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Cosgrove, Charles H.

Elusive Israel: The Puzzle of Election in Romans

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The hermeneutical question that drives Cosgrove's study of the "ambiguous sign" of Israel in Romans is simple yet profoundly important: "What ought Christians to do when faced with conflicting reasonable interpretations of scripture?" This issue is of utmost concern, because, for example, Jewish people inhabit the world of the Christian reader; thus interpretations of these texts influence perspectives on and interaction with contemporary Jewish people. And this is a question for the Jewish or other person approaching the text as well.

Cosgrove determines not to pursue the answers by the historical-critical method, wherein the stress is on ascertaining the intention of the original author and the range of possible meanings for the original addressees. Though he grants that enormous advances have been made, Cosgrove notes the "mounting evidence that many questions of exegesis cannot be historically resolved, because the texts themselves are irreducibly ambiguous." He sets out instead to "establish the limited range of interpretations that Paul's text warrants," not with the historical Romans in view, but the canonical Romans (p. xii). Cosgrove thus offers an explicit statement of principle for making interpretive decisions in the context of the Christian canon based on Matt. 22:37-40: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (pp. xiii, 41-45). One may note that this principle is made explicit, however, without appeal to the entire canon, by simply staying within Romans: 13:8-10. Moreover, it is not uniquely Christian, being ever-present in the scriptures of Israel and in rabbinic Judaism, not to mention its guiding presence in many of the other world religions too.

Cosgrove brings a creative perspective to the task by running three contemporary views of Romans through the conversation of three imaginary Roman Christians at the time when Romans may have been just beginning to be read as part of regular worship services, so that these dialogical partners are not conceived of as participants in the original rhetorical situation of the letter. The dialogue is a delight to read and productive, allowing for a level of clarification of the issues not generally achieved in arguments mounted on behalf of any one position. One view is that true Israel refers to the church since the coming of Christ, wherein ethnic identities are immaterial. A second one maintains that the Israel defined by genealogy and Mosaic Law continues to be true Israel, retaining her vocation and the promise of final salvation, even if rejecting the Christian message for a time. And a third view is that true Israel is and always has been composed not of all Jewish people, but of an elect remnant, thus since Christ true Israel is inclusive only of those who believe in the gospel message.

Within his methodological framework, Cosgrove makes a most unexpected move. He imagines interpreters to "share the common lexicon of Paul and his original audience" and their views to count "as a valid interpretation of the historical Romans" (p. 3). Yet on Cosgrove's own grounds they speak from a distinctively Christian perspective, one that is post-parting of the ways (see pp. 1-4, 55, 98-99). And they are informed by other correspondence from Paul that is also no longer situated in its original context, as well as views of other authors whose original language and intentions may even differ from Paul's. It may be that they do not share the lexicon of Paul or the original recipients of the letter any more than we do today, perhaps even less than do modern practitioners of the historical-critical method. If the anti-Jewish views that riddle the writings of the early church fathers provide any indication, such canonical voices are hardly the best ones to listen to in the pursuit of "loving your neighbor as yourself," at least where the empirical people of Israel are concerned. By noting this compromise of method in the claiming of too much, I do not mean to suggest that the enterprise Cosgrove has engaged in collapses, but only to contain it as is methodologically warranted: this book begins with a suspicion of the historical-critical enterprise and therefore should not claim to provide Paul's original thought, especially not by privileging the insight of these (second- or third-century?) Romans (note the telling adjectival descriptions: a "gentile Christian" and two "Jewish Christians," with the attribution to one of them of what appears to be the modern interpretation of the possible anti-Paul position of the later pseudo-Clementine literature; pp. 3-4; cf. *Kerygmata Petrou* H II 16-17; XVII 13-19 [ca. 4th cent. C.E.]).

In chapter 2 Cosgrove creatively suggests the possibility that Paul employs the rhetorical device of co-deliberation, which he also, figuratively, applies to the hermeneutical situation of the reader in an interesting discussion of the element of the interpretive will. As defined by Quintilian, the co-deliberative technique creates suspense by rhetorical questions which are followed by a sequel, wherein the suspense is resolved. This sequel may confirm the expectation raised, or may offer instead a surprising conclusion that subverts it. Cosgrove suggests that this device may tie Romans 9:22ff.

and 11:11ff. together as a sequence, so that "the suspense of 9:22 is not immediately resolved but has a surprise sequel—one that does not appear until the second co-deliberation with suspense in 11:11" (p. 35). This intriguing explanation certainly calls for further consideration.

Chapter 3 examines the canonical reframing of the apocalyptic Paul into the prophetic Paul, with special attention to the apocalyptic Paul of J. Christiaan Beker and the Dispensationalist Paul of E. F. Stöter, among others. The argument is sophisticated, the conclusion insightful: "In the retrospective focus of the Christian Bible, Paul's apocalypse looks like contingent prophecy. Paul appears as one more biblical prophet who discloses a divine word that turns out to be contingent—because disconfirmed. The question is, then, how to understand the abiding truth of the surpassed disclosure" (p. 62).

In the last chapter Cosgrove brings his various suggestions together. He moves between the historical and canonical Paul, and at points engages in some useful historical-critical analysis. There are too many valuable reflections to discuss adequately here, some troubling, others enlightening. To be noted are the discussions of the translations Gentiles/nations as applied especially to 11:25, some suspect common uses of ethnocentrism and universalism, the affirmation of interpretive judgments that "pit the canonical Paul himself against anti-Jewish Christian habits of mind and rhetoric" (p. 74), and the conclusion that because "God has a special and undying passion for carnal Israel" (p. 79), this "helps us interpret the impartiality of divine universalism. God is impartial in loving human beings not only in the similarities to one another but also in their differences, including the ethnocultural differences that separate human beings into distinct peoples" (p. 79). Does this helpful conclusion need to be distanced, however, from the message of the historical Paul, either as a Jewish figure or a believer in Jesus Christ preceding the canonical Christian Paul? It seems to me that the sensibilities of a post-Holocaust Christian interpreter offer a welcome development for dealing with a problem noticeable by the time of canonical Paul, but that this is a reversal of a process unknown and unanticipated by the historical Paul. In other words, it appears to me that this sensitivity is a return to Paul, not a move beyond him, in reversing trends of interpretation that came after him, during the time of canonical development and thereafter.