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N. T. Wright

THE PAUL DEBATE: Critical questions for understanding the Apostle

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Rowan Williams

MEETING GOD IN PAUL

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Paul of Tarsus was a pioneer who did much and wrote little. Even taking at face value his authorship of everything that bears his name, his writings take up barely fifty pages in a typical Bible. Yet these letters are electrifying and arresting, inspiring and infuriating, luminous and opaque, revolutionary, conservative and plain incomprehensible all at the same time – not infrequently on the very same page. Of the making of scholarly books on the man there is no end – and the trend among recent authors in this industry has been for doorstoppers nearer a thousand pages in length than Paul’s fifty.

The two works under review represent a refreshing departure from this pattern: each engages Paul in a bare handful of chapters. And at first sight they appear to merit close comparison. Both authors are among the most senior retired bishops of the Church of England while remaining active as distinguished academics. One is perhaps the world’s best-known living New Testament scholar; the other a leading Anglican theologian. And the latter explicitly references the former’s recent “magisterial”

magnum opus, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (reviewed in the *TLS*, April 18, 2014), as “one of the most important studies [ever?] of Paul’s theological world”. For these two men to attempt short books on Paul promises a feast of rare intensity. The contrasts are nevertheless striking.

*The Paul Debate* is a unique sort of book, nothing more or less than a review of reviews of Professor Wright’s recent Pauline opus. Seventeen reviewers are acknowledged by name in the preface, while an overlapping but non-identical list of sixteen are documented in the concluding bibliography. The aim is to engage the critics in broad strokes by pressing the point of Paul’s theological coherence in five chapters. These focus respectively on the Jewish background of Paul’s Messianism; the origin and key to his Christology; the misguided contrast asserted in some (mainly American) recent scholarship between an “apocalyptic” and a “covenantal” framework of Paul’s theology; the Apostle’s view of the Church and its relation to Israel; and a grab-bag of issues in defence of Paul’s mission and Wright’s “abductive” method (i.e. big-picture “inference to the best explanation”, here defended against “the guild of New Testament scholars” and others who lack right-brain “imagination” and “elegance”).

The resulting book was written in a week and, no doubt partly for that reason, has excellent flow and rhythm as a retail user’s guide for unboxing the machine that is *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*. We have here in miniature all we would expect to find in Wright’s Paul: the grand narrative of Israel (in fact two Israels: the Hebrew Scripture’s chosen people and now “another ‘Israel’”, the followers of Jesus), Paul as a Jewish thinker about restoration and the end of “long exile”, pivotally motivated by the resurrection of Jesus in his christologically “revised monotheism”, which the Apostle took to demonstrate that “God had done in the middle of history, to one person, what he was expected to do at the end of history, to all his people”. One

cannot help but sympathize with Professor Wright's sense of frustration about some of the mutually contradictory criticisms he has incurred from his reviewers, who at times may indeed have obscured genuine debate by responding in kind to what some perceive as his "agonistic rhetoric".

Yet some of them do raise quite specific questions to which there are no obvious answers here: about the place of Romans 9:4 in the Wrightian panopticon of Romans 9–11, for example (Paula Fredriksen); or why, if indeed Paul's theology sets out to mount a decisive challenge specifically against the powers of evil concentrated in the Roman Empire, the Apostle somehow neglects ever to mention this "real analysis of the world" in any of his letters (John Barclay). In reply to these and other queries, the book tends not to respond but to reiterate. To be sure, this includes both affirmations and denials, defending ways taken against ways not taken. But avoiding any temptation of "small-scale point-scoring", there are with a single exception no footnotes or referenced citations of sources other than the Bible. And aside from passing mentions of individual twentieth-century scholars, there is virtually no explicit engagement with contemporary interlocutors in the field, including those acknowledged in the preface or in the bibliography of reviewers (an exception is made for the left-brain vs right-brain theories of Iain McGilchrist). *The Paul Debate* answers the critics of Wright's Paul in considerable part by paraphrasing Wright on Paul. As a handy guide to *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, it is magnificent. As a "debate", it features appreciably more give than take.

*Meeting God in Paul*, even slimmer than its companion in this exercise, is a self-declared "very short book about St Paul" that takes as its audience "complete beginners". Its three short chapters amounting to barely a hundred pages present an

approach to Paul that is at once disarmingly simple and profound, winsome and surprising. The pregnancy and excitement of Williams's account is eloquently if dialectically revealed from the outset: on the one hand, we confront the Apostle's "intense conviction that he was exploring a new country"; on the other, the assurance that he is emphatically "not improvising a new religious system", but "labouring to do justice to something that is already there confronting him" in stories and practices about Jesus. The Introduction also contextualises Paul historically, socially, and in relation to the "authenticity" of his letters (in unnecessarily laboured tribute to the historicism of traditional biblical scholarship).

