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God and the Faithfulness of Paul

A Critical Examination
of the Pauline Theology of N.T. Wright

edited by

Christoph Heilig, J. Thomas Hewitt,
and Michael F. Bird

Mohr Siebeck

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Paul and the Faithfulness of God as Postmodern Scholarship

James G. Crossley and Katie Edwards

This essay will not focus on the rights and wrongs of N. T. Wright's historical analysis in *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, though it will inevitably touch on such issues. Instead, *PFG* will be used as a primary source for understanding the social history of biblical scholarship. One of the main advantages of using Wright's work as a primary source in such a manner is that, for all of his seemingly idiosyncratic views, he is one of the great synthesizers of our age. To read Wright's grand sweep of the history of Christian origins is to get an indication of the ideological issues at work among the most prominent in mainstream New Testament scholarship – in this case the strong emphasis on the “Jewishness” of Paul and Jesus, the significance of eschatology (however construed by Wright), and, of course, the New Perspective on Paul. And in *PFG* we have the culmination of an academic career's worth of Pauline study. Indeed, the span of Wright's career since the 1970s broadly corresponds to what we conventionally label “postmodernity.” Wright has long been critiquing postmodernity and postmodernism; in this essay we instead locate the work of Wright as a significant example of an influential strand of postmodern New Testament scholarship and attend to the range of cultural interests this reveals. It should be stated at the outset that this is not about looking for Wright's face at the bottom of the well. That individualized view of the social history of scholarship is difficult to maintain, not least given the well-known complexities surrounding authorial intention. Instead, we will be looking at broader cultural issues revealed in *PFG*, focusing more on the rhetoric of *PFG* and the often unconscious issues at play.

1. The Postmodern Scholar, Multiculturalism, and the Construction of “Jewishness”

First, some brief comments relating to the term “postmodernity” are required. Postmodernity, at least as it will be used in this essay, refers to the (dying?) era over the past forty years or so which has become, as Terry Eagleton famously put it, “suspicious of classical notions of truth, reason, identity and objectivity, of the idea of universal progress or emancipation, of single

frameworks, grand narratives or ultimate grounds of explanation.” In its place, so the argument goes, is an emphasis on, or emergence of, diversity, instability of meaning, multiple voices, instant image, fluid identities, eclecticism, playfulness, and the blurring of high and low culture.¹ “Postmodernism” in this respect might be deemed the label for the accompanying forms of contemporary culture. But is not Wright, with all his heavy stress on overarching, grand, guiding narratives for understanding Paul and Christian origins, the very antithesis of what is popularly understood as “postmodern”? Yes and no. We will return to how Wright’s Paul functions partly as a reaction and challenge to the fragmentation of the so-called “postmodern condition,” but we might label Wright – like any of us, from Stephen Moore to Catrin Williams – as a “postmodern scholar” in the simple sense that he is a scholar active in the era of postmodernity. Wright’s penchant for grand narratives does not disqualify him in this sense. The point is that grand narratives do not necessarily dominate in the way they once did, not that they are non-existent. Wright too should be regarded as one among many postmodern voice, or one proponent of a grand narrative in a marketplace of grand narratives.

Yet even this apparent lack of a cultural grand narrative requires qualification because of the accompanying economic conditions which likewise emerged over the past forty years.² Fredric Jameson famously called postmodernism the cultural logic of so-called “late capitalism.”³ David Harvey similarly saw the postmodern condition as part of the crisis of accumulation that began in the late 1960s and as a part of the results of the economic shift from Fordism-Keynesianism to neoliberal capitalism, with its distinctive emphasis on the private sector over the public sector and a strong rhetoric of individualism.⁴ The era of postmodern capitalism is also tied in with contemporary forms of multiculturalism and discourses of liberal inclusiveness in relation to the Other(s). For instance, as Slavoj Žižek has argued, multicultural-

¹ Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), vii.

² Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity* (London: Verso, 1998).

³ Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” *New Left Review* (1984): 53–92; Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Duke University Press, 1991). On “late capitalism,” see Jameson, *Postmodernism*, xviii–xxii.

⁴ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989); David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital and the Crises of Capitalism* (London: Profile Books, 2010). On neoliberalism more generally see also, e.g., Dieter Plehwe, Bernhard J. A. Walpen, and Gisela Neunhoffer, eds., *Neoliberal Hegemony: A Global Critique* (London: Routledge, 2007); Philip Mirowski and Dieter Plehwe, eds., *The Road from Mont Pelerin: The Making of the Neoliberal Thought Collective* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

al inclusiveness may superficially appear to embrace the Other(s), but it is a limited inclusiveness most suited to liberal western multiculturalism with an acceptance of the palatable Other without any problematic otherness.⁵ We might recall the common debates about what “true Islam” is or discourses on welcoming immigrants of the right sort in relation to “national values.”

