

*Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, by N. T. Wright. London: SPCK, 2013. 2 vols. Pp. xxviii+1658. ISBN: 978-0-281-07140-1.

In this massive study (to my knowledge, the largest single-author work on Paul in print, perhaps the largest ever published), we surely have Wright's *magnum opus* on the apostle. It is a sprawling work of sixteen chapters, ranging over a wide array of matters, displaying impressive learning, much (sometimes sharp) engagement with other scholars (especially his critics), decades-long pondering of texts and issues, and Wright's accessible writing style and vigorous presentation of his views. He obviously loves his subject, and has a keen concern to project and defend a fully (even tightly) coherent Pauline theology. But the scope of the work extends well beyond what one might expect in a 'theology of Paul', exploring also Paul's relationship with his cultural/political setting and his continuing relevance for Christian thought today.

In Volume 1, Part 1 (chapters 1-5), 'Paul and His World', Wright lays out expansively the importance and nature of what he sees as Paul's 'worldview', and then offers descriptions of the Jewish, Greek and Roman contexts that comprised Paul's setting. Part 2 (chapters 6-8) is given to 'The Mindset of the Apostle', focusing especially on the grand narratives in which (Wright insists) Paul lived and thought out his faith. In Volume 2, Part 3, 'Paul's Theology' (chapters 9-11, each of them monograph length, collectively 657 pages, and clearly the heart of the larger work), comprises extended expositions of what Wright contends are the three key categories in Paul's theology: 'monotheism' (Who is God?), 'election' (Who are the people of God?), and 'eschatology' (God's intentions for this people and the creation). Finally, in Part 4, 'Paul in History' (chapters 12-16), Wright proposes how Paul's theology related respectively to the Jewish, Greek (philosophical) and Roman (political) worlds described in the first several chapters, concluding with an extended discussion of Paul's continuing relevance for Christian thought and action today.

Those who have followed his numerous previous publications on Paul (which include commentaries, essays, and earlier books) will likely recognize many/most of Wright's positions taken in this work. But this must now be considered his consummative and comprehensive treatment of the apostle. Within the limits of this review, it is impossible to engage (or even to describe adequately) the full panoply of matters on which Wright proffers stimulating and often provocative (and debatable) views. So, in the remaining space I shall confine myself to highlighting and commenting briefly on a few of his major emphases.

Wright repeatedly (and rightly) insists that Paul was, and remained, a profoundly *Jewish* thinker. He also proposes that the uniqueness of YHWH, the covenant-election of Israel, and the future hope of God's victory over evil and redemption of the world were the three central convictions and categories of Paul's thought. But Wright equally insists that Paul radically reformulated each of these three major beliefs. So, in Paul's theology the uniqueness of YHWH was reformulated as 'christological monotheism' in which Jesus is both Messiah and the human embodiment of YHWH, Jesus' earthly ministry the personal, embodied return of YHWH to Israel (which Wright posits as central in ancient Jewish hopes). This view of Jesus as the personal embodiment of YHWH allows Wright to take on board (and subsume) Bauckham's 'divine identity' christology. But Wright is critical of the idea (that I've proposed) that ancient Jewish 'divine/principal agent' traditions may have been one historical factor drawn upon (and modified significantly) in the eruption of early Jesus-devotion. It seems to me, however, that he offers more of a caricature of my proposal than an accurate characterization of or engagement with it.

In any case, for all his emphasis on Paul's historical context, Wright's aim really seems more to show that Paul's beliefs form a coherently rounded theology than to address adequately *how* (in historical terms) Paul came to hold them. If, however, as Wright contends, Paul developed an unprecedented 'mutation' in ancient Jewish 'monotheism', it is surely all the more important to ask how this remarkable innovation arose. Certainly, Wright is correct to emphasise that Paul reflects a creative use of Jewish scriptures in developing/expressing his theology. But what in particular prompted and shaped this novel reading of these texts? Wright's focus on Paul's ideas is no doubt appropriate for a *theology* of Paul, but may leave some historical questions insufficiently addressed.

Of the aforementioned three major theological categories that Wright posits as crucial for Paul, by far the greatest space is devoted to Paul's reformulation of 'election'. Chapter 10, 'The People of God, Freshly Reworked', is easily the largest (268 pages), and there is further discussion of the subject subsequently (e.g., another 142 pages in Chapter 11). Specifically, Wright posits that Paul 'reworked' the idea of Israel as the elect people so that their elect status was devolved upon Jesus, and was thence extended to believers in Jesus, i.e., the church, which becomes the redefined 'Israel'. Of course, in varying forms the idea that the church became the true/new Israel has a venerable (if now controversial) history in Christian tradition. But, to my mind, it remains doubtful whether *Paul* actually held such a view. Romans 9–11 is obviously the crucial Pauline material, and Wright devotes over 100 pages to it, including some 20 pages to 11:25–27 alone, insisting that 'all Israel shall be saved' simply refers to the church. But despite Wright's ingeniously argued case, I remain convinced that Paul projects here a future redemptive inclusion of a *Jewish 'plērōma'* (11:12), an eschatological action that will comprise God's final triumph over the widescale 'unbelief' and 'hardening' of Israel that troubled Paul so much.

Wright repeatedly accounts for Paul's reworking of Israel by ascribing to the Jewish people a failure to be a light to the nations, and a selfish grasping of elect status for herself. Supposedly, in Paul's view, Jesus then stepped in to make up for Israel's failure. But to my knowledge Paul's only expressions of disappointment with his Jewish kinfolk have to do with their unbelief in, and/or opposition to, Jesus and the gospel. In short, it seems to me that for Paul it was Jesus and the gospel that produced the question of whether Israel had 'fallen' irreparably (Rom. 11:11), and not a putative prior failure of Israel as elect people that had then required Jesus to take on Israel's elect status single-handedly, and then convey it to the church.

As to Paul's beliefs about the future, Wright conducts a running battle with scholars who advocate what they call an 'apocalyptic' approach (e.g., J. L. Martyn), and he reiterates his now well-known view that so-called 'apocalyptic' language is thoroughly symbolic, typically referring to political events in history. In his view, Paul's 'eschatology' (Wright's preferred term) was mainly concerned, not with future events, but particularly with the redemptive significance of the past events of Jesus' death and resurrection, which ushered in the inauguration of God's kingdom in history, involving also the dispensation of the Spirit that now provides believers with the potential to live in obedience to God's purposes.

In line with his previous publications, Wright also ridicules what he portrays as the view of some other scholars that Paul expected the dissolution of 'the space-time universe' (which may be another instance of caricature), and the undoubtedly widespread popular Christian notion that the future hope is to depart to a heavenly realm for existence as spirits/souls. Wright correctly insists that for Paul 'God' remained the creator of this world, and that God's purposes involve the redemption of believers (including their bodies) and the world as well, not their obliteration. But, curiously, Wright gives little discussion of what the consummation of this redemption might actually involve. How, for example, does one fit the resurrection of believers and the bestowal of immortality that Paul posits within the world as

we know it? What does Paul mean in projecting the participation of all creation in ‘the freedom of the glory of the children of God’ (Rom. 8:21)? There are a few scattered references to 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 or 1 Corinthians 15:35-55, but I find no extended discussion of the remarkable things that Paul projects in these passages. In short, granting Wright’s emphasis that Paul sought transformed lives of believers in history as we know it, in this mammoth treatment of Paul’s beliefs I expected more discussion of the specifics of the future of God’s redemptive plan that Paul so firmly asserted.

If space permitted, there are numerous other topics and Pauline texts in this rich and stimulating work that could be commented on and/or commended. To mention one thing briefly, it seems to me that Wright reads Paul essentially using Ephesians as the lens. That is perhaps how the author of Ephesians hoped it would be used. But also that might well deserve more justification than Wright gives.

Finally, to engage one further matter, Wright portrays Paul as a major theological innovator, who, for example, uniquely perceived the ‘plight’ of Israel and the world, and was the first to imagine ‘what it might mean for the people of God if Messiah appeared *and was crucified*’ (1146, emphasis his). Indeed, Wright presents Paul as a monumental and singular figure, who stood out like a mountain in a prairie (a classic ‘great man’ presentation). I have no doubt that Paul was a particularly gifted and important figure in earliest Christianity. But Wright gives scant attention to the question of how much Paul also drew upon, reflected and developed convictions and traditions of ‘those who were in Christ’ before him (e.g., Rom. 16:7), those with whom, Paul insists, he shared basic beliefs and message (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:1-11).

Paul surely developed his own arguments in support of his gentile mission and in opposition to those who required gentile believers to Judaize, to mention one area in which he seems to have been notable. But we must also recognise that this former Pharisee who experienced God’s revelations powerfully confirming Jesus’ high significance and Paul’s own special mission then *joined* a religious movement that was already sufficiently developed to have generated his prior zealous and forceful efforts to ‘destroy’ it (to use Paul’s own term, Gal. 1:13). In a study of this size and claiming a strong historical orientation, one might have hoped for more discussion of Paul’s theology *in relation to the larger Jesus-movement* of his time. Wright’s emphasis on Paul’s singularity could be taken (against his own wishes, I judge) to justify the old canard the Paul was the real founder of Christianity.

But, in the end, it is perhaps better to express gratitude for the contents of the study that Wright has given us than complain about what else it might have included. Its size and expansive style of disquisition will demand committed and patient readers (and I think that the work could have benefitted from some more disciplined writing/editing to avoid repetition and unnecessarily long disquisitions on some collateral topics). But the breadth of topics addressed and the articulate, informed and passionate handling of them will provide various rewards for readers’ efforts. A 69-page bibliography and indexes of ancient sources, modern authors and ‘selected topics’ complete this weighty work.

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