

# The Meaning and Telos of Israel's Election: An Interfaith Response to N.T. Wright's Reading of Paul

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## ■ Abstract

N. T. Wright offers a systematic and highly influential metanarrative to account for Paul's theology of Israel. However, Wright overlooks or underemphasizes important dimensions of Paul's thinking, leading to problematic distortions. Thus, Wright claims that God rejected the historic people of Israel due to their failure to missionize the gentile nations, an idea not easily found in the Hebrew Bible texts Paul utilizes or in Paul's own statements concerning his fellow Jews. Wright relies heavily on the diatribe of Rom 2 to build a Pauline theology of Israel, but he downplays the many positive things Paul says elsewhere about Israel's status. Particularly troubling is Wright's use of Rom 5 to argue that Paul characterizes Torah as divinely intended to draw sin onto Israel, with the expected consequence that human sin would reach its zenith within Israel, a view that moves Wright toward the very supersessionism against which Paul cautioned his gentile followers. These exegetical decisions, which form a tightly structured messiah-oriented understanding of Israel's election, ignore what the Hebrew Bible and Paul affirm: while God accomplishes certain larger aims through Israel, God's election of Israel is ultimately grounded in God's inalienable love for Israel and Israel's ancestors.

## ■ Keywords

Paul, election, Israel, N.T. Wright, Romans 2, 5, 9–11, Isaiah 40–66, supersessionism

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As historical exegetes, of course, it is not up to us to dictate to Paul what he ought to have said, or indeed to worry about the long-term effects either of understanding him or misunderstanding him, but to track as best we can what he said in fact.

—N. T. Wright<sup>1</sup>

## ■ Introduction

As one of the most widely read and prolific contemporary authors writing on the Pauline corpus, N. T. Wright is to be complimented for bringing many insights from the New Perspective Pauline school of thinkers to a broader audience and for his lucid and accessible writing style. Yet some of his interpretations and certain theological moves he makes are exegetically questionable. As we demonstrate in the body of this essay, Wright has resurrected and given a significant role to a few disturbing anti-Judaic stereotypes. While he is a major participant in the New Perspective, some of Wright's arguments suggest that Paul viewed both the Jewish law more negatively and the Jewish people as more expendable than can be sustained on the basis of a close reading of the Pauline letters and the various Hebrew Bible passages upon which Paul built his theology. At other times, Wright suggests plausible readings of Paul's arguments, and, of course, Jewish readers may find some of Paul's arguments offensive or unconvincing. But in some instances, Wright dubiously argues that Paul's reading of the Hebrew Scriptures is, in fact, its likely contextual meaning, implying that Jews in Paul's time failed to heed the message of certain prophetic texts. Wright's tendency to read Paul's corpus and the Hebrew Bible texts Paul cites as if these documents were all parts of a unified systematic theology exacerbates these tendencies and has the unfortunate side-effect of moving Wright toward a problematic type of supersessionism that views the Jewish people as supplanted by the church.<sup>2</sup>

Most responses to Wright have focused on specific aspects of his comprehensive construct. We take a wider-angle look at Wright's narrative theology of Paul's writings in order to call attention to some implications of his overall system. No single position that we explore below in and of itself is sufficient to claim that Wright has lapsed into a deeper, and hence potentially more problematic, type of supersessionism than we believe is textually warranted (or, from a contemporary viewpoint, theologically viable in a post-Holocaust world). But when taken together,

<sup>1</sup> N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Book 2; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013) 863. Hereafter abbreviated *PF*.

<sup>2</sup> Any Christian reading of the Hebrew Scriptures is likely to involve some form of supersessionism, by which we mean that the early Christians came to believe that their reading of Israel's scriptures superseded other earlier and contemporary readings of these sacred texts by other Jewish readers and that God's acting through Jesus's death and resurrection had ushered in the beginning of the eschaton, thus opening a path for gentiles to participate in God's promises to Israel. We are here concerned about more pernicious forms of supersessionism in which the Jewish people are completely replaced by the nascent church.

Wright's portrayals of Paul's view of Israel's divinely appointed role among the nations, Paul's view of "Israel" contemporary to Paul, and Paul's understanding of the Torah's purpose lead to a strongly instrumental conception of Israel's election whose telos is only Messiah Jesus. This combination of positions tends to bolster the notion that the vast majority of the historic people of Israel have been displaced by the nascent church and that now that Messiah Jesus has come, the physical descendants of Israel who do not identify with Jesus are completely outside the newly defined people of God and hence beyond salvation.

### ■ Wright's Reading of Isaiah on Israel and the Nations

A troubling feature of Wright's exegesis is his understanding of Israel's uniqueness within Paul's writings and most especially his very flat and overtly Christian reading of texts from Isa 40–66, upon which Paul draws. Wright summarizes his own view on how Israel was to be "a light to the nations," a phrase drawn from Isa 42:6 and 49:6, as follows: "Torah gives 'the Jew' the outline of knowledge and truth; it is then the responsibility of 'the Jew' to pass this on to the world, to obey the vocation to bring a balance to the world, to mend the world."<sup>3</sup> We can appreciate the sense of *tiqqun 'olam* (repair of the world) here, but Wright's assumption that the phrase "light to the nations" in texts from Second Isaiah calls for Israel to missionize the gentiles is highly dubious, and thus his criticism of Judaism for failing to enlighten the nations lacks credibility.

Wright here follows and comes to the defense of H. H. Rowley's reading of Isa 40–66.<sup>4</sup> Yet, we would contend that Rowley's and Wright's own understandings of Israel's election are suffused with a Christian type of universalism that leads them to retroject uncritically an expectation for mission onto Israel, via certain verses extracted from Second Isaiah's servant songs. It is the case that some texts from Isa 40–66 upon which Rowley and ultimately Wright (and Paul as well) draw do portray the nations of the world as witnessing and acknowledging God's power. Yet, only a few select texts from chapters 56–66, likely penned by a group of Judeans who had returned from exile, ever speak of certain gentiles attaching themselves to Israel's cultus, and it is far from evident that even these passages involve any process of conversion that makes them into Israelites. The emphasis is rather on the nations serving restored Israel, their wealth flowing into Jerusalem, and the grand vision of all humanity in the end worshipping Israel's God, enthroned in Jerusalem.<sup>5</sup>

Wright grounds his strongly instrumental reading of Israel's election, which envisions Israel's primary responsibility as requiring the Jewish people to pass

<sup>3</sup> Wright, *PGF*, 811.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 806.

<sup>5</sup> Joel Kaminsky and Anne Stewart, "God of All the World: Universalism and Developing Monotheism in Isaiah 40–66," *HTR* 99.2 (2006) 139–63. This essay examines the few passages, such as Isa 56:3–8; 59:19; 60:3; 66:18–23, that touch upon the question of various non-Israelites being attracted to the worship of Israel's God.

Torah on to the gentiles, in what he characterizes as a straightforward, incontestable reading of Isa 42:6 and 49:6 where the “light to the nations” metaphor occurs. But the truth is that he reads these two verses in almost total isolation from their larger contexts. He then finds Paul’s diatribe against the Jew in Rom 2:17–20 to be Paul’s own indictment that Israel has not lived out her instrumental calling.<sup>6</sup>

A review of one passage will demonstrate how Wright imposes a Christian lens on the text, grossly misrepresenting its central thrust. Immediately after Isa 49:6, with its language of Israel as a light to the nations, verse 7 makes clear that the focus is on redeeming lowly Israel from her straits. Verses 8–12 describe the new exodus back home, while verse 13 portrays God comforting Zion. In 49:15–17, in response to Zion’s complaint in verse 14 that she is forsaken, God says that he has inscribed Zion on the palms of his hands. Does a contextual reading really suggest that the focus of this chapter is the conversion of gentiles or that Israel has failed at being a light to them? Isa 49:19–20 goes on to describe Israel reborn. It is true that 49:22 depicts God’s lifting his hand to the nations. But the gentile nations bring Israel home and work as slave laborers for the newly redeemed people of Israel. Their faces bow down and lick the dust off Israel’s feet in verse 23, while Israel’s oppressors eat their own flesh in verse 26. When the gentiles see this, they recognize the power of Israel’s God, but this acknowledgment does not necessarily signal their conversion.

Even in those rare instances where passages envision other nations joining Israel in worshipping God, they remain gentiles and Israel remains Israel. Note the language used in the following passage from Third Isaiah that calls such people foreigners and speaks of God’s temple as a gathering place for many peoples:

And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant—these I will bring to my holy mountain . . . for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. (Isa 56:6–7)

As Joel Kaminsky argues in detail in his monograph on Israel’s election theology, a careful reading of these texts from Isaiah 40–66 demonstrates that they remain much more stubbornly particularistic than Wright and Rowley acknowledge.<sup>7</sup> In fact, Isa 40–66 likely contains the greatest concentration of biblical passages that emphasize God’s mysterious and persistent attachment to Israel. Israel’s recognition of the larger universal horizon that her election might imply for other nations never signals a lessening of her unique peoplehood, but rather a deepening of the very tendencies for which Wright criticizes Jews living in Paul’s time. Thus, Brooks Schramm underlines that Isa 56:3–8 addresses only those foreigners who have attached themselves to YHWH and “has no intention of granting membership in

<sup>6</sup> Wright, *PGF*, 810–16.