The era of postmodern capitalism has served Wright well and has provided the context to help make him one of the most prominent scholars over the past forty years, at least in Anglo-American scholarship. His particular scholar-image is as well-known as any today; indeed, his particular image among historical Jesus scholars was considered instantly recognizable by Mark Allen Powell: “Even those who have never read any of Wright’s volumes may know him as the scholar who spells *god* with a lowercase *g*.”⁶ Wright’s books sell extremely well, and it is not inconceivable that SPCK would still make a profit even if they dropped every other author. The contexts of neoliberalism and postmodernity also help us further understand the prominence of the content of his work. In the context of historical Jesus studies, William Arnal has shown why there have been such heated debates over Jesus’s “Jewishness” (which no contemporary scholar denies) since the 1970s in relation to “the postmodern condition.”⁷ For Arnal, the emergence of “Jesus the Jew” with a strict scholarly definition of a culturally stable, and essentialist notion of, “Judaism,” partly functions as a response to socio-economic instability and fractured cultural identities, alongside the shifts in the geographical center of scholarship from Germany to North America in particular.⁸ Wright has

⁵ Among various publications see, e.g., Slavoj Žižek, “Multiculturalism, or, the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism,” *New Left Review* (1997): 28–51; Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real! Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates* (London: Verso, 2002); Slavoj Žižek, “Liberal multiculturalism masks an old barbarism with a human face,” *Guardian* (3 October, 2010), <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/oct/03/immigration-policy-roma-rightwing-europe>; Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 2011). For broader discussions of “race,” multiculturalism, and neoliberalism with more detailed analysis see, e.g., David Theo Goldberg, *The Threat of Race: Reflections on Racial Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009) and Alana Lentin and Gavan Titley, *The Crises of Multiculturalism: Racism in a Neoliberal Age* (London: Zed Books, 2011).

⁶ Mark Allan Powell, *The Jesus Debate: Modern Historians Investigate the Life of Christ* (Oxford: Lion, 1998), 142.

⁷ William Arnal, *The Symbolic Jesus: Historical Scholarship, Judaism and the Construction of Contemporary Identity*, Religion in Culture: Studies in Social Contest and Construction (London: Equinox, 2005).

⁸ By “essentialism” we mean the assumption that a given or defined phenomenon (e.g., “Judaism,” “Christianity,” “religion”) have a distinct collection of unchanging features which make them what they are. By “essentializing” we mean tendencies in the direction of “essentialism.” Critique of “essentialist” and “essentializing” discourses is one of the most prominent features of postmodern continental philosophy and associated especially

been prominent in this sort of essentialist presentation of “Jewishness” and Jewish identity and has a significant North American audience (whether hostile or favorable). Of course, what Arnal says about Jesus studies also applies to Pauline studies.

Even a cursory look at *PFG* shows strong essentializing tendencies in relation to its construction of Judaism and “Jewishness” that will be familiar to anyone who has read Wright’s previous work. Indeed, New Testament scholarship has had a long history of constructing a rigid Jewish identity in essentialist terms.⁹ *PFG* continues this and is as explicit as any example we have come across. As Chris Tilling has also noted, the phrase “essentially Jewish” is ubiquitous in *PFG*.¹⁰ Among numerous examples, we might mention, “this essentially Jewish narrative” (*PFG* 1279), “Paul’s essentially Jewish ... exposition” (*PFG* 1303), “an essentially Jewish message” (*PFG* 1437), and, in a most telling image, “the same *essentially Jewish* olive tree” (*PFG* 1449, italics original). Likewise, not only does this apply to Paul’s message, but also to “the life of his communities” which “remained essentially Jewish” (*PFG* 1438; cf. *PFG* 385). This essentialist reading of Jewish identity is, of course,

with Jacques Derrida. See, e.g., Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978), 278–94 (279): “Thus it has always been thought that the center, which is by definition unique, constituted that very thing within a structure which governs the structure, while escaping structurality. This is why classical thought concerning structure could say that the center is, paradoxically, within the structure and outside it. The center is at the center of the totality, and yet, since the center does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality), the totality has its center elsewhere. The center is not the center. The concept of centered structure – although it represents coherence itself, the condition of the episteme as philosophy or science – is contradictorily coherent. And, as always, coherence in contradiction expresses the force of a desire. The concept of centered structure is in fact the concept of a freeplay based on a fundamental ground, a freeplay which is constituted upon a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude, which is itself beyond the reach of the freeplay. With this certitude anxiety can be mastered, for anxiety is invariably the result of a certain mode of being implicated in the game, of being caught by the game, of being as it were from the very beginning at stake in the game. From the basis of what we therefore call the center (and which, because it can be either inside or outside, is as readily called the origin as the end, as readily *arché* as *telos*), the repetitions, the substitutions. The transformations, and the permutations are always taken from a history of meaning – that is, a history, period – whose origin may always be revealed or whose end may always be anticipated in the form of presence. This is why one could perhaps say that the movement of any archeology, like that of any eschatology, is an accomplice of this reduction of the structurality of structure and always attempts to conceive of structure from the basis of a full presence which is out of play.”

⁹ James G. Crossley, *Jesus in an Age of Terror: Scholarly Projects for a New American Century*, BibleWorld (London: Equinox, 2008), 143–94.

