

PETER WALKER

Lifelines : The Historical Jesus

Part II – The Contribution of Tom Wright

In an earlier LIFELINE (*Anvil* 18:3) we noted the work of some of the key contributors to the debate about the historical Jesus in the last 20 years. This present article now focuses exclusively on the work of Tom Wright. A positive assessment and initial critique of his views will appear in a third and final LIFELINE to be published in *Anvil* in the near future.

Our survey so far reveals that there are a string of questions that are constantly being asked in 'historical Jesus' research. For example, was there ever a document (now termed 'Q') which was a common source shared by Matthew and Luke? Can we take John's Gospel as historical? What weight do we give to apocryphal literature, especially the *Gospel of Thomas* (though still dated to the second century by most scholars)? And what are the appropriate tests for establishing the authenticity of a Gospel saying? But, as noted in conclusion to PART I, there is also the whole issue of methodology: if all scholars are prone to a 'circularity of argument' (producing a Jesus which suits their prior hypotheses, often 'hidden' and unacknowledged), perhaps what we need is a completely different approach to the task of history.

This is what Tom Wright seeks to do. Rather than seeking to establish the authenticity of every last saying before daring to speak of Jesus, he argues that all good history proceeds by an open methodology of 'hypothesis and verification'. The task of those in historical Jesus studies, he contends, is to find a historically credible hypothesis that does justice to the historical data. This article seeks to summarise Wright's impressive results, using this alternative method, as published in his *Jesus and the Victory of God* (SPCK 1996).

Finding the right framework

For Wright, the mark of a good hypothesis is that it accounts for as much as possible of the original material (not leaving the Gospels dismembered in smithereens) and does so with a certain simplicity of flow-line and in such a way as to explain other related phenomena. In the study of Jesus the hypothesis must also account for the evident transition from pre-Christian Judaism to what we know of Christianity in the early second century.

This inclusion of later Christianity is already a vital move in Wright's argument. So often 'historical Jesus' scholars work with tunnel vision. So, for example, the earliest claims about Jesus (his being worshipped and his death being 'for our sins') are seen as irrelevant to the enquiry; yet, in fact, they are precisely part of the historical material that needs to be explained. What was it about Jesus that could so quickly prompt such beliefs?

For Wright, therefore, the Early Church is allowed to exercise a form of historical control, providing a first-century framework for our study. The likely result, of course, is that the Jesus discovered will prove amenable to the Church, but this is not another example of circular argument – because the Early Church is a genuine part of ancient history. This too needs to be explained. 'Historical Jesus' studies have failed if they can offer no explanation for this, the next stage in the 'history' of Jesus.

Many scholars, however, work with a strong bias against the Early Church, and so inevitably produce a portrait of Jesus that the Early Church would never have recognised. They may then justify this anomaly by arguing that the Early Church was not interested in recognising the original Jesus but was creating a Jesus to suit its own ends. Scholars, they claim, are now rediscovering the authentic Jesus, dismissed by the Early Church. Yet against this, we have every right to ask whether this reconstruction of the Early Church is itself historically likely. What would make these early Christians take this bizarre and risky step of concocting this fanciful, non-historical Jesus? We need again a *sufficient cause* for explaining what took place. Simply at a historical level, it is far more likely that Jesus himself was that cause, than that 'Jesus' was some kind of 'blank piece of paper' which the Early Church then decided to fill in.

Wright argues therefore that within this overall framework of the first century, there are five key questions that any hypothesis must answer satisfactorily: How did Jesus relate to the Judaism of his day? What were Jesus' aims? Why did Jesus die? How and why did the early Church begin? Why are the Gospels what they are? Many reconstructions fail to answer several (if not all) of these key questions. In this article we note Wright's answer to the first two, which in themselves open up for us his views concerning both Jesus' death and his identity.

How did Jesus fit into the Judaism of his day?

In answering this, Wright notes the significance of 'worldviews'. Judaism at the time of Jesus, he argues, was dominated by a worldview governed by three great Jewish beliefs: monotheism, election and eschatology. In other words, there was one Creator God, who had chosen his people Israel, and who would at the 'end of time' (*eschaton*) act to restore his people and implement his saving rule over all the world.

