

# N. T. Wright and Paul's Supersessionism: A Response to Kaminsky and Reasoner\*

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## ■ Abstract

Joel Kaminsky and Mark Reasoner offered a concerted critique of N. T. Wright's account of Israel's election as well as Wright's description of the apostle Paul's messianic atonement theology. They allege that Wright treats Israel's election as instrumental rather than intrinsic and his exegesis of Rom 5:20–21 results in a rehearsal of anti-Jewish tropes. This essay responds to them by 1) claiming that many of their criticisms are inaccurate representations of Wright's views; 2) defending a missional perspective of Israel's view of election; 3) asserting that Wright's reading of Rom 5:20 about the Torah multiplying sin within Israel is neither immoral, nor implausible, nor idiosyncratic; and 4) offering some final thoughts about Wright and Jewish-Christian relations.

## ■ Keywords

Paul, Pauline theology, election, Israel, N. T. Wright, Jewish missionary activity, supersessionism

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## ■ Introduction

Joel Kaminsky and Mark Reasoner offer a highly critical response to N. T. Wright's description of Paul's vision of Israel.<sup>1</sup> Their principal concern is that Wright's Paul views Israel's election as instrumental rather than based on divine love, and also that Wright suggests that Paul thought that the Torah draws sin upon Israel in such a way that turns Israel into a virtual incarnation of sin. They accordingly charge Wright with propagating a "problematic type of supersessionism," where the Jewish people are rendered "expendable" and which trades in "anti-Judaic stereotypes."<sup>2</sup>

Their critique of Wright arouses interest for several reasons. First, supersessionism is a serious subject. Irrespective of whether one inhabits the domain of biblical scholarship or interfaith dialogues, supersessionism is arresting for the historical, hermeneutical, theological, and socioreligious conversations that surround the apostle Paul. Any allegation of promoting a pernicious supersessionism or anti-Jewish readings of a sacred text deserves attention. Second, Wright's scholarship on Paul is arguably one of the most comprehensive and compelling proposals in the last century concerning how the apostle Paul relates to Israel and her scriptures. In my judgment, the power and poignancy of Wright's Paul, set forth principally in his magnum opus *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*,<sup>3</sup> is that Paul emerges as someone who has rethought Israel's election in light of the Messiah and the Spirit, who regards the unified church comprised of Jew and gentile as the central symbol of God's covenant faithfulness to Israel, who instructs churches to embody and carry forward the story of Israel themselves, and who develops "theology" as a mode of messianic reasoning to equip churches to consider any complexity of ethics or relationships in light of God's love for them. Wright has impressively articulated Paul's messianic eschatology and excitedly enunciated Paul's gripping ecclesial vision. I find such an account intertextually mesmerizing, historically satisfying, pastorally gripping, and theologically enabling. So, the arresting topic combined with my appreciation for Wright naturally piqued my interest.

At some points I would be prepared to grant that Kaminsky and Reasoner seem to have the better end of the argument. For instance, when it comes to Rom 11:26, where "all Israel will be saved," I concur that Paul envisages the deliverance of empirical or ethnic Israel in a future state.<sup>4</sup> That said, I must confess that I do not recognize Wright's Paul in the Kaminsky-and-Reasoner critique. On the whole, their

<sup>1</sup> Joel Kaminsky and Mark Reasoner, "The Meaning and Telos of Israel's Election: An Interfaith Response to N. T. Wright's Reading of Paul," *HTR* 112 (2019) 421–46.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 422.

<sup>3</sup> N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Christian Origins and the Question of God 4; London: SPCK, 2014 [hereafter *PFG*]).

<sup>4</sup> Contrast Wright, *PFG*, 1239–46; *idem*, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991) 233, 249–51; and *idem*, "The Letter to the Romans: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in *NIB* (ed. Leander E. Keck; 12 vols.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1994–2004) 10:688–91; with Michael F. Bird, *Romans* (Story of God Bible Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016) 390–94; Kaminsky and Reasoner, "Israel's Election," 438–40.

description puts the worst possible spin on Wright's arguments, and their rejoinder is based more on inferences drawn from Wright's argument than reliant on Wright's account itself. For instance, Wright nowhere says that Israel is "supplanted by the church," that the "Jewish people are completely replaced by the nascent church," or that ethnic Jews are "completely outside the newly defined people of God and hence beyond salvation."<sup>5</sup> What Wright does advocate is a Jewish form of supersessionism, similar to Qumran, an oxymoronic "Jewish supersessionism."<sup>6</sup> For Wright's Paul, the church does not replace ethnic Israel as much as it represents Israel in the messianic age, redefines the boundaries of promissory Israel to include gentiles, and rehearses the missional vocation of Israel in the context of the new covenant.

Therefore, the aim of this article is to contest the Kaminsky-and-Reasoner critique of Wright in defense of Paul's messianic eschatology which largely generates Paul's view of Israel, Messiah, gospel, and gentiles. The way that I will proceed is by: 1) highlighting their misrepresentation of Wright in some instances; 2) defending a missional component to Israel's election; 3) supporting a messianic atonement theology in Paul; and 4) concluding with some thoughts about Paul and Jewish-Christian relations. My ambition here is not so much a vindication of Wright—Wright is no damsel in need of rescue—as much as a vindication of Paul as a narrative theologian of Israel's story, a story to which the church considered itself as nonnegotiablely tethered because it was the story that would transform the world.

