

# Covenant Theology and Recent Interpretation of Paul: Some Reflections

By Guy Prentiss Waters

## INTRODUCTION

The theme of this year's journal is "Scripture." Many of the articles in this issue address the ways in which leading Reformed theologians have explained and defended the doctrine of Scripture. I have been kindly invited and have agreed to do something a little different—to reflect on Scripture in the New Perspective on Paul (NPP). Why address the NPP? First, the NPP sits at the heart of the last thirty years of academic Pauline interpretation. To explore the NPP is to take the pulse of recent critical reflection on the apostle Paul. Second, the NPP, particularly the work of N. T. Wright, has currency within the evangelical and Reformed church. Any responsible engagement of the doctrine of Scripture in the contemporary evangelical church cannot ignore the NPP.

Addressing the topic of Scripture in the NPP is a daunting task, in part because the NPP is not a monolithic entity. Three examples relating to the doctrine of Scripture come to mind. First, with respect to the authority of Scripture, some proponents, such as E. P. Sanders, do not understand the letters of Paul to be divine revelation. Other proponents, such as N. T. Wright, attempt to understand both the Old Testament and the letters of Paul in terms of divine revelation.<sup>1</sup> Second, with respect to the New Testament's use of the Old Testament, Sanders sees Paul as essentially a "proof-texter"—one who quotes Old Testament passages without particular concern for their original context.<sup>2</sup> Wright, however, argues that the New Testament writers frequently respect the narrational context of the Old Testament passages that they cite or reference. Third, with respect to the canon of Scripture, particularly the Old Testament, neither Sanders nor Wright evidences appreciable recognition of Paul's commitment to the canonical distinction between the books of the Old Testament and other Jewish literature (Gal 1:14, 2 Tim 3:15–17).<sup>3</sup>

In light of the number of issues relating to the doctrine of Scripture presented to us by the NPP, we must necessarily be selective in our discussion. There are essentially two paths before us. We might take up *formal* considerations relating to Scripture in the NPP. These considerations include some of the questions we broached in the previous paragraph—the nature of Scripture, the exegetical methodology of the New Testament authors, and the canon of Scripture. Alternatively, we might give attention to *material* considerations relating to Scripture in the NPP. We might ask how, according to NPP writers, Paul understood his own theology in light of what he understood the theology of the Old Testament to be.

It is this last matter that will occupy our attention here. Specifically, we will concentrate on the way in which N. T. Wright sees the apostle Paul articulating his own theology in the context of a theology of the

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1. For Wright's efforts to understand the Scripture in terms of "revelation," see N. T. Wright, *The Last Word* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), esp. 30–32. See also the review by D.A. Carson, "Three More Books on the Bible: A Critical Review" *TJ* 27 (2006): 1–62, reprinted in D. A. Carson, *The Collected Writings on Scripture* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2010), 237–301.

2. E. P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1983), 20–24.

3. See my *Justification and the New Perspectives on Paul* (Phillipsburg, N. J.: P&R, 2004), 156–157; and Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., "Paul the Theologian" *WTJ* 62 (2000): 121–141. So far as I have been able to find in his writings, Wright refrains from speaking of the Old Testament in terms of the formal, normative authority that Paul affirms it to possess. Consequently, when we speak of Wright attempting to explain Paul's understanding of the Old Testament, we are referring to Wright's efforts to understand how Paul was shaped by and interacted with the contemporary Jewish beliefs and expectations that were informed by, but not altogether determined by, the Scriptures of the Old Testament.

Old Testament Scriptures. To help focus our approach, two preliminary observations are in order. First, unlike many in the historical critical tradition, Wright understands there to be essential *continuity* within the biblical accounts of salvation history. Wright, for instance, understands there to be a single, coherent theology of the New Testament.<sup>4</sup> What's more, Wright sees this New Testament theology to bring to realization or fulfillment Old Testament hope and expectation. This fulfillment does not consist merely of multiple "types" and their corresponding "antitypes."

Paul saw scripture [*sic*] as story and prophecy [and] the story was always moving toward a climax; it contained

4. As evidenced in Wright's multivolume *Christian Origins and the Question of God: The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), vol. 1; *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), vol. 2; *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), vol. 3.

5. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 264. Emphasis Wright's.

6. See Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's and Sons, 1951, 1955).

7. And yet, Wright is by no means a lone voice in stressing such salvation-historical continuity within the historical-critical study of Paul. See, for instance, Oscar Cullmann, *Salvation in History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), and Leonhard Goppelt, *Theology of the New Testament*, ed. J. Roloff, and trans. J. E. Alsup, 2 vols.; (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981, 1982).

8. Wright, *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision* (London: SPCK, 2009), 180. Wright does see, however, Paul as having "rethought Judaism entirely, and now ... re-presenting it as need arises, as part of the fresh understanding he has of Israel's story, the world's story, and ultimately even God's story, on the basis of the death and resurrection of the Messiah and the gift of the Spirit," *Climax of the Covenant*, 215. Paul, for Wright, does not simply read the "single, divine plan," he transforms it. For my response to such an approach to the New Testament's interpretation of the Old Testament, see my review article of J. R. Daniel Kirk, *Unlocking Romans: Resurrection and the Justification of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), *Reformation* 21, March 2009 at <http://www.reformation21.org/shelf-life/unlocking-romans.php>, accessed October 13, 2010.

9. This is not to say that Wright has no positive placement of "apocalyptic" as a category in Pauline theology. See Wright, *Paul in Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 40–58. In *Paul in Fresh Perspective* and *Justification*, Wright is particularly concerned to allay apocalyptic fears that his heavy accent on covenant does not entail neglect of "creation" in Paul. It is also worth noting that Wright respectfully acknowledges Käsemann to be "one of my own heroes," their differences not withstanding, *Paul in Fresh Perspective*, 51.

10. On which see representatively Wright's discussion at *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans / Cincinnati: Forward Movement Publications, 1997), 118, 131.

11. Geerhardus Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology* (1930; Phillipsburg, N. J.: P&R, 2004); Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, trans. John Richard de Witt (1966; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975).

within it, at specific and non-arbitrary moments, advance warnings and promises about that climax; it contained within it, again not at arbitrary moments, prefigurements of that climax ... and, most importantly, it was a story whose climax, Paul believed, *had now arrived* [in] the resurrection of Jesus.<sup>5</sup>

Wright, then, not only argues for essential continuity between Paul and the Old Testament, but he understands that continuity in terms of narrative. When one considers Rudolf Bultmann's influential accent on *discontinuity* between Paul and the Old Testament, and Bultmann's sustained *disinterest* in exploring Paul's engagement of the Old Testament as narrative,<sup>6</sup> it is not difficult to appreciate Wright's efforts within the critical tradition.<sup>7</sup> To hear Wright speak, for instance, of "Paul's reading of a single divine plan" within such a discussion is little short of breathtaking.<sup>8</sup>

Second, Wright understands this narrative continuity between the Old Testament and Paul fundamentally in terms of "covenant." Instructive in this regard is to contrast Wright's approach with that of the twentieth-century New Testament scholar Ernst Käsemann. Käsemann understood Paul fundamentally against the background of Jewish apocalyptic—the inbreaking or irruption of salvific power into a creation held hostage to the power of sin. Such an approach naturally accented Paul's *discontinuity* with the Old Testament. Consequently, the Old Testament category "covenant" plays a negligible role in Käsemann's understanding of Paul.

Wright, however, self-consciously sets his project apart from that of the apocalypticists.<sup>9</sup> For Wright, "covenant" is not only at the heart of his understanding of Pauline justification,<sup>10</sup> but at the heart of his understanding of the one divine plan that he sees consuming Paul's theological attention and energies. Wright, then, can summarize his argument in *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision* as having set forth "covenant theology" (Wright, *Justification*, 222). It is fair, then, to characterize Wright's Paul as a covenant theologian, and, to the degree that we identify Wright's own theology with that of the apostle, Wright himself as a covenant theologian.

With these two preliminary observations in place, perhaps we are now in a position to see why evangelical students of the Scripture have found Wright to be an attractive and sonorous voice amidst the cacophonous din of the academic study of Paul. We can furthermore understand why those who are committed to the covenant theology of, say, the Westminster Standards, and Geerhardus Vos's and Herman Ridderbos's eschatological or redemptive-historical surveys of Pauline theology,<sup>11</sup>

might take Wright to be a co-belligerent, if not a fellow-traveler.<sup>12</sup>

Such an evaluation, however, merits careful scrutiny. While acknowledging the genuinely helpful contributions of Wright's biblical-theological project, we must give pause before credentialing Wright as a covenant theologian within the historical Reformed tradition. In what follows, we have two basic aims. First, we will try to summarize Wright's understanding of the contours and trajectory of Old Testament theology according to Paul. Second, after underscoring points of appreciation, we will explore some of the leading points of difference between Wright's project and Reformed covenant theology.

#### PAUL'S THEOLOGY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT, ACCORDING TO WRIGHT

Wright's understanding of Paul's theology of the Old Testament may be represented under four interlocking headings: Creation, Abraham, Israel and the Mosaic Law, and Fulfillment in Christ. Each of these headings represents what Wright sees as successive stages within Old Testament salvation history, as characterized by Paul. We will consider each of these headings in turn.

##### 1. Creation

According to Wright, creation is fundamental to the covenantal reflections about Israel circulating in Second Temple Judaism. "Israel's covenantal vocation," Wright claims, "caused her to think of herself as the creator's true humanity," specifically, the "true Adamic humanity."<sup>13</sup> Further, Deut 27–30 is said to "bring together creation and covenant in terms of the land: if Israel obeys the voice of YHWH, the created order within the promised land will be abundantly fruitful..."<sup>14</sup> For Second Temple Judaism, the axiom "the creator God is the covenant God, and vice versa; and his word ... will rescue and deliver his people from the enemy ... constituted the deep implicit narrative" that gives "coherence and meaning" to the "multiple other narratives of second-Temple Judaism" (*Paul in Fresh Perspective*, 24).

For Wright, "this theology of creation and covenant" is at the heart of Paul's own theology (*Paul in Fresh Perspective*, 25). This centrality is evident in Paul's phrase, *dikaosune theou* (Rom 1:16–17), which Wright translates, "the justice of God." By this phrase, Paul is saying "that because God is the creator he has the obligation to put the world to rights once and for all ... not from some abstract ideal but from the creator's obligation to the

creation and from the covenant God's obligation to be faithful to his promises" (*Paul in Fresh Perspective*, 25). What is the "problem" that besets the creation? That problem, Wright notes, is "sin and death" (*Paul in Fresh Perspective*, 28). Second Temple Judaism, following the Old Testament, traces this problem back to the sin of Adam (*New Testament and the People of God*, 262, 263). The significance of "Adam-theology" for Second Temple Judaism and for the Old Testament itself, Wright argues, is in that "it either advances, or develops, a claim about the place of Israel in the purposes of God. It is another way of saying that the world was made for the sake of Israel, or that Israel is, or is to become, God's intended true humanity" (*Climax of the Covenant*, 21). Israel, then, has borne the mantle that Adam dropped. Second Temple Judaism saw Israel as the eschatological, or last, Adam (*Climax of the Covenant*, 39).

Paul, Wright argues, must be "understood against this background not merely at one or two isolated points but all along the line" (*Climax of the Covenant*, 26). Seen in this light, Jesus as "last Adam" (1 Cor 15:45) must be understood in terms of Israel—"the eschatological Israel, who will be raised from the dead as the vindicated people of God" (*Climax of the Covenant*, 35). Jesus here "is the one through whom God is doing what he intended to do, first through humanity and then through Israel. Paul's Adam-christology is basically an Israel-christology, and is predicated on the identification of Jesus as Messiah, in virtue of his resurrection" (*Climax of the Covenant*, 29). Jesus, then, fulfills the Adamic calling that neither Adam nor Israel obeyed.

Paul is said to argue a similar point at Rom 5:12–21, a passage that Wright says "comes, perhaps, as a sort of sub-category of *Heilsgeschichte*..." (*Climax of the Covenant*, 215). In Rom 1–4, Wright sees Paul claiming that "God's answer to the sin of humanity (of Adam...), is the people of Abraham, and Abraham's true people are those redeemed in Christ..." (*Climax of the Covenant*, 36).<sup>15</sup> At Rom 5:12–21, however, Wright gives more concerted attention to the place of "Adam" in distinction from Israel.

12. In this vein, it is important to note that Wright has labeled himself both as an evangelical and Calvinist. See, for instance, his "New Perspectives on Paul" in *Justification in Perspective: Historical Developments and Contemporary Challenges*, ed. Bruce L. McCormack (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006 / Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 2006), 243–264.

13. Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 262. Unless otherwise noted, all further titles cited are authored by Wright.

14. *Paul in Fresh Perspective*, 23.

15. For Wright, when Paul claims that "Abraham's true people are those redeemed in Christ," the apostle does so having "reworked" "Jewish tradition ... in light of the gospel," *Ibid*.

Christ had to begin where Adam ended, that is, by taking on to himself not merely a clean slate, not merely even the single sin of Adam, but the whole entail of that sin, working its way out in the ‘many sins’ of Adam’s descendants, and arriving at the judgment spoken of in 1.32; 2.1–16; and 3.19–20. (*Climax of the Covenant*, 37)

Even so, the “obedient” work of Jesus Christ in Rom 5:12–21 must be seen as “the act of *Israel’s* representative, doing for *Israel* what she could not do for herself,” and thus undoing “Adam’s sin and its effects” (*Climax of the Covenant*, 39).<sup>16</sup> To speak of the work of the last Adam, Wright argues from Rom 5:12–21, is necessarily to invoke both the first Adam and Israel.

In summary, Wright sees at least three points of significance in Paul’s theology for “creation,” and specifically a creation characterized by sin and death. First, sin originates with the one sin of Adam. Wright is unclear about how that one sin relates to the sins of Adam’s posterity, but, at the very least, we may say that, for Wright, that one sin has temporal priority over and has in some way brought on the sins of Adam’s descendants. Second, Second Temple Judaism understood Adam’s forfeiture of the calling to be truly human to mean that Israel, God’s covenant people, was supposed to be God’s true humanity. This understanding was eschatological—Israel was the “last Adam.” For Paul, however, the last Adam, or eschatological Israel, is not the nation of Israel but Jesus. Third, in Jesus, God is not “abandoning” but “renewing” the creation (*Paul in Fresh Perspective*, 29). This renewal is the goal or endpoint of Jesus’ work as “last Adam.”

Our exposition of Wright’s Paul thus far leaves unanswered two questions. First, how is it that Israel came to understand herself to be God’s true humanity, the eschatological Israel? Second, how is it that Israel failed in her calling to be God’s true humanity? To answer the first question, we must turn to Wright’s understanding of “Abraham” in Paul. To answer the second, we must turn to Wright’s understanding of “Israel and the Law” in Paul.

### 2. Abraham

Wright argues that, within the understanding of Second Temple Judaism, the promises and covenant that God

16. Emphasis mine. For Wright’s exposition of Phil 2:5–11 in terms of a contrast between Adam and Christ, see *Climax*, 90–97.

17. Emphasis Wright’s. Elsewhere in *Justification*, Wright observes that “God’s purpose in calling Abraham . . . was to deal with the problem created through Adam,” 199; and that by the Abrahamic promises “the creator God would now bring blessing to . . . [the] whole world [which] had been cursed through Adam and Eve, through the human pride which led to Babel,” 78.

makes with Abraham “begin to reverse” the “line of disaster and of the ‘curse’” beginning with Adam. What’s more, “Abraham and his progeny inherit the role of Adam and Eve” (*New Testament and the People of God*, 262, 263; *Climax*, 36). It was in light of the Abrahamic Covenant and the purpose of that covenant that Israel came to understand herself to be the eschatological, Adamic, true humanity (*New Testament and the People of God*, 262, 263).

Paul, if anything, sharpens this understanding of the purpose of the Abrahamic Covenant. “Paul’s view of God’s purpose is that God, the creator, called Abraham so that through his family he, God, could rescue the world from its plight.”<sup>17</sup> This Abrahamic arrangement, then, is for Paul part of “God’s single plan” (*Justification*, 73).

### 3. Israel and the Problem of the Law.

Wright’s treatment of Paul’s understanding of creation, Adam, and Abraham largely underscores continuity with that of Second Temple Judaism. Wright’s treatment of Paul’s understanding of the Torah, however, underscores the apostle’s discontinuity with the Judaism contemporary to him. To appreciate this discontinuity, let us first consider the way in which Wright claims that many first century Jews saw the Torah, Israel, and the “plight” of Israel during the first century.

How did Jews understand the Torah? “For an orthodox Jew, then as now, Torah was the great gift which signaled Israel’s special status and vocation” (*New Testament and the People of God*, 405). Wright underscores the importance of covenant in relation to the Torah. “The Torah was the covenant charter of Israel as the people of the covenant god (*sic*),” and, as such, was inextricably tied to temple and land (*New Testament and the People of God*, 227; cf. *Justification*, 53). This covenantal charter was, in turn, tied to Israel’s creational calling. As with the Abrahamic covenant, the covenant that God made with Israel, Wright stresses, was intended “to solve the problems within creation . . . the problem of evil, the problem of Adam, the problem of the world.” Israel’s “calling,” then, was “to hold fast by the covenant. Through Israel, God will address and solve the problems of the world, bringing justice and salvation to the ends of the earth” (*Paul in Fresh Perspective*, 24). It was through Israel’s obedience to her covenant charter, Torah, that God would bring blessing and salvation to the world.

Israel, however, experienced exile, that is she was forcibly removed from the Promised Land by her captors. Israel understood her exile to be nothing less than covenant

curse for sin (*Paul in Fresh Perspective*, 132, 133).<sup>18</sup> What's more, even after Israel geographically returned to the land in the sixth century B.C., Second Temple Judaism prevalently understood itself to be in continuing, though metaphorical, exile (*New Testament and the People of God*, 268–272). Specifically, Israel's plight of ongoing exile "is to be explained, *within* the terms of the divine covenant faithfulness, as [God's] punishment for her sin" (*New Testament and the People of God*, 271). But the exile was not the end of the story. Jews were awaiting the end or conclusion of the narrative in which they were situated. This eschatological conclusion consisted in the "Day of YHWH, Kingdom of God, victory over evil and pagan rulers, end of exile, the coming of the Messiah, the new Exodus, and the return of YHWH himself; and, in and through all of this, the resurrection of the dead" (*Paul in Fresh Perspective*, 135). Jews did not question that God was going to be faithful to his covenant promises. What was uncertain to them was both the time and manner in which he would fulfill those promises. Wright understands the phrase "the righteousness of God" in precisely these terms. This phrase articulates the question "when and how ... Israel's god (*sic*) [would] act to fulfill his covenant promises" (*New Testament and the People of God*, 271). Israel's hope, then, was fundamentally one of the renewal of the covenant that God had made with her (*New Testament and the People of God*, 280).

Wright draws an important conclusion concerning the place of the law in first century Israel. Although this Jewish eschatological expectation was unfulfilled in the first century, Jews concluded that "the way to tell, in the present, who would thus be vindicated in the future was to see who was keeping Torah (in some sense at least) in the present" (*Justification*, 57). The importance of Torah-keeping to the Jew, Wright argues, was in its signaling or identifying who was (and was not) a Jew. This is primarily a question, then, of ecclesiology or sociology. This question is what Wright understands "justification" to mean: "not ... *how someone enters the community of the true people of God*, but ... *how you tell who belongs to that community*, not least in the period of time before the eschatological event itself, when the matter will become public knowledge" (*What Saint Paul Really Said*, 119). Wright does not say that questions of soteriology were unimportant to Jews. He stresses, however, that soteriology simply was not a leading matter of debate or discussion for first century Judaism.

The key question facing Judaism as a whole was not about individual salvation, but about God's purposes for Israel and the world. If God was going to be faithful to

the covenant, what form would this take, when would it happen, and who would be the beneficiaries when it happened? The "present age" would give way to the "age to come," but who would inherit that "age to come"? ... The answer ... was this: Israel will be vindicated, will inherit the age to come—but it will be the Israel that has kept Torah, or that, through penitence and amendment of life (as in Daniel 9, looking back to Deuteronomy 30), has shown the heartfelt desire to follow God's ways and be loyal to his covenant ... The broad assumption was the Torah, in all its complexity, was the badge that Israel would wear, the sign that it really was God's people" (*Justification*, 56–57).

To summarize, Wright understands two great questions to dominate first century Jewish thinking about Israel and the Torah. First, how will God be faithful to the covenant promises he made with Israel? This, Wright says, is the question of the "righteousness of God," or the "covenant faithfulness of God." Second, how can you tell in the present whom God will vindicate in the future? This Wright will say, is the question of "justification." What answers did the New Testament, and specifically the apostle Paul, offer to these two great questions?

#### 4. Jesus and the Fulfillment of Israel's Promises.

For Wright, what unifies the theology of the New Testament may be summarized in a single observation: in the New Testament, we find the reconfiguration of Israel's story around Israel's Messiah, Jesus.<sup>19</sup> For Paul, "the complex event for which Israel had hoped had already happened in the events of Jesus of Nazareth." Specifically, the resurrection of Jesus marked the "breaking in to the scene of ongoing history, of the ultimate End." Thus, "what Israel expected God to do for *all* his people at the *end of time*, God has done for the Messiah in the middle of time" (*Paul in Fresh Perspective*, 136). How does Paul elaborate this conviction, particularly in view of Israel's covenantal calling (Adamic blessing to the nations), her covenantal charter (Torah), and her covenantal curse (exile)? Let us take up each of these considerations in turn.

#### Covenant Calling (Adam)

In Rom 5:12–21, Paul explores the relationship between

18. Wright cites Deut 30 and Dan 9 in support of this claim. For a succinct survey of Wright on this point, see *Justification*, 37–45.

19. For Wright's defense of the essential theological continuity between Jesus and Paul in relation to this point, see *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 167–183; and *Paul in Fresh Perspective*, 154–161.

Adam and Christ. He follows, Wright says, the conventional Jewish understanding of identifying Adam with the descendants of Abraham as the “true humanity.” Paul, however, “declares that Abraham’s people are to be identified as the people of the Messiah, Jesus ... Christ, and [that] his people, form the true humanity which Israel was called to be but, by the law alone, could not be” (*Climax of the Covenant*, 36).

Paul did not “simply substitute Christ (and his people) for the nation of Israel in current Jewish expectation” (Ibid.). That is to say, the Last Adam did not “merely begin something new,” but “dealt with the problem of the old” (Ibid., 38). The crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus had therefore forced Paul to reevaluate the “task to which the true Israel, God’s true Man, was called. He had to deal with the ‘many trespasses,’ and the consequent judgment, which had resulted from the sin of Adam” (Ibid., 36, 37). Yet even this reevaluation does not, for Wright, rupture the continuity in God’s one plan for the creation. In becoming “obedient to death, even the death of the cross,” Jesus “enacted ... God’s saving plan for the world,” a plan that had been “Israel’s vocation” all along (Ibid., 40).

#### Covenant Charter (Torah)

What implications does Paul’s reconfiguration of Israel and Israel’s vocation in light of the crucified and risen Jesus have for Israel’s covenant charter, Torah? Wright argues that Paul continued to understand Torah in terms of a “covenant charter” (Ibid., 203). This understanding helps us to grasp what, for Paul, the law’s “curse” is and is not.

The Torah brings the curse for Israel, because Israel has not kept it. I do not mean by this that individual Jews do not keep it fully; that is not what is here [i.e. at Gal 3.10–14] at issue, and in any case that would not be sufficient for Israel as a race, from Paul’s point of view, to be affirmed as they stood as God’s people. Rather, Israel as a whole has failed in her task of being the light of the nations, of being the seed of Abraham through whom the varied families of the world would be blessed. This is the central affirmation, I think, of [Gal] 2.16f.: this is why “by works of the Torah shall no flesh be justified” (Ibid., 155).

In invoking the law’s curse in Galatians, Wright continues, Paul “is not saying, in any form, that ‘achieving’

20. Israel’s obedience to the law, Wright argues elsewhere, was a “response to saving grace” *Justification*, 53–54.

is a bad thing, as though what was wrong with the Torah was that it entices one to think that ‘keeping’ or ‘achieving’ is a good thing” (Ibid.).<sup>20</sup>

To understand the law and the law’s curse in such individual terms, Wright contends, is to miss Paul’s whole argument in Galatians. Paul’s point is that “the death of Jesus, precisely as the Messiah who draws Israel’s destiny on to himself, is, historically, the climactic point of the curse of Deuteronomy 27–8, and thus functions *theologically* as the fulfillment ... of the whole paradoxical history of Israel” (Ibid.). With this curse now exhausted, Abrahamic blessing may now come upon the Gentiles (Gal 3:14), and God’s people are identified or marked out by Abrahamic faith (Ibid., 156).

Understanding Torah and Jesus this way, Wright argues, helps us to grasp Paul’s argument in Romans 7. Romans 7 is not a picture of the believer’s or the unbeliever’s personal experience under the law. Romans 7, rather, is a portrait of “what happened when the Torah arrived in Israel, and what happens still as Israel lives under the Torah” (*Paul in Fresh Perspective*, 31). What Paul shows in Rom 7 is “that, through Torah, Israel actually recapitulates the sin of Adam and the sinful human life which follows from it” (Ibid.).

Wright stresses that “the problem with the single-plan-through-Israel-for-the-world was that Israel failed to deliver. There was nothing wrong with the plan, or with the Torah on which it was based. The problem was in Israel itself,” specifically Israel was “in Adam” (*Justification*, 171). What was the nature of this problem? It was not that Israel lacked “some kind of meritorious behaviour through which Israel would rescue itself.” Israel’s failure, rather, concerned “faithfulness to God and his covenant purposes that would enable Israel to live up to its calling as the light in the dark world...” (*Justification*, 177).

Wright sharpens his description of Israel’s failure in a comment on Paul’s argument at Rom 9:30–10:13.

The problem, then, is not that Israel is attempting ‘works righteousness’ in the old Reformational sense, that is, trying to earn favour in God’s sight through the performance of good moral deeds. Israel, we recall yet once more, is the people of God whom God rescued at the exodus, whose law was the way of life for a people already redeemed. No: Israel’s mistake, here as elsewhere, was to imagine that the purpose of God was not the single-purpose-through-Israel-for-the-world but a single-purpose-for-Israel-apart-from-the-world. Israel was taking God’s wider purpose and focusing it back on itself ... acting out that primal sin through the

attempt to carve out and cling on to a covenant membership which would be for Jews and Jews only, a national identity marked out by the 'works of Torah' which proclaimed Torah distinctiveness (*Justification*, 215).

At the heart of Israel's failing, then, was an ethnocentric misuse of her covenant charter, Torah. Wright describes this misuse in terms of Israel's illegitimately restricting covenant membership to "Jews and Jews only." God, however, had not given the Abrahamic covenant and Torah to Israel so that Israel could hoard the privilege of covenantal membership for herself. God had given the Abrahamic covenant and Torah to Israel so that Israel could be a conduit of blessing to the world.<sup>21</sup> This misuse, then, illustrates how Torah became the means by which Israel lived out the sin of Adam. It also shows how Israel failed to fulfill her Adamic calling to obey her covenant charter.

This phenomenon, Wright sees Paul arguing, was not outside the plan and purpose of God. The Torah "drew sin on to Israel, magnifying it precisely within the people of God (7.13–20), in order that it might then and thus be drawn on to Israel's representative and so dealt with on the cross (8.3)" (*Climax of the Covenant*, 39). In his death and resurrection, Jesus has therefore done what Israel failed to do, and undone what Adam did (*Ibid.*). Against Israel's failure of covenantal faithfulness, Jesus was faithful (*Justification*, 178).<sup>22</sup> This "covenant renewal . . . through Jesus and the Spirit" therefore deals fully and finally with the problem of creation that the covenant was supposed to resolve all along (*Paul in Fresh Perspective*, 31). It also ensures that "Abraham's family [will] be the worldwide Jew-plus-Gentile people it was always intended to be" (*Ibid.*, 37).

#### Covenant Curse (Exile)

Paul's reworking Israel's narrative around the crucified and risen Messiah has implications for his understanding of Israel's "exile." Paul treats this subject at particular length, Wright argues, in Galatians 3:10–14. It is here that Paul expressly says that "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, by becoming a curse for us."

