COVENANT-APOCALYPTIC SOTERIOLOGY: N. T. WRIGHT’S APOCALYPTIC JESUS IN CONVERSATION WITH THE LIBERATIONIST CRITIQUE OF ATONEMENT

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COVENANT-APOCALYPTIC SOTERIOLOGY:
N. T. WRIGHT’S APOCALYPTIC JESUS IN CONVERSATION WITH THE
LIBERATIONIST CRITIQUE OF ATONEMENT

A Dissertation
Submitted to the McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

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the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By
Joseph D. Smith

December 2022
COVENANT-APOCALYPTIC SOTERIOLOGY:
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ABSTRACT

COVENANT-APOCALYPTIC SOTERIOLOGY:
N. T. WRIGHT'S APOCALYPTIC JESUS IN CONVERSATION WITH THE LIBERATIONIST CRITIQUE OF ATONEMENT

By
Joseph D. Smith
December 2022

Dissertation supervised by William M. Wright IV, Ph.D.

This dissertation develops a theory of atonement in accordance with N. T. Wright’s covenant-apocalyptic interpretation of the ministry and message of the historical Jesus. A covenant-apocalyptic atonement theory, in opposition to the trajectory of contemporary soteriology, prioritizes divine causality in the means of salvation, because, as is generally expected from an apocalyptic hermeneutic, it peers behind systems of violence and oppression to the intangible powers that underlie them. Unlike other strands of apocalyptic theology, though, a covenant-apocalyptic soteriology can stand up to a liberationist critique of the escapism and the divine sadism of a certain popular form of Christian soteriology, because it understands salvation as an intrahistorical reality and acknowledges the religio-political causes of Jesus’ execution.
DEDICATION

For Gwendolen—your turn.
I want to express my deepest gratitude first to Bill Wright for directing this dissertation. We knew all along it would be something of a sprint. But his thoughtful, direct, and non-anxious guidance helped me to pour out, in short order, what had been percolating in me for years. I am indebted also to the other members of my committee, Anna Floerke Scheid and Fr. Radu Bordeianu for their careful reading and consideration. Countless friends and colleagues have helped work out the ideas that eventually took shape here. I couldn’t possibly name them all, but Justin Pearl, Drew Dunbar, and RoBear Wilson are certainly worth mentioning. First United Methodist Church of Pittsburgh and the Preacher’s Aid Society have been generous in supporting my work on this project. I appreciate most of all the love and support of my wife, Gwendolen Jackson. Her keen eye as a copy editor made the dissertation much sharper than it might otherwise have been. But it wouldn’t have been at all if not for her gently but firmly demanding that I get back to work, even when I insisted that I was quite ready to give up. And so, it is to her that I dedicate this dissertation.
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CHAPTER 1:
ATONEMENT WITH AN ASTERISK:
THE LIBERATIONIST CRITIQUE AND THE NEW TAXONOMY OF
ATONEMENT

The trajectory of Christian soteriology has undergone two major shifts in the last half-century. The first is a shift from conceiving of salvation primarily as an inner, spiritual transformation to seeing it as an intrahistorical, political reality. The second, related shift moves from a fixation on divine causation to a focus on human cooperation in the means of salvation. The first is a long overdue correction of the failure of a tradition that had been in a position of steadily increasing global domination adequately to interpret their founding texts, written, as they were, entirely by people living under the thumb of dominating empires. It would take the centering of voices of those similarly marginalized by their society to bring the biblical emphasis on the political nature of salvation properly into focus. The second shift, I will argue, is more ambivalent. Though it is perhaps encouraging to members of some communities, it may just as well lead to moral paralysis for others. The covenant-apocalyptic soteriology, which, I will argue, forms the backbone of Jesus’ ministry, message, and self-identity, presumes the first but not the second.

These two shifts are in no small part the result of a potent critique leveled by liberation theologies, or “theologies from the margin,” against a popular soteriology, which, for reasons that will soon become apparent, I will call the “popular substitutionary-escapist” soteriology, (hereafter PSE). I will trace this critique along four lines: First, that in PSE soteriology’s forensic model of atonement, divine justice is pitted against divine mercy. Second, that PSE soteriology has concentrated on the forgiveness of sinners while ignoring the victims of sin and injustice. Third, that the PSE
soteriology’s penal substitutionary model of atonement relies on divine violence. And fourth, the desired end of PSE soteriology has tended toward escapism.

But first, one caveat is in order. Some will object that what is being attacked here is only a strawman, that no serious theologian holds any of the views being criticized, and certainly not all of them. I suspect that, if one knew where to look, one would not have to go to too much trouble to identify a number of quite serious theologians who hold any one of these views, quite possibly all four of them. But that is beside the point. I have quite intentionally located this critique as against “popular soteriology” – popular in the sense that it is what is subtly taught in homilies, hymns, prayers, and Sunday school lessons, or at least that it is what is heard by regular people in the pews. Liberation theologies are, as a matter of principle, less concerned with the particularities of theory than with how it translates into attitudes and action. As a person who has made my career in the church, I could offer many personal anecdotes to confirm the prevalence of these views within at least a certain branch of American Christianity, but this too would be beyond what is necessary. In this dissertation I will analyze the liberationist critique itself and evaluate my formulations by it. The extent to which liberation theologians adequately or fairly describe PSE soteriology, or whether such a thing even exists, is a datum not relevant to that project.

I. Blood Dripping and Weird Stuff: The Liberationist Critique of Atonement

A. A Forensic Model of Sin and Grace

One common liberationist critique of PSE soteriology it that it relies on a forensic model of atonement, in which the trinitarian Father is pitted against the Son, or at least
divine justice is pitted against divine mercy. Patrick Cheng, a queer Asian-American theologian, makes this critique most clearly in his exposition of the “crime-based model” of sin and grace. On this model, so common in Western Christian soteriologies, Cheng says, sin is conceived of as a violation or transgression of divine law. There is, however, no theological equivalent for what a legal code might consider damages paid to the victim (in this case, God) to compensate for the tort; nothing one might consider restorative (as opposed to retributive) justice. To the extent that sin is a crime against a sovereign, punishment is demanded, “up to and including eternal death or damnation.” If sin is understood as a crime in this way, then grace must be conceived as acquittal and rehabilitation.

It is only within this crime-based model that the salvific function of the death of Jesus of Nazareth on a Roman cross could be understood, as it is so broadly in certain forms at least of Western Christianity, as a substitutionary punishment. But, as Cheng notes, the modern sense of justice is offended by the double projection that the logic of this way of understanding the cross demands: Not only are humans convicted of the sin of their ancestors as in the Augustinian Original Sin formulation that so often accompanies this understanding of the cross, but also in a “troubling jurisprudential notion of vicarious liability,” someone else is forced to serve the sentence.

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2 Cheng, *From Sin to Amazing Grace*, 35.
3 The forensic concepts of acquittal and rehabilitation, Cheng says, are rough equivalents of the way Protestants at least have spoken of, respectively, justification and sanctification; *From Sin to Amazing Grace*, 38.
4 Cheng, *From Sin to Amazing Grace*, 49.
This forensic model of sin and grace does not exist in a theoretical vacuum; it has a profound effect on ethics. Cheng shows, for instance, that it is the fear of collective divine punishment, not only for the offenders but for their entire communities, rooted in this crime-based model of sin and grace, that underlies the Church’s heinous treatment of queer people.⁵

**B. Sinners and the Sinned Against**

A second element of the critique is that PSE soteriology focuses too narrowly on the forgiveness of sinners. In the immortal words of John Newton, God’s grace “saved a wretch like me.” Perhaps, as Miguel De La Torre intimates, someone like Newton himself—who, despite sentimental hagiography, remained a slave-ship captain at the time of his conversion to Christianity, of his ordination to the Anglican priesthood, and of his penning that verse; and who became a critic of the slave trade only decades later, when it had become socially and politically expedient to do so—may “need to recognize the depth of their depravity before accepting amazing grace.”⁶ If one’s sins are those of pride, self-centeredness, and greed, then “such emotions of self-derogation may be a healthy step toward a spiritual path of healing.”⁷ But the captives Newton transported on his ships like cargo were in need of neither exculpation (they had committed no sin), nor the attendant humiliation (they had suffered plenty of that already).

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⁷ De La Torre, *The Politics of Jesús*, 129
From De La Torre’s perspective, such a distinction has never been well made in Christian piety:

Sermons emulating from economically privileged spaces preach to the marginalized self-denial, submission, and worthlessness, when instead the wretched should be hearing pride in self, liberation, and worth...It is the privileged who need to come to terms with their spiritual wretchedness. It is the wretched who need to come to terms with their infinite worth.8

The exclusive focus on salvation for sinners, then, is not a neutral oversight; it comes at the expense of attention to victims of those sinners.

Korean-American theologian Andrew Sung Park draws on the concept of han, a Korean designation for the woundedness of victims, to name this reverse side of the Christian doctrine of sin. He defines han as “the critical wound of the heart generated by unjust psychosomatic repression, as well as by social, political, economic, and cultural oppression.”9 Sin and han are thus opposing concepts: “Sin is of oppressors; han is of the oppressed,” but they are linked causally: “Sin causes han and han produces sin.”10 As such, Park says, “sin and han must be treated together, if we are to grasp a more comprehensive picture of the problems of the world than that delineated by the doctrine of sin alone.”11

Native American theologian George “Tink” Tinker raises a similar concern in the context of decrying the role of Christian theology in maintaining systems of degradation.

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8 De La Torre, The Politics of Jesús, 130-1.
11 Park, The Wounded Heart of God, 10.
Here he has in mind especially the World Council of Churches’ document “Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation,” which, he says, understands creation “merely as an add-on to concerns for justice and peace,” rather than, as in the historic creeds, the starting point for Christian theology. Indeed, Tinker contends that the failure of Euro-Western Christianity to deal adequately with climate change is rooted in a failure to take their own Trinitarian theology seriously. This omission renders western-European Christianity complicit not only in the deprivation of indigenous peoples but also in the environmental degradation that threatens the viability of the planet. For it represents both a failure to value the unique gifts of indigenous cultures in formulating an adequate theology of nature and a distortion of the theology of redemption at the very heart of missionary colonialism. To lead with the fall-redemption narrative is simply to heap shame on top of the already mounting economic, sociological, and psychological depression that results from colonization. “By the time the preacher gets to the ‘good news’ of the gospel, people are so bogged down in the reification of their experience and in the internalization of brokenness and lack of self-worth that too often they never hear the proclamation of ‘good news’ in any actualized, existential sense.” Whereas a starting point of the “first-

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13 Tinker, American Indian Liberation, 46. I suggest it would make more sense in this context to speak of “creedal theology” rather than “Trinitarian theology,” given that in his chapter on “Indians, Christianity, and Trinitarian Theologies,” Tinker does not talk about the doctrine of the Trinity at all, only about the doctrine of creation. He seems to collapse the two into the category of “first-article [of the creed] concerns.”

14 Tinker, American Indian Liberation, 38-9.

15 Tinker, American Indian Liberation, 42.
article” concern of creation would have formed “a natural bond with indigenous cultural roots.”  

C. Divine Violence and Cycles of Abuse

The third line of critique to be noted gets closest to the heart of the question of atonement since it deals with the crucifixion of Jesus specifically. In its projecting a penal-substitutionary meaning onto the death of Jesus, liberation critics say, PSE soteriology depicts a violent and sadistic God. This is by far the most common strand of the critique of PSE soteriology by liberation theologians and thus perhaps warrants a more sustained treatment here. Though the critique is nearly ubiquitous in liberation theologies, I will examine only two of its most well-known iterations from feminist theologians Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker and womanist theologian Delores Williams. In their memorable essay, “For God So Loved the World?,” Brown and Parker contend that connecting the crucifixion of Jesus in any way with human salvation makes God “a divine sadist and a divine child abuser,” whose “abuse is paraded as salvific and the child who suffers ‘without even raising a voice’ is lauded as the hope of the world.”

Williams, often regarded as the mother of womanist theology, levels a similar critique, drawing on Black women’s unique experience of surrogacy. Williams resonates with the biblical story of Hagar, who, when her slaveholders Abram and Sarai could not produce an heir, was forced to bear Abram’s child in Sarai’s place (Gen 16). “Because she was a slave,” Williams writes, “[Hagar’s] body, like her labor, could be exploited in

16 Tinker, American Indian Liberation, 42.

any way her owners desired. Her reproduction capacities belonged to her slave holders.” Later, when Sarai (now Sarah) was miraculously able to conceive, she cast Hagar and her son out of the household.

Surrogacy like that forced upon Hagar has been a feature of Black women’s experience in various capacities throughout American history. In the antebellum period, Black female slaves were often coerced to act as surrogates for their slave-owners’ wives: ignoring their own children to nurture hers; filling in for her in governing the household; even acting as the slave-owner’s lover, freeing her to live up to the sexless ideal for women of that period. After emancipation, when the law no longer upheld such coerced surrogacy, social pressures continued to influence Black women to fulfill “voluntary” surrogacy roles.

Attending to Black women’s historic experience of surrogacy raises concerns about PSE theology’s penal substitutionary theory of atonement. If “Jesus died on the cross in place of humans, thereby taking human sin upon himself,” she writes, then “Jesus represents the ultimate surrogate figure; he stands in the place of someone else: sinful humankind.”

So, part of Williams’s aim in *Sisters in the Wilderness* is to raise the question “whether the image of a surrogate-God has salvific power for black women, or whether this image supports and reinforces the exploitation that has accompanied their experience with surrogacy.” Her answer is clearly the latter. For one, “there is the issue of the part God the Father played in determining the surrogate role filled by Jesus, the

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19 Williams, *Sisters*, 54-5.
20 Williams, *Sisters*, 143.
21 Williams, *Sisters*, 143.
Son.” 22 If Jesus is a surrogate, is God a white slave-owner? Black women simply cannot worship that kind of a God. Neither, Williams contends, do they want anything to do with salvation that relies on someone’s having to act as a surrogate: “Salvation,” she declares, “does not depend upon any form of surrogacy made sacred by traditional and orthodox understanding of Jesus’ life and death.” 23

For both Williams and Brown and Parker, not only does the PSE understanding of the cross constitute a cruel and violent theology, it also produces a cruel and violent ethic. Brown and Parker observe the ways sexual and domestic violence are perpetuated and sustained when women are convinced their suffering is justified, because the unjust suffering of Jesus is an example to be imitated. It is “this fundamental tenet of Christianity” that Christ suffered and died for us that “upholds actions and attitudes that accept, glorify, and even encourage suffering.” 24 The woman who internalizes this theology, Brown and Parker say, gets trapped in a cycle of abuse: When redemptive suffering is held before her in the image of Jesus on the cross, she is compelled to sacrifice herself for others. She sees it as her role “to suffer in the place of others, as Jesus suffered for us all.” 25 She thus willingly endures abuse, believing it will bring about the salvation of the world. Pushed to its most twisted extreme, she becomes more concerned about her victimizer than herself. She comes to believe that any sense she has a right to care for her own needs conflicts with being a follower of Jesus.

22 Williams, Sisters, 143.
23 Williams, Sisters, 145.
If the image of Jesus on a cross perpetuates violence against women, the image of a “loving father” carrying out the suffering and death of his own son sustains a different kind of abuse. “When parents have an image of a God righteously demanding the total obedience of ‘his’ son—even obedience to death—what will prevent the parent from engaging in divinely sanctioned child abuse?”26 Further, this image has left the church with little resources for victims of abuse. What could a theology that identifies love with suffering possibly say to a child having to navigate the inner conflict between a parent’s professed love and the suffering that same parent forces upon her?27

Similarly, Williams argues that “surrogacy, attached to this divine personage, thus takes on the aura of the sacred.”28 If Black women accept the idea that the world is redeemed by Jesus’ acting as a surrogate, she asks, “can they not also passively accept the exploitation that surrogacy brings?”29 Instead, she says, womanist theologians must reject a theology of the cross if they are to show Black women “that God did not intend the surrogacy roles they have been forced to perform. God did not intend the defilement of their bodies as white men put them in the place of white women to provide sexual pleasure for white men during the slavocracy.”30

Williams’ rejection made headlines after the controversial “Re-imagining” conference, held November 1993 in Minneapolis, Minnesota, as part of the World Council of Churches’ “Decade of Solidarity with Women.” After the conference, critics

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28 Williams, Sisters, 143.
29 Williams, Sisters, 143.
30 Williams, Sisters, 147.
released to congregations of denominations supporting the conference a document listing what they took to be highly provocative statements made by the conference speakers. Among these was Williams’s reply to a direct question about her theory of atonement: “I don’t think we need an atonement theory at all…I don’t think we need folks hanging on crosses and blood dripping and weird stuff.”  

But in *Sisters in the Wilderness* she had said as much and even more directly: “There is nothing divine in the blood of the cross.”

This critique may well lead one to conclude, as Brown and Parker do, that “no one was saved by the death of Jesus.” Christians have so extensively theorized about the salvific efficacy of the cross, they say, because “Christianity is an abusive theology that glorifies suffering.” Therefore, “if Christianity is to be liberating for the oppressed, it must itself be liberated from theology. We must do away with the atonement.” Brown and Parker ask—rightly, I think—“If we throw out the atonement is Christianity left? Can we call our new creation Christianity even with an asterisk?”

In this dissertation I am attempting to articulate a positive understanding of the salvific meaning of Jesus’ death, but one that is not subject to Brown’s and Parker’s critique or the other strands of the liberationist critique—we might call it atonement with an asterisk.

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D. Escapism

The final liberationist critique of PSE soteriology I will consider is that it conceives of salvation as escape, either literally to an otherworldly dimension or as an inner, spiritual transformation. Liberation theologians, on the other hand, argue that the Bible emphasizes instead salvation as an intrahistorical reality of social and political transformation.\textsuperscript{34} Nowhere are this critique and counter-emphasis more evident than in Gustavo Gutiérrez’s \textit{A Theology of Liberation}, widely regarded as the foundational text of liberation theology. “Salvation,” says Gutiérrez, “is not something otherworldly, in regard to which present life is merely a test.”\textsuperscript{35} Rather, “salvation is an intrahistorical reality,” which “orients, transforms, and guides history to its fulfillment.”\textsuperscript{36} When Gutiérrez looks to the scriptures and finds that the soteriological imagery there is drawn from the liberation of slaves and that the eschatological hope is born from a vision about the restoration of the house of Israel from exile in Babylon, he concludes that “the struggle for a just society is in its own right very much a part of salvation history.”\textsuperscript{37} Not only is salvation historical, but history itself is salvific.

We have thus seen liberationist critiques of PSE soteriology’s operating system: a forensic model of justice; the beneficiary of its salvation doctrine: sinners; its means of salvation: a surrogate punishment; and the end of its salvation project: escape to an otherworldly heaven. To put it succinctly, PSE soteriology says that God put Jesus to

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item See especially Gustavo Gutiérrez, \textit{A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation}, Fifteenth Anniversary Edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988, 1973), but this theme is so common in liberation theologies that it is often invoked simply by reference to Gutiérrez’ famous formulation “salvation history is one.”
\item Gutiérrez, \textit{A Theology of Liberation}, 85.
\item Gutiérrez, \textit{A Theology of Liberation}, 86.
\item Gutiérrez, \textit{A Theology of Liberation}, 97.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
death on the cross in the place of sinners as a just punishment for their transgressions, so that one day they can live forever with God in a disembodied heaven. Liberation theologians think this is wrong at every turn.

These four strands of the liberationist critique of PSE soteriology are by no means exhaustive of authors, perspectives, or themes. There are, to be sure, other strands of a liberationist critique of atonement that could have been traced here. And even for those mentioned I often have cited only one or two particularly poignant examples, when many more could have been provided. My aim above was simply to highlight the strands of the critique that most clearly led to the dual shift in contemporary soteriology toward cooperative human action for an historical and political liberation. Nor should one presume that the liberationist critique necessitates a wholesale rejection of atonement theology. It can, in some instances, precipitate such, as we saw from Williams and Brown and Parker. But many liberation theologians affirm that the death of Christ should play a crucial role in the Christian doctrine of salvation. But what is that role? If God did not kill Jesus as a punishment in the stead of sinners, so that the latter might be whisked away to an otherworldly bliss, then what is the meaning of his death?

II. A Solidarity Model of Atonement

Liberation theologians have understood the cross of Christ primarily in terms of God’s solidarity with the oppressed and marginalized. This view may have been articulated first by Jürgen Moltmann but it has since been recapitulated by liberation
theologians in myriad ways and from varying social contexts. Moltmann got interested in the theology of the cross after being given a copy of the New Testament by an American chaplain while he being held in a British prisoner of war camp during the closing years of World War II. Decades later, when the movements of hope of the 1960s toward which Moltmann was working—like the “socialism with a human face” movement in Czechoslovakia, the Civil Rights movement in the United States, and even the ecumenical movement in theology—were met with contention, he was reminded of how the image of the cross had sustained his hope all those years earlier while he was behind barbed wire. Once again, the theology of the cross became for Moltmann the center of hope and resistance.

Like the liberation theologians after him, Moltmann critiqued particularly Protestant theology for understanding the cross as “an expiatory death for sin.” But one does not understand the deepest meaning of the cross, Moltmann thinks, by appealing immediately and directly to humanity or human sinfulness. To do so would be to remove the cross from its proper “context of the relationship of the Son to the Father.” Instead, the cross “must be understood as an event between God and the Son of God.” To say that the same Jesus who was stripped naked, humiliated, and nailed to a Roman cross is

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“the image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15)\textsuperscript{43} means, for Moltmann, that “God is like this. God is not greater than he is in this humiliation. God is not more glorious that he is in this self-surrender. God is not more powerful than he is in this helplessness. God is not more divine than he is in this humanity.”\textsuperscript{44}

Does this mean that God the Father suffers? Moltmann answers unblushingly in the affirmative. In the incarnation God “enters into the finitude of man.”\textsuperscript{45} More, because Jesus did not die a natural death, the result of mere finitude, but the violent death of a criminal, resulting in abandonment and rejection, God entered also “into the situation of man’s godforsakenness.”\textsuperscript{46}

Moltmann is compelled by an expression of the theology of the cross in the memoir of Auschwitz survivor, Ellie Wiesel: One evening the guards forced the whole camp to watch the hanging of two Jewish men and a boy. “Where is God? Where is he?” Wiesel heard someone ask.\textsuperscript{47} The men died quickly. But the death throes of the boy, being too light of frame to break his neck against the rope, lasted nearly half an hour. As he writhed against the noose Wiesel heard the same man call out again: “Where is God now?” And I heard a voice within me answer: “Where is he? Here he is—he is hanging

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\textsuperscript{43} Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of biblical texts are from the \textit{New Revised Standard Version, Updated Edition} (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2022), hereafter NRSVue.

\textsuperscript{44} Moltmann, \textit{The Crucified God}, 205.

\textsuperscript{45} Moltmann, \textit{The Crucified God}, 276.

\textsuperscript{46} Moltmann, \textit{The Crucified God}, 276. Though the charge of patripassianism might stick, Moltmann is careful at least to avoid being in league with the death of God movement fomenting in his day. (\textit{Der gekreuzigte Gott} was published in 1972, just six years after \textit{Time} Magazine asked: “Is God Dead?”) He says that God is “active with his own being in the dying Jesus,” and that God “suffered with him” (190). But ultimately the Father does not suffer his own death; “the Father suffers the death of his Son” (192). If one speaks of the death of God, then, Moltmann advises “to abandon the concept of God and speak of the relationships of the Son and the Father and the Spirit as the point at which ‘God’ might be expected to be mentioned. From the life of these three, which \textit{has within it the death of Jesus}, there then emerges who God is and what his Godhead means” (207, italics added for emphasis).

there on this gallows.” Commenting on the passage, Moltmann writes: “Any other answer would be blasphemy…To speak here of a God who could not suffer would make God a demon. To speak here of an absolute God would make God an annihilating nothingness.” With such a conclusion it is difficult to disagree, its orthodoxy notwithstanding.

It is only from the theology of the suffering of God, implied by the theology of the cross, that an appropriately corresponding anthropology emerges as well. If it is revealed in the cross that God participates in the suffering and death of Jesus, then perhaps all of the cycles of misery and suffering are a sacrament of divine presence: In the vicious circle of poverty, God is bread for the hungry. From the vicious circle of violence, God is liberation. In the vicious circle of alienation, God is recognition and human dignity. In the vicious circle of environmental degradation, God is harmony between humanity and the rest of creation. “In the vicious circle of meaninglessness and godforsakenness, finally, he comes forward in the figure of the crucified Christ, who communicated the courage to be.”

Liberation theologians have adapted Moltmann’s solidarity model of atonement to varying contexts of marginalization. James Cone, for example, noted the resemblance of Jesus’ execution to the lynching of thousands of Black men and women in the United States.

Often as many as ten to twenty thousand men, women, and children attended [a lynching]. It was a family affair, a ritual celebration of white supremacy, where women and children were often given the first opportunity to torture black

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victims—burning black flesh and cutting off genitals, fingers, toes, and ears as souvenirs. Postcards were made from the photographs taken of black victims with white lynchers and onlookers smiling as they struck a pose for the camera. They were sold for ten to twenty-five cents to members of the crowd, who then mailed them to relatives and friends, often with a note saying something like this: “This is the barbeque we had last night.”

Jesus too, is portrayed in the Gospels as an innocent victim arrested by an angry mob, beaten, and hung on a tree while onlookers hurled insults at him. Clearly such public spectacles as lynchings “could not have happened without the widespread knowledge and the explicit sanction of local and state authorities and with tacit approval from the federal government, members of the white media, churches, and universities.” Pilate always washes his hands.

Cone contends that in his day and place the cross is properly understood only through the lens of the lynching tree: “The lynching tree frees the cross from the false pieties of well-meaning Christians. When we see the crucifixion as a first century lynching, we are confronted by the re-enactment of Christ’s suffering in the blood-soaked history of African Americans. Thus the lynching tree reveals the true religious meaning of the cross for American Christian today.”

This understanding is attested to in stories like that of Isaiah Fountain (d. January 23, 1920), who insisted that “he be executed wearing a purple robe and a crown, to analogize his innocence to that of Jesus Christ.”

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53 Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 161.
Knowing that Jesus suffered as they did gave victims of lynching hope that God was with them as God was present to Jesus as he suffered and died.\textsuperscript{55}

Likewise, the lynching tree stands in need of the cross. Without it, the lynching tree is an abomination the memory of which would be too great to bear. The cross bears witness “that there is a dimension to life beyond the reach of the oppressor.”\textsuperscript{56} At stake for Cone in this double identification was both the credibility of the gospel and any hope of healing the wounds of racial violence that continued to divide the nation. The lynching tree frees the cross from white Christian sentimentality, while the cross gives meaning to the otherwise senseless suffering of the lynching tree.

Kelly Brown Douglas updates Cone’s metaphor by exposing the theoretical history that underlies the contemporary equivalent of lynching, police killing of Black people and other people of color. White people, Douglas argues, have been socialized to understand themselves to have the right, even the responsibility, to protect by whatever means necessary the cherished property of American exceptionalism housed in the sacred space of Whiteness, from encroaching Black and brown bodies. The sum of this socialization and the actions that result from it Douglas dubs “stand-your-ground culture.”

Douglas intimates that Jesus, too, was a victim of stand-your-ground culture. For crucifixion “was a stand-your-ground type of punishment for the treasonous offense of violating the rule of Roman ‘law and order’.”\textsuperscript{57} Of the culture that produced this proto-stand-your-ground law, Douglas writes:

\textsuperscript{55} Cone, \textit{The Cross and the Lynching Tree}, 21-2.
\textsuperscript{56} Cone, \textit{The Cross and the Lynching Tree}, 161-2.
\textsuperscript{57} Douglas, \textit{Stand Your Ground}, 174.
In Jesus’ first-century world, crucifixion was the brutal tool of social-political power. It was reserved for slaves, enemy soldiers, and those held in the highest contempt and lowest regard in society. To be crucified was, for the most part, an indication of how worthless and devalued an individual was in the eyes of established power. At the same time, it indicated how much of a threat that person was believed to pose. Crucifixion was reserved for those who threatened the “peace” of the day.58

This, as Douglas argues throughout the book, is the same class of people who are victims of police killing today. Christ suffers and dies in solidarity with them.

Feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson similarly understands the cross as “the paradigmatic locus of divine involvement in the pain of the world.”59 Johnson observes how strange it is that the Christian tradition has remained tethered to the Greek philosophical (read: patriarchal) conception of an impassible, apathetic God, despite its confession that, in Christ, God suffered a brutal execution at the hands of violent men.60 How could so powerful an image, rather than actually influencing our perception of God, instead give rise to such unsatisfactory formulations as: Jesus suffers only in his finite human nature, but suffering cannot be predicated of the divine? For Johnson, this is testimony to the pervasiveness of patriarchal power, and she believes that the cross presents a challenge to the hegemony of that power: “The crucified Jesus embodies the exact opposite of the patriarchal ideal of the powerful man,” and thus exemplifies “the ‘kenosis of patriarchy,’ the self-emptying of male dominating power in favor of the new humanity of compassionate service and mutual empowerment.”61 In this model of divine

solidarity, redemption is accomplished through the cross “in a way different from the techniques of dominating violence. The victory of shalom is won not by the sword of the warrior god but by the awesome power of compassionate love, in and through solidarity with those who suffer.”  

Johnson is nevertheless wary of extending the image of the suffering God too far. She notes that “one of the key ingredients in the maintenance of systems of oppression is inculcating a feeling of helplessness in those oppressed,” because it diminishes the drive to resistance. For this reason, Johnson worries that divine powerlessness may not serve to liberate the oppressed, but rather maintain this sense of despair. She writes, “the ideal of the helpless divine victim serves only to strengthen women’s dependency and potential for victimization, and to subvert initiatives for freedom, when what is needed is growth in relational autonomy and self-affirmation.” So, Johnson does not want to replace the impassable God of patriarchal power with “the reverse image of a victimized, helpless one.” Rather, she hopes to “step decisively out of the androcentric system of power-over versus victimization” altogether and reimagine the categories of power, pain and human experience.

An even more strident criticism of suffering God theology comes from Brown and Parker. Like Johnson, they see the modern emergence of suffering-God theology as 

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66 Johnson, *She Who Is*, 254. Reimagining the categories of power and pain is precisely the task to which Johnson sets herself in the concluding chapter of *She Who Is*. Unfortunately, space does not permit a full discussion of those reimagined categories here.
preferable to a penal substitutionary theory of atonement. But they argue, also in
congruity with Johnson, that it does not liberate those who suffer because it remains
hampered by the problem of emulation: It “still produces the same answers to the
question, How shall I interpret and respond to the suffering that occurs in my life?” The
answer is that I am to “patiently endure; suffering will lead to greater life.”

More pointedly, though, Brown and Parker call into question whether one should
draw a connection between solidarity and redemption at all. The notion that God bears
the burden of suffering with us, they say, may make suffering more bearable, but
“bearing the burden . . . does not take the burden away.” Even if lightening the load of
the suffering just a little were a sufficient end of the gospel, Brown and Parker ask: “Do
we need the death of God incarnate to show us that God is with us in our
sufferings?...Was God not with us in our suffering before the death of Jesus? Did the
death really initiate something that did not exist before?”

III. History is One: A New Taxonomy of Atonement

The shifts toward an intrahistorical understanding of salvation and toward human
cooperation in the means of salvation, precipitated by the growing influence, particularly
in the academy, of liberation theologies, have so radically altered the landscape of
atonement theology that a new taxonomy of atonement theories is now warranted. In a
sense, one could trace the history of atonement theology across these two axes: the

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68 Brown and Parker, “For God So Loved the World?”, 16-17.
69 Brown and Parker, “For God So Loved the World?”, 18.
physical/spiritual and the human/divine. In fact, I will do just that. But the particular combination of emphases of liberationist soteriologies on human cooperation toward an intrahistorical salvation exposes a lacuna not accounted for in earlier atonement taxonomies.

Adolph von Harnack was, to my knowledge, the first to classify Christian soteriologies. Harnack did not necessarily set out to do so, but in his review of Anselm in his magisterial *History of Dogma*, he distinguished at least Anselm’s satisfaction theory of atonement (and with it most of the Western tradition thereafter) from that of the Greek fathers. It is worth noting here again that the extent to which Harnack or the other historians of dogma I will consider have rightly characterized Anselm, Augustine, the Greek fathers, or anyone else is immaterial to the point that I am making. I am interested here only in the mechanisms by which they classify various theories of atonement.

Unfortunately, the whole of the liberationist critique of PSE soteriology is sometimes unduly laid at Anselm’s feet. To provide just one example, De La Torre, here echoing the liberationist critique of escapism, dismisses a theology in which “the cross becomes a necessity for salvation that leads toward a life of bliss in some hereafter.”

His repudiation of this theology and its supposed founder, though, covers the gamut of the liberationist critique and is quite searing:

Anselm of Canterbury (1033?-1109) created this theology, reasoning that the cross was necessary to satisfy God’s anger, to serve, specifically, as a substitute for us. Before an angry God who requires blood atonements, sinful human beings could not redeem themselves. Only a sinless God-as-human-being could gratify God’s thirst for vengeance, make restitution, and restore creation. In other words, in order to satisfy God’s vanity, God’s only begotten son must be humiliated,

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70 De La Torre, *The Politics of Jesus*, 149.
tortured, and brutally killed, rather than the true object of God’s wrath—us humans.\textsuperscript{71}

Harnack rightly notes, though, that Anselm’s satisfaction theory of atonement “is no theory of penal suffering, for Christ does not suffer penalty; the point rather at which penalty is inflicted is never reached, for God declares Himself satisfied with Christ’s spontaneous acceptio mortis.”\textsuperscript{72} Nor, Harnack insists, does Anselm’s satisfaction theory, in a strict sense, even rely upon a notion of vicarious suffering, “for Christ does not suffer penalty in our stead, but rather provides a benefit, the value of which is not measured by the greatness of sin and sin’s penalty, but by the value of His life, and which God accepts, as it weighs more for Him than the loss which He has suffered through sin.”\textsuperscript{73}

Harnack does not count any of this to Anselm’s credit, though. Rather, he says it betrays Anselm’s failure to account sufficiently for the gravity of sin. Harnack thus judges that Anselm’s theory “can afford no comfort whatever to any distressed conscience.”\textsuperscript{74} With characteristically Lutheran concerns, he demands: “If it cannot be shown from the person of Christ that we really are redeemed, if the certainty of salvation (certitudo salutis) is not derived therefrom, nothing is gained.”\textsuperscript{75} As it stands, Anselm’s theory does not afford Harnack that assurance, only the possibility of it, because it

\textsuperscript{71} De La Torre, \textit{The Politics of Jesús}, 149.


\textsuperscript{73} Harnack, \textit{History of Dogma}, 68.

\textsuperscript{74} Harnack, \textit{History of Dogma}, 69.

\textsuperscript{75} Harnack, \textit{History of Dogma}, 69.
depends on the degree to which one partakes of this grace by fulfilling the commands of scripture.⁷⁶

Harnack does think that Anselm’s satisfaction theory represents a significant step forward in the history of atonement theology, though, because Anselm understood that that from which humans need redemption is the guilt of sin. This, in contrast to the “physical” conception of the Greek fathers whom, he says, always spoke of redemption in terms of the consequences of sin, namely death. More specifically, Anselm understood that humans stood in guilt before God. This indeed was an improvement, Harnack thought, over the Greek fathers—and “even Augustine,” he adds with an almost audible gasp—who rehearse superstitions about satisfying the devil.⁷⁷ One might employ Harnack’s taxonomy, then, by plotting a soteriology at some point along a continuum, from those that, like the Greek fathers, emphasize the physical, historical, or social dimension of salvation to those that emphasize the dimension of inward and spiritual transformation, (see figure 1.1).

![figure 1.1](image)

A generation after Harnack, another Lutheran historian of dogma, Gustaf Aulén, would take issue with the “traditional” classification of atonement.⁷⁸ (Aulén does not

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⁷⁶ Harnack, History of Dogma, 68.
⁷⁷ Harnack, History of Dogma, 70.
mention Harnack directly but clearly has him in view, among others, when he speaks of a traditional atonement classification.) This traditional account distinguished only two types of atonement: (1) There was the theory, often associated with Peter Abelard, that the primary function of the death of Christ was as a demonstration of divine love toward humanity. In the contemporary literature this view customarily goes under the name “moral exemplar” but was known to the divines of Protestant orthodoxy in Aulén’s day as “the subjective view,” since in it salvation consists “essentially in a change in men rather than a changed attitude on the part of God.” This was contrasted with (2) Anselm’s satisfaction theory, termed “the objective view” in the sense that “God is the object of Christ’s atoning work and is reconciled through the satisfaction made to His justice.”

According to this traditional accounting, Anselm’s view was the first that could properly be called a theory of atonement. Whatever the Greek fathers had to say about the meaning of the death of Christ in the economy of salvation was not considered by the traditional view a theory of atonement at all, so tethered was it to the physical death of the body. Thus, Aulén summarizes the traditional evaluation of Anselm’s contribution to soteriology this way:

By the theory of satisfaction developed in the Cur Deus homo? he repressed, even if he could not entirely overcome, the old mythological account of Christ’s work as a victory over the devil; in place of the older and more ‘physical’ idea of salvation he put forward his teaching of a deliverance from the guilt of sin; and above all, he clearly

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79 Aulén, Christus Victor, 2.
80 Aulén, Christus Victor, 2.
taught an ‘objective’ Atonement, according to which God is the object of Christ’s atoning work, and is reconciled through the satisfaction made to His justice.\(^81\)

Aulén sought to retrieve the Greek patristic tradition from the cold dead grip of Harnack’s accusation of mere physicality. He re-brands it the “dramatic view” because, he says, it conceives of salvation “as Divine conflict and victory; Christ—Christus Victor—fights against and triumphs over the evil powers of the world, the ‘tyrants’ under which mankind is in bondage and suffering.”\(^82\) Death is one such tyrant, yes—at least Death with a capital D—but so too, for Aulén, are Sin with a capital S and all the forces of darkness. Thus, Aulén parses the “three main types of the idea of atonement”—to quote the subtitle of the English translation of his short but immeasurably influential *Christus Victor*—which remain the standard classification of atonement theories now, nearly a century later: (1) Anselm’s “objective” satisfaction theory, (2) Abelard’s “subjective” moral exemplar theory, and (3) the Greek patristic “dramatic view.” That the latter is referred to most often in the contemporary literature as Christus Victor is owed primarily to Aulén.

Not only did Aulén consider the Greek fathers to have produced a viable theory of atonement, he was keen to plant the flag of his own theological hero, Martin Luther, firmly in this patristic soil. Since on the traditional accounting the only alternative to the Anselmian satisfaction tradition was Abelard’s subjective view, “the evident fact that Luther’s teaching on the Atonement was fully ‘objective,’ and contained the idea of vicarious suffering, seemed sufficient proof that it was to be ranged with that of

\(^{81}\) Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 1-2.

\(^{82}\) Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 4.
Anselm.” Aulén does not think this follows. From his perspective the entire medieval Latin tradition, including both Anselm and Abelard, was an aberration.

The Latin type of Christian doctrine turns out to be really a side-track in the history of Christian dogma—admittedly of vast importance and influence, but still only a side-track; and the proud claim of Roman theology to represent the continuity of Christian doctrine cannot be substantiated. The history of the doctrine of the Atonement shows clearly that just at this central point the Latin view definitely deviates from the classical Christian view.

It was Luther alone, then, who, according to Aulén, continued the main line in the development of atonement doctrine: “From the side-line of the Latin theory [Luther] bends right back to the main line, making a direct connection with the teaching of the New Testament and the Fathers.” Luther is outstanding even among Protestants, Aulén says, since the Lutheran tradition “without hesitation and without delay” reverted to a medieval satisfaction theory of atonement.

Why is Aulén so keen to locate Luther in this tradition which up until then had been seen as exclusively Greek and patristic? In part, it is that he does not wish Luther’s good name to be associated, as it so often had been, with the Anselmian satisfaction tradition. Aulén did not disparage the satisfaction tradition for the same reasons many liberation theologians today reject it (as discussed above). Rather, Aulén’s criticism is that while Anselm’s theory is “objective” in the sense that “the act of atonement has

83 Aulén, Christus Victor, 120.
84 Aulén, Christus Victor, 14-5.
85 Aulén, Christus Victor, 121-2.
86 Aulén, Christus Victor, 123.
indeed its origin in God’s will,” it is still “a discontinuous Divine work,” since it depends upon an “offering made to God by Christ as man on man’s behalf.”87 In other words, it is not objective enough. By contrast, the cosmic drama of Christ’s victory over death and the forces of darkness, which Aulén perceives both in the Greek patristic tradition and in Luther, constitutes “a continuous Divine work.”88

So, to Harnack’s distinction between the spiritual and historical effects of salvation, Aulén adds a second distinction between “objective” and “subjective” causes of salvation. By the former he means a soteriology that conceives of Christ’s saving work as a monergistic divine action, which disrupts corrupted human nature and saves it in spite of itself; by the latter, one that assigns salvific responsibility to human volition and action, elevated, as it may be, by divine grace. This distinction, too, can be thought of as a continuum. Recall that the reason Aulén judges the medieval Latin tradition to be a “side-track” in dogmatic history is that in it, Christ, though God, offers himself in sacrifice as a human being; thus, it does not constitute a “continuous Divine work,” such as the more properly objective dramatic view. So, one could plot at any point along the continuum a soteriology that requires elevated human nature to cooperate, to one extent or another, with Christ’s saving grace.

