

František Ábel, Ed.
***Israel and the Nations: Paul's Gospel
in the Context of Jewish Expectation***

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The essays in this volume began as presentations at a conference held in September 2019 in Bratislava, Slovakia. A primary aim of that conference was “to introduce and implement the *Paul within Judaism* perspective into the Slovak academic environment” (xii). The essays all represent varying attempts to situate Paul’s statements about the relationship between Israel and the nations in the context of early Judaism and the early Roman Empire. The sixteen essays are almost evenly split between scholars whose work regularly appears in English (Genevive Dibley, Anders Runesson, Matthew Novenson, Loren Stuckenbruck, Kathy Ehrensperger, William Campbell, Joshua Garroway, Kenneth Atkinson, and Mark Nanos) and those primarily publishing outside the Anglophone sphere (Eric Noffke, Patrick Pouchelle, Imre Peres, Michael Bachmann, Markus Öhler, Karl-Wilhelm Niebuhr, and František Ábel). The essays by the latter group may help introduce some readers to current discussions in European scholarship not written in English, which the interested researcher may more easily find through these short pieces and their characteristically robust endnotes.

The volume is organized into two parts. The first seven chapters deal primarily with early Jewish eschatology in sources other than Paul’s letters while putting them in conversation with Paul, and the final nine chapters engage more with Paul’s own writings. The essays are broad-ranging, covering material ranging from the Book of the Watchers (*1 Enoch* 6–11) to the *Letter of Aristeas* to Greek sepulchral inscriptions in addition to the Pauline letters themselves. The volume presents a relatively representative cross-section of Paul within Judaism (and PWJ-adjacent) scholarship, evident in several significant disagreements across several of the essays, though all are agreed on the fundamental approach of considering Paul within, rather than at odds with, his Jewish context.

Several consistent themes emerge throughout the essays, the first of which is how the salvation of nations/gentiles relates to Israel’s salvation. There is a general and sustained effort across a plurality of the essays to situate Paul’s position on gentiles in conversation with views reflected in other early Jewish materials such

as the *Letter of Aristeas*, the third *Sibylline Oracle*, the Book of the Watchers in *I Enoch*, Josephus, Philo, and more. The essays include a fair amount of debunking of previously cherished ideas. Matthew Novenson, for example, makes the compelling argument that Paul “aimed to bring about not the eschatological *pilgrimage* of the gentiles but the eschatological *obedience* of the gentiles” (67), and Patrick Pouchelle argues that the Greek translation of the twelve minor prophets does not introduce more universalism to those texts than is already present in the Hebrew versions.

Most of the contributors agree that Paul envisions gentile salvation as entirely distinct from, albeit related to, Israel. Here Joshua Garroway's essay “The Ins and Outs of Paul's Israelite Remnant” (187–98), is a significant outlier. Garroway argues that Paul transforms the familiar remnant concept “into an operative principle in all Israelite history” (192) such that “the historic Israel, the present Israel, and the future Israel ... are not the same, varying in both constituency and in criteria for membership” (188). Garroway argues that whereas other early Jewish sources “envision an eschatological inclusion of Gentiles concomitant to the final paring down of Israelites,” Paul goes one step further, proposing that gentiles are becoming “constitutive members of the Israelite remnant itself” (192), though the remnant remains open to addition until Christ's return.

This perspective stands sharply at odds with the conclusions (and assumptions) in the essays by Genevive Dibley, Anders Runesson, William S. Campbell, Mark Nanos, Kenneth Atkinson, and Karl-Wilhelm Niebuhr. These authors all emphasize that Paul's gospel maintains a strict division between gentiles-in-Christ and Israel. Of these, Campbell argues that Rom 9:6 has been interpreted backwards and that Paul defines Israel in strictly biological terms, excluding from Israel anyone not directly descended from Jacob, though gentiles can be saved apart from Israel. Nanos argues that although Paul preaches salvation to gentiles, he gives no indication that Israel needs to be “saved” at all; instead, Rom 11:26 refers to all Jews, regardless of their response to Christ, being “kept safe” due to their covenantal status. Nanos does not, however, address why, if Israel needs no salvation, this statement is immediately followed by reference to Israel's deliverance from “impiety” (ἀσεβεία; 11:26) and the removal of their “sins” (ἁμαρτία; 11:27).

In contrast, Niebuhr argues, “Salvation from God's judgment is *needed* for Israel as well as for the Gentiles as long as they lean on their own will and turn themselves against God” (274). Nevertheless, whereas “the nations, if at all, will be saved by faith in Christ alone” (282), “all Israel ... will be saved by the salvific eschatological act of the merciful God who will enforce his promises to his people out of his own will” (282) regardless of belief in Jesus. Similarly, Runesson argues that although Paul insists gentiles must convert and join the “in-Christ” group to be saved (without changing their ethnicity!), all Jews will be saved regardless of their response to “the in-Christ offer” (32) because “God's covenant with them stands” (33). Atkinson argues that much of Romans is a reaction to Paul's fear that if gentile converts behave too Jewishly, it will cause a backlash in Rome; thus he “wants to erect a dividing wall to prevent gentiles from being confused with Jews” (210),

specifically allowing gentiles-in-Christ to remain integrated in pagan Roman society (by eating idol meat [!]) since they “are not part of the covenant community” (209).

A second and related theme has to do with Israel’s role with respect to the nations and gentile salvation. Kathy Ehrensperger and František Ábel highlight early Jewish understandings of Israel’s role as a light to the nations and suggest that Paul’s disagreements with unbelieving Jews centers on their not living out their vocation as heralds to the nations to bring about universal (but ethnically distinct) salvation.

Two essays challenge recent proposals that have gained traction in PWJ scholarship. In “If you are called a Judean...,” Markus Öhler demonstrates that ἐπονομάζει in Rom 2:17 must be understood as a passive (“you are called”) rather than a reflexive verb. He then argues that the interlocutor of 2:17 should not be understood as a proselyte nor as a typical representative of “Judaism.” Instead, he joins others in concluding that ἱεροσυλεῖν in Rom 2:22 alludes to the deceitful Jewish teacher (and accomplices) who deceived Fulvia as recounted in Josephus’ *Antiquities* 18:81–84.

In “The Making and Unmaking of Jews in Second Century BCE Narratives and the Implication for Interpreting Paul,” Genevive Dibley offers what may be the most significant essay of the collection. Dibley engages with Matthew Thiessen’s proposal that Paul (like the author of the book of Jubilees) objects to gentile circumcision on the grounds that since ethnicity is immutable, adult circumcision cannot make gentiles into Jews. Dibley challenges a primary foundation of this view, arguing that Jubilees’ emphasis on eighth-day circumcision does not have the question of gentile conversion in view at all. Instead, “On the subject of circumcision, Jubilees served to warn Jews, not to inform gentiles [about the covenant].” Thus “the visitors to Galatia, about whom Paul was so exercised, could have argued their same case for gentile convert circumcision from Jubilees 15 as much as from Genesis 17” (14). Dibley concludes that Paul’s “shrill rhetorical pitch” (15) would hardly be warranted if he thought adult circumcision was merely ineffectual. Instead, she argues, Paul believed the opposite, “that gentile circumcision worked all too well in making gentiles Jews” (16), threatening the apostle’s eschatological vision of a union of Jews and gentiles under one God.

One shortcoming of the volume is that nearly all its contributors presume that “Israel” is synonymous with “[the] Jews,” limiting the questions asked and, in some cases, leading to outright contradiction, such as when Runesson argues that God’s impartial judgment is foundational to Paul’s gospel (36), except that all Jews are exempt from such impartiality and will be saved no matter what. In another example, when Bachmann concludes that “the Israel of God” refers to “ethnic Jews” (128), are we really to conclude that by “Israel” Paul necessarily excludes Samaritans, who are not Jews (cf. John 4:9) but do claim descent from the Joseph tribes of Israel? And what constitutes “ethnicity” in the first place? One wonders, for example, how proselytes and those such as Ruth or Rahab fit into Campbell’s strictly biological reading of Israel. As Dibley’s essay demonstrates, Jewish or Israelite ethnicity was rarely (if ever) merely a matter of biological descent alone.

Unfortunately, this insight is mostly ignored in the other essays, which regularly treat “Jews” and “Jewishness” in an uncritical fashion, arriving at conclusions—such as the idea that all who are biologically descended from Jacob are Jews or that those of such descent will automatically be saved—that nearly all early Jews would likely have found surprising at best.

The essays could also have been copy edited more thoroughly, and the English of some of the articles is uneven at times. Nevertheless, the essays in this volume display a broad range of Paul within Judaism and PWJ-adjacent scholarship and thus provide a window into the present discourse within a field undergoing significant reorientation. The essays of Dibley, Novenson, Öhlers, and Garroay in particular deserve sustained engagement in future academic studies, and the volume as a whole is a worthwhile resource for Pauline scholars and those interested in Jewish-Christian relations in general.