

Notes on N.T. Wright's understanding of Jesus

Malcolm Ross

23rd June, 2010

1 Introduction

N.T. Wright is both an Anglican bishop and an academic historian, and believes that faith and history need each other. His commitment is to bring both into a united vision, and he believes that they result in a coherent picture (Wright 2000). He insists that Jesus must initially be understood in first-century Jewish terms, i.e. as his contemporaries understood him and as he understood himself.

2 Jesus' mission and message in the context of first-century Judaism

If there is one god, and you are his one people, but you are currently suffering oppression, you must believe that the current state of affairs is temporary. Monotheism and election thus give birth to (what I call) eschatology: the belief that history is going somewhere, that something will happen through which everything will be put right. First-century Jewish eschatology characteristically claimed that the one god would soon act within history to vindicate his people and to establish justice and peace once and for all. Jesus shared this belief. (Wright 2000: 32)

This formed the framework for Jewish beliefs about Jesus during his lifetime and for his belief about himself. It echoed the Exodus narrative and the return from the Babylonian exile, but there was a sense that somehow the exile wasn't yet over. Israel's sin was still being punished because they were still under foreign overlords and the great promises of forgiveness articulated by the prophets of the exile, Isaiah (e.g. 52:7–12), Jeremiah and Ezekiel, hadn't yet been fulfilled.

Within this context Jesus announced that $\Upsilon\text{H}\omega\text{H}$, Israel's God, was at last becoming king. But a common understanding of the kingdom of God was a political and revolutionary one, of an earthly kingdom in which the foreigners would be put to flight, as illustrated in the rebellion of Simeon ben-Kosiba ('Bar-Kochba', 'son of the star') in 132 A.D., the last messianic revolt, after which the rabbis turned away from political rebellion (Wright 2000: 32–34). Thus

Jesus' announcement of the Kingdom looked different from what was expected. He warned Israel that its ways of advancing the kingdom were counterproductive and would result in national disaster and challenged them to follow *him* in advancing the kingdom. Thus he not only challenged the power of Herod, Caiaphas and Rome. He challenged the structure of Jewish society that maintained its own purity towards outsiders, following the Torah, and perpetuated social distinctions that enshrined injustices, and he also challenged the militant aspirations of the messianic revolutionaries (Wright 2000: 36). We tend to interpret "Repent and believe the gospel" as only personal, but within first-century Judaism it transcended this to also mean "Give up your agendas and believe in mine." It meant giving up dreams of xenophobic nationalist revolution, loving one's neighbours, turning the other cheek and going the second mile, losing your life in order to gain it. Jesus welcomed sinners into his kingdom. It was not the fact that he associated with the wrong sort of people that angered the Pharisees. It was that by welcoming them into the kingdom he was announcing the forgiveness of their sins, and in Judaism repentance and forgiveness were focussed on the temple and the sacrificial system. He offended against the central tenet of the establishment, the more so as the temple was also the centre of political power (Wright 2000: 38–39, 44). When Jesus cast out the traders, he effected a symbolic break with the sacrificial system that formed the temple's *raison d'être*. The temple was the central symbol of a Judaism that had gone horribly wrong, and Josephus also realised that God would execute judgment on it through the Romans. Jesus did not believe that God would take up residence in the temple when his kingdom was established (Wright 2000: 45). Instead he would take up residence in the renewed heart, which, receiving God's forgiveness, would love God and neighbour as stated in the Shema, the daily Jewish prayer. This would replace the sacrificial system (Wright 2000: 46–47).

"Well said, teacher," the man replied. "You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices."

When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." (Mark 12:32–34)

Jesus' contemporaries expected judgment to fall on other nations, providing their vindication, but he warned that judgment would fall on Israel itself because it had failed to respond to God's summons to be an example to the world. Jesus' warnings have traditionally been interpreted as being about the postmortem condemnation of unbelievers and the destruction of the world, but Wright argues that Mark 13 and similar passages are not a prediction of the end of the world but of the fall of Jerusalem. The language of Mark 13:24–27 is drawn from Isaiah 13, Daniel 7 and elsewhere (Wright 1992a: 291–297, Wright 1996: 360–365, 510–519), passages that refer to the collapse of pagan empires and the vindication of God's people (Wright 2000: 40–42).

Jesus believed himself to be the messiah, the bringer of the kingdom. He believed that he was called to take on the real enemy, of which Rome was merely the pawn and the symbol. He believed he was to build the true temple. He believed he had to lead the way in losing your life in order to gain it (Wright 2000: 48–50).

3 The meaning of the cross in the first-century context

Events are readily reconstituted in the oral histories of pre-modern urban societies, and once a piece of oral history is established, it is accurately preserved, so there is good reason to believe that the core story of Jesus' life in the Gospels is correct (Wright 2000: 94–95).

Loving one's neighbours, turning the other cheek and going the second mile, losing your life in order to gain it, these things weren't simply an 'ethic': they represented Jesus' own agenda and vocation—he was called to go ahead of the people and face the enemy on their behalf. In the process he would replace the temple. He believed that this task would be accomplished through his own suffering and death. He applied to himself the visions of Zechariah, Daniel's vision of 'one like a son of man', the symbolic representative of Israel, and the poems about the 'servant' of Isaiah 40–55. Others had applied them in this kind of way during the second-temple period (Wright 2000: 96–97). Above all he believed that he would go ahead of the nation to take upon himself the wrath of Rome and the judgment of God of which he had warned (Wright 2000: 98). This was a fresh construal of the thought-world of second-temple Judaism, but it fits right into it (Wright 2000: 99). There is no need to assume that any of these ideas are a retrojection of later Christian thought.

The only reason Pilate wanted to free Jesus was to snub the chief priests, but his arm was twisted because he couldn't afford Rome to hear that he had released a 'king of the Jews', and they wanted him out of the way because he challenged the temple (Wright 2000: 101).

Other messiahs and rebels were executed by the Romans, and were soon forgotten. Something different happened after Jesus' death: his followers believed that his death had been validated through his resurrection, and it was the hinge on which the door of God's new world had swung open (Wright 2000: 102–103).

To say that the messiah had died for sins in fulfillment of the scriptures was to make a claim, not so much about an abstract atonement theology into which individuals could tap to salve their guilty consciences, as about *where Israel and the world now were within God's eschatological timetable*. The sins that had caused Israel's exile had now been dealt with, and the time of forgiveness had arrived. (Wright 2000: 103)

Peter's exhortation, 'Save yourselves from this corrupt generation' (Acts 2:40) is to be understood in this context. The messiah had broken through the barrier of sin that had kept Israel in exile, and there was no need any longer for anyone to remain bound within the old agendas. Wright thinks that Paul's assertion that 'the Messiah loved me and gave himself for me' can be understood in this context, too, as Paul had been following the Jewish revolutionary agenda which would otherwise have led to disaster for him (Wright 2000: 103–104).

This understanding of what Jesus had done was rapidly extended from Israel to the whole world by early Christians, as Israel's God was the God of the whole world. What Jesus had done for Israel, he had done for the world. If he had overcome Israel's enslavement to evil, he had overcome the enslavement of the world to the principalities and powers (see e.g. Galatians 4:1–11). (Wright 2000: 104).

The relatively modern emphasis that the sin of individual sinners has been dealt with on the cross is 'perfectly true and valid', but it is part of the larger story of victory over evil as a whole on the cross (Wright 2000: 105). The problem with this latter assertion, and the reason it gets screened out, is that it is at odds with the realities of the world, so the victory is projected inward into the heart and conscience of the believer alone and forward to death or to

the end of the world. Both Paul and Revelation point to this larger victory that is being worked out in the world. Wright believes that the lives of individual Christians corporately through suffering, prayer, martyrdom, church unity and the eucharist make Christ's death effective in the world in ways that are beyond the lives of individual Christians. (Wright 2000: 105-106).

