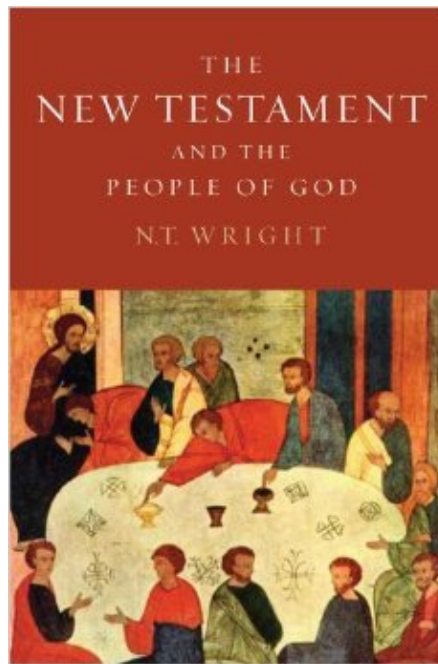




The New Testament and the People of God

N.T. Wright

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Part of a five-volume project on the theological questions surrounding the origins of Christianity, this book offers a reappraisal of literary, historical and theological readings of the New Testament, arguing for a form of "critical realism" that facilitates different readings of the text.

Provides a historical, theological and literary study of first-century Judaism and Christianity, offering a preliminary discussion of the meaning of the word 'god' within those cultures.

The New Testament and the People of God Details

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From Reader Review The New Testament and the People of God for online ebook

Zach Adams says

It took a long time for me to build up the courage to read this book. But after finally finishing it, i look back on it and say, "that wasn't nearly as hard as I thought it would be." Wright is not only brilliant in his content, but also surprisingly fluid and conversational in his academic writing. So for you out there who enjoy Wright (and also have at least some biblical studies training—which is needed to fully appreciate the work), but haven't read this volume, go for it! Just chip away at it!

Jeremy says

A brilliant introduction to reading Christian scriptures including many of the common distortions. Wright is often considered on the conservative end of things by liberals, but relatively liberal by conservatives and fundamentalists. What we see hear is brilliant scholarships. The method of this book will be useful for anyone reading scriptural texts in other traditions. Part of a series of three, highly recommended.

Bill Orlandi says

Ótimo livro sobre a cosmovisão do judaísmo do primeiro século e do cristianismo primitivo. Creio que o autor cometeu alguns equívocos de ordem teológica ao longo do livro, mas ainda sim é leitura obrigatória para quem quer entender mais o NT.

Christopher says

The New Testament and the People of God is the first volume in a multi-volume series by noted New Testament scholar N.T. Wright called "Christian Origins and the Question of God." This first volume is suppose to act as a sort of introduction to the many themes that Mr. Wright will hit upon in future books and will act as a sort of reference to those volumes. That is not to say that this book is boring or unnecessary. Quite the contrary actually. This is perhaps one of the most insightful books you are likely to find on the Early Church out there. Using a form of literary criticism he calls "Critical Realism," Mr. Wright lays out the various beliefs, stories, and actions (or praxis) that first century Judaism and Christianity held. Though Mr. Wright draws upon the history of post-exilic Judaism (roughly 530 B.C. to 135 A.D.), Mr. Wright focuses his attention on the Judaism of the Second Temple era (roughly 63 B.C. to 135 A.D.) from which Christianity sprung from. Through it all, Mr. Wright maintains his theme that can be found in nearly all of his works and yet is still wonderfully profound: that through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ Israel's story, which began with the fall of man in Genesis and went through the covenantal promises to Abraham, Moses, and David, has reached its climax and now God is drawing all peoples to him to proclaim his kingdom. Mr. Wright wonderfully defends this with sound criticism that takes into account nearly all recent scholarship on the Early Church. Though not the longest book in this series (that title goes to his recently published behemoth Paul and the Faithfulness of God), this is still not a book for the faint of heart. It is filled with footnotes, citations, and asides to and about biblical scholars and their arguments, which he

engages with just as readily as he engages with the scriptures. And he also takes into account the apocryphal Jewish and Christian writings of this era to compare and contrast the New Testament with the intellectual, religious, and political context of the period. It can get a little heady and difficult to track, but for those of you interested in New Testament biblical scholarship, you would be hard pressed to find a better place to start than this book.

