

**N.T. Wright. *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*.  
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*Paul and the Faithfulness of God (PFG)* encompasses a massive two-volume study of Paul, itself part of Wright's larger (now) five volume project on Christian Origins. No one can deny the industry behind this endeavor. And the breadth of early Jewish and Christian materials assessed, driven by ambitious theological syntheses, makes the scale of the project one of its most impressive features.

In Part I of *PFG*, Wright takes up the task of addressing "Paul and His World." Wright is at his best in constructing creative metaphors encoded with rich disciplinary nuances. Wright does just this in the first chapter, as he seeks to present a case for the power of historical analysis in biblical scholarship through the example of a range of background issues surrounding Paul's letter to Philemon. Wright then proceeds in the subsequent chapter to describe Paul's Jewish context, and then in chapters 3–5 he illustrates Paul's Greco-Roman context, discussing philosophy, religion, and empire respectively.

Part II provides an overview of the "mindset" of Paul, a term used by Wright to denote an individual's variation of his or her community's shared worldview. Here Wright relies upon the worldview model used in the first volume of the five-part series, in which all worldviews (and, by extension, mindsets) are composed of four basic categories: stories, symbols, praxis, and questions. Chapter 6 is devoted both to Paul's symbolic praxis inherited from his historical context (described in Part I) and his reconstruction of this symbolic praxis in light of the coming of the Messiah and renewal of humanity. In the seventh chapter, Wright describes the foundational stories of Paul's mindset, centered around the drama of God and his creation, with all of its various subplots. Part II concludes in chapter 8 with Wright's attempt to assess Paul's answers to fundamental questions, such as "Who are we?," "Where are we?," "What's wrong?," "What's the solution?," and "What time is it?," leaving a final question (Why?) as the starting point for his account of Pauline theology in the second volume of this two-part project on Paul.

Part III of *PFG* (where Wright's second volume on Paul picks up) is by far the most substantial section, consisting of over 600 pages in just three chapters. Wright approaches Pauline theology in these chapters in terms of three Jewish theological categories (monotheism, election, and eschatology) and attempts to synthesize Pauline thought in a way that accounts for many of the motifs (e.g. participationist, juristic, apocalyptic, etc.) highlighted by different schools of thought within Pauline studies. Chapter 9 takes on Paul's rethinking (though not abandoning) of first-century

Jewish monotheism around the new revelation of the Messiah and the Spirit. This is followed in the tenth chapter by Paul's reworking of his Jewish conception of the people of God, with election now seen as the incorporation of God's people in the faithful Messiah and the application of this redemptive work through the Spirit. Finally, chapter 11 concerns Pauline eschatology, with the hope of Israel redefined around the launching of new creation in the resurrection of Jesus and the arrival of YHWH's presence in the new temple found in the indwelling of the Spirit. The resulting inaugurated eschatology, however, is faced with a set of challenges when combined with Paul's redefinition of election, and these form the subject of the remainder of the chapter, highlighted by Wright's detailed and lengthy exegesis of Rom 9-11 (*PFG* 2:1156-58).

*PFG* concludes with Part IV, which parallels Part I by examining how Paul's mindset and theology relate to and challenge the Jewish and Greco-Roman contexts described at the start of the book. Chapter 12 contains Wright's assessment of the controversial "Paul and Empire" discussion, with Wright providing a sustained critique of John Barclay's work on the topic (*PFG* 2:1307-19). Chapters 13 and 14 concern Paul's interaction with contemporary religious and philosophical movements, respectively, including a sustained critique of Troels Engberg-Pedersen. The fifteenth chapter presents issues related to Paul's Jewish identity, including the nature of his conversion/calling, and his approach to the Jewish Scriptures. The concluding (sixteenth) chapter restates many of the results of Wright's analysis and plots out several further implications.

## ***PFG's* Contribution to New Testament Scholarship**

Wright's biggest strength as a New Testament scholar is his ability to synthesize large amounts of data into a single, coherent metanarrative. This strength, however, correlates with Wright's major weakness: his focus on the big picture often results in a lack of attention given to methodological and linguistic detail. There are a few notable exceptions to this, but in general, Wright seldom engages in thorough exegesis of individual passages, which are often swept up in conformity to his overall agenda.

Wright's approach to framing Pauline theology offers another fresh contribution to the field. Wright's use of contextually-based Jewish theological categories (monotheism, election, and eschatology) offers a significant improvement over common approaches to Pauline theology that use the anachronistic framework of later Christian systematic theology. Likewise, Wright reconstructs Paul's theology in a way that does not fit neatly into the existing categories in Pauline studies, incorporating a wide range of themes into one unified and comprehensive account of Pauline thought. Despite these important advances, a few methodological concerns should be registered.