<sup>7</sup> Joel S. Kaminsky, *Yet I Loved Jacob: Reclaiming the Biblical Concept of Election* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007) 137–58.

the community and participation in the temple cultus to foreigners in general.”<sup>8</sup> Schramm correctly cautions that one must distinguish between an openness to proselytes and the “modern theological concept of ‘universalism.’”<sup>9</sup> While the text opens membership to some who had previously been excluded, it articulates in new ways what it means to be the “old chosen people.”<sup>10</sup> As we will see, Wright’s interpretive lens ultimately redefines Israel in a much more radical fashion that replaces almost all of the old chosen people.

Wright’s instrumental reading of Israel’s election is therefore poorly (if at all) supported by these Isaianic passages, in spite of his assertions to the contrary.<sup>11</sup> In actuality, Wright tends to ignore those parts of Second Isaiah that affirm an intrinsic value to God’s election of Israel. Thus, Isa 49:14–16 does not appear in the Scripture index of *PFG*.

We applaud Wright’s insight that God’s justice that delivers Israel is covenantally grounded. But as we argue below, God fulfills the covenant with Israel in a different way from what Wright describes. Wright characterizes Isa 51:1–6 as envisioning “worldwide salvation in the form of the promised new creation, the restored Eden,” but the oracle is actually saying that God will make the devastated city of Zion like Eden. It is good that Wright recognizes that this oracle fits with a later oracle in 59:15–21 celebrating the divine “faithfulness through which he will establish his covenant with his people.” But he also treats the LORD’s covenant with Israel as in jeopardy because of Israel’s supposed failure to be a light to the nations. We do not see how the two servant songs in Isaiah 42 and 49 celebrating Israel’s return from exile prove that Isaiah envisions Israel as primarily elected for an instrumental purpose, nor do we see evidence that Isaiah or various New Testament authors view Israel as somehow failing this chimerical purpose.<sup>12</sup> So one way to characterize our difference with Wright is that, while he values the covenantal heritage of Israel, he sees it as leading inexorably toward what he views as its primary telos, the salvation of the world. On the other hand, we continue to take seriously those many Isaianic texts that view God’s election of Israel as ordered toward a telos that values Israel for her own sake (e.g., Isa 27:6–13; 43:1–7; 49:14–16, 24–26; 65:17–25; 66:10–23). Those passages that celebrate Israel as a “light for the peoples” do not imply that Israel is to evangelize the world with Torah, nor that everyone in the world who trusts God will replace Israel as heirs of Israel’s covenants (Isa 2:1–5; 51:4–11;

<sup>8</sup> Brooks Schramm, *The Opponents of Third Isaiah: Reconstructing the Cultic History of the Restoration* (JSOTSup 193; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995) 122.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>10</sup> Kaminsky and Stewart, “God of All the World,” 159.

<sup>11</sup> Wright is not only commenting on Paul’s reading of Isaiah but also on the actual contextual meaning of these Isaiah passages. On *PFG*, 811, Wright argues that the contextual meaning of Isa 42 and 49 is that “the Jew” has a responsibility to pass the Torah’s truth and knowledge on to the world in a missionary manner. In n. 116 on this page, Wright assumes that the “light to the world” imagery calls on Israel to bring Torah truths to the gentiles.

<sup>12</sup> Wright, *PFG*, 803 (“worldwide salvation . . .”), 804 (“faithfulness . . .”); on 804–5, Wright explicitly grounds his instrumental reading of Israel’s election on Isa 42:6–7; 49:5–6.

66:6–23). As in the call for Israel to be holy in Deut 7:6–11, God’s choice of Israel in Deutero-Isaiah is grounded in the mystery of an irrational attachment that the God of Israel has for this people.

In our view, Wright misreads not only the passages from Isa 40–66 but also aspects of Paul’s own exegesis of these texts.<sup>13</sup> While expressions like “a light to the nations” in their Isaianic context certainly were not commissioning Jews to go out to proselytize the nations, of course, Paul, in light of his faith in the meaning of Jesus’s death and resurrection, may well have come to believe that Israel should now missionize the gentiles on the basis of these Isaianic passages. But, in distinction from what Wright at times implies, this would not be because Paul thought all Jews qua Jews of his time should be missionizing the gentiles. Here it is worth highlighting the apostolic mission strategy Paul describes in Gal 2:9. If Peter was designated as apostle to the Jews and Paul received apostolic approval to evangelize the gentiles, it seems unlikely that Paul would have expected all Jewish followers of Jesus to be missionizing gentiles. If Paul did not expect prominent Jews in the early Jesus movement, such as Peter and James, to be evangelizing gentiles, it is difficult to presume with Wright that Paul considered Israel to have failed because the nation was not spreading Torah to the gentiles, let alone that Jews who lived before this time should have been doing so. While Second Isaiah pictures Israel as a light to the nations, the contextual reading of these passages does not support the view that Israel was expected to missionize the gentile nations.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, even Paul’s own drive to missionize the gentiles, contra Wright, need not mean that he thinks the Israelites would no longer maintain their distinctive identity or that Jews would no longer observe the Mosaic law. Israel remains Israel for Paul, as illustrated in his powerful proof in Rom 15:9–12, which cites passages in the Hebrew Bible that describe the nations standing *alongside* Israel, praising God.

### ■ Wright on Israel Contemporary to Paul

Wright’s portrait of Judaism at Paul’s time is not simply critical of the supposed failure of (most) Jews of his time to missionize the gentiles. Rather, Wright thinks that instead of being a light to the nations, Israel used the Torah as a way to keep the nations away from God:

<sup>13</sup> See *ibid.*, 804–5, for a sampling of his highly extrinsic, instrumental view of the election of Israel.

<sup>14</sup> Shaye Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), persuasively argues that the possibility of conversion to Judaism as a religion only developed in the late Second Temple period, and Martin Goodman, *Mission and Conversion: Proselytizing in the Religious History of the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), has raised doubts about how central a role conversion played even in the New Testament. Finally, Matthew Thiessen, *Contesting Conversion: Genealogy, Circumcision, and Identity in Ancient Judaism and Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), argues that many groups of Jews in this period would have thought only someone circumcised on the eighth day after birth could be a member of the Jewish people and that Paul may have adhered to such a view (see Phil 3:5).

They are “in Adam” like everyone else. But their use of “works” (sabbath, food laws, circumcision and so on) as the way of “hunting for the law of righteousness” was the way of using some of the badges of Torah-keeping as the way of doing what Deuteronomy 9 warned them against, setting themselves up to be inalienably God’s people, and keeping everyone else at bay.<sup>15</sup>

Wright, along with other New Perspective scholars, conflates and hence misunderstands two distinct but interrelated issues: 1) Israel’s uniqueness, including her call to maintain her distinctness from the other nations; 2) The moral triumphalism that Israel might develop in the wake of God’s special relationship with Israel. Wright’s argument here appears to assume that, since Deuteronomy tells Israel that God’s special relationship to her is not based on Israel’s moral superiority, Israel should have ignored Deuteronomy’s repeated calls to make herself worthy of God’s gracious gift of election. Importantly, according to Deuteronomy, if Israel is to heed those calls, the Israelites must thoroughly and unambiguously distinguish themselves from other nations by keeping their special commandments, such as the food laws, and assiduously avoiding any items or practices contaminated by association with the worship of other gods.<sup>16</sup>

That Israel has so often failed to obey God’s commandments does not indicate that they have ceased to be God’s specially treasured people, unique upon the earth. In fact, Deuteronomy regularly depicts Israel as God’s special people and even calls on her to separate herself sharply from the other nations of the world. Thus, in Deut 4:19 only Israel is prohibited from worshipping idolatrous images, and in 7:6 and 14:1–2 Israel is marked out as especially holy to God. In fact, throughout the Pentateuch God regularly commands Israel not to behave like the other nations of the world and to keep herself separated from them (Lev 20:22–26). Wright, like other New Perspective scholars who read “works of the law” as the “identity badges” of circumcision, food laws, and Sabbath observance, has not convincingly proven that Paul thought Israel had thus disobeyed God and “kept the nations at bay,” when throughout the Hebrew Bible God regularly commands the people of Israel to maintain their distinction from the other peoples/nations of the world.

We recognize that it is difficult to discern how best to take account of the rhetorical contexts of Paul’s criticisms of the law. But, following scholars like Sanders and Gager and contra to what Wright implies at times, we would argue that these criticisms were primarily addressed to Paul’s gentile church members who were attracted to the observance of Mosaic law, an observance that Paul thinks will pull them away from understanding their position “in Christ.”<sup>17</sup> Hence, they do not

<sup>15</sup> Wright, *PFG*, 1178.

