



*The Challenge of Jesus:
Rediscovering Who Jesus Was
and Is*

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“More than two hundred years of ‘historical criticism’ of the Bible have vastly increased our knowledge of biblical times and vastly decreased many Christians’ confidence in their sacred text. Wright . . . takes the historical-critical method with utmost seriousness but, by challenging some of its assumptions, offers readers not the desiccated shadow-Christ of the notorious ‘Jesus Seminar’ but a historically reliable portrait of the man, his teaching and his mission – a portrait that is, in its own way, an invitation to faith.”
– George Weigel, *Wall Street Journal*

“In this strange, dark new world, we urgently need new light.”

Jesus continues to challenge us all in various ways. When I wrote the original lectures on which this book is based, in something of a hurry for the conference in January 1999, I never imagined the twists and turns that would be taken in the scholarly world, in the popular Christian world and in the wider world of the dangerous twenty-first century that was about to dawn. I remain convinced that the picture I sketched of Jesus, and of the challenge he presents to those who follow him in today’s world, makes good sense historically, theologically and practically. But new things have happened. In the world of scholarship, things have not stood still. Though I have been working in other areas – in the life of the church and the study of Paul – three areas of continuing discussion have nonetheless caught my eye.

First, the Temple. When I began research, nobody much was talking about the Temple in relation to Jesus. Geza Vermes, in his famous *Jesus the Jew*, did not think Jesus’ Temple action merited much attention. Ed Sanders changed all that in his *Jesus and Judaism*, making the same incident central; but even Sanders did not, it seems, appreciate just how extraordinary Jesus’ claims actually were. The Temple, after all, was supposedly the place where heaven and earth met and did business. For many modern Christians, the Temple has appeared as simply a rather grand churchlike structure: a place of worship, but not really the microcosm, the “little world” in which heaven and earth were contained in a tiny space. Since that is the language Christians often use about incarnation, we should perhaps pay more attention to Jesus’ engagement with the Temple, and his implicit claim to upstage or even replace it, in terms of his implicit claim about himself. Of course, the early Christians continued to meet and worship in the Jerusalem Temple. It was not, so to speak, a straight swap. But by Paul’s day they already thought of their new movement (as Qumran had done before them) as in some sense a new Temple.

The second theme I have continued to explore relates closely to this. In *Jesus and the Victory of God*, and then briefly in *The Challenge of Jesus*, I suggested that one way to grasp Jesus’ self-understanding was in terms of the ancient Jewish belief that Israel’s God, YHWH, had long promised to return in glorious presence to Jerusalem, and indeed to the Temple. Nowhere in second-Temple literature do we find anyone saying that this had in fact happened. The Gospels, however, frame their story of Jesus in exactly that way. Mark opens with quotations from Malachi and Isaiah that are explicitly about getting ready for YHWH’s return. John’s prologue climaxes with a verse that resonates with the coming of the divine glory into the Tabernacle in Exodus 40, into Solomon’s Temple in 1 Kings 8, and into the prophesied new Temple in Ezekiel 43. The more I have studied this theme the more I have come to think that it is central to most, if not all, New Testament christology; I think it was central to the

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A prolific writer of both scholarly and popular books, **N. T. Wright** has written over thirty books, including *Simply Christian*, *The Original Jesus: The Life and Vision of a Revolutionary*, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, *The Challenge of Jesus* and *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions*. His magisterial work, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, is widely regarded as one of the most significant contributions to contemporary New Testament studies.

Formerly bishop of Durham in England, Wright is research professor of New Testament and early Christianity at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. He was formerly canon theologian of Westminster Abbey and dean of Lichfield Cathedral. He also taught New Testament studies for twenty years at

understanding of Jesus himself. . . .

