

RESOURCE:

INTERVIEW WITH NT WRIGHT: FORGIVENESS RE-FRAMED

At the heart of God's work with Israel is the Presence of God, a theme coursing through the whole Old Testament — from Genesis 3:8 to Genesis 12 to the house of God with Jacob to the tabernacle's and the temple's ark of the covenant and especially with the temple and on and on. God's Presence is at the heart.

And this Presence vacates the temple as an act of judgment in Exile.

If the essence of sin is idolatry and the surrender to alien powers, then what becomes of the "forgiveness of sins"? NT Wright argues in The Day the Revolution Began, forgiveness of sins needs to be seen through the grid of a sound narrational approach to biblical theology. But we have approached it all, he claims, from mistaken paths:

We have Platonized our eschatology (substituting "souls going to heaven" for the promised new creation) and have therefore moralized our anthropology (substituting a qualifying examination of moral performance for the biblical notion of the human vocation), with the result that we have paganized our soteriology, our understanding of "salvation" (substituting the idea of "God killing Jesus to satisfy his wrath" for the genuinely biblical notions we are about to explore). (147)

When God's Presence is absent it is called Exile, or the "death" of Exile. The end of Exile is the return of the Presence to the temple, and this is precisely how Jesus is at times described in the NT: John 1:14 especially!

Jews of Jesus' day were not looking to be rescued from this world but for a renewal and rescue within this world (113). They were looking for that renewal in connection with the return of the Presence to the temple, and that means they were looking for the end of Exile and an expression that was often used to speak of the end of Exile was...

... the forgiveness of sins. NT Wright now, from p. 115:

The "forgiveness of sins" was a huge, life-changing, world-changing reality, long promised and long awaited. It was the fulfillment of Israel's hopes for restoration, coupled with the sense that when Israel was restored, this would somehow generate a new for the whole human race.

[p. 157] "Forgiveness of sins," for the first disciples, was now to be seen as a fact about the way the world was, a fact rooted in the one-off accomplishment of Jesus's death, then revealed in his resurrection, and then put to work through the Spirit in the transformed lives of his followers. Forgiveness of sins became another way of saying "Passover" or "new Exodus." Or, as in Isaiah 54-55, following hard on the heels of the kingdom announcement of chapter 52 and the "servant's" work in chapter 53, it would come to mean "new covenant" and "new creation." The gospel was the announcement of this new reality.

And when the Presence returns God would return as king, God would bring redemption through suffering, and all this as a dramatic expression of God's covenant love. Hence, what the people needed was (1) the end of Exile or the forgiveness of sins, (2) it would be the great Exodus or the final great Passover, and (3) this would all occur as the work of God (138).

Forgiveness of sins in the NT, he is arguing, is about the end of Exile, the return of God to the temple, and the establishment of kingdom conditions already at work in this world, and all this means that individuals can be rescued, renewed and restored to God, to themselves, to one another and to all creation.