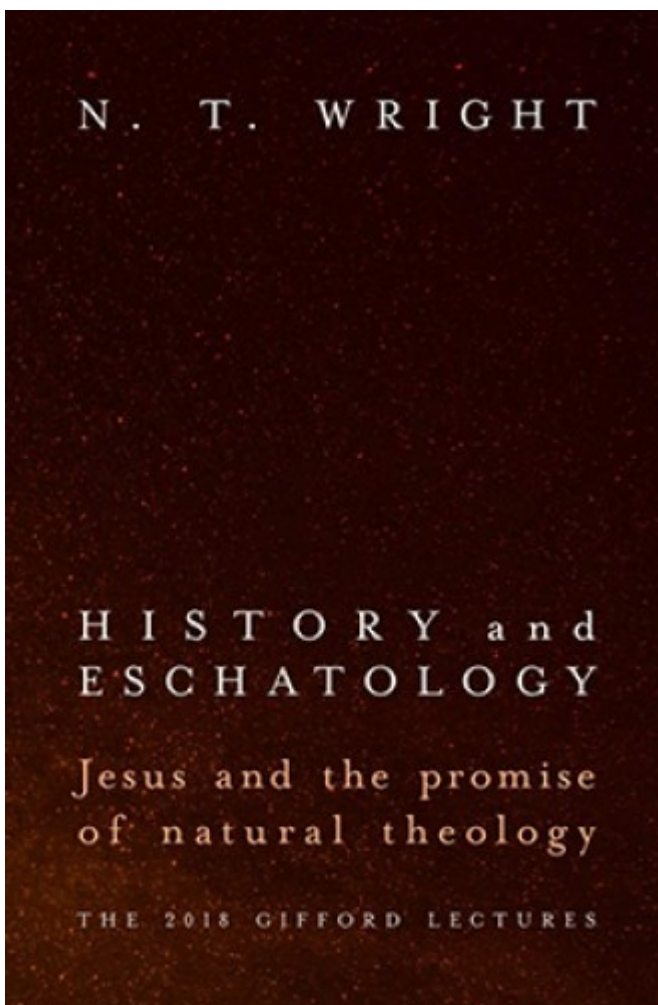


N. T. Wright insists that Jesus is the starting point of natural theology

Wright's rereading of scripture is brilliant. Too bad he's so disparaging of other viewpoints.

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [March 11, 2020](#) issue

In Review



History and Eschatology

Jesus and the Promise of Natural Theology

By N. T. Wright
Baylor University Press

When I was pondering whether to focus on theology or the Bible in graduate school, a mentor suggested I split the difference and study with N. T. Wright. “I would go pitch a tent wherever Tom Wright is and just do what he does,” he said.

It wasn't advice I could take literally. Although he's long been one of the most recognized New Testament scholars in the world, Wright resumed full-time academic work only in the latter part of his career—first at St. Andrew's and recently, in retirement, at Oxford. You can't easily work on a PhD with a canon, dean, or bishop, and Wright has been all three: canon at Westminster Abbey, dean of Lichfield Cathedral, and bishop of Durham.

Wright often insists that he is a historian, not a theologian. For British evangelicals of Wright's era, theology was something done by woolly-headed liberals who were inclined to dismiss the miracles of the Bible and the historical reliability of scripture. The task of Christian scholars, as they saw it, was to do biblical history better than the secular historians do it. In Wright's hands, history properly attentive to Jesus' first-century Jewish context can nearly prove the bodily resurrection.

If that's not bold enough for you, his book *History and Eschatology*, based on his 2018 Gifford Lectures, should be. The book bears the same title as one used by the great German New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann, famous for his program of demythologizing biblical texts. Wright treats Bultmann with respect while setting him aside. The aim of the book is to suggest that Jesus, properly understood, is an appropriate starting point for natural theology.

Lord Gifford endowed his lectures at Aberdeen University with the goal of encouraging theologians to talk about God without reference to revelation—Jesus, the scriptures, the church, all the messy particulars. The lecturers were to look only at creation or “nature” as the basis of their theology. The presumption was that although a “vast, ugly ditch” (to quote Gotthold Lessing) separates the truths of history from the truths of religion, maybe, with Gifford's money, the best theologians could argue their way from earth to heaven by some route other than revelation. Many have tried; most have failed.

