

BOOK REVIEW

Wolter, Michael, *Paul: An Outline of his Theology* (trans. Robert L. Brawley; Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2015). xvi + 476. Hbk. USD79.95.

Pauline theology is all too often the subject of partisan arguments tied to deeply entrenched positions. Not so for this translation of Wolter's overview of Pauline theology, however. Although the book's thesis is difficult to pinpoint, as the topic is so broad, at its core, the book is an account of how and why Christianity reflects reality specifically for Christians. I appreciated that this book does not seem to simply rehash old debates on proposed 'doctrinal centers'. While aimed at the graduate-school level, scholars and pastors will find this work insightful for its sociological perspective and its focus on recent discussion in German scholarship.

In discussing the antecedents to Pauline theology, Wolter offers a cursory overview of Paul's biography. His discussion of much-debated topics, such as Paul's education and occupation reflects a grasp of the issues but avoids premature conclusions. He presents pre-conversion Paul as a Pharisee, who is zealous for preserving Israel's 'sanctity as the people of God' (p. 18) by promoting the Torah. The Damascus Road experience was both a conversion to 'a new certainty of existence' (p. 27) centered upon Jesus Christ and a call to proclaim the gospel to the nations. This event also raises important questions: what now is the Torah's status, and what will happen to those Jews who 'still wish to embody and preserve their sanctity by the law alone?' (p. 30). Unfortunately, I will have to point out that this book has several typos (e.g. 'although Paul was a Jew from "Cicilia" [p. 11]...he was a very different man after his "conversation" on the road to Damascus' [p. 23]).

After discussing the controversies Paul was involved in, Wolter claims that the term 'gospel' *never* refers to the content of Paul's proclamation, but *always* to the act of proclaiming itself. Theological

claims discuss the meaning and implications of the proclamation, but the gospel always precedes theology. The term ‘gospel’ is not primarily related to the Septuagint or to Hellenism, but it gives simply the general sense of ‘good news’. Paul uses three modifiers for the word, calling it *God’s*, *Christ’s* and *my* gospel, all referring to the same proclamation. The content of the original proclamation ‘contained the summons to turn to Israel’s God and to the exclusive orientation toward the expectation of salvation at the parousia of God’s Son’ (p. 62).

Wolter then identifies faith as fundamentally a matter of acceptance. Thus, regarding the *πίστις Χριστοῦ* debate—a construction he takes to be a genitive of quality—he points out that faith is actually the disposition that makes it possible to attribute faithfulness to Christ in the first place. Faith, for Wolter, is also interchangeable with the gospel as far as content is concerned. This is because, as Wolter would argue, Paul presents the gospel as the object of faith. Wolter also points out that the source of faith’s realization, for Paul, is distinctly divine and human. Faith is not only an event of conversion, but also a ‘permanent orientation of life’ (p. 81) both for individuals and for the group, a community-constituting ethos.

While this is an insightful reading, it is not without problems. He claims that Paul uses the phrase ‘in Christ’ to describe a new reality: ‘a symbolic universe that is differentiated from other symbolic universes’ (p. 87) by faith. However, I would note that whatever Paul is doing, he is not consciously contrasting ‘symbolic universes’ per se. In a similar passage, Wolter describes how Onesimus is a slave in ‘the everyday symbolic universe’, but a beloved brother in ‘the symbolic universe of faith’ (p. 87). The use of the term ‘symbolic universe’ is crucial to Wolter’s section on faith as assurance of reality, but it would have been helpful for him to explain why this concept is utilized. Why not simply say, for example, that, in light of Philemon’s former relationship with God, Onesimus was nothing but a slave to him; but now, in light of Philemon’s new relationship with God, Onesimus became a beloved brother—why introduce a modern sociological explanation without explaining why it is actually necessary? Paul talked about relationships, but he did not talk about symbolic universes.

Regarding the atonement, Wolter frames the salvific significance of Jesus’ death in terms of the faith of those who are saved. In other words, Jesus’ death can only be understood as ‘the revelation of God’s universal salvation’ by faith (p. 96). Only faith, explains Wolter,

actually assigns salvific efficacy to Jesus' death. To have 'Christ-faith' is 'to understand Jesus' death as a *ἱλαστήριον*' (p. 98) or that which effects the removal of sins. This is evident in Paul's claim that Christ is a *ἱλαστήριον* by faith through his blood. This faith in Christ, Wolter claims, subordinates all other identities.

It would have been useful for Wolter to explain, however, just what he means by the term 'identity'. The language of identity subordination presents Christian faith as a replacement for other identities. However, Wolter does not offer a nuanced explanation for why Paul's identity in Christ is compatible with his identity as a Jew. While Wolter does explain the pre-eminence of Christian identity for Paul, his explanation nevertheless reflects too many assumptions, such as his notions of what racial, religious or social identities actually were in the first century. This topic is highly debated and would no doubt have been argued more strongly had Wolter included recent research into social identity in Paul's letters.

Wolter then elaborates on the theological meaning of baptism in regard to the discussion about faith mentioned above. Baptism, he claims, is only meaningful in the context of faith; apart from this, it is meaningless. Baptism can never be discussed in Paul's writings apart from Christ-faith, while Christ-faith can be discussed apart from baptism. However, he does not conclude that infant baptism is inappropriate; in cultures that are shaped by Christian heritage, baptism can no longer be a conversion rite, but is rather a rite of tradition. Either way, nevertheless, he claims that baptism is a signifier of the new identity and reality in which Christians exist.