<sup>16</sup> Ironically, contra Wright and other New Perspective scholars (and in disagreement with Paul as well), according to Isa 56 gentiles who wish to worship in Israel’s temple cultus must observe Sabbath and practice circumcision, commandments that Wright calls “Torah badges” used to keep others out! Similarly, note the attention to maintaining strict holiness standards in the eschatological vision found in Zech 14:20–21.

<sup>17</sup> E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia:



at all provide us with an explanation of Paul's "problem" with the Torah in relation to his Jewish contemporaries who did not confess Christ. Paul was indeed bothered when someone from within the church refused to eat alongside gentiles in a way that would influence gentiles to think they had to keep Jewish food purity rules (Gal 2:11–14). But in regard to Jews in his churches who chose to keep their food laws and observe the Sabbath, Paul seems ready to endorse their practices, which necessarily involved some separation from the gentiles (Rom 14:5–6, 14–15, 21; 1 Cor 9:20). Furthermore, Paul continues to affirm Israel's unique status among the nations (Rom 3:1–2; 9:4–5; 11:28–29). Israel remains separately identified from the nations even in the eschatologically oriented catena of Rom 15:9–12, as mentioned above.

Wright's tendency to view God's election of Israel in highly instrumental and behavioral terms is ironic for an exegete whose theology is opposed to such works righteousness. The fact is that Israel remains beloved by God, according to Paul, not for anything they are doing, but because of God's relationship to Israel's ancestors and God's unbreakable promises to them (Rom 11:28–29). While the view that God chose Israel for the instrumental purpose of bringing his message to the gentiles has proven useful for understanding the church's place within the history of salvation, it has come under fire even from Christian scholars. Note Sigurd Grindheim's trenchant comments in his response to Wright's instrumental understanding of Israel's election:

The bride metaphor illustrates well the purpose of election. God did not choose his bride to use her to save the world, but to love her. He did not choose his people to give them a job, but to demonstrate his grace. This loving relationship and this demonstration of divine grace is also the way in which God brings his salvation to the world when the world sees what he has done for his people.<sup>18</sup>

Wright's rejoinder to Grindheim seizes on the last sentence quoted above as proof of Wright's own instrumental reading:

[Grindheim] undermines his own point by suggesting that this love . . . was meant to demonstrate God's character to the nations. That is exactly Paul's point, leading to the problem which he highlights, drawing on Isaiah and Ezekiel, when he says that Israel's faithlessness has nullified that demonstration.<sup>19</sup>

Fortress, 1977) 489–90; idem, "Paul's Attitude toward the Jewish People," *USQR* 33 (1978) 175–187, here at 176; John Gager, *Reinventing Paul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) 43–45.

<sup>18</sup> Sigurd Grindheim, "Election and the Role of Israel," in *God and the Faithfulness of Paul: A Critical Examination of the Pauline Theology of N. T. Wright*, WUNT 2/413 (ed. Christoph Heilig, J. Thomas Hewitt, and Michael F. Bird; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016) 329–46, here at 344. Grindheim here in part draws on elements of arguments put forward in Kaminsky's *Yet I Loved Jacob*, 153–58.

<sup>19</sup> N. T. Wright, "The Challenge of Dialogue: A Partial and Preliminary Response," in *God and the Faithfulness of Paul*, 711–68, here at 738. We have already dealt with Paul's use of Isaiah on Israel and the nations. We do not find Paul explicitly employing Ezekiel for an instrumental portrait of Israel.



Yet there are important distinctions here. Unlike Grindheim's reading, in Wright's the instrumental dimensions of Israel's election completely overshadow any awareness that ultimately God's election of Abraham and his descendants through Isaac and Jacob is grounded in God's unmerited love for Israel. Additionally, there is not much, if any, solid evidence in Paul's letters or in Paul's reading of Isaiah that Paul views post-exilic Israel as under judgment for not being a light to the nations.

In the same essay from which we just quoted, Wright relies heavily on Paul's diatribe against a Jew in Rom 2 for his instrumental view of Israel: "Nor is it the case that I think Paul had already been convinced of a 'failure' on the part of Israel prior to his call/conversion . . . though it is not easy to be sure how, as a zealous Jew, he would have read the texts that he cites in, for instance, Rom 2:24."<sup>20</sup> Yet, he goes on to state that Rom 2:19–20 indicates that Torah was intended to have a "*transformative effect on the rest of the world*" through Israel, which Wright links to Paul's notion that "the Jews were entrusted with God's oracles" (Rom 3:2). And then he cites Rom 3:22 as evidence of Paul's view of "the *faithfulness* of Israel's representative Messiah . . . [who] accomplishes, alone, the vocation of Israel."<sup>21</sup> When the dots are connected, Wright's arguments suggest that the post-conversion/call Paul regarded Israel as not having fulfilled her divine commission.

Exegetically, the material in Rom 2 that Wright cites does regard a Jew within Paul's diatribe as a hypocrite. The descriptions Paul the interlocutor attaches to this diatribal Jew make it sound as though the latter considered himself to be someone who would spread divine light to others. This does not prove that Paul thought that in general Jews were supposed to be guides to blind gentiles or that Jesus had to come because Jews were not doing this. In fact, the question of how Jews are defined here has led Thiessen to propose that Paul is actually addressing gentiles who are seeking to be circumcised, rather than lifelong Jews.<sup>22</sup> Even if one assumes with Wright and many others that Paul is speaking to a Jew by birth here, in the developing structure of Rom 1–3, this section seems to be the Jewish reverberation of the stock tirade against all peoples in 1:18–32. The diatribal nature of this discourse in chapter 2 should give one pause before assuming it represents Paul's view of the Jewish people's place in the divine economy and his understanding of their elective purpose. One needs to be especially careful here, since Paul affirms at its conclusion that Jews have a great advantage over gentiles, an idea reprised near the end of the olive tree metaphor and after the "all Israel will be saved" pronouncement (3:1–2; 11:23–24, 28–29).

A better indication of Paul's view of his own people would be from outside the diatribe genre. In Rom 9:31–32 he says that Israel, pursuing a law of righteousness did not arrive at that righteousness, because they pursued it on the basis of works

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 733.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 736 (*italics his*).

<sup>22</sup> Matthew Thiessen, "Paul's Argument against Gentile Circumcision in Romans 2:17–29," *NovT* 56 (2014) 373–91, especially 378–88.

rather than faith. And in 10:2–4 he characterizes Jews as seeking to establish their own righteousness, rather than availing themselves of the righteousness that the Christ, who is the telos of the law, brings. This explanation seems to support the more modest appraisal of Sanders and New Perspective scholars like Grindheim and Yinger that Paul had a problem with Israel because most fellow Jews did not believe in Jesus as Messiah.<sup>23</sup> That appraisal fits Paul's discourse better than Wright's comprehensive narrative of Israel's not living up to her calling and Jesus's functioning as a replacement. Israel typology is indeed used for Jesus in the Gospels and in Paul's letters.<sup>24</sup> But this does not prove that the Gospels' authors and Paul thought that Israel had been replaced by Jesus as the one who could do what Israel did not do. We, along with a number of New Testament scholars, never hear Paul say that Jesus completes what Israel was supposed to do.<sup>25</sup> Paul only says that God sent Jesus to do what the law could not do, weak as it was because of the flesh (Rom 8:3; see also Rom 10:4). The notion of Jesus as the telos of the law has much more solid grounding in Paul's letters than does Wright's suggestion that Jesus completes Israel's failed mission to share Torah with the gentile nations. Here, Wright does not follow Paul in attending to both the instrumental and the intrinsic dimensions of Israel's election, and this makes him prone to write as though Jesus has replaced Israel. Paul's instrumental references to Israel in places like 1 Cor 10:1–13 must be held in balance with passages where Paul affirms the intrinsic and perduring value of Israel within the divine economy, such as Rom 3:1–4; 11:28–29.

While Paul's letters suggest he may have been frustrated that others did not read the events of the day in relation to Israel's Scriptures as he did, his reading of the Jewish Scriptures was actually idiosyncratic and hardly as self-evident as Wright himself implies at times.<sup>26</sup> Paul's use of the veil imagery (2 Cor 3:14–15) and

<sup>23</sup> Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 441–47, 550; Grindheim, "Election and the Role of Israel," 340; Kent L. Yinger, *The New Perspective on Paul: An Introduction* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011) 89.

<sup>24</sup> For "Israel typology," consider the following scenes in Gospel narratives. The authors seem to see Jesus recapitulating Israel's national history in his own life: childhood time in Egypt (Matt 2:14–15), testing in wilderness for forty days (Matt 4:1–10), meets woman at well, as Jacob and Moses did (John 4:4–6, 12–14).

