

Wright's Paul and the Cloud of (Other) Witnesses

Markus Bockmuehl, University of Oxford

A book of this magnitude from a scholar like Tom Wright is unquestionably a scholarly landmark that will dominate debate for years to come. A useful and appreciative overview of the book's specific achievements are offered in Michael Gorman's contribution to the present symposium. For my own part, I am painfully aware that the sheer size of Wright's enterprise almost inevitably renders my present response little more than impressionistic – rather like that of the proverbial cat whose account of seeing the Queen was to have frightened a little mouse under her chair... Nevertheless, in order to make this engagement useful and productive it seems essential in what follows to concentrate on points of debate rather than of consent. If space and leisure were less confined, my account would certainly reveal far more of agreement than dissent.

Within the terms he sets for himself, Tom Wright's Paul is quite simply magnificent – a judgment that easily survives even after the publisher's customary rent-a-plaudits have been discounted. And as is invariably the case with Wright's books, this one too is, for all its heft, characterized by an altogether enviable clarity of argument and accessibility of style. It is also conspicuous throughout for the characteristic sparkle of his oral delivery. His friends will readily recognize both N. T. and *Chrysos* Tom at work.

Significant themes in this book will remain familiar to readers of Wright's earlier oeuvre, both in this series and in his other Pauline books like *The Climax of the Covenant* or *What Saint Paul Really Said* (Wright 1991, 1997). An obvious order of magnitude separates those efforts from this book, which

might fairly be characterized as *The Climax of N. T. Wright*. Tom himself writes, 'There is a clear genealogical line both from my first article on Paul, published in the 1978 *Tyndale Bulletin*, and from my doctoral dissertation, completed in 1980, to several strands in the present book' (Wright 2013a, xxiii) – a line which, moreover, he helpfully documents in the companion volume of Pauline essays published alongside *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Wright 2013b). Elsewhere he has indicated that this is the book he wanted to write for 40 years (Email to the author, 11 May 2013).

In addition to the Wrightian Paul's reassuringly familiar tropes and cadences, however, there are areas of considerable development too – certainly of earlier engagements with issues like Paul's Graeco-Roman philosophical and political context, which are here for the first time placed on a structurally equal footing with Paul's Jewish theological context. But Wright also revisits with renewed vigour and refined argument a number of specific challenges raised in the past against his positions about issues like the end of exile, the historical significance of apocalyptic symbolism, the relational account of justification and participation, the extent and nature of Paul's opposition to Roman imperial authority, and so forth. The four-part structure makes the work highly accessible:

1. The Jewish and Graeco-Roman worlds without Paul,
2. Paul's mindset and
3. worldview,
4. Paul in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman worlds.

It is clear from this structure that pride of place in a constructive engagement belongs to Tom's Pauline theology: this is emphatically the heart of the book, and it is this on which Michael Gorman's overview concentrates. Closely

related is the historical contextualisation of Wright's Pauline theology in relation to 'apocalyptic', a controversy that lies at the heart of Martin DeBoer's robust analysis.

With my two learned colleagues picking up the project's central theological themes, it seemed to me that I might usefully take on the easier task of thinking instead about some apparent gaps and lacunae in the big-picture view of the project. Is it possible to gain a critically useful bird's eye view of 'ways not taken' in a project of this size? This task of course is only partly a matter of paying careful attention to the Table of Contents – although that is in fact, as it happens, an excellent and valuable guide. My question more specifically is whether what we get here is a big book on the whole Paul, or a big book focused on particular aspects of Paul.

Quite understandably, Tom's immediate response to such a question will be, 'Well, isn't the book big enough for you as it is?' And it is true that his scholarly books have been getting progressively longer and wider-reaching. This present one, weighing in at 1600 pages, is joined by a further 600 page book of supplementary essays and another volume before long on the history of scholarship. So reviewers seem more likely to complain that there is too much rather than too little – making my question appear nit-picky and impertinent.

