

# The portrait of a prophet – why is Wright not right about Jesus?

Estelle Dannhauser<sup>1</sup>

Research Associate: Faculty of Theology  
University of Pretoria

## Abstract

*N T Wright's extensive research on the subject of the historical Jesus has led him to the conclusion that the office of eschatological prophet passionately bent on delivering an urgent eschatological message is best suited to describe the portrait of Jesus as it emanates from the sources at hand. Wright furthermore abstracts from the sources the program of this prophet which involves extending a message of welcome and warning. Many a scholar would agree with these conclusions. When revealing how he arrived at the conclusions he refers to the "notorious" complexity of the problem of the literary relationship between the gospels. Can any scholar disagree? What does, however, seem to invite contention, are his statements that the gospels tell us far more about Jesus than scholarship has ever done, and that the two-source hypothesis which has been misleading scholars over the past two hundred years is not of any great importance in the study of Jesus. Wright believes that we are not in a position to answer the synoptic question and then bases a reconstruction of Jesus on this answer. What, then, are his sources and how does he apply them to arrive at these conclusions? This article presents the portrait Wright painted of the historical Jesus and investigates how it was arrived at.*

Epiphanius (see University Microforms International, 1976:499-500) wrote at the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE in his *Panarion*: "Jesus ... was called an archangel, not messiah, and was recognized as the true prophet."

Albert Schweitzer (2000:478) singled out Weiss as the sole scholar with the courage to follow through the evidence regarding the eschatology of Jesus, the apocalyptic preacher with a worldview so alien to our own, that he "... will be to our time a stranger and an enigma".

---

<sup>1</sup> Estelle Dannhauser (PhD) is a research assistant of Dr Andries G van Aarde, honorary professor at the Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria. This article is based on a PhD dissertation entitled "The historical Jesus: Maps and memories", and was presented at the annual NTSSA congress, 15-18 April, 2008.

### *The portrait of a prophet – why is Wright not right about Jesus?*

In present-day scholarship it is the Bishop of Durham, N T Wright, who chooses the office of eschatological prophet as best with which to describe Jesus. In his own words: “Though his followers came to regard him as more than a prophet, they never saw him as less” (Wright 1996:162), and: “This portrait of Jesus as a prophet seems the most secure point at which to ground our study of Jesus’ public career, and in particular of his characteristic praxis” (Wright 1996:166).<sup>2</sup>

Wright believes that Jesus the prophet was passionately bent on delivering an urgent eschatological message. In conversation with other scholars, he wends his way through the dirt roads with Jesus and becomes involved in his program of extending a messianic welcome and message of vindication. But his word is, without a doubt, a double-edged sword and Wright hears clearly the warning of judgment and vindication.

Wright’s research leads him to the conclusion that Jesus was seen by his contemporaries, and by himself, as harbinger of an urgent eschatological message for Israel, a prophet performing mighty works as catalyst to the redefined kingdom of the God of Israel, talking and acting in a way reminiscent of, at the very least, Elijah and Elisha, the famed prophets of Israelite tradition.

The Jesus encountered on his prophetic journey by Wright was no people-pleaser. In fact, he was a thorn in the flesh for many, attacking, in no uncertain terms, symbols which they held sacred or which upheld them in positions of authority, and replacing them with new symbols appropriate to the kingdom of god (the lower case being preferred by Wright) that he was inaugurating through his mission. He believes that Jesus was, succinctly put, an eschatological prophet announcing the kingdom and dying in order to bring it about.

Although many a scholar would agree with Wright thus far, it is his views on which sources to tap and how to go about it that may be more controversial. Wright’s extensive research on the subject of the historical Jesus has led him to the conclusion that the office of eschatological prophet passionately bent on delivering an urgent eschatological message is best

---

<sup>2</sup> The following passages contain more or less direct references to Jesus as prophet: In Q 9:57-10:16 we read of the commissioning for prophetic envoys. In the canonical gospels we find allusions to both John and Jesus in the prophetic role, such as that of Elijah, for example: Luke 1:17: John the Baptist “will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children ...”; Mark 9:11-12/Matthew 17:10-11: “His disciples asked him: ‘Why do the scribes say that Elijah must come first’? And he answered and said: It is true, Elijah comes and will restore all things”; Matthew 11:14: And if you will accept it: He is Elijah who was to come.” The following texts contain more direct references from the gospels (and one from Ac) which may be interpreted as indicators of Jesus’ prophetic role: Mark 6:4; Mark 8:28; Mark 6:14-15; Mark 14:65; Matthew 10:41; Matthew 13:57; Matthew 14:1-2; Matthew 16:14; Matthew 21:11; Matthew 21:46; Matthew 26:68; Luke 4:24; Luke 7:16; Luke 7:39-50; Luke 9:19; Luke 9:7-8; Luke 13:33; Luke 22:64; Luke 24:19; John 4:19; John 7:40; John 7:52; John 9:17; Acts 7:37.

