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#81 Do Jewish people need Jesus?

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Are Jews saved under the old covenant? How should I share my faith with Jewish people today? Does the Bible endorse Zionism? Support the show – give from the USA or Rest of the world (and get the show e-book) · For bonus content, the newsletter, prize draws and to ask a question sign up at www.askntwright.com · Exclusive podcast offers on Tom's books and videos from SPCK & NT Wright Online · Subscribe to the Ask NT Wright Anything podcast via your preferred podcast platform

Transcript

[MUSIC] The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast.

[MUSIC] Well, hello and welcome back. I hope you had a good summer.

I'm Justin Briley, Premier's Theology and Apologetics Editor, bringing you the show where I get to sit down with renowned New Testament scholar, NT Wright. And the program is brought to you in partnership with SBCK, Tom's UK publisher, and NT Right Online, who published Tom's online video teaching courses. Now, we've just been recording some fresh episodes of the show with Tom.

So, expect some really interesting topics coming up on atonement, parenting, scandals in the church, the role of feelings in the Christian life, all things that you've asked Tom questions about by sending them in. Also, something that I think will prove very popular, we're doing a special episode in which Tom will be responding directly to one of his most vociferous critics, John MacArthur. So, look out for that in your podcast feed.

Also, plans in the pipeline for launching an NT Right, Ask NT Right Anything YouTube channel as well, so that you can have access to all of the video versions of these shows that we've accumulated over the last few years. So, just some of the things coming up to Wetta Apatite, and today on the show we'll be tackling questions on Jewish salvation. Now, if you know someone who would enjoy this podcast, do make sure to tell them about it.

Tell them to subscribe at askNT Right.com. And if you haven't done that, well, shame on you. You're missing out on regular updates from the show, bonus content, and of course, the chance to ask a question yourself. And if you're able to click through to support the show, there at the show page, that would be massively appreciated.

We'll send you the exclusive show ebook as a thank you, which features Tom's responses to 12 big questions. Again, that's askNT Right.com. It's enough from me for now, on to today's show.

[MUSIC] >> Well, welcome along to another edition of the podcast.

And it's great to have you back, Tom. You've been having a bit of time off, haven't you, over the summer. Tell us what you've been up to with family.

>> Yes, Maggie and I took most of the family up to the far north west of Scotland, which was wonderful. Weather was mixed, but the sea is spectacular anyway. >> Wonderful.

And you had a special anniversary, I understand as well. >> Yes, we can't quite believe it, but it is 50 years since Maggie and I got married. I mean, where did that go to? It's quite a bizarre feeling.

But yes, it was good to have most of our children and all of our grandchildren with us. And a good old-fashioned celebration, yeah. >> Yeah, well, it's good to get away sometimes as well, isn't it? And just have a change you've seen.

Back in the Oxford study though now. >> Yeah. >> And back for another set of questions that have come in.

And thank you for everyone who's been getting in touch today. We're looking at issues around Judaism, Jewish salvation is sort of the general theme here. Why don't we leap straight in with Anne in Australia, Tom, who says, do you think Jewish people are saved under the ancient promises God gave his people and prophets before Christ appeared? What's your thoughts on this? >> Yes, I mean, when I hear a question like this, my mind goes immediately to the beginning of Luke's Gospel and to Zachariah and Elizabeth, who have held on to the promises of God and have obviously been a prayerful couple waiting for what God has promised to do.

And then when they discover that Elizabeth is going to give birth to John, who we know is John the Baptist, then this is a cause for great celebration in a classic first century Judaism setting. And then when Jesus is born and Joseph and Mary take him into the temple, you have Simeon and Anna who have been looking for the consolation of Israel and waiting for the promises to be fulfilled. And you have a sense that there were thousands and thousands of devout Judeans in that time, Jews living in Judea and Galilee, I should say.

