N. T. Wright

Paul and the Faithfulness of God

Christian Origins and the Question of God 4

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The much-anticipated fourth volume of N. T. Wright’s series Christian Origins and the Question of God reflects his forty years of research on Paul. Building upon findings represented in previous volumes of the series, in particular The New Testament and the People of God and The Resurrection of the Son of God, both of which he references regularly, Wright explores the perplexing problem of the nature of Paul’s message. He is convinced that the best way to understand Paul is in light of his Hellenistic Jewish heritage, focusing on monotheism, eschatology, and Paul’s conviction that the Hebrew Bible’s messianic promise of return to the land was fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth.

The two volumes, or “books,” of Paul and the Faithfulness of God, consist of some fifteen hundred pages of text and are divided into four separate parts. Part 1 is about Paul and his world. The first chapter focuses on Philemon to provide the conceptual paradigm for the rest of Wright’s discussion. It is not focused thematically but rather integrates topics to create a more holistic understanding of the apostle’s message. This approach leads to an amalgamation of theology and ethics, since Paul’s focus is communitarian, based on his conviction that Jesus of Nazareth was the God of Israel’s Messiah, whom God raised from the dead. To accomplish this task, Wright rejects the history of religions antithesis that saw Paul as either a Jewish thinker exegeting scripture in isolation or as an apostle to
the gentiles who had largely abandoned his Jewish heritage. Rather, “We must strive for a larger vision of his overall project in which his ... careful use of the scriptures ... and his supposed engagement with the non-Jewish philosophical traditions ... can be integrated within a fresh account of his actual, Christ and spirit orientation” (45). Paul, therefore, is to be understood primarily as a Jewish thinker who is convinced that Jesus’s resurrection actually took place (71). Indeed, Wright asserts that the resurrection of Jesus was vital for Paul’s whole theological project (408, 1383, 1483). It was the distinguishing feature of his whole worldview (409–10), around which he restructured traditional Jewish themes of monotheism, election, and eschatology.

Wright then focuses on the conflicting worldviews of Judaism (ch. 2), Hellenism (chs. 3–4), and the Roman imperial ideology (ch. 5). His hypothesis is that Paul’s method was to read the scripture as a story that confronted the dominant gentile narrative, particularly that of the Roman Principate. However, this distinctly Jewish narrative had a twist: it was interpreted through the lens of the crucified Messiah (141). Therefore, readings of Paul that interpret him either in terms of an evolving theology of salvation history or a world-shattering apocalyptic eschatology are incorrect. The former, Wright contends, owes its origin to the Kantian and Hegelian view of history that has held sway since the Enlightenment. The latter reflects a misunderstanding of the eschatology of Second Temple Judaism. Instead of expecting the “end of the world” in a fiery conflagration, as often contended by adherents of “apocalyptic eschatology,” Jews of the Second Temple period dreamed of the world’s re-creation. It is this eschatological hope for a new creation that challenged both the Platonic view of the physical universe as corrupt and the Roman eschatology that saw history’s fulfillment occurring in the emergence of the empire (see 295–97).

Part 2 focuses on Paul’s worldview and is perhaps Wright’s greatest contribution to our understanding of the apostle’s thought. Wright seeks to plumb the depths of Paul’s self-understanding, which as a Jew focuses on Judaism’s most distinguishing characteristic, monotheism. At the same time, Paul “rethought [monotheism] around Jesus and the spirit” (566). That is, while Paul cannot be considered a Chalcedonian Trinitarian, the seeds of Trinitarian thought were incipient within Paul’s proclamation, to be developed by later generations. Nevertheless, the role of Jesus and the spirit never compromise Paul’s monotheistic beliefs. Rather, Paul’s vision of the one God is consistent with the monotheism of Second Temple Judaism but modified by Paul’s understanding of God’s inaugurated eschatological act in Jesus.

This observation leads to Wright’s longest section, part 3. In three chapters (chs. 9–11) Wright discusses Paul’s theology. It is a narrative theology based upon a rereading of Israel’s story, culminating in God’s new and surprising work in Christ. In chapter 9
Wright discusses how Paul’s rereading led to a restructuring of monotheism in light of the Christ event. Wright agrees with Bauckham’s and Hurtado’s contention that even at an early date Christians thought of Jesus as divine. Paul shared that belief (647–48, 653). But could early Christians draw on the stories of Judaism to support their understanding of a divine Messiah? Wright answers in the affirmative (653). Early Judaism longed for a return of God’s people to the land of Israel, where God would dwell with the chosen people. These expectations were expressed not only in the Hebrew Bible but also in Second Temple Jewish authors such as Ben Sira. For the early church, this hope was fulfilled in the person of Jesus (654–56). In short, the story of Jesus is the story of the exodus and return from exile. To support this contention, Wright engages in extensive exegesis of passages, including Gal 4:1–11; Rom 8:1–4, and 1 Cor 8–10, to note how Paul develops a new matrix.

This example illustrates Wright’s methodology in chapters 9–11. He begins by proposing a hypothesis and then offers detailed exegesis of chosen Pauline passages to prove his point. In chapter 10, for example, Wright contends that Paul reformulated Second Temple Jewish eschatology, so that the Christ event becomes the fulfillment of the promise of God’s spirit (see Jer 31). Thus, the people of God are empowered by the spirit of God to live a new quality of existence (1028–32). What, then, is wrong with the Torah? Wright focuses on Rom 5 and 7 to contend that Paul’s problem with Torah was that it was subject to the realm of Adam (1034–37). Thus, rather than fulfill God’s redemptive promises to Abraham by providing universal blessing, Jewish ceremonial restrictions established cultural barriers between Jews and gentiles abolished in Christ (see Rom 14:1–15:13; Eph 2:11–22), forming a new community devoid of ethnic barriers.

Likewise, in chapter 11 Wright engages in an extensive discussion of Rom 9–11. On the basis of his analysis, he notes that Paul shares the Second Temple Jewish belief in election. In particular, when Paul expounds upon the covenant promises such as those of Deut 32; Isa 11; 65; and Ps 19, he demonstrates that gentile Christians are incorporated into God’s people Israel. There are not two people of God but one (1214). Any other conclusion would undermine Paul’s contention that Jesus was Israel’s Messiah. Salvation of the gentiles, then, fulfills the grand purposes of God by provoking Israel to jealousy in order that Israel might be saved.

These conclusions may lead some to suppose that Wright is affirming a traditional view of Paul. This accusation will not hold, as is made clear in part 4. Here Wright’s findings are summarized. In distinction from traditional Protestantism, Wright states that Paul is not preaching an individualistic or existential salvation. Rather, Paul, like other early Christians, did not conceive of salvation as “going to heaven” but as God’s ultimate transformation of the created order. It was this eschatological message that brings Paul’s
proclamation into conflict with the dominant imperial eschatology expressed in Roman propaganda (see ch. 12). Likewise, to assert that Paul’s kerygma was a philosophical, rather than a religious, message fails to account for the religious connotations of Paul’s theology and praxis (see ch. 14). Paul was, in fact, both a religious and philosophical figure. Wright also contends, in contrast to many forms of standard “Protestantism,” that for Paul salvation and justification are to be differentiated. When Paul speaks of justification he means “a historical objective accomplishment … to ground [Christians] in something outside themselves” (887). Justification then leads to ultimate salvation, or acquittal (887). This salvation is not focused, however, on the individual but on the community of Jew and gentile.

However, one sometimes wonders if Wright’s dialectic of either/or at times goes too far. Wright is correct that Paul was not a Platonic dualist (1401) and that his soteriology was not focused on “going to heaven” but redemption of the earth and humanity in a new creation. At the same time, Wright recognizes that in Phil 1:23 Paul comes his closest to asserting the possibility of at least an intermediary state. Wright, however, quickly dismisses the possibility that Phil 1:23 refers to a disembodied heavenly existence. Instead, Paul “is looking forward to the Messiah coming from heaven to change his present body into a glorious body” (1400, emphasis original). Yet does this interpretation do full justice to what Paul says in Phil 1:23? Cannot Phil 1:23, as well as 2 Cor 5:1–6, also be read as a desire for heaven? While the language of both passages is ambiguous and can support Wright’s reading, it can also be understood to support the hypothesis that Paul’s soteriology is complex.

Furthermore, many scholars will not be comfortable with Wright’s regular use of Ephesians, Colossians, and 2 Thessalonians in his reconstruction of Paul’s theology. While he makes a good case to include these epistles in the discussion of the Pauline corpus, others will say that any presentation of Paul’s thought needs to be confined to the seven undisputed letters. Wright is certainly free to disagree with this contention. Nevertheless, the inclusion of the three disputed letters adds a possibly unnecessary distraction from Wright’s central arguments, particularly in the European continent and North America.

Despite these caveats, however, Wright definitely has plumbed the depths of Paul’s thought and noted how Paul is ultimately a consistent thinker and reader of Israel’s history. The questions of whether Paul’s thought was so apocalyptic as to lack coherence or was so coherently focused on salvation history that he abandoned a Jewish worldview is answered by Wright’s contention that Paul was concerned to demonstrate how God’s faithfulness to the covenant is fulfilled in the messianic mission of Jesus of Nazareth. While many disagree with that message, it is important to understand Paul on his own
terms rather than to squeeze him into a Procrustean bed of the scholar’s imagination. For this insight alone readers should be grateful. The book is not an easy read, but it is an important and profitable contribution to the guild.