

**REVIEW**

Mark D. Nanos and Magnus Zetterholm, Eds.

*Paul within Judaism:*

*Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle*

(Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), paper, x + 350 pp.

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This volume consists mainly of essays presented at and developed from the “Paul and Judaism” session at the Society of Biblical Literature annual meetings starting in 2010. Following an introductory essay by Mark D. Nanos, the contributions include: Magnus Zetterholm’s “Paul within Judaism: The State of the Questions”; Anders Runesson’s “The Question of Terminology: The Architecture of Contemporary Discussions on Paul”; Karin Hedner Zetterholm’s “The Question of Assumptions: Torah Observance in the First Century”; Nanos’s “The Question of Conceptualization: Qualifying Paul’s Position on Circumcision in Dialogue with Josephus’s Advisors to King Izates”; Caroline Johnson Hodge’s “The Question of Identity: Gentiles as Gentiles—but also Not—in Paul’s Communities”; and Paula Fredriksen’s “The Question of Worship: Gods, Pagans, and the Redemption of Israel.” The editors also solicited essays to address issues from the vantage point of political- and gender-criticism: Neil Elliott’s “The Question of Politics: Paul as a Diaspora Jew under Roman Rule” and Kathy Ehrensperger’s “The Question(s) of Gender: Relocating Paul in Relation to Judaism.” Lastly, the editors invited a critical response from Terence L. Donaldson, whose contribution is entitled “Paul within Judaism: A Critical Evaluation from a ‘New Perspective’ Perspective.”

In many respects, the essays are a reaction to the so-called New Perspective (NP) on Paul. While the NP has made significant advances over traditional readings that rested (in part) on caricatures of Judaism, the contributors still share strong

reservations about it. Not least is that the NP can still perpetuate the notion that Paul, after his encounter with the risen Christ, found something inherently wrong with or deficient in Judaism. Moreover, they point out that NP scholars tend to drive a wedge between Christianity and Judaism to a degree that was not true during Paul's life and ministry. There is also a tendency to import later meanings onto terms Paul employs (e.g., *ekklēsia*) and to perpetuate a narrower notion of *pistis* (often reduced to "belief") than he intended.

The title of the volume, *Paul within Judaism*, is the name given to the perspective from which the authors approach Paul's writings. In seeking to move beyond the NP, this new paradigm claims to commit to an unremitting historical analysis of Paul's writings, bringing to bear the rich texture of first-century Judaism (with all its variations) in the broader context of the Greco-Roman world. This historical quest trumps, they contend, any theological concerns and biases.

Any advocate of the NP (and, for the sake of full disclosure, I fall in that camp) stands to learn much from and to be challenged by these essays. To give a small sampling: Runesson's essay challenges an uncritical use of terminology. For instance, to assert when analyzing Paul's writings that one is studying "early Christianity" is to predetermine the results from the outset because of the (often unconscious) tendency to think of Christianity and Judaism in terms of the distinctive religions they eventually came to be. Runesson also calls for critical caution about translating *ekklēsia* as "church," given its broader use in the Greco-Roman world to denote public assemblies, not to mention its possible connotation as "synagogue."

Hedner Zetterholm's article on assumptions is a salutary corrective for interpreters who have a monolithic understanding of what is meant by, and considered to be, Torah observance. In the first century (and also in the present), establishing and applying halakha involve a complex process into which many factors enter. She provides an illuminating reading of 1 Corinthians 8-10, Paul's response to a question from the *ekklēsia* in

Corinth on the eating of meat sacrificed to idols. She offers an interpretation of these chapters in light of the Mishnah tractate *Avodah Zarah* to show how Paul's reasoning resembles rabbinic debates that not only took into account the objective act in question but also the significance attached to that act by witnesses, as well as the situation of Jews living in the midst of gentiles. Her essay successfully sets forth Paul's Jewishness and a nuanced presentation of halakha and its application.

Nanos's article on conceptualization makes a number of important distinctions, including that between the *practice* of Jewish religious actions by non-Jews, on the one hand, and the question of whether non-Jews should undertake circumcision (i.e., proselyte conversion), on the other hand. Nanos insists that, while Paul was adamantly opposed to the latter, he insisted that gentile members of the *ekklēsia* do the former (i.e., walk in the ways of Torah). Building on this point, Fredriksen claims that the phrase *dikaïōthentes ek pisteōs*—typically rendered “justified by faith”—meant for Paul that gentiles live according to the two tables of the Law (with the exception of Sabbath observance). This is how they were to show piety toward God and justice/righteousness toward other people. Indeed, this is what Paul meant, in Gal 5:6, by “faith working through love.”

The thorough contextualizing of Paul in Judaism is the volume's great virtue and strength. There are several helpful cautions and correctives. However, *Paul within Judaism* contains some problematic features as well. As Donaldson rightly points out in his concluding essay, the eschatological scenario presumed by the book's authors—one in which Jewish restoration involves the inclusion of non-Jews *as non-Jews*—is not fully supported by the pertinent literary evidence. Given the authors' insistence on a thorough historical analysis of first-century Judaism, including end time expectations, it is surprising to see an end time scenario that is claimed to offer the key motive for Paul's missionary activity not be better substantiated.

And while the volume challenges the ways traditional and NP readings of Paul can overstate the *discontinuity* between Paul and his Jewish heritage, the “Paul within Judaism” perspective tends to overstate the *continuity*. It is striking how little, if at all, the authors treat passages in which Paul regards that which formerly had great value (including his Jewish heritage) as “rubbish” (Phil 3:8), or those that convey his emphasis on the centrality of the cross (e.g., 1 Cor 1:18–25). Such difficult passages cannot simply be ignored or wished away.