



Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us . . . fix our eyes on Jesus, . . . who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. — Hebrews 12:1, 2, NIV.

The Victory of God¹

Digest

N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996).²

Editorial Note: N. T. Wright, Canon Theologian at Westminster Abbey, wrote the first draft of his book, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, in 1989 while staying in Jerusalem. As he stated in the preface, “From my room I could hear distant gunfire; on the street one could sense Jewish anxiety and Palestinian frustration in about equal measure. To have a riot dispersed with tear gas outside my window while I was writing the chapter on the cross gave me, to say the least, food for thought. . . . The multiple ambiguities and tensions of that beautiful country are now forever bound up in my mind with the subject-matter of the book itself . . .” The following digest is drawn from Wright’s conclusion to his chapter on “The Return of the King.”

“ . . . JESUS’ AIMS AND BELIEFS . . . [were] based on his faith-awareness of vocation. He believed himself called, by Israel’s god, to *evoke* the traditions which promised YHWH’s return to Zion, and the somewhat more nebulous but still important traditions which spoke of a human figure sharing the divine throne; to *enact* those traditions in his own journey to Jerusalem, his messianic act in the Temple, and his death at the hands of the pagans (in the hope of subsequent vindication); and thereby to *embody* YHWH’s return. His intentions, putting

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those aims into practice, involved the detail of the journey, of his arrival in Jerusalem and action in the Temple, of the Last Supper, of his agonizing wait in the garden, and of his refusal to offer any defence of himself before the authorities. He carried out those intentions, believing that he was thereby accomplishing those aims. . . .

“Jesus believed that there was one God who had made the world, and who had called Israel to be his people; that this one God had promised to be with his people, and guide them to their destiny, their new exodus; that his presence, guidance and ultimately salvation were symbolized, brought into reality, in and through Temple, Torah, Wisdom, Word and Spirit. He was a first-century Jewish monotheist. . . .

“The difference between the beliefs of Jesus and those of thousands of other Jews of his day amounted simply to this: he believed . . . that all these things were coming true in and through himself. His particular task was to offer a symbolic encoding (or decoding?) of this entire theology and expectation in terms of his own life and work. The words he spoke as Messiah, on the night he was betrayed, would resonate out prophetically as words of Israel’s god, spoken about Jesus himself. “This is my son, my beloved, in whom I am well pleased”; “This is my son, my beloved, listen to him”; and now “This is my body, given for you.”

The Return of YHWH to Zion

“Speaking of Jesus’ ‘vocation’ brings us to quite a different place from some traditional statements of gospel christology. . . . Jesus’ prophetic vocation . . . 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’.

“ . . . [T]he 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,

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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. . . .

"[Thus,] . . . Jesus saw the coming of the kingdom closely bound up with his own Messiahship, his own forthcoming death, and the journey to Jerusalem which would encapsulate both. He would embody in himself (that is) the return from exile, the defeat of evil, and the return of YHWH to Zion. Once we have understood that entire sequence of thought, as a whole and in its parts, . . . we can see that, from Jesus' point of view, this was indeed how the 'son of man', who is also here the 'son of god', would be vindicated. This was how YHWH would return to Zion; this was what he would accomplish when he arrived there. This would be the way to the victory of God."³

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Endnotes

1. N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), p. 741.
2. N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, is available from Barnes & Noble at www.barnesandnoble.com/w/jesus-and-the-victory-of-god-n-t-wright/1100921300.
3. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, pp. 651-653.

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