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Bridging the gulf between biblical scholars and theologians: Can Barth and Wright provide an answer?

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Abstract

There was a time when the interpretation of the Bible was a seamless integrated theological activity. Today, the separation of biblical studies from theologically interested exegesis amongst theologians encourages a sceptical arms-length relationship between Old and New Testament scholars and theologians. Theologians criticise biblical studies' so-called objective and disinterested approach to interpreting the Bible for requiring scholars of both testaments to suspend their theological convictions. Biblical scholars condemn theologians for misusing biblical texts in support of their own preconceived theological agendas. The article suggests a way to bring these divergent exegetical approaches into conversation in a charitable, yet critical fashion, by comparing Karl Barth and N. T. Wright's exegesis of Romans 3:21–4:25. It concludes that the biblical scholar's and theologian's respective sensitivity to the historical and theological sense of the biblical text can, when brought together, benefit each other's reading of the Bible.

The gulf between biblical scholars and theologians

At one time, the church's great interpreters of scripture (such as Origen, Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin and Luther) did not think of themselves narrowly as specialists in Old and New Testament, in theology or church history. For them, the interpretation of the Bible was a seamless integrated theological activity that spoke directly to the needs of the church. In contrast today, theologians and biblical scholars continue to be at odds regarding the place and use of scripture both in the academy and the church.

One of the long-term results of the historical critical method for interpreting the Bible in biblical departments has been to separate the practice of interpreting the Bible in a manner geared toward historical reconstruction from the practice of developing a theologically significant reading.[1] Loyalty

[1] What I mean by a 'theologically significant reading' is one that seeks a 'practical knowledge of God, that is, knowledge which aims at the furtherance of the life of the Christian community, the salvation of humankind, and godly discipline'. See John

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to historical criticism does not seem to allow the theological convictions of biblical scholars to have any impact on their interpretations of the Bible. In many biblical departments across North America a dispassionate and detached attitude is a prerequisite for a serious and objective study of the Bible. Adherence to a *regula fidei* is considered a hindrance to constructive exegesis.

To counter this *wissenschaftlich* tendency in biblical studies, recent postliberal theologians have attempted to reclaim the centrality of biblical inquiry for theological purpose. In contrast to a so-called objective historical inquiry of biblical texts fostered in some biblical departments, postliberal theologians are encouraging an ecclesial or socio-linguistic reading of the Bible that shifts the discussion about how to interpret it away from which methodological tools should be used to the domain of meaning in which the Bible can be properly interpreted. This approach seeks to shake biblical studies free of its investments on human acts of interpretation, and give much more attention to locality, to the field within which alone interpreters and their acts have real depth and extension. Unfortunately this shift to locality has brought with it a theological price. The heavy emphasis on the ecclesial use of scripture that does not push on to consider the doctrines of the Trinity and revelation does not deliver some scholars from an anthropologically centred interpretation of the Bible. Ecclesial or socio-linguistic approaches to interpreting the Bible not only fail to break from the existentialist moorings they seek to separate from, but also widen the existing gulf between biblical and theological engagements with the biblical text.

Might there be a better way to bridge this entrenched gulf? I believe there is. The best way to do this is to bring together, in a constructive yet reciprocally critical fashion, the interpretative practices of biblical scholars and theologians. This article will attempt to do just that by comparing and critically evaluating the exegetical strategies of two prominent representatives of biblical and theological studies, N. T. Wright and Karl Barth, in particular their respective interpretations of Romans 3:21–4:25.[2] I have chosen these particular individuals because both seek a balanced approach to interpreting the Bible that does not eliminate careful historical study of the text nor leave

Webster, 'Scripture, Theology and the Theological School', in *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 116.

[2] I am drawing my summaries of Wright's and Barth's respective exegesis of Romans 3:21–4:25 from N. T. Wright, *Acts: Introduction to Epistolary Literature. Romans. 1 Corinthians*, The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes, vol. 10 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002), pp. 395–505, and Karl Barth, *A Shorter Commentary on Romans* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1959). I've selected these works, in particular *Shorter Romans* because of their straightforward commentary style.

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behind one's ecclesial and theological commitments. Wright does this by attempting to purge the historical critical method of its pro-Enlightenment bias and then applying an impartial or critical realistic historical account of the Bible. He does this by distinguishing between the actual argument of what Paul says and the wider worldview belief system of Paul. An open question for Wright is if his critical realistic approach to scripture is critical enough. Does his project simply mirror the Enlightenment bias of former historical critical scholarship he rejects by replacing it with a different kind of bias, equally strong and equally uncritical, although more conservative?

