



How Jesus Saw Himself

By N. T. Wright Bible Review 1996



The quest for the historical Jesus began as a protest against traditional Christian dogma. But when the supposedly “neutral” historians peered into the well, all they saw was a featureless Jesus. Even when these scholars decided that everybody else—John the Baptist, the evangelists, Paul, the Q people^a and so on—was at home in a richly storied and symbolic world, Jesus himself was not allowed to act symbolically, to criticize his contemporaries, to think theologically, to reflect on his own vocation or to evoke any of the various meta-narratives with which his Jewish world was replete. At this point, objectivist historiography begins to eat its own tail; and it has now decided that it doesn’t like the taste. Hardly surprising.

So why discuss the historical Jesus and Christian theology? Because I take the challenge of Hermann Samuel Reimarus seriously. Reimarus’s *On the Intention of Jesus and His Teaching* (1778) was perhaps the first modern work to challenge us to look for the historical Jesus. His platform: Investigate Jesus, and see whether Christianity is not based on a mistake. But we also need to take Albert Schweitzer’s challenge seriously: Put Jesus within apocalyptic Judaism, and watch bland unthinking dogma shiver in its shoes.

If this is too dangerous, escape routes are available. According to William Wrede, for example, Mark is theological fiction, and Jesus is a non-apocalyptic, teasing teacher. This view is alive and well, even a hundred years later. Or, for Martin Kähler, the true Christ is the Christ of faith detached from the Jesus of history. This, too, is alive and well today. The church may urge the latter escape route—the Christ of faith apart from the Jesus of history; part of the academic guild may urge the former—Jesus the wise teacher. Both of these escape

routes should be resisted. The historical method leads me to accept both Reimarus's challenge (Is Christianity based on a historical mistake?) and Schweitzer's proposal (Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet).

Schweitzer's account, however, must be seriously modified. "Apocalyptic" is not the same as "end-of-the-world."^b Rather, it invests major events within history with their theological significance. It looks, specifically, for the unique and climactic moment in, not the abolition of, Israel's long historical story. Apocalyptic is the symbolic and richly charged language of protest, affirming that God's kingdom will come on earth as it is in heaven—not in some imagined heavenly realm, to be created after the present world has been destroyed. In particular, apocalyptic is the language of revolution: It does not proclaim that YHWH will destroy the world, but that he will act dramatically within it, to bring Israel's long night of suffering to an end, to usher in a new day in which peace and justice will reign.

Apocalyptic, therefore, sets the natural context for a truly subversive wisdom. Wisdom and folly, within this world-view, are not abstract or timeless. They consist in recognizing, or failing to recognize, that the long-awaited moment is now arriving. Apocalypse and wisdom fit snugly together, and are mutually reinforcing.

When we make the adjustments required by this historical redefinition of apocalypse, the major division in contemporary Jesus studies becomes clear. The controversy, though far more complex, is essentially comprehensible as a debate between Wrede's "consistent skepticism" and Schweitzer's "consistent eschatology." John Dominic Crossan and the Jesus Seminar offer a non-apocalyptic Jesus:^c not just a Jesus who did not expect the end of the space-time universe, but a Jesus who did not think that Israel's long and checkered story was now reaching its dramatic and definitive climax.

I take the other view, claiming descent from Schweitzer. While agreeing that Jesus did not expect the end of the space-time world, I insist, like E.P. Sanders and many others, that Jesus was not a religious reformer but an eschatological prophet. Like other first-century eschatological prophets, and Messianic or quasi-Messianic figures, Jesus really did believe that Israel's God was acting through him and his movement to do for Israel, at last, what Israel's prophets had promised.

What, precisely, was that? With the Exodus as their symbolic narrative backdrop, the prophets declared that Israel would be released from the bondage that had begun with the Babylonian Exile and that continued into Jesus' own day. Nobody in Jesus' day would have claimed that the visions of Isaiah, Jeremiah or Ezekiel had already been fulfilled. The Babylons of this world were yet to be defeated, and Israel was yet to be free. And this real return from exile—that is, this complete liberation—would of course involve the return of YHWH to Zion.^d Prophet after prophet says so; nowhere in Second Temple literature does anyone claim that it has actually happened. The prophets, moreover, interpreted the exile as punishment for Israel's sin, so that the end of exile would therefore be the "forgiveness of sins"; it would mean Israel's redemption, evil's defeat and YHWH's return. All of this can be summed up in a single phrase: "the kingdom of God."

