

Paul and the Law: A Contextual Approach. By Frank Thielman. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994, 336pp., n.p.

Having recently completed my own book on Paul's theology of law and having read Frank Thielman's important dissertation *From Plight to Solution: A Jewish Framework for Understanding Paul's View of the Law in Galatians and Romans* (1989), I was eager to read his newest work and was not disappointed since it is a splendid book. With so many books emerging on Paul and the law one looks immediately for what is distinctive in Thielman's work. The subtitle conveys his particular angle in that in that he examines the law in Paul by investigating each letter in context instead of adopting the approach of studying the law topically. All thirteen of the Pauline letters are accepted as authentic, and all the letters are consulted for what they communicate about the law, with more discussion naturally on Galatians and Romans. The circumstances which called forth the letters are surveyed, and the false teaching or situation which prompted Paul to write are summarized. This approach is a helpful supplement to topical approaches and is sensitive to the unique context which summoned forth the letters.

It should be noted that before Thielman delves into each of the Pauline letters, he provides a useful survey of Pauline scholarship relative to the law. He begins with Aquinas, sketches in briefly the contributions of Luther and Calvin and then focuses on the modern debate which was largely initiated by the work of E. P. Sanders, although precursors who anticipated some of Sanders' conclusions are noted. The inclusion of Aquinas proved to be especially interesting since his work on this topic is usually neglected, at least in Protestant circles. Thielman concludes that Luther was correct to oppose Aquinas' view that grace cooperated with works in justification, and he asserts that Calvin, even more than Luther,

understood the gracious character of the law, and the positive role of the law in Christian living.

The second chapter, which precedes the analysis of the individual letters, is programmatic for the entire book. Here Thielman attempts to demonstrate that Jews in the time of Paul believed that they were subject to Roman oppression because they had not kept the law, and that God had promised to liberate them in the future from domination by foreign powers. A number of sources are marshalled to support this view including Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Baruch, and especially Josephus. Thielman concludes from this that most Jews in the Second Temple Period would have agreed that they were under the curse of the law since they were not liberated from Roman domination. It has become increasingly popular in NT scholarship to say that Israel was under the curse of the exile during Paul's day. I previously concurred with this analysis but now wonder if it is overly precise. Surely Jews in Paul's day believed that the promises had not been fulfilled and they chafed under Roman power, but is this the same as being under the curse of exile? The exile in Jewish history was especially associated with the destruction of the temple in 586 B.C (cf. also the Assyrian deportation of 722 B.C). Most of the evidence Thielman adduces from Josephus to support his thesis relates to the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70, and its destruction would probably have convinced many Jews that they were suffering exile again. But the temple was destroyed after Paul's letters were written and thus the theme that Israel was cursed and in exile may not have been so evident to Paul's contemporaries. Some Jews (perhaps the Qumran community and the author of the Psalms of Solomon) believed they were on the verge of the promised era instead of under the curse. These observations do not overturn Thielman's general pattern completely, for most Jews believed that the future

promises were not yet a reality due to the sin of the people, but this is not precisely the same thing as saying Israel was experiencing the curse of exile.

One of the benefits of Thielman's work is that he does not confine himself to texts where the law is specifically mentioned. Texts in which OT themes or designations are applied to Pauline churches are also consistently noted. For instance, Thielman demonstrates that Paul regularly applied to his churches language that related to Israel in the OT. In the OT Israel was "the assembly of the Lord," "holy," "elect," "called," promised the gift of the Spirit, and called to live in purity. Paul relates all of these to the church, and in essence sees the church as restored Israel since he contrasts believers in Christ with "Gentiles." Thielman's study enables us to grasp Paul's hermeneutical approach to the OT more precisely, and he demonstrates convincingly that the OT scriptures, interpreted through the lenses of the Christ event, played a major role in Paul's gospel which was conveyed to the newly planted churches.

To discover Thielman's stance on matters of controversy today is of particular interest. "Works of law" are understood to refer to the whole law, and righteousness by works of law is excluded since no one can observe the law perfectly. This conclusion of Paul would be uncontroversial for most Jews, says Thielman, because they were keenly aware, given Roman domination, that they were under the curse of the law. Thielman does not agree with Dunn, then, that "works of law" focuses on the boundary markers of the law, viz., circumcision, food laws, and sabbath. But he rightly takes up the positive features in Dunn's position, showing that Paul rejected the imposition of boundary markers upon his churches since the dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles has been removed. Does the refusal to impose circumcision, food laws, and sabbath indicate that the Mosaic law has

come to an end? In *Plight to Solution* Thielman argued that only the curse of the law was removed, not the law itself. He has changed his mind on this issue and now argues (rightly I think) that the Mosaic law and covenant have ceased with the coming of Christ. Those who insist that the Mosaic covenant is still in force have not provided a convincing interpretation of 2 Corinthians 3 and Galatians 3. Both of these texts are most naturally understood to teach that the law of Moses is no longer binding since the new covenant has arrived and the promises to Abraham are being fulfilled.

