

# Story-Lines of Scripture and Footsteps in the Sea

Mark A. Seifrid

**Mark A. Seifrid** is Ernest and Mildred Hogan Professor of New Testament at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He has served as Visiting Lecturer at Wheaton College and at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Along with many articles, Dr. Seifrid is the author of *Justification by Faith: The Origin and Development of a Central Pauline Theme* (Brill, 1992) and *Christ Our Righteousness: Paul's Theology of Justification* (InterVarsity, 2001). In addition, he has co-edited (with D. A. Carson and Peter T. O'Brien) the two-volume work *Justification And Variegated Nomism* (Baker, 2001, 2004).

*He also has placed eternity in their heart, yet not so that they can find out what God has done from the beginning to the end* (Eccl 3:11).

## 1. Story-Lines and God's Mysterious Way

Theologians of all sorts, both systematicians and exegetes, have been gripped by a fever of story-telling. Everyone in their own way wants to tell the old, old story. This drive to narration derives from diverse concerns. For many the appeal lies in the alternative "salvation-history" traditionally has provided to the negative effects of historical-criticism, especially its atomization and subsuming of the text into a modern narrative of the world. Over against the standards of enlightened historical judgment, the Scriptures, it is contended, have their own story-line that holds its validity and truthfulness over against the modern, secular vision. This interpretation of Scripture as a unified, overarching story seems all the more urgent in the face of postmodern rejection of all-encompassing "metanarratives." Not only outside church walls, but also within them, each and everyone wants to have their own story of the world, a story that "works" for them. This swallowing up of the objective by the subjective—if it were finally possible—would be the end of Christian faith. The concern to reinforce the biblical story is therefore quite understandable.

This first concern overlaps with another, one that is perhaps more strongly

felt by the evangelical left, and yet is certainly not absent from the right. The appeal to "story" allows for emphasis on moral exhortation, the call to find one's location within that story and to live out the divine purpose that it narrates. It diverts attention from the salvation of the individual to the redemption of the people of God. Narrative interpretation of Scripture thus serves as a useful weapon against quietism and privatism by giving the community of faith priority over the individual believer. It is not surprising that those who contend for a missional theology nearly always embrace a comprehensive narrative interpretation of Scripture.

The aim of furthering Christian living in mission and community is entirely valid, provided it does not take upon itself ultimate goals. Nor is there any question that the Scriptures tell us of God's purpose for the world, its beginning and its end: God created the world out of his own goodness; God yet rules the world despite humanity's fall into sin; God will bring the world to its consummation through a final judgment; God has acted decisively for our salvation in Jesus Christ, in whom all things shall be consummated. Most of us learned the basic stories of Scripture already in Sunday School: creation, fall, flood, Babel, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Egypt, Exodus and so on, all the way to Christ's return. In this sense, the Scriptures clearly present a universal history with a definite goal. Yet

the “story” of Scripture is given to us in a fragmentary manner and in the form of promise so that the “why” and “how”—the true mystery of salvation and its continuity—is reserved for God alone. We are called to faith and hope in the God who “moves in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform” (William Cowper). Biblical faith thus stands between the optimism of modern epistemology, with its blind certainty of discovery, and the unseeing incredulity of postmodernism, with its unresolved multiplicity of perspectives. Jesus Christ himself, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, is the key to the interpretation of the whole of God’s purposes, not as a “principle” (the possession of which makes us judges of the text), but as the incarnate God, in whose living, suffering, dying and rising again all the promises of God—and thus all the stories of Scripture—find their fulfillment (2 Cor 1:20).<sup>1</sup> As the risen Lord, he is the true and final interpreter, who again and again calls us afresh to faith in him by opening the Scriptures to us, as he did to the disciples on the Emmaus road.

In another context we might pursue the question as to whether redemptive-historical interpretation together with all attempts at a comprehensive narrative of Scripture do not fall prey to the quest of the Enlightenment for a unified, comprehensive knowledge of the world, discernible, readable, and bound up with the ideal of the progress. Although it had its precedents, salvation-historical interpretation is largely a product of the nineteenth century. Its flowering came about not only as a reaction to the idealism of Hegel and the historicism of von Ranke, but also as an outgrowth of these forces, rooted in similar perspectives on the progress of history and the nature of

the historical task,<sup>2</sup> as is especially apparent in its concern to overcome historical distance.<sup>3</sup>

Here we must raise the question as to whether the drive for a *unified* and *comprehensive* narrative of redemptive-history—in which God’s footsteps may be traced—imposes an alien framework on the Scriptures. In the construction of such metanarratives, rebellion and transgression, wrath and judgment, disaster and salvation, death and life—which appear as unqualified breaks within the biblical narrative—are bridged over by a larger, coherent scheme. Discontinuity is overlooked or reduced to a “tension” that is resolved in the progress of the narrative.

This bridging of the gaps comes at the cost of abstraction and distance from life.<sup>4</sup> The lines of a unified history of redemption are drawn out from a bird’s eye view of the whole of God’s work. So long as we remain in this body and life, however, this tracing of God’s way is not possible. God’s work—unlike our own—appears *only* in retrospect.<sup>5</sup> God’s remarkable “yes” to all his promises is not *yet* established in an outward course of events that we may follow, but found in the crucified and risen Christ, whom we possess in faith (2 Cor 1:20). To imagine that we already can see the whole of God’s plan is to overlook the distinction between faith and sight, and thus *to privilege abstract knowledge over wisdom rooted in life*.<sup>6</sup> The metaphor of a “story-line” as a way of understanding Scripture is itself misleading, in that it threatens to overlook the heights and depths of God’s ways, namely, God’s condescension into the miseries of our fallen condition and the heights of the triumph that emerge from that condescension. It is worth remembering that the knowledge prom-

ised to us in the eschaton is not *merely* that of the story, the reading of which the Lamb alone may enact by breaking its seals. It is seeing God's righteousness. It is God's wiping away the tears from every eye.<sup>7</sup> It is our beholding God's face,<sup>8</sup> our knowing fully in the same manner as we have been known by God (1 Cor 13:12). *The Scripture thus speaks of its own limits.* All interpretation of Scripture, therefore, must provide a *concrete* account as to how we presently see only "through a glass, darkly."<sup>9</sup> It is questionable whether that accounting is possible within the plan of a comprehensive and unified narrative of Scripture. The construction of such a narrative involves a forgetfulness that we do not speak from above, but *from within* the ongoing story of God's dealings with the world.

The descriptive form of redemptive-historical interpretation and other comprehensive narratives of Scripture, legitimate though it is, remains derivative and secondary. All our theological discourse, all our God-talk, is in the first instance not a speaking *about* God, but a speaking *to* God, a response to God which is fundamental to us as human creatures. Whether we are conscious of it or not, we constantly are giving answer to God, in concrete and *irreducibly narrative* forms, either those of faith (thanksgiving, praise, petition, confession, and lament), or those of unbelief (boasting, self-justification, blasphemy, cursing and complaint).<sup>10</sup> It is no accident that in Romans the apostle Paul concludes his massive exposition of his Gospel (and thereby of the whole of Scripture) with a hymn of praise—a celebration of God's *unsearchable* judgments and *untraceable* ways (Rom 11:33-36)! Comprehensive narratives of Scripture seek a pre-

mature transcendence of narrative form.

