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In Quest of a Coherent Portrait of Paul: A Rejoinder to Michael Bird

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■ Abstract

This rejoinder to Michael Bird's critique of our argument in Joel Kaminsky and Mark Reasoner, "The Meaning and Telos of Israel's Election: An Interfaith Response to N. T. Wright's Reading of Paul," *HTR* 112 (2019) 421–46, acknowledges that Wright recognizes a dimension of intrinsic value in God's election of Israel, while it shows how Wright's metanarrative is not only unduly skewed toward an instrumental view of Israel's election but also, in effect, totally redefines Israel. Our rebuttal first reiterates some of our original claims and also presents new arguments against an exegesis of Second Isaiah that portrays Israel as divinely called to bring light or Torah to the nations. Later Second Temple sources also did not understand Israel as failing to fulfill a divine call to missionize the gentiles. Bird's own inconsistency on the mission orientation of Israel weakens his defense of Wright here. Wright's exegesis of Rom 5:20–21 as teaching that God intentionally gave Torah to draw the world's sins onto Israel and Bird's defense of this on the basis of Isaiah 53 are anomalous and untenable in the light of other scholars' readings of Romans and the rest of the New Testament. Finally, against Bird, Wright does indeed read non-Christ-confessing Jews out of Israel in a highly problematic way. Bird's agreement with us against Wright that "all Israel" in Rom 11:26 refers to corporeal Israel strengthens our original critique of Wright's redefinition of Israel in Rom 9–11.

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■ Keywords

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

■ Introduction

We are pleased that the editors of *HTR* not only have agreed to publish Michael Bird's thoughtful response to our essay critiquing aspects of N. T. Wright's reading of Paul¹ but have also invited us to offer a rejoinder to Bird's criticisms. We want to thank Professor Bird for engaging with our essay in such a serious manner. While we have deep disagreements with some of his arguments, it is a pleasure to have such a gracious dialogue partner. However, because Bird, rather than Wright himself, is responding to our critique, in places we will be arguing over exactly what Wright says. In other instances, we will be demonstrating that we stated matters in more careful terms than Bird's excerpted quotations suggest. But our primary focus in this rejoinder will be to clarify and defend the main argument of our original essay: Wright's portrait of Paul lacks credibility, because its assertions of Israel's failure to fulfill its mission, its claim that Paul views God as bringing Torah to Israel in order to draw the world's sins onto Israel, and its caricature of Paul's redefinition of Israel are not grounded in either the Scriptures Paul cites (especially Isaiah) or his own letters.

■ Was Israel called to missionize the Gentiles in texts from Isaiah 40–66?

Bird introduces the term “missional” to describe Israel's election and notes how the book of Isaiah has functioned to inspire studies in missional theology. His response seeks in this way to defend Wright's instrumental reading of what we can learn about the divine election of Israel in Isaiah. He admits that Wright appeals to Isa 42:6 and 49:6 and agrees with us that canonical Isaiah offers a variety of scenarios depicting Israel and the nations. Bird offers no exegetical argument from Isaiah for his claim that Israel was supposed to be a missionary nation, spreading Torah to others. So we cannot respond to any specific exegesis of these passages that he offers.

However, Bird seems not to have reckoned fully with our critique of Wright's reading of Isa 40–66 and Paul's supposed use of these texts according to Wright. The latter is not simply arguing that in Paul's time some Jews read these texts in a missional way. Rather, Wright, coming to the defense of H. H. Rowley, argues that the straightforward and contextual meaning of Isa 40–66 is one of spreading Torah to the nations of the world. This claim is dubious at best.

¹ Joel Kaminsky and Mark Reasoner, “The Meaning and Telos of Israel's Election: An Interfaith Response to N. T. Wright's Reading of Paul,” *HTR* 112 (2019) 421–46.

Before proceeding further, we want to clarify a nuance in our original essay that Bird seems to have overlooked or misunderstood. Although we argue that Wright holds a “strongly instrumental conception of Israel’s election whose telos is only Messiah Jesus” (423), we nowhere claim that he ignores all intrinsic dimensions to Israel’s chosenness, nor do we think that the election theology of the Hebrew Bible lacks any instrumental dimensions, as Bird at times implies.² In short, one vector of our argument is that Wright’s system overemphasizes the instrumental dimensions and underappreciates the intrinsic dimensions of Israel’s election, and thus he distorts what Second Isaiah and the Torah actually say about the foundations, meanings, and purposes of Israel’s election.

