

TOM WRIGHT AND THE SEARCH FOR TRUTH: A THEOLOGICAL EVALUATION, by Tom Holland

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Tom Holland is Senior Research Fellow of Union School of Theology, Oxford. His forty years of scholarship have produced fruit in many fields, especially in new exodus theology. *The Search for Truth* is, as the subtitle suggests, an evaluation of N. T. Wright's theology. In the conclusion, Holland offers a powerful warning:

In many ways [Wright] has been a great example of a servant of Christ. My problem is that I don't believe that he can reach those positions via the arguments he has presented. He has been able to avoid the catastrophes that I fear that others will encounter, because many have never had the foundations put in place in their early years to keep them "on the rails." In following Tom Wright's methodology, without having his confessional underpinning, they will be in danger of even more fanciful exegesis than that which he has followed; one which will lead them away from their intended theological home (554–55).

Holland sounds a strong warning that needs to be heeded, and he has a lifetime of scholarly wisdom to share with the next generation of pastors and scholars. In fact, the similarities between Holland and Wright extend to more than merely their shared first name. His theology is built on a narrative substructure from the Jewish Scriptures that reveals rich depth to Paul's theology. Like Wright's work, it is intriguing. But Holland has provided a narrative and a theology that is closer to the true moorings of Scripture itself and avoids many of the unnecessary false dichotomies that characterize Wright's work.

Chapter 1: Probing the Contours of Recent Research

The first chapter gives a broad overview of Pauline studies and N. T. Wright's role in it. Holland gives a brief survey of the "New Perspective on Paul," beginning with E. P. Sanders' landmark 1977 work *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (London: SCM, 1977). Sanders' lasting contribution was his concept of "covenantal nomism," a framework for understanding the Jewish law not as a legalistic approach to receiving salvation but as a covenantal approach to being faithful to God's covenant. Holland shows that Wright has generally accepted Sanders' position (23). Holland then gives a broad overview of Wright's major works. He expresses general appreciation for his scholarship, especially in the way he has challenged the Jesus Seminar.

Chapter 2: Probing Saul and His Political Identity

In Chapter 2, Holland takes on Wright's assertion that Paul was a zealot in the tradition of Phinehas, Elijah, and the Maccabean martyrs. Holland challenges this notion by a closer look at the passages where Paul uses the word "zeal" to see if Paul indeed includes himself in the zealot tradition. First, Holland examines the connection between Paul and Elijah. Wright claims that Paul's stay in Arabia was an intentional move to align himself with Elijah's ministry (32). Holland looks at Galatians 1:11–17a and rightly concludes that Paul's purposes for going to Arabia are much different than any kind of connection with Elijah's ministry (33).

Holland then investigates Paul's use of the word "zeal" to see if Paul really alludes to an official tie with the zealots of first-century Judaism. Holland's strongest point comes from Acts 22:3–5, where Paul mentions that he was "zealous for God" and that he persecuted Christians. Holland aptly notes that if Paul's reference to zeal here was as politically charged as Wright says, Paul would have been admitting his own anti-Roman behavior to a Roman official, a claim worthy of execution (47). Holland comes down strong in his conclusion: "Such an understanding of being 'zealous' ... has nothing to do with being followers of Phinehas, as Wright has argued, but it has everything to do with bringing perceived law-breakers to trial within the Jewish system" (47–48). I personally wonder if there couldn't be some middle ground here. In my reading of the "zeal" texts, there does seem to be some connection with the Phinehas tradition, especially because Phinehas' zealous action is "counted as righteous," another significant phrase for Paul (cf. Philippians 3). Nevertheless, Holland's critique stands in that Wright's strong parallel between Paul and the zealots is off balance, and consequently the foundation of many of Wright's conclusions proves to be off balance as well.

Chapter 3: Probing Paul and His Theological Identity

Chapter 3 shows another layer of Paul's theological antecedents, namely, Isaiah's suffering servant. Holland shows how the OT understanding of the role of the servant is thoroughly embedded in the concept of covenant, and thus it should not be confused with a Greco-Roman concept of servant or slave. For Holland, even influential scholars such as Roland de Vaux and C. K. Barrett have missed the significance of Paul's OT reference because of their ambitions to bring in Hellenistic implications.