Consequently, such narratives reduce the intersection of past, present, and future that is characteristic of God's work to a historical (and often moral) line of progress. Even redemptive-historical interpretation, to the extent that it locates God's purpose within a temporal stream of development cannot do justice to the intersection of the times. The biblical typology to which it appeals stands at odds with the line of progress that it proposes: in biblical typology—as in all Christian living—progress is always a return to the Creator's prior work, a return to the beginning in Jesus Christ, who as the Alpha and Omega is also the end of God's work: progress is progress into him.<sup>11</sup>

The biblical conjunction of the times has at least two dimensions. First, the fulfillment of God's promises in Jesus Christ brings the reality of the new creation into the present fallen world (2 Cor 5:17). We already have come to the heavenly Jerusalem, yet, like Israel before us, are called to enter God's promised rest (Heb 4:1-13; 12:18-24); we are simultaneously the temple of God and God's wandering people (1 Cor 3:16-17; 10:1-13); we have died to sin, yet we must not allow it to exercise its lordship in us (Rom 6:1-2; 12); we have overcome the Evil One, yet we must guard ourselves from idols (1 John 2:13,14; 4:4; 5:21).<sup>12</sup> We live in two times. To obscure this reality in a line of progress is to lose sight of the reality of sin and the temptations that surround us. It is also to lose sight of God's redeeming work in Christ.

Secondly, God's address to us in judgment and mercy within the biblical narratives *itself has the power to bridge past, present, and future.* The interpretation of biblical types does not depend on a

redemptive-historical framework that we ourselves must construct in order to overcome historical distance. On the contrary, God's address to us in the figures of Scripture *interprets us* and in so doing provides the language and forms for interpreting its narratives as they are fulfilled in Jesus Christ. The whole of Scripture functions in the same way as did the prophet Nathan's parable told to David (2 Sam 12:1-15): we find ourselves in the text, addressed by God in judgment, in the promise of mercy fulfilled in Christ, and in the sufferings of all believers. In their interpretation in Jesus Christ, God's words to us in the prophets—in many portions and in many ways—lose nothing of their particularity and content.<sup>13</sup> The distinction between promise and fulfillment remains. The time of waiting plays an essential role. Together with the figures who appear in Scripture (Noah, Abraham, Israel, Moses, Joshua, David, and all the rest) we are determined by God's dealings with the world in Adam and in Christ in such a way that as Scripture speaks to the past it *also* speaks to the present, and to the future as well.<sup>14</sup>

## 2. The Footsteps in the Sea

God's saving purpose in the world, the church, and individual believers undoubtedly progresses. Yet its progress, both in the past and in the present, is not such that it may be discerned outwardly and visibly, and traced in a story-line. God's work instead takes the form of promise, which—by virtue of the Creator's power—performs its work in the world and comes to pass, contrary to all appearances and expectations. God plants his footsteps in the sea.

The breakdown of continuity in the biblical story of God's dealings with

human creatures appears already in the fall. Where does evil come from? How did the "crafty" serpent—which the Scripture names a creature of God—arise? Where did the serpent obtain its remarkable power to seduce the first human beings? Here, too, we should remind ourselves, past, present and future intersect: the fall of humanity does not remain in the past, but is the story of every human being and of the entire world: all of us are children of Adam and Eve. Their transgression is recapitulated in each of our lives daily, as the apostle Paul reminds us in Romans 7. This sad narrative is also the story of Israel: "like Adam they transgressed the covenant" and "dealt faithlessly" with the Lord (Hos 6:7). Unbelief and rebellion interrupt the story of Israel at its pivotal points: the giving of the Law at Sinai is answered by the worship of the golden calf; the call to enter the promised land is met with the refusal to do so; the incomplete conquest of the land culminates in the worship of the Baals and Asherahs. The introduction of a king within Israel appears not merely as a divinely-ordained development within Israel's life, but as radical disobedience: it is nothing other than the rejection of Yahweh as king.<sup>15</sup> From its very start, the Davidic kingship—which follows God's repentance over his choice of Saul (1 Sam 5:11,29,35)—is the incalculable wonder of the Lord using human sin as a tool for his purposes. For all the developments that take place within Israel's life, one can hardly describe Israel's story as progress. It is largely characterized by strange acts of rebellion: "the heart is a perverse thing and incurably sick: *who can understand it?*" (Jer 17:9). To attempt to unify the narratives of these misdeeds within a single, coherent story obscures the depths of

guilt and tragedy with which they appear in Scripture. The penitential confession of Psalm 51 thus defies all explanation and fractures all story-lines: “I was born in guilt and in sin my mother conceived me (Ps 51:6).<sup>16</sup> *To narrate sin comprehensively—and thus to comprehend it—is to overcome it.* This metanarrative belongs to the depths of the cross alone, namely, to the wondrous battle and exchange between God and the human being that took place in it. It becomes ours only in the confession of sin.

In the attempt to fit the whole of Scripture within a rationally-unfolding, progressive plan, comprehensive narratives not only flatten out the reality of sin, they also tend to level the depths of divine judgment and mercy. God’s wrath does not appear within Scripture in measured terms, aimed at nothing other than furthering a larger, coherent good, as Lactantius argues.<sup>17</sup> Where the wrath of God is unleashed according to Scripture, it is immanent and immeasurable, charged with a justice that we cannot calculate. So, for example, in the Song of Moses, God—whose anger “burns to the depths of Sheol”—hides his face from his rebellious children to “see what their end will be” (Deut 32:20,22). What restrains him from “blotting out the memory of them” according to the text is not his commitment to a larger, unfolding purpose, but his vexation with his enemies whom he uses as tools for Israel’s punishment (Deut 32:27). In other contexts, of course, the Lord is said to “remember” his covenant with Israel and his mercy, and so restrains his judgment so as not to destroy them (e.g. Lev 26:42-45; Ps 106:45; Jer 14:21; Hab 3:2). But do we rightly and adequately interpret such texts if we claim that God necessarily “remembered mercy in judg-

ment” so as to further his larger plan (Hab 3:2)? The impassioned pleas of the psalmists and the prophets suggest otherwise. Furthermore, no line of development emerges: even where God’s wrath arrives as understandable judgment upon evil, its measure remains incalculable as it meets mortals and sweeps them into dust (Ps 90:3). “Who knows the power of your anger, and the wrath that accords with the fear of you?” (Ps 90:11). Neither Israel’s place nor ours can be secured by a location within a story-line: God is able to raise from the stones children for Abraham (Matt 3:9). Indeed, Israel comes to a “null point” within the “story” of Scripture. Judgment brings *an end* to Israel (e.g., Hosea 1:6-8; Amos 8:1), to Judah and Jerusalem (e.g., Isa 6:1-13), *an end* to the line of Davidic kings (e.g., Jer 22:24-30). The potter’s jug is shattered *so that it can never be mended* (Jer 19:10-13). Radical discontinuity such as this can be overcome only by a resurrection from the dead. As the prophet recognizes, the answer to the question, “Shall these bones live?” rests with God alone (Ezek 37:3).