Now let us turn to our analysis of the textual evidence. The Hebrew Bible mentions various phenomena that may have contributed to the later Christian missionary impulse, but these are quite different from the active missionary outreach of converting others to one’s own faith that one finds in Paul and in later Christian sources. These phenomena have often been explained by an instrumental rationale behind God’s election of Israel, i.e., that God chose Israel so that Israel might serve God in some way. Perhaps the weakest form of an instrumental reading of God’s election of Israel vis-à-vis the nations is that the gentiles witness what God is doing with Israel and are either overwhelmed with shame, or in other instances awed by it, so that they participate in repatriating the Israelites to their land (Isa 49:7, 22–26; 60:10–14). While the nations (or some among them) acknowledge what God is doing with Israel and submit to Israel’s domination over them, this is far from saying these gentiles all become Israelites or share in Israel’s Torah. Other texts seem to assert more strongly that Israel is instrumental in the nations’ relation to God. These texts have gentiles realizing Israel’s God is in fact the one and only creator of the world and bowing in submission either to the Israelites or to their God (Isa 45:14, 16, 23). But these types of verses are also set in contexts emphasizing that God’s salvific activity is primarily directed to restoring Israel. Perhaps the closest any of these prophetic texts come to later Christian missionary activity is found in passages in which the gentile nations are magnetically drawn by the God of Israel to Jerusalem, as in Isa 2, or going even a bit further in texts that describe select individuals either attaching themselves to the people of Israel (Isa 14:1; Zech 8:20–23) or joining Israel’s worship of their God in his temple (Isa 56:6–8). Even in these last instances, these gentiles who attach themselves to Israel or Israel’s God, or who become worshipers of Israel’s God, remain gentiles. The point here is, while these later prophetic eschatological texts open a view to a world in which Israel’s God is envisioned as ruling over the entire world, they rarely envision Israel actively missionizing the gentile nations.

² Both at the beginning of Bird’s introductory comments and in the opening of the following section, “Israel’s Election: Israel-for-the-Sake-of-the-World,” he claims that we criticized Wright because he reads “Israel’s election as instrumental rather than based on divine love” (499) or for our supposedly saying that Wright’s “insistence that Israel’s election is instrumental and based upon a vocation to be a ‘light to the gentiles’ (Isa 42:6; 49:6)” (500) is an idea we think has no validity.

Later use of Isaiah by Christian theologians to construct missional theology does not persuade us that exilic or postexilic Israel and Judah were in a relationship with their God that was dependent on their delivery of Torah to the gentile nations of the world, a calling that neither Isaiah, nor Wright, nor Bird specifically defines. Indeed, Bird's invocation of several Christian theologies of mission inspired by Isaiah actually bolsters our own argument. Two of the authors he cites in note 22 admit that there is no evidence that Israel was called to be an active witness to the nations. Thus, Robert Martin-Achard explicitly says that the effect God may have on the gentiles envisioned in various eschatological texts in Isaiah comes by "the divine initiative alone," without any "intervention" by Israel itself.³ Similarly, Charles Scobie describes "the almost total absence from the Old Testament of any concern that the people of Israel should actively go out and share their knowledge of the one true God with the other nations," mentioning only the book of Jonah as exceptional for its universalism, but then admitting that Jonah was not written to motivate Jews into missionary activity.⁴

Contrary to Bird's claims, there is a conspicuous lack of any exegetical argument for the expectation of missionary activity in Isaiah. Even some of the very scholars writing in missional theology whom Bird cites do not think that the book of Isaiah, in its growth over several centuries, asserts that Israel was expected to spread Torah to other nations.

■ Did various Second Temple sources and Paul think Israel had been called to missionize the Gentiles and failed in this task?

Bird's defense of Wright's strongly missional reading of the telos of Israel's election in places seems to suggest that Wright's argument is actually more about how texts like those found in Second Isaiah came to be read as missional in the Second Temple period, based on various eschatological scenarios in contemporary texts. However, a careful look at several of the texts Bird cites to support this claim are unpersuasive, because there is little solid evidence that the authors of the texts he invokes expected Jews to missionize non-Jews in an active way. Tobit 13:11 (cited by Bird, 502), does not send Jews to the nations to convert them. This passage is better seen as a restatement of the imagery found in Isaiah 49 or 60–62, in which the gentile nations stream to Jerusalem; as we already noted, this does not mean they become Israelites. Submitting to God or even becoming YHWH worshipers is not the same as becoming Jews. A quick look at Tob 14:6 is instructive. The NRSV

³ Robert Martin-Achard, *A Light to the Nations: A Study of the Old Testament Conception of Israel's Mission to the World* (trans. J. Penney Smith; Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1962 [French original, 1959]) 75.

⁴ Charles H. H. Scobie, "Israel and the Nations: An Essay in Biblical Theology," *TynBul* 43 (1992) 283–305, here at 286 and n. 11. Christopher J. H. Wright represents Bird's position in the way he insists on Israel's call to bring the knowledge of God to the nations, without specifying how this was to be done, except through the observance of Torah (*The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2006] 330–33).

translates this verse (we believe incorrectly) as, “the nations in the whole world will all be converted,” but the Greek uses a form of *epistrepho*, which means “to turn.” A hyperliteral rendering of the Greek reads: “And all the nations will turn truly to fear the Lord God and will bury/ruin their idols, and all the nations will bless the Lord.” Thus, this passage is about the gentiles’ repenting of their idolatry, and this explains why in Tob 14:7 Israel is restored intact to her land. Wisdom 18:4, also cited by Bird, comes closer to the evidence Bird needs to support his claims, but its main point is that gentile nations are at fault for keeping God’s people in exile.