One might imagine, further, these two continua intersecting to form a Cartesian plane, such that plotting a point along each would place it in one of four quadrants (see figure 1.2). Soteriological formulae that understand salvation as social and political transformation within history and achieved divine intervention would plot in Quadrant I.

87 Aulén, Christus Victor, 5, italics in original.
88 Aulén, Christus Victor, 5, italics in original.
Conceptions of salvation as inner, spiritual transformation given as divine gift plot in Quadrant II. Inner, spiritual transformation achieved by the development of virtue plot in Quadrant III. Finally, understandings of salvation as social transformation in history realized by religiously-inspired political organizing plot in Quadrant IV.

It is worth pausing here to note that the four quadrants of our soteriological matrix do not represent neat, tidy boxes into which any and all theories of atonement easily fit. Many theories will show characteristics of two or more different quadrants, weaving together various strands in creative ways. To provide just one example, Gutiérrez, as we have already seen, stresses that “without liberating historical events, there would be no growth of the Kingdom.” At the same time, however, he concedes that “the process of liberation will not have conquered the very roots of human oppression and exploitation without the coming of the Kingdom, which is above all a gift.” In other words, “the historical, political liberating event is the growth of the Kingdom and is a salvific event;

89 Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 104.
90 Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 104.
but it is not *the* coming of the Kingdom, not *all* of salvation. It is the historical realization of the Kingdom and, therefore it also proclaims its fullness.”91 Because he is reacting primarily against PSE soteriology, which, as he perceives it, belongs in Quadrant II, Gutiérrez’s soteriology emphasizes the characteristics of its opposite, Quadrant IV. But in qualifying that the political liberating event is not *all* of salvation, we see Gutiérrez here straddling the axis between Quadrant IV and Quadrant III. And, in using the language of gift, we see him straddling the axis as well between Quadrant IV and Quadrant I. Perhaps we would do well to pay special attention to those soteriological formulae that push against, and thus help us to revise, our categories. Nevertheless, the questions that create our paradigms prove helpful for understanding the shifts that are occurring in contemporary Christian soteriology, and potentially for identifying a blind spot outside the current field of vision.

The liberationist critique, particularly the charge of escapism, has asserted that the PSE conception of salvation plots solidly to the left of the y axis, in Quadrant II or Quadrant III. That is, they have tended to conceive of salvation in terms of an inner, spiritual transformation rather than a social and political one. I reiterate that the accuracy of the liberationist evaluation of Western Christian soteriology is not under investigation here; nevertheless, this claim seems to me wholly uncontroversial.

We could be more specific. Most Western Christian soteriologies, at least since the Pelagian controversy at the turn of the fifth century, have conceived of inner, spiritual transformation primarily as an unmerited and unaided act of divine grace, thus plotting somewhere in the Quadrant II. There are, to be sure, significant exceptions in the

tradition, thinkers who emphasize the necessity of substantial human cooperation with
divine grace, the development of virtue, in accordance with divine wisdom, in order to
bring about inner, spiritual transformation. These would plot in Quadrant III. But this is
more than needs to be established here and would take a whole dissertation in itself to do.
We need only to note that the liberationist critique—probably accurately—locates PSE
soteriology on the left side of the plane.

Liberationist soteriologies, by contrast, do not tend to plot on the left side of the
soteriological plane. As we have already seen, they tend not to conceive of salvation as
an inner, spiritual transformation—at least not exclusively—but instead emphasize the
historical and political dimension of salvation. This emphasis has precipitated what we
have called the first shift in the trajectory of contemporary Christian soteriology. From
the margins of hetero-patriarchal, white-dominant Western society, liberation theologians
have illuminated the social and political dimension of biblical soteriology. This
immeasurably important contribution to Christian theology has, perhaps more than any
other, charted the course of contemporary Christian soteriology.

Liberationist theologies not only generated this first shift, from the popular
escapist preoccupation with inner, spiritual transformation to a vision of social and
political transformation in history—or, we might say, from the left side of the
soteriological plane to the right. They also provoked the second shift, from an emphasis
on divine causation of salvation to an emphasis on human cooperation—or, from the top
of the plane to the bottom. This should not be surprising. The liberationist critique, as we
saw, locates PSE soteriology primarily in Quadrant II: inner, spiritual transformation by
divine fiat. A strong reaction against such a formulation, as liberation theologies tend to
have, would naturally find a home in its opposite, Quadrant IV: salvation as political organization for social transformation within history.

The value of this second shift should be assessed carefully and on a contextual basis. In the communities from which many liberation theologians write, there are those who have been preached at—I use choose the preposition intentionally—from the perspective of PSE soteriology: They are born guilty of sin and deserve eternal punishment for their crimes. They should therefore deny themselves and submit to suffering, just as Christ suffered divine wrath in their stead. But in fact, their most immediate problem is not that they were born in sin, but that they were born on the underside of systems of oppression; that they have been denied rights and forced into submission. Neither they, nor Christ need suffer divine wrath; both have suffered too much already under systems of violence and domination. For these, the mere acknowledgement that they have been sinned against and of the deep wounds of han could go a long way toward the process of healing and wholeness.

The same cannot be said of me, however. I am a middle-class, able-bodied, cisgender, straight, white, American man. I benefit from the privileges of every power dynamic and system of inequality and inferiorization our society has constructed. To summon the spirit of St. Augustine, I was born into systems of violence and oppression that I did not create and for which I am not responsible, but for which I am nevertheless culpable. My sinning takes a certain shape that was given to me at birth. To people like me—to sinners—especially to those who have neither engaged the inner work to discover their privileges nor taken the time to educate themselves about the harm done to others by the systems by which they are privileged, the constant barrage of messaging from our
culture that they are responsible for dismantling these systems—right or wrong—most often, in the best case scenario, only induces guilt and shame, and in the worst, annoyance and offense. Even to those who have begun a journey of education and self-discovery about systemic injustice and privilege, that same messaging can lead to overwhelm and moral paralysis. Social analysis is deeply important and necessary for privileged and powerful people to come to self-awareness but it does not necessarily translate into social transformation. To call once more on St. Augustine, it can tell us what to do but it cannot give us the power to do it. This is the inevitable result of a soteriology that plots below the x axis of our plane, in Quadrant III or Quadrant IV. It calls forth human participation in ways that are generative, but it also relies on human cooperation when it may be too bound in sin. Salvation is worked out only with fear and trembling. In addition to social analysis, one needs to see that the liberation of the oppressed is intrinsically and inextricably linked to the forgiveness of sins.

Likewise, it is not difficult to imagine how the solidarity model of atonement might be a source of great comfort to communities of people who have for generations been beaten, killed, excluded, marginalized, degraded, or abused. Those who have been nailed to the many crosses of history find, in the in execution of Christ, a God who was there before them. But what of those who identify with the Roman centurions? What message about the cross should be preached to those, like me, who, in every system of violence and oppression, find ourselves in the shoes of the oppressor? Here a solidarity model of atonement may be useful as a dramatic form for moral instruction. Christ on the cross is a divine mirror held up to our violence.\textsuperscript{92} Inasmuch as one has nailed the least of

\textsuperscript{92} For a version of a solidarity model of atonement used in this way see René Girard (in English translations), \textit{Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World}, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer
these to the crosses of social progress, white Christian supremacy, and hetero-patriarchy, one has done it unto him. Yet, once again, the soteriological function of such a mirror is pedagogical rather than liberative. This Quadrant IV soteriology enjoins one to change sides, to join Christ in the solidarity with the oppressed, whether by divesting privilege or using it, but once again it does not afford one the power to do so. The mirror does not break the chains that bind oppressors just as strongly as the oppressed to the system. It gives the oppressor information—vitally important information, yes—but not transformation.

These observations are, I think, an appropriate and fitting way for a person from outside the communities from which liberation theologies are written to begin to grapple with their important contributions to the broader conversation about Christian soteriology. It is, after all, liberation theologians who, more than anyone else, have taught us that the adequacy of a theological construction is determined in part by its context. The above, then, is not a critique of liberationist soteriologies; it is a recognition of another important of liberation theologies’ lessons.

By bringing Harnack’s question about the historical or spiritual ends of salvation into conversation with Aulén’s questions about the monergistic or cooperative means of salvation, my new taxonomy of atonement theories does two things that earlier taxonomies have not done. First, it provides a much-needed modernization. Where does Williams’ insistence that “there is nothing divine in the blood of the cross” fit in Aulén’s

tripartite atonement taxonomy? The answer is, it does not. In fact, it is not clear how
one would classify liberationist soteriologies within the mechanisms of any current
taxonomy of atonement theory. This is a shocking deficiency given the exponential
growth of liberation theologies in influence and complexity over the last half a century,
not least in the global south, where Christianity’s center of gravity is rapidly shifting. My
taxonomy accounts for this shifting geography.

Second, the liberationist critique has exposed the fact that most atonement
theories in the Western Christian tradition have emphasized only the inner, spiritual
effects of salvation, and my taxonomy shows that that is only a fraction of formulations.
Western Christian theories of atonement plot uniformly in Quadrant II or Quadrant III,
only on the right side of the soteriological matrix. Liberationist soteriologies themselves
certainly provide one viable alternative, but as we have seen, these too have certain
shortcomings, sometimes significant ones, particularly when employed in communities
other than those from which they originate. There is, to my knowledge, no soteriology
deep in the Western Christian tradition at least that conceives of salvation as a social and
political transformation in history and that anticipates this as a unilateral divine action
and intrusion upon human history. If ever such a soteriology existed as a viable theory in
the history of Christian doctrine outside the New Testament, surely it was in the Greek
patristic tradition. Aulén was right that it had been lost on the Christian West (save,
perhaps, whatever Luther may have picked up from the Fathers or maybe even the New
Testament itself, but which, in any case, the Lutheran tradition abandoned “without

hesitation and without delay”). Aulén himself succeeded in recovering the Christus Victor motif, but in his eagerness to exonerate it from Harnack’s accusation of mere physicality, he portrayed a dramatic battle against spiritual forces, creating to some extent another purely spiritual, Quadrant II model.

IV. A Covenant-Apocalyptic Soteriology

To summarize what I have said above, in addition to a deep analysis of the structure of sin which brings the privileged to generative self-awareness, we need a story of how the liberation of the oppressed is intrinsically and inextricably linked to the forgiveness of sins and reconciliation of relationships. In addition to Christ on the cross, suffering in loving solidarity with the victimized and holding a mirror to the violence of the victimizer, we must tell of the defeat of the powers that bind both victim and victimizer in a cycle of violence. It is only in that narrative that one might find the power to work toward dismantling the shell of those structures beyond shame and fatigue.

It is time for a new understanding of the meaning of the cross, one that appreciates the intrahistorical and political meaning of salvation elucidated by liberation theologies, dismantling systems of dominance and oppression and empowering those on the margins, and one that simultaneously accounts for the deeper evil that underlies those structures and holds captive both those oppressed by them and those who appear to

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94Aulén, Christus Victor, 123. I think that Aulén was right in his assessment of Luther and the Lutheran tradition at this point, though this is not the place to try to establish it. The New Finnish School has shown significant affinities between Luther’s and Eastern Orthodox soteriologies. See, for instance, Tuomo Mannermaa, Christ Present in Faith: Luther’s View of Justification, ed., Krisi Stjerna (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005); Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, eds., Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998); and particularly Mannermaa’s essay “Justification and Theosis in Lutheran-Orthodox Perspective,” pp. 25-41 in that volume.
benefit from them. My new taxonomy of atonement theories shows that such an understanding has been largely untried, at least in Western Christianity.

So, I advance a hypothesis: that a soteriology informed by the strand of biblical and theological tradition known as apocalypticism might be able both to acknowledge the intrahistorical and political meaning of salvation elucidated by liberation theologies—that salvation means, in part, dismantling systems of dominance and oppression, both societal and internalized—and emphasize divine causality in defeating the dark powers that hold both oppressed and oppressor captive to those systems. In this dissertation I develop what I will call a covenant-apocalyptic soteriology by examining the narrative theology from which New Testament scholar and Anglican bishop N. T. Wright has engaged the conversation in New Testament studies about apocalyptic for the last five decades. In particular, I will look at how Wright’s covenant-apocalyptic soteriology is developed in the context of historical Jesus research.

The covenant-apocalyptic soteriology of Wright’s Jesus is particularly well-suited to this task because Wright understands the meaning of apocalyptic eschatology in its first century context in a way that avoids both the escapism and world-negating dualism of other apocalyptic portraits of Jesus in recent memory. As such, it affirms the shift in the trajectory of modern soteriology, from salvation solely as spiritual transformation to salvation of intrahistorical reality, and it can bear the weight of the liberationist critique

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95 A strand of apocalyptic thought was detectable in the early development of liberation theology in thinkers such as Johann Baptist Metz and Jon Sobrino. See J. Matthew Ashley “Apocalypticism in Political and Liberation Theology: Toward an Historical Docta Ignorantia,” Horizons 27, 1 (2000): 22-43. But it is not apparent in any of the American context-attentive liberation theologians considered in this dissertation. Randall Reed has argued that the two ideological systems are incommensurate. Randall W. Reed, A Clash of Ideologies: Marxism, Liberation Theology, and Apocalypticism in New Testament Studies (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2010).
of the PSE view. But, in contrast to the second shift, it emphasizes divine initiative in salvation and thus sustains the work for justice and peace in the world in the hope of the eventual defeat of the powers of darkness and the establishment of God’s kingdom.

V. Chapter Outline

In chapter 2, I locate Wright’s covenant-apocalyptic soteriology on the map of New Testament apocalyptic. I do this first by reviewing significant modern interpretations of the apocalyptic nature of Jesus’ mission and message: (1) In the _konsequente Eschatologie_ of Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer, Jesus’ eschatological message is said to have been intended to guide his followers to escape an imminent cosmic catastrophe that would bring about the end of the world. (2) In the demythologized apocalypticism of Rudolf Bultmann, Jesus’ eschatological message is understood to address instead an existential crisis of individual identity and thereby trigger a spiritual transformation. (3) In the realized eschatology of C. H. Dodd, the “end” came in the middle of history in the life and ministry of Jesus. (4) Finally, in G. B. Caird’s linguistic analysis, apocalyptic imagery is understood as hyperbolic and biblically-textured metaphor for great social and political upheaval.

Wright will agree with the _konsequente Eschatologie_ that the historical Jesus of Nazareth was an apocalyptic prophet. But unlike Weiss and Schweitzer, he does not think that Jesus’ eschatological message was a prediction of the end of the space-time universe. Instead, he will follow Caird in understanding the language of cosmic catastrophe in the Gospels as a vivid and biblically enriched metaphorical description of predicted events, both socio-political and spiritual, which together would constitute the restoration of
YHWH’s covenant with Israel. Wright situates this Cairdian reading of apocalyptic eschatology within the overarching biblical narrative, or what I will call the covenant narrative. Given the particular shape of the plot of that narrative during Jesus’ life and ministry, he couches it fundamentally in terms of exile and return: the return of YHWH to Zion, the return of Israel’s rightful king to the Davidic throne, the return of the Jewish homeland from its pagan overlords to its rightful inhabitants.

Chapter 3 focuses on the work of fellow student of Caird, Marcus Borg, particularly on his criticism of representations of Jesus as an eschatological prophet. For Borg, the language of crisis in the Gospels, at least insofar as it can be said to go back to the historical Jesus, was not intended as a prediction of the coming end of the world. It was rather a judgment declared upon Israel. One might notice already the conceptual overlap between Wright and Borg at this point, even as the language they use to describe their positions is at odds. Borg also mounts a series of arguments against the historicity of the Son of Man sayings, which, according to Borg, are the critical link in the three-way bond between Jesus’ pronouncement of the kingdom of God, images of cosmic catastrophe, and the language of imminence, and thus play an indispensable role in the development of an apocalyptic Jesus. With the link severed, the image of the apocalyptic Jesus begins to crumble, Borg says, and the kingdom of God becomes a metaphor for the experience of the numinous. The chapter concludes with Wright’s response to each of Borg’s arguments.

In chapter 4, I lay out Wright’s positive construction of Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet. Jesus draws upon and deliberately mirrors the ancient Hebrew prophets. He announces the kingdom of God as the fulfillment of the covenant narrative. His miracles
are signs of the kingdom’s coming. And he builds an apocalyptic community. I will assess Wright’s understanding of Jesus’ confrontation with the religious leader of Israel. Most importantly, I will give Wright’s account of how Jesus’ apocalyptic message envisaged an unexpected climax to the covenant narrative.

Finally in chapter 5, I show how an apocalyptic theory of atonement overcomes the deficits and the contextual limitations of the liberationist solidarity model, and how Wright’s covenant-apocalyptic soteriology in particular, because of how he understands the meaning of apocalyptic imagery, avoids the charge of escapism, which other apocalyptic portraits of Jesus do not. Rather than by an abstract forensic theory of atonement, I answer the question, “Why did Jesus die?” in terms of the social and historical motivations of the Jewish religious leaders who arrested him and of Pilate who sentenced him to be executed. More importantly, I explore what one reasonably can say about Jesus’ own perception of the meaning of his impending death. I show that Jesus understood his own death within the framework of a narrative in which sinner and sinned against are tangled together in the web of a larger enemy, with whom Jesus would die in battle. The picture emerges, not of the angry punishing deity of PSE soteriology, but of a protective mother hen, sacrificing her own life for that of her chicks.
In the previous chapter we saw that a number of liberation theologians have produced a devastating critique of popular soteriology: It espouses an escapist mentality that cannot attend to the structures of sin present within creation and society. As such, it offers no hope of liberation to victims of oppression. Instead, it endorses a myth of redemptive violence that perpetuates cycles of violence and distorts the image of God. Through this critique, liberation theology has helped to shift the center of gravity of contemporary Christian soteriology toward understanding the intrahistorical and political meaning of salvation.

Moreover, as an alternative to the penal substitutionary atonement of PSE soteriology, many liberation theologians have proposed some variation of a solidarity model, in which the cross represents God’s compassionate suffering with the marginalized and abused. Because it focuses more on human cooperation than on divine causality as the means of salvation, however, the solidarity model may not achieve its hoped for liberation. Instead, it may even contribute to a sense of hopelessness and a lack of resilience. At the least, its application is restricted by context.

So I hypothesized that an apocalyptic soteriology could preserve both the intrahistorical and political meaning of salvation illuminated by liberation theologians and divine causality in breaking the ties that bind both oppressed and oppressor to systems of injustice. In order to develop that soteriology, I begin by exploring how the
language and imagery of apocalyptic is used in the New Testament, particularly in the Gospels.

I. A Brief Historical Survey of the Interpretation of New Testament Apocalyptic

A. Konsequente Eschatologie (Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer)

It would be difficult to point to a thinker more influential in the field of historical Jesus scholarship than Albert Schweitzer. With his magisterial *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, Schweitzer drew the so called “first quest” for the historical Jesus to a close. In it, he painstakingly reviewed the history of (mostly German) historical Jesus scholarship and noted that “each successive epoch in theology found its own thoughts in Jesus…each individual created him in accordance with his own character. There is no historical task which so reveals a man’s true nature as the writing of a Life of Jesus.”

Schweitzer appreciated the tradition of historical Jesus scholarship for its extricating Jesus from the bonds of dogmatic ontological speculation. But any momentary glimpses of the man it may thereby have caught proved elusive. For Jesus merely “passes by our time and returns to his own…by the same inevitable necessity by which the liberated pendulum returns to its original position.” There, Schweitzer believed, Jesus must remain, firmly situated in his own historical context. He scorned attempts to make Jesus relevant to modern society, espousing the religious and socio-political agendas of European intellectuals.

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2 Schweitzer, *Quest*, 397.
The only scholar who passes through Schweitzer’s extensive survey unscathed is Johannes Weiss. Weiss had understood the central tenet of Jesus’ preaching to be the imminent coming of the kingdom of God, “a radically superworldly entity which stands in diametric opposition to this world.” Schweitzer’s only critique of Weiss’ eschatological view of Jesus is that it had not gone far enough, “for it applied the eschatological explanation only to the preaching of Jesus…instead of using it also to throw light upon the whole public work of Jesus…It represented Jesus as thinking and speaking eschatologically in some of the most important passages of His teaching, but for the rest gave us as uneschatological a presentation of His life as modern theology had done.”

Schweitzer thought that the only reason the entire guild had not immediately taken up Weiss’ eschatological view was that his *Jesus’ Proclamation of the Kingdom of God* had been too short a book for its full significance to be grasped. Schweitzer nevertheless counted it “one of the most important works in historical theology. It seems to break a spell. It closes one epoch and begins another.” He also made allowance for the fact that “the complete victory of one of two historical alternatives is a matter of two full theological generations,” which of course does not do justice to the far-reaching success of Schweitzer’s own portrait of Jesus less than a decade later. Since the kernel of

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4 Schweitzer, *Quest*, 349.
5 Schweitzer, *Quest*, 238.
6 Schweitzer, *Quest*, 238.
7 Schweitzer, *Quest*, 238.
Schweitzer’s eschatological Jesus was present already in Weiss—and to honor the former’s debts to him—we will trace the main points of this view through him.

Marcus Borg summarized the whole tradition stemming from Weiss and Schweitzer under the label “imminent eschatology.” This, he said, is shorthand for an understanding of Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom of God as:

*Imminent:* Jesus believed it would happen soon, within his generation. *Inevitable:* Its coming was not conditional—it was going to happen. *Interventionist:* God would do it by supernatural intervention. How else could it happen soon? *Unmistakable:* Its coming would be so dramatic and obvious that nobody could doubt that it had happened.8

Whether Borg’s four-point definition is an adequate description of the understanding of Jesus’ eschatology that took root in German and American New Testament scholarship in Weiss’ and Schweitzer’s wake is a question somewhat beyond the purview of this dissertation. It will nevertheless serve as a useful mechanism for organizing our assessment of the main line of Weiss’ argument.

1. Imminent

Weiss’ view of the eschatological and “superworldly” kingdom stood in opposition to the modern liberal theology that identified the kingdom of God of Jesus’ preaching with a set of universal ethical principles. He delayed the publication of *Jesus’ Proclamation of the Kingdom of God* until after the death of his father-in-law, Albrecht Ritschl, who had been among the foremost proponents of this liberal view, in order to

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avoid offending him. But it was precisely Ritschl’s theology and that of his cohorts at which Weiss took aim.

The proposal of the liberal New Testament scholars of Weiss’ day—and which, as we shall see, was taken up again by others after him—was that Jesus understood kingdom of God as an already present reality. This argument was made on the grounds of such passages as, for example, Matt 11:11: “Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist, yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.” Taken one way, the passage seems to imply that some are, already at the time of Jesus’ speaking, in the kingdom of heaven. If this is the case, then the kingdom of heaven must, for them at least, be a present reality, not an eschatological future. However, as the very next verse says: “From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and violent people take it by force” (Matt 11:12). Weiss contends that “these words can and must be understood only in the sense of a rebuke. Jesus is describing the kind of people who had been aroused by the Baptist’s preaching to the point of impassioned agitation. Jesus rebukes them because they wish to seize by for what they should be waiting for instead.”

Taken together, then, the verses mean exactly the opposite of what v. 11 might have been understood to mean on its own: There is no kingdom that yet exists as a concrete entity or community. And one of the things that is to blame for this fact is the “impassioned impatience,” which John had called forth in his disciples.

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10 Weiss, Proclamation, 70.

11 Weiss, Proclamation, 71.
The positive argument that the kingdom is not already a present reality is the prayer Jesus taught his disciples to pray: “May your kingdom come. May your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” (Matt 6:10); so also Jesus’ injunction to seek the kingdom (Luke 12:31 et al.). Why should one ask for the kingdom of God to come on earth if it is already present? Why seek it if it is already to be found? For Weiss’ Jesus, the kingdom of God is not present; it is coming soon.

2. Interventionist

For Weiss’ Jesus, the kingdom of God would be “mediated solely by God’s supernatural intervention,” not by human effort. Among Weiss’ most important contributions to New Testament eschatology is his forceful insistence that Jesus is not the founder of the kingdom of God. He notes that, aside from Jesus’ response to Simon Peter’s confession, in Matt 16:15-19, “there is no reliably attested saying of Jesus in which he designates himself as founder of God’s Kingdom.” Not even Jesus himself could bring about the kingdom. “He has to wait, just as the people have to wait, until God once again definitively takes up the rule.” Instead, according to Weiss, Jesus’ role is as the proclaimer of the kingdom and the defeater of Satan who stands in its way.

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12 Weiss, *Proclamation*, 73.
13 Weiss, *Proclamation*, 82.
14 Weiss, *Proclamation*, 79-80. Many scholars today would not consider this passage reliably attested, as the part relevant to our discussion is preserved only in Matthew’s special material.
3. Unmistakable

Part of what it means for Weiss to speak of the kingdom of God as “radically superworldly”\(^\text{17}\) is that the kingdom is not something that can exist in the hearts and lives of Jesus’ followers but potentially go unperceived by those around them. The liberal theologians whom he opposed like to point to Luke 17:21: “the kingdom of God is among you.” But Weiss points out that Jesus spoke these words to the Pharisees. Thus, he “can only be understood to mean that without the Pharisees’ observing it, the βασιλέα has been realized in some mysterious manner.”\(^\text{18}\) So, if the kingdom is, in any sense, present among the Pharisees, it cannot be as a physically perceptible entity such as Jesus’ healing ministry or his inclusive table fellowship, but only as “mysterious events, which are invisible to the perverse eye.”\(^\text{19}\) Thus, this passage too “does not give any occasion for seeing…an allusion to the actualization of the Kingdom of God within the group of disciples.”\(^\text{20}\)

For Weiss’ Jesus, the kingdom of God will come universally, unexpectedly, and unmistakably. It will imply the end of even the most basic social institutions, like marriage (Luke 20:34-35=Matt 22:30). To enter it, one must give up all of one’s earthly possessions (Luke 18:22=Matt 19:21). “Certainly the suddenness of its coming is the main point of the comparison [to the deluge, see Luke 17:22 ff.], but its universality and destructiveness are also important.”\(^\text{21}\) Weiss notes also that the “decisive signs” are

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\(^\text{17}\) Weiss, *Proclamation*, 114.
\(^\text{18}\) Weiss, *Proclamation*, 73.
\(^\text{19}\) Weiss, *Proclamation*, 73.
enumerated in Mark 13:24-25a, apparently not discerning, or at least not pointing out, any conflict between an unexpected advent proceeded by decisive signs.

4. Inevitable?

Perhaps the most influential legacy of Weiss’ picture of the historical Jesus was the claim that, because of the relentless enmity of his opponents, especially those in power over the religious and cultural establishments, Jesus concluded that the kingdom of God would not come as soon as he had thought. First, “an enormous obstacle, the guilt of the people, had to be removed” and Jesus believed that “he would not live to see this happen, but first must fall victim to the hatred of his opponents.”  

Under the influence of Weiss and Schweitzer, passages such as those in which Jesus tells his followers that “many will come from east and west and will take their places… in the kingdom of heaven, while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness” (Matt 8:11-12), or threatens the chief priest and the elders that “the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces its fruits” (Matt 21:43), are interpreted as evidence of Jesus’ reaction to this crisis in his life’s work.

In the end, Weiss says, Jesus “parted from this life with the painful realization that the Kingdom of God, which he had proclaimed to be so near, still had not been established.” Thus, with this painful recognition, he tells his disciples, “From now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes” (Luke 22:18). In

22 Weiss, Proclamation, 87.
23 Weiss, Proclamation, 84.
that sense, the imminent eschatology proposed by Weiss and Schweitzer was not in fact inevitable, as Borg suggested. Yet, confusingly, Weiss also claimed that:

From Jesus’ religious understanding of his whole life, this could not mean the failure of his work. It must rather be a means for bringing about the final goal. And since the sin which will cause his death is at the same time the chief obstacle to the coming of the Kingdom, he seized upon the audacious and paradoxical idea—or the idea seized him—that his death itself should be the ransom for the people otherwise destined to destruction.\(^{24}\)

Either Weiss is here uncritically attributing the atonement theory of the later church to the historical Jesus, or he imagines that Jesus had a radical revelation about the meaning of his death sometime between the last supper and the crucifixion, which Weiss does not narrate. The jury is still out, then, on the inevitability of the eschaton for Weiss’ Jesus.

5. Conclusion

Weiss’ eschatology, at least after it gained traction in the guild by way of Schweitzer, caused a significant rupture in New Testament studies and particularly the historical study of Jesus. For it asserted that “Jesus’ consciousness of the nearness of the Kingdom is a feature that cannot be disposed of.”\(^ {25}\) And it raised the question “whether it is really possible for theology to employ the idea of the Kingdom of God” without divesting it of such “essential traits” and thereby so modifying it that “only the name still remains the same.”\(^ {26}\) Weiss did not suggest that theologians should no longer employ Jesus’ concept of the kingdom. “On the contrary,” he said, “it seems to me as a matter of


\(^{25}\) Weiss, \textit{Proclamation}, 131, italics in original.

\(^{26}\) Weiss, \textit{Proclamation}, 131.
fact, that it should be the proper watchword of modern theology.” But they must do so with a readiness to admit that they give to it a sense different from that of Jesus.

**B. Eschatology and Mythology (Rudolf Bultmann)**

Rudolf Bultmann has the reputation of being an ahistorical theologian. To the extent that he reads the New Testament for it existential import, the reputation is deserved. Interestingly, though, by Bultmann’s own account, the ahistorical character of his theology is in fact rooted in the best research of his day on the historical Jesus. In 1958 Bultmann was able to declare that “today nobody doubts that Jesus’ conception of the Kingdom of God is an eschatological one—at least in European theology and, as far as I can see, also among American New Testament scholars.” Bultmann agreed with this consensus. In particular, he understood the historical Jesus though the apocalyptic lens of his teacher Johannes Weiss.

Weiss showed that the Kingdom of God is not immanent in the world and does not grow as part of the world’s history, but is rather eschatological; i.e., the Kingdom of God transcends the historical order. It will come into being not through the moral endeavor of man, but solely through the supernatural action of God. God will suddenly put an end to the world and to history, and He will bring in a new world, the world of eternal blessedness.

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29 Bultmann thought that Schweitzer “carried the theory of Weiss to extremes. He maintains that not only the preaching and the self-consciousness of Jesus but also his day-to-day conduct of life were dominated by an eschatological expectation which amounted to an all-pervading eschatological dogma.” *Christ and Mythology*, 13.

30 Bultmann, *Christ and Mythology*, 12.
Bultmann seems to have accepted Weiss’ *konsequente Eschatologie* in its entirety. “Jesus,” he explained, along with his contemporaries, expected the end of the world “would take place soon, in the immediate future, and he said that the drawing of that age could already be perceived in the signs and wonders which he performed, especially in his casting out of demons.” Bultmann’s existentialist hermeneutic is rooted precisely in the radical discontinuity between the present world and that soon-coming kingdom that Weiss’ theory proposed.

The Jesus of Weiss’ and Schweitzer’s *konsequente Eschatologie* could not be other than a failed prophet. The imminent and unmistakable kingdom of his preaching clearly has not come these two thousand years. The literal meaning of Jesus’ preaching, then, is relegated to that ancient mythological conception of the world of which Bultmann is keen to disabuse his readers. There is a question that follows inevitably from this move: “Is it possible that Jesus’ preaching of the Kingdom of God still has any importance for modern men and the preaching of the New Testament as a whole is still important for modern men?” And if so, what is its import?

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33 Bultmann, *Christ and Mythology*, 16.
34 I personally do not think “demythologizing” is the most apt description of Bultmann’s project of attempting to discover the existential meaning behind the texts of the New Testament. He does not, for instance, attempt to retain Jesus’ ethical principles while discarding his eschatological proclamations. This, it seems to me, would be the task of “demythologizing,” as Bultmann himself—wrongly, in my estimation—names his project. Instead, he maintains, “we must ask whether the eschatological preaching and the mythical sayings as a whole contain a still deeper meaning which is concealed under the cover of mythology” (*Christ and Mythology*, 18). This, of course, is precisely how one read mythology. One do not scrub Homer’s *Odyssey* of fantastic elements in hopes of finding underneath them the kernel of some “real” Odysseus before the gods and monsters. This proper form of demythologizing is, as we will see in chapter 3, the prerogative of many of Bultmann’s intellectual successors in the Jesus Seminar. But it is not what Bultmann himself means by the term. Neither, though, ought one to relegate the stories of Odysseus’ fateful return to Ithaca to the role of frivolous entertainment. Generation after generation of readers have found the meaning of their own journeys in his. Bultmann would have us read the Gospels with the same
As Bultmann sees it, the existential meaning of the eschatological elements that, as he learned from Weiss, were central to Jesus’ teaching is:

to be open to God’s future which is really imminent for every one of us; to be prepared for this future which can come as a thief in the night when we do not expect it; to be prepared, because this future will be a judgement on all men who have bound themselves to this world and are not free, not open to God’s future.\(^{35}\)

In this short quotation we see a sketch outline of what Bultmann sees as the threefold meaning of Jesus’ eschatological teaching: First, in the eschatological preaching of Jesus, “the idea of the transcendence of God is imagined by means of the category of time.”\(^{36}\) That is to say, God is “never present as a familiar phenomenon,” but “always the coming God, who is veiled by the unknown future.”\(^{37}\) The eschatological preaching of Jesus, in Bultmann’s view, urges his hearers to view the present time in light of that unknown future, and the present world in which we live and love and work and plan as transitory and empty in light of the far more real world of the kingdom.\(^{38}\) Second, not only does the eschatological preaching of Jesus bring to consciousness the transitory nature of the world of time and space, it also declares the judgment of God upon the sin and evil that rules it. It therefore represents the existential responsibility of the individual toward God and the performance of God’s will.\(^{39}\) Third, Jesus’ apocalyptic proclamation

\(^{35}\) Bultmann, *Christ and Mythology*, 31-2.

\(^{36}\) Bultmann, *Christ and Mythology*, 22.


\(^{38}\) Bultmann, *Christ and Mythology*, 23.

of the imminent end of the world is an announcement not only of judgment but also of the beginning of eternal bliss.\textsuperscript{40}

There is a sense in which Bultmann imagines that this eternal bliss is available now. However, unlike his British counterpart, C.H. Dodd—to whom we will now turn our attention—and others who saw the kingdom of heaven not as a future destination but as a present reality attendant to, or at least inaugurated by, the Christ event, Bultmann conceived of the heavenly realm as “a world where man reaches the perfection of his true, real essence,” and asserted that “this essence can be realized only imperfectly in this world.”\textsuperscript{41}

\textit{C. Realized Eschatology (C. H. Dodd)}

While Bultmann emphasized the existential import of Jesus’ apocalyptic proclamations, C. H. Dodd, in England, was experimenting with his own way of rescuing Jesus from eschatological obscurity. For Dodd, contrary to Weiss and Schweitzer, Jesus was not wrong about the imminent coming of the kingdom of God. Nor, contrary to Bultmann, was this because the kingdom had come with an ontologically different character to that which Weiss and Schweitzer said Jesus believed it would have. Rather, Dodd insisted that the real-world socio-political kingdom that Weiss and Schweitzer said Jesus preached had in fact come in real and tangible ways.

Dodd recognizes, of course, that for most Jews of Jesus’ day the kingdom of God was something yet to be revealed. According to the prevailing theology of the day,

\textsuperscript{40} Bultmann, \textit{Christ and Mythology}, 27.
\textsuperscript{41} Bultmann, \textit{Christ and Mythology}, 30.
YHWH is not only the king of Israel but of all the world but the world does not as yet recognize his sovereignty. At the time of Jesus, though, YWHW’s own people were subject to foreign rulers. Thus, pious Jews in the first century prayed, as they still pray to this day, “may He establish His Kingdom during your life and during your days, and during the life of all the house of Israel.” In this sense the kingdom of God is eschatological, a hope for the future. But the fact that the hope for the kingdom of God is sometimes presented in the Gospels as an eschatological hope does not necessarily preclude that it is perceived also as a temporal and political one. Indeed, Jesus seems to have thought that it would be, when he taught his disciples to pray for the coming of the kingdom saying, “May your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt 6:10). But in the literature of the period the kingdom is sometimes associated with “the final and absolute state of bliss in a transcendent order.” Dodd even suggests that Jesus, too, may have on occasion thought of the kingdom of God as “an order beyond space and time, where the blessed dead live for ever ‘like the angels’.”

Dodd was not naïve about the passages cited in the previous paragraph or the conceptions they represent; nor did he try to explain them away. Still, he worried that in the wake of the konsequente Eschatologie of Weiss and Schweitzer, New Testament scholarship of his day had failed to recognize the import of passages in which Jesus seemed to indicate that the kingdom of God was already present in his own lifetime.

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43 Here Dodd cites Ass. Mos. 10: “And then His Kingdom shall appear throughout all His creation…And God will exalt thee, and He will cause thee to approach to the heaven of the stars.” trans., Charles in Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, as cited in Dodd, *Parables*, 23, n. 3.

Here the Kingdom of God is a fact of present experience, but not in the sense which we have recognized in Jewish usage. Any Jewish teacher might have said, ‘If you repent and pledge yourself to the observance of Torah, then you have taken upon yourself the Kingdom of God’. But Jesus says, ‘If I, by the finger of God, cast out demons, then the Kingdom of God has come upon you.’ Something has happened, which has not happened before, and which means that the sovereign power of God has come into effective operation. It is not a matter of having God for your King in the sense that you obey His commandments: it is a matter of being confronted with the power of God at work in the world. In other words, the ‘eschatological’ Kingdom of God is proclaimed as a present fact, which men must recognize, whether by their actions they accept or reject it.\footnote{Dodd, \textit{Parables}, 28-9.}

He cites also Luke 11:31-32 (par. Matt 12:41-42): “The queen of the South will rise at the judgment with the people of this generation and condemn them, because she came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon, and indeed, something greater than Solomon is here! The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and indeed, something greater than Jonah is here!” No doubt this is an enigmatic prophecy, but its import for our question is relatively clear. “What is this ‘something greater’ than Jonah the prophet and Solomon the wise king?” Dodd asks. “Surely it is that which prophets and kings desired to see, the coming of the Kingdom of God.”\footnote{Dodd, \textit{Parables}, 31.} Jesus himself seems to endorse this interpretation when he says to the twelve, “Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see but did not see it and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.” (Luke 10:23-24, par. Matt 13:16-17). Dodd may also have cited Jesus’ response to the
Pharisees that “the kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed, nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you” (Luke 17:20b-21). But he limited his exposition to Mark and Q.

Appropriate attention in New Testament studies to the theme made clear in these verses, Dodd thinks, would drastically reshape theological proclamations. Having acknowledged that the kingdom of God has already come in the historical life of Jesus, it becomes impossible, for example, “to represent the death of Jesus as in any sense the condition precedent to the coming of the Kingdom of God. We may not say that He died ‘to bring in the Kingdom’; that his death was the ‘price’ of its coming; or that He died to being about the repentance without which it could not come.”

Each of these common theological explanations of the relationship of Jesus’ death to his kingdom proclamation, Dodd argues, are ruled out by fact that Jesus declared the kingdom already to have come during his lifetime.

Dodd says that there are not any passages that explicitly say the kingdom of God will come to balance out the ones that say it has come. He interprets passages that express that “the kingdom of God has come near” as variations of the theme that the kingdom has already come. Of two such passages, Mark 1:14-15 and Luke 10:10-11, he says, “These passages, the most explicit of their kind, are sufficient to show that in the earliest tradition Jesus was understood to have proclaimed that the Kingdom of God, the hope of many generations, had at last come. It is not merely imminent; it is here.”

Clearly, this is a significant break from the interpretation of these soon-coming-kingdom

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47 Dodd, Parables, 55.
48 Dodd, Parables, 37.
49 Dodd, Parables, 33.
passages advanced by *konsequente Eschatologie*. We will see in the next chapter that Marcus Borg, whose picture of the historical Jesus was much closer to Dodd’s than to that of Weiss and Schweitzer, nevertheless followed the latter in their more apparently straightforward interpretation of the soon-coming-kingdom passages; except Borg concludes that they do not go back to the historical Jesus. This controversial interpretative move, on which Dodd’s whole project seems to stand, is nevertheless stated but not argued for.

Dodd does admit one possible exception, Jesus’ prophecy to the crowds gathered at Caesarea Philippi: “Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power” (Mark 9:1). But he suggests that this might mean the disciples will later come to recognize that the kingdom that has already come in Jesus’ ministry.\(^{50}\)

Dodd, therefore, understands the *konsequente Eschatologie* of Weiss and Schweitzer to have wrongly negotiated a compromise between sayings which imagine the kingdom of God as a future event and those that see it as a present reality, by offering an “interpretation which represented it as coming very, very soon.”\(^{51}\) Dodd, as we have just seen, explained away the former, negating the necessity of a compromise. Thus, he thinks it would be incorrect to assume, as Weiss and Schweitzer had done, that “the content of the idea, ‘The Kingdom of God’, as Jesus meant it, may be filled from the speculations of apocalyptic writers. They were referring to something in the future, which could be

\(^{50}\) Dodd, *Parables*, 37. The other “coming” passages that Dodd addresses, Mark 14:25; Luke 13:28-29 (=Matt 8:11), he understands as Jesus’ predictions of suffering, either his own or that of the nation the nation of Israel, see pp. 40-8.

