



Paul and the Gift

John M.G. Barclay

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In this book esteemed Pauline scholar John Barclay presents a strikingly fresh reading of grace in Paul's theology, studying it in view of ancient notions of "gift" and shining new light on Paul's relationship to Second Temple Judaism.

Paul and the Gift centers on divine gift-giving, which for Paul, Barclay says, is focused and fulfilled in the gift of Christ. He offers a new appraisal of Paul's theology of the Christ-event as gift as it comes to expression in Galatians and Romans, and he presents a nuanced and detailed discussion of the history of reception of Paul. This exegetically responsible, theologically informed, hermeneutically useful book shows that a respectful, though not uncritical, reading of Paul contains resources that remain important for Christians today.

Paul and the Gift Details

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From Reader Review Paul and the Gift for online ebook

Matthew Colvin says

This is the most overrated work of Biblical studies in recent years. Exegetically, Barclay is on the wrong side of several debates, and he fails to engage with the philological reasons why, e.g. Romans 4:1 cannot be translated, "What shall we say that Abraham our forefather according to the flesh has found?" or why πιστις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ? ought not to be rendered "faith in Christ".

While setting himself over against the New Perspective, he does not challenge any of its core criticisms of the Lutheran tradition's misreadings of Paul's theology. Yet despite not having deflected any of those blows from Dunn, Sanders, Stendhal, Wright, etc., Barclay has the audacity to characterize the Lutheran reading of Paul as a "brilliant recontextualization for the 16th century" instead of as a misreading that resulted in horrendous distortions of soteriology within the church and frightful mistreatment of Jews outside the church.

Barclay's central heuristic device is his six-fold taxonomy of "the perfections of grace": singularity, superabundance, priority, incongruity, efficacy, and non-circularity. This is fine as far as it goes, but it should be recognized as a philosophical theory, and not as a piece of Pauline theology derived from the text of Scripture. Barclay's use of these "perfections" as a way to evaluate exegetical options without needing to descend into the philological and lexical trenches smells a bit like cheating. Reading Paul through a grid of abstract perfections of grace is not an adequate substitute for the hard work of bringing forth the inner coherence of Paul's language and arguments. And Barclay's historical survey of other second-temple Jewish texts (Philo, 1QH^a, 4 Ezra, etc) is employed not so much to provide historical context for Paul as to offer contrasting test cases for Barclay's use of the six "perfections".

What did I gain from this 600+ page book? Very little new understanding of Paul's ideas and arguments, but a helpful philosophical taxonomy for talking about grace. The book has been touted as an answer to the New Perspective on Paul. It is not.

Cliff Kvidahl says

Barclay has published a fresh work on the grace/gift of God that will most certainly provide scholars and students with much to discuss for years to come. Well researched, enjoyable prose, and creative in its conclusions, do yourself a favor and pick up a copy and find a few days to sit with this tome. You will not be disappointed.

Steve Stanley says

Helpful reviews by Tom Schreiner:<http://themelios.thegospelcoalition.o...>, Doug Moo: <http://themelios.thegospelcoalition.o...>, Peter Orr: <https://au.thegospelcoalition.org/art...>, and Mark Baker: <http://www.booksatglance.com/book-re...>

Timothy Bertolet says

Excellent book examining the concept of 'grace' in Second Temple Judaism. Then examines Galatians and Romans. Barclay offers a corrective and advancement to the New Perspective on Paul. He takes its strengths and avoid its weaknesses. He is a first rate scholar and this book certainly advances the discussion in Pauline studies.

Josh Washington says

Generally the book reads well and I didn't find it too hard to understand. It was interesting and reading it was not as much a chore for a book with so many pages to cover. It was long, but not stupidly long (e.g. NT Wright's, Paul and the Faithfulness of God, D Campbell, Deliverance of God).

If one were to divide readings of Paul up into Reformed, New Perspective, Jewish, Apocalyptic and Diatribe.

His overall framing and use of language seems to reflect an apocalyptic mindset.

Especially with regards to the Christ event, his opposition to salvation historical readings and interpretation of the Old Testament. I'm not sure with Wright he would agree Paul was a Jewish thinker.

The best thing about his book is his six perfections of grace.

This is a very helpful tool for analysing grace in people's writings and being careful with their own. I'm surprised, two thousand years after Paul's writings and so much discussion on grace that something like this hasn't been done before.

The book of course has extended discussion on second temple Jewish texts. (After reading the book I don't think reading these is necessary to understand his treatment on Paul.) As mentioned with my post on his treatment on Sanders I believe his readings of these texts have their own shortcomings.

