

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_churchman\\_os.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php)

# N. T. Wright's Hermeneutic: Part 2 – The Historical Jesus

Robert Stewart

N. T. Wright consistently applies the hermeneutic that he outlined for his readers in *The New Testament and the People of God* as he seeks to analyze Jesus' worldview in relation to questions he asks concerning the historical Jesus in *Jesus and the Victory of God*. This section will examine how he answers those questions.

## Jesus' Self Identity

Wright believes that Jesus' self-identity may be found by examining Jesus against the backdrop of the worldview of Second-Temple Judaism. So Wright analyzes how Jesus' basic beliefs were both similar and dissimilar to that worldview. To grasp Wright's understanding of Jesus' self-identity, his understanding of the worldview of Second-Temple Judaism must be examined.

Like all worldviews the worldview of Second-Temple Judaism is revealed as an implicit story. That story is one of Creation, Fall, Election, and Vindication. It goes something like this: Israel is YHWH's chosen covenant people, but she has been unfaithful to YHWH and disobeyed his Torah. For this reason she finds herself in exile.<sup>93</sup> But YHWH is faithful to his covenant and when Israel repents and once again is obedient, YHWH will deliver her from exile, defeat the evil ones, and dwell in Zion. When this takes place, a new world, with a new way of living, will be realized.<sup>94</sup> It was evident to most, if not all, Jews of Jesus' day that this had not yet happened, that Israel's story was lacking its God-ordained conclusion.<sup>95</sup>

The symbols of Israel's worldview are Sabbath, Food, Nation, Land, Torah, and supremely, Temple.<sup>96</sup> Like all worldview symbols, they provide Israel with a sense of identity and boundaries that make clear who is and who is not among the people of God. Israel's praxis may be summarized as including worship, festivals, and living according to the Torah.<sup>97</sup> Wright summarizes—

Story, symbol and praxis, focused in their different ways on Israel's scriptures, reveal a rich but basically simple worldview.

1. Who are we? We are Israel, the chosen people of the creator god.
2. Where are we? We are in the holy Land, focused on the Temple, but, paradoxically, we are still in exile.
3. What is wrong? We have the wrong rulers: pagans on the one hand, compromised Jews on the other, or, half-way between, Herod and his family. We are all involved in a less-than-ideal situation.
4. What is the solution? Our god must act again to give us the true sort of rule, that is, his own kingship exercised through properly appointed officials (a true priesthood; possibly a true king): and in the mean time Israel must be faithful to his covenant charter.<sup>98</sup>

Out of this worldview flow Israel's basic beliefs. These beliefs may be summarized as monotheism, election, and eschatology. Monotheism declares that Israel's God is the only true God. The gods of other nations are false gods, and worship of them is idolatrous.<sup>99</sup> Israel's God works within history through natural events.<sup>100</sup> Election is Israel's answer to the challenge of Theodicy. What will God do in the face of evil? He will choose a people to serve as his vehicle through which he will set right the world.<sup>101</sup> These two beliefs coupled with the realization that things are not yet set right, lead to eschatology, i.e., Israel's expectation that God himself will act on her behalf. But for God to do this, he must first deal with the source of the problem, Israel's sin against him. Two themes are central for this: sacrifice and suffering. Sacrifice, understood as including regular worship, pilgrimages, national feasts, and fasts, not only numbered the participants among God's chosen people, but also enacted symbolically the hoped-for restoration.<sup>102</sup> Suffering served as the anticipated prelude to God's climactic act. Wright agrees with Tessa Rajak in concluding that a number of first century Jews were preoccupied with the concept of collective suffering for national sin.<sup>103</sup> For Wright, these are the essential elements of the Jewish worldview of Jesus' day.

Wright recognizes that one may use different terms to speak of Jesus' self-understanding. One may refer to Jesus' ministry, his career, his activity, his work, his life, or his vocation. But none of these terms is fully adequate in and of itself. He, therefore, chooses to use a variety of terms.<sup>104</sup> Although he uses a variety of different terms, the one that bears most significantly on the question of Jesus' self-understanding is 'vocation'. Vocation 'relates to Jesus' inner attitude to what he was doing',<sup>105</sup> not simply to his actions themselves. This is

consistent with Wright's emphasis on uncovering Jesus' aims and intentions.

Wright maintains that Jesus understood himself as the one through whom God was fulfilling his promises to Israel. He writes, 'The difference between the beliefs of Jesus and those of thousands of other Jews of his day amounted simply to this: he believed, also, that all these things were coming true in and through himself.'<sup>106</sup> He concludes that Jesus understood himself as functioning in three basic ways: (1) as a prophet; (2) as Israel's messiah; and (3) as the embodiment of Yahweh.

Wright pictures Jesus as a combination of Robert Webb's category of 'leadership popular prophet' and Richard Horsley's and John Hanson's category of 'oracular prophet'.<sup>107</sup> Prophets of leadership and oracular categories would be expected to gain a following, teach disciples, pronounce judgements, and most significantly for Wright's thesis, perform symbolic actions,<sup>108</sup> all of which Jesus did. Wright points out that, although early Christians believed that Jesus was much more than simply a prophet, they never denied that he was a prophet.<sup>109</sup> As a prophet Jesus symbolically proclaimed God's plan through his entry into Jerusalem, his temple-action, his meals with sinners, and the last supper. Finally, Jesus did what all the prophets before him did: he called the people to repentance.<sup>110</sup>

Concerning Jesus' consciousness of his messianic identity, Wright declares, 'He regarded himself as the one who summed up Israel's vocation and destiny in himself. He was the one in and through whom the real "return from exile" would come about, indeed, was already coming about. He was the Messiah.'<sup>111</sup>

Again he writes—

This whole scene, summed up here from the previous Part of the book, has encouraged us to ask the question, who did Jesus think he was? The first answer must be: Israel-in-person, Israel's representative, the one in whom Israel's destiny was reaching its climax. He thought he was the Messiah.<sup>112</sup>

The clearest case for Jesus' consciousness of his messianic identity is found in his temple-action, which demonstrates his kingly role by highlighting the fact that the messiah has authority over the temple.<sup>113</sup> The Last Supper and the temple-action together symbolically point to his messiahship. They both serve

in no uncertain terms to declare the out-dated nature of the then-present temple system and point to access to God—through Jesus himself.<sup>114</sup> His baptism points to his messianic call and anointing.<sup>115</sup> Wright continues—

[A]n obvious first-century option for a would-be Messiah would run: go to Jerusalem, fight the battle against the forces of evil, and get yourself enthroned as the rightful king. Jesus, in fact, adopted precisely this strategy. But, as he hinted to James and John, he had in mind a different battle, a different throne.<sup>116</sup>

It was in this action that Jesus made clear what sort of messiah he was: a self-giving, suffering messiah. As Israel's messiah, he would sacrificially take upon himself the wrath incurred by her, and deliver her from her true exile--spiritual estrangement from God. The Last Supper serves both as an alternative to the Passover and a retelling of the Exodus. As such it serves as the symbolic lens through which the fulfilment of the 'messianic woes' tradition becomes clear—

The central symbolic act by which Jesus gave meaning to his approaching death suggests strongly that he believed this moment had come. This would be the new exodus, the renewal of the covenant, the forgiveness of sins, the end of exile. It would do for Israel what Israel could not do for herself. It would thereby fulfil Israel's vocation, that she should be the servant people, the light of the world.<sup>117</sup>

Wright warns that one must not read all sorts of later theology back into the term 'messiah'. Messiah is *not* a synonym for deity.<sup>118</sup> He maintains that it is beyond the historian's task to prove that Jesus was the messiah. His more modest goal is to demonstrate, as a historian, that Jesus' actions, and implicit aims, are consistent with what one would expect from one who believed himself to be the messiah.<sup>119</sup> In this way Wright is true to his critical-realist epistemology.

