

## BOOK REVIEW

Wright, N.T., and Michael F. Bird, *The New Testament in Its World: An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the First Christians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2019). 992 pp. Hbk. \$59.99.

The convergence of biblical studies and history in the last quarter century has given birth to the discipline of ‘Christian origins’. Among the many massive projects written within this new field of enquiry stands N.T. Wright’s *Christian Origins and the Question of God* series. The six-part work covers the narrative and historical background of Second Temple Judaism (vol. 1), Jesus and his role in that historical, theological and literary context (vol. 2), the resurrection event (vol. 3), Paul and his contributions to the evolution of Christian thought and practice (vol. 4, in two physical volumes), and the last two volumes on the making of the New Testament, the development of gospel traditions, etc. and the early church are currently being finished. In the meantime, it became apparent that the size and technicality of the series presented a challenge for a more popular audience. Wright’s colleague Michael Bird took it upon himself to solve this particular problem. *The New Testament in Its World* is a condensed, accessible and colorful distillation of Wright’s *Christian Origins* series—combined with other critical insights from his commentaries and publications.

Wright’s thought and distinct interpretation of the Christian story has many influences and features that cannot all be summarized here. But if one had to oversimplify to provide a list of them, it might look something like the following:

- (1) The story of Israel in Second Temple Judaism was one of continued exile, oppression and waiting for God’s redemptive act of deliverance.
- (2) Jesus, while (for Christians) is plainly considered to be the Jewish ‘Messiah’, is more specifically the answer to Israel’s unique problems. In Christ, the exile is over, God became King over all kingdoms, and through the Church,

God will reign over all creation and through all peoples (as originally promised to Abraham).

- (3) The resurrection is central to this kingdom inauguration—and it *was* bodily, and it *can be* grounded in the work of ordinary history. While history has boundaries, so does Gospel criticism, and there is an undeniable level of reliability in the New Testament writings that furnishes authentic testimony about Jesus and the resurrection.
- (4) The eschatological buildup to God’s kingdom was authentic; if Christ was not raised, the whole Kingdom-coming project really would be an epic, unredeemable disappointment. This is because, contrary to both standard Christian interpretations and critical New Testament perspectives, the Olivet Discourse and similar end-time anticipations were not talking about the end of the space-time continuum—whether they were to be fulfilled later (as many Christians see it) or were not fulfilled at all since Jesus died (as Schweitzer and others saw/see it). Rather, the authors of the Gospels were rooted in Jewish thought and symbols and used ‘end-of-the-world’ language to describe the 68–70 CE ‘end of the Jewish world as we know it’ events.
- (5) Paul was a Jewish Christian who continued the trajectory of Jesus’ teachings and vision and applied them to his own situation within the local churches of his time. With Dunn and Sanders, Wright argues that Paul’s specific teachings on righteousness and ‘justification’ need to be grounded in the historical realities of the day, not in sixteenth-century debates.

As one can see, many of these conclusions are unoriginal—and that is part of the point. Wright is providing both an explanation and an apologetic of the basic, traditional contours of the Christian story against the backdrop of a world of scholarship gone awry, all according to his own historically-grounded framework. This is largely how Wright gained his notoriety: *the dots connect*. The New Testament and its claims and storyline(s) make sense given what we know historically and theologically. Of course, it is only natural that the most frequent objections by critics (including those by ‘in-house’ Christian scholars) surround the problem of making things fit *too neatly*. Are Wright’s views *too* coherent to be fully credible? This issue has taken center stage in a number of recent publications (e.g. James Scott [ed.], *Exile: A Conversation with N.T. Wright* [Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017]) and will likely continue in decades ahead. For readers who want to at least balance out their perspective on Christian origins, it is essential to read Dunn’s three-volume ‘Christianity in the Making’ series and the works of Larry Hurtado, among others.

In compiling and re-writing Wright’s material, Bird manages to pack a considerable amount of information into one (thick) volume. The book is organized into nine parts, largely corresponding to the *Origins* series: (1)

Reading the New Testament; (2) The World of Jesus and the Early Church; (3) Jesus and the Victory of God; (4) The Resurrection of the Son of God; (5) Paul and the Faithfulness of God; (6) The Gospels and the Story of God; (7) Early Christians and the Mission of God; (8) The Making of the New Testament; and (9) Living the Story of the New Testament. Running citations of key Greco-Roman primary sources and cross-references to the larger *Origins* series comprise much of the reference material. Illustrations, tables, ‘further reading’ and special sections of related content are found throughout, as well as ‘Emails from the Edge’, which recounts brief Q and A between a student and professor about popular matters of veracity and apologetics. The format is clearly geared towards classroom use.