Williams's Paul is a vulnerable and deeply human actor, shaped in a social and religious world of "outsiders and insiders". Into this world enters the big "disturbing idea" that impels Paul's work: God's "universal welcome", whose principle and energy drives a "new kind of belonging" that is brought about by "God's initiative, nothing else; not a bland bit of social philosophy, an ideal of 'social inclusion' and no more". Those who now belong may have been strays, migrants, exiles and foreigners, but they have become insiders in God's assembly. This is a community whose members are set free from slavery to the world of insiders: they discover the self-forgetting liberty of Jesus to be a freedom both from thinking that one has to satisfy God but also from all behaviours resulting from such anxiety. On these and other matters, the "unsettling newness of the gospel" pushes Paul to a new understanding of community brought about by the healing sacrifice of Jesus as the place where reconciliation occurs: "God, through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, has brought into the world what he himself most deeply is – selfless love", and "he will see in us what we can be transformed into".

This leads to a discussion of Paul's Christian universe of new creation. God's image and presence are in Jesus, who is in turn fully bound up with his people. As a result,

Jesus bears in himself the burden of our alienation from God, leaving “no abandonment . . . too deep or dark for God to penetrate and heal”.

Paul’s description of the resulting new life in his letters is driven by the question of what must change in the way we think about God, and what must therefore now be said about Jesus. He is not only the Messiah, but “the place where the presence and power of God are seen to reside”, “the face of God . . . who moves out into engagement with what he is not”. All of this is for Paul fundamentally bound up with his experience of prayer. Above all, God’s work is most fully present in the “real” but frail community breaking bread: where people are faithful to one another in this vision, they will suffer whatever it takes to heal failure and sin – thus representing a “foretaste of heaven”.

Ethics here becomes a vision not of concrete moral particulars but of a divine “style” of living and relating, a “vision of Spirit-led mutuality” in seeking “what liberates each person to give what only he or she can to the common life”. This is for Williams nevertheless visible and physical, even prosaic, inasmuch as “the spiritual is the realistic”.

On the Apostle’s future hope, finally, we learn that the mature Paul “moved on” from his earlier apocalyptic imagery to a vision of “the great universal climax of Christ bringing the whole world back to its source”, or about an end that is “something like the world blossoming into its fullness”, part of a future that has already begun. (Williams accepts no tension between this and the belief that Paul did not change his mind about his hope for Christ’s return in glory). Group discussion questions and a Lenten reading guide close the book. There are a handful of notes (N. T. Wright being the only New Testament scholar cited) and selective suggestions for further reading, among which NT Wright again holds pride of place.

Pauline specialists will understandably quibble with this judgement or that, but to focus on detail would be to misconstrue the author's intentions. This is not a book for scholars, but for general readers wishing to explore the Apostle's faith and indeed to "meet God" through – or "in" Paul. (Surprisingly, the title's promise of divine encounter is never explicitly related to the man Paul himself, who repeatedly claims to manifest Christ "in" and through his own apostolic person, ministry and example.)

Williams's slender volume offers a deeply perceptive, theologically fertile and eirenic portrait that pays attention to critical and historical questions while taking seriously the far-reaching theological demands of the subject matter. This is a book that invites existential engagement precisely of the sort anticipated in the concluding Lenten study guide. It depicts a Paul wholly captivated by his encounter with Christ, and invites readers to "meet God" in this fashion for themselves.

My three main queries concerned a New Testament Paul who arguably does not "move on" from his early hope for the future so much as vary the earthiness of his imagery about Christ's return and rule; a Paul who remains more deeply, messianically and therefore christologically committed to Israel's election and Israel's scriptures than is allowed for by replacement language such as "what Israel was always designed to be . . . the Christian community is"; and a Paul whose moral "foretaste of heaven" articulates rather more of the imitation of Christ and the law of Christ, retaining its concrete expressions beyond mutuality and individual potential, and expecting his return to bring about both resurrection and judgement.

Here are two small but powerful books on St Paul, showing less to be more. And both may be judged to succeed in the terms they set for themselves. That also means it is in the end impossible to juxtapose and compare them directly. Where N. T. Wright spares a week of astonishing productivity to confound his critics, Rowan Williams's

more patiently paced exercise represents, as a cover blurb puts it, “a lifetime’s learning and praying . . . distilled into profound simplicity”.