

# OpenTheo

## #153 Is the Bible inerrant? Is 'Sola Scriptura' correct? What about verses endorsing slavery?

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### Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

How should we treat the Bible? Inerrant? Infallible? Does it contain errors? Tom answers questions on the nature of the Bible as well as related issues such as whether the Reformers were right to concentrate solely on scripture rather than church tradition, and whether there is a 'trajectory hermeneutic' when it comes to issues like slavery in the Bible.

First broadcast in 2019, this episode includes a bonus bit of 'Tom Unplugged' at the end!

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## Transcript

[music] The Ask NTY Anything podcast.

[music] Hello and welcome along. NTYY is of course one of the best-known New Testament scholars in the world.

I'm Justin, the guy lucky enough to sit down with him on this show regularly and ask your questions. Today, in a replay from 2019, we'll be asking, "How should we treat the Bible?"

Is it inerrant, infallible? Does it contain errors?" Well, Tom's answering questions on the nature of Scripture, as well as related issues such as whether the Reformers were right to concentrate solely on Scripture rather than church tradition, and whether there's a trajectory hermeneutic when it comes to issues like slavery in the Bible. By the way, thanks to Muzih in South Africa who left this review.

Thank you NTY and Justin for such a great podcast. I actually found Dr. Tom's teachings via someone who was critiquing his views on eschatology, and I've never stopped following. This podcast makes it easy to find your teachings and insights and they're presented with great simplicity.

But what makes me love Tom more is his humility, both in presenting his views and dealing with those who oppose him, no matter how rude or offensive they may be. That's helped me and is a constant reminder to season my speech with salt, not only in what I say, but also in how I say it. What a lovely review, Muzih.

Thank you very much. Believing that. And of course you can leave a review too on your podcast provider, help others to discover the show.

And do keep listening at the end of today's podcast for a special treat from Tom unplugged. Let's get into today's episode. Welcome, welcome.

I am Justin Briley, sitting down with theologian and prolific author Tom Wright to ask your questions. Again, Tom publishes under Tom Wright in his more popular level stuff, NT Wright for his more academic books, he answers to both titles. The show brought to you by Premier in partnership with SBCK and NT Wright online.

Today, Tom's going to be tackling your questions on how we should treat the Bible, inerrancy, in fallibility, solar scriptura, and does the Bible go far enough on issues like slavery? So if you'd like more episodes like these updates or want to ask a question yourself for a future program, do register at the website, [askentiwright.com](http://askentiwright.com). By the way, if you register now, you'll also get access to bonus video content. We've got ones of Tom answering questions on speaking in tongues and the rapture only available if you subscribe to the newsletter there at [askentiwright.com](http://askentiwright.com). Plus anyone signing up to the newsletter by the end of March also gets automatically entered into a prize draw for one of three signed copies of Tom's new translation of scripture, the Bible for everyone. He's translated the whole of the New Testament and John Goldengate, Old Testament scholar, has done the Old Testament.

So sign up now for the bonus videos, the prize draw, the newsletter, and of course, to ask a question if you want to. It's all at [askentiwright.com](http://askentiwright.com). And before the end of today's podcast, we'll have another musical treat for you. So do make sure to listen right through the whole of today's episode.

Well, it's time for our regular sit down with Tom. We've got the coffee, pastries, the bananas ready for fueling us as we go into another podcast. We've been arranging all of these podcasts by theme thus far.

We're going to talk today specifically about doctrines and scripture, specifically in the broader sense. And I'm looking forward to digging into that. You've been a lifelong reader of the Bible, Tom.

But before we dig into that, you do read other books as well. What have you been enjoying recently in terms of? Well, I do read quite a bit of poetry, and I've always enjoyed poetry ever since I was boy. And recently, I've had the privilege of getting to know an extraordinary new book of poems or a single poem, but in a sequence of poems by the Irish poet, Michael O'Sheol.

And the poem is called The Five Quintets, obviously echoing Eliot's four quartets, but quite different and quite long. And it's an extraordinary, celebratory, cultural history of the last four or five hundred years. How we got into modernity, how modernity has gone horribly wrong, and how it can be coming out the other side, which is a wonderful narrative.