Wright insists that in addition to understanding himself as a prophet and the messiah, Jesus also understood himself to be the 'embodiment of YHWH'. He argues that one reason second-Temple Jews typically believed that Israel was still in exile was the Isaianic message that the messianic kingdom would include the return of YHWH to Zion.<sup>120</sup> Yet the Jews saw no evidence of such, 'the geographical return from exile, when it came about under Cyrus and his

successors, was not accompanied by any manifestations such as those in Exodus 40, Leviticus 9, 1 Kings 8, or even (a revelation to an individual) Isaiah 6'.<sup>121</sup> In emphasizing this theme, Wright agrees with Bruce Chilton that 'kingdom of god' denotes 'the coming of Israel's god in person and in power'.<sup>122</sup>

Wright is not at this point addressing directly the issue of whether or not Jesus was divine, but is instead attempting as a historian to understand Jesus' 'own aims and beliefs: the sense of vocation that led him, as a first-century Jew, to do and say what he did and said, and the belief system within which those actions and words made sense'.<sup>123</sup> He insists that through his entrance into Jerusalem and temple-action, coupled with his stories and riddles, Jesus was symbolically declaring that YHWH was returning to Israel in and through him.<sup>124</sup>

Wright's case is not without substantial biblical support. He buttresses his claim with several pages of quotations from not only Isaiah (which is vitally important for Chilton's thesis) but also from other Old Testament authors whose writings support his thesis at this point (Isa. 4:2-6; 24:23; 25:9-10; 35:3-6, 10; 40:3-5, 9-11; 52:7-10; 59:15-17, 19-21; 60:1-3; 62:10-11; 63:1, 3, 5, 9; 64:1; 66:12, 14-16, 18-19; Ezek. 43:1-7; Hag. 2:7, 9; Zech. 8:4-5, 10-12; 8:2-3; 14:1-5, 9, 16; Mal. 3:1-4; Ps. 50:3-4; 96:12-13; 98:8-9).<sup>125</sup>

Anticipating the objections of those who would object that YHWH had already returned to Israel through the vision of Sirach or through the cleansing of Judas Maccabaeus, Wright quotes other post-biblical writings that look forward to the return of YHWH to Zion (1 En. 1:3-4, 9; T. Mos. 10:1, 3, 7; 12:13; Jub. 1:26-28; 11Q19; 29.3-9; 1QS3.18; 4.19; CD 7-9; 8.2-3). He further lists key New Testament passages that speak of YHWH 'visiting his people' in Jesus (Lk. 16:8; 15:14; 1 Pet. 2:12).<sup>126</sup>

The fact that Jesus understood himself to be Israel's messiah need not prevent him from embodying the return of YHWH. In fact it was expected that YHWH would act through his accredited agents.<sup>127</sup> Wright stresses that Jesus' praxis is consistent with this expectation. He did things only YHWH had the authority to do (forgive sins and give the law); and proclaimed that loyalty to Israel's God meant loyalty to him.<sup>128</sup> Furthermore, Jesus spoke of himself in ways reserved for YHWH (bridegroom, shepherd). Most significantly he symbolically re-enacted YHWH's return to Zion in his journey to Jerusalem.

Jesus went to Jerusalem in order to embody the third and last element of the coming of the kingdom. He was not content to announce that YHWH was returning to Zion. He intended to enact, symbolize and personify that climactic event.<sup>129</sup>

Wright thus insists that Jesus understood himself to be in a symbolic sense what the Old Testament had pointed to all along: YHWH dwelling among his people. Wright maintains that all of Israel's major symbols (Temple, Torah, Wisdom, Spirit, and Word) are to be understood as present in and through the ministry of Jesus. Supremely Jesus is understood as upstaging the central incarnational symbol of Judaism, the Temple, by being himself the ultimate sense in which YHWH would tabernacle among his people. He thus declares that Old Testament 'house of David' language is best understood to mean that—

God will indeed dwell with his people, allowing his glory and mystery to 'tabernacle' in their midst, but the most appropriate way for him to do this will not be through a building but through a human being....Jesus, at the very center of his vocation, believed himself called to do and be in relation to Israel what, in Scripture and Jewish belief, the Temple was and did....Jesus was claiming that he rather than the temple was the place where and the means by which the living God was present with Israel.<sup>130</sup>

As mentioned above, Jesus also understood his vocation to be to embody symbolically the presence of YHWH in light of each of the other Jewish symbols as well.<sup>131</sup>

Anticipating the objections of those who would say that first-century Jewish monotheism would allow no such understanding of the messiah, Wright also puts forward a second argument that, he grants, is less well supported than his primary point. That argument, simply stated, is that there is evidence that many second-Temple Jews were quite comfortable speculating on the possibility of a plurality of powers in heaven without abandoning monotheism.<sup>132</sup> All of this is consistent with what many Jews knew would take place: 'when YHWH acted in history, the agent through whom he acted would be vindicated, exalted, and honoured in a quite unprecedented manner.'<sup>133</sup> His intention is simply to demonstrate that such speculation was not inconsistent with the Jewish monotheism of Jesus' day. Wright concludes—

One possible scenario that some second-Temple Jews regarded as at least thinkable was that the earthly and military victory of the Messiah over the pagans would be seen in terms of the enthronement-scene from Daniel 7, itself a development of the chariot-vision in Ezekiel 1.<sup>134</sup>

Positing that Jesus understood himself as YHWH embodied compels one to ask: did Jesus believe himself to be God? Wright addresses this question from within his understanding of Jesus' worldview, aims and beliefs and concludes that Jesus did believe himself to be divine, but that this consciousness flowed out his faithfulness to his vocation, not vice versa.

I do not think that Jesus 'knew he was God' in the same sense that one knows he is tired or happy, male or female. He did not sit back and say to himself, 'well I never! I'm the second person of the Trinity!' Rather 'as part of his human vocation, grasped in faith, sustained in prayer, tested in confirmation, agonized over in further prayer and doubt, and implemented in action, he believed he had to do and be, for Israel and the world, that which according to scripture only YHWH himself could do and be'.<sup>135</sup>

Let me be clear, also, what I am not saying. I do not think Jesus 'knew he was God' in the same sense that one knows one is hungry or thirsty, tall or short. It was not a mathematical knowledge, like knowing that two and two make four; nor was it straightforwardly observational knowledge, like knowing that there is bird on the fence outside my room because I can see and hear it. It was more like the knowledge that I have that I am loved by my family and closest friends; like the knowledge that I have that sunrise over the sea is awesome and beautiful; like the knowledge of the musician not only of what the composer intended but of how precisely to perform the piece in exactly that way—a knowledge most securely possessed, of course, when the performer is also the composer. It was, in short, the knowledge that characterizes *vocation*.<sup>136</sup>

I suggest, in short, that the return of YHWH to Zion, and the Temple-theology which it brings into focus, are the deepest keys and clues to gospel christology. Forget the 'titles' of Jesus, at least for a moment; forget the pseudo-orthodox attempts to make Jesus conscious of being the second person of the Trinity; forget the arid reductionism that is the

mirror-image of that unthinking would-be orthodoxy. Focus, instead, on a young Jewish prophet telling a story about YHWH returning to Zion as judge and redeemer, and then embodying it by riding into the city in tears, symbolizing the Temple's destruction and celebrating the final exodus. I propose, as a matter of history, that Jesus of Nazareth was conscious of a vocation: a vocation, given him by the one he knew as 'father', to enact in himself what, in Israel's scriptures, God had promised to accomplish all by himself. He would be the pillar of cloud and fire for the people of the new exodus. He would embody in himself the returning and redeeming action of the covenant God.<sup>137</sup>

In summary, Jesus understood himself as an eschatological prophet, Israel's messiah, YHWH embodied, and divine. For Wright these positions are first and foremost historical conclusions, drawn from a thorough analysis of Israel's symbols in light of the worldview of second-Temple Judaism, not simply theological propositions.

#### Jesus' Teaching

The basic thrust of Jesus' message was consistent with his God-given vocation. In short Jesus declared that the kingdom of God was at hand and that YHWH was acting through him to accomplish all that he had declared beforehand that he would.<sup>138</sup> Jesus' message was primarily eschatological, not the proclamation of a new ethic, a call for sociological reform, or a call for violent political revolution, although Wright does see limited aspects of all three, excepting violence, in Jesus' message. In that his message was for all of Israel, it was political. In that he declared the kingdom of God, it was religious. But in his day one could not choose to be either religious or political; to be one was to be the other.<sup>139</sup>

In understanding Jesus' message as eschatological Wright follows in the tradition of Albert Schweitzer, but with an important twist. Whereas Schweitzer understood apocalyptic, end-of-the-world language literally, Wright understands it metaphorically. Apocalyptic language was 'simply a Jewish way of talking about Israel's God becoming king.'<sup>140</sup> Like his mentor, George Caird, Wright maintains that apocalyptic language formed its own language convention through which events in the space-time world were 'invested with the full theological significance'.<sup>141</sup> Accordingly Wright offers seven different understandings of eschatology and identifies his as number three.

