

HISTORY AND THE VICTORY OF GOD: THE CONTRIBUTION OF N. T. WRIGHT
TO THE STUDY OF THE HISTORICAL JESUS

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ABSTRACT

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N. T. Wright's *Christian Origins and the Question of God* series is a landmark in New Testament scholarship not only for the ambitious scope and comprehensive nature of its inquiry but also its thorough articulation of historical method. The purpose of this thesis is to summarize and evaluate N. T. Wright's influential historical method for studying Jesus of Nazareth. Chapter 1 introduces the need for and approach of this study, suggesting that Wright's holistic historical method offers a means of breaking the impasse of current historical Jesus scholarship. Chapter 2 analyzes the elements of Wright's historical method, demonstrating that Wright uses a story-based critical realism to integrate the study of history with the study of literature and theology. Chapter 3 evaluates Wright's method, examining three major objections that critics have raised in response to the historical method presented in the first volumes of Wright's *Christian Origins* series. Specifically, the issues of holism and narrativity, the relative valuation of the sources, and the role of theology will be discussed, with the goal of surfacing ways in which Wright's historical method can be improved. Proposed improvements, summarized at the end of chapter 3, include limiting the scope of the hypothesis, proceeding from the narrative context of the data, accounting for the transmission process, and utilizing the church's theological heritage. Yet perhaps the real significance of Wright's laudatory, if imperfect, historical method is that it raises questions of historiography to the center of the discussion in historical Jesus studies where they belong.

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	<i>A New Paradigm? Theological Interpretation</i>	
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ABBREVIATIONS

<i>CT</i>	<i>Christianity Today</i>
<i>DTIB</i>	<i>Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible</i> , ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005)
<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JETS</i>	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
<i>JSHJ</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus</i>
<i>JSNT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
<i>JSNTSup</i>	Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplement Series
<i>JTI</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Interpretation</i>
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
<i>JVG</i>	N. T. Wright, <i>Jesus and the Victory of God</i> , vol. 2 of <i>Christian Origins and the Question of God</i> (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996)
<i>NovT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
<i>NTPG</i>	N. T. Wright, <i>The New Testament and the People of God</i> , vol. 1 of <i>Christian Origins and the Question of God</i> (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992)
<i>NTTS</i>	New Testament Tools and Studies
<i>PTMS</i>	Princeton Theological Monograph Series
<i>RSG</i>	N. T. Wright, <i>The Resurrection of the Son of God</i> , vol. 3 of

Christian Origins and the Question of God (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003)

SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
SBLRBS	Society of Biblical Literature Resources for Biblical Study
SBT	Studies in Biblical Theology
SBTS	Sources for Biblical and Theological Study
<i>SJT</i>	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
STI	Studies in Theological Interpretation
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Need for This Study

The so-called “Quest for the Historical Jesus” aims at studying “the Jesus whom we can recover, recapture, or reconstruct by using the scientific tools of modern historical research.”¹ The Quest has proceeded in light of the problem that we have only fragmentary, incomplete, and at times contradictory knowledge of Jesus of Nazareth.² The goal of the Quest, therefore, is to find the historically-validated “reliable data” concerning this Jesus.³

Yet within this Quest there is a much-bemoaned state of affairs (indeed, a crisis): the continued diversity of scholarly portraits of Jesus, often radically at odds with or in outright contradiction to one another, has made the field of historical Jesus research “something of a scholarly bad joke.”⁴ The failure of the Quest to come to any firm

¹ John P. Meier, *Origins of the Problem and the Person*, vol. 1 of *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 1. This definition is not without debate, but it does emphasize the distinctively *historical* focus of this research.

² Besides the four canonical Gospels, there are also non-canonical gospels, *agrapha*, and non-Christian literary sources that reference Jesus. Furthermore, there are innumerable other sources that can inform the study of Jesus by way of background and context. For a brief overview of these sources, see Darrell L. Bock, *Studying the Historical Jesus: A Guide to Sources and Methods* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 13-41, 45-63.

³ Meier, *Origins*, 10.

⁴ John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), xxvii.

conclusions about the historical Jesus is a “rather devastating fact” facing the field.⁵ Not surprisingly, this has led some scholars to give up on the entire enterprise.⁶

There are, however, at least three reasons for taking up this historical task. First, Christianity makes its claims with explicit reference to certain historical events, namely the life, death, and resurrection of one Jesus of Nazareth in first-century Palestine. “Christianity appeals to history; to history it must go.”⁷ Second, from a Christian perspective, the fact of God entering into the space-time universe via the incarnation makes historical investigation not only possible but necessary. Writes G. B. Caird, “Anyone who believes that in the life and teaching of Christ God has given a unique revelation of his character and purpose is committed by this belief, whether he likes it or not, to the quest of the historical Jesus.”⁸ Third, the world has seen the results of an ahistoricized Jesus; stripped from his historical context, Jesus can be made to serve any agenda, good or ill.⁹ Simply put, “The Christian stake in history is immense.”¹⁰

Thus, despite the difficulties inherent in the Quest for the Historical Jesus, the task is nevertheless an essential one. Jesus scholars are increasingly convinced that there is in fact a way forward in this discipline, but it will require a better methodology for

⁵ James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, vol. 1 of *Christianity in the Making* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 97. Cf. Dale C. Allison, *The Historical Christ and the Theological Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 6-30.

⁶ E.g., Joel Willitts, “Presuppositions and Procedures in the Study of the ‘Historical Jesus’: Or, Why I Decided Not to be a ‘Historical Jesus’ Scholar,” *JSHJ* 3 (2005): 61-108; Scot McKnight, “The Jesus We’ll Never Know,” *CT*, April 2010.

⁷ *JVG*, 11.

⁸ G. B. Caird, *Jesus and the Jewish Nation* (Ethel M. Wood Lecture, 9 March 1965; London: Athlone, 1965), 3; reprinted in *The Historical Jesus in Recent Research*, ed. James D. G. Dunn and Scot McKnight, SBTS 10 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 275.

⁹ As noted, for instance, in the aftermath of World War II by the German scholar Ernst Käsemann, “The Problem of the Historical Jesus,” in *Essays on New Testament Themes*, SBT (Naperville, IL: Alec R. Allenson, 1964), 15-47.

¹⁰ Mark A. Noll, “History,” in *DTIB*, 295.

such research. Indeed, “The problem of multiple and discordant conclusions forces us back to questions of theory and method.”¹¹ One recent commentator has aptly summarized the problem facing the discipline:

It will not do for us to compare contemporary portraits of Jesus if fundamentally different means were used to arrive at those portraits. Comparisons and contrasts on the former level will result in the portraits talking past one another, for one portrait can criticize another as historically illegitimate only on the basis of some criteria of historical legitimacy. Such criteria are found, in critical history, in the means by which the historian claims to investigate the historical object.¹²

In other words, the way forward in the Quest for the Historical Jesus is not another portrait of Jesus but a better historical method for doing Jesus research.¹³ Perhaps the most influential and widely discussed attempt to take up this challenge has been undertaken by N. T. Wright, the former Bishop of Durham and now Research Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity at the University of St. Andrews, in his landmark multi-volume series *Christian Origins and the Question of God*. Wright devotes the entire first volume (*The New Testament and The People of God*, 1992) and portions of the second (*Jesus and the Victory of God*, 1996) and third (*The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 2003) to explicitly laying out his methodology. While the results of Wright’s work have been among the most influential contributions to New Testament scholarship in this generation, his methodology “seems to be almost as important as – if

¹¹ Crossan, *Jesus*, xxviii.

¹² Donald L. Denton, Jr, *Historiography and Hermeneutics in Jesus Studies: An Examination of the Work of John Dominic Crossan and Ben F. Meyer*, JSNTSup 262 (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 7.

¹³ By “historical method,” I mean “the set of theories, philosophical presuppositions, and generally accepted techniques upon which a scholar relies when interpreting a text or pursuing study of an individual or event from the past.” So Beth M. Sheppard, *The Craft of History and the Study of the New Testament*, SBLRBS 60 (Atlanta: SBL, 2012), 3.

not more important than – its critical results.”¹⁴ It is therefore Wright’s historical methodology, and not his actual portrait of Jesus, that will be the subject of this thesis.

The Approach of This Study

This thesis seeks to summarize and evaluate N. T. Wright’s historical method. Chapter 2 examines the elements of Wright’s historical method, describing his critical-realist epistemology and the various components of his narrative-based historiography. Chapter 3 evaluates Wright’s method, focusing on three of the most significant challenges critics have brought against it and suggesting how Wright’s method could be further refined in light of this evaluation and recent trends in New Testament scholarship.

In terms of the key distinctives that this thesis will trace, Wright’s historical method can best be described as a holistic approach that integrates the study of history, theology, and literature through the use of story and worldview analysis to produce a grand hypothesis subject to critical verification. In Wright’s words, “the real task, still awaiting all students of Jesus, is that of major hypothesis and serious verification, not pseudo-atomistic work on apparently isolated fragments.”¹⁵ According to Wright, good historical method offers “fully blown hypotheses that [make] a fair amount of sense within first-century Judaism, rather than the bits-and-pieces reconstruction based on a small collection of supposedly authentic but isolated sayings.”¹⁶ The resulting hypothesis, as will be seen, must be tested for its simplicity, inclusion of the data, and ability to shed light elsewhere.¹⁷ As Wright’s polemical language indicates, his holistic approach to

¹⁴ Nicholas Perrin, “Jesus’ Eschatology and Kingdom Ethics: Ever the Twain Shall Meet,” in *Jesus, Paul and the People of God: A Theological Dialogue with N. T. Wright*, ed. Nicholas Perrin and Richard B. Hays (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 97.

¹⁵ *JVG*, 33.

¹⁶ N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 29.

¹⁷ *JVG*, 133.

historiography distinguishes him from the vast majority of historical Jesus scholars, and it will be the task of this thesis to examine it in detail. In the following pages, this approach will be carefully unpacked, submitted to critical scrutiny, and modified for further usefulness.

CHAPTER 2

THE ELEMENTS OF WRIGHT'S HISTORICAL METHOD

As noted above, Wright takes a holistic, “top-down” approach to studying the historical Jesus. Within this framework, Wright further distinguishes his historical method by insisting on the integration of traditional historical investigation with the study of literature and theology. “The study of Jesus,” Wright contends, “is first and foremost a matter of history, needing careful ancillary use of literary study of the texts and theological study of implications.”¹ Thus, in contrast to those who attempt to isolate history from these other fields, Wright argues that “history cannot exist by itself”; rather, “it points beyond” to these other subject matters.²

Specifically, Wright proposes a “creative synthesis” of the three disciplines, featuring serious historical investigation, careful attention to the normative role of theology, and an appropriation of postmodernism’s attention to a text and its readers.³ This task, however, is complicated by the breakdown of the empiricist epistemology that has characterized Western philosophy since the Enlightenment. In light of this fact, Wright proposes a form of epistemology known as *critical realism* to undergird his inquiry across these three disciplines. As will be seen below, critical realism is an attempt to account for both the subjective and objective components inherent in human knowing.

¹ *NTPG*, 14.

² *NTPG*, 3-28, 81. Conversely, many redaction critics have approached the Gospels by pitting theology against history, whereas many literary critics have excluded historical questions from their study of the Gospels as literature. Cf. *RSG*, 5.

³ *NTPG*, 26-28.

While critical realism is not unique to Wright, his unique spin on this epistemology comes through his insistence that it is *story* that “can help us in the first instance to articulate a critical-realist epistemology, and can be put to wider uses in the study of literature, history, and theology.”⁴ In other words, critical realism, grounded in the idea of story, provides a solution to the “problem of knowledge in each of these disciplines, allowing for meaningful historical investigation into Jesus and Christian origins.”⁵

This chapter examines the critical realism that is the foundation of Wright’s epistemology and then the application of this epistemology to the fields of study that undergird his investigation into the historical Jesus. Of necessity, each of these sections will be limited to an overview of the ideas from which Wright draws inspiration and the ways in which he has developed them to make a unique contribution to the study of Jesus and Christian origins.

