

SCRIPTURE STUDY: TURN WRIGHT I

Those familiar with my previous work may find all sorts of twists of meaning in my title, and we shall come to those later. But my present concern is to tackle as simply as possible a single question posed to me about N.T. Wright. The question came to me with a document, which I reproduce below, titled “Is N.T. Wright Wrong about Jesus?” by Rachel Miller, Monday, February 11, 2013.¹

Rachel puts together a series of quotations from recent popular books by Wright. What I wish to do is develop an elementary approach to the problems raised by these quotations, and indeed by Wright generally, so as to help us along in facing both the reading of Wright and the problem of a contemplative reading of Scripture.

It seems best, in offering immediately Rachel’s reflections, to intersperse her work with some reflections of my own, elementary pointings to you that should help lift the puzzling, eventually, to the fresh effective level needed in our 21st century. Then—with your help I hope—I shall gather, in the winter months, the pointers and problems we have reached in what seems a decently suggestive way so that we can venture on slowly together.

So: on we go into Rachel’s text, which she begins with two quotations from Wright’s recent popular books. I identify my musings as we go along by keeping them in italics.

I do not think Jesus ‘knew he was God in the same sense that one knows one 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!” (N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus*, 154).

Two points from me immediately to help our reading and re-reading:

¹ Rachel Miller is News Editor for the Aquila Report. She is also a homeschooling mother of three boys and member of a PCA church in Spring, Texas. This article first appeared on her blog, *A Daughter of the Reformation*. “IS N.T. WRIGHT WRONG ON JESUS?” is available at: <https://adaughterofthereformation.wordpress.com/2013/02/10/is-n-t-wright-wrong-on-jesus>. After the first quotation from Wright at the bottom of this page, I will intersperse my reflections with Rachel’s reflections. Mine are in italics, while her words are not. Wrights words are block indented in the same way they appear in the Miller’s blog.

[1] Skip the 'knew he was God' part for the moment. Focus on "in the same sense that one knows." But what sense is that? In this messy quest, it seems good to figure out this so as not to be moving from an obscure sense, e.g., of what knowing is, like knowing whether I am tired.

[2] The second sentence is a neat way of generating concrete interest in Jesus's knowing and part of its neatness is that it pushes us to think in terms of a leap of insight, something certainly that we share with the Jesus of history. But note the oddness that is there regarding that leap in Jesus: is there a hint that Jesus, at some stage, made that leap? This raises all sorts of further questions about what gave rise to the leap. But let us slip on.

I have found from time to time that the Jesus I knew by faith seemed less and less like the Jesus I was discovering by history. (*The Meaning of Jesus*, 25).

Let's keep this close to our own experience. Then, yes, if you start at some stage finding out more about Jesus—through prayer and/or study or both meshed, which seems proper—that yes, the Jesus of faith you began with changes, becomes less and less like the starting-point Jesus. If you are moving in Wright's way, then you get to place the Jesus of his time in his time in a rich fashion. Let's not get into the richness for the moment. The important point here is a seeming opposition. Let us say that you start with the Jesus of Faith, but mainly imaged by early education, pictures, music, parables. Don't you go on within faith to discover better that same Jesus of faith, but a Jesus that, so to speak, is getting more like 'the real Jesus'? Is there lurking in Wright's claim a sort of opposition between faith and discovery? We have a clear contextualizing page from Rachel now before we hit the next question.

N.T. Wright, formerly Bishop of Dunham, is well-known for his association with the New Perspective on Paul (NPP) and for his staunch defense of the bodily resurrection of Jesus. I was first introduced to Wright's books through a pastor who thought Wright had been unfairly criticized. The pastor encouraged me to read him for myself and not to be swayed by unfavorable reviews. He told me that Wright's book, *Surprised by Hope*, was the best he'd read on heaven. So I began to read Wright. I started with *Surprised by Hope*, and I found much that concerned me on a number of topics.

Instead of agreeing with the pastor, I was shocked that any Reformed pastor who had read the book would recommend it, given how far off-base Wright was on many different issues. I continued to read Wright's books and articles, and I also began researching what others had written in critique of his work. I discovered that the one area I found the most

troubling almost no one had written about: Wright's Christology.

Early on in my reading, I began to wonder if Wright really believes that Jesus is/was God. This article is the result of two years of research into what Wright believes, or at least has written, about Christ. The books and articles I've read and will quote here are: *Surprised by Hope*, *The Meaning of Jesus*, *Simply Jesus*, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (I've read portions, but not the whole of this one), "Jesus and the Identity of God", and "Jesus' Self Understanding."

To help explain why I began this research, here is Wright's answer for "Is Jesus God?"

When people ask 'Was Jesus God?' they usually think they know what the word God means and are asking whether we can fit Jesus into that. I regard this as deeply misleading (*The Meaning of Jesus*, 144).

And,

I do not think Jesus 'knew he was God' in the same sense that one knows one 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!" (*The Meaning of Jesus*, 154).

This article will look first at what Wright has written concerning Jesus generally and then specifically at how Wright interprets the major events in Jesus's life.