It is not only the wrath of God against sin that interrupts the story-line of Scripture. We must also reckon with the wrath of God that does not come in response to sin and remains incomprehensible to us.<sup>18</sup> The Lord who promises Abraham descendants through Isaac and who forbids child-sacrifice<sup>19</sup> nevertheless himself tests Abraham by calling him to sacrifice his beloved son.<sup>20</sup> The Lord who sends Moses to announce deliverance to Israel in Egypt seeks to kill him on his way (Exod 4:24-26). Who was it, who provoked David to take a census and bring disaster on Israel? Was it Satan (1 Chr 21:1) or was it the Lord (2 Sam 24:1)? Can we create a *single, unified narrative* out of the two accounts without

speculation and rationalization? In the face of defeat and disaster, the psalmist laments that the people of God are “put to death all day long” because of *God alone* (Ps 44:20-22; Rom 8:36). Although they have not forgotten God’s name or lifted up their hands to another god, God has abandoned them as sheep for the slaughter. The present world is not the world of Job’s friends. God’s righteousness—the revelation of the omnipotence and love of the one true God—awaits its final revelation in the light of glory.<sup>21</sup>

The attempt to draw a story-line through the whole of Scripture not only obscures the way in which human beings encounter God’s wrath, but also—and even more—the wonder of God’s mercy and love. Creation itself and our very existence within it cannot be grounded in anything other than the free and unfathomable goodness of God.<sup>22</sup> There is likewise no *a priori* reason why the course of God’s dealings with Israel and with the world had to culminate in the triumph of God’s love and the gift of salvation in Christ’s cross and resurrection. If that were so, Christ’s prayer in Gethsemane and his cry of dereliction on the cross (“*Why* have you forsaken me?”) would be nothing other than rebellion and blasphemy. Just as we dare not dilute biblical affirmations of divine immutability, so we dare not dilute biblical descriptions of divine condescension. We do so at the cost of confessing the wonder of God’s love. The necessity of all things within the divine purpose does not diminish the absolute freedom of God. Nor does divine necessity, as we meet it, for example, in Luke’s Gospel, issue in fatalism on Jesus’ part. Nor should it issue in monothelism on ours, as again Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane makes clear. God’s wrath at Israel’s

worship of the golden calf might well have consumed them once and for all. Moses only barely averts the judgment by his petition: God repents! (Exod 32:7-14; 30-34). According to the book of Judges, it is sheer pity and no other consideration that moves the Lord to deliver his wayward people from their oppressors (Judg 2:18). As we have noted, in Scripture the Lord again and again *remembers* his covenant when he heard his people’s cry of distress (Ps 106:44-46). Might he not have forgotten it forever? To dismiss this question is to dismiss the questioning lament of the psalmists, who use this very language.<sup>23</sup> According to the prophet Hosea, although the Lord has surrendered his people to judgment and destruction, the Lord’s heart suddenly overturns within him—or, indeed, perhaps, against him (יְהוָה רַךְ עָלַי לְבִי)—so that he is filled with compassion for them (Hos 11:8). Nothing need have turned out so well as it did: “It is of the Lord’s mercies that we are not consumed” (Lam 3:22). The continuation of Israel’s life does not constitute a true continuity: the wilderness generation, including Moses himself, perished without entering the promised land. The remnant that emerges from the destruction of Jerusalem marks a new beginning, like a shoot that rises from the stump of a fallen tree.<sup>24</sup> The promised return from exile is a new Exodus, an act of creation, just as the Exodus from Egypt itself is an act of the Creator.<sup>25</sup> Such continuity rests solely in the wonder of the power and love of the Creator, who brings life out of death.<sup>26</sup> Progress here is no straight line, but a return to the Creator’s love, and thus a return to the beginning. Thus the Lord calls his people in the book of Isaiah: Look to Abraham! Look to Sarah! (Isa 51:1-3). The promise of a new begin-

ning remains even now for Israel, whose present unbelief in the crucified and risen Messiah introduces a break in the story of Scripture that cannot be bridged. Israel's final salvation, as a matter of unseen hope, shall arrive like a bolt out of the blue (Rom 11:25-27). The ways of God in wrath, judgment, and mercy—past and present—remain an unsearchable and inscrutable mystery (Rom 11:28-36). The love of God is poured out within our hearts by the Spirit in the face of outward troubles, contrary to any calculable course of events, and contrary to all that we deserve. The “right time,” for Christ to die for us was when we were weak and ungodly (Rom 5:6). Our encounter with the love of God in Jesus Christ is never a matter of a necessary course of events, but ever remains a sheer wonder. Is it really the case that “linear history is the obvious corollary of redemption”?<sup>27</sup> Is it not so, instead, that “The peace of God passes all understanding, and so does God's plan of salvation.”<sup>28</sup>

For redemptive-historical interpretation and other comprehensive narratives of Scripture, however, the continuity of God's dealings with humanity suffers no end or break. On this point one cannot avoid old debates. Is it the case that the whole of the Scriptures, aside perhaps from the first three chapters of Genesis, may be interpreted in terms of one overarching covenant of grace in its various forms?<sup>29</sup> A covenant, as it is understood in such theology, requires a partner, but that partner must first be created and—where there is judgment and death—recreated. The Creator's work suffers no partners. As the gift and promise of life, it does not remain in the past, but continues in all God's saving deeds and culminates in the resurrection of the dead, the new creation

in Jesus Christ. The God who speaks in promise to Abraham—and thus enters into covenant with him according to Genesis (Gen 15:17-21)—does so as the One who “justifies the ungodly” (Rom 4:5), “makes the dead alive,” and “calls into being that which is not” (Rom 4:17). This covenant, in which the Creator speaks in *unconditioned* giving and promise, stands in stark contrast to the covenant at Sinai, which God *commands* and on which blessing is *conditioned*.<sup>30</sup> The goodness of the Law notwithstanding, no line of continuity may be drawn between the demands of the Law and the promise of the Creator that brings life and blessing.<sup>31</sup> Yahweh will be who he will be (Exod 3:13-15). Between the Law's curse and its fulfillment in the new creation stand the unfathomable depths of God's judgment and mercy in the cross and resurrection of Christ.<sup>32</sup>

Something similar may be said with respect to the kingdom of God, which plays a large role in all comprehensive narratives of Scripture. It is not clear that such readings sufficiently take into account the abiding distinction between the *mediated* rule of God through earthly rulers—of which the Davidic kings are a special instance—and the anticipation of *immediate* divine rule that is heightened by the failure of the Davidic kings. In varying ways, the psalms (e.g., Ps 72:1-20), the prophets (e.g., Isa 11:1-9), and the apocalyptic writings (e.g., Dan 7:13-18) anticipate this *direct* rule of God—namely, the removal of all enemies, including death, and the advent of the new creation.<sup>33</sup> According to the witness of the New Testament, this promised kingdom has arrived here and now in Jesus, and is present as an undivided whole within the midst of the old, fallen world.<sup>34</sup> The

Risen One who sits at God's right hand rules in the midst of his enemies.<sup>35</sup> The kingdom is thus present, here and now within the world, so that we already may share in it.<sup>36</sup> Yet we still must pray that it might come, and strive to enter it.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, although it is present, we receive and inherit it only at the resurrection of the dead.<sup>38</sup> It grows and makes its own progress in the world, but never according to outward standards, and always in the face of opposition.<sup>39</sup> It is *proclaimed* within the world as *good news* and thus remains inseparable from Jesus Christ, who is not subject to division or a gradual parceling out.<sup>40</sup> Christ's brothers and sisters shall inherit the kingdom *that was made ready for them from the foundation of the world* (Matt 25:32). They are not placed at a point in a story-line of progress, but in the intersection of two times: they live simultaneously in the old, fallen creation (and therewith in one earthly kingdom or another), and in the new creation, the kingdom of God that is present in Jesus.