Critical Realism

Our examination of the foundation of Wright’s historical method begins with his answer to the question of how people know things. Tangential though this subject may first appear, it is crucial to note that “the quest of the historical Jesus records the changes of religious horizon effected by the evolution of modern European philosophy and specifically of the philosophy of knowledge.”⁶ With this in mind, then, we turn to epistemology. As noted above, Wright defends an epistemological theory known as

⁴ *NTPG*, 32.

⁵ *NTPG*, 31.

⁶ Ben F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1979), 54.

critical realism.⁷ Wright argues that critical realism can best be understood by contrasting it with empiricism, the dominant epistemology in the West since the Enlightenment.

Empiricism stresses the role of sensory experience as the exclusive or dominant means of attaining knowledge. Wright distinguishes between two empiricist positions which he labels “the optimistic and pessimistic versions of the Enlightenment epistemological project.”⁸ On the one hand, there is optimistic *positivism*, which holds that definite knowledge and objective truth can be attained through empirical methods. The scientific method is a good example of this. On the other hand, pessimistic *phenomenalism* insists that one can only be sure of one’s own sense-data; external objects of knowledge are thus truly unknowable. Both emphasize that true knowledge of reality occurs through sense-data. But what of “knowledge” in the realms of economics, politics, or theology? To what extent can this knowledge be “real”? And how sure are we that what we observe with our senses is in fact true knowledge, untainted by our own biases, presuppositions, and worldview?

Following Ben Meyer, whose *Aims of Jesus* (1972) represented the first attempt to apply the insights of critical realism to the New Testament, Wright’s critical realism proposes a *via media* that accounts for both the objective and subjective features of knowledge.⁹ As Wright describes:

[Critical realism] is a way of describing the process of ‘knowing’ that acknowledges the *reality of the thing known, as something other than the knower*

⁷ The initial formulation of the basic principles of critical realism is attributed to the Jesuit philosopher Bernard J. F. Lonergan, particularly his *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1958) and *Method in Theology*, 2nd ed. (New York: Herder & Herder, 1973).

⁸ *NTPG*, 32.

⁹ For Wright’s acknowledgment of his indebtedness to Meyer, see N. T. Wright, “Whence and Whither Historical Jesus Studies in the Life of the Church?” in *Jesus, Paul, and the People of God: A Theological Dialogue with N. T. Wright*, ed. Nicholas Perrin and Richard B. Hays (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 123. See further Ben F. Meyer, *Critical Realism and the New Testament*, PTMS 17 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 1989); and idem, *Reality and Illusion in New Testament Scholarship: A Primer in Critical Realist Hermeneutics* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994).

(hence ‘realism’), while also fully acknowledging that the only access we have to this reality lies along the spiralling path of *appropriate dialogue or conversation between the knower and the thing known* (hence ‘critical’). This path leads to critical reflection on the products of our own enquiry into ‘reality’, so that our assertions about ‘reality’ acknowledge their own provisionality. Knowledge, in other words, although in principle concerning realities independent of the knower, is never itself independent of the knower.¹⁰

This description captures the three major features of critical realism. These include “ontological realism” (the Object is real and exists outside of the Subject), “epistemological relativism” (the Subject cannot observe the Object apart from his own point of view) and “judgmental rationality” (the Subject can nevertheless overcome his relative perspective and critically engage with the Object).¹¹

Within this dynamic interplay of subject and object, Wright’s critical realism insists that there is a sense in which one can accurately come to true knowledge by means of a process of hypothesis and verification. This form of hypothesis and verification is different from the positivistic model which claims to construct and verify hypotheses solely from an objective, “bottom-up” study of sensory evidence, as it instead sees “story” as the framework within which the critical-realist process of hypothesis and verification takes place. For Wright,

Instead of working from the particulars of observation, or ‘sense-data’, to confident statements about external reality, positivistically conceived, critical realism (as I am proposing it) sees knowledge of particulars as taking place within the larger framework of the story or worldview which forms the basis of the observer’s way of being in relation to the world. [...] Knowledge takes place, within this model, when people *find things that fit* within the particular story or (more likely) stories to which they are accustomed to give allegiance.¹²

¹⁰ *NTPG*, 35 (italics original).

¹¹ Robert L. Webb, “The Historical Enterprise and Historical Jesus Research,” in *Key Events in the Life of the Historical Jesus: A Collaborative Exploration of Context and Coherence*, ed. Darrell L. Bock and Robert L. Webb (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 29. These terms appear to be derived from Margaret Archer, et al., *Critical Realism: Essential Readings* (London: Routledge, 1998), xi.

¹² *NTPG*, 37 (italics original).

In other words, knowledge consists of “the claim that the story we are now telling about the world as a whole makes more sense, in its outline and detail, than other potential or actual stories that may be on offer.”¹³ The process is as follows: when a critical realist is confronted with new facts or data, he advances a hypothesis that seeks to explain them. This hypothesis, Wright claims, is really nothing more than an explanatory story grounded within a larger story or worldview by which a person understands the world. The hypothesis is said to be “verified” if it includes all the relevant data, is clear and simple, and has explanatory power in related areas.¹⁴ A hypothesis-story is affirmed provisionally, so long as it is the best explanation for the data at hand. When a story cannot account for some event or phenomenon, or comes into contact with another, different story, it generates alternative hypotheses in the forms of stories that may confirm, modify, subvert, or challenge the original story.¹⁵

Wright’s key presupposition is that human knowing is essentially “storied”; that is, “all knowledge of realities external to oneself takes place within the framework of a worldview, of which stories form an essential part.”¹⁶ Here Wright is indebted to the work of the Scottish philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, particularly in regards to his conception of life as enacted narrative. MacIntyre argues that “man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal.”¹⁷ According to MacIntyre, people understand themselves as subjects of a narrative that runs from their birth to death. This narrative gives purpose and direction to life, as well as a context of

¹³ *NTPG*, 42.

¹⁴ *NTPG*, 42.

¹⁵ *NTPG*, 40.

¹⁶ *NTPG*, 45.

¹⁷ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 216.

meaning for individual actions and events. Thus, “It is because we all live out narratives in our lives and because we understand our own lives in terms of the narratives that we live out that the form of narrative is appropriate for understanding the actions of others.”¹⁸ Wright, following MacIntyre, insists that human life is “grounded in and constituted by the implicit or explicit stories which humans tell themselves and one another.”¹⁹ These stories contribute to the worldview by which people experience, perceive, and relate to the world, as well as make sense of reality. As such, the mechanism by which hypotheses are formulated and verified is the worldview by which a person makes sense of life, precisely because all of reality is filtered through the lens of a worldview.

This critical realist account of human knowledge, which accounts for both the subjective and objective elements of human knowledge by means of the storied nature of human existence and knowing, thus proceeds from the notion of story. Wright applies this general theory of knowledge to the relevant areas of inquiry for studying the historical Jesus: literature, history, and theology.

Literature

Of the three disciplines that together shape Wright’s investigation into the first century, literature is the first to which he applies the insights of critical realism. With the exception of occasional archaeological discoveries, we are reminded that “the study of early Christianity, of Jesus and Paul, and especially of the theology of the whole movement and of individuals within it, is conducted by means of the study of literature.”²⁰ This corpus of literature includes not just the writings of the New Testament, but extra-canonical works such as the *Gospel of Thomas* and the writings of Second Temple

¹⁸ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 212.

¹⁹ *NTPG*, 38.

²⁰ *NTPG*, 47.

Judaism. This task is complicated by the advances in literary theory over the last century which have reconceived of the workings of the reading process.²¹ At the center, however, remains the question of knowledge, in this case applied to knowledge that comes from the act of reading.

Corresponding to the broader accounts of knowledge described above, different epistemological systems relate reader, text, author, and reality in different ways. On the one hand, positivism claims that the reader is an unbiased interpreter who has direct, objective access to the one “right” or “true” meaning of the text through scientific application of the laws of exegesis. But the sheer number of disparate, “objective” readings of any text is enough to cast doubt on the positivist enterprise; clearly, subjective factors involved in reading must be taken into account.²² On the other hand, phenomenologists hold that a text might contain an infinite number of “true” readings that happen when unique readers encounter a text. The only thing the reader can know for sure is how he or she responds to the text. The subsequent downside of such a view is that the text ceases to be normative or “publicly relevant.”²³ Literary evidence ceases to be useful in the historical enterprise.

Over and against these models, the critical realist account of reading takes into account both objective and subjective elements through the model of the “hermeneutical spiral,” which reflects the complex relationship between the text and reader. It is indeed inevitable that the interpreter will come to a text with preconceptions; what matters, however, is the nature of these preconceptions. While bad preconceptions involve reading one’s own opinions and notions into the text, good ones are the result of the hard work

²¹ For a comprehensive introduction to the discipline of hermeneutics, with special reference to biblical studies, see Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

²² *NTPG*, 66.

²³ *NTPG*, 66.

involved in understanding the world of the text, the author, and oneself. These tools allow the interpreter to form hypotheses, from which she can make a judgment as to which one best captures the intended sense of the text. The interpreter must work hard at getting to know the world of the text and the text itself.²⁴ Wright describes this as a “hermeneutic of love,” in which there is a conversation between reader and text, such that “through patient listening, real understanding (and real access to external reality) is actually possible and attainable.”²⁵ Thus, critical realism holds that while the subjective dimensions of reading can never be fully overcome, a text does in fact have an intended meaning that can be communicated to the reader.²⁶

Wright's contribution to this discussion is again with reference to story. Wright's critical realist account of reading “locates the entire phenomenon of text-reading within an account of the storied and relational nature of human consciousness.”²⁷ While agreeing with Meyer that all writing carries with it meaning, Wright insists that this meaning is essentially storied, reflecting his view of the storied nature of human knowing and existence. For Wright, “human writing is best conceived as the articulation of worldviews, or, better still, *the telling of stories which bring worldviews into articulation*.”²⁸ While this is obvious in some forms of writing, such as a novel or parable, this holds true even in other forms; Wright gives the examples of a love letter, which tells a story about what it means to be human, and of a science textbook, which tells the story of an ordered, understandable world. When a reader, who approaches a text in light of her

²⁴ NTPG, 64.

²⁵ NTPG, 64.

²⁶ NTPG, 62. For more on these issues, see Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006).

²⁷ NTPG, 61.

²⁸ NTPG, 65 (italics original).

own stories and worldview, encounters the stories and worldview of the text, it results in a reaffirmation, modification, or subversion of her understanding of the world and reality.²⁹ “Stories, both in the shape and in the manner of their telling, are the crucial agents that invest ‘events’ with ‘meaning’.”³⁰ That is to say, the way in which material is selected, arranged, and described imbues meaning to that material.

Proceeding from that conclusion, Wright argues that the task of literary criticism is “to lay bare, and explicate, what the writer has achieved at this level of implied narration, and ultimately implied worldview, and how.”³¹ To accomplish this, the critical realist reader must pay close attention to the narrative structure of stories. Wright acknowledges his debt to A. J. Griemas and Vladimir Propp; while he rejects the structuralist theory of Griemas in its entirety, he maintains that a “cautious use of Griemas-like narrative analysis” within the bounds of critical realism can shed light on how narratives work.³² At the heart of Griemas’ scheme is the identification of three sequences (initial, topical, and final), each of which features many of the essential elements of story (sender, object, receiver, agent, helper, and opponent). Wright believes that applying Griemas’ insights will cause the interpreter to slow down and pay careful attention to how the stories are functioning at each stage.³³

This approach is particularly helpful to the study of Jesus and the New Testament, Wright contends, because the literature produced by Second Temple Jews and early Christians demonstrates that both groups saw their lives, both individually and

²⁹ *NTPG*, 67.

³⁰ *NTPG*, 79.

³¹ *NTPG*, 65.

³² *NTPG*, 70. Cf. Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 486-94.

³³ *NTPG*, 70.

collectively, as essentially storied.³⁴ To the extent that these stories claimed roots in real historical events, we must now turn to the critical realist account of history.

