



Wright, N. T.

*How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels*

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

New Jersey

*How God Became King* is N. T. Wright's attempt at recovering what he believes to be the central message of the Gospels, namely that in Christ, Israel's history reaches its climax and their God becomes king, which the majority of the Western Christian tradition has largely forgotten. Take, for example, the Apostles' Creed, which says, "I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried." Wright's gripe is with jumping from incarnation to crucifixion with no mention of Jesus' life in between those two points.

He's concerned with the kind of reading of the New Testament that tasks itself with proving Jesus' deity or his humanity, which Wright believes was presupposed by the Gospel writers (and which he's also happy to affirm), without any recognition that Jesus' ministry was all about establishing God's kingdom on earth as in heaven. At this point I should mention that Wright appears critical of the classic creeds for what they omit, but once one moves past the rhetoric they discover that his problem is more with how the creeds have been employed as didactic devices rather than being left to do what they were originally intended to do, which is address certain controversies with pithy summaries of the Church's faith.

The reader is also left to work through the rhetoric exemplified in the book's subtitle. One might think that the publisher chose a provocative subtitle in order to sell copies, and that probably is true to some degree, but Wright himself repeatedly makes the claim that we've been misreading the Gospels all along. He lays a lot of this charge at the feet of the Enlightenment but Platonism doesn't escape unscathed either. Somewhere along the line Christians exchanged the glory of God's earthly rule for the corruptible image of an eternity in an ethereal heaven whereby we'll escape this present evil age. The problem being, of course, that this is at best a form of escapism and at worst a form of Gnosticism. It certainly isn't the message we find in the Gospels, which don't separate salvation from an earthly theocratic kingdom.

With conversational prose Wright leads the reader through highlights of the Bible's grand narrative, which climaxes at the cross where Jesus brings God's kingdom (that he inaugurated in his ministry) to earth in its fullness through his death. His reading is a canonical one in the sense that he takes the final form of the text as we have it as his jumping off point, without regard for what the form, source, and redaction critics are doing. The reading is also canonical in the sense that he allows the canon itself to shape his conclusion rather than filtering the canon through the later creeds that leave so much unstated. And throughout the course of Wright's treatment of the Gospels he weaves together the larger common theme of them all without neglecting the distinctive nuances of each one individually. This culminates in a fresh reading of the Apostles' Creed that makes room for both kingdom and cross.

Wright is clearly an attentive reader of the Bible and he has done well to point out a theme that probably is neglected by the better part of the Christian tradition. He speaks from 40 years experience with various traditions and who would I be to tell him that he's wrong? And yet experiences differ. James K. A. Smith noted in [his musings](#) on this very book that those of the Kuyperian persuasion in the Reformed tradition have long been doing what Wright suggests we've all forgotten. My own experience is quite different from that which Wright describes in the book as well. The early years of my adult Christian life were spent sitting under dispensational teaching, which always had a heavy emphasis on God's earthly kingdom. Unfortunately, Wright is happy to sweep dispensationalism under the rug in less than a paragraph about eschatological confusion (225).

Where I found myself begging for fuller explanation is in Wright's overall eschatological vision. He seems to be saying that God's kingdom has come in full at the cross and resurrection (see 246 for a fairly clear statement to this effect), and if this is so, then what is our future hope? Why does the world exist in its present condition if God's eschatological rule is in effect? And how does this

work out with regard to the resurrection of believers? I'm not sure if Wright is a postmillennialist, a preterist, or something in between, but the final outcome of all this kingdom talk is still a bit murky for me. Again, as one reared under dispensational teaching, it's been my understanding that the kingdom was inaugurated during the public ministry of Jesus and will come in full when he returns. I believe this makes the best sense of the Olivet Discourse as well as Revelation 20-22. Perhaps Wright has fleshed this out in other publications but it would have been most welcome in this one.

In all I think that Wright has addressed an incredibly important topic and he's done it quite well. His writing is superb (even if I did find myself rolling my eyes at many of his parenthetical comments) in that he's able to take rather complex subject matter and decipher it for a non-academic audience. But this isn't to say that academics won't benefit from interacting with this work as well; they most certainly will! Once one works through the intentionally provocative rhetoric they'll find a well reasoned argument for reading the Gospels as telling the story about how God became king. In fact, I think he could have told the same story without mention of how we've all forgotten it in the first place! Nonetheless, I gladly recommend this volume to one and all.