

Scribes Instructed unto the Kingdom

A RESPONSE TO N. T. WRIGHT'S *HISTORY AND ESCHATOLOGY*

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In this essay, I will engage some fundamental issues in any Christian “theology of history” by reflecting on aspects of the “old” and the “new,” especially within the framework of continuity and discontinuity. Old and new, after all, lie at the heart of Christian claims about historical reality. Old and New Testaments; former and new creations; behold, I do something new! But old and new are central to Christian claims, I will argue, in a way that renders a specifically Christian theology of *history* difficult, unstable, perhaps even impossible in any logically rationalist sense. By which I mean in the sense of a “natural theology of history” upon which we can point to “happenings” that locate the old and new in time, in any steady or predictable fashion—this is the old, this is the new, and here is when it all takes place. There always hovers about these attempts the troubling and almost poignant human puzzlement articulated in 2 Peter 3:4: “For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation . . .” (AV). Nothing has changed. That is, how do we actually establish in empirical experience—history defined a certain way—the difference between old and new when “everything goes on as it always has”—the phenomenon of temporal uniformity, by the way, that undergirds historical study itself?

To get at the problematics of old and new, in a Christian historical perspective, and with it describe some main categories of response, I’m going to focus on a popular and highly influential Christian thinker in our day, N. T. Wright. Wright, of course, is not primarily a theologian—and some would not rate him highly in that regard—but his New Testament

scholarship has had extraordinarily wide currency, and he is greatly respected, if also contested, in his own discipline.

A central argument in Wright's powerful and vigorously argued *History and Eschatology*—his Gifford Lectures of 2018—is that “history” is itself a form, perhaps even the primary and proper form, for Christian “natural theology.”¹ History itself—what happens—can and indeed does reveal God to us somehow;² and therefore “studying earth to find out what heaven is up to”³ is not only a legitimate Christian pursuit, but because of the very nature of Jesus's own revelatory life, it is the foundation of Christian hope. Not only do “things” tell us about God. Even more so, what “happens” is precisely the meaning of God's reality, at least with respect to human apprehension.

This argument coheres, more or less, with a traditional Christian perspective, in which “history,” if not always approached under the rubric of “natural theology,” has been studied within the category of “providence,” a kind of reflection that goes back to the earliest Church. To be sure, providential readings of history have varied in their methodologies—for example, in their approach to historical research itself—and this can radically change the conclusions one reaches. Still, even though most Christians, including pastors and preachers, tend to engage history in a variety of often contradictory ways, most at least *want* to be able to affirm Wright's basic claim. After all, if our historical experiences have little empirical relationship with the known or knowable character of God, our faith is, at best, hard to commend to others and, at worst, hard to hold onto ourselves. And my point is that Wright's large argument, despite his occasional claims for its novelty, is not one that stands at odds with fundamental Christian intuitions and embedded intellectual practices.

1. N. T. Wright, *History and Eschatology: Jesus and the Promise of Natural Theology* (Baylor University Press, 2019).

2. Wright, 101.

3. Wright, 106.

Wright's focus on historical research, nonetheless, as founding such providential understandings of the world and imposing a kind of rigor on what one can legitimately claim about "what happened," provides, in contrast to some earlier providentialist approaches to history, a far more chastened reading of the divine significance of human experience. It is this aspect I want to reflect upon. For, taken seriously, a rigorously articulated "history," however contestable its conclusions, must reveal both a difficult God and history's own difficulty with this God. Making history itself a comprehensive tool of natural theology is theologically humbling at best, and at worst, deeply frightening. That is not, I will suggest, a bad thing; rather, it is a very good thing indeed, and I only wish that Wright could be more upfront about this reality, since it touches on how both the natural world and the Bible itself are to be understood.

Wright would take issue with this view of history complicating the world and Christian faith, both. He would do so, I think, largely because he is convinced that historical study reveals a kind of key to providential meaning, a key that is located in the Resurrection of the crucified Jesus. No classical Christian would ever deny the absolute significance of this key. The question is whether the key properly releases a providential lock, historically defined, or whether providentialism is thereby itself profoundly obscured or perhaps simply redefined in a way that challenges common-sense notions of "history" itself. Does providentialism (which I will use as a term for any "natural theology of history" or "historical natural theology") clarify our faith or complicate it? I believe it does the latter, making the familiar profoundly strange.

There are four parts to the following essay. First, I will briefly address the *novum* in the context of the discipline of historical studies; next, I extend this discussion with a consideration of the problematics of theodicy; third, in light of the challenges of theodicy—a modern child of natural theology—I suggest a particular demand laid upon the Christian historian, that is, presenting history as itself a reality that is "alien" or

discontinuous with our benumbed historical apprehensions; and finally I will offer my own proposal (quite traditional) for conceiving human history, suggesting that temporal experience is the product of Scripture's generation, as it were, of time itself. I will briefly conclude on what, therefore, is old and new in a Christian theology of history.