Holland is working from a narrative substructure thoroughly guided by OT themes, which yields rich dividends. Holland shows how Paul alludes to Isa 49:8 and 52:11 in 2 Cor 6:1–2, thus making it evident that "Paul saw his own ministry as that of a servant of the new covenant, just as Moses, Isaiah, and the nation of Israel were servants in the old covenant" (68). Furthermore, Paul never saw his sufferings as unique to his apostolic calling; rather, they were part of his life as a Christian, as one who fills up "what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body" (Col 1:24).

Holland concludes this section with a fascinating hypothesis: it is precisely this connection between Christ's sufferings and Christians' sufferings that minimized NT references to Isaiah 53. Since the NT church understood itself as the servant of God, as Christ was the servant of God, the early church wanted to make sure that Christ's vicarious suffering was reserved as unique to Christ. Finally, Holland shows how the servant motif challenges Wright's claim that Paul was a zealot: "We need to ask if Saul saw himself as a zealot in the way that Wright has claimed. Is it possible that a man burning with such anger and hatred could change in a matter of hours and without any theological instruction to help him see how wrong he had been in his previous understanding?" (76). This chapter showcases a great strength of the book: Holland not only challenges Wright's theology but also serves as a guide for understanding Paul through a more faithful narrative substructure.

Chapters 4 and 5: Probing Paul and His Backgrounds

In chapter 4, Holland challenges the notion that Paul's Judaism had already been thoroughly Hellenized, engaging with Martin Hengel's *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in Their Encounter in Palestine During the Early Hellenistic Period* (London: SCM, 1974). Holland states that Hengel's widely accepted proposal should not go unchallenged. Holland admits that first-century Judaism had been Hellenized but claims that there could still be individuals who resisted the widespread cultural influence. He warns that "there is a danger in assuming that the majority worldview is one that is shared by all people living within a certain demographic, while in fact, there are many views—some

of which strongly oppose the majority view” (85–86). Therefore, Holland suggests that Paul’s writings come from an “exclusively Hebraic perspective” (86). Holland admits that Paul uses some Greek culture: he writes in Greek, using Greco-Roman epistolary structure and a contemporary writing style. But, Holland argues, “there is a huge difference between making use of cultural norms of the prevailing culture and using the literature and its presupposition in philosophy etc. to build his theological models” (93).

Holland goes on to illustrate the implications of his claim, starting with a description of Paul’s “new exodus theology.” For Holland, this theme is a key substructure for Paul, and it is a theme that is often obscured by references to Greco-Roman rather than Jewish culture. Holland claims that Wright “has failed to see just how pervasive the paradigm is” (103). Holland goes on to show how a key subtheme in the exodus narrative is the marital theme: the exodus is the occasion where Yahweh is joined covenantally with his people, much like a marriage. Holland then shows how the combination of these two motifs allows for a deeper understanding of the role of the law for the believer. For Holland, the law was a wedding gift given to Israel (131). The role of the Torah was to bring Israel to her bridegroom. Holland’s conclusion here is worth quoting at length:

This was the antitype of the great exodus type, the fulfillment of the Passover type, the time of Israel’s marriage to Yahweh and the feast when Israel was united with Moses and he became their representative. In this antitype that Paul has followed, the entire remnant community, which included all believing Jews and gentiles, slaves and free, male and female, were united with Christ as he died. This was not only the moment of unity through death but also through marriage for she was being cleansed to become Christ’s bride. (130).

The reader does not need to agree with every jot and tittle of Holland’s argument to partake in the rich feast of the metaphors that he brings out in this section.

