

# Notes on Jesus' Resurrection 1: "The Historical Jesus"

Video Series: **Jesus' Resurrection. Then and Now.** N. T. Wright.  
Tabgha Foundation, Minneapolis. Available from CARES (Center for  
Advanced Religious External Studies)

## Wright's Opening Comments

(Additional quoted material and the summary is taken from "The Mission and Message of Jesus",  
Chapter 3 in **The Meaning of Jesus. Two Visions.** Marcus J. Borg; N. T. Wright. Harper San  
Francisco, 1998.)

## Who was Jesus of Nazareth?

Was he:

- ◆ a moral teacher?
- ◆ great hero of faith?
- ◆ great leader?
- ◆ doom and gloom apocalyptic prophet?
- ◆ teacher of spirituality, offering a new way of going to heaven?

We are secure in saying Jesus was no less than a *first century Jewish prophet announcing the kingdom of God*

## A first century Jewish prophet . . .

Three fundamental first century Jews beliefs that Jesus shared:

- ◆ 1. Jewish monotheism -- their God, YHWH, was the only God
- ◆ 2. election -- the Jews were the chosen people of God
- ◆ 3. a sense that "the one god would soon act within history to vindicate his people and to establish justice and peace once and for all."

Jesus led a movement, announcing that YHWH, the one God was at last becoming king. He spoke and behaved as a prophet.

## . . . Announcing the kingdom of God

### *The Kingdom of God: A Revolutionary Slogan*

The "Kingdom of God" or the "Kingdom of Heaven" was a revolutionary slogan with heavy political import at the time: it was not talk about a *place* where God ruled, but rather a declaration that *God would rule* -- and not Caesar or Herod

### ***The Kingdom of God: Isaianic “Good News”***

In his Kingdom Announcement, Jesus went beyond this revolutionary ideology. He drew from Old Testament Scripture, including Isaiah’s vision of the “Kingdom of God in Isaiah 40-55 (and summarized in the passage Isaiah 52:7-12).

The “Kingdom of God” in Isaiah (“Isaianic gospel or “good news”) included three hopes:

- ◆ 1. a return from Israel’s exile; a new Exodus
- ◆ 2. the defeat of evil
- ◆ 3. the return of God to Zion

In announcing the Kingdom of God, Jesus was announcing this “good news” -- that God would vindicate Israel, defeat evil and return to Zion.

Jesus was offering far more than just “good advice.”

### **... Clashing with the Expectations of his Listeners**

Jesus’ sense of the Kingdom *clashed* with what most of Jesus’ listeners expected -- they expected political freedom for Israel, God smashing its enemies. Jesus’ message was revolutionary because it overthrew other agendas. In particular:

- ◆ 1. it challenged the power of Herod and Rome
- ◆ 2. it also challenged the militant Messianic expectations of many of his fellow Jews

### **... Clashing with the “Symbols” Expected by his Listeners**

Jesus’ Kingdom Announcement also clashed with the “symbols” his listeners often expected would accompany the Kingdom. For example, they expected a reaffirmation of the Judaism they knew, including Jewish dietary laws and the Sabbath.

### **... Implying He was the Messiah, the one through whom the true God would accomplish his decisive purpose.”**

For example: Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem and his actions in the temple implied the right to stake a claim to the temple. These were royal messianic acts --- but not quite as his followers expected (Jesus did not go to the temple to claim a seat of power, with his followers getting the top jobs around him)

### ***But What kind of Messiah?***

Jesus seemed to feel a vocation to be a different kind of Messiah, -- a messianic role that involved suffering and possibly death.

This belief was consistent with ideas of *martyrdom* and *redemptive nature of suffering* in the Scriptures (Isaiah's suffering servant, Daniel interpretation of the suffering servant, Macabees)

### ***Why did Jesus' Messianic Movement Succeed and Others Fail?***

Why did Christianity begin? There were other messianic movements that ended with the violent death of the founder; their movement died with them.

## **Summary: Who is Jesus?**

Jesus was a:

- ◆ first century Jewish prophet
- ◆ announcing the "Kingdom of God,"
- ◆ believing "the kingdom was breaking in through his own presence and work"
- ◆ "summoning other Jews to abandon alternative kingdom visions and join him in his." ("get on board")
- ◆ "warning of dire consequences for the nation, for Jerusalem, and for the temple, if his summons was ignored."
- ◆ clashing symbolically with those who embraced other agendas
- ◆ implying He was the Messiah, the one through whom the true God would accomplish God's decisive purpose."

## **Questions and Discussion**

### **The Kingdom of God**

In Jesus's day, this phrase had huge political resonances: God will rule, not Caesar or Herod.

Jesus' Kingdom declaration implied more: a reversal of the normal "power games" of most of humanity (for example, the weak will shame the strong)

The Kingdom of God is about God, but it would be wrong to think of it as purely "spiritual."

"God rules" is still a "revolutionary" announcement, even today for those of us living in an apparently sympathetic democracy.