suited to describe the portrait of Jesus emanating from the sources at hand. He furthermore abstracts from the sources the program of this prophet which involves extending a message of welcome and warning. Many scholars would agree with these conclusions. When revealing how he arrived at the conclusions he refers to the “notorious” complexity of the problem of the literary relationship between the gospels. Can any scholar disagree? What does seem to invite contention though, are his statements that the gospels tell us far more about Jesus than scholarship has ever dreamed of, and that the two-source hypothesis which has been misleading scholars over the past two hundred years is not of any great importance in the study of Jesus. Wright believes that we are not in a position to answer the synoptic question and then base a reconstruction of Jesus on this answer. What, then, are his sources and how does he apply them to arrive at these conclusions? This paper views the portrait painted by Wright of the historical Jesus and investigates how it is arrived at.

## **1. WHERE HIS SOURCES LED HIM: AN EXAMPLE OF CLASSICAL PROPHECY**

In Wright’s opinion most scholars would agree that the following statements about Jesus are more or less axiomatic (1996:147-168): That he

- was born in 4 BCE;
- grew up in Nazareth, a town in Galilee, close to the major city of Sepphoris;
- spoke Aramaic, some Hebrew, at least some Greek;
- emerged as public figure round about AD 28 in the context of the work of John the Baptist, to whose work his initially showed resemblances;
- exhorted people to repent and announced the kingdom or reign of the God of Israel, mostly by means of parables;
- journeyed habitually from village to village in Galilee, engaging in itinerant ministry and travelling at least once to Jerusalem, announcing his message and enacting it through the performance of healing miracles, including exorcisms, and through the table-fellowship with a group of sweeping social and cultural scope, eating and drinking with them in a celebratory atmosphere as a further way of inaugurating the kingdom;

***The portrait of a prophet – why is Wright not right about Jesus?***

- called a group of close followers or disciples, among whom twelve received special status;
- often prayed, sometimes in lonely places, addressing God as “Abba” in a way if not unique then at least distinctive of Jesus;
- only (according to sources available) fasted once;
- through his actions, and one dramatic one in the Temple in particular, incurred the wrath of some in Judaism, especially of the high-priestly establishment, towards the end of his life;
- resulting partly from this, was handed over to the Roman authorities to be
- executed in a manner reserved for insurrectionists;
- was claimed by his followers, soon after his death, to have been raised from the dead and they carried on his work in a new way, resulting in their persecution by Jews as well as non-Jews.

Wright is convinced that these statements could all withstand the test of his series of criteria for painting a true picture, namely the criteria of being attested to by the most reliable sources, of dissimilarity and of acceptance by the “almost all serious writers” (Wright 1996:150). He therefore argues that *“... the best initial model for understanding this praxis is that of a prophet; more specifically, that of a prophet bearing an urgent eschatological, and indeed apocalyptic, message for Israel”* (Wright 1996:150 – emphasis mine). His first argument in support of the portrait of Jesus as a prophet is that he believes it to make sense in the general context of Judaism, in the context of popular movements in particular:

- Certain dynamics such as an undercurrent of potential or actual revolution were at work in first century Judaism and it was not confined to the lowest social classes but had as participants some Pharisees and even aristocrats.
- Wright (1996:151) refers to allegations that prophecy had ceased in the first century and to the absence of prophetic writings since Daniel in the developing canon. He argues, however, that despite what seems to be evidence to support these allegations and despite what Josephus

refers to as the failure of an exact succession of prophets in the second-Temple period; various types of prophecy seem to have continued unhindered in this period.

- Webb (1991:350-355) distinguishes three different types of prophets:
  - clerical prophets, holders of priestly, perhaps even royal office,
  - sapiential prophets, wise men belonging to various sectarian groups such as the Essenes or the Pharisees,
  - and popular prophets which group may be subdivided into leadership and solitary popular prophets.

Wright (1996:155) says that, by recognizing that Jesus shared in the traits of the popular prophet, "... we are in touch with part of what we will later see to be bedrock within the Jesus-tradition". It was as a prophet in this basic mould, acting symbolically in ways that would be understood, and were designed to be understood, that Jesus made his decisive impact on his contemporaries.

Leader-ship prophets were initiators and leaders of movements promising salvation and liberation, teaching, pronouncing oracles and engaging in symbolic actions. A symbolic entering into the land was often enacted by these prophets leading their followers into the wilderness, particularly around the Jordan, thereby retelling the exodus-story and pre-enacting the great liberation or "return from exile.

(Wright 1996:155)

Wright emphasizes that these acts were not random but that they underlined and reinforced a controlling story or "metanarrative" underlying the whole programme or agenda. This metanarrative was the annunciation of the end of Israel's suffering and hardship, to be replaced by a new beginning through the intervention of their God who would finally be king of the world.

