrated from Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah 40-55, Daniel and Ezra.

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; and, as long as Israel remained under the rule of the pagans, as long as Torah was not observed perfectly, as long as the Temple was not properly restored, so Israel longed for 'forgiveness of sins' as the great, unrepeatable, eschatological and national blessing promised by her god. In the light of this, the meaning which Mark and Luke both give to John's baptism ought to be clear. It was 'for the forgiveness of sins', in other words, to bring about the redemption for which Israel was longing.

3. Challenge: the call to live as the new covenant people. The question of whether Jesus intended to form a 'church' has been hotly debated. Wright takes the view of Gerhard Lohfink that 'Jesus did not intend to found a church *because there already was one*, namely the people of Israel itself' (275). Jesus' intention was to reform Israel, not create a completely new community, but he aimed to do so by establishing 'what we might call cells of followers, mostly continuing to live in their towns and villages, who by their adoption of his praxis, his way of being Israel, would be distinctive within their local communities' (276). In many ways, his followers would have resembled other Jewish sects (John's disciples, Pharisaical groups, the Essenes) active at the time.

The praxis that went with the kingdom-story, therefore, cannot be reduced to an individual ethic or piety: its primary purpose was to 'demarcate Jesus' people as a community'. Wright warns against trying to force Jesus' ethical teaching into an abstract reformation dichotomy of faith and works. The Sermon on the Mount and related teaching cannot be understood apart from the announcement to Israel that the kingdom of God is at hand.

Renewal of the covenant and renewal of the heart go closely together. There is no division between works and faith, material and non-material, outward and inward: the crucial distinction is between a condition of evil, both inward and outward, and a condition of renewal, both inward and outward. With particular reference to Jesus' teaching about divorce, Wright argues that the story to which Jesus was obedient was one in which 'Israel was called by YHWH to restore humankind and the world to his original intention' (285). 'For that to happen, hardness of heart must be dealt with.'

The Sermon on the Mount should not be read as generalized ethical teaching but as an historically contextualized 'challenge to Israel to *be* Israel' (288). The beatitudes are an appeal to Jesus' hearers to 'discover their true vocation as the eschatological people of YHWH' (see also [commentary](#)). The antitheses of the law ('you have heard that it was said... but I say to you') emphasize 'the way in which the renewal which Jesus sought to engender would produce a radically different way of being Israel in rela-life Palestinian situations' (290). Jesus' followers are not to 'make common cause with the resistance movement': 'do not resist evil' (Matt.5:39). The house built on the rock 'is a clear allusion to the Temple'. The Lord's prayer 'comes from within the very heart of Jewish longing for the kingdom': the prayer for forgiveness presupposes the inauguration of the new covenant; deliverance from the time of trial and the evil one has in view the turmoil that was soon to come upon Israel. Wright envisages this teaching providing the basis for a way of life for the small communities of followers scattered through the villages of Palestine that was not only theologically but also socially and politically radical (296-297)

4. Summons: the call to be Jesus' helpers and associates. Wright also stresses the political dimension to Jesus' call to some of those who heard his message to leave their homes and livelihoods and literally follow him: "The announcement that YHWH was now ling, and the consequent summons to rally to the flag, had far more in common with the founding of a revolutionary party than with what we now think of as either 'evangelism' or 'ethical teaching'" (301); 'a summons to risk all in following Jesus places him and his followers firmly on the map of first-century socially and politically subversive movements' (304).

Taking as his starting point the parable of the good Samaritan, Wright also considers Jesus' views regarding the status of the Gentiles. In terms of Jewish expectation, the announcement that Israel's God was about to become king inevitably had implications for the Gentiles, either for judgment or for blessing. 'From Jesus' point of view, the narrative of YHWH's dealings with Israel was designed to contribute to the larger story, of the creator's dealings with the cosmos' (310).

Stories of the kingdom (3): judgment and vindication

The story Jesus told had a clear end in view: divine judgment on Israel in the form of 'political, military and social' disaster and the escape of his followers from that disaster. This reading is controversial at four points:

- (a) Passages about impending judgment have regularly been seen as predictions of the end of the space-time universe....
- (b) Alternatively, such passages have sometimes been denied to Jesus on the grounds that he was not an 'apocalyptic' thinker of this sort; they are then accredited to the early church....
- (c) Similarly, passages about the vindication of Jesus and his people have routinely been treated as later constructions of the church, on the grounds that Jesus did not envisage either his own resurrection or a community of people loyal to himself....

(d) The idea that Jesus warned his contemporaries, and the city of Jerusalem, of impending judgment has sometimes been rejected as making Jesus somehow anti-Jewish.... (320-321)

The warnings of judgment run through all strands of the gospel traditions; they have an historical frame of reference and should not, in the first place at least, be read as statements about 'a general *post mortem* judgment in hell'. There are four aspects to their relation to the immediate historical context: i) they fit quite naturally into the wider context of Jewish sectarianism; ii) they make good sense in view of the threatening presence of Rome ('it did not take much political wisdom to extrapolate forwards and to suggest that, if Israel continued to provoke the giant, the giant would eventually awake from slumber and smash her to pieces'); iii) Jesus did not issue a general or universal warning but addressed a particular moment in Israel's history; and iv) Jesus' warnings were at odds with the agendas of many groups within Israel at the time - the revolutionaries on the one hand, the temple hierarchy on the other.

Wright then surveys a wide spectrum of passages, excluding Mark 13 and parallels, that contain this message of judgment (326-336), and concludes that Jesus consistently 'told a story... in which the judgment usually associated with YHWH's action against the pagan nations would fall upon those Jews who were refusing to follow in the way he was holding out to them'. He also deals briefly the words of assurance to the disciples in similar fashion, then proceeds to examine the key passage of Mark 13 and parallels.

Wright's exposition of this text needs to be examined in detail, but here we will simply quote a summary passage:

...the whole passage seems to me (a) to refer clearly to the forthcoming destruction of Jerusalem, and (b) to invest that event with its theological significance. This is emphatically not to 'demythologize' the apocalyptic language concerned. Nor is it to reduce it to a 'mere metaphor'. It is to insist on reading it as it would have been heard in the first century, that is, *both* with its very this-worldly, indeed revolutionary, socio-political reference *and* with its fully symbolical, theological, and even 'mythological' overtones. The event that was coming swiftly upon Jerusalem would be the divine judgment on YHWH's rebellious people, exercised through Rome's judgment on her rebellious subject. It was also the rescue from judgment of Jesus' people, in an event which symbolized dramatically their final escape from exile. All of this spoke powerfully of the vindication of Jesus himself, both as prophet, and as the one who has the right to pronounce upon the Temple, and (in a sense still to be fully explained) as the actual *replacement* for the Temple. (342-343)

Symbol and controversy

Jesus' message about fulfilment and judgment, and his redefinition of them through his own work, became especially dangerous when it was recognized as a 'clash of symbols'. Wright looks first at recent scholarly controversy over the interpretation of Jesus' disputes with Jewish officialdom for which his own summary is adequate:

(i) Traditional readings of the gospels have made Jesus the teacher of a religion of love and grace, of the inner observance of the heart rather than the outward observance of legal codes.

(ii) The same traditional readings have envisaged Jesus opposing the Pharisees, or they him, on the grounds that they supported a religion of outward observances and perceived him to be an antinomian threat.

(iii) This double reading has recently been opposed, particularly by E. P. Sanders, on the grounds of historical implausibility: Jesus did not 'speak against the law', and what he did say would not have been particularly irritating to the Pharisees.

(iv) I shall propose a quite different reading of the controversy-stories, which avoids the critique of the older, caricatured position, to which I do not for a moment subscribe. Jesus announced, in symbol as in word, the kingdom of Israel's god; he attacked the symbols

which spoke of an Israel resistant to his kingdom-vision.... As a result, some of his contemporaries believed that he was guilty of the offence spelled out in Deuteronomy 13, that is, of 'leading Israel astray'.

(v) The controversy-stories are highly likely to be historical at the core; but their meaning is not the one traditionally assigned to them. They were about eschatology and politics, not religion or morality. Eschatology: Israel's hope was being realized, but it was happening in Jesus' way, and at his initiative. Politics: the kingdom Jesus was announcing was undermining, rather than underwriting, the revolutionary anti-pagan zeal that was the target of much of Jesus' polemic, the cause (according to him) of Israel's imminent ruin, and the focal point of much (Shammaite) Pharisaic teaching and aspiration. (371-372)

1. Symbols of Israel's identity: sabbath, food, nation, land. In order to understand the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees two things need to be made clear: i) the zeal for YHWH expressed by the 'hard-line Shammaite Pharisees' was a matter of guarding Israel against paganization; ii) the purity codes were the means by which the separation of Jew and Gentile was maintained (384). In Jesus' view this 'zeal' was leading Israel to ruin, which is the reason for his opposition to 'those aspects of Torah which marked out Israel over against her pagan neighbours'. The kingdom that was coming would be 'characterized not by defensiveness, but by Israel's being the light of the world; not by angry zeal which would pay the Gentiles back in their own coin..., but by turning the other cheek and going the second mile' (389).

I therefore propose that the clash between Jesus and his Jewish contemporaries, especially the Pharisees, must be seen in terms of *alternative political agendas* generated by *alternative eschatological beliefs and expectations*. Jesus was announcing the kingdom in a way which did not reinforce, but rather called into question, the agenda of revolutionary zeal which dominated the horizon of, especially, the dominant group within Pharisaism. It is not to be wondered at, therefore, that he called into question the great emphases on those symbols which had become the focal points of that zeal: sabbath, food taboos, ethnic identity, ancestral land, and ultimately the Temple itself. The symbols had become enacted codes for the aspirations of his contemporaries. Jesus, in challenging them, was not 'speaking against the Torah' *per se*. He was certainly not 'speaking against' the idea of Israel as the chosen people of the one true god. Rather, he was offering an alternative construal of Israel's destiny and god-given vocation, an alternative way of telling Israel's true story, and an alternative to the piety which expressed itself in nationalistic symbols. He was *affirming* Israel's election even as he *redefined* it, just as other Jewish groups and parties did. This was, of course, revolutionary; which was why, in all the stories up to the time of the Temple-incident itself, the message remained veiled and cryptic. (390)

Wright then examines the nature of the controversy in relation to the sabbath and food but suggests that in two other areas, nation/family and land/possessions, Jesus 'challenged the symbols of Israel's worldview' (398) on the grounds that they sustained his 'contemporaries in an idolatrous pursuit, in a quest they could not hope to win' (405).

2. Symbols of Israel's identity: the temple. The question of Jesus' attitude towards the temple is central to the task of historical reconstruction. Here Wright asks: what did Jesus do, and why? By way of introduction he stresses three aspects of the temple's significance: 'the presence of YHWH, the sacrificial system, and the Temple's political significance' (406-407).

