

May 2021

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### Recommended Citation

Shaw, Benjamin C.. 2021. "History and Eschatology by N. T. Wright: A Review." *Eleutheria* 5, (1). <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/elevol5iss1/17>

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## History and Eschatology by N. T. Wright: A Review

### Abstract

Wright, N. T. *History and Eschatology: Jesus and the Promise of Natural Theology*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019. 365 pp. \$34.99

### Keywords

Wright, History, Eschatology, Natural Theology

### Cover Page Footnote

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N. T. Wright's *History and Eschatology: Jesus and the Promise of Natural Theology* is the product of Wright's 2018 Gifford Lectures. Many will notice that the title reflects another set of Gifford Lectures that was also turned into a book, namely those given by Rudolf Bultmann in 1955-1956, which then became *History and Eschatology: The Presence of Eternity* (NY: Harper and Row, 1962). Wright's work, however, is vastly different from that of Bultmann's work. Indeed, Wright's primary argument is that because Jesus was a *real* person who lived and acted *within the natural* world and that the NT was also written by *real* people in history about *public events* in the past, we ought to include Jesus and the NT as sources for the task of *natural* theology (xi-xiii, xvi).

The book is separated into four parts (two chapters each), the first being an important summary of the current Enlightenment and Epicurean paradigms and their rise to prominence. The second section addresses how these *philosophical* influences have affected (or, rather, *distorted*) our understanding of history, eschatology, and apocalyptic. The third section seeks to retrieve a more robust understanding of the worldview of first-century Judaism so that the NT may be more properly understood within that context rather than that of modern Epicureanism. The final section then covers how Jesus and the NT contribute to the questions of natural theology and how to move the discussion forward.

Chapter one opens with a crucial discussion of the development of the current cultural situation. Wright locates the initial tremors of the modern mood to 1417 with the rediscovery of Lucretius and Epicureanism. This ancient alternative to Christianity described the world as an entirely random series of events without any interference by the distant and unconcerned gods (8, 12-16, 22-29). The growing adoption of this revived Epicurean mindset is not only demonstrated in the responses to the 1755 Lisbon earthquake (6), but it is also broadly reflected in five other features of the late eighteenth century: revolutions, the rise of pre-Darwinian evolutionism, economic theories of Adam Smith, Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, and the beginning of 'The Quest for the Historical Jesus' (16-22, cf. 36-39). Wright makes two notable observations regarding this situation. First, there is great irony in claiming the Enlightenment has discarded ancient beliefs, such as Christianity, for more 'modern' beliefs considering that Epicureanism is anything but 'modern' (7-9, 14-15, 21-22, 28, 36-37. Cf. 26-27). Second, and more importantly, this view has, among other things, created a gulf or ditch (cf. Lessing) that separates the 'supernatural' world from the 'natural' world (9-16, 20-22, 29, 31-32, 34, 37). These have led to

various distortions in both natural theology and NT studies as these Epicurean effects have influenced both believers and unbelievers (20, 31-32),

Chapter two assesses how these philosophical and worldview considerations affected the study of the Gospels. After helpfully noting that the English tended to misunderstand German assessments of the Gospels (44-46, 49, 66-67), Wright then proceeds to argue, as an example of these philosophical impositions, that “the idea of a literal and imminent ‘end of the world’ as a central belief of first-century Jews, including Jesus and his early followers, is a modern myth” (47. See also 48). A number of well-known NT critical scholars are identified as having fallen into this trap, such as: David Strauss, Albert Schweitzer, Rudolf Bultmann, Hans Conzelmann, Ernst Käsemann, and Martin Werner (49-66). Wright’s response to this situation is that “the movement which has sailed under the flag of ‘historical criticism’ has regularly had too much criticism and not enough history. What if we did it differently?” (68. Cf. 88).

In chapter three, Wright provides an alternative and begins by a detailed examination of what is meant by the various uses of the term ‘history’. He highlights four primary meanings: it can refer to *events*; *narratives* about events; the *task* which historians undertake; and to the *meaning* historians and others discern in events (79). Also helpful in this chapter is the acknowledgement and identification of the ambiguities regarding the term ‘historicism’ when used in its various contexts (108-117). The primary significance of this chapter is Wright’s description of critical realism, which incorporates aspects of his ‘epistemology of love’, for producing real historical knowledge (95-105). A vital component of this is that one does not project their own (philosophical) views upon those in the past, but seeks to reconstruct the aims and motives of those other than the historian. Lastly, despite the fact that believers and unbelievers alike have succumbed to the temptation to ignore history (75, 88), Wright emphasizes that it is precisely history that can defeat the defeaters, dismantle the distortions, and direct the discussion (120-124).

The fourth chapter seeks to further illustrate how philosophical distortions have affected our understandings of ‘eschatology’ and ‘apocalyptic’. Wright returns to question the view that Jesus and the earliest followers believed the world was going to come to an end and suggests that the “post-Enlightenment world...never really engaged with ancient Jewish thought” (136). Rather, the “modern mistake emerged, by a typical projection of contemporary concerns onto a fictitious historical screen.” (152. Cf. 144-146). He examines what Paul (138-144), the Gospels (144-150), and the early church (145, 151) would have thought

regarding such an end of the world interpretation. Wright argues that these sources would have found an actual end of the world as a surprise because these texts, and in line with Second Temple Judaism, were arguing for *transformation within* space and time, not an elimination of it. Thus, for Wright, there is “all the difference between a cosmic catastrophe, in which the present world will cease to exist and a new purely ‘heavenly’ reality will take its place, and a cosmic Exodus in which the whole creation will be liberated from decay” (139).

Chapter five begins the third section of the book, and here Wright seeks to apply his critical realism and ‘epistemology of love’ to the historical sources. His goal is to describe how these sources would have been understood within their own first-century Jewish framework rather than a distorting Epicurean framework (or Platonic, Stoic, etc.). The Jewish tradition is “like the stone rejected by the builders in Jesus’ parables, [and] presents itself as the appropriate foundation for fresh cultural, political, ideological and above all theological construction” (157). In order to show how the Jewish view offers a contrast to these alternatives, Wright highlights the Temple, Sabbath, and Image. In short, the Temple was an advanced sign of new creation; weekly Sabbaths were foretastes of a coming New Age which was both similar and dissimilar to the present; and humans are to partake in this cosmic picture filling their proper vocation as priests and kings (176).

With this framework presented, chapter six then seeks to assess Jesus’ resurrection while returning to epistemological discussions. The resurrection becomes an important illustration for the value of history since it: ‘defeats the defeaters’ by showing how alternative theories to Jesus’ resurrection are problematic historically (192-193); ‘dismantles the distortions’ by clarifying that resurrection meant bodily (193-196); and ‘directs the discussion’ towards the reality of this event, its context, and relevant worldview questions related to it (196-198). While one could not start with the framework of “‘Temple, Sabbath and Image’ and deduce Easter” (191), Christianity nevertheless belongs within the Jewish matrix (195), and the resurrection itself redeems, retrieves, and establishes the goodness of original creation (201) through events that occurred in the real and public world (197, 205). The historical epistemology used here is *critical realism* as opposed to forms of positivism or skepticism and is grounded in *love* (187-192, 203-212) while avoiding approaches that fail to seriously (or lovingly) understand others who may think differently.

The seventh chapter begins the final section and introduces Wright’s new proposal for natural theology. Natural theology conducted within a revived

Epicureanism runs into problems as it presupposes (and perpetuates) a split between the ‘supernatural’ and ‘natural’. Wright’s new proposal is one that works with an “integrated cosmos, a purposed new creation already tasted in advance, and a vocational anthropology” (219). Focus is then placed upon seven vocational signposts (justice, beauty, freedom, truth, power, spirituality, and relationships). However, these signposts not only appear broken but even deceitful, especially in light of the *cross* (241, 261). Yet, when we look at these signposts afresh from the standpoint of the *resurrection*, things change (242-248). Traditional arguments from natural theology might also begin to look different (246-247. Cf. 252, 258, 264). For example, Paley’s watchmaker argument might be revised to argue that while the watch is broken, it is in the process of being repaired (much like the signposts).

This leads to Wright’s final chapter on the outworking of this new natural theology in the real world. Wright offers five “concrete” areas where his arguments can be further developed: the Mission of God, aesthetics, sciences, politics, and a refreshed sacramental theology (268-274). Pursuing these tasks becomes more evident when Jesus’ resurrection is contextualized, not with modern Epicurean concepts, but within the metaphysics from which Jesus’ resurrection arose. For Wright, “Telling the historically rooted story of Jesus *as the story of God*...becomes the focus of the church’s work in justice and beauty as well as in evangelism, generating an ongoing told-and-lived narrative which, by its very nature, invites new participants and, if it is true to itself, can never collapse into the ‘in-talk’ of those who have received a private ‘special revelation’” (276).

Throughout the work, Wright brilliantly integrates various disciplines. His arguments are not just holistic by being interdisciplinary but also because they highlight how different issues unite at different levels. Wright is thus able to effectively connect philosophy, history, and theology within the broader cultural trends as well as in specific examples. The emphasis of the epistemology of love as it relates to critical realism is equally valuable for reminding scholars that one must genuinely try to understand the worldview of others (even if those they disagree with) while also being cognizant of potential distorting philosophies that can be projected into the past.

Some minor concerns are that Wright’s discussions on critical realism and the epistemology of love might give the impression that investigation into the aims and motives of others will always be a delight (197, 200). While this may be true for NT scholars studying Jesus, it might be less delightful and more

distressing for those studying World War 2 (though presumably, Wright would agree here). Philosophers might also be understandably concerned about Wright's using 'love' as a new mode of knowing (188-189). Wright does appear aware of such a concern and offers some nuances (210). Another potential issue is for those who are not so much concerned about distant or deistic gods but immanent ones. Of course, this topic is not the intention of the present work, and Wright's discussion is minimal (265-266).

Wright's work is beautifully written and masterfully argued. It provides an important challenge to those who might not be aware of the extent that neo-Epicureanism has affected their own thought or those around them. Indeed, believers and unbelievers alike will be challenged to thoughtful reflection as both sides have been tempted to separate Jesus from natural theology or, surprisingly, from history itself. Very highly recommended.

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