But in any project great or small we always make decisions about what to include and what to exclude, and I would be interested to hear a little more about the rationale for questions not asked and ways not taken. It may be of course that there is no specific answer in particular cases: Tom acknowledges in the preface that 'I have written lots of books, like someone trying to shoot rabbits in the dark, blasting away with a shot-gun in the hope of the occasional

hit' (Wright 2013a, xxv). But at least in this case the book is so carefully organized and structured that readers seem entitled to believe there is rather more focused delivery at work. No rabbit hit by this two-volume projectile in the dark could fail to be impressed by its comprehensive impact!

Omission or silence does not as such entail any deficiency. So my question about 'what is not said' is intended as a patently constructive one. To be sure, the clarity of Tom's argumentation comes through from the very first page: but with a publisher as astonishingly generous and accommodating as SPCK and Fortress have been, it seems worth discussing why in fact the Table of Contents omits what it does.

That of course still leaves the problem of how best to do this, especially with a book of this size that seems so enormous and seemingly exhaustive in scope. How best might a short response elicit the appropriate questions about gaps and bring them to a point in a way that still in some sense does justice to this work as a whole?

What I decided to use as my point of departure is what Wikipedia calls a 'word cloud' or 'text cloud', a graphical representation of all the significant words in a given text according to their frequency. About five years ago someone published a striking website that provided a sliding set of word clouds for every single presidential State of the Union Address in the United States since George Washington in 1794, which makes for a fascinating comparison.¹

Might this work for a scholarly construct? Having been sent the draft file for the review session at the 2013 International SBL meeting in St Andrews, I

¹ <http://chir.ag/projects/preztags/> accessed Feb 1, 2014.

decided to generate a word cloud for *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*. The calculations twice crashed the online server, but in the end I succeeded. They say that a picture is worth a thousand words; this one claims to represent three quarters of a million words! Here it is:

How might this help our engagement? We must immediately note that it is only of rather limited use. The most obvious point is that due to the length of the book even the smallest words in this picture do in fact represent approximately 400 occurrences. This means that the absence of particular terms emphatically does **not** signify absence from the book. It just may in some cases point to a possible reduced emphasis. But only possible: the word cloud does not, for example, help us see that the book features lengthy discussions on matters like eschatology or justification, Stoicism or the Emperor cult.

Nevertheless the experiment seemed worth persisting with – not as an outcome but as a starting point for discussion.

The first, general observation confirms what I noted at the outset above: in terms of theological *substance* there is much that is reassuringly present in this book. What we see is indeed what one would expect in Tom Wright's Paul: the word cloud shows up plenty of material about Israel's God and his people, about Jesus as the Messiah and his new community, about Spirit and covenant and Torah and much else besides.

But secondly, the familiarity of the overall construct also extends to Tom's dominant *methodological* categories including elements like 'worldview', 'story', 'narrative' and so forth. The emphasis is very strongly on Paul's 'radical mutation' of the story and worldview of Israel, reworking 'Israel's God' around 'Messiah' and 'Spirit'.

This is again entirely as we would expect, and the stress on the radical newness of this reworking is in itself a judgment about 'history', as Tom rightly likes to stress – however much his critics might read certain things differently.

But the question I wish to pose here is historical in a slightly different way. What interests me about the book as it unfolds is the extent to which this approach inevitably downplays certain other historical features of the Pauline canon. In contrast to the extensive attention paid to the identity and actions of the so-called historical Jesus in the earlier books, here there is little historical context or narrative given to the importance of the life and times of Paul. His origin is acknowledged as 'Saul of Tarsus'; but we hear surprisingly little of what that large city of trade and learning was like, how Paul and his family got there and acquired their citizenship, how and where and in what languages he was shaped by the scriptures and by Greek and Jewish education, etc.

Our word cloud, by contrast, gives a picture that is indeed reflected in the book: Wright's Paul is emphatically a theologian and a letter writer, above all a writer of Romans, of monotheism and, despite occasional protestations to the contrary,² more specifically of soteriology. Unlike the apostle of his own autobiographical recollection, of Luke or of Christian living memory and legend in the later first or second century, this Paul is not one who observes Nazirite vows or has visions in the Temple, undergoes purification or offers sacrifices, fights the demons of Artemis, makes tents, performs miracles, experiences imprisonment in Philippi or Caesarea or Rome or elsewhere, makes undignified escapes from Damascus and Thessalonica and other places, suffers shipwreck off Malta, let alone one who is beheaded by Nero. He is in other words a thinker as in Romans rather than a doer as in Acts.

