

## **On N.T. Wright and Israel**

*Written by Joseph Weissman*

### **Introduction**

I write this article as a great admirer of N.T. Wright's theology and research, particularly on the subject of Jesus' resurrection. I thoroughly enjoyed reading the third part of his 'Christian Origins' series, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*.<sup>1</sup> I have also found his book *Surprised by Hope*<sup>2</sup> to be a great comfort to me, inspiring me to imagine the reality of God's new creation alive on Earth. I greatly appreciate how Wright has re-approached the Jewish context of Paul and the gospels, educating a new generation of Christians about the relevance and importance of knowing Hebrew phrases and understanding the Jewish mind-set of the first century. I have also been privileged to meet N.T. Wright in person and hear him deliver a series of informative talks on the subject of human flourishing. This essay is written, however, in response to N.T. Wright's approach to the state of Israel, a subject on which he has made many controversial political and theological statements. It is written with the aim of encouraging Wright and his supporters to be considerate and reasonable in the way they talk about Israel, especially when considering the long and unfortunate history of theologically-driven anti-Semitism in Western Christian thought. It is my sincere hope that Dr Wright will be kind enough to respond to some of the points raised in this article.

### **Contents:**

1. N.T. Wright and Supercessionism (p.2)
2. N.T. Wright and Jews (p.4)
3. N.T. Wright and the state of Israel (p.5)
4. N.T. Wright and the land of Israel (p.6)
5. N.T. Wright and Jewish Religious Zionism (p.9)
6. N.T. Wright and Christian Zionism (p.10)
7. N.T. Wright and Near East Christians (p.12)

---

<sup>1</sup> N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, Augsburg Fortress, 2003

<sup>2</sup> N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*. SPCK, HarperOne, 2008.

## 1) N.T. Wright and Supersessionism

‘The case against Christian Zionists’, writes Colin Chapman, ‘has been supported by new scholarship, as for example, in the writings of N.T. Wright (1996) and Peter Walker (1994, 1996).’ Chapman asks, ‘Can work of this quality be matched by Christian Zionists, or are they simply, dare I say, repeating the same old arguments that have been put forward in the past?’<sup>3</sup> Indeed, many leading Christian anti-Zionists (Chapman in particular)<sup>4</sup> have leaned on N.T. Wright’s theology to support their political polemics against Christian Zionism.

University of St. Andrews lecturer N.T. Wright is one of the most innovative and successful Christian thinkers of recent years. His theology on justification has prompted huge controversy particularly in Reformed-evangelical circles, prompting John Piper to write a book-length polemic entitled *The Future of Justification: A Response to NT Wright*.<sup>5</sup>

Wright, in turn, responded with the book *Justification: God’s Plan and Paul’s Vision*<sup>6</sup> published the following year, seeking to answer his critics on a variety of subjects, most importantly the topic of justification itself.

In this book, Wright also sought to answer criticisms that he promoted replacement theology or ‘supersessionism’, i.e. a negative theology about Israel which sees her as being replaced by the Church in God’s plans. NT Wright examines Philippians 3:3, which reads:

“We are the ones who are truly circumcised, because we worship by the power of God’s spirit and take pride in Christ Jesus”

Wright comments<sup>7</sup>:

‘Paul, breathtakingly, snatches the phrase ‘the circumcision’ away from ethnic Israel and claims it for those in Messiah. [...] This, by the way, is at the heart of the correct answer to those who suggest that I and others are guilty of imposing something called ‘supersessionism’ on Paul. If such critics would show that they had read Philippians 3.3, and for that matter Romans 2.25-29, where a similar point is being made, they might deserve to be taken more seriously.’

Wright claims that, by applying the term ‘circumcision’ in a spiritual sense to believers, Paul is ‘snatching’ away ‘circumcision’ from ethnic Israel. However it can be strongly argued that, as Paul is clearly using the term ‘circumcision’ consistently with how it was used in Israel’s Torah, ‘snatching away’ is not an appropriate phrase in this instance.