History

Thus we come to the intersection of critical realism and the study of history, which Wright defines as “*the meaningful narrative of events and intentions*.”³⁵ History is, of course, at the center of investigation into the historical Jesus and therefore worthy of special attention, yet one must not forget Wright’s insistence that history be integrated with theology and literature, for “history cannot exist by itself.”³⁶

Historical knowledge, Wright posits, is a form of knowledge in general and therefore can be studied using the insights of critical realism. The historian is neither an unbiased observer with direct, objective access to the “bare facts” of history, nor is he merely speaking of himself, with his work in selecting and arranging historical data capable of being reduced to his own perspective or point of view.³⁷ Instead, critical realism argues that true historical knowledge is indeed possible, even if there is no such thing as “non-interpreted” historical data, such that history is always presented through a certain lens or point of view. Just as a good interpreter of a text is aware of the subjective lenses with which he works, so also the good historian is aware of the spiral between himself and the source material.³⁸

³⁴ Cf. *NTPG*, parts 3 and 4, on Judaism and early Christianity, respectively.

³⁵ *NTPG*, 82 (italics original). Cf. *RSG*, 12-14 on various understandings of “history.”

³⁶ *NTPG*, 81.

³⁷ For more on historical positivism (“historicism”), see Beth M. Sheppard, *The Craft of History and the Study of the New Testament*, SBLRBS 60 (Atlanta: SBL, 2012), 120-30. For the postmodern, phenomenalist approach to history, see *ibid.*, 164-9.

³⁸ *NTPG*, 86-88. See also Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 38-62.

Having argued that historical knowledge is attainable, we now turn to special topics related to this process of interpretation within the study of history. We examine, first, the historian's task of narrating events as seen from the "inside," and, second, the historian's method of hypothesis and verification.

Task: Meaningful Narrative of Human Intentionality

Wright's account of the task of history is indebted to the Oxford philosopher-historian R. G. Collingwood. The chief contribution of Collingwood to the philosophy of history is his emphasis on the "inside" of an event as the goal of historical inquiry.³⁹ The historian, Collingwood argues, must go beyond the study of the "outside" of an event (that is, the "mere facts" which we have demonstrated are in fact an illusion) to discerning the thoughts and motivations of historical actors. Events, therefore, are important only insofar as they reveal human intentionality; the *why* is just as important as the *what*. As an example, Collingwood suggests that the historian should not be content with saying that Caesar crossed the Rubicon at a certain date; rather, he should note that this event signified Caesar's challenge to Republican law. As he writes of the historian, "His work may begin by discovering the outside of an event, but it can never end there; he must always remember that the event was an action, and that his main task is to think himself into the action, to discern the thought of its agent."⁴⁰ In so doing, the historian is distinct from the scientist: the latter seeks to explain events by the fixed laws of nature, while the former does so by examining the unique intentionality of historical characters.⁴¹

³⁹ *NTPG*, 109. Meyer's work was also distinguished by its reliance on Collingwood, a debt which Wright acknowledges (*ibid.*, 109 n. 55).

⁴⁰ R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 213. As Meyer, *Critical Realism*, 167 puts it, understanding the "inside" of an event means "to grasp it as motivated in some way, moving in some direction, significant in some context." Cf. Licona, *Resurrection*, 106.

⁴¹ Collingwood, *History*, 214; Meyer, *Critical Realism*, 148.

The historian, therefore, must strive to put himself in the mind of the historical actor. This is not, however, an exercise in psychoanalysis but in fact an application of critical reasoning and intensive study. As Collingwood writes, “It is not a passive surrender to the spell of another's mind; it is a labour of active and therefore critical thinking.”⁴² Given that human action is often the result of conscious intentionality, we can agree with Meyer that events in the form of human actions reveal internal intentions that can be grasped by the “rational consciousness” of the historian.⁴³ Events do not happen randomly, according to this view, but as the result of human intentionality. Actions thus have a symbolic meaning, a “pragmatic effect,” which is properly within the scope of historical inquiry.⁴⁴ The task of historical interpretation, therefore, is nothing short of “the discovery of what historical agents really intended and the effective mediation of this discovery to a given audience.”⁴⁵

Wright, following Aristotle, divides human intentionality into three levels: aims, intentions, and motivations.⁴⁶ The broadest of these is the *aim*, which represents the overarching direction or purpose of one's life. More specific is the *intention*, which applies the aim to a given problem or situation. The narrowest is the *motivation*, which represents a specific, concrete action or group of actions. This approach to history works not only for the study of individuals but also societies, which express their worldviews by means of their symbols, characteristic behaviors, and literature.⁴⁷ In both circumstances, it

⁴² Collingwood, *History*, 215.

⁴³ Meyer, *Aims*, 79.

⁴⁴ Meyer, *Critical Realism*, 167.

⁴⁵ Meyer, *Aims*, 77.

⁴⁶ *NTPG*, 110.

⁴⁷ *NTPG*, 112.

is both possible and desirable to discover the “inside” of events through a study of human intentionality.

The next step in the historical task is to integrate a series of such events into a single narrative. Thus, “the historian's job is to show their interconnectedness, that is, how one thing follows from another, precisely by examining the ‘inside’ of the events.”⁴⁸ The historian, in other words, is telling an explanatory story. Real history, according to Wright, is “a harmonious account of the whole,” that is, “a narrative, a story, in which the data are contained, for the most part, within a comparatively simple scheme, which contributes substantially to our knowledge of events in other areas as well.”⁴⁹ In other words, this story is subject to the process of hypothesis and verification: the best historical story is the one that contains the data, is simple, and has explanatory power. Given the centrality of this method in Wright's program, we conclude this section with a closer look at how it proceeds specifically within the realm of historical investigation.

Method: Hypothesis and Verification

A hypothesis is “a construct, thought up by a human mind, which offers itself as a story about a particular set of phenomena, in which the story, which is bound to be an interpretation of those phenomena, also offers an *explanation* of them.”⁵⁰ Wright

⁴⁸ *NTPG*, 113.

⁴⁹ *NTPG*, 114. Similarly, Sheppard, *Craft*, 16 defines history as “creating from the available information a plausible narrative synthesis that includes an explanation and analysis of the subject being studied.” To reject Wright’s method at this point is to reject the very foundation of the discipline of history. For a recent study of human memory and how it becomes “narrativized” from the beginning, forming a bridge to a narrativized history, see Samuel Byrskog, *Story as History – History as Story: The Gospel Tradition in the Context of Ancient Oral History* (WUNT 123; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000).

⁵⁰ *NTPG*, 99.

identifies three characteristics of a good hypothesis: it must (1) include all the data; (2) be simple and coherent; and (3) have explanatory power.⁵¹

First, a good hypothesis must include all of the data. The vast amount of data available to Jesus scholars makes this an incredibly challenging task, as it is often easier or more convenient to focus on one subset of the evidence (e.g., from the Greco-Roman world) at the expense of the whole. Ancient sources are also, of course, selective, and they often take knowledge of certain things for granted. In this sense, historians are “like paleontologists struggling to piece together a set of bones which a dinosaur had used all its life without even thinking about it.”⁵² Data are thus the prerequisite for formulating questions and hypotheses concerning historical events.⁵³

Second, a hypothesis must be essentially simple. In effect, this follows Occam’s Razor, which states that the hypothesis that makes the fewest assumptions is best. Wright contends that the first two of these war against one another in Jesus studies, with one usually winning out over the other. In liberal circles, much of the extant data is dismissed by using various “criteria” drawn from a particular historical interpretation; among conservatives, all the biblical data is included at the expense of a clear, comprehensive picture of Jesus’ life and ministry.⁵⁴ Wright also emphasizes consistency of character (the “*continuity of the person*”) as a key feature of a simple hypothesis.⁵⁵ The underlying rationale holds that people normally behave and act in intelligible, consistent

⁵¹ *NTPG*, 99-101. Licona, *Resurrection*, 109-11, includes a similar list of criteria for validating a historical hypothesis: explanatory scope, explanatory power, plausibility, less ad hoc, and illumination.

⁵² *NTPG*, 101.

⁵³ Meyer, *Aims*, 88.

⁵⁴ *NTPG*, 100.

⁵⁵ *NTPG*, 107 (*italics original*).

manners, pursuing the aims, intentions, and motivations that give us access to the “inside” of events.

The third requirement comes into play when multiple hypotheses have been advanced that satisfy the first two requirements. The best hypothesis is the one that also has explanatory power; that is, it helps to explain other, related problems.⁵⁶ Regarding the study of Jesus, this means that the hypothesis must illuminate our knowledge of the rest of the first century, Second Temple Judaism, Paul, and the early church.

The process of validation involves choosing between competing hypotheses which meet, to varying extents, the requirements described above. As noted above, the primary two criteria (the inclusion of data and simplicity) are in tension with one another: is it better to choose the hypothesis that has all the data but is very complex, or the hypothesis that is simple but omits some of the data? Wright argues for the former, on account of the complex, “unruly” nature of human history; “though there will be an eventual or ultimate simplicity about a good historical hypothesis, and though one should not rest content with odd complexities, inclusion of data is ultimately the more important of the first two criteria.”⁵⁷

As noted earlier, this insistence on including the majority of data (and its corollary, the reluctance to form initial presuppositions regarding its historicity) is a distinctive feature of Meyer and Wright compared to other historical Jesus scholars, who come to the table with the assumption “that we know, *more or less*, what Jesus’ life, ministry and self-understanding were like, and that they were *unlike* the picture we find in the gospels.”⁵⁸ Wright, however, insists that we take the evidence (that is, the Gospels) at face value unless there are convincing external reasons to think otherwise, and even

⁵⁶ *NTPG*, 100.

⁵⁷ *NTPG*, 105.

⁵⁸ *NTPG*, 106 (*italics original*).

then this should be an exceptional circumstance.⁵⁹ This is entirely consistent with the epistemology of critical realism, which maintains that “the control of the data does not take place at the outset as a first but final acquisition.”⁶⁰ As such, the critical historian is indeed obligated to carefully weigh the integrity and usefulness of her sources, but these judgments about the reliability and usefulness of data should not be made at the outset of the historical process.

To put it another way, decisions about sources can only be made after the historian has told a story of the past *that meet the criteria of a good hypothesis*.⁶¹ Wright would no doubt agree, as would Crossan and Meier, with Collingwood’s statement that it is “the historian’s picture of the past, the product of his own *a priori* imagination, that has to justify the sources used in its construction.”⁶² The difference, however, is that Wright insists that the historian’s account of the past must meet the criteria of a good hypothesis, which have been described above. An *a priori* decision to exclude vast swaths of what little evidence we do have for the life of Jesus is simply bad historical method. History, then, like a novel, is “self-explanatory” and “self-justifying.”⁶³ The proof of any given historical hypothesis is indeed in the pudding; that is, “its vindication will come, like that of all hypotheses, in its inclusion of the data without distortion; in its essential simplicity of line; and in its ability to shed light elsewhere.”⁶⁴

⁵⁹ *NTPG*, 107. Wright gives Fee’s argument against the authenticity of 1 Cor 14:34-35 as a “good example” of a case being made outside of the text itself for its non-originality (*ibid.*, 107 n. 48). While outside of the Gospels, this is nevertheless one of several examples of Christian texts that were expanded over the course of the transmission process. See below on Wright’s use of the Gospels.

⁶⁰ Meyer, *Aims*, 80.

⁶¹ *JVG*, 43, 79.

⁶² Collingwood, *History*, 245.

⁶³ Collingwood, *History*, 245-6.

⁶⁴ *JVG*, 133.

In conclusion, we have seen that Wright views history as “the advancement of serious historical hypotheses – that is, the telling of large-scale narratives – about Jesus himself, and the examination of the *prima facie* relevant data to see how they fit.”⁶⁵ Turning to the study of Jesus and Christian origins, we quickly discover that the aims, intentions, and motivations of the historical actors, not to mention the worldviews of Judaism and Christianity as a whole, are related to ideas and stories about God. This brings us to the final element of Wright’s historical method: theology.

