

The Wright Reading of the Historical Jesus

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Introduction

Nicholas Thomas “Tom” Wright is probably the most prolific, if not the most controversial, leading NT scholar in the field today. His massive volume, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, the second in the anticipated magisterial six-volume series on NT theology entitled, *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, is already a portent of voluminous things to come. Volume One, *The New Testament and the People of God*, laid out much of the methodology that underlies volume two. In what follows, I will present Wright’s hypothesis (volume two) and historiographical method of critical realism (volume one), which tests the premise that Jesus came as a prophet pronouncing the restoration of Israel from exile. My aim in this essay is to assess Wright’s theological and historical scheme in his quest for the historical Jesus. Against the backdrop of the school of thought where Wright is coming from, I will then situate the entry-point of Wright’s approach to his Christology, sketch the grid that girds it, and then scan it with critical eyes.

Sketch

N. T. Wright is the bishop of Durham in the Church of England (2003-present). Prior to that, he was canon of Westminster (2000-3); dean of Lichfield Cathedral (1994-99); lecturer in NT studies (1986-93); and assistant professor of NT Language and Literature, McGill University, Montreal (1981-86). He has received seven honorary doctorates and two honorary fellowships in a span of eight years (2001-09). He earned two bachelors with first class honors from Exeter College, Oxford (1971-73), a master in arts at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford (1975), and two doctoral degrees—in philosophy (1981) and in divinity at Merton College, Oxford (2000). Not to be overlooked is his many years of pastoral ministry (1971-03), making him one of those few scholars with a pastoral touch. Wright is a visiting lecturer to seminaries and universities around the world.¹

Within evangelicalism, Wright is perceived to be coming from an open evangelical perspective,² and is a leading advocate of the New Perspective on Paul³ and “Third Quest for the

¹ He was also Fellow and Chaplain, Downing College, Cambridge; College Tutor in Theology (1978–81); and Junior Research Fellow, Merton College, Oxford, and College Tutor in Theology (1975–78). Interestingly, previous to his academic and ministerial career, he worked as a site laborer for a chemical company (1969), dry chain laborer in a lumber camp (1968), and a freight loader in a railway company (1968). N. T. Wright, “Nicholas Thomas Wright, *Curriculum Vitae – Web Version*.” Cited January 16, 2010. Online: http://www.ntwrightpage.com/NTW_WebCV.htm. The lowly worker of the late 60s has now become the most interesting NT scholar of our day.

² Open Evangelicals are committed to: “the intrinsic authority and trustworthiness of the Bible; the longing for conversion to Jesus Christ of all people;” renewal within Anglicanism; and open to: “surprises of the Holy Spirit; . . . learning from other traditions (within Anglicanism); working ecumenically (with other denominations); positive fruit of biblical scholarship . . . issues of justice . . . significance of the sacraments and liturgy; learning from other faiths (dialogue as well as proclamation); and ordination of women.” Graham Kings, “Canal, River and Rapids: Contemporary Evangelicalism in the Church of England.” Cited January 18, 2010. Online: <http://www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/news/2003/20030930watercourses.cfm?doc=2#a2>.

³ For the NPP, see Ed Parrish Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977); J. D. G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul, and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990); N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997); N. T. Wright, “Romans,” *New Interpreter’s Bible: Acts-First Corinthians* (vol. 10; ed. Leander E. Keck; Nashville: Abingdon, 2002).

historical Jesus,” which underlies his hypothesis in his second volume.⁴ To say that Wright merely validated his conclusions through his Third Quest is to put the *kalesa* before the horse. Rather, his view of the historical Jesus and of Christianity changed over time while seeking coherence between history and theology.⁵ Alongside what he calls the “thoroughgoing skepticism” of William Wrede and the Jesus Seminar, Wright agrees broadly with Albert Schweitzer,⁶ and later proponents, E. P. Sanders⁷ and Ben F. Meyer,⁸ in their view that Jesus must be portrayed according to the context of the Judaism of his time, which is that of apocalyptic.⁹ Unlike Schweitzer, however, Wright thinks that Jesus’ apocalyptic is not referring to the end of space-time history, but of the return of Israel from exile and with it, the fulfillment of the coming of the kingdom of Yahweh, with himself as “the focal point” of Israel and of his kingdom message.¹⁰ How did Wright arrive at this conclusion?