---

<sup>3</sup> Colin Chapman, ‘Ten Questions for a Theology of the Land’, in Johnston and Walker, *The Land of Promise*, p.185

<sup>4</sup> Paul Wilkerson, *For Zion’s Sake: Christian Zionism and the Role of John Nelson Darby* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster), 2007 p.65

<sup>5</sup> John Piper, *The Future of Justification: A Response to N.T. Wright* (Inter-Varsity Press), 2008

<sup>6</sup> N.T. Wright, *Justification: God’s Plan and Paul’s Vision* (Inter-Varsity Press), 2009

<sup>7</sup> N. T. Wright, *Justification: God’s Plan and Paul’s Vision*, p.120

Deuteronomy 28:16 reads:

“Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn.”

Surely, Jews throughout history reading Deuteronomy would take this verse spiritually (unless they dismissed Moses as a poor physician). Here then is proof from Israel’s Torah that circumcision could refer to *both* an outward sign *and* an inward spiritual decision. Thus, when Paul speaks of being ‘truly circumcised’, he is not ‘snatching’ the term away from Israel, but rather using circumcision-language in a recognisably, authentically *Jewish* spiritual sense, consistent with the Torah.

Thus, I would challenge Wright's view that Paul could ‘snatch’ away circumcision from Israel when the term was already flexible in meaning in Israel, although one of course could say that Paul gave ‘circumcision’ a fresh spiritual meaning in Christ.

Leaving aside the core of this argument for now, I wish to highlight how Wright has responded to the accusation of supercessionism.

Worryingly, Wright does not suggest that supercessionism is in any sense harmful to a faithful reading of Paul. Instead, Wright is arguing that it is *correct* Pauline theology to simply replace ‘Israel’ with the Church, or as Wright refers to it, ‘the believing-in-the-Messiah-people.’ He denies that he has ‘imposed something called supercessionism’ on Paul, without actually denying the charge of supercessionism.

For Wright, the church (“the believing-in-the-Messiah-people”) as represented by Paul is:

‘the new reality to which ethnic Israel pointed forwards but to which, outside the Messiah, they could not attain.’

Whether it is appropriate or correct for Christian theologians to argue that the Church is the ‘new reality’ – or to suggest that ethnic Israel existed as a mere signpost to the dawn of the Church – is a matter for scholarly debate. Clearly though, Wright advances a supercessionist understanding of ‘Israel’ through his reading of Paul.

The reason why I draw attention to Wright’s approach to the theological concept of ‘ethnic Israel’ is that it helps us to understand how he approaches the modern state of Israel and how he understands Christian support for Israel, as we shall see further on.

As I have said before, I have hugely benefited from reading N.T. Wright’s writings. They have helped me in my personal spiritual life to gain a clearer, more profound understanding of the gospel.

I hope that all Christians will engage in N.T. Wright’s theological writings in order to discover more about Christ and the new covenant, and it is for this same reason that we must highlight aspects of his theology which are unhelpful and even incorrect.

## **2) N.T. Wright and Jews**

In relation to the previous section on Philippians 3:3, we shall examine the wider context of the opening verses from Philippians 3.

Writing elsewhere about this passage, N. T. Wright has complained [emphasis mine]:

“The old debate as to whether Paul was opposing Judaism per se or a form of Jewish Christianity akin to that of the Galatian "agitators" is, I think, skewed in recent discussion by **the anxious attempt to protect Paul from saying anything apparently derogatory about Jews**, and the balancing attempt in some quarters to have him say as many snide things as possible about some of his fellow-Christians.”<sup>8</sup>

It is both sad and yet revealing that N. T. Wright considers those reading Paul as pro-Jewish to be making an “anxious attempt”. Wright considers Jews to have a ‘fleshly identity’ outside of Christ, writing:

"From Paul's Christian point of view, those Jews who do not embrace Jesus as their Messiah are thereby embracing instead **an identity marked out by blood and soil**, by ancestry and territory, in other words, by the "flesh". They are therefore subject to the same critique as paganism."