On a more critical note, I would point out that throughout the book Wolter enhances his discussion of theological concepts with close readings of biblical passages in Greek. However, some of his arguments rest upon questionable assumptions about certain Greek grammatical concepts. For example, the aorist tense is assumed to have a strictly past-referring meaning, whereas the absence of it is evidence of a strictly present temporal reference (see pp. 138-40, 404). Wolter's arguments would have been strengthened by a more carefully nuanced reference to the presumed tense reference of verbs, identifying why specific clauses are taken to have a given tense reference.

'Hope', Wolter argues, is another distinguishing feature of Christianity, along with Christ-faith, baptism and the Spirit. 'Hope' is a 'constituent of Christian existence', and as such, shares 'paradigmatic

interchangeability' (p. 180) with faith. Under the heading, 'Hope', Wolter develops the topic of eschatology. He helpfully describes eschatology as a semantic field that can be divided into three domains: individual, universal and cosmic eschatology. The present 'eschatic salvific' reality is described by Paul in different, 'semantically isotopic' (pp. 181, 186) ways.

Again, Wolter's use of linguistic terminology is helpful in drawing specific connections between the varying aspects of Paul's language and thought that have all too often been pitted against one another. However, a clearer methodological discussion would have enhanced this work. Nevertheless, the utilization of linguistic concepts is a strength of Wolter's work. Paul's eschatology, according to Wolter, is 'already' and 'not yet' because of the '*simultaneity* of the two aeons' (p. 186)—the present evil world and the world to come. Wolter's discussion of the resurrection is nuanced, and his interaction with different texts on the final judgment likewise avoids simplistic generalizations.

Wolter's analysis of the phrase 'in Christ' is focused on identifying the semantic fields within which the phrase occurs; however, actual semantic field analysis is not included explicitly, except in the form of conclusions: "'In Christ" serves as a designation for the leading paradigm of that symbolic universe, which for "Christ-faith" is God's "new creation"' (p. 234). Participation in Christ, claims Wolter, does not derive from the body metaphor: 'When Paul speaks of being "in Christ" as a characteristic of those who believe and are baptized, he intends thereby to express an existential belonging and dependence that cannot be imagined as closer and nearer...spatial concepts are either not present or at best metaphorically so' (p. 239). Participation is construed as soteriological, claims Wolter, only at the high price of generalizing soteriology, so that 'the concept of soteriology thereby loses all semantic contours and becomes quite useless' (p. 249).

Coming to ecclesiology, Wolter identifies 'the church' as a group that worships together and whose communion is made real in the symbol of the Lord's Supper. The people who partake in this supper constitute a group describable in body, family and temple metaphors, and who also participate in the identity of Israel—without replacing Israel. Wolter offers a nominalist conception of ecclesiology—the church is not a thing that *has* members; rather, it *is* its members, constituted by the people who belong to the group.

Devoting a chapter to Pauline paraenesis or ethics, Wolter addresses the classic distinction between ‘indicatives’ and ‘imperatives’. He argues for an insightful conceptual parallelism, saying, ‘the connection of indicative and imperative in Paul functions just like the connection of election and Torah in Judaism’ (p. 305). Moreover, he claims that Paul’s ethics are correlated with justification by faith, resulting in an ‘egalitarian reciprocity’ (p. 314) that demands that both sides of a conflict relate to one another properly, as Christians. His claims are generally accommodating to a number of different approaches to Pauline studies, although his attempt to situate Paul’s commands about immorality and idolatry within a set of three ‘Noahide laws’ comes across as merely an afterthought, and seems out of place compared to his treatment of the law in the next chapter, where he delineates four different uses of the law—none of which correspond to the Noahide laws of the rabbinic period.

In the book’s longest chapter, Wolter outlines an intriguing account of justification by faith. While deeper discussion of the role of metaphorical constructs would have been fitting given the tenor of the entire work, Wolter nevertheless usefully interacts with a number of different issues. The issue of justification, embedded ‘in the question of Israel’ (p. 345), is an issue of identity, not just status. Paul’s theology is universalistic in that all are subject to the anthropological reality of sin, which in turn provides the necessary context within which justification can take place. Justification involves freedom from the law, but not antinomianism, because God himself justifies people, declaring and making it a reality. This act, moreover, involves various characteristics of God, such as his justice, grace and glory. What I found intriguing was the generally traditional positions Wolter takes that are nevertheless coupled with an ecclesiological framework for justification—rather than simply a soteriological one—which has ecumenical implications.

In the final chapter, Wolter attempts to account for the aporia, or dilemma, at the heart of a Pauline theology that is fundamentally concerned with communal identity: what is the identity of Israel? In his discussion of three key passages (1 Thess. 2.14-16; Gal. 4.21-31; Romans 9-11), Wolter offers a descriptive account of Paul’s apparent theology of Israel. In the end, he claims that the aporia remains unresolved for Paul: Israel’s hardening is temporary, and they will be saved in Christ, but this does not negate their election by God. The aporia, Wolter notes, is rooted in Paul’s own paradoxical identity—a

thoroughly Jewish identity, and an identity fundamentally defined by Christ-faith.

Several points should be made in summary. First, Wolter's catalogue of Pauline theology should be taken as a whole; it is not a reference book. Secondly, Wolter primarily interacts with German scholarship, though not neglecting some of the most important discussions of scholars from North America and the United Kingdom. Thirdly, he offers an account of Pauline theology that is refreshing in that it is strikingly different from much discussion on the use of sociological concepts gleaned from the Pauline epistles, without necessarily having particular sociological theories at its core. For all of these reasons, Wolter's book would serve as a useful introductory textbook for graduate students, pastors or others who are interested in Pauline theology.

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