



A VISUAL GUIDE TO
N.T. WRIGHT

THE MARRIAGE OF HEAVEN AND EARTH

*50 PICTURES TO EXPLAIN
THE ROCKSTAR THEOLOGIAN
OF OUR DAY*

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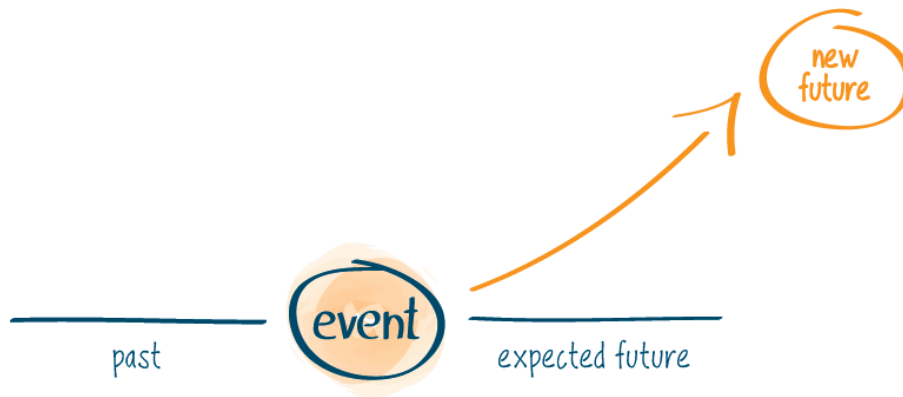
Sample Chapter – The Marriage of Heaven and Earth

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The event in Jesus

1) How we misunderstood the Gospel

What is news?



How news works: life cruises along, then something happens. That changes the direction of life.

When we open a book of Tom's we usually encounter steep claims. "We have not understood the Gospel," is as bold as one can claim. Isn't the Good News the basis and center of our faith? And we haven't understood it – how?

"In many churches," writes Tom in *Simply Good News*¹, "the good news has subtly changed into good advice: 'here's how to live, they say. Here's how to pray... Here's how to make sure you're on the right track for what happens after death... you won't go to hell; you'll go to heaven. Here's how to do it.' That is advice, not news.

News is about events that changes the course of things. For example, a friend has a serious medical condition. After a visit to the doctor, he brims with joy since the latest findings declare him healthy. Something happened (healing confirmed by the doctor's information) that changes the trajectory of life (not sickness, but health and therefore new perspectives).

In ancient times, a gospel was a public announcement of change of rulership. The good news that whatchamacallit become emperor – hence life will be better now. A public statement about something that has happened.

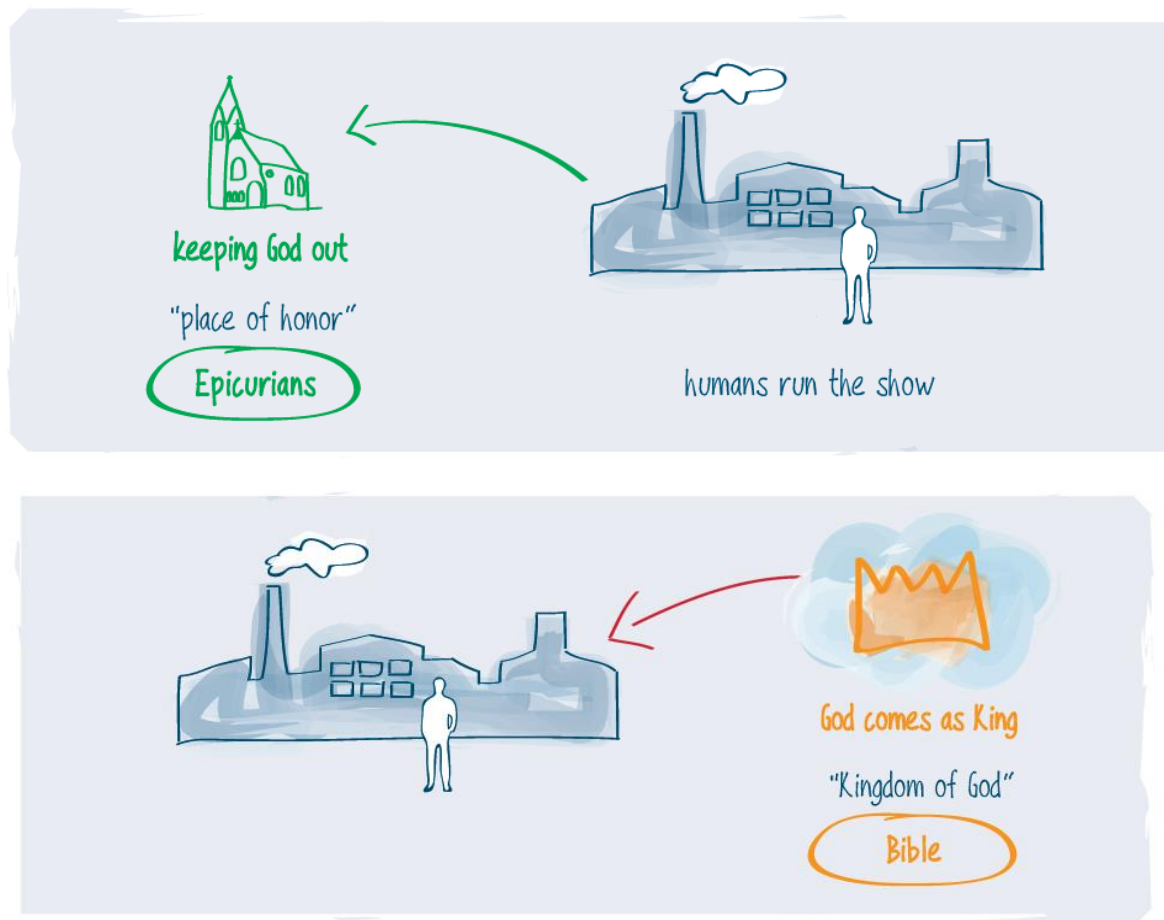
And if we look at churches up and down the road – we see this shortened Gospel. The preaching offers spiritual options to people. How life with God beats life without him. How we can avoid hell. How to live in this or that area.