1. Eschatology as the end of the world, i.e., the end of the space-time universe.
2. Eschatology as the climax of Israel's history, involving the end of the space-time universe.
3. Eschatology as the climax of Israel's history, involving events for which end-of-the-world language is the only set of metaphors adequate to express the significance of what will happen, but resulting in a new and quite different phase within space-time history.
4. Eschatology as major events, not specifically climactic within a particular story, for which end-of-the-world language functions as metaphor.
5. Eschatology as 'horizontal' language (i.e., apparently denoting movement forwards in time) whose actual referent is the possibility of moving 'upwards' spiritually into a new level of existence.
6. Eschatology as critique of the present world order, perhaps with proposals for a new order.
7. Eschatology as critique of the present socio-political scene, perhaps with proposals for adjustments.<sup>142</sup>

Wright's understanding of eschatology is probably the most controversial part of his project. Craig Blomberg believes that there is an intermediate position between Wright's second and third definitions. Blomberg grants that much, but not necessarily all, apocalyptic language is metaphorical rather than literal, but he also insists that some of Jesus' teaching refers to a future literal return of Jesus and an earthly millennium in this current space-time universe.<sup>143</sup> In *The Meaning of Jesus* Wright makes it clear that he believes that Jesus will return to and reign on a renewed earth. But he does not think that Jesus' teaching referred to that time.<sup>144</sup> Space does not permit a full discussion of the issue. Suffice it to say that Wright is in the minority among New Testament specialists on this point.<sup>145</sup>

Wright's understanding of Jesus' eschatological message of God's kingdom includes several rich themes. The first is that Israel's exile has ended. Wright maintains that many Jews of Jesus' day believed that Israel was still in exile. When Wright speaks of Israel in exile, he is referring to more than geography. 'Exile was the state of political servitude, cultural domination, and above all theological unredeemedness that Israel continued to experience.'<sup>146</sup> He writes—

Babylon had taken the people into captivity; Babylon fell, and the people returned. But in Jesus' day many, if not most, Jews regarded the exile as still continuing. The people had returned in a geographical sense, but the great prophecies of restoration had not yet come true. What was Israel to do? Why, to repent of the sin which had driven her into exile, and to return to YHWH with all her heart....What her God had done for her in the exodus—always the crucial backdrop for Jewish expectation—he would at last do again, even more gloriously, YHWH would become king, and would do for Israel in covenant love, what the prophets had foretold.<sup>147</sup>

Wright's opinion at this point is controversial. A fairly recent volume of the *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* includes review articles of *Jesus and the Victory of God* by Clive Marsh and Maurice Casey in which both raise several issues concerning the idea that for many Jews the exile had not ended.<sup>148</sup> Casey argues that the presence of the Temple in Jerusalem, with its sacrifices signifying the presence of God, regular pilgrimages to Jerusalem by faithful Jews, and Jesus' statement as recorded by Matthew that 'he who swears by the sanctuary swears by Him who lives in it' (23:21), all work against Wright's position. He concludes: 'We would need stunningly strong arguments to convince that these Jews really believed they were in exile when they were in Israel. All Wright's arguments for this view, however, seem to me to be quite spurious.'<sup>149</sup>

On the other hand, Craig Evans argues at length in favour of Wright's position.<sup>150</sup> In fairness to Wright, he need not prove that most Jews believed this, only that a large enough number believed it for a message of the sort Wright describes to be intelligible in Jesus' day. But Wright argues that 'the great majority' of Jesus' contemporaries believed they were still in exile.<sup>151</sup>

The difference between the teaching of the early church and Jesus is the most significant eschatological problem for Wright to address. If Jesus taught that the kingdom of God was present within his ministry, and all future language is to be understood metaphorically, how does one account for the fact that the earliest church clearly proclaimed a future-oriented eschatology?

Jesus' vehicle for proclaiming the kingdom of God was that of story. Through both his preaching and his parables Jesus retold Israel's story with himself in

the centre.<sup>152</sup> Jesus uses parables both because stories are one of the best ways to change society's worldview and because parables are an effective way to communicate a subversive message. Jesus' retelling of Israel's story threatened both treasured symbols and the existing power structures.

His commitment to the vehicle of story leads Wright to conclude that almost all the parables are about Israel, not religion or morality.<sup>153</sup> In arguing that most parables refer to Israel Wright may be over-reaching. For example, according to Wright, the 'parable' of the two houses—one on sand, the other on the rock—is a warning of judgement to come against the temple.<sup>154</sup> Jesus' point, however, is not to abandon the house on the rock, or to reform it, it is that those who hear his words will build their lives on the solid foundation of the rock (temple), which is precisely what Wright says Jesus is telling people not to do.

A second example is his treatment of the parable of the prodigal son. He sees this as a parable of Israel's return from exile.<sup>155</sup> However, there is little, if any, direct evidence of such a line of thought in the gospels themselves. This is significant because Wright bases much, if not all, of the rest of his project on his unique interpretation of the parable. It appears that his commitment to story has led him astray at this point. In fairness to Wright, one should note that his thesis does not depend entirely on the interpretation of the parable.

There is both similarity and dissimilarity to Jesus' telling of Israel's story. The basic story was familiar to first-century Jewish ears. But Jesus' retelling of Israel's story was also dissimilar at the level of consequent belief. Jesus includes his own unique and subversive elements in retelling Israel's story.<sup>156</sup> Jesus implied through his retelling of Israel's story 'that his own career and kingdom-announcement is the moment towards which all Israel's history has been leading'.<sup>157</sup> Jesus declares that it is in him that YHWH is finally acting on behalf of his people, to end their exile, to defeat the enemy, and to return to Zion.<sup>158</sup>

The second theme that Wright sees in Jesus' eschatological message was the challenge to Israel to repent and be Israel in a new way. Jesus, according to Wright, did not speak of repentance simply in an individual, moral sense, but in a national, political, and most importantly, eschatological sense.<sup>159</sup> Jesus' message challenged Israel to see the Gentile world in a new light and to reject violent revolution as a means of establishing God's kingdom. In short, Jesus

challenged Israel to take up a new agenda, his agenda. The first part of the new agenda was to repent of her exclusiveness toward sinners and Gentiles and to become a people of invitation and welcome. In short, Israel was under God's judgement for her failure to be the light to the nations that God had intended her to be. Her exile would end when she repented. Therefore Jesus went out of his way,

to create a fictive kinship, a surrogate family, around himself....Jesus had called for a deep and shocking disloyalty to human, and nation-defining, family that his hearers knew; it was to be replaced by a total devotion and loyalty to Jesus himself, and to the others who also followed him...

The parallel, indeed, makes the symbolic point clearly enough: this was remnant-theology, return-from-exile theology. Instead of the genealogies which marked out the returnees, the symbol of identity for the renewed people was Jesus himself, and his kingdom-announcement.

What is more, this family was in principle open to all, beyond the borders of Israel.<sup>160</sup>

Jesus' mighty acts further communicated that those who previously had been excluded from membership in Israel, were welcome in God's kingdom.<sup>161</sup> Jesus offered final 'eschatological blessing outside the official structures, to all the wrong people, and on his own authority. That was his real offence'.<sup>162</sup>

The second dimension of repentance was that Israel should cease from her efforts to overthrow Rome through violent revolution. This was the way to destruction not freedom. The reason for this was that there was another enemy behind Rome, Satan himself.<sup>163</sup> Richard Hays questions whether Wright's position—that the Pharisees were committed to violent revolution—can be supported historically especially in light of Josephus's somewhat different portrayal of them.<sup>164</sup> On the other hand, Wright believes that Josephus may have seen other, middle ways, of resolution.<sup>165</sup>

Jesus also warned what would happen if Israel did not repent and take up his agenda—destruction of both city and temple. Consistent with his understanding of eschatology, Wright declares that Mark 13 and its parallels do not refer to the end of the world, but to the fall of Jerusalem.<sup>166</sup> The destruction of Jerusalem and the temple would serve in an unexpected way as

the vindication of both Jesus and his new-covenant people.<sup>167</sup> Vindication would come to him because God had acted as he had predicted—he was not a false prophet.<sup>168</sup> Deliverance would come to the church because they heeded his warning and fled Jerusalem. This is an extremely subversive message. Israel's hope is fulfilled through the loss of her two most tangible symbols of her heritage—temple and land.