### ■ Israel's Election: Israel-for-the-Sake-of-the-World

What Kaminsky and Reasoner regard as a "troubling feature"<sup>7</sup> of Wright's exegesis is his insistence that Israel's election is instrumental and based upon a vocation to be a "light to the gentiles" (Isa 42:6; 49:6). They assert that Wright ignores passages such as Isa 49:14–16 that "affirm an intrinsic value to God's election of Israel," while his "interpretive lens ultimately redefines Israel in a much more radical fashion that replaces almost all of the old chosen people."<sup>8</sup> Their chief objection here is that Wright regards Israel's election as having a telos in worldwide salvation rather than being animated by "God's mysterious and persistent attachment to Israel" and the "irrational attachment that the God of Israel has for this people."<sup>9</sup> They applaud Wright for covenantally grounding God's justice that delivers Israel, but they believe he misreads the place of the gentiles in Isaiah. They point out that Paul did not think that other Jewish Christ-believers had a mandate to evangelize gentiles, therefore, it is highly unlikely he would have attributed such a role to Israel. Wright is then guilty of conflating Israel's call to distinctiveness from the nations

<sup>5</sup> Kaminsky and Reasoner, "Israel's Election," 422, 422 n. 2, 423.

<sup>6</sup> Wright, *PFQ*, 810.

<sup>7</sup> Kaminsky and Reasoner, "Israel's Election," 423.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 425.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 424, 426.

with the moral triumphalism that Israel periodically expressed over the nations.<sup>10</sup> They sense that although Wright's instrumental portrait of Israel's election contains theological utility, with its useful backstory for the church and sense of finality in the revelation of Christ, they worry that it can yield the position that the church rather than Israel are the true people of God, with Jesus and the church replacing Israel as a light to the nations.<sup>11</sup> Several things can be said by way of response.

First, Wright certainly stresses the instrumental and missional aspect of Israel's election in a way that is distinctive, which some critics regard as seriously overstated, but he nowhere denies God's intrinsic election of and love for Israel. Wright declares of Paul that saving the world was the purpose of Israel's election, not the grounds of its election!<sup>12</sup> Added to that, Wright argues explicitly and repeatedly that Paul denies that God has rejected or replaced his people.<sup>13</sup> Wright thinks Paul offers a "massive reaffirmation of the goodness and God's givenness of Israel, Israel's call, Israel's scriptures, Israel's promises, Israel's destiny within the creator's overall purposes."<sup>14</sup> Wright comprehends Paul's thought in Rom 11:29 that "God has not written them off; that is the main point Paul is making."<sup>15</sup> Wright's Paul explicitly warns gentile Christ-believers against indulging in "anti-Jewish arrogance," and Rom 9–11 is "aimed at the proto-Marcionism he suspects may exist in the Roman church, attitudes which really would deserve the name 'supersessionism,' a belief according to which God has effected a simple transfer of promises from Jews to Gentiles so that Jews are just as shut out now as Gentiles were before (a very convenient thing to believe in Rome in the middle or late 50s after those unpopular Jews were allowed back again upon Nero's accession)."<sup>16</sup> Wright's Paul is emotionally invested in Israel (Rom 9:2–3) because God is electively committed to Israel (Rom 11:29).<sup>17</sup>

Second, the book of Isaiah sustains a number of missional readings. Wright makes much of Isaiah (esp. Isa 42:6; 49:6) in his account of Israel's vocation to be "a light to the nations."<sup>18</sup> Of course, the relationship of Israel vis-à-vis the gentiles

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 421–31.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 431.

<sup>12</sup> N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said* (London: Lion, 1997) 82: "The God of Israel had called Israel into being in order to save the world; that was the purpose of election in the first place." And idem, *PFG*, 1199: "And, at the heart of this, he has endorsed not only Israel's election but also the purpose of that election in bringing about worldwide salvation."

<sup>13</sup> Wright, *PFG*, 367–68, 542–43, 1206, 1254, 1416–17; idem, "Romans," 693–94; idem, *Climax of the Covenant*, 253; idem, *Pauline Perspectives: Essays on Paul, 1978–2013* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013) 403.

<sup>14</sup> Wright, *PFG*, 368.

<sup>15</sup> Wright, "Romans," 693.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 406; cf. idem, *Climax of the Covenant*, 234, 243; idem, *Paul: Fresh Perspectives* (London: SPCK, 2005) 127. Wright (*Climax of the Covenant*, 232) opines that the Protestant marginalization of Rom 9–11 "robbed the church of the best weapon it could have had for identifying and combating some of the worst evils of the Third Reich."

<sup>17</sup> Wright, *PFG*, 542.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 804–6, 811, 1056–59; idem, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Christian

in Isaiah is not uniformly positive, as Kaminsky and Reasoner rightly point out.<sup>19</sup> The place of the nations in Isaiah is complex, and there is no clear and consistent account of the conversion of the nations to worship Israel's God. Sometimes the nations gather on the "mountain of the Lord" with gifts to receive "instruction" and to join Israel's "worship" (Isa 2:2–4; 11:10; 14:1; 18:7; 19:23–25; 56:6–8; 66:23). Other times the nations are doomed to slaughter by divine fury (Isa 34:1–3), or else the nations are subjugated and made subservient to a restored Israelite kingdom (Isa 45:14; 49:23; 54:3; 60:11). The book of Isaiah, much like other prophetic writings, exhibits a variety of motifs revolving around the judgment of the nations and their accompanying the exiles to Zion to worship with them and to work for them.<sup>20</sup> The ambiguity was such that the question of precisely who these gentiles are intrudes upon Isaianic texts and translation. For instance, in Isa 56:6, the ambiguity surrounding the identity of the *neḵar* results in differences across the LXX, Tg. Isa., and 1QIsa<sup>a</sup> as to whether the "foreigners who join themselves to the Lord" are gentile worshipers or gentile proselytes.<sup>21</sup>