And these five about literature, art, and music, about economics, about politics, about science, about philosophy and theology, imagine one person having all that in his head. And imagine them writing brilliant sonnets and haikus and tersereima and so on, pulling it all together in this rich tapestry. Michael is a wonderful Irish poet, an extraordinary human being.

And I helped to host him reading his poems in St. Andrews in Edinburgh a week or two ago. And this poem, I think people are going to be studying it in a hundred years' time as an extraordinary representative of the high culture of the early 21st century. Can you give us the name of the poem again? The five quintets.

The five quintets. There you go. I'll make sure there's a link from today's podcast to Michael and to the Mikhail.

Well, I think he pronounces it "mihaul." Okay. "Mihaul," oh, she'll. He's a native Irish speaker.

He speaks about literally 19 languages like Japanese and Icelandic and goodness knows what. Gosh. Extraordinary, brilliant, linguist, brilliant man.

Well, look, from that, Mikhail, to another, Michael in Ireland, who is the, I imagine not the same, but in any case, the first question on scripture for today's podcast comes from Michael in Ireland who says, "Can you explain what you think is wrong with the American view of inerrancy? And if you wouldn't use that terminology, how would you speak about the trustworthiness of Bible?" Yeah. I do prefer the word trustworthiness. And I take quite

a pragmatic view that I really do believe that the Bible is the book God wanted us to have, and he wanted us to have it the way it is.

And at the same time, because the Bible is written in Greek and Hebrew, Christianity was a translating faith in the beginning. Jesus almost certainly spoke most of the time in Aramaic, but we have his words in Greek. So it's as though, yes, this is the original text from one point of view, but it's already making its way out into the world.

And the point is not to look back at it and say, "Can we analyze this by some scientific test and prove that every syllable is true on some modern pragmatist account of truth?" The important thing is to live within the narrative and see what it does. And the trustworthiness is something that we don't put in our pockets and say, "I've got this infallible scripture, so I'm all right." It's, "Oh my goodness, if this story is the real story, then what's it doing in me and through me and what's it doing in and through the church for the world?" And as soon as you turn around and say, "Shall we call it inerrant or infallible or in this or in that?" I don't like these words beginning with the letters I in. Then it seems to me you're getting trapped in a defensive mode, which is precisely what the Bible doesn't want you to do.

Now I know why that happened. It seems to me it happened because at the time of the Reformation, the question was scripture or tradition, and the Reformers said, "God's word, God's word, God's word." And so the sense of the Bible itself confronts the many Christian traditions and says, "No, there's something more to learn here." And then in the 17th and 18th century, particularly various rationalist movements and deist movements, we're trying to say, "No, no, no, we will work out what's true by the light of reason. And if the Bible happens to fit with that, so be it, and if it doesn't, we'll jettison it." Thomas Jefferson famously got rid of chunks of the Bible.

And so people said, "No, no, no, we've got to hang on to the Bible." And then because that happened within a rationalist turn within Enlightenment philosophy, people wanted to say, "We are going to see this as a rationalist thing. If there is a good God who wants his people to know the truth, he must have given us a true revelation. So therefore, since the Bible is obviously that revelation, it must be absolutely true." Now I always worry when people argue, "Must, must, must, must," that if there is a God who he must have done this, because actually, how do we know about God? We know about God by looking at Jesus.

Yes, and we know about Jesus by looking at Scripture, but Scripture presents us with a Jesus who doesn't give us truth as a commodity that we can put in our pockets and possess. He gives us this living truth which is utterly reliable, but which is not ours to possess. It's ours to be driven by out into the world to do what he wants.

So I have a very high view of Scripture. If I find myself saying in some exegetical argument at this point, Paul or John or whoever seems to have got it wrong, then red

lights start to flash. I think let's just put this one on hold.

Let's go around the tracks and see, "May well be me that's getting it wrong." And I've seen that happen with many scholars and so on. I've had to revise my own views about things again and again. My understanding may be wrong.

Let's work with the text and see, but the text is there for us to work with. So for me, saying Scripture is infallible doesn't shut down questions. It opens them up.

That's the difference. So much of the rather narrow American fundamentalism shuts down the questions. The Bible is infallible.

Now sit down, shut up, and we know the answers. No. If this is the book God wanted us to have, all questions are on.