Wright argues that the entire program is wrong. Any metaphysic that regards heaven and earth as separate is rigging the game in advance. If historians for the

past 200 years have been right to study Jesus in his proper context as a first-century Jew, then he is part of nature. Jesus then can't be ruled out of any exploration of the natural world. Jesus, therefore, is a fitting subject for natural theology. And since the resurrection of Jesus and the new creation he inaugurates are parts of history, they should reset the way we think about nature.

If Wright's self-designation as a historian rather than a theologian is an effort to avoid being dismissed by the secular academic guild, it hasn't really worked. Many nonevangelical scholars consider him a fundamentalist and ignore him. And when I ask mainline biblical scholars what they think of Wright, their opinions are usually negative. Professional jealousy? Perhaps, but there's likely another reason.

Wright's rhetoric tends to imply that anyone who disagrees with him is wholly wrong. He generally reads scripture at a macro level and brushes off detail-oriented colleagues when they ask about this or that verse. When questioned, he tends to repeat himself rather than listen or nuance the point. And he dismisses much of the Christian theological tradition as distorted by Platonism, because it is too often ready to turn the this-worldly kingdom of God into an individualistic flight of souls into heaven. "I issue a plea at this point to the larger world of theology: do not fear or reject history. You have nothing to lose but your Platonism." He returns to this diatribe every few pages.

Yet Wright has an admirable ability to attract a wide range of readers. That includes very conservative ones like John Piper, with whom Wright has had a running (and book-length) argument over what Paul meant by justification by faith. Wright sharply disagrees with Piper, but his books appeal to Piper's kind of readers—conservative Reformed students seeking an authoritative reading of the text—as well as more liberal ones. Wright makes all readers trust more in the God of the Bible, and *History and Eschatology* shows how he does it.

Jesus was a part of nature, says N. T. Wright, so he should be a part of natural theology.

First, Wright gives no credence to the claim that ancient Christians thought the world was about to end. He thinks only a few verses in scripture even suggest that view, and he interprets them as pointing in a different direction. Passages that speak of a coming cataclysm of the world actually refer to the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD. The New Testament and patristic writings don't reveal widespread

disappointment about the delay of the second coming.

The idea that the first Christians were waiting for an apocalyptic end to the space-and-time world originated, Wright believes, with modern scholars like Albert Schweitzer. These scholars expected that modernity would usher in an era of peace, and when modernity's version of the Parousia failed to materialize, Schweitzer and his followers projected their disappointment back onto the biblical text.

Fascinatingly, Wright details how Schweitzer was influenced by Richard Wagner, showing that the theologian's interest in beliefs in the end times was rooted in the composer's neo-Norse mythology. The source was pagan, not biblical. The New Testament is not about awaiting the end times; it's about God coming to reign as king on earth through Jesus' death and resurrection.

Second, Wright rejects the idea that modern people necessarily read ancient texts differently than ancient people themselves did, with different assumptions about what is credible. We are not so original in matters cosmological or metaphysical, Wright argues. Darwinism, for example, is simply a revival of Epicureanism—the ancient view that events are entirely random. Modernity's only novelty is in coupling Epicureanism with the optimistic belief that technology, democracy, and capitalism must necessarily make things better. In either worldview, if there are any gods, they don't care about us. They certainly aren't guiding history.

The notion that modern science should alter our interpretation of the Bible is built on bad eschatology, Wright says; it regards the turning point of history as modern science. For Christians, the turning point of history is the cross and resurrection of Jesus. The spirit (always, puzzlingly, lower case for Wright) is calling a people to be those through whom God puts creation to rights.

Third, Wright believes that the proper way to know anything is through a critically realist epistemology rooted in love for the other. "Love simultaneously *affirms and celebrates the otherness of the beloved* (be it a person, a tree, a star) and wants it to be itself, not to be a mere projection of one's own hopes or desires." Wright moves from this insight to stressing the importance of recognizing the otherness of the past. We are not affirming the otherness of our ancestors, Wright argues, if we amalgamate their beliefs with what we already believe.

There are plenty of places in the book where Wright is wrong. He consistently conflates Platonism with Gnosticism. He alleges, for instance, that resurrection

would be undesirable from a Platonist perspective, because it views bodies and materiality as objectionable. Either he doesn't understand how ancient and medieval Christians used Platonism in developing a sacramental view of the world, or he doesn't care.

Wright speaks of theologians from the fourth century (Nicaea), the fifth (Chalcedon), the 13th (Aquinas), and the 16th (the Reformers) as if all they had to offer was error. Worse, he speaks as though all they had to do was read the bible historically—as he does—and they would have avoided their Platonist distortions.

I find it hard to believe that Wright actually thinks so little of his predecessors in the church, and I suspect that if he were pressed on how particular thinkers used Plato in treating creation, the sacraments, the resurrection of the body, and the renewal of creation, he would back off. Hans Boersma has accused Wright of overlooking the massive changes to Platonist thought that ancient and medieval Christians undertook as they wove a sacramental tapestry that the church still finds helpful.

Methodologically, Wright is like a *sola scriptura* Reformer (hence his proximity to Piper). He thinks we can talk about God as though there were no history of interpretation between the closing of the canon and now. But of course there is, and that history has entered into Wright's own life and work. He would never let another historian get away with reading first-century Jewish sources as uncharitably as he reads patristic and medieval Christian sources.

Wright also speaks disparagingly of contemporary theologians and, more generally, the guild of theology. Theology refuses to take into account new data out of fear of being unfaithful, he writes, and so proceeds "without a well-grounded historical base, as it has regularly done to this day."

Who exactly does he have in mind? He never identifies the offending theologians by name, so readers are left guessing. Wright does cite Martin Kähler, C. S. Lewis, and Luke Timothy Johnson as skeptics about the ability to locate a historical Jesus "behind" the Gospel accounts, and he may have an argument there. But contemporary theologians like Rowan Williams, Sarah Coakley, and David Ford are not guilty of dismissing history, and almost every theologian alive is eager to take into account new discoveries about history and the Bible.

In any case, Wright offers theologians these pointed words of advice: "If theology is to be true to itself it must not simply snatch a few biblical texts to decorate an

argument mounted on other grounds, excusing the procedure by referring to the great theologians of the past who have done the same thing. It must *grow out of historical exegesis of the text itself.*" Wright is so enthusiastic about what his vision of history can yield that he sometimes implies that no other form of Christian scholarship need exist.

Wright perpetuates the myth that a text can have only one meaning.

Nevertheless, Wright offers dazzling readings of scripture through his conviction that Jesus reorganized Israel's key symbols around himself.

For instance, the prophets anticipate a day when YHWH will return to dwell with his people personally. The Gospel writers, Wright argues, are aware of this subtext as they write of Jesus coming triumphantly—if, paradoxically, in lowliness—into Jerusalem. One day God's presence will fill the whole creation as the waters fill the sea.

Wright also portrays the temple as a microcosm of creation, and creation as a macrocosm of the temple. That's why the imagery for Christ's coronation is cosmological, he explains, with stars falling and the Son of Man in the clouds. Bultmann was right: these are not literal future events. They took place already in Jesus' passion and resurrection.

In another reading, Wright describes Jesus' journey to Jerusalem as the long-awaited return of YHWH to Zion. This is a common move in Wright—he interprets something we have often taken to be future and cosmological as actually completed in Jesus' life or shortly thereafter. I'll never preach those apocalyptic texts the same way again.

Wright eventually gets around to some comments on what a Jesus-informed natural theology might look like. He refers to *signposts*, things that the resurrection fills with a different sort of "natural" significance: beauty, justice, freedom, truth, power, spirituality, and relationships.

Wright also brilliantly connects his method of reading scripture to the official topic of the lectures. Natural theology, he believes, was always wrong to diagnose a "problem of evil" and then pretend it cannot be solved. God's answer to that problem is Christ's atoning work. Natural theology should strive to match God's vulnerability in Christ. It should be done through tears, like Mary Magdalene's at the

tomb.

That preaches! I just wish he had started that way on the first page. It's odd that the book only gets to its main topic after a 200-page prolegomenon (which mostly argues for Wright's vision of history and accuses theologians of ignoring it).

Wright's work might be the best of any biblical scholar drawing breath when it comes to the power of his writing and the missionary urgency of his account of scripture. He is more a servant of the church than Bultmann ever was.

Yet Wright perpetuates one of modernity's biggest myths: that a text can have only one meaning, the one put there by the human author (and then covered over by layers of historic error until finally recovered by the diligent scholar). I'm not sure Wright really believes this, but that's how he often sounds. And his rhetoric can make it seem as if having the correct reading of scripture is what saves us—a common Protestant mistake. In fact we are saved only by Jesus Christ, the God who has pitched a tent among us in Israel and in the incarnation.

Wright's aim in the end is to shift natural theology from the first person of the Trinity to the second, and he speaks of what he calls a "kind of 'Holy Saturday' version of natural theology." His vision of how that can be done is not always persuasive. But it's never less than stunning and captivating.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Natural theology crucified."