

The Narrative of Scripture and Justification by Faith: A Fresh Response to N. T. Wright¹

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I. Introduction: A Fresher Reading of Paul

We cannot escape the theological currents of our time. Whether directly or indirectly, their forces come to bear on us. The course of biblical studies, as Adolf Schlatter long ago observed, largely has been determined not by forces arising from within the discipline, but from the broader cultural and philosophical concerns of the day. Biblical scholars seldom are able to see precisely what drives the course of study at the moment. In theology the rearview mirror generally offers a better view than the front windshield. That is not to say, however, that we operate best by throwing our vehicle into reverse. The attempt to repristinate is bound to fail. New questions require that we take fresh stances in order to maintain fidelity to the gospel. Like Alice-through-the-Looking-Glass, we must run *fast* if we only wish to stay in place. Or, as the author of Hebrews enjoins us, we must here and now give the closest attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. Fresh interpretations of Scripture, particularly when they raise questions about matters which Christians have long believed, taught, and confessed, require still fresher restatements of biblical truth. Only then can the gospel remain gospel. Thankfully, the gospel so fundamentally addresses us as fallen human beings that it has the power again and again to impart itself afresh to us in our present time.

Various currents within the present life of Evangelical Christianity (and Protestant Christianity more broadly considered) stream through N. T. Wright's ambitious work in New Testament theology. That does not in any way imply either opportunism or surrender to these currents on Wright's part. Nor does it imply that all of the present currents flow in the wrong direction. Everything must be tested against the text. One would be

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blind, however, not to see the ways in which the concerns of our time—the thirst for community, the preference for image-driven Christianity, the drive toward equality-without-distinction, and the effort to recover moral virtue for church and society—run through his work.² With three massive volumes already published, Wright's project is arguably the most influential in our time.³ The wide appeal of his work and the provocative nature of his reading of Paul make engagement with his views unavoidable. The project has emerged over a long period of time with roots going back to Wright's unpublished dissertation on Paul titled "The Messiah and the People of God."⁴ His introductory and programmatic volume, *The New Testament and the People of God*, sets the background for the whole of his work with its sweeping presentation of early Judaism and earliest Christianity.⁵ Although Wright has not yet published his major volume on Paul, a collection of essays, brief commentaries on the Pauline Epistles, and two brief works have already appeared.⁶

² On current cultural issues in Evangelical Christianity, see D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005).

³ N. T. Wright, *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, 3 vols. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992-2003).

⁴ N. T. Wright, "The Messiah and the People of God: A Study in Pauline Theology with Particular Reference to the Argument of the Epistle to the Romans" (DPhil diss., University of Oxford, 1981).

⁵ N. T. Wright, *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, vol. 1, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).

⁶ For the collection of essays, see N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993). For Wright's two brief works on Paul, see N. T. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), and *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997). Wright's brief *Paul for Everyone* commentaries, part of the *For Everyone Series* published jointly by Westminster John Knox in Louisville and SPCK in London, include the following: *Romans, Part 1: Chapters 1-8* (2005); *Romans, Part 2: Chapters 9-16* (2005); *1 Corinthians* (2004); *2 Corinthians* (2004); *Galatians and Thessalonians* (2004); *The Prison Letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon* (2004); *The Pastoral Letters: 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus* (2004). In addition, Wright has written other commentaries on Pauline Epistles: *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary*, rev. ed., Tyndale New Testament Commentaries 12 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007), and "The Letter to the Romans: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in *The New Interpreter's Bible: General Articles & Introduction, Commentary, & Reflections for Each Book of the Bible, including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*, vol. 10, *The Acts of the Apostles; Introduction to Epistolary Literature; The Letter to the Romans; The First Letter to the Corinthians* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002).

As Wright himself indicates, his work represents the next wave of New Testament studies, which follows the now-aging, not-so-new "New Perspective on Paul." More firmly and unquestioningly than most, Wright continues to embrace the conclusions of the New Perspective, and of E. P. Sanders in particular, that first-century Judaism was (largely, at least) a religion of grace which found an unconditioned promise of salvation in God's covenant with the people of Israel. The close connection to Sanders's work is understandable. Wright's dissertation, out of which his remarkable program has developed, was completed only shortly after Sanders's *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* appeared in 1977.⁷ That is not to say that Wright does not critically distance himself from Sanders. His thesis that the majority of Jews in Paul's day viewed themselves as living in a continuing "exile" of Israel fills a serious gap which Sanders originally left in his work. It is a plight to which Jesus' proclamation and Paul's gospel provided an answer. Wright also significantly departs from the New Perspective in his narrative interpretations of Jesus and of Paul and regards this departure as one of the most significant developments of this "revolution."⁸ According to Wright's reading of Paul, the apostle does not treat Israel's Scriptures arbitrarily, as Sanders notoriously claimed. Paul rather takes up Israel's story as it is found both in Scripture and the writings of early Judaism. This narrative has at least three basic elements: the announcement of the one true God, the election of Israel, and God's covenant with his people. In this form, Israel's narrative fills out Paul's message. Yet there is one crucial difference: Paul redefines Israel's story around Jesus Christ. In Wright's re-reading of Paul, Paul re-reads Israel's history. This re-reading of Paul in relation to early Judaism, which Wright presents as a "fresh perspective," entails a revisionary understanding of justification; through this "fresh perspective," Wright distances himself in various ways from traditional Protestant views. Wright's fresh questions demand still fresher answers.

II. Wright's Reading of Scripture and Justification

Narrative and Interpretation

The Necessity of Explanation. It is crucial to observe that narration and dogmatic explanation are not mutually exclusive but in fact interdependent. Doctrinal statements must be set within a life-context if we

⁷ E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977).

⁸ Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 8. Other, quite different influences—for example, that of Hans Frei and the "Yale school"—also played a major role in this turn to narrative.

are to know their significance. Narrative, conversely, bears an explanatory connection with the external world (whether explicit or implicit) by which it speaks to us.⁹ Wright complains, probably legitimately, that some of his critics have treated narrative readings of Paul as though the narrative “is just the embroidery around central theological points, which are taken to be non-narrative.”¹⁰ Fair enough. It is not clear, however, that Wright sufficiently recognizes the critical role which the theological linking of narrative to the external world plays. One of the primary weaknesses of the appeal to “salvation-history” in the 1950s (and beyond) was the difficulty of determining precisely *how* that salvation-history addresses us as human beings here and now. It is already evident that Wright’s program is in some measure an heir of the earlier salvation-historical approaches. As we shall see, and this is our fundamental criticism, Wright accomplishes the linking of narrative to life through a sort of moral idealism.¹¹ His “explanation” of narrative, like any doctrinal statement, is therefore necessarily static, even if it is implicit rather than discursive.

⁹ Oswald Bayer, who appropriates Hamann’s critique of Kant, overthrows Kant’s dictum concerning the relation of thought and sensory objects in a reformulation of Kant’s own words: “Erklärung ohne Erzählung ist blind, Erzählung ohne Erklärung ist leer.” Narration (whether in faith or unbelief) has priority over explanation, since all our speaking is a response to the address of our Creator through the creation, which, of course, is historical in nature. The biblical narrative has the power to communicate itself to us, to supply its own explanation in God’s word of promise and its fulfillment in Jesus Christ, and to open our ears to hear our Creator. See Oswald Bayer, *Gott als Autor: Zu einer poetologischen Theologie* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), 240–254. The alternative is to treat the stories humans tell and their establishing of historical facts *as independent acts, abstract and isolated from the address of the Creator*. Kevin Vanhoozer, who characterizes and critiques the work of Paul Ricoeur in a similar rephrasing of the Kantian dictum (“history without poetry is blind, but poetry without history is empty”), approximates Hamann and Bayer in his recognition of the resurrection as simultaneously “deed” and “promise.” Yet he does not take into account the prior and determinative poetical “speech-act” of God in the creation and preservation of the world, and of each of us within that world. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: A Study in Hermeneutics and Theology* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 279–284. On the development of Vanhoozer’s thought, see note 16 below.

¹⁰ Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 9.

¹¹ Wright’s approach is remarkably similar to one of the weaker points in the ethical theology of Karl Barth. I am by no means suggesting dependence or even a mediated influence of Barth on Wright’s work. It is merely the similar pattern in which Christ is linked with life that is instructive. See Karl Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik: Die Lehre von Gott*, vol. II/2 (Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1942), 564–603. For a critique of Barth, see Oswald Bayer, *Theologie, Handbuch Systematischer Theologie 1* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1994), 356–379, to whom I am indebted. Bayer points to the similarity of

The Unity of Scripture, Encounter with God and Faith. Wright is quite insistent that “a single narrative line” runs through the Hebrew Scriptures and early Judaism to Paul and beyond. The “great stories” of Scripture yield not merely motifs and patterns, typological recapitulations, but a meta-narrative about God’s redeeming activity which runs from Genesis to Revelation. In this one must, of course, agree with Wright. We learn the basics of it already in Sunday School: creation, fall, flood, Babel, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Egypt, Exodus, and so on, all the way to Christ’s return. Yet our “locating” ourselves here and now within that story, that is, within the larger, overarching purpose of God, is just as critical as the story itself. That location is not simply a point on a line. Naturally, progress in God’s dealings with the world is not to be denied. We are not called, as Israel once was, to possess the land of Canaan and slay its inhabitants. Nor are we looking for an earthly king, priesthood, or temple. Nevertheless, our connection to the biblical story is not punctiliar. Those who belong to Jesus Christ live simultaneously in two times.¹² In Adam we live in the time of the fallen creation, which God yet preserves. As those addressed by the word of God (both individually and corporately), we take our place alongside Israel in Scripture, although we certainly are distinct from it. In Christ we live simultaneously in the time of the new creation. We are those “upon whom the ends of the ages have come” (1 Cor 10:11). Although the goal and end has come to us, we must make our way through the wilderness to that end, subject to the same temptations as Israel once was (1 Cor 10:13). God’s ways with Israel and Israel’s failures remain instructive for us: “these things happened as *patterns for us*, so that we might not desire evil things, as they desired them, nor become idolaters, as they did” (1 Cor 10:6–7a). God’s address to Israel is not his address to us. The two must not be confused. In addressing Israel, however, God addresses us *with* and *through* Israel.¹³

The discernment of “patterns” (or “types”) of God’s dealings *presupposes* a meta-narrative and its development. It is not independent of

Barth’s ethics as presented in *Christusgemeinde und Bürgergemeinde* to the work of Oscar Cullmann that preceded it. The construction bears remarkable similarity to Wright’s work and in seminal form bears its weaknesses: Oscar Cullmann, *Christus und die Zeit: Die urchristliche Zeit- und Geschichtsauffassung*, 2nd ed. (Zollikon-Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1948), 164–169.

¹² Wright attempts to take into account the intersection of the times but does not fully succeed, see *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 170–171.

¹³ For this formulation of the distinction, I am indebted to Oswald Bayer, “Glauben und Hören: Grundzüge einer reformatorischen Theologie in gegenwärtiger Verantwortung” (lectures, University of Tübingen, winter semester, 2004–2005).

it. Conversely, and this again is the main point, *interpretation of the narrative of Scripture* is not a matter of pinpointing our situation on a line. Whether one has in view its corporate or individual significance, interpretation has to do with an encounter with God, which in the present time cannot be reduced to a single, unified vision.¹⁴ We still see only “in a mirror, indirectly by reflection,” and know and prophesy only “in part” (1 Cor 13:9, 12-13). We walk by faith and not by sight (2 Cor 5:7). There is something to be appreciated in the current narrative approaches to theology and to the interpretation of Scripture in so far as they illuminate the life-setting(s) of doctrinal propositions. Yet it would be false to imagine that the narrative approach is free from the temptation to radical systematization, the attempt to reduce the message of Scripture to a single, unified vision of God and God’s dealings with the world. The narrative approach can be in its own way just as radically systematic as any doctrinal outline. It is worth reminding ourselves that just as Scripture has not been given to us as a dogmatic outline, neither has it been given to us as a single, unified story. It is a collection of narratives that not only complement one another but also overlap and stand in tension with one another. There are two accounts of creation in Genesis, two accounts of the Davidic monarchy, and four Gospels. The Psalms tell and retell the story of Israel in ways that are sometimes remarkably different from one another.

More significant than the variations in perspective, and often lying behind these variations, are the differing ways in which God encounters his people. We no longer live in Eden, yet God’s quiet governance and preservation of the present world preserves the traces of Eden in it. At the same time, in this fallen world we also encounter God as one who works not only life and blessing, but also death and destruction, and that not in predictable retribution of evil but seemingly without reason or cause (cf. Isa 45:7; 1 Sam 2:6). The Psalms especially recount the experience of God’s hiddenness and absence (e.g., Psalms 44, 77). That is not all. Through the law, human beings further encounter the condemning voice of the God who calls them to account and who brings judgment on them for their sins. Israel’s story in Scripture is anything but a single, unbroken line. The broken covenant brings an end to Israel’s history, a break in the narrative which is bridged and overcome only by the wonder of God’s unbounded mercy (e.g., Isa 6:13; 11:1; Hos 1:6-7; 2:21-23; Amos 8:1-3). The promises to the fathers notwithstanding, the story need not have run this way. The narrative is held together, not by a “strong historical continuity” as Wright

¹⁴ Here and in the following discussion of the four-fold nature of human encounter with God, I am again indebted to Oswald Bayer, *Theologie*, 408-418.

claims, but by the love and power of the Creator alone.¹⁵ That brings us finally, and decisively, to the human encounter with the God who, out of unconditioned love, forgives sin, promises salvation and blessing, and in Jesus Christ has brought his promises to fulfillment. In the gospel, God reveals himself to us beyond all other encounters with him as our loving, forgiving, and saving Creator.

All four of these experiences of God appear in Paul's letter to the circle of house churches in Rome: the preserving presence of the Creator, for example, in his affirmation of the governing authorities (Rom 13:1-7); the hiddenness of God in his description of the sufferings of believers and again in his lament over Israel's unbelief (Rom 8:35-36; 9:1-5); the condemning work of the law in his charge that all human beings are under the power of sin (Rom 3:9-20; 7:1-25); and the gospel itself from the opening words to the conclusion of the letter. Paul makes no attempt to resolve these presently irreducible experiences by a dogmatic outline or a simple story-line. He rather *proclaims* their final resolution in Christ, confessing it by faith, not by sight: "I trust [πέπεισμαι] that neither death nor life, nor angels nor authorities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing shall have power to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:39).

As we have observed above, the tracing of the overarching narrative of Scripture, as proper as that task may be, does not finally interpret the Scripture. It is only a dimension of the *claritas externa*. The text must still somehow be brought to the world, or, more fundamentally stated, we must hear it as it brings itself to the world.¹⁶ In place of the idealism by which Wright connects the textual narrative to the world (and thus interprets it), the Scriptures offer us a deeper, richer witness that does not diminish, overlook, or eliminate the unanswered questions, sorrows, laments, or radical guilt of the human being. The unity of the story-line of

¹⁵ Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 12.

¹⁶ In its appeal to and use of narrative and dramatic form, current theology has not reflected sufficiently on this problem. Despite its virtue in seeking to articulate the connection between theological proposition and life, the recent Evangelical proposal by Kevin Vanhoozer makes the "performance" of the "divine drama" illegitimately contingent on human response. The (professional) theologian, whether academic or pastoral, correspondingly is thrust into a mediating position between Scripture and the congregation. One finds here a nearly Aristotelian alternative to Wright's nearly Platonistic idealism. See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine a Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005).

Scripture – which remains for us in the form of promise – is found solely in Jesus the Christ and *his story* in all its particularity (Luke 24:25–27, 44–49).

In the real life of this world, in time and space, the confession of the unity of the narrative of Scripture, and thereby the unity of God, cannot be reduced to a transforming vision or ideal. Contrary to outward appearance, it demands faith in the incarnate, crucified, and risen God. A *vision* necessarily remains essentially within the human being either in silent contemplation or in moral endeavor. In contrast, the encounter with the living God of Scripture calls human beings outside themselves into *communion* with God in *verbal form* in thanksgiving, lament, petition, and the confession of guilt.¹⁷ If our interpretation of Scripture is to take place on the terms of Scripture, it must embrace this *claritas interna* which is found in faith and given by the Holy Spirit alone. Along with Israel in the wilderness, we have still to learn the ways of God, *precisely because* we already know the promise of God and the end of the story (see, for example, Pss 77:1–20; 95:1–11; Isa 40:3, 43:16; 55:8). With the psalmist, we still must confess, both individually and corporately, “my times are in your hands” (Ps 31:15). The interpretation of Scripture includes the divine address which comes to us through its narratives.¹⁸ In Wright’s work, the drive for a *unified* interpretation leads to an idealism that overruns the irreducibly different ways in which God speaks to us in and through the Scriptures.

Between the Lines: Reading the Text or Reading into the Text? Narrative approaches to biblical theology, such as that of Wright, face special difficulties when dealing with the Letters of Paul and other didactic texts that primarily explain God’s works rather than narrating them. That does not mean, of course, that a narrative approach to Paul has no value. Especially in Galatians and Romans, but not exclusively there, his argument often has to do with how one ought to read Israel’s story (Rom 4:1–25; Gal 3:15–29; 4:21–31). Allusions to scriptural narratives abound in Paul’s Letters. Nevertheless, as the practitioners of this art have recognized, caution is in order. Those who adopt this sort of reading generally appeal to an *implicit narrative* that informs the statements which appear in the text.¹⁹ The text stands in constant danger of being overrun by the imagination of the interpreter, rather than being illuminated by a story

¹⁷ I again want to acknowledge the work of Oswald Bayer, e.g., *Theologie*, 408–418.

¹⁸ Stories themselves naturally have the power to instruct and challenge, as do, for example, Jesus’ parables; however, the further they stand from our own stories, expectations, and time, the more they require explanation.

¹⁹ For example, Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 9.

to which it alludes.²⁰ The various criteria which Richard Hays wisely proposed, and which have been widely adopted, may be applied with varying degrees of rigor.²¹ Judgments likewise may differ as to whether the standard of detection has been met in any given reading.

Moreover, there is a substantial difference between detecting an allusion to a biblical narrative in a brief statement or phrase in Paul's Letters²² and proposing a sweeping narrative sequence which shapes the interpretation of the whole of Paul's Letters. The larger claim demands stricter and more careful application of the criteria. A further "criterion of explicit markers" suggests itself: the more extensive the claim, and the more interpretive power that the interpreter accords to it, the more the interpreter is obligated to locate *explicit* words, phrases, and statements within the text that may be demonstrated to express the proposed theme or narrative sequence. The more far-reaching the claim, the more explicit that usage must be.

Wright's fundamental and repeated claim that Paul was a "covenant theologian," one who understood that God had made a single, unbroken covenant with Israel beginning with Abraham and extending to the consummation of all things, simply falls flat when so measured. It is something of an overstatement and an obscuring of a legitimate question to claim, as he does, that the infrequency of the term διαθήκη in Paul's Letters is "no argument against calling him a covenant theologian."²³ Even if one concedes this claim, one still may ask why, if the concept of "covenant" is so basic and significant to Paul's thought, the term διαθήκη does not at least appear at some crucial juncture of Paul's argument in something close to the sense that Wright ascribes to it. On this basis one may reasonably argue, for example, that υἱὸς θεοῦ conveys a significant aspect of Paul's Christology, even though it appears only eighteen times in his letters. In contrast, however, when διαθήκη finally appears in Romans 9:4—its first occurrence in Paul's Letter to the Romans—it is in the plural form. When it appears for the second and last time in the letter, it clearly refers to a future covenant that God will conclude with his people in redeeming them, hardly a sense that would support Wright's claim (Rom

²⁰ I am reminded of an experience related to me by Ronald Youngblood. He once received from an author a dozen or more gratis copies of a self-published exposition of the entire Scripture based on Job 40:15 KJV ("behold now behemoth, which I made with thee"); it was titled *I Have Seen an Elephant in the Bible*.

²¹ Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 29–33.

²² E.g., Isaiah 50:1 and "exile" in Romans 7:14, "sold under sin."

²³ Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 26.

11:27). Further, it is not clear that Wright can subsume the plural in Romans 9:4 into his proposal since these “covenants” are obviously bound up with the Exodus and Sinai. The reference to “covenants of promise” in Ephesians 2:12 comes a bit closer, but in Ephesians 2:15 these covenants are distinguished from the law.

Paul’s usage elsewhere offers little support to Wright’s case, since, in two of the passages in which *διαθήκη* appears, Paul draws an explicit distinction between the new covenant and the old, between the law and the promise (2 Cor 3:6, 14; Gal 3:15, 17). I suppose that Wright would insist that the “new covenant” which Jesus effects, and to which Paul refers in his account of the institution of the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor 11:25), is to be understood merely as a “renewed” covenant, and that this claim somehow applies to Galatians 4 and 2 Corinthians 3. But to build such a massive construction on so few texts—to which such debatable claims must be attached—is highly questionable. Even if one overlooks these objections, one waits in vain for an argument as to why the contingencies of Paul’s situation require him to set aside explicit use of the term “covenant” (or other, similar language) in expressing his primary theological conception. One may therefore reasonably ask whether the implicit narrative which Wright proposes is present at all. Reading between the lines has its weaknesses and dangers.

“The Covenant” and Idealism

It is instructive to consider the conception of God’s covenant with Israel that guides Wright’s reading of Paul (and of the entire New Testament). It is best for us to consider this theme in connection with that of creation and God’s work as Creator, as Wright himself does in his recent work on Paul. God’s covenant with Abraham is intended to solve the problem of evil in the world. For this reason, Wright declares, all attempts to evade “covenant theology” are doomed to failure.²⁴ One might in fact agree with him. Everything depends on how one understands “covenant.” That is precisely where Wright’s reading of Scripture becomes interesting. His recent description of *what he means* by “covenant” does not begin with Abraham but with Psalm 19:7–14, God’s gift of the law to Israel. Two dimensions of his interpretation of “covenant” are worth noting. In the first instance, the call of Abraham shifts directly to a charter for a people. Community and the individual may well be equal in Wright’s reading, as he maintains, but of these two equals the priority belongs to

²⁴ Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 24.

community. One shares in salvation only as one shares in the covenant community.

At this point Wright stands at some distance from Scripture and especially from Paul. He also lands in some rather large theological difficulties. His construal of God's covenant with Abraham in terms of the gift of the law to Israel is equally questionable. In the context of his discussion of the people of God, he frames the matter as follows:

For the writer of Genesis, the call of Abraham was God's answer to the problem of Adam which had become the problem of Babel The canonical Old Testament frames the entire story of God's people as the divine answer to the problem of evil: somehow, through this people, God will deal with the problem that has infected his good creation in general and his image-bearing creatures in particular. Israel is to be God's royal nation of holy priests, chosen out of the world but also for the sake of the world. Israel is to be the light of the world: the nations will see in Israel what it means to be truly human, and hence who the true God is. For this purpose, Israel is given Torah.²⁵

Can the promise to Abraham, however, be identified with the law in this way? There is an irony here that we must not overlook: when Paul recounts the story of Abraham, he is intent upon showing the sharp distinction between promise and law (Gal 3:15-29; 4:21-31; Rom 4:1-25). The apostle's explicit reading of Israel's history stands at odds with the implicit reading which Wright attributes to him. This merging of promise and law, unconditioned gift and demand, runs through the whole of Wright's discussion and leads to what at first seems to be a lack of clarity in his presentation. In fact, Wright tries to resolve this difficulty, and leaves only one matter nebulous and highly problematic. His attempted resolution of the problem lies in his interpretation of Christ and his saving work, the same act of interpretation that brings Wright's narrative reading into life. The root conception of his broader project appears in this interpretation of Christ.

In assessing Wright's interpretation of Christ, we shall have to examine three interrelated tensions into which the problematic joining of law and promise resolves: first, the tension that we already have touched upon between conditionality and unconditionality within the promise to Abraham; which leads, second, to the central and fundamental tension between the purpose of God for Israel in the gift of Torah and God's saving work in Christ; and, third, the tension between the exclusivity of the gift of Torah to Israel and the universality of God's saving purpose.

²⁵ Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 109.

The Covenant: Conditional or Unconditional? Within Wright's work, the covenant with Israel appears conditional, in the first instance at least, in that the sins of Israel thwart the blessings of the covenant for both them and the nations. Citing Deuteronomy 27-30, Wright recounts its warnings: if Israel obeys, the Promised Land will be fruitful; if it disobeys, the land itself will drive them into exile.²⁶ That is precisely what happened, of course: the prophets of Israel announced that the people of Israel, "the bearers of God's solution," were part of the problem.²⁷ Exile thus came upon Israel.²⁸ Matters are no different in Paul's day: the presence of sin within Israel "as it stands" means that God cannot effect his saving purposes through them.²⁹

Yet Wright also speaks of the divine promise and covenant with Israel as undefeated and effective despite Israel's failure. God did not abandon his people when he sent them off to Babylon.³⁰ Indeed, God knew that Abraham and his family were part of the problem of sin, and yet called them to undo the sin of Adam.³¹ The failure of Israel notwithstanding, the covenant with Abraham is meant as God's way of dealing with evil within the good creation.³² Wright even speaks of God fulfilling the *promise* of a new creation, despite Israel's failure.³³ It is here that confusion enters into his argument, since the covenant with Abraham must either be an unconditioned promise or a conditional offer of blessing. It cannot be both at once. Yet this confusion, if it is present, is not the whole picture, since it is precisely at this point that Wright introduces God in the role of Creator, who unconditionally intervenes to rectify Israel's failure and bring salvation.

Just as the covenant serves to mend creation, so creation, or God's acting as Creator, serves to mend the defects in the covenant.³⁴ The Creator thus appears on the scene like an incompetent plumber who arrives to repair leaks in the system that he himself installed. In any case, Wright finds these two dimensions of God's saving work bound together in the

²⁶ Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 23.

²⁷ Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 110, 115.

²⁸ Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 110.

²⁹ Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 117-118.

³⁰ Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 12.

³¹ Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 23. Cf. Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 260-268.

³² Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 36.

³³ Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 31.

³⁴ Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 22-26.

expression, "the righteousness of God."³⁵ Consequently, the unconditional saving purpose of God is loosed from a distinct word of promise and becomes generalized in an indistinct conception of "creation" or "promise." Correspondingly, the freedom of the Creator disappears. The Creator now has an obligation to bring salvation to the world, a claim which stands at the widest distance from Paul who rejects all speculation about the right of the Creator and insists that the Creator remains free even in that word of promise to which the Creator has bound himself (Rom 9:1-29).³⁶

Torah and Christ. The first tension spills over into the second. On the one hand, as Wright repeatedly indicates, "Israel is to be the light of the world," the means by which God "will address and solve the problems of the world, bringing justice and salvation to the ends of the earth."³⁷ On the other hand, "Abraham and his family are themselves part of the problem as well as bearers of the solution."³⁸ As the exile made clear, Israel failed in its vocation.³⁹ The covenant that God made with Abraham, he fulfilled in Jesus. What then was God's purpose for Israel? Was it to be the means of salvation or the recipient of it?

This question is inescapably bound up with a second. What was the purpose of Torah, the gift given to Israel as the expression of God's covenant with the nation? On the one hand, according to Wright, Psalm 19 "celebrates Torah as the covenant charter, designed to enable each individual Israelite to become a whole, cleansed, integrated human being."⁴⁰ Torah was given to facilitate Israel's role as light of the world, so that "the nations will see in Israel what it means to be truly human, and hence who the true God is."⁴¹ On the other hand, according to Paul, Torah "spectacularly" failed "to give the life it promised."⁴² With the arrival of Torah in Israel, Israel "recapitulates the sin of Adam, and the sinful human life which follows from it."⁴³ What then, we may ask, was God's purpose for Torah? Was it to enable Israel to be a light for the nations? Or was

³⁵ Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 25-26.

³⁶ Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 26, 130. Some confusion as to the location of unconditional promise remains, but the larger context in both cases suggests that Wright finally locates it in God's role as Creator.

³⁷ Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 24.

³⁸ Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 23.

³⁹ Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 29.

⁴⁰ Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 22-23.

⁴¹ Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 109.

⁴² Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 99.

⁴³ Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 31.

God's purpose for Torah to expose Israel's sin and point it to the Messiah? The answer for Wright, fraught with difficulty though it is, seems to be that it was both: Israel was to be both the means of salvation and its recipient. It is at this point in the narrative that God appears as the plumber who repairs his own work.

Wright attempts to reconcile the irreconcilable by proposing that God fulfilled the covenant with Israel through *Jesus*, the one faithful Israelite: "Precisely as Messiah, he offers God that representative faithfulness to the plan of salvation through which the plan can go ahead at last, Abraham can have a worldwide family, and the long entail of Adam's sin and death can be undone"44 For Wright, the Messiah's task is to act *as Israel's representative*, embodying that faithfulness to covenant and Torah which Israel had failed to do. In so acting, "the Messiah has done for the world what Israel was called to do but could not, namely to act on behalf of the whole world."⁴⁵ Now those who are in the Messiah and transformed by the Spirit attain "the genuine humanness envisaged as God's will for Israel."⁴⁶ Furthermore, Jesus acted not only as Israel's representative but also as God's representative.⁴⁷ The high Christology, which Wright quite admirably embraces, shines through brilliantly at this point: Jesus is the true image of God who has fulfilled "the double divine purpose" in "creation and covenant."⁴⁸ In him God has revealed his righteousness.⁴⁹

This is the heart of Wright's interpretation of Scripture, the means by which he binds his narrative reading to life. Jesus fulfills his saving role as Messiah by being the faithful Israelite, God's image and God's representative. In him we *see* the true God and what it means to be truly human, and *in seeing* him we are transformed by the power of the Spirit. Among other unnamed functions, the resurrection of Jesus serves "not least" as a *symbol* of the new creation.⁵⁰ Torah itself could not fill this role. *The image of true humanity had to be embodied in human life.* Here lies the significance of Wright's repeated statement that God gave the gift of Torah to Israel so that Israel might become a light to the nations. Israel's failure to be this light has been overcome by the "representative faithfulness" of Jesus the Messiah. In him God's righteousness, God's covenant

⁴⁴ Wright, Paul: *In Fresh Perspective*, 47.

⁴⁵ Wright, Paul: *In Fresh Perspective*, 122.

⁴⁶ Wright, Paul: *In Fresh Perspective*, 124.

⁴⁷ Wright, Paul: *In Fresh Perspective*, 48.

⁴⁸ Wright, Paul: *In Fresh Perspective*, 27-28.

⁴⁹ Wright, Paul: *In Fresh Perspective*, 30.

⁵⁰ Wright, Paul: *In Fresh Perspective*, 70.

faithfulness, has finally been revealed. The “genuine humanness” that is God’s will for all humanity is ours in him. At this point any hint of the “wonderful exchange” between God and humanity in Christ is excluded. The fundamental element of Wright’s conception of “representation” is thus a moral idealism with Platonistic features.⁵¹ The human being threatens to become “god” writ small.

Alongside this idealistic conception of Jesus’ saving work, Wright retains the traditional understanding of Jesus’ death as sacrificial and atoning, a death in which God passed judgment on the sin of Israel and of the world.⁵² It is precisely here that another major element in Wright’s meta-narrative comes into play. In his estimation, “many if not most” Jews of Paul’s day saw themselves as living in a continuing exile, still under punishment for sin.⁵³ Jesus’ death and resurrection brought for them (and therewith for the world) the end of exile, the forgiveness of sins. Nevertheless, as far as he is able, Wright makes this more or less traditional interpretation of Jesus’ death serve his larger idealistic reading. Several features of his work make this apparent. First, he treats the presence of guilt and sin within Israel as a corporate phenomenon. While guilt ultimately has to do with the individual, it has to do in the first place with the nation. Consequently, Wright imagines that first-century Jews read their continuing guilt off of Israel’s outward circumstances and the unfulfilled promises of God: “Israel’s present plight is to be explained, *within* the terms of the divine covenant faithfulness, as his punishment for her sin.”⁵⁴ No room is left for the God who inexplicably hides his face. Nor is there any decisive address to the “rebellious and despairing” human heart. Second, particularly in connection with Deuteronomy 30 and Romans 10:5–11, Wright interprets Israel’s salvation (and that of the world) as contingent on its repentance and renewal.⁵⁵ The restoration of creation, the present plight of which is the indicator of humanity’s guilt, is the result of the renewal of humanity, which in turn has its basis in the faithfulness of Jesus. Wright undoubtedly regards the forgiveness of sins as somehow underlying renewal, but it nowhere appears in his work as the

⁵¹ It is for this reason that the merging of law and promise (or gospel), which was characteristic of Barth’s theology, reappears as a central element of Wright’s work.

⁵² Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 38, 53, 120.

⁵³ Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 92, 132–135, 138–140.

⁵⁴ Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 271.

⁵⁵ Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 32–33, 37–38, 91–92, 125, 132–133, and in considerable detail in Wright, “The Letter to the Romans,” 658–664, where Wright distances himself slightly from Barth in that he reads Leviticus 18:5 in Romans 10:5 as speaking of the believer, rather than of Christ.

unconditioned act by which God recreates fallen human beings and, with them, the world. The renewal of the human being, not a bare and unqualified forgiveness of sins, serves as the basis for the restoration.

That leads back, finally, to the initial question: What was God's purpose for Israel? Was it to be the recipient of salvation or the means of salvation? In light of the preceding reflections, the lack of clarity in Wright's construal becomes telling. God called Abraham in order to solve "the problem of evil, the problem of Adam, the problem of the world."⁵⁶ Israel in the first place was to be a "light to the nations." Did God then intend Israel to die for the sins of the world? If Israel had been faithful to God, would it have fulfilled this role? How could the people who from the start were part of the problem *themselves* be the solution to the problem? That these questions remain unresolved indicate that, despite its traditional elements, *Wright's understanding of Christ's saving work is driven by the moral idealism inherent to his conception of "representation."* At the very least, his work requires considerable clarification at this crucial point. Otherwise, the traditional understanding of the atonement seems to ride along in his work as nothing more than excess baggage.

The Covenant: Exclusive or Universal? The third tension in Wright's reading of Scripture confirms the primacy of its moral idealism. Throughout his work, the scriptural dialectic between the exclusivity of God's call upon Israel, especially as it is expressed in the gift of Torah, and the universal purpose of God is heightened and stretched into an aporia. As already noted, in Wright's view Israel's particular sin was that it claimed the exclusive privilege of election and covenant for itself, rather than fulfilling its purpose of being a light to the nations. In another context, it would be worth retracing some of the broad strokes of Israel's story in Scripture, where it quickly becomes clear that this reading of Israel's vocation cannot be sustained. Indeed, the end of the Exodus is the conquest of Canaan, where it was God's purpose that Israel utterly destroy its inhabitants. The biblical Psalms celebrate not only the conversion of the nations to the true God but also their defeat and destruction. This inner biblical tension remains until the arrival of the Messiah. Likewise in the prophets: while Israel is singled out for judgment, it is nevertheless promised renewal. In the wonder of God's love, "the gifts and calling of God" upon Israel remain irrevocable, despite Israel's failure.⁵⁷ We should also note that the unconditionality of the election of the people of Israel

⁵⁶ Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 24.

⁵⁷ Rom 11:29.

plays a significant role in Paul's understanding of justification, as becomes apparent in Romans 9–11.

It is the gift of Torah that interests us at this point. On the one hand, Torah is Israel's guide by which "Israel celebrates its unique vocation as the creator's chosen people, the people who know the secrets of the universe and are called to live by its otherwise hidden rules, while the other nations blunder around in darkness."⁵⁸ On the other hand, as we have seen, Israel's meta-sin was that it treated its vocation as "indicating exclusive privilege."⁵⁹ In Wright's view, the psalmist's joy that the Lord who has made known his "statutes and judgments to Israel" and has not "dealt thus with any other nation" (Ps 147:20) entails a "certain unappealing smugness."⁶⁰ This criticism, which is fundamental to Wright's entire program, finds at least partial resolution in his idealistic conception of the covenant. According to his basic line of interpretation, when God fulfills the covenant in Jesus he enables "Abraham's family to be the worldwide Jew-plus-Gentile people it was always intended to be."⁶¹

It is from this perspective that the charge of exclusivism arises against Israel. Wright readily acknowledges that Gentiles could and did join the nation of Israel and that Israel might invite them to do so, but that was at the expense of their remaining Gentiles. In the end, Wright implicitly conceives of God's covenant, as it ought to have been embodied in Israel, as consisting finally in a Torah stripped of ethnic particularity, food-laws, circumcision, Sabbath, ceremony, and whatever else might not conform to a universal human ideal. Although it is highly problematic to speak in this way, Israel's sin was that it did not see beyond the particular demands of Torah to this ideal. This is another indication that a form of moral idealism drives the whole of Wright's interpretation. This problem expresses itself again directly in his repeated assertion that the "new covenant" is nothing

⁵⁸ Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 22. Without in any way dismissing the benefits of the law for Israel, for example, such as in Deuteronomy 4:5–8, one has to regard this statement as an over-reading of Psalm 19 that runs into direct conflict with Paul's declaration that the "work of the Law" is written in the hearts of Gentiles (Rom 2:15) and almost certainly, too, with his charge that immoral idolaters "know the judgment of God, that those who do such things are worthy of death" (Rom 1:32). Wright's own reading of Romans 1:32 stands at odds with his claim here. See Wright, "Letter to the Romans," 434. His interpretation of Romans 2:15 as a reference to believing Gentiles fails to convince, not least because Paul here clearly speaks of the final judgment comprehensively (i.e., encompassing the entire human race).

⁵⁹ Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 36.

⁶⁰ Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 112.

⁶¹ Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 37.

but a “renewed covenant.” He does not see that *precisely* in the “new covenant,” and *only* in the “new covenant,” the reality of the eschaton breaks into the world, transcending the distinction between Jew and Gentile. Consequently, he necessarily introduces universalism into God’s former covenant with Israel *by interpreting that covenant in idealistic terms*.⁶²

Wright’s Reading of Justification

We are at long last ready to consider Wright’s reading of justification in Paul. It is best to allow him to speak in his own words. For the sake of clarity, we may begin with a description of the thought of early Judaism from *The New Testament and the People of God*:

When the age to come finally arrives, those who are the true covenant members will be vindicated; but if one already knows the signs and symbols which mark out those true covenant members, this vindication, this ‘justification’, *can be seen already in the present time*. Covenant faithfulness in the present is the sign of covenant vindication in the future⁶³

This understanding of justification continues in early Christianity and comes to expression in Romans. Wright therefore claims in *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*:

the word ‘justification’ does not itself denote the process whereby, or the event in which, a person is brought by grace from unbelief, idolatry and sin into faith, true worship and renewal of life. Paul, clearly and unambiguously, uses a different word for that, the word ‘call’. The word ‘justification’, despite centuries of Christian misuse, is used by Paul to denote that which happens immediately after the ‘call’: ‘those God called, he also justified’ (Rom 8.30). In other words, those who hear the gospel and respond to it in faith are *then* declared by God to be his people, his elect, ‘the circumcision’, ‘the Jews’, ‘the Israel of God’. They are given the status *dikaïos*, ‘righteous’, ‘within the covenant’.⁶⁴

⁶² Admittedly, he is able to speak of Paul’s theology of the “renewed covenant” as that in which the nations may share on equal terms. See Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 38. This statement has to be regarded either as an inconsistency—otherwise Israel would have no particular sin—or, more likely, as expressing Paul’s correction of Israel’s failure. With this, however, it is not merely early Judaism but the Israel of Scripture—the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms—which Paul’s theology corrects!

⁶³ Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 336.

⁶⁴ Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 121. See also Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 458.

Consequently:

The doctrine of justification by faith, from Galatians through Philippians to Romans, was never about how people were to be converted, how someone might become a Christian, but about how one could *tell*, in the present, who God's true people were—and hence who one's family were, who were the people with whom one should as a matter of family love and loyalty, sit down and eat.⁶⁵

Several features of his interpretation of justification stand out. First, Wright understands justification to be a subordinate element of the covenant which he discerns in the scriptural narrative. Salvation of human beings in the proper sense, that is, their deliverance from sin and guilt, takes place apart from and prior to justification, which now is placed in a medial position between the initial event of salvation (namely, the call of God), and the final vindication of God's people when all creation is renewed. Wright's construal of final redemption thus lacks clarity. Final salvation, he says, is not to be regarded as an "ahistorical rescue *from* the world but as the *transhistorical* redemption *of* the world."⁶⁶ The *parousia* of the Lord is not to be regarded so much as a "coming" as it is "drawing back a previously unnoticed curtain to reveal what had been there all along."⁶⁷ The King will come back and transform the earth where we have lived "as a colonial outpost of heaven."⁶⁸ Christian words and work no longer remain distinctly within the limit of "witness" but in some measure are exposed to taking upon themselves absolute burdens. Every believer is charged with "making God's saving, restorative justice as much of a reality as possible in the present age."⁶⁹ The fulfillment of God's redemptive purpose for creation does not arrive decisively with the final judgment but with the completion of a transition already begun. The problem is compounded by Wright's insistence that Israel *alone* was to be the channel of blessing and salvation for the world, a role which through Jesus the Messiah now falls upon the community of believers.⁷⁰ These statements may be read innocently, of course, but there is no clear indication of their limit.

⁶⁵ Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 159.

⁶⁶ Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 12.

⁶⁷ Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 143.

⁶⁸ Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 143.

⁶⁹ Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 147.

⁷⁰ Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 24, 108–129. Consequently, insufficient room is left for God's quiet governance of the fallen world beyond the pale of the church. It is allotted only the role, through pagan rulers, of preventing anarchy. See *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 66.

Second, this medial placement of “justification” means that justification takes the form of a “constative utterance,” that is, a statement which establishes facts.⁷¹ God declares those who have faith to be his people, to be *dikaios*, righteous. God shall yet vindicate them and give them justice as an act of his covenant fidelity. For Wright, the *effect* of justification is located firmly in a covenantal framework. For Paul, however, justification ultimately consists in nothing other than a “performative utterance” by God. The promise of God that is fulfilled in Christ *creates* the human being anew and thus effects righteousness.⁷²

Third, the divine declaration that human beings are righteous is based on “faith.” Here Wright’s understanding of justification becomes highly problematic, and rather troubling. In some sense, he wishes to find an unconditioned work of God behind and before justification, but, as we have seen, he does not conceive the covenant with Abraham as strictly promissory. His conception of it is tinged with the demands of a moral idealism. The unconditional, saving commitment of God to creation that he supposes is itself problematic since it remains diffuse and unattached to a definite word from God. Wright’s moral idealism, moreover, comes to bear on his conception of faith, so that his discussion of “faith” contains the lack of clarity that we have seen in various forms in his work. On the one hand, it is faith alone which justifies. On the other hand, Wright does not distinguish between faith and “faithfulness” or “obedience,” especially in his understanding of Paul’s references to “the faith of Christ.” We have already seen what a large role the “faithfulness” of Jesus plays in Wright’s understanding of salvation. Those who believe are transformed by the power of the Spirit. They come to share in God’s new humanity, the genuine humanness that Jesus embodied. This new humanity is marked out not by circumcision or Torah but *by the badge of faith*.⁷³

⁷¹ I have borrowed the appeal to John Austin’s speech-act theory from Oswald Bayer. The debates associated with the Holl school at the beginning of the twentieth century used the Kantian distinction between “analytical” and “synthetic” judgments, in which the external and effective character of the divine word does not come to expression.

⁷² The difference between the two forms of utterance may be illustrated within a modern legal context (which, it should be noted, differs from the biblical context). A “constative utterance,” in the American system of justice at least, is the task of the jury, which finds the facts with respect to the law in a given case. The “performative utterance” belongs to the judge, who, taking up the jury’s verdict, pronounces sentence or releases the accused with an operative statement. The judge’s word *effects* the sentence, in contrast to the work of the jury.

⁷³ Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 121.

Thus, while faith for Wright has its center in the human heart, it is also *outward and visible*, a mark of allegiance to Jesus as Messiah. Wright understands faith, whatever else it might be, as a transforming vision of the image of God and of the true humanness found in Jesus. Wright's understanding of faith thus comes under the pull of his moral idealism. *It is no longer clear in his proposal that justification takes place entirely in the work of God in Christ, a work which faith passively receives.* Rather than regarding faith as an expression of the new creation, Wright makes the blessing and renewal of the creation contingent on faith, a deeply troubling move when one considers that in his reading "faith" embraces "faithfulness." For this reason, too, his claim that when, on account of the work of the Spirit, Paul looks forward to the last day, "he holds up as his joy and crown, not the merits and death of Jesus, but the churches he has planted who remain faithful to the Gospel."⁷⁴ The dichotomy is false and, again, deeply troubling.

It is instructive to consider for a moment the potential situation of the people who embrace Wright's reading of Scripture. Believing in Jesus, they know themselves to share in the vocation to be truly human people by the power of the Spirit, part of the vanguard of the new creation. Whether one takes this vocation leniently or strictly, one's status with respect to God is determined by the mark of faith in one's life. How much faith is enough? To what extent must my life be marked by this faith—or faithfulness? The word of forgiveness and justification in this case is very much like the word of the priest to the young, pre-Reformational Luther in the sacrament of penance; the priest, seeing the contrition of the penitent and thus finding righteousness present, stated the facts of the case in the word of forgiveness: *te absolvo*.⁷⁵ At the very least, Wright's interpretation of justification results in a radical loss of assurance, which we fallen human beings then will always seek to find elsewhere (to be sure, "by the power of the Spirit") in our works, our faith, and our humanness. We thus lose God as our Creator who by his word of promise alone forgives us and makes us new creatures. This loss of assurance and of the knowledge of our Creator go largely unnoticed in Wright's scheme because, through the lens of his moral idealism, he views salvation primarily as a corporate reality and overlooks divine judgment as an essential element of the saving event. That you and I must die and stand before God *alone* hardly comes

⁷⁴ Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 148.

⁷⁵ Again my debt to Oswald Bayer is apparent. See his *Promissio: Geschichte der reformatorischen Wende in Luthers Theologie*, 2nd ed. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1989).

into view. We therefore return to Paul for a still fresher reading of justification.

III. Justification Still Fresher Yet: Paul's Witness in Romans

We will take Paul's pithy summary of God's justifying work in Christ in Romans 3:21-26 as the focal point. After reading the text afresh, I will offer a series of reflections in which I will attempt to connect it with Paul's larger argument in Romans. On the basis of these reflections I want to offer four theses on justification.

God's Righteousness through Faith from the Crucified and Risen Christ

Romans 3:21-26:

Now,

 apart from the Law,
 the righteousness of God has been manifest
 being borne witness by the Law and the prophets.
 indeed, the righteousness of God
 through the faith *which is of Jesus Christ* unto all who believe.
 For all sinned and lack the glory of God,
 being justified freely by his grace through the *deliverance* which is in
 Christ Jesus.

 whom God *purposed as a mercy-seat*, through faith, by his blood
 unto the demonstration of his righteousness
 on account of the passing over of past sins
 in the mercy of God.
 unto the demonstration of his righteousness
 in the present time
 so that he might be righteous
 and the justifier of the one who is of *the faith of Jesus*.

The passage begins in striking and profound contrast to Paul's preceding discussion as to how one is to read the law (Rom 2:17-3:20). The Jewish dialogue partner reads the law as the gift of the knowledge of God's will, with the underlying supposition that the human being (no doubt with divine aid) is able to put that knowledge into practice (Rom 2:17-24). Paul reads the law in a radically different way. The law *speaks* to us, announcing our subjection to sin, which is both tragic and guilty. It speaks in order that "every mouth might be shut" and the whole world might be guilty (*ὑπόδικος*) before God (Rom 3:19). The inner voice of conscience is insufficient. God's saving purpose requires the external voice of the law. It is not that Paul imagines that human beings are incapable of doing anything that the law demands. Those who possess the law are well

able to accomplish the “works of the Law,” deeds of outward observance which mark a person as a pious Jew;⁷⁶ but “no flesh” can be justified before God by these deeds. It is the experience of sinning, not justification, which comes through the law (“the knowledge of sin,” cf. Rom 7:7-13).

“Now the righteousness of God has been manifest” (Rom 3:21). With these words Paul takes up his opening announcement that the gospel is God’s saving power *because* the righteousness of God is revealed in it (Rom 1:16-17). This expression quite clearly alludes to Psalm 98:2, and similar passages in the Scriptures, where “the righteousness of God” does not refer to a divine attribute or to a status conferred. It refers instead to an event in which God establishes saving justice in the rebellious and corrupt world which he nevertheless rules: “Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things; his right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him. The Lord has made his salvation known and revealed his righteousness to the nations.” The revelation of this righteousness of God in the gospel follows the pattern which Paul finds in the prophet Habakkuk who, in the face of impending judgment and disaster on Israel, announces that “the righteous one shall live by the faithfulness of the Lord to his promise” (Hab 2:4).⁷⁷ The apostle rightly understands this “living by the faithful promise” as a call to faith. As is the case elsewhere in the prophets, deliverance comes through disaster. Mercy is given only in judgment. Justification comes only in the justification of God against his enemies. Paul underscores this dimension of God’s righteousness, when in Romans 3:4-5 he cites Psalm 51:4 in conjunction with Psalm 116:11. Every human being shall be shown to be a liar (that is, in context, an idolater) in order that God might be justified in his words, words which declare us to be so. The manifestation of God’s righteousness is the manifestation of our unrighteousness: *deus verax, homo mendax*.

