

MATTHEW J. THOMAS

Paul's 'Works of the Law'
in the Perspective of
Second Century Reception

*Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen
zum Neuen Testament 2. Reihe*

468

Mohr Siebeck

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For Nabeel Qureshi (1983–2017)

Preface

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This book is dedicated to our friend Nabeel, a true witness of Jesus Christ.

Matthew J. Thomas

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Abbreviations

Abbreviations of primary and secondary sources in this volume conform to Patrick H. Alexander, John F. Kutsko, James D. Ernest, Shirley Decker-Lucke, and David L. Petersen, eds. 1999. *The SBL Handbook of Style*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson. Additions and alterations to these guidelines are as follows:

<i>ActPl</i>	<i>Acts of Paul</i>
<i>Arist.</i>	Aristides, <i>Apology</i>
<i>Comm. Gal.</i>	John Calvin. 1996 [1965]. <i>Commentary on Galatians</i> . Ed. T.H.L. Parker. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
<i>Comm. Rom.</i>	John Calvin. 1995 [1965]. <i>Commentary on Romans</i> . Ed. Ross Mackenzie. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
<i>Didasc.</i>	<i>Didascalia Apostolorum</i>
<i>JP</i>	Aristo of Pella, <i>Dialogue of Jason and Papiscus</i>
<i>KP</i>	<i>Preaching of Peter</i>
<i>LW</i>	<i>Luther's Works</i> . 1955-1986. Ed. J. Pelikan and H.L. Lehmann. 55 vols. St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
<i>PP</i>	Melito of Sardis, <i>On Pascha</i>
<i>Ref.</i>	Hippolytus, <i>Refutation of All Heresies</i>
<i>Ser. Gal.</i>	John Calvin. 1997 [1558]. <i>Sermons on Galatians</i> . Ed. Kathy Childress. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust.
<i>WA</i>	<i>Dr. Martin Luthers Werke</i> . 1883-1993. 69 vols. Weimar: Böhlau, 1883-1993.

Part I: Introduction

“It is a matter of doubt, even among the learned, what the works of the law mean.”

John Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*¹

¹*Comm. Rom.* 3.20, trans. Owen (Mackenzie 1995 [1965], 69).

Chapter 1

Introduction, Theory and Methodology

1.1. Introduction

In Paul's epistles to the Romans and the Galatians, the Apostle famously declares that one is considered righteous by faith, and not by works of the law. This antithesis, forcefully stated in the context of disputes regarding Jews and the law, has induced a number of theological aftershocks in Christian history; for some it represents the definitive articulation of Christianity itself, providing the interpretative lens through which the rest of the Scriptures are to be read. But what exactly is Paul opposing? What works of what law are these? What is the significance of practicing them, and why are they rejected by Paul? The answers to such questions will necessarily influence one's conception of what Paul means by faith, justification, and indeed the Christian gospel itself.

These questions have been asked with renewed interest since 1977, when E.P. Sanders' *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* introduced a picture of Paul and his context that differed considerably from the prevailing image in New Testament studies. As attested by Luther and Calvin in the sixteenth century and the majority of interpreters in Sanders' time, these works were viewed as any and all actions that one might perform in order to be justified before God and earn salvation. According to Sanders, such a scenario was without historical foundation in the Judaism of Paul's time, being instead a projection of Reformation-era critiques of the late medieval church on to Paul's interlocutors. Rather, according to Sanders, Paul was reacting against the imposition of a particular law – the Torah – and within it specific works such as circumcision, Sabbath and food laws, which were performed not on an individual basis to accord merit with God, but to become part of God's people, the Jews. Sanders' view soon found defenders in figures such as James Dunn and N.T. Wright and became known as the "new perspective" on Paul, with those holding to the traditional view in the vein of the Reformers being called the "old perspective."

The debate between "old" and "new" perspectives has continued unabated since the early 1980s, spurring a variety of offshoots from the two frameworks and an enormous amount of research in Paul's epistles and Second Temple Jewish sources on both sides. Such efforts have nevertheless been unable to draw the debate to resolution, with questions regarding what precisely Paul is objecting to by "works of the law" remaining a central point of division between these two camps in New Testament studies. Within such discussions,

however, a potentially useful body of material has gone largely unexamined: the witness of the early patristic figures that followed Paul, who stand in close proximity to the Apostle's debates and are among the earliest known readers of his epistles. In what ways might these early figures have understood the works of the law to which Paul was objecting? How might their early perspectives relate to the "old" and "new" perspectives on this issue? And what might their collective witness suggest about Paul's own meaning?

