

Why Wright is wrong on creation

Surprised by Scripture: Engaging with Contemporary Issues

N.T. Wright

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The well-known New Testament scholar and former Anglican bishop N.T. ('Tom') Wright has written several chapters in his recent book, *Surprised by Scripture*, that comment on creationism and a Christian approach to Adam and Eve.

Wright has made some notable contributions to evangelical theology in the past, especially on Christ's Resurrection.¹ Wright has also emphasized the Gospel in relation to the heralding of the kingdom of God, the need to see unity between God's plans in the Old and New Testaments, and a rejection of a neo-Gnostic eschatology that seeks heavenly glory with little concern for the earth. However, his 'New Perspectives on Paul' has been justifiably criticized for its faulty view on biblical justification.² But in this recent book Wright fails to follow through in his thinking on the influence of neo-Gnosticism on Christian thought regarding creation, and there are some inconsistencies here and loose ends that need to be considered.

In this book Wright is critical of fundamentalism, but fails to explain adequately what he means by this term. Historically the term was used for the followers of the 12-volume series entitled *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth* (1910–1915).

* US Version: *Surprised by Scripture: Engaging Contemporary Issues*, HarperCollins, New York.

These defended five fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith:

- the inerrancy of the Bible
- the virgin birth of Christ
- the substitutionary atonement of Christ
- the bodily resurrection of Christ
- the authenticity of Christ's miracles.³

Some liberals use the term 'fundamentalist' pejoratively against opponents as a means of ignoring their concerns and thus avoiding an accurate response, but Wright is really closer to the mainstream evangelical movement than to the liberal wing. Now it is true that Christians can lose sight of God's love and grace-filled purpose in the world, and thus fall back on narrow-minded legalism. That is something we all need to guard against, and if that is what he means by fundamentalism then it is something we need to be careful of.

Although the book looks at a number of contemporary issues, it is the first few chapters that are the main focus of this review, even though some of the other chapters pick up on similar themes regarding Epicurean influence on modern life (figure 1). The first chapter looks at science and religion: 'Healing the divide between Science and Religion'; the third chapter is 'Can a Scientist believe in the Resurrection?' Other chapters are of less direct relevance to creation, but are of interest. They concern, for instance, the role of women in leadership, environmentalism, suffering, politics, and the end times. The second chapter, entitled 'Do we need a historical Adam?', is of most interest to creationists. He seems to follow Dennis Alexander⁴ and John Walton⁵ in holding to Adam and Eve as federal heads to humanity, two individuals called out from among other



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hominids to be God's representatives and co-workers on Earth.

Is the young-earth position allowable?

In the second chapter, 'Do we need a historical Adam?', he makes quite critical remarks towards young-earth creationism, suggesting it is a false position and not even 'allowable' theology.

"I wonder whether we are right even to treat the young-earth position as a kind of allowable if regrettable alternative, something we know our cousins down the road get up to but which shouldn't stop us getting together at Christmas ... And if, as I suspect, many of us don't think of young-earthism as an allowable alternative, is this simply for the pragmatic reason that it makes it hard for us to be Christians because the wider world looks at those folks and thinks we must be like that too? Or is it—as I suggest it ought to be—because we have glimpsed a positive point that urgently needs to be made and that the young-earth literalism is simply screening out? That's the danger

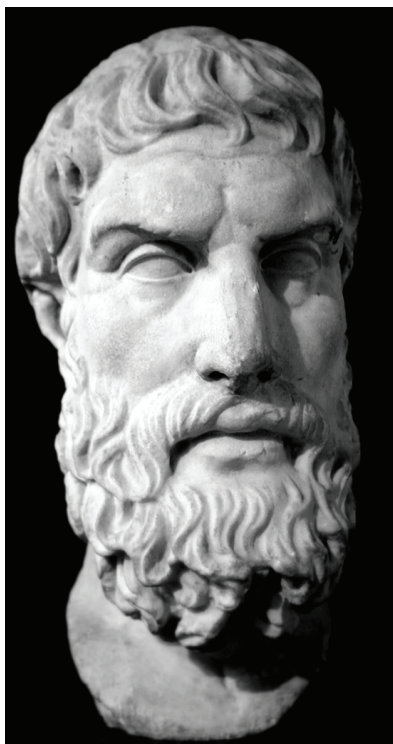


Figure 1. Bust of Epicurus, housed in the British Museum, London. It is a Roman copy, in Marble, of a Greek original. Wright recognizes the negative influence of Epicurean philosophy upon evolutionism and modern thought, but still fails to see that this philosophy is foundational to the ‘science’ of evolution.

of false teaching: it isn’t just that you’re making a mess; you are using that mess to cover up something that ought to be brought urgently to light” (p. 31).

He thinks that evangelical Christians should therefore reject it and proponents may not even be worthy of being properly accepted in the family of the evangelical community until they turn from their foolish ways. For Wright they must be confronted firmly, even if gently and with civility, perhaps in the same way that Paul challenged Peter at Antioch for the sake of truth. However, this would logically mean that we should reject all the Church Fathers (including Augustine), medieval theologians, and Reformers, who affirmed what we would now call ‘young-earth creation’, and most of whom accepted creation in six 24-hour days.⁶

Wright rightly criticizes evolutionism

Wright is also critical of evolution with a big ‘E’, and correctly notes that it is not a new idea as it arose from Greek Epicurean philosophy. In the first chapter, and in later chapters, he rightly identifies this philosophy as a problem in modern thought, which he thinks underpins the whole of the Enlightenment project. This influence leads to the removal of a sense of divine judgement and a move towards hedonism, and to the ancient philosophy of evolutionism. He does acknowledge that some forms of theistic evolution go too far in embracing naturalism, and even acknowledges that he might be seen as an opponent of the Enlightenment and modernism. He doesn’t wholly dismiss this claim and recognizes good and bad in it. However, he thinks Christians should be willing to accept the broader theory of evolution in theistic terms because it is a ‘proven hypothesis’ (p. 32).

Creationists are seen as both anti-science and too scientific

He seems to fail to understand the position of creationists, and also fails to see how deeply Epicurean philosophy has shaped the claims of Darwinists. Creationists generally draw a distinction between operational and historical science, those things that are directly demonstrable, such as minor variation in the breed of dogs, cats, and livestock, and those claims that arise out of some other source. Augustine saw the same distinction and was willing to accept operational science, but not claims that come from pagan sources.⁷ Creationists have also accepted limited forms of natural selection and adaptation—from before Darwin to the present—but within the context of created kinds; and as far as science goes such limited adaptation is ‘proven’. But when Darwinists speak

of an evolutionary progression of early man from other apelike ancestors they are moving to conjecture and opinion that is more in harmony with Greek paganism.

Wright is also critical of the creationist response to Epicurean thinking, suggesting that opposition to Darwinism is still framed in what he calls the modernist neo-Gnostic division between the natural and supernatural.⁸ Creationists then are at the same time seen as both anti-science and too wedded to a modernist, scientific mindset. There may be some merit in the latter claim, even as the anti-science claim is false. Creationists generally value science, as even the lapsed Adventist historian Ron Numbers has pointed out that, “creationists rarely display hostility towards science”.⁹ And I think many creationists recognize the second problem regarding scientific modernism, even if the language is not always framed in the right terms.

However, in seeking to establish a bridge between naturalism and supernaturalism, Wright doesn’t really elaborate on what he means, which is a shame. He could, for instance, follow Thomas Torrance in seeing that Einstein’s General Relativity breaks down the dualism between the fixed form of the universe and the human observer. This dualism follows from the Newtonian–Kantian container-box model of the universe, which effectively excludes God from creation.¹⁰ And it is noteworthy that many creation scientists do seek to understand the age of the universe through the lens of relativity. Wright fails to get to grips with the detail of creationist thinking; he admits that he dropped out of science at an early age to study classics. He does however rely upon close friendships with leading scientists such as Francis Collins, who is specifically mentioned in the Preface as an influence upon him. However, Collins, like many theistic evolutionists, seems bound-up in accepting evolutionism,

something criticized by Wright as a faulty approach to the theology and science relationship.¹¹ Collins also seems to deny an historical Adam.¹²

How did the Apostles and Church Fathers read Genesis?

For Wright, Genesis is read as primarily a literary, poetic work and he thinks this is how Paul, John, and Peter read it, and not in the context of literal 24-hour days and a recent creation. But this needs some justification on his part, which he doesn't give in this book. A plain-sense reading of the New Testament would suggest that they *did* hold to a literal six-day recent creation. The Gospel writers also saw symbolism in the real miracles of Jesus—the symbolism arising out of real, literal events, or the literary arising out of the literal. And this is how they read the Old Testament, where real events speak symbolically of Jesus and his redemptive work. This is similar to the rabbinical *peshat-pesher* approach to biblical interpretation (holding both literal and symbolic meaning), except that for the Gospel writers it is focused upon Jesus. And we ought to ask why a similar hermeneutic would not apply to their reading of Genesis.

It was seemingly the writings of John and Peter that led some of the Church Fathers to infer a millennial scheme where the seven days of creation prefigured seven thousand years of history, the final day of rest corresponding to a millennial rest with Christ reigning on Earth.¹³ Paul also speaks of the physical “first man, Adam” pointing to the spiritual “last Adam”, Jesus (1 Corinthians 15: 42–49)—the literal, or natural, pointing to the spiritual. The bottom line for Wright is that while he seeks to get rid of neo-Gnostic thinking with regard to the Resurrection and eschatology, he doesn't seem to follow through in his reading of Genesis and the creation account. His reading of Genesis is still

seemingly influenced by neo-Gnostic approaches to biblical interpretation.

Paul may of course have been aware of Philo's writing on the creation. Although Philo saw the days of creation as allegorical, because of a reading of the LXX Apocrypha and the influence of Plato, there is no reason to think that Philo did not hold to a young earth.¹⁴ He thought that creation had occurred all at once, but Paul was not bound to follow Philo in this regard. Some early theologians, such as Origen, were also influenced by Philo and neo-Platonism; that is, the desire to read Scripture in an excessively spiritual, allegorical context. Yet even Origen firmly rejected long ages.¹⁵

But others read the symbolic from the literal. St Basil recognized the laws of allegory, but read the creation account literally as well, claiming to be not ashamed of the Gospel.¹⁶ Augustine also held to a young earth in a literal sense even as he was seemingly following Philo in believing that creation occurred all at once. He was however critical of claims about the age of the Earth that arose from pagan sources:

“They are deceived, too, by those highly mendacious documents, which profess to give the history of many thousand years, though, reckoning by the sacred writings, we find that not 6,000 years have yet passed.”¹⁷

So, whereas Wright doesn't think young earth creationism is an allowable position, clearly many of the Church Fathers did, and a common sense reading of Scripture suggests that is how the New Testament writers read Genesis. Wright really needs to justify his comments in light of the position of the Apostles and early Christian theologians.

Wright has, of course, produced a lot of material on the Greek and Hebrew background to Paul's life, although he doesn't directly reference it in this book. He does, though, seek to read

Paul in the context of Second Temple Judaism. However, as Duncan has shown, there are good reasons to think that Sanders, Dunn's and Stendahl's analysis, which has influenced Wright in this regard, is faulty.¹⁸ There is, I think, difficulty in attributing the background of Hebrew Rabbinical thought to Paul's post-conversion life. Paul was, of course, trained in both the school of the Pharisees and in Greek philosophy, as well as in Greco-Roman rhetoric, but he received revelation of the power, richness, and wonder of God that led him to preach the Gospel. He had a keen sense of the power [Greek *dunamis*] of God at work in his life and that of the church. And when we study the New Testament letters of Paul we are led back, time and again, into the Old Testament prophets. I can't help thinking that Paul saw his calling in the same light as an Isaiah or Elijah, perhaps someone who felt like an outsider to his own people, even as he was calling them to Christ. And Wright has previously noted the correlation between Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus and Elijah's journey.¹⁹

Creationism is not grounded in dispensationalism

Wright also fails to engage in the depth and breadth of thought among creationists, but instead makes wide-ranging and erroneous generalizations. For instance, he conflates young-earth creationism with dispensationalism, thinking that a literal reading of Genesis goes hand-in-hand with nineteenth-century Darbyite theology. John Nelson Darby's theology was focused upon a developing Christian Zionism, a secret escapist rapture, and the end times. Most obviously, Wright ignores the prevalence of literal readings long before Darby. Also, it is clear that Darby's followers were not that bothered about a literal reading of Genesis. The text notes

of the *Scofield Reference Bible*, for instance, a widely read publication from the early twentieth century that promoted Darby's theology, discusses pre-Adamic races and the gap theory. These ideas were all rejected by young-earth creationists. Rather, when John Whitcomb and Henry Morris wrote *The Genesis Flood* (1961), often credited with reviving young-earth creation, the book was accepted by the clearly non-dispensational Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing.

The early Fundamentalists such as B.B. Warfield (who contributed a chapter, "The Deity of Christ", to *The Fundamentals*) and James Orr ("Science and Christian Faith") were not especially committed to a young earth either. Today you will find that young-earth creationists have varying views on dispensationalism and Darby's theology; some may be sympathetic, others will hold more to Covenant Theology.

I would suggest that it is more likely that the reawakening of belief in a literal creation stems from popular-level revivalism, for instance as found in the writing of John Wesley (1703–1791) and his down-to-earth preaching to the man-in-the-street. Pentecostal and Charismatic revivals have also encouraged belief in the possibility of miracles, thus building faith in God's ability to act in the world. Pentecostalism has often been most accepted among the ordinary folk and working classes. In this movement there is a rejection of cessationist views regarding miracles among ordinary people, and this, I would suggest, correlates with belief in a literal creation and rejection of naturalism among Christians.²⁰ Tenneson and Badger report that at least from the 1920s onwards the young-earth position was the 'prevailing view' among Pentecostals, and, from recent survey evidence, suggest it is still the largest position (35%).²¹ It was eighteenth and nineteenth century writers,

such as David Hume and Charles Darwin, who promoted naturalism and were so skeptical of miracles, while liberal academic theologians were naturalizing Christian faith. The rise of acceptance of a literal reading of Genesis then correlates with Christian revivalism and a rejection of materialism and naturalism. If one believes that God may act in the world today or in the time of Jesus, for instance through the Resurrection, as *The Fundamentals* required, then why not believe that God acted in a miraculous way in the creation account, speaking all things into existence through his powerful word?

Concerns about anti-intellectualism

Wright raises concerns about anti-intellectualism in fundamentalist Christian circles, suggesting an opposition to study and science among creationists. But this is far from the truth as many creation scientists have multiple and higher degrees in a wide range of subjects. There is, however, a problem in the Western secular education system for the children of conservative Christians. It is that they are taught one set of beliefs at home and at church, and then another at school, and this leads to confusion. Some make it through, understanding the worldview struggle that exists, but others keen to be faithful to Christ give up on academic study, while others sadly lose their faith. There is no reason, however, why a consistent conservative Christian view of the world cannot be intellectually rigorous and demanding, as Augustine's writing, for instance, shows. It is just that it is not given an opportunity to flourish when secular humanism dominates and directs education for Christian children. Wright really needs to examine and address this problem instead of blaming it on Christian fundamentalism.

The needs of the academy versus the needs of the market square

This raises further issues regarding the needs of the academy versus the needs of the market square, or man or woman in the street. Wright seems concerned about the effect that creationism has upon respect in academic circles, as do others such as Denis Alexander. The purpose of holding to evolution, then, is to make the Gospel acceptable to non-Christian academics through the appearance of human respectability. Ordinary people, however, have a simpler view of truth, which leads them to read Scripture literally. However, we need to heed Paul's message in 1 Corinthians 1. He tells us that unity is of prior importance for the sake of Christ, the community of believers, and the Gospel. And further, that the Gospel message is foolishness to the wisdom of the world. From this Paul tells us that God uses the foolish things of the world to shame the wise. Human respectability only leads to pride, which is a stumbling block to the Gospel.

While Wright is right to tell us of the Epicurean perspective on modern life, it is evident that the academy is a place of elitism, and this correlates with the thinking of Plato regarding the place of academics in society. Plato's idea was that philosopher-kings should rule the ideal city-state, while the majority should only be educated to such a level that they are economically productive.²² As a result Greek society was elitist, but Paul insists that within the Christian community there is equality (Gal. 3:28). Christian academics in secular universities, however, can then find themselves caught up in a world that is elitist with an overwhelming peer pressure to conform to the worldly view with its ancient Greek influence. Within the Platonic scheme symbolic, spiritual readings of religious texts have greater value than literal readings. However, we see from

the New Testament authors, and Church Fathers, that the symbolic readings arise from real, or literal, events. We need to accept, then, that the Gospel that we hold to may appear foolish to those steeped in Greek thinking, and we should not be ashamed of the message. The Gospel needs to be preached in humility, and if that means bearing the shame of foolishness because we read Genesis literally or sharing the shame that Christ endured upon the Cross, then so be it (Heb. 13:12–14, Rom. 1:16).

Summary

There are some useful chapters in this book, and many have appreciated Tom Wright's insights on a number of issues. It is, however, regrettable that he doesn't follow through when he approaches interpretations of Genesis and the creation account. But at least he does acknowledge the Epicurean influence upon evolution, even if he doesn't go far enough for creationists. We need a dialogue based upon integrity and honesty, and a more careful reading of the New Testament authors and Church Fathers. Simply seeking to dictate to creationists what is and what is not allowed is insufficient. There is a need for academics to be brave enough to engage more deeply with popular-level theology. There are a number of historical incidents where the theological academies have had to play catch-up as ordinary people pick up on fresh insights of God's dealing with the world. Martin Luther had to leave his academic position, and posted his Ninety-five Theses to the outside of the church door at Wittenberg. John Wesley was prevented from preaching in the Anglican churches so took the revivalist message of Jesus around the country, often preaching in the market square. The Pentecostals and Charismatics also experienced the reality of revival and taught about the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Today young-earth creationism is growing

outside of academic circles as people rediscover God's power in creation—and perhaps this is another area where academic theologians need to catch up with what God is doing in the church. But we should not forget that we also need academic theologians to scrutinize popular-level theology because it sometimes makes mistakes. But regrettably the theological academies are sometimes out of touch with the needs and aspirations of ordinary people.

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6. Lewis, J.P., The Days of Creation: An Historical Survey, *J. Evangelical Theological Soc.* 32:449, 1989.
7. Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis (de Genesi ad Litteram)*, translated and annotated by John Hammond Taylor, vol. 1., Paulist Press, S.J., New York, book I, chap. 21, p. 41, 1982. "When they are able, from reliable evidence, to prove some fact of physical science, we shall show that it is not contrary to our Scripture. But when they produce from any of their books a theory contrary to Scripture, and therefore contrary to the Catholic [universal] faith, either we shall have some ability to demonstrate that it is absolutely false, or at least we ourselves will hold it so without any shadow of a doubt."
8. Although many Christians, C.S. Lewis included, see a useful distinction here to describe the difference between God's ordinary activity in the world, and his extraordinary activity.
9. An interview with Ron Numbers on PBS. He comments, "To me, the struggle in the late 20th Century between creationists and evolutionists does not represent another battle between science and religion because rarely do creationists display hostility towards science. If you read their literature, you'll rarely come across an anti-scientific notion. They love science. They love what science can do. They hate the fact that science has been hijacked by agnostics and atheists to offer such speculative theories as organic evolution." www.pbs.org/faithandreason/transcript/num-frame.html.
10. Torrance, T.F., *Christian Theology and Scientific Culture*, Christian Journals Limited, Belfast, 1980. Of course Newton was not seeking to try and remove God from the universe, but that is where an increasingly mechanistic and less personal model was leading, through, for instance, Kant's thinking.
11. See, for instance; Weinberger, L., Harmony and discord: A review of *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief*, by Francis S. Collins (2006), *J. Creation* 21(1):33–37, 2007; creation.com/collins-review.
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13. See, for instance, Sibley, A., Creationism and millennialism among the Church Fathers, *J. Creation* 26(3):95–100, 2012.
14. Zuiddam, B., Does Genesis allow any scientific theory of origin?—a response to J.P. Dickson, *J. Creation* 26(1):106–115, 2012; creation.com/dickson.
15. "After these statements, Celsus, from a secret desire to cast discredit upon the Mosaic account of the creation, which teaches that the world is not yet ten thousand years old, but very much under that, while concealing his wish, intimates his agreement with those who hold that the world is uncreated." Origen, *Contra Celsum (Against Celsus)* 1.19, Coxe, A.C., *Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D.325* 4:404; www.biblehub.com.
16. "I know the laws of allegory, though less by myself than from the works of others. There are those truly, who do not admit the common sense of the Scriptures, for whom water is not water, but some other nature, who see in a plant, in a fish, what their fancy wishes, who change the nature of reptiles and of wild beasts to suit their allegories, like the interpreters of dreams who explain visions in sleep to [m]ake them serve their own ends. For me grass is grass; plant, fish, wild beast, domestic animal, I take all in the literal sense. 'For I am not ashamed of the gospel.'" Basil, *Hexaëmeron*, Homily 9:1:IN: Schaff, P. (Ed.), *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, Series I and II, 1886–1890; ccel.org.
17. Augustine, *The City of God* 12(10), "Of the falseness of the history which allots many thousand years to the world's past." (in Schaff's Volumes).
18. Duncan, J.L., The Attractions of the New Perspective(s) on Paul, alliancenet.org, 2009; accessed 26 September 2014.
19. Wright, N.T., Paul, Arabia, and Elijah (Galatians 1:17), *J. Biblical Literature* 115:683–692, 1996.
20. See, for instance, Ruthven, J., *On the Cessation of the Charismata*, Word and Spirit Press, Tulsa, OK, 2011. (Ruthven describes the influence of Hume's rejection of miracles on cessationist thought). It is noted that CMI does not take an official position on debates over Covenant Theology vs Dispensationalism, nor on Cessationism vs Pentecostalism. And there are many cessationists who hold to a recent creation.
21. Tenneson, M. and Badger, S., A Brief Overview of Pentecostal views on Origins, *Enrichment Journal*, Assemblies of God, Spring 2010; enrichmentjournal.ag.org/201002/ejonline_201002_origins.cfm, accessed 30 September 2014. They report that 31% would now be described as old-earth creationists, and only 16% theistic evolutionists.
22. Plato, *The Republic* (Greek: Πολιτεία, Politeia), 380 BC (5.473b).