

Book Review

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Title: *The Paul Debate: Critical Questions for Understanding Paul*

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N. T. Wright is one of the leading New Testament scholars of today. He is now the Research Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity at St Mary's College in the University of St Andrews. *The Paul Debate* is Wright's response to the reviews on his 2015 published book: *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, the fourth volume of his magisterial series *Christian Origins and the Question of God*.

Wright chooses not to reply to each review individually. Instead, he gives his reply through the exploration of five different topics, one topic for each chapter. The chosen topics are those that have raised a sufficient amount of attention, and those that are questionable or controversial (ix).

The **first chapter** is titled: "Paul and the Messiah." The issue raised in this chapter is whether Paul was simply a Jewish thinker who happened to know the name of the Messiah; Or was he a Hellenist thinker? (19). Wright is opposed to both views. He claims that while Paul was basically a Jewish thinker, his thought however had been *radically renewed* by what God had done in and through Christ (17). For Paul there is now in Christ a new creation (4). In Christ the family of God has been redefined. The new family is united by baptism and by the Lord's Supper, both of which have their focus in Christ Jesus (9). Jesus is the Messiah anticipated by the Jewish scriptures, but exceeds far beyond that expectation.

Chapter two focuses on the issue of Paul's Christology. While Paul might have treated Jesus as the Jewish Messiah, but did he treat him as divine? Wright raises two questions at the beginning of this chapter. First, did Paul identify Jesus with the God of Israel? Second, how did Paul come to his particular understanding of Jesus? (21-22). Wright argues that Paul did have a "high view" of Jesus (25). He did somehow place Jesus "within the identity of Israel's God" (22). Wright draws evidence from 1 Cor 8 and Phil 2:6-11 (22-26).

As to how Paul came to his conclusion about Jesus, some would argue that it is because Paul had the idea of the divine Messiah. Jesus being the Messiah must therefore be divine

(28-9). This idea of the divine Messiah however has been discredited by modern scholarship. Others would argue that it is because of the early Christian's experience of Jesus' divine presence that Paul was led to the conclusion that Jesus is divine (29). Still, others would argue that it is because of the resurrection that Jesus was regarded by Paul as divine (29-30). Wright concludes that while "all of these suggestions are partly right, pointing in more or less the right direction," they are however insufficient for explaining Paul's high Christology (30).

In **Chapter three**, Wright asks the question whether Paul was an "apocalyptic thinker" (41). According to Wright there are basically two different answers to this question. First, the answer is yes. Paul was an apocalyptic thinker. He was a member of the apocalyptic movement. He believed that "the cross and resurrection of Jesus was the divine 'invasion' which brings to an end the narrative of Israel's covenant with God" (41). Second, the answer is no. Paul was not an apocalyptic thinker. Rather, he worked with the idea of "progressive revelation." The Christ event was for him the climax of the steady buildup of Israel's covenant narrative.

The option is therefore between, in Wright's own words, cosmic invasion and covenant narrative. Wright rejects both options and claims that in Paul's writings there is a crashing chord that "interrupts the sequence of volume, though not the sequence of harmony" (60). In other words, Wright finds in Paul's letters both continuity and discontinuity, both apocalyptic thinking and covenant theology. For instance, Paul, before the coming of Christ, had the idea of the world being enslaved under evil (continuity). The death and resurrection of Christ, however, led him to see that "the problem was deeper and more radical than he had before imagined" (discontinuity)(63). It taught him that Israel itself is 'in Adam' in need of salvation (63).

The **fourth chapter** is about *the people of God* in Paul's thought. Wright again begins the chapter with two opposing opinions. First, salvation is about saving and justifying sinners. It has little to do with Israel according to the flesh. Wright puts Luther, the dispensationalists, and the American "apocalyptic" school within this camp (66-7). The second view, represented by Albert Schweitzer and W. D. Davis, stresses that Paul was a Jew and that he envisaged the Church not as some brand new entity, independent of Israel (68-9). Wright argues that through the resurrection Paul came to the understanding that Jesus was Israel-in-person, for what God had promised to do for Israel he had done it for Jesus (77). Therefore, the Church, as the body of Christ, is not independent of Israel.

The question concerning the people of God is related to the question about *justification*

(71). Scholars who advocate the first option (the people of God as “saved sinners”) usually interpret justification as the “imputation of Christ’s righteousness.” Those who advocate the second option (the people of God as the “new Israel”), they usually interpret justification as the inclusion of Jews and Gentiles within the new Israel (71). The second option, according to Wright, is more convincing for it is clear that Paul regarded Jesus as Israel’s Messiah. As Israel’s Messiah, Jesus therefore sums up Israel in himself bringing together in himself both Jews and Gentiles (91).

In the **fifth and final chapter**, Wright deals with two different topics. One is the nature of Paul’s mission; the other is on methodology. The first topic is on Paul’s mission. Wright asks whether Paul’s mission was to save souls or was his mission to transform society from within (93). Wright rejects both options. He claims that Paul’s mission was not simply about saving individual souls, nor was it a carefully planned out social engineering. Paul thought messianically (96). He wanted to liberate things that were enslaved by sin so that they may be brought into the new-creation world where they would again reveal their goodness and usefulness.

The second theme in the final chapter is on method (98). Wright argues that while studying Paul six different layers of thought must be distinguished. The first three layers have to do with Paul’s own process of thought (98). First, how did Paul himself arrive at his beliefs and ideas? Second, how did Paul line up the beliefs that he held? What is the structure of his thought? Third, how did Paul explain his beliefs to his hearers? (98) For Wright, many scholars who accuse Paul of being inconsistent, they reach such a conclusions because they fail to distinguish layers two and three. In others words, “inconsistencies” are often simply different ways of expressing the same thought.

The other three layers of thought that must be distinguished while studying Paul have to do with our own ways of thinking (100-101). First, how did we arrive at our beliefs about Paul? Second, how did we form a coherent understanding of Paul? Third, how do we persuade others that our view of Paul is sound? Wright is concerned about the interface between the first and second layers. Some scholars would argue that “induction” is the only legitimate method to arrive at a big picture of Paul. Wright has often been accused by these scholars of bring in a preexisting grand narrative to his reading of Paul. Wright argues that hypotheses are inevitable: “no interpreter ever comes to the text with a *tabula rasa*” (105). The only way to guard against “eisegesis” is not to abandon “the grand narrative,” but to be aware of it, test it, scrutinize it, and refine it.

This book serves as an excellent guide to Wright's new book *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*. It highlights the important topics dealt within the book. These topics also are some of the most contented issues in current Pauline scholarship. The book not only highlights the major subjects within Wright's book, it also shows clearly what are the major contributions made by Wright concerning these issues. The book also shows what is the primary evidence and what are the arguments in support of Wright's claim.

The book shows clearly that from Wright's perspective the primary task of Pauline scholarship is to understand the *interface between Judaism and early Christianity*, i.e., to understand how Paul modifies or readjusts his Jewish beliefs in light of the Christ event; or how he rethinks and remodels his understanding of God, of the people of God, and of the future of the people of God. Such a task puts an emphasis on the Jewish thought and Jewish religion that is the foundation and source of Paul's thought. Wright is interested in knowing how the Jewish worldview evolves through Christ and morphs into early Christianity. Such a task also highlights the *cognitive aspect* of Paul's life and works. It is Paul's understanding of God, the people of God, and the future of the people of God that captures Wright's attention. This book stresses on the importance of understanding the source and the development of Paul's thought. Wright tends to neglect the fact that Paul's thought is a thought-in-action.

Paul is always actively engaged with the Hellenistic world, busy persuading people (especially Gentiles) to be reconciled to God. Rethinking Jewish thought is not what captivates Paul. It is the gentile mission that captivates him. Thus, the *interface between Paul and the Hellenistic world* should have been given more attention. Also important is the *rhetorical* aspect of Paul's letters. Paul is not interested in thought only, but how to persuade people toward action.

While this book serves as a helpful guide to some of the major controversies within Pauline studies and also to Wright's contribution to the debate. It however does *not* serve as a good introduction to the various different Pauline interpreters. The dichotomies set up at the beginning of each chapter are often crude. The scholarly positions are simplified, radicalized and polarized, with the aim to show that the *via media* route taken by Wright is the most reasonable way out. Where in fact scholarly opinions are often far more diverse and complex than what is depicted by Wright.

This book is recommended to readers who are interested in understanding the critical issues involved in Paul's relationship with Judaism. Readers looking for other critical issues in Pauline study will need to consult other writings.