



Two Views of Jesus

Eduqas A level R.S. C1A Christianity Theme 1F

Key Concepts:

- N.T. Wright says that to 'write off' Christian beliefs in Jesus as irrelevant to modern life is to uncritically accept an **enlightenment worldview** of life.
- We need to start by examining our worldviews: a set of assumptions and stories that answer basic questions such as 'Who are we?', 'Why are we here?' and 'What's wrong with the world?'
- The enlightenment worldview (or **naïve realism**) assumes that sense perception gives us a sure understanding of the world, and that history, a dry set of facts divorced from meaning and spiritual beliefs, should be kept personal and private.
- There are many reasons to question this worldview. Not least is the reaction of **phenomenalism**; that all that can be known is the knower.
- Wright says that we should engage in **critical realism**: things can be known outside of ourselves, though this knowledge is always filtered by our own point of view.
- The New Testament presents a worldview which is compelling: Jesus presents history as having meaning and purpose.
- Jesus reinterpreted '**Messiah**' in a striking way to include a rejection of violence and the theme of a sacrificial death. The fact that the Jesus movement survived is itself evidence of the truth of Christian belief since movements of other '**failed messiahs**' disbanded.
- John Dominic Crossan is sceptical of orthodox Christian accounts of Jesus which present Jesus in terms of an all-powerful Son of God removed from the concerns of the world.
- He is also sceptical of taking the Gospels at face value as they reached their final form only after 30 years from the death of Jesus and present a Church structure with an established male hierarchy.
- In constructing an 'historically accurate' view of Jesus, Crossan tries to locate early traditions (30-60CE) from within the Gospels, such as 'Q', the shared material between Matthew and Luke, the **Gospel of Thomas** and other **non-canonical** writings.
- Crossan argues that these sources do not present Jesus as having a miraculous birth or a resurrection, but as a **teacher of wisdom** with an emphasis on social justice.
- Jesus as a **social revolutionary** who tried to build a community without gender or class distinctions (his **open table** fellowship, women in leadership, and welcoming **outcasts**).
- The so-called 'miracles of healing' were really **social healings**, including those cast out from the centre of society.
- Jesus should be compared to the Graeco-Roman **cynics** who were **itinerant** teachers and rejected social codes and material wealth.
- Jesus was a '**Mediterranean Jewish Peasant**' – each of these words unlocks an aspect of his identity.

Key arguments/debates:

N.T. Wright's critical realism says we aren't sceptical enough of our scepticism: life can contain a mystery that can't be encapsulated in a closed approach. Others believe that the enlightenment 'won' for good reason: we don't want superstition and abusive religious leaders.

Another debate: aren't the four Gospels canonical for a reason? They are the earliest and widely attested as accurate by the early church. We do not have firm evidence that Q or the Gospel of Thomas predate these Gospels. However, others see the latter as compelling evidence for a proto-Gospel that does not contain supernatural 'bookends' on Jesus' life.

Key questions:

- Can science alone teach us what is 'real'?
- Is the worldview of Jesus of value for today?
- Is historical scepticism different from a dogmatic historical approach?
- Are the four Gospels good sources for knowledge of Jesus?



Key quotes:

"Worldviews, and the stories that characterise them, are in principle normative: that is, they claim to make sense of the whole of reality." (N. T. Wright)

"Pagan Cynicism involved ... contempt for honour and shame, for patronage and clientage. Jesus and his first followers fit very well against that background." (J. D. Crossan)

Key words:

Worldview enlightenment | naïve realism | phenomenalism | critical realism | messiah | failed messiah | Mediterranean Jewish Peasant | Gospels Q | Gospel of Thomas | non-canonical | teacher of wisdom | social revolutionary | open table | social healing | itinerant | cynics | outcasts