### 3. The Interpreter in the Storm

As we have noted already, the attempt to interpret Scripture as a comprehensive and unified story presupposes that the reader is in a position to discern God's work as a rational plan, from the creation to the eschaton. Such a position, set above the fray, is not ours. We are not yet beyond the battle between unbelief and faith, between the worship of the idols and the worship of the one, true God. We remain simultaneously sinners and saints, and therefore do not yet possess a whole and unified identity, but await it in hope.<sup>41</sup> It is the Scripture that interprets us, tells us who we are in our present state, as in the apostle's penetrating narrative of the human encounter with the Law

and recognition of the Gospel in Romans 7. So long as we remain in this body and life, we find ourselves in that wretched person, who cries out for deliverance and finds it in Jesus Christ.

The Scripture tells not only our story as sinners and saints, but also the story of the church—*within which* the battle for the Gospel constantly takes place on various fronts. The New Testament writings are nothing other than documents of this conflict. So long as sinners and mortals remain within it, the visible church cannot be identified with the kingdom of God. Indeed, Paul battles against the danger of reading the Scriptures in such a way that the story-line leads to us here and now.<sup>42</sup> We must still learn to pray, as our Lord has taught us, for the kingdom to come and for God, our Father, to forgive us our trespasses. Penitence and lament belong to our common worship. Where they are absent, where worship becomes merely celebratory, it threatens to become self-celebration. The church remains the community of justified sinners, who find their fellowship with one another in Jesus Christ, and wait for the hope of righteousness.

Here we again touch upon the difference between wisdom and knowledge that is largely overlooked in redemptive-historical interpretation and other comprehensive narratives of Scripture. To the extent that such a narrative becomes the framework for interpretation, we necessarily go *behind* the text, to this preconstructed framework, in order to understand the text.<sup>43</sup> The preaching of Christ from the Old Testament may then begin to look like the clever trick of the interpreter, who pulls Christ out of the text as a magician pulls a rabbit out of a hat. Conversely, in narrative construc-

tions such as that of N. T. Wright, the straightforward preaching of repentance and faith that we hear in the New Testament may turn out to be unexpectedly different from what we can see on the surface: the good news of the forgiveness of sins, the return of the prodigal, and the resurrection of Christ turn out to be all about Israel's return from exile and the call to live within a new humanity. On the one side, there is the danger of an arid intellectualism, that speaks to the head, but not the heart. On the other side, there is the danger of a moral idealism, in which Christ functions primarily as a moral example and not as Savior. As different as the concerns that generate such readings may be, they both derive from the appeal to a prior narrative construction that guides the reading of the text. Despite their concern to remain historical, they will tend toward allegory, since in transcending narrative form they appeal to a known pattern in order to interpret the unknown matter of the text. Regardless of how well we know the Gospel, it remains alien to our practical and actual thought in life. Faith lives from hearing ever afresh the strange and wonderful word of God's grace in the Gospel, a word that springs apart every story-line that we might imagine. That word comes not to detached interpreters, but to those in the midst of storm and battle, in the midst of all the trials and temptations of earthly life. In this storm, neither a mere map nor a model is sufficient. Only God's sure word of promise, fulfilled in Jesus Christ, can carry us safely to shore.

#### **4. Getting the Story (W)Right**

The most influential attempt at a comprehensive narrative of Scripture on the current scene is N. T. Wright's large

project in biblical theology, supplemented by his continuing stream of popular works. His metanarrative represents the new wave of New Testament studies that follows the "new perspective on Paul" and its claim that first-century Judaism was largely a religion of grace, based on God's unconditional election of Israel.<sup>44</sup> As Wright tells the story, the plight from which the majority of Jews sought deliverance was not that of individual guilt, but Israel's continuing exile of social and political oppression under Roman power. The problem of evil thus takes priority—materially, if not chronologically—over the problem of sin, the standing of the individual person before God. Jesus delivers Israel from exile in an earthly and concrete way. He does so not in rebellion and violence, but in meekness, suffering, and death, a way which God has brought to victory in his resurrection. This narrative subtext drawn from the Scriptures runs through the New Testament and binds the whole into a unified story. In Jesus the one true God has come to his people and brought his covenant with them to a climax. In Jesus God fulfilled the calling at which Israel failed: Jesus is God's true Servant and the light to the nations.<sup>45</sup> Through this risen Lord, God now rescues human beings, "in order that humans might be his rescuing stewards over creation." That, according to Wright, is the good news of the Gospel and "the inner dynamic of the kingdom of God."<sup>46</sup>

As with nearly all comprehensive narratives of Scripture, the idea of a single, overarching covenant between God and the community of faith is fundamental to Wright's program. Wright further takes the view, common since Barth, that the Gospel is not distinct from the Law, but merely its fulfillment.<sup>47</sup> In Wright's case,

there's a bit of wanting to have one's cake and eat it too. On the one hand, Israel's guilt and exile are integral elements of Wright's narrative, which God in Christ comes to remove. On the other hand, the Law was God's covenantal gift to Israel, intended to make her to be a light to the nations. Israel was to be the means by which God righted the wrongs in the fallen creation. The question then inescapably arises: Had Israel fulfilled its calling, would Israel then have died for the sins of the world? Wright provides no answer. Demand and promise, conditional blessing and unconditioned grace, Law and Gospel stand side-by-side in an unresolved contradiction within a supposedly coherent conception of "covenant."

Or perhaps the contradiction is resolved after all. Jesus enters into the story of Scripture as the one, faithful Israelite, who fulfills the divine purpose, the true image of God in whom God's purpose for humanity is embodied.<sup>48</sup> The in-breaking of the Creator is so subsumed into Jesus' humanity, that the covenantal narrative retains its continuity and indeed, is brought to its fulfillment. This resolution of ambivalence in the concept of "covenant" comes at a cost. To the extent that Jesus is identified as "the one faithful Israelite" and merely does what Israel was called to do, the "wonderful exchange" between God and the human being that has taken place in Christ's cross and resurrection recedes into the background.<sup>49</sup> The forgiveness of sins becomes the mere means of implementing God's larger purpose. Jesus is no longer properly the fulfillment of the story of Scripture, but merely the agent who furthers that story.

Consequently, Wright's scheme bears a tendency—one might, perhaps, call it

Eutychian—to reduce Christ's humanity and deity to a unity in the manifestation of the divine image. In his affirmation that Jesus died for the guilt of Israel (and with it of all humanity), in order to bring the forgiveness of sins, Wright follows traditional Christian understandings. As we have just noted, however, for Wright this moment within the divine narrative is no longer final and decisive, even if it was necessary. As the true image of God, Jesus embodies "the genuine humanness" that is God's will for all of us. In seeing him, *as the one in whom God's purpose for us has been realized* we are transformed by the Spirit.<sup>50</sup> Wright's conception of salvation so closely identifies Jesus with Israel and with ideal humanity, that corporate identity threatens to swallow up Jesus' personal identity. Here we no longer encounter Jesus as a distinct person, who entered into his own unique and unrepeatable experience of the human condition. Wright's Jesus cannot finally utter the cry of dereliction: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mk 15:34; Ps 22:2).<sup>51</sup> In contrast, in the Gospels Jesus' suffering remains distinctly his own, not that of Israel, not that of humanity, even though, of course, his cry takes up the lament of the psalmist. The same is true of his triumph: power, wealth, wisdom, might, honor, glory and blessing belong to the Lamb who was slain, *and to no other* (Rev 6:11). Jesus' victory is not imparted by a mere vision, but communicated by the address of God in the Risen One. That is true even for Paul himself according to the reports of Acts, and is implicit to Paul's own accounts of his vision of the risen Christ (2 Cor 4:6; Gal 1:16). The same holds in the Gospel accounts of the appearance of the Risen Lord: "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, so

I send you" (John 20:21). Unlike a vision, an address necessarily comes from an individual and speaks to individuals, no matter how many ears it reaches.<sup>52</sup> It establishes not a representative (or ideal) relation, but a communicative one, in which persons are not identified, but remain *distinct*: "I shall announce your name to my brothers (and sisters), in the midst of the assembly, I shall praise you" (Heb 1:12; Ps 22:22). Corporate identity thus does not have priority over the individual. Nor does the individual have priority over the community. Each one of us is addressed by Christ our brother, within the midst of our brothers and sisters. The community is created by the word of the risen Christ, which binds us together in our relation to the Father. Wright's "divine image christology" obscures the distinct and individual humanity of the Risen Christ who speaks and who thus creates the community of faith.

