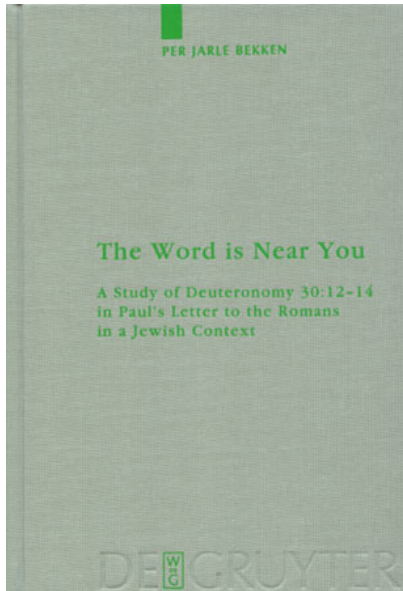


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Bekken, Per Jarle

The Word Is Near You: A Study of Deuteronomy 30:12–14 in Paul's Letter to the Romans in a Jewish Context

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For more than a decade, scholars studying Rom 10 have appreciatively engaged Per Jarle Bekken's seminal article situating Paul's use of Deut 30:12–14 in a Jewish context ("Paul's Use of Deut 30,12–14 in Jewish Context," in *The New Testament and Hellenistic Judaism* (ed. Peter Borgen and Søren Giversen; Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1995), 183–203). We are now fortunate to have a fuller expression of his argument in *The Word Is Near You*. The monograph is built upon the author's 1998 doctoral dissertation, but the footnotes give evidence of continuing research in the nine years between the dissertation defense and the appearance of this volume. In all, the book is a welcome contribution to the ongoing study of this vexing Pauline text; however, it would be a mistake to pigeonhole this book as simply a study of Paul. Much of the volume is devoted to careful reading of Philo's employment of Deut 30:12–14, and in these chapters as well Bekken shows himself to be a deft reader of Jewish texts, challenging critical orthodoxies en route to giving an explanation of the Philonic passages in question.

The argument consists of six chapters and is followed by an extensive bibliography and indices of modern authors and references. The first chapter surveys the state of the question. Here, two broad issues are assessed. Bekken's first concern is with the largely neglected figure of Philo as an important contemporary voice for understanding Paul as a

Jewish reader of scripture. Various scholars have indicated Philo's importance, but few have delved deeply in exploring his writing in parallel with Paul's. Bekken focuses on Philo's use of Deut 30 in *De virtutibus* 183–184 and *De praemiis et poenis* 79–84. The other cluster of issues Bekken introduces pertains to Paul's use of Deut 30:12–14. Bekken's conclusions will downplay the idea that Paul's exegetical method is idiosyncratic for a Jew of his day.

The second chapter studies the meaning and function of Deut 30:12–14 in the texts under consideration. This part of the study employs text-linguistic tools to explicate the “textual organization and line of thought” (28) for the two Philo texts as well as Rom 10. Looking at *Virt.* 183–186, Bekken argues that Deut 30 is used to discuss conversion: both of a non-Jewish proselyte and of a repentant Jew (34). In *Praem.* 79–84, the biblical text underscores the idea of blessing being brought about by obedience to the law and the wisdom of those who keep the law when compared to other nations (41). Turning to Paul, Bekken establishes that Rom 10:5–13 is an argument for the “subtheme” expressed in 10:4 that “Israel did not know that Christ was the τέλος of the Law” (47–48, 51).

Chapter 3 then turns to an analysis of the citations themselves. Philo, Baruch, and Paul are compared in the areas of exegetical method (all use exegetical paraphrase). Bekken then shows that the exegetical structures (quotation followed by exegetical paraphrase that gives way to an exposition) are parallel as well. The chapter concludes that charges of Paul's idiosyncratic handling of scripture are unfounded, inasmuch as the apostle's exegetical practice is in step with the literary conventions of his day.

From here Bekken turns to in-depth exegetical studies of *Virt.* 183–184 (ch. 4), *Praem.* 79–84 (ch. 5), and Rom 10:4–17 (ch. 6). Bekken entitles his chapter on *De virtutibus* “Conversion of Jews and Gentiles.” He views Philo's use of *μετάνοια* as applying both to repentant Israelites and to Gentile proselytes. The chapter suggests that Deut 30 indicates how one should behave if one wants to claim “membership within the true people of God” (Bekken's definition of conversion, 102–12). For Gentiles, conversion would also entail joining with the Jewish nation (87). The chapter generates important points of comparison with Paul as Bekken details ways in which Philo (much like Paul) is updating Deuteronomy in step with his broader set of convictions.