Rachel adds the new first quotation here: The Meaning of Jesus, 144. It adds to our poise in moving on, if we pause over the inner claim in regard to ourselves: 'they usually think they know what the word God means.' Are you one of those usuals? I should hope not. It is a pretty silly thing to think that you know what the word "God" means. Certainly you can have some little meaning, like your little meaning of what being understanding means. But if you come at this from a Christian past, you are more likely to have got that glimmer from the Jesus-story. So, Wright's point is in itself oddly misleading. Who are those usual people? Is Wright talking about a certain type of scripture study that starts from 'my idea of God' and then tackles the fitting or not fitting of Jesus into that?

First, N.T. Wright is very concerned, in all his writings, that modern readers of the Bible pay attention to the historical setting and context of the books. For the New Testament, he writes that it is important to understand what a first-century Jew would have believed about God, salvation, Israel's history, and Israel's future. This, then, is the way he approaches understanding Jesus:

We have to make a real effort to see things from a first-century Jewish point of view, if we are to understand what Jesus was all about (*Simply Jesus*, 9).

Here I would wish you to pause over the single word “was.” Yes, it is quite an effort to get a grip on the first-century Jesus, his talking habits, his habits of socializing, the poise he had with regard to the story of his group. One need only take a serious look at Wright’s long life of study which gives him a quite marvelous mastery of those time and the prior and then-present cultures of the world. But add to our pause the switch to “what Jesus is all about.” You are lifted from the “all about” of the first century to a bigger “all about.” Or are you? But, at all events, there is a problem lurking here, hidden in the words, “all about.”

Wright recognizes that his understanding of Jesus and many key doctrines are not traditional, but he says that’s a good thing:

This way of looking at the climax of Jesus’s story is not, to be sure, the standard, traditional, ‘orthodox,’ ‘conservative’ reading, though it highlights from a new angle the ‘traditional’ dogmas of ‘incarnation’ and ‘atonement.’ My contention is that it enables us to understand the original, historical reality for which those dogmas are later, often dehistoricized, abstract summaries (*Simply Jesus*, 172).

Rachel is inviting us, indeed, to muse over the “all about,” with this heavier quotation from Wright. It is a dense and tricky complex of suggestions. Let us start with the “to be sure.” In a sense, yes, we are sure that thinking out the first century Jesus is, to be sure, not a matter of imposing later views. But, you may ask, do later views help in any way? And you may get to asking in what way the first century perspective highlights the later view. No problem here with Wright’s “My contention is that it enables us to understand the original, historical reality.” That is the whole drive of Wright’s work, and perhaps ours if we share his climb a bit. But the rest of his sentence is a muddy business. How muddy is Wright about this business? What is his meaning of “abstract summaries”? And we can—but later—push the question of how these “summaries” emerged.

He then briefly outlines common views within Western Christianity that he says need to be rethought:

Here we find the classic Western Christian myth about Jesus, which is still believed by millions around the world. In this myth, a supernatural being called “God” has a supernatural “son” whom he sends, virgin-born, into our world, despite the fact, that it’s not his natural habitat, so that he can rescue people out of this world by dying in their place. As a sign of his otherwise secret divine identity, this “son” does all kinds of extraordinary and otherwise impossible “miracles,” crowning them all by rising from the dead and

returning to “heaven,” where he waits to welcome his faithful followers after their deaths. . . . In the Protestant version, Jesus commissions his followers to write the New Testament, which reveals the absolute truth about Jesus and, once more, how to get to heaven (*Simply Jesus*, 30).

I had best leave this passage for later lengthier comment. There are too many problem words like “myth” and “supernatural” and there is a tone of caricature. The point, regarding me being saved and getting to heaven, is a regular point from Wright. No doubt he met it regularly in his times of pastoral work. Wright goes on making the point in the beginning of the next piece. Then he gets on to the sound point re God being in charge.

He goes on to explain the error of this understanding:

[I]t will not do to suppose that Jesus came to teach people “how to get to heaven.” That view has been immensely popular in Western Christianity for many generations, but it simply won’t do. The whole point of Jesus’s public career was not to tell people that God was in heaven, and that, at death, they could leave “earth” behind and go to be with him there. It was to tell them that God was now taking charge, right here on “earth”; that they should pray for this to happen; that they should recognize, in his own work, the signs that it was happening indeed; and that when he completed his work, it would become reality (*Simply Jesus*, 146).

So, a pause over the final sentence, a pop-version of a sound position. But is it pastorally expressed, and what, anyway, does this question of expression mean? Note, in the pausing, the large questions. “pray for this to happen”: but won’t it happen anyway. AND in that mandate for prayer, is there not to be, humanly, a need to contemplate in order to get a meaning for “this”? Finally, that contemplation certainly is needed regarding “when he completed his work.” When is the work of Jesus completed? Is he, so to speak, still working? So: think of the expression-mess here.

And,

[M]ost important, we must avoid jumping to the conclusion, from all that has been said above, that Jesus was doing things that “proved his divinity” – or that the main point he was trying to get across was that he was the “son of God” in the sense of the second person of the Trinity (*Simply Jesus*, 149).

Two main points to attend to here. The whole problem of “proof” that indeed haunts Wright’s work. AND the way Wright expresses the “point he was trying to get across”: quite a muddled use of later words, and perhaps meanings.

Wright is, of course, aware that many theologians have used the title, “Son of God,” to

refer to Jesus's divinity. He cautions against using it in that way.