Scriptor Ignotus says

When I picture Jesus of Nazareth, I'm inclined to imagine a man, slender at the waist but tall and broad-shouldered like a college football quarterback, with an immaculately-trimmed beard bristling the contours of a jawline that could shear sheet metal, eyes that slay leviathans and make babies laugh by changes of countenance, and shoulder-length, wavy tresses of such impeccable sheen and lift that women everywhere want to know: is he born with it, or is it Maybelline?

This man strides over the hill country of Galilee, disciples bumbling in tow, alighting in this village and that one, rousing the villagers from their epistemological slumber, healing lepers, casting out demons, speaking kind words, and all the while being pestered by the first-century Judean iteration of the fun police; the Pharisees. Who are they, and why are they being so mean to a guy who's just trying to help people? But this question begs another: who is Jesus, and what is his significance? And this question, in turn, begs a truly bewildering array of others.

Our understanding of Jesus and the founding of Christianity is hopelessly devoid of context; and context, perhaps more so in the Christian religion than in all others, forms an indispensable part of the total worldview. Christianity, after all, is based on the proposition that the God who created the universe and sustains it in being showed up on Earth at a particular historical moment, with the body of a Jewish day laborer from a backwater town on the fringes of both the Roman Empire itself and the domain of its Jewish client-king. The *meaning* of Christianity, then, if such a thing can ever be grasped, must be found within a nesting doll of overlaying theological, historical, and biographical narratives.

The life of Jesus is narrated by the evangelists, who construe it as a climactic recapitulation of the story of YHWH and the people of Israel. This story contrasts with those of other Jewish sects, like the Pharisees, Essenes, and Sadducees, each of whom longed for the liberation of the holy land from the pagans, restoration of the Solomonic temple, and the reinstitution of the true worship of the true God, but who differed on the means and circumstances of this liberation and the role of human agency in fulfilling God's promise to the progeny of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

These narratives of the Jewish resistance contrasted with those of the collaborators: Herod rebuilt the temple in the hopes that he would be regarded as a messianic figure, while simultaneously benefitting from the sponsorship of the pagan emperor. Josephus told a story according to which the God of Israel had defected to the Romans because of her malfeasances, the speculative world-ruler who would come from Judea turned out to be the emperor Vespasian, who was proclaimed as such by his troops while campaigning in Judea, and the God of Abraham had thrown in his lot with the imperial pretensions of the Roman Empire.

Christianity took shape within this tangled web of stories. The Christian *story*, articulated in some measure as an oppositional polemic to the others, is, more than any abstract theological axioms could hope to be, what Christianity is *about*.

First-century Judea was positively on fire with revolutionary fervor and apocalyptic expectation. According to Jewish belief, God had created a fundamentally good world, created mankind to be its stewards, watched

mankind become corrupted, and chose the people of Israel to be the means by which He would rectify the human condition. He promised His people a land of their own, a land flowing with milk and honey, His own dwelling place at Mount Zion, from which He would enlighten the world and finally be recognized as the one true God.

This dream was subjected to continual setbacks; the promise of the Davidic kingdom was quashed by captivity in Babylon; the return from exile was dampened by subjection first to the Seleucids and then to the Hasmonean dynasty, which claimed to be their liberator but smacked of Hellenic decadence. The Hasmoneans were succeeded by the Herodians, clients of yet another pagan superpower, and zealous Jews were left groaning in anticipation of the moment at which their God would finally act to cleanse His land of the pagan, restore His law, and take His place as ruler of the world.

Many were the revolutionaries who took up arms to bring about salvation. All of them failed. The Jewish war of 66-70 ended with the destruction of the temple. Simon Bar-Kokhba, the final would-be Messiah, led a revolt that ended in 135 with his own death, the destruction of his prospective Messianic kingdom, and the near-annihilation of the Jewish people. There would be no more whisperings of a Jewish state until 1947. Without the temple, keeping Torah became the marker of Jewish identity. The aspirations of Zionism were pushed out of immediate consideration; consigned to a distant and unforeseeable future.

The Christian writers put an astonishing twist on this story. With a zeal that must have seemed ludicrous, they proclaimed that God *had* in fact fulfilled His promise. He *had* defeated paganism; He *had* become King; He *had* restored His promised land to His people; He *had* inaugurated a new age; and He *had* reconstituted His people. He had done all of these things in a way that was at first surprising, but upon reflection could be discerned as the necessary and inevitable consummation of the long, fissiparous relationship between God and man.