It is important to grasp Wright's nuanced understanding of this third category ('eschatology'). Eschatology does not mean an expectation of some cosmic meltdown but rather the beginning of a new age *in this world*. The Jews of Jesus' day longed for this new age to dawn. Wright argues that first-century Judaism would

have seen itself as still ‘in exile’. They might be back in the Land and not literal ‘exiles’, but the exilic state of pagan domination was frustratingly obvious. They longed for an end to exile, a new exodus, a new age – for God to fulfil the outstanding ‘eschatological’ promises of the OT. It was into this situation of great expectations, that Jesus came (see e.g. Luke 2:25, 38). Only against *this* background, this authentically Jewish worldview, can we then properly understand the individual ‘mindset’ of Jesus.

So Wright sides squarely with those scholars who insist on the importance of Jesus’ Jewishness. Yet this thoroughly Jewish Jesus will not be so identified with Judaism as to become virtually indistinct from that background (unlike Sanders’ Jesus). He will prove distinctive within that worldview and offer a significant variant to that tradition.

Some scholars produce a simply Jewish Jesus; some Christians produce a simply Christian Jesus; some, we have noted, produce a Jesus who is strangely both non-Jewish and non-Christian! Instead, argues Wright, the most likely solution is a Jesus who was thoroughly Jewish but also significantly different from Judaism in certain respects. He will also have been thoroughly ‘Christian’ (in the sense that Christianity organically flows out from him) and yet in some respects ‘different’ to what later Christians have made him (simply because he was operating in a different place and in a different, indeed unique, time within salvation-history). Only in some such way will Jesus function as the historical ‘middle-term’ between non-Christian Judaism and Early Christianity. Wright calls this phenomenon the ‘double criterion of similarity and dissimilarity’.

This then characterises Wright’s whole presentation of Jesus. *Jesus only makes sense within Judaism, but as a startling variation within it.* Jesus was indeed an ‘eschatological prophet’, speaking to Israel an urgent word which yet proves to be subversive. The longed-for exile is over, but not in the expected manner. The Kingdom of God is at hand, but parables will be necessary to elucidate its surprises. The Messiah is here, but keep it secret, because it will be misunderstood. This is all thoroughly – and necessarily – Jewish, but it will prove to be a Judaism with a difference.

What were the aims of Jesus?

What then, were Jesus’ aims? Wright identifies three central parts of Israel’s hope (all clustered together, for example, in Isaiah 52), each of which became integral to Jesus’ own sense of vocation. His aim was to be the agent through whom each of these three expectations would be fulfilled:

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who say to Zion ‘your God reigns!’... When the Lord returns to Zion, they will see it with their own eyes; for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. The Lord will bare his holy arm in the sight of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God’ (Isa. 52:7-10).

When Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom of God, declaring that Israel’s God was now truly ‘reigning’, this would have evoked the themes of this prophetic passage.

These can be summarised as:

- a) the 'good news' (or 'gospel') of the *end of exile* (the Lord 'comforting and redeeming' his people)
- b) the *defeat of evil* (the Lord revealing his 'holy arm');
- c) the *return of the Lord himself to Zion*.

a) To proclaim the end of exile

Wright then traces these three themes through Jesus' ministry. The *end of exile* theme confirms Sanders' portrait of Jesus as a prophet of 'restoration eschatology'. Jesus' Kingdom-proclamation would have been heard by his contemporaries, not as promising a merely spiritual 'kingdom of heaven', but as an encouragement to believe that YHWH was at last becoming King, acting for Israel to end her exile.

This gives us the proper background for various aspects of Jesus' ministry. Jesus' 'miracles' were signs that God was working to 'restore' his people (cf. Isa. 35), and Jesus' table practice announced that the days of exile and fasting were over – it was time for any 'prodigal sons', who had been exiled to a far country, to start celebrating! They were to 'repent', abandoning their previous ways of thinking and signing up for Jesus' agenda. Jesus was consciously founding a renewal movement within Israel, summoning people to give him their allegiance.

Note that this 'restoration' necessarily included 'forgiveness'. The reason for Israel's exile had been her sins. So, if God was now 'comforting his people', it could only be because 'her sins had been paid for' (Isa. 40:1-2). So Jesus lived and proclaimed God's forgiveness to 'sinners' of all kinds. This was 'good news' indeed, but it was radical and disturbing. For, despite his own evident holiness of life, Jesus showed no qualms about whom he included and no concern to use the official channels and structures: forgiveness came through him, not through the priests or the Temple sacrifices.

So (*contra* Sanders) Jesus did indeed debate fiercely with the Pharisees. Jesus shared their desire for holiness, but he sharply disagreed with them. Why so? The point at issue, Wright argues, was not about different 'patterns of religion', but was rooted in different eschatologies. Jesus was proclaiming that in him the new age of fulfilment had dawned. As a result, some of the key aspects of Israel's life (its Sabbath, purity laws, food codes, and even the Temple) were no longer relevant. This was risky stuff if Jesus was wrong about that timetable!

