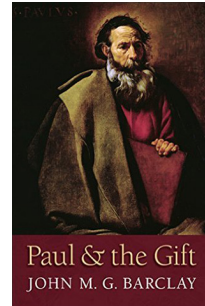


## Book Review

John M.G. Barclay.  
*Paul and the Gift*

Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2015.  
xvi, 672 pp., hardback & kindle. ISBN: 978-0-8028-6889-3, \$70,  
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One might well wonder if there remains anything significant to be said about so central a topic as grace in the writings of Paul, however, in his latest work, *Paul and the Gift*, professor Barclay's holds up a magnifying glass to this topic and produces a study that is potentially quite revolutionary.

Barclay situates his study in the broader framework of the anthropology of 'gift' and begins by surveying and highlighting the insights of modern treatments on the topic in which the diversity of notions of 'gift' and 'gift-giving' across time and culture have been demonstrated. Barclay shows that "Gift" is neither a single phenomenon nor a stable category' (11) – an insight particularly evident when modern and Greco-Roman conceptions of 'gift' are contrasted. Barclay demonstrates how, in the latter, gift-giving (including Greek 'eurgetism' and Roman patronage) is inherently reciprocal, entailing obligation and the expectation of return in some form while the modern Western notion of gift is of that which is entirely 'free', in which no return is expected and no obligation conferred. This latter notion of 'gift', he concludes, is 'a historically and culturally specific Western invention' (64).

While scholars have viewed the concept of 'grace' in largely monolithic ways, Barclay argues that 'grace' is polyvalent, that it is essential to determine what covert presuppositions influence our definitions of grace and to

'disaggregate' the various 'perfections' that may accompany it. By 'perfections' Barclay means the process whereby we 'draw out' a concept to its 'logical conclusion' or 'ultimate reductions' (67). Barclay offers six such perfections which serve as an analytical tool for the remainder of the book: *superabundance*, *singularity*, *priority*, *incongruity*, *efficacy*, and *non-circularity*.

This taxonomy is then applied, illuminatingly, to various prominent interpreters of Paul both pre-modern and modern. Of the latter, Barclay demonstrates the helpfulness of such a semantic disaggregation with particular reference to E.P. Sanders and the discussion surrounding the New Perspective on Paul (NPP). As groundbreaking as was Sanders' 1977 volume, according to Barclay, it suffered from covert suppositions regarding the nature of grace. While Sanders perfected the priority of grace ('getting in' and staying in') he incorporated, unawares, additional perfections viz. incongruity: 'There seems to be a hidden assumption that if grace were shown to be congruous with the worth of its recipients, it would not be considered grace at all' (155). This failure to distinguish between the differing perfections of grace has muddied the waters and has had significant consequences for the discussion moving forward.

Plagued by similar terminological and conceptual imprecision regarding grace, neither NPP proponents nor their detractors have allowed Paul and Judaism to have differing conceptions of grace; a position which has all

too often lead either to exegetical stalemates or heated skirmishes. For the former, if Judaism is a gracious religion after all then it must be a grace identical to Paul's, while for the latter if Judaism does not exhibit Paul's grace then it is not grace at all. Barclay essentially cuts the Gordian knot by subjecting this key term to renewed scrutiny. The upshot is that both Judaism and Paul are allowed to have an essential place for grace in their soteriological frameworks while acknowledging that the grace in question is perfected differently in each case.

In part 2 Barclay applies this taxonomy to five Second Temple Jewish texts in which he moves beyond Sanders' 'covenantal nomism' which he refers to as 'the analytical frame that has dominated the last forty years of scholarship on the Soteriology of Second Temple Judaism' (309) and which he argues had a homogenizing effect on these texts: 'Finding grace everywhere, [Sanders] gave the impression that grace is everywhere the same' (158). This conviction led Sanders to speak merely of different *emphases* of an essentially uniform concept of grace. Instead, argues Barclay, these texts differ not primarily in degrees of emphasis of grace but in the '*forms of perfection* with which they articulate it' (319). The analysis is then enhanced still further by contrasting these perfections with those found in Paul.

In part 3 Barclay relates these insights to Galatians and Romans offering fresh readings of old problems and advancing a view that is ultimately at odds with the views of both 'old' and 'new' perspective interpreters. Though Barclay's earlier writings undoubtedly belong in the camp of the latter, and though he still agrees that the context of Paul's theology of justification by faith is the gentile mission, he now differs by arguing that 'Paul's ecclesiology has its roots in his soteriology of grace' (573). It is this paradigm altering nature of the Christ-gift that shapes Paul's appeal to the Abrahamic promises.

This book represents a watershed in Pauline studies and one that will reframe the debate for years to come. Moving forward scholars must first come to terms with the added precision afforded by Barclay's taxonomy before arguments can transcend the well-worn paths along which they have proceeded for entirely too long.