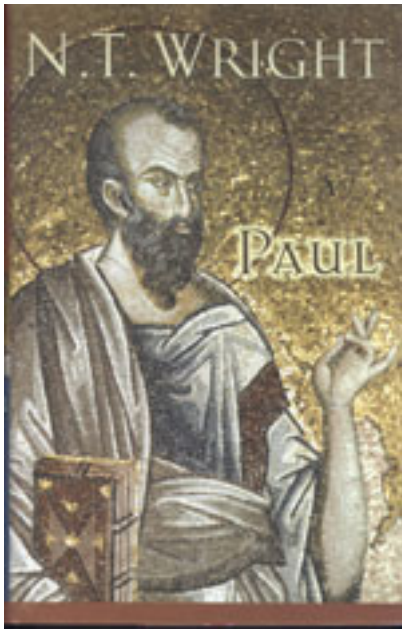


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**Wright, N. T.**

***Paul: In Fresh Perspective***

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This book collects the Hulsean Lectures that N. T. Wright delivered at Cambridge University. As the title clearly indicates, the author does not want to present a traditional study of Paul but hopes to shed some new light on the first-century apostle. He states in the preface: “My aim in these lectures ... was in fact to let some new shafts of light on Paul, even if that meant carving a notch through some of the traditional ways of studying him, and to observe closely how he goes about certain tasks, even if that meant employing for the purpose the hermeneutical equivalents of new telescopes” (ix). The aim of the book is not to be exhaustive; rather, the author throws a sort of challenge to Pauline scholarship: “Try to look at the apostle in new ways!” Looking at Paul as the “intellectual equal of Plato, Aristotle or Seneca” (x), Wright seeks to remind the academic world that the study of Paul is one of the most demanding disciplines of the New Testament field.

The book itself is divided in two parts. The first part (introduction and chs. 2–4) is interested in certain Pauline themes that are found in Jewish theology and were deeply reworked by Paul (creation and covenant, Messiah and apocalyptic, gospel and empire). Here Wright’s ambition is to see how “Paul’s mind worked” (xi). The second part (chs. 5–7) attempts to draw out a systematic account of Paul’s theological thoughts. The book

is purposefully written with no footnotes and little references to scholarly debate. Wright often indicates that a fuller treatment of certain questions can be found in previously published works or will be given in the fourth volume of his series *Christian Origins and the Question of God*.

What does this fresh perspective on Paul look like? The first chapter consists of an introduction to Paul's world, or rather worlds. These three worlds, although treated separately, are supposed to "resonate simultaneously" (3) for Paul. Wright defines these worlds as follows: Judaism, Greek or Hellenistic culture, Roman Empire. To these three worlds Paul adds a fourth one, the *ekklēsia*, that is, the people of God. To be part of the people of God meant to embrace "an identity rooted in Judaism, lived out in the Hellenistic world, and placing a counter-claim against Caesar's aspiration to world's domination" (6). Wright sees these worlds as being best described in terms of competing narratives. Thus he embraces a recent move in scholarship—a move inaugurated by Richard B. Hays—that gives a central place to narratives in the study of Paul. For Wright, the story of Jesus opens a new chapter in the story of Paul himself, and "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, not least the questions of justification and the law upon which the 'perspective'-battles have been so often fought out" (9).

After the introductory chapter lays out Paul's world and Wright's methodology, chapter 2 starts looking at themes that traverse Paul's letters. In chapter 2 Wright takes up creation and covenant, first as they are exposed in two psalms (Pss 19; 74) and in Isa 40–55. In these three cases Wright underlines that the God of creation is also the God of covenant. Creation and covenant can only be understood together. The covenant is a way to solve problems within creation, but creation is also invoked to solve problems inside the covenant: Israel cries to the covenant God as creator. This theology of covenant and creation is present in Paul as well. Wright uses Col 1:15–20; 1 Cor 15; and Rom 1–11 to make this point. Through this theology of covenant and creation Paul is able to construct an implicit narrative that explains what has gone wrong in the world and in Israel and how it can be fixed. What has gone wrong can be summarized in the basic sin of idolatry, "the worship of that which is not in fact the living creator God" (35). The death and resurrection of Jesus offers a solution to what has gone wrong. It is God's way of fulfilling the covenant, and it has a double effect: it fulfills "the original covenant purpose (thus dealing with sin and procuring forgiveness) *and* [it enables] Abraham's family to be the worldwide Jew-plus-Gentile people it was always intended to be" (37). One major result of the chapter on covenant and creation is to frame the question of justification in a much broader manner. It is not just about how individual sinners can find themselves in a right relationship with God. Rather, it fits in the larger question of "how the creator God