I mean, it's all rather complicated in terms of where they were and who they were at that point. But who were praying the Psalms, who were reading the scriptures and who were just trusting God the Creator, the God of Israel, that one day he would fulfill his promises. Now, as Zachariah and Elizabeth don't know anything yet about Jesus and Simeon and Anna in the temple only know that here is a little baby who they believe, they believe God has shown it to them, that this is the one through whom the promises are going to be fulfilled.

And that sense of waiting for God to fulfill his promises is absolutely central to so much of the ancient Jewish world as of the modern Jewish world and much in between. Now, you could then say, of course, well, Simeon and Anna, their hope then gets focused on Jesus. And so we should expect that now if wise Jews are studying the scriptures, praying the Psalms and looking for their God to deliver them, they all to them to recognize Jesus as Israel's Messiah like Simeon and Anna did.

But there's a mystery there and the mystery goes right into the heart of the New Testament and we find it everywhere from Mark's gospel to the letters of the Romans to all sorts of Hebrews to all sorts of other places, which is that they not all do see, they not all do recognize Jesus as Israel's Messiah because a crucified Messiah was such a stumbling block, such a shock to them. And so I want to say as much affirmation as I can about that wonderful, noble, patient Jewish waiting on God. And then I want to say, so what happens when they hear about Jesus? And of course, part of the trouble is that when Jewish people, often throughout the last 2000 years have heard about somebody called Jesus, it's been in a way which has been dismissive of them that we now have Jesus and you lot are left on the back burner somewhere at best.

And that has taken an enormous amount of getting over and is still a major problem. And perhaps we'll come back to that in other questions. I do sense though that in this question, perhaps what's being referred to as well is there's a certain sort of theology that exists in some Christian camps of a sort of dual covenant idea that there is still a covenant for the Jews and that which they will be saved under as it were.

And so we don't necessarily need to worry about sharing the message of Christ with them or whatever that may be. What do you think of that idea? Yes, I've met that many, many times over the last 40 years as I've been researching Paul particularly, but also the Gospels. And there are some Christians who particularly seeing the horror of what happened in the 30s and 40s in Germany and Poland and Austria and so on, otherwise the Holocaust have said we've got a back right off from that and just say out of shame and sorrow for what the so-called Christian West has done to the Jews living in its midst, that we now have to say, look, you have your own relationship with God, please get on with that and we will do our own thing.

The trouble with that is precisely that it plays into the problem which Paul was aware of

right in the 50s of the first century, the danger of seeing Christianity as basically a Gentile movement. And seeing Christianity as a Gentile movement has been one of the foundations of would-be Christian anti-Judaism and then laterally anti-Semitism. We need to separate those out because the idea of sea mites as a racial thing is a 19th century idea but anti-Judaism existed long before the rise of that kind of quasi-social Darwinian ethnic theory.

So just that's a footnote but an important one in terms of how we speak about all this. So I then want to say, you know, when I meet as I was privileged in the last year of his life to get to know the late Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks and discussing with him who God is, how we construe God's purposes in the world, there's so much convergence that as Jesus said to the scribe in Mark 12, you know, one wants to say with humility and not with arrogance, you are not far from the Kingdom of God and then to leave that up to God as to how he deals with that. But at the same time, and I've had that experience with other Jewish friends interlocutors as well and some people listening to this may know the late great Jewish biblical scholar Alan Segal who wrote a great deal and remained a loyal Jew but constantly was dealing with the early Christian evidence in a way which made some of his friends think that he was actually a closet Christian.

So again and again, one has this sense of proximity of being, you know, cousins just across a boundary but that's not a way of saying therefore we have Jesus and they have something else because that as I say is the beginning of precisely that dismissive attitude. Of course, it starts off being very welcoming and affirming but actually it's then a way of saying and of course, if you say we have Jesus, who is this Jesus? Jesus is nothing if he isn't Israel's Messiah and see they're developed quite early on I think from the third and fourth centuries, a sense among some Jews that there was a Christian Messiah, this Jesus who would take you to heaven but they were still waiting for the Jewish Messiah who would put things right on earth and that's a tragedy because it shows that the Christians had platonized their tradition and had forgotten the message of Luke 4, the message of so much of the New Testament that God has come in Jesus to put things right not to say forget this world we'll take you away somewhere else. So the idea that there might be two Messiahs, a Jewish one and a Christian one is simply wrong historically and we have to say either Jesus is Israel's Messiah or he isn't and if he isn't then we Gentiles shouldn't be interested in him either because he's just a failed Jewish hero.

