

Summary of The Challenge of Jesus by N T Wright

The Challenge of Jesus: a Summary

Below is a reasonably thorough summary of N T Wright's wonderful book: The Challenge of Jesus. I hope you find it helpful.

Chapter 1 – The Challenge of Studying Jesus

There have been three main views on the historical Jesus.

1. We can know very little. Only focus on what we can be very certain of. So no picture of a human being in his context, just a miscellaneous collection of certain sayings. Often starting with an outright disbelief in the supernatural, thus no resurrection and miracles from the start.
2. Other extreme. The quest is a waste of time. What counts is knowing the living Jesus now. This approach is almost a bit scared of looking.
3. Try to respectfully look. Using a good historical method to generate a picture that fits what we are told and fits into the correct historical context.

Reasons for doing so.

KNOWING GOD – God cannot be seen. Though we can gain some information about him from looking at creation and his dealings with Israel, the place where we see him most clearly is in Jesus. We are told that Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever. So by studying Jesus as he was when he

walked the earth, we are learning about what he is about now, and so what God is like.

LOYALTY TO SCRIPTURE – Our approach should be ‘We believe the Bible thus we should find out what it is really saying to us.’ Each generation needs to check that what has been added in terms of tradition is appropriate and on course.

TRUTH – we should be committed to the truth and so should not be scared of facts and looking. If what we believe in is true, though some details may need to change, then there is nothing to be afraid of. If it isn’t then we should give it up and just enjoy ourselves! People have genuine questions about our faith that cliches won’t satisfy. We have a duty to do the hard work and answer these questions respectfully and thoroughly.

MISSION – We as Christians know that God expects certain things of us. Having a fresh look at Jesus, who he was and what he wanted to achieve, and what he did achieve, is vital if we are to understand our place in the bigger picture. And then from there work it out practically.

Chapter 2: The Challenge of the Kingdom

It is generally acknowledged that the teaching of the Kingdom was central to Jesus’ teaching and vocation.

N T Wright links the Kingdom message to the ‘return from exile’, the start of a ‘renewed people’ and the coming ‘disaster and vindication’.

RETURN FROM EXILE – this can be seen in the prodigal son parable. A young man who went to a foreign country coming back, receiving forgiveness and restoration and some people not being happy about this. Jesus is bringing about a return from exile and the Pharisees don’t like it, especially the choice for the ‘renewed people’. Also parables about sowing echo passages in Isaiah and elsewhere about this return from

exile. N T Wright says that a state of continuing exile was generally believed in. Though many had returned they were still ruled over by gentiles and so the exile was not really over. A major aspect of the Kingdom of God was this return from exile.

THE RENEWED PEOPLE – Like Josephus, Jesus' call to repent is about bringing people away from nationalist revolt and getting them to follow him instead. He has another way of being faithful to God and being the light of the world. The sermon on the mount is full of reference to this – turning the other cheek, going two miles for the soldier, and warnings against not fulfilling this calling to be the light of the world – the salt thrown out and trampled by men; the house built on sand that falls with a great crash.

[My thoughts on this – the idea of calling a new people into being reminds me strongly of John chapter 1, which talks about Jesus as the word of God, and his involvement in creation, and that for those who believed him he gave power to become children of God.]

DISASTER AND VINDICATION – It was often considered that Israel would have to go through various trials and then be vindicated by God. About two hundred years before Jesus this was with the Syrians – Antiochus Epiphanes. This type of trial and vindication is seen in Isaiah and also in Daniel. At the time of Jesus, Rome was the monster that was believed would cause suffering but then would be defeated and Israel vindicated. Jesus had a much less popular message: Israel, Jerusalem and the Temple would be destroyed, and he and his followers would be vindicated. They were the true Israel. The Temple which now represented nationalist ambitions would go. Jesus would be vindicated through his resurrection and through the destruction of the Temple as he foretold.

Chapter 3: The Challenge of the Symbols

Before going into detail NT Wright points out that issues such

as Sabbath, food laws and circumcision were not things that Jews did to be saved. They were the markers of the Jewish people with whom God had a special covenant. When Jesus clashes with the Pharisees over these issues, particularly Sabbath, he is not bringing a way of 'grace' in contrast to a way of 'legalism' he is in effect saying that with the coming of the Kingdom of God things are going to be different and Sabbath, food laws and circumcision are not what will mark out the people of God. **The symbols of Jesus' own work indicate that the people of God was being redefined in and around him and his work.** One example is Jesus having 12 disciples with him at the centre.

The symbols of Sabbath, food, circumcision and Temple were beginning to stand for the revolutionary agenda – military force to kick out the Romans. Jesus saw the revolutionary road as being false and leading to disaster.

SABBATH – When questioned in Mark 2:24 – 28 Jesus makes two comments which strongly emphasis his messianic mission. First he refers to David (breaking the Sabbath) and Doeg telling on him (like the Pharisees), and then he says “The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.” So Jesus is saying that as the Messiah, anointed like David, he is the true representative of Israel, and though threatened by evil will be vindicated by Israel's God. This breakthrough that was coming was to be redefined around a new set of symbols.

FOOD – Key passage is Mark 7, paralleled in Matthew 15. This is not about legalism vs grace. Food was one of the boundary markers that marked out God's chosen people. Jesus was marking cryptically that Israel was not to keep God's light to herself. Soon, food, was no longer going to mark out God's chosen people.

TEMPLE – Jesus' view of the temple did not seem very positive. He offered what the temple offered, forgiveness and healing, in a seemingly non-official way. He prophesied the destruction

of the temple – primarily through his actions in the temple but also through many of his sayings.

LAND AND PEOPLE – Jesus draws on passages concerning the return from exile, that also mention, alongside restoration of the land, the restoration of human beings (e.g. Isaiah 35). These healings were a sign of Jesus' reconstitution of Israel.

FAMILY – Jesus called into being a new family centred around himself and his kingdom message. This family spoke of God's new world opening up and bringing healing and blessing wherever it went.

TORAH – Certain symbols replaced the praxis of Torah. In particular the central role of forgiveness. This should not be seen simply as great ethical teaching. The whole point of the kingdom was the restoration of the exile – an exile caused by sin. If the sins that caused the exile in the first place were being forgiven then the exile would be ended. If Jesus' followers were to withhold forgiveness from others then they would be denying what God was doing.

TEMPLE – Jesus indicated that through his presence and ministry Israel's God was active in the same way that he was in the Temple. It was noted that Jesus and his disciples did not keep the traditional fasts. These fasts were generally to remember the destruction of the temple. Zechariah promised that days of fasting would be turned to feasting when the temple was rebuilt. This temple was now being re-built around Jesus, and his celebratory feasts with the sinners and tax-collectors were the start of the longed for feasts.

¹⁹ *Thus says the Lord of hosts: The fast of the fourth month, and the fast of the fifth, and the fast of the seventh, and the fast of the tenth, shall be seasons of joy and gladness, and cheerful festivals for the house of Judah: therefore love truth and peace.*

Chapter 4: The Crucified Messiah

This chapter looks at why from very early on Jesus' followers considered him the Messiah. Rather strange considering the fact that he was crucified – the sign of a failed messiah.

Jesus does see himself as the Messiah. This is seen most clearly in his temple action, and sayings concerning its future destruction. Temple and kingship go hand in hand. David planned it, Solomon built it, Judas Maccabeus cleansed the temple after entering Jerusalem. And after Jesus, Bar Kokhba minted coins with the year 1 on and the temple façade. He planned to destroy the Romans and rebuild the temple. As well as the temple action, Jesus' triumphal entry had deep royal overtones. Jesus clearly saw John the Baptist as the Elijah who was to come. It was well known that Elijah would come to make way for the Messiah.

That Jesus claimed to be a king makes sense of what we hear about his trial – questions about temple action, and then the question as to whether he is God's son – the messiah. Then the sign above his head – king of the Jews.

It is pointed out that the idea of his followers calling him the Messiah without the resurrection makes no sense. He was crucified as a false messiah, but in raising him back to life God puts his seal of approval on him – vindicated him – and so God in a sense overrules the judgement of the court – Jesus is the Messiah.

The messiah was expected to rebuild or cleanse the temple and defeat Israel's enemies. Jesus saw his death as in some way defeating the powers of evil and bringing in God's kingdom. This is seen most explicitly in the last supper – itself a reminder of the rescue from Egypt. Jesus then takes this symbol and gives it a new meaning with himself at the centre. Also within the many riddles around it – the stone the builders rejected becoming the cornerstone implies both

rejection and then a building of the temple. Also linked to the rock in Daniel that shattered the statue and grew and grew to be a mighty kingdom.

With Isaiah 40 – 55 there was the belief of suffering and then vindication. Suffering for the sins of Israel, and then Israel's restoration. Jesus also talks about the 'cup' he was to take which often referred to martyrdom. Jesus must have known that claiming to be a king, with authority over the temple, and criticizing the Jewish leaders would have got him into trouble, and yet there is no evidence of resistance or a failed escape.

Chapter 5: Jesus and God

N.T. Wright starts this chapter by pointing out that when we consider the question of Jesus and God we need to make sure that we are aware of the first century Jewish view of God. This is not the god of the enlightenment, a far off god who created the world and then left it to be. There is also a lot of confusion because of popular new-age beliefs that sometimes teach you that you have an 'inner goddess' etc, and you need to channel that power.

The Jewish view of God was not arrived at through philosophical speculation but through God's intervention in history and his covenant with Israel. In particular the events around the time of the Exodus. God's presence was revealed through the pillar of fire and cloud, and the glory that inhabited the tabernacle and later the temple; God was revealed through Torah – his will for Israel; and God was revealed through his spirit which rested on and within Moses and his followers. So we have God's Presence, God's Law, and God's Spirit at work in the world. These three ways of thinking about God are also linked in the Hebrew scriptures to God's Word and God's Wisdom. Both are connected with creation and can say what was said through Shekinah (glory) and Torah (law).

Two further considerations are, first, the belief that God would return to Zion and, second, that God would be enthroned and that someone, a man or angel, would share that throne.

It is pointed out that the belief in Jesus divinity did not arise because he was considered the Messiah, or simply on the basis of the resurrection, though the resurrection did play a major role in this belief. Jesus resurrection did confirm that he was the Messiah, but more than that it was believed by his early followers that through Jesus' death and resurrection the evil powers had been defeated. However, only Yahweh could do this. Therefore putting one and one together, his followers believed that Jesus was the personal embodiment of Israel's God.

Adding to this N T Wright mentions 2 Samuel 7:12.

"and I will resurrect your seed" (Septuagint translation)

The context is the building of the temple. So basically they would have understood that God raised up a man from the dead, that man is his Son, and is in a sense a temple, the presence of God among men.

Is this an early Christian invention, or does it fit with the words and actions of Jesus?

We see that Jesus thought that he would replace the temple – particularly through the last supper, which must be seen in connection with his temple action. The temple would go and to replace it would be his body and blood.

Also we see that Jesus saw his journey to Jerusalem as fulfilling the prophecy that YHWH would come to Zion. Particularly in the stories about the return of a king or master, e.g. Matthew 25:14. In Luke Jesus talks about Jerusalem missing its "visitation".

Jesus also implies that the Messiah would reign beside God, consider for example his comment about Psalm 110.

Chapter 6: Jesus and Easter

N T Wright points out that the resurrection has fascinated many people as it is very hard to explain away. Two common options are to deny that (i) Jesus died on the cross, or (ii) he wasn't raised from the dead. Problems with (i) are that the Romans knew how to kill people, they did it all the time, and also, if he had not died he would have been in an awful mess and would hardly have inspired the movement and many martyrdoms that followed. The problem with (ii) is that many people claimed to have seen him alive, and not as a spirit or in a vision.

Kingdom of God movement

The early followers of Jesus believed that God's kingdom had come in some way through the death and resurrection of Jesus. It would be hard to imagine them saying this if he had simply died at the hands of the pagans.

Resurrection Movement

The word resurrection at the time meant re-embodiment. There was other terminology for spiritual beings such as 'angel', 'spirit', 'souls'. The early Christians would have known the difference between the terms resurrection and angel, spirit, souls etc. So theories that the disciples had a vision and then believed that a resurrection had taken place are flawed.

Messianic Movement

From the very beginning the early Christian movement was a messianic movement. This does not make sense if Jesus died on the cross and that was the end of him. That was the end of false messiahs who did not deliver. This implies that Jesus made messianic claims during his life and that these were confirmed in his resurrection.

Other important points. The followers of Jesus distinguish between Jesus being resurrected and with them after his death, and later when he ascends to heaven and his spirit is with

them. in Luke he ascends into heaven, in John he will.

Paul speaking about his encounter with Jesus says: "Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me." (1 Cor 15:8). This implies: (i) that the appearance to Paul was different from before; (ii) there were no more appearances of this sort after that.

Does Paul not talk about a spiritual body? Paul means that our present body is a body animated by the soul; our future bodies will be animated by the Spirit. Consider Romans 8:10 where it is the Spirit that is at work in the resurrection of Christians. The word translated physical ψυχικόν is better translated soul.

Chapter 7: Walking to Emmaus in a Post-modern world

N T Wright brings Post-modernism into the picture. First though he mentions modernism. Modernism thought it could know things objectively about the world, vaunted the great individual - 'I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul'. Also believed in a bigger story in which the enlightenment and industrial revolution would bring untold blessings to the world.

Post-modernism in contrast is very suspicious about knowledge, with the belief that all truths are told in such a way as to benefit the one telling. Post-modernism deconstructed the self. I am not the master of my fate but simply a collection of forces and impulses. Post-modernism also deconstructed any big story that sought to make sense of the bigger historical picture. It says accurately that many of these stories were told to benefit those telling them or legitimized selfish and aggressive behaviour.

N T Wright then mentions Psalms 42 and 43 that talk about a man who led worship in Jerusalem who now is up North near mount hermon surrounded by ungodly people. He feels far from the presence of God and is depressed. The Psalmist then asks

God to send his light and truth to lead and help him.

The road to Emmaus

The disciples on the road to Emmaus were confused. Everything had seemed right – Jesus spoke with authority, he did incredible miracles and claimed to be the Messiah. But then he was crucified. That is what happens to false messiahs. He was meant to cleanse the temple and defeat the enemies of Israel – ‘we thought that he was the one that would redeem Israel’. The ironic truth was that he was, it is just that their view of Israel’s story and where it was to go was wrong. These events did not fit well within their current worldview. There was nothing wrong with what had happened, they just needed to change their view of Israel’s history, and the prophecies about deliverance, and then things would be more clear. Salvation came and would come through suffering. The enemies were not Rome but sin and death. Through this death, Israel’s sins could be forgiven, and that meant the end of the exile and the coming of the Kingdom of God.

N T Wright gives a modern rendition of the walk to Emmaus. Two unbelievers are talking and then Jesus comes along...

‘Foolish ones’, replied Jesus; ‘How slow of heart you are to believe all that the Creator God has said! Did you never hear that he created the world wisely? And that he has now acted within his world to create a truly human people? And that from within this people he came to live as a truly human person? And that in his own death he dealt with evil once and for all? And that he is even now at work, by his own Spirit, to create a new human family in which repentance and forgiveness of sins are the order of the day, and so to challenge and overturn the rule of war, sex, money and power?’ And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, and now also the apostles of the New Testament, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.

Chapter 8: The Light of the World

This chapter starts by looking at John Chapter 20 where on two separate occasions John mentions this is “the first day of the week”, also with the reference to Jesus as the “gardener”, the implication that this is in a sense the first day of a new creation. N T Wright goes on to talk about what Jesus as the light of the work means for us. He says that we are to build the house, tend the garden, write the score. Our vocation is to be understood in terms of the human call to bear God’s image and Israel’s call to be the light of the world. To reflect God’s creative stewardship of the world, also to reflect Jesus’ redeeming love.

We are called to perform in deeds and words signs that declare that the Kingdom has come in Jesus and that go against tendencies towards the marks of exile. The way we will have to go will involve suffering. We are not to call on the world from high above, detached. Rather we are to share and bear the pain and puzzlement of the world. This is the perspective given in Romans 8. God is groaning too, present within the church.

We also have to take seriously the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, and be to the world what YHWH was to Israel and the world.

²⁶ In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. ²⁷ And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God’s people in accordance with the will of God.