

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *The Mystery of Romans: The Jewish Context of Paul's Letter* by Mark D. Nanos

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MARK D. NANOS. *The Mystery of Romans: The Jewish Context of Paul's Letter*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996. Pp. 435.

Already the focus of discussion at the SNTS meeting in Birmingham, UK, a panel at the 1997 annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, and a session at the 1998 annual meeting of the Catholic Biblical Association, Nanos's volume offers an original rereading of Romans. Should he be correct, his work requires a rethinking not just of the Epistle but also of the history of the Roman church, of Pauline soteriology, and potentially of the contemporary Jewish-Christian dialogue.

There is much that is praiseworthy in the volume. Technically, the bibliography of more than 20 pages is complete, the notes are substantial, and the treatment of other scholars is accurate. Substantively, the argument is comprehensive: Nanos provides an extensive treatment of Pauline paraenesis in 14:1–15:28, the governing authorities in 13:1–7, the Jewish community in 1st-century Rome, the relationship between Pauline thought in Romans and in Galatians, Jewish views of gentiles and gentile views of Jews and Judaism, Septuagintal word studies, and observations on rhetoric. All this is undertaken in the context of viewing the New Testament as a “Jewish book” (p. 4) and of Paul as a “good Jew” rather than as an apostate or antinomian.

Surprises and controversial claims accompany each discussion. For example, the “weak” of Romans 14 and 15 are not, as is typically argued, Christian Jews who insist on retaining the laws of *kashrut*. Instead, according to Nanos, the “weak in faith” is a “highly nuanced and respectful reference to the Jews in Rome who were not Christians” (p. 155); their faith is “weak” in that it has not yet recognized Jesus to be the Christ or righteous gentiles to be co-participants in divine blessing. The “jealousy” of Romans 11 is not that of Jews who turn to Jesus out of envy for the justification of the gentiles; it is, rather, the jealousy of non-Christian Jews who see the success of Paul's missionary endeavor in bringing about the conversion of the gentiles, who recognize the expected messianic ingathering of the nations, and who therefore must want to participate in Israel's calling to be a light to the nations. The authorities to whom the Gentile Christian addressees are to show obedience (13:1–7) are not imperial powers but synagogue leaders; the tax is not to the state but to the Temple.

These points converge in the volume's major thesis: Christian gentiles, still meeting in Roman synagogues or in homes, but under the auspices of synagogue authority, are developing a sub-group identity born of ethnic superiority and Christian Gentile exclusivism. Paul's opponents want to convince their fellow gentiles to abandon solidarity with Jewish Christians, and to demonstrate this by abandoning the behavior Jews would expect of righ-

teous gentiles. Paul's problem with his fellow Jews, in this reconstruction, is not their retention of halakhah, but their insistence that gentiles must become Jews to be equal participants in divine blessings. This ethnocentric exclusivism is their "stone of stumbling" (9:30–33). Jew and Gentile unite, according to Nanos, under the rubric of the *Shema*^c. That is, gentiles are forbidden to become Jews not because Torah observance is no longer a valid act of faith, but because to do so would be to deny the universalistic oneness of the deity. If all became Jews, then God would be the God only of Israel and not of all nations; divine unity would be compromised.

The argument is clear, albeit if frequent repetition of the main points and the prolix syntax make the language of Ephesians look like Hemingway by comparison. Whether the arguments can move from interesting to convincing is another question.

The positivistic approach to synagogue organization in pre-70 Rome is the first stumbling block. Christian gentiles may have worshipped in house-churches which claimed legal protection under Judaism's *religio licita* status, but it is just as likely that they were independent gatherings with no legal formulations. Twenty-five years after the crucifixion, an independent messianic congregation is probable. Also questionable is Nanos's presumption of "an almost insurmountable learning curve in bringing gentiles to an understanding of faith in Christ and the practice of righteousness without association with the synagogue and the life of the Jewish community" (p. 73). An association need not last twenty years for the learning curve to bend. Nor is there evidence for such an association existing, let alone remaining, for the churches in Thessalonica, Corinth, or Galatia.

Next, the arguments concerning behavior of the righteous gentiles have limited practical value and even less direct evidence in Romans. Nanos cautiously infers a dependence of the argument of Romans on Luke's description of the Jerusalem Council and avers that Paul's adaptation of halakhah for righteous gentiles parallels the injunctions of Acts 15:19–29. On the one hand, Acts 15 need not lead to a system of equal co-participation, in that *kashrut*-observing Jewish-Christians may not have considered a meal served in a Christian Gentile's house acceptable. On the other hand, such a "separate but equal" system need not lead to equal co-participation. Complicating Nanos's argument are also questions of the historicity of Luke's account and Paul's apparent disregard for the decree in both Galatians and 1 Corinthians.

While Nanos's reading of Romans 13 is attractive (I have visions of Christians no longer debating draft registration but now worrying about the amount of their pledge to the United Jewish Appeal), it is compromised by the vagueness of Paul's language (e.g., Paul does not speak of "*synagogue* leaders"), the struggle throughout the documents of early Christianity to come to terms with the government (e.g., 1 Peter 2, Revelation), and the lack elsewhere in Paul's epistles of an exhortation to gentiles to submit themselves to synagogue authority. Nor are there cogent reasons why synagogue leaders

would encourage or even permit the reading of Paul's letter, would want to place themselves in positions of authority over gentiles, or would seek to collect the temple tax from them. To the contrary: if the gentiles are, in Paul's view, to remain "gentiles," then there is no need for them to pay the tax and thereby act as Jews.

The argument that the "weak" are non-Christian Jews is not without its own difficulties. The term "weak" may be "nuanced and respectful," but it is also imprecise; further, I doubt that any non-Christian Jew so identified would find the label congenial. Nanos's claim concerning Jewish soteriological exclusivity is insecure: not all Jews held a restricted notion of salvation, and the argument based on Romans is not self-confirming. Nor does Nanos's argument sufficiently explain concerns for festival observance and even for food. The dietary concerns of the "weak" as described in Romans do not address, at least directly, issues of *kashrut*. Abstention from meat (14:2) and, especially, from wine (14:21) are not sigla of Judaism. Moreover, for the "righteous gentile" not everything is clean (contra Rom 14:20). While Nanos's assertion that Paul's exhortations limit Christian freedom in deference to the weaker congregant is compellingly supported by 1 Corinthians, there may be more reason to view the policies as consistent with internal Christian practice rather than in relation to non-Christian Jews.

Finally, it remains unclear how observing Gentile Christians engaged in Noahide-like commandments and/or the fulfillment of the Apostolic decree of Acts 15 would convince non-Christian Jews that the messiah had come. To convince the "weak" non-Christian Jews that the messiah had come and that the ingathering of the exiles had begun, something more than a group of gentiles worshipping the God of Israel and avoiding idol meat would be required.

Perhaps my disagreements are more the product of my own traditional education. I may be looking through the glass darkly, and Nanos, writing apart from formal Ph.D. training, may be the only one to see clearly. Then again, he may be wrong. Given the detail, the rigor, the coherence, the intelligence, and the sheer bravery of the volume, readers should test Nanos's work themselves. Regardless of how much, finally, convinces, this provocative work will prevent anyone from looking at Romans, or Paul, in quite the same way again.

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