Wright believes that Jesus was seen as and saw himself as a prophet – a prophet such as the prophets of old, delivering to his people a message from the covenant God of Israel, warning of the dire consequences of the way in which she chose at the time to live and exhorting her to turn back to her God and his laws. Like John the Baptist, but to a greater extent, he conveyed a prophetic message in the manner of the "oracular" prophets and inaugurated a movement of renewal in the manner of the "leadership" prophets. He even bears resemblances to both "clerical" and "sapiential" prophets, although he could also be interpreted as counter-clerical. He calls

### ***The portrait of a prophet – why is Wright not right about Jesus?***

the evidence “impressive” and says that it stems from “triple-tradition” concluding that “... we are here in touch with firmly authentic tradition, preserved against all the tendencies that may be presumed to have been at work” (Wright 1996:165, 166).

Taking the synoptic gospel evidence completely at face value, Wright states furthermore that Jesus had modelled his ministry on that of various Old Testament prophets, regarding his own ministry as being in line with and bringing to a climax the work of the great prophets of the Old Testament “... culminating in John the Baptist, whose initiative he had used as his launching-pad” (Wright 1996:167).

Although all three synoptic gospels, in his opinion, as well as the early church as a whole, “clearly” regarded John the Baptist to be an Elijah *redivivus*, they likewise portrayed Jesus as Elijah-like in his actions “... and show that the disciples were thinking of Elijah-typology as giving them a blueprint for his, and their own, activity” (Wright 1996:167). Just as Jeremiah and Elijah had done, Jesus conveyed a message from the God of the covenant, verbally as well as through symbolic actions. In, for example, Luke 7:11-17 he finds evidence that Jesus, in explaining the nature of his own work, had been portrayed as using both Elijah and Elisha as models.

A prophet like the ones Israel had known before him, Jesus was politically a lonely figure in spite of his followers, reprimanding the people for their transgressions of the law, exhorting them to repent and follow a different path, challenging and denouncing the ruling parties and the status quo.

Wright (1996:167-170) believes himself to be standing, historically speaking, on firm ground in saying that Jesus was an oracular prophet, but his group of followers – that he had followers is an undisputed fact - and his symbolic actions (sometimes reminiscent of the exodus) also qualify him as a “popular prophet”.

Although John the Baptist had already started joining together the two prophetic modes of oracular and leadership, Jesus did this in an innovative and unique way, exceeding John’s prophetic mode in three ways: He was itinerant, he taught extensively and with an even greater sense of urgency, and he engaged in a regular programme of healing. Wright (1996:169, 170) says that at each of these points the double criteria of similarity and dissimilarity can be invoked. In his opinion this outline of Jesus’ praxis is thoroughly credible within a first-century Jewish context, and makes good sense as part of the presupposition of the early church. At the same time, according to him, this praxis breaks the moulds of the Jewish context, while being, in detail, significantly unlike the characteristic activity of most of the early Christians.

Jesus went from village to village, repeating in essence the same material, probably with minor variations; sentences, aphorisms, rhythmic sayings, memorable stories with shorter variations, parables and beatitudes. Through these he "... urged repentance, commended faith, encouraged the desperate, rebuked those he considered hard-hearted, spoke words of healing" (Wright 1996:170). There would doubtless have been local variations. Wright warns that in the light of this, sayings and deeds are not disjunct but form a unity and must be perused as such. Moreover different parts of the bigger ministry which had been artificially divided must be allowed to throw light each on the other.

## **2. THE KINGDOM DRAMA**

### **2.1 Act one: Annunciation**

Jesus the eschatological prophet acting in the kingdom-drama came and announced that Israel's God would once again become king through the telling of a story that evoked many sacred, treasured memories. But somehow the story was different in its sameness for the plot had been subverted and redirected. Wright maintains that Jesus retold Israel's story, both explicitly and implicitly, as part of his prophetic work. He says that a refusal to accede to this equals ultimately a refusal to think historically.<sup>3</sup> Nor should it come as a surprise, when one remembers the other "leadership" prophets, that Jesus would place himself, as the kingdom-announcer, at the centre of the redrawn narrative.

In announcing the advent of the "kingdom of God" Jesus was confirming what the people of Israel had long expected and hoped for, deliberately evoking with the big picture of his story-line, one time-ingrained in the memories of his audience; that their God would be lord of the world and would bring an end to their suffering and exile. At the same time however, he was painting a dramatically new picture, of what the kingdom meant, who would in reality enter into it and on what terms; and who were excluded from it, so "... as to subvert and redirect its normal plot" (Wright 1996:199).

Wright warns that Jesus' teaching should not be seen as timeless ethics nor merely as instructions for the ongoing life of his followers (to use Schweizer's term "*Interimsethik*"), nor may the observer of the ministry of Jesus fail to realise that his sharpest criticism is aimed not at pagans, but at Israel herself.

---

<sup>3</sup> Confer Meyer (1992:15-17).

