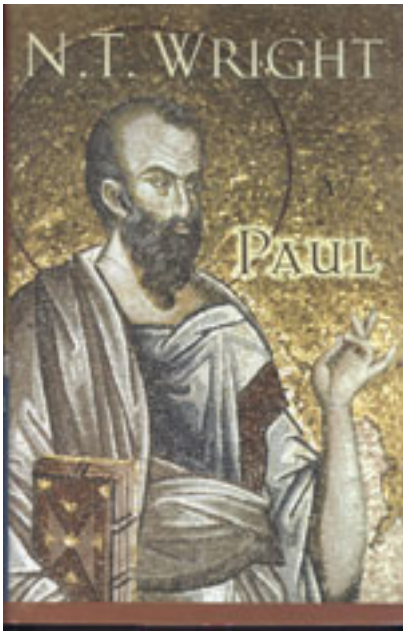


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Wright, N. T.

Paul: In Fresh Perspective

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This book originates from the Hulsean Lectures that the author delivered in Cambridge University. Wright organizes his book into two parts, “Themes” and “Structures,” subdividing each into four chapters. The first part of this review summarizes the content of the book, often using Wright’s own phrases and sentences with or without quotation marks; the second section of the review offers critique and points out issues that warrant further study.

In the first chapter, “Paul’s World, Paul’s Legacy,” having affirmed Paul’s three worlds—Second Temple Judaism, Hellenism, the Roman Empire—Wright introduces narrative study as his new method. He believes that “rediscovery of the narrative dimensions of Paul’s thought” (R. B. Hays) is “one of the most significant developments which the ‘new perspective’ revolution has precipitated” and that it “enables us both to re-articulate the ‘new perspective’ and to ward off the ... standard criticism of it” (13). According to Wright, thinking in terms of the story that stretches from creation to eschaton, containing within itself the narratives of Abraham’s call, the exodus, and the exile and return, the Second Temple Jews “were eager to discover where precisely the plot had got to and what role they were called to play within it.” “Paul’s whole point is precisely that with [the event] of Jesus the Messiah a new chapter has opened with the

story,” so “understanding what that story is and how this chapter is indeed a radically new moment within it provides one of the central clues to everything else he says” (9).

In chapter 2, “Creation and Covenant,” Wright shows how creation and covenant are combined in Paul’s thought, as in much of Old Testament/Jewish literature. After expounding several Pauline passages (esp. Rom 1–11) in terms of the two narrative themes of creation and covenant, Wright claims that, once Pauline theology is rightly understood in terms of these two overall narratives, the current divide between the old perspective that concentrates on the question of individual sin and forgiveness and the new perspective, which focuses on the problem of Israel and the inclusion of the Gentiles within God’s people, turns out to be a false either/or, as these two concerns are in fact integrated.

In chapter 3, “Messiah and Apocalyptic,” Wright looks at the concept of messiahship itself, demonstrating how Paul’s view of Jesus as Messiah enables him both to draw on the categories of Jewish apocalyptic in a new way and to integrate those categories with those of creation and covenant. Wright summarizes the Jewish messianic expectations and then demonstrates how they are all “solidly present in Paul’s use of *Christos* for Jesus”: (1) The Messiah is the true king of Israel and hence the Lord of the world (Rom 1:3–4; 15:12); (2) the Messiah will successfully fight Israel’s ultimate battle against the forces of evil and paganism (1 Cor 2:6–8; 15; Col 2:14–15); (3) the Messiah will build the temple, the house to which Israel’s God will at last return and live (1 Cor 3; 6; Rom 8:1–11); (4) the Messiah will thus bring Israel’s history to its climax, ushering in the new world of which prophets and others had spoken; (5) the Messiah will act in all this as Israel’s representative (Gal 2:16; Rom 3.23–26: *pistis Christou*, the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah); (6) in another sense the Messiah will act as God’s representative or agent to Israel and hence to the world (Rom 3:21–26, etc.: *dikaiosyne theou*, God’s covenant faithfulness). Later, in chapter 8, Wright suggests that Paul’s belief in Jesus as the Messiah is based on Jesus’ own self-understanding as the fulfillment of those expectations.

