

## SCRIPTURE STUDIES: TURN WRIGHT II

**T**he first essay around the works of N.T. Wright—*DQ* 4—was weaved round a text sent by a questioner interested in my take on that text. It ended with an appeal from further questions that I would take up through the winter. At the time I had not intended to continue musing until such questions turned up after the December outreach. But questions have come up from various people and nudged me to add this second essay as an aid in our struggle to locate Hebrew-Christian scriptures—and, implicitly, all religious scriptures and writings—in our grappling with finitude’s meaning. Its focus is to be on a preamble to Part II of N.T. Wright’s *The New Testament and the People of God*,<sup>1</sup> and we should get towards being able to describing it very briefly at the end. In the spring of 2017 we should push on in “Scripture Studies: Turn Wright III.”

First, however, I must share the enlightening lead that came to me this morning, thinking over my final conversation in 2000 with my old colleague of graduate days, Lochlainn O’Raifeartaigh.<sup>2</sup> We were in the Institute of Theoretical Physics in Dublin, famed for being reputedly founded by De Valera to house Erwin Schrödinger. We rambled around a recent successful publication of his, and came to talk of the Big Bang. Lochlainn was emphatic about the importance for modern physics of a focus on that beginning. Neither of us had any doubt about the type of focus involved and required: a fully up-to-date perspective. It was not the place for me to push questions of that fullness, but on the physics, taken in strategic isolation, there was no obscurity, no debate. The approach was and is the approach from a controlled grip on the Standard Model, including its unfinished character. Let me give two references and some contextualizing hints to help us along in imagining the sort of tricky work involved. My handy referencing is to two texts to which I have referred before, which I name here **Penrose**

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<sup>1</sup> *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1992) is the first volume of three by N.T. Wright (“I was actually thinking of five.” op. cit., xiii) focused on the New Testament.

<sup>2</sup> Lochlainn O’Raifeartaigh (1933–2000) went on to a distinguished career in physics. See the article on him by Siddhartha Sen in *Physicists of Ireland: Passion and Precision*, edited by Mark McCartney and Andrew Whitaker (Philadelphia: Institute of Physics Publishing, 2003), 282–92.

and **Lawrie**.<sup>3</sup> The Penrose reference is to chapter 28, “Speculative theories of the Early Universe”; the Lawrie reference is chapter 13, the final chapter of his book, a chapter titled “The Early Universe.” Note, immediately, that in both senses the content of these two chapters is ‘far out.’ I am tempted to add some detail, but best resist: it would kill your interest and patience. Penrose begins by considering “symmetry breaking”;<sup>4</sup> Lawrie ends the chapter with a section on “The Very Early Universe” “by which I mean roughly the first  $10^{-4}$  seconds,”<sup>5</sup> and earlier on that page he has the statement. “It is worth reflecting, however, that all the events which determine the constitution of the universe took place within the first few seconds.”

Have you already caught on to my discomfoting parallel? There is the very early universe of the Big Bang of the Incarnation and its  $10^{-4}$  second-ary esse; there is the early universe that is sketchily represented by the New Testament, Jesus’s symmetry breaking of history and God-identity.<sup>6</sup> The first Big Bang was 13.7 billion years before the second, but be startled by the fact that both their stories move on unendingly, thus overwhelming the little beginning time-gap.

However, the key nudge of my recalling of Lochlainn’s point is that, yes, is it not obvious that we need, in this other context, to approach the early universe and the very early universe with the bestest of present Standard Models, the bestest of “Speculative theories of the early universe”?<sup>7</sup>

So now, sadly, I wish you to face the possibility that the difference of this from present scripture studies is “the difference between high civilization and primitive gardening.”<sup>8</sup> I brutally follow that economic pointing of Lonergan with his following sentence. “But we are

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<sup>3</sup> Roger Penrose, *The Road to Reality: A Complete Guide to the Laws of the Universe* (New York: Vintage pb, 2005); Ian D. Lawrie, *A Unified Grand Tour of Theoretical Physics* (Philadelphia: Institute of Physics Publication, 1990). Lonergan’s standard reference, Lindsay and Margenau, *Foundations of Physics*, is of course an irreplaceable background.

