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*ADVANCING THE  
CHRISTIAN TRADITION  
IN THE THIRD MILLENNIUM*

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*I say my prayers, I read a book of devotion, I prepare for, or receive, the Sacrament. But while I do these things, there is, so to speak, a voice inside me that urges caution. It tells me to be careful, to keep my head, not to go too far, not to burn my boats. I come into the presence of God with great fear lest anything should happen to me within that presence which will prove too intolerably inconvenient when I have come out again into my "ordinary" life. I don't want to be carried away into any resolution which I shall afterward regret.*

C. S. LEWIS

## THE BIBLE AND THE BIG STORY: THE BIBLIOLOGICAL BURDEN OF N. T. WRIGHT



P. ANDREW SANDELIN

### ***THE LAST WORD: BEYOND THE BIBLE WARS TO A NEW UNDERSTANDING OF THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE***

N. T. Wright

New York: HarperCollins Publishers (2005)

146 pages, cloth, \$19.95

N. T. Wright is arguably the most popular New Testament scholar in the English-speaking world today. His manner is winsome, his writing incisive, his speech engaging, and his scholarship impressive. He churns out both scholarly and popular volumes more quickly than most folks can read them, and he has become a darling of many conservatives for his stalwart defense of the integrity of the historic Jesus and the biblical documents. In the wake of over one hundred years of anti-supernaturalistic bias within mainstream New Testament scholarship, Tom Wright has emerged as a champion for many conservatives who still take the orthodox view of the Bible seriously.

But not all conservatives. His revisionary definition of

justification, for example, has not won him supporters among those orthodox Reformed committed to sixteenth-century structures of soteriology, and *The Last Word* will only confirm the suspicions of those critics who already perceive Wright as a mediating theologian lacking firm evangelical convictions. Those willing to evaluate Wright on his own terms may arrive at a more positive, if still critical, assessment.

We might find it puzzling that a scholar who has devoted so many thousands of pages to explicating the message of the Bible would commit only 146 pages to his bibliology—or at least the only one he's written to date. Such puzzlement evaporates, however, when we come to grasp Wright's conception of the role of the Bible in the church and the faith. It can be boiled down to this critical distinction: *Whereas earlier evangelicals saw the Bible as explicating the contours of the Christian faith, Wright sees the Bible as itself an aspect of that larger faith—the faith is a drama, and the Bible is a component of that drama.* Earlier evangelicals conceived of the Bible as the epistemic fountainhead of the faith, while Wright suggests it is a pivotal tributary of the larger Christian drama—the Big Story, we might call it. The authority of the Bible must be understood in terms of that larger Christian drama and does not itself generate the contours of the story (30).

#### THE CRISIS OF POSTMODERNITY

Wright is aware that his countermove represents a sharp break in the traditional understanding of the Bible's authority, and he invites his readers to leave behind "one or another well-established point[s] of view" and "be prepared to do business with the [contemporary] serious debate at its cutting edges" (22). Given his penchant for identifying faith with story, Wright not surprisingly situates this debate within the literary currents surrounding postmodernism. As we will note more fully below, he joins the contemporary chorus in debunking modernism, particularly as it has viewed the Bible. Wright recognizes in the Enlightenment the seeds of this modern(istic) approach, according to which truth is

understood as scientifically quantifiable facts. By contrast, the Bible as story, according to Wright, does not conform to this standard, and therefore in the modernistic paradigm (both fundamentalist or liberal) the Bible was denuded of all truth and functional authority. In the recent *postmodern* approach, Wright finds not so much an ally of biblical authority as he does different ways of reading the Bible (feminism and post-colonialism, for example) to which a responsible view of biblical authority must be sensitive. Wright's tract is an attempt to refine and even redefine biblical authority in terms of the present cultural climate, but with an eye toward what he believes is the Bible's own approach to its authority.

#### WHAT THE BIBLE IS NOT

Wright is intent initially to communicate what the Bible is *not*. First, it is not a revelatory authority in the sense understood by conservatives for the last three hundred years, an authority exercised as a "final court of appeal," a "commanding officer," or a "list of rules" (28). The Bible reflects, rather, the Hebraic sense of authority, an authority submerged in and subordinate to *mission*. The authority manifests itself in the message and is not anterior to the message. This thesis of Wright's is not materially different from that of earlier theologians like Karl Barth, Herman Ridderbos, and G. K. Berkhofer, who refused to see Scripture as a sort of formal authority to which its redemptive message is attached. Rather, the message—salvation by grace in Jesus—is the authority. It is not clear, however, that traditional evangelicals will be persuaded by Wright's aversion to a definition of authority that excludes the Bible as a source of appeal to settle disputes.

