

Review

Wright, N.T. *Into the Heart of Romans: A Deep Dive into Paul's Greatest Letter*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2023. Pp. xvi + 232. Hardcover. ISBN: 9780310157823.

By Isaiah Allen, PhD

Into the Heart of Romans by N.T. Wright is an exposition of Romans 8 especially suitable for Christian ministers. According to Wright, Romans 8 culminates a critical section of Paul's grand argument, but Christians often misunderstand the consequential issues it addresses. The substance of the book includes a Preface, nine generally exegetical chapters, and two appendices.

The Preface (xiii-xvi) describes Wright's aim and approach. He wants to help modern readers understand Romans by correcting common assumptions and highlighting neglected aspects of Paul's message. Wright poses three questions to draw out meaning and give some organization to his exposition in each chapter: 1. How does a passage's beginning and ending signal its main theme? This question is apropos, assuming the passage does so and assuming one has not imposed artificial unit boundaries. Wright admits the beginning and ending can be difficult to draw definitively (142). 2. How do a passage's connecting words reveal its logic? Wright's conventional explanation of Greek particles may be appropriate for his intended audience, but he does not incorporate recent, nuanced linguistic studies (e.g., Sarah H. Casson, *Textual Signposts in the Argument of Romans* [SBL Press, 2019]). 3. How does Paul's Jewish and Greco-Roman milieu affect his meaning? These semantic, logical, and contextual questions may not constitute a comprehensive or innovative method, but they are valid.

In chapter 1, "Romans 8 in Context," Wright explains that context is critical for understanding Romans and that Romans 8 illuminates the whole letter. He introduces the recurring metaphor of a London cabbie who knows all the streets to describe a reader who understands the context of Romans and ably navigates it. Such "biblical taxi-drivers" not only know the passageways of Romans but have been transformed by them (2-3). Romans is "more complicated and interesting" than readers may recognize (5). In this chapter, Wright previews key themes in Romans 8, commending openness to further insight (10).

Chapters 2-9 treat sequential sub-units of Romans 8. Wright starts each chapter with his idiomatic translation of the passage. Romans 8:18, for instance, reads, "This is

how I worked it out. The sufferings we go through in the present time are not worth putting in the scale alongside the glory that is going to be unveiled for us” (108). A Greek transliteration in the right-hand column accompanies each passage.

In chapter 2, “Romans 8.1–4: No Condemnation,” Wright explains how Paul’s gospel is thoroughly Jewish. Just as Torah is covenant, instruction, and religious and civil law, Paul’s gospel contains these elements. “Law” (Torah) is not the problem; it is part of the solution. Commenting on “penal substitutionary atonement,” Wright points out that sacrificial animals were never viewed as enduring a punishment that human worshipers deserved. Rather than dying as the substitute for a duly condemned criminal, Jesus died as the substitute for a community whose vocation was to embody God’s good Torah and so to condemn sin (57).

In chapter 3, “Romans 8.5–11: The Spirit Gives Life,” Wright further explains how Torah was part of God’s solution to the human problems of sin and death. Sometimes, Wright seems to accept the theological superimposition of “sinful nature” onto the Greek term *sarx* (*flesh*), despite Paul’s nuance. Wright knows that *sarx* is not inherently negative, since Christ died “in the flesh,” and he explains that Christian virtue entails embodiment (71).

In chapter 4, “Romans 8.12–17: Led by the Spirit,” Wright explains that Romans 8 is about vocation more than salvation (90). God saves, not simply so that people can enjoy their salvation, but so that these image-bearers can “*carry out the father’s project*” (94, emphasis original), which has cosmic proportions. Wright correlates this passage with Exodus—e.g., Israel as God’s child, slavery and freedom.

In chapter 5, “Romans 8.17–21: The Liberation of Creation,” Wright defines glory according to Paul: the glory of God indwells through the spirit and is manifest in God’s image-bearers reconciling and reigning over creation. Wright shows how Paul draws on themes from across the Tanakh, namely Genesis 1 and Psalm 8, to identify stewardship over creation as the human vocation God always intended.

In chapter 6, “Romans 8.22–7: The Groaning of the Spirit,” Wright emphasizes the role of prayer in this vocation. In such prayer, God is active—healing and reconciling the world and restoring humans to their proper place of freedom and stewardship. This vocation of prayer, according to Paul, brings the faithful into spiritual fellowship with God, Israel’s exodus, a woman in childbirth, Jesus in Gethsemane and on the cross, and the entire world. Both grief and hope are entailed in intercessory prayer.

In chapter 7, “Romans 8.28–30: Justified and Glorified,” Wright explains how the text indicates that God does not just work *for* those who love him but *with* those who love him. Again, the emphasis is on vocation—the faithful are active partners, not passive recipients. “Those who love him” alludes to Israel and “the Shema of Deuteronomy 6” (159). Wright addresses the potential concern of readers fearing a synergistic soteriology: the vocation of implementing God’s plan is based on the completed work of Christ (161).

In chapter 8, “Romans 8.31–34: If God Is for Us,” recognizing that “Our world is increasingly hostile to genuine Christian faith” (178), Wright shows how Paul emphasized God’s righteousness as covenant loyalty. He sees Christian faith in the light of Israel’s faith, not in contrast to it. Paul draws from each section of the Hebrew Bible (Torah, Prophets, and Writings) to convey God’s faithfulness through Jesus’ death and resurrection. Paul sees Isaiah’s suffering servant as a model of Israel’s vocation in relation to the nations, an interpretation of the Christ event, and also the church’s eschatological role in the world.