Paul's words here are "designed for a particular task within a particular argument, not for an abstract systematized statement" (*Climax of the Covenant*, 138). Wright elsewhere stresses that we will surely misunderstand Paul's argument here if, in answer to the question, "Why did the Messiah become a curse for us?," we answer, "So that we might be freed from sin and share fellowship with God to all eternity." The Pauline answer,

Wright claims, is "radically different: 'so that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles, and so that we (presumably Jews who believe in Jesus) might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith,'" (*Justification*, 103). The curse, in other words, must not be understood primarily in terms of individual *persons*, whether Jew or Gentile, but in terms of the covenant *people*, Israel. The curse concerns "Israel as a whole . . . not in terms of the future *post mortem* damnation which hangs over the heads of sinners, but in Deuteronomy's own terms as Israel's exile, her subjugation at the hands of pagans. . ." (*Climax of the Covenant*, 148).

Specifically, the "curse" which Jesus bore must be understood against the background of Deuteronomy 27–30, from which Paul twice quotes in Gal 3:10–14. These Deuteronomic chapters concern "exile and restoration, *understood as* covenant judgment and covenant renewal" (*Climax of the Covenant*, 140). These chapters show how the Torah had placed "a valid interdiction" on the Abrahamic "promises of blessing." The "curse" of Torah "had in fact come true, and was still being proved true, in the events of the exile, and its strange continuance right up to Paul's day and beyond" (*Climax of the Covenant*, 142).<sup>23</sup>

In Gal 3:10–14, Paul argues that "the covenant has reached its climax in the death of the Messiah" (*Climax of the Covenant*, 143). The curse that Jesus is said to bear here is the exilic curse of Torah upon Israel. The death of Jesus, the true Israel, must then be "understood in covenant-renewing terms," specifically the restoration that follows exile (*Climax of the Covenant*, 153, 152). In so dying, Christ shows himself to be the "true seed of Abraham . . . being a light to the nations," thereby permitting entrance of Gentiles into Abraham's family (*Climax of the Covenant*, 154). Further, "Christian Jews" in

21. Wright sees a two-fold objective to the Abrahamic covenant. The first is redemptive, "dealing-with-sin-and-rescuing-people-from-it;" the second is ecclesiological, "bringing-Jews-and-Gentiles-together-into-a-single-family," *Justification*, 78. This two-fold objective, Wright argues, corresponds to the two-fold plight of Gen 3 and Gen 11, respectively. In this way the Abrahamic covenant is God's "means [to] deal with evil within the good creation, which meant dealing in particular with evil within human beings," *Paul in Fresh Perspective*, 36.

22. Wright argues that Paul's phrase *pistis Christou* is to be understood in this fashion—the "faithfulness of the Messiah" (Rom 3:22; Gal 2:16).

23. Notice how Wright explains Gal 3:10: "a. All who embrace Torah are thereby embracing Israel's national way of life; b. Israel as a nation has suffered, historically, the curse which the Torah held out for her if she did not keep it; c. Therefore all who embrace Torah now are under this curse," *Climax of the Covenant*, 147. Paul stresses here "the inability of the Torah to give the blessing which had been promised" (*Ibid.*).

particular “have their membership renewed, brought back to life, by sharing the death and resurrection of their Messiah” (*Climax of the Covenant*, 154, 155). In this respect, their experience of exile is brought to an end.

#### *Some Points of Appreciation*

When compared with other scholars in the historical-critical tradition, Wright’s construal of Pauline theology is understandably attractive to Reformed students of the Scripture. Four observations are in order.

First, our survey of Wright’s exposition of Paul’s exposition of redemptive history has highlighted one feature we earlier identified as characteristic of Wright’s Pauline theology—continuity. For Wright, Paul understands Jesus to be the conclusion of a single narrative extending back to Adam, and encompassing Israel, Israel’s Torah, and Israel’s exile. Wright understands this coherent narrative to unfold along the lines of a basic “problem—solution” framework. The Adamic problem, recapitulated and exacerbated in Adamic Israel, is resolved by the true Israel, Jesus. This resolution or solution, furthermore, involves the recovery, not the discarding, of the creation. Creation and redemption, therefore, are not set against one another in any necessary tension.

This continuous narrative is, at its core, eschatological. Jesus does not simply undo the problem of Adam. Jesus fulfills the unmet obligations of Israel. The result is that a worldwide family is created in keeping with God’s promises to Abraham. In Jesus, furthermore, Wright frequently stresses, the verdict of the end of time is brought into the middle of time. Jesus’ death and resurrection are therefore fundamentally eschatological acts, and Israel’s story is brought to a properly eschatological climax.

Second, our survey has highlighted the way in which Wright sees Paul’s construal of Israel’s narrative to be covenantal. At each stage of this story, “covenant” figures prominently. If Wright does not see Adam’s disobedience to be itself an act of covenantal treason, he does see Adam’s sin as providing a necessary backdrop for God’s subsequent covenantal dealings with his people. God makes specifically covenantal promises with Abraham—Israel is constituted a covenant people. This covenant people is given a covenant charter, Torah. When Israel fails her covenant calling, the result—exile—is nothing less than covenant curse. The work of the Messiah, Jesus, brings this exile to an end, and thereby constitutes covenant restoration. An effect, if not a component, of this covenant restoration is the bringing of Gentiles into the

one, world-wide covenant family of God. The renewal that Jesus brings to the creation is the outworking of the covenant promises of the covenant-, creator-God.

A third point of attraction concerns Wright’s appreciation of Paul’s redemptive-historical sensibilities. In all Paul’s correspondence, and particularly in Galatians and Romans, questions concerning Israel and Gentiles in the redemptive plan of God are never distant. Wright is concerned to do justice to this state of affairs. Wright commendably wishes to retell the theology of Paul in such a way that the Jew/Gentile question is not an extractable and dispensable appendage but a constituent, even defining, component of that theology. Wright, in other words, is concerned to describe Paul as a first century, Jewish thinker, in terms that are both historically and theologically credible.

Fourth and finally, Wright tries to show that Torah had a positive and constructive place in Paul’s theology. He wants to demonstrate that, while Torah was an instrument of “curse” in redemptive-history, nevertheless Torah itself was and remains “holy and righteous and good” (Rom 7:12). Torah was a constituent part of God’s one plan to redeem the world, not a diversion or distraction from that plan. Jesus’ Messianic ministry, then, is incomprehensible apart from the context that the Torah gives to it. Christianity is not the repudiation of Torah, but represents Torah brought to its proper goal: “*When people believe the gospel of Jesus and his resurrection, and confess him as Lord, they are in fact doing what Torah wanted all along, and are therefore displaying the necessary marks of covenant renewal*” (*Justification*, 217). In this fashion, Wright wishes to honor Paul’s statement that the gospel, far from “overthrow[ing] the law,” in fact “uphold(s) the law” (Rom 3:31).

#### *Some Points of Concern*

For all these positive features of Wright’s biblical theology, his project suffers from some serious deficits and liabilities. We may address some areas of concern under two broad headings.

#### The Two Adams

Wright amplifies the importance of the “two Adams” in the structure of Paul’s biblical theology. As we have seen Wright argue, Jesus, for Paul, is the “last Adam.” Jesus undoes what the first Adam did, and he does what Adamic humanity has failed to do. On the face of it, Wright appears to be saying something very similar to what historical Reformed covenant theology has said

about the two Adams, and the two covenants associated with those two Adams.