<sup>25</sup> Other scholars have critiqued Wright on exactly this point. Larry Hurtado's review of *PFG* (*Theology* 117.5 [2014] 361–365) states on p. 363: "Wright repeatedly accounts for Paul's reworking of Israel by ascribing to the Jewish people a failure to be a light to the nations, and a selfish grasping of elect status for herself. Supposedly, in Paul's view, Jesus then stepped in to make up for Israel's failure. But to my knowledge Paul's only expressions of disappointment with his Jewish kinfolk have to do with their unbelief in, and/or opposition to, Jesus and the gospel." Similarly, John Barclay's review of *PFG* (*SJT* 68.2 [2015] 235–243, here at 240) incisively notes: "That Jesus 'represents' Israel and fulfils its vocation—a 'central' point that gives everything in Paul a 'tight coherence' (pp. 815–16, 823–24, 839)—is more asserted than proved." This is unsurprising because (as Barclay observes earlier in his review) few Jewish texts from this period envision God using Israel to rescue the world and, in fact, Paul never makes this argument.

<sup>26</sup> For example, note Wright's comments on 2 Cor 4:3–6 in *PFG*, 679 (his italics): "To speak of seeing 'the glory of God in the face of Jesus the Messiah', in the context of a long discussion of Exodus 33–4, can only mean one thing. *The God who abandoned Israel at the exile, because of*

Luke's narration of the road to Emmaus story and its sequel (24:25–47) indicate how unusual the christological reading of Scripture was in Paul's own time. If it takes a veil to be removed or a miraculous opening of the mind to see Jesus of Nazareth in the Jewish Scriptures, then those who can see Jesus there need to respect the difficulty that others have in doing so. At times, Wright recognizes this issue. In relation to his reading of Paul's understanding of Israel's vocation, he concedes that "many first-century Jews might, for all we know, have disagreed."<sup>27</sup> But Wright's acknowledgement of the problem does not seem to affect his tendency to use language that suggests that any Jew who rejected Paul's highly midrashic exegesis missed the obvious, contextual meaning of these prophecies. Had Wright acknowledged the creative but noncontextual use to which Paul puts various prophetic texts, he could have presented Paul's interpretive insights as the midrashic tour de force they often are, while depicting Paul's Jewish opponents, who read these Hebrew Bible texts differently, in immensely more sympathetic terms.<sup>28</sup>

In summary, Wright's instrumental portrait of Israel segues into a messianic understanding of Jesus's completing what Israel failed to do. The theological utility of this twofold schema is not difficult to see. It provides Christians a way of relating Old and New Testaments that appreciates the Old Testament while maintaining the finality of the revelation in Christ. It also works as a way of relating the church to Israel, by presenting the church as the beneficiary or end goal of God's election of Israel. The model thus has profound appeal for Christians, who need a back story, Israel's foundational narratives, and in turn may feel compelled to show why the church, rather than Israel, is the true "people of God." However, this model can quickly lead to a replacement motif that views the vast majority of the Jewish people as now outside of God's plan.

### ■ Wright's Assertion that God Gave Torah to Draw Sin on to Israel

A further particularly troubling aspect of Wright's highly instrumental reading of Israel's election in the Old Testament concerns how it contributes to his claim that Paul's understanding of the Torah is quite negative. Wright takes Rom 5:20 to mean that God gave Israel the Torah in order to draw sin onto Israel, so that God might deal with humanity's sin through his relationship with Israel:

The problem under which Israel suffers (in Pauline retrospect) is . . . not that Torah is frustratingly difficult to keep. It is, rather, that Torah was given as *part of the divine purpose in election*; but the purpose, it seems, included a

*idolatry and sin, but who promised to return one day, as he had done in Exodus after the threat of withdrawing his 'presence', has returned at last in and as Jesus the Messiah.*"

<sup>27</sup> Wright, *CFG*, 811.

<sup>28</sup> See, e.g., how J. D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9–16* (WBC 38B; Dallas: Word, 1988) 604, juxtaposes other ways that Deut 30:11–14 was read by Hellenistic Jewish authors and Targum Neofiti in his exegesis of Rom 10:5–13.

necessarily negative element. This is what was anticipated in Galatians 3.19, where he says that the law was given “because of transgressions”, and 3.22, where he says that scripture “shut up everything under the power of sin”, which Paul echoes in the present letter in 11.32. It was, in particular, what Paul had hinted in the cryptic line in Romans 5.20: Torah intruded into the Adam–Messiah sequence *in order to* “increase the trespass”. The double *hina* in 7.13 is, in other words, not out on its own. With Christian hindsight, Paul is offering a consistent account of Torah which indicates that it had a particular *and negative* role to play within the overall purpose of election. And, to insist on the point, which will come to full expression in Romans 9–11, this particular and negative role was itself divinely intended.

The divine purpose was, it seems, *to allow sin to do its worst in Israel itself, precisely through the Torah.*<sup>29</sup>

First of all, it is very difficult to read Gal 3:19 as indicating that God gave Torah to Israel to help Israel sin more, since this ignores the metaphor of the *paidagōgos* in Gal 3:24–25. Perhaps if one goes further, to 4:9–10, one could argue that Paul views Torah as designed to bring sin and that it is one of the elemental principles of the world, but this does not fit Paul’s respect for the law that is evident in Gal 5:14, Rom 3:30 and 7:12,14. In contrast to Wright, New Perspective scholar J. D. G. Dunn finds Paul more opaque here. Though Dunn recognizes that this is a negative statement in regard to Torah, Dunn says that in Rom 5:20 Paul may be returning to his argument in 5:13–14, that the law intensifies sin by transforming it into transgression, or by increasing the quantity of sin—an idea that seems to anticipate Rom 7:7–12. But Dunn presents what he thinks is the better explanation as follows:

But more likely here Paul is recalling the actual effect of the law on his own people—their pride in the law which caused them to identify righteousness too much with distinctively Jewish actions, particularly circumcision, and so to lose sight of the deeper, less easily definable righteousness which could be ascribed to Gentile as well as Jew.<sup>30</sup>

Here we see that Dunn is treating the *ἵνα* of Rom 5:20 as indicating a result—the consequences of how Israel responded to the Torah, while Wright treats it as indicating a purpose: the divine plan for the Torah all along was to increase sins within Israel. Though Wright treats Rom 5:20 as consistent with Gal 3:19, this reading is not obvious.<sup>31</sup> Kari Kuula, for example, emphasizes that the Torah is not presented here in Rom 5:20 as something God intentionally gave to Israel to make it more sinful:

<sup>29</sup> Wright, *PFG*, 895 (Wright’s italics).

<sup>30</sup> J. D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8* (WBC 38A; Dallas: Word, 1988) 299, on Rom 5:20.

<sup>31</sup> Another author who seems to read Rom 5:20 in light of Gal 3:19 is J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB33A; New York: Doubleday, 1997) 354–55.

The clauses in 5:20a and 5:20b *are not meant to be read together* as explaining that the law came in order to increase the trespass so that grace would increase even more. The point is rather that the law came in order to increase the trespass, *but* where sin increased, grace increased even more. For these reasons we must conclude that Paul does not claim that the sin-increasing law somehow serves God's plan of salvation.<sup>32</sup>

Kuula goes on to support his point by observing that in Rom 6:1–7:6, law and sin do not contribute at all to the salvation that Paul pictures. Following Dunn, or Kuula, who also rejects a simplistic grace *versus* works reading of this passage, we would argue that Wright's exegesis is far from certain on this point. Wright thinks that Paul viewed the Torah as divinely intended to increase Israel's sins, before God brought salvation through Jesus. But there is no solid basis for saying that Paul thinks the Torah was given to increase Israel's sins. It seems more responsible to say that Paul views the Torah as sent because of transgressions (Gal 3:19); i.e., as a *paidagōgos*, or custodian, it kept sins in check (Gal 3:24–25). Its interface with human nature resulted in an increase of transgressions, i.e., of quantifiable infractions against the divine will (Rom 5:20), but this does not mean that God designed Torah or gave Torah to Israel in order to increase Israel's sins.

### ■ Wright on Torah-Possessing Israel: Sin Did Its Worst in Israel

In contrast to a scholar like Dunn, Wright is more negative in his assessment of the law, though not by reverting to earlier generations' portrait of Jews trying to earn their place with God by legalistically keeping Torah.<sup>33</sup> Turning to Rom 8:3–4, Wright claims not only that the Torah was designed to prompt and increase sin in Israel, but he goes on to imply that this sin reaches its apex in Israel's killing her Messiah and in Jewish attempts to keep Paul from preaching to the nations. We will begin by citing a few select quotations in which Wright appears to endorse the view we have imputed to him.