The text of Philippians 3:2 reads:

“Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh”

N. T. Wright comments on this text:

"I believe Paul intended the first level of meaning of [Philippians 3] verses 2-6 to be about Jews in general, rather than specifically about Jewish Christians. Of course, the Galatian "agitators" would have come into the frame as well, but as a subset of a larger group: **the dogs, the evil workers, the mutilation people**. The first two of these epithets could have applied to pagans, of course, not least Cynics, as some have suggested, but the third, though clearly a pagan term, by generating the counter-assertion of verse 3, shows that **it is Jews who are in mind. Yes, but Jews seen now as a form of paganism.**"<sup>9</sup>

These words may well prove instructive when attempting to understand N. T. Wright's political approach to the modern state of Israel.

---

<sup>8</sup> N. T. Wright, 'Paul's Gospel and Caesar's Empire' in Center of Theological Inquiry

<sup>9</sup> N. T. Wright, 'Paul's Gospel and Caesar's Empire' in Center of Theological Inquiry

### 3) **N.T. Wright and the state of Israel**

N.T. Wright has previously commented on the policies of the state of Israel and the Sharon government. He told the Independent in 2003:

‘I’m not anti-Israel but when I see what’s been done to the Palestinians over the past 50 years, I say, ‘Well I’m sorry, but if you put people behind barbed wire, keep them caged, take their land despite international resolutions, and bulldoze their homes, you are asking for trouble [...] This is not in any way to excuse or exonerate the horror and enormity of suicide bombing. It is just to say that if you squeeze people that tight sooner or later they’ll do drastic things.’<sup>10</sup>

N.T. Wright has been consistently outspoken in his criticisms of Israeli government policy towards the Palestinians<sup>11</sup>, as he is quite welcome to be. Surely there is much Israeli policy to criticise. Still, it is worth considering the nature of Wright’s political thought at work here.

N.T. Wright’s essay ‘The Holy Land Today’<sup>12</sup> reveals how he considers the modern state of Israel. Typically, Wright typically enjoys beginning his writings with parables, and here is the story he offers on the formation of Israel:

‘Once upon a time there was a family who had lived in a great old house for so long that they’d almost forgotten they hadn’t built it themselves. They loved the house and its grounds dearly; they knew every room, every nook and cranny, every stick and stone on the property. They had suffered much because of violent and abusive neighbours, and were reduced in circumstances to the point where some of the fine rooms in the house were shut up, and some fields left uncultivated. One day, to their alarm, a woman swept up the drive in a car, announced that she was in charge now, and proceeded to throw some of the family off the estate altogether, herding many of the rest into little encampments, while she took over the best parts of the house and grounds. When they protested, she called up her powerful friends, who gave her money to see her through. Now, a generation later, the family have grown used to her, but many, particularly the younger generation, are asking why they have to put up with this intolerable situation a moment longer.’

In the story, the ‘great old house’ is the land of Palestine, and the family is assumed to be Palestinian Arabs. The woman who arrives and announces she is in charge is presumably Zionist Israel, who calls up ‘powerful friends’ to give her money. I shall comment on the use of the ‘woman’ later.

---

<sup>10</sup> Paul Vallely “It’s not a question of left versus right, says the combative priest who opposes the war in Iraq and gay bishops”, *The Independent* 29/12/03

(<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/profiles/tom-wright-its-not-a-question-of-left-and-right-says-the-combative-priest-who-opposes-the-war-in-iraq-and-gay-bishops-757855.html> Accessed 24/11/10)

<sup>11</sup> See also interview with Travis Tamerius in *The Reformation & Revival Journal*, Winter 2002

(<http://www.hornes.org/theologia/travis-tamerius/interview-with-n-t-wright> Accessed 24/11/10)

<sup>12</sup> N. T. Wright, ‘The Holy Land Today’ in *The Way of the Lord: Christian Pilgrimage in the Holy Land and Beyond*.

