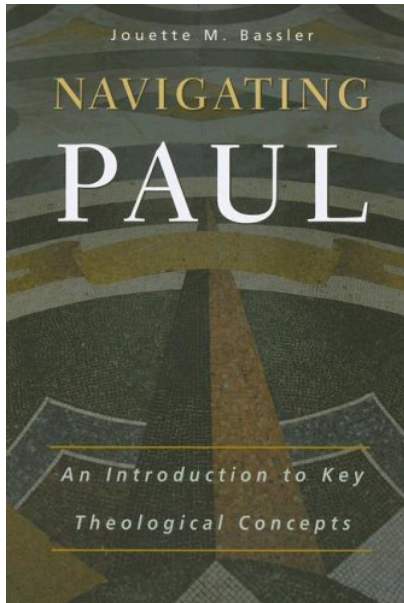


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Bassler, Jouette M.

Navigating Paul: An Introduction to Key Theological Concepts

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This seven-chapter volume of essays is intended to orient the reader to the significance of key theological themes in the Pauline letters, identified as grace, the law, faith, “in Christ,” the righteousness of God, Israel, and the End (parousia and resurrection). Bassler does not intend to write a book on Paul’s theology, since she affirms that, whilst the apostle practiced theology, she is not at all certain that he had what we would call a theology. Rather than a comprehensive map to Paul’s letters or theology she offers “navigational guides to the more difficult currents of his thought” (viii). Bassler recognizes that there is now no general agreement about the basic structure of Paul’s theology; any previous consensus seems to have collapsed.

Chapter 1 demonstrates this particularly in relation to the theme of grace. With Sanders she recognizes that grace was central to almost all forms of first-century Judaism. “Numerous Pauline references to undeserved acts of divine favour ... reflected, in a Christ-centred key, ideas current in first century Judaism” (2). Bassler seeks to uncover ways in which Paul’s views on grace may be distinctive; for example, in his discussions of suffering and the law, grace is seen to have distinctive overtones characteristic of his thought alone. Although Paul maintains the atoning death of Christ, he would also claim that believers had the privilege of suffering for him as well (Phil 1:29). Suffering is a gift

not because it has atoning value but because it marks believers' union with Christ. Bassler finds the most distinctive understanding of grace in Paul in Galatians and Romans, where "grace stands in stark opposition to the law or works of law" (5–6; although she does admit that the opposing term "law" or "works of law" is imprecise). The discussion of the law-grace dichotomy is traced from Bultmann to Dunn, arguing that the former's analysis is almost certainly wrong, not least because it grotesquely misrepresents first-century Judaism as a religion of "rebellious pride" (6). Paul's objective was the full inclusion of Gentiles in the people of God; thus he opposed a notion of grace that restricts salvation to those under the law. In any case, grace for Paul was not a static concept, and his understanding of it must have continued to grow through suffering and the mission to the Gentiles in a new locus (of grace) in the cross.

Chapter 2 deals with the most hotly disputed topic in Paul, his view of the Jewish law. There is agreement that Paul understood his call as a commission to bring a law-free gospel to the Gentiles, but there is no consensus as to whether Paul's view of the law derived from his conversion experience and thereafter remained constant or developed out of his conflicts with other missionaries. Did he, in fact, hold any consistent position on the law? Although Paul seems to treat circumcision as an indifferent matter, he is still on the margins of Jewish opinion of his time. Yet in Galatians circumcision is forbidden for Gentiles, suggesting that Paul sees it as wrong to complement faith with works of the law. Following Sanders, Bassler rejects the view of the latter as works done to earn God's favor. Dunn's view of works of the law as identity markers of God's people is more satisfying, although caricaturing Judaism as a racist, nationalistic religion. Bassler finds that both legalistic (soft or hard) interpretations of Paul's criticism of works of the law are not convincing, since attempts to fit all of Paul's references to works of the law into a single theological framework require strained exegesis. For Jews who are the object of other apostles' missions, there seems to be no objection to a continuing obedience to the law as a complement to their faith. Paul's response emerges because his opponents required Gentiles to become Jews in order to be acceptable to God. So, despite his flexibility as regards aspects of the law, Paul is totally inflexible on this issue.

Chapter 3 deals with Paul's understanding of *pistis*, the essential characteristic of those he called believers. Several things distinguished Paul's use of *pistis* from that of Greek-speaking Jewish writers: "He opposed *pistis* to the Jewish law instead of coordinating it with obedience.... he related *pistis* to Christ and he emphasized not only the element of trust but also ... an element of assent to (that is, belief in) the content of the gospel" (23). Paul's wide-ranging use of *pistis* terminology might suggest that one aspect of these may be more foundational for him than others, but Bassler regards it as more important to see these as a continuum rather than to resolve their ranking. Although for other Jewish writers trust in God and obedience to God's law were two sides of the same coin, Paul

presents the two as completely antithetical. Dunn's suggestion that Paul actually opposes Jewish national self-confidence based on their being the people of the law is a better reading.

The deeper problem may lie behind the diversity of scholarly opinion. Bassler offers a thorough and careful discussion of whether Christ's faith should be understood as objective genitive (faith in Christ) or subjective genitive (faith of Christ). Bassler seems more convinced by the translation "faith of Christ" because Paul assumes that the Romans will understand what he means by this phrase without explanation. In addition to the seven instances where Paul follows *pistis* with reference to Christ, he uses the construction twenty-four times with a different reference, always in relation to the faith or faithfulness of the individual. The ambiguous genitive phrases in Romans that *may* refer to the faith of Christ are surrounded by passages that use precisely parallel phrases that clearly refer to the faithfulness of God and the faith of Abraham. Thus for Paul "Christ's faithfulness revealed and fulfilled God's own covenant faithfulness to Israel" (33).

In chapter 4, following Deissmann and Schweitzer, the issue is raised whether "in Christ" in Paul denotes mystical reality or mere metaphor. After a useful discussion of the resistance to the language of "mysticism" in Paul, Bassler concludes that whatever language was used "more and more scholars of a non-mystical bent are acknowledging that some form of *real* union with Christ was important, even central, to Paul's experience and thought" (37). Paul, it seems, did not need to argue that union with Christ is central to the believer's experience; he simply assumed it. Yet that focus did not cause him to retreat into a mystical union in isolation from the world, but quite the reverse.

Chapter 5 offers a thorough discussion of the righteousness of God with particular reference to the Bultmann-Käsemann debate. Bassler acknowledges Käsemann's contribution in defining God's righteousness as God's power but questions whether the two can be actually equated, likewise the assumption that almost the whole of Paul's theology can be compressed into the one phrase *dikaïosynē theou*. Following insights from Sam Williams, Bassler's conclusion is that it is "not so much by determining what 'God's righteousness' means as by investigating *how* it means in Romans that we can gain real insight into its significance for Paul" (56). She perceives the starting point for this to be God's readiness to do what is right and fitting. Following a detailed discussion of the varied nuances of righteousness in Romans, Paul's argument is seen as a dialogue with the perception that God's righteousness is appropriately manifested in covenant faithfulness but moving inexorably to the conclusion that God's righteousness is now active in Christ to include Gentiles in salvation. Justification is not dealt with as a separate topic here but only certain aspects of it, other aspects being dealt with throughout the volume.

In chapter 6 the issue of who is Israel and what future Paul envisaged for historic Israel is discussed with reference to 1 Thess 2:14–16; Phil 3:2–3; 1 Cor 10; 2 Cor 3; Gal 4:21–31; 6:16; and Rom 9–11. Three options are considered for the identity of Israel: (1) “all Israel” is the elect of Israel, but there could still be a rest outside; (2) “all Israel” is spiritual Israel, the elect of Israel plus the full number of Gentiles; (3) “all Israel” is all of Israel, the elect and the rest combined, in addition to which the full number of Gentiles will also be saved. For Bassler, Paul’s view of the future of Israel rests finally on the reading of Rom 9–11, a passage that resolutely resists a definitive interpretation. “The vague allusiveness of Paul’s language allows—indeed, almost requires—the presuppositions of the reader to take charge of the interpretation” (84). A text such as Rom 9–11 becomes a mirror for us to see and examine not Paul’s views on the future of Israel but our own convictions about that future.

The concluding chapter deals with the parousia and the resurrection of the dead. After a brief overview of intertestamental writings on the theme, key texts on the parousia in 1 Thessalonians and 1 Corinthians are discussed, followed by reflection on the dichotomy of the nakedness of a disembodied soul or a new spiritual body. Following a discussion whether departure from life means immediate transfer to the presence of Christ and of the link between the cosmos and the parousia in Rom 8:18–25, Bassler concludes that “Paul’s comments on the *parousia* and resurrection present a challenging mosaic of ideas” (96), whether seen as reasonably coherent or differing due to development. Either way it is clear that Paul is convinced that God remains faithful to the faithful.

Within Christian tradition we have been led to expect that Paul’s theology can be conceptualized. If one must identify his theological concepts, then Bassler has made an excellent contribution. She has attempted always to keep context and conceptualization in tandem, a difficult exercise, since the conceptualization is always prone to universalizing tendencies with a life of their own. Bassler has written a useful short study that should prove a good aid for teaching in that it presents scholarly stances in clear, concise, and balanced form. Indeed, at points she could have been more critical of extreme positions; it is not only Bultmann who reveals a distorted view of Judaism and who is therefore “almost certainly wrong” (6–7); some stark forms of supersessionism equally merit this critique. Does her own starting point that there is now, post-Sanders, no real consensus concerning Pauline theology mean that all stances are equally viable? In my view, the best chapter in the book is chapter 3, on faith, which gives an excellent overview of the debate concerning “faith in Christ” or “faith of Christ,” presented with a clear indication that the author feels the strength of the latter position.

A particular question could be raised in relation to the sequence of chapters 2 and 3. Why should chapter 2, “Paul and the Jewish Law,” precede the chapter on faith? Is this a way of

presenting the faith-law dichotomy as a necessary prelude to the meaning of faith? One may likewise question the quest for what is *distinctive* in Paul. Such a quest is fine if the comparison were to be with Peter or James, but when it is raised in comparison or contrast to Judaism, the issue is less simple. The criterion of dissimilarity in Jesus research is now seen to be of limited or no value. Comparing Paul and Judaism already presupposes difference, whereas few question that Qumran is not part of Judaism. Paul has so much in common with certain strands of Judaism and is so different from others that the comparative task is value-laden and precarious. What is common and characteristic may ultimately be of more value, and what is distinctive may not be in contrast to Judaism.

One statement in Bassler's generally careful study I found problematic; she notes: "It thus seems ironic that Paul, having demolished the law as a barrier that denies gentiles access to grace *as gentiles*, then sets up a Christological barrier that denies Jews access to grace *as Jews*"(8). In Galatians Paul opposes a failure by some to recognize Gentiles in Christ as Gentiles, but it seems a strange logic that we then allow him to use ethnic reasoning against Jews as Jews. Basic to this discussion is Paul's recognition of the abiding difference between Jews and Gentiles in relation to Christ, which I have argued at length elsewhere.

Despite these reservations Bassler's study is a worthy addition to the ongoing debate concerning how to construct a "theology of Paul." Her navigation of these concepts will help toward this goal.