can be true to creation, how the covenant God can be true to the covenant, and how those things are not two but one” (37).

In chapter 3, “Messiah and Apocalyptic,” the main point Wright makes is to show that Paul’s understanding of Jesus as Messiah allowed him to use the categories of Jewish apocalypticism in a new way and at the same time to “integrate those categories ... with those of creation and covenant” (40). According to Wright, Paul’s understanding of Jesus’ messiahship is in agreement with Second Temple Judaism. It is a royal messiahship, with the Messiah successfully fighting Israel’s battle against the forces of evil. The Messiah will also rebuild the temple, thus bringing Israel’s history to its climax. Finally, the Messiah acts not only on behalf of Israel but also as God’s representative. All these elements can be found in Paul’s letters. Jesus needs to be understood as the Jewish Messiah in Paul’s letters: “precisely as Messiah, he offers God that representative faithfulness to the plan of salvation through which the plan can go ahead at last” (47). Wright points out that this understanding of Jesus as the Jewish Messiah has consequences for understanding the expression *pistis Christou*, which should be understood as the “*faithfulness of the Messiah to the purposes of God*” (47). One of the main conclusions of this chapter is to argue that it is essential to keep in mind that Paul understands Jesus as being the Messiah promised to Israel.

Wright highlights the apocalyptic dimension of Paul’s thought in the idea of tension between continuity and newness. God remains faithful to God’s covenant, but this faithfulness is manifested in a new manner: “in the messianic events of Jesus’ death and resurrection Paul believes *both* that the covenant promises were at last fulfilled *and* that this constituted a massive and dramatic irruption into the processes of world history unlike anything before or since” (54). For Wright, Paul’s theology is covenantal and apocalyptic. The covenant is fulfilled in a surprising manner, through the unveiling of God’s plan in the events of Jesus the Messiah. As for the church, it lives in what the author names an “*inaugurated eschatology*” (57). The Jewish themes are ever-present in Paul’s theology but deeply reworked.

Chapter 4 deals with the twin themes of gospel and empire. Here too, according to Wright, Paul reworks a Jewish theme of critique of the empire and of the Caesars, through the story of Jesus. Paul’s main conviction, at the heart of his “counter-imperial theology” (69), is that “Jesus is Lord and Caesar is not” (69). For Wright, this conviction is fueled by Paul’s covenantal, messianic, and apocalyptic theology. After having sketched the main themes of Paul’s theology, Wright tries to propose an outline of the shape of Paul’s theology in chapters 5, 6, and 7. In order to organize Paul’s thought, Wright seeks to follow the “shape of classic Jewish theology” (83), with its insistence on God and God’s people (monotheism and election). A third theme to add to the picture is

eschatology (the future of God's world). These three topics are reinterpreted by Paul through three other topics, which Wright does not discuss in detail in this book. These reorienting topics are a rereading of Israel's scriptures, a polemic against paganism, and a task of preaching the gospel to the world.

Monotheism is the first topic that Wright takes up, as he presents a picture of monotheism in Judaism and centers on the problem posed by evil for a monotheistic religion. For Wright, the problem of evil in Jewish thought finds its solution in the themes of exile and restoration. It is also related to the critique of the pagan world, which embodies the "failure of human beings to live as they were made to live" (89). According to Wright, Paul shows in many places a complete adherence to this understanding of monotheism. It is, however, redefined first through the figure of Jesus. One of Paul's strategies to redefine monotheism is to use the *kyrios* of Septuagint passages as referring to Jesus himself. This allows him to express a "very Jewish and very high Christology" as in Phil 2:6–11: "Paul understands the human being Jesus to be identical with one who from all eternity was equal with the creator God, and who gave fresh expression to what that equality meant by incarnation, humiliating suffering, and death" (93). Paul redefines monotheism to equate God with Jesus (see also his use of the expression "Son of God"), but Paul also redefines monotheism in his use of the Spirit. Wright adduces Gal 4:1–7 and Rom 8 as passages indicating how the Spirit and the Son function as God's agents in fulfilling God's promises. This redefined monotheism is bound with the three reorienting topics mentioned earlier. It indicates a fresh engagement with Scripture, denotes an opposition to the pagan world, and is worked out in daily work with the young communities.

Redefining God also means redefining or reworking God's people, the topic of chapter 6. Wright insists that this reworking did not take place only in theory; it was actually something that Paul did. Paul believed in Israel's election, even when redefining it through Jesus and through the Spirit. Through Jesus, the people of God becomes one people, or, as Wright puts it, "God has one family." He adds, "Faith, not the possession and/or practice of Torah, is the badge which marks out this family, the family which is now defined as the people of the Messiah" (113). Justification is not about how "someone becomes a Christian" (112) but indicates "*who belongs to the people of God, and how you can tell that in the present*" (112). Election is also redefined through the Spirit and is connected to a renewed call to holiness, "a holiness which comes from the heart" (124). Finally, election is redefined through Scriptures. To make this point, Wright uses Rom 9–11, describing it as "a massive retelling of the scriptural narrative" (125). Wright wants to make the point that, even though election has been redefined drastically, in Rom 9–11 Paul indicates that Jews "*are not debarred, in virtue of their ethnic origin, from coming back into the family, their own family*" (126). They are only temporarily separated from

this family because of their unbelief. Once more, this reworking of election stands in sharp opposition to the Roman ideology.

In chapter 7 Wright takes up eschatology, which involves not only God's future for the world but also God's future itself. According to Wright, Paul's eschatology remains deeply Jewish but is redefined through Christology. Paul's high Christology means that "*God's own future ... has burst into the present*" (135), and his incorporative Christology indicates that, through the new understanding of election, "*Israel's future ... has at last come to pass*" (135). The major change in this redefined eschatology is that God is concerned not only with Israel's future but with the future of the world, the pagan world, as well. Eschatology is reworked around the theme of the Messiah and around the theme of the Spirit. Key elements of Jewish eschatology are reshaped around the Messiah. Jesus marks the end of the exile and moves the story forward, inaugurating a new phase of history. This new phase is, however, deeply anchored in the story of Israel.

Eschatology is also reworked around the Spirit. The covenant renewal mentioned earlier marks the inauguration of the eschatological state whereby Gentiles are brought in and Jews are renewed from within. Together they create the eschatological people of God. In that way, the Spirit function as the *arrabōn* of what is to come: "the new covenant work of the Spirit, transforming the heart so as to enable it to keep the commandments of the Torah, is the sign that God's new age has broken in in respect of this person too" (146). Here, too, the reworking of eschatology is made through dialogue with the Old Testament and with Second Temple readings of it. In agreement with Jewish eschatology, it retains the confrontation with paganism. In his last chapter Wright indicates how this theology played itself out in Paul's everyday work and proposes several venues of reflection for further work in Pauline studies.

This book offers a broad survey of Pauline theology. It definitely insists on Paul's Jewish roots as being central to his way of doing theology, not paying much attention to the Hellenistic influences that were also part of Paul's milieu. The picture that emerges is therefore somewhat one-sided, but it gives appropriate due to Paul's Jewish heritage. At the same time, it insists that Paul somewhat stands out of this Jewish milieu and has appropriated it in challenging new ways, sometimes giving the impression that Paul is something of a solitary genius. The work reads easily and provides a good introduction to Paul's thought, although it runs the risk of making sweeping comments and of taking too many shortcuts when presenting issues in Pauline scholarship.