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_N.T. Wright’s Theological Perspective and Methodology– An Evangelical Analysis and Evaluation_

**Abstract**

This article is the result of a research year spent at Asbury Theological Seminary in 2015. In this paper, the theological perspective and the methodology of N. T. Wright is analyzed and evaluated from an Evangelical perspective. Wright singularly focuses on the covenant status of Israel and God’s faithfulness to His covenant with Israel. For Wright this single focus becomes the superlative theological and hermeneutical perspective in expounding Pauline theology and the entire Bible. He justifies this single-perspectival approach by appealing to the authority of the Bible itself and the historical scholarship on 1st century Judaism.

This author finds his methodology has some serious flaws. On the one hand, faithful biblical exegesis is often overridden and distorted by his preoccupied theological reading of the passages. On the other hand, Wright’s appeal to the historical-critical method subjects his whole theological project to uncertainty and criticism, which demands his further clarification and modification. In addition, he fails to remain loyal to the Evangelical principle of _sola scriptura_ by prioritizing the background knowledge of 1st century Judaism.

**Keywords:** N. T. Wright, Methodology, Evangelical Theology, Romans, New Perspective on Paul

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Korean Abstract 논문 요약

N. T. 라이트는 보기 드문 탁월한 신학자이자 학문과 교회사역에 균형을 갖춘 기독교인이다. 그는 다양한 분야에서 기독교와 복음주의 신학에 기여해 왔다. 그러나 그의 관점과 신학은 또한 복음주의 신학계에서 논쟁의 대상이 되어 왔다.

이 논문은 그의 신학적 관점을 파악하고 그의 신학방법론을 분석하고자 한다. 더 나아서 이 논문은 그의 관점과 신학방법론에 대해 복음주의 관점에서 비평하고자 시도한다. 이 논문은 문헌연구를 주로 한다. 라이트의 신학관점의 정확한 분석을 위해서 그의 관점의 발전과정을 나타내고 있는 인터뷰, 전기, 자서전적 기록들과, 그의 신학적 관점을 잘 나타내는 그의 논문들, 그리고 그의 신학적 성경해석을 잘 보여주는 로마서 주석을 참조하였다.

이 논문이 밝혀낸 것은 라이트의 신학적 관점이 이스라엘의 연약적 위상과 하나님 나라다신하심에 일관되게 집중하고 있다는 것이다. 이 주제는 라이트가 로마서와 성경전체를 읽어내는 중심적 관점이 되고 있으며, 또한 그의 구원론 신학의 원리가 되고 있다. 이 논문은 또한 그의 신학방법론을 분석한다. 그가 종교개혁자들의 "신학적 성서해석"을 비판하면서도, 그 자신의 "신학적 성경읽기"를 용호하는 배경에는 그의 두 가지 신학방법론이 자리잡고 있다. 첫째는 성서 자체의 메시지를 통해서 자신의 신학적 주제를 드러내는 성서주석적 방법이다. 그는 이 방법에 있어서 종교개혁자들과 동일하다고 주장한다. 둘째는 1세기 유대교에 대한 역사적 연구성과를 바탕으로 사도바울의 신학적 주제를 포착하는 역사적 비평적 방법이다. 이 방법의 적용에 있어서 라이트는 "바울에 관한 새관점" 학자들의 도움을 받고 있다.

그러나, 라이트의 방법론은 심각한 문제를 앓고 있다. 첫째, 그의 성서주석적 방법은 그의 단일 관점에 의거한 신학적, 주제적 성경읽기로 인해서 종주 무효화되거나 왜곡되는 문제점을 드러내고 있다. 둘째로, 그 자신의 신학적 성경읽기를 보증하는 역사적 방법론은 과거에 대한 역사연구 자체가 안고 있는 다양한 인식론적, 해석학적 문제들로 인해서 불확실성과 비평에 직면하게 된다. 또한, 그가 성경해석을 더욱 중요한 신학적 방법론으로 제시하면서 자신이 따르고 있다고 주장하는 sola scriptura의 원리에서 벗어나고 있다.
Introduction

