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Stuhlmacher, Peter

*Revisiting Paul’s Doctrine of Justification: A Challenge to the New Perspective*

With an essay by Donald A. Hagner


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The impact of E. P. Sanders’s *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) on Pauline studies over the last quarter of a century would be difficult to overestimate. At the heart of the “new perspective on Paul” to which it has given rise lies a redescription of ancient Judaism: from a “legalistic” religion, where acceptance by God must be earned through good works, to a “covenantal nomism,” where observance of the Torah, including means of atonement for transgression, is the way to maintain (not to earn) the favorable status already granted graciously by God to his covenant people. If this redescription is correct, the central point of Paul’s gospel can scarcely have been to replace a religion of “legalism” with a religion of “grace”; as Albert Schweitzer (*Die Mystik des Apostels Paulus* [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1930]) and others had already argued, then, “justification by faith” as opposed to works could not have been the generative center of Pauline theology. One sign of the continuing influence of this line of interpretation is the growing number of voices that have been raised against it over the last decade. This study of Paul’s understanding of justification, which began as a series of lectures delivered at Beeson Divinity School and the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, is a part of that chorus. Convinced that the significance of Paul’s “doctrine of justification” has been “obscured” by the new perspective, Stuhlmacher (with Hagner) intends this work to set matters aright (10).
After a preface and brief preliminary remarks, the book presents three short chapters on various aspects of Paul’s teaching on justification: its traditional-historical context (ch. 1); its missionary context (ch. 2); and the teaching itself (ch. 3). Tacked on to the study, and comprising roughly a third of the text of the book, is an updated version of an essay by Donald Hagner, first published ten years earlier under the title “Paul and Judaism: The Jewish Matrix of Early Christianity: Issues in the Current Debate” (BBR 3 [1993]: 111–30). Hagner’s contribution does not continue the central study of Pauline justification so much as contextualize it with a more broadly conceived assault on the new perspective. It is revised here primarily to include more up-to-date bibliographical references.

Stuhlmacher begins by articulating his core hermeneutical assumption that the Bible is a genuinely oracular work. More specifically, it is a “two-part book” that should be studied “until we discover that the one God … speaks to us through the biblical writings and had our salvation in mind while we were still ‘weak’ and ‘sinners’, or even before we were in the world (cf. Rom 5:6–8)” (11). Justification, in other words, is not merely an important Pauline concept but, more generally, one of the Bible’s “essential themes” (11). The first chapter, in fact, argues that Paul’s “doctrine of justification” only “sharpens” an earlier “doctrine” that had long been central to the Jewish scriptures, as well as to pre-Pauline Christians (14). Already in the Old Testament, it is argued, justification appears as a forensic concept, “decidedly located in the final judgment” (14). Individuals are judged on the basis of their deeds (see esp. Ezek 18), while the notion of atonement through vicarious suffering—perhaps of Gentiles as well as Israel—emerges from Second Isaiah. Against this broad background, the term “God’s righteousness,” found frequently in Paul, refers to God’s creative acts of salvation in the history of Israel and in the eschatological judgment. This tradition concerning justification is said to have been given a christological formulation in the “doctrinal traditions” of the Damascus community that baptized Paul (see Acts 9:18), of the Jerusalem apostles (see 1 Cor 15:3–5), and of the Stephen circle (see Rom 3:25; Gal 2:16), in a development that can ultimately be traced to Jesus himself (Mark 10:45; 14:24). Paul’s teaching “gains its special profile” only “from the fact that Paul incorporated his own experience of God’s calling into the justification tradition and then bound together the individual statements about it thematically” (23).

The second chapter engages the new perspective more directly by enumerating several “deficiencies” in it. Perhaps the most comprehensive of these concerns Sanders’s redescription of Judaism, which is considered “an idea whose time had come,” but “one-sided” nonetheless (40; cf. Hagner, 84–88). Following Friedrich Avemarie (Tora und Leben [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996]), Stuhlmacher finds “two contrary principles”—
gracious election (cf. covenantal nomism) and retribution for works (cf. legalism)—in irresolvable tension with one another within rabbinic and other early Jewish traditions. Paul had sought “a precise answer” regarding the grounds for both Jewish and Gentile salvation but was consequently unable to find it within his Pharisaic tradition. It “came to him,” rather, only “in his encounter with Jesus Christ” (41–42); he realized that salvation was possible only through faith in Christ. The messianic Zion tradition of Paul the Pharisee was thus reinterpreted “in the light of his personal encounter with the living Christ” (46), just as it had already been given a “Christian stamp” in pre-Pauline Christianity (48). (Such experiences of the risen Christ despite “severe failure,” in fact, bound Paul together with Peter and James in a way that transcended their lack of perfect harmony on the question of the law [26].) Paul thus shared with all the apostles not only a common gospel concerning the atoning death of the messianic Son of God but a common mission to all nations, Jew and Gentile, starting from Jerusalem (see Matt 28; Acts 8–10). Paul’s teaching on justification through Christ as the “place of atonement” (Rom 3:25) acquire[s] its comprehensive overtones” within this eschatological mission (51).

The third chapter lays out more explicitly what the preceding chapters have already suggested about “the process of justification” as understood by Paul. Justification “at its core” means God’s justification of “the individual ungodly person ... for the sake of Jesus’ atoning death” at the final judgment (68). The process of justification centers on Christ from beginning to end: as the new “place of atonement” (see Rom 3:25), as the heavenly advocate who presently intercedes for Christians before the throne of God, and as the one through whom God’s kingdom will finally be established. Justification in and through Christ involves both Gentiles and Jews, the latter of whom will finally have, collectively, a Damascus-type experience of their own when Christ appears from Zion (71). Paul’s teaching is in fact cosmic in scope, as justification will ultimately encompass all of creation, cursed since Adam. While the “sanctification” it involves does entail an ethical response, it is only the Christian’s status within the kingdom of God that is effected by deeds, not salvation itself. Salvation, indeed, is guaranteed for all “who have confessed Christ Jesus and [sic] Lord and Savior” even in cases of total failure regarding “what they should have done for him on earth”; “unbelievers” alone face eternal destruction (69; cf. 62).

This is a remarkably wide-ranging reconstruction for what amounts to only about sixty pages of text. Given its length, it is perhaps not surprising that the detailed exegetical decisions on which its restatement of the traditional (Protestant) Christian interpretation is based are frequently assumed as much as fully argued. This, however, seriously weakens the book’s challenge. Romans 1–3, for example, occupies a particularly crucial place in Stuhlmacher’s reconstruction. Read as “a relentless analysis of the culpability of Gentiles and Jews in the judgment” (42), it apparently provides key evidence for Paul’s
preoccupation with the question of the grounds for Gentile and Jewish salvation. The interpretation of Rom 3:25 with reference to the “place of atonement,” moreover, is central to Stuhlmacher’s understanding of Paul’s own answer to this question (e.g., 22, 29, 42, 56, 59; cf. Hagner, 92). If common, these interpretations are hardly self-evident, particularly in light of the extensive critique of both registered in Stanley Stowers’s *A Rereading of Romans* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), a work that Stuhlmacher, oddly, fails even to mention. The insistence that faith in Christ itself “guarantees” salvation, similarly, is less than compelling in the absence of some treatment of Paul’s warning to Gentile Christians in Rom 11:17–22.

More generally, one cannot help but wonder whether the basic thesis of a relatively consistent “doctrine” of justification at the heart of both the Bible and Christian origins owes as much to Stuhlmacher’s dogmatic assumptions as to his efforts as an historian. It is difficult to avoid the impression that, in emphasizing themes such as “last judgment” and individual salvation in the Hebrew literature, Stuhlmacher—like Luther before him (see p. 35!)—is only reading the Jewish scriptures through the eyes of (his construction of) Paul. To what extent is either theme important, for example, within the central biblical narrative of Genesis–Kings? On the other hand, the point regarding the essential uniformity of the thought and mission of Paul with the pre-Pauline movement will stand only to the extent that one shares Stuhlmacher’s confidence in the historical reliability of (canonical) early Christian narrative and his comfort with explaining historical developments with reference to supernatural realities.

In sum, this book is quite instructive as a recent and concise statement of the traditional Christian reading of Paul. Its challenge to the new perspective, however, will not likely persuade those not already disposed to the position it argues.