Scholarly views regarding the meaning of Jesus' action in the temple run from reform of the temple cult to an 'acted parable of destruction'. Wright summarizes the argument of the book so far with respect to Jesus' role as a prophet of the kingdom of God and arrives at an 'irresistible' conclusion:

...when Jesus came to Jerusalem, he symbolically and prophetically enacted judgment upon it - a judgment which, both before and after, he announced verbally as well as in action. The Temple, as the central symbol of the whole national life, was under divine threat, and, unless Israel repented, it would fall to the pagans. Furthermore, Jesus, by making this claim in this way, perceived himself to be not merely a prophet like Jeremiah, announcing the Temple's doom, but the true king, who had the authority which both the Hasmoneans and Herod had thought to claim. (417)

Taking his cue from Borg, Wright also suggests that the phrase 'den of robbers' (Mk.11:17 and pars.) points to the role of the temple as a focus for resistance to Rome (*lestai* interpreted as 'bandits' or 'insurrectionists').

3. **Jesus' symbols of the kingdom.** Jesus' intention was not to depart from the traditions of Israel but to call the people back to a true understanding of them. 'Israel's hope was conceived in relation to land, Torah and Temple; Jesus subverted the common interpretation of these, and offered his own fresh and positive alternatives' (428).

In place of Israel's inheritance in the land Jesus offered 'human communities that were being renewed and restored through the coming of the kingdom'. He substituted for the existing 'familial and national symbolism' a 'fictive kinship, a surrogate family, around himself'. At the heart of the 'symbolic praxis which was to characterize his redefined Israel' was neither Torah nor the temple but Jesus' offer of forgiveness as a sign of eschatological blessing.

Healing, forgiveness, renewal, the twelve, the new family and its new defining characteristics, open commensality, the promise of blessing for the Gentiles, feasts replacing fasts, the destruction and rebuilding of the Temple: all declared, in the powerful language of symbol, that Israel's exile was over, that Jesus was himself in some way responsible for this new state of affairs, and that all that the Temple had stood for was now available through Jesus and his movement. It is not surprising, therefore, that when Jesus came to Jerusalem the place was not, so to speak, big enough for both him and the Temple together. The claim which had been central to his work in Galilee was that Israel's god was now active, through him, to confront evil and so to bring about the real return from exile, the restoration for which Israel had longed; and that Israel's god himself was now returning to Zion in judgment and mercy. The house built on sand, however - the present Temple and all that went with it, and all the hopes of national security which clustered, as in Jeremiah's day, around it - would fall with a great crash. If we understand Jesus' action in the Temple in the way I have suggested, we achieve the very great historical benefit of coherence, at this point, between a good many words and deeds which were most characteristic of Jesus during his itinerant ministry, and the deeds and words which, in Jerusalem, brought that whole prophetic career to its climax. (436-437)

Wright concludes this chapter with some brief comments on the meal in the upper room (437-438) and an examination of the view that Jesus was regarded by his opponents as a 'deceiver of the people' (cf. Deut.13) and 'false prophet' (cf. Deut.18).

The questions of the kingdom

Wright's 'profile of the prophet' has so far examined i) Jesus' characteristic actions; ii) the stories he told; and iii) the ways in which he organized his symbolic world. To these must be added a consideration of the key worldview questions: 'who are we, where are we, what's wrong, what's the solution - and what time is it?'

1. **Who are we?** 'Jesus regarded his followers as, in some sense, the eschatological people promised in the scriptures, through whom, in a manner yet to be explicated, the glory of YHWH would be revealed to the world' (444).

2. **Where are we?** Jesus 'had not come to rehabilitate the symbol of the holy land, but to subsume it within a different fulfilment of the kingdom, which would embrace the whole creation' (446).

3. **What's wrong?** Jesus foresaw a battle for the kingdom, but as with the other traditions and symbols of Judaism, he redefined the notion of a zealous holy war.

Jesus used the language of cosmic warfare to *denote* the specific struggles in which he himself engaged, and to *connote* his belief that the inner dimension of these struggles was a battle, indeed ultimately *the* battle, against the powers of darkness. I suggest, in other words, that Jesus believed that he, himself, had to fight the true battle of the people of YHWH, through opposing, not just the pagans (though no doubt he, like most first-century Jews, disapproved of their beliefs and behaviour), not just some renegade Jews, but the whole movement in Jewish life which had embraced exactly this tradition of holy war, and

was seeking vigorously to promote it - and which, perhaps, was hoping to recruit him in the cause. (449)

Jesus was offering a different way of liberation, a way which affirmed the humanness of the national enemy *as well as* the destiny of Israel, and hence also affirmed the destiny of Israel as the bringer of light to the world, not as the one who would crush the world with military zeal. (450)

The real enemy was not Rome but the satan, the accuser. Wright explores this theme by looking at three passages from the gospels: the Beelzebul controversy; the warning to fear the one who has the power to cast into Gehenna, understood as a reference to satan; and the story about the seven demons who take up residence in a man along with the unclean spirit that had been cast out, which Wright interprets as a parable about Israel. For Jesus, however, the battle began at the outset of his career when he was 'tempted' by satan (457-459). This is the struggle presupposed by his assertion during the Beelzebul controversy that he was able to cast out demons because the 'master-demon' had already been overcome.

4. What's the solution? Essentially the answer to Israel's plight is Jesus himself: 'His own work - his kingdom-announcement, his prophetic praxis, his celebrations, his warnings, his symbolic activity - all of these were part of the movement through which Israel would be renewed, evil would be defeated, and YHWH would return to Zion at last' (464). But the next question is: How did Jesus expect things to end? How would the battle with evil take place? Wright's argument is that Jesus' retelling of Israel's story belongs with a number of narratives that make suffering the precursor to, and prerequisite for, national salvation. This leads to an inevitable, and predictable, conclusion:

He took a stand which brought him into inevitable conflict with the authorities, but he construed that conflict as being not merely with them but with the dark power that, he believed, stood behind them. The climax of the story, of the battle for the kingdom, was therefore, inescapably, that Jesus would die, not as an accident, nor as a bizarre quasi-suicide, a manipulated martyrdom, but as the inevitable result of his kingdom-inaugurating career. But this death, as he conceived it, would be the actual victory of the kingdom, by which the enemy of the people would finally be defeated. Jesus would act out the role of the revolutionary, at the point at which it could no longer be misunderstood. It is therefore not surprising, but entirely natural, to suggest that Jesus, in telling the story of Israel reshaped around himself, predicted his own death. It did not take much insight to see that it was very likely from the beginning. From within Jesus' retelling of the Jewish stories, such a death would carry an obvious, though shocking, interpretation. (466)

5. What time is it? Wright's resolution, or at least explanation, of the tension between the now and not yet of the kingdom can be quoted at length:

Jesus' redefinition of YHWH's kingdom, as we have studied it so far, indicates that in his view the kingdom was indeed present, but that it was not like Israel had thought it would be. Israel's god was becoming king in and through the work of Jesus; this kingdom would reach its climax in the battle which he was going to Jerusalem to fight; within a generation there would be an event which would show that Jesus was right to claim all this. YHWH would be king, and the true Israel would at last be redeemed from her exile. Even before the great events that would inaugurate the kingdom on the public stage and in world history, that kingdom was already present *where Jesus was*. To deny its presence, indeed, would be to undermine the hoped-for future: if it was not, in this sense, already present, what guarantee had Jesus' followers that the final victory was imminent? Jesus' reading of the signs of the times, then, produced an answer to the fifth worldview question which, once we understand him historically, makes perfect sense. His public ministry was itself the true inauguration of the kingdom which would shortly be established.

PART III: THE AIMS AND BELIEFS OF JESUS

Jesus and Israel: the meaning of messiahship

Wright gives an overview of the argument of the third part of the book, which is basically that Jesus applied to himself the three main elements of his teaching about the kingdom of God: the return from exile, the defeat of evil, and the return of YHWH to Zion. Chapter 11 deals with the first of these claims: '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' (477). Three things need to be said about this first claim: i) the word 'messiah' does not refer to a 'divine or quasi-divine figure'; ii) there is no reason to think that Jesus was incapable of serious and original theological reflection; and iii) to investigate Jesus' self-understanding is an historical rather than a psychological exercise.

Messiahship in Judaism and early christianity

The concept of messiahship in first-century Judaism is polymorphous, but the royal motif is of particular importance, not least because it is so closely connected with the idea of national restoration. This hope was expressed not only through 'proof-texts' but also through symbols and praxis: so the hope included the expectation that the king would both rebuild (or at least refurbish) the temple and defeat Israel's enemies.

Since, however, Jesus neither rebuilt the temple nor defeated Israel's name, the historian must ask why Jesus' followers came to believe that he was the Messiah. This question becomes all the more acute when we consider i) that to announce a messianic movement was to invite trouble from both Rome and the Herodians; and ii) that 'a messianic movement without a physically present Messiah posed something of an anomaly' (487).

Jesus' and kingship: events in Jerusalem

The ensuing discussion of Jesus' messiahship has two focal points: the *titulus* on the cross and Jesus' action in the temple, which most scholars now consider to have been 'the proximate cause of his death' (490).

It has already been argued that Jesus' action in the temple 'spoke not just of religion but of royalty... not just of cleansing but of judgment'. It was the true Davidic king, not the high priests, who was ultimate ruler of the temple, so the incident was bound to be interpreted as an explicit messianic claim. Wright then demonstrates how this explains a set of 'royal riddles', all of which point back to the temple-action: the sayings about the destruction and rebuilding of the temple and about the mountain which is thrown into the sea; the riddle about John the Baptist; the parable of the tenants with the quote from Ps.118:22-23 about the stone which the builders rejected; the saying about paying tribute to Caesar; and the question as to whether the Christ was David's Lord or David's son (493-509).

Wright next re-examines Jesus' apocalyptic discourse in Mark 13 in order to demonstrate how it also provides an explanation of the temple-action in terms of his messiahship.

So closely do they belong together, in fact, that the destruction of the Temple - predicted already in symbolic action, and here in prophetic oracle - is bound up with Jesus' own vindication, as prophet and also as Messiah. In the eschatological lawcourt scene, he has pitted himself against the Temple. When his prophecy of its destruction comes true, that event will demonstrate that he was indeed the Messiah who had the authority over it. (511)

In order to understand the passage about the coming of the Son of man (Mk.13:24-26), Wright proposes three 'guiding threads'. First, apocalyptic language must be understood historically. Secondly, Jesus' allusion to the son of man figure in Daniel 7 must be understood in relation to Jewish interpretations of this text in the first century. Wright argues that there is strong evidence that Jews at the time found in Daniel 2, 7 and 9 in particular a messianic story of

vindication and restoration that, to quote Josephus, 'more than anything else, incited the Jews to revolt' (514).