Second, and arising from the first negation, the Bible is not merely revelation (30–32). The notion of the Bible as exclusively divine self-communication springs from an Enlightenment propensity to see God as the absentee landlord who happens to launch messages to the terrestrial outpost. Alternatively, the Christian idea is that God is constantly laboring with and in his creation for his glory and

purposes. God, to use Wright's language, "transforms" his self-revelation as it enters his "mission to the world" (31–32). This highly "dynamic" view of revelation will raise the eyebrows—and ire—of many conservatives, but Wright's proposal can at least be credited with taking seriously the incarnational character of revelation. Wright seems to be arguing that revelation cannot be mediated except in the actual mission of the church and may, in fact, be *adjusted* by that mission. In this suggestion, Wright tends to mitigate the objective character of revelation, but he capitalizes a view of revelation wedded inescapably to the ongoing message and mission of the church (the gospel).

Third, the Bible is not merely a devotional manual (32–34). While not denying this role for the Bible, Wright is worried that "hearing God speak in Scripture" may just be a form of self-deceit that leads—and, in fact, has led—to dangerous consequences for the church. For this reason, we must admit that God speaks in both creation and (preeminently) Jesus Christ. He wants to avoid reducing authority to speech. Rather, the issue is *speech-acts*: God speaks in his activity in history (and not just in redemptive history). This move to merge as sources of authority the speech of Scripture with the activity of Providence will disappoint Christians who look to the Bible as uniquely authoritative divine speech.

Positively, Wright posits (33–34) a three-pronged model of biblical authority: (1) God speaks in Scripture; (2) Scripture transforms our minds and thus transforms *us*; and (3) Scripture energizes us for mission to transform the world by the gospel.

Wright is weary of the "Battle for the Bible" waged by (mostly) American evangelicals in the 1970s and '80s, the battle instantiated in, for example, the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy. For one thing, he is convinced that we cannot situate the Bible as a stand-alone authority, even a divinely given stand-alone authority (xi, 23–25). He is at pains to identify "Authority of Scripture" as shorthand for "God's authority exercised *through* Scripture" and argues that "God's 'word' [is] not a synonym for the written scriptures but

... a strange personal presence, creating, judging, healing, recreating" (38). At first blush this distinction is not especially controversial, but Wright inquires that since the Bible is mostly a story, not a "compendium of true doctrines" (though he acknowledges that the Bible contains those doctrines), how can it be authoritative? How do *stories* exercise authority? Wright initially furnishes the example of the secretary of the cycling club who cannot get members' attention about safety precautions by straight prose, and who therefore posts on the bulletin board a tragic story of a cyclist who suffered for not obeying those safety rules. Since the Bible narrates an overarching story, Wright suggests, we must infer its authority from that narrative structure and not impose some other sort of structure on it to ascertain how it is authoritative (26–28). Moreover, biblical authority takes its place in metanarrative (25–26) in which it participates and is not an epistemic foundation for "theological method" to which conservatives have become accustomed. The story, not the Scripture, is paramount. And if the story, not the Scripture, is paramount, *the story gets to shape the Scripture*. Wright's book explains how the story does this.

Interestingly, however, by drawing attention to this difficulty of grasping how story can be authoritative while advising that the Bible is not essentially a set of received doctrines, Wright tacitly acknowledges that such a "compendium of true doctrines" can be more readily grasped as authoritative than a story can. Perhaps this is why much of the historic church (rightly or wrongly) has conceived of biblical authority in the terms Wright now revises. He really is offering a new view of biblical authority (or, Wright would likely counter, a revival of a very, very *old* view of biblical authority—that of the Bible itself), and the book's subtitle is entirely appropriate: *Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture*.

#### BUT WHAT'S THE STORY?

Wright is unhappy with a construction of biblical authority by which one settles an argument with the assertion, "The

Bible says" or even "The Bible *read in context* says" (21). He shrewdly observes that the issue of biblical authority almost always emerges amid eras of theological protest—when the Bible is under attack (from "the outside"). The view of biblical authority rising in such eras is, therefore, not as such suitable to settle how Scripture actually functions as an authority for God's people (27). As a narrationalizing champion, Wright counters with the idea of the Bible as a story—not just a canon replete with stories (which it surely is) but as itself a story within the Big (Christian) Story.

But what is the Big Story? There's the rub. Wright delimits it as the kingdom of God spreading in the earth as a result of the work of Jesus. Evil has come into God's good world, and God has sent Jesus to overcome that evil (the Christus Victor theme lurks here [35–37]). Jesus brings everything "back to rights." The Bible, targeting Israel as the covenant people in the Old Testament and the multinational church in the New Testament, narrates this story (28–34). The Bible is the Jesus-story.

