

Wright! Write. Right?



RADU GHEORGHITA*

*Associate Professor of Biblical Studies
Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary
Kansas City, MO 64118
rgheorghita@mbts.edu*

In an instance of “creativity gone wrong,” I originally titled this essay “Jeru-Wright” because I kept thinking about Jeru-Baal as I wrote this essay. The title was supposed to be an echo of the episode in Judges 6:25-35, in which Baal is summoned to defend itself against the attacks of Gideon, the Israelite judge who destroyed the idolatrous altar. I soon realized, however, that the similarities are quite precarious, and, even worse, by associating Bishop N. T. Wright with Baal, I would have sent the exact opposite message than the one intended.

In the end, wisdom prevailed and I settled on the new title which captures, albeit enigmatically and employing a somewhat overused pun, the nature and scope of my article. The first “Wright!” designates the topic of the essay, N. T. Wright, the Bishop of Durham, an “exclamation point” theologian, who has had an epoch-making impact in New Testament studies for the last quarter of a century. The second “Write.” in the title stands for one of the most distinctive characteristics of this theologian: he is a prolific writer, which implies that his ideas are disseminated on a large scale with potentially huge impact. Last, but certainly not least, the question mark in “Right?” points to the need to assess Wright’s ideas and overall contribution to the field of New Testament studies and our understanding of the origins of Christianity.

At the outset, a word of clarification is in order regarding the readers’ expectations and the kind of article that is hereby offered. Even though the following considerations revolve around scholars and their theological disputes, focusing on one scholar in particular, by choice they have not been written in a scholarly manner. The main reason for this choice was simply the abundance of such approaches, from single

articles to entire series of books – and everything in between – a stream of publications that is unlikely to run dry anytime soon.¹ There has been a significant number of studies that engage with the ideas and the writings of Wright at the highest scholarly level published in the last decade, not leaving much justification for yet another. In fact, it was in one such volume, written predominantly by evangelical scholars, that I first became aware of the impact of Wright’s work.²

Furthermore, even though I am an enthusiastic, albeit nuanced admirer of Wright, I did not plan to advance a fully fledged defense of his theology, because I believe that he does not need any peer theologian to defend him. In this sense, then, Jeru-Wright, “Let Wright defend himself!” (cf. Judg 6:31). Here, and only here, the similarities with the Baal episode to which I alluded earlier are applicable. Wright is more than capable to present his theology and to defend it, and he does it better than anyone. Auspiciously, he is engaged in such defense almost constantly since he firmly upholds to the imperative of doing theology in the agora of ideas and not secluded in the proverbial ivory tower.³

Here, however, is the missing link that this article wants to address. In order to allow Wright to defend himself, the potential dialogue partner must give him the chance to do so. First and foremost this means engaging with the man and his work first hand, via the fruit of his labor, i.e., his books. It implies reading and understanding him, assessing his ideas and their implications; it implies observing their impact in all sorts of ways and walks of life.

But why bother to do this evaluation? Who is Wright and why does

*Dr. Gheorghita is the author of *The Role of the Septuagint in Hebrews: An Investigation of Its Influence With Special Consideration to the Use of Hab 2:3-4 in Heb 10:37-38* (WUNT 160; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 2003, which is a revision of his 2000 Cambridge University dissertation.

¹ See, for example, the two volumes edited by D. A. Carson, Peter T. O’Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid: *Justification and Variegated Nomism. Volume 1: The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001), and *Justification and Variegated Nomism. Volume 2: The Paradoxes of Paul* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004).

² 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, IL: InterVarsity, 1999).

³ The latest and the best example of theological dialogue in print is the ongoing debate between John Piper and N. T. Wright on the doctrine of justification by faith. It has generated much interest and polarization. Piper’s position is given in *The Future of Justification: A Response to N. T. Wright* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), Wright’s in *Justification: God’s Plan and Paul’s Vision* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009).

he deserve a closer look than anyone else? Wright is a New Testament scholar and theologian, the current Bishop of Durham in the Anglican Church, who comes close to what might be considered a phenomenon in the area of New Testament studies. A biblical theologian par excellence, with the rigor of a master in the research of primary sources, with an encyclopedic knowledge of the history of the Christian Church and doctrinal beliefs, and possessing equally an incredible power of synthesis of the essence of the Christian faith and a profound discernment of the complex reality in which we live, Wright will certainly be considered one of the most important theologians of our time. His contribution to our understanding of Jesus, Paul and the message of the New Testament in general will be remembered as one of the key segments in the history of NT interpretation and theology at the turn of the millennium.