Starting Point

Questions about Jesus are “*as yet not fully answered*,” Wright writes, “and that a clearly worked out historical method, and a fresh reading of first-century Judaism and Christianity, will point us in the right direction.”¹¹ This is Wright’s entry point and method in a nutshell. He begins with the question, “Who was Jesus?” and, given what he calls, “the icon or the silhouette that the mainline theologians (or some of them) have supplied,” the related question, “as to which Jesus are we talking about.”¹² Against the subject matter at hand, Wright’s starting point, therefore, is the “Jesus” event.¹³

Wright also proceeds from another angle by posing the larger question that all first-century historians are bound to ask: “how do we account for the fact that, by AD 110, there was a large and vigorous international movement . . . whose founding myth (in a quite ‘neutral’ sense) was a story about one Jesus of Nazareth, a figure of the recent past?” This question of

For critiques of the NPP, see Jacob Neusner, *Judaic Law from Jesus to the Mishnah: A Systematic Reply to Professor E. P. Sanders* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1993); Thomas Schreiner, *The Law and Its Fulfillment: A Pauline Theology of Law* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993); D. A. Carson, Peter T. O’Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid, eds., *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, in *The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism* (vol. 1; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001); and Guy Prentiss Waters, *Justification and the New Perspectives on Paul: A Review and Response* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2004).

⁴ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 83-124. The First (Old) Quest started with Hermann Samuel Reimarus and ended with William Wrede in the 19th century. In Wright’s view, Reimarus projected Jesus “as a Jewish reformer who became increasingly fanatical and politicized; and he failed.” The First Quest sought “not to find Jesus upon whom Christian faith might be based, but to show that the faith of the church . . . could not in fact be based on the real Jesus of Nazareth.” The New (Second) Quest began with Ernst Kasemann in the 1950s, who “insisted that if Jesus was not earthed in history then he might be pulled in any direction.” But it did not turn to history, put off the view of apocalyptic as the end of the world, or stop using form and tradition criticism, which in Wright’s eyes, is designed to discover the early church and makes historical reconstruction “difficult.” Wright, *Jesus*, 16, 17, 23-24.

⁵ Wright, *Jesus*, xv.

⁶ Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede* (London: A & C Black, 1954), 329-330, in Wright, *Jesus*, 20.

⁷ E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (London: SCM, 1985).

⁸ Ben F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1979).

⁹ Wright, *Jesus*, 20-21, 28-29.

¹⁰ Wright, *Jesus*, 126-127, 538-539.

¹¹ Wright, *Jesus*, xiii.

¹² Wright, *Jesus*, 10.

¹³ Wright prefers the name, “Jesus,” and not the title, “Christ,” because the question concerns Messiahship in the gospels. The historian then must see him through the eyes of the people of his day. Further, “Christ” has “a limited meaning.” N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), xiv.

history leads to the next question, as to “who then was Jesus, what was he trying to do, what happened to him, and why?”¹⁴

Having established the key issues of the question of Jesus, Wright now proceeds on a step-by-step argument to answer his basic hypothesis comprising the bulk of his book, “that Jesus’ public persona within first-century Judaism was that of a prophet, and that the content of his prophecy was the ‘kingdom’ of Israel’s god.”¹⁵ In terms of the categories developed in his first volume, Wright discusses the praxis of Jesus as a prophet, and the story, symbol, and question of the kingdom.¹⁶ He attempts to trace the shape of Jesus’ mindset against the background of first-century Jewish worldview. The projected form will allow him to draw a coherent picture of Jesus’ aims and beliefs.¹⁷ Wright’s central thesis then is that Jesus as prophet came pronouncing the end of exile of Israel, and that he himself is the agent of that return from exile, renewing the covenant, and offering forgiveness of sins.¹⁸ He believed himself to be the avatar of his kingdom message, as “the true interpreter of Torah; the true builder of the Temple; the true spokesperson for Wisdom.” Jesus’ Messiahship is thus a redefinition of itself around his kingdom-agenda, which is similar to the Jewish expectation, but dissimilar enough to make his followers and persecutors misinterpret him. Jesus’ redefined belief in his Messianic role corresponds to his own kingdom-praxis, kingdom-stories, and kingdom-symbols, and answers the key kingdom questions.¹⁹ Jesus’ eschatology, then, is not the expectation of the end of time-space world, but the hope that Yahweh would act soon to vindicate Israel through himself, and within history itself.