The discourse as a whole then works as follows. Jesus has been asked about the destruction of the Temple. His reply has taken the disciples through the coming scenario: great tribulation, false messiahs arising, themselves hauled before magistrates. They need to know both that Jerusalem is to be destroyed and that they must stand and fight, but must escape while they can. There will then occur the great cataclysmic event which will be at the same time (a) the final judgment on the city that has now come, with awful paradox, to symbolize rebellion against YHWH; (b) the great deliverance promised in the prophets; and (c) the vindication of the prophet who had predicted the downfall, and who had claimed to be embodying in himself all that Jerusalem and the Temple had previously stood for. (515)

The third guiding thread is the assumption that in private he would naturally have spoken less ambiguously about the destruction of the temple 'in language which made it clear that he regarded Herod's Temple, and the regime of Caiaphas and his family, as part of the problem, part of the exilic state of the people of YHWH, rather than as part of the solution' (516).

These three guiding threads lead to a ruthless repudiation of traditional speculation about a heavenly figure who would descend to earth on a cloud:

This monstrosity, much beloved (though for different reasons) by both fundamentalists and would-be 'critical' scholars, can be left behind, appropriately enough, in the centre of his mythological maze, where he will no doubt continue to lure unwary travellers to a doom consisting of endless footnotes and ever-increasing epicycles of hypothetical and unprovable *Traditionsgeschichte*. The truly 'apocalyptic' 'son of man' has nothing to do with such a figure. Within the historical world of the first century, Daniel was read as a revolutionary kingdom-of-god text, in which Israel's true representative(s) would be vindicated after their trial and suffering at the hands of the pagans. Jesus, as part of his prophetic work of announcing the kingdom, aligned himself with the 'people of the saints of the most high', that is, with the 'one like a son of man'. In other words, he regarded himself as the one who summed up Israel's vocation and destiny in himself. He was the one in and through whom the real 'return from exile' would come about, indeed, was already coming about. He was the Messiah. (517)

Wright considers next the messianic implications of the trial narrative and argues that the account moves through four stages on an historically coherent and comprehensible trajectory. There is, first, the 'false' accusation regarding Jesus and the temple. Secondly, there is the question of messiahship: Wright reminds us that the term 'Messiah' in this context cannot be understood in trinitarian or incarnational terms. Jesus' response to the high priest, thirdly, is an affirmation both of his messiahship and, by way of reference again to Daniel 7 and to Psalm 110, of his expectation of being vindicated. Wright suggests, moreover, that at this point Caiaphas and his regime have been implicitly recast as the new Antiochus Epiphanes, the fourth beast to Jesus' Son of man (525-526). The fourth stage, the hardest to understand historically, is the accusation of blasphemy. Four lines of thought point towards the charge: i) Jesus' opposition to the temple and the high priest; ii) the exaltation of Jesus to the right hand of God (Mk. 14:62), not as a 'transcendent' figure but as Israel's king; iii) the symbolism of clouds, signifying a theophany; and iv) the supposition, presented earlier (439-442), that Jesus was regarded as a 'false prophet' who was 'leading Israel astray'.

Messiahship as the secret of Jesus' prophetic ministry

In this final section Wright is concerned principally to establish the fact that Jesus was consciously following a 'messianic programme', in which in some sense he was claiming to represent Israel himself, not only in Jerusalem but throughout his work (528-538). To this end he examines messianic praxis and sayings in Jesus' early ministry and the 'call' that he received at the time of his baptism.

The reasons for Jesus' crucifixion

Wright's explanation of the Roman and Jewish charges against Jesus can be summarized conveniently. As far as the Roman authorities were concerned, Jesus was executed as a rebel against Rome, but matters are complicated by the political situation:

First, Pilate recognized that Jesus was not the ordinary sort of revolutionary leader, a *lestes* or brigand. If he was a would-be Messiah, he was a highly unusual one. Part of this recognition came, we may suppose, through the prisoner's own equivocation: 'the words are yours', as all four accounts have it. Second, Pilate therefore realized that the Jewish leaders had their own reasons for wanting Jesus executed, and were using the charge of sedition as a convenient excuse. Third, this gave him the opening to do what he would normally expect to do, which was to refuse their request; he tried this, but failed. He failed, fourth, because it was pointed out to him in no uncertain terms that if he did not execute a would-be rebel king he would stand accused, himself, of disloyalty to Caesar. (546-547)

The Jewish authorities condemned Jesus as a false-prophet and would-be Messiah who had committed the further outrage of claiming that he would eventually be vindicated and rule at the right hand of God. He was sent to the Roman governor, therefore, on a capital charge

- i) because many (not least many Pharisees, but also, probably, the chief priests) saw him as 'a false prophet, leading Israel astray';
- ii) because, as one aspect of this, they saw his Temple-action as a blow against the central symbol not only of national life but also of YHWH's presence with his people;
- iii) because, though he was clearly not leading a real or organized military revolt, he saw himself as in some sense Messiah, and could thus become a focus of serious revolutionary activity;
- iv) because, as the pragmatic focus of these three points, they saw him as a dangerous political nuisance, whose actions might well call down the wrath of Rome upon Temple and nation alike;
- v) because, at the crucial moment in the hearing, he not only (as far as they were concerned) pleaded guilty to the above charges, but also did so in such a way as to place himself, blasphemously, alongside the god of Israel.

The intention of Jesus (1): the key symbol

The Last Supper is understood as a 'deliberate double drama', which told both the story of divine deliverance from tyranny and the story of Jesus' life and death (554). Jesus' actions with the bread and the cup are to be regarded as prophetic symbolism. The relation of the meal to the temple-action strongly suggests that he intended a contrast to be perceived 'between the Temple-system and Jesus himself, specifically, his own approaching death' (558, emphasis removed). The meal, however, is also interpreted by Jesus' words: i) the bread is identified with his body; ii) the cup is made a sign of the forgiveness of Israel's sins, the renewal of the covenant, the great return from exile; iii) Jesus insists that this will be the last meal with his disciples before the coming of the kingdom; and iv) the disciples are commanded to repeat the meal 'as a way of remembering Jesus himself'.

The intention of Jesus (2): the sayings and the symbol

If Jesus was announcing that the kingdom of God was in the process of happening, we must ask the question: what did he think would happen next? Two clues emerge from the preceding investigation: i) the expectation of a battle not against the pagan occupying force but against Satan; and ii) the 'revolutionary way of being revolutionary' that he had taught his followers: 'At the heart of that subversive wisdom was the call to his followers to take up the cross and follow him, to become his companions in the kingdom-story he was enacting' (564). Wright argues that Jesus took this story with the utmost seriousness: 'He would defeat evil by letting

it do its worst to him.' But this can only be grasped if we do not extract Jesus from the world of Jewish apocalyptic eschatology.

Wright next examines the 'various riddles which circle around Jesus' awareness of where his work was leading him': the parable of the tenants, in which the murder of the son precipitates judgment on the tenants; the great commandment saying, with its hint that the sacrificial system would be replaced; the story of the prophetic anointing of Jesus for burial; and the sayings about the green wood and the dry (Luke 23:27-31), the hen and her chicks, and the cup that Jesus must drink and the baptism with which he must be baptized (565-574).

Finally, there are Jesus' predictions of the passion to be considered, which must be understood in relation to the distinctive vocation that emerges from the 'riddles' about his death: 'The "son of man" - the representative of the people of the saints of the most high - would find the beasts waging war upon him; but he would be vindicated' (576). In order to pursue this idea further, it is necessary to ask: 'what resources were available to Jesus for reflecting on how the kingdom might come through the suffering and death of Israel's representative?'

The intention of Jesus (3): eschatological redemption in Judaism

The controlling story is the now familiar one about exile and restoration, but a particular emphasis is placed on the exodus motif as the 'classic Jewish metanarrative' that made sense of the hope of restoration. Within this story are two subplots. First, there is the belief that 'the kingdom would finally come through a time of intense suffering' - the messianic woes. Secondly, there is the expectation of 'specific or individual suffering', found in the tradition of the suffering prophet, in the Qumranic belief that the community would suffer because of their faith in the Teacher of Righteousness, and in the stories of the Maccabean martyrs. 'According to this tradition, the suffering and perhaps the death of certain Jews could function within YHWH's plan to redeem his people from pagan oppression: to win for them, in other words, rescue from wrath, forgiveness of sins, and covenant renewal' (583).

This tradition is then traced back to the scriptures. Daniel is an 'obvious source for first-century reflection on the way in which the fate of nation and martyr hang together'. Behind this we find the Levitical sacrificial code, the Psalms (especially the Psalms of lament), the story of judgment and restoration in Zechariah, Ezekiel's symbolic experience of the punishment of Israel (Ezek.4:1-6), and above all Isaiah 40-55. Four points are made in relation to this last text; i) the servant passages must be read in the context of the whole story about restoration; ii) the text was an important in the Maccabean period as a way of making sense of the suffering of the righteous; iii) there is evidence that Isaiah's servant figure was interpreted messianically; and iv) this does not mean that 'pre-Christian Judaism... embraced a doctrine of a *suffering* Messiah, still less a dying one' (590).

What follows from this in terms of the world within which Jesus read the Jewish scriptures, and came to an understanding of his own vocation? There was no such thing as a straightforward pre-Christian Jewish belief in an Isaianic 'servant of YHWH' who, perhaps as Messiah, would suffer and die to make atonement for Israel or for the world. But there was something else, which literally dozens of texts attest: a large-scale and widespread belief, to which Isaiah 40-55 made a substantial contribution, that Israel's present state of suffering was somehow held within the ongoing divine purpose; that in due time this period of woe would come to an end, with divine wrath falling instead on the pagan nations that had oppressed Israel (and perhaps on renegades within Israel herself); that the explanation for the present state of affairs had to do with Israel's own sin, for which either she, or in some cases her righteous representatives, was or were being punished; and that this suffering and punishment would therefore, somehow, hasten the moment when Israel's tribulation would be complete, when she would finally have been purified from her sin so that her exile could be undone at last. There was, in other words, a belief, hammered out not in abstract debate but in and through poverty, exile, torture and martyrdom, that Israel's sufferings might be, not merely a state *from* which she would, in YHWH's good time, be redeemed, but paradoxically, under certain circumstances and in certain senses, part of the means *by* which that redemption would be effected. (591)

The intention of Jesus (4): the strange victory

Wright next asks the question: 'How can we understand his predictions of his own sufferings, within his thoroughly Jewish pre-Easter context?' Some useful summary statements head this discussion:

I propose... that we can credibly reconstruct a mindset in which a first-century Jew could come to believe that YHWH would act through the suffering of a particular individual in whom Israel's sufferings were focused; that this suffering would carry redemptive significance; *and that this individual would be himself*. And I propose that we can plausibly suggest that this was the mindset of Jesus himself. (593)

The hypothesis I now wish to advance draws these three together into one. I propose that Jesus, consistent with the inner logic of his entire kingdom-praxis, -story and -symbolism, told the second-Temple story of the suffering and exile of the people of YHWH in a new form, and proceeded to act it out, finding himself called, like Ezekiel, symbolically to undergo the fate he had announced, in symbol and word, for Jerusalem as a whole. (594)

He took upon himself the totally and comprehensibly Jewish vocation not only of *critique* from within; not only of *opposition* from within; but of *suffering the consequences* of critique and opposition from within. And, with that, he believed - of course! - that YHWH would vindicate him. That too was comprehensibly Jewish. (595)

In two respects, however, Jesus differed from his predecessors: i) his aim was not nationalistic victory over the pagans but to make Israel what she was called to be - the light of the world; and ii) Jesus took upon himself the 'wrath' of God ('which, as usual in Jewish thought, refers to hostile military action') not simply because Israel had compromised with paganism but more importantly because '*she had refused his way of peace*'.

