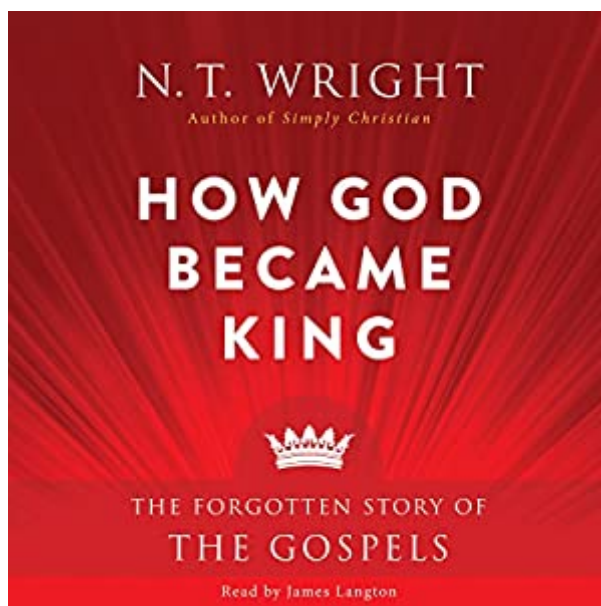


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# How God Became King: The Forgotten Story Of The Gospels



## Synopsis

New Testament scholar N. T. Wright reveals how we have been misreading the Gospels for centuries, powerfully restoring the lost central story of the scripture: that the coronation of God through the acts of Jesus was the climax of human history. Wright fills the gaps that centuries of misdirection have opened up in our collective spiritual story, tracing a narrative from Eden to Jesus to today. Wright's powerful rereading of the Gospels helps us realign the focus of our spiritual beliefs, which have for too long been focused on the afterlife. Instead, the forgotten story of the Gospels reveals why we should understand that our real charge is to sustain and cooperate with God's kingdom here and now. Echoing the triumphs of *Simply Christian* and *The Meaning of Jesus*, Wright's *How God Became King* is required reading for any Christians searching to understand their mission in the world today.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In his latest book, *How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels*, N.T. Wright addresses what he perceives to be a "fundamental problem deep at the heart of Christian faith and practice": "we have all forgotten what the four gospels are about" (ix). On the surface, then, the book appears to aim to help readers rediscover what the gospels are about and how to read them for all they're worth. Upon closer inspection, however, *How God Became King* is much more ambitious, for anyone who takes seriously Wright's proposals for how to read the gospels will find that they

transform the way one reads not only the gospels, but the entire Bible. The opening part of the book addresses the ways in which the church has struggled to read the gospels well. Wright contends those who have taken cues from the ancient creeds have often failed to reckon with the great emphasis the gospel writers place on Jesus's life. On the other hand, those who have taken cues from post-Enlightenment critical scholarship have failed to reckon with the bookends (birth and death) of Jesus's life highlighted by the creeds. Neither approach, having neglected significant portions of the gospels in their final forms, can be said to fully grasp what the gospels are all about, for each fails to hold together the themes of kingdom and cross which the gospels insist are inextricably intertwined. The fundamental problem Wright diagnoses in the preface can be recognized most clearly in six common, but inadequate answers often provided by the church to the question "What are the Gospels all about?": instructing people how to go to heaven (42-46), recording Jesus's unique ethical teaching (46-48), portraying Jesus as a moral exemplar (48-50), presenting Jesus as the perfect sacrifice (50-52), telling stories with which humans can identify and thus find direction (52), and demonstrating Jesus's divinity (53-57). While each of these answers contains an element of truth, Wright argues they all fail to grasp the heart of the gospel accounts. In part two, Wright utilizes the image of a sound system with four speakers, one in each corner, to describe the four dimensions of the gospels to which readers must pay attention. He insists the reason most churches and most Christians have failed to grasp what the gospels are all about is the speakers are out of balance, with some turned up too loud and others turned way down or even unplugged from the system. In order to properly hear the gospels' message, the four dimensions of the gospels must be properly calibrated, like the four speakers of a sound system. The first speaker, turned so low it's been inaudible to many Christians, is the gospels' presentation of their message as "the climax of the story of Israel" (65). The second speaker, turned up so loud that it's distorted, is the gospels' portrayal of "the story of Jesus as the story of Israel's God coming back to his people as he had always promised" (83). The third speaker, distorted like the second, is the gospels' intent as foundational documents to tell "the story of the launching of God's renewed people" (111-112). The fourth speaker, which hasn't even been hooked up to the system, but has been in storage in the attic, is the gospels' account of "the story of the kingdom of God clashing with the kingdom of Caesar" (127). Drawing upon his almost unparalleled ability to hear echoes of the Hebrew scriptures in the gospels, to make connections between the two testaments, and to present them in such a way that the reader can easily see how the scriptures as a whole fit together, Wright's treatment of these four dimensions is an absolute tour de force. Having sought to address the problem of missing the gospels' point by calibrating the four speakers, in part three Wright considers the implications of

