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BOOK REVIEW

Michael F. Bird, ed. *Four Views on the Apostle Paul*. Counterpoints: Bible and Theology. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012. 236 pp. Pbk. ISBN 0310326953.

The Pauline writings are a consistent venue for scholarly discussion and debate, and the Zondervan Counterpoints series has attempted to make this discourse more accessible to those readers who are not necessarily in the midst of its ebb and flow. Michael Bird edits this volume and has assembled what he views as a “diverse bunch” to provide windows into their distinctive positions in Pauline interpretation. These authors are: Thomas Schreiner (an evangelical), Luke Timothy Johnson (a Catholic), Douglas Campbell (a mainline Protestant), and Mark Nanos (a Jewish scholar). Four major topics are to be assessed: Pauline soteriology, Pauline Christology, a preferred framework for Pauline interpretation, and Pauline ecclesiology. Each contributor is afforded the opportunity to engage all four topics in one self-contained chapter, with a brief chance to respond to the other contributors.

Thomas Schreiner opens the book with a “Reformed Reading” of Paul. His introductory paragraph alone is worth considering; Schreiner states that he will engage in an inductive reading of Paul’s letters (all thirteen of them) with minimal interaction with other scholars. This statement is confusing for a number of reasons. Is this chapter an inductive reading of Paul or a Reformed reading of Paul? Are these readings the same or different? That is to say, will Schreiner’s Reformed perspective govern his interpretation or will an unadulterated inductive reading just so happen to generate a Reformed perspective (which is therefore equivalent to the genuine Pauline perspective)? From the outset, I would prefer to see Schreiner be more open about

his goals. That being said, the “inductive” character of the chapter stands out against the other major chapters of the book. For the most part, Johnson, Campbell, and Nanos actively and sensitively engage relevant issues within Pauline studies and clearly delineate the stakes of the discussion. Schreiner, on the other hand, simply provides a synthesis—a brief Pauline theology of sorts. It becomes difficult, therefore, to determine (without any prior knowledge) what makes this reading particularly “Reformed”; it is only the response essays that clarify this a little more. While I can appreciate the reasons for this (clarity, ease of access, etc.), this approach presents Schreiner’s readings as self-evident or even as undisputed facts. Many of Schreiner’s points, in fact, are disputable, and not necessarily according to any of the alternative perspectives presented in this book. For example, that Christ’s sovereignty over the church is a function of his headship (p. 25) is only true given the understanding that *κεφάλη* (head) means authority in the relevant passages. This is a point highly disputed among Pauline scholars and it is somewhat misleading for Schreiner to state the position as he does. Those familiar with Schreiner’s work will not be surprised by his emphasis on such positions as a forensic reading of the righteousness of God, an objective genitive reading of the *pistis Christou* construction, and his view that the church exists as the spiritual, or “true” Israel. Schreiner’s decisive conclusion is that the theology of Paul (including derivative “ologies”) is Christ-centered.

Luke Timothy Johnson follows Schreiner with a “Catholic” reading of Paul. Johnson’s introduction is helpful (especially in contrast to Schreiner’s) insofar as he attempts to locate his forthcoming analysis within his particular tradition. Johnson’s is an interesting position to be in, insofar as he is able to draw upon 1500 years of Christian tradition in a way that is difficult for the other two Protestant authors. This is a lot of tradition and debate to sift through; indeed, Johnson refrains from too sharp an analysis. However, he is able to highlight emphases, including the resurrection, the work of the Spirit, and the church as Christ’s body, that seem to characterize notable streams of Catholic thought. Perhaps the most valuable contribution that Johnson

makes is an assessment of first principles: what letters make up the Pauline corpus and why? What are the material circumstances of the Pauline correspondence? And what seem to be the guiding principles for Pauline thought? Johnson resists attempts to ascertain a specific proposition or premise (compare this to Campbell's approach) that make up the center of Paul's theology. Yet, he does characterize Paul's work according to select concerns: Paul's personal religious experiences (including the Damascus road and continuing mystical experiences), the religious experience of those to whom he wrote, and the practices and traditions that already existed within the church communities. In spite of this three-pronged set of concerns, Johnson spends a significant portion of the chapter dealing with Paul's portrait of Christ. In fact, Christ seems to be of utmost significance to Paul, a perspective seemingly shared with Schreiner (a point Johnson makes in his response to Schreiner). Johnson characterizes Pauline ecclesiology by its response to tensions in the churches that result from his utopian/egalitarian ideals and the social realities of the communities. Paul's prescriptions are therefore heavily contextualized and community-oriented. This point stands in stark contrast to Schreiner's synthetic and individualistic interpretive strategy.

Douglas Campbell constructs his essay in a significantly different manner compared to the previous authors in an attempt to distill his post-new-perspective reading of Paul. Campbell begins very briefly by outlining standard new-perspective views of Pauline thought before launching into what he sees as a reappraisal of Paul's gospel. For Campbell, the concerns of this volume can be accessed in relation to this fundamental question, and an examination of Romans 5–8 is the primary means to this end. It is unclear what it is about Campbell's *approach* to interpretation that yields his distinctive conclusions—in some ways it appears much like Schreiner's inductive approach. Yet, by focusing on certain eschatological and ethical concerns in Romans 5–8, he is able to propose some answers to the book's four organizing topics. Campbell's answers are synthetic and nicely inter-related: Christ is the full disclosure of God, who acts in a saving manner to bring together a community in full communion with

him. Fraternal imagery is important—the church is an assembly of brothers (the masculine emphasis is troubling to me), who participate in the image of Christ. In fact, Campbell claims that “participation” forms the fundamental and underlying logic to all of Paul’s arguments. While Campbell’s chapter suffers from an unbalanced treatment of the Pauline corpus (does a segment of Romans reflect the full nuance of Pauline thought?), he is able to avoid some of the sweeping statements made in the earlier chapters. I’m not sure which I prefer, but this tension does at least imply some of the challenges of Pauline theologizing.

Mark Nanos has, in my opinion, the most interesting essay in the volume insofar as he is able to provide some insights that the other authors cannot, given their position as (Christian) confessional scholars. Nanos suggests that many of the features of Pauline Christianity are potentially unpalatable to a Jewish reader—Paul is framed in opposition to Judaism, Christianity replaces Judaism, and Pauline Christianity is fundamentally superior to Judaism. The issue is that Paul is frequently understood as someone who stands outside of Judaism, and Pauline interpretation becomes a purely Christian-based conceptualization. As a result, Nanos identifies a polarized discourse between Jewish and Christian scholars; this polarization seems to result in a misunderstanding of Paul’s views of Judaism. For Nanos, the best way to understand Paul is as a Torah-observant Jew—his proposal for law-free living is directed at non-Jews. Perhaps Nanos’s most significant nuance is that Paul is not opposed to Torah observance but to proselyte conversion. Paul, therefore, envisions an ethnically hybrid community with differing behavioral expectations, united through faith in the messiah; Paul organized Jewish sub-communities and not an ostensibly new religion.

Especially within the context of this volume, Nanos’s article is the most provocative, presenting a radically different view of Pauline thought. His greatest strength is the suggestion that our readings of Paul, filtered through 2000 years of Christian religious tradition, may have been skewed in some a-historical directions. This goes both ways, however, and Johnson’s critique that Nanos’s Judaism is itself anachronistic is worth considering.

As Campbell points out in his response, this framework assumes that Judaism and Christianity are equally particularistic. There are scholarly voices that would see Paul's vision as a more universalistic conception; if this is the case, Nanos's reading loses much of its thrust.

If nothing else, this volume reveals that the framework within which we approach the interpretation of Paul has notable effects on our conclusions. I am not convinced that any one of these positions has a monopoly on truth or that this should be our goal. The conversational model of this volume is a positive one and it is interesting to see how the different approaches can often result in some important common ground. For example, Campbell deeply sympathizes with Nanos's discomfort with the "Lutheran" Paul. In fact, it is the opportunity for each author to respond to the essays of the others that provides the best forum for productive discussion. Authors are able to clarify their positions, including agreements and disagreements, in ways that are directly relative to the immediate concerns. The responses highlight that our own experiences and interpretive positions have generative power, but also limit the extent of our conclusions. I hope that Pauline studies can be approached in this conversational mode more often, inasmuch as different voices can alert us to our own blind spots. It is important to realize that certain interpretations of Paul have the potential to alienate particular communities. Several have anti-Semitic tendencies, but, for example, Nanos's perspective that Paul's Christianity was simply a Jewish sub-community is in some ways just as racially insensitive. An unfortunate limitation of this volume was that the religious/ethnic element of Pauline studies was the only diversity that was explicitly identified. Paul had important things to say about ethnicity, but he also had important things to say about gender, poverty, slavery, and religious expression, to name a few. The ethnic tensions raised by Nanos find parallels in all of these areas and the interpretation of these issues in Paul is a product of the interpreter's own status within such social and political arrangements. Does the fact that the majority of Pauline interpreters have been male, or of Western descent, or in a position of socio-economic privilege inform the way that Paul has

been read? Certainly this is true. I agree with Schreiner that “the cross was an offense in Paul’s day” (p. 191), but this shouldn’t invite the exclusion of the voices who perceive such offense as directed upon themselves. The inclusion of four select approaches to Pauline interpretation is a helpful reminder that there are multiple, reasonable ways to understand the Pauline writings. This volume is a chance for the inexperienced reader to gain an appreciation for such diversity and should evoke a desire for further research into this rich set of texts.

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