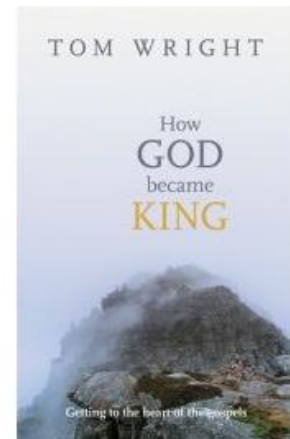


How God Became King: Getting to the Heart of the Gospels by Tom Wright (SPCK, 2012)

Summary by Andrew Sampson

Introduction

This is my favourite book on ‘the gospel in the Gospels’ and one of Tom Wright’s best, in my view. Like his other titles, it isn’t perfect: a bit repetitive in places and longer than it needs to be (much like this summary, in fact). Nevertheless, it is an invigorating read that breathes new life into the four books of the Bible that are among the best known, yet most frequently misunderstood, by Christians.



Failing to see the big picture

Tom Wright argues that, historically, both reformed and liberal thinkers have been too narrow in their take on the gospel narratives.

i) The Reformed picture of Jesus

- ***Making much of the edges of the gospel narratives and less of the middle***

Evangelicals often take the epistles as their starting point for interpreting Jesus’ ministry. The problem is that, seen in light of the epistles’ teaching, much of the content of the gospels does not seem to be especially relevant. What really matters is the atonement and justification, so what are we to make of all the stuff between the stable and the cross?

- ***Focus on ‘going to heaven when you die’***

It’s often been assumed that the gospels are all about ‘going to heaven when you die.’ It is true that there’s a great deal about the ‘kingdom of heaven’ in the gospels, but this is Jesus’ way of talking about the rule of heaven coming to earth, not people leaving earth for existence elsewhere (p. 43). We also need to be careful that we don’t interpret Jesus’ controversies with the Pharisees on the assumption that the Pharisees had one system for ‘going to heaven’ and Jesus had another in which God had relaxed the rules. Wright notes that this fails to do justice to either party (p. 46).

- ***Proving Jesus’ divinity***

The rise of scepticism in the west challenged the church with the question: Was Jesus really divine? The gospels have been put to use in the area of Christian apologetics. ‘Look at Jesus’ miracles!’ say the apologists. ‘Jesus did miracles, so that proves that he’s the divine son of God’ (p. 36). There are two problems with this. Firstly, the Bible mentions plenty of people who performed miracles, but nobody uses these to suggest that they were divine. The bigger issue is that the gospel writers are not setting out to prove that Jesus is divine. Instead, they presuppose his

divinity in order to tell us 'what this embodied God is now up to' (p. 54). The miracle accounts are therefore not about demonstrating Jesus' divinity; they are about demonstrating the new thing that the God of Israel is doing through the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

ii) The Liberal picture of Jesus

- ***Making much of the middle of the gospel narratives and less of the edges***

The quest for the *real* Jesus is concerned with separating the Christ of faith from the Jesus of history (p. 28). As a result, the virgin birth, the saving meaning of Jesus' death, and his resurrection and ascension are rejected as never having happened. All we're left with is a naïve revolutionary, an apocalyptic revolutionary or a mild-mannered teacher (p. 26).

- ***Focus on a 'social gospel'***

The Liberals have bequeathed to us a 'social gospel', the idea that what Jesus really wanted his followers to do was simply make this world a better place. As a result, many people have mistakenly thought that the gospels are simply all about Jesus' great ethical teaching or moral example.

We cannot allow ourselves to fall into the trap of presenting Jesus as simply one figure among all the other great religious teachers from antiquity. This is to miss Jesus' frequent, insistent declaration that he did not merely come to inspire his followers to be better people; he came to announce that, through him, a new world was being born, and to help people understand how to live within that new world (p. 47).

Tom Wright argues that both the traditional Reformed and Liberal readings of the gospels are reductionist and miss the Big Story that the gospel writers are trying to tell.

'Adjusting the volume'

We now move on to the section in which Wright seeks to show us what the gospels are *really* all about. This introduces us to the main, anchoring illustration in the book. We are invited to imagine a sound system consisting of four speakers, one in each corner of the room. Wright explains: 'without these four "speakers" all properly adjusted we simply won't hear the music the four gospels are playing' (p. 62).

Speaker one: the story of Jesus as the climax of the story of Israel

Wright remarks that for many people, this speaker has been turned down or turned off altogether. He explains:

The problem is that we have all read the gospels, if we haven't been careful, simply as God's answer to the plight of the human race in general. The implied backstory hasn't been the story of Abraham, of Moses, of David, of the prophets; it's been the story of Adam and Eve, of 'Everyman',

sinning and dying and needing to be redeemed.¹ ... But when we turn to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, we discover that they ... think it's important to retell the history of Israel and to show that the story of Jesus is the story in which that long history ... reaches its God-ordained climax (pp. 66-67).