So there are huge issues rumbling along underneath that. Obviously at the local level whether in Australia as with this question or in America or in Europe or many many other places it behoves us to be very pastrally and personally sensitive and wary of how we speak because many Jewish people are on the lookout for Christian arrogance and sadly we have often given them a lot of Christian arrogance to look at and sometimes my critics have seen arrogance where none was intended or why I hope none existed and so it's a very touchy area or walking on eggshells all the time but clinging on to Jesus as

Israel's promised Messiah is absolutely central. Well that sort of sense of how we should approach these types of conversations leads into our next question from John in California who says after hearing many of your lectures on first century Jewish life and world views do you have any suggestions on sharing these teachings with modern Jewish people it seems often that current Jewish worldviews are quite different from the first century and that sharing the good news of Jesus can even be treated as a form of anti-Semitism any advice would be greatly appreciated.

And that is that is certainly the case that sadly again we have to admit to the tragedies of the last few hundred years that when Martin Luther believed he had rediscovered the gospel in the early sixteenth century one of the exciting things for him was that now that we've understood how the gospel works we will go to our friends down the road or our neighbors down the road in the synagogue and say hey we've been getting it wrong all this time here's the truth of it now of course you will convert won't you and when they didn't when they told him to get lost then he kind of swung the other way and was really angry and some of the bitter, vituperative language which Luther used of the Jews sadly remained as it were in the tradition like a kind of a poison in the bloodstream of that tradition which then burst out in the nineteenth and particularly in the twentieth century so we have to be very very careful and I mean I've gone around these tracks many times about 30 years ago the movement called Jews for Jesus put up a sign in the tube in London which said Jews for Jesus question mark why not after all Jesus is for Jews and the local Jewish communities in North London objected strongly and told London transport to take this advertisement down which they did which raises the question so if Jesus isn't for Jews then what's this about and I preach to sermon which I think is printed in one of my books where I contrasted that with a terrible story which was told by a Jewish reporter who was well known in in broadcasting circles 30 years ago his voice was very well known who said as a young boy in New York he had gone secretly to see Father Christmas in Macy's store and Father Christmas recognizing that he was Jewish had said this isn't for you son go and see your rabbi and he had run home crying a Jewish boy in a Christian country at Christmas time and those two things jangle against each other is Jesus for the Jews or isn't he for the Jews and I think the Jews for Jesus sign was probably insensitive but ultimately that's the truth whereas what that Father Christmas said this isn't for you you've got something else is actually that's the really arrogant thing so we've got to be terribly terribly careful there is no kind of safe easy way of handling this final question here on these issues around Judaism and sharing faith with Jewish people the question on Zionism from Jared in North Carolina says do you think there is a biblical case for Zionism and if so how should we understand it against Israel's troubling efforts to forcibly remove Palestinians from their homes in order to place Jewish settlers among other troubling actions firstly I suppose a definition of Zionism could be something like the the view that the return of Jewish people to a specific geographical area of land is somehow within the promises of God and part of a fulfillment of old and New Testament promises and therefore there is obviously a significant movement within the Christian