N. T. Wright is a remarkable theologian. Richard Hays, New Testament professor at Duke Divinity School, calls him a genius who even surpasses the renowned scholar, Rudolf Bultmann. This commendation does not seem an exaggeration. Wright, a prolific writer, has published about 30 theological books in addition to his New Testament commentary series and his innumerable academic papers. He is a creative and bold thinker who challenges the whole history of Biblical scholarship and Christian doctrinal traditions, driving them into a new direction. Like Bultmann he leads a new school of thought, which he himself named “the new perspective on Paul.” He is also an amazingly coherent and systematic thinker. For example, the theological perspective he held decades ago is sustained in his most recent work today. He is also an influential scholar. His “Paul for Everyone” commentary series have been widely read. Thus, Expository Times commended the series by noting it to be “probably most exciting thing to have happened in Christian education in Britain for many years.”

Wright’s greatness does not rest only in the academic realm. For one thing, he deeply commits himself to church ministry. Until lately he has served the Anglican Church in various positions including as bishop of Durham. As a result, even the people who criticize his theology appreciate his well-rounded balance. For example, John Piper writes: “He [Wright] is a remarkable blend of weighty academic scholarship, ecclesiastical leadership, ecumenical involvement, prophetic social engagement, popular Christian advocacy, musical talent, and family commitment.”

Also worth noting is Wright’s contribution to Evangelical theology. Wright has advocated the positions of Evangelical Christianity on various topics. He has been an adamant defender of some of the Evangelical doctrines about Jesus such as the virgin birth, the physical resurrection, and the deity of Jesus Christ. His open criticism of homosexuality also seems to mark him firmly within the conservative Evangelical circle. Wright freshly reaffirms the Evangelical principle of sola scriptura by appealing to the authority of the Scripture itself on doctrinal matters. He suggested several theological prescriptions to remedy common Evangelical misconceptions. For example, he emphasizes the communal nature of the church against the individualism so rampant in Western churches today. Finally, Wright stirs up new interests in the doctrine of salvation or Soteriology, which has long been taken for granted and forgotten. This paper is indebted to Wright on this account.

However, Wright’s theology has also been controversial in Evangelical circles, leading to accusations that he redefined important theological terms,
reinterpreted some of the central doctrines of salvation and challenged Reformation and Evangelical theology. What makes his challenge more serious is that Wright draws his theology from the Scripture itself. In other words, he claims to operate on the same Evangelical principle; Scripture has the final authority for theology.9

This paper has two goals. First, it attempts to articulate Wright’s theological perspective and methodology. Accurate understanding of a theologian’s perspective and methodology is a shortcut to understand the whole of his/her theology. Second, this paper also presents a critical evaluation of Wright’s perspective and theological methods from an Evangelical and doctrinal perspective, which is the author’s own perspective. In fact, this doctrinal and Evangelical perspective is congenial to Wright himself for two reasons. First, Wright is a doctrinal theologian as much as a Biblical scholar; he articulates doctrinal implications from his Biblical scholarship, openly challenges existing doctrines and suggests alternative ways to understand them. He even puts a glossary at the end of his commentary that provides his own definitions of several doctrinal concepts.11 Second, Wright understands his own doctrines as Evangelical: “And let us be clear. No other ‘New Perspective’ writer, I think, has said anything like what I just said. This version of the ‘New Perspective’ gives you everything you could possibly have got from the ‘old perspective.’ But it gives it to you in its biblical context.”12 Wright here answers the Evangelical critics, defending his theology as fully relevant to Evangelical theology. Here “old perspective” represents the Reformation-Evangelical perspective.

A brief introduction to the main resources for the discussion in this paper may be in order. I have consulted Wright’s biographies and interviews to discover Wright’s theological perspective and its development. I also find that Wright’s 2011 article, “Justification: Yesterday, Today and Forever” succinctly and clearly shows his perspective and methods. His introductory writings and commentaries on the Epistle to Romans are also excellent resources to pick up Wright’s theological schemes. Finally, Wright’s book, Scripture and the Authority of God—How to Read the Bible Today, is a direct source on his own methods, and we will discuss it towards the end of this paper.

