

RBL 04/2006



Wagner, J. Ross

Heralds of the Good News: Isaiah and Paul in Concert in the Letter to the Romans

Leiden: Brill, 2003. Pp. xxii + 437. Paper. \$49.00. ISBN 0391042041.

Christopher D. Stanley
St. Bonaventure University
St. Bonaventure, NY 14778

The publication three years ago of Ross Wagner's study of Paul's use of Isaiah in the letter to the Romans showed how the movement inspired by Richard Hays fifteen years ago in *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) continues to mature and develop. Wagner, who studied under Richard Hays at Duke University, has written an impressive book that makes judicious use of Hays's methods and conclusions while moving beyond Hays at many key points. The quality of the argumentation is high throughout; indeed, the book sounds more like the work of a seasoned scholar than a recent Ph.D. student. Wagner's study is essential reading not only for scholars interested in Paul's use of Scripture but for anyone involved in the study of Paul's thought.

The bulk of Wagner's book is devoted to a detailed exposition of key passages in Rom 9–11, where Paul quotes or alludes to the book of Isaiah. In each case he starts by comparing the Pauline version of the text with its original form in Isaiah, then shifts into an examination of how Paul interprets the Isaianic text and how this interpretation fits into Paul's developing argument. Wagner argues that Paul took the contexts of his quotations and allusions seriously, since he believes that Paul knew the entire Greek text of Isaiah by memory. At the same time, he parts company with scholars who have

insisted that Paul faithfully reproduced the ideas of his source text. Instead, he claims that Paul engaged in a “radical rereading” of the book of Isaiah (154, 271) through the eyes of Christian faith. This Christian reinterpretation of Isaiah led Paul to engage in “shocking” interpretive moves (82) and “stunning misreading[s]” (205; cf. 89) of the prophetic text. On the whole, Wagner seems sympathetic to Paul’s reading strategy, but he is no naïve apologist for Paul.

While acknowledging that many of Paul’s readings of the biblical text appear tendentious, Wagner rejects the claim that Paul simply plundered the Jewish Scriptures for verses that would lend weight to his own arguments. When he compares Paul’s quotations of Isaiah with their original contexts, Wagner finds evidence that Paul paid careful attention to the language and ideas not only of the individual passages that he cites but of the book as a whole. Again and again he points to places where, in his view, Paul brings together ideas from different parts of Isaiah to form a “web of intratextual connection” (184) that can be unraveled by those who are familiar with the content of the book. Sometimes these “intratextual fields” included verses from outside the book of Isaiah, such as the Song of Moses in Deut 32. Uncovering this network of textual connections not only helps us to see how Paul read the book of Isaiah but also leads us to a richer understanding of what Paul was trying to communicate in his letter to the Romans, since Wagner believes that Paul expected his audience to be able to hear many of the textual resonances and echoes that remain unstated in his letter.

According to Wagner, a careful review of Paul’s references to the book of Isaiah in Romans shows that Paul studied Isaiah to find answers to questions that arose from his missionary experience. In particular, Paul needed to make sense of the inexplicable rejection of his message by his fellow Jews at the same time that it was being embraced by an increasing number of non-Jews. Paul was attracted to the book of Isaiah because he found in the prophet a “fellow preacher of the good news” (1), one who spoke about God bringing his salvation to Gentiles as well as to Jews. Through reading Isaiah, Paul learned of a divine pattern of action that involved “the surprising reversal wrought by God’s grace, in which those apparently outside the scope of God’s mercy are included among the people God has redeemed for himself” (83). As a result, Paul came to view his own mission to the Gentiles as an actualization of this pattern, a vital stage in the realization of God’s eschatological plan of salvation.

A closer reading of Isaiah, reinforced by similar verses from Deuteronomy and the Psalms, revealed to Paul a divine plan whereby God intended to harden the hearts of the people of Israel so that the message of God’s saving acts (i.e., Paul’s preaching about the death and resurrection of Jesus) would be carried to the Gentiles. At some point their willing acceptance of God’s gift of salvation would cause God’s covenant people to

become jealous to receive a similar blessing. In the end, Jews and Gentiles would live together as God's people and rejoice in God's goodness. This, according to Wagner, is the message that Paul sought to communicate to the Christians in Rome through his frequent references to the book of Isaiah.

Wagner's view of Paul's reliance on the book of Isaiah has much to commend it. Clearly the book was important to Paul—he refers to it more than any other part of the Jewish Scriptures—and Wagner has made a solid case that Paul depended on Isaiah even more than can be learned from his explicit quotations. The question of how Paul arrived at his two-stage theory of the divine “hardening” and eventual “salvation” of Israel has long troubled interpreters, and Wagner's explanation that the theory arose from Paul's reading of particular passages of Scripture is worthy of serious attention.

Wagner's contention that Paul read the Jewish Scriptures in the light of his missionary experience and vice versa also rings true, since, as Richard Hays has shown, the bulk of Paul's quotations and allusions pertain in some way to the identity and conduct of the Christian community. Finally, Wagner's proposition that Paul found his own mission prefigured in the prophecies of Isaiah helps to explain several of Paul's more obscure references to Isaiah in his letter to the Romans. Contemporary readers might dismiss such a reading of Scripture as presumptuous, but Paul's view is no more arrogant than the claims of the Qumran community that the words of the prophets anticipated the experiences of their own community.

