

SOME REFLECTIONS ON HERMENEUTICS AND METHOD: A REPLY TO GUY WATERS

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I am grateful for the remarks made and questions posed in Guy Waters's piece, "Rejoinder to Nicholas Perrin, 'A Reformed Perspective on the New Perspective.'" The issues raised in Waters's book and in the ensuing interchange engendered by my review are important ones. Some of these issues are, I think, especially important given certain shifts presently occurring within evangelical—and by extension conservative Reformed—theology. For better or worse, the past thirty or so years have witnessed a balkanization of theological method. This together with the postmodern turn has suddenly made the evangelical movement self-conscious in regards to issues of hermeneutics (how do we get at truth?) and method (how do we relate history to theology?). I suspect that the tension between Mr. Waters and N. T. Wright is *in part* related to a similar hermeneutical tension occurring in the evangelical academy and the church. With the advent of the New Perspective on Paul, it is almost as if we have had a new visitor to our bridge club, one who plays with slightly different but not entirely new conventions, and the club members are somewhat divided as to whether he should be invited for membership or sent away to the bridge club down the street and on the left. Sometimes bridge players develop new conventions because they want something new; sometimes they do so because they have taken a close look at the old way of doing things and found room for improvement. But quite apart from conventions, whether the new in this case is better, Waters and I also disagree as to how to play the hand properly. Just as any bridge columnist will tell you, there is a right way and a wrong way to play the game, so too there are right methods and wrong methods when it comes to assessing the New Perspective on Paul. Despite the protests of my dialogue partner, I believe he has not got it right.

Waters has objected to my review on a number of points, not all of which properly lie within the realms of hermeneutics and method. I hope and trust that my foregoing a detailed response to each of the specific objections is not misconstrued, either as an attempt to be evasive or as a tacit statement that the rejoinder's objections are not worthy of retort. Waters claims that my "criticisms might have been averted or tempered through a more careful reading" of *Justification and the New Perspectives on Paul*. But my sense is that entering into a game of "He said ... he said," or some version of, "But if you took the time to read what I wrote on page 54, the third footnote, you would have seen my point...," would not help matters much. Such interchanges all too often degenerate into quibbling without engaging the more substantive issues. But let me say this: I do think that I have given *Justification and the New Perspectives on Paul* an honest, careful, and fair reading. I will leave it to the unprejudiced reader of both the book and the review to determine whether or not I was right in my judgments. As for hermeneutics, let me focus on Waters's remarks concerning the relationship between (to

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use Wright's original phrasing) 'Jewish story-theology' and "the rarified territory of abstract Hellenistic speculation." In my review, I took issue with what I perceived as the author's playing one off against the other. But as Waters sees it, if "there is a dichotomy here it is because Wright has introduced it and pressed it." The rejoinder continues:

Perrin further pleads for what he terms a "linearity and logic" that is the province of narrative or story. We suspect that most readers are unfamiliar with this "logic." It seems to be different from the logic of the textbooks. How are the claims of this storied logic to be reconciled with the claims of conventional logic? Are they completely separate realms? Is there a third form of logic that transcends and encompasses both of them? If so, where might we learn of that logic? (134-35)

A brief consultation of *The New Testament and the People of God* shows that Wright is very clear on this matter.¹ He is not saying, as some postmodernists do in a dichotomizing fashion, that storied logic is superior to or somehow trumps the logic of propositional discourse, Wright is seeking to develop a methodology that avoids imposing post-Enlightenment categories. He does this by making the assumption (one widely granted since Ricoeur and in my mind intuitively true) that people, at a very basic and reflexive level, make sense of their lives through stories. Our work and play, our day-to-day routine and conversations, our support for or against the war, our decisions to marry or take this job rather than that one—all these things are playing out an internal story. These are stories that answer questions like, "Who am I? Where have I come from? Where am I going?" Waters says, "We suspect that most readers are unfamiliar with this 'logic.'" On the contrary, all readers, all people, unless insane, operate by this logic moment by moment without even thinking about it. If I ask Mr. Waters why he goes to church on Sunday, I rather doubt he would answer me with a syllogism. (I hope he would not do so!) Instead, he might say something like this: "Well, there's a story behind this. 'It's a story I love to tell.'" Yes, this logic is different from the "logic of textbooks" (thank God for that), but it is rather silly to set this order of cognition against the claims of "conventional logic," whatever that is. Wright certainly does nothing of the kind.