Here, it is useful to remember that Bird invokes these texts to defend Wright’s claim that passages like Isa 42 and 49 were regularly read as commissioning Jews to bring Torah to the gentile nations. And because few, if any, Jews in Paul’s time or earlier engaged in active missionizing, as later Christians would, scholars like Rowley and Wright criticize Judaism and the Jewish community for not doing what Jewish Scripture supposedly commanded them to do. Thus, in Wright’s metanarrative that supposedly stood behind Paul’s understanding of Israel’s election, Jesus replaced deficient Israel, succeeding in the task at which his Jewish predecessors and contemporary compatriots had failed. Bird seems to endorse a position similar to Wright’s in his 2006 article on these “light to the nations” texts in which he, too, asserts that Israel had failed in its mission.⁵

Yet once again some of the very scholars whom Bird cites in support of the notion that various Second Temple texts envisioned a missionary stance toward the gentile nations actually question the existence of such a phenomenon. For example, Scot McKnight (cited in n. 29 of Bird’s response) states the following in his monograph on this subject: “It is the conclusion of this work that Judaism never developed a clear mission to the Gentiles that had as its goal the conversion of the world. . . . [T]here is no evidence that could lead to the conclusion that Judaism was a ‘missionary religion’ in the sense of aggressive attempts to convert Gentiles.”⁶

None of this should be surprising, because in his critique of our essay, Bird is much more circumspect than Wright and appears somewhat inconsistent in his claims surrounding this subject. In a single paragraph on page 504 he claims that “the phenomenon of Jewish missionary activity” proves that ancient Jews perceived “a covenantal obligation to declare God among the nations,” although he goes on to “balk at calling Judaism a ‘missionary religion.’” The truth is that the language Bird uses in his own book exploring the Jewish antecedents to the missionary stance of early Christianity, while reaching a slightly different conclusion from McKnight, still acknowledges that, fundamentally, Judaism in the Second Temple period was not a missionary religion: “Second Temple Judaism did attract proselytes and facilitated the conversion of Gentiles that wanted to convert to Judaism, but

⁵ Michael F. Bird, “‘A Light to the Nations’ (Isaiah 42:6 and 49:6): Inter-textuality and Mission Theology in the Early Church,” *RTR* 65.3 (2006) 122–31, esp. 126.

⁶ Scot McKnight, *A Light among the Gentiles: Jewish Missionary Activity in the Second Temple Period* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 116–17.

it was not *self-consciously missionary* since the role of Israel, the Torah, and the synagogue was never directed unequivocally towards Gentile recruitment.”⁷ Bird notes that only within what would in time come to be called Christianity did certain antecedents in Judaism align and lead to active missionizing of gentile converts. Yet Bird’s defense of Wright’s claim that Paul thought his fellow Jews had failed to missionize the gentiles, and thus Jesus replaced them and succeeded where they failed, makes sense only if many, or at least quite a few, Jews actually thought Scripture authorized such an active mission. After all, why would Paul maintain this aspect of Wright’s metanarrative if so few of Paul’s Jewish coreligionists actually conceived of an active mission to the gentiles as a possibility, let alone as something they had been commanded to perform? And, if few, if any, Jews thought this in Paul’s time, then Wright’s contention that somehow Jews missed the obvious contextual meaning of the “light to the nations” passages in Isaiah is implausible.

We readily acknowledge that certain early Christian writers and possibly even Paul himself found authorization for an active mission to the gentiles by creatively reading these missionary impulses back into selected texts from Israel’s prophetic corpus.⁸ We have no objection to such a creative, midrashic reading of these texts. What is wrong is that Wright fails to admit that such a reading is not the probable, contextual meaning of these passages from Isa 42 and 49. Furthermore, even if Paul is among those early Christians who came to read Isa 42 and 49 as authorizing his mission work among the gentiles, this neither proves that a major stream of Paul’s message was directed toward critiquing his contemporary Jewish brethren for not missionizing the gentiles nor that Jesus succeeded in this task where all previous Jews had failed. While Paul explicitly criticizes his non-Jesus-confessing Jewish compatriots for missing the messianic implications embedded in the Hebrew Bible, which on his reading foretell the significance of Jesus’s death and resurrection, Wright’s claim that Paul also found fault with the Judaism of his day because Jews had not missionized the gentiles finds little if any support in Paul’s letters.