The contours of Jesus' message were so subversive. If true, he was fulfilling Israel's longings, but the fulfilment was alarmingly radical, novel and disturbing. And this radicalism is seen most strongly in Jesus' attitude towards the Roman occupiers. Despite the hopes of Jesus' contemporaries, and contrary to the promises of various other political 'Messianic' figures, Jesus' announcement of God's reign would not signal the end of Roman domination. Instead he announced an ethic of love for one's enemies, whilst warning Israel that this day of restoration would be for some a time of judgement (cf. e.g. Amos 5:18-20). God's 'visitation' would not result in Jerusalem's vindication; no, the Roman armies would soon be 'camping around' the city (Luke 19:41-44). God was indeed at work, but not in line with the hopes of the anti-Roman nationalists. There was another way of being

Israel and God had a different way of restoring Israel – through Jesus. Those who followed Jesus would be vindicated as the true, reconstituted, people of God. For them judgement would be followed by resurrection; not so those who pursued the path of anti-Roman revolt. Jesus' message was awesomely provocative – ringing 'all the right bells' but then completely changing the tune.

This is seen most clearly in Jesus' attitude to the Temple. Jesus' provocative demonstration there evoked the longings that God would himself build a new restored Temple (not one financed by the pagan Herod). But, according to Wright (again *contra* Sanders), he did not envision a new physical Temple taking the place of Herod's Temple. No, the present Temple would be replaced by a Temple established 'after three days' (John 2:17; Mark 14:58). In some mysterious way Jesus himself would be the longed-for eschatological Temple. And when the present physical Temple was indeed destroyed (in fulfilment of Jesus' explicit prophecies: Mark 13:1ff) Jesus would finally be vindicated as the true prophet – the 'Son of Man', as depicted in Daniel 7, would come to the Ancient of Days as the one in whom God's true people had been vindicated. This is all an 'end of exile' fulfilment, but with profound and unexpected differences.

Jesus' first aim, therefore, was to announce the arrival of God's Kingdom – that the exile was over and the new age of God's purposes had dawned. He was indeed the ultimate eschatological prophet. Throughout this we sense the paradox of a thoroughly Jewish Jesus, who yet is playing a decidedly different 'variation' on the theme. He is being deeply loyal to the OT vision, but also outwardly subversive.

All this then successfully explains two further historical facts. First, that the first Christians were soon reading the OT in quite novel ways and claiming that Jesus was the one in whom 'all the promises of God find their "yes"' (2 Cor. 1:20). The only possible explanation for this novel and audacious development, says Wright, is the example of Jesus himself. He was the creative genius, the powerful 'middle-term' between Judaism and the Church, who showed how fulfilment could come to pass in an unexpected fashion.

Secondly, it explains the fact that Jesus, despite his initial popularity for announcing the long-awaited kingdom, was soon so severely challenged by his contemporaries and denounced. This Messianic claimant, unlike others, posed a startling threat to Israel's national life. Who did he think he was? Why, he seemed convinced that somehow he had the right, single-handedly, to rewrite Israel's prophetic script around himself!

b) To defeat the true enemy

The opposition Jesus experienced from the various religious authorities, as recounted in the Gospels, thus makes perfect sense: Pharisaic opposition in Galilee, all the questions about the Temple in Jerusalem. Wright accordingly has no difficulty in accepting the Gospels' accounts for the events leading up to Jesus' crucifixion. In the light of Deuteronomy 13 the hierarchy were almost bound to see him as a 'false prophet leading Israel astray' who must be removed. The fact that his ideas were also politically dangerous only sealed his fate – as well as providing useful grounds for a charge which would suitably disturb Pilate. Christians would later

see this as the exact reverse of the truth: for them Jesus was the true prophet, who had been no real threat to Rome. Instead he had willingly embraced these false charges and the fate of those Zealots who opposed Rome.

But was it 'willingly'? That raises the question of whether Jesus consciously 'planned' to die in Jerusalem. We look now at Jesus' second aim, which involves looking at his death.