Rachel is pointing here. I don't like the loose word "aware": that may sound fussy, and we'll get back to it. Then there is the usage question, which he goes on to write about next. "son of God" is a name needing a context for determining its various meanings. The caution should identify the context and disperse the fog. Especially if the context is properly determined, which is the cloud that hangs over what Wright says next. A major problem we'll get back to when we talk of the control of meaning through genetic sequencing. Don't boggle too much over that last suggestion: yet!

[F]or most people the phrase "son of God" carries with it all the connotations of that first myth, in which the supernatural being swoops down to reveal secret truth, do extraordinary "miracles" to prove his "divinity," die a redemptive death, and get back to heaven at once, enabling others to get there too.

And if I say – as I'm going to – that I don't think that story is the right way to talk about Jesus, some will say, "So you don't think he's the Son of God, then?" and condemn me as a hopeless liberal. Whereas if I say – as I'm going to – that I do think Jesus was and is the "son of God," albeit within a very different sort of story, others will condemn me as a hopeless conservative (*Simply Jesus*, 32).

This is unnecessary muddling, and one has to wonder whether there is a muddle in Wright. But again, the deeper problem is context, each claim coming "within a very different sort of story." You might puzzle here, in relation to the nudge at the end of my previous comment, "Is there a context that might control the variety of contexts that Wright is implicitly referring to in the above?"

According to Wright, theologians have modified the way that Paul and older Jewish writers used the phrase:

Paul, like other New Testament writers, uses the phrase "son of God" to denote Jesus. Later theologians, forgetting their Jewish roots, would read this as straightforwardly Nicene Christology: Jesus was the second person of the Trinity.

Paul's usage, though, is much subtler and offers further clues not only as to what the earliest Christians believed, but also why. "Son of God" in Jewish thought was used occasionally for angels, sometimes for Israel, and sometimes for the king (*The Meaning of Jesus*, 149).

What, then, did "son of God" mean to Paul and the early church? "Son of God" was a way "of saying that what had happened in Jesus was the unique and personal action of the one

God of Israel” (*The Meaning of Jesus*, 150).

Most decent theologians in fact are familiar with the Pauline stuff, and the distinction of usage and meaning. It is quite silly, as a theologian, to read “son of God” in the Bible as Nicene. But my statement there is in a restricted context that suits the present flow. At all events, pause, with me, over the claim, “saying that what had happened in Jesus was the unique and personal action of the one God of Israel.” The claim is true, whether one talks of Paul or of Thomas Aquinas or of Wright. The three are talking about the same reality, but obviously differently. And Rachel picks up that point immediately: yes, “hard to explain.” But she heads for help in another direction than the one I would suggest. I will only mention it here, perhaps, teasingly: a genetic context. We are hovering over something that grows, like the sunflower. Do we get to grips adequately with the sunflower by focusing on the seed and somehow cutting out the memory of its glorious grown face??

*We now move on through Rachel’s gathering of points from Wright without interruption of my italicized comments: about ten pages. But instead of the italic additions I add the change, here and there, of boldfacing, **boldfacing**. This is a strategy I have used previously to nudge a peculiar shift in reading stance, or at least to add a disturbing reminder that the shift has not occurred in you, is not recurring. The question that emerges is: **Is the shift occurring, or has it occurred, in Wright’s reading? Then more generally in right reading of the Scripture, or indeed any text?** A comforting distinction here for most readers is that the right reading I am talking about is the reading within the serious enterprise of theology that we shall be talking about in “Studying Scripture: Turn Wright II.” It is a question raised implicitly by Wright himself previous but you need not go there for the present.³ He writes there of “critical realism,” and rather than following it up there you could well take an eyeful of a text of mine, available on the website, titled “The Inside-Out of Radical Existentialism.”⁴ The jolt of the boldface print is had when you jump to the disturbing conclusion that the print you see is behind your eyeballs. I can add to the shock by noting that the Jesus Rachel invites you to imagine is, *wow*, behind your eyeballs. Go figure!*

² No harm now in nudging you towards the larger context. There is [Cantover II](#) with title, “Sunflowers Speak to US of Growing”, which begins with the strange Christ-poem, “Sun, flowers, Son-flowered, / Speak to us of growth / Seed cauled, cribbed, / Kabod yet confined, / Crossed with dark earth, / Light-refined, / Rill open-ends a trill / Annotaste of Throat.”

³ You could well profitably go there is the volume is handy: N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and The People of God*, Fortress Press, 1992: the first of three volumes. The relevant zone is pages 31–46, chapter 2 “Knowledge and Varieties” in **Part II**, titled (the boldfacing is his, but is it not neat for us and him!?), **Tools for the Task**.

⁴ It is chapter 5 of my little book [Wealth of Self and Wealth of Nations: Self-Axis of the Great Ascent](#).

*My occasional boldfacing in these next ten pages is a persistent nudging, a “cajoling or forcing attention,”⁵ to go figure. But the boldfacing asks you to figure in the context of what is boldfaced, e.g., **what was going on behind the eyes of the baby Jesus?**⁶ On we go, then, with Rachel.*

So what does Wright mean when he says that “what had happened in Jesus was the unique and personal action of the one God of Israel”? It’s somewhat hard to explain, and it would help to look first at how Wright interprets the major events in the life of Jesus, events that are often used to illustrate how Jesus was both God and man.