<sup>4</sup> **Penrose**, 735.

<sup>5</sup> **Lawrie**, 328.

<sup>6</sup> A goodly nudge here is James Duffy, “A Special Relation,” *Seeding Global Collaboration*, edited by Patrick Brown and James Duffy (Vancouver: Axial Publishing, 2016), 91–114.

<sup>7</sup> **Penrose**, the title of chapter 28: pp. 735–81.

<sup>8</sup> Lonergan, *For a New Political Economy*, CWL 21, 20.

not there yet. And for society to progress towards that or any other goal it must fulfill one condition. It cannot be a titanothore, a beast with a ten-ton body and a ten-ounce brain.” And there is Lonergan’s sentence later in that same paragraph: “It must lift its eyes more and ever more to the more general and more difficult fields of speculation, for it is from them that it has to derive the delicate compound of unity and freedom in which alone progress can be born, struggle, and win through.”

So, thus troubled, we can return to our preamble to Wright’s Part II of that first volume, titled “Tools for the Task,”<sup>9</sup> to see how he measures up.

“To see how he measures up”? Now there is a six-pack! How is anyone—including himself—to see how he or she measures up? That was the question posed by Lonergan at the end of chapter 7 of *Insight*, finding the X called Cosmopolis: “Am I truly cosmopolitan?” He repeated the point in the final chapter of *Method in Theology*, almost thirty years later, in a Christian context, talking about “a process of self-constitution, a *Selbstvollzug*.”<sup>10</sup> By then, of course, he had his decent answer: the process fits evolution’s cycling norm expressed by Oparin:

When there was massive growth of the original systems, selection took place, the only one’s which were preserved for further evolution being those in which a network of reactions was so coordinated that there arose stationary chains of reactions which were constantly repeated or, even better, closed cycles of reactions in which the reactions always followed the same circle . . . .<sup>11</sup>

In that evolutionary context one can pose the answer to Wright’s question fulsomely: he measures up if his effort is preserved. But now the issue complexifies. We ask, “What part of his effort?”, and I roughly suggest that there are three parts: a scholarly part, a methodological

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<sup>9</sup> *Op. cit.*, note 1: pp. 31–144. The first chapter there (31–44) is Wright’s presentation of his rather light view of knowledge and epistemology, which points forward to the other 3 chapters in Part II on story, world view, theology.

<sup>10</sup> *Method in Theology*, 363.

<sup>11</sup> A.I. Oparin, *The Origin of Life*, 1957, 359. See my *Randomness Statistics and Emergence* (Macmillan and Notre Dame Presses, 1970), 218–9, 225, 256. Ann Synge’s translation of Oparin’s Russian work of 1924 is available on Google. Lonergan’s expression of this, meshed into his self-luminating view of emergence is in lines 3–10 of *Insight* 144. One can thus lift magnificently up, secularly, Oparin’s view of “self-reproduction” (*op. cit.*, 359). The lift into actual history is, of course, a matter of the full dual Big Bang theory that is being sketchily weaved into the text above.

part, a pastoral part. Think of his recent output of books as pastoral. The scholarly part is evidently the early volumes we mentioned, and other similar work that is ongoing. The question of the methodological part? That is tricky, since method is the man moving forward in the functions of meaning. Best stay simple here and go back to my initial idea of homing in on his “Tools of the Task.” Then I toss before you the suggestion that the scholarly part will survive with siftings, but the other two parts will not, but again with siftings.

I would ask you to pause seriously over that last sentence. What does it mean to you? What might it mean to you? What does it mean to me? What might it mean to Wright?

I return to my colleague Lochlainn’s comment on the study of the early universe. The tossing of suggestions had best, bestest, be done in the best standard model. Here we are faced with the brilliance of Lonergan’s version of Oparin’s Biopoiesis. It perhaps is posed with nice simplicity by the sunflower’s clan’s goings-on in our cosmic story, where one finds cycles within cycles.<sup>12</sup> The cycle I am thinking about now is the cycle-dynamics that occurs in what you are now at least nominally familiar with: The 1833 Overture of Lonergan, where the tossing is one that forces an upgrading to and beyond the present standard model. The instructions in those lines: I toss my view to you of the story of our interest, etc., we toss our stories together, trapped methodologically in a vortex “process of self-constitution, a *Selbstvollzug*,”<sup>13</sup> that nudges us to “a broadened basis.”<sup>14</sup> That nudge is terrifying: the whole paragraph referred to there, mid-page 287, is something of a great methodological joke. It is a matter of us, who care seriously, turning right, Deshil Alles Eamus.<sup>15</sup> But it will not turn Wright: that is my firm suspicion. No more than Donald Trump will turn right by my writing an accusatory book of invitations asking him to turn right, to turn America right: *Profit: The Stupid View of President*

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<sup>12</sup> I am thinking here of my [Cantower II](#), “Sunflowers Speak to Us of Growing.” The essay climbs up through musings on such things as the complex sub-cycles of photosynthesis to arrive, in part 3 (p. 20), with musings on “The Organism that is God.” The essay ends, as it began, with the suggestive poem, “Sun, flowers, Son-flowered, / Speak to us of growth / Seed cauled, cribbed, / Kabod yet confined / Crossed with dark earth, / Light-refined, / Rill open-ends a thrill / Annotaste of Throat.”

<sup>13</sup> *Method in Theology*, 363.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 287.

<sup>15</sup> I mentioned this at the end of the previous essay, but here with an extra twist: roughly translating from the three Languages gives *Let us all turn right*.

*Donald Trump*.<sup>16</sup> But now, what am I or you to do? : there is the stupid view of N. T. Wright expressed in “Tools for the Task.”

Go figure. We may, perhaps, converse over the winter, but the first effort had best be a self-regarding that is helped by regarding Wright. You might even venture into the text “Tools for the Task” and brood over what Wright has to say about knowing and about epistemology and about its weave into the story and story-telling. You might find it useful to recall Lonergan’s readable talk of the historian being “at pains not to conceal his tracks”<sup>17</sup> and the problem of track-victimization “from the climate of opinion in which the historian lives and from which he inadvertently acquires certain fixed convictions and the nature of man and his world.”<sup>18</sup>

But what I would like us to find in ourselves and the culture of biblical studies is the shocking “Existential Gap,”<sup>19</sup> that must be faced if we are to replace that cultural focus on the second Big Bang in the manner suggested by Lonergan, in his sublation of the second canon of hermeneutics into the cyclic dynamics that is to shift us into the positive Anthropocene age. Useful in this struggle, of course, is my recent book, *The Allure of the Compelling Genius of History*, which weaves *Insight* and *Method in Theology* together and focuses both on the character of the Second Big Bang.

The challenge of this winter enterprise is to push towards imagining what serious scripture studies, in any religious group on the globe, would look like: what is this farewell to “academic disciplines” to be, spun out of the seeds, in Lonergan, of global collaboration? And can you imagine that in a millennium the study of sacred writings will be unimaginably different both in content and in street effect?

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<sup>16</sup> Axial Publishing, 2016, available in both paperback and eBook versions on [Amazon](#).

<sup>17</sup> *Method in Theology*, 193.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>19</sup> I refer here to two sections of *Phenomenology and Logic*: “The Existential Gap” (CWL 18, 281-84) and “Horizon and Dread” (CWL 18, 284-89), but the drive of the entire volume is relevant. Especially to be coped with existentially is the dread of its shocking sublation into the Biopoiesis of chapter 5 of *Method in Theology*.