In and through Jesus, God had defeated the powers of death and enthroned himself over the world. He had established a new covenant, based on a new identity; no longer one enforced by ethnic kinship, but by the faith of all seekers of the one true God. He had rounded the final corner of his world-historical mission, whereby the creation of humanity—the *true* humanity—would finally be accomplished.

How he did this, precisely, is the subject matter of the next book. I'm game.

Mark Sequeira says

Wow! So N.T. Wright rocks my world yet again! Okay, yes, it may be more of the same considering I've already read "Jesus and the Victory of God" (which technically comes after this one I believe) and if I had to, I'd say that one is better but once reading N.T. Wright, I want to read more. Big books, slow reading, but boy has it been worth it. Got to be some of the most important reading I have done and I have done a lot of reading from Calvin's Institutes to John Owen to Stanley Grenz to Wesley to Arthur Pink to Eugene Peterson's Spiritual Theology series to...Esp. good on the background to the N.T. and the worldview back then, thought patterns, etc.

Kirk Winslow maybe said it best below, "if you have an interest in the subject, it's first-rate all the way. If historical background to the NT doesn't float your boat, go straight to vol. 2, "Jesus and the Victory of God." That one will change your life - really."

B. Hawk says

Much of this book is clearly about introductions: historiography, methodology, and the place of the historian among all of these. Throughout most of this, Wright places himself in relation to his predecessors and others in his field, establishing how his work moves forward in new directions. Of course, he also acknowledges his debt to many of his influences, and those from whose work he has gained much of the background to his own project. In all, the book establishes the foundations of the rest of the series, paying particular attention to both the contexts of biblical history and the contexts of his own project.

Beyond these introductions, however, Wright does explicate his underlying arguments. His main approach is “to rethink a basic worldview” of early Christianity (24), and, essentially, “to articulate new categories” of Christian thought (25). Wright seeks to do this by way of literature, history, and theology—all three examined in order to establish the basic worldviews surrounding the New Testament (both Jewish and Christian). Fundamentally, Wright advocates a methodology of “critical realism” that straddles the opposing views of positivism and subjectivity; such a methodology, he proposes, leads to the examination of *worldviews* as “the grid[s] through which humans, both individually and in social groupings, perceive all of reality” (32).

Even more basic to his methodology, however, is to establish the fundamental “Story” that each worldview and group embraces. In other words, for Wright, “the deepest level of meaning consists in the stories, and ultimately the worldviews, which the texts thus articulate” (66). For second-Temple Judaism, the story is one of exile and exodus “reaching its climax”; and, for Christianity, “it is the same story” (150). For Wright, therefore, the project of “Christian Origins and the Question of God” must be set in direct relation to the basic cultural contexts of first-century Judaism. This is the story out of which Christianity grows. Furthermore, this is the context in which both Jesus and Paul—the two major figures of his project—must be understood. Both were part of the second-Temple Jewish culture, and both worked from a worldview of the story of their god’s interaction with Israel in a series of exile and exodus events moving toward the ultimate exodus.

A notable aspect of the book is Wright’s ability to navigate between the big picture and necessary details. He continually moves between scholarship and his own claims, overviews of the history and case studies that prove his points. While he often claims that many of these issues need further critical attention, he does well to present the material in a coherent manner. No doubt many of the individual issues and details will be dealt with later (Wright himself promises to return to several points in his later volumes), but they work well together without the risk of loose ends ready to fray and unwind his arguments.

Although the work is not perfect—sometimes Wright’s quirky illustrations or self-deprecation (Does he really believe that he is not capable of offering authoritative claims based on his examinations, even though he goes on to do so anyway?) can distract from his study—it does offer a fresh and persuasive way of doing history. Even more, this study presents a holistic and contextual framework for understanding the New Testament and early Christianity within its original milieu, rather than from modern assumptions and misconceptions. This book is an important work, and proves to be influential to future studies—indeed, it seems to have already made such an impact, according to reviews and citations by other scholars—including the subsequent volumes that extend Wright’s project from introductions to more extensive examinations.

