

# OpenTheo

## #123 How St. Paul changed the world Pt 2 - Tom Holland & NT Wright

June 23, 2022



### Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

NT Wright and popular historian Tom Holland continue their discussion about the way the writings and theology of St Paul changed the modern world.

Watch the conversation between Tom Holland and NT Wright:

[https://youtu.be/nlf\\_ULB26cU](https://youtu.be/nlf_ULB26cU)

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## Transcript

The Ask NT Wright Anything podcast Who was Paul? What difference did he make in the world? What do we know about his conversion? We had such an interesting conversation and we heard the first part of it last week between Tom Holland and NT Wright. Do I sit down with every week on this show to ask your questions? This is a bit different, this is a conversation we recorded back in 2018 when Tom Holland and NT Wright first met and it was such a joy to bring them together. They got on like an absolute house on fire and it was such a good conversation so I thought it worth re-airing on the Ask NT Wright Anything podcast.

We'll be back to the normal format next week so do make sure to get your questions in by the way because you know it's always a good time to ask Tom your questions. You

can go and do that. The easy way to do that now is simply go to our new website PremierUnbelievable.com. When you register you'll get the link to ask a question of Tom it's that easy.

If you want to watch the video by the way of today's show it's linked with today's info on the podcast. You can also find the link there to our Michaela Peterson and John McCray big conversation live. Are Millennials and Gen Z ready to believe in God? That's what we're asking you can be part of the live audience on Tuesday the 12th of July.

It's absolutely free to attend from anywhere in the world you just need to register. Again that's PremierUnbelievable.com and the links are with today's show. Let's continue this conversation on St Paul and the difference he made in the world between Tom Holland and Enthi Wright.

Just how strange would this idea of a God who or a Messiah or whatever who becomes crucified be have been in the Roman world that this message was being delivered into? Beyond weird. Totally beyond weird as Paul repeatedly says. He says foolishness is ridiculous and he's aware of this the whole time.

Just how embarrassing this is in a sense. It is kind of and that is the whole point that to suffer death on a cross is the worst death that the Roman state can inflict but it is also shaming in the context of the Mosaic law which also says that to be hung from a tree is a cause of being cursed. We often forget with our stylized depictions of the crucifixion just how gory and shameful it was.

What is happening is that it's like a kind of it's the ultimate judo throw where you turn the strength of your opponent against him. The Roman power is affirmed by brutality. The governor of a province has the right to burn, to throw to beasts, to crucify anyone who he feels is a danger to Roman power and governors did that absolutely at the drop of a hat.

What is happening with Paul's proclamation of the one God in some way suffering this fate is to absolutely upend the very fabric and basis not just of Roman power but of powerful stop because of course the assumption through you know from reading the Jewish scriptures was that God is a warrior and that God will you know the overthrow of Roman power the establishment of a kingdom of peace will in some way be affected by the sword and what Paul is saying is that actually the true source of power is to suffer and that notion you know that to be a victim can somehow be a source of power is unbelievably subversive in the context of plastic and tick and still today to some extent I mean you know it's not as though we all believe that today although you see you know you see all the time in the news at the moment that that cast yourself as a victim is somehow to give yourself power and and you would only have power by virtue of being a victim if you existed in the context of a society that was still in its fundamentals Christian in the Roman world if you said I'm a victim they'd say yeah and I'll enslave you exactly