The only support we can think of might be found in Rom 2, which in our original article we identified as part of Paul’s diatribe and therefore not a reliable guide to Paul’s theology. We can add to that critique by taking a closer look at 2:19–21, where Paul applies the metaphors of guide, light, and teacher in his critique of Israel. Careful reading here shows that Paul is not faulting his people for not bringing Torah to the nations. Rather, he is identifying hypocrisy as the reason that Israel should not take pride in its status as the elect of God. Hypocrisy is the issue, as seen in the preceding and following contexts (2:1, 22–23). It is Wright, rather, who imposes the speculative claim that the Jews had failed to witness to the nations on

⁷ Michael F. Bird, *Crossing over Land and Sea: Jewish Missionary Activity in the Second Temple Period* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010) 151 (Bird’s emphasis).

⁸ See, e.g., J. Ross Wagner, *Heralds of the Good News: Isaiah and Paul “in Concert” in the Letter to the Romans* (NovTSup 101; Leiden: Brill, 2002); Florian Wilk, *Die Bedeutung des Jesajabuches für Paulus* (FRLANT 179; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998).

Paul's thinking, because Wright's hypothetical metanarrative presumes this must be the case, in spite of the lack of any explicit evidence to support such a claim!

There are other, more plausible readings of Rom 2:17–24 than what Wright offers. Arland Hultgren details the ways in which Paul has here edited the Scripture proof from LXX Isa 52:5 in order to focus the prophetic criticism more directly on Israel and concludes: "This is a case where there is a 'stunning misreading of the text' of Isaiah, or else it is a case where Paul quotes a text from memory, unaware of its context at the moment, and adapting it for his purpose at this point in his letter."⁹

Wagner and Wright regard Paul's quotation of LXX Isa 52:5 in Rom 2:24 as consistent with the contextual meaning of the passage in Isaiah. Wagner thinks that the text as it stands in LXX Isaiah traces the blasphemy of God's name among the nations to Israel's sins that led to its exile. Still, he admits that the context envisions divine deliverance for Israel and thinks that this fits with what will follow in Romans as well. In other words, Wagner is more ready to say that Paul's use of LXX Isa 52:5 in Rom 2:24 reflects its contextual meaning in Isaiah, without going so far as to say that this fits with a redefinition of Israel. Equally important, Wagner links the passage to the sins that led to Israel's exile. Wright is not as specific, first saying that Israel did not prove to be a light to the nations and then that Paul in Rom 2:24, like the Old Testament prophets, is pointing out the sins of Israel who were called to be a holy people.¹⁰

Joseph Fitzmyer identifies the purpose of Paul's diatribal paragraph (Rom 2:17–24) from the preceding context. The paragraph develops what Paul has already claimed in Rom 2:12–13, that both Jew and gentile are liable to God's judgment.¹¹ If this is the main point of the passage, then the assurances of God's faithfulness in Rom 3:3–4 regarding Israel's unfaithfulness direct the exegetical compass against reading the diatribe in Rom 2 as a rejection of national Israel as God's people. Wright's emphasis on Israel's disqualifying unfaithfulness in Rom 2:17–29, in order to make Jesus fit into his narrative as the faithful Israelite who will do what Israel was supposed to do (3:22–26), founders on Paul's early and continued assertion of God's abiding faithfulness toward Israel (3:3–4; 11:25–32).

Thus, when Wright links Israel's election to its mission to convert the gentiles, and speaks of Israel's failing in this mission, such a reading is based on a later Christian set of presuppositions that is not well grounded in Second Isaiah, in many of the Second Temple texts Bird mentions, or in Paul's own letters. While Paul's letters are strongly focused on the question of gentile inclusion, in Wright's thinking, Israel's early failure in this task explains why God's promises have been shifted away from the historic Jewish community to a new Israel, one composed primarily

⁹ Arland Hultgren, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011) 129. The "stunning misreading" quotation is from Richard Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) 45.

¹⁰ Wagner, *Heralds of the Good News*, 177–78; N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013) 811–12 (hereafter abbreviated *PF*G).

¹¹ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans* (AB 33; New York: Doubleday, 1993) 315.

of gentiles, since most Jews did not come to accept Jesus. Here and elsewhere, Wright's reading of Paul is much closer to a number of early church fathers than to what Paul actually claims, inasmuch as Israel is completely redefined in Wright's system, a point we discuss in detail below. For now, we note how closely Wright's argument follows a pattern Jeffrey Siker highlights in his important book on Paul: "The Jewish-Christian claim of Paul that Gentiles are truly children of Abraham developed eventually into the Gentile-Christian claim of Justin [Martyr] that Jews are not children of Abraham."¹²

Finally, and admittedly this is an argument from silence, Bird does not explain how Wright's larger systematic reading of Paul works, when at times his premises conflict directly with each other and mystify the reader. Why would Paul fault fellow Jews for not spreading Torah to the nations in Rom 2 while also holding that Torah is designed to promote transgressions in Rom 5? If Torah serves such a negative purpose in Paul's theological outlook, why blame the Jews for not doing more to spread it to the larger world?

■ Does Isaiah 53 support Wright's idea that the Torah was given to draw sin onto Israel?

It is difficult for us to follow Wright's exegesis of Rom 5:20–21 that God revealed the Torah to Israel in order to draw sin onto Israel, where God would then deal with it. Bird is not bothered by how this explanation has the potential to reignite the millennia-old charge of guilt for crucifying the Messiah. Instead, in the section headed "Paul's Messianic Atonement Theology" (508–10), Bird argues that since the servant of the so-called Fourth Servant Song (Isa 52:13–53:12) could conceivably represent Israel, and since this song repeatedly emphasizes how the servant suffers for others' sins and guilt, then perhaps this supports Wright's portrait of Israel's bearing the world's sins (Isa 53:4–12). But there is little, if any, support for this claim in the places where the New Testament quotes from this passage. The quotations are either directly messianic, i.e., focused on Jesus as the servant who bears others' sins (John 12:38; Acts 8:32–35; Rom 10:16; 15:21; 1 Pet 2:22–25), or they simply provide incidental diction applied to others (Rom 15:21; Rev 14:5). There are no hints in the New Testament's use of Isa 52:13–53:12 that we should do the exegetical gymnastics necessary to see Israel as the scapegoat for the world's sins.

When we turn to the letter of Romans, it seems inconsistent to hold that Rom 5:20–21 means that God intentionally gave Israel the Torah to draw the world's sins onto Israel while also accepting Paul's positive descriptions of the same Torah (Rom 3:2; 7:12, 14; 9:4). No help is available from Calvin. He simply follows Augustine's idea that when people break a known command, sin increases by reason of the sinner's contempt for the lawgiver.¹³ Barth as well treats Rom

¹² Jeffrey S. Siker, *Disinheriting the Jews: Abraham in Early Christian Controversy* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991) 195.

¹³ John Calvin, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans* (trans. Ross MacKenzie; 1960;

5:20 as a result. He interprets “law” as representing human religion and observes that wherever religion is fervently practiced, human sin becomes evident.¹⁴ Contemporary Romans commentator Alain Gignac, sensitive to Paul’s discourse, cites earlier texts in Romans that show how Mosaic law can bring consciousness of sin or result in transgressions (3:20; 4:15), and this is most probably what Paul is emphasizing here as well.¹⁵

Wright’s exegetical backstory to Rom 5:20–21—that Paul teaches that God has intentionally given Israel the Torah to make Israel more sinful and thus deal with the world’s sins in Israel—sounds like a new explanation. But actually, other Romans commentators come close to saying this. James Dunn considers it “likely” that: “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 distinctly 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.”¹⁶

Still, Dunn presents the increase of sin as a result and not as the intended purpose of the Torah. It is indeed difficult to maintain that God intended the Torah to increase sin in Israel when one considers the positive portraits of Torah in Romans.¹⁷

Robert Jewett comes close to Wright’s approach to Rom 5:21. Jewett says that Paul’s “sin reigning in death” signifies that it is “the climactic human sin of the crucifixion of the Messiah and the death of that Messiah, that reveal the superabundance of grace.”¹⁸ But this explanation ignores the way that Paul deals with death as a personified threat to all humanity in the preceding context (5:12–17). The death of Jesus is presented only as a conscious, merciful gift for others (5:6–8, 15), a righteous act of obedience (5:18–19). Paul’s death versus life comparisons that span 5:12–18 concern death and life for the human race.

Paul, who could be characterized as a “Yes”-and-“No” man in his modes of discourse (2 Cor 1:17), does at times say negative things about the Torah (Gal 3:1–2; 4:4–5, 8–9, 21–31; Rom 3:21). After all, that is why he has to take pains to defend the Torah in Rom 7, why the author of Acts emphasizes the Jerusalem council as a pivotal moment in Paul’s career, and why Marcion found Paul so useful.¹⁹ Of course, one must always keep in mind whether such derogatory remarks are directed toward gentiles who are seeking to take on Jewish practices, something that Paul condemns, or toward Jews maintaining Jewish observance, something for which Paul leaves

repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973) 119.

¹⁴ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns; 1933; repr., London: Oxford University Press, 1980) 185–86.

¹⁵ Alain Gignac, *L’épître aux Romains* (Commentaire biblique. Nouveau Testament 6; Paris: Cerf, 2014) 228.

¹⁶ James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8* (WBC 38A; Dallas: Word, 1988) 299.

¹⁷ Rom 3:1–2; 7:12, 14; 9:4. We discuss Dunn’s scholarship at length in our original essay, and on the whole we find Dunn’s approach to Paul judicious and balanced.

¹⁸ Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007) 389.

¹⁹ On Marcion’s use of Paul, see Judith M. Lieu, *Marcion and the Making of a Heretic: God and Scripture in the Second Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015) 234–69.

much greater leeway (1 Cor 9:20). Our concern here is that in his exegesis of Rom 5:20–21, Wright does not capture Paul’s complicated, or possibly conflicted, view of Torah and its purposes, as he fails to factor in the positive statements that Paul makes concerning Torah elsewhere in Romans (Rom 3:31; 7:10, 12, 14).

Wright’s account of Paul’s view of the origin of Israel’s law according to Rom 5:20–21 runs against the preceding context in Rom 5, as well as Paul’s *paidagōgos* metaphor in Gal 3, and is nowhere explicitly stated in Paul’s letters. Neither Wright’s explanation of Rom 5:20–21 nor Bird’s creative appeal to Isa 53 represents the plain sense of the text. Both are anomalous depictions of Paul’s position on the function of Torah.

■ Redefining Israel: Wright’s Paul reads non-Christ-confessing Jews out of Israel

While Bird claims that we go beyond what Wright explicitly argues, this is something we openly acknowledged several times, for example: “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 . . .” (436). In other instances, Bird exaggerates and thus distorts our position. For example, he argues that we level the following charge against Wright: “that ethnic Jews are ‘completely outside the newly defined people of God and hence beyond salvation’” (Bird, 500). But note the more cautious formulation in our original essay: “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” (423).

Still, let us grant that Bird’s point is that several times we claim that Wright reads those Jews who do not confess Jesus out of God’s promises to Israel; but, according to Bird, Wright never actually says this. Does Bird’s claim withstand scrutiny? Note the following quotation from Wright’s *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* that we cited on page 444 of our original essay:

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.²⁰

Or, alternatively, here is a passage from Wright we cite on page 438 of our essay, in which Wright describes what “all Israel” means in Paul’s conclusion that “all Israel will be saved” (Rom 11:26):

²⁰ Wright, *PFG*, 367–68.

[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.²¹

To substantiate our point further, we will add the two sentences that follow this last quotation: "To be sure, Paul locates this multiple failure ultimately in the inscrutable purposes of Israel's God. But he also lays all these charges at the door of his contemporaries."²² There is thus ample evidence for us to ask readers to consider where Wright's arguments on the redefinition of Israel are headed. Bird himself agrees with us that Wright is wrong to read the "Israel" in the "all Israel will be saved" conclusion of Rom 11:26 as a redefined Israel (499). Bird's argument, like our own, follows Paul's olive tree metaphor more closely; it is a better reading of Paul than what Wright's model offers. Furthermore, in the penultimate paragraph of Bird's response, he characterizes the end result of Wright's model as an Israel that is expanded rather than replaced. This again seems different and better than what Wright actually says. Our critique of Wright's redefinition of Israel therefore deserves a more even-handed evaluation from Bird.

We are not the only scholars who are unconvinced by Wright's occasional claims that his reading of Paul should not be faulted for its supersessionism. Thus, Harink notes that "Wright is certainly nervous about the charge of anti-Judaism which might be leveled at such a reading of Paul" and that "it is not at all clear . . . how there is 'no shadow, no hint, of anything that can truly be called anti-Judaism' in Wright's Paul."²³

Here, we reiterate that equally, if not more, objectionable is Wright's claim that in Paul's eyes the family of Israel was redefined specifically because Israel in the past or in Paul's own time had failed to be a light to the nations, as Wright claims in the following quotation: "[T]he creator makes promises *through* Abraham to the world; Abraham's family fail to pass on the 'oracles', . . . to be the 'light to the nations, the guide to the blind' and so on that they were supposed to be (2.17–20); how is this God then going to keep his promises *through Israel* to the world?"²⁴

²¹ Ibid., 1244–45.

²² Ibid., 1245.

²³ Douglas Harink, *Paul among the Postliberals: Pauline Theology beyond Christendom and Modernity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2003) 159, citing N. T. Wright, "Paul's Gospel and Caesar's Empire," in *Paul and Politics: Ekklesia, Imperium, Interpretation. Essays in Honor of Krister Stendahl* (ed. Richard Horsley; Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000) 160–83, here at 182.

²⁴ Wright, *PGF*, 838 (Wright's italics). Similarly, see *PGF*, 814, where Wright states: "The failure of God's people as a whole has not thwarted the divine plan to *save the world through Abraham's family*, to lighten the nations through Israel" (Wright's emphasis).

Bird's insistence that Wright accepts the intrinsic election of Israel means little when Wright emphasizes that Paul thinks God has redefined Israel after the historic people of Israel—that is, the Jewish people—failed in their calling. For Wright, Paul's letters show a "drastic reworking of election" that fulfills what the prophets had predicted: that God would change the hearts of Israel to keep the law.²⁵ However, these surface level affirmations of God maintaining Israel's elective status that Wright and now Bird offer do not compensate for the basic plot of Wright's narrative explanation of Paul's theology: "By speaking of the Messiah's 'faithfulness,' Paul clearly intends to relate the action (or passion) of the Messiah to the purpose of God to which Israel had been *unfaithful*."²⁶ In Wright's reading, Israel failed in its calling, God sent Messiah Jesus to complete this calling, and so now God has redefined Israel to be only those who identify with this Messiah, in effect reading the majority of the Jewish people out of God's special covenantal relationship with Israel.

