

RBL 07/13/2000



Dabourne, Wendy

Purpose and Cause in Pauline Exegesis: Romans 1:16-4:25 and a New Approach to the Letters

Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 104

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. Pp. xii + 257, Hardcover, \$59.95, ISBN 0521640032.

Mark Given
Southwest Missouri State University
Springfield, MO 65804

In the 1977 introduction to *The Romans Debate*, Karl Donfried complained that the historical-critical method had only recently been applied to Romans (Karl P. Donfried, ed., *The Romans Debate: Revised and Expanded Edition* [Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991] xli-xliii). He observed that as late as 1944, a major commentary by Anders Nygren continued to treat the letter as "a compendium of the Christian religion," but he was encouraged by the fact that a flood of new commentaries since 1970, as well as the essays collected in *The Romans Debate*, showed that times were changing. By the time the expanded edition appeared in 1991, Donfried was confident that a consensus had been reached that Romans is addressed to a Christian community "which finds itself in a particular historical situation," and that socio-historical investigation of that situation must inform our understanding of Paul's "theological intention" (pp. lxix-lxxii). But that very choice of terminology, "theological intention," could serve as evidence for Wendy Dabourne's contention that, in spite of their best efforts, historical-critical exegetes still have a long way to go. They have never quite broken free from the old tendency to treat Romans not as a real letter, but as theological exposition.

To break free, Dabourne proposes a new historical-critical approach that features a two-step exposition, the first teleological and the second causal. The ordering of these steps is crucial and a matter of getting priorities straight. The first step is "a rediscovery of what Paul was intending to say to the Romans. . . . It answers the question, Where was this text going *to*? This step depends on a careful examination of Paul's purpose in writing and of the nature of the text, and entails a very careful, audience-oriented reading

of the text." The second step is "an examination of the major theological presuppositions underlying what Paul was intending to say, the justification theology and the Creator-creature relationship. . . . It answers the question, Where was this text coming *from*?" Application of these steps to Rom 1-4 offers a "radically new view of the nature of the whole," not as "theological exposition but something we describe best as pastoral preaching" (p. 22). Paul's aim was not to give a justification account, but "to help the Romans, especially those with a very conservative understanding of Israel's election, to come to terms with an important corollary of their faith in Christ. God's action in Christ fulfilled the purpose of Israel's election by breaking the bounds of Israel" (p. 23). Therefore, "the driving question is not, How can we be righteous in God's sight since we are sinners? It is, How can God be righteous in our sight if he justifies believing sinners without reference to the Jew-Gentile distinction?" (p. 22).

Other interpreters, of course, have suggested that Romans 1-4 is not really a justification account, but none have succeeded in presenting a convincing alternative explanation for how the justification language is functioning (p. 7). Dabourne sees the most potential in the work of scholars still laboring within but straining the justification framework, namely E. P. Sanders and two major commentators who build on his insights, James D. G. Dunn and J. Ziesler. All recognize the shortcomings of Paul's argument if he really was intending to prove the universality of sin and the need of every individual to be justified by Christ (pp. 7-10). But rather than accept the possibility that Paul was so incompetent a communicator that he fell short of his intended goal, Dabourne argues that we should instead consider the possibility that we have misunderstood his intention (p. 17). This reconsideration does not "risk throwing a baby out with the bath water. The hypothesis we need to develop is that Paul was talking about something else, but the justification theology was important for whatever it was" (pp. 18-19). Paul did not need to make an ironclad argument about justification itself because he assumed his audience already agreed with him on this subject. The "something else" he did need to talk about was, as we saw above, "How can God be righteous in our sight if he justifies believing sinners without reference to the Jew-Gentile distinction." The "our" referred to is especially a conservative Jewish believer who would probably be troubled by this issue.

Having established the state of the question in chapter one and introduced her new approach in chapter two, Dabourne pursues three tasks in the remaining chapters. First, she provides further justification for separating what Paul was intending to say from his theological presuppositions (chaps. 4-7). Second, she defines the nature of the whole of Rom 1-4 (chaps. 8-9). And, finally, she presents the detailed exegesis itself, followed by a review and conclusion (chaps. 10-13). It would be impossible to summarize the detailed, informed, and mostly persuasive exegetical arguments of these chapters in a short review. Instead, I will limit my remarks to a few observations about Dabourne's methodology. This is appropriate since the author is not primarily claiming to offer radically new exegetical insights, but rather a radically new hermeneutical strategy that

will allow recent exegetical advances to be harmoniously integrated by Paul's true pastoral intention.

