

REVIEW

David R. Wallace

*Election of the Lesser Son:
Paul's Lament-Midrash in Romans 9-11*

(Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), paper, xiii + 316 pp.

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The God Paul describes in Romans 9-11 can appear partial, arbitrary, and manipulative: Partial insofar as God chooses Jacob over Esau to receive the divine promise; arbitrary insofar as no grounds are given for that choice; and manipulative insofar as God hardens the hearts of both Pharaoh and the Israelites in order to provoke the disobedience that moves salvation history forward. It is no wonder that the imagined interlocutor that Paul inserts into his letter (e.g., 9:14, 19) routinely calls into question God's justice.

According to David R. Wallace's *Election of the Lesser Son: Paul's Lament-Midrash in Romans 9-11*, appearances are deceiving. Contrary to what it seems, Wallace contends, a proper interpretation of Romans 9-11 reveals that, for Paul, God's promotion of the younger Jacob was neither partial nor arbitrary, and God's treatment of human actors is always merciful and patient. It is just that interpreting this passage properly requires that readers be attuned to the specific form and style in which Paul has couched his argument. Wallace posits that Romans 9-11 integrates an Old Testament form, the lament, with a rabbinic style of argument, midrash. The latter genre in particular calls upon readers to delve beneath the surface of Paul's text and to consider the context of his many biblical allusions. Once that is done, Wallace insists, God's purpose in electing Jacob becomes clear and God's fundamentally fair and merciful character is revealed.

Wallace's reading of Rom 9-11 unfolds in five chapters, each examining a successive passage in Paul's so-called "lament-midrash": (1) "Paul's Grief for Israel," 9:1-5; (2) "God's Faithful Election of Israel," 9:6-29; (3) "Israel's Failure to Hear," 9:30-10:21; (4) "The Grace of God for Israel," 11:1-32; and (5) "Paul's Praise to God," 11:33-36. Chapter two is the linchpin. Here Wallace does battle with the oft-expressed view that Paul understands God's election of Jacob over Esau—before either was yet born—as a demonstration of God's inscrutable, seemingly arbitrary, sovereignty. Such a view, Wallace argues, fails to account for the proof-text Paul adduces from Malachi 1:2-3, "Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated." The context of this oracle, in which Malachi describes God's annihilation of Esau (qua Edom) in order to warn Jacob (qua Israel), highlights the historical failure of both Jews and Gentiles. By choosing Jacob over Esau, God gave Jews the opportunity to exhibit humility by submitting to God's laws, and Gentiles the opportunity to exhibit humility by submitting to Israel's superiority. According to Malachi, everyone disobeyed: Gentiles by showing contempt for Israel, and Israel by showing contempt for God. Despite the disobedience, God has mercifully decided to embrace a new people composed of a remnant from among both Israel and the gentiles.

Wallace's claims rest upon this interpretation of Malachi, though he largely follows prevailing interpretations of Paul. In Rom 9:30-10:21, Paul indicts the non-remnant in Israel for rejecting Christ despite having heard the gospel; in Rom 11:1-10, Paul distinguishes between the hardened non-remnant in Israel and those, like Elijah and Paul, who have remained true to God; in Rom 11:11-32, Paul explains how God permits hardened Israelites, spurred by jealousy, to be readmitted into God's people; and in Rom 11:33-36, Paul praises the wisdom and mercy in God's plan for Israel.

Readers will appreciate the careful attention Wallace pays to the form and style of Paul's argument, which at times brings clarity to Paul's notoriously knotty rhetoric. It is especially helpful to be reminded that Paul does not deploy biblical allu-

sions in a simplistic fashion. That said, I am not sure Wallace demonstrates that rabbinic midrash is the best model for Paul's use of the Septuagint. The (very) brief description of midrash in the book's introduction does little justice to the depth and complexity of midrashic literature, and nearly every instance of "midrash / midrashic" in the remainder of the book could be replaced by "interpretation / interpretive" without compromising the point.

Readers may also wonder whether Wallace's approach to Romans 9-11 amounts to special pleading on behalf of God. Wallace insists over and over again that God is merciful and impartial despite appearances. Yet, the interpretations required to subvert the apparent challenges to theodicy in Romans 9-11 are often tortured. When it comes to God's seemingly inexplicable selection of Jacob over Esau, for example, Wallace makes the choice explicable only by demanding a great deal from the proof-text from Malachi. Similarly complicated interpretations are required to declare God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart an act of mercy, or to find in Paul's potter metaphor (9:21) a demonstration of God's "gentle patience" (p. 104). Even readers who are convinced by one or more of these interpretations might still wonder about the extent to which Romans 9-11, a passage in which Paul more than once emphasizes the inscrutability of God (Rom 9:20; 11:33), can be expected to yield so crisp a portrait of God's character, whatever it is understood to be.

I suspect, therefore, that few readers will be convinced by Wallace's reading on the whole. Even if they are not persuaded at every turn, however, those readers interested in Paul's deployment of the Septuagint or his theology of election will no doubt profit from reading Walter's book.