

A Critical Review of Tom Wright's *Revolution*

Abstract/Intro: What follows is a critical review of Tom Wright's *The Day the Revolution Began*¹ (hereafter TDRB) from the perspective of an evangelical Christian.² I have benefitted from many of Wright's insights over the years, but I have been massively disappointed by TDRB, which I can only describe as a poorly-argued and (from an evangelical perspective) potentially harmful book. Here and there it makes some helpful observations, but TDRB's pros do not even begin to outweigh its cons. I have decided to write a review—or, more accurately, a critique—of TDRB for four main reasons: **(1)** because it presents a distorted and irresponsible view of what “we” (which I take to mean ‘we evangelicals’) believe about the Gospel; **(2)** because it presents a theologically incomplete and unbalanced view of the cross, which many people appear to have uncritically accepted; **(3)** because it has received too much praise and too little criticism from those who have reviewed it; and **(4)** because its method of argumentation is both flawed and inconsistent—indeed, if Wright treated the OT in a consistent manner, he would be obliged to affirm much of what he denies. TDRB is over 400 pages in length. I cannot, therefore, hope to summarise its arguments in a short review,³ much less to set out a point by point refutation of them. And, since TDRB is not aimed at a scholarly audience, it does not seem appropriate simply to provide a list of references where Wright's claims are addressed in detail. Instead, I would like to say a brief word about the four criticisms I have outlined above and, afterwards, in the spirit of TDRB, to segue into a positive discussion of how (contra the impression given by TDRB) the satisfaction of divine wrath forms an integral part of the overall narrative of Scripture.

Key Words: *N T Wright, The Day the Revolution Began, critical review, atonement theology, OT narrative & allusion, propitiation, divine wrath, Gospels*

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¹Tom Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began: Reconsidering the Meaning of Jesus's Crucifixion* (HarperOne, San Francisco, California), 2016, 440 pp., Hardback, £16.58.

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³Helpful summaries of TDRB's central message can be found here: «www.derekvreeand.com/2017/03/n-t-wright-revolutionary-cross-week-1/» or here: «www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/book-reviews-the-day-the-revolution-began».

The above four key points expanded

(1). **A distorted view of what evangelicals believe.** As many reviewers have pointed out, TDRB is full of straw men. Consider, for instance, Wright’s description of how “we” (evangelicals) have conceived of man’s fallen condition. “We have all too often”, Wright says, “[conceived of] ‘sin’ as the breaking of arbitrary commandments and [of] ‘death’ as the...penalty inflicted by an unblinking divine Justice on all who fail to toe the line”.⁴ Have we? I do not think I have ever heard anyone describe God’s moral law as a set of ‘arbitrary commandments’ or sin as a ‘failure to toe the line’. Wright’s description of how we have conceived of Jesus’ salvific work is little better. The “domin[ant]” line of thought in “much [of] Western Christianity”, Wright says, can be summarised as follows: “Humans sinned, causing God to be angry and to want to kill them. ...[But] Jesus somehow got in the way...(it helped, it seems, that he was innocent—oh, and that he was God’s own son too), [so] we are in the clear after all...provided, of course, we believe it”.⁵ Again, I do not think I have ever heard anyone describe Jesus’ salvific work in such terms, much less have I heard Jesus’ sinless and divine nature categorised as a mere ‘nice to have’. (Such quotes can easily be multiplied: elsewhere, for instance, Wright feels the need to distance himself from “the idea of an angry, bullying deity who has to...have his wrathful way with someone, even if it isn’t the right person”;⁶ and so TDRB continues.)

Of course, Wright knows his representations of the evangelical world are mere caricatures; indeed, at times, he almost admits as much.⁷ The question therefore needs to be asked, Why portray the evangelical world in such a caricatured manner? Why not set out a view of the cross which prominent evangelicals actually affirm and *then* (if necessary) critique it? The answer is not for me to guess at, but what I do want to comment on is the impression created by Wright’s caricatures, which is as follows: we evangelicals have made a real mess of atonement theology over the last twenty centuries or so, and we now need Wright to come and straighten things out for us. “If we keep our nerve”, Wright assures us midway through one of his caricatures, “we may perhaps be able to

⁴p. 103.

⁵p. 38.

⁶p. 44.

⁷For instance, Wright adds by way of caveat to p. 38’s caricature, “Many preachers and teachers put [things] more subtly than this” (p. 39), though, in truth, Wright’s caveat only makes matters worse, since it suggests the *substance* of Wright’s caricatures is accurate even if preachers happen to ‘put their claims more subtly’ in order to make them sound palatable.

get things straight at last”.⁸ Wright does not merely want to correct certain oversimplifications of what we have come to believe; he wants to advance a fundamentally new theory and ‘at last to set things straight’.

Suffice it to say, then, an ‘untrained’ believer who reads TDRB will come away with a distorted view of what the evangelical world believes and with very little respect for the theologians of past centuries. He may even start to ‘hear’ Wright’s caricatures when responsible accounts of Christ’s sacrifice are set forth. As such, TDRB has the potential to damage those for whom Christ has died.

A further problem with Wright’s caricatures is their rhetorical function. Wright’s caricatures cast his objections to the notion of an angry God in search of a victim as points in favour of *his* particular theory of atonement—which, of course, they are not. Wright exhorts us, for instance, to view the Bible not as a narrative “of divine petulance” (as if that would be our natural inclination), “but [as a narrative] of unbreakable divine covenant love”, as if such a narrative is uniquely available on Wright’s approach.⁹ Ultimately, Wright seems unable to reconcile two Biblical doctrines: that God is love, and that God punished Jesus in order to satisfy his wrath. (John 3.16, he says, is often made to sound like “God so *hated* the world that he *killed* his only son”.¹⁰) But the apostle John does not share Wright’s concerns. “[God] loved us”, John says (in a passage nowhere expounded by Wright), “and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins”.¹¹ As Wright himself has stated, “You can’t play off the juridical account of atonement...against an account which stresses God’s love”,¹² and “if you take a half-truth and make it into the whole truth, it becomes an untruth”.¹³ Yet that, ironically, is precisely what Wright does in TDRB.

(2) A theologically incomplete and unbalanced view of the cross. Even on the far side of a 400-page book, I remain unclear as to *how* Wright thinks the cross saves us from God’s wrath; and I am not alone.¹⁴ I am not even sure

⁸p. 105. One reviewer has even written in reference to TDRB, “Evangelicalism is sick and in need of a doctor. I believe Tom Wright may be exactly what we need”. While the reviewer may be right in one sense (‘evangelicalism’ is not in the greatest shape today), the solution to the problem is certainly not TDRB.

⁹p. 224.

¹⁰p. 43.

¹¹1 John 4.10. In response, Wright would deny the connection between an act of “propitiation” and the satisfaction of wrath (p. 329), but, as we will see, his view does not pass muster.

¹²«www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/articles/the-cross-and-the-caricatures/» acc. 2017.

¹³«www.premierchristianity.com/Past-Issues/2017/February-2017/Tom-Wright-s-cross-centred-revolution» acc. 2017.

¹⁴As one reviewer notes, “[Wright] often bypasses the question of the mechanism of salvation in order to highlight how the cross fulfills Israel’s story”. But I would personally want to put the point more

whether *Wright* is clear on the matter. Wright says in reference to Corinthians, “At no point does [Paul] offer anything like a complete exposition of either what the cross achieved or why or how it achieved it”;¹⁵ and if Wright thinks a more complete exposition is set forth elsewhere in the Pauline corpus, then he does not mention it in TDRB. In the final analysis, the reason why Wright is unclear on the mechanism of atonement is because he thinks *Scripture itself* is unclear on the matter. When faced with texts which shed light on the mechanism of Jesus’ act of atonement (e.g., texts which frame Jesus’ death against the backdrop of the Passover), Wright talks at great length about what is said to be *accomplished* in such texts (namely Israel’s liberation from the world’s dark powers) yet completely ignores what they imply about the *mechanics* of atonement,¹⁶ the end result of which is a lack of balance. Scripture is not only interested in the fact of Jesus’ victory and its place in the grand sweep of redemption history; it is also interested in the details of *how* Jesus has won his great victory.

But, while Wright is unclear on what he *does* believe about salvation’s mechanism, he is not so unclear on what he does *not* believe about it. “That wrath falls on Jesus instead of on his people” Wright explicitly rejects. “That God [sets] Jesus forth as a ‘propitiation’, [i.e.], a means [to turn] away wrath” Wright likewise rejects.¹⁷ The term *hilastērion*, Wright says, “does not denote a ‘propitiatory sacrifice’ in which Jesus is punished for the sins of others”.¹⁸ (Again, such quotes can easily be multiplied.) Ultimately, the nub of the issue is as follows: Wright wants to craft an account of atonement which is firmly grounded in the OT backdrop to Christ’s death yet which does *not* wed Christ’s death to the satisfaction of God’s wrath, and his pursuit of this objective creates an irreconcilable tension at the heart of TDRB since the backdrops against which Wright frames Christ’s death (most notably, the Passover, the exile, and the day of Atonement) entail the very notion Wright wants to avoid, namely the satisfaction of God’s wrath.

Consequently, Wright must engage in a kind of ‘shell game’. “Jesus chose *Passover* as the moment for his final dramatic [act]”, Wright says. “He did not choose one of the other festivals; in particular, he did not choose the great and somber day

strongly. Wright’s avoidance of the issue of how Jesus’ death delivers us from God’s wrath goes beyond the ‘frequent’; it is a consistent and systematic feature of TDRB’s theology. Wright actually seems to disapprove of the very *notion* of a theory of how the cross accomplishes its results (pp. 196-197). “[The Gospels] do not seem concerned”, Wright says, “about...how [Jesus’] death...enables sinners to be forgiven” (p. 196).

¹⁵p. 246.

¹⁶e.g., pp. 197-198

¹⁷p. 273.

¹⁸p. 331.

of Atonement”.¹⁹ Here, Wright makes it sound as if the way to portray Jesus’ death as a propitiatory sacrifice would be to frame it against the backdrop of Yom Kippur. (The Passover lamb, Wright says, is not a ‘sacrifice of atonement’.²⁰) Yet when Paul frames Jesus’ death against the backdrop of Yom Kippur in Rom. 3.24-26,²¹ Wright *still* says a propitiatory sacrifice is not in view. Why? Because, he says, “there is nothing [in the Yom Kippur] ritual about punishment”.²² “Paul does not mean [to say] God...punish[ed] Jesus for the sins of Israel. Had he wanted to say that, he would not have echoed the language of the day of Atonement”!²³ One is therefore left to wonder what kind of OT language and allusions Paul *could* have employed had he wanted to portray Jesus’ death as a propitiatory sacrifice.²⁴ Wright’s method of exegesis appears to be a kind of ‘reduction by dissection’ where only certain aspects of OT allusions are allowed to be carried over into the NT. “[Sacrifices are] not...‘punished’ in the place of the people”, Wright says. “So, when Paul [says]...God [set] Jesus forth as a *hilastērion*, he does not mean...God...punish[ed] Jesus for the sins of Israel”.²⁵ But what Wright thinks Paul *does* mean remains unclear to me.

(3). Too much praise and too little criticism. Before I read TDRB, I consulted a number of online reviews to see whether it would be a worthwhile investment of time. The general impression I got was one of ‘buyer beware’. I would need to be careful in places, I was warned, but, on the whole, I would benefit from TDRB. The truth of the matter turned out to be otherwise. As I have mentioned above, TDRB is full of straw men and unbalanced exegesis. Well-

¹⁹p. 184.

²⁰p. 332.

²¹by his use of the term *hilastērion*

²²p. 329.

²³p. 330.

²⁴One is also left to wonder whether Wright’s view of Jesus’ death is even consistently presented in TDRB, since Wright elsewhere says (in his treatment of the Gospel narratives), ‘Jesus bears the punishment marked out for his fellow Jews’ (p. 211), and, in relation to Mark 10.38, “[Jesus] must drain...the ‘cup of the wrath of God’ so...his people won’t have to” (p. 221). Perhaps Wrights thinks the notion of substitutionary atonement is a doctrine affirmed by the four evangelists yet not by Paul, though I doubt it. (Wright also comes close to a statement of penal substitutionary atonement in his treatment of Rom. 8.1-4, where he refers to how Jesus “takes upon himself the consequences of Israel’s rebellion”, though Wright does not seem comfortable with this claim, and prefaces it with the phrase, “If Paul is hinting at ‘punishment’ in this passage...”: p. 339.) It seems as if what Wright has in mind is not so much a process where Jesus bears God’s wrath in the place of sinners, but a process where Israel is delivered from her oppressors (both political and cosmic) because Sin (which Wright spells with a capital ‘S’, apparently in order to personalise it in some way) directs its full destructive force towards Jesus. Ultimately, however, the important issue is not what Wright believes; it is what TDRB is likely to lead its readers to believe. And I doubt whether too many young Christians would emerge from TDRB with a belief in penal substitutionary atonement.

²⁵p. 330. Wright later re-iterates the point: “Paul”, he says, “does *not* intend [Rom. 3.24-26 to be understood as] a statement of how the punishment deserved by sinners...was meted out on Jesus instead” (pp. 329-330).

versed theologians may be able to sort out the wheat from the chaff when they read TDRB (and may, therefore, be able to benefit from some of its insights), but many readers will not be able to do so. That TDRB has been reviewed in a primarily positive light is, therefore, highly problematic. If it was irresponsible for Wright to *compose* TDRB, then it has been no less irresponsible for reviewers to *commend* TDRB (even if their commendations happen to be followed by lists of things which ‘could have been better’).

Books where Christian orthodoxy is called into question and new ideas are thrown around in its place (to see if they stick) may be meat and drink for academic theologians, but the majority of people in today’s churches are *not* academic theologians (and TDRB is not aimed at an academic audience in any case), and people who review books like TDRB must bear that fact in mind. If a member of my fellowship asked me whether or not they should read TDRB, I would reply with an unqualified ‘No’. The problems with TDRB far outweigh any useful insights it might contain.

(4). Flawed and inconsistent argumentation. Most readers of TDRB will (rightly) find themselves able to affirm much of what Wright affirms, but they need not (and should not) deny what Wright denies. Yes, Jesus’ sacrifice is about the defeat of the world’s dark powers, the inauguration of a new eschatological age, the announcement of a ‘year of liberty’ (i.e., the Jubilee), and a million other things. But it is *also* about the satisfaction of God’s wrath, which God does not ask us to explain away, but invites us to rejoice in; indeed, Jesus’ sacrifice is able to accomplish what it accomplishes precisely *by* the satisfaction of God’s wrath. To put the point another way, TDRB is full of false dichotomies. Wright repeatedly asks us to deny P and affirm Q instead when the correct course of action is to affirm P *as well as* Q; that is to say, Wright repeatedly casts his conclusions as ‘not P, but Q’ when the arguments he offers for them only warrant the conclusion ‘not *only* P, but *also* Q’. TDRB’s treatment of the OT is particularly problematic in this respect. But, before we consider it in more detail, a word needs to be said about TDRB’s treatment of Rom. 3.24-26.

Wright outlines the context of Rom. 3.24-26 under two main banners: the “covenantal” and the “cultic”.²⁶ Absent is any mention of God’s wrath against man’s sin, which soon becomes evident in Wright’s exegesis. Consider, for instance, Wright’s treatment of 3.25. As far as Wright is concerned, Jesus is set

²⁶pp. 297-298.

forth as a *hilastērion* (which Wright renders as “[a] place of mercy”²⁷) *not* in order to turn aside divine wrath, but in order to “display the covenant faithfulness of Israel’s God”.²⁸ Wright’s claim is problematic on at least two counts.

First, its discussion of the term *hilastērion* is inadequate. The term *hilastērion* has been studied in a huge amount of detail over the years. In the context of 3.25, it is standardly understood (by a whole range of commentators and translators) to signify a propitiatory sacrifice, i.e., a sacrifice which satisfies wrath. But Wright tells his readers little (if anything) about the warrant for the standard view of *hilastērion*; he simply says it is “lexically possible” and “sometimes claims support from the use of the term in a Jewish...book called 4 Maccabees”.²⁹ As a result, the average reader—who is unlikely to have heard of 4 Maccabees—will think ‘the standard view’ rests on shaky ground, when, in actual fact, the standard view is not only made “possible” by the text of 4 Maccabees, but is made highly *probable* by it, and, as Wright must know, has been vigorously defended on the basis of exhaustive studies of every occurrence of the word *hilastērion* in Greek inscriptions, Greek literature,³⁰ later Christian texts, and Greek translations of the OT.³¹ Wright’s discussion of the term *hilastērion* will, therefore, mislead many readers.

Second, Wright’s association of *dikaiosynē* with God’s “covenant faithfulness” in 3.25 does not make sense given 3.25’s context. That God has ‘glossed over’ Israel’s past sins does not call God’s *faithfulness* into question; it calls God’s *justice* into question. It suggests God has violated the ethos of the Torah since he is guilty of favouritism and is prepared to pervert the course of justice (when it suits him). Contra Wright’s claim, then, God’s demonstration of his *dikaiosynē* should be seen as a demonstration of his justice rather than his faithfulness. The same point is brought out (in a different way) in 3.26. The text of 3.26 is predicated on two premises: i] God’s law condemns man as unrighteous^[adikos] and makes man a rightful object of God’s wrath;³² and ii] that same law condemns those who show favouritism and ‘join hands’ with the unrighteous^[adikos] because

²⁷p. 306.

²⁸pp. 300, 333. In his translation of Rom. 3.21-26, Wright renders *dikaiosynē* as “covenant justice” (p. 318), but, when it comes to 3.25’s exposition, Wright reduces its sense to “covenant *faithfulness*”.

²⁹p. 300.

³⁰classical, Hellenistic, and Jewish

³¹A. Deissmann, “*hilastērios* und *hilastērion*: Eine lexikalische Studie” in *ZNW*, Vol. 4 (1903), pp. 193-212; L. Morris, “The Use of *hilaskesthai* etc. in Biblical Greek” in *ET*, Vol. 62 (1951), pp. 227-233; R. Nicole, “C. H. Dodd and the Doctrine of Propitiation” in *WTJ*, Vol. 17 (1955), 1961 ed., pp. 117-157; etc. True—the debate still continues today, but now is not the time for a discussion of it. Suffice it to say, a strong case can be made for the standard view.

³²Rom. 1.18-3.20, particularly 1.18, 2.8, 3.5, 3.20.

YHWH is not the kind of God to declare the guilty righteous^[*dikaioō*].³³ The text of 3.26 therefore raises an important question, namely, How can God be just^[*dikaios*] and yet justify^[*dikaioō*] the unrighteous? The answer is stated explicitly in the text: by means of Jesus’ sacrifice. God has set Jesus forth as a *hilastērion*—a sacrifice to satisfy his wrath and justice. In 3.27, Paul is therefore able to turn his attention away from the issue of God’s wrath and man’s guilt (a theme developed throughout 1.18-3.20) and towards the issue of whether those who *have* been declared righteous are able to “boast” about it. As such, Paul’s flow of thought is clear and instructive, and does not cohere with Wright’s treatment of the terms *hilastērion* and *dikaiosynē*.³⁴ Of course, far more needs to be said about all these things, but, as mentioned above, in what remains of the present review I want to turn my attention to Wright’s treatment of the OT, since it is so foundational to many of TDRB’s arguments.

Throughout TDRB, Wright stresses the importance of the Passover as the backdrop to Christ’s death and resurrection—and rightly so. But consider, for a moment, the events of the night of the first Passover. YHWH’s destroyer passes through the land of Egypt and slays the firstborn of each household unless a lamb has been slain in its place; otherwise, just as the destroyer takes the lives of the Egyptians’ firstborn sons, so it will take the lives of the Israelites’ firstborn sons. From YHWH’s divine perspective, the Passover lamb serves as a substitute; its death is accepted instead of the firstborn’s death.³⁵ As such, the Passover narrative is predicated on the concept of *substitution*. It is also set against the backdrop of YHWH’s wrath. Contra the assertions of Wright (who says the context created by the Passover is unconnected with punishment³⁶), YHWH’s decision to slay each family’s firstborn son is an expression of his anger at, and judgment of, both Egypt’s sin³⁷ and Israel’s sin.³⁸ The death of each firstborn will afflict Israel’s households unless a lamb is first slaughtered and its blood applied to the

³³Exod. 23.1-7.

³⁴or, at least, it does not cohere with what Wright asserts in TDRB, though it seems consistent with Wright’s previously-published thoughts on the matter. In 2007, Wright wrote, “In [Rom.] 1.18-3.20,...God’s wrath is revealed against all ungodliness and wickedness, and, by the end of the passage, in accordance with the ‘justice’ of God, those who were formerly sinners and under God’s wrath are now justified freely by grace. ...Something has happened in the death of Jesus through which the wrath of God has been turned away” («www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/articles/the-cross-and-the-caricatures/» acc. 2017), which I would fully agree with.

³⁵Exod. 12.1-13.

³⁶p. 329.

³⁷Psa. 78.43-53.

³⁸First and foremost in YHWH’s mind is the sin of idolatry. In the aftermath of Canaan’s conquest, Joshua challenges Israel to turn away from the gods which they have carried out of Egypt with them (Josh. 24.14, 24.20-23), and YHWH himself says (via the prophet Ezekiel) of Israel’s sojourn in Egypt, “[Israel] rebelled against me. ...They did not cast away the detestable things [from before] their eyes, nor did they forsake the idols of Egypt, so I decided to pour out my wrath on them—to spend my anger

houses' doorframes. To put the point another way, either a lamb must die or the firstborn must die. The point is underscored in Exod. 13, where, as an illustration of the Passover's events, Moses tells the Israelites, "[From now on], you must redeem each firstborn of a donkey by means of [alt. at the cost of] a lamb, and, if you do not redeem [it], you must break its neck; and [so] each firstborn man among your sons you must redeem".³⁹ As per the events of Passover night, then, either a firstborn must die or a lamb must die.

Ironically, then, the events of the Passover encourage us to view Jesus' death in the very manner in which TDRB encourages us *not* to view it. As Wright repeatedly points out, Jesus frames his death against the backdrop of the Passover. Jesus thereby encourages us to view his death against the backdrop of a penal and substitutionary sacrifice. Just as YHWH once allowed a ram to take the place of a man on mount Moriah, so YHWH will allow a man to take the place of a lamb on Golgotha's hill. God's wrath will befall him so it will not befall his people. In the context of TDRB—a book in which Wright a] frequently criticises those who promote a given theory of atonement in isolation from the Biblical narrative,⁴⁰ and b] imbues certain OT allusions with a lot of theological freight—, Wright's failure to mention these substitutionary and penal aspects of the Passover story is a significant omission.

Before we move on to our next motif, it may be helpful for us to note a further aspect of Wright's treatment of the Passover. TDRB repeatedly says the Passover was not a 'festival of atonement', i.e., a festival intended to deal with sin.⁴¹ But the truth of the matter is not so straightforward. We have good reason to view Jesus' death in light of Ezekiel's eschatological temple,⁴² where the Passover *is*

on them in the midst of the land of Egypt" (Ezek. 20.8 cf. 20.34-36 where the language of "judgment" is explicitly employed).

³⁹Exod. 13.13-16. Here, as in Lev. 17.11, the relevant *bēt* prefix can plausibly be translated as 'at the cost of' (e.g., Exod. 32.29, Num. 16.38, Josh. 6.26, 1 Kgs. 2.23, 2 Kgs. 6.25, etc., as also in Ugar. lit.); that is to say, just as 'the blood atones at the cost of [the animal's] life' in Lev. 17.11 (*bannepeš*), so the firstborn of a donkey is redeemed at the cost of a lamb's life in Exod. 13.13 (*bēseh*). Both texts therefore illustrate—and are consistent with—the talionic principle of Lev. 24.17-18, namely "life for life". Either a life must be forfeit, or a life must be offered in its place.

⁴⁰e.g., pp. 169-173

⁴¹e.g., p. 332

⁴²especially in light of how the Gospel of John portrays Jesus. We cannot go into all of the Gospels' Ezekielic allusions here, but consider briefly how, like Ezekiel's climactic vision, the Gospels connect Jesus's death and resurrection with the inauguration of a new Jubilee cycle (40.1, 46.16-18), a new priesthood (44.15-25), and a new temple (namely Jesus himself: 43.18-27, 45.18-20), as well as how Jesus' ascension enables God to establish a permanent residence among his people (43.7, 44.2). Consider also how, like Ezekiel's priests, Jesus leaves the garments in which he has performed his ministry behind him (in the tomb: 42.14 cf. John 20.6-7), and how water flows forth from Jesus' side to heal and purify the nations (47.1-12 cf. John 7.37-39, 19.34) and allows multitudes of fish to be caught by Israel's fishermen (47.10-11 cf. John 21.6). John even alludes to the place names mentioned in Ezekiel's vision. Ezekiel

connected with atonement;⁴³ and a similar connection is present in Josephus as well as Rabbinic texts,⁴⁴ in which case it is not unlikely to have been viewed in such terms in Jesus' day.

The second OT motif which demands our attention is the exile. Throughout TDRB, Wright stresses how Jesus' death spelt the end of exile for Israel. But, like the Passover motif, the exile motif has important ramifications as far as the nature of Jesus' death and resurrection is concerned, which Wright fails to mention. In Scripture, the exile is portrayed as the outbreak of God's wrath against his people⁴⁵ (and the nations to whom Israel are handed over as the agents of God's wrath⁴⁶), and Jesus' death is portrayed in the very same terms. Consider, by way of illustration, some of the many parallels between how the prophets depict the exile and how the four evangelists portray Jesus' death. Jesus, the Son of Man, is given into the hands of the world's fourth beast.⁴⁷ He is bound and led out of Jerusalem in apparent humiliation.⁴⁸ He is mocked by his enemies.⁴⁹ As day breaks, he is cut off from his city.⁵⁰ And, as he is led away, he is accompanied by a multitude of grief-stricken women, who mourn what has befallen him.⁵¹ Naked and defenceless, Jesus is hung on a tree, where desolation overtakes him.⁵² His enemies gloat as they divide his inheritance by lot.⁵³ He is made to drink the wine of God's wrath;⁵⁴ he becomes parched as he does so;⁵⁵ and, deprived of his sight, he is rendered unable to see his tormentors.⁵⁶ Jesus' environment echoes

mentions two springs of water where fish are caught—*Gedi* and *Eglayim*—, which form a backdrop to John 20-21 since: a] *Eglayim* can be translated as 'two calves', which is the sacrifice required when a priesthood is inaugurated (Lev. 9.1-4); b] *Gedi* has the (gematrial) value 17; and c] *Eglayim* has the value 153, which is the 17th triangular number and is the number of fish caught by Jesus' disciples after the resurrection.

⁴³In Ezekiel's eschatological temple, at the time of the Passover, the "prince" offers a "sin offering" on behalf of both himself and the people (Ezek. 45.21-22), which, of course, is a central component of atonement rituals, most notably Yom Kippur's (Lev. 16.15-16).

⁴⁴The blood of the lamb is said by Josephus to purify (*hagnizō*) the Israelites' houses (*Ant.* 2.312), and later Rabbinic literature compares the doorposts of the houses to "altars" (*Mech.* 12.7).

⁴⁵Lev. 26.28-33, Deut. 29.22-28, Isa. 5.24-30 (cf. 5.1-14), Jer. 4.3-9 (cf. 4.23-26), 7.16-34, 25.15-18, 32.16-37, 44.1-10, Ezek. 5.1-17, 7.1-27, 36.16-21, etc.

⁴⁶Ezra 9.7, Psa. 106.40-41, Isa. 10.5-6, 47.5-6, Jer. 51.20-26, Ezek. 31.11, Zech. 1.12-21, Matt. 21.41, 22.6-7.

⁴⁷Dan 7.25, Mark 14.41.

⁴⁸cf. how Israel are 'cast out' of their vineyard into outer darkness (Matt. 8.12, 21.39 cf. Isa. 5.5-16, Isa. Targ. 5.1-7)

⁴⁹Psa. 44.10-17, Lam. 1.7, Hab. 1.6-11, Matt. 27.39-44.

⁵⁰Hos. 10.15 ("At dawn, the king of Israel will be completely cut off"), Matt. 27.1 cf. Luke 23.28-30's citation of Hos. 10.8.

⁵¹Isa. 29.2, 32.9-14, Jer. 6.26, 9.17-21, Lam. 2.5, 2.18, Luke 23.27.

⁵²cf. how Israel is 'laid bare' and 'exposed' to the nations (Isa. 5.5, Hos. 2.1-3)

⁵³Nah. 3.10, Obad. 1.11-12.

⁵⁴Jer. 25.15-18, Mark 14.35-36.

⁵⁵Deut. 28.48, Isa. 5.13, Jer. 23.10, Ezek. 37.11, Hos. 2.3, 13.15, John 19.26.

⁵⁶Deut. 28.28, Isa. 29.9-10, Jer. 52.11, Lam. 4.13-14, Mark 14.65.

his grief, as Israel's did in the days of her exile. The earth quakes;⁵⁷ and, in the middle of the day, darkness falls as Jesus is left to grope in the dark.⁵⁸

The implication of the aforementioned parallels is unmistakable: the wrath outpoured on Israel as they are sent into exile is outpoured on Jesus on the cross in Israel's place. The dark clouds on Jerusalem's horizon (foreseen by Jesus in the Olivet discourse) gather around him as YHWH 'makes men more scarce than gold' in Jerusalem—originally an reference to widespread destruction, but one which can equally well be read as a reference to 'a time when YHWH makes a man more *precious* than gold',⁵⁹ i.e., when the one valued at thirty shekels of silver by Jerusalem's priesthood is accepted by YHWH as a ransom for many. The one who stood next to YHWH stands between Rome and Jerusalem's inhabitants to allow them to scatter before it is destroyed. The sword properly reserved for Israel's worthless shepherds is awakened against the good shepherd⁶⁰ as men shake their heads at what has become of him and the extent of his fall.⁶¹ Caiaphas's words are thereby fulfilled: the Romans do to Jesus what they should have done to the nation of Israel⁶² as Jesus is led away into exile.

The final OT motif we will consider is the day of Atonement. As I have mentioned above, Wright is happy to connect Christ's death with the Yom Kippur rites, yet is not so happy to connect the concept of atonement with punishment. "Animals", he says, "...[were] not punished in the place of the people", and the day of Atonement was not "about punishment".⁶³ But, as before, a more detailed consideration of the relevant OT backdrop reveals an extra dimension to the story. Consider the *effect* of atonement. When a sin cannot be atoned for by the Levitical system, its perpetrator is forced to 'bear his own guilt'; that is to say, he is forced to suffer the divinely-ordained consequences of his own actions.⁶⁴ By way of contrast, when sin *is* atoned for, YHWH's wrath is 'spent' or 'satisfied' in some way. The essence of atonement is, therefore, to stay YHWH's wrath, as is repeatedly borne out in the Pentateuch's narrative.

Consider, for instance, the aftermath of Korah's rebellion. When the Israelites follow Korah's sinful example, YHWH sends a plague against them, which spreads

⁵⁷Isa. 5.25, 13.13, Jer. 4.24, 8.16, Joel 2.10-11, Amos 8.7-10, Matt. 27.51.

⁵⁸Deut. 28.29-30, Amos 8.9, Mark 15.33-34.

⁵⁹Isa. 13.9-13, Mark 13.24-26.

⁶⁰Zech. 11.17, 13.7 cf. Mark 14.27, Luke 21.20-24.

⁶¹Jer. 18.16, 48.27, Lam. 2.15, Matt. 27.39.

⁶²John 11.50-52.

⁶³p. 329.

⁶⁴Lev. 5.1.

through the congregation like a fire through a cornfield. Aaron (the high priest) runs into the midst of the assembly and offers incense as an atonement for the people's sin, and the plague (a manifestation of YHWH's anger,⁶⁵ as we previously noted) is hence assuaged. At the end of the narrative, the figure of Aaron is portrayed as a barrier between YHWH and the Israelites, with those before him slain and those behind him spared. Aaron's person and position as high priest marks the boundary-line between life and death—between the realm where YHWH's anger is given free reign and the realm where YHWH's anger is restrained.⁶⁶ The same point is brought out in the next chapter, where YHWH's wrath again breaks forth against the people. As the people approach the Tabernacle, they begin to perish, and cry out, "Must everyone who comes near...to the Tabernacle...die? Are we to perish completely?"⁶⁷ In response, YHWH establishes Aaron's recently-demonstrated role as a restrainer of YHWH's anger as a permanent office. Aaron's house is to "attend to the duties of the sanctuary and altar, so there may never again be wrath on the people of Israel".⁶⁸

Also relevant to the concept of atonement is the image of fire. YHWH's revelation of himself at mount Sinai is depicted primarily in terms of fire (enshrouded in clouds),⁶⁹ and fire comes forth from YHWH's presence to consume^[?KLL] Nadab and Abihu when they approach him (in an unauthorised manner). The same fire then consumes^[?KLL] the priests' sacrifices on their day of ordination,⁷⁰ which is instructive. The Levitical sacrifices are propitiatory in nature. YHWH is a fire, the nature of which is to consume^[?KLL],⁷¹ and the purpose of the Levites' ministry is to shield Israel from its dangers, which is precisely why the day of Atonement's regulations are set against the backdrop of Nadab and Abihu's deaths.⁷²

To say the Yom Kippur ritual has 'nothing to do with punishment' is, therefore, quite mistaken. True—the *word* 'punishment' does not occur in the text. But then why should it? The whole point of the Yom Kippur ritual is to *prevent* the outbreak of YHWH's wrath against his people. 'Punishment' is not mentioned in the Yom Kippur ritual precisely because it is averted by means of the ritual. To

⁶⁵Num. 11.33, 16.46-50.

⁶⁶Lev. 5.1, Num. 16.42-50.

⁶⁷which we can compare to the Egyptians' dismayed exclamation in the aftermath of the Passover, namely, "We will all be dead!" (Exod. 12.33)

⁶⁸Num. 17.12-13, 18.1-5.

⁶⁹Exod. 19.18, 24.17, 40.38.

⁷⁰Lev. 9.24.

⁷¹Exod. 24.17, Deut. 4.24, both of which passages are associated with wrath in Num. 11.1.

⁷²Lev. 10.1-2, 16.1 (cf. 9.24). For a non-cultic incident where YHWH 'consumes' those who have sinned by means of fire, see the death of Korah and his followers (Num. 16.35).

ground a claim in the absence of the word ‘punishment’ is, therefore, to miss the whole point of the Levitical system.

Suppose, by way of illustration, I write a cookbook about the dangers of obesity and how it can be prevented by means of a sugar-free diet.⁷³ At the start of the book, I recount a number of examples of how a sugar-rich diet has led to obesity and related problems in people’s lives. A sugar-free diet, I claim, is absolutely vital. Afterwards, I provide fifty recipes for sugar-free meals, and encourage my readers to make use of them. Now, suppose someone picks up my book and asks in a surprised tone of voice, ‘Didn’t you say this book was about the dangers of obesity and sugar consumption? That’s not true at all. I’ve read every one of this author’s recipes, and not one of them discusses the possibility of obesity! They don’t even *mention* ‘sugar’!’. What would you say to such a person? You would (presumably) tell them they have missed the whole point of my recipes. Why? Because they have completely overlooked their *context*. The same oversight lies behind Wright’s analysis of the Levitical sacrifices. Just as the purpose of my cookbook is to prevent obesity, so the context of the Levitical sacrifices is to prevent wrath, i.e., to enable (by means of atonement) a holy God to dwell in the midst of his sinful people without the manifestation of his wrath against them. The Levitical rites do not omit to mention ‘wrath’ because they are unrelated to it; they omit to mention ‘wrath’ because their purpose is to *prevent* it.

So, is it true to think of a sacrificed animal as ‘punished in place of the people’? In a word, Yes. Consider the situation outlined in Lev. 16’s description of the Yom Kippur rites: the people of Israel have sinned; if left unatoned, those sins will result in death and exile; two goats are chosen out from Israel’s herd, one of which is slain and the other of which is (figuratively) sent into exile; and, as a result of these things, the Israelites are *not* slain and are *not* sent into exile. The scapegoat bears^[NŚ?] Israel’s iniquity^[‘āwōn] so Israel need not ‘bear her own iniquity’;⁷⁴ it is cut off from YHWH’s presence so Israel might remain in YHWH’s presence. Lev. 17.11 underscores the point: when the blood of a sacrifice atones for sin, the animal’s life is said to be accepted in place of the offerer’s life.⁷⁵ Like the Passover, then, the Yom Kippur rites are predicated on the concept of penal substitutionary atonement. Whether we translate *hilastērion* as ‘place of mercy’ or ‘propitiatory sacrifice’ in Rom. 3.25 is not, therefore, what is important; what

⁷³an illustration utilised by Larry Tomczak in a different context

⁷⁴Lev. 16.21-22 contra 5.1, 5.17, 7.18 (as also Exod. 28.38 contra Exod. 28.43).

⁷⁵Rashi notes the one-to-one correspondence between the animal and the worshipper: “one soul”, he says, “is to come and atone for another soul” (תבוא נפש ותכפר על הנפש).

is important for us to appreciate is the full significance of Paul's allusion to the Yom Kippur ritual and the full scope of what it entails.

Before we conclude, a final remark about the aforementioned OT motifs may be in order. Suppose the premises of Wright's 'shell game' are correct; that is to say, suppose the Passover does not in fact involve substitutionary atonement and the day of Atonement does not involve divine wrath. What follows? Very little as far as I can see, since the way to understand the cross is not to seek out a common denominator between its OT foreshadows and then to shrink our view of the cross to fit it. As Wright acknowledges,⁷⁶ the cross marks the climax and culmination of *all* of the OT's many shadows—the convergence of multiple strands of OT thought in a single awesome moment.⁷⁷ Whether every aspect of penal substitutionary atonement can be found in a single OT backdrop to Jesus' sacrifice is, therefore, irrelevant. To borrow some terminology from set theory, Jesus' sacrifice should not be viewed in light of the *intersection* of its OT backdrops, but in light of their *union*. Indeed, the NT actively encourages us to view Jesus' sacrifice in such a manner.

Consider, by way of illustration, how the NT encourages us to view Jesus' final visit to Jerusalem as a confluence of both the Passover and the Yom Kippur rites. The Hebrew calendar has an inherent symmetry to it. On the 10th day of the 1st month, each house is to take a Passover lamb in preparation to celebrate the Passover feast (on the 15th day); in the same way, on the 10th day of the 7th month (Yom Kippur), each man in Israel is to 'humble himself' in preparation to enjoy the feast of Tabernacles.⁷⁸ Since the religious year begins in Nisan while the 'civil year' begins in Tishri, both Nisan (the 1st month) and Tishri (the 7th month) can be seen as the 'head of a year', which is why in Israel today the 1st day of the 7th month is known as *Rosh Hashanah*. Israel's 'dual calendar year' is significant. Why? Because, in Jesus, God's anointed priest and king, Israel's two calendar years become one. Jesus belongs to the order of Melchizedek. In him, the religious and civil years coincide. As such, the Passover and Yom Kippur rites converge on the cross.

The same point is hinted at in Ezekiel's vision of the eschatological temple. When the temple is inaugurated, the Prince cleanses it and provides a bull as a sacrifice "for himself and for all the people of the land".⁷⁹ Hence, at the time of the

⁷⁶pp. 328, 332.

⁷⁷Luke 24.25-27, 2 Cor. 1.20, Col. 2.17.

⁷⁸Exod. 12.3, Lev. 23.27.

⁷⁹Ezek. 45.18-20 cf. Lev. 16.3, 16.5-6, 16.11, 16.15+.

Passover, Yom Kippur's activities are performed: the Temple is purified by means of a sacrifice of atonement. These same activities are performed by Jesus, the Prince of Peace, at the climax of the Gospel narratives: at the time of the Passover, Jesus purges Jerusalem's temple, later offers up his life up as a sacrifice of atonement, and, by means of his earthly sacrifice, purifies YHWH's heavenly temple.⁸⁰ Again, then, the Passover and Yom Kippur rites are brought together, as they are by John the Baptist when he refers to Jesus as "the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world".⁸¹ Jesus is both a sacrifice (a Passover lamb) and a scapegoat (who carries Israel's sin away).

In sum, then, Wright's shell game does not work. It also strikes me as methodologically flawed.⁸² Consider, by way of analogy, how words function in sentences. The sense of a word is determined not by its etymology, but by its *usage*. The word 'nice', for instance, derives from the Latin *nescius* ('ignorant'). But to refer to someone today as 'nice' is not to charge them with 'ignorance' in any way (as even the most cursory consideration of how the word 'nice' is employed will soon reveal). The historical etymology of the word 'nice' is irrelevant to its semantic field.

The question therefore arises, Wouldn't it make sense to apply a similar approach to our interpretation of the NT's employment of images and allusions? That is to say, wouldn't it make sense to determine the significance of an image employed in the NT on the basis of its NT context rather than to restrict its sense to its original OT sense? If Paul alludes to Yom Kippur in Rom. 3.25—and if God's wrath at man's sin is even *part* of the backdrop to Rom. 3.21-26—, then don't we *ipso facto* have a good reason to view the Yom Kippur ritual in light of divine wrath, i.e., in light of the backdrop against which Paul frames it? It would seem so. Wright, however, seems to want to determine what Yom Kippur imagery *cannot* have in mind (on the basis of OT exegesis) and then to infer what Paul *cannot* have in mind when he employs it, which does not seem right from a methodological standpoint. The exegete of Scripture must allow a certain amount of two-way interaction between the Old and New testaments to take place, which Wright does not do.

⁸⁰Heb. 9.11-26.

⁸¹In Syr. translations of the OT and NT, the same verb is applied to the scapegoat in Lev. 16.22 and Jesus in John 1.29, namely «ŠQL».

⁸²as has been noted by another reviewer of TDRB here:
«www.australia.thegospelcoalition.org/article/n-t-wright-vs-straw-men-a-review-of-the-day-the-revolution-began»

Final thoughts

As I said at the outset of the present review, TDRB is a poorly-argued and irresponsibly-written book. It has the potential to mislead and confuse its readers, and I would not encourage anyone I know to read it. Its portrayal of the evangelical world is inaccurate; its treatment of important terms (such as *hilastērion*) is contextually flawed and fails to acknowledge the warrant for standard treatment of these terms; and its application of the OT systematically avoids those aspects of its narrative which do not fit Wright's theology. Jesus' sacrifice on the cross is the focal point, centre-point, and highlight of history. It simultaneously displays the righteousness and holiness of our God, the awfulness and ugliness of our sin, and the obedience and humility of our Lord. It displays God's anger at man's sin and God's delight in his Son's righteousness. It demonstrates the force and justice of God's wrath, which cannot merely be forgotten about but must be spent and satisfied. It demonstrates the power and sovereignty of God's love, which has been prepared to meet the demands of God's uncompromised justice. It draws every thread of Scripture together in a single awesome moment, glorifies and exalts the triune God, and humbles God's blood-bought people. These are the aspects of Jesus' sacrifice which should occupy our attention and should draw forth our praise as we contemplate the wonder of what God has done in and through Christ; yet, sadly, I find such truths to be compromised rather than adored in TDRB. We will not stand in awe of God's love until we reckon with the justice of his wrath against us and how it was endured by his beloved Son in a transaction of immeasurable gravity. And, once we do truly comprehend these wonders, our lives and ministries will be forever transformed. As Wright says, the message of the cross should "[catch us up] in the rhythm of worship and mission".⁸³ But Wright's (entirely commendable) objective will not be accomplished by the denial of Scripturally-taught truths; it will come to pass only as we appreciate each and every aspect of the wonder of the cross and allow them to radically reshape our lives.

⁸³p. 363.