

# OpenTheo

## #7 Bible infallibility, Sola Scriptura and 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.

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For a 20% discount on The Bible For Everyone go to <https://spckpublishing.co.uk/the-bible-for-everyone> and enter discount code NTWRIGHT at checkout.

For the poetry book mentioned near the start - 'Five Quintets' by Michael O'Siadhail <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Five-Quintets-Micheal-OSiadhail/dp/1481307096>

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## Transcript

Hi there. Before we begin today's podcast, I want to share an incredibly special resource with you today. If you're like me, life can get pretty hectic pretty quickly but one thing that helps me slow down is connecting with God in new ways and I'd like to share a resource that has really helped me do that.

It's called Five Ways to Connect with God. You can download it for free right now at [premierinsight.org/resources](http://premierinsight.org/resources). I think you'll find refreshment for your soul.

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The Ask NTY Anything podcast. Welcome, welcome. I am Justin Brierley 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. NTY for his more

academic books. He answers to both titles.

The show brought to you by premier in partnership with SBCK and NTY on line. Today, Tom's going to be tackling your questions on how we should treat the Bible in erancy, infallibility, 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 ask NTY right dot 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 ask NTY right dot com plus anyone signing up to the newsletter by the end of March also gets automatically entered into a prize draw 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 Golden Gay 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 ask NTY right dot 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 dig 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 a 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, Michal O'Sheel. And the poem is called The Five Quintettes, obviously echoing Eliot's four quartets, but quite different and quite long. And it's a it's an extraordinary celebratory cultural history of the last four or 500 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 terserema and so on, pulling it all together in this rich tapestry. Michal 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.

Yeah. There you go. I'll make sure there's a link from today's podcast to Michael and to the Michal.

Michael. Michael. Well, I think he pronounces it Michal.

Okay. Michal O'Sheel. He's a native Irish speaker.

He speaks about literally 19 language like Japanese and Icelandic and goodness knows what. God, extraordinary, brilliant, distinguished, brilliant man. Well, look, from that, Michal to another Michal in Ireland, who is 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 the 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 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 were 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, you know, 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, 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.

And 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 and 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 and 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.

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 ear 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, et cetera. 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 it, 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 M. and 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 and so. And his tutor simply said, what if Mark got it wrong? And that sort of suddenly things came tumbling down for him. 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 have been? 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 went off there. 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. 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 Quirianias was governor of Syria.

Let me just check what in my own New Testament translation. Thomas now referred to his recently released New Testament Bible for everyone along with John Goldingay, who did the Old Testament. And here in Luke 2, it says, this was the first census before the one when Quirianias 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 problem that's been pointed out before? Is that from Josephus, the Jewish historian, we know when Quirianias 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 Lacona, 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, 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 synodical reform or whatever. Well, if you haven't seen it, I do recommend why are there differences in the Gospels? Michael Lacona does a fascinating study looking at various aspects of Plutarch and where he does exactly the same telescoping or spot lighting 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 asks, do you believe the Bible is the infallible word of God, another inward? If so, what evidence 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 how should what terminologies 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 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, you know, 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, you know, I would much rather somebody said, basically this book is infallible, meaning I can utterly 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-Write Anything podcast is brought to you by Premier in partnership with SBCK and NT-Write 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 NT-Write.

That's No Spaces and All Caps. Again, The Bible for Everyone at [sbckpublishing.co.uk](http://sbckpublishing.co.uk) and to discount code NT-Write. No Spaces and All Caps to get 20% off for 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. So Jeffrey in New Key Corn will ask, do you think the Reformation through the baby out with the bathwater 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 Scriptura's 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, the 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 stuck 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. Caustiously, 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 we can use it for our own agenda. 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 sort of Wilberforce agenda. It's as unthinkable as it would be if we were to preach from the pulpit today that we all ought to stop using motor cars and airplanes and all or 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 is living on. 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 Philipp had checked with the apostles? No, absolutely not. Philipp 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, for instance, Paul doesn't outright condemn slavery in his day and age, but obviously he kind of changes the terms of bondage. He puts a time bomb inside it. I mean, 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 of the 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 will go to something like 2 Timothy 3, all the Scriptures God breathed and used for rebuke, correction, training, and righteousness and so on. Some people see that as a mandate to say, yes, you see, in errantcy, infallibility. Others say, don't be daft.

That's not what it's saying. What do you think 2 Timothy 3 is saying? Well, Fristart is not talking about the New Testament. No.

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 stories 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, 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, 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 [AskNTRight.com](http://AskNTRight.com). Until next time, Tom, thank you so much for being there. Thank you. Thank you for your hospitality.

Thank you for being with us today. But don't go away just yet as Tom is pulling out the guitar once again in a moment. If you want to see some exclusive videos of Tom in unplugged mode, do go to the video section on our website, [askNTRight.com](http://askNTRight.com). Today, Tom was reading from his own translation of the New Testament in the Bible for everyone.

We've three signed copies to give away. It's a hefty old prize. I can assure you as well.

Just make sure you're subscribed to the newsletter and we'll pick the winners from among our subscribers at the end of March. Signing up also gets you access to bonus video content, the fortnightly newsletter. It means you get the link to ask a question too.

And we're taking your questions right now for further episodes of the podcast. Going to be recording again very soon with Tom. So do go to [www.askNTRight.com](http://www.askNTRight.com) and get yourself subscribed.

We've got to that point where we have a little extra something for you. NTRight 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 a 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. 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 wonderful. 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 wherever it was.

New York, I think, was 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 to 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 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, 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 minute cosmic 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. Mm hmm.

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Very good. Very good.