In religion, it is easy to forget that those who played a role in its history were, indeed, humans. It is an often-made mistake to project present contexts onto those in the past; but it is not a mistake to assume that people of the past were just as subject then as we are today to their environments. Just as we are today, people like Cleopatra, Thomas Jefferson, Jesus and all the rest were limited by social constraints. Even this idea that we are all products of our environment is a post-Enlightenment idea; today, that is the premise from which scholars explore historical figures. Indeed, this is the premise N.T. Wright starts with in his analysis of Paul. In his book, he stresses that Paul was heavily influenced by the world he lived in, which comprised Judaism, Hellenism, and the Roman Empire. At the heart of Paul’s theology as it is written in the New Testament letters is his deep connection to his religion, Judaism. Too often, Wright argues, Paul is taken out of his Jewish context and the meaning of his writings is warped or not fully understood. Modern Christians have taken the narrative of Judaism and ended its story before Jesus’ birth. This is contrary to what Paul thought should have happened, according to Wright. Christianity was not meant to be a new and separate religion; for Paul belief in Jesus as the messiah was a belief that the Jewish scriptures had been fulfilled, albeit in an unexpected way. It was not the end of one narrative, but the continuation of it. Jesus was the fulfillment of the covenant that God had made with the Jews. For Paul, God had not made a *new* covenant; he had *renewed* the covenant through Jesus.

Recreation and Renewal

Judaism is a religion revealed through narrative. God’s role and his attributes are exposed within the narratives of the myths, starting with the creation story in Genesis. This is a critical book in the theological development of Judaism and Christianity, for in it the idea of sin is introduced and, indeed, this provides the problem of the entire story. God gives Adam and Eve a perfect garden for a small price: they are commanded not to eat the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. Of course, they do. Adam’s sin provides the conflict, around which the story revolves. Creation and covenant, two components of Paul’s theology, are connected in Genesis in a circular relationship: God’s creation defiles itself; but God enters into a covenant with his creation (Abraham), in which God and his chosen people will work together to usher in the “original” state of the world – the world before original sin. God calls upon Abraham and his family “to undo the sin of Adam, even though Abraham and his family are themselves part of the problem as well as the bearers of the solution” (23). The covenant with Abraham is centered on land of Israel and parallels the story of Adam and Eve. There are two options for Israel as there were for Adam and Eve: obey God and inherit the fruitful “promised land,” or do not and be exiled from it. But the conflict is only worsened because Israel fails to uphold its end of the covenant. Acknowledging these historic events (for Paul they were historic) is critical for understanding Paul’s Jewish insertions into a theology that, today, may seem completely new and different.

Wright points to Colossians 1:15-20 (recognizing its controversial authorship) to showcase from where Paul gets his ideas. This passage reiterates the *Jewish* notion that “the creator God is also the redeeming, covenant God, and vice versa” (27). But, instead of addressing the covenant God made with Israel, Paul writes that God has made “peace through the blood of his [Jesus’] cross” (Colossians 1:20, NRSV). Clearly, Paul is not devising a new narrative, and it is not mere coincidence that the creator/covenant-making God of the Jews is the same God as Paul’s. Jesus is, rather, a fulfillment of the covenant made with Abraham and others in the Hebrew Scriptures: Jesus the Messiah is “the one through whom both creation and redemption have come about.” Wright’s point is that Paul saw Jesus as the “true fulfillment of Genesis 1.26” – that he was made in the image of God – and as the only one who could uphold the covenant for God’s people. This is the epitome of covenant and creation combined to form Paul’s theology.

Wright then addresses 1 Corinthians 15, in which Paul again refers back to Genesis: “For since death came through a human being [Adam], the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being [Jesus]” (1 Cor. 15:20, NRSV). Furthermore, Jesus’ redemption of the world entails the creation of a “new type of human.” Both Adam and Jesus are made in the image of God (28). But Adam comes from the earth and Jesus from heaven. Wright claims that Paul’s argument is that “as we have been born in the image of the earthly human being [Adam], we shall also bear the image of the heavenly one [Jesus]” (28). The language is somewhat clearer here; Jesus is considered to Paul to be the foil of Adam, i.e. the reversal of sin’s destruction, the fulfillment of the Jewish covenant. The letter to the Romans spells out further why the Israelites needed Jesus’ intercession on their behalf: “the covenant people have become part of the problem, not the agents of the solution. … [H]ow is God to be both faithful to the covenant and just in his dealings with the whole creation?” (29). Here Jesus’ role is unveiled: he is the one true Israelite who can be perfectly faithful to the covenant with God. Jesus then breaks down the barriers between Jews and Gentiles because it is God himself, and not his chosen people, who keeps the covenant alive. The promise was that Israel would be faithful to God and God would be faithful to them, delivering them from their oppressors. Through Jesus, the covenant is fulfilled and now creation can be renewed. Wright claims that Paul redefined the terms of God’s covenant with Abraham: The reward is no longer Israel’s return to the Holy Land; the Holy Land becomes the message of Jesus, which is not a point of assembly but rather something that must be taken out to the whole world. Moreover, the Law given to Moses is made obsolete because of Jesus’ ultimate faithfulness, which culminated in death. In fact, Paul decries the Law because it reveals sin rather than prevents it (31). The only way to be faithful is to have faith in Jesus the Messiah: “When human beings come to believe this gospel they are precisely the first-fruits of redeemed creation” (33). This is how salvation is now attained, according to Paul.

