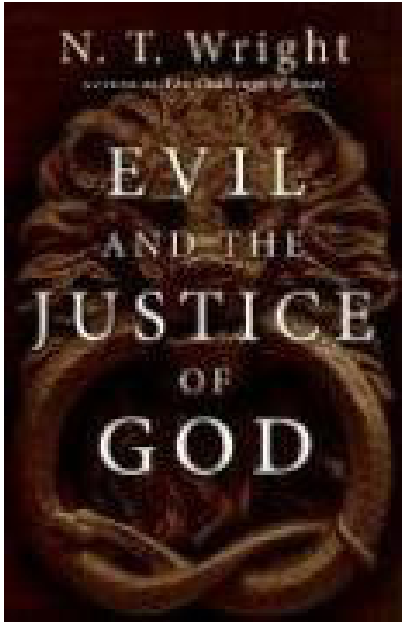


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Wright, N. T.

Evil and the Justice of God

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Tom Wright has done it again. He has written a book characterized by his usual punchy verve and “big picture” thinking. He says some things so wonderfully well one cannot but be grateful for his contribution. And, as usual, he reserves a place for a few things that are doubtful, mistaken or (at best) out of proportion, or just plain annoying.

The book began its life as a series of five lectures delivered at Westminster Abbey when Wright was the Abbey’s canon theologian. Wright has since become Bishop of Durham, and the lectures have become this book. They have also become a video giving us an abbreviated form of the book. I have watched the video, but I will not comment on it here.

In the first chapter, Wright pokes holes in contemporary responses to evil. In the wake of September 11, 2001, President Bush declared war on the “axis of evil,” while Prime Minister Tony Blair declared, rather ambitiously, that our aim should be to rid the world of evil. Throw in the “natural” disasters of the tsunami and of Katrina, and people are talking about evil again. The widespread doctrine of “progress” left people unprepared. Even the blows against this happy optimism administered by WWI, the writings of Barth and of Dostoyevsky, and the staggering impact of Auschwitz have barely slowed the

notion down. This means, Wright avers, that we ignore evil “when it doesn’t hit us in the face” (24), we are surprised when it happens, and then “we react in immature and dangerous ways as a result” (24). On the latter, the “appalling day” we label 9/11 “rightly provoked horror and anger. But the official response was exactly the kind of knee-jerk, unthinking, immature lashing out which gets us nowhere” (27). It made the entire United States a lily-white victim and a lot of Muslims so bad that the only right thing to do was to drop a lot of high explosives on them. It was “them” and “us.” Equally awful is the nihilism of postmodernism. Wright ends the chapter by saying that three things must be “factored in” to our thinking at this point: (1) Western styles of democracy cannot be held up as the answer; most of them are undergoing their own crises at the moment anyway; (2) there are suprahuman or supranormal forces of evil that can appear to take over human beings or, in some cases, entire societies—the sort of thing Walter Wink has treated; and (3) Solzhenitsyn has it right: a sober assessment of where human evil lies acknowledges that the line between good and evil runs right down the middle of all of us (an affirmation to which Wright keeps returning), not somewhere between “us” and “them.”

The second chapter marks the beginning of Wright’s treatment of what we learn from the Bible. We want God to *say* something about evil, to give us an explanation, whereas in fact the Bible gives us very little explanation but devotes itself to “*telling the story of what God has done, is doing and will do about evil*” (45, emphasis original). Wright begins with the call of Abraham (Gen 12) and works back through the tower of Babel and the flood to Eden. In each case Wright detects severe judgment and a display of mercy. But going forward, the call of Abraham, meant to call into being a people who would be part of the solution, ends in a people who are no less a part of the problem—whether we are talking about the Israel’s rapid defection from God in the wake of the exodus or the sins of the nation that plunge it into exile. A Samson demonstrates with terrible clarity that evil runs right down the middle of each of us, and a great royal psalm such as Ps 89 “juxtaposes 37 verses of the wonderful things God will do through the Davidic king with 14 verses asking plaintively why it’s all gone wrong” (60). Wright interprets Isa 40–55 as the demonstration of God’s “righteousness” understood as his covenant faithfulness, all creation requiring a “fresh act from the sovereign Creator God” (65)—an act that “comes into sharp focus” in the suffering servant of Isa 53. “Sharing the fate of Israel in the exile which, as we know from Genesis 3 onward, is closely aligned with death itself, he bears the sin of many. He embodies the covenant faithfulness, the restorative justice, of the sovereign God” (65). In Dan 7, the monsters that come up out of the sea “make war against the human figure; but God exalts the human one over the beasts” (67). The book of Job pictures the satan, “the personified force of evil” (71), being factored into what evil is, while Job himself functions much like Isaiah’s servant. All these pictures refuse to absolve human responsibility for