In chapter 9, “Romans 8.34–39: Nothing Can Separate Us from God’s Love,” Wright points out that Paul conveyed “*penultimate* assurance” (203, emphasis original). Trials do not imply God’s displeasure or ambivalence, nor are they simply “nasty things to get through” (216). Rather, they are commensurate with the vocation of sharing in the “messianic woes” (203). Romans 8 brings God’s love full circle from Romans 5:1–11. Wright contrasts Paul’s emphasis on love with Greco-Roman ideology (208).

Two brief appendices sample primary sources that reinforce Wright’s portrayal of the historical-cultural background of Romans: “Appendix 1: Roman-Inaugurated Eschatology: The Return of the Golden Age (the Age of Saturn)” (223–4) and “Appendix 2: Hebrew Eschatology: The Messianic Age and/or the Coming of God’s Glory” (225–6). The Bibliography (227–8) lists twenty works of which fourteen were written by Wright. The book ends with an Index of Ancient Sources and Biblical References (229–32).

Wright corrects several misconceptions, asserting, among other things, the following: Romans is not about “me and my salvation” (5). Rather, Paul addresses “the crisis of the whole cosmos” and the human vocation within God’s plan (6). The salvation of humanity is not strictly about an individual’s destiny. Rather, God rescues people from sin and death so that they can fulfill their vocation as God’s representatives. Love is not contrary to the justice/righteousness of God; rather, it is pivotal to God’s purpose of putting all things right (14). “We are saved, not *from* the world but *for*

the world” (18). Jews of Paul’s day were not trying to climb “a ladder of good works” to heaven or achieve “works righteousness” (20). Paul’s theology of human salvation and creational redemption is grounded in Israel’s founding narratives and scriptures—Abraham and Sarah, the exodus, and the whole Tanakh (e.g., Genesis, Isaiah, Psalms)—not in philosophical abstractions. *Agapē* is not a special word for a special kind of love (211); rather the love Paul describes is special because it is defined by the triune God’s faithful and self-giving actions. Most emphatically and repeatedly, in virtually every chapter, Wright reminds readers that salvation is *not* about believers going to heaven when they die.

Although this book is published by an academic label, it exhibits several non-academic features. Wright uses contractions, colloquialism (e.g., “all the fiddly stuff,” 35; “the meat of the passage,” 69; “mind-blowing,” 122), and first- and second-person pronouns (e.g., 61, 80, 103, 125, 175) throughout. He expects his reader to either be familiar with Greek or willing to consult a second English translation (29)—wide goal posts. Providing transliteration, but not the Greek text, aims somewhere in the middle. Occasionally, more gender-inclusive verbiage would have improved his statements (e.g., 6, 89, 93–94). Wright often omits precise citations when referring to the Bible (e.g., 37, 43, 69, 170, 174) or other ancient literature (e.g., 25, 60, 99, 115). He liberally highlights correspondences across scripture, especially between the Johannine and Pauline corpora and among the undisputed and disputed letters (e.g., 65, 77, 175, 190), without explaining *how* correlations apply. He treats Acts as commensurate with Paul’s background, speaking of the “Damascus Road” on multiple occasions and referring to pre-Christian Paul as Saul (48). His earlier scholarly works exhibit more nuance. Taking a canonical approach would be valid, but he offers no such explanation of method.

There is very limited engagement with secondary literature. Of the book’s few dozen footnotes, most refer to the author’s own works. Wright often presents his interpretive claims as “obvious” (e.g., 50, 72, 87, 113, 125, 164, 180) but rarely entertains serious alternatives. He frequently refers dismissively to “some scholars,” “popular preaching,” or equivalent generic entities and discourses without citing examples of those who hold the view he describes (e.g., 31, 37, 50, 59, 89, 112, 119, 128). He brushes their straw opinions off the table to present his own. His conclusions are interesting, worthwhile, or compelling, but this style of argument does not befit an academic book. Wright does not seem to be offering a proposal for interpreting Romans 8 but *the* proper interpretation. The argument of this book sometimes comes across as too final, lacking the tentative posture that Wright himself suggests is critical for interpretation (10).

Wright does not mention the origins of this material. Perhaps it began as a series of addresses to Christian ministers. Its colloquial tone and casual style, the omission of most citations, and other features suggest orality. More than once, he refers to “today’s passage” (e.g., 109, 209), and he expresses repeated interest in preachers and ministers (e.g., 136, 141, 216, 219–220), occasionally addressing them in the second-person plural or including them in a first-person plural—e.g., “those to whom you preach” (4), “to clergy, I would say” (179), “all of us preachers and teachers” (182). Although the copyright page and jacket indicate that the book was published for the North American market, it retains British spellings, turns of phrase, and citation syntax. There are very few typographical errors in the English text (46, 47) but some transliteration mistakes (109, 162, 164).

Wright grounds this academic-popular crossover work in scholarship that may not be accessible to non-scholarly audiences. This book exposes readers to critical insights. Wright often explicates the theological implications of Paul’s argument in confessional terms and views Romans 8 as an inept trinitarian text (e.g., 26). Readers will find Wright’s illuminating interpretation, but not the careful weighing of other possible readings. The book is more of an exposition than a commentary. It is academically informed, theologically insightful, exegetically astute, pastoral, and devotional.

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