Wright's point rather is that stories are the foundation on which other modes of thought operate. So, for example, when we use terms like "election" or "monotheism," these in turn presuppose a story, the story of how God called Israel out of Egypt and revealed himself as the one true God. Terms like these are a kind of shorthand, which conjure and encapsulate whole narratives unto themselves. Arguably, apart from the narrative contexts these theological terms are virtually void of meaning. Thus, Wright reasons, not unjustly, that a proper interpretation of the New Testament writers' beliefs and aims must first begin with the stories that underlie such beliefs and aims.

That beliefs (crystallized in propositional form) are derived from story—not vice versa—is manifestly the case upon consideration that the Bible itself is constituted by narrative. One might think, for example, of Jesus' parables. Jülicher and the rationalists before him were eager to boil down these "heavenly stones with an earthly meaning" to

¹ N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).

a summarizing bottom-line. Such theologians (and too many preachers!) think they are helping Jesus get to the real point, the hidden truth of the parable, by reductionistically casting the “point” of the parable into propositional form. Certainly we need propositional language to talk about narrative, but to imply, as is often done, that such discourse is a superior substitute for the narrative itself is nothing more than a form of rationalism. If Waters faults Wright for beginning with stories rather than beliefs, he may as well also fault God for revealing himself through a book that also fails to use “conventional logic.” The Bible is not a textbook: the Bible is itself one grand narrative. How this narrative logic relates to belief (Waters’s “conventional logic”—a telling phrase, I think) Wright makes perfectly clear in *The New Testament and the People of God*.

Is Wright really setting up a dichotomy between “Jewish story-theology” and “the rarified territory of abstract Hellenistic speculation”? A contrast, yes. A dichotomy, no. Clearly Wright is responding to—and this seems to escape Waters entirely—the Old Liberal notion of Paul, popularized by Harnack, which suggested that the apostle had distorted the original essence of Christianity by imposing his Hellenistic thought-forms, Wright is saying, in so many words, that Harnack is wrong and that all such attempts to make Paul out to be a systematic theologian (in the modern sense, not the same thing as a theologian who happens to be systematic) are equally misguided. To read this as an attempt to deconstruct propositional discourse, logic, and all things systematic (coherent) is simply *eisegesis*. But if Wright is being accused of attempting to situate the apostle in his proper historical milieu, then he is guilty as charged. Perhaps this “new” convention is a better hermeneutic and does a better job at getting a sense of what cards Paul held to his chest. Perhaps too Waters should have exhibited a better awareness of the state of play of this discussion.

So much for hermeneutics, now on to method. To repeat a point I brought out in my review, I do find Waters’s handling of history and theology most dissatisfying. In response to this complaint, the author writes: “It is evident that *J&NPP* has fallen short of Perrin’s methodological expectations. It is not altogether clear what those expectations are” (137). Let me clarify with a few further examples from the book itself.

Waters objects to “the notion that a secondary reconstruction of one set of texts should control our reading of another set of primary texts” (*J&NPP* 155). By the former, the author presumably means non-canonical Second-Temple literature; by the latter, biblical texts. His objection is based on the theological principle of scripture interpreting scripture. Waters seems to be saying, in other words, “Let’s not confuse ourselves with texts outside the Bible. When thinking about Paul, let’s stick to what the Bible says.” In his rejoinder, Waters agrees that it is inappropriate to impose “a systematic-theological conclusion upon a particular text independently of a text’s ascertained meaning” (137). But by ruling out or at least minimizing the evidentiary force of Second-Temple literature on the grounds of its non-canonical status, he has already forced “a systematic-theological conclusion upon a particular text independently of a text’s ascertained meaning.” A historian ascertains meaning by gathering and comparing all relevant data. Waters, by contrast, seems to want to start with a theological prolegomenon (canonical

sources are the only ones that count) and then move from there to doing history.² This might be good theology (I am no theologian, but doubt that it is); this is certainly not good history.