### ***The portrait of a prophet – why is Wright not right about Jesus?***

Jesus in the role of a prophet was pushing the boundaries of the genre in innovative ways, employing various narrative forms in which to mould the “story” he was telling - the verbalisation of a new vision of Israel and her destiny, a destiny which was hurtling toward fulfilment – and simultaneously subverting rival interpretations.

#### **2.2 Act two: Welcome, challenge and summons**

Wright (1996:244-247) believes that Jesus claimed to be the true prophet of God spearheading the movement of renewal and salvation in Israel by which Israel’s true god would become king.

His behaviour seems to show that the return from exile was already taking place, consisting of his own efforts and the results of his mission and that this entitled him to make pronouncements on who belonged to the new restored Israel and who not. He therefore enacted his announcement in terms of a welcome and a warning: The welcome he extended to those in need; all and sundry, but especially to the poor and the sinners whose repentance and restoration would culminate in their return from exile and celebration. They would reap the benefits of his work although they had to bear in mind that the true Israel returning from exile must naturally expect to meet with resistance. The warning applied to those who rested upon the laurels of their ancestral heritage and the assumption that the coming kingdom implied their vindication, and the threat of the judgment of YHWH returning to Zion to those who rebelled against his rule.

Acceptance of his invitation meant by implication a realignment of praxis as well as of some elements in their worldview. Wright speaks of a *welcome* to live, personally and corporately as the new Israel in a new way of being the people of God as well as a *summons* to follow him and accompany him on his mission which entailed a journey to Jerusalem and would reach a startling climax.

He welcomes the recent emphasis on Jesus as “sage” or “teacher of wisdom” and as such “standing in a line of great wisdom teachers going back in both Jewish and pagan traditions to the book of Proverbs and beyond” (Wright 1996:311).<sup>4</sup> Jesus’ teaching has been the object of scrutiny as has the way in which it, “by its very style, was designed to subvert the worldviews of his hearers. Teasing aphorisms, laconic and cryptic sayings, and strange subversive stories, all challenged their perceptions of reality and deftly unlocked fresh possibilities” (Wright 1996:311).

Borg (in Borg & Wright 1999:68-70) subdivides teachers of wisdom into two groups: the teachers of conventional wisdom on the one hand, and on the other teachers of subversive or alternative wisdom, the latter indicating

---

<sup>4</sup> See also Witherington (1994:172-201).



through their didactics a way beyond the paths of convention. Both the “sheer weight of wisdom teaching attributed to Jesus” and the “form of memorable short sayings (aphorisms) and provocative short stories (parables), both classic wisdom forms” (Borg 1999:68) in which his teaching was cast, persuades Borg that the category of teacher of subversive wisdom is the one best suited to him. Of particular interest is what he believes to be the origin of this subversive wisdom: “The most likely source of such wisdom is mystical experience: enlightened wisdom teachers see and teach as they do because of their own enlightenment experience. Such, I am persuaded, was the source of Jesus’ teaching: he spoke differently because he had seen differently” (Borg, in Borg & Wright 1999:70).

The invitation extended by Jesus further calls for helpers to actively contribute towards the execution of the action the story needed. However, acceptance of this invitation implied specific conduct from these exiles returning to become the new Israel, not merely enforcing a new set of rules or abstract ethical codes, but rather generating an appropriate realignment of praxis and of certain other elements in their worldview among those who accepted it.

Wright concluded that Jesus had been aware both that he would have to do alone what needed to be done for the rebirthing of Israel into a new community and that his followers would be muddled and ambiguous. Most definitely he had anticipated that the whole of the nation would not repent. And paradoxically these factors had vindicated his new way of being Israel instead of annihilating it, to the extent that his followers, having failed to respond to his summons during his lifetime, would recall it after his death and accept the challenge to Israel to see themselves as the renewed community of the people of God, just as he had intended them to do all along.

For his purpose had a scope far wider than mere social reform within Israel; he was the prophet destined to fulfil God’s purpose, through the people of Israel, with the whole world. He adds that Jesus was deeply concerned with the corporate and social effects of his kingdom-announcement. In terms of his use of the word “corporate” over against “personal” meaning for each and every one of Jesus’ followers, he explains that it does not undermine, but instead enhances the personal meaning of Jesus’ announcement for everyone who listened to him.

The idea that Jesus expected the end of the world to dawn at any moment is, according to Wright, scholarly *passé*. Moreover, he says that there is virtually no evidence that Israel was expecting the end of the space-time universe, on the contrary, he believes evidence to point in the direction that they did not, but merely used metaphor and cosmic imagery to portray to the full the theological significance of cataclysmic events on the social and

### ***The portrait of a prophet – why is Wright not right about Jesus?***

political fronts. Although he believes Jesus to have expected it to come soon, he evidently thought there would be time aplenty for the manifestation of a new form of community. However, when the end came, it would do so in an earth-shattering climax of judgment falling on the impenitent and by contrast in vindication bestowed on the followers of the true path.