The divine purpose was, it seems, *to allow sin to do its worst in Israel itself, precisely through the Torah*. This is not (in case there should be any doubt) a matter of the creator "causing" sin. It is a matter of his responding to the fact of sin in the world by deciding to lure it on to one place, to cause it to be focused on one point, *in order that* (there it is again) it can be dealt with right there.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Kari Kuula, *Paul's Treatment of the Law and Israel in Romans* (vol. 2 of *The Law, the Covenant and God's Plan*; Publications of the Finnish Exegetical Society 85; Helsinki: Finnish Exegetical Society; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003) 196 (Kuula's italics).

<sup>33</sup> Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (rev. ed., 1886; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947) 330; Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933) 364–369; C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1979) 510.

<sup>34</sup> Wright, *PFQ*, 895–96 (Wright's italics and parenthetical comments).

Here, Wright portrays Paul's understanding of Israel as affected by how Torah draws sin most intensively onto Israel, so that God then judges the world's sin in the person of Israel's Messiah.

Further on in *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, Wright returns to the idea of sin reaching its worst in Israel:

According to Romans 8.4, the Messiah himself was the place where, at the climax of Israel's history, sin did its worst—even, with extreme paradox, the sin of his being “handed over”, which was itself the means of the divine “handing over”!—in order that sin itself might then be condemned. I am following Paul's own lead in addressing these issues through a “what if”, because even exegetically, let alone theologically, we would be right to sense here an ocean of possibilities and problems crashing in twenty-foot waves over our heads whichever way we try to swim. But might it not be that Paul, in the years of reflection and debate that have led up to the writing of this extremely careful piece, has determined to approach the new, eschatological question of Israel's election through the question of *the Messiah's own election*, that is, the Messiah's own standing at the point where Israel's history reached its zenith? And might that not be because he saw the Messiah as Israel's representative precisely in terms of the “servant” figure of Isaiah 52 and 53, as indicated by Romans 10.14–17? This motif of “hardening”, in other words, should not be read as a rejection of Israel, of Israel's specialness, of Israel's call to be the light of the world, the bearer of God's promises to the nations. This is, on the contrary, the way in which that call had to become a reality. That was how it had been with the Messiah himself.<sup>35</sup>

Before discussing the content of this paragraph, it is worth noting that Wright assumes that Paul's position should be our position. “I am following Paul's own lead . . . [the waves are crashing] over our heads whichever way we try to swim.” This fits as well with the quotation at the very beginning of our essay. We wish Wright gave more prominence to the metaexegetical question of whether any act of interpretive translation needs to occur when moving between the occasion of Paul's letters and our own, a point we will discuss in more depth toward the end of this essay.

The main idea of the suggestive paragraph quoted above is that Paul divines the purpose of Israel's election through his understanding of the election of Jesus the Messiah. But the identification of the Messiah as the place where “sin did its worst,” defined as “the sin of his being ‘handed over,’” seems to go beyond what Paul has said about the Messiah, the Torah, and Israel, and it seems to run against the tenor of Rom 11:13–24. It is not at all clear how Rom 8:4 indicates that “the Messiah himself was the place where, at the climax of Israel's history, sin did its worst,” but we will try to recover how Wright may have arrived at this claim below. Since Jesus's life on earth is interpreted through a christological reading of

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 1192 (Wright's italics).

the fourth Servant Song, Wright seems to be saying that just as Jesus the Messiah was handed over to death, so Israel is handed over to experience God's judgment.

Yet, as we will soon see, while in agreement with Paul that Jesus submits completely to God and remains sinless, Wright then goes well beyond Paul when he claims: "Israel was called in order to be the place where sin would grow to full height, so that it [sin] might at last be fully and properly condemned."<sup>36</sup> Wright employs Paul's statements that the Mosaic law prompted or increased sin among those to whom it was given to suggest that God gave the Mosaic law to render Israel sinful, so that God could then deal with sin through Messiah Jesus. Paul's statements in Gal 3:19 and 22 and Rom 5:20 could be related to the highly negative account of some laws God gave Israel found in Ezek 20:25–26. But it is important to underline that elsewhere Paul regards the law as good and holy (Rom 7:12, 14), counts it as a benefit that Israel possesses (Rom 3:1–2; 9:4), and repeatedly insists that his gospel completes or fulfills the law (Rom 3:31; 13:8–10; Gal 5:14). In contrast, Wright's model overemphasizes the notion that Paul portrays the Torah as bringing sin on the Jewish people, while underemphasizing that Paul regards the Jewish people in his day as holy because, as God's elect people, they have inherited the covenants and all the privileges that these entail (Rom 9:4–5; 11:16, 28–29).

Of even greater concern is that Wright's enigmatic prose in the long quotation above can be read as implying the highly toxic charge that God has judged the Jews especially harshly. We mean statements such as: "the Messiah himself was the place where, at the climax of Israel's history, sin did its worst—even, with extreme paradox, the sin of his being 'handed over', which was itself the means of the divine 'handing over'!—in order that sin itself might then be condemned."<sup>37</sup> It is hard not to cringe when one of the preeminent New Testament interpreters of today speaks of "the sin of his being 'handed over,'" which can too easily lend renewed support to the charge that the Jewish people as a whole bear the guilt for Jesus's death that has over the previous two millennia animated a good deal of Christian hatred of Jews. But here we simply register our rejection of Wright's caricature of Paul as teaching that the Torah, functioning as a metaphorical steroid of sorts, caused sin to multiply within Israel, making Israel especially sinful.

Let us examine some of the key elements that animate Paul's understanding of the law and what this implies about the Jewish people as well as Wright's interpretation of these passages. Paul highlights how he and his people continued to sin while possessing the Torah and how this condition seemed to be resolved with the coming of Christ, who enabled him to walk by the Spirit and live as one who was a new creation. Paul considers the Torah to be an important factor in universal history and possibly not restricted to Israel (Rom 3:19), when he surveys the ways in which death has haunted humanity (Rom 5:13–14). In any case, Paul views both gentiles (Rom 1:18–32) and Jews (Rom 2:17–24) as sinful before God, stressing that both

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 897.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 1192.



Jew and gentile are affected by sin (3:9, 23), rather than that such sinfulness is in some manner more of a Jewish than a gentile problem.

Wright's claim that Paul viewed the Jews as particularly sinful is related to his idea that Torah is both "helper" and "opponent": "God's purpose is that Israel, though rightly drawn to Torah insofar as it is God's holy and good law, must be shown up not only as the people of God but as a people who are still 'in Adam.'"<sup>38</sup> Wright's claim that "according to Romans 8.4, the Messiah himself was the place where, at the climax of Israel's history, sin did its worst"<sup>39</sup> seems based on a crucifixion-oriented reading of Rom 8:3–4, which describes how God sent "his own son in the likeness of sinful flesh and . . . condemned sin in the flesh, so that the righteous decree of the law might be fulfilled in us who live not according to the flesh, but according to spirit." Wright also draws on 1 Thess 2:15–16 as demonstrated by another of his comments utilizing the "handing over" phrase: "Paul has said in 1 Thessalonians 2 that the full height of that sin was the handing over of Jesus to the Romans and so to his death, and the similar opposition to God's purposes which consisted of trying to stop the gentile mission going ahead."<sup>40</sup> Wright's idea that Paul's narrative includes Torah drawing sin onto Israel and its Messiah, on whom sin does its worst when he is handed over for crucifixion, is not self-evidently supported by these texts, written as they were to gentile churches in order to keep their members following Paul's Torah-free gospel.

It is widely agreed that Paul in some way associates Torah with sin. We have already noted the enigmatic statement in Gal 3:19 that God gave the Torah "because of transgressions," which then gets reinterpreted in Rom 5:20 as saying that "law came in with the result that the trespass multiplied." Yet both these explanations are found in contexts that put the emphasis on Christ's salvific power. The increase of sins highlights the benefit of Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection for the world. Wright not only inverts the emphasis of these passages, but he takes a worrisome step beyond the text when he insists that Paul views the Torah as drawing sins specifically onto Israel, and in the most intensified form of sinfulness to boot. Paul never says this. Wright's attempt to include the crucifixion of Jesus within his schema that traces the result of Israel's election comes close to Abelard's idea that God judges the Jews as guiltier than gentiles because they sinned even though they had Torah.<sup>41</sup> Without explicitly saying that God is judging the Jews for the crucifixion of the historical Jesus, the steps are in place in Wright's system—an instrumental emphasis on Israel's election, description of Israel's failure, God

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 510. This statement is followed by Wright's quotation of Rom 7:14–23.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 1192.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 1190.

<sup>41</sup> Peter Abelard, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (trans. Steven Cartwright; Fathers of the Church Medieval Continuation 12; Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2011), §67 on Rom 1:18; 113. See also the Cambridge Commentator (ca. 1141–52) in *The Letter to the Romans* (trans. and ed. Ian Christopher Levy, Philip D. W. Krey, and Thomas Ryan; The Bible in Medieval Tradition; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 79 on Rom 1:18.

drawing all sin onto Israel, followed by the condemnation of sin that occurs in the crucifixion of Jesus—for this reflex that Christian theologians have shown in past centuries.