thanks for you know or I'll rape you I'll do whatever I mean you know and on top of this was also this statement which I think was being used in quite a political way of Jesus's Lord which was obviously yes and so yes and so set against the idea that well no Caesar is Lord so if we think if we think of Paul arriving in Galatia it would seem that in some way the Galatians feel that they have a particular relationship to the figure of Augustus so they transcribe the raised guest like his account of his achievements and we it seems to have been done to a far greater degree than anywhere else in the Roman Empire and so they are inscribing this idea of Augustus who describes himself as *deve filias* son of God son of Caesar but you know he he he's been raised up to the heavens he's been he is a prince of peace he has established a universal amity across the world and this is you and Gailio this is good news this is a gospel to be proclaimed but the statues of Augustus the raised guest eye of Augustus the very essence of Augustus is that the peace that he has brought has been brought by a sword he is an *imporato* he is a general who is victorious this is what an emperor is and so in the in the cities that Paul is arriving at this cult of Caesar which is the fastest growing cult probably in history up until that point you know it's spread like wildfire and it's not a kind of frigid cult it's a cult that people across the Roman world invest in with a deep emotional sense this idea of a conquering human who is divine who was risen from the earth and gone to the heavens he is the epitome of earthly power and therefore of divine power as well and so in that context the subversion that Paul is effecting by turning up and saying actually the son of God that I preach is someone who was crucified by Roman power I mean you can it's it's kind of makes you win but why did it work then what what why did anyone listen to such a crazy message that's a great question I mean I just want to endorse everything Tom said I think this it is one of the most extraordinary turnarounds in history that the symbolism of crucifixion said we run this world and if you get in our way we'll rub you out and that is callous brutal power and then to have within 20 years the crucifixion as a symbol of all conquering self giving love that's just quite extraordinary and as you said we in the modern Christian world see crucifixes we have them you know as jewelry decoration or nice pretty things in churches and actually this was like an electric chair or a horrible gallows or something so so why did it work and I think if we'd asked Paul that he would have said because when you announce the crucified Jesus as Lord there is a strange power which he sometimes calls the gospel and sometimes calls the spirit and that power goes to work in people's minds and hearts and stuff happens they find themselves gripped and grasped grasped by it and I think Paul would have said there is no logical explanation of course there is nobody actually wants to sign off this but it's I mean everything that Tom Holland was saying just now was reminding me of of Mark 8 where Jesus says you know we're going to Jerusalem and it's all going to happen and if you want to come after me you've got to be prepared to die take up your cross as well I think they thought that was a metaphor but in fact Jesus really meant it and then he marked 10 when he says don't you realize when James and John want to sit in the best seats to be his right and left hand men and he says don't you realize the rulers of the nations bully people and Harry people and Lorded we're not going to do it like that we're going

to do it the other way anyone who wants to be great must be your servant because the Son of Man didn't come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many so Jesus himself is precisely articulating the redefinition of power with the cross at the center of that and Paul picks up from that and says that and I think this is what Paul would actually want to say first on the cross Jesus did in fact defeat the principalities and powers he says that two or three passages he disarmed the powers and made a public exam of course he didn't look like that this is the theological interpretation in the light of the resurrection but then when you've got that interpretation you can go to work and say now actually Jesus crucified is the fulcrum around which world history turns and people find that it's true for them I mean this brings us to that interesting tension that you sit in in a sense as both a believer and a historian of the scriptures Tom Wright because in a sense you're saying Paul the ex-patient Paul would have given is that something supernatural happened this gospel changed people or are you and are you allowed to as a historian to say it'll be interesting to see what happens when Tom Holland gets past Galileo and on into the 18th and 19th century because this word supernatural has changed his meaning okay the word supernatural in the middle ages as far as I understand it meant a super abundance of godness over and on top of but not excluding what goes on so it's it's what normally goes on plus some extra dimensions but from the 18th century onwards something very interesting happened culturally and the ancient philosophy called epicureanism really became the dominant philosophy of the West and with epicureanism the gods and our world are totally separate they're made of the same stuff they're made of atoms but they they have nothing to do with us so supernatural means something out there as opposed to something down here and then Christians trying to make sense of the faith within a basically epicurean world think of God quote intervening so you either have natural events or supernatural events and I resist that dichotomy I think it's a product of 18th century sources if you want more on this the Gifford lectures that you gave this year thank you yes but very nice but but unfortunately it's going to take a little while before they get published because I've got some work to do but they are available on that actually yeah they are I think yeah YouTube goodness but but the point is this that we still in our culture and I think I say this one of the Giffords actually the only real question that the great British public know theologically is does God intervene in the world or doesn't he which is why a journalist faced with a new Archbishop says do you believe in the virgin birth and the resurrection in other words are you going to be one of those embarrassing fundamentalists who says you believe at all are you going to be one of those equally dodgy liberals who say you disbelieve it all it's a horrible dilemma and I want to say wrong question this is not for me as a historian the more I know about history the more I think yeah all sorts of odd things happen in the world and the idea that everything is just a closed continuum is a very particular philosophical thing so I want to have it both ways actually how do you approach this because you know we can talk about metaphysical commitments on your part Tom Holland but at the end of the day someone like that you're sitting opposite like Tom Wright obviously does believe the