“The Third Quest, then, is the basic starting-point of this book,” Wright writes.²⁰ He is referring to the phrase which he invented, “to denote one particular type of contemporary Jesus-research, namely, that which regards Jesus as an eschatological prophet announcing the long-awaited kingdom, and which undertakes serious historiography around that point.”²¹ Thus, the key to understanding Jesus is the eschatology of Jesus; hence, the title, *Jesus and the Victory of God*. The benefits make the blind see: By answering the questions and honing its methods, Jesus can be understood in his historical setting and continuities and discontinuities between Jesus of Nazareth and Christian theology can be identified.²²

Scheme

Wright’s approach is based on the premise that history (unrestricted investigation of Jesus in first-century Judaism) and theology (unrestricted investigation of its theological significance) go together.²³ The Third Quest begins by asking historical questions. Against the overarching question of who is Jesus, Wright poses five main questions: “How does Jesus fit into the Judaism of his day? What were his aims? Why did he die? How did the early church come into being, and why did it take the shape it did? and Why are the gospels what they are?”²⁴ Rather than being interdependent or isolated, the questions are interlocking and sequential, revealing Wright’s far-

¹⁴ Wright, *Jesus*, 90.

¹⁵ Wright, *Jesus*, 11.

¹⁶ Wright, *New Testament*, 215-338; Wright, *Jesus*, 147-443.

¹⁷ Wright, *Jesus*, 11-12.

¹⁸ Wright, *Jesus*, 126-127, 539.

¹⁹ Wright, *Jesus*, 538-539.

²⁰ Wright, *Jesus*, 123.

²¹ Wright, *Jesus*, xiv.

²² Wright, *Jesus*, 123.

²³ Wright, *Jesus*, 13.

²⁴ Wright, *Jesus*, 90.

reaching view of the issues involved in the question. The answers to these questions form the crux of his analysis in the book.

In that the historical Jesus is to be seen in the context of the Jewish worldview of his time, the Third Quest uses first-century sources such as Josephus, Qumran, and other apocalyptic writings of first-century Palestine, to get the picture of the historical Jesus.²⁵ The present volume is largely based on the synoptic gospels, in that the debate about the historical Jesus has been argued “almost entirely in terms of the synoptic tradition.”²⁶ Nonetheless, Wright refers to his earlier discussion of sources of Jewish eschatology and first-century Judaism in volume one.²⁷

The renewed New Quest downplays the Jewishness of Jesus and the significance of Jesus’ death. However, the Third Quest rejects this, stressing instead a “comprehensible” and “crucifiable” first-century Jew.²⁸ It evaluates Jesus’ sayings, not for its timeless truths, but for what it meant to the audience of his day. It sees Jesus as the historical Jesus, and not the Christ of faith.²⁹ Instead of form criticism, the form of inquiry begins with hypothesis and validation. The gospels, then, must be read as texts and literary art. For the gospel writers present Jesus, not their theology about Jesus.³⁰

In Wright’s more nuanced, operating epistemology, he argues for “critical realism,” which is a method that utilizes narrative, and not proposition, in grasping Jesus’ mindset and worldview. Critical realism is “a theory about how people know things.”³¹ It “acknowledges the *reality of the thing known, as something other than the knower* (hence ‘realism’).” At the same time, it affirms “that the only access we have to this reality lies along the spiraling path of *appropriate dialogue or conversation between the knower and the thing known* (hence, ‘critical’).³² In this sense, it is not realism that provides a critique, but “‘realism *subject to critique*’.”³³ It involves three processes. The observer (knower) observes an object (thing known). His initial observation is challenged by critical analysis of it. The result is a new picture of reality.³⁴ For example, I look at the table in the room. I interpret the sight of the table through a web of senses, memories, stories, etc., which reflect my pre-understanding or worldview. I then look at it from where I’m coming from, from the communities where I belong. Hence, I look at the table as a student, teacher, janitor, etc. Statements of this kind of realism are only provisional, subject to testing. Wright proposes to see things “as taking place within the larger framework of the story or worldview which forms the basis of the observer’s way of being in relation to the world.” In other words, people know when they “*find things that fit* with the particular story . . . to which they are accustomed to give allegiance.” But in order to test their view of things, their hypothesis, one must ask questions about the aspects of that hypothesis. The key question is: In what way do the stories fit the data?³⁵

²⁵ Wright, *Jesus*, 85.

²⁶ Wright, *Jesus*, xvi.

²⁷ Wright, *Jesus*, 203; Wright, *New Testament*, 280-338.

²⁸ Wright, *Jesus*, 85-86.

²⁹ Wright, *Jesus*, 89n 24; Contra, Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996).

³⁰ Wright, *Jesus*, 85, 89.

³¹ Wright, *New Testament*, 32.

³² Wright, *New Testament*, 35.

³³ Wright, *New Testament*, 35n 12.

³⁴ Wright, *New Testament*, 36.

³⁵ Wright, *New Testament*, 39.

Taking it to the next level, story-telling humans observe a story-laden world. The worldview of people is the map through which they perceive things and conveyed through their beliefs and aims. It is important to realize that stories characterize the worldview itself. They are located “on the map of human knowing.”³⁶ Yet the story-tellers will have to challenge their own stories, which may be debatable or mistaken, through other stories, which may be contradictory or consistent with their own stories. Through further narrative, the story-teller can then find other ways of telling the story about the world, with the resultant use of new stories. Through this lens, there can be no such thing as objective and subjective ways of knowing.

In summary, the critical realist epistemology assumes that people know, think, and live through narratives, or “stories,” within the framework of their larger worldview. It then weaves all the stories into hypotheses and tests them by seeing how they fit within the larger story of their worldviews.³⁷ They are tested not against an external, objective framework, because there is no such thing; but by “their ability to make sense of a wide scope of experiences and events.”³⁸ The task then, is not to reconstruct a historical Jesus according to the traditions of the early church, but to synthesize all the stories to form a hypothesis—a telling of the narratives—about Jesus himself, and the evaluation of the “relevant data to see how they fit.”³⁹

For Wright then, the people of Second Temple Judaism possessed a narrative worldview that the early Christians later redesigned around the person and work of Jesus. It is a worldview that Jesus challenged as a prophet, by weaving their stories with his own story of the return of Israel from exile and the coming of the kingdom of God. This Jesus did by answering the questions of his kingdom praxis, stories, symbols, and questions.

What then is the mode of narrative analysis? In determining how stories powerfully change how people think, Wright utilizes A. J. Greimas’s narratology. This scheme sees narratives through six key players in the story. A “sender” sends an “object” to a “receiver” through an “agent.” This agent is aided by a “helper,” but opposed by an “opponent.”⁴⁰ Thus, the story of Jesus’ message is Jesus’ retelling of Yahweh’s story with Israel. Yahweh (sender) wants to announce the end of exile (object) to Israel (receiver) through Jesus (agent). Followers of Jesus (helper) aid Jesus; while his enemies (opponent) resist him.⁴¹

As if the foregoing concept is not daunting enough to explain, I now tackle Wright’s unique view of double similarity and double dissimilarity, which is his main tool in testing his hypothesis. In historical Jesus research, there is the criterion of authenticity. As Craig Blomberg explains, this criterion accepts as authentic only those words and works of Jesus that differ both from the Jewish context around him and from subsequent early church theology. Other data may be authentic, but historians cannot identify it for sure. Hence, it is possible that data that fail in both halves of this criterion of double dissimilarity may have been concocted by early Jewish Christians who want to redraw him, or early Christians who read their reconfigured theology of Jesus back to the historical Jesus.⁴² Wright’s criterion of dissimilarity, however, puts Jesus within the context of first-century Judaism, but at the same time perceiving what are his beliefs,

³⁶ Wright, *New Testament*, 38.

