

Review of N.T. Wright's *Paul and the Faithfulness of God**

Jerry L. Sumney
Lexington Theological Seminary
Lexington, Kentucky

Professor Wright's *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*¹ is a monumental work. It is a forceful and extensive presentation of an understanding of Paul that all New Testament interpreters will need to be in conversation with—indeed, should be in conversation with. This book is the most extensive argument for this way of reading Paul's thought and work thoroughly within his Jewish matrix. With its many distinctive elements, this work represents the culmination of Prof. Wright's work to this point. As the fourth volume of a set that has taken much more than a decade to produce, this book is in conversation with friends and critics of earlier versions of Wright's work. Thus, the book often spends significant effort both defending its views against critics and offering detailed explanations to show how the critics have either been wrong or have misunderstood. At the same time, the book interacts at length with the history of Christian theology and Pauline exegesis. Thus, in addition to being an exposition of Wright's understanding of Paul, there are apologetic and polemical edges to notable portions of the book. The persuasiveness of much of the argument of this book became clear to me as I was giving a lecture on Matthew while I was reading it. In response to student questions in the class about Matthew I found myself using language and concepts from this book on Paul.

Wright focuses attention on (at least) two related fronts.² First, he sees it as central to his interpretation of Paul to emphasize the narrative nature of the Torah. It is not only that Paul reads it as a narrative, but that it is most centrally a narrative. This grounds the way Paul reads it and the most important theological assertions Paul makes. Second, the most important theological affirmation concerns the centrality of the Messiahship of Jesus and the presence of the [S]pirit in the church. This identification of Jesus leads Paul to radical redefini-

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addition to my review, the panel included reviews by Richard Hays and James Thompson, with a response by Prof. Wright.

tions of his understanding of God, election, and eschatology. All other elements of Paul's thought fit under or are dependent on what Paul says about these three crucial things.

In Paul's reworked monotheism the God of Israel has unexpectedly returned in the person of Jesus (654, 677). This is the fulfillment of the promises about God returning to Zion after the exile. This is a "high" Christology because of the identity that it posits between Jesus and the God of Israel (654). This is not the invention of Paul, Wright notes (665, 689, 690), but what the church already confessed about Jesus. Thus the name Lord, that name of God found in the LXX, is applied to Jesus from very early in the church (701-709).

In this new understanding of God, the Spirit is the continuing presence of God in the church (711-13). Just as God was working *as* Jesus, so God fulfills God's promises *as* the [S]pirit (721). The exodus motif is a central means by which Wright interprets God's presence as the [S]pirit and as the Son. The presence of the [S]pirit in the church makes the church the new Temple and so fulfills the promise that God would again dwell in the temple.

Wright's treatment of the question of whether Paul starts with a plight of humanity that the gospel solves or starts with the gospel and devises a need for it deserves special notice. I think this is one of the most helpful parts of the book. The problem that all Jews faced was why the world is so unjust if it is made by the one good God. All point to the sin of Adam as the origin of the problem and see the descendants of Abraham as those through whom the solution comes. But in Paul's thought this problem is redefined and intensified (as is the solution). The cross and resurrection show the problem to be deeper than previously thought. Israel could not mediate a solution because it was also "in Adam," that is, in the same condition as those without the law; it was unable to do God's will because of the power of sin. Abraham's descendants were to perform the rescue operation, but they were trapped in the same predicament as the rest of humanity. So the coming of Jesus the Messiah was the rescue operation for the rescue operation. Thus, Paul starts with a plight, but that plight is understood as a deeper problem when the solution (the death of Jesus) is manifested. So Wright takes important aspects of the two options and develops a more complex response to the issue that makes better sense than either alternative.

Wright's discussion of election is focused (exclusively) on Israel's task of bringing salvation to the nations. God calls Abraham's descendants in order to undo the sin of Adam and its consequences (784). So salvation is the goal of the covenant with Abraham. As Wright emphasizes, God chose Israel for a *purpose*, to accomplish something *through* them (810). It is through Israel that God will save and rule the world. When Israel was unable to accomplish this, even with the Law, God acts again in Christ. Christ is the representative of Israel, *the* seed of Abraham through whom the promise is fulfilled. Election has been transferred from Israel to Israel's messiah, Jesus (902). When the offer of salvation is fulfilled in the Messiah, Israel's election is also fulfilled. According to Wright, the heart of Paul's theology is that God and Israel meet in Jesus; monotheism and election come together in Jesus. Thus, the divine purpose of Israel is accomplished in him (816, 1262). So now, Israel "as a whole" is summed up and redefined in Christ (831).

