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N.T. Wright

The New Testament and the People of God

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The author, N.T. Wright, born in 1948 in North East England is a contemporary theologian and New Testament scholar. In *The New Testament and the People of God*, N.T. Wright presents his work in five sections. Part one and two discuss ways to read the text by understanding a variety of perspectives. Part three presents a study and perspective of first century Judaism. Part four presents a study and perspective of first century Christianity and offers his conclusions in part five.

Introducing his thorough work, N.T. Wright sets the table in Part one for how we should read the New Testament; “The New Testament, I suggest, must be read so as to be understood, read within appropriate contexts, within an acoustic which will allow its full overtones to be heard. It must be read with as little distortion as possible, and with as much sensitivity as possible to its different levels of meaning” (6). He continues suggesting that it must be read to understand the stories at different levels with an open mind, and in a way that engages the drama that it presents.

In part two, chapters 2-5, Dr. Wright makes the argument that knowledge obtained by reading the literary, historical and theological texts must be clarified by filtering through a grid of various worldviews (32). He suggests that there are competing perspectives that lead to knowledge. A “Positivist” believes there are some things we can have definite knowledge. We can empirically test the belief to prove them to be true(33). The “Phenomolism” considers

evidence and aligns it with their own senses(34). This view is also called Subjectivity or Relativity because it only considers input that they personally experience. Lastly, he concludes that the “Critical Realist” starts with a belief or hypothesis, but allows for consideration of another’s perspective and story. Critical Realism lets the process of knowledge and verification confront their truth and test their hypothesis to arrive at a more accurate interpretation of the events or text. Critical Realism, he concludes, is the way in which we arrive at the fullest understanding of the true story(45).

Much of the New Testament is written in literary form and represents the most evidence for our faith. A story invites us to share its worldview as much by what it does not say as by what it does. This is also true for the Gospels. How open is the story to new ways of being read? What is truth? N.T. Wright asks the question, “how much of all this can we, or must we, ‘get right’, and how much remains open to new readings and interpretations? (49)” The author suggests that literature is the telling of stories that present worldviews written in the forms of short letters, novels, textbooks and other forms of writing. Stories are extremely effective in changing the way people think, feel and behave. Therefore stories have a powerful influence on shaping the world. Recognizing and understanding the world view of the characters within a story is important to truly understanding the reality of what is happening within the story. This is critical in our study of *The New Testament and the People of God*.

Chapter four emphasizes the point that history is an important frame of reference for knowledge. However, history cannot exist by itself as the only point of reference for knowledge. History tells us what actually happened and history tells us what people write about what actually happened. All history has a point of view. Recorded history is a distillation of information to a set of facts presented by the author to describe an event. All history is filtered

by perspective, bias and selection by the author and the reader. N.T. Wright says the observer (us) must be open to the possibility of events that do not fit in our worldview, i.e. scholars must have an objective and open mind (97).

Historical review is one method of inquiry, but also needs to be tested by hypothesis and verification. Human life is recorded in stories, stories generate questions, and humans advance explanations. A hypothesis is an answer to the question raised in the human story. The requirements of a good hypothesis must include evidence or supporting data, must construct a picture in my mind what happened, and must prove to help or explain other problems.

History includes the study of the aims, intentions, and motivations of a specific event with the goal of understanding why. The historian's job is to review all the evidence including intent and motivation to construct a story with a comprehension of various worldviews and imagination to reach a conclusion. That conclusion is often the meaning of the story. With all the considerations of point of view, bias, aim, intention, motivation, and worldviews is it even possible to find the true meaning? The author contends that with a Critical Realist reading of history and paying attention to the context and worldviews, aims, intentions, and motivation of humans and societies involved, it is possible to understand the meaning of the story(118).