I suppose in my experience as well, the people who have concerns about inerrancy are asking questions from a very specifically Western, modern viewpoint about the way texts should be read and not necessarily take them as they were meant to be written in a minute. Absolutely. And the very notion of truth itself is much more complex than we usually realize.

People think truth, i.e. did it happen or didn't it happen? Is it true in that sense? Well, that's the question essentially that Dan in Illinois asks, who asks a similar question about biblical inerrancy, but says if the Bible is the word of God, can it air? If so, how do we know what parts are true? Yeah. Well, it depends what you mean by "er" and depends how you read the different texts and obvious examples that when the psalmist says God has smoke coming out of his nostrils, we say, well, this is poetry. This means that God is a living God and he's active and he gets cross when bad things happen in his world, etc.

Fine. But I don't think that God is a funny old gentleman with smoke coming out of his nostrils. But then what about Genesis 1 and 2? What about so many passages in Scripture which many people have said? This is a kind of poetry.

This is the only way that granted that culture that you can talk wisely about creation and particularly if Genesis 1 is seen as the construction of a temple-like world, a heaven and earth world with an image at the heart of it, then this isn't a scientific account. This isn't sort of on a par with what somebody in a laboratory in Harvard or Cambridge or something might say about the big bang or what preceded the big bang. This is a way of saying, this is what it means.

This is what the world, as we know, means because this is how God made it. And the attempt to say, therefore, six days of creation, that's often where it comes down to, isn't it? Is it a problem if there are what appear to be on the surface, at least, simply factual inaccuracies? So I'm going back to Bart Ehrman, who we talked about in a previous podcast. I remember when I interviewed him about his journey gradually away from

Christianity, he said the thing that stopped him being a sort of an evangelical sort of inerrantist was when he first got marked on a paper trying to defend a particular verse in Mark about whether the bread offered was under the priest so and so or so and so.

And his tutor simply said, what if Mark got it wrong? And that sort of suddenly things came tumbling down, Finn. Now, what's going on there? Is it a problem if Mark did happen to misattribute the person who was the priest in charge at the time, whatever it might be? Yes. I've never felt that as a problem.

And maybe this is a deficiency in me, but I think there's two things going on because I've met again and again, scholars who've said, oh, well, at this point, Paul just had indigestion and really quite mean what. And I've had really famous scholars actually say that. Oh, well, Paul just... He was having an off day.

He was just not concentrating at this point. And I've found over and over again, and I've been studying Paul, obviously, for nearly 50 years, that then 10 years down the track, some scholar reading the Dead Sea Scrolls or doing a fresh take on something in Paul will come back and say, it really looks as though at this point what Paul is actually meaning is such and such or... He got it right after all, isn't he? Got it right after all. And so I want to say, just cool down here, and the quick, oh, it's wrong, really isn't as easy as that.

Another one which people quote again and again is the census at the beginning of Luke. And Luke is often translated to say, this was the first census at the time when Quiranius was governor of Syria. Let me just check what in my own New Testament translation... Paul is now referring to his recently released New Testament Bible for everyone along with John Golden A who did the Old Testament.

And here in Luke 2.2 it says, this was the first census before the one when Quiranius was governor of Syria. Now, I didn't make that up. The Greek word protos, and other scholars have pointed this out as well, but not a lot of people actually have cordoned on.

The Greek word protos with a genitive can mean before rather than the first. So I say this was the first census, but it was before the one when... And just to close the circle, what's the point in that's been pointed out before? The problem here is that from Josephus, the Jewish historian, we know when Quiranius was governor of Syria, and that wouldn't square with what appears to be Luke's chronology. Now, many people have fastened on that as part of their case that the birth stories were all just made up later and got wrong.

Of course, it's possible that Joseph has got it wrong, but that's another question. And I think, again, we need to lighten up in terms of, for instance, the order of events that when Jesus comes to Jerusalem and he curses the fig tree, then goes in and comes out and it's withered away. Mark arranges that story one way, Matthew arranges that story another.

Does that matter? For goodness sake, it really doesn't matter. It's been some interesting work done on this, I think, by Mike Lykona, who are working off Richard Burridge, really, to say that was the way they wrote biography all the time in those days. They rearrange their materials.

