

## READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

# *How God Became King*

by

N. T. Wright

### CHAPTER 1:

#### THE MISSING MIDDLE

1. Before picking up this book, what would you have said the gospels were all about? What would you have said about *why* they were written?
2. N. T. Wright believes that the great creeds, such as the Apostles Creed and Nicene Creed, skip over the “missing middle” of Jesus’s life, instead jumping from his birth to his suffering, death, and resurrection. “Would it have made any difference if, as the virgin-born son of God, he had been plucked from total obscurity and crucified, dying for our sins, without any of [his life] happening?” (p. 4). Were the gospel writers “wasting

- time” telling us about what Jesus did and said between his birth and death? Why or why not?
3. “The gospels were all about God becoming king, but the creeds are focused on Jesus being God” (p. 20). According to Wright, the canonical gospels seem, at first sight, to present a different Jesus than the historical creeds. Do you agree with Wright’s assessment? Why does this distinction matter?
  4. In this chapter, Wright notes that not only have we misread the gospels but we haven’t really read them at all (p. 10). “Western churchgoers treat the gospels as the optional chips and dip at the start of the evening. . . . Only after that do we sit down at table for the red meat of Pauline theology” (p. 21). What are your thoughts about this? Have you heard sermons or Bible teachings skew more toward the early church’s reflection from Paul’s letters rather than focus on Jesus’s teaching?

## CHAPTER 2: THE OPPOSITE PROBLEM

1. Wright explains how the opposite problem of skipping the miraculous birth and resurrection and focusing only on Jesus’s moral teaching produces a strong “social gospel” agenda (p. 26). How has a focus on Jesus’s teaching influenced the way people view Jesus? Have you known people who viewed Jesus in this way?

2. Why do you think people want to hear that Jesus was a great teacher but, at the same time, want to avoid all that “odd supernatural stuff at either end” (p. 27)? If someone were to focus only on the center, rather than the edges, how would that lead to a misreading of the gospel?

### CHAPTER 3: THE INADEQUATE ANSWERS

1. Which of the six “inadequate answers” Wright provides on pages 42–53 resonate the most with you? Do you agree with Wright that these six answers are inadequate to define what the gospels are saying about Jesus? Why or why not?
2. Wright states that the point of the gospels “is not whether Jesus is God, but what God is doing in and through Jesus” (p. 55). Does this framework challenge your previous assumptions about the gospel message? When you explain the gospels, do you include the dangerous picture the gospels are sketching, as Wright reveals in this chapter?

### CHAPTER 4: THE STORY OF ISRAEL

1. In this chapter, Wright compares our misreading of the gospels to a set of four speakers in a sound system that has not been properly adjusted (p. 62). Prior to reading

this chapter, which “speaker” was too quiet or too loud, causing you to miss the climax of the story of Israel in your reading of the gospels?

2. “What God does for Israel is what God is doing in relation to the whole world” (p. 74). Have you ever found yourself asking, “Why is Israel’s story so important? Why then, and why now?” Do you agree with Wright’s statement? If so, how can that understanding create a pathway to the central message of the rest of the New Testament?

## CHAPTER 5: THE STORY OF JESUS AS THE STORY OF ISRAEL’S GOD

1. In Western Christianity, Wright states, “we have been so concerned to let the gospels tell us that the story of Jesus is the story of God incarnate that we have been unable to listen more carefully to the evangelists telling us which God they are talking about and what exactly it is that this God is now doing” (p. 84). How does your reading of the gospels change when the focus is on God establishing sovereign rule over Israel and the world through Jesus rather than God sending Jesus to save us from sin?
2. How might you read the story of Jesus as the story of Israel’s God returning? How is this different from how it is often read? Read Luke 19:11–27 (also pp. 98–99). What do you notice in the gospel message when you think in “first-century Jewish terms”?

## CHAPTER 6: THE LAUNCHING OF GOD'S RENEWED PEOPLE

1. Wright identifies different distortions that inhibit our understanding of the gospels. One distortion is the assumption that the gospels only present a guideline for morality and that Jesus was nothing more than a moral teacher (p. 109). Have you experienced this distortion? What other assumptions come to mind that might distort your reading of the gospels (e.g., the Bible is a rule book)? Where do you believe these assumptions and distortions originated, and how have they infiltrated society?
2. “The more you tell the story of Jesus and pray for his Spirit, the more you discover what the church should be doing in the present time” (p. 119). Do you agree? If so, why do you think telling the story of Jesus will help the church discern what it should be doing? What should the church be about? What has the church done well, and what should change?

## CHAPTER 7: THE CLASH OF THE KINGDOMS

1. In Western ideology, we are often quick to say there should be a division between church and state (p. 134). Do you believe this is an ideology that Jesus was presenting? What have you learned from Jesus's approach to the political leaders of his day?

2. In the clash of the kingdoms, Caesar vs. God, we see two ways of exercising power: lording it over the people (Caesar) and the way of the servant (Jesus) (p. 139). What servant leaders come to mind today? What are the qualities of a servant leader? As a leader, where can you shine light into the dark corners in the world around you, “bringing judgment and mercy where it is badly needed” (p. 145)?

## CHAPTER 8: WHERE WE GET STUCK

1. The heart of this book suggests that “not only have we misread the gospels, but that *we have made them ordinary*” (p. 158). Through your reading so far, how have your views been challenged? Do you think you have made the Gospels ordinary? How so?
2. Wright identifies four unhelpful reactions to the challenge of modernity in the church’s reading of the gospels (pp. 165–66). If you grew up in the church, which reactions were present in your upbringing? Which reactions are you confronted with today by friends, family, or your church community?
3. When have you seen people use scripture to serve their contemporary political agenda (p. 168)? How did you respond?

## CHAPTER 9: KINGDOM AND CROSS IN FOUR DIMENSIONS

1. As Wright describes the link between the kingdom and the cross in the gospels, he presents a vision of the church as a “community rescued by the cross and transformed into kingdom-bringers” (p. 203). Do you think this describes the modern church? If not, how have you seen the Western church drift from those “moorings,” and how can we work to bring it back?
2. When and how have you shared in Jesus’s suffering? Have you seen your suffering help extend God’s kingdom? If so, how?

## CHAPTER 10: KINGDOM AND CROSS

1. Wright presents the case that kingdom and cross should not be treated as two themes but as one (p. 212). Do you agree? If so, how does it change your understanding of the gospels?
2. “Jesus is portrayed by the gospels as a one-man apocalypse, the place where heaven and earth meet, the place where and the means by which people come and find themselves renewed and restored as the people of the one God” (p. 236). If you consider Jesus as a “walking temple,” the place where heaven and earth overlap, how does that inform your understanding of God’s kingdom being inaugurated by Jesus? Which gospel stories make this clear?

3. “Our questions have been about a ‘salvation’ that rescues people from the world, instead of for the world. ‘Going to heaven’ has been the object” (p. 242). What are your thoughts about these statements? What would happen in the church if, instead of preaching how to get to heaven, it preached how to address the evil in the world in the hope of the resurrection?

## CHAPTER 11: HOW TO CELEBRATE GOD’S STORY

1. Wright describes how Christians have misread the creeds and viewed the Old Testament as a parenthesis in the whole story. “Creation, sin, Jesus. That is the implicit narrative of millions of Christians today—and it guarantees that they will never, ever understand either the Old Testament or the New” (pp. 260–61). How have you experienced this in the church or in conversations with other believers? What could you add to the conversation now that you’ve read Wright’s suggestions for reading the gospels from a “kingdom” point of view?
2. “Put tradition first, and scripture will be muzzled and faded. Put scripture first, and tradition will come to new life” (p. 274). Wright emphasizes the importance of starting with the gospels rather than the creeds. With this in mind, how might you approach the gospels differently and experiment with new ways of reading or praying with the gospels so that their message can be fresh?