He has challenged the notion of 'getting in by grace' in second temple Judaism.

More research has to be done in light of more precise understandings of grace and particularly incongruity. His work has, in my opinion, left Sanders pattern of 'covenantal nomism' untouched. It still stands as the best way of understanding first century Judaism. Overall I don't think his book has corrected New Perspective readings.

His interpretation of 'justification' by faith apart from works of law' is virtually the same as NPP.

His attention to the social context of Paul's letters is part of what led him to make this conclusion.

In his sections on Galatians and Romans he quotes Greek frequently. But I found I didn't have to know Greek to understand what he was talking about. Nothing an interlinear translation can't help.

His discussion on Paul was dominated by the perfection of incongruity. With much less emphasis on the others.

His insights into the implications of this perfection I found quite helpful and stimulating. I'll be thinking upon this for some time, especially when I read and blog through Paul's letters. That being said I found he did not comment on the other perfections to the extent he should have. Especially the perfections of efficacy or reciprocity. Even at a surface level, Paul's description of his calling and received grace reflect these.

For those interested in engaging with Paul at a serious level, this is necessary reading.

<http://thescripturesays.org/2016/09/1...>

Bart says

John Barclay's *Paul and the Gift* (2015) has been hailed as one of the most groundbreaking works in Pauline scholarship in the last twenty years. Barclay argues that modern scholars have misread Paul and his contemporaries within Second Temple Judaism as though their definition of 'grace' and 'gift' were the same as "the modern (Western) ideal of the 'pure' gift, which is supposedly given without strings attached" (562).

Barclay helpfully provides six different axes along which a gift might be 'perfected' (that is, drawn out to an extreme for the sake of definition). He distinguishes six possible perfections of the gift: its superabundance, its singularity (the giver is nothing but gracious), its priority, its incongruity, its efficacy, and its non-circularity (69). Barclay demonstrates that the final perfection is entirely modern: gifts in the ancient world always obliged the receiver to reciprocate. Although Paul speaks of the first five perfections of the gift, the one he most emphasizes (in contradistinction to most of Second Temple Judaism) is the incongruity of grace with the worthiness of the recipient. The second half of Barclay's book explores Paul's concept of the gift in Galatians and Romans. Barclay notes in conclusion,

The reading of Paul offered in this book may be interpreted either as a re-contextualization of the Augustinian/Lutheran tradition, returning the dynamic of the incongruity of grace to its original mission environment where it accompanied the formation of new communities, or as a reconfiguration of the 'new perspective,' placing its best historical and exegetical insights within the frame of Paul's theology of grace (573).

Guilherme Nunes says

Um dos mais importantes livros sobre teologia paulina das últimas duas décadas.

Nicholas Quient says

A rich work that I found stimulating.

Daniel Supimpa says

Hopefully, I will work on a proper review in the future.

This is Barclay's magnum opus, and for many well-regarded biblical scholars, the most significant shift in Pauline studies since E. P. Sanders' "Paul and Palestinian Judaism" in the late 70s. Barclay's overall argument runs around the language of divine "grace/gift" (the char- radical in the Greek), in order to get a clearer view of Paul's relationship to his Jewish background (although the Greco-Roman cultural understandings of gifts and patronage are also briefly considered at the beginning).

Two initial remarks are important for the whole work. First, drawing from anthropological studies on gifts-relations, Barclay initially concludes that the concept of gifts with "no strings attached" is Western and modern. No other culture outside this space and time would presuppose some relationship between a gift and the honour or response of the receiver. Second and central to his whole argument, Barclay builds on Kenneth Burke's linguistic idea of "perfection," which Barclay means by "the tendency to draw out a concept to its endpoint or extreme, whether for definitional clarity or for rhetorical or ideological advantage" (p.67. Chapter 2, actually, is one that the reader will constantly have to turn back to, in order to understand different points of the book). Thus, Barclay distinguishes six common perfections of a gift (based on p.69-75):

- 1) Superabundance - a gift is characterized by a large scale, demonstrating the generosity of the giver;
- 2) Singularity - the giver is characterized by benevolence, and this alone;
- 3) Priority - the timing of the gift (before any previous interaction between giver and recipient) highlights the freedom and generosity of the giver;
- 4) Incongruity - a gift bears no relation to the worthiness of its recipient;
- 5) Efficacy - a gift, in its effects, achieves the purpose for what it was given; and
- 6) Non-Circularity - a gift is unilateral, free from constraints, so the giver does not seek his own benefit out of the gift.

