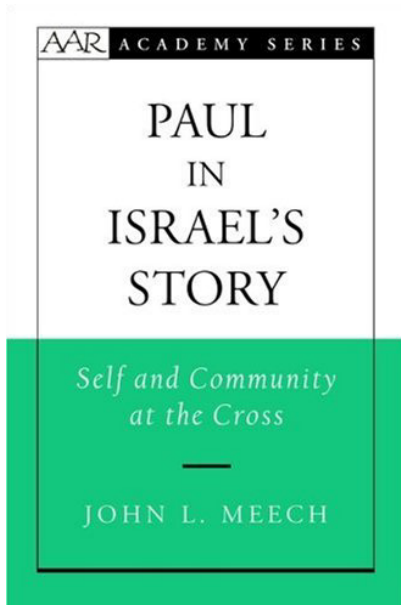


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Meech, John L.

Paul in Israel's Story: Self and Community at the Cross

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This book is an attempt to use philosophical theology to expand Ricoeur's categories of personhood to include the dimension of community and then apply that revised view of personhood to Paul's writings. In the introductory chapter, Meech presents as axiomatic that "at the heart of Paul's story is the claim that Israel as a community dies and rises in its King, Jesus the Christ (Rom. 6–8; Gal. 3:10–14)" (7). A driving question for the volume is: "Are we moderns (or postmoderns, if you prefer) really the sort of beings who can make sense of Paul's 'I have been crucified with Christ?'" (14).

In the second chapter, "Paul as Another in Israel's Story," Meech links the subjective genitive reading of the "faithfulness of Christ" in Rom 3:22, 26 with the idea that Christ replaces Israel: "When Paul confronted Christ resurrected without the Torah-observant, he recognized that Jesus himself had fulfilled Israel's hope to be the people in whom God tabernacles" (30). From here he states that he reads Israel as the divided "I" in Rom 7: "Sin in Rom. 7 is therefore a kind of monstrous counterfeit of God's Spirit, masquerading as Israel's principle of life" (33). Meech explains that Paul does not blame Israel for Christ's death, since the "I" that he sees as representing Israel in Rom 7 is trapped by sin (34). This leads to his conclusion that "When Paul faces the crucified and resurrected Christ, he is forced to recognize that only one man has fully entered into the righteous

community, and he had to die to be raised. Paul reconfigures Israel's story around this man (rather than the Torah-observant community as he had once conceived it), and that story stands in the background of Rom. 7" (35). The communally informed rereading of the atonement that comes at the end of this chapter is fascinating: "Paul really dies in Christ, that is, his former communal personality dies in the shift from Torah to Christ, and his future physical death is renarrated in the story of Christ's death. Paul is really raised into a new life, which is to say that he has a new communal structure, facing his neighbor in Christ" (44). I wish Meech had taken more space here to work out and show how his communally oriented reading of participation in the death and resurrection of Christ compares to other readings of the atonement.

Chapter 3 examines whether Paul's communal "I" is an artifact from the past that needs to be demythologized in our time. This question seems not as necessary to me as the questions I was left with at the end of the second chapter on what the communal reading of dying and rising with Christ means for our models of the atonement. For those who wish to live their faith exactly as Paul conceived it, no concern for demythologizing the communal "I" arises. For those who live in the postmodern consciousness, the communal persona of Paul and of every believer is a given. Meech's engagement with Bultmann in this chapter involves his rejection of Bultmann's timeless eschatology for Moltmann's world-affirming eschatology (58–61). Meech then goes on to criticize Bultmann's view of what it means to encounter and proclaim the risen Christ. He relies on David Fergusson's criticisms of Bultmann here, that Bultmann has a false dichotomy between "historical causality or encounter" and that Bultmann cannot show us Paul accurately, for Bultmann's demythologizing isolates the singular person from the relationships that actually form human identity (62). Another objection that Meech raises is "that Paul intends to narrate the identity of the eschatological community, not the story of the human in general" à la Bultmann (63). Later in the same chapter Meech says that Paul allows the Christ event to transform the historical sphere in which Paul's self, community, and world are evident (70). "The Church aims to represent the eschatological community that embraces all peoples in their genuine alterity" (71). This is all well and good, but Meech could strengthen his case by including a concrete definition of "the church." Ricoeur's lack of systematic definition or use of "church" that is mentioned later is no excuse for the lack of definition of this term in this community-oriented book of constructive theology (124). Somehow all the explication and interaction regarding Bultmann's demythologization in this chapter seems like a lot of work for what turns out to be a rather modest construction in response: "The crucial function of demythologizing is thus served by a more complex communal process—to interpret the past, interpret the present, and narrate the continuity between the two" (71).

Chapter 4 uses Ricoeur's *Oneself as Another* "to take a last detour to the self through community" (75). Meech helpfully and resourcefully takes Ricoeur's emphasis on the self's relationships with others to talk about how the self must always be rooted in community; even when the self has conflicts with its community, the self is still a member of the community and is responsible for communicating the story of the community (97). In two paragraphs of this chapter, Meech considers Ricoeur's admission that when the self has genuine encounters with others, the self can see "other potential universals ... in so-called exotic cultures" (95, quoting *Oneself as Another*, 289). Meech writes of the possibility that the representatives from these two different communities could discover that they have already been in one shared community (96). Although no explicit reference is made to Judaism and Christianity here, that seems to be the most clear direction in which readers can take these paragraphs.

Chapter 5 is Meech's description of an ontology of the self in community" (101). Meech's main point in this chapter is that "an ontology of the self is the correlate of a conversation in a community. The real that resists being interpreted otherwise can only be articulated properly when one considers simultaneously the self, the other, and the community in which they meet—a community that correlatively only appears where self and other meet" (102). The self must be narrated with the transcendent dimension of "living God, absent God, or empty place," the silent suffering other, and the self that stands in relation to itself by means of conscience (122–23). Meech's silent, suffering other might be taken to be an ontological analog to the Torah's figure of the marginalized and Paul's figure of the weak (e.g., Lev 23:22; Rom 15:1). The dominant strategy of the book, activating the communal nature of Christian existence to Ricoeur's *Oneself as Another*, recurs here: "Ricoeur's multidimensioned correlation of the self and kerygma far surpasses Bultmann's and ensures the connection between the kerygma and action. Yet Ricoeur continues to follow Bultmann in regarding the kerygma as a possible life story, not as the story of an actual community" (125).

In the final chapter Meech attempts to reconcile his construction of an ontology of the self with Paul's letters, relying on Bultmann's interpretation of the human being as *soma*, which Meech correlates with Ricoeur's "flesh," conscience (*syneidesis*), which Meech interprets for Paul "as the call of his neighbor in Christ" (133), and spirit (*pneuma*), which Meech defines as "*phronēsis* (wise deliberation)" or "an open conversation involving both attestation and suspicion" (133). To Bultmann's idea of how the spirit encounters the risen Lord, Meech predictably adds that such an encounter means that the person must retell the community's story (134).

Paul's phrase "I have been crucified with Christ" is finally defined by Meech not as an ontological death (135) but as a shift in how the self lives in community: to be crucified

and raised with Christ articulates a concordant discordance of the self and its community. A believer who dies and rises rejects a misdirected way of being and sets out on a way of being directed more originally to the community's aim.... An actual way of being ceases to be, and a formerly unrealized way of being becomes actual practice—a way of being that is at once new (it could not be practiced before Christ) and yet more original (in retrospect we see that the community always aimed at it, though brokenly)" (136).

Brief sections on "The Community of the Living and Dead in Christ" and "The Spirit of Christ as the Subject of the Church's Conversation" follow. In the former, Meech adopts Moltmann's communal definition of eschatological existence in a qualified way: "We must preserve the first-person perspective and never reduce the resurrection to the community's practice.... we experience community with the dead in worship, especially in the Eucharist and prayer. When we try to express this community with the dead outside the worship experience, perhaps the best we can do is to honor the regulative ideal to participate with the dead in our praxis" (139). In the latter, Meech surveys how Ricoeur and Charles Taylor describe "dialogue" philosophically and how Robert Jenson describes "Spirit" theologically. In the second description, Meech again makes the predictable move of emphasizing community: "If the Spirit of Christ is the subject of the Church's conversation, then the risen Lord is present in the Church for the world. Consequently, what the one who hears the kerygma meets is not just an authentic individual but a community, the body of Christ, in the proclaimer (142–43). In the end, with a suspicion "not predicated on the destruction of the cogito on a more original grasp of the ethical aim to embrace the suffering other," "the Church can hope to claim that the aim disclosed in our community is the true human aim" (144–45).

Exegetes may well consider this book mistitled. There is very little sustained exegesis of Pauline texts. Exegetical arguments are missing in this book. One gets the impression that Meech selects exegetical options based on how well they fit with his interpretive scheme. A theological model appears to be like a "build-your-own-PC"; one can select the components one wants in order to arrive at a satisfactory philosophical account of Paul's "I have been crucified with Christ." "Israel" is considered in this book only as a theologoumenon within Christian theology. Any attention to "Israel" as the rabbis understand it is available only in limited references to E. P. Sanders. The modern, human subject, extended into the community, remains firmly in control in this book. From a postmodern perspective, this book is strong on community but weak on the transcendent. This book will not work as a text for exegesis courses. It will work as a text for theology courses on Ricoeur or on community.