Finally, as not only we but also a number of New Testament scholars who have reviewed Wright's *PFG* have noted, Paul nowhere explicitly criticizes his fellow Jews for failing to bring Torah to the nations of the world.²⁷ We are willing to concede that Paul may have come to believe that Jesus's resurrection signaled the start of a new era in which gentiles could now be granted access to Israel's God in a way not previously possible. According to Acts 15, Paul receives permission to pursue a mission to the gentiles, but nowhere in this scene are other Jewish compatriots faulted for not doing likewise.

■ Reflections backward and forward

We were initially at a loss to know how to take Bird's comments concerning Harink and others who read Paul more apocalyptically (509–10). It seems as though Bird is arguing, "If you think Wright is problematic for Jews, just look at Harink and other proponents of the apocalyptic Paul." In any case, our essay seeks to understand Wright's views and critique Wright, and at times, of course, this requires us to place him within the larger New Perspective on Paul landscape. We focused on Wright because his books and essays are reaching a very wide audience. Thus, problematic aspects of Wright's thinking might have an outsized influence over how many Christians think not only about Jews in Paul's day but about their Jewish neighbors today. That said, what seems odd about Bird's indictment of Harink is that Harink's reading of Paul leaves vastly more theological space for non-Jesus-confessing Jews than does Wright's own understanding of Paul. Note the following statement in Harink's critique of Wright's interpretive stance:

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 922 (quotation) and 923 (fulfillment of prophets, citing Jer 31:33; 32:39–40; Ezek 11:19; 36:26–28).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 842 (Wright's italics).

²⁷ See our original essay (430 n. 25) for supporting quotations and bibliography.

If *God* fails finally to redeem his people, Israel in the flesh, then there is no reason at all to find comfort in the prophet's words. . . . If Jews even today await a final deliverance, one which (from a Christian theological perspective) has already been inaugurated in Jesus Christ, then they stand firmly on the sure words of the Law (Genesis, Exodus, Deuteronomy) and the Prophets (Isaiah). And there is no reason to believe that Paul thought differently.²⁸

This in turn brings us to the final paragraph of Bird's response to our original critique of Wright, in which he describes how on each of his children's thirteenth birthdays (in lieu of a bar or bat mitzvah), he takes each child through a rite of passage by visiting the Melbourne Jewish Holocaust Centre Museum, where they can witness "the brutal reality of evil as it was inflicted by so-called Christian nations against the Jewish people" (512). Yet, on Wright's and Bird's readings of Paul, all Jews should become Christians, as Judaism is now in effect a defunct religion. Wright's system, while different from the works righteousness failure that Luther pinpoints, finds equally negative reasons that Judaism is an inferior religion to Christianity and a religion that, to boot, is no longer recognized as valid by Israel's God.²⁹ In the eyes of many contemporary Jews, this is facilitating Hitler's ultimate goal, to eliminate Judaism and the Jewish people, but by other means. Or, to put it kindly, it is good that Bird is taking his children to visit a Holocaust museum. But while he acknowledges the brutality that was inflicted by Christian nations, he fails to see that the very supersessionist reading he is defending has played a significant role over the centuries in dehumanizing Jews. It is widely acknowledged that centuries of highly negative Christian theological understandings of Judaism too often led Christian bystanders to do little to nothing in the face of Nazi atrocities and at times emboldened various Christians (whom perhaps Bird would label as "so-called" and not actual Christians) to join in the Nazi persecution of Jews with little awareness of how antithetical Nazi characterizations of Judaism were to the views of Judaism held by Paul or Jesus.³⁰ Do we imagine that Paul would be pleased to learn that texts like Rom 9–11, even after the Shoah, are still being read as authorizing those gentiles who have come to worship Israel's God through belief

²⁸ Harink, *Paul among the Postliberals*, 168 (emphasis his).

²⁹ In this respect, Wright's use of the New Perspective on Paul takes a turn never envisioned by W. D. Davies or his student E. P. Sanders.

³⁰ The biblical exegeses and theological constructs that enabled Christians to countenance the Shoah are traced in: Robert P. Ericksen, *Theologians under Hitler: Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus, and Emanuel Hirsch* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Wayne A. Meeks, "A Nazi New Testament Professor Reads His Bible: The Strange Case of Gerhard Kittel," in *The Idea of Biblical Interpretation: Essays in Honor of James L. Kugel* (ed. Hindy Najman and Judith H. Newman; Leiden: Brill, 2004) 513–44; Lenore Siegele-Wenschkewitz, *Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft vor der Judenfrage. Gerhard Kittels theologische Arbeit im Wandel deutscher Geschichte* (Theologische Existenz heute 208; Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1980). The Church of England seems alert to the high stakes of any theology regarding Israel (Faith and Order Commission, *God's Unfailing Word: Theological and Practical Perspectives on Christian-Jewish Relations* [London: Church House Publishing, 2019] 13–15).