I. The Question of the *Novum*

One of the major issues in any clarifying providentialism that relies on the cross and Resurrection is how to integrate within it the reality of “newness.” Wright spends some time on this reality in chapter 6 of his book, under the rubric of the “New Creation.” By definition, any notion of a “new creation” trades on the reality of historical *discontinuity*, and such discontinuity, according to Wright's centralizing of the Resurrection, stands as the fundamental determinant for Christian understandings of history. But what does historical discontinuity do to providentialist theologies, ones especially bound to their purported “natural” explanatory power?

The concept of “history” constitutes a complex set of cognate meanings whose variations Wright helpfully examines at length. Wright's own view of “doing history”—that is, of historical study and its fruits⁴—involves the gathering of evidence, the framing of hypotheses, their testing, and so on, such that this kind of study gives rise to “real knowledge” (much as in the hard sciences).⁵ Historical knowledge—which is the only history we can rely upon—obviously involves human agents with motivations and worldviews, such that historical understanding demands subtle engagement with human attitudes and collective dynamics, as well as less definable skills and virtues like “sympathy.”⁶ But taken as a whole, historical study and thus knowledge is only possible if it takes up as its data a comprehensible array of artifacts, including

4. Wright, 100.

5. Wright, 101.

6. Wright, 102.

sociopsychological ones. Even if this data is misunderstood, it must be fit into categories of previously grasped realities such that a uniform process of analysis can be applied. Historical study, that is, presupposes a “continuous” history where not only the rules of observation and argument are consistent but the intrinsic character of the data examined are consistently patent to such analysis. More than this, a providentialist view of history, in this arena, would have to attribute to such rules a certain divine authority. (The notion of “continuous history” is based on comprehensible experience and is not the same as the worldview that Wright pejoratively characterizes as the “closed continuum” of the natural world, which operates mechanistically.)

Wright himself wants to emphasize, for all this, that history is filled with “surprises.”⁷ The historian’s task does not, properly, yield predictive theories. However continuous may be the rules of historical apprehension, history itself may, it seems, prove discontinuous in its otherwise expected unfolding. There is a profound logical, and perhaps even more, a profound existential tension lodged in this framework. And in fact, Wright himself operates with a grand narrative and set of claims about what to expect from history—that is, what he calls the “lavish love” of God that is revealed from the first act of creation itself and that elicits from human beings a responsive love in return.⁸ The “new creation” opened up by the Resurrection is not, after all, a *random* surprise but a surprise always of a consistent kind that is bound to the very character of the creating God. Wright will want to claim that the Resurrection can be historically affirmed or at least demonstrated as highly plausible, based on a consistent application of historical research methods; he will want to argue for its unique event status on this basis; and he also wants this uniqueness to fit into a hypothesized grand theory of divine love. Since I believe in the theory by and large myself, that

7. Wright, 116.

8. Wright, 199, 207.

is not the issue. Rather, the issue is how historical theories like this must inevitably function and, in this case, helpfully or not, for something called “natural theology,” which is an evidence-based claim about knowing God that is wrapped in a providentialist reading of historical experience. In short, what is the status of “the new” for a historian who wants “the new” to explain all of history in a consistent way? This goes to the heart of specifically *Christian* providentialism.

For Wright, providential newness, given somehow in the Resurrection, constitutes a “transformation” of creation itself, not just of Jesus and his body. But this transformation is accessible to apprehension through the efforts of historical research that deal with “public” realities and that finally give rise to further public “worlds” that are open to historical identification.⁹ The “new creation” is bound up with elements that are in fact laid out for historical scrutiny. Providentialist claims are always, of course, open to public contestation, even secular versions like Steven Pinker’s *The Better Angels of Our Nature*,¹⁰ with its plethora of statistics purporting to demonstrate the historical decline of human violence in the modern era. Pinker’s hypothesis, and evidence, has been re-scrutinized by other historical critics based on commonly accepted standards of analysis, with the general result that his claim for a developed and relative *novum* of peace has been judged to be both ill-conceived and at best pointing to but a brief eddy in some larger and unstable temporal passage. In the case of Pinker’s claim, continuous history has, as it were, triumphed over claims to discontinuity, based on the application of uniform methods of study. What do we do, then, with the notion of a “new creation” in historical terms? Can it be “demonstrated,” and if so, how?

9. Wright, 127, 205.

10. Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (Viking, 2011).

