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Dabourne, Wendy

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

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While not identified as a dissertation, this book begins like one in its tedious sketch of methodology to be employed. The first 46 pages are essentially an introduction to Dabourne's project, which is a reading of Rom 1:16-4:25 dedicated to Paul's purpose ("Where was this going to?"), followed by a reading of the same text dedicated to the causal factors behind the passage ("Where was this coming from?," p. 212). Of these readings, the teleological is given more attention (chapter 10, pp.115-70) than the causal reading, which the author admits is incomplete (chapter 12, pp. 182-207). The former reading is conducted with an explication of the persons implied by the text: the Apostle, the Conservative (a Jewish believer in Jesus who is bothered that God apparently accepts Gentiles without their acceptance of Torah), and the Congregation. The essential result of this reading is that, in Rom 1:16 - 4:25, Paul is addressing the Romans regarding "how God could be righteous in the eyes of these particular sinners (Paul and the Romans) if he justified all of them on the basis of their faith in Christ without reference to the Jew-Gentile distinction" (p.112, see also p. 208). While this may not seem a new discovery, some of the book's strengths are in the emphases that Dabourne makes en route.

The first strength of this book is that it successfully shows the benefits of what too many of us who write on Romans forget: it is best to begin with what Paul wants to do in this letter in relation to the Romans.

This strength leads to a trio of related, worthwhile emphases: 1) this letter is a proclamation of the gospel to the Romans' situation, not an essay about the gospel; 2) we

must ask what Paul could expect his audience in Rome to understand when the letter was read to them, employing a criterion of intelligibility; 3) the speech behind our text of Romans and the aural aspects of this text need to be heard (e.g. p. 81). This final emphasis represents a cutting edge in Romans research.

The sensitivity to the Jew/Gentile distinction and the election of Israel as it relates to the justification language in this section of Romans is another major strength of this book. Dabourne helpfully shows how the election of Israel is presupposed in the "to the Jew first, then to the Greek" of 1:16b (p. 117). Dabourne is surely right that, in this section of Romans, justification by grace through faith is not the solution but the problem. For its repositioning of justification within Rom 1:16-4:25 and the other points noted above, the book is worth reading.

As a first attempt at a teleological reading, this work is successful. But sometimes legitimate questions are swept aside, as on 3:21-26--"To follow what is being said, we do not need to know whether The Apostle and The Conservative, Paul and the Romans, thought of a price being paid or of God bringing Israel out of Egypt without paying any price to Pharaoh. Because the communication does not require this, it would be sheer accident if the information were available from the context. This is one practical consequence of the fact that the text is created by the author's intention" (p. 152). I agree with Dabourne here that we do not have enough data in the text to answer all questions about atonement that arise from 3:21-26. But we need a way of determining what is fair game for the teleological reading, since we are constrained by what Dabourne thinks was Paul's intention (pp. 167-68). This ambiguity might be rectified by a more careful distinction between "purpose" and "cause."

A second weakness of the book is its identity crisis in relation to past studies on Romans. I wonder if Dabourne might be more specific rather than simply lumping past labeled approaches into her constructs "the mainstream debate" (pp. 96, 103, 109, 119, 152, 167, 183, 186), "mainstream exegesis" (pp. 97, 179, 208, 210), "single-strand exegesis" (p. 181), or simply "the mainstream" (p. 178). She does identify "the older pattern of exegesis in the Luther tradition" (p. 205) and this is more helpful. The nomenclature represents a deeper weakness--the teleological reading is not immediately tested against past readings of this section of Romans: "Our hypothesis will be tested by the teleological reading it yields. By definition this does not deal with all of the meaning in the text, so it will not be comparable with readings in the mainstream debate, and therefore cannot be effectively tested against them" (p. 109). Dabourne does admit in the last chapter that she is "very much beholden to" the past debate, after explaining that she could not place her readings into the mainstream debate since that would mean "choking off the new enterprise before it has been considered on its own terms" (p. 223). I wish there were more dialogue partners within the teleological reading. This would have lent more credibility to that reading, or am I still awaiting redemption from the mainstream debate?

Dabourne's book is a helpful study of the opening of the main argument in Romans. It moves our attention back to the occasion of the text's first reading and thus forces us to pay closer attention to the text itself. I hope those within the mainstream debate on Romans will consider this book's teleological reading of Romans 1:16 - 4:25.