Bible to be both a historical document that we can you can both agree on you can pull apart and dissect and look at but is also a source of divine revelation at some level rather as a kind of Darwinian right in the sense that I assume that Christianity triumphs or you know achieves what it achieves because it gives something that people want that they hadn't previously been given so there's a social survival of the fittest so if you if you I mean it's evident for you know most famously from Paul's stay in Athens that there is in a sense a marketplace for God's inner antiquity so if you if you think of Paul arriving in Galatia the the Galatian gods are famously horrible there's one god that that supposedly goes around punching women in the breasts and you think you know this is this is this is not a kind of president particularly pleasant the other the other famous deity in Galatia is Kibley who sits on a mighty mountain and in the ecstasy of their worship men will castrate themselves in her honor and Paul kind of makes a grim joke about this in Galatian saying you know if he's opponents I wish that they would castrate themselves so so so these are kind of these are intimidating gods these are gods who certainly don't love you you know maybe you're a philosopher and you know you you look at the god of Aristotle the the the the fixed I mean there was a kind of love this fixed mover but there's no implication at all and if there was a relationship it was quite transactional it was sort of keep them happy and then we can get on with our lives and that is also true of of devi filias or gustus you know this is you know this is also kind of transactional relationship we will worship him then please don't come and kill us yeah yeah now so in in that context the the god of the Jews you know it provokes a lot of mockery a lot of kind of of contempt but also a fair degree of envy because actually I think it's pretty clear that there are lots of people in in the Greco Roman world who are quite jealous of this idea of a god who loves the Jews and who particularly cares for them and who would like to be a bit of that and so you have these kind of liminal figures who you know their gentiles but they kind of would like to have a part of of this kind of Jewish vibe yeah and in that context Paul turning up and saying you know you you don't have to give up Paul you don't have to be circumcised and and and this god loves you as he loves me you know you can see why that would have been attractive I think you can absolutely see why that would be attractive and I think that clearly this does this does cut through to people who are who are who are relatively prosperous and and Paul mentions them in his letters you know women as well as men who can provide him with with with funding and with backing but the side but but but it must also have given I mean what what the impact it must have had on on slaves to be told that you know you are one with the free to be told you know a slave in Rome in the household of a Christian to be told you are a child of God at a time where Nero is absolutely in his pomp and Nero is kind of dramatizing what it is to be a son of you know the son of a god in the Augustan sense to you know to an astonishingly histrionic degree for a slave in some you know take in the suburbs of Rome to be told that I mean I mean it's been overwhelming it is short and and also for women and to point Rodney Stark makes in his book *The Rise of Christianity* and I think it needs to be drawn out particularly in today's culture but that the the valuing of women there is no male or female male and female in Galatian 3 that that is almost

unthinkable in a post Aristotle world where men and women are almost different species and you know who's who's in charge here and then when you see the way that Paul treats his female co-workers and the way that he when he's written this extraordinary letter called Romans one of the most amazing pieces of writing in the ancient world he entrusted to Phoebe who is a deacon in the church in Cenkrae she takes it to Rome and I mean to know Tom Holland's take on this but my understanding is that when you give a letter to somebody to take to somebody to a group she is likely to be the person who reads it out and quite possibly explains it maybe the first person there is another brilliant book that I'm sure you're aware of by Paula Gooda on this very subject her her novelization of the Phoebe story I know of that I'm very proud of Paula she's a former student of mine and I'm looking forward to reading that book yes yes well I had her on unbelievable right right right a rather different actually interlocutor that was Francesca Stavrakapulu opposite she was she doesn't like Paula she she likes Paula but because they she finally enough Francesca was a student of Paula's has a right okay so yes it's the world of biblical scholarship I mean I'm very much interested in would like to press this further because I do totally agree that this idea that you can all be one there is a new community and you are loved and valued and I was thinking about this in relation to forgiveness the other day that the ancient gods didn't forgive people I mean Zeus and Poseidon and Co you might be able to placate them you might be able to sneak around when they weren't watching but the idea they would forgive you is quite different I don't think you find that in the Grecharaman world and people didn't as far as I know reckon that they were going around needing forgiveness in that sense I'm still confused at one level as to I mean I accept that there's this thesis okay it the reason it caught on was because it allowed slaves to suddenly feel like they there were people who maybe wanted in on this but at the same time you you make very clear in the book Tom just how socially inconvenient it was it's a massive massive like this is a way to climb the ladder I mean no absolutely absolutely not and this is part of the problem all the way through in first thessalonians Paul looking back to the time when they became believers just a few weeks earlier he says you turned from idols to serve a living and true god now it's hard for us to imagine what that's like but an ancient city like Thessalonica or Corinth or Ephesus or anywhere you've got idle temples your temples on every street corner you've got processions you've got games in honor of the Lord God so and so whatever it is particularly Lord Caesar you've got celebrations regular festivals regular holidays and everyone shows up people are regular people are regularly coming through the streets with sacrificial animals that's what you do and in a world where there is no such thing as private life except for the very very rich everybody knows if you suddenly aren't showing up you know that family down the street they haven't been to anything this last month what's going on oh haven't you heard they've joined this funny new group well who are they well they say they're Jews but they're not Jews so we don't know who they are and so suddenly you're not doing all the things that people in your world you like in it in the modern world is some Paul say going into Wall Street and sort of saying right we've got to abandon all of these whole nations the way we run our lives you know I sometimes