N. T. Wright’s Theological Perspective

Wright’s perspective began to emerge with his reading of Romans during his graduate studies. At first, he read Romans in light of Reformed theology.13 Focusing on the topic of sin, he tried to “sort out” the doctrine of predestination from Romans. He also attempted to find a pre-millennial eschatological answer concerning the destination of Israel in Romans.
However, his view gradually changed. Recalling the moment of change, he writes: “I walked round Cambridge in the snow thinking it through. Yes, Christians still struggle with sin. Yes, the sinless perfectionists are wrong. But no, that’s not what Paul is talking about. He is talking about Israel (not ‘humans in general’, as the mainline German view suggests) under the Torah.” Thus, Israel became for Wright a dominant theme in reading Romans. As his theological concern was fixed on Israel, other topics of Romans were illumined by the central topic. For example, Jesus’ role must be related to the destiny of Israel as well. He writes: “Around the same time I became convinced that I should explore Davidic ‘representative’ Messiahship as a fundamental clue to Paul.”

This new focus on Israel and Jesus’ Jewish messiahship as a fundamental clue to understanding Paul led Wright to read the whole book of Romans in a new light. It began with Romans 10:3:

I had begun to read Rom 10:3 very differently from the traditional reading, indicating that Paul’s critique of his fellow Jews was not that they were legalists trying to earn merit but that they were nationalists trying to keep God’s blessing for themselves instead of being the conduit for that blessing to flow to the Gentiles.

Elsewhere Wright adds:

... before there was such a thing as a “new perspective,” that I came out with this reading of Romans 10:3 which is really the fulcrum for me around which everything else moved: “Being ignorant of the righteousness of God and seeking to establish their own.” In other words, what we have here is a covenant status which is for Jews and Jews only. I have a vivid memory of going home that night, sitting up in bed, reading Galatians through in Greek and thinking, “It works. It really works. This whole thing is going to fly.” And then all sorts of things just followed on from that.

Thus, Wright reached a pivotal perspective for reading Romans and all of the Pauline epistles. He now focuses on the theme of Israel, and particularly on Israel’s covenant relationship with God.

In the introductory article to Romans he wrote in 2005 for The New Interpreter’s Bible, Wright clearly expounds the vantage point he has found out for reading Romans. There he begins with the importance of finding a central theme for the book of Romans:
In fact to see how the different parts of the letter [Romans] hang together and to understand why Paul wanted to say just this at just this moment to these people, the most important thing to do is to grasp the main theme of the letter and to see why it was important to first-century Jews in general, to Paul in particular, and to him in this setting most specifically... It is not difficult to discover the main theme of the letter: “God’s gospel unveils God’s righteousness...”

Wright asks the readers of Romans to find and adopt a main theme, and that is God’s righteousness.

However, why God’s righteousness? How is it related to Israel? The newly found theme of Israel led Wright to ask a series of new questions in Romans. What was the message of Romans to Israel? What was the meaning of the Gospel to Israel? How did God respond to Israel when they failed to obey the law and forfeited the covenant? Who was Jesus to Israel?

God’s faithfulness was the answer to those new questions. In spite of the failure of Israel before God, God was faithful to the covenant promise He had given to Israel. In fact, God has opened up a new way to restore Israel to their original covenant status, and this new way was Jesus Christ. Through the faithful obedience of Jesus - the true Israelite - God removed the failure of Israel and fulfilled his covenant with Israel. Now all the Jews who believe in Jesus Christ are the people of God. This is the meaning of Jesus’ accomplishment. This is why Wright suggests God’s faithfulness as the main theme of the letter. God’s faithfulness is the message of Romans to Israel. Therefore Wright asks all interpreters of Romans to read the book from the perspective of Israel’s concern for their covenant status with God and God’s faithfulness as the answer to Israel’s concern.