This idealistic christology of the divine image also obscures at least one dimension of the way in which the New Testament speaks of Jesus as God.<sup>53</sup> According to Wright's narrative, Christ acts savingly entirely in reference to the larger plan and purpose of God: he determines to "embody in himself the returning and redeeming action of the covenant God."<sup>54</sup> While we must not ignore the way in which Jesus' deity is manifest in his imitation of the Father according to the Johannine witness, it is questionable, whether Wright deals adequately with the full christology of John or of the New Testament. In varying ways the New Testament speaks of Christ's saving work *as a spontaneous act of his own*. Thus, for example, we read in John's Gospel: "No one takes my life (individual life; ψυχή) from me, but I give it *of myself*. I have

authority to give it, and I have authority to take it again. This commandment I have received from my Father" (John 10:18). The Father loves Jesus for freely laying down his life, and in fact has given him commandment to so act with free, divine authority. The Son fulfills his divine vocation in that he acts with sovereign freedom: "my Father is working until now, and I also am working" (John 5:17). Divine freedom and obedient imitation are simultaneously present and interpenetrate one another.<sup>55</sup>

Wright's construal of salvation and of the human being correspondingly suffers. As the divine image, Jesus serves as nothing other than the agent who implements the divine purpose for humanity—and thus is functionalized within the grand narrative. That is also true of those who come to share in salvation. As we have noted, according to Wright we are rescued "*in order that* we might become rescuing stewards of creation."<sup>56</sup> Human beings are saved "not for themselves alone, but for what God now longs to do through them."<sup>57</sup> "*Atonement, redemption, and salvation are what happen on the way* because engaging in this work (sc. of the kingdom) demands that people themselves be rescued from the powers that enslave the world in order that they can in turn be rescuers."<sup>58</sup> God thus deals with us in a utilitarian manner: he does not so much seek us, as he seeks *to use us* for his larger purposes.<sup>59</sup> Does God will to have us not merely for ourselves, but for what he wants to do through us? If so, shall we not regard and treat others in the same utilitarian manner? Are other persons significant to us only to the extent to which they might contribute to the furthering of God's purposes as we conceive them?

Wright's scheme at the same time assigns to the human being a role that far exceeds that to which the Scriptures call us. We ourselves are rescuers, "colleagues and partners" of God in God's larger project of renewing creation.<sup>60</sup> Through our stewardship—and finally at our unveiling as God's children—"creation will be brought back into that wise order for which it was made."<sup>61</sup> Now burdens are placed on us that do not belong to us. Now we are no longer merely God's co-workers, but his co-creators. Now the human being threatens to become "god" writ small.

Not surprisingly, a note of conditionality also enters into Wright's understanding of salvation: "[I]f you want to help inaugurate God's kingdom, you must follow in the way of the cross, and if you want to benefit from Jesus's saving death, you must become part of his kingdom project."<sup>62</sup> Now our works—no matter that they are aided and empowered by the grace of God—determine our persons, and indeed our salvation. Our "genuine humanity" is dependent on the degree to which we participate in the kingdom. All of us are human, but some of us are more human than others. Are some of us then of lesser worth?

Such an understanding of salvation entails a forgetfulness of our creatureliness, and thus an inversion of the biblical relationship between faith and love, between receiving and giving.<sup>63</sup> We cannot create ourselves, nor can we recreate ourselves and our world, nor can we preserve ourselves and the world in the meantime. These denials do not at all mean that God does not call us to significant tasks in the world. They do mean, however, that each and every one of us is an end of God's purposes in our-

selves, *and not a means to something else.* We are not thereby left to the perversion of our self-seeking hearts! We are rather liberated from ourselves by the Gospel, and by the response of faith and thanksgiving which God's word of forgiveness *creates* within our hearts. As Paul reminds us, the God who saves remains the unqualified Giver, the source of all good: "From him, through him, to him are all things." Consequently all praise belongs to him, "To him be the glory forever! Amen" (Rom 11:36). As Paul reminds the Corinthians, in the gift of salvation we receive the Giver of salvation (e.g., 1 Cor 1:13, 30; 2 Cor 13:5). Consequently, all our giving forth to others is only a further thankful reception of the Giver himself: his gifts to us *freely* overflow to others.<sup>64</sup> The unconditional gift of salvation thus remains undiminished and unqualified. So, for example, Paul ends his appeal to the Corinthians to participate in the gift for Jerusalem with the exclamation of praise: "Thanks be *to God* for his indescribable gift!" The gift and the giving of the Corinthians is nothing other than the gift and giving of God in Christ (2 Cor 9:15). This dynamic of receiving and giving forth also becomes clear, for example, in the Gospel of Matthew, particularly in the fifth petition of the Lord's Prayer and in the parable of the unforgiving servant (6:12, 14-15; 18:23-35). The free gift of forgiveness from the one true Giver reaches its goal, in our forgiving others. God's love toward us, unqualified by any goal beyond us, comes to perfection *in us* in the new reality of love (1 John 4:16-21). As is especially apparent in Jesus' parable, the indissoluble connection between gift and giver exists at even the earthly level: it is only as we recognize the giver and the giver's action for us, that we receive that

which has been done and given as a gift. Mercy is spontaneous and (in this sense) pre-ethical.<sup>65</sup> This spontaneity becomes apparent, for example, in the parable of the good Samaritan: the Samaritan, the foreigner and outsider, upon seeing the miserable victim of a beating is “moved with compassion” (Lk 10:30-37). Our acts of mercy arise solely from the reception—first in creation, and then even more so in new creation—of God’s spontaneous, free mercy toward us, *which seeks nothing beyond each of us and our good*. In giving forth what we have received, we do not become genuinely human, as Wright imagines, but we return, or more properly, *are brought back from our proud imaginations* to the true humanity, that we already share with all other human beings.<sup>66</sup> As important as all large-scale endeavors at social good remain, their structures of delivering aid and assistance cannot engender or replace the warmth of mercy and compassion.<sup>67</sup> Very often, in fact, it is the warmth of mercy that first puts these structures in place. Unless it continues to fill them, they grow cold and preoccupied with their own power. Nor should we think of the spontaneity of mercy as merely momentary: it has the power to endure all things, and often manifests itself in ongoing, and even life-long endeavors. It is not this love, however, nor “loving knowledge” (as Wright puts it)<sup>68</sup> that is primary in Christian living, but it is rather the faith that in Christ finds God the Creator in his immeasurable, saving goodness and love. This discovery is the well-spring and source of Christian living. “In Christ Jesus, nothing but faith working through love has power” (Gal 5:6). The priority of faith over love liberates the individual from being functionalized and exploited by the community.

The activity of faith in love means that the one who believes, addressed by God in the midst of others, cannot remain in an isolated, private piety.

The remarkable continuity that Wright presupposes between present Christian endeavor and the arrival of the kingdom in its fullness stands and falls together with his unified conception of righteousness and justice.<sup>69</sup> The converse is true as well: Wright’s unified conception of righteousness cannot stand apart from the way he conceives the continuation of our works from this age into the one to come. Wright employs the metaphor of building “for the kingdom” as a craftsman performs a task for the construction of a cathedral to summarize the tension between continuity and discontinuity. The construction of the whole lies in the hands of the architect. The smaller tasks belong to the laborers. But Wright’s figure merely distinguishes between the partial and the complete, the envisioning of the work and the execution of that work through others.<sup>70</sup> Consequently, the transition between the present and the eschaton is merely a “fresh gift of transformation and renewal from the Architect himself.”<sup>71</sup> This scheme and its radical continuity overlook the testing of all our works by fire.<sup>72</sup> Admittedly, Wright does not ignore the prospect of the final judgment, and in fact points to 1 Cor 3:10-17. Nevertheless, his acknowledgment that the *parousia* brings a “note of judgment” stands in an unresolved relation to his affirmation that, “All that we do in faith, hope, and love in the present . . . will be enhanced and transformed at his appearing.”<sup>73</sup> According to Wright, the final judgment brings the vindication of the “true covenant members,” whose covenant faith(fulness) *already can be seen*

*in the present*—that is to say, it can be read off of what they have done in obedience to God, in conformity to the divine image *made visible* in Jesus.<sup>74</sup> Present righteousness thus continues into the eschaton.

Various problems are attached to this judgment. In the first place, it underestimates the enormous challenge of discovering earthly justice, especially within the political realm.<sup>75</sup> Contention over earthly rights will remain until the eschaton. Righteousness and the discernment of it come as an unqualified gift from God. When and where they appear in this world, as legal enactments put in place by force or the threat of it, they remain mere anticipations of the eschaton: “Give your judgment to the king, and your justice to the king’s son!” (Ps 72:1-2). It is not at all clear that Christian transformation of social structures will be unerringly right and representative of the wise and just rule of God. Where it is wrong, it must and shall be judged impartially at the last Day.<sup>76</sup> It is not clear, either, how Christian commitment to Jesus’ path of meekness and mercy can possibly further justice in a fallen world in which the exercise of force remains necessary in the face of brutal evil. Wright’s scheme is in danger of a naiveté that makes a theology of the cross into a principle that triumphs everywhere and at all times.<sup>77</sup>

The most serious problem, however, with Wright’s unified understanding of righteousness is that it overlooks the corruption of the human heart that perverts all our works. We have already touched on the way in which comprehensive narratives of Scripture overlook the radical nature of evil. Wright’s program is no exception. All that we do in “faith, hope, and love” shall surely endure into eternity, but nothing that we do is done

without reserve in faith, hope, and love. Helmut Thielicke, a pastor and theologian active in the oppositional, Confessing Church during the period of Nazi rule, preaching in Stuttgart in the final days of the Third Reich, comments profoundly on the fifth petition of the Lord’s Prayer:

I must begin with myself and my own guilt whenever there is anything to be said about the world’s guilt. I cannot simply look out the window and be morally indignant over the great Babylon that lies spread out before me in all its godless darkness. No, what I see out there in global proportions must only remind me of my own “Babylonian heart” (Francis Thompson). And quite involuntarily I will be reminded of the prophet Nathan’s hard rebuke to David: “Thou art the man!” I am the one who needs forgiveness, and the sanitation of the world must begin with me.<sup>78</sup>

When and where this truth concerning our condition is overlooked or ignored, when and where we thus deceive ourselves (1 John 1:8), when and where our attention is directed primarily to outward and visible acts of righteousness, the corruption that is present within our hearts and our actions only becomes worse. When evil is thus submerged behind outward good, it secretly brings the greatest evils into the world. As Luther comments, the real devil is not the one dressed in black, but the one dressed in white, who appears as an angel of light.<sup>79</sup> The worst evil that takes place within the world—and within the church—takes place under the claim of justice and morality.<sup>80</sup>

True deliverance from Israel’s exile in Babylon, an image fundamental to Wright’s understanding of salvation, is no mere deliverance from oppression or the physical evils of this world, or even from death itself. It includes all these, but it is

much, much more. In this sense, it must be said against Wright that God not only saves “wholes,” he also saves “souls.”<sup>81</sup> True deliverance from Babylon is a deliverance from our own “Babylonian heart”:

Our towns are copied fragments  
from our breast;  
And all man’s Babylons strive but  
to impart  
The grandeurs of his Babylonian  
heart.<sup>82</sup>

This deliverance cannot come by means of a retributive justice that rewards the works of those who are genuinely human, and punishes the rest. Deliverance from our “Babylonian heart” requires *another kind of righteousness* that transcends all earthly justice. It requires a spontaneous and incalculable love that, transcending all story-lines, “does not find, but creates that which is pleasing to it.”<sup>83</sup> It requires an act of the Creator, who just as he gives life to the dead, justifies the ungodly (Rom 4:5,17). According to Scripture, that deliverance has been given to us in the resurrection of Jesus, our Lord, from the dead (Rom 4:24-25). In the form of promise, we know and experience it already here and now (Rom 6:1-23). In a way that transcends all story-lines, we groan and wait by the power of the Spirit for the hope of righteousness (Gal 5:5). This new, unheard of kind of righteousness, which (contrary to all our calculations) works the new reality of love in our hearts and lives, springs from faith alone.

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>See Bonhoeffer’s reflections on this text in a letter from Tegel prison, August 21, 1944 in *Widerstand und Ergebung* (16th ed.; KT 100; Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1977), 209-10. Against G. Goldsworthy, *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics: Founda-*

*tions and Principles of Evangelical Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007), 48: a “principle” (i.e., an *a priori* necessity) cannot be joined to the contingencies of history. Christ cannot be made into a “hermeneutical principle,” as Goldsworthy wants to make him, unless he is placed within a redemptive-historical *scheme* (not history itself), which scheme then serves as the decisive criterion for interpretation, rather than Christ.

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, G. W. F. Hegel, “Christians, then, are initiated into the mysteries of God, and this also supplies us with a key to world history. For we have here a definite knowledge of providence and the divine plan. It is one of the central doctrines of Christianity that providence has ruled and continues to rule the world, and that everything which happens in the world is determined by divine rule commensurate with the divine government” (*Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction: Reason in History* [trans. H. S. Nisbet; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1975], 41). I owe the reference to O. Bayer, *Zugesagte Gegenwart* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 116.

<sup>3</sup>Hofmann’s attempt to deal with historical distance through appeal to the history of Scripture’s effects is not entirely false, even if it is highly problematic. On Hofmann see Matthew L. Becker, *The Self-Giving God and Salvation History: The Trinitarian Theology of Johannes von Hofmann* (New York: T & T Clark, 2004), and despite Becker’s criticisms, E. W. Wendebourg, “Die heilsgeschichtliche Theologie J. Chr. K. von Hofmanns in ihrem Verhältnis zur romantischen Weltanschauung,” *ZThK* 52 (1955): 64-104.

