

Book Review

The God I Don't Understand: Reflections on Tough Questions of Faith

Christopher J. H. Wright

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Christopher Wright presents a careful and scholarly exposition of the biblical texts in their ancient Near Eastern context while at the same time bringing a heart for the mission of God to that exposition—confronting biblical problems with “a combination of honesty and humility,” as John R. W. Stott notes on the dust jacket.

Wright's major contribution focuses on the area of ethics and relating the Old Testament to the lives of Christians today. *The God I Don't Understand* is a byproduct of that theological journey. He addresses major areas of faith where difficult questions arise, describes how he deals with those questions, then reassures the reader that though his love for and trust in God has only grown deeper through the years he still struggles to understand some things about God.

His four-part book addresses the big issues of: (1) evil and suffering; (2) killing authorized by God in the Old Testament, specifically the conquest of the Canaanites; 3) the work of God through the cross of Christ—how one man's death changed everything for mankind; and 4) what the Bible clearly teaches about the end of the world.

Wright first clarifies each issue then presents a few basic points on each to provide clarity. He successfully avoids endless details and

philosophical arguments. On evil, Wright draws one of his interesting and carefully thought out conclusions, “Evil does **not** make sense”—it is a mystery (42). He also concludes that “the Bible allows us to lament, protest, and be angry at the offensiveness of evil” (55). God has ultimately promised that one day His Kingdom will be fully in place through Christ, and “we will have been delivered from all evil forever” (71). These significant samples illustrate the insightful and beneficial reading Wright provides on this issue.

On the second issue, the killing of the Canaanites in the Old Testament, Wright discredits three common explanations which denigrate the Old Testament as mistaken and sub-Christian. In summary, he calls for understanding the context within the overall plan of God and seeing the executions as God's just punishment of wickedness. In dealing with these issues, he clarifies the definition of key terms; rather than accepting the accusations of critics who accuse Israel of committing “oppression,” “genocide,” or “ethnic cleansing,” he shows that the biblical accounts of the killings do not fit those terms as defined today. In the end, Wright says the key is to read these narratives in the light of the cross (107).

The understanding of the cross, the third issue, focuses on the concept of substitution and explains it in balanced, clear terms. Wright shows that what happened to Christ for the salvation of humanity is a matter of several “both/and” statements in answer to the “either/or” questions people pose. The work of Christ on the cross involved *both* God’s anger *and* His love, *both* shame *and* guilt, *both* human wickedness *and* God’s judgment.

Wright’s final topic, the end of the world, contains various controversial sub-topics. He puts the millennium, the rapture, and the role for the land of Israel into perspective without rejecting them. He helps Christians focus on what is clear and certain in the Scriptures and how this knowledge should impact daily life. On the new creation, he believes the new is not totally different from the old in the sense of being a spiritual or heavenly replacement for the created order of earth (195).

The God I Don’t Understand helps the reader realize that the Scriptures often do not provide explanations for *how* things

happened in the past or will happen in the future. Scripture rarely provides an explanation for *why* things happen; nevertheless, Christians can trust the Word of God, knowing that these things *are certain* and that God does what is best for His children. In his conclusion, Wright points the reader to Psalm 73, where the presence of God makes all the difference for the psalmist in dealing with the troubling questions. Finally, he challenges believers with a very practical application: “All our behavior **now** must be governed by the standards of the new creation” (220). Eternal truths should affect our temporal choices.

Wright’s book creates a sense of hope and joy in knowing the God of the Bible. This book is both helpful and inspiring in its exposition of the Scriptures concerning these very important and troubling issues. It is well-written, down to earth, and easily understood by those who are not academic theologians. I highly recommend it to everyone who has an interest in dealing with the difficult issues of understanding the God of the Bible.