

***Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith***, by Francis Watson. London and New York: T & T Clark, 2004. Pp. 584. Reviewed by Dennis W. Jowers.

This major work is a comparative study of the OT Scriptures most central to Pauline theology, of Paul's interpretation of them, and of the rival interpretations proposed by non-Christian Jews of late antiquity. One of its overriding aims, albeit by no means its only aim, is to overcome the tendency of present-day NT scholars to conform Paul's theology as much as possible to that of his fellow first-century Jews. While Watson recognizes that Paul is no crypto-pagan who adopts a basically Gentile worldview over against his former co-religionists, he also considers the minimization of differences between Pauline and non-Christian Jewish soteriologies characteristic of the so-called "new perspective on Paul" as unhelpful at best and, at worst, profoundly misleading.

Watson divides his work into four main parts, which he entitles, respectively, "Antithesis," "Promise," "The Wilderness," and "Last Words." He opens the first part, "Antithesis" with a chapter on Paul's interpretation of OT Scripture in Rom 3:21–4:25 in which he attempts "to substantiate the claim that Paul's doctrine of righteousness by faith is an exercise in scriptural interpretation and hermeneutics" (p. 76): that, in other words, Paul derives his doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone largely, if not exclusively, from his reading of the OT. Naturally, such a hypothesis might seem to underestimate the role played in Paul's ministry by the more direct revelation to which he refers in Gal 1:11–12: "I certify you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached of me is not after man. For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ." Nevertheless, Watson's understanding of Paul's theology of the fruit of OT exegesis contrasts refreshingly with the more common view that Paul simply imposes an ideology derived from without on OT prooftexts. Watson completes his section on "Antithesis" with a chapter on the interpretation of the minor prophets, and especially Habakkuk 2:4, in the Qumran community, and an additional chapter in which he offers his own interpretation of Habakkuk 2:4.

In the following section, "Promise," Watson devotes two chapters, entitled simply "Genesis (1)" and "Genesis (2)" to the Abraham narrative in Genesis. Here Watson, as before, begins by surveying Paul's approach to the patriarch. Paul, he argues, recognizes a dialectic in Genesis between Abraham the observer of God's commands and Abraham the recipient of promises, and chooses to unfold the blessedness of Abraham exclusively from the latter motif. In Watson's view, moreover, Paul crafts a "theocentric" (pp. 183, 218, 220) interpretation of Abraham's life story, in which Abraham is sustained and blessed by an all-powerful deity over against the dominant anthropocentric paradigm, according to which Abraham the righteous earns divine favour for himself and his descendants. After surveying this Pauline "*counter-reading*" (p. 219, Watson's italics), Watson turns to more anthropocentric interpreters of Scripture such as the author of Jubilees, the author of the Genesis Apocryphon, Philo, Josephus, and Eupolemus, whose accounts of Abraham's life he characterizes as "eulogizing and hagiography" (p. 268). Paul and his Jewish contemporaries, as Watson presents them, hold almost diametrically opposed views about Abraham's fundamental relationship towards God.

The third and longest section of Watson's book, "The Wilderness," concerns Pauline and late antique Jewish interpretations of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. In this section's first chapter, entitled simply "Exodus," Watson focuses on the Moses/Christ, letter/spirit antithesis of 2 Cor 3 and its possible roots in the text of Exodus itself. The character of the

Old Covenant as a ministry of death he traces to the slaughter of the Golden Calf's worshippers after Moses' first, abortive deliverance of the tables of the law to the people. Watson relates the peculiar significance Paul attaches to Moses' veiling himself when conversing with the people, likewise, to an oddity in the scriptural account of the veiling of Moses' face. In Exod 34:29–35 it is not entirely clear (a) that Moses' face is actually veiled when he initially recounts the law to Aaron and the elders; and (b) that Moses dons the veil during the time when, having emerged from the tent with a revelation, he instructs the people in the commands of the Lord. The actual purpose of the veil, Watson claims, was to conceal the disappearance of the glory that illumined Moses' face immediately after he received a revelation. Since, in Watson's view, Paul metaphorically identifies Moses himself with the law, Watson concludes that the veil signifies the deceptive appearance of grandeur exuded by the letter that kills.

This interpretation seems quite dubious. Watson does, nonetheless, successfully disassociate Paul's construal of Exod 34 in 2 Cor 3 from Philo's interpretation, which allegorical interpretation claims to lead to deeper and more important truths than the literal method. He also interprets 2 Cor 3 itself in a way strikingly reminiscent of Augustine's *On the Spirit and the Letter*. Whereas the letter that kills is the law that demands of human beings what they cannot and do not wish to do, the Spirit endows human beings with the desire and the ability to obey God's commandments.

In the second chapter of "The Wilderness," which is devoted to Leviticus, Watson argues that, although Paul does not interpret Lev 18:5 in a "perfectionist" fashion (p. 326), he does regard its offer of life to law-abiding persons inaccessible to human beings as they are. Likewise, Watson maintains, Paul in Rom 10:5–9 employs the contrast between this text and certain Deuteronomic passages to unveil the presence of an alternative soteriology of grace within the Pentateuch. After contrasting Paul's interpretation of Leviticus with that of Josephus, then, Watson begins the final chapter of "The Wilderness," devoted to Numbers. This chapter constitutes a sustained argument, based on Rom 7 and 1 Cor 10, for the following thesis: "For Paul, the Book of Numbers shows how, in the aftermath of the Sinai event, the law represented a sentence of death for virtually all of its original addressees" (p. 355). Unlike the author of the Wisdom of Solomon, whose reflections on Numbers Watson contrasts with those of Paul, the Apostle:

chooses not to conceal the fact that the gift bestowed at Sinai led immediately to catastrophe, but rather to highlight it and to find paradigmatic significance in it. The catastrophe is the subversion of the law's conditional promise that 'the one who does these things will live by them,' an offer that was immediately overtaken by the reality of sin and death. (p. 411)

"Against this dark background," Watson concludes, "the unconditional divine promise to Abraham...stands out all the more brightly" (ibid.).

In the fourth and final segment of the book, "Last Words," Watson devotes two chapters to Deuteronomy. In these chapters, surprisingly, Watson mingles with the soteriological themes that have commanded his attention thus far discussion of ethical and eschatological issues raised by the use of certain Deuteronomic texts by Paul and the authors of 4 Ezra and Baruch. In the conclusion to the work Watson reasserts what we consider the central thesis of the entire book, a thesis that, in our view, contains significant moments of truth. "It can be simply stated," Watson writes:

that Paul's controversy with "Judaism" (Christian or otherwise) is in fact a conflict about the interpretation of the Torah; that the disputing parties agree that the Torah, correctly understood, is soteriologically normative; and that the question at issue is whether interpretative priority is to be given to a particular mode of divine agency (the making of an unconditional promise) or of human agency (the observance of the commandments). (p. 528)

Although his book is flawed, especially in its overemphasis on the exegetical origins of Paul's theology, Watson succeeds brilliantly in underscoring two truths: (a) that Paul's exegesis of the OT is not arbitrary, but methodical and faithful; and (b) that Paul does approach the scriptural text with a profoundly theocentric hermeneutic: a hermeneutic that, in our view, Christians would do well to apply in their own interpretation of Scripture and in everyday reflection on the world and their lives.