Excerpt Page from N. T. Wright
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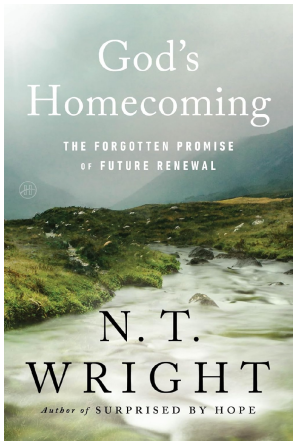

There is a new book by renowned New Testaments scholar N. T. Wright, titled God's Homecoming: The Forgotten Promise of Future Renewal. *As you might glean from the title, Wright argues that Christians, over the centuries, have gotten the message upside-down when we have come to emphasize 'our going home to heaven when we die.' Here is his argument against reading John 14:1-4 as about 'going to heaven.' (pp. 116-210:*

In the customary reading of this passage, Jesus is promising (a) that "heaven" is the ultimate destination of his followers, and that it has plenty of room for them, and (b) that he will eventually return (in the "second coming," presumably) to take them to be with him there.

If the passage has this meaning, it is unique in the New Testament, and certainly in John's gospel. But there are signs that Jesus is pointing to something different, something more in tune with John's larger themes. These may initially appear complex, but this is largely because our default mode has been so firmly set in, the normal western tradition.

The overall thrust of John 14 is the challenge to the disciples to believe in Jesus, to trust him, and through the gift of the spirit, to do in the world the works that will continue and develop the work that Jesus has been doing. The basic homecoming here, stated at the climax of the chapter, will be that of both the father and the son, coming in the spirit to dwell with believers:

> *If anyone loves me they will keep my word. My father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.* (John 14:23.)

The chapter as a whole thus suggests a quite different understanding of the opening verses. There seem to be at least three overlapping points.

First, if the "home" where both father and son will come to dwell is the community of believers, then the phrase "in my father's house" can be read as referring to the father's *household*, the "house" or family within which there is plenty of room for all.

Second (this can seem confusing, but John's gospel is full of this kind of double meaning), the phrase "my father's house" clearly refers to the temple, a major theme throughout John. But the temple is the heaven-and-earth building, not simply an image of "heaven" itself. And, as we saw, ever since 1:14 and 2:21, Jesus has been designated as the ultimate reality to which the Jerusalem temple was an advance signpost. In belonging to him, the disciples are being given their places in this new temple.

This is presumably why, third, he goes on to explain that he is the "way" to the final destination (14:6). If there is also a long-range glance to the ultimate future, this is how it must work. John's reader already knows, from John 5:28-29, that Jesus promises his followers bodily resurrection, which implies the wider context of a whole new creation. Here he promises that, in between their own death and that final new reality, the God of heaven and earth will look after them, equipping them for their Jesus-like "works" in the present and, if there is also a glance at life beyond death, looking after them prior to their resurrection.

The key term here, which I have translated as "room to live," is actually in the plural: *pollai monai*, "many places to live." The word *monē* has a clear and regular meaning in Greek, and it is neither the King James version "mansions" nor any other sense of a permanent dwelling. A *mone* is not a final dwelling place. It refers, rather, to a place to stay for a while, perhaps a resting place on a journey.

This, I have discovered, is controversial. We had better consider some evidence. The modern version of Arndt and Gingrich's Lexicon, though intending to suggest parallels for the sense of "dwelling-place," "room," or "abode," actually provides several passages that undermine this,

suggesting rather that the word cannot mean a permanent residence. In Chariton's novel *Callirhoe* (1.12.1) the pirate chief Theron, having abducted the heroine, gets his men to land a few miles from Miletus in order to remain undetected while he decides what to do. He tells his men to "construct a shelter" (*monēn poiein*) for Callirhoe, not (of course) intending that she will live there forever, but only hoping to keep her safe overnight while further plans are hatched. Pausanias (10.31.7), cited for the same meaning, actually refers to a "stopping place" or "station," a temporary pause on a journey. Josephus, retelling the story of Elijah running away to Mount Sinai, says that he found a cave where he "made his abode for some time (*poioumenos en autō tēn monēn*); he had no intention of living there permanently. Other examples (cited, for instance, in the Brill Dictionary of Ancient Greek, which translates *monē* as "act of staying behind, rest, pause"), include a rest on a journey (Thucydides), a break on a march (Xenophon), a pause in a dance (Plutarch), or a staging post on the way (Clement). Not until later Christian usage, where the word can denote a monastery, and may intend an echo of the present passage, does it refer to a permanent dwelling.

The sense of a *temporary* resting place, then, is the natural Greek meaning of Jesus's promise. Ahead of the final resurrection, any of Jesus's followers who die will be looked after until that great day. By the same token, the promise in John 14:23, where the word is used for the dwelling of the father and. Jesus with those who keep Jesus's word, indicates that this, too, is in advance of the final restoration of all things.

In particular, then, the promise that Jesus will "come back and take you to be with me" is, to say the least, ambiguous in this context. The customary reading has been that Jesus will return at the "second coming" and take his followers to be with him in "heaven." But in the same passage the "coming again" of Jesus refers, not (or not primarily) to the "second coming," but to the "coming" of Jesus in the form of the holy spirit. Thus in John 14:18 he promises:

> *I'm not going to leave you bereft. I am coming to you . . . Because I live, you will live too. On that day you will know that I am in my father, and you in me, and I in you . . . Anyone who loves me will be loved by my father, and I will love them and show myself to them . . . If anyone loves me, they will keep my word. My father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them . . . I've said all this to you while I'm here with you. But the helper, the holy spirit, the one the father will send in my name, he will teach you everything . . . You heard that I said to you, I'm going away, and I'm coming back to you."* (John 14:18-21, 23-26, 28)

The promise is not that Jesus, at his own "second coming," will take his people to heaven. It is, rather, that when the spirit comes there will be a new kind of mutual indwelling. Believers will dwell in Jesus; Jesus will dwell in the father; Jesus-and-the-father will together dwell, by the spirit, in the believer — and they will be *at home* there. This state of affairs will be partial and incomplete until the final new creation and resurrection. But we have said enough to indicate that John 14:1-3 is best read as an assurance of Jesus's presence with his people in the new creation, presently inaugurated but not yet complete, rather than as a promise about going to heaven, specially not about heaven as a final destination. John 20, describing Jesus's resurrection and his gift of the holy spirit, must be seen as part of the fulfillment of this promise, though there remains the haunting promise of Jesus's personal return in 21:22-23 ("If it's my intention that he should remain here until I come, what's that got to do with you?").

It thus appears that the gospels endorse the vision of Israel's scriptures, while narrating the shocking and unexpected mode of their fulfillment. God the Creator had made promises to Israel and to all creation, promises shaped in advance by his coming to dwell in the wilderness tabernacle and then the Jerusalem temple. These strands of promise were concentrated on the divine intention to return to Zion after Israel's prolonged exile. The gospel writers, in their different ways, insist that God's promise to come home to his people and his world has been fulfilled in Jesus, and that it is being fulfilled, and will be fulfilled, by the spirit.