4 The resurrection

The meaning of resurrection in first-century Judaism was not a vague life after death but a physical resurrection, the undoing of death and burial (Wright 2000: 111-115).¹ For the earliest Christians, there is no doubt that this was what it meant. They were asserting that the great hope of Israel had been realised, but in a way that no one had anticipated (Wright 2000: 115-119). The earliest text to describe what happened is 1 Corinthians 15:42–44.² For Paul, resurrection entails a transformed physicality. He refers to *σῶμα πνευματικόν* (*sōma pneumatikon*) a 'spiritual body', but 'spiritual' does not mean 'non-physical': it contrasts with *σῶμα ψυχικόν* (*sōma psychikon*) 'soulish body', i.e. a body animated by the spirit rather than a body (like the present one) animated by the soul (Wright 2000: 120).

Wright argues that the Easter morning stories are impossible to harmonise precisely because they look like a variety of independent eye-witness reports in a court of law (Wright 2000: 121–122). The simplest explanation of the resurrection stories is in fact that it happened. The problem is that no historian can interpret his sources other than in the framework of his worldview. If your Enlightenment worldview insists that the resurrection cannot have happened, then you will have to explain these stories in other, more complicated ways. It is no use saying that resurrection is not scientifically supported. Science deals with what usually happens. The claim here is that something unusual happened (Wright 2000: 124-125).

Wright considers some modern explanations of what the resurrection 'means' to be inadequate, e.g. it proves there is life after death, it proves Jesus is alive and we can have relationship with him. But the first Christians already believed in life after death: for them the resurrection meant that the story of God, Israel and the world had entered a new phase—it was eschatological. And the idea that we can have relationship with a disembodied Jesus was not the central meaning of his bodily resurrection, but rather the consequence of Pentecost as John perceived it. The resurrection is the validation of Jesus as messiah,³ a sign of victory (Colossians 2:14–15, 1 Corinthians 15:7), and the proclamation of a new world (Wright 2000: 125–127).

¹ The emphasis on the empty tomb is a modern one. For first-century Christians, resurrection presupposed an empty tomb (Wright 2000: 119).

² 'The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.' Also 2 Corinthians 5:1: 'Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands.' And Philippians 3:20–21: 'But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.'

³ ... the gospel [God] promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son, ... who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God, by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord. (Romans 1:1–4)

5 Jesus' divinity

The question 'Is Jesus God?' is tricky because many people who ask it aren't sure what they mean by 'God' or 'god' (Wright 2000: 157–158). First-century Jews were *creational and covenantal monotheists*. $\Upsilon\text{H}\omega\text{H}$ was the fully personal maker of all that exists who remained in close and dynamic relationship with his creation. He had called Israel to be his special people, and they were in the midst of a history in (often troubled) relationship with him (Wright 2000: 158–160).

Wright picks out five first-century ways in which Jews talked about their relationship with God, which enabled them to speak simultaneously about his 'sovereign supremacy and his intimate presence, his unapproachable holiness and his self-giving compassionate love' (Wright 2000: 160):

God's Spirit broods over the waters.

God's Word goes forth to produce new life.

God's Law guides his people.

God's Presence or **Glory** dwells with them in a fiery cloud in tabernacle and temple.

God's Wisdom is his handmaid in creation, the firstborn of his works, his chief of staff, his delight (Proverbs 1–8).

This is where the early Christians began, despite claims that thinking of Jesus in the same breath as the one God was paganisation (Wright 2000: 160). Early Christian theology developed the use of these terms in relation to Jesus and to the Spirit. Several of them are present in John 1:1–18. Here Jesus is the Word, and the whole passage depends on the Wisdom tradition, and we see the Glory.⁴ 'However much the spreading branches of Johannine theology might hang over the wall, offering fruit to the pagan world around, the roots of the tree are firmly embedded in Jewish soil' (Wright 2000: 161).

John is usually regarded as late. The earliest Christian writer was Paul., and the earliest parts of his letters are likely to reflect pre-Pauline Christian tradition. Three passages stand out.⁵ 1 Corinthians 8:6⁶ adapts the *Shema* itself, placing Jesus within it. In Philippians 2:5–11⁷ he draws on the fierce monotheism of Isaiah 50–55 to celebrate Christ's universal lordship: 'at the name of Jesus every knee should bow'. Isaiah has $\Upsilon\text{H}\omega\text{H}$ defeating pagan idols and being enthroned over them. Paul has Jesus enthroned in a position of equality with 'the Father' because he has done what in Jewish terms only God can do. Colossians 1:15–20⁸ 'is a Wisdom poem, exploring the classic Jewish theme that the world's creator is also its redeemer, and vice

⁴ More detailed analysis in Wright (1996: 413–416).

