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Other Problems from a British Perspective: 'Jewishness', Jesus, and the New Perspective on Paul

James G. Crossley

In terms of discourses concerning 'race' in the history of New Testament studies, the relationship between (on the one hand) Jesus, Paul, and the early church and (on the other) an assumed 'Jewish background' has been dominant. Over the past forty years, this relationship has been understood against the background of a Judaism often constructed in ways inspired by debates about the New Perspective on Paul. The story of the New Perspective on Paul, and its accompanying constructions of Judaism, is familiar enough to New Testament scholars. E. P. Sanders' *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* challenged the dominant construction of Judaism in Lutheran-influenced analyses of Paul in which Judaism was negatively stereotyped as legalistic in contrast to the loving religion of grace advocated by Paul. Sanders famously coined the term 'covenantal nomism' to describe 'common Judaism', which was understood to be the combination of ideas of gracious election and the maintenance of the covenantal relationship through observance of the commandments (ideas Sanders distinguished with the two key notions of 'getting in' and 'staying in').¹ Whatever diversity of scholarship comes under the umbrella of the New Perspective on Paul, the idea of 'covenantal nomism' has become its most unifying feature. Given that the concern was to locate Paul against or (largely) within a more positive appraisal of the 'Jewish background', it is unsurprising that the influence of Sanders' reading of Judaism spread beyond Pauline studies. Indeed, Sanders also contributed significantly to the now dominant scholarly view of placing Jesus within, or largely within, a more positively constructed Jewish context.²

Two of the most prominent figures in both the New Perspective on Paul and the study of the 'Jewish Jesus' have been the British scholars N. T. Wright and James Dunn. Indeed, the term 'New Perspective on Paul' itself was heralded by James Dunn in 1983,³

¹ See E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (London: SCM, 1977), for example, 17.

² E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (London: SCM, 1985).

³ James D. G. Dunn, 'The New Perspective on Paul', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 65 (1983): 95–122.

though Wright already in 1978 showed the influence of Sanders' groundbreaking work and used the phrase 'new perspective'.⁴ Both have since produced landmark works on Jesus and Paul that have dominated the respective subfields.⁵ And throughout their numerous works on Jesus and Paul they have been as influential as anyone in developing what has become a common academic discourse. As Michael Bird has pointed out, such language includes 'nationalism', 'boundary markers', 'story, symbol and praxis', 'a web of social and religious commitments', 'ethnicity', and so on.⁶ In analysing such concepts, we might follow those who see discourses about 'religious' and 'social' boundary markers as 'post-racial' in the sense that older, less palatable ideas of constructing 'race' (and especially involving physical racial features) are now rethought in more acceptable terms in mainstream political discourses. 'Racial' language, though occasionally still lingering, is now typically denied in the categorization process but the older patterns of collective identifications (e.g. ethnicity, dress, food, associates, beliefs, repeated behaviours, alleged national identifications) can still be used to single out, construct, and categorize minority groups.⁷ This more acceptable form of collective classification, while denying 'racist' intent and even having anti-racist intentions, is most clearly seen in governmental and popular treatments of Muslims in European and North American political discourses and the claims to be identifying the *ideology* associated with certain people, *their* behaviours, and even *their* dress codes, as part of the desire for *their* assimilation to the liberal nation state.⁸ As we will see, a related and benignly presented discourse is what we find in contemporary treatments of early Judaism where such language is not just about classifying Judaism but classifying an implicitly superior Jesus and Paul in relation to and in distinction from this assumed 'Judaism' collectively constructed as concerned with nationalistic and ethnic boundary markers (e.g. Sabbath, land, circumcision, Torah). As this language of religious-ethnic group differentiation and notions of (our) superiority would suggest, ideas about race, ethnicity, and nation are continually being rethought and constructed in this era of scholarship.

The rest of this essay will look at why such work came to prominence when it did, why there is such a heavy emphasis on Jewishness, and the significance of the relationship with ongoing post-racialized discourses in contemporary British politics and culture (and beyond). Mostly for reasons of space, I will focus particularly on the work of Wright. Yet Wright is also a particularly important figure because he effectively bookends the New Perspective era. Just as he was present at its inauguration so his recent scholarly work on Paul effectively marks its end or at least a major transition.⁹

⁴ N.T. Wright, 'The Paul of History and the Apostle of Faith', *TynBul* 29 (1978): 61–88.

⁵ Among the most prominent are: N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996); *idem*, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (2 vols; London: SPCK, 2013); James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998); *idem*, *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids, MI, and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2003).

⁶ Michael F. Bird, *The Saving Righteousness of God: Studies on Paul, Justification and the New Perspective* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006), 105.

⁷ See, for example, Alana Lentin and Gavan Titley, *The Crises of Multiculturalism: Racism in a Neoliberal Age* (London: Zed Books, 2011), 67–70.

⁸ See, for example, Liz Fekete, *A Suitable Enemy: Racism, Migration and Islamophobia* (London: Pluto Press, 2009); Arun Kundnani, *The Muslims Are Coming! Islamophobia, Extremism, and the Domestic War on Terror* (London: Verso, 2014).

