

The Mystery of Romans: The Jewish Context of Paul's Letter

By Mark D. Nanos

Reviewed by Pamela Eisenbaum

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While Mark Nanos may describe himself as a “non-affiliated Jew” and a “non-academic,” he has written a very Jewish, very academic, and very interesting book. Nanos writes about Paul's *Letter to the Romans*—the most theologically important document in the New Testament—from a self-consciously Jewish perspective. Building on the work of others, mostly Christian, New Testament scholars who have recently sought to understand the Jewish matrix of early Christianity, Nanos declares that “we can now read the New Testament as a Jewish book.” Touché!

He is not, however, the first Jewish author to undertake such a task. Two other recent books offer readings of the Apostle's letters from a Jewish perspective: *Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee* by Alan Segal (Yale University Press, 1990) and *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* by Daniel Boyarin (University of California Press, 1994). Like his predecessors, Nanos writes appreciatively of Paul. He has a exuberant enthusiasm for Paul's written legacy and displays a sympathetic understanding of Paul's perplexing and sometimes contorted theology.

Unlike his predecessors, Nanos did not have the benefit of formal academic training (at least at the graduate level, though he does have an undergraduate degree in Judaic studies). But no matter. He is an autodidact—and an impressive one at that. He has mastered voluminous amounts of scholarly literature on Paul and Judaism in Rome. The result is a masterful tome, one that can introduce newcomers to the subject as well as offer detailed arguments—in dialogue with other interpreters of Paul—for his highly original interpretation of the text. Indeed, Nanos'

accomplishment has already been appropriately recognized: He received the National Jewish Book Award in the category of Jewish-Christian Relations last December.

Nanos believes that Paul had a profound appreciation for Torah and Torah observance—the latter is what sets him apart from most other readers of Paul’s letters. He argues that the advent of Christ for Paul was a way for gentiles to come to know the God of Israel, who is after all the one and only God, and that Christ’s coming never meant that Jews should stop practicing Judaism. It just meant that other peoples were now given a way to worship God (through belief in Christ) and thereby to be recognized by God, without having to “convert” to Judaism. Since the time of Luther, Paul is said to have preached a “Law-free” gospel, meaning that the Mosaic Law, i.e., Torah, has now been superseded by Christ. Keeping the commandments is rendered theologically irrelevant. In sharp contrast to this traditional, Protestant interpretation, Nanos argues that Paul preached a “Law-respectful” gospel. By this Nanos means that Torah was still valid for all Jews, whether or not they believe in Jesus Christ, and that gentiles who came to believe in Christ were bound by the Noahide commandments, a set of minimal requirements (including, e.g., not committing idolatry) that applied to anyone who wanted to be a “God-fearer,” or “righteous gentile.”

Paul’s appreciation for Torah in all its requirements is not such an easy thing to prove, since Paul is notorious for making the kinds of arguments that give Torah observance a bad name: “I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died, and the very commandment that promised life proved to be death for me. For sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me” (Romans 7:10-11). Taken at face value, such claims do not seem to indicate that Paul believed Jewish law has a positive theological role to play, at least not since the advent of Christ and what Paul considered to be the salvific act of his death and resurrection. On the other hand, Paul is not known for being logically consistent. In a remark that concludes the argument contained in lines just quoted, he says, “So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good.” Such seemingly

contradictory arguments make the study of Paul's letters confusing, at times even infuriating. So scholars devote their lives to resolving them.

Nanos resolves Paul's conflicting claims about Jewish Law the way some other interpreters have before him, but with important nuances. Paul modulates his rhetoric according to the nature of the issue and the audience it implies. Positive claims indicate that Paul wants to insure that gentiles have appropriate reverence for Torah. Furthermore, since Nanos considers Paul to be a good Jew, positive claims are what we expect from him. Negative claims derive from Paul's need to convince other Jews not to have too arrogant an attitude about their claim to Torah. For Nanos, Paul was the consummate monotheist who carried monotheism to its logical conclusion when he asked, "Is God the God of Jews only? is He not the God of Gentiles also?" (Romans 3:29). Thus, Jews (those with Torah) and gentiles (those without it) must be equal in God's eyes. Indeed, one of the most significant contributions of *The Mystery of Romans* is the highlighting of the importance of the *Shema* and the theological implications of the oneness of God in Paul's thought.

Both Jews and gentiles have their unique role to play in God's plan for world history—what biblical scholars commonly call salvation history. Paul's understanding of "salvation history" appears in Romans 9—11, chapters so variously interpreted that Nanos' attempt to gain clarity is most welcome. He identifies a two-step plan, the first step achieves salvation for gentiles, the second redeems Israel, i.e., the Jewish community.

Step One: Because many Jews did not accept the gospel Paul preached, Paul proclaimed Christ to the gentiles. Nanos correctly points out that Paul believed the advent of Christ had signaled the end of the age. And, according to the prophets, the end of the age meant the ingathering of the nations, i.e., when the peoples of the world would finally recognize and worship the one, true God. It was Israel's job "to be a light to the nations" (Isaiah 49:5-6), so Paul took it upon himself to preach the good news to the gentiles. Paul's mission then, in proclaiming to the nations the message of Christ having died and been raised, was to inaugurate

this eschatological moment. The fact that many of Paul's Jewish peers did not believe in Jesus and did not believe in the validity of Paul's mission was not a problem for the Apostle; on the contrary, Jewish resistance was part of the plan. Since part of Israel rejected Paul's message, there was greater opportunity to reach out to the other peoples of the world.

Step Two: The ingathering of the nations provokes Israel's jealousy, and, as a result, leads to repentance and restoration. Thus, in Paul's words, "all Israel shall be saved" (Romans 11:26). In the typical reading of Romans, Israel's jealousy derives from the other nations currying favor with God. For Nanos, Israel is jealous of Paul's missionary success. Once Paul persuades the known world to embrace monotheism in the form of the worship of Israel's God, then the other Jews will recognize this as the ingathering of the nations, embrace Paul's mission and message, and together Jew and Gentile will be saved. Of course, salvation here does not mean personal salvation, but the inauguration of a new era of peace, tranquillity, and justice. By interpreting Romans 9—11 this way, Nanos bolsters his contention that Paul's dispute with other Jews is not focused on the validity of Judaism or the practice of Jewish law. It is rather a dispute about God's timetable. Paul believes the end of the age is imminent; it is time for the ingathering of the nations. His opponents just think they are at a different point in history. Mark Nanos has written an absolutely fascinating book. While not all the pieces of the argument are equally convincing, he has made an important contribution to the study of Paul and our understanding of Christian origins. After reading Nanos' work, no one can ever read Romans in quite the same way.

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