



ADVANCING THE
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Christian doctrines are ideas and concepts, but they are more. Christian doctrine is what the Church believes, teaches and confesses as it prays and suffers, serves and obeys, celebrates and awaits the coming of the kingdom of God. It is also an expression of the broken state of Christian faith and witness, the most patent illustration of the truth of the apostolic admission in 1 Corinthians 13:21: "Now we see in a mirror dimly. . . . Now I know in part."

JAROSLAV PELIKAN

"**T**he authority of Scripture" is really a shorthand for "the authority of God exercised through Scripture"; and God's authority is not merely his right to control and order the church, but his sovereign power, exercised in and through Jesus and the Spirit, to bring all things in heaven and on earth into subjection to his judging and healing rule.

N. T. WRIGHT

N. T. WRIGHT: PAULINE CARTOGRAPHER



THOMAS N. SMITH

PAUL: IN FRESH PERSPECTIVE

N. T. Wright

Minneapolis: Fortress (2005)

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"Maps are a way of organizing wonder."

—Peter Steinhart¹

Cartographers draw pictures of geographic reality. Maps are pictures of geographic reality. Maps are not geographic reality but only pictures of that reality. Until very recently, errors and distortions in the mapmaking process were inevitable, and some of these errors were huge, the maps bearing very little correspondence to the reality they claimed to represent. Just look at fifteenth-century maps of the Americas to see how true this is. Mapmakers are, by the nature of the business, limited by their data, their instruments of observation, their perspective, and their own personal prejudices. What Thomas Jefferson expected Lewis and Clark to discover in the Louisiana Purchase proved to be a far cry from what the

leaders of the Corps of Discovery, through their careful observations and cartography, actually discovered to be the reality of the matter. The geography of the imagination and the geography of careful observation and charting are usually two entirely different things. Mapmaking is thus, like everything human, subject to the weaknesses, the shortsightedness, and the prejudices of human beings.

Theologians are mapmakers. Theologians are engaged in drawing pictures of theological reality. Theologians are no more infallible in their chartings than geographic mapmakers are in theirs. This is true even when, as with biblical theologians, the reality they are describing is founded upon divine authority—namely, the Bible. Theologians are subject to the same human condition spoken of before: weakness, myopia, and prejudice. Still, with proper care, scientific tools, and self-doubt, theologians, like mapmakers, may be expected to draw adequate, if not perfect, pictures of the reality they claim to chart.

Bishop Tom Wright is a theological cartographer. He is creating for us a visual image of the reality, the terrain that is already there. He is careful and self-doubting. And he is equipped with the best scientific tools for the work: a thoroughgoing training in history, the biblical languages, and exegesis. In one of his newest books,² Wright attempts to draw us a big map, a kind of continental map of Paul's theology. Wright does this by charting for us what he regards as the significant contours of Paul's thought.

Wright's approach is to divide his subject into two sections, "Themes" and "Structures." Under the first section he deals with Paul's own historical placement on the map of the first century and then proceeds to discuss "major Pauline themes . . . which allow us to put down some preliminary markers about the way Paul's mind worked" (xi). These themes are creation and covenant, Messiah and apocalyptic, and gospel and empire. In each, he firmly grounds Paul's thinking in the intellectual world of Second Temple Judaism and Paul's life in the Hellenistic-Roman world of a first-century Jew. In the next section, "Structures," Wright develops

and relates these major themes under three ideas, "Rethinking God," "Reworking God's People," and "Reimagining God's Future." Wright concludes with a brief treatment of the praxis suggested to the church in the twenty-first century by these themes and structures.

The size of this book is deceptive. Its 174-plus pages of text suggest that this will be a popular synopsis of Wright's mature thinking on Paul. And it is. But no one can promise that Wright's new *Paul* will be an easy read. This is not because of any fault in his English style. His prose is, as always, direct, clear, and at times poetic and moving. As is his logic, which likewise is direct, clear, and inexorable. The difficulty in reading N. T. Wright, however, is that both his thinking and his writing are, to use a favorite phrase of his in describing Paul, "dense." That is to say, Wright's work on Paul is "thick" rather than "thin" (to use categories favored by anthropologists). Paul's thinking is of a multi-layered "thickness," and any respectable treatment of this thinking must reflect this. I think that Wright has succeeded.

There are four areas that I think Wright has understood as being utterly necessary in order to "map Paul's thought." They are: The Paul of History, The Paul of the Bible, The Paul of Jesus as the Messiah, and The Paul of "the Fullness of the Times."

