

## **Gabriele Boccaccini** ***Paul's Three Paths to Salvation***

(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), hardcover, 200 pp.

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Gabriele Boccaccini is a distinguished specialist in Second Temple Judaism and Christian origins at the University of Michigan. Best known as the founding director of the Enoch Seminar, Boccaccini has situated nascent Christianity squarely within its Second Temple Jewish environment from the very beginning of his academic career. In his first major monograph, *Middle Judaism*, published in 1991, he critiqued rigid distinctions erected between ancient Judaism and early Christianity. Three decades later, Boccaccini continues studying earliest Christianity as part and parcel of Second Temple Judaism with a monograph devoted to Paul's Jewish identity.

In the first chapter of the book, Boccaccini lays out his methodological framework for investigating Paul within a Second Temple Jewish context. Boccaccini critiques traditional (mis)assumptions that cast Paul against Judaism, reified as a legalistic and particularistic religious system. He also engages with more recent interpretations, such as the New Perspective on Paul and the Radical New Perspective on Paul, highlighting their strengths and weaknesses. For Boccaccini, Paul's Jewish identity is a starting point for historical inquiry, but he warns that reclaiming Paul's Jewishness does not have to mean that "he was a Jew like everybody else or that he was not an original thinker" (18). The challenge lies instead in determining "what kind of Jew Paul was, as there were many different ways to be a Jew in the diverse world of Second Temple Judaism" (27).

The rest of the book contains his examination of various dimensions of Paul's Jewish identity and thought. In Chapter 2, "Paul the Convert Who Never Converted," Boccaccini rejects the language of "conversion" to describe Paul's spiritual journey, since Paul did not join a new religion separate from Judaism. However, in contradistinction to some Pauline scholars, Boccaccini does not reduce Paul's reorientation to a mere prophetic calling: "In describing his experience as not so much a (prophetic) 'call' but rather as an (apocalyptic) 'revelation' (Gal 1:12), Paul himself indicated the radicality of the event" (35).

In Chapter 3, "Paul the Apocalyptic Jew," Boccaccini draws extensively from his expertise on Second Temple Judaism, especially Enochic Jewish traditions, to

examine Paul's apocalyptic worldview. Boccaccini highlights the belief in supernatural evil as a central concern for many Second Temple Jews. The problem for such Jews, including Paul, was first and foremost the superhuman origin of evil, linked with the rebellion of angelic powers, which affected the entire cosmos, making it very hard for Jews and non-Jews alike to follow God's will (46).

Boccaccini, in chapter 4, "Paul the Messianic Jew," further assesses Paul's apocalyptic thought in light of his messianic beliefs. Boccaccini argues that by the turn of the common era several Jewish circles had gone beyond the expectation of a human messiah and awaited a heavenly messiah, the Son of Man, who could free them from the superhuman power of evil. Here too Boccaccini draws from Enochic literature, especially the Book of the Parables, to shed light on Paul's messianic expectations.

Boccaccini explores the theme of forgiveness of sins in Second Temple Judaism in chapter 5, "The Eschatological Gift of Forgiveness." He stresses that the entire Jewish tradition assumes that no one, not even the righteous, will be saved without some intervention of divine mercy, even if each one will be judged at the end time according to one's works. Jewish tradition, in other words, maintained that righteous people would be saved according to their works *along with divine mercy*. Nevertheless, some Second Temple Jewish texts, notably the Book of Parables and the Synoptic Gospels, indicate that certain individuals, namely the "sinners" who have no good works to offer on their behalf, will be justified at the end of time *by mercy alone*.

Boccaccini, in chapter 6, "The Divine Christology of Paul the Jew," emphasizes as in chapter 4 that the notion of a divine messiah was not foreign to ancient Judaism. Jews in antiquity, like pagans, considered to various degrees many beings as "gods." However, Boccaccini believes that Jews in first century maintained a clear distinction between the uncreated status of their own god and other created supernatural beings: "It was God's uncreated status that made God *God* and defined God's uniqueness" (94). Since in Boccaccini's estimation Paul also subscribed to this Jewish view, Paul never fully equated Jesus with God even though he viewed him as a preexistent divine being (100).

The last three chapters of the book overlap with the theme of forgiveness treated in chapter 3. These chapters constitute the most elaborate and original section of the book. Boccaccini interprets Paul's view on justification in line with what he detects in the Book of Parables as well as the Synoptics, which he claims show concern for the justification of the *sinners alone*, whether Jewish or Gentile. These writings do not depict all humans as sinful. There are righteous Jews and righteous Gentiles, however few, who comply with God's will. Some Jews faithfully observe the Torah; some Gentiles follow their conscience and natural law. These individuals therefore do not need to rely exclusively on divine mercy in order to be justified. Only the sinners do. Three paths of salvation accordingly become discernible in Paul's thought: one for Jews through adherence to the Torah; another for Gentiles, who listen to their conscience and the natural law; and, finally, a third path for all sinners who stand in complete need of Jesus' eschatological gift of forgiveness.

As his many other insightful contributions to the study of Second Temple Judaism, Boccaccini's treatment of Paul does not disappoint. His original interpretation of Paul's thought in light of Enochic texts is especially welcome, as Pauline scholarship has neglected this literary corpus. By widening the spectrum of Second Temple Jewish texts, Boccaccini effectively elucidates Paul's Jewish identity without divorcing him from his original Jewish milieu or reducing him into a Jew of "common Judaism" (to quote E. P. Sanders) who agreed with other Jews on every key point, save for the belief that Jesus had come to save the Gentiles.

The most original idea of this book though may elicit controversy. Some readers might wonder to what degree, if any, Paul would have divided humanity into the three categories (i.e., righteous Jews, righteous Gentiles, and sinful Jews and Gentiles) that Boccaccini discerns in the *Book of Parables* and the Synoptics. This proposal, however, requires the most serious consideration, seeing how Paul's letters—along with the rest of the New Testament—have been interpreted to condemn, indeed eternally damn, Jews (and non-Jews) who do not confess Jesus. It is hoped therefore that Boccaccini's book will reach the widest readership possible. It will challenge convictions that are assertively exclusivistic while empowering those seeking to construct a more considerate hermeneutic that is historically grounded.