¹⁰ Chris Tilling, “Paul and the Faithfulness of God: A Review Essay (Part 1),” *Anvil* 31 (2015), 45–56 (48n10).

continued in its application in *PFG*. When talking about “the Jewish objection to the entire Roman view of the gods” (an “essentially Jewish view,” of course, *PFG* 370), Wright states that this was

not simply about monotheism (though that was of course the basis of the standard critique of idolatry), nor even about election (their belief that they, rather than the Romans or anybody else, were the chosen people of the one true God). (*PFG* 370)

Instead, it “was about eschatology” and “their belief that the one God had determined on a divine justice that would be done, and would be seen to be done, in a way that Roman imperial justice somehow never quite managed” (*PFG* 370). Again, this leaves little room for maneuver in the construction of Jewish identity in the ancient world, or indeed ancient perceptions about Jewish identities. What if some Jews were more accommodating to, or indifferent about, Roman views about gods? What if some Jews foregrounded “monotheism” or “election” instead of “eschatology”? If pushed, Wright may well concede that these points were possibilities but the rhetoric shows his strict essentialist formulations: Judaism *is* x, y, and z and *not* a, b, and c. Wright does try to qualify this rigid view of identity when he compares debates about the imperial cult with understandings of Judaism:

Still, as with the protests of the 1980s that there was ‘no such thing as first-century Judaism’, only Judaisms, plural, so we ought not to be too blown over by an Aristotelian critique of that Platonic abstraction, ‘imperial cult’. As long as we recognize that there was no single uniform reality that corresponded to that phrase, and as long as we remain alive to the multiple meanings which our diverse evidence throws up, we can, at least for present purposes, think in terms of a single complex phenomenon. (*PFG* 313–14)

However, we will see that when others do provide alternative formulations of Jewish identity, Wright rejects them in some of the strongest possible terms, only enhancing the idea that Wright’s construction of identity can reasonably be understood as hard essentialism.

This construction also involves an essentialist Jewish-pagan binary, which Wright has inherited from his primary sources and their long reception history. In his preface, Wright points out that his use of “pagan” is a “convenient shorthand” (*PFG* xxi), but whatever we make of the realities of historical reconstruction and analysis, the label still functions as a category typically in stark opposition to Judaism throughout *PFG*. Not only does Wright claim that “what Paul thought he was doing was offering an essentially *Jewish* message to the *pagan* world” (*PFG* 200, italics original), but he also construes a range of different philosophical traditions as representing “paganism,” and these traditions are not to be understood as sources of concepts in Paul or in Jewish writings, irrespective of overlaps in language. When discussing Wisdom of Solomon, Wright argues that it raises issues that “would of course have been anathema not only to Epicureans, but also to Stoics, Platonists and more or less everyone else across the spectrum of paganism.” Wisdom of Solomon

might use the language of such “pagan” philosophy, but Wright instead sees this as evidence for an essentialist Jewish identity. According to Wright, Wisdom of Solomon “has made [‘pagan’ philosophy] serve, decisively, an essentially Jewish vision of reality” (*PFG* 241). We might add that another function of this discourse is to construct an orthodox path through history and thus protect the Christian message from being tainted by anything deemed idolatrous. This might incorporate a degree of what Luke Timothy Johnson called the “Hengel sidestep” where

any possible influence of Greco-Roman culture on the New Testament is systematically filtered through Hellenistic Judaism, which, presumably, renders it non-toxic for Christianity.¹¹

Wright does accept a little “pagan” window dressing in Paul, though, perhaps because he more firmly locates the apostle in his definition of “Judaism” than Hengel did.

It is striking that this essentialist approach to Jewish identity continues in Wright’s construction of more recent (and thus timeless?) Jewish identity in *PFG*. He briefly turns to Hannah Arendt and Walter Benjamin who “in the extreme conditions of the mid-century crisis, understood the urgency of present action ... Something has to be done, and done now.” Quoting Arendt, Wright adds that what is needed is

a new guarantee which can be found only in a new political principle, in a new law on earth, whose validity this time must comprehend the whole of humanity while its power must remain strictly limited, rooted in and controlled by newly defined territorial entities. (*PFG* 1474)¹²

Similarly, Wright adds that Benjamin “offers a reminder that the ancient Jewish vision, in which the Messiah and the redemption of history have played such an important role” brings “the challenge to action in the world itself” (*PFG* 1474). Wright summarizes: “One does not have to fill in too many gaps to see that this is essentially a Jewish vision: a world at one, with human authorities necessary but firmly under limitation” (*PFG* 1474). This again works with a fixed view of Jewish identity across the ages (note once

¹¹ Luke Timothy Johnson, review of Richard H. Bell, *No one seeks for God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 1:18–3:20*, *RBL* (1999), http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/382_408.pdf. On the construction of an orthodox path through history, compare also the following comments by Wright where there are heretical historical paths the historian best avoids: “two of the greatest poems in scripture, perhaps in all the world, are the psalms we call 19 and 119, the latter celebrating Torah from every possible angle, the former balancing it with the power and glory of the sun itself. That is what Torah is like. Not to recognize that is to take a large step towards Marcion, or indeed towards the gnosticism that would scorn the created order as well” (*PFG* 1016–17).

¹² Quoting the preface to Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism: New Edition with Added Prefaces*, 3 vols., 4th Eng. ed., (Orlando: Harvest Books, 1968).

again the use of “essentially”), which has been established by the interpreter, Wright. It might be granted that Arendt and Benjamin (and indeed others in the Frankfurt School) were influenced by their Jewish backgrounds. But we might also factor in their Marxist backgrounds or wonder if such a vision might be known in Christianity, nineteenth-century nationalism, the developing Labour movement of the early twentieth century, complex combinations of all the above, or indeed something developed specifically in light of “the extreme conditions of the mid-century crisis.” And what do we do with those identifying and identified as Jews but who do not think of “a world at one, with human authorities necessary but firmly under limitation” (*PFG* 1474)? Would not at least some of the well-established Jewish anarchists in the East End of London prior to World War I have had difficulties with the idea of *necessary* “human authorities,” no matter how limited their power? Wright does not go into detail about what we do with alternative Jewish visions, but their very existence again reveals the extent of the static and essentializing nature of Wright’s “Jewishness.”