Jesus' sense of vocation arose from his reading of four main sections of scripture: Daniel, Zechariah, the Psalms, and Isaiah 40-55. Wright demonstrates how each of these texts contributed to the expectation 'that he would have to suffer, and that that suffering would somehow be redemptive' (599-604).

Jesus believed that his death would accomplish the two crucial messianic tasks: the restoration or rebuilding of the temple and the defeat of Israel's enemies. The parallelism between the temple-action and the last supper suggests that he 'saw his own approaching death in terms of the sacrificial cult', and specifically in terms of the Passover: 'the one-off moment of freedom in Israel's past, now to be translated into the one-off moment which would inaugurate Israel's future' (605). The battle against the forces of darkness (the real enemy behind his visible opponents) was to be fought on two fronts: the confrontation with his 'accuser' Caiaphas and the confrontation with the might of Rome.

Jesus therefore took up his own cross. He had come to see it... in deeply symbolic terms: symbolic, now, not merely of Roman oppression, but of the way of love and peace which he had commended so vigorously, the way of defeat which he had announced as the way of victory. Unlike his actions in the Temple and the upper room, the cross was a symbol not of praxis but of passivity, not of action but of passion. It was to become the symbol of victory, but not of the victory of Caesar, nor of those who would oppose Caesar with Caesar's methods. It was to become the symbol, because it would be the means, of the victory of God. (610)

The return of the king

The final chapter addresses the question of what Jesus believed about the return of YHWH to Zion, which leads to a further question: why was Jesus worshipped 'in early, very Jewish, and still insistently monotheist Christianity'? Wright's proposal is that Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem was, like the temple-action and the last supper, a symbolic action that embodied the reality. 'Jesus went to Jerusalem in order to embody the third and last element of the coming of the kingdom. He was not content to *announce* that YHWH was returning to Zion. He intended to enact, symbolize and personify that climactic event' (615).

The Jewish world of meaning

The Jewish background to this question has three components: the hope of YHWH's return, speculation about an agent who would be exalted to share the throne of God, and the symbolic language used for YHWH's activity in the world.

The hope of YHWH's return: Wright quotes a large number of biblical passages that express this hope (616-621). Although there was a geographical return from exile, there is no accompanying manifestation of the glory (as with the exodus), Israel's enemies go undefeated, and there is no 'universally welcome royal dynasty'. It is unsurprising, therefore, that the tradition of YHWH's return to Zion is maintained in the post-biblical writings.

Sharing the throne of God: the point is that 'according to some texts from this period, when YHWH acted in history, the agent through whom he acted would be vindicated, exalted, and honoured in a quite unprecedented manner' (624). The two main texts that Wright has in mind are Ezekiel 1 and Daniel 7. He points out that whereas in Ezekiel's vision there is only one figure on the throne, Daniel implies that there are two. According to the Septuagint translation of Dan.7:13 the Son of man figure comes not *to* but *as* the Ancient of Days, suggesting that the Son of man took upon himself the form and character of God. A brief survey of how this tradition developed in second Temple Judaism leads to the following conclusion:

Out of a much larger and highly complex set of speculations about the action of Israel's god through various mediator-figures, one possible scenario that some second-Temple Jews regarded as at least thinkable was that the earthly and military victory of the Messiah over the pagans would be seen in terms of the enthronement-scene from Daniel 7, itself a development of the chariot-vision in Ezekiel 1. (629)

Symbols for God and God's activity: Jewish monotheism used the symbols of Shekinah (glory), Torah, Wisdom, Logos and Spirit to affirm YHWH's active involvement in the world and especially in the life of Israel. The fact that the Messiah was also closely associated with these symbols signifies that he 'would be the agent or even the vicegerent of Israel's god, would fight his battles, would restore his people, would rebuild or cleanse the house so that the Shekinah would again dwell in it' (630).

Jesus' riddles of return and exaltation

Stories of YHWH's return to Zion: Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem is the 'symbolic enacting of the great central kingdom-promise, that YHWH would at last return to Zion, to judge and to save'. This action is interpreted by a number of stories and riddles that Jesus told that involved the return of a king or master. Wright rejects readings of these texts that find in them prophecies of Jesus' 'second coming' and sketches an alternative approach:

First, I reiterate my earlier point. Jesus did speak of 'the coming of the son of man', but that this whole phrase has to be taken quite strictly in its Danielic sense, in which 'coming' refers to the son of man 'coming' *to the Ancient of Days*. He is not 'coming' *to earth from heaven*, but the other way around.

Second, I propose that Jesus did speak of a 'coming' figure in the more usual sense of 'one who comes to Israel'. This coming figure was YHWH himself, as promised in the texts we have set out above. Jesus, I suggest, thought of the coming of YHWH as an event which was bound up with his own career and its forthcoming climax.

On this basis he examines at some length the parable of the talents or pounds, drawing from it two main points of interpretation: i) 'it was a warning that, when YHWH returned to Zion, he would come as judge for those in Israel who had not been faithful to his commission'; and ii) 'it was the further warning that his coming of YHWH to Zion was indeed imminent' (637-638). Other parables of return are interpreted in a similar fashion (640-642).

Riddles of exaltation: Jesus makes a number of statements to the effect that he will be not only vindicated but 'enthroned', bringing together Psalm 110 and Daniel 7. This claim lies at the root of the charge of blasphemy against him.

The trial scene, which we have already studied from several angles, now comes into complete focus. At stake was the whole career of Jesus, climaxing in his journey to Jerusalem, which itself exploded in his action in the Temple, and was further explained by his Last Supper. The trial opened, as it was bound to do, with the question about the Temple. Jesus had claimed authority over it, authority indeed to declare its destruction. This could only be because he believed himself to be the Messiah? Yes, answered Jesus: and you will see me vindicated, enthroned at the right hand of Power. The whole sequence belongs together precisely as a whole. The final answer drew into one statement the significance of the journey to Jerusalem, the Temple-action, and the implicit messianic claim. Together they said that Jesus, not the Temple, was the clue to, and the location of, the presence of Israel's god with his people. Sociologically, this represented a highly radical Galilean protest against Jerusalem. Politically, it constituted a direct challenge to Caiaphas' power-base and his whole position - and, of course, to those of Caesar and Pilate. Theologically, it was either true or it was blasphemous. Caiaphas wasted no time considering the former possibility. (644)

Vocation foreshadowed

This last section attempts to outline, within Jesus' understanding of his prophetic and messianic calling, a 'deeper vocation', manifested supremely in the 'peculiar appropriateness' of designating Israel's god as 'father'.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion to this chapter Wright summarizes Jesus' aims and beliefs.

I have argued that Jesus' underlying aim was based on his faith-awareness of vocation. He believed himself called, by Israel's god, to *evoke* the traditions which promised YHWH's return to Zion, and the somewhat more nebulous but still important traditions which spoke of a human figure sharing the divine throne; to *enact* those traditions in his own journey to Jerusalem, his messianic act in the Temple, and his death at the hands of the pagans (in the hope of subsequent vindication); and thereby to *embody* YHWH's return. (651)

Jesus' beliefs remained essentially those of 'a first-century Jew' (ie. monotheism, election and eschatology), but a first-century Jew *'who believed that the kingdom was coming in and through his own work'*.

I suggest, in short, that the return of YHWH to Zion, and the Temple-theology which it brings into focus, are the deepest keys and clues to gospel christology. Forget the 'titles' of Jesus, at least for a moment; forget the pseudo-orthodox attempts to make Jesus of Nazareth conscious of being the second person of the Trinity; forget the arid reductionism that is the mirror-image of that unthinking would-be orthodoxy. Focus, instead, on a young Jewish prophet telling a story about YHWH returning to Zion as judge and redeemer, and then embodying it by riding into the city in tears, symbolizing the Temple's destruction and celebrating the final exodus. I propose, as a matter of history, that Jesus of Nazareth was conscious of a vocation: a vocation, given him by the one he knew as 'father', to enact in himself what, in Israel's scriptures, God had promised to accomplish all by himself. He would be the pillar of cloud and fire for the people of the new exodus. He would embody in himself the returning and redeeming action of the covenant God. (653)

The Resurrection of the Son of God

Setting the scene

We gain an initial impression of the scope of this book from Wright's sketch of the 'paradigm for understanding Jesus' resurrection' that he believes has dominated scholarship in recent years:

In general terms, this view holds the following: (1) that the Jewish context provides only a fuzzy setting, in which 'resurrection' could mean a variety of different things; (2) that the earliest Christian writer, Paul, did not believe in *bodily* resurrection, but held a 'more spiritual' view; (3) that the earliest Christians believed, not in Jesus' bodily resurrection, but in his exaltation/ascension/glorification, in his 'going to heaven' in some kind of special capacity, and that they came to use 'resurrection' language initially to denote that belief and only subsequently to speak of an empty tomb or of 'seeing' the risen Jesus; (4) that the resurrection stories in the gospels are late inventions designed to bolster up this second-stage belief; (5) that such 'seeings' of Jesus as may have taken place are best understood in terms of Paul's conversion experience, which itself is to be explained as a 'religious' experience, internal to the subject rather than involving the seeing of any external reality, and that the early Christians underwent some kind of fantasy or hallucination; (6) that whatever happened to Jesus' body (opinions differ as to whether it was even buried in the first place), it was not 'resuscitated', and was certainly not 'raised from the dead' in the sense that the gospel stories, read at face value, seem to require." (7)

Wright intends to argue that there are sound historical grounds for rejecting this position and for replacing it with an alternative paradigm:

The positive thrust, naturally, is to establish (1) a different view of the Jewish context and materials, (2) a fresh understanding of Paul and (3) all the other early Christians, and (4) a new reading of the gospel stories; and to argue (5) that the *only* possible reason why early Christianity began and took the shape it did is that the tomb really was empty and that people really did meet Jesus, alive again, and (6) that, though admitting it involves accepting a challenge at the level of worldview itself, the best historical explanation for all these phenomena is that Jesus was indeed bodily raised from the dead. (8)

The main part of this introductory chapter is an examination and rebuttal of six objections to a historical study of the resurrection: i) we have no access to the resurrection as an event in history (Marxsen); ii) historians cannot write about events for which there is no historical analogy (Troeltsch); iii) there is no real textual evidence for the resurrection (Lüdemann, Crossan); iv) the resurrection cannot be investigated historically but it is the fundamental ground or presupposition of Christian epistemology (Frei); v) the resurrection is a demonstration of Jesus' divinity and therefore beyond historical investigation; and similarly vi) the resurrection is an eschatological event and therefore beyond historical investigation (15-28).