On the surface, a message like this would appear to be anti-Jewish. But Wright assures his readers that closer inspection will reveal that Jesus stands within the time-honoured Jewish tradition of 'critique from within'. Like the prophets before him, Jesus was speaking against a corrupt temple and a rebellious way of being Jewish.<sup>168</sup> This critique takes place as a clash of symbols. According to Wright, Jesus pictures himself as the replacement for the Temple.

God's kingdom was precisely about replacing the temple system with the renewed heart which, itself celebrating the forgiveness of God, would love God and neighbour in the way that the Shema, the daily prayer of the Jews to this day, indicated as the heart of Jewish practice. Jesus was claiming to offer all that the temple stood for.<sup>169</sup>

His miracles of healing, his open-table fellowship, and his new covenant meal all served to offer a symbolic alternative to the temple.

In moving from village to village proclaiming an important message for Israel as a whole he was like a politician on the campaign trail.<sup>170</sup> But Jesus did not tailor his message to suit his listeners. He challenged them to repent by retelling Israel's story, replacing her symbols, and providing a new way of answering the worldview questions:

(1) Who are we? '[T]he real, the true, Israel.' (2) What's wrong? The satan, a cosmic enemy, had deceived historic Israel into blindly adopting a demonic worldview, a central pillar of which is a self-destructive policy of militarism. (3) What's the solution? The kingdom of God, which had decisively arrived in Jesus' own life and work. Thus, Israel's real enemy was neither Roman powers nor corrupt Jewish leaders, neither Pilate nor Caiaphas, but rather the personal, cosmic, satanic force that stood above and behind both of these historical entities. And it was through Jesus that

the satanic adversary would be defeated, not by a nationalistic holy war (itself a satanically inspired scheme designed to distract Israel from its true vocation), but, paradoxically, via the cross.<sup>171</sup>

In summary, Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God in an eschatological sense. His message had political and religious significance, but was not primarily either. In the time-honoured tradition of critique from within he called Israel to commit to him and realize a new way of being Israel, which emphasized non-violence, forgiveness, and outreach to Gentiles and sinners. It also warned of destruction to come if his warnings were ignored. When they were ignored, and the predicted destruction resulted, both Jesus and his followers were vindicated.

#### Jesus' Death and Resurrection

Why was Jesus crucified? In other words, what did Jesus say or do that aroused such hostility toward him? Wright proposes that the cause of Jesus' crucifixion be examined from three perspectives.

From the Roman perspective, i.e., Pilate's perspective, Jesus was crucified because it worked to Pilate's own benefit. Crucifixion was the penalty for rebel kings, and Jesus' own people had identified him as king. The Jewish leaders had cryptically threatened to report Pilate to Rome, if he did not execute this rival king.<sup>172</sup> Pilate acted as his pragmatic nature dictated he should.

From the Jewish perspective the primary reason Jesus had to die was because he advocated a different and dangerous agenda. This different political agenda was the result of his different eschatological vision.<sup>173</sup> 'Political' does not necessarily mean 'revolutionary'. Within this context it means simply that Jesus had a different agenda for Israel as a nation. Both Pharisees and Sadducees perceived Jesus to be a false prophet leading the people astray. The Pharisees opposed him because he rejected their nationalistic agenda. The Sadducees feared him because he was prone to make trouble and stir up the people.<sup>174</sup> In order to mollify the people they had to be able to accuse Jesus of a capital crime. To this end they accused Jesus of being both a false prophet and a blasphemer.<sup>175</sup> Yet this would not give them the authority to put him to death. Only Pilate could do that. Therefore they brought Jesus before Pilate on the charge of sedition.

The act that had brought the Jewish leaders to the conclusion that Jesus had to

die was his Temple Action, in which Jesus was symbolically declaring, in the Old Testament prophetic tradition, that the temple would be destroyed if Israel did not repent and embrace his agenda.<sup>176</sup> This coupled with his praxis of forgiving sins apart from any work performed in the temple declared that that the temple was on its way to becoming redundant.<sup>177</sup> None of this served to endear him to the ruling class of the Jews.

The third and most important perspective is Jesus' own. The gospels all record that Jesus predicted his death, either explicitly or symbolically. Therefore the task confronting the historian, according to Wright, is to show how and why such an action would or would not make sense within the worldview of Second-Temple Judaism.<sup>178</sup> Wright evaluates Jesus' intentions through the symbolism of the Last Supper and a series of related sayings, which Wright refers to as 'riddles of the cross'.<sup>179</sup> In the Last Supper Jesus symbolically fuses Israel's story with his life in such way that his death becomes the story's climax.<sup>180</sup> When the Last Supper is coupled with his Temple-Action, it becomes clear that Jesus intends to replace the temple system not with another system of ritual, but with himself.<sup>181</sup> Wright maintains that Jesus intended to bring about the true exodus through his own death. This is consistent with his call to a new way of being Israel, a way of non-resistance to violence and turning the other cheek. He will take the lead by substituting for Israel.<sup>182</sup> This is also consistent with two before-mentioned expectations on the part of some Jews: (1) that the end of the story could not come except through a time of intense suffering; (2) that the messiah would suffer on behalf of Israel.<sup>183</sup> In essence it is through Jesus' redemptive, messianic death, in place of Israel, that the victory of YHWH is achieved.<sup>184</sup> Wright maintains that this interpretation of Jesus' Temple-Action, the Last Supper, the cryptic sayings pointing to the cross, and his crucifixion provides the most reasonable explanation currently at hand when the data is evaluated in light of the worldview of Second-Temple Judaism. In fact, Wright holds, that no other reading can account for sayings that are so radically different than what the early church was trying to do.<sup>185</sup>

In summary, in one sense Jesus was crucified because it was pragmatically advantageous for Pilate to put to death all those who threatened Rome. In another more important sense, he was crucified because he presented a different vision of what Israel was to be than the leaders of the Pharisees and Sadducees. But ultimately he was crucified because he was faithful to his God-

given vocation to be Israel's messiah, suffering redemptively in her place.

Jesus' death naturally leads into consideration of Jesus' resurrection. What can one know historically concerning the resurrection of Jesus? According to Wright one cannot separate the resurrection from the birth of early Christianity. It is the resurrection that makes sense of what follows, i.e., the establishment of the Christian community with its own distinctive story, praxis, and symbols.<sup>186</sup> Given that Jesus was not the first or the last to lead a messianic movement, and that such self-proclaimed messiahs were routinely put to death, why did his movement live on without replacing him as leader? Wright concludes that the only rational answer is the resurrection.

If nothing happened to the body of Jesus, I cannot see why any of his explicit or implicit claims should be regarded as true. What is more, I cannot, as a historian, see why anyone would have continued to belong to his movement and to regard him as its Messiah. There were several other Messianic or quasi-Messianic movements within a hundred years either side of Jesus. Routinely, they ended with the leader's being killed by the authorities, or by a rival group. If your Messiah is killed, you conclude that he was not the Messiah. Some of those movements continued to exist; where they did, they took a new leader from the same family. (But note: Nobody ever said that James, the brother of Jesus, was the Messiah.) Such groups did not go around saying that their Messiah had been raised from the dead. The early Christians did believe that Jesus had been raised bodily from the dead. What is more, I cannot make sense of the whole picture, historically or theologically, unless they were telling the truth.<sup>187</sup>

The significance of the resurrection for the early church is seen in the fact that—

They reconstructed their worldview, their aims and agendas, around this belief so that it became, not merely an extra oddity, bolted onto the outside of the worldview they already had, but the transforming principle, the string that had pulled back the curtain, revealing God's future as having already arrived in the present.<sup>188</sup>

The degree to which the early Christians reshaped their worldview is evident when one considers the fact that they maintained their commitment to Jewish

monotheism yet at the same time began to worship Jesus.<sup>189</sup> Wright's point is that although the resurrection alone would not account for such a praxis on the part of the early church,<sup>190</sup> it is inconceivable that worship of Jesus could take place as it did apart from a literal resurrection of Jesus.<sup>191</sup>

Wright's recent work, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*,<sup>192</sup> the third volume of his New Testament theology, is a detailed (800+ pages) and philosophically nuanced examination of the resurrection in light of the teachings of ancient paganism, the Old Testament, and Second-Temple Jewish writers, as well as the New Testament testimony. Wright considers virtually every possible explanation for the data and concludes that Jesus' literal resurrection is the most likely explanation, that it makes sense of the data in light of the Second-Temple worldview—and is highly probable historically.<sup>193</sup> Space does not permit a detailed analysis of this significant new work on the topic of Jesus' resurrection.