Where does Jesus belong on this map, and what effect does his presence and message have on Christian theology? First, Jesus exemplified *the praxis of a prophet*. He was known as a prophet; he spoke of himself as a prophet. He was both an oracular prophet and a prophet as leader. His movement grew out of that of John the Baptist, who was also a prophetic figure. Both men were clearly *eschatological* prophets. They were not merely visionary teachers. They were not merely advocating subversive wisdom or behavior. They were announcing, in symbol and narrative, that Israel's story was reaching the point for which Israel had longed.

Second, Jesus was a teller of apocalyptic stories. His parables, and his whole announcement, consisted at bottom of this: The time had arrived. To say "the kingdom of God is at hand" (*Matthew 4:17*) was to supply the missing line in the story that many wanted to hear. To speak of the return of a disgraced young son (*Luke 15:11–32*), and to use that as the validation of open and celebratory commensality (*Luke 15:1–2*), was to claim table-fellowship as the embodiment of the real return from exile. To speak of the fall of the house (*Matthew*

7:26–27) evoked the theme of evil's defeat. To speak of the master returning after a long absence (*Luke 19:11–27*) hinted at YHWH's return to Zion. These were among Jesus' characteristic kingdom-stories.

But they had a twist for which Jesus' hearers were unprepared. Like all kingdom-stories of the time, they invited Herod and Pilate, Caesar and Caiaphas to tremble in their beds. If Israel's God was going to become king, all other rulers would be demoted. But, like most kingdom-stories of the time, they also offered a critique of other kingdom-stories. If the Pharisees' kingdom-story was correct, the Essenes' was not, and vice versa. Jesus' kingdom-story, like all others, was doubly subversive, striking not only at the great empires and their representatives but also at other Jewish kingdom-stories.

Jesus invited his hearers to become part of the story. His radical narrative summoned all and sundry to celebrate with him the real return from exile, the real forgiveness of sins. He was offering the latter precisely because he was enacting the former. This is eschatology, not reform. Jesus' so-called ethics were part of the story, the story of what God's renewed Israel would look like. As other Jewish leaders before and since, Jesus was urging his contemporaries to follow him in the subversive way of peace. He was radically opposed to the way of ultra-orthodoxy, of violent nationalist revolution. This was not, of course, because he was supporting the status quo, or was non-political, but precisely because he wasn't.

By the same token, Jesus warned his contemporaries that failure to follow him would result in ruin. He stood in the great tradition of Israel's prophets, notably Elijah and Jeremiah. His story had two possible endings, between which his hearers had to choose. If they came his way, the way of peace, they would be the light of the world. If they went the other way, as Jesus saw many of his contemporaries eager to do, they would call down on themselves the wrath of Rome. Jesus, like Amos or Jeremiah, warned that Rome's wrath would constitute God's wrath. To follow Jesus' teachings, his subversive wisdom, would be the only way to build the house on the rock. To follow the false prophets who were leading Israel into nationalist revolution would cause the house to fall with a great crash.

Not only did Jesus behave as an eschatological prophet and tell stories that clothe the apocalyptic message in narrative form. He was also an interpreter of traditional Jewish symbols:

Family: Jesus subverted conventional Jewish family loyalty, loyalty ultimately to the people ('*am*), regarding his followers as a fictive kinship group.

Land: He urged his followers to abandon their possessions, which in his world mostly meant land.

Torah: Jesus acted and spoke with a sovereign authority, challenging in particular the symbolic practices—Sabbath observance and food restrictions—by which Galilean Jews distinguished themselves from their pagan neighbors.

Temple: Jesus symbolically enacted its destruction, recognizing that its guardians, and the people as a whole, had refused his way of peace.