\(^{51}\) Dodd, *Parables*, 34.
conceived only in terms of fantasy.” Dodd thinks that Jesus was instead speaking of an object of his hearers’ experience.

“In what sense, then, did Jesus declare that the Kingdom of God was present?” Dodd asks. “Our answer,” he asserts, “must begin with His own answer to John: ‘The blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the Gospel preached to them’.” This “realized eschatology,” Dodd says, “is the fixed point from which our interpretation of the teaching regarding the Kingdom of God must start.” In other words, in the ministry of Jesus, the kingdom has come in tangible, if small-scale ways.


The word “eschatology” was first coined by German systematic theologians to refer to the “last things”: death, judgment, hell, and heaven. But when, in the nineteenth century, biblical scholarship began to emerge from systematic theology as a separate discipline, biblicists began using the term to refer principally to the destiny of the Jewish nation. In particular, they used it to name the Jewish hope for a metamorphosis of world history during which an age of justice and shalom should emerge from the shell of the present evil age. Thus, a great chasm separates the individualist eschatology of the systematicians and the historical eschatology of the biblicists. In fact, in the final chapter

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52 Dodd, *Parables*, 34.
53 Dodd, *Parables*, 35.
54 Dodd, *Parables*, 35.
of _The Language and Imagery of the Bible_, Caird distinguishes no fewer than six subsets of eschatology.56 “The danger then,” Caird writes, “is that in using the one word eschatology to cover both types of belief we should overlook the fact that we may be using words such as ‘last’, ‘final’, and ‘end’ in different senses.”57

Caird sees this confusion lurking in every corner of the history of interpretation of New Testament apocalyptic. For instance, Weiss and Schweitzer were absolutely right, Caird thinks, to notice that eschatology was a primary concern of Jesus. But in what sense? Weiss and Schweitzer overlooked the inconsistencies in even the material that seemed to support their view. For example, in Luke 17:22-37 the coming of the Son of Man will be unheralded, catching many unawares amidst such ordinary activities as eating, drinking, marrying, and giving in marriage. In Mark 13, by contrast, the Son of Man will come only after many warnings and signs—wars, earthquakes, famine—which, as Caird comments with characteristically wry wit, “one might have expected to cause some disruption of daily routine.”58

Or again, in Mark 14:62 Jesus tells Caiaphas that he will “‘see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power’ and ‘coming with the clouds of heaven’.” The parallel passage in Matthew repeats Mark’s words with the addition of “from now on” (Matt 26:64). Thus, the coming of the Son of Man was—for Matthew, unlike Mark—something which would take place, not just at the end of history, but continuously or repeatedly

56 They are: the individualist eschatology of the systematic theologians, which Caird calls _Eschatology I_; the historical eschatology of the biblicists (_Eschatology H_); Weiss’ and Schweitzer’s _konsequente Eschatologie_ (_Eschatology K_); Dodd’s “realized eschatology” (_Eschatology R_); Bultmann’s existentialist eschatology (_Eschatology E_); and a Jewish philosophical equivalent to Greek teleology (_Eschatology P_).

57 Caird, _Language and Imagery_, 244.

58 Caird, _Language and Imagery_, 252.
from the moment of Jesus’ crucifixion. For Caird, this addition, among others, commends a Bultmannian interpretation, wherein judgment is not a future event but an existential experience continually pressing in upon one, as a viable reading for the eschatological material in Matthew’s gospel, even though it is an insufficient hermeneutic for the other canonical gospels.  

In general, Caird is not uncompelled by Bultmann’s existential eschatology. In fact, “if Bultmann had gone a step further,” he contends, “and had defined eschatology as a Jewish understanding of history, the Jew’s self-understanding of his involvement in the corporate life of his nation and of mankind, this chapter of mine would not have needed to be written, since he would have given a fair summary of the conclusion to which it is leading.” So Caird affirms Bultmann’s insistence that eschatology constitutes an existential encounter; he just thinks that Bultmann conceives of that encounter in too individualistic a manner. Bultmann, he says, “had no place in his thinking for the corporateness which is the very stuff of ordinary historical existence.” For Caird, eschatology is, in the final analysis, an existential engagement with history.

With his teacher C. H. Dodd, Caird acknowledges for many texts in the Gospels, in the life of Jesus the prophets had been fulfilled (Luke 10:23-24), the time of the present age had come to a close (Mark 1:15), and the kingdom of God had arrived (Luke 11:20). He thinks Dodd was right to emphasize this radical interruption into history implied in the coming of Jesus, but that he too forcefully ironed out the continuity of that

59 Caird,Language and Imagery, 268.  
60 Caird,Language and Imagery, 254.  
61 Caird,Language and Imagery, 254.  
62 Caird,Language and Imagery, 252-3.
event with prior Jewish covenantal history on the one hand and the continuing mission of the Church on the other. Another way of saying the same thing, perhaps, is that Caird thinks Dodd failed to understand the extent to which this realized eschatology functions as a metaphor, “the application of end-of-the-world language to that which is not literally the end of the world.”63 Thus, in addition to the confusion about the extent to which eschatological language should be understood individually or historically, which is created by the disparity in how systematic theologians and biblicists use the terms, further confusion is aroused by Dodd’s formulation about when in history the end will—or has—come.

Caird summarizes his exposition of the history of New Testament eschatological thought this way:

It appears, then, that Weiss and Schweitzer were right in thinking that eschatology was central to the understanding of biblical thought, but wrong in assuming that the biblical writers had minds as pedestrian as their own; that Bultmann was right in defining eschatology as a Jewish form of self-understanding, but wrong in failing to see that it was above all a Jewish understanding of history; that Dodd was right in describing the beliefs of Jesus and the early church as realized eschatology, but wrong in thinking that this term adequately distinguished the events of the gospel story from other events, both before and after.64

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63 Caird, Language and Imagery, 253. Caird says that Dodd “revised his extreme position” on this point and adopted the term inaugurated eschatology, as proposed to him by Joachim Jeremias as an alternative to his realized eschatology; see Caird, Language and Imagery, 253. I have not been able to track down confirmation of either claim, but in his commentary on John, Dodd does admit that “realized eschatology” is a “not altogether felicitous term.” “Emendations of it which have been suggested for the avoidance of misunderstandings are Professor Georges Florovsky’s ‘inaugurated eschatology’ and Professor Joachim Jeremias’s ‘sich realisierende Eschatologie’, which I like, but cannot translate into English.” C. H. Dodd, The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953, 1968) 447, n. 1.

64 Caird, Language and Imagery, 271.
With these many shades of meaning hidden just below the surface, often bubbling up into pools of confusion, how is one to read the eschatological language of the New Testament?

Caird lays out his own answer to that question in three propositions: First, the biblical writers believed that the created world would, one day in the future, literally come to an end, just as they believed it had a literal beginning one day in the past. The psalmist says this explicitly: “Long ago you laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you endure; they will all wear out like a garment” (Ps 102:25-26a). Other passages refer to the end of the physical world in what seems to be a straightforwardly literal way (see, for instance, Gen 8:22; Ps 72:7; Isa 51:6; 54:10).

Second, many biblical writers regularly use language about the end of the world metaphorically to refer to things other than the literal end of the world. As an example, Caird demonstrates that the prophet Jeremiah uses language unique to the Genesis description of pre-creation chaos to refer to the destruction of Jerusalem and decidedly not to its obvious literal referent, the destruction of the whole creation.

At the outset of his ministry (626 B.C.) Jeremiah predicted the destruction of Jerusalem by an enemy from the north (Jer. 1:14-15; 4:6; 6:1; 10:22), and in a syncretic vision he saw this as God’s judgement, depicting it as the return of chaos and even using the words tohu waboho (waste and void) [4:23], which occur elsewhere only in the account of creation in Gen. 1:2. The expected attack

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65 Caird, Language and Imagery, 256.

66 Caird does not allow for the objection that in some other passages the earth is to last forever (see Ps 78:69; Eccl 1:4). “In comparison with the transitoriness of human existence, the earth will last until the end of time, but it is not everlasting as God is everlasting,” he writes. Caird, Language and Imagery, 257. This, it seems to me, is cooking the books in hopes of securing the internal consistence of biblical cosmology. Wright, by contrast, will deny a literal referent to the passages that predict the end of the world, I suspect for much the same reason.

67 Caird, Language and Imagery, 256.
did not come, and for years Jeremiah had to live with the haunting doubt that he might be a false prophet, guilty under the Deuteronomic law of capital offence (Deut. 18:20-22). He even accused God of having duped him (Jer. 20:7). But in 605 B.C. he reissued his early prophecies by dictating them to Baruch (Jer. 36:1-4). This time his prediction came true, for Jerusalem was captured in 598 B.C. and reduced to ruins in a further siege eleven years later. But it never occurred to Jeremiah or anybody else that he might still be regarded as a false prophet because the world had not yet come to an end.68

Third, as with all metaphor, vehicle and tenor are occasionally blurred by the writer.69 This can be observed in the “two-way traffic” we sometimes see “between the vehicle and tenor of a metaphor.”70 In other words, “When the eschatological language of the end time is used to interpret a historical event, that event can be taken up into the myth of the end.”71 For example, because Daniel had described Antiochus IV’s “desolating sacrilege” in the Temple in end-of-the-world language, the term was absorbed into later Jewish eschatological vocabulary and used by others to describe the cataclysmic events of their own day (cf. Mark 13:14 ff; Matt 24:15 ff.). So also, Daniel’s four beasts give shape to the primeval ocean monsters of Rev 13:1-2. Given this blurring by the writers of eschatological metaphor, we must allow for some measure of literalist misinterpretation by the reader as well.72

68 Caird, *Language and Imagery*, 259. As a further example, Caird says that “the day of the LORD” is language intended to describe the end of the world, but we also find it being used to refer to events such as the overthrow of Babylon (Isa 13:6, 9) and the annihilation of Edom (Obad 1:15). Caird presumes, but does not argue for, the first assertion. It is not clear to me that any iteration of the phrase “the Day of the LORD” in the Hebrew Bible refers literally to the end of the world. But if Caird’s assertion is right, then “the day of the LORD” is language about the literal end of the world, which is, in these instances, being used metaphorically to refer to cataclysmic political events. Nevertheless, the fact that the authors used end-of-the-world language in this way, does not mean that they ceased to believe in a literal end of the world, or that they lost the ability to distinguish between them “any more than the writer of Ps 23 lost the ability to distinguish between himself and a sheep;” Caird, *Language and Imagery*, 258.

69 Caird, *Language and Imagery*, 256.

70 Caird, *Language and Imagery*, 264.


72 Caird, *Language and Imagery*, 256.
II. N. T. Wright: Covenant-Apocalyptic Paradigm

N. T. Wright recounts a story of hearing John J. Collins expound a view of Jewish eschatology not unlike Caird’s in a paper given at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in November of 1989. After the presentation, Wright quipped to Collins that “if Albert Schweitzer had heard that paper a hundred years ago, the entire course of New Testament studies in the twentieth century would have been different.”\(^73\) It is, of course, not worth speculating about such counterfactuals in history. What is certainly not in question is that today N. T. Wright’s own view of Jewish eschatology is shaping the course of New Testament studies for what remains of the twenty-first century and beyond. “Schweitzer was right,” Wright says, “when at the beginning of the twentieth century he drew attention to apocalyptic as the matrix of early Christianity. It is now high time, as the century draws to a close, to state, against Schweitzer, what that apocalyptic matrix actually was and meant.”\(^74\) Elucidating what Wright thinks the apocalyptic matrix of early Christianity actually was and meant is the task to which we will turn in the remainder of this chapter.

A. Worldview

Wright is interested in the way eschatology—particularly historical eschatology, in Caird’s terms—forms the structure of the Second Temple Jewish worldview, that is,


\(^74\) Wright, *NTPG*, 334.
the vital but largely subconscious foundations of a society’s ultimate concerns, the lenses “through which, not at which, a society or an individual normally looks.” Worldviews are, according to Wright, expressed most fully in a society’s stories – stories that give people a sense of identity and environment, that provide narrative context for the problems they face and propose a solution to those problems. These stories are, in turn, depicted in shorthand in a culture’s symbols and dramatized in festivals, family rituals, and other cultural liturgies. Worldviews are not derived from, but instead give rise to, explicit beliefs.

1. Israel’s Story: Renewal and Rescue

If this is right, then the controlling story of the people Israel, in which their worldview is expressed, is obviously the overarching biblical narrative: the story of creation and rebellion in the garden, of YHWH’s covenant with Abraham, of slavery and rescue from Egypt, of the giving of the Torah, of the Davidic monarchy and the Jerusalem Temple, of exile and return. Throughout this dissertation, I will refer to this large story as “the covenant story,” since, as we will see, YHWH’s covenant relationship with Israel is the center point around which the story hinges.

The main line of the covenant story is oriented toward remitting the divine judgement upon Adam and Eve and reversing the curse upon the serpent and the land; that is, the restoration of Eden, and the renewal of creation itself. This is evident in the way that Abraham’s story is designed to demonstrate, finally, fulfillment of the

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75 Wright, NTPG, 125.
76 Wright, NTPG, 122-6.
77 Wright, NTPG, 221.
commands given to the primordial couple in the garden. “Thus,” Wright says, “at major turning-points in the story—Abraham’s call, his circumcision, the offering of Isaac, the transition from Abraham to Isaac and from Isaac to Jacob, and in the sojourn in Egypt—the narrative quietly insists that Abraham and his progeny inherit the role of Adam and Eve.”

The theme does evolve, however, in the Abrahamic cycle: The command to “be fruitful” (Gen 1:28) becomes a promise: “I will make you exceedingly fruitful” (Gen 17:6). And the command to “fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen 1:28) becomes a promise that Abraham will possess the land of Canaan (Gen 15:18-21).

This theme is apparent in the prophets, like how Ezekiel, when he foresees the restoration of Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the Temple, envisions rivers flowing out from it to water the whole world (Ezek 47:7-12), a clear Edenic typology. It is developed also at Qumran and in other Second Temple literature, including importantly the midrash on Genesis, where, when asked what he is to do about the presence of evil in the world, YHWH responds: “I will make Adam first, and if he goes astray I will send Abraham to sort it all out.” This is the covenant story in miniature: the children of Abraham sorting out Adam’s straying.

Insofar as Israel is the true Adam, the natural corollary, as Wright keenly notes, is that the gentile nations are the wild animals over whom he has dominion. That perception is expressed, by turns, that YHWH has given Israel “as a light to the nations” (Isa 49:6)

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78 Wright, NTPG, 263.
79 Wright, NTPG, 263.
80 Wright, NTPG, 265.
81 Genesis Rabbah 14.6, as quoted in Wright, NTPG, 251; for further discussion on this passage and the Abrahamic recapitulation of Adam more generally, see N. T. Wright, The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).
and that he has made: “the nations your heritage and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.” (Ps 2:8-9). Discussions of the Gentiles divide evenly along these lines and no doubt in tandem with a felt sense of oppression, but the idea that the fate of the nations was bound up with that of Israel was nowhere in question.\(^{82}\)

Like any complex story, the covenant story has a number of subplots with their own narrative arcs. The arcs of the subplots of the covenant story are sometimes so well-developed, in fact, that one could get disoriented at any number of points along the way, believing themselves to be at the climax of the larger narrative. For instance, when Israel, the hero of the story, finds herself enslaved or exiled by the villain, the pagan nations, the rescue of the protagonist becomes the obvious and immediate orientation of the narrative. When recounting these parts of the overarching covenant narrative, it is easy to get wrapped up in the thought that the rescue of Israel is what the whole story is about. Some texts no doubt tend in that direction. But, as Wright correctly points out, how YHWH will rescue and restore Israel is a second-order question, in service to the first order question of how YHWH will, through Israel, remake the world.\(^{83}\) Even if many Jews of the period were preoccupied by the second-order questions of the subplot—because “they did not need to think beyond the rescue and restoration [of Israel] of which some of their key stories, such as the Passover Haggadah, reminded them year by year”\(^{84}\)—in the primary texts of the period, the larger story of the renewal of creation is never far below the surface.

\(^{82}\) Wright, \textit{NTPG}, 263.

\(^{83}\) Wright, \textit{NTPG}, 268.

\(^{84}\) Wright, \textit{NTPG}, 223.
2. Symbols and Praxis

As Wright believes to be common to worldview stories, the covenant story—both the first-order story of the renewal of creation and the second-order subplot of the rescue of Israel—he says, was cast in the primary symbols of the culture: the Temple, the Land, the Torah, and Jewish ethnic identity. And it was dramatized in in her principal festivals and cultural practices.

Herod’s Temple occupied a shockingly large area of the city of Jerusalem, some 25% of the usable land. Jerusalem in the first century, as Wright says, “was not so much a city with a temple in it; more like a temple with a small city around it.” The Temple was not only a religious shrine; it functioned also as the seat of Israel’s national government (allowing for the fact that Rome was the real ruler of the country) and national bank. Even though, as we will see, many Jews regarded Herod’s Temple with suspicion, it remained the focal point of Israel’s religious, cultural, and even national life.

The Temple was the holiest site in all of Israel—indeed, so far as Jews were concerned, in all the world—“but the holiness of the ‘holy Land’ spread out in concentric circles, from the Holy of Holies to the rest of the Temple (itself divided into concentric areas), thence to the rest of Jerusalem, and thence to the whole Land.” As such the Land itself becomes another symbol that of the whole covenant story. In my reading of the covenant story, neither the holiness of the Land nor its symbolic significance is derived entirely from the presence of the Temple in it. Rather, it is bestowed by YHWH when he

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85 Wright, *NTPG*, 225.
86 Wright, *NTPG*, 227.
divides the nations of the world among the gods and takes Israel—the Land and its people—as his own portion (Deut 32:8-9).  

Torah, of course, contains the covenant narrative in a more literal sense than do the other symbols. But Torah too serves a symbolic function, its presence calling to mind the whole narrative. Like the land, Torah was inextricably linked to the Temple: “the Torah sanctioned and regulated what happened in the Temple, and the Temple was (in much of this period) the practical focal point for the observance of Torah.” This tight link between Torah and Temple is no doubt part of the reason that in the Diaspora, and even in the land of Israel itself after the destruction of Solomon’s Temple, the importance of Torah study and practice as a focal point of Jewish identity became exaggerated.

The fourth and final symbol that, Wright says, in the Second Temple period, contained and pointed to the entire covenant story is Jewish ethnic identity itself. It had been to some degree, of course, ever since YHWH commanded Abraham to circumcise his male offspring throughout their generations (Gen 17:9-14). But, not unlike Torah, the question of pure breeding became increasingly important as exiled Jews began returning from Babylon to the homeland.

Day after day and year after year, Israel enacted and embodied these symbols. The principal festivals dramatized the crucial turning points of the covenant story:

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87 Wright’s failure to highlight the polemical context of YHWH among the gods of the nations as the locus of the significance of the Land is, in my judgment, symptomatic of an insufficient angelology more generally. Because this point will become important for my larger argument about the efficiency of apocalyptic to produce a soteriology robust enough to hold up to the liberationist critique, it is one to which we will return at length in the final chapter.

88 Wright, NTPG, 228.

89 As evidence of this Wright points to the long genealogies in 1 Chron 1-9; Ezra 2; 8; 10; and Neh 7; 12. Wright, NTPG, 230.
exodus from Egypt (Passover), the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai (Pentecost), and following YHWH’s pillar of cloud through the wilderness en route to the promised land (Tabernacles). Likewise, the identity-markers that set Jews apart from the pagan nations, as the covenant people—circumcision, sabbath, and kosher laws—do their own work of making the covenant story quite tactile.

3. Belief

A culture’s narratives, symbols, and praxis, all of which operate to some degree on a subconscious or precognitive level, are ultimately given explicit expression in the culture’s shared beliefs. At one level of analysis, then, belief is the final cause for which people write the stories they write and behave the way they do, even if the beliefs are developed chronologically later. Wright acknowledges, first, that most Jews to not understand Judaism primarily as a set of beliefs but as a halakah, a way or walk of life, and second, that even if Jews did so regard Judaism, “there is no such thing as first-century Judaism” to speak of, only “Judaisms’, plural.” These caveats notwithstanding, Wright wants to get the core beliefs that give rise to the “broad family resemblance” among various first century Jewish groups, which underlies their great diversity of presentation.

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90 Wright, NTPG, 234.
91 Wright, NTPG, 237.
92 Wright, NTPG, 245-6.
93 Wright, NTPG, 244-5.
94 Wright, NTPG, 244-5.
For Wright, the fundamental belief which both emerges from and undergirds Israel’s story, symbols, and praxis is monotheism. Israel’s monotheism, he says, is *creational, providential, and covenantal*.\(^{95}\) That is, Israel’s god, YHWH, is the one creator-god of the universe. And YHWH has covenanted with Israel to be the light to the nations of the world. Sometimes, following Sanders, Wright will name monotheism and election as the two fundamental beliefs of Israelites of our period. But, as we can see, the notion of election is built into this way of conceiving of monotheism itself: YHWH the creator-god elected his people Israel to fulfill his purposes for creation. Thus, for ease of referent, I will henceforth refer to Israel’s foundational belief simply as covenantal monotheism.\(^{96}\) It is precisely this foundational belief in covenantal monotheism, coinciding with a string of national crises—beginning with destruction of Solomon’s Temple and the Babylonian exile through a number of foreign occupations—that caused the theological crisis that undergirds the early Christian movement, and for that matter, rabbinic Judaism.

\(^{95}\) Wright, *NTPG*, 248-52.

\(^{96}\) I want to flag here a question to which I have already made passing reference more than once, but which will have to wait for a fuller treatment in chapter 5: If what Wright means by his insistence on monotheism as the foundational belief of Jewish of our period is simple that YHWH is the one and only god who created the universe and that he has covenanted with Israel to accomplish his purposes in creation, then it seems to me a useful summative appellation. If, however, Wright has in view a less nuanced and more conventional definition of monotheism, by which it is thought that Jews in the Second Temple period believed that besides YHWH there are no gods worthy of the title, that YHWH was alone in the spiritual universe, not only would that be demonstrably untrue, it would also, it seems to me, undercut Wright’s eschatological project. Absent a narrative of the rebellion of YHWH’s divine council and subsequent handing over of the nations, one would be hard pressed to establish the need for the divine cosmic intervention to which Wright says the New Testament’s apocalyptic language applies.
B. The Continuation of Exile and the Conclusion of the Covenant Story

The upshot of this theological crisis is that the covenant story is continually being reshaped around the questions that it raises: How can things go this badly for the chosen people of the one creator-god of the universe? Has YHWH forgotten his covenant? Will Israel at last be restored? And thus, at least in what is commonly thought of as the biblical period, Wright says, the story “runs out without a sense of an ending.”

Wright has discussed this lack of resolution to the covenant story by appealing to a purported sense of continued exile. “Many Second Temple Jews” he says, “interpreted that part of the continuing narrative in which they were living in terms of the so-called Deuteronomic scheme of sin—exile—restoration.” That is, even after many Jews had returned to their homeland and the Temple had been rebuilt, they understood their place in the covenant narrative “as still somewhere in the middle stage of exile looking forward to the restoration but being shackled at the ankles by their past sins—both corporately and individually.”

Wright makes the case from a number of texts written in the post-exilic period. In a particularly poignant chapter of the book of Daniel—set during the Babylonian exile, though the text as we have it was completed much later—the protagonist pleads with YHWH to end the exile. Daniel knows that the exile must be coming to an end soon because Jeremiah had said it would last seventy years (Dan 9:2; cf., Jer 25:11-23), so he begins praying and fasting. He confesses, in language drawn directly from Deut 28, that

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97 Wright, NTPG, 216.
YWHW is righteous in his decision not to act, given Israel’s sin. Nevertheless, he implores YHWH to turn his anger and wrath away from his holy mountain and to let his face shine once more in his sanctuary (Dan 9:4-17). Daniel reports that, while he was speaking, Gabriel, whom he had known previously from visions, came to him and said:

Seventy weeks are decreed for your people and your holy city: to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, and to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet, and to anoint a most holy place. Know therefore and understand: from the time that the word went out to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the time of an anointed prince, there shall be seven weeks, and for sixty-two weeks it shall be built again with streets and moat, but in a troubled time. After the sixty-two weeks, an anointed one shall be cut off and shall have nothing, and the troops of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary. Its end shall come with a flood, and to the end there shall be war. Desolations are decreed. He shall make a strong covenant with many for one week, and for half of the week he shall make sacrifice and offering cease, and in their place shall be a desolating sacrilege until the decreed end is poured out upon the desolator (Dan 9:24-27).

Thus, the angel reveals to Daniel the true meaning of Jeremiah’s prophecy. The exile would not come to an end after seventy years, but after seventy weeks of years—four-hundred and ninety years!  

This revelation certainly brings the prophecy into relevance for Daniel’s own setting, regularly understood to be the Maccabean revolt. Yet it remains unclear how this exact calculation should work out: “Four hundred and ninety years before 167 BCE is 657 BCE, a full sixty years before Nebuchadnezzar took the city in 597, and seventy years before he destroyed it in 587,” as Wright does the sums.  

But it was precisely that sort of calculation that Daniel 9 set in motion, teasing pious Jews for the next three

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100 Wright, “Yet the Sun,” 25.
101 Wright, “Yet the Sun,” 25.
hundred years with the challenge to work out a riddle.” And indeed, such calculations were evidently a significant feature of Jewish literature from the mid-second century through at least the second century of the Common Era. The point is: long after many Jews had returned to the land, they still understood this prophecy of a long-delayed end of the exile as an appropriate symbol under which to categorize their own experience.

A different image could be cited to the same effect from Ezra’s prayer in Neh. 9:

Here we are, slaves to this day, slaves in the land that you gave to our ancestors to enjoy its fruit and its good gifts. Its rich yield goes to the kings whom you have set over us because of our sins; they have power also over our bodies and over our livestock at their pleasure, and we are in great distress (Neh 9:36-37).

Here again direct reference is made to Deut 28 (vv. 33, 51), making clear that the Deuteronomistic sin—exile—restoration scheme is in view and locating even the returned exiles still squarely in the exilic sequence. They are “slaves to this day,” and even “in the land that you gave to our ancestors.” The clear implication is that a second exodus is required.

Wright goes to great lengths to defend the concept of a continued exile as the umbrella under which to understand the theological crisis at the root of the rabbinic Judaism and the early Christian movement, despite strident criticism. A thorough

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102 Wright, “Yet the Sun,” 25.
104 Wright, “Yet the Sun,” 31.
A critique of Wright’s thesis was made by Brant Pitre in his 2004 dissertation. Though Pitre honors Wright for his emphasis on the central importance of the theme of exile for understanding the historical Jesus—he calls it “the most significant advance that has been made in the study of Jesus’ eschatology since the works of Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer”—he thinks Wright is fundamentally wrong in his understanding of exile. He offers two reasons for this assessment.

The first is that Wright redefines exile to mean, not geographical dislocation, but the political and theological experience of Jews living in Judea, having returned from Babylon. Here is one exemplary passage from Wright (with Pitre’s italics added for emphasis):

> Most Jews of this period [i.e., the Second Temple period], it seems, would have answered the question ‘where are we?’ in language which, reduced to its simplest form, meant we are still in exile. They believed that, in all the sense which mattered, Israel’s exile was still in progress. Although she had come back from Babylon, the glorious message of the prophets remained unfulfilled. Israel still remained in thrall to foreigners; worse, Israel’s god had not returned from Zion.

Elsewhere Wright makes explicit this point of Pitre’s critique. He maintains that many Second Temple Jews believed themselves to be in exile,

whether, for them, exile was in fact a geographical reality, as for many in the Diaspora …whether they were aware of the continuing theological and cultural oppression of foreign nations…or whether they believed that in some sense they themselves were the advance guard of the ‘real return from exile,’ indicating that

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106 Published the following year as: Brant Pitre, Jesus, the Tribulation, and the End of Exile: Restoration Eschatology and the Origin of the Atonement (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005).

107 Pitre, Jesus, 32.

108 Wright, NTPG, 268-9, as quoted in Pitre, Jesus, 32 with Pitre’s italics and bracketed annotation.
it had been going on right up to their time and still was for everyone except themselves.\textsuperscript{109}

Pitre’s second criticism is that when Wright talks about the continuation of exile, he seems to refer only to the Babylonian exile of the two southern tribes of Judah from 586-539 BCE, not the Assyrian exile of the northern tribes in 722 BCE. “Wright has the right insight,” Pitre says, “but the wrong exile.”\textsuperscript{110} The prophets as well as a host of Jewish texts from the Second Temple period make explicit that a full return from exile must mean nothing short of the return of all twelve tribes to the land.\textsuperscript{111} “No first-century Jew living in the land would have considered themselves to still be in exile,” Pitre asserts, but “every first-century Jew would have known that the ten tribes of the northern kingdom were still in exile.”\textsuperscript{112}

In light of Pitre’s critique, I am going to tender an argument that covenant is a more comprehensive framework within which to understand the theological crisis at the root of rabbinic Judaism and early Christianity than is continued exile. Early in his career, Wright himself seemed poised to employ the concept of covenant, as I will here, as a broader frame for the crisis.\textsuperscript{113} And he certainly still understood \textit{covenantal} monotheism

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[109]{Wright, “Yet the Sun,” 21-2.}
\footnotetext[110]{Pitre, \textit{Jesus}, 35.}
\footnotetext[112]{Pitre, \textit{Jesus}, 38, italics in original. James Dunn cites a number of post-exilic texts and practices that do not square with the idea that Jews living in the land thought of themselves as being still in exile. James D. G. Dunn, \textit{Jesus Remembered}, vol. 1, Christianity in the Making (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003), 473-5. For Dunn, though, the most grievous weakness of Wright’s hypothesis is his “inability to demonstrate that the narrative of return from exile was a controlling factor in Jesus own teaching” (475), despite Wright’s sometimes awkward attempts to slide texts into the assumed narrative.}
\footnotetext[113]{See Wright, \textit{Climax of the Covenant}, a revision of his doctoral dissertation.}
\end{footnotes}
to be a necessary ingredient for it, as we saw above, even if he later came to view the continuation of the exile as the more comprehensive image.

Consider first the theological meaning Wright applies to the concept of continued exile; namely, that some Second Temple Jews believed that YHWH had not returned to Zion—that YHWH himself remained, as it were, in exile. Obviously, this is not coterminous with the return of many Jews from captivity in Babylon to their homeland, which had been at least partially accomplished under Cyrus’ edict. And even if we grant Pitre’s point that the latter is the traditional referent of the phrase “return from exile,” and thus that no Jews living in the land would have considered themselves to be in exile, still Wright’s basic theological assertion is undeniable. It must be accounted for even if a sense of continuing exile is not the appropriate label for it.

Attendant to the Babylonian exile and the destruction of Solomon’s Temple, Ezekiel saw a vision of syncretism and other abominations taking place there:

And he brought me to the entrance of the court; I looked, and there was a hole in the wall. Then he said to me, “Mortal, dig through the wall,” and when I dug through the wall, there was an entrance. He said to me, “Go in and see the vile abominations that they are committing here.” So I went in and looked; there, portrayed on the wall all around, were all kinds of creeping things and loathsome animals and all the idols of the house of Israel. Before them stood seventy of the elders of the house of Israel, with Jaazaniah son of Shaphan standing among them. Each had his censer in his hand, and the fragrant cloud of incense was ascending. Then he said to me, “Mortal, have you seen what the elders of the house of Israel are doing in the dark, each in his room of images? For they say, ‘The LORD does not see us; the LORD has forsaken the land.’ ” He said also to me, “You will see still greater abominations that they are committing.” (Ezek 8:7-13)

Ezekiel then sees YHWH leave the Temple, as to extricate himself from these corrupting influences (Ezek 10). The house made by human hands would be destroyed, but YHWH
would not be harmed. And toward the end of the book, the prophet has another vision of a future day on which YHWH would return to Zion.

Then he brought me to the gate, the gate facing east. And there the glory of the God of Israel was coming from the east; the sound was like the sound of mighty waters, and the earth shone with his glory. The vision I saw was like the vision that I had seen when he came to destroy the city and like the vision that I had seen by the River Chebar, and I fell upon my face. As the glory of the L ORD entered the temple by the gate facing east, the spirit lifted me up and brought me into the inner court, and the glory of the L ORD filled the temple.

While the man was standing beside me, I heard someone speaking to me out of the temple. He said to me: “Mortal, this is the place of my throne and the place for the soles of my feet, where I will reside among the people of Israel forever. The house of Israel shall no more defile my holy name, neither they nor their kings, by their prostitution and by sacrificing to their kings at their death (Ezek 43:1-7).”

In the last words of the book the city is named “YHWH is There” (Ezek 48:35).

There is no doubt that many Jews in the post-exilic period, though they themselves were no longer exiled in Babylon, did not believe that Ezekiel’s promised return of YHWH to the Temple had come to pass. This is why, in Ezra, at the laying of the foundations of the new Temple, when all the people gathered to celebrate their return to the land and the restoration of the Temple, Ezra tells us that the young people were shouting loudly and singing responsively of the goodness and steadfast love of God, but the old folks wept (Ezra 3:10-13). Why did they weep? They wept because they remembered the stories of the grand opening ceremony of Solomon’s Temple—when

114 Similarly, Isaiah declares: “Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices; together they shout for joy, for in plain sight they see the return of the L ORD to Zion” (Isa 52:8).
115 “Dissatisfaction with the first-century Temple was also fueled” Wright says, “by the fact that, although it was certainly among the most beautiful things ever constructed, it was built by Herod.” Wright, NTPG, 225; citing Jos. Ant. 15.380-425. The Essenes explicitly rejected Herod’s Temple as illegitimate and corrupt in practice and hoped for a new Temple, built to proper specifications and officiated over by properly constituted high priests. The Pharisees, too, objected at least to the Hasmonean priesthood, even if they were prepared to tolerate it as a lesser of two evils.
YHWH’s glory filled the house with the overwhelming thickness of divine presence (1 Kgs 8:10 ff.). But this time, it seems, YHWH had not returned. The priests donned their vestments, the band was in position with their trumpets and cymbals, but there was no fire, no cloud, no smoke, no light—YHWH, it seemed, had not returned. All the religious trappings of the Temple were there, but YHWH was absent. With Pitre, continuation of exile may not be the appropriate name this this belief, apparently shared by some Jews of the Second Temple period, that the Temple was absent divine presence, but it certainly constitutes a theological crisis nonetheless.

The return of YHWH to the Temple is necessarily mirrored in the re-installment of Israel’s king to the Davidic throne. Wright notes that bringing the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem and planning of the Temple were essential to solidifying David’s rule. And when Solomon built the Temple, he established the pattern for future generations: “the Temple-builder was the true king, and vice versa.” Wright does not, however, highlight that the reestablishment of the Davidic Monarchy would be seen as synonymous with the return of YHWH to Zion owing to the belief, seemingly ubiquitous in the Ancient Near East, that the king is the embodied representative of his god. This is true, of course, not only of Israel’s king and Israel’s god, but the kings of all the nations and their gods as well.

Thus, the defeat of the occupying forces, the reestablishment of the Davidic Monarchy, and the return of YHWH to Zion are just different facets of the same moment. Once the true Davidic ruler—not some puppet like Herod—has established his throne as the true king of Israel, and thus YHWH as true king of all the world, the pagans will all

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flock to Israel to worship the one true god.\textsuperscript{117} This, as we already saw Wright establish above, is the principal movement of the covenant story. The return of the covenant people from exile—whatever one may mean by that—is only a subplot in that larger story, as is the forgiveness of the sins for which they believed themselves to be exiled in the first place\textsuperscript{118} and the requisite renewed commitment and obedience to Torah.

All of these—the return of YHWH to Zion, the cleansing and right ordinance of the Temple, the defeat of Israel’s enemies and the reestablishment of the Davidic Monarchy, the forgiveness of sins, obedience to Torah, yes even return from exile, and ultimately the worship of YHWH in all the nations—are elements of the Jewish hope for the reestablishment of the covenant and the fulfillment of YHWH’s purposes for creation. The nonappearance of any one of these elements indicates that the covenant remains in crisis. And thus, the status of any one of the elements can be used as a shorthand for where in the covenant story Israel finds herself.

Pitre’s critique was that Wright unjustifiably redefines exile to mean the absence of YHWH from the Temple and the presence of foreign occupation. That is a fair criticism. And while Wright’s silence on the exile of the Northern tribes baffles me, once one properly situates return from exile as a subplot in this larger covenant narrative—as Wright himself, in at least one place, says one should—then it does not much matter whether by “return from exile” one refers, with Pitre, to the return of the Northern Israelite tribes from their centuries-long Assyrian exile; the return of the remaining Jews of the from the Babylonian diaspora; with Wright, the resolution of a spiritual sense of

\textsuperscript{117} See e.g., Ps 22:27; 86:9; Isa 2:2-5; 6:30; Mic 4:1-2; Zech 8:22.

\textsuperscript{118} For a list of all the passages from the prophets that understand the exile as a divine punishment for Israel’s sin, see Wright, \textit{NTPG}, 271, n. 112.
continued exile for those Jews who had returned to the land; or some combination of the three. All are part and parcel of a larger story.

C. The Apocalyptic Framing of Covenant-Eschatology

In the Second Temple period, this covenant story is framed most memorably in the imagery of apocalyptic, not least by Jesus in the synoptic gospels. As we saw above, no small amount of ink has been spilled in the effort to work out just exactly what is meant by this imagery. So, in order to elucidate the way in which the New Testament writers, and the evangelists in particular, told the climax of the covenant story, we now turn finally to Wright’s contribution to this century-long debate.

Wright wants to restrict the term “apocalyptic” to its original usage as a designation for a genre of literature. In broad strokes, apocalyptic is characterized by an appeal to ancient authority, often by means of pseudonymous authorship. Apocalypses are often written cryptically. They report mystical visions which disclose a state of affairs normally hidden from human view or give insight into the divine plan for a great reversal of the current state of affairs.\(^{119}\)

The great reversal might well follow any of the themes of crisis in the covenant story discussed above. In this present age, Jerusalem is controlled, not by its rightful king, but by a foreign occupation. YHWH has abandoned the Temple, defiled, as it is, by their

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pagan statues and practices. And both of these realities are signals that Israel lives in disobedience to Torah. But in the age that is to come—which may or may not be inaugurated by a Messiah figure—YHWH will return to a cleansed and renewed Temple, the heir of David will take his rightful throne, Israel’s sins will be forgiven, and all the nations will flock to Jerusalem to worship YHWH as their one true Lord. It is, in other words, the renewal of the covenant, “the rebetrothal of YHWH and Israel, after their apparent divorce.”

In this sense, apocalyptic literature exhibits an eschatological dualism, distinguishing between a present evil age and a coming age characterized by justice and shalom. However, following the konsequente Eschatologie school, Wright says, scholarship in the last century has understood apocalyptic to be not only a literary genre, but its own worldview. As such, scholars have taken this eschatological dualism to imply also a cosmological dualism, in which the world is evil and must be destroyed, and an anthropological dualism of a good soul and a bad body. Moreover, they have taken the language of cosmic catastrophe in the Gospels and elsewhere to refer literally to the violent and abrupt end of the world.

But apocalyptic is not a worldview, Wright argues. Apocalypticists had exactly the same worldview as other Jews of the period. As creational monotheists, they did not see the world as evil or look forward to its end. God’s good creation coming to an end,

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120 Wright, *NTPG*, 301, citing Isa 54:4-8; Hos, *passim*.
121 Wright, *NTPG*, 297-9
especially a violent one, would be unthinkable in Jewish terms.\textsuperscript{122} Apocalypticists simply employed a unique literary genre to tell the covenant story.

Still there is reason that apocalypticists used the cosmic and catastrophic language that they did. Wright offers the following analogy to how such language might play out in modern discourse:

I have often pointed out to students that to describe the fall of the Berlin Wall, as one well might, as an ‘earth-shattering event’ might perhaps lead some future historian, writing in the \textit{Martian Journal of Early European Studies}, to hypothesize that an earthquake had caused the collapse of the Wall, leading to both sides realizing they could live together after all. A good many readings of apocalyptic literature in our own century operate on about that level of misunderstanding.\textsuperscript{123}

In the same way, following the view laid out by Caird, Wright understands the apocalyptic imagery in the Gospels not as literal descriptions of a violent of abrupt end of the world but as a poetic description of the restoration of YHWH’s covenant with Israel. There is simply no language better suited than these vivid andbiblically enriched metaphors to describe the to the dramatic sociopolitical and spiritual reversal of the simultaneous return of the one creator-god to his throne, political coup, and mass religious conversion of the nations, which they believed YHWH was poised to make. Such would surely constitute the end of the world for them, or the end of the world as they then knew it, even though it did not mean—could not mean—the literal end of the space-time universe.

\textsuperscript{122} Wright, \textit{NTPG}, 299. Wright seems here to be at odds with Caird, for whose proposal, as we saw above, the biblical belief in a literal end of the world is the first point, see Caird, \textit{Language and Imagery}, 256-7. It is interesting that Wright does not mention it in his forward to the Eerdmans edition of that book, even where he raises points of disagreement, xxvi-xxvii.

