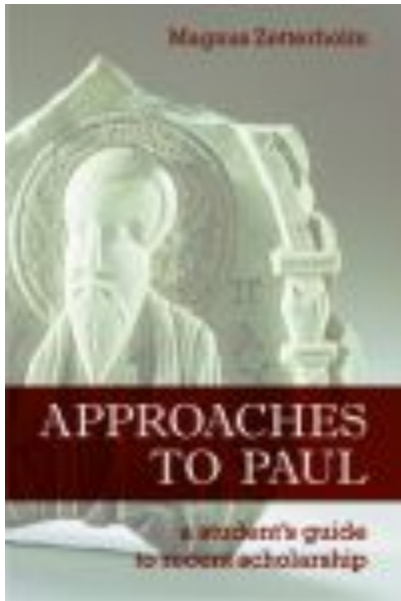


RBL 03/2010



**Zetterholm, Magnus**

***Approaches to Paul: A Student's Guide to Recent Scholarship***

Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009. Pp. xv + 270. Paper.  
\$20.00. ISBN 9780800663377.

Nijay Gupta  
Ashland Theological Seminary  
Ashland, Ohio

Magnus Zetterholm's *Approaches to Paul* is a meticulously researched guide to Pauline scholarship, especially with a view toward perspectives on the apostle generated by New Testament scholars in the last two generations. Zetterholm is interested, however, in a particular aspect of the interpretation of Paul, namely, whether he ultimately broke apart from and stood against the Judaism of his day or remained within it. The book not only offers various viewpoints but establishes a critique of the former position insofar as the majority of Pauline scholars have been unduly influenced in their interpretation by "the dogmatically motivated dichotomy between Judaism and Christianity" (x). (Zetterholm admits, in the preface, that he approaches the issue from a secular point of view and lacks theological conviction.) The plan of the book is quite simple, progressing more or less chronologically from Paul's time through to interpreters as recent as 2008.

In the first chapter, Zetterholm introduces the aims of the book and briefly engages in a discussion of the historical Paul. He is particularly interested in looking at the two dominant and irreconcilable views that Paul either stood within Judaism (albeit a "universalistic" and "messianic" one) or opposed it. Through his recounting of the way scholars have understood the issues and read the evidence, his ultimate desire is to discern

“the most historically plausible picture of Paul and the development of the early Jesus movement” (10).

The treatment of Paul’s life and apostolic ministry in the first chapter is concise and uncontroversial. Zetterholm relies heavily on Acts for this biographical reconstruction, as many scholars do. But, of course, this immediately supports the case he will make that Paul maintained fidelity to his Jewish heritage.

In the second chapter, Zetterholm sets out to define how “Christianity” came to be pitted against “Judaism,” in the interpretation of Pauline theology. He begins with the Tübingen school and F. C. Baur. Each time he treats an interpreter of Paul, he offers a useful biographical sketch and insight into that individual’s social and intellectual context. He explains that “Baur’s basic assumption is that Christianity represents the ‘absolute religion’ and that all messianic particularism was thwarted with the death of Jesus” (38). Baur saw Judaism as inferior to Christianity and as the religion that Paul himself rejected. Taking a step back, Zetterholm pauses to reflect on “anti-semitism in antiquity” (40–47), which includes ancient *Christian* anti-Semitism (47–58). In this chapter Zetterholm also reflects on a number of theologians and scholars who set Judaism and Christianity at odds: Martin Luther, Ferdinand Weber, and Wilhelm Bousset.

In chapter 3 Rudolf Bultmann, Ernst Käsemann, and Günther Bornkamm are discussed at length as scholars who helped to form the “standard view” of Paul’s attitude toward Judaism. Zetterholm, after describing their individual contributions to the issue at hand, repeatedly concludes that the dichotomous attitude toward Judaism and Paul’s so-called “Christianity” stems from a particular theological construct that will dominate attitudes toward Paul’s letters and early Jewish literature for many years. Zetterholm, however, like many others, observes that dissenting voices can be found early on, such as J. G. Montefiore, S. Schechter, and G. F. Moore. He finds, however, that in their own time such early protests were not taken seriously.

In the next chapter, Zetterholm moves forward to Krister Stendahl, E. P. Sanders, and the revolutionary “New Perspective on Paul.” Stendahl is appropriately described as “an extraordinarily farsighted scholar” in his concern for the standard view of Paul’s ostensible antagonism toward Judaism, and Sanders is given the status of being such an important figure, in terms of deconstructing views of Judaism being a legalistic religion, that Zetterholm emphasizes his work as the natural point of departure for subsequent Pauline scholars. Attention is also given at this point to the “inconsistent Paul” (Heikki Räisänen) as well as the very influential work of James D. G. Dunn (who coined the phrase “the New Perspective on Paul”), and N. T. Wright (who attempted to paint a picture of a consistent Paul in line with the positive perspective on Judaism espoused by Sanders and Dunn).

While Zetterholm recognizes that these interpreters of Paul attempted to locate Paul within a Jewish context, others have taken it even further. Thus, he refers to a viewpoint he dubs “the radical new perspective,” the focus of chapter 5.

In this fifth chapter, called “Beyond the New Perspective,” Zetterholm surveys the work of Lloyd Gaston, Peter J. Tomson, Stanley Stowers, Mark Nanos, and Caroline Johnson Hodge. These scholars, according to Zetterholm, treat Paul as belonging to first-century Judaism, and many of them are quick to point out that his concern was not with Jews but with Gentiles. Some of these Pauline interpreters understand Paul to be encouraging Torah obedience for Jews and faith in Christ for Gentiles. In that sense, Paul has no real contention with Judaism per se. Zetterholm ultimately values the fact that these “radical new perspective scholars” do not allow “Christian normative theology” to bias or color their interpretations. Again, this is precisely Zetterholm’s qualm with Bultmann, Käsemann, and Bornkamm.

The conservative voices of modern Pauline scholarship are sounded in chapter 6, “In Defense of Protestantism.” Direct attention is paid to Frank Thielman (“from plight to solution”), A. Andrew Das (“beyond covenant nomism”), Simon J. Gathercole (“boasting in Christ”), and Stephen Westerholm (“the explicitly Lutheran Paul”). Although Zetterholm reserves a few positive comments for these scholars, overall he takes issue with the fact that they all seem to bring their “normative Protestant theology” to bear on their “exegesis”: “scholars working from within a confessional paradigm usually reach confessional results” (193).

In the penultimate chapter, “Breaking Boundaries,” Zetterholm recounts those scholars who take the discussion even further and criticize the “traditional paradigm” from various angles. He includes a very diverse group of people, including Alain Badiou, Neil Elliott, Kathy Ehrensperger, and Davina Lopez (among others). For such scholars, power and authority are important issues, and Paul’s Jewishness is the natural point of departure where views are taken further beyond the “radical new perspective.” A summary of each phase of Pauline research appears in the final chapter. Zetterholm reasons retrospectively, again, that there is a problem with “scholars” who approach Paul’s letters and the history of his thought, religion, and work as “theologians.” Thus, he writes, “The idea of the absolute opposition between Paul and Judaism is a theological consequence of a certain theological problem” (239). He accepts that, with a cacophony of interpretive voices, we may end up only with “a blurry and elusive portrait of Paul” (239). But his personal preference is revealed in the last line of the book, where he wonders if the “radical new perspective may provide an interesting starting point” for a new paradigm to emerge.

The value of Zetterholm's meticulous hermeneutical and historical research is almost incalculable. He has provided a synthesis of the research and perspectives of a host of Pauline interpreters from Baur's time to the present. One can turn back to his summaries, time and time again, to be reminded of the distinctive views of such scholars. Indeed, while many books offer comparisons of such people as Bultmann, Sanders, Dunn, and Wright, it is useful to have other key figures in Zetterholm's book, such as Bornkamm, Nanos, Elliott, and others. Also, when it comes to how Paul is viewed with regard to Judaism, Zetterholm reframes the discussion by showing that, while Dunn and Wright argue for a Jewish Paul, they still locate him in sharp distinction with some major aspect of Judaism, even if it is just "Jewish particularism."

While there are many merits of Zetterholm's work, a number of problems and peculiarities emerged through the book. Though it is a rather small matter, Zetterholm uses the term "non-Jews" where many would use "Gentiles." If he has a reason for this, it is not clearly stated. More problematic, when he quotes Paul's letters, he uses "Gentiles" presumably to designate the same group. Why not modify the translations for consistency? Another (rather innocuous) issue is the title of the book: *Approaches to Paul*. I assumed that this book was a basic introduction to interpreting Paul *in general*, whereas Zetterholm's interest is in approaches to Paul and his relationship to Judaism.

Other concerns are more pressing. While Zetterholm has presented a generally cogent case, based on the history of Pauline interpretation, for viewing Paul as *not* breaking from the Judaism of his time, he appears to have missed some key voices in the discussion. I was shocked that no mention was made of Francis B. Watson's two editions of *Paul, Judaism, and the Gentiles* (1986; revised and expanded in 2007), as Watson's conclusions are starkly opposed to Zetterholm's "radical new perspective." While this is the one serious lacuna, it is also unfortunate that no space was given to the work of Donald Hagner and also to the contributors of the two volumes entitled *Justification and Variegated Nomism* (2001–2004).

Perhaps Zetterholm's main (methodological) concern in this book is to demonstrate how theological convictions bias scholars in their interpretation in such a way that they sometimes force the historical evidence to align with their normative theological paradigms. The inverse of this would be that Zetterholm approves of a kind of nontheological approach to the historical Paul. In the first place, however, one can hardly say that ideological interests are not at play in *all* work on Paul. After all, Zetterholm himself points out that the new perspective on Judaism was largely influenced by post-World War II concern over anti-Semitism. Are some ideological concerns more useful in historical interpretation than others? How do we cope with the fact that many, if not most, interpreters of Paul have theological commitments and doctrinal constructs?

Finally, one could voice the late Brevard Childs's perspective: What sense does it make to study the historical Paul in a "secular" way when the very texts under scrutiny are *canonical* texts that were collected and shaped by the church for the purpose of doctrinal orthodoxy and ecclesial and personal edification?

The above criticisms notwithstanding, Zetterholm has provided a very handy guide to Pauline scholarship on the apostle and his relationship to the Judaism of his day. Whether or not one finally agrees with his appraisals of the various viewpoints, this book can easily serve as a useful quick reference to students and scholars alike.