⁵ See Wright (1992b: Chs 6–6) and Wright (1997: Ch 4).

⁶ ... yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.

⁷ Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

⁸ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of

versa. But at every point of creation and redemption we discover, not Wisdom, but Jesus.’ (Wright 2000: 161)

In Galatians 4:1–11⁹ ‘Paul tells the story of the world as the story of God’s freeing slaves and his making them his children, his heirs. As in the Exodus, the true God reveals himself as who he is, putting the idols to shame. But the God who has now revealed himself in this way is the God who “sent the Son” and then “sends the Spirit of the Son.” In these passages we have, within thirty years of Jesus’ death, what would later be called a very high Christology. It is very early and very Jewish.’ (Wright 2000: 162)

Later theologians read Nicene Trinitarian theology back into Paul’s use of ‘Son of God’, but Paul’s usage is rooted in Jewish usage. ‘Son of God’ was sometimes used for angels, sometimes for the king. Early Christians used it to connote Jesus’ messiahship. But already by Paul’s day it also connoted ‘God present, personal, active, saving and rescuing, while still being able to speak of the one God sovereign, creating, sustaining, sending, remaining beyond.’ (Wright 2000: 162)

The resurrection did not ‘prove’ Jesus’ divinity: it pointed to messiahship. A central Jewish expectation, however, was that YHWH would return in person to Zion, his return after the exile having been delayed, and rescue his people. Jesus’ stories about a king or master who went away, leaving tasks for his servants to perform, relate to this overarching narrative. The church later forgot the Jewish roots and read the stories as if they were about Jesus himself and a ‘second coming’. But Jesus acted as if he thought the stories were coming true in what he was accomplishing, although this is cryptic and only emerges when one looks at the sum of what he said and did (Wright 2000: 163–165). The heart of Jesus’ vocation was that he ‘believed himself called to do and be, what in the scriptures, only Israel’s God did and was’ (Wright 2000: 166).

6 The virgin conception

The virgin conception is not a miracle in the sense of the other miracles in the Gospels, but rather an anomaly in the post-Enlightenment ‘closed continuum’ of cause and effect. This continuum in any case stands opposed to the Jewish view of a God who is present and active within the world.¹⁰ (Wright 2000: 171–173).

the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fulness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

⁹ What I am saying is that as long as the heir is a child, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate. He is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father. So also, when we were children, we were in slavery under the basic principles of the world. But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, “Abba, Father.” So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir. Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you.

¹⁰ It also stands opposed to the very concept of free will.

Matthew's and Luke's stories of the virgin conception are complex and controversial, as well as different from each other. Matthew's story, told from Joseph's point of view, is reminiscent of biblical birth stories like that of Samson, with the angel, the command against fear, the righteous obedient couple (Judges 13). Like Samson, Jesus has a dangerous public future, being born under King Herod's nose. As Immanuel he embodies God's presence with his people (Isaiah 7:14,¹¹ quoted in Matthew 1:23¹²). In the genealogy Jesus is the culmination of Israel's long covenant history (Wright 2000: 173).

If Matthew's genealogy finishes with Joseph, why does he go on and tell us that Joseph wasn't Jesus' father? This was obviously no problem for Matthew. The fact that Jesus was born into the Davidic family was enough, and its symbolic significance is what matters (Wright 2000: 174).

Luke tells the story from Mary's point of view, still with the theme that Israel's history is reaching its God-ordained climax, but emphasising the birth as a challenge to the pagan power of Rome.¹³ Luke makes a lot of the census. He knew that this was the time of the great revolt led by Judas the Galilean, and is implicitly aligning Jesus with the Jewish kingdom movements (and explicitly in the words of Gamaliel in Acts 5:37.¹⁴) (Wright 2000: 174–175).

