

A NEW HEAVEN AND A NEW EARTH

The hope of Israel, expressed variously in the Torah, Prophets, and Psalms, was not for a rescue operation that would snatch Israel (or humans or the faithful) from the world, but for a rescue operation that would be for the world, an operation through which redeemed humans would play once more the role for which they were designed. It was the hope for a renewed world in which justice and mercy would reign forever. Jesus was explaining not that this hope had been abandoned in favor of “saved souls going to heaven,” but that this hope for new creation had been fulfilled in a shockingly unexpected way. The revolution had already taken place. By the evening of that Friday, had they but known it, the world had changed. From our point of view, as we read this story, it all involves a double redefinition. First, there is indeed a radical redefinition of the Jewish hope of rescue from pagan oppression, of a new justice and peace for the world, of the ultimate return of YHWH to his Temple. Once you put the crucifixion and resurrection of Israel’s Messiah in the middle of that story and make it the new focus, everything looks different. Second, the Christian world has for so long clung to and taught a meaning of “redemption” that involves “saved souls going to heaven” that it takes quite an effort of the imagination to come to terms with the New Testament’s message, that what we are promised in the gospel is the kingdom of God coming “on earth as in heaven”; or, to put it another way, for all things in heaven and on earth to be summed up in the Messiah; or, to put it yet another way, “new heavens and a new earth, in which justice will be at home” (2 Pet. 3:13). Once we learn, with the puzzled disciples on that extraordinary evening, to grasp the way the ancient biblical hope was redefined around Jesus himself, then we are bound to embrace the far more radical revision of our own “Christian” cultural expectations concerning “heaven.” And once we do that, we are forced into two more major questions that hover over the present part of the book. The two questions are as follows. First, what is the calling of humans in this promised new world? Second, granted human failure (“sin”), how are humans to be rescued so that they can fulfill that calling?

Wright, N. T.. The Day the Revolution Began: Reconsidering the Meaning of Jesus's Crucifixion (pp. 146-147). HarperCollins.