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Review of *Jesus and the Victory of God*
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Wright, N. T. *Jesus and the Victory of God*. Vol. Second. 1st North American ed. Christian Origins and the Question of God. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992.

Author Information¹

N. T. Wright has written over thirty books, including *Simply Christian*, *The Original Jesus: The Life and Vision of a Revolutionary*, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, *The Challenge of Jesus* and *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions*. The present work under review is widely regarded as one of the most significant contributions to contemporary New Testament studies.

Formerly bishop of Durham in England, Wright is research professor of New Testament and early Christianity at the University of St Andrews in Scotland. He was formerly canon theologian of Westminster Abbey and dean of Lichfield Cathedral. He also taught New Testament studies for twenty years at Cambridge, McGill and Oxford Universities. He has been a visiting professor at Harvard Divinity School, Hebrew University in Jerusalem, Gregorian University in Rome and many other institutions around the world.

In addition to his many books, Wright reaches a broad audience through his frequent media appearances. A sought-after commentator, Wright writes frequently for newspapers in England, including the *Times*, the *Independent* and the *Guardian*. He has been interviewed numerous times by radio and television broadcasters on both sides of the Atlantic, including ABC, NBC, CNN, PBS and NPR.

Thesis/Purpose

Jesus and the Victory of God is the second volume in a multi-volume series entitled *Christian Origins and the Question of God*. The book is essentially an argument for what Wright terms the Third Quest in the field of historical Jesus studies. The book centers on answering three questions of a series of six questions around the person and work of Jesus Christ. The questions dealt with extensively in this volume are 1) How does Jesus fit into Judaism?, 2) What were Jesus aims?, 3) And why did Jesus die? The other questions to be explored in future volumes of the series are 4) How and why did the early church begin? and 5) Why are the Gospels what they are? On page 117, Wright suggests a sixth question, “How does the Jesus we discover by doing history relate to the contemporary church and world?” In many ways, the answers to the sixth question are implicitly present throughout this book.

The book is divided into four parts. Part One, which is entitled “Introduction,” is made up of four chapters that acclimate the reader to the current state of research in the quest for the

¹ Taken and modified from “N.T. Wright - Author Bio,” n.d., n.p. [cited 27 January 2015]. Online: https://www.ivpress.com/cgi-ivpress/author.pl/author_id=1069.

historical Jesus. It also serves to point the reader in the direction that Wright will take them in this book as he argues for the Third Quest. In Part Two, entitled “Profile of a Prophet,” Wright explores the relationship of Jesus to Judaism particularly in regard to his ministry as a prophet. In Part Three, entitled “The Aims and Beliefs of Jesus,” Wright develops the purpose behind Jesus’ ministry particularly in light of his role as the Messiah. It is also in this part of the book that we find Wright’s explanation for the crucifixion of Jesus. In Part Four, the briefest section of the book, Wright concludes with a chapter on the results of his study with a particular interest in how his readers should relate to the Jesus portrayed in his book.

Summarizing a book of this magnitude in matter of few paragraphs is impossible task. N.T. Wright is a both prolific and verbose writer. Thus, the summary that follows will attempt to hit some of the high points of the book that might be of most interest to future readers of the work.

Summary

In Part One, Wright deftly summarizes the multiple Quest for the historical Jesus. Covering a broad range of writers, Wright respectfully yet carefully engages the work of scholars like Burton Mack, John Dominic Crossan, and Marcus Borg (among many others). Crossan receives the greatest amount of attention in this section before Wright turns to his discussion of the Third Quest on page 83. While Wright acknowledges the scholarship of the former quests, he believes (for multiple reasons) that their work was misguided. In turn, Wright believes that the Third Quest has significant advantages over all of the former quests. They are as follows (89):

- 1) First, it takes the total Jewish background extremely seriously.
- 2) Second, it’s practitioners have no united theological or political agenda, unlike the quite monochrome New Quest and its fairly monochrome renewal; the diverse backgrounds of the scholars involved serve to provide checks and balances, so that one scholar’s reading of a particular passage in Josephus is balanced by another’s, and a measure of critical realism is both possible and increasingly actual.
- 3) Third, there is increasingly been a sense of homing in on the key questions which have to be asked if we are to make progress.