\textsuperscript{123} Wright, \textit{NTPG}, 282.
This is not to say that no extraordinary or even catastrophic natural phenomena were expected to attend the great reversal. "No doubt eclipses, earthquakes, meteorites and other natural phenomena were regarded as part of the way in which strange socio-political events announced themselves. The universe was, after all, regarded as an interconnected whole." Nor is it to suggest that writers employed apocalyptic images in a mechanical and obvious way. How did apocalyptic literature come to be? Did people really see visions? Given the Jewish mystical tradition of meditation on the divine throne, fasting, contemplation on Torah, etc., it would be cavalier to think that no one ever actually had the visions they wrote down. Certainly other did write about socio-political events from the cool distance of their desks and simply used the colorful metaphor of the mystics. And there was no doubt everything in between. It is simply to say that the visions that apocalypticists had or reported, and the natural phenomena that were interpreted as signs and portents, make the sense they make only within the overarching matrix of the larger Jewish worldview, rooted, as it is, in covenantal monotheism.

III. Summary and Analysis

I have tried to present a brief history of apocalyptic interpretations of Jesus and the Gospels. In the konsequente Eschatologie of Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer, Jesus was seen as a failed eschatological prophet who expected and announced the imminent end of the world. This project would cast a shadow over historical Jesus scholarship for a century or longer until, as we will see in the next chapter, a renewed quest began to break the stronghold of the konsequente view. Rudolf Bultmann, for

\[124\] Wright, *NTPG*, 285.
\[125\] Wright, *NTPG*, 286-7.
instance, took the apocalyptic view of Jesus so seriously that he thought the historical and religious details of his kingdom message were irrelevant to modern people. The task of kerygma, Bultmann said, was to get behind Jesus’ view of the world to the universal kernel of existential truth. C. H. Dodd attempted to save Jesus from the failure by another strategy: Jesus was right, he said. The kingdom had come and gone in Jesus’ own ministry.

Wright sidesteps this argument all together. He does not think that Jesus predicted the end of the world. Rather, following G. B. Caird, Wright understands the language of cosmic catastrophe in the Gospels as vivid, metaphorical descriptions of coming social, political, and spiritual reversal. Rather than a cosmos-ending catastrophe, Wright situates Jesus’ apocalyptic eschatology within an overarching narrative that began with the creator-god’s election of Israel to redeem and renew his creation, but now requires the dramatic rescue of Israel herself.

I have written this brief reception history in order properly to situate Wright’s profile of Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet (chapter 4), which, in conversation with the liberationist critique, will lead to the development of a covenant-apocalyptic soteriology (chapter 5). But first, in order to highlight by contrast the apocalyptic the apocalyptic character of Wright’s Jesus, we need a examine a non-apocalyptic portrait of Jesus.
In the previous chapter, I traced the history of apocalyptic eschatology as a lens for understanding the historical Jesus, beginning with Johannes Weiss and culminating in N. T. Wright’s covenant-narrative framing of eschatology and non-literalist reading of apocalyptic. In this chapter, before laying out Wright’s covenant-apocalyptic Jesus (chapter 4), I will consider a counterproposal to the apocalyptic-eschatological portraits of Jesus in the tradition of Weiss and Schweitzer. This non-eschatological conception of Jesus was a prominent, though not exclusive, feature of the Jesus Seminar and one could demonstrate it in the collective work of the Seminar or any number of its fellows. But perhaps the keenest proponent of the non-eschatological Jesus in the Seminar was Marcus Borg. Fellow students of G. B. Caird, Borg and Wright have as many interesting convergences in their understanding of Jesus as divergences. We will thus lay out Borg’s case for the non-eschatological Jesus, and that of the sources he draws from most. Then, we will allow Wright to respond point by point before turning, in the next chapter, to his own positive thesis.

I. Collapse of the Consensus?

For most of the twentieth century, historical Jesus scholarship has lived in the shadow of Weiss’ apocalyptic Jesus, particularly as rendered by Albert Schweitzer. It is hard to say when cracks began to show in the near-consensus about the apocalyptic nature of Jesus’ mission and message, but Borg was able to detect evidence of them by
1986. In preparation for his article “A Temperate Case for a Non-Eschatological Jesus,” Borg polled two groups of historical Jesus scholars: the thirty charter fellows of the Jesus Seminar and the then forty-two participants in the Historical Jesus Section of the Society of Biblical Literature. Of the thirty-nine respondents, sixteen said they thought, or were inclined to think, that Jesus expected the end of the world in his own lifetime; twenty-three did not. Borg acknowledges (perhaps somewhat contrary to the Jesus Seminar’s methodological commitments) that historical plausibility cannot determined by vote. Still, he thinks the poll is indicative of the state of the question in the academy. Further, Borg points out that the absence of a consensus about the apocalyptic-eschatological nature of Jesus’ mission and message does not amount to a consensus around a non-eschatological Jesus. Rather, as he states in a later essay, “the discipline is divided, perhaps about evenly, though my own sense is that the division is currently tipped in favor of a non-eschatological reading of the Jesus tradition.”

1 The article was first published in Foundations & Facets Forum 2, no. 3 (September 1986): 81-102. All citations will be to its later reprinting in Marcus J. Borg, Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994).

2 Borg notes that there is no official membership in the Historical Jesus Section of the SBL and that the list of forty-two participants was provided him by Paul Hollenbach, then-chair of the section. Borg, Contemporary Scholarship, 65, n. 44.

3 Specifically, the poll asked, “Do you think Jesus expected the end of the world in his generation, i.e., in the lifetime of at least some of his contemporaries?” and gave four options for a response ranging from “strongly think so” to “strongly do not think so.” This question included Borg’s clarifying commentary: “I am not simply asking whether, for example, Jesus expected a drastic change in the life of Israel, or whether he was referring to a dramatic internal or subjective change that might be referred to as ‘end of world’ for one who experienced it. Rather, I am asking whether you think he thought the end was near, understood as a cataclysmic change in the ‘objective world,’ however we might interpret that expectation or proclamation today.” It also asked the age range of each participant. Borg says that “the sample proved too small for any significant generalization” about differences between age groups in response to the first question. Borg, Contemporary Scholarship, 59-60 and 65-66, nn. 45-46. A more precise breakdown of the results is given at 66, n. 47.

4 I am not convinced that the charter members of the Jesus Seminar are, or were in 1986, representative of the larger body of historical Jesus research, though the participants of the Historical Jesus section of the SBL may have been.

5 Borg, Contemporary Scholarship, 69.
Borg was surprised by these results. In light of his perception of the appearance of a continued consensus, he thought that he had been “a maverick” in denying the eschatological Jesus in his 1984 dissertation, but perhaps he was, in fact, in the slight majority. He believes that his new evidence of the breakdown of the consensus will both help theologians and other non-specialists in historical Jesus research who nevertheless depend on their work not to assume a monolithic picture that does not exist, and within the field of historical Jesus research itself, to open the path for a variety of non-eschatological images of Jesus.⁶

II. Marcus Borg’s Temperate Case

It is telling that Borg prefers to use the term “imminent eschatology,” because he thinks it more precise than “the apocalyptic Jesus,” or even “the eschatological Jesus,” both of which he had used previously.⁷ We will certainly want to quibble over the words later, but for now it is simply worth noting the emphases inherent in the term various authors choose to inscribe the parameters of the debate. We need not infer too much, though; Borg tells us exactly what he means by the term:

Imminent eschatology is shorthand for an understanding of the kingdom of God in which it is seen as: Imminent: Jesus believed it would happen soon, within his generation. Inevitable: Its coming was not conditional—it was going to happen. Interventionist: God would do it by supernatural intervention. How else could it

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⁶ Borg, Contemporary Scholarship, 60.

happen soon? *Unmistakable*: Its coming would be so dramatic and obvious that nobody could doubt that it had happened.  

For the remainder of the present chapter we will continue to speak of “the apocalyptic Jesus,” but we will assume Borg’s fourfold definition of the view that Jesus is said to have espoused.

In a popular book, Borg offers some insight into what is at stake for him, as a Christian, in this debate to which he devoted so great a percentage of his scholarly energy. Since Borg’s arguments will form the structure of the largest part of this chapter, I think it is worth our time to hear him at some length about what motivates them.

In addition to learning that the popular image is not historical, students in the seminaries of mainstream churches over the past several decades have basically learned two things about Jesus: one, we cannot know much about him; and two, what we can know is a bit shocking and largely irrelevant to the life of the church. The image of Jesus as mistakenly expecting the end of the world in his own time and calling people to repent because the end was near does not lend itself well to Christian preaching and teaching. Never have I heard a preacher say in a sermon, “The text tells us that Jesus expected the end of the world in his time; he was wrong, but let’s see what we can make of the text anyway.”

As a consequence, among mainstream clergy there is often a strange silence about what Jesus was like as a historical figure. Christian preaching about Jesus is left to those who still think of the popular image as historical and who therefore proclaim that image with confidence. When mainstream clergy do preach about Jesus, understandably they tend to emphasize *kerygma*, the message of the early church about Jesus, and not Jesus himself. No wonder the popular image has remained so dominant, for Christians are typically not exposed to a persuasive and compelling alternative image.

The non-eschatological Jesus was a major theme of Borg’s 1984 doctoral dissertation, published more than a decade later but largely unchanged as *Conflict*,

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8 Borg, *Jesus*, 253, italics in original.

Holiness, and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus.¹⁰ And he narrates the breakdown of the prior consensus of the Eschatological Jesus in two important articles: “A Temperate Case for a Non-Eschatological Jesus,” cited above, which was first published in 1986 and reprinted in his 1994 Jesus and Contemporary Scholarship, and “Jesus and Eschatology: Current Reflections” in the same volume.¹¹ Between those three works, Borg lays out three arguments for a non-eschatological understanding of Jesus: First, the primary aim of Borg’s dissertation was to offer an explanation for the air of urgency, even crisis, running through the tradition, other than Jesus’ belief in the imminence of the eschaton. Second, he marshals four arguments which together, he thinks, prove the Son of Man sayings, which are so central to the case for the eschatological Jesus made by Schweitzer and others, to be inauthentic to the Jesus tradition, at least in the way that they are used to make that case. The third argument hinges on the second. The once-common understanding of the kingdom of God as the imminent end of the world is not clear from the kingdom of God sayings themselves; rather, the imminence at least must be imported from the eschatological Son of man sayings. Thus, Borg expounds upon what he perceives as an emerging consensus around a different meaning of the kingdom of God.


¹¹ See n. 1 above.
A. The Nature of the Crisis

The first argument Borg makes against the apocalyptic Jesus regards the “bell of crisis” that “peals throughout the synoptic tradition”\(^\text{12}\) He has in mind passages like Luke 17, which speaks of the day the Son of Man is revealed:

> On that day, anyone on the housetop who has belongings in the house must not come down to take them away, and likewise anyone in the field must not turn back…Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it. I tell you, on that night there will be two in one bed; one will be taken and the other left. There will be two women grinding meal together; one will be taken and the other left.” Then they asked him, “Where, Lord?” He said to them, “Where the corpse is, there the eagles will gather.” (vv. 31, 33-37).

And there are many other such threats throughout the synoptic tradition, some of them with a sense of great urgency: “even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees” (Luke 3:9). But for whom does the bell of crisis toll?

Under the paradigm of the apocalyptic picture of Jesus, the general consensus has been that the bell tolls for everyone in the coming apocalyptic judgement. Borg’s thesis is that “the conflict between Jesus and some of his Jewish contemporaries (especially but not only the Pharisees) over ‘the shape’ of Israel provides a more comprehensive context for interpreting Jesus’ words and deeds.” By “the shape” of Israel, he means “Israel’s social-political structures, cultural dynamics, and historical direction: in short ‘politics’ in the broad sense of the term.”\(^\text{13}\) The conflict was between compassion and holiness as the “competing core values” of Israel’s political life.\(^\text{14}\) It raged around Jesus’ inclusive meal practice and his challenge to Sabbath piety and came to a head in his challenge of the

\(^\text{12}\) Borg, *Conflict, Holiness, and Politics*, 213.

\(^\text{13}\) Borg, *Conflict, Holiness, and Politics*, 1.

\(^\text{14}\) Borg, *Conflict, Holiness, and Politics*, 2.
Jerusalem Temple. “Conflict about politics (that is, about the shape and future of Israel), and not apocalyptic eschatology,” Borg proposes, “provides a more comprehensive context for interpreting the traditions about Jesus.”

When he was writing his dissertation, which years later became Conflict, Holiness, and Politics in the teachings of Jesus, largely unchanged, Borg understood the Temple as both the center of purity and the center of Jewish resistance to Roman occupation, the center, in other words, of a type of Jewish nationalism. He thus understood Jesus’ critique of the Temple as a critique of a nationalist sentiment that led to the Great Jewish Revolt of 66-70 C.E. But Borg has since changed his mind:

I continue to see the issue between Jesus and his opponents as social-political (and, of course, within a religious framework). But I no longer see the central political issue as a misguided nationalism generated by the dynamic of holiness, but as a domination system legitimated by the ideology of holiness/purity.

Borg still sees the Temple as a center of purity, but instead of the center of Jewish nationalism, he sees it now as the center of the native domination system, of collusion not resistance. This also changed the way he viewed the politics of purity: rather than seeing it as operating in an undifferentiated way throughout society, he now sees it as the ideology of the ruling elites, centered in the temple.

The body of the argument is a detailed analysis of the threats Jesus levied in the Gospels. The results of that analysis suggest that “what faced the hearers of Jesus was not

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15 Borg, Conflict, Holiness, and Politics, 2.
16 Borg, Conflict, Holiness, and Politics, 15.
17 Borg attributes this shift to the introduction of cross-cultural studies of the political and economic structures of pre-modern societies, which he learned from Richard Horsley, John Dominic Crossan, and Walter Wink. Conflict, Holiness, and Politics, 10-12.
the imminent inevitable eschaton, but imminent and yet contingent catastrophe for Jerusalem and the temple,”¹⁸ the result of a Temple-centered politics of purity and either resistance to or collusion with—depending on when in Borg’s career one is reading—the Roman domination system.

Borg counts sixty-seven threats in the sayings attributed to Jesus, discounting parallels. Present in Jesus’ parables, stories, laments, and aphorisms, the threats are attested in Mark, Q, M and L. But ultimately, Borg excludes from his analysis material unique to Matthew, save the Matthean parables because, he says, “the Matthean pattern in general, as regards both threats and warrants, diverges remarkably from that found in the rest of the synoptic tradition.” Thus, once special M is removed, fifty-three threats with forty-eight warrants are considered.¹⁹ What the threats have in common across sources and structures is a warning of a future consequence that flows from present behavior. Most of the threats, sixty-two of the sixty-seven, have a “warrant” attached to them; that is, “an indication the action that will lead to the actualization of the threat.”²⁰

The warrants connected to the threats Borg considered, he says, “justify the claim that what was indicted was not individual wickedness, but the continuation of the quest for holiness at a time when that quest would bring disaster. The threats, therefore, are to be viewed as the consequences of the quest for holiness in Israel’s corporate life.”²¹

An analysis of the content of the threats themselves, which would give us an indication of the picture of the future they paint, is somewhat more complicated. Twenty-

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¹⁸ Borg, Conflict, Holiness, and Politics, 214.
¹⁹ Borg, Conflict, Holiness, and Politics, 215.
²⁰ Borg, Conflict, Holiness, and Politics, 214.
²¹ Borg, Conflict, Holiness, and Politics, 217.
one of the fifty-three are “threats of unidentifiable content.” Such a threat “speaks of judgement in general terms, or leaves the threat in the imagery of the parable or metaphor.”

They are urgent, but whether they prophesy an apocalyptic final judgement, a political catastrophe, or something else, we do not know. Of the remaining thirty-two threats, nine threaten that the priority of Israel in fulfilling the purposes and promises of God will be taken away and given to others, eleven predict destruction at the hands of Rome in historical terms, and twelve speak of a final judgment. Of the twelve threats of final judgment, six give no indication of imminence. The other six are what we will call apocalyptic Son of Man sayings.

Borg’s proposal is that the picture of the apocalyptic Jesus is based on a “series of extensions.” First, the image of cosmic catastrophe, which appears, in the threats, only in Mark 13:24-27 and its parallels, is extended to all of the Son of Man sayings. Then, the notion of imminence is extended from the six Son of Man threats to the remaining six threats of final judgment. And finally, the image formed from combining cosmic catastrophe with imminence is painted onto the blank canvas that is the threats of unidentifiable content. The entire edifice of the apocalyptic picture of Jesus, then, Borg thinks, rests on the apocalyptic Son of Man sayings, and particularly on Mark 13:26. Those sayings will become the primary focus on Borg’s attention, as it pertains to the apocalyptic Jesus, for the remainder of his career.

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B. The (In)authenticity of the Apocalyptic Son of Man Sayings

In the synoptic gospels—we will leave the Gospel of John to the side for the moment—Jesus often uses the phrase “the Son of Man.” Whether and how often the historical Jesus actually used the phrase, and if so, what precisely he meant by it, has been the source of much debate. The Jesus of the synoptics uses the phrase in a variety of ways. Sometimes he uses it to refer to himself in his present ministry.26 Other times, primarily from Mark, he uses it to predict his future betrayal, suffering, death, and resurrection.27 But some few of the Son of Man sayings in the synoptics seem to refer to one who, like the mysterious figure in Dan 7:13-14, will come on the clouds of heaven, gather his elect, and preside over the last judgment.28 These, in large measure, Borg thinks, formed the basis for the apocalyptic picture of Jesus. “It is important to realize,” he writes, “how central the coming Son of man sayings are for this position. Without them, there is very little in the Gospels which would lead us to think that Jesus expected the end of the world soon…most of the exegetical foundations for the eschatological Jesus would disappear.”29 Thus, if he succeeds in casting aspersions on the authenticity of the coming Son of Man sayings, Borg thinks, then what remains of the exegetical picture of the apocalyptic Jesus will topple under its weight.

26 See, for example, Mark 12:1-2 (par. Matt 9:2-8; Luke 5:17-26); Luke 7:34 (=Matt 11:19); 9:58 (=Matt 8:20).


29 Borg, Contemporary Scholarship, 52.
As we noted, not all or even most of the Son of Man sayings speak of his coming. Nor do all of those speak of that coming as imminent. Here one might cite Matt 25:31-46, a parable of judgment, which begins “When the Son of Man comes in his glory,” but neither gives any indication that such an event should occur soon, nor evokes the urgency of the little apocalypse. Another interesting example is the brief eschatological discourse in Luke 17:22-37. Though this text emphasizes the suddenness and unexpectedness of the Son of Man’s coming, and thus creates a sense of urgency or at least of hyper-vigilance in that sense, there is again no insinuation that it will happen soon. Borg admits Luke 17:22-37 as an imminent coming Son of Man saying because “one does not give urgent warnings about an unexpected event that may be an indefinitely long time in the future.”

Nevertheless, there remain three that are coming Son of Man sayings, in which his coming is said to be imminent, and which formed the basis for the apocalyptic Jesus: Matt 10:23: “truly I tell you, you will not have finished going through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes;” a curious passage in Matt 16:27-28: “For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom;” and finally, from the little apocalypse:

But in those days, after that suffering,

the sun will be darkened,

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30 Luke 17:22-37 is possibly preserved from Q, given that it shares some language with Matt 24, though the latter clearly borrows its structure from Mark’s little apocalypse, which is echoed also in Luke 21:5-36.

31 Borg, Conflict, Holiness, and Politics, 224.
and the moon will not give its light,  
and the stars will be falling from heaven,  
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels and gather the elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. (Mark 13:24-30, par. Matt 24:29-34; Luke 21:25-32).

It is these passages to which Borg turns his attention. “There is increasing agreement,” he claims, “that ‘Son of Man’ was not a designation in first-century Judaism for a supernatural end-of-the-world figure.”

He argues, therefore, that Jesus could not have used the title Son of Man as a shorthand for referring to an end of time figure.

Borg cites a number of arguments to catalog this increasing agreement. We will reproduce four of them here without particular reference to where they fall in Borg’s argument.

1. A Psychological Argument

The first argument Borg raises against the authenticity of the apocalyptic Son of Man sayings is John Knox’s line of questioning about the “psychological implausibility” of messianism in general and Son of Man in particular “as a mode of Jesus’ own self-consciousness”

We will not dwell on this argument long, in part because Borg put it

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32 Borg, *Contemporary Scholarship*, 52.
33 Borg, *Contemporary Scholarship*, 52-53.
forward as a suggestion for consideration in only two paragraphs of his dissertation\textsuperscript{35} and, as far as I can tell, never returned to it, but also because Knox himself admits that the “question is scarcely susceptible of a verifiable answer” and “it calls necessarily for a subjective judgement.”\textsuperscript{36}

For Knox the question of Jesus’ mental health, if we are to believe he thought of himself and referred to himself as the Messiah, becomes all the graver with the additional consideration of the apocalyptic Son of Man sayings. Knox has no problem imagining someone being an open claimant to a messianic throne, however lofty it may be conceived to be. But to identify oneself as the Son of Man, “a supernatural being who at the appointed time would appear on the clouds of heaven”\textsuperscript{37} is, for Knox, a bridge too far. “Could so sane a person have entertained such thoughts about himself? How could such a person have identified himself with the essentially super-human personage of the apocalypses—with him who, ‘sitting at the right hand of Power,’ will come ‘with the clouds of heaven’ (Mark 14:62)?”\textsuperscript{38} Knox has already admitted that the question is rhetorical and that he hopes only that his readers will entertain it sufficiently. But the questions themselves betray Knox’s answer.

The matter becomes even more confusing, however, when we recognize that it is not clear that when Jesus uses the phrase “Son of Man” in the Gospels he always refers to himself. Just one example will suffice here: in Mark 8:38, Jesus warns his disciples that “those who are ashamed of me [Jesus] and of my words in this adulterous and sinful

\textsuperscript{35} Borg, \textit{Conflict, Holiness, and Politics}, 231-2.
\textsuperscript{36} Knox, \textit{The Death of Christ}, 64.
\textsuperscript{37} Knox, \textit{The Death of Christ}, 57.
\textsuperscript{38} Knox, \textit{The Death of Christ}, 58.
generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

As Bart Ehrman points out, “If you didn’t know in advance the Christian idea that Jesus was the Son of Man, there’d be no way you would infer it from this saying. On the contrary, just taking the saying on its own terms, Jesus appears to be referring to someone else.” In other words, Ehrman cites this passage as an example of the criterion of dissimilarity: “Since Christians thought Jesus was the Son of Man, it seems unlikely they would make us a saying in such a way as to leave it in question whether he was referring to himself.” Presently, we will recount arguments from one scholar who thinks that early Christians did make up this saying about Jesus, even with its inherent ambiguity. But that is beside the point. I cite it here simply to make the case that the Son of Man sayings tradition is incredibly complex and deserves careful attention.

2. A Linguistic Argument

The second argument Borg puts forward is Géza Vermes’ linguistic argument. In an appendix to Matthew Black’s An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts, Vermes argued that the phrase translated “Son of Man,” bar nash(a) in Jesus’ native Aramaic, was so common that it could not have been used with titular significance by the earliest

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41 Ehrman, Jesus, 135.
followers of Jesus. In chapter seven of Vermes’ *Jesus the Jew*, he provides a summary, update, and defense of that earlier argument.

Vermes begins with three observations about peculiarities relating to the use of the phrase “Son of Man” in the New Testament: First, it is used quite often in the Gospels and almost nowhere else in the New Testament. It is used in thirty-eight cases, (paralleled for a total of sixty-six instances) in the synoptics. Yet it is used only three times total in the New Testament outside the Gospels: once in Acts 7:56, which seems to be an allusion to Luke 22:69, and twice in Revelation, 1:13 and 14:14, both of which are lifted directly from Dan 7. Second, the phrase is always on the lips of Jesus; no one else ever calls him “the Son of Man.” And third, none of Jesus’ interlocutors in the Gospels seem to get either angry or excited about his use of the phrase. No one seems to react to it at all.

With those three curiosities in the background forming the question that drives our research, Vermes launches into a linguistic analysis of the phrase. He notes first that the phrase *ho huios tou anthropou* is not a native Greek idiom and must be translated from a semitic original. And since Hebrew would not use an article “*the* Son of Man,” it must be from the Aramaic *bar nash(a).*

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44 Vermes, *Jesus the Jew*, 160-1.

45 Vermes, *Jesus the Jew*, 162.
Since *bar nash(a)* is not a commonly used Aramaic phrase, Vermes turns to a synonym, *hahu gabra,* “that man.” Sometimes *hahu gabra* is used literally to indicate an unidentified third person. More often, *hahu gabra* is used as a circumlocution for first- or second-person singular pronouns, “I” or “you.” In particular, such a circumlocution would be called for when discussing sensitive or unpleasant issues like sickness or death.\(^{46}\) Could a similar circumlocutional use of *bar nash(a)* be at play in the Son of Man sayings in the Gospels? Some of have suggested so but thus far, Vermes claims, the hypothesis has been “backed by no evidence.”\(^{47}\) He intends to provide it.

To that end, Vermes provides examples from Galilean rabbinic sources in which *bar nash(a)* is used as a circumlocution, similarly to *hahu gabra* but with two minor differences.\(^{48}\) First, whereas *hahu gabra* is used for both first- and second-person singular pronouns, “I” and “you;” *bar nash(a),* when used as a circumlocution, replaces only the first-person singular pronoun “I.” If it is the circumlocutional use that accounts for the appearance of “the Son of Man” in the Gospels, that would explain why it is only spoken by Jesus about himself and never used by someone else to refer to him. Second, *bar nash(a),* like *hahu gabra,* is used to soften unpleasant or morbid statements but, unlike *hahu gabra,* it is also used when particular modesty or humility is called for. Again, if it is the circumlocutional use that accounts for the appearance of “the Son of Man” in the Gospels, this would explain why Jesus’ interlocutors are nonplussed by its use.

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\(^{46}\) Vermes, *Jesus the Jew,* 163-4.

\(^{47}\) Vermes, *Jesus the Jew,* 164.

\(^{48}\) Vermes, *Jesus the Jew,* 163-8; citing, for example, *Gen. R.* 48:12; 79:6; 100:5; *yMSh.* 55c; *yMK* 81d; *yBer.* 5c; *yKet.* 35a; *yBer.* 3b. (cf. *yShab.* 3a); and *ySheb.* 38d.
Two additional points about the circumlocutional use of *bar nash(a)* are worth noting. First, it appears to be a regionalism, restricted to Galilee. And second, it can only be documented from the second century onward. This of course does not mean, Vermes hastens to add, that the circumlocutional use of *bar nash(a)* was not or could not have been used in Galilee prior to the second century, only that it was not written, or that, if it were, the writings did not survive.\(^{49}\)

In contrast to the evidence for the circumlocutional use of *bar nash(a)* in Galilee from the second century, “no trace survives of its titular use, from which it must be inferred that there is no case to be made for an eschatological or Messianic office-holder generally know as ‘the son of man’.”\(^{50}\) Vermes thus concludes:

> The only possible, indeed probable, genuine utterances are sayings independent of Daniel 7 in which, in accordance with Aramaic usage, the speaker refers to himself as the *son of man* out of awe, reserve, or humility. It is this neutral speech-form that the apocalyptically-minded Galilean disciples of Jesus appear to have eschatologized by means of midrash on Daniel 7:13.”\(^{51}\)

At this point, Ehrman is right to raise another obvious objection. Ehrman does not cite Vermes, but clearly has him in view when he writes: “The assumption seems to be that if no one else used [Son of Man as a title], Jesus wouldn’t have either.”\(^{52}\) Of course this is a rather audacious assumption. People often invent words and phrases or new uses for existing words and phrases. And there is an example of someone in Galilee in the first century using Son of Man as a title for a coming cosmic judge. There is independent

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\(^{49}\) Vermes, *Jesus the Jew*, 168.

\(^{50}\) Vermes, *Jesus the Jew*, 168.

\(^{51}\) Vermes, *Jesus the Jew*, 186.

\(^{52}\) Ehrman, *Jesus*, 146.
attestation of Jesus using the phrase this way all over our earliest sources. Vermes himself admits the titular use of Son of Man in Mark 13:26 (par. Matt 24:30; Luke 21:27): “The evangelist’s intention is to affirm that after his earthly career, Jesus, like the figure in Daniel’s vision will be seen in all his Messianic heavenly prestige.”53 But he denies its authenticity on grounds that it would require “a full Messianic consciousness on the part of the speaker.”54 “Someone coined the phrase;” Ehrman objects, “it would be pretty bizarre to think that it couldn’t have been Jesus, the one to whom all of these sayings are attributed in independent sources.”55 If Ehrman is right, then in order not to count Jesus’ own use of Son on Man in the Gospels as evidence for the possibility of its titular use, one would have to, on other grounds, call into question the authenticity of the Son of Man sayings in the Jesus tradition. To do that, Borg turns to the textual argument laid out by John Dominic Crossan.

3. A Textual Argument

Crossan’s textual argument for the inauthenticity of the apocalyptic Son of Man sayings appears in his magnum opus, The Historical Jesus,56 which Borg has called “the most important book on the historical Jesus since Albert Schweitzer’s Quest of the Historical Jesus at the beginning of this century.”57 In order to elucidate Crossan’s claims about the Son of Man sayings in that book, one must first learn to navigate its imposing

53 Vermes, Jesus the Jew, 183.
54 Vermes, Jesus the Jew, 183.
55 Ehrman, Jesus, 146, italics in original.
57 Borg, Contemporary Scholarship, 33.
methodological structure. Crossan’s methodology for reconstructing an historically accurate picture of Jesus is ambitious and brilliant. Yet, its flaws—so seemingly minor, if they were simply to be listed, as to be deceptively unnoticeable—bear implications for the results so huge as to render the project nearly useless. Crossan’s method has what he calls a “triple triadic process.”\(^{58}\) The first triad concerns the tools with which Crossan constructs his picture of the historical Jesus: he relies upon a “reciprocal interplay” of cross-cultural social anthropology, Greco-Roman history, and the sources directly relaying, or purporting to relay, the words and deeds of Jesus.\(^{59}\) Crossan’s command of anthropological research adds a depth and texture to his reconstruction of Jesus rarely found in other such reconstructions.

The second triad concerns the valuation of the sources themselves. Crossan inventories every extant text recording or purporting to record the words and deeds of Jesus up to 150 C.E. He then categorizes each source into one of four strata, according to chronological sequence: Stratum 1 = 30 to 60 C.E., Stratum 2 = 60 to 80, Stratum 3 = 80 to 120, and Stratum 4 = 120 to 150.\(^{60}\) Once the sources are stratified, Crossan catalogs the number of independent attestations of each complex (Crossan’s term for discrete individual segments of tradition) within each stratum. A complex may subsist in multiple units (or parallels) in dependent sources, but attestations are counted at the complex-level.

The stratification is the most controversial part of Crossan’s work. He includes as independent sources within the first stratum, some hypothetical but no longer extant texts

\(^{58}\) Crossan, *Historical Jesus*, xxviii.

\(^{59}\) Crossan, *Historical Jesus*, xxviii.

\(^{60}\) Crossan, *Historical Jesus*, xxxi.
now supposed to be imbedded in other early sources, such as: *Q*; a *Miracles Collection*
believed to be a source for both Mark and John, and thus predating Mark; an *Apocalyptic Scenario* presumed to lie behind both *Did. 16* and Matt 24 but unknown to Mark, thus at least predating Matthew. More controversially, he includes in the first stratum a number of non-canonical gospels and fragments such as the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Egerton Gospel*, and the non-extant *Gospel of the Hebrews*, known to us only from citations.

Crossan makes almost no attempt in *The Historical Jesus* to justify his early dating of these sources.\(^{61}\) Perhaps more controversially still, the arbitrarily drawn division-points of the strata, mean that Crossan omits Mark from the first stratum. The monumental effect of these questionable inclusions and omissions can be seen clearly only in light of Crossan’s third methodological triad.

The third triad spells out Crossan’s methodological preferences for prioritizing complexes within his reconstruction. Crossan defers first to the sequence of the strata and only then to the hierarchy of attestation. Crossan acknowledges that, in theory, a complex only appearing in later strata could retain material more original than one found in an earlier stratum. “But in terms of method, that is discipline and investigative integrity,” he rightly maintains, “study must begin with the first stratum.”\(^{62}\) But the prioritization of strata sequence over hierarchy of attestation means that Crossan will consider for his reconstruction a doubly attested complex that appears in the first stratum far more seriously than a complex attested seven or eight times or more but that first appears in the second stratum. Indeed, in this reconstruction, Crossan works almost exclusively with

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\(^{62}\) Crossan, *Historical Jesus*, xxxii.
complexes appearing in the first stratum. To draw out the glaring consequence of these seemingly minor methodological technicalities, this means that Crossan’s picture of Jesus is drawn almost entirely from the Gospel of Thomas, the Egerton Gospel, and the Gospel of the Hebrews, and almost not at all from Mark, Matthew, or Luke. The third step in this final methodological triad is to bracket from his reconstruction any complex, even if it appears within the first stratum, with only single attestation. Once again Crossan stresses that a singly attested complex found only in a later stratum might, in theory, retain material more original than one multiply attested within the first stratum. The bracketing of singly attested complexes from Crossan’s reproduction is “intended as a safeguard and an insurance.”

With Crossan’s methodological terminology under our belt, we turn now to his inventory of the apocalyptic Son of Man sayings, and the Son of Man sayings generally. In Crossan’s inventory, the apocalyptic Son of Man sayings appear in eighteen complexes: nine in the first stratum, three in the second, five in the third, and one appearing only in Acts 7:55-56, in Crossan’s fourth stratum. Of these eighteen complexes, six are plurally attested. Crossan represents that [18:6+12], where the number before the colon represents the total of complexes in the category, the number to the left of the + represents the number of those complexes plurally attested, and the number to the right of the + represents the number singly attested. Five of the plurally attested complexes appear in the first stratum. Since there are nine complexes containing apocalyptic Son of Man expressions in that first stratum, this is represented [9:5+4].

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63 Crossan, Historical Jesus, xxxii.
64 Crossan, Historical Jesus, 243-59, 454-6.
remaining plurally attested complex with an apocalyptic Son of Man expression is in the second stratum [3:1+2]. However—the importance of this point for Crossan’s analysis cannot be overstated—that a complex in which an apocalyptic Son of Man expression appears is multiply attested does not necessitate that the apocalyptic Son of Man expression itself is multiply attested. One example will suffice.

The complex which Crossan titles “Before the Angels” appears in eight units from four independent sources: (1.) Q=(Luke 12:8-9/Matt 10:32-33); and 2 Clem 3:2 (from Matt 10:32); (2.) Mark 8:38 (par. Matt 16:27; Luke 9:26); (3.) Rev 3:5; (4.) 2 Tim 2:12b. This complex appears in Mark as an apocalyptic Son of Man expression: “Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels” (Mark 8:38). But in the three other sources it appears without the son of man expression.

And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before others, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God, but whoever denies me before others will be denied before the angels of God. (Luke 12:8-9, from Q)

If you conquer, you will be clothed like them in white robes, and I will not erase your name from the book of life; I will confess your name before my Father and before his angels (Rev 3:5).

if we deny him, he will also deny us (2 Tim 2:12b).

So is it not the case that six of the eighteen apocalyptic Son of Man expressions are plurally attested. Six of the eighteen complexes in which apocalyptic Son of Man expressions appear are plurally attested [18:6+12]. But in every instance, just like the “Before the Angels” example above, the apocalyptic Son of Man expression appears in
only one independent source within the complex. Thus, apocalyptic Son of Man
expressions would be represented [18:0+18].

Widening the scope, all Son of Man expressions, not just apocalyptic ones, appear
in forty complexes, fourteen of which are multiply attested [40:14+26]. But only one Son
of Man expression itself is multiply attested, in the complex “Foxes Have Holes”: (1.)
Thom 86; (2.) Q=(Luke 9:58/Matt 8:19-20). Thus, all Son of Man expression together is
represented [40:1+39].

We are not yet prepared to critically evaluate Crossan’s reconstruction or the
methodology that underlies it. But to anticipate briefly what direction such a critical
evaluation might take, it is difficult not to notice how drastically which data is analyzed
affects the analysis. Even if only one of the individual expressions was doubly attested,
and none in apocalyptic contexts, still by Crossan’s own count, our sources have Jesus
referring to himself as Son of Man forty times, eighteen in apocalyptic contexts. To use
Crossan’s categories, if “Jesus refers to himself as Son of Man” were examined as a
complex, it would be multiply attested all over the map.

Crossan’s argument about the Son of Man sayings is couched within his larger
scheme of contrasting an apocalyptic interpretation of the Jesus material with a sapiential
one. The rift between these two, apparently opposing ways of interpreting the Jesus
tradition goes back as far as our sources can take us, Crossan says. He offers three
eamples: First, he cites Helmut Koester in understanding the context to 1 Cor to be a
conflict between Paul and the “gnostics or proto-gnostics” in that congregation,
“convinced of their possession of divine wisdom” and making “recourse to the wisdom
This sapiential interpretation of Jesus employed by some of the Corinthians was opposed, Crossan presumes, to Paul’s apocalyptic interpretation. As evidence of the latter he cites Paul’s insistence, in the seventh chapter of that letter, that “the appointed time has grown short” (v. 29) and that “the present form of this world is passing away” (v. 31b). Second, he refers to Stevan Davies’ insight that the disciples questions in the Gospel of Thomas represent the wrong (from the perspective of the gospel’s author) apocalyptic, while Jesus’ replies to them represent the sapiential viewpoint. Third, he highlights Kloppenborg’s stratification of Q into an earlier sapiential layer and a later apocalyptic layer. Taken together, these three studies indicate to Crossan “that the sapiential and apocalyptic understandings of Jesus were both well developed and simultaneously present at an extremely early stage. Those twin interpretations, in other words, seem equiprimordial visions of Jesus.” So much is this the case that the rift between the apocalyptic and the sapiential may point not just to interpretations of Jesus, but to historical events in the life of Jesus himself.

Here Crossan’s inimitable historical method comes into play once more. With respect to Jesus’ relationship to John, whose apocalyptic pedigree no one calls into question, Crossan judges as original to Jesus the complex he titles “Into the Desert,”

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67 Crossan, Historical Jesus, 230.

68 John’s message, according to Crossan, “was an announcement of imminent apocalyptic intervention by God;” that is, before it was “deftly and smoothly changed into a witness about the advent of Jesus.” The original form of that message, Crossan thinks, is preserved in Q “but without the Lukan frames in 3:15-16a and 18”: “I baptize you with water; but he who is mightier than I is coming, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie, he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire. (Sayings Gospel Q: Luke 3:16b-17 = Matthew 3:11-12);” Crossan, Historical Jesus, 234-5.
Why have you come out into the desert? To see a reed shaken by the wind? To see a man clothed in soft clothing? Those who are gorgeously appareled and live in luxury are in kings’ courts. What then did you come out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 69

as well as the complex he titles “Greater than John,”

Jesus said, “Among those born of women, from Adam until John the Baptist, there is no one so superior to John the Baptist that his eyes should not be lowered (before him). Yet I have said, whichever one of you comes to be a child will be acquainted with the Kingdom and will become superior to John. (Thom. 46) 70

Both are plurally attested already in Crossan’s first stratum. As far as Crossan is concerned, that these passages may both be judged original to Jesus “leaves only one conclusion, namely, that between those twin assertions Jesus changed his view of John’s mission and message. John’s vision of awaiting the apocalyptic God, the Coming One, as a repentant sinner, which Jesus had originally accepted…was no longer deemed adequate.” 71 “Not John in the desert but the child in the Kingdom is the beginning of the future.” 72 It is no surprise, then, that both apocalyptic and sapiential interpretations prevail from the earliest days of the tradition that we can access: According to Crossan, Jesus’ own mission and message was an apocalyptic one until he outgrew it.

69 Crossan, Historical Jesus, xv. Here Crossan quotes the Q version preserved in Luke 7:24-26 (=Matthew 11:7-9), which he judges to be more reliable that the parallels in Thom and Mark because he considers that “two originally independent units have become merged in the Sayings Gospel Q complex and that those two are still visible in that original separation of Gospel of Thomas 78 and Mark 1:2-3, respectively.” Historical Jesus, 236.

70 I here quote only the Thom. version, though Crossan quotes both it and its parallel in Luke 7:82 (=Matthew 11:11), because he thinks the appearance of this passage “not at all unexpected” in Q, as it would simply by further evidence of the supposed second, apocalyptic layer of the document adding material about John in an attempt to balance out the sapiential material about Jesus in the earlier layer. The presence of this complex in the Gospel of Thomas, by contrast, is “very unexpected” given that gospel’s lack of interest in John or in apocalyptic hopes. “It is, therefore,” Crossan judges, “as old as anything we can get.” Historical Jesus, 237.

71 Crossan, Historical Jesus, 237-8.

72 Crossan, Historical Jesus, 237.
As we saw above, Crossan makes his argument against the authenticity of the apocalyptic Son of Man sayings on textual grounds, but the reason he makes it is framed within this larger narrative of Jesus’ break with John’s apocalypticism. Jesus did not say the apocalyptic Son of Man sayings, according to Crossan, because, by the time of most at least of his recorded words, he was no longer an apocalypticist.

