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#138 An evening with NT Wright at The Rock Church

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Recorded at The Rock Church, San Diego, Tom Wright challenges us to think like first-century Christians, to imagine Jesus and the early church within the history, culture, and religion of Second Temple Judaism and the Greco-Roman world. Recorded in Nov 2019.

For 'The New Testament In Its World': <https://zondervanacademic.com/pages/new-testament-in-its-world>

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Transcript

Welcome back. I'm Justin Breiley and this is the show where I get to sit down with one of the world's leading theologians. Tom Wright to ask your questions is brought to you in partnership with SBCK and NT Wright online and comes to you from Premier Unbelievable, the umbrella organisation where you can get loads more of our resources

and shows at premierunbelievable.com. It's all linked with today's show.

Well, we're continuing to bring you some bonus content from Tom on the show at the moment. This is a talk Tom gave in November 2019 at the Rock Church in San Diego. They were hosting an event called An Evening with NT Wright and this was shortly after the launch of the New Testament in its world.

That major work with New Testament scholar Mike Byrd, looking at the world that the New Testament was written into. And in this talk, Tom challenges us to think, like first century Christians, to imagine Jesus and the early church within the history, culture and religion of the second temple Judaism and the Greco-Roman world that they lived in. So thanks to the Rock Church for permission to re-broadcast this talk and here's Tom.

Thank you so much for that welcome. It's great to be here and to share both in fellowship and in study with you all because this book which you've just seen a micro advertisement for, the New Testament in its world, is really aimed at helping all of us to get in touch with stuff which often we in the church don't get sufficiently in touch with, namely the actual context of the New Testament. I have a biblical image for why I think this matters.

At the end of the book of First Kings, in First Kings chapter 22, two kings are wanting to go to war and they ask the prophets to tell them whether they should do this or not. And most of the court prophets, just like the idea of a war now and again, say, say, go and do it. And then one of the kings says, isn't there another prophet we can ask? And then they get this other prophet.

It's Mykiah. And one of the kings doesn't like Mykiah for various reasons. But Mykiah begins by saying, yes, go and fight and it'll be all right.

And then they say, no, you must tell us the word of the Lord. And Mykiah pauses and he says, I saw all Israel scattered on the mountains like sheep that have no shepherd. And oh, my goodness, this is bad news.

And so they shut him up and say, go away. And then they go off and fight. And of course he was right.

And they lose big time. But Mykiah first stood humbly in the councils of God. It's when he had his vision so that he could then stand boldly in the councils of the world.

That's a vocation, my friends, which we all are called to. The church is often hidden away from its responsibilities to speak the word of God to the world. We don't have that luxury anymore.

We live in a dangerous, complicated, confused, and often diverse and scratchy and unpleasant world. And if the church can't speak God's word to God's world, then shame

on us. But how do we stand humbly in the council of God? Well, in the New Testament it says that in various ways God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets, including Mykiah, but in these last days he has spoken to us through a son.

Who is this son? Obviously Jesus. How do we know who Jesus is? We don't intuit it. Or if we do, we may well imagine Jesus in all sorts of ways that aren't in fact anywhere near the reality.

We really know who Jesus is when we really read the New Testament and we read the New Testament well when we read the New Testament in its world. And that's what this book is about. In other words, it means history.

It means getting to know that first century world. People often say to me, "Oh, but if you put Jesus back in his first century world, he becomes irrelevant to us because we live in a world that's so different." Well, it isn't. It isn't so different.

There are big differences. I mean, they didn't have cars and smartphones and lots of other things. But in all sorts of ways, they were very similar, but that's not the point.

One of the first things we learn is that we put the New Testament into its Jewish world. And in its Jewish world, many Jewish people of the day were waiting and longing and praying for God at last to do what he'd promised, for God to come back and take control. And when Jesus says, "The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand," that's what he's talking about.

And if we believe and this is central to genuine Christianity, that world history changed its course. When Jesus of Nazareth announced God's kingdom and died and rose from the dead and ascended and poured out his spirit, if we believe that that was when the great door of history swung open with good news waiting the other side, then we have to know what was going on then. Otherwise we will just get it wrong and fantasize and imagine that, oh, they were basically addressing our issues, which they were and they weren't.

