Excerpt Page from N.T. Wright
Easter 7A / Ascension — May 17, 2026

Excerpt from N.T. Wright's *The Challenge of Acts: Rediscovering What the Church Was and Is* (Zondervan, 2024), pages 5-17.

Kingdom and witness

This brings us to the disciples' key question in verse 6: 'Is this the time when you are going to restore the kingdom to Israel?' This question emerges, naturally enough, from considerable confusion. Jesus' friends had not of course been expecting his crucifixion and resurrection. Those shocking and tumultuous events were quite outside their sense of how God's great purposes would unfold. But the reason they had followed Jesus was because they had come to believe that he was Israel's Messiah, the king who would rescue Israel and restore her fortunes at last. So, they are saying, 'Can we get all that back on track now? Is this the time to do what we had all along expected, what Deuteronomy and the Psalms had appeared to promise, to make Israel the top nation and send the wicked pagans back where they belong?' So: is this the time to restore the kingdom to Israel?

Many have assumed that Jesus' answer is 'No, but' — in other words, 'No, this isn't the time; that will come later; but you have work to do between now and then' From that point of view, which has been popular in some quarters, not least within dispensationalism, 'restoring the kingdom to Israel' is a *further* goal, some way down the road, presumably involving some kind of national and geographical 'restoration' of the Judean people. That would make the disciples' witness 'to the ends of the earth' into a temporary fill-in, ahead of that eventual result. In that scheme, when the disciples ask, 'Is this the time for you to restore the kingdom to Israel?' Jesus' answer would be 'No, but': '*No*, it's not the time for that yet, *but* you have a job to be getting on with in the meantime.'

I have been convinced for many years that the correct answer is 'Yes, but'. Think again of the two on the road to Emmaus, who say, 'We were hoping that he was going to redeem Israel', with the implication that he was crucified, so he can't have been Israel's promised redeemer (Luke 24:13-35, at v. 21). Jesus then explains that it was precisely through that event — his crucifixion — that his redemption would be accomplished. We should think back, too, to the parables of the kingdom, which say again and again, 'Yes, the kingdom is indeed arriving, but no, it's not happening in the way you think.' It's like seeds planted in the soil . . . like a man with two sons . . . and so on. We might think also of Luke 19:11-27, when Jesus and his followers are approaching Jerusalem, the disciples think the kingdom will arrive immediately, and Jesus tells the parable about the nobleman coming back to see how his servants have got on with their commission. *Yes*, the kingdom is being launched right now; but *no*, it's not going to look like you thought.

Think, too, of what Jesus told his followers at the Last Supper: that he wouldn't drink with them again until the kingdom of God arrived (Luke 22:18). Clearly, for Luke (as indeed for all the others), the events of Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension really are the inauguration of his kingdom. The mission of the Church is not about *preparing for Jesus to become king*. It is implementing the fact that *he has become king*, even if that new kingship doesn't look like the sort of thing people had been expecting.

How does that work? We shall return to verses 6-8 in a moment. But for me the crunch comes in verses 9-11, where Jesus is taken up to heaven. If we ask, 'What is the most obvious and vivid scriptural account of God's kingdom being given to God's people?' the answer is of course Daniel 7 — which is itself a kind of nightmare version of Psalm 2, about the nations raging and then God exalting the Messiah. In Daniel, the four beasts do their worst, and then 'one like a son of man' is exalted on the clouds to sit beside the Ancient of Days, receiving' kingdom, power and authority, so that all peoples, nations and languages should serve and obey him (verse 13, RSV). In Daniel 7 itself, this vision is interpreted in relation to 'the people of the holy ones of the Most High', in other words, the remnant of true Israel. Daniel 7 — focused on the 'one like a son of man' being taken up to heaven — is all about *the kingdom being restored to Israel*. What we have here in Acts 1 is the exaltation of the one Luke's readers have come to know as, inter alia, 'the son of man'. This exaltation is then followed at once, in Acts 1:15-26, by a careful description of the restoration of the 'twelve', the symbolic representatives of the renewed Israel, after the departure of Judas. Luke is saying, quite deliberately, 'This is what Daniel was talking about.'