This does not mean, Thielman cautions, that the Mosaic law no longer has any function for believers. The OT law still functions as authoritative scripture and aspects of the Mosaic law are absorbed into the law of Christ which functions as the new standard for believers. The law of Moses still speaks to believers today but it must be interpreted in light of the gospel of Christ. These observations are on target, but Thielman leaves some questions unanswered as he is very cautious about drawing any general conclusions. I wondered, for instance, whether the moral norms of the Mosaic law are included in the law of Christ. It seems to me that such a conclusion could be drawn from a number of texts in the Pauline writings (e.g. Rom. 7:7; 8:4; 13:8-10; 1 Cor. 7:19; Eph. 6:2). It is not apparent that Thielman would necessarily reject this conclusion, for his understanding of the law is closer to Calvin than Luther (and thus Westerholm today), but he does not address this issue specifically. Perhaps he questions whether one can distinguish "moral law" from the rest of the Mosaic corpus. His own discussion on boundary markers and the citation of moral norms of the law as authoritative for the Pauline churches indicates that roughly speaking the designation is appropriate.

One of the most interesting discussions in the book relates to legalism. The

influence of E. P. Sanders has been felt throughout Pauline scholarship and thus many scholars conclude that virtually no polemic against Jewish legalism can be detected in the Pauline writings (e.g. Dunn, Wright). Thielman parts company from these scholars in concluding that Jewish legalism is contested in some Pauline texts (Rom. 3:27-4:8; 9:30-10:8; Phil. 3:2-6; cf. Luke 18:9-14). He warns, however, that we should not conclude from this that all Jews or even most Jews were legalists, since the general pattern of Jewish religion taught that grace was the foundation upon which God established his covenant with Israel. Paul prior to his conversion and the Judaizers were legalistic, according to Thielman, but they were especially zealous Jews and not all Jews can be uncritically lumped together. I believe Thielman is generally right on this point. It is a mistake to say that all Jews or all of Jewish theology was legalistic. The diversity of Second Temple Judaism must be appreciated.

Whether or not "most" Jews in Paul's day were legalists is harder to judge. Thielman thinks that most Jews believed they were in exile due to sin and would have acknowledged that their works were insufficient. The acknowledgment, though, that their obedience was lacking need not have led to Pauline conception of grace. Presumably some Jews would have argued that they should exert more effort in keeping the law, without relying--at least in Paul's view--on divine grace. Here I pick up on Thielman's own observations on Rom. 9:30-10:8. He insightfully notes that this text does not indict all Jews throughout Jewish history as legalists. It is those Jews who have recently heard the gospel and rejected it that are charged in Rom. 9:30-10:8 with attempting to accomplish their own righteousness by works. Yet Paul's own discussion in Romans 9-11 indicates that "most" Jews who heard the gospel rejected it, presumably--at least in part--for the reasons

explicated in Rom. 9:30-10:8. Thus, the problem with legalism among Jews of Paul's day was probably more widespread than Thielman acknowledges. He rightly cautions us against seeing it everywhere in Judaism, but is too optimistic in opining that most Jews were free from it.

I found it puzzling that Thielman saw no legalism in the phrase "having my own righteousness" in Phil. 3:9 (p. 155) while agreeing that legalism was a problem for the pre-Christian Paul according to Phil. 3:2-6 (p. 153). He is surely right that such righteousness was inadequate and insufficient, but the near context, as Thielman acknowledges, indicates that self-righteousness was a problem for Paul. It seems unlikely, therefore, that Phil. 3:9 can be severed from the previous verses so that no whiff of legalism is detected. Similarly, in Rom. 10:3 the Jewish attempt to establish their own righteousness cannot be sundered from the attempt to pursue the law "as of works" in Rom. 9:32. If Rom. 9:32 indicts self-righteousness, as Thielman agrees, then it is quite improbable that the polemic against the Jewish attempt to "establish their own righteousness" does not do the same. Moreover, Thielman passes over Eph. 2:8-10 too quickly. If this represents later Pauline teaching, does not this text indicate that Paul was concerned about boasting in works even after the problem with legalistic Judaizers was over? The reason for this is that boasting in one's deeds is not intrinsically a Jewish malady. We are all, as C. S. Lewis warns, prone to "The Great Sin"--pride. Boasting in works, the Pauline gospel suggests, even though it did not plague every Jew or all of Judaism, is an unceasing temptation for human beings to which we are all prone. For Thielman to acknowledge that Paul resists it at all is noteworthy in a day in which so many scholars claim there is no polemic against legalism. And for the exegetical skill which permeates this work, his lucid writing style, and a host of other

insights we can all be grateful.

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