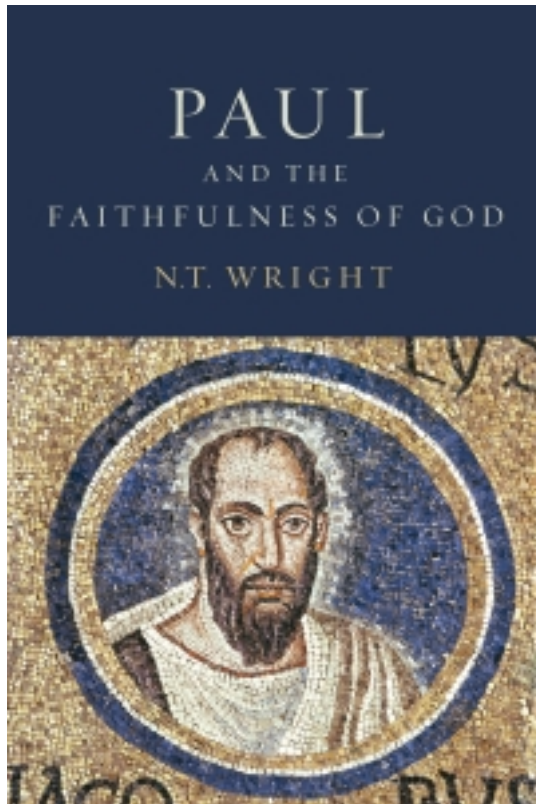


Review for Fortress Press (February 2014)



N.T. Wright.

Paul and the Faithfulness of God.

Vol. 4 of *Christian Origins and the Question of God.*

Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013.
Pp. xxvii + 1660. Paper. \$89.00. ISBN
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N.T. Wright is a prolific author and thinker. He will be among those named as the most influential writers of the twenty-first century. Upon reading Preston Sprinkle's recent monograph, *Paul and Judaism*¹, I quickly identified with Sprinkle as having a very similar story.

Sometime during my second year of seminary, a friend recommended that I read a book by N.T. Wright about Paul's theology. My immediate reaction was that this would be a waste of time...so I stole away a few hours at a nearby coffee shop and dove into a borrowed copy of Wright's *What Saint Paul Really Said*. Within minutes, I was hooked, and my view of Paul would never be the same.²

¹(Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013).

²Sprinkle, *Paul and Judaism*, 11.

So with a similar encounter, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* had been on my radar for years awaiting its final production. Much to my hope and expectation, like Wright's other Pauline texts, this new Pauline magnum opus did not disappoint. Whether or not you agree with his conclusions, any reader of Wright will leave you with a plethora of new insights and never again will you approach nor read Pauline literature the same again.

In this review, I highlight N.T. Wright's primary objective(s), only engage a few ideas pertinent to my studies as a Pauline student, and give final recommendations. If you are looking for critical reviews, I'd suggest consulting Moo; Schreiner; Bird pt.1, pt.2, pt.3, pt.4.

Paul and the Faithfulness of God is volume 4 in the Christian Origins and the Question of God series. In this 4th volume, four distinct books were released (one still pending). One is a collection of articles by Wright. One is a history of Pauline scholarship. The final two, of which my review is concerned, engages Pauline theology.

Paul and the Faithfulness of God. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013.

Pauline Perspectives: Essays on Paul, 1978–2013. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013.

Paul and His Recent Interpreters. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014. (Due out Nov. 1, 2014).

Overview and Historical Presuppositions

This four-part book totals 1660 pages (16 chapters). The make-up of the book comprises a chiasmic structure. **Part I: Paul's World** engages ancient literature, both Jewish and Greco-Roman. These chapters enable the reader to envision the theological, political, and social dimensions of the melding cultures. "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."³ He begins here presupposing continuity, and reframing a current theological acumen and social dimensions of Paul's theology around a new figure, Christ the Messiah.

Parts II and III serve as the central piece to Wright's Pauline paradigm. **Part II: Paul's Mindset** describes Paul's large worldview schema. **Part III: Paul's Theology** reworks Paul's theology, continuous with second-temple Jewish 'theology', around a new Messiah

³N.T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, vol. 4, Christian Origins and the Question of God (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013), xvi.

and His Spirit.⁴ Therefore, Wright develops Paul's theology via (1) Monotheism,⁵ (2) Election,⁶ and (3) Eschatology.⁷

The final part, **Part IV: Paul in History**, attempts to mimic Part I and return to an essentially historical endeavor. Here, Wright places Part II and III, essentially Paul's entire theological construct, and inserts Paul back into a historical context engaging foreign political powers, different social dimensions, and antithetical religious beliefs.

Wright integrates two ideas that are helpful pillars when analyzing the overwhelming data. First, Wright assumes *Critical Realism*, a social science category, for addressing his data. This is distinct from a pure historical endeavor. *Critical Realism* assumes both historical inquiry and scientific historical observation while also engaging ideas, ontological belief systems, and worldview analysis via cultural symbols and observable data. Thus, it is historical study with ontological belief systems simultaneously engaged. These presuppositions have been established in Wright's previous works.⁸

A world-view analysis is the vehicle Wright uses to engage all the data. This model, for the most part stays consistent throughout the book. As pictured below, it is the interwoven matrix of story, praxis, symbols, and worldview founded upon central beliefs. *Story* is the historical narrative and purely a historical reconstruction of "what happened." *Praxis* is the ethical, moral, and spiritual practices of the culture. *Symbols* reflect the visual imagery of religious or social moorings (e.g. Jewish Temple). *Questions*, then, are the social, ethical, etc. applications of the previous three. I found this model rather convincing, holistic, and helpful to think through history, the tangible reflections of symbols, and belief systems. This attempts to combine the corporeal with non-corporeal, realis with irrealis, physical story and symbols with beliefs and worldview questions.

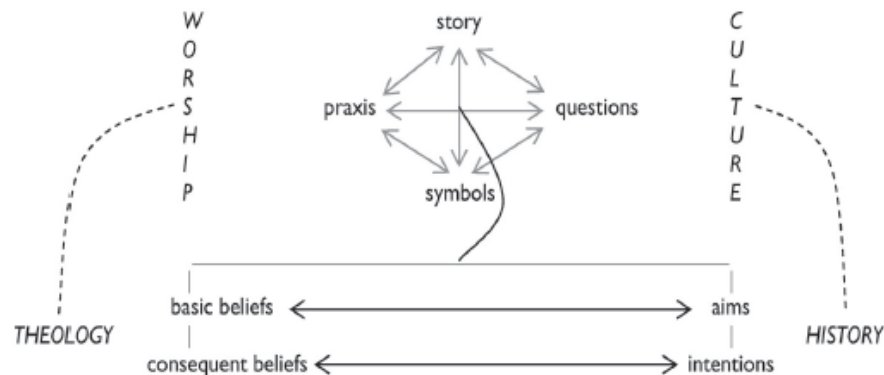
⁴Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 4:612-18.

⁵Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, vol. 4, chap. 9 (618-773).

⁶Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, vol. 4, chap. 10 (774-1042).

⁷Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, vol. 4, chap. 11 (1043-1265).

⁸See, N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, vol. 1, Christian Origins and the Question of God (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 32-46.



Personal Areas of Interest in Biblical Studies

Integration of Biblical Theology. Currently living in a theological climate where theological centers and systematic theology are apropos to some and impossible for others, Wright's overall Pauline theological reconstruction proved useful to see the interconnectedness of ideas. Biblical theology provides a better tool to analyze theological thought because it allows for the complex and diversified ideas to simultaneously exist.

Take for example, Wright's comments about 'participatory' themes.

Here, in fact, all the 'categories' of modern analysis are cheerfully jumbled up. If all we had was Galatians rather than Romans, it is unlikely that anyone would have thought to separate out 'juridical' images from 'participationist' or 'anthropological', or for that matter 'salvation historical', or 'apocalyptic', or 'covenantal', or 'transformative' in the way they are now routinely handled. Here these elements all belong together, not in a muddle (as though seven blindfolded cooks were all trying to add their favourite ingredients to a stew, but in a coordinated and coherent line of thought.⁹

Reading Galatians 2-3 and discussing 'justification' seems to be nearly impossible without also engaging ecclesiology, participatory themes, Christology, and covenant themes. Single ideas are integrated into a complex theological matrix to nearly prohibit finding a central theme and talking of one theme with the exclusion of others.

Second Temple Literature. The most valuable chapter, or at least the chapter where I learned the most, was **Chapter Two: Like Birds Hovering Overhead: The Faithfulness of the God of Israel**. Here, Wright demonstrates incredible handling of Second-Temple literature and linking related themes together. I don't think Wright would rightly claim the title, but I could easily classify him as a Biblical-Historical Theologian when reading Second-Temple literature. Wright wonderfully develops the concept of Torah, ideas of Exile, Temple, and the Pharisees's.

⁹Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 4:851.

Especially pertinent for NT studies, Second-Temple literature retells the story of Israel so as to cast the new readers as a newly created Israel.¹⁰ Second-Temple readers, however, would read themselves into the exile narratives, casting their history as the newly created Israel. “Within the continuing narrative which virtually all Jews believed themselves to be living in... a great many second-Temple Jews interpreted *that part of the continuing narrative in which they were living* in terms of the so-called Deuteronomic scheme of sin—exile—restoration, with themselves still somewhere in the middle stage, that of ‘exile’.”¹¹ Do not NT writers (e.g., Matthew, 1 Peter, Hebrews) re-tell the story so as to create a new community in exile? This is a patterned theme in religious literature.

One area needing further study is Wright’s description of 4QMMT. With Evangelical, New Perspective, and Post-New Perspective discussions of justification, the role of works in Paul’s theological matrix still proves potentially problematic. One frequent criticism of NPP is their appeal to justification by works. “We are bound to find it frustrating that we have almost no texts from this period that do what we would like, namely, speak from a clearly Pharisaic point of view about what Paul the apostle calls ‘justification by works of the law’. The closest we get, as is well known, is the Essene document 4QMMT.”¹² This document and historical study may need more individuals engaging historical study.

Jarvis Williams, Preston Sprinkle, and others have/are providing helpful critiques of Wright’s interpretation of Second-Temple literature. Consult Sprinkle’s *Paul and Judaism Revisited*. Sprinkle has a different reading of divine sovereignty and human responsibility.

Final Thoughts

The purpose of this review was not to offer a critique, per se. Rather, it highlights the presuppositions of *Critical Realism* and world-view model of Wright. Those involved in historiography would do well to engage this idea and glean any benefits to the historical endeavor. In this way, historical inquiry also engages belief systems and symbols. Also, I provide two major portions of insightful ideas and topics. The book is a treasure trove of topics to pursue for further study; whether or not the reader agrees with Wright, you will leave with a greater appreciation of Second-Temple literature, Pauline Theology, and

¹⁰Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 4:117–35.

¹¹Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 4:140.

¹²Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 4:184.

Biblical Theology. Wright has an incredible mastery of texts and history and strings the two together to create a masterful mosaic of thought. Of course the book has flaws, but others have provided those helpful critiques.¹³

I would unreservedly recommend this text to any NT student or Biblical Studies student. N.T. Wright is shaping and reconfiguring the landscape of Pauline and New Testament studies through his prolific literature, fresh readings of Pauline texts, and engaging questions through a different lens. Therefore, it is worthy of such a read; any academic student or scholar would do well to read this text regardless of theological presuppositions and convictions. Even for critics of the New Perspective, this book will prove valuable to demonstrate the non-monolithic movement of NPP and how Wright distances himself from the movement.

Thank you to Fortress Press for kindly allowing me to review this book.

¹³Part one has far too many typographical and spelling errors. I don't know if this volume will go through a second edition, but it may prove helpful to edit the text one more time.