### **2.3 Act three: Judgment and vindication**

In the opinion of Wright (1996:367, 368) Jesus' story of the kingdom told in a subversive way of the long-awaited final end to Israel's long exile with the present regime in Jerusalem targeted as the main antagonist. Jesus spoke and acted as prophet for the true ancestral traditions of Israel, "denouncing what he saw as deviation and corruption at the very heart of Israel's present life" (Wright 1996:367). This denunciation could not but provoke anger and dissent and this wrath would concentrate itself in hotspots exactly where Jesus' story with all the symbols sacred to and characteristic of the prophet threw down the gauntlet to opposing symbols at the heart of the dominant worldview.

But someone persistently announcing a new kingdom while criticising present social practices was bound to attract negative attention and incur suspicion, animosity and wrath from those who controlled and benefited from the status quo, such as the high-priestly party, so that it is hardly surprising, nor can it in all earnest be doubted, that he was executed as claimant to the throne of David, as the memory of the ironic "king of the Jews" signifies.

### **2.4 The script: How the message was conveyed**

#### **2.4.1 Parables**

When Jesus delivered his prophetic message, he very often and in a totally unique way used parables to best convey what was of such importance for Israel to hear and experience. "Jesus' parables, then, belong with, rework, re-appropriate and redirect Israel's prophetic and apocalyptic traditions. They belong substantially, as they stand, within the specific period of his public career and ministry, of his work as a prophet of judgment and renewal" (Wright 1996:180). They express "... the very heart of his message in their form as well as their content, in their style and language as well as their particular imagery and apocalyptic or allegorical meaning" (Wright 1996:181).<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Crossan (1992:152) writes: "It is a parable's destiny to be interpreted and those interpretations will necessarily be diverse. When the diversity ceases, the parable is dead and the parabler is silent."

He expresses strongly his belief that Jesus, as oracular prophet, had indeed announced oracles of judgment on God's recalcitrant, unrepentant people in a way that had come to be expected of and was considered completely natural in the prophetic vocation and role. The warnings typically issued by Jesus were that Israel was treading a path of doom that would consequently incur God's judgment on his people through disaster affecting the whole nation and every aspect of their lives, if they did not repent and change their ways.

Wright views these admonitions to be in line with those of the classic prophetic type, thus placing Jesus firmly in line with the "... sad, noble, and utterly Jewish tradition of Elijah, Jeremiah and John the Baptist" (Wright 1996:185).

#### **2.4.2 Miraculous deeds**

"... [F]ew serious historians now deny that Jesus, and for that matter many other people, performed cures and did other startling things for which there was no obvious natural explanation" (Wright 1996:188). His followers would have perceived his mighty works to have been a confirmation and one sign amongst others of his claim that the kingdom of the god of Israel was on the verge of realization. "They were indications of a prophetic ministry to be ranked at the very least with those of Elijah and Elisha" (Wright 1996:196).

Most of the "mighty works" of Jesus are works of healing, whereby membership in Israel is restored to those who, as a result of their condition, had been labelled as being ritually unclean. Thus the healings, just as his open welcome to sinners, had the intended effect of welcoming the unwelcome in his initiation of the rule of the healing and sovereign god of Israel. The re-inclusion of the outcasts also pertained to his association with the dead which, instead of rendering him unclean, instead brought restoration to them. It pertained likewise to the miracles performed for gentiles and a Samaritan in order to carry the message of their inclusion within the people of YHWH. This non-exclusivist message and the actions pertaining to it furthered his subversive agenda. The vindication for which they had longed, had been accomplished in the here and now, the waiting was over. On them was bestowed the unsurpassed blessings of the renewed covenant and it included the forgiveness of sins.

These signs of covenant renewal may also be seen in the multiplication of the bread in the wilderness and the stilling of storms, both according to Wright carrying overtones of the exodus. Other acts such as the withering of the fig tree and his actions in the Temple symbolize the flipside of the coin, namely the judgment that would fall on those of the nation who would not repent. He concludes that the mighty works were never meant to be a power

***The portrait of a prophet – why is Wright not right about Jesus?***

display, but formed an essential part of the fulfilment of the promises that had been made to Israel as a whole and were as such the inauguration of the kingdom of their god coming "... in power to save and heal" (Wright 1996:193).

The echoes of prophecy, and the theme of fulfilment, belong therefore not simply in later theological reflection, but as part of the question, what did people see when they saw Jesus at work? The praxis of the prophet invited the interpretation: he was announcing the great fulfilment, the great renewal, the time when Israel's god would at last become king.

