

## Jesus' Self Identity as Messiah

Excerpt from N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1996), 651–653

I have argued that Jesus' underlying aim was 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 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' beliefs, therefore, remained those of a first-century Jew, committed to the coming kingdom of Israel's god. He did not waver in his loyalty to Jewish doctrine. But his beliefs were those of a first-century Jew *who believed that the kingdom was coming in and through his own work*. His loyalty to Israel's cherished beliefs therefore took the form of critique and renovation from within; of challenge to traditions and institutions whose true purpose, he believed (like prophets long before, and radicals in his own day), had been grievously corrupted and distorted; and of new proposals which, though without precedent, were never mere innovation. They always claimed the high ground: fulfilment, completion, consummation.

We can summarize Jesus' beliefs in terms of the three most fundamental Jewish beliefs: monotheism, election, and eschatology.

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.

He believed that Israel was the true people of the one creator God, called to be the light of the world, called to accomplish her vocation through suffering. He cherished this belief in Israel's special vocation, even as he challenged current interpretations of it.

He believed in the coming kingdom of Israel's god, which would bring about the real return from exile, the final defeat of evil, and the return of YHWH to Zion. He embraced this Jewish hope, making it thematic for his own work.

The difference between the beliefs of Jesus and those of thousands of other Jews of his day amounted simply to this: he believed, also, 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.'

Speaking of Jesus' 'vocation' brings us to quite a different place from some traditional statements of gospel christology. 'Awareness of vocation' is by no means the same thing as Jesus having the sort of 'supernatural' awareness of himself, of Israel's god, and of the relation between the two of them, such as is often envisaged by those who, concerned to maintain a 'high' christology, place it within an eighteenth-century context of implicit Deism where one can maintain Jesus' 'divinity' only by holding some form of docetism. Jesus did not, in other words, 'know that he was God' in the same way that one knows one is male or female, hungry or thirsty, or that one ate an orange an hour ago. His 'knowledge' was of a more risky, but perhaps more significant, sort: like knowing one is loved. One cannot 'prove' it except by living by it. Jesus' prophetic vocation thus 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'.

I suggest, in short, that the 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, 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.