<sup>4</sup>The bridging of the gaps thus creates its own gap, which cannot be overcome by mere knowledge or by moral exhortation—although it is often attempted.

<sup>5</sup>See Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 25: Lectures on Romans (55 vols.; ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan et al.; Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972), 367 (hereafter, Luther, *LW*).

<sup>6</sup>On this distinction between “knowledge” and “wisdom” (which is nearly the inverse of Augustine’s distinction between the temporal and the eternal), see Oswald Bayer, *Theology the Lutheran Way* (trans. J. Silcock and M. Mattes; Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2007), 28-32.

<sup>7</sup>Rev 7:14-17; 21:3-4.

<sup>8</sup>Rev 22:4; cf. Ps 17:15; Exod 33:20, 23.

<sup>9</sup>The language of the text is even more vivid than that of the King James: we see through a mirror in a riddle (δι’ ἐσόπτρου ἐν αἰνίγματι; 1 Cor 13:12).

<sup>10</sup>On our speaking as a response to God’s word to us, see O. Bayer, *Schöpfung als Anrede: Zu einer Hermeneutik der Schöpfung* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1990).

<sup>11</sup>Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luther's Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (69 vols.; Weimar: H. Böhlau Nachfolger, 1883), 56:486, 7-8 (hereafter, Luther, *WA*). “Proficere, hoc est semper a novo incipere.” Properly understood, typology is not an interpretive method, but a theology of history, a theology of the ways of God in wrath, judgment, and mercy.

<sup>12</sup>There is a third way in which the times intersect in Scripture: God’s

words of promise, as *acts* of the Creator, *immediately* bring to reality what they speak in the form of faith (Heb 11:1; cf. Rom 4:17-22). This time of faith remains distinct from the time of sight and fulfillment.

<sup>13</sup>The distinction between the internal clarity of Scripture, in its immediacy given by the Spirit, and the external clarity of Scripture, which may be established by historical means removes or at the very least alleviates the problem of a salvation-history detached from the larger course of events in the world that are subject to human investigation.

<sup>14</sup>Johann Georg Hamann (in response to Moses Mendelssohn) speaks of “historical truths not only of the past, but also of the future, proclaimed and announced in advance” (*Saemtliche Werke*: III. Band: Schriften ueber Sprache/Mysterien/Vernunft 1772-1788 [ed. Josef Nadler; reprint ed.; R. Brockhaus/Antiquariat Willi, Wuppertal/Tuebingen: 1991 (1951)], 305.).

<sup>15</sup>1 Sam 8:1-22; cf. Deut 17:14-20; Judg 8:22-23.

<sup>16</sup>Likewise, the forgiveness for which the psalmist appeals takes the form of a petition for a fresh act of the Creator that transcends all calculation, “create in me a clean heart, O God!” (Ps 51:10).

<sup>17</sup>On Lactantius, see T. Reinhuber, *Kämpfender Glaube: Studien zu Luthers Bekenntnis am Ende von De servo arbitrio* (Theologische Bibliothek Töpelmann 104; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2000), 93-94.

<sup>18</sup>On God’s incomprehensible wrath, see Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther’s*

*Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation* (trans. T. H. Trapp; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 198-205.

<sup>19</sup>Deut 18:10; Lev 20:1-5; cf. Jer 32:35; Ezek 23:36-37; Ps 106:34-39.

<sup>20</sup>The Lord “tests” or, indeed, “tempts,” תָּקַח; LXX: ἐπέειραξεν, Gen 22:1; cf. Jas 1:13.

<sup>21</sup>On “the light of glory” and Luther’s appropriation of the doctrine of “three lights,” see *LW* 33:292 (“The Bondage of the Will”).

<sup>22</sup>The freedom and goodness of the Creator expressed in creation appears, for example, in Ps 104:1-35; see Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 95-119.

<sup>23</sup>E.g., Ps 44:23-26; 74:1-23; 89:38-52.

<sup>24</sup>Isa 1:21-31; 6:13; 10:20-23; 11:1.

<sup>25</sup>E.g., Isa 43:14-21; 48:20-21; 51:9-11; Ps 74:12-17; 77:11-20.

<sup>26</sup>E.g., Isa 40:6-8; 43:14-21.

<sup>27</sup>Thus Goldsworthy, *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics*, 219. We may further ask where then is there room for the final judgment, in which all human deeds are brought back, laid bare, and judged? Likewise, if history is strictly linear, how can the appearing of Christ bring the restoration of all things (Acts 3:21)? Is the new creation in no sense a restoration of the original creation?

<sup>28</sup>E. Käsemann, “Justification and Salvation History,” in *Perspectives on Paul* (trans. M. Kohl; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 63.

<sup>29</sup>Thus Goldsworthy, *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics*, 227.

<sup>30</sup>E.g., Deut 4:13; 28:1-68; 29:1; Lev 18:5.

<sup>31</sup>Though not a Bartian himself, on this point Goldsworthy (*Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics*, 226-7) sounds positively Barthian in his rejection

of a distinction between the Law and the Gospel: “To those who say we need the law first—that is, we need to perceive our problem before we will flee to God for grace, we must reply that such an assertion assumes the ability without grace to understand the law as natural law. The gospel is the clearest explication of the law, both in its perfect fulfillment and in the effects of its being broken.” With regard to the first assertion: Does any human being who hears the Decalogue fail to comprehend its goodness (Deut 4:5-8)? Is there no room for the common grace of the Creator? With regard to the second: We may freely admit that it is only in the Gospel that we rightly comprehend the condemning voice of the Law. It by no means follows, however, that the proclamation of the Law is not necessary to the grasping of the Gospel! *Can one do away with the message of Israel’s prophets? Can one begin reading the book of Isaiah at chapter 40 and still make sense of it? Does John the Baptist represent an unnecessary aside in the larger divine drama?* None of us came to faith by *internal reflection*, but only by another who communicated the word of God to us—as demand and gift, as Law and Gospel.

<sup>32</sup>Goldsworthy’s charge that “the Lutheran dialectic between Law and Gospel failed to remove a medieval tendency to impose a hermeneutical divide between the Testaments” (*Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics*, 240) widely misses the mark. The distinction between Law and Gospel did not constitute

a divide between the Testaments for Luther, nor does it for Lutheran interpretation generally. Gospel appears in the Old Testament in the form of promise, as for example in the preamble to the Decalogue. Law appears in the New Testament in the form of demand, as for example, in the Sermon on the Mount.

<sup>33</sup>Even now within our fallen and broken world, the Creator establishes his kingship in ever-new saving acts—which may indeed take place through human agents—that point to this final hope: e.g., Exod 15:18; Ps 74:12-17; Pss 93:1; 97:1; 98:6; 99:1; Isa 45:1-25.

<sup>34</sup>E.g., Mt 12:28; 13:44-46; 21:31.

<sup>35</sup>Ps 110:1-2; 1 Cor 15:24.

<sup>36</sup>E.g., Rom 14:17; 1 Cor 4:20; Col 1:13; Rev 1:9.

<sup>37</sup>E.g., Matt 6:10; Acts 14:22; Gal 5:21; 1 Cor 6:9-10; 2 Pet 1:11.

<sup>38</sup>1 Cor 15:50.

<sup>39</sup>E.g., Matt 11:12; 13:18-32; Rev 1:9.