Our concerns over Wright's arguments point to a larger problem for Christian discourse, at the intersection of soteriology, hamartiology, and interfaith relationships. Christians want to say that Christ's death and resurrection are the means that the God of Israel used to atone for the sins of humanity. Since the death aspect of this event is often conceived of as a sacrifice, the death of a Passover lamb, or the death of the only son, Jesus's death is treated as the single means by which God removed the sin of the world. If we conceive of God as transferring all of humanity's sins onto Jesus (2 Cor 5:21), then it is a short step—but not a necessarily logical one—to ascribe responsibility for this death to the human agents behind it.

The New Testament presents different explanations for Jesus's death. There is a primary tension between Jesus's death as a divinely planned event and his death as a contingent act of Israel that could have been avoided, hence rendering Israel culpable. The "advantage" of the latter explanation is that it more securely positions the Christian understanding of Jesus and those who follow him as Lord within the revered narrative of God's election of Israel. Also, this view resonates deeply with a Christian self-portrait vis-à-vis Israel: few Christians think twice when seeing someone with the proper name closest to the generic word "Jew"—Judas—at the bottom of Dante's inferno.

We, a Christian and a Jew, maintain that the Pauline letters and the texts that Paul cites from Isaiah do not characterize Israel as the most sinful nation on earth, losing her place in the divine economy to Jesus, because Israel did not serve as a light to the nations or transform the world by means of Torah. Wright and others who argue similarly undervalue other Pauline and non-Pauline New Testament texts that link Jesus's death to propitiating God's anger *for all of humanity's sins* (Rom 3:25–26; 5:15–16; 1 Cor 15:3; 1 John 2:2). An equally if not more serious defect in Wright's reading of Paul is that in the one text where Paul most explicitly addresses Israel's place in the divine economy—Rom 9–11—Paul does not regard her as the most sinful nation on earth, as Wright does when explaining Torah's function in Israel. And in contrast to Wright, Paul anticipates the historic people of Israel's salvation at the climax of Rom 11, a text to which we now turn.

### ■ God Elects Corporeal Israel for Salvation

One of the most questionable moves Wright makes in his attempt to describe Paul's view of Israel's election occurs in his reading of Rom 9–11, especially the climax of this passage toward the end of chapter 11. Wright—appealing to the idea of circumcision of the heart in Rom 2:25–29, Paul's statement in Phil 3:3 that "we" form the true group of the circumcised, and Gal 6:16, where, according to some commentators, Paul's phrase "Israel of God" refers to the church—holds that the

“all Israel” who are saved in Rom 11:26 results in “a *polemical redefinition*” of the people of Israel.<sup>42</sup>

[I]t excludes . . . those Jews who, despite being given a space of time by God’s patience and kindness, have stumbled over the stumbling stone and have not picked themselves up, have not become “jealous” in the way Deuteronomy 32 described, have not been provoked by Paul’s own gentile apostolate, have not come to believe and confess in the way Deuteronomy 30 indicated, have not “submitted to God’s righteousness” (10.3), have not availed themselves of God’s circumcision of the heart, have not joined in the renewal of the covenant and have not grasped at the divine fulfillment of the Abrahamic promises.<sup>43</sup>

Thus, Wright seems to endorse the view that the “all Israel” in effect excludes the majority of non-“Messiah-believing” ethnic Jews and includes many “Messiah-believing gentiles.”<sup>44</sup> But this ignores the distinction that Paul still maintains between “Israel” and the gentiles in Rom 11:28, which occurs immediately after his prediction of the salvation of “all Israel” in Rom 11:26. How can Paul have told his gentile church members that the people of Israel remain their enemies if these gentile church members are now members of “Israel”?

The context of Rom 11:25–27, in which all references to Israel make sense only if they refer to the Jewish people, is a strong argument for viewing the “all Israel” as referring to all or almost all of the Jewish people in 11:26, even if one acknowledges that earlier in Rom 9 the term “Israel” may have a different valence. Wright’s dialogue partner, J. D. G. Dunn, is bothered by Wright’s move here. In discussing Wright’s treatment of this significant text in Romans in his *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, Dunn writes: “On a small but important point, the 22-page exposition of Rom 11:25–27 includes a reading of ‘Israel’ in two different ways in the course of two verses, which comes across as more than a little improbable.”<sup>45</sup> Dunn’s comment is an understated way of registering disagreement with Wright’s redefinition of Israel in Rom 11:26 from the historic people of Israel to the church viewed as the cultivated olive tree with ingrafted gentile branches.

Repeatedly in *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, Wright asserts that Paul has carefully arranged his arguments and that the questions surrounding and solution to the theological conundrum that Christ-less Israel poses to Christian theologians have been systematically worked out by the apostle. Yet we would argue that a preponderance of evidence supports those scholars who suggest that Paul has written his letters in a more ad hoc fashion, shaping them to address distinct issues that arose for different addressees. Even within a single letter, Paul often adopts

<sup>42</sup> Wright, *PFG*, 1242–44 (italicized on 1242, repeated without italics on 1243–44).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 1244–45.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 1244.

<sup>45</sup> J. D. G. Dunn, “An Insider’s Perspective on Wright’s Version of the New Perspective on Paul,” in *God and the Faithfulness of Paul*, 347–58, here at 355.

different arguments before arriving at his conclusion. This has specific implications for how one reads Rom 9–11.

Mark Reasoner has explained how Wright's reading of Rom 11:26 privileges Rom 9:6 in a way that presumes that Paul's argument is a unified, homogenous whole.<sup>46</sup> What needs to be emphasized is that in long treatments on a given topic, such as in 1 Cor 7, 1 Cor 8–10, or 1 Cor 12–14, Paul frequently starts by adopting a possible approach, at times taking up a view that some members in his community hold. He then develops this position partially, or comments on it, and often ends such arguments in a somewhat, and at times very, different place from where he began. Thus, for example, in 1 Cor 7:1, he cites the Corinthians' slogan that "it is good for a husband not to touch a wife." But then he goes on to encourage regular intimacy (1 Cor 7:5, 9, 36).

In Rom 9, Paul begins by citing and possibly affirming a cryptic statement expressing the thinking of those gentile believers who saw Israel as replaced by the church (Rom 9:6b). But he ends this three-chapter section by warning gentile believers not to consider themselves as having ultimately replaced ethnic Israel, envisioning the likelihood that the branches cut off will be grafted back onto their own tree (11:13–24). On another vector, he moves from saying that God can elect whomever he will, equating Israel with Pharaoh whose heart was hardened (9:14–21), to saying that Israel chose not to believe (10:16–21; 11:20a) and can easily be fully restored when they will return to God in faith (11:24). Because readers prioritize the conclusions of Paul's other extended treatments of a given topic, we should do so with Rom 9–11 as well, and read "Israel" as meaning the historic people of "Israel," the connotation it appears to have throughout all of Rom 10–11. This means that in Paul's thought, the future that God envisions for the Jewish people, contra Wright, is her salvation. While the end of Rom 11 is frequently read to imply that the Jews will acknowledge Jesus, the language here is quite cryptic and never states clearly how God will show mercy to the Jewish people. What is stated is that Israel's election is sure: "the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (11:29).

Robert Foster agrees with Brendan Byrne and Charles Cosgrove, who observe that many early negative elements in Rom 9–11 lead in the opposite direction from a plausible reading of 11:25–32 that is much more positive and inclusive of Israel's ultimate fate. Byrne in particular argues that "[i]t is important, when considering individual elements, always to keep in mind the broader, ultimately 'inclusive' vision pursued by Paul."<sup>47</sup> Cosgrove is much less sure that a reading like Byrne's is any more plausible than Wright's claim that "all Israel" in 11:26 refers to the new unified community of Jewish and gentile believers in Jesus the Christ. But

<sup>46</sup> Mark Reasoner, "Israel in the Outline of Romans 9–11," *Letter & Spirit* 10 (2015) 109–29.

<sup>47</sup> Robert B. Foster, *Renaming Abraham's Children: Election, Ethnicity, and the Interpretation of Scripture in Romans 9* (WUNT 2/421; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2016) 3–4, citing Brendon Byrne, *Romans* (SP 6; Collegeville, MN; Liturgical Press, 1996) 284.

unlike Wright, Cosgrove ponders the implications of choosing Wright's plausible interpretation over, say, Byrne's or Dunn's more inclusive readings: "is it 'heresy' to choose 'against' carnal Israel by electing, for theological use, a critically justifiable interpretation (of the *canonical* Paul) that has proven conducive to Christian anti-Jewishness, when another justifiable interpretation is available that does not conduce to anti-Jewish theology?"<sup>48</sup>

### ■ Wright within the New Perspective

The views of Foster, Byrne, and Cosgrove lead one to inquire about Wright's place among readers of Paul. In *Paul and His Recent Interpreters*, Wright sees E. P. Sanders as the one who prompted the New Perspective on Paul, by showing that rabbinic literature has a significant appreciation for God's grace and mercy and that not all ancient Jews thought they needed to earn their way into God's favor. In Sanders's account, first-century Judaism was a covenantal nomism that promised salvation by grace to those in the body of Israel. Wright suggests that Sanders failed to consider the metanarrative with which Paul was working. Thus, Wright offers his Pauline metanarrative of God's electing Israel to deal with humanity's sin, Israel's failure to spread God's righteousness to the world, and Jesus the Messiah completing what Israel failed to do. Wright posits that this is the missing narrative that should accompany Sanders's arguments against the sixteenth-century, Lutheran model of legalism as the problem Paul saw in his Jewish compatriots.<sup>49</sup> Whereas Sanders proposed that Paul thought Jesus was Messiah and then worked back from that to find problems with life under Torah (the solution-to-plight model), Wright and certain other New Perspective scholars, seeking to discern a narrative behind Paul's reading of Scripture, move in the reverse direction, from plight to solution. In particular, Wright argues that Paul and other first-century Jews saw Israel as still in exile, even though Jews lived in Israel and the temple cult continued, because the Romans occupied their land. Aside from turning Sanders's insightful construct on its head so that it requires a metanarrative, a major difficulty is that Wright has not demonstrated that the continuing exile motif at the center of his metanarrative actually played a substantial role in Paul's theological outlook.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Charles H. Cosgrove, "Rhetorical Suspense in Romans 9–11: A Study in Polyvalence and Hermeneutical Election," *JBL* 115.2 (1996) 271–87, here at 284 (emphasis his).

<sup>49</sup> N.T. Wright, *Paul and His Recent Interpreters: Some Contemporary Debates* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015) 74–75.

<sup>50</sup> Dunn notes that while the continuing exile motif certainly occurs in pre-NT writers, that it "was a continuing factor in shaping Paul's (as also Jesus's) teaching has hardly been demonstrated"; Dunn, "An Insider's Perspective," 350. Other essays in *God and the Faithfulness of Paul* (e.g., Steven Moyise's "Wright's Understanding of Paul's Use of Scripture," 165–80) raise similarly trenchant critiques against the central role Wright gives to this motif and more generally highlight the methodological difficulties of Wright's attempt to employ an overarching metanarrative in his quest to explain Paul's letters in a systematic fashion.

Wright's metanarrative has not persuaded all biblical scholars. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann finds it reductionistic, noting how both Jeremiah and Ezekiel anticipate a new work of God that is not directly generated by the curse-repentance-blessing model of Deuteronomy that Wright closely follows.<sup>51</sup> Jörn Kiefer notes how *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael* (Pisha 14 commenting on Exod 12:41) presents the glory of the LORD as accompanying Israel wherever she went, including Egypt, Babel, and Elam, in a way that is congruent with Ezek 11:16.<sup>52</sup> Wright would no doubt concede that not all first-century Jews experienced a single type of oppressive exile or thought of themselves as under God's curse. But in Wright's account of the coherent metanarrative animating Paul's theology, he affirms that Paul views Israel through the lens of the Deuteronomistic school, interpreting Israel's subjugated position in the Roman Principate as a curse for not living up to the expectations of the covenant, which in this case means not being a light to the nations. Critiques of Wright's metanarrative or extreme dependence on this metanarrative are reflected as well by New Testament scholars within the New Perspective.

Dunn finds the narrative questionable.<sup>53</sup> Grindheim, who appreciates Wright's emphasis on election and its basis in the covenant God has with Israel, faults his highly instrumental view of election. He thinks Wright should begin with Israel's privilege when writing about election rather than seeing Israel as failing to be a light to the nations, as Wright does.<sup>54</sup>

Hewitt and Novenson, writing in the same volume as Grindheim, a volume generally positive toward Wright's model, agree with Wright's conclusion that Paul argues for "messianic participation" but disagree with his "multi-story worldview approach." In its place, they advocate a "ground-up approach" focusing instead on what Paul does with his scriptural resources, rather than starting with an overarching and hypothetical top-down metanarrative.<sup>55</sup> Wright's metanarrative gives rise to several of what we believe are the most serious problems in his system: his intensely instrumental understanding of Israel's election, his view of how Jesus replaces Israel in God's plan for the world, and his claim that Torah is divinely intended to draw sin on to Israel. We think that Hewitt and Novenson build a more constructive model on the insights first offered by Sanders—that Paul was not concerned to

<sup>51</sup> Walter Brueggemann, "Wright on Exile: A Response," in *Exile: A Conversation with N. T. Wright* (ed. James M. Scott; Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017) 83–92, but esp. 87–88.

<sup>52</sup> Jörn Kiefer, "Not All Gloom and Doom: Positive Interpretations of Exile and Diaspora in the Hebrew Bible and Early Judaism," in *Exile: A Conversation with N. T. Wright*, 119–34, here at 123–25.

<sup>53</sup> J. D. G. Dunn, "The Narrative Approach to Paul: Whose Story?" in *Narrative Dynamics in Paul: A Critical Assessment* (ed. Bruce W. Longenecker; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002) 217–30.

<sup>54</sup> Grindheim, "Election and the Role of Israel," 343–44.

<sup>55</sup> J. Thomas Hewitt and Matthew V. Novenson, "Participationism and Messiah Christology in Paul," in *God and the Faithfulness of Paul*, 393–415, here at 412.

address a legalistic view of Torah, but rather to call gentiles to participation with Christ, whom he regarded as Israel's Messiah.

A significant point of division among New Perspective proponents revolves around the question of how Paul sees Jesus in relation to Israel. Kent Yinger situates himself within the variety of New Perspective on Paul positions by noting that he reads Paul as describing a reconfigured Israel, not because Israel has failed a la Wright, but simply because of Paul's conviction that Jesus has come as Israel's Messiah. He mentions others who do not see Israel as necessarily reconfigured in Paul's view, but rather consider Paul as envisioning the salvation of all Israel alongside the gentiles who follow Israel's Messiah.<sup>56</sup>

The variety within the New Perspective thus arises from how scholars respond to the related questions of Paul's narrative of Israel and Paul's indictment of Israel apart from Jesus. An earlier perspective on Paul, made popular by Martin Luther, viewed Israel as caught up in a legalism that did not understand the grace of God. Wright accepts Sanders's critique of this legalistic model of Judaism, but in its place he posits a Pauline narrative that faults Israel for not being a light to the nations in centuries before Christ and for using the Torah to separate itself from the nations. Dunn also accepts Sanders's critique of a legalistic model of Judaism. But Dunn is wary of Wright's approach to Paul's writings because it relies on a speculative metanarrative that contains ideas not explicitly found in Paul's writings (e.g., Wright's unproven assertion that Paul subscribed to the continuing exile motif), gives too little attention to other dimensions of Paul's thought (e.g., Wright's underemphasis of the New Perspective insight that Paul in some sense remained a Jewish theologian who continued to affirm many aspects of his Jewish heritage), and because Wright's model too easily leads to a dangerous supersessionism that Paul himself was at pains to avoid.<sup>57</sup> Still, Dunn and Wright agree that Paul faulted Israel in his day for using the Torah in an ethnocentric way—especially the food laws, the ritual of circumcision, and the Sabbath command—to divide Israel from the nations.<sup>58</sup> Yinger, like Wright, sees a reconfigured Israel in Paul, though not because Israel failed or because God drew the world's sin onto Israel. Like Hurtado and Grindheim, Yinger simply agrees with Sanders in saying that Paul faulted his fellow Israelites only for not following Jesus.<sup>59</sup> Dunn's insistence on a tension in Paul's thinking, which we summarize below, seems to us to be the best appropriation of the New Perspective for reading Paul on Israel and the Torah.

<sup>56</sup> Yinger, *New Perspective*, 35–36, 88–89.

<sup>57</sup> Dunn's various critiques of Wright can be found in "An Insider's Perspective," 347–58, esp. 350 and 357, and his own view of the careful balance that Paul sought to strike is discussed at length in our concluding section.

<sup>58</sup> Yinger, *New Perspective*, 20–23.

<sup>59</sup> Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 441–47, 550; Hurtado, review, 363; Grindheim, "Election and the Role of Israel," 340; Yinger, *New Perspective*, 89.