II. Historical Discontinuity and the Challenge of Theodicy

Moving to my second section, we can turn, symbolically, to the 2 Peter question: For all your grandiose claims to newness, nothing has changed. If it has, O Rigorous Historian, show me! I think, in this regard, that Wright is too quick to dismiss Hume.¹¹ Hume's argument against miracles¹² was perhaps driven by prejudice, but its bite was properly analytic: We know things according to customary expectations, which include experienced trustworthiness. Knowing is learned. Claims to special and novel experiences are rightly accepted only on this learned basis. Thus, miracles themselves are either *nova* that by definition escape such modes of acceptance altogether, in which case they are no longer part of our common-sense historical cognition; or miracles are not truly *nova* at all, in which case they dissolve before the application of the historian's uniform rules of analysis, applied to a history judged to be "continuous." The issue for Hume was less divine "intervention," with its presuppositional frameworks of nature and supernature or inside and outside, frameworks decried by Wright; nor was it simply a matter of abstract epistemology for Hume. Rather, the question was one of social comprehension, and it was a problem thrust upon Hume's generation (and others) by a recent history of often violent and abusive religious conflict in which the purported *nova* of historical experience were used to justify social division and early modern "hemoclysms" (to use Pinker's term for historical "bloodbaths," borrowing from Matthew White).¹³ The issue of continuous and discontinuous history, that is, was a moral one for Hume, as much as anything. And any natural theology, including a providentialist sort, will have to face this moral problem head-on.

11. Wright, *History and Eschatology*, 21.

12. David Hume, "Of Miracles," section 10 in *Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals* [1777], 2nd ed., ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Clarendon, 1902), 109–131.

13. Pinker, *Better Angels of Our Nature*, 190

Wright senses this in a concrete way. He opens his volume with a discussion of the famous 1755 Lisbon earthquake, which killed up to fifty thousand people in the area and destroyed much of the city, including its irreplaceable libraries. Wright tags the earthquake as a kind of symbolic marker for a visible shift in European intellectual vision, wherein the natural world—with its floods, diseases, and geological tremors—was now taken as a kind of independent realm of materialist mechanisms, playing itself out on its own steam, while God looked on from some empyrean vantage, occasionally intruding. This shift of perspective was demanded, as it were, by the crumbling of an “optimistic” natural theology that could count on God to run the world benignly. This finally unfounded early modern split between a “natural” sphere and a divine sphere constitutes the motor of Wright’s larger argument about history as itself, ordered by the Resurrection, an integrated form of revelation. But the split, as Wright acknowledges, was one based on the moral problem of suffering, discontinuous with its context of a Christian society gathered, as it happened, on Lisbon’s fateful day to pray that morning at the Feast of All Saints. The moral problem, however, was religiously novel in that it was now seen to be tied up with the character of God in a way that Christians had not considered before. Wright insists that Paul’s readers, as well as the early Church, were “troubled by many things,” but not by “earthquakes, famines and the like.”¹⁴ Even if this were true (and it seems unlikely), it points less to a novel moral problem than to a shifted locus for the problem—that is, God’s character itself. On this score, Wesley’s attribution of the earthquake to divine judgment¹⁵ was altogether traditional and congruent with scriptural and patristic attitudes, for which history may be continuous, but with a continuity driven by wrenching and often destructive divine purposes.

14. Wright, *History and Eschatology*, 6.

15. Wright, 6.

Theodicy, in its modern form, is an attempt to resolve the problems of this kind of continuous providentialist history in a way that can recast God's character as decoupled from its traditional ordering of painful discontinuities.¹⁶ History's impervious burdens, after all, including things like the overwhelming destruction of personal hopes bound up with cataclysmic earthquakes, constitute discontinuities of religious meaning that common sense has difficulty integrating. Divine judgment, freedom, or incomprehensibility were venerable ways of grasping such integration until early modernity, but by 1755—for a host of cultural reasons—these seemed no longer tenable for many. Should they have been? Wright seems to agree with the modern sensibility that they should not have; Wesley was unhelpful. Still, the “Epicurean” metaphysic that Wright, perhaps over-comprehensively, argues informed the modern shift in natural theology was as much a response to this moral problem, now intransigently thrust upon public consciousness through new modes of communication and common apprehension, as it was its cause. If history is continuous, as the historical scholar demands, now widely reported disasters like Lisbon threatened to become as much elements of intolerable continuity as of disorienting assault. This proved a combination that seemed lethal to benign providentialist rhetoric, which depended on a trustworthy deity working through a trustworthy historical experience. In the context of Lisbon, either the *novum* of new creation appears incompatible with history or the *nova* of disaster become history's extended ingredient. Early modern Christians, as a result, increasingly sought to protect God from nature by distancing the latter from the former; others, to protect nature from its terrifying God through a converse

16. For an extended argument on how this happened in pneumatological terms, see Ephraim Radner, *A Profound Ignorance: Modern Pneumatology and Its Anti-Modern Redemption* (Baylor University Press, 2019).

movement. But both attitudes were clearly subversive of Christian claims.

