

Paul and the Faithfulness of God. By N. T. Wright. 2 vols. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013, xxvii + 1,658 pp., \$89.00 paper.

This much-anticipated “book” by Wright comes in two books, totaling 1,658 pages. The two books constitute the fourth volume in his larger project investigating the origins of the early Christian movement (Christian Origins and the Question of God). Since Wright has written at least three books on various aspects of Paul’s theology over the last few decades in anticipation of this fuller treatment, it is an understatement to note that the author has already contributed significantly to the field of Pauline studies. Not only did he play a leading role in the development of the “new perspective on Paul,” stressing a reading of Paul against his Jewish background, but he also pushed the field ahead to consider Paul against his imperial context—whether and to what extent Paul proclaims the lordship of Jesus Christ vis-à-vis the lordship of Caesar. Both of these aspects of Wright’s unique approach to Paul appear prominently in the present tome.

Much of what Wright presents here has been anticipated in a number of other publications, but there also is much that is new and the form of his argument will surely be reviewed by scholars in many venues and in various publications in coming years. The major thrust of Wright’s overall argument is that, while Paul is in thoroughgoing continuity with his Jewish heritage, he also transforms the pillars of Judaism and the faith of Israel in light of the work of God in Christ and the presence of the Spirit among the new creation people of God. In one of his many summary statements, Wright claims that

the hypothesis at the heart of this book is that Paul’s thought is best understood in terms of the revision, around Messiah and spirit, of the fundamental categories and structures of second-Temple Jewish understanding; and that this ‘revision’, precisely because of the drastic nature of the Messiah’s death and resurrection, and the freshly given power of the spirit, is no mere minor adjustment, but a radically new state of affairs, albeit one which had always been promised in Torah, Prophets and Psalms. The radical newness, then, does not alter the fact that Paul’s theology is still a ‘revision’ of Jewish theology, rather than a scheme drawn from elsewhere, as advocates of a non-Jewish Paul have regularly supposed (p. 783).

For Wright, then, Paul is reworking the essential aspects of his Jewish heritage, and this involved the invention of something new—"theology." That is, in order for Paul to understand for himself and translate to his churches the character of God's new work in the Messiah and the Spirit, he more or less invented a new discipline, or perhaps he took it to a new level (p. 404). Wright situates Paul within the world of the culture and religion of his day, along with a range of philosophical schools, and regards Paul as doing something similar yet distinct from the philosophical schools.

With regard to the content of Paul's "theology" and how he transformed his Jewish heritage, Wright argues that Paul transformed three essential elements—monotheism, election, and eschatology. Before embarking on these discussions, however, Wright sets the stage in the second part of his work, arguing that readers of Paul have to ask what Paul is writing about. Here, Wright makes an important contribution by claiming that Paul is speaking to and from the larger body of convictions about what the God of Israel has done in Jesus the Messiah to consummate the incomplete story of Israel. Paul is not "writing about" the relationship of individuals to God, letting them know how they can be saved and grow in their understanding of their newly established right relation (p. 490). For Wright, while individual relating to God is important, this is part of a larger framework, having to do with the creator God's mission to reclaim and transform his broken creation and to restore his purposes for it and for humanity through Abraham and Israel, and thus, the Messiah (pp. 475–537). Wright is well known for his big-picture thinking and it is on display here, to great effect.

Regarding Paul's transformation of monotheism, Wright builds to some extent on Richard Bauckham's work on monotheism, developing an eschatological monotheistic framework within which to understand Israel's faith. Israel did not merely confess that there was only one God, nor that their God was the one true God. They confessed faith in the singular Creator who would return to Zion as he had promised, vindicate Israel as his people, and restore the creation that belonged to him alone. The monotheistic faith of Israel is reworked in that "Paul saw in Jesus the shocking and explosive vision of *Israel's God returning at last, as he had always promised*" (p. 698, emphasis original). Beyond Jesus's merely having an identity as divine or as God himself, Jesus himself is the God of Israel returning to Zion to bring in the Kingdom of God and restore Israel. To confess faith in this figure, then, is to take upon oneself the yoke of the kingdom and commit oneself to the cause of the God of Israel revealed in Jesus the Messiah (p. 773).

The second revision of Paul's theology, for Wright, is the transformation of election, by which Wright means the identity of the people of God. The term had formerly applied to Israel's special relation to God and unique commission on behalf of the God of Israel to be a light to the nations (p. 775). This section of the work is quite large, running nearly three hundred pages, but it is here that Wright deals with some of the more controversial aspects of his reading of Paul. He treats justification by faith in Paul in some detail, along with the manner in which he regards Paul to have related the current identity of the people of God to historical Israel. In the past, some have accused Wright of "supersessionism," and his discus-

sion in this work will not satisfy those critics. Though he prefers to speak of "fulfillment" rather than "supersession" (pp. 809–10), he does not completely shrink from the charge of holding the latter, claiming that most sectarian groups within Judaism would be subject to the same accusation. That is, any group that maintained that it alone was faithful to the heritage of Israel, like Qumran, could be subject to the same claim (pp. 806–9).

The third major aspect of Wright's conception of Paul's reworked theology is eschatology. That is, the hopes of restoration for Israel and the return of Israel's God have taken place in time in Jesus the Messiah and the Spirit. Wright, then, as with the previous two topics, describes how this works out in a variety of Paul's texts.

The first thing that strikes anyone encountering Wright's work is its size. It is massive and this will put off many students of Paul who simply will not make it through the entire work. This is unfortunate because many of Wright's most refined statements on various aspects of Paul's theology are found here, after years of honing his articulation of them. A second thing that strikes the persevering reader is the manner in which Wright both casts a big-picture reading of Paul and develops this reading in a range of texts from Israel's Scriptures, Second Temple Judaism, and Paul's letters themselves. It seems that Wright's obvious strength is grasping the bigger picture, and students and scholars alike will benefit from these global proposals whereas there will obviously be much disagreement when it comes to finding this big picture in the particular texts.

It is refreshing to see that Wright has no time for the scholarly fashion that regards Ephesians as post-Pauline and that he views the consensus that Ephesians is not from the hand of Paul as having to do with little more than scholarly fashion (pp. 61–63). He has the sort of stature whereby he can afford to take on the guild and its opinions here, though this section discussing the sources of Paul is typical of the author's writing style. In a section given to the topic of sources on Paul, his comments leave some lack of clarity on whether or not he fully accepts the thirteen letters or whether 1 Timothy fails to pass the test of authenticity. Further, it is likely the case that his elaboration of justification by faith, which he wraps within a larger discussion of the revision in Paul's understanding of the identity of the people of God, will fail to satisfy his critics on that issue. In addition, those who take Wright to task for his supersessionistic tendencies will also be dissatisfied on this score.

As indicated briefly above, there is simply too much in this volume to focus on one topic to evaluate. It is an understatement to note that Wright has provided a vigorous reading of Paul that will give the guild of biblical scholars much to discuss over at least the next several years.

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