#### Jesus and the Church

In addressing the question of the relationship of Jesus to the early church Wright proposes to analyze Jesus against the backdrop of the worldview of the early church in much the same way that he analyzes Jesus against the backdrop of Second-Temple Judaism. To this end he reconstructs the worldview of the early church. Wright identifies three main aspects of early Christian praxis: mission, sacrament, and martyrdom. By mission he refers to the evident fact that the early church was evangelistic. Citing Ben Meyer, he writes of the early church's missionary zeal: "This missionary activity was not an addendum to a faith that was basically 'about' something else (e.g., a new existential self-awareness). "Christianity was never more itself than in the launching of the world mission."<sup>194</sup>

This is consistent with the commission to evangelize that one finds Jesus giving to his disciples in the gospels. The centrality of mission in the early church is further testified to through baptism.

Early Christian praxis also included sacrament, the early church regularly made the Lord's Supper part of their worship. Concerning baptism and the Lord's Supper, he writes: "They were not strange actions which some Christians might on odd occasions perform, but ritual acts which were taken for granted,

part of that praxis which included the early Christian worldview.<sup>195</sup> The significant thing to note is that according to the gospels, observance of the Lord's Supper, like the administration of baptism, was commissioned by Jesus.<sup>196</sup> The taken-for-granted nature of the praxis of these two rites testifies to the genuineness of the gospel testimony concerning their origins.<sup>197</sup>

Finally, early Christian praxis is highlighted by the evident fact that early Christians were willing to die for their faith, and often did. Wright sees early Christian martyrdom as a redefinition of Jewish martyrdom for the Torah. It was rooted in loyalty to the same God, but expressed through loyalty to Jesus.<sup>198</sup> As mentioned above, praxis tends to identify those within a group. The three major emphases of Christian praxis all focus on Jesus, with two of them being commissioned by him.

The central symbol of Christianity is the cross. A symbol so horrible that it was not mentioned in polite society became the central symbol of Christianity in a very short time.<sup>199</sup> It is highly unlikely that any group would choose such a symbol for aesthetic reasons and so the reason must be historical. Therefore the cross was not chosen by the early church—it was thrust upon them. Other symbols such as mission and the early creeds (baptismal formulae) define the nature and identity of the church, much as Jewish symbols such as the Torah, circumcision, kosher, and Sabbath did prior to Jesus' death and resurrection.<sup>200</sup>

Jesus called people to repent and believe, welcoming the outcasts, challenging his followers to live as God's people, and most importantly to go with him.<sup>201</sup> This points to the founding of a new community of faith. In answer to the question of whether or not Jesus intended to found a church, Wright answers, yes and no. 'Suffice it to say here that a good deal of evidence indicates that Jesus fully intended his stories to generate a new form of community....'<sup>202</sup> But he rejects a harsh dichotomy between Israel and the Church. Wright agrees with Lohfink that 'Jesus did not intend to found a church *because there already was one*, namely the people of Israel itself. Jesus' intention was therefore to *reform* Israel, not to found a different community altogether'.<sup>203</sup>

Finally, Wright stresses that the story that the early church told and the ways in which they answered the worldview questions evidence a basic continuity with the story that Jesus told, which had a basic continuity with Israel's story.

Whereas Jesus proclaimed that Israel's story was reaching its climax in him, the early church proclaimed that Israel's story, indeed the world's story, had reached its climax in Jesus.<sup>204</sup>

In this way, Wright maintains that the early Christian worldview is a modification of the basic Second-Temple Jewish worldview that can be tied directly to Jesus and his actions within history. Wright would thus say that in a sense Jesus founded Christianity, but not in the sense of starting a different group from Israel. The Christian church is not an alternative to Judaism, but rather the fulfilment and redemption of it.

### Jesus and the Gospels

Two questions must be answered in regard to the relationship between Jesus and the gospels: (1) Are the gospels accurate and do they originate with Jesus? (2) Do they reveal the theology of the early church within particular contexts?

Wright indicates that he will examine the relationship of Jesus to the gospels in depth in a later volume. But one may catch a glimpse of his thought concerning the relationship between Jesus and the gospels by examining his treatment of the gospels, Acts, Paul, and Hebrews in *The New Testament and the People of God*, (chs. 13, 14) along with ancillary statements made in his other writings.

Wright insists that one must begin by studying extant texts, not hypothetical texts. One should work from the synoptics and John to Q and other hypothetical texts, not vice versa.<sup>205</sup>

Wright acknowledges that the synoptic authors wrote for different audiences and structured their gospels so as to highlight different theological themes or to address particular situations in the early church. But he rejects the simplistic dichotomy that has the evangelists either 'simply collecting bits of tradition and stringing them together at random' or inventing material out of thin air to meet their 'home-made scheme of theology'.<sup>206</sup> The gospels, like all history, are interpreted history.

Wright rejects also the dichotomy between history and biography. The evangelists were writing biographies about Jesus, but biographies with a theological dimension in that they fitted within and reflected the whole story

of Israel and her God. He does not deny that there were some Jewish stories, such as Judith and Tobit that were known to be fictional in nature. Nevertheless he is quick to add: “But if all Jewish stories were fictions, and known to be fictions (in the normal, popular sense of ‘fictions’), the whole worldview would collapse upon itself.”<sup>207</sup>

To date, Wright has not chosen to argue that the apostles to whom they traditionally have been credited penned the gospels. He notes that none of the gospels tells the writer who the author was. He also is in no hurry to challenge relatively late dates for them because ‘the argument for the substantial historicity and accuracy of the Gospels never depended on their dating anyway’.<sup>208</sup>

Wright’s basic position is that all the New Testament authors, but especially the evangelists and Paul, thought in terms of Israel’s worldview story. It is the implicit narrative one finds in the New Testament texts. Not only did they think in terms of the worldview of Second-Temple Judaism, they thought in terms of that worldview story being fulfilled in Jesus. Therefore they were writing about ‘real events because as the climax of Israel’s history they could not be anything else’.<sup>209</sup> Wright concludes—

But if this is so, it means that the gospels are not simply Hellenistic-style biographies, modified slightly in a Jewish direction. They are Jewish stories; indeed, they claim to be The Jewish Story. Because that story has now to do with an individual human being, and because the story of this human being must now be announced to the Gentile world, as part of the fulfilment of the story itself, it must be told precisely *as a biography*, albeit a biography with a difference. Had the story, and the underlying worldview, been of a different order, the gospels could have been written more like *Pirke Aboth* or the *Gospel of Thomas*. They could have been collections of sayings. They were not. They are the Israel-story told as biography, modified in the direction of the secular genre (Luke especially shows evidence of this) but without using the secular genre as either the base or the goal.<sup>210</sup>

The connection is obvious. The New Testament authors understood Israel’s story as Jesus proclaimed it. Therefore one cannot help but conclude that

Wright understands the gospels as originating with Jesus.

Concerning the accuracy of the gospels, Wright holds that what is called for when dealing with differences in the gospels is neither a simplistic realism that says 'it all happened exactly like that' (positivism) or a simplistic cynicism that says 'nothing like that happened at all' (phenomenalism).<sup>211</sup> His proposal is that one should understand the gospels first as written to 'tell the story of Jesus' and second as written to 'address the evangelists' contemporaries'.<sup>212</sup> This relates to the source history of the gospels. Wright follows Kenneth Bailey in arguing that the gospels spring from informal but controlled oral traditions.<sup>213</sup> In other words the evangelists were permitted to shape stories of Jesus to address the needs of the early church, but they could not alter them essentially. This is perfectly consistent with his emphasis upon narrative and his use of critical realism.