First, Wright says this about Jesus’s birth:

Jesus’ birth usually gets far more attention than **its role in the New Testament warrants**. Christmas looms large in our culture, outshining even Easter in the popular mind. Yet without Matthew 1-2 and Luke 1-2 we would know nothing about it. . . . One can be justified by faith **with no knowledge of it** (*The Meaning of Jesus*, 157).

And,

If the first two chapters of Matthew and the first two of Luke had never existed, I do not suppose that my own Christian faith, or that of the church to which I belong, would have been very different (*The Meaning of Jesus*, 164).

Wright understands that many theologians consider the uniqueness of Jesus’s birth, “conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin,” very important. He disagrees:

Those who have emphasized Jesus’ divinity have sometimes made the virginal conception central. . . . The birth narratives have no impact **on my reconstruction** of Jesus’ public agendas and his mind-set as he went to the cross (*The Meaning of Jesus*, 158).

⁵ Lonergan, *Insight*, CWL 3, 423. Don’t panic about this figuring. I recall my very first conversation with Lonergan, Easter 1961 in Dublin, Ireland, when I asked him when he did this figuring. He spoke eloquently about the shock, but never did answer. But the jump may not come for you this month, or these next years! In the later culture of theology, the jump will be fostered communally, and be a regular accepted psychic oddity of procedure.

⁶ A nudge here is beneficial, pointing to serious inquiry about Jesus, the pre-natal Jesus, the post-resurrection Jesus. See Joan Stiles and Terry L. Jernigan, “The Basics of Brain Development,” *Neuropsychology Review*, 2010 Dec; 20(4): 327–348. Published online 2010 Nov 3 doi: [10.1007/s11065-010-9148-4](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11065-010-9148-4) PMID: PMC2989000. Such a pointing, as we may see, can rise to a glimpse of the eschatological brain of Jesus, holding humanity in eternal mindfulness, indeed sharing molecules with more than 10¹¹ (yes, eleven zeros!) humans.

Next, Jesus's public ministry began with his baptism. The account of Jesus being baptized, with the Spirit descending as a dove and the voice of God speaking and proclaiming Jesus as His Son, is regularly used to show the Biblical basis for the Trinity: Father, Son, and Spirit all together. Wright gives a different explanation:

Jesus joins the crowds, and, as he is baptized, his vocation is confirmed and sharpened by a voice from the heavens: "You are my son! You are the one I love! You make me very glad" (Mark 1:11). ... All the signs are that Jesus understood his baptism as the moment when he was "anointed" like Israel's kings long ago, for this task. Israel's God was acting through him, in him, as him. The baptism confirmed what Jesus had intuited long before and gave him the moment and the platform from which to launch the kingdom movement through which the saving plan would be accomplished (*Simply Jesus*, 167).

Wright says that the baptism **confirmed, for Jesus, that he'd "intuited" correctly** that he was called by God to "launch the kingdom movement." And in case we misunderstand what Wright means by "anointed," he explains:

This, again, is where the ancient idea of "anointing" comes into play. An individual is solemnly smeared with holy oil as a sign, and perhaps as a means, of a special "equipping," or "enabling," from YHWH himself to perform the necessary tasks. Such persons are no longer acting on their own authority or initiative, but on God's (*Simply Jesus*, 59).

According to Wright, Jesus, then, was "equipped" or "enabled" by God to do what he did.

Jesus's temptation in the wilderness further served to confirm, for Jesus, that he truly had been anointed at his baptism:

His secret wilderness victory, however, played the same role in his career that David's killing of Goliath played in his. It indicated that the anointing at his baptism, like David's anointing by Samuel, had been real (*Simply Jesus*, 168-169).

What about the miracles that Jesus performed? How do those fit into Wright's understanding of Jesus? According to Wright, Jesus healed the sick, raised the dead, commanded nature, not because he was God and had the power to do so, but rather **because he was illustrating** what the new creation would be like when heaven and earth came together:

We can see the material world itself being transformed by the presence and power of Israel's God, the creator. We see it already, to be sure, in the healing stories. ... Jesus not only heals the sick; he raises the dead. He feeds the hungry crowd with a few loaves and a couple of fish. Something new is happening, and it's happening to the material world itself. He commands the raging storm to be quiet, and it obeys. ...

Perhaps they are not even evidence of a kind of "interventionist," miracle-working, "supernatural" divinity of some "conservative" speculation. Perhaps they are, instead, the sort of things that might just be characteristic of the new creation, of the fulfilled time, of what happens when heaven and earth come together (*Simply Jesus*, 142-143).

Wright goes on to remind us that Jesus's miracles are not "proofs of divinity":

Jesus's powerful acts of healing, then, together with the other extraordinary things the gospels credit him with, are not done in order to "prove" his "divinity" (*Simply Jesus*, 150).

What about forgiving sins? What does it mean that Jesus forgave sins? First, Wright points out that what Jesus meant by forgiving sins was not what the early church understood it out to be:

Israel's God had dealt with the state of exile-because-of-sin in which Israel, and the whole world, had languished. Although the early church developed ways and means of making this point that went beyond anything that Jesus himself had said ... (*The Meaning of Jesus*, 100).