It is the way we write biographies as well. As we've mentioned before, there are many, many biographies today. I just picked up a new book on the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey, and it arranges quite a lot of the material thematically.

So here's Michael Ramsey dealing with the South African problem, and that cuts to and fro across chronology. And then we come back and here's Michael Ramsey dealing with synodic reform or whatever. Well, if you haven't seen it, I do recommend why are there differences in the Gospels, Mike Lykona? Right.

There's a fascinating study looking at various aspects of Plutarch and the way he does exactly the same telescoping or spotlighting and lots of other aspects. This would only be a problem if you're an 18th century rationalist who thinks that the Bible was just a transcript of the videotape that somebody was running when Jesus was walking around Galilee. And clearly that's not the case.

Because actually, that isn't how anyone does history or biography. It's always done by selection and arrangement. There's no other way to write.

It's a similar question here, but I don't know if there's something you want to pick out from this blaze in Ripley-Arse. Do you believe the Bible is the infallible word of God, another inward? If so, whatever it is there to support that this is a perfect book inspired by God, how can the book of Psalms, for instance, be the word of God if it's written to God by man? I mean, you've obviously covered various aspects of this. I suppose the question I will draw out then from Braise's question is, is how should what terminology should we use in the Bible if we're not going to say necessarily infallible in errant? What do we say? And you see, in the Bible itself, the phrase the word of God doesn't refer to the Bible.

The primary word of God is Jesus himself, according to John. And when the risen Jesus is commissioning his disciples at the end of Matthew, he doesn't say all authority in heaven and earth is given to the books who chaps are going to go and write. He says all authority is given to me.

So when we talk about authority of Scripture as I do, then this must be a shorthand way of talking about God's authority vested in Jesus exercised somehow through this book. But the danger is then, again, because we live in a modern Western rationalist world, we think that this means that the Bible sits on the shelf. And when you have a question, you can go and look up page 123.

There's a correct answer to it. Now, there are some things where you can look up and find answers like that. But the questioner is quite right that my late mother saying to me once, David always seemed to have trouble with his pronouns.

I said, what on earth do you mean? So when we read the Psalms, sometimes he says you and sometimes he says I and sometimes says he. Is he talking about God or to God or is it God talking to him? And I think that is part of the love poetry of God and God's people. And we then read that not because it's sort of simplistically a word from God to us, but because it's a word which the Holy Spirit has caused to bubble up out of the hearts of the Psalmist's God's poetic people, which then we can inhabit so that we can join in that conversation.

Because when you think trinitarianly, then you're not just thinking about a top down God inspiring scripture. And here it is. Paul's letters are quite clearly by somebody called Paul, who is a very different character from, say, Matthew or Luke.

Jeremiah is a very different character from Isaiah, etc, etc, etc. God, and this is the principle of incarnation, God works by his spirit through the specificities of these human beings. And I would much rather somebody said, basically, this book is infallible meaning, I can not really rely on it than somebody who said, oh, it's just full of old stories or oh, it's just a library and you can take and pick and choose what you like.

Because I have seen again and again, when people start saying that, the bits that they choose not to get into are the bits that really might make a difference in their lives, which perhaps they don't want to make. And so, I'm wary of that myself. Are there bits that I'm ignoring? So there are pastoral questions, as well as kind of abstract theological ones.

The Ask Anti-Right Anything podcast is brought to you by Premier in partnership with SBCK and Anti-Right Online. SBCK are Tom's UK publisher. They've recently released his very exciting project, The Bible for Everyone.

It's a fresh translation of The Whole of Scripture by John Goldenay and Tom Wright, a fresh, insightful and highly readable translation. I've been using it myself and Tom's been using it in today's episode. We've an exclusive podcast listener discount on it.

Go to [sbckpublishing.co.uk](http://sbckpublishing.co.uk), look for The Bible for Everyone and then simply enter the discount code anti-right. That's No Spaces and All Caps. Again, The Bible for Everyone at [sbckpublishing.co.uk](http://sbckpublishing.co.uk) and to discount code anti-right.

No Spaces and All Caps to get 20% off the podcast listeners. Sometimes this idea of Solar Scriptura comes up, you know, we should only rely on The Bible for getting out our understanding of God and Son. Jeffrey in Newquay Corn will ask, do you think the Reformation through the baby out with the bath water with Solar Scriptura? So solely



concentrating on the Bible and dismissing hundreds of years of church tradition.