² Beginning at Wright 2013a, 37.

In itself, the methodological decision to prioritize Paul's thought is of course a common and easily justifiable one. But in a book of this size it still seems worth asking why the choice seems quite so stark. Paul's earliest in the memory of the church arguably showed at least equal – and possibly greater – interest in his martyrdom and his Acts as in his ideas, which in this earliest period of reception were particularly singled out by Marcion. (These days most of us seem less inclined to believe that the church's reception comprehensively misconstrued the Apostle from the start, as was accepted once upon a time by German readers of Marcion following Overbeck and Harnack.) One suspects that Paul's biography must at one level bear upon 'Christian Origins and the Question of (the Faithfulness of) God'. Indeed, does not Paul himself repeatedly attribute a *theological* instrumentality to his own biography in many or most of his letters, including at least 1-2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians and Colossians?

Another area of useful controversy could be pursued on the question of the term 'Messiah', which our word cloud renders highly prevalent at the expense of the term 'Christ', which is largely absent. The book does occasionally use the latter term too, but the balance is overwhelmingly in favour of 'Messiah' (over 3,330 times, by a quick reckoning). It is well known, of course, that Paul unlike John never once uses the loan word 'Messiah' among his over 280 uses of 'Christos'.

Wright signals early on that 'Christ' always and straightforwardly means 'Messiah': 'When Paul uses the word *Messiah* he evokes a world in which the Messiah, the king of Israel, sums up his people and their story in himself' (Wright 2013a, 17). Several aspects of this blanket judgment would still be fairly widely contested in the guild. Even those of us who agree that Paul's

view of Jesus is vitally grounded in his identity as Messiah, and that significantly 'Messianist' connotations do quite demonstrably attach to at least some of Paul's usage of 'Christos', might like to see just a little more attention to critical detail for a question of this importance. To affirm that Paul clearly believed Jesus to be the Messiah is not yet to accept that every occurrence of 'Christos' bears the full force of the present paragraph's opening quotation. Unless one engages a little more forthrightly with those who disagree, the rabbits in the dark are unlikely to be convinced by a few scattershot footnotes (on pages 817-25, none of them engaging German critics of this view), whereupon the case is assumed to have been made.³

Another feature of Wright's project to which the word cloud draws attention is the shape of his Pauline canon. In textual terms it is quite clearly Romans above all through which Paul is read, alongside Galatians and Corinthians. That is hardly surprising, as it is this prism that has of course dominated Pauline interpretation for a very long time. Philippians, Ephesians, Colossians, 1-2 Thessalonians, Philemon and 2 Timothy are also used and accepted, although rather less prominently. '1 Timothy and Titus come in a different category, and will be used, in the opposite way to that in which a drunkard uses a lamppost, for illumination rather than support' (Wright 2013a, 61; I am not sure I entirely understand what historical or methodological decisions that statement entails.)

³ These pages oppose mainly Andrew Chester, dismissed in Wright 2013b, 522 as exemplifying a scholar who "resolutely puts the telescope to a blind eye". Unnecessary cheap shots aside, one could imagine the riposte that there was no time to deal with other critics as the book was too long already. To this we may perhaps respond that of the 600-page companion volume featuring 35 years' worth of Pauline essays, only one chapter foregrounds the question of 'Christos as Messiah' (Wright 2013b, 510-46). This features much useful close reading of Galatians, but it too engages few critics of that view other than Chester, and none in languages other than English.

