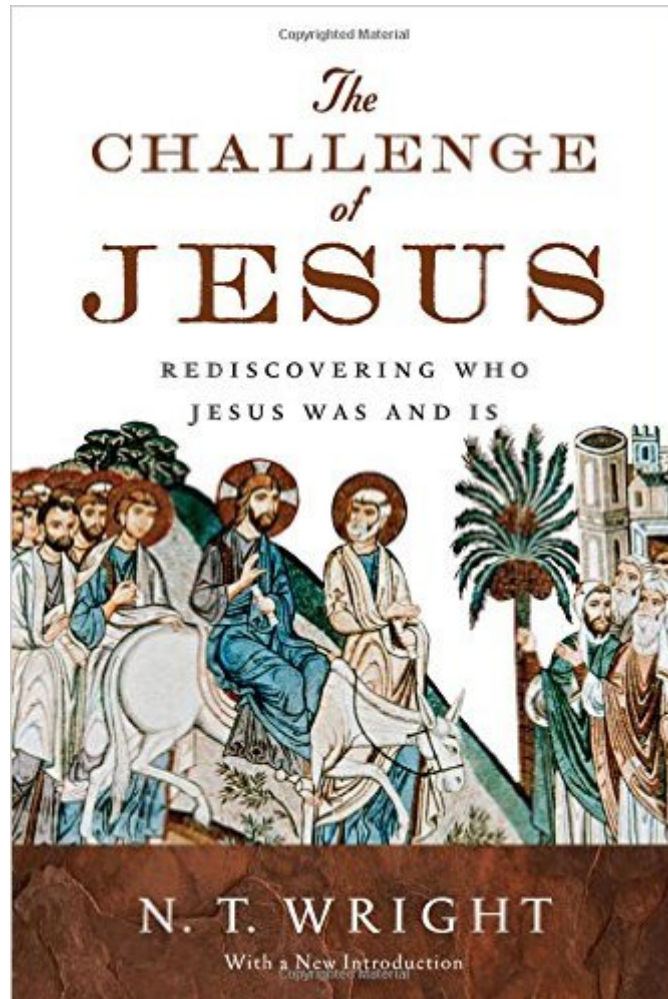


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The Challenge Of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was And Is



Synopsis

Today a renewed and vigorous scholarly quest for the historical Jesus is underway. In the midst of well-publicized and controversial books on Jesus, N. T. Wright's lectures and writings have been widely recognized for providing a fresh, provocative and historically credible portrait. Now this paperback edition of Wright's classic work contains the same original content plus even more insight with an all-new introduction by the author. Out of his own commitment to both historical scholarship and Christian ministry, Wright challenges us to roll up our sleeves and take seriously the study of the historical Jesus. He writes, "Many Christians have been, frankly, sloppy in their thinking and talking about Jesus, and hence, sadly, in their praying and in their practice of discipleship. We cannot assume that by saying the word Jesus, still less the word Christ, we are automatically in touch with the real Jesus who walked and talked in first-century Palestine. . . . Only by hard, historical work can we move toward a fuller comprehension of what the Gospels themselves were trying to say." The Challenge of Jesus poses a double-edged challenge: to grow in our understanding of the historical Jesus within the Palestinian world of the first century, and to follow Jesus more faithfully into the postmodern world of the twenty-first century.

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Customer Reviews

The author is Canon Theologian of Westminster Abbey, and this book represents a distillation of ideas he presents at length in lengthy scholarly publications, which engage in "mainstream" historical debate about Jesus and first-century Christianity. Wright debates, however, without setting

aside personal commitment to and belief in the essential truth and genuine historicity (of Jesus's resurrection, for example) which the New Testament books and letters claim. This does not mean that he feels bound to toe any particular line defined as orthodox. "I am someone who believes that being a Christian necessarily entails doing business with history and that history done for all it's worth will challenge spurious versions of Christianity, including many that think of themselves as orthodox, while sustaining and regenerating a deep and true orthodoxy, surprising and challenging though this will always remain." (p 16) I would have to let theologians offer opinions on the orthodoxy of Wright's arguments; but these arguments are in any case stimulating and bring fresh air to scriptural study and devotional contemplation. There are three areas where Wright challenges what he feels are common misunderstandings about Jesus. First, he argues that "Jesus remained utterly anchored in first-century Judaism" (p 73), and that everything he said and did was a "unique challenge to his contemporaries" and was "related uniquely and specifically to that situation" [i.e. in the first century] (p 174). Wright feels that this approach closes off the possibility of Deism, or of seeing Jesus merely as one of several 'great men' of a certain type in human history, a type of deeply wise, gentle moral philosopher preaching timeless aphorisms. By setting studying Jesus in his historical context alone, and shutting off (at least for the moment) the universality of his words and deeds, we come to a better understanding of their profound radicality and significance. Jesus was casting himself as the culminating nexus of everything that Jewish history and prophecy had been pointing to. Wright shows how this approach helps us to understand better why the first Christians (who were Jews) became utterly convinced that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah, whose message had to be taken to the Gentiles. Wright cautions that his approach does not mean that Jesus loses his relevance for today - "this fear is groundless". "The key I propose for translating Jesus' unique message to the Israel of his day into our message to our contemporaries is to grasp the parallel, which is woven deeply into both Testaments, between the human call to bear God's image and Israel's call to be the light of the world. ... Jesus came as the true Israel, the true Jew, the true human." (p 184) The author also challenges what he considers a creeping Docetism into our modern understanding of who Jesus was, and of how he understood his vocation and what he believed himself to be. Wright's arguments in this book, although shortened from his methodical treatment in other books, are still too complex - challenging - to outline in a review. He urges Christians to "forget the 'titles' of Jesus, at least for a moment; forget the attempts of some well-meaning Christians to make Jesus of Nazareth conscious of being the second person of the Trinity" (p 122-123), as these approaches can reduce Jesus to almost a ghostly, supernatural presence, when in fact he was a breathing, sleeping, walking man who suffered and died. Third: in