We might notice, in parallel to this, that at the end of Matthew 28, in the so-called 'Great Commission'

passage, the risen Jesus speaks of 'all authority in heaven and on earth' being 'given to' him, in words that echo those same promises in Daniel (Matthew 28:18; Daniel 7:14, 18, 27.). The whole New Testament is actually clear and unanimous: the, sovereign rule of Jesus, as king of the Judeans and hence lord of the world, is not postponed until his eventual return (which of course is still in mind). It is truly inaugurated with the events of his death, resurrection and ascension. Nor should we understand Jesus' promises about his kingdom to refer to 'the end of the world', as many have thought. They are about God's good world *now under new management*. The second coming will complete the work, but it has now decisively begun. 'He has to go on ruling', says Paul, 'until "he has put all his enemies under his feet"' (1 Corinthians 15:25). There is a future completion; but the 'rule' has already begun.

So we come back to verse 6. What did the disciples have in mind? We might think of the kingdom-movements in the centuries either side of Jesus. In the 160s BC Judas Maccabeus and his men overthrew the Syrian tyrant who had desecrated the Temple, and established an independent Judean kingdom which lasted for a century until the arrival of the Romans. In the 130s AD Simeon ben Kosiba, aka 'bar Kochba', was proclaimed as king, and ruled a small free kingdom for three years — until, once more, the Romans moved in. There were other kingdom-movements in between, particularly in the 60s AD. Their task was always conceived in terms of overthrowing the Gentile idolators who had polluted the land and the Temple, and restoring God's people to be the pure torah-observers they were supposed to be — quite possibly then becoming the supreme nation, ruling the world. It's not hard to see a straight line to that ambition coming from the Psalms and the Prophets: Israel's king will rebuild the Temple; he will be lord of the world; the princes of the nations will join themselves to Abraham's family; and that's how God will clean up and sort out the whole world.

So the disciples' puzzled question looks as though they are saying, 'Well, we weren't expecting all this, but now can we please get back to the main story, the great national dream?' And in that question they themselves were involved: like James and John earlier, they, presumably, expected to play key parts in that new work (see e.g. Mark 10:35-40). So Jesus is saying — and the whole of Acts is saying — *Yes*, this dream is now being fulfilled, but *No*, not in the way the disciples imagine. Their task is precisely to advance the kingdom *by being his witnesses*. In and through their work, the sovereign rule of the risen Jesus will become a reality on earth as in heaven. It will start small but it will quickly reach extraordinary new proportions. They must not, as Jesus indicates, bother their heads about when exactly the kingdoms of the world will finally become the visible kingdom of God and of Jesus. That's God's job. They are to get on with working *for* the kingdom — in other words, making it known in word and practice that Jesus is the world's new king. When Paul and Silas are later accused of saying that there is 'another king, Jesus', we shouldn't be surprised (Acts 17:7). Luke wants to say, 'Well, yes, of course.' And this, as we shall see, raises the big question that haunts much of the narrative, and ought to be carefully pondered by all readers of Acts today: how does obedience to God, and the following through of this missionary mandate, play out in relation to human authorities?

We note already that the disciples' calling is to announce and inaugurate Jesus' sovereign rule. This will come into effect through their witness to him, their summoning people to repentance and faith (in other words, the people are to turn from idols and give allegiance to the one God), and their assuring them of salvation in the renewed world that will be completed at Jesus' return. But — and this is always hard for some Christians today to take on board — this isn't about explaining to people what they must do (or not do) in order to ensure that they will go to heaven when they die. You see, when we read the language of 'salvation', our minds easily flick back into the default mode of Western Christianity: we assume that the whole message is about 'going to heaven'. That is never mentioned here. In fact, *the New Testament isn't about our going to be with God; it's about God coming to be with us*. Think of the strapline in the last great scene of the Bible: not 'humans have gone to dwell with God', but 'God has come to dwell with humans' (Revelation 21:3). Luke, after all, regularly uses the language of 'salvation' to refer to what we might call 'this-worldly' realities, such as healings, or rescue from disaster including shipwreck. The point is that such events *anticipate* in the present time the ultimate rescue from death itself that is promised in the final new creation and resurrection.