evil. Moreover, this evil is “integrated with the enslavement of creation” (72). Yet God is taking action, and these stories, “at least in pattern and outline,” anticipate “that narrative which offers itself as the climax of the Old Testament.... The multiple ambiguities of God’s actions in the world come together in the story of Jesus” (74)—which takes us to the next chapter.

This chapter sets out to answer the question, Why did Jesus die? The answers that interest Wright are not the merely historical ones but the theological ones: Why *in the purpose of God* did Jesus die? “God has undertaken a plan: it is a daring and risky plan, involving God in so much ambiguity—one might almost say subterfuge—that he begins to look like a double agent, becoming compromised at many points in order to pull off a solution” (76). The four canonical Gospels, Wright avers, “tell us a double story, in which the themes of my first two chapters are drawn together in a single point” (79). On the one hand, they “tell the story of the *political* powers of the world reaching their full, arrogant height” (79). This story also exposes the corruption within Israel. Further, the Gospels “tell the story of the deeper, darker forces which operate *at a suprapersonal level*” (81). In fact, the line between good and evil runs “*down the middle of Jesus’ followers themselves*. Peter, called to be the rock, is immediately denounced as ‘Satan’” (82). The downward spiral of evil is everywhere apparent. On the other hand, “the Gospels are *also* the story of how God’s long-term plan from Abraham through to the time of Jesus, the apparently ambiguous and risky plan which we explored in chapter two, finally came to fruition” (83). Here Wright summarizes (as he acknowledges) his earlier work in *The Challenge of Jesus and Jesus and the Victory of God*. The story culminates in Jesus warning his people of God’s impending judgment, identifying himself totally with Israel (“taking its vocation upon himself, coming to the point of pain, of uncleanness, of sickness, folly, rebellion and sin” [86]), and “thus taking on himself the direct consequences, in the political and in the theological realm alike, of the failure and sin of Israel” (86).

He was dying, quite literally, for their sins. (I once saw a bumper sticker beside an Indian reservation on the shores of the Ottawa river to the west of Montreal, declaring that “Custer died for your sins.” That was making a very similar point.) This is not a piece of strange or arbitrary theology read into the narrative at a later stage. This, the Gospels are telling us, is what it was all about all along. Jesus was taking upon himself the direct result of the ways in which God’s people had failed in their vocation (86).

All four Gospels show this to be simultaneously Jesus’ own intention and God’s intention. “Jesus had long realized that as Israel’s representative he, and he alone, had the task to do what, according to the same Scriptures, Israel’s God had said that he and he alone could do” (87–88). Now evil has done its worst and been exhausted: that is the point of Jesus’

resurrection. “[T]he story of Jesus’ death ... [is] the climax of the story of Israel, and hence ... the point where political and cosmic evil met together and burned themselves out in killing the son of God” (102). Similarly, Paul understood “that in the death of Jesus God had condemned sin, passed and executed judicial sentence upon it (Romans 8:3). God’s great *No* to evil had been acted out in the person of Jesus, the person who could and did represent Israel as its Messiah, and hence the person who represented the whole world” (88).