In the next section following these stated advantages, Wright frames the discussion with the questions that will direct the rest of the book (See Thesis/Purpose for questions). After making a case for the Third Quest as a “basic starting point of the book,” (123) Wright concludes the first part of his book with a proposed methodology (131-133) that will place Jesus within Judaism and evaluate his worldview and mindset (141-142) in order to provide answers to the questions posed above.

Parts Two and Three represent Wright’s answers to the key questions of Jesus’ relationship to Judaism, his beliefs and aims, and the reason why he died. In Part Two, attention is given to investigating Jesus’ words and actions as an “oracular and leadership prophet” within the context of first-century Judaism (168). These aspects of Jesus’ ministry are evaluated in light of the method proposed that the end of Part One. Wright covers topics ranging from Jesus’ use of parables, the call to repentance and faith, warnings and judgments, the practices of the “New

Covenant” community like the Lord’s Supper and mutual forgiveness, and the key symbols of the kingdom like a redefined family and torah, and a rebuilt temple. Wright concludes Part Two with a discussion of what he believe is the real battle facing the people of God. For Wright, it is not Rome that is the real enemy, but “the satan” (451).

In Part Three, Wright tackles the issues of Jesus’ aims and beliefs. He begins the discussion by considering the meaning of “Messiahship” in first century Judaism and early Christianity. From here he explores the different actions and sayings that reflect Jesus’ messianic function throughout his ministry. As the Messiah, Wright states, “Jesus believed himself to be the focal point of the people of YHWH, the returned-from-exile people, the people of the renewed covenant, the people who sends were now to be forgiven. He embodied what he had announced. He was the true interpreter of Torah; the true builder of the Temple; and the true spokesperson for Wisdom” (538). After addressing the matter of Jesus’ Messiahship, Wright turns his attention to the crucifixion. Chapter 12 explores the different charges that Jesus faced that led to his death. Yet, on page 611, Wright summarizes Jesus understanding of his own death as being “the means, in his life and particularly his death, of the radical defeat of evil.” A chapter then follows chapter 12 and presents a case for Jesus’ understanding of his return before a summarizing chapter in Part Four is given to conclude the book with Wright’s results.

Critique

There's so much to commend about this book it's hard to even know where to begin. For starters, Wright is an incredibly skilled writer. As D.A. Carson once quipped in a lecture on the New Perspective on Paul, “Wright couldn’t be boring if he tried.” The structure with which he writes makes the content incredibly easy to follow. One feature in particular that makes an academic book like this accessible to the novice is Wright’s use of list. They are enumerated well and change very little. Examples of such lists can be found all throughout the book, but they are particularly helpful in Part One where Wright includes a treasure trove of information on historical Jesus studies. He is a wonderful model of fair-minded engagement with positions and people with whom he disagrees, so long as those people are not conservative evangelicals.

Another feature that makes this book an invaluable resource is his engagement of the historical questions that often times frustrate Bible students. On page 122, Wright writes, “We must take the historical questions and challenges on board; we cannot retreat into a private world of ‘faith’ which history cannot touch (what sort of god would we be believing in if we did?).” For too long, evangelical Christians have retreated into anti-intellectual fundamentalism and lost academic credibility and thus less influence within the world. If all truth is God's truth, then historical investigation must not scare the Christian. While Wright might overstate at points the importance of historical study, he does all Christians everywhere a great service in facing the questions head on with respect and scholarship.

