

## REVIEW

Florian Wilk and J. Ross Wagner, eds.,  
with the assistance of Frank Schleritt

*Between Gospel and Election:  
Explorations in the Interpretation of Romans 9-11*

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A professor I know used to have a sarcastic comment at the ready whenever he would meet a Ph.D. student in New Testament: "About what *verse* or *word* will you be writing your dissertation?" The joke is funny, if a bit painful, because of how often it has been true. While the book under consideration here does bring three whole chapters of one Pauline letter under its microscope, the reader is nonetheless left with a bit of vertigo from having stared at the same thing for too long. Readers of this journal will be rewarded if they choose essays carefully, lest one drown in the "vast oceans of research on Rom 9-11 in recent German and English-language scholarship" (p. xii).

The book's essays, in either German (fifteen essays) or English (eleven essays) and spanning over five hundred pages, were developed from a May 2008 conference held near Göttingen: "*Römer 9-11 im Spannungsfeld zwischen 'New Perspective on Paul' und christlich-jüdischem Gespräch*" ("Romans 9-11 at the Interface between the 'New Perspective on Paul' and Jewish-Christian Dialogue"). About twenty of the authors would be considered *Neutestamentler*, and the others are scholars of Hebrew Bible (1), Systematic Theology (3), and *Religionspädagogik* (1). The book opens with a section called "Horizons," which includes keynote addresses on the role of Paul in contemporary Jewish-Christian relations (B. Schaller) and the role of Rom 9-11 in the "New Perspective" (N. T. Wright), in addition to two *Forschungsgeschichten* of German and English scholarship on the passage (K. Haacker and M. Reasoner). In the next section, entitled "Contexts," only some of the authors actually analyze texts or settings from outside the New Testament (J. Barclay on the Wisdom of Solomon; A. Steudel on Qumran; W. Campbell on church and synagogue worship). Other authors stay within the "contexts" of Paul's letters. For example, D. Sänger and S. Eastman interpret Rom 9-11 in light of Paul's other statements about "Jews" (1 Thes 2) or "Israel" (Gal 6), while C. Stenschke's "context" is the literary context of Romans as a whole.

In the next section called "Readings," the first essay by F. Wilk offers a rhetorical analysis of Paul's three-chapter argument within the framework of 9:1-5 and 11:25-36. Subsequent authors treat discrete sections in turn (B. R. Gaventa on 9:6-29; F. Schleritt on 9:30-33; F. Avemarie on 10:1-21; E. E. Popkes on 11:1-10; M. D. Nanos on 11:11-24). The fourth section gathers theological "Themes," such as: the imagery of God as "father and potter" (R. Feldmeier); a presentation of Paul as a struggling, "God-intoxicated" prophet (A. K. Grieb); the multiple referents of the term "Israel" (W. Reinbold); Paul's diverse characterizations of Gentiles (J. R. Wagner); and Pauline anthropology (K.-W. Niebuhr). It is important to note that these essays on theological themes are written exclusively by *Neutestamentler*. I say this not to discount their arguments, but rather to note that they do not engage the categories or traditions of systematic

theology, as one might expect from the way the section is introduced. (One exception is a reference to Karl Barth in A. K. Grieb's essay).

This illustrates a weakness in the book—its lack of methodological diversity. Though the book's contributors include "specialists in Biblical Studies, Judaic Studies, Systematic Theology, and Practical Theology...from Germany, the UK and the USA," many of the essays consist only of *neutestamentlich* philological or rhetorical analyses of Rom 9-11 (p. xi). Some authors never expand their study to texts or contexts outside Romans. In general, it is a great challenge nowadays to say anything new about the New Testament without looking somewhere outside of the New Testament; the challenge is exacerbated when the text under consideration has been one of the most carefully studied texts in the last fifty years. The essays in this work that bear the most fruit, then, situate Rom 9-11 in either an ancient context that has not been fully explored or a contemporary context of Jewish-Christian relations.