John says

Wright's first volume in his "Christian Origins" series is largely an apologetic work, whose thesis is well summarized toward the end of the book. He writes:

"The New Testament writers claim that, though there is only one god, all human beings of themselves cherish wrong ideas about this one god. In worshipping the god thus wrongly conceived, they worship an idol. Pagans worship gods of wood and stone, distorting the creator by worshipping the creature. Jews, Paul argues in parallel with this, have made an idol of their own national identity and security, and so have failed to see what the covenant faithfulness of their god, the god of Abraham, had always entailed.¹⁵ Christians, as the addressees of the New Testament writings, are clearly not exempt from the possibility of idolatry, of using the words 'Jesus' and 'Christ' while in fact worshipping a different god.¹⁶ Our study of the history of Judaism and Christianity in the first century leads us inexorably to the conclusion that both cannot be right in their claims about the true god."

While I think Wright's conclusions are correct, I really struggled to follow the logic of his argument since it is so deeply rooted in extra-biblical texts. I suppose this may be more significant to the liberal critics that Wright seems to deal with. But these arguments can be made more persuasively and powerfully from the Bible itself, without resorting to the Apocrypha and other ancient Jewish texts.

Those that have read any of Wright's other long works will rightly expect the book is well padded with passive-voice ramblings which his editor didn't have the courage to slice and dice. I found some value in this, but surprisingly little, considering the book's reputation and length.

I cannot recommend this one. I'm hoping for better in the second volume.

Jacob Aitken says

NTPG attempts a constructive methodology for reading Scripture and doing theology in a post-postmodern age. This book sets the stage for the next two, draws heavily from it, and determines later exegesis. If this book is mastered, much of Wright's later writings is fairly simple.

Overview:

Wright criticizes the Enlightenment's approach to knowledge. He says, in line with Postmodern philosophy, that a tabula rasa is impossible. We do not simply "see" other facts, but receive those facts pre-interpreted and subconsciously offer our own interpretation.

More controversially, Wright argues we must read Scripture in light of the issues of 2nd Temple Judaism (2TJ). This leads to the content of Wright's method:

Wright argues that the 2TJ period was a story in search of a conclusion. They had returned from exile, but the promises of the post-exilic prophets had gone unfulfilled. Subtly, many of the Jewish themes of covenant and election were redefined. If Israel was the people of God, and if their God was the creator of the world, he would have to act and vindicate his people. The doctrine of election is reworked around the covenant. If we are the people of God, then we are in covenant with God. God in some way will have to fulfill his covenant. Fulfilling the covenant meant defeating Israel's enemies (e.g., Rome) and God becoming King of the world. When the covenant is renewed, Israel would see God as king of the world.

Wright maintains this is how 2TJ read Scripture, and I think he is largely correct. The above theology will be

reworked around Christ and his ministry. Wright's theology is remarkably consistent, even when he might overstate his case.

Corey Hampton says

Late last year I decided that I was going to read through N.T. Wright's Christian Origins and the Question of God series, as I have benefited so greatly from his other works and found them so helpful theologically and ecclesialogically.

But the reality that I have (surprisingly) run into, is that N.T. Wright is quite a controversial figure within evangelicalism, particularly within my circle of churches. In fact, I have now read this book twice; this, because, after my first reading, I realised that I needed to go back and more fully understand the nuances of his arguments (as I was unaware at how much disagreement I would find on Wright's scholarship). I have received (or read) numerous negative comment on his 'New Perspective on Paul' and his teaching on the historical Jesus (from both evangelical and liberal pastors/church leaders); but I have also found that most of those who think negatively of him have never seriously engaged with the work of Wright himself. And, for me personally, this is quite a grievous reality. I fear that this is reactionary to (their perception of) his threat to the status quo of evangelical scripture reading.

In light of my study, I find Wright's work to be extremely important for evangelical churches living within a post-christendom reality. Perhaps old (overly conservative) ways of reading scripture are no longer appropriate. And perhaps liberal critiques aren't appropriate either. Both seem to read the scripture from within a worldview that needs fresh, first century critique; and I believe that Wright provides it in his scholarship.

The New Testament and the People of God is the first volume of the series, which is followed by Jesus and the Victory of God, The Resurrection of the Son of God, and, to this point, Paul and the Faithfulness of God. In this volume, Wright attempts to give a coherent understanding of first century Judaism and Christianity through a study of their history, literature, and theology. Central to his methodology is his use (and further development) of Ben F. Meyer's critical-realist hermeneutic.