Wright contrasts his approach with classic “theories of the atonement,” all of which are, “in themselves, *abstractions* from the real events” (94). Nevertheless Wright feels himself “compelled toward one of the well-known theories of the atonement” (94–95): the *Christus Victor* theme. Once that is in place, “other theories come in to play their respective parts. For Paul, Jesus’ death clearly involves (for example in Romans 8:3) a *judicial* or *penal* element, being God’s proper *No* to sin expressed on Jesus as Messiah, as Israel’s and therefore the world’s representative” (95). Moreover, with the resurrection of Jesus, the destruction of the effects of sin in corruption and death are already being reversed, in anticipation of the last day, when they will be totally reversed—as much in the political and public spheres as in the personal sphere. Already God’s people are to participate in that reversal. That takes us to the final two chapters.

The church’s task, then, consists of implementing Christ’s achievement and thus anticipating the future, both in the wider world (ch. 4) and in our personal lives (ch. 5). In chapter 4, Wright eschews both dualism and progressivism. The chapter includes an “interlude” (107–14) on “naming the powers”—a brief exploration of Satan and of the demonic.

The satan, it seems is a nonhuman being, a type of angel, perhaps in some accounts an ex-angel or fallen angel, and he or it (somehow feminists never campaign that the satan should be referred to as “she”) comes to be opposed to humankind, and then to Israel, and hence, not surprisingly, to Jesus.... The satan, it seems, is opposed not only to humankind, to Israel and to Jesus but to creation itself. It is constantly pressing to undo the project of God, the world which God said was very good (Genesis 1:31), when that world needs—according to the biblical authors—remaking. The height of the satan’s aim, in other words, is death: the death of humans and the death of creation itself. The means that the satan has chosen to bring the world and humans to death is sin; and sin is the rebellion of humankind against the vocation to reflect God’s image into the world, the refusal to worship God the Creator. (108–9)

Wright says he prefers to speak of the satan as “subpersonal” or “quasi-personal” “as a way of refusing to accord the satan the full dignity of personhood while recognizing that the concentration of activity (its subtle schemes and devices) can and does strike us as very much like that which we associate with personhood” (111–12). If this seems a bit uncertain, Wright refers us to Heisenberg: there are some things in the universe, even in the realm of physics, where observing a thing closely is precisely what ensures that we cannot see exactly what it is. In any case, the satan has been defeated. At this juncture Wright runs rapidly through several New Testament passages that picture the culmination of sinlessness, a world without evil (Rev 21–22; 1 Cor 15; Rom 8:19–25), before listing the intermediate tasks that implement and anticipate the fullness of Christ’s achievement. The five tasks are prayer, the pursuit of holiness, confronting politics and empire (Wright appeals to Mark 10:35–45), transformation of penal codes to aim for restorative justice, and the right handling of international disputes. In the latter domain, what “we urgently need is the extension into the international sphere of that concept of legitimate authority which is underlined in Romans 13” (125), and at the moment our best hope is the United Nations and the International Criminal Court.

The final chapter finds Wright heavily relying on several books, perhaps most notably Miroslav Volf’s *Exclusion and Embrace* and Desmond Tutu’s *No Future without Forgiveness*. (In the interests of full disclosure, I should say that I interacted both appreciatively and critically with both of these books in my *Love in Hard Places*.) The chapter is a meditation on forgiveness with many useful insights (common enough in the literature, all too uncommon in practice) and some judgments that must surely be questioned.

Those familiar with Wright’s work will recognize that much of the substance of this book is a summary of his earlier work (as he himself several times acknowledges), applied now to the question of how we are to face evil. They will be grateful that on some points he has improved the balance and proportion of biblical themes treated in his earlier work. Exile and end-of-exile are, rightly, less prominent, nestled into the bigger stories of the exodus, and, still earlier, the flood and the rebellion at Eden. Moreover, in a day when many scholars attempt only atomistic studies, it is always stimulating and refreshing to read someone who is constantly trying to put together the big picture. As usual, Wright has an ability to articulate some things in a fresh and memorable way, things that many Christians believe. For instance:

No, all theories of atonement adequate to the task must include both a backward look (seeing the guilt, sin and shame of all previous generations heaped up on the cross) and a forward dimension, the promise that what God accomplished on Calvary will be fully and finally implemented. Otherwise the cross becomes

merely an empty gesture, ineffective unless anyone happens to notice it and be influenced by it to act in a particular way. (96)

Nevertheless, as I intimated, some things in this book are doubtful, mistaken or (at best) out of proportion, or just plain annoying. I begin with the doubtful. Some locutions raise an eyebrow: the Old Testament story is about “the messy way in which *God has had to work* to bring the world out of the mess.... God *has* to get his boots muddy and, it seems, to get his hands bloody, to put the world back to rights” (58–59, emphasis added). But does the narrative say he *has* to, or does it depict him as choosing to? And historically, whatever necessity (“has to”) may be involved, does this issue out of some external determination greater than he or from his own determined character? Because of Jesus’ death, Wright tells us, God will forgive, “and with that forgiveness God will not only release the world from its burden of guilt but will also, so to speak, release himself from the burden of always having to be angry with a world gone wrong” (136). God really does not want to be angry, poor chap, and it has been a terrible burden to have to be angry, but now he is relieved of his burden—what a treat. I understand how Wright is trying to prepare the way for his psychological meditations on the nature of forgiveness, but it is difficult to see exactly how this sort of locution squares with any strand of biblical teaching, from the most virulent displays of wrath to the portrait of YHWH as the Almighty cuckold (Hosea). Again, what compels us to think of God’s plan as “daring and risky” and involving “so much ambiguity” (76)? I understand how Wright derives these assertions, but they are unchecked by complementary biblical emphases: the insistence of the Apocalypse that Jesus is in the mind of God the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world and the multiplied insistence by many New Testament texts that all the crucial events in Jesus’ life were predicted by God in advance and took place to fulfill antecedent Scripture (however commonly that fulfillment works along one kind or another of typological axis). Again, does Jesus’ crucifixion with two others really mean that he identifies himself with the revolutionaries and their failing cause (84)? He is certainly identified with them in the eyes of Rome; insofar as he is constantly identifying with sinners in the Gospel accounts, doubtless he is identifying with them in that sense. But what evidence is there that he is identifying himself with their cause, failing or otherwise? Is the General Custer bumper sticker (“Custer died for your sins”—I have seen the same one) really “making a very similar point” (86)? Custer died for “your sins,” that is, for the sins of others, in the sense that the terrible sins of European-American settlers who at various times broke faith with the Indians, brutalized them, and tried to exterminate large segments of them—sins in which Custer was personally implicated—generated the skirmish in which Custer was killed. But, (1) does the “Christ died for your sins” language of the New Testament find its fundamental meaning in the mere affirmation that the sins of individuals brought about the conflict in which Jesus was bumped off? (2) Did Jesus

participate in the sins that brought about the skirmish that resulted in his own death? (3) In what sense does the bumper sticker rightly indict today's readers of the bumper sticker? Neither I nor my ancestors had anything to do with the extermination of Indians; they were still in Europe. I cannot see any sense in which Custer died for my sins. I can see several powerful senses in which Christ died for my sins. I fear that if this (admittedly merely analogical appeal) lies at the heart of Wright's understanding of what the cross achieved, he is a very long way removed from the understanding of the biblical writers; if it is meant as no more than a clever aside, it is too clever by half and demeans what it is intended to clarify.