There are many problems with this narrative, firstly that it assumes that the people living in pre-1948 Palestine were of one family, whereas in fact there were Jews and others living alongside Arabs before the declaration of the state of Israel. Sadly, Israel was founded in civil war and bloodshed. Injustices occurred and many Arabs lost their homes and identities. We would not wish to gloss over these terrible facts which reflect thousands of personal tragedies.

However it is also worth noting that many Jews were ejected from Arab countries in 1948. These Jews were dispossessed and sent into exile, despite many of them feeling a strong sense of belonging to their countries of origin and wishing to stay there. These Jews were not Zionists and they were not particularly rich. Many who did have riches lost all when they left their homes.<sup>13</sup>

Thus 1948 should properly be understood as a twin-tale of parallel tragedies. Many immigrants to Israel were survivors of the Holocaust and had lost their entire families. They had no homes to return to, and many of those who did attempt to return to their European home found they were no longer welcome. Other immigrants were exiles from Arab nations. There was reciprocal violence in Palestine as Jews and Arabs alike acted and reacted with fear, hostility and uncertainty to one another. A Jewish state was established via a vote in the United Nations (one that would ensure the protection and civil rights of its non-Jewish minorities) and so Israel came to be.

Again, without wishing to ignore the tragic history of the Palestinian people, the story is not as simple and black-and-white as how N.T. Wright has presented it. The most worrying sentence in Wright's "parable" reads:

‘When they protested, she called up her powerful friends, who gave her money to see her through.’

The idea of being able to represent Israel as a single, crude caricature has a long and tragic history in Western Christianity. Particularly in Mediaeval times, Christians imagined ‘the Jew’ as possessing negative, ugly and even demonic characteristics, entertaining the idea that the Jewish nation could be summed up in one representative figure. Further, it was commonly believed that the Jews would be committed followers of the Antichrist, the figure in whom evil is personified. The Antichrist – who would enslave the world’s nations and cause them to give glory to Satan – could count Jews as his most fervent supporters.<sup>14</sup>

Whilst I am not suggesting that N.T. Wright is indulging such horrific imagery, it is worth bearing in mind that Jews are sensitive to being stereotyped or personified negatively – particularly by Christian clerics. Thus, when Wright allegorises Israel as ‘the woman’, and accuses her of calling up ‘powerful friends’ to get money, he is unwittingly indulging in themes historically associated with anti-Semitism.

---

<sup>13</sup> For more see Malka Hillel Shulewitz *The Forgotten Millions: the modern Jewish exodus from Arab lands* (Continuum International Publishing Group, 2000)

<sup>14</sup> Andrew Collins Gow, *The Red Jews: antisemitism in an apocalyptic age 1200-1600* (E.J. Brill, 1995) p.97

For instance, the anti-Semitic forgery ‘The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion’ imagined a global conspiracy in which powerful Jews could use their endless political and financial influence to get what they wanted, and to perpetrate evil. In the ‘basic doctrine’ of the Protocols we read:

‘Therefore we must not stop at bribery, deceit and treachery when they should serve towards the achievement of our end. In politics one must know how to seize the property of others without hesitation if by it we secure submission and sovereignty.’<sup>15</sup>

Thus to imagine Israel as a unique individual who is callous with money and power is to – consciously or not – toy with very dark and dangerous ideas. Wright might protest that he is writing about the political entity of Israel, and therefore not making a comment about Jews or Judaism. However, such an objection would be undermined by the way Wright juxtaposes ideas about Jews, Israel and the Holocaust in the same essay:

‘The Jews came in on the high moral ground of their sufferings in the Holocaust: the Yad Vashem memorial, in modern West Jerusalem, stands both as a horrific reminder of the appalling sufferings of European Jewry a generation ago and as a strong appeal for the moral legitimacy of the present state of Israel. Every criticism of Israel can at once be construed as a resurgence of anti-Semitism.’