This study seeks to answer these three questions. For the first task, this book attempts to identify how the phenomena of works of the law were understood in early patristic sources up to the time of Irenaeus in the late second century. As is outlined below, this search does not focus exclusively on the phrase ἔργα νόμου, but traces lexical overlap with this phrase within a broader examination of patristic discussions that are similar to Paul's in this period. This examination assesses the works and law that are rejected in similar conflicts with Jewish parties, and the patristic usage of Paul's epistles and specific works of the law passages in such disputes.¹ It evaluates these works in terms of "meaning," "significance," and "opposition," asking which particular works of what law are under discussion, what the practice of these works appears to signify (i.e., to earn salvation, to become a Jew), and why these works are not necessary for the Christian in each author's perspective. Following from this analysis, this study's second aim is to evaluate how these second century perspectives relate to the conceptions put forward by the old and new perspectives in New Testament debates. As Part II of this book illustrates, such assessments must be properly nuanced: while the views of figures within these categories are sufficiently consistent to make the classifications intelligible, there is diversity within both the old and new perspectives on this subject. The third aim of this study – to assess what these early perspectives would suggest regarding Paul's own meaning by works of the law – must be stated the most tentatively, but is also potentially the most significant. While Paul's meaning is not to be decisively settled by early reception, tradition or memory alone, this book seeks to identify what the early patristic evidence would suggest about how the burdens of proof should be borne in contemporary debates on this subject.

1.2. Theory: Effective history and living memory

A model for how early patristic sources can be of use in New Testament interpretation is found in the work of Markus Bockmuehl, whose 2006 book *Seeing*

¹ Such an approach holds correspondence with Barclay's recent study on "grace," which similarly attempts to analyze a concept behind the words rather than simply the usage of words themselves, cf. Barclay 2015, 3: "Hence, our study is confined to no single term (and certainly not to χάρις); its focus is on concepts, not words."

the Word presents the case for utilizing early reception to engage contested areas of interpretation. Building on the work of Ulrich Luz,² Bockmuehl's proposal for providing a way through impasses in contemporary New Testament scholarship is "that New Testament scholars explicitly adopt the history of the influence of the New Testament as an integral and indeed inescapable part of the exercise in which they are engaged."³ As Bockmuehl comments:

The meaning of a text is in practice deeply intertwined with its own tradition of hearing and heeding, interpretation and performance. Only the totality of that tradition can begin to give a view of the New Testament's real historical footprint, the vast majority of which is to be found in reading communities that, for all their diversity, place themselves deliberately 'within the living tradition of the church, whose first concern is fidelity to the revelation attested by the Bible.' And conversely, that footprint, for good and for ill, can in turn serve as a valuable guide to the scope of the text's meaning and truth.⁴

Of course, such attention to reception or effective-history (*Wirkungsgeschichte*)⁵ runs the risk of engaging a cacophony of contemporary New Testament interpretation by simply introducing a second cacophony of historical reception, which Bockmuehl acknowledges: "[T]he further the effects are removed in time from their causes, the more tenuous their connection becomes," so that "Wirkungsgeschichte increasingly turns into the story of serendipitous echoes and often arbitrary canons of intertextual association, rather than a continuity of demonstrable effects."⁶ However, between the original texts and events and later interpreters, there is "a third set of voices, uniquely placed to mediate between primary and secondary sources": the early witnesses that follow within a period of "living memory," who "retain a personal

² Cf. e.g. Luz 1994, 23-38, Luz 2007 [1989], 60-66. Luz himself is dependent on Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, cf. particularly Gadamer 1975, 268-74, though he recognizes his work cuts against Gadamer's intentions. See Luz 2007 [1989], 62; Gadamer 1975, 305.

³ Bockmuehl 2006, 64-65.

⁴ Bockmuehl 2006, 65, citing *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* in Fitzmyer 1995, §3.

⁵ Luz distinguishes between reception-history (*Auslegungsgeschichte*) and effective-history (*Wirkungsgeschichte*), with the former referring to commentaries and the latter to reception elsewhere ("verbal media such as sermons, canonical documents, and 'literature,' as well as in nonverbal media such as art and music, and in the church's activity and suffering, that is, in church history"; Luz 2007 [1989], 61). These distinctions do not play a role in Bockmuehl's model, and for the purposes of this study the two terms are taken as essentially coterminous, though effective-history is preferred in emphasizing the potential of influence in this period beyond strictly textual interpretation (and since none of the sources here are commentaries in the strict sense; cf. similarly Kirk 2015, 34).