THE PAUL OF HISTORY

Wright begins in chapter 1 by setting Paul solidly within his own historical and cultural milieu. Paul is the inhabitant of three worlds: Judaism, Hellenism, and the Roman Empire. Paul was a Jew. He is a Jew of the Second Temple Period, and, by his own testimony, zealous in every way for the traditions of his Jewish heritage. He is even bold to say that, as a Christian, he worships and serves the God of Israel (Acts 26:4–8). This is so even though he has undergone a revolutionary rethinking of what a "Jew" is (Romans 2:28–29 and Philippians 3:2–11, see pages 115–18). Cut off from his Jewish roots, Paul's thought becomes a map without a legend, without a

compass rose—unintelligible. The world of Paul is the world of Hellenism with its philosophies, deities, and immoralities. Paul the Jew, like his fellow countrymen, is locked in deadly combat with this world; Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, even more so. And Paul, the Roman citizen, inhabits the Roman Empire, which is Caesar's domain with its claims of power, supremacy, and ultimacy—as in its burgeoning emperor-cult.

One of the most important roles Wright plays in current Pauline studies is to locate Paul and his thinking in just this milieu and with just this solidity. He is a man of this place and time. Therefore, whatever Paul has to say is said from within this historical setting. And whatever Paul means has meaning, first and foremost, for this time and place. Without this historicism the terrain shifts, and charting its contours becomes a maddening impossibility.

One suspects that some of the criticism leveled at Wright, especially from conservative evangelicals, is just the result of his stubborn insistence that Paul and his theology be grounded in the historical setting described above. Wright is annoyed (as in his earlier work on Jesus) with what he calls, "timeless truths," which I understand to be his slightly pejorative description of attempts by theologians and Bible teachers to extract principles from Paul by extracting Paul's message from its historical setting. Wright's Paul sees every Jewish and biblical concept in its historical setting and continuum: creation, covenant, election, Israel, Messiah, and so forth. For example, Wright's treatment of Paul's "covenant theology" has virtually nothing to do with Reformed scholasticism's constructions described by the same terminology. Paul's "covenant theology" is his understanding of the making, breaking, and renewal of God's covenants in the history of Abraham, Israel, and finally with Jesus and the Spirit—the fulfillment of both Israel's hope and God's promise.

The same can be said of Wright's "fresh perspective" on Paul's theology of justification by faith. Paul's thinking on the revelation of "the righteousness of God" is God's faithful and righteous fulfilling of his own covenantal obligations, so tragically violated by Israel, in the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, the

Messiah, the embodiment of Israel. In Jesus' own faithfulness to God and his covenant, the curse of exile is lifted from Israel, the way is cleared for the promise of God to Abraham that he would become heir of the world, and a new and united family of Jews and Gentiles is made possible.³ The "mark" or "badge" of membership within this family becomes "in Christ," not the works of Torah, but faith in the one true God who raised Jesus from the dead. One of Wright's severest criticisms of his own critics is that they present an "ahistoricized" treatment of Paul's doctrine at just this point (120).

Nor does this view jettison the older Protestant view of justification having to do with salvation from sin and death. In a passage that simultaneously praises and critiques the so-called "New Perspective," Wright says:

This is where the so-called "new perspective" has made one of its necessary points—that every time Paul discusses justification he seems simultaneously to be talking about Gentile inclusion—but has not, usually, shown how this integrates with the traditional view that he is talking about how sinners are put right with God. Once we frame the question within the overall narratives of creation and covenant, the way is clear and open to a fresh statement of Paul which will do far more exegetical justice to the passages concerned and which will show how these two emphases are in fact part of the same thing, both to be equally stressed. (36)

In this way, Wright sets these categories firmly on the map by setting them firmly within the historical and historic dealings of God, first with Israel, then the world ("to the Jew first and also to the Gentiles"), in the history of Jesus the Messiah.⁴

PAUL AND THE BIBLE

Wright's Paul is *par excellence* Paul the *biblicist*. Wright's Paul is concerned at every point with the biblical story contained in the sacred writings of the Old Testament. Indeed, his

every idea is ancillary to the great biblical narrative, beginning with creation and covenant, proceeding to covenant violation and exile, culminating in covenant renewal and the removal of the covenantal curse in Jesus, and resulting in the blessing of Abraham coming to all nations through faith in the gospel. Paul retells the story of Israel, the old story, by telling the story of Jesus, the embodiment of Israel, the Light of the World. And Wright's understanding of the biblical Paul is just this *narrative* understanding (6–13). This is why he can present Paul's "righteousness of God" in terms, not simply of Greek genitives, but of the *biblical* context of the revelation of YHWH's righteousness in Psalms 19 and 74 and Isaiah 40–55 (21–24).⁵ Without this biblical foundation, Paul's message becomes fugitive and mapping him becomes a futile labor, like mapping a melting iceberg adrift in the North Atlantic.

It is Paul as a *biblical* theologian that excites Wright. Paul is a "walking Bible" who has come, through his personal experience of the resurrected Jesus, to understand where the Old Testament was always going! Jesus as Messiah becomes the climax and fulfillment of all that Moses in the law and the prophets wrote. He is the climax of the covenant and of history. This is how Paul reads the Old Testament—in light of the coming and accomplishment of Jesus, Israel's Messiah and the world's redeemer!

Wright's work at this point is a sheer joy. By carefully exposing the Old Testament "echoes" in Paul (see especially 61–62), by incisive exegesis of a sampling of pertinent texts, and by his inexorable logic,⁶ Wright's treatment of Paul as a biblical theologian is a *tour de force*. I anxiously await the coming of part four of his Christian Origins and the Question of God for more of the same.

PAUL AND JESUS, THE MESSIAH

I want to insist that Paul's whole point is precisely that with the coming, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus the Messiah a new chapter has opened within the [biblical] story in which he had believed himself to be living, and that understanding what

that story is and how this chapter is indeed a radically new movement within it provides one of the central clues to everything else he says. (9)

This, of course, is precisely the model offered by the representative death of Jesus the Messiah, who from Paul's perspective offered to God the perfect obedience Israel should have offered, and thereby fulfilled on behalf of Israel as well as the world the rescue operation the covenant always envisaged. (38)

Precisely as Messiah, he offers God that representative faithfulness to the plan of salvation through which the plan can go ahead at last [Romans 3:21–31], Abraham can have a worldwide family (chapter 4), and the long entail of Adam's sin and death can be undone (5:12–21) through his obedience, which as we know from 1:5 is for Paul very closely aligned with faith, faithfulness or fidelity. (47)

The royal Messiah had come from the seed of David, had fought and won the ultimate battle, had built the new temple, had brought Israel's history to its long-prophesied climax, and had done so as Israel's representative and even as God's representative. (48)

I have now argued that he believed Jesus to be Israel's Messiah, the one in whom God's purpose for Israel, and even (we dare say) God's purpose for himself, was fulfilled, and that he made that belief a central and major strand in his thinking and writing. (49)

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. And at the heart of both parts of this tension stands the cross of the Messiah, at once the long-awaited fulfillment and the slap in the face for all human pride. (54)

He believed that Jesus was the Messiah promised by God to Israel, and that his death and resurrection in particular constituted the great apocalyptic event through which God's hidden place was at last revealed to Israel and, through the preaching of the gospel, to the world. (59)

As every serious reader of Paul has long recognized, though not so many have explored it to the full, the cross of Jesus the Messiah stands at the heart of Paul's vision of the one True God. (96)

That all this has now come to pass in Jesus the Messiah is a central plank in the theology of St Paul. . . . Through his high Christology, it is indeed God's own future that has burst into the present. Through his incorporative Christology, summing up his redefined doctrine of election, it is Israel's future that has at last come to pass. Through his extraordinary interpretation of Jesus' crucifixion as the divine victory over the powers of evil, the great battle has come and gone, and the pagan powers have been decisively defeated. (135)

The great apocalypse had occurred, revealing Jesus as Israel's Messiah. Jesus was therefore Lord of the world, and Caesar was not. (163)

These are a few of the many statements that Wright makes concerning Paul's understanding as Jesus as the Messiah. This is the "compass rose" that gives direction to everything on Paul's map.⁷

For Paul, Jesus is the Son of God, which originally carried messianic overtones from such passages as 2 Samuel 7 and Psalms 2 and 89. But, inevitably, the significance of this title comes to carry *divine* weight. This it clearly does in Paul. This is what Wright refers to as Paul's "high Christology." Along with his understanding of the Spirit of the Messiah (97–101), the conclusion is inescapable. Commenting on Galatians 4:1–7, Wright says:

This is a typically Jewish thing to do, to line up the Exodus-God against the pagan deities; and Paul has described the Exodus-God as the son-sending, Spirit-sending God. It is as though he is saying, you either have this God, known in this way, or you have paganism. From here on—and I believe that Galatians is one the earliest Christian documents we possess—one might conclude that if the doctrine of the Trinity did not come into existence it would be necessary to invent it. (98)

But along with this "high Christology" is to be seen Paul's "incorporative Christology." This is likewise central to Paul and, from his earliest writings, central to Wright's understanding of Paul. "Incorporative Christology," under the more familiar terminology, "union with Christ," has frequently been seen as the central motif in Paul.⁸ Building on his earlier work and with reference to 2 Samuel 20:1, Wright says: "[Paul] regularly speaks of people entering into the Messiah's people, that is, coming *into Christ*, as a result of which they are now *in Christ*, so that what is true of him is true of them, and vice versa" (46).

For Paul, Jesus, the Messiah, is the new Adam and the new Israel. As such, he faithfully obeys what they transgressed and in this way establishes the "righteousness of God," that is, God's covenantal faithfulness, by his own faithfulness unto death. The resurrection is God's vindication of Jesus' faithfulness. Those who by the power of the Spirit believe in Jesus are incorporated into him, into the family of Abraham, and into the family of God.

Thus, around the motif of "incorporative Christology" Wright plots Paul's "Reworking [of] God's People" in chapter 6. This involves a reshaping of the doctrine of election (though Wright never explicitly defines or describes the word, "election.") Israel's election, according to Wright, is "reshaped around Jesus" (10). As such, the promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are fulfilled in Jesus and in his new elect people, Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus. These are "Jews" (Romans 2:28, 29), "the circumcision" (Philippians 3:3), and "the Israel of God" (Galatians 6:15, 16; see 110–22).

As such, there is nothing really new here. Non-dispensationalist theologians have been saying similar things for a long time. What is new, however, is Wright's conjoining this with his understanding of the doctrine of justification by faith *that includes Gentile incorporation* without denying the soteric nature of its teaching.⁹ Referring to Romans 3:21–31, Wright says:

This passage, and particularly verses 27–31 which follow, show how impossible it is therefore to separate the doctrine of justification by faith from that of the incorporation of the Gentiles into the people of God. The attempt to do so can only even begin by screening out the larger theology in which Paul fully shares and shrinking the whole argument to nothing but an individualistic, ahistoricized and de-covenantalized parody. (120)

THE PAULINE ESCHATOLOGY

The fourth significant area of Wright's mapmaking is eschatology. Most of the people I am in contact with who are at all familiar with the word *eschatology* think it refers to the kinds of things that we find in the *Left Behind* novels, that is, the rapture, the tribulation, and so forth. Wright contends that *all of the New Testament is concerned with eschatology*. The New Testament *is* eschatology. In this, Wright is not saying anything new. Geerhardus Vos said the same things nearly seventy-five years ago in his *The Pauline Eschatology* and more recently by Hermann Ridderbos in his magisterial *Paul: an Outline of His Theology*.¹⁰

The point is this: for Paul, the end of the age has been introduced in the middle of history. This has happened in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah. The kingdom of God has come. The exile has been reversed. The curse of the violated covenant has been taken away. The Spirit has been poured out. The covenant has been renewed. The forgiveness of sins has been granted. The Enemy has been defeated. The temple has been rebuilt. The people of God have been raised from the dead. The Gentile nations have been brought to know and love the God of Abraham.

This is not, however, a denial of the presence of the old age, "the present evil age." Until the destruction of the "last enemy," death, the remains of the present age will continue, and so they will also continue to plague the human race. But, in the resurrection of the Son of God, the power of death has been decisively defeated, as well as the one who held the power of death, the Devil.

We now live in the overlap of two ages that will continue until the end, the consummation, when the present evil age will cease to exist and the completed exodus of the people of God will include the deliverance of the creation itself into "the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Romans 8:18–25). This is just another example of the eschatology of the "already, not yet" found in Paul and throughout the New Testament.

God's purpose has always been the salvation of the creation, the cosmos, and the world. God's purpose has always been to have a family of human sons and daughters made perfectly in his image. *This*, he has accomplished in Christ. *This*, Christ shall finally and utterly accomplish in the new heavens and earth.

It is this ultimate vision that makes Wright at times to speak almost contemptuously of what has dominated the Christian church's vision of the afterlife under the term, "heaven." Wright asserts repeatedly that "heaven" is the penultimate hope of the church, while "the new heavens and earth" are its ultimate, final, and glorious hope. In his other work, he calls this hope "life after life after death."

One of the implications of Wright's understanding of Paul is this: Unless this eschatology is understood and respected, there is little hope of comprehending Paul at all.

This, in short, is the map that N. T. Wright makes of the thought of the apostle Paul.¹¹

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This is an important book. It even possesses shades of greatness, a greatness that may yet be realized in the

forthcoming volume(s?) in Wright's series, *Christian Origins and the Question of God*.

It is an important book in that it locates Paul on a larger map than do those treatments of him that focus only on parts of his thought (like "justification by faith" or "the righteousness of God"). This is a brief but thorough attempt to see Paul *holistically*. It is an attempt that succeeds.

It is an important book in that it maps out Paul's thought in its connection with its larger biblical world. This it does in its treatment of Paul's use of the Old Testament, as we have seen. But it also does the same (briefly) in connecting Paul with the life and mission of Jesus himself (154–61).

It is an important book in that it places Paul on the map of his historical setting in the first rather than the sixteenth century. Paul the Jew, Paul the Roman citizen, and Paul the apostle becomes more alive, more real, and more understandable as the result.

Finally, it is an important book because it tells us concisely where Tom Wright himself is on the Pauline map. For those who have not taken the trouble to read *The Climax of the Covenant* or the time to read *What Saint Paul Really Said*, this book will clear the air of much of the fog of doubt, suspicion, and anxiety that often occlude clear vision in discussions of what the Bishop of Durham is talking about, as well as about what others are talking about, pro and con, when they discuss the bishop and his perspective.

I thank the bishop for his new work on Paul, as well as for all his other written works. I have been informed and enriched by him. I am indebted to him. I am indebted to God for him.

I began this essay with a quote from Peter Steinhart: "Maps are a way of organizing wonder." It is with a tremendous sense of wonder that N. T. Wright approaches Paul. It is with this same kind of wonder that he charts the contours of Paul's landscape. The resulting map is calculated to inspire like wonder in those who take the time to examine it.

AUTHOR

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NOTES

1. From "Names of a Map," cited by William Least Heat-Moon, *PrairieErth* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991), 4.
2. *Paul, In Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).
3. See pages 138–40 and chapter 7 of Wright's *The Climax of the Covenant* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).
4. This theme is frequent in Wright's *Climax of the Covenant* referred to above.
5. The relevant verses in Isaiah are 40:1–8; 42:5–9; 45:20–25; 46:13; 53:1, 11; 55:1–13.
6. For the use and misuse of logic in exegetical-theological argument, see *Climax of the Covenant*, chapter 1.
7. A "compass rose" is a "circle of the principal directions marked on a chart," *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, Oxford, 1976.
8. See again *Climax of the Covenant* and his unpublished PhD Thesis, "The Messiah and the People of God," Oxford University, 1980.
9. A fair treatment of the so-called "New Perspective on Paul," is Michael B. Thompson's *The New Perspective on Paul* (Cambridge, U.K.: Grove Books Limited, 2002), available through ACT 3.
10. Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), esp. chapter 1. Ridderbos, *Paul, An Outline of His Theology*, John Richard De Witt, trans. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), esp. chapters 2, 4, and 7. A popular treatment of these themes may be found in Anthony A. Hoekema's *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), esp. chapters 1–6.
11. Even a cursory reading of Wright's *Paul* will note that I have not included a discussion of chapter 4, "Gospel and Empire." This chapter deals with the political message of Paul's gospel. In this chapter Wright shows how Paul follows a traditional Second Temple Jewish critique of paganism and the Roman Empire and intensifies this critique by insisting that, with the confession, "Jesus is Lord," the whole Roman cult of power and incipient emperor worship is called to account and told,

"Your time is up!" The very language of the gospel is seen as a subtle and subversive attack upon the claims of the Imperium (69–79). I find his arguments persuasive, but am reticent towards some of his implications, even as he is of some of the implications of other writers (75, 76). On these things I need more time to think and choose, therefore, at present to reserve judgment. A complimentary perspective on the political issues raised in this chapter can be found in Marva J. Dawn's *Powers, Weakness, and the Tabernacling of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

In fact, it sometimes seems that we are so trapped in ineffectual life patterns that we are playing out the old military adage: If it doesn't work, double it. The motivations and habit patterns that underlie most of our behavior are seldom logical; we are much more often driven by impulses, preconditions, and emotions of which we are only dimly aware.

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