This is an impressive and thought provoking reading of Romans 1-4, highly recommended for Pauline scholars and graduate students. Perhaps above all, it confirms once again the almost endless potential of audience-oriented criticism. Dabourne makes use of reader-response concepts in positing an implied author called The Apostle, an implied audience called The Congregation, and a subgroup within the audience called The Conservative (pp. 104-105). This reading strategy allows her access to some dimensions of the text that are often insufficiently explored.

But Dabourne's use of reader-response theory will strike some readers as naïve and out of touch with its broader poststructural interpretive implications. For her, a reader-response approach is the key to revealing Paul's true intention in writing to the Romans. While a poststructural perspective does not rule out a concern with authorial intention, it certainly calls into question scenarios in which an author or speaker has such full control of his/her intention and expression that s/he can craft a discourse that will be virtually unambiguous to all but the most incompetent readers/auditors in the intended audience. Yet that scenario is precisely what Dabourne seems to envision. The assumption that the letter fully communicated Paul's meaning to its original audience then serves as a foundation for her arguments that the interpretive problems are largely the creation of later audiences who overlook or insufficiently comprehend the letter's pastoral purpose in its original situation. Too many times in this study one reads comments to the effect that Paul meant what he said and said what he meant, and that we are "taking Paul at his word" (p. 226). In all of this, Dabourne displays an overly optimistic view of language and an unrealistically simplified conception of the audience--both implied and actual--Paul was addressing. Her approach provides quite a contrast with another recent study that uses reader-response criticism to explicate the complexity of Paul's Roman audience and the wide diversity of responses his letter would likely have provoked (see Charles H. Cosgrove, *Elusive Israel: The Puzzle of Election in Romans* [Louisville: Westminster, 1997]). On even so critical an issue as "Israel," Cosgrove argues that we can never know with sufficient probability Paul's "communicational intent" (p. xii). In contrast, Dabourne's confident defense of Paul's communicative abilities borders on uncritical adulation: "How do we proceed? We asked whether the mistakes are Paul's or ours. Our hypothesis suggests that at least some of them are ours" (p. 19). Actually, as the study unfolds, it appears that all of them are ours.

On a related note, Dabourne suggests that many exegetes too quickly decide that Romans is to some degree apologetic in tone: "We must set aside the adversarial style of our own work and attend to Paul as to one preaching with authority to a committed and responsive congregation" (p. 114). She is convinced that many historical and theological interpreters have simply created Paul in their own image as a scholar writing for other scholars. From time to time she gives humorous expression to her exasperation with this

aspect of Pauline scholarship. For example, "This Paul is a curious amalgam of first- and twentieth-century models, writing theological arguments for the first numbers of *NTS* or *ZNW*, AD 56" (p. 31). Although Dabourne has some appreciation for Ernst Käsemann's work, his highly technical and deeply reflective theological commentary presents an easy target (pp. 179-180). But in the final analysis, this reviewer did not find Dabourne's insistence that Paul's tone is not defensive in Romans convincing, especially since, curiously enough, she fully acknowledges evidence that Paul is aware that he may already be perceived as a controversial character in Rome (e.g., pp. 71-72). The Romans were no doubt "a committed and responsive congregation," but why we should assume they would respect Paul's authority is not so clear.

It will not escape the reader versed in rhetorical criticism that while Dabourne claims her new method grows out of the soil of historical criticism and is not imported from other disciplines, she is in fact doing a form of rhetorical criticism influenced by reader-response criticism. On the one hand, after briefly surveying formal rhetorical approaches to Romans, Dabourne agrees with S. E. Porter that such analyses of Paul's letters are inappropriate (pp. 88-90). On the other hand, referring with approval to G. A. Kennedy's *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism*, she sees great value in the type of rhetorical approach that concentrates less on formal matters and more on speech as argument and persuasion (p. 90). It comes as no surprise, therefore, that her footnotes contain many positive references to Stanley Stowers' work on Romans. Actually, Dabourne's hermeneutic is hardly "radically new," but rather another manifestation of "the rhetorical turn" in much of recent interpretation.

Finally, Dabourne writes self-consciously as a pastor (e.g., pp. 1-5), well aware that "No exegete . . . can avoid making Paul in her own image to some extent" (p. 228). It is tempting then to compare her confident interpretation of Paul with that of *The Pastor*. Both seem a bit frustrated that other Paulinists sometimes miss the forest (intended meaning) for the trees (extra meaning), and both occasionally express that frustration with a flash of irony and/or sarcasm. Whether either one *really* understands Paul or not, both pastors provide us with some interesting reading.

This volume is mostly free of typographical and other mechanical errors. A bibliography, index of biblical and other ancient sources, and a very limited general subject index are included, but lamentably, there is no author index. This is, all in all, a thought-provoking and worthwhile contribution to the study of Romans 1-4.