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Galatians Re-Imagined: Reading with the Eyes of the Vanquished

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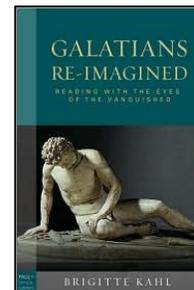
Book Review

Galatians Re-Imagined: Reading with the Eyes of the Vanquished

Brigitte Kahl

Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010

Brigitte Kahl's thorough study *Galatians Re-Imagined* is part of the "Paul in Critical Contexts" collection which I have found to be a most excellent and challenging scholarly series on the controversial figure of Paul. In fact, it could be argued that the so-called "apostle to the Gentiles", in this time and place, remains a more controversial figure than Jesus of Nazareth as far as the discipline of Religious Studies is concerned. However, at the very least, there has been an explosion of excellent studies of Paul and his impact on the early Jesus Movement. In the particular series in which Dr. Kahl's study has appeared, she joins others in placing Paul as a resolute foe of imperial values and culture. In choosing Galatians as her focus the author enters a history of long scholarly controversy as more recent writings have challenged the dominance of Luther's impact, especially through the more recent scholarship of the Bultmann school with its anti-Law, pro-grace Lutheran heritage.



Let me underscore my over-all positive assessment of this work. I recommend it highly for its scholarship and convincing argumentation. But more of that later! First of all, I want to point out what I did not like in the book. As one who appreciates the recent Pauline studies' emphases of Paul's anti-imperial focus (a much-needed corrective within our own imperial, success-oriented society) I welcomed what I deemed would be an in-depth look at how this perspective would play out in Dr. Kahl's book. I found myself inundated by tedious detail around her "semiotics" motif and architectural descriptions, especially regarding the Great Altar of Pergamon. In no way am I prepared to challenge her conclusion, nor do I question the depth of her scholarship. However, as I kept reading and reading, I felt "Enough already!" This relentless detail of her methodology and models gave me the impression that I was reading a doctoral dissertation. I was reminded of the famous Moltmann book *Theology of Hope*. I went to it in the "hope" to be inspired and found instead tedious brilliance until the last chapter. I believe that his book was a revised dissertation. Is Dr. Kahl's *Galatians Re-Imagined* a dissertation revised as well? At least, that is how it comes across. Although my tone may sound harsh, I underscore that I am reflecting my own reading tastes and impatience with such "thorough thoroughness." So, if your reading tastes are like mine, I beg you to bear with Dr. Kahl's book. In spite of the above critique, I kept on reading and found the book to be a gold mine waiting to be discovered.

For one thing she made a fine case for the context of the epistle which, in and of itself, gives us a minimum of clues. Her portrayal of the constantly defeated and exiled Galatians moves beyond convincing to the poignant. Using visual statuary and Roman propaganda she portrays graphically and convincingly the vulnerability and victim hood of the Galatians in Asia Minor and elsewhere. I was especially captivated by her analysis of Paul's anger toward "his" Galatians as he sees them capitulating into the realms of safe

identity in an imperial culture. Instead of the traditional Lutheran Paul who rejects Torah and circumcision in the name of “justification by grace through faith,” Dr. Kahl moves beyond this blithe anti-Judaic “supersessionism” to a more nuanced notion. If I understand her position, she argues that these vulnerable Galatians sought to fit into imperial culture by adopting an ethnic identity (Judaic via circumcision) already accepted by Rome’s imperial brand of tolerance.

In the final analysis I am delighted that I stuck with the book. *Galatians Re-Imagined* is not only brilliant in scholarship (apparent from start to finish) but also engaging, challenging, powerful and convincing as it rolls into high gear.

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