The necessary starting point for this study is the attempt to locate the claims about Jesus' resurrection within the thought-worlds of paganism, second-temple Judaism, and early Christianity.

It will become clear - and this is among the first major conclusions of our historical study - that the early Christian worldview is, at this point at least, best understood as a startling, fresh mutation within second-Temple Judaism. This then raises the question: what caused this mutation? (28)

A general observation is also made at this point: resurrection was understood by both pagans and Jews not as 'life after death' but as 'life *after* life after death' - as a two-stage process involving death, a period of 'death-as-a-state', and a re-embodiment (31).

Life beyond death in ancient paganism

Chapters two and three provide extensive surveys of beliefs about life after death in paganism and post-biblical Judaism. Both chapters have good concluding sections which can be useful summarized here.

In paganism 'the road to the underworld ran only one way' (81). Attempts to return were invariably prohibited or punished. The dead were thought of as disembodied souls or shades who, for the most part, inhabited Hades, the Isles of the Blessed, or Tartarus. Death was all-powerful: 'One could neither escape it in the first place nor break its power once it had come.' Resurrection, as a re-embodiment, was regarded as both impossible and undesirable. It would have been seen not as a form of life after death but as a step beyond life after death.

This has three major implications for this book. i) The resurrection of Jesus would have been seen by the ancient pagan world as an unprecedented event, not merely as a variation on beliefs about the afterlife. ii) Belief in the resurrection of Jesus could not have been based on belief in his divinity: divinization did not require resurrection. iii) Some writers within second century Christianity reinterpreted the notion of resurrection as a 'state of blissful disembodied immortality' (83).

Death and beyond in the Old Testament

Wright repeats the point that resurrection was a 'life *after* "life after death"' (201).

'Resurrection', with the various words that were used for it and the various stories that were told about it, was never simply a way of speaking about 'life after death'. It was one particular story that was told about the dead: a story in which the *present* state of those who had died would be replaced by a *future* state in which they would be alive once more.

'Resurrection' in the Old Testament has a primary metaphorical meaning, for which Ezekiel's allegory of the dry bones is the supreme example: resurrection is a figure for the restoration of Israel. It was, therefore, a revolutionary doctrine because it 'spoke of the concrete hope of national freedom' (202). An earlier passage is worth quoting at length:

The real problem was that resurrection was from the beginning a revolutionary doctrine. For Daniel 12, resurrection belief went with dogged resistance and martyrdom. For Isaiah and Ezekiel, it was about YHWH restoring the fortunes of his people. It had to do with the coming new age, when the life-giving god would act once more to turn everything upside down - or perhaps, as they might have said, right way up. It was the sort of belief that encouraged young hotheads to attack Roman symbols placed on the Temple, and that, indeed, led the first-century Jews into the most disastrous war they had experienced. It was not simply, even, that they thought such beliefs might lead the nation into a clash with Rome, though that will certainly have been the case. It was that they realized that such beliefs threatened their own position. People who believe that their god is about to make a new world, and that those who die in loyalty to him in the meantime will rise again to share gloriously in it, are far more likely to lose respect for a wealthy aristocracy than people who think that this life, this world and this age are the only ones there ever will be. (138)

From the 3rd century BC the metaphor of resurrection took on a new meaning, largely through 'reflection on the suffering of those who withstood the pagans in the hope of national redemption'. This develops as a reaffirmation of the Jewish belief in the 'goodness and god-giveness of the created world and of bodily human life with it' (202). By the time of 2 Maccabees the metaphor has become quite literal, expressing the hope of a return to physical wholeness, though still within the frame of the wider hope for national restoration.

Belief in a future resurrection led naturally to the development of beliefs about an intermediate state between death and resurrection, which could sometimes have a hellenistic or Platonic character. The dead 'are, at present, souls, spirits or angel-like beings, held in that state of being not because they were naturally immortal but by the creative power of YHWH'. Where are they? 'They are in the hand of the creator god; or in paradise; or in some kind of Sheol, understood now not as a final but as a temporary resting-place' (203). In conclusion:

Resurrection... seems to possess two basic meanings in the second-Temple period, with considerable fluidity between them. In each case the referent is concrete: restoration of Israel ('resurrection' as metaphorical, denoting socio-political events and investing them with the significance that this will be an act of new creation, of covenant restoration); of human bodies ('resurrection' as literal, denoting actual re-embodiment)... 'Resurrection' in its literal sense belongs at one point on the much larger spectrum of Jewish beliefs about life after death; in its political, metaphorical sense it belongs on a spectrum of views about the future which YHWH was promising to Israel. Both senses generated and sustained nationalist revolution. The hope that YHWH would restore Israel provided the goal; the hope that he would restore human bodies (especially of those who died in the cause) removed the fear that might have undermined zeal. No wonder the aristocratic Sadducees rejected resurrection. Anyone who used the normal words for 'resurrection' within second-Temple Judaism would have been heard to be speaking within this strictly limited range of meaning. (204)

Resurrection in Paul

Resurrection in Paul (outside the Corinthian correspondence)

Again the findings of this chapter are conveniently summarized at the end (271-276).

1. Paul's 'richly variegated, but fluently integrated' understanding of resurrection comprised three basic moments: 'the bodily resurrection of Jesus the Messiah; the future bodily resurrection of those who belong to the Messiah (along with the transformation of the living); and 'the anticipation of the second, on the basis of the first, in terms of present Christian living, to which "resurrection" language applies as a powerful metaphor in line with the metaphorical usage available, alongside the literal use, in Judaism' (271-272). He also adumbrates in different ways an intermediate state: those who die go to be 'with the Messiah' or they are 'asleep in the Messiah'.
2. The main development in Paul's writings is from an early conviction that he would be among those who are alive when the Messiah returned to the later view that he would probably die before the end.
3. Paul's understanding of resurrection remained grounded in Judaism but is a development of Jewish belief in seven respects: i) he believed that the 'age to come' had already begun; ii) his understanding is much more sharply defined than anything in Judaism, particularly with regard to the emphasis on transformation; iii) there is a subtle rethinking of the tradition *from within* (eg. a reapplication of the language of Dan.12:1-3 to describe Christian witness); iv) Paul grounds his belief in the resurrection as the work of the creator God in the actual resurrection of Jesus; v) he developed a new terminology to articulate his distinctive beliefs, most notably the distinction between 'flesh' and 'body'; vi) he developed a modified two-stage doctrine of final judgment, parallel to the two-stage doctrine of resurrection, according to which condemnation had already taken place on the cross; and vii) perhaps most striking the idea of resurrection pervades Paul's writings in a way that is quite unprecedented in Jewish thought. 'In all these ways, Paul kept both feet firmly on the soil of his own Jewish tradition, while making significant developments and modifications, not at all in the direction of a paganization of the concepts and beliefs, but by rethinking them in the light of the Messiah' (274).
4. Likewise Paul's entire worldview remained firmly grounded in Judaism but was rethought around Jesus and his resurrection. i) He used the foundation stories of creation and exodus to speak of the new creation and new exodus. ii) The various aspects of his apostolic praxis (Gentile mission, prayer, vocation to suffering, collection from the Gentile churches) arise out of a Jewish, Pharisaic worldview but have been reordered by the gospel and especially the resurrection. iii) The symbols of his work (proclamation of the gospel, baptism) are closely tied to the death and resurrection of Jesus. iv) Paul would answer the worldview questions as follows: we are 'in the Messiah'; we are in the 'good creation of the good God', which is still subject to decay but is already under the lordship of the Messiah; what is wrong is that the world is still under the control of sinful and idolatrous forces; the solution is resurrection in

the metaphorical sense in the short term and in the literal sense in the long term; the 'age to come' has been inaugurated but the 'present age' still continues.

5. Finally, there is an urgent historical question: 'If Paul was indeed drawing so thoroughly upon the Jewish beliefs and hopes about resurrection, what could have caused him to speak of it in this way?' Resurrection as envisaged in the prophets and later Jewish traditions had not happened: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, *et al.*, had not been raised to bodily life; Israel had not been 'resurrected' metaphorically from oppression. So why did he make resurrection as a past event so central to his theology? The answer is simply that he believed that it had happened.

Resurrection in Corinth (1): Introduction

This chapter examines passages in 1 and 2 Corinthians that touch on the theme of resurrection *apart from* the two key passages in 1 Cor.15 and 2 Cor.4:7-5:10. Wright concludes:

These two letters, omitting for the moment their most important sections, have returned the same answer to our questions as the rest of the Pauline corpus:

(1) In terms of the ancient spectrums of belief about life after death, Paul is with the Jews against the pagans, and with the Pharisees (and the majority of other Jews) against the Sadducees and against any who looked for a disembodied immortality.

(1a) He saw the Spirit in the present as the guarantee of the resurrection to come, in which believers would have new bodies.

(1b) These letters say nothing much about an intermediate state, but offer nothing to contradict the view we gleaned from the others.

(1c) The continuity and discontinuity between the present Christian life and the future resurrection life is all-important, though in subtly different ways, in both the Corinthian letters. It is the point on which many of his arguments in the first letter rest, and the point which enables him, in the second letter, to interpret his apostolic ministry as one of paradoxical glory.

(1d) Several times he hints at the larger picture (new covenant, new creation) within which what he says about resurrection makes sense.

(2) He develops substantially the 'present' meaning of resurrection in both letters, making sustained and subtle metaphorical use of the concept, to denote aspects of present (concrete) Christian living and apostolic work while connoting their rootedness in the (concrete) resurrection of Jesus and their goal in the future (concrete) resurrection of believers, to the last of which the language continues to apply literally.

(3) Paul seldom addresses, in the passages we have studied here, the question of what precisely happened at Easter, of what Jesus' own resurrection actually consisted in. However, since he uses Jesus' resurrection again and again as the model both for the ultimate future, and for the present anticipation of that future, we can conclude that, as far as he was concerned, Jesus' resurrection consisted in a new bodily life which was more than a mere resuscitation. It was a life in which the corruptibility of the flesh had been left behind; a life in which Jesus would now be equally at home in both dimensions of the good creation, in 'heaven' and 'earth'. (310)

Resurrection in Corinth (2): the key passages

1 Corinthians 15 makes it clear that Paul's understanding of resurrection is grounded in a creation-theology. What this text adds to the other statements is 'a detailed account, unprecedented in the Judaism of the time, both of the two-stage rising of the dead (the Messiah first, then his people when he returns), and of the mode of *discontinuity* (focused on the corruption/incorruption distinction and on the two types of humanity with the Spirit as the agent of the new one)' (360). Both innovations derive from what he believes about the resurrection of Jesus.