Paul’s theology of creation and covenant is the foundation for his theology of salvation. The myth of Genesis reveals a very real human problem, whether the book is taken literally or figuratively: sin is the byproduct of the “fracturing of human relationships and the fracturing of the relationship between humans and the non-human creation” (34). Sin is the result of humans’ failure to trust in God. Wright says it clearly:

“humans were made to function in particular ways, with worship of the creator as the central figure, and those who turn away from that worship – that is, the whole human race, *with a single exception* – are thereby opting to seek life where it is not to be found, which is another way of saying that they are courting their own death and decay” (35, emphasis added).

Perfect faith in God could only be embodied in Jesus, who now serves as Paul’s model of faithfulness. Wright’s above statement captures why Paul placed such a heavy emphasis on the connection between creation and covenant. God’s covenant with the Israelites could not be fulfilled until God appointed himself as the messiah of the world. He was, in the end, the only one who could defeat death and decay and usher in the new creation, i.e. the spiritual recreation of the believer. This theology of creation and covenant is the perfect segue for Jewish scriptures to converge into Jesus, who lifted the burden from the Israelites by offering to God “the perfect obedience Israel should have offered” (38). That God sent his son to fulfill the covenant for an undeserving people is *grace*, a key component of Paul’s theology. By God’s grace, sin is nullified, forgiveness is given, *and* Gentiles are enabled to partake in the rewards of the renewed covenant. Indeed, the New Testament is named after this new covenant established between God and the world, whereby belief replaces the Law and the kingdom of God replaces the Holy Land. Israel was meant to be the “light of the world,” as Wright calls it (109). The Jews were meant to reveal to the Gentiles “what it means to be truly human, and hence who the true God is,” by living out the human function, worshipping the creator (109). Jesus changes everything; not only is the covenant renewed and creation recreated, but God’s people are redefined. The essence of Paul’s theology is summed up in Wright’s translation of Galatians 2:15-16:

“’We,’ affirms Paul, ‘are by birth Jews, not “gentile sinners”; yet we know that one is not justified by works of Torah, but through the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah; thus we too have believed in the Messiah, Jesus, so that we might be justified by the faithfulness of the Messiah and not by works of Torah, because through works of Torah no flesh will be justified’” (111).

This is what the renewed covenant looks like. It is redefined in terms of who is part of the covenant and what the conditions are. No longer is it limited to the Israelites to whom God gave the Torah. And no longer does justification come from obedience to the Torah. All people must have faith in Jesus the Messiah and emulate his perfect obedience to God. When people enter into the renewed covenant with God, then they are recreated by their faith. The meaning of “justified,” according to Wright, is a statement about “*who belongs to the people of God, and how you can tell that in that person*” (112). Those who have faith in Jesus as the Messiah are transformed by the Spirit, they are driven to live like Jesus lived and love like he loved; therefore their actions inevitably speak of their faith (112). God’s purpose for Israel as the chosen people was to act as an example to the rest of the world; Israel was “cast … as the messenger through whose faithful work the creator would bring the news of his power and love to the whole world” (119). But Israel was “unfaithful *to the commission God had given it*” (119). It was always God’s intention to bring Gentiles into his family, but as long as the Israelites were unfaithful, this could not happen. Jesus’ *faithfulness* allows the narrative to move beyond the obstacle; both Jews and Gentiles have access to salvation.

What does it mean, though, to belong to God in the context of this renewed covenant if it no longer means God will return the Israelites to the Promised Land? Furthermore, what does it mean to belong to the people of God? What is the ultimate reward? Paul takes Jewish eschatology and reworks it around Jesus the Messiah, who has brought the “new age” into the present, “inaugurate[d] the new covenant, … [and] plant[ed] the seeds of the new creation” (147). Wright contends that the Spirit, dispersed after Jesus’ death and resurrection, is a “gift from God’s future, the gift which guarantees that future” (146). The Spirit works in the hearts and minds of the people who hear the gospel, and they are transformed by it. Thus, Christians are participants in the “renewal of the cosmos,” acting as beneficiaries and as agents (114). The theology of creation and covenant comes full circle in Paul’s new eschatology:

“faith, hope, and supremely love are the things that will last, the qualities which, as fruits of the Spirit, are the bridges into the new world, and by learning to cross those bridges we are already living by the rule, as Paul can still sometimes call it, of God’s new creation” (147).

