

Article Review

*Paul and the Faithfulness of God*¹

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This book, the latest in Wright's series on 'Christian Origins and the Question of God', is a daunting phenomenon: over 1500 pages, packaged in two volumes, containing (I reckon) more than 800,000 words. Building on his earlier publications, and referring across to companion volumes – not even this gigantic text is self-sufficient – Wright here advances in full the synthetic vision of Paul's theology which he has developed and promoted over more than thirty years. The scale reflects his ambition: to integrate all the motifs in Pauline theology within a single large-scale schema; to elucidate its Jewish roots and its points of interaction with Graeco-Roman philosophy, religion and politics; to engage in most of the recent debates on Pauline theology; and to defend and advance his own distinctive theories on justification, covenant and the Messiahship of Jesus, against critics who have lined up against him on several sides.² The structure and size of the project create considerable repetition. Many topics are opened, postponed for several hundred pages, then discussed and then later reprised, while the reader is liable to be wearied by a prose style which often seems excessively baggy. Wright strives to keep our attention with arresting metaphors, engaging illustrations and a knock-about lecture-hall style, but the latter is often tetchy in its criticism of others, and descends too often to caricature. Indeed, the standard of intellectual engagement with contrary opinions is often disappointing, and hardly improved by grand generalisations about 'Enlightenment frameworks' and 'postmodern moralism'.³ It is only rarely that this large work engages

¹ N.T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, Parts I and II, III and IV (Christian Origins and the Question of God; 2 Vols) (London: SPCK, 2013), pp. xxvi + 1658. £65.00 (pbk).

² The dialogue is largely Anglophone: less than 60 of the 1,300 items in the bibliography are in German.

³ The dismissal of those who argue for the non-Pauline authorship of Colossians and Ephesians is a case in point (pp. 56–61); the detailed historical, literary, stylistic and content-focused arguments current in scholarship deserve much better than this. Wright may come to regret some of his rhetoric: post-Holocaust sensibilities are noted sympathetically at times, but then apparently ridiculed as 'the tearful misted-up spectacles of post-holocaust western thinkers' (p. 1413). He promises fuller engagement with others in his forthcoming *Paul and his Recent Interpreters*; but the inadequate comprehension of (e.g.) Bultmann and Martyn, and his hostility to rival interpretations of Paul, suggest that his polemical perspective will skew his analysis.

in detailed exegesis (close engagement with texts, in debate with a range of exegetical options): the opening discussion of Philemon, the focused study of Galatians 6:16 and the close analysis of Romans 9–11 (the highlight of this work) are among the exceptions. Of course one cannot advance a thesis of such breadth without sacrificing some depth in textual debate, but the effect is to lessen considerably the persuasiveness of the whole.

The sixteen chapters of this book are structured in chiasmic fashion, such that the central discussions of ‘The Mindset of the Apostle’ (chapters 6–8) and ‘Paul’s Theology’ (chapters 9–11) are flanked by opening discussions of Paul’s world (chapters 2–5: Second Temple Judaism; Greek philosophy; ‘Religion’ and ‘Culture’; the Roman empire), which are picked up in the closing chapters which spell out the social, cultural and political significance of Paul’s theology in its first-century context (chapters 12–15). Wright properly insists that Paul’s writings cannot be tucked away in a corner of the bookshop labelled ‘spirituality’ or (in modern definitions) ‘religion’: in creating innovative communities, building on but transforming his Jewish heritage, Paul’s theology makes a claim on every sphere of social life, including (at least some of) what we label ‘politics’. In this connection Wright develops his claim that Paul’s theology constitutes an unspoken but persistent challenge to the claims of Caesar, such that Paul saw all the ‘powers’ of the cosmos ‘coming together and doing their worst precisely in and through Rome itself’ (p. 1311). Paul of course never says this, and the thesis requires that Paul left unspoken in *all* of his letters his real analysis of the world. In order to explain this reticence, Wright now appeals not so much to the danger of hostile snoopers (the essence of other scholars’ theories of a ‘hidden transcript’) but to Paul’s anxiety lest his Christian hearers ‘get the wrong end of the stick’ and take him to advocate ‘a literal call to arms’ (p. 1315). On this hypothesis, Paul lacked the ability to make himself clear on a central point in his theology, even to churches he knew very well – a conclusion which will surprise and disappoint many readers.⁴