the final two chapters of the book Wright explains why he feels that postmodern philosophy has discredited modern philosophy (modern = 18th, 19th, early 20th centuries), with its claim that science can uncover objective truth, and why we should not fear this. Rather, he considers that Christianity can flourish as well or better in the postmodern intellectual world, and mixes the argument with personal, devotional reflections on what it means to be a follower of Jesus today. I recommend the book especially to anyone who wants to read an intellectually rigorous challenge to the conclusions of those historians who wish, however tactfully, to debunk Christianity.

"Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5:18) Jesus Christ came to reconcile us with the Father. Through his wounds we are healed. In "The Challenge of Jesus," N.T. Wright does a good job of helping us to try and look at Jesus with our blinders off. Rejecting the thesis of Wrede, and following in the footsteps of Schweitzer, Wright believes that we can learn a good deal about the actual, "Historical" Jesus (my, how that phrase has been abused in the last half-century) through doing the work of history. I praise Wright for attempting this grand task. "The Challenge of Jesus" is a shorter distillation of Wright's larger ongoing work which at the time of my writing consists of two published volumes (The New Testament and the People of God; Jesus and the Victory of God) with the series length now projected at six volumes total. This volume is no doubt aimed at a broader audience than Wright's more scholarly work. Wright attempts to look at Jesus without the lens of a controlling theology. I like this a lot. We should always read the Bible for what it actually says, remembering the context in which they were written, and then build our theology from that foundation. Too often, we make up a theology and then try and fit its square peg into the round hole that the Word of God confronts us with...there is a word for this kind of thing: idolatry. Wright manages to do a fairly good job of interacting with the Bible and history. He does disappoint me on his views of Jesus knowing whether he is God or not...he gives a waffling answer with unsatisfactory support. Wright's Jesus comes out looking a lot like the Jesus of orthodoxy in the things that he did: proclaiming the Kingdom, Dying a sacrificial, atoning, and reconciling death, making clear claims to divinity (in spite of Wright's own weird view on the matter,) and being Bodily Resurrected on a Sunday morning...the startling part of the book is the perspective...Wright solidly locates Jesus and his message within the milieu of second temple Judaism...the results give a whole new spin on the Message of Jesus. For me, this book has strengthened my walk with the Savior. In spite of its flaws, I'm giving this one five stars...it is incredibly thought-provoking. I recommend this book most highly.

PREMISE: We have at least two camps (actually more) of persons who study the life of Jesus. There are those who search for the historical Jesus. This camp is too often made up of historians who come at the issue with a bias against traditional Christianity that was born of the enlightenment. Hence, they discount stories of the miraculous because they don't believe in miracles. A second camp is made up of conservative Christian scholars who approach the life of Jesus from a theological bias, born of centuries of Christian tradition. They do believe in miracles, because they have faith. Surprise! Both camps find the Jesus they set out to look for. N.T. Wright is aware of both camps, but writes somewhere outside of either. He approaches Scripture and the life of Jesus through the eyes of Second Temple Period Jewish Politics. His version of the historical Jesus is VERY political. He puts forth a rational case for his thesis, then examines the impact this new vision of Jesus should have on the church in this postmodern world. AM I CONVINCED? I'm not sure I would say he convinced me, intrigued would be a better word. His case is too unusual to accept at first reading, but he certainly offers the reader a lot to think about, and delivers his message well. I will keep my eyes open a little wider for future discussions of this nature. RECOMMENDATION: If you like to be challenged, you might like this book. If you are too accepting, you might be tempted to accept his well written premise too easily. If you tend to be a "Defender of the Faith" you might find this book threatening.

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