

BALANCING OUT (W)RIGHT: JESUS' THEOLOGY OF INDIVIDUAL AND CORPORATE REPENTANCE AND FORGIVENESS IN THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

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N. T. Wright has been a polarizing figure in evangelical scholarship.¹ His work in what has been labeled “the New Perspective on Paul” has been both critiqued and praised by a multitude of articles and books.² The debate over his writings has in recent years been incited by John Piper’s *The Future of Justification: A Response to N. T. Wright*, Wright’s response in *Justification: God’s Plan & Paul’s Vision*, and the subsequent debate at the Evangelical Theological Society’s annual meeting in 2010.³ At times, critics have called into question Wright’s motives and warned of the dangerous implications of many of his teachings. More recently, however, even scholars from within the Reformed tradition have expressed appreciation for his work in Pauline studies, agreeing with him at times, while also providing thoughtful criticisms on several of his key points.⁴ While much of the current discussion within evangelical scholarship has centered on Wright’s understanding of Paul, Wright’s work on Jesus has not received the same amount of attention. Nevertheless, his work on the Gospels and in the field of historical Jesus studies has been influential and demands the attention of scholars of varying stripes.⁵

The present article seeks to engage with N. T. Wright and his emphasis on Jesus coming to restore Israel, releasing her from exile. Supported by Wright’s ability to bring together a convincing overarching narrative that sits well within Jesus’ first-century context, along with the work of other scholars who have

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¹ This article was originally written for a Ph.D. seminar at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. Thanks are due Debra Chatraw and Dr. Cliff Morris for their suggestions concerning clarity and grammar.

² Examples of some of the better-known works include Peter T. O’Brien, D. A. Carson, and Mark A. Seifrid, *Justification and Variegated Nomism: The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001); Peter T. O’Brien, D. A. Carson, and Mark A. Seifrid, *Justification and Variegated Nomism: The Paradoxes of Paul* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004); John Piper, *The Future of Justification: A Response to N. T. Wright* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007); and Nicholas Perrin and Richard B. Hays, eds., *Jesus, Paul and the People of God: A Theological Dialogue with N. T. Wright* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2011).

³ Piper, *Future of Justification*; N. T. Wright, *Justification: God’s Plan & Paul’s Vision* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2009). The plenary papers delivered at the 2011 annual ETS meeting can be found in *JETS* 54/1 (2011). John Piper was initially scheduled to take part in these debates, but was later replaced by Tom Schreiner.

⁴ See, e.g., Michael F. Bird, *The Saving Righteousness of God: Studies on Paul, Justification and the New Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007); and Thomas R. Schreiner, “Justification: The Saving Righteousness of God in Christ,” *JETS* 54 (2011) 19–34.

⁵ N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992); N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997).

provided further details, it will be argued that Wright's basic argument concerning exile and restoration has been substantially proven. In light of this overarching exile theme, Wright has helpfully brought attention to the corporate nature of repentance and forgiveness in the Gospels, an emphasis at times neglected by evangelicals. However, in bringing attention to a theme that has at times been neglected, it will be argued that Wright has swung the pendulum too far in the opposite direction with the effect of underemphasizing Jesus' teachings on individual repentance and forgiveness. To begin with, Wright's view of the exile will be explored.

I. N. T. WRIGHT AND THE EXILE THEME

N. T. Wright's understanding of the exile has served as an important background for his understanding of the entire NT, including the Gospels and Jesus. Wright argues that most Jews in the first century would have understood themselves, "in all the senses which mattered," to still be in exile. Although Israel had physically returned from Babylon, the prophets' message had not ultimately been fulfilled. Israel was still under the rule of foreigners, and her God had not returned to Zion. Wright's argument is best summed up in his own words:

most first century Jews would have seen themselves as still, in all sorts of senses, "in exile." This is not an idiosyncratic view, as the notes there make clear; many colleagues, in person and in their writings, have encouraged me to persist. Nevertheless, some have remained unconvinced. Without wishing to labour the point further, I would ask critics to face the question: would any serious-thinking first century Jew claim that the promises of Isaiah 40–66, or of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, or Zechariah, had been fulfilled? That the power and domination of paganism had been broken? That YHWH had already returned to Zion? That the covenant had been renewed, and Israel's sins forgiven? That the long-awaited "new exodus" had happened? That the second Temple was the true, final, and perfect one? Or—in other words—the exile was really over? ... The point of all this is not that the exile functioned in this period as an *example*, an illustration from the past of the way in which YHWH might perhaps work; nor was it just an *idea*, a type or image that might have been useful in formulating a soteriology that "really" consisted in something else. The point is that Jewish eschatology in the second-Temple period focused on the hope that that which happened in the Babylonian exile, the triumph of paganism over Israel because of her sins, was still the dominant state of affairs, but would at last be undone.⁶

II. THE LEGITIMACY OF THE EXILE THEME

Wright's understanding of exile has increasingly been accepted in scholarship since his first two volumes of *Christians Origins and the Question of God*.⁷ Recently, Tom Schreiner, who has challenged many of Wright's views on other issues, has noted,

⁶ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* xvii–xviii.

⁷ Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*; Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*.

I also want to say that I think Wright is fundamentally right in what he says about the exile. Jesus came proclaiming the end of the exile and the restoration of the people of God. Perhaps exile is not the right word to use (I do not have any quarrel with it), but the idea is on target in any case. Israel was under the thumb of the Romans in Jesus' day because of its sin and had not yet experienced the fulfillment of the great promises found in Isaiah and the prophets.⁸

Wright's understanding, however, has not been without its detractors.⁹ But while Wright's view has been directly challenged by some and simply ignored by others, it has only been strengthened by a series of works that affirmed Wright's central thesis and provided more detailed support.¹⁰ The following will briefly survey the major arguments which have provided the support for Wright's thesis.

When the OT prophets speak concerning the nation's exile, there are certain distinguishing marks of the exile and certain distinguishing marks that denote the future restoration from exile.¹¹ Deportation from the land (Isa 5:13; 6:11–12; 27:8; 32:9–14; Jer 13:19, 24; Ezek 5:10; Hos 9:3; Amos 5:27; 7:11; Mic 1:2–2:11), the absence of economic and political blessing (Isaiah 5; 32:9–14; Jer 13:18; Hos 11:5), and suppression of spiritual health (Isaiah 5; 6:9–13; 29:10; Amos 5:21–24; 8:7–12) are all marks of Israel's exile. While restoration to the land was certainly part of how the prophets viewed the future return from exile (Isa 27:12–13; 32:15–20; Jer 33:7; Ezek 34:11–13), it also included a restoration of the nation economically and politically (Isa 2:1–5; 30:23–26; 41:11–20; 54:1–17; 60–61; Ezek 36:8–15, 33–38; Amos 9:11–15; Zech 8:1–17), as well as spiritually (Isa 2:21–31; 30:19–22; 31:6–32:8; 35:5–10; 55:1–13; 60–61; Jer 31:27–34; Ezek 36:16–32; Hos 14:4). Furthermore, the promised restoration was also closely connected with the coming Messiah (e.g. Mic 2:13; 5:1–5; Isa 11:10–16; Jer 23:1–8).

In recounting the history of the Jews from the beginning of their exile through the first century and their Roman occupation, Wright demonstrates that Israel was not restored economically, politically, or spiritually. Even in the short window of time after the Maccabean revolt, Israel was never actually politically autonomous.¹² There is no question that the revolt ever fulfilled the glorious prophetic announcements. In view of this history, it is understandable that the Jews did not believe the promises of restoration from exile had been fulfilled, at least

⁸ Thomas R. Schreiner, "Justification" 19–20.

⁹ See Clive Marsh, "Theological History? N. T. Wright's Jesus and the Victory of God," *JSNNT* 69 (1998) 77–94; Maurice Casey, "Where Wright is Wrong: A Critical Review of N. T. Wright's *Jesus and the Victory of God*," *JSNNT* 69 (1998) 95–103.