Elsewhere Waters accuses Wright of imposing “a foreign biblical-theological model upon the text of Paul” (*J&NPP* 180). He continues by stating that a

sounder and more textually faithful method of proceeding is to examine each instance of “righteousness” where it occurs and to allow the context to define this term for us. At Romans 3:25-26 (cf. 3:5), “righteousness” means God’s inherent justice; at Romans 1:17; 3:21-22; 5:17; 10:3, the term means that “which God gives and which he approves.” (*J&NPP* 180)

Having just read that we should “allow the context to define the term for us,” the reader might expect an exegetical defense of some kind. Instead, Waters follows this statement with argument by assertion. Arguments by assertion of course prove nothing, but they do show up where and when a writer has stopped doing history and started relying on unarticulated theological convictions. This occurs repeatedly. Equally interesting is Waters’s refusal, on hermeneutical grounds, to allow a biblical theological reading of Paul. But if Paul himself was a biblical theologian of sorts (a historical assertion), then it is inappropriate to dismiss this for theological reasons.

Consider another example. In his treatment of Sanders, Waters writes:

The fact that the rabbis could inquire why God elected Israel is more significant than Sanders admits. We cannot afford to pass over such statements because they are allegedly peripheral to the central conviction *that* God elected Israel. Any system of theology that conceives God as electing a person on the grounds of his or her foreseen or actual deeds is not gracious in the biblical sense. The Old Testament itself precludes such reasoning (see Deut. 7:7-8; 9:4-5), for the biblical position is that God has chosen his people solely because it pleased him to do so. (*J&NPP*, 55-56)

As Waters sees it, Second-Temple Judaism adhered to a belief system that was not gracious, but semi-Pelagian. One reason we know that it was not a gracious religion, according to Waters, is because the rabbis inquired as to why God had elected Israel. The very fact that the rabbis were asking this question shows that they conceived “God as electing a person on the grounds of his or her foreseen or actual deeds.” This is “not gracious in the biblical sense.” But many theologians would disagree with this last statement: God is not gracious solely because it pleased him to be so; God is gracious on the grounds of *someone’s* actual deeds, namely, Christ’s. I do not see the rabbis as being wrong, unbiblical, or self-righteous in asking the question. The question is altogether appropriate and makes perfect sense within a gracious “system of theology” (That is, unless Waters thinks that Charles Hodge maintained a non-gracious system of theology)

The point is this. Waters is inferring the legalistic nature of Second-Temple Judaism

² Waters’s move is different from canonical criticism, as practiced by Childs and Sanders. For these scholars, the historical-critical/grammatical-historical method is still germane, even if final meaning is not co-identical with authorial intent.

in part on the basis of their discussion of election. What he fails to see is that this historical judgment is strongly conditioned by his personal theological judgments.³ At the end of the day, the above-cited paragraph and Waters's overall discussion tell us more about Waters's theology than they do about the nature and aims of Paul's polemic.

I for one am willing to believe that a number of first-century Jews did not have complete assurance of salvation. Others—for example, the authors behind a number of the Qumran texts—seemed to have complete assurance. But wasn't fuller assurance one of the points in God's granting of the Holy Spirit (Rom 8:15-16)? And if so, would we not also expect that Judaism, before the coming of the Messiah, would fail to attain the same level of assurance commended through the NT writings? Surely, if Geerhardus Vos taught us anything, he taught us that progressive revelation forbids a facile comparing of pre-messianic and post-messianic "systems," as if we were comparing apples with apples. Is Paul criticizing Judaism because it is a full-grown tree that fails to produce good apples? Or is he criticizing Judaism because it is a sapling that refuses to become a tree? Whereas I suspect that Bultmann and Waters would opt for the former, I maintain the latter.

I believe, in other words, that Paul is upset with his contemporary Jews not because of the self-righteousness inherent in their views of election or made manifest by their lack of assurance; he is upset because they have rejected their full rights as heirs. Now on one level, this rejection of Christ may arise out of a self-righteousness (ultimately all rejection of Christ does), but this does not entail that Paul saw Judaism as being self-righteous in essence. This is a view handed down from Old Liberalism and one that too many evangelicals, including Mr. Waters, I fear, have bought into. If Judaism had really sunk into a system of legalistic works self-righteousness, how then does one explain such characters as Anna, Simeon, and Elizabeth? Were they just oddballs? And if they were, then what was it about their belief-system that set them apart from their contemporaries?

Waters's argument is that Paul objected to his first-century Jewish peers because they were semi-Pelagian. This is an important point for Waters. Let us return to a passage which I flagged in my review, a passage in which Waters cites Wright and then goes on to criticize him. Because Waters says that I have taken him to task unfairly here, I cite the passage in full:

We are all familiar with the tired battle cries that the Reformers read their own struggles with late medieval Catholicism into Pauline interpretation. Wright is especially egregious in this regard: "Many people, including many supposedly 'Pauline Christians,' would say, off the cuff, that the heart of Paul's teaching is 'justification by faith.' What many such people

³ Francis Watson (*Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith* [London: T&T Clark, 2004], 12) makes a similar critique of Sanders when he writes that "Sanders' entire presentation of 'Palestinian Judaism' is informed by an unexamined theological value judgment, according to which a religion (Christian or Jewish) *should* give priority to divine grace, while not neglecting consequent human conduct.... But the normative principle is itself the product of Pauline and (liberal) protestant Christianity, divested of Christological trappings that are supposed to be inessential" (italics original). Waters has, in other words, fallen into the Sanders trap. Although showing divergent results, both scholars compare the relative graciousness (however one defines that!) of Second-Temple Judaism and Christianity, without reference to the latter's Christological framework. However rigorous in its use of sources, such an approach is inevitably superficial and bound to be skewed.

understand as the meaning of this phrase is something like this. People are always trying to pull themselves up by their own moral bootstraps. They try to save themselves by their own efforts; to make themselves good enough for God, or for heaven. This doesn't work; one can only be saved by the sheer unmerited grace of God, appropriated not by good works but by faith. This account of justification owes a great deal both to the controversy between Pelagius and Augustine in the early fifth century and to that between Erasmus and Luther in the early sixteenth century”

Ironically, it is the *ignorance* of historical theology on the part of Wright and other scholars that prompts them to make such affirmations as these. Late medieval Catholicism was not a Pelagian religion—it was *semi*-Pelagian in nature.⁴

Implicitly, Waters berates Wright for affirming that late medieval Catholicism was a Pelagian religion, but this is patently not what Wright says. And if we look at what Wright does say, we might ask what statement here is historically inaccurate, prompted by “*ignorance* of historical theology”? Wright’s goal is to give a certain account of Paul with which we are all familiar and which, we also know, does owe much of its modern Protestant framing to two historic conversations from the past. It is not his goal, at any rate, to pinpoint the precise nature of late medieval theology and then use it as a rubric for understanding Paul’s opponents. That’s Waters’s project. What Wright is trying to say is this: “Let’s understand Paul’s situation on its own historical terms, without embroiling ourselves in the anachronisms that may result from calling Luther and Augustine to our aid.” While I don’t wish to defend Wright as a leading expert in Reformation theology (I don’t think he would want to defend himself), I think his point is nonetheless well taken.⁵

Waters apparently thinks that semi-Pelagianism does provide the explanatory model for Second-Temple Judaism. I demur. There are insufficient data from which to infer Second-Temple Jews’ construal of the precise interrelationship between (prevenient) grace and human agency. But let us assume, for the sake of argument, that Waters is correct: that Paul is attacking his opponents because they hold to a semi-Pelagian position. It is clear that, as far as Paul was concerned, the stakes were high for the Judaizers. To hold to the Judaizer position, whatever it was, essentially meant forfeiting salvation (Gal 1:8, 9; 2:21; 5:4). In this case, again if Waters is right, to adopt semi-Pelagianism is tantamount to having forfeited salvation. In this case too, if we may think about the implications of Waters’s reading of Paul for today, this not only puts the Roman communion in serious jeopardy, but also consigns our evangelical, Arminian brothers and sisters to perdition. If readers are convinced of Waters’s position, then they must be equally convinced—to put it bluntly but nonetheless in keeping with the logic of his argument—that a good portion of the Evangelical Theological Society stands in need of evangelization. Again, I demur.