The surveys of Paul’s Graeco-Roman context are well-informed but not especially innovative, and the real heart of this book lies in its thesis about the ‘essentially Jewish’ and ‘covenantal’ framework of Paul’s theology, which transforms core Jewish convictions regarding monotheism, election and

⁴ The necessity to read Paul’s letters as coded speech is thus a continuing weakness in Wright’s case, although only one element of our continuing debate (see pp. 1307–19). Wright wonders why I identify some passages in Josephus as a coded critique of Rome, but do not find the same in Paul. The answer is simple: Josephus was writing, as Paul was not, for an audience which included Roman officials, including his imperial sponsors.

eschatology in the light of the cross and resurrection of the Messiah.⁵ Essential to Wright's thesis is that Paul (and many, if not most, of his fellow Jews in the Second Temple period) thought within a narrative frame, in which Israel was currently in real or metaphorical 'exile' awaiting the fulfilment of the promised covenant blessings: a new exodus, the return of God to his Temple and the restoration of creation. We may readily grant that many of Paul's contemporaries had eschatological hopes, and regarded the prophetic visions of national renewal, global sovereignty and/or messianic rule as presently unfulfilled. But Wright advocates a more specific thesis: that Jews plotted their location on a biblical time-line which was stuck in Deuteronomy 29 (hence 'exile'; cf. Daniel 9), and awaited the new covenant promises of Deuteronomy 30, as echoed in Jeremiah 31, Ezekiel 36, etc. Wright properly insists that Paul regarded the promised eschatological realities as now decisively inaugurated. He is impressed by the fact that Paul cites Deuteronomy 30 at a point in Romans 9–11 (Rom 10:6–8) that he takes to be the climax of a narrative survey of Israel's history: the citation suggests that we have reached 'the turning-point of Israel's prophetic history' (p. 1172). However, Paul's citation from Deuteronomy 30:11–14 does not derive from its eschatological scenario, but from Moses' present-day instructions about obeying the law ('today', 30:11).⁶ In general, the notion of a narrative template, based on Deuteronomy 27–30, seems overstated, and poorly evidenced in Paul. Without it the language of 'exile' becomes a general and potentially misleading metaphor for unfulfilled Jewish hopes of many different kinds.

That aside, Wright is correct to insist that Paul places the Christ-event in relation to events both before and after it – in that very general sense, on a narrative time-line. This is a helpful corrective both to the Bultmannian tendency to focus exclusively on the present moment of existential encounter with the gospel, and to the tendency in dogmatic theology to turn Pauline motifs into timeless soteriological principles. But the question is *what kind of narrative Paul builds around the Christ-event: a narrative of whom and in what kind of shape?* Wright repeatedly lampoons Martyn's 'apocalyptic' reading of Pauline theology, which he misrepresents as practically 'sweeping away everything Jewish and replacing it with an entirely new construct' (p. 542).⁷

⁵ Readers with less than 60+ hours at their disposal might welcome some reading guidance: in my judgement the most creative and significant theses of this book reside in chs 2, 7, and 9–11; even those constitute a taxing 860-page read.

⁶ For a better reading, see F. Watson, *Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith* (London: Continuum, 2004), pp. 329–41, 436–9.

⁷ To dub Martyn's reading of Paul non-Jewish, even anti-Jewish (pp. 612; 1481; parallel to Nazi erasure of Jewish history, p. 1477, n. 8!) will horrify those who understand

Martyn and de Boer may have (unnecessarily) downplayed the Abraham texts in Galatians 3–4, as merely responsive to Paul's opponents, but they are clear that Paul sees Christ as the fulfilment of God's promises to Abraham. Their essential point is that the continuity of divine purpose typically cuts against the grain of human history and is independent of human processes of development or descent. Wright partly grants that point, and wishes to dub his own reading 'apocalyptic' as well. Both sides in fact agree that the load-bearing narratives in Paul's theology concern God's purposes, gifts and interventions, but the polemics of this book do not allow for further discussion of this point or of its theological ramifications.

At the core of Wright's thesis is a claim that Paul works with a set of interlocking narratives, arranged like a Russian doll, one inside the other (p. 184). The outer frame is the story of creation leading to new creation, with humanity designed to be its rulers and its means of blessing. Inside this is the story of Abraham's family, which was intended to undo the sin of Adam and to put the creation project back on track after the disasters of Genesis 1–11. Inside this again is the narrative of the Messiah Jesus, who takes on the role of Israel, where Israel had failed in its task and when sin had used the law to concentrate its force in this one place. As the representative Israelite (and as God himself, 'returning to Zion' in the person of his Son), Jesus fulfils the faithfulness that Israel was unable to accomplish, defeating sin and saving Israel while doing Israel's job of saving the nations, so that those 'in Christ' (that is, in 'the Messiah-and-his people', p. 17) can gain the virtues necessary to rule the world in the renewed creation. The Messiah-people are justified (counted members of the covenant people) by faith, that is, by a faith/faithfulness which matches the Messiah's faithfulness, which is itself the expression of God's faithfulness to the covenant. In this covenant-narrative not only are the various motifs in Pauline theology scooped up into a single, multilayered story, but scholarly dichotomies between 'justification by faith' and 'participation in Christ', and between 'salvation history' and 'apocalyptic', are overcome by their placement within a single overarching frame.

The range and ambition of this thesis is remarkable, and it is advanced with a thickness of reference to biblical texts which will appeal to many who are looking for new ways to integrate not only Paul but the whole drama of the Bible. But is it sustainable as a reading of Paul? A crucial move, on which 'a good deal hangs' (p. 775), is the claim that Paul reads the

Martyn's concerns. Wright's tone here becomes so irritable, and the picture so distorted, that scholars who know Martyn's work but are favourable to Wright are likely to squirm with embarrassment.

election of Abraham/Israel as designed to undo Adam's sin and its effects (p. 784), to deal with evil (p. 907), in short, to save or to rescue the world (pp. 814, 839, etc.). This hypothesis is advanced by a reading of Genesis, where parallels between the creation story and the story of Abraham are taken to suggest that Abraham is called to undo Adamic sin, a reading which Wright confesses is unsupported by most commentators on Genesis (p. 785, n. 27).⁸ The assertion that this reasoning is evidenced in Second Temple Judaism is unconvincing: apart from a citation from Genesis Rabbah (p. 794), a text written many centuries after Paul, Wright produces no Jewish texts which suggest anything like the claim that Israel was the means by which God would rescue the world.⁹ And, crucially, there is nothing in Paul to substantiate this claim. Although Wright points frequently to Romans 2:17–24 in this connection as a description of Israel's vocation,¹⁰ the language there used of light, instruction and guidance for the nations indicates an educational but not at all a salvific role. There are no linguistic links here to anything that Paul says elsewhere about how God deals or has dealt with sin. Thus a central load-bearing pillar in Wright's edifice looks dangerously weak.

The same may be said for the claim that Jesus, as Messiah, has played out the role of Israel and fulfilled its task in saving the world. Whatever one makes of Wright's insistence that every time Paul says 'Christos' he means us to think of Jesus' Messianic status, one may dispute several elements in the claim that he was 'Israel's representative Messiah, who summed up the life and

⁸ And for good reason: it is a large and unsupported step to read the narrative links as signalling not only recapitulation (Abrahamic 'multiplying' echoes the instructions to humanity) but also reversal (Abraham is intended to reverse Adam's fall).

⁹ The claim to 'plenty of evidence' (pp. 792, 811) notwithstanding. On the crucial pages (pp. 181–4), most weight is placed on Philo's reference to the Jewish people as priests for the world; but that, as Wright himself notes, concerns intercession and representative praise, which is a long way from 'putting the world to rights' (p. 182). Following up cross-references to Wright's earlier work (p. 181, n. 407) will lead to no additional evidence: that Israel is or will be the true humanity does not imply that through Israel God will redeem the rest of the world. In fact, as Wright notes, many Second Temple texts are content for God to save Israel even if other nations perish (pp. 792–3).

¹⁰ And to Rom 3:2, where the oracles of God are 'entrusted' to Israel; surely, Wright insists, for the sake of the nations (pp. 836–9). However, the entrusting could be for the sake of later Jewish generations and/or for the sake of future believers in Christ (see Rom 15:4). The companion essay on Romans 2:17–3:9 (N.T. Wright, *Pauline Perspectives: Essays on Paul, 1978–2013* (London: SPCK, 2013), pp. 489–509) does not add materially to the argumentation. When Paul cites the promises that God would bless the nations in Abraham and his seed, he indicates that they were fulfilled in Christ (Gal 3:1–16; Rom 4:1–25), not that this blessing was a mission that Israel failed to accomplish.

story of the people in himself [and] brought Israel's history to its appointed if shocking and unexpected climax' (p. 405). That Jesus 'represents' Israel and fulfils its vocation – a 'central' point that gives everything in Paul a 'tight coherence' (pp. 815–16, 823–4, 839) – is more asserted than proved. Arguments from biblical statements about David are advanced with some tentativeness (pp. 828–30), and it is admitted that there is nothing in Second Temple Judaism to support the notion that the Messiah incorporates his people (pp. 826–7). It can only be deduced from Paul himself – or from an imposition of Wright's schema onto Paul. The purported evidence does not convince: Paul is hardly speaking as a representative Israelite in Galatians 2:19–20, the resurrection of Jesus is never expounded by Paul as the resurrection of Israel in nuce, while the 'casting off' of Israel in Romans 11:12, 15 has no linguistic connections with what is said of Jesus' death. That Jesus as Messiah is 'Israel in person' (pp. 842, 930), offering to God the faithfulness which Israel had failed to perform (pp. 857–8, 890), is by no means the only way to bring coherence to Pauline theology, even if it ties the knots for Wright. As a sign of its strain, we now have the famous *pistis Christou* formulation playing two roles in the narrative, first as the Messiah fulfilling God's covenant faithfulness to the world, and then as the Messiah offering the (expected but unforthcoming) faithfulness of Israel to God. This *pistis* is then echoed in that of believers, though here it also has two faces: both their faith in the resurrection (as they look helplessly to God, p. 1031) and their faithfulness to God.¹¹ Wright acknowledges that he thereby gives human *pistis* two senses – both faith (as trust) and faithfulness (as being trustworthy, pp. 920, 1470–1) – but he disregards the problems this raises for lexical semantics.¹² Here 'coherence' seems to be bought at the cost of a linguistic fudge (either Paul's or ours). And if Wright's knot gives way at this point, a beautiful pattern unravels before our eyes.

If the central thesis of Wright's work is unlikely to convince most scholars, there is still much to be salvaged. At many points Wright illumines the

¹¹ *Pistis* in the sense of faithfulness (i.e. trustworthiness, dependability) is never unambiguously attributed to Jesus by Paul; obedience and faithfulness are not semantically equivalent. Wright insists that Jesus' *pistis* does not designate his faith in God (p. 842), so at that point there is no parallel with what is said of Abraham and of believers in Rom 4.

¹² See B. Matlock, 'Detheologizing the *pistis Christou* Debate: Cautionary Remarks from a Lexical Semantic Perspective', *NovT* 42 (2000), pp. 1–23. As Matlock makes clear, one picks out the sense of a word from its context: God's *pistis* in Rom 3:2 (alongside reference to his 'truth' and 'righteousness') clearly betokens his 'faithfulness', but this cannot determine the sense of *pistis Christou* in 3:21–6, where the context, with the verbal form *pisteuein*, helps us pick out the sense 'faith'.

coherence of Romans and properly emphasises the church and its practice as the goal of Paul's theologising. He correctly insists that Paul does not propound an abstract soteriology, but his counter-emphasis on narrative is weakened by his failure to recognise the distinctive ways in which Paul tells narratives in the patterns of grace. His insistence that Romans 9 tells the story of Israel in a form that any Jew would have recognised and affirmed is manifestly incorrect. One only has to compare this chapter with *Wisdom of Solomon* 10 (where God rescues the righteous), or with Philo's concern to find reasons for God's preference for Jacob over Esau (e.g. *Leg.* 3:65–106) to realise that Paul's insistence that Israel has always depended on an unconditioned mercy represents a peculiar version of its story.¹³ The same is true regarding Romans 4, where Wright's reading of the justification of the ungodly (4:5) as the justification of Gentiles (despite the immediate context in Romans 4:1–8, the backdrop of 3:10–20 and the parallel in 5:6) reflects a persistent failure to grapple with the radicality of Paul's gospel of the unconditioned gift. A holistic reading of Romans 4 reveals that Paul tells the story of Abraham to show not only that the Abrahamic family includes Gentiles but also that its origin is incongruous grace (4:4–6, 16), from the God who calls into being what does not exist (4:17).¹⁴ Since this mercy is the basis of Israel's calling in Romans 9–11 (9:6–8; 11:28–32), indeed the 'root' from which the branches draw their nurture (11:17–24), Paul is deeply upset but not utterly despondent regarding Israel's current unbelief. Wright puts forward powerful arguments against a 'two covenant' reading of Romans 9–11, but his energetic effort to defend his minority reading of 'all Israel' (11:26) as 'all believers, Jews and Gentiles' does not, in my view, convince.¹⁵ Paul still hopes for the salvation of his people, since their calling was unconditioned

¹³ Wright notes the difference from *Wisdom* 10 but says: 'I still see broad convergence at a deeper level: telling this story is the key to God's dealings with the world' (p. 1184, n. 56, emphasis his). But it makes the world of difference how one tells the story of Israel, and appeal to a lowest common denominator illuminates nothing. See further my *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, forthcoming).

¹⁴ Wright is anxious to distance himself from Reformation readings (pp. 850, 1003–6), to the extent of suggesting that Rom 4 is 'hardly at all soteriological' (p. 1002), except in the sense that (on his reading) Abraham's family was called to rescue the world from its plight. But it is the means of God's calling, and the basis for the covenant, which fascinates Paul; the Gentile horizon of the covenant rests on its character as an unconditioned gift.

¹⁵ Among the weaknesses in the current form of his argument is that it requires taking 'Israel' in Rom 11:25, as well as 11:26, to mean 'the people of God in Christ, both Jews and Gentiles'. But the 'hardening upon part of Israel' (or 'upon Israel for a time') in 11:25 clearly echoes 11:7, where the meaning of 'Israel' is unambiguous. There are not 'two Israels' in Rom 9:6 or anywhere else in Rom 9–11. Rom 9:6 indicates

by any element of worth and is therefore not disqualified by their current disobedience. What he envisages is probably (as Wright argues) their turning from unbelief to faith in Christ, though it is not clear how or when this will take place, or exactly what is meant by 'all'. In other words, because Israel's narrative is, in Paul's reading, determined from the start by a peculiar, incongruous grace, Paul can explain the oddity of Gentile incomers (9:24–6, 30–3; 10:11–13, 20) while also retaining hope that God will have mercy on the currently 'disobedient' Israel.

If he had given full weight to the special shape of the Pauline narratives, Wright could have found common ground with the Reformation figures whom he (in good 'new perspective' fashion) repeatedly criticises as failing to see what Paul was about. Despite claims to the contrary (pp. 1038–9, 1513–14), the dichotomy between the 'old perspective(s)' on Paul and the 'new' is one that Wright is a long way from overcoming. Those who know the Reformers and their writings will wince at some of the generalisations (to put it generously) articulated here.¹⁶ Closer inspection would have shown that they were not so much imposing their own dogmatic agendas onto innocent Paul narratives, as trying to draw out the meaning of his narratives from the fact that they were told in such peculiar forms. Of course, they were also trying to relate that meaning to their contemporary context, as theological interpreters are required to do.

Wright presents his work as the historical recovery of the original Paul, against a history of misreadings, whether Platonic, Augustinian, medieval, Reformation, Enlightenment, modern or post-modern. All are confidently swatted aside, although none is here studied in depth: in general, reception history is regarded as a 'recent fashion' (p. 48). Indeed, the persistent rhetoric of this book is that, to understand Paul, one simply needs to do better history. What is required is 'sheer history' (p. 1261, n. 731), since exegesis is 'a branch of history' (p. 1515). Recognising that his reading might be taken to be Christian, he indicates that 'the "Christian" view I take, in my tradition at least, is to let the text be the text, rather than make it say what we want' (p. 1133). That, of course, is a false or at least a highly simplistic way of representing our hermeneutical options. As his own earlier exposition of 'critical realism' appeared to acknowledge, there is no possibility of simply

only that not all those who are 'descended from Israel (*ex Israel*)' are Israel. God makes his choice among the descendants, on his terms alone.

¹⁶ According to Wright, Lutherans tend to say 'that God has cut off the Israel-plan and done something completely different' (p. 499). Reformation thought is divided: 'is the law a good thing (Calvin) or a bad thing (Luther)?' (p. 514). This is so crude, and so misleading with regard to Luther, that one wonders what level of readership Wright expects.

'letting the text be the text':¹⁷ all readers start and to some extent remain in a location which shapes their reading, otherwise they could make no sense of the text at all. Exegesis has an indispensable historical responsibility, but the synthetic literary and ideological work which goes into making sense of Paul is by no means merely a historical task. Wright is quick to tell us what has led others astray and diagnoses theological (or anti-theological) prejudice with freedom. What he fails to tell us is where he is reading from, and for what goal.¹⁸ This lack of hermeneutical self-reflection (or at least, self-disclosure) may arise from the fact that Wright's own theology is tacitly in agreement with (his reconstruction of) Paul's; at least no critical gap emerges in the course of this exposition. But by presenting himself 'as a historian and an exegete' who 'must stick to the text and try to understand what it actually says, not what I might like it to say' (p. 1133) he has masked his own agency as a reader whose work of 'understanding' and connecting these complex texts inevitably (and properly) brings his own interests and conceptual tools to bear on their interpretation.

My tone may seem unduly negative. There are many valuable passages in this book, and its energy, breadth, confidence and ambition are on a scale commensurate with its size. In the history of the discipline few scholars have attempted such an original yet comprehensive construal of Pauline theology, and in the modern era perhaps only Schweitzer could match the liveliness of Wright's mind. But I doubt that many Pauline scholars will accept the large synthetic schema that Wright presents, for all its attractions, while the stimulus offered by this book will be lessened, and perhaps cancelled, by its persistently shrill and overheated rhetoric.

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¹⁷ N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK 1992), pp. 32–7, 81–118.

¹⁸ There is a hint of the latter in the claim that 'the principal and ultimate goal of all historical work on the New Testament ought to be a more sensitive and intelligent practice of Christian mission and discipleship' (p. 1484). That is, of course, one possible purpose for historical scholarship. But then one should clarify how commitment to such a goal has influenced this project from the start and all along the way.