

A REVIEW OF N.T. WRIGHT'S *THE ORIGINAL JESUS:*
THE LIFE AND VISION OF A REVOLUTIONARY

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Biographical Sketch of the Author

Nicholas Thomas Wright was born in 1948 in Morpeth, Northumberland. Currently seated as the Chair in New Testament and Early Christianity at the prestigious University of St. Andrews in Scotland, N. T. Wright is one the most prolific authors and speakers on the subject of the historical Jesus. Wright's considerable experience includes positions as the Bishop of Durham, Canon Theologian of Westminster Abbey, and Dean of Lichfield Chapel. Over a twenty year span, Wright has taught New Testament studies at the University of Cambridge, McGill University in Montreal, and Oxford University.¹ Wright's preparation for these influential positions consists of undergraduate studies in the Classics at Exeter College in Oxford. He then enrolled in Wycliffe Hall at Oxford, earning an honors degree in 1973 and a Masters degree in Theology in 1975. He was ordained as an Anglican priest in 1976.²

In addition to academic achievements and ministry milestones, Wright is inspired by an interest in music which he has fostered since childhood. He is an accomplished pianist and maintains proficiency in jazz trombone and guitar.³ Wright met his wife Maggie while studying at Wycliffe Hall. Wright is a prolific debater, particularly on the subject of the historical Jesus. His schedule has included a forum style debate with John Dominic Crossan of the Jesus Seminar on the campus of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary in 2005.

¹ "eerdmans.com – contributors," Eerdmans Publishing Company", http://www.eerdmans.com/shop/contrib.asp?contrib_id=658 (accessed February 9, 2011).

² "N.T. Wright: A Biography." Adversaria. alastair.adversaria.co.uk/?p=371 (accessed February 9, 2011).

³ Ibid.

Summary of the Book

The tension and challenge to be resolved in the book was signposted early in the work with the following quote. “Puzzled people in the modern Western world often ask: how can the death of a man 2,000 years ago, in another culture and another place, be relevant for me, at this end of the twentieth century?” (127)⁴ This tension is then played out in the ancient context of Jesus’ ministry in Jerusalem. Wright closes the loop by challenging the reader to engage the narrative with transformation in mind:

And to investigate that claim, it won’t do simply to look at it from the outside. There is no such thing as neutrality or objectivity at this point. If you pin the history to the wall like a butterfly, you may be able to study it analytically, but you mustn’t be surprised that it won’t fly again. To get to the heart of it all, you have to live within the story and see what it does to you. That’s what this book invites you to do. (182)

Most of N. T. Wright’s books are very academic in style and context. This work is written for an every believer audience and focuses on rekindling the revolutionary passion in all of us for the Gospel.

The revolutionary focus is showcased initially with the parable of the prodigal son. The lost importance of respect for our elders is stressed as the missing link for modern application. In the ancient culture an elder who walked too briskly would be in jeopardy of losing his dignity. To the Jewish audience the notion of an elder running to anyone, let alone a disrespectful son would have been inconceivable. (346) While provocative, the context for the original audience would have been a radical love for an undeserving person at the end of their rope: a picture of the Messiah.

⁴ All references to specific text position for this book are Kindle location numbers.

The next target for reframing is the Sermon on the Mount. The tension is elicited with this statement, “To hear some people talk, and from the look of the ‘Mount of Beatitudes’ today, you’d think that the Sermon on the Mount consisted simply of Jesus telling people to be nice to each other.” (433) The illumination of this event frames the sermon in a similar light to a political rally with a worthy revolutionary assembling a passionate force of renegades.

From his point of view, Israel at that time was making a pretty poor fist of being the light of the world. Many of Jesus’ contemporaries were hot-headed, zealous would-be revolutionaries. Was that the way the kingdom would come? Was that how to be the light of the world? Jesus’ answer was an unequivocal No. He was calling and challenging his contemporaries to be the people of God in a radically new way. (459)

Jesus, in revolutionary fashion, challenged all that the temple represented at the conclusion of the sermon. Wright clarified the true revolutionary context.

Well, the winds came, the storms blew, and the crash happened. The leaders of Israel in Jesus’ day refused his challenge, didn’t listen to his warning, and continued to pursue their dream of military revolution, keeping the light for themselves in order to ensure that they were the only light in the world. Many of the ordinary Jews followed their leaders into ruin. And the house of God, the temple, was destroyed by the Romans, just forty years after Jesus had warned them about it. (509)

Then the modern challenge, will we be the light of the world?

Another interesting perspective pursued in this work is the original idea of what the resurrection would have meant. The original belief about the resurrection was that it would bring about peace and justice for Israel. The ancient context did not hold a consideration that the resurrection would play out in the rising up to new life of one person. (668) The questions are then raised, “So why did Jesus’ first followers insist that that was what had happened? Why didn’t the story end when Jesus was crucified? Why didn’t they run away, go back to their fishing, give up the struggle?” (671) Because they all agreed he was alive and therefore they didn’t need a new revolutionary.

The next section gives a detailed systematic approach to the four Gospels. The reader is drawn in with a common problem, “Many readers of the Gospels, particularly within devout Christian contexts, assume that they tell us the same as we would have got if someone had been following Jesus around with a camcorder.” (858) Authenticity and validation are the key elements to this section. One of Wright’s great academic adversaries is brought out in this area of the text, ‘Instead, such scholars (including many in the ‘Jesus Seminar’) think the Gospels were simply the expression of early Christian faith and experience, in which stories ‘about’ Jesus weren’t anything of the kind. They were just miniature novels, designed to speak of, and to commend, the speaker’s Christian faith.” (1024) A comprehensive account of John, Luke, Matthew, and Mark is given with two main questions forming an umbrella over the study: (1) what is this telling us about Jesus? and (2) what is the evangelist trying to say, through this story about Jesus, to his own contemporaries? All the while, Wright retains the revolutionary tone.

Evaluation

Wright is an academic author. If this book was intended to fuel the fire of a lay person in the same way as the poetic personification of Lucado, or the narrative transparency of McManus, then it missed the mark. The appreciable quality of this book is in the depth of historical accuracy and doctrinal stability. Wright has sought out a new audience outside the textbook genre and provided an important Biblical foundation for the revolutionary Jesus found in so many of the strictly screenplay attempts elsewhere. The opening approach is inductive in nature and sets up the challenge for the reader. “What made Jesus special? Why do people all over the world tell the story of his death, rather than any of the others?” (158) These questions must be answered in the mind of any believer who hopes “to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you”. (1 Pet. 3:15 NASB)

It could be argued that this book is trying to turn our loving God into some sort of tough-love Jesus. A secondary scouring of the text for obvious poetic license was not fruitful. Wright is a widely recognized scholar in Biblical history. As he fleshes out passages with historical context the Sermon on the Mount and the Gospels are revolutionary by definition. Jesus was and is ushering in a radical new way to live. “So what was Jesus’ revolution all about? At its heart, he was remaking the people of God around himself, and telling everybody that they were freely welcome in it.” (563) There is a strong argument presented that suggests that the Western world has lost its appetite for a revolutionary Jesus. “For many people today, this move is a bit radical, a bit threatening; so they prefer to back off, to see Jesus as simply, at best, a signpost to God, the revealer of God, the teacher of timeless truths, someone who provokes us into thinking differently and perhaps even into living differently.” (780)

Most people today open the Bible and read out of a sense of obligation passed on by a well meaning clergy. They end up with an overly mystical view of Scripture simply because they don’t understand how to read it. The second half of this relatively short read gives a beautifully comprehensive set-up to a thorough reading of the Gospels. The reader should come away with Wright’s hope for them, “The Gospels, then, were not just written to describe events in the past. They were written to show that those events were relevant, indeed earth-shattering, worldview-challenging, and life-changing, in the present.” (1249)

A very specific challenge is included in the conclusion of the book which is uniquely engaging in a work of this type. “First, read the Gospels from cover to cover, struggling to make more and more sense of exactly who Jesus was. Second, read the Gospels . . . to see what each evangelist is saying as a whole.

Third, . . . how can people, today, retell the story so that the world gets the message? But, fourth, read the Gospels . . . wondering throughout: if I were in the crowd at that scene, what would Jesus say to me?" (1507) An added gem at the end of the book is an extensive bibliography annotated by N.T. Wright.