



The authoritative word

REVIEWER | LIONEL WINDSOR

What is the authority of the Bible? How does the Bible's authority affect our lives as God's people who recognise the lordship of Christ? Lionel Windsor has a look at how N.T. Wright attempts to answer these questions.

I would hazard a guess that if I collected a moderately-sized bunch of self-professing Christians of various persuasions in a single room and asked, "Hands up who believes in the authority of the Bible?", a fair majority of the crowd would put their arms in the air. But if I then inquired of each individual hand-raiser exactly what he or she understood by the phrase, 'the authority of the Bible', I suspect I'd receive a wide variety of opinions, ranging from a strict belief in the eternal applicability of every sentence, to a vague feeling that the Bible sometimes has helpful things to say.

What is 'the authority of the Bible'? How does the Bible actually *have* authority in the day-to-day life of ordinary Christians? In an attempt to answer these questions, N. T. Wright, Bishop of Durham in the Church of England and one of Britain's most influential biblical scholars, has written his book, *Scripture and the Authority of God*. The book is the result of Wright's own wrestling with the issue of biblical authority in two very specific contexts: the International Anglican Doctrinal and Theological Commission (still ongoing) and the Lambeth Commission which produced *The Windsor Report* (no relation!) in October 2004.¹ Yet the book is not limited to the issues raised in these commissions. It is designed to address a wide variety of modern contexts and current debates. It is clear,

friendly and accessible, yet it also exhibits the care and precision of a world-renowned scholar.

Reading a book by N. T. Wright is a bit like taking an exhilarating guided coach tour of your own home town, with Wright pointing out all sorts of fascinating things about the landscape, and offering helpful insights into familiar territory with thoughtful cogency and often unsurpassed clarity that makes you genuinely grateful for the tour. However, after a while, you catch glimpses of Wright's final destination and you really start to wonder whether or not you want to end up there.

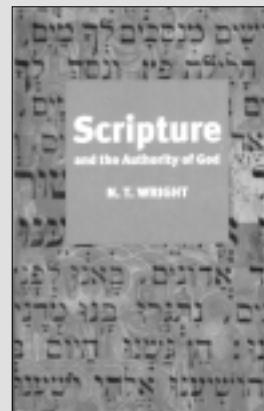
I'll deal with Wright's destination—his 'big picture'—presently. But first, let me mention a few of the helpful things about the book.

Wright's initial aim is commendable: he wants to understand the Bible's authority in its own terms, rather than imposing an alien view of 'authority' upon it. What does the Bible say about its own authority? Firstly, Wright helpfully points out that the Bible's authority is not independent; it is

derived from its principal subject—God.

The phrase "authority of scripture" can only make Christian sense if it is a shorthand for "the authority of the triune God, exercised somehow *through Scripture*". (p. 17)

That is, Scripture only has the authority that the supremely sovereign God invests in it as his written word. Secondly, the Bible's authority is a *narrative* authority, for the Bible itself is essentially a (true!) story (pp. 18-19), rather than a set of universal maxims or commands (even though there are maxims and commands within the story). Thirdly, Wright identifies a word that the Bible itself uses to fill out the idea of authority, the word 'kingdom', which is not an abstract philosophical category. Rather, 'the kingdom' is the concrete *action* of the sovereign creator



Scripture and the Authority of God

N. T. Wright
SPCK, London, 2005, 107pp.

Available from
Moore Books
T 02 9577 9966
E info@moorebooks.com.au
W www.moorebooks.com.au



God, putting the world to rights, judging evil and bringing forgiveness and new life.

Picturing ‘authority’ in terms of God, narrative and kingdom allows Wright to argue that Scripture doesn’t just provide information *about* God and/or his purposes, it is actively used *by* God to achieve his purposes (pp. 22-23). The authority of the Bible, therefore, lies not merely in its usefulness as a resource for information or devotion. Rather, in modern parlance, God performs ‘speech-acts’ through Scripture to authoritatively reorder, judge and redeem his world (cf. Isa 55:10-13). This insistence—that the Bible’s authority is the authority of God who acts through his word to bring about his kingdom—is returned to again and again throughout the book, and is probably its greatest strength. For example, in speaking of the relationship between Israel and the Old Testament, Wright says:

Scripture did not just reflect the experience, religious awareness, social and cultural turmoils and so forth of God’s people, though of course it did all that as well. Again and again the point of scripture was that it addressed a fresh, prophetic word to Israel in the midst of its often very ambiguous “experience”, breaking in to Israel’s own world of muddle and mistakes—doing, in fact, in verbal form what God himself was doing. (p. 27)

And of the New Testament, he writes:

The written word, expressing and embodying the living word of the primitive gospel, was the Spirit empowered agent through which the one creator God was reclaiming the cosmos. (p. 43)

With this view of authority in mind, Wright traces the ‘story’ of how the Bible’s authority has been viewed from ancient Israel, through Jesus and the apostles, to the present-day church. He traces both the impressive historical continuity in (as well as the lamentable deviations from) the belief in Scripture’s dynamic, kingdom-creating



PHOTO © ISTOCKPHOTOS.COM

authority over God’s people and God’s world. He critiques the Enlightenment for substituting an alien concept of autonomous human reason for the Bible’s authority. His proposals for ‘getting back on track’ are largely helpful, clear and passionately argued, for

ethnic and geopolitical entity that God used to further his purposes of creation, judgement and renewal for the world. But, according to Wright, Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection has turned Israel into ‘the church’. Jesus has reconstituted God’s people from

The death and resurrection of Jesus was the climactic ‘turning point’ in the story of God’s people. Jesus was Act IV in a cosmic five-act play.

example: reintegrate a proper view of the Bible’s authority with a properly-chastened view of tradition, reason and experience; make sure that the Bible (both Testaments) is central in all church meetings; call all church leaders to be Spirit-empowered Bible teachers rather than administrators.

But behind all of these helpful observations and appeals there is a ‘big picture’ that keeps asserting itself as the backbone to the book’s argument. This big picture is Wright’s particular view of the relationship between Israel, Jesus Christ and the church.² Israel was God’s ‘old covenant people’, an

being an ethnic enclave to being a global and expansive (but nevertheless earthly and political) concern. Hence, for Wright, the church is “the new covenant people, the restored Israel-for-the-world” (p. 36).³ In Jesus, “God’s call to Israel [is] now transmuted into God’s call to his renewed people” (p. 37).

So according to Wright, God is currently acting to renew the world *through the church*, just as he once was (in a different mode) through Israel. The death and resurrection of Jesus was the climactic ‘turning point’ in the story of God’s people. Jesus was Act IV in a cosmic five-act play. The previous

three acts in this play were creation, fall and Israel; we (the church) are Act V (see especially pp. 89-93). So Wright speaks of “God’s project of new covenant and new creation” having “begun” in Jesus, “necessarily taking a new mode” (pp. 41-42). But the story is unfinished. It is our role, as the church, to complete the story—to become actors in God’s unfinished story—to improvise the rest of the story without forgetting our basic theme that stems from its beginnings in Israel and Jesus Christ.

What effect does this have on Wright’s construal of the Bible’s authority? Simply put, the Bible’s authority becomes subservient to a

focused. According to the New Testament, Jesus Christ is *not* merely the ‘turning point’ in the story of God’s purposes in the cosmos, or the vital lynch-pin between Israel and the church. Rather, in many very significant ways, Jesus’ death and resurrection are the *end*, the *fulfilment*, the *goal* and the *completion* of God’s purposes in the cosmos (e.g. John 12:31-33; 2 Cor 6:2; Col 1:13-23; Heb 1:1-3, 9:25-28), as well as in the ‘story’ of Israel (e.g. Rom 10:4, 1 Cor 10:11, 1 Thess 2:14-16). God’s authoritative kingdom action is *not* primarily demonstrated through the ongoing actions of the church; it is demonstrated in that already completed

cally be used to claim that even the highly ambiguous *Windsor Report* is part of the narrative of the ‘new covenant people’ through which God is authoritatively guiding the creation towards its final destination, as the accredited leaders of the church listen to the ‘unfinished story’ of Scripture and then have a go at improvising on the basic theme (see pp. 100-104). This view would only add more confusion to already troubled waters.

The attempt to articulate a proper Christian view of the authority of Scripture is an important task. We desperately need a clear and passionate articulation of the Bible’s authority that can account for how God brings about his kingdom purposes through his authoritative word, the Holy Scriptures. Yet it must also account for the place of the contemporary church in that story. Wright’s attempt is valiant but ultimately fails to come to grips with the unique position of the Lord Jesus Christ in the biblical narrative as both the fulfiller and the goal of all history. **B**

LIONEL WINDSOR IS AN ASSISTANT MINISTER AT ST MICHAEL’S ANGLICAN CATHEDRAL, WOLLONGONG.

ENDNOTES

1. *The Windsor Report* was an attempt to deal with the consequences of wildly varying views on the appropriateness of homosexual activity amongst members and clergy of the worldwide Anglican Communion.
2. Much of this view is filled out in more detail in Wright’s previous publications.
3. Wright does not seem to be aware of the serious problem of using the ‘covenant’ category as a basis to discuss the continuity between Old Testament Israel and the New Testament church. In the New Testament, the term ‘covenant’ is very scarce and it is never used as a designation of the corporate identity of God’s people.

The Bible’s authority becomes subservient to a much grander theme for Wright: the ongoing mission of the (earthly) church.

much grander theme for Wright: the ongoing mission of the (earthly) church. For Wright, the Bible is first and foremost God’s instrument to guide his earthly church through uncharted waters, to judge and forgive and renew his cosmos through this ‘new covenant people’. So, according to Wright, our view of the authority of Scripture

needs to keep as its *central* focus the goal of God’s kingdom, inaugurated by Jesus on earth as in heaven and one day to be completed under that same rubric. (p. 84, emphasis mine)

According to Wright, the New Testament is for us what the Old Testament was for Israel:

[T]he New Testament understands itself as the new covenant charter, the book that forms the basis for the new telling of the story through which Christians are formed, reformed and transformed so as to be God’s people for God’s world. (p. 44)

The problem with this view is that it isn’t properly and biblically Christ-

action of death and resurrection which Christ has achieved. We as the church are simply called to trust and obey him. Certainly, Christians are to be active in God’s world, and we should expect God to work in our world through our individual and corporate obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ. However, in doing this we are *not* taking part in a grand ‘unfinished story’ in the same way that Israel was before Christ. Rather, we are proclaiming and living out the consequences of God’s *finished* story in Jesus Christ, and we await his return when the implications of what he has done will be obvious to all. In terms of the ‘story’ of the Bible, the New Testament does not merely continue the Old Testament; it completes it.

In the end, despite a promising start, Wright’s vision of the Bible’s authority is too open-ended, too ambiguous, and too intertwined with the vagaries of whatever we might want to identify as ‘the church’ on earth or ‘the people of God’ to be of proper help. Indeed, the arguments in *Scripture and the Authority of God* could quite logi-