For Wright, the chief characteristic of apocalyptic is the idea of the unveiling of heavenly mysteries, especially of the divine plan that is about to reach a climax in the time when the book is being written. According to Wright, Paul believes that the ultimate apocalypse, the full disclosure of God’s secret plan, *has already come about* in and through the events concerning the Messiah, Jesus, and so is eager to explain in many passages the way God’s long and many-staged plan of salvation (his covenant plan) has come to fruition. Wright dwells especially on Paul’s statement of the revelation of God’s righteousness (Rom 1:17; 3:21), the materialization of God’s faithfulness to the covenant plan to liberate the whole creation from evil and death: God has made full provision for human sin through the sacrificial death that Jesus offered up in faithful obedience to

God's saving plan. Along with this inaugurated eschatology, Paul's writings also include a futuristic eschatology, "messianic apocalypticism."

In chapter 4, "Gospel and Empire," then, Wright examines how Paul's message, with his theology of creation and covenant, messiahship and apocalyptic, implicitly and explicitly subverted the Roman imperial ideology. This topic constitutes an essential element in the "fresh perspective" on Paul that Wright is now proposing. Paul's belief in the one God, the creator and ruler, his covenant theology that this God would rescue his people from pagan oppression, his messianic theology hailing Jesus as King, Lord, and Savior, and his apocalyptic theology that saw God revealing his own saving justice in the death and resurrection of the Messiah—all these led Paul to proclaim the gospel in antithesis to the imperial ideology. Wright illustrates this point by examining Paul's use of such words as *kyrios*, *soter/soteria*, *parousia*, *apantesis*, *euangelion*, *dikaiosyne*, *freedom*, *peace*, and so forth, as well as passages such as Phil 2–3; 1 Thess 4:13–5:11; 1 Cor 2; 15; and Rom 1:3–4/15:12.

In part 2 Wright sketches an outline of the shape of Paul's theology. Wright believes that Paul's thought can best be understood as his redefinition of the three topics of classic Jewish theology—God, his people, and the future of his people and the world—around the Messiah and the Spirit. So, dissatisfied with the traditional arrangements of Pauline theology, in chapters 5–7 Wright expounds Paul's redefinitions of the three topics in turn and then adds his concluding reflections and proposals in chapter 8. In each of chapters 5–7 Wright endeavors to show that each of the redefinitions is wrought through Paul's rereading of Israel's scriptures; that in each case Paul's main polemical target is not Judaism but paganism, and that each of these redefined doctrines came to expression in the task of preaching the gospel to the world and then of building up the church.

Accordingly, in chapter 5, "Rethinking God," by examining various Pauline texts, Wright shows how Paul redefines Jewish monotheism around Jesus the Messiah, to speak of God the Father and Jesus the Son of God. Wright stresses that it is the crucifixion of the Messiah that reveals the *dikaiosyne theou*, the faithfulness of the covenant God to his promise, the faithfulness of the creator to his creation (Rom 3:21–26). Hence God is redefined by means of a reference to Jesus (Rom 4:25). Then Wright shows how monotheism is also redefined around the Spirit and how the Trinitarian conception develops.

In chapter 6, "Reworking God's People," Wright expounds, among others, Gal 2:11–21; Phil 3; and Rom 1–4 in order to show how Paul redefines election in the light of the revelation of God's righteousness in the death and resurrection of Jesus. God's people are defined no longer by the works of the Torah but by faith in the gospel that proclaims the

atonement wrought through the faithfulness of the Messiah in Israel's place as her representative. Carrying on the new perspective into his fresh perspective, Wright insists that the redefinition of God's people is the context in which the doctrine of justification by faith was first formulated and has its real meaning. Then Wright examines various Pauline passages to show that God's people are also redefined in terms of the Spirit.

In chapter 7, "Reimagining God's Future," Wright summarizes the complex Jewish eschatological expectations in terms of the Day of YHWH, the kingdom of God, victory over pagan rulers, rescue of Israel, end of exile, the coming of the Messiah, the new exodus, the return of YHWH himself, and the resurrection of the dead. Then Wright states that the belief that all these have come to pass in Jesus the Messiah is central in the theology of Paul. According to Wright, Paul also speaks of events still in the future, but they are also reworkings of the same Jewish expectations. Wright observes that some of Paul's characteristic themes (justification, the body of Christ, etc.) are located in the creative tension between what has already happened in the Messiah and what is still to happen at the ultimate end.

According to Wright, in Rom 8:12–30 Paul redefines Jewish eschatology around the Spirit. There Paul tells of the new exodus story in which the Spirit takes the place of the Shekinah, the presence of YHWH with his people as they journey through the wilderness to the promised land, so bringing about the real return from exile and the undoing of creation's bondage to decay.

In the eighth and final chapter, "Jesus, Paul and the Task of the Church," Wright first argues for a correct understanding of the relationship of Paul to Jesus in terms of their different salvation-historical roles. Wright goes on to examine how the redefinitions of Jewish theology as shown in chapters 5, 6, and 7 were worked out in the actual lives of Paul and his churches. Finally, Wright completes the book with a reflection on the implications of his picture of Paul for the task of the church in our day.

The content of the book is not entirely new, as it builds on the author's many previous proposals, some of which (e.g., exile/return, the new perspective) have been extensively debated. Yet it is valuable as it presents those proposals in a systematic whole. Reading Paul in a most thoroughgoing fashion in terms of the Old Testament/Jewish narratives of creation, covenant, exodus, and exile and expounding his theology in terms of redefinitions of the three topics of classic Jewish theology, Wright expands the horizon of the new perspective from its focus on the issues of justification and God's people to cover the whole range of Paul's theological thinking. As a result, in this book he is indeed giving a fresh presentation of or a fresh perspective on Paul. His method, his interpretations, his identification of paganism and the imperial ideology as the chief

target of the gospel, and his understanding of salvation as the “*trans*historical redemption of the world” (139) or renewal of creation are all “fresh,” in comparison with the traditional models of presenting Pauline theology. No doubt, as Wright hopes, his theological proposal presented here in an outline sketch will provide “a fruitful seedbed for future research” (153).

Among the many issues raised by this book that future research may take up, I would like to mention first the narrative approach. There are certainly some brilliant insights and fruitful interpretations resulting from Wright’s reading of some Pauline passages in terms of the Old Testament/Jewish narratives of creation, covenant, exodus, and exile. However, in some other passages such a reading does not seem to command an immediate nod. Set aside Wright’s disputed reading of the exile narrative in several Pauline passages and take the example of the covenant narrative. Apparently Wright is able to see the covenant, for example, in 1 Cor 15 and Rom 5–7 (29, 31) because he follows his own “important exegetical principle” of recognizing a *theme* even though the *word* denoting it does not occur in a given passage (26, 45), as well as R. B. Hays’s principle that “a single small allusion can conjure up an entire world of thought” (10). But Wright’s interpretation of 1 Cor 15 and Rom 5–7 in terms of the covenant seems to demonstrate only the need to find some ways of establishing a valid use of those principles, unless we are prepared to see the covenant narrative everywhere (in fact, Wright says we should be [36–37]—pan-covenantism!) because the covenant is “the hidden presupposition” of Paul, as much as of Jewish literature (26) or because subjects such as the Messiah, the law, sin, righteousness, obedience, grace, salvation, fulfillment, and the like all can conjure up the covenant narrative. (If so, what is the point of highlighting passages such as Pss 19; 74; Col 1:15–20 [pp. 21–28]?)

Wright focuses on the narrative of Israel (covenant, exodus, and exile), treating the narrative of Adam/creation only in terms of Israel’s narrative, merely as its wider framework. This perspective results in a failure to accord the universal dimension a proper place in Paul’s thinking of the fall and redemption (cf. Wright’s treatment, in his *Jesus the Victory of God*, of the parable of the Prodigal Son exclusively as a story of Israel rather than primarily of Adam and only secondarily of Israel, as I believe). Hence Wright tends to schematize Paul’s thinking too much in terms of the Jews versus the Gentiles, allowing little room for Paul’s universal reflection on (Adamic) human beings as such. But the order of the exposition of the gospel and the Adam-Christ typology in Rom 1–8 show that Paul subsumes the predicament of Israel under that of Adamic humanity rather than seeing the latter in light of the former. Further, 1 and 2 Thessalonians show that Paul does not always think in terms of Jews versus Gentiles. In 1 Cor 15 he thinks of the problems of sin and death as Adamic humanity’s predicament quite independent of the narratives of Israel’s covenant disobedience and exile, and he explains

Christ's redemption in terms of overcoming the Adamic predicament quite independent of the narrative of Israel's return from exile—although in Rom 8 he does present the two perspectives intermixed. Wright's exclusive focus on the narrative of Israel leads him to see Christ's death practically as *a vicarious act only for Israel*. Expounding Rom 3:21–26, Wright does say that “[the Messiah's] death has made the atonement through which all nations are redeemed” (120). But it is not at all clear whether Wright means that Christ's death was atonement *for the sins* of the whole (Adamic) humanity, for he repeatedly stresses only that “the Messiah has done *in Israel's place* what Israel was called to do but could not, namely to act on behalf of the world” (120, emphasis original), but does not spare a word for Christ having acted *in all human beings' place*.

It is astonishing how many times Wright comes to discuss justification in this short book. While charging the old perspectivists of failing to understand its primary meaning of Jews and Gentiles being made God's people together, he now admits that the new perspectivists have also made a mistake, of neglecting the dimension of forgiveness of sins and putting sinners right with God (36). He illustrates this problem from Eph 2: “It is one of the telling features of current debate that some within the new perspective ... have highlighted Eph 2.11–21, while most of [the upholders of the old perspective] have ... highlighted 2.1–10” (116). So Wright insists on them being two sides of one whole. No recent upholder of the old perspective, I suppose, would deny this. The old perspectivists would insist only that the two sides should be arranged properly, as in fact shown in Eph 2: the gospel of justification by grace without works of the law necessarily brings both the believing Jews and Gentiles into the one community of the people of God, that is, the priority of the universal principle of justification *sola gratia/fide* and its necessary salvation-historical/missiological consequence of the Gentiles' entrance into the family of God.

At any rate, Wright's call for the integration of the two sides is salutary. He claims that his method of interpreting justification within the creation/covenant narratives can bring about the right integration (36–37). But this method used with his concentration on the covenant narrative of Israel that makes the Adamic dimension in Paul's thinking only consequential leads Wright still to put all the emphasis on its “ecclesiological” side, upholding its priority both in origin and in meaning and making the side of putting sinners right with God only its consequence or implication (121–22)—thus reversing the order of Eph 2. So, in connection with justification, Wright's fresh perspective is only a slightly improved version of his new perspective.

The recent movement of highlighting the anti-imperial implications of the Pauline gospel certainly is noteworthy, as it might add a new dimension both to our understanding of Paul's gospel and to our preaching of it today. Thus we can appreciate Wright's efforts to

include it in the fresh perspective on Paul that he is proposing beyond the new perspective. However, quite apart from the question about the plausibility of Wright's interpretation of some Pauline passages (e.g., Phil 2–3), Rom 13:1–7 presents an obstacle to his anti-imperial reading of Paul. Of course, Wright is not without an explanation of the passage: in order to prevent his readers from taking “all the counter-imperial hints [he] has given in [Romans] ... and indeed by his entire gospel” as a warrant for civil disobedience and revolution, Paul adopts here the Old Testament/Jewish tradition of enjoining God's people under pagan rule to submit to the pagan authorities in order to preserve justice and peace (78–79). This explanation is not so sophistic as some other “political” interpreters' attempts to explain away the thorny passage. However, it is still questionable whether the appeal to the Old Testament/Jewish tradition really resolves the self-contradiction inherent in Wright's “political” reading of Paul and adequately accounts for some really *positive* statements about pagan political authorities in Rom 13.

It is also a credit for Wright to raise “the question of the integration of this political dimension with all the other themes of Paul's theology,” which other advocates of “political” readings of Paul generally neglect to raise. The “hint” that he gives by means of Romans is this: “The result of the revelation of God's saving justice (chs. 1–4) is the creation of the worldwide family of faith promised to Abraham, the people whose sins have been forgiven and who have thereby been rescued from the world of paganism (ch. 1) in whose problems the Jews share equally (ch. 2). As a result, this new people enjoy peace (ch. 5) and freedom (ch. 6), within the larger metanarrative that Paul outlines at this point, the retelling of the Exodus” (77–78). But I must confess that I find this quite unreal as an integrated interpretation of Romans.

Wright has presented us with another stimulating book. In it he again impresses his readers with his creativity and courage, his grand biblical-theological scheme, his systematic thinking, and his sincere pastoral concerns. I also appreciate his efforts to develop an integrated understanding of the gospel and his efforts to integrate the concerns of the new perspective with those of the old and the political dimension of the gospel with its other dimensions. Some of my criticisms above, if they are valid at all, may be due to the nature of the book as an outline sketch of a new proposal. So I hope that soon Wright will be able to flesh it out fully (but not another 800-page book, please!). In that book, I hope that as one who has pioneered the new perspective and now supplemented it with the fresh perspective, Wright will develop the “right perspective” on Paul. For the right perspective, Wright may well need to make greater efforts to integrate the insights obtained through his fresh perspective with those of centuries-old Pauline scholarship, about which Wright often makes dismissive remarks—in the sweeping manner of a preacher. Then the right perspective may help us also understand salvation in Christ more fully—as transcendental as well as transhistorical.