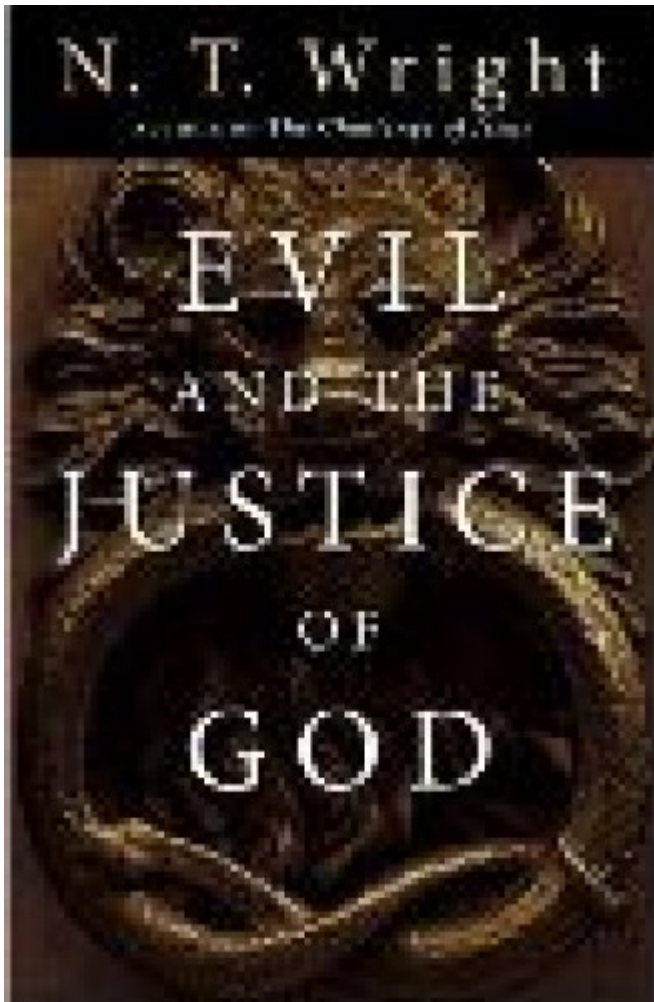


# God's justice

By [Samuel Wells](#) in the [August 21, 2007](#) issue

## In Review



## Evil and the Justice of God

N. T. Wright  
InterVarsity

Woody Allen famously pointed out that the problem is not that God doesn't exist, but that he is an underachiever. The philosophical tendency for at least the past three

centuries has been to assume that the human estimation of God is more significant than the divine estimation of humanity. And “evil” names the extent to which, in human estimation, God’s purposes have invariably been found wanting.

In a lucid treatment of this perennial conundrum, N. T. Wright argues that pondering the “problem of evil” is an activity that displaces us from the business of implementing the healing, restorative justice of God. The problem of evil is philosophically located in theoretical analysis of an inherently distant God—that is, the deist God of the Enlightenment. By contrast, Wright engages with the scriptural God, revealed through narrative rather than theory and addressed through lament, obedience, discipleship and faith rather than through dispassionate analysis—in short, the God of Jesus Christ. Christ’s death and resurrection, the promise and embodiment of forgiveness, and the hope of God’s final victory make the people of God a people who bring into the present a reconciliation that is assured in the future.

Wright is characteristically strong in diagnosing the contemporary public imagination. He exposes the tendency to ignore evil (often through acquiescing to a process believed to be part of progress) and to be surprised by its appearance. He names the recklessness of contemporary responses to evil, many of which resort to an “us = good; them = bad” dualism, particularly favored at the current White House. He says that evil cannot be eliminated with high explosives.

In his treatment of the Old Testament, Wright is magisterial. He notes how Genesis 1-11 provides a template for all that follows. Rebellion is found in Genesis 3, wickedness in Genesis 6 and arrogance in Genesis 11. The exile of Adam and Eve and the turmoil of Babel coalesce in the captivity in Babylon. Likewise, David, the ultimate king, symbolizes Israel in both his devotion and his infidelity. Wright marches peerlessly through Isaiah, Daniel and Job, and this exegesis is the highlight of the book.

Turning to the New Testament, Wright imaginatively seeks to unite traditional atonement theories with the question of evil. Here emerges one of the book’s great merits: its facility in demonstrating the political dimensions of the Christian faith at precisely the points where many have chosen to keep it personal and private. Again his writing is thrilling when he harmonizes Old and New Testament exegesis: the resurrection is God’s act of new creation after judgment had fallen on the old—like the call of Abraham after Babel, or the dove bringing back the olive branch after the

40 days of rain. More successfully than I have seen him do before, Wright shows how the kingdom of God is not just a matter of going to heaven when you die or of reordering present reality, but the establishment of a new people and a new creation to serve God and reign on earth. Romans 8 is the eschatological centerpiece of this argument, for “drawing down” God’s final purpose to redeem a people and set them in authority over the world “leaves God, so to speak, in the clear.”

Wright’s concluding chapter is an impressive paean to what might be called the politics of forgiveness. “The power of forgiveness is precisely that it enables both God and God’s people to avoid the imposition of other people’s evil.” This seems to me exactly right. Forgiveness is about power—it not only sets free the sinner from the burden of guilt but also sets free victims from being forever defined by what has hurt them. The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission emerges as the emblem of a broad political and social program that embraces restorative justice and the release of international debt, and crystallizes—as Wright expresses in his characteristically dazzling fashion—in the discovery that forgiveness is fundamentally the end of exile. My only disappointment here (and throughout) is that despite the fact that both Wright and Desmond Tutu are bishops, Wright has little explicitly to say about the role of the church.

By the end of the book’s scriptural sections, one thing is evident: the question of evil is the wrong question. Wright has written a marvelous book, but he has not given an answer to the question at hand. Wright’s masterly exegetical treatment now gives way to a somewhat less steady philosophical presentation. Only three quarters of the way through do we get some kind of definition of evil—and it is a broadly Augustinian one. Evil is a black hole, a missing rung in the ladder, or a hole in the road, epitomized by a nonhuman and nondivine quasipersonal force called “the satan,” which entices people to death through the means of sin. Sin is essentially misplaced worship. The heat of the debate is over by the time we get to the identification of the question.

And this is what makes this volume a book with countless brilliant things in it rather than a brilliant book. It offers a convincing and inspiring portrayal of how God addresses and overcomes sin and enables God’s people to embody forgiveness. If the book were called *Sin and the Justice of God*, it would answer the question it asks. But it never fully explores the relationship between sin and evil. It begins and ends with the scriptural picture of the sea, the realm of chaos that is absent from the final vision of the new heaven and the new earth. But is chaos the same as evil? Is evil

simply sin, wrong and bad in a loud voice?

Wright dedicated this book to the victims of 9/11, the South Asian tsunami, Hurricane Katrina and the 2005 Kashmir earthquake. It seems to me that it has a lot to say about 9/11, because 9/11 involved a colossal series of acts of sin culminating in the heartless and public murder of relatively random and thus faceless human beings. This is sin so malevolent it seems almost to be a disease, sin pursued in the minds of the perpetrators as a perverse notion of good—and thus something one may well want to call evil. We can address it only by breaking it down into individual actions of sin that can individually be named, faced and forgiven—a painfully difficult task when the sinners and immediate victims are all dead. Ghastly as the genocides of Armenia, Auschwitz and Kigali are, virulent as the disease of evil was in each case, the same logic essentially applies to them as to 9/11.

But the tsunami, Katrina and the Kashmir earthquake seem to be in a different category—a category Wright doesn't address. While not without their human elements—poor construction, unheeded warnings, human-induced climate change and so on—these disasters were the result of essentially impersonal forces with powerful human consequences. After all, the quintessential item of evidence in the classic case against God is the 1755 Lisbon earthquake; it was a moment of irrational evil at the height of the Enlightenment pursuit of rational good.

If the theologian can never say “nature” but can only say “creation,” then the theologian (even in philosophical mode) can never say “natural evil” but only “created evil.” As long as sin remains personal and as long as evil is an extension of sin, then the satan can be overcome and God reunited with God's people. But what about impersonal evil, moments when the satan never got involved and sin doesn't apply, when the finger of justice seems to point to God and nowhere else? This leaves us with a problem neither Wright nor the scripture he explores so compellingly seems to solve.