Chapter 5 provides further support to Holland’s general claims in chapter 4. Essentially, Holland asks the question, “What would it look like to read the New Testament being thoroughly convinced that Paul was indeed a ‘Hebrew of Hebrews’ (Phil 3:5)?” Holland proceeds to provide a thorough investigation of the Pauline themes or metaphors that seem the most Greco-Roman: military procession imagery (2 Cor 2:14–17), Christian armor imagery (Eph 6:10–20), anthropological tripartite language (1 Thess 5:23–24), and the Greek games (1 Cor 9:24–27). For every supposed reference to Greco-Roman culture, Holland provides compelling arguments for potential OT references. Holland’s work on 2 Corinthians is especially compelling here; the exodus/pilgrimage imagery makes much more sense in the structure of 2 Corinthians. This chapter provides forceful arguments for avoiding uncritical acceptance of Greco-Roman antecedents in Paul.

Chapter 6: Probing Paul’s Use of Second Temple Literature

In chapter 6, Holland lands a heavy critique on the pervasive use of Second Temple literature in biblical studies. He begins with a reference to Richard Hays’ seminal work, *Echoes of Scripture in Paul*, pointing out that Hays’ famous seven criteria for recognizing intertextuality between the Old and New Testaments has been generally accepted by the scholarly guild. These seven criteria provide careful guidelines for determining echoes and allusions of the Old Testament in the New and help scholars avoid what Samuel Sandmel famously labeled “parallelomania.” Yet Holland astutely observes that there are no corresponding criteria for detecting echoes or allusions to Second Temple literature. Holland recognizes this gap as an urgent problem.

As it relates to Wright, Holland notes that “the presence of one word, or even a string of words, found in both the intertestamental literature and a writing of Paul or any other apostle is insufficient

to allow Wright to utilize these texts as supporting evidence for his views concerning the teachings of the primitive apostolic church” (192). Holland is clear that some engagement with Second Temple literature is legitimate; his concern is that Wright and others tend to use it as a “theological Rosetta stone” rather than an occasional cultural resource (193).

Holland has two major points to support his case. First, the date, occasion, authorship, and overall culture details behind Second Temple documents are quite ambiguous. There is great danger in ascribing similarity between texts that could be proved to be erroneous in the next generation, as Bultmann’s infamous connection between the New Testament and Gnosticism has shown. Second, as John Barclay has demonstrated in his recent *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), Second Temple literature is extremely diverse, and any alleged connection between themes needs significant nuance to produce any kind of theological fruit.

Though Holland comes down hard on this point, he does make clear that his problem is not that Second Temple literature is used in biblical studies but rather the way in which it is used. He maintains that this literature is helpful in providing a context for broader cultural issues but contends that the help they offer is limited (214). Overall, Holland is right in waving a flag of caution here. Wright does not just glean from Second Temple documents from time to time; he “weaves ideas from extra-biblical literature into the biblical (Old and New Testament) story line” (218). Both pastors and scholars should benefit from Holland’s wisdom here.

Chapter 7: Probing Paul’s Understanding of the Person of Christ (Christology)

Chapter 7 applies the same general critique to Wright’s Christology. For Holland, Wright’s Christology is wrongfully informed by 4 Maccabees. Holland rightly points out that the primary festal tradition of the book of 4 Maccabees is Hanukkah, which is rather absent from the Gospels: “If [Hanukkah] is the key to understanding Jesus’ mindset, then it has to be asked why this feast was not chosen by Jesus to illustrate the meaning of his coming death? Instead, he explained his death and its significance right in the centre of the Passover celebration” (241).

Furthermore, Wright’s Christology looks too similar to that of the secular historians who adopt an evolutionary model of Jesus’ self-awareness. In Wright’s own words, “Jesus did not ... ‘know that he was God’ in the same way that one knows one is male or female, hungry or thirsty, or that one ate an orange an hour ago. His ‘knowledge’ was of a more risky, but perhaps more significant, sort: like knowing that one is loved” (*Jesus and the Victory of God*, 653). Wright’s picture of Jesus is one who is limited in knowledge to future events and is even limited in knowledge concerning his own identity. Holland’s critique is strong here: “I do not doubt that Wright seeks a robust scholarly solution to the thorny problems of Christology that commends Christ to a skeptic world. My problem is that I am not too comfortable with the sort of Saviour he has described” (275).

