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Ashworth's "Paul's Necessary Sin: The Experience of Liberation" - Book Review

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ASHWORTH, T., *Paul's Necessary Sin: The Experience of Liberation* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 270. ISBN 0754654990, Hardback, \$99.95, £55.

This reviewer has a number of things in common with the author of the book. Besides our sharing of the same given name, we have both engaged in the academic study of Paul. Like Tim Ashworth I have discovered that we need to pay attention to Paul's use of words and that traditional interpretations need to be reexamined. My graduate study at Brown University led me also to explore the cultural context of Paul's letters and to try to determine what Paul says about the Jewish law in relation to the Gentile condition. Additionally, I share with the author an interest in interpreting and teaching the Bible from a Quaker perspective.

I differ, however, from the author in some significant ways. First, Ashworth wants to detect the root meanings of words and apply that to every instance where the word is used. I think we can reinterpret Paul in significant ways if we pay attention to the way in which language is used within its cultural context and interpret idiomatic expressions according to those contexts. Secondly, Ashworth seems to move quickly from the literary context of Paul's letters dealing with Jews and Gentiles to talk broadly about the human condition. I think we fail to understand Paul properly if we ignore the ethnic distinctions Paul makes, particularly in Romans and Galatians (specifically, if we fail to understand Paul's message about Gentiles not needing the Jewish law). Thirdly, I'm also aware of our own social locations. Ashworth is in dialogue mainly with scholars who are either from the UK or taught there (J. Dunn, J. Ziesler and E. Sanders) and who represent the mainstream of Anglicanism in Britain. I am more influenced by North American scholars on Paul (S. Stowers, J. Gager, L. Gaston, R. Hays and A. Malherbe), and have no religious concern with what Anglicans teach about Paul. Finally, Tim Ashworth and I come from distinctly different Quaker traditions: Ashworth represents classic, British Quakerism, while I am a pastor of a programmed Friends meeting in Indiana.

Rather than simply summarise the main arguments of the book and briefly respond to its overall thesis, I have chosen to engage the text by closely analyzing the way in which Tim Ashworth presents and argues his research. There's no doubt he has spent a great deal of time studying Paul. Anyone who does that should be commended. No one should be surprised by a British Quaker taking on the scholars of the Church of England. It is a bold move, but anyone who challenges the best of the academy needs to be able to support his or her contentions. This book contains detailed philological and exegetical studies of specific Pauline texts. That's exactly what we need to do in order to help people rethink who Paul was and what he taught. I regret to say, however, Ashworth's methodology and analysis is seriously flawed and, therefore, he is not able to support his argument. I can only take one example and try to illustrate how what he does with the Greek text is fallacious and lacks any real merit.

A case in point is Ashworth's treatment of the noun *stoicheion* and the verb *stoicheō* in Paul. Ashworth wants to get to the 'consistent core of meaning' and claims "row" or "series" 'represents the 'root meaning' (p. 37). He refers to the 'consistent hard core or skeleton of meaning' as 'to keep aligned' or 'alignment'. As he does with nearly every Greek word or phrase he discusses, he here commits the error commonly called the etymological fallacy. In spite of his few quotes in the introduction from a few people supporting such a practice, there seems to be more of a consensus today among linguists to favor a synchronic analysis of words rather than treat them like boxes that carry an original root meaning around with them wherever they go. There is a place for talking about etymology and root meanings and what the literal sense might be as a way of understanding the all too often obfuscating English idioms used in modern translations. But Greek, like any other natural language, developed idiomatic expressions which must be understood in contexts of meaning.

Ashworth's proposal is that Paul uses these words mentioned above to emphasise living by the Spirit as opposed to living by regulation. Regarding these terms, Ashworth first discusses Gal. 5:16–18, 22–25. He claims the translation of the verb

stoicheō as ‘walk’ does not bring out the distinction Paul is making between the phrase ‘walk (*peripateite*) by the Spirit’ in v. 16 and ‘let us also walk (*stoichōmen*) by the Spirit’ (p. 39). He wants to translate the latter with the literal expression ‘keep aligned’ (p. 39) in distinction to being merely synonymous with ‘walk’ (*peripateō*). For Ashworth, this implies the person is not the active agent in moral behavior, but it is the Spirit who causes the person to act morally. Ashworth says Paul’s ‘exhortation is not about conduct; it is rather about remaining in a fundamentally changed way of living that inevitably brings a transformation of behaviour’ (p. 40). I don’t think Ashworth makes his case here. The verb in Gal. 5:25 is still an active subjunctive with the force of an exhortation to do something. Ashworth changes it into a passive ‘keep aligned by the Spirit’ (p. 39). The word ‘by’ expresses the dative voice of the noun as the indirect object, not the action of the object on the subject as in the passive voice. The passive does occur in Gal. 5:18, ‘But if you are led by the Spirit’. In order to support his contention about the meaning of the word, he would have to translate the phrase as ‘let us also align by means of the Spirit’. The individual in this text does the aligning, albeit through or by means of the Spirit. But it is not an action the Spirit does for the person. At least not in this text.

Ashworth goes on to discuss Rom. 4:12. Again he points to the ‘core meaning’ (p. 40) or a ‘simple precise meaning’ (p. 41). Rather than ‘walk (*stoichousin*) in the footsteps (*ichnesin*)’, Ashworth prefers ‘keep aligned in the footsteps’ (p. 41). He notes that this literal sense has disappeared in the NRSV: ‘follow the example’. Ashworth discusses this text only to try to maintain his thesis that *stoicheō* has this basic sense of alignment in every context in which it occurs. How could we prove otherwise? It happens that Paul uses the noun *ichnos* in another context. In 2 Cor. 12:8 Paul asks two questions, the second of which is elliptical and requires us to supply the verb from the former phrase: ‘Did we not walk (*periepatēsamen*) by/in the same Spirit? [Did we] not [walk] by/in the same footsteps (*ichnesin*)?’ The idiom of following an example as ‘walk in their steps’ is so common, Paul could leave out the verb in the second phrase. That’s why it’s easy to understand Paul expressing the same idiom in the Galatians context but using a different verb simply for variation—an important rhetorical device often overlooked by those who want to squeeze the literal meaning out of every word.

The next text is Gal. 6:16. The phrase in question is ‘to as many as walk/follow (*stoichēsousin*) by this rule (*kanon*)’. Ashworth discusses this in the larger context of Gal. 6:14–17 (pp. 41–43). In his brief treatment of this text, Ashworth pushes etymology beyond the limits of credulity when he claims three of the Greek words (*stauros*, ‘pale, cross’; *kanōn*, ‘rule, standard’; *stigma*, ‘mark, brand’) in this context all have the root idea of ‘stick’ and Paul is somehow making a point (no pun intended) based on their literal meanings, which conforms to the literal meaning of *stoicheion* as alignment. Sure, *stauros* and *kanōn* both having something to do with wooden poles, but a *stigma* is not related in any way, since in Greek usage a *stigma* is not even the result of being poked with a sharp stick. The main point here seems to be Ashworth’s repeated attempt to say Paul doesn’t establish a standard code (*kanon*) of conduct by which people are to live. Instead, Ashworth translates the phrase in Gal. 6:16, ‘as for

those who will keep aligned by this stake' (pp. 42–43). Ashworth thinks 'stake' (*kanōn*) refers back to the cross (*stauros*) as a 'pale', in the sense of a 'boundary marker' in v. 14. Would a first-century reader have gotten this connection? If these terms were so closely related, might we not expect other Greek authors to use such synonymous terms within the same context—ever? A search of the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* shows no other author uses these two terms within a proximity of 250 words. The metaphorical sense of *kanōn* as a 'rule' was quite common in this sort of context. Compare 4 Macc. 7:21–22, which uses *kanōn* in a very similar sense as Paul: 'What person who lives as a philosopher by the whole rule (*kanōn*) of philosophy, and trusts in God, and knows that it is blessed to endure any suffering for the sake of virtue, would not be able to overcome the emotions through godliness?'

The final example relates to the meaning of the plural noun *stoicheia* in Gal. 4:9 and in a related text Col. 2:8, 20. These are texts in which this noun is often translated as 'elemental spirits'. In order to support his case about words always carrying with them their root meaning, Ashworth feels he must prove *stoicheion* in these contexts also refers to alignment or his argument 'breaks down' (p. 49). He goes so far as to claim that the concept of elemental spirits is a later development for the plural *stoicheia* (p. 51). This is simply not the case. Aristotle, for example, in GC 314a.26 and 29 uses this term to refer to the four elements (fire, air, water, earth), which usage he attributes to the pre-Socratic philosopher Anaxagoras. In a fragment attributed to Zeno of Elea by Hesychius, Zeno applies Paul's expression 'elements of the world' to the Titans. Philo, a contemporary of Paul, uses the expression 'elements of the world' in *Aet.* 109.4 and describes them as becoming immortal. This had become a very common expression and an established concept long before Paul.

When Ashworth discusses the Gal. 4:9 text, he claims that the relative pronoun in Gal. 4:10 'whose slaves you were' refers not to the antecedent noun 'elemental spirits' (*stoicheia*) in vs. 10, but to 'beings that by nature are no gods' in v. 8. When you look for the antecedent to a relative pronoun, you look for the preceding noun that agrees in gender and number. You can't skip one and keep going back into what is really a previous sentence to find a noun you like, one that fits your theory.

I've only been able here to engage with one small section of this book. But this is a representative example of the sorts of philological, grammatical and exegetical errors that run throughout the book. That is unfortunate, because I think Ashworth's goal in the book is laudable. Contemporary followers of Pauline Christianity continue to be enslaved to principles of Christian conduct rather than discover the freedom and transformation Paul describes as the life of the Spirit. But that doesn't mean Paul didn't advocate preaching and proclamation or exhort people to follow codes of conduct for moral living. In the end, Ashworth fails to make his case. Nevertheless, I hope he will continue to work on the project of reinterpreting Paul, but that the next time he will be more careful about his Greek exegesis.

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