For a number of reasons, Crossan believes the Kingdom sayings, generally, to be more reliably original to Jesus than the Son of Man sayings. First, we have already seen that Crossan counts forty complexes with Son of Man in at least one unit, fourteen of those complexes plurally attested (represented [40:14+26]). There are seventy-seven complexes with Kingdom in at least one unit, thirty-three of which are plurally attested [77:33+44]. Even in the “crudest statistics,” then, Kingdom sayings are far more frequent than Son of Man sayings and appear in more plurally attested complexes.\(^3\) Additionally, we saw above that Crossan nuanced the statistic but inventorying for the expression Son of Man, however, and found only one was plurally attested [40:1+39]. By contrast, twelve individual Kingdom expressions are plurally attested [77:12+65].\(^4\) Finally, while Son of Man is found outside the canonical gospels only twice, and outside the New Testament only once, the Kingdom expression is found outside the thirty times in New Testament books other than the Gospels and eight times outside the New Testament in the Apostolic Fathers.\(^5\)

Having established, then, that the Kingdom sayings are more deeply situated in the Jesus tradition, and in the Christian tradition broadly speaking, than the Son of Man

\(^3\) Crossan, *Historical Jesus*, 265; cf. 454-60.
\(^4\) Crossan, *Historical Jesus*, 265.
sayings on which the apocalyptic portrait so heavily relied, the question that arises
naturally from within Crossan’s own schema is: Was the Kingdom that Jesus preached an
apocalyptic Kingdom or a sapiential Kingdom? By the former would be meant,

a future Kingdom dependent on the overpowering action of God moving to
restore justice and peace to an earth ravished by injustice and oppression.
Believers can, at the very most, prepare or persuade, implore or assist its arrival,
but its accomplishment is consigned to divine power alone. And despite a serene
vagueness about specifics and details, its consummation would be objectively
visible and tangible to all, believers and unbelievers alike, but with appropriately
different fates.  

A sapiential Kingdom, by contrast, “looks to the present rather than the future and
imagines how one could live here and now within an already or always available divine
dominion. One enters that Kingdom by wisdom or goodness, by virtue, justice, or
freedom. It is a style of life for now rather than a hope of life for the future.” Crossan
sees both understandings of the Kingdom exemplified by Jesus’ contemporaries. He cites
the Psalm of Solomon and The Testament of Moses as examples of an apocalyptic
understanding of the Kingdom, and Philo of Alexandria and The Wisdom of Solomon
as examples of a sapiential understanding of the Kingdom. Unsurprisingly, Crossan
thinks that Jesus had a sapiential understanding of the Kingdom of God, not an
apocalyptic one. His argument for such an assertion, or lack thereof, is perhaps buried
sneakily in the midst of an argument he does make.

Crossan suggests that one could cross his dichotomy of apocalyptic and sapiential
understandings of the Kingdom with another dichotomy he had discussed previously in

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76 Crossan, Historical Jesus, 292.
77 Crossan, Historical Jesus, 292.
78 Crossan, Historical Jesus, 284-7.
the book: that between scribal elites (or, “the Great Tradition”) and peasants (“the Little Tradition”), to create a quadrant. The primary distinction between scribes and peasants, for our current purposes, is how they enact their understandings. “The Great Tradition writes and proclaims, the Little Tradition marches and performs.” 79 In other words, scribes proclaim. They put their understandings in writing because that is what they can do. Peasants perform their understandings: they fight and they march in protests because that is what they can do. We have, in Philo of Alexandria, a good example of how a scribal elite would proclaim a sapiential Kingdom. But “what did the sapiential kingdom of God entail for peasants?” 80 Crossan proposes we can know by looking to Jesus: “My proposal is that when we cross apocalyptic and sapiential with scribes and peasants, it becomes necessary to locate Jesus in the quadrant formed by sapiential and peasant.” 81 But why so locate Jesus? One reason Crossan gives is that “what is described by his parables and aphorisms…is precisely a Kingdom performed rather than proclaimed.” 82 This, if it is true—and I think it is—certainly places Jesus squarely on the peasant side of Crossan’s peasant/scribe dichotomy. But why should we place Jesus also on the sapiential-interpretation-of-the-Kingdom side of the sapiential/apocalyptic dichotomy? Crossan does not say.

79 Crossan, Historical Jesus, 292.
80 Crossan, Historical Jesus, 292.
81 Crossan, Historical Jesus, 292.
82 Crossan, Historical Jesus, 292.
4. An Historical Argument

Another tack could be taken to suggest that the apocalyptic Son of Man sayings are not original to Jesus. Before Crossan’s *The Historical Jesus* was published, Borg made this claim by drawing on Norman Perrin’s argument that the apocalyptic Son of Man sayings were a product of Christian interpretation of Dan 7 after the development of the doctrine of resurrection and ascension.\(^{83}\)

Perrin argues that there does not appear to be a developing Son of Man tradition from Dan 7 to *1 Enoch* 70-71 and *4 Ezra* 13. The latter texts do not, for instance, assume a “Son of Man concept,” but each cited Dan 7 afresh. Nor is there much similarity between the two, save for that connection.\(^{84}\) Perrin suggests that a similar thing happened to Jesus in the apocalyptic Son of Man sayings: Jesus came to be seen as the coming Son of Man, by way of a fresh interpretation of Dan 7—not by application of an already existent Son of Man concept—*as a result of the resurrection and ascension*. The idea that Son of Man as a title must have been applied to Jesus as a result of the resurrection is, of course, central to Perrin’s argument, since it suggests that it could not have been so applied during his own lifetime, and therefore not by himself, as the Gospels attest.

Perrin’s argument rests on the fact that the apocalyptic Son of Man sayings in Mark 13:26 (par. Matt 24:30; Luke 21:27) and Mark 14:62 (par. Matt 26:64; Luke 22:69) alter the passage they are drawing in Dan 7:13, both by adding the phrase “you/they shall see,” but moving the cloud phrase closer to the verb, as to suggest that the clouds

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\(^{84}\) Perrin, *Rediscovering*, 165-7.
are a vehicle for the Son of Man’s coming (i.e. return) from heaven to earth. In the Midrashic tradition, as well as in 1 Enoch 70-77 and 4 Ezra 13, the image of the Son of Man is—as in Daniel’s original vision—that of the Messiah coming to God, not to earth.

From these alterations Perrin concludes: “If this text [Mark 13:26], and the particular form of Son of man expectation which it embodies, is the product of Christian tradition, then one thing becomes clear: Jesus must first be regarded as having ascended to heaven as Son of man before he can ‘come with the clouds’ from heaven as that Son of man.” The implication is clear as well: if the form of the Son of Man saying preserved in Mark 13:26 and 14:62 required a conception of resurrection and ascension to be developed, then it cannot be original to Jesus during his lifetime.

Perrin is certainly right about the data, as is plain to see by comparing the text of Mark 13:26 and Mark 14:62 with Dan 13:7. And it seems to me a compelling argument, so far as it goes; Borg reports that Perrin’s “conclusion has been increasingly accepted.” But it does seem worthy of remark that it remains unclear to me whether, or to what extent, the change in the placement of the cloud phase relative to the verb is a result of the distinctions between Hebrew and Greek grammar, rather than a theological commitment. In any case, even if it turns out to be the result of a specific theological

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85 Perrin, Rediscovering, 173-75.
86 Perrin, Rediscovering, 166-72.
87 Perrin, Rediscovering, 175.
88 Borg, Contemporary Scholarship, 52.
formulation, both of the changes upon which Perrin’s argument hinge are attested only in
Mark. Crossan would have to exclude them from consideration out of hand.

C. The Meaning of the Kingdom

Borg’s third argument follows naturally from the second. Calling into question the
authenticity of the apocalyptic Son of Man sayings weakens the only exegetical
grounding for the once-prevalent conception of the kingdom of God as the imminent end
of the world. In Norman Perrin’s brief history of scholarly discussions of the kingdom of
God in Jesus’ message, he reports that the conversation has largely been defined by
Johannes Weiss’ understanding of the kingdom of God as “essentially an apocalyptic
concept,” and by Schweitzer’s popularization of that understanding. That is to say, the
concept of the kingdom in New Testament scholarship has, for the most part, mapped
exactly onto Borg’s definition of imminent eschatology: an imminent, unmistakable, and
inevitable divine intervention in history. In Weiss’ own words, it is “the breaking out of
an overpowering divine storm which erupts into history to destroy and renew, which man
can neither further nor influence.”

Borg tells us—here summarizing Perrin’s history—that, owing in large measure
to Dodd’s realized eschatology, “scholarship by mid-century had begun to speak of the

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89 Acts 7:56 does have, “Look,” he said, “I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the
right hand of God!” which, while not exactly the same as “you/they shall see,” could reasonably be
construed as attestation of the formula.

90 Norman Perrin, Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom: Symbol and Metaphor in New Testament

91 Perrin, Language of the Kingdom, 34.

92 Weiss as cited in Perrin, Language of the Kingdom, 34.
kingdom as both present and future,” though it still “seemed that the future kingdom received greater emphasis.”

As Borg points out, however, “the association of imminence, end of the world, and kingdom is not justified in the kingdom texts themselves.” The element of imminence must be, and indeed has been, imported from the apocalyptic Son of Man sayings, which are not found together in the same set of texts with the kingdom of God sayings. “They seem to represent two quite distinct traditions.” To the extent that one is convinced by any of the arguments for the inauthenticity of the apocalyptic Son of Man sayings delineated above, therefore, one must adopt a non-apocalyptic, or at least non-imminently-eschatological interpretation of the function and meaning of the kingdom of God in Jesus’ message. Perrin provides just such a reinterpretation, one which Borg finds promising.

It is important for Perrin that the kingdom of God functions not as an idea or conception, but as a symbol. He borrows Philip Wheelwright’s definition of a symbol: “a relatively stable and repeatable element of perceptual experience, standing for some larger meaning or set of meanings which cannot be given, or not fully given in perceptual experience itself.” As a symbol in this sense, the kingdom of God “can represent or evoke a whole range or series of conceptions or ideas,” but is not itself coterminous with

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93 Borg, Contemporary Scholarship, 53.
94 Borg, Contemporary Scholarship, 54.
95 Borg, Contemporary Scholarship, 54.
96 Borg, Contemporary Scholarship, 54.
97 Phillip Wheelwright, Metaphor and Reality (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1962), 92; as cited in Perrin, Language of the Kingdom, 29.
98 Perrin, Language of the Kingdom, 33, italics in original.
any single idea or conception. Importantly, Perrin also employs Wheelwright’s distinction between a *steno*-symbol, which bears a one-to-one relationship with the singular concrete historical event or object it depicts, and *tensive* symbol, or “a set of meanings that can neither be exhaustive nor adequately expressed by any one referent.”

The kingdom of God can, and indeed does, according to Perrin, at different times in Israel’s history, function as either type of symbol.

Through careful analysis of the kingdom of God sayings that he takes to be authentic to Jesus, Perrin concludes that Jesus uses the phrase as a tensive symbol to evoke the “deep roots in the Jewish consciousness of themselves as the people of God,” which “functions within the context of the myth of God active in history on behalf of his people,” and to represent, in some sense, as the symbol had come to by Jesus’ day, “the expectation of a final eschatological act of God.” But this symbol could not, like a steno-symbol, be said to correspond directly to a particular and concrete divine intervention in history.

Drawing on Perrin’s understanding of the kingdom of God as a symbol, Borg says that “the function of a symbol is to evoke a *myth.*” Here Borg understands myth as “a story about the relationship between to the two realms, the sacred and the profane, the noumenal and the phenomenal…Myth is the language for speaking about ‘the other

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99 The words of the definition are Perrin’s, *Language of the Kingdom,* 29-30, but he attributes the concepts to Wheelwright. Perrin likens this also to Paul Ricoeur’s “sign” (=Wheelwright’s “steno-symbol”) and “symbol” (=Wheelwright’s “tensive symbol”).

100 Perrin, *Language of the Kingdom,* 32.

101 Borg, *Conflict, Holiness, and Politics,* 258.
realm’ and its relation to this realm.” Further, myth “mediates the reality of which it speaks.”

Borg sees “the myth of divine kingship” in the Hebrew Bible most clearly in the coronation psalms (e.g. Ps 47; 93; 96-99), which he says associate “God’s kingship especially with creation and the restoration of creation.” As such, he says, “the myth affirms that visible reality has its origin, sustenance, and destiny in the other realm, in God…This is Israel’s version of the classic cosmogonic-eschatological myth.”

He sees Jesus employing this mythic symbol in three ways: (1) There is a connection between kingdom of God language and Jesus’ activity as an exorcist (Luke 11:20=Matt 12:28). In these instances, Borg says, kingdom of God “is Jesus’ designation or ‘name’ for the primordial beneficent energy which can become active in ordinary reality and which flows through him.” (2) Jesus sometimes spoke of the kingdom “as something which could be entered or possessed.” To enter the kingdom, Borg says, “refers to the mystical experience of God, the return to the paradisal experience of life in the presence of God, the experience of communion with God as Abba.” (3) Finally in those “clearly authentic sayings of Jesus,” in which he spoke of the kingdom as a future reality, “it was a symbol for the power or presence of the numinous breaking into


103 Borg, *Conflict, Holiness, and Politics*, 259.

104 Borg, *Conflict, Holiness, and Politics*, 259.


ordinary reality.” In other words, we may speak of Jesus’ “mystical eschatology – an eschatology in which the new age was the other realm of mystical communion.”

III. N. T. Wright’s Response to the Non-Eschatological Portrait of Jesus

A. The Language of Crisis

Borg argued that his analysis of the threats levied by Jesus suggests that the “bell of crisis,” which sounds with such great urgency throughout the synoptics, signals, not an imminent, inevitable eschaton, but a political conflict between Jesus and some of his Jewish contemporaries. They disagreed, Borg argued, about whether to organize Israel’s political life around holiness or compassion. The conflict heated up over Jesus’ inclusive meal practice and his challenge to sabbath piety; it came to a fever pitch over his challenge of the Jerusalem Temple. Jesus was convinced, Borg argued, that a Temple-centered politics of purity and (depending on when in Borg’s career one is reading) either resistance to or collusion with Rome was barreling toward an imminent, but still possibly avoidable, catastrophe for Israel.

Early in his career, Borg understood the Temple as the center of both the politics of purity and the Jewish resistance to Roman occupation. He thus understood Jesus’ critique of the Temple as a critique of Jewish nationalism and revolt. Later, he began to understand Jesus’ critique to be leveled, not against “a misguided nationalism generated by the dynamic of holiness,” but against the Roman occupation “as a domination system

109 Borg, Conflict, Holiness, and Politics, 269.
110 Borg, Conflict, Holiness, and Politics, 269.
111 Borg, Conflict, Holiness, and Politics, 213.
legitimated by the ideology of holiness/purity.” 112 As a result, he understood the politics of purity as the ideology of the ruling elites, rather than seeing it as operating in a undifferentiated way throughout society. 113

For his part, Wright thinks that critique of a Jewish nationalist movement is “vital and non-negotiable” for understanding the mission and message of Jesus. 114 It cannot be “wished away by those who, desiring to find a revolutionary Jesus, refuse to have him make any criticisms of his revolutionary contemporaries,” 115 he says in a barely veiled swipe at Richard Horsley and John Dominic Crossan. It was under the influence of Horsley and especially Crossan that Borg, in his later writings, turned his attention from the nationalist and revolutionary nature of Israel’s relationship with the Roman occupation to focus solely on the internal conflict between the rich elite and the impoverished majority. 116 Wright thinks that Borg had struck exactly the right balance between a focus on Jesus critique of violent resistance and on this internal social stratification and resultant conflict in Conflict, Holiness, and Politics in the Teachings of

112 Borg, Conflict, Holiness, and Politics, 15.
113 Borg attributes this shift to the introduction of cross-cultural studies of the political and economic structures of pre-modern societies, which he learned from Richard Horsley, John Dominic Crossan, and Walter Wink. Conflict, Holiness, and Politics, 10-12.
115 Wright, “Foreword,” xii.
116 For a description of how Horsley and Crossan shifted the focus of Jesus’ critique from a militant nationalist resistance to a critique of social stratification, by way of an innovative reading of the concept of social banditry in the Gospels, see N. T. Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God, vol. 2 in Christian Origins and the Question of God (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 156-60.
Jesus, and that he went awry in his later writing.\textsuperscript{117} Crossan, in turn, has criticized Wright for ignoring this internal division.\textsuperscript{118}

But for Wright, the bell of crisis is not only about a violent Jewish nationalism movement or an internal unjust social order. As we saw in the previous chapter, Wright’s “covenant narrative” is replete with themes of crisis. He agrees with Borg, of course, that Jesus is not predicting an imminent end of the world, but the crisis is eschatological, in the sense that it distinguishes the present evil age from a soon-coming new age. The Jerusalem of Jesus’ day is controlled by a foreign occupation, not its rightful king. YHWH has abandoned the Temple, defiled, as it is, by their pagan images and practices. Both of these signify Israel’s disobedience to Torah. But Jesus believes, with many of his contemporaries, that YHWH will return to a cleansed and renewed temple, the heir of David will take his rightful throne, Israel’s sins will be forgiven, and all the nations will flock to Jerusalem to worship YHWH as their one true Lord.

This eschatological dualism should not, however, be taken—as it was in the \textit{konsequente Eschatologie} school and much of the subsequent history of New Testament theology following it—to imply a cosmological dualism, in which the world is evil and must be destroyed, or an anthropological dualism of a good soul and a bad body.\textsuperscript{119} Nor, he says, should the language of cosmic catastrophe in the Gospels and elsewhere be understood to refer literally to a violent and abrupt end of the world. Such a belief would be impossible for creational monotheists. Rather, as we have seen, Wright understands

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{117} Wright, “Foreword,” xiii-xiv.
\end{itemize}
the apocalyptic imagery in the Gospels as a poetic description of the restoration of YHWH’s covenant with Israel. Such images, soaked in the rich and strange biblical narrative, simply provide the only language sufficient to describe the dramatic sociopolitical- and spiritual-reversal of the return of YHWH to his throne, the overthrow of Rome, and the mass conversion of the nations, which Jesus believed was soon to be revealed. These events would not be—could not be—the literal end of the space-time universe. But they would constitute the end of the world as Jesus’ contemporaries knew it.

**B. Authenticity and the Son of Man**

Borg advanced four arguments for the inauthenticity of the apocalyptic Son of Man sayings. First, he offered Knox’s psychological argument: Could a sane person entertain the thought that he is a supernatural being who will, at the appointed time, appear on the clouds of heaven? Then he endorsed Vermes’ linguistic argument that the circumlocutional meaning of “son of man” accounts for most instances of its use in the Gospels, and those for which it does not are unlikely attributable to the historical Jesus. Next was Crossan’s complex textual argument that when individual Son of Man expressions are considered independently of the passages in which they appear, only one is plurally attested in independent sources; and that one—“Foxes Have Holes,” attested in Thom. 86 and $Q$=(Luke 9:58/Matt 8:19-20)—is non-apocalyptic. Finally, he reviewed Perrin’s historical argument that the evolution of the Son of Man expectation observable in Mark 13:26 and 14:62 presupposes that Jesus is regarded to have ascended to heaven; i.e., the tradition cannot have been original to Jesus during his lifetime and must have
developed in the early Church. Not responding directly to Borg, but occasionally to some of his sources, Wright addresses almost all of these arguments.

1. Representation

In *The New Testament and the People of God*, Wright carefully parses the various types of metaphor, or representation, commonly found in apocalyptic literature.\(^\text{120}\) There is, first, the sort of “literary representation” with which readers of nearly any genre are familiar. In literary representation the vehicle imparts certain of its qualities or dimensions to its tenor. For example, in Dan 7, the “one like the son of man” (v. 13)\(^\text{121}\) represents “the holy ones of the Most High” (v. 18) in this literary way. Through this image, Israel is invested with the quality of humanness amid the nations similarly invested with the beastliness of their literary representatives.

In addition to this “literary representation,” there may also be “metaphysical representation” at play in Dan 7. This characteristic feature of apocalyptic literature can be seen clearly a few chapters later in Dan 10:12-21. Here the angel Michael, serving as the “prince” of Israel, battles against the “princes” of Persia and Greece. The cosmic battle between these “princes” is not to be understood as other than the real-world battles taking place on in the physical plane between the nations they represent. Likewise in Dan 7, the heavenly vindication offered by the Ancient of Days to the one like the son of man over the beasts corresponds to the hope for the physical reality that Israel’s suffering at

\(^{120}\) Wright, *NTPG*, 289-91.

\(^{121}\) The NRSVue translates *bar enash* in Dan 7:13 as “a human being.” I make no judgement about the validity of that translation. But it is rather unfortunate that they have thereby disconnected it from Son of Man passaged in the New Testament. Here and throughout I have for the traditional translation, uncapitalized to make clear that the designation is not titular in Dan 7.
the hands of the pagans will end in her vindication. To suppose in either case, however, that this means Israel thought of her leader actually as a heavenly being would be a category mistake and a failure to understand the way the genre of apocalyptic works.

When the son of man of Dan 7 came, in Jesus’ day, to be identified with the Messiah, it took on a further sense of “sociological representation.” The Messiah, like any other regal figure, stands in for the whole nation of Israel, fighting their battles for them. The nation’s fate is bound tightly to his. The metaphysical representation is certainly retained as well – what does the Son of Man’s coming on the clouds mean if not his vindication, and with it the vindication of the nation he represents? But “to object to Jesus speaking of himself in ‘son of man’ language taken from Daniel 7, on the grounds that this would involve him in declaring himself to be, unequivocally, ‘a transcendent being’,” Wright says “misses the point.”122 Thus, though he does not address Knox directly, Wright would rule his psychological argument against the authenticity of the Son of Man sayings out of hand as a misunderstanding of the apocalyptic genre.

2. Mark 13 and the Narrative Sequence of Daniel

Wright admits that Vermes’ circumlocutional use of the phrase “son of man” may have been commonly used. He even suggests that Jesus himself may have used it and that his use of it may be recorded in some passages of the Gospels, such as Luke 7:34 (=Matt 11:19); 9:58 (=Matt 8:20); and especially Matt 16:13, where the parallels (Mark 8:27; Luke 9:18) simply have “I.”123 Wright argues that, though the Danielic son of man figure

122 Wright, JVG, 518.
123 Wright, JVG, 517; and 517, n. 143.
may not have been messianic in its original setting, it was in read that way by some Jews in roughly Jesus’ day.\textsuperscript{124} “The whole debate,” he says, “has suffered the consequences of a failure to read Daniel 7 as it was read in the first century.”\textsuperscript{125} He offers a reading of Jesus’ titular and messianic use of the Danielic son of man theme in Mark 13, which he believes to be perfectly plausible in within a first century Jewish context.

Unsurprisingly, he shifts the focus away from whatever precise Aramaic phrase might lay behind the use of \textit{bar enash} in Dan 7:13 or \textit{ho huios tou anthropou} in the synoptics and toward the narrative structure of the book of Daniel as a whole. He cites 4 Ezra 11-12; 2 Baruch 35-40; 1 Enoch 37-71; and lines 68-89 of \textit{Ezekiel the Tragedian} as quite diverse but clearly related examples of how, roughly at the time of Jesus, Danielic imagery was invoked as an expression of the hope that “YHWH would vindicate [Israel] against the pagans, rescuing her like a human figure from among monsters.”\textsuperscript{126} In less metaphorical terms, this is to say that “Daniel was read as a revolutionary kingdom-of-god text, in which Israel’s true representative(s) would be vindicated after their trial and suffering at the hands of the pagans.”\textsuperscript{127} And that is why, as Josephus explains, it was the messianic prophecies of Daniel that “more than anything else, incited the Jews to revolt.”\textsuperscript{128}

Wright argues that the sequence of Mark 13 follows exactly this logic: Jesus prophesies the destruction of the Temple. And when his disciples inquire about when the

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{w124} Wright, \textit{JVG}, 514.
\bibitem{w125} Wright, \textit{JVG}, 516.
\bibitem{w126} Wright, \textit{JVG}, 514.
\bibitem{w127} Wright, \textit{JVG}, 517.
\bibitem{w128} Josephus, \textit{War} 6.312-15, as quoted in Wright, \textit{JVG}, 514.
\end{thebibliography}
prophecy will be fulfilled, he walks them through a scenario of war and natural disaster, sacrilege and false messiahs. They themselves will be brought before magistrates. And when ultimately Jerusalem is destroyed, they should not stay and fight but flee to the hills. For then will occur a cataclysmic event (the sun will go dark, the powers in heaven will be shaken, etc.), which will spell both the final judgment of Jerusalem, which in a tragic paradox has become the capital of the rebellion against YHWH; and the vindication of the one who had foretold its coming and who embodies in himself the obedient son Jerusalem was intended to be. When read in light of the Danielic narrative, the indication is that this messiah figure will bear the brunt of the Gentile abuse. And when mapped against Dan 9:24-27 in particular, the complete picture includes the real end of exile, the reanointing of the most holy place, the cessation of sacrifices, and the final atonement for sin. As in Daniel, “the beasts will make war upon the son of man, upon YHWH’s true Israel; the great Babylon will do its worst and then will come the moment when the tyrant is overthrown and the true Israel is redeemed, publicly vindicated, shown to be the true people of the creator god.”\(^{129}\) The predictions of Mark 13 follow this pattern explicitly: “Jesus and his people will be shown to be in the right….The city that has opposed him (and them) will reap the inevitable result of choosing the way against which he had solemnly warned, the way of confrontation with Rome, of rebellion against the god of mercy and grace.”\(^{130}\)

By now it should come as no surprise that for Wright, “the only language that could do justice to the rushing together of themes which occurs at this point is the highly

\(^{129}\) Wright, *JVG*, 515.

\(^{130}\) Wright, *JVG*, 515.
charged metaphor and myth of apocalyptic.” He is quick to point out, though, that in apocalyptic imagery “there is no suggestion either from Jesus or from Mark, that the space-time universe is about to come to an end.” Nor should we imagine a transcendent Christ figure literally floating on the clouds. To do so would be drastically to misunderstand the nature of the imagery.

3. Hypothesis and Verification

Though Wright addresses some of the arguments against the authenticity of the apocalyptic Son of Man sayings directly, the heavy weight of his defense lies in his historical method. Wright sees his own historical work on Jesus, and the work of others, as sufficiently different from the defining and parsing of historical criteria characteristic of the Jesus Seminar to constitute a “Third Quest.” This designation is meant to distinguish it from, on the one hand, the “Old Quest,” which Schweitzer brought to a close at the turn of the twentieth century and on the other, the “New Quest,” which had been revived by Käsemann and reached its pinnacle, perhaps, in the Jesus Seminar. Although, he says that “the distinction which Schweitzer drew between himself and Wrede”—i.e., between those who understand Jesus within the context of apocalyptic

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131 Wright, JVG, 515.
132 Wright, JVG, 516.
134 This at least is how Wright sees the lay of the land. Some scholars see the Jesus Seminar, because of its recourse to cross-cultural studies, as part of the “Third Quest.” Fascinatingly, Wright does include Borg on his list of contributors to the “Third Quest” (see full list in JVG, 84). He acknowledges, however, that “the categories are heuristic attempts to describe recent writing, not watertight compartments,” (JVG, 83-4). And in fact, he says Borg “straddles[s] the revived ‘New Quest’ and the ‘Third Quest’,” since he “puts Jesus firmly in his Jewish social and cultural context, but ends up with Jesus as a non-apocalyptic sage, teacher, prophet, and movement-founder” (JVG, 83).
Jewish eschatology and those who do not—“is where the real leading edge of contemporary Jesus-scholarship is to be found.” In other words, there is a sense in which Wright sees his own historical Jesus research, and that of others whom he includes among the scholars of the “Third Quest,” as putting to rest the “New Quest,” and perhaps the Seminar in particular, by returning Jesus to his apocalyptic context, much as Schweitzer had done to the “Old Quest” of the nineteenth century Protestant liberals. The difference is that the “Third Quest” has enough contributors to constitute a new tradition, rather than merely to shut down the conversation for the next half a century or more as Schweitzer had done.

The most characteristic feature of the “Third Quest,” Wright says, is “a real attempt to do serious history.” This, opposed to the apparently unserious history of previous quests which, Wright says, “had determined that Jesus look as little like a first-century Jew as possible.” They “played down the specifically Jewish features of Jesus, stressing instead those which he may have shared with other Mediterranean cultures.” For even as they recognized Jesus’ particular historical location, they thought that “his first-century Jewishness was precisely not the place where his ‘significance’ lay.” Instead, they hailed Jesus as teacher of timeless wisdom.

Wright’s “Third Quest,” by contrast, demonstrates “a willingness to be guided by first-century sources,” like Josephus and the Qumran texts, “and to see the Judaism of

135 Wright, JVG, 84.
136 Wright, JVG, 84.
137 Wright, JVG, 85.
138 Wright, JVG, 85-6.
139 Wright, JVG, 85.
that period in all its complex pluriformity.\textsuperscript{140} It evaluates Jesus’ message “not for its timeless significance, but for the meaning it must have had for the audience of his own day, who had their minds full of poverty and politics, and would have had little time for theological abstractions or timeless verities."\textsuperscript{141} The “Third Quest” also anchors its investigation in the crucifixion – an historical bedrock about which many representatives of the “New Quest” were somewhat embarrassed – as revelation of Jesus’ character and purpose. All the hermeneutical and theological consequences of the “Third Quest” are derived from the tightrope narrative that would render Jesus both understandable in a first century Jewish context and “crucifiable” in that same context.\textsuperscript{142}

The most important characteristic of the “Third Quest” for our purposes, though, is not any of its particular conclusions, but its historical method. Wright may tussle with any of the arguments mounted against the authenticity of the apocalyptic Son of Man sayings but, in a more fundamental way, he rejects the very process by which they are said to be unauthenticated. Wright does not detach sayings attributed to Jesus from their narrative context in the Gospels and examine them in isolation, according to a predetermined set of “pseudo-historical” and “home-made ‘criteria’.”\textsuperscript{143}

Wright’s reason for rejecting this method is, first, that it is not the way ancient history is conducted in other contexts: “Nobody grumbles at a book on Alexander the Great if, in telling the story, the author ‘harmonizes’ two or three sources; that is his or her job, to advance hypotheses which draw together the data into a coherent framework

\textsuperscript{140} Wright, \textit{JVG}, 85.
\textsuperscript{141} Wright, \textit{JVG}, 85.
\textsuperscript{142} Wright, \textit{JVG}, 86.
\textsuperscript{143} Wright, \textit{JVG}, 87.
rather than leaving it scattered.” Wright admits that sources for the historical Jesus, as for any figure of history, have biases which must be accounted for. “But the object of the exercise is to produce a coherent synthesis which functions as a hypothesis and must be treated as such.” Secondly, he fears that rigidly to assume these supposedly fixed points lifted from the anything-but-fixed history of Jesus scholarship, is to squelch the creation of fresh hypotheses.

So, Wright rejects the isolate-and-authenticate method, exhibited so systematically by the Jesus Seminar, which is designed to determine what data should be excluded from a reconstruction. Instead, his method (along with, he intimates, that of others whom he includes within the “Third Quest”), is designed to see what evidence it can include in a reconstruction. “Hypothesis and verification,” as Wright calls it, is “the advancement of serious historical hypotheses – that is, the telling of large-scale narratives – about Jesus himself, and the examination of the prima facie relevant data to see how they fit.” The more material that can be cogently explained by a reconstruction, the better the reconstruction is deemed to be.

4. On the Historical Argument

Wright does not address Perrin’s historical argument against the authenticity of the apocalyptic Son of Man sayings except baldly to assert that “the early church...is

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144 Wright, JVG, 88.
145 Wright, JVG, 88.
146 Wright, JVG, 88.
147 Wright, JVG, 88.
highly unlikely to have initiated this rereading of Daniel. The only context which will do – but which will do very well indeed – is that of the ministry of Jesus himself.”

C. The Meaning of the Kingdom

To the extent that one is convinced by any of the four arguments for the inauthenticity of the apocalyptic Son of Man sayings delineated above, and follows Borg’s logic that dispensing with these sayings breaks the association between an imminent end of the world and the coming kingdom of God, one must adopt a non-apocalyptic, or at least non-imminently-eschatological interpretation of the function and meaning of the kingdom of God in Jesus’ message. Borg found promising Perrin’s reinterpretation, in which Jesus uses the phrase “kingdom of God” as a tensive symbol that evokes deep streams in the Jewish and consciousness about what it means to be the people of God and represents themes in Hebrew mythology about God’s activity in history on behalf of his people, and even the expectation of a final eschatological act. But it does not correspond directly to a particular and concrete, divine intervention in history.

Wright does not address Perrin’s argument. Nor, for that matter, does he address Borg directly on this question, except in the forward to Conflict, Holiness, and Politics in the Teaching of Jesus, where, when Borg gets to his exposition of the kingdom at the end of the book, Wright wonders what happened to his rejection of existentialism at the beginning: “The hands are the hands of Borg,” he says, “but the voice is the voice of Bultmann...both suppose that the ‘real’ meaning of Jesus’ apocalyptic Kingdom

148 Wright, JVG, 519.
announcement was the invitation to his hearers to experience a new recording of their interior personal worlds.”  

Wright thinks this is exactly the wrong direction. The kingdom of God he argues, “is not merely a general cipher for the presence of ‘the other’, ‘the holy’, ‘the numinous’, or whatever, but summed up and expressed Israel’s hope for liberation—the hope, in other words, that fueled the revolutionary movements that Borg made the starting point of his argument.”

In a book in which Borg portrays Jesus as critiquing nationalist liberation movements, Wright wonders why does he not even consider the possibility that the kingdom of God should be understood as an alternative political movement. “To do so would not mean abandoning the ‘spiritual’, ‘mystical’, or ‘theological’, dimension for which he has so carefully argued. It would mean integrating this dimension far more closely with the stress on Israel’s national life which characterizes the rest of the book.”

Wright suspects that this in the conclusion Borg was in fact trying to reach “but he never works it out.”

Wright does, however, address Burton Mack’s and John Dominic Crossan’s non-apocalyptic conceptions of the kingdom of God. It would take us too far afield to offer

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149 Wright, “Foreword,” xx-xxi.
150 Wright, “Foreword,” xxi.
151 Wright, “Foreword,” xxi.
152 Wright, “Foreword,” xxi. I think Borg did work it out by 2006. In his most mature book on the historical Jesus, Borg lists three characteristics of Jesus’ message about the kingdom of God, which sound quite different from his earlier formulations. First, Borg says, for Jesus, “God’s kingdom was for the earth...it is not about heaven.” Second, “kingdom of God’ was a political as well as religious term, to distinguish between two aspects of life that were not separable in the Jewish world of Jesus...As a political-religious metaphor, the kingdom of God referred to what life would be like on earth if God were king and the kingdoms of this world, the domination systems of this world, were not.” And third, “the kingdom of God was not only for the earth, but involved a transformed world. It is a blessed state of affairs, a utopia brought about by God, God’s dream for the earth.” Borg, Jesus, 186-7. These modifications can, no doubt, be attributed to the influence of Horsley and especially Crossan on Borg’s later work. But I cannot help but think that Wright would be happy with Borg’s new characterization of the kingdom of God as well, if he had responded to it.

153 For the full exposition see Wright, JVG, 210-4.
here a fresh or nuanced summary of Mack’s and Crossan’s expositions of the kingdom material, and in any case our goal is simply to see how Wright responded to them and thus how he might respond to a similar conception in Perrin and Borg.\textsuperscript{154}

In Mack’s and Crossan’s accounts, at least as Wright reads them, instead of an “apocalyptic” prophet Jesus was a “sapiential” teacher. On this view, “Jesus’ sayings bore no relation to the specific expectations or aspirations of Israel; rather, they teased people into looking at their lives and social situations in a new way…Jesus held a vision that was ‘more subtle, less bombastic and threatening’” than the apocalyptic prophet of the *konsequente* school.\textsuperscript{155}

Wright proffers three arguments against this way of portraying Jesus’ conception of the kingdom:\textsuperscript{156} First, it relies upon the classic false reading of apocalyptic, which, as his argument summarized in the previous chapter of this dissertation shows, is historically untenable. Second, he says, “it is not easy—as Crossan, I think, implicitly recognizes—to think of Jesus-the-\textit{peasant} embracing a style of thinking known to us, within Judaism, only in Philo.”\textsuperscript{157} Third, it is difficult to imagine the non-apocalyptic Jesus giving birth to the thoroughly apocalyptic early Christian movement.

For Wright, it simply makes no sense, within the prevailing worldview of Judaism in the first century, that kingdom language could signal some universal spiritual and mystical wisdom that is not rooted in the history and hope of Israel. In fact, because kingdom of God language is royal language, it necessarily invokes the specifically


\textsuperscript{155} Wright, \textit{JVG}, 210.

\textsuperscript{156} Wright, \textit{JVG}, 210-1.

\textsuperscript{157} Wright, \textit{JVG}, 210.
political hopes of Israel. Therefore, we find “in Josephus particularly, the idea of the true god being king was tied in with the dream of holy revolution. ‘No king but God!’ was the slogan that fired the revolutionaries.” It is a counter claim to the throne of Caesar and probably Herod and the entire high-priestly clan besides.

Moreover, for Wright, Jesus’ kingdom pronouncements—and kingdom language in first century Judaism generally—are thoroughly eschatological in the sense that are “bound up with the hopes and expectations of Israel.” Thus when Jesus spoke of the kingdom of God, he was invoking the entire covenant story, the narrative lens though which his hearers were bound to see the world. Just as a proclamation that the long exile was finally coming to an end implied the restoration and cleansing of the Temple, the reinstalment of the rightful king to the Davidic throne, and the forgiveness of the sin for which they had been exiled in the first place, so also the claim that Israel’s god is once again becoming king implies the ouster of the occupying forces, the return of YHWH to the Temple, and that the Gentile nations soon will flock to the Temple to bow before the one true god and king of the world.

In his kingdom pronouncements, Wright argues, Jesus was invoking this familiar story but also retelling it in such a way as to subvert its normal plot. As we shall see in the next chapter, according to Wright, Jesus redefined all of the important symbols of the covenant narrative around himself. And he proclaimed that a great climatic end to the covenant story was soon approaching. Of course, it would not be, as Weiss and Schweitzer had said, the end of the world—that would be unthinkable within the

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158 Wright, JVG, 203-4; for a fuller exposition of this point see Wright, NTPG, 170-81, 302-7.
159 Wright, JVG, 202.
worldview of creational monotheism. Instead, the story would culminate with a great battle, in which victory of Israel’s enemies would be part and parcel of YHWH’s victory over the true enemy.

IV. Summary and Analysis

In contrast to Wright, Marcus Borg takes a non-eschatological view of the historical Jesus. For Borg, as for Wright, the language of crisis in the Gospels should not be understood as a description of the coming end of the world but as a judgment declared upon Israel, though they came to disagree on exactly whom this judgement was declared, and why. But Borg sought to break the link between the images of cosmic catastrophe, the language of imminence, and Jesus’ announcement of the kingdom of God, by denying the historicity of the Son of Man sayings. With those apocalyptic elements removed, Borg—at least in his early career—understood Jesus’ kingdom language as a mythic symbol of mystical communion.

In the following chapter, I will outline Wright’s very different profile of Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet: Jesus deliberately mirrored the ancient prophets; he announced the kingdom of God; he preformed “mighty works” as signs of the kingdom’s coming; and he built an apocalyptic community. Then, I will elucidate his account of Jesus’ apocalyptic message as a surprising climax to the covenant narrative I developed in chapter 2.
CHAPTER 4:
COVENANT AND ESCHATOLOGY IN THE MINISTRY AND MESSAGE OF
JESUS

I have been attempting to develop an understanding of the meaning of Jesus’
death on the cross in the economy of the Christian doctrine of salvation that holds up
against the liberationist four-fold critique of a certain popular version of Christian
soteriology, which I traced in chapter 1. On that critique, PSE soteriology (1) relies on a
forensic-fictional understanding of divine justice that pits the work of Jesus, and
particularly the meaning of his death, against the character of God; (2) offers forgiveness
of sinners, but not justice and liberation for the sinned against; (3) endorses a myth of
redemptive violence and depicts a violent and capricious God; and (4) avoids the
problems of history in the hopes of escaping either to an otherworldly heaven or into an
internal transformation.

Our new understanding of the meaning of the cross must appreciate the
intrahistorical and political meaning of salvation elucidated by liberationist theologies,
dismantling systems of dominance and oppression and empowering those on the margins.
However, it must at the same time account for the deeper evil, which underlies those
structures and holds captive both those oppressed by them and those who appear to
benefit from them. Liberation theologies tend to develop soteriologies that provide
theological and socio-political strategies for dismantling intrahistorical and structural
systems of oppression and internalized oppression. Because they are written primarily for
marginalized communities, however, and, I argued, because they often do not sufficiently
account for the powers that underly structures of oppression, liberationist soteriologies do
not often offer necessary renewal of the heart for those held captive by their privileges
with respect to systems of domination. And liberationist soteriologies emphasize human causality in the salvific dismantling of oppressive systems, which may result in both greater resilience for marginalized communities and in some cases meaningful social transformation. But it also means that they often deemphasize divine causality which may just as well lead to burnout and despair.