Verse 8, then, sketches the sequence which the whole book will follow: Jerusalem and Judea, then Samaria as in chapter 8, and then the wider Gentile world, as in chapters 13–28. And with that we move to

the climax of the passage.

The son of man coming in his glory

Generations of Western Christians have been puzzled by the ascension. We have lived in an implicit cosmology in which 'heaven' is thought of as a long way away, up in the sky — reflected in hymns which speak of 'beyond the blue' and so on, and in stained-glass windows which have Jesus going upwards, with his feet sticking downwards out of a cloud. But with the rise of modern science people have realised (as many people in the ancient world knew, too) that heaven cannot be a location within our space-time universe, somewhere you would eventually get to if Elon Musk or Richard Branson flew you far enough. So what is the ascension about? Does it commit us to a kind of Jesus-the-spaceman viewpoint which we know to be deeply misleading?

No. The problem is with our implicit metaphysic and cosmology. Modern secularism has assumed that, because there isn't such a place as 'heaven' within our cosmos, it can't exist. Many Christians in response have lurched towards Plato and said, 'Ah, but we have souls, and the soul's true home is "heaven", which is a "spiritual" place, not material at all.' That is the view, perhaps, of a majority of Western Christians today, insofar as they have reflected about the question.

But then we have . . . the ascension. Which is precisely about Jesus' *physical* body — his resurrected body, yes indeed, still recognisable by the mark of the nails, still able to walk and talk and, as in verse 4, to sit at table and eat with his friends. The ascension is about *this physical body* now being in 'heaven'.

This makes no sense in modern secular cosmology. But in the genuinely biblical cosmology it makes all the sense in the world. The difference between these two ways of understanding the world has nothing to do with the biblical cosmology being 'ancient' and the secular one 'modern'. Secular modernism is simply a new variation on ancient Epicureanism, in which the gods lived in a totally different sphere from the humans. Most people in our culture, including most Christians, don't realise that there *are* different cosmologies; so most go along with the modernist one, without really thinking it through. Most Christians then add in a dash of Platonism, claiming that, even if we and God are a long way apart, we have souls which can jump the gap and which will eventually end up leaving 'earth' and going to 'heaven'.

That is an unbiblical distortion. In Scripture, from Genesis 1 onwards, *heaven and earth are the twin halves of God's good creation*. They are designed to interlock and overlap. They are made for each other. Scripture affirms repeatedly that they are designed eventually to come together as one. Heaven is God's space; earth is our space; but that isn't to suggest that 'heaven' is a *Platonic* heaven in which space, time and matter have no place. Far from it. To do cosmology, as with everything else, we should not start with other views of how the cosmos works and then try to fit Jesus into them. We should put Jesus at the centre, and rethink everything around him. With the ascension, the human body of Jesus is gloriously at home in his father's territory, against the day when he comes again to bring everything to judgement and to the long-awaited universal restoration, of which Peter speaks a couple of ch4ters later (3:21).

It's interesting that both Paul and John, when speaking of that moment, refer not simply to Jesus' 'coming', as though from some distance away, but to Jesus' *appearing or being revealed*. This is the, language used in Colossians 3:4 and in 1 John 3:2. Heaven and earth are already secretly intertwined, with the heavenly reality — focused on Jesus himself — very close, but hidden as it were behind a curtain, ready to be revealed. The ascension isn't about Jesus going away and leaving us to our own devices. It's about Jesus now at the father's right hand — in other words, holding the place of authority and power in the whole cosmos. In the Bible, *heaven is the CEO's office*, the place from which things are run. And God made the world in such a way — as in Genesis 1 — that it would work properly when God's sovereign authority was put into operation *through obedient humanity*. That's what Psalm 8 is about — and Psalm 8 was very important in early Christian thinking, about our human destiny and calling but more specifically about Jesus himself. Jesus is now enthroned in the place of authority marked out for the human one from the beginning.