Alternative Christian responses, of course, appeared. One was the Hegelian hypothesis of a purposeful history of violence, echoing Boehmian intuitions of the outworking of an intra-divine agony or, from another perspective, historicizing Leibniz's "best of all possible worlds." This kind of historicist "grand theory" is one that Wright correctly rejects from a Christian perspective. But it is also a theory that one must take seriously in its theodical elements, for they answer real questions. Still, it is not a framework that leaves room for the discontinuities of "new creation" in any obvious way. There were, and remain, more generally Pentecostal histories (though there are analogous sectarian versions, both liberal and conservative) in which various peoples or groups are apportioned different kinds of continuous experience, one with and one without evidenced pneumatic fruit. Here, "new creation" is not so much new as carefully channeled in its continuities into a stream that avoids too much experienced mischief and attaches itself only to the chosen (the rest stuck in the "old").

These kinds of responses have never been wholly consistent with the Christian tradition, of course. But does Wright's own notion of history as "new creation" avoid the demands that made such responses plausible for many? He would like it to, but I am uncertain if his framework can bear the theodical weight it seeks to carry. Adjusted to elements of each, however, it might: Were "new creation" both more willingly tinged with the colors of an at least seemingly violent God (the venerable assumption behind Wesley's response), and were God's grace given in an order that was admitted as being more nonsensical to our comprehension than the historian's commitment to uniform rules of analysis must assume (a truer version of Leibniz, it seems to me), Wright's framework of a natural theology of history might prove robust. This would require on Wright's part, however, a less dogmatic insistence on the

historian's gnostic privileges. There are things we cannot know, and that includes history and its very nature.

III. Alienating History

So, in this third section of my essay, let us return to the vexing religious question of Lisbon: Can "historians" unveil the historically discontinuous such that this discontinuity can reframe the experience of destruction into one of hope? Wright has tried to do this with his historical analysis of the "empty tomb" but, by definition, only to the point of staring in over the edges of the stone box into the voided space within. Though the "best" explanation for a range of documented experiences by Jesus's followers may well be that the tomb was "in fact" empty, and empty without subterfuge, it is hard to see how the historian can say more on the basis of those rules of analysis that assume a continuous history itself. Hume's discussion of, for example, miracles cannot be simply waved aside here: We need not necessarily assume deceit in the face of the empty tomb, but we are certainly not equipped to demonstrate historically the *hapax* of Resurrection except as a kind of speculative question. The historian's struggle to make sense of discontinuous history is not simply a technical problem of consistent method. Lisbon is a part of continuous history, which allowed it to be apprehended, reported, measured, studied, and effectively responded to by—for the first time in European experience as far as we know—internationally organized efforts of relief that understood the mechanisms of disastrous want and the demands of municipal rebuilding.¹⁷ The Gospel, on the other hand, is proclaimed into Lisbon's midst as something discontinuous with these expectations and, within the current of history's continuous (and thus well-known) human challenges, something "new"

17. On Lisbon, see the wealth of material in Anne-Marie Mercier-Faivre and Chantal Thomas, *L'Invention de la catastrophe au XVIIIe siècle: Du châtement divin au désastre naturel* (Droz, 2008).

to that history's predictive sequence and that, in a real sense, must contradict the expectations of analysis itself.

The tension here is profound and perhaps irresolvable: What has the continuous to do with the discontinuous? Should we not say, instead, that the cross and Resurrection can constitute a providentialist history only if that natural history is itself *altogether* discontinuous, from top to bottom? Lisbon is redeemable only if the theodical dislocation of an earthquake for example—hopes dashed, loves eradicated—is part of a dislocable universe as a whole, one that is intrinsically detachable, in both its parts and integrities, from the continuities that would otherwise consign Lisbon to the repetitive rhythm of unwanted disaster.

What would this mean? It cannot mean, as Wright acknowledges, Tertullian's *Credo quia impossibile*.¹⁸ But it might mean *Credo quia Deus est* and *Non sumus Deus*. History is discontinuous, and it does not follow, either in its metaphysical forms or in its deepest existential meanings, the exclusive shape of chronological sequence attributed to it by the critical historian, for the sole and simple reason that God is sovereign creator of all things, including temporal experience itself. "Supernatural" or "divinely interventionist" frameworks are something Wright vigorously argues against. He wants a world—a history and nature—that is God-engaged from the ground up. This is a central Christian conviction. But what the old language of the supernatural pointed to, contrastively, was not necessarily a nature and history that God had no concern or involvement with but rather the fact that God "owns" history in such a way that God can dis-order it, with respect to the ultimately perverse constraints of human expectation, at will. This is perhaps not the most felicitous way of putting it, with its connotation of divine caprice. But the fundamental point in positing a nature-supernature framework was to emphasize

18. Wright, *History and Eschatology*, 202; the tag is a bit of a bowdlerization of the original.

that history and nature are not, ultimately, “ours.” They are divinely created, held, and divinely given to us as gift.

