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Jesus' View of Repentance and Forgiveness: A Hermeneutical Test Case

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Introduction

Recently, in a review of Tom Wright's *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, Tom Schreiner wrote:

It seems as if discussions on Wright easily become a matter of whether one is “for him” or “against him.” But such an approach isn't helpful and blunts the kind of discussion that is needed. It is fitting to be grateful (see above) for his contributions to scholarship and for his service to the church. He is clearly not an enemy of evangelicalism but a friend. At the same time, we serve scholarship and truth in raising questions and concerns as well. If demonizing Wright is irrational, we must also beware of an uncritical adulation where any disagreement with him is viewed as an attack. Mature discussion takes place when we honestly dialogue about places where we agree and differ with kindness and grace.¹

Building up on Schreiner's remarks, Wright's creativity and willingness to challenge traditional paradigms can be helpful, even if one is not in full agreement with his conclusions, because it forces one to go back and look at the Bible again. And in particular, for those who have the patience, it drives readers to examine how conclusions are reached. The questions that are not asked enough by the theological students who want to rush to find out “Whose right?” Or, “Whose side am I on?” are “Why are there disagreements on this issue?” Or, to put this differently, “What methodological differences are driving the different exegetical conclusions?” Evaluating the steps along the interpretive path helps to dig under the surface of debated conclusions to get to the roots of the disagreements and draw some important hermeneutical lessons.²

¹ Thomas Schreiner, “N. T. Wright Under Review: Revisiting the Apostle Paul and His Doctrine of Justification” *Credo* 4/1 (2014), p. 47.

² A special thanks to my former doctoral adviser and friend Andreas Köstenberger for his encouragement to write on this topic.

N.T. Wright on Repentance and Forgiveness

In *Jesus and the Victory of God (JV/G)*, Wright defines repentance, in contrast to what he labels as the “traditional” understanding, as “what Israel must do if YHWH is to restore her fortune at last,” with Jesus proposing the answer to be “abandon revolutionary zeal.”³ Wright sees his understanding of Jesus’ use of “repentance” as a return to the historical context in which Jesus lived rather than the ahistorical conversion sense of the word. In other words, instead of “repentance” referring to the negative side of the conversion, Jesus is primarily calling Israel to turn from their revolutionary zeal and be restored from exile. Wright argues this restoration for the nation of Israel is what Jesus means by “forgiveness.” Hence, in contrast to the traditional understanding of forgiveness as God’s gracious response to sinners who have responded appropriately to Jesus, Wright argues forgiveness is “another way of saying return from exile.”⁴ The following will trace out how Wright uses background material in order to understand how this affects both his definitions of what Jesus meant by repentance and forgiveness and his exegesis of related passages. The article will then conclude with several practical observations for interpretation.

The End of Exile Theme

Wright’s understanding of the exile has served as an important background for his understanding of the entire NT, no less the Gospels and Jesus. Wright argues that most Jews in the first century would have understood themselves, “in all the senses that really mattered,” to still be in exile.⁵ Although a remnant had physically returned from Babylon, the prophets’ message had not ultimately been fulfilled. Israel still was under the thumb of foreigners and her God had not returned to Zion.⁶ While Wright’s view has been directly challenged by some and simply ignored by others, it has only

³ For N. T. Wright on repentance see *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), pp. 247–51.

⁴ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 268. For his full explanation of forgiveness according to Jesus, see pp. 268–72.

⁵ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 445.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. xvii–xviii.

been strengthened by a series of works that affirm Wright's central thesis and provide more detailed support.⁷

Once this national expectation is accepted as the hope of many first century Jews, it has implications for understanding Jesus' message. Wright has tightly connected the exile theme from the OT and Second Temple literature with how the concepts of forgiveness and repentance are used in the Gospels and in some instances there is merit to such a connection due to the use of the concepts in the context of a future return from exile. Yet, while not denying these connections exist, there are a considerable number of instances in the OT where repentance and forgiveness are used with reference to the individual, and often when the Second Temple literature speaks of these concepts, it refers back to these examples of repentance and forgiveness in the Hebrew Bible. In other words, as the next section will show, the OT backdrop is more diverse in how such terms are used than is portrayed in *JVG*.