Because let me go back to that Jewish world of the first century. We discover that our contemporary ideas about the kingdom of God often need radical revision. When I grew up, many of us just assumed that when Jesus talked about the kingdom of God, he meant the kingdom of heaven, and by that he meant going to heaven when you die.

That is such a widespread Western misunderstanding. He's spoken fronted. But at the end of the 19th century and on into the 20th century, many people, scholars, preachers, teachers, believed that when Jesus said the kingdom of God is at hand, he meant that the world was about to come to an end, the end of the world.

He didn't mean that either. Those two misunderstandings have jostled to and fro in our world in popular and scholarly communication. And where people have thought that

Jesus meant, here's a neat way by which you can go to heaven, often that has made them withdraw from this world.

This world is not my home. I'm just a passing through, excuse me, God made this world, and he said, it's very good. Are you sure it's not your home in some sense or other? And so they have become escapists and often escapists politically and socially as well, not wanting to know about the real troubles in the real world and what the real God is doing about them.

And then the other side is people who say, well, Jesus thought the world was going to end and it didn't. He got it wrong. And therefore, we have to rethink all the things that he was saying and teaching.

And we can retrieve some of them, but the bits that seem odd to us will say, well, he was wrong about the end of the world, so he was wrong about this too. And I think those two positions are partly at the root of our present culture wars and standoff between the escapists who are happy to leave the world as it is and the radical reformers who want to change everything overnight and other ways you can say that. You know this mess that we're all in on both sides of the Atlantic.

But when we're talking about God's kingdom, we're talking about, as Jesus taught us to pray, God's sovereign saving rule coming on earth as in heaven, not in heaven as in heaven, heaven where God's space is, that's already just doing fine. Thank you. But on earth, on earth as in the way that I used to get at this when I was in a different kind of public ministry was I would ask groups, sometimes town councils, sometimes youth groups, whatever, what would it look like if God was in charge here? And usually some fool would say, well, we'd have better coffee for a start and say, no, that's not the point.

Imagine your town, your city, your street, your neighborhood, your youth club, your old folks home, whatever it is. What would it look like if God was running? Now here's the thing. Many people say, oh, you're talking about theocracy.

We don't like theocracy. That means an angry God bullying us and forcing us to do things we don't want to being angry with us if we don't. No, you've got the wrong God.

The word God is not univocal. It means different things to different people. What would it look like if the God we see active and revealing himself in Jesus of Nazareth? What would it look like if that God was in charge and suddenly the whole world looks different? And it also looks scary because Jesus comes in saying, this is what it looks like when God takes charge and he's healing people and he's having parties, but at the same time, the forces of evil are gathering and they're massing around him and threatening him and eventually they kill him.

But what they didn't realize, as St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians, what they didn't realize is

who he was and what his death was going to achieve, that by his death he overcame the forces of darkness so that then in his resurrection he would launch not a new stairway to heaven, but he would launch God's new creation in the midst of the present world and he would invite all people everywhere to become part of that project. That's at the heart of the gospel. Now, you get there, you get where I just got by doing the history.

I've studied the world of second temple Judaism for the last 30 or 40 years and the more I study it, the more I see this is what the gospel is all about and I grieve when I see the church missing the point. We need to pay attention to history and only then when we see the New Testament in its world do we realize what was actually going on, not least what was going on with the resurrection. I was talking to a friend the other day who said that people she knew believed the resurrection because they believed in the supernatural and God can do anything so he did this.

I want to say no, the resurrection isn't an example of something else, some more general truth. The resurrection is the great fact that stands at the heart of history and from one point of view it is the most shocking, unexpected and unbelievable thing within the present world, well of course it is because people in the ancient world like people in our world know perfectly well that dead people don't get raised. But from the other point of view it is the launching foundational and most natural imaginable event within God's new creation and if we're followers of Jesus we are people of new creation, Paul says if anyone is in the Messiah there is a new creation right there, that person and the world that they represent is a new creation because when you come to be in Christ you become in yourself a small working model of God's new creation assured thereby as we were just singing that when Jesus comes again and renews all things we will be raised to share the new heavens and new earth, that's where it's all going.