Theology

Finally, Wright turns to the nature of theology, which purports to speak truly of realities and causation beyond our space-time universe. If integrating the study of literature with the study of history is relatively uncontroversial, including theology within historical work generates a great deal of problems and controversy. As Robert Webb notes, “questions concerning history become more complex when descriptions of divine intervention in human events are used as a causal explanation.”⁶⁶ Traditionally, many historians of Christian origins have rejected divine causation in line with their own ontological naturalistic worldviews. Recently, however, some historians have proposed a “methodological naturalism” that brackets out the discussion of divine intervention from the historical discussion by setting “narrow and specific limits” to what history entails (that is, cause and effect within the closed continuum of the physical, space-time universe) without making an ontological judgment on the existence of the supernatural.⁶⁷ For Wright, however, theology is not so easily split from history. As he declares, “History does not rule out theology; indeed, in the broadest sense of ‘theology’ it actually

⁶⁵ *JVG*, 88 (italics original).

⁶⁶ Webb, “Historical Enterprise,” 39.

⁶⁷ Webb, “Historical Enterprise,” 42-47.

requires it.”⁶⁸ Following Caird, Wright argues that “the idea of history as a ‘closed continuum’ is itself a fallible presupposition of modern study.”⁶⁹ Instead, Wright insists, historians must be open to the best explanation, *including that of divine causation*, even “if this means we end up needing a new metaphysic.”⁷⁰ But the crux of Wright’s argument is again found in the use of critical realism.

Wright uses critical realism to legitimate the possibility of theological knowledge by means of story and worldview analysis. Critical realism maintains that theological knowledge can indeed exist insofar as it tells a story about humans and the world, which must be evaluated by the process of hypothesis and verification, just as any other “non-theological” knowledge must be. Thus, critical realism affirms “the right of theological language to be regarded as an appropriate dimension of discourse about reality.”⁷¹ This is possible because theology “highlights what we might call the god-dimension of a worldview.”⁷²

While this worldview dimension may be absent among many heirs of the Enlightenment, it was nevertheless an assumed viewpoint for the authors and historical

⁶⁸ *NTPG*, 95.

⁶⁹ *NTPG*, 426 n. 25. Despite acknowledging Wright’s polemic against methodological naturalism, C. Stephen Evans, “Methodological Naturalism in Historical Biblical Scholarship,” in *Jesus & The Restoration of Israel: A Critical Assessment of N. T. Wright’s Jesus and the Victory of God*, ed. Carey C. Newman (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 180-205, insists that Wright in fact relies on a form of methodological naturalism at various points in his discussion of Jesus’ life and ministry (see esp. 188-96). However, Wright’s vigorous defense of the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus (cf. *RSG*, 681-2) and claim that “historical knowledge about the resurrection, of a sort that can be discussed without presupposing Christian faith, cannot be ruled out a priori, even if the resurrection, if acknowledged, would then turn out to offer a differently grounded epistemology” (*RSG*, 22; cf. *RSG*, 11-20, 710-18) suggest otherwise. Thus, contra Evans, Webb, “Historical Enterprise,” 52 correctly labels Wright as a “critical theist” who affirms divine causation only when it is indeed the best explanation for a particular historical event.

⁷⁰ *JVG*, 8.

⁷¹ *NTPG*, 130.

⁷² *NTPG*, 130.

actors of the New Testament.⁷³ But for Wright, the idea of worldview “embraces all deep-level human perceptions of reality,” not excluding the question of the existence (or non-existence) and nature of divine beings.⁷⁴ Specifically, worldviews are “the basic stuff of human existence, the lens through which the world is seen, the blueprint for how one should live in it, and above all the sense of identity and place which enables human beings to be what they are.”⁷⁵ Locating theology within the larger category of worldview makes its study accessible to theists and atheists alike; as a public, comprehensive take on the world, a worldview can be observed, analyzed, and even evaluated.

According to Wright, worldviews have four interrelated functions. First, they “provide the stories through which human beings view reality.”⁷⁶ This matches his earlier point, following MacIntyre, concerning the storied nature of human knowledge and life. Second, from worldviews can be derived the answers to the basic questions of existence that are common to all cultures: (1) who are we? (2) where are we? (3) what is wrong? (4) what is the solution?⁷⁷ Third, worldviews are expressed in cultural symbols, such as holidays, festivals, and traditions, which often function as socio-cultural “boundary markers.”⁷⁸ Fourth, a worldview “entails actions,” such that one’s praxis reflects the worldview one holds.⁷⁹ In fact, studying actions (particularly symbolic ones) can reveal far more about a historical actor than just words or isolated sayings.⁸⁰ To summarize,

⁷³ Not to mention, of course, that belief in the supernatural remains a majority view worldwide even today.

⁷⁴ *NTPG*, 123.

⁷⁵ *NTPG*, 124. Cf. *RSG*, 29-30.

⁷⁶ *NTPG*, 123.

⁷⁷ *NTPG*, 123. *JVG*, 138 adds one more question: What time is it?

⁷⁸ *NTPG*, 123-4.

⁷⁹ *NTPG*, 124.

⁸⁰ *JVG*, 141.

while worldviews cannot be glimpsed directly, they do give rise to basic beliefs and aims which in turn give birth to consequent beliefs and intentions that are the stuff of everyday debate and argumentation.⁸¹ The study of theology thus complements the study of history, in that in order to make sense of historical actors' aims, motivations, and intentions, special attention must be paid to the "god-dimension" of their worldview.⁸²

As we conclude this chapter, we have seen that Wright's historical method involves the study of literature, history, and theology, all through the prism of story. This reflects the fact that the early Christian kerygma was essentially narrative in form. This story provides answers to the worldview questions, generates symbols and praxis, and gives rise to basic and consequent beliefs, including those involving God. Like the stories of all worldviews, the Christian story about Jesus is public, claiming to tell a comprehensive story about God, his world, and his people; it is thus *theological*.⁸³ But this story also purports to be *historical*, to speak truly about past events. As Meyer notes, "From the beginning Christian faith has been a confession of events in history."⁸⁴ This story was recorded in the form of *literature*, as in the canonical Gospels, which we can analyze using the tools of literary criticism. Thus, from the beginning, early Christianity was characterized by a defining story which we must use literary, historical, and theological tools to fully comprehend.

Wright's method thus seems to reflect the realities of Christian origins. But how do modern scholars view his efforts? We now turn to an evaluation of Wright's historical method.

⁸¹ *NTPG*, 126.

⁸² *NTPG*, 137. Note that this worldview-based understanding of "theology" does not include the Church's confessional tradition in the way that most people think of theology. This issue will be discussed further below.

⁸³ *NTPG*, 137.

⁸⁴ Meyer, *Aims*, 95.

CHAPTER THREE

AN EVALUATION OF WRIGHT'S HISTORICAL METHOD

Much of Wright's method has been positively received by other scholars and found echoes in other works on the historical Jesus in the last twenty years. That being said, debate has swirled around certain aspects of Wright's program. The three most significant of these debates, regarding Wright's use of holism and narrativity, near-exclusive reliance on the Synoptic Gospels, and purported bracketing out of Christian theology, will be analyzed below with an eye to identifying specific ways in which Wright's historical method could be improved. First, though, we will briefly consider the primary gains of Wright's method.

Methodological Gains

Before considering the most common critiques of Wright's method, we must first pause to consider several oft-cited positive qualities of Wright's method. While no historical method is perfect (as evidenced and argued below), these strengths are such that few scholars would hesitate to concede that Wright has significantly advanced the discourse concerning historical method in New Testament and Jesus studies.¹

Perhaps the most significant of Wright's gains is the further articulation and application of a critical-realist epistemology.² While Ben Meyer introduced critical

¹ For statements of the significance of Wright's methodology for Jesus studies, see Paul J. Achtemeier, review of *JVG*, by N. T. Wright, *Int* 52 (1998): 301; James D. G. Dunn, review of *JVG*, by N. T. Wright, *JTS* 49 (1998): 730; Nicholas Perrin, introduction to *Jesus, Paul and the People of God: A Theological Dialogue with N. T. Wright*, ed. Nicholas Perrin and Richard B. Hays (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 7-17.

² As praised by, e.g., James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, vol. 1 of *Christianity in the Making* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 110-11; Richard B. Hays, "Knowing Jesus: Story, History, and

realism to the field of New Testament studies, Wright clearly demonstrates its necessity as a path through the twin traps of positivism and phenomenalism.³ Wright's use of story as a key component of critical realism is a welcome addition to Meyer's epistemology. It is difficult to see how any serious historical program will not make use of critical realism to one extent or another, though further study of the implications of the various hermeneutical circles for interpretation and application of the biblical text will no doubt continue. While many Jesus scholars make little or no attempt to articulate a historical methodology or interact with their religious or philosophical presuppositions, Wright puts these questions back to the center of the discussion where they belong.⁴

Also of great importance is Wright's effort to integrate the study of literature, history, and theology.⁵ As noted earlier, this stands in opposition to streams of New Testament studies that seek to hold these fields apart.⁶ Yet current trends in historiography as well as the fact that the boundaries between these disciplines were far looser in the ancient world strongly suggest that an interdisciplinary approach is in fact necessary to do true "history."⁷

the Question of Truth," in Perrin and Hays, *Jesus, Paul and the People of God*, 45-46. See also Hurtado's defense of critical realism as a "hermeneutic of *agape*," in "New Testament Studies At the Turn of the Millennium: Questions for the Discipline," *SJT* 52 (1999): 172-6.

³ In so doing, however, Wright risks being too broad in describing critical realism; cf. Donald L. Denton, Jr, *Historiography and Hermeneutics in Jesus Studies: An Examination of the Work of John Dominic Crossan and Ben F. Meyer*, JSNTSup 262 (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 218-22, who complains that Wright's account of critical realism lacks the specificity that characterized Lonergan's original formulation.

⁴ Paul R. Eddy, "The (W)right Jesus: Eschatological Prophet, Israel's Messiah, Yahweh Embodied," in *Jesus & The Restoration of Israel: A Critical Assessment of N. T. Wright's Jesus and the Victory of God*, ed. Carey C. Newman (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 41.

⁵ Cf. Craig Blomberg, "The Wright Stuff: A Critical Overview of *Jesus and the Victory of God*," in Newman, *Jesus & The Restoration of Israel*, 20-21.

⁶ See chapter 2, n. 2 above.

⁷ On the prevailing interdisciplinarity of late twentieth and early twenty-first century historiography, see Beth M. Sheppard, *The Craft of History and the Study of the New Testament*, SBLRBS 60 (Atlanta: SBL, 2012), 137-8. For how "history" was viewed in the ancient world, see *ibid.*, 107-8.

Wright's attention to sources, particularly those of Second Temple Judaism, is worthy of emulation.⁸ Even if one interprets the sources differently, there can be no doubt that Wright's level of interaction with primary text source material is the standard which other Jesus scholars should strive to meet. As a result of this and Wright's emphasis on narrative, Wright's method also has explanatory power insofar as it makes sense of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament as a single coherent story.⁹

Controversy: Holism and Narrativity

The first major contested issue in regards to Wright's method gets to the very heart of his approach to historiography. Wright's use of a *holistic* method distinguishes him from many other historical Jesus scholars. This section concludes that despite its limitations, holism, particularly when it takes into account the inherent narrativity of the data, is a powerful historical tool.

The Supremacy of Holism over Atomism

As described earlier, Wright's critical realism leads him to articulate a historical method that is *holistic*, meaning that historical facts are intelligible only in light of a larger whole.¹⁰ This represents a significant paradigm shift away from that of most Jesus scholars, whose use of tradition criticism leads to a more *atomistic* approach to historical work. The basic premise of this "classic methodological model"¹¹ for Jesus

⁸ Stephen Fowl, review of *NTPG*, by N. T. Wright, *Modern Theology* 10 (1994): 313; Hays, "Knowing Jesus," 47-8; Robert H. Stein, review of *JVG*, by N. T. Wright, *JETS* 44 (2001): 209. Still, more attention to Greco-Roman sources would have strengthened Wright's argument, so Luke Timothy Johnson, review of *NTPG*, by N. T. Wright, *JBL* 113 (1994): 537.