Wright is aware that Sanders thinks any such idea would make Jesus 'weird'; also that Schweitzer was one of the last 'historical Jesus' scholars to affirm this traditional idea. But he notes the frequent Synoptic references to this (not just the 'Passion predictions' but passages such as Mark 2:20; 10:38-45; 12:7-8, 14:8; Luke 12:49-50; 13:33) and explains that Jesus may well have been influenced by the concept of the 'messianic woes'. Various OT texts were interpreted as meaning that the great act of deliverance from exile would be accompanied by intense suffering and 'woes'. Jesus now saw this as his vocation. Also he wove together two OT ideas that had never been linked before – the Suffering Servant with the Messiah – and identified himself with both. If the true Messiah was the one who successfully routed Israel's enemy, *this* Messiah would do this by the paradoxical route of suffering. In other words, he himself would enter into the judgement associated with Israel's exile in order thereby to bring Israel out from exile. Thereby her sins would be 'paid for' and her 'warfare ended' (Isa. 40:1-2). Jesus' second aim was therefore to defeat Israel's enemy – but through his own death.

But there was a deeper reality behind this notion of 'warfare'. For who was the ultimate enemy? Not Rome, but Satan. He it was who was at work, causing Israel to pursue its divinely appointed mission in all the wrong ways. He needed to be defeated once and for all, if ever Israel was to be freed. How might this be? Jesus acted in accord with a vocation, fully reflected in his own ethic of love and non-retaliation, of deciding to allow Satan's evil to do its worst to him; he took up his cross and breathed words of forgiveness through the midst of the pain, trusting to God that thereby evil would be robbed of its power. In Narnian terminology, Jesus would defeat the great enemy by implementing a 'deeper magic'.

If so, then Jesus' aim was not just to *announce* the end of exile as a prophet, but actually to *bring it to pass* – by accepting in his own body God's judgement upon exilic sin and by defeating the one who had taken Israel captive. In other words, he was not only the predictor of judgement, but also its bearer. He would give his life as a substitute – 'as a ransom for many' (Mark 10:45).

And once more (as in the area of Jesus' teaching, so now in the area of what would later be termed 'atonement' theology) one senses something of Jesus' own distinctive approach: it is both thoroughly Jewish and fully 'Christian' (being recognisably the basis for what is soon said of Jesus' death by the early Church), yet it is not identical to both. It is Jesus' own unique standpoint – a vocation pursued with solitary determination and awesome courage. For it is one thing to talk about one's death as the means of, and prelude to, vindication; it is quite another to put one's neck to the noose.

c) To enact and embody the return of YHWH

Perhaps the most startling but refreshing part of Wright's presentation, however, has to do with this third idea. Isaiah 52 had associated the end of exile with Israel witnessing the Lord's 'return to Zion' (v. 8). Zion (Jerusalem with its Temple) had known the presence of God in her midst before the exile, but Ezekiel had had a vision of this glorious *Shekinah* departing from the Temple (Ezek. 11:22-3). Nothing thereafter in Israel's history suggested that her God had yet returned to his appointed residence. When and how would this come to pass? When would the 'Lord return to Zion'?

Wright argues that Jesus' last journey to Jerusalem consciously evoked this tradition. His sitting on a donkey deliberately evoked the prophecy in Zechariah (9:9) that Zion's *King* would enter the city on a colt. But who was Zion's true King if not God himself? Was Jesus warning Zion, the city of God, that she was witnessing the arrival of *God himself*? Then again, Jesus' entrance into the Temple evoked Malachi 3:1, which spoke of the *Lord* suddenly entering his Temple. 'My house', he declared quoting Isaiah, 'shall be a house of prayer', but whose house was it if not God's? And so, back in Jericho when people were expecting his arrival in Jerusalem to usher in the Kingdom of God, Jesus had deliberately told a parable about a King who went away but promised to return (Luke 19:12-27). This, argues Wright, is not about the *parousia*, but concerns what Jesus was doing at that very moment: he was the King, who had been absent from Zion for generations, but who was now about to stage his unexpected return!

According to Wright, this is one of the most significant Synoptic categories for Christology. And Jesus is here not just acting out this truth symbolically; he is claiming that this is it: his coming to Jerusalem *IS* the return of the Lord to Zion. This is more than enactment, it is embodiment. Jesus is embodying the very presence of God. Israel's God has entered human history in, and as, Jesus.

So, who was Jesus?

These are fresh ideas indeed and Wright argues for them lucidly and forcefully. One keeps encountering a Jesus who seems both unfamiliar and yet familiar, both fresh and yet traditional. Wright's work is itself full of originality, and yet it somehow unearths a Jesus who himself is refreshingly original in his own teaching and also fully in keeping with the 'original' Jesus of the Early Church. It is no mean feat. For example, in looking at Jesus' death or self-understanding, you find yourself encountering material that would be normally be labelled 'substitutionary atonement' or 'incarnation' but from a novel vantage-point – a vantage-point which Wright yet argues is authentically that of first-century Judaism.

