
Paul and the Gift. John M. G. Barclay. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2015. Pp. xvi, 656.

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In *Paul and the Gift* John M. G. Barclay (henceforth JB) explores the language of gift in Paul and particularly how it is to be understood in the Letter to the Galatians and in the Letter to the Romans. The reading of Paul offered in this book, as the author himself presents it, “may be interpreted *either* as a re-contextualization of the Augustinian-Lutheran tradition, returning the dynamic of the incongruity of grace to its original mission environment where it accompanied the formation of new communities, *or* as a reconfiguration of the ‘new perspective’, placing its best historical and exegetical insights within the frame of Paul’s theology of grace” (573). JB’s proposition is to show that the notions of gift and perfection of grace found in the apostle Paul are best understood in terms of “incongruity,” that is, the unconditioned gift of God-in-Christ to Jews and Gentiles without regard to superior ethnicity, status, or cultural prestige (360).

The first section of the book surveys multiple meanings of gift and grace throughout history, e.g. in the Greco-Roman World, Augustine, Luther, Barth, Sanders and recent discussions of Paul and grace. Starting with Marcel Mauss’s famous work “*Essai sur le Don*” (1925), JB highlights that our modern western idea of gift (the Western “pure” gift), where the beneficiary is not required to give back, is completely alien to the ancient world where one can simply not think of the notion of gift without also having to give/receive something in return. Indeed, this concept of reciprocity is clearly found in the Greco-Roman World in both Roman patronage and Greek euergetism, for instance. As for the Jews, JB points out that although they do not appear to have adopted this “Mediterranean culture of reciprocity,” the “Jewish ideology is undergirded not by the ethos of a ‘pure’, unreciprocated gift, but by an emphasis on the certainty of reciprocation from God” (44). In studying the concept of “perfection” (following the work of K. Burke, 1954), JB will go on to suggest six ways in which the gift/grace is perfected: superabundance, singularity, priority, incongruity, efficacy, non-circularity (66–75). To be sure, JB argues, they do not constitute a “package deal” since one may perfect one or several without perfecting them all.

In the second section of *Paul and the Gift*, JB analyses a variety of texts portraying different understandings of divine grace in Second Temple Judaism. According to JB, the Wisdom of Solomon shows that mercy cannot be extended to the undeserving to the point of undermining the justice that sustains the universe (194–211, 310), while *4 Ezra* maintains that God will reward the righteous with congruous mercy and that those who will be saved will be saved *qua* the righteous and the Torah-observant, “not on the grounds of sentiment or arbitrary preference”

(280–308, 313). Correspondingly, Philo presupposes that God's gifts are neither unjust nor random since God gives to those who are "worthy" of his benefits (212–38, 310). On the other hand, other texts perfect the incongruity of divine grace as we read in the Qumran *Hodayot* (1QH^a), which calls a particular attention to the polarity between this divine kindness and the humans granted this grace who are physically and morally worthless (239–65, 311). Likewise, Pseudo-Philo's *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* portrays Israel's larger story as "permeated by a mercy incongruous with its persistent sin" (266–79, 312). Among these Jewish thinkers of Second Temple Judaism, Paul is perhaps to be placed in the middle of these arguments about grace; although Paul's voice is consistently distinctive due to the Christ-event and the Gentile mission, and the relation of both to the incongruous mercy of God (328).

What this grace/gift is and how it is perfected are the questions JB answers in his third and fourth sections, dealing with the Epistle to the Galatians and the Epistle to the Romans, respectively. In contrast to Luther's reading of Galatians, JB argues that rather than stressing the "subjective" individual conscience, this letter underscores instead the "objective" system of values (391). In this way, the divine gift—this incongruity of grace due to the Christ-event—is "neither coordinated with creation nor with Torah, but with a particular event endowed with universal significance" and it does "not correspond to the worth of its recipients, nor to any previously established system of worth" (446). Similarly, according to JB, in his letter to the Romans Paul underlines the "newness of life" arising from the Christ-event, which is the moral consequence of the gift (its reciprocity), located not only on the conscience of the individual believer but also of the whole community. Simply put, Christian "obedience" is the proper response to the incongruous gift of God in Christ (517).

In closing, I offer my evaluation of the volume as a whole. The reading of Paul that JB offers here is certainly well balanced, especially in that his project succeeded admirably in being "historically plausible, exegetically responsible, theologically informed, and [...] hermeneutically useful" (7). The different texts from authors of Second Temple Judaism analysed by JB are very well documented, which enables him to show the relationship between these texts and what we find in the letters of Paul with respect to grace/gift. It is precisely this use/interpretation of grace/gift in Paul that is the great contribution of JB's book: the Christ-event is the unique hermeneutical key for understanding divine grace as an incongruous gift (an unconditioned gift expecting reciprocity). JB does a fantastic job in showing how Paul, in using language of antiquity, is not creating a new word, rather he is giving it a new content (by its relation to Christ): Paul is using a wide word (grace/gift) to which he attaches a theological meaning. Moreover, throughout the third and fourth sections of the book, the reader will certainly appreciate how JB portrays Paul as being radical about incongruity of grace, but not to its effect (perfection of grace).

Hence, a gift is fulfilled when it is received and responded to (to reach its *telos*); unlike Augustin, for instance, who believed that gifts from God cannot be rejected. The reader will also enjoy JB's constant dialogue with ancient and contemporary commentators of Paul (e.g. Augustine, Luther, Barth, Bultmann, Sanders, Dunn, Martyn, Kahl, Wright) throughout his book and his fair and informed conversation with the "different schools on Paul." In particular, the discussion JB carries on with Luther is enlightening. Indeed, what is distinctive in Luther is the "permanent state of incongruity" of grace, where "believers live perpetually from a reality outside of themselves," hence a gift-giving "stripped of the instrumental reciprocity" (116). JB will then point out Luther's excessive emphasis on the unconditioned grace of God and the individual transformation that happens in the conscience of the believer. JB will argue instead for the *reciprocity* that comes with God's gift/grace expecting a proper ethical response from those who are in Christ.

Overall, *Paul and the Gift* seems to me to be a milestone in Pauline theology studies, and it will most definitely stimulate further research. However, one may underline JB's silence on this Pauline notion of gift/grace in both the patristic (e.g., Origen) and the scholastic tradition (e.g., Thomas Aquinas), especially among the Church Fathers who lived in the Greco-Roman world, spoke Greek, and whose writings often represent an advance over Paul's construal. This is not a major critique, though, since JB's book provides the reader both interpretations of grace/gift prior or contemporary to Paul (e.g., Second Temple Judaism) and substantial interpreters of Paul on grace in church history (e.g., Marcion, Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and several modern authors). Finally, in reading JB's book and his hermeneutic of Pauline theology and the Christ-event, one may also raise the question as to whether we are to think of the "Christ-event within the theological frame," or "the theological frame within the Christ-event."¹²

¹² This question was raised by John Barclay himself during Christof Landmesser's review session *Paul & the Gift* at the "Inhalte und Probleme einer neutestamentlichen Theologie" Seminar Group at the 71st General Meeting of the SNTS, 3 August 2016, held at McGill University, which I was delighted to attend.