⁹ Hays, "Knowing Jesus," 53.

¹⁰ Denton, *Historiography*, 155. Cf. Hays, "Knowing Jesus," 46.

¹¹ As labeled by John Dominic Crossan, "Divine Immediacy and Human Immediacy: Towards a New First Principle in Historical Jesus Research," *Semeia* 41 (1988): 123.

research is that through “the scientific tools of modern historical research,” one can create an objective reconstruction of the historical Jesus.¹²

The classic model, broadly speaking, involves two consecutive steps to determine whether a given unit of Jesus tradition goes back to the historical Jesus or is from a later point in the development of the tradition.¹³ First, the scholar uses source, redaction, and tradition criticism to identify the earliest form of a given unit of Jesus tradition and screen out any redactional or editorial additions to the core tradition, sifting for evidence that can be used in the next step by the “primary” criteria of authenticity.¹⁴ Second, the piece of tradition is subjected to the primary criteria, which “bear the heaviest weight in making a judgment concerning the authenticity of an event or saying.”¹⁵ Among the key criteria are multiple attestation, dissimilarity, and embarrassment, though individual scholars give different weight to these and other criteria.¹⁶ Thus, the priority for these scholars is on “evaluating each individual tradition on its own merits rather than considering the whole corpus of material in light of some grand hypothesis.”¹⁷ The scholar proceeds from a judgment on what the authentic facts are to a decision on what those facts mean.

¹² John P. Meier, *Origins of the Problem and the Person*, vol. 1 of *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 25.

¹³ As a result of Bultmann’s legacy, this phrase “Jesus tradition” almost exclusively refers the sayings of Jesus (cf. *JVG*, 79).

¹⁴ Robert L. Webb, “The Historical Enterprise and Historical Jesus Research,” in *Key Events in the Life of the Historical Jesus: A Collaborative Exploration of Context and Coherence*, ed. Darrell L. Bock and Robert L. Webb (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 57.

¹⁵ Webb, “Historical Enterprise,” 60.

¹⁶ For a thorough look at these various criteria, see Stanley E. Porter, *The Criteria for Authenticity in Historical-Jesus Research: Previous Discussion and New Proposals*, JSNTSup 191 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 63-123, and Webb, “Historical Enterprise,” 55-75.

¹⁷ Mark Allan Powell, *Jesus as a Figure of History: How Modern Historians View the Man from Galilee* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 22.

The classic approach, however, has recently come under fire from many scholars.¹⁸ First, the presuppositions that anchor this approach have been cut loose. The “assured results” of tradition criticism have generally assumed near-exclusive literary dependence among the Gospels, with each account placing layers over an original, but recent studies in orality suggest that some parallel traditions are in fact the result of oral traditioning processes.¹⁹ As for the use of the primary criteria of authenticity at the center of the second step, we may note that these criteria cannot give absolute judgments on the non-historicity of data; instead, while they can give positive support for the historicity of a piece of data, they cannot be used to definitively declare something non-historical.²⁰ Thus, the most these criteria can do is raise or lower the probability that a saying or event is authentic; absolute statements about the historicity of something based on these criteria cannot be substantiated.²¹ The failure of the criteria to provide any “uniformity of result” is further evidence “that the criteria themselves are seriously defective.”²²

Perhaps the biggest complaint levied against this method in general is that the way it is articulated masks what is really going on. Advocates of the classic method claim to scientifically, objectively sift through the data and only then build a reconstruction of Jesus, when in fact these scholars are the whole time working with a particular view of Jesus and the early church by which they then judge individual sayings or traditions

¹⁸ The most recent and thorough assault on the classic criteria is Chris Keith and Anthony Le Donne, eds., *Jesus, Criteria, and the Demise of Authenticity* (London: T&T Clark, 2012).

¹⁹ Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 253; cf. Denton, *Historiography*, 63-64.

²⁰ Ben F. Meyer, *Critical Realism and the New Testament*, PTMS 17 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 1989), 131. See also Dale C. Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 2-10. This point is developed with reference to the Jesus Seminar by Sheppard, *Craft*, 127-8.

²¹ Webb, “Historical Enterprise,” 73.

²² Dale C. Allison, “The Historians’ Jesus and the Church,” in *Seeking the Identity of Jesus: A Pilgrimage*, ed. Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Richard B. Hays (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 79. Cf. Dale C. Allison, *The Historical Christ and the Theological Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 54-60.

according to how well they fit with this view.²³ In other words, decisions about historical reliability are often little more than the reflection of judgments made on other grounds.²⁴ Indeed, as will be argued below, all historical work requires large-scale hypotheses. But the problem with the classic method is twofold: first, that it claims a measure of scientific “objectivity” which is clearly not possible, and, second, that a vast majority of the data we do have for the life of Jesus is *a priori* rejected as ahistorical.²⁵ This is akin to a detective arriving at a crime scene and ruling out the usefulness of certain pieces of evidence based on a preconceived notion of how the murder took place.²⁶ Instead, there must be a more dynamic interplay between data and hypothesis, such that “there is reciprocity between determining what will be valid data and interpreting those data, between deciding what data are relevant and deciding what is the significance of the relevant data.”²⁷ In other words, the approach must be both “bottom-up” and “top-down.”²⁸ A more careful understanding of data control is thus required of a new model.

The holistic model pioneered by Meyer and Wright is up front about the fact that “on the whole it is rare that a solid judgment of historicity can be made prior to and apart from a large frame of reference, i.e., the substance of historical investigation.”²⁹ This conclusion flows directly from the insight of critical realism that all knowledge of particulars is arrived at from a dialogical engagement with a larger whole.³⁰ As noted

²³ *JVG*, 33.

²⁴ *JVG*, 79.

²⁵ *JVG*, 79. Cf. Webb, “Historical Enterprise,” 72.

²⁶ R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 266-8.

²⁷ Denton, *Historiography*, 71.

²⁸ Webb, “Historical Enterprise,” 79.

²⁹ Ben F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1979), 84.

³⁰ Denton, *Historiography*, 155.

above, even scholars following the classic method proceed from a large-scale hypothesis about the data as a whole. What matters for Wright and other holistic historians is that one chooses the *right* starting paradigm, which may be altered as individual points of data are considered and be ultimately verified by its ability to account for all the data, make a simple argument, and have explanatory power. That is to say, we need to “identify what facts we can reasonably know and what generalizations we can plausibly make about Jesus before we enter the congested realm of conjectural tradition-histories.”³¹

This view is further buttressed by a reconception of how historical data is viewed. James Dunn makes the point that the synoptic tradition is evidence not so much of Jesus himself as of Jesus’ impact.³² The result is that “data are not simply true or false testimony, but are first of all evidence.”³³ In other words, data are not to be evaluated as “true” or “false” in relation to facts before they are first assessed as facts in and of themselves, “traces” of past events that have significance in their own right.³⁴ Thus, for the holistic historian, “beginning by identifying broad themes and distinctive emphases in the sources allows one to consider the value of data that may not pass the test of authentic testimony, but may yet shed light on the historical object.”³⁵ Rather than start with questions about the historical reliability of individual units, the right question to ask about a piece of tradition is “Does this particular build into a coherent and consistent picture of the person who made the impact of the broader picture?”³⁶

³¹ Allison, *Millenarian Prophet*, 31.

³² Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 130.

³³ Denton, *Historiography*, 160.

³⁴ Denton, *Historiography*, 161; cf. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 102-3.

³⁵ Denton, *Historiography*, 161.

³⁶ James D. G. Dunn, “Can the Third Quest Hope to Succeed?” in *Authenticating the Activities of Jesus*, ed. Bruce Chilton and Craig Evans, NTTS 28/2 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1999), 47.

In conclusion, we have seen that “a holistic approach to the data is a result of an appreciation of the contextual nature of particulars, as well as of historical data-as-evidence.”³⁷ This is clearly a major methodological advance over the classic, atomistic view. Yet there are some potential weaknesses with holism that need to be taken into account, to which we now turn.

A Critical Assessment of Holism

Though holism represents a clear step beyond atomism, there are three major objections to this approach to historiography. Our goal will then be to identify means of mitigating the method’s weaknesses.

First, and most significantly, practitioners of holism run the risk of forcing a single grand narrative on the data beyond what it can reasonably sustain. Central to Wright’s holistic method is the notion that the “real task” of history is that of a major hypothesis.³⁸ Wright is often put on the defensive over his “return from exile” hypothesis, accused of reading the story of Israel’s return from exile into almost every saying or parable of Jesus.³⁹ Furthermore, there is the question of whether, amidst such diversity in Second Temple Judaism, there was in fact any “single comprehensive grand narrative shaping the thought of Jesus’ contemporaries.”⁴⁰ Perhaps there were other “controlling stories,” emphasizing other elements of Jewish expectation, that lie behind Jesus’

³⁷ Denton, *Historiography*, 162.

³⁸ *JVG*, 33.

³⁹ Cf. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 473; Klyne R. Snodgrass, “Reading and Overreading the Parables in *Jesus and the Victory of God*,” in Newman, *Jesus & The Restoration of Israel*, 61-76. The most notorious example of this is, of course, Wright’s reading of the Parable of the Prodigal Son (cf. *JVG*, 125-31).

⁴⁰ Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 475.

kingdom proclamation.⁴¹ But the central complaint here is that Wright “squeezes” the diversity of the tradition to make it conform to a single controlling story, with the result that significant aspects of the tradition are left unexplored.⁴² As Dunn describes the problem, “the single grand narrative effectively brackets out a good deal of the data, privileges some of the data as more conducive to the story the historian wants to tell, and orders the selected data into a narrative sequence which validates the view put forward by the modern historian.”⁴³ As a result, Wright’s method leads to an overreading of certain passages, importing meanings foreign to the text’s original context.⁴⁴

Wright is correctly concerned not to *a priori* dismiss any historical data as irrelevant or falsified; there is, however, a difference between *dismissing* data and acknowledging that no hypothesis can ever account for *all* the data. All evidence should be considered, but not all evidence will fit equally into a single *interpretation*. The alternative is to commit the historical fallacy of reductionism.⁴⁵ The real problem, therefore, is not so much with grand narratives themselves but with ones that try to bear more weight than they are mean to carry.⁴⁶ This is a valid criticism: a holistic approach

⁴¹ Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 475 includes the removal of disabilities and defects, the eschatological feast and pilgrimage of the nations, the defeat of Satan, and the final judgment as some of the other motifs controlling Jewish expectations.

⁴² Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 477. Cf. Stein, “Review,” 210; Hays, “Knowing Jesus,” 55; Markus Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word: Refocusing New Testament Study*, STI (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 114.

⁴³ James D. G. Dunn, “On History, Memory and Eyewitnesses: In Response to Bengt Holmberg and Samuel Byrskog,” *JSNT* 26 (2004): 477.

⁴⁴ See, for instance, Snodgrass, “Reading,” 70-71 for several examples. This is a form of the fallacy of prooftexting; see Sheppard, *Craft*, 83.

⁴⁵ Sheppard, *Craft*, 76.