So it would appear that another absence or empty set relates to properly pseudonymous letters, of which there are none. That is in itself an interesting position, and one whose impact on the overall conception would be worth discussing further. But what we also do not find are substantive discussions of authorship, of epistolography or epistolary rhetoric, etc. We find breezy statements like ‘The main reason why Ephesians and Colossians have been regarded as non-Pauline ... is because they fly in the face of the liberal protestant paradigm for reading Paul’ (Wright 2013a, 56) – i.e. because they de-emphasize justification and hold a higher Christology and ecclesiology). Really? That is certainly an arresting claim, which may or (as I suspect) may not be true; in any case one suspects that more proof of that particular concept could be helpful.

In matters of authorship, Tom Wright evidently regards himself confronted by a classic binary choice of either ‘authenticity’ or ‘inauthenticity’; and faced with that alternative, he consistently chooses the former. There seems little scope, in other words, for complex or shaded scenarios – let alone for a Paul of Tarsus whose own writing and dictating bleed into his reception, and whose received prosopography in turn illuminates the earliest remembering of the man and what he said. (A cognate puzzlement was occasionally noted by critics of Wright 1996, an earlier volume in this same series, regarding the question of ‘authentic’ versus ‘inauthentic’ sayings of Jesus: there appeared to be none of the latter, perhaps precisely because these were the only two categories available.)

Returning finally to the earlier theme of Paul’s narrative world, it is unsurprising to find the word cloud attesting the dominance of terms like ‘Israel’, ‘Torah’, ‘Abraham’, ‘covenant’, ‘Jewish’ etc. And yet, as also expected,

Wright's familiar idea of Paul's wholesale ecclesiocentric replacement of Israel is strongly restated. Romans 9-11 receives substantial attention; and as previously in the commentary on Romans (Wright 2002), the *pas Israēl* of Romans 11.26 remains Paul's 'polemical redefinition' (Wright 2013a, 1243-44, a favourite phrase) of 'Israel'. Paul's 'Israel' now emphatically, but to my mind still oxymoronically, *excludes* all Jews who do not accept this Pauline gospel. "This is not," says Wright, "what most exegetes in the modern western tradition have wanted to hear. But it is what Paul wanted to say" (Wright 2013a, 1245).⁴

'Polemical redefinition' is another way of saying that Paul's conception of Israel has sprung a rather gaping, election-shaped hole where actual, particular Torah-faithful Jews used to be. Thus redefined, 'only a robust re-appropriation of the Jewish *beliefs* – monotheism, election and eschatology... would do', but Jewish practices like circumcision, the food laws, and so on had to be 'set aside' by Jews and Gentiles alike as 'inappropriate for the new messianic day, for the new messianic people' (Wright 2013a, xvi).

Wright does not say how he knows this. But then his cadences on these matters suggest that his is, as we saw earlier, a Paul of defining beliefs rather than of defining practices – and a Paul of Romans rather than a Paul of Acts, a Paul of soteriological *logos* rather than of Christomimetic *ethos*, of suffering or of sacrifice. In other words, a remarkably Protestant Paul. That is as such not particularly problematic or surprising, given the modern history of Pauline

⁴ Wright is rarely slow to note that 'almost all exegetes miss' his own 'vital' observations without which they 'end up in the wrong part of the forest', or that his 'much bigger' solution to the problem of creator and creation succeeds where 'traditional western soteriology, whether catholic or protestant, liberal or conservative,' has failed (Wright 2013a, 494, 755). While anyone would gladly receive such dramatically clarifying instruction, purple rhetoric of this kind might also gain in persuasion if it engaged a little more patiently with dissenting points of view in traditional western scholarship, whether classic or modern, liberal or conservative, Anglophone or allophone.

scholarship: similar complaints were raised by non-Protestant critics like Jacob Neusner about Ed Sanders's *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*. But it remains the case that the coin you insert in the top of the Pauline vending machine affects what you get out at the bottom. Structurally, at least, the Paul of Luke who circumcises Jewish co-workers, takes Nazirite vows, retains an explicitly Pharisaic self-understanding and continues sacrificing in the Jerusalem Temple is in Wright's book one of the rabbits that get shot in the dark. Perhaps Tom would concede that we may in principle be allowed *both* Pauls? In any case the shape even of the canonical Paul suggests that we really do need both. If the Protestant Paul was the 'real' Paul, did that 'historical' Paul ever exist?