Given a brief review of the history of Christian soteriologies, we determined that an apocalyptic soteriology might both appreciate the intrahistorical and political meaning of salvation elucidated by liberationist theologies, dismantling systems of dominance and oppression, and emphasize divine causality in defeating the dark powers that hold both oppressed and oppressor captive to those systems. And I have proposed that what I have called the covenant-apocalyptic soteriology of N.T. Wright’s Jesus meets these criteria.

The significant middle section of the dissertation (chapters 2-4) constructs our picture of the historical Jesus as a covenant-apocalyptic prophet. In chapter 2, I situated Wright’s covenant-apocalyptic soteriology in the history of the interpretation of New Testament apocalyptic. We will see in the present chapter that, like Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer, Wright understands the historical Jesus of Nazareth primarily as an apocalyptic prophet. Unlike Weiss and Schweitzer’s konsequente Eschatologie, however, Wright does not think that Jesus’ apocalyptic eschatological message implied that he expected the imminent (or even eventual) end of the space-time universe. Wright does not think that Jesus expected for himself or his followers to escape a cosmos-ending catastrophe to an otherworldly heaven. Neither does he think that one can escape the real historical and political problems of the world, into an existential and spiritual transformation, contrary to the demythologized—if, in some sense at least, still
eschatological—apocalypticism of Bultmann. Nor, finally, will he allow us to escape the implications of Jesus’ eschatology for us and for our time by, with Dodd, restricting the meaning of Jesus’ eschatological message and ethic to his own day.

Instead, Wright situates Jesus’ apocalyptic eschatology within the overarching story around which Jews in the first century organized their understanding of world. From what we can reconstruct from our sources, this story, which we have labeled the covenant narrative, looks forward most fundamentally to the return of YHWH to Zion. Many Jews of Jesus’ day believed YHWH to have been absentee since Ezekiel’s vision of his evacuation of the Temple prior to Nebuchadnezzar’s armies destroying it, despite the rebuilding of Herod’s temple. The return of YHWH to the Temple is necessarily mirrored in the re-installment of Israel’s rightful king to the Davidic throne, the precondition for which is the defeat of Israel’s pagan enemies. This alone, Wright says, would constitute the true return from exile and thus signal YHWH’s forgiveness of the sins for which they were in exile in the first place. This narrative, together with the symbols, praxis, and beliefs that arise from it, constitutes the worldview of first century Judaism, broadly construed, to which Wright gives the title creational monotheism.

Properly understood within the worldview of creational monotheism, apocalypticism does not espouse a cosmological dualism, in which the world is viewed as evil and must be destroyed, or an anthropological dualism of a good soul and a bad body. These are often assumed to be corollary to an eschatological dualism between the present evil age and the coming age of a great political and spiritual reversal. But, while eschatological dualism is a necessary inference of the covenant narrative, both cosmological- and anthropological dualism are nearly unthinkable from a creational
monotheist worldview. As such, Wright, following his teacher G. B. Caird, understands the language of cosmic catastrophe in the Gospels, not as literal descriptions of a violent of abrupt end of the world, but as an apocalyptic description of the restoration of YHWH’s covenant with Israel. These vivid and biblically enriched poetic metaphors are the only language suitable to describe the dramatic socio-political- and spiritual reversals that constituted the hoped-for fulfillment of the covenant narrative. The coming of the kingdom would not be the end of the world, but it would be the end of the world as they then knew it.

Wright’s thesis is, of course, not without challenge. So, before laying out fully his reading of the covenant-apocalyptic nature of Jesus’ ministry and message (in the present chapter) and the meaning of Jesus’ crucifixion (Chapter 5), we reviewed in Chapter 3 one important opponent not only of Wright’s portrait but of eschatological portrayals of Jesus generally, namely, fellow student of Caird, Marcus Borg. For Borg, the language of crisis in the Gospels was not to be understood as an apocalyptic description of the coming end of the world but a judgment declared upon Israel. Here Wright and Borg are in at least partial agreement in concept, which both learned from Caird, even as they are using the language of eschatology differently. At the beginning of his career, Borg believed that Jesus had declared judgment upon Israel for a politics that emphasized purity to the exclusion of compassion and for a resulting militant and nationalistic resistance to the Roman occupation, both centralized in and symbolized by the Temple (a view with which Wright agreed). Later, Borg became convinced that Jesus had instead critiqued the collusion of Jewish elites with the Roman occupation, still centered in the Temple.
We also reviewed four arguments Borg collected against the historicity of the Son of Man sayings: one psychological, one linguistic, one textual-critical, and one historical. Borg believed that the Son of Man sayings were the only link between Jesus’ pronouncement of the kingdom of God and both the language of imminence and the images of cosmic catastrophe. With that bridge sufficiently burned, Borg was free to interpret the kingdom of God, not as an otherworldly heaven to which the righteous will escape the coming destruction of the world, but as an internal experience of the numinous.

Wright thinks this is exactly the wrong direction to take in conceiving of the kingdom, and he wonders why Borg, who understands Jesus to be a social prophet criticizing the political position of his contemporaries, does not consider the kingdom of God to be an alternative political movement.

As to the arguments against the authenticity of the Son of Man sayings, Wright rejects the historical-critical processes by which they are ruled inauthentic by the scholars Borg cites. Instead of isolating individual sayings and trying to determine what can be authenticated for use in reconstructing a picture of Jesus and what should be excluded, Wright thinks good history is done by running a hypothesis through all the available data to see what can be included. The more data that can be accounted for by a reconstruction, the better the reconstruction. Wright’s own reconstruction shows that Mark 13 (among other Son of Man texts) is perfectly plausible as it follows the logic of a common reading of Daniel at the time of Jesus, as a revolutionary kingdom of God text in which Israel’s true representative is vindicated after suffering at the hands of the pagans.
In the present chapter, I will review Wright’s profile of Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet: his deliberate mirroring of the ancient prophets, his announcement of the kingdom of God—the fulfillment of the covenant story, his “mighty works” as signs of that kingdom’s coming, and the community he built as apocalyptic community. I will assess Wright’s understanding of Jesus’ confrontation with the religious leader of Israel. And most importantly, I will put forward Wright’s account of how Jesus’ apocalyptic message is a surprising and peculiar climax to the covenant narrative. This will make it possible, finally, in the following chapter, to make a case for an apocalyptic interpretation of the death of Jesus, and this in conversation with the liberationist critique of atonement put forward in chapter 1.

I. Jesus as Apocalyptic Prophet

For Wright the primary character profile of Jesus is that of an apocalyptic eschatological prophet. Wright draws on Robert Webb’s distinction of three basic categories of prophecy in first century Palestine: 1 “Clerical prophets” are holders of priestly or perhaps royal office, whose prophetic authority is attendant to the office. “Sapiential prophets” are wise teachers, such as are to be found among the Essenes and Pharisees, and perhaps writers like Philo and the author of Wisdom. Finally, are the “popular prophets,” whose work arose neither from political office nor scribal education.

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but from the grassroots of Palestine; they appealed to the uneducated peasant class. For Wright, following Webb, Jesus functions as a popular prophet.

On Webb’s accounting, and in what will be crucial for Wright’s depiction of Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet, popular prophets tended to make pronouncements not only in oracles but also in symbolic action that recapitulated the story of Israel in which their pronouncements made sense, what we have called the covenant narrative. The popular prophets seem to have been informed particularly, Wright says, by the ministries of Moses and Joshua. “Retelling, or re-enacting the story of the exodus, then, was a classic and obvious way of pre-telling, or pre-enacting the great liberation, the great ‘return from exile’, for which Israel longed.”

John the Baptist is an example of a popular prophet who functions in this way: “Anyone collecting people in the Jordan wilderness,” Wright says, “was symbolically saying: this is the new exodus. Anybody offering water-baptism for the forgiveness of sins was saying: you can have, here and now, what you would normally get through the temple cult.” Most importantly, “anybody inviting those who wished to do so to pass through an initiatory rite of this kind was symbolically saying: here is the true Israel that

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2 Webb further divides the latter into “solitary popular prophets,” who neither promise salvation nor attempt to build a social reform movement but simply stand on the street corner shouting of impending doom, and “leadership popular prophets,” whose announcements of destruction are tempered by the hope of the reforms they both promise and build. Further, this division of popular prophets maps onto, but does not correspond exactly with, Horsley’s early distinction between “oracular prophets” and “action prophets.” Wright, JVG, 153-55; cf. Richard A. Horsley and John S. Hanson, Bandits, Prophets and Messiahs: Popular Movements at the Time of Jesus (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1985), 135-46. Thus, Wright refers to Jesus interchangeably as a “popular prophet” and the slightly more precise “leadership prophet,” and sometimes, drawing on Horsley, as both an “oracular-” and an “action prophet.” For simplicity, I hereafter refer to this aspect of Wright’s conception of Jesus only as “a popular prophet” and will make the finer distinction only when they add clarity.

3 Wright, JVG, 155.
is to be vindicated by YHWH.⁴ That John put oracles of doom together with these
prophetic enactments and an urgency to be part of the true people of YHWH when the
great moment came, means that he cannot but be seen as a prophet who sought not only
the renewal of the existing structures of Israel’s religious and political life but their
replacement in a great eschatological reversal.⁵ On this point almost no one disagrees.

Wright argues that Jesus, too, was seen by his contemporaries, and saw himself,
as a prophet in the tradition of John.⁶ Like the prophets of old, Jesus came to Israel “with
a word from her covenant God, warning her of the imminent and fearful consequences of
the direction she was traveling, urging and summoning her to a new and different way.”⁷

A. In the Tradition of the Ancient Prophets

Jesus drew on a number of ancient Hebrew prophets:⁸ Like Micaiah ben Imlach,
who foresaw the death of King Ahab, saying “I saw all Israel scattered on the mountains,
like sheep that have no shepherd” (1 Kgs 22:17), Jesus had compassion on the crowd
gathered by the sea “because they were like sheep without a shepherd” (Mark 6:34). Like
Ezekiel, Jesus predicted the departure of YHWH’s glory from the Temple (Luke
13:35=Matt 23:38; cf. Ezek 10-11). To explain his action in the Temple, Jesus drew

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⁴ Wright, JVG, 160.
⁵ Wright, JVG, 160.
⁶ This is attested in material from Mark, M, L, and John: Mark 6:14-16 (par. Matt 14:1-2; Luke 9:7-9); 14:65 (par. Matt 26:68; Luke 22:64); Matt 21:11, 46; Luke 7:16, 39-50; 13:33; 24:19; John 4:19; 7:52; 9:17. Wright argues that the theme of Jesus as prophet also passes the criterion of dissimilarity: “Apart from Acts 3.22 there is nothing in the New Testament, outside the gospels, about Jesus as a prophet. It appears that the early church quickly left this category behind in their understanding of Jesus and his work.” (JVG, 165).
⁷ Wright, JVG, 163.
⁸ Wright, JVG, 166-7.

**B. Announcing the Kingdom of God**

That Jesus was an eschatological prophet can also be deduced from the most basic historical data we have about him: that he announced the coming of the kingdom of God. “Anyone heard talking about the reign of Israel’s god,” Wright says, “would be assumed to be referring to the fulfillment of Israel’s long-held hope. The covenant god would act to reconstitute his people, to end their exile, to forgive the sins. When that happened, Israel would no longer be dominated by the pagans. She would be free.”¹⁰ It is simply inconceivable to Wright that Jesus could have used the language of divine rule, in first century Palestine, “if he were not in some sense or other claiming to fulfil, or at least announce the fulfilment of, those deeply rooted Jewish aspirations.”¹¹

Moreover, as we have seen, for Wright to speak of any one element of the covenant narrative is to evoke every other element of that tightly packed storyline as well.¹² To speak of the “reign” or the “kingdom” of YHWH in the first century, for

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¹⁰ Wright, *JVG*, 150.

¹¹ Wright, *JVG*, 172.

¹² Wright, *JVG*, 199.
example, given widespread concerns about corruption of Herod’s Temple (see above, chapter 2), is very likely to suggest a renewal, or perhaps even a replacement of the Temple as the divine throne. It is necessarily to speak also, in some sense, of the reinstalment of Israel’s rightful king to the Davidic throne, as YHWH’s terrestrial representative. Rome, of course, would not readily abandon the throne to more than a client king like Herod. So, to speak of the kingdom of God is to speak also of the defeat of Israel’s enemies, the ouster of the Roman occupation. If a prophet wanted to evoke and the entire covenant narrative, then, and make all of these claims at once, it is difficult to imagine him coming up with a more appropriate and concise slogan to do so than “kingdom of God.”

It is not difficult to see why Wright understands Jesus’ announcement of the kingdom as not only a political, but a revolutionary claim: “The idea of YHWH’s being king carried the particular and definite revolutionary connotation that certain other people were due for a demotion. Caesar, certainly. Herod, quite probably. The present high-priestly clan, pretty likely.” It is no wonder that Wright is able to trace the idea of Israel’s god being king to its ties with revolutionary aspirations. “No king but God!” he says, “was the slogan that fired the revolutionaries. It gave them courage to do the unthinkable: to tear down the eagle from outside the Temple, or to assemble *en masse* in risky protest at the latest indignity threatened or inflicted by a crass governor or a megalomaniac emperor.”

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14 Wright, *JVG*, 203.
We see here also that the covenant story—with all its revolutionary political implications—that is evoked by the phrase “kingdom of God” may be in view even in the absence of the phrase itself. Clearly, when revolutionaries chant “no king but God!” they are swimming in the same narrative waters as Jesus when he says “the kingdom of God has come near” (Mark 1:15). Moreover, just as an announcement of the kingdom implies the fulfillment of other elements of the covenant story, so to speak of the restoration of the Temple or vindication of Israel over her enemies would likewise be to evoke the same story evoked by the phrase “kingdom of God.”

We cannot, therefore, limit our exposition of what Jesus intended in his announcement of the kingdom to he basileia tou theou and its cognates.

It is not only those in seats of political power, though, who might have taken offense at Jesus’ kingdom announcement and telling of the covenant story. For, Wright says, “he was retelling this familiar story in such a way as to subvert and redirect its normal plot.” Jesus was telling the familiar covenant story, and in so doing, affirming Israel’s most basic beliefs and aspirations. Israel’s god is the one true god of creation and he will act to defeat Israel’s enemies and to vindicate her. It is important to note that Jesus did not do away with this paradigm. He was working precisely within it. Even if Jesus drastically redefined the story, he would have done so necessarily within its narrative world. And Wright thinks that Jesus did mean drastically to redefine the Israel

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17 Wright, JVG, 224-5.

18 Wright, JVG, 199. The wide-scale offense of Jesus retelling of the covenant narrative on Wright’s reading of it, lends, he thinks, to its historical credibility, as it exhibits a “double similarity” and a “double dissimilarity” (JVG 226): To tell the covenant story makes sense within first century Judaism; to tell it in the way that Jesus does presents enough of a challenge to make him “crucifiable.” And it sets forward a trajectory that can be sensibly traced into the early history of the church without mimicking it.
that was to be vindicated, and thus to reinterpret Israel’s picture of who her real enemy was.19

C. Jesus’ Ethic

Much of New Testament studies diverges along now-familiar lines on the meaning of Jesus’ ethical teaching. Some, following Schweitzer and the konsequente Eschatologie school, understand Jesus to have prescribed for his followers an intermediary ethics relevant only for the supposed brief period of time between his own ministry and the impending end of the world, which now, given Jesus’ miscalculation of the times, can largely be discarded. Bultmann attempted to salvage a universal ethical kernel of Jesus’ teaching from that error. Many have followed Bultmann in portraying Jesus as a teacher of timeless spiritual truth, even after they dispensed the idea of Jesus as a failed eschatological prophet (e.g. Mack, Crossan, and to a lesser extent, Borg). Wright does not believe Jesus’ ethics can be reduced to either a stopgap measure or a timeless spiritual truth. Rather, if we take seriously Jesus’ public persona as a prophet, then the material generally construed as Jesus “ethical teaching” must “be thought of as his agenda for Israel.”20 Jesus intended to constitute a new community of those who would be rescued from YHWH’s impending judgment upon Israel, and thus who would be vindicated as the true people of YHWH. His ethical material is intended for them proleptically to live now as though they already have been. In fact, Wright says, that

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19 Wright, JVG, 173.

20 A private letter from George Caird to N.T. Wright penned in 1982 and reproduced, in part, in Wright, JVG, 173-4.
Jesus’ teaching seems to be aimed at building a new kind of community “ought to be sufficient to call into question any unthinking acceptance of the old dogma of the imminent expectation of the end of the cosmos,” or one might add, of Jesus as a sapiential purveyor of timeless and universal spiritual truths.

Here I will discuss Wright’s commentary on three important themes of Jesus’ ethical teaching: repentance and forgiveness, the renewal of the heart, and taking up the cross. I will also offer a brief excursus on the Sermon the Mount, which is certainly the most centralized collection of Jesus’ ethical teachings, and which also nicely encapsulates two of our themes.

1. Repentance and Forgiveness

The themes of repentance and the forgiveness of sins are central to Jesus’ ethical teaching. Wright makes two major claims about the repentance and forgiveness theme in the teaching of Jesus. First—and this is the great insight of the “Third Quest”—Jesus was not, as in so much Reformation theology, offering private repentance and personal forgiveness over against the supposed self-help moralism of the Pharisees. Rather, he was announcing the great eschatological forgiveness of sins attendant to the true return from exile, the renewal of the covenant, and the reestablishment of the Davidic monarchy.

Or, as Wright says it plainly: “Forgiveness of sins is another way of saying ‘return from

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21 Wright, JVG, 246.


23 Wright, JVG, 272.
exile’.” This position is certainly plausible as Israel’s own sin had long been understood as the reason for exile (see Deut 28:15 ff.); and thus, repentance and forgiveness are the obvious and necessary preconditions for return.

The prophets repeatedly make this point. As a unit, Isa 40-55 is about the promised return from exile and YHWH’s return to Zion. The text begins by announcing that Israel’s sins have been dealt with: “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins” (Isa 40:1-2). Lamentations makes explicit that once the sentence of sin has been accomplished the exile will be over: “the punishment of your iniquity, O daughter Zion, is accomplished; he will keep you in exile no longer” (Lam 4:22a). And the return to the land will be occasioned by a ritual cleansing from sin, says Ezekiel: “I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land….On the day that I cleanse you from all your iniquities, I will cause the towns to be inhabited, and the waste places shall be rebuilt” (Ezek 36:24, 33). The promise of restoration, too, is connected to forgiveness and cleansing: “I will restore the fortunes of Judah and the fortunes of Israel and rebuild them as they were at first. I will cleanse them from all the guilt of their sin against me, and I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me” (Jer 33:7). Finally, the renewal of the covenant is precipitated by divine forgiveness: The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah… I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more” (Jer 31:31, 34b). Nor will this new covenant be like the

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24 Wright, JVG, 268.
one YHWH made with their ancestors, and which they broke through their sin and
lawlessness. For this time, says YHWH, “I will put my law within them, and I will write
it on their hearts” (v. 33).

Deut 30:2, 8 speaks of Israel ‘returning’ to YHWH with her whole heart, and this
as the condition for the end of exile. The prophets regularly used the term “repent” to
denote this turning. Repentance and forgiveness are connected with eschatology at
Qumran and in other post-biblical Jewish literature both before and after the time of
Jesus. If Wright’s thesis is correct, therefore, and Jesus was an eschatological prophet,
then we should expect his message to include the demand for repentance and an offer of
forgiveness. And in fact, such sayings are well attested in the sayings tradition.

The second claim Wright makes about the repentance and forgiveness scheme in
the teaching of Jesus is that Jesus not only was offering the eschatological forgiveness of
sins, but that he was doing so on his own authority, apart from the official channels
designed for such an offering. Jesus no doubt adopted the tradition from John, who
proclaimed “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4, par. Matt
3:1-2; Luke 3:3), not from the Temple in Jerusalem, but down by the river out in the

25 See a list of such passages in Wright, JVG, 244, n. 15. Wright notes also that “the whole point of
passages like Daniel 9, Ezra 9 or Nehemiah 9 is that these great prayers of repentance…are prayers
precisely designed to bring about the return from exile” (JVG, 248-9).
26 See examples in Wright, JVG, 249.
27 See n. 22 above.
28 Wright, JVG, 272.
5:17-26) and salvation (Luke 19:1-10) on his own terms and by his own authority, Wright argues, it constituted an implicit claim against the continued relevance of the Temple.29

For Wright, the objection to Jesus’ offer of forgiveness resulted from the combination of these two facts: the announcement of the kingdom together with the implied critique of the Temple. “The question was not about the sinners,” Wright argues, “or the moral or theological niceties of whether they had repented, and if so, in what sense. It was about the scandalous implied redefinition of the kingdom itself. Jesus was replacing adherence or allegiance to Temple and Torah with allegiance to himself.”30 In other words, the religious leaders objected to Jesus’ announcement of forgiveness (Mark 2:6-7, par. Matt 9:3; Luke 5:21), again, not because he preached mercy or allowed licentiousness while they preferred judgmentalism and order, but because he threatened to render the Temple obsolete in its eschatological function.

2. Renewal of the Heart

For Wright’s Jesus, the primary condition from of which Israel needed to repent, and for which they needed forgiveness, was hardness of heart.31 Hardness of heart and the renewal of the heart, like repentance and forgiveness, are images thoroughly woven into the covenantal narrative and associated with return from exile. Ezekiel imaged the new covenant with a replacement of Israel’s heart of stone for a new heart of flesh (36:26-27). Jeremiah said that the new covenant would involve God putting the fear of the Lord on the hearts of his people (32:38-40) and writing his law on their hearts (31:33). And the

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29 Wright, JVG, 257.
30 Wright, JVG, 273-4.
31 See e.g., Mark 7:14-23 (par. Matt 15:10-20); 10:2-9 (par. Matt 19:3-9).
Deuteronomist spoke of the circumcision of the heart (30:6). It would make sense, therefore, if Jesus shaped his prophetic ministry around the climax of the covenant narrative, as Wright has suggested he did, for him to have demanded of and offered to his followers the renewal of heart which was to characterize the eschatological people of God.

3. The Sermon on the Mount

These twin themes of eschatological forgiveness and repentance (return) are drawn together, Wright argues, in that most auspicious collection of Jesus’ ethical teachings, the Sermon on the Mount. The sermon begins with an appeal for Jesus’ followers to recognize their true vocation as those who will be the vindicated by YHWH at the climax of the covenant story. Here, quoted at length, is Wright’s reading of the beatitudes to this effect:

Israel longs for consolation, for paraklesis (5:4). But YHWH has in mind to give her, not the consolation of a national revival, in which her old wounds will be healed by inflicting wounds on others, but the consolation awaiting those who are in genuine grief. Israel desires to inherit the earth (5:5); she must do it in Jesus’ way, by meekness. Israel thirsts for justice (5:6) but the justice she is offered does not come by way of battles against physical enemies. It is not the way of anger, of a ‘justice’ which really means ‘vengeance’. It is the way of humility and gentleness. Israel longs for mercy, not least the eschatological mercy of final rescue from her enemies (5:7). But mercy is reserved for the merciful, not the vengeful. Israel longs for the vision of her god (5:8); but this is the prerogative not of those who impose an external purity, but of those with purity of heart. Israel desires to be called the creator’s son, being vindicated by him in the dramatic historical proof of national victory (5:9). But those whom Israel’s god will vindicate as his sons will be those who copy their father; and that means peacemakers.\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{32} Wright, \textit{JVG}, 288.
The five antitheses explicate the way in which these newly defined eschatological people should approach the world in a way radically different from the customary way of being Israel.\(^{33}\) The normative interpretation of Torah would lead to the path of destruction. So Jesus offered a different approach: Accusers should be faced head-on and issues reconciled outside of the court system (5:25-26). And soldiers commandeering aid should be shown bewildering generosity rather than be resisted (5:41). In particular, Wright claims that what emerges from the final two antitheses is that “Jesus’ followers are not to make common cause with the resistance movement;”\(^{34}\) they should “not resist evil” (5:39). For neither one’s personal enemies nor the enemies of the Jewish state are the true enemies of YHWH. The true eschatological community must learn to love and pray for them (5:44).

4. Take Up the Cross

Finally, in this synoptic tradition, Jesus’ ethical exhortations are often heightened by the call to follow him into political danger. In the “mission discourse” in Matthew, the disciples are warned that they will be handed over to councils, flogged in their synagogues, and dragged before governors and kings (Matt 10:17-21, par. Luke 12:11-12; 21:12). They may even be called upon to follow Jesus to a Roman cross (Mark 8:34, par. Matt 16:24; Luke 9:23). The latter passages in particular are often judged to be interpolations of the early church on the grounds that Jesus could not have predicted the

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\(^{34}\) Wright, *JVG*, 290.
manner of his own death.\textsuperscript{35} However, within the context Wright has suggested, that Jesus is naming his followers as the vindicated, eschatological people of God, he argues that such a prediction is perfectly plausible: Anyone who heeded Jesus’ call to take up a cross and follow him “would have to be prepared to act in such a way that, if they were caught, they would be likely to pay for it with their lives. One can imagine Judas the Galilean or Bar-Kochba saying similar things to their disciples. The Pharisees who urged the young hotheads to pull down the eagle from Herod’s temple issued a similar call.”\textsuperscript{36} Seen in this light, then, the crucifixion predictions are not only historically plausible; they place Jesus squarely on the map of first century Jewish social and political revolutionary movements.

\textit{D. Mighty Works}

Jesus’ miracles—or “mighty works” as Wright styles them—too, testify to his status as an eschatological prophet, in particular as one who is proclaiming the fulfillment of the covenant narrative in the way Wright suggests Jesus was doing. He argues that any first century Jew would have seen most, if not all, of Jesus’ reported healings as “the

\textsuperscript{35} For instance, The Jesus Seminar designates Mark 8:38 “black,” meaning “I would not include this item in the primary database for determining who Jesus was,” or “Jesus did not say this; it represents the perspective or content of a later or different tradition.” Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and The Jesus Seminar: \textit{The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus} (New York: HarperOne, 1993), 36. The reason offered for this designation in the publications of the Seminar is an “implied Christian understanding of the cross,” in which “the admonition to take up one’s cross appeals to the fate of Jesus as the standard of commitment.” This understanding of the cross, they say, “probably reflects a time when the Christian community was exposed to the pressures of persecution. There is no evidence that the cross served as a symbol of radical self-denial outside the context of the crucifixion of Jesus prior to that event.” Though they recognize that “the cross became a symbol in the Jesus tradition at an early date,” citing three independent attestations of the saying, or one quite like it: Mark 8:34, (par. Matt 16:24; Luke 9:23); Luke 14:27 (=Matt 10:38); and \textit{Thom.} 552, they remain “unable to justify attributing the saying, or anything like it, to Jesus because of its strong Christian overtones.” \textit{Ibid.}, 78-9.

\textsuperscript{36} Wright, \textit{JVG}, 304; citing Jos. \textit{Ant.} 17:149-66; \textit{War} 1:648-55, “once we allow for Josephus’ rendering of their speeches into philosophical language appropriate for his own audience” (Wright, \textit{JVG}, 304, n. 229).
restoration to membership in Israel of those who, through sickness or whatever, had been excluded as ritually unclean. The healings thus function in exact parallel with the welcome of sinners, and this, we may be quite sure, was what Jesus himself intended."³⁷ Evidence from Qumran suggests that someone maimed by certain illnesses or disabilities could not be a full member of that community. It is difficult to assess how drastically these taboos affected Jewish society at large. But the seriousness with which it was taken by the Qumran community suggests that, in addition to the innate challenge of being blind, deaf, or otherwise physically disabled, such a person may also have been considered unable to be a full Israelite.³⁸ Many of Jesus’ healing works were preformed on people who would marginalized in precisely this way. “There were blind people, deaf and dumb, lepers (who were not only ritually excluded, but also, of course, socially ostracized), a woman with an issue of blood, which rendered not only her, but anything she sat on, or anyone or anything she touched as unclean, a crippled woman “whom Satan bound for eighteen years.”³⁹ Thus, Wright argues that Jesus’ healing miracles and exorcisms should be seen not only as healing physical ailments but also as offering renewed membership among YHWH’s people.⁴⁰

Nowhere is this theme more evident than in the exorcism of the Gerasene demonic (Mark 5:1-20, par. Matt 8:28-34; Luke 8:26-39). The setting is on the non-

³⁷ Wright, JVG, 191.
³⁸ Wright, JVG, 192; citing 1QSa 2.3-11.
⁴⁰ Wright, JVG, 192.
Jewish side of the lake, in gentile territory. The demoniac (or demoniacs, in the Matthaean version) lives among tombs. Nearby herdsmen are feeding pigs. In Mark’s and Luke’s version, the demons identify themselves as “legion,” calling to mind the Roman occupancy. Every detail of the story conveys the meaning: Jesus goes into what was thought of as enemy territory to do battle with the enemies of the people of YHWH. This is quite resonant with the covenant story as it is normally told. But retelling and reenacting the story as he did, the enemy Jesus went to defeat was not the Roman legion. Taking on the demon of uncleanness and hostile paganism, he defeated instead the real enemy.41 This is perhaps why the healings were also linked closely the great blessing of the covenant renewal: the forgiveness of sins (Mark 2:1-12, par. Matt 9:1-8; Luke 5:17-26).

II. The Controversies of Jesus

There is a sense, then, in which Jesus, if he is an apocalyptic prophet—at least in the sense that Wright defines that role in opposition to Schweitzer—he must also be a revolutionary. Wright is critical, however, of portraits of Jesus as a revolutionary in usual sense, which he says explain the crucifixion but offer no context for Jesus’ earlier controversies with Jewish officials and therefore must dispense with much of the evidence of the life of Jesus.42 By the same token, depicting Jesus as a sapiential teacher

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41 Wright, JVG, 195-6.

42 Wright has in view S. G. F. Brandon, Jesus and the Zealots: A Study of the Political Factor in Primitive Christianity (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1967). The same thesis has been advanced more recently by Reza Aslan, Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth (New York: Random House, 2013).
of a new sort of religion explains the controversies but not the crucifixion, and disregards much of what we know about first century Judaism.⁴³

Wright, along with E. P. Sanders and others, has expended a great deal of effort in dispensing with the old Lutheran idea that in the controversies in which he was embroiled Jesus (to say nothing of Paul) did not set out to deconstruct law-keeping itself, which, in this notion, functioned as a sort of proto-Pelagianism by which the Pharisees sought to earn their salvation by moral effort.⁴⁴ Wright, following Sanders, insists instead that Torah formed part of the social boundary around the nation of Israel and that neither Jesus nor Paul considered any of the specifics of Torah bizarre, outdated, or overbearing. It was, rather, the rigorous application of the law precisely as a reinforcement of national boundaries and thus as a defense against Gentile corruption that, according to Wright, Jesus understood as “a symptom of the problem rather than part of the solution.”⁴⁵ The kingdom Jesus announced, as mirrored both in his teaching and in his life, and especially his death, would not be characterized by defensiveness, shielding its flickering light under a bushel basket; Israel would be the light of the world, the city on the hill beckoning the nations come to the house of the God of Jacob.

While the Pharisees were not the proto-Pelagians of this earlier view, they did, on Wright’s account, embody the reading of Torah as national boundary marker, and thus as

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⁴³ Here Wright cites E. P. Sanders’ polemic against Joachim Jeremias in Jesus and Judaism (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985) and The Historical Figure of Jesus (London: Allen Lane, 1993), though he suggests that Sanders may not have been fair to Jeremias, JVG 370. To a lesser degree, one might also cite here Burton L. Mack, A Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988). It must be noted at this point, too, that it has not yet been made clear how Jesus’ objection to a violent, nationalistic resistance movement might merit execution by Rome, neither in my argument nor in Wright’s to this point in JVG. More will be said on that point in the next chapter.


⁴⁵ Wright, JVG, 389.
a defense—and sometimes offense—against the Gentiles. It is precisely this sort of boundary markers that Jesus, in Wright’s view, renounced. Wright says the Pharisees appear during this Hasmonean period “both as a political pressure-group and as a group concerned for the maintenance of purity.”\(^{46}\) But the Roman occupation beginning in 63 BCE and the establishment of the Herodian dynasty in the 30s certainly diminished what political influence they may have had.\(^{47}\) Their concern for the maintenance of purity did not change, though. There is evidence to suggest that two factions divided Pharisaism after the fall of the Hasmonean dynasty. And Wright thinks it reasonable to consider that the battle lines were drawn over the appropriate way for Pharisees to address the manifestly escalating social and cultural pollution, in view of their waning political clout.

One natural reaction—the one apparently advocated by the schools of Hillel and Gamaliel—was to compensate for the lack of control over the purity of national life as a whole by concentrating instead on intensifying personal purity and cleanliness. On this reading, the Pharisaic intensification of biblical purity regulations, as well as withdrawal into private study and practice, sought to achieve liberation from Rome and from more corrupt segments of Judaism by means of social (as opposed to geographical) isolation.\(^{48}\) The other approach would be to “make common cause with the out-and-out rebels.”\(^{49}\) Wright thinks that the revolutionary strand of Pharisaism “is by no means as widely recognized as it should be,”\(^{50}\) and he lays out a fair amount of evidence for revolutionary

\(^{46}\) Wright, *NTPG*, 188

\(^{47}\) Wright, *NTPG*, 189.


\(^{49}\) Wright, *NTPG*, 190.

\(^{50}\) Wright, *NTPG*, 190.
political activities among the Pharisees—particularly in the more populous House of Shammai.\(^{51}\)

Thus, Jesus’ controversies with the Pharisees were not about religion or morality but about eschatology and politics. His polemic, according to Wright at least, undermined the revolutionary, anti-pagan zeal at the heart of (Shammaite) Pharisaic aspirations, which he believed would be the immediate cause of Israel’s imminent destruction. Jesus’ eschatological announcement was a warning that those who persisted in these zealous aspirations would soon reap the harvest they sowed: “all who take the sword will die by the sword” (Matt 26:52). And his kingdom announcement was an exhortation that there is still time—though it was running short—to give up this interpretation of their traditions before it drove them to ruin, and to embrace instead Jesus’ way of victory through loss, of turning the other cheek and going the second mile, of enemy love.\(^{52}\)

Wright’s foundational methodological thesis (which we explored in chapter 2) is that the stories that give a society its sense of identity and role in the world and provide a narrative context for its problems and the solution to those problems are perpetuated primarily through the society’s symbols, festivals, and rituals. If that is right, and if it is true that the object of Jesus’ critique was the zeal with which some of his contemporaries wanted to circle the wagons of national identity and defend against Gentile corruption, then one might expect him take aim at precisely those symbols which mark out Israel over against her pagan neighbors. And, of course, it is precisely these symbols—particularly those that Wright calls “the four great distinctives:” Temple, sabbath

\(^{51}\) See Wright, *NTPG*, 190-7.

\(^{52}\) Wright, *JVG*, 383-4.
observance, dietary purity, and circumcision\textsuperscript{53}—that form the conceptual setting of Jesus’ controversies with the religious leaders of Israel. They are the symbols Rome would seek to clear away in the process of assimilation, and they thus formed the religio-political agenda of the Pharisaic resistance movement.\textsuperscript{54} In affirming Israel’s unique vocation, not to maintain an exclusionary national identity and defend against Gentile corruption but to be a light to the nations, Jesus relativized and redefined those longstanding markers of Jewish distinctiveness.\textsuperscript{55}

\textit{A. Sabbath, Food, and Family}

There are numerous reports of Jesus’ controversies with the Pharisees and other religious leaders over his activity on the Sabbath.\textsuperscript{56} At various times on the Sabbath, Jesus healed a man with a withered hand (Mark 3:1-6, par. Matt 12:9-14; Luke 6:6-11), freed a woman from a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years (Luke 13:10-17), healed a man of edema (Luke 14:1-6) and a man born blind (John 9:1-41). Once, a man whose lameness Jesus healed was harassed for carrying his mat (John 5:2-18). In every case, Jesus is questioned by religious leaders for his impropriety, and in every case, he emphasizes that it is better to do good on the Sabbath than to cause harm by deliberate inaction, telling stories of farm animals tied up or having fallen into a well. In one report (Mark 2:23-28, par. Matt 12:1-8; Luke 6:1-5), Jesus and his disciples are spotted gleaning

\begin{small}
\textsuperscript{53} Wright, \textit{JVG}, 386.
\textsuperscript{54} For a fuller discussion of this point see Wright, \textit{NTPG}, 237-41.
\textsuperscript{55} Wright, \textit{JVG}, 389.
\textsuperscript{56} Wright argues against Sanders for the historical reliability of these accounts, reported in Mark, L, and John; \textit{JVG}, 390-6; cf. Sanders, \textit{Jesus and Judaism}, 264f.; Sanders, \textit{Historical Figure}, 212-8.
\end{small}
gains from a field by some Pharisees who point out their lawlessness. Jesus reminds them that David similarly ran afoul of ceremonial order because he and his companions were hungry (1 Sam 21:1-5). This story indicated to Jesus that “the Sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the Sabbath” (v. 27).

Likewise, Jesus conflicted with the Pharisees over dietary purity. In Mark 7:1-23 (par. Matt 15:1-20), when the Pharisees noticed his disciples eating with unwashed hands they accused him of forsaking the traditions of the elders. Jesus snapped back that they “have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition!” (v. 10). Later, commenting on the exchange, he asked his disciples: “Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters not the heart but the stomach and goes out into the sewer?” (v. 19a). “Thus,” Mark adds, “he declared all foods clean” (v. 19b). And he said, “it is what comes out of a person that defiles” (v. 20).

In our sources Jesus does not directly address the symbol of circumcision. But circumcision is a symbol of Israel’s election, which in turn generated the symbols of nation and family. Thus, in his relatively frequent interactions with the symbols of nation and family, Jesus addressed the same constellation of images as circumcision itself. Jesus indicated that he did not recognize his biological family, only those who “do the will of God,” or, in other words, who follow his eschatological program (Mark 3:31-35, par. Matt 12:46-50; Luke 8:19-21; Thom. 99). And it seems he demanded the same attitude of his followers. He told at least one person not to allow his burial obligation to his father to distract him from following him (Luke 9:59-60; par. Matt 8:21-22). But he promised that “everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife

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or children or fields for my name’s sake will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life” (Matt 19:29, par. Mark 10:29-10; Luke 18:29).

Strikingly, Q material has Jesus saying that he intends to bring division within families:

Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided:
father against son
and son against father,
mother against daughter
and daughter against mother,
mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law

Jesus even suggests that “whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26).

B. The Temple

In our sources, Jesus frequently warns of the destruction of Jerusalem and of the Temple in an impending political and military disaster and promises, through that judgment, the vindication of his own followers. ⁵⁸ Jesus may have ruffled feathers with his iconoclasm with respect to Sabbath, dietary laws, and family, but scholars increasingly

agree that it was Jesus’ polemic against the Temple—and in particular his prophetic action in the court of the Gentiles—that got him killed.59

This theme is most clear and present in Mark 13, so Wright exposits it in detail, and we will examine his exposition. But because of the controversy surrounding the interpretation of that passage he first tries to establish the case with other passages.

1. Other than Mark 13

When Jesus sent his disciples out to propagate his kingdom announcement, he instructed them not to waste too much time in a town where their message was not received. Rather, they should declare: “‘Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.’ I tell you, on that day it will be more tolerable for Sodom than for that town” (Luke 10:11-12, par. Matt 10:14-15). As Jesus himself entered Jerusalem,

he wept over it, saying, “if you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. Indeed, the days will come upon you when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you and hem you in on every side. They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God” (Luke 19:41-44).

Not only did Jesus predict this cataclysmic destruction, he predicted that it would come within his generation. He seemed to believe himself to be living at a time of significance comparable to the great prophets of old:

59 Scholars as diverse as Sanders, The Historical Figure of Jesus; Crossan, Jesus; and Wright, JVG support this conclusion.
When the crowds were increasing, he began to say, “This generation is an evil generation; it asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah. For just as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so the Son of Man will be to this generation. The queen of the South will rise at the judgment with the people of this generation and condemn them, because she came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon, and indeed, something greater than Solomon is here! The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and indeed, something greater than Jonah is here! (Luke 11:29-32, par. Matt 12:41-42).

And indeed, he seems to have thought that his generation would be charged somehow, and for some reason, with the crimes of all the generations of the house of Israel to come before:

One of the experts in the law answered him, “Teacher, when you say these things, you insult us, too.” And he said, “Woe also to you experts in the law! For you load people with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not lift a finger to ease them. Woe to you! For you build the tombs of the prophets whom your ancestors killed. So you are witnesses and approve of the deeds of your ancestors, for they killed them, and you build their tombs. For this reason the Wisdom of God said, ‘I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute,’ so that this generation may be charged with the blood of all the prophets shed since the foundation of the world, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who perished between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, it will be charged against this generation” (Luke 11:45-51, par. Matt 23:29-36).

The destruction which Jesus believed and proclaimed was to befall this generation would come not just upon the people of Israel, or even the city of Jerusalem, but most notably upon the Temple itself. Some rose during Jesus’ trial before the high priest to charge that they “heard him say, ‘I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands’” (Mark 14:58, par. Matt 26:61). Others hurled the charge mockingly back at Jesus as he hung on the cross (Mark 15:29-30, par. Matt 27:39-40). In Acts, Stephen’s accusers likewise rose during his trial,
claiming that they had “heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses handed on to us” (Acts 6:14). In fact, as Wright points out, “virtually all the traditions, inside and outside the canonical gospels, which speak of Jesus and the Temple speak of its destruction.”