Upon closer inspection, however, Wright is saying something different. In Wright's construction, "Israel" assumes a role of structural dimensions alongside the two Adams. Israel, after all, is specifically understood to bear the mantle that Adam failed to bear. This calling is nothing short of an *eschatological* calling. Israel, of course, fails miserably in this task. When Jesus takes up the task of the "last Adam," he does so as the one who has reconfigured Israel around himself. For Wright, it is fair to say, Jesus' identity as the "last Adam" is inexplicable apart from his identity as the new Israel. In Wright's Pauline theology, then, "Israel" constitutes a necessary and indispensable bridge between "Adam" and "Christ."

This construal of Paul is problematic for at least two reasons. First, I am unpersuaded that this Adam-Israel-Christ construction can be sustained exegetically from Paul's writings. Wright sees this construction in two passages, Phil 2, and Rom 5–8.<sup>24</sup> Wright's exposition of Rom 5–8 is especially instructive. At Rom 5, Paul is saying that "Adam's race, like Israel itself, has been in exile; Jesus has drawn that exile on to himself" ("Romans and the Theology of Paul" [hereafter "Romans"], 48). Jesus has also "offered to the covenant god (*sic*) the obedience that should have characterized Israel," and thus become "the means of Adam's rescue" (Ibid.). In this fashion, Jesus became "the creator's means of rescuing and restoring, not simply of condemning, the world of humans and the wider creation" ("Romans," 47).

This rescue operation, Wright argues, structures Rom 6–8. Rom 6 details "Jesus [as] the means of Adam's exodus" ("Romans," 48). Rom 7:7–12 "deals with the arrival of Torah as a one-time event..." while Rom 7:13–20 "deals with the continuing state of Israel living under Torah" ("Romans," 50). At Rom 8:1–11, Jesus is said to be the "means of Adam's Sinai, Pentecost." Finally, at Rom 8:17ff., Jesus is "the means of Adam's entering at last upon his promised land..." In sum, "all through [Rom 5–8], Paul is telling the Jewish story as the true-Adam story" ("Romans," 48).

Wright's reading of these four chapters of Romans is sweeping and ingenious. I am unable to see, however, where Paul at any point in the text of Rom 5:12–21 expressly, or by necessary implication, identifies Adam with Israel. Equally doubtful is that such a contrast governs Paul's argument in Rom 6–8. The running contrast between Adam and Christ is evident at Rom 5:12–21. The identification between Adam and Israel in Rom 5:12–21, and the running and controlling contrast said to exist between Adam/Israel and Christ in Rom 6–8 is

not at all evident. Wright's reading of these chapters is only plausible if one first grants this identification between Adam and Israel. Wright, however, has not made a convincing case for this identification from the text of Romans. "Israel" simply does not play the role in Paul's "two Adam" theology for which Wright pleads.

There is a further concern with the way in which Wright explains the "two Adams" in Paul's theology. When it comes to explaining how it is that Adam's sin has impacted his posterity, Wright is not particularly lucid. Adam's sin, to be sure, is temporally prior to the sins of his descendants. But *in what manner* or *by what mechanism* did that "one sin" come to impact his descendants? Reformed exegesis of Rom 5:12–21, of course, answers that question by observing that Paul teaches here the imputation, or reckoning, of Adam's one sin to his ordinary posterity, such that they stand justly condemned before God. Wright is clear in saying *that* Adam's one sin impacted his posterity. He is not at especially clear in saying *how* that one sin impacted his posterity.

This imprecision is also perceptible in Wright's exposition of Pauline justification. Paul argues in Rom 5:12–21 that Adam and Christ are parallel representative or federal heads. The way in which Adam's sin comes into the possession of those whom he represents is the same way in which Christ's righteousness (his perfect obedience and his full satisfaction) comes into the possession of those whom he represents. This way, Reformed exegetes argue from the text, is imputation—just as Adam's sin became ours by imputation, so also Christ's righteousness can become ours by imputation. Wright is clear that Jesus' death on the cross was substitutionary and propitiatory, and that the believer benefits from Jesus' death so understood. Wright, however, does not see Paul teaching that Christ's active and passive obedience is imputed to the believer (*Romans* in "New Interpreter's Bible [hereafter *Romans*], 528–29).<sup>25</sup> Neither does he articulate in some alternative fashion precisely how Christ's obedience and death results in the believer's justification. In other words, the same imprecision that attends Wright's exposition of the relationship between Adam and Adam's posterity represents the relationship between Christ and Christ's people: there is no perceptible mechanism, much less a *forensic* mechanism, in place to explain how

24. For Phil 2, see *Climax of the Covenant*, 56–98; for Rom 5–8, see N. T. Wright, "Romans and the Theology of Paul," 30–67 in *Pauline Theology, Volume III: Romans*, ed. David M. Hay and Elizabeth M. Johnson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995). Compare *Romans* in "New Interpreter's Bible: Acts—First Corinthians," vol. 10, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 508–514.

25. See Wright's exposition of justification, more generally, at *What Saint Paul Really Said*, esp. 95–133.

the work of the representative comes into the possession of the represented.

Compounding this difficulty is the way in which Wright conceives “sin” and “death” at work in Paul’s argument beginning at Rom 5:12, and continuing into Rom 8.

Sin and death, here personified, continue as “characters” in Paul’s narrative through to chap. 8. In terms of his overall argument for assurance, they are forces that must be defeated if the Christian is to be sure of eternal life. In terms of his underlying new-exodus story, sin and death play the role of Pharaoh: Paul imagines them as alien powers, given access to God’s world through the action of Adam. Once in, they had come to stay; staying, they they seized royal power. Linked together as cause and effect, they now stride through their usurped domain, wreaking misery, decay and corruption wherever they go. No one is exempt from their commanding authority (*Romans*, 525).

What is striking in Wright’s overview is the overwhelming emphasis that he gives to the dominion and corruption wrought by sin and death in Paul’s post-Adamic landscape. It is not as though the forensic or juridical dimensions of Paul’s theology are lost on Wright. They are most certainly present, not least in his descriptions of Pauline justification. But at a point in the argument of Romans (Rom 5:12f.) where Paul is both describing a pair of representative relationships, and highlighting the forensic character and consequences of the actions of each representative, Wright in his description of this argument is silent concerning these matters.

It is fair to say that the bondage and corruption of sin is at the heart of what Wright understands Paul to say is the “Adamic problem.” If Christ is properly perceived to pose the solution to the problem wrought by Adam, then we surely must understand Christ’s work with a similar emphasis: at the heart of Christ’s work as the last Adam is the deliverance of sinners from the dominion and corruption caused by the entrance of sin into the world. The problem with putting matters in this way is not that Wright has introduced a concern foreign to Paul’s thought. Paul is most certainly concerned to stress that Christ’s work definitively addresses sin as that which enslaves and corrupts, and that in its cosmic dimensions (see Rom 8:18–25). The problem with the way in which Wright states matters is that the forensic line of Paul’s “two Adam” theology is attenuated. What Paul argues in Rom 5:12–21 lies at the heart of the work of the two Adams—the forensic character of the work

of each representative head—plays neither a governing nor an appreciable role in Wright’s exposition of Paul’s two-Adam theology.

The diminution if not elimination of the forensic dimension of Paul’s two-Adam theology highlights an additional liability in Wright’s Pauline theology. D. A. Carson has observed in his review of Wright’s *The Last Word* a striking lacuna in Wright’s account there of the biblical “story.”

We have repeatedly seen how the “story” of God’s advancing kingdom is cast in terms of rescuing human beings and completing creation, or perhaps in terms of defeating the powers of darkness. Not for a moment do I want to reduce or minimize those themes. Yet *from what* are human beings to be rescued? Their sin, yes; the powers of darkness, yes. But what is striking is the utter absence of any mention of the wrath of God. This is not a minor omission. Section after section of *the Bible’s story* turns on the fact that God’s image-bearers attract God’s righteous wrath. The entire created order is under God’s curse because of human sin. Sin is not first and foremost horizontal, social (though of course it is all of that): it is vertical, the defiance of almighty God (Carson, *Collected Writings*, 297).

The same observations apply *mutatis mutandis* to what we have seen to be Wright’s understanding of Paul’s biblical theology. Wright’s “two Adam” theology in particular has no appreciable place for the wrath of God against individual sinners and the forensic dimensions of the sinner’s reconciliation with God. It is precisely in a discussion of Paul’s understanding of the “two Adams,” however, that we expect pointed attention to be given to the wrath-bearing death of the second Adam by which God reconciles sinners to himself (Rom 3:25; Rom 5:10–11, 15–19). But it is such attention that is absent in Wright’s work on Paul. To borrow Carson’s phrase, this is hardly a “minor omission”—whether we are considering Paul’s theology generally or Paul’s “two Adams” construct specifically.

In summary, then, the structural similarities between Wright’s two-Adam theology, and the understanding of the “two Adams” in classical Reformed theology are more apparent than real. Wright understands Israel to be a necessary bridge between the two Adams in a fashion that is exegetically dubious at best. In fact, Israel’s role in Wright’s understanding of Paul comes to overshadow the controlling, structural importance of the first Adam in Pauline theology. There is a sense in which, for Wright, “Israel” may be said to be more basic or fundamental

to Pauline theology than “Adam.” Wright, furthermore, mutes the forensic dimensions of Adam’s sin in Rom 5:12–21. This observation is borne out by the fundamental lack of clarity in Wright’s work concerning how the work of the two Adams comes into the possession of those who are “in Adam” and “in Christ.” It is also borne out by the absence of any sustained consideration in Wright’s writings of the forensic dimensions of such matters as “wrath” and “reconciliation” in connection with the work of the two Adams. In this respect, then, Wright and classical Reformed theology are not in alignment when it comes to understanding both the problem and the solution that Paul so devotes his energies to expound.

### Exile

Wright argues that “exile” plays an important role not only within Second Temple Jewish theology, but also within Pauline theology. Paul is said to have shared the prevailing first century understanding of Jews as being in metaphorical or continuing exile. Specifically, Jews understood themselves to be subject to the Deuteronomic curses of the Torah. For Paul, Jesus—the new Israel—took these Torah curses upon himself at the cross (Gal 3:10–14). Jesus’ death, then, was covenant renewal, and entailed the renewal of the covenant membership of Jewish Christians, and the entrance of Gentile Christians into the family of God as full covenant members.

Some have questioned whether “exile” is as pervasive a category within Second Temple Judaism as Wright understands it to be, and whether Paul in fact adopted this category in his own thinking.<sup>26</sup> More important for our purposes is what “exile” tells us about Wright’s understanding of Pauline theology. Specifically, “exile” for Wright is one indication of Paul’s prevailing concern with corporate categories. By comparison, the role or place of the individual in Wright’s Pauline theology is palpably diminished. This diminishment arises from the way in which Wright antithetically relates the corporate and individual. The net result is that Wright’s Pauline theology presents a distorted portrait of the teachings of the apostle Paul.

It is fair to say that Wright understands the progress or flow of redemptive history in national or corporate categories. In itself this is not only an unobjectionable but a commendable observation. After all, for much of redemptive history, the people of God was more or less coterminous with the nation of Israel. Much of the New Testament, furthermore, testifies to some of the growing pains that the church experienced as Gentiles entered her ranks in large numbers.

But these concerns hardly exhaust much less get at the heart of the Scripture’s representation of redemptive history. Nations are, of course, composed of individuals, and God deals with individuals *as individuals* throughout redemptive history. Paul knows, for instance, that the penalty of sin is death—not temporal death ultimately, but eternal death (2 Thess 1:8–10). This penalty is God’s just verdict upon human disobedience to the moral standards that he has made known to every rational creature (Rom 1:32; cf. Rom 2:14–15). Paul is concerned with sins associated with ethnic pride—he addresses these, for instance, in Romans 2. But Paul is not only or even primarily concerned with sins associated with ethnic pride. When Paul opens the body of his epistle to the Romans with the words “for the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth” (Rom 1:18), he has in mind the moral transgressions of individual Gentiles (1:18–32) and of individual Jews (2:1–3:8), for which the wrath of God is each offender’s due.<sup>27</sup> When Paul takes up the subject of sin in these chapters, his leading concern is sin in the context of the individual relationship between the Creator and each human being that he has created. As Paul goes on to say, the good news of the gospel is that Jesus’ penal, substitutionary, propitiatory death and perfect life of obedience, imputed to the sinner and received by faith alone, is the sole ground of that sinner’s justification before a holy God (Rom 1:16–17; 3:21–26; 4:1–5; Rom 5:12–21). The “solution” of redemption in Christ, in other words, is tailor-made to the “problem” of human sinfulness. Both the problem and the solution, so defined, primarily concern the individual as individual.<sup>28</sup>

26. See, for instance, Richard B. Hays, “Victory over Violence: The Significance of N. T. Wright’s Jesus for New Testament Ethics,” in *Jesus & The Restoration of Israel: A Critical Assessment of N. T. Wright’s Jesus and the Victory of God*, ed. Carey C. Newman (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1999), 147–8; Guy Prentiss Waters, *The End of Deuteronomy in the Epistles of Paul* (WUNT 2.221; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 29–77; Clive Marsh, “Theological History? N. T. Wright’s *Jesus and the Victory of God*,” and Maurice Casey, “Where Wright Is Wrong: A Critical Review of N. T. Wright’s *Jesus and the Victory of God*,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 69 (1998): 77–94, 95–103. See also N. T. Wright, “Theology, History, and Jesus: A Response to Maurice Casey and Clive Marsh,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 69 (1998): 105–112.

27. Individual transgressions, furthermore, proceed from a sinful nature for which nature the individual is held accountable (see Rom 3:10–12, 20).

28. This is not to deny that there is in the Scripture a legitimate corporate or social dimension either to sin or to redemption. It is to say that the individual and corporate dimensions of sin and redemption are not fundamentally antithetical in nature. Furthermore, when

We expect Paul to describe the human predicament, and the redemptive significance of Christ's death at Gal 3:10–14 in terms similar to those in the opening chapters of Romans. This is in fact what we find. Paul indicts any and all persons who fail to keep the law perfectly (Gal 3:10). Such a person's failure renders him liable to the law's "curse." The solution to that problem is found not in himself, but in Christ—Christ "redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us" (Gal 3:13). In his substitutionary, curse-bearing death, Jesus took from us the curse that we had earned by our sin.

Wright, however, steadfastly refrains from understanding these verses in such a sense. The "curse" in view in Gal 3:10 is the curse of Torah upon Israel-as-a-nation. Therefore the warning of Gal 3:10 ("for all who rely on works of the law are under a curse...") is directed to those who would join the nation of Israel and embrace that way of life. The "curse" that Jesus bears (Gal 3:13) is this curse of Torah upon Israel-as-a-nation. And the consequences of Jesus' curse-bearing death pertain to individuals as they are members of ethnic groups—Jew or non-Jew. Corporate considerations, however proper they are in the broader context of Paul's argument (see Gal 3:15–4:7), drown out the point that Paul is making here—to be justified by faith and not by works of the law (Gal 2:16) speaks to the individual looking not to his own performance but trusting in the merits of Christ to be accepted and accounted righteous before God.

Wright, we have seen, understands Paul's argument in Romans 7 in a similar fashion. Romans 7 describes neither the individual unbeliever's nor the individual believer's experience under law. Romans 7, rather, explains the initial and ongoing experience of *Israel-as-a-people* under Torah. In fact, we might say that Wright's understanding of Paul's critique of the law in general runs along these lines. Paul, for Wright, does not criticize Torah because it cannot justify the sinner. He does not mount, in other words, a soteriological critique of the law—its inability to save the sinner who relies upon his law-keeping to merit God's favor. Paul's critique of the Torah is fundamentally corporate or ecclesiological: Torah does not delineate or identify the one whom God will vindicate at the last day. Because the verdict of the last day has been brought into the present in Jesus, the identifying marks of those vindicated in Jesus is not Torah obedience but faith in Jesus.

Wright's distorting emphasis on the corporate is also evident in his definition of the gospel. The gospel,

the Scripture speaks of the application of Christ's redemptive work to human beings, it does so primarily in terms of the individual, and secondarily in terms of the corporate or social.

Wright argues, "was that the crucified Jesus of Nazareth had been raised from the dead; that he was thereby proved to be Israel's Messiah; that he was thereby installed as Lord of the world" (*What Saint Paul Really Said*, 46). Wright highlights what he sees to be important about the death and resurrection of Jesus. "In his cross, the decisive victory has been won over all the powers of evil, including sin and death themselves. In Jesus' resurrection the New Age has dawned, inaugurating the long-awaited time when the prophecies would be fulfilled, when Israel's exile would be over, and the whole world would be addressed by the one creator God" (*What Saint Paul Really Said*, 60). Jesus' death and resurrection, in other words, are significant in their corporate dimensions—as overcoming the powers of evil in relation to the world—Jesus' royal "victory" in death, no less; (*What Saint Paul Really Said*, 47) as ending the exile of Israel; and as the time when God would address the entire world. Wright stresses polemically that "the gospel" is not an account of how people get saved. It is ... "the announcement of Jesus' lordship, which works with power to bring people into the family of Abraham, now redefined around Jesus Christ and characterized solely by faith in him" (*What Saint Paul Really Said*, 133).

Wright, to be sure, is not saying that the gospel does not entail individual salvation. Neither is he saying that the gospel is opposed to individual salvation. He is saying, rather, that the gospel is not to be understood fundamentally as a message of personal redemption from personal sin. Wright, however, not only claims that the gospel's central, overriding concerns are cosmic and corporate in character, but he does so in such a way as to minimize or diminish the gospel as a message of personal salvation.

To conclude this portion of our discussion, we are not faulting Wright because he gives attention to the corporate dimensions of Pauline theology. Nor are we faulting him because he argues that such dimensions occupy a prominent place in Paul. The redemptive historical expositions of Pauline theology by Geerhardus Vos and Herman Ridderbos have in large measure demonstrated that there is no necessary tension between the corporate and the individual in Paul. The problem, rather, concerns Wright's failure to give personal sin and personal redemption their due in Pauline theology. This failure is understandable within Wright's overall understanding of Paul's biblical theology, in which corporate considerations are at points overtly set in antithesis to Paul's concern for the individual. The result, regrettably, is the absence of the evangelical emphasis upon, and the overturning of formulations concerning personal

**In Brief: The Breadth of Paul's Theology.**

Next to its profoundly religious spirit the breadth and comprehensiveness of Paul's theology perhaps ought to strike us most. His outlook is unbounded except by the mystery of the hidden background of the counsel of God itself. The Spirit, who teaches this highest knowledge, "searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God" (1 Cor. 2:10; cf. also the comprehensiveness of the hypothetical statement, 1 Cor. 13:2). Paul's theological vision spans the entire sweep of man's spiritual history and places it in its entirety under the point of view of an unfolding of the eternal purpose of God. He is not content with giving a soteriological construction, as in the contrast between the disobedience of Adam and the obedience of Christ (Rom. 5:12–20), though this is in itself one of the boldest and grandest contrasts ever drawn, but, recognizing that Christ accomplishes far more than the restoration of what Adam ever lost, he places the two over against each other in 1 Corinthians 14:45–49 as the representatives of two successive stages in the carrying out of God's sublime purpose for humanity, in such a way that the state of rectitude and the state of glory are by a sudden flash of light seen in their mutual re-

lation, detached as it were for a moment from the soteriological process intervening. In Ephesians and Colossians also Paul reduces to a higher unity the work of creation and the work of redemption as both mediated by Christ. And the same masterful grasp of the principles underlying the structure of history, as an organism of the ages, may be observed also in the apostle's dealing with the history of redemption. The promise given to Abraham in its worldwide significance, the law as introduced by Moses in its disciplinary, convicting function, both in their relation, in case of the former positive, in case of the latter negative, to the gospel, have once for all been interpreted for us by this great philosopher of history. And this retrospective grandeur of conception is equaled by the sublimity of the eschatological outlook the apostle opens up to us into that perfect kingdom of God towards which all the streams of human history roll their waters as towards their final goal. Geerhardus Vos, "The Theology of Paul," in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, edited by Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1980) 358–359.

sin and personal redemption that has marked the very best of Pauline interpretation.

## CONCLUSIONS

Our critical interactions with Wright should by no means diminish appreciation for his contributions to historical-critical discussions of New Testament theology. When viewed against the backdrop of that academic conversation, Wright is attractive indeed. Our point of comparison, however, has been the covenant theology represented within mainstream Reformed theology as the most faithful representation of Pauline teaching. This is not an unfair comparison. Wright understands the apostle Paul as a covenant theologian. Wright, furthermore, has conducted much of his Pauline scholarship in dialogue with the theologians and the theology of the Protestant Reformation, and particularly those within the Calvinist tradition. We have seen that the Pauline theology that emerges from Wright's pen has certain apparent similarities with but critical differences from Reformed covenant theology. On the one hand, these similarities help to explain the interest

of some within the Reformed tradition in Wright's work on Paul. On the other hand, these differences account for the understandable reservation expressed by many Reformed students of the Scripture concerning Wright's Pauline theology.

Our survey has highlighted, to be sure, that many differences between Reformed theology and Wright are exegetical in nature. These differences, in other words, concern the contextual readings of particular texts in the epistles of Paul. We have also seen, however, that some of the most salient differences are hermeneutical in character. They concern the way in which Paul is to be read—strategies by which the texts of Paul are to be and not to be interpreted. To the degree that the Reformed church fails to ask and answer such hermeneutical questions as these, her engagement of Wright will be incomplete. To the degree that Wright's work in Paul compels the Reformed church to raise and to reflect thoughtfully upon these questions in her own study in Paul, her engagement with Wright will have been worthwhile.<sup>29</sup> ■

29. I wish to thank my research assistant, Michael Lynch, for his invaluable bibliographical and editorial assistance.