And that brings me to my third point of scholarship. In what sense did “the kingdom come” in the public career of Jesus, and then supremely through his crucifixion and resurrection? Many have pushed back at my exposition of the kingdom in Jesus’ teaching, insisting once more that he really did expect the world to end, or something like that, within a few years. I have repeatedly argued against this on the grounds of the way that “apocalyptic” language actually works, both in the Jewish world and in early Christian writings. Then comes the divide: some want to say, “Jesus promised the end of the world and got it wrong,” and others want to say, “Jesus said the kingdom was coming quickly, and he meant the transfiguration,” or something like that. The latter then sometimes go on to say that the kingdom won’t come properly and fully until Jesus returns. This, it seems to me, ignores what all four Evangelists say in their own way: that the crucifixion really was the enthronement of Jesus as the King of the Jews, and that when Matthew’s risen Jesus claims “all authority in heaven *and on earth*” (Mt 28:18, emphasis added), this is true to the kingdom understanding of the whole early church and of Jesus himself. No doubt this debate will rumble on.

It is this theme of God’s kingdom that has had a surprising effect at the level of less scholarly church life. I have naturally been delighted that many leaders and teachers in traditions other than my own have found value in my work. I have been invited to Vineyard churches, to “emerging” churches, to various postmodern gatherings of Christians with no label except a general dissatisfaction with what they have found in the churches where they grew up. I have often expressed an amused surprise: what are such people doing flocking around a middle-aged Anglican bishop? The answer seems to be that Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom of God, which I set out in *Jesus and the Victory of God* and then again in the present book, has been for such people like a cold drink on a hot day. It’s what they have been waiting for, only they didn’t know it. Again and again I have been told, “My church never taught or preached about this, but it is the most relevant thing I’ve heard.” The kingdom has been a closed book to many, and I, quite by accident, seem to have prised it open just a little. . . .

When God wants to sort out the world, as the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount make clear, he doesn’t send in the tanks. He sends in the meek, the broken, the justice hungry, the peacemakers, the pure-hearted and so on. Read Acts and watch them do it. And this, I am convinced, is what Jesus himself had in mind all along. He really did think he was kick-starting God’s kingdom on earth, but just as he radically redefined the way in which the decisive battle would be won (the cross), so he radically redefined the way in which that victory would be implemented (the servant vocation). That is what Mark 10:35-45 is all about. The church has regularly read all this wrong, looking only for “atonement” (“the son of man came to give his life as a ransom for many”) and failing to see the redefinition of power within which that vital statement is contained (“the rulers of this age do things one

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BOOK EXCERPT

Cambridge, McGill and Oxford Universities. He has been a visiting professor at Harvard Divinity School, Hebrew University in Jerusalem, Gregorian University in Rome and many other institutions around the world.

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

“Wright provides a treatment of ‘the historical Jesus’ that is attentive to both critical scholarship and living faith. The present book is a generally accessible version of his more academic Jesus and the Victory of God.”

—*First Things*

way, . . . but we’re going to do it the other way”). I now see this even more clearly than I did fifteen years ago. Maybe a taste of the corridors of power in British society has alerted me to the gospel-shaped redefinition of power more than I realized at the time.

Maybe that explains the way I now see the new century in which we live. Nobody imagined, in January 1999, what would happen less than three years later, as planes smashed into buildings and the world changed forever. The Western world, and the Western church, was embarrassingly unprepared, not just for the terrible and wicked deeds of September 11, 2001, but for the worldview challenges that it offered. For far too long Western Christianity had believed, at least implicitly, that religion and politics were two such separate things – that one didn’t really need to think too hard about how they might engage each other. The reaction to the atrocity was then predictable: meet fire with fire. The result of that, in turn, has also been predictable: there is far more unrest in the Middle East than there was fifteen years ago.

In this strange, dark new world, we urgently need new light. Jesus of Nazareth brought that light a long time ago. The world, and the church, has found it too dazzling, and we have done our best to cover it up, talking busily about a private spirituality in the present and a “heavenly” salvation in the future. But when Jesus taught us to pray that God’s kingdom would come, and God’s will would be done, on earth as in heaven, he actually meant it. When he said that all authority had been given him *on earth* as in heaven, he meant that too. We have scarcely begun to figure out how this ought to work out in practice. But I hope and pray that this little book will be, for some at least, an introduction to what Jesus himself meant by it at the time, and hence an invitation to ponder what he might mean by it today and tomorrow, as he summons us still to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth.

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—*Taken from the Introduction*