

Jesus and the Restoration of Israel: A Critical Assessment of N. T. Wright's Jesus and the Victory of God. Edited by Carey C. Newman. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1999, 320 pp., \$22.99 paper.

N. T. Wright's magisterial series, *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, is perhaps the most creative and important project in New Testament theology since Bultmann's. That it comes during a period of renewed interest in historical Jesus research and following on the heels of a number of highly publicized releases from the Jesus Seminar calls attention to it even more. One measure of the significance of Wright's project is the recent publication of a book about one of his books. In *Jesus and the Restoration of Israel: A Critical Assessment of N. T. Wright's Jesus and the Victory of God*, a collection of essays focusing on Wright's understanding of Jesus, as outlined in *Jesus and the Victory of God* (JVG), editor Carey C. Newman fields an all-star lineup of contemporary scholarship. No doubt this also highlights the importance of Wright's project.

Jesus and the Restoration of Israel is neither an evangelical apologetic nor a meeting of the N. T. Wright fan club. In addition to evangelicals, Newman wisely includes scholars who hold differing theological convictions and opinions concerning the historical Jesus. Readers will find several essays by authors who have disagreed with Wright at points (Dale Allison, Marcus Borg, and Luke Timothy Johnson) in the past. *Jesus and the Restoration of Israel* also includes essays by a renowned historical theologian (Alister McGrath) and a respected evangelical philosopher (C. Stephen Evans) as well. This adds a much-needed dimension to the book, given that historical Jesus research has too often been primarily, if not exclusively, the domain of biblical specialists.

The book is divided into two major sections, sandwiched between the introduction and conclusion by Newman. The first section, "Assessment," makes up the bulk of the book (208 pages). This section consists of several essays that mostly describe certain aspects of Wright's presentation of Jesus in JVG, offering only a brief critique (Craig Blomberg, Paul R. Eddy, and Darrell Bock), along with others that mostly critique or defend Wright's position on one point or another (Klyne R. Snodgrass, Craig Evans, and Allison). In addition several essays in this section are at least reflections, if not responses, to Wright's work (Richard Hays, McGrath, Stephen Evans, and Johnson). One is left wondering what the criteria were for distinguishing between a response and an assessment. The second section, "Responses," consists of Borg's "appreciative disagreement" with Wright followed by Wright's response to the authors.

One repeatedly finds the authors discussing Wright's treatment of eschatology and apocalyptic language as well as his contention that most first-century Jews believed that Israel had not yet fully returned from exile. Two essays in particular focus on these issues. In "Jesus and the Victory of Apocalyptic," Dale Allison expresses his disagreement with Wright concerning what Jesus' end-time language means. Craig Evans, on the other hand, devotes most of his essay, "Jesus and the Continuing Exile of Israel," to defending Wright's thesis concerning the exile of Israel.

The best section of the book is Wright's response. At points he is quite critical of several authors. He clearly believes that some have misunderstood him. It may be the case that Wright has himself to blame for some of this. At times he paints in broad verbal strokes and at others he

uses a very fine brush. This leads to a work that is both rhapsodic and technical. One can easily get lost in Wright's soaring prose and miss the subtleties of meaning within his work. Whatever the reason, Wright helpfully clarifies his position at several points in his response. His distinction between history as writing ("history-W") and history as event ("history-E") is quite helpful. His discussion of the abductive nature of historical research and the difference between "literal" and "metaphorical" as well as "concrete" and "abstract" is both helpful and insightful. The result is a very helpful chapter that certainly furthered this reader's understanding of what Wright is intending to accomplish. One can thank Newman's authors for pushing Wright to respond in this way.

Blomberg and Eddy offer useful introductory essays on JVG as a whole and who Wright thinks the historical Jesus was, respectively, to those approaching Wright's work for the first time. Likewise Richard Hays and McGrath contribute thoughtful articles that reflect on the significance of Wright's Jesus for ethics and theology, respectively. C. Stephen Evans addresses Wright at the level where Wright's work must ultimately be addressed—the methodological. Unfortunately Evans chooses to address the issue of methodological naturalism, rather than the more important issue of hermeneutics (one is left wishing for a discussion of Wright's philosophy of language). Nevertheless Evans is to be commended for seeing the importance of method.

One weakness of the book is that it focuses upon JVG, and excludes Wright's first volume, *The New Testament and the People of God* (NTPG), although several authors refer readers to NTPG. The earlier volume is foundational for all that follows. The material in NTPG is more difficult and theoretical than that in JVG but those who neglect it do so at their own peril. Among the relevant issues that could have been treated had the book focused on Wright's complete project to date rather than on one volume of it are Wright's choice of critical realism as his operating epistemology, his use of A. J. Greimas's narratology, and perhaps even his understanding of the nature of biblical authority. It is surprising that so few systematic theologians have written on the implications of Wright's project. Does that mean theologians are not reading New Testament theology these days?

Jesus and the Restoration of Israel reminds one of the collected essays edited by Jeffrey Carlson and Robert A. Ludwig, *Jesus and Faith: A Conversation on the Work of John Dominic Crossan* (Orbis, 1994). Yet there are significant differences. The authors in *Jesus and Faith* often use Crossan's work as a runway from which to take off on their own flights of fancy. In addition one gets the feeling that there is no real substantive disagreement between Crossan and the majority of his dialogue partners. This is not the case with *Jesus and the Restoration of Israel*. The essays in Newman's collection point the reader to Wright's work rather than to their own opinions. Furthermore, although all the authors admire and respect Wright there is also genuine, heartfelt disagreement at points. The book is much the better for this.

The target audience for this book is probably seminary students, although there is much that may prove useful to the specialist in these essays as well. This book is not a text, but it is a resource. It will not take the place of reading Wright (nor is it intended to), but it does offer the reader who is coming to feast at Wright's table for the first time a glance at the menu ahead of time. In doing so, it may further whet one's appetite for what Wright has to offer. In other words, it will

prove useful to those who are trying to get some feel for what Wright is doing without reading through the nearly 1200 pages of NTPG and JVG. It may also serve to encourage those who are questioning whether or not they have the appetite for such a heady course to dig in. Having said that, one must remember that Wright's project is only 1/3 completed. It may well be that he will yet surprise us all. Newman's collection is well rounded and useful. As such it should find its way onto the shelves of all who are interested in historical Jesus research.

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