⁴⁶ Bengt Holmberg, “Questions of Method in James Dunn’s *Jesus Remembered*,” *JSNT* 26 (2004): 457 notes that even Dunn, who with reference to Wright is critical of “grand narratives,” nevertheless operates within “a theistic, even Christian, grand narrative guiding all of his historical reconstruction of Jesus.” Locating Jesus within Judaism, the *sine qua non* of the Third Quest, is itself something of a grand narrative (453). But none of these grand narratives must be allowed to become all-

indeed seeks to present a large-scale narrative, but the complexity of the data requires tempering the scope of any one such narrative.⁴⁷

Second, holistic scholars use an admittedly vague, subjective method for finding a starting paradigm. For Meyer, this is as simple as finding “intelligible patterns” in the sources.⁴⁸ Similarly, Dale Allison finds his starting paradigm in the coherent patterns that are consistent across the tradition.⁴⁹ Dunn forges his paradigm from what is both “*characteristic of and relatively distinctive within the Jesus tradition.*”⁵⁰ John Meier admits the appeal of a holistic approach but worries that “until we have at least a vague idea of what parts might qualify as belonging to the historical whole, a ‘holistic’ approach remains a distant ideal.”⁵¹ The diversity of starting paradigms casts doubt on the usefulness of this methodology. Even Donald Denton, an advocate of the holistic approach, concedes that the identification of patterns must take place within the larger context of the observer’s horizons.⁵²

Third, beyond this issue of subjectivity, there is the larger problem of the essentially contextualized nature of the data as we have it: in the holistic method, “the data are dumped into one large pile, and themes and patterns are chosen from the whole lot with little regard for how the data may have functioned differently in different

consuming and thus commit the sin of reductionism. Indeed, Dunn, “Response,” 477 concedes that his criticism is against “a particular form of these grand narratives” rather than all such narratives.

⁴⁷ Cf. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 477.

⁴⁸ Denton, *Historiography*, 164. Cf. *JVG*, 147-50.

⁴⁹ Allison, *Millenarian Prophet*, 36; *ibid.*, 45-46 also notes this requires a basic level of trust in the overall picture of Jesus presented by our sources because if the broad strokes of the tradition are not authentic, it is even more unlikely that smaller details will be true to reality. Cf. *idem*, *Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination, and History* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 1-30.

⁵⁰ Dunn, “Third Quest” 46 (*italics original*); cf. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 333. Holmberg, “Questions,” 454 sees this as similar in approach to the “grand narratives” that Dunn claims to reject.

⁵¹ Meier, *Origins*, 195 n. 66.

⁵² Denton, *Historiography*, 164; cf. also Bockmuehl, *Seeing*, 114.

sources.”⁵³ Given that all data is contextualized by the mere fact of the selectivity of historical sources and its context within a historical document, this represents a serious problem for holism, and many reviewers of Wright’s work have made this very point.⁵⁴ As Denton summarizes, “Though he begins with a stated focus on narrativity, and on the integrity of the narrativity of each source, Wright appears to gloss over the true distinctiveness of sources that should follow on reading the sources on their own terms.”⁵⁵ The complex witness to Jesus in the four Gospels is reduced to a single “distillation” of these sources, here privileging the account of an event or saying in one Gospel and there in another.⁵⁶ These criticisms are valid: Wright does diminish the differences between the Evangelists’ accounts, instead constructing a single account of the life of Jesus.⁵⁷ But to the extent that Denton and others are concerned about the narrative context of historical data, Wright is not entirely guilty as charged, because the narrative context by which Wright interprets his data is not the “micro-level” of the Gospel narratives, but the “macro-level” of the story of Israel. Wright goes outside of the narrative context of the Gospels in search of a broader, “canonical” narrative context. Still, Wright’s method is vulnerable to the extent that he does not adequately address the immediate narrative context of the data, nor does he address the issue of how one properly identifies a starting paradigm for holistic work.

⁵³ Denton, *Historiography*, 180.

⁵⁴ See, for instance, Hays, “Knowing Jesus,” 55-58; Luke Timothy Johnson, “A Historiographical Response to Wright’s Jesus,” in Newman, *Jesus & The Restoration of Israel*, 216-8; Robert H. Gundry, “Reconstructing Jesus,” *CT*, April 27, 1998.

⁵⁵ Denton, *Historiography*, 181.

⁵⁶ Johnson, “Historiographical Response,” 221.

⁵⁷ Johnson, “Historiographical Response,” 217-8 gives the example of Wright (*JVG*, 167) insisting that Jesus patterned himself after Elijah. This is the case according to certain Lukan texts, but on the whole the Synoptics seem to link John the Baptist, not Jesus, with Elijah. Without considering the Evangelists’ “compositional tendencies,” Wright risks running roughshod over authorial intent and creating a gruel-like Synoptic stew (cf. Dunn, “Review,” 733).

Denton aims to address these concerns regarding holism by affirming that it is *the context of the sources* in which the “initial understanding of the data” is to be located.⁵⁸ The obvious insight here is that data comes to us not in a vacuum but within the context of a given source – in our case, the Gospels. Rather than the individual historian sifting for patterns amidst a single amorphous mass of data, stripping the data of their original contexts within the Gospel texts, Denton proposes starting with analyzing *how the sources themselves understand the data*. Denton notes that this has the strength of providing a public context by which the data can be understood, as opposed to an individual’s idiosyncratic perspective on what appears to be patterns in all of the data.⁵⁹

Specifically, the narrative context of the Gospels is significant on account of the insight that the historical Jesus can only be known through how the sources remember him. The goal of the historian is then to understand how Jesus is presented in the sources and therefore what historical reality must be assumed to have generated the remembrance of Jesus in these sources.⁶⁰ In other words, the data of the Gospels should be considered as not merely testimony but evidence, as historical facts do not exist apart from interpretation.⁶¹ The chief interpretive context provided by the Gospels, like all literary sources, is of course that of *narrative*, a point argued earlier in light of the storied nature of human consciousness and the role of worldviews in organizing the world around us. This principle, that the knowledge of data can only take place within the context of a text, expressed in narrative, neatly parallels Wright’s critical realism, which holds that all

⁵⁸ Denton, *Historiography*, 176.

⁵⁹ Denton, *Historiography*, 177. Wright, “Doing Justice to Jesus: A Response to J. D. Crossan: ‘What Victory? What God?’,” *SJT* 50 (1997): 364, in fact appears to argue for the need to recognize the source context of the data, which fits with his belief in narrative intelligibility. Thus it is all the more strange that Wright seems to disregard this in *JVG*.

⁶⁰ Denton, *Historiography*, 177; cf. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 239-45.

⁶¹ Denton, *Historiography*, 182.

knowledge takes place within the context of an essentially storied worldview.⁶² Denton's approach to identifying the source context of data is, therefore, a natural extension of Wright's critical realism, and it coheres with what we have already established in terms of the essentially *storied* nature of human existence and the notion of history as the *narrative* of events and intentions. Thus, this proposed modification to Wright's method is in fact aligned with some of Wright's most cherished assumptions and emphases.

In light of this, Denton suggests a two-step process for an improved holistic method which he calls the "coherence theory of historical truth and verification."⁶³ First, the historian must, as described above, identify the source context of the data, and thus understand "the total picture of Jesus presented in each source, in its narrative unity and also in its distinctiveness."⁶⁴ Tools such as narrative criticism, composition criticism, redaction criticism, and intertextuality can all illuminate the data's narrative intelligibility.⁶⁵ This step can be thought of as gathering and organizing the data; "what we are left with after we see the data in narrative context is an overall picture of Jesus as portrayed in the source in which we find the data."⁶⁶ How the Evangelists redact, reimagine, or reapply the Jesus tradition is a necessary part of understanding the narrative context of the data. Various sketches of Jesus thus begin to take shape.

The second step is to compare these portraits with one another and with the wider historical context, drawing on the insights of fields such as archaeology, sociology, and the study of literature outside of the New Testament, to determine how well these various elements cohere. Thus, "the data *begin* to have their sense in the narrative

⁶² Cf. *JVG*, 138-44.

⁶³ Denton, *Historiography*, 182.

⁶⁴ Denton, *Historiography*, 182.

⁶⁵ Denton, *Historiography*, 182-3.

⁶⁶ Denton, *Historiography*, 184.

contexts in which we find them, but this sense is subject to elaboration and alteration as historical investigation proceeds beyond the sources themselves.”⁶⁷ This critical comparison is what distinguishes this as a historical method as opposed to an exercise in New Testament theology.⁶⁸ The fact that this step follows the first guards against the problem of allowing a proposed historical context to reign sovereign over the data, excluding data from the outset that appear to conflict with that context.⁶⁹ It is only at this point that historical criteria such as multiple attestation or proximity, the tools of critical history, can be applied as the broad strands of evidence are compared and evaluated for general coherence.⁷⁰ I propose that this attention to the “coherence” of the narrative and historical context of the data helps address the problems related to Wright’s use of holism.

Controversy: The Valuation and Use of Sources

A second major issue concerns Wright’s use of sources, for any account of history is of course dependent on the weight and judgment of historical reliability given to the various sources. Wright promises to include as much of the extant data for Jesus as possible, and to not *a priori* dismiss any sources of evidence.⁷¹ Even a casual perusal of his *Jesus and the Victory of God*, however, demonstrates that Wright clearly prioritizes the Synoptic Gospels over any other sources, including the Fourth Gospel, the *Gospel of Thomas*, and Q.⁷² This section defends Wright’s use of the Synoptics as the best sources

⁶⁷ Denton, *Historiography*, 184.

⁶⁸ Denton, *Historiography*, 182.

⁶⁹ Denton, *Historiography*, 183.

⁷⁰ Denton, *Historiography*, 183-6. For more on “coherence,” see *ibid.*, 162-3.

⁷¹ Cf. *JVG*, 88.

⁷² Note that in Wright’s “Index of Ancient Sources” (*JVG*, 705-30), the Synoptics receive a little over eight pages of references, while John and *Thomas* get only half of one page each.

for studying the life of Jesus while advocating further use of John's Gospel as a historical source.

The Reliability and Use of the Synoptics

Wright defends the essential historicity of the Synoptic Gospels on several fronts. First, Wright insists that the Evangelists considered themselves to be writing real history, insofar as their Jewish heritage “demands that actual history be the sphere in which Israel's god makes himself known.”⁷³ “The evangelists' theological and pastoral programme has in no way diminished their intent to write about Jesus of Nazareth.”⁷⁴ Second, Wright demonstrates that, contrary to the claims of the classic form critics, the Gospels in fact show little evidence of answering the major controversies and problems of the early church (such as those described by Paul), while they do focus on many topics and themes that failed to be taken up by the early church.⁷⁵ Third, Wright discounts the problem of parallel accounts on account of the nature of Jesus' itinerant ministry and the phenomenon of informal but controlled oral tradition.⁷⁶ Fourth, Wright rejects the traditional form critical account of the development of the gospel tradition, which holds that short *chreiai* were at a later date developed into full pericopae.

This final point deserves further attention, as it explains why Wright does not place much value on *Thomas* as a reliable source. Given Jesus' Jewish context, the earliest forms of the Jesus tradition must be essentially Jewish. The accounts in the Gospels “correspond to forms which are known to have been available to Jesus' first

⁷³ *NTPG*, 426.

⁷⁴ *NTPG*, 403.

⁷⁵ *NTPG*, 422.

⁷⁶ *NTPG*, 423. Cf. *JVG*, 134; Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 205-10. The work of Kenneth Bailey features heavily in all of these arguments; see further Terence C. Mournet, *Oral Tradition and Literary Dependency: Variability and Stability in the Synoptic Tradition and Q*, WUNT 2/195 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005).

followers, and to forms characteristic of stories that were longing for their god to act in calling a great renewal movement around a prophetic, or indeed messianic, figure.”⁷⁷ Given this Jewish context, we would expect any modification to actually be in the direction of the detached, story-less Hellenistic *chreiai* and not vice versa. The only early document not to fit this Jewish worldview is the *Gospel of Thomas*, which it is therefore much more natural to see as an isolated corruption of the original tradition rather than the other way around.⁷⁸ *Thomas*, given its distinctive Hellenistic and Cynic style and worldview, most likely “represents a radical translation, and indeed subversion, of first-century Christianity into a quite different sort of religion.”⁷⁹ Attempts to link *Thomas* with a hypothetical layer of the proposed Q source have been tried and found wanting.⁸⁰

Finally, while Wright did not make much mention of this point, a second edition of *The New Testament and the People of God* might also wish to draw on the recent work of Richard Bauckham and Robert McIver on the eyewitness testimony that likely stands behind the Synoptic tradition.⁸¹ The role of the eyewitnesses as not just formulators of the tradition but also living, active guarantors of their testimony is one of the strongest points that can be made for the general reliability of the Synoptic Gospels.