It should be noted that the seed for this article was planted during the Sizemore Lectureship in Biblical Studies hosted by MBTS in the Fall of 2009. The guest speaker, Dr. Mark Seifrid, *Professor of New Testament Interpretation* of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, has acquired the reputation of being one of the keenest and most vocal critics of Wright. The two lectures he delivered for that occasion are printed in this edition of the *Midwestern Journal of Theology*. I believe that the choice for the series topic as well as for the speaker could not have been better, other than, of course, having Wright in person.

To the audience in the chapel as well as to the readers of the printed lectures, it is quite evident that Dr. Seifrid has detected serious faults in the theology of Wright, primarily in its implications for the body of reformed theology. It is not the intention of this article to summarize Dr. Seifrid's criticism and to offer a rebuttal. Dr. Rustin Umstatted of MBTS, a keen observer and assessor of Wright's theology, takes that very route in his contribution to this volume. I did not want to duplicate that approach, but to remain silent was not an option, either.

The goal of this article is more modest. While the following considerations will not be a defense in the strict sense of the word, I would like to take this opportunity to issue an invitation to all the readers to tackle and to test for themselves the theology of Wright in the most direct way. As eluded earlier, I would not extend this sort of invitation for any theologian; I am doing it, however, in Wright's case, because I believe he deserves a hearing. In the post modern era, the internet, which has become the main source of info-education, assaults us with a barrage of voices that are so noisy that the voice of the bona-fide scholar is barely audible. That is why Wright books are so valuable: In them one could still hear the scholar and not the amateur addressing the issues at the heart of the New Testament and Christian doctrine.

Here then is the plea advanced in this article: Get Wright's books

and read them! This would be the best start, a path that would avoid – at least for the time being – the never ending cycle of criticism, counter-criticism, counter-counter-criticism which is growing exponentially in Wright’s case. I myself am frequently frustrated with the inevitable law of scholarship: “criticism breeds criticism.” Yet, important as this law is, somehow in Wright’s case the rebuttals, the counter-rebuttals, and counter-counter-rebuttals have made the quarrel deafening. Time and again I have found this dialogue marred by accusations of “not reading me properly” or “not construing my words rightly” flying back and forth. It is clear to me that for Wright this unfortunate pattern will continue unabated primarily because he cannot be reduced to sound bites and clichés; his proposals are far too complex and loaded with too much theological nuance to permit sound-bite rebuttals.

At this juncture, however, a personal testimony is in order. It was during my early seminary years at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School that I first came across the ideas of Wright in a course on the Synoptic Gospels focusing on the life and teachings of Jesus. During the study of Jesus’ parables we reached Luke 15 and the well known parable of the prodigal son. Here is Wright, speaking for himself:

Son, or father? The prodigal son, it is often called; but the son is not the only prodigal in the story. This is an explosive narrative, designed to blow apart the normal first-century reading of Jewish history and to replace it with a different one. Just as we saw in NTPG that some retellings of the Jewish story were designed to subvert others...so this tale subverts the telling of the story which one might expect from mainstream first-century Jewish, not least those claiming to be the guardians of Israel’s ancestral heritage.

He continues,

Years of scholarship have produced many commentaries on Luke, and many books on the parables. But none that I have been able to consult has noted the feature which seems to me most striking and obvious. Consider: here is a son who goes off in disgrace into a far country and then comes back, only to find the welcome challenged by another son who has stayed put. The overtones are so strong that we surely cannot ignore them. This is the story of Israel, in particular of exile and restoration. It corresponds more or less exactly to the narrative grammar which underlies the exilic prophets, and the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, and a good deal of subsequent Jewish literature, and which must therefore be seen as formative for second-Temple Judaism. The exodus itself is the ultimate backdrop: Israel

goes off into a pagan country, becomes a slave, and then is brought back to her own land. But exile and restoration is the main theme. This is what the parable is about.⁴

I remember vividly the impact this idea had on me. It was not only a novel and unexpected twist in the interpretation of the parable, for which I thought nothing new could be said; it also seemed to make very good sense in the historical milieu of Jesus' life and ministry, in fact much better sense than scores of alternative proposals. It was freshness itself, especially in a field of investigation in which recycled ideas seems to be more often the expected norm.

I was thus introduced to the world of Wright and to his overarching theological and historical reconstruction of the first-century Judaism. In Jesus, according to Wright, the God of Israel is intersecting in a decisive way with the history of humankind and its plight: His promises are fulfilled, the Temple is restored, the Covenant is renewed, and the Exile was finally over. These themes are foundational to all his subsequent work.