So the more you study the Jewish world of the New Testament and the more you read the New Testament within that world the more you see all kinds of things which are present culture including many bits of our Christian culture have screened out but it isn't only the Jewish world, the two other great worlds which converge and which together shape the world of the New Testament. The next one is the Roman world when Jesus was a baby there was a Roman emperor on the throne Augustus, he had become emperor after a long period of civil war and strife after the death of his adoptive father Julius Caesar and as a result he had brought so they said rescue and salvation to the whole world by stopping all those horrible civil wars and by establishing peace and justice so they hailed him as Lord and around the Roman Empire particularly in the East, in the Middle East they started to worship him as God. First as son of God and then after his death they actually said he was now divine.

So Jesus was born into and announced God's kingdom within a world where Caesar was the Lord of the world, was the Savior, was the bringer of justice, the bringer of peace and was God incarnate. And we in the modern West with on this is on both sides of the

Atlantic with our multiple separations of fact and value of faith and public life, of church and state we've split it all apart. So many people think that you can follow Jesus and call him Savior and call him Lord and all of that in a kind of a private world.

No such thing as a private world in the ancient world. When you say Jesus is Lord in the ancient world you mean that Caesar is not. When you say his Savior you mean that Caesar is not.

But of course if it's Jesus who is Lord and Savior he redefines what it means to be Lord, he redefines what it means to be Savior. He's saved the world not just from recurrent bouts of civil war and various other things but from death itself and from all that leads to death, all the corruption and decay and idolatry and sin which produces the decline and the decay and the dissolution of human beings and human societies. Jesus is the ultimate Savior.

Some of you, most of you I guess, know that for yourselves if for any here tonight you don't know this is what this message is all about. Jesus is Lord and Savior in a totally different way but this means when we look out at the world we have to say who is Caesar in our world. It isn't so obvious in a democracy Caesar is all of us.

We often try to shirk that but even in a democracy we need to say Jesus is Lord and Caesar isn't. And I think we've hardly begun to think what that means for church life in the 21st century certainly in the western world. Certainly my country is hugely confused on the topic but here's the thing.

When Jesus was a little boy there were serious riots in northern Palestine where he lived in Galilee, riots because the Romans were imposing a new tax. What do the Romans do faced with a riotous population? They crucify. Boy do they crucify.

Hundreds, possibly thousands of young Jews stuck up on crosses slowly rotting away half dead and half. Jesus of Nazareth grew up under the shadow of the cross. Happened again in 80s, 70s when the Romans took Jerusalem they crucified so many people that there weren't enough trees to make the crosses to go around.

It's a hideous story. Jesus lived in that world. A world in which the cross meant we run this world, we are the big bullies and if you get in our way this is what we do to you.

But my friends, by the late 40s AD within 20 years of Jesus' crucifixion people were writing poems celebrating the fact that the cross was now not simply this hideous weapon of Roman brutality but was the ultimate symbol of a previously unimagined loving God, giving his life as a ransom for many. And it's when I as a Roman historian, that was my first university degree before I did theology, when I think about the meaning of the cross in the Roman world and then I think about the meaning of the cross in the Christian world, you see why I called my book on the cross the day the revolution began.

This is a revolution, replacing the love of power with the power of God's love and it's the more I put the New Testament into its Roman world the more that message shines out.

But then the third world in which we have to put the New Testament is the world of Greece, the world of philosophy, the world of ideas. St. Paul grew up in a town called Tarsus which was one of the two or three great centers of philosophy in the ancient world and in the ancient world philosophy wasn't something that a few eggheads went off and studied in college and came back talking in comprehensible nonsense. Philosophy in the ancient world was something that everybody was chattering about on the street because it's about what we all know that there is such a thing as justice, what is it and how do we do it? We all know that we need some order in our society but how can we do that without squelching individual freedoms? We all want freedom and so on and so on and so on and so the great philosophers were popularizers of these great questions.

And the early Christians emerged into a pluriform world. People sometimes say, "Oh dear, it's so difficult today because our world is so pluriform and we don't know who we are anymore." And I want to say we have lived in a little Christian bubble for some time in Western society but Christianity was born into a world of thousands of ideas and world views and the early Christians relished it. They took it on.

