

WRIGHT, NT

PAUL AND THE FAITHFULNESS OF GOD

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The much-anticipated fourth volume (in two volumes and more than 1 600 pages) in NT Wright's Christian Origins and the Question of God series, this work is the culmination of a lifetime's engagement with the person and writings of the Apostle Paul. Sure to become a classic and authoritative resource, it is a "must-read" for New Testament scholars and theologians.

The work is divided into four parts. Book I, containing Parts I and II, addresses Paul's world (Jewish, Greek, Roman – including philosophy, religion, and empire) and worldview. Book II, containing Parts III and IV, addresses Paul's theology (in terms of monotheism, election, and eschatology, all rethought by Paul around the person and work of Jesus and the Holy Spirit) and Paul in History (connecting Paul to the historical contexts discussed in Part I (now Roman, Greek, and Jewish).

Wright summarizes his "main thesis" thus: "Paul developed something we can appropriately call his 'theology', a radical mutation in the core beliefs of his Jewish world, because only so could he sustain what we can appropriately call the 'worldview' which he held himself and which he longed for his churches to hold as well ... My proposal is that Paul actually *invents* something we may call 'Christian theology', in this particular way (Jewish beliefs about God, reworked around the Messiah and spirit), for this particular purpose (maintaining the new messianic people in good order)" (xvi).

The sections on Paul's worldview and theology make up the heart of the book. But Wright begins the work with a discussion of Philemon. In this short Pauline letter one can see, Wright argues, a picture of Paul's central worldview symbol –

the unified, Jew and gentile, messianic people of God, or the church. When we get to Part II, where Paul's worldview is directly addressed, Wright helpfully discusses the "symbolic praxis" that makes up "Paul's implicit worldview", the "interlocking narratives" that Paul draws upon, and what Wright considers to be the key "worldview questions." The key questions are: Who are we? Where are we? What's wrong? What's the solution? And what time is it? A sixth question, asking "Why?" leads into Part III, on Paul's theology.

The section on the interlocking narratives of Paul's worldview is especially interesting. Wright argues that Paul has at least four stories in mind throughout his writings. The largest story backdrop is the story of God and creation. Within that is the story of God and humanity. Within that is the story of God and Israel. And within that is the story of Jesus. The Jesus story is the key that unlocks the other stories. It is the solution to the problem of Israel (Jesus is the true Israelite). It is the solution to the problem of humanity (Jesus is the second Adam, the true human being). And it is the solution to the problem of creation (now humans can once again bear God's image, and thus, creation can be restored). The argument here is imaginative and complex, but the case is clear and compelling.

In discussing Paul's theology, Wright comments:

"So when people say, as they often do, that Paul 'was not a systematic theologian', meaning that 'Paul did not write a medieval *Summa Theologica* or a book that corresponds to Calvin's *Institutes*', we will want to say: Fair enough. So far as know, he didn't. But the statement is often taken to mean that Paul was therefore just a jumbled, rambling sort of thinker, who would grab odd ideas out of the assortment of junk in his mental cupboard and throw them roughly in the direction of the problems presented to him by his beloved and frustrating ecclesiae. And that is simply nonsense. The more time we spend in careful reading of Paul, and in the study of his worldview, his theology and his aims and intentions, the more he emerges as a deeply *coherent* thinker" (568).

Wright's discussion of Paul's theology demonstrates this point. He organizes his analysis around three key points. The first, monotheism, discusses how Israel's one God has been "freshly revealed." The second, election, discusses how the identity of God's people has been "freshly reworked." This is where he discusses Justification – a topic of some interests for those who follow Wright's work. The third, eschatology, discusses how the future has been "freshly imagined". Again, these essentially Jewish categories are reworked around Paul's understanding of Jesus, as the Messiah, and the Spirit. These categories must be rethought in light of "the faithfulness of God". That is, what has happened through the Messiah and the Spirit has happened as

God's own answer to the plight of Israel, humanity, and creation. This has happened as the fulfilment of God's promises. God has done what he always said he would do. God has been faithful to his promises – even if in a surprising way. This unexpected form of fulfilment demanded the hard theological work in which Paul engaged. Paul argued for this vision of God in his writings. And Wright argues for this vision of Paul in his.

Wright's work is informative, insightful, elucidating, and imaginative throughout. Readers will gain a clear picture, and deeper understanding, of Paul's overlapping contexts, as well as a detailed argument for Paul's worldview and theology. The account is remarkably coherent and persuasive. Other New Testament scholars and theologians are not likely to agree on every point, but the overall case is quit compelling. Extensive research in primary sources, and engagement with important secondary voices, strengthen the big picture that Wright portrays. One can tell that the thesis has been worked out over many years of in-depth study.

The work is so extensive that one could easily get the sense that Wright may understand Paul better than Paul understood himself. Perhaps this is the case with any full-scale study of a particular person and their writings. Paul's worldview and theology are so deeply examined that it is possible he was not fully conscious of all that Wright asserts. Just the same, Wright's argument is strongly supported, and demonstrably reasonable. The book(s) probably could have been shorter. Some points seem repetitive or superfluous. Wright also uses a lot of long sentences with lots of commas, which can make the main point difficult to follow. Just the same, aside from a couple stylistic obstacles, this important work makes for enjoyable and massively informative reading. I must give it my highest recommendation. I cannot imagine that anyone who wants to give serious attention to Paul's letters can do without critical engagement with Wright's works.

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