Few will contest that there is in the Pauline letters an inevitably difficult and unstable balance between newness and fulfilment, between Paul the Israelite and Paul the messianic Israelite. Nevertheless, friends as well as critics of Wright have sometimes sensed in his work an uncomfortable definition of Israel that leaves little further use for particular Israelites, for particular Jews, for believers subject to an abiding election of the people of Israel. I know he often feels misunderstood on this point, so it seems worth inviting him to comment.

One of Tom's favourite images in the past has been of Israelite covenantal praxis as a boat that was useful to get to the newfound shore but which can now be safely discarded and left behind.⁵ John Paul II famously became in April 1986 the first pope since perhaps the first century to pray in Rome's Great Jewish synagogue; as he did so, he affirmed that 'The Jewish

⁵ E.g. Wright 2005, 57, 'It is not hard to imagine illustrations of how this continuity and discontinuity function. When travelers sail across a vast ocean and finally arrive on the distant shore, they leave the ship behind and continue over land, not because the ship was no good, or because their voyage had been misguided, but precisely because both ship and voyage had accomplished their purpose.' He cites Gal 3:22-29 as illustrating this perspective, which he regards as exemplifying the right balance between continuity and discontinuity.

religion is not 'extrinsic' to us... The Jews are beloved of God, who has called them with an irrevocable calling.' He went on later to say, 'This people continues in spite of everything to be the people of the covenant and, despite human infidelity, the Lord is faithful to his covenant'.⁶ Would it be appropriate to assume that in Wright's view such ideas fundamentally contradict 'what Paul wanted to say', or indeed 'What St Paul Really Said', about Israel reconfigured around the Messiah?

A Concluding Question of Architecture

Our present exercise of hunting the snark that is not there could doubtless carry on for some time, but space is limited and I would like in closing to append a more structural question about this new work. Where does *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* place us in terms of the overall architecture of the project of which it is a part, 'Christian Origins and the Question of God'? After the introductory volume on method we had two on the mission and the resurrection of Jesus, and now a large one-in-two on the ideas of Paul. Does the concept of 'Christian Origins' essentially comprise the actions of Jesus and the ideas of Paul? The present volume's preface suggests a hint of hesitation about whether there will be more, having now reached 'an important milestone' (Wright 2013a, xvii). If there will be or may be, what would Volume 5 do to round out 'Christian Origins'? Will it, for example, deal with other 'originating' characters, customs and canons, such as the evangelists including John, Acts or Hebrews to Revelation – some of which might divide less confidently between vital beliefs and superseded practices of Judaism, even for the case of Paul? Or is 'Christian Origins' essentially about the 'historical' Jesus and Paul, but relegating the Original Christians and their actually

⁶ Variousy quoted, e.g. in Pontifical Biblical Commission 2002, para. 86.

remembered, experienced and imitated Jesus (and Paul) to the status of also-rans with an inferior grasp on what Really happened and was Really said?

To be sure, many of these questions are unwieldy and indeed perennial problems for New Testament interpretation, which would equally challenge anyone else's attempt to do justice to Paul of Tarsus. The success of *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* certainly cannot be said to depend on their definitive resolution. Wright's work on the Apostle's Theology gives us without a doubt the most complete account of its kind in existence today. In both design and execution it is an astonishing masterpiece, and I offer my heartfelt congratulations on bringing four decades of aspiration to completion in this work.

WORKS CITED

- Pontifical Biblical Commission. 2002. *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana.
- Wright, N. T. 1991. *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark.
- Wright, N. T. 1996. *Jesus and the Victory of God*. Minneapolis: Fortress.
- Wright, N. T. 1997. *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* Oxford: Lion.
- Wright, N. T. 2002. "The Letter to the Romans: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections." *New Interpreter's Bible* 10: 373-795.
- Wright, N. T. 2005. *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture*. 1st. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco.
- Wright, N. T. 2013a. *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* 2 vols. London: SPCK.
- Wright, N. T. 2013b. *Pauline Perspectives: Essays on Paul, 1978-2013*. London: SPCK.