He constructed his own alternative Jewish world-view (as, *mutatis mutandis*, the Essenes had done) around key symbolic actions: healings, which were seen by some as subversive and magical; open and festive table-fellowship; the call of the twelve; the offer of the eschatological gift of forgiveness; the redefined family; his own agenda and vocation. Jesus' critique of his contemporaries' use of traditional symbols came together in his upsetting the tables of the money-changers at the Temple (*Mark 11:15–19*). His own symbols came together in the Last Supper (*Mark 14:12–25*). These two actions belong together and interpret each other.

Does all this mean that Jesus was in some sense anti-Jewish? Of course not. Was Elijah anti-Jewish for telling his contemporaries that they were under judgment? Were the Essenes anti-Jewish for denouncing the present Temple and its rulers, or for attacking the Pharisees? The debate, like some tragic current ones, is essentially

intra-Jewish. Once again, Jesus' critique was based, not on religion, but on eschatology. Jesus did not "speak against the law," as though he were a Lutheran born at the wrong time. He did not regard the symbols of Israel's world-view as bad, shabby, offensive or strange—or as representing a wrong sort of religion—as though he were a 19th- or 20th-century liberal. Nor did he simply offer a new option to be chosen by anyone who fancied it, as though he were a postmodernist. He claimed that the day had arrived in which the God-given Mosaic dispensation was being overtaken by the *eschaton*. And this was highlighted for him by the fact that he saw the God-given symbols of Temple, Torah, land and family being used to undergird the ultra-orthodox zeal for revolutionary violence. Jesus' work aroused opposition, not in the form of an intra-Pharisaic dialogue about the finer points of Torah, but in the form of a radical clash of agendas.

Jesus' praxis, stories and symbols thus indicate his answers, implicit and sometimes explicit, to the five major world-view questions.

Who are we? Jesus and his followers form the real return-from-exile people, the remnant, the seed, the little flock.

Where are we? We are in the land, though still slaves; but our God will make us inherit the earth.

What time is it? The hour of crisis: the time of great tribulation, through which the kingdom will come; the long-awaited moment when the Exodus will be re-enacted, when exile will end, evil will be defeated and YHWH will return to Zion.

What's wrong? Evil is rampant, not merely within paganism, but within Israel: From the oppressive regime of the Chief Priests to the populist revolutionary movements, the world's evil has radically infected Israel also.

What's the solution? Everything we know about Jesus suggests that in his heart of hearts he gave the answer: I am.

But how? Without in any way psychologizing Jesus, we can as historians attempt to understand the network of motivation, and even of vocation, that seems to have been present to him. We can move, in other words, from world-view to aims and beliefs.

Jesus believed he was Israel's Messiah, the one through whom YHWH would restore the fortunes of his people. The word Messiah had, of course, nothing to do with trinitarian or incarnational theology. Simon and Athronges had been hailed as Messiahs when Jesus was a boy. The Sicarii regarded Menahem as Messiah, until a rival group killed him. Simeon ben Kosiba was hailed by Akiba as "son of the star." Presumably they all regarded themselves as the Messiah. People today mostly don't think like that. But Jesus was a first-century Jew, not a 20th-century liberal. Anyone doing and saying what Jesus did and said must have faced the question: Will I be the one through whom the liberation will come? All the evidence, not least the Temple action and the title on the cross (*Mark 15:26*), suggests that Jesus answered, Yes.

Jesus' radical and counter-cultural agenda, subverting both the political status quo and the movements of violent revolution, was focused on his awareness of his vocation. John the Baptist re-enacted the Exodus in the wilderness; Jesus would do so in Jerusalem. Jesus' gospel message constantly invokes *Isaiah 40–55*, in which YHWH returns to Zion, defeats Babylon and liberates Israel from her exile; at the heart of that great passage stands a job description. Schweitzer argued that Jesus saw the Great Tribulation, the Messianic Woes, coming upon Israel, and believed himself called, like the martyrs, to go ahead of Israel and take them upon himself. This would be the victory over evil; this would be the redefined Messianic task. Jesus had warned that Israel's national ideology, focused now upon the revolutionary movements, would lead to ruthless Roman suppression; now, as Israel's representative, he deliberately went to the place where that suppression found its symbolic focus. He drew his counter-Temple movement to a climax in Passover week, believing that as he went to his death Israel's God was doing for Israel, and hence for the world, what Israel as a whole could not do.