Wright's project, I believe, needs a more robust theology of God's Word as evidenced in Barth's exegetical practice. Although Barth's exegesis has come under considerable criticism from biblical scholars as overtly 'pneumatic' and 'unscientific', his use of historical critical tools suggests this is not true. What distinguishes him from biblical scholars (including Wright) is a more critical and thus humble use of historical critical tools. Barth rejects subsuming a literal sense reading of the text within a so-called worldview of Paul because the very notion that a reliable narrative backdrop can be reconstructed is not tenable. For Barth, historical investigations are warranted. Yet, any such investigations must be, if they are to be theological, of service to and thus not override the argumentative sequence of what the text says. In so doing, we allow the text to properly function as an instrument of God's apocalyptic self-giving presence in Christ, which, in turn, determines and shapes historical investigations without eliminating them.

Nevertheless, Wright does have something to teach Barth and other theologians about interpreting the Bible. Barth, I believe, mistakenly imports a Lutheran understanding of the law that is foreign to Paul's thinking. The likelihood that Paul adopted elements of the Jewish teaching regarding justification blocks from the beginning a Lutheran viewpoint where there is a fundamental antithesis between Paul and Judaism, gospel and law. Wright reminds all theologians that historical investigations of the Bible, although in the service of God's Word, can be used as a helpful corrective to theologically biased readings. To support my proposal, I will first provide a summary of Wright and Barth's respective exegesis of Romans 3:21–4:25 and then bring to bear on each a critical evaluation from the perspective of the other.

Wright's exegesis

Wright maintains that Paul's letter to the Romans is set within and acts as a window to his worldview.[3] This worldview offers the theological framework

[3] Wright writes extensively about Paul's worldview in his essay, 'Romans and the Theology of Paul', in David M. Hay and E. Elizabeth Johnson (eds), *Pauline Theology*,

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for understanding what Paul says. Paul's worldview incorporated Second Temple Judaism, the Hellenistic culture and Roman imperial ideology of his day and very much influenced, according to Wright, the subject matter of Romans 3 and 4, 'the righteousness of God'. Within the context of a first-century Jewish law court, the accused and defendant pleaded their civil cases before a judge who declared the successful party 'vindicated' or 'righteous'. The righteously declared status of the individual by the court had nothing to do with the individual's moral behaviour, although once declared righteous, appropriate behaviour was expected to befit the individual's status.

At a deeper level, first-century Jews believed God's righteousness would one day be revealed when he fulfilled the covenantal promises made to the patriarchs by rescuing creation from sin and death. God's righteousness, seen in terms of covenantal faithfulness and through the image of the law court, is the way God puts the world to rights or brings justice to the world.

Wright concludes that Paul's use of the phrase 'righteousness of God' is a variant on Second Temple Judaism's understanding of righteousness. The event of Jesus' death and resurrection is the apocalyptic moment all Jews had been longing for. In the person of Jesus, God's covenantal promises to Israel are fulfilled and his actions make it possible for God to declare that both Jews and Gentiles can now be members of God's family.

The Greek culture and Roman ideology of his day also influenced Paul's worldview. As a Roman citizen, he was at home in Hellenistic discourse, language and philosophies that had cut deep into Roman imperial ideology. Paul lived, worked, thought and wrote within complex and multiple integrated worlds. Yet, his ease with Hellenistic culture and Roman ideology was balanced by Judaism's traditional critique of pagan empires that stretched back nearly a millennium. To belong to the church meant embracing an identity rooted in Judaism, lived out in the Hellenistic world, and placing a counter-claim against Caesar's aspiration to world dominion.

Paul's Second Temple understanding of righteousness, Wright argues, rejects the traditional Lutheran and, as we shall see, Barth's interpretation of the same concept. God's righteousness is God's faithfulness to the promises he made long ago to Israel as evidenced by Paul's allusion to Genesis 15 in Romans 4. In what Wright calls, 'Paul's covenantal theology',[4] Jesus the Messiah has accomplished that which Israel has failed to do – be faithful to

vol. 3 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995) and in his recent book, *Paul: In Fresh Perspectives* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).

