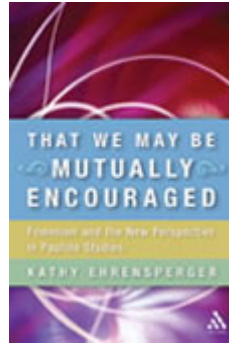


○ **REVIEWING *THAT WE MAY BE MUTUALLY ENCOURAGED: FEMINISM AND THE NEW PERSPECTIVE IN PAULINE STUDIES***

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Jennifer Bird reviews *That We May Be Mutually Encouraged: Feminism and the New Perspective in Pauline Studies*, by Kathy Ehrensperger (T&T Clark, New York, 2004. ISBN: 0-5670-2460-X).



The title piqued my curiosity – ‘what is she going to do with that combination?’ The cover, though I know we ought not judge a book this way, caused much concern – ‘this does not bode well for the content.’ These two initial responses actually set me up for a more significant surprise and deeper appreciation for the content than I might have had if the book had been more appealingly attired.¹ Kathy Ehrensperger brings three typically separate strands of scholarship into conversation with one another and produces something not only unique but also monumentally important. She also notes the influence of poststructuralism and postcolonialism in her approach to texts and they are certainly in the background of this work. Her ultimate goal is to find new avenues of research into Pauline studies, and she succeeds through the dialogue of post-Shoah theology, Beyond the New Perspective on Paul studies, and certain feminist approaches to scripture in general.

In the first section of the book, ‘Hermeneutics and Presuppositions’, she carefully summarises a history of interpretation of Christian scriptures in general and of Pauline studies in particular in light of anti-Semitic issues. The introduction explains well her reasoning for this particular combination of areas of research. Feminist studies emphasise relatedness in all aspects of life, thus she is applying this approach to Pauline studies. Both feminist studies and traditional malestream studies on Paul have at times been guilty of perpetuating anti-Judaism, thus post-Shoah theology informs every aspect of her fresh approach to Paul. She begins her work opposing ‘a naïve empiricism claiming that what we experience, see, and understand is the objective reflection of “reality”’ (p. 5). Just as life events are not self-explanatory, scripture also needs to be interpreted in context. She also holds feminists who disregard post-Shoah studies in the same position as those of malestream communities who disregard feminist studies.

Chapter two, 'Changing Perspectives', covers the impact of the Enlightenment and of the insights of various philosophers, such as Hans-Georg Gadamer, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin and Max Horkheimer, on biblical interpretation. She then adds to the mix the hermeneutical consequences of a post-Shoah theology: that it is no longer possible to do Christian theology that is untouched by Auschwitz. This change in theological claims and interpretations 'affect the roots of Christian identity' (p. 19), and must be accounted for in all biblical interpretations that want to be taken seriously. Next she makes the first significant connection between post-Shoah and feminist studies: they are both seeking to move beyond 'dominating and oppressive patterns of interpretation' (p. 19). Then she briefly recounts the history of the coming-to-consciousness within feminist biblical studies and of the inherent anti-Semitic nature of much feminist theology.

Ehrensperger then moves into a broad brush stroke summary of Pauline studies.

Most strikingly, Ehrensperger rehearses a notably Germanic perspective of traditional interpretations of Paul (Baur, von Harnack, Bousset, and Bultmann) as that of a man who 'overcame Judaism in favor of a universalistic Christian faith.' Then addressing early alternatives, she begins with Albert Schweitzer, then moves on to George F. Moore, W. D. Davies and ends with Johannes Munck, all of whom offer a corrective to the 'traditional' interpretation of Paul, either in bringing in apocalypticism or the presence and influence of some form of Judaism. Krister Stendahl is offered as a scholar who affected a change in our perspective of Paul, suggesting that Paul's intention was not to address modern concepts of conscience or piety but to address the 'quest for assurance about man's salvation out of a common human predicament.' (Stendahl's lecture, p. 33) Then she summarises the New Perspective studies, which brings us to E. P. Sanders's covenantal nomism and James Dunn's identity-making view of the Torah. In between she notes Heikki Räisänen's interpretation that Paul was overreacting to opponents and thus passes along a distorted view of Judaism and Jacob Neusner and his call for more careful attention to the use of rabbinic literature. She ends this section with Lloyd Gaston's unique contribution to Pauline studies, illuminated by bringing post-Shoah issues into the Pauline debate. His thesis is that Paul was disagreeing with others regarding what it meant to be Jewish toward Gentiles, which becomes a basic premise for Ehrensperger's approach to Paul and thus for what she advocates in this book. She closes this chapter by noting the variety of ways feminist theologians approach Paul, and places herself within a community of women addressing aspects of Paul other than an interpretation of his opinion on women in order to recuperate any of Paul that is helpful.