What it means today

Despite Wright’s intentions to portray Paul as a Jew who did *not* mean to create a new religion, he did. Paul’s theology of covenant and creation has been perhaps one of the sharpest knives that cut off Jews and Christians from each other. Until just recently, Jews and Christians have had a terrible relationship, often involving discrimination and persecution. To Christians, Jews who did not believe in Jesus as the Messiah were left in the dark. By not entering the renewed covenant between believers and God, Jews were demoted in the eyes of Christians from their place as God’s Chosen People. This has, as A.J. Levine expounds in her book *The Misunderstood Jew*, created a culture of anti-Semitism within Christianity that still lingers today. The title of the New Testament is, indeed, evidence of the demotion of Jews: they are the people who believe in what is old and outdated, while Christians take their place as God’s people. The renewed covenant that Paul speaks of in his letters undermines the relationship God has with the Jews by effectively stating that God has moved on to newer and better people.

Certainly it was not Paul’s intention to develop a distinct religion, as Wright argues throughout his book. But when more Jews refused to accept Jesus as the Messiah, the apostles turned to the Gentiles, who were a much more receptive audience. Jews today feel the same contempt for Christians that Christians feel for Muslims; there is a certain instinct triggered when a group of people claim that their religion overrides the former, and it is nothing short of anger and betrayal. While the Qur’an contains verses that insist that all people of the book can enter paradise, the New Testament is not so lenient. Paul’s theology centers on faithfulness as the key to salvation, and that key is one only Jesus can turn. This Christian theology underlines the relationship between Jew and Christian, and it has often had a damaging effect. Indeed, anti-Semitism in the West, from ancient eras until the 20th century, culminated in the Holocaust, the worst calamity ever recorded.

N.T. Wright: a critical analysis

As with all historians and scholars, a student of Wright must employ caution. His bias is admitted in the seventeenth page of his book: he does “believe in the mysterious, unpredictable, and usually hidden work of the Holy Spirit.” This belief does not run wild throughout the pages of his book, but it does at times color his interpretation of Paul. How could it not? Furthermore, Wright is an Anglican bishop and thus is heavily influenced by Catholic doctrine and teaching. A prime example of his bias is revealed in his translation of Galatians 2:15-16, whereby he contends that works are certainly necessary to demonstrate that a person is in the faithful community. He interprets this passage to mean that the *faithfulness of Jesus*, not one’s *faith* *in* Jesus, renders a person justified before God (111). Aside from this Protestant-Catholic interpretive difference, there are likely to be tensions between his Christian viewpoint and that of the Jews’. It is always somewhat dangerous for someone to be the spokesperson for a faith he or she doesn’t practice. Levine addresses this very danger in her book*.* What a Christian thinks about Paul could easily be refuted by a Jew. The best way to check bias is to engage in collaborative efforts to reconstruct the meaning of something like Paul’s works. Wright does not offer other perspectives in his book, which I have found is a recurrent, egocentric mistake in the books of many scholars of religion.

While trying to deter people from regarding Paul as anything but Jewish, he certainly makes it easy for Christians to read Christian theology back into the Hebrew Scriptures. This perhaps reveals Wright’s failure to really include the other contexts that inevitably influenced Paul, i.e. Hellenism and the Roman Empire. Paul was Jewish, but he also wrote in Greek to Gentiles who were integrated into a Hellenistic and Roman world. Wright looks through the lens of Judaism, but neglects to look through the other two lenses, which undoubtedly must be equally as important. How did Hellenistic culture, philosophy and even the Greek language affect Paul’s theology and presentation? How did Roman rule affect Paul’s motives? Though Wright does an excellent job of making Paul a Jewish human, he, in a sense, flattens him by limiting him to his Jewish context. It’s not enough to introduce Paul’s three worlds in the beginning and then let him live and think in only one of them.

The study of historical figures requires intense discipline. Historians are biased by their own contexts and motives, just as their subjects of study once were. N.T. Wright is adamant about placing Paul back in his contexts of Judaism, and, though more limitedly, Hellenism and the Roman Empire of the first century C.E. His arguments are compelling; he does not fail to make the connection between first-century Jewish beliefs and Paul’s theology. In fact, he does a brilliant job of assuring the reader that Paul was, undoubtedly, Jewish. This is such an important contribution to the study of an historic theologian – indeed, *the* theologian of Christianity. Paul cannot be understood properly without acknowledging that the Jewish narrative written before him shaped the context of his life. Wright does a remarkable job of *humanizing* Paul by recognizing that, realistically there was no way Paul could have divorced himself completely from his Jewish roots. The story of Christianity as Paul reveals it in his theology is, in his mind, seamlessly sewn to the story of Judaism. Indeed, Jesus’ purpose would be naught without the Jewish prequel. The creator and covenant-making God of the Jews would have no reason for Jesus without the story the Hebrew Scriptures narrate. This is Wright’s point; and, indeed, his delineation of Christianity’s origins sheds light on Christian theology and on the religion as a whole.