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KNOWING JESUS THROUGH THE OLD TESTAMENT

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DAVID SHIELDS

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CRITICAL BOOK REVIEW: KNOWING JESUS THROUGH THE OLD TESTAMENT

In his work, *Knowing Jesus through the Old Testament*, author Christopher J.H. Wright presents considerable information to the nature and preexistence of Jesus Christ throughout the Old Testament. In this critical review, I intend to outline the main themes the author discusses in his work and offer a thorough analysis of the main subject matter as it is presented. Where relevant, I will discuss the various textual and extra-biblical conclusions as the text offers them to the reader.

Starting from the very basic story of Jesus as a man and the son of God, Wright slowly builds a framework of interconnections between the Hebrew scripture and Jesus in the New Testament. In the beginning, the author shows the reader the importance of Jesus' Jewish heritage and his connection to King David (Wright 1992, 6). Furthermore, the reader is supplied with a brief chronology of the Jewish people and the promises that were offered and fulfilled in Jesus and still discusses the 'Gentile Jesus'. As the story progresses, Wright offers contrasting opinions of what he calls 'Carol singing Christians' (Wright 1992, 8) might know about Jesus with what he has found through careful consideration of the Old Testament texts.

Using the Gospel of Matthew with great liberty, Wright outlines Jesus' life and history as it is referenced in various messianic passages in the Old Testament before launching into a detailed breakdown of the promises God gives his people and their subsequent dissolution of said promises by their own actions (Wright 1992, 77-93). It is then made apparent through proof in the scripture that God already had a working plan to offer a promise to surpass the others long before Jesus was placed in a manger. In a more descriptive and defining way, the author builds a comprehensive and cohesive concept of Jesus' identity as son of God and son of man and

masterfully illustrates how Jesus embodies a parallel to God's own view of his people of Israel (Wright 1992, 118-129). The author provides unique correlations in what the Old Testament defines as Jesus' role with what Wright believes would have been Jesus' perception of his own purpose culturally.

Taking a slightly different angle at the hub of his creation, Wright discusses some of the core theological elements in Jesus' story by relating him to known Old Testament titles such as 'servant of the Lord' and 'Messiah' as they would have been perceived by his Jewish peers and the Early Church. Furthermore, the author discusses the various eschatological messages that the Minor Prophets offered to Jewish society in preparation for the Messiah and seamlessly ushers these writings into their living fulfillment in the person of Jesus Christ. Wright creates a basis for the restoration of hope that the New Testament and Jesus brings to the beleaguered and, by this point, spiritually exhausted, nation of Israel whose only foreknowledge of any hope comes from the Messiah defined in the book of Daniel (Wright 1992, 143). In order for us to fully understand the Messiahship of Jesus, the author is able to make light of virtually all titles Jesus is either called or assigns himself in the Gospels and connects them to such Old Testament books as Isaiah, Daniel and even Psalms to exhibit their origin. This aids in depicting Jesus as a walking, living, breathing scripture compilation.

As the reader is made keenly aware of the prophetic promises Jesus fulfills, they are introduced to the manner in which the mission of the New Testament Church itself is saturated with purposes of God's people from as far back as Abraham. It is stressed that the church must take a unified front in caring for people of all nations and the Servant Kingdom of God (Wright 1992, 175). Despite the cry for unity from not only Jesus but Paul as well, we are reminded that the Hebrew of the era were still clinging to their opinion that they were God's chosen people

from the Old Testament days and seemed unable to see the very fulfillment Jesus offered as the final piece of the promise from centuries past.

In the final stretch of his work, Wright seamlessly segues into how the culture of Jesus' upbringing, deeply rooted in Judaism, molds and shapes not only his interactions with Satan during the temptation (which Wright strategically links to the 40 days Israel wandered through the wilderness of Sinai) but provides him ample ammunition to completely destroy the legalistic logic of his foe – a fitting power for the Son of God. Readers are momentarily interrupted in the story by Wright's seemingly abrupt injection of a study of Deuteronomy 4-11 which he titles 'The Basic Orientation of Life before God' (Wright 1992, 187-191) but further reading reveals that this was meant to deepen understanding of Jesus' Old Testament repertoire. The author brings his work to a close by aligning some of Jesus' most admirable teaching skills with their Old Testament genetics and covers everything from Jesus' classification among the prophets to his multifaceted concept of God's kingdom, authority and grace.

In the preface of the book, Wright expresses his love for Hebrew scripture (Wright 1992, ix) and what he perceives as the rampant misunderstanding of modern Christians about the very nature of Jesus as his own words postulate 'After all, Jesus never read the New Testament!' (Wright 1992, ix). These themes run quite fluidly throughout the story to the point – such as the aforementioned spontaneous Deuteronomy 4-11 study – that they sometimes detract from the ambiance being developed around them. Even so, Wright is able to accomplish precisely what he intended to do... show the lay person and theologian alike that Jesus was not a sudden explosion of Godly happenstance but the realization of Yahweh's ultimate salvation plan intricately woven into the fabric of Jewish history and theology.

From the onset of the story, or ‘right out of the gate’, Wright prepares us well for the style prevalent in the rest of the work and does so in such a way that eases the reader into his conceptual framework. We are shown a simple connection between Jesus as he is predestined in the Old Testament and Jesus as he is delivered in the New. Jesus’ genealogy in of itself is a theological message that the anointed one of God is both Jew and Gentile and that the defining promises of the Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic covenants are not absent in his person. Wright also takes this time to make the first *raison d’être* for creating his work - the modern church’s unwavering focus on the New Testament. While important, this methodology serves to reduce one’s comprehension of God’s endless love for his people, a love that can be seen in no more complete fashion than through his relationship with them in the Old Testament.

During the larger part of the book that follows, a less desirable trait in Wright’s style becomes painstakingly obvious, his tendency to try and compact large amounts of Old Testament dialogue to support much smaller components of Jesus’ purpose and ministry. This tenacity for detail is one of the few complaints that Pastor Brian Tubbs had in his otherwise glowing review of the book on the Protestantism website Suite101.¹ In reference, as Wright is beginning to discuss the identity of Jesus in the Old Testament, there are over nine pages of Old Testament scripture elements (Wright 1992, 107-116) tied together to say Jesus is the son of God. To its credit, the information is well patterned with clear associations between each node, yet this could have been accomplished just as well with less verbosity. This device is present at many other points in the flow of the story such as the many prophetic scriptures of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Zechariah, connected to Psalms to illustrate the “sending of the Son” (Wright 1992, 137-140) and the ten to fifteen references to Isaiah as the reader is introduced to the ‘Servant of the Lord’

¹ Brian Tubbs, “Jesus and the Old Testament: A Review of Christopher J.H. Wright’s Book on Jesus in the OT.” Suite101. http://protestantism.suite101.com/article.cfm/jesus_and_the_old_testament [accessed July 29, 2009].

aspect of Jesus. Again, the information presented does not appear inaccurate from an interpretive standpoint, it just seems superfluous to the element Wright is discussing.

A recognizable concept among scholars and theologians both past and present is the need for variety when choosing sources. In *Knowing Jesus*, Wright seems to overlook this as he presents a few of the aspects in Jesus' early life. Most notable of all, is his penchant for the Gospel of Matthew, a brief scan of the various New Testament references that are used in this manuscript reveals more references to the Gospel of Matthew than almost any other New Testament source and not far behind that are its references to the Gospel of Luke. However, there is very little attention to the Gospels of Mark or John and although the author does use references to the Pauline letters, they are sparse and often seem to have little or no effect on the conclusion being drawn. In Paul Alexander's review of the book, he even makes note of Wright's extensive draw from Matthew 1-4² which seems to strengthen the argument that the author should include more sources of information. Even so, the draw of Matthew does not provide any major sources for criticism and even Wright makes note that the connections Matthew institutes between Jesus' childhood and Old Testament scripture seems vague at best (Wright 1992, 55-56). This does not, however, stop Wright from providing other plurals in Matthew with scripture of the Old Testament.

Meandering information and occasional overcompensation of Old Testament scripture aside, Wright is able to make several universal points that any follower of Christ can meditate over and deepen their walk with God both now and forever. Wright reminds us throughout his work of one overarching truth, the promises of God to his people of Israel all the way into the Jewish values of Jesus illustrate the fact that God's love is universal and has lasted for centuries

² Paul Alexander, "Book Review: Knowing Jesus through the Old Testament," IX Marks. <http://www.9marks.org/CC/article/0,,PTID314526|CHID598014|CIID2438290,00.html> [accessed July 29, 2009]

before and will last for centuries forward. In his covenant with Abraham, God promises that Abraham's descendents will spread God's redemptive love through all nations (Wright 1992, 83) and in the Sinai (Mosaic) covenant God may have set apart Israel but not as a single people to privately enjoy God's grace, but as mission statement to all followers in all nations. This further expounds on the Abrahamic covenant (Wright 1992, 86). Although any 'carol singing Christian' is aware of the Old Testament narratives over the promises, Wright's presentation on their New Testament realization against backdrops of Old Testament truths makes this point become much more real when superimposed with Jesus and his Messianic fulfillment of those very promises.

In addition to the understanding of the Old Testament source and the New Testament provision of God's love provided by Wright to the lay person is the boundless teaching options his insight creates and the respectable caution against approaching the Old Testament as a disconnected piece of ancient history. With all of the countless schools of New Testament thought prevalent in the modern world and the Church's ever-present focus on these thoughts, the Old Testament is scarcely regarded as being related to it at all. Adding insult to injury, when one tries to teach anything of any value from the Old Testament, the need to explain the 'why' and 'how' of the culture before even establishing the foundation for study makes teaching it a daunting task. Wright does not approach this with trepidation as many of his contemporaries do, rather, his delivery of these connections is light and airy in most circumstances and the structures he creates offer many ways for the preacher or Sunday school teacher to easily dispatch Old Testament connections to New Testament faith. The author's command of this subject matter is obvious, and the reader will need little convincing of Wright's accuracy as they read.

Combining Old Testament history, theology, and chronology under the banner of Jesus Christ is a task one might consider at the very least intimidating if not theoretically impossible.

Although *Knowing Jesus* does not necessarily state that such things are its intention, this is the closest to accomplishing that lofty goal a scholar could hope to find but is not composed in such a way that the average person wanting to deepen their knowledge of Christ would find it too challenging to read. My own knowledge of the Old Testament, although more thorough than a lay Christian is still quite supple and needs to be strengthened if I hope to reach any future followers of Jesus Christ in a way that is both topical and scripturally sound. I have Christopher J.H. Wright to thank for giving me a critical piece in this puzzle – connecting the Old with the New – that will offer immense value both as I study Christ and as I present him to once and future believers. With as clearly as Wright shows Jesus as the living word of God, I have no doubt in my mind that when we sit around the table in Heaven, that Wright and John the apostle will have much to talk about.

Bibliography

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