When Scripture says that Jesus would save His people from their sins that **meant, Wright explains, that their physical exile was now over:**

Embedded within the earliest strands of Christian tradition we find an already formulaic statement: the messiah died for our sins according to the scriptures. ... It was not, first and foremost, a way of saying that the moral failures of individuals had been atoned for **in some abstract theological transaction**. That would come, and quickly; we find it already in Paul's mature thought.

But in the beginning it was a claim about what Israel's God had done, in fulfillment of the scriptural prophecies, to bring Israel's long night of exile to its conclusion, to deal with the "sins" that had kept Israel enslaved to the pagan powers of the world, and to bring about the real "return from exile," the dawn of the new day, for which Israel had longed (*The Meaning of Jesus*, 98).

When Jesus forgave the sins of individual people, Wright explains that this was merely

the outworking of Israel's forgiveness as a nation and return from exile:

Individual forgiveness is the up-close-and-personal version of what it looks like when God does what he promised and restores his exiled people (*Simply Jesus*, 82).

Wright also downplays the significance of Jesus being without sin:

If we ask the question of how this particular human being is the instrument of salvation and do not say as our first answer, "because in him God's Israel-shaped plan to save the world came to fulfillment," then we leave **a huge vacuum in our thinking (and in our reading of scripture)**. I believe it is because of this vacuum that people have elevated minor themes, such as the sinlessness of Jesus, to a prominence which, though not insignificant, they do not possess in the NT itself ("Jesus and the Identity of God," emphasis added).

The transfiguration is another event that is often used to illustrate the divinity of Jesus. Wright disagrees with this since Moses and Elijah were transfigured, and many other mystics have experienced transfiguration:

[T]he Transfiguration of Jesus is not, as it stands, a "proof" of his "divinity." Moses and Elijah were "transfigured" too. So, in this nineteenth-century story, were the Russian mystic and his disciple. What the story of Jesus on the mountain demonstrates, **for those with eyes to see or ears to hear**, is that, just as Jesus seems to be the place where God's world and ours meet, where God's time and ours meet, so he is also the place where, so to speak, God's matter – God's new creation – intersects with ours (*Simply Jesus*, 146).

Instead, the transfiguration was a central moment when heaven and earth met and God's glory came down on Jesus as it once did on the Temple:

It is within some such set of suppositions that we might make sense of the strangest moment of all, at the heart of the narrative when the glory of God comes down not to the Temple in Jerusalem, not to the top of Mount Sinai, but onto and into Jesus himself, shining in splendor, talking with Moses and Elijah, drawing the Law and the Prophets together into the time of fulfillment. The transfiguration, as we call it, is the central moment (*Simply Jesus*, 144).

Also, despite the way in which it has come to be used, Jesus's role as Messiah does not indicate that he is God:

‘Messiah’, or ‘Christ’, does not mean ‘the/a divine one’. It is very misleading to use the words as shorthand for the divine name or being of Jesus (“Jesus’ Self-Understanding”).

Which brings us to what Wright speaks of as Jesus’s “vocation:”

The historian must assume that Jesus of Nazareth was gripped by a strong sense of vocation. **All that we know about him suggests that he was powerfully aware**, not just of a general numinous quality to the universe, but of the deeply personal presence and purpose, strength, and guidance of the one he called “Abba,” Father. ... It also means that **Jesus was aware**, as many other Jews down the years – most recently his own cousin John – had been, that he had a particular vocation, a role to perform (*The Meaning of Jesus*, 40).

And what was Jesus’s vocation? According to Wright:

My case has been, and remains, that **Jesus believed himself called** to do and be things which, in the traditions to which he fell heir, only Israel’s God, YHWH, was to do and be. **I think he held this belief both with passionate and firm conviction and with the knowledge that he could be making a terrible, lunatic mistake.** I do not think this in any way downplays the signals of transcendence within the Gospel narratives (“Jesus’ Self-Understanding,” emphasis added).

And,

Speaking of Jesus’ “vocation” brings us to quite a different place from some traditional statements of gospel Christology. “Awareness of vocation” is by no means the same thing as Jesus having the sort of “supernatural” awareness of himself, of Israel’s god, and of the relation between the two of them, such as is often envisaged by those who, concerned to maintain a “high” Christology, place it within an eighteenth-century context of implicit Deism where one can maintain Jesus’ “divinity” only by holding some form of docetism. ...

I really have to break in here ironically: this is pretty weird stuff!

Jesus’ prophetic vocation thus included within it the vocation to enact, symbolically, the return of YHWH to Zion. His messianic vocation included within it the vocation to attempt certain tasks which, according to scripture, YHWH had reserved for himself. He would take upon himself the role of messianic shepherd, knowing that YHWH had claimed this role as his own. He would perform the saving task which YHWH had said he alone could achieve. He would do what no messenger, no angel, but only the “arm of YHWH”, the presence of Israel’s god, could accomplish.

As part of his human vocation, grasped in faith, sustained in prayer, tested in confrontation, 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. He was Israel's Messiah; but there would, in the end, be "no king but God." (*Jesus and the Victory of God*, 652-653, emphasis added.)

So, according to Wright, Jesus believed himself called to do for Israel what the Scriptures said only God would do, and part of this vocation would be to "enact, symbolically" God's return to Jerusalem. But, Wright says, Jesus knew he could have been making a terrible mistake.

Wright is well-known for his defense of the bodily resurrection, but I think it's important to consider how he interprets both the death and resurrection of Jesus. Here is how Wright applies his idea of Jesus's vocation to his death:

He [Jesus] seems to have construed his vocation in terms familiar in the stories of the martyrs. He would go ahead of the nation to take upon himself the judgment of which he had warned, the wrath of Rome against rebel subjects. That was what his royal vocation demanded. That, I believe, lies at the heart of the New Testament's insistence that Jesus died the death that awaited others, in order that they might not die it (*The Meaning of Jesus*, 93).

Wright explains that Jesus believed himself called to inaugurate God's kingdom through his own death:

Somehow Jesus's death was seen by Jesus himself, and then by those who told and ultimately wrote his story, as the ultimate means by which God's kingdom was established (*Simply Jesus*, 182).

And,

Jesus came to believe that the only way one could defeat death itself, and thereby launch the new creation for which Israel and the world longed, was to take on death itself, like David taking on Goliath in mortal combat, trusting that Israel's God, the creator of life itself, would enable victory to be won (*Simply Jesus*, 171).

Wright warns that Jesus's death is often misunderstood:

[I]t is easy to belittle Jesus's death theologically. ... [N]otoriously, it can be done by imagining a straightforward transaction in which a God who wanted to punish people was content to punish the innocent Jesus instead. This always, of course, leaves unanswered, the question of how such a punishment could itself be just, let alone loving (*Simply Jesus*, 181).

The same warning goes for the resurrection:

I have heard, too, that the resurrection means that Jesus is now alive, and one can enter into a relationship with him. That is true so far as it goes, but it is not the specific truth of the resurrection, and it is certainly not the meaning that the evangelists and Paul read from the first Easter (*The Meaning of Jesus*, 117).

Wright explains that the resurrection of Jesus is not meant as a “proof of divinity:”

Despite a long tradition, I do not regard the resurrection as instantly ‘proving Jesus’ divinity’ (“Jesus’ Self Understanding”).

So what does the resurrection mean? According to Wright, there are two main points. First, the resurrection confirms that Jesus did in fact have a vocation to be the Messiah and that God has vindicated him:

Rather, the meaning of the resurrection must begin with the validation of Jesus as messiah, as Paul says in Romans 1:4. It means that Israel’s God, the creator, has affirmed that Jesus really was, all along, his “son” (*The Meaning of Jesus*, 118).

And,

Jesus was the messiah; and the explanation was that God had vindicated him by raising him from the dead (*The Meaning of God*, 110).

Second, Wright says that Jesus’s resurrection means that the kingdom of God has come and the new creation has begun. Jesus is, himself, the prototype of the new creation:

Jesus’s risen **person** – body, mind, heart, and soul – is the prototype of the new creation. We have already seen him as **the Temple in person**, as the jubilee in **person**. Now we see him as **the new creation in person** (*Simply Jesus*, 189).

Wright also has a different interpretation for the meaning of the ascension. The ascension is also not about Jesus’s divinity, but rather his humanity:

The ascension thus speaks of the Jesus **who remains truly human** (*Surprised by Hope*, 103).

And,

Nor would the ‘glorification’ of Jesus, his ascension to God’s right hand have that effect: Jesus had, in New Testament theology, thereby attained the place marked out from the beginning not for an incarnate being but for the truly human one (“Jesus’ Self-Understanding”).

The significance of the ascension, according to Wright, is that **Jesus is now lord** and that “there is already **a human being** at the helm of the world.” (*Surprised by Hope*, 103)

Moving on to Wright’s view of the second coming, Wright says that Jesus never spoke of a “second coming:”

The first thing to get clear is that despite widespread opinion to the contrary, during his earthly ministry Jesus said nothing about his return (*Surprised by Hope*, 113).

Wright explains that when Jesus told parables of about the master who goes away and returns that he was speaking about how God was returning to Jerusalem through Jesus’s own work:

[T]he stories Jesus tells about a king or master who goes away for a while and leaves his subjects or servants to trade with his money in his absence were not originally meant to refer to Jesus going away and leaving the church with tasks to get on with until his eventual second coming, even though they were read in that way from fairly early on. ...

In their original setting, the point of these stories is that Israel’s God, YHWH, is indeed coming at last to Jerusalem, to the Temple – in and as the human person Jesus of Nazareth. The stores are, in that sense, not about the second coming of Jesus but about the first one. ...

Jesus was having a hard enough time explaining to his disciples that he had to die How could they possibly have understood him saying something about further events in what would have been, for them, a still more unthinkable future? (*Surprised by Hope*, 114).

The apocalyptic language that Jesus uses in Mark 13 (and similar passages) is not describing the end of the world, according to Wright, but rather, his death and the coming destruction of Jerusalem:

[Mark 13] is to be read as a prediction not of the end of the world, but of the fall of Jerusalem. When the Old Testament prophets speak of the sun, and the moon being darkened, the stars falling from heaven, and so forth, they do not intend that this language be taken literally. ...

In the same way, the language in Mark 13: 24-27 about the sun and moon being darkened, and particularly about the Son of Man coming on the clouds, **should not be taken in a crassly literalistic sense** (*The Meaning of Jesus*, 46).

And,

Many have traditionally read Jesus' sayings about judgment either in terms of the postmortem condemnation of unbelievers or of the eventual destruction of the space-time world. The first-century context of the language in question, however, indicates otherwise.

Jesus was warning his contemporaries that if they did not follow his way, the way of peace and forgiveness, the way of the cross, the way of being the light of the world, and if they persisted in their determination to fight a desperate holy war against Rome, then Rome would destroy them, city, temple, and all ... (*The Meaning of Jesus*, 46).

Wright goes on to explain that the modern Western church **has completely misunderstood Jesus's "return:"**

Many Christians, particularly in North America, have been taught for the last century and a half that when Jesus returns he will come down from "heaven" and that his faithful people (i.e. Christians) will then fly upward into the sky to meet him and be taken to heaven with him forever. ...

But it's a complete misunderstanding. It's based on a misreading of what Paul says about the return of Jesus in 1 Thessalonians 4:14-17, just four verses, with the idea of a "rapture" in only one, as the basis for a complete theory of everything. ... The point is that this language is not meant to be taken literally (*Simply Jesus*, 195-196).

Instead, Wright says that there is a better explanation for what will happen at the end of time. Jesus will not "return" exactly. Instead, he will reappear when heaven and earth come together:

Thinking of the second coming or of Jesus "returning" often raises the same kind of problems that we saw with the ascension. People who still think that "heaven" is a long way away, up in the sky, and that that's where Jesus has gone, imagine that the second coming will be an event somewhere like the return of a space shuttle from its far-off orbit. Not so.

Heaven is God's space, God's dimension of present reality, so that to think of Jesus "returning" is actually, as both Paul and John say in the passages just quoted, to think of him presently invisible, but one day reappearing.

It won't be the case that Jesus will simply reappear within the world the way it presently is. His return – his reappearing – will be the central feature of the much greater event that the New Testament writers promise, based on Jesus's resurrection itself: heaven and earth will one day come together and be

present and transparent to each other. That's what they were made for, and that's what God will accomplish one day.

It has, in fact, already been accomplished **in the person of Jesus himself**; and what God has done in Jesus, bringing heaven and earth together at immense cost and with immense joy, will be achieved in and for the whole cosmos at last (*Simply Jesus*, 197).

So far, we've seen that Wright denies that "son of God" or "Messiah" are titles that refer to Jesus's divinity. We've also seen that Wright says that Jesus did not know he was God. In addition, Wright has reinterpreted Jesus's baptism, temptation, miracles, forgiving of sins, transfiguration, death, resurrection, ascension, and second coming. He downplays the importance of Jesus' birth and sinless life, and he redefines Jesus's work in terms of "vocation."

So what does Wright say about the incarnation? And how does he explain the relationship between Jesus, the Son, and God, the Father?

Here is how Wright summarizes his understanding of who Jesus was:

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 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 to 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 (*Jesus and the Victory of God*, 653, emphasis added).

Wright also says that Jesus read the Scriptures and felt a calling to do and to be for Israel what the Scriptures said that God Himself would be and do for Israel. As such, because of his anointing and his special awareness of God, Jesus "embodied" or acted out "symbolically" the return of YHWH to Zion:

Jesus could, and I have argued, did believe that he, in filling these roles, was doing something for Israel that Israel could not do for itself, something that in its scriptures only its God, YHWH, could and would do (*The Meaning of Jesus*, 208).

And,

He [Jesus] believed, it seems – the stories he told at the time bear this out quite strikingly – that as he came to Jerusalem he was embodying, incarnating, the return of Israel’s God to his people in power and glory (*Simply Jesus*, 48).

Wright says, then, that Jesus embodied the presence of God in the way that the Temple once did:

Around and within all is the presence, the presence of Israel’s God himself, no longer in the pillar of cloud and fire, no longer in a wilderness tabernacle or an ornate stone-and-timber Temple, but in and as a human being, the Human Being, the Image-bearer, Jesus himself (*Simply Jesus*, 178).

And,

It [the Temple] was the place where heaven and earth met. ... And Jesus, as we have already seen, had been going about saying that this God, Israel’s God, was right now becoming king, was taking charge, was establishing his long-awaited saving and healing rule on earth as in heaven. Heaven and earth were being joined up – but no longer in the Temple in Jerusalem. ...

[T]he joining place, the overlapping circle, was taking place where Jesus was and in what he was doing. Jesus was, as it were, a walking Temple. A living, breathing place-where-Israel’s-God-was-living. ...

[T]his is the very heart of what later theologians would call the doctrine of the incarnation. But it looks quite different from how many people imagine that doctrine to work. ... Jesus was behaving as if he were the Temple, in person. He was talking about Israel’s God taking charge. And he was doing things that put that God-in-chargeness into practice (*Simply Jesus*, 135).