[4] Wright, *Romans*, p. 464. Wright admits that Paul speaks 'without using the word, of the covenant'. Still, for Wright, covenant is useful for drawing attention to Gen. 15, which Paul expands upon in Rom. 4.

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God's promises so it can be a light unto the Gentiles. Questions concerning sin and justification by faith are secondary concerns for Paul. Paul's main concern is 'God's creation of a single worldwide family, composed of believing Jews and Gentiles'[5] originally promised to Abraham and now fulfilled in and through the one who is faithful on Israel's behalf, Jesus Christ. In fulfilling his covenant with Abraham in Christ, God declares that those who wear the badge of faith are now members of God's people. I will now consider Wright's exegesis of Romans 3:21–4:25 in light of Paul's worldview.

The 'But now' (v. 21) opening of this section segues into a new topic; that God's righteous is revealed through the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah for the benefit of all who believe apart from the Torah. The Torah and the Prophets do witness to this revelation of God's righteousness. Still, the righteousness of God unveils God's covenantal plan of salvation, which is fulfilled in Jesus, who offers to God what Israel could not. Unlike Israel, the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah (*pistis Iēsou Christou*) restores justice in the world and fulfils God's plan of salvation.

In vv. 22b–24, Paul offers a solution to the plight of Adamic humanity. God deals with the Adamic problem that 'all have sinned' by declaring that those who believe are now in the right; their sins have been dealt with and thus they can be God's true covenant people. God can declare that believers are justified because this has been accomplished 'through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus' (v. 23b). Wright directs us to three aspects of Paul's understanding of redemption. First, our redemption in the Messiah was and continues to be a gift from God. Second, it evokes a whole world of thought in Paul's mind. At one level, this metaphor refers to first-century Judaic understanding of the slave-market. At a deeper level, Israel could scarcely hear the word without thinking of Egypt, Passover, the Red Sea, the wilderness wanderings and the Promised Land. 'Redemption' would have conjured up for Paul images of slaves being brought back and set free so that, as in the time when God set Israel free from Egypt, God frees the cosmos from sin. Paul also had in mind Genesis 15, the passage he will later expound upon in Romans 4 where God promises Abraham that his seed would dwell as slaves in a foreign land and be rescued at the proper time. Third, the time of redemption has come in Israel's representative 'the Messiah, Jesus',[6] who has accomplished God's saving purpose through his faithfulness and obedience, which Israel could not do.

Verses 25–6 express the heart of what Paul began to say in 3:21. The redemption of both Jew and Gentile, according to Wright, fulfils

[5] Ibid., p. 465.
[6] Ibid., p. 471.

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God's covenantal promise to Abraham that he would have a faithful family composed alike of Jews and Gentiles. The fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham 'undoes the problem of Adam'[7] (1:18–3:20). In the death of Christ, God is righteousness, not simply by dealing with the sins of his people, as they deserved, but also by declaring that both Jew and Gentile can now be his people.

To understand Paul's use of sacrificial language in vv. 25–6, Wright unpacks Second Temple Judaism's understanding of the word *hilastērion*. He points out that the same word *hilastērion* in v. 25 is also used in Lev. 16 for describing the Day of Atonement. According to Lev. 16:2, *hilastērion* was the 'mercy-seat' of the Ark of the Covenant, the place where Aaron sprinkled the blood of a bullock and a goat to make atonement for Israel's sins. Wright concedes that nowhere does Paul refer to the great Day of Atonement in Romans. Yet it was natural for Second Temple Jews to understand God's faithfulness to Israel in terms of temple cult activities where sacrifices for Israel's sins in general and the Day of Atonement in particular would elicit God's righteousness. Influenced by Second Temple cult practices, Paul now declares that God has done the same thing in a once-and-for-all grand scale in Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, Paul was probably aware of the often told stories during his time of the Maccabaean Martyrs who opposed Syrian oppression around 160 BC and whose blood and death was also considered a *hilastērion*, or a ransom for Israel's sin. It was not far from the mind of a Second Temple Jew, and thus Paul's thinking, that a suffering Jew might in some way atone for the sins of Israel.

Last, Second Temple Judaism's construal of martyrdom in terms of sacrificial and other redemptive actions went back to Isaiah 40–55. According to Wright, Paul's thinking was probably influenced by the sustained exposition of the righteousness of God in terms of the suffering servant who represents Israel by offering himself as a sacrifice and a light unto the nations in Isaiah 40–55. The significance of Isaiah 40–55 here lies in its ability to tie together and explain why Paul should imagine that the sacrificial death of Jesus reveals the righteousness of God and deals punitively with sins.

Considering the sacrificial overtones (as drawn from Leviticus, Isaiah and Second Temple martyrdom stories), *hilastērion* carries Paul's point that Jesus' death is the answer to the plight of the world and to the problems outlined in 3:1–8, that is of God's own justice, truth and faithfulness. Although the sacrifices in Leviticus do not seem to be propitiatory, the sacrificial language during Paul's time was used in exactly this way precisely by those

[7] Ibid., p. 472.

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righteous Israelites whose deaths somehow exhausted the divine wrath that was otherwise suspended over Israel. Therefore, Paul's understanding of the word *hilastērion* suggests that the faithfulness of Jesus to God's saving plan atones for the sins of the world.

Wright is consistent with the 'new perspective on Paul'[8] in his interpretation of Romans 3:27–31. He rejects typical Protestant accusations that Jews were legalists trying to earn their way into heaven through meritorious works. Contemporary studies of first-century Judaism show that Paul's contemporaries were not Pelagians, bent on earning their justification from performing the law. For the first-century Jew, living by the Torah was a response to God's grace rather than an attempt to merit it. Paul is not rejecting the 'boasting' of a moral legalist, but the ethnic pride of Israel aroused in those who believe the mere possession of the Torah and its performance is what sets it apart from pagans. The revelation of God's righteousness in the death of Jesus eliminates any suggestion that Israel has any special status. Since the 'Torah of faith' defines the people of God, not 'the works of the Torah',[9] Jews can no longer boast that they are the only members of the covenant because the badge of membership is faith, not works. Paul proves this point by quoting Judaism's own confession of faith, the Schema, 'since God is one' (v. 30), which indicates that faith is true obedience to the Torah.

In Romans 4, Paul supports what he said in Romans 3:21–31 by expounding Genesis 15 and asking who belongs to Abraham's family. Wright argues that the doctrine of justification by faith is not of primary concern here for Paul. Paul is concerned to show that Abraham is the father of everyone who believes in the God who raised Jesus, so that faith, not possession or works of the Torah, is the sole badge of membership for God's people.

To understand what Paul meant by the word, 'reckoned' in v. 3, Wright considers its usage in Second Temple Judaism. 'Reckoned' was a bookkeeping metaphor during this time. Paul probably imagined God entering the words 'faith in this promise' into the column titled 'righteousness' in Abraham's ledger, thus declaring Abraham's faith as the sign that he is in the right. Since

[8] I am here referring specifically to the ground-breaking work of E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (London: SCM Press, 1977). For more recent proponents of this new perspective on Paul see Ellen T. Charry, 'The Law of Christ All the Way Down', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7 (2005), pp. 155–68; Richard B. Hays, 'Christology and Ethics in Galatians: The Law of Christ', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 49 (1987), pp. 268–90; *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); and J. Louis Martyn, *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1997).

[9] Wright, *Romans*, p. 481.

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Abraham is now in the right, his faith is a sure sign that he belongs in God's family.

In vv. 4–5, Paul contrasts what Abraham may have gained if works as opposed to faith justified him. What Paul says in v. 5 'deconstructs'[10] what is said in v. 4 so that the alternative to 'working' is to 'trust the one who justifies the ungodly'. Wright deals with Paul's apparent contradiction with Old Testament teaching that a just God cannot justify the ungodly (Ex. 23:7; Proverbs 17:15, 26; Deut. 16:19, 27:25; Ezek. 22:12), by considering again Paul's central theme, God's established covenant with Abraham. Abraham was declared righteous and accepted into God's family despite his ungodly activity, as are his descendants, because God has fulfilled his promise to Abraham in and through the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah. God's justice is preserved because he has now put things to rights through the death of Jesus who has accomplished that which Israel could not do.

Paul repeats in vv. 9–15, in a sharper form, his answer to his question in 4:1, by 'rewording'[11] Genesis 17. He reminds Jewish Christians that their circumcision is a sign or seal of a faith-demarcated righteousness. Faith, not circumcision, is the badge of covenant membership just as it was for Abraham. Abraham was justified freely by grace and before he was circumcised so that the marks of Abraham's family are faith, not circumcision. Consistent with Second Temple Judaism teaching that Abraham's seed would inherit the whole cosmos, the covenant is fulfilled in the creation of a worldwide family marked out by Abraham-like faith (vv. 16–17). The promise made to Abraham is now valid for all his seed. Wright rejects reading the themes of faith, grace and promise into these verses. These themes are vital but they are not the subject matter. If exegesis of these verses is to 'come out smoothly',[12] Wright argues, the main subjects are Abraham, his family and his God.

In Romans 4:18–22 Paul expands on the nature of Abraham's faith. For Wright, Abraham's faith was not synonymous with a general religious belief. It trusted in the specific promises made by the true God who is the life giver and creator out of nothing. Christians demonstrate the same kind of faith when they believe that God raised Jesus from the dead. Abraham's faith in God's promise, despite reasonable expectations, is in complete contrast to humanity's worship of idols (ch. 1) and Israel's disobedience (2:17–3:20). Abraham's faith is the sign of life; life is the gift of God. God declares that anyone who show signs of this life belongs to God's covenant people.

[10] Ibid., p. 492.
[11] Barth, *Shorter Romans*, p. 494.
[12] Ibid., p. 497.

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Paul argues in vv. 23–4 that Abraham's faith, along with Christian faith in general, gains its form and content from the revelation of God's covenant faithfulness in Jesus Christ. Faith for Paul is never a thing in itself but always defined in relationship to the God in whom trust is placed. More specifically, faith means believing in the God who raised Jesus the Lord, the One who is the Messiah and Israel's representative from the dead. Those who confess that Jesus is Lord and believe he is raised from the dead share the faith of Abraham and, like him, are declared righteous.

All this was made possible through the death and resurrection of Jesus. As it says in Isaiah 53 (from which Paul is quoting), he was so identified with us that Christ suffered the fate we deserved. As the servant in Isaiah is raised to new life to make many righteous so too is Jesus raised from the dead so we can be justified. Referring to Romans 1:4, Wright concludes that the resurrection unveils to the world that Jesus is the Messiah, the one in whom God is faithful to the covenantal promises made to Abraham. All those who respond in faith to God's faithfulness belong to Abraham's covenant family.

Barth's exegesis

Barth introduces Romans 3:21–4:25 with a brief summary of what Paul said so far. The content of the gospel for Paul is 'the man Jesus Christ, the righteous Judge appointed by the faithful God, whose life, i.e., whose resurrection from the dead (1:4), is that revelation, already prophesized in the OT'.[13] The 'verdict pronounced by the man Jesus'[14] is twofold. In Romans 1:18–3:20, Paul addressed God's condemnation of humankind. In Jesus the Judge is revealed God's wrath on the disobedient, Jew and Greek. God's judgement is 'no respecter of persons'.[15] Yet God's condemnation seeks a positive end. As we shall now see in Barth's interpretation of Romans 3:21–2, God condemns us in order not to reject us but rather to elect us to be his covenant partner.

According to Barth, Romans 3:21 parallels what Paul said regarding the revelation of God's righteousness in 1:17, although the Greek word for 'disclosed' in 3:21 (*pephanerotai*) is not the same word used for 'revealed' in 1:17 (*apokaluptetai*). *Pephanerotai* does not refer to something that has so far been hidden and is now revealed, as does *apokaluptetai*, but to something that has now become visible 'apart from the law'. What becomes visible in 3:21 is not our damnation but the demonstration of God's righteousness, a complete act of God that does not intend our condemnation.

[13] Ibid., p. 23.
[14] Ibid., p. 25.
[15] Ibid., p. 43.

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For Barth, along with Luther, the law functions for Paul in a negative fashion for the Jew, that is, as a witness to the sinful disobedience of humankind. Barth, unlike Wright, does not consider that for the first-century Jew, and thus Paul, living by the Torah was a response to God's grace, rather than an attempt to merit it. God's wish to elect us to be his covenant partners can only be understood apart from the law. All attention, trust and faith must be given to Jesus Christ, the Judge himself, in whom God's righteousness is revealed. Although both Jew and Gentile cannot justify themselves, Jesus can and has delivered them from the dominion and consequences of sin by becoming the propitiatory sacrifice for all who believe. In his death, the Judge has judged himself so that all those who believe in Christ can be declared God's righteous people. God is righteous when he justifies the individual who meets him with faith in Jesus because 'the Judge was judged for him'.[16]

In Romans 3:27–4:25 Barth unpacks two Pauline concerns. First, whether the manifestation of God's divine verdict is consistent with what was witnessed to 'by the law and prophets'. Second, what is faith in Jesus Christ all about? In 3:27–31, Paul maintains, Barth argues that, apart from God's divine verdict revealed in Christ, no one has anything to boast about before God. To boast is to reject what has been accomplished by Christ for us. For Barth, Luther's addition of the word 'alone' to the phrase 'by faith' in 3:28 aptly reflects Paul's thinking.[17] The same God whom Jews confess to be one (v. 30) has now exerted his divine decree to justify all who believe in Jesus Christ. Since the law of faith measures both Jew and Gentile no one can boast.

Still, both Jew and Gentile are expected to 'act' as God's covenant people. Here Barth's more reformed understanding of the law comes into play. The law is not abrogated. Faith believes in God's promise that the law will be fulfilled. Since it is now fulfilled in Jesus Christ, lawless behaviour on our part is unacceptable for Paul and would contradict his reason for coming to Rome in the first place; that is, 'to bring about the *obedience* of faith' (1:5).

In Romans 4, Paul addresses Abraham's righteousness, the nature of his faith, and Christian faith in general. Abraham is declared righteous because of his faith and not his works (vv. 2–6). Paul does not deny that Abraham showed some 'praiseworthy works'[18]. Yet, as Paul's reference to Ps. 32 indicates in vv. 7–8, he was incapable of justifying himself before the Lord. Abraham understood and presented himself as a sinner in need of God's forgiveness. God declared Abraham righteous solely because he believed in God's promises.

[16] Ibid., p. 46.
[17] Ibid., p. 47.
[18] Ibid., p. 49.

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Neither was Abraham righteous because he was circumcised (4:9–12). His circumcision does witness to the fact that he, along with the people of Israel, is among God's chosen people. Yet he was declared righteous because of his faith, not his circumcision. Circumcision is a sign that simply confirms that Abraham was declared righteous by faith alone. Thus, Abraham is the father of both the circumcised and uncircumcised.

Furthermore, since God did not declare Abraham righteous because he possessed or had any knowledge of the law (4:13–17a), Israel's possession or knowledge of the law does not make them God's people. This would be a misunderstanding of the law's purpose. For the 'Law is an instrument of God's wrath',[19] revealing the disgraceful behaviour of Israel. Righteousness and freedom from sin can only be found 'where there is no law' (v. 15), in the Judge, Jesus Christ, who has fulfilled the law's requirements on Israel's behalf. Only those who believe in the promise, along with Abraham, that their Messiah would fulfil the Law, are God's chosen people and declared righteous.

Paul now gives a positive description of Abraham's faith in 4:17b–22. To have faith is to believe, as did Abraham, in God's Word who creates *ex nihilo* something radically new. Abraham believed in God's promise without the support of any human evident reality to support this promise. He refrained from any human calculation, position of doubt or worldly point of view. Abraham did not treat the promise of God as one possible religious option among many to choose. He did not even regard the quality of his faith as important. Abraham simply accepted what he was promised despite all appearances. He directed all attention away from himself to God by simply letting God be the God who has the power to fulfil what he has promised. That was the faith for which God declared Abraham righteous.

What was written of Abraham was written of us today, if we believe in God's verdict as revealed in Jesus Christ that he is our acquittal and our justification. According to Barth, 'Jesus Christ was the seed promised to Abraham in Isaac!'[20] Abraham's faith was directed towards Jesus Christ when he believed and trusted God's promise. Since Abraham's faith is directed ultimately to the one who fulfils God's promise, the faith of Abraham is the same as faith today when it directs its attention to the same Lord. Like Abraham, true faith today is not concerned with its strength, quality and beauty. True faith focuses solely on the omnipotence, fidelity and constancy of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. Restating what he said in 3:22–6, Paul reiterates in 4:24–5 that God declares us righteous as he once declared

[19] Ibid., p. 51.
[20] Ibid., p. 53.

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Abraham in the resurrection of Jesus. In the resurrection, God has delivered and appointed his Son to be our Lord (1:5), to do away with all our sin and the consequence of sin, death. If we trust and believe that Christ is our Lord, then we stand before God exactly as does Jesus, truly and legitimately righteous before Him.

Let us now consider, critically, the respective interpretations of Romans 3:21–4:25 of Barth and Wright in light of the other.

What Wright might learn

Wright, in his attempt to purge the historical critical method of its pro-Enlightenment bias, rightly seeks to keep together the historical and theological sense of the biblical text. For Wright, a theological reading of Romans incorporates Paul's 'worldview'. Paul's worldview consists of three worlds, Second Temple Judaism, the Hellenistic culture of Paul's day and Roman imperial ideology. The text acts, in Wright's estimation, as a 'window upon, Paul's symbolic world'.[21] The question that arises is, 'In what manner does the text act as a "window" to Paul's symbolic world or way of thinking?' Upon closer examination of an answer to this question, it becomes apparent that Wright fails to distance himself from the Enlightenment bias of former historical-critical approaches to the Bible which tended to sever the historical sense of the text from its textual moorings. In so doing Wright, like those he attempts to overcome, imposes onto the text what is not mean to be there.

For instance, does Paul believe that God called Abraham to deal with the problem of Adam as Wright claims? There doesn't seem to be any indication from what Paul actually 'says' that this is the case. Yes, in 3:22b–24, Paul is clearly dealing with the problem of sin, but there is no sense in what Paul says in Romans 4 that Abraham's election – and consequently Israel's – merely serves a temporal function, that is to be an instrument of salvation to all nations. Barth rightly reminds us that the Adamic plight of humanity serves as a background to the main story, which is about Abraham and his descendants, and that the Creator God, besides whom there are no other gods, continues to declare his universal rule in order to bring comfort to his people whom he has chosen for their own sake. 'By calling him [Abraham] "our forefather according to the flesh" Paul acknowledges that he himself is a Jew and places himself among the first to inquire about the proper interpretation of the OT' to discover '[w]hat then made Abraham a righteous man?'.[22] The point behind discovering the nature and character of Abraham's faith is to show, according to Barth, that '[t]hose in Israel who believed rightly,

[21] Wright, 'Theology of Paul', p. 32.
[22] Ibid., p. 49.

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who did not believe an imaginary promise [are those who believed in] the promise which is fulfilled at the end of the history of Israel, . . . believed in God himself and in his grace'.[23] Barth, contrary to Wright, rightly considers the basis of Abraham's righteousness so that 'the reader of the OT',[24] the Jew, can see what is the true basis of his or her election.

Wright correctly points out that Paul probably had Genesis 12–15 and Isaiah 40–55 in mind when he wrote Romans 3 and 4. Yet do these passages regard Abraham's election solely in instrumental terms? There is no indication in Genesis 12 that Abraham's election – and consequently Israel's – serves another end. Consider God's promise to Abram in Genesis 12:1–2: 'I will make you a great nation, and I will bless *you* [my italics] and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing'. Harink rightly points out that '[w]hile Abram does indeed serve as the mediator of God's blessing to the nations, he does so only *in and as* he himself is the primary object of God's choosing, creating, and blessing'.[25] Furthermore, text after text in Isaiah 40–55 affirms God's commitment to his covenant with Israel (cf. 43; 44:1–5, 21–2; 45:1–4; 49; 52:1–10; 55:3). Again, Harink notes, 'the most striking thing about these passages is the profound lack of instrumentality in depicting the relationship between God and Israel'.[26] Wright, unlike Barth, never seems to consider that Abraham and his descendants after the flesh were chosen, yes, so that others may be blessed, but primarily so God would bless them.

Wright's misconstrued instrumental understanding of Abraham and Israel's election coincides with his instrumental understanding of the biblical text. Similar to the instrumentalisation of historical critical research he himself condemns, Wright too quickly detaches his historical research from the argumentative sequence of the text so that the meaning of the biblical text is now referable to an external more general context. In so doing, Wright contextualises what, for Barth, is Paul's central concern, God's divine verdict as revealed in Jesus Christ. In other words, he contextualises the coming of Jesus Christ characterised as the apocalyptic invasion of God's verdict on humankind within the narrative framework of Second Temple Judaism, Hellenistic culture and the Roman imperial ideology of Paul's day.[27] Yet for Paul, as Barth rightly discerns in his interpretation of Romans 4:1–8, the revelation of God in Christ is the single point in history which illuminates all

[23] Ibid., p. 51.
[24] Ibid., p. 49
[25] Harink, *Paul among the Postliberals: Pauline Theology Beyond Christendom and Modernity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2003), p. 163.
[26] Ibid., p. 166.
[27] Ibid., p. 176.

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history.[28] Although Wright continues in the tradition of the 'New Perspective' on Paul's thinking which, I believe, rightly turns our attention onto 'God's' faithful dealings with the world in Christ, he does not give it the concerted attention it rightly deserves in what Paul says. Consequently, Wright fails to distance himself from the pro-Enlightenment bias of historical-critical method.

What Barth might learn

Barth, on the other hand, distances himself so far from historical-critical resources that he imports subject matter to the biblical text that is not central to Paul's thinking. Although Barth is correct to be sceptical of historical criticism, nevertheless, it can serve to correct theologically biased readings of the biblical texts. Wright's 'critical realistic' reading of Romans 3–4 raises a theological flag for Barth, in particular his reading of Paul's understanding of the Law for Jews. He adopts the dominant Lutheran reading of Paul which sees an antithesis of faith and works, grace and law. This tradition claims that Paul sets in opposition the Christian understanding of salvation with the Jewish one. But does Paul in fact do this?

Barth presupposes that 'works are Abraham's glory in the eyes of [the Jewish] reader according to the Scriptures'.[29] Furthermore, the 'Jew . . . no doubt makes an effort to keep the written Law . . . and in theory and in practice he undoubtedly does adopt a "moral-ethical" standpoint'.[30] Yet, according to Wright, the Jewish doctrine of justification in the first century also taught that God's righteousness is a gift from God so that there are clearly elements of Paul's doctrine of grace in the Jewish teaching of the law.[31] According to Wright, Second Temple Judaism's understanding of the word 'righteousness' and thus for Paul, never had anything directly to do with the general moral behaviour or virtue of the individual.[32] Wright concludes, in contrast to Barth, that Paul is not attacking a theology of self-help legalism in which righteousness is earned by moral effort.[33] Instead, Paul is mainly concerned with the nature of God's covenantal faithfulness. Justification by

[28] D. Wood, 'Ich sah mit Stauen: Reflections on the Theological Substance of Barth's Early Hermeneutics', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 58 (2005), p. 194.

[29] Barth, *Shorter Romans*, p. 49.

[30] Ibid., p. 37.

[31] For other positions that are similar to Wright's see Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), pp. 21–32; Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*; and Charry, 'Law of Christ All the Way Down', pp. 155–68.

[32] Wright, *Romans*, p. 399.

[33] Ibid., p. 490.

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faith is a secondary issue for Paul. What concerns Paul is not 'whether or not Abraham was a good moralist but whether those who are in Christ have become Abraham's family according to the flesh'.[34]

To give Barth credit, he rightly perceives a positive place for the law in the context of the gospel in his exegesis of Romans 3:31. In the context that Jesus Christ has fulfilled the law, there can be a 'genuine hearer of the Law . . . [whose] . . . active obedience consists in faith: faith in him, the Judge who was condemned for us and through whom only we are righteous before God'.[35] Unfortunately, Barth does not see that elements of the Christian understanding of the law are consistent with the Jewish one from which Paul probably drew his own understanding.

Conclusion

I have attempted to show what benefits can be gained from bringing into conversation the exegetical approaches of a biblical scholar with that of a theologian. The theological sensitivities to the biblical text by theologians such as Barth reminds us that, if historical criticism hangs too loosely from the text's literal or argumentative sequence, it becomes too easy to read into the text subject matter that overrides what the text intends. On the other hand, careful historical research can help prevent a theologian's preconceived insights from overburdening the text. Although the subject matter must not be separated from what the text actually says, historical critical research, humbly employed, helps keep the interpreter focused on the subject matter of the text itself.

This article has only skimmed the surface of exegetical differences which separate biblical and theological dealings with the Bible today. Postmodern, postcolonial and feminist interpretations of the Bible are but a few examples of what occupy the exegetical interests of biblical scholars and theologians. Still, this article has hopefully succeeded in showing what benefits can be gained when biblical scholars and theologians engage in their respective interests together. A truly open engagement of this sort will not only benefit the academy, but also the church. The open-ended question remains: 'Is there enough charity from both sides for this to happen?'

[34] Wright, 'Romans and Theology of Paul', p. 41.
[35] Barth, *Shorter Romans*, p. 48.

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