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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_churchman\\_os.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php)

# N. T. Wright's Hermeneutic: An Exploration

Robert Stewart

N. T. Wright is one of the more significant biblical scholars in present-day Protestant theology.<sup>1</sup> The first two volumes of his proposed six-volume New Testament theology series,<sup>2</sup> *Christian Origins and the Question of God* have been widely read and very influential. Richard Hays writes concerning the series:

The sweep of Wright's project as a whole is breathtaking. It is impossible to give a fair assessment of his achievement without sounding grandiose: no New Testament scholar since Bultmann has even attempted—let alone achieved—such an innovative and comprehensive account of New Testament history and theology.<sup>3</sup>

This article will first describe Wright's hermeneutical method. The next issue will include an overview of his conclusions concerning the historical Jesus and evaluate how his hermeneutical method affects his conclusions as to who the historical Jesus was.

## Wright's Critical-Realist, Worldview Hermeneutic

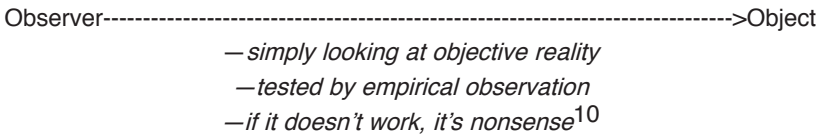
Wright's hermeneutic integrates several different methods into a harmonious whole. Examples include narrative structural criticism, worldview analysis, and a critical-realist epistemology. This section will answer four major hermeneutical questions, after first considering Wright's epistemology—critical realism.

Wright consistently approaches knowledge from the perspective of critical realism. Critical realism is a term borrowed from the philosophy of science<sup>4</sup> and carried over into theology and biblical studies. Critical realism is, in van Huyssteen's words:<sup>5</sup>

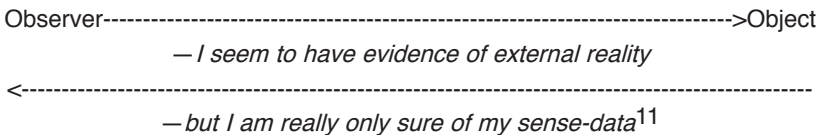
...neither a theological nor a scientific thesis, it is a philosophical, or even more accurately, an epistemological, thesis about the goals of scientific knowledge and the implications of theoretical models in science. Hence it should not be seen as a theory about truth, but rather as a theory about the epistemic values that shape scientific rationality.<sup>6</sup>

Critical realism is both post-Kantian and post-Kuhnian in that it recognizes that one can never have knowledge of the thing-in-itself and that all knowledge is necessarily theory-based in nature. Critical realism recognizes that all knowledge is socio-historical in nature, but rejects the claim that ‘religious language provides only a useful system of symbols that can be action-guiding and meaningful for the believer without being in any sense reality depicting in its cognitive claims’.<sup>7</sup> Yet advocates of critical realism are quick to insist that all knowledge is provisional, and thus subject to revision. Related to the efficacy of language, critical realists do not hold that words are derivative of an objective world, only that they represent and refer to an objective world.<sup>8</sup>

Wright’s brand of critical realism forges a middle road between epistemological certainty as characterized both by pre-modern dogmatism and modern subject-object dualism, on the one hand, and post-Kantian phenomenism and postmodern deconstruction, on the other. The former view, which Wright labels positivism, is naïve, while the various forms of phenomenism often lead to solipsism.<sup>9</sup> Wright’s diagram of the positivist position is below.

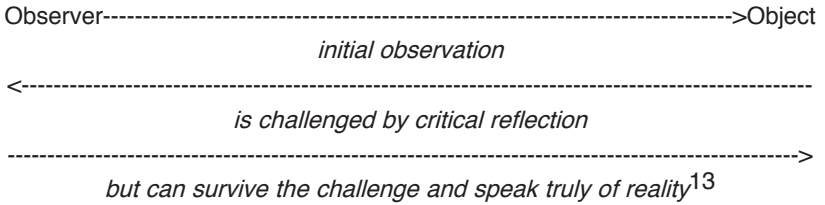


His diagram of the phenominalist position is also reproduced below.



Critical realism retains the strengths of each position. Like positivism it recognizes the reality of objects ‘out there’. Like phenomenism it recognizes that all knowledge is mediated. Critical realism thus ‘acknowledges the *reality of the thing known, as something other than the knower* (hence “realism”), while also fully acknowledging that the only access we have to this reality lies

along the spiralling path of *appropriate dialogue or conversation between the knower and the thing known* (hence “critical”).<sup>12</sup> His diagram of the critical realist position is reproduced below.



Wright is not asserting that critical realism leads to certainty, only to knowledge. All assertions that critical realists make are provisional in nature, and thus subject to revision.<sup>14</sup>

The crucial question that must be addressed is—are there sufficient similarities between scientific theorizing and historical reconstruction to justify the translation of critical realism from one field (philosophy of science) to the other (historical Jesus research)? Wright believes that there are. He writes that historical knowledge is subject to the same caveats as all knowledge in general.<sup>15</sup> All knowledge is arrived at through the process of hypotheses, or imagination, tested by asking particular questions of the available data.<sup>16</sup> One area in which the two are similar is access to the details of events. In both science and history, the objects of investigation are often beyond the realm of direct observation or literal description. Yet both the physicist and the historian are able to write meaningfully about phenomena that they cannot directly observe.<sup>17</sup>

The critical realist recognition that all knowledge is culturally situated in nature leads Wright to the conclusion that one’s worldview serves as the grid through which hypotheses are formed and data evaluated.<sup>18</sup> This leads Wright to build his hermeneutic around the idea of evaluating worldviews according to specific criteria. In this way he consistently applies his critical-realist epistemology to historical Jesus research. In every area of his project it is either the explicit or implicit epistemology from which he forms his hypotheses and by which he draws his conclusions.