The last thing I want to look at here is the way in which Wright describes the relationship between Jesus, the Son, and God, the Father. Wright consistently speaks of them as separate entities, but in a way that is different from traditional descriptions of the persons of the Trinity. Here Wright gives his definition of the Trinity:

The Trinity is precisely a way of recognizing and celebrating the fact of the human being Jesus of Nazareth as distinct from while still identified with God

the Father, on the one hand ... and the Spirit, on the other hand (*Surprised by Hope*, 103).

Wright also explains that reason Jesus has equality with God the Father is because of what did, not because of who he is:

Paul has Jesus exalted to a position of equality with “the Father” because he has done what, in Jewish tradition, only the one God can do (“Jesus and the Identity of God”).

In addition, Wright writes that Jesus’s reign is temporary:

In fact, Paul in that passage (1 Corinthians 15:20-28) says something we might not otherwise have guessed. The reign of Jesus, in its present mode, is strictly temporary. God the father has installed Jesus in power, to act on his behalf; but when his task is complete, “the son himself will be placed in proper order” under God the father, “so that God may be all in all” (*Simply Jesus*, 223-224).

In summary, I believe that Wright has redefined what it means to say that Jesus is God. From the general consideration of Jesus’s work to the specifics events of his life, death, and resurrection, Wright has fought against what he sees as errors in the church’s understanding:

My problem with “proofs of divinity” is that all too often, when people have spoken or written like that, it isn’t entirely clear that they have the right “God” in mind. What seems to be “proved” is a semi-Deist type of Christianity – the type of thing a lot of Christians in the eighteenth century, and many since then, have thought they should be defending. In this sort of Christianity, “God” is in heaven and sends his divine second self, his “Son,” to “demonstrate his divinity,” so that people would worship him, be saved by his cross, and return with him to heaven (*Simply Jesus*, 149-150).

This I find really hairy. Has Wright got the right God in mind to assess the other minders? The semi-Deist thing: well, really that does not interest me, nor really his view of that group, real or not. And why the “round God, Son, Demonstrate his divinity? He really is flogging to death this horse’s tale, this personal saving and going to heaven with Jesus. But here I am just rambling loosely: we need to push on with the questions implicitly raised in my italicized comment and my bold facing.

And he has sought to correct those errors with his own reinterpretation:

Instead, I suggest that we think historically about a young Jew, possessed of a desperately risky, indeed apparently crazy, vocation, riding into Jerusalem

in tears, denouncing the Temple, and dying on a Roman cross—and that we somehow allow our meaning for the word “god” to be re-centered around that point (‘Jesus and the Identity of God’).

*This I find quite acceptable, either within a broad common sense, or within the more sophisticated view to which I invite you to reach as we move on. Yes, as we move on I suggest that we think historically about a young Jew, etc. The problem is that Wright and I are at odds about the meaning of “think” and “historically.” I wandered back to Wright’s heavier scholarly work before continuing, but decided that we could get lost there. I mention just the single page, 7, of a book I have considered elsewhere.⁷ Wright lists six pieces of a dominant paradigm, against which he claims “the negative burden of this book is that there are excellent, well-founded and secure historical arguments against each of these positions.”⁸ Why should I lead you into that wonderland which is now to be replaced by a serious global science: though it will take generations to shake off the clouded mythic consciousness of “academic disciplines.”⁹ In that later culture Wright and I would meet in the 1833 Overture that is to protect common sense from Clown Nein. The protection is to be a culture of The Tower of Able that is self-luminous about **thinking** and **history**.*

In conclusion, Wright says:

After fifteen years of serious historical Jesus study, I still say the creed *ex animo*; but I now mean something very different by it, not least by the word “god” itself (‘Jesus and the Identity of God’).

*Not too helpful a conclusion. So, I end my musings about Rachel’s work. I would like to carry forward as pedagogically as possible, thinking of people like Rachel who are guided into these zones by pastors or whomever. You, who are reading here, may have suggestions for me. You may be anywhere in the spectrum of readers from decent struggling religious or atheist person to being an evolutionary sport, someone who caught my meaning or “turn Wright” when you read the title. I echo there the mandate I steal regularly from James Joyce, “Desbíl Holles Eamus,” from the beginning of the “Oxon of the Sun” section of **Ulysses**, a mandate I*

⁷ N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003). My prior reflection is in [Lonergan Gatherings 9](#): “N.T. Wright and Resurrection: the Problem of Initial Meanings.” In *The Allure of the Compelling Genius of History* (Vancouver: Axial Publishing, 2015), I used Wright as an illustration of a good scholar who settled into the conventional present entrapment in enriched and complexified initial meanings. It is the primary minding disease of what Sorokin calls a sensate culture, the more deeply molecularly embedded in that—recall McLuhan, with a twist—the sick Medium is prior to the Massage. Later we shall muse further on initial meanings.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 7, the concluding sentence.

⁹ *Method in Theology*, p. 3, the last two words.

associate with the turning to and of the collaborative scientific style of doing theology. One translation of the mandate is "Let us turn Right," which of course you can associate with our initial title. For some of you this introduces a new but familiar poise in dealing with the problem of reading scripture and of interpreting Wright. But for others it is quite remote in its suggestiveness. What I wish is that we try to face the challenge at all levels. So contributions at any level will be appreciated as I venture forward towards a winter of puzzling in this area. E-mail me if you have questions or suggestions at pmcshane@shaw.ca .