It is a misrepresentation to suggest that Jews imagine themselves as on a ‘moral high ground of their sufferings.’ Rather, it would be more correct to say that the Holocaust *confirmed* for most Jews their belief that they needed a nation in order to protect and shelter themselves from bigotry. Whilst this may *underline* the need for a Jewish nation, the Zionist movement had been in full flow since the nineteenth century. Theodor Herzl, the founding thinker of Zionism, lived over a century before the Holocaust. Zionism had emerged following the success of the Italian Risorgimento and other European trends of nationalist movements.<sup>16</sup>

Wright presents no evidence that ‘the Jews’, as a collective group, claimed any moral high ground from anyone. Yet he further suggests that ‘*every* criticism of Israel’ can be construed as a resurgence of anti-Semitism, which again displays a lack of understanding and nuance. There are few, if any, Jews who would argue that *every* criticism of Israel might be a resurgence of anti-Semitism. Rather, most Jews are specifically concerned with the existential threats posed by various totalitarian Islamist movements in the region that are committed the destruction of the Jews.

Yet N.T. Wright does not deem the pre-Shoah Zionist movement as worthy of a mention in this essay. Neither does he appear to understand the existential threats which Israel faces, preferring instead to understand Israel as merely ‘construing’ criticisms as evidence of anti-Semitism. This is hugely disappointing from a scholar of Wright’s magnitude and capability.

---

<sup>15</sup> ‘The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion’

[http://ddickerson.igc.org/The\\_Protocols\\_of\\_the\\_Learned\\_Elders\\_of\\_Zion.pdf](http://ddickerson.igc.org/The_Protocols_of_the_Learned_Elders_of_Zion.pdf) (Accessed 24/11/10)

<sup>16</sup> Walter Lacquer, *A History of Zionism* (USA: Tauris Parke Paperbacks, 2003)

#### 4) N.T. Wright and the land of Israel

Wright also presents an explicit critique of Israel the political entity:

‘Instead of Israel as a political entity emerging from political exile, we are invited in the gospel to see Israel-in-person, the true king, emerging from the exile of death itself into God’s new day. That is the underlying rationale for the mission to the Gentiles: God has finally done for Israel what he was going to do for Israel, so now it’s time for the Gentiles to come in. That, too, is the underlying rationale for the abolition of the food laws and the holy status of the land of Israel: a new day has dawned in God’s purposes, and the symbols of the previous day are put aside, not because they were a bad thing, now happily rejected, but because they were the appropriate preparatory stages in God’s plan, and have now done their work. When I became a man, I put away childish things.’<sup>17</sup>

Wright thus moves from his *moral* critique of settler ideology to an *existential* critique of Israel as a political entity. For Wright, it seems that Israel as a political entity is at best an anomaly, as the true Israel is Jesus, ‘Israel-in-person.’ Wright describes Jesus *Israel-in-person* as God’s ‘new day’. This would surely imply that Israel the *political* entity belongs to God’s ‘old day.’

Wright argues that ‘the holy status of the land of Israel’ was ‘abolished’, which unfortunately appears to be a crude expression of supercessionism.

Yet, far from Jews simply assigning Israel ‘holy status’, it is worth noting that Jews have coped without being in the land of Israel through much of their history, including during the episode of the Babylonian exile. In those days, religious Jews did not escape in despair to return to Israel, but awaited a royal decree, which was eventually issued by King Cyrus of Persia.<sup>18</sup> In a similar way, religious Jews did not form the state of Israel out of chaos, but rather an international decree affirmed her as a nation.<sup>19</sup>

Religious Jews have had to reconcile their faith with an uncertainty about where they would dwell, yet throughout history they have expressed a collective yearning for Zion in their prayers. Traditionally, Jews say at the end of every Passover celebration, *L’shanah ha’ba b’Yerushalaiaim* – “Next year in Jerusalem!”