<sup>40</sup>E.g., Matt 4:23; 24:14; Acts 8:12; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31.

<sup>41</sup>See Bonhoeffer’s poem, “Who am I?” which is included in the memoir by G. Leibholz published in *The Cost of Discipleship* (rev. ed.; New York: MacMillan, 1963), 18-20.

<sup>42</sup>This is one of the burdens of Ernst Käsemann in his trenchant and well-known response to Krister Stendahl, “Justification and Salvation History,” 60-78.

<sup>43</sup>See H. W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University, 1974), 179-82. So, for example, Goldsworthy appeals to “epochs or stages within salvation-history” as

“macro-analogies” by which types are to be located (*Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics*, 248). The concern to tame typology is legitimate, but the criterion for taming it is to be found in God’s ways in wrath, judgment, and mercy, not in these large schemata.

<sup>44</sup>Ironically, Wright himself regards God’s covenant with Israel as in some sense conditional, a conditionality which he takes up into his own reading of the Gospel. See Mark Seifrid, “The Narrative of Scripture and Justification by Faith: A Fresh Response to N. T. Wright,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* (2008): 28-31.

<sup>45</sup>Cf. Isa 42:6; 49:6; Lk 2:32; Acts 13:47.

<sup>46</sup>N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: Harper One, 2008), 202.

<sup>47</sup>Here, despite their differences, Wright and Goldsworthy meet in their common concern for a seamless reading of Scripture. See n. 31 above.

<sup>48</sup>N. T. Wright, *Paul in Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 47: “Precisely as Messiah, he offers God that representative faithfulness to the plan of salvation through which the plan can go ahead at last, Abraham can have a worldwide family, and the long entail of Adam’s sin and death can be undone.”

<sup>49</sup>In his characterization of Jesus’ obedience and Israel’s failure, Wright, it seems to me, falls into the same pattern of supersessionism that Adele Reinhartz finds in Dorothy Sayers. See her “Caiaphas’ Post-Canonical

Career" (Paper presented at the 63rd Annual Meeting of the Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas, August 4, 2008, Lund, Sweden).

<sup>50</sup>Wright, *Paul in Fresh Perspective*, 70.

<sup>51</sup>Wright masks both Jesus' unique suffering and the depths of his questioning lament, by subsuming the cry of dereliction under Jesus' vocation: the kingdom comes through the suffering of the righteous (*Jesus and the Victory of God* [Christian Origins and the Question of God 2; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996], 600–01). Jesus' suffering thus becomes generic—and the cry of dereliction is explained away.

<sup>52</sup>The relation in Scripture between "hearing" and "seeing" is worthy of further reflection.

<sup>53</sup>It is not clear that Wright accounts fully for the way in which Pauline texts such as 2 Cor 4:4 and Col 1:15 attribute the divine image uniquely to Christ. Our conformation to that image does not remove that distinction (2 Cor 3:18; Col 3:10): Christ appears in the former texts not as a moral ideal, but in the role of the Creator.

<sup>54</sup>Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 653.

<sup>55</sup>Paul, likewise, speaks of "the Son of God who loved me, and gave himself up for me" (Gal 2:20), and of Christ "who, at the right time, died for the ungodly" (Rom 5:6).

<sup>56</sup>Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 202.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*, 200.

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>59</sup>The apostle, in contrast, writes to the Corinthians: "I do not seek your things, but you! (2 Cor 12:14). See also Phil 4:17.

<sup>60</sup>Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 192.

<sup>61</sup>*Ibid.*, 200.

<sup>62</sup>*Ibid.*, 204–5.

<sup>63</sup>Both in this phrasing, and in my following comments I am taking up the thought of Oswald Bayer, especially as it represented in O. Bayer, *Freiheit als Antwort: Zur theologischen Ethik* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995), 13–9; and "Ethik der Gabe," Systematisch-theologisches Symposium "Die Gabe—ein 'Urwort' der Theologie?"; Katholisch-soziale Akademie (Akademie Fritz-Hitze-Haus) in Münster i.W., 5 April, 2008.

<sup>64</sup>I have borrowed this wonderful image from Bayer, "Ethik der Gabe."

<sup>65</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup>Luther, WA 5, 128, 38 - 129,1 (on Ps 5:2): "Because we in Adam ascended to the likeness of God, he has descended to our image in order to lead us back to the knowledge of ourselves ... to make out of unhappy and proud gods true human beings, that is, those who suffer and are sinners."

<sup>67</sup>O. Bayer, *Zugesagte Gegenwart* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 54–60.

<sup>68</sup>Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 239.

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*, 207–12. In his refusal to distinguish between justice and justification, Wright again approximates the thought of Karl Barth. On this topic, see O. Bayer, *Theologie* (Handbuch Systematischer Theologie 1; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1994), 344–7. Likewise, despite significant differences in his understanding of the atonement and the hope of the resurrection, Wright's program bears remarkable

similarity to the Social Gospel in its utilitarian conception of individual faith, its understanding of Jesus as the initiator of the kingdom, and its emphasis on the continuity between present righteousness and that of the kingdom come. See, for example, W. Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: Macmillan, 1917), 95–166; "The Brotherhood of the Kingdom" (1893) in *Walter Rauschenbusch: Selected Writings* (ed. Winthrop S. Hudson; New York: Paulist, 1984), 71–94.

<sup>70</sup>Paul's picture of Christian labor differs not least in that God remains immediately at work: I planted, Apollos watered, but God caused growth, 1 Cor 3:1–17, esp 3:6.

<sup>71</sup>N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 210. As his metaphor already suggests, Wright apparently regards even this gift as one that will be mediated through our stewardship. See *ibid.*, 200: "That is what Paul insists on when he says that the whole creation is waiting with eager longing not just for its own redemption, its liberation from corruption and decay, but for God's children to be revealed: in other words, for the unveiling of those human beings through whose stewardship creation will at last be brought back into that wise order for which it was made."

<sup>72</sup>Wright frequently appeals to 1 Cor 15:58 in support of his claims, e.g., *Surprised by Hope*, 192–3. But this text has in view this moment of judgment, in which death is not by-passed, but conquered by God in Jesus Christ. The salvation of all

things arrives by the power of the Creator on the far side of death and destruction. The psalmist likewise hopes for the morning beyond the night of God's wrath and judgment: only there shall the works of our hands be established (Ps 90:13-17).

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., 143.

<sup>74</sup>Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 336; for further discussion see Seifrid, "The Narrative of Scripture and Justification by Faith," 36-40.

<sup>75</sup>M. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 193-231.

<sup>76</sup>It is not merely an abstract "note of judgment" through which our works must pass. The mercy of God that comes at the final judgment brings retribution on all the wrongs we have done to others. The vengeance for which the importunate widow appeals, Jesus promises to his disciples (Lk 18:1-8); divine mercy is vengeance (Ps 62:13).

<sup>77</sup>O. Bayer, *Gott als Autor: Zu einer poetologischen Theologie* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), 255-65.

<sup>78</sup>H. Thieliicke, *Our Heavenly Father: Sermons on the Lord's Prayer* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1960), 105.

<sup>79</sup>Luther, *LW* 26:41.

<sup>80</sup>"For all evils and seductions are done under the guise of godliness. Every calamity begins in God's name" (ibid., *LW* 16:245).

<sup>81</sup>Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 200.

<sup>82</sup>Thieliicke draws on this line from Francis Thompson's "The Heart Sonnet."

<sup>83</sup>Luther, *LW* 31:58.