Despite the many strengths of his study, Wagner's work does have a few notable weaknesses. Wagner is not alone in most of these areas; similar problems can be seen in virtually all recent studies of Paul's use of Scripture. Like many others who have tried to retrace the reasoning behind Paul's biblical references, Wagner's study suffers from a lack of clear criteria for evaluating the validity of his reconstructions of Paul's thought patterns. Wagner is more judicious than most in his efforts to identify biblical allusions and echoes in Paul's letters, and nothing significant hinges on the few cases where his judgment might be questioned. He even includes a list and discussion of the criteria that he used to guide his decisions (11–13). By contrast, Wagner says almost nothing about how he arrived at his views concerning the way Paul read the text of Isaiah or how his readings might be tested. His comments on this point are limited to the oft-repeated assertion that the value of his reconstruction “will have to be measured by its ability to make sense of what Paul actually does with these texts in his letters” (32; cf. 13). But “sense” is in the eye of the beholder, and other scholars have offered different readings of Paul's biblical reasoning that conflict at many points with Wagner's views. How are we to judge between them? How do we decide whether Paul did or did not take the context of a particular quotation or allusion seriously? How do we evaluate claims that Paul

identified an unstated link between two verses that he quotes in his letter, or that his thinking was influenced by a verse or passage of Scripture that he neither quotes nor mentions? Questions such as these arise repeatedly as one wades through Wagner's detailed reconstructions of Paul's thought.

On the whole, Wagner's interpretations are as plausible as those of many other scholars who have worked in this area, though he has to strain at times to maintain his position that Paul took seriously the context of his quotations, as in his handling of Rom 10:18–21. But the fact that a reading sounds plausible to contemporary scholars does not mean that Paul actually thought in the manner described. In the end, we have no way of knowing for certain the reasoning that lay behind Paul's references to the Jewish Scriptures. But this does not excuse scholars from indicating clearly their reasons for thinking that their readings at least approximate what Paul might have been thinking rather than simply revealing the literary creativity of the contemporary reader. Wagner is clearly a creative reader, but is it possible that he might be more clever than Paul?

Additional problems arise from Wagner's ambivalence about the importance of the audience in determining the meaning of Paul's direct and indirect references to the Jewish Scriptures. In the opening chapter of his book, Wagner states, "My focus will primarily be on *Paul's* reading of Isaiah—to the extent that it can be discerned from the text of Romans itself—not, in most cases, on what the first hearers of Paul's letters might have picked up from his use of Isaiah in Romans" (19, emphasis original). In general, he maintains this focus on Paul's reading strategies throughout his book. Here and there, however, he suggests that an ancient reader who had "ears to hear" might have noticed points that Paul left unstated in his reading of a particular biblical passage or heard echoes of verses that Paul does not explicitly mention in his letter. Occasionally he questions whether an audience that knew the Jewish Scriptures would have been able to recognize an allusion or discern the links that he believes Paul saw between the verses that he cites. In the end, however, these questions have no visible effect on Wagner's analysis of Paul's use of Scripture in Romans. His study seems to envision Paul sitting at a table with a scroll open before him looking for answers to his personal questions. Nothing is said about how Paul's use of Scripture in Romans might have been influenced by the rhetorical purposes that led him to compose the letter. This is a serious omission, since it leaves unanswered the crucial question of why Paul referred so often to the Jewish Scriptures in a letter written to a group of people whom he had never met. As with all of his letters, Paul had a reason for writing as he did. Wagner's study leaves Paul in splendid isolation.

Wagner does evince awareness that his analysis of Paul's engagement with Scripture might be compromised if the initial recipients of Paul's letters, like 80 to 90 percent of

the people in the ancient world, were illiterate and did not know the biblical text well enough to follow Paul's arguments or recall the broader context of his quotations. To address this problem, Wagner suggests that Paul expected the more biblically literate members of his Roman audience to explain his reasoning to those who were incapable of reading the biblical text for themselves. But this proposal is fraught with problems. In the first place, Paul had no way of knowing which passages of Scripture the literate Roman Christians could recall from memory, and it seems unlikely that he would have presumed that they had ready access to expensive biblical scrolls and sufficient leisure time to find and study the context of the less familiar verses that he cites in his letters.

Second, it strains credulity to suppose that Paul expected the more literate Roman Christians to figure out the reasoning behind his often allusive references to Scripture when Pauline scholars with all of their resources have been unable to reach agreement on what Paul was doing in many cases. Finally, if Paul's readings of the book of Isaiah were as shocking and tendentious as Wagner says, it seems virtually certain that some of Paul's biblically literate Roman readers would have objected to some of his readings. Would Paul have taken such a risk at a time when he was seeking to overcome Roman suspicions of his message and solicit the Romans' support for his upcoming mission to Spain?

Fortunately, the Christians in Rome did not have to retrace and approve all of Paul's implicit interpretations of the Jewish Scriptures in order to be impressed by his ability to ground his arguments in the biblical text. Paul may indeed have developed his ideas in dialogue with the text of Isaiah and other biblical books as Wagner argues, but only rarely do his arguments presuppose that the audience has a solid knowledge of a particular passage of Scripture (e.g., Rom 4:1–25; 9:6–18; 1 Cor 10:1–11; Gal 4:21–31). (For more on these points, see Christopher D. Stanley, *Arguing with Scripture: The Rhetoric of Quotations in the Letters of Paul* [T&T Clark, 2004].)

In closing, it should be noted once again that none of these criticisms is peculiar to Wagner's work; they represent challenges that must be addressed by every scholar who works in this field. In the end, Wagner's book remains one of the best books to appear in many years on Paul's use of the Jewish Scriptures.