Wright's Christology, in fact, turns out to be fully in line with later creedal formularies, yet firmly rooted in Jewish soil. Since Jesus could not speak of the 'incarnation' (the term had not been coined, because the reality of which it speaks was only now being unveiled!), he instead hints at his unique identity by using the Jewish categories that *were* available to him. Thus he did things which in Jewish expectation were properly the action of God himself – calling himself the 'bridegroom' and the 'shepherd', speaking in the role of Wisdom, issuing a new

Torah, forgiving sins, returning to Zion as King. Above all, he compared himself to the Temple, for this building symbolized the very presence of God. Noting Jesus' forgiveness of the paralytic (thus by-passing the Temple) and his remarkable hint that his own body was the 'restored Temple', Wright argues that Jesus saw himself as a one-man counter-Temple movement. Jesus claimed to be and to do for Israel that which the Temple previously had been. It was another way of hinting at this unprecedented reality – God was present again, but this time in a human 'temple'.

Wright therefore argues that the high Christology, as found almost immediately within the NT, has its roots in Jesus' own self-understanding. He is clear that 'Messiah' is not in itself a divine title – it is rather a royal title, a claim to be the King of Israel who represents the nation. But Wright argues well for the authenticity both of those texts in which Jesus makes Messianic claims (what he terms 'royal riddles'), and of those where he hints at his divinity. The claim that he should be identified as both 'Messiah' and 'Lord' ultimately goes back, says Wright, to none other than Jesus himself.

For Wright, then, Jesus is an exceedingly creative figure, a theologian in his own right, who sees his ministry as the eschatological conclusion of a divine narrative that has rightly had Israel at its centre. This Jewish Jesus announces a new age within God's purposes towards Israel; he critiques certain aspects of his contemporary religious scene (especially the exclusive and selfish understanding of election, the increasing tendency towards nationalistic violence, and the abandonment of Israel's true vocation as a light to the world); and he casts a vision for an alternative way of being Israel for the blessing of the nations. His people are then the continuation of Israel but in a new situation.

He is a thoroughly Jewish figure who yet dared to challenge Israel to rethink its story by placing himself at its centre as the one inaugurating the promised Kingdom of God. He now walks into the narrative of Israel and retells that story with himself as the climactic key. Somehow the fortunes of the people are drawn together onto himself and his own work. If he was wrong, his views and his hermeneutics, which sought to wrap Israel's destiny around himself, would have to be judged as exceedingly self-centred. If he was right, on the other hand, that very self-centredness might prove to be the mark of genuine God-centredness; for we may be dealing here with a 'self' which is none other than Israel's God himself – now entering his own narrative story-line, now entering his own created world. The God of Israel, claims Wright, has thus acted in his own person at the climactic point within Israel's history to reconstitute Israel around himself. He has come in self-giving love to Israel and the world; he has come to reveal, to redeem and to restore.

Conclusion

This is quite frankly a breath-taking, magisterial accomplishment, grounded in a careful historical reasoning but deeply rich in theological consequences. Wright's 650 pages (summarised here all too briefly) simply whistle by in enjoyable prose and forceful sweep of argument. His alternative methodology, defended at great length in his opening section, allows him to enter the 'historical Jesus' debate and

not get lost in the minutiae of debates about authenticity. He has, quite simply, established a new paradigm for the debate and no work in this field hereafter will be able to by-pass his work. If the readers of *Anvil* are Anglican evangelicals, then we owe our colleague the most enormous debt of gratitude. Even if some of his reconstructions do not stand the test of time, Wright has convinced many that the historian's Jesus is not inherently inimical to the Jesus confessed in the creeds and worshipped in our churches today.

In a concluding article we will assess further positive aspects of Wright's work, as well as summarising some important and helpful criticisms that have been levelled against it.

Some Recommended books

- Richard Bauckham *God Crucified* (Eerdmans, 1998).
Markus Bockmuehl *This Jesus – Martyr, Lord, Messiah* (1994).
Peter Walker *Jesus and his World* (Lion, Oxford 2003).
N. T. Wright *Jesus and the Victory of God* (SPCK, London 1996).
The Original Jesus (Lion, Oxford 1998).
The Meaning of Jesus – Two Visions (SPCK, London 1999).
The Challenge of Jesus (SPCK, London 2000).

The Revd Dr Peter Walker is Tutor in NT at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford.

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