Well, that's an interesting question. Because of course, Solar Scriptura goes with Solar Christ alone and the Bible witnesses to Christ and it's a little bit more complicated than most quotations of Solar Scriptura would envisage. And if I can refer to my book scripture and the authority of God, I've tried to tease out there much more fully how the authority of Scripture actually works in practice.

Because you know, most of the Bible is narrative. How can a narrative be authoritative? Well, answer is God is saying, this is my story with the world. It came to its climax in Jesus.

And by the Spirit, I'm calling you to join in with this story. Now, that's a different thing from going and looking up right answers. There are right answers.

We have to struggle for them, but they come in the context of the whole story and the whole life. So, the danger with the Reformation, yes, was that there was a sense that the last 200 years have really got it horribly wrong. However, the Reformers, Luther, Calvin, Thomas Cranmer, and Tyndale in this country, they weren't throwing out all tradition.

They read the Fathers, they read Chrysostom, they particularly read Augustine. And they were very concerned to retrieve all the wisdom of the first five centuries. But they did kind of leave a gaping hole from roughly five or six hundred through to their own time, which is an odd way to look at church history.

And that was kind of a bit of overkill because they saw the medieval church as having got it horribly wrong with odd theories about the mass, with odd theories about purgatory. So, in order to get rid of that, they said, "We will go back to the beginning." Now, see, I say again and again that even the early Fathers missed out some of the key dynamics that are there actually in the New Testament itself. And I get stick from some theologians who are saying that.

But of course, I want tradition, I want reason, but we have to go back and back to Scripture because that is what witnesses to Christ and it's in Jesus the Messiah that we see the face of the living God. Let's go to this one from Pete in Oxford who says, "Do you see anything wrong in the so-called trajectory hermeneutic approach to Scripture? Is there say anything wrong with asserting that Paul didn't go far enough when he fails to condemn slavery? Conversely, does Philip go too far in baptizing the Ethiopian eunuch without checking with the apostles in Jerusalem?" First of all, what do you take our question of Pete to mean by trajectory hermeneutic? Yes, I think he's saying that the New Testament is the starting off on a line and maybe we have to go further down that line. Courshously, yes, there is a danger there because as soon as you say, "Well, they didn't go far enough and I want to go here," then that's open season for all kinds of agendas and you have to be very, very clear of your ground in creation and new

creation, in covenant and new covenant, all focused on Jesus in order even to begin down that line.

However, I do think that for instance the abolitionist movements in the 18th and 19th century were applying radically to society, things that are embedded in Scripture after all the Exodus narrative is the great narrative which says, "We know God as the slave free in God." That is unthinkable in the first century in terms of Wilberforce agenda. It's as unthinkable as it would be if we were to preach from the pulpit today that we ought to stop using motor cars and airplanes and all ought to ride on horses and donkeys instead. You can preach that if you like but your congregation are going to roll their eyes and say which planet he's living on.

But similar things could be said. We know that these are damaging to our health and to the planet but we go on doing them anyway. Yes, you can follow things through but you do have to be very careful.

Do I wish Philip had checked with the apostles? No, absolutely not. Philip has authority to do this. The church has always taught actually that baptism in the name of the Trinity is baptism even if you're not a nurse in a hospital can baptize a baby.

You don't have to be ordained to do that. So overall though you're not opposed to the idea that there can be starting points. In the case of Paul doesn't outright condemn slavery in his day and age but obviously he changes the terms.

He puts a time bomb. The letter to Philemon is an extraordinary little time bomb, completely changing the dynamics of masters and slaves. But as I say in his day you've got to do this now and then maybe others will do that then.

And cultures change and different challenges change as you go along. So I'd want to know where the questioner was going to be going with that because it could be some very interesting conversations. And obviously the church has wrestled with that in terms of for instance should Christians fight in the military.

And that's been a major bone of contention. Probably the most impressing one in our day and age is sexuality but that's probably a conversation for another time. Yes but there I would say I think the New Testament writers would say go back to the notion of creation, a good creation being reborn.

That's the framework. It's a first article question, i.e. the three articles that Creed God the Father, Son, the Holy Spirit. This is about the goodness of creation and the redemption of that good creation.