Still, even those conservative scholars who agree that the Synoptics are *generally* reliable believe Wright needs to pay more attention to discerning which *details*

⁷⁷ NTPG, 435.

⁷⁸ NTPG, 443.

⁷⁹ NTPG, 443.

⁸⁰ Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 164-5; 468-9; NTPG, 436-43. For this hypothesis, see Helmut Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels: Their History and Development* (London: SCM Press, 1990), 124-8; John S. Kloppenborg, *Excavating Q: The History and Setting of the Sayings Gospel*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000). Further support for a late date for *Thomas* is found in Mark Goodacre, *Thomas and the Gospels: The Case for Thomas's Familiarity with the Synoptics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012).

⁸¹ Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006); Robert K. McIver, *Memory, Jesus, and the Synoptic Gospels*, SBLRBS 59 (Atlanta: SBL, 2011). Cf. Sheppard, *Craft*, 52-53.

of the Synoptic tradition are authentic.⁸² This includes attention to the insights resulting from source, redaction, and tradition criticism. Part of this is recognizing that the information we have about Jesus in the Gospels comes to us not as objective historical reality but as the result of a complex process of oral and written transmission. As Dunn explains, “The Synoptic tradition provides evidence not so much for what Jesus did or said in itself, but for what Jesus was *remembered* as doing or saying by his first disciples, or as we might say, for the *impact* of what he did and said on his first disciples.”⁸³

This is not to say that there is no historical referent behind the testimony of the Gospels; a mediated account of Jesus’ identity need not imply we no longer have “access” to Jesus’ life and teachings. Yet Wright does not tackle the import of the transmission process beyond stating that the Evangelists were not “artless chroniclers or transcribers” but theologians, before going on to attribute the majority of theological innovation contained in the Gospels to Jesus himself.⁸⁴ Nor does Wright account for the frailties and problems associated with human memory, both individual or corporate, over time.⁸⁵ Wright’s holistic method means that his focus is on the coherence and authenticity of the overall hypothesis, but this need not result in a complete lack of consideration for how the transmission process may have shaped the historical reliability of the tradition.⁸⁶ Dunn has developed just such a model for the transmission of the Jesus tradition that

⁸² Johnson, “Historiographical Response,” 216-8”; Clive Marsh, “Theological History? N. T. Wright’s *Jesus and the Victory of God*,” *JSNT* 69 (1998): 81; Craig Blomberg, “The Wright Stuff,” 31.

⁸³ Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 130, acknowledging a debt to Martin Kähler. Cf. Meyer, *Aims*, 115; Hays, “Knowing Jesus,” 57.

⁸⁴ *JVG*, 479.

⁸⁵ Granted, much of the research applying memory theory to the Gospels has taken place after the publication of the first two volumes in Wright’s *Christian Origins* series. See, e.g., Allison, *Constructing Jesus*, esp. 1-30; Alan Kirk and Tom Thatcher, eds., *Memory, Tradition, and Text: Uses of the Past in Early Christianity*, Semeia 52 (Atlanta: SBL, 2005).

⁸⁶ For an extreme case in point, see Kyle R. Hughes “The Lukan Special Material and the Tradition History of the *Pericope Adulterae*,” *NovT* 55.3 (2013): forthcoming.

distinguishes the fixed center of a tradition from the flexible details characteristic of oral performance variation.⁸⁷ Similarly, Wright needs to not just defend the Synoptics in the broadest sense but also explain how the transmission process may or may not have impacted the historicity of details of the tradition. In other words, a better balance of micro and macro analysis is needed.

Enter the Fourth Gospel?

Wright's decision not to include the Gospel of John among the data from which he drew his portrait of Jesus has drawn a fair amount of criticism.⁸⁸ In the preface to *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Wright explains that he excluded the Fourth Gospel from his book because he is participating in a debate "conducted almost entirely in terms of the synoptic tradition."⁸⁹ This scholarly tradition uniformly sets aside John's historical reliability on account of its elevated Christology and differences (or even contradictions) with the Synoptics.

Though arguments for the essential historicity of John are not new,⁹⁰ in the last few years, some non-evangelical scholars have argued for a "new perspective" on John that takes the Fourth Gospel seriously as a historical source. In a key article published in 2010 in the *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus*, James Charlesworth gave ten reasons why historians should reconsider excluding John from their sources.⁹¹ Indeed, the

⁸⁷ Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 209.

⁸⁸ See, e.g., Johnson, "Historiographical Response," 220; Marianne Meye Thompson, "*Jesus and the Victory of God* Meets the Gospel of John," in Perrin and Hays, *Jesus, Paul and the People of God*, 21-37.

⁸⁹ *JVG*, xvi.

⁹⁰ Cf. Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel: Issues & Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

⁹¹ James H. Charlesworth, "The Historical Jesus in the Fourth Gospel: A Paradigm Shift?" *JSHJ* 8 (2010): 3-46.

Fourth Gospel, as an independent account of Jesus' life rooted in early sources,⁹² may at times give chronological, archaeological, and other historical data superior to that found in the Synoptics.⁹³ Furthermore, it is true that differences between John and the Synoptics are often exaggerated.⁹⁴ And it is manifestly the case that an *a priori* decision to exclude John as a source leads historians to "violate the canons of historiography: The historian should use and sift for insight all available data and witnesses to the events being represented."⁹⁵

Yet all of this can be accepted without conceding the point that the Synoptics should remain the *primary* source for studying the historical Jesus. The multiple layers of attestation on the side of the Synoptics and the likely distance of the *ipsissima vox* of the historical Jesus from the Johannine Jesus (whose language is often indistinguishable from that of the Evangelist) are enough to give precedence to the Synoptic tradition. Perhaps, then, the best way to think of the value of the Fourth Gospel is as a supplemental or confirming source. The purpose of the Fourth Gospel in historical research, then, is best seen as "a secondary source to supplement or corroborate the testimony of the Synoptic tradition."⁹⁶ Wright should not be so shy about using the Fourth Gospel, and a future edition of *JVG* should show how the portrait of Jesus in John complements or confirms Wright's own portrait; as Marianne Meye Thompson has pointed out, Wright's Jesus and the Johannine Jesus could no doubt get along quite well.⁹⁷

⁹² E.g., the so-called "Book of Signs." Cf. Charlesworth, "Fourth Gospel," 15-16.

⁹³ Charlesworth, "Fourth Gospel" 16-21; 26-27.

⁹⁴ Charlesworth, "Fourth Gospel," 27-29.

⁹⁵ Charlesworth, "Fourth Gospel," 44.

⁹⁶ Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 167.

⁹⁷ Thompson, "John," 37.

Controversy: Whither Theology?

Wright insists that good historical method integrates history and literature with theology. Yet some critics have complained that Wright's work does not adequately grapple with theology, especially insofar as "Christian theological tradition is by and large bracketed out."⁹⁸ To the extent that "theology" includes the church's tradition of how it reads and understands the Scriptures, Wright is up front about his desire to proceed from a historical rather than theological starting point, the consequences for the church's Jesus be what they may.⁹⁹ This, however, generates a hermeneutical issue regarding the relationship between a text and its history of interpretation.

A New Hermeneutic? Wirkungsgeschichte

In laying out the elements of his method, Wright appears to restrict "theology" to the "god-dimension" of a worldview.¹⁰⁰ This seems to limit theology to a historical artifact on display in a museum, while many consider "theology" to be a living, dynamic process that includes the church's reflection on the Christ event. According to this latter view, for Wright's method to truly integrate the study of theology, it must also consider how Jesus has been understood through the lens of the church's canon and the church's theological traditions.¹⁰¹ Markus Bockmuehl explains the underlying problem with methods such as Wright's that claim to put up a dividing wall between the "historical" study of the New Testament and later theological reflection on these texts by noting that "it remains a fact that the New Testament *neither envisages nor validates* any reliable

⁹⁸ Hays, "Knowing Jesus," 50-51, 56-58.

⁹⁹ *JVG*, xv. Cf. Wright's seeming placement of history above theology, as noted in Marcus J. Borg and N. T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), 26.

¹⁰⁰ *NTPG*, 130. See also chapter 2, above.

¹⁰¹ Cf. the discussion in Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Richard B. Hays, "Seeking the Identity of Jesus," in Gaventa and Hays, *Seeking the Identity of Jesus*, 1-24.

access to the identity of Jesus Christ except through the apostolic witness of the apostolic churches.”¹⁰² If our knowledge of Jesus is inextricably colored by the theological heritage of the church, how can that heritage be completely bracketed out of the discussion?

This charge strikes at the heart of a key hermeneutical issue. For a growing number of scholars open to the insights of postmodern literary theory, the meaning of a text cannot be fully understood apart from its history of interpretation and performance.¹⁰³ The development of this concept of the *Wirkungsgeschichte* (“effectual history”) of a text is credited to the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, who challenged conventional wisdom by emphasizing the influence of the past upon the present.¹⁰⁴ There is not an empty gap between the world of the text and the world of the modern reader; rather, we must reckon with centuries of history that color any interpretive effort.¹⁰⁵ Our reading of a text cannot be understood apart from tradition because “the intervening tradition is part of us.”¹⁰⁶ Put another way, going “in front of the text” to study its reception and history of influence is just as important for interpretation as going “behind the text” with the standard historical-critical tools.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰² Bockmuehl, *Seeing*, 47 (italics original). Compounding the issue is that the apostolic witness recorded in, for instance, the Pauline epistles *predates* the composition of the Gospels.

¹⁰³ Bockmuehl, *Seeing*, 65.

¹⁰⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. and ed. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd rev. ed. (London: Continuum, 2004), 295-301. For Gadamer, “Time is no longer primarily a gulf to be bridged because it separates; it is actually the supportive ground of the course of events in which the present is rooted” (*Truth and Method*, 297).

¹⁰⁵ Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 131.

¹⁰⁶ Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 122; cf. Bockmuehl, *Seeing*, 116-8.

¹⁰⁷ Bockmuehl, *Seeing*, 65. For a nuanced appraisal of Gadamer, see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?: The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 409; Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 469-71. For a justification of including reception history (*Auslegungsgeschichte*) within a broader understanding of *Wirkungsgeschichte*, see Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, trans. James E. Crouch, Hermeneia (Minneapolis:

Gadamer's theory of *Wirkungsgeschichte* holds that the effectual history of a text affects not just the interpretation of the text but the interpreter himself.¹⁰⁸ Dunn summarizes Gadamer's *wirkungsgeschichte Bewusstsein* ("historically effected consciousness") as the notion that "the interpreter's consciousness, or pre-understanding we might say, is not simply influenced by the text; rather, it has in some measure been brought into being by the text."¹⁰⁹ This stands in contrast with the modern quest for a scientific, neutral, objective interpretation of a text. Postmodernism has shown this to be an impossible task; instead, it seeks "to replace the ideal of neutral objectivity with constructively critical use of interpreters' presuppositions and perspectives."¹¹⁰ Thus, rather than considering interpreters' presuppositions as things to be eliminated, they might in fact "preserve perspectives from outside our time and place and personal subjectivity, bringing them to bear on interpretation perhaps in spite of ourselves."¹¹¹ Acknowledging and integrating different perspectives might bring us closer to the true "meaning" of a text than a fruitless quest for a single "objective" interpretation.¹¹²

All of this clashes with Wright's stated goal of bracketing the Christian theological tradition out of his historical investigation, even to the extent that he has no problem proposing interpretations that he admits are completely novel.¹¹³ Richard Hays questions why, as a believing Christian "formed intellectually and imaginatively by years

Fortress Press, 2007), 60. Ibid., 60-66 contains a pioneering argument for the role of reception history in biblical interpretation.

¹⁰⁸ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 301-6.

¹⁰⁹ Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 122; cf. Bockmuehl, *Seeing*, 117-8. Allison, *Historical Christ*, 50 includes Christians' present-day religious experiences and encounters with Jesus as part of this *Wirkungsgeschichte*.

¹¹⁰ Treier, *Theological Interpretation*, 34.