He begins by arguing for a critical-realist epistemology that moves beyond both positivist and phenomenalist theories of knowledge to,

a way of describing 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 spiralling path of appropriate dialogue or conversation between the knower and the thing known (hence critical'). This path leads to critical reflection on the products of our enquiry into "reality" so that our assertions about "reality" acknowledge their own provisionality. Knowledge, in other words, although in principle concerning realities in dependant of the knower, is never itself independent of the knower.'

After explicating this epistemology, he then relates it to literature (particularly, though not exclusively, in the N.T.), history (particularly in the first century), and theology (in light of N.T. literature and history). In these sections, Wright provides a methodology and hermeneutic that he will use in all works that follow; they are foundational.

And, also central to his hermeneutic is his argument that texts ('human writing') are 'the articulation of worldview'—or even, 'the telling of stories which bring worldviews into articulation.' In light of this

hermeneutic, Wright says that ‘Part at least of the task of literary criticism is therefore, I suggest, to lay bare, and explicate, what the writer has achieved at this level of implied narrative, and ultimately implied worldview, and how.’ Therefore, when we read the New Testament, the deepest meaning will lie in the implied narrative—the story of Israel—and the worldview of the author—in Paul’s case, Judaism, Hellenistic culture, Roman imperial ideology, and, most importantly, his membership ‘in Christ’. All of these narratives, rushed together in the New Testament, then birth a new worldview; and ‘by reading it historically, I can detect that it was always intended as a subversive story, undermining a current worldview and attempting to replace it with another. By reading it with my own ears open, I realize that it may subvert my worldview too.’

Wright presents his methodology for explicating a worldview by looking at ones’ aims, intentions, beliefs, hope, stories, questions, symbols, and praxes. He then uses this methodology to work out a detailed assessment of second temple Judaism and first-century Christianity. His basic argument is that God had chosen Israel as his covenant people to undo the sin of Adam and to bring blessing to all the nations of the earth. If they obey the covenant, then they will be blessed; if they disobey, they will deal with the consequences (exile). The story is a continuous reminder of the frailty of Israel; it’s a story of continuous disobedience and pain. And, in the first-century, though Israel is in the promised Land, they are still in exile (under the rule of the Roman empire). Therefore, Israel (in all of its diversity) is waiting in expectation for God to renew his covenant; to bring judgment on the pagan empire, cleanse the land and Temple, and to vindicate his chosen people, through whom he would rule the nations.

This is the reality that Jesus is lived, died, and was resurrection. He, Wright argues, was a prophet who represented Israel as her Messiah. He was God’s chosen King who would renew God’s covenant with his people. Yet, he does so in a deeply subversive way than expected:

The exile came to its cataclysmic end when Jesus, Israel’s representative Messiah, died outside the walls of Jerusalem, bearing the curse, which consisted of exile at the hands of the pagans, to its utmost limit. The return from exile began when Jesus, again as the representative Messiah, emerged from the tomb three days later. As a result, the whole complex of Jewish expectations as to what would happen when the exile finished had come tumbling out in a rush. Israel’s god had poured out his own spirit on all flesh; his word was going out to the nations; he had called into being a new people composed of all races and classes, and both sexes, without distinction. These major features of Paul’s theology only make sense within a large-scale retelling of the essentially Jewish story, seen now from the point of view of one who believes that the climactic moment has already arrived, and that the time to implement that great achievement is already present. Paul fitted his own personal narrative world into this larger framework. His own vocation, to be the apostle to the Gentiles, makes sense within a narrative world according to which Israel’s hopes have already come true.

Clearly, there remained a fulfilment yet to come. Paul, like Luke, believed both that the End had come and that the End was yet to come. 1 Corinthians 15 is the fullest version we have of his retelling of the still-future part of the Jewish story. It is a redrawn apocalypse, which again only makes sense in terms of the story of Israel, the story we studied in chapter 8, now seen in a new light. The same could be said of the ‘apocalyptic’ passage in Romans (8:18–27). The narrative needs an ending, and Paul hints at it in these and other passages: the creation as a whole will be set free from its bondage to decay. The exodus of Israel was a model for the death and resurrection of Jesus, and both of these events point forward to a greater exodus to come, when the whole cosmos will be liberated from its Egypt, its present state of futility.