#### JESUS AND THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

Unlike older views of Jesus and biblical authority, Wright is not especially interested in Jesus' "views" of the Old Testament. Rather, in dramatic fashion, he insists that Jesus occupies in the New Testament era the role that the Old Testament did for Israel (42–46): *Jesus himself is the storyline of the Bible*. For this reason, one may not abstract Jesus' assessment of the authority of the Old Testament from his kingdom ministry. To repeat: Scripture is subordinate to the story.

#### AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE IN HISTORY

Wright argues that the apostles carried on from their Lord this view of biblical authority (48–54). It was not an authority in general but the authority of a message: the story of Jesus who died for our sins and rose again to redeem the world in a most comprehensive way. This is the apostolic meaning of the

"word" of God (48). It is not a divine word spoken as such to man but a word conveying the gospel. The gospel (alone) is the "word" of God. In participating in that story, the apostles saw themselves as aspects of the narration of that word.

Likewise, the sub-apostolic church saw itself in continuity with (a subsequent "act" in) the story. Its vision of the Old Testament furnishes, according to Wright, a key to the relationship between Old and New Testaments. They conceived of the Old as an earlier act in the play, an act necessary but now superseded by another act (Jesus' redemptive activity in history). The authority of the Old Testament, like that of the New, resided in its message; and the subsequent act of the message is not repeated (just as Christ's redemptive ministry constituting the New Testament act is not repeated in our act of redemptive history today). Imbibing the story transforms the church for its mission in the world; this is how the Bible is authoritative (59).

While the sub-apostolic church generally preserved the narrational view of biblical authority, over time the church lost the "Israel-dimension" of the Bible and of itself, and "the notion of scriptural authority became detached from its narrative context" (64). Coordinate with this loss was the adoption of the allegorical method of interpretation, which was necessary to compensate for the loss. If the narrative method is abandoned, a new method of continuity must be enlisted. The allegorical method saw the Bible as a kind of codebook held together by hidden meanings. This method (extending into the medieval era) maintained the unity of the Bible but at the expense of missing its chief message, the story.

By contrast, the Reformers (rightly) jettisoned much of the allegorical sense(s) and insisted on the literal sense (73–77)—literal here meaning not anti-metaphorical but rather what the original writer intended. If he intended a metaphorical sense, that would be the "literal" sense. Wright applauds this move, but he complains that the Reformers, in meeting the Roman Catholic challenge of an authoritative church, actually undercut biblical authority by positing the Scriptures as "the place where you could go to find an authoritative ruling" (75). The

Scriptures, per Wright, are not a court of appeal but a *message* in narrative form.

If the Reformation undercut biblical authority, the Enlightenment decimated it (82–96). While the Enlightenment rightly wanted to shear the allegorical method and cut a swath back to the writers' original meaning, in time it assumed it could operate with a "neutral, scientific" (= rationalistic) approach that eroded the core of biblical faith (its supernaturalism, its dogma, and its view of the Bible itself—the effect of higher historical criticism). Enlightenment soon redefined sin as ignorance and thus salvation as knowledge (unaided human reason). Religion and knowledge were soon sequestered from one another—or, rather, religion was thought to embody a *special form* of knowledge not amenable to reason. Christianity and other religions were "kicked upstairs" out of the realm of this world and thought to inhabit only the world of belief, not knowledge, and perhaps even of superstition. In this latter move, many Christians unwittingly collaborated, "protecting" the Bible from the acid of Enlightenment historical criticism at the cost of blunting the Bible's "global, cosmic and justice-laden message and treat[ing] it only as the instrument of personal piety and the source of true doctrine about personal salvation" (89).

Postmodernism savaged the Enlightenment's pretensions of neutrality and objectivity by arguing that these views were simply power plays under the guise of scientific activity. The Bible itself was seen as a collection of misogynic, imperialistic, racist writings under the pretense of the word of God. Wright does not question this bias in all biblical texts, but he contests that a "critical realist" reading (like his own) takes account of the contributions of postmodernism without surrendering to a nihilism and skepticism about the text. Neither modernism nor postmodernism will rescue biblical authority.