in Jesus to think that God had indeed taken away the irrevocable gift of Israel's divine election from the Jewish people? *Mē genoito!*

We are not the first people to traverse this terrain. Years ago, Nils Dahl suggested that the triumphalist way Christians have read Paul for centuries jeopardizes their participation in the divine economy. Thus, while Paul concludes "that God's promises to his chosen people remain valid, . . . Later Christian theologians came up with a much simpler solution, applying the promises of the Old Testament to Christ and the church, but all indictments of the sins of ancient Israel to the Jewish people."³¹ Dahl likely derives some of his cautionary reading from Paul's warning in Rom 11:17–24 against gentiles boasting in their displacement of Israel. It is far better for Christians to respect Israel's continuing place in the divine economy than to redefine Israel in a way that in point of fact excludes almost all Jews. As Dahl emphasizes, this is especially true in the wake of the Shoah: "After Auschwitz it has become morally as well as historically impossible to continue the centuries-old practice of reading the Bible and the history of the church as if all promises and blessings belonged to the church while words of judgment pertained to the Jews."³²

Bruce Marshall has shown how Christians' quandary over Israel results from the need to affirm two truths that at times appear to be contradictory: God has chosen Israel as his elect people forever, and humanity is saved through Christ. The former truth means that there must be practicing Jews qua Jews. While Marshall's response to this apparently contradictory challenge relies on Roman Catholic documents from Vatican II and the Catholic catechism,³³ authorities that many readers of this journal will not acknowledge, his response is nonetheless instructive. Marshall notes how the Catholic catechism recognizes that both Jews and Christians await messianic redemption. Since this is so, and since Jews qua Jews need to exist on this earth in fulfillment of the promises to Israel in the Christian Old Testament, Marshall advocates a respect toward those practicing Judaism. For Marshall, this respect means that Christians no longer should evangelize Jews.³⁴ In that regard, Marshall's position avoids the charge that Ephraim Mirvis, chief rabbi of the United Kingdom, leveled against the Church of England's document, *God's Unfailing Word*, for not censuring the Christian evangelization of Jews.³⁵

³¹ See Nils Dahl, "The Crucified Messiah and the Endangered Promises," in Dahl, *Jesus the Christ: The Historical Origins of the Christological Doctrine* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 65–81, here at 77.

³² *Ibid.*, 78.

³³ The Vatican II sources are *Nostra Aetate* §4 (663–67); *Ad Gentes* §8 (594–95); and *Lumen Gentium* §§1, 9, 48 (14–15, 24–26, 78–80). Page numbers in parentheses follow *The Documents of Vatican II* (ed. Walter M. Abbott, SJ; New York: America Press, 1966). The catechism source is *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1994) §840 (242).

³⁴ Bruce D. Marshall, "Christ and Israel: An Unsolved Problem in Catholic Theology," in *The Call of Israel: Essays on the Election of Israel in Honor of Jon D. Levenson* (ed. Gary A. Anderson and Joel S. Kaminsky; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013) 335–47.

³⁵ Ephraim Mirvis, afterword to *God's Unfailing Word*, 101–5.

■ Conclusion

Both Wright and Bird revert to some ways Christians have read Paul for centuries, interpretive paths that, ironically, various recent New Perspective scholars note raise the very prospect that Paul critiques in his olive tree branches metaphor (Rom 11:17–24).³⁶ Paul's emphasis in this metaphor is on how God's graciousness to graft gentiles onto the native olive tree should not lead these gentile believers in Jesus to boast that they have replaced the natural branches. Such triumphalism endangers the very promises the gentiles received through Jesus. Yet on Wright's reading of Rom 9–11, the emphasis is now placed not on the graciousness of God's inclusion of the gentiles who affirm Jesus as the Christ, nor on the sureness that God will ultimately show mercy to Israel, whose disobedience, on Paul's reading, has actually created space for more gentiles to join the church. Rather, Wright's reading emphasizes how God has supposedly redefined Israel in such a way that makes a mockery of the long-standing promises of God to Israel's ancestors and their descendants, the Jewish people.

We were fully aware before writing our original article of those places in Wright's scholarship on Paul where he makes positive statements about Israel. Our concern was, and remains, that Wright's metanarrative effectively neutralizes any positive statements he might make. When read in the context of his metanarrative, the positive statements about Israel actually highlight how Wright's grand narrative redefines Israel. As Bird himself agrees (499), Wright wrongly views the Israel in Rom 11:26 whom God will save as a different entity from corporeal, ethnic Israel, Paul's fellow non-Jesus-confessing Jewish brethren, whose eschatological salvation Paul emphatically affirms in the concluding verses of Rom 11.

³⁶ For other New Perspective scholars' critiques of Wright, see Kaminsky and Reasoner, "Meaning and Telos," 440–42.