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## Review of VanLandingham's "Judgement & Justification and the Apostle Paul"

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*Judgment and Justification in Early Judaism and the Apostle Paul.* By Chris VanLandingham. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006, xvi + 384 pp., \$29.95.

This slightly revised version of Chris VanLandingham's 2000 Ph.D. dissertation under George Nickelsburg forms an important addition to the ongoing evaluation of Jewish and Pauline soteriology in the wake of E. P. Sanders's *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977). At first glance, it appears to be simply another book trying to figure out how justification by faith and judgment according to deeds work together in Judaism and in Paul. However, the reader will quickly discover that VanLandingham poses a far more radical challenge to a whole host of received traditions, both scholarly and theological: justification by faith has little to do with final salvation; obedience, not faith, causes salvation; grace does not mean "unmerited favor," etc.

The impetus for VanLandingham's investigation is Sanders's new perspective on Judaism, namely, that most Jews were not works-based legalists but relied fundamentally on God's unmerited favor shown in the election of Israel. While few critics of Sanders are interested in resurrecting caricatures of legalistic Judaism, many have been troubled by Sanders's elimination of Jewish works-righteousness as the foil for Pauline interpretation. Thus, various studies have suggested that works-righteousness could still be found in some versions of Jewish soteriology (see, for example, some of the essays in *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, vol. 1: *The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism* [ed. D. A. Carson, Peter T. O'Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001]). VanLandingham's critique heads in a different direction: grace as unmerited favor played no role in Jewish soteriology. Lest critics of the New Perspective on Paul applaud too quickly, VanLandingham will argue that grace played an equally minimal role in Paul's soteriology.

The book's argument unfolds in four simple steps. Grace, as traditionally understood, was absent from Jewish soteriology (chap. 1). Behavior, not divine mercy, determined final destiny in Judaism (chap. 2). Likewise for Paul, the outcome of eschatological judgment had little to do with grace or justification by faith, but depended upon one's works (chap. 3). The *dikai-* word group referred not to forensic justification, but to the initial stage of salvation when one is "made righteous" (chap. 4).

Chapter 1 examines the meaning and role of "grace" in early Judaism. (His frequent use of "post-biblical Judaism" as an equivalent term is confusing since it includes the

book of Daniel.) "I find divine grace remarkably absent in Jewish accounts of Abraham's election, or of election in general. . . . God elected Abraham and his descendants as a response to Abraham's obedience. God's grace is not an issue" (p. 16).

This forms the cornerstone of the entire book and tackles an almost unquestioned scholarly consensus as to the nature of grace/election in Israel. Two points are of particular note. First, he disputes the generally understood definition of "grace" as unmerited, unmotivated, undeserved favor or kindness. Instead of a divine attitude held in spite of what one deserves, grace refers to a *beneficence that is deserved* (p. 65). Second, he surveys a large number of biblical and Second Temple texts to demonstrate that divine beneficence to Abraham and to Israel, including election, is never unmerited, but always a response to obedience (especially to Abraham's obedience on behalf of Israel).

Readers may be surprised at the strength of the evidence he marshals in this and other chapters (for a different voice, consult studies such as Rowley's classic *The Biblical Doctrine of Election* [London: Lutterworth, 1950] or Novak's *The Election of Israel* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995; not considered as far as I can tell]). This opening chapter shows both the strengths and weaknesses of the entire volume. Instead of the very narrowly focused analysis found in most dissertations, this study charts a new landscape in understanding Jewish and Pauline texts, one that is neither traditional nor New Perspective. This breadth is also its weakness, since it can only give cursory and suggestive treatment of a host of critical minutiae. To give but one example, Deut 7:7-8 and related OT texts are almost universally held to indicate God's unmerited grace in the election and redemption of Israel. "It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the LORD set his heart on you and chose you . . . [but] because the LORD loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand." These texts receive brief discussion with plausible counter-interpretations (pp. 40-42), and VanLandingham is certainly aware of opposing viewpoints, but the broad sweep of the book does not allow the kind of thorough interaction that will be necessary to reverse carefully argued opinions.

Chapter 2 deals with the criteria for salvation in Jewish literature. He is particularly exercised by Sanders's thesis that salvation cannot be "earned" and that Jews did not think they could be righteous enough to merit such salvation (p. 67). "Is there a *quid pro quo* involved in God's mercy, or is it completely undeserved?" (p. 122). He holds that the former is always fundamental. Even in the Qumran hymns, with their emphasis on human unworthiness, "God responds to repentance with forgiveness and purification," even there it is "deserved" (p. 124); "salvation and eternal life result from human effort" (p. 125).

Chapter 3 examines Pauline texts, especially Romans 2. The author argues: (1) that Paul is particularly concerned with moral behavior for his Gentile converts, since this moral blamelessness constitutes the apostle's consistent eschatological hope, not the recognition of a legal verdict ("justification"); (2) that the last judgment is retributive (based solely upon works, not upon proleptic justification by faith); and (3) that loss of salvation for moral misbehavior is possible. He appears to adopt Donfried's schema of justification (initiation stage), sanctification (present experience), glorification/judgment (based upon obedience), but rejects that author's understanding of an already/not yet tension in justification. Thus, "the Last Judgment in Paul always depends on one's deeds, not upon one's faith. The role of deeds or behavior should not be confused with the role of faith or believing, especially faith as the initial act in the Christian life" (p. 214). Again, the breadth of the study is both breathtaking and too cursory.

No one, including me, comes away unscathed in this chapter. The radical continuity posited between Paul and Judaism may appeal to advocates of the New Perspective,

until they realize the continuity is with a form of Jewish nomism *sans* covenantal elements. Pauline scholars, on the other hand, who agreed with the more nomistic Judaism portrayed in chapters 1–2 now find an equally nomistic Paul. “Other than making Jesus Christ the tribunal [rather than Torah], Paul has not altered Jewish belief in the Last Judgment in any significant way. Like his Jewish contemporaries, Paul maintains that . . . an individual’s eternal destiny will be decided at the Last Judgment and that one’s eternal destiny will be adjudicated on the basis of works” (p. 240).

Finally, chapter 4 takes up the language and concept of “justification.” The *dikai-* word group refers only to an initiatory element (= “make righteous,” pp. 246, 303) with no necessary impact on the outcome of the last judgment for final salvation. “Justification” is a mistranslation and is decidedly not forensic; it “simply cannot refer to the gift of acquittal at the Last Judgment” (pp. 244–45). Most of the important bases are covered and given a challenging reinterpretation, including lexical analysis and treatment of relevant Jewish and Pauline texts.

The book closes with a helpful summation of Jewish/Pauline soteriology. “At the time of faith, a person who has been ‘made righteous’ is forgiven of past sins (which then become a dead issue), cleansed from the guilt and impurity of sin, freed from the human propensity to sin, and then given the ability to obey. The Last Judgment will then determine whether a person, as an act of the will, has followed through with these benefits of Christ’s death. If so, eternal life will be the reward; if not, damnation” (p. 335).

Some readers may be inclined to dismiss this non-Reformational reading of Paul and the OT, but there is a great deal to be gained from this book. The traditional understanding of grace as unmerited favor does run the risk of cutting the nerve between divine and human action. (Recent studies of *charis* in Greco-Roman benefaction might strengthen the book’s argument on this point.) Various Jewish and Christian texts do portray God as repaying human obedience with life. The (forensic?) nature of *dikai-* terminology is still worth reconsidering. The author’s concluding appeal to distinguish more carefully between texts referring to the beginning point of salvation and its end point is well worth heeding (p. 334).

Overall, however, I remain unconvinced by VanLandingham’s daring and well-argued reconstruction. Here are three areas of concern. The portrayal of Sanders’s new perspective on Judaism, against which he argues especially in chapter 2, seems unfairly skewed toward a sort of monergism (grace alone). A rigid contrast between “*quid pro quo*” and “completely undeserved” hardly represents Sanders’s covenantal nomism in which salvation is “established on the basis of the covenant,” yet still “requires . . . obedience.” I could not help but feel that the “nomism” element of Sanders’s solution had been unfairly sublimated to the “covenantal” element (for a critical voice acknowledging the both/and in Sanders’s position, see Simon Gathercole’s *Where is Boasting? Early Jewish Soteriology and Paul’s Response in Romans 1–5* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002]).

Second, in chapter 4 on justification, the analysis of *dikaioynē theou*, so central to the position of most others, is given only minimal consideration (pp. 248–52). In the same chapter, an initial survey of the debate over the meaning of justification is confused (pp. 242–44). Statements such as “very little disagreement exists,” most (even Catholics) “endorse the forensic reading” and “almost unanimously favor a relational reading,” and “Roman Catholicism now officially endorses the traditional Lutheran position on justification” gloss over hotly debated issues (not to mention missing Cremer’s distinction between a forensic and a relational interpretation).

Third, I often felt that his equating of “earned” and “deserved” (in spite of American dictionary usage, cf. p. 2, n. 1) missed the possibility in Jewish and Pauline texts that salvation can be “unearned,” yet still “deserved.” He rightly sees in the language of “walking worthy,” etc., that grace cannot be divorced from behavior, but too easily

assumes that such language implies merit or earning as the causative factor (see, for example, 1 Thess 2:12; 2 Thess 1:5, 11).

I hope to see serious engagement with this book by biblical scholars. Its careful attention to the sources will force every reader back to the texts, which can never be a bad thing, can it?

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