In contrast to Wright’s proposal, Holland suggests persuasive arguments for a connection between the concept of Jesus as “firstborn” and Jesus as “redeemer.” Holland provides strong evidence for connections between the Son of Man theme and the Passover (254). This point is strengthened by a careful analysis of the four recognized hymns in the New Testament: the Colossians hymn (Col 1:13–20), the Philippians hymn (Phil 2:6–10), the Hebrews hymn (Heb 1:3–6), and the Apocalypse hymn (Rev 1:5–18). Holland’s proposal that the Passover contains an atoning element through the connection of “firstborn” and “redeemer” deserves greater consideration in New Testament studies.

It might be helpful to pause here to reflect on a few items that would have made this good chapter even better. The chapter is sixty-two pages long—perhaps too long for the subject matter covered, especially considering some unnecessary repetition (i.e. the same quote from Wright on 224 and 225

n. 181). In addition, the section on the hymns has sparse interaction with other scholars. While I appreciate the original research, Holland's proposal might be more widely received with additional citations of scholarship both for and against his position. Perhaps he could have even used Hays' criteria mentioned in the previous chapter to solidify the existence of the exodus theme in the NT hymns. These minor quips aside, this chapter provides a needed critique of Wright's theology.

Chapter 8: Probing Paul's Doctrine of the Atonement

Chapter 8 moves to Paul's doctrine of the atonement. Holland begins with a helpful summary of Wright's view as well as briefly touching on others' views, most notably Leon Morris. As we have seen in the previous chapter, one of Holland's main points of contention with Wright is his dependence on 4 Maccabees for understanding Paul's references to the atonement.

Holland counters Wright's points by again looking to the exodus as Paul's primary antecedent. While most commentators do not see an atoning aspect to the exodus or Passover, Holland points out that the original Passover event did include atoning elements, namely the blood on the doorposts serving as a covering for the firstborn. This atoning element is not repeated in subsequent Passover celebrations, but that point should not obscure the original reference to atonement. Holland concludes by claiming that there is a "clear echo" of the original Passover in Rom 3:25.

This section includes one of Holland's most substantiated arguments. He connects the terms "public display," "passing over," "justification," and "God's righteousness" in Romans 3 with themes from the exodus. He provides well-informed interaction with secondary literature and brings in some often-overlooked passages in Ezekiel to provide additional support. From a critical angle, I still found myself wanting further clarification of Holland's own method: what qualifies as a "clear echo"? How can we be sure that Paul intended to reference the exodus? Holland has provided a more convincing case than Wright here, but more methodological support for these echoes would have further substantiated his point. Though Holland does reference it in his introduction, this chapter could have benefited from interaction with Wright's new book on the atonement, *The Day the Revolution Began: Reconsidering the Meaning of Jesus' Crucifixion* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2016).

The chapter concludes with a fascinating discussion of Old Testament antecedents to the theme of resurrection on the third day. Not surprisingly, Holland reveals rich themes coming from the new paschal theme, showing once again how important this theme is to the New Testament.

Chapter 9: Probing Wright's Doctrine of Justification

This chapter gets to the heart of the New Perspective(s) on Paul (NPP) debate and to the heart of much of the controversy surrounding N. T. Wright. Holland primarily critiques Wright for his covenantal definition of justification, which Holland summarizes in three parts. First, "justification is not about how one was made right with God, but about being declared to be in the right with God because of being in the covenant" (341). Second, God the judge acquits the guilty not because of the imputation of Christ's righteousness but because of the believer's right standing in the covenant. Third, there is an eschatological dimension to justification, when "Israel will be declared to be God's people before all the nations of the earth" (341). To sum up, Wright views justification as an ecclesiological, not a soteriological, doctrine; it is about recognizing who is acceptable within the covenant, not about how to get into the covenant.

Holland lodges three major critiques of Wright's view of justification. First, he has either misunderstood or misrepresented the Reformers' arguments. This is a vital point because Wright

often uses the Reformers as a foil for his own theology, but Holland rightly points out that Wright is regularly guilty of using strawman arguments (349). Wright normally targets Luther instead of Calvin, saying that Calvin's focus on union with Christ is much closer to his own view. Yet Holland provides ample evidence from Luther's own writings that Luther did not ignore union with Christ. Though Holland does not fully endorse the findings of the New Finnish interpretation of Luther, he also acknowledges the growing number of scholars who have made similar observations about Luther's theology.

Second, Holland claims that Wright has suggested a false dichotomy between Paul's focus on the corporate body of Christ and individual benefits given to the believer. Wright frequently complains that Western Pauline scholars are too prone to focus on the individual whereas Paul focused on the collective. For Wright, the corporate nature of Paul's theology eliminates the possibility of a soteriologically focused justification. In contrast, Holland points out that Wright sometimes misses some elements of Paul's corporate focus. Yet, for Holland, none of this focus eliminates individual blessings of salvation: "Only when individuals are brought into the community through repentance and faith, do they receive all the blessings that the covenant community as a whole, as Christ's bride, has been bequeathed, including the imputation of his righteousness" (367). Many of Wright's readers find his focus on the corporate nature of Paul refreshing, so they are willing to follow Wright into other areas, such as his denial of imputation. Holland's answer is refreshing: yes, Paul focuses on the corporate body of Christ, but the blessings of salvation—including imputed righteousness—are still given to individual believers in Christ.

Third, Holland believes that Wright has placed far too much emphasis on 4QMMT—one of the documents of the Dead Sea Scrolls—in his understanding of justification. He states that Wright has committed "a major transgression of hermeneutic practice" by allowing the shared words between 4QMMT and Galatians to shape Wright's understanding of justification (388). While I agree with Holland's point here, there are a few places where the point could have been made slightly differently. For example, Holland faults Wright for the way in which he interacts with 4QMMT in *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, saying that he should have disclosed more information from his earlier article on the same topic (370). I wouldn't share Holland's concern about this instance, since Wright seems to provide a detailed discussion of the issues, including references to his older article (see *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 184–91, esp. 184 n. 418).

Overall, Holland is right to sound a methodological alarm here. Scholars from every side need to use extreme care when drawing comparisons between the New Testament and Second Temple documents. I am also thankful that there are some excellent new resources that provide some of the guidelines for which Holland is calling: John Barclay's *Paul and the Gift* and Preston Sprinkle's *Paul and Judaism Revisited* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2013) come to mind as two works Holland could have referenced in this chapter to outline a better way forward.

Chapter 10: Probing Paul's Doctrine of Justification

Holland now turns to his own positive construction of Paul's doctrine of justification. In response to Wright's near-monolithic covenantal definition of justification, Holland offers nine meanings for the term "justify": (1) the acquittal of sin; (2) the imputation of righteousness; (3) the declaration that a person is in the covenant; (4) the creation of a covenant; (5) justification ratification; (6) the deliverance and justification of Israel; (7) the justification of the Gentiles; (8) the justification of God; and (9) the justification of the divine marriage (443). Holland's explanation of the significance of

these nine meanings is well put: “These nine meanings of justification not only demonstrate that Wright’s one meaning of being declared in the covenant is inadequate to cover the diversity of meaning contained in the expression, but also, and far more importantly, it shows the glorious richness of the salvation that God has secured out of his grace for his people” (443).

Holland’s exposition of these nine meanings provides a significant challenge to Wright’s covenantal view. Not only does it show some deficiencies in Wright’s own construction of Paul’s theology, it also provides a positive counter-argument to the richness of justification in Paul. The fourth meaning, “covenant making,” is particularly helpful. Here Holland masterfully explains how “justify” can mean “make a covenant,” which is why God can “justify” Phinehas for his actions—he makes a covenant with him (Num 25:10; cf. Ps 106:31). Holland even shows how this statement has caused confusion in Reformed circles, quoting John Murray who states that Phinehas was justified by works, in contrast to Abraham who was justified by faith (412)! These missteps in Reformed circles have often provided Wright a legitimate critique against the Reformed position. Holland stands in the gap as a reliable guide here—there is a better way forward than Wright’s alternative.

