

"Freedom and Exodus, Ellul and N.T. Wright"

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## 1. Introduction

Jacques Ellul is, in many ways, an unlikely prophet of the New Perspective on Paul (hereafter "NPP"). Because he anticipated a number of the major shifts in biblical interpretation by a few decades, his theological and exegetical method is worthy of continued consideration, even if some of his ideas need modification. Nonetheless, Ellul also provides the purveyors of the NPP some constructive criticism.

Engaging Ellul with the NPP in any satisfactory way would take significant space and time not possible here. There are challenges for Ellulians from the NPP, and challenges to the NPP from an Ellulian perspective, some of which I've done in other papers and in my book. So, to keep it short, simple, and representative, we are going to briefly look at the theme of exodus, which is important to both Ellul and N.T. Wright.

But the exodus presents a pragmatic problem for the scholar of both Ellul and Wright. Ellul understood the exodus as a major controlling narrative of scripture, and yet, he does not engage with that narrative in the way he did with many other books or passages of the Bible. Nonetheless, Ellul says in *Anarchy and Christianity*, "The Jews ... primarily see in God not the universal Creator, but their Liberator.... The biblical God is above all the one who liberates us from all bondage..." (39).

N.T. Wright likewise does not spend a lot of time working through the Exodus in Scripture, but takes its given centrality as cultural background in understanding Jesus' mission. His monumental *Christian Origins and the Question of God* barely discusses exodus, and yet he can say, "The exodus shaped Jesus, too. He shared the belief of his contemporaries (that the one God would finally rescue his people and the world through a new exodus) but with one difference. He believed it was his own job to make it happen."<sup>1</sup>

So in looking at Ellul and the Bible we have to first confess that Ellul did not deem it necessary to give a lengthy exegesis of the central narrative of the Hebrew Bible, and we should also confess that this is not really a problem. In fact, it reveals one of the first ways in which Ellul seems to be an unlikely prophet of the New Perspective—he understood the centrality of narrative in the formation of imagination instead of developing a systematic theology based on selected proof-texts. Indeed, Ellul explains that freedom and liberation was so integral to the

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1. N. T. Wright, *Simply Good News: Why the Gospel is News and What Makes it Good* (NY: HarperOne, 2015), 36.

Jewish milieu that there was no need for NT writers other than Paul to discuss it, as Paul was often addressing Gentiles.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. N.T. Wright and the NPP

Tom Wright is one of most influential and prolific voices in contemporary theology, both for the academy and the church. In many ways he has served as a figurehead for the so-called "New Perspective on Paul," though this is not an established school of thought or monolithic group. Wright's work in his four volume *Christian Origins and the Question of God* series has masterfully crafted a renewed vision for what Christianity was in the first century, and what implications that has for Christian theology and practice today.

The basic premise of the NPP is simply that generations of Christian theologians have misread especially Paul, because they lost contact with the background context in which Paul wrote and Jesus ministered. Because we have enough resources to recover a fairly clear picture of Second Temple Judaism, we can reread the NT with something closer to an original set of eyes. The result of the NPP has been a deep critique of both Roman Catholic and Protestant theology and their central focus on a gospel of salvation, by which people generally mean how to avoid going to hell when you die and instead going to a paradisaal heaven. The Jewish people were not primarily interested in the question of life after death, but in the redemption and restoration of Israel—a new exodus. Thus messianic expectations had less to do with forgiveness of sins, avoidance of God's judgment, or personal moral excellence, than with the political liberation of Israel. Christianity, for Paul, therefore was more about the arrival of God's rescue and the establishment of God's righteous rule over the whole earth and the fulfilment of God's covenant promise to Abraham. For Paul, God is expanding his people to incorporate the gentiles, which is the great mystery of Jesus' mission. God is saving his people from slavery to sin which through Christ includes people of all tribes. Sin is not just personal moral failings, but the ruling power of the rival kingdoms of God that hold God's people in slavery. Thus, Jesus' salvation was not simply political, but was first and foremost, liberation from the dominion of sin. Unlike traditional Christian theology, however, it is indeed political. Jesus' kingdom of God was not a spiritualizing otherworldly dominion, but God's righteous rule breaking into and conquering human kingdoms through the self-giving love of Jesus.

This has serious practical implications for Christians. Wright often preaches the merit of character formation or virtue. Christians, for Wright, have a twofold task after salvation, which is discipleship and mission. Discipleship means having one's character molded into the image of Christ. The kingdom mission is thus "*inviting people of all sorts to share not only in the benefits*

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2. Jacques Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 98.