Here we should note that, for Wright, God’s righteousness primarily means God’s faithfulness to his promise to Israel. Wright writes, “The phrase ‘the righteousness of God’... summed up sharply and conveniently, for a first-century Jew such as Paul, the expectation that the God of Israel... would be faithful to the promises made to the patriarchs.” Thus, Romans should be read in light of God’s righteousness to Israel and the restoration of Israel to original covenant status by the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Further, Wright claims that this perspective should be the one proper perspective from which we understand the whole of the Bible:
God’s agents in that plan. Humans sin; that’s their problem, but God’s problem is bigger, namely that his plan for the world is thwarted. So God calls Abraham to be the means of rescuing humankind. Then Israel rebels; that’s their problem, but God’s problem is bigger, namely that his plan to rescue humans and thereby the world is thwarted. So God sends Israel-in-person, Jesus the Messiah, to rescue Israel, to perform Israel’s task on behalf of Adam, and Adam’s on behalf of the whole world. He announces God’s kingdom, and is crucified; and this turns out to be God’s answer to the multiple layers of problems, as in the resurrection it appears that death itself has been overcome. It all fits—and it all shows that the point of the covenant is organically and intimately related at every point to the particular concern of sinful, guilty humankind. The point of the covenant with Israel, in the whole of Scripture, is that it is the means by which God is rescuing the children of Adam and so restoring the world.20

Thus, according to Wright, the Bible is the big story in which the faithful God rescues the world through the covenant that God has given to Abraham and restored through Jesus Christ.

For Wright, this new perspective in reading the Bible becomes the dominant doctrinal perspective as well. “Within this larger theme, there is still all the room required for that which other readings have traditionally seen as the major subject – namely, the justification and salvation of individual human beings. But in this letter at least... these vital and highly important topics are held within a larger discussion.”21 In other words, the central topic of Israel and God’s faithfulness to them encompasses all other topics including the crucial, Evangelical doctrinal topics.

N. T. Wright’s Methodology

How, then, does Wright justify his perspective? What makes his new perspective more proper than other ones such as the Evangelical perspective he criticizes? This question demands us to look into his methodology, which we find to be two-fold. First, Wright always appeals to the biblical text itself for the correctness of his interpretations. In other words, his perspective comes from his reading of the Bible. In his reading of Romans and Galatians, Wright has found that Paul wrestles with the destiny of Israel from beginning to end. He confirms that this exegetical process is indeed his method of theology and hermeneutics:

I, naturally, wanted to hold out for a sense of “word of God” in which Scripture held the prime place and was allowed to
question tradition and magisterium alike. That, I take it, is the historic Protestant position. Now I discover that some from what I had thought were Protestant quarters are accusing me of something called “biblicism.” I’m not sure what that is, exactly. What I am sure of is what I learned forty years ago from Luther and Calvin: that the primary task of a teacher of the church is to search Scripture ever more deeply and to critique all human traditions in the light of that, not to assemble a magisterium on a platform and tell the worried faithful what the tradition says and hence how they are to understand Scripture.22

Here Wright affirms that his biblical, exegetical method is congenial to that of the Reformers who professed sola scriptura, and that he will be ever faithful to this principle.

Wright also finds strong support for his way of reading Romans and the whole Bible in the historical study of 1st century Judaism. Contemporary historical research regarding Second Temple Judaism23 pioneered by E. P. Sanders24 provides Wright with a renewed knowledge of the Judaism at the time of the apostle Paul, revealing the Apostle Paul’s theological background. In other words, Paul operated within this theological framework. This means, in turn, that Paul had to harmonize the Gospel of Jesus Christ with the Judaism of his day in the book of Romans and other epistles he wrote. Thus, Wright naturally brings the outcome of historical research on 1st century Judaism into the biblical exegesis.25

