Assessing N.T. Wright’s *Jesus and the Victory of God* in any specific respect is daunting for a number of reasons. The most obvious is that its 662 pages offer a portrait of Jesus that is both highly detailed and extensively, perhaps even exhaustively, argued. Wright’s exposition, furthermore, is intricately interconnected at every part. The explanation of each part depends on the overall construal, while the overall construction evokes in support the steadily mounting bits of evidence that have been adduced. Wright’s approach is thoroughly synthetic rather than analytic. He thinks of his procedure in terms of testing a hypothesis (*JVG* 131–133). Others might think that Wright’s search for a singular and simple explanation runs the risk of circularity and totalization. In either case, his presentation more easily invites affirmation or dissent with regard to the whole than it does a critical assessment of the parts.

Adding to the difficulty of response, the volume under consideration represents only the second part of a six-volume project whose overall target is purportedly the question of “God” in the New Testament. Evaluating Wright’s historical reconstruction of Jesus must take into account the argument already established in *The New Testament and the People of God* (as his constant references to that volume as support for positions in the present volume make obvious), but in principle it ought also to consider the further stages, which have yet to appear. The publication of *What Saint Paul Really Said* amplifies somewhat the brief sketch of Paul found in *The New Testament and the People of God*, but the interdependent character of Wright’s argument means that the evaluation of any portion apart from the whole is hazardous.

In this essay I take up Wright’s historiographical method and practice in his two major volumes already in print, because these are so critical to the fair evaluation of his overall project. It is in considering how he goes...
about doing history that the most searching questions might be raised concerning the adequacy of his reconstruction.

_Placing Wright’s Project_

Recognition is due to Wright’s accomplishment: the project thus far completed is marked not only by size and ambition but also by great energy and intelligence. This is by any measure a significant contribution to the entire historical Jesus debate. Nor is it the case that Wright develops his argument in a scholarly vacuum. His engagement with other scholars is lively if sometimes uneven. He gives a great deal of attention to what he calls the “traffic on the Wredebahn,” represented by the Jesus Seminar, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan (JVG 28–82). In light of this, his failure give anything other than passing recognition to John P. Meier’s monumental historical Jesus project⁴ is all the more striking and puzzling, particularly when Wright agrees with Meier in significant ways (e.g., the eschatological character of Jesus’ ministry) and, especially, when in some cases (e.g., the miracle stories) Meier’s general discussions are so rich and useful. In contrast, Wright’s debt to the late Ben F. Meyer’s work on _The Aims of Jesus_ is frequently and gratefully noted.⁵

Wright’s work is also remarkably consistent in its adherence to a theoretical model. The model was worked out in part two of _The New Testament and the People of God_ (31–144) and is followed faithfully in Wright’s reconstruction (see JVG 125–144). This model seeks to cover the complexity of the data and yet retain simplicity (NTPG 99–100). Simplicity is achieved primarily by a heavy emphasis on the “continuity of the person” or “consistency in thought” (NTPG 107–109). Wright’s model demands coherence between story, symbol and praxis in an individual as well as in a specific culture, and it assumes that questions, controversies, aims and intentions equally reveal a consistent internal logic (JVG 139). The strength of the model is its simplicity and clarity. The weakness, I will argue, is that simplicity is achieved at the cost of a more adequate reading of the evidence. But Wright cannot be faulted for failing to present his theory from the start.

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⁴ J.P. Meier, _A Marginal Jew_; Wright’s index lists only six references to Meier’s massive project (JVG 55, 84, 147, 395, 615, 631).