Christ Died for the Ungodly: Narrative Soteriology in Paul?

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I. Introduction: Soteriology and Story

When Paul seeks to articulate how human beings are saved, does he answer the question by telling a story? Or, perhaps to put the matter more cautiously, do Paul's soteriological affirmations rest upon a narrative substructure? If so, what implications does this have for our understanding of Paul's theology?¹

It is no longer surprising to find "Paul" and "narrative" in the same sentence. Over the past twenty years, a number of significant studies have highlighted various narrative elements in Paul's thought. In addition to my own efforts in this regard, I would mention particularly the contributions of Norman Petersen, Stephen Fowl, Tom Wright, Ben Witherington, Luke Timothy Johnson, Sylvia Keesmaat, and A. Katherine Grieb.² A recent collaborative

¹ This paper was originally presented in the Pauline Soteriology Group at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, Atlanta, GA, 24 November 2003. Some portions of the paper were subsequently incorporated into my essay, "Is Paul's Gospel Narratable?" Journal for the Study of the New Testament 27 (2004): 217-239. My thanks to David Horrell, editor of JSNT, and to the publishers, for permission to reprint this material here.

² My own early reflections on this matter are now further developed in a new introduction to the second edition of The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Substructure of Paul's Theology in Galatians
volume of essays by leading British NT scholars, under
the editorship of Bruce Longenecker, has produced a
stimulating discussion of Narrative Dynamics in Paul.3
This way of thinking about Paul's letters has entered
the mainstream of discourse in the field. A single citation will
illustrate my point. In his magisterial study of The Origins
of Christian Morality, Wayne Meeks writes as follows:

We have not thought of Paul as a storyteller,
for the Jesus stories of the Gospels are absent
from his letters. Yet his use of narrative is very
important..., because Paul's central concern
was to use the narrative [of Jesus] to form
a moral community. The pivotal story for
Paul was simple and astounding: God's son
and anointed one was the very Jesus who was
most shamefully crucified, dead, and buried,
but whom God then raised from the dead,

was published in 1983.) See also Norman R. Petersen, Rediscovering
Paul: Philemon and the Sociology of Paul's Narrative World (Philadelphia:
Fortress, 1985); Stephen Fowl, The Story of Jesus in the Letters of Paul
(JSNTSup 36; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990); N. T.
Wright, The New Testament and the People of God (London: SPCK,
1992); Ben Witherington III, Paul's Narrative Thought World: The
Tapestry of Tragedy and Triumph (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox,
1994); Luke Timothy Johnson, The Real Jesus (San Francisco:
HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 117-22; Sylvia Keesmaat, Paul and His
Story: (Re)interpreting the Exodus Tradition (JSNTSup 181; Sheffield:
Sheffield Academic Press, 1999); and A. Katherine Grieb, The Story of

3 Bruce W. Longenecker (ed.), Narrative Dynamics in Paul: A
Critical Assessment (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002). For
an extended review of this important book, and for a fuller discussion
of the question of narrative in Paul's letters, see Hays, "Is Paul's Gospel
Narratable?" (n. 1, above).