## Wright's Linguistic Methodology: *Pistis Christou* as a Case Study

First, the issue of linguistic competence. Wright does not typically comment on the original Greek biblical text in a sustained way, even though certain elements of Wright's reconstruction of Paul's thought depend heavily upon specific readings (and therefore, exegesis) of key Pauline passages and phrases. We see this perhaps most clearly in Wright's discussion of the *pistis Christou* construction and the controversy surrounding it. While Wright refers both to the ongoing debate and to his interpretation of the phrase many times throughout both volumes, the fullest discussion of his view occurs in the second volume of *PGF*, pages 836-842. In this subsection, Wright turns his attention to Rom 3-4, which plays an important role in his description of Paul's reworking of election in terms of Israel's Messiah. After citing some of the secondary literature, Wright provides an original argument for the "subjective genitive" position: in his view, the preceding context of Rom 3:22 implies that the "faith" in question is Jesus' own faithfulness, and this is seen most clearly in Rom 3:2-3. In 3:2, Paul states that the Israelites were entrusted with the oracles of God, meaning (according to Wright) that God has given a vocation to Israel with the purpose of blessing the entire world through Israel. The problem, as stated in verse 3, is that Israel has been unfaithful to this vocation; however, as Paul's rhetorical question implies, the unfaithfulness of Israel does not somehow nullify the faithfulness of God. This, Wright argues, forms the backdrop of 3:22 with its mention of the "faith of Jesus Christ," and provides the answer to the problem of Israel's unfaithfulness: God is faithful to his promise because he has blessed the world through the faithful Israelite, the Messiah. Because of the progression of the underlying argument in Rom 3, according to Wright, the *pistis Christou* construction in 3:22 must refer to Jesus' faithfulness, not to faith in Jesus.

While this argument is original and seems initially plausible, it neglects important linguistic considerations that must be taken into account in this debate.<sup>1</sup> First, Wright seems unaware of the fact that the *pistis Christou* construction is actually contained within a larger structure for the genitive word group—the prepositional phrase (i.e. group). In each of these theologically significant *pistis Christou* passages (including not only Rom 3:22, but also Rom 3:26, Gal 2:16, Gal 2:20, Gal 3:22, Phil 3:9, and Eph 3:12), *pistis* functions as the head term of a prepositional phrase. Second, Wright's analysis depends deeply upon translating *pistis* as "faithfulness." After all, what would it mean to be justified by the *faith* of Jesus? So if there are syntactic reasons for preferring the abstract sense of *pistis* (faith) over the ethical sense (faithfulness), this would undermine Wright's reading of Rom 3:22 and other similar Pauline texts. But while there are instances of *pistis* in the NT that express the "ethical" meaning of "faithfulness" that Wright and others defend, none of these instances use

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<sup>1</sup> This paragraph refers to and at places summarizes Stanley E. Porter and Andrew W. Pitts, "πίστις with a Preposition and Genitive Modifier: Lexical Semantic and Syntactic Considerations in the πίστις Χριστοῦ Discussion," in *The Faith of Jesus Christ: Problems and Prospects*, ed. Michael F. Bird and Preston M. Sprinkle (Carlisle, MS/ Peabody, UK: Paternoster/ Hendrickson, 2009), 33-53.

*pistis* as the head term of a prepositional phrase. Therefore, the occurrences of *pistis* in Rom 3:3, though (as Wright correctly notes) they convey the ethical meaning of “faithfulness,” do not help clarify the *pistis Christou* construction of Rom 3:22 precisely because they do not occur within the same syntactic environment (i.e. in a prepositional phrase), a feature that serves to disambiguate the meaning of the word group away from the ethical sense for *pistis*, upon which Wright’s reading depends.

All of this seems to me to reveal a more significant problem with his linguistic methodology: a constant reliance on the possible English translations of the Greek original, rather than focusing on the semantics of the Greek forms themselves. The various nuances that can be created by the use of different glosses in the receptor language (English) are entirely irrelevant to the meaning of the *pistis Christou* construction (or anything else)

in the Greek texts written by Paul. Not only is this tendency prevalent in Wright’s discussion of the *pistis Christou* phrase, but this is also seen, for example, in his analysis of *ex akoēs pisteōs* in Gal 3:2 (PFG, 2:919-20) and other places.