world that supports the activities on the part of Israel to as the questioner says take on parts of these disputed territories so yes I suppose do you think there is a biblical case for this and perhaps your thoughts on the on the whole situation there Tom? Yes again very very difficult I came into this one as a cautious Zionist 50 years ago when I first was aware of these questions I had known about the Holocaust as a young man and have been horrified by it and as a as a teenager and in my early 20s hearing about these things I have thought thank God that they had a place to go and thank God that this was a way of fulfilling ancient promises gradually through the early and middle 1970s as I was studying the New Testament intensively not least Romans 9 to 11 I found myself pushed out of that position by the New Testament itself and I have never gone back to it and when in the late 1980s I was able to go and live in Jerusalem for a while I had all these questions in my head and my heart and I talked incessantly to both Jewish friends and Palestinian friends about them so which is a very confusing thing to do because everybody you talk to has a different angle a different set of stories a different set of horror stories about bad things that have happened because of which dot dot dot and I learned that we ignorant non-Jewish and non-Palestinian Westerners actually have to do a lot of shutting up and a lot of listening and I've tried to do that having said all of that the New Testament is very emphatic that all the promises of God find their yes in Jesus it isn't the case as the movement called dispensationalism one way and another has argued that some of the promises got fulfilled in Jesus but there were lots of others which had to be fulfilled some other way and particularly in Romans one of the great central texts of the early Christian tradition we have the promise to Abraham and his family this is quoted in Romans chapter 4 that he would inherit the world and that retrieves the great Old Testament narrative if you put Abraham and the Psalms together Abraham and Isaiah together the promise to Abraham about the family and the land is expanded because in Psalm 2 God says to the coming great king you are my son the stay of I begotten you ask of me and I'll give you the nations as your inheritance the uttermost parts of the world for your possession now in the first century there were many Jews who saw the spread of Jews around the world as an advanced fulfillment of that phyllo in Alexandria saw the Jewish presence around the world like that that there we are where we are being alike to the nations and so on but the early Christians picked that up and kind of transposed it into a different key by saying Jesus is Lord of the whole world precisely as Israel's Messiah read the Psalms read Isaiah 40 to 55 and you'll see that Israel's coming king is Lord not only of one piece of territory but of the whole earth and then that gets gloriously stated in Romans 8 where the inheritance is the whole creation so to say oh no no that there's this bit of turf in the Middle East and that's their real inheritance I think that's a multiple category mistake in terms of exegesis in terms of theology and in terms of real apology now I have to say faced with what happened in the 1930s I think the global community stumbled for various reasons but came up with what was ultimately going to be the only viable solution to create and sustain some kind of Jewish state you know some people even said that the Jews should be given another country somewhere some people even suggested give the Jews Uganda and that can be

their national homeland well yeah that was never going to work quite apart from the fact there were lots of people living there already but the idea which some said at the time not all was that the country was empty and so a people without a land could go and live in a land without people that is almost blasphemous there are people and I know some of them whose ancestral homes had been and still are in the land they called as the Romans called it Palestine and there are many many other questions which circle around all that and as I said in I wrote a book on pilgrimage called The Way of the Lord some years ago and I did a little intro on this whole question and I said with everything one says in this area we always ought to add but actually it's a lot more complicated than that and there's no way one can simply bundle it up and say there it is job done but this is where I would start the New Testament promises that Jesus Israel's Messiah is the Lord of the whole world and then we have to live with the ambiguities and the call for justice in the real world and there's that passage in Deuteronomy which says justice and only justice you shall seek and there was a rabbi who said why does the text say justice twice answer because there must be justice for Israel and justice for Israel's neighbors and my friend that Yimatik the Palestinian Liberation Theologian wrote a book called Justice and Only Justice and 20 years ago 30 years ago expounding that and applying it to the present situation that's the kind of road I would cautiously want to go down. Thank you so much for your thoughts and your wisdom on what is obviously a highly contested area today Tom and a huge area that we haven't done justice to obviously in this short chat but thank you again for your time and I look forward to catching up with you again on next week's podcast. Thank you.

Well thanks so much for listening today. Next time we'll be looking at your questions on problems with the church including some recent abuse scandals in the Anglican church. Just a reminder also that SBCK Tom's UK publisher have some special deals on Tom's books for podcast listeners links for that are in the show notes today.

You can find out more about the show at AskNTRight.com and if you're able to support and help bring Tom's thought and theology to many more people we'd be delighted to send you the exclusive show ebook 12 answers to questions about the Bible life and faith that Tom has written. Again that's AskNTRight.com and just click on give for now. Thanks for listening see you next time.