The main argument with regard to 2 Cor.4:7-5:10 is that the later passage constitutes a change of perspective rather than a change of mind: Paul simply now recognizes the possibility of his own death before the new age arrived in its complete form.

A number of general concluding remarks are made concerning Paul's views on resurrection. i) His beliefs are fundamentally Jewish and Pharisaical rather than pagan:

He believed, that is, in the future bodily resurrection of all the true people of the true God, and he cautiously explored, here and there, ways of referring to the intermediate state which was the necessary corollary of such a belief. He believed that Israel's God, being both the creator of the world and the God of justice, would accomplish this resurrection by his Spirit, who was already at work in the Messiah's people. (372)

ii) His beliefs are a development of Jewish eschatology in two important respects. First, he believed that resurrection had become a two-stage affair with Jesus' resurrection preceding that of the people of the Messiah. Secondly, he believed that the resurrection would not only be bodily but would also entail a transformation of the body, understood principally in terms of a new creation:

Though Paul does not refer to the tree of life in Genesis 3, his controlling narrative is constantly pointing to the way in which the creator finally brings his human, image-bearing creatures, and indeed the entire cosmos, through the impasse of the fall, of the thorns and thistles and the whirling, flashing sword, to taste at last the gift of life in all its fullness, a new bodily life in a new world where the rule of heaven is brought at last to earth. (373)

iii) Paul uses the language of resurrection in a metaphorical sense to denote 'the concrete, bodily events of Christian living, especially baptism and holiness'. This was a development of the metaphorical use of resurrection language in Judaism to speak of the coming restoration of Israel and return from exile.

iv) 'The question any historian must ask, discovering such a nest of intricate ideas, at once so Jewish and so unlike anything any Jew had said before, is obvious: what caused these developments-from-within, these newly articulated resurrection-beliefs?' The only explanation for this mutation is Paul's belief in Jesus' own bodily resurrection.

The Damascus Road vision of Jesus

Briefly, Wright argues in this section that for Paul the revelation of Jesus on the road to Damascus was proof that YHWH had 'vindicated Jesus against the charge of false messianism' (394). From this certain things follow:

He is to be seen as Israel's true representative; the great turn-around of the eras has already begun; 'the resurrection' has split into two, with Jesus the Messiah as the first-fruits and the Messiah's people following later, when he returns. And if he is Messiah, then it must follow, from those biblical roots we set out earlier (Psalm 2, Daniel 7 and so on), which are reaffirmed in the New Testament as central to the church's developing view of Jesus, that he is *the world's true lord*. He is the *kyrios* at whose name every knee shall bow. He is the 'son of man' exalted over the beasts, Israel's king rising to rule the nations. But every step down this road... takes us closer to saying that if Jesus is the *kyrios* now exalted over the world - a deduction, we repeat, from his Messiahship - then the biblical texts which speak in this way are harder and harder to separate from the texts which, when they say *kyrios*, refer to Israel's god, YHWH himself. Jesus, the Messiah, is *kyrios*. (395)

Luke's telling of the event is designed to evoke Old Testament theophany scenes: the vision of Daniel 10, the revelation on Mount Sinai, and the opening vision of Ezekiel. The primary meaning of the vision is that Jesus has been designated 'son of God' in the messianic sense. But the setting of the vision within a prophetic framework suggests that there is more to it than this:

Since prophetic calls were perceived as coming from Israel's god, albeit sometimes through intermediaries as in Daniel 10, the revelation of Jesus as the messianic 'son of god' hovers precariously on the edge of the new, previously unthinkable belief: that this messianic

title might contain much more than anyone had previously imagined from reading either Psalm 2 or 2 Samuel 7. Paul's own use of Psalm 110 echoes its use in the synoptic tradition: he discovered that David's son was also David's lord.

Wright then tentatively sketches a process by which this discovery might have come about. Paul came to believe that Jesus was the Messiah as a result of an experience that seemed to him very much like the biblical theophanies: perhaps he discovered that the figure on Ezekiel's 'throne-chariot' was Jesus. As he prayed to Israel's God, he found that the phrase 'son of God' took on a new meaning, running parallel to 'the other notions in which Jews had invoked the presence and activity of the transcendent, hidden God' (397). As the memory of the Damascus Road vision and the practice of prayer interacted in Paul's mind, he

had an increasingly clear sense that this God was to be known as the one who sent the son and the Spirit of the son (Galatians 4.4-6); the one who shared his unshareable glory with this new Lord of the world (Philippians 2.9-11); the one in whom the invisible God was reflected (Colossians 1.15); the one whose very Lordship provided, through the multiple possibilities of the word *kyrios*, a way of distinguishing between 'one God, the father' and 'one lord, Jesus Christ', while simultaneously, and with the same words, affirming Jewish monotheism over against pagan polytheism (1 Corinthians 8:6). (398)

Resurrection in early Christianity (apart from Paul)

Hope refocused (1): Gospel traditions outside the Easter narratives

On the basis of a survey of a number of more or less overt references to resurrection in the Gospels in advance of the Easter stories themselves Wright draws certain general conclusions. The tradition that emerges belongs with Pharisaic Judaism over against both other Jewish positions and paganism: passages that speak of the disciples losing their lives in order to gain them, for example, are very much like the exhortations of the Maccabean leaders:

The implication is that the kingdom of god, or of the son of man, will involve the same kind of world as at present, but with god's true people vindicated. (407)

But there are also differences. The theme is more pervasive than in second-temple writings and, as in Paul, it has undergone some redefinition.

i) 'Resurrection' is still 'god's gift of new bodily life to all his people at the end'. But 'it can also be used, in a manner cognate with the development of metaphorical uses in Judaism, to denote the restoration of god's people in the present time, as for instance in the dramatic double summary of the prodigal son's being "dead and alive again" in Luke 15' (448).

The examination of Jesus' dispute with the Sadducees about marriage and the resurrection is of particular importance here, not least because Wright uses it to oppose the traditional view that 'resurrection' is equivalent to, and indeed means, 'life after death' or 'going to heaven', where the dead will have an angelic form of existence (415-429). He stresses that resurrection is a political theme in the context of the gospels and that Jesus' response to the Sadducees had profound political implications - that 'Israel's god was at work in a new way, turning the world upside down, going (perhaps) to the present Jewish rulers what Jesus had done in the Temple' (427).

In Luke's gospel the metaphorical use of 'resurrection' has a clear concrete referent: 'Jesus is receiving sinners and eating with them, and, as far as these sinners go, this is a dramatic and vivid form of "life from the dead", a real return from exile, in the here and now' (437).

ii) There is the idea that the singular event of Jewish expectation has been split into two resurrections: first Jesus, then those who follow him. It is this development that the disciples found so hard to grasp at the time.

iii) The notion of resurrection is stretched beyond the conventional thought of a 'return to the same kind of bodily life that people have had up to now'. It was not a 'resuscitation into the same kind of life but rather a going through death and out into a new sort of life beyond, into a body that was no longer susceptible to decay and death' (450).

Hope refocused (2): other New Testament writings

This chapter covers Acts, Hebrews, the general letters, and Revelation. For the most part the analysis emphasizes the continuity between these texts and the rest of the New Testament. Two particular areas stand out, however. i) There is an extended examination of certain difficult texts in the letters of Peter: the description of the 'day of the Lord' as an event of apparent cosmic destruction in 2 Peter 3:5-13 (462-463); the common misreading of 'salvation' in 1 Peter 1:3-9 as the departure of the soul to heaven (464-467); and the puzzling statement about the 'spirits in prison' in 1 Peter 3:18-22 (467-469). ii) The view of resurrection in Revelation presupposes the 'worldview of second-Temple Judaism, and in particular of that end of the spectrum which, longing for the coming kingdom, saw judgment on the wicked nations and the vindication of God's suffering people as the moment to be longed, prayed and worked for'. But we also find a Christian innovation in the distinction between a first and second death and between a first and second resurrection. For the beheaded martyrs the post-mortem experience has three stages (20:4-6): 'first, a state of being "dead souls"; second, whatever is meant by the "first resurrection"; third, the implied "second" or "final" resurrection described... in chapters 21 and 22' (475).

The chapter closes with a set of general conclusions about resurrection (476-479):

All the major books and strands, with the single exception of Hebrews, make resurrection a central and important topic, and set it within a framework of Jewish thought about the one god as creator and judge. This resurrection belief stands firmly over against the entire world of paganism on the one hand. Its reshaping, around the resurrection of Jesus himself, locates it as a dramatic modification within Judaism on the other.

There are five remarkable aspects to this statement which require historical explanation. i) In Judaism resurrection remained on the periphery of thought; in early Christianity it has moved to the centre. ii) There is not the diversity of beliefs about life after death in early Christianity that we find in Judaism and paganism: 'from this point of view, Christianity appears as a united sub-branch of Pharisaic Judaism'. iii) The Pharisaic view, however, has been modified in two important respects: a split between the resurrection of Jesus and the resurrection of all his people; and the resurrection body is defined specifically as transformed, for which Wright coins the term 'transphysical'. iv) Early Christianity was selective in its use of Old Testament texts to explain resurrection: surprisingly, for example, very little use is made of Daniel 12:1-3. v) The use of resurrection as a metaphor for 'the concrete events of the expected return from exile' (as in Ezekiel 37) is 'totally absent in early Christianity'. Instead resurrection is used metaphorically to describe certain aspects of the Christian life: 'baptism, holiness of bodily life, and Christian witness'.

Hope refocused (3): non-canonical early Christian texts

This chapter surveys early Christian thinking about resurrection from the apostolic fathers through to Origen, with a look also at the writings of early Syriac Christianity and the Nag Hammadi texts. The conclusions are straightforward. As distinct from paganism early Christianity affirmed the 'future bodily resurrection of all god's people' and differed from developed Jewish views in that the raised body would be incorruptible, the messiah had been raised in advance of the whole people, an intermediate had been introduced conceived 'in terms of the departed person being with the Lord until the resurrection' (551).

Like the Jews, the Christians based themselves on the doctrines of creation and judgment, and they rooted themselves in a rereading of Jewish scriptures, not simply as prophecies of one-off events but as providing a foundation narrative which they believed had reached its climax in Jesus. They nevertheless developed the notion of resurrection in such a way that, without leaving its literal use and concrete referent, it abandoned the regular Jewish metaphorical use (referring to the concrete events of Israel's national redemption), and they developed instead a different metaphorical use, referring to the concrete events of baptism and holiness of body and behaviour. (552)

It is remarkable that Christianity did not develop a spectrum of beliefs about resurrection but more so that within this quite narrow framework it developed 'new ways of speaking about what resurrection involved and how it would come about which could not have been predicted

from the Jewish sources'. These two observations raise the important historical question: 'what caused this remarkable development, which brought resurrection not only from the circumference of belief to the very centre, but also from a semi-formed belief into a very sharply focused one?'

Hope in Person: Jesus as Messiah and Lord

This chapter examines two beliefs of early Christianity, both of which are surprising in view of Jesus' recent execution by the Romans: that Jesus was the messiah and that he was the true 'lord' of the world.

i) Jesus as messiah

The argument that early Christianity was thoroughly messianic is directed principally against those scholars who argue that Q and the Gospel of Thomas are evidence for an very early strata of Christian belief that was not interested in Jesus' messiahship (554-557).

Judaism did not envisage a messiah who would suffer a shameful death at the hands of Israel's enemies.

...the Messiah was supposed to win the decisive victory over the pagans, to rebuild or cleanse the Temple, and in some way or other to bring true, god-given justice and peace to the whole world. What nobody expected the Messiah to do was to die at the hands of the pagans instead of defeating them; to mount a symbolic attack on the Temple, warning it of imminent judgment, instead of rebuilding or cleansing it; and to suffer unjust violence at the hands of the pagans instead of bringing them justice and peace. The crucifixion of Jesus, understood from the point of view of any onlooker, whether sympathetic or not, was bound to have appeared as the complete destruction of any messianic pretensions or possibilities he or his followers might have hinted at. The violent execution of a prophet (which, uncontroversially, was how Jesus was regarded by many), still more of a would-be Messiah, did not say to any Jewish onlooker that he really was the Messiah after all, or that YHWH's kingdom had come through his work. It said, powerfully and irresistibly, that he wasn't and that it hadn't. (557-558)

'Why then did the early Christians acclaim Jesus as Messiah, when he obviously wasn't? Why did his followers not give up their 'dreams of revolution'? Or why didn't they look for another messiah - James, the brother of Jesus, for example? They preserved the basic shape of Jewish messianic belief but also transformed it: the messiah did not belong only to the Jews; the 'messianic battle' was not a military campaign but a fight against evil itself; the temple would be rebuilt in the community of believers; and the 'justice, peace and salvation which the Messiah would bring to the world would not be a Jewish version of the imperial dream of Rome, but would be God's *dikaosune*, God's *eirene*, God's *soteria*, poured out upon the world through the renewal of the whole creation' (563). Why was the messianic hope redefined around Jesus in this way?

ii) Jesus, the messiah, is Lord

The belief in Jesus as lord was 'a *function of* belief in him as Messiah, not a *move away from* that belief' (564). It is grounded in classic biblical portraits of the Messiah found especially in the Psalms, Isaiah and Daniel. On the basis of these texts Wright sets out three propositions:

(1) these texts all bear witness to a biblically rooted belief in a coming king who would be master not only of Israel but also of the whole world; (2) these are the passages drawn on by the early Christians to speak about Jesus not only as Israel's Messiah (albeit in a redefined sense) but also as the world's true lord, again in a sense which was redefined but never abandoned; (3) we must therefore understand the early Christian belief in Jesus as lord, not as part of an abandonment of Jewish categories and an embracing of Greek ones, nor as part of an abandonment of the hope for god's kingdom and a turning instead to 'religious experience', nor yet as an abandonment of the political meaning of this universal sovereignty and a re-expression of it in terms of 'religious' loyalty, but as a fresh statement of the Jewish hope that the one true god, the creator, would become lord of the whole world. (565-566)

1. **Jesus and the kingdom:** just as Jesus was raised in advance of the resurrection of the people of God, so the kingdom of God has also been anticipated in the 'reign of Christ'. The early Christians reused Jewish kingdom motifs in a transferred sense but not in such a way as to reduce to a private religious experience. 'The transferred sense remained a public, this-worldly sense, a sense of the creator god doing something new within creation, not of a god acting to rescue people *from* creation' (567).

2. **Jesus and Caesar:** if Jesus was lord, then Caesar was not. This does not mean that the early Christians were not prepared to 'respect legal authorities as constituted by the one true god'. The remarkable thing is that the early Christians persisted in this belief for two or three generations at least despite the overwhelming superiority of Rome. The only explanation is that they believed that Jesus had been raised from the dead.

3. **Jesus and YHWH:** 'when the early Christians called Jesus *kyrios*, one of the overtones that word quickly acquired, astonishing and even shocking though this must have been, was that texts in the Greek Bible which used *kyrios* to translate the divine name YHWH were now used to denote Jesus himself, with a subtlety and sophistication that seems to go back to the earliest days of the Christian movement' (571).

Wright cites the quotation of the 'fiercely monotheistic' Isaiah 45:23 in Philippians 2:10, the inclusion of Jesus in the frame of the *Shema* in 1 Corinthians 8:6, the description of Jesus as the one through whom all things were created in Colossians 1:15-20, the quotation of Joel 2:32 in Romans 10:13, of Psalm 34:8 in 1 Peter 2:3 and Isaiah 8:13 in 1 Peter 3:15, and Thomas' confession in John 20:28. He asks whether this identification has anything to do with the resurrection and concludes that with the exception of Thomas' confession the resurrection was not interpreted as a straightforward argument for Jesus' divinity.

Wright puts forward, however, a more complex 'sequence of moves, each step of which is comprehensible within second-Temple Judaism' (575). The first conclusion that the disciples would have drawn from the resurrection 'was that he was indeed the prophet mighty in word and deed, and that he was, more particularly, Israel's Messiah'. Paul came to understand that through Jesus 'Israel's one true god had been not merely speaking, as though through an intermediary, but personally present'. Wright stresses that the early Christians 'determinedly spoke of Jesus, alongside the creator god and as his personal self-expression, within categories familiar from the dynamic monotheism of second-Temple Judaism'.

...within second-Temple Judaism there were various strategies for speaking of how Israel's god was God, the one, true and only divine being, who remained the creator, distinct from the world and responsible for it, could nevertheless be present and active within the world. Various writers spoke of God's word, God's wisdom, God's law, God's tabernacling presence (*shekinah*), and God's Spirit, as though these were at one and the same time independent beings and yet were ways in which the one true God could be with his people, with the world, healing, guiding, judging and saving. At a different linguistic level, they spoke of God's glory and God's love, God's wrath and God's power, not least in the eschatological sense that all these would be revealed in the great coming day. The New Testament writers draw on all these to express the point that, I suggest, they had reached by other means: that Jesus was the Messiah; that he was therefore the world's true lord; that the creator God had exalted him as such, sharing with him his own throne and unique sovereignty; and that he was therefore to be seen as *kyrios*. And *kyrios* meant not only 'lord of the world', in the sense that he was the human being now at the helm of the universe, the one to whom every knee, including that of Caesar, must bow, but also 'the one who makes present and visible what the Old Testament said about YHWH himself. That was why the early Christians ransacked texts about God's presence and activity in the world in order to find appropriate categories to speak of Jesus (and of the Spirit, though that is of course another topic). The high Christology to which they were committed from extremely early on - a belief in Jesus as somehow divine, but firmly within the framework of Jewish monotheism - was not a paganization of Jewish life and thought, but, at least in intention, an exploration of its inner heart. (577)

The starting-point for all this is the belief that Jesus was the messiah, 'son of god' in the sense of Psalm 2; 89; 2 Samuel 7:14, because God had raised him bodily from the dead.

The chapter concludes with a summary of resurrection belief within the early Christian worldview. i) Praxis: the early Christians behaved as though in some sense they were already living in the new creation, the belief may have been reflected in burial practice, and the first day of the week replaced the sabbath. ii) The symbolic world of early Christianity focused on Jesus himself: baptism, eucharist, the cross, the fish. iii) Stories about the resurrection 'can be plotted on a grid of Jewish-style stories of the vindication of the covenant people after suffering'. iv) The worldview questions also 'elicit a set of resurrection-shaped answers'.

This worldview finds expression in early Christian beliefs, hopes and aims. The early Christian view of god and the world is, at one level, substantially the same as the second-Temple Jewish view: there is one god, who has made the world, and who remains in an active and powerful relationship with the world, and whose primary response to the problem of evil in the world is the call of Israel, which itself generates a second-order set of problems and questions (why has Israel herself apparently failed? what is the solution to Israel's own problems, and hence to the world's problems?). But the resurrection of Jesus, and the powerful work of the Spirit which the early Christians saw in that event and in their own lives, has reshaped this view of the one god and the world, by providing the answer, simultaneously, to the problems of Israel and the world: Jesus is shown to be Israel's representative Messiah, and his death and resurrection is the proleptic achievement of Israel's restoration *and hence* of the world's restoration. The first Christians, despite what used to be said in the heyday of existentialist theology, were thereby committed to living and working *within history*, not to living in a fantasy-world where history had in principle already come to a stop and all that remained was for this to be worked out through the imminent end of the space-time universe. The promised future, both for themselves and for the whole cosmos, gave meaning and validity to the present embodied life. (581-582)

The story of Easter

Chapter 13 addresses a number of general issues relating to the resurrection narratives in the Gospels. Wright dismisses Crossan's argument that the resurrection story in the *Gospel of Peter* constitutes a source for the canonical accounts and is generally sceptical of form-critical and redaction-critical attempts to explain their literary history.

He then lists a number of surprise elements in the Gospel stories: i) the lack of embellishment from the biblical tradition; ii) the absence of personal hope regarding life after death; iii) the strange mix of mundanity and mystery in the descriptions of the risen Jesus; and iv) the emphasis on the presence of women at the tomb (599-608).

There are two options for explaining these oddities. Either the evangelists took a theology of resurrection such as Paul's which described the peculiar 'transphysicality' of the resurrection body and from it developed 'significantly different narratives about Jesus'. Or we must suppose that Paul provided 'a theoretical, theological and biblical framework for stories which were already well known'. Then, to pick up on an earlier point, the reason that there is no evocation of Daniel 12:1-3 in the resurrection stories is that the risen body of Jesus had not shone like a star.

I find this second option enormously more probable at the level of sheer history. I can understand, as a historian, how stories like this (and perhaps other similar ones which we do not have) would create a puzzle which the best brains of the next generations would wrestle with, using all their biblical and theological resources. I cannot understand, however, either why any one would develop that theology and exegesis unless there were stories like this to generate the puzzle, or how that theology and exegesis, formed thus (one would have to suppose) by a kind of intellectual parthenogenesis, would then generate three independent stories from which, in each case, all those developed elements had been carefully removed. The very strong historical probability is that, when Matthew, Luke and John describe the risen Jesus, they are writing down very early oral tradition, representing three different ways in which the original astonished participants told the stories. These traditions have received only minimal development, and most of that probably at the final editorial stage, for the very good reason that stories as earth-

shattering as this, stories as community-forming as this, once told, are not easily modified. Too much depends on them. (611)

Fear and trembling: Mark

Wright argues, first, largely on internal literary grounds, that Mark originally had a fuller ending that has been lost (he discounts verses 9-20 as a later addition). Secondly, he counters the view of Bultmann and others that the story of the empty tomb is an 'apologetic legend'. He then highlights a number of features which 'indicate what sort of a story Mark thinks it is'. i) The story is told from the perspective of the women. ii) There is a repeated emphasis on the unexpectedness of the events. iii) The 'discovery of the empty tomb is not presented as the historicizing "explanation" of a belief in Jesus' resurrection, but as itself a puzzle in search of a solution'. iv) Mark casts the angelic interpreter of apocalyptic visions as a real figure - the young man sitting beside the tomb. v) Although the story is truncated, it is implied in the promise of 16:7 that the disciples will see Jesus, thus providing part of the 'non-negotiable bedrock' of Christian belief about the resurrection. vi) The narrative grammar of 16:1-8 suggests an alternative explanation of the abrupt ending. If, as Luke suggests, the disciples did not begin to proclaim the resurrection until a month or two later, it may be that Mark's emphasis on the women's fear functioned as an apologetic: if the women really had seen the empty tomb, why did they not immediately tell the whole city? Mark's answer is that they were afraid (630).

Earthquakes and angels: Matthew

Matthew's extraordinary account of the earthquake and the raising of the dead (27:51-54) has a number of biblical echoes: Ezekiel 37:12-13; Isaiah 26:19; and Daniel 12:2. Wright considers a number of ways of accounting for the story and the allusions; he is reluctant to pass judgment on the question of the historicity of the event but inclines towards the view that

Matthew knows a story of strange goings-on around the time of the crucifixion, and is struggling to tell it so that (1) it includes the desired biblical allusions, (2) it makes at least some minimal historical sense (the earthquake explains the tearing of the Temple veil, the opening of tombs, and particularly the centurion's comment), and (3) it at least points towards, even if it does not exactly express, the theological meaning Matthew is working towards: that with the combined events of Jesus' death and resurrection the new age, for which Israel had been longing, has begun. (635)

Apart from this, Wright's broad conclusion is that Matthew's exposition has many points of contact with early Christian traditions while retaining a distinctive literary character.

Burning hearts and broken bread: Luke

There are some interesting thoughts here regarding the place of the resurrection narratives within Luke's work as a whole. In particular, Wright points to a number of parallels between Luke 24 and Luke 1-2. He also suggests that the opening of the eyes of Cleopas and his wife (?) on the road to Emmaus echoes the opening of the eyes of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:7. The correspondence with Luke 1-2 also brings into view the political implications of the resurrection:

When the message goes out to 'all nations', it offers more than just a new way of being religious. As Acts makes clear, the message is that Jesus is the world's true lord. The creator god is bypassing the networks of imperial power and communication. One central meaning of Easter, as far as Luke is concerned, is that Jesus and his followers are now to confront the kingdoms of the world. (653)

The proper biblical background to Luke's account of the ascension in Acts is Daniel 7. The ascension is:

the vindication of Jesus as Israel's representative, and the divine giving of judgment, at least implicitly, in his favour and against the pagan nations who have oppressed Israel and the current rulers who have corrupted her. It is, in other words, the direct answer to the

disciples' question of 1.6. This is how the kingdom is being restored to Israel: by its representative Messiah being enthroned as the world's true lord. (655)

New day, new tasks: John

Two important conclusions are drawn here (674-675). First, the resurrection narrative in chapter 20 is closely integrated with the rest of the book, 'several of whose main themes can only be understood when they are seen to lead the eye not just towards Jesus' crucifixion but also towards his resurrection'. Attention is drawn in particular to the structural parallels between chapter 20 and the prologue to the Gospel. Secondly, the 'new creation' theology that underlies the whole book indicates that John intended the resurrection story to be interpreted literally and realistically. 'Precisely because he is an incarnational theologian, committed to recognizing, and helping others to recognize, the living god in the human flesh of Jesus, it is vital and non-negotiable for him that when Thomas makes his confession he should be looking at the living god in human form, not simply with the eye of faith..., but with ordinary humansight, which could be backed up by ordinary human touch...' (668).

A final section summarizes the analysis of the Gospel resurrection narratives.

We are left with the conclusion that both the evangelists themselves, and the sources to which they had access, whether oral or written, which they have shaped to their own purposes but without destroying the underlying subject-matter, really did intend to refer to actual events which took place on the third day after Jesus' execution. The main conclusion that emerges from these four studies of the canonical evangelists is that each of them, in their very different ways, believed that they were writing about events that actually took place. Their stories can be used to refer metaphorically or allegorically to all sorts of other things, and they probably (certainly in the case of Luke and John) intended it to be so. But the stories they told, and the way they crafted them (each so differently, yet in this respect the same) as the deliberate and climactic rounding-off of their whole accounts, indicates that for reasons of narrative grammar as well as theology they must have intended to convey to their readers the sense that the Easter events were real, not fantasy; historical as well as historic. They believed, of course, that these events were foundational for the very existence of the church, and they naturally told the stories in such a way as to bring this out. But in the worldview to which they all subscribed, the fresh modification-from-within of the Jewish worldview which we can trace throughout earliest Christianity, the whole point was that the renewed people of Israel's god, the creator, had been called into being precisely by events that happened in the world of creation, of space, time and matter. (680-681)

Belief, event and meaning

Easter and history

The historical datum now before us is a widely held, consistently shaped and highly influential belief: that Jesus of Nazareth was bodily raised from the dead. This belief was held by virtually all the early Christians for whom we have evidence. It was at the centre of their characteristic praxis, narrative, symbol and belief; it was the basis of their recognition of Jesus as Messiah and lord, their insistence that the creator god had inaugurated the long-awaited new age, and above all their hope for their own future bodily resurrection. The question we now face is obvious: what caused this belief in the resurrection of Jesus? (685)

Wright's aim in this chapter is to demonstrate that the empty tomb and the resurrection appearances constitute together, with qualifications, both *sufficient* and *necessary* conditions for the emergence of the early Christian belief that Jesus had been raised from the dead. He proceeds by way of a seven step argument.

1. The first step draws together the context of belief about resurrection in second-temple Judaism and the claims of the early Christians that the tomb had been found empty and that Jesus had appeared to his followers after his death.

2. Neither the empty tomb nor the appearances alone is sufficient condition for the rise of the resurrection belief.
3. These two conditions *together*, however, are sufficient to account for the emergence of the belief within the community of Jesus' followers.
4. The empty tomb and the appearances also constitute necessary conditions for the rise of early Christian belief. 'Without these phenomena, we cannot explain why this belief came into existence, and took the shape it did. With them, we can explain it exactly and precisely' (676).
5. At this point two rival theories of the origins of the resurrection belief are considered: i) a 'cognitive dissonance' theory, according to which 'individuals or groups fail to come to terms with reality, but live instead in a fantasy which corresponds to their own deep longings' (697-701); and ii) the argument (associated here with Schillebeeckx) that the resurrection stories were a later objectification of an original experience of grace (701-06).
6. 'It is therefore historically highly probable that Jesus' tomb was indeed empty on the third day after his execution, and that the disciples did indeed encounter him giving every appearance of being well and truly alive' (687).
7. Lastly, it is necessary to ask what sort of explanation can be given for these two phenomena. At this point Wright takes on Enlightenment rationalism head on. If the 'larger dreams' of the Enlightenment (colonialism, western capitalism, etc.) have been shown to be 'politically, economically and culturally self-serving on a massive scale', perhaps the rationalist refusal to take the resurrection seriously may also prove to be 'part of that intellectual and cultural hegemony against which much of the world is now doing its best to react'.

What if the resurrection, instead of (as is often imagined) legitimating a cosy, comfortable, socially and culturally conservative form of Christianity, should turn out to be, in the twenty-first century as in the first, the most socially, culturally and politically explosive force imaginable, blasting its way through the sealed tombs and locked doors of modernist epistemology and the (now) deeply conservative social and political culture which it sustains? (713)

The risen Jesus as the Son of God

The last chapter addresses the question of the *meaning* of the resurrection within the larger Christian narrative and worldview. The starting point is the early Christian belief that the resurrection demonstrated that Jesus was the 'Son of God'. Wright separates out three layers of meaning.

1. Within the Jewish world the phrase 'son of God' referred either to Israel as a whole or to a representative figure such as the king or a messiah. The first level of meaning, therefore, was that in Jesus, as Israel's messiah, 'the creator's covenant plan, to deal with the sin and death that has so radically infected his world, has reached its long-awaited and decisive fulfilment' (728).
2. In the pagan world the phrase would most naturally have referred to the Roman emperor. The coin that the Pharisees offered to Jesus in Mark 12:13-17 would have borne the inscription AUGUST. TI. CAESAR DIVI AUG. F.: 'Augustus Tiberius Caesar, Son of the Divine Augustus'. Therefore: 'The resurrection constitutes Jesus as the world's true sovereign, the "son of god" who claims absolute allegiance from everyone and everything within creation. He is the start of the creator's new world: its pilot project, indeed its pilot' (731).
3. The early Christians took a further step, on the basis of their reflection on Israel's scriptures and with some tentative precedent in Judaism, and came to see Jesus as 'the *unique* "Son" of *this* God as opposed to any other'. 'They meant by this not simply that he was Israel's Messiah, though that remained foundational; nor simply that he was the reality of which Caesar and all other such tyrants were the parodies, though that remained a vital implication. They meant it in the sense that he was the personal embodiment and revelation *of* the one true god' (731).

No wonder the Herods, the Caesars and the Sadducees of this world, ancient and modern, were and are eager to rule out all possibility of actual resurrection. They are, after all, staking a counter-claim on the real world. It is the real world that the tyrants and bullies (including intellectual and cultural tyrants and bullies) try to rule by force, only to discover that in order to do so they have to quash all rumours of resurrection, rumours that would imply that their greatest weapons, death and deconstruction, are not after all omnipotent. But it is the real world, in Jewish thinking, that the real God made, and still grieves over. It is the real world that, in the earliest stories of Jesus' resurrection, was decisively and for ever reclaimed by that event, an event which demanded to be understood, not as a bizarre miracle, but as the beginning of the new creation. It is the real world that, however complex this may become, historians are committed to studying. And, however dangerous this may turn out to be, it is the real world in and for which Christians are committed to living and, where necessary, dying. Nothing less is demanded by the God of creation, the God of justice, the God revealed in and as the crucified and risen Jesus of Nazareth. (737)