¹ NT Wright – *Simply Good News: Why the Gospel is News and What Makes it Good*. Page 4

The event of Jesus and his resurrection - that was news to the first believers. It changed the fate of Israel. Everything was different all of a sudden. It changed the fate of the world. It changed the fate of individuals. Something was radically different. God was in charge. And Caesar was not. That statement spread into all the world – a public faith that changed the Mediterranean countries like nothing before.

2) From Personal to Private Religion

Worldviews in tension



The tension how we see the world. Our society loves to run the show and keep God out of the picture. It may give church a place of honor, but clear separation of state and church. Jesus had a different idea – he came as king.

These days, I get sick if people tell me: "Faith is fine, as long as it helps you". As if Jesus were some sort of coping trick for a burdened life. The idea behind that sort of statement can easily be tracked: there are many religions – who know which one is right? Why press religion on anybody – just let us all be tolerant and each has its way?

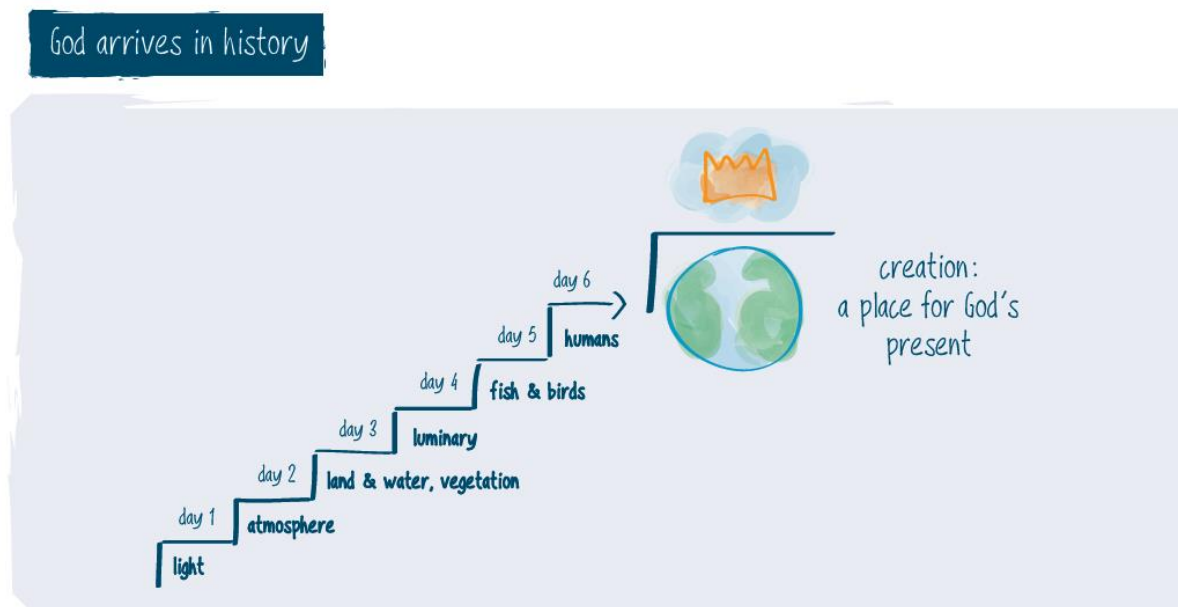
Well, fair – we should respect our preferences and not push each other into our opinion. I am all with that. This fits the modern worldview of inner discovery and no absolutes. Maybe, that is why Jesus as an option is easier to swallow than the event of Jesus.

The church has bought into this. From a religion of the heart, we moved to a religion of “minding your own business”. Personal religion became private religion. God may have a place of honor in society – with churches and a few references here and there. But for all practical purposes, God is uninvited to our modern life and humans are left to run the show.

We are not the first ones with this idea. The ancient Greeks came up with the idea of a “split” between heaven and earth. Epicur, a philosopher, lived about 350 years before Christ and got annoyed with all the God-stuff looming over life. His innovation: why don’t we let the God’s deal with heaven, while humans rule the earth. Tom calls this “kicking God upstairs”- (“God lives at the top of the building, and we live at the bottom; the stairs have been destroyed, and the elevators stopped working a long time ago”²) In the 18th century, people plugged into the idea again with Enlightenment and the theory of evolution. God lives upstairs, cares for “spiritual” things – while things down here are best left to figuring out natural laws and not bothering with superstition or any kind of fanatic mingling.

The Bible claims that in Jesus, God became King. He has started to take charge. The event of Jesus means that we have a new boss in town. *“A new state of affairs has been brought into existence. A door has been opened that nobody can shut. Jesus is now the world’s rightful Lord, and all other lords are to fall at his feet.”*³

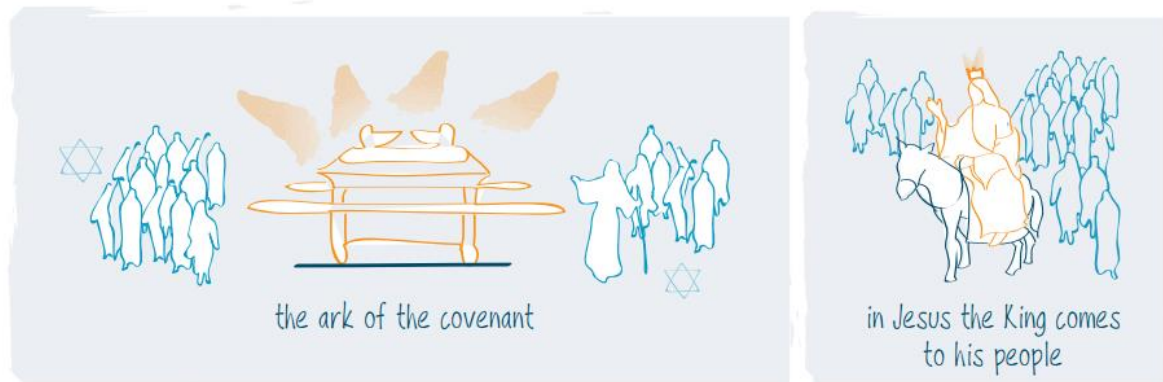
3) God arrived in history



Immanuel – God is with us. It was there in creation – as God dwelt amongst people. It was there in the ark of the covenant. And it was the claim of Jesus: God came to dwell amongst his people.

² NT Wright – Surprised by Scripture: Engaging Contemporary Issues. Page 6

³ NT Wright – How God became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels. Page 34-36



Let's look at another motive running through the Bible: God's presence. We see his presence in creation, then later in the Exodus, the Ark, and in the Temple. Tom talks about the creation story with this motive:

The original creation story envisages a God who was making a dwelling place for himself. The six "days", or "stages" of creation indicate, to those who understand the world of the ancient Near East, that creation itself, heaven and earth together, is a kind of temple, a dwelling place for God.⁴

God living with his people. His presence with the people – this is the shalom the Bible talks about. The Bible ends in Rev 22-23 on this note. "Immanuel" was bringing this perspective into human history.

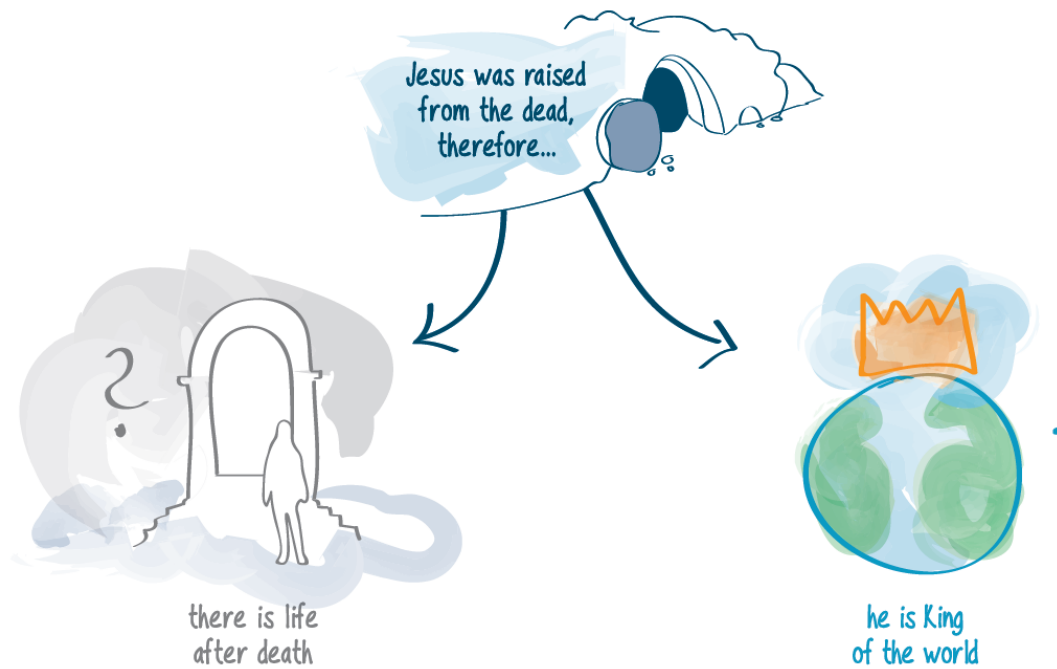
In the very earliest Christian documents all pointed to a strange new reality: that, in Jesus, Israel's God had become present, had become human, had come to live in the midst of his people, to set up his kingdom, to take upon himself the full horror of their plight, and to bring about his long-awaited new world.⁵

This shows the turning point of history. From the moment of Jesus, everything is different. God dwelt with his people. The story changed. History runs in a different direction. The presence of God comes as more than an inner fuzzy feeling, or individual highlight. God with his people – the day of the lord has arrived. A new morning. The spirit dwelling with communities. This really changes everything.

⁴ NT Wright – How God became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels. Page 87

⁵ NT Wright – How God became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels. Page 94

4) Easter speaks about this world



Which message did Easter send? Jesus raised, therefore we have life after death. Or: Jesus raised, therefore he is Lord of the world.

Each Easter millions of Christians celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. We celebrate the “new day”. There is always a sense of completion with that moment. Tom makes an interesting observation on the reactions to the Easter event in the first century:

Despite a thousand Easter hymns and a million Easter sermons, the resurrection narratives in the gospels never, ever says anything like “Jesus is raised, therefore there is life after death,” let alone, “Jesus is raised, therefore we shall go to heaven when we die.”... No. Insofar as the event is interpreted, Easter has a very this-worldly, present-age meaning: Jesus is raised, so he is the Messiah, the world’s true Lord; Jesus is raised, so God’s new creation has begun – and we, his followers, have a job to do! Jesus is raised, so we must act as his heralds, announcing his lordship to the entire world, making his kingdom come on earth as in heaven!⁶

The resurrection of Jesus was news, if there ever was news. It happened. And that statement and fact triggered all sorts of consequences. It meant not least that God was finally acting on his promises.

Let us recall the story structure of the Bible. We live in the 5th act of the Bible’s story, the age of the church, and we are invited to play an active role in the story. As with any real play, we can improvise and shape the story. To live our part faithful and true to God’s overall style and goal, we need to understand the early scenes well. “The biblical text is the primary authoritative source (“actors” should respect its plot-line, character development, and so on), but they must move beyond it if they are

⁶ NT Wright – Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church. Page 56

going to be faithful to it.”⁷ And then our actions drive the story towards the final scenes. We truly have a mission. God is on the move. And he has invited us to join.

⁷ How Can The Bible Be Authoritative? The Laing Lecture 1989, and the Griffith Thomas Lecture 1989. Originally published in *Vox Evangelica*, 1991, 21, 7–32. http://ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Bible_Authoritative.htm