The use of colored images and illustrations is also particularly helpful, though not in certain cases. The large number of Byzantine and high-Christendom images was distracting and seemingly random in places (e.g. Icon of Holy Wisdom, p. 78; The Visit of the Queen of Sheba, p. 229). This was a noticeable contrast to the more relevant graphics of first-century archaeological remains, biblical manuscripts and Greco-Roman subject matter. Given that the whole purpose of the book is to undo over a thousand years of mental images and ideas and encourage students to *get back to the first century*, the frequent use of medieval-renaissance iconography and paintings is confusing. The space given to such images could have been put to better use. For example, the synoptic problem and oral tradition sections in the last two chapters could have been expanded. If Zondervan plans a second edition, I would prioritize this kind of revision.

The other significant concern is that, in this reviewer’s opinion, there is simply no way *The New Testament in Its World* will function for undergraduate use. The ambitious goal of the book required extremely concise prose and, at times, complex sentences with many clauses and participial phrases that I had to read multiple times to really grasp. Thankfully, however, the argumentation itself was clear and easy to follow, and I never left the book wondering what the author(s) meant.

What does this mean for graduate students and seminarians? One endorser says, ‘If you want to introduce time-starved seminary students to the New Testament through the eyes of N.T. Wright but can’t assign a thousand pages of reading, this is the book you need’. Aside from the fact that 992 pages is very close to ‘a thousand’, the book would, indeed, fit best for an ‘Intro to New Testament’, albeit with a heavy emphasis on historical studies. For MA and pre-doctoral students? Yes. For MDiv students? It depends. *The New*

*Testament in Its World* is like a combination of Mark Alan Powell's *Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2nd edn, 2015) and a background volume like Joel Green and Lee Martin McDonald [eds.], *The World of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015) or Everett Ferguson's *Backgrounds to Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 3rd edn, 2003), all wrapped into one. Its orientation is also explicitly 'traditionalist' with a moderately defensive posture, making it uniquely valuable for those engaged in such questions as veracity (but then needing other critical views for a balanced perspective). Ultimately, the main value of the book is its accessible synthesis of Wright's cumulative contributions to New Testament studies.

Other quibbles remain. The book could have been more aware of its uncritical use of masculine pronouns for God, and I cannot comment on back-matter since the pre-publication copy I received from Zondervan did not include it. There are also the obvious questions about Wright's perspective on particular matters and claims. For example, Wright's discussion of monotheism in the historical theology of Israel desperately needs more critical reflection and insight from such work as Mark Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), Thomas Römer, *The Invention of God* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015) and Konrad Schmid, *A Historical Theology of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019). The full theological implications of John's willingness to theologize in explicitly Greek terms and ideas in conjunction with the unashamed use of  $\theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$  to describe Yahweh by the early church also seem to lack clarity or development, which seems important for a series on 'the question of God'.

The implications of Wright's work for systematic theology and its relationship to contemporary theology is also unclear. Bird's *Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2nd edn, forthcoming) is the first work (to my knowledge) that attempts this kind of integration. In teaching through the volume in a systematics class, it became clear to me that, while the importation of New Testament theology was incredibly refreshing, it also came with substantial sacrifices in being able to integrate, appreciate and converse with non-Western, non-classical and contemporary theologies. Wright has attempted to bridge this gap and integrate his thoughts more directly in a number of popular topical volumes. But these works often seem less a result of broadening the applications of his nuanced New Testament theology and more of producing the pastoral opinions of a high-demand author.

In other words, it is right to say that ‘we cannot simply approach the first-century scriptures with twenty-first century questions’. But is it not also right to say that ‘we cannot simply approach the twenty-first century with first-century questions’? Wright has been featured on *The Christian Transhumanist* podcast and has spoken for a number of innovative, contemporary venues. So it is not fair to level this concern without qualifiers and exceptions. But there is a long way to go. Given evolution, how was God working with people prior to Israel, and just how much of a monopoly did Israel have on God’s blessing? Are Christians obligated to follow the models of theology in Paul, or should they be as creative as Paul in constructing new models today? Just how universal is Christianity, given inclusivist pluralism and the resurgence of universalism in general (e.g. David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019])? Perhaps second-generation scholars, like Bird and others, will have to do the hard work of connecting his Kingdom-vision to the important work of people like Jürgen Moltmann, James Cone, Richard Rohr, Linn Marie Tonstad, and especially constructive theologians like Sallie McFague, Peter C. Hodgson, Gordon Kaufman, Laurel Schneider, Catherine Keller and Anne Primavesi—assuming, of course, that this is even a legitimate enterprise.

Until then, no small feat has nevertheless been achieved, and it *is* important that ‘we get the early stuff right’ and venture *ad fontes*. *The New Testament in Its World* is a tremendous accomplishment with countless hours of labor behind it. It sets out to introduce ‘the history, literature, and theology of the first Christians’, and it does this splendidly. Whether for classroom use or a general reference of a ‘traditionalist’ perspective on Christian origins, we all have Bird and Wright to thank for this superb synthesis.

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