

A BOOK REVIEW
“INTO THE HEART OF ROMANS/A DEEP DIVE INTO PAUL’S GREATEST LETTER”

March 9, 2024

TITLE OF BOOK: “Into the Heart of Romans/A Deep Dive Into Paul’s Greatest Letter”

AUTHOR: N. T. Wright, the former Bishop of Durham and Senior Research Fellow at Wycliff Hall, Oxford University, who is considered by many to be the world’s leading New Testament Scholar, and to be a leading expert in the interpretation of the Epistles of Paul, and who has published numerous books and publications on Paul and his writings, including *Interpreting Paul*.

PUBLISHER AND DATE OF PUBLICATION: Zondervan Academic, 2023.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

I am going to provide you, the Reader, with both my (your Reviewer’s) initial, over-riding impressions of this wonderful book, and then I am going to plagiarize the written impressions of some of the scholars, whose Reviews are encapsulated on the book’s cover or introduction.

First, My Impressions: This is a marvelous, brilliant, eye opening, game changing book, when it comes to the interpretation of not just Romans 8 (which is the Author’s subject matter), but of the entirety of Paul’s wonderfully full and complex letter to the Romans, and of the entirety of the Gospel as presented by the New Testament. One could argue, with substantial justification, that this book provides many of the keys to understanding the unity of the narrative provided by the entirety of Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation. In my (your Reviewer’s) opinion, this is a MUST HAVE BOOK. I, like you the Reader, have constantly heard the refrain that, while the Bible’s 66 books appear in various genres, it, in fact, presents a “unity” of thought in its overall narrative. A very popular project, “The Bible Project”, has, as its motto “We Believe that the Bible is a Unified Story which leads to Jesus”. While I certainly believe these teachings, I have found it difficult to find ways to really accept, understand and teach this “unity” or “unified” concept, using the Bible itself, and not the opinions of experts. This book demonstrates the truth of the unity or unified concept, and further shows how one cannot truly understand the Gospel, and the teachings of the authors of the four Gospels, and the teachings of Jesus and of Paul without having a good knowledge of the Old Testament, and of the overall narrative of the entirety of Scripture. It should be read and studied, and constantly referred to by Christian Pastors, Teachers and Leaders, and by any Christian who wants to try to achieve at least a decent understanding of Romans, its heart, Romans 8, the New Testament, and the entirety of Scripture. Have you heard the relatively new theological or Biblical interpretive technique known as “hyperlinks”, that technique or theory being that the Biblical Authors were well versed in all of Scripture, and that they, in their individual books or writings, referred, either explicitly or implicitly, to earlier parts of stories of Scripture, showing how the various stories or parts of Scripture tie together. Well, without even referring to “hyperlinks”, our Author, in this book, clearly demonstrates the validity of the hyperlink theory or technique. You have to have, read and study this book, and retain it as a valued reference source, including as a source of countless sermons or teachings.

Second, the Impressions of Other Reviewers: The statement that appears on the reverse side of the Cover for this book really tells it all, in summary form. That statement is as follows: “*In this short book, Wright takes a deep dive into Romans 8 (Note. The book of Romans is, by many, thought to be a presentation of the entire gospel, in condensed form, with Romans 8 being the very heart of Romans and*

with Romans 8 actually presenting the entirety of Romans and the Gospel, in condensed form), showing how it (i.e. Romans 8) illuminates so much else that God reveals in Scripture: God the Father, Christ, and the Spirit; Jesus's messiahship, cross, resurrection, and ascension; salvation, redemption and adoption; suffering and glory; and holiness and hope. Wright also shows how Romans 8 holds together covenant, apocalyptic, justification, and "being in Christ". It illuminates the gospel from the promises to Abraham, through the visions of Revelation." This short statement, in my opinion, says it all. It truly encapsulates the entirety of what Wright, our Author, is trying to say and accomplish, and what, he in fact, does accomplish with this book.

In short, you must have, read and study and constantly refer to this book. If you don't then that will be both your loss and the loss of those God brings to you in order for you to try to help them read and understand Scripture, particularly the marvelous tapestry of Paul's letter to the Romans. Not having, reading and retaining this book for future reference will also deprive you of having a ready source for future Sermons and Messages.

WHAT IS THE AUTHOR DOING WITH WHAT HE IS SAYING (WHAT IS HE TRYING TO ACCOMPLISH WITH WHAT HE IS SAYING/WHAT IS HIS PURPOSE?)

If I tried to answer this question, in a summary form, I could not do a better job than was done by the writer of that statement which appears on the reverse side of the front Cover Sheet for this book, and which is quoted above. Truthfully, that statement says it all. Candidly, there is no way I can do more justice for the contents of this book in a manner which would improve upon that quoted statement. However, Dear Reader, if you will tolerate me to some extent, I will try to give you a few short, summary statements or "take aways" from this book, which will, hopefully cause you to do what you ought to do which is to obtain, read, study and retain this book for future reference. I want to try to bring about that result.

- A) MY INADEQUATE SUMMARY OF THE BOOK'S CONTENTS: As an inadequate summary of the books, contents, I would submit that our Author demonstrates, through Paul's sometimes dense words in Romans 8, how the entire story of the Bible ties together:

In this book, our brilliant Author, N.T. Wright, demonstrates how God, through the sometimes dense, sometimes hard to understand words of the Apostle Paul in Romans 8 (Again Note: Many experts consider the Book of Romans, Paul's most brilliant letter, to be a condensed form of the entire Gospel, with Romans 8, the very heart of Romans, presenting the entirety of Romans and of the Gospel in even more condensed form), has shown us how God's plan for redemption of His Creation, as revealed by Scripture, is being and will be accomplished by Jesus and the Holy Spirit and God's Resurrected, Fully Human (as intended by God) Human Beings, working with and under the direction of God, as provided by God through Jesus and the Holy Spirit. If you think that the true teachings of the Gospel are that God's People (those who have and persevere in faith in God and Jesus) will be saved by faith in Christ and will "go to heaven", then the Author will disabuse you of that understanding. In our Author's view, God, through Paul's words in Romans 8, shows us that his Plan for Redemption of His Creation, the entire Cosmos, is, and has from the beginning been that God, working in partnership with "Fully Human" (as "Fully Human" is intended by God) humans, will work for the salvation, the redemption of the entirety of God's creation. In the Author's view, Paul would submit that "heaven", as we probably think of heaven (some place which is somehow disconnected from this world), is not to be our ultimate residence. Rather, this world, a re-created, redeemed world which will touch and be joined by heaven, God's residence, is something that we are to work towards, today, and which we will, as resurrected, Fully Human people,

work with God to bring about in the future. True Christians, as God's people, have both present vocations and an ultimate vocation; that ultimate vocation coming into place after their bodily resurrection, when they will be the True Humans, as God intended humans to be. Those two vocations are as follows:

- a) Present Vocation: While some would hold that Christians are not citizens of this world, and that their future home is a heavenly one, and that they can live with the goal of getting to heaven and not have huge concerns about the status of the world today, our Author submits that God, through Paul, in Romans 8 states that such is not the case, and that we Christians have a present God given vocation to seek to deal with the miserable state of our current world. In many cases, we don't know what to do to seek to improve on that state of the world, but we are called upon to: 1) endure and persevere through current sufferings and pain, both our own and that of the world in general, as those current sufferings and pain are a joinder, by us, in the messianic pain and sufferings of Jesus, which were required as a part of the Plan to rescue the world, 2) engage in "lamentations", whereby we lament the state of the world and the pains and sufferings of God's creation and our own pains and suffering, and 3) pray, even though we don't really know what to pray for or how to pray, as our "groanings", which are a part of the groanings of the corrupted creation, will be joined in by the Holy Spirit, who will convey those groanings, joined in by the Spirit's groanings, to God the Father.
- b) Future Vocation: When God's people are bodily resurrected, in perfect bodies, they will, in effect, be re-created as True Human Beings, meaning the Human Beings which God intended for people to be, and they will go forward, with God, under the Lordship of Christ and with the guidance of the indwelling Holy Spirit, to work with God and partner with God to bring about a new, uncorrupted Creation. This new, uncorrupted world will constitute a joinder of heaven and earth, and will be a suitable place for God to dwell therein among His people; Sin and death having been finally, and forever defeated.

Our Author would have us first refer to Genesis 1: 26-28 in which we learn that God created human beings, male and female, in God's Image, and instructed them to increase in number and rule over and subdue the earth, and would have us conclude that this, very early passage of the Bible described the "vocation" of those created in God's image. That vocation was to work with God, who would live and be in their presence, to reign with God over God's creation. This vocation could be pursued only if God could be with, and reside with His people, His creation, which he could not do and cannot do in the presence of Sin. In the Author's view, "Sin" is not just our individual, wrongful, commandment violations, but is an overall dark force which corrupts, and seeks to subvert God's intentions and His good creation. God cannot tolerate Sin, and He cannot reside in a world which is subject to Sin. His created Humans Beings, as described by the Fall narrated in Genesis 3 and subsequent parts of the Bible, violated their vocation, and, with the devious work of Sin, allowed Sin to come into the Creation, thereby corrupting the entirety of Creation, the world and the Cosmos, and making the world an unsuitable dwelling place for God. God then embarked upon His plan to redeem His Creation, knowing full well how things would proceed. The steps in His plan began with His selection of Abraham, and His covenants with Abraham, including the covenant to make Abraham the father of many nations. The plan proceeded through the Egyptian Exile, and the enslavement of Abraham's descendants in Egypt. God "heard their groanings" (a repeated refrain in Remans 8) and He rescued them from their Egyptian enslavement as described in the book of Exodus, and He made them a nation, and made his Mount Sinai Covenant with them, and provided them with the Law, and with instructions for the construction of the tabernacle and Ark, which (with the later Temple) could serve as a limited, Sin Free dwelling place where God could reside with His chosen people, the Israelites. The covenant given vocation of the Israelites was

that they, by keeping God's commands and observing His Wisdom, would serve as a nation of Priests, and would bring light to the entirety of the world. Of course, they failed in this vocation. But, as promised, God, when the time was proper, God brought his Messiah into the world, with the Messiah, a sin free and perfectly Fully Human man (although both human and divine, God himself), serving as God's anointed representative of Israel, chosen to do what Israel could not do, and bringing to fulfillment the intended purposes of the Law (i.e. the abolishment of sin and death and the making of a true Fully Human human) purposes which Israel and the Law (while all good) could not fulfill. The Messiah, Jesus (who actually represented and embodied Israel), by His death, resurrection and ascension, defeated Sin and death in God's people and His creation, thereby making God's people a suitable dwelling place for God in the person of the Holy Spirit. In effect, God's people became the temple and a dwelling place for Spirit of God. The Author would hold that these people, the Spirit indwelling people, have a "vocation", which is, the original vocation which was given to the first created humans in Genesis 1, that vocation being to work with God in bringing about God's intended creation.

While I know that this summary does not begin to do justice to our Author's book, I hope that it at least demonstrates that our Author seeks to show that Romans 8 contains a condensed form of the entire Biblical narrative.

- B) Some Brief Take-Aways From This Book: Some very briefly stated personal take-aways which I have taken from this book, and which I set forth here in the hope that they will entice you to read this book for yourself, are as follows:
- a) Our Concept of Leaving this Earth and Going to Heaven is Misguided: As noted in Section A above our Author would submit that the Bible does not teach that we will, at our deaths and resurrections, in effect abandon this world and go to some heaven. Rather, as noted above, the Bible teaches that, at our bodily resurrections, heaven and earth will be joined together or will touch each other and will be a Sin (as the author defines "Sin") free and death free place, a place which is suitable as a place for God to dwell among His people.
 - b) "Sin": The Author refers to Sin, in two respects, first as our individual, personal failures to follow God's commands and wisdom, and secondly, and more importantly, as an over-arching, dark presence which is corrupting God's creation and is leading people created in God's image to participate in that corruption, leading to the evils which have infected our world, including wars, killings, disease, death, etc. As long as "Sin" exists, those places where it exists are places where God cannot be. Christ, by His death and more importantly by his Resurrection (something which our Author submits that the Church talks about with some reluctance) has defeated Sin to the extent that God's people, who have been "justified" by the death of Christ, are now suitable dwelling places for God's Holy Spirit, and are able to work and pray in concert with the Holy Spirit (who joins in our inarticulate prayers and our "groanings") for the redemption of God's creation.
 - c) Importance of Jesus's Asension: We and the Church do not place sufficient weight upon the Asension of Christ and His sitting at the right hand of God the Father. By way of this Asension, Jesus, a Fully Human man, who was and is and remains as such a Fully Human man, can receive the prayers of God's people, as transmitted and perfected by the Holy Spirit, and can intervene for God's people with the Father, and can mediate on their behalf with the Father.
 - d) Ultimate "Inheritance": As noted above, our ultimate "inheritance" is not to leave this earth and go to "heaven", but rather is to receive an inheritance of a vocation to

work with God in ridding God's creation of its states of corruption, thereby bringing about a "re-created creation". (Jokingly: I always thought that I would, hopefully, go to heaven where I would play perfect golf on perfect golf courses, and fish for trout in beautiful trout streams. Guess not. Looks like our inheritance is to work with God (I assume joyfully and with full contentment) to bring about God's originally intended Creation.)

- e) Adoption: We are referred to as the "Adopted" children of God, who are co-heirs with Christ. Paul points out that the original hearers of his letter would have understood the terminology of "adoption", with a view to the then status of their world, a world which was dominated by the Roman Empire and the Roman Emperors. In that world, as it existed after the death by assassination of Julius Caesar, the then Emperors would "adopt" a son, who would be trained to follow in the footsteps of the emperor and to carry on his responsibilities. The first such "adopted" son was Augustus, who was so "adopted" by Julius Caesar, who, like all following emperors was defied at his death, with his adopted son thereby being considered to have been adopted by a deity and to have been trained to follow in the footsteps of that deity, and, in effect, to also be a deity. So, when Paul's first readers or hearers of Romans 8 heard about "adoption" by God and as being sons of God they would have understood that such "adoption" and "sonship" conferred upon them duties and responsibilities to learn from, and to prepare for the furthering of the work being carried out by the "adopter" (if that is a word), God.
- f) Interpreting Paul: The Author does teach us a system which he uses for interpreting Paul, and which he has further described in other books which he has written. He first notes that we cannot properly understand Paul unless we can read and understand his words in the original Greek language in which he wrote. The Author understands that most of us cannot acquire a sufficient understanding of the original Greek words used by Paul. He, therefore, recommends some resources which we might use in order to understand the original Greek. He urges that, at least, we should never rely on a single English translation Bible. To help us understand his, the Author's translation of Paul's words, our Author sets forth, at the beginning of each Chapter of his book (each Chapter dealing with the verses of a separate section of Romans 8 that is being dealt with in that Chapter), in a side by side comparison, Paul's original Greek writings or words which were used in the particular section or verses in question appearing on the right side, and the Author's English translations of those Greek writings and words appearing on the left side. So, the Author urges that in interpreting Paul we have to first use our very best efforts and available resources to understand (as best we can) an appropriate English translation of Paul's original Greek Words, which we need to try to understand in the context in which Paul used those words. The Author then urges that a three-part effort must be used in trying to best understand and interpret any of Paul's passages in any of his letters, such effort being as follows:
 - a. First: What Does the Paragraph or Section or Verse or Section of Verses signal as being the main theme or purpose of that Section or Verse or Section of Verses. What does the Paragraph or Section or Section of Verses itself, in its opening and closing, signal as its main theme. We need to be aware of that main theme and concentrate on it, without getting sidetracked by extraneous matters or our prior thoughts or conceptions.

- b. Second: How do Paul's "small connecting words" (i.e. "for", "but", "because", "therefore", etc.) reveal his underlying train of thought, keeping in mind that Paul's sentences are almost never just random ideas, one after another, but rather, when taken together, form logical arguments which indicate the deeper structure of Paul's thoughts and of the gospel itself. (Note, many of Paul's writings, if not in fact all of them contain highly structured arguments for or statements of a position. He was a skilled advocate and one needs to try to best understand the structure of his advocacy.)
- c. Third: Try to understand what wider contexts in Paul's wider world, either his Jewish world or the larger Roman world where he worked (with Gentiles) would provide the natural resonances for what he says. (Note: We always urge that we have to try to read the Bible so as to "hear it" as its original audiences would have heard it, taking into account the world and culture in which they resided. Certainly, that is part of the point here. Paul often spoke to both Jews and Gentiles, and that is what he was doing with his letter to the Romans, a letter to struggling Roman house churches which consisted of both Jews and Gentiles, who were struggling to relate to each other. Furthermore, Paul was an extremely learned Jew, and one might call him a "Bible Nerd" of the Jewish Bible, the Torah. As a Torah literate Jew, he might refer, either implicitly or explicitly, to parts of the Jewish Bible, the Torah, or our Old Testament. As one speaking to Jews and Gentiles living in the Roman World, or so called "Greco-Roman World", he would want to speak in terms which would resonate with his audience, in that world. Paul might often use a favored rhetorical technique whereby he might raise a rhetorical question or a question raised by his audience, and then state or imply an answer as the backbone of his argument.)
- g) Resonances to and with the Exodus and the Passover, and Other Old Testament Texts: The Author finds, in Romans 8, that it, in essence, has strong resonances with the Passover, and particularly with Exodus. He would find that the birth, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus were, in effect, a "new Exodus", a new "rescuing" of God's people from slavery (i.e. "Sin" and death) and a renewal of God's covenant/promises with and to the Israelites who could not observe the law, and who were embodied in the Messiah, Jesus, the perfect, Fully Human man and Israelite. There are constant allusions in Romans 8 to Genesis, the Exodus, the Prophets (particularly Isaiah), the Psalms and other parts of the Hebrew Bible. So, for those who would urge that Christians can disregard the Old Testament, Romans 8 (and the Author's statements) would stand in strong argument against that position.
- h) Jesus the Only Truly Human Person: Jesus was (and we would say IS) the only Perfect, Truly Human human, who came to do and who did what the Israelites could not do because of their corrupted hearts (and which we cannot do, by ourselves, without the help of Jesus and the Holy Spirit), and which the Law was designed to do but could not do.
- i) Divorce Our Thinking: We must read Romans 8, and all of Romans and all of the New Testament, particularly the teachings of Jesus, not as twenty first century people but as a First Century, Bible (i.e. Torah) soaked Messiah focused Jew might have thought.
- j) Covenant Fulfillment: God's covenant with the Israelites was fulfilled in Jesus.
- k) Trinitarian Thought: Romans 8 represents the Bible's greatest explanation of "Trinitarian Thought".

- l) Entire Cosmos: Romans 8 shows how God is and will address, not just individual salvation, but rather the salvation of the entire cosmos. God's Gift of Salvation will not be Gift just "To" His people, but will be a Gift "Through" His People, who will work with God for the salvation of the entire world and cosmos.
- m) Israel: God's purposes for his selected people, Israel, were and are the intended focal point and means for God's intended purposes for the whole world. The Messiah, as God's anointed one, sums up Israel's vocation and destiny in Himself.
- n) Upside Down View of Salvation: Our view of Salvation is upside down. It does not involve "going to heaven", but rather means that we, working with Jesus, with the help of the indwelling Holy Spirit working with us and through us, as God's True Imagers, will fulfill the vocation and work conferred by God upon Humans, in the beginning, as described in Genesis 1.

These are just a few of the "Take-Aways" which I, your Reviewer, have taken from this book. I hope that these statements of Take-Aways will inspire you to obtain, study, retain and use this book as you go forward with your personal ministry efforts.

HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

I wish that I could provide you with some thoughts about some short form way to skim through this book, or to "read it without actually reading it, front to back". I can't do that. While this is a relatively short book (just a little over 200 pages) it is far too important to allow for any "short-cut reading". It needs to be read, meditated about, savored, retained and often used in the future. Sorry, but that is just the way it is. If you don't read this book, then you will have suffered a loss, and those you are called upon by God to help or teach will join you in that loss.

IS THIS BOOK SUITABLE FOR HOLDING IN THE TEI LIBRARY OR FOR USE IN ANY TEI/ECLI CLASS?

This book should, absolutely and without question, be held in TEI's library, and should be recommended by TEI for anyone interested in understanding Romans, particularly Romans 8, or in gaining some understanding of Paul's writings (and the Author does mention other resources in this respect). Insofar as the usefulness of this book in any TEI/ECLI Class might be, that usefulness would depend on the nature of the Class. Any ECLI/TEI instructor should have a good knowledge of this book for his or her use in teaching or facilitating any class on hermeneutics, or in one which seeks to teach a greater understanding of the relationships between the two Testaments, the New Testament and the Old Testament, or which seeks to provide and greater understanding of Paul's letters, or of Romans, or, really, of the New Testament. This book would not be suitable as assigned reading or as a text for any basic class on hermeneutics or any other subject. Now, for a more advanced or in-depth class on hermeneutics, or the New Testament, or Paul's Letters or Romans generally, this book would be a great resource and/or assigned reading or text.

Thank You!

Dan Simon