Why does the story of Israel matter? Because God 'has chosen and called Israel to be the people through whom he will redeem the world' (p. 73). Turning up this speaker to its correct volume means we become attentive to the following points:

- *Jesus brings about the end of Israel's exile.* The theme of being rescued from exile is closely associated with the forgiveness of sins, which is why this theme is so significant in the New Testament (p. 71).
- *Jesus is the faithful Israelite.* The life of Jesus recapitulates key elements in the story of Israel. Where Israel has failed, he succeeds. He takes on Israel's vocation, to be the means by which all people of the world will be blessed (p. 72).²

Speaker two: the story of Jesus as the story of Israel's God

Wright remarks that, with the attempt to prove Jesus' divinity from the Gospels (*Jesus is God! Jesus is God!*), this speaker has been turned up so loud that the noise has become distorted and drowned out the rest of the music. It is true that Jesus continually points to God to explain his own actions. But this isn't a story about a man going about proving that he's God; it's the story of God coming back in person to rescue his people.

It is important that speaker is adjusted so it is finely balanced with the first speaker. The story of Jesus is the story of God incarnate, but this is not the God of western imagination; it is the God of *Israel*. Much of the Old Testament is full of longing for the fulfilment of God's ancient promise that he will return to his people. The claim of the gospel writers is: 'This is what it looks like when Israel's God returns at last' (pp. 92-93).

Speaker three: the story of Jesus as the launch of God's renewed people

Typically this speaker has been turned up too loud, especially by those who are liberal in theology (pp. 105-6). In putting an emphasis on the gospels as reflections of the life and beliefs of the early church, the Liberals are right about one thing: The gospels are designed to be foundational documents for a

¹ 'For far too long now Christians have told the story of Jesus as if it hooked up not with the story of Israel, but simply with the story of human sin as in Genesis 3, skipping over the story of Israel altogether. From that point of view, the story of Israel looks like a failed first attempt on God's part to sort out his world. "Here," he says, "you can be my people. I'll rescue you from slavery and give you my law!" But then the people find they can't keep the law and the story goes from bad from worse. Eventually, God gives up the attempt to make people (specifically, Israel) "better" by having them keep his law and decides on a different strategy, a "Plan B". This involves sending his son to die and declaring that now the only thing people need to do is to believe in him and his saving death; they won't have to keep that silly old law after all. This is a gross caricature of the actual biblical story, but it is certainly not a gross caricature of what many Christians have been taught, either explicitly or by implication' (pp. 84-85).

² For example: Jesus' baptism – passing through the Red Sea; 40 days in the wilderness – 40 years in the wilderness; 12 disciples – 12 tribes of Israel; transfiguration – Sinai; Communion – the Passover.

new movement. They are the stories we Christians tell to explain and give direction to our own lives (p. 111).³

When we are alert to how the gospels sketch out the ground for the life of the church, we come to appreciate the following points:

- God's action in Jesus has ushered in a new world order in which a new way of life is not only possible, but mandatory for Jesus' followers (p. 118).
- Jesus' followers now have a mission that is worldwide in its scope (p. 118).

Speaker four: the story of Jesus as the story of the kingdom of God clashing with the kingdom of Caesar

This sound from this speaker is often inaudible. Again, it's a consequence of the fact that the story of Jesus is frequently disconnected from the story of Israel, which is all about 'how Israel's God is taking on the arrogant tyrants of the world, overthrowing their power, and rescuing his people from under its cruel weight' (p. 129).

Turning up the volume of this speaker enables us to be attentive to the fact that Jesus came to dethrone the ruler of this world. The whole of Jesus' ministry is about the clash of God's power with the power of earthly authority, and the battle reaches its climax at the cross (p. 142).

Keeping everything together

As readers and interpreters, we run into problems when we fail to hold these four strands together. To borrow from Wright's analogy, if we're listening to one part of a melody, we need to hear it in relation to the music coming out of all four speakers. No one aspect of the gospels should be heard in isolation.

Wright points out that one of the most obvious ways in which Christians have frequently 'pulled this tightly coherent story apart' (p. 175) is when 'kingdom' and 'cross' have been separated from one another. Some Christians have wanted to highlight the 'kingdom' to validate a social agenda (Liberal tradition); others have highlighted the 'cross' to emphasise the means by which God saves sinners (Reformed tradition). But the gospel writers bring these elements together (p. 176).

The four speakers give us the four main themes of the story that the gospels are telling. Wright shows that paying attention to these four themes enable us to tune in to the integrated story of kingdom and cross.

³ Wright uses this illustration: 'Like Americans retelling the story of the brave pioneers who crossed the ocean and settled in a difficult and dangerous land, and doing so not merely for the sake of a good tale but in order to reinforce the sense of modern America a country with a particular kind of risky, can-do attitude towards life, so the gospel writers told the story of Jesus in order to undergird and reinforce the Christian determination to follow him...' (p. 109).

Returning to speaker one: kingdom, cross and Israel

The gospel writers offer the story of Jesus as the completion of the story of Israel. 'As the Psalms and prophets sharpen up their vision of how God's kingdom is to come to the world, there emerges a strange and initially perplexing theme: Israel itself will have to enter that darkness' (p. 179). Sometimes the suffering is spoken of in terms of Israel as a whole; sometimes it seems to be focused on a particular representative figure. But the message is clear: it is through Israel's suffering that she will fulfil her original vocation of being the means by which God's sovereignty over the nations becomes a reality.

Pulling together a complex web of ideas, Wright suggests that we are to understand the relationship between God, Jesus and Israel in this way: 'God called Israel to be the means of rescuing the world, so that he might himself alone rescue the world *by becoming Israel in the person of its representative Messiah*' (pp. 187-8).

Returning to speaker two: kingdom, cross and God

The music coming from the second speaker is about God once again returning to his people. It is through the obedient suffering of the mysterious figure in the servant songs of Isaiah that *God* will come in person to defeat the enemy and rescue his people.

Here, again, we see the tight nexus between God, Israel and the suffering servant, who is the Messiah. The role of the suffering servant is one that only God himself can take. God returns to his people in the form of a servant to establish his reign on the earth:

God himself will come to the place of pain and horror, of suffering and even of death, so that somehow he can take it upon himself and thereby set up his new style theocracy as last. The evangelists tell the story of Jesus in such a way that this combination of Israel's vocation and the divine purpose come together perfectly into one. This, I suggest, is the reality behind the later abstractions of 'humanity' and 'divinity'. The humanity is the humanity of Israel, the divinity is the divinity of Israel's God (p. 196).

Speaker three: kingdom, cross and church

The story that the gospels tell is the story of how Israel is transformed into a new community, based on Jesus the Messiah. Following the resurrection, Jesus' followers come to appreciate that the themes of kingdom and cross are not simply teachings to understand; they are the pattern of their life. Wright concludes:

Reading the gospels as the launching of God's renewed people, then, is not merely a historical note: 'This was where and how our story began.' It declares too: 'this is the sort of people we are: suffering kingdom-bringers, suffering kingdom-sharers' (pp. 201-2).

Speaker four: kingdom and cross in Caesar's world

The gospel writers present Jesus as the place where heaven and earth come together, and the event where this happens supremely is the crucifixion. The cross is 'the victory of the "son of man" over the monsters (Dan 7); the victory of God's kingdom over the world's kingdoms; the victory of God himself over all the powers, human and suprahuman, that have usurped God's rule over the world' (p. 206). The kingdom of God will be established only when the other 'lords' have been overthrown.

The gospels show that Israel's story comes to its climax on the cross. This is because the story of Israel was all along the story of how God was going to deal with the problem of evil. Genesis 12 was always designed as the answer to Genesis 3-11. Wright explains:

[God] would draw [evil] onto one place, allowing it to do its worst at that point. And he himself ... would go to that place, would become Israel-in-person, in order that evil might do its worst to him and so spend its force once and for all (p. 207).

In an inspiring flourish, Wright's laments that our atonement theories are too reductionist and limited in their scope:

We have, alas, belittled the cross, imagining it merely as a mechanism for getting us off the hook of our own petty naughtiness or as an example of some general benevolent truth. 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. It is the moment when a great old door, locked and barred since our first disobedience, swings open suddenly to reveal not just the garden, opened once more to our delight, but the coming city, the garden city that God had always planned and is now inviting us to go through the door and build with him. The dark power that stood in the way of this kingdom-vision has been defeated, overthrown, rendered null and void. Its legions will still make a lot of noise and cause a lot of grief, but the ultimate victory is now assured. This is the vision the evangelists offer us as they bring together the kingdom and the cross (pp. 239-40).

Cross and kingdom together

Tom Wright offers some final reflections on holding cross and kingdom together.

- The main point of Jesus' public career between his baptism and the cross is not that he demonstrates that he is the embodiment of Israel's God, but that 'in and through the Messiah, Israel's God reclaims his sovereign rule over Israel and the world' (p. 240).
- 'This kingdom is radically defined in relation to Jesus' entire agenda of suffering, leading to the cross' (p. 241).
- Jesus' kingdom is about the renewal of this world rather than escape from it. The gospels do not urge us to sectarian withdrawal, but 'inform a new generation for holistic mission, to

embody, explain and advocate new ways of ordering communities, nations and the world' (p. 242).

- Interpreting the cross as the coming of the kingdom leaves us with 'the primary application of the cross not in abstract preaching about "how to have your sins forgiven"..., 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.' From this understanding of the cross flows our commitment to mission (p. 244).

Andrew Sampson, October 2013 (revised November 2020)