¹⁰ See Craig Evans, "Jesus and the Continuing Exile of Israel," in *Jesus & the Restoration of Israel: A Critical Assessment of N. T. Wright's Jesus & the Victory of God* (ed. Carey C. Newman; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1999) 77–100; James C. VanderKam, "Exile in Jewish Apocalyptic Literature," in *Exile: Old Testament, Jewish, and Christian Conceptions* (ed. James M. Scott; Boston: Brill, 1997) 89–109; T. R. Hatina, "Exile," in *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (ed. Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000) 348; Douglas S. McComiskey, "Exile and the Purpose of Jesus' Parables (Mark 4:10–12; Matt 13:10–17; Luke 8:9–10)" *JETS* 51 (2008) 59–85; idem, "Exile in the Scriptural Allusions of Jesus," *JETS* 53 (2010) 673–96; Scot McKnight, *A New Vision for Israel: The Teachings of Jesus in National Context* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

¹¹ See McComiskey, "Exile and Parables" 59–85.

¹² See Wright, *New Testament and the People of God* 268–72, 299–301.

fully, during the Second Temple period. In separate contributions, N. T. Wright, Craig Evans, James C. VanderKam, and T. R. Hatina have cited a wealth of texts that demonstrate the Jews throughout this period believed themselves to still be under the curse of the exile and were looking for an ultimate restoration from exile.¹³

It can be argued that in Ezra, Nehemiah, and the Second Temple period the remnant of Jews who entered the land fulfilled at least one aspect of the restoration of Israel, but it seems implausible that the Jews would have viewed the full national, political, spiritual, or messianic promises associated with their return from exile fulfilled. Ezra and Nehemiah testify to the corporate unfaithfulness of the first remnant to return from exile. Moving to the NT, the Gospels also include a negative appraisal of the spiritual health of Israel and her leaders. Nowhere in the Scriptures are the Jews portrayed as having the type of spiritual health that would accompany the return from exile foretold by the prophets. McComiskey is accurate when he concludes,

it seems best to view the return of a few generally unfaithful people in the Ezra-Nehemiah era as either a failed return or as merely preparatory to a later, authentic return through the Messiah Jesus. Jesus' compatriots in Palestine, though in the land, would be considered either as *part of a nation* (both kingdoms) still scattered in exile, or as still exiled in the sense that they have not yet entered the kingdom of God, the true resolution to their loss of kingdom in the exile.¹⁴

Some take issue with the word "exile" since the term is not found in the Gospels themselves and because many of the Jews were in the Land and the temple was operational.¹⁵ Nevertheless, even if one objects to the use of the term "exile," it appears the concept behind the term is fundamentally on target. Snodgrass rightly notes,

One may argue Wright has overstated this theme, but the issue whether Jews believed they were still in exile (or half-exile) is almost irrelevant, for Wright is correct to emphasize that Jews knew the promises that God would return to comfort his people, destroy evil and establish righteousness had not been fulfilled. Even if the exile was over, its effects were not, and the acts of God terminating those effects had not occurred. As Nehemiah 9:36 puts it, the Jews who returned from exile were slaves in the land God gave their forefathers (see also Ezra 9:8–9).¹⁶

Due to the space limitations and the vast amount of research available on this topic, only a brief sketch of the evidence has been provided. While some might quarrel with certain lines of evidence, the cumulative force of the passages from the OT and Second Temple literature makes a strong case for there being a widespread belief during the time of Jesus that corporately the nation as a whole was, at least in

¹³ Ibid. 268–72, 299–301; Evans, "Jesus and the Continuing Exile" 77–100; James C. VanderKam, "Exile in Jewish Apocalyptic Literature," in *Exile* 89–109; T. R. Hatina, "Exile" 348.

¹⁴ McComiskey, "Exile and parables" 70–71.

¹⁵ R. H. Stein, "N. T. Wright's *Jesus and the Victory of God*: A Review Article," *JETS* 44 (2001) 207–18.

¹⁶ Klyne R. Snodgrass, "Reading and Overreading the Parables in *Jesus and the Victory of God*," in *Jesus & the Restoration of Israel* 62.

some sense, still in exile.¹⁷ This sets the scene for Jesus himself and the expectation that the Messiah would be involved in bringing the exile to an end and restore the nation. It is with this historical background in place that N. T. Wright approaches Jesus, and, more specifically for the purposes at hand, Jesus' teachings on repentance and forgiveness.

III. WRIGHT ON REPENTANCE AND FORGIVENESS

In order to avoid misstating Wright's position, it is best to begin by allowing Wright to speak for himself. He explains Jesus' conception of repentance in view of the exile theme:

The most plausible historical reconstruction of Jesus' call to repent brings together, I suggest, the two emphases we have now sketched (returning to YHWH so that the exile may come to an end; renunciation of nationalist violence). It was an *eschatological* call, not the summons of a moralistic reformer. And it was a political call, summoning Israel as a nation to abandon one set of agendas and embrace another. "Repentance" in Jesus' first century context is not to be conceived simply as one feature within the timeless landscape of a non-historical religion. That is the mistake of many Christian writers, who, ignoring the perfectly clear place of that sort of repentance within day-to-day Jewish life and teaching, have imagined that Jesus invented the idea and so became unpopular.¹⁸

He continues by explaining,

as a would-be prophet, and a prophet of the eschaton at that, he [Jesus] summoned Israel to a once-for-all national repentance, such as would be necessary for the exile to end at last. This was not simply "repentance" that any human being, any Jew, might use if, aware of sin, they decided to say sorry and make amends. It is the single great repentance, which would characterize the true people of YHWH at the moment when their god became king. What is more, this repentance seems to have little to do with the official structures of the Jewish system. True repentance, it seems, consisted rather in adherence and allegiance to Jesus himself.¹⁹

For Wright, Jesus' use of the word "repentance" would have been understood to mean "what Israel must do if YHWH is to restore her fortune at last," with Jesus proposing the answer to be "*abandon revolutionary zeal*."²⁰ Wright sees this understanding of Jesus' use of "repentance" as a return to the historical context with which Jesus lived rather than the ahistorical conversion sense of the word:

The older commentaries and dictionaries are more or less unanimous in treating "repentance" as a major theme of Jesus' ministry, giving to the concept the meaning so to speak, of the negative side of conversion. This forms part of a

¹⁷ For examples of the texts routinely cited see 2 Chr 29:9 LXX; Neh 9:36–37; 4QDan 1:3–11; Tob 14:5–7; Bar 2:6–15; 3:6–8; 2 Macc 1:27–29; 2:5–8, 18; 1QM 1:2–3; CD 1:3–11; 1 Enoch 93:1–10; 91:11–17; T. Levi 16–17; Pss. Sol. 9:1–11; Sib. Or. 3.265–290; T. Judab 23; T. Zeb. 9:5–9; T. Naph. 4:1–5; Ezra 1:31–52; 5:17–18, 28–30; 6:55–59; 10:7–24; 12:46–51; 2 Apoc. Bar. 3:1–9; 67:1–9; 80:1–7; Tg. Isa. 53:8; Jub. 1:7–18.

¹⁸ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* 251.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid. 248, 250.

more or less ahistorical scheme, in which Jesus preached a timeless message about “God” and “Man,” and about how the latter could be converted.²¹

In emphasizing the corporate dimensions of repentance from nationalistic zeal, Wright insists that Jesus did not call for repentance in the “normal” or “conversion” sense of the term.

In line with his understanding of repentance, Wright explains forgiveness in contrast to the traditional understanding:

Centuries of Christian usage have accustomed readers of the New Testament to think of “forgiveness” as primarily a gift to the individual person, which can be made at any time. It is, in that sense, abstract and ahistorical, however much it may burst upon one’s consciousness with fresh delight in particular historical situations. On this basis, analyses of Jesus’ offer of forgiveness have tended to focus on the piety (the *sense* of forgiveness) or the abstract theology (the *fact* of forgiveness, or the belief in it) of Jesus’ hearers and/or the early church.