Wright’s dependence on historical scholarship is not contingent nor occasional, but essential and systematic in his biblical theology, making it his second, major theological and hermeneutic method. For example, he writes,

> It is therefore vital that we pay close and strict attention to the actual detail of what the NT says rather than assuming that we have the right to abstract bits and pieces and make them fit quite different scenarios and then be absolutized in their new form. Of course what Paul said in his context needs to be applied in different contexts. That is what Luther and Calvin and the others did, while being very clear that historical exegesis, not allegorical or typological, was the rock bottom of meaning to which appeal had to be made.26

Wright advocates for finding the actual details of the Bible’s teaching over against an allegorical and typological reading of it, and for that purpose, we need historical exegesis. That is the foundation meaning to which our interpretation should appeal.

As a result, we conclude that Wright employs two theological-hermeneutical methods: an exegetical method and a historical-critical method. It
is due to his dominant exegetical method that he consistently suggests to reading the text of the Bible without any preoccupation with doctrinal correctness. At the same time, Wright also employs a historical-critical method and follows the consensus of contemporary historical scholarship on 1st century Judaism. Another example of his fully functional historical method is that his work on Jesus and Paul mainly focuses on those biblical books of which authorship is historically established.

An Evangelical Evaluation of Wright’s Theological Perspective

On the one hand, Wright’s perspective focusing on Israel’s covenant with God and God’s faithfulness to Israel is a fresh viewpoint for reading Romans and the whole of the Bible. This perspective opens our eyes to the words and topics in Romans and the Bible that most Evangelical readers have ignored: Israel, Abraham, Covenant, etc. Those topics did not mean much to typical Evangelical readers who tend to focus on the salvation and justification of an individual believer. However, Wright suggests to them a new way to read Romans through the eyes of a Jew. We now realize that the book of Romans was written not only for Gentiles, but also for the Jews. At least we can admit that a few chapters of Romans are devoted to the destiny of the Jewish people.

However, our question here is whether this fresh new perspective is the only truthful perspective there is. Does this new perspective invalidate the traditional, “Gentile” perspective of Reformation-Evangelical theology that focuses on individual salvation? This question is important, for there is always the temptation and danger of applying a single, universal theological perspective to the reading of the Bible. If the Evangelical perspective was problematic, wasn’t it because it was a single, dominant theological perspective dictating itself on Biblical exposition? If Martin Luther was singularly preoccupied with his theme of justification by faith so as to do injustice to some other Biblical texts including the book of James, why would Wright commit the same error by applying another single perspective? Can his perspective be mutually compatible with other major perspectives? However, Wright’s answer is “No.” For instance, he writes: “... knowing that, out of sheer loyalty to the God-given text, particularly of Romans, I couldn’t go back to a Lutheran reading.” What, then, makes Wright’s perspective essentially better than Luther’s? How does Wright defend his own superior theological perspective? To find an answer to this question and to evaluate it properly, we need to look into his methods.
An Evangelical Evaluation of Wright's Methodology

Earlier in our section on Wright’s methodology, I have analyzed his methodology as both exegetical and historical. He appeals to the Biblical text itself for the propriety of his reading. On this ground he claims that his method is congenial to that of the Reformers themselves. At the same time, he also follows and appeals to the historical scholarship for proper reading of the Bible. Historical knowledge — specifically the knowledge of 1st century Judaism — is “the rock bottom of meaning to which appeal had to be made.”

However, both of his methods show problems. First, his biblical-exegetical method has the problem of being dominated by a theological, thematic reading of the Bible. As we have previously pointed out in our discussion of Wright’s perspective, Wright reads the whole of Romans from the single perspective of the covenant of Israel and God’s faithfulness to it. The problem is that this single theological theme is so dominant in the reading of the Bible that it often overrides or contradicts the true meaning of the Biblical passages. As such, his reading becomes not true “exe-gesis,” but “eise-gesis”.

For example, throughout his commentaries on Romans, there are numerous examples of overriding the faithful exegesis of the passages by his theological perspective. For example, Wright constantly introduces “covenant” in his exposition of Romans. The matter of fact is that there are only two occurrences of “covenant” in the whole book of Romans: in 9:4 and 11:27. Yet, Wright consistently and repeatedly explains the passages of Romans in terms of “covenants.” He even introduces “covenant” into his own Bible translations. He translates “righteousness from God (NIV)” into “God’s covenant justice” in Romans 1:17 and other verses.

In fact, we may not need any more examples of this single perspectival reading of the Bible by Wright if we look into its outcome - soteriological construction. In the glossary to his commentary on Romans, most theological concepts are explained in support of the specific theme of the covenant of Israel and God’s faithfulness to Israel. Certainly he demonstrates logical consistency in his reading, but at the expense of a faithful exegesis of the Bible, failing to expound the abundant meanings of the passages. It is strange to see that Wright commits the same error in reading of the Bible after he dismisses the Reformers’ reading as a “typological” reading. There is no essential methodological difference between the two. The point of our critique is that dictating any single perspective upon the biblical exegesis is dangerous and harmful to the exegesis of the Bible. Doing such inevitably demands abstracting the details of the Biblical passages and does injustice to their abundant meanings of the passages.
Wright’s answer to this critique is that his single perspective is different from other “types” or perspectives because it is “historically” correct. Let us quote his statements on his historical method once again:

It is therefore vital that we pay close and strict attention to the actual detail of what the NT says rather than assuming that we have the right to abstract bits and pieces and make them fit quite different scenarios and then be absolutized in their new form. Of course what Paul said in his context needs to be applied in different contexts. That is what Luther and Calvin and the others did, while being very clear that historical exegesis, not allegorical or typological, was the rock bottom of meaning to which appeal had to be made.  

Here Wright defends his single perspective by appealing to historical scholarship. Thus we need to closely examine his second method.

This second method of Wright, namely the historical method, specifically means that his single perspective – the faithfulness of God to the original covenant with Israel – is relevant to Judaism of the 1st century, and thereby relevant to the perspective of Paul himself. He claims that he “knows” Paul’s perspective through the historical studies on 1st century Judaism, and it is Israel’s concern for their covenant status with God and God’s faithfulness to the covenant.

For example, he once wrote, “The fact that the Messiah represents his people, so that what is true of him is true of them, and vice versa is one of the secret springs of all Paul’s thinking.” How does Wright know about Paul’s secret spring of thought? Obviously he found it in the historical scholarship on Paul’s contemporary Judaism. Thus, his theology draws heavily from the works of “the New Perspective on Paul” scholars on the Judaism of the 1st century.

However, the method of historical exegesis has an inherent problem. The huge historical gap between the Biblical era – in this case, the 1st century AD – and the 21st century causes insoluble problems epistemologically and hermeneutically to the researchers. There are issues of source, linguistics, and our own hermeneutic pre-understanding. In spite of these inherent problems, can we truly know what Judaism was at the time? Was there one Judaism, or several Judaisms at the time? Which Judaism was Paul’s own Judaism? Is it justifiable to trace back to Paul’s time through later sources on Judaism? Is our reading of the sources faithful to their original meanings of the ancient languages? All these are parts of the fundamental problems defining the limitedness of any historical inquiry regarding the “historical Jesus,” “historical Paul” and the like. Thus, it is not surprising that several biblical and
historical scholars have pointed out these problems within “the New Perspective on Paul.”

One symbolic example regarding the problem of the historical method is Rudolf Bultmann. Bultmann, the renowned German Biblical historical scholar, gave up the historical inquiry for this very reason: the inherent limitation of the historical method. Apart from the legitimacy of Bultmann’s alternative solution to this problem - turning to the ahistorical Existentialist interpretation of the Bible, Bultmann’s scholarly distrust of “historiography” was for an honest and valid reason. Nevertheless, N. T. Wright criticizes Bultmann and re-endorses the historical inquiry into 1st century Christianity and Judaism. In so doing there is a question he has to answer: “what makes your historical inquiry any better than Bultmann’s?”

Wright’s own defense to this critique is that his historical method is different from the “modernistic” historical inquiry that Bultmann and other modernists performed. In a book on his theological methodology, Wright points out several problems of the modernistic historical method. For example, modern historical research operated within the realm of human reason, and as such, human reason was “the arbiter of which religious and theological claims could be sustained.” In historical biblical scholarship, this attitude resulted in “manifold reductive and skeptical readings which scorned the previously central beliefs of Christians as ‘out of date,’ ‘pre-modern’, etc. – a scorn still often expressed in both popular and scholarly circles, despite the attacks that have increasingly been mounted against the whole Enlightenment project...” Thus, Wright criticizes the rationalistic bias of modern historical scholarship.

Wright mentions another problem of modern historical scholarship: it suggests themes and visions that are not fully biblical. For example, being driven by the “progressive” worldview of modernity, modern historical scholarship offered an optimistic eschatology and a dominantly intellectual solution to the problem of evil in the world. In this theological perspective, the role of Jesus Christ became reduced to a rational, moral instructor. This is an unacceptable reading of the Bible to Wright.

In contrast to modern historical scholarship, Wright suggests a dialogical model of historical scholarship. He observes that any serious reading of the Bible always assumes a certain scholarship background whether implicitly or explicitly. Wright then claims that such scholarship needs to be supplemented by newer scholarship: “Today’s and tomorrow’s will be just the same, of course, but this does not absolve us from constantly trying to do better from the never-ending attempts...”
to understand scripture more fully.” Here Wright suggests that the exegesis of the Bible should be constantly refreshed and supplemented by historical scholarship. He makes it clear that his “new” historical scholarship does not share the modernistic aim for absolute certainty. One section-title in his book shows this modesty clearly: “Historical Exegesis: Still Basic, but No Guarantee of Modernism’s ‘Assured Results’.” Thus, Wright defends his “new” historical method by separating it from the rationalism and universal validity of modern historical scholarship.

Is Wright successful in distinguishing his own historical method from modern historical scholarship, thereby defending it as a legitimate method for biblical exegesis? The answer is “No,” for we still find a problem. The “dialogical” nature of his own method does not allow him to justify his single perspective over the Scriptural exegesis. Wright envisions a mutually supplementing relationship between biblical exegesis and historical scholarship. However, in fact, his biblical exegesis is dominated by his theological perspective, and that perspective is drawn from and driven by the historical scholarship on 1st Century Judaism. This makes his historical and theological method no different than modernistic methods. He may be different in his methodological intention, but in its outcome, he is similar to modern historical scholarship. Even though he says he does not believe in “historical reconstruction,” Wright indeed aims to and claims to have succeeded in reconstructing the theological mind of the Apostle Paul through historical scholarship.

Another critique on Wright’s methodology from a Reformation theological perspective is that his appeal to historical scholarship seems to have lost the essential methodological balance. Of course, it is desirable and beneficial that our reading of the Bible draws from all kinds of sources including historical and critical scholarship. Any sound Evangelical theology would not exclude them in the study of the Bible. However, there is an important question of prioritizing various theological methods. The position of Evangelical theology is that the authority of Scripture supersedes any other authorities such as the church magisterium, human reason, religious experience and, of course, tradition. Wright’s methodology begins from Scriptural authority, but then goes behind Scripture, heading for the authority of reason and tradition. He tends to begin with the exegesis of the biblical text, but then goes behind the Biblical passages to their background histories. He then brings in the background knowledge as a guide for exegesis of the biblical passages, often over-riding the immediate meanings of the biblical passages by the “imported” historical perspective. In other words, Wright gives equal or more priority to the historical method than to the Scriptural exegetical method.
One simple example that demonstrates Wright’s methodological priority is the fact that he always calls Romans “Paul’s” writing. This reveals his assumption that, if one can understand Paul’s mind-set, one can fully comprehend the true messages of the Bible. However, that is not true for most Evangelicals: even if we may possibly access the “back of Paul’s mind,” this does not mean that we can fully comprehend the true messages of the Bible. That is because Evangelical theology holds the Bible as the inspired Word of God through the human writers. The primary author of the Bible is the Spirit of God, and this fact demands Bible readers and researchers to have different attitudes and methods than simply appealing to certain scholarship for a final approval. This is the profession and priority of the Reformers and most Evangelicals. In conclusion, in spite of Wright’s insistence that he remains loyal to the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura*, his method is clearly different from that of the Reformers.