Chapter three, 'Different Perspectives', begins with Ehrensperger calling us to reconsider what we expect from Paul and his logic. She draws out the implications of (our) inherited Platonic and Aristotelian thinking, dualistic and hierarchical as it is. With this dualistic ontology laid out, she briefly addresses the 'ways of thinking' and the use of language in the Hebrew Scriptures, noting that abstraction - if there is such a thing in the Old Testament - is described in the concrete realities of everyday life. G*d is G*d only in relation and action, not in existence alone; and there is no central theme of the Hebrew Scriptures, as dialogue, relation, and discussion are all embraced, not singularity of meaning. Continuing this thread of plurality of meaning and interpretation, she describes various first century Jewish interpretive approaches to Scriptures: the Pharisaiic (pre-Rabbinical), which included both the Targumim and Midrashim; that of the group at Qumran; the interpretation of Apocalyptic texts, which offer 'visions and revelations [to] serve as means for understanding contemporary events in light of scripture' (p. 83); and the implications of Hellenistic influences, seen in Philo and Josephus.

Her first section, as the reader may have noticed, is fairly extensive in the areas of research that it overviews. This aspect is helpful for allowing the reader to see the author's own thought process that leads to the conclusions she proffers. The second section, 'Paul in Contemporary Studies and Theologies', is much more streamlined than the first, and more specifically addresses concerns within Pauline studies. She has chosen to work with New Perspective studies, as they sought to counter the effects of typical anti-Semitic interpretations of the Pauline material. But the New Perspective interpretations of Paul still '[depict] the particularistic ethnocentrism of Judaism as being in contrast to the "universalism" of Pauline theology' (p. 124). Thus, the attempt to undermine the anti-Jewish interpretations has not only failed, but they have been re-enforced. Thus a new assessment of Paul is needed, a Beyond the New Perspective method, which she begins with the Judaism/Hellenism debate. The question remains for her: '*how* and *to what extent* was Paul influenced by Hellenism?' Thus, she assesses four areas of interest.

The first is the contextuality of Paul's statements. Ehrensperger notes the four volume set on Paul's theology as an indication of scholars' response to this void in Pauline studies and then turns to Beker's work as a response to this series. Beker's thesis, Paul's pragmatic theology is grounded in contingency and coherence, is a key element of Ehrensperger's project. The second aspect of potentially Hellenistic influence on Paul's work is the realm of rhetoric, which she broadly defines as 'argumentation' and asserts that it aids Paul's writing due to the specific political and historical situation out of which he writes. This application of rhetoric also accords with the contingency/coherence of Beker. The third aspect she addresses is the Jewish pattern of Paul's statements that are rooted in scripture - think halakah and midrash. She agrees with Alan Segal's claim that a mystical apocalyptic worldview is essential to understanding Paul's call and the content of his letters. She highlights the phrase, 'to the Jew first and also to the Greek', implying that the reader is to consider Paul as a reformer more than a conversionist. The final, and rather significant component of Paul's thinking, concerns the meaning of the phrase, 'one in Christ'. It implies, even requires, that there are differences among G*d's people, since it is not 'sameness in Christ'. This perspective flies in the face of some applications of the Hellenistic concept of the One, which have required uniformity instead of unity. 'This Hellenistic ideal [desire for the One] obliterates difference and diversity in its zeal to attain one and same universal human essence.... Oneness is something different from, but not in contrast to, diversity' (p. 154). The final assessment of Hellenistic influence on Paul is the political dimension of Paul's message. Politics and religion were not separate spheres of influence, thus Paul's use of elements of imperial language must be understood as an intentional engagement with political authorities, and not simply a spiritualisation of earthly constructs.