Jesus’ polemic against the Temple came to a head with his dramatic action in the Court of the Gentiles. Wright, along with a growing number of historical Jesus scholars, sees Jesus’ action in the Temple not as a mere critique or cleansing but as an enacted parable of judgment and destruction. The prophets of Israel regularly engaged in these kinds of enacted parables. Isaiah walked around naked for three years as a sign of the shame the Egyptians would feel when the king of Assyria carted them, “buttocks uncovered,” into captivity (Isa 20:1-6). Jeremiah’s smashed earthenware jug served as a parable even of his prediction of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple (Jer 19:1-15).

60 Wright notes that “topos (‘place’) was a regular way of referring to the Temple,” JVG, 335, n. 71. And in fact, Wright thinks that Jesus may have invoked the temple in his threats far more than even is explicit, employing the image of “the house,” a common moniker for the Temple at the time. See e.g., Luke 6:46-49 (=Matt 7:24-27); 11:24-26 (=Matt 12:43-45); 13:35 (=Matt 23:38); Luke 13:1-5. (JVG, 334).

61 Wright, JVG, 416. We have already mentioned Luke’s poignant image of Jesus weeping over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41-44), the traditions in the synoptic gospels and Acts of the accusations leveled at the trials of Jesus and Stephen, that Jesus had threatened the destruction of the Temple (Mark 14:58, par. Matt 26:61; Acts 6:14), of his being mocked at the foot of the cross (Mark15:29, par. Matt 27:40). There are, similarly, John’s saying about destruction and rebuilding (John 2:19) and Thomas’ cryptic parallel: “I will destroy this house, and no one will be able to rebuild it” (Thom. 71). Finally, there is there is Mark’s fig-tree incident (Mark 11:12-14; par. Matt 21:18-19), which we will review shortly. Wright argues that there are too many texts that adhere to this theme in independent sources to all be retrojections. This, it seems to me, is undeniable. But he argues, further, that the theme is sufficiently discordant with the early Christian practice of continuing to worship in the Temple to think that they made it up. The second argument is specious. Granting one’s Lord the power of prediction seems a more powerful motivation than not wishing to admit that one had not properly heeded his warning.

62 Among scholars who take this view are Borg, see Conflict, Holiness, and Politics; and Jesus; and Sanders, The Historical Figure of Jesus.
Wright makes three arguments for understanding Jesus’ action in the Temple as a parable of its destruction. First, there is the incident with the fig tree (Mark 11:12-14, 20-21), which Mark deliberately split in two parts to bookend his telling of the story of Jesus’ Temple action, so that his readers would understand and interpret each story in light of the other.63 Like the fig tree, Jesus came to the Temple seeking fruit only to find it, like the fig tree, lacking. So, like the fig tree, Jesus announces its destruction. “The fig tree action” Wright says, “is therefore an acted parable of an acted parable.”64

Second, this mutual interpretation of the Temple action and the cursing of the fig tree is reinforced by Jesus’ comment in explanation of the latter: “Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ and if you do not doubt in your heart but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you” (Mark 11:23, par. Matt 21:21). Spoken in Jerusalem—and certainly in the context of Jesus’ protest—“this mountain” would inevitably be taken to mean the Temple Mount.65

The third argument has to do with Jesus’ only recorded explanation of the protest itself: “Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’? But you have made it a den of robbers” (Mark 11:17).66 An earlier generation of scholarship which understood Jesus to be “cleansing” the Temple of corrupt practices had no problem explaining Jesus’ use of these quotations: the money changers and those who

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63 Though the parallel in Matt 21:18-22 does not employ the same technique, Wright suggests that Mark is making explicit an interpretation that was already latent in the tradition and perhaps implied in Jesus’ actions themselves.

64 Wright, JVG, 421.

65 Wright, JVG, 422.

66 Parallels in Matt 21:13 and Luke 19:46; and cf. John 2:16. He seems to have been combining quotations from Isaiah: “For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples” (56:7c) and Jeremiah: “Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight?” (7:11a).
were selling sacrificial animals seemed to those earlier interpreters to be swindling unsuspecting worshippers and, in that sense, operating as a den of robbers. However, Wright points out that *lestes*, in “its regular usage in first-century Palestine, as evidenced by dozens of occurrences in Josephus is in reference to brigands or bandits...[who] were not mere highway robbers...they were revolutionaries.”67 This is why it makes sense for John to call Barabbas—whom Luke says was a the leader of a murderous insurrection (Luke 23:19)—a *lestes* (John 18:40). And it is why two *lestai* were crucified next to Jesus (Mark 15:27, par. Matt 27:38). “Crucifixion was a punishment reserved, not for thieves or swindlers, but for revolutionaries.”68 With this understanding, Jesus’ action in the Temple comes into sharper focus. Zeal for Jewish purity, centered in the Temple, had led to the exclusive focus on national identity and violent resistance of which Jesus had been a critic. “This is not to say that there were already, in Jesus’ day, violent revolutionaries holed up in the Temple,” Wright clarifies. “The point has to do with ideology: the Temple had become, in Jesus’ day as in Jeremiah’s, the talisman of national violence.”69 The “house” had become a den of *lestai*, of violent rebels and brigands, and Jesus believed that it would ultimately lead to divine judgment executed by the swift sword of Rome. And so, like Jeremiah whom he quoted, Jesus prophetically and dramatically declared that divine judgment had fallen upon the Temple.70

67 Wright, *JVG*, 420.
68 Wright, *JVG*, 420.
69 Wright, *JVG*, 420.
70 Wright, *JVG*, 334. Borg and Crossan offer an alternative reading of the Temple action in a coauthored book for a lay audience on the passion week as recounted in the Gospel of Mark. Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: A Day-by-Day Account of Jesus’s Final Week in Jerusalem* (HarperCollins: New York, 2006). Borg and Crossan agree with Wright’s first and second arguments, that Mark’s framing of the Temple action within the fig tree incident and Jesus’ saying about throwing “this mountain” into the sea, suggest that Mark does not understand Jesus to have “cleansed” the Temple but to have “symbolically destroyed” it (35). Further, they too hinge their interpretation on the
One final point must be raised about Jesus’ warnings of coming destruction.

When in Matthew’s gospel Jesus sends out the twelve to spread his kingdom message, he warns them that they will be handed over to councils, flogged in the synagogues, and dragged before governors and kings (Matt 10:17-18). But he admonishes them to stay the course, for whoever “acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven, but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven” (vv. 32-33, par. Luke 12:8-9). It is emphasized here, as elsewhere (see e.g., Mark 8:34-38, par. Matt 16:24-28; Luke 9:23-26) that those who follow the way of Jesus will escape the coming destruction. The implication, Wright says, is that it is they will receive Israel’s promised vindication and experience at last the true release from exile.71

71 Wright, JVG, 336.
Jesus’ warnings of impending judgment have, since Weiss and Schweitzer, regularly been interpreted as predicting the end of the world. I outlined this view and Wright’s rejection of it in chapter 2. More recently, such passages have been rejected as inauthentic to the Jesus tradition because Jesus is assumed to be a “sapiential” teacher rather than an “apocalyptic” prophet. Passages about the vindication promised to his followers, too, are accredited to the early church on the grounds that Jesus did not envisage a community who would continue to be loyal to him after his death. I discussed the first denial at length in chapter 3; the second I took up in briefly above, in the section of the present chapter entitled “Jesus’ Ethic.”

Read within the covenant narrative, though, and indeed as one interpretation of the climax of that narrative, Wright argues that Jesus’ stories of judgment and vindication are perfectly historically plausible. Jesus was in fact telling the story of a quite widespread Jewish belief about the divine judgment to befall the nations who oppress Israel, only the surprise reinterpretation is that in Jesus’ stories the judgment was to fall upon impenitent Israel herself. Jesus believed that, under its present regime, Jerusalem had become as Babylon.72 “Throughout the teaching, story-telling and career of Jesus, this message rang out again and again, in word and deed. Israel was being redefined; and those who failed to heed Jesus’ warning would discover themselves in the position that they had thought was reserved for the pagans.”73 Jesus’ story that draws these themes together as well as any other, for Wright, is the parable of the wicked tenants (Mark 12:1-12, par. Matt 21:33-46; Luke 20:9-19; Thom. 65-66):

72 Wright, JVG, 323.
73 Wright, JVG, 329.
The present hierarchy had decided to try to keep the vineyard for themselves, but it was not to be given to others. Their rejection of Jesus meant that now they would not only not be the heirs, they would not be the tenants either. Those who rejected the heaven-sent messengers would find the kingdom of God taken away from them and apportioned elsewhere; the stone which had been rejected would become the head of the corner.74

Even this reinterpretation, surprising though it may be, was not novel. Certainly, for a Jew to pronounce judgment upon any of the Roman client kings or the authorities of Herod’s Temple was hardly unusual. “Nor,” Wright stresses, “was it in the slightest degree a sign that one was being ‘anti-Jewish’. On the contrary, it was a sign of deep loyalty to Israel’s true god and true vocation, and of deep distress at the corruption which seems endemic in the national life.”75 The great prophets themselves had occasionally told the story in precisely this way.76 Indeed, it is an almost stereotypical profile of a Hebrew prophet to retell Israel’s story in such a way as to draw it toward a devastating climax in which YHWH uses pagan forces to execute judgment on his people and vindicating from within them a remnant, those who heard the word of the prophet. Jesus seems to have adopted this theme from John the Baptist, who both predicted the coming wrath and suggested that being a member of ethnic Israel does not equate to being a “child of Abraham” or thereby guarantee a share in the age to come (Matt 3:7-10, par. Luke 3:7-9).77

74 Wright, JVG, 328.
75 Wright, JVG, 324.
76 As an example of this pattern, Wright cites Isa 1:10, where the prophet likens Judah to Sodom and Gomorrah; JVG, 323.
77 Wright, JVG, 324.
Still, these warnings “cut against several strands within the complex and pluriform Judaism of the time.” Most importantly for Wright, Jesus warned against violent revolution, and by extension warned his followers against the revolutionary strand at least of the Pharisaic agenda. But also, like Jeremiah, he criticized the Temple as a symbol of national inviolability, which certainly would have provoked the ire of the chief priests and other Temple authorities, especially when these words were accompanied by disruptive and destructive actions.

2. Mark 13

The theme—that the coming kingdom was to be precipitated by a divine judgment, surprisingly to befall Israel herself by the hand of the occupying Gentile forces, and that those who follow Jesus’ way will be rescued and vindicated—is exemplified most clearly in the so-called “little apocalypse,” Mark 13. If Jesus actually spoke the words of Mark 13, or something very much like them, the Mount of Olives would have been the perfect setting to make such a prediction, peering across to the Temple Mount. Wright suggest that by choosing such a setting Jesus alluded to—or perhaps just had in mind—Zech 14: “On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives…And you shall flee by the valley of the LORD’s mountain…and you shall flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of King Uzziah of Judah. Then the LORD my God will come and all the holy ones with him” (vv. 4-5), where the reason for the flight is a coming great battle of the nations against Jerusalem: “For I [YHWH] will gather all the

78 Wright, *JVG*, 325.
79 Wright, *JVG*, 325.
nations against Jerusalem to battle, and the city shall be taken and the houses plundered
and the women raped; half the city shall go into exile, but the rest of the people shall not
be cut off from the city” (v. 2), and the context of the battle is the coming of the
kingdom: “And the LORD will become king over all the earth; on that day the LORD will
be one and his name one” (v. 9). But if such an allusion is made, Wright argues, it is
Jesus’ own. For there is no earthquake in the synoptic accounts, as there is in Zechariah,
and Jesus is sitting rather than standing on the mountain. That alone, Wright says, “is
enough to suggest that the evangelists have not deliberately invented the scene merely to
‘fulfill’ Zechariah.”80 The timing, too, is obvious, Jesus having acted out a parable of the
destruction of the Temple this very week.

But both the authenticity and the analysis of this passage are fraught.

Interpretations of it fall along several lines: (1) In chapter 2, we saw that Weiss and
Schweitzer, not to mention the many scholars that followed in their tradition, understood
this passage and others like it to foretell a coming cosmic catastrophe and resultant end of
the world, which Jesus predicted would take place within a generation of his own
lifetime. Also in that chapter, I outlined Wright’s argument that this tradition of
interpretation demonstrates a categorical misunderstanding of the function of apocalyptic
language. (2) Many fundamentalists have followed the konsequente reading, except, to
save Jesus from having been proven wrong, have said that Jesus meant something
different by “this generation.” But there is simply no non-religiously-motivated reason to
believe that phrase does not have a literal referent. (3) In the preceding chapter I laid out
the four arguments, which Borg amassed, that Mark 13 along with other Son of Man

80 Wright, JVG, 344.
passages do not go back to the historical Jesus. Using his method of hypothesis and verification—which attempts to fit a majority of the material into an historical reconstruction, rather than determining what needs to be ruled out—Wright responds by putting forward an understanding of Son of Man language from Daniel that he thinks would be perfectly plausible for Jesus to have adopted and refurbished. Nevertheless, this fraught reception history is why Wright puts Mark 13 aside as he begins his exposition of Jesus’ warnings. That Jesus pronounced judgement upon his nation and against his own generation in particular, that he warned of disaster to befall Jerusalem and Temple, and that he promised rescue and vindication of his followers can be established without it.81

All this leaves yet to mention the standard historical-critical insistence that Mark 13, and other specific warnings of the destruction of the Temple, could not go back to the historical Jesus because he could not have predicted it. In particular, there is a tradition within mainline New Testament scholarship to argue that verses 1-4 constitute a separate entity from the remainder of the chapter, since they speak of the destruction of the Temple while the balance of the chapter is an apocalyptic prophecy of cosmic catastrophe and the coming of the Son of Man on a cloud. The latter has been read alternately as Jesus referring to his own second coming (the Pietists) and Jesus predicting the imminent end of the world (the konsequente Eschatologie school of Weiss and Schweitzer and their successors).82

As we saw in chapter 2, there is nothing in Daniel, in first century interpretations of Daniel, or in the teaching of Jesus that would lead us to believe that the Son of Man’s

81 Wright, JVG, 336.
82 Wright, JVG, 341.
coming on the clouds refers to a parousia, Christ traveling downwards toward the earth. Rather the coming of the Son of Man is apocalyptic and metaphorical language for vindication of the true people of YHWH and the defeat of their enemies. Wright’s response to the *konsequentemente* reading hinges on the details of the prediction itself:

This is scarcely to be taken as a reference, after the event, to the actual happenings of AD 66-70. For a start, Titus and his legions were occupying the Mount of Olives and Mount Scopus, the two highest hills overlooking Jerusalem; fleeing to the hills would mean surrender and/or death. For another thing, by the time the Romans took the sanctuary itself it was too late to do anything about running away. Thirdly, the tradition of the Christians getting out of Jerusalem and going to Pella hardly counts as fleeing ‘to the hills’; to get to Pella they would have had to descend 3,000 feet to the Jordan valley and then travel north for about thirty miles (Pella itself is about three miles east of the Jordan, and twenty miles south of the Sea of Galilee). No one in their right mind would describe a flight to Pella as ‘to the hills’.

Jesus was not an oracle who predicted every detail of the events to come, down to the day or the hour (Mark 13:32). But foresight, as they say, is primarily insight and Jesus apparently possessed enough of the latter to know that if his generation continued down the path it was on, it could lead only to destruction.

It is evident that the entire chapter, not just the first verses, should be read as a prediction of the destruction of the Temple as a result of the Temple’s pollution, the “desolating sacrilege” (v. 14). Jesus wants urgently to communicate to his disciples that the time will come when the only thing for them to do is to “flee to the mountains” (v.14). Jerusalem’s doom has been announced and they should not be there when the city falls. Jesus will die at the hands of the Romans but no mistaken sense of loyalty should convince them to stay and fight for the survival of the city or otherwise try to inaugurate

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83 Wright, *JVG*, 353.
the kingdom by means of the sword. They are not to be implicated in the coming war. Their vindication will come.\textsuperscript{84}

Moreover, if one takes as a starting point Wright’s reading of apocalyptic, which I exposited in Chapter 2, then whole of Mark 13 may simply undergird the prediction of destruction in vv. 1-4. As we have by now come to expect, this is exactly how Wright understands the passage: the apocalyptic symbolism is the only language appropriate to evoke the full weight of biblical resonance and thereby to give the warning its proper theological significance.

When Isaiah spoke an oracle against Babylon, he said that “the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light” (Isa 13:10). He taunted the king as a fallen star: “How you are fallen from heaven, O Morning Star, son of Dawn! How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low!” (Isa 14:12). Ezekiel, similarly denouncing the king of Egypt, wrote: “I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon shall not give its light. All the shining lights of the heavens I will darken above you and put darkness on your land, says the Lord God” (Ezek 32:7b-8). To use language such as “the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light” (Mark 13:24), then, means that the fall of an earthly empire will be an “earth shattering” event. “Cosmic darkness…is the dominant image when YHWH acts to judge the Babylon of this world.”\textsuperscript{85} This move, for Wright, “is emphatically not to ‘demythologize’ the apocalyptic language concerned. Nor is it to

\textsuperscript{84} Wright, \textit{JVG}, 359. Here again is an allusion to Zechariah. When Babylon is destroyed the proper response for YHWH’s people is to run (see Zech 2:6-8; 14:3-5).

\textsuperscript{85} Wright, \textit{JVG}, 356.
reduce it to a ‘mere metaphor’.” Rather he insists, it is to read it exactly as it would have been heard in the first century, that is, with its clear intra-historical, political, and even revolutionary implications folded into the rich biblical imagery and symbolism.

Allowing for this reading of the apocalyptic material leads also to the conclusion of the passage: The same imagery that the classical Hebrew prophets used to describe the destruction of Babylon, Jesus is here using to predict the destruction coming upon Jerusalem. It is, once again, a retelling of the old covenant story, with the twist that instead of depicting Jerusalem as the victim of pagan aggression or corruption, Jesus depicted Jerusalem herself as Babylon, the enemy of the true covenant people.

Shocking as that is and is meant to be, it should not be surprising. We saw above that Jesus elsewhere used Tyre, Sidon, Sodom and other pagan cities as types of the judgment to fall on this or that town or village that had rejected him. What else might one expect when Jesus perceived that YHWH’s own holy city had rejected his message than that he would speak of it with the imagery previously reserved for referring to the destruction of the archetypal pagan city of the Old Testament period?

Having come at last to Jerusalem, Jesus’ disciples would naturally have wondered if the time for Jesus to be installed as king was at hand. The inevitable implication of Jesus’ speaking in this way was that the disciples would have understood his prophetic announcement of the destruction of the Temple “as the announcement, also, of his own

86 Wright, JVG, 342.
87 Wright, JVG, 354.
88 Wright, JVG, 340.
vindication in other words, of his own ‘coming’ – not floating around on a cloud, of course, but of his ‘coming’ to *Jerusalem as the vindicated, rightful king.*”  

**C. The Real Battle**

If Jesus did make such a messianic claim to the throne, and if the claim was understood as such, that would constitute the groundwork to a serious case for why the Roman authorities would want him dead. It is a great historical curiosity, though, that, sentencing Jesus to the cross, Pilate did not also order his followers to be rounded up and executed as well. One explanation for this discrepancy is that even a clearly intrahistorical and politically radical claim, such as Wright argues Mark 13 to be, did not lead Jesus to assemble an army or to take up a sword.  

This, Wright argues, is because “Rome, from Jesus’ point of view, could be at most the penultimate enemy. The pagan hordes surrounding Israel were not the actual foe of the people of YHWH.”  

The real enemy, which for Wright’s Jesus stood behind the oppressive power of the Roman occupation, was the dark power, which, drawing on some biblical traditions, Jesus seems to have referred to as the Satan, the Accuser. This is why Jesus did not organize his followers for military action and why he told Peter to put away his sword (Matt 26:52; Luke 22:51; John 18:11). He was not thereby demonstrating a philosophical commitment

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89 Wright, *JVG*, 340.

90 To assume that Pilate acted on this information is to attribute to him an understanding of Jewish theology, and of Jesus’ theology in particular, nuanced enough to strain credulity. I take up this issue directly in the next chapter. For now, I am only trying to establish a point about Jesus’ own mindset which will be important for our overall thesis.


to nonviolence, nor even (primarily) an ethic of love. Rather, as Jesus understood it, the struggle necessary for the purity of the Temple and the proper governance of the Holy Land—i.e., for full return from exile—would not be won by martial victory; it would be folded into a cosmic battle.

By the same token, the judgment Jesus leveled against his own people Israel includes simultaneously compassion for the long exile to which they have been bound by the Satan: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you, desolate” (Matt 23:37-38, par. Luke 13:34-35a). The worldview of covenantal monotheism presupposed that Israel was chosen to redeem and renew YHWH’s rebellious creation. But the disease that they were called to cure has infected Israel, too. Thus, for Jesus, it would not do to think of Rome as the source of evil, for evil had taken up residence in Israel’s own house.

Two examples from the sayings tradition will suffice to establish this conception. First, there is the admonition not to “fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather, fear the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt 10:28, par. Luke 12:2-5). Surely the perceptible enemy, Rome, was capable of killing the body. Who else, then, is the real enemy except the Satan?93 Then there is the teaching about the return of the unclean spirit:

When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it wanders through waterless regions looking for a resting place, but it finds none. Then it says, ‘I will return to my house from which I came.’ When it returns, it finds it empty, swept, and put in

93 Wright, *JVG*, 455.
Then it goes and brings along seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and live there, and the last state of that person is worse than the first. So will it be also with this evil generation (Matt 12:43-45, par. Luke 11:24-26).

Wright argues that the closing sentence of the passage in Matthew: “So it will be with this evil generation” (v. 45b) makes explicit, and the context of the parallel in Luke—situated, as it is, just before the sign of Jonah—indicates, that this teaching is about Jesus’ own contemporaries and coreligionists. Israel had tried before, through reform and revolutionary movements like the Maccabean revolt, to rid its “house” (this word might once again indicate the Temple) of demons. But these apparently had not finished the job, and therefore left Israel vulnerable to further affliction.94

Here, too, is the link between Jesus as an exorcist and his ministry as a prophet proclaiming the kingdom of God. Jesus’ exorcisms were a sign that YHWH was at last delivering Israel from her true enemy.95 Jesus’ saying, amid the Beelzebul controversy, that “no one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man” (Mark 3:27, par. Matt 12:29; Luke 11:21-22) may suggest that he believed himself to have won a decisive battle against the Satan at the beginning of his career. And the synoptic tradition narrates just such a battle: (Mark 1:12-13; Luke 4:1-13=Matt 4:1-11).

Nevertheless, Jesus seems to have feared that the Satan was attempting to lure him into the same trap in which he understood his generation to be entangled: to be a messiah who would not undergo great suffering and rejection but would take the kingdom by force (Mark 8:31-33, par. Matt 16:21-23). “Heavy irony swirls in clouds

94 Wright, JVG, 456.
95 Wright, JVG, 456.
around this formulation,” Wright says. “It was because Jesus refused to fight the battle that his contemporaries wanted him to fight that he found himself fighting, from his point of view, the true battle – against them; or rather, he would have said, against the real enemy, whom he perceived to be operating through them.”\(^{96}\) In his final hour Jesus could not even fully trust his own closest disciples. It is not surprising, as Wright intimates, that under these circumstances Jesus might have come to regard them with some suspicion: They believed themselves to be going to Jerusalem to secure actual thrones and disputed among themselves about who would get those which commanded the greatest authority (Mark 10:35-45, par. Matt 20:20-28). Peter tried to dissuade Jesus from taking up cross (Mark 8:31-33, par. Matt 16:21-23); for the Satan was sifting him like wheat (Luke 22:31). And Judas, under the influence of the Satan, became the proximate cause of Jesus’ trial and death (Luke 22:3; cf. John 13:2).\(^{97}\) At some point along the way, Jesus must have realized that he would have to wage the decisive battle alone.

Three implications can be drawn out at this point. First, the battle required to purify YHWH’s dwelling place in Zion, to reestablish the divine kingship, and thereby to bring the long exile to an end was not, Jesus believed, to be waged against the occupying pagan forces. It was a cosmic battle against the dark powers that held both Israel and her enemies in their bonds. Jesus understood himself to be bringing to an end the demonic powers (and thereby the political ones as well) in order that individual and national repentance and renewal might be possible. The “cosmic catastrophe” Jesus expected was a political revolution effected by YHWH himself. Jesus’ apocalypticism, then, expressed

\(^{96}\) Wright, *JVG*, 448.

\(^{97}\) Wright, *JVG*, 462-3.
the belief that YHWH was now casting down the Satan from his throne, in order to make possible the renewal of the people of Israel. The coming of the kingdom necessarily entailed the termination of the old order.

Second, within the context of this greater cosmic battle, Jesus was able to see the Gentile pagans, including even the occupying forces who might commandeer Jewish peasants to carry their packs, as fellow victims of the power of the Accuser. This is why the real battle could not be won by a military confrontation. It is why Jesus taught his disciples instead the “doubly revolutionary method: turning the other cheek, going the second mile, the deeply subversive wisdom of taking up the cross.” This was the only way to win the battle against the Satan; it is how the kingdom would come.

Third, YHWH’s own people had been bound by the very same chains from which they were called to liberate the rest of the world. Israel’s own salvation and restoration had once been a subplot in the larger covenant story of YHWH’s plan, thought Israel, to rescue and redeem all of creation. But now, at the final hour, Jesus understood that he alone must accomplish, in and though Israel, the redemption and renewal of creation to which Israel had been called, but which Israel could not do for herself.

How exactly this was to happen will be the subject of the next chapter. But to begin to hint at a formulation even now, we must quote Write at length:

Within several Jewish retellings of Israel’s story, the great themes of exile and restoration, and of the kingdoms of god and the kingdoms of the world, would reach their climax in a great moment of suffering and vindication. The night would get darker and darker, and then the dawn would come. Israel’s tribulations would reach their height, and then redemption would arrive. Daniel would face the lions, and then be exalted. Judith would go into the tent of the enemy

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commander, and emerge victorious. The Maccabean martyrs would die horribly, and a new dynasty would be set up within an independent Israel. The son of man would suffer at the hands of the beasts, and then be lifted up to the right hand of the Ancient of Days. The symbol of suffering was itself a key ingredient within the Jewish expectation of the great deliverance the great victory.

If, then, Jesus was telling a story which belonged genetically within this group of Jewish narratives, as I have argued that he was, there is a strong probability that he envisaged for himself a similar fate of suffering and vindication. The language placed on his lips at various points of the passion narrative probably reflects an awareness of vocation that, historically, had preoccupied him for much longer.  

Jesus, therefore, may very well have conceived of his own impending death as the decisive battle in which the real enemy of YHWH’s people of would be defeated, the long exile brought to an end, and the kingdom of God established.

III. Summary and Analysis

I have outlined N. T. Wright’s picture of the historical Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet. First, in chapter 2, I showed how Wright situates Jesus’ apocalyptic eschatology in the context of creational monotheism and as the climax of the covenant narrative, around which Jews in the first century organized their understanding of world. Since there is no room in the worldview of creational monotheism for a cosmological dualism or the destruction of creation, Wright understands the language of cosmic catastrophe in the Gospels not as literal descriptions of a violent, abrupt end of the world but as an apocalyptic description of the restoration of YHWH’s covenant with Israel. The kingdom Jesus announced would mean the end of the world his disciples knew, but it would not be

100 Wright, JVG, 465.
101 Wright, JVG, 466.
the end of the space-time universe. In chapter 3, I fortified Wright’s case by reviewing his response to arguments put forward by Marcus Borg in opposition to eschatological portraits of Jesus, or at least arguments like Borg’s. Finally, in this chapter, I laid out Wright’s profile of Jesus itself: Jesus drew upon and intentionally mirrored the ancient prophets. He announced the kingdom of God as the climax of the covenant narrative. His “mighty works” were signs of that kingdom’s coming. And he built an apocalyptic community. Jesus’ creative reframing of the covenant narrative redefinition of symbols that exemplified the first century Jewish world view put him in tension with the religious leaders of Israel. Most importantly, we have now seen how, in Wright’s account of Jesus’ apocalyptic message, the covenant narrative comes to its climax in the defeat of the powers of darkness that hold in bondage both the oppressive forces of the Roman occupation and the violent and nationalistic responses to it in the life of Israel.

With this picture of the historical Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet, we are finally in a position, in the fifth and final chapter, to make a case for an apocalyptic meaning of his death, and to do so in conversation with a liberationist critique of atonement put forward in chapter 1. I will show how Jesus’ enfolding of the revolutionary political significance of the kingdom within apocalyptic imagery of the defeat of the powers of darkness overcomes the shortcomings of the solidarity model of atonement found in much liberation theology. Wright’s reading of apocalyptic language as narratively-textured metaphor helps the theory to sidestep the liberationist charge of escapism in PSE soteriology. Since the covenant narrative comes to a head in Jesus’ battle with the powers of darkness that hold both the Roman occupation and Israel in bondage, both sinner and
sinned against find liberation. Finally, none of this requires the divine violence of a penal substitutionary theory of atonement.
Layer by layer, I have been expositing, expounding upon, and in some instances critiquing and refining N. T. Wright’s construction of the historical Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet. In this chapter, I will complete that picture by taking up the question this entire dissertation has been pointing to: Why did Jesus die? Then, I will bring Wright’s Jesus into conversation with the liberationist critique of atonement in order to develop my covenant-apocalyptic atonement theory.

In chapter 2, I situated Wright’s covenant-apocalyptic soteriology within a reception history of the apocalyptic elements of the ministry of Jesus, at least as they are presented in the canonical gospels and particularly the synoptics. Contrary to the \textit{konsequente Eschatologie} of Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer, which governed much at least of German and American New Testament scholarship of the twentieth century, Wright does not think it possible that Jesus, with a first century Jewish worldview, could have proclaimed the end of the space-time universe, let alone expected for himself or his followers to escape such a cosmos-ending catastrophe to a disembodied, otherworldly heaven. One could conceive of this difference between Wright’s covenant-apocalyptic eschatology and the \textit{konsequente Eschatologie} in terms of \textit{place}: the one proclaims the redemption of this world while the other seeks to escape to another world.

Likewise, there is a difference in \textit{direction} between on the one hand covenant-apocalypticism, which takes aim at the intrahistorical political problems of oppressive
foreign occupation, nationalistic sectarianism, and violence, and on the other Bultmann’s
demythologized apocalypticism, which seeks existential and spiritual transformation.

The difference between Wright’s covenant-apocalyptic eschatology and C. H.
Dodd’s realized eschatology relates to \textit{time}. Dodd restricted the meaning of Jesus’
eschatological message and ethic to his own ministry in his own day. Covenant-
apocalyptic eschatology invites followers of Jesus in every age to build for the kingdom
of God, which in one sense has come in the death and resurrection of Christ but in
another is yet to be realized.

Between Wright as an historical Jesus scholar and the liberal Jesus scholars of the
late twentieth century—represented in this dissertation most prominently by Marcus
Borg—there is a difference in \textit{methodology}. Wright and Borg agree that the language of
crisis in the Gospels expresses not a description of the soon-coming end of the world, but
a declaration of intrahistorical judgment. (At the beginning of Borg’s career they agreed,
too, upon to whom Jesus rendered judgment, but Borg changed course on that question.)
In order to liberate Jesus from the grips of \textit{konsequente Eschatologie}, Borg opted to
marshal attacks upon the historicity of the apocalyptic Son of Man sayings, which he
argues are the only link between the language of imminence, images of cosmic
catastrophe, and the pronouncement of the kingdom of God. The latter had been
understood by the \textit{konsequente Eschatologie} school as the otherworldly heaven to which
one would escape the coming disaster. To delegitimize the apocalyptic Son of Man
sayings, then, is both to strip the \textit{konsequente Eschatologie} school of its most cogent
argument for an imminent catastrophe and to open the way for an interpretation of the
kingdom of God as an internal experience of the numinous. Wright rejects the process by
which they are said to be unauthenticated. Rather than detaching sayings attributed to
Jesus from their narrative context in the Gospels and examining them according to a
predetermined set of criteria to determine what data should be excluded from a
reconstruction, Wright opts for advancing large-scale narratives as historical hypotheses
in an attempt to determine how much of the prima facie relevant data he can include in a
reconstruction. The more material that can be cogently explained, the stronger the
hypothesis.

Having situated Wright’s work within the history of interpretation of
apocalypticism in Jesus scholarship, I outlined his construction of Jesus as an apocalyptic
prophet. Jesus drew inspiration from and intentionally mirrored the ancient prophets. He
announced the kingdom of God as the climax of the covenant story, his “mighty works”
were signs of that kingdom’s coming, and he built an apocalyptic community. But Wright
situates Jesus’ apocalyptic eschatology within the covenant narrative. In other words,
according to Wright, Jesus’ eschatology does not anticipate the end of the space-time
universe; rather it looks forward to the return of YHWH to Zion after his evacuation of
Solomon’s Temple prior to its destruction (Ezek 10). The return of YHWH to Zion, a
celestial reality, is necessarily mirrored by the terrestrial purification of the Temple, the
reinstalment of Israel’s rightful king to the Davidic throne, and the defeat of Israel’s
pagan enemies. These, Wright argues, would constitute true return from exile and thus
signal the eschatological forgiveness of the sins.

Read as an interpretation of the climax of the covenant narrative, Jesus’
predictions of judgment and vindication tell a very traditional Jewish story about the
divine judgment to befall the nations who oppress Israel, but with a new twist ending: in
Jesus’ stories, the judgment was to fall upon impenitent Israel herself. Rather than the victim of pagan aggression or corruption, Jerusalem had become Babylon, the enemy of the true covenant people. This reframing of the covenant narrative and redefinition of symbols that exemplified the first century Jewish world view put Jesus in tension with the religious leaders of Israel. Most prominently in Wright’s account, Jesus warned against violent resistance to the Roman occupation, and by extension, impugned a certain revolutionary strand of Pharisaism. But maligning the Temple as a symbol of national distinctiveness and purity would have made the chief priests and other Temple authorities none too happy as well, especially when accompanied by disruptive demonstrations.

Most importantly, though, in Wright’s account Jesus identifies the true enemy as neither the oppressive occupying Roman forces nor the nationalistic and sometimes violent resistance of the occupation, but the Satan, the dark power that locks both the occupiers and the occupied in their increasingly agitated powder keg. Ultimately, Jesus’ apocalyptic message proclaiming the covenant narrative comes to its climax in the defeat of the powers of darkness and the vindication of those who would not succumb to its enticing cycle of violence.

Why have I so painstakingly painted this picture of the historical Jesus as a covenant apocalyptic prophet? I set out to develop an understanding of the meaning of Jesus’ death on the cross within the Christian doctrine of salvation. I was convinced by a harmonious chorus of liberation theologies that at least the PSE theology of atonement espouses an escapist mentality that does not address the structures of sin present within creation and human society, offers no hope of liberation to victims of oppression, endorses a myth of redemptive violence that perpetuates cycles of violence, and distorts
the image of God. Neither, however, does the solidarity model of atonement proffered by many liberation theologies effect the liberation they seek. In fact, in some instances it may actually contribute to despair and impede resilience.

So, I advanced a hypothesis: that a soteriology informed by apocalypticism—a strand of biblical and theological tradition which my new taxonomy reveals to be sorely missing from historic Christian soteriological formulae—might be able to acknowledge the intrahistorical and political meaning of salvation elucidated by liberation theologies, that salvation means, in part, dismantling systems of dominance and oppression, both societal and internalized, while simultaneously emphasizing divine causality in defeating the dark powers that hold both oppressed and oppressor captive to those systems. I have proposed that what I have called the covenant-apocalyptic soteriology of Wright’s Jesus is particularly well-suited to this task because Wright understands the meaning of apocalyptic eschatology in its first context in a way that avoids both the escapism and world-negating dualism of other apocalyptic portraits of Jesus in recent memory.

Having laid out Wright’s construction of Jesus as a covenant-apocalyptic prophet, I can now make my case for a covenant-apocalyptic theory of atonement. I will argue that Jesus’ enfolding his politically radical proclamation of the kingdom into the larger apocalyptic narrative of the defeat of the powers of darkness provides a model for Christian soteriology that is both intrahistorical and invested in divine causality. As such, it fills the remarkable lacuna that liberation theology has exposed PSE soteriology; namely, it accounts for the intrahistorical and social dimension of salvation so clearly present in the biblical narrative itself. At the same time, it overcomes a shortcoming of the solidarity model of atonement presented in much liberation theology: it understands
that underlying every system of social oppression is a power greater than the sum of its perpetrators, and that no amount of solidarity or organizing will bring about salvation even within history, without also, perhaps even primarily, the divinely initiated transformation of soul. Then I will bring covenant soteriology into conversation with the critique of PSE soteriology leveled by various liberation theologians in chapter 1, to see if it falls prey to the same issues.

But first, I will summarize that critique. First, PSE soteriology relies on what Patrick Cheng calls a crime-based model of sin and grace, in which the salvific function of Jesus’ death is understood, as it is so broadly in certain forms at least of Western Christianity, as a substitutionary punishment. Here the trinitarian Father is pitted against the Son, or at least divine justice against divine mercy. Second, PSE soteriology is so preoccupied with the forgiveness of sins that it pays little or no attention to the victims of sin and injustice. Andrew Sung Park names the shadow side of the Christian doctrine of sin with the Korean concept of han, “the critical wound of the heart generated by unjust psychosomatic repression, as well as by social, political, economic, and cultural oppression.”1 Third, liberationist atonement critics say that PSE soteriology creates and a violent and sadistic depiction of God. Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, say that the picture is of a God who is “a divine sadist and a divine child abuser,” whose “abuse is paraded as salvific,” and of a “child who suffers ‘without even raising a voice.’”2 This theology, they contend, perpetuates continued abuse and victimization. Fourth, Gustavo

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Gutiérrez, emphasizes that in Scripture “salvation is an intrahistorical reality” of the transformation of social and political structures, and that history itself, to the degree that it participates in the struggle for a just society, is salvific.\(^3\) This in opposition to a PSE soteriology that conceives of salvation as escape to an otherworldly heaven.

I. Models of Atonement

A. The Solidarity Model

In place of the understanding of the cross operative in PSE soteriology, liberation theologians have understood the cross of Christ as God’s act of solidarity with the oppressed and marginalized. In chapter 1 we saw how this view was articulated by Jürgen Moltmann. Moltmann understood the cross as “an event between God and the Son of God,” in which “the Father suffers the death of his Son.”\(^4\) This event has radical implications for our understanding of the very nature of God. Whatever one might mean by the word “God” in the Christian tradition, one cannot mean less than the relationships between the Father and the Son and the Spirit, relationships which contain and are shaped by the death of Jesus.\(^5\) In the incarnation and death of Jesus, God enters into human finitude and “into the situation of man’s godforsakenness.”\(^6\) Consequently this is precisely what it means to be God: “God is not greater than he is in this humiliation. God is not


more glorious that he is in this self-surrender. God is not more powerful than he is in this helplessness. God is not more divine than he is in this humanity.’’

Moltmann began to develop his solidarity model of atonement as a German prisoner of war during World War II, while contemplating his own complicity in the sins of his people, and wrote it in its mature form decades later when he was working on the socialist revolution in Czechoslovakia, the Civil Rights movement in the United States, and the ecumenical movement in theology. In other words, Moltmann’s solidarity model of atonement was fitting both as a sinner in need of forgiveness and reconciliation and later as an ally seeking solidarity with the oppressed and working toward their liberation.

We saw also that liberationist theologians adopted and adapted this solidarity model of atonement for their own social situations, like James Cone’s juxtaposition of the cross and the lynching tree. When Jesus was arrested without warrant by a mob, beaten, and left hanging on a tree for passersby to mock and ridicule, he suffered, Cone says, in solidarity with the thousands of Black victims of lynching in the United States. The cross provides hope that that there is “a dimension to life beyond” the otherwise senseless suffering of lynching tree, Cone says, and “the lynching tree reveals the true religious meaning of the cross.”

Kelly Brown Douglas adapted the solidarity model to the crisis of police brutality and police killings of Black people and other people of color in the United States, a result of what she calls “stand-your-ground culture.” Jesus, she says, “was a victim of stand-your-ground culture,” and crucifixion “was a stand-your-ground type of

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7 Moltmann, The Crucified God, 205.
punishment…reserved for slaves, enemy soldiers, and those held in the highest contempt and lowest regard in society… [and] those who threatened the “peace” of the day.”⁹

Crucifixion was, in other words, inflicted on the same class of people who are victims of police killing today. Christ suffered and died in solidarity with them.