say to people when when people say why didn't Paul say that slavery was wrong I say well when did you last go into the pulpit on a Sunday morning and say by the way it's quite clear that motor cars are polluting our planet and destroying our world so I want you to leave your cars in the parking lot we'll have them taken to the dump later on because we're all going to be either walking or on horseback from now on you know most congregations would not think that was very good sermon but actually when you're talking about a major social revolution you're just not going to be doing those processions anymore and this is why in southern Greece they get permission to shelter under the Jewish permission because the Jews had permission not to do that stuff and this is where a lot of the hassle comes from because then when suddenly there's a bunch of non-Jews claiming the same permission the authorities want to know who up and then they'll go around to the Jewish community and suddenly this is a bit of this thing's getting out of control I think this is the best explanation for a lot that's going on in Galatians particularly and I'm very interested in Tom's well I mean I've got slightly edgier comparison and you know any comparison between the 21st century and the 1st century is obviously you know they're so different but but but if you think about the the spread of radical Islam if you think about the way that people worry about their children or their wives or their sons becoming radicalized I think you might have some faint echo of how it's working we were talking about you know Paul's use of of letters the reason that he can he can do this the way the reason that he can communicate across the Roman world is because there is an enormous road system which is being used by Caesar and by governors to communicate you know it's the it's the kind of ganglion that's connecting the fabric of the mighty brain of Rome and Paul is kind of piggybacking on that rather in the way that Islamic radicals are piggybacking on the internet which was originally developed by you know the internet is our Roman road system of today yeah and so it's kind of using technology and the infrastructure of a superpower to come up with things that are profoundly opposed to it and in a sense part of the appeal of radical Islam is precisely that it is subversive of almost everything that people in secular society take for granted so I'm not saying that you know that you know Paul is I'm not comparing Paul to a kind of Isis but I understand the principle you're employing there yeah but part of the you know people say why would anyone run off to Syria I mean you know and sign up to you know this terrifying cult in a sense the it's precisely the challenge of it that becomes the appeal and you know Paul talks a lot about the spirit and he talks a lot about the spirit bringing freedom and that idea of being free in a world where everyone else is not free gives you a kind of dignity and status that in the long run will enable people to suffer torture and even death in the cause of affirming that and and to that to this extent I think that that Paul and the early Christians are the ancestors of Isis and are the ancestors of almost every group that defines themselves in terms of belief because they're willing to to suffer martyrdom for belief you don't really get I mean you know there this is the odd Socrates is kind of an example but but but the idea that you as you know as a slave girl or you know that you are willing to suffer death for a belief that is really something that the religion is obviously there are parallels and it's very interesting

to explore those and they go back of course to the the pre-Christian Jewish radical zealots as in the Maccabean period who were prepared to die for their hope that God was going to renew the world and you see that in the book called second Maccabees particularly I mean just just just I mean that is also about kind of defending land though isn't it that's always a ending land re-establishing the temple etc etc etc sure yes but what we see in Paul is the taking of that radical tradition which is also a violent tradition I mean some of them are martyred but some of them are going to sharpen their swords and win a extraordinary battle and in the second century AD you see this with the Barcoquevrevre revolt in 132-135 we have a brief little messianic kingdom of Judea under the rule of this man the son of the star and they are going to have they think an astonishing military victory over the Romans so that that continues on what you see in Paul has all of that energy but turned upside down exactly as Tom Holland was saying before through the notion of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus that this is a different kind of victory won by a different kind of means and we see if there is a sense in which Paul is the ancestor of Isis Paul is also the ancestor of St Francis and of Mother Teresa and of the people who are saying no there is a different way to transform the world and it is the way of love it's the way of self giving and the ancestor of people like Desmond Tutu who you know we forget that in the 70s Desmond Tutu was standing in front of crowds of angry people his own people who wanted to use violence and he was saying that is not the way we transform the world and astonishingly that message got through and won the day though South Africa is still difficult but there is a message of love and forgiveness. Well I hesitate to bring up the subject of Paul and the law in the presence of Tom Holland I mean it's a hubristic thing to do but Paul is clearly also I think the ancestor of the modern notions of international law that Isis are committed to overthrowing because what Paul introduces into the bloodstream of the West and then by extension because the West spreads those ideas across the world the entire kind of global framework of how international law is structured is the idea that God's law can be written on the heart that you no longer need the Torah that the spirit will write it on the heart and therefore you will know what is right and that will be illumined and so what that gives in the long run the West is a notion that law can be human and be morally valid and that's the great contrast with the Islamic world where law is you know in the sense of the Torah and the Talmud you know Sharia is about the idea of God having directly revealed kind of legal rulings which have to be imposed on people where they like it on us whereas in the West the idea that law can be something that is of human origin is absolutely taken for granted and so this you know this this this is kind of the great gripe that Islamic radicals have with international law is precisely that they recognize its Christian origins so there's a guy Al-MacDese, Palestinian Jordanian radical who was hugely influential intellectually on ISIS and on al-Qaeda and he detests Saudi Arabia because Saudi Arabia is part of the United Nations and he's saying well the chart of the United Nations is of human origin it is not of divine origin so essentially his argument is with the Pauline idea that that is fascinating and it goes I mean obviously that's an ancient Jewish idea the writing of the law on the heart is Jeremiah Ezekiel and it



fits with this whole idea that basically Pauline Christianity is to kind of an odd phrase Judaism for the masses I mean Nietzsche said it was Platonism for the masses that's absolutely wrong in the 19th century many Christians were Platonists and that's a problem but the idea that this Jewish insight about a loving God who will inscribe the law on the hearts of his people and now this can happen to anyone. Because liberalism is Christianity for the masses.

In a sense, up to a point called proper, yeah let's not go there but then what we get with that with Paul this extraordinary thing which when I was writing this book it impinged on me again that what we already see when there's a rumor that there's going to be a famine coming the church in Antioch instantly instead of stockpiling food they said we've got to help them down in Jerusalem and you have a sense of a translocal community as well as a trans ethnic community in a way which I think is unprecedented in the ancient world. The Jewish communities the synagogue communities were translocal they were across the world and they sort of knew about one another and were in touch with one another but it was basically Jews and proselytes or God fears or whoever and there were translocal communities of the Roman imperial administration and the Roman army but that was all jolly well loyal to Caesar thank you very much. What you have in Christianity is a community which Paul insists is one it's a united community and has to be struggled for that unity and that's precisely the origin of the United Nations that's a Christian Pauline idea the problem is if you try to get it without the roots in an explicit belief in this particular God who has rescued the world in this particular way well you can see go to the UN today you can whistle for it because it's falling apart because we've tried to get it without the without the basis.

We're going to have to leave it there I wish we had more time but thank you so much gentlemen both Tom Holland and Tom Wright for joining me on the program today and Tom Holland we want you back when your book is available and we'll get you in another interesting discussion about it Tom Wright I'm looking forward to we've got a little bit of a plan in the pipeline for a regular podcast with you so watch this space if you're a Tom Wright fan you might be able to get more of conversations like this coming to you in the future but for the moment thank you both for being with me thank you for the pleasure. Thank you. Well I hope you enjoyed that conversation as much as I enjoyed hosting it a few years ago when Paul Lebaurography was first published by NT Wright and if you want to watch the video it's linked with the show notes today as well.

Before we go just to say that we're going to be bringing you more of your questions and answers from Tom on next week's show as we enter a new season of the Ask and To Write Anything podcast you can always send your questions in it's easy to do you just go to our website [premierunbelievable.com](http://premierunbelievable.com) register for the newsletter and then you'll receive the link to be able to ask a question yourself and don't forget that special event coming up as well soon Tuesday the 12th of July Michaela Peterson and John McCray I'll be with them you can be part of the live audience as well online as we ask our

millennials and Gen Z ready to believe in God again unbelievable.live to register your place for that or go to the website premierunbelievable.com for now thanks for being with us and see you next time.

[Music]

(gentle music)

[buzzing]