⁶ Bockmuehl 2006, 168. Alternatively, as Räsänen notes, *Wirkungsgeschichte* can risk being used for the construction of echo chambers, with theologians "keen on appealing to the 'effective history' of the Bible as a norm which they use in defending their particular vision of biblical study" (Räsänen 1992, 306).

link to the persons and events concerned.⁷⁷ According to Bockmuehl, such a period of living memory continues beyond the New Testament into the second century, with there being “a uniquely privileged window of up to 150 years... when there were still living witnesses of the apostles or of their immediate students,”⁷⁸ and within which “tradition inhabits a narrative world that is still colored, and at least potentially subject to correction, by what is remembered.”⁷⁹ Bockmuehl’s proposal is that effective-history be employed in this particular period of living memory, “to privilege the *earlier* over the more remote effects for a historical understanding of Christianity’s texts, persons, and events.”⁸⁰

This proposal is further developed in Bockmuehl’s subsequent prosopographic studies on Simon Peter.⁸¹ As Bockmuehl writes, “[i]t is a matter of historical record that during the limited window of a generation or two, the New Testament aftermath includes a unique group of people who retained a personal link to the persons and events concerned,” which was claimed both by the figures themselves and affirmed by their younger contemporaries.⁸² Bockmuehl suggests that privileging the testimony of these early witnesses can lead to real exegetical and historical gains, as “[t]he individual and communal memory of that early period offers us an interpreted appropriation of the past by people who personally retain experiential and cultural links to the events – historical links that are closer than ours can ever be, even with the best historical methods.”⁸³ While such evidence “of course must be taken with considerable caution – read critically and *dialectically*, i.e. sifting and discerning between the differing contexts, commitments and agendas,”⁸⁴ this period of living memory is nevertheless available for inquiry for New Testament scholars up to “[t]he passing of the church father Irenaeus (c. 130-200).”⁸⁵ His death “signals the demise of those who remembered the apostles’ last surviving disciples,”⁸⁶ with discussions thereafter taking on a more distinctly archival character without

⁷ Bockmuehl 2006, 168.

⁸ Bockmuehl 2006, 170.

⁹ Bockmuehl 2006, 172. This 150-year window incorporates three generations: “(1) sources dating roughly from the lifetime of the apostles (ca. 1-70); (2) younger contemporaries like Polycarp, who personally remembered either the apostles or their close associates (ca. 70-130); and (3) people like Irenaeus, who in turn were taught by these students (ca. 130-200)” (Bockmuehl 2006, 178).

¹⁰ Bockmuehl 2006, 169 (*italics original*).

¹¹ Bockmuehl 2010; Bockmuehl 2012.

¹² Bockmuehl 2010, 20.

¹³ Bockmuehl 2010, 20.

¹⁴ Bockmuehl 2010, 20 (*italics original*).

¹⁵ Bockmuehl 2010, 17.

¹⁶ Bockmuehl 2010, 17.

similar appeals to memory; as Bockmuehl notes, “we find no such claims made in the third century.”¹⁷

This study follows Bockmuehl’s recognition of the distinct value of testimony in this period, and sets the scope of its inquiry to the time of Irenaeus, the last figure recognized to be writing within a window of apostolic “living memory.” The function of this early testimony can be illustrated by borrowing and adapting an analogy from Bockmuehl regarding smoke and fire. This book attempts to identify how the “smoke” of early effective-history might help us adjudicate between competing accounts of the “fire” – the conflicts over works of the law – that Paul and his congregations were engaged in.¹⁸ While this smoke of second century testimony might be so widely dispersed as to only create a fog, if at all concentrated, it will constitute valuable evidence in evaluating whether the fire of these conflicts is located in one of the areas identified by the old and new perspectives – or it may perhaps lead us places that neither perspective currently identifies. Complicating this task, of course, is the fact that identifying influence of a given text or event in later discussions is often an inexact science; and further, unlike Bockmuehl’s prosopographical study (where the “fire” ends with the individual’s death), disputes with Jewish parties

¹⁷ Bockmuehl 2010, 24. One objection to Bockmuehl’s methodology comes from Paul Foster, whose study on Simon Peter in the apocryphal New Testament writings concludes that the representation of Peter in these sources “is both diverse and highly contested” (Foster 2015, 260). These traditions “are largely literary reinventions of Peter,” and their “vastly differing representations reflect the theological concerns of the authors of the texts... rather than stemming from historically reliable traditions concerning Peter” (Foster 2015, 260). Targeting Bockmuehl’s claim that later sources preserve memories that can contribute to historical questions, Foster asks whether the canonical NT writers and patristic sources “are any less likely to be prone to the same forces of reinvention, which serve the legitimation of theological positions” (Foster 2015, 261). Foster concludes his analysis on a skeptical note: “So who is the Peter of the noncanonical texts? Probably the simple answer is whoever the authors wanted, or needed him to be” (Foster 2015, 262).

In this particular case, I believe Foster understates the level of coherence found in the Petrine picture that Bockmuehl assembles from the diverse body of sources within this early period, which is less clear in a study such as Foster’s which is limited in scope to apocryphal texts. Nevertheless, in our own case, one can neither prove nor rule out *a priori* whether a search for Paul’s “works of the law” in the second century will find a jumble of self-interested literary inventions; the evidence has to be examined to discover whether this is the case. Even in Foster’s worst-case scenario, however, his own study does not absolutely negate Bockmuehl’s methodology, as he himself attests to have discovered two consistent pieces of testimony from his noncanonical sources: that “Peter was the leader or spokesperson of the Twelve, and he was present during the revelatory events of the transfiguration” (Foster 2015, 260). Such findings may be modest, but they are not insignificant; and if the present study were to find only a few key consistent testimonies amidst an array of otherwise discordant Pauline reinventions, these would nevertheless serve as valuable data for the question at hand. (I am indebted to Simeon Burke for the reference to Foster.)

¹⁸ Cf. Bockmuehl 2010, 8.

appear to have continued throughout this period, and one cannot be certain that these conflicts would have remained identical in the years following Paul, either from Paul's side or that of his interlocutors. While these concerns can be alleviated somewhat by prioritizing sources that are more clearly influenced by Paul, they nevertheless illustrate how the task of relating the smoke of patristic reception to Pauline fire must remain at the level of relative probabilities rather than certitude.

Such challenges notwithstanding, however, there remains considerable potential in accounting for early interpretation and effective-history within an historical investigation of works of the law. A useful point in this regard is made by Schreiner, who notes that "the preservation of Paul's letters by the churches implies that his arguments were related to actual views in the religious world of his readers."¹⁹ If this is indeed the case, then identifying the actual views in the religious world of Paul's early readers should also be of historical value in shedding light back onto his arguments, where these happen to be in dispute. The reflexive connection between text and effects is reflected on by Luz, who writes that effective-history is "an expression of the texts' own power," which "belongs to the texts in the same way that a river flowing away from its source belongs to the source."²⁰ Thus, just as studying a river can tell us about the source from which it originates, so too can these effects tell us about the original texts and events, with effects in close proximity to the source being of particular value. Such an approach does not deny that early patristic sources engage the Apostle and his writings with an eye to their own contexts and circumstances, of course, but rather maintains that such engagements are not pure reinventions. As White argues in his study on Paul in this period, "memory is not *just* a product of present needs, though it certainly is this, but is also constrained by the past – molded by the force of tradition."²¹ This constraining quality of the past signals the value of early testimony for such an investigation, for as Kirk observes, "Paul, like any other great historic figure, exerted such influence and created such a lasting impression while alive that the contours of his historical footprint could not be so easily reshaped a generation or two after his death."²² As such, an examination of effective history within this generation or two following the Apostle represents a promising witness to the debates in which he engaged.

¹⁹ Schreiner 1991, 242.

²⁰ Luz 1994, 24.

²¹ White 2014, 17 (*italics original*), siding with Schwartz and Hutton over Halbwachs. Cf. White 2014, 96-97, 167-68.

²² Kirk 2015, 20, arguing against an overly "presentist" perspective represented in Pervo 2010. For "presentist" and "continuity" perspectives on memory (the latter represented by White and Kirk), cf. e.g. Keith 2011, 57f.

1.3. The early reception of Paul

The recent interest in reception and effective-history, witnessed in proposals like Bockmuehl's,²³ has coincided with a renewed appreciation for the early patristic period as a source for Pauline reception. This renewal can be traced to the late 1970's and early 80's, when the studies of Andreas Lindemann, Ernst Dassmann, and David Rensberger overturned previously influential notions of a "Pauline captivity,"²⁴ in which Paul's influence in mainstream Christian circles in the second century was thought to have diminished, usually due to supposed connections with Marcion and the gnostics.²⁵ Against this idea, these studies on the engagement with Paul in the first and second centuries found that while "gnostics and Marcionites are opposed on matters of substance" by early orthodox writers, "Paul himself – like Jesus and like other apostles – is never the issue; no one disavows his authority or doubts his orthodoxy when opponents appeal to him."²⁶ As Lindemann observes, within the writings of the apostolic fathers from the late first to mid-second century, Paul is the most frequently mentioned figure apart from Jesus, and his epistles are the most referenced New Testament sources for engaging contemporary debates.²⁷ Paul's popularity is such that the title of "the Apostle" becomes his own personal epithet in the second century, with Paul being the only figure to whom it applies "absolutely and without need for further specification";²⁸ for whatever their disagreements elsewhere, this singular designation is agreed upon by an "entire range of ideological adversaries," being employed by Basilides, the author of *Diognetus*, Heracleon and Irenaeus alike.²⁹ Even Justin Martyr – whose failure to employ this title or any other explicit references to Paul had made him the key evidence for a Pauline captivity – was argued by Lindemann to make considerable tacit use of Paul, and a majority of contemporary studies now regard Justin as indeed drawing upon the Apostle's writings.³⁰ As Babcock writes in a 1990 essay,

²³ On this interest in recent biblical studies more broadly, cf. e.g. Knight 2010; Boxall 2013, 209-29; Evans 2014; and England and Lyons 2015.

²⁴ Lindemann 1979a; Dassmann 1979; Rensberger 1981. See also the important volume of Wiles 1967, which, while dealing primarily with later patristic sources, nevertheless reached similar conclusions about Paul's distinct influence in early Christianity.

²⁵ This idea has roots in the work of F.C. Baur (cf. Baur 1878, 147n.1), and is influentially developed in W. Bauer's *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (Bauer 1971 [1934], 215-28). An excellent overview of the development of this narrative from the time of Baur to its downfall with these studies is found in White 2014, 20-48. On "Pauline captivity," see particularly 9.2 on Justin Martyr in this volume.

²⁶ Rensberger 1981, 363; cf. Lindemann 1979a, 402.

²⁷ Cf. Lindemann 1990, 28-29, 45.

²⁸ Babcock 1990, xiv.

²⁹ White 2014, 7; cf. the table of references in White 2014, 7-8.

³⁰ See Lindemann 1979a, 353-67; cf. the broad survey in 9.2.1 in this volume.

rather than being derived from the patristic evidence, the notion of Paul's captivity seems to have been fundamentally rooted in a tendency among biblical scholars to assume that if their own conceptions of Paul's theology could not be found in the early patristic sources, Paul must not have been read at all.³¹ Whatever judgments are rendered on these conceptions, the theory that Paul was unengaged by the patristic sources is untenable as a support for them: "[Paul] was simply too vast a presence in the early history of Christianity to permit such a notion."³²

This recognition of Paul's early influence has been further explored in a wide range of studies since this time, of which major works include the edited volumes of Babcock (*Paul and the Legacies of Paul*, 1990) and Bird and Dodson (*Paul and the Second Century*, 2011), the recent monographs of White (*Remembering Paul*, 2014) and Strawbridge (*The Pauline Effect*, 2015), and the volumes on Paul in the *Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament*, *Blackwell Bible Commentaries*, and *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* series. While this book is unique in its aims of determining the early patristic understanding of works of the law and relating it to contemporary debates,³³ it builds upon the work of these and similar recent studies on early Pauline reception, and engages with them where relevant in its analysis.³⁴ In addition to these works, the earlier studies of Barnett 1941, Massaux 1990 [1950], and Hagner 1973 are engaged in tracing the usage of specific Pauline texts in the early patristic writings. This study also interacts with the broader context of scholarship on Jews and Christians in this period where relevant (including the "Parting of the Ways" literature), such as the studies of Wilson 1995, Lieu 1996, Horbury 1998, Becker and Reed 2003, Murray 2004, Boyarin 2004, Buell 2005, Dunn 2006, Skarsaune and Hvalvik 2007, and Robinson 2009.

³¹ Cf. Babcock 1990, xiii-xv.

³² Babcock 1990, xv.

³³ Following from my earlier brief study in Thomas 2012.

³⁴ Such studies include Stanton 1996, Gaca and Welborn 2005, Gregory and Tuckett 2005a and Gregory and Tuckett 2005b, Rylaarsdam 2006, Aageson 2007, Sundkvist 2008, Pervo 2010, Liljeström 2011, Arnold 2013, Nicklas, Merkt and Verheyden 2013, Kirk 2015, and Dunn 2015. See also the valuable earlier studies of Kieffer 1982, Räisänen 1983, and Eno 1984. While engaging different periods, this book holds correspondence with the work of Despotis 2014, which looks at the work of later Greek interpreters (such as Chrysostom) in relation to the New Perspective on Paul. The recent volume on Tertullian and Paul (Still and Wilhite 2013) similarly falls outside this study's immediate scope. Many older evaluations of sources in this period (such as Aleith 1937, Hasler 1953, Torrance 1959 and Schneemelcher 1964) are strongly colored by the presupposition of what is now termed the "old perspective," rendering their studies less useful in contexts where this viewpoint is itself under analysis.

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