The entire argument of this book so far indicates that this puts the cart before the horse. What is regularly missing from analyses of forgiveness is that which, arguably, stands front and centre in precisely those biblical and post-biblical texts upon which Jesus and the early church drew most heavily. *Forgiveness of sins is another way of saying “return from exile.”*²²

Later he continues,

Forgiveness, in other words, is not simply one miscellaneous blessing, which will accompany covenant renewal. Since covenant renewal means the reversal of exile, and since exile was the punishment for sin, covenant renewal/return from exile *means* that Israel’s sins have been forgiven—and vice versa.²³

For Wright, this view of “forgiveness of sins” makes better sense of Jesus’ conflicts with the Pharisees:

Jesus’ “welcome” to sinners, and the offence that it caused, therefore had everything to do with *eschatology* (in the sense I set out in the previous chapter), and little to do with (what we call) “*religion*.” That is, he welcomed people into his retinue as, by implication, *part of the restored people of YHWH*. Like David in the period between his anointing and his enthronement, Jesus collected a motley crew of followers who formed, as it were, a royal retinue-in-waiting. They were a sign that YHWH was at last restoring his people. They were not simply the recipients of a grace and mercy which had been denied them within Judaism; had they wanted to find “forgiveness” as private individuals within the existing system, the means were available. The sacrificial system and the means of purification were in principle open to them—though how realistic is it to think of tax-collectors abandoning their despised but bread-winning job in order to seek reconciliation with Israel and her god may well be questioned. What Jesus was offering, in other words, was not a different religious system. It was a new world order, the end of Israel’s long desolation, the true and final “forgiveness of sins,” the inauguration of the kingdom of God. This I suggest was what was implied when Jesus announced “forgiveness of sins” to particular people.²⁴

²¹ Ibid. 247.

²² Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* 268.

²³ Ibid. 269.

²⁴ Ibid. 272.

At times, Wright seems to allow for individual repentance and forgiveness, which appears in at least some sense to be (though Wright himself does not put it this way) timeless moral truth. For instance, he writes, “The following passages indicate *prima facie*, that Jesus was indeed summoning his hearers to a great turning, that is, *not just to an individual moral repentance*, but to an eschatological act which would prove the only way to escape eschatological judgment.”²⁵ Yet the focus for Wright is consistently on the corporate nature of these two concepts.²⁶

To be clear, the contention is not that Wright totally dismisses a place for individual repentance and forgiveness in Jesus’ message. Indeed, occasionally he affirms its validity. However, in his desire to connect repentance to an overarching exile theme and correct what he views as an ahistorical scheme concerning “conversion” that has become the normal sense of the word in much of Christianity, Wright swings the pendulum too far in the other direction. Wright’s definitions of repentance as “what Israel must do if YHWH is to restore her fortune at last” with Jesus proposing the answer to be “*abandon revolutionary zeal*” and forgiveness as “*another way of saying ‘return from exile’*” are both true in part, but they do not fit Jesus’ use of the terms in many of the immediate contexts in which they are used. Hence, in Wright’s work, Jesus’ call for individual repentance and offer of universal forgiveness in a “timeless” or “moral” way (to use Wright’s words) are de-emphasized to such an extent that the evidence itself is sacrificed in favor of a larger scheme. The result is an unbalanced view on a major theme in Jesus’ teaching.

IV. WRIGHT’S SYNTHESIS OF THE SYNOPTICS

In arguing for the historicity of Jesus’ message of repentance against those, such as E. P. Sanders, who claim that the historical Jesus did not preach such a message, Wright makes a revealing statement:

That Luke is particularly interested in it [repentance], as witnessed by two passages in which he mentions repentance while the parallel passage does not (5:32; 15:7: see below), is no good reason for denying that it formed part of Jesus’ preaching; Luke may conceivably have thought of it in a less “eschatological” and more “moral” fashion, but this does not remove it from Jesus’ announcement. The following passages indicate *prima facie*, that Jesus was indeed summoning his hearers to a great turning, that is, not just to an individual moral re-

²⁵ Ibid. 252 (emphasis added). Blomberg notes, “Wright does later insist that his corporate interpretation of Jesus’ stories does not exclude (but actually enhances) the ‘personal meaning’ for every listener. Indeed, the only way Israel can corporately be restored is as numerous individuals within the country themselves return from exile.” Craig Blomberg, “The Wright Stuff: *A Critical Overview* of Jesus and the Victory of God,” in *Jesus & the Restoration of Israel* 25. While Blomberg is correct that Wright does not absolutely exclude the personal meaning, if the emphasis on the corporate is meant to enhance the individual sense of repentance, it is odd that this individual significance is not emphasized by Wright, being rarely mentioned in *Jesus and the Victory of God*.

²⁶ See examples given below in the section below entitled “Jesus’ Theology of Repentance and Forgiveness in Luke.”

pentance, but to an eschatological act which would prove the only way to escape eschatological judgment.²⁷

Wright admits that Luke is particularly interested in repentance in more the “moral” sense of the term, as he even adds that Jesus was calling for a great turning “not *just* to an individual moral repentance.” The pertinent question is, if Wright acknowledges that Luke and Jesus himself were calling people to both an individual moral repentance and to the corporate repentance from nationalistic zeal and the end of the exile, what consistently causes him to squeeze out the former and emphasize the latter? Perhaps Wright’s method is partly to blame.

In *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Wright has synthesized the Synoptic Gospels to weave three portraits of Jesus into one (he only treats the three Synoptic Gospels in *JVG*). The problem is that the NT contains four Gospels, not one harmonized Gospel. The danger in this sort of synthesis is that certain aspects of Jesus’ message, which are perhaps more prominent in a particular Gospel, will get drowned out because they do not fit as smoothly in the overall picture the theologian is seeking to paint.²⁸ Invariably, a Gospel author will be silenced at particular points. The NT provides four different portraits of Jesus, and while there is a place in biblical studies for responsible harmonization, there is an inherent problem in attempting to develop a complete picture of Jesus before first allowing the theology of each particular Gospel portrait to stand alone.²⁹

In emphasizing the exile theme, Wright has identified an important aspect in biblical theology and, more specifically for the purposes of this paper, a concept that has bearing on Jesus’ understanding of repentance and forgiveness. Those who seek to challenge Wright on “exile,” as mentioned above, have some weighty evidence to counteract. Nevertheless, accepting the presence of an exile theme in the Gospels and first-century Judaism does not mean that one should allow “exile” or “return from exile” to serve as the primary referent or dominating theme throughout. It appears that at times the exile theme has functioned for Wright as a controlling paradigm, which has led to a neglect of certain aspects of Jesus’ message, and in the case of the dual themes of repentance and forgiveness, to an unbalanced understanding of Jesus’ teaching. In order to provide the evidence for this claim and in light of Wright’s own remark that Luke emphasizes the “moral” dimension of repentance, this article will turn to the picture presented in Luke to consider one of the portraits of Jesus’ message of forgiveness and repentance given in the NT.

²⁷ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* 252.

²⁸ Richard Hays has critiqued N. T. Wright for seeking to find the Jesus behind the text with the effect of neglecting the theological contribution of each Gospel writer. See Richard B. Hays, “Knowing Jesus: Story, History, and the Question of Truth,” in *Jesus, Paul, and the People of God* 41–61. Though Wright does have a section in *The New Testament and the People of God* summarizing each Gospel (pp. 371–403), these summaries are brief and Luke’s emphasis on moral repentance and forgiveness is never mentioned.

²⁹ On responsible harmonization, see Craig L. Blomberg, “The Legitimacy and Limits of Harmonization,” in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon* (ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986) 135–74.

V. JESUS' THEOLOGY OF REPENTANCE
AND FORGIVENESS IN LUKE

Luke's use of three words sets the course for the remainder of this study. Ἐπιστρέφω ("to turn") is used seven times in Luke. Four usages refer to turning in the religious sense (1:16, 17; 17:4; 22:32).³⁰ In 17:4, this verb is combined with repenting (μετανοέω) from sin and being forgiven (ἀφίημι).

Μετάνοια ("repentance") and its verbal cognates occur three times in Mark and seven times in Matthew. Luke uses the word fourteen times in his Gospel (3:3, 8; 5:32; 10:13; 11:32; 13:3, 5; 15:7, 10; 15:7; 16:30; 17:3, 4; 24:47). The word is on the lips of Jesus once in Mark (1:15) and four times in Matthew (4:17; 11:20, 21; 12:41), compared to twelve in Luke. However, Luke's use of μετάνοια is selective and he omits two sayings from Mark (1:15; 6:12).

The word ἄφεσις ("forgiveness") and its verbal form ἀφίημι ("to forgive") are used 46 times in Luke's Gospel (1:77; 3:3; 4:18 [βίσι]; 4:39; 5:11, 20, 23; 6:37; 7:47 [βίσι]; 8:51; 9:60; 10:30; 11:4 [βίσι]; 12:10 [βίσι], 39; 13:8, 35; 17:3, 34; 18:16, 28; 19:44; 21:6; 23:34; 24:47). At times, the term is not used in a religious sense (4:39; 5:11, 7:47; 8:51; 9:60; 10:30; 12:39; 13:8, 35; 17:34; 18:16, 28; 19:44; 21:6). In other places, ἄφεσις is used on a horizontal level to indicate how Jesus' followers should respond to each other (11:4; 17:3–4). Only the occurrences where the term is used in a vertical and religious sense will be considered.

Though passages with ἐπιστρέφω, μετάνοια, ἄφεσις and their cognates form the center of this study, at times certain texts that do not include these words will be considered because either the concept without the exact terminology is present or a theme that is directly relevant to the discussion is apparent. Luke's chronology will basically be followed. However, in order better to interact with particular comments Wright makes concerning how Jesus' proclamations of forgiveness should be understood, Jesus' announcement of forgiveness to the sinful women in Luke 7:16–30 has been moved forward to be considered with similar proclamations to individuals in Luke 5.

1. *John the Baptist as the forerunner to Jesus.* The Baptist is an important part of any study of Jesus because he is the prophetic forerunner to the Messiah.³¹ Their ministries are connected in each Gospel, and thus continuity between their messages is to be expected.

a. *Luke 1:16.* This verse is found within the context of an angel of the Lord announcing the birth of John the Baptist to Zechariah. The angel announces that John will call the nation to "turn to God" (ἐπιστρέψαι). Whereas ἐπιστρέφω is used frequently later in the NT to describe an initial change in an individual's attitude toward God (i.e. conversion; e.g. Acts 9:35; 2 Cor 3:16; 1 Pet 2:25), John uses the

³⁰ Because 1:17 refers to John the Baptist's ministry turning families back to each other, it will not be considered in this article.

³¹ R. L. Webb, "John the Baptist and His Relationship to Jesus," in *Studying the Historical Jesus: Evaluations of the State of Current Research* (ed. Bruce Chilton and Craig A. Evans, Boston: Brill, 1998), 179–229; idem, *John the Baptist and Prophet: A Sociocultural Study* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006).

word here to call the covenant people of God back to covenant obedience.³² The call to turn is neither universal nor primarily individual but to “many of the children of Israel” (πολλοὺς τῶν υἱῶν Ἰσραήλ). The overall context harks back to Malachi, and this verse in particular recalls Mal 2:6.³³ “Turning to God” is used frequently in the OT to denote the repentance of the corporate people of God (Deut 30:2; 1 Sam 7:3; Hos 3:5; 7:10; cf. Acts 15:19).³⁴ Bock notes, “The prophets called Israelites to live a faithful, righteous life before their covenant God and reminded them of this call when they turned away. John has this same role.”³⁵

b. *Luke 1:77*. This verse takes place within Zechariah’s *Benedictus* (Lk 1:67–80). Zechariah praises God for the coming Davidic ruler, John’s role as the forerunner to the Messiah, and God’s work in blessing the nation of Israel. The nationalistic language throughout this hymn is apparent: “the God of Israel” (Luke 1:68); “redemption for his people (Luke 1:68); “to do mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant” (Luke 1:72); “to give knowledge of salvation to his people” (Luke 1:77).³⁶ The entire hymn according to Luke 1:68 is based on praising God for visiting his people to set the nation free from her enemies. Bock notes, “The language of the verse is that of OT national salvation, as the God of Israel is blessed in terms that are commonly used in the OT (Gen 9:26; 1 Sam 25:32; 1 Kings 1:48; Ps 41:13 [41:14 MT]; 72:18; 89:52 [89:53]; 106:48) and Judaism (Tob 3:11; Ps of Sol 2:37).”³⁷ In view of the OT background and the immediate context in Luke 1, it is clear ἄφεσις is used in Luke 1:77 with an emphasis on the corporate forgiveness of Israel.

c. *Luke 3:1–14*. It is widely recognized that John’s baptism was a symbolic act, corresponding the prophetic symbolic actions of old, intended to alter the attitude and actions of individuals and the nation so that they would be prepared for the coming Messiah and salvation of Israel.³⁸ Luke connects this baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (βάπτισμα μετανοίας εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν; Luke 3:3) with a quotation from Isa 40:3–5 (Luke 3:4–6). This quotation on the lips of John the Baptist appears to be part of a widely accepted Isaianic new exodus motif present in Luke–Acts.³⁹ David Pao has convincingly shown that the Baptist’s use of Isaiah

³² I. Howard Marshall, *Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 58.

³³ David W. Pao and Eckhard J. Schnabel, “Luke,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 258.

³⁴ See *TDNT* 7:727; cf. Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994) 87. See also Jer 3:7, 10, 14; 18:8; Ezek 3:19; Dan 9:13.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 87.

³⁶ For more on the OT expressions, see Pao and Schnabel, “Luke” 263–65.

³⁷ Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50* 178.

³⁸ Webb, “John the Baptist and His Relationship to Jesus” 179–229.

³⁹ Peter Mollen, *Reading and Transformation of Isaiah in Luke-Acts* (New York: T & T Clark, 2008); David W. Pao, *Acts and the Isaianic New Exodus* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002) 111–249. The central elements of this new exodus theme from Isaiah 40–55 can be summarized with the following: “a ‘way’ is to be prepared for the Lord in the wilderness (Isa 40:3–5; 43:19); God will come as warrior to defeat Israel’s oppressors (40:10; 42:13; 49:24–25); the Lord will lead his people out of captivity and shepherd them along ‘the way’ (51:12–16; 52:11–12; 40:11); God will pour out his Spirit on them and teach them

40 (Luke 3:3–5) is an important backdrop to Luke’s entire theology: “The themes introduced in the prologue of Isa 40:1–11 contribute to the structure of Luke’s theology: restoration of Israel, mission to the Gentiles, power of the word of God, and the frailty of the enemies of God’s people.”⁴⁰

After the largely negative pronouncement of judgment and exile in Isaiah 1–39, Isaiah 40 introduces the announcement of the second-exodus theme of Isaiah 40–55.⁴¹ In these chapters, Isaiah is announcing the future salvation for Israel, the glorious return from exile. It is within this context that Isa 40:3–5 portrays a prophetic voice calling for a moral transformation in preparation for God’s restoration of his people.

Thus, in the context of salvation history and the larger new exodus theme that is presented in Luke’s Gospel, John’s message of repentance for the forgiveness of sin is seen as the preparation for the great salvation promised corporately to the nation of Israel in Isaiah. God would finally and ultimately deliver Israel, as he had promised in the prophets.

Luke emphasizes John’s message, which accompanied his baptisms, of the repentance from and the forgiveness of sins.⁴² In Luke 3:7–14, Luke elucidates John’s proclamation of a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin. John the Baptist warns the crowds surrounding him that they should flee from God’s judgment on them by bearing fruit as a product of their repentance. Here repentance is best understood in the context of the OT Scriptures where שׁוּב is used to indicate “a reorientation of one’s perspective from sin to God (1 Kings 8:47; 13:33; 2 Kings 23:25; Ps 78:34; Isa 6:10; Ezek 3:19; Amos 4:6, 8).”⁴³

In particular, John the Baptist calls on Israel to reorient their attitude toward God in a way that would change their actions (Luke 3:8–9). The Baptist gives specific examples of the type of changes that would result from this reorientation (Luke 3:10–14). Three groups of people are given as examples. First, the crowds are to share their resources with each other. Second, the tax collectors, employees of the Roman oppressors, are to stop demanding from people more money than they are authorized to collect. Third, soldiers are instructed to be content with their wages and not take money from others.

2. *Jesus’ opening sermon.* In weaving together John and Jesus’ birth (Luke 1–2) and presenting John’s baptism of Jesus (Luke 3:15–22), Luke has now set the stage for Jesus to take center stage in the Gospel. After presenting the genealogy and the temptation of Jesus, Luke relates how Jesus’ formal ministry began with a declaration in the synagogue quoting Isa 61:1–2 with one line from Isa 58:6 (cf. Luke 4:18–19), and then declares, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your

(44:3; 48:17); and finally God will be enthroned in a restored Zion/Jerusalem (40:9; 52:1–10).” Mallen, *Isaiah in Luke-Acts*, 14.

⁴⁰ Pao and Schnabel, “Luke” 276.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Mark also presents John the Baptist as preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Mark 1:4), while in Matthew John preaches repentance because the kingdom is near, with no explicit mention of the forgiveness of sins (Matt 3:2).