(Wright 1996:194)

However, Wright (1996:193) argues that Jesus believes the real battle has to be waged not against Rome, but against the Satan and therefore engages in head-on battle with him as is signified by the exorcisms. According to Wright, a battle with the accuser makes perfect sense within the worldview of first-century Jews in which Jesus as a Jew would have partaken. He says that the particular interest of the exorcisms lies in the fact that they did not form part of Old Testament predictions nor of first-century Jewish expectations for the coming kingdom and the healing and deliverance expected to accompany it, nor were they a major focus of the life and work of the early church yet. The criterion of dissimilarity thus points them out to be manoeuvres in a battle in which Jesus alone was engaged, with the exorcisms indicating that he was winning (Mt 12:28/Lk 11:20) although the battle was still building up to a climax. He elaborates further that Jesus saw himself as more than a prophet (Wright 1996:196, 197); that he saw himself as the prophet referred to in Deuteronomy 18 through whose work Israel's history would finally reach a climax in the inauguration of the kingdom.

Along a road mapped by his particular methodology and use of sources, Wright thus discovers a first-century Jewish monotheism subscribed to by people who believed their god to be the only one, the one who elected them to be his chosen people. Wright (in Borg & Wright 1999:32) likewise discovers a first-century Jewish eschatology ("the belief that history is going somewhere, that something will happen to put it right" [Wright, in Borg & Wright 1999:32]) claiming that the one god of his chosen people would soon act within history and vindicate his elect and establish peace and justice once and for all. Although God's people had returned from exile as God's punishment for their sins, foreigners were still their overlords and this meant that the punishment was continuing. The great promises of forgiveness given by the great prophets of old had not yet come to fruition. They anticipated their

future liberation in language reminiscent of the return from exile, seeing this hope as the new exodus.

Jesus, the first-century Palestinian Jew, announced in the manner, language and demeanour of a prophet, that YHWH, the God of Israel, was now, at last, becoming king, for the arrival of his kingdom in this world was imminent. Israel is at long last experiencing the true return from exile. YHWH was finally returning to Zion and judgment awaited those in Israel who had failed to be truly loyal to their God. This kingdom would be a place distinguished by the fact that God ruled, or would soon rule. In a world where theology and politics, piety and revolution went hand in hand, the hope for God's kingdom was not merely political. Therefore this new kingdom would bring a new kind of religion, a new spiritual experience, a new code of mores. For it was about the story of Israel having reached its climax and moving towards its decisive moment in time. All this is coming to pass in and by Jesus' own work.

The kingdom Jesus announced, was somewhat different from the one expected and the enemy was not Rome, but the one behind Rome. The final battle before the kingdom would break in upon the world, had already been inaugurated in and through the person and work of Jesus with his emphasis on prophetic symbolism. It challenged the power and policies of Herod, Caiaphas and Rome itself, it challenged the militant aspirations of the revolutionaries within the ranks of Israel, it challenged the injustices and oppression endemic within its own society – a society resting on the laurels of its own purity and isolating outsiders in sharp distinction while perpetuating the injustice.

Jesus invited his audience to become kingdom people, God's people who had truly returned from exile by repentance and faith in his gospel. They must relinquish all revolutionary ideas and buy into Jesus' counter-agenda – turning the other cheek and going the extra mile, losing their lives to gain it – and all of this in a newly constituted community where debts would be written off and sins forgiven. He welcomed sinners into fellowship with himself as members of the kingdom he was announcing, offering forgiveness of sins out on the street, without sacrifice or temple. He challenged people to live as the new covenant people in forgiveness and prayer, to abolish barriers against those on the outside and the oppression of those on the inside so that God, through them, could fulfil God's long-cherished intentions for the world.

### **3. ASSESSMENT: WRIGHT'S JOURNEY IN RETROSPECT**

In his choice of sources for his study of Jesus, Wright echoes Albert Schweitzer (and the numerous scholars following in Schweitzer's wake) in finding in the Gospel of Mark a sufficient source for historical research in his

***The portrait of a prophet – why is Wright not right about Jesus?***

quest to find an authentic Jesus. Flying in the face of the findings of scholars such as William Wrede (1971) who detect in the Gospel of Mark interpretation of the material at hand, which diminishes its value as a source, Wright and the like-minded encounter a scholarly impasse in attempts to search for sources further back than the Gospel of Mark. Finding behind this Gospel a speculative no-man's land, they choose to take Mark's gospel at face value.

Wright (1996:40) argues that the synoptic tradition as a whole, in both its pre-literary and its literary forms, was intent on referring to the actual, original Jesus and not to a mythical cult-figure. He furthermore argues against the status Q enjoys within the Jesus Seminar, pointing out its tenuous character and the speculative nature of attempts to award gospel status to and reconstruct this imaginary document.

History, abhorring the vacuum left by the dismissal of Mark as pure fiction, has come up with new fictions which seem harder to attack only because they are based on nothing at all. The blithe "reconstruction" not only of Q, not only of its different stages of composition, but even of complete communities whose beliefs are accurately reflected in these different stages, betokens a naïve willingness to believe in anything as long as its nothing like Mark.