We have considered literature and history as ways of studying the New Testament, but we also must involve theology in our consideration. Theology does not supercede history and literature, but enhances them. Theology is a study of God within a held worldview and is the result of reflective thinking on the symbolic universe often expressed in story as the driving force within a person that inspires them to take action. In many cases the theological story has a focus on symbols such as the cross or a scroll(127). To fully understand theology you must consider these symbols and the emotions that these bring to the story. Theology is the God-dimension of

worldview and is an essential ingredient to interpret story and to understand the answers given to worldview questions. Theology is a non-negotiable part of the study of literature and history. Part II ends with the conclusion that to better understand the biblical story we must further investigate the historical context of Judaism and then early Christianity from the gospel writers, Paul, and the perspectives of the world within which people remembered and recorded the life of Jesus.

Part three covers chapters 6 – 10 and discusses the history and circumstances transitioning from Babylonian exile to what it is like to be a Jew in the 1st century A.D. The New Testament and Christianity were born out of 1st century Judaism and shared a common worldview, so it is important to understand Judaism during this period. The author provides a picture of a transition period after the destruction of the temple where doubt and discouragement were prevalent among Jews living without a temple, living under overlords and a Hellenistic culture that threatened the religion and culture of the Jews (157). Chapter 7 discusses the importance of the Maccabean revolt leading to a split and growing diversity within Judaism. Chapter 8 illustrates how story combined with symbols of the temple, the land, the Torah, and their racial identity supported a common theme of God's covenant with Israel, political oppression and rescue (224-231). Praxis illustrated and reenacted Israel's history through the celebrating of feasts and fasts (233). Although there was a wide range of different opinions and consequent beliefs, the 1st century Jews stayed true to their core beliefs of monotheism, election and eschatology (279). The author concludes part three in chapter 10 that Israel renews their hope for the future; hope for liberation from repression, hope for redemption and renewal of the monotheism covenant, hope for the rebuilding of the Temple, hope for the cleansing of the Land and re-establishing the Torah (299, 303, 306).

Part four includes chapters 11 – 15 and pieces together praxis, symbols, and story of 1st century Christians to help us better understand the biblical story. Josephus provided a wealth of information to help us understand 1st century Judaism, but there is not a historian like Josephus that was writing about 1st century Christians. Therefore, we have to reconstruct known fixed historical points combined with geology and literature to help us frame the story(346-358). While Christianity was rapidly growing, we know that they did not keep the Jewish or pagan festivals, but were consistent in practicing rituals of baptism and the eucharist that were part of the praxis that maintained the Christian worldview. The cross was a powerful symbol that was “easy to draw, hard to forget, pregnant both in its reference to Jesus himself and in its multiple significance for his followers”. (367). Baptism, the eucharist, and the cross answered the worldview questions; who we are? Where we are? What is wrong? What is the solution?

Form-criticism is introduced as a tool for discovering Jesus by analyzing smaller stories to learn about the early church(418). These stories supported the hypothesis and when read together make sense. The 1st century Christians dismantled the Jewish worldview and were refined by persecution, self-denial, social ostracism, imprisonment, torture and death. 1st century Christians held to their core beliefs, praxis and symbols and did not compromise to accommodate Hellenistic views.

Part five concludes the review of history, literature and theology through the lens of a critical realist, yielding competing worldviews where two communities claimed to be the people of the one true God. 1st century Judaism looked for God to act in a public way to liberate Israel so that all the world would know that their God was sovereign and has vindicated His people. The 1st century Christians believed that Jesus was the Messiah and accomplished the liberation anticipated by the Jews to complete the Jewish story.

Reading *The New Testament and the People of God* was laborious and challenged me to navigate through the verbous language and terms in this book. At times I cursed the author, but in retrospect gained an appreciation for the logic and content that will remain with me and enhance my study of the Bible. I learned to appreciate the efforts required to be a biblical scholar that considers the various sources of history, literature and theology and applies critical realism to draw conclusions to what really happened. I also gained a renewed appreciation for the power of story to shape worldviews, culture, and inspire significant change in the hearts of men and nations.