Indeed, even the construction of paganism remains when Wright discusses problematic modern identity. The “horrible anti-semitism of Nazi ideology” was “of course essentially pagan, though sometimes borrowing some clothes designed to look ‘Christian’” (*PFG* 805). We might question the validity of such essentialism in academic analysis (as Wright does, *PFG* 248). What does it mean to say Nazism was “essentially pagan” (whatever that seemingly enormous category might contain) while anything seemingly “Christian” is only donning “clothes designed to look” so? This is not, of course, to say that Nazism was essentially Christian or the like, but clearly there were Nazis who did identify as Christian and who borrowed from earlier figures who also identified as Christian. Is it the role of the historian to distance “pure Christianity” from any unfortunate “impure” manifestations, not unlike popular discourse of ISIS not being “true Islam”? We would say this is not the historian’s task, but the point here is to show just how firmly essentialist Wright’s binaries are and how they are arguably the clearest example of what Arnal saw as a reaction against fragmented postmodern identities.

2. New Perspectives on “Jewishness”

Wright is, of course, one of the most important representatives of one of the most high-profile developments in New Testament scholarship of the post-modern era: the New Perspective on Paul. Gaining momentum at more or less the same time as the scholarly rhetoric of Jesus the Jew, the “New Perspec-

tive” was, so the story goes, heralded by James Dunn,¹³ though in 1978 Wright was already showing influences of E. P. Sanders’s groundbreaking work of 1977 and was already using the phrase “new perspective.”¹⁴ While not the first to make the challenge, Sanders’s *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* meant that scholarship, and Pauline scholarship in particular, was no longer going to be able to repeat uncritically, at least not without serious criticism in response, Lutheran-influenced analysis of Paul and early Judaism and the continual negative stereotypes about Judaism as a cold, harsh legalist religion of works-righteousness in contrast to the loving religion of grace advocated by Paul and, in the long run, (orthodox) Christianity. Sanders’s famous “covenantal nomism” – namely, the idea that “common Judaism” typically combined ideas of graceful election and the maintenance of the covenantal relationship through observance of the commandments (“getting in” and “staying in”) – became the central feature of the diverse approaches brought under the heading of the New Perspective on Paul.

However, while “Jewishness” continued to be constructed as a strict form of identity, there is another distinctive feature of contemporary New Testament scholarship which has also affected the New Perspective: difference from that which came before, often couched in language of “transcending” this fixed construction of Jewish identity which is now “redundant,” even though the language of “Jewishness” remains.¹⁵ As Wright previously put it about his construction of Jesus: “[this is] a very Jewish Jesus who was nevertheless opposed to some high-profile features of first-century Judaism.”¹⁶ For all the criticisms of the Old Perspective on Paul for its negative portrayal of Judaism,¹⁷ a soft supersessionism has hardly been absent from the rhetoric of New Perspective publications, including *PGF* and other work of Wright, even if the rhetoric has become more positive. Indeed, Paul’s letters (with their apparent critique of the Law) make it easier for contemporary scholars to justify a “Jewish Paul” distanced from any potentially unpalatable Jewish beliefs. Paul, after all, raises some slightly different problems from Jesus. Whereas Jesus in the Synoptic tradition is not so obviously presented as re-

¹³ James D. G. Dunn, “The New Perspective on Paul,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 65 (1983), 95–122.

¹⁴ N. T. Wright, “The Paul of History and the Apostle of Faith,” *TynBul* 29 (1978), 61–88.

¹⁵ Crossley, *Jesus in an Age of Terror*, 143–94; James G. Crossley, “A ‘Very Jewish’ Jesus: Perpetuating the Myth of Superiority,” *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 11 (2013), 109–29.

¹⁶ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God 2 (London: SPCK, 1996), 93

¹⁷ Such rhetoric is still present in *PGF*. For instance: “The deeper aim of Bultmann’s analysis can be seen, with hindsight, to be a radical *deJudaizing*, not only of the gospels (where his ‘demythologizing’ is best known) but of Paul as well” (*PGF* 458).

jecting his Jewish tradition, Paul does at least imply that some aspects of Jewish Law and identity are problematic or possibly irrelevant to at least some degree (see, e.g., Gal 2:17–21; 3:10–13; 4:21–26; 6:15; Rom 14:1–8; 1 Cor 7:19).

From a perspective concerning popular Jewish debates, the problem was casually summarized by Jacob Taubes, himself in negotiation with his own Jewish traditions:

Now it happens that the Jewish study of Paul is in a very sad state. There is a literary corpus about Jesus, a nice guy, about the rabbi in Galilee, and about the Sermon on the Mount; it's all in the Talmud and so on ... This apologetic literature proliferated in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and there is a consensus in Liberal Judaism (not in Orthodox Judaism, which hasn't moved an inch), that is, a sort of pride in this son of Israel. But when it comes to Paul, that's a borderline that's hard to cross.¹⁸

Taubes, more keen to “rescue” Paul for Judaism, saw Paul as part of a long Jewish tradition where the Law is overthrown in light of the new radical moment. But what is crucial for our purposes involves where the emphasis is placed in the construction of Jewish identity. By making things like circumcision and Torah central to a strict construction of Jewish identity, Wright can have Paul be different in order to “rescue” Paul for Christianity while Taubes has to make this difference from Torah practice another established Jewish tradition in order to “rescue” Paul for Judaism. Both work with the same data, both make similar arguments, but it is where the emphasis is put on their fixed notions of identity that allows each writer to construct their respective “Pauls” in relation to Judaism. In other words, how a scholar constructs Jewish identity can tell us a lot about the ideological underpinnings of a given scholar's work and the assumptions of their categorizations. So, while Wright's Paul is “essentially” or, in what functions as a near-synonymous category in Wright's rhetoric, “thoroughly” Jewish, his Paul still transcends this strict construction of Jewish identity. Paul's essential Jewishness presents “a new dramatic variation” (*PFG* 1438) about which “he thought through and transformed his existing Jewish worldview and theology” (*PFG* 611). Indeed, Wright see as “the main thesis of the book” the idea that Paul created a theology which was “a radical mutation in the core beliefs of his Jewish world” and where “markers (circumcision, the food laws, and so on) had been set aside as inappropriate for the new messianic day, for the new messianic people” (*PFG* xvi; cf. *PFG* 538–39).

While a Christian tradition of superiority over Judaism obviously has an ongoing influence, it is also part of those discourses about contemporary multiculturalism where the palatable bits of the Other are embraced and where problematic otherness is pushed away. Put another way, “essential”

¹⁸ Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, trans. Dana Hollander, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 5.

Judaism becomes acceptable for certain scholarly constructions of Paul's identity, but the difficult and strange aspects of Jewish identity (e.g., circumcision, much of the Law) are put to one side. However, there is another important development which also helps explain this positive rhetoric towards Judaism while simultaneously presenting Paul in ways that go beyond what is assumed to be a previously "essential" Judaism. Part of Arnal's argument was that the scholarly emphasis on strict Jewish identity involved a reaction against the dominance of pre-1970s German scholarship and a desire for Christian scholars to show that Christianity is not antisemitic at its core in order to distance Christianity from complicity in the Holocaust.¹⁹ This argument was nuanced further by Crossley. The rhetoric of Jesus's "Jewishness" was part of post-1967 cultural shift including the first widespread interest in the Holocaust and a hugely favorable attitude towards Israel in Anglo-American political, educational, and popular culture after the Six Day War. Yet this philo-Semitism nevertheless perpetuated attitudes of cultural and religious superiority in relation to Jews, Judaism, and Israel, and all as part of a general shift of the center of biblical scholarship from Germany to North America.²⁰

In terms of *PFG*, we might note not only the use of the philo-Jewish rhetoric to proclaim transformation of a "Judaism" constructed by Wright, but also the loaded language he uses to disagree with his opponents and remove any potential complicity in the Holocaust on the part of an assumed "true" Christianity. On a number of occasions Wright turns to Nazi Germany as a point of bleak contrast. For instance, Wright argues that the Nazis could not tolerate two histories and so Jewish history had to be erased "in order that the fresh Nazi story of Germany could stand on its own new feet" (*PFG* 1479). But in the accompanying footnote Wright manages to associate such overtly anti-Semitic views with the contemporary "apocalyptic" readings of Paul associated with, among others, the late J. Louis Martyn: "The parallel between this and the proposals of today's neo-'apocalyptic' interpreters of Paul is, or should be, a matter of concern" (*PFG* 1479n8). Unsurprisingly, then, for Wright's logic, this "apocalyptic" approach to Paul is "something quite different," an "essentially non-Jewish 'revelation'" (*PFG* 611–12). One function of this, of course, is to promote the moral purity of Wright's work in the face of the not infrequent allegations of supersessionism while putting other rival supersessionist readings in their place with a culturally-loaded insinuation.²¹

¹⁹ Arnal, *Symbolic Jesus*, 39–72.

²⁰ Crossley, *Jesus in an Age of Terror*, 143–94.

²¹ Cf. *PFG* 806: "This carries, so it seems, none of the old propensity of the 'hard supersessionism' to say that Jewish persons are not welcome within the new way. It is just that being Jewish, and adhering to the Jewish hope that God would fulfil his long-awaited promises to Abraham, appears to be exactly the wrong kind of thing. It is what, according to Martyn, Paul's opponents in Galatia had been teaching. And Paul insisted that any such

Indeed, there are moments when vast swathes of European thought are tainted with fascism for Wright. In his discussion of Heidegger and the Nazis, Wright makes a plea for twenty-first-century New Testament scholarship to bring

the long overdue liberation of exegesis and theology, and actually of early Christian history itself, from the dark gravitational pull of the whole post-Enlightenment European philosophical and political matrix, of which Heidegger was and is a central symbol. (*PFG* 1477)

Quite how a figure like Noam Chomsky, who identifies as a child of the Enlightenment but is not naïve about its dark side,²² and a whole host of anti-fascist, libertarian post-Enlightenment thinkers fit into this somewhat problematic generalization of the past few centuries is beyond us, but it does show the potential scope of Wright's tainting of opposition views with the darkest of European legacies in order to protect his essentialist readings.