St. Paul says, "I take every thought captive to obey Christ." Are we doing that today? Not so as you'd notice, not that much. The great philosophers and opinion makers of our day, they look down their noses at us, "Oh, you're the church. You just go on muttering and singing your funny songs and we'll tell you the way the world really is." And we have often let them do that.

Paul says, "I beseech you brethren by the mercies of God, present your bodies as a living, say, whole selves as a living sacrifice to God. This is your properly human worship." And that phrase, your properly human worship, echoes the great philosophers like Aristotle who said, "We'll tell you what it is to be truly human." And the early Christians say, "No, we are modeling a new way of being human and authentic way which resonates out into that world of ideas and philosophies. There is a different way to be human and it's called following Jesus." And that's why in the second verse of Romans 12, he says, "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you may figure out and put into practice what God's will is.

Be transformed by the renewing of your mind." And so often we Western Christians have let the world tell us not only what to think but how to think. We've been drowning in that nonsense and it's time to recapture the early Christian vision which you see by putting the New Testament into its world and reading it there, the early Christian vision of outthinking the confused and puzzled world. You can see Paul doing it in miniature on the Ariopagus.

You know that scene in Acts 17 when Paul is in Athens and they're a bit suspicious because he's bringing foreign gods and that's what got Socrates into trouble. The Ariopagus is not a philosophical debating club, it's a court and Paul is on trial but he turns it into a philosophical society for a moment because what he wants to say is actually this new message that I'm bringing, it outflanks your best ideas. You've got the Stoics who think that God and the world are basically the same thing and he says, "Well, God is not far from anyone of us but God and the world are not the same thing." You've got the Epicureans who think that if there are gods they're miles away and they have nothing to do with us.

Oh no, he is not far from each one of us and he wants us to reach out and find him. And Paul doesn't do what so many modern Western Christians do. Again, you find this out by putting the New Testament into its world, namely, faced with the problem of deism, Epicureanism, Stoicism, whatever, we run back to Plato who says, "We have souls which are alienated from their true home in heaven and we're looking forward to going back there one day." You read the history of the first century.

Who is it who teaches that? It's not Paul, it's not John, it's not Peter, it's not Jesus himself, it's Plutarch who is a middle Platonist, he's a pagan priest in Delphi. He says, "My soul is looking forward to going back to heaven." I read that and I think that's what many of my Christian friends think Christianity is. Oh, we believe in new creation and being rescued, saved from the wicked world of sin and death, not in order to leave behind the created order but in order to share and share in the making of God's new creation.

We need to understand the Jewish world, the Roman world, the Greek world, in order that having then stood humbly in the councils of God, we can stand boldly in the councils of the world because there is a fourth world actually which the New Testament belongs in as well and it's our world. Psalm 2 says that God says to the Messiah, "I will give you the nations as your inheritance and the uttermost parts of the earth for your possession." You can't get more uttermost parts of the earth than San Diego, it seems to me. Well, here we are.

This is God's world and therefore it's the Bible's world and in my experience of a lifetime, the more I see the Bible in its world, its multilayered, complex world, its three dimensional, we are three dimensional people. The more we understand the three dimensional world of the first century, the more we see, the many, many, many ways the Bible enables us to be the people of God for our world. And as I've often said to my students and others, it's time to stop giving 19th century answers to 16th century questions and start giving 21st century answers to 1st century questions.

We've got to study that first century so that we can then see what we are meant to be doing and being. We stand humbly in the councils of God incarnate, the God who became human in the first century Jewish and Roman and Greek world so that we can

then stand boldly in the face of our world and that we can share the saving, rescuing, healing, new creative love of the one God revealed in Jesus and the Spirit. Thank you, my friends, all I wanted to say God bless you.

Thank you. Hope you enjoyed that talk from Tom and there are links from today's show to the Rock Church and the video and of course to the New Testament in its world. It could be a great Christmas gift for the New Testament lover in your life this year.

Next time, we'll be bringing you the sit down conversation that Tom had with the senior pastor of the Rock Church, Pastor Miles McPherson. But for now, don't forget all of our shows are available at premierunbelievable.com. You can explore the back catalogue from Ask N2 Write Anything and you can ask a question of Tom yourself for a future show by registering for our newsletter there. Registering also gets you a free ebook on the evidence for God from the universe and access to loads of exclusive big conversation, video content and more ebooks.

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