More broadly, one of the reasons, I think, why Wright prefers the *Christus Victor* theme, elevating it to controlling status, lies in his narrow reading of the Old Testament story. If his understanding of sin included not only sustained reflection on the nature of the structures of evil but on the nature of idolatry (a major Old Testament theme) and how offensive such idolatry is to God, and how central the theme of the wrath of God is to the plot line itself, then it might be clearer how central the penal emphases of the atonement are among New Testament writers. At the end of the day, the central notion of sin in Wright's thought is that it is somehow anarchic rebellion against *shalom*, and the triumph at the end is the restoration of *shalom*. What is lost is the intensely personal dimension of sin: it is rebellion against God, and he is regularly portrayed as the most offended party (cf. Ps 51!). One does not want to ignore the corporate, not to say cosmic, dimensions of sin; certainly one must not downplay the controlling importance of the goal of a new heaven and a new earth. But to lose the profound sense in which sin is personally against God is to lose something important in the storyline itself. Ironically, it is to trivialize sin (although this is certainly not Wright's intent); ultimately, it is to misunderstand the cross. To put the matter another way: When the biblical writers say that Christ's death *saves* us, *from what* does it save us? We could say it saves us from death, from the consequences of our sin, from our lostness, but centrally it saves us from the wrath to come. Death, the consequences of our sin, and lostness are nothing other than preliminary manifestations of the wrath of God. It is of course true that the Bible depicts God as working to rescue his people from sin. Yet it is no less true that the most central consequence of sin from which they must be rescued is the wrath of God: it is impossible to read the Old Testament narrative without tripping over this theme in countless chapters. This dynamic tension lies at the heart of what the New Testament writers insist that the cross achieves, and Wright misses it almost entirely.

Again, precisely what justifies Wright's reason for assigning "subpersonal" or "quasi-personal" status to the satan? He refuses "to accord the satan the full dignity of personhood" (111). Why? Because of the satan's sin? But in that sense should we not withhold assigning "the full dignity of personhood" to human sinners? And what biblical

warrant is there for this easy way many have of talking about “forgiving myself”? In the domain of pop psych, we all know, more or less, what we mean. But in the matrix of Wright’s discussion of what forgiveness is and entails, you have to have two parties to talk about forgiveness: the offender and the offended. Forgiving oneself is, quite frankly, incoherent. One can accept God’s forgiveness, and the forgiveness of others, and press on in various ways. But talk of forgiving oneself merely has the effect of muddying the crispness of the earlier discussion.

Turning now to mistaken matters, or matters at best out of proportion: (1) Although many scholars agree with Wright in thinking that the heart of “righteousness” in Isaiah is covenant faithfulness, and there are at least some who would concur that Isa 53 focuses on restorative justice, it is vaguely troubling, even in a popular book like this, to see that Wright presses on without interacting with the many critics who have, in considerable details, challenged him on this point, or acknowledging the weakness of his case. (2) The frequent reiteration of the fact that the line between good and evil goes right down the middle of each of us is a fair summary of many biblical passages, of course, but surely one should say something about the many, many contexts in which the Bible *does* distinguish between the righteous and the unrighteous, whether in the idealism of a wisdom psalm (e.g., Ps 1) or in the distinction between the disciples of Jesus and the persecuting world (e.g., Matt 10; John 15:18–16:4), or in parabolic distinctions between sheep and goats and their respective destinations (Matt 25:46), or in demands for a local church to excommunicate a particular sinner (1 Cor 5). Wright’s *positive* point is certainly well represented in Scripture, but because he treats it as if it were the *only* point, the antithetical way he has of casting it (the line is drawn down the middle of each of us, *not* between them and us) simply rules out of court a lot of biblical texts that have their own important contribution to make to the discussion. The result is significantly distorted theology—and significantly distorted politics, too. Would Wright want to assert that there is no moral difference between those responsible for Auschwitz and the significant numbers of Dutch citizens who risked (and sometimes lost) their lives to give Jews sanctuary? Yes, we are all lost, and the line between good and evil goes down the middle of all people: there is an important theological truth there, for the alternative is that there are only good people and bad people. But to focus on this one insight and not complementary biblical emphases yields amateurish theology and slightly ridiculous politics. (3) Similar distortions achieved by focusing on one side of abundant evidence abound. Yes, of course Jesus exhorts his followers to turn the other cheek and did so himself. Still, in the same Sermon on the Mount, he tells his followers not to cast their pearls before swine (which advice he also himself followed), which means somebody has to figure out who the pigs are. The two emphases cannot simply be played off against each other, of course, as if each has the function of trimming the other. But not to think