hearing the gospels' message in its intended harmony. This is a difficult challenge, because "not only have we misread the gospels, but . . . we have made them ordinary, have cut them down to size . . ." (158). Rather than holding together the themes of kingdom and cross, Christians have polarized into camps of "kingdom Christians" and "cross Christians" while at the same time being sucked into post-Enlightenment delusions of utopian grandeur that try to ignore the failure of the Enlightenment to turn the corner of world history. Wright suggests Christians have reacted to the Enlightenment's failure in four unhelpful ways: assuming the world doesn't matter because soon they'll leave the world behind for heaven, withdrawing to form a parallel society in which to live out the values of Jesus, baptizing right-wing politics as Christian, and baptizing left-wing politics as Christian. The trouble with these approaches, Wright asserts, is that each fails to take seriously that Jesus was inaugurating God's cross-shaped kingdom on earth as in heaven, and it is into this vision that followers of Jesus, readers of the gospels, are called to live. Wright then explores the ways each of the four dimensions of the gospels' message holds together the themes of cross and kingdom, just as they are in fact held together in the Hebrew scriptures. Further, he demonstrates that from beginning to middle to end, the stories in the gospel which are often read as highlighting either kingdom or cross are actually highlighting both, so that they can make perfectly clear they are telling the story of God becoming King. Wright closes the book with a chapter that seeks to demonstrate the way in which this approach to reading the gospels can transform the way the church reads the gospels. Rather than reading the gospels through the lens of the creeds, which has led to reductionist readings of the gospels, churches can read the creeds through the lens of the gospels, which will allow the creeds to make their points in a manner more consistent with the overarching story of both scripture as a whole and the gospels. Given the growing number of churches and Christians for whom the creeds play an insignificant role or no role, I wish Wright had taken time to broaden the scope of his reflections in this chapter. Even those who don't utilize the creeds proper in worship still have unofficial creeds which shape their approach to scripture and the gospels just as significantly as the official creeds. These unofficial creeds take the form of elements of the liturgy including hymns/praise and worship songs, influential writers/preachers/pastors, or other dogmas to which they adhere (political, scientific, religious, etc.). I fear some will not make this connection and thus miss the opportunity to begin reading these unofficial creeds through the lens of the gospels rather than reading the gospels through the lens of their unofficial creeds. My only other quibble with the book relates to Wright's assertion that the gospels' message centered upon the unity of kingdom and cross is aimed at transforming readers into suffering kingdom-bringers. My frustration is not a matter of disagreeing with Wright's assessment of the gospels' intention. Rather,

it stems from the lack of a clear vision of how this plays out. Wright, like others who draw similar conclusions, humbly admits his own lack of suffering and acknowledges the much greater suffering of many around the world. Yet, at what point do such admissions and acknowledgments fall short? At what point does lack of suffering disqualify our claims to be followers of Jesus? Are we to seek out suffering? Or are we simply to continue making such admissions and acknowledgments until we ourselves face legitimate suffering, if indeed we ever do? Wright fails to wrestle with these questions. So while he may have provided an approach to reading the gospels which helps us remember what the gospels are all about, he fails to deal adequately with the questions bound to arise when facing the challenge of figuring out what it looks like to live into their vision. I hope he or someone else will wrestle with these questions in greater depth in the future. Coming hot on the heels of his outstanding book on Jesus, *Simply Jesus*, I wondered whether a book on the gospels would seem redundant. But as I read *How God Became King*, it became clear not only that it is not redundant, it is a perfect follow-up, because while it's about the story of the gospels, it's about much more than that. It is about the story of God and creation, the story of the entire scriptures. In *How God Became King* Wright provides much needed pastoral instruction aimed at helping churches recover the gospels as the primary agent shaping their being and activity, he demonstrates the degree to which the canonical gospels set themselves apart from those not included in the canon, and he offers individual Christians an approach to reading scripture that can inform them so they are able to engage the world not on the terms of the powers, but on behalf of the God who became King on earth as in heaven. I wholeheartedly recommend it! Disclaimer: Thanks to HarperOne for a review copy. I was not obligated to write a positive review.

This is a 'must read' book for everyone. N T Wright explains that "the story Matthew, Mark, Luke and John tell is the story of how God became king - in and through Jesus ... [But the] way the gospels have been read, [especially] through the lens of the great early creeds, has quite accidentally pulled this tightly coherent story apart. This has come through into contemporary readings in which 'kingdom' and 'cross' have been played off against one another." (Ch.9) "We have lived for many years now with 'kingdom Christians' and 'cross Christians' in opposite corners of the room, anxious that those on the other side are missing the point, the one group with its social-gospel agenda and the other with its saving-souls- for-heaven agenda. The four gospels bring these two viewpoints together ... the gospels tell of a Jesus who embodied the living God of Israel and whose cross and resurrection really did inaugurate the kingdom of that God." (Ch.8) "... the New Testament writers were setting forth an eschatology that had been inaugurated, but not fully consummated ... not just

the personal or 'spiritual' eschatology of so much Western thought (going to heaven in the future, but with a taste of heaven in the present) but the social, cultural, political and even cosmic eschatology ... [that] new creation itself has begun ... and will be completed. Jesus is ruling over that new creation and making it happen through ... his church." (Ch.8) "Matthew, Mark, Luke and John ... Paul, Hebrews and Revelation ... all think that Jesus is already in charge of the world ... that is what they understood by 'God's kingdom'. ...[M]ost Christians have never even thought about such a thing, let alone begun to figure out what it means for us today ... God's kingdom on earth as in heaven." (Ch.1) Western Christians today think "that Jesus came to teach people how to go to heaven. That is, I believe" says Wright, "a major and serious misunderstanding." Wright claims: "We have belittled the cross, imagining it merely as a mechanism for getting us off the hook ... It is much, much more. It is the moment when the story of Israel reaches its climax; the moment when, at last, the watchmen on Jerusalem's walls see their God coming in his kingdom; the moment when the people of God are renewed so as to be, at last, the royal priesthood who will take over the world, not with the love of power but with the power of love; the moment when the kingdom of God overcomes the kingdoms of the world. ... God ... is now inviting us to ... build with him ... This is the vision the evangelists offer us as they bring together the kingdom and the cross." (Ch.10) "The four gospels leave us with the primary application of the cross not in abstract preaching about 'how to have your sins forgiven' or 'how to go to heaven' but in an agenda in which the forgiven people are put to work, addressing the evils of the world in the light of the victory of Calvary." (Ch.10) "Jesus himself is ... at the heart of the new creation ... on the move, as Jesus' people go out, in the energy of the Spirit, to be the dwelling of God in each place, to anticipate that eventual promise [of the whole earth being filled with the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea] by their common and cross-shaped life and work." (Ch. 10) Such 'life and work' is not the subject of this book, and needs further exploration. In his previous book *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* (2010), Wright comments that Christian character should reflect "God's image once more into the world - the image of the generous, loving creator filling his world with beauty, order, freedom, and glory ... seeking, generating and sustaining justice and beauty in a world where both have been at a discount for too long." (p. 231) However, Wright acknowledges that "This is a large topic, in need of much fuller exploration than we can give it here" (p. 231). In *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (2008) Wright identifies 'justice' (pp 213 - 222) and 'beauty' (pp 222 - 225) as important areas in which "to work for God's kingdom in the present" (p. 207). Wright asserts that God is redeeming the world of space, time and matter, not discarding it. He states: "... the church ... must... claim [the world of space, time and matter] for the

kingdom of God, for the lordship of Jesus, and in the power of the Spirit so that we can then go out and work for that kingdom, announce that lordship, and effect change through that power." (p. 264) "The mission of the church must therefore include, at a structural level, the recognition that our space, time and matter are all subject not to rejection but to redemption." (p. 264) "If it is true, as I have argued," says Wright, "that the whole world is now God's holy land, we must not rest as long as that land is spoiled and defaced. This is not an extra to the church's mission. It is central." (pp. 266) For Wright 'mission' includes, for example, addressing "massive economic imbalance" and "Third World debt", politics, art, music, sculpture, poetry, architecture, town planning, transportation, agriculture, "proper use of resources" etc., areas of our 'life and work' through which Jesus is reclaiming and ruling his world (pp 216, 223, 265-266) In "How God Became King" N T Wright has provided "a fundamental re-think about what the gospels are trying to say" (Preface). A sequel from Wright about "how we then might order our life and work in accordance with [the gospels]" would be most welcomed and appreciated.

I wish you could give half-stars, but as it is I'm going to have to go with 3. Mostly it's due to the first section of the book where Wright goes on ad nauseum about how no one has ever realized this before -- at the very least no one in modern history. While reading this, I turned to another book I'm reading (written in the 1930s or so) that clearly said one of the things no one else says. I know, it's marketing -- you've got to buy my book because it's unlike anything you've ever read. This is contained primarily in the first three chapters, but it re-appears throughout the book. As to his actual teaching -- that the gospels and the cross are about the inauguration of the Kingdom, not just forgiving sins -- what he says is powerful and useful, just not as original as he seems to think. That said, when he gets to walking through some passages of the gospels, he points out some great things I'd never noticed or heard anywhere else before. I would much rather have seen this book abbreviated drastically into the introduction for a commentary(ies) on the gospels where he points out the places where we often miss the Kingdom. I know he wrote some lay-level commentaries some years ago and will check them out.

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