This book is so detailed and carefully argued that I couldn’t possible give an exhaustive review or summary of all of the details and nuances; but I can’t recommend this work enough. Let me give a few points on the most important points I am taking away after my second reading of the book (I definitely plan on reading it a few more times!):

N.T. authority is something that I’ve been exploring for a bit, and I have found his five-act hermeneutic very

helpful. It will take many conversations, and much thinking and praying to work out what this might mean for the local church; but I believe this is a model that will work well hermeneutically and in light of the continuing, creative work of the Spirit in the life of the church.

Salvation theology needs a serious re-assessment in both liberalism and evangelicalism. We often think of it as the promise of eternal, disembodied heavenly bliss in heaven with God. But that's not a Jewish hope or a Christian hope; and this is not what the New Testament understands eschatological salvation to be. The reality is much more glorious! We'll work this out in more detail elsewhere.

The (seemingly) old Reformed understanding that Judaism as 'the wrong sort of religion' (and that Jesus came to bring something completely new) is a bad understanding of covenant theology. Jesus, Wright argues, is the climax of God's promise! God is faithful to his covenant with Israel through the faithfulness of Jesus; and through Jesus all people are invited to join God's covenant people and their vocation to bring God's healing presence into the world.

The local church has, in light of the Enlightenment, separated 'religion' from everyday life of politics, economics, social-justice, etc. But Jesus held them all tightly together; in fact, his message brought judgment on Israel's practical understanding on all of this. Therefore, we need to hear Jesus afresh, in his context, so that we can change in light of it.

This book was truly a treasure to read. I plan on going back to it several times in my life.

Now to move to Jesus and the Victory of God.

Jon Beadle says

If the breadth of scholarship was an ocean, Wright would be walking on the water! This book took me nearly a month to finish and I don't think my perspective of the early church in the world of second-temple Judaism will ever be the same.

Nick says

N.T. Wright has been somewhat of a hero of mine for a while now. I must admit that I do not agree with him on all points and he tends to be a bit repetitive; however, I could say this of many authors.

Wright is one of my heroes because he is cross-disciplinary. He is a historian, theologian, biblical exegete, pastor, and a good writer to boot. NTPG reflects this diversity of roles in the best way.

Justin Evans says

A very clearly written, well-argued, but sometimes repetitive book. The first methodological section is embarrassing for anyone who has read literary criticism or philosophy of the last forty years--as ever, the other humanistic disciplines take a while to catch up (viz, classics). But Wright's approach is fair. You might even call it common-sensical, except that it's couched in such high-flown concepts: to understand what people meant by their texts, you should try to find out how they saw the world. Very good. Not sure why we need Greimas for that.

His criticisms of other theologians or hermeneutists are good (basically, they all have an agenda, and so does Wright, but his is usually less obtrusive than theirs). His questions are good (e.g., what exactly did these

people mean by 'God', anyway?). His answers are interesting ("works" are signs of Jewish identity, not good deeds; the 'kingdom of God' was always an allegorical claim about the end of the present world order, never a factual claim about the end of the world itself; Christians believed, from the start, that Jesus was the Messiah).

I just hope the volumes on Jesus and Paul are less repetitive.

James says

As an atheist with an interest in the Bible and its history, I'm afraid to say that I've been put off reading N.T. Wright until now. While most of the best Biblical scholars I've read (Crossan, Borg, Dunn, Brown etc.) have all notionally retained their Christian faith to one degree or another in spite of their rigorous scholarship, I was well aware that Wright is often particularly forthright in his defence of certain Christian claims (the resurrection, virgin birth etc.) that other scholars have treated rather more circumspectly. While I'm scarcely afraid to challenge my beliefs by reading those who disagree with me, I was also a little hesitant to invest the time in reading the work of someone who would (presumably) prioritise the defence of their faith over and above more scholarly concerns. I'm interested in the history of Christianity, and wasn't prepared to submit myself to the work of someone with a different set of priorities. So, was I wrong?

As you can probably tell by my 5 star rating, I'm happy to report that I was, at least to the extent this particular book is concerned. While Wright is often strident in the defence of his beliefs (an *unapologetic apologist*, as it were) this never overtly interferes with the quality of his scholarship. I can't say I always agreed with him, but his reasoning was always genuinely honest and cogent, which is the most you can ask for in an argument you happen to disagree with.