⁴³ Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50* 287.

hearing” (Luke 4:21). Standing at the forefront of his ministry as his first sermon in the Gospel, this quotation, similar to the Baptist’s quotation of Isa 40:3–5 (Luke 3:4–6), is programmatic to the rest of Luke’s presentation of Jesus.⁴⁴

In the OT context, Isaiah 61 serves to give hope to exiled Israel with the announcement that they will be set free (ἄφεσις; set at liberty, to release, or to forgive) from their captivity in the year of the Lord. Because of the various options for the word ἄφεσις, there is disagreement over the best translation in these verses. Some have opted for “set at liberty” or “release,” and this is likely the way John the Baptist understood Jesus’ use of this verse since in Luke 7:18–23, while in prison, he sends two disciples to ask Jesus if he really is the Messiah. Jesus responds by listing his activities and quoting part of Isa 61:1. Whereas John appears to have understood Isa 61:1–2 in terms of a literal release of prisoners, Jesus appears to have interpreted the passage differently. Porter notes, “Jesus’ interpretation includes both the physical healing of those who are afflicted, something expected from the Messiah, and the spiritual healing of sinners through forgiveness. Both are evidenced throughout Luke’s gospel.”⁴⁵ As Jesus proclaims to those in the synagogue on the Sabbath “today the Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing,” Jesus announced the great eschatological promises of Isaiah to be fulfilled in his ministry. Moreover, his individual healings, casting out of demons, and proclamations of the forgiveness of sin can also serve as symbolic proclamations that the day of the Lord has been ushered in by Jesus and Israel will finally be “set free”—physically and spiritually.

It is apparent from the above survey that Luke’s presentation of John’s message and Jesus’ words in the synagogue fit well within Wright’s emphasis on corporate repentance and forgiveness in response to Israel’s “exile.”⁴⁶ However, three qualifications are necessary at this point.

First, while Wright’s emphasis on corporate repentance and forgiveness is legitimate, John’s call for individual repentance and forgiveness should not be minimized. Corporate forgiveness would only be achieved when individuals within

⁴⁴ See D. L. Bock, *Proclamation from Prophecy and Pattern: Lucan Old Testament Christology* (JSNTSup 12; Sheffield: JSOT, 1987) 27–37; idem, “Proclamation from Prophecy and Pattern: Luke’s Use of the Old Testament for Christology and Mission,” in *The Gospels and the Scriptures of Israel* (ed. C. A. Evans and W. R. Stegner; JSNTSup 103; SSEJC 3; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994) 280–307; M. L. Strauss, *The Davidic Messiah in Luke-Acts: The Promise and Its Fulfillment in Lucan Christology* (JSNTSup 110; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995) 199–260.

⁴⁵ Stanley E. Porter, “The Messiah in Luke and Acts: Forgiveness for the Captives,” in *The Messiah in the Old and New Testaments* (ed. Stanley E. Porter; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007) 153.

⁴⁶ Wright, *New Testament and the People of God* 334. In fact, Wright has the following to say about Luke’s Gospel in particular: “Like so many Jews (and presumably well-taught proselytes) of the period, Luke believed that, prior to Jesus, Israel’s story had yet to reach its climax. The exile was not over; redemption had yet to appear. It was appropriate, within that context, that he should tell the story of the one life in which, he believed, the exile became most truly exilic, sin was finally dealt with, and redemption at last secured” (ibid. 381).

Israel repent, hence John's call for repentance and baptism of individuals within corporate Israel.⁴⁷

Second, it is difficult to see John limiting his call for repentance to a turning from "violent nationalism," as Wright has emphasized in his definition of repentance. The tax collectors John was baptizing were recognized as traitors working for the Roman oppressors, hardly a group open to the indictment of being overly zealous for a patriotic cause.⁴⁸ Furthermore, Luke emphasizes that John's message of repentance was related to turning from greediness and coveting, especially in regards to money and physical goods (Luke 3:10–14).

Third (and this last point will have to be demonstrated in the subsequent section), Jesus' message, while displaying continuity with John's emphasis on Israel's corporate rescue (Luke 4:18–22), frequently appears to go beyond John (though as noted above individual repentance and forgiveness is not absent in the Baptist's message) in emphasizing individual repentance and was foundational in the development of the early church's message of repentance as an "initial reorientation" of an individual's life to God.⁴⁹

3. *Jesus calls for repentance and announces forgiveness for individuals.* Wright argues that when Jesus announces the forgiveness of sins to particular people, the proclamation must be understood within the context of the return from exile motif. In Wright's own words, "The point is that Jesus was offering the return from exile, the renewed covenant, the eschatological 'forgiveness of sins'—in other words, the kingdom of God. And he was offering this final eschatological blessing outside the official structures, to all the wrong people, and on his own authority. That was his real offence."⁵⁰ The problem with this is not that it is wrong; it is just not all that needs to be emphasized. In view of John's ministry and Jesus' use of Isa 61:1–2, both of which have a strong emphasis on corporate salvation, Wright is correct to highlight that the corporate restoration of Israel cannot be ignored in the individual proclamations of restoration. The problem occurs when the exile motif is run through all the individual narrative units and placed in the foreground, while there is no mention of Israel and eschatological corporate "forgiveness of sins" in the immediate context. When passages are approached this way, the background becomes the foreground. Despite Wright's claim that "there is, in fact, no tension, no play-off, between the personal and the corporate," there does at least seem to be a problem with what is being emphasized.⁵¹ The following will survey the three passages in Luke where Jesus calls for repentance and/or proclaims forgiveness of an individual person.

⁴⁷ Though Wright does occasionally acknowledge corporate forgiveness implies individual repentance, it rarely gets the same attention as the corporate dimension in Wright's work. See, e.g., Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* 272.

⁴⁸ See Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50* 310–14; *TDNT* 8:94–105.

⁴⁹ See, e.g., Acts 9:35; 2 Cor 3:16; 1 Pet 2:25.

⁵⁰ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* 272. Here Wright stresses that all the particular instances of Jesus' announcement of forgiveness of sins should be read highlighting this corporate eschatological forgiveness.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 272.

a. *Luke 5:17–26*. Jesus proclaims to the paralytic “your sins are forgiven” (ἀφεώνται σοι αἱ ἁμαρτίαι σου) after seeing the faith of those who lowered the man from the roof. Even though Luke describes Jesus as seeing “their faith,” Jesus speaks specifically to the paralytic, forgiving only his sins. By proclaiming the forgiveness of sins, Jesus is demonstrating his authority as the Son of Man (*Luke 5:24*) and raises the consternation of the scribes and Pharisees who thought Jesus was speaking blasphemy. Jesus then heals the paralytic to prove his authority to forgive sins.⁵² Jesus appears to have been setting the Pharisees up for this conversation (*Luke* is careful to note their presence; *Luke 5:17*) by first announcing the paralytic’s forgiveness before performing the healing.

Nothing in the text indicates the man needed to repent of “nationalistic zeal,” and while the larger background of an implicit return of corporate Israel from exile echoes in the background, the foreground of this passage goes in another direction. The main point, as indicated by *Luke 5:24*, is that Jesus has the authority to forgive sins as the Son of Man, and his proclamation and subsequent healing is proof of this authority.⁵³

b. *Luke 5:27–32*. Here Luke records Jesus’ call of Levi, a tax collector, and then a subsequent feast at Levi’s house with a large group of tax collectors. Jesus’ association with tax collectors is met with disapproval by the Pharisees and their scribes. When asked why he associates with these types of moral outcasts, Jesus replies, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance (μετάνοια)” (*Luke 5:31–32*).

Again, tax collectors and the morally disreputable are unlikely to need to “abandon revolutionary zeal.” As mentioned previously, tax collectors were viewed as guilty of a variety of immoralities, including collaborating with Romans, who were looked down upon, especially by the most zealous Jews.⁵⁴ However, throughout *Luke* it is these moral outcasts who understood their need and responded to Jesus appropriately, with repentance. In view of Jesus’ words in response to the Pharisees (see *Luke 5:31–32* above), the main point appears to be that just as Jesus called Levi, an individual to repentance, individuals who see their need for forgiveness, not those who view themselves as morally upright, are the people who will appropriately respond to Jesus with repentance.

c. *Luke 7:36–50*. In this passage, a woman who was apparently a known “sinner” (ἁμαρτωλός) anointed Jesus’ feet with oil as she wept below him in the house of a Pharisee named Simon.⁵⁵ Simon reacts negatively because Jesus allows a known “sinner” to touch him. Jesus responds in telling a parable with a

⁵² I. H. Marshall notes, “Jesus is showing that his miraculous work carries a message about spiritual realities.” Marshall, *Gospel of Luke* 213.

⁵³ As mentioned previously, there is a connection in the OT between the coming restoration of Israel, the Messiah, and the forgiveness of sins, so Wright is correct in noting the implications of the passage in the broader context, but the immediate context must first take precedence.

⁵⁴ See Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50* 310–14; *TDNT* 8:94–105.

⁵⁵ The exact basis for the woman being described as a sinner is unknown, but it has been suggested that she is a prostitute. For a survey of the evidence, see Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50* 695.

moneylender depicting God; the debt owed to the lender representing sin; the two debtors symbolizing the Pharisee (who owes less) and the woman (who owes more). Jesus explains the lesson to be learned from the parable in Luke 7:47–50: “‘Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little.’ And he said to her, ‘Your sins are forgiven.’ Then those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, ‘Who is this, who even forgives sins?’ And he said to the woman, ‘Your faith has saved you; go in peace.’” In other words, those who realize the greatness of their sin will better appreciate the greatness of God’s mercy toward sinners.

The emphasis of this passage appears to be salvation and forgiveness for those, no matter their social status, who respond correctly to Jesus. The woman serves as an example for all people of what type of response to Jesus is required for forgiveness. Due to her faith, Jesus proclaims she has been saved and her sins are forgiven. Whereas a broader connection should be made with Jesus’ overall mission (Luke 4:18–19; Isa 61:1–2)—a point sometimes missed by an overly atomistic approach—in the immediate context, the emphasis remains primarily on individual salvation of those who respond correctly to Jesus.

d. *Conclusions.* Within their immediate contexts, these texts appear to be primarily focused on the individual need for repentance and forgiveness. Moreover, these passages do not appear to have much of any connection with understanding repentance as a call to turn from nationalistic zeal. This is not to say that Wright’s ability to see the forest amidst the trees is not helpful. Indeed, Wright’s emphasis on the corporate forgiveness of sins stands as a valid theme in Luke’s Gospel (as indicated in the sections on John the Baptist and Lk 4:18–22), but the immediate contexts show that the restoration of Israel from exile should be seen as in the background rather than the foreground of these passages. In other words, as appealing and legitimate as the grand overarching narrative can be, the main points derived from the immediate context must be allowed to speak before incorporating the passages within their larger context.

Moreover, these passages are relevant in evaluating Wright’s argument that Jesus offended the Pharisees not because he was extending grace and mercy to sinners and tax collectors, but because he was offering this forgiveness outside the official structures.⁵⁶ This appears to be a false dichotomy. Certainly, as seen in Luke 5:17–26, Jesus’ claim to forgive sins outside the official structures was offensive, but Jesus was also offending the Pharisees because he was offering this forgiveness to moral outcasts, hence Jesus’ response in Luke 5:31–32 and the story of the moneylender and two debtors (Luke 7:41–42).

4. *Forgive and you will be forgiven.* During Jesus’ sermon on the plain he proclaims, “Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven” (Luke 6:37). The implication in this phrase is that if a person responds in a certain way to others, God will respond in the same way toward the individual. Therefore, if you forgive others, God will

⁵⁶ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* 272.

forgive you. This would certainly cause listeners who might have had “revolutionary zeal” against their Roman oppressors to reconsider their approach, especially after in Luke 6:27–36 Jesus teaches on loving your enemies. However, it is too narrow a reading to say abandoning revolutionary zeal is the only or even the central point Jesus is making. Instead, the immediate context focuses on abandoning an attitude of judging and condemning “your brother” (τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ σου; Lk 6:39–42). Again, while one should not deny possible corporate implications from this passage, in light of Jesus’ overall message, the immediate context appears to focus on individual relationships within the people of God.

5. *Repentance in Jesus’ rebukes.*

a. *Luke 10:13–15.* Jesus’ indictment of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum was that despite the many miracles performed in them they did not repent. Jesus claims that if the same miracles had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, two Gentile cities that were condemned by the OT prophets for Baal worship and materialism, they would have repented (μετενόησαν) long ago. Consequently, according to Jesus it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon than for Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum on the Day of Judgment.⁵⁷ This passage has corporate repentance in view as the specific cities are rebuked.

b. *Luke 11:29–32.* Here Jesus rebukes the crowds for seeking a sign and claims, “The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented (μετενόησαν) at the preaching of Jonah, and behold something greater than Jonah is here” (Luke 11:32). The point is that while Ninevites, a pagan nation known for their wickedness, repented because of Jonah’s message, how much greater the condemnation on the people of Israel who reject the “One” and the message of the “One” greater than Jonah and instead ask for a sign. Again, there are corporate elements here as the people of Nineveh are compared to the crowds of Jews gathered around Jesus. The moral aspect of repentance is emphasized in the comparison with the notoriously wicked city of Nineveh, but the eschatological aspect of Jesus’ message is also present as “something greater than Jonah is here.”

c. *Luke 11:37–52.* While neither ἐπιστρέφω nor μετάνοια are used in this section, the concept of repentance is clearly present. In these verses, Jesus rapidly rebukes and implicitly calls the Pharisees and lawyers to repent of several practices. First (Luke 11:37–44), using the metaphor of a cup, Jesus claims that the Pharisees conform to the outward standards of the law without conforming the inner attitudes of their heart to God. They are full of “greed and wickedness” (Luke 11:40). They neglect “justice and the love of God” (Luke 11:42). They love the public recognition for their moral behavior (Luke 11:43). Jesus calls them to turn from this behavior and conform their inner self to God (Luke 11:41).

⁵⁷ David Ravens, notes, “Tyre and Sidon were notorious Gentile cities (see e.g. Isa. 23) and repentance was not a contemporary Gentile practice, yet even they would have moved to repent in sackcloth and ashes.” David Ravens, *Luke and the Restoration of Israel* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press: 1995) 145; cf. C. F. Evans, *St. Luke* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International) 236.

Next (Luke 11:45–52), Jesus rebukes the lawyers for burdening people, apparently with extra-biblical traditions (Luke 11:46); for building statues of the prophets while they, similar to their fathers, kill and persecute prophets (Luke 11:47–51); and for their proclamation of knowledge, which has actually led themselves and others astray (Luke 11:52). Once again, the Pharisees and lawyers are called to repent from sins that do not fall neatly into the category of nationalistic zeal.

d. *Luke 13:1–9*. These verses contain two units that are related. To begin (Luke 13:1–5), Jesus is told about the tragedy involving Pilate’s massacre. Jesus uses this tragedy, as well as the eighteen who were killed when the tower in Siloam fell (Luke 13:4), as a warning that all who do not “repent” (μετανοήτε) will perish (Luke 13:3, 5). The emphasis on the importance for individual repentance is evident in these five verses, but the parable of the fig tree that follows (Luke 3:6–9) indicates Israel’s corporate repentance is also in view.

The fig tree in the vineyard is imagery taken from the OT where these images (or variations of the imagery) are used to describe Israel (1 Kgs 4:25; Ps 80:8–19; Isa 5:1–7; 34:4; Jer 5:17; 8:13; 24:1–8; Hos 2:12; 9:10; Joel 1:7; Mic 4:4; 7:1; Hab 3:17). The nation, represented by the fig tree, has not produced spiritual fruit, and it will only be given a short amount of time to repent and produce fruit. If it does not respond with repentance, it will face judgment.⁵⁸

e. *Conclusions*. In Jesus’ rebukes and subsequent calls to repentance, both the corporate and individual aspects of repentance have been highlighted. Furthermore, while revolutionary zeal was no doubt a sin that Israel at times was called from which to repent, these texts point to a diverse list of sins from which Jesus called for repentance.

These texts also call for repentance in light of coming judgment. One of Wright’s interpretive assumptions throughout *Jesus and the Victory of God* is that the kingdom Jesus preached has little to do with what happens to people after they die and that Jesus’ main focus in his judgment warnings are for the nation of Israel.⁵⁹ However, in Luke 11:31–32 and throughout the Gospel, Jesus and his contemporaries have a great deal of interest in the afterlife (Luke 10:14; 12:4–5, 13–21, 33; 13:1–5; 16:19–31; 18:18). The more Jesus and his dialogue partners appear to be concerned with the afterlife and hence a final judgment, the more difficult it is to emphasize Israel’s corporate need for repentance in view of the nation’s coming judgment in contrast to the individual need for humans to repent in view of their eternal state. This appears to be an example of “both-and” rather than “either-or,” as both themes are present in Luke.

⁵⁸ Contra Marshall, *Gospel of Luke* 555; J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke* (AB 28A; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985) 1005; Evans, *Saint Luke* 548. Ravens is correct when he argues that Israel is most certainly the referent “in the light of passages such as Isa. 5:1–7, which describes God’s destruction of the vineyard, that is the house of Israel, and God’s punishment of Judah in Jeremiah 8, the vine without grapes and the fig tree without figs (8.13). . . .” Ravens, *Luke and the Restoration* 146.

⁵⁹ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* 202, 255.

6. *Parables related to repentance and forgiveness.*

a. *Luke 15:1–31.* The three parables in chapter 15 are in the context of tax collectors and sinners drawing near to Jesus and the Pharisees grumbling concerning his association with these moral outcasts (Luke 15:1–2). Each of these parables teach on repentance and are absent from the other Gospels. The first two parables, commonly called the “Parable of the Lost Sheep” and the “Parable of the Lost Coin,” will be considered together, and the parable, traditionally labeled the “Prodigal Son,” will be considered separately because of the prominent role it plays in *Jesus and the Victory of God*.

b. *Luke 15:3–10.* First, Jesus tells a parable of a man who leaves ninety-nine sheep to find one lost sheep and who then rejoices after the lost sheep is found. Jesus himself explains the meaning of this parable, “Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents (μετανοοῦντι) than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance (μετανοίας)” (Luke 15:7). Second, Jesus tells of a woman who has ten coins, but loses one, and searches the house until she finds the lost coin, rejoicing after she finds it. He again explains, “Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents (μετανοοῦντι)” (Luke 15:10).

These parables clearly emphasize the repentance and, by way of implication, the forgiveness of the individual sinner as rejoicing takes place over the “one” (ἐνὶ; Luke 15:7, 10). Within the context from which these parables are told (Luke 15:1–2), the religious leaders are to see that their reaction to Jesus’ association with moral outcasts was wrong because God has not abandoned these people, but rejoices when sinners repent and are restored.

c. *Luke 15:11–32.* This well-known parable functions centrally in *Jesus and the Victory of God* as Wright argues that the parable tells the story of Israel’s exile and restoration. The traditional interpretation of the parable understands the characters in view of the context set in Luke 15:1–2 and accordingly sees the prodigal son representing the sinner, the older brother representing the self-righteous religious leadership, and the father picturing God. This view argues that the lesson of the parable is that, “Sinners are to come to God, and the righteous are to accept the sinner’s decision to turn to him. It is the father’s reaction to the sons that is at the center of the parable. His response, in turn, instructs people on how they should respond.”⁶⁰

Though Wright himself admits that his reading of the parable is without precedent, he nonetheless is convinced that return from exile is the central theme. Snodgrass summarizes Wright’s interpretation succinctly:

The exodus story is the ultimate backdrop, but the Babylonian captivity is also in mind. Those who stand in the way of Israel’s return are the mixed multitude, not least the Samaritans, so that those who grumble at what is happening in Jesus’ ministry are cast in the role of the Jews who did not go into exile. They are virtually Samaritans (even though, as Wright notes, this nuance does not fit Luke’s view of the Samaritans.) Jeremiah 31:18–20, as a text about exile and re-

⁶⁰ Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53* 1320.

pentance that refers to Israel as God's dear son, provides the background for the understanding of the parable. The references to resurrection in Luke 15:24, 32 are metaphors for return from exile. The parable is an enactment of the return from exile and, whatever else it is, a classic account of repentance (*JVG* 125–31, 242, 254–55).⁶¹

There are several problems with Wright's interpretation. First, it does not fit within Luke's context. As mentioned previously, the context of all three parables in chapter 15 is that tax collectors and sinners gathered around Jesus and the Pharisees have grumbled concerning his association with these moral outcasts. The previous two parables have focused on repentance of individuals and correspond well with the traditional interpretation that this parable is defending the acceptance of tax collectors and sinners who have returned to the father. Second, the justification for seeing Jer 31:18–20 as the basis for this parable is tenuous at best. Not every reference to a "son" in the Gospels is meant to serve as a reference to Israel, and there is nothing else in the passage that would call for seeing Jer 31:18–20 as the background. Moreover, if Jer 31:18–20 is not accepted as the basis, then there is no justification for accepting the exodus or the Babylonian captivity as the background for the passage. Finally, there is no evidence to support the claim that the elder brother represents the Samaritans who did not want Israel to be restored from exile.

In view of the lack of evidence to support Wright's reading, the traditional interpretation should stand, and it is no surprise that even those who are sympathetic to Wright's work have tended not to follow him on his understanding of this parable. Wright has overplayed the exile theme and has squeezed out the most obvious reading of this parable. Snodgrass is justified when he writes,

The theology of repentance and return operative in the parable is valid for Israel and was already in evidence in various writers such as Jeremiah. The parable of the prodigal, however, is not about us or Israel's return from exile. It is about two kinds of response to the kingdom forgiveness Jesus embodied: a repentance that leads to reconciliation and celebration, and irrational disdain, the result of which the parable leaves undetermined.⁶²

d. *Luke 16:30*. Here the occurrence of μετανοήσουσιν takes place within the context of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31).⁶³ Although the word repentance does not occur until the end of this story, the concept is present throughout.

Again, in this parable the context is significant. The audience was the Pharisees who John notes were "lovers of money" (Luke 16:14). Jesus has just

⁶¹ Snodgrass, "Parables" 69.

⁶² *Ibid.* 70.

⁶³ Though some have preferred to call this an "example story" rather than a parable, it appears that the two categories are not easily distinguishable. Blomberg refers to "example stories" as a subclass of parables. Whatever label is placed on the story, it appears to teach through using a real life hypothetical situation. For the purposes of this paper, this story will be referred to as a parable. For more discussion on this verse see Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990) 73; J. A. Fitzmyer, *Gospel According to Luke (x–xxiii)* (AB 28B; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985) 1126; Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53* 1362–63.

accused them of being “those who justify yourselves before men” (Luke 16:15). The parable that follows is complex because it makes several points, yet two of these points are related to the concept of repentance. First, in view of the context (Luke 16:14), Jesus is calling the rich, in particular the Pharisees, to repent of their use of wealth as he tells of the rich man living lavishly while not appropriately caring for the poor (Luke 16:20–21, 25). Second, as seen in Luke 16:26–31, the parable teaches that repentance is not dependent on signs. Some will not “repent” (μετανοήσουσιν; Luke 16:30) even if someone returns from the grave to deliver the message.⁶⁴ Marshall summarizes this point well: “the law and prophets are insufficient to call the rich to repentance, even the return of someone resurrected from the dead will not achieve the desired effect. Miracles in themselves cannot melt stony hearts.”⁶⁵ The call is for people to recognize in the present life the need for repentance.⁶⁶

e. *Luke 18:9–14*. This passage is an example of the limits of word studies in identifying theological themes. Neither ἐπιστρέφω, μετάνοια, nor ἄφεις is used in the parable, yet the contrasting attitudes of the Pharisee and tax collector make it an example of what true repentance looks like. Again, like in past parables surveyed, the context helps determine the interpretation: “He also told his parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt” (Luke 18:9). The Pharisee’s self-righteous attitude (an example of someone who trusted in himself) leaves him outside the mercy and forgiveness of God, while the tax collector who approaches God with humility and a contrite heart, recognizes his sin, asks God for mercy, and goes away justified. Jesus ends the parable with an explanatory comment, “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted” (Luke 18:14b). The main point appears clear: it is the person who humbles himself who finds forgiveness with God, not the person who is righteous in his own eyes.

f. *Conclusions*. Several points from Luke’s parables related to repentance/forgiveness are pertinent to the overall purpose of this paper. First, Wright’s argument that Jesus did not offend the Pharisees because he was extending grace and mercy to sinners and tax collectors does not fit well within these parables.⁶⁷ The parables of the lost sheep, lost coin, and the Pharisee and tax collector emphasize Jesus’ attitude of grace and mercy to sinners in contrast to the attitude of the Pharisees. Second, related to the first point, the individual moral aspects of forgiveness have been seen clearly in the immediate contexts of the parables. Jesus is emphasizing the need for humility and an attitude of repentance in contrast to self-righteousness. Repentance from “trusting in yourself,” the

⁶⁴ Bock also notes that the story is teaching an OT ethic and the finality of the afterlife based on the decisions made in this life (*Luke 9:51–24:53* 1360–61).

⁶⁵ Marshall, *Gospel of Luke* 632.

⁶⁶ Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53* 1378. This interpretation is in contrast to Wright who argues Jesus’ attitude toward the poor in this parable should be seen as a sign that Israel is returning from exile. The rich man corresponds to those “who seek a national or personal agenda for the restoration of land and property or ancestral rights.” Again, his interpretation of this parable has failed to produce many followers.

⁶⁷ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* 272.

improper use of money and a judgmental attitude toward sinners appears to be particularly in view. Third, Wright's interpretation of the parable of the prodigal son and his attempt to use the parable as a key passage in his argument for the exile theme have proved unconvincing.

7. *Jesus' prayer on the cross.* Luke recounts Jesus praying for his executioners, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).⁶⁸ Jesus is asking for God to forgive those responsible for his execution because they did not know the full significance of what they were doing. Bock has argued that while Luke's readers might apply this prayer to all the people who took part in his execution, the primary group Jesus has in view are the Jews.⁶⁹ He provides three reasons. First, the Romans are not mentioned in the pericope so they are unlikely the party in view. Second, Stephen's parallel prayer in Acts 7:60 "almost requires that this prayer be for Jesus' accusers."⁷⁰ Third, there is a possible conceptual tie to Isa 53:12, "where the Servant suffers for the transgressors, a point that has slightly more force if Jews are meant."⁷¹

While the Jews certainly played a central role in Jesus' death and would have been one of the referents in his prayer, Jesus' prayer also appears to be meant to include Gentiles. First, the Gentiles are involved throughout Jesus' sentencing and his crucifixion: Pilate delivers Jesus to be crucified (Luke 23:18–25); "they [apparently Gentile soldiers] led him away" (Luke 23:26); they [again, presumably the Gentile soldiers] crucified him" (Luke 23:33); and "the soldiers also mocked him" (Luke 23:36). Second, while Stephen's prayer in Acts 7:60 is directed at the Jews, this does not require Jesus' prayer to be only for Jesus' accusers rather than his executors. The context of each passage must not be overlooked, and the context of Luke 23:34, as noted in the previous point, indicates a larger group than just the Jews are in view. Finally, there is no verbal correspondence between Luke 23:34 and Isa 53:12. However, even if Isa 53:12 is meant to be an allusion, there is no reason this verse could not be widened to include Gentiles, as is regularly done when the NT uses an OT passage that is referring to Israel in its immediate context.

Therefore, Jesus' prayer of forgiveness refers to both parties—Jews and Gentiles—who were involved in his execution. Jesus' intercession for his enemies indicates that forgiveness is available for all people, even his enemies that put him to death. Again, the corporate and individual aspects of forgiveness are in view, as the nation of Israel and all the individuals involved in the crucifixion (including Gentiles) are the referents of Jesus' prayer.

8. *Jesus' commission.* Commentators frequently see the phrase "repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations" (Luke 24:46–

⁶⁸ There is some question as to whether this statement was in the original manuscript. External evidence leans toward its exclusion, as many Alexandrian and Western witnesses do not include the prayer. However, internal evidence points toward its inclusion in Luke's original manuscript. For a survey of the evidence and an argument for the inclusion of this verse see Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53* 1867–68.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* 1849–50.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* 1850.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

47) as a paraphrase of Jesus' message throughout the Gospel.⁷² It also serves as Jesus' commission to the disciples and corresponds to Jesus' final commission in the book of Acts, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and *to the end of the earth* (ἕως ἑσχάτου τῆς γῆς)" (Acts 1:8b), which is likely an allusion to Isa 49:6, "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach *to the end of the earth* (ἕως ἑσχάτου τῆς γῆς).

The corporate significance of Luke 4:27 is increased if Pao and Schnabel are correct in arguing that because the programmatic connection between Luke 24:47 and Acts 1:8 appears to be deliberate, it "may be regarded as an allusion to Isa 49:6 and thus as a reference to the Isaianic new-exodus program as announced in Lk 4:16–30, pushed forward with the introduction of the Gentiles."⁷³ Accordingly, Jesus is demonstrating his ministry is the fulfillment of past promises: both to end the exile and bring salvation to the Gentiles. Pao and Schnabel indeed may be correct. However, one must approach this conclusion somewhat cautiously since there are no lexical connections between Luke 24:47 and Isa 49:6, and Pao and Schnabel must use Acts 1:8 to make the connection.

Nevertheless, both national and individual aspects are present as the early disciples carry out these commissions (Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8), proclaiming repentance and forgiveness. The national dimension is highlighted by the mission beginning with Israel and then going out to the nations (Acts 1:8). On the other hand, the stories of conversion emphasize the individual nature of the message (Acts 2:38; 3:19; 5:31; 8:22; 11:18; 13:24; 17:30; 19:4; 20:21; 26:20).

VI. CONCLUSION

Part of Wright's aim is to correct an ahistorical view that has failed to recognize the corporate aspects of repentance and forgiveness. This is a legitimate enterprise, particularly needed in the modern Western world where individualism has blinded readers to this corporate dimension. Yet the danger is swinging the pendulum too far in the other direction, and to the degree that this has happened, two problems arise. First, it causes an unbalanced position where the corporate eschatological nature of repentance and forgiveness drowns out the immediate individual and moral aspects in particular passages. Second, by overstating his case at particular points, there can develop an unfortunate hesitancy among traditional readers to adopt Wright's other legitimate and valuable contributions.

Rather than seeking to overturn Wright's main findings, this article has sought to balance out his conclusions concerning corporate and individual repentance and forgiveness in Jesus' teachings. It has been argued that Wright is fundamentally right to place the Gospels within the framework of first century Jews who saw themselves as, in some sense, still in exile with the expectation that the Lord would one day soon come to restore the nation. Wright is also correct to argue repentance and forgiveness of sin at times has corporate Israel primarily in view, rather than

⁷² See, e.g., Pao and Schnabel, "Luke" 401; Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53* 1938–41.

⁷³ Pao and Schnabel, "Luke" 401; cf. Pao, *Exodus* 84–91.

the traditional individual conversion sense of the terms. Nevertheless, at points Wright has overstated his case, pressing texts to fit a true concept, but not one meant to be placed in the foreground of every passage. Moreover, his synthesis of the three synoptic Gospels into one has only contributed to the problem as it causes the voices of the particular Gospel writers to be muffled.

These issues have led to a de-emphasis on what appears to be the straightforward reading of texts in their most immediate context, which has minimized the individual nature of Jesus' teaching on repentance and forgiveness. Furthermore, Wright's insistence that Jesus was primarily calling for repentance from nationalistic zeal is too narrow of an understanding of Jesus' call for repentance.⁷⁴ More work remains to be done to establish the balance between the two aspects of repentance and forgiveness in the three other NT Gospels. However, this survey of Luke's Gospel has demonstrated that, at least in one of the four Gospels, Jesus calls both (1) Israel to a corporate repentance that would bring forgiveness and restoration to the nation; and (2) individual sinners to repentance from their own personal sin to receive the forgiveness that he as the Messiah has the prerogative to grant.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Snodgrass comes to a similar conclusion as he states, "Wright effectively counters Sander's de-emphasis of repentance in the message of Jesus, but he views sin from which people need to repent as revolutionary zeal or violent nationalism (*JVG* 250, 317). The Gospel accounts seem to have a much broader understanding of sin and place little emphasis on nationalism as the sin preventing people from following God." Snodgrass, "Parables" 64.

⁷⁵ Perhaps this last sentence was basically what Wright meant to communicate, but he felt he had to emphasize (1) because he believed it had been so badly neglected. Nevertheless, overstating one's case and de-emphasizing an important element in Jesus' teaching tends to lead to confusion and bring suspicion to one's work. This suspicion, when it has led to dismissal, is unfortunate because much of N. T. Wright's work is not only helpful, but a model of what evangelical scholarship should be striving to achieve.