¹¹¹ Treier, *Theological Interpretation*, 202.

¹¹² Treier, *Theological Interpretation*, 203; cf. Sheppard, *Craft*, 124-5.

¹¹³ *JVG*, 126, on the parable of the prodigal son.

of participation in the rich liturgical life of the Church of England,” Wright does not “acknowledge that the church’s tradition might provide aid rather than hindrance in seeking to understand” Jesus.¹¹⁴ Instead, Wright has become, in effect, a “Fifth Evangelist” whose portrait of Jesus is superior to that presented in the canonical Gospels.¹¹⁵ Wright, however, responds to this argument with the claim that “the Great Tradition has seriously and demonstrably distorted the gospels” by asking the wrong questions (namely, Jesus’ divinity) when in fact they provide answers to a very different set of questions (namely, the kingdom of God).¹¹⁶ Wright also argues that all people in fact become “Fifth Evangelists” in their individual efforts to make sense of who Jesus was and is. If it is true that all Gospel readers have a mental portrait of Jesus, Wright claims he is merely unique in that he has “decided to subject mine to conscious, critical reflection.”¹¹⁷

Of course, Wright is correct to suggest that critical reflection is superior to uncritical naïveté. And this certainly does not mean following Luke Timothy Johnson down the trail of abandoning history all together.¹¹⁸ But *Wirkungsgeschichte* demonstrates that Wright’s method would indeed profit from taking on board Hays’ advice to use the church’s interpretive tradition as an aid, to fully integrate theology with history. Wright

¹¹⁴ Hays, “Knowing Jesus,” 57.

¹¹⁵ Hays, “Knowing Jesus,” 57. The image of this criticism is drawn from Martin Kähler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ* (1892; repr., Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964).

¹¹⁶ N. T. Wright, “Response to Richard Hays,” in Perrin and Hays, *Jesus, Paul and the People of God*, 63.

¹¹⁷ Wright, “Response to Hays,” 63.

¹¹⁸ As argued by Blomberg, “The Wright Stuff,” 20, Johnson’s “repeated, simplistic appeals to church tradition and canonical authority to bypass the historical process” fail to do justice to the necessity for Christianity of the reality of God’s acting in history; faith cannot be divorced from history so easily. Bockmuehl, *Seeing*, 117 n. 20 and Joel B. Green, “Rethinking ‘History’ for Theological Interpretation,” *JTI* 5.2 (2011): 159-74 affirm the theological value of historical study of the Bible, *contra* some other members of the theological interpretation movement.

would do well to embrace his work as a truly “theological history.”¹¹⁹ We now turn to some specific proposals generated by the so-called “theological interpretation” movement for demonstrating how and why theology can play a role in historical investigation.

A New Paradigm? Theological Interpretation

The postmodern hermeneutical shift has provided an epistemological justification for biblical scholars disillusioned with the traditional historical-critical method to reappropriate the role of theology in the interpretive process. The key elements in the loosely defined movement of “theological interpretation” include emphases on the reception history of Scripture and the concept of the virtuous or ideal reader. My contention is that these elements need not supplant the historical-critical method, but can be used profitably to supplement the work of scholars such as Wright who proceed from a holistic paradigm.¹²⁰

First, theological interpretation takes into consideration the history of interpretation and influence (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) of Scripture. This emphasis manifests itself at various levels. At a very basic level, reading Scripture as part of a larger, unified “canon” places individual books of the Bible in a larger context of interpretation than its original situation, such that the canon generates “a dynamic tradition of critical reinterpretation.”¹²¹ This in turn raises the question of the next level, which is how the church has traditionally interpreted this canon, especially during the period of the living

¹¹⁹ Marsh, “Theological History?” 91.

¹²⁰ “An accurate vision of history, including that of the New Testament and its dramatis personae, requires both proximity and distance” (Bockmuehl, *Seeing*, 167-8).

¹²¹ Vanhoozer, *Meaning*, 380; Bockmuehl, *Seeing*, 108-14. The work of Brevard Childs is usually credited as foundational in the area of canonical criticism. Cf., e.g., Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

memory of the apostolic age.¹²² The *regula fidei* of the apostles and early fathers provides a mechanism (or, to use Irenaeus' term, a *hypothesis*) by which to read and understand Scripture.¹²³ For Daniel Treier, reading according to the rule of faith "does not simply involve coming to exegetical conclusions that cohere with trinitarian orthodoxy; rather, it means stretching ourselves to explore imaginatively the classic Christian consensus about God."¹²⁴ Extending this to one final level, any individual passage of Scripture could be studied in light of its entire history of interpretation; in particular, early patristic interpretation should be taken seriously as potentially shedding light on the Evangelists' authorial intentions. In summary, a truly Christian approach to *Wirkungsgeschichte* ultimately speaks not only about our interpretation of Scripture but also about "how Scripture has interpreted *us*, the readers."¹²⁵

Second, theological interpretation suggests that certain interpreters might be specially positioned, *on account of their presuppositions*, to interpret a text well. In terms of the study of the New Testament, this demands "approaching Scripture...with the practices and habits of mind that [the early church] shared and passed on."¹²⁶ To bring this into Christian terms, Jesus is not a mere historical figure but a living presence within the interpreting community, such that "true beliefs about Jesus cannot be separated from

¹²² Bockmuehl, *Seeing*, 168-88, describes this period as having the ideal mix of both proximity and distance from the historical events being remembered, and contends that it extends for about 150 years through the death of Irenaeus (c. 200). Cf. Samuel Byrskog, *Story as History – History as Story: The Gospel Tradition in the Context of Ancient Oral History* (WUNT 123; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000); Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses*, esp. ch. 2, 6, and 10-13.

¹²³ On Irenaeus and the *regula fidei*, see John J. O'Keefe and R. R. Reno, *Sanctified Vision: An Introduction to Early Christian Interpretation of the Bible* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 33-44, 119-28; cf. Irenaeus *Against Heresies* 1.8.1 and 1.10.1-3.

¹²⁴ Treier, *Theological Interpretation*, 63.

¹²⁵ Bockmuehl, *Seeing*, 165 (italics original). For more on the theory of *Wirkungsgeschichte* and its application to the New Testament, see Mark Knight, "Wirkungsgeschichte, Reception History, Reception Theory," *JSNT* 33.2 (2010): 137-46. This entire issue of *JSNT* is devoted to the topic.

¹²⁶ Treier, *Theological Interpretation*, 201. Cf. Bockmuehl, *Seeing*, 70.

praxis that seeks to implement Jesus' kingdom agenda."¹²⁷ Put another way, to read a text well requires a certain "interpretive virtue" that brings humility and openness into the reader's encounter with the text.¹²⁸ Finally, we can note that the Bible itself presupposes a particular view of history involving trans-temporal realities and "an ongoing ecclesial participation in God's historical *sacra doctrina*."¹²⁹ As such, interpreting Scripture "requires not only linear-historical tools (archaeology, philology, and so forth), but also, and indeed primarily, participatory tools – doctrines and practices – by which the exegete enters fully into the biblical world."¹³⁰ Reading the Gospels from a perspective of faith, therefore, might provide a better interpretation of these texts than a supposedly objective, critical one.¹³¹

The modern discipline of theological interpretation remains in its infancy, and a complete discussion of the issues it raises is well beyond the scope of this thesis.¹³² But at the very least, theological interpretation suggests that Wright's critical realism does not adequately take into account many of the developments in postmodern hermeneutics; despite his claims to the contrary, his attempt to keep "history" separate from the church's history of interpretation is overly optimistic and positivistic. At the least, Wright should consider these theological insights as a supplement to his historical method. Particularly where he proposes readings of biblical texts that are out of step with the

¹²⁷ Hays, "Knowing Jesus," 43.

¹²⁸ Vanhoozer, *Meaning*, 377. On patristic exegesis as a religious exercise, see O'Keefe and Reno, *Sanctified Vision*, 128-39.

¹²⁹ Matthew Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis: A Theology of Biblical Interpretation* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 15.

¹³⁰ Levering, *Exegesis*, 1-2. Cf. Bockmuehl, *Seeing*, 117-8.

¹³¹ Bockmuehl, *Seeing*, 113 argues that "nonecclesial and nontheological interpretation is from the start handicapped and ill-suited to the evident intent of the New Testament itself."

¹³² For a nuanced view of the relationship between theology and the historical-critical study of the New Testament, see the sage comments of Hurtado, "Questions," 169-72.

entirety of two thousand years of tradition, Wright should question whether he is not overreading the text to fit his grand hypothesis.

Summary and Significance

This thesis affirms the broad sweeps of Wright's historical method as a welcome development from most other approaches to studying the historical Jesus. Wright's key contributions, as noted above, include his integrative, holistic approach to history and his use of critical realism and narrativity as a means of thinking about historical data. These are real gains for which Wright is rightly celebrated.

That being said, Wright's method is not without weaknesses. Summarizing the results of this chapter, I suggest the following as improvements to his otherwise laudable approach:

(1) *Limit the Scope of the Hypothesis*. The use of a holistic grand hypothesis poses many risks, the most significant of which is the danger of forcing a single grand narrative on the data beyond what the complexity of reality and the diversity of data might allow. No single hypothesis can ever account for all of the data, and it should not attempt to. The hypothesis should indeed include all of the data, but only in the sense that the hypothesis should shed light on other parts of the data that do not directly relate to the primary hypothesis or narrative. Other themes, motifs, and narratives must not be subsumed or suppressed but allowed to interact with and help clarify the primary hypothesis.

(2) *Proceed from the Narrative Context of the Data*. Wright's hypothesis would be much more convincing if it were grounded in the narrative context of the data. Denton's two-step coherence theory of historical truth and verification, described above, correctly recognizes that study of the source context of a particular passage using various forms of biblical criticism must precede any attempt to detach it and apply it in service of

a hypothesis. This process, rather than the historian's imagination, should be the foundation of a holistic hypothesis.

(3) *Account for the Transmission Process*. The Synoptic tradition comes to us not as a pure, objective historical account but as the result of a complex process of oral and written transmission. To the extent that Wright is eager to claim that the Gospels are legitimate, reliable historical sources, he needs to account for this transmission process and propose or defend a model for identifying the historical core of a unit of tradition along the lines of what Dunn has suggested. Micro-level analysis of the tradition is just as important as Wright's emphasis on the macro-level.

(4) *Utilize the Church's Theological Heritage*. Wright's claim to integrate the study of theology into his program falls short on account of his dismissal of the church's theological heritage. While recognizing some measure of discontinuity between historical and theological work, the insights of the theological interpretation movement can in fact be of service to the historian. In particular, studying the reception history of a passage or the passage's intended or ideal reader can help modern scholars get back to how a text was initially understood, and thus avoid idiosyncratic or unconvincing interpretations.

In the final accounting, perhaps the real significance of Wright's work, beyond his actual portrait of Jesus and Christian origins, is to remind New Testament scholars that *historical method matters*. If historical Jesus scholars are ever to stop talking past one another, there must be agreement on what counts as good historical method. And so long as many *Neutestamentlers* remain formally untrained in the discipline of history, so long as knowledge of historical methods "remains in short supply," Wright's contribution could not be any more urgent.¹³³ If nothing else, Wright has raised awareness of methodological and epistemological issues that relate to such study. These issues are

¹³³ Mark A. Noll, "History," in *DTIB*, 295.

all the more pressing in evangelical circles, particularly those that insist on continuing an essentially modernist approach to history and hermeneutics, relying on nineteenth-century categories of “truth” and “inerrancy” and trusting that the historical-grammatical method, if only applied correctly, will yield an objectively “accurate” interpretation. Though this approach seems to promise “an objective basis for faith,” it in fact turns out to be a house built on shifting sand.¹³⁴ Instead, a truly *Christian* approach to history is one that, like Wright’s, makes room for faith by seeking *adequate*, rather than *absolute*, certainty.¹³⁵

¹³⁴ Sheppard, *Craft*, 123-4.

¹³⁵ Cf. Michael R. Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 69.

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