⁹ Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*; *idem*, *Paul and His Recent Interpreters*, (London: SPCK, 2015).

This is not to say that New Perspective questions have gone away but rather that a series of different ones have gained greater prominence (e.g. empire, apocalyptic, philosophy, gender), and Wright himself recognizes this in his engagement with some of them.¹⁰ As it happens, and whatever the reasons might be, Wright's career also maps on to some of the major ideological changes in Anglo-American politics and culture relating to different ways of understanding issues of post-racial identity that will frame this essay: the rise and crises of neoliberalism and postmodernity. Before turning to Wright's work in particular, we first turn to a broader outline of New Testament scholarship and its construction of 'Jewishness'.

1 'Jewishness' according to New Testament scholarship

The story of questions relating to ethnicity, race, and Jewishness in pre-1970s New Testament scholarship is increasingly well known.¹¹ For instance, the nineteenth-century Lives of Jesus also involved a concern for the 'great man' and his relationship to people, land, and nation, all as part of the developing European (and particularly Germanic) nationalisms.¹² Questions of Jews and Judaism regularly functioned as a negative foil for Jesus, as they did in regard to the nation state. This would feed into the developing anti-Semitism which would culminate in Nazi fascism. By the end of the nineteenth century, Houston Stewart Chamberlain was advocating an Aryan Galilee (and thus an Aryan Jesus), a de-Judaizing of Jesus and Christian Origins which was developed further in Nazi New Testament scholarship, whether in Walter Grundmann's work on the Aryan Jesus or in the various contributions to the influential *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, edited by the Nazi propagandist, Gerhard Kittel.¹³ But the anti-Jewish rhetoric did not disappear with the Nazis. After the Second World War, the Lutheran-influenced construct of Judaism as a harsh, legalistic religion of works-righteousness persisted despite the prominence of anti-Nazi German scholars like Rudolf Bultmann, such was its embeddedness in the field. Indeed, even in the 1960s Ernst Käsemann could claim that Paul 'strikes at the hidden Jew in all of us, at the man who validates rights and demands over against God on the basis of God's past dealings with him and to this extent is serving not God but an illusion'.¹⁴ In terms of the Historical Jesus, Form Criticism ensured, as Maurice Casey put it, 'that out from

¹⁰ Wright, *Paul and His Recent Interpreters*, for example, 135–338.

¹¹ Cf. Shawn Kelley, *Racializing Jesus: Race, Ideology and the Formation of Modern Biblical Scholarship* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

¹² See Halvor Moxnes, *Jesus and the Rise of Nationalism: A New Quest for the Nineteenth Century Historical Jesus* (London and New York: I. B. Taurus, 2011).

¹³ For details see, for example, Maurice Casey, 'Some Anti-Semitic Assumptions in The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament', *NovT* 41 (1999): 280–91; Peter Head, 'The Nazi Quest for an Aryan Jesus', *JSHJ* 2 (2004): 55–89; Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008). (See also Kathy Ehrensperger's chapter – Eds.)

¹⁴ Ernst Käsemann, *New Testament Questions of Today* (London: SCM, 1969), 186; for discussion of this remark, which was also broadcast on radio, see, Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 213–14.

under the Synoptic Gospels there could never crawl a Jewish man'.¹⁵ Indeed, if we take Form Criticism's focus on *Sitz im Leben* seriously, then one of the reasons (among many) for its failure (at least in the mid-twentieth century) to provide sustained social contextualization of forms was its avoiding Jewish social life.¹⁶

The 1970s saw a shift in the constructions of Judaism. In 1973, Géza Vermes' *Jesus the Jew* caught the Zeitgeist for the beginnings of changing scholarly perceptions.¹⁷ The work of Sanders in 1977 blew open the established constructions of Judaism in the field while simultaneously showing how anti-Jewish and anti-Semitic attitudes were deeply embedded in post-war New Testament scholarship. Nevertheless, Vermes' title and emphasis caught on in Historical Jesus studies, and today there are numerous books with titles emphasizing Jesus in (positive) relation to Judaism, such is the discourse embedded in the field.¹⁸ What some of the polemics over Jesus' Jewishness have revealed is that Historical Jesus scholarship repeats clear, blunt, and essentializing assumptions about what Jewish identity *must be* and what it *must not be*. Whether historically right or wrong, clearly it is impossible, according to a certain logic about Jesus' Jewishness, for Jesus to have been both a Cynic-like or Hellenistic philosopher *and* at the same time Jewish. But this post-racial categorizing tells us more about the scholarly constructions of Judaism than ancient historical realities. Typically, this construction of identity involves essentializing views about attitudes to purity, family, apocalypticism, ethnicity, circumcision, Torah, Temple, Sabbath, and/or gender as a marker of what is or is not to be deemed appropriate for Jesus, irrespective of whether a given ancient figure self-identifies in such a way or was identified in such a way.¹⁹