After that first encounter, I marked down his name for future reference. It was a decisive moment in understanding the importance of these theses and their potential to reshape the discussion in the research area of the Historical Jesus, particularly the "Third Quest," a term coined by Wright himself.⁵ Soon I was to discover that Wright is just as important a contributor in the area of Pauline studies, especially in what has become known as the "New Perspective on Paul," a label attributed to James D. G. Dunn. Since I had just started my doctoral work, the desire to delve into Wright's take on Jesus and Paul studies had to be quenched for the moment and any direct engagement with his theology postponed. I had a colleague, however, whose dissertation topic was a critical assessment of Wright's understanding of Paul. That helped me maintain a sliver of contact with the developments in Wright's world, but my main interest was devoted to the Epistle to the Hebrews and the Septuagint, two topics outside of Wright's radar.

When I finished the dissertation, Wright was on the top of things to which I was determined to return after graduation. Meanwhile, Wright's name had become the talk of the theological town. I decided that the time had arrived to look into him more seriously. There were plenty of sources to tackle: two of his volumes in the Christian Origins series were

⁴ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1997), 126.

⁵ Stephen Neill and Tom Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861-1986* (new ed.; New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 379.

out and a number of books for the laymen had also been published. I started reading with fascination, not only because I saw how much the studies of Jesus and Paul have progressed during my absence, but also because I was dealing with a central think-tank in the field, one destined to remain an essential contributor to the dialogue. I discovered in Wright a man engaged in a panoply of theological and ecclesiastical issues, not limited to bookish exegesis but also dealing with real life issues. By now, after teaching positions at McGill University and Oxford, an unsuccessful candidacy for the position of NT professor at King's College, London, followed by an appointment as Dean of Lichfield Cathedral and later as Canon Theologian at the Westminster Abbey, Wright became the Bishop of Durham, the fourth most senior position in the Anglican Church.

Foremost, I found in Wright an incredibly good writer. In all his writing he comes across as a very able and captivating communicator. Here again is a lengthier quotation from an article on New Testament Christology:

What are we therefore saying about the earthly Jesus? In Jesus himself, I suggest, we see the biblical portrait of YHWH come to life: the loving God, rolling up his sleeves, (Isaiah 52:10) to do in person the job that no one else could do; the creator God, giving new life; the God who works *through* his created world, and supremely through his human creatures: the faithful God, dwelling in the midst of his people; the stern and tender God, relentlessly opposed to all that destroys or distorts the good creation, and especially human beings, but recklessly loving all those in need and distress. 'He shall feed his flock like a shepherd; he shall carry the lambs in his arms; and gently lead those that are with young.' It is the Old Testament portrait of YHWH; but it fits Jesus like a glove.

Let me be clear, also, what I am not saying. I do not think Jesus 'knew he was God' in the same sense that one knows one is tired or happy, male or female. He did not sit back and say to himself, 'Well I never! I am the second person of the Trinity!' Rather, 'as part of his human vocation, grasped in faith, sustained in prayer, tested in confrontation, agonized over in further prayer and doubt, and implemented in action, he believed he had to do and be, for Israel and the world, that which according to scripture only YHWH himself could do and be.'⁶

⁶ N. T. Wright, "The Biblical Formation of a Doctrine of Christ," in *Who Do You Say That I Am? Christology and the Church* (ed. Donald Armstrong; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 47-68, esp. 64-65.

I do not recall reading or hearing a more succinct, precise, biblical, and, at the same time, beautiful description of Jesus' vocation and identity as the Savior of the world. This is the kind of treat awaiting those who turn to Wright's books.

At this stage in my book-based encounter with Wright, Atlanta 2003 happened, the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society followed by the Society of Biblical Literature. It was my first chance to hear Wright in person, and I concluded that captivating as he was in his writings, he was even more so at the lectern. He was scheduled to deliver a paper and engage in a debate with J. D. Crossan on the resurrection of Jesus.⁷ Unfortunately, the designated room for the event was utterly insufficient for the interest generated by the session. In fact, about 30 minutes before the session would start, there was no standing room in the hall; all the access ways were jammed packed. I remember hearing the lecture standing on a chair by the main door, and even there, I did not benefit from a 'front-row' situation: I was hanging on the person in front of me, and backed by three more rows of people behind, all standing on chairs, grasping for a better chance to see or hear him. Not since the days of the Second Baptist Church of Oradea, the flagship Romanian church that opposed and defied the communists, had I ever seen anything of the sort. The lecture hall was taken by assault. I am sure that if the fire department knew what was going on, they would have stopped the lecture without recourse. I probably do not need to convince the reader that an interest in theology of this magnitude does not happen very often, and while flooding lecture halls are not indicative of the rightness of one's theology, I wish we had more theologians who could generate this kind of interest in their discipline, and ultimately in God's Word.

