

Book Review

Surprised by Scripture: Engaging Contemporary Issues

By N. T. Wright (HarperOne, 2014)

REVIEWED BY DAWN GENTRY

N. T. (Tom) Wright is an esteemed scholar and prolific author whose work is no stranger to readers of *Priscilla Papers*. His article, “The Biblical Basis for Women’s Service in the Church,”¹ was one of the first I read on the topic and served as a launching point for my subsequent research and writing. Consequently, I am pleased to provide a review of his recent book, *Surprised by Scripture: Engaging Contemporary Issues*.

Wright is well-respected in academic circles. While some of his theology is considered traditional, he is unafraid to bring more controversial views to the forefront. In this book, Wright emphasizes the influence that the eighteenth-century Enlightenment had on the development of modern Western thinking. Similarly, his assertion that Epicureanism is foundational for Modernity is borne out in several essays, particularly as it applies to political thought. Until readers are able to recognize their own firmly held, underlying beliefs about the way things are, he notes, they will be unable fully to appreciate the (potentially surprising) things scripture has to say. (On the impact of worldview on the dialogue about patriarchy versus equality, see the summer 2014 issue of *Mutuality*.)

As a former bishop and current professor, Wright skillfully crafts exemplary scholarship into a readable treatise, while showing pastoral care for his readers. His ability to reach a varied audience is evident in his *For Everyone* New Testament Commentary series, and this ability shines in Wright’s latest work as well. Using several case-studies, Wright illustrates how “people may not expect the Bible to have much to say on these topics... [and] when it does speak to them it may not say what people have imagined” (x). Wright found he was himself “surprised by scripture” and developed these essays in response to lecture requests on various topics.

The first three essays interact with the scientific community. In “Healing the Divide Between Science and Religion,” Wright lays out his case for Epicurus and Lucretius as predecessors of Darwin, and suggests a deep-seated opposition between a “system in which God has been disinvolved” and one that “insists on God’s actions in creation and providence” (15). His second essay asks, “Do We Need a Historical Adam?” and suggests that even asking the question raises concerns about scriptural authority (27). In his third piece, Wright examines the difference between scientific inquiry and historical analysis, using the resurrection of Jesus as an important example.

Subsequent essays include conversations on creation care (and how it relates to our views on the second coming) (95), the question of systemic evil in the world and our needed response to be “living embodiments of that new creation” (128), and three ways to “listen afresh to the message of the whole Bible” (140). In his chapter on idolatry, Wright also illuminates the importance of biblical wisdom as a remedy for widespread worship of “Mars, Mammon, and Aphrodite” (156). He engages in conversation with political systems and, in particular, notes the importance

of the church playing its part “in holding the powers to account and thus advance[ing] God’s restorative justice” (179).

Nestled among the wide ranging topics above is Wright’s essay, “The Biblical Case for Ordaining Women” (64-82). Of interest to me at the outset was the titular shift from “women’s service” (2006) to “ordaining women” (2014). After comparing the two essays closely, however, I do not see much expansion of thought—the beliefs described in his 2006 *Priscilla Papers* article remain essentially unchanged in his 2014 book. (In fact, much of the book’s essay is word-for-word from the article.) Perhaps adding the phrase “women’s ordination” increases the book’s list of topical subjects (for library searches) or search-engine optimization (e.g., for Google and Amazon).

For long-time members of CBE who may be discouraged by this similarity, I will highlight a few developments that *were* added in the book. When calling attention to women leaders in the early church, Wright suggests incredulity over translators fighting about Junia being a woman since no historical or exegetical proof exists that she was a man. He mentions the woman who anointed Jesus, pointing out, “this was a priestly action that Jesus accepted as such” (69). There is an expanded introduction about cultural issues and head coverings (73) and a brief comparison of the use of *kephalē* in Ephesians to that in 1 Corinthians (75).

Wright does not doubt authorship of the Pastorals. He offers an updated translation of “the hardest passage of all” (1 Tim 2) which he hopes will show how “the words can actually mean something significantly different than what has usually been assumed” (78). He recognizes that some might charge his translation serves only to “tailor this bit of Paul to fit our culture” but asserts that there is “good, solid scholarship” behind it (79). Wright does take the time to explain the word *authentēin* as having overtones of “being bossy or seizing control,” without getting into the nuances of the Greek (the book, after all, is not an academic one) (80).

Because CBE’s website provides easy access to the 2006 article (www.cbeinternational.org/resources/article/editors-reflections-autumn-2006-204),² there is no need to buy this book for the chapter on women’s ordination. Having said that, there are certainly other positive reasons to read it, and its topical variety provides helpful discussion points on “contemporary issues.” One encouraging point about the broad appeal of this book (both in its writing style and array of content) is that many who have not yet been exposed to the teachings of CBE will perhaps pick it up and read it. On the topic of women’s ordination, the well-respected N. T. Wright would be a positive first read.

Anyone with particular interest in one or more chapters will be happy to note that many of them have been expanded into their own books, and Wright alludes to these titles within each essay to recommend further study. Our own study of scripture often leads to more questions than answers, and Wright asserts,

“some of the most important questions in life need to be approached from several angles at once” (xi). While the chapter on women may not be a “new angle” to some CBE supporters, it will certainly be new to many. Wright’s book serves as a vital conversation partner for dialogue and provides an original and biblical perspective for some current issues, including women’s ordination.

Note

1. *Priscilla Papers* 20, no. 4 (Autumn 2006): 5-10. This 2006 article was adapted from Wright’s address at the 2004 “International Symposium on Men, Women, and the Church,” co-sponsored by CBE, Women and the Church (WATCH), and Men, Women and God (MWG) at St. John’s College in Durham, England.

2. All issues of CBE’s award-winning journals are available for free under the Publications Menu at www.cbeinternational.org, except the most recent three years. CBE members may access *all* articles.

DAWN GENTRY is now pursuing her MDiv at Emmanuel Christian Seminary, after 11 years of full time church ministry. She and her husband, Harold, have two grown children and an adorable grandson. Dawn is passionate about equipping others for ministry and encouraging dialogue on a biblical theology of women. When she’s not writing papers for graduate classes, she blogs at www.dawngentry.com.



Book Review

The CEB Study Bible

Edited by Joel B. Green (Nashville: Common English Bible, 2013)

REVIEWED BY CHARLES M. METCALF

A wide spectrum of thoughtful Bible students could benefit from *The CEB Study Bible*. This text provides the reader with ample study notes, cross-references, maps, introductory essays to each biblical book, and a concordance. For those not familiar with the *Common English Bible* translation, the CEB was produced in 2011 utilizing the effort of over 120 translators from twenty-two faith traditions. One of the primary goals of this translation was achieving a balance between accurate renditions of the ancient original texts and clear expression to the target audience. The result is a readable version utilizing contemporary English. The translators also sought to “use gender-inclusive or neutral syntax for translating pronouns that refer to humans, unless context requires otherwise” (xxi). This translation was crafted in the church community for the church community.

When one surveys the team of contributors to this study Bible, it is apparent these scholars are from diverse faith communities representing a wide range of Christian theological tendencies. With this understanding, no one branch of Christianity or denominational belief dominates the text. Of the sixty-three contributing authors, nineteen are female (30%). Since the purpose of the CEB is to provide an everyday English translation, it is no surprise to see that the overwhelming majority of scholars who worked on *The CEB Study Bible* are from the United States.

Individuals familiar with study Bibles will be pleased to see some of the additional features *The CEB Study Bible* offers. Each book of the Bible begins with an introductory two-page essay together with a related full color picture followed by a basic outline of the book. The format includes a single column page layout for the biblical text coupled with scriptural cross-references along the outer margins. The bottom half of each page has a two column layout with copious study notes highlighting individual

verses and sections. These notes read like a condensed form of leading biblical commentaries (Interpretation, Expositor’s, etc.) that provide historical background and context rather than trying to persuade the reader to take certain theological positions. Each book also includes numerous brief topical essays which provide rich insights into the relevant history and themes addressed.

One positive feature of *The CEB Study Bible* is its use of color: the text is black, the headings are maroon, the chapter numbers are goldenrod, the numerical cross-references are blue, and the essays have a light green background. These colors blend well to present a clean and aesthetically pleasing format while helping the reader quickly identify sections without being overwhelmed. The final section contains additional articles, a concordance, and twenty-one full-color maps. The concordance, while not exhaustive, contains eighty-two pages of entries, much more than would be expected of a study Bible. The high quality maps were created by the National Geographic Society. The supplemental articles in the back of the Bible approach various contemporary theological concerns and would benefit from a brief introduction. The articles discuss the authority of scripture, the Bible’s unity, how we got the Bible, the Bible and its chronology, and guidelines for reading the Bible. Each of the articles (five to six pages in length) guides the reader through common questions such as: Why is the OT relevant? Did the NT authors think they were writing scriptures? What is the proper use of the Bible? How should we approach scripture? The articles also touch on how the Bible has been used as a repressive tool in slavery, racism, and the abuse of women. Overall, they do an excellent job providing a quick overview of each topic and are helpful in theologically framing and understanding scripture as a whole.