That said, Isaiah, at least in its canonical form, has been deemed sufficiently conducive to several missional readings and contributes to a biblical theology of mission.<sup>22</sup> Kaminsky and Reasoner allege that such a reading, typified by Wright, imposes the lens of Christian universalism.<sup>23</sup> To which I respond that this universal or missional reading of Isaiah emerges in Isaiah's reception-history, at least in regard to Isa 42:6 and 49:6, as intimated in some Jewish texts (Tob 13.11; Wis 18.4; 1QM 1.8; T. Levi 4.4) and deployed by Christian authors from Luke (Luke 2:32; Acts 13:47; 26:23), to the Epistle of Barnabas (Ep. Barn. 14.7–8), to Justin Martyr (*Dial.* 121–122).<sup>24</sup> The underlying premise is that when the great promise of an Isaianic new exodus transpired, when Israel was restored, its sequel involved the inclusion of gentiles, in some cases joining the returning exiles to worship God in

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Origins and the Question of God 1; London: SPCK, 1992) 264, 267–68.

<sup>19</sup> Kaminsky and Reasoner, "Israel's Election," 424–25. Wright himself is quite aware of this (see *New Testament and the People of God*, 262–68).

<sup>20</sup> Michael F. Bird, *Jesus and the Origins of the Gentile Mission* (LNTS 331; London: T&T Clark, 2007) 26–29.

<sup>21</sup> See Craig A. Evans, "From 'House of Prayer' to 'Cave of Robbers': Jesus' Prophetic Criticism of the Temple Establishment," in *The Quest for Context and Meaning* (ed. Craig A. Evans and Shemaryahu Talmon; Leiden: Brill, 1997) 417–42, at 424–32.

<sup>22</sup> See, e.g., Robert Martin-Achard, *A Light to the Nations: A Study of the Old Testament Conception of Israel's Mission to the World* (trans. J. Penney Smith; Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1962); Charles H. H. Scobie, "Israel and the Nations: An Essay in Biblical Theology," *TynBul* 43 (1992) 283–305; Christopher H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006) 166–67; Michael W. Goheen, *A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church and the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011) 23–73, esp. 66–68; Walter C. Kaiser, *Mission in the Old Testament: Israel as a Light to the Nations* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2012) 51–64.

<sup>23</sup> Kaminsky and Reasoner, "Israel's Election," 423–24.

<sup>24</sup> Michael F. Bird, "'A Light to the Nations' (Isaiah 42:6 and 49:6): Intertextuality and Mission Theology in the Early Church," *RTR* 65 (2006) 122–31.

Jerusalem. In effect, as T. W. Manson said, “a transformed Israel would transform the world.”<sup>25</sup> Or, as Geza Vermes commented: “A pure and sanctified Israel was to draw the Gentiles to God. The manifestation of God’s sovereignty over his own was to serve as a magnet to the rest.”<sup>26</sup> Thus, Wright’s Paul, with his missional reading of Isaiah, is no anachronism but fits into the interpretive scheme of ancient Jews and the first Christians.

Third, there are solid indications that many Jews consciously thought of themselves as having a specific vocation toward the world because of their election as God’s chosen people. To begin with, Philo describes Israel as a wise nation that acts as a beacon of “light” to the world to diffuse the Abrahamic blessings to all nations (*Somn.* 1.175–178). Philo insists that the Jerusalem cultus operates on behalf of the whole world.<sup>27</sup> He claims that Israel, “the most God-loving of all nations,” has “received the offices of priesthood and prophecy on behalf of the whole of humanity” (*Abr.* 98). Philo is most likely inferring this vocation based on the notion of Israel as a “kingdom of priests” (Exod 19:5), a passage which proved very important to early Christian identity (1 Pet 2:9; Rev 1:5; 5:10), and perhaps influenced Paul in his “priestly service” to administer the offering of the gentiles (Rom 15:15–16). One could sum up Philo’s view of Israel’s position vis-à-vis the nations with the words of Julius Wellhausen about God and Israel in Deutero-Isaiah, “There is no God like YHWH and Israel is his prophet.”<sup>28</sup> In addition, the Qumran community, for all its intra-Jewish sectarianism, had a very universal vision of its destiny. The sect had received or would receive “all the glory of Adam” (1QS 4.22–23; 1QH<sup>a</sup> 4.15; CD 3.19–20), and the returnees from exile would possess “all the inheritance of Adam” (4Q171 3.1–2). The premise is that a purified Israel recapitulates Adam’s pre-fall glory and, like pre-fall Adam, a purified Israel should be ruling over creation. The same sentiment is what led one Jewish seer to ponder the pagan nations’ domineering and devouring Israel, and then, like a zookeeper trying to fathom how it is that the beasts are now running the zoo, complaining to God: “If the world has indeed been created for us, why do we not possess our world as an inheritance? How long will this be so?” (4 Ezra 6.56–59).

No surprises that many of the first Christians appropriated this universalistic role for themselves. In the vision of the Roman Shepherd, the elderly woman he encountered was a symbol for the “church,” about whom the angel explains: “she was created before all things; therefore she is elderly, and for her sake the world was formed” (*Herm. Vis.* 8.1). Similarly, the author of the Epistle to Diognetus was operating in analogous Jewish categories when he said of Christians: “To sum up all in one word—what the soul is in the body, Christians are in the world. . . . The

<sup>25</sup> T. W. Manson, *Only to the House of Israel? Jesus and the Non-Jews* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964) 23–24.

<sup>26</sup> Geza Vermes, *Jesus and the World of Judaism* (London: SCM, 1983) 35.

<sup>27</sup> Philo, *Spec.* 1.96–97, 113; 2.163; *Mos.* 1.149–152; *Legat.* 306; cf. T. Levi 18.9.