I'll admit that it took me a while to shrug off my skepticism. In the early pages he asserts that a Christian may be best placed to assess the history of Christianity for the same reason a mathematician may be best placed to assess a mathematical proof, which stands as a bewildering argument but one I don't intend to dwell on here. Suffice to say, the quality of his argument improves as the text progresses, but the underlying message that there is more at stake for Wright here than a mere dispassionate analysis of the forces that led to the emergence of the Christian faith never strays far from the surface of the text.

The first section (probably the weakest, but still eminently thought-provoking) is where Wright lays out his methodology for the rest of this series. In contrast to other authors who have engaged in a similar project (e.g. Dunn in his "Christianity in the Making" series) Wright only perfunctorily addresses the methodology of others, and rather seeks to forge his own methodology seemingly free from prior influence. His message here - and it is indeed a compelling one - is that we should treat the Jewish and Christian texts as a continuous narrative, and that we should let these "stories" speak on their own terms rather than in allowing ourselves to get bogged down in reductive obsessions concerning historical "facts". That is not to say that the historico-critical perspective has no place in Wright's scholarship - as the rest of the book will show, it clearly does - merely that not all aspects of religious tradition can be broken-down into brute "facts" for further empirical analysis. The texts were never composed with such concerns in mind.

The second section concerns the progress of Jewish thought from the Torah up until the late second-Temple period of Jesus, and I can safely say that it is the best treatment of the subject I have ever read. Wright is able to draw in an incredible amount of detail and condense it into an essay that is extraordinarily lucid and readable given the often abstruse subject matter. Wright doesn't fall into the trap of simply scouring these inter-testamental Jewish writings for points of contact (or divergence) with the early Christian faith as so many others have done, but rather - again - is content to let these texts speak on their own terms. Despite the

undeniable heterodoxy of the texts from this period, Wright is able to convincingly show that they are unified in their presentation of a continuous (theological) narrative from the time of the Patriarchs to what was for the authors the "present day". The book would be worth reading for this section alone, particularly for its treatment of the apocalyptic literature that had such an important influence on the first Christians.

The final section deals with early Christian literature (most specifically the literature of the NT), though the treatment is obviously rather provisional in anticipation of the subsequent books in the series. As per the title of this volume, this section focusses more on the "People of God" behind the texts, rather than the texts themselves. Here, again, the thrust of Wright's thesis is that the authors of the NT were characteristically Jewish, and they saw themselves as existing at the end (perhaps conclusion?) of a much longer Jewish narrative. Wright here is able to convincingly show that even the more supposedly "gentile" works of the NT (e.g. the epistles of Paul and the Gospel of Luke) were informed by, and constructed upon, an appreciation of the Jewish conception of YHWH and his relationship to Israel. That is to say, it is impossible to understand the NT without a deeper understanding of earlier Jewish narrative theology.

If it is possible to identify a weakness in this volume, it may be its unwillingness to intersect with - or even address - the views of other scholars on matters of great controversy. Indeed, Wright - from the beginning - makes it clear that this work represents his own views on the origins of Christianity, and to that extent is not interested in surveying the attitudes of wider scholarship. For this reason, the text may sometimes assert a confidence in its own conclusions that - in my view at least - is not warranted given the plurality of dissenting views. However, in some ways this is also the book's strength: to again compare with Dunn's project, which is frequently side-tracked with involved and arcane discussions of existing scholarly controversies that can detract from this wider thesis, Wright's project is eminently readable and his train of thought always easy to follow. If only all scholars could write with such clarity!

So, to re-iterate, despite some early misgivings, I found this to be one of the best treatments of the background of the New Testament I've ever read. Whether you are a believer or a skeptic, I think you'll find plenty to chew on here.

Ben Smitthimedhin says

Wright does an excellent job at weaving Judaism and Christianity together while still distinguishing their core beliefs and practices from one another. In *The New Testament and the People of God*, Wright establishes the message of the New Testament within its first century context, showing how Jesus and Paul cannot be understood apart from their Jewish themes.

I personally found the first couple chapters (on epistemology and literary criticism) to be unnecessary. While I understand that Wright wishes to convince postmodern audiences of their flawed theory of knowledge, I think he should just stick with the history and theology of the New Testament, which are broad enough on their own. Although the book is pretty thorough, it is not a good introduction to those who are unfamiliar with Second Temple Judaism. For those who have been introduced to Wright before though, this book is a treat.