And that's the starting point. Well maybe we'll get a chance to open up those issues in more depth another time. I just wanted to finish with asking my own question which is when it comes to Scripture a lot of people in terms of the way they approach it we'll go

to something like 2 Timothy 3. All the Scriptures God breathed and useful for rebuke, correction, training and righteousness and so on.

Some people see that as a mandate to say yes you see in errancy, infallibility. Others say don't be daft that's not what it's saying. What do you think 2 Timothy 3 is saying? Well Christart is not talking about the New Testament because there isn't a New Testament.

It's part of the New Testament. Yes, yes. That's talking about Israel's Scriptures.

And Israel's Scriptures of course from a Christian point of view are the story so far which we now know reached its climax in Jesus the Messiah. So yes basically you need that whole scriptural narrative. The frustrating thing to me is many many people who have banged on about 2 Timothy 3 and all Scripture etc.

But don't take Scripture seriously. There's the Old Testament insists that the good creation is going to be redeemed and renewed by God and many many Christians who take 2 Timothy the way they do actually think that that's just a metaphor for a platonic spiritual salvation. And I want to say sorry all Scripture is given by God.

Jolly well taken seriously please. It's been brilliant spending some more time with you. Thank you so much for what we've been able to do so far in this special podcast series.

Let me remind you if you're listening and you'd like to let other people know about it always helps to rate and review the podcast wherever you're listening to it via your podcast software gets it out to more people. And don't forget you can ask questions yourself or leave comments on some of the issues we've been debating thus far via the website. Get registered there at [askentiright.com](http://askentiright.com). Until next time Tom thank you so much for being.

Thank you. Thanks for listening today and do keep listening as we've won more special surprise for you. Now if you find this show helpful the Ask and T right anything podcast do consider supporting us.

You can give right away to the Ministry of Premier Unbelievable from wherever you are in the world. There's a giving link with today's show in the info or find it at [premierunbelievable.com](http://premierunbelievable.com). You can also find links there for more from the show our newsletter and of course our next live event discussing sexuality gender and identity. Two Christians on different sides of that debate will be joining me on 7th February.

You can be part of it too again [premierunbelievable.com](http://premierunbelievable.com) the links with today's show. For now see you next time and here's that special something. We've got to that point where we have a little extra something for you.

Entiright unplugged the sessions. We're going to be hearing a song you actually wrote

with famous biologist Francis Collins about Christian himself of course and founder of the Biologos Institute in America. Tell us how this song came together Tom.

It was an extraordinary moment I was in a conference in Rome actually. My wife went shopping while I was in a conference session and it was snowing it was February and she came back to the hotel in a cab and the cabi serenaded her all the way back with singing Beatles songs and actually tried to sell her a CD of his own singing. And so she came back in on a high I've just been you know wonderful this this cabi and one of the songs was Paul McCartney's yesterday and so I went off to the next session of the conference with the tune of yesterday in my head but then I thought I'm about to go to this Biologos meeting in where if it was New York I think or somewhere.

And for some reason I realized that the word genesis works the same way that yesterday worked. So I scribbled down in the conference center I wasn't paying attention really what was going on. One or two possible verses and I emailed them that night to Francis Collins and I said Francis ignore this if it's if it's silly or you don't want to but what about it and within an hour or two he emailed me back another verse or two and then we just worked on it together and then when we got together we it had its premiere at that Biologos and he and I have done it.

I have to say Francis is a much better guitarist than me so he actually gets it right and I just sort of strum along in the background but it's been kind of fun. Okay let's hear it. Okay.

Genesis, earth and heaven in a cosmic kiss evolution must have been like this oh I believe in Genesis and then the verse that Francis wrote DNA shaping creatures from the dust and clay double helix in the Milky Way oh Genesis means DNA how he made it all 14 billion years ago wisdom truth and love for he spoke and it was so Genesis even at a minicosmic bliss in a paradise we all now miss oh I believe in Genesis in a trace didn't listen to divine advice Einstein wondered whether God plays dice were trapped within a world of vice why they had to fall I don't know it doesn't say they did something wrong and they've longed for God's new day Genesis royal priesthood in a holy bliss new Jerusalem will be like this oh I believe in Genesis oh