



Reviews of the Enoch Seminar 2016.12.13

Robert B. Foster, *Renaming Abraham's Children: Election, Ethnicity, and the Interpretation of Scripture in Romans 9*. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2. Reihe 421. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016. ISBN: 978-3-16-154483-5. Pp XVIII + 327. 89.00 €. Sewn paper.

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Who is the “Israel” that Paul claims will be saved, and what does he mean by “all” (Rom 11.26)? If we look to Romans 9.4-5, the answer will seem pretty straightforward: Israel refers to Paul’s *sungeneis kata sarka*, the historical kinship group and recipients of biblical privileges and promises, to which God remains committed (“for the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable,” 11.29; cf. 15.8). God has not rejected “his people” (*Mē genoito!* 11.1). But then to what end does Paul present an elaborate history of election and hardening in 9.6-29? Further: How can Paul regard *nomothesia* as a defining privilege, when he has already discounted circumcision, and Torah-observance more generally, as of any value for righteousness and for salvation (Romans 2; cf. Phil 3.8-9, and his furious remarks in Galatians)? For that matter, Paul has already redefined “Israel” exclusively as that Christ-committed community of Jews and gentiles together (Gal 6.16): What, then, can he possibly be talking about in Romans?

Interpreters have long banged their heads against this particular stone wall. At least since the second century, gentile commentators have redefined “Israel” to mean “the church,” that Christian community of the saved consisting of a gentile majority, with the addition of a remnant of Christ-believing Jews. Schweitzer in the 1930s (*The Mysticism of the Apostle Paul*), and Scandinavian scholars in the mid-20th century – Munck, Dahl, Stendahl – insisted, by contrast, that by “all Israel” Paul meant all Jewish Israel, whose divine hardening to the gospel message, Paul anticipated, would soon cease. Lloyd Gaston and, following him, John Gager, focusing on the fact that all of Paul’s addressees in his extant letters are gentiles, urged that Paul actually promoted a “two-covenant” model of eschatological salvation. Circumcision and Torah observance were *adiaphora* for gentiles; but for Jews, they remained binding and important. In other words, they concluded, Paul urged Torah for Jews and Christ for Gentiles. More traditional New Testament scholars, on the contrary – some at tremendous length – have continued to hew to the classic supersessionist line: for Paul, they variously insist, Jewish Israel had ceded to Christian “Israel.” In this way, a polarized reading of Paul’s most polarizing letter, Galatians, has set the plumb line for interpretations of Romans: only Christians (of whatever ethnicity) are saved.

In this revised dissertation, Robert Foster proposes an ingenious solution to this abiding controversy. He begins by insisting on that old-time religion: Paul *is* supersessionist. In Galatians, in 1 Corinthians, in Philippians 3, and even in Romans 2, it is faith in Christ, not the works of the Law, that determines who numbers among the “people of God.” (See esp. ch. II, pp. 44-83.) The status of being children of Abraham “obtains only for those who believe in Christ” (55). “Israel’s covenantal adoption . . . is redirected exclusively toward the Messiah” (56). The allegory of Galatians 4 addresses the split between non-believing Jews and believing gentiles (58). The “Israel of God” of Gal. 6.16 is redefined around Christ (61). In sum, this idea of the “New [Christian] Israel” might, for Paul, be an anachronistic term, but it is an appropriate concept (73). Put otherwise: non-believing Jews no longer count as or in Abraham’s family (83).

But. But on the evidence of Romans 9-11, Paul apparently changed his mind. “Only in Romans 9-11 does Paul recognize the abiding significance of Israel as a distinct entity free from Gentile presence or Christological redefinition” (84). In the second half of this letter, the ethnic features of Israel return.

How does Foster explain, indeed justify, this “both/and” way of reading Paul? In chapter III, “Ethnic Difference and Epistolary Exigency,” he ingeniously reconceives Paul’s reasons for writing Romans. He reviews and then dismisses the familiar backstory of Jewish expulsion and gentile *superbia* that interpreters have spun from Suetonius and Acts (85-95). In fact, he stands it on its head. Gentile Christ-followers in Rome, he suggests, held Jewish customs in high regard, and were proud of their affiliation with the “elect people.” If Paul wants the Roman community’s support for his coming trip and his projected missionary efforts in Spain, he must be sensitive to their respect for the Law (95). Accordingly, in Romans – addressing his letter to gentile believers but presupposing Jewish auditors as an “oblique audience” (107), Paul renounces his own former supersessionism (detailed and reviewed on 96). But why?