Thus, another way to describe the contrast is that between a “domesticated” history—continuous, uniform, but unredeemed in its unrelenting deconstruction of our hopes (Lisbon after Lisbon after Lisbon)—and an “alienated history,” a history that is not ours, that belongs to Another, that is not just susceptible to but constituted by divine act, and that is, by comparison with our own normalized expectations, “discontinuous.” A theological historian thus aims at alienating history, putting it in the hands of Another. This is a Lutheran insight, perhaps (although in this case, rightly congruent with Tertullian’s purpose). Nor is it one with which we can rest easily either, because the “alien” is also that which draws close to us, in Christ. Here, perhaps, the cross is indeed the center of the discussion. But not in a continuous way either, however intimately given. Continuously, it is just another crucifixion; discontinuously, in its alien form, it is “glory.” Only in this way could the cross be forgiveness, renewal, and hope.

How does the historian, *qua* historian, get at this? How does Lisbon become ordered in its justly apprehended experience by the cross in its dislocating re-ordering of all experience? The whole challenge of a Christian natural theology of history is focused on this paradox. Wright describes the project in terms of a series of historically located “broken signposts,” a phrase that seems designed to capture something of the venture’s oddity, though not its resolution. In his version, the historian can trace the appearance of a range of human aspirations and longings met by the cross; these are then responded to in the Christian community in a fashion, however “broken,” that can also be historically mapped. This charting of Christian response through time parallels the historian’s work in outlining the actual reactions of the first Christians to the empty tomb, the great *novum* upon which all else depends. In both projects there are compelling conclusions to be drawn. But now the historical study involves laying out the way the Christian community fulfills the “vocational”

aspects of the new creation/kingdom in terms of justice, beauty, and truth.

Wright calls this a different kind of historical knowing, one to which he gives the phrase “epistemology of love.” “Love” believes the Resurrection, which is God’s vindication of the cross, and this gives rise to new communities of love, embracing a range of callings (the *missio Dei*) that embody retrospective confirmations of the cross and Resurrection’s embedded truth in creation itself.¹⁹ As a result, with reoriented eyes of apprehension, “new creation” is seen at last to be lodged in the past and also embodied in the present and in its divine pull into the future. In short, Wright gives as his answer to the historian’s dilemma of discontinuity a practice he actually shares with one of his more reviled forebears, William Paley: the natural theology of the Church.²⁰ Paley has his own version, after all, of the “broken signposts,” with which he ends his famous volume on Christianity:

It has mitigated the conduct of war, and the treatment of captives. It has softened the administration of despotic, or of nominally despotic governments. It has abolished polygamy. It has restrained the licentiousness of divorces. It has put an end to the exposure of children, and the immolation of slaves. It has suppressed the combats of gladiators, and the impurities of religious rites. It has banished, if not unnatural vices, at least the toleration of them. It has greatly meliorated the condition of the laborious part, that is to say, of the mass of every community, by procuring for them a day of weekly rest. In all countries in which it is professed, it has produced numerous establishments for the relief of sickness and poverty; and, in some, a regular and general provision by law. It has triumphed over the slavery established in the Roman

19. Wright, 208–10.

20. Wright, 246–47.

empire: it is contending, and, I trust, will one day prevail, against the worse slavery of the West Indies.²¹

Nonetheless, I am not sure that Wright realizes how hard an ecclesially oriented “evidences of Christianity” approach is in our day, even when translated into less quantifiable categories like “love.” In the seventeenth century, to be sure, it was a valued approach—one thinks of William Cave and what became the Religious Society movement—but less as an apologetic than as a spur to reform.²² Lisbon, in any case, was a natural disaster and cast its shadow on God’s sovereignty and character. But the rising pile of debris left in the wake of specifically Christian disasters became increasingly mixed up with such natural challenges, as people like Voltaire pointed out when he interwove Lisbon’s cracking earth with its auto-da-fé’s (e.g., in *Candide*’s narrative).²³ By the time one arrives at the Holocaust—something Wright mentions only once in passing—it is unclear what a “signpost” might constitute, broken or not, for a natural theology of the Church.

Wright’s own theodicy²⁴ can be taken in two ways in such a developed context, wherein the Church, in the eyes of many, has exhausted her credit. It is perhaps fideist, insofar as the Christian follower of Jesus who looks back at history “in the light of the Resurrection” “discovers” something otherwise obscured to others. What the Christian uniquely apprehends, through some inner response of love, is the Crucifixion’s divine meaning that, in turn, offers direction to a future divine fulfillment, marked by fragile ecclesial signs along the way. Under the debris, that is, the Christian discerns divine

21. William Paley, *The Evidences of Christianity* [1794] (Ward, Lock, 1878), 257.

22. William Cave, *Primitive Christianity, or, The Religion of the Ancient Christians in the First Ages of the Gospel, in Three Parts* (J. M. for Richard Chiswell, 1673).

23. Voltaire, *Candide*, trans. Burton Raffel (Yale University Press, 2005), 14–19.

24. Wright, *History and Eschatology*, as summarized on 261–62.

goodness at work, but only because of a spiritual vision instigated by an apprehension of cross and Resurrection. Though Wright has been consistently disparaging of what he views as Platonic temptations to denigrate the world's created substance, and hence history itself, it is not clear that such a fideist approach to the burdens of earthly existence is any less of a moral "escape hatch," at least theodically. On the other hand, Wright may, more specifically, be relying on the dogged insistence that a historically plausible Resurrection intrinsically changes *everything*, and any divine apologetic of natural history can and must flow from this fact. Still, the "everything" that is touched by this historically tethered *novum*, by definition, must still be evidenced by the vocational concretizations and achievements of those who are so reasonably persuaded. One thus faces the same problems of whether a "broken" signpost is really an adequate characterization of abject ecclesial failure. Historical apologetics for the Christian Church may be possible, but they are deeply contested and hence inefficacious. If the nature of the historical *novum* is so limited that it is hard to demonstrate how the Church in fact participates within it, the *novum* itself threatens to be swallowed up by the continuous beating of the Lisbon drum.

IV. Scripture's Explanatory Priority

If there is a solution to this challenge, it perhaps lies less in trying to separate Lisbon and Church—something that seems historically suspect in any case—and more in holding them more closely together according to a scheme of meaning that alienates *both* from the uniform rules of historical study that themselves cannot comprehend a *novum* without subjecting it to its flattening theodical demands. The historian's history is too small. It cannot contain a *novum* that touches all of history without reducing what is "new" to yet another of history's crumbled hopes. How can Lisbon be more than "just Lisbon"? When it becomes more like Babylon, or Rome, or Jericho, or Sodom, or Jerusalem . . . perhaps even more like the Church, and the Church like its analogues. In this case, Lisbon is

like a string of fallen cities—but fallen cities themselves that witness to the ordering hand and revealed character of God. The issue, that is, is scriptural. The fact that God orders (and seemingly disorders, in experiential terms) history “at will” cannot be parsed in terms of divine caprice but in terms of that will itself, which Scripture has traditionally been seen as disclosing.

Here it is worth pausing on Wright’s generally negative discussion of the tradition of the “Two Books,” Scripture and Nature, each testifying somehow to God.²⁵ The image can be traced back at least to Augustine, was elaborated in the Middle Ages, and reached its apogee on the cusp of early modernity, as scriptural and natural “science” each sought to tell us something about God in a nonconflictual fashion. Wright worries that treating each of these two categories as “parallel” can end with each being treated as a kind of encyclopedia of facts, from which interesting, but often incoherent, truths can be drawn. Wright’s intuitions seem just, at least as applied to later appeals to the reality of “two books” of revelation that diminished apologetics itself to a heedless listing of variously demonstrated propositions often unattached to an integrated divine cosmos. But in fact these worries do not generally adhere to the use of the image more extensively.²⁶ The commonality of the Two Books was seen to lie in their shared relationship to a Creator God, not in their analogous function as informational repositories. Each was not only revelatory but divinely formed by the miracle of being, and most intimately by its order. Both Scripture and Nature (Creation) were seen as entities reflecting the divine ordering of creaturely life and being. And thus both, if in different ways, instantiate the divine ordering of temporality as creaturely gift and subject. Finally—and here the difference between

25. Wright, 271.

26. Rémi Brague, *The Wisdom of the World: The Human Experience of the Universe in Western Thought*, trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan (University of Chicago Press, 2003).

the two—Scripture is this kind of creaturely revelation in a unique way, one that clarifies for human beings the nature of God’s specific self-offering in Christ. As the “Word written” (in the Anglican Article XX’s medieval phraseology), Scripture lays out the ordering logic of God’s “will” in a way that spans history and its human experience, but from the Creator’s self-offered perspective, properly alienated from the constraints of human apprehension, though also explicative of the human understanding’s perverted limitations. To this degree at least, Scripture is logically prior to the natural world, locating each of the latter’s elements within a divinely articulated grasp; and Scripture is thus logically prior to the historicity which we attribute to nature. The shape of Scripture orders time itself, at least logically from the divine side.

Indeed the notion of there being “two books,” and not just “one” from which and in which God speaks, is one of disclosing historicity’s—nature’s—coherent and comprehensive subjection to God’s creative word. The aim of a “Two Books” theology moves far to the side of separating nature and supernature, as Wright worries. And thereby, the concept underscores and also complexifies the relationship of Scripture to nature, acting as a formative lens through which not only to view but also to experience the one world in which we live. If Lisbon is like Sodom, and then Jerusalem, which itself is like the Church in some fashion, that is because Scripture itself has disclosed these connections and thereby exposed the nature of history itself, and we are now free to and in fact called and driven to experience Lisbon, whoever we are, through just these scripturally figural ligatures. Similarly, the cross will be seen as first given scripturally, not temporally, in its logic. For only in Scripture is the cross more than “just a cross” (just as Lisbon is more than “just Lisbon”) and thus properly discontinuous with the unfolding sequence of crosses and earthquakes. Only in Scripture can the cross be revealed as a motor for all history. Furthermore, the cross can do this only through the details of its *scriptural* telling, as if the narrative itself holds some kind of sway over temporal

experience in all directions. The nature of the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world (Rev 13:8), or at least destined as such (1 Pet 1:20) before “nature” has a being, grounds the possibility of discontinuous meaning in history even while it renders historical sequence not so much unreal as epiphenomenal, some one thing among many meanings.

The historian’s task, I suggest, is only ancillary to the scriptural reader’s, at least with respect to the *novum* that marks history’s meaning. This does not negate the possibility of natural theology, natural history included; rather, it points to the way that nature and history are only partially understood according to the critical tools of the historical and positivistic disciplines. If the historically discontinuous, like the cross and Resurrection, are real, then the very possibility of such discontinuities must reorder the actual instantiation of events: What can seem past is present; what can seem present is past; the future is itself already known in some way because it is not in fact unformed. To make sense of this, therefore, requires that we resituate “historical experience” with respect to our metaphysics. Past, present, future—these need to be categories that are relativized with respect to God and to Scripture both. Wright, with his longstanding critique of “Platonistic” attitudes, has consistently pressed against such resituating out of a fear of losing the “flesh and blood” realities that a divinely ordered history, and incarnation, imply. But the goal of rethinking the nature of historical events and relativizing their temporal nature is not to render bodies and human experience “fake”; rather, it is to complicate their status and thus meaning as utterly God-belonging and thereby to grant their connection precisely to the discontinuous realities of cross and Resurrection that display history as a divine gift rather than a curse.

After all, it is Scripture alone by which we have access to much that counts as “history” in the Old Testament (and everything else that does not); and it is Scripture alone by which we have access, frankly, to anything like the actual *content* of the New Testament, whose meanings, to be sure, may

be elucidated by extra-scriptural artifacts but whose coherent significance in its world-referring substance remains steadfastly intra-textual. We can say that “history” is inferred from Scripture, but in fact, in the majority of cases Scripture *is* the only history we have that relates to the central historical claims Christians make. It is just this uniquely uncorroboratable character of Scripture’s historical referents that grounds their status as discontinuities, capable of informing the breadth of nature. So, too, as has been the practice since the early Church, Scripture is the means by which the theological historian alienates history, allowing the Bible to dictate historical experience itself in its discontinuous mode.

For all his hesitations with this line of thinking, Wright pursues it in his own way precisely in order to establish a means for escaping the theodical impasse of a purely historical enterprise. Here the eschatological elements of his project come into play, such that ultimately resolving historical hopes bound up with God’s past promises—hopes, for instance, that there will come a time when Lisbon should no longer be “just Lisbon”—are granted proleptic experience in the present through certain apprehensions of their reality, retrospectively “validated” through the events of cross and Resurrection.²⁷ In particular, Wright lifts up the images of an elaborated temple cosmology and sabbath eschatology, drawn as “world views” or “interpretive grids” from Second Temple Judaism, and presents these otherwise difficult outlooks as theories that have been powerfully confirmed by the historically established figure of Jesus (chap. 5). In this case, however, it is the cosmology and eschatology themselves that are meant to do the larger theodical work for history’s troubling continuities by presenting a vision in which spaces and times—the now of the present world and those of the fulfilled kingdom of God’s promise—“overlap” in a kind of simultaneous experiential “doubling.”²⁸ Both temple and sabbath grant us true

27. Wright, *History and Eschatology*, 211.

28. Wright, 206–7.

experiences of God's future in some sense even here, and this doubled reality is given an apprehensible form in Jesus and then, of course, in the subsequent unfolding of the Christian community's life and sacramental practice.

These are not straightforward ways of talking about chronological time. Nor should they be. Wright seems to realize that any claim to the *novum* of the Resurrection as something that, for example, reaffirms the goodness of original creation, rescues and renews the old, fulfills divine intention, redeems, retrieves, and firmly establishes the world²⁹ cannot be constructed on simple temporal continuities. Just these Resurrection promises lay out a theodical demand that cannot be resolved on the basis of a unidirectional continuous history, especially one that is purportedly "set right" at a given point in time, unless all times, events, personages, and meanings coexist metaphysically according to some "doubled" or "overlapping" reality that constitutes God's ordering of reality. Such intimations open the door to a range of traditional Christian interpretive approaches not just to the Scriptures but to the nature of history itself: Origen, Bede, the Puritans, complete with typology, spiritual reading, figuralism, rabbinic and kabbalistic entrées. Such an opening includes even a renewed appreciation of St. Paul's own complex and perhaps obscure understandings of time. To say that our lives in their historicity belong to God utterly insofar, at least, as God has taken them "on"—that is, in the Incarnation—is true, but it is not enough. If taken on, these elements are also reordered. The famous Athanasian reversal—God became human so that human beings could become divine—cannot only be moral but must also be metaphysical; or rather, if it is to be moral, it must be metaphysical as well.

Thus, if God is the God of the living, not of the dead, and the living include Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Mark 12:26–27), then the character of time cannot be exclusively continuous in its "arrow" of entropic demand. The same is true if "you [Lord]

29. Wright, 199–201.

are with me even in Sheol” (Ps 139:8). Or again, the arrow swerves if “before Abraham was, I am” (John 8:58), from the lips of the temporally limited Jesus. Yet time is not the only strangely reordered aspect of the scripturally articulated world: The natural referents for which one might scramble endlessly to resolve metaphorically, for example, the “rock” of the wandering Israelites that is Christ (1 Cor 10:4), become objects from the past’s real events (10:11) that populate an ongoing world of miracles. These in turn reshape the meaning of contemporary action.

Lisbon might do the same, and probably should, in such a scriptural world of transfigured history. Insofar as the Christian knows the Church to inhabit the same times and spaces as that string of communities from Cain’s Enoch to David’s Zion, Lisbon emerges as a warning and a promise both, a city taken down and a city rebuilt (Amos 9:11). Certainly, a narrative like Revelation 12 would indicate as much, with its visions of past, present, and future rolled up into a grand scriptural template of person, event, and outcome that seems designed to take in the history of the world. As Jacob and Esau struggle through time—a temporal “doubleness” of extended reach itself—such that “all Israel will be saved” within divine consignment of humanity to sin (Rom 11:26, 32), history itself is seen as something located deep within the unknown depths of God’s hidden wisdom and unplumbed mind (11:33–34). Origen, Bede, and the Puritans may not have functioned with the contemporary physicist’s “block theory” of the universe, wherein temporal distinctions (according to various complex hypotheses) coexist in a singularly but infinitely ramified and given cosmos, but they might well have found such a theory plausible on a logical basis.³⁰ History might make more *Christian* sense in such a perspective, wherein the universe is given in the totality—the “block”—of Scripture itself.

30. Sam Baron and Kristie Miller, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Time* (Polity, 2019), 16–19, 206.

One of Wright's favorite words for the historical relationship of Jesus to the Old Testament's Jewish expectations is "shocking."³¹ But who has known the mind of the Lord? There is and ought to be a sense in which all aspects of the world we live in are "shocking," insofar as they must be discontinuous with our expected outcomes. But the Old Testament's scriptural framework in itself is not overturned by the New; rather, it contains in its own embodied forms already all the shocking realities of salvific discontinuity—that is, of divine creative order, from top to bottom. This, of course, renders the Old Testament as much of a challenge theodically as the New, which it ought rightly to be: God appears to be dangerous, violent at times, passionate, inconsistent, extravagant, and beyond comprehension. And tied to the God of the crucified and resurrected Jesus, as one and the same, the New Testament itself becomes a book of searing inconsistencies as well: Jesus and the children, Jesus and the fires of hell; Jesus dead, Jesus raised and gone; Jesus encountered, Jesus disappeared. The alienated history of divine creation draws old and new together into its single theodical response: We live in a world of wonders, whose only justification is their grace. The *novum* is always God. But God is "from the beginning." Always.

Conclusion: The Strange Old World

Wright's project is ultimately apologetic; he is an evangelist and wants "history" to convince people. In my mind, however, only one kind of person is convinced by history: the saint. The rest of us, in good Humean fashion, trust them and are, one hopes, touched by the "taste and see" offered by the true or "truest" saint, the great Holy One, Jesus (Mark 1:24; Acts 3:14; John 1:39). Historical experience is not what it seems; the shockingly desultory is divinely particular and specifically given. It is "the best," as Leibniz understood, though its threads to ultimate purpose are lost to us in the blaze of

31. The word appears eleven times in Wright, *History and Eschatology*, 195–205.

the infinite. What we are given instead is a Scripture that lays that experience out, through whatever intricacies time seems rather to hide than to explain, such that we can ground them in the singular biblical forms by which God declares his creative gift. Yet this is a “gospel” insofar as it decouples Lisbon from its continuous repetitions and places it within the mysterious ordering of God’s creative goodness, however reticent that goodness may be to give up its internal mysteries to the *vana curiositas* of those unwilling to follow the vocation of God’s Son. His own passage through the corridors of Scripture that mark the breadth of his historical life is the only unlocking of history and nature’s door that a Christian knows. With this, Wright seems to agree.

But if this is so, if a natural theology of history presses in this direction, then its pursuit becomes coincident with Christian discipleship itself. Natural theology, therefore, just because it is a following, cannot be for the faint of heart, though it offers a strange kind of solace and rest as well. The world is far stranger for Christians than Wright sometimes seems willing to admit. Not because it is not strange for others; indeed, it is precisely because the world’s order is overwhelming, if not at every moment, at least at many, and eventually altogether, for everyone. We study the earth to know what heaven is up to; we are dumbstruck. Faith as a courageous wager, or a tentative hope. Or perhaps even a tremulous gift. Faith is humbling and frightening both. It is new, and it is old (Matt 13:52).