“The Law and the Future Hope of Blessings” is the summary title given to the chapter on *De praemiis et poenis*. Throughout this section Bekken aligns himself with the arguments of Peder Borgen that “historical and national elements are integral to Philo's perspective” (117), a position contrasted with a line of reading represented by Richard Hecht and Ulrich Fischer that sees a “dehistoricised individual universalism” in Philo's ethics (116). Bekken makes his case well, arguing that Philo employs Deut 30 to demonstrate how

obedience to the law is not only a precondition for future blessing but also a marker distinguishing Jewish people from the other nations (121). Here Bekken is making an important contribution to the study of Philo. Indeed, the monograph deserves serious attention from scholars of Diaspora Judaism in general and of Philo in particular.

The final chapter is an engagement of almost seventy pages with Rom 10:4–17. Bekken leads into his discussion of Rom 10 by showing how it builds on the argument begun already in 9:30–33. He argues for the position staked out by Sanders and Dunn that Israel's problem was in pursuing the law in the wrong manner: "faith in Christ is the only manner of attaining the Law which leads to righteousness" (161). Therefore, Gentiles can come in as Gentiles, not as converts to Judaism. Bekken's building on "the New Perspective" is clear in these pages as he underscores that pursuing the law by works (ἐξ ἔργων) indicts Israel as pursuing a way of righteousness "open only to Israel or converts to Judaism" (162). This is the theme not only of 9:30–33 but also of 10:1–3 and 10:4–17. One of the great strengths of Bekken's reading is the way in which it allows the reader of Romans to see a coherent, developing argument in this portion of the letter. Set next to his early Jewish contemporaries, Paul's appeal to Deut 30 for equal inclusion of the Gentiles turns the work of Philo (and Baruch) on its head: the latter use Deut 30 as part of an appeal for the special place of Israel in God's dealings with the world. Both Paul and Philo use Deut 30 to speak of the "conversion" necessary to be rightly related to God, but for Philo this means being included in the Jewish people while for Paul it means faith in Christ (176).

When he comes to interpreting Paul's use of Deut 30 itself, Bekken begins with a straightforward reading: Christ need not be fetched from afar not only because he has already come and been raised but also because the word preached has been brought near to the hearers (179). Bekken's argument grows more complex, though no less persuasive, as he interprets Paul's claim that the "word" of Deut 30 is "the word of faith which we preach." Bekken concludes that this is the law as properly understood, the law of faith, the law read as having faith in Christ as its goal.

Paul and Philo are brought together again in the exegesis of 10:6–10 in order to return to one of the overarching claims of the book: Paul's own hermeneutical method finds a ready home within the Jewish hermeneutical milieu in which Paul lived. Each interprets Deut 30:12–14 in view of his eschatology. Bekken will even claim that obedience to the law is required in both; however, for Paul this "obedience" means adherence to the law as proclaiming the coming Christ (187–89). This is the most significant point at which I was not sure that Bekken had followed his argument through to the end. Bekken claims, "In a similar way to Philo, Paul also focuses on the Law as a way of participation in the eschaton" (189). But once Paul has reinterpreted "focusing on the Law" such that the law

is referring to Christ rather than to its own precepts, is it possible any longer to claim that Philo and Paul focus on the law “in a similar way”? Bekken finds in Paul an eschatologically induced transformation of how one should read the law but continues to speak of faith in Christ as a way of keeping the law. The question of how to articulate continuity and discontinuity in such a reading of Rom 10 requires further direct discussion and nuance.

Subsequent sections on Rom 10:11–13 and 10:14–21 further underscore that Paul is rereading the law, which itself had “explicitly upheld the distinctions between Jews and non-Jews” (195). Exegesis of these subsequent passages bolsters earlier claims about the centrality of Jew-Gentile issues in Rom 9–10 and that the law as something that sets apart Jews as God’s people is the problem Paul is seeking to overcome.

This volume is full of insightful exegesis and commentary, both on Paul and on Paul’s Jewish contemporaries. Each section and chapter, as well as the book as a whole, is punctuated by clear, concise summary statements. Bekken has clearly articulated a reading of Paul that encapsulates the best insights of New Perspective scholarship, that sets Paul into meaningful conversation with his Jewish contemporaries, and that raises numerous points for fruitful scholarly conversation in the future.