

John Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015. Pp. xvi+656. ISBN 978-0-8028-6889-3. N.p. Hbk.

John Barclay's long-awaited volume, the product of ten years' labour, seems sure to make its mark as Pauline scholarship's most defining book in English since E.P. Sanders' *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* almost forty years ago. It tackles what remains a puzzlingly underexplored conundrum in Paul's thought: how precisely does he envisage the workings of divine grace in relation to human responsibility?

To this question Barclay applies a methodological tour de force that injects welcome nuance and refinement into clunkily binary conceptions of "grace" vs "works", "conditional" vs "unconditional", or even (in Sanders' terms) "getting in" vs "staying in". As Barclay soon demonstrates with wholly convincing clarity, "grace is everywhere" in Paul, in Judaism and in the history of interpretation, "but not everywhere the same".

Barclay defines Paul's *theology* of grace through the lens of a cultural *anthropology* of "gift", underwritten by an unlikely ancient-modern alliance of Seneca, Mauss and Derrida. Over half the book constructs for this analysis a machine (here called a "tool") scanning six disaggregated "perfections" of grace, resembling independent gauges or levers capable of settings from 0 to 100, which are assumed to determine all conceptions of gift, ancient and modern: superabundance, singularity, priority, incongruity, efficacy, noncircularity. This machine is fine-tuned in relation to a tellingly eclectic history of Pauline interpretation, and then road-tested against "Second Temple Judaism" (reduced to five texts from roughly the first Christian century, only one of them in Hebrew: the Qumran Hodayot). Paul's emerges as one voice among diversely contested Jewish construals of grace – a point that, despite the narrow text base, is convincingly established vis-à-vis conventional perspectives both "new" and "old".

Within this context, Barclay's Paul "radicalizes" and "perfects" the *incongruity* of God's Christ-gift given without regard for the recipients' intrinsic worth or symbolic capital. Just two letters serve to establish this: Galatians and (more briefly!) Romans. Yet even in Paul, it turns out, grace is "not everywhere the same": in Galatians, its incongruity means that the gift appears entirely *ex nihilo* (or perhaps: *ex machina*). With only the slightest hints at any exception (e.g. 6.16), grace is radically severed from any story of God's promise, election or a chosen people (never mind Scripture's "foreseeing" the salvation of the Gentiles, 3.8). And no gift or reception of law has any part to play (despite Paul's presumption of 'gift' at 3.21, Spirit-powered 'law fulfilment' at 5.14-16, etc.), so that even life in the Spirit, if Torah-shaped, "is no Spirit at all, only flesh".

Romans, by contrast, develops and in part "reverses" earlier negations about Israel or about connections between Torah and Spirit-led behaviour. Like Galatians, Romans perfects the gift's "incongruity" with human worth – but not its "singularity" or its "noncircularity": here, the effect of unconditioned grace in the recipients includes their social *transformation* in community-forming "obedience of faith", thus rendering the incongruous gift eschatologically congruous with the just judgement of God. And even grace's incongruity is in Romans integral to the story of Abraham –

and indeed to the story of Israel, which in the “Christ event” is not completed so much as “discovered” and imbued with meaning.

No brief summary could begin to do justice to this milestone of international Pauline scholarship. The reviewer’s confined space permits just three questions for consideration in what will clearly be a discussion for years to come.

First, Barclay analyses Paul’s deeply *theological* account of salvation through an emphatically *anthropological* account of “gift” (a term Paul deploys only occasionally to denote God’s initiative in Christ, sometimes critically – e.g. at Gal 2.21). Leaving aside its textbook vulnerability to Feuerbach’s critique of religion, this move appears to favour an account of grace that is heavily *transactional* (“the Christ event” etc.) rather than primarily and overwhelmingly *personal*. Is what God gives really an “event” or transaction rather than, above all, God’s self “for us” – “his only Son” and with him “everything”, union with him and adoption as children, his personal Triune presence in grace, love and communion?

Second, this book wears its relentlessly Protestant identity with confidence on its sleeve, despite periodic self-critical awareness of that tradition’s weaknesses. After Marcion (*en passant*), the protagonists of its intellectual world are Augustine (not always persuasively) and Luther, Käsemann and Martyn, Badiou and (eventually) Kahl. If the historic shape of Pauline reception matters at all (as apparently it does), then it seems surprising that Barclay cites no ancient or medieval Pauline commentators other than Augustine, not even those who (like Origen, Ambrosiaster, Pelagius, Chrysostom, Aquinas or Lyra) were unquestionably formative for their contemporaries and successors alike (including the Reformers!), adumbrating a full-bodied account of grace’s perfections that was appreciably less reactive – and not constricted to just two *Hauptbriefe*. Without accounting for the canonical apostle’s larger footprint and reception, is there not a danger that the six-levered machine produces at the bottom largely what is inserted in the top?

Finally, among the consequences of ratcheting up the “incongruity” lever all the way to 100 may be the logical difficulties of entertaining quite such conflicting Pauline conceptions of grace in two letters of vaguely comparable date and subject matter. The mature Paul of the year 50 or 55 might conceivably have understood grace either according to Barclay’s Galatians or according to Barclay’s Romans, but not easily both at once without some mental discomfort. Similarly, if grace’s incongruity is radically “perfected” to the extent proposed for Galatians, it becomes difficult to understand how a gift so entirely unheralded and *ex nihilo* could ever require the surprising *specificity*, both Christ-like and Torah-like (5.14; 6.2), of moral obligations entailed by grace’s “imperfect” noncircularity in this letter – let alone in Romans or 1 Corinthians. Might such abstract “incongruity” in the end assume the very mantle of that undisaggregated, pre-Barclayan grace of which Sanders et al. are here so effectively convicted? Perfect incongruity may be everywhere in Paul’s view of grace, but perhaps it is not everywhere the same.

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