

RBL 10/2008

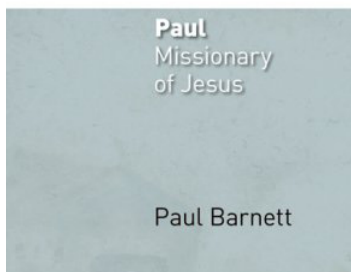


Barnett, Paul

Paul: Missionary of Jesus

After Jesus 2

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008. Pp. xvi + 240. Paper.
\$16.00. ISBN 0802848915.



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Paul Barnett's book on the apostle Paul is a fine contribution to the literature. Barnett's writing style is flowing, easy to follow, and often elegant. From page 1, this volume is extremely interesting and, for its size, sheds an uncommon amount of light on Paul's life and mission. Its main thesis is that Paul was *not* "the real founder of Christianity." Barnett poses the issue in these terms: "Was Paul a true missionary of Jesus? Embedded in that question are others. Did Paul know about Jesus' life and teaching? Did Paul preach Jesus' message? Was Paul true to Jesus' intentions? Did Paul continue in the trajectory begun by Jesus?" (2). In a nutshell, the answer to all of the above is yes. Barnett starts out with a discussion of Paul's relation to the historical Jesus. By means of a serviceable table of references to Jesus in Paul's letters (18–20), it is argued persuasively enough that the apostle, by one means or the other, had more than a passing acquaintance with the Jesus of the Gospels. Consequently, in comparing the teaching of the Pauline Epistles with the teaching of Jesus, and by bringing alongside of Paul Luke's contemporaneously written account in Acts, it cannot be, contends Barnett, that Paul struck out on an independent course from his Lord, thereby becoming "the real founder of Christianity." The whole is encapsulated in a quotation from J. Ross Wagner: "Paul's mission ... is nothing less than the outworking of Jesus' own mission" (99). The heart of the book is chapter 7, in which Barnett demonstrates capably enough that Paul's mission to the Gentiles was but the

logical extension of “Jesus’ promise to the nations” (Joachim Jeremias), as forwarded by the Synoptic Gospels especially.

I must say that as a member of “the choir” I hardly needed to be convinced of Barnett’s conclusion that “there is no wall between Jesus and Paul, but only level ground between them” (22). Thus, the principal value of the book, I would propose, resides in the insights it offers into Paul’s life and apostleship. The following are particularly noteworthy.

(1) The discussion of Paul’s Tarsus years, including his Roman citizenship and his grasp of Greek, is brief but nonetheless helpful. I found it especially interesting that the principal route to Roman citizenship was either because of *emancipation* from the servitude of a distinguished patron or as a *reward* for significant services rendered to a noted Roman leader. In either case, according to Luke’s narrative, Paul’s announcement to the Roman tribune that he was born a citizen of Rome rings true (Acts 22:28).

(2) The survey of Paul’s formative years in Jerusalem yields some important insights into the psyche of the young Saul of Tarsus. Preeminently, while Jerusalem did not likely witness wholesale bloodshed during his years there, there were at least two immensely important religious issues current: the hated poll tax, symbolizing the kingship of Caesar over the covenant people; and the series of crises arising from Pilate’s attempts at subverting the laws of God.

A young man like Paul who grew to maturity at that time and who was religiously intense could not have been unaffected by these circumstances. In short, the era in which the young Tarsian Paul was living in Jerusalem was one of considerable religious and political tension. Paul the young Pharisee must have been deeply aware of the issues for his religion that Roman occupation created. (32)

(3) The chapter entitled “Why Paul Persecuted the Church” takes up the question, What kind of Pharisee was Paul precisely? Given that his teacher was the illustrious Gamaliel, the student of the even more illustrious Hillel, it would seem to follow that Paul at least started out as a Hillelite (as opposed to the Shamaites). The Hillelites, as illustrated by Acts 5:34–39, were typically tolerant and accustomed to taking a wait-and-see attitude. But if such characterized the school from which Paul emerged, then what gave rise to his persecuting zeal? Barnett’s explanation is along the following lines. Paul’s “advance in Judaism” (Gal 1:14) started out as academic, in the cloisters of Gamaliel’s academy. However, with his consent to the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:54–8:1) and the subsequent persecution of the church (Acts 8:2–3), he was thrust into the limelight in a way in which he had never been before. “In short,” writes Barnett, “his significant ‘advance in Judaism’ was achieved in scholarly privacy but was revealed at large in Jerusalem by his attempt to

‘destroy’ both the church and its ‘faith’ ” (51). In other words, Saul was so incensed and outraged by Stephen’s perceived attack on the temple that he had no choice but to reassess at least a portion of his training “at the feet of Gamaliel” (Acts 22:3). I might add that this would not be the first or the last time a student would venture to disagree with a teacher.

Especially insightful is the way in which Barnett links the Christian Paul’s reassessment of the significance of Jerusalem to Stephen’s speech, especially verses 44–53. Says Barnett:

Implicit in Stephen’s criticism of the temple was a rejection of the eschatological centrality of Jerusalem. For him the mission of God for the gathering of the nations was not centripetal (pulling in to the center) but centrifugal (driving out from the center). That is to say, Stephen’s antitemple polemic reversed the direction of the prophetic expectations, which saw God “pulling in” the nations to Jerusalem/the temple as the center of God’s end-time plan for Israel and the nations. (52)

The same is true of Philip the evangelist, who was called “the evangelist” not merely because he was a passionate preacher but also because he understood that God’s purposes were *outward from* Jerusalem, not *inward to* Jerusalem. By contrast, the apostles remained in Jerusalem, probably because they saw the Holy City as the center of God’s end-time universe (52). Barnett continues: “The notion of Jerusalem as centrifugal and not centripetal in God’s mission to the nations, which became so much associated with Paul, had its seeds in the vision of Stephen and the activities of Philip” (53).

(4) The chapter on Paul’s conversion tackles the question of whether Paul was “called” or “converted.” Since Krister Stendahl’s essay, “The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West” (1963), discussions like this have become inevitable. Again as one of “the choir,” I found Barnett’s conclusion to be entirely convincing:

Was Paul “converted” as well as “called”? The weight of the evidence from the book of Acts and the specific references, and the identifiable allusions in Paul’s letters, leaves no doubt that the Damascus event represented a complete relational and moral turnabout that was accompanied by a radical new vocation as one commissioned to preach to the Gentiles to bring them into the divine covenant.

The direction and trajectory of Paul’s life and movement from Damascus onward are written on every page of Paul’s letters and are the engine that drives the narrative of the Acts of the Apostles. To deny this is to deny the evidence of history. (75)

The one flaw of the chapter is its less than accurate rendering of the “New Perspective on Paul.” Barnett links the NPP to Stendahl, who in some ways was a forerunner of the current movement. The slant resides in the claim that fundamental to the NPP are two views: (1) the Judaism of Paul’s day was not a legalistic system based on “works of the law” that provoked individual guilt; (2) Paul’s teaching on justification did not criticize the law but rather provided a means of entry for Gentiles to the covenant (55 n. 3). The first point is misleading in that the NPP does indeed acknowledge that “works of the law” form the basis of Judaism, not in terms of “legalism” but of “nomism” or covenant service. That the Israelite would have had a sense of guilt follows from the sacrificial system itself. Why else would sacrifice be necessary, if not to atone for sin? As for the second, everyone acknowledges that Paul opposed the perpetuity of law because its continuance would have prevented the influx of Gentiles into the community of the new covenant. What Paul criticized was an attitude toward the law that would keep it intact once it had served its salvation-historical purpose. But again, such an outlook is not unique to the NPP.

A similar critique of the NPP appears as an excursus: “E. P. Sanders’s Theory of Covenantal Nomism” (130–32). Barnett wrongly attributes to Sanders the origin of the now familiar “new perspective,” and he is simply incorrect that Sanders is a proponent of the NPP. As James Dunn himself clarifies, Sanders gave New Testament scholarship “*a new perspective on Second Temple Judaism*” (*The New Perspective on Paul: Collected Essays* [2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008], 5). The very reason why, in his Manson Memorial Lecture of 1982, Dunn coined the phrase “The New Perspective on Paul” was because Sanders, while providing legitimate insight into Judaism, still worked with an “old perspective” outlook on Paul himself.

Barnett’s prime objection to the NPP is voiced in a quotation from Sanders:

Thus one can see already in Paul how it is that Christianity is going to become *a new form of covenantal nomism*, a covenant religion which one enters by baptism, membership in which provided salvation, which has a specific set of commandments, obedience to which (or repentance for the transgression of which) keeps on in the covenantal relationship, while repeated or heinous transgression removes one from membership. (*Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977], 513)

I agree with Barnett that Paul is not substituting one nomism for another, simply because “nomism” pertains to the Mosaic Torah. Rather, Christology was the deciding factor between Paul and the various forms of Judaism and Jewish Christianity. It is not that Paul introduced another boundary-maintaining code, even with baptism and the Lord’s

Supper, in the place of the entire body of laws given to Israel as a mark of her distinctiveness and separation from the Gentiles. Instead, he substituted a person who has rendered the law obsolete by demolishing “the dividing wall of hostility” that once so radically bifurcated the two formerly alienated segments of the human family (Eph 2:14–15).

Nevertheless, there are similarities between covenantal nomism and the new covenant as preached by Paul, as is evident from the quotation from Sanders, principally, I would say, the factors of “getting in” and “staying in.” Under both old and new covenants, one enters into a relationship with God and thereafter remains in that relationship by fidelity to the covenant bond. But once more, the distinguishing feature of the new covenant is Christology, as accompanied by pneumatology: Christ and the Spirit are now the “boundary markers” of the new creation community. Moreover, Barnett’s claim that 2 Cor 3 rejects Sanders’s “sunny verdict on Judaism/old covenant” is a caricature, because throughout *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* Sanders is concerned to stress the notion of obedience = perseverance. His verdict is no more “sunny” than that of Moses in Deut 30:11–14.

(5) The question of why Paul went to the Gentiles is given two answers. One is apocalyptic ferment. At that time, Judea was in the grip of “apocalyptic fervor” (138), due to certain policies enacted by the Romans. Therefore, Paul endeavored to “cash in” (my phrase) on this “apocalyptic fervor” in his mission to the nations. Barnett is right to set the Pauline mission in the context of apocalyptic, because Paul’s theology as a whole is conditioned by this prospect of a new heavens and a new earth (Isa 65:17). The discussion could have been enhanced by tying into the question that characterizes Galatians in particular: What time is it? In Paul’s hands, this question functions as a two-edged sword. On the one side, his answer is radically different from the Jewish answer. As a Pharisee, so says N. T. Wright, he would have answered: we are living in the last days before the great act of God within history to defeat the pagans and liberate Israel. As a Christian he answered: we are living in the first days after the great act of God within history to defeat sin and death and liberate the whole cosmos (*What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997], 141). What time it is, then, marks the foremost difference between Judaism and Christianity (see further my *An Exposition of Galatians: A Reading From the New Perspective* [3rd ed.; Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2007], 26–30).

The second answer to the question why Paul went to the Gentiles is the hardening of Israel, itself an apocalyptic motif. The statement of Rom 11:25 that a hardening has come upon a part of Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles comes in, is no passing observation

but a direct appeal to Scripture (Deut 29:4; Isa 6:9–13). In turn, this hardening gave Paul the signal that the moment had arrived for the “coming in” of the Gentiles.

In short, it was against this political, apocalyptic, and prophetic background and under the conviction that God had “hardened” Israel that Paul decided to leave Syria-Cilicia and strike out toward Rome, bringing the message of Jesus the Messiah and his impending return in salvation and judgment (1 Thess 1:10; 4:13–5:11; 2 Thess 1:9; 2:1–12; 1 Cor 7:29; 15:23).

(6) There is the connection between the righteousness of God and the kingdom of God. According to Barnett, the “righteousness of God” meant for Paul being acquitted by God of wrongdoing (negatively) and being declared to be “in the right” with God (positively). To be “righteoused,” as Barnett translates the *dikaio-* word group, is possible only through faith in Christ the faithful one. Of course, such is virtually indisputable, though it must be added that being “righteoused,” by the nature of the case, entails liberation from sin (Acts 13:39; Rom 6:7, 18; see my *Studies in the New Perspective on Paul: Essays and Reviews* [Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2008], 149–64).

That the latter consideration (liberation from sin) was much on Paul’s mind is confirmed by Barnett’s notation that the kingdom does not consist in food and drink but righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom 14:17). His treatment would have benefited from a discussion of the relation of justification as a declaration and righteousness as the life of the covenant. In any event, Paul’s employment of righteousness was consistent with and entailed a genuine extension of Jesus’ own conception of the righteousness of the kingdom, as both were grace-based and ritual-free (196).

All in all, as stated at the outset, this volume is a valuable contribution to the literature on Paul. If nothing else, Barnett has succeeded admirably in reminding us that Paul was a missionary theologian. With all our deliberations about Paul’s theology, it is easy to overlook the most basic fact of all: Paul was a *missionary*. Consequently, the engagement of his insight and creative abilities in unpacking and applying the Scriptures of Israel was, in his mind, to the end of winning the nations for Christ.