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Review

Signs, Wonders, and Gifts – divination in the Letters of Paul

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Review by Dr Annette Potgieter¹

Our interpretation of Paul is often diluted through the lens of tradition, estranging us from the real Paul. The ancients lived in a world which they believed was filled with powers and forces that have an effect on people and vice versa, a world in which gods speak to humans, a world that modern interpreters often ignore. Modernistic and rational thinking routinely deny such categories as mere impossibilities or at very least highly improbable. However, the importation of such beliefs into Pauline exegesis is highly problematic; reading Paul amidst his original context should be the endeavour of any theologian who would like to work responsibly with the text. It is against this backdrop that Jennifer Eyl makes a monumental contribution in shedding light on divinatory and wonderworking practices in Paul's letters that have been neglected in Pauline studies but are starting to be excavated now by a new generation of scholars.

Without taking anything away from the Paul we have come to know as a prolific proponent of the gospel and proclaiming Christ, Jennifer Eyl invites an alternative perspective on Paul, a perspective that is substantiated with a rich expertise in classical texts and comparisons with practices in the Roman Empire. She explores how Paul was very much operating as another religious figure within the Roman Empire. Again, it should be underscored that in no way does Eyl paint a ridiculous picture of Paul. Paul is no charlatan, swindler or televangelist trying to profit. Rather, Paul is presented within his historical milieu with textual evidence indicating Paul's repackaging of practices which would have been immediately understood by the original intended audiences. Eyl coherently and cogently indicates that these practices were vital to Paul

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even if they were not the principal focus of his letters, shedding a much-needed light on Paul as a diviner and wonderworker. Paul is redescribed within the world he lived and Eyl succinctly takes the reader on a journey to rediscover Paul as a product of his world.

Eyl (2019:1) boldly starts with two statements, firstly, that Paul “engaged in numerous forms of divination and claimed to possess divine powers” and secondly that “Paul’s divinatory practices are best understood within a framework of reciprocity that dominated human-divine relations in the ancient Mediterranean.” Throughout the book, she convincingly explains both assumptions by drawing from related ancient literature and examining Pauline literature unpacking assumptions that obstruct us from understanding Paul in a first-century context. She points out how our notion of Paul as unique eschews our understanding of him. Again, the traditions that Luther and Calvin left us are not being denied per se, but rather she provides a sound look at the interpretative problems such categories and modes have caused. She provides an alternative taxonomy, opting to define Paul in his historical milieu.

Paul is situated within the realm of widespread divinatory practices found in the Roman Empire. Her examples of the gods exerting themselves into the human world are compelling. A clear picture is painted of gods taking over the speech of humans, appearing in dreams and effecting internal organs of animals or directing their behaviour (Eyl 2019:84). Moreover, it also becomes clear that for Paul, it is only his God that matters.

Paul introduces himself to his audiences as someone who has divine authority. This is seen in particularly three ways: firstly, he professes having visual encounters (including trips to a third heaven on four occasions), secondly, he describes himself as “called” and “sent” by a god and finally Paul often states that he has access to secrets and mysteries (Eyl 2019:144). Paul does not only use these practices, but he also undertakes to enlighten his followers how to understand their gifts and wonderworking practices. A major contribution occurs in the manner reciprocity is understood. Eyl points out the danger of reductionist understandings of ancient religion (the term is already anachronistic) as well as reciprocity. It is a faux pas to think that pistis as “faith” developed only from a Christian perspective and moreover that reciprocity only entails a tit-for-tat system. Such ideas obscure the nuances and rich

complexity of relationships between humans and gods. To not read Paul's understanding of pneumatic gifts within a context of reciprocity, is to again, extricate Paul from his original milieu and anachronistically cast Paul into a meaning-structure that was not originally intended.

From an African perspective, *Signs, Wonders, and Gifts* – divination in the Letters of Paul is a must read. For the African context, the idea of divinatory practices is not as foreign as perhaps for interpreters in Western countries. However, the book invites serious consideration of Paul's historical milieu, and thus aiding in combatting anachronism and provides a valuable research tool – especially for African scholars wanting to work from a different perspective. The only negative is that the hardcover version is prohibitively expensive for many scholars in the African context; this being said, it is worth the buy and should be in all African libraries.