Wright notes that Paul's redefinition of election has parallels within Second Temple Judaism, including the Qumran community (809-11; 1415-16). Such groups redefined "Israel" so that only they were Israel. This is what Paul has done in his understanding of the church, except that the new boundary is faith in the Messiah. Since that is the case, Israel now includes believing Gentiles as well as believing Jews.

For Wright, Paul is centrally concerned, at least in Romans (the letter he deems most important), with the covenant righteousness of God. Paul argues that through Christ God has fulfilled the promise to Abraham to save the world through Abraham's seed. Thus, God is seen to be faithful to God's promises and to be the one who reclaims God's good world.

In a book of this size there is always something to raise questions about. I would want to have some extended discussions about the interpretation of a number of passages, including some in the Apocrypha. But I appreciate Wright's recognition of the ways Paul is dependent upon beliefs in the church that were already present when he joined the movement. I also appreciate the demand of reading Paul in context as much as possible. Still, I want to raise four issues that I think have far reaching importance for the way Wright reads Scripture and understands Paul.

First, Wright sees Paul's method of reading Scripture always, or nearly so, as what we today would call reading in context. Paul does not just cite a phrase or sentence, but cites a text in a way that indicates

that he has in mind at least the surrounding chapters and perhaps a theological theme that Wright finds in a whole book. He attributes this in part to believing that Paul thinks with a master narrative that conditions all his thought and that the Torah itself is primarily, at least in Paul's reading, a narrative. Wright attributes an inability to see this use of Scripture in Paul to the "left-brain rationalism" of modernist culture (1452).

I must admit that I am one of those who thinks that Paul on occasion, and even regularly, picks a text because its particular phrase suits his argument. He engages in what we would call proof-texting. But that is not an accusation. In this, he reads Scripture the way many of his contemporaries read Homer. And as Wright himself notes, the Rabbis do not read with the narrative method he sees in Paul, though some other Second Temple works do (though we should note that they have more explicitly narrative sections than the Pauline letters). The concern to defend Paul by saying that he reads in context seems to be the product (if I may return the *ad hominem* argument) of that modernist left-brain. Paul was not, as Wright would agree, concerned about a historical critical reading of the text. Neither do I see Paul worrying about the larger point of the flow of the section from which he takes a passage.

There are many places where it seems that Wright's concern to read in the ancient literary context of what Paul quotes does not allow Paul to cite a text and just mean to cite the text rather than an entire and hidden narrative that Wright attaches to the surrounding material. But reading Paul as a person of his time does not require him to read Isaiah as I would or with themes that I can discern. The kind of reading Wright envisions seems to demand that Paul has the text readily at hand so that he can read the surrounding materials and keep running themes in mind. But it seems highly unlikely that Paul always travels with a Torah scroll or an Isaiah scroll with him. (After all, he would have lost them in ship wrecks and imprisonments.) There may be places where Paul does have such broad themes and movements in texts in mind, but the pervasiveness of this kind of reading that Wright finds seems to demand a modern book and a quiet study.

Wright also sets having Paul see Scripture as a divine oracle from which he can draw phrases over against having Paul reading Scripture in relation to Israel and to Messiah. I do not see these as mutually exclusive. I think Paul both has a narrative and uses the wording of otherwise unrelated texts to establish points in his arguments.³

I also think that the question of the competent reader deserves more attention than Wright does. If we take seriously the Gentile character of Paul's churches, we should expect that those readers/hearers of the text (who are new to the heritage of Israel) will often not hear the complex-narratives Wright hears. If Paul's message relied on these hidden themes when writing to Gentiles who, for the most part, cannot read, he was likely not a very good communicator.

We will not settle this much wider debate here, but I do want to note that Wright makes his understanding of how Paul reads Scripture a constant element of this work. But I do not think it is vital to the argument in most places. In fact, there are places where it gets in the way of presenting the argument that is in the Pauline text. In places within the book, Wright calls readers to attend to what is in the text rather than what is not (e.g., 1428). Heeding that advice in this regard might be helpful because in many places his arguments from what is in the text are strong enough to make his case so that he does not need to depend on the speculation that these envisioned reliances on the flow of a prophetic or Torah text contribute.

A second question that arose as I read this book concerned the place of the *Sinai* covenant. There is a great deal of concern about the covenant with Abraham and the promise that God made to Abraham. That covenant receives more emphasis here than in nearly any other Pauline interpreter. This is an important contribution to understanding Paul. Within the context of the Abrahamic covenant, Wright sees the Torah as something that had a specific job and a limited lifespan. Its work has now been fulfilled, so its time is past. Israel is no longer bound to the commands of Torah that made Israel Israel. The unspoken understanding seems to be that the Mosaic covenant ends when Torah is fulfilled. I say unspoken because Wright does not talk about this covenant. He has the Abrahamic covenant and the Torah; not the Abrahamic covenant and the Sinai covenant. Some of this stems from the Pauline texts, but Paul does speak of the Mosaic covenant, for example in 2 Corinthians 3, and Romans 9:4 speaks of multiple covenants.

It seems to me that there was (perhaps *is*) more to the Sinai covenant than the Torah. The Torah, as Law or instruction or perhaps even as narrative, sets out stipulations of the covenant. But there seems to be more to this relationship than Torah. So I would like to hear Prof. Wright talk about how he sees the *Sinai* covenant related to the Abrahamic covenant. I do not think the Sinai covenant can be subsumed within the Abrahamic covenant with no remainder. So, what

happens to the rest of the Sinai covenant when the Torah is fulfilled? This leads me to my next over-arching question.

Wright devotes a great deal of this work to discussion of Election. As I noted above, Wright defines the election of Israel through Abraham exclusively in terms of its mission to be the means through which God repairs the world. "Israel" can be redefined as the Messiah and Messiah people (that is, the church) because Christ has fulfilled this task. My question is whether election can be defined so narrowly. I think Wright is completely correct when he suggests that we should put Paul on the map of separatist Jewish sects that make exclusivist claims about their identity (1415-16). Still, there seems to be something more to the Jewish people's election for Paul. (These separatist sects also continued to see a difference between Gentiles and other [unfaithful] Jews.) To return to the letter that Wright sees as most important (e.g., 1052, 1062), Rom 9:4-5 lists a number of privileges that Israel has been granted through its election: adoption, the glory, the covenants, the law, and the patriarchs, in addition to being the people through whom the Messiah came. In addition to this list, Paul seems concerned to maintain certain advantages for Jews⁴ even throughout his argument that confines all under sin (3:1-3). Even if these advantages do not end up making them any less sinful and in need of salvation (3:9), Paul still lists them as advantages—as things that seem to be a part of their election. Even the thematic verses of Romans note that the gospel is (present tense) for Jews first (1:16-17), and more than chronology seems to be involved here. Furthermore, Wright acknowledges that Paul's mission practice was to go to the synagogue first and recognizes that this is part of Paul thinking that the gospel is for "Jews first" (1440-42). These things suggest that something remains of the election of Jews. Wright's discussion of the redefinition of Israel that takes place through THE seed in order to bring salvation does not, I think, touch on why that is the only element of Israel's election that seems to matter. That it is the only thing mentioned in Genesis 12 does not seem like a sufficient reason (to anticipate an initial response). If there is nothing left to their election, why is the gospel for Jews first?

The final question I want to raise concerns what Paul thinks about Jewish identity in the church, including his own Jewish identity. The Antioch incident recorded in Galatians 2 makes it painfully clear that this was an issue that Paul had to deal with directly. Yet interpreters remain divided over what Paul had to say about it. I suspect that this is true in part because Paul's response was complicated.

Wright recognizes that in some places Paul is Torah observant, though he diminishes the importance of it by saying that it was just tactful when he preaches in synagogues (1440). I think something more may be going on.

In his discussion of whether Paul maintains a Jewish identity, Wright says, “Being ‘Jewish’ was no longer Paul’s basic identity” (1436). I think that is exactly right, though I would want to say that this is about Paul’s “basic *religious* identity.” But I think Wright goes beyond what Paul would say when he asserts that Paul would reject any Jewish identity “apart from the one ‘identity’ which mattered: that of being Messiah-people” (1433-34) and that it was non-sense to Paul to cling to Jewish identity because the Messiah had come (1433).⁵ Wright contends that this is the case because Paul has “died to the Law.” Indeed, Wright asserts, Paul must not be Torah observant if he can utter these words (1430-31). Contrary to the implication here, there are other ways to understand this statement of Paul. For example, perhaps he means that he died to the Law as the single way that the people of God (Messiah believers) live out their devotion to God or perhaps Paul died to his own misunderstanding of the law (which Wright mentions on p. 1431). Or perhaps the possibility that Paul is engaged in exaggerated rhetoric is more likely than Wright allows. In any case, this statement does not manifestly exclude the possibility that Paul is Torah observant as a Jew in circumstances other than trying to evangelize observant Jews.

I think we need more nuance here. I think it is more accurate to say that Paul subordinated his Jewish identity to his identity as a Messiah person. As I noted above, I think Wright is correct when he says that Paul’s most important religious identity has changed. Nothing is more important than being “in Christ.” It is also clear that being a Jew or a Gentile does not establish any privilege or status in the church. Circumcision and uncircumcision count for nothing with respect to attaining salvation or having status in the community, but you do not stop being one or the other. Yes, Paul can on occasion say that non-Jewish believers were once Gentiles because they have been brought into the Messiah. But he does not quite say that he used to be a Jew. He did give up status and privilege and seeming advantages, which he sees as truly valuable because they are the comparative standard that demonstrates that what he gained was exceedingly valuable (Phil 3). In addition, Paul submitted to punishment from synagogue authorities (2 Cor 11:24) and Acts has him go to the temple in Jerusalem to worship (Wright accepts the reliability of a number of things about Paul that

appear only in Acts). Thus, Paul clearly recognizes some continuing validity of the worship there. The coming of the messiah does not seem to mean that the expiration date for the temple (as a manifestation of Jewish [or of Israel's] worship and conformity to the Torah) has past.

Paul is clear that Jewish identity must not interfere with fellowship when the Messiah people are together. In that context being one with the congregation of Gentiles and Jews who together are the church is more important than his Jewish identity and being Torah observant. The Antioch incident is about which identity is primary, not about whether Jewish identity should be jettisoned. Recognizing that we all have multiple identities, even multiple religious identities, can help us craft a more nuanced picture of the ways that Jewish identity and church identity are related to one another. This understanding seems to me to cohere better with Paul's assertion that Jews and Gentiles must be together in Christ because God is the God of the whole world. If Jews must stop being Jews, then God is only the God of Gentiles.⁶

Despite having raised some questions that touch on important aspects of Wright's proposal, I want to express my sincere appreciation for his work. Seldom do we see interpreters even try to pull together so wide a range of elements of Paul's thought into a coherent whole. We owe Professor Wright a significant debt of gratitude for giving us such rich material to think about and to help us understand Paul more clearly.

End Notes

¹ *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 2 vols. Christian Origins and the Question of God, Vol. 4 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013).

² Most of my comments involve material in chapters 9-11, the sections that Wright identifies as the heart of the book.

³ This is similar to the approach Francis Watson takes in his *Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2004) that Wright discusses in 1456ff.

⁴ It may be important to note here that Paul uses the term *Ioudaios*. It may be that Paul wants to distinguish "Jew" from "Israel" in this place. Perhaps that helps him discuss the issue with more nuance. However, Wright says that Paul also identifies Messiah believers as Jews (1432).

⁵ This seems a strange assertion. Other Jewish sects certainly thought Jewish identity was important in the time after the messiah came.

⁶ I think this view also coheres better with Paul's concerns to maintain relations with the Jerusalem church, that remained Torah observant (especially according to Acts) and to the presence of the kinds of churches that Matthew's Gospel seems to address.