It is to this understanding of the righteousness of God and of justification that Paul returns in Romans 3:21-26, where he four times refers to God’s righteousness at the opening and closing of this summary, thus bracketing and defining his description of justification. Paul’s final reference to the “demonstration of God’s righteousness,” which bears

⁷⁶ Cf. 4Q398 14-17, II, 3 = 4QMMT 113, in *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated: The Qumran Texts in English*, ed. Florentino García Martínez, trans. Wilfred G. E. Watson, 2nd ed. (Leiden: Brill; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 84-85.

⁷⁷ I have offered a slight over-translation, the basic idea of which is well-supported by the context. See Mark A. Seifrid, “Unrighteous by Faith: Apostolic Proclamation in Romans 1:18-3:20,” in *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, vol. 2, *The Paradoxes of Paul*, ed. D. A. Carson, Peter T. O’Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 112-113.

distinct overtones, is worth noting. He thereby indicates that God "comes to be just": God's right is established by the revelation of his righteousness "in the present time," namely in the crucified and risen Jesus. The judgment and salvation of the fallen human being emerge together from the same event. By the wonder of God's love, our condemnation is simultaneously our justification and salvation. The two can be distinguished but not separated. They are found in the crucified and risen Christ alone.

Christ stands at the center of this description of justification. The glory of God the Creator, which each and every human being has abandoned in idolatry, is restored to us by God's justifying work in him (Rom 3:23; cf. 1:23). In Paul's words, we are "justified by the deliverance which is in Christ Jesus" (Rom 3:24). In the resurrection of the crucified Jesus, the new exodus promised by God has come about. This event is not merely the starting point but the abiding center of the life of the believer: God purposed Christ Jesus to be for us *ἰλαστήριον*, the mercy-seat, the one and only place we sinful human beings may ever encounter God in his glory for salvation (Rom 3:25). The justifying work of God in Christ encompasses both the moment of deliverance and the entire life of the one who believes, a relation which continues *into all eternity*.

The righteousness of God revealed in Christ for salvation is made *ours* by faith. More precisely, it is "through the faith of Jesus Christ." Neither the traditional reading of this expression as "faith in Christ," nor the currently popular reading "faith/faithfulness of Christ," is fully satisfying, the former because Paul generally presupposes the object of faith in the term *πίστις* itself and the latter because we never find in Paul a verbal expression of Christ's faith/faithfulness. Furthermore, there are a number of signals in this passage, and elsewhere, that in this usage Paul views the crucified and risen Christ himself as the source from which faith flows.⁷⁸ Already his description of justification taking place "in Christ Jesus," and that implicitly as the restoration of the glory of God (Rom 3:24), points in this direction, as does his concluding description of the believer as one who is "of the faith of Jesus" (Rom 3:26). It is also important to see that Paul describes Abraham's faith in the following chapter as the work of the promissory word of God the Creator "who makes alive the dead and calls (for his purposes) that which is not as if it exists" (Rom 4:17). Abraham believes and acts, yet, in Paul's reading of Genesis, Abraham is more fundamentally acted upon: despite his aging body and Sarah's barrenness,

⁷⁸ See now Mark A. Seifrid, "The Faith of Christ," in *The Faith of Christ Debate*, ed. Michael F. Bird (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, forthcoming).

with respect to the promise “he was made strong in faith” and “is made fully assured” that the Creator could do what he promised. Abraham’s “giving glory to God” – Paul here overlooks his rather remarkable failure (Genesis 20) – is nothing other than the work of the Creator in Abraham (Rom 4:20). Our believing in “the One who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead” is no different. Faith for Paul is nothing other than the word of promise performing its work in those who believe.

A note of individualism appears decisively in the final word of Paul’s summary: “God is the justifier of the one who is of the faith of Jesus” (Rom 3:26). This makes clear that Paul’s preceding universal statements are to be understood as individualizing as well: “the righteousness of God (is given) through the faith of Christ *unto all who believe, . . . for all have sinned and lack God’s glory*” (Rom 3:22–23). This individualizing emphasis, which continues in Romans 3:27–31, is an extension of Paul’s prior argument. Already at the outset he uses the singular pairing “Jew and Greek” to indicate the scope of the gospel (Rom 1:16; 2:9–10), setting it aside only to indicate universal subjection to sin (Rom 3:9), and then pointedly opening his catena of condemnation with the singular, “there is none righteous, no not one” (Rom 3:10; Ps 14:1). Likewise, when he turns to the moralizing judge at the opening of Romans 2, he shifts to the singular form common in the diatribe and continues to use the singular in his address to the rhetorical figure of the Jew in Romans 2:17–29. Particularly here, in his rejection of the efficacy of the law in imparting true wisdom and knowledge, he drives a wedge between the benefits in which Israel shared corporately and the responsibility of the individual before God. We must not overlook the thrust of the argument which begins in Romans 1:18 and runs into Romans 3 and beyond. Paul understands human beings to seek their identity *within a corporate reality of this fallen world and its unified narrative*. Sometimes, as in the case of Paul, they seek to be an outstanding member of that community (cf. Gal 1:14).⁷⁹ The believing Paul, in contrast, seeks to individuate, to set the individual before the presence of God as a sinner (Rom 3:4; *tibi soli peccavi*; Ps 51:4) and as one who is justified and forgiven in Jesus Christ (Rom 3:26). The unity of our times is found in him alone.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ We may observe that Western individualism, expressed primarily in materialism (or sometimes in reaction against it) operates precisely in this way as it is subject to mass marketing (or, rarely, in reaction against it).

⁸⁰ See Rudolf Hermann, *Religionsphilosophie*, ed. Heinrich Assel, *Gesammelte und nach gelassene Werke* 5 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995), 137–160.

It is here that we find the significance of the brief clause in Romans 3:22, "for there is no distinction," that is, no distinction between Jew and Gentile. The reason that the inclusion of Gentiles appears so regularly in connection with Paul's teaching on justification is that their participation in the people of God was a *visible and bodily* expression of the justification of the ungodly, an event which cannot be reduced to a moral vision (see Gal 2:11-21). Table-fellowship with Gentiles was therefore a call to mission, to the evangelization of the world, a call to an ever-expanding community. This community of Jews and Gentiles was not held together by any visible outward ties but solely by the invisible bond of faith in the risen Messiah (Rom 15:5-13). It was a community of forgiven sinners who came to one another, not by means of an ideal of equality (defined on whose terms?), and certainly not by a common culture (cf. Rom 14:1-23), but through Jesus Christ alone. As Paul instructs his readers in Romans 9-11, Israel and the nations were, after all, God's work. Their varying paths to Christ were the open, visible, and necessary indications that God's mercy, if it is to be mercy, must be radically free.

Theses on Justification:

1. The gospel of God's saving work in Jesus Christ, in which God gives himself to us in unconditioned promise, is distinct from his condemning work in the law, which remains necessary to us throughout life.

2. Justification is an event in Jesus Christ in which God comes to his right as Creator in the fallen human being. It is not merely "God's covenant faithfulness."

3. Faith is the creation of God by the word of promise, the gospel of Jesus Christ, which stands over against the unfaithfulness of the human being.

4. Through law and gospel, God individuates the fallen human being who seeks to hide in earthly community and its history. God thus saves us and sets us in the community of justified sinners.



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