Finally, the ninth sublevel, justification and the divine marriage, showcases another place where Holland is at his best. Holland gives a rich tour of the theme of the divine marriage, undergirded by a new-exodus narrative substructure. For readers who find Wright’s theological narrative engaging but disagree with some of his conclusions, Holland’s work will provide a rich theological feast.

Chapters 12 and 13: Probing the Doctrine of Justification in the Pauline Letters

Holland devotes the next two chapters showcasing how his method and narrative substructure illuminate Paul’s doctrine of justification. Instead of a strict word-study approach, he takes a conceptual approach. He looks not only at texts that include the word “justification” but also at texts that include related themes. His aim here is to show that “the matter of justification underlines much of Paul’s argument” (446). Holland does warn that this approach will include some repetition from earlier chapters. While it is helpful to have his Pauline theology of justification all in one place, readers who worked through the previous chapters slowly may feel comfortable reading these chapters at a faster pace.

Holland’s discussion of Rom 2:6–13 stands out as a highlight of this section. While Wright often uses this passage as an argument against justification by faith alone, Holland provides good evidence to the contrary, saying that that the passage “is not, as Wright (with many others) argues, dealing with justification by faith—it is dealing with what makes justification by faith necessary” (479). For Holland, this passage anticipates Paul’s argument in Romans 3 that all people—Jews and Gentiles alike—fall short of God’s standard and thus deserve wrath and fury. There are many different answers to Wright’s problems with this passage; even for readers who interpret the passage differently, Holland’s lengthy discussion on the topic will prove profitable.

Holland’s comments on union with Christ in both Rom 5:12–21 and 1 Cor 1:26–31 provide key insight to the debate. For Holland, Wright primarily critiques the imputation of Christ’s righteousness based on the application of righteousness to the individual in a rather simplistic and mechanistic way. Holland’s response is that imputation happens corporately through union: the wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption of 1 Cor 1:30 are not separate events but “all aspects of the one saving act of Yahweh: his deliverance of his people from exile in Babylon” (503).

Holland also provides good coverage of 2 Cor 5:21 as well as passages pertaining to justification that are not always covered in NPP discussions. Strangely missing in this section (and in the book) is any coverage of Titus 3:7.

Chapter 14: Reconciling Conflict and Review

The conclusion of the book returns to Wright's method and includes some strong words: "Wright's historical realism is nothing other than a rewritten history in which Jesus has been deeply influenced by the Maccabean exploits and claims. This is not critical realism, it is historical surrender!" (544). Holland continues by saying that Wright's "version of critical realism is only possible by closing one's mind to the issues that have been ignored and that are raised here. It is this hidden eclectic narrative that he has created and seeks to exegete that has failed to provide a compelling case for the new exodus tradition being in the text of the New Testament" (545).

Ultimately, I agree that there are some significant flaws in Wright's method and that Holland's new exodus motif deserves great consideration. On the other side, I will also add my appreciation for Wright in that, among biblical scholars, he is one who has devoted considerable space in his writings in making his method known. The first one hundred pages of *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) are devoted to his method as well as large portions in *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013). At the risk of suggesting that a long book become longer, weighty claims such as this one should probably include more interaction with Wright's formal methodological statements, not just the execution of them.

All in all, *The Search for Truth* is an impressively comprehensive critique of Tom Wright's scholarship. It covers his theological method, the controversy over his theology of justification, and even his Christology. Not only that, but Holland also provides a rival constructive theology and narrative substructure in his new exodus motif. There are very few scholars who could have written this book, but Tom Holland has risen to the challenge, and he has left the church and the academy a wonderful gift that will prove to serve as a useful guide for years to come. Whether you are relatively new to the current debates in Pauline theology or are well versed in the field, you will gain much theological fruit and edification from the time spent reading Tom Holland's *The Search for Truth*.

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