³⁷ Wright, *New Testament*, 44-45.

³⁸ Wright, *New Testament*, 46.

³⁹ Wright, *Jesus*, 87-88.

⁴⁰ Wright, *New Testament*, 69-80.

⁴¹ Wright, *Jesus*, 244-245, 310.

⁴² Craig Blomberg, “The Wright Stuff: A Critical Overview of Jesus and the Victory of God,” in Carey C. Newman, ed., *Jesus and the Restoration of Israel: A Critical Assessment of N. T. Wright’s Jesus and the Victory of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1999), 22.

aims, and agenda and why the authorities rejected him and his followers. This means that the historical Jesus cannot differ too much from their contexts. While there was continuity between Jesus' disciples and himself, Jesus also differed in many ways from the ways of his followers. Thus, Wright argues that the parable of the prodigal son (or father) is a case study of similarity to both the Jewish context and the early church,⁴³ to the central drama of Israel's exile and restoration. Simultaneously, it is also a study of dissimilarity, in that it is Jesus' "subversive retelling" of the story of Israel, with Jesus making the claim to be the agent of the restoration of Israel to Yahweh.⁴⁴ The parable is then a story of hope being fulfilled in himself, because of the prodigal "love of her god."⁴⁵ Thus, Wright posits a double similarity—"when something can be seen to be credible (though perhaps deeply subversive) within first-century Judaism, and credible as the implied starting point . . . of something in later Christianity, there is a strong possibility of our being in touch with the genuine history of Jesus."⁴⁶ Thus, double similarity takes enough material about Jesus that is both amply located in first-century Judaism and recognizable as a source of early Christian thought. Double dissimilarity considers material to be authentically attributed to Jesus, if it is very much unlike first-century Judaism and early Christian thought. Double similarity and double dissimilarity in this parable and many other test samples that Wright cites,⁴⁷ therefore strongly suggest that we can draw the contours of Jesus' identity and intentions.

Scrutiny

Feasting at the table of Wright's gastronomic two course menu makes one come away mentally tired, but also assuredly thoughtful. Wright's towering prose may make some miss his refined data down below, if not for his helpful summaries usually found at the end of major sections and chapters. Yet Wright honestly presents a Jesus that is worth looking into.

The strength of Wright's model is the simple but sophisticated weaving of complex historical data into a coherent grid of praxis, story, symbol, and question, against a perceived unified Jewish worldview—Israel in exile, which is central to his reconstruction. The weakness, as seen also in the Jesus Seminar model, may be found in the "uncritical assumptions concerning history," to use L. T. Johnson's words, including Wright's view of its normative function in revising Christian theology.⁴⁸ If Wright is right, we can actually align Jesus' prophetic words with his eschatological intent. Yet historiographers disagree, in that historical reconstructions are limited and non-normative,⁴⁹ esp. in the diverse climate of first-century Judaism. For example, that "many, if not most, Jews, regarded the exile as still continuing,"⁵⁰ is heavily disputed, and therefore, debatable.⁵¹ Moving from such a literary theme to a hypothesis based on that theme may tantamount to what David Hackett Fischer calls either the "'aesthetic fallacy' (if it works

⁴³ Wright, *Jesus*, 132.

⁴⁴ Wright, *Jesus*, 131.

⁴⁵ Wright, *Jesus*, 127.

⁴⁶ Wright, *Jesus*, 132.

⁴⁷ Wright sees similarity in Jesus' announcement of the wrath of Yahweh with his Elijah-like ministry; but also the dissimilarity of celebration and inauguration. There is also the historicity of Jesus' kingdom concept, both as something understood in the Jewish world and the early church; but also both challenging some Jewish beliefs in that context and focusing on Jesus' career, not his followers. Wright, *Jesus*, 167, 226, 450, 489.

⁴⁸ Wright, *New Testament*, 22; Luke Timothy Johnson, "A Historiographical Response to Wright's Jesus," *Jesus*, 209.

⁴⁹ Johnson, "A Historiographical Response," *Jesus*, 210.