<sup>28</sup> Julius Wellhausen, *Israelitische und jüdische Geschichte* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1958) 152: “Es gibt keinen Gott als Jahve und Israel ist sein (Knecht d.h.) prophet.”

soul is imprisoned in the body, yet preserves that very body; and Christians are confined in the world as in a prison, and yet they are the preservers of the world” (Ep. Diogn. 6.1, 7). Israel, in its ideal and eschatological form, was the adamic priest of the entire creation, a light to the nations, God’s prophetic people, a role that the later church resourced to describe their own vocation in the world.

Fourth, further proof that ancient Jews believed that they possessed a covenantal obligation to declare God among the nations is the phenomenon of Jewish missionary activity. Now, ancient Jews were generally not “evangelical” about their customs and cultus as we understand the term; i.e., there was no ancient version of “Jews for Gentiles for Moses.” However, Jewish religious rituals and community life did attract many gentiles to adopt Jewish practices; some even formally joined the Jewish commonwealth as proselytes, and in numbers that alerted and alarmed many Roman elites. In addition, some Jews were unusually active in trying to propagate their way of life among Romans, Greeks, and barbarians. The Matthean Jesus offers an opaque denunciation of Pharisees for their conversionist activities: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cross sea and land to make a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves” (Matt 23:15). The imagery cannot be written off as pure hyperbole, because we do know from Josephus of at least one interesting account about three Jews—a merchant named Ananias, a Galilean named Eleazar, and another unnamed Jew—who persuaded King Izates of Adiabene and his mother Helene to embrace Jewish worship and customs (Josephus, *Ant.* 20.34–35, 38–46). In addition, although rabbinic statements about proselytes are mixed, Rabbi Eleazar is reported to have said that the purpose of the dispersion was so that proselytes might join Israel (b. Pesah. 87b). I balk at calling Judaism a “missionary religion,” but it should be acknowledged that Jewish communities did enthusiastically receive gentile proselytes, and Jews engaged unevenly in proselytism through their literary activities and through the relationships that they cultivated with non-Jews. Such proselytism was born not only of a competitive religious environment but out of a conviction that Israel’s worship was not directed at a mere tribal deity but at a sovereign Lord who had a claim upon the whole of creation and its inhabitants.<sup>29</sup>

Fifth, Wright’s reading of Rom 2–3, with its description of Israel’s vocation vis-à-vis the nations, is eminently plausible. Wright contends that “Israel *should* have been—had been called to be—the divine answer to the world’s problem; and that,

<sup>29</sup> See discussion in Scot McKnight, *A Light among the Gentiles: Jewish Missionary Activity in the Second Temple Period* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991); John P. Dickson, *Mission-Commitment in Ancient Judaism and in the Pauline Communities: The Shape, Extent and Background of Early Christian Mission* (WUNT 2.159; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003); Terence L. Donaldson, *Judaism and Gentiles: Jewish Patterns of Universalism (to 135 CE)* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008); Michael F. Bird, *Crossing over Sea and Land: Jewish Missionary Activity in the Second Temple Period* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010); James Carleton Paget, “Hellenistic and Early Roman Period Jewish Missionary Efforts in the Diaspora,” in *The Rise and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries of the Common Era* (ed. Clare K. Rothschild and Jens Schröter; WUNT 301; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013) 11–49.



instead, Israel is itself fatally compromised with the very same problem.”<sup>30</sup> Wright bases this on Paul’s words that Israel as a whole was “entrusted with the oracles of God” (Rom 3:2), intended to be “a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness” (Rom 2:19), and “the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles” precisely because Israel failed in this task (Rom 2:24; Isa 52:5). What is more, Israel’s unfaithfulness (Rom 3:3) is countered by the “faithfulness of Jesus Christ” (Rom 3:22), the climax of Israel-faithfulness to the divine purpose of redemption, since Jesus is the representative Messiah who accomplishes in himself the role marked out for Israel.<sup>31</sup> In contrast, Kaminsky and Reasoner remain unpersuaded by Wright’s reading here on the grounds that the diatribe of Rom 2 is stereotypical, the “Jew” of Rom 2:17 might even be a gentile who calls himself a Jew, and Paul’s overall assessment of Israel’s problem is not a failure to spread “divine light to others” as much as it is unbelief in Jesus as the Messiah.<sup>32</sup>

Wright’s view is a minority one, but it is hardly idiosyncratic. Much like Rom 2:19, the Jewish sibyl refers to Israel as “the guide of life to all mortals” (Sib. Or. 3.195), while in 1 Enoch the righteous and wise are given the Scriptures to enable them to be “guides” for all the “children of the earth” (1 Enoch 104.12–13; 105.1). In the Jewish scriptures, Israel’s Torah and Temple-worship were meant to have a quasi-kerygmatic character so that the Lord is “praised among the nations” and the “word of the Lord goes forth from Zion” (Deut 4:6; Ps 22:7; 117:1; Jer 31:7; 33:9; Isa 2:3; 12:4; Mic 4:2; Zech 14:16; Tob 14:6; Sir 24:6, 8, 23–24, 32–33; Wis 1:1). Thus, Israel’s “advantage” (Rom 3:1) was to be recipient of a divine revelation (Jer 18:18; Ezek 20:11; Ps 19:7; 103:7; Neh 9:14; Rom 3:2; 9:4), which was intended to be transmitted afar (see Philo, *Mos.* 2.22–26; Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 2.123, 261, 282, esp. 293; idem, *J.W.* 7.45, on the penetration of the Torah among the nations), and in shorthand we can appropriately designate this as Israel’s stewardship of the “oracles of the Lord” (Rom 3:2).

Lionel Windsor, himself committed to post-supersessionist readings of Paul,<sup>33</sup> has argued that Paul’s apostolic ministry was an expression of a Jewish vocation to reach the nations. Windsor disagrees with Wright in that Paul’s contention against his Jewish contemporaries was not the ethnocentrism of which some have accused them; rather, it was their failure to grasp the purpose of their ethnicity and their failure to discharge their unique divine vocation. Whereas “mainstream” Jewish communities believed that their vocation was to keep and teach the Mosaic law, Paul conceived of the Jews’ distinct role “to preach the gospel of Christ to the Gentiles as the fulfilment of the Law of Moses and the power of God for salvation to all

<sup>30</sup> Wright, “Romans,” 445 (italics in original).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 445–48, 453, 470; idem, *Paul*, 47; idem, *PFG*, 830–31, 836, 842–44, 931, 978, 1000, 1027, 1208, 1253–54; esp. idem, *Pauline Perspectives*, 489–509.

<sup>32</sup> Kaminsky and Reasoner, “Israel’s Election,” 429–30.

<sup>33</sup> Lionel J. Windsor, *Reading Ephesians and Colossians after Supersessionism: Christ’s Mission through Israel to the Nations* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017).



who believe.”<sup>34</sup> He maintains that Israel was the recipient of a divine revelation in the Torah which revealed God’s universal wisdom. This Torah, if taught properly, pointed ahead to Christ, which Israel was failing to do, but Paul, in a manner reminiscent of the Isaianic servant, was himself called to announce. According to Windsor, “Paul viewed his own apostolic vocation as the fulfillment of Israel’s vocation,” so that his identity as an “Israelite” (Rom 11:1) and his identity as the “apostle to the nations” (Rom 11:13) are two sides of the same coin. Paul identifies himself with Israel because “Israel is central to God’s worldwide purposes, as declared in his gospel (Rom 9:1–5).”<sup>35</sup> Important for Windsor is that Paul is not seeking to “eradicate Jewish distinctiveness or to show that all Christians are in fact ‘true Jews.’” Rather, “Paul is confident that his own vocation and Israel’s vocation will ultimately converge.”<sup>36</sup>

Sixth, I hasten to add that what is instrumental is not only Israel’s election but the Messiah’s mission to Israel as the means for worldwide salvation and the formation of a multiethnic church. This is why Paul can write that “God sent his Son . . . born under the Torah, in order to redeem those who were under the Torah [i.e., Israel], so that we [i.e., Jews and gentiles] might receive adoption as children” (Gal 4:4–5), and that “Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy” (Rom 15:8–9). Paul’s Jesus is only for gentiles because Jesus is first for Israel. Paul’s gospel of messianic salvation for the world can only be comprehended to and through Israel. It is Israel’s election and the messianic event toward Israel that enables the gentiles to come to faith in Israel’s God. The story of salvation, as Paul received it and taught it, was a variation of Jewish restoration eschatology whereby Israel’s rescue was messianic and mysterious, and bound up with the rescue of the entire creation, including the nations. That was, as Wright and others have made clear, a very Jewish way of viewing Christ and Israel in relation to the gentiles.

Seventh, I find it very interesting that in modern Jewish social ethics, the rabbinic notion of contributing to the “restoration of the world” (*tiqqun ‘olam*) is applied in such a way as to presume that Jews have a role in the world to be the paragon of global citizens. Rabbi and social entrepreneur Sidney Schwarz believes that the Jews’ role in such a restoration is to “extend the boundaries of righteousness and justice in the world” (Gen 18:19) and to be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exod 19:18). He discerns in Isa 42:6 and 49:6 a mandate for the Jewish people “to be a beacon of morality for others to emulate.”<sup>37</sup> Similarly, Daniel Boyarin insists that Jewish “cultural practice” is “our task and calling in the world.”<sup>38</sup> In a truly

<sup>34</sup> Lionel J. Windsor, *Paul and the Vocation of Israel* (BZBW 205; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014) 34–35.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 19–21.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 20–21, and see also 143–44 n. 16

<sup>37</sup> Sidney Schwarz, *Judaism and Justice: The Jewish Passion to Repair the World* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2008) 5, 9.

<sup>38</sup> Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of

fascinating lecture, former British chief rabbi Jonathan Sacks spoke at the 2008 Lambeth Conference about how the Christian churches have succeeded where the Jews had corporately failed, by taking the Jewish message of God's forgiveness to the world. Sacks said:

We did not take it to the world. We are few. You are many. You took it to the world. In fact, we are so few. I have the numbers of Jews from all of the countries in the world. That is part of my job now and I travel to see them. We have 5 Jews in China. You can bet that they have 6 synagogues and someone is saying that the Jews are running the country. You have taken that message of one who was a Jew to the world. Take that message as a Jewish message: forgive them Father. If there is one Jewish message we need it is the courage to forgive one another. To walk side by side in many differences of faith, but the shared experience of faith. The World is enlarged by differences. We must do what Joseph did in Genesis. We must have the courage to forgive one another.<sup>39</sup>

Sacks was generously applauding one good thing about Christian history, namely, how Christians took a Jewish message of God's Messiah and God's forgiveness to the world. That observation resonates with Wright's Paul, who was not trying to "replace" Israel with Jesus as much as he regarded the Messiah's faithfulness and gentile belonging to the faith-of-Jesus-the-Messiah (Rom 3:22, 26) as the instrument to project Israel's covenantal blessings to the world.<sup>40</sup>

In sum, we might conclude from Wright's reading of Paul that *extra Israel nulla salus*, "outside of Israel there is no salvation."<sup>41</sup> There is no sense, contra Kaminsky and Reasoner, that Wright alleges that Israel's election is a means to an end in which Israel does not share. For Wright's Paul, Israel is simultaneously an agent and object of salvation. Israel's πρόσλημψις ("acceptance," Rom 11:5) is part of God's plan, according to Wright's reading of Paul. Beyond that, Israel's election is the premise for the church's evangelistic effusion into the world and the pattern for the church's mission to emulate. The church, grafted onto Israel, carries forth the mission to be Israel-for-the-sake-of-the-world by bringing the peoples of the earth into Abraham's family through Israel's Messiah. Paul Minear put it well: "the Israel to whom the gospel comes and through whom the mission to the

California Press, 1994) 32.

<sup>39</sup> Chris Sugden and Chertie Wetzel, "Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks Answers Questions on Covenants, Jesus and Peace," *Virtuosity: The Voice for Global Orthodox Anglicanism* (ed. David Virtue), 30 July 2008, <https://virtueonline.org/rabbi-sir-jonathan-sachs-answers-questions-covenants-jesus-and-peace>.

<sup>40</sup> Bird, *Romans*, 87–88.

<sup>41</sup> See Michael Bird, *An Anomalous Jew: Paul among Jews, Greeks, and Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016) 118–19; Dale B. Martin, "The Promise of Teleology, the Constraints of Epistemology, and the Universal Vision of Paul," in *St. Paul among the Philosophers* (ed. John D. Caputo and Linda Martin Alcoff; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009) 91–108, at 101: "The theme of Romans, put in Latin, would not be *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (no salvation outside of the church), but, and this is what so many Christians refuse to recognize when they read Romans, *extra Israel nulla salus*: 'there is no salvation outside of Israel.'"

world is accomplished is the same Israel to whom the promise had been given.”<sup>42</sup> There is certainly a type of supersessionism here, but it is not a replacement of Israel. Perhaps it is better to say that the church receives, represents, rehearses, or replicates Israel’s missional vocation rather than replaces Israel in mission! If I wear my Jewish grandfather’s old soccer jersey when I play for the Israeli soccer team, even if I am a messianic Jew, am I replacing him, rejecting him, or emulating him? All analogies break down of course, but the point remains: standing in Israel’s mission is not standing over and against Israel!

### ■ Paul’s Messianic Atonement Theology

A further objection of Kaminsky and Reasoner is against Wright’s reading of Rom 5:20–21 in light of Gal 3:19, 22, where, in Wright’s description, Paul argues that the purpose of Torah was to draw sin onto Israel so that God might deal with humanity’s sins through his relationship with Israel. “The divine purpose was,” says Wright, “to allow sin to do its worst in Israel itself precisely through the Torah.”<sup>43</sup> In effect, the Torah serves to draw and concentrate sin onto Israel, so that God then judges the world’s sin in Israel’s Messiah on the cross. They consider “toxic” and “worrisome”<sup>44</sup> Wright’s assertion that “the Messiah himself was the place where, at the climax of Israel’s history, sin did its worst—even, with extreme paradox, the sin of his being ‘handed over,’ which was itself the means of the divine ‘handing over’—in order that sin itself might be condemned.”<sup>45</sup> Kaminsky and Reasoner object to the specific words concerning “the sin of his being ‘handed over,’”<sup>46</sup> since it “can too easily lend renewed support to the charge that the Jewish people as a whole bear the guilt for Jesus’s death that has over the previous two millennia animated a good deal of Christian hatred of Jews.”<sup>47</sup> Wright’s reading is indeed contestable, not the least over whether the *ἵνα* in Rom 5:20 indicates purpose or result, as Kaminsky and Reasoner point out.<sup>48</sup> However, I do not find Wright’s reading to be grossly implausible or inherently immoral.

First, if the Isaianic *‘ebed* of the Fourth Servant Song is Israel (Isa 41:8–9; 43:1–13; 44:21; 48:20), and if the *‘ebed* makes atonement for others (Isa 53:4–11), then attributing a sin-bearing and sin-atonement role to Israel is hardly out of the question. Yes, I am keenly aware that a simple equation of *‘ebed* = *Yisra’el* is not certain, but even if the *‘ebed* is a prophet or a royal figure, he is still the representative of Israel called to carry away Israel’s sins. One finds a similar view in the Qumran scrolls, where the sect, as a microcosm of Israel or a remnant of

<sup>42</sup> Paul S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) 72.

<sup>43</sup> Wright, *PFG*, 895–96; cf. idem, *Climax of the Covenant*, 239, 243, 247–48.

<sup>44</sup> Kaminsky and Reasoner, “Israel’s Election,” 435–36.

<sup>45</sup> Wright, *PFG*, 1192; cf. idem, *Pauline Perspectives*, 503–4.

<sup>46</sup> That Jesus’s death is both divinely foreordained and humanly culpable is evident also in Acts 2:23, 31, 36; 4:27–28.

<sup>47</sup> Kaminsky and Reasoner, “Israel’s Election,” 435.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 431–33.

its righteous part, understood itself as the *yahad* who had been “chosen by God’s will to atone for the land and to recompense the wicked their due” (1QS 8.6; cf. 4 Macc 1:11; 6:27–29; 17:21).

Second, Wright’s conclusion emerges largely from his view of Israel’s Messiah as her representative par excellence. In one of his first publications, Wright argued that “a crucified Messiah implies a crucified Israel” because, “If the Messiah dies under the law’s curse, that means that Israel stands under the same curse: that is part at least of the meaning of Galatians 3:10–14. Calvary means that Israel also must die between two thieves, must share the fate of the ungodly. In the long purposes of God, Israel acts out the role of fallen mankind. Nor does she thus escape from fulfilling also the role for which God has cast her, since it is precisely by her fall that salvation is brought to the Gentiles. This paradox, clearly set out in Romans 11, could be summed up by saying: Israel has become what Adam is, so that Adam may become what Israel is.”<sup>49</sup> In addition, there is an important dimension to Wright’s argument that Kaminsky and Reasoner ignore. If the Messiah’s cross is the place where Israel bears the world’s sin, then the Messiah’s resurrection is the place where the Messiah’s risen life and vindication becomes too the life and vindication of Israel. Wright reads Rom 11:15 to the effect that “if Israel has embodied the *casting away* of the Messiah, Israel will now find a way to share his *resurrection* as well.”<sup>50</sup>

Wright’s reading is brilliant for understanding Jesus’s death Israelologically (forgive the painful neologism) and grasps Israel’s suffering christologically and missiologically! The Messiah’s body, as an Israel-body, is the place where “The outstretched arms of the crucified one, embodying the love of the creator God, provide . . . the place where the kingdom of sin did its worst and the kingdom of grace its triumphant best,” and “Sin may have abounded through the Torah, but that was where grace more than abounded; and God will not revoke that grace.”<sup>51</sup> Israel through its transgression of Torah bears the world’s sins in the Messiah’s crucified body just as much as Israel carries the world’s hope for grace, righteousness, and life in the Messiah’s resurrection.

Third, even those on a far different theological axis to Wright, among the “apocalyptic Paul,” find themselves drawn to the same basic conclusion about Torah, multiplying sin, and Israel’s death and resurrection in the Messiah. J. L. Martyn has a similar position to Wright when he interprets Gal 3:19 in light of Rom 5:20, to the effect that “the Law entered the picture, in its own time, in order to elicit transgressions,” which is “a view of the Law for which there is no proper parallel in Jewish traditions, where the Law is thought to increase resistance to

<sup>49</sup> N. T. Wright, “The Paul of History and the Apostle of Faith,” *TynBul* 29 (1978) 68.

<sup>50</sup> Wright, *PFQ*, 1198 (italics in original); and idem, *Climax of the Covenant*, 246: “If Israel is the people of the crucified Messiah, she can also be raised to new life.”

<sup>51</sup> Wright, “Romans,” 530, 694.

transgressions.”<sup>52</sup> Plus, according to Douglas Harink—himself an ardent critic of Wright and committed to non-supersessionist readings of Paul<sup>53</sup>—“The deliverance of the body of fleshly Israel from her hardening and imprisonment is a *necessary* demonstration of the truth of the gospel, God’s powerful apocalyptic deliverance of all of his creatures through the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Without the death and resurrection of corporeal Israel, the gospel of God’s sin-and-death-destroying and life-giving righteousness as Paul preached it in Rom 1–8 is rendered false.”<sup>54</sup> Wright is synthesizing these two points and lodging the resulting conclusion in a wider narrative concerning Israel’s vocation before the world.

For Kaminsky and Reasoner, Paul never says what Wright alleges about Torah drawing sin onto Israel. I will let the jury decide that charge. Still, I have to point out that Wright himself does not say what they allege, namely, that Israel became “the most sinful nation on earth.”<sup>55</sup> In addition, in a grossly unfair move, they critique Wright for what might be inferred from his argument. They claim “the steps are in place in Wright’s system” to support Abelard’s idea that “God judges the Jews as guiltier than gentiles because they sinned even though they had Torah,” even though they acknowledge that Wright is not “explicitly saying” anything of the sort.<sup>56</sup>

## ■ N. T. Wright, the Apostle Paul, and Jewish-Christian Relations Today

Recently, I listened to the Quillette podcast featuring an interview with the now former *New York Times* editor Bari Weiss about anti-Semitism. There she pointed out that anti-Semitism is probably the most successful ideology of the twentieth century, and that in contemporary American politics, anti-Semitism finds expression among both the alt-right and the progressive left.<sup>57</sup> It was a sober reminder of the constant threat posed to the Jewish people by segments of media, political tribes, and even by religious groups. In such a context, religious communities have a special responsibility to promote tolerance, not by mundane mantras that there are many paths up the mountain, but by using the resources of our respective traditions to teach each other how to live with differences among those who are “other.” As scholars of biblical texts we must be attentive to how interpreters “select, prioritize and construe them according to their own social locations and their cultural or

<sup>52</sup> J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1997) 355. Martyn adds (368–70) reasons for maintaining that charging Paul with being anti-Judaic at this point is inappropriate.

<sup>53</sup> Douglas Harink, *Paul among the Postliberals: Pauline Theology Beyond Christendom and Modernity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2003) 151–207; idem, “Paul and Israel: An Apocalyptic Reading,” *Pro Ecclesia* 16 (2007) 359–80.

<sup>54</sup> Harink, “Paul and Israel,” 372 (*italics in original*).

<sup>55</sup> Kaminsky and Reasoner, “Israel’s Election,” 437.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 436.

<sup>57</sup> Quillette Magazine, “PODCAST 54: New York Times Editor Bari Weiss on Her New Book,” 21 September 2019, <https://quillette.com/2019/09/21/podcast-54-new-york-times-editor-bari-weiss-on-her-new-book/>.

political agendas” and make “responsible sense of them in our own contemporary context.”<sup>58</sup> As Reasoner and Kaminsky point out, we have the task of making Paul’s voice “theologically viable in a post-Holocaust world.”<sup>59</sup> That said, I find that Wright’s reading of the apostle Paul, even with its Christian supersessionism,<sup>60</sup> demonstrates Paul’s love for the covenant people, urges gentile assemblies not to imitate the anti-Judaism of Roman elites, and requires gentile Christ-believers to welcome in fellowship Jewish Christ-believers. Wright himself evinces this ethos of Paul in an exchange he had with messianic Jewish rabbi Dr. Mark Kinzer at Samford University in September 2019.<sup>61</sup>

Furthermore, for all the protests about Wright and supersessionism, I fail to understand why the same alarms are not rung over the apocalyptic-Paul school of interpretation whose hyper-Barthian reading of Paul is brutally and nakedly supersessionist.<sup>62</sup> In its extreme varieties, Israel is simply a parable of the religious man *coram Deo*, so Paul strikes at the “hidden Jew” within us all.<sup>63</sup> Or else, according to Harink, Israel is first among equals within creation, and although Israel shares in the slavery of creation, to the point of “hardening, stumbling, blindness, and imprisonment,” Israel will be delivered because of God’s faithfulness to creation. The problem with Harink’s scheme, apart from collapsing Israel’s election into creation, is the stunning denial of Israel’s soteric agency. Israel at most is a sign for the new creation but is not part of the story of creation’s deliverance. The implication is that Israel’s law and faith are not a promise and preparation for the gospel—that would be the dreaded “salvation-history” or the linear “covenantal” narrative. Instead, they are simply part of the religious debris of a dead *kosmos*, which God’s invasive grace launches upon. So, of course the church does not replace Israel; for Harink, there is nothing there worth replacing!<sup>64</sup>

Whereas Harink sees “God’s deed in Christ is a new, direct, and original act of God, an act of invasion, deliverance, and new creation comparable only to God’s act of creation in the beginning,”<sup>65</sup> Wright mostly agrees, but with two critical

<sup>58</sup> John M. G. Barclay, *Paul: A Very Brief History* (London: SPCK, 2017) 85.

<sup>59</sup> Kaminsky and Reasoner, “Israel’s Election,” 422.

<sup>60</sup> Kaminsky and Reasoner (“Israel’s Election,” 422 n. 2) rightly note: “Any Christian reading of the Hebrew Scriptures is likely to involve some form of supersessionism, by which we mean that the early Christians came to believe that their reading of Israel’s scriptures superseded other earlier and contemporary readings of these sacred texts by other Jewish readers and that God’s acting through Jesus’s death and resurrection had ushered in the beginning of the eschaton, thus opening a path for gentiles to participate in God’s promises to Israel.”

<sup>61</sup> Samford University, “N. T. Wright and Mark Kinzer: A Dialogue on the Meaning of Israel,” 20 September 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qIBt64m-Py4&t=1765s>.

<sup>62</sup> For a critique of the apocalyptic reading of Galatians, see Bird, *Anomalous Jew*, 108–69; Wright, *PFG*, 807–8; idem, *Paul and His Recent Interpreters: Some Contemporary Debates* (London: SPCK, 2015) 135–218.

<sup>63</sup> Ernst Käsemann, “Paul and Israel,” in *New Testament Questions of Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969) 186. See Wright, *PFG*, 807–8, 1131, 1409, against such a position.

<sup>64</sup> Harink, “Paul and Israel,” 366–79.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 367–68.

variations. First, there is no circumventing Israel's place in the story of salvation. For Wright, Israel is not merely an object of salvation, she also has soteric agency. Israel is the means through which God reaches the world: "Israel's vocation is to be the agent of the creator god [*sic*] in restoring to the world that which it has lost."<sup>66</sup> Israel's role as a kingdom of priests, a light to the nations, and its kerygmatic worship are given positive force and permanent validity. Second, God's gracious invasive action transpires in the context of the prophetic paradigm of promise and fulfillment: "The one God had acted suddenly, shockingly and unexpectedly—just as he had always said he would."<sup>67</sup> The "just as" is crucial, for it means that salvation cannot jump from Gen 3 to Matt 1 without telling the story of Israel.<sup>68</sup>

I submit that Wright's Paul is eminently superior to the apocalyptic Paul, because he remains a deeply Jewish thinker. He is not against Judaism as a "religion" or even as "a human criteria of value."<sup>69</sup> Instead, Wright's Paul sees the story of Israel as continued in the church; Israel is not replaced so much as expanded to include gentile Christ-believers; and there remains hope yet for ethnic Israel's reconciliation with God. The type of supersessionism that Wright and others find in Paul sees the story of Israel as kept alive, and with it the hope for a miracle on par with resurrection, with ethnic Israel's reconciliation to the God who raised Jesus from the dead (Rom 11:15).<sup>70</sup>

I am not Jewish, so my children do not get a bar mitzvah or bat mitzvah. However, on their thirteenth birthday I do take them all through a rite of passage. No, not baptism or confirmation; rather, we visit the Melbourne Jewish Holocaust Centre Museum. The first lesson of adolescence I wish my children to learn, growing up in a Christian family, is the brutal reality of evil as it was inflicted by so-called Christian nations against the Jewish people. The solution to such evils is—as I suspect Wright, too, believes—the Pauline narrative of God's rescue of creation through a transformed Israel that transforms the world, for the making of atonement and the reconciliation of τὰ πάντα, and for redemptive acts concentrated in Israel's Messiah. This is the story which the Pauline ἐκκλησία is supposed to embody; a story which showcases God's inexhaustible mercy for Jew and gentile alike.

<sup>66</sup> N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 258.

<sup>67</sup> Wright, *PGF*, 1411.

<sup>68</sup> See Scot McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).

<sup>69</sup> John Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015) 428 and 439, 442, 444–45, 539.

<sup>70</sup> See esp. Wright, *PGF*, 1408–17.