Wright knows that by insisting that the gospels speak accurately of Jesus he is putting forward a much more theological understanding of Jesus than has often been heard from those seeking the historical Jesus. This, however, is not a weakness. The failure of others to conceive of Jesus as thinking theologically is not founded upon historical investigation, but rather philosophical presupposition. The bifurcation of sacred from secular, and historical from theological, springs from enlightenment rationalism, not the worldview of first-century Israel.<sup>214</sup>

So the answers to the two major questions addressed in this section are, yes, the gospels are both accurate and originate with Jesus; and yes, they do reflect the theology of the early church. Wright insists, however, that the theology which the gospels reflect has its roots in the teaching and actions of Jesus.

#### Evaluation

Three aspects of Wright's hermeneutic are obvious throughout—worldview analysis; narrative analysis, and critical realism. Wright consistently makes use of worldview analysis to provide historical context. The picture he paints of Jesus is shaped by his analysis of the worldview indicators. He consistently seeks to interpret Jesus in light of the story, praxis, and symbols of Second-Temple Judaism in order to expose how Jesus would answer the four ultimate questions. He then is able to answer questions concerning who Jesus believed he was or

what the content of his message was. A brief glance at the table of contents of *Jesus and the Victory of God* shows just how thoroughly worldview analysis permeates Wright's historical Jesus research. The chapter titles of Part II, containing chapters 5-10, read: The Praxis of a Prophet, Stories of the Kingdom (1): Announcement, Stories of the Kingdom (2): Invitation, Welcome, Challenge and Summons, Stories of the Kingdom (3): Judgment and Vindication, Symbol and Controversy, and The Questions of the Kingdom.<sup>215</sup> The degree to which Wright follows the hermeneutical model he laid out in *The New Testament and the People of God* is stunning. Such consistency is commendable and rare.

Wright's use of worldview as a hermeneutical tool is to be applauded. Far too often this step has been either ignored altogether or dealt with too simplistically to be of any value. An understanding of a culture's worldview is fundamental to understanding texts from any period. James Sire holds that 'World-view confusion' takes place when, 'a reader of Scripture fails to interpret the Bible within the intellectual and broadly cultural framework of the Bible itself and uses instead a foreign frame of reference'.<sup>216</sup> Worldview confusion is, in Sire's estimation, 'the major cause or the major effect' of all reading errors.<sup>217</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff writes of 'control beliefs' that affect one's selection of theories for critiquing disciplines as diverse as art, history, psychology, or the Bible.<sup>218</sup> Wright's emphasis upon worldview analysis is consistent with what research in this area has brought out and therefore well founded.

There is, however, a concern about his approach at this point. One might question whether or not Wright has paid sufficient attention to the variety of expressions that one finds in Second-Temple Judaism. Closer attention to and a more clear delineation of these differences might fend off some of the criticism that he has received concerning the two most-often criticized portions of his thesis—eschatology and the return from exile theme. Wright's position does not depend on proving that all, or even most, Jews believed what he insists Jesus was intending. All that he need prove is that such language and imagery would be intelligible within Jesus' day.

One final concern about Wright's worldview methodology must be mentioned. One sometimes gets the sense that he pays attention to the overall, implicit setting (worldview) of a text at the expense of the immediate, explicit setting (context). His treatment of the house on the rock versus the house on the sand

(Matt. 7:24-27) serves as an example. Within the context of watching for false teachers and impending judgement, those who apply (not merely hear) his words are like those building on the rock. He is most emphatically *not* saying that the house on the rock is in danger. He runs the risk of overusing worldview analysis at the expense of literary context in some cases. More attention to immediate context would be helpful.

Wright is to be commended for emphasizing the narrative nature of Jesus' thought. There is a growing body of evidence that indicates that human beings do think in narrative form. Mark Turner writes, '*Story* is a basic principle of mind. Most of our experience, our knowledge, and our thinking is organized as stories.'<sup>219</sup> W. R. Fisher declares, '[N]arration is the foundational, conceptual configuration of ideas for our species.'<sup>220</sup> Perhaps most significantly for Wright's position Alasdair MacIntyre insists, 'Man is, in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a storytelling animal.'<sup>221</sup>

Wright's emphasis upon narrative also provides much-needed context for the aphorisms of Jesus. Without historical and literary context, Jesus' aphorisms can be made to say virtually anything. Not only does his emphasis upon understanding Jesus' statements in light of a thorough analysis of his worldview provide a context from which Jesus' words cannot be wrenched without violence, it also provides a context within which some of Jesus' 'cryptic' sayings can be more readily grasped.

There are, however, also some difficulties related to Wright's use of story. (1) Wright's use of Greimas's methodology runs the risk of oversimplifying biblical narratives so as to make all stories fit into a preconceived notion of what stories look like and do. At times Greimas's methodology makes Jesus into more of a plot move than a person. (2) Wright's commitment to story sometimes causes him to pound square pegs into round holes. His treatment of some of the parables comes to mind at this point. This is not to say that his use of story does not make many parables clearer. But Jesus' parables were not dispensed in a one-size-fits-all fashion. (3) One must consider whether Wright carries over something that is clearly valid in narrative literature into the world of human experience, where its validity is questionable. In other words, symbolic messages in print, on stage, or in movies, may be much more easily perceived by the interpreter because of *repeated* exposure to and study of the

story. One must question whether Jesus' Temple Action, or his 'royal riddles' could have been as clearly perceived as Wright claims they were in the ebb and flow of daily life, given its one-view-only nature.

Yet one must note that Wright links Jesus' parables or 'riddles' to his 'actions'. Ben Meyer comments on the connection between Jesus' symbolic actions and his parables—

Now, symbol calls for interpretation and Jesus was himself the guide to the interpretation of his symbolic acts. He contested and corrected mistaken or malicious interpretations, as we know from his debates with critics. His parables were designed to help Israel decipher all these actions and to read in them the message they were meant to carry.<sup>222</sup>

In other words, Jesus went out of his way to make certain that the meaning he intended his symbolic actions to have was the meaning given them. Meyer also notes that many of Jesus' most important actions and sayings took place during the Passover season. Drawing upon communication theory, Meyer notes that Jesus chose to act when 'receiver-competence was at its peak' and concludes therefore that Jesus was much more likely to be understood at that time of the year than at any other.<sup>223</sup>

Meyer does concede that 'the sense of this integral act' was difficult to interpret for both Jesus' contemporaries and modern scholars.<sup>224</sup> Wright is not oblivious of this. He grants that Jesus' actions and riddles are cryptic, but also insists that there is a reciprocal relationship between them—they interpret one another. Nevertheless Wright's primary interest is not in discussing how Jesus' actions were understood (although he is not uninterested in this), but in assessing Jesus' aims. This criticism of Wright is therefore conditioned by the time at which Jesus performed his temple action and accompanying it inaugurated the Lord's Supper, and the inherent relationship between symbolic action and symbolic speech.

Wright makes a strong case for a narrative interpretation of the gospels. But the issue is not primarily about how one ought to interpret the gospels. It is about how actions that Jesus took were interpreted *before* the gospels were written. There are also here some questions as to the applicability of Greimas's literary method to historical reconstruction.

One also must ask how much does Wright see himself in the well of history? Wright insists that he is uncomfortable with the Jesus that he finds through the application of his method.<sup>225</sup> This is probably so. Certainly the Jesus that Wright pictures is neither an Oxford professor nor canon theologian of the most prestigious Anglican abbey in the world. But he nevertheless bears a striking resemblance to Wright's hermeneutic. Wright's hermeneutic is built upon the analysis of stories. Wright's Jesus is the messianic storyteller. Perhaps as Wright looks back through over 200 years of liberal and existential darkness all he sees is his hermeneutic in the well of history. This is not a condemnation of Wright or his method. Neither is it an attempt to discern Wright's personal psyche in his work. It is evidence for the accuracy of the thesis of this paper: there is a strong connection between one's hermeneutic and one's conclusion concerning the historical Jesus.

Wright's critical realism leads him consistently to state his argument in terms of a *via media*. Repeatedly he opts for the middle road between whatever positions he labels as positivism and phenomenism. He illustrates his method through diagrams that remind one of Thiselton's two horizons (which remind one of Gadamer's fusion of horizons).<sup>226</sup> The drawings are somewhat helpful to the first-time reader, but may serve to oversimplify the task. What is involved in historical Jesus research is not critiquing the degree to which one's knowledge of what is known is shaped by one's theoretical precepts (although of course that is part of the challenge of knowing). The task is more complicated than the way in which Wright's diagram pictures it in two horizons. What is actually involved in historical Jesus research is not—

Observer-----Object

It is actually closer to one of the two models below.

Observer---Text (Mark?)---Oral Tradition---Object (Jesus)

or

Observer---Object (text)---Oral Tradition---(Jesus)

In other words, while there may be two horizons (observer/knower and object/referent/that which is known) there are many layers, or intermediate objects, that one must “get through” in order to have access to, or to know,

the referent that one desires to know, whether that referent is a physical object or some historical fact(s). Whichever model one prefers the task involves several levels more than Wright's' diagram pictures. Wright is aware of the complex nature of the task. He makes it clear in his response to Marsh and Casey that he understands that knowledge in a critical–realist model is of an ongoing and spiral nature.<sup>227</sup> The point is not that he *treats* the material simplistically. It is rather that his diagram *presents* the theoretical issues involved somewhat simplistically.

In conclusion, Wright's model is innovative and thought provoking. He is well aware of the current state of historical Jesus research and his work addresses appropriately that of others in the field. Wright is correct concerning most of the major moves he makes, although some areas need to be more clearly explicated, while others can be balanced out by more attention to what the text explicitly states. But overall Wright has shown the way forward with his clear and unique proposals concerning Jesus.

ROBERT STEWART is Professor of Theology and Philosophy at New Orleans Baptist Seminary.

#### ENDNOTES

93. A crucial factor in grasping Wright's meaning is to understand that 'exile' is not primarily a geographical term, specifying a particular location, but rather a sociological and theological term, referring to a particular condition, namely political/military bondage under pagan nations (Babylon, Rome). Israel may be in Palestine and worship regularly in the temple, but nevertheless still in exile. Wright, *NTPG*, pp. 215-23; Wright, *JVG*, pp. 126-31.
94. Wright, *NTPG*, pp. 216-23.
95. *Ibid.*, p. 217. Others who would agree with Wright that most first-century Jews lived in anticipation of Israel being restored as the kingdom of God include Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 77-119, 335-40; Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus, A New Vision: Spirit, Culture, and the Life of Discipleship* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), pp. 125-49; Marinus de Jonge, *Jesus, the Servant Messiah* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), pp. 55-75.
96. Wright, *NTPG*, pp. 24-32; *idem*, *JVG*, pp. 383-428.
97. Wright, *NTPG*, pp. 223-43.
98. *Ibid.*, p. 243.
99. *Ibid.*, p. 248. Wright lists several types of monotheism that Israel rejected:

- henotheism, pantheism, Gnosticism, and Deism. Additionally Israel's worldview excluded paganism. 99. *Ibid.*, 249-50.
100. *Ibid.*, pp. 250-51.
101. *Ibid.*, pp. 250-52
102. *Ibid.*, p. 277.
103. *Ibid.*, p. 278. Cf. Tessa Rajak, *Josephus: The Historian and His Society* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), pp. 97-100.
104. Wright, *JVG*, pp. 143-44.
105. *Ibid.*,
106. *Ibid.*, p. 652.
107. Robert L. Webb, *John the Baptizer and Prophet: A Socio-Historical Study*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 62 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1991), pp. 307-350, esp. pp. 339-42. Leadership popular prophets were prophets who lacked clerical credentials, were not of an organized Jewish subgroup (Essenes, Pharisees), and sprang up from among the people. For characteristics of oracular prophets see Horsley and Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs*, p. 257. None of this treatment of prophetic categories should be allowed to obscure the fact that Wright also interprets Jesus' prophetic ministry and actions as consistent with the ministries and actions of Old Testament prophets. Wright compares Jesus' pronouncements of judgment to those of Elijah, Jeremiah, Amos, and Malachi. Wright, *JVG*, pp. 182-86, 637.
108. *Ibid.*, pp. 152-55, 162-68.
109. Marcus J. Borg and N. T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), p. 33. Hereafter *MOJ*. Wright is by no means alone in arguing that Jesus understood his vocation as that of a prophet. Those who see prophet as the primary rubric for understanding Jesus include, Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*; Gerd Theissen, *The Shadow of the Galilean*; Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence*; idem, *Sociology and the Jesus Movement*; Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*; idem, *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet*. Even Ben Witherington, who rejects 'prophet' as the primary rubric for understanding Jesus acknowledges that a prophetic element was a crucial part of Jesus' ministry. Witherington, *The Jesus Quest*, pp. 186-87.
110. Wright, *JVG*, 246-64.
111. *Ibid.*, p. 517.
112. *Ibid.*, p. 538.
113. *Ibid.*, p. 490.
114. *Ibid.*, pp. 438, 553-63. His entry into the city also had clear Maccabean overtones. *Ibid.*, pp. 490-93.
115. *Ibid.*, pp. 536-37.
116. *Ibid.*, p. 539.

117. *Ibid.*, p. 538.
118. *Ibid.*, p. 597.
119. Wright, *MOJ*, p. 255, n. 30.
120. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
121. Wright, *JVG*, p. 612.
122. Wright, *JVG*, p. 621.
123. Wright, *JVG*, p. 615. See Bruce Chilton, *God in Strength: Jesus' Announcement of the Kingdom* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1987), pp. 283-88.
124. Wright, *JVG*, p. 613.
125. Wright, *JVG*, p. 615.
126. Wright, *JVG*, pp. 616-20. Of course, simply stringing together verses does not a thesis prove. But one had better have some sources if one hopes to prove a thesis, be it historical or biblical.
127. Wright, *JVG*, p. 622.
128. Wright, *JVG*, p. 623.
129. *Ibid.*, pp. 644-51.
130. *Ibid.*, p. 615. Wright acknowledges that his understanding of Jesus as YHWH embodied is intimately linked to the idea of Israel's return from exile. But it is crucial to understand that Wright does not present either the 'return from exile' or the 'embodiment of YHWH' over against the 'kingdom of God'. Quite the opposite, the 'return from exile' and the 'embodiment of YHWH' are non-negotiable components in the establishment of the kingdom of God. *JVG*, p. 623.
131. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus*, pp. 110-11.
132. *Ibid.*, p. 114.
133. Wright, *JVG*, pp. 624-29.
134. Wright, *JVG*, p. 624.
135. Wright, *JVG*, p. 629.
136. Wright, *MOJ*, p. 166.
137. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus*, pp. 121-22.
138. Wright, *JVG*, p. 653.
139. *Ibid.*, p. 204.
140. Wright, *MOJ*, p. 36.
141. Wright, *JVG*, 202-203. Dale Allison contends that Wright has misunderstood what Weiss, Schweitzer, and possibly even Bultmann meant by eschatological and apocalyptic. He thus sees Wright's talk of "end of the space-time universe" as setting up a false dichotomy. Dale C. Allison, Jr., "Jesus and the Victory of Apocalyptic," in *Jesus and the Restoration of Israel: A Critical Assessment of N. T. Wright's Jesus and the Victory of God*, ed. Carey C. Newman (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1999), pp. 126-41.
142. Wright, *NTPG*, p. 286. Wright insists that metaphorical language is not necessarily