Another function of this sort of rhetoric is, of course, to show that Wright's fixed construction of Jewish identity is the one we should deem accurate, and this is why we might be skeptical about Wright's claim to be alert to multiple meanings, diverse evidence, and complexity in this regard. Theoretically, could not a Jewish identity be constructed as something radically different to its past? Who gets to decide? This sort of allegation is, of course, not new for Wright. As he claimed of his opponents (who are far better understood in terms of North American "culture wars") whose Jesus did not adhere closely to Wright's construction of Judaism:

Have the New Questers, and the advocates of the Cynic Jesus, come to terms with the problematic analogy between themselves and those German scholars who, in the 1920s and 1930s, reduced almost to nil the specific Jewishness of Jesus and his message?²³

What Wright's rigid notion of Jewish identity does is effectively claim that a Jew could not have very much in common with Cynic philosophy, despite (say) Matt 10:5–15.

thing – any continuity with Abraham, let alone Moses – had been swept away in the 'apocalypse' of Jesus and his death. The new reality thus 'supersedes' the old. Attempts by Martyn and his followers to resist this conclusion from their teaching simply fail."

²² Cf. Noam Chomsky, *Understanding Power* (New York: Vintage, 2003), 232, 261: "we've become a much freer society than we were in absolutist times. And intellectuals have often played a role in that, breaking down ideological barriers ... for instance during the Enlightenment. That often took a lot of courage and quite a struggle, and it goes on until today ... typically you're going to find major efforts made to marginalize the honest and serious intellectuals, the people committed to what I would call Enlightenment values – values of truth, and freedom, and liberty, and justice."

²³ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 79n233, quoted and discussed in John S. Kloppenborg, "As One Unknown, without a Name? Co-opting the Apocalyptic Jesus," *Apocalypticism, Anti-Semitism and the Historical Jesus: Subtexts in Criticism*, ed. John S. Kloppenborg with John W. Marshall, LNTS 275 (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 1–23 (19–21).

Wright, and the New Perspective on Paul more generally, therefore attempt to present difference from Judaism without bringing in the triumphalism and negativity associated with the Old Perspective on Paul – even if it means tainting alternative scholarship with allegations of similarities to fascism. Instead of the overt rhetoric of Christian superiority, such New Perspective approaches use the language of Jewish “boundary markers” and Jewish nationalism to show how Paul rejects these categories when they impact upon the early church. Yet, as with Jesus the Jew, the superiority myth is perpetuated implicitly and with a liberalizing, credible overlay in positive language. There can be few better examples of using liberal rhetoric while maintaining cultural and religious superiority than Dunn’s suggestion that one of the five points of the New Perspective on Paul is that justification, in stark contrast to the pre-New Perspective period, can now help combat “nationalism and racialism.”²⁴ The unmentioned implications of this for the scholarly construction of Judaism seem somewhat negative to say the least (presumably Judaism is less able to combat “nationalism and racialism” according to this logic). Wright is more subtle in that he goes out of his way to look at how Jewish thinking was in opposition to some of the toxic debates of the twentieth century, though perhaps Wright is less forgiving of such thinking which lacked God (*PFG* 1474). Yet, as we saw, Judaism is still transformed and mutated, with certain markers set aside. In this respect, it is perhaps worth noting what might happen to those scholarly positions which attempt to construct too high a degree of Otherness, namely those views which seem to allow Jewish identity (at least as constructed by scholarship) to flourish relatively untouched. The problematic fuller embrace of Otherness may be why Simon Gathercole has to explain his decision not to discuss such scholarship in his own (non-New Perspective) work on Paul: “L. Gaston and S. K. Stowers have not been particularly influential with their theological conclusions because they have been so radical.”²⁵ Wright, with some more detail, is also dismissive “of those who want to claim that Paul remained a ‘Torah observant’ Jew” (*PFG* 1427). Again, this is not to dispute the historical accuracy of Wright’s claims but rather to understand what does and does not get stressed in scholarship. And, if we play Wright’s game, then why should Wright’s Paul be allowed to sweep such seemingly important practices off the table and remain “thoroughly Jewish”? Again, such language helps us understand the cultural assumptions of the Pauline interpreter.

Another key aspect of this liberal turn, so to speak, is the “secularization” of the language which has become a hallmark of evangelical New Testament

²⁴ James D. G. Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul: Collected Essays*, WUNT 185 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 15.

²⁵ Simon J. Gathercole, *Where is Boasting? Early Jewish Soteriology and Paul’s Response in Romans 1–5* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 18.

scholarship. As part of his extensive analysis of evangelical biblical scholarship as a primary source, Stephen Young argued that self-representation as academics and the “insider” language of the academic have become significant protective strategies.²⁶ To reapply Young, where terms such as imputed righteousness, justification by faith, righteousness of God, salvation, and so on were standard in the Old Perspective era, we now have a new academic vocabulary with terms familiar to readers of Wright, such as “nationalism,” “boundary markers,” “common Judaism,” “story, symbol and praxis,” “a web of social and religious commitments,” “ethnicity,” and so on, as Michael Bird has pointed out.²⁷ Much of this language is, of course, integral to *PFG* (e.g., *PFG* 28, 31, 42). Indeed, Wright shows some sensitivity about issues relating to the so-called “secular” historian and the theologian (*PFG* 72–74). He argues with a typical flourish:

For a start, Paul will reassure both sides that they are full partners in his work. As we shall see when we examine his worldview, the symbols, praxis and stories which contribute to it are none of them simply about ‘ideas’ and ‘beliefs’. They are about the creator God, his world and his people – and this world and these people are creatures of space, time and matter, open by definition to historical enquiry, living life in public without shame, modelling a way of life which is precisely in and for the world, affirming the goodness of the creator’s universe and of human beings within it. Yes, says Paul to the suspicious slave-master History: I am your partner! You and I belong together! (*PFG* 72)