## ■ Conclusion

As the discussion above reveals, not all scholars influenced by the New Perspective are as ready as Wright to speak of the church replacing the historic people of Israel in the symbolic world of Paul. J. D. G. Dunn writes that Paul inherits the tension between the particularism of Israel's election and the universal claim that her God is lord of the nations, and Paul retains this tension in his christologically informed explanation in Romans of how Israel's God relates to the elect and the nations:

Could Paul only defend his gospel for Gentiles by denying that God remained committed to Israel? His denial was, as usual, emphatic: *mē genoito*—"By no means. God forbid." But the tension remained. Indeed, the theological argument of the letter reaches its climax precisely as the attempt to square the circle: that God is both a God who elects one and rejects the other (9.6–13) and the God who will have mercy on all (11.25–32). The God of Israel is the one God, is the God of all. And in his concluding summary Paul seeks to maintain the tension by declaring that "Christ became servant of circumcision for the sake of God's faithfulness" (Rom. 15.8).<sup>60</sup>

Wright, by contrast, regularly uses replacement language to describe Paul's view of Israel and the church:

As we have already seen in relation to the question of table-fellowship, Paul has (dare we say!) replaced the solidarity of Israel, and/or his group of "the pure" within Israel, with the solidarity of the people of God who find their identity "in the Messiah".<sup>61</sup>

The next paragraph begins with an explicit denial by Wright that his reading of Paul is insensitive to Jewish concerns, let alone that it is anti-Semitic:

We should note here, as we shall see in more detail in the proper place, that this has nothing whatever to do with something called "supersession" or with the strange notion of "anti-Judaism". On the contrary: it is based on, and coloured all through by, a massive reaffirmation of the goodness and God-giveness of Israel, Israel's call, Israel's scriptures, Israel's promises, Israel's destiny within the creator's overall purposes. Anti-Judaism, characteristically, rejects all this; Paul insists on it. . . . Indeed, Paul sees the danger of anti-Judaism coming up over the horizon, as a ghastly distortion of the truth, and he argues explicitly against it. Rather, Paul's view has to do with *the fulfilment of the promises made by the creator God to Israel*, a fulfilment which is now, as the promises themselves had repeatedly indicated, not for Israel alone but for anyone at all who would heed the worldwide invitation.<sup>62</sup>

But we ask readers to pay close attention to the end of this paragraph, which we quote just below. Note how Wright's description of Paul's "revision" replaces "the ancient

<sup>60</sup> J. D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1998) 45.

<sup>61</sup> Wright, *PFQ*, 367.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 368 (Wright's italics).

Jewish original,” “the family solidarity of Israel,” with “this new family,” Paul’s churches, who become “the sole concrete, visible symbol of the new worldview”:

Because Paul has so thoroughly and carefully revised the symbols of Temple, Torah and land, this revision, which refers to actual flesh-and-blood communities, now has to bear even more weight, within his symbolic universe, than its ancient Jewish original. The family solidarity of Israel was, after all, one of the loadbearing pillars, along with those others. But the kind of revision that has happened leaves this new family as the sole concrete, visible symbol of the new worldview.<sup>63</sup>

This paragraph, which we have almost quoted in full, is representative of Wright’s description of Paul’s view of Israel and her law. While occasionally asserting that he is not being supersessionist or anti-Judaic, Wright continues to insist on a model in which the church fully replaces the historic people of Israel, as one can clearly see in the following quotation on Paul’s treatment of the theological category of “family”:

He [Paul] is horribly, tragically aware of the enormous question that this raises about those of his kinsfolk who do not believe in Jesus as Messiah, but it is a tragedy, . . . precisely because he believes that Israel’s God, through Israel’s Messiah and his death and resurrection, has himself redefined the family as he always warned that he would, and has done so thoroughly, explicitly, effectively.<sup>64</sup>

Wright does go on to say that he is emphasizing God’s fulfillment of promises to Israel, but in our view, he describes this fulfillment by adopting a *de facto* supersessionist position of the type that should give serious pause to any reader of Paul (whether Christian, Jewish, or secular) living in the post-Shoah world.

Similarly, concerning Torah, Wright never says that Paul thinks it no longer applies to Jews. But at times Wright seems to absolutize Paul’s statements to gentiles regarding the Torah into a system that views the Torah as a necessary instrument in Jesus’s death, a move that too easily allows Christians to return to the anti-Judaic rhetoric so common for too much of the past two thousand years. Wright’s ability to paint the big picture is definitely a positive element in his exegesis. But when the big picture for the meaning and telos of Israel is constructed from Paul’s writings to gentiles regarding how his Torah-free gospel fits with his Scriptures, Wright seems to advocate that Christian readers view historic Israel as a means to an end, an end that almost wholly excludes the historic people of Israel. Note Wright’s comment in his discussion of Rom 9–11 that Paul

highlight[ed] God’s purpose to save the world through the “handing over” of the Messiah, Israel’s representative, an event which could only come about as the focal point and intentional climax of the divine plan *for Israel itself*

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 368.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 367–68.

*to experience the covenantal 'casting away' which was, itself, the strange purpose of election.*<sup>65</sup>

We have argued that this instrumental, “cast away” picture of historic Israel does not match what Paul actually says and that Wright’s view of Paul’s teaching on the role of Torah within Israel is unnecessarily negative, since it is based on Paul’s apologetic orientation for the Torah-free gospel he proclaims to gentiles. This is not to mention that these very troubling aspects of Wright’s reading of Paul may give new life to historic Christian anti-Judaic stereotypes, in turn threatening much of the progress made in recent decades in the broad range of ongoing contemporary Jewish-Christian dialogues.

To arrive at a balanced assessment we must read Paul’s positive statements about the Torah not as a sleight of hand, but as a bona fide endorsement of the Torah that God has given God’s people. We must not go beyond what is written to view the Torah as drawing the world’s sin onto Israel when Paul speaks of sins as multiplying after Torah’s introduction. If Israel remains intrinsically beloved by God because of the fathers, and if Israel’s gifts and election are irrevocable (Rom 11:28–29), then the Torah that constitutes Israel as Israel has to remain as a valuable mediator between God and Israel, even if it may now hold less soteriological value. The Torah is not a mountain that faith in Christ has cast into the sea (cf. Mark 11:23). Paul’s statements to gentile church members not to take on the observance of Torah (Gal 2:19–21; 5:2) cannot be extended to mean that God has now discarded the Torah. Yes, Paul believes that even his fellow-Jews are justified by the faith of Christ (Gal 2:16), but this does not mean that Paul views the Torah as serving to draw the world’s sin onto Israel or that Paul views the Torah as simply an obstacle creating social divisions between Israel and the nations.

When the idea that sin reached its zenith in Israel’s crucifixion of Jesus the promised Messiah is combined with highly negative assessments of the Torah and the additional claim that Paul has replaced the ethnic people of Israel in the “family” area of his symbolic universe with the church, we are returning to a complex and more pernicious form of supersessionism, one that had been standard fare in past centuries of Christian theology, too often with disastrous results. As Andrew McGowan’s critique of Wright highlights: “Interpretation is in fact always political and theological. . . . [T]here really are inescapable questions of ethics in NT interpretation, and anti-Semitism is among them. . . . This remains true however sympathetic we may be to the repeated insistence in *PFG* that historical evidence must have the first and final word.”<sup>66</sup>

Wright admits that his model is a sort of “Jewish supersessionism,” such as is seen at Qumran. In this model of supersessionism, a subset of ethnic Israel remains God’s chosen people, while others from within Israel are now viewed as outside

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 1194 (emphasis Wright’s).

<sup>66</sup> Andrew McGowan, “Ecclesiology as Ethnology: The Church in N. T. Wright’s *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*,” in *God and the Faithfulness of Paul*, 583–601, here at 589–90.

the people of God. This is an incomplete portrait of Paul, in our view, since Paul does say, in Rom 11:26, that all Israel will be saved, which we believe must refer to the Jewish people as a whole. In this sense, the eschatological window that Paul opens differentiates his view of Israel's election from that of the Qumran sectarians. Wright describes those who might critique his outlook on Paul as supersessionist as engaging in a sort of postmodern moralism.<sup>67</sup> Our critique of Wright is postmodern in the sense that we are reacting to a modernity that saw too many Christians, including many learned theologians, relegate Jews and Judaism to the past, denying Paul's statements that Israel is heir of the covenants and remains the people of God (Rom 9:4; 11:1–2, 29). But it is not postmodern in the sense that we are trying to call something its opposite. We see, with Dunn, that Paul upholds a tension: he is convinced that Jesus is Israel's Messiah, while affirming that the physical descendants of Israel remain God's people who still are heirs of God's covenants.<sup>68</sup>

Because the meaning of Israel's election remains intrinsic to God's acceptance of and promises to her ancestors (Rom 11:28), Paul regards the Jewish people as beloved for the sake of the fathers, i.e., beloved in their own right, not simply for the sake of Messiah Jesus. And the telos of Israel's election is not ultimately Messiah Jesus but God's mysterious favor toward Israel in itself, a divine choice made on the broad horizon of mercy toward the peoples of the earth (Gen 12:3; Exod 19:4–6; Rom 11:32; 15:7–12). The gifts and calling of the historic people of Israel, including the gift of God's call to be among all the peoples of the earth God's own special possession, remain irrevocable.

<sup>67</sup> Wright, *PPG*, 809–10.

<sup>68</sup> Dunn, *Theology of Paul*, 45.