This does not necessarily mean that the Jews are ascribing a ‘holy status’ to Jerusalem or Zion. Rather, it suggests that many committed Jews have a deep yearning to be in Zion, born out of their collective sufferings in the Diaspora, their rich religious literature, and their historical and cultural roots in the land. *For Wright, however, an earthly attachment to Zion merely counts as a ‘childish thing’, perhaps suggesting he does not fully understand how Jews think practically and emotionally on this issue.*

---

<sup>17</sup> N.T. Wright ‘The Holy Land Today’

<sup>18</sup> Isaiah 45:1

<sup>19</sup> UN General Assembly Resolution 181 (Partition Plan) November 29<sup>th</sup> 1947

## 5) N.T. Wright and Jewish Religious Zionism

In the same essay, Wright launches into a tirade against Orthodox religious Zionists. He initially complains about religious settlers who abide in areas of the West Bank:

To this day there are Jews living in those Palestinians' houses, tilling their fields, sleeping in their beds, eating off their china, and quite likely quoting Deuteronomy to back it all up: houses you did not build, fields you did not plant, vineyards you did not grow.<sup>20</sup>

Here there is a clear link between Jewish Torah-interpretation and settler violence, which sadly is the case in many instances. So far, Wright has offered fair comment, although his use of the general word 'Jews' rather than the more specific 'religious settlers' is questionable given the sensitivities required in Jewish-Christian relations. Writing about religious Jews, Wright uses unhelpful language. This makes his prose appear as if he were blaming US-based Orthodox Judaism for instructing settler violence. Wright opines:

'Among the Jews, of course, are a large minority, perhaps even a majority, who long for peace with their every breath who would only too gladly give up some land for the sake of it and who bitterly resent the importation from America of plane-loads of Orthodox cousins, fired up with passionate synagogue sermons from their ageing rabbis in Brooklyn, ready to arm themselves and take over the Promised Land.'<sup>21</sup>

Yet there is no mention of peaceful religious Orthodox Jewish-American Zionists, or of synagogues where 'ageing rabbis' urge toleration and love of all peoples. Having read the above paragraph, one might imagine that settler violence is mainly fostered in a synagogue environment, whereas the reality is far more complex and nuanced.

There are many Orthodox who are sympathetic and kind towards Palestinians, just as there are atheist and agnostic Israelis who are ultra-nationalist and hostile to Arabs. And despite his reference to Brooklyn, ironically Wright has failed to mention that there are many anti-Zionist Orthodox rabbis in America, particularly in the Satmar Hasidic community of New York.<sup>22</sup>

Sadly though, it does not appear that Wright was determined to provide an accurate, nuanced picture of the Orthodox synagogue in this case. Instead, Wright has presented a crude parody of Jewish Orthodoxy. Wright's negative approach here to modern day Judaism chimes strangely with the respect he shows to first-century Judaism in other theological writings.

Given his influence, I am sure that if Wright were to speak of modern religious Jews in an empathetic way – as he does superbly with ancient religious Jews – it would do wonders to curb modern trends in religious antisemitism.

---

<sup>20</sup> N.T. Wright, 'The Holy Land Today'

<sup>21</sup> N.T. Wright, 'The Holy Land Today'

<sup>22</sup> Jerome R. Mintz, *Hasidic People: a place in the new world* (USA: Harvard University Press), 1992, p.37

## 6) N.T. Wright and Christian Zionism

N.T. Wright reserves his harshest words for Christians who support the modern state of Israel – ostensibly those consider her re-emergence to be a fulfilment of Biblical prophecies. Yet rather than challenging their view of Christian prophecy, Wright’s condemnations appear to reveal his prejudices against Judaism itself. Wright has written in an essay about Jerusalem [emphasis mine]:

‘there can be no ‘Christian’ theology of ‘holy places’ (**on the model or analogy of the ‘holy places’ of a religion that has an essentially geographical base**), any more than there can be a Christian theology of racial superiority on the model or analogy of a religion that has an essentially racial basis. **To that extent**, ‘Christian Zionism’ is the geographical equivalent of a *soi-disant* ‘Christian’ apartheid, and ought to be rejected as such.’<sup>23</sup>

Further in the essay, Wright is even more explicit:

‘If it is our experience that particular churches can become ‘holy places’, **this does not require us to return to some quasi-Jewish theology of ‘sacred turf’**; rather it is because one day the *whole creation* will be sacred.’<sup>24</sup>

Thus, Wright appears to dismiss Judaism as a ‘geographically-based’ religion (deemed worthy of comparison with a racially-based religion) and a poor model for Christians to adapt. As well as crudely misrepresenting Jewish theology, Wright has once again overlooked the various nuances to Christian support for Israel.

Elsewhere, Wright goes further still, heavily implying that to offer theological Christian support for Israel based on an understanding of *prophecy* would mean you are not a Christian, and you are denying the both the Cross and the power of Christ’s Resurrection. He writes [emphasis mine]:

To suggest, therefore, that as Christians we should support the state of Israel because it is the fulfilment of prophecy is, in a quite radical way, to cut off the branch on which we are sitting. [...] It is similar to the mistake of which the Reformers accused the mediaeval Catholics, of supposing that in every Mass they were actually re-crucifying Jesus, when Jesus’ death had been once and for all, never to be repeated, on Calvary. **It is a way of saying that in the cross and resurrection God did not actually fulfil his whole saving purpose**; that Jesus did not in fact achieve the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy; **that his resurrection was not the start of God’s new age**; that Acts is wrong, Romans is wrong, Galatians is wrong, the letter to

---

<sup>23</sup> N.T. Wright ‘Jerusalem in the New Testament’ in Walker, *Jerusalem*, pp.69-75

<sup>24</sup> N.T. Wright ‘Jerusalem in the New Testament’ in Walker, *Jerusalem*, pp.69-75

the Hebrews is wrong, Revelation is wrong. **Say that if you like, but don't claim to be Christian in doing so.**<sup>25</sup>

This is a very grave charge, and it is not helped by the fact that Wright has used polemical language to condemn one source of Christian support for Israel. Readers who lack a wider appreciation for the nuances of Christian support for Israel<sup>26</sup> or who assume that all Christian support for Israel is based on a misunderstanding of Old Testament prophecy<sup>27</sup> may be left thinking that any Christian sympathy for Zionism is a rejection of Christ.

If Wright is going to charge prophecy-orientated Christian Zionists with doing violence to the Cross, disempowering the Resurrection and denying the faith, he should be able to provide a robust defence of this position and how it applies to all Christian supporters of Israel, rather than simply asserting that it is so – especially as Wright's judgement would effectively condemn Charles Wesley, Charles Spurgeon, J.C. Ryle and others as heretics.<sup>28</sup>

As Richard Gibson succinctly notes, it is important not to generalise about Christian Zionists for political or theological expediency. Gibson cautions readers that:

“to define every Christian who supports the political system known as Zionism as a “Christian Zionist” is reductionist. [...] It is like insisting that the Jehovah's Witnesses are Protestant Christians because they preach about Jesus and don't like Roman Catholicism. Not all Christians who believe that the Jewish State of Israel is a legitimate entity and has a biblical and historic precedent to exist should be classified as “Christian Zionists”. [...] Christian Zionism is not a denomination nor has it a single unifying Statement of Faith; it is a diverse patch-work of organisations and individuals holding a broad spectrum of theological ideas. At its simplest, Christian Zionism has been defined as “Christian support for Zionism that is based on theological reasons”<sup>29</sup>