Like Sanders before him, Waters attempts to compare the Pauline pattern of religion, extracted from history, with Second-Temple Judaism, equally extracted from history.

⁴ Waters, *J&NPP*, 185-86, citing Wright, *What St Paul Really Said* (Cincinnati, Ohio; Forward Movement Publications, 1997), 113. All italics original.

⁵ In the same place Waters refers to Paul as, “to speak anachronistically, a thoroughly Augustinian writer.” Does Waters mean to imply that Paul saw justification as a process finally grounded on the believer’s *caritas* (love)? If not, it seems that Waters holds Wright to a higher standard of historical accuracy than he himself is willing to hold on the same page!

This isn't the best way to go about understanding Paul because the hinge of Paul's argument involves the historical shift that has occurred with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In my view, Paul's quarrel with the Judaizers is not that they were caught in the web of their legalisms. His argument is that they have missed the great salvation-historical shift that has occurred. As a result, their "works of the law" are a misdirected attempt to locate themselves within the Mosaic covenant. By attaching themselves to the Mosaic covenant, the Judaizers risked forfeiting the soteriological and ecclesiological blessings of the New Covenant. In arriving at this position, I find myself at points in exegetical agreement with Wright against Waters and at points with Waters against Wright.

I bring up my view not because I think Waters should have written a book arguing my particular point of view (nothing is more frustrating than a reviewer who writes a review stating what he or she wished the author had said), but because *Justification and the New Perspectives on Paul* creates the misleading impression that we have New Perspective Exegesis and Theology on the one side and Traditional Exegesis and Theology on the other side: *tertium non datur*. Let the reader beware: there is no such thing as New Perspective Systematic Theology and there is no such thing as Traditional Exegesis. You can compare exegesis with exegesis. You can compare theology with theology. But you can't compare exegesis with theology.

But this is just the problem: for Waters there doesn't seem to be any real difference between exegesis and theology. True, the New Perspective interpreters of Paul generally have not given a full account of the individual's sin and the precise mechanism by which God deals with this sin. (I am not familiar with one place in Luther's writings where the Reformer treats systemic sin—a weakness perhaps, but I am not about to condemn the Reformer for that.) But since when has it been incumbent on exegetes to do comprehensive theology? You might as well be cross with your plumber for failing to fix your fusebox while he was in the basement tinkering with your pipes.

I conclude with three points. First, Waters's misgivings concerning Wright's "storied logic" betray a hermeneutical stance heavily invested in a certain post-Enlightenment epistemology and, moreover, a certain degree of naiveté regarding the fact of this investment. When you're playing bridge it's important to know that there are other trump cards outside your own hand. Second, Waters's commingling of theology and history prevents him from making a convincing case, theologically or historically, that Paul's polemic is against a proto-semi-Pelagianism. When you call a trump suit, you must stick with it for the duration of the hand. Finally, Waters claims that his argument "awaits refutation": "The rest of the tricks are mine." This tone of triumphalism may win the grateful admiration and applause of certain lay readers, but his being quite taken with his own argument does not make it any more convincing. On the contrary, it makes it less so. He has not won the hand, much less the match. In response to Wright's lead in history, he has attempted to lay down a few cards of various suits at the same time. "If you play a heart, my spade wins; if you play a spade, my heart wins." Waters's argument will indeed "await refutation" to the end of time, because its confusion of the categories of history and theology makes it unfalsifiable. But if he agrees to follow suit and reaches for the Paul-as-anti-proto-semi-Pelagian card, I don't have high hopes for such a card surviving the round.