Some of these appear in the fifth section entitled "Perspectives." It contains five essays that will be of interest to readers of *SCJR*, since they deal with the contemporary theological and practical significance of Rom 9-11 for Jewish-Christian relations. The authors work primarily or exclusively within Protestant (*Evangelisch*) theological frameworks, but that is a benefit, not a drawback, to the collection. Essays examine: how a person's memory of oneself—and especially one's biological lineage—becomes a treasury of resources from which religious identity is continually constructed, looking at the example of Paul (N. Slenczka); Paul's doctrine of election as contingent and historical (K. Sonderegger); how anti-Judaism has affected Christian education in Germany (M. Rothgangel); and the actual effects of Rom 9-11 in contemporary Jewish-Christian dialogue encounters (R. K. Soulen and W. Kraus).

Of the essays dealing with contemporary issues, I will first highlight Rothgangel's adroit blend of *wissenschaftlich* and *pastoralisch* approaches in "Christliche Identität ohne antijüdische Kontrastfolie: Zur Bildungsrelevanz von Römer 9-11" (pp. 483-96). Using "social identity theory," he takes a sociological approach to a pastoral problem: how to pass on Christian religious identity without always using Judaism as a *Kontrastfolie* (a "foil") or losing one's religious identity (*Identitäts-Verlust*). In the same section, Soulen's essay, "'They Are Israelites': The Priority of the Present Tense for Jewish-Christian Relations," is effective in its simplicity (pp. 497-504). He describes how Christians tend to think of Jewish election as primarily "a phenomenon of the *ancient past*," and those who "pay a little attention" to scripture might also think of it as "a phenomenon of the *eschatological future*" (p. 499; italics in original). But Soulen emphasizes instead the present tense of Rom 9:4 and 11:28b—"the iron brackets which surround Paul's argument and ultimately contain its explosive force"—in order to focus Christian readers on the "abiding *now* of covenant history" for Jews, the "shock of the present tense" (p. 499; italics in original).

Of the far greater number of essays dealing with ancient contexts, I first recommend the essay by Nanos, "'Broken Branches': A Pauline Metaphor Gone Awry?", for his thorough pursuit of the famous "olive tree" allegory in connection with ancient agricultural practices (pp. 339-376). "Rather than serving to reinterpret reality," he writes, "this allegory has [usually] been reiterated as if it were a straightforward reflection of reality, as if the metaphorical language described what came to pass, what is and what will be in terms of social reality, without regard for the limitations of metaphorical communication" (p. 340). Nanos argues that, by mixing metaphors of "broken" and "cut off" branches in Rom 11, Paul ended up subverting his own message to self-righteous Gentiles and opened himself up to centuries of Christian misinterpretation.

I conclude by citing the ever-eloquent J. M. G. Barclay, whose essay "Unnerving Grace: Approaching Romans 9-11 from the Wisdom of Solomon" packs a punch belied by its deceptively

simple agenda (pp. 91-109). Through a comparison of Wisdom of Solomon and Romans, two texts whose methods of “natural theology” have sometimes been juxtaposed, Barclay ultimately presents Paul’s vision of God as “thoroughly Jewish, but also bizarre, theologically dangerous and extremely unnerving” (p. 92). In contrast to Wisdom, Paul’s version of Israel’s story disregards “cosmic order, symmetry or equilibrium. There is *no* correspondence between God’s action in the world and any comprehensible moral, rational, or natural order in the cosmos. ...What has twisted Paul’s theology into this strange shape is his understanding of a ‘gift’ that has redefined the meanings of χάρις [grace] and ἔλεος [mercy] and that defies explanation or rationale” (p. 109; italics in original). Barclay’s concluding line serves as a spur to further dialogue: “Rom 9-11 is a highly disturbing text, and if our scholarly labours reduce its offence by microscopic scrutiny or over-familiarity, we have failed to hear its threat, and thus its remarkable promise” (p. 109).