- non-referential language. On eschatology and apocalyptic language see chapter 10 of *NTPG*. Cf. George Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1980; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), pp. 243-71.
143. Wright, *JVG*, p. 208.
  144. Craig Blomberg, "The Wright Stuff: A Critical Overview of Jesus and the Victory of God," in *Jesus and the Restoration of Israel*, pp. 28-29.
  145. Wright, *MOJ*, 197-204. Wright sees this position in light of his beliefs about 'the plans of the creator God for creation as a whole'. *Ibid*, p. 197.
  146. See Dale C. Allison, "A Plea for Thoroughgoing Eschatology," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 113 (1994): 651-68; *idem*, *The End of the Ages Has Come: An Early Interpretation of the Passion and Resurrection of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985). Wright's position appears to make use of two eschatological positions that are often thought to be mutually exclusive. He follows Schweitzer's thoroughgoing eschatology in seeing Jesus' basic message as eschatological and apocalyptic in nature. But his emphasis on the this-worldly nature of eschatological language appears to be in line with C. H. Dodd's realized eschatology. Unlike Wright's eschatology Dodd's eschatology has little if any future reference at all. C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (London: Nisbet, 1935); *idem*, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Development* (Chicago: Willett and Clark, 1937); *idem*, *The Old Testament in the New* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963); *idem*, *The Coming of Christ: Four Addresses for the Season of the Advent* (Cambridge: CUP, 1951).
  147. Wright, *MOJ*, p. 32.
  148. Wright, *JVG*, pp. 126-27. The idea that Jews of Jesus' day thought of themselves as in exile is not new. Nor has it gone without challenge. Those defending the idea include Michael A. Knibb, *The Qumran Community* (Cambridge: CUP, 1987), 20; Craig A. Evans, "Aspects of Exile and Restoration in the Proclamation of Jesus and the Gospels," in *Exile: Old Testament, Jewish, and Christian Conceptions*, ed. James M. Scott (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1997), pp. 299-328; D. J. Versput, "The Davidic Messiah and Matthew's Jewish Christianity," in *Society of Biblical Literature 1995 Seminar Papers*, ed. E. H. Lovering, Jr. (Atlanta: Scholar's Press, 1995), pp. 102-16; Tremper Longman III and Daniel G. Reid, *God Is a Warrior*, *Studies in Old Testament Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), pp. 91-118.
  149. 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; 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 New Testament* 69 (1998): 95-103. For Wright's response to Casey and Marsh, see N. T. Wright, "Theology, History and Jesus: A Response to Maurice Casey and Clive Marsh," p. 105-12.
  150. Casey, "Where Wright Is Wrong," p. 99.
  151. Craig A. Evans, "Aspects of Exile and Restoration in the Proclamation of Jesus and

the Gospels,” pp. 299-328. Evans also defends Wright against the charges of Marsh and Casey in “Jesus and the Continuing Exile of Israel,” in *Jesus and the Restoration of Israel*, pp. 77-100.

152. Wright, *JVG*, p. 445. cf. *NTPG*, pp. 268-72.
153. Wright, *JVG*, p. 204.
154. *Ibid.*, pp. 177-79.
155. *Ibid.*, p. 292.
156. *Ibid.*, pp. 125-33.
157. *Ibid.*, p. 176.
158. *Ibid.*, p. 235.
159. *Ibid.*, p. 242.
160. *Ibid.*, p. 251.
161. *Ibid.*, pp. 430-31.
162. *Ibid.*, p. 191.
163. *Ibid.*, p. 272.
164. Wright, *JVG*, 451. The kingdom of God is often presented within the context of God defeating spiritual enemies in Jewish thought. See John Gray, *The Biblical Doctrine of the Reign of God* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1979); Trygve N. D. Mettinger, “Fighting the Powers of Chaos and Hell: Towards the Biblical Portrait of God,” *Studia Theologica* 39 (1985): 21-38; Longman and Reid, *God Is a Warrior*.
165. Richard B. Hays, “Victory over Violence: The Significance of N. T. Wright’s Jesus for New Testament Ethics,” in Carey C. Newman ed., *Jesus and the Restoration of Israel: A Critical Assessment of N. T. Wright’s Jesus and the Victory of God*, (Downers Grove: IVP, 1999), p. 149. For Josephus’s mention of the Pharisees, see Jewish War 2.411-16.
166. Email correspondence from May 3, 2000.
167. Wright, *JVG*, pp. 343, 348.
168. *Ibid.*, pp. 348, 360, 362.
169. *Ibid.*, p. 438.
170. Wright, *MOJ*, pp. 44-45.
171. *Ibid.*, p. 47.
172. Wright, *JVG*, pp. 171-72. This meant that he had an itinerant ministry style that delayed his arrest and execution. *Ibid.*
173. *Ibid.*, pp. 443-67.
174. *Ibid.*, pp. 553-54.
175. *Ibid.*, pp. 383-90.
176. *Ibid.*, pp. 548-49.
177. *Ibid.*, pp. 550-51.
178. *Ibid.*, p. 417. Despite the fact that some have considered it nonhistorical (R. J. Miller, “The (A)Historicity of Jesus’ Temple Demonstration: A Test Case in Methodology,”

- in *Society of Biblical Literature 1991 Seminar Papers*, ed. E. H. Lovering, Jr. [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991], pp. 235-52; D. Seeley, "Jesus' Temple Act," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 55, no. 2 [1993]: 263-83), recognition of the historicity of some kind of action in the temple is so widespread that even the Jesus Seminar was in general agreement that "Jesus performed some anti-temple act and spoke some word against the temple" (R. W. Funk, *et al*, *The Acts of Jesus: The Search for the Authentic Deeds of Jesus* [San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998], p. 121).
179. Wright, *JVG*, p. 426.
  180. *Ibid.*, pp. 553-54.
  181. *Ibid.*, pp. 565-76.
  182. *Ibid.*, p. 554.
  183. *Ibid.*, p. 558.
  184. *Ibid.*, p. 564.
  185. *Ibid.*, p. 577-84.
  186. *Ibid.*, p. 592
  187. *Ibid.*, p. 592-611.
  188. *Ibid.*, pp. 658-59; *NTPG*, pp. 399-401, 460; N. T. Wright, "How Jesus Saw Himself," *Bible Review* 12 (June 1996): 29. Wright's next volume will deal extensively with the matter of resurrection in a style similar to the way he has dealt with Jesus' messianic vocation, personal conversation with Wright, August 16, 1997. Therefore, all of the following is subject to revision after the completion and publication of his third volume.
  189. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
  190. Wright, *MOJ*, p. 118.
  191. Wright, *JVG*, p. 111. For more on the origins of Christian worship of Jesus, see Larry W. Hurtado, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988); *idem*, "What Do We Mean by 'First-Century Jewish Monotheism'?", in *Society of Biblical Literature 1993 Seminar Papers*, ed. E. H. Lovering, Jr. (Atlanta: Scholars, 1993), pp. 348-68; Richard Bauckham, "Jesus, Worship of," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 3, pp. 812-19.
  192. Wright, *NTPG*, p. 399-400.
  193. Wright, *JVG*, p. 487-89.
  194. Wright, *NTPG*, p. 360.
  195. *Ibid.*, p. 361.
  196. One could argue that the early church was speaking at that point, not Jesus, but to argue that the early church did something (observed baptism and Lord's Supper) because the early church wrote it into the gospels is to avoid the question and mistake an effect for a cause.
  197. *Ibid.*, p. 361
  198. *Ibid.*, p. 365.

199. *Ibid.*, p. 367.
200. *Ibid.*, pp. 367-68.
201. Wright, *JVG*, p. 245. Jesus' call to a new praxis is thus understood as a means to identify exactly who is truly Israel.
202. *Ibid.*, p. 246.
203. *Ibid.*, p. 275. Cf. Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*, trans. J. P. Galvin (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).
204. Wright, *NTPG*, pp. 369-403, esp. pp. 369-70 and pp. 396-403.
205. *Ibid.*, pp. 371-72.
206. *Ibid.*, p. 380.
207. *Ibid.*, p. 397.
208. Tom Wright, *The Original Jesus: The Life and Vision of a Revolutionary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 126, 129.
209. Wright, *NTPG*, pp. 398-99.
210. *Ibid.*, p. 402.
211. Wright, *The Original Jesus*, p. 99.
212. *Ibid.*, pp. 105-6.
213. Kenneth Bailey, "Informal Controlled Oral Tradition and the Synoptic Gospels," *Asia Journal of Theology* 5, No. 1 (1991): 42-55.
214. Wright, *NTPG*, pp. 244-52.
215. Wright, *JVG*, pp. viii-X. The subheadings are also filled with references to the various worldview indicators.
216. James W. Sire, *Scripture Twisting: 20 Ways the Cults Misread the Bible* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1980), p. 26.
217. *Ibid.*, p. 127.
218. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), pp. 15-20.
219. Mark Turner, *The Literary Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), v.
220. W. R. Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value and Action* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1989), p. 193.
221. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2d ed. (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1988), p. 21.
222. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus*, p. 169.
223. Ben F. Meyer, *Christus Faber: The Master Builder and the House of God*, Princeton Theological Monograph Series, 29 (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick, 1992), p. 263.
224. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus*, p. 170.
225. Wright, *JVG*, xv.
226. Wright, *NTPG*, pp. 35-36.
227. Wright, "Theology, History and Jesus," p. 106.