(Wright 1996:81)

The gospels are, according to him, not merely biography or religious propaganda, yet they share the main characteristics of both of these. They are connected to Jesus and exist because of what he said and did. Of the utmost importance for understanding his *modus operandi* can be seen in his following statement: "First-century Judaism, and the gospels, are opposite edges, and all discourse about Jesus must take place between them" (Wright 1996:112). He is optimistic that quite a lot can be known about Jesus. "What we know, with the kind of 'knowledge' proper to all historical enquiry, may turn out to generate theological and practical significance far in excess of, and perhaps quite different from, anything that recent scholarship, and recent Christianity, has imagined or wanted" (Wright 1996:123). In the conclusion to his book he writes:

It has been the burden of this book that the gospels do in fact tell us far more about Jesus than such scholarship had dreamed of, and that, though certain types of Orthodoxy may want to recoil from drawing the conclusions, such a response would be self-defeating and profoundly inauthentic. The portrait of Jesus' mindset, aims and

beliefs that I have set out suggests ... (a God) whose glory is strangely revealed in the welcome and the warning, the symbol and the story, the threat to the Temple, the celebration in the upper room, and the dark night at noon on Calvary.

(Wright 1996:662)

On the matter of the sources available to us he says that no coherent picture is offered to the researcher. Just as the historian examines every scrap of evidence as a source, so he too uses all available material. Questions of relationships between sources, the sources they might have used, a three-stage development in source material, including oral traditions and what shaped them, their solidifying into literary sources by means of collection and editing, pose, to Wright's mind, questions which would be wonderful if answered or even answerable, but seeing that they're not, they aren't (Wright, in Borg & Wright 1999:20).

"It has long been assumed among New Testament scholars that in order to work back from our sources to find Jesus himself we must first solve the problem of the literary relationship between these gospels. This is notoriously complex" (Wright, in Borg & Wright 1999:20). Wright does not hold much hope that if the gospels had used sources, including one another, these sources could be reconstructed. After a brief summary of some of the problems and pitfalls that may be encountered in this investigation of sources, he poses:

... one large question: why did Christianity begin, and why did it take the shape it did? This includes questions about Jesus and John the Baptist; it includes questions about Paul, John, and the Gospel of Thomas; it includes, particularly, questions about the nature of the synoptic material and the way in which it reached its present form. And the way to solve all such questions, whether to do with Jesus or to do with the sources, is once more the scientific method of hypothesis and verification.

(Wright, in Borg & Wright 1999:22)

This method implies that the researcher immerses him- or herself completely in the data after which he or she emerges with a hypothesis, a big picture of how all fits together. This hypothesis is to be tested against three criteria, namely whether it makes sense of the data as it stands, whether it has "... an appropriate level of simplicity, or even elegance" (Wright, in Borg & Wright 1999:22) and whether it sheds light on other areas of research than the one it was supposed to cover. We are not in a position to first answer the synoptic

***The portrait of a prophet – why is Wright not right about Jesus?***

question and then base a reconstruction of Jesus on this answer. But he is convinced that we know more certainly of Jesus of Nazareth that he was a Jewish prophet announcing the kingdom of God, than we know anything about the history of traditions that led to the formation of the gospels as we know them (see Wright in Borg & Wright 1999:23).

Wright has only one step in his use of the gospels. He says that because for some researchers the verdict is out on Mark being the oldest of all the gospels and whether the Q-source really existed, the whole matter is to be placed on hold and he proceeds without care for what came earlier and what later. His best hypothesis is the one which accumulates and incorporates as much information as possible into the overall hypothesis and he is of the opinion that the two-source hypothesis is not of any great importance in the study of Jesus and that the majority of scholars over the past two hundred years have been wrong.

This creates the problem of failing to acknowledge that the Gospel of Mark, though one of our oldest sources, may already be interpretation. If one acknowledges this probability, the question could then be raised whether Jesus saw and announced himself to be a prophet or whether that was already Markan interpretation. Wright pleads for an approach which takes the gospels and Mark at face value. He does not consider the possibility of persevering in the search for sources underlying Mark to be worthwhile, for he considers such a search to be fraught with difficulty. This threatens to turn him into little more than a neo-orthodox theologian, who wants to uphold the theology of the church. He sees Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet anticipating the end of the world and is disappointed when this fails to come to pass. Jesus then forces the wheel of God to turn full cycle by his death as a martyr. But throughout Wright's argumentation one has the feeling that his selection and evaluation of data is a rather random affair.

Wright works with a grand narrative, a large hypothesis in which judgment on smaller-scale issues is made according to how they fit into the large picture. But what constitutes the controlling story, can be problematic. He identifies this as exile and restoration, which is contentious in a number of ways (cf Dunn [2003:473-477] who concludes that one "should heed postmodernism's warning against uncritical dependence on grand narratives, against the superimposition of a unitary meta-narrative on much more complex data").