While this review intends to allow other scholars of a higher caliber to critique the work in this book in the synopsis of reviews, this reviewer desires to register at least one point of concern that may prove to be pervasive throughout the entirety of the book. At the bottom of page 200, Wright states, “It is important to stress that the story as Jesus retold it, with its reworked praxis, symbols and answers-to-questions, fit exactly into the overall grid of second-

Temple retellings of Israel's controlling narrative.” This statement seems to assume a great deal of uniformity within second-Temple Judaism. Recent works by scholars like D.A. Carson and others have demonstrated that more variation existed within second-temple Judaism than previously espoused by scholars like E.P. Sanders. The point of raising this issue is rooted in the reviewer’s concern that Wright’s overall presentation of his argument is a little too clean for comfort. His argument seems too neat, and while he does fairly engage the work of other scholars with in the historical Jesus movement, there appears to be a lack of engagement (and even dismissal at times) of those scholars from a pre-critical era (or position) of study. It seems that in attempting to build a strong case, he has attempted to do too much, and as one other reviewer has stated, “He weakens his case.”

Synopsis of Reviews

In Robert Stein’s review of *Jesus and the Victory of God*, which can be found in the Journal of Evangelical Society (June 2001, 207-18), he begins with a brief summary of the book noting in particular the “succinct and extremely useful survey of research into the life of Jesus.” Stein admits, “a simplistic overview cannot do justice to the work.” In the second portion of his review, entitled “A Word of Appreciation for Wright's *Jesus and the Victory of God*), Stein acknowledges Wright as “truly a giant among giants.” For Stein, there is much to be admired in this book. However, this is not to suggest that Stein does not have some criticism. The rest of the review explores seven criticisms ranging from Wright’s misuse of certain biblical text in order to fit them into his system, his tendency to over-emphasize corporate elements to the neglect of individual ones, his “normative” view of first century Judaism, his overuse of the expression “return from exile,” and the importance he places upon Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and subsequent cleansing of the temple. Stein concludes with the two questions that he believes Wright has failed to adequately answer. They are as follows: First, “how does the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 vindicate Jesus?” and “In light of Wright’s own definition of first century Jewish thinking about the ‘returned from exile,’ would this alleged interpretation of Jesus’ teaching make any sense at all to his contemporaries?” Stein commends the book, but not without some substantial disagreements.

In James D.G. Dunn’s review of *Jesus and the Victory of God*, which can be found in the Journal of Theological Studies (NS 49, NO 2, O 1998, 727-34), he, like Stein, begins with high praise for Wright’s book. Dunn takes more space to summarize the book before proposing four matters with which he takes issue. The first issue relates to the controlling nature that Wright gives to the exile language. Dunn writes, “I remain unconvinced that the thought of Israel as still in exile formed the principal metanarrative governing either the thought of the time or Jesus’ understanding of his own ministry.” Dunn’s second issue questions whether or not Wright has overstated his case regarding the apocalyptic. Dunn asks, “Has he collapsed apocalyptic too much into human political and social action?” Dunn’s third concern relates to “Wright’s use of the Jesus tradition.” Dunn insists that his use of the tradition is “too cavalier” and takes “too little account of question of redaction between versions.” Fourth and finally, Dunn states, “The issue of Jesus’ Messiahship needs a rather more careful treatment than Wright provides.” All in all, though, Dunn appreciates the book and is thankful for how it is “renewing the discussion of the character of Jesus’ ministry.”

In Paul J. Achtemeier's review of *Jesus and the Victory of God*, which can be found in the journal entitled *Interpretation* (52 no 3 J1 1998, p 299-301), he briefly summarizes some of the key points of Wright's book. In particular, he focuses a bit on Wright's method of "double dissimilarity" and "double similarity," which he uses to identify information in the gospel accounts related/accredited to Jesus. Achtemeier notes, "Along the way of discovery of such a Jesus, Wright makes a number of assumptions about some much-discussed issues." As with other reviewer, Wright's sweeping assumption do not escape Achtemeier's discernment, but this does not lead him to "wright" off the work found in *Jesus and the Victory of God*. In fact, Achtemeier concludes his review by stating, "This is a book of major, even revolutionary, significance for serious scholarly inquiry into the life of the historical Jesus, and it represents a most careful and persuasive portrait of that enigmatic figure."