Paul’s remarks in 1 Thessalonians 2:13-16, his being lashed by synagogue authorities on five different occasions (2 Cor 11.25), his other remarks dissociating Jews from “Israel” all cohere, Foster notes, with the accusations against Paul brought by Jewish critics in Acts 18.13 and 21.21 and 28. As Foster nicely observes in one of his footnotes, “The supersessionist, anti-Torah, ‘Reformation,’ anachronistic Paul was first a construct of Paul’s *contemporary Jewish critics*” (as expressed in Acts; 99 n. 39, italics in the original). Evidently, the accusations brought Paul up short, and he realized that he would lose a sympathetic hearing in the Roman community (103). “The stinging accusation, ostensibly rooted in his own teachings, that Paul called for Jews to apostatize from Moses [sic] may very well have spurred him to reevaluate past formulations” (111). Accordingly, Paul addresses these accusations in his last letter by arguing that Jews and Gentiles represent “distinct though related descendants of Abraham who should not be confused with each other” (101). This reinvigorated understanding of Israel’s election allows Paul to say in Romans what he says nowhere else: “Jews and Gentiles are separate but equal children of Abraham” (112).

Foster’s solution to the problem of how to read the Paul of Galatians et cet. together with the Paul of Romans is elegant in its simplicity. It enables the interpreter to take Paul’s many anti-Torah statements straightforwardly. It suggests that Paul, like any other person, may have changed his mind over time. And it permits an equally straightforward reading of Romans 9-11,

thereby relieving Paul's god of seeming to have perpetrated one of the greatest bait-and-switch sleights of hand in the history of salvation. For those who like to shave with Occam's razor, Foster's reconstruction has much to commend it.

Alas, the remaining 150 pages of *Renaming Abraham's Children* float a reconstruction of Paul's thinking as confoundingly complex as the preceding explanation was clarifying. Foster feels compelled to conjecture a hermeneutical backstory of how Paul read Genesis to account exegetically for Paul's going where he goes in Romans 9 when invoking Hosea (my-people and not-my-people) and Isaiah (sand, remnants and Sodom and Gomorrah). An "ironic" hypothetical substructure "doubly inverts" the idea of election, resulting in a "complex of associations" that supposedly illumines "Paul's labyrinthine rhetoric" (148) . . . the "logic" of which "lies outside of the epistle's text itself" (151). Thanks to Hosea, Paul's understanding of "election is "inverted," "ironic," "reversed" and "negated." Foster's evidence for this super-epistolary matrix of meaning that inverts (and even "transgenders," 204) election has to do with minute explanations for Paul's changing the wording of Septuagintal phrases, occasionally by appeal to Paul's familiarity with the Hebrew text (cf. 33) and to his training in "rabbinic" exegesis (cf. 21). Here, all these textual details start running in circles, as the proof for the existence of this supposed matrix is the text of Romans itself.

The convolutions of the book's second half retrospectively clarified not Paul's letter to the Romans, but several remarks made by Foster in his opening chapter, where he summoned a "subterranean meaning of scripture" (22) and gestured toward Paul's "multifaceted deployment" and "allusive" uses of it (25). How complicated could Paul have allowed his scriptural pyrotechnics to get, given that he was writing to (only recently) ex-pagan pagans? Foster suggests that Paul "attributed to his [gentile] audience an intellectual ability beyond their actual capacity" (25). But, aren't letters supposed to, well, communicate? (Loc. cit., Foster lifts up Paul's "obvious skills as an effective communicator," 25.)

I could scarcely track Foster's closing reconstruction as I sat, mentally and physically girded by a desk full of print texts in various languages, reading and rereading these passages at will and at leisure, cross-referencing them, and sitting on top of a several-decades-long familiarity both with all of Paul's letters and with the scholarship on them. I was swamped. Good luck to Paul's gentile auditors in Rome. "The question of whether Paul's audience could discern nuances and retrace his hermeneutics falls outside the scope of this study," Foster firmly announces (25). Alright; that's the author's prerogative. But the answer to that question emerges fairly clearly, I think, from pages 113-262 of said study: If Foster's reconstruction truly represents how Paul actually was thinking, Paul was talking largely to himself.

The historical arguments of the first half of the book do not rely upon the hermeneutical speculations of its second half. These arguments merit serious consideration, and they may even promise a way out of the current scholarly impasse in understanding Paul-as-Late-Second-Temple-Jew versus Paul-as-First-Christian-Theologian. For nourishing that hope, Foster deserves our thanks.