This is why the disciples, faced with Jesus going away, are not sorrowful, but joyful. Jesus is now lord of the world! He is now in charge! That's the good news! The one whose resurrection has launched the new creation, following his defeat of evil on the cross, is now ruling the world! . . .

Conclusion

I now want to draw this first chapter together by briefly stressing five things that emerge from this passage and which must shape our reading of the rest of the book — and, with that, our own calling and mission under Jesus' lordship.

First, what biblical reference-points would first-century Judeans think of when faced with Jesus' ascension? [Elijah, taken up to heaven (2 Kings 2:1-14), Moses going up the mountain to God, Daniel 7.]

But second, we need to consider — as we shall be doing in later chapters — what it means to say that Jesus is already ruling the world. People will say, as they've always said: 'Look at the world around you; just look out of the window! It doesn't *look* as though Jesus is in charge.' But think what we are saying. It is *Jesus*, not Caesar, not Herod, who's in charge. As Jesus made clear in Mark 10 and John 19, there is a sharp contrast between two different types of ruling, of authority. The rulers of this world stamp their will on their subjects by bullying and violence. Jesus wins the victory through the power of self-giving love. His followers will have to do the same: through their suffering, their martyrdom, their loving witness, their creation of communities that, by their very existence, call the world to account. The results are mostly not instantaneous. That's not how self-giving love works. But they will quickly be remarkable . . .

Acts describes the start of that often faltering process. The Church in every generation is called to carry it on. This isn't about a steady, smooth 'progress' of the gospel. That idea, an attempt to read the gospel through the lens of Hegel's philosophy, died a death (or should have done) a hundred and more years ago. But real gospel work continues, shaping communities and individuals through the witness of love and the power of the spirit. As historians recognise — I'm thinking particularly of Tom Holland's remarkable book, *Dominion* — the world is now already a very different place from the amoral darkness of the Roman Empire. Key differences can be traced to the Jesus-movement. Secularism tries to deny it, but it's true. One obvious example is the abandoning of unwanted children, especially baby girls. Everyone in the ancient world did this, except for the Judeans. But the Christians, in this as in other things, went with the Judeans — because they, too, were creational monotheists, believing that the present creation is the good work of the good Creator, and that humans are made in his image. And if today the vast majority of people in the world take the same line, that's an indication of a moral sea-change. There are many other examples.

Third, what would people in Luke's non-Judean world think of when faced with a story of someone ascending to heaven? [Examples of the Caesars ascending into heaven . . . but not after being crucified!]

Fourth, [We don't need Christ the King Sunday if we celebrate Ascension Day.]

But fifth, a vital point which resonates forwards into the rest of the book: Jesus, in his human body, is now equally at home on earth and in heaven, so that in him the project of creation itself is fulfilled. In Ephesians 1:10, Paul declares that God's plan always was to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. With the ascension, part of earth — Jesus' body — is already and rightly in heaven. But if there is a physical place where heaven and earth come together — well, that is the very definition of a *temple*. A temple is a heaven-and-earth place, with an image of the god at its heart. Jesus is now that place, that image, that heart.

So if, in the first chapter of Acts, we see a small part of 'earth' namely the human body of Jesus — fully at home in heaven, joining the two in himself, then in the second chapter we shall see the breath of heaven rushing down to fill the disciples.. That is again Temple-language. *Acts 1 and 2 constitute Jesus and his people as the true Temple*, the place where now, already, God and humans, heaven and earth, come together. We will pursue this in the next chapter, when we're looking at Pentecost itself.

That is why, as we shall see, most of the pressure points and controversies in Acts are precisely about temples — whether in Jerusalem, or Athens, or Ephesus, or back again in Jerusalem. That is exactly what we should expect, and it shapes much of Luke's story. And temples are places of power and danger. If Acts is about the new Temple clashing with the old ones, this means a challenge of power. Who is really in charge, and how must Jesus' followers navigate this strange new world of competing power-claims? Acts calls us to discern, for our own time and place, what it means to live as the new Temple, confronting the idolatrous temples of our own day; and also what it means to say that we must obey God rather than human authorities. These all go closely together, as we will shortly see in what follows.