Clearly then, not all Christian supporters of Israel approach the issue from a prophetic perspective.<sup>30</sup> As I have stressed before, most Christian supporters of Israel are pragmatists. They recognise the unique freedoms that Israel provides in the Middle East, the pragmatic need for a democratic Jewish state following the horrors of the *Shoah*, and the continuing,

<sup>25</sup> N.T. Wright, 'The Holy Land Today'

<sup>26</sup> For further reading, see Calvin Smith, *The Jews, Modern Israel and the New Supersessionism* (Lampeter: Kings Divinity Press, 2009)

<sup>27</sup> Those who have read Stephen Sizer, *Christian Zionism: Road-map to Armageddon?* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2004) will note that he describes 'Christian Zionism' as 'Christian support for Zionism' (pp.35-36), and thus may conclude that all Christians who express sympathy for Israel do so because of their understanding of Bible prophecies.

<sup>28</sup> For further reading, see Paul Wilkerson, *For Zion's Sake* (Paternoster, 2007)

<sup>29</sup> Richard Gibson 'Christians and Zion' in the British Church Newspaper, 31<sup>st</sup> March 2006

<sup>30</sup> Although many do, and are elegantly defended by Barry Horner, *Future Israel: Why Christian Anti-Judaism Must Be Challenged* (USA: B&H Publishing Group, 2007)

menacing presence of anti-Semitism throughout the world. It would have been helpful, therefore, if Wright had mentioned such Zionist Christians in his piece about Israel and her Christian supporters.

As it is though, Wright goes beyond even Stephen Sizer and Colin Chapman by suggesting that pro-Israel Christians who support Israel because of their prophetic beliefs may not be true believers in Jesus at all. Perhaps Wright would be willing to clarify these statements and also reassess his position towards both Zionist Christians and prophecy-orientated Christian Zionists, in the light of these comments. Indeed, I would urge Wright to do so hastily, given the gravity of his assertions and their ecclesiological implications.

### 7) N.T. Wright and Near East Christians

Wright writes of Christians in the Near East,

“In particular, as pilgrims we must take with the utmost seriousness the fact that almost all Christians living in the Holy Land today are Palestinians. Yes, there are some Jewish Christians, some brave souls living their faith openly, and, I have it on good authority, many others who practise their allegiance to Jesus as Messiah behind locked doors, as certain of their forebears did between the first Easter and the first Pentecost. But most of those who worship God in Christ day by day and week by week in the Holy Land today are Palestinian Arabs”<sup>31</sup>

It is curious that Wright chooses to highlight that there are more Palestinian Arab believers in Jesus than Israeli Jewish believers. Given that Wright has argued strongly that ethnic and national distinctions are of *no value whatsoever* in Christ, it is surprising that he chooses to emphasise the ethnic-national identity of Palestinian Arab Christians. It is good that Wright acknowledges the presence of Israeli Messianic Jews and commends them as ‘brave souls.’ Surely then, Wright should be emphasising the fact that there are believers in Christ both Jew and Arab who meet together regularly, rather than stressing *numerical* differences between those in the respective communities.

Indeed, one might venture that Wright’s failure to mention any semblance of unity between Jewish and Arab believers in Christ<sup>32</sup> stands in sharp contrast to the kind theology he offers in which he presents the gospel as the ultimate unifier of Christian Jews and Gentiles.

**Conclusion:** *For the reasons outlined above, I encourage N.T. Wright to moderate his stance and present a more balanced critique of Israel and her Christian supporters from a theological point of view, without holding back criticism and fair comment when due. I also encourage all Christians to appreciate N.T. Wright’s writings in a considerate way.*

<sup>31</sup> N.T. Wright, ‘The Holy Land Today’

<sup>32</sup> There are many examples of this in Israeli and Palestinian society, for example the Musalaha organisation which encourages unity between believers. (<http://www.musalaha.org>)