For Barclay, each person or author might have one or more perfections in mind when talking about grace, but rarely the six of them. And rarely, different people in different culture will perfect "gift" in the same way. So, for example, modern Western culture tends to perfect the non-circularity of gift (the idea of a non-interested "pure" gift) whereas Marcion would have perfected its incongruity and singularity, thus affirming the idea that God cannot be at once a gracious gift-giver and a righteous demanding judge with undeserving human beings (the solution: the benevolent God and Father who forgive believers in Jesus had to be different from the Old Testament harsh Yahweh, probably a "semi-god").

This distinction of perfections is the foundation for Barclay's evaluation the main interpreters of Paul throughout history. In my view, the high peak of this section was the evaluation of Sanders' argument that Paul and Palestinian Judaism were basically identical in their understanding of grace/gift (see esp. 151-8). In Barclay's evaluation, Sanders was right in analyzing the presence of grace in texts of Second Temple Judaism (contra general Protestant scholarship) and of demonstrating that Paul was closer to STJ in his understanding of grace than previous scholarship had perceived. However, Sanders fell short of seeing a distinction in the perfections of "priority" (which was the cornerstone of his argument) and "incongruity" (which was assumed but not developed throughout his work and was, ironically, a characteristic that Sanders could not get totally aware of his Protestant scholarship heritage). Because of this blindspot, Sanders presupposed that (1) ALL mentions of grace in ancient texts (either in Paul or STJ) highlighted its incongruity; (2) that STJ had a uniform understanding (or at least, a core understanding) of grace.

From these two blindspots, Barclay will develop the rest of his book. The Second Part is an analysis in the conception of grace in five witnesses of STJ (The Wisdom of Solomon, Philo of Alexandria, the Qumran Hodayot, Pseudo-Philo (LAB), and 4 Ezra). Barclay is highly thorough and compelling in these chapters, and his synthesis makes a strong case for "the diversity in Second Temple Judaism on this topic [grace], a diversity that 'covenantal nomism' not only masks but is conceptually incapable of grasping" (319).

The Third Part and Fourth part dive into Paul's understanding of grace in the book of Galatians and Romans, respectively. These are densely researched and skillfully written 200 pages, thoughtfully interacting with the most significant Pauline interpreters in the English and German speaking world (e.g. Kahl, Dunn, Martyn, Hays, Wright, B. Longenecker) . Barclay's previous work in these Pauline books makes his argument very mature, and his footnotes gold mines for the researcher. Overall, Barclay concludes that in Pauline discourse, the Greek for grace (charis) "appears to have acquired a particular perfection: it functions without regard to the worth of its recipients" (354). This, of course, has less to do with existential categories ("I am a worthless sinner in desperation for meaning"), and more to do with worth based on race (Jews and Gentiles have the same standing before the gift of God in Christ). This is why Paul emphasizes the figure of Abraham in both Galatians and Romans. From the patriarch, God graciously created a people out of nothing, when no human causes were possible at all (either spiritual or physical). God was, therefore, doing the same in Christ for Jews and Gentiles. In other words, incongruity is the main way in which Paul perfects grace in Galatians and Romans.

In a very short sentence about the outcome (and here I risk being simplistic), one could say that Barclay's position sits methodologically closer to the New Perspective on Paul (the importance of the STJ background to understanding Paul's basis for dealing with grace in his mission of creating communities composed of Jews and Gentiles), and theologically closer to Calvin (incongruity is more fundamental to Paul's argument than non-circularity. The fruits of justice become integral to the exercise of faith for those who receive Christ as God's gift while they were still sinners, cf. Rom 5:8. Hence, participation cultivates sanctification.).

This is probably the most thorough work on Paul I have read in my life (although I'm not exactly a Pauline scholar). It was worth the three months of investment! Even if you disagree with Barclay, from now on you cannot ignore him in the debate on grace and justification for Paul.

Matt Pitts says

If it had not been impressed upon me that this was an important piece of Pauline scholarship, I don't think I would have made it through the 50 pages of sociology, the 100 pages of church history, or the 100+ pages surveying several Second Temple sources. That's not a criticism of the book but a warning for potential readers. Those sections make the book what it is. And they are followed by 100+ pages of a fresh reading of Galatians (which is what I read it for) and another 100+ on Romans. Though I'm sure I don't agree with everything in it, it is worth reading every page.