In this section, we have discussed the methodology of Wright and criticized the problems of his twofold methods. In spite of the novelty and the amazing consistency of their applications, Wright’s methods have major problems that not only locate the methods outside the Evangelical methodology, but also subject them to serious questions and critiques. On the one hand, his thematic and theological reading of the Bible from a single perspective seriously mars and overrides faithful exposition of the Bible. On the other hand, his commitment to the historical-critical method begs the question regarding the validity of the historical inquiries into the origin of Christianity and the *de-facto* resemblance between his universal, single perspective with that of modernistic historical scholarship.

**Conclusion**

In this paper we have analyzed the theological perspective and the methodology of N. T. Wright and evaluated them from an Evangelical perspective. Wright singularly focuses on the covenant status of Israel and God’s faithfulness to His covenant with Israel. For Wright this single focus becomes the superlative theological and hermeneutical perspective in expounding Pauline theology and the entire Bible. He justifies this single-perspectival approach by appealing to the authority of the Bible itself and the historical scholarship on 1st century Judaism.

However, his methodology has some serious flaws. On the one hand, faithful biblical exegesis is often overridden and distorted by his preoccupied theological reading of the passages. On the other hand, Wright’s appeal to the historical-critical method subjects his whole theological project to uncertainty and criticism, which demands his further clarification and modification. In addition, he
fails to remain loyal to the Evangelical principle of sola scriptura by prioritizing the background knowledge of 1st century Judaism.

Therefore, it is the author’s suggestion that Wright’s historical and theological perspective be fully appreciated and accepted as a guide to read the Scriptures without making itself an exclusive perspective. This is what his non-modernistic position calls for, and how we remain truly open to the abundant messages of the Scriptures.

End Notes

1. This article was made possible through a generous grant from Seoul Theological University during my research year at Asbury Theological Seminary in 2015.


6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.


10. In fact, Wright once served as canon theologian at Westminster Abbey between 200-2003.

11. For example, see the Glossary in N. T. Wright, Paul for Everyone Romans: Part One (Louisville: WJK, 2004), 145-161.


14 Ibid. Parenthesized words are original.

15 Ibid.


25 Wright clarifies that he has reached this perspective in his own in his reading of Romans and other Pauline gospels. Then he found a similar conclusion in the work of E. P. Sanders and others. Thus, Wright does not mind being called a member of the “New Perspective on Paul” school, but also maintains his own perspective within this school.


27 When he was a student, he read the Bible in the doctrinal frame of reference. He published a book with other students titled The Grace of God in the Gospel. In the book, he tried to present biblical reference to the five points of Calvinism. However, he gave up this method afterwards. Alastair Roberts, “N.T. Wright: A Biography,” accessed September 26, 2015. http://alastair.adversaria.co.uk/?p=371


35 Ibid.


37 For example, there are two books that collect several scholarly articles addressing these issues and other problems of the historical research on the 1st century Judaism by the same editors: D. A. Carson, Peter T. O’Brien and Mark A. Seifried ed. *Justification and Variegated Nomism: The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism*, (Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 2004); *Justification and Variegated Nomism: The Paradoxes of Paul* (Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 2004).

38 *Scripture and the Authority of God* (San Francisco: Harper One, 2011), 84. In fact, Wright distances his position from both modernism and postmodernism.

39 Ibid. 87.

40 Ibid. 89.

41 Ibid. 92.

42 Ibid. 94.

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