### **The Temple at Jerusalem**

We must avoid the temptation to imagine it in the same sense we might think of a big cathedral in a modern city.

For a first century Jew, the temple was the *center of the cosmos*, *the center of the entire universe*, the dwelling place of God on earth.

For Jesus to claim authority over the temple was an enormous claim.

## **The Inclusion of Gentiles in the Kingdom of God**

Prophetic tradition: when God does for Israel what God is going to do for Israel, the rest of the world will then become involved. This arises from Jewish monotheism and sense of election: God has chosen Israel for the sake of the world.

- ◆ Jews in Jesus' day often believed that vindication of Israel meant the pagan world would be judged and destroyed

Jesus' Kingdom announcement: God is now doing for Israel what God had planned. So the others will soon come in: "many will come from east and west and sit down with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob."

Jesus own ministry was however primarily to the Jews; he left evangelization of the Gentiles to his followers

Note that Judaism was itself a very diverse religion in Jesus' day: Pharisees, Essenes, Sadducees.

## **Revolutionary Fervor in First Century Israel**

Despite the diversity of Judaism, there was in general a common and widespread feeling in first century Israel that when the Messiah came, the Jews would be freed of Romans in a new Exodus, and the Gentiles would be smashed

There were both hard liners and other schools which took a "softer" line on the Gentiles. Among the Pharisees, there were two schools:

- ◆ School of Hillel (softline)
- ◆ School of Shammai (hardline) --- probably the dominant school until after the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD and the failure of the Great Revolt 132-135 AD lead by Simeon ben-Kosiba, hailed (by the greatest rabbi of the period, Rabbi Akiba) as "Bar-Kochba" = "son of the star." Bar-Kochba was killed by the Romans

Galilee, Jesus' home town, a "hotbed" of revolutionary feeling.

## **Embrace of Christianity by the Jews in the First and Second Centuries**

Many Jews were able to see Jesus as the promised Messiah of the Scriptures. The Jews may well have been the people most likely to become Christians in the early centuries of the Church.

The Acts of the Apostles tells us thousands of Jews were able to happily embrace the message of Jesus.

## **Jesus and his Twelve disciples Among Other Prophetic and Messianic Figures**

There were other prophetic figures and messianic figures in Jesus' day, but no evidence that other such figures chose 12 disciples.

Jesus' choice of 12 disciples is highly symbolic of his implied claim of being the Messiah -- he was the one who called the "12" into existence, symbolic of a renewal of the twelve tribes of Israel

## **More on Jesus' Vision of the Kingdom of God**

Jesus described the Kingdom of God

- ◆ in stories, parables
- ◆ by acting symbolically

Jesus drew on both the:

- ◆ revolutionary ideology of his time
- ◆ Isaianic "Good News" from the Isaiah 52: 7-12 (Herald on the Mountain) "Your God reigns." There were three actions in this passage:
  - evil will be defeated at last
  - Israel will be vindicated in a final Exodus / great final return from Exile
  - God (YHWH) will return personally to Zion

Jesus deliberately told these stories in new way and acted them out:

- ◆ calling of 12: a renewal of Israel
- ◆ going to Jerusalem: Jesus the symbol of God returning to Zion

## **Did Jesus Seek Death, or Just Accept a Kingdom Path That Might Lead to Death?**

There is a sense of both:

- ◆ Jesus both sought death in the sense of *redemptive suffering*, and
- ◆ also accepted a Kingdom Path that he would not compromise (like Socrates) even if it led to death

### ***Redemptive Suffering in the Jewish Scriptures***

A concept of *redemptive suffering* is present in Isaiah, Daniel, Macabees: that through suffering, God can redeem the world.

Jesus evoked these traditions.

### ***Jesus' Vocation***

Jesus seemed to be aware of a vocation:

- ◆ "to go where Israel and the world was in pain"
- ◆ to take that pain and suffering upon himself
- ◆ for the redemption of the world
- ◆ acting as a suffering servant.
- ◆ In Jesus' self-understanding, the return of God to Zion culminates on the cross

### ***Jesus on the Cross***

Jesus did not go to the cross convinced it would all be fine in just a couple days.

- ◆ Jesus had a sense of darkness and abandonment: he knew the path he had taken was a *gamble*.
- ◆ Fully human, Jesus surely could not help but wonder if he had taken the right path -- after all, it was failed Messiahs that were crucified

Both then and today, we have to say Jesus is either:

- ◆ craziest blasphemer that ever lived
- ◆ or the son of God

You cannot turn Jesus into a nice teacher of ethics

## **Further Reading**

- 1. The Meaning of Jesus. Two Visions.** Marcus J. Borg; N. T. Wright. Harper San Francisco, 1998. *Wright's vision of the historical Jesus described in this video is fleshed out in Chapters 3 and 5 of this book ("The Mission and Message of Jesus"; "The Crux of Faith")*
- 2. The Challenge of Jesus. Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is.** N. T. Wright, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, 1999