Why do Matthew and Luke both emphasise the virgin conception in their very different stories? There is no pre-Christian Jewish tradition suggesting that the messiah would be born of a virgin. No one used Isaiah 7:14 in this way before Matthew. The only parallels are pagan, and nothing else in these stories is other than Jewish. One can only conclude that they believed the virgin conception to be a fact. The alternative idea that the virgin conception was initially a metaphor which was then reinterpreted as fact and then came to be incorporated into the Gospels is unduly complicated and asks us to believe in the birth of an idea with no parentage. If we accept that Jesus represents the fulfillment of God's covenant with Israel, then it is no more difficult to believe that God was active in his birth (Wright 2000: 176–178).

7 The future of Jesus

Since Wright believes that those sayings of Jesus that are conventionally taken to be about the second coming are about the fall of Jerusalem or about the vindication of God's people after their suffering, his friends ask him if he believes in the second coming. He says one can only answer this question in the light of one's belief about God's plan for creation as a whole (Wright 2000: 197).

The NT picture is one in which God will create a new heavens and a new earth, perhaps even in material continuity with the present creation (Revelation 21:1–5).¹⁵ Paul evidently

¹¹ Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.

¹² “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”—which means, “God with us.”

¹³ And by implication, to Satan (mdr).

¹⁴ “... Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered.”

¹⁵ Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God,

shared such a vision (Romans 8:19–23).¹⁶ This is not a vision of a disembodied spirit entering a timeless eternity. The New Testament envisages that God’s act of new creation will deal with the problems of the old: evil, corruption, death (Wright 2000: 197–198). God’s people will have what Wright calls ‘a new mode of physicality’ (see §??).

The ‘paradise’ that Jesus talks of on the cross was for the a temporary resting place before the glorious new world. The Wisdom of Solomon 3:1-8 (in the Apocrypha) speaks in these terms.¹⁷ (Wright 2000: 200). And so does Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:12–18, 22–26¹⁸ (mdr).

‘Language describing God’s future ... is a set of signposts pointing into a mist’. The first signpost is God’s promise to renew heaven and earth. This has already happened in the person of Jesus: he has united God and humanity and his resurrection body enjoys the new mode of physicality. The second signpost is that Jesus is the messiah, and that at his name every knee will bow, as he brings justice, peace, holiness and life to the world and judges injustice, oppression, wickedness and death itself. The third signpost is the Jewish expectation of the return of $\Upsilon\text{H}\text{W}\text{H}$ to Zion. The early Christians believed that he did this in Jesus, but as the first part of a two-stage process. They also believed Jesus would be present as the agent of God’s new creation (Wright 2000: 201). The New Testament often uses the word $\pi\alpha\rho\omicron\upsilon\sigma\iota\alpha$ (parousia), frequently translated ‘coming’, but it refers to Jesus’ *presence*, and was often used of the ‘royal presence’ of a ruler. Thus it refers to Jesus’ royal presence within God’s new creation (Wright 2000: 201–202).

Paul certainly believed in a future of this kind:

prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!”

¹⁶ The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

¹⁷ ‘But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and there shall no torment touch them. In the sight of the unwise they seemed to die: and their departure is taken for misery, And their going from us to be utter destruction: but they are in peace. For though they be punished in the sight of men, yet is their hope full of immortality. And having been a little chastised, they shall be greatly rewarded: for God proved them, and found them worthy for himself. As gold in the furnace hath he tried them, and received them as a burnt offering. And in the time of their visitation they shall shine, and run to and fro like sparks among the stubble. They shall judge the nations, and have dominion over the people, and their Lord shall reign for ever.’

¹⁸ ‘But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. ... For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.’

Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed— in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.” (1 Corinthians 15:51–54)

However, Paul had evidently believed in a single dawning of the kingdom, but events made him stretch it out so that Jesus’ resurrection became the promise of our resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:12–28). This second stage was announced to the disciples at the Ascension (Acts 1:10–11).¹⁹ (Wright 2000: 202).

1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 is the source of many ideas about the ‘second coming’:

Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord’s own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord for ever. Therefore encourage each other with these words.

