



Meeting Jesus: His Life & Times

Week 7

Who was Jesus?

Much of the material for this class, even its general structure, is taken from the work of N.T. Wright, currently the Bishop of Durham in the Church of England. Dr. Wright is one of the foremost New Testament scholars and probably the most respected first century biblical historian working today. He is currently working on the fourth volume of a projected six volume work titled, *Christian Origins and the Question of God*. This is a monumental work and an extraordinary gift to the church.



Our Task Today – Who was Jesus?

- ❖ We've seen that "messiah" and "God" didn't go together for a first-century Jew. Jesus' disciples wanted to know if he was the returning King, God's agent, the one who would bring about God's kingdom.
 - Jesus functioned as a prophet announcing the arrival of God's kingdom; as Messiah, bringing about the real return from exile.
- ❖ But now . . . we begin to put them back together. Jesus' disciples, some of them now his apostles, reflected on what had happened and who it was that they followed. Was there still more to the story?
- ❖ How did it come about that Jesus was worshiped as God – by fiercely monotheistic Jews – who did not believe that they were leaving Judaism??!!



The Hope of YHWH's Return

- ❖ The Jews had a persistent belief that YHWH would return to Zion, doing again what he did at the Exodus, coming to dwell in the midst of his people.
 - Isaiah 4:2-6; Isaiah 25:9-10; Isaiah 60:1-3
 - Zechariah 14:1-5
 - Malachi 3:1-4
 - This hope is also expressed in many post-biblical Jewish writings.
- ❖ Jews hope for YHWH to return and dwell again in his temple. The presence of the *shekinah* (God's presence) would mean that God would act, through his agents, to judge and to save. The exile would be over. Sins forgiven. This is an eschatological hope.



Jesus' Journey to Jerusalem

- ❖ We've seen that Jesus' actions on his arrival in Jerusalem were messianic demonstrations. He was the returning king, the one whom God would exalt to share God's throne. The Son of Man coming to the "ancient of days" (Daniel 7).
- ❖ But could more be going on? Might Jesus' journey be the enactment of YHWH's return to Zion?
 - Remember . . . Going back to Israel's first days, Israel was to have "no king but God!"



Jesus' Hidden Vocation

- ❖ Jesus called twelve into existence. He was not one of the twelve. God had gathered around himself twelve tribes.
- ❖ God said to Abraham: "Leave your family and your father's house. And go the land I will show you. Jesus said: "Leave your father and the boat, follow me, and I make you fishers of people."
 - Loyalty to God would now be loyalty to Jesus!
- ❖ Jesus spoke of himself as the bridegroom and as the shepherd – both images were evocative of YHWH in Judaism, e.g. the 23rd Psalm
- ❖ An important way for Jews to talk about God's presence was as Divine Wisdom. Jesus invited his hearers, as did Wisdom, to come to him and find rest.



Jesus and Torah

- ❖ Jesus was the new lawgiver, not just as a new Moses, but as the one who gave new instructions on his own authority.
- ❖ "Here is a Torah teacher who says in his own name what the Torah says in God's name . . . So we find ourselves . . . with the difficulty of making sense, within the framework of Torah, of a teacher who stands apart from, perhaps above, the Torah . . . We now recognize that at issue is the figure of Jesus, not the teachings at all." (from *A Rabbi Talks to Jesus*, by Jacob Nuesner, a leading rabbinic scholar)
- ❖ Jesus was claiming to be inaugurating a new age, to which the Law of Moses pointed but was inadequate.



Jesus and his Father

- ❖ Jesus experienced God in a unique way, enabling him to speak of YHWH as "Abba!"
 - See Matthew 11:25-27/Luke 10:21-22
- ❖ Jesus would do and be for Israel and the world, what only YHWH could do and be!
 - *He* would forgive sins, when sins were forgiven only at the Temple and only by God. *He* would defeat evil.
 - Jesus weeps in Luke 19:41-44 because Israel fails to see YHWH's return.
- ❖ Caiaphas grasped all this – at least in some sense! (Mark 14:61-63)



Evoke . . . Enact . . . Embody (from Wright)

- ❖ Jesus believed himself called, by Israel's God, to
 - **evoke** the traditions which promised YHWH's return to Zion and the traditions which spoke of a human figure sharing the divine throne;
 - **enact** these traditions in his own journey to Jerusalem, his messianic act in the temple, and his death at the hands of the pagans;
 - **embody** YHWH's return.
- ❖ Jesus did not waver in his loyalty to Judaism. But his beliefs were those of a first-century Jew who believed that the kingdom was coming in and through his work.
- ❖ Jesus' resurrection was seen by the first Christians as the proof that Jesus was the embodiment of YHWH.



Early Christians' View of Jesus

- ❖ They were good, Jewish monotheists trying to make sense of what had happened – in light of Jesus' resurrection. They had no interest in betraying Judaism.
- ❖ The Jews' belief in one God was never a statement about God's inner being. They simply believed that there was one God who created everything and chose Israel as the ones through whom he would restore creation. But . . . what ought they to make of Jesus?!
- ❖ See Philippians 2:5-11 & Colossians 1:15-20
 - These are letters from Paul containing well-established doxologies written years before any of the Gospels.



John's Gospel

- ❖ The last of the Gospels to be written. Clearly, John's community believes that the church needed another, and somewhat different, Gospel.
- ❖ John wants to make clear that -- in Jesus, the Word of God was made flesh. The prologue prepares us for what is coming. The opening words *en arche*, "in the beginning," are exactly the same Greek words as open Genesis in the Septuagint, the Greek OT.
 - The prologue is the Gospel in miniature – the story of Jesus is the true and redeeming story of Israel which is the true and redeeming story of God and his cosmos.
- ❖ In John's Gospel – there is no room for the middle ground. You are in the light or in the darkness.
 - Yes . . . Our claims are remarkable!



What can we say about Jesus' self-understanding?

- ❖ Based on the evidence, it is probably a mistake to imagine that Jesus thought of himself as God in the same way that he thought of himself as a male or a Jew.
- ❖ The problem with thinking that Jesus thought to himself something like, "I'm God" is that it cheapens his human suffering and fear at Gethsemane and the cross. It weakens our confession that Jesus is fully and completely human.
- ❖ It is probably closer to the truth to believe that Jesus cherished a relationship with God unlike any other human and that he believed that he had been given a vocation, by God, to do and be for Israel what only God could do and be. Jesus' knowledge had an element of risk, rather like knowing one is loved.
- ❖ It took others, empowered by the Holy Spirit, to realize that their understanding of God's oneness had to be modified . . . that Jesus was the very incarnation of God, who is inherently relational, forever constituting a unity in a loving community of three.