through how disparate but complementary themes *ought* to work together ends up distorting the one theme that is being advanced. Again, Israel's story is represented as successive cycles of rebellion that bring down God's judgment and mercy, while pointing forward to the climax in the cross, such that the cross must be read against that background. There is substantial truth in this synthesis. But there is very little reflection in this book on the way in which the cross is presented as the antitype of Yom Kippur or the easy fashion in which Paul refers to Jesus as the Paschal lamb. Covenant language is barely mentioned. (4) All of this comes to a head when the dominant manner in which Wright thinks of the atonement is in terms of confronting evil, usually large-scale social and political evil, and somehow exhausting it. With the best will in the world, it is hard to believe that this is the controlling way in which the New Testament writers think of the cross. One recalls the memorable imagery of C. S. Lewis in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*: death runs backward. The imagery is in some ways insightful, certainly imaginative, and even necessary to the fairy tale, but it does not quite belong to the categories deployed by the biblical texts themselves. It would be worth a long review simply to wrestle with this point. If some Christian writers think rather too narrowly in terms of the sins of individuals, Wright thinks almost exclusively in terms of structural evil. (5) Wright's version of the "already" and the "not yet," inviting us simultaneously to implement and to anticipate the future, is sometimes helpful. But does the description of God's redeemed people reigning on the earth (Rev 4–5) mean that John thinks believers are *now* to reign on the earth and exercise authority over the empires of this world? How does this square with Jesus' admonition to give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's—even though, of course, everything belongs to God? How does it square with, say, Rom 13? Of course, there are many strands in the New Testament that anticipate confrontation between Christians and Caesar, with Christians being willing to pay the price when Caesar oversteps his bounds. But the Apocalypse pictures Christians finally coming into their own at the End, in the new heaven *and the new earth*. By ignoring prominent themes, Wright's eschatology will strike many as *structurally* overrealized, even where one wants to agree with some of his ethical and political announcements. (6) Not least here, one worries that Wright's enthusiasm for his own arguments sacrifices something of common sense. Wright wants to curb the evils he detects in *present* empire, by which he means the United States, by "extending" (his category) the argument of Rom 13 to warrant world government. By what inconceivable optimism does he imagine that world government, if it were achieved, would be less corrupt and coercive than the government of the United States? The track record of U.N. administration, even with the limited powers it now has, is scarcely encouraging. It turns out that Wright's righteous indignation against empire is highly selective and blinkered. (7) Finally, when Wright details the "intermediate tasks" that Christians are to undertake this side of the cross and in anticipation of the end, he does not even mention evangelism,

proclaiming the gospel, planting churches, or making disciples of all the nations. The omission is frankly staggering. How much of the theological reasoning and moral reflection of the New Testament writers are bound up with the entailments of the cross, resurrection, exaltation of Christ, and gift of the Spirit *for the church*? “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church” (Eph 5:25–27).

I do not detail these things because I have not benefited from Wright’s book. Far from it. But it appears that Wright’s powerful and imaginative mind is stronger in the domain of constructive systematic theology than in the domain of exegesis. He is stronger in understanding what the resurrection is about than in understanding what the cross is about. Or, otherwise put (as Douglas J. Moo once suggested), where Wright is right (and he often is), he tends to background what the biblical texts put in the foreground and foreground what they put in the background.

Finally, a few merely annoying things. (1) Why is it that everyone else’s understanding of the atonement can be repeatedly dismissed as mere abstract theories of the atonement, while his own presentation escapes the rubric? Are not the (other) “theories of the atonement” grounded, in their writers’ minds, in what actually happened, in what God actually accomplished? And does not Wright’s own understanding of what God actually accomplished constitute another “theory of the atonement”? The shift in terminology is merely a way of dismissing the views of others and sanctifying his own. (2) More broadly, Wright has a penchant for replicating the Elijah syndrome: “And I, even I only, am left.” To offer but one of many examples: “The trouble with imagining the future world is that we’ve all been given the wrong impression” (114). Well, I suppose we should be grateful that we have now been given the Wright impression.