### The Nature of Texts about Jesus

Wright maintains that texts are ‘best conceived as the articulation of worldviews, or, better still, *the telling of stories which bring worldviews into articulation*’.<sup>19</sup> All texts, with the possible exceptions of tickets and directories, communicate an implied narrative—a story that at least conceivably may be discovered within the text.<sup>20</sup> Worldviews are expressed through: (1) stories that order one’s view of reality; (2) symbols (shorthand statements of the stories); (3) answers to four ultimate questions (who are we, where are we, what is wrong, and what is the solution?); and (4) praxis, a way of being in the world. In any of these the entire worldview can be glimpsed, although stories contain the fullest expression of a worldview.<sup>21</sup> Texts contain these expressions of worldviews, which provide the reader with a fundamental tool with which to discern the meaning of the text.

The hermeneutical positivist believes that through the proper application of critical methods the right meaning can be found while the hermeneutical phenomenalist denies that any such meaning exists. Wright, in contrast to both, posits that:

A critical-realist reading of a text will recognize, and take fully into account, the perspective and context of the reader. But such a reading will still insist that, within the story or stories that seem to make sense of the whole of reality, there exists, as essentially other than and different from the reader, texts that can be read, that have a life and a set of appropriate meanings not only potentially independent of their author but also potentially independent of their reader; and that the deepest level of meaning consists in the stories, and ultimately the worldviews, which the texts thus articulate.<sup>22</sup>

In short, texts do not put one directly in touch with the thoughts or feelings of an author. That is a positivist dream, whether the positivist is a rationalist or a romanticist. Yet they are not entirely removed from the author because they express the worldview in which the author is situated. One must understand that, for Wright, worldviews are never understood individually until they have first been understood corporately.<sup>23</sup>

In *The New Testament and the People of God*, Wright reconstructs the worldview of Second-Temple Judaism.<sup>24</sup> This step is foundational for

everything Wright does in seeking the historical Jesus. Wright thus insists that one discover the worldview of a text from within the text itself, not impose a *Sitz im Leben* derived from outside the text upon a text.<sup>25</sup>

Because a critical-realist reading is by definition provisional and constantly subject to revision, knowledge of the worldview the text communicates is provisional, and constantly open to revision. This means that a text may refer to persons, objects, or events beyond itself, but the reader can never be certain that he or she has correctly grasped that to which the text refers.<sup>26</sup> Against the backdrop of a particular worldview, however, some readings are more appropriate than others.<sup>27</sup>

### The Role of the Reader

The reader must first discern from a text an understanding of the worldview it articulates. This is foundational. When one fails to grasp the worldview of a text, one cannot hope to understand it correctly. To understand the worldview of a text, one must analyze the story that the text is seeking to affirm, address, or undermine.<sup>28</sup> To this end Wright recommends a 'cautious use' of elements of A. J. Greimas's narrative structuralism or actant analysis of stories.<sup>29</sup> Recognizing that Greimas' method is decidedly anti-historical, Wright's intention is not so much to follow it slavishly, but to reuse a particular aspect of it.<sup>30</sup> The fact that narrative analysis does not focus on the meaning of texts, but on their function, seeking to understand plot moves that are invariably made within the story, forces the reader to pay close attention to how the story actually works. Because the gospel stories are so familiar to Christian scholars, exegetes often approach them as if they already know how they work and thus overlook their structure. Wright sees the application of narrative analysis as a means to guard against this tendency.<sup>31</sup>

Although he grants that narrative analysis will not work for all texts,<sup>32</sup> it is clear that he believes that it may be used fruitfully in a broad sense for many, if not most, biblical texts. Even Pauline passages may be more readily understood for their full worth when this approach is applied.<sup>33</sup>

One difficulty in applying this model in practice is that the gospels in particular, and the biblical texts in general, are not simple in form. In the gospels one often finds one or more stories within a story. Therefore one

role of the reader is to understand how the smaller stories function within the larger story that Jesus is telling. One cannot afford to lose sight of either the forest or the individual trees. Wright's use of narrative analysis is intended to keep the forest in sight. One should not suppose, however, that the shorter units are unimportant. In various ways they also relate the overall worldview story. 'Short poems and aphorisms are what the snapshot is to the *story* of a holiday, a childhood, a marriage.'<sup>34</sup> But like the snapshot the shorter, non-contextual units are understood against the backdrop of the overall worldview story. Wright thus emphasizes the larger story over the smaller stories one finds within the overall worldview story.<sup>35</sup>

Not everyone is convinced that narrative analysis and critical realism belong together. J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh reject the nomenclature of critical realism. They write:

Our problem with critical realism is that such an epistemological framework still carries too many overtones of a realism that has proven to be bankrupt and has legitimately been deconstructed by postmodern thought. 'Critical realism' could be a cover for a chastised, more humble (kinder and gentler) realism. But as a realism it seems to hide a pretentious aspiration to 'get it right.' "If only we are sufficiently self-critical," the critical realist seems to be saying, "then we will finally get to the thing itself." Such an aspiration, however, is epistemologically impossible to realize.... Indeed, it rests upon the conviction that a final, universally true perspective can be achieved. But more important, in the light of a biblical understanding of reality, such an aspiration is undesirable because it invariably (if unwittingly) ends up in a totalizing stance that is idolatrous in character. Simply put, critical realism does not seem sufficiently to fill the requirements of epistemological stewardship.<sup>36</sup>

They recommend that one adopt a narrative approach to truth apart from any form of realism, critical or otherwise.