## Wright’s Historical Methodology: Critical Realism and the Study of Paul

In an earlier and more philosophically oriented work, *The New Testament and the People of God*, which constitutes the first volume of Wright’s *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (COQG vol. 1),<sup>2</sup> Wright advocates a historical method/epistemology that he refers to as critical realism. Wright’s method has been adopted by numerous New Testament scholars, including but not limited to James Dunn, Donald Denton and recently Jonathan Bernier. To understand this critical realist methodology and its relationship to Wright’s recent Paul project, we must turn to COQG vol. 1.

Here, Wright suggests that his critical realist methodology attempts to describe the process of knowing “that 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 spiraling path of *appropriate dialogue or conversation between the knower and the thing known* (hence ‘critical’)” (COQG, 1:35). And Wright thinks that “This path leads to critical reflection on the products of our enquiry into ‘reality’, so that our assertions about ‘reality’ acknowledge our own provisionality. Knowledge, in other words, although in principle concerning realities independent of the knower, is never itself independent of the knower” (COQG, 1:35). Wright sets up this model of historical knowing as the epistemic foundation for the historical descriptions that will follow in subsequent volumes.

Wright’s descriptions here raise a number of questions regarding the precise nature of Wright’s task. Does he hope to propose a theory of epistemology calibrated specifically for the study of Christian Origins? His mention of epistemology thirty-four

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<sup>2</sup> N.T Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, vol. 1 of *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992).

times in his narrative on critical realism would seem to suggest this. Or does he seek to plot out a method for evaluating what is or is not historical (i.e., what did or did not in fact happen)? The reader is left to assume this by his constant emphasis on “historical reconstruction” and the deep interest the book shows in evaluating what can and cannot be said to be “historical,” including varying degrees of certainty acquired through a process of hypothesis and verification. Or, does Wright intend to propose a hermeneutical theory? This seems to be at least part of his wider methodological project as well. He pays close attention to the reading process and seeks to weigh carefully the role worldview—both the ancient author’s and the reader’s—in configuring meaning. In fact, he seems to view these multivariate processes as intersecting and building upon one another:

those who care about [a] serious reading of the gospels [must] set about exploring ways in which to articulate a better epistemology, leading to a better account of what happens when a text is being read, a better account of what happens when *a sacred text* is being read, a better account of what happens when *a sacred text which purports to be historical* is being read, leading to a better account of what happens when the gospels themselves are being read (*COQG*, 1:67).

Although a number of dimensions of this methodological description could be addressed, in this review, I focus on the specifically epistemic components of Wright’s methodology, also touching upon intersecting historiographic and hermeneutic elements.

As noted above, many New Testament scholars have been persuaded by Wright’s epistemology. From my view, philosophers and theologians, as well, seem broadly sympathetic to Wright’s biblical-theological methodological agenda. But can it bear the weight that New Testament scholars and others have placed upon it?

Some recent work in New Testament Studies suggests that it cannot. To my knowledge, the first critical response to Wright’s epistemology (published prior to Wright’s Paul books, *COQG* vols. 4-5) was published in the *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* by Stanley Porter and myself, where we sought to situate Wright’s version of critical realism within the wider context of contemporary analytic epistemology. We showed that since Wright grounds his analysis in Ben Meyer (McMaster University), and Meyer (1970s-1980s) develops his epistemology from Bernard Lonergan (1940s, McMaster University), the model Wright ultimately employs dates back to a form of pre-Gettier (pre-1963) internalism and is thus not immune to the Gettier-style counterexamples to the internalism of his day, including critical realist models. This seemed to myself and my co-author to be a major oversight on the part of Wright and his followers.

So where does this leave us with *PFQ*? In *PFQ*, Wright continues to develop and apply his critical realist model to the study of Paul. As discussions in epistemology have advanced, Wright’s epistemology remains relatively the same and thoroughly internalist, but not in a way immune to the Gettier counterexamples. In his historical analysis of Paul’s letter to Philemon, Wright advocates critical realism as a self-critical epistemology which, in rejecting the naive realism which simply imagines that we are

looking at the material with a God's-eye view, rejects also the narcissistic reductionism of imagining that all apparent perception is in fact projection, that everything is really going on inside our own heads (*PFG*, 1:51).

In other words, Wright pronounces critical realism as a kind of middle-of-the-way epistemology, rejecting the extremes of realism and anti-realism. For Wright, this means:

Critical realism engages determinedly in a many-sided conversation, both with the data itself and with others (including scholars) who are also engaging with it. This conversation aims, not of course at an unattainable "objectivity," but at truth none the less, the truth in which the words we use and the stories we tell increasingly approximate to the reality of another world, in the historian's case the world of the past (*PFG*, 1:51).