⁷ Thomas R. Schreiner, "Justification: The Saving Righteousness of God in Christ," *JETS* 54 (2011): p. 19–20, who challenges many of Wright's views on other issues, has noted, "I also want to say that I think Wright is fundamentally right in what he says about the exile. Jesus came proclaiming the end of the exile and the restoration of the people of God. Perhaps exile is not the right word to use (I do not have any quarrel with it), but the idea is on target in any case. Israel was under the thumb of the Romans in Jesus' day because of its sin and had not yet experienced the fulfillment of the great promises found in Isaiah and the prophets." Also see Craig Evans, "Jesus & the Continuing Exile of Israel," in *Jesus & the Restoration of Israel: A Critical Assessment of N. T. Wright's Jesus & the Victory of God* (ed. Carey C. Newman; Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1999), pp. 77–100; James C. VanderKam, "Exile in Jewish Apocalyptic Literature," in *Exile: Old Testament, Jewish, and Christian conceptions* (ed. James M. Scott; Boston: Brill, 1997), p. 89–109; T. R. Hatina, "Exile," *DNTB*, p. 348; Douglas S. McComiskey, "Exile and the Purpose of Jesus' Parables (Mark 4:10–12; Matt 13:10–17; Luke 8:9–10)," *JETS* 51 (2008): pp. 59–85. Passages cited in favor of Wright's conclusions include: 4QDa 1:3–11; Tob 14:5–7; Bar 2:6–15; 3:6–8; 2 Macc. 1:27–29; 2:5–8, 18; 1QM 1:2–3; CD 1:3–11; 1 En. 93:1–10; 91:11–17; T. Levi 16–17; Pss. Sol. 9:1–11; Sib. Or. 3.265–290; T. Jud. 23; T. Zeb. 9:5–9; T. Naph. 4:1–5; 4 Ezra 1:31–52; 5:17–18, 28–30; 6:55–59; 10:7–24; 12:46–51; 2 Apoc. Bar. 3:1–9; 67:1–9; 80:1–7; Tg. Isa. 53:8; and Jub. 1:7–18.

The Old Testament as Background

In the Hebrew Scriptures repentance and forgiveness are seen both at the corporate and individual level.⁸ Wright correctly writes that such prayers as those within Daniel 9, Ezra 9, and Nehemiah 9 are “precisely designed to bring about the return from exile.”⁹ Furthermore, numerous OT passages highlight the corporate eschatological repentance and forgiveness that was foretold by the prophets (e.g., Isa 2:21–31; 30:19–22; 31:6–32:8; 35:5–10; 55:1–13; 60–61; Jer 31:27–34; Ezek 36:16–32; Hos 14:4).

Nevertheless, repentance for personal sins was also a feature in the OT. The Law required individuals to confess their sins and for individual sins to be atoned (e.g., Lev 5:5; Num 5:6–7; 15:27–31). Individuals are regularly portrayed as confessing sin in hope of forgiveness (e.g., Gen 50:17; 1 Sam 15:24–25; 2 Sam 12:13; Job 42:6). Moreover, the wisdom literature appears to emphasize the importance of repentance and forgiveness for individuals within the covenant community. For example, Prov 1:23 says, “If you turn at my reproof, behold, I will pour out my spirit to you; I will make my words known to you.”¹⁰ The Psalms provides examples of repentance for sin in the form of confession (Ps 32:15; 38:18) and also proclaims blessings on those who have their sins forgiven: “Blessed

⁸ Human repentance is normally translated in the Hebrew Scriptures as **שוב**. However, at times **נחם** can be used with the same meaning (e.g., Exod 13:17; Job 42:6; Jer 8:6; 31:19). The LXX renders **שוב** with either *ἐπιστρέφω* or *ἀποστρέφω* and only with *μετανοέω* in Sir. 48:15. The word *μετανοέω* normally translates **נחם** in the LXX. Nevertheless, in the LXX *μετανοέω* and *ἐπιστρέφω* appears to share a substantial amount of semantic overlap. The Hebrew **סלח** is most frequently used to denote forgiveness in the OT, but **נשא**, **כסה**, **מחה**, and **כפר** are also translated as “forgiving” or “forgiveness.” In LXX, nearly 20 different words are used to translate these Hebrew words in a context where they denote forgiveness: *ἀφίημι* (Gen 50:17a), *δέχομαι* (Gen 50:17b), *προσεύχομαι* (Exod 10:17; 34:7), *ἴλωσ* (Num 14:20), *ἐξιλάσκομαι* (Num 15:28), *ἀνίημι* (Jos 24:19), *αἴρω* (1 Sam 15:25), *ἰλάσκομαι* (2 Kgs 5:18), *καθαρίζω* (Ps 19:12 MT; 18:13 LXX), *εὐίλατος* (Ps 99:8 MT; Ps 98:8 LXX), *λασμός* (Ps 130:4 MT; Ps 129:4 LXX), *ἀθώω* (Jer 18:23), *ἰλάσκομαι* (Dan 9:19), *λαμβάνω* (Hos 14:2 MT; Hos 14:3 LXX), *ὑπερβαίνω* (Mic 7:18), and *ἀπολύω* (3 Macc 7:7).

⁹ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 249.

¹⁰ For another example, Prov 28:13: “Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy.”

is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit" (Ps 32:1). While emphasizing the need for corporate repentance from sins in order to be restored to God and return from exile, the prophets do not neglect the importance of personal repentance (e.g., Isa 6:7; Jer 31:30; Ezek 18:1–32; 33:10–20).¹¹ The OT context can refer to both the corporate and individual aspects of these terms; therefore, it is not surprising that the authors of the Second Temple literature use the terms in both ways.

Josephus and the Use of Second Temple Literature

The importance of Second Temple literature to the present discussion is evident by the way N. T. Wright draws his conclusions concerning how "repentance" was understood in first century Galilee.¹² Wright highlights the significance of a passage from Josephus' biography in order to provide a context for Jesus' proclamation:

Josephus has gone to Galilee to sort out the turbulent factionalism there. A brigand chief called Jesus . . . makes a plot against Josephus' life. Josephus manages to foil it. Then, he tells us, he called Jesus aside and told him "that I was not ignorant of the plot he had contrived against me . . . ; I would, nevertheless, condone his actions if he would show repentance and prove his loyalty to me. All this he promised . . . [Jos. *Life* 110]." . . . Josephus is requiring of this Jesus that he give up his brigandage, and trust him (Josephus) for a better way forward. "Repentance," in this sense of abandoning revolutionary inclinations, is found elsewhere in the narra-

¹¹ While these texts do not exclude certain corporate implications, individual accountability to repent is evident. For example, in view of the bleak picture presented for the nation's future in Isa 6:10, J. McKeown, "Forgiveness," *DOTP*, p. 256, notes, "This seems to indicate that forgiveness is impossible, but we must remember that in this same passage God provided atonement and forgave the prophet himself when the coal from the altar touched his lips (Is 6:7). Thus, the prophet is living proof that God is still willing to restore individuals to harmony with himself."

¹² For a helpful discussion emphasizing both the importance and possible dangers with extra-biblical research, see the section entitled "The Use of Ancient Literature in Biblical Exegesis," in Michael Bird, "What is There Between Minneapolis and St. Andrews? A Third Way in the Piper-Wright Debate," *JETS* 54 (2011): pp. 299–301.

tive; so for that matter, is “belief”, in the sense of trust in and loyalty to a leader. I find it somewhat remarkable that, in all the literature I have read about Jesus of Nazareth, only one writer even mentions the incident involving Josephus and the brigand Jesus, and even he makes no comment about the meaning of “repentance” and “belief” in the light of it. *It is, I suggest, of considerable significance. That is what those words meant in Galilee in the 60’s; by what logic do we insist that they meant something rather different, something perhaps more “personal”, “inward”, or “religious”, in Galilee in the 20’s and 30’s?*¹³

This evidence from Josephus is offered by Wright in direct support for his conclusion that Jesus’ call to repentance “. . . was not simply the “repentance” that any human being, any Jew, might use if, aware of sin, they decided to say sorry and make amends. It is the single great repentance which would characterize the true people of YHWH at the moment when their god became king.”¹⁴ Since Josephus is the featured example to make his point about “what those words meant in Galilee in the 60’s,” a few comments are in order.

Wright has identified one way in which the word “repentance” was used by Josephus. However, even in the example of Josephus’ interaction with Jesus, Josephus is demanding repentance in the individual sense of the word.¹⁵ Nevertheless, to conclude from such a limited survey of evidence that repentance for Jesus’ audience would have automatically meant Israel “abandoning nationalistic inclinations” rather than “something perhaps more personal, inward, or religious” is hardly justified.

¹³ N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), pp. 250–51 (emphasis added). Despite making such specific claims concerning what repentance meant in the first century, later in a context where he is arguing against E. P. Sanders that Jesus did indeed preach repentance, Wright notes, “Since the concept of ‘repentance’, with its personal dimension, was clearly well known within Judaism, it would be extraordinary if a call to an *eschatological* and *national* repentance were not perceived to include a call to personal repentance within it” (p. 256; emphasis Wright’s). This acknowledgement is difficult to integrate with his persistent claims that within the first-century context repentance was a national summons, not something personal or inward (see pp. 248–52 of *JVG*).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 251.

¹⁵ Josephus, *Life*, p. 110.

Often, Josephus can speak of repentance and forgiveness on the corporate level (Josephus, *Ant.* 2.315; 2.322; 4.195; 5.166; 6.92–93; 11.143–44; 11.156). Yet, while some of the listed examples fit well under the general heading of “turning from nationalistic zeal,” in Josephus this emphasis is only a sub-category of sin from which the nation was called to repent. In the texts listed above killing, anger, speaking against Moses, desire for a human king, and violations of the Law are all examples of sins from which the people were called to repent in order to receive forgiveness. Furthermore, Josephus, often commenting on OT figures, regularly uses the concepts of repentance and forgiveness in reference to an individual (Josephus, *Ant.* 7.153; 7.193; 7.207; 7.264; 16.125; 20.42). Thus, in Josephus’ writings, repentance was often an action by an individual in order to receive forgiveness both from God and others. In these examples, a variety of sins were repented from, including throwing stones, reproachful words, the avoidance of circumcision, murder, deceit, and adultery.¹⁶

The Return from Exile and Judgment/Salvation in Luke

Two noteworthy examples of Wright’s understanding of repentance and forgiveness are found in two parables (Luke 15:11–32; 16:19–31) that are exclusive to the Gospel of Luke and provide insight into the interpretive process. Wright sees his interpretation of these parables to be supported by the larger “return from exile” theme within the Gospel. Thus, before examining these two Lukan parables, this section briefly comments on two themes within Luke

¹⁶ Guy Nave has made a similar critique of Wright’s use of Josephus in support of his understanding of repentance, Wright concludes, on the basis of a limited number of references to μετανοέω and μετάνοια in the writings of Josephus, that repentance in the context of Jesus’ preaching entailed nationalistic violence. He fails, however, to carefully consider the more than seventy-seven references to μετανοέω and μετάνοια in Josephus’ writings. What is common to all of the references in the writings of Josephus—as we all as in the writings of other Hellenistic Jewish authors of the time—is that they all refer to a fundamental change in thinking that is often accompanied by a fundamental change in living. Guy Nave, “Repent for Kingdom of God Is at Hand’: Repentance in the Synoptic Gospels and Acts,” in *Repentance in Christian Theology* (ed. Mark J. Boda and Gordon Smith, Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 2006), p. 90.

that assist in evaluating Wright's definition of repentance and forgiveness.

Luke emphasizes God's plan foretold in the OT and fulfilled in Jesus (e.g., Luke 1:1; 1:14–17, 31–35, 46–55, 68–79; 2:9–14, 30–32, 34–35; 4:16–30; 13:31–35; 24:44–49). The promises in the OT were made to the nation of Israel, and Luke presents Jesus as coming to restore the nation. Furthermore, Luke points to a widespread hope that God would fully restore the nation of Israel: "But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel" (Luke 24:21, cf. Acts 1:6). This appears to be something akin to a hope of a "new exodus" or a "return from exile" for the nation.

Furthermore, David Pao has argued that Luke's overall narrative in Luke-Acts contains an Isaianic new exodus program.¹⁷ At the very least, his work demonstrates that the "new exodus" of Isaiah is in view at critical junctures in the Gospel and thus influences Luke's presentation of Jesus.¹⁸

In further support for Wright's view, judgment in Luke is at times directed at Israel corporately for their sin and in particular for their rejection of Jesus (e.g., Luke 3:9; 10:13–16; 11:29–33; 11:46–52; 13:6–9; 13:34–35; 20:9–19; 21:24; 22:30).¹⁹ Moreover, language commonly associated with salvation is used to refer to the hope of restoration for the nation as a whole (e.g., Luke 1:68; 2:25; 24:21).

However, Luke often speaks of judgment for individuals after death. Anyone who responds appropriately to Jesus can avoid being cast out to where there will be "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Luke 13:23–30) and enter to the final eschatological banquet (Luke 18:26–30). Jesus says, "But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell" (γέενναν; Luke 12:5). This statement makes no sense apart from a real end-time judgment for individuals. Furthermore, when the Son of Man returns, all individuals will face judgment or avoid judgment based

¹⁷ David W. Pao, *Acts and the Isaianic New Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002).

¹⁸ See Luke 3:4–6 (cf. Isa 40:3–5), Luke 4:18–19 (cf. Isa 61:1–2; Isa 58:6), and Luke 24:46–47 (cf. Isa 49:6).

¹⁹ One of the conclusions from Pao's *Acts and the Isaianic New Exodus* is that Luke's narrative transforms Isaiah's new exodus theme with an ironic twist: though Isaiah 40 announced salvation for Israel, Israel has rejected Jesus and his "new exodus" and thus will be judged (Isa 6:9–10; cf. Acts 28:25–28).

on whether they sought to preserve their life or if they lost their life (Luke 17:30–35). The rich ruler desired to know what he must do to “inherit eternal life.” Bock notes that Luke uniquely presents Jesus speaking of “personal eschatology.”²⁰ In Luke 24:42–43, Jesus speaks of the thief on the cross as being aware of his presence after death (cf. Acts 7:55–56).

Bock aptly summarizes the Gospel’s presentation of this theme: “Luke also underscores judgment by making the point that one is accountable to God. To ignore God’s message leaves one exposed to the judgment Jesus will bring one day ([Luke] 11:50–51; 12:20, 45–58, 57–59; 13:1–9; 16:19–31; 17:26–37; Acts 10:42; 17:31).”²¹ Jesus and his contemporaries were concerned with individual salvation as well as the restoration of Israel.²²

Hence, while the “return from exile” theme is present in Luke’s Gospel this theme does not rise to such level of prominence that it can serve as an all-encompassing definition for Jesus’ teaching concerning repentance and forgiveness. The “return from exile’s” national implications are more appropriately balanced when Jesus’ teachings concerning judgment and salvation are considered. With the background material and these broader Lukan themes surveyed,

²⁰ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1994), p. 42.

²¹ Darrell L. Bock, *A Theology of Luke and Acts: God’s Promised Program, Realized for All Nations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), p. 262.

²² The point is that while Wright largely skips over the eternal implications for individual judgment, the Jesus of Luke (and all the other Gospels as well) does not. Craig Blomberg, “The Wright Stuff: A Critical Overview of Jesus and the Victory of God,” in *Jesus & the Restoration of Israel: A Critical Assessment of N. T. Wright’s Jesus & the Victory of God* (ed. Carey C. Newman; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1999), p. 32, correctly critiques Wright on this point: “Where is the central narrative of Jesus’ teaching ultimately headed? Wright concludes in chapter eight (*JVG*, pp. 320–68) that it leads to both judgment and vindication. Here he helpfully sets Jesus’ narrative in the context of the Psalms, the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Macabean literature and Josephus, though interestingly there are hints of an afterlife in a different world in all of these books, of a kind that Wright apparently denies to Jesus’ own teaching. In fact, he even admits that Jesus’ view on hell may have ‘wider implications’ than just for this life; but he then alleges that those implications remain ‘outside the scope’ of this book (*JVG*, p. 323), though it is not at all clear why.”

we are now ready to understand and evaluate Wright's interpretation of two parables related to repentance and forgiveness in Luke.

Two Parables Related to Repentance and Forgiveness

Luke 15:11–32

Luke 15:11–32 functions centrally in *JVG* as Wright argues that the parable tells the story of Israel's exile and restoration.²³ The traditional interpretation of the parable understands the characters in view of the context set in Luke 15:1–2 and accordingly sees the prodigal son representing the sinner, the older brother representing the self-righteous religious leadership, and the father picturing God. This view argues that the lesson of the parable is that, “. . . sinners are to come to God, and the righteous are to accept the sinner's decision to turn to Him. It is the father's reaction to the sons that is at the center of the parable. His response, in turn, instructs people on how they should respond.”²⁴

Though Wright himself admits that his reading of the parable is without precedent, he nonetheless is convinced that return from exile is the central theme. According to Wright, the exodus stories and the Babylonian captivity serve as the backdrop for the parable. The younger brother represents Israel who finds himself in exile: “What was Israel to do? Why, to repent of the sin which had driven her into exile, and to return to YHWH with all her heart.”²⁵ According to Wright, those who grumble at Jesus' ministry are the “mixed multitude, not least the Samaritans, who had remained in the land while the people were in exile.”²⁶ Jeremiah 31:18–20, which concerns both exile and repentance, refers to Israel as God's son and provides the OT textual background for the parable. Furthermore, for Wright, the references to resurrection in Luke 15:24 and 15:32 are metaphors for the return from exile.²⁷

There are several problems with Wright's interpretation. First, it does not fit within Luke's context. The context of all three parables in chapter 15 is that tax collectors and sinners gathered around Jesus, and the Pharisees have grumbled concerning his association

²³ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, pp. 125–31; pp. 242, 254–55.

²⁴ Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53*, p. 1320.

²⁵ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 126.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 125–31, 242, 254–55.

with these moral outcasts. The previous two parables have focused on repentance of individuals and correspond well with the traditional interpretation that this parable is defending the acceptance of tax collectors and sinners who have returned to the father.

Second, the justification for seeing Jer 31:18–20 as the basis for this parable is tenuous at best. Not every reference to a “son” in the Gospels is meant to serve as a reference to Israel, and there is nothing else in the passage that would call for seeing Jer 31:18–20 as the background. Moreover, if Jer 31:18–20 is not accepted as the basis, there is no other evidence for understanding the exodus or the Babylonian captivity as the background for the passage.

Finally, there is no credible evidence to support the claim that the elder brother represents the Samaritans who did not want Israel to be restored from exile. If this is what Jesus meant to symbolize with the elder brother in the parable, it is at odds with this Gospel as Luke presents Samaritans in a positive light (Luke 10:25–37; 17:11–19). The obvious parallel is the correct one: the elder brother represents the Pharisees who are grumbling about Jesus’ ministry and listening to this parable.

In view of the lack of evidence to support Wright’s reading, the traditional interpretation should stand, and it is no surprise that even those who are sympathetic to Wright’s work have tended not to follow him on his understanding of this parable.²⁸

Luke 16:19–21

The occurrence of μετανοήσουσιν in Luke 16:30 takes place within the context of the parable of the “Rich man and Lazarus” (Luke 16:19–31).²⁹ Although the word repentance is not seen until

²⁸ Snodgrass Klyne R. Snodgrass, “Reading & Overreading the Parables in *Jesus and the Victory of God*,” in *Jesus & the Restoration of Israel: A Critical Assessment of N. T. Wright’s Jesus & the Victory of God* (ed. Carey C. Newman; Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1999), p. 70, is justified when he writes, “The theology of repentance and return operative in the parable is valid for Israel and was already in evidence in various writers such as Jeremiah. The parable of the prodigal, however, is not about us or Israel’s return from exile. It is about two kinds of response to the kingdom forgiveness Jesus embodied: a repentance that leads to reconciliation and celebration, and irrational disdain, the result of which the parable leaves undetermined.”

²⁹ Though some have preferred to call this an “example story” rather than a parable, it appears that the two categories are not easily distinguish-

the end of this story, the concept is present throughout. Wright summarizes his understanding of this parable:

The other parable that stresses repentance is the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31). The story carries clear echoes of well-known folk-tales, to which Jesus is giving a fresh and startling twist. The emphasis falls at the same point that was made twice—i.e. with great stress—in the prodigal son: “resurrection,” i.e. “return from exile,” is happening all around, and the Pharisees cannot see it.³⁰

For Wright, the parable is about what is happening in Israel’s present. Moreover, Lazarus’ welcome into Abraham’s bosom parallels the acceptance of the prodigal by the father and was a sign of the “real return from exile,” and the five brothers parallel the prodigal’s elder brother.³¹

Wright’s reading does not find much support in the immediate context of Luke. Since both men in the story die, it is difficult to read it as a story of Israel’s present. There is no clear connection between any part of this story and exile, and no evidence for the parallels that he draws with the parable of the prodigal.

Again, Luke’s context for this parable is significant. The audience is the Pharisees who Luke notes are “lovers of money” (Luke 16:14). Jesus has just accused them of being “those who justify yourselves before men” (Luke 16:15). The parable that follows is complex because it makes several points, with two being related to the concept of repentance. First, in view of the context (Luke 16:14), Jesus is calling the rich, in particular the Pharisees, to repent of their use of wealth as he tells of the rich man living lavishly while not appropriately caring for the poor (Luke 16:20–21, 25). Second, as seen in Luke 16:26–31, the parable teaches that repentance is not dependent on signs. Some will not “repent” (μετανοήσουσιν; Luke 16:30), even if someone returns from the

able. Blomberg refers to “example stories” as a subclass of parables. Whatever label is placed on the story, it appears to teach through using a real life hypothetical situation. For the purposes of this paper, this story will be referred to as a parable. For more discussion on this verse, see Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990), p. 73; Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke*, p. 1126; Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53*, pp. 1362–63.

³⁰ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 255.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 255.

grave to deliver the message.³² Marshall summarizes this point well: “[T]he law and prophets are insufficient to call the rich to repentance, even the return of someone resurrected from the dead will not achieve the desired effect. Miracles in themselves cannot melt stony hearts.”³³ The call is for people to recognize in the present life the need for repentance.³⁴

The Need to Emphasize “Both/And”

In concluding this survey of Jesus’ call to repentance and forgiveness in these two Lukan parables, it is important to note where we have been. By looking at the background material which helps us interpret the Gospels, it has been argued that Wright is fundamentally right to place Jesus’ ministry within the framework of the hope within many first-century Jews who saw themselves as corporately, in some sense, still in exile with the expectation that the Lord would one day soon come to restore the nation. And indeed, with the background in view, it seems correct to affirm that repentance and forgiveness *at times* have corporate Israel primarily in view, rather than the traditional individual conversion sense of the terms. Yet Wright goes further than arguing that Jesus *at times* can use repentance and forgiveness of sins as primarily corporate and with the exile in view. According to Wright, “Forgiveness of sins is another way of saying ‘return from exile.’”³⁵ And also, for Wright, when Jesus called for repentance he “. . . summoned Israel to a once-for-all national repentance, such as would be necessary for

³² Bock also notes that the story is teaching an OT ethic and the finality of the afterlife based on the decisions made in this life. Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53*, pp. 1360–61.

³³ Marshall, *Gospel of Luke*, p. 632.

³⁴ Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53*, p. 1378. This interpretation is in contrast to Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 291, who argues that Jesus’ attitude toward the poor in this parable should be seen as a sign that Israel is returning from exile. The rich man corresponds to those “who seek a national or personal agenda for the restoration of land and property or ancestral rights.”

³⁵ N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 268. Later he adds, “Forgiveness, in other words, is not simply one miscellaneous blessing, which will accompany covenant renewal. Since covenant renewal means the reversal of exile, and since exile was the punishment for sin, covenant renewal/return from exile *means* that Israel’s sins have been forgiven—and *vice versa*” (emphasis mine; p. 269).

the exile to end at last,”³⁶ with repenting from nationalistic zeal primarily in view.

The problem occurs when the exile motif is run through all the individual narrative units and placed in the foreground, when there is no mention of Israel and eschatological corporate “forgiveness of sins” in the immediate context. When passages are approached this way, the background becomes the foreground. Despite Wright’s claim that “there is, in fact, no tension, no play-off, between the personal and the corporate,” there does at least seem to be a problem with what is being emphasized.³⁷

Of all the Gospels, the individual and universal need for all people to repent of sin and find forgiveness is most evident in Luke. In fact, Wright seems to agree with this conclusion. Specifically, Wright’s statement concerning the Gospel of Luke brings into focus certain methodological issues in interpreting Jesus’ message:

That Luke is particularly interested in it [repentance], as witnessed by two passages in which he mentions repentance while the parallel passage does not (5:32; 15:7: see below), is no good reason for denying that it formed part of Jesus’ preaching; Luke may conceivably have thought of it in a less “eschatological” and more “moral” fashion, but this does not remove it from Jesus’ announcement. The following passages indicate *prima facie*, that Jesus was indeed summoning his hearers to a great turning, that is, not just to an individual moral repentance, but to an eschatological act which would prove the only way to escape eschatological judgment.³⁸

Wright admits Luke is particularly interested in repentance in more the “moral” sense of the term. The pertinent question is: if Wright acknowledges that Luke and Jesus himself were calling people to *both* an individual moral repentance and to the corporate repentance from nationalistic zeal and the end of the exile, what causes him to downplay the former and emphasize the latter in his definitions of the terms and at times in his interpretation (see two examples above)? To this question, we now turn as we have dug far enough to conclude by gleaning four hermeneutical lessons from this test case.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 251.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 272.

³⁸ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 252.

Hermeneutical Lessons

First, we must be careful to not “over-systematize” the biblical data. In this case, Wright appears to have over-focused on the “return from exile” in understanding what Jesus meant by repentance and forgiveness.³⁹ Often, systematic theology texts are accused of defining concepts, in this case repentance and forgiveness, without carefully noting how the concepts are used differently at various points within salvation history.⁴⁰ For example, rather than asking, what does the term “repentance” mean for Jesus in his context within salvation history, often contemporary theologians can be guilty of simply bypassing the temporal question in favor of the atemporal question of what does the term mean in the whole Bible, which might be different, or at least have different emphases and nuances in different biblical books. Undoubtedly, this lack of attention to salvation history is in part due to the differences between the disciplines of biblical and systematic theology, yet this occurrence is not limited to systematic texts.⁴¹ The failure to recognize

³⁹ Richard B. Hays, “Knowing Jesus: Story, History, and the Question of Truth” in *Jesus, Paul, and the People of God: A Theological Dialogue with N. T. Wright* (ed. Nicholas Perrin and Richard B. Hays; Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2011), p. 55, points to Wright as an example of what he labels as “over-systematization”: “The question that haunts many readers of *JVG* is whether Tom’s synthetic construct is too clever by half, whether it obsessively forces all the evidence into a single mode of exile and return pattern.”

⁴⁰ For example, see Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), p. 709. Repentance is explained in the context of individual conversion: “The word *conversion* itself means ‘turning’—here it represents a spiritual turn, a turning *from sin to Christ*. The turning from sin is called repentance, and the turning to Christ is called *faith*.” Most other standard Christian theology texts explain repentance and forgiveness as they relate to individual conversion. For more examples, see Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 480–509; Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), pp. 933–42.

⁴¹ For example, J. Lunde, “Repentance,” *DJG*, p. 669 writes, “Repentance in the Gospels refers to the radical ‘turning away’ from anything which hinders one’s wholehearted trust in God.” For an example in regards to forgiveness, see P. Ellingworth, “Forgiveness of Sin,” *DJG*, pp. 241–43. Though Ellingworth mentions the national corporate forgiveness in the OT, he does not connect this OT emphasis to the way Jesus’ mes-

such distinctions seems to be in part why Wright critiques the “traditional” definitions of repentance and forgiveness.⁴² Wright’s argument against the traditional definitions should alert theologians of how concepts are often used differently within the canon and within different stages of salvation history. In this way, Wright can help theologians avoid an overly narrow definition of “repentance” and “forgiveness” that does not pay close attention to the context for concepts within the different stages in salvation history and the different parts of the canon.

On the other hand, one of the dangers of Wright’s storyline approach to biblical theology is that, while helpful in many ways, it runs the risk of privileging a particular theologian’s self-constructed framework onto the text.⁴³ The present study has offered an exam-

sage has been understood by those who stress the restoration of Israel as central to Jesus’ message. For more on the definitions and the relationship between biblical and systematic theology, see D.A. Carson, “Systematic and Biblical Theology,” *NDBT*, pp. 89–104.

⁴² Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 268.

⁴³ Andreas Köstenberger, “The Present and Future of Biblical Theology,” *Themelios* 37 (2012): p. 459, writes concerning Wright and his approach to Biblical Theology, saying: “Evangelicals such as Beale believe that it is every word of Scripture that is inspired, not merely the biblical storyline. If so, what in practice helps us to avoid privileging the biblical storyline (as construed by us) to the extent that less prominent portions of Scripture are unduly neglected? Here we must take care not to be similar in practice (though not in theory) to the approach of scholars such as N.T. Wright (not an inerrantist) in his work *The Last Word* or German content criticism, which has also had a notable impact on the work of some British and other evangelicals. Some recent works are more rigorously inductive while others proceed from a systematic or confessional framework in exploring the teachings of Scripture. Also, the specific proposals made by various scholars differ as to what the theology of the Bible actually is and how it coheres. In part, this is a matter of setting different emphases or privileging a particular overall framework, whether the glory of God, eschatology, salvation history, or some other central topic, not to mention the importance of hermeneutics.” For more on Wright’s overall method, see the chapter entitled “Biblical Theology As Worldview-Story: N.T. Wright” by Klink and Lockett in Edward W. Klink III and Darian R. Lockett, *Understanding Biblical Theology: A Comparison of Theory and Practice* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), pp. 109–24. Klink and Lockett comment, “What sets Wright’s approach apart from the ‘tunnel vision’ of modern NT scholarship is his ability to set a particular passage into the

ple of how Wright's storyline approach itself can result in "over-systematization." Instead of allowing the immediate context of verses that include the concepts of repentance and forgiveness to take priority, Wright often focuses on broader background considerations. While the exile, with its national implications, is found in each Gospel, it is a mistake to understand this theme as the main point of many texts related to repentance and forgiveness. Hence, when "exile," a theme that is present but not as pervasive as Wright suggests, is made the central overarching theme in defining repentance and forgiveness, unbalanced and overly narrow definitions emerge.

Second, synthesizing the three Synoptic Gospels can cause the voices of the particular Gospel writers to be muffled.⁴⁴ While Wright sees all the Synoptics as supporting his definitions of repentance, he admits that in Luke, Jesus is portrayed as using the term repentance in more of the "moral" sense of the term.⁴⁵ It could be argued that in different ways each Gospel calls into question Wright's definitions as too narrow and his interpretations as overly emphasizing the corporate aspects of forgiveness and repentance. However, if Wright had avoided synthesizing the Synoptics into one narrative as he explored these concepts, Luke's more "moral" emphasis would have been difficult to downplay in his description of Jesus' proclamation of repentance.

Third, those who seek to reconstruct a "historical Jesus" and maintain the historical reliability of the canonical Gospels must be careful not to make sharp distinctions between a particular evangelists' portrait and the historical Jesus. Luke presents Jesus—

larger framework of early Christian origins. Like the backdrop on a movie set, the 'story' or larger worldview is the crucial setting within which the action of the NT unfolds. In order for one to understand what Jesus and Paul is doing in the scene, one must frame the action within the correct context" (p. 110). In agreement with their assessment, Wright's ability to cast a believable overarching storyline does appear to be one of Wright's strengths, but, perhaps, like often occurs in life, one's greatest strength can also be one's greatest weakness. In sticking with Klink's and Lockett's analogy, this paper suggests that for Wright one of the *various* biblical plots (i.e., "return from exile") has been mistakenly viewed as *the* central storyline for which every scene related to forgiveness and repentance is to be understood.

⁴⁴ Hays, "Knowing Jesus," p. 55.

⁴⁵ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 252.

according to Wright—as using the term “repentance” in more of the moral sense than in Jesus’ “actual” ministry. At this point, Wright appears to make a distinction between the historical and canonical Jesus.⁴⁶ Implicitly, it seems that whereas Luke highlights the “moral” and “individual” sense of repentance, Wright’s reconstruction of Jesus takes priority over Luke’s portrait.

Finally, extra-biblical literature is important in view of the historic nature of the Gospels, but this material can be easily misused. Even those paying close attention to the historical context can get off course by offering an insufficiently nuanced perspective. Moreover, a further danger exists in allowing extra-biblical material to overshadow the biblical text. Wright has reminded interpreters of the importance of placing Jesus firmly in the context of first century Judaism and displays an exceptional overall grasp of Second Temple literature. Yet, this article has argued that the background material is less monolithic than Wright suggests.

⁴⁶ Ibid.