It does not take more than a modicum of empathy to see how this model of atonement can be a source of great comfort to a community brutalized by lynchings and by lethal police brutality. God, too, knows the savage fist and spit of a barbarian with state-sanctioned power. God hangs from a tree with them. But it is not just comfort; for some, an understanding of the cross as divine solidarity with the suffering aroused the courage to fight for liberation. Cone says that “the spirituals and the church, with Jesus’ cross at the heart of its faith, gave birth to the black freedom movement that reached its peak in the civil rights era during the 1950s and 60s.”¹⁰ “There were more songs, sermons, prayers, and testimonies about the cross than any other theme,”¹¹ he writes, because “the cross speaks to oppressed people in ways that Jesus’ life, teachings, and even his resurrection do not…the cross places God in the midst of crucified people, in the midst of people who are hung, shot, burned and tortured.”¹² The juke joints provided solace and sanctuary for Black people, but it was the spirituals, with the cross at the heart of their theology, “that sent people protesting in the streets, seeking to change the social structures of racial oppression.”¹³

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On the other hand, we saw, particularly from some feminist theologians, a reservation about the solidarity model of atonement. Brown and Parker point out that the model itself is not sufficient to bring about liberation. The notion that God bears the burden of suffering with us may make suffering more bearable but, they say, “bearing the burden . . . does not take the burden away.”14 Elizabeth Johnson worries that an image of divine weakness and suffering may actually even contribute to the sense of helplessness and despair that diminishes the drive to resist injustice and oppression. “The ideal of the helpless divine victim,” she writes, “serves only to strengthen women’s dependency and potential for victimization, and to subvert initiatives for freedom, when what is needed is growth in relational autonomy and self-affirmation.”15

To this I added a contextual critique: For people whose social locations make them, not victims of systems of violence and oppression, but beneficiaries of the existence of those systems, a solidarity model of atonement holds a divine mirror to their complicity in violence. As such it provides useful moral instruction to join Christ in solidarity with the oppressed, whether by divesting privilege or using it. But it does not promise to liberate them from the powers that bind them by their own benefit and privilege to systems of violence.

**B. The Covenant-Apocalyptic Model**

In the previous chapter we observed Wright’s vociferous—some might even say obstinate—argument that Mark 13 and similar passages in which the Jesus of the Gospels predicts the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple at the hands of Rome go back to the historical Jesus himself. He argues as well, paradoxically, that this violent and destructive act would mark the beginning of the climax of covenant narrative, that Israel’s god, and not Caesar, was becoming king of world. The radical implications of such a claim for questions as broad ownership of the land of Israel, claim to the throne of Judea, and control of the Temple are readily apparent, the point being that a covenant-apocalyptic soteriology is not naïve to the stark realities of political controversy. Nevertheless, Jesus did not organize his followers for military action, and he rebuked them when they misunderstood the mission in this way (Matt 26:52; Luke 22:51; John 18:11). This is because, for Wright’s Jesus at least, the real enemy was not Rome but the Accuser, the Satan, who underlay and upheld the Roman regime. The real struggle for the rights to the land and the soul of the Temple would be won in a cosmic battle with the Satan and the powers of darkness.

According to the covenant story, Jesus’ own people Israel would be the ones through whom YHWH’s rebellious creation was to be rescued from its enslavement to the dark powers. But they find themselves bound by the very chains they were to break. Israel’s own liberation, then, is the necessary subplot in the larger story of YHWH’s redemption and renewal of creation though Israel. In his final hours, Jesus, having bound

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the Satan in the wilderness (Mark 1:12-13; and from Q, Luke 4:1-13=Matt 4:1-11) and plundered his property through his exorcisms (see Mark 3:27; par. Matt 12:29; Luke 11:21-22), now knew that he alone must win the final victory to which Israel was called.

From the point of view of a covenant-apocalyptic soteriology, then, to ensure access to the divine presence and to establish a just social order is not simply to dismantle unjust social structures. If history has taught us anything, it is that every dismantled structure gets rebuilt anew, often with seven others more wicked than itself so that the last state is worse than the first. This is a logic native to atonement theories that plot on the bottom half of the soteriological plane, Quadrant III and especially Quadrant IV (see figure 1.2). It has its place. As we have seen, it can be deeply comforting to, and often inspire a certain resilience in, victims of sin and injustice. But as we have also seen, this logic itself is not sufficient to being about liberation of either oppressed or oppressor, and it may just as well enforce a sense of despair and diminish the capacity to resist injustice and oppression. A covenant-apocalyptic soteriology operates instead from a Quadrant I logic, in which the real-world social and political struggles are enfolded within a cosmic battle waged against the dark powers that underlie every unjust structure. It is the Satan who both empowered the pagan occupation and incited Israel’s sometimes violent and nationalist response. A covenant-apocalyptic theory of atonement is, at its heart, the conviction that the power of the Satan over both sinner and sinned against has been and will be broken.

It is this understanding, that both the oppressed and the oppressor are bound by the dark powers, that afforded Jesus the radical empathy to suggest that the Galilean peasants who constituted his audience resist their oppressors in serious and creative ways,
even while refusing common cause with the violent resistance movement that would seek
to cause them bodily harm. So, someone who has been slapped across the face should
turn to face his attacker, asserting his humanity (Matt 5:39). If a creditor whose
outlandish interest collections threatens literally to take the shirt off someone’s back, he
should strip naked right in the middle of the court room, exposing the disgrace and
degradation of the system of pillaging (Matt 5:40). If a soldier of the Roman occupation
(legally) conscripts someone to carry his pack for a mile in whatever direction he happens
to be heading, he should keep on carrying it until the soldier starts to worry that he will
be drawn up on charges for (illegally) forcing a citizen to carry his equipment too far
(Matt 5:41). Both sinner and sinned against are bound and their liberation is bound up
with one another.

II. Apocalyptic and the Problem of Covenantal Monotheism

I want to take a moment to raise a question that I have left largely unaddressed in
this dissertation. Here I can set it out only as an agenda for further research. I think that
Wright obstructs his characterization of narrative apocalypticism in the message of Jesus
by his formulation of the central belief of Second Temple Judaism as covenantal

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17 Precisely because he is trying to draw out Jesus’ opposition to the movement for violent resistance to
the Roman occupation present in a certain strand of Pharisaism, Wright’s own reading of these passages,
which I reviewed briefly in chapter 4, is somewhat less attuned to the note of resistance than the reading I
have offered here; see Wright, JVG, 289-91. I am following an interpretation by Walter Wink in Engaging
the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992),
175-93; The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium (New York: Doubleday, 1999), ch. 5; and

18 I am dependent in this section on the work of Michael S. Heiser, particularly Supernatural: What the
Bible Teaches about the Unseen World – and Why It Matters (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015); and
The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press,
2015).
monotheism. If what he means by this is simply that YHWH is the one and only god who created the universe and that he has covenanted with Israel to accomplish his purposes in creation, then covenantal monotheism is a useful summative appellation. If, however, Wright has in view a less nuanced, more conventional definition of monotheism, by which it is thought that Jews in the Second Temple period believed that besides YHWH there are no gods worthy of the title, that YHWH was alone in the spiritual universe, not only would that be demonstrably untrue, it would also, it seems to me, undercut his eschatological project.

There are times when Wright writes as though he understands monotheism in the first, more nuanced sense. Monotheism in early Judaism “was not a philosophical or metaphysical analysis of the inner being of a god, or the gods,” he says. “It was the unshakable belief that the one god who made the world is Israel’s god, and that he would defend his hill against all usurpers and attackers.”19 Other times, though, he writes in the less guarded and more conventional sense: “Israel was committed to seeing her god as ontologically (and not merely practically) superior to the gods of the nations, and hence was committed to certain belief about her own place and purpose.”20 This is true enough, at least in the sense that they believed YHWH to be the unique creator god. But Wright goes on: “The gods of the nations are not ‘real’ gods; they are idols.”21 This is almost the opposite of how Paul expresses it to the Corinthians: “in fact there are many gods,” even if the idols that represent them are not real. But “for us there is one God” (1 Cor 8:5-6).

20 Wright, NTPG, 249.
21 Wright, NTPG, 249.
Paul is, of course, simply recognizing the fact that, according to much of Israelite religion, YHWH rules by a council of gods, and that there is a rich narrative history of those gods in the Hebrew scriptures, even though for Israel none of them is to be worshipped as coequal to YHWH.

Deuteronomy intimates that YHWH gave to the members of the divine council rulership over the nations of the world: “When the Most High apportioned the nations, when he divided humankind, he fixed the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the gods; the LORD’s own portion was his people, Jacob his allotted share” (32:8-9). Israel being YHWH’s own portion is what makes the Land itself sacred. As we saw in chapter 2, Wright identifies the Land as one of the four primary symbols in which the covenant worldview story was cast. But, being strangely unattuned to this narrative, Wright attributes the holiness of the Land to the presence of the Temple in it: “The holiness of the ‘holy Land’ spread out in concentric circles, from the Holy of Holies to the rest of the Temple (itself divided into concentric areas), thence to the rest of Jerusalem, and thence to the whole Land.” There is, no doubt, a reciprocal relationship between the sacredness of the Land and the sacredness of the Temple, both ultimately a result of the presence of YHWH. But even if YHWH were to exit the Temple, as Ezekiel envisioned before Nebuchadnezzar destroyed it (Ezek 10), the land of Israel would remain that which he “chose as a dwelling for his name” (Deut 12:11) when he declared it his portion. This is why Naaman, a gentile Aramean who nevertheless came to believe...

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22 See for instance 1 Kgs 22:19-22; Job 1:6-7; Ps 89:5-7.
23 The NRSVue follows the Qumran manuscripts here; the Masoretic Text has “according to the number of the Israelites.”
24 Wright, NTPG, 225.
that there is no God in all the earth except YHWH, asked for two mule-loads of dirt from
the land on which to offer sacrifices to YHWH with no reference to the Jerusalem
Temple (2 Kgs 5). Naaman understood that that dirt belonged to YHWH in a way that the
dirt on which he lived did not. Transporting it was his way to sing YHWH’s song even in
a foreign land.

The gods of the nations are often depicted as celestial bodies. In Gen 1, human
beings, who bear the image of the Creator-God (vv. 26, 27) are made rulers over “the fish
of the sea and over the birds of the air and over the cattle and over all the wild animals of
the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth” (v. 26). That is, over
everything besides themselves created in days five and six (vv. 20-25) and living with
them in the houses built on days two and three (vv. 6-13). Likewise, the “two great
lights,” the sun and moon, are appointed as governors to rule the kingdom of day and
night and the stars that dwell therein (vv. 3-5, 14-19). This is likely a subtle polemic
against the astral worship of the Babylonians, in whose captivity the Israelites were when
this text took its written form. Your gods may govern the day and night as human beings
govern the earth, it implies, but it was the Creator-God of Israel who established their
dominion.

This reading of Gen 1 is supported by Deut 4, where Moses entreats the people to
keep the commandments:

Watch yourselves closely, so that you do not act corruptly by making an idol for
yourselves in the form of any figure: the likeness of male or female, the likeness
of any animal that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the
air, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that
is in the water under the earth (vv. 15b-18).

The resonances to days five and six of the creation poem in Gen 1 are clear. He goes on:
And when you look up to the heavens and see the sun, the moon, and the stars, all the host of heaven, do not be led astray and bow down to them and serve them, [these are] things that the LORD your God has allotted to all the peoples everywhere under heaven. But the LORD has taken you and brought you out of the iron smelter, out of Egypt, to become a people of his very own possession, as you are now (vv. 19-20).

YHWH has given the Egyptians and the Babylonians and “all the peoples everywhere under heaven,” Moses seems to say, to the sun, moon, and star, and other such gods. But you are YHWH’s own portion.

In Genesis the proximate cause of the nations’ being divided up among the gods of the council is a rebellion in which human beings try to build their way up to a godlike status (Gen 11). Canonically, this story comes one chapter after the division of the nations among the gods, but one cannot be too woodenly literalistic about the timelines in mythological stories. Prior to it (though it is probably best to understand these stories as simultaneous; terrestrial activities are often mirrored in the celestial realm) the sons of god try to breed human beings into immortality (Gen 6:1-14). The heavenly rebellion parallels the earthly rebellion. We are told that God judges the council for this: “God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment” (Ps 82:1). The New Testament authors actually get specific about that judgment: “The angels who did not keep their own position but deserted their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains in deepest darkness for the judgment of the great day” (Jude 6).25 In 2 Peter the judgment is explicitly connected to Gen 6:

God did not spare the angels when they sinned but cast them into hell [tartaros] and committed them to chains of deepest darkness to be kept until the judgment; and…he did not spare the ancient world, even though he saved Noah, a

25 By this time angelos had become an umbrella term for all heavenly beings.
herald of righteousness, with seven others, when he brought a flood on the world of the ungodly (2 Pet 2:4-5).

Thus, the normal state of affairs in the biblical worldview is that of rebellious gods ruling over rebellious nations. One can catch a glimpse of this worldview in Isaiah’s oracle about the day of judgment:

On that day the LORD will punish the host of heaven in heaven and on earth the kings of the earth. They will be gathered together like prisoners in a pit; they will be shut up in a prison, and after many days they will be punished. Then the moon will be abashed and the sun ashamed, for the LORD of hosts will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and before his elders he will be glorified (Isaiah 24:21-23).

The actions and the fate of the kings of the earth are bound up with the gods they represent. Three examples will establish this pattern: (1) Isa 14 narrates the casting down of a deity called the Morning Star (vv. 12-20) and this is connected to a taunt and threat against the king of Babylon (vv. 1-11). (2) In Ezek 28:11-19, the ouster of the king of Tyre is identical to the casting out of a cherub who was appointed as guardian of Eden. (3) In Dan 10, Gabriel, an angel of YHWH, tells Daniel that he had wanted to come to his aid sooner but that the “prince” who has dominion over Persia had delayed him for three weeks until another angel, Michael (whom he also refers to as a prince) had come to help him overcome the prince of Persia. Here the conflicts on earth reflect heavenly battles and divine reproof.

Within this worldview, the return of YHWH to Zion, the great climax of the covenant narrative as Wright lays it out, would necessarily be mirrored in the reinstalment of Israel’s king to the Davidic throne. As with the land, Wright connects the importance of the monarchy with the Temple: “Temple and royalty belonged closely together,” he says. “When David was establishing his rule, one key move [was his]
planning of the Temple. When Solomon built the Temple, he established the pattern that would remain true for all subsequent generations up to and including the first century: the Temple-builder was the true king, and vice versa. He does not, however, highlight that the re-establishment of the Davidic Monarchy would be seen as synonymous with the return of YHWH to Zion owing to the belief, seemingly ubiquitous in the Bible, that the king is the embodied representative of his god. This is as true of Israel’s king and Israel’s god as it is of the kings of all the nations and their gods as well.

This is why in the book of Revelation Sodom, Egypt, and Rome are interchangeable:

> When they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up from the bottomless pit will wage war on them and conquer them and kill them, and their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city that is prophetically called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified (11:7-8).

Babylon is as well (passim, especially ch. 18). For it is not an individual government that, at any given time, oppresses the people of YHWH; it is the beast from the bottomless pit, the spirit that underlies all oppressive regimes. It is also why the Fourth Gospel can refer to the Satan as “the ruler of this world” (12:31; 14:30; 16:11) and why Paul can refer to him as “the god of this world” (2 Cor 4:4). One should not, therefore, understand Jesus’ battle against the daimonion (“lesser gods”) as distinct from his conflict with the Temple authorities or his final confrontation with Rome as anything other than the climax of the confrontation begun with the Satan in the wilderness.

I do not know why Wright does not attend to this narrative of the rebellion of YHWH’s divine council and the subsequent handing over of the nations. Perhaps it is

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26 Wright, JVG, 205.
part of his overall tendency to find more continuity than discontinuity between the biblical world and the world of the church. Perhaps he simply does not see it or think it important. Regardless, with so anemic an angelology, Wright is hard pressed to establish the need for the divine cosmic intervention to which he says the New Testament’s apocalyptic language applies. The reader is then whiplashed by the sudden insertion of the Satan, a *deus ex machina* dropped seemingly from nowhere, not to resolve the problem of the narrative but to create it.

**III. Escapism and the Language of Apocalyptic**

I have suggested that an apocalyptic soteriology might avoid some of the sticking points we discovered in a liberationist solidarity model of atonement. However, given the recent history of apocalyptic readings of Jesus and the Gospels, one would be justified in worrying that an apocalyptic soteriology might contribute to one of the issues the liberationist critique raised with regard to PSE soteriology, namely, that it would be escapist. In the *konsequente Eschatologie* of Weiss and Schweitzer, Jesus’ apocalypticism implied that he expected the imminent end of the space-time universe and he taught his followers literally to escape this cosmos-ending catastrophe to an otherworldly heaven. In Bultmann’s demythologized eschatology, the Christian escapes the real historical and political problems of the world—Jesus’ world and one’s own—by understanding them as existential threats, grist for the mill of spiritual transformation. Dodd’s realized eschatology escapes the implications of Jesus’ challenge for us and for our time by restricting the meaning of Jesus’ eschatological message and ethic to his own day.
By contrast, as we have seen throughout this dissertation and particularly in chapter 2, Wright restricts his use of the word “apocalyptic” in characterizing the ministry and message of Jesus to only the same meaning as designates that genre of early Jewish literature that is characterized by reports of mystical visions which disclose a state of affairs normally hidden from human view or give insight into the divine plan for a great reversal of the current state of affairs. This means that Wright does not take the eschatological dualism characteristic both of apocalyptic texts and of the apocalyptic imagery employed by Jesus to imply and underlying cosmological or anthropological dualism.27 Rather, according to Wright, Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet and the authors of apocalyptic texts were creational monotheists. They did not see their bodies as a corrupt prison for pristine souls. They did not see the world as evil or look forward to its end.28 Both were part of YHWH’s good creation. And they themselves were covenanted to partner with YHWH in their redemption and restoration.

Thus when Jesus uses the language of cosmic catastrophe he is not, according to Wright, speaking literally of an abrupt and violent end of the world. Rather, he is employing vivid and biblically enriched metaphors in a poetic register to describe the dramatic socio-political and spiritual reversals that would result when the creator God returned to Zion, Israel regained political control of the Jewish homeland, and the nations converted en masse to the worship of YHWH. What language could be better suited to this end of the world as they knew it? This covenant-historical version of apocalypticism,

27 Wright, NTPG, 297-9
28 Wright, NTPG, 299. Wright seems here to be at odds with Caird, for whose proposal, as we saw above, the biblical belief in a literal end of the world is the first point, see G. B. Caird, The Language and Imagery of the Bible, reprint with a new forward by N. T. Wright (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 256-7. It is interesting that Wright does not mention it in his forward to the Eerdmans edition of that book, even where he raises points of disagreement, xxvi-xxvii.
then, does not recapitulate the escapism of PSE soteriology. To the contrary, it turns its attention precisely to the real-world intrahistorical and political systems that liberation theologians understand to be the proper object of salvation.

IV. Why Did Jesus Die?

We can at last face head-on the question that has driven this entire dissertation: Why did Jesus die? There are, of course, many possible answers to such a question. Most simply, Jesus was executed as a rebel against Rome. As best as can be ascertained from our sources, Jesus was arrested by Temple police (Mark 14:43-52; par., Matt 26:47-56; Luke 22:47-53; and John 18:1-11), likely for his dramatic protest and property destruction in the court of the Gentiles. He was tried before Caiaphas, the high priest (Mark 14:53-65; Matt 26:57-68), and a council of elders and scribes.29 He was then handed over to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, who sentenced him to crucifixion (Mark 15:1-15; Matt 27:11-26; Luke 23:1-5, 13-25; John 18:28-19:16).30 So the Jewish authorities had reasons for arresting Jesus and handing him over to Pilate, who had his own reasons for sentencing him. What also emerges from our sources is that Jesus too had some agency in his own death. In fact, ask Wright why Jesus died and he will say “ultimately, because he believed it was his vocation.”31

29 Possibly he was tried first by the former high priest, Annas, and then Caiaphas, as in John 18:12-14, 19-24, or both together, as in Luke 22:66-71.

30 In one account, before sentencing Jesus, Pilate sent him to the client tetrarch, Herod Antipas, who “questioned him at some length” but got no answers (Luke 23:6-12).

31 Wright, JVG, 593.
In my opinion, the details of Wright’s account of the Jewish authorities’ reasons for arresting Jesus and particularly of Pilate’s reasons for sentencing him to crucifixion are on shakier historical ground than much of the rest of his construction. For that reason, I will cover what he says about them quickly and use most of this section to discuss what he says about Jesus’ own understanding of his death. However, the mere fact of addressing the historical and religio-political reasons for Jesus’ death is immensely important. One of the primary critiques that liberation theologians leveled against PSE soteriology is its forensic model of sin and grace. Jesus died, on this model, to serve the punishment for humanity’s crimes against God. There are several issues with this way of naming the problem, chief among them that it has nothing whatever to do with the historical life and execution of Jesus of Nazareth. Simply to recognize that Jesus was executed on the charge of insurrection, an enemy of the Roman empire instigated by religious collaboration, is already to break the grip of the abstract forensic notion of atonement.

A. The Case of the Jewish Authorities

The Jewish authorities were incensed because Jesus’ Temple protest had been a blow to the primary symbol of Israel’s national life. This is reflected in the charge heard at the trial before the high priest’s council that Jesus had threatened to destroy the Temple (Mark 14:58; par., Matt 26:61). And, though it was clear that Jesus was not leading a military revolt, he was no doubt a messianic or quasi-messianic figure who could therefore easily foment revolutionary zeal and thus make the nation a target of Roman aggression.
However, the Jewish authorities could not very well paint Jesus as a revolutionary leader. That would have endeared him to the crowds. Having a popular revolutionary put to death, particularly right in the middle of the Passover celebration, may have incited just the sort of riot they were eager to avoid. That, Wright says, is what the meeting described in John 11:47-53 (and only there) was about: finding a charge against Jewish law that would stick.32

The charge they came up with, according to Wright, is that Jesus was “a false prophet leading Israel astray.”33 Such a charge is rooted in Deuteronomy 13:

If prophets or those who divine by dreams appear among you and show you omens or portents, and the omens or the portents declared by them take place, and they say, ‘Let us follow other gods’ (whom you have not known) ‘and let us serve them,’ you must not heed the words of those prophets or those who divine by dreams… But those prophets or those who divine by dreams shall be put to death for having spoken treason against the LORD your God… If anyone secretly entices you…saying, ‘Let us go serve other gods,’ whom neither you nor your ancestors have known… Stone them to death for trying to turn you away from the LORD your God.34

Obviously, a person guilty of such a charge would warrant a death sentence. But applying it to Jesus would require a consideration of his mighty works alongside claims of his disloyalty to Israel’s traditions. Only the combination could suggest the verdict that he was enticing some to serve unknown gods.35

32 Wright, JVG, 550.
33 Wright, JVG, 550.
34 Deut 13:1-3a, 5a, 6, 10a; see Wright’s discussion of the charge in, JVG, 439-42.
35 Wright, JVG, 440; see, for instance, see Mark 3:22; (par., Matt 12:24b; Luke 11:15).
Wright hears echoes of this charge when Jesus is accused of “deceiving the crowd” (John 7:12), and when it is said that he “stirs up the people” (Luke 23:5) or is “inciting our nation” (Luke 23:2; cf. v. 14).  

Even if we accept Wright’s hypothesis about the quasi-Deuteronomistic charge of “leading Israel astray,” decided at a secret Johannine meeting, it is not yet clear why Pilate would be inclined to sentence him to death. One of the most intractable problems in historical Jesus studies is how to explain both Jesus’ controversies with the Jewish authorities and why Rome would see it as worthwhile to crucify him. Either one of these propositions is easily explained; together they create a riddle. As we saw in chapter 3, Marcus Borg once understood the central issue of Jesus’ politics to be “a misguided nationalism generated by the dynamic of holiness.” But Borg later came to understand the problem not as a violent opposition to Rome but as the Roman “domination system” legitimated by religious ideology. The result of such an evolution is that it became far easier for Borg to explain why Rome would see Jesus as a threat. The tradeoff, though, is that he was no longer able to explain Jesus’ controversies with his co-religionists, except to frame it as a dispute with the “elites” who were in collusion with the domination system. Wright thinks that Borg’s initial analysis was right and that he went off course in his later work. For Wright, as we have seen, particularly in chapter 4, Jesus took aim at the nationalistic anti-pagan zeal of at least Shammaite Pharisaism and the politics of

36 Wright, JVG, 439-42. Justin Martyr apparently was aware of the charge as well (Dial. 69:7), and it is reflected also in some Talmudic passages (bSanh 43a; 107b).
purity that undergirded that impulse. He can easily read the controversies through that lens. But it takes a bit of historical gymnastics to explain why opposing militant revolution would not endear Jesus to Pilate, let alone incline him to crucify him. Wright’s solution is to suggests that both the Jewish authorities who had Jesus arrested and Pilate who executed him knew that he was not guilty of the charge and intentionally misrepresented him, each for their own purposes. Once again this is a valid hypothesis: if anyone had actually believed Jesus to be a dangerous revolutionary they likely would have arrested his followers as well. There is no reason to think it is wrong. But neither is there any compelling reason to posit it.

**B. The Roman Case**

What does Wright say were Pilate’s motives for ordering Jesus’ execution? First of all, he does not accept the innocent if easily manipulated Pilate who appears prima facie in the Gospels. “What emerges from the record,” he says, “is not that Pilate wanted to rescue Jesus because he thought he was good, noble, holy or just, but that Pilate wanted to do the opposite of what the chief priests wanted him to do because he always wanted to do the opposite of what the chief priests wanted him to do.” In this case, however, Pilate was not able to subvert the chief priests. When the brief accounts of the synoptics are read alongside the Johannine narrative, Wright says four facts emerge: (1) Whether by Jesus’ equivocation—some version of “your words, not mine” is in all four

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39 Wright, NTPG, 188-97.
40 Wright, JVG, 544.
41 Wright, JVG, 547-8.
canonical gospels\textsuperscript{43}—or by some other means, Pilate recognizes that Jesus is not the normal sort of revolutionary. (2) Pilate must have realized that the Jewish leaders had their own reasons for wanting Jesus executed. (3) He tried to refuse their request but failed.\textsuperscript{44} (4) He was not able to thwart the chief priests because it was pointed out to him that if he did not execute an accused rebel he would appear disloyal to Caesar.\textsuperscript{45}

Though this is certainly a plausible hypothesis, it says, in my estimation, far more than the data demands that one say. Wright’s method, as we saw in chapter 3, relies not on establishing with the closest approximation to certainty possible, but on positing a hypothesis grand enough to incorporate as much of the available data as possible. That method is on display here, if anywhere. But again, what matters most for my thesis about the intentions of Pilate and of the Jewish authorities is not the specific details of the events but the mere fact that there are real-world religio-political reasons for the crucifixion of Jesus. Christ did not die, as in PSE soteriology, as a divine punishment to appease God’s wrath against the sin of humanity. He died because people with the power to kill perceived him as a threat. What will matter more for the covenant-apocalyptic soteriology I am trying to develop is an account of Jesus’ own understanding of and perhaps even intentionality in his death.

\textsuperscript{43} Mark 15:2 (par., Matt 27:11; Luke 23:3); John 18:37.

\textsuperscript{44} Even though Wright backpedals on the historicity of the actual details of the account in Mark 15:6-14 (par. Matt 27:15-23; Luke 23:17-23) and John 18:39-40—“Neither the Barabbas nor the Herod incident materially affects our present enquiry” (\textit{JVG}, 546, n. 30)—he states the whole structure quite confidently.

\textsuperscript{45} Wright, \textit{JVG}, 546-7.
C. Jesus’ Intentions

1. The Last Supper: Forgiveness and Liberation

The key symbolic action through which Jesus interprets the meaning of his own death is the Last Supper. Like all Passover meals, Jesus’ Last Supper recalled the exodus event. It celebrated victory over the Pharaohs and return to the promised land. Naturally, for first-century Jews, it would point as well to a new exodus, the final return from exile. As such the Passover meal stirred hopes of victory over the Roman occupation—for the real victory, after all, was to be over the powers of darkness who enliven both Pharaoh and Caesar—the reinstalment of the Davidic king, the return of all Israel to the land, and forgiveness of the sins for which they had been exiled in the first place.

Thus, the cup is Jesus’ “blood of the covenant” (Mark 14:24, par., Matt 26:28; Luke 22:20), echoing Exod 24:8. Exodus is a covenant-renewing event, just as return from exile is a covenant climactic event. To this Matthew adds that it is “poured out… for the forgiveness of sins” (26:28). This move explicitly connects exodus with return from exile. The Israelites were not slaves in Egypt because they were sinners. They were the victims of an insecure, xenophobic, and ruthless ruler who feared what he did not know and so brutalized it (see Exod 1:8-14). They did not need forgiveness; they needed rescue. The exile, on the other hand, had long been understood as the result of Israel’s covenant unfaithfulness (see Deut 28:15ff). Consequently, the prophets

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46 Wright, JVG, 554.
47 Wright, JVG, 557.
48 Wright, JVG, 560.
connected forgiveness of sins with return from exile and restoration of the covenant. It must be stressed again that, in this context, forgiveness of sins does not denote a forensic declaration or transactional exchange between God and an innately sinful human being. It is, rather, the concrete expectation that YHWH will remember his covenant with his people and rescue them from the exile that resulted from their unfaithfulness to that same covenant. The disclosure that Jesus’ blood is “poured out…for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt 26:28)—be they Jesus’ own words or Matthew’s—does not suggest that Jesus’ death will satisfy the terms of an abstract atonement, but that it will be the means of rescuing YHWH’s people from exile.

Second, liberation theologians have critiqued PSE soteriology for focusing almost obsessively on the forgiveness of sins while simultaneously ignoring the plight of the sinned against. But notice how, in overlaying the return from exile theme of forgiveness onto the Passover narrative, Jesus blurs and intermingles the categories of sinner and sinned against. We have already seen how Israel, who in a traditional telling of the covenant story is painted as the victim of gentile aggression, becomes in Jesus’ telling of it the aggressor, controlled by the very spirit of violence that enlivened the pagan oppressors. Here he makes the opposite move: a sinful people serving out the curse of their covenant unfaithfulness in exile is identified with the victims’ slavery. This way of thinking is not the result of careless or tone-deaf use of metaphor that does not properly distinguish the contexts created by social stratification. Rather, it is the inevitable result of an apocalyptic understanding of the nature of reality. Sinner and the sinned against are

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49 Isa 40:1-12; Jer 31:31-34; 33:7; Lam 4:22a; Ezek 36:24-36. See my extended discussion of this topic in chapter 4.

50 Wright, JVG, 561.
both victims of the dark powers that bind each, in different ways, to systems larger than themselves. Bondage and exile interpret one another. Forgiveness and liberation are bound up together.

2. The Suffering Servant: From Abusive Father to Protective Mother

Jesus’ Last Supper cannot be understood solely within the context of Passover, for this meal was Jesus’ second major prophetic symbol of the week. It should be understood in relation to Jesus’ Temple action earlier in the week. The two symbols interpret one another. The reader will recall that in chapter 4 I laid out Wright’s argument that Jesus’ action in the Temple was an enacted parable of the Temple’s imminent destruction. Here, Wright suggests that, by calling the loaf that he has just broken (destroyed) “my body” (Mark 14:22, par., Matt 26:26; Luke 22:19), Jesus identifies his own body with the Temple. Somehow his death would be linked to its destruction.51 How so?

According to Wright, as we have seen, Jesus believed that Israel’s exile had reached its climax. In the tradition of Elijah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, he had announced that Jerusalem and the Temple were under YHWH’s judgment. But whereas “the prophets had warned Israel of the consequences of compromising with pagan cults; Jesus warned of the consequences of compromising with pagan politics.” Whereas “the Maccabees had denounced…those Jews who had compromised with Antiochus Epiphanes; Jesus denounced…those who compromised with Caesar…by thinking to defeat him with his own weapons.”52 In other words, according to Wright, Jesus did not

52 Wright, JVG, 595.
announce a program of purity and of being undefiled by the pagan nations. Had he, he would have had recourse to a perfectly legitimate strand of the prophetic tradition, but it was not the strand Jesus deemed needful at the time. Instead, he called Israel back to her covenant vocation to be a light for the nations.\footnote{Wright, \textit{JVG}, 595.}

These earlier prophets had all been ignored, but Jesus, the last in line, would be killed (Mark 12:1-12, par. Matt 21:33-46; Luke 20:9-19). “Like the Maccabean martyrs, he suffered what he saw as the result of Israel’s pagan corruption…Unlike them, he saw as pagan corruption \textit{the very desire to fight paganism itself.}”\footnote{Wright, \textit{JVG}, 596.} On Wright’s telling of the history at least, “Israel had become a hotbed of nationalist revolution; suffering would come of it, specifically in the form of Roman swords, falling masonry, and above all crosses planted outside the capital city.”\footnote{Wright, \textit{JVG}, 596.} Jesus accepted willingly, if with some trepidation,\footnote{Mark 14:36, (par. Matt 26:39; Luke 22:42); John 10:18; 15:13.} to take that suffering upon himself as Israel’s representative. For “fighting the battle of the kingdom with the enemy’s weapons,” as Jesus believed some of his coreligionists (in particular, a nationalistic strand with Shammaite Pharisaism) were doing, meant that they “had already lost it in principle, and would soon lose it…in practice.”\footnote{Wright, \textit{JVG}, 595.} Jesus determined that is was his role and calling “to lose the battle on Israel’s behalf.”\footnote{Wright, \textit{JVG}, 595.}

Attributing to Jesus such a radical self-conscious vocation strains modern Western credulity. One has to think only of John Knox’s suggestion, which I discussed briefly in...
chapter 3, that only a megalomaniac of the worst order could possibly conceive of himself as the apocalyptic Son of Man. But the fact of the matter is that there was a theology developing already during Second Temple period that the ultimate end of exile and the covenant renewal might come by suffering and that the suffering might be that of a representative individual.\(^5^9\) “One of the most obvious categories of suffering individuals within Israel is that of prophets. The most obvious evidence for this is in the New Testament, where it has become proverbial.”\(^6^0\) But representative suffering is apparent in other Second Temple texts as well.\(^6^1\) And it has roots in the biblical tradition (2 Chr 36:15f.; Neh 9:26; Jer 2:30). Put simply, “Jesus lived in a world where it might well make sense to believe one was called to take upon oneself the fate, the exile, of Israel.”\(^6^2\)

The most notable example of the theme of representative suffering in the Hebrew scriptures appears in the servant songs of Deutero-Isaiah, most notably the suffering servant (Isa 52:13-53:12). In the canonical gospels, Jesus does not quote directly from Isa 40-55 as much as he does from say Deuteronomy or the Psalms. Though, notably, in Luke’s Gospel, it does provide the mission statement for his public ministry:

> “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind,

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\(^6^0\) Wright, *JVG*, 579. See e.g., Luke 6:22-23 (=Matt 5:11-12); 11:47-51; (=Matt 23:29-36); 13:34; (=Matt 23:37); Acts 7:52.

\(^6^1\) Wis 2:12-20; At Qumran: 1QpHab 5:10-11; 1QpHab 11:4-7; Most importantly, “the sufferings of the martyrs are described in 2 Maccabees as having the effect of dealing with the nation’s sins in the present time, so that Israel might receive mercy in the future, unlike the other nations whose sins were mounting up until they were finally to be judged.” Wright, *JVG*, 582; citing 2 Macc 6:12-17; similarly in *4 Macc.* 6:27-29; 9:23-24; 17:20-22; 18:3-4.

\(^6^2\) Wright, *JVG*, 593.
to set free those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (Luke 4:18-19; cf. Isa 61:1-2)

Whether or not Jesus ever actually preached such a sermon in his hometown synagogue,
such a statement is entirely appropriate as a banner over his ministry and message.

Everything that Jesus says and does maps thematically onto the whole of Deutero-Isaiah.

One has to look only at a short representative passage to see it all: the proclamation of the
“gospel,” the announcement to Zion that her God was becoming king, that he would
defeat the nations and return his people to their land.63

How beautiful upon the mountains
    are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,
who brings good news,
    who announces salvation,
who says to Zion, “Your God reigns.”
Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices;
    together they shout for joy,
for in plain sight they see
    the return of the LORD to Zion.
Break forth; shout together for joy,
you ruins of Jerusalem,
    for the LORD has comforted his people;
he has redeemed Jerusalem.
The LORD has bared his holy arm
    before the eyes of all the nations,
and all the ends of the earth shall see
    the salvation of our God. (Isa 52:7-10)

Could a more apt summary of Jesus’ ministry and message be given? “It is therefore
highly probable,” Wright says, that “in addition to several other passages which informed

63 Wright, JVG, 601-2.
his vocation, Jesus regarded [Isa 52:13-53:12], in its whole literary context, as
determinative.”

The entire program of Isa 40-55—YHWH’s divine rule, the defeat of Israel’s
enemies, the return from exile—is put into effect by the redemptive suffering of the
servant. It should not be surprising, then, that Jesus, whose mission and self-identity is so
clearly formed by these songs, should act and speak as if the kingdom would be put into
effect by his share in Israel’s suffering. Wright thus proposes that having “told the
second-Temple story of the suffering and exile of the people of YHWH in a new form”—
that is, with the YHWH’s own city and people standing, in the place of the pagan
empires, under YHWH’s judgment, because they had been infected by the spirit of
Babylon—Jesus then “proceeded to act it out, finding himself called…symbolically to
undergo the fate he had announced, in symbol and word, for Jerusalem as a whole.”

The implications of this reading for of Jesus’ self-consciousness for a covenant-
apocalyptic theory of atonement are significant. Liberation theologians have criticized
PSE soteriology for painting a picture of God as an abusive father demanding his pound
of flesh and of Jesus as the violated son, obediently meeting the cruel demands. What
emerges from Jesus’ understanding of his own death, as shaped by Isa 52-53 and
parabolically enacted in the upper room, is a picture of a fearless mother hen gathering
her brood under her wings (Luke 13:34=Matt 23:37), sacrificing her own life to shield
them not from the violence of God but from the violence of Rome.

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64 Wright, *JVG*, 603.
65 Wright, *JVG*, 594.
V. Conclusion

We began with the liberationist critique of PSE soteriology: (1) that it relies on a forensic model of sin and grace, which pits divine justice against divine mercy; (2) that it idolizes the forgiveness of sin, ignoring, and often at the expense of, the sinned against; (3) that it depicts a violent and sadistic God; and (4) that it conceives of salvation as escape. We then examined the liberationist alternative to PSE soteriology: a solidarity model of atonement in which, through the cross of Christ, God suffers with the oppressed and marginalized. We found that for victims of oppression and marginalization the solidarity model has been a source of great comfort and sometimes engenders the courage to fight for liberation. However, acknowledging that God shares in one’s suffering does not take that suffering away. To the contrary, an image of divine weakness may contribute to the sense of helplessness and despair that diminishes the will to resist oppression. Moreover, for those who appear to benefit from the existence of systems of oppression and violence, a solidarity model of atonement provides moral guidance but not the power to be liberated from those systems.

I have put forth, as an alternative both to PSE soteriology and a solidarity model of atonement, what I have called N. T. Wright’s covenant-apocalyptic soteriology. Apocalyptic theology peers behind the veil of history to recognize the forces at work behind and underneath what seem mere mechanistic political and social systems. As such, an atonement theory informed by the apocalyptic strand of Jesus’ ministry and message avoids the problems with the solidarity model of atonement by insisting on divine causality in defeating the dark powers that underlie systems of oppression and violence. Although, I have questioned whether Wright’s angelology, in particular, is robust enough to support this claim.
Moreover, Wright’s covenant-apocalyptic soteriology holds up to the liberationist critique. In contrast to a number of other apocalyptic portraits of Jesus in recent memory, Wright understands the meaning of apocalyptic eschatology in its first context in a way that avoids both escapism and world-negating dualism. As such, a covenant-apocalyptic soteriology will acknowledge the intrahistorical and political meaning of salvation. Because this understanding of atonement is rooted in history—in the communal life of the people of Israel and in the historical life and execution of Jesus of Nazareth—it does not rely on an abstract forensic or transactional understanding of sin and grace. Jesus’ own understanding of the meaning of his death, revealed in the symbolic Passover meal he gave to his disciples on the night he was betrayed, shows that, for Jesus, the forgiveness of sin and the liberation of the oppressed are bound together—both are instantiations of the great battle with the powers of evil. Moreover, in his recourse to themes from the servant songs of Deutero-Isaiah Wright depict a Christ who will go to extraordinary lengths to protect his people from the wrath of Rome, not an obedient victim suffering in their stead the wrath of God.

This dissertation represents a significant contribution to atonement theology, in that I have created a new taxonomy of atonement theories, one that exposes a gap in other modern taxonomies. I have filled that gap by offering an atonement theology informed by the apocalyptic strand of Jesus’ ministry and message, which both attends to the intrahistorical and political meaning of salvation and relies on divine causality to defeat the powers that underlie systems of injustice and oppression. I have made some small contribution too, I hope, to liberation theology, by exposing the limits of some liberationist formulae—in particular, the solidarity model of atonement—to speak beyond
the contexts from which they are written. The argument that I have put forward here suggests that an apocalyptic turn might afford liberation theology more universalizability, while maintaining its distinct and invaluable focus on the intrahistorical nature of salvation. Finally, in apocalyptic theology, I have bolstered the argument for a Cairdian interpretation of apocalyptic language by showing that it can produce an atonement theory that holds the weight of the liberationist critique. I hope especially that those working on the apocalyptic nature of the Paul’s letters will take heed of this argument.
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