Francis Watson may have had his tongue firmly in cheek when he claimed that the New Perspective emphasizes “presuppositionless exegesis” in the sense that proponents are seemingly freed from prior theological commitments, but there has obviously been a tendency to downplay, to some degree, an overtly Protestant (and specifically Lutheran) background in the language of New Perspective, even if some have tried to rectify this,²⁸ and even if the story of Israel culminating in Jesus still has a Reformed feel. However, as Watson recognizes, one of the functions of this academic language is to give credibility or legitimacy to the New Perspective and partly discredit the “too theological” (or perhaps “wrongly theological”?) Old Perspective. Another function of such secularizing language is, therefore, to perpetuate a theological agenda. Indeed, as with historical Jesus studies, Sanders, who has openly portrayed himself as not interested in theology but in history and religious

²⁶ Stephen L. Young, “Protective Strategies and the Prestige of the ‘Academic’: A Religious Studies and Practice Theory Redescription of Evangelical Inerrantist Scholarship,” *BibInt* 23 (2015): 1–35.

²⁷ Michael F. Bird, *The Saving Righteousness of God: Studies on Paul, Justification and the New Perspective*, Paternoster Biblical Monographs (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006), 105.

²⁸ Francis B. Watson, “Not the New Perspective” (paper presented at the British New Testament Conference, Manchester, September 2001).

studies,²⁹ becomes the touchstone, the figure used in his scholarly reception to present an argument as especially credible. But even Sanders himself and his influential reading of Judaism can be seen as perpetuating (presumably unconsciously in the case of Sanders) a Christian theological agenda. While covenantal nomism is not perpetuating a specifically Lutheran model, it certainly is a model influenced by Christian systematic theology which imposes on Judaism ideas of grace and works, neither of which seem to have been systematized in early Judaism.³⁰

3. The Dictatorship of God?

Intimately tied in with postmodernism and global capitalism, though perhaps not always comfortably, has been the emergence of postcolonial theories.³¹ In this respect we want to look at a final area where Wright has been particularly prominent and continues the debate in *PFG: Paul and Empire*. As Wright is aware, this trend in scholarship can be seen partly as a reaction to recent American imperialism as well as to the rise of postcolonial theory, though it is hardly without precedent (*PFG* 312). Wright has continued to present Paul's proclamation of Jesus as an alternative to Caesar, and what we think is happening in Wright's rhetoric is a case where we can turn the theory on the interpreter (as well as on Paul).³² In this instance we can look at postcolonial

²⁹E. P. Sanders, "Comparing Judaism and Christianity: An Academic Autobiography," in *Redefining First-Century Jewish and Christian Identities: Essays in Honor of Ed Parish Sanders*, ed. Fabian E. Udoh with Susannah Heschel, Mark Chancey, and Gregory Tatum, Christianity and Judaism in Antiquity Series 16 (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2008), ch. 2.

³⁰See further Philip S. Alexander, "Torah and Salvation in Tannaitic Judaism," *Justification and Variegated Nomism, Volume I: The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism*, ed. D. A. Carson, Peter T. O'Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid, WUNT II 140 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 261–301.

³¹For discussion of such connections in relation to biblical studies see Stephen D. Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse: Postcolonialism and the New Testament*, Bible in the Modern World 12 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2006), 78–86.

³²Paul and Caesar is a major area of discussion in current Pauline studies, and we are aware that we are only scratching the surface of the complex issues. It is not clear that there was an overtly "anti-Empire" message in Paul that would necessarily have been picked up by all hearers or readers, and if there was, how it would have been understood. Would there have been indifference to the Empire in the knowledge that it would soon end? Would the interpretation have involved outright hostility to the Empire? Or would there be varying shades in-between? Indeed, there may well have been a range of reactions among Paul's audiences. What should be clear enough, however, is that Paul is making imperial claims about the role of the rulership of Christ and God, both in the present and future. For discussion of the complexities of Paul's view of Caesar and the Empire see now

mimicry where the language of the colonizing power is replicated albeit in a new form (as indeed Paul himself may well have done, if indeed we can separate Paul and Wright at this point – Wright does seem to endorse Paul’s logic throughout³³).

For example, Wright’s Paul “noticed the ‘gods many and lords many’” but would upstage them “with the one God, one lord of his revised monotheism” (PFG 382). Imperial rhetoric was confronted “at point after point”:

Jesus is ‘son of God’; he is ‘lord of the world’; he is ‘saviour’; the worldwide revelation of his rule is ‘good news’, because through it ‘justice’ and ‘peace’ are brought to birth at last. He is the one who ‘rises to rule the nations’. (PFG 382)

Wright’s Paul worked with

the fact of a new community ... which transcended the boundaries of class, ethnic origin, location and (not least) gender, by all of which the pagan world in general, and the imperial world in particular, set so much store. (PFG 383)

Indeed, rather than Caesar

coming from Rome to rescue a beleaguered colony, Jesus will come from heaven to transform the world ... He is the *sōtēr*; the saviour; he is the *kyrios*, the lord; he is *Christos*, the Messiah, the Jewish king destined to be lord of the whole world. (PFG 1293)

Phil 2:6–11 is about (among other things), “Paul declaring that Jesus is to receive the homage from every creature in heaven, on earth and under the earth,” a “universal sovereignty,” and the text is described by Wright as a “powerful statement.” Even more strikingly for our purposes, Phil 2:6–11 is described as “a narrative of imperial legitimation” (PFG 1294).

Is this not replacement of Empire with Empire, both by Paul and Wright? In fact, we can see this functioning as Wright’s challenge to postmodernity, looking to the hope of the era of the imperial Christ, not unlike the lowly-but-to-be-elevated Christ of Phil 2:6–11 eventually becoming the god of Rome. Wright might like to distance Paul from Marx and Marxism (e.g., PFG 1276, 1297, 1306, 1319), and indeed the whole of post-Enlightenment thought, but

Christoph Heilig, *Hidden Criticism? The Methodology and Plausibility of the Search for a Counter-Imperial Subtext in Paul*, WUNT II 392 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015).

³³ Cf., e.g., PFG 318: “To say that a particular police force is riddled with corruption, racism or collusion with organized crime is not to say, ‘therefore we should not have a police force’. To say that the present imperial system encourages and sustains wickedness or folly of various sorts is not to say, ‘therefore we should have no human authorities’ ... The answer to corrupt authorities is not anarchy. Paul, once again as a good creational monotheist, would not suggest such a thing; that is what is underneath his strong affirmations, so shocking to some liberal democrats, never mind some Anabaptists, in Romans 13.1–7. That is why the poem of Colossians 1.15–20 is so important. Creational monotheism entails a strong statement about the God-giveness of human structures, even while at the same time also indicating that the one God will hold office-holders to account.”

he does claim that Walter Benjamin's "own frustrated denunciation of various types of mid-twentieth-century Marxism itself constituted a form precisely of inner-*Jewish* debate" (PFG 1478). Indeed, he adds, Marx "offered a secularized, Hegelian version of the Jewish story of liberation" (PFG 1478). This "secularized" difference is important for Wright's reading of "apocalyptic": "If we bring that picture forward nineteen centuries or so, but take God out of it, we find Karl Marx" (PFG 1478). This connection between Wright's Jewish "apocalyptic" tradition, Marx, and Wright's Paul is significant because it leaves Wright's Paul open to the same prophetic critique the nineteenth-century anarchist Mikhail Bakunin (and others after him) leveled at Marxism: it will only end up ferociously replicating the power it will replace.³⁴ Does this not also apply to the logic of the narrative of power Wright, Wright's Paul, and indeed the "historical Paul," are presenting – the new dictatorship of God to overthrow the present age? Wright argues that "some people in the 1930s did indeed advocate a 'salvation history' which was really the totalitarian wolf dressed up in biblical sheep's clothing" (PFG 1508). But does a Wrightian/Pauline theocracy really escape this charge?³⁵

³⁴ E.g. Mikhail Bakunin, *Selected Works* (New York: Knopf, 1972), 283–84: "The reasoning of Marx ends in absolute contradiction. Taking into account only the economic question, he insists that only the most advanced countries ... are most capable of making social revolution ... This revolution will expropriate either by peaceful, gradual or violent means, the present property owners and capitalists. To appropriate all the landed property and capital, and to carry out its extensive economic and political programs, the revolutionary State will have to be very powerful and highly centralized. The State will administer and direct the cultivation of the land, by means of salaried officials commanding armies of rural workers organized and disciplined for that purpose. At the same time, on the ruins of existing banks, it will establish a single state bank which will finance all labour and national commerce ... For the proletariat this will, in reality, be nothing but a barracks: a regime, where regimented workmen and women will sleep, wake, work, and live to the beat of a drum; where the shrewd and educated will be granted government privileges ... There will be slavery within this state, and abroad there will be war without truce, at least until the 'inferior' races, Latin and Slav, tired of bourgeois civilisation, no longer resign themselves to the subjection of the State, which will be even more despotic than the former State, although it calls itself a Peoples' State."

³⁵ For full discussion of this logic and these issues, including a hermeneutic of suspicion leveled at imperialistic claims of "peace," see James G. Crossley, *Jesus and the Chaos of History: Redirecting the Quest for the Historical Jesus*, Biblical Reconfigurations (London: Oxford University Press, 2015). This might be contrasted with, for instance, Reinhard Feldmeier, *Macht – Dienst – Demut: Ein neutestamentlicher Beitrag zur Ethik* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012).

4. Concluding Remarks

PFG is an important book, no doubt in many respects. But for our purposes its size, vision, and intellectual scope make it a near-perfect primary source for analyzing the ideological trends present in postmodern New Testament scholarship. To repeat, this is not to challenge the historical reconstruction presented by Wright – others in this volume will do that – nor is it necessarily to claim that Wright consciously “intended” to use Paul in the ways outlined here, although there may be some convergence between Wright’s intentions and our analysis. What Wright particularly shows us is how postmodern Pauline scholarship remains obsessed with “Jewishness” and constructing a fixed notion of Jewish identity upon which Paul’s theology can be established. This, as we have seen, is partly a reaction to trends at work in postmodern capitalism and liberal multiculturalism. The harshness associated with the Old Perspective may be gone, but the myth of superiority over the construction of Judaism remains, albeit in softened language. What is striking about Wright’s epic project is that there is another function: to imply that Paul’s challenge to cultural norms is a challenge for our postmodern, post-Enlightenment contexts. But, it seems to us, this has dangers of its own as Wright’s Pauline vision looks like nothing less than a new Empire in the form of theocracy. Wright provides a forceful challenge to failed ideologies of the twentieth century, but it is far from clear that his alternative avoids totalitarianism in the making.

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