Of course, the lecture did not disappoint. In content, in civility, in wit, and foremost in the scholarship espoused, a better display of theological dialogue could not be envisaged. These occasions, unfortunately rare, prove that the old accolade still holds true: theology, when done properly, is indeed the "queen of sciences." It was also clear to me and to all the participants that in Wright the more liberal exponents of the historical Jesus have found their match. The Crossans, the Ehrmans, the Pagelses, the Macks, and the Funks of academia, to say nothing of the rest of the infamous Jesus Seminar, or the idiosyncratic Dan Brown (not really deserving a place on this list) were now assessed critically, and found wanting, demolished and replaced with a superior

⁷ The classic dialogue was later published as *The Resurrection of Jesus: John Dominic Crossan and N. T. Wright in Dialogue* (ed. Robert B. Stewart; Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2006).

reconstruction of the life of Jesus and the origins of Christianity, one more solid biblically and more accurate historically. Furthermore, this was done by someone who could not be easily dismissed or silenced simply by being labeled an evangelical conservative, unworthy of being given a hearing.

My conclusion after that meeting was easy to reach: regardless of what his critics or admirers might say, Wright is a phenomenon in the field of New Testament theology. It seems to me that he is the kind of theologian who emerges once in a lifetime. Indeed, one often hears accolades and praises similar to the one offered by Richard Hays: “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.”⁸ This indeed is the reason for writing my own kind of defense for Wright. Love him or abhor him; he will not go away, and New Testament Theology will be forever changed by his contribution.

If this article has failed to raise the readers’ interest in and determination to explore the theology of Wright, it is my own fault, not theirs. If it did, however, I would like to end by recommending a pathway into the theological world of Wright, an entry through the front door of listening to the man himself and not through the back door, tantalizingly opened by his critics. Of course, one can always try the latter route and start out by forming his or her first impressions by reading what others have said about Wright. In a sense, the articles in this volume of *MJT* offer this alternative. While, indeed, this would be a legitimate approach, in Wright’s case, I would strongly advise against it, primarily because the former pathway is so much better and offers so much more. So, start with him; then go to his admirers and his loathers.

Here then is my recommendation for a Wright 101. Nothing seems to be more important to the reader at this juncture that to become aware of the kind of books Wright has published, roughly divided into two major tiers: the scholarly studies on the one hand, and works written for a larger readership, on the other. Depending on the reader’s time, budget, and preferences, one tier may be more suitable than the other.

The first tier comprises of N. T. Wright’s scholarly contribution, the three volumes in an anticipated seven-volume series under the overarching title “Christian Origins and the Question of God,” a project undertaken by Fortress Press. None of these three titles are for the faint-of-heart; they are demanding tomes. I believe, however, that they

⁸ Jacket blurb for *Jesus and the Victory of God*.

represent theological and historical scholarship at its best. We see in them a Wright in his researcher garb, building architectonic structures, analyzing biblical passages, clarifying potential misinterpretations, defending his position and engaging others with the vigor of a seasoned scholar. The footnotes and bibliography galore will satisfy the expectations of even the most demanding reader.

The first volume in the series introduces the theological landscape of Wright's program and functions as a methodological prolegomena to the subsequent volumes.⁹ Volumes two and three cover essentially the life of Jesus within its historical, literary and theological contexts.¹⁰ The material is somewhat unevenly distributed between them, with roughly 660 pages devoted to the teachings, the life and death of Jesus, in volume two, while a massive 750 pages treat the resurrection of Jesus in the third volume, a partition not planned originally. The subject matter of the third volume was intended to be the concluding chapter in the second volume: the result of the research, however, had outgrown its intended banks and demanded to be released as a separate volume. It offers one of the best ever scholarly analyses and defenses of the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ as a historical event. Even as I write, word circulates that volume four in the series, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, an eagerly anticipated study on Paul, might be released in 2010.

Worthy of a place in this first tier is also Wright's 400 page commentary on the book of Romans. It is part of the New Interpreter's Bible, one of the finest series of commentaries on the Bible in print. Since his doctoral work Paul's letter to the Romans has always been a primary focus of Wright's work. It is no surprise then to see his attention turning to the crown of Pauline corpus for a scholarly commentary. I find it full of fresh and interesting insights, arresting in its exegesis, fair in the treatment of the difficult passages, and, foremost, animated by the desire to let Paul be Paul. There is a constant effort to prevent as much as possible this first century document becoming cluttered by theological and ecclesiastical debates developed centuries later. A commentary written from the vantage point of having the Greek text of the epistle memorized will always command respect.

It is beyond any doubt that the aforementioned volumes, both the historical-literary-theological investigation of nascent Christianity as well as the trademark exegetical commentary on Romans would convince any skeptic of Wright's preparedness to engage with an

⁹ N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1992).

¹⁰ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, and *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2003).

important topic such as the beginning of Christianity and the nature of God. It goes without saying that no fair criticism should be leveled against Wright before these volumes are thoroughly covered and digested. They constitute the most rigorous presentation, explanation, and defense of his positions.

For the busy pastor or student, who would rather approach Wright in smaller strides, the options available are even more accommodating. The Jesus and Pauline studies are roughly summarized in three volumes: *The Challenge of Jesus, What Did Paul Really Say?* and *Paul in Fresh Perspective*.¹¹ Each one of these volumes rehearses in condensed format and in more accessible language the essence of Wright's position on these matters. Alongside these volumes there is a sprawling collection of thematic studies in areas of applied theology as diverse as the authority of Scripture,¹² Christian worship,¹³ and the presence and the reality of evil.¹⁴ As I write, I have on my desk the latest book of Wright on ethics and the Christian character.¹⁵ It forms, together with two earlier titles, *Surprised by Hope* and *Simply Christian*, a formidable trilogy of applied NT theology.¹⁶ The last mentioned one in particular is a sure candidate to become a classic, and will do for our generation what C. S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity* did for the generation before us. All the titles in the second tier remind me of a well composed fugue of J. S. Bach, in which the main theme is first stated, then retaken in a different register, expanded, inverted, compelled to enter into inter-voice dialogue, only to be brought to a harmonious final accord.

Alongside these predominantly thematic approaches, there is a fine series of NT commentaries published by John Knox Westminster Press, including such titles as *Hebrews for Everyone* and *Acts for Everyone*. To date, the series covers about half of the NT books. Not since William

¹¹ N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), and *Paul in Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2005).

¹² N. T. Wright, *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005).

¹³ N. T. Wright, *For All God's Worth: True Worship and the Calling of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997).

¹⁴ N. T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006).

¹⁵ N. T. Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010).

¹⁶ N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006).

Barclay's Daily Study Bible Series have I encountered a more enjoyable and helpful exposition of the biblical text.

In addition to this fervent publishing activity, Wright is a conference speaker in high demand. The interested reader will be able to follow and keep up with his recent or past lectureships on his web page, www.ntwright.com.

So, let Wright defend himself! He has made his position known both in scholarly and in larger laic circles. If the reader wants proof that the New Testament is not a boring, stale, obsolete area of research, he ought to read Wright. His reconstruction proves that the NT remains a powerful and complex locus of revelation. Each generation is called out to read it, analyze it, understand it and live it out. The answers and conclusions of yesteryear are important and are valuable, but the homework done by our theological forefathers does not absolve us of the responsibility of doing it for our own generation. This is where Wright's contribution comes into place: he is on the forefront of the theologians who have undertaken this challenge. His proposals and solutions are not infallible; his lead cannot be followed blindly; yet, he cannot be ignored nor dismissed lightly. He has many critics, some accusing him for being too far right, other for being too far left. Regardless of where Wright ends up in anyone's assessment, I believe it is important to recall that only three decades ago the then Bishop of Durham, Rev. David Jenkins, was making headlines by rejecting the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus.¹⁷ To have the same bishop seat now occupied by a theologian who not only believes and affirms the historical resurrection of our Lord, but also emerges as one of the foremost defenders of its historicity is a tribute to the power of the Gospel of our Lord.

It would be a fitting end to these thoughts to alert the readers that the 2010 annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in Atlanta will have the theme of justification as the overarching topic and Wright as one of the plenary speakers.¹⁸ The event is promising to be one of the most important, highly anticipated, and definitive evangelical debates on the doctrine of justification. Jeru-Wright!

¹⁷ The story of the controversy is chronicled in Murray J. Harris, *Easter in Durham: Bishop Jenkins & the Resurrection of Jesus* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1985).

¹⁸ For details, visit the site of the ETS: www.etsjets.org.