

Book Review

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

Christopher J. H. Wright

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Christopher J. H. Wright, one of the foremost evangelical Old Testament and missionary scholars of our time, ably navigates complex Old Testament exegetical and theological issues and presents a cohesive mission hermeneutic for the entire Bible. This ability places him in an excellent position to confront the challenges to faith.

In *The God I Don't Understand*, a brief work aimed at a popular but thoughtful audience, Wright addresses the genuine questions that arise in the minds of believers, inquirers, and skeptics regarding such things as the existence of evil and answered and unanswered prayer. The author is honest and humble as he confronts issues that trouble the most fervent. Neither a work of formal apologetics nor a homily of living with hard times, Wright aims instead for a third way that integrates intellectual acumen and spiritual affection.

He confronts four areas that baffle humankind: (1) the problem of integrating the realities of evil and suffering with the goodness and omnipotence of God, (2) the specific problem of the Israelite conquest of Canaan and the divine command to destroy all the population of particular tribes, (3) the paradox of the cross as the icon of innocent

suffering and God's answer to evil, and (4) the nature of eschatology and Christian hope and how the end of the world should inform one's present engagement in the world.

The author is mostly successful in unveiling the experiences of God's people as they confront these difficulties. One of Wright's best moves is demonstrating how the Bible itself reveals God's people wrestling with these issues. The ancient Jewish challenge, "God, I believe in you, but I have a few questions for you," permeates the whole book. On a practical level, Wright gives the believer permission to possess, confess, and dialogue with God about his or her deepest concerns. Wright also highlights humanity's limited understanding when it comes to positive answers to prayer and other blessings that come to undeserving recipients of grace.

Wright's opening section pertaining to the nature of evil is solid, standard apologetics and does not add any new arguments. People are confronted, to paraphrase G. K. Chesterton, with the mystery of iniquity that finds, "a sneer across the universe." The "why" of evil is beyond human understanding, but the nature of rebellion, the consequences of both Lucifer's and

humankind's falls are spelled out well, along with God's promised remedies.

Wright is at his best when discussing the Canaanite conquest. He does not pretend that any war is good or that all the questions are resolved. He does, however, present a solid case for Israel being God's instrument of judgment on a horrific culture.

"Yahweh's Wars" are not a *carte blanche* for greed and human glory—but rather a specific part of a larger work to redeem the world.

Wright reveals his indebtedness to N. T. Wright as he surveys the implications of the cross. He does not reveal much new information, except to place the substitutionary atonement of Christ (which he affirms unequivocally) within the larger framework of God's reconciling plan. The cross and resurrection are God's primary answers to evil, as Christ absorbs sin and suffering and unveils power over death. In the risen Lord, believers see their future as the new humanity in Christ.

Wright has no time for popular eschatology that speculates on current events and avoids the ethical implications of the gospel. Here he is much too dismissive of the genuine desire of God's people to "understand the

times" and see God at work as they approach the coming of the Lord. Wright is deeply committed to environmental concerns and more optimistic about Christian engagement in these arenas than many other leaders. Wright's call for transformational activity is commendable, but his caricature of some streams of Evangelical/Pentecostal thought is unhelpful.

The God I Don't Understand should be on every leader's bookshelf to help equip the Church with guidelines for intellectual apologetics and devotional growth as people wrestle with personal issues of evil (sickness and natural disasters) as well as the great questions of cosmic evil and salvation. Wright's humility and passion for Christ shine through and help believers cope with their personal queries.

Skeptics will be impressed, if not persuaded, by this work. For deeper apologetic material, the works of William Lane Craig or Ravi Zacharias may be more satisfying, but as a primer for confronting challenges in one's daily walk with Christ, Wright's work is a great help.