That it is correct to reconstruct a 'Jewish Jesus' has now become so obvious that it is simply part of scholarly common sense. Yet, as so often with common sense ideas, they do not always reflect how things have supposedly always been, even if it might seem that way. In fact, one of the more perplexing things in Historical Jesus and New Testament studies is just how long the Jewishness of Jesus took to be widely emphasized in European and North American scholarship. By this I do not mean the issue of Jesus' ethnicity as such – after the Nazi era virtually everyone has long accepted that Jesus was born Jewish – but the stress on, and debates over, Jesus' or Paul's teachings which must be classified as *Jewish*, in contrast to the rhetoric of hard dissimilarity from Judaism

¹⁵ Maurice Casey, 'Who's Afraid of Jesus Christ? Some Comments on Attempts to Write a Life of Jesus', in *Writing History, Constructing Religion*, ed. James Crossley and Christian Karner (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 129–46, at 133.

¹⁶ James G. Crossley, *Why Christianity Happened: A Sociohistorical Account of Christian Origins 26–50CE* (Louisville, KY: WJK, 2006), 3–22.

¹⁷ Géza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew* (London: SCM, 1973).

¹⁸ For example, James H. Charlesworth, *Jesus within Judaism: New Light from Exciting Archaeological Discoveries* (London: SPCK, 1989); John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991); Géza Vermes, *The Religion of Jesus the Jew* (London: SCM Press, 1993); John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (4 vols; New Haven, New York and London: Doubleday, 1991–2009); Seán Freyne, *Jesus, a Jewish Galilean: A New Reading of the Jesus-Story* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2004).

¹⁹ See William Arnal, *The Symbolic Jesus: Historical Scholarship, Judaism and the Construction of Contemporary Identity* (London and Oakville: Equinox, 2005); James G. Crossley, *Jesus in an Age of Terror: Projects for a New American Century* (London: Routledge, 2008); *idem*, 'A "Very Jewish" Jesus: Perpetuating the Myth of Superiority', *JSHJ* 11 (2013): 109–29.

that dominated much of twentieth-century scholarship until such rhetoric began to break down in the 1970s.

So why did it take until the 1970s to see such a significant rhetorical shift? It might have been thought that the Holocaust would have prompted a more immediate rethink of attitudes towards Jewishness and Judaism. The polemical use of the Jewishness of Jesus in debates against the Jesus Seminar and those who proposed Cynic-like Jesuses – both of which allegedly denied Jesus' Jewishness despite such claims never being made – puzzled William Arnal and in response he gave several plausible reasons for the emergence of the debate over Jewishness, particularly the scholarly insistence on a stable and relatively fixed first-century Jewish identity.²⁰ Arnal argued that an emphasis on fixed Jewish identity is partly a reaction against fractured cultural identities associated with 'globalisation' and postmodernity over the past forty years. He further argued that the emergence of the emphasis on Jewishness at a time when no one now denies Jesus was Jewish has partly been a reaction against the dominance of pre-1970s German scholarship and the shifts in the geographical centre of scholarship towards the UK and North America.

In my own work, I have added further reasons for understanding this shift in Historical Jesus scholarship towards positive rhetoric about Jews and Judaism, in particular the change in attitudes towards the state of Israel since 1967. The decisive 'Six Day War' in 1967 brought about geopolitical changes in a part of the world most directly associated with Christian origins. There is little doubt that this war signalled a dramatic shift in American attitudes towards Israel, from a kind of indifference to high levels of staunch support for Israel over against the Palestinians, particularly in light of the contrast with perceived failures in Vietnam.²¹ This has become a major trend found across party politics, mass media, higher education, and culture more broadly, including in the UK. A crucial post-1967 development in terms of sympathizing with Jews, Judaism, and Israel has involved the memorializing of the Holocaust. As Peter Novick and Norman Finkelstein have shown in their own different ways, the Holocaust became increasingly significant in American culture after 1967.²² For Novick, this new or increased interest in the Holocaust also involved American Jewish perceptions of 'new anti-Semitism' and the increasing prominence of issues surrounding assimilation and identity politics, with the wars of 1967 and 1973 forging tighter bonds between America and Israel.²³

But something else was going on amidst the philo-Semitism in New Testament scholarship. It remains that one of the dominant issues in contemporary scholarship involves lip service being paid to 'Jesus the Jew', at least in terms of Jewish identity as constructed in modern scholarship. And so, Jesus is frequently seen to be 'Jewish' or 'very Jewish' but noticeably *different from* his Jewish context. For all John Meier's emphasis on the Jewish Jesus, his Jesus does remain a *marginal Jew*.²⁴ In crucial

²⁰ Arnal, *The Symbolic Jesus*.

²¹ See Crossley, *Jesus in an Age of Terror*, 143–94.

²² Peter Novick, *The Holocaust and Collective Memory* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999); Norman Finkelstein, *The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering*, 2nd edn (London and New York: Verso, 2003).

²³ Novick, *Holocaust and Collective Memory*, 127–203.

²⁴ See Maier, *Marginal Jesus*.

ways, then, some things do not in fact change from pre-Vermes times, even if the rhetoric shifts from being 'radical' in terms of Law and grace to being socio-religiously 'radical', but still over against the rest of Judaism.²⁵ This pattern of finding ways for Jesus to 'transcend' or intensify Judaism, or at least do something new and unparalleled within Judaism, remains a serious trend in contemporary Historical Jesus scholarship. Subtly or otherwise, this pattern is found from the more obscure Jesus scholarship through to the major works, whether the transcending moment is discovered on the issue of forgiveness of the wicked, or burying the dead, purity, food, oaths, attitude towards women, Sabbath, and so on.²⁶ In terms of Pauline scholarship we might think, for instance, of how Dunn and Wright locate Paul 'within Judaism' but present Judaism as being different in terms of being too ethnocentric in its adherence to badges of national identity like circumcision or Sabbath.²⁷

Some of this tension reflects the lengthy history of the perceived superiority of Christianity over Judaism that goes back centuries and has dominated the field of New Testament studies. But there are other cultural reasons which help explain why these expressions of superiority are found alongside the simultaneous philo-Semitism. There are, to put it mildly, some tensions in the various contemporary relationships with Israel which are related to religious and cultural superiority. In many ways, the Christian Zionist relationship with Israel ought to be a strange one, even if it is obviously pragmatic from the perspective of some Israeli Jews and some Jewish Zionists. After all, Jews must convert and become one of 144,000 Jewish Billy Grahams, to use Hal Lindsey's memorable phrase,²⁸ or, ultimately, burn with the rest of the non-Christians, liberals, communists, and homosexuals. An extreme example, certainly, but the pattern of an asymmetrical relationship runs deep. In American politics, it is difficult to see the dominant pro-Israel policy being done out of eternal love for Israelis. The pressure group, the Project for the New American Century, which contained important and staunch supporters of Israeli actions, was, after all, an attempt to establish *American* values, and this is part of a long political tradition in the aftermath of 1967.²⁹ In British terms, we might, for instance, note Mark Curtis' observation that a 1970 Foreign Office report on future British policy did not opt for an *entirely* pro-Israeli policy but simply could not endorse a pro-Arab policy, not only because of public and political attitudes in the UK but also because of US pressure 'to keep us in line in any public pronouncements or negotiations on the dispute'.³⁰

²⁵ See Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2006).

²⁶ For more discussion on this, see Crossley, 'A "Very Jewish" Jesus'.

²⁷ For example, James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8* (WBC 38A; Waco, TX: Word, 1988), lxix-lxxii ('the law as a source of ethnic pride for the typical devout Jew ... circumcision as the focal point for this sense of privileged distinctiveness', lxxii); N.T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and Law in Pauline Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 3: 'The boundary-marker is faith in Christ and not Jewish race, with its badges of circumcision, kosher laws, sabbath observance'.

²⁸ Hal Lindsey, *Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1970), 111.

²⁹ Crossley, *Jesus in an Age of Terror*, 143-94.

³⁰ Mark Curtis, *Unpeople: Britain's Secret Human Rights Abuses* (Vintage: London, 2004), 155-7.

2 Neoliberalism, postmodernity, and race

But we might also understand such rhetoric further in the context of neoliberalism or postmodern capitalism of the sort that has developed and dominated economic and cultural discourses since the end of the 1960s until the serious challenges to its hegemony after the 2008 financial crash. In this respect, we might point to the extensive work of David Theo Goldberg on race and racializing discourses perpetuated in the age of neoliberalism and how anti-racist rhetoric in political institutions, universities, and academic discourse – despite good intentions – still perpetuates unconscious and implicit racializing distinctions, of the sort described in the language of the ‘post-racial’ above.³¹ An example of this might be Dunn’s obviously well-intentioned suggestion that one of the five points of the New Perspective on Paul is that justification, in stark contrast to the pre-New Perspective period, can now help combat ‘nationalism and racialism.’³² Yet the unmentioned implications of this for the scholarly construction of Judaism seem somewhat negative to say the least: Non-Pauline Judaism is all about nationalism and racialism. We might similarly point to Slavoj Žižek’s argument that liberal Western multicultural inclusiveness is typically an acceptance of the Other without the Otherness.³³ Put another way, part of the narrative of Western liberalism, and the liberal nation state, is to include the Other without the too unpalatable bits and to extract those bits which are palatable. Put yet another way, Vermes’ Jesus might have provided, for the Christian or non-Jewish academic at least, an experience of the Other with all the Otherness, a fully caffeinated Jesus³⁴; but in response to Vermes what has emerged is the dominant rhetoric of a ‘very Jewish’ Jesus where problematic parts of Judaism are transcended or dropped because of their incompatibility with Jesus.³⁵

³¹ David Theo Goldberg, *The Threat of Race: Reflections on Racial Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

³² James D. G. Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul: Collected Essays* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 15. Compare also Shawn Kelley’s critique of the history of distinction-making in parable scholarship where he comments: ‘There are times when racial thought shuns the vile rhetoric of the demagogue in favor of the dignified discourse of the poet and the intellectual ... This form of racial thinking appears in discourse that is decidedly gentle and in rhetoric that can tend towards the inspirational ... The aesthetic ideology is more than capable of prospering in the rarefied air of postmodern criticism’; Kelley, *Racializing Jesus*, 192, 208.

³³ See Slavoj Žižek, ‘Multiculturalism, or, the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism’, *New Left Review* 1/225 (1997): 28–51; *Welcome to the Desert of the Real! Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates* (London and New York: Verso, 2002); *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003); ‘Liberal Multiculturalism Masks an Old Barbarism with a Human Face’, *Guardian*, 3 October 2010; *Living in the End Times*, rev. edn (London and New York: Verso, 2011).

³⁴ I am alluding to, for example, Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 96: ‘On today’s market, we find a series of products deprived of their malignant property: coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without alcohol ... And the list goes on ... up to today’s tolerant multiculturalism as an experience of the Other deprived of its Otherness ...? Virtual Reality simply generalizes this procedure of offering a product deprived of its substance: it provides reality itself deprived of its substance ... just as decaffeinated coffee smells and tastes like real coffee without being the real coffee, Virtual Reality is experienced as reality without being so.’

³⁵ See James G. Crossley, *Jesus in an Age of Neoliberalism: Quests, Scholarship, Ideology* (London: Routledge, 2012); *idem*, ‘A “Very Jewish” Jesus’.

A general feature of the New Perspective on Paul has involved dealing with difference from Judaism without bringing in the triumphalism and negativity associated with the Old Perspective on Paul. To do this, the New Perspective era instead brought us the language of Jewish boundary markers and Jewish nationalism, and how Paul rejects these categories when they impact upon the early church. Yet, as with Jesus the Jew, the superiority myth is perpetuated implicitly and with a liberalizing credible overlay, and the difficult and strange aspects are put to one side. A key aspect of this liberal, post-racial turn, so to speak, is the 'secularization' of the scholarly language. To contextualize Bird's list of scholarly language and the New Perspective noted above, a new academic vocabulary, with terms such as 'nationalism', 'boundary markers', 'common Judaism', 'story, symbol and praxis', 'a web of social and religious commitments', 'ethnicity', and so on, has begun to replace the normative language of the Old Perspective era with its terms such as 'imputed righteousness', 'justification by faith', 'righteousness of God', salvation, and so on'. Much of this new critical language is, of course, integral to Wright's work³⁶ but Wright also reveals awareness of the tensions between the so-called 'secular' historian and the theologian which need to be resolved:

For a start, Paul will reassure both sides that they are full partners in his work. As we shall see when we examine his worldview, the symbols, praxis and stories which contribute to it are none of them simply about 'ideas' and 'beliefs'. They are about the creator God, his world and his people – and this world and these people are creatures of space, time and matter, open by definition to historical enquiry, living life in public without shame, modelling a way of life which is precisely in and for the world, affirming the goodness of the creator's universe and of human beings within it. Yes, says Paul to the suspicious slave-master History: I am your partner! You and I belong together!³⁷

With this in mind, Francis Watson was perhaps going too far in his claim that the New Perspective emphasizes 'presuppositionless exegesis' in the sense that proponents are freed from prior theological commitments,³⁸ but it remains the case that there has obviously been a tendency to downplay, to some degree, an overtly Protestant (and typically Lutheran) background in the language of the New Perspective. Indeed, despite their own self-identifications and overt theological interests, both Wright and Dunn regularly attack the ways in which Protestant presuppositions, abstract theology, and church traditions distort historical and exegetical analysis.³⁹ However, as Watson recognizes, one of the functions of this academic language is to give credibility or legitimacy to the New Perspective and partly discredit the 'too theological' Old Perspective.⁴⁰

³⁶ See, for example, Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 28, 31, 42.

³⁷ Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 72; cf. 72–4.

³⁸ Francis B. Watson, 'Not the New Perspective' (paper presented at the British New Testament Conference (BNTC), Manchester, 2001).

³⁹ For example, Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, lxiv–lxvi (lxv: 'The point is that Protestant exegesis has for too long allowed a typically Lutheran emphasis on justification by faith to impose a hermeneutical grid on the text of Romans'); Wright, *Climax*, 258–62; *idem*, *Victory of God*, 13.

⁴⁰ Watson, 'Not the New Perspective'.

But in doing so, this move simultaneously perpetuates a theological agenda masked, mystified, or deflected by ‘secular’ academic language. A related point has been made about the ‘secularization’ of theological language which has become a hallmark of contemporary evangelical New Testament scholarship. As part of his extensive analysis of evangelical biblical scholarship, Stephen Young argues that self-representation as academics and the ‘insider’ language of the academic have become significant protective strategies.⁴¹ In this sense, we might note that the most obvious unifier of the New Perspective is the endorsement of Sanders’ ‘covenantal nomism’ as a critical model which is emphatically *not* perpetuating a specifically Lutheran view of Judaism. Nevertheless, ‘covenantal nomism’ is simultaneously a model influenced by categories from Christian systematic theology which imposes onto Judaism the categories of grace and works – both of which were certainly present in early Judaism but neither of which seem to have been particularly systematized – as well as being a model that is deemed to make Judaism worthy of positive respect. Furthermore, as already suggested in a different way, does not the New Perspective simply perpetuate a post-racial myth of religious/theological superiority through such ‘secularizing’ language, at least in those readings of Paul which ditch the problematic Jewish practices? If we tie this back to earlier arguments, the construction of a kind of reasonable, critical, tolerant ‘centrism’ of the New Perspective, of the sort we might associate with Wright and Dunn, is part of the legitimization process of a neo-liberal or postmodern perpetuation of older categories of race, ethnicity, and nationalism but now in various ‘post-racial’ senses identified above and as we will see in more detail below.

3 N. T. Wright’s Jewish (but not that Jewish) Jesus and Paul

This construction of superiority over against Judaism is typical of Wright’s presentation of Jesus and Paul. Wright brings together a number of key trends in contemporary scholarship perhaps more than any other scholar. Both Jesus and Paul are presented by Wright as ‘very Jewish’, but the various ethnic and national symbols or badges of Judaism are presented as being transcended by both, even if Judaism is now positively constructed. As Wright puts it about his own reconstruction of Jesus, he has presented ‘a very Jewish Jesus who was nevertheless opposed to some high-profile features of first-century Judaism’.⁴² A good example of this perpetuation of discourses of negative difference under a benign guise is Wright’s handling of the saying ‘Let the dead bury their dead’ (Mt. 8.21-22//Lk. 9.59-60) where he effectively follows Sanders’ acceptance of Martin Hengel’s view⁴³ that this saying was shocking to Jews, even though no Jews appear shocked in the Gospel passages. The use of Hengel’s work is, however, particularly curious. Hengel’s interpretation – like much, if not most, of his work – is dominated by the distinctively Old Perspective ‘Law versus Gospel’ model, that is,

⁴¹ Stephen L. Young, ‘Protective Strategies and the Prestige of the “Academic”: A Religious Studies and Practice Theory Redescription of Evangelical Inerrantist Scholarship’, *BibInt* 23 (2015): 1–35.

⁴² Wright, *Victory of God*, 93.

⁴³ Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 252–4.

the driving myth behind the scholarship Sanders shattered in the 1970s and 1980s. In his discussion of Mt. 8.21-22//Lk. 9.59-60, Hengel expresses the typical pre-Sanders and Protestant-sounding claims, such as that 'any casuistic legal codification was repugnant' to Jesus, that the 'decisive thing is a faith that is put into practice', and that 'Jesus' answer ... in a unique way expresses his sovereign freedom in respect of the Law of Moses'.⁴⁴

Crucially, this language is not used in Wright's analysis of the passage though his conclusion is effectively the same as Hengel's, but this time in benign dress. Wright claims, with particular reference to Hengel and Sanders as key sources, that Jesus' declaration 'is, quite frankly, outrageous. Many scholars have pointed out that Jesus is here advocating behaviour that his contemporaries, both Jewish and non-Jewish, would have regarded as scandalous'.⁴⁵ However, according to Wright, there is the necessary qualification that Judaism is still understood positively because Jesus 'set a time-bomb' beside the symbol of ethnicity and that such a symbol had now 'become (not wicked, or shoddy, but) redundant'.⁴⁶ Yet, despite rejecting Hengel's use of anachronistic Protestant language, is not Wright actually perpetuating the very thing against which he has so fiercely reacted? Wright even mocks the very view that Hengel attempted to spread, namely that of 'events which showed the clash between false religion (here represented by sixteenth-century legalists or formalists thinly disguised as Pharisees) and the true one offered by Jesus'.⁴⁷ As Wright informs us, 'it used to be thought that Jesus' clashes with the Pharisees ... consisted of his standing up against the "petty legalism" of the Pharisees There is no historical verisimilitude in the picture of the Pharisees as petty, and perhaps Pelegian, legalists'.⁴⁸ Given Wright's concern to avoid the language and arguments of Protestant anachronism, would he have been so enthusiastic about using Hengel without Sanders' endorsement? Quite possibly. Nevertheless, I think we have to conclude that this is indeed a perpetuation of old ideas about the Jewish Question while claiming the exact opposite, much like Goldberg said of the tacit and ongoing (post-) racializing in academic structures and concepts.

The assumed static and collective nature of Judaism is stressed even more in his more recent and major book on Paul – *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* – where the phrase 'essentially Jewish' is ubiquitous and is the basis for allowing Paul to transcend Judaism's perceived limitations.⁴⁹ Among numerous examples of a static Judaism, we might mention 'this essentially Jewish narrative', 'Paul's essentially Jewish ... exposition', 'an essentially Jewish message', and, in a telling image with original

⁴⁴ Martin Hengel, *The Charismatic Leader and His Followers* ((1968) English Translation; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1981), quotations from pages 9 and 14 respectively.

⁴⁵ Wright, *Victory of God*, 401.

⁴⁶ Wright, *Victory of God*, 399–402.

⁴⁷ Wright, *Victory of God*, 13.

⁴⁸ See Wright, *Victory of God*, 107–8.

⁴⁹ See James G. Crossley and Katie Edwards, 'Paul and the Faithfulness of God as Postmodern Scholarship', in *God and the Faithfulness of Paul: A Critical Examination of the Pauline theology of N.T. Wright*, ed. Christoph Heilig, J. Thomas Hewitt and Michael F. Bird (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 603–21; cf. Chris Tilling, 'Paul and the Faithfulness of God: A Review Essay (Part 1)', *Anvil* 31 (2015): 45–56, at 48.

italics, 'the same *essentially Jewish* olive tree'.⁵⁰ Wright also applies this beyond Paul's message to 'the life of his communities' which 'remained essentially Jewish'.⁵¹ Further, when talking about 'the Jewish objection to the entire Roman view of the gods' (an 'essentially Jewish view'), Wright claims that this was 'not simply about monotheism (though that was of course the basis of the standard critique of idolatry), nor even about election (their belief that they, rather than the Romans or anybody else, were the chosen people of the one true God)'. Instead, this 'was about eschatology' and 'their belief that the one God had determined on a divine justice that would be done, and would be seen to be done, in a way that Roman imperial justice somehow never quite managed'.⁵² This too does not allow much room for manoeuvre in the construction of Jewish identity in the ancient world, or for a wider variety in ancient perceptions about Jewish identities. In this respect, we might ask more questions: What if some Jews were more accommodating to, or indifferent about, Roman views about gods? What if some Jews foregrounded 'monotheism' or 'election' rather than 'eschatology'? Wright may well concede that these points were possibilities, but what we have is Wright's text (and plenty of it) as our data, and it reveals strongly essentialist formulations about what Judaism *is* and what it *is not*.

Wright's construction in *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* also includes an essentialist and bounded Jewish–pagan binary, partly inherited from the primary sources and their long reception history. Certainly, Wright notes that his use of 'pagan' is a 'convenient shorthand'⁵³ but even so, the labelling still functions throughout as a category employed typically in strict opposition to Judaism. Wright claims not only that 'what Paul thought he was doing was offering an essentially *Jewish* message to the *pagan* world'⁵⁴ but also that a range of different philosophical traditions represent 'paganism'. And, for Wright, this philosophical 'paganism' is not to be understood as the source of concepts in Paul's or Jewish writings, irrespective of whether there are overlaps in language. When discussing the Wisdom of Solomon, Wright argues that it raises issues that 'would of course have been anathema not only to Epicureans, but also to Stoics, Platonists, and more or less everyone else across the spectrum of paganism'.⁵⁵ Wisdom of Solomon might use the language of such 'pagan' philosophy, but Wright views this as evidence for an essentialist Jewish identity. According to Wright, Wisdom of Solomon 'has made it ['pagan' philosophy] serve, decisively, an essentially Jewish vision of reality'.⁵⁶ It might be argued that another function of Wright's discourse is to construct an orthodox path through history and protect the Christian message from being tainted by anything deemed idolatrous. This might incorporate the influence of what Luke Timothy Johnson called the 'Hengel sidestep' by which he meant that 'any possible influence of Greco-Roman culture on the New

⁵⁰ Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1279, 1303, 1439, and 1449, respectively.

⁵¹ Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1440, cf. 385.

⁵² Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 342.

⁵³ Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, xxi.

⁵⁴ Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 200 (italics original).

⁵⁵ Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 241.

⁵⁶ Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 241.

Testament is systematically filtered through Hellenistic Judaism, which, presumably, renders it non-toxic for Christianity.⁵⁷

This essentialist approach to Jewish identity continues in Wright's construction of more recent Jewish identity. In *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, he pays some attention to Hannah Arendt and Walter Benjamin who, 'in the extreme conditions of the mid-century crisis, understood the urgency of present action Something has to be *done*, and done *now*.'⁵⁸ Wright quotes from Arendt that what is needed is 'a new guarantee which can be found only in a new political principle, in a new law on earth, whose validity this time must comprehend the whole of humanity while its power must remain strictly limited, rooted in and controlled by newly defined territorial entities.'⁵⁹ In a similar way, Wright suggests that Benjamin 'offers a reminder that the ancient Jewish vision, in which the Messiah and the redemption of history have played such an important role', brings 'the challenge to action in the world itself.'⁶⁰ As Wright summarizes, 'One does not have to fill in too many gaps to see that this is essentially a Jewish vision: a world at one, with human authorities necessary but firmly under limitation.'⁶¹ This assessment too works with a fixed view of Jewish identity across time which has been established by the scholarly interpreter, in this instance Wright. Of course, it can be acknowledged that Arendt and Benjamin (and indeed others in the Frankfurt School) were influenced by their Jewish backgrounds, but that is not the whole story. Most obviously, we might also factor in their Marxist influences. But we might wonder if Wright's essentially Jewish description even works historically. Is it possible that such a vision might be known in Christianity, nineteenth-century nationalism, the developing Labour movement of the early twentieth century, or whatever complex combinations of all of the above we might refer to? Might this vision have been something developed specifically in light of, as Wright puts it, 'the extreme conditions of the mid-century crisis'? And then there is the case of those identifying and identified as Jews, but who do not think of a world at one, 'with human authorities necessary but firmly under limitation'. Are they rejecting an essentially Jewish vision? Would not at least some of the well-established Jewish anarchists in the East End of London prior to the First World War have had difficulties with the idea of *necessary* 'human authorities', no matter how limited their power? Wright does not go into details about what we do with alternative Jewish visions, but their very existence again reveals the extent of the static and essentializing nature of Wright's 'Jewishness' which appears close to being a timeless categorization.

⁵⁷ Luke Timothy Johnson, 'Review of Richard H. Bell, *No one Seeks for God*, RBL (1999). Available online: http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/382_408.pdf (accessed 31 March 2017). On the construction of an orthodox path through history, compare also the following comments by Wright where he indicates heretical historical paths the historian best avoids: 'Two of the greatest poems in scripture, perhaps in all the world, are the psalms we call 19 and 119, the latter celebrating Torah from every possible angle, the former balancing it with the power and glory of the sun itself. That is what Torah is like. Not to recognize that is to take a large step towards Marcion, or indeed towards the gnosticism that would scorn the created order as well' (*Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1016–17).

⁵⁸ Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1474 (italics original).

⁵⁹ Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1474.

⁶⁰ Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1474.

⁶¹ Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1474.

Even the construction of ‘paganism’ remains when Wright discusses problematic modern identity. The ‘horrible anti-semitism of Nazi ideology’ was ‘of course essentially pagan, though sometimes borrowing some clothes designed to look “Christian”’.⁶² We might question the validity of such essentialism in academic analysis. What does it mean to say Nazism was ‘essentially pagan’ (whatever that seemingly broad category might contain) while anything seemingly ‘Christian’ is only wearing ‘clothes designed to look’ right? This is not, of course, to say that Nazism was essentially Christian, but clearly there were Nazi Christians who did identify as Christian and did borrow from earlier figures who also identified as Christian. Is it really the role of the historian to extract purest Christianity from any unfortunate contamination, not unlike the popular discourse of ISIS not being ‘true Islam’? Perhaps not, but the point here is to show just how firmly essentialist Wright’s binaries are and arguably the clearest example of what Arnal saw as a reaction against fragmented postmodern identities.⁶³ And in the hands of Wright, it is Pauline theology which is the ultimate revelation of what such Judaism ought to be, once anything problematic for postmodern liberal discourses is removed.

Concluding remarks

We have seen how, through the example of the leading British New Testament scholar, N. T. Wright, and broader trends in contemporary scholarship, essentialized ‘Judaism’ and ‘Jewishness’ are part of wider cultural, geopolitical, and post-racial discourses. This includes their classifications of a particular minority in relation to a constructed set of collective behaviours, appearances, and relationship to notions of liberalism and the liberal nation state, irrespective of whether individual scholars are aware of this or not. Both Goldberg’s claim that the lingering racialized categories recur in different and downplayed settings and Žižek’s claim that liberal multiculturalism embraces the Other without problematic Otherness function as driving forces in the New Perspective on Paul and the contemporary quest for the Historical Jesus, as well as, on closer inspection, a specific proponent like Wright. This has been an examination of a more specifically British manifestation of the New Perspective on Paul and the Jewishness of Jesus, but it is one that has been influential in Anglophone scholarship. Indeed, despite Sanders’ decisive intervention (and employment at Oxford in the 1980s), Wright and Dunn have been two of the most influential proponents of constructions of Judaism in relation to the New Testament and especially Jesus and Paul. Moreover, they have also been influential in American scholarship, or at least certain areas of American scholarship, and both have attracted many doctoral students from North America. But it is also an era that is coming to an end, and not only generationally. Since the 2008 financial crash, the neo-liberal settlement has been challenged like never before and more ethno-nationalist discourses have come to prominence – whether Trump in America or May and Brexit in the UK – as well as reactions against them. It will no doubt be engagement (implicit or explicit) with these kinds of competing discourses

⁶² Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 807.

⁶³ See Arnal, *The Symbolic Jesus*; also note 20 and discussion above.

that will leave their marks on the next generation of New Testament scholars and the Jesuses and Pauls they produce in relation to the ways in which concepts of race, ethnicity, and nation will become reconstructed. This alone should be warning enough that, despite using 'post-racial' in a fairly non-polemical way in this essay to describe the ways scholars categorize according to set and essentialized behaviours, we should take Goldberg's more forthright use of 'racial' seriously because he shows how such categories, despite appearances, can be used in malign ways. Indeed, such classificatory systems are continually used for monitoring and surveillance of minority groups by the liberal capitalist state and thereby perpetuating difference and the potential for discrimination. As we see with contemporary Muslims in Europe and North America, the potential for what might otherwise be called 'racial' or 'racist' profiling has hardly gone away.

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