⁵⁰ Wright, *Jesus*, xvii, 126, 445.

⁵¹ See Maurice Casey, "Where Wright is Wrong: A Critical Review of N. T. Wright's Jesus and the Victory of God," *JSNT* 69 (1998): 99-100.

logically, it must have happened factually) or the fallacy of generalization . . . (if some people thought this way, everyone must have thought this way).”⁵² To ask whether a first-century Jew claimed that the promises of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, or Zechariah had been fulfilled,⁵³ would seem to assume that that most Jews posed that question, thereby going back to a circular, albeit, fallacious assumption that most first-century Jews thought they were living in exile.

Wright has ingeniously posited that since the synoptic writers were writing a history of Jesus, wherein the resurrection is not the determining factor, they are therefore “the story of Israel in miniature.”⁵⁴ In short, Wright assumes the historical accuracy of the synoptics, while insisting on the Israel script. Then he tries to fit in his hypothesis of the historical Jesus as following that basic script, which includes his interpretation of Jesus’ eschatology as the end, not of the space-time world, but metaphorically, of Israel’s exile. At this point, David C. Allison Jr. has argued convincingly that Wright is wrong in his metaphorical interpretation of a key passage as Mark 13,⁵⁵ where Wright thinks the prophecies there were already fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE.⁵⁶ Of course, this is expected in light of Wright’s attempt to fit it in Jesus’ eschatological schema as he pictures it. A weakness in Wright’s scheme then is his tendency to squeeze his metaphorical reading of the biblical text into his framework, at the risk of committing horrible exegetical fallacies. Thus, “turning the other cheek” now means that his followers should avoid joining the resistance movement against Rome.⁵⁷ Settling a dispute with a friend out of court means that Israel should make peace with Rome.⁵⁸ The “house upon the rock” and not sand, now refers to the “Temple,” and the “rock,” the foundation-stone of the Temple.⁵⁹ Worse, the “seed” in the parable of the soil refers to true Israel.⁶⁰ Yet Jesus himself interpreted the seed as the word of God (Mark 12:1-12). The exegetical base that supports Wright’s bridge looks fragile. Klyne R. Snodgrass rightly raised serious exegetical concerns in Wright’s reading (or overreading) of his Israel-story emphasis in the parable of the prodigal son, where the return from exile theme, he argues, is missing.⁶¹ The ever present danger then is to push one’s hypothesis at the expense of authorial meaning and divine intent in the text.

It also raises the question of whether the synoptics tell only *the* storyline of Israel, or a variety of stories. The theme of Jesus as prophet may fit Luke⁶² and John more than Matthew and Mark. Thus, it raises a related question of whether the writers stressed only one story of Israel, as Wright thinks, or other themes within the story of the history of Jesus.⁶³ That Wright’s study is limited in the synoptics, may make his conclusions also limited. Wayne A. Meeks has shown the

⁵² Johnson, “A Historiographical Response,” in Newman, *Jesus*, 209; see David Hackett Fischer, *Historians’ Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 87, 104.

⁵³ Wright, *Jesus*, xvii.

⁵⁴ Wright, *New Testament*, 397-398, 401-402.

⁵⁵ David C. Allison Jr., “Jesus and the Victory of the Apocalyptic,” *Jesus*, 126-141; See Wright, *Jesus*, 345. For a balanced, but pointed critique of Wright’s 70 CE as vindication of Jesus’ message, see Robert H. Stein, “N. T. Wright’s *Jesus and the Victory of God: A Review Article*,” *JETS* 44, no. 2 (June 2001): 207-218.

⁵⁶ Wright, *Jesus*, 339-368.

⁵⁷ Wright, *Jesus*, 291.

⁵⁸ Wright, *Jesus*, 324, 327.

⁵⁹ Wright, *Jesus*, 334.

⁶⁰ Wright, *Jesus*, 232.

⁶¹ Klyne R. Snodgrass, “Reading and Overreading the Parables in *Jesus and the Victory of God*,” *Jesus*, 69-71. For an extended discussion of other parables used by Wright, see Snodgrass, “Reading,” *Jesus*, 69-75.

