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Paul: An Introduction to His Thought

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Paul: An Introduction to His Thought

C.K. Barrett

Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994

xii + 180 pp. \$12.99 U.S. paper

Written as part of a series on outstanding Christian thinkers, by a scholar who himself has had an outstanding career as an interpreter of the New Testament, this is a masterful, lucid, and highly readable introduction to the apostle Paul. At the same time, however, since it tends to downplay some of the more recent shifts in Pauline interpretation, it represents more of an expert summary of where Pauline scholarship has been than a guide to where it might be going.

While the focus is on Paul as a thinker, C.K. Barrett is too careful a student of Paul to attempt an introduction to his thought without giving due consideration both to the context in which it took shape and to the form in which it was expressed. Accordingly, he begins by surveying Paul's career (ch. 1), and then—on the assumption that “conflict was what made Paul creative” (p. 169)—discusses the various controversies in which his thought was forged and honed (ch. 2). The result is a chronological reconstruction of Paul's life and letters that is admirably succinct, surprisingly fresh and consistently stimulating.

In chapter 3—the longest, representing more than half the book—he turns to a direct consideration of “Paul's theology” itself. While sensitive to those aspects of Paul's letters that have led some to postulate stages of development in his thought, and others to describe him as an unsystematic or even incoherent thinker, Barrett believes nonetheless that there is a real thematic unity to be perceived, at least in the seven undisputed epistles. This unity of thought, however, is dynamic, not static—cohering in the message of salvation that Paul preached, but displaying a characteristic “variety, mobility, [and] spontaneity” (p. 56) determined by the occasional nature of the epistles and the brilliance of their author. And so, striking just the right balance between dynamic creativity and systematic structure, he sets out Paul's theology under the following heads: the reign of evil; law and covenant; grace and righteousness; Christ crucified; the church; and the Holy Spirit and ethics. Even here, though, he stays close to the text in all its contextual particularity. Indeed, exegesis is the strong point of the book; page after page contain shrewd insights and fresh perspectives on even the most familiar texts. The treatment of the Christ-hymn of Philippians 2 (pp. 105–109) is but one especially pertinent example.

Since the publication of E.P. Sanders' *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* in 1977, there has been a significant reassessment of several central aspects of the traditional understanding of Paul, resulting in a “new perspective” (James D.G. Dunn) on his thought. Stated very briefly, the new approach has tended to displace justification by faith from the central place traditionally assigned to it, seeing the faith/works language more as a specific

argument which Paul uses to defend his central conviction (Christ as saviour of all on equal terms) against objections raised from Jewish or Jewish Christian quarters. While Barrett is well aware of this development (e.g., p. 83), he tends to give it short shrift, continuing to see justification by faith as central to Paul (indeed, to Christian existence itself; see pp. 174-175), and opposition to legalistic religion as the substance of his "works" language. Readers' appreciation of this aspect of Barrett's book will vary, of course, according to where they hang their theological hats.

The book concludes with two shorter chapters, one dealing with "the sequel" to Paul's thought in the six disputed letters, the other containing brief but incisive observations about the significance of Paul for today. These chapters round out what can only be described as a superlative introduction, one that will in its own way help to ensure Paul's ongoing significance for today.

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A Social Reading of the Old Testament: Prophetic Approaches to Israel's Communal Life

Walter Brueggemann
Edited by Patrick D. Miller
Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994
328 pp.

A Social Reading of the Old Testament is a collection of fifteen previously published essays by one of the most accessible Old Testament teachers, Walter Brueggemann. In his erudite and yet lucid manner, Brueggemann encourages a social reading of the text which simultaneously challenges contemporary society and reveals new avenues of possibility.

The essays in *A Social Reading* are grouped into three sections. The three essays of Part I, Guidelines and Approaches, are programmatic. In "Trajectories in Old Testament Literature and the Sociology of Ancient Israel", Brueggemann traces two competing trajectories in the Old Testament, the royal (Davidic) trajectory which presents God as faithfully supporting the powers that be, and the liberation (Mosaic) trajectory which supports societal have-nots.

It becomes soon evident that Brueggemann is clearly more comfortable with the liberation stream. Indeed, the two other essays of Part I, "Covenant as a Subversive Paradigm", and "Covenant as Social Possibility", deal with covenant clearly from the Mosaic point of view.

Covenant for Brueggemann is more than a theological construct. To enter into a covenant relationship with God affects the whole realm of society,