
Book Reviews

Jesus and the Victory of God

NT Wright

SPCK, 1996, 741pp

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People who read the first of Tom Wright's projected five volume series on "Christian Origins and The Question of God" have waited impatiently for five years for this, the second book. The wait has been rewarded with a book which should command our attention for some years. Primarily, this is Wright's contribution to what has been termed "The Third Quest for the historical Jesus" – taking seriously and identifying the historical role of Jesus in first century Israel. But it is more than that, for here he has tried to bridge the gap, in both liberal and evangelical theology, that exists between the Christ of faith and the Jesus of history. If Wright's interpretation of the Gospel evidence is correct, we are left with serious questions about the formulation of our systematic theology. For those who have read widely in the scepticism of the Jesus Seminar, or in other third questors, here is a refreshing acceptance and defence of the authenticity of the Gospels' presentation of the life and death of Jesus the Christ. In common with most academic work, Wright has concentrated on the evidence of the Synoptic Gospels, but there are some references to Johannine material.

The book has four parts. The first is an analysis of the state of academic Third Questing and a presentation of the five questions that need to be addressed:

- (a) How did Jesus fit into Judaism?
- (b) What were Jesus' aims?
- (c) Why did he die?

- (d) Why are the Gospels what they are?
- (e) How and why did the early church begin?

He adds to this the sixth question of how the result of such an historical investigation is to be related to the contemporary church and world. Questions a, b, c and e are largely answered in this book. It is (a) to which Wright gives most attention and in so doing, casts fresh light on several Gospel passages. He is especially useful in identifying OT backgrounds and allusions. Question (d) is only partly answered here and we are promised another book on the resurrection of Jesus as the vindication of the victory on the cross. The sixth question, (e), is the most difficult one and will need to be addressed in preaching, teaching and evangelism.

Part 2 presents Jesus as the prophet who announces the coming of the Kingdom of God. Part 3 deals with the aims and beliefs of Jesus. The short part 4 is entitled Conclusions.

Wright argues that there was a strong belief in Second Temple Judaism that the exile had not ended. This meant that the prophecies of the return had not been fulfilled. Jesus presents himself as the fulfillment of all these prophecies in his coming to Jerusalem. It is there that he gains the victory of God over the true enemy of Israel, Satan, who is to be found at the heart of Israel. Jesus redefines in his own person all the symbols of the People of God – especially Temple and Torah. Eschatological passages are interpreted as referring to the coming of God in the person of Jesus during his earthly ministry or to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in AD70. Wright does not see in

the Gospels any prediction of an end to the space-time universe or the Second Coming of our Lord. This is not to say that he would not recognise it as part of Christian belief from other NT documents, but it should not be an interpretative tool for understanding the Victory of God in the work of Jesus. The Victory has taken place. It is not something still awaited.

This book is refreshing and exciting, but some parts will be challenged. Wright tries to interpret almost every parable in the light of the history of Israel. Is this the best way to understand the Sower or the Prodigal Son? The challenge that God must be defined totally in terms of Jesus during his ministry (p. 662) would be debated as will his whole understanding of eschatology. Each reader will have his own area of dispute with Wright, but no one will fail to be stimulated to look again at the Gospel evidences. Wright has come a long way since his first book was published by The Banner of Truth in 1972, but the intention of that book in directing us back to what Scripture really says, is also in this new book.

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Jesus the Messiah

Robert H. Stein

IVP, Leicester, 1996, 290 pp., hb., £12.99, ISBN 0-85111-750-3

Robert Stein has long been recognised as a scholar who is determined to make good biblical scholarship accessible to a wide audience. In this recent volume he applies his skills to "A Survey of the Life of Christ" (the book's sub-title), particularly suited for new theological students, but also appropriate for any thoughtful Christian. Indeed, it is the kind of book that would

provide very useful background reading for believers listening to a series of sermons on one of the Gospels, and perhaps pastors should be more ready to encourage their people to tackle such works.

The book is divided into two parts. Part one deals with issues of historical method, where Stein identifies the importance of identifying presuppositions in our study, discusses the various sources available to the student of Jesus, and outlines the chronology of the events under consideration. This section is particularly useful for students concerned about the controversial results of some recent scholarship. In sharp contrast to some recent works on Jesus, Stein states that "this life of Christ has been written from a believer's viewpoint" (p. 13). This does not entail, in his view, the abandonment of historical judgement, it simply means that biblical sources are treated with the respect they deserve, and that the presuppositions of the interpreter are acknowledged from the outset.

Part two deals with the life and ministry of Jesus in numerous brief chapters which allow the reader to become acquainted with the thrust of the issue without getting bogged down in the detail. This section is much more accessible to the general reader, introducing him or her to familiar topics such as the baptism of Jesus, the transfiguration and the last supper, in a fresh way, making use of the best in contemporary research. It is particularly encouraging to see both the death and the resurrection of Jesus dealt with in a book on the "historical Jesus".

Other chapters, however, deal with less familiar subjects such as Jesus' family, the languages he spoke, and the accounts of his trial. Some of the