Wright points to the parallel between this and 1 Corinthians 15, and suggests that the apocalyptic language of the Thessalonians passage is metaphorical in relation to the more literal account in 1 Corinthians. ‘Will come down from heaven’ is typical apocalyptic language for ‘will appear’. ‘We ... will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air’ matches ‘we will all be changed’ in 1 Corinthians 15:51, echoing Daniel’s vision (Daniel 7:13–14)²⁰ in which God’s people are vindicated.²¹ ‘Meet’ was presumably intended in the sense of citizens going out to meet royal dignitaries in order to escort them back into the city (Wright 2000: 203).

Tradition holds that the early Christians believed these things would happen within a generation, and Mark 13:30²² is often cited, but this refers to the fall of Jerusalem. Paul in his earlier writings (1 Thessalonians and 1 Corinthians) thought he might be among those ‘left

¹⁹ ‘They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”’

²⁰ “In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.”

²¹ ‘... the Ancient of Days came and pronounced judgment in favour of the saints of the Most High, and the time came when they possessed the kingdom’ (Daniel 7:22).

²² “I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.”

alive', but by the time he wrote 2 Corinthians he had realised that he might die before that time.

8 Politics

Wright sees four areas of Christian experience, all of which need to cooccur in the individual Christian: spirituality (which includes prayer, meditation and reading), theology (being able to speak truthfully about God), politics and healing.

The most challenging of the four (mdr) is politics. The Enlightenment sought to consign religion to the private sphere in the interests of peace, so that rational men could sort matters out without war,²³ and this rhetoric persists. But Jesus stands against this split. First-century Jewish eschatology was about God becoming king, and challenged Caesar's power.²⁴ The early church was persecuted, culminating with the ruthless Diocletian (emperor from 284 to 305) precisely because it challenged the power structures of the time. The Christian message is deeply subversive, because its allegiance is to Jesus (Wright 2000: 218–219). Christians continue to be persecuted and to die for their faith (Wright 2000: 221–222).²⁵

Diocletian was followed by Constantine, who converted to Christianity. Questions can be asked about his motives and commitment to Christianity. However, if a ruler is serious about his allegiance to Jesus, then the church retains the right to tell the ruler in no uncertain terms when s/he is failing in this basic duty.²⁶

A Christianity that looks back to Jesus himself, then, seen as the messiah of Israel and the Lord of the world, will not shrink from bringing together (a) the spirituality that acknowledges him as lord of one's life, taking precedence over all other claimants, worshiped and adored in prayer, sacrament, meditation and contemplation, (b) the theology that articulates his lordship and divinity and seeks to express these as truly and clearly as possible for today's world, and (c) the politics that acknowledges him as Lord of the world and seeks to implement that lordship by all appropriate means. (Wright 2000: 221).

What might this look like in practice? Wright mentions debt remission.

References

- Horsley, Richard A., 1997. *Paul and empire: Religion and power in Roman imperial society*. Harrisburg PA: Trinity Press International.
- Marshall, Paul, 1997. *Their blood cries out*. Dallas: Word Publishing.
- O'Donovan, Oliver, 1996. *The desire of nations: rediscovering the roots of political theology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Volf, Miroslav, 1996. *Exclusion and embrace: a theological exploration of identity, otherness and reconciliation*. Nashville: Abingdon.

²³ The fact that one of the great monuments to the Enlightenment was the French Revolution, which had to kill so many people to make its point, is overlooked.

²⁴ Wright recommends Horsley (1997).

²⁵ For a well researched account see Marshall (1997).

²⁶ Wright recommends two books on these themes: O'Donovan (1996) and Volf (1996)

- Wright, N.T., 1992*b*. *The climax of the covenant*. Minneapolis: Fortress.
- , 1992*a*. *Christian origins and the question of God*. Vol. 1: *The New Testament and the people of God*. Minneapolis: Fortress.
- , 1996. *Christian origins and the question of God*. Vol. 2: *Jesus and the victory of God*. Minneapolis: Fortress.
- , 1997. *What St Paul really said*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- , 2000. (Chapters). In Marcus J. Borg & N.T. Wright, eds, *The meaning of Jesus: two visions*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco.