

2004

Review of Dickson's "Mission-Commitment in Ancient Judaism and in the Pauline Communities"

Kent Yinger

George Fox University, kyinger@georgefox.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/gfes>



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Yinger, Kent, "Review of Dickson's "Mission-Commitment in Ancient Judaism and in the Pauline Communities"" (2004). *Faculty Publications - George Fox Evangelical Seminary*. Paper 57.
<http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/gfes/57>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the George Fox Evangelical Seminary at Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications - George Fox Evangelical Seminary by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.

John P. DICKSON, *Mission-Commitment in Ancient Judaism and in the Pauline Communities: The Shape, Extent and Background of Early Christian Mission* (WUNT, 2/159; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003). xiv + 413 pp. ISBN 3161480708. €64.00/\$99.50.

This revised version of the author's PhD dissertation (September 2001, Macquarie University) takes part in a renaissance of study on mission in Paul and the New Testament. Just in the past five years see J. Nissen, *New Testament and Mission*, 3rd edn (2004), L.J. Lietaert Peerbolte, *Paul the Missionary* (2003), E. Schnabel, *Urchristliche Mission* (2002), P. Bolt and M. Thompson (eds.), *The Gospel to the Nations* (2001), R. Plummer, 'The Missionary Nature of the Church' (Dissertation 2001), W. Reinbold, *Propaganda und Mission* (2000), and J. Ådna and H. Kvalbein (eds.), *The Mission of the Early Church* (2000).

Dickson asks, 'In what ways and to what extent were Paul's converts expected to promote their new-found faith to unbelievers?' (p. 4). He concludes that Paul did, indeed, 'expect his converts...to promote the cause of the gospel in their local context' (p. 226) and 'to devote themselves to the salvation of those with whom they had daily contact' (p. 227; see also p. 308).

A brief introduction (10 pages) surveys the history of research on the topic and establishes its focus (eight primary Paulines [including Colossians]). He rejects the 'minimalist' definition of mission as intentional proselytizing activity (or 'evangelizing', so McKnight), opting instead for a continuum or 'range of activities by which members of a religious community desirous of the conversion of outsiders *seek to promote their religion to non-adherents*' (p. 10, emphasis added). This range of activities involves: (1) information (like public advertising), (2) education (esp. further enlightenment of members), (3) apologetic (defense against external criticism or

arguments to gain public approval), and (4) proselytism, either (a) internal (e.g., Pharisees winning other Jews to Pharisaic viewpoint), or (b) external (conversion of outsiders). If some, or most, of this range of activities is present, a community or individual may be said to evince mission-commitment.

Chapters 1 and 2 examine mission in Judaism. Here Dickson interacts explicitly with M. Goodman (*Mission and Conversion* [1994]) and S. McKnight (*A Light among the Gentiles* [1991]) who define mission solely in terms of 4(b) above. In line with their restricted definition, they conclude that Judaism was not actively mission-minded. Dickson, in contrast (following Paget, 'Jewish Proselytism', *JSNT* 62 [1996]), marshals considerable evidence that 'some forms of Judaism...expressed various types of missionary commitment' (p. 49). The selection of Jewish texts is sufficiently broad and fairly examined so as to substantiate Dickson's claim. This represents a helpfully nuanced clarification in understanding the possible missionary character of Judaism, somewhere between the maximalist position of most past interpreters (e.g., Harnack; more recently Feldman) and the minimalist position of Goodman and McKnight.

Chapter 3 looks at Paul's understanding of himself as prophet and apostle and of the churches under his influence as partners in the gospel mission. As regards the former, readers may now refer to the simultaneously published *Paul the Missionary* by L. J. Lietaert Peerbolte (2003), esp. chs. 4–6. The second half of the chapter begins the focus on Paul's mission expectation of his churches. After noting the paucity of Pauline material on this subject, he discounts five passages traditionally taken to reflect an expectation that Paul's churches (= every believer) would actively engage in local and regional mission (so O'Brien; cf. 1 Thess. 1.8; Phil. 1.27; 2.15-16; Eph. 6.15, 17). Paul did, however, expect these churches to be actively involved in local outreach via authorized heralds (e.g., evangelists) and in the larger mission of the gospel via partnership with Paul (see esp. Phil. 1.3-5; 2 Cor. 9.13). This sets the stage for a 'two-dimensional view of mission' (p. 177): apostolic heralds proclaimed, congregations partnered with them in a variety of ways (i.e., promoted mission).

Chapters 4 and 5 probe the role of local heralds. A few are identified from texts in 2 Corinthians and Philippians, and an understanding of authorized gospel messengers is drawn from New Testament use of Isa. 40–65. It is unlikely that Paul expected each member to partake in 'preaching the gospel [*euangelizesthai*]' in light of his understanding of this activity as an authorized, eschatological heralding activity. 'The Jewish traditions from which Paul appropriated his gospel-terminology conceived of gospel-heralding as an eschatological, divinely commissioned activity. Such vocabulary was therefore inappropriate as a description of the mission of believers in general' (p. 153).

Chapters 6 through 10 take up various ways in which local congregations were expected to be involved in mission. Through financial help (ch. 6) and prayer (ch. 7) they were active partners in Paul's gospel work. This prayer was primarily for the success of Paul's mission, not for unbelievers themselves (exception: 1 Tim. 2.1-10). In their own locale they were to commend the gospel by mixing in society (ch. 8), adorning the gospel with honorable behavior (ch. 9), and showing and telling the truth in public worship (esp. 1 Cor. 14.20-25) and ad hoc conversations with outsiders (ch. 10). Thus, 'Paul expected his converts to work not only for the success of *Paul's*

mission but also for the salvation of those within their *local* sphere of influence' (p. 308).

A chapter with 'Summary and Conclusions' is followed by three appendixes: Epaphroditus as missionary, the meaning of *euangelistês*, and texts less likely pointing to Pauline expectation (1 Cor. 7.16; Rom. 12.17, 20-21). A bibliography and three indexes (references, modern authors, subjects) conclude the volume.

Dickson places himself between those who find little or no Pauline expectation of congregational mission-commitment (so Bowers and Ollrog) and those with an 'overstated affirmation of the same' (p. 177; so van Swigchem, O'Brien, Ware and Plummer). He faults Goodman and McKnight for an overly restrictive definition which prejudices the issue—even much of the Christian movement might not qualify as mission minded in this sense. His broader definition allows for demonstrable mission-commitment on the part of Jewish and Pauline communities, yet (in general agreement with Goodman and McKnight) sees the more direct proselyte-making in the hands of teachers, apostles and evangelists, but not generally expected of every community member. 'The task of local evangelization lay in the safe hands of locally active evangelists' (p. 151). Those utilizing Dickson's position should not overstate the difference to Goodman and McKnight; he nuances rather than overturns them.

This is a well-written and well-conceived monograph. Apart from four incorrect Greek diacritics (Appendix B, pp. 330, 332, 335 [2×]) and a pointer to previous material as 'argued...below' (p. 317, referring to pp. 122-29), it is free from editorial errors. Of course, individual points of interpretation might be challenged; for instance the evangelistic versus apologetic import of 1 Thess. 4.12 ('behave properly toward outsiders') is overplayed (pp. 262-69). However, the fair and thorough treatment of other positions in the field and of relevant passages in the New Testament and ancient literature make *Mission-Commitment* the best tool at present in English for those wanting to delve into the subject of Paul and mission. The bibliography should include J. Nissen, *New Testament and Mission* (1999 [3rd edn 2004]) and two recent works in German: W. Reinbold, *Propaganda und Mission* (2000), and E. Schnabel's massive *Urchristliche Mission* (2002, intended to replace Harnack), and can now be updated with the addition of Lietaert Peerbolte's *Paul the Missionary* (2003).

Kent L. Yinger