Schweitzer divided the “lives of Jesus” into those that had Jesus going to Jerusalem to work and those that had him going there to die. Schweitzer chose the latter. I think he was right.

Jesus believed something else, which makes sense, albeit radical and shocking sense, within precisely that cultural, political, social and theological setting. Jesus evoked, as the overtones of his own work, symbols that spoke of Israel’s God as present with God’s people. He acted and spoke as if he was in some way a one-man counter-Temple movement. He acted and spoke as if he was defining Israel at this eschatological moment—the job normally associated with Torah. He acted and spoke as the spokesperson of wisdom. Temple, Torah and wisdom were powerful symbols of a central Jewish belief: that the transcendent creator and covenant God would dwell within Israel and order Israel’s life. Jesus used precisely those symbols as models for his own work. In particular, he not only told stories whose meaning was that YHWH was returning to Zion. He acted, dramatically and symbolically, as if it was his vocation to embody that event in himself.

I suggest, in short, that the Temple, and YHWH’s return to Zion, are the keys to gospel christology. Forget the titles, at least for a moment; forget the pseudo-orthodox attempts to make Jesus of Nazareth 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. He would be the pillar of cloud for the people of the new Exodus. He would embody in himself the returning, and redeeming, action of the covenant God.

This bald and unsubstantiated summary of several lengthy historical arguments will not, perhaps, convince by itself. The main argument in its favor is its double similarity and double dissimilarity, with Jesus’ Jewish world and with the early church. The picture I have drawn is obviously not what the early church believed, but we can see how early Christian beliefs might have grown out of it. My picture is thoroughly credible within first-century Judaism, while not being at all what most first-century Jews were thinking. My Jesus is not the featureless Jesus of modernist reconstruction; but then, why should not Jesus have been just as much aware of symbol, story, theology and vocation as the other figures to whom we enthusiastically ascribe them?

This historical reading is, of course, completely theological, both in itself and in our reading of it. Schweitzer was right to see that his eschatological Jesus would shake comfortable Western orthodoxy to its foundations. I have modified his scheme by interpreting apocalyptic historically; but the Jesus I discover remains shocking. Western orthodoxy has for too long had an overly lofty, detached and oppressive view of God. It has always tended to approach christology by assuming this view of God, and trying to fit Jesus into it. The result has been a docetic Jesus—that is, a Jesus who only seems to be truly human, but in fact is not. My proposal is not that we know what the word “God” means, and manage somehow to fit Jesus into that. Instead, I suggest that we think historically about a young Jew, possessed of a desperately risky, indeed apparently crazy, vocation, riding into Jerusalem, denouncing the Temple, dining once more with his friends, and dying on a Roman cross—and that we somehow allow our meaning of the word “God” to be re-centered on that point.

The story of Jesus, thus understood, does not generate a set of theological propositions, a “New Testament Theology.” It generates, as Schweitzer saw with prophetic clarity, a set of tasks. The great exegetical mistake of the century (perpetrated by Schweitzer himself)—the idea that first-century Jews (including Jesus) expected the end of the world and were disappointed—has so occupied the minds of scholars that the real problem of delay has gone almost unnoticed, and people now come upon it as though it were a novelty.

If, for Jesus, and indeed for the whole early church for which we have any real evidence, the God of Israel defeated evil once and for all on the cross, then why does evil still exist in the world? Was Jesus, after all, a failure? The New Testament answers this question with one voice. The cross and resurrection won the victory over evil; but it is the task of the Spirit, and those led by the Spirit, to implement that victory in and for all the

world. This task demands a freshly drawn world-view: new praxis, stories, symbols, answers. These involve a fresh vision of God, in which, precisely because of the discovery of who this God actually is, history, theology, spirituality and vocation increasingly recover their mutual connectedness. For Jesus' followers, finding out who Jesus was in his historical context meant and means discovering their own task within their own contexts.

Yet several first-century Jews besides Jesus held, and acted upon, remarkable and subversive views. Why should Jesus be any more than one of the most remarkable of them?

The answer must hinge on 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.

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