

Judgment & Justification in Early Judaism and the Apostle Paul

Chris VanLandingham

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SUMMARY

VanLandingham critiques the idea of 'covenantal nomism' by addressing the meaning and function of judgment by works in early Judaism and Paul. He does not advocate returning to the Old Perspective, for he finds this method of reading Paul to be incorrect also. He argues that Abraham received the covenant as the reward for his obedience. Grace and mercy do not refer to unmerited divine actions of forgiveness. Early Judaism, including Paul, agreed that the final judgment was according to works and that it determined one's destiny. 'Justification by faith' does not mean acquittal at the judgment. Christ's death only atones for one's past sins, frees one from the power of sin, and gives one the ability to obey God's will. Paul and his contemporaries agreed that the criterion that determined whether one received eternal life or damnation was one's obedience.

RÉSUMÉ

VanLandingham critique la notion de « nomisme d'alliance » en considérant comment le judaïsme ancien et Paul abordent le sujet du sens et de la fonction du jugement que Dieu porte sur les œuvres humaines. Il ne préconise pas de retourner à « l'ancienne perspective », car il trouve aussi cette lecture des écrits pauliniens incorrecte. Il considère qu'Abraham a reçu l'alliance comme la rétribution de son obéissance. La grâce et la miséricorde n'ont à ses yeux pas de lien avec un pardon divin immérité. Paul était d'accord avec le judaïsme ancien pour considérer que le jugement final serait basé sur les œuvres, et que cela déterminerait la destinée finale de chacun. La « justification par la foi » ne signifie pas l'acquiescement au jugement dernier. La mort de Christ n'expie que les péchés passés, elle libère du pouvoir du péché et apporte la capacité d'obéir à la volonté divine. Paul et ses contemporains s'accordaient pour penser que le critère qui détermine si un individu obtient la vie éternelle ou la damnation, c'est son obéissance.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

VanLandingham kritisiert die Vorstellung des „Bundesnomismus“, indem er die Bedeutung und Funktion des Gerichtes nach den Werken im frühen Judentum und bei Paulus behandelt. Er vertritt keine Rückkehr zur alten Perspektive, da er deren Methode, Paulus zu lesen, ebenfalls nicht korrekt findet. Er argumentiert, dass Abraham den Bund als Lohn für seinen Gehorsam erhielt. Gnade und Barmherzigkeit verwiesen nicht auf unverdiente göttliche Vergebungshandlungen. Das frühe Judentum inklusive Paulus stimmte darin überein, dass das letzte Gericht nach Werken sei und dass es das Schicksal jedes einzelnen festlegte. Der Tod Christi sühnt nur die vergangenen Sünden, befreit von der Macht der Sünde und schenkt die Fähigkeit,

Gottes Willen zu gehorchen. Paulus und seine Zeitgenossen stimmten darin überein, dass das Kriterium, anhand dessen ewiges Leben oder Verdammnis festgelegt würden, der individuelle Gehorsam sei.

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VanLandingham not only opposes the New Perspective on Paul, but he also seeks to overturn the Old Perspective. In light of the Protestant emphasis on justification by faith and the claims of E.P. Sanders and the New Perspective that Paul (and early Judaism) agreed that salvation is by grace not works, VanLandingham suggests another option for understanding judgment by works. This work contributes to the evaluation of 'covenantal nomism' by challenging Sanders' claim that for early Judaism salvation was based solely on God's grace. VanLandingham argues instead that (most) early Jewish authors held that eternal life or damnation was the result of one's obedience, which God judges at the final Assize. Paul, he claims, adopts this same perspective about judgment by works: one's obedience, which is the criterion of the final judgment, determines one's eternal destiny.

VanLandingham begins by analyzing the basis on which God entered into a covenant relationship with Israel (chapter 1). His goal is to challenge Sanders' interpretation that election was founded on God's grace. He discusses the origin of the Abrahamic covenant as it is described in Genesis 12, 15, 17 and how these portions of Genesis were interpreted by second temple Jewish authors. Abraham received, he argues, the covenant based not on God's grace but because of his obedience. While VanLandingham provides a significant challenge to Sanders' understanding of the election of Israel, most will not be surprised by his interpretation of the second temple texts. Perhaps most surprising is his claim that in Genesis the covenant is a reward for obedience.

In chapter 2, he argues that, for a significant portion of early Judaism, obedience did not simply maintain or give evidence of one's place in the covenant. Rather, obedience to the Torah was the means to eternal life, and disobedience resulted in damnation. The judgment is indeed according to works, and it determines one's eternal status. Salvation is the reward given to the obedient. The conclusions drawn from chapter 2 are applied to Paul in chapter 3. According to VanLandingham, Paul also thought that the final judgment is based on one's deeds not whether one believed, and the judgment determines one's status before God and one's eternal destiny. To claim that all believers will be saved regardless of their moral behaviour renders Paul's moral exhortations and his comments about divine judgment meaningless.

In the final chapter, VanLandingham argues that the phrase 'justification by faith' has been completely misunderstood by Pauline scholars. In particular, he maintains that terms from the dikai- root rarely have a forensic or judicial meaning and 'do not refer to an acquittal at the Last Judgment' (p.331). Rather, these terms refer to the initial benefits of Christ's death: forgiveness from past

sins and deliverance from Sin.

Underlying VanLandingham's argument is a basic concern for divine justice. Fundamental to his thesis are the definitions of mercy and grace introduced in chapter 1. Mercy (חַן; רַחֵם) and grace (חֶסֶד) are not unmerited divine actions in which God passes over human transgressions. Rather, grace refers to God's loyalty to the covenant (pp.55-57), and mercy is the reward given to the repentant (pp.57-60). VanLandingham finds these concepts of grace and mercy, which are developed first from the Hebrew Bible, throughout second temple Judaism.

This work will certainly draw mixed reactions. I note here three broad problem areas that will need to be addressed for the argument to be convincing. First, although VanLandingham references a significant number of primary sources, he never attempts to understand his selected (proof) texts within the context of the whole work. It is not enough to claim that *Jubilees*, for example, says the final judgment is by works. The important question, which is not asked, is how does this function with the soteriological scheme that the author of *Jubilees* develops? Exploring themes will only get us so far and can quickly result in unfair comparisons.

Second, VanLandingham's thesis does not adequately account for Paul's Christology or pneumatology. The effects of Christ's death cannot be limited simply to freeing a person from the human inclination to sin, wiping the slate clean, and giving one the potential to be obedient with the Spirit's assistance (p.335). Further, it is doubtful that VanLandingham has understood rightly the eschatological orientation of Paul's theology. The Christ-event and its effects were far more important to Paul than VanLandingham's argument suggests.

Third, although he notes that early Judaism contained other perspectives, VanLandingham commits the same error as Sanders: he minimizes the diversity and produces a soteriological scheme that is the same for everyone, including Paul. His arguments may explain some sources, but, in the quest for a unifying perspective, he downplays different points of interest (for example, predestination in Qumran). Further, he provides no significant reasons why one should simply apply this scheme to Paul. Perhaps Paul used the same ideas but redefined them around his understanding of God's action in Christ (cf. Jesus' use of 'Kingdom of God' language).

Jason S. Maston
Aberdeen, Scotland

Divine and Human Agency in Paul and His Cultural Environment

John M.G. Barclay and Simon J. Gathercole,
editors

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SUMMARY

The essays in this volume address how Paul and his contemporaries, especially other Jews, understood the relationship between God's actions and those of humanity and the implications for salvation. The Introduction outlines some of the methodological problems of this particular subject. The essays highlight the diversity of early Judaism, but they do not set Paul against his contemporaries. Paul's view of divine and human agency is one perspective among many. The volume represents well the current state of research.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Die Essays in diesem Band widmen sich der Frage, wie Paulus und seine Zeitgenossen, besonders andere Juden, die Beziehung zwischen Gottes Taten und menschlichen Handlungen sowie deren Implikationen im Hinblick auf die Errettung verstanden. Die Einleitung skizziert einige der methodischen Probleme des vorliegenden Themas. Die Essays heben die Vielfalt des frühen Judentums hervor, setzen Paulus aber nicht in Gegensatz zu seinen Zeitgenossen. Die Perspektive des Paulus auf göttliche und menschliche Wirkungsweisen ist eine unter vielen. Der Band repräsentiert den gegenwärtigen Forschungsstand gut.

RÉSUMÉ

Les essais contenus dans cet ouvrage traitent de la question de savoir comment Paul et ses contemporains, en particulier d'autres Juifs, considéraient la relation entre les actions de Dieu et celles des humains, et quelles implications en découlaient pour la conception du salut. L'introduction indique quelques-uns des problèmes méthodologiques que l'on rencontre lorsqu'on aborde ce sujet. Les essais mettent en évidence la diversité des opinions au sein du judaïsme, mais ils ne présentent pas Paul comme étant en opposition à ses contemporains. Le point de vue de l'apôtre quant à l'action divine et l'action humaine en est un parmi beaucoup d'autres. Cet ouvrage présente bien l'état actuel de la recherche.

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The essays in this book are the result of a symposium held at the University of Aberdeen in the summer of 2004. The book as a whole seeks to revisit and, in some cases, to correct our understanding of how Paul and his contemporaries explained the relationship between God's actions and those of humans. As J.M.G. Barclay explains in the Introduction, the time is now right to return to this issue (pp.2-4). In their own ways, then, the authors of this volume attempt to explain how Paul