Wright thus builds up an impressive picture of Jesus the prophet, but because it is obvious that, apart from turning a deliberate blind eye to what-/whomever may lie behind the Gospel of Mark, his determining factors in proving case for case what can be traced back to Jesus, are gut feelings and



healthy logic, one can't help wondering about the accuracy of the image. He seems to bring much of his theological presuppositions to bear on his picture so that Jesus seems to be slightly one-dimensional and removed from the social and political realities of his context – a figure promoting abstract theology which has too little bearing on the true crises in which his people found themselves at the time.

One wonders furthermore to what level Mark had already applied interpretation in portraying Jesus as a prophet; whether he had maybe succumbed to the longing created by years of expectation of “the Prophet” who was to come and save his people, so that when Jesus appeared, seemingly displaying so much of what had been hoped for, this gospel interpreted him too lithely as that prophet.

My own concerns with his work are that he too readily dismisses the possibility of achieving any results from looking critically at the sources, their ancestry and their interdependence, and especially at and behind the Gospel of Mark. The work of Horsley has shown that it is indeed possible, plausible and scientific to do so and the results of such a study inspire much more confidence that, what is learnt from the investigation, brings one close to the actual intention of Jesus. When travelling with Wright in search of a clear view of Jesus, one can not help but feeling that Jesus, instead of being found at the destination of the journey, had been a fellow-passenger all along, nor can one help wondering at times what the whole point of the journey was.

Wright attempted through his research to determine the impressions of the average Galilean contemporaries of Jesus as they watched him walking the dusty roads, challenging certain aspects of the Jewish worldview in no uncertain terms, spreading word of the coming kingdom of the God of Israel and celebrating and manifesting this kingdom through open table-fellowship. Wright (1996:150) offers two arguments in favour of Jesus as prophet before even starting out on his journey:

- The model of Jesus as prophet offers the amenity of being able to function as springboard for further study and of gathering in a multitude of other features of Jesus' life which might otherwise have remained in the wings.
- In what Wright (1996:150) considers to be “one of the strongest arguments for the prophetic portrait” he maintains this portrait to be the one that makes the best sense within the contexts of Judaism in general, of popular movements in particular, and most particularly of John the Baptist.

### ***The portrait of a prophet – why is Wright not right about Jesus?***

Through his extensive endeavours, Wright has reached the conclusion that, based on the evidence, Jesus had been perceived by friend and foe alike, by the villagers who saw and listened to him, as prophet. His speech and actions had, for them, evoked and contemporised pictures stored in collective and individual memories of traditional prophets, even while surpassing it. Through his mighty works this prophet Jesus was inaugurating the kingdom of Israel's god with the welcome and warning announced by the double-edged sword of his word. These are indicators of the praxis of a prophet ranked at least as high as Elijah or Elisha. In his kingdom programme he threw down the gauntlet before Israel and its sacred cows, the cherished symbols the names of which were engraved in the palms of their hands. To reduce the view enjoyed upon reaching Wright's destination to a pocket-sized snapshot: all evidence, according to Wright (1996:150), points to the probability that Jesus was seen as and saw himself as a prophet. Jesus' praxis and worldview typify him as a prophet bearing an urgent eschatological, or, to be more specific, apocalyptic, message for Israel and fulfilling, through the movement he was initiating, the divinely ordained destiny of Israel.

### **Works consulted**

- Borg, M J (1984) 1998. *Conflict, holiness and politics in the teachings of Jesus*. New York: Mellen.
- Crossan, J D 1992. s v Parable. *ABD* 5, 146-152.
- Crossan, J D 1994. *Jesus: A revolutionary biography*. San Francisco, CA: Harper.
- Crossan, J D & Reed, J L 2001. *Excavating Jesus: Beneath the stones, behind the text*. San Francisco, CA: Harper.
- Dunn, J D G 2003a. *Jesus remembered: Christianity in the making, Vol I*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Dunn, J D G 2003b. Altering the default setting: Re-envisaging the early transmission of the Jesus tradition. *NTS* 49, 139-175.
- Eusebius [1953]. *Ecclesiastical history*. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America.
- Meyer, B F 1992. *Christus Faber: The master-builder and the house of God*. Allison Park, CA: Pickwick.
- Webb, R L 1991. *John the baptizer and prophet: A socio-historical study*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic. (*JSNTSS* 62.)
- Wrede, W [1901] 1971. The Messianic secret, translation of *Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien: Zugleich ein Beitrag zum Verständnis des Markusevangeliums*, tr by J C G Creig. Cambridge: James Clarke. (The Library of Theological Translations.)
- Wright, N T 1992. *The New Testament and the people of God*. London: SPCK.
- Wright, N T 1996. *Jesus and the victory of God*. London: SPCK.
- Wright, N T 2003. *The resurrection of the Son of God*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress.