

BOOK REVIEW

How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels. By N. T. Wright. New York: HarperOne, 2012. 282 pp. \$25. 99. ISBN 978-0-06-173057-3.

In his latest book noted Biblical scholar and Anglican Bishop Nicholas Thomas Wright declares with passion that “there is a fundamental problem deep at the heart of Christian faith and practice...we have all forgotten what the four Gospels are about” (ix). He insists that the Western Christian Tradition, especially since the age of the Enlightenment, has misread and/or misinterpreted the Gospels, thereby reducing the extraordinary, full and rich message of the evangelists to something ordinary.

In Part I the author contends that Western Christian faith has been shaped into what he calls a “Creedal Christianity,” centered on the Apostles’, Nicene and Athanasian Creeds. While these early creeds offered definitive statements clarifying controversial theological issues of the times, they were not intended to present the full spectrum of the faith. Once the creedal statements became the syllabus for teaching the faith, however, the focus of the Good News of Jesus shifted to the Good News about Jesus and reduced the Gospels to a background story.

As Wright points out, the creeds jump from a statement of God the Father, creator of the world, to the divinity and incarnation of Jesus, to his suffering, death and resurrection, with no mention of Jesus’ public ministry or his proclamation of the Kingdom of God. Yet it is the Kingdom of God that was the center of Jesus’ message and, as a result according to Wright, the focus of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

Using the metaphor of a sound system with four speakers (each representing a dimension found in all four Gospels) that must be finely adjusted to produce the optimum and truest sounds, Wright presents, in Part II, what he proposes as the full song of the evangelists. He further states that the corrected message may be radically different and possibly very disturbing for Christians today since over Christianity’s history the first and fourth speakers have been turned down or off while the other two have been turned so high that they have distorted their message for centuries.

According to Wright, the first speaker (one of the ones that have been turned down) actually proclaims that Jesus is the climax of the story of Israel. The intended salvation of the world through Israel was not a first and failed attempt that necessitated a second plan – that of God’s Son becoming human and dying to atone for sin. Rather, the story of Jesus is the story in which the history of Israel reaches its intended climax; intended from the call of Abraham as a

response to the spread of evil of Genesis 3-11. Jesus is the one who brings the history of Israel to its proper goal. The message from the first speaker demands that Christians have a profound familiarity with the Old Testament and an appreciation of their importance in the salvation of the world.

The second speaker proclaims that the story of Jesus is the story of Israel's God. It is not sufficient to focus, as the creeds do, on the divinity of Jesus as the second person of the Trinity. Rather, it is essential to recognize that in Jesus, the creator God, the God of Israel has come back to His people as their King.

The third speaker heralds the launching of God's renewed people. The stories told by Jesus are not just history but the defining of a new world order, an everlasting kingdom ushered in by God through Jesus' life and death. Israel has reached her final climax.

The fourth and final speaker (the other one that seems to have been turned off) tells the story of Jesus as the story of the clash of the Kingdom of God with the Kingdom of Caesar. It is the story of how God vindicates his people and rescues them from the power of worldly kingdoms through Jesus who brings forth to earth from heaven the Kingdom of God. As Wright claims, while it is absolute that Jesus suffered death to redeem humanity from sin, the evangelists understood that Jesus' death and resurrection conquered earthly kingdoms and brought forth the inauguration of God's kingdom on earth. Jesus does not redeem us *from* this world but *for* this now regenerated world. This fourth speaker challenges all Christians to accept the mission to continue the work of living in God's kingdom rather than looking forward to the time when we will die and be brought up to the kingdom. Such a perspective challenges us and offers tremendous implications for our daily living as Christians.

In Part III, the author shows how the themes of the Kingdom and the Cross, often separated into opposing views of social justice and atonement theology, cannot be separated but must be seen as one. Without the Cross, the Kingdom of God on earth cannot be inaugurated; without the Kingdom, the Cross makes less sense. Each of the dimensions the four speakers herald clearly shows how these two themes are intimately bound together. Finally, Wright concludes his book with an eye-opening and challenging reinterpretation of the Apostle's Creed with the four speakers in proper balance.

Throughout his book, N. T. Wright presents clear and sound scholarship steeped in the Scriptures, especially from the Psalms, Isaiah 40-55, Daniel 7-9 and the Gospels, in an easy and readable manner. At times, however, he seems to belabor his point, although with a conviction that highlights his passion for a new and deeper understanding of the Gospels. Furthermore, the author occasionally refers in passing to his earlier books or hints at a future book on the subject, which gives this work a conversational feel rather than that of a scholarly

presentation. Despite these flaws, this book deserves a wide audience; those in the pew and those tasked with preaching, teaching and studying the fullness of the message of the Gospels. Above all this book offers a challenge to re-embrace the Gospels with an open mind and new eyes. Once done, only God knows where new insights will lead us and what challenges will call us as members of the inaugurated but not fully realized kingdom.

Claire J. Schirtzer, D.Min.
Adjunct Assistant Professor of
Theology and Religious Studies
Molloy College
Rockville Centre, NY