⁶² See Luke Timothy Johnson, “Luke-Acts” (ABD; ed. D. N. Freedman; New York: Doubleday, 1992), 403-420.

⁶³ Johnson, “A Historiographical Response,” *Jesus*, 217.

gospel of John to contain the theme of Moses as prophet,⁶⁴ making it an element in the prophetic Jesus; yet Wright excludes it in his schema. John's stress on the divinity of Jesus may in turn change Wright's view that Jesus' words and works do not prove his divinity, but his prophetic ministry. John may be the missing link between the Jesus of history to the Christ of faith. One wonders if Wright's exclusion of John in his discussion may fall into the exegetical "fallacy of selective evidence." The point is that the exclusion of the dominant prophetic themes of Luke and John makes Wright's portrait of the historical Jesus at best, tentative, and at worst, inconsistent with the rest of the NT data. Their inclusion might change the whole picture. Still, it is not clear how the "Jesus of history" became the "Christ of faith," of whom the early church ascribed their utmost devotion.

It can be unsettling when the Jesus of history Wright projects may not be the Christ of faith⁶⁵ of orthodox Christian theology. Although Wright proposes a twin sharing of history and theology,⁶⁶ his historical reconstruction of Jesus draws a different picture than that of the theological reading. Jesus' Messiahship is not to prove his divinity, but the fulfillment of his eschatology.⁶⁷ Yet therein lies a weakness. The believable, crucifiable, eschatological first-century prophet named Jesus, who has become comparable to the other great prophets of Israel, is now less believable as the object of worship by the church, as Carey C. Newman rightly raises.⁶⁸ How else can we conclude otherwise, when Wright writes that "Jesus did not . . . 'know that he was God' in the same way that one knows one is male or female, hungry or thirsty, or that one ate an orange an hour ago"? For a moment, he wants us to "Forget the 'titles' of Jesus . . . the pseudo-orthodox attempts to make the Jesus of Nazareth conscious of being the second person of the Trinity."⁶⁹ Wright's narratology is thus reductionist, in that his study, confined mainly in the synoptics, seems to have reduced the high Christological propositions of the rest of the NT into an apocalyptic prophet, and no more. This is another way of saying that the Jesus-event cannot be dichotomized from the report of that event. The question now is whether Wright's rule of history takes priority over the rule of faith.⁷⁰ Wright seems to say so.⁷¹ The whole tenor of the book appears to resonate in the affirmative, given his willingness to pursue his quest as far as possible, even at the expense of changing our Christology.⁷²

Nonetheless, Wright has managed to make his portrait of Jesus now accessible to seminary students, pastors, and scholars alike. His remarkable command of the first-century sources, logical use of the historical data in a well-ordered fashion, and clear writing style despite the complexity of his ideas, make his work a definitely compelling contribution in historical Jesus research, from a Third Quest perspective.

Already, his third installment, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, was published in 2003, with one more, *Paul and the Justice of God*, due in 2010.⁷³ That gets him halfway through

⁶⁴ See Wayne A. Meeks, *The Prophet-King: Moses Traditions and the Johannine Christology*, Supplement to Novum Testamentum 14 (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1967), *Jesus*, 316n 21.

⁶⁵ Wright, *Jesus*, 10, 89n 24.

⁶⁶ Wright, *Jesus*, 122.

⁶⁷ Wright, *Jesus*, 94, 104.

⁶⁸ Carey C. Newman, "From (Wright's) Jesus to 'the Church's Christ,'" *Jesus*, 287.

⁶⁹ Wright, *Jesus*, 653.

⁷⁰ Stephen E. Fowl, a review of "Jesus and the Victory of God: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is," *Pro Ecclesia* 11 no. 1 (2002): 109-111.

⁷¹ Wright, *New Testament*, 22.

⁷² Wright, *Jesus*, 10-11.

⁷³ Wright, "Wright, *Curriculum Vitae*," http://www.ntwrightpage.com/NTW_WebCV.htm.

his anticipated magnum opus in the field of NT theology. The rest of the package should complete the message. It may well be that once again, Wright may yet surprise us all.

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