#### "HOW TO GET BACK ON TRACK"

This heading is the title of the book's last chapter. He has earlier written that the Bible is authoritative as story, but how

*specifically* is *this* story authoritative? Wright gets around to answering this question on page 115, and his proposal is surprisingly existential. The Bible (within the Big Story) forms the mind of the church and steels us to "implement the resurrection" unto the final day. In short, as we read the Bible, it changes *us* within the context of the church, an aspect of the story. That story is a five-act model consisting of creation, "fall," Israel, Jesus, and the church. The first four acts are recorded in the Bible. The last act we ourselves play out on the basis of the previous four, but especially the fourth, which maintains narrational unity but offers a decisive break with the previous one (Israel). This is why as we read Paul's words to, for example, the churches in Ephesus and Corinth, we read them as though they were directed to us; we cannot say this of the Old Testament (125). Reading the fourth act, we improvise the fifth act, which we ourselves (the church) are playing out.

This notion offers a widely neglected dimension of biblical authority among reactionary, rationalist conservatives, who too often see the Bible as authoritative only in proffering information that binds us to believe and act. Here Wright could have cited Hebrews 4:12: "For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart." Word is act, not just information.

#### ASSESSMENT

This narrative view of biblical authority is likely to elicit criticism from older evangelicals like Millard Erickson (in *The Evangelical Left: Encountering Post-Conservative Evangelical Theology*), who will remind us that even if stories are authoritative in a second-order sense, they must be translated into propositions actually to assert that authority. When we read stories, we don't grasp their authority until we construct mental propositions that assert it: "Oh, I see; the author is really saying that I should (or should not) do such-and-such." Even if one affirms narrational authority, he cannot actually grasp

it except by means of self-constructed propositions. This is also why no matter how narrational the Bible is construed to be, it will never substitute for systematic theology. Stories must be translated into propositions (even if only mental propositions) in order to function as authority. The tale of the boy who cried wolf exercises authority in that one infers the proposition: "If you lie often enough, people won't believe you even when you tell the truth." Wright is correct, therefore, in stressing that propositions are no substitute for story, since story conveys the message in a powerful, emotive way. But Erickson is correct that story is no substitute for propositions, since stories derive their authority from the factuality of the propositions they narrationally clothe.

Church-shaping narrative is a neglected dimension of biblical authority, and Wright is correct to highlight it. It is not, though, the only one. Jesus and the apostles (not to mention the prophets of the Old Testament) do appeal to Scripture again and again to support assertions and settle issues (2 Kings 23:24; Isaiah 8:18–20; Matthew 4:1–11; John 5:39; Acts 17:10–11; Galatians 3:16); that is, they employ Scripture as authority in a way that Wright resists. Wright, however, seems to leave little room for this sort of exercise of biblical authority, weary as he is of North American "Bible battles."

Wright has (re-)captured a crucial aspect of biblical authority in declaring that it exercises that authority powerfully when it changes us, the people of God. This "ontological" component of Biblical authority is welcome relief to rationalist conservatives who interpret biblical authority only objectively—as though it were something outside us to which we respond in obedience. Actually, it does, by the Spirit's power in it, change us into Christ's image and thereby exerts its authority in a sublime and permanent way. But in reminding ourselves that the Bible is authoritative in that it changes us, we cannot neglect the fact that it is authoritative in that it challenges us in its very assertions and not just as its story (-ies) re-shapes the church's thinking.

Finally, while there is no doubt that the story is bigger than the Bible, it is equally true that *we get the only objectively*

*authoritative information about the story in the Bible.* It is here that we still have much to learn from the redemptive-historical and salvation history schools (e.g., Vos, Ridderbos, Cullmann, and Gaffin). The chief role of the Bible is to preserve the kerygma; it is the revelation, attestation, and interpretation of redemptive events that announces the gospel, which changes lives and families and all of human culture. The interface between the Scripture and the story cannot allow the easy subordination of the one to the other. Without the story the Scripture has no meaning; without the Scripture the story has no audience. As Ridderbos has incisively argued, the Bible itself is an aspect of redemptive history. It plays a role in mediating the message of man's redemption and in establishing the boundaries by which he must live his life under God. Wright would likely agree with this declaration, but his book is so intent to subordinate Scripture to story that the objective character of Scripture as both gospel- and regulation-bearer gets lost.

Wright's thesis is less mistaken in what it affirms than what it ignores. The Bible does disclose the Big Story culminating in Jesus, a grand five- (or six- or ten-?) act drama; but that story does not marginalize the Bible, which contains commands that bind individuals—both Christian and non-Christian, and it does not exercise its authority merely by changing us internally.

Nonetheless, the significance of Wright's book is disproportionate to its size. Rightly or wrongly, if evangelicals adopt Wright's thesis *in toto*, they will leave behind the view of biblical authority to which they have grown comfortable.

#### AUTHOR

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