So, it does not seem as though Wright has advanced much from his initial discussions. We still find a very archaic form of critical realism, broadly out of step with contemporary internalist epistemologies, as we find, for example, in the Gettier-qualified internalist account of Timothy and Lydia McGrew.

At one point, Wright employs his critical realist model to construct a way of reading Paul that (eventually) allows the reader to minimize (escape?) the influence of their Lutheran, Kantian or Bultmannian lens for viewing the apostle through critical introspective reflection upon potential influences from one's worldview. So while some may helplessly surrender to the inevitable impact of their worldview upon the reading process, Wright contends that the examination of one's own beliefs and influences can help one transcend one's worldview and arrive at least partially at the meaning of biblical texts.

But can introspection help us better understand how historical beliefs are justified? Take one of the examples that Wright mentions, Luther. Wright has had many discussions with those who read Paul in the so-called Lutheran way, and I think Wright would want to say that their reading of Paul has in many ways been shaped by this tradition. And let's say that Lutherans even grant this point. On Wright's model, critical examination of one's beliefs would hopefully reveal an undue influence from the Lutheran Paul upon the reader and so would undercut one's justification for historical beliefs about Paul's soteriology. But what if it turns out that Luther was largely right about Paul's soteriology? Lutherans would then have true beliefs, but on the basis of inadequate means of justification—i.e., for Wright, their Lutheran tradition—at least, in part. This is analogous to the problem that Gettier raised with the kinds of internalism current in Lonergan's day; and since Wright's epistemology is, for the most part, an extension of Lonergan's, we can see that it suffers from the same kinds of shortcomings.

Rather than a full-fledged historical epistemology, Wright's methodology looks more and more hermeneutical with each fresh application. Moreover, his more hermeneutical critical realism seems to serve a primarily polemic purpose, as it is so often put to use merely to sidestep the modernist and post-modernist poles of the

“hermeneutical situation” (*PFG*, 1:67). He says: “The historical study of Paul ... will therefore in itself constitute a move towards liberation from at least three paradigms that have arguably continued to pull historical exegesis out of shape” since critical realism is “fully aware of the postmodern critique of all external knowledge but equally aware that to cut off that access is to collapse into a clever-sounding solipsism” (*PFG*, 2:1477; see also 2:1482). So, in application, Wright’s critical realism appears to have an apologetic/hermeneutical function more than anything else, even though it often attempts to answer epistemic questions.

Another problem with Wright’s interpretive model involves its dependence upon structuralism (a theory of interpretation going back to A.J. Greimas, which sought to isolate structural oppositions/opposites—e.g. black vs. white—as a means of assessing narrative composition), recast as narrative criticism (see e.g. *PFG* 1:110, 587). We observed this in the work of Richard Hays many years ago and Hays did eventually concede the problems with this methodology. The problem is that structuralism has been abandoned (at least in the form advocated by Greimas) in literary and linguistic studies (where it originated) for decades now and it was never widely received in biblical studies, being limited for the most part to the work of Daniel Patte in the 1980s and 90s. This is not the place to rehash the several criticisms in literary and linguistic studies that led to its demise, but they are numerous and substantial.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the way in which Wright adopts structuralist modeling strategies appears radically out of step with how those categories were originally designed to be used. This does not make Wright’s implementation of a structuralist methodology wrong, necessarily. But one would expect his work at least to reflect awareness of the current state of the discussion regarding tools so central to his methodology. We might also hope for engagement with the many problems that have been iterated with the structuralist paradigm—relabeling it narrative criticism, as Hays did before him, does nothing to circumvent these substantial critiques.

## Concluding Thoughts

No one can deny that Wright has made a massive impact upon the field of New Testament Studies, particularly in relation to the study of Paul. And Wright’s new two-volume *PFG* will continue to propel the discussion. Though many positive features can be noted about the book—e.g., it provides us with a compendium of Pauline studies from one of the leading voices in the field—it seems to me that Wright and his followers still have much theoretical work to do in refining their methodology and especially in setting it in relation to contemporary discussion.

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<sup>3</sup> See Andrew W. Pitts, “Daniel Patte: A Structuralist Semiotic Model for Interpreting Didactic Discourse,” in *Pillars in the History of Biblical Interpretation, Vol. 2: Prevailing Methods After 1980*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Sean A. Adams (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2016), 337–58.