*of this kingdom but also in the work through which it will come to its ultimate completion.*"<sup>3</sup>

At the heart of the good news of Jesus, for Wright, is the establishment of God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven by Jesus himself becoming king of all creation on the cross, and thereby reconciling heaven and earth, defeating death through his resurrection. All of this is understood as a new exodus for the expanded people of God. The great story of God's people being rescued from slavery thus forms the framework for what salvation really means.

### 3. Ellul's Theology of Liberation

For Jacques Ellul, the exodus is also central to the biblical narrative. Not, however, because he deeply understood Second Temple Jewish expectations, or at least not as well as Wright. The exodus is central because Ellul believes that God's most defining characteristic is his liberating love. He says, "If God liberates, it is because he expects and hopes that we will come to know him and love him."<sup>4</sup> For Ellul, the centrality of exodus and liberation lies at the core of his *Ethics of Freedom*, his anarchism, his belief in universal salvation, and his theological response to the various alienations he discusses in his sociological works.

Ellul calls freedom a "Superstructure of Revelation".<sup>5</sup> In section three of chapter three of *Ethics of Freedom*, Ellul explains that the books of Moses are essentially about God's continual acts of deliverance and the Israelite's return to bondage. This liberation is from the powers and structures of the world, not simply from personal sin.

But we also here find that Ellul sees God's action as *essentially* liberating. That is, "God is our God as our liberator. He is our liberator and hence we know that he is our God. This implies that our freedom is in fact God's own presence."<sup>6</sup> Liberation is who God is. A more careful biblical scholar would caution Ellul here that covenant faithfulness is lifted up as God's primary attribute in the Hebrew Bible, not his liberating actions. His acts of liberation are, in fact, examples of his covenant faithfulness which is an outworking of his mission of reconciliation.

For Ellul, the liberation of God is not simply a liberation from political slavery. It is liberation from the alienations of power and the powers through myth, *la politique, la technique*, propaganda, and violence. This liberation destroys the mythical and sacred structures that form human group identities, which are themselves a product of alienation from God.

This freedom, like the original exodus, leads to the wilderness. Ellul's *Ethics of Freedom*

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3. Wright, *Simply Good News*, 164. Italics original.

4. Jacques Ellul, *Anarchy and Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 39.

5. Ellul, *Ethics*, 94.

6. Ellul, *Ethics*, 96.

presents a stark ethic in which the individual Christian lives as a stranger and pilgrim, avoiding bondage, and being personally responsible for personal choices. This is necessarily individual. "Freedom is indeed an individual act and life-style. There is no collective freedom and Christ has not liberated man or mankind in general."<sup>7</sup> This does not neglect the collective aspect, of course, but the people of God, for Ellul, is a product of individual love for one another.

In this way, Ellul misses some key points of the centrality of the exodus for Paul. For both Jesus and Paul, the new exodus was the expansion of the people of God and transformation through fulfilment of the covenant God had made with them. It is difficult to refer to God's acts of liberation in scripture without in the same breath speaking of the formation of a people with a mission, at least after the NPP. Nevertheless, this is what *Ethics of Freedom* does not manage to recognize and develop. I deeply appreciate and have been personally shaped in some ways by *Ethics of Freedom*, as I have been by the existentialism of other 20th century thinkers. But this individualism is a deeply anachronistic reading of scripture, even if modern philosophy has revealed the situation of modern, alienated humanity.

In summary, Ellul makes exodus and liberation central to the character of the God who is love. We do not have space to explore this in his other books, but again, one can find this same logic elsewhere. We are touching the heart of Ellulian theology with his identification of the character of God with liberation. But Ellul interpreted this liberation through an existentialist lens, for want of a better term. Some of his *Ethics of Freedom* sounds very much like Heidegger's *Being and Time*, though Ellul hated the comparison and refused to engage with his work because of his Nazism.<sup>8</sup> These connections are also found through early Barth and Bonhoeffer, for whom the notion of individuals taking up responsibility was vital. This was, and still is to some degree, the philosophical milieu of our time, and Ellul consciously read sin as alienation in order to engage with his time.<sup>9</sup>

But if the heart of Ellul's theological vision is tied to an existentialist reading of the nature of God as liberator, what value does he have for 21st century study of the Bible? Much in every way. Nor should we reject out of hand the entirety of Ellul's focus on the individual and God's liberation from the powers, including the self-created identities humans make in politics and technique.

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7. Ellul, *Ethics*, 270.

8. Jacques Ellul, *Living Faith: Belief and Doubt in a Perilous World* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), 79.. Nevertheless, Ellul notes him in Ellul, *Ethics*, 45.

9. Ellul, *Ethics*, 23ff.

## 4. Dialogue

If we begin a dialogue between Wright and Ellul we find obvious and large differences. A Wrightian critique of Ellul would begin by focusing on the people of God, the meaning of salvation, discipleship as positive formation of one's character to become like Christ, and the grand mission of God to reconcile all things to himself through his people. Ellul addresses some of these themes, but in very different ways.

An Ellulian critique of the NPP would revolve around a lack of awareness of the structures of alienation in other periods of history after the first century, and thus the importance of individual liberation in the contemporary world, whether or not one can legitimately ground this liberation in the way that Ellul does.

But there are a few ways in which Ellul anticipates the NPP. Most obviously, both move exodus and liberation to the forefront, as we have seen. Both understand that this liberation or new exodus is not simply spiritual deliverance for the next life. It is all encompassing and implies radical transformation in the life of a believer. This new exodus has political consequences. Wright is very clear that Jesus and the early church understood his claim to kingship as a challenge to the authority of Caesar.<sup>10</sup> Ellul likewise sees liberation as the theological heart of his anarchism. Ellul explores what liberation from Mammon means in *Money and Power*, what liberation from violence means in *Violence*, and what liberation from *la technique* means in *Meaning of the City*. Both are willing to take unpopular stands based on their understanding of freedom in Christ or discipleship (rather than law/commandments), especially in the field of human sexuality.

Furthermore, and at a more fundamental level, Wright's theological method bears important similarities to Ellul's. For Wright, history matters vitally. Understanding the cultural contexts of the NT will reveal much of the original meaning without having to engage in deep systematic theological enquiry based in a specific philosophical system. That is, social science (history) reveals the truth of Scripture without requiring Scripture to be demythologized, as with Bultmann. Ellul and Wright share a Protestant belief in the authority of Scripture, and both reject Bultmannian modernization of the text to discover a "Christ of faith" without regard for a "Christ of history." Both Ellul and Wright believe that the Christ of history is the only one who can be the true Christ of faith. Though, for Wright, the emphasis would of course be on the Christ of *faithfulness*.

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10. N. T. Wright, *How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels* (NY: HarperOne, 2016), N. T. Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began: Reconsidering the Meaning of Jesus's Crucifixion* (HarperOne, 2016).

## 5. Conclusion

It is most clearly their respective concern for unifying the Christ of faith and the Christ of history that Ellul and Wright end up agreeing in many ways. They both engage in something of a dialectical method, Ellul more clearly than Wright. But Wright does engage in a dialectical method insofar as he brackets his faith commitments to do solid history, just as Ellul did in his investigations of *la technique* and other sociopolitical phenomena. Both are respected scholars outside of the church, and in Ellul's case probably far more respected outside than inside. But both confront the world of social science with the critical question of the kingdom of God, and both are adamant that the kingdom of God is present in our world today making important and real differences. For these reasons, Ellul might legitimately be called an unlikely prophet of the NPP. Certainly there are differences and disagreements. There are points each can learn from the other. And it is here that biblical scholars of today might benefit from engagement with Ellul. Ellul's incisive critique of modern alienations and slavery wonderfully complement the theology of the new exodus of Jesus' kingdom found in NT Wright, and produce by a wonderful synthesis an ethic better than either has produced alone: existential freedom in Ellul and classical virtue in Wright.

Such a synthetic ethic will engage politics, economics, technology, the environment, human sexuality, identity creation, and value systems in a dialectical way. It will speak of Christian faith as a threefold movement of disorientation from all possible milieux, discipleship (the formation of identity in Christ), and mission to all possible milieux, as I argued in my PhD thesis.<sup>11</sup> And it will form an alternative community in which the kingdom of God is made plausible to the world by its ambassadorial work.

I imagine that Ellul would have loved to learn from the major transformation in biblical studies that was just forming in his last years. Wright's first main volume, *The New Testament and the People of God*, was published just two years after Ellul's death. Ellul was an avid reader of biblical scholars, but he formed his own theological conclusions. I imagine he would do the same with N.T. Wright. To my knowledge Wright has not read Ellul. And though I'm not sure he would be impressed especially with his focus on the individual, I imagine he would appreciate Ellul's incisive sociological investigations. In any case, the engagement of these two is worthy of further work, work which could and should bear fruit for the people of God in discipleship and mission.

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11. GP Wagenfuhr, "Revelation and the Sacred Reconsidered: The Revelation of God in Jesus Christ as Desacralising Reorientation to 'Milieu' in and Beyond Jacques Ellul," diss., University of Bristol, 2013).

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