Ehrensperger then briefly, yet pointedly, notes previous feminist work on Paul's letter to the Romans, as this is the letter she focuses upon throughout the book. She clarifies that she is not interested in joining the fray of voices that seek to present 'the' image of Paul in terms of his view of women, but is attempting to offer a new avenue for approaching his writings, one that may be found through openness and critical self-reflection. She has chosen three significant feminist scholars within Pauline studies, Elizabeth Castelli, Elsa Tamez and Rosemary Radford Ruether. Though these scholars are responding to different aspects of Paul's writing, Ehrensperger's main point in discussing their work here concerns what she sees that they have in common. All three of them, to varying degrees, have sought to reveal something new about Paul or his writings, but have done so by using the same tools and methods employed by traditional malestream scholars,

simply through feminist lenses. Thus where most men see positivistic ideals they see negative ones, whether due to platonic or Gnostic dualism (Castelli and Ruether) or to an anti-Judaic law vs faith dualism (Tamez). In light of her previous chapters that highlight the more Jewish nature of Paul's thinking, Ehrensperger would challenge the purely dualistic analysis of Paul's writings.

By the time she reaches her penultimate chapter, Ehrensperger has the reader on the edge of her intellectual seat awaiting the final insights that will pull together the various strands of scholarship in a productive and informative manner. The post-Shoah voices have sung their warning and reminder throughout the book, thus she does not rehearse them again at this point. How is it that feminist scholarship can positively advance Pauline studies, if the three women she has referenced and a plethora of others have not been able to do so yet? It is in the call for mutuality and relationality, difference and diversity that feminist voices contribute to this new perspective. It is by embracing the diversity of thought about and interpretive approaches to scripture, which are embedded within Judaism's history, that Pauline scholars can then offer fresh insights to the conversation. Instead of interpreting Paul's writings through the mindset of finding dualisms, Ehrensperger challenges us to let Paul's words, such as 'being one in Christ', and 'for the Jew first and then for the Gentile', indicate that Paul was genuinely searching for a way to have diversity – both Jews and Gentiles – within the body of Christ in a way that does not replace the former with the latter. All criticism of Judaism that one has found in Paul is now to be understood as Paul encouraging Jews to behave rightly in relation to 'all the nations', that they have not understood what it meant to be a Jew in the sight of the peoples of the nations. When we realise that Paul's theology was based upon scriptural reasoning and was addressing contemporary issues, we see that 'theologizing in a Pauline way means to be involved in an on-going dialogical process of negotiation' (p. 188).

My suggestions are few, yet quite significant. The first I have concerns the way Ehrensperger represents the role or purpose of feminist critique within biblical studies. Her disclaimer is noted that she cannot apply 'all' issues that are relevant to feminist studies, simply because it is not practical to do so even if one could specifically name all of the relevant issues. Her choices of issues to use in this dialogue with Pauline and post-Shoah studies are quite apropos (issues of difference and diversity, mutuality and relationality). Since feminist studies are grounded in a concern for equality of all people, a feminist approach within biblical studies begins by attending to the language that is used to talk about G*d - the one in whose image all people were made and from whom all people receive their value. To get to the point, I was startled by Ehrensperger's use of purely male pronouns, instead of neutral or a combination of male and female; it struck me as a lack of awareness of the underlying implications of assigning gender to G*d. Coming to the conversation with linguistic concerns will only serve to strengthen the results, as language for G*d has implications for theology, post-Shoah in particular, as well. This re-visioning of G*d also leads to deeper implications for human equality, an aspect of Schussler Fiorenza's work that she appears to have missed. Ehrensperger explains a quotation from Schussler Fiorenza that includes the use of 'wo/men' only with reference to men and women, while the word 'wo/men' is intended to draw attention to not only the oppression of women, but the oppression of gender definitions in general, as well as the oppression of men and women due to any number of other social/cultural hierarchies enforced by the dominant powers. As Ehrensperger is calling for mutuality, relationality, and inclusion, her argument can benefit significantly from an application of these deeper implications of the scholarship with which she is already familiar.

Secondly, considering that her introduction ends with the following sentence: ‘the consequences of such interaction between different strands of research on Paul [“feminist interpretation, Pauline studies, