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# Review Article

STEVE WALTON

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## Exit the Second Coming?

N T WRIGHT

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### **Jesus and the Victory of God: Christian origins and the Question of God Vol 2**

SPCK, London 1996, xxi + 741 pp

£30.00

ISBN 0 281 04717 0

Let it be said at the outset: *Jesus and the Victory of God* (hereafter *JVG*) is one of the best books on the historical Jesus – indeed, in NT studies – for years. Tom Wright has thought long and deep before publishing this stimulating, exciting and readable work, and the wait has been worth it.<sup>1</sup> This is not a dull piece of historical criticism which endlessly debates whether Jesus could or could not have said this or that (although it contributes to such discussions): Wright works on a bigger canvas and, in my judgement, manages to cut through much sterile debate by coming at questions in a fresh way. And he writes accessibly and readably – not qualities often associated with this field of study!

Good though it is, it is also highly controversial, as a stream of reviews (many with responses by Wright) shows.<sup>2</sup> Wright has been accused of ditching the idea of the 'second coming' of Jesus (on which, see further below), although he himself claims 'eschatology' (carefully defined) as the central theme of the ministry and beliefs of Jesus. The placing of the category of return from exile at the heart of Wright's reading of Jesus, with the claim that the majority of Jews of Jesus' day would have seen themselves as not having really returned from the Babylonian exile of the sixth century BC, has met with lots of questions and discussion.

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1 Although we had a shorter work on Jesus in the meantime: N. T. Wright, *Who Was Jesus?*, London, SPCK 1992, the last chapter of which presaged some of the larger book. In similar manner, the excellent Tom Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, Oxford Lion, 1997 presumably presages the big Paul book slated for Wright's series.

2 e.g., David Bryan & N. T. Wright, 'Silhouettes and Icons Not Included: N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* and a Response from Dr N. T. Wright', *Reviews in Religion and Theology* (1997), pp 7-15; Maurice Casey, 'Where Wright is Wrong: A Critical Review of N. T. Wright's *Jesus and the Victory of God*', *Journal for the Study of the*

This review article will attempt to summarise the argument of the book before identifying a number of key resulting issues. I shall endeavour to be as succinct as possible, although I crave my readers' indulgence: to handle over 700 pages in brief compass is not going to be easy!

## Outline

The book opens with an introduction which makes it clear that this book is built on the foundation of Wright's earlier *The New Testament and the People of God*.<sup>3</sup> The method developed there, of studying world views through stories, symbols, praxis and questions,<sup>4</sup> is used in this book. The work here is based almost entirely on the synoptic Gospels, on the ground that recent debate on the historical Jesus has focused almost entirely there.<sup>5</sup> Part I consists of a survey of historical study of Jesus over the last two hundred years (chs 1-3) and a chapter setting Wright's own approach out (ch. 4). In part II Wright approaches his study of Jesus thematically, rather than chronologically, using the categories of praxis (ch. 5), stories (chs 6-8), symbol (ch. 9) and questions (ch. 10) to identify Jesus' own understanding of his 'vocation' as a prophet. This leads to a more focused look at the aims and beliefs of Jesus (part III), centred on Jesus as Messiah (ch. 11). A consideration of the death of Jesus from the perspectives of the Jewish leaders, the Romans and Jesus' own view follows (ch. 12), and the book climaxes with Wright's proposal that the return of Israel's God to Zion provides the framework in which Jesus understood his calling (ch. 13). An appendix provides the main references to 'kingdom of God' in the early Christian writings, and bibliographies and a helpful set of indices (ancient sources, modern authors, topics) complete the book – and make it a book to which I shall be much more easily able to refer on particular points in future.

## Summary

The book opens with a readable three-chapter-long survey of historical Jesus scholarship, extending the fine brief survey in Wright's *Anchor Bible Dictionary* article.<sup>6</sup> Wright identifies two tracks in study of Jesus, one following Wrede's thoroughgoing historical scepticism and one following Schweitzer's thoroughgoing eschatology. He traces the line from Wrede through Bultmann to the modern 'Jesus Seminar', discussing (and critiquing) the work of Mack, Crossan, Downing and Borg.

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*New Testament* 69 (1998), pp 95-103; Clive Marsh, 'Theological History? N. T. Wright's *Jesus and the Victory of God*', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 69 (1998), 77-94; N. T. Wright, 'Theology, History and Jesus: A Response to Maurice Casey and Clive Marsh', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 69 (1998), pp 105-112; J. Dominic Crossan, 'What Victory? What God? A Review Debate with N. T. Wright on *Jesus and the Victory of God*', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 50 (1997), pp 345-358; N. T. Wright, 'Doing Justice to Jesus: A Response to J. D. Crossan', *Scottish Journal*

*of Theology* 50 (1997), pp 359-379. IVP (USA) are shortly to publish a collection of essays on *Jesus and the Victory of God*, edited by Carey Newman.

3 N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God, vol. 1, London, SPCK 1992 (hereafter *NTPG*).

4 *NTPG*, esp. chs. 8-10, 12.

5 *JVG*, p xvi.

6 N. T. Wright, 'Jesus, Quest for the Historical' in David Noel Freedman, ed., *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 3, Doubleday, New York 1992, pp 796-802.

By contrast, Wright sees himself in the tradition of Schweitzer, identifying eschatology as central to understanding Jesus – but at the same time Wright wishes to distance himself from Schweitzer's view that Jesus (mistakenly) expected the imminent end of the space-time universe.

Absolutely central to the argument is Wright's key assertion that Jews of Jesus' day saw themselves as not yet enjoying the blessings of return from the Babylonian exile promised by the prophets (esp. Isaiah 40-66, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Zechariah) and as therefore *still in the time of exile awaiting God's deliverance*,<sup>7</sup> even though they were physically in the land – for they were oppressed by the pagans (Romans rather than Babylonians). A number of metaphors were used, Wright claims, for 'return from exile', including forgiveness of sins (cf. Isa. 40:1f), covenant renewal, the return of Yahweh to Zion, and the kingdom of God.

Thus by 'eschatology' Wright means that Israel's God would intervene *in history* to bring about the 'real' return from exile which fulfilled God's promises through the prophets. It is vital to grasp this definition (although the author repeats it often enough for it to be clear by the end, at least), for without it readers used to 'eschatology' meaning the classic 'last things' (heaven, hell and judgement) will simply puzzle over Wright's use of the term.<sup>8</sup> Wright argues cogently that first-century Jews were not awaiting the end of the space-time universe, but that they used the *language* of cosmic catastrophe metaphorically of their hope that the present evil age (of exile in their own land) would end through the mighty deliverance of their God – rather as we might speak of the fall of the Berlin wall as 'earth-shaking' without being understood as describing a literal earthquake having taken place in the city.<sup>9</sup> Thus Wright argues that Jesus was working within a first-century Jewish world view, while so redefining key elements as to subvert it.

Chapter 3, on the 'Third Quest' (a phrase which Wright coined), is a clear and lucid survey of this stream of scholarship over the last thirty-five years, beginning with George Caird, Wright's own doctoral supervisor. Caird is a significant influence on Wright: he is cited approvingly often, and there are numerous plants harvested by Wright whose seeds were planted by Caird.<sup>10</sup> Wright identifies himself as part of this 'Third Quest', a quest centred on providing serious historical hypotheses about *Jesus*, rather than merely reconstructions of the development of the traditions about Jesus within proposed groupings among the early Christians. As he observes, the former is the normal way in which historical scholarship in other fields aims to study a character from the past – but it has not been the way in which historical Jesus scholarship has developed, for that has far more often been focused on whether particular words could plausibly be ascribed to Jesus. But to assert that a saying could not come from Jesus in itself presupposes a hypothesis about the kind of person Jesus was.<sup>11</sup> The overall aim of Wright's project, then, is to seek answers to five key questions: (i) How does Jesus fit into Judaism? (ii) What were Jesus'

7 *JVG*, pp xviii, *NTPG*, pp 268-272.

8 See the excellent discussion of varied scholarly uses of 'eschatology' in G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*, Duckworth, London 1980, ch. 14.

9 e.g. *NTPG*, pp 280-286, 304-307; *JVG*, pp 207-209.

10 The brief G. B. Caird, *Jesus and the Jewish Nation*, London, Athlone Press 1965 appears to have been particularly influential.

11 *JVG*, p 87.

aims? (iii) Why did Jesus die? (iv) How and why did the Early Church begin? (v) Why are the Gospels what they are?

With 'Prodigals and Paradigms' (ch. 4) we reach Wright's own approach, focused on a fascinating study of the parable of the prodigal son. Wright proposes that the motif of going into a foreign land and returning echoes the Israel-story of exile and (still awaited) restoration, and he therefore reads the parable as announcing that the process of restoration is now in hand through the ministry of Jesus. This is a startling reading of this story, at least to this reviewer, but one which grows in plausibility as the book progresses, as Wright shows the sense in reading parable after parable as a re-telling of the story of Israel.<sup>12</sup>

Wright then turns to the question of criteria for authenticity and proposes criteria of double similarity and double dissimilarity (pp 131-133). Double similarity means that an interpretation of Jesus is likely to be correct if it is credible within what we know of the Judaism of Jesus' day *and* as the wellspring from which early Christianity developed; double dissimilarity means that it bears witness to Jesus' individual mindset within the Jewish context (and is thus dissimilar in some respects to Jewish beliefs and aspirations of that period) *and* that it is not simply the full flower of later Christian understanding. Satisfying these criteria would produce a portrait of Jesus which fits precisely and only into Palestine/Israel in the early first century AD. These criteria are invoked at key points later in the book<sup>13</sup> and seem to me plausible and likely to lead us to an understanding of Jesus much more accurate than the oft-cited (and now, surely, discredited) criterion of dissimilarity of older research (which claimed that a saying is authentic only if it is dissimilar both from Judaism and from early Christianity – producing a Jesus who is out of touch with his context and misunderstood by his followers).

So Wright sets out to locate the 'mindset' of Jesus, that is, the particular variation on his society's world view which he held. This is accessible to historical scholarship, Wright argues, by considering Jesus' actions, stories, symbols and questions (chs 5-10). The central category which describes Jesus is 'prophet' and, more specifically, 'leadership prophet', that is, one who spoke from God in the manner of the OT prophets and gathered followers to lead them to salvation (understood not as 'going to heaven', but as this-worldly). Jesus in doing this was reconstituting Israel around himself, seen not least in his choice of twelve disciples to echo the twelve tribes.

As Jesus travelled he would have told the same stories and said many of the same things over and over – a suggestion richly suggestive for much tired synoptic criticism. Jesus' use of parables Wright sees as deliberately secretive, so that he was not understood too well too early in his public ministry and therefore removed from the scene before he could fulfil his aims. This means, of course, that the secrecy motif found, for example, in Mark, fits precisely within the ministry of Jesus, for the early Christians were not secretive about their beliefs about Jesus – far from it! – and that Wrede's 'messianic secret' idea can at last be given a decent burial. The earliest Christians were not inventing an idea of secrecy which they read back

12 e.g. his reading of the parable of the sower, *JVG*, pp 230-239.

13 e.g. *JVG*, pp 169, 226f, 449f, 488f.

into the ministry of Jesus in order to cover up the fact that Jesus was not known as Messiah in his lifetime; it was from Jesus himself that the secrecy motif sprang. Here, as often, Wright's logic is devastating in its effectiveness.

Jesus also announced God's judgement, in line with the OT prophets (pp 183f provides an extensive list of passages). Similarly, his deeds showed that something remarkable was going on – not for nothing was he accused of casting out spirits by Beelzebul (a charge which the early Christians could scarcely have invented). Through these 'mighty deeds' the reconstitution of Israel was taking place, for often the healings restore people to their place in Israel (pp 191f).

Wright spends three chapters (p 6–8) on Jesus' stories (in which he includes much of Jesus' teaching, arguing that it contains an implicit re-telling of Israel's story) and makes them central to his thesis. The stories are to be seen as announcement of God becoming king (which is the meaning of the much-debated phrase 'the kingdom of God'), that is, that the exile was coming to an end by God acting to redeem Israel in and through Jesus' ministry. That the 'exilic' state consisted in pagan oppression implies that Jesus' announcement that God was becoming king was 'political' – among other things, the later Zealots' slogan 'No king but God' shows this to be so.

The stories are also an invitation, welcome, challenge and summons to respond (ch. 7). Wright places Jesus' call to repent in its historical context as meaning that which Israel must do in order for the exile to end – here, to give up zeal for violent revolt. The call to repent is in tune with the message of the OT prophets, but it is taken a stage further by Jesus' further call to 'believe', that is, to place faith in him personally as the agent through whom God was now acting. Indeed, Jesus saw repentance and forgiveness as something which he could announce (e.g. Mark 2:1-12) without reference to the 'official' channels of the temple and priesthood – and this was deeply offensive to the Jewish authorities. But God was abandoning these channels and working in and through Jesus. That was why Jesus could and did spend time in table-fellowship with 'sinners'. But here comes another surprise, for Wright sees 'forgiveness of sins' as yet another way of saying 'return from exile' (p 268), making the link with Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:24-26, 33; Isaiah 40:1f and other passages. Thus forgiveness is not merely a private religious experience, but how to become a member of the people God will vindicate when he acts – as he is doing climactically in Jesus. In this context Wright discusses the sermon on the mount and the Lord's prayer as how Israel is to live and to pray in the days of God's action (pp 287-294).

If the stories invite response, they also tell of judgement and vindication (ch. 8). Wright reads the Gospel passages warning of judgement as universally relating to the present crisis of Jesus' ministry (shades of C. H. Dodd's realized eschatology), and not as concerning the 'end of time'. Jesus frequently warns of judgement on 'this generation' and Wright's survey of the passages (pp 329-336) is as clear as it is persuasive that this theme is central to Jesus' stories, and that before the key passage in Mark 13 and parallels is considered.

When Wright comes to Mark 13 (pp 339-367) he discusses the passage clearly and well; this is the strongest argument I have seen for viewing the whole section as relating *only* to the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. In particular, to my mind Wright is completely persuasive in his reading of the use of Daniel 7:13 in Mark 13:24-31 as being about the *vindication* of the 'son of man', rather than picturing the 'son of man' floating to earth on a cloud in a 'second coming'. His logic here is cogent: Daniel 7:13 speaks of the 'son of man' going *to* God on a cloud to be vindicated, rather than coming to earth, and this (as he shows from contemporary Jewish readings of Daniel) is how Daniel 7 was understood at the time. The implication of this reading appears to be that the vindication of the son of man is the fall of Jerusalem: this, in Wright's view, is what shows Jesus to have been a true prophet and that the return from exile has truly taken place.

Symbol and controversy follow (ch. 9) and here Wright argues that Jesus attacked the key symbols of second-temple Judaism, not least the temple itself, as being redundant in the light of his arrival and mission. *Inter alia* Wright provides a fine summary of varying scholarly views on Jesus' relationship with the Judaism(s) of his day (pp 371-383). The heart of Jesus' attack was on the four central symbols of Judaism: the sabbath, the food laws, the nation, and the land, focused in the temple. Jesus, as Wright shows, was not anti-law, but regarded parts of the torah as now past their sell-by date in the light of his coming. Specifically, the food laws and the sabbath, which testified to the separation of Jew and Gentile, were now to be discarded, for the return from exile which Jesus was accomplishing would be a time of blessing for Gentiles in which they would come into the true people of God.

Likewise, Jesus' demonstration in the temple, which has properly come centre stage in recent discussion of Jesus,<sup>14</sup> is seen (rightly, in my view) as warning of the destruction of the temple by Rome as God's judgement for Israel's failure to obey God's call to respond to him (summary: p 417). To attack the sellers and money-changers was implicitly to attack the system which relied on the availability of pure animals for sacrifice and special coinage for the temple tax – that is, it was to announce that the system was to be done away with as redundant.<sup>15</sup> It was this attack, which implied that Israel's God was no longer working as he had been assumed to do, which led to the charge that Jesus was a false prophet.

Wright then turns to the classic world view questions: who are we? where are we? what's wrong? what's the solution? and, what time is it? (ch. 10) Israel's answers to those questions should be: we are the people of God whom God is bringing out of exile; but we are presently still experiencing exile in our own land; an enemy, the satan,<sup>16</sup> has taken us captive and seduced our nation into missing its vocation to be the light of the world; this will be solved by God becoming truly king of Israel, and therefore king of the world, in and through the ministry of Jesus; this is

14 e.g. E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, SCM, London 1984, ch. 1.

15 This inclines me to think that the tearing of the temple curtain (Mark 15:38 and parallels) should be seen not as the opening of the way into the Holy of Holies, but rather as representing God abandoning the

temple and showing that he was not present (cf. Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, Geoffrey Chapman, London 1994, vol. 2, pp 1098-1118).

16 Wright avoids being more specific than this, reflecting (he says) the biblical ambiguity about how personal this enemy is (*JVG*, p 451 with n 33).

happening now, but has a further dimension yet to be seen (thus reflecting the 'now and not yet' tension in early Christian eschatology).

In my judgement it is in part III that the most stimulating and exciting material comes. For here Wright argues (ch. 11) that Jesus saw himself as Israel's Messiah, and offers a picture of the Messiah as a representative figure who sums up the nation in himself, as the king had done in OT times (pp 481-486). Wright presents several lines of argument for this reading of Jesus' mindset, identifying as messianic the 'triumphal entry', the temple demonstration, the whole sequence of controversies in Mark 11-12, the references to 'son of man' in Mark 13, and events during the trial, particularly Jesus' answer to the high priest (Mark 14:62). He then tracks back earlier in Jesus' ministry and finds a similar understanding in the key encounter at Caesarea Philippi (Mark 8:27ff) and other incidents, including the baptism of Jesus, concluding that Jesus saw himself as Messiah from the earliest days of his public ministry – a conclusion that is as well-argued as it is out of tune with much contemporary scholarship.

This leads to the question why Jesus was crucified (ch. 12), and Wright asks the question from three angles. First, what was the charge which led the Romans to assent to Jesus' crucifixion? Pontius Pilate found himself painted into a corner by the Jewish leaders' claims that Jesus was an insurrectionist combined with their charge that if he allowed such a person to go free he was not loyal to Caesar.

Second, what was the Jewish charge against Jesus? Here, Wright argues that Jesus was condemned as claiming Messiahship, a royal title (hence the *titulus* on the cross, 'the king of the Jews', widely accepted as historical), as a false prophet who was leading the people astray – the latter being a capital crime (Deut. 18:20), and because of his temple demonstration, which implied that Israel's God was to abandon the temple. This comes to a head in Jesus' answer to Caiaphas (Mark 14:62), in which Jesus blasphemously places himself alongside the God of Israel.

Third, did Jesus intend to die in this way? Wright here puts together a strong and persuasive argument that the last supper's central meaning is that Jesus saw himself as the one through whom God was acting to bring about the return from exile, and that this event and other sayings point towards Jesus seeing the return as requiring his death. Along the way he throws light on numerous passages, not least (to this reviewer) Matthew 23:37-39/Luke 13:34f, the saying about Jesus wishing to take Jerusalem's children under his wings, as a mother hen does. Wright suggests that the picture is of a farmyard fire, where the mother gathers the chicks under her wings: she may be scorched to death, but the chicks will survive the fire (pp 570f). There follows a careful discussion of how Jesus would have seen his death as fulfilling OT Scripture, particularly Daniel, Ezekiel, Zechariah and Isaiah 40-55, concluding that Jesus saw his messianic task as fighting and winning the battle against Israel's enemies – but paradoxically fighting by surrender, rather than by using the enemy's own weapons and methods.

The book concludes (ch. 13) with what Wright says is substantially a new proposal for understanding the whole framework of the ministry and mindset of Jesus, the idea that Israel's God was returning to Zion after his long absence during the exilic period which the nation had been experiencing. After a valuable survey

of the Jewish evidence for this neglected idea (pp 615-624), Wright goes on to argue that there was an expectation that when God acted in this way, 'the agent through whom he acted would be vindicated, exalted, and honoured in a quite unprecedented manner' (p 624).

Central to Wright's argument here is his reading of the parable(s) of the talents/pounds (Matt. 25:14-30; Luke 19:11-27). He focuses on the Lukan version in his discussion (pp 632-639) and argues that (as normally in Jewish stories) the king figure in the parable is not Jesus going away and returning, but God himself. Thus the parable is to be read in the context of the present journey to Jerusalem, and the 'ideal reader' of the parable is located not at the beginning of the story (waiting for the master to go away and later return), but near to the end (the master is already absent, but shortly to return and bring judgement). A cogent point in the midst of this argument is that the other early Christian authors do not suggest that there will be condemnation of some within the church at the 'second coming' – a very prominent feature of the parable on the usual reading. I find myself attracted to this reading, although Luke's editorial comment that Jesus told the parable 'because he was near Jerusalem, and because they supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately' (Luke 19:11) appears to suggest that Jesus' parable relates in some way to the *timing* of the kingdom's appearance, whereas Wright proposes that the parable relates to the *nature* of the kingdom itself as consisting in judgement of Israel (rather than reaffirming Jewish superiority over the nations).

Finally, Jesus' view of his relationship with Israel's God is considered, and Wright here finds the seeds of the fuller early Christian view of Jesus as the second person of the Trinity, while being careful to deny that Jesus walked around knowing himself to be God incarnate. This is a difficult issue, for if (as Christians believe) Jesus is God in the flesh, what did his inner self-consciousness look like? For sure we are in an area where certainty is impossible, but in what sense was Jesus conscious of his sonship (a reality which Wright affirms)? This is an area which Wright leaves open – presumably because it is outside the province of the historian – but one which readers will look for further guidance on.

## Issues

I have summarised the book at such length because I regard it as highly important. This is the first major study of the historical Jesus I have encountered which takes the Gospels with such seriousness, for Wright avoids 'explaining away' as inauthentic actions or sayings that do not fit his schema and works hard at fitting all of the data we have in. To find an evangelical scholar doing such cutting edge work is tremendously encouraging, for so often evangelical scholarship is simply reactive rather than creative. Let me summarize what I see as some of the strengths of Wright's project and some questions which arise.

## Strengths

Wright takes history seriously, against some recent work on the Gospels (including some work by Evangelicals), which focus on the narrative structures of the stories in order to avoid asking historical questions. Historical scepticism has effectively won the day in the growth of many recent approaches to narrative in the Bible,

focusing only on the way the stories are told, the responses of different kinds of readers and so forth. But the Gospel stories make historical claims and Christian scholarship cannot avoid these claims: otherwise we might as well be reading *Winnie the Pooh* or a detective novel. To see Wright asking the questions and coming to such positive answers is heartening. Particularly, I am delighted to see Wright's readiness to see Jesus as the creative mind behind early Christianity, rather than positing many (usually unknown) creative minds, as scholarship is accustomed to doing.

Second, the wide sweep of the project is breathtaking. Wright's ability to see the big picture as well as to deal with the detail means that this is a book to which I – and my students – will return again and again. There are many discussions of particular passages which are provocative and well-argued. But, more than that, the overall portrait of Jesus appears credible within the first-century Jewish setting, by contrast with so many portraits which fall under Cadbury's axe, for they simply reflect the image of the scholar back from the bottom of the well.

Third, Wright's ability to summarize scholarly debates clearly, fairly and lucidly makes this a book which will be of enormous value to students, teachers and preachers. He has chosen his conversation partners in debate judiciously and responds well to some of the more (usually American) 'off the wall' pictures of Jesus which are around in popular discussion. During a sabbatical in the USA I was astonished at the piles of copies of books by Crossan, Mack and other Jesus Seminar members, to say nothing of Spong, in the bookshops. To find Wright offering a scholarly, readable alternative is splendid.<sup>17</sup>

Fourth, Wright is persuasive in placing eschatology and Messiahship at the centre both of the Jewish world view and of Jesus' own mindset. He is helpful in his definitions of these slippery terms, and opens a number of doors by his approach. By doing this he makes Jesus both more and less accessible, for he shows how great the distance is between Jesus' mindset and our (post-) modern world views while giving us a clear enough picture of the first-century Jewish context to see the original image.

## Questions

Among a vast array of questions which could be raised, I select five. Each is seeking to push Wright's view further than its present presentation.

First, is it likely that the evangelists, writing up the Gospels at least some time after the events, did not read the events in the light of subsequent Christian faith? Wright's position again and again depends on arguing that a particular saying or action of Jesus fits only into Israel/Palestine of the early first century AD, and that that action or saying would not fit so appropriately in the time of earliest Christianity. But would Luke, a Gentile, have reproduced stories which he was manifestly culturally out of touch with unless they continued to have relevance and resonance for the early Christian communities? In particular, is it not likely

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<sup>17</sup> He has also provided a popular reading of Jesus in Tom Wright, *The Original Jesus*, Lion, Oxford 1996.

that the early Christians, who expected the cosmic renewal which we call the 'second coming', did not see resonances between Jesus' predictions of the fall of Jerusalem and their expectation of the renewal of heaven and earth? Further, Eddie Adams has recently argued that the idea of cosmic conflagration is present in Graeco-Roman thinking and would mean that passages such as Mark 13 would be *heard* by Graeco-Roman readers (who formed the majority of the churches within fifty years) as being about the end of the cosmos, whatever their Jewish origins.<sup>18</sup> Does not that make it likely that Mark 13 and parallels should be read at (at least) two levels: an historical reading of Jesus' own teaching (which Wright does), and a 'theological' reading concerning the evangelists' own expectation, formed in the light of the resurrection of Jesus? Perhaps we need to wait for Wright's promised volume on the Gospels for the answers to these questions.

Second, Wright appears to suggest that the vindication of Jesus as 'son of man' was the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, for that event showed that he was right about God's rejection of the city and its temple. This raises two issues. First, it is not to the fall of Jerusalem, but to the resurrection of Jesus, that the early Christians appeal when they argue that Jesus is Messiah (e.g. Acts 2:29-36; Rom. 1:1-4). The fall of Jerusalem hardly features in the rest of the NT. Why, if it is so important to the mindset of Jesus and as providing the key piece of evidence of his vindication? Second, is it not likely that the early Christians would have seen the yet-to-happen event of cosmic renewal as the ultimate vindication of Jesus, when they would 'see him as he is' (1 John 3:2)? These two factors mean that I am not yet persuaded that the vindication of Jesus was solely and fully seen in the fall of Jerusalem.

Third, as Wright acknowledges, Jesus would have come to nothing if he had simply been another in a long line of failed Messiahs. The resurrection is central to the claims which Jesus made about his own role. He has written briefly elsewhere on this topic,<sup>19</sup> and we are promised a further volume from him on the resurrection of Jesus, but it is frustrating to find the book ending without the crucial piece of the jigsaw being in place. What does Wright think he can say as an historian about the resurrection of Jesus?

Fourth, when does Wright think that the Gospels were written? This is not simply an 'academic' question, but has implications for how those books are to be read. Were at least some of them written up in the light of the fall of Jerusalem in AD70 as is often suggested, or is Wright arguing that the form of the stories as we have them implies that the authors did not know that Jerusalem was going to fall to the Romans? This question has long been debated in relation to Luke 21 (and Wright declares his support for C. H. Dodd's view that this chapter reflects OT language about earlier falls of the city, and therefore does not require a post-70 date), but what about its implications wider in the Gospels?

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18 Edward Adams, 'Historical Crisis and Cosmic Crisis in Mark 13 and Lucan's *Civil War*', *Tyndale Bulletin* 48 (1997), pp 329-344.

19 e.g. Marcus J. Borg & N. T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions*, HarperSanFrancisco, New York 1998, ch. 7.

Fifth, how did the early Christians come to believe in the 'second coming' of Jesus? Wright has been unjustly attacked for ditching this idea, although he re-models it substantially from the popular Christian idea of Jesus floating to earth out of the sky.<sup>20</sup> He argues that many (all?) of the Gospel passages which are usually taken to refer to the end of the space-time universe, including the personal return of Jesus to earth, are actually about God's return to Zion in and through his agent Jesus. He also suggests that it is unlikely that Jesus would present the idea of the 'second coming' to disciples who were already struggling to grasp his mission and who operated with a world view which had no expectation of cosmic conflagration. How, then, did the belief in the renewal of creation, which is linked by Paul (1 Cor. 15; 1 Thess. 4–5) to the appearance of Jesus on earth, come to be held by the earliest Christians? Wright, a little coyly, says that Luke presents this belief as stemming from the word of the angels at the departure of Jesus (Acts 1:11).<sup>21</sup> Does he think that Jesus himself ever spoke of it to his disciples, before or after his resurrection? If so (or if not), how did the early Christians come to regard the belief in cosmic renewal and regeneration as so central (e.g. 1 Thess. 1:9f, which summarises the initial evangelistic message of Paul's missionary team in Thessalonica)?

## Conclusion

This book sets an agenda for much ongoing work, not least by Wright himself, as well as providing a tremendous resource for students, teachers and preachers. Long though it is, it more than repays the effort of reading through it. We are indebted to the author for his work, and the questions above should be seen as appreciation of his fine study. Whether his view will carry the day has yet to be seen; that it cannot be ignored is sufficient tribute to the quality and clarity of the portrait Wright has painted.

**Steve Walton** is Lecturer in Greek and New Testament Studies at London Bible College.

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20 See the helpful discussions in Borg & Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus*, ch. 14 and N. T. Wright, *New Heavens, New Earth: The Biblical Picture of Christian Hope*, Grove Biblical Series 11, Grove Books, Cambridge 1999.

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21 *JVG*, p 635; Borg & Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus*, p 276 n 13.