Van Huyssteen, on the other hand, holds that narrative approaches to knowledge are consistent with critical realism, so long as the narrative is open to critique from other sources.<sup>37</sup> Gary Comstock distinguishes between 'pure' narrative theologies and 'impure' narrative theologies. Pure narrative theologies

are not open to philosophical analysis whereas impure narrative theologies are. Comstock notes that pure narrativists are anti-foundationalist, 'cultural-linguistic, Wittgensteinian-inspired descriptionists', while impure narrativists are 'revisionist, hermeneutical, Gadamerian-inspired correlationists'.<sup>38</sup> Related to this, David Tracy maintains that 'narratives contain all sorts of historical, psychological and metaphorical claims and therefore invite the critical inquiry of historians, feminists, and philosophers'.<sup>39</sup>

Like virtually everyone who uses narrative criticism, Wright believes that the starting point for theology should be the biblical story, not philosophical reflection. But Wright does not discourage either philosophical reflection upon the biblical story or systematic theologizing.<sup>40</sup> What he does reject is beginning with theological propositions and moving to the story, rather than approaching theology from the foundation of story.<sup>41</sup> Wright's use of narrative analysis in the service of historical research is thus consistent with Comstock's category of impure narrative theology.

The fact that story is by far the most important expression of the four worldview indicators Wright has identified does not mean that the other worldview indicators are unimportant. In fact they play a role in making the worldview story that much more clear. Symbols point to what the group understands to be significant, and at the same time also function as boundary-markers: those who observe them are insiders, those who do not are outsiders.<sup>42</sup> Praxis indicates what is given priority in that group. In seeking to analyze praxis and symbols one evaluates not only texts written by members of a group, but also texts written by others about them, as well as other expressions beyond writing, such as art or worship materials.<sup>43</sup> Praxis, more than any other element of a worldview, is crucial to determining the aims, intentions, and motivations of historical characters.<sup>44</sup> More on aims, intentions, and motivation will be said below. From one's conclusions concerning praxis and symbols as they relate to the overarching worldview story, implicit answers to the four questions (who are we, where are we, what is wrong, and what is the solution?) can be drawn.<sup>45</sup> All the indicators of a worldview merit the reader's attention. Additionally all of the worldview indicators relate reciprocally to all of the others. Wright's diagram illustrating this relationship is reproduced below.<sup>46</sup>



Story-telling humans----->Story-laden world  
*initial observation (already within a story)*

-----<  
*is challenged by critical reflection on ourselves as story-tellers (i.e.  
 recognizing that our claims about reality may be mistaken)*

----->  
*but can, through further narrative, find alternative ways of speaking truly  
 about the world, with the use of new or modified stories*

#### Story, Praxis, Questions, Symbols<sup>47</sup>

Once the reader has discerned the larger worldview story that the New Testament texts are articulating, modern critical disciplines such as form and/or redaction criticism may fruitfully be used, albeit without Bultmann's faulty presuppositions.<sup>48</sup> Wright stresses that form criticism was not originally intended to discover Jesus, but rather to discover the forms of the earliest Jesus stories. This sort of information can be very useful to biblical scholars of all persuasions. Wright contends that attention to the form of the Gospel stories affords one insight into their oral history. An oral history simply outlines how stories concerning Jesus developed to the point at which one finds them in the Gospels. One need not assume that such stories were created out of thin air or had no historical referent. An oral tradition, on the other hand, results from a teacher's instructing his disciples concerning both the form and the content of the message that they are to convey.<sup>49</sup>

Traditional form critical methods have made much of various criteria of authenticity. Two criteria often used, despite the fact that they are on the surface contradictory, are those of dissimilarity and similarity.<sup>50</sup> Wright links the two and insists that the passages that are most likely to be authentic are those that show Jesus as both similar and dissimilar to both first-century Judaism and the early church. He thus advocates double similarity and double dissimilarity as one criterion.<sup>51</sup> When something can be seen to be credible, though perhaps deeply subversive (similar yet dissimilar) within first-century Judaism, and credible as the implied starting-point, though not an exact replica, of something in later Christianity (similar, yet dissimilar), there is a strong possibility that one is in touch with the genuine history of Jesus.<sup>52</sup> This is crucial for historical research of new movements and significant individuals. Because new movements spring out of existing movements, there will necessarily be some similarity between the old and the new. But in order for the new to be genuinely

new it must also be distinctly dissimilar to the old. The fact that followers are never fully able to imitate their master also supports Wright's criterion of double similarity/dissimilarity.<sup>53</sup>

Redaction criticism helps one to understand the intention of the evangelist. Stories are neither told nor retold without a reason. One may thus recognize a development in intention concerning Gospel pericopae. As with form criticism, none of this requires that Gospel pericopae necessarily do not come originally from Jesus.<sup>54</sup>

It is thus clear that the reader must operate on two levels. Form and redaction criticism are required at the level of the smaller (or inner) stories, the gospel pericopae (not individual logia—at least not initially). Narrative analysis is necessary both at the level of the gospel pericopae and the larger story of Israel's God fulfilling his covenant (through Jesus) in actual space-time events.

One might say that Wright proposes both a micro-hermeneutic (refined form and redaction criticism, built around the criterion of double similarity and double dissimilarity) and a macro-hermeneutic (narrative structural analysis). In this way Wright combines the diachronic methods of modern literary criticism (form and redaction criticism) with the synchronic methods of narrative criticism (narrative structural analysis). But the reader must first give attention to the narrative structure of a passage because that is the level at which the worldview becomes clearest through the vehicle of story. By giving attention to the form of a passage against the backdrop of the overall worldview the text affirms or addresses, one can better grasp the intention of the author.<sup>55</sup>

In this way, Wright reverses the order in which New Testament critical work has been done for the better part of this century. Instead of working from the minute (Gospel pericopae) to the general (larger narrative sections), he posits that readers should work from the greater to the more minute.

All of the above has dealt with how the reader reads the text. But the reader is not only responsible to discern the worldview of a text, but also to understand his or her own worldview. Wright stresses that 'we cannot stand outside our own worldviews, any more than we can see without our own eyes'.<sup>56</sup> It thus becomes clear that readers must not only study the text before them, but also

critique themselves both before and during the reading of a text. Much of Wright's approach to analyzing the New Testament worldview was developed by Brian Walsh and J. Richard Middleton<sup>57</sup> as a way to analyze contemporary worldviews and communicate the gospel cross-culturally. This means that it may also be used effectively by a reader to discern his or her own worldview and hopefully guard against reading a text through a worldview that is foreign to it.

In summary, the first role of the reader is to discern the worldview of a text by analyzing the structure of the story that the text is seeking to affirm or subvert as well the other worldview indicators (symbol, praxis, ultimate questions). The second role of the reader is to analyze the smaller individual stories within the overall worldview story by application of revised form and redaction criticism. Finally the reader must critique his or her own worldview and make every effort not to allow their own worldview to hinder their understanding of the worldview of the text.

#### What Constitutes a Legitimate Reading

As mentioned above, a critical-realist approach to texts insures that the meaning one deduces from a text will be necessarily provisional and open to revision. But there are some readings that are inappropriate, or at least less appropriate than others. In other words, a text may have more than one meaning, but not an infinite number of equally valid meanings. If the reader allows his own worldview to override the worldview of the text, the resultant reading cannot be one of Wright's more appropriate readings.

So how exactly does one discern an appropriate reading from an inappropriate one? Wright directs the reader to Anthony Thiselton's assertion that for many speech-acts there must be a 'fit' between what is said in the text and events in the extra-linguistic world.<sup>58</sup> Wright seems to mean that by discerning the worldview that the text articulates, one can apprehend something similar to what Schleiermacher calls the life-world of the text, and thus roughly arrive at Thiselton's "fit."<sup>59</sup> It appears that Wright sees his use of "worldview" to be roughly synonymous to Schleiermacher's use of "life-world."<sup>60</sup> Legitimate readings provide meanings that 'fit' within the worldview of the text.

More specifically Wright insists that a legitimate reading of the Bible will take seriously Scripture's historical, literary, and theological dimensions. If a

reading does not allow for all three, it is deficient. Reading a text simply for its (modern) historical meaning (what did it mean when written?) results in the loss of contemporary and personal relevance. Robert Morgan (with John Barton) writes that such an approach results when New Testament critics mistake a historical method for the historical goal.<sup>61</sup> But when a text is read simply for its (postmodern) literary effect (what does this mean to me?), it often is stripped of its public relevance.<sup>62</sup> Critical realism demands that the story that the Bible tells be understood as public, not private in nature. Therefore a purely private reading is not a legitimate option.<sup>63</sup>

Finally, biblical texts must also be read in such a way that they are allowed to speak in a theological sense, that is to say a word about God, and to say that word in a normative fashion. A theological component is not merely an addendum to biblical hermeneutics; it is a necessary ingredient.<sup>64</sup> The main reason a theological component is necessary for historical research is that there is a necessarily theological component, either explicitly or implicitly, within the stories that are inherent in worldviews.<sup>65</sup>

Asking theological questions of a text thus goes hand in hand with posing historical or literary questions. Wright points out that it is hermeneutically inconsistent to treat statements that are theological (about God) any differently than statements that are political or sociological. Theological language is therefore 'on the same footing as language about anything else' and as such one should, 'affirm the right of theological language to be regarded as an appropriate dimension of discourse about reality'.<sup>66</sup>

Wright does not propose to bypass literary or historical concerns. Neither does he assume that theological language is gifted with a perspective that other language lacks. Consistent with critical realism, theological language is public, that is, subject to critique and correction.<sup>67</sup> In this way he seeks a theological reading that will enhance both literary and historical dimensions.<sup>68</sup>

A theological reading must be part of a biblical hermeneutic because a concern for theology brings out a dimension of the worldview that historical and literary criticism are not equipped (or intended) to address. This dimension is the dimension of the symbolic.<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, theology 'suggests certain ways of telling the story, explores certain ways of answering

the questions, offers particular interpretations of the symbols, and suggests and critiques certain forms of praxis'.<sup>70</sup>

What of reading the Bible in a normative sense? Wright proposes a model for biblical authority in which the Bible is understood in similar fashion to an extant portion of a Shakespearean play lacking most of the final act. The play is entrusted to experienced and sensitive Shakespearean actors, who are charged with immersing themselves in the earlier stages of the play and acting out for themselves the final act.<sup>71</sup> The completed portion of the play would be the authority for the ending. The ending could be challenged as inappropriate. All possible conclusions would have to demonstrate their consistency with the extant part of the story that the play told. But there could be no authorized, once-for-all ending. Shakespeare's words would never be confused with the words of the cast. But Shakespeare's words would exercise some authority over any cast, and every suggested ending would be judged by his words. In the same way, Scripture and theology are not to be confused. The authority of Scripture comes from God himself.<sup>72</sup> The authority of theological statements is derived from Scripture in much the same way that harmonic overtones in music are derived from an original fundamental.<sup>73</sup> In the same way, theological statements are only authoritative to the degree that they are derived from Scripture.

Wright insists that a legitimate reading will 'fit' within the worldview of the text, and a legitimate reading will include historical, literary, and theological dimensions. Because the reading is based upon a critical-realist epistemology it cannot be understood as objectively true, but neither can it be understood as private. An appropriate reading is mindful of these concerns and continues to be open to critique and revision, but not to revision apart from critique.

#### Hermeneutics and History

Wright contends that the task of historical reconstruction is impossible if one fails to understand the interpreted nature of all historical inquiry. He does not deny either the reality of objective events in the past or that people often speak of history in this sense. He simply wants to disabuse his readers of the idea that there is such a thing as 'mere history'.<sup>74</sup> That idea is a positivist myth. On the other hand, history is not created by hermeneutics in an ontological sense. History does not consist of either 'bare facts' or 'subjective

interpretations'.<sup>75</sup> It is apparent that all historical writing involves both a process of selection (one event or person is written about while another is not). What is not as readily apparent is that selection entails a process of interpretation (selection is determined on the basis of what is deemed meaningful).<sup>76</sup> Clearly then, interpretation (hermeneutics) is as much a part of writing history as it is of reading history. Wright attempts to write about history as interpretation in a way that does not exclude history as 'real events in the past'.<sup>77</sup> His understanding of the relationship of hermeneutics to history is consistent with critical realism: history tells about *objective events* in the past *through interpretation*, not apart from it.

Wright addresses some faulty notions concerning history. He applauds the work of C. W. Fornara and Colin Hemer<sup>78</sup> in rejecting the idea that ancient historians did not understand the perspectival nature of writing history. He further labels the idea that ancient writers felt free to create stories out of thin air or to blend fantasy, legend, and fact together and call it history, a modern myth.<sup>79</sup>

Wright points out two other mistakes that readers of New Testament history commonly make. The first is to assume that one already knows certain things about a text or its contents before reading the text. This sort of approach often leads one down a blind alley rather than to the text's most appropriate meaning due to one's sifting out data that contradict what one already knows to be the case. The second mistake is reading the biblical text purely with an eye to organizing its data into theological conclusions. Both of these errors evidence a misunderstanding of the nature of historical texts, be they religious or otherwise.<sup>80</sup>

In Wright's opinion new tools are needed for doing New Testament history. He recognizes that the pre-modern dogmatic approach to history is distorting. He also understands that the modern approach to historical knowledge with its distinctions between subject-object and natural-supernatural is even more distorting. He therefore calls for both a new epistemology and a new ontology.<sup>81</sup> Both his suggested new epistemology and his suggested new ontology involve the vehicle of story. Epistemologically one should be prepared to listen to all sorts of stories about life and reality, even those that may subvert one's own story. If one's story (worldview, ontology) is subverted by another story, one must not be allowed to reject such a story for superficial

reasons. The only responsible reaction to a story that makes more sense of the world is to make it one's own, or at least to incorporate part of it into one's own story.<sup>82</sup>

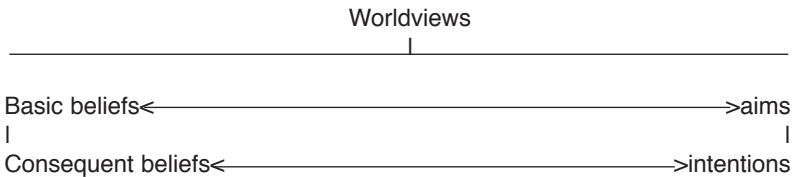
Wright understands the meaning of history, at its most important level, to consist of 'the intentionalities of the characters concerned (whether or not they realize their ambitions and achieve their aims)'.<sup>83</sup> The goal of the historian then is to move from event to meaning.<sup>84</sup> To this end, Wright distinguishes between *aims, intentions, and motivations*. An aim is the fundamental direction of a person's life. An intention is the specific *application* of the aim in a particular situation. Motivation deals with the specific sense, on one specific occasion, that a certain action or set of actions is *appropriate* and desirable (for accomplishing one's intent).<sup>85</sup> All this implies that 'meaning' will necessarily be found on several levels, when one examines significant events in history or the actions of historical persons. Wright lists three levels at which meaning may typically be found: (1) the intentionalities of the character in question (Caesar crossed the Rubicon to set himself above the law of the Republic); (2) the contemporary relevance of the events (would-be tyrants should be watched closely when they make vital strategic moves); and (3) the revealed divine intention of an event (Caesar's hubris did not go either unnoticed or unpunished by God).

Wright maintains that he is not seeking to discover the psychological state of Jesus' mind.<sup>86</sup> He contends that one may reasonably grasp the intention of historical figures by evaluating their words and actions against the backdrop of their worldview.<sup>87</sup> Building upon the work of Ben Meyer,<sup>88</sup> he seeks to deduce Jesus' intentions by evaluating his praxis (both verbal and visual) within the context of the worldview of Second-Temple Judaism. He then works from his worldview to uncover Jesus' basic beliefs, aims, consequent beliefs and intentions.

According to Wright, one's worldview becomes apparent on a day-to-day basis through certain basic beliefs and aims that are discussed somewhat regularly by those sharing a particular worldview. These basic beliefs and aims then produce consequent beliefs and intentions. There may be some variation and disagreement at both the levels of basic beliefs/aims and consequent beliefs/intentions, without those holding to particular positions necessarily changing their basic worldview. Wright illustrates how this works through a political analogy: Modern Western materialists hold a worldview

of a certain sort, which expresses itself in basic beliefs about society and economic systems, and in basic aims about appropriate employment and use of time....It is perhaps possible for someone to become convinced that some of these basic beliefs and aims are misguided, and so (for instance) to change from being a Conservative Western materialist to being a Social Democrat Western materialist, or *vice versa*, without any fundamental alteration of worldview.

These *basic beliefs* and *aims*, which serve to express and perhaps safeguard the worldview, give rise in turn to *consequent beliefs* and *intentions*, about the world, oneself, one's god. These, in their turn, shade off in various directions, into opinions held and motivations acted upon with varying degrees of conviction. Many discussions, debates and arguments take place at the level of consequent belief and intentions, assuming a level of shared basic belief, and only going back there when faced with complete stalemate.<sup>89</sup> Wright illustrates this model through the diagram below:



This model allows one to move from historical events to historical meaning. When reconstructing the historical Jesus, he will use both this model and worldview analysis to gain a historical understanding of Jesus.<sup>90</sup>

Consistent with critical-realism, Wright suggests a model of historical research that is much like that employed by most sciences: hypothesis followed by verification. There are three criteria by which any historical claim may be evaluated. The first concerns the available data. Any hypothesis must include all the data that one knows of concerning the subject.<sup>91</sup> The second involves the scope of the hypothesis. It must be no more complex than required by the coherent inclusion of all the data.<sup>92</sup> The third criterion is, in many ways, the ultimate test of any historical conclusion—it must actually make better sense



not only of the available data, but also of other related fields, as well as life as one lives it, than all other available hypotheses.<sup>93</sup> As with every other part of Wright's approach, this is all conditioned by critical realism's ongoing spiral of knowledge. Historical knowledge, like all knowledge, is always knowledge under critique, knowledge constantly subject to revision, as need be.

In conclusion, Wright's hermeneutic includes elements of Walsh and Middleton's worldview analysis, Greimas's narrative analysis, Meyer's analysis of intentionality, and Wright's revised application of form and redaction criticism. All these elements are applied in a manner consistent with Wright's commitment to critical realism as his basic epistemology.

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#### ENDNOTES

1. N. T. Wright is Bishop-Elect of Durham. He is at present Canon Theologian of Westminster Abbey in London. Prior to serving at Westminster Abbey, he taught at Cambridge University, McGill University, and Oxford University. He also has served as Dean of Lichfield Cathedral and as visiting professor for Alonzo L. McDonald Family Professorship of Evangelical Theological Studies at Harvard University. Tim Stafford, "N. T. Wright: Making Scholarship a Tool for the Church," *Christianity Today*, 8 February, 1999: 42-46; personal conversation with Wright, November 21, 1999.
2. At the time he was writing the first volume, Wright envisioned a five-volume project. Wright, NTPG, xiii. The project has since increased by one volume, personal conversation with Wright, August 16, 1997. Volume 3 of the series, (*The Resurrection of the Son of God*) was released in March, 2003. If early returns are any indication, it will receive attention and acclaim similar to that received by the two previous volumes.
3. Richard B. Hays, back cover of Wright, NTPG.
4. Useful texts on critical realism include, Roy Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science*, 2d edn. (London: Verso, 1997); *idem*, *Reclaiming Reality* (London: Verso, 1989); *idem*, *Scientific Realism and Human Emancipation* (London: Verso, 1986); Andrew Collier, *Critical Realism: An Introduction to Roy Bhaskar's Thought* (London: Verso, 1994); Peter Manicas, *A History and Philosophy of the Social Sciences* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987). The roots of critical realism lie in the New Realist epistemology of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. New realism was a type of

direct realism that served as a reaction to the idealism of the nineteenth century. The critical realism of R. W. Sellars and G. Dawes Hicks served as a *via media* between new realism and idealism by acknowledging the mediatory role of mental concepts in human knowledge, while at the same time insisting on the independent, objective reality of external objects. As an epistemological system critical realism began to flounder in the 1940s, but Roy Bhaskar's appropriation of it in philosophy of science led to a contemporary revival of the concept. Cf. Andrew Collier, "Critical Realism" in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 2. ed. Edward Craig. (London: Routledge, 1998); C. F. Delaney, "Critical Realism," in Robert Audi, ed., *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); *idem.*, "New Realism," in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*.

5. A brief list of those who advocate the use of critical realism in theology and/or biblical studies includes, J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997); *idem.*, *Theology and the Justification of Faith: Constructing Theories in Systematic Theology*, trans. H. F. Snijders (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989); Niels Henrik Gregersen and J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, eds., *Rethinking Theology and Science: Six Models for the Current Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); Ben F. Meyer, *Critical Realism and the New Testament*, Princeton Theological Monograph Series (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick, 1989); John Polkinghorne, *Belief in God in an Age of Science* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); *idem.*, *Science and Christian Belief: Theological Reflections of a Bottom-Up Thinker* (London: SPCK, 1994); Langdon Gilkey, *Nature, Reality and the Sacred* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993); Ian Barbour, *Issues in Science and Religion* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1971); Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*; and Paul Hiebert, *Missiologial Implications of Epistemological Shifts: Affirming Truth in a Modern/Postmodern World* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999); Susan Gallagher and Roger Lundin, *Literature Through the Eyes of Faith* (New York: Harper and Row, 1992); and K. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*.
6. Van Huyssteen, *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology*, 41.
7. *Ibid.*, 43.
8. *Ibid.*, 48.
9. Wright's description of critical realist epistemology is necessarily broad. There are, in fact, different varieties and expressions of critical realism. Nevertheless his basic point is one that virtually all critical realists would agree with: one may not conclude that, because all perception takes place in the mind, perceived objects exist only in the mind. In other words, one may grant several tenets of idealism

without conceding all its conclusions. It appears that Wright is primarily following Ben Meyer's exposition of critical realism, which Meyer indicates is influenced by Bernard Lonergan's phenomenology of knowledge. See Ben F. Meyer, *Critical Realism and the New Testament*. For Lonergan's perspective, see Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1958); *idem*, *Method in Theology* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1974).

10. Wright, NTPG, 35.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.* Wright's use of the adjective 'critical' is different in function from Kant's. For Kant, reason provides a critique. For Wright, reason is critiqued. *Ibid.*, 35, n12.
13. *Ibid.*, 36.
14. *Ibid.*, 35, 43. A critical realist reading is '*lectio catholica semper reformanda*'. NTPG, 67.
15. *Ibid.*, 34.
16. *Ibid.*, 37.
17. Van Huyssteen, *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology*, p. 44; NTPG, 81-92.
  
18. Wright, NTPG, 37.
19. *Ibid.*, 65. For more on worldviews, see James Olthuis, "On Worldviews," *Christian Scholar's Review* 14, no. 2 (1985): 153-64; Arthur Holmes, *Contours of a World View* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983); Brian J. Walsh and J. Richard Middleton, *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1984); J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995); James Sire, *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog*, 3d edn. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997); David Burnett, *Clash of Worlds* (Eastbourne, MARC, 1990); Paul A. Marshall, Sander Griffioen and Richard J. Mouw, *Stained Glass: Worldviews and Social Science* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989); Michael Kearney, *World View* (Novato, CA: Chandler & Sharp, 1984); Douglas A. Walrath, *Frameworks* (N.Y.: Pilgrim, 1987).
20. Wright, NTPG, 65.
21. *Ibid.*, 122-24. In JVG, Wright adds a fifth question: What time is it? JVG, 443.n.1.
22. *Ibid.*, 66.
23. *Ibid.*, 122.
24. *Ibid.*, 145-364.

25. *Ibid.*, 52-53. Craig Blomberg writes concerning form criticism's use of *Sitz im Leben*, 'If one can discern how the early church used a certain aspect of the Gospel tradition, one may better understand in what contexts today it may be most useful. ...But in most cases such reconstructions are highly speculative because they are based on what other ancient cultures did in settings that are not always closely parallel to the rise of Christianity.' C. Blomberg, "Form Criticism," in Joel B. Green and Scott McKnight, ed., *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992), p. 245.
26. Wright, NTPG, 54-64.
27. *Ibid.*, 67.
28. *Ibid.*, 78.
29. *Ibid.*, 69-70. Wright calls for use of 'Greimas-like' narrative analysis. For more on Greimas's method, see A. J. Greimas, *Structural Semantics: An Attempt at a Method*, trans. Daniele McDowell, Ronald Schleifer, and Alan Veile (Lincoln & London: Univ. of Nebraska Press); *idem*, *Du Sens* (Paris: Seuil, 1970). For a useful introduction to Greimas's method, see Corina Galland, "An Introduction to the Method of A. J. Greimas," in Alfred M. Johnson, Jr., trans. and ed., *The New Testament and Structuralism* (Pittsburgh: Pickwith, 1976). For general introductions to structural exegesis, see Daniel Patte, *What Is Structural Exegesis?* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976); *idem*, *Structural Exegesis for New Testament Critics* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1990); and Patte and Patte, *Structural Exegesis: From Theory to Practice*.
30. Wright, NTPG, 70. Wright is more directly influenced by Richard Hays's appropriation of Greimas's method than by Greimas's own work. One finds a virtually identical explanation of the method of narrative analysis in N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), pp. 204-209. The only mention of Greimas is when Wright writes that Hays is 'following the work of A. J. Greimas'. *Ibid.*, 204, n. 20. Cf. Richard Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ*, pp. 93-125.
31. For more details concerning Greimas's method, as well as a chart reproducing Wright's appropriation of it, see the appendix (Part 2).
32. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant*, 204.
33. The clearest example of how Wright uses such an approach to bear fruit in studying Paul's writings is found in ch. 10 of *The Climax of the Covenant*. In this chapter, appropriately titled "The Vindication of the Law: Narrative Analysis and Romans 8:1-11," the heart of Paul's *magnum opus* is examined from the perspective of narrative structuralism. Wright concludes that when this passage is

read in the light of narrative structuralism, it becomes clear that Paul is nowhere near as negative in his understanding of the Law as some (e.g., Luther and Bultmann) have supposed him to be. From this, one can see clearly that the 'law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus' (8:2) and the 'law of sin and death' (8:2b) are not two separate laws, each opposed to the other, but one law, the Torah, working in different ways at different times to achieve an overall divine purpose. *Ibid.*, 209-210. Wright also uses narrative analysis, although not so obviously, in *What Saint Paul Really Said*. Cf. N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Oxford: Lion, 1997), pp. 113-34.

34. Wright, NTPG, 65.
35. *Ibid.*, 69.
36. Middleton and Walsh, p. 168.
37. Van Huyssteen, *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology*, pp. 189-90.
38. Gary Comstock, "Two Types of Narrative Theology," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 55, no. 4 (1987): 688. Other articles touching on the differences within narrative criticism and narrative theology include, Gary Comstock, "Truth or Meaning? Ricoeur versus Frei on Biblical Narrative," *Journal of Religion* 66, no. 2 (1986): 119. The ranks of the purists would include Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974); George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984).
39. David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1975), p. 52.
40. Wright, JVG, 653.
41. Wright, NTPG, 139.
42. *Ibid.*, 123.
43. *Ibid.*, 359-69.
44. *Ibid.*, 124.
45. *Ibid.*, 369. Middleton and Walsh note that the four questions correspond to elements of a drama—'Where are we?' relates to the component of setting; 'Who are we?' relates to casting; 'What's wrong?' reveals the underlying plot conflict. 'What's the remedy?' relates to the component of plot conflict. Middleton and Walsh, p. 64.
46. *Ibid.*, 44
47. Wright, NTPG, 124.
48. Bultmann and his followers wrongly assumed that the early church developed

- in a two-stage process from Palestinian Judaism to Hellenistic Catholicism. They also wrongly assumed that the early church felt free to put words into the mouth of Jesus, if it served their purposes to do so. Finally they misunderstood myth as being non-historical rather than as stories of actual events invested with ultimate (theological) meaning. NTPG, 420-27. For evangelical assessments of the usefulness of believing form and redaction criticism, see Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, pp. 71-131; Darrell L. Bock, "Form Criticism," in *New Testament Criticism and Interpretation*, ed. David A. Black and David S. Dockery (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), pp. 175-96; Grant R. Osborne, "Redaction Criticism," Stephen H. Travis, "Form Criticism," in I. Howard Marshall, ed., *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), pp. 153-64; Stephen S. Smalley, "Redaction Criticism," *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods*, pp. 181-95.
49. Wright, NTPG, 423.
  50. Wright attributes the significance of 'dissimilarity,' to Bultmann's presupposition that 'though Jesus was historically a first-century Jew, his first-century Jewishness was precisely not the place where his "significance" lay'. Wright, JVG, 85.
  51. *Ibid.*, 85-86.
  52. *Ibid.*, 132.
  53. *Ibid.*, 86, 131-32, 226.
  54. Wright also proposes yet another reason for the differences in the details one finds in the gospel stories: Jesus himself told the same stories over and over in slightly different forms and in different settings and contexts. There was thus some natural variation in both the form and the intent of the stories even during the ministry of Jesus. Wright, NTPG, 422-23.
  55. *Ibid.*, 378-403.
  56. *Ibid.*, 121.
  57. Walsh and Middleton.
  58. Wright, NTPG, 68. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, pp. 558-62. In this section he discusses the hermeneutics of Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Betti, Wittgenstien, and Searle concerning the possibility of reconstructing the 'life world' or 'stream of thought' of an author in such a way that there are multiple but limited possible meanings to the text. He also summarizes Ricoeur as support. See Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, p. 191.
  59. Thiselton holds that Schleiermacher's 'life-world' and John Searle's 'background' are roughly equivalent. He also points to the socio-historical work of Jerome Murphy-O'Conner as a useful model of extra-linguistic research leading to a

fit to world. From this it is clear that the life-world of a text is not found solely within the text itself. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, p. 561. See John Searle, *Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 166-76; Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *St Paul's Corinth: Texts and Archaeology* (Wilmington: Glazier, 1983).

60. Similarly Arthur Holmes sees the concept of worldview growing out of Dilthey's use of 'life-world'. Holmes, p. 32.
61. Robert Morgan with John Barton, *Biblical Interpretation*, Oxford Bible Series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 287.
62. Wright, NTPG, 66.
63. *Ibid.*, 41-42, 130.
64. Clive Marsh suggests that Wright is consistent with New Historicism when he insists on a corporate meaning and on allowing theology an explicit role in interpretation. See, "Quests of the Historical Jesus in New Historicist Perspective," *Biblical Interpretation* 5, no. 4 (1997): 411-15. This does not mean that Marsh understands Wright in the main to adhere to the New Historicist perspective. For more on New Historicism as it relates to biblical interpretation, see A. K. M. Adam, *What Is Postmodern Biblical Criticism?*, New Testament Series (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), pp. 45-58; Dan O. Via, "New Testament Theology: Historical Event, Literary Text, and the Locus of Revelation," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 19, no. 4 (1992): 369-88. *Biblical Interpretation* Vol. 5, no. 4 is devoted to the new historicism.
65. Wright, NTPG, 127.
66. *Ibid.*, 130.
67. *Ibid.*, 133-36.
68. *Ibid.*, 121.
69. *Ibid.*, 126-30. Wright uses the analogy of politics as a way of discussing internal motivations and decisions made within the same worldview. The writer is reminded of Basil Mitchell's insistence that speech about God is more akin to political speech than scientific speech. See Basil Mitchell, *The Justification of Religious Belief* (N.Y: Oxford University Press, 1981). There are some obvious differences in application and focus between Mitchell (the question of God's existence) and Wright (New Testament interpretation), but both recognize that many of the objections raised in the (Modern) past have resulted from a misunderstanding of the nature of theological language. This results in a quest for a type of result that theology was never intended to deliver.
70. Wright, NTPG, 126.

71. *Ibid.*, 140-44. For his fullest discussion of this understanding of biblical authority, see N. T. Wright, "How Can the Bible Be Authoritative?" *Vox Evangelica* 21 (1991): 7-32.
72. *Ibid.*, 14.
73. *Ibid.*, 25.
74. Wright, NTPG, 81-82, 88.
75. *Ibid.*, 81-82.
76. *Ibid.*, 83.
77. *Ibid.*, 82.
78. Charles W. Fornara, *The Nature of History in Ancient Greece and Rome* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); Colin Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990).
79. Wright, NTPG, 84.
80. *Ibid.*, 87.
81. *Ibid.*, 96-98.
82. *Ibid.*
83. *Ibid.*, 95.
84. *Ibid.*, 109-110. There are some similarities at this point between Wright's position and action theory. Both distinguish between basic events and intended results. See Hugh J. McCann, "Action Theory," in Robert Audi, ed., *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), pp. 6-7; Jennifer Hornsby, "Action," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 1:37-41. For a useful discussion of action and causality in relation to historical understanding, see David Hellel-Ruben, "Explanation in History and Social Science," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 3:525-31.
85. Wright, NTPG, 110-111. *Ibid.*, 95-96.
86. *Ibid.*, 111. Blomberg asserts that to do so would be to commit the 'intentional fallacy'. C. 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), p. 23. Cf. W. K. Wimsatt and M. C. Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy" in W. K. Wimsatt, ed., *The Verbal Icon* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1954), pp. 2-18.
87. Wright, NTPG, 109-12. Wright sees words and actions as being very closely related. There are some similarities at this point between what Wright is arguing for and 'speech-act' theory. Both argue that intentionality is a vital component in determining meaning. In other words it is through 'doing things,' whether with words (speech-act theory), physical actions (action theory), or both (Wright's



worldview analysis) that one's intentions become clear to interpreters/historians. On speech-act theory, see J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962); John Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

88. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus*, 19-21, 174-220.
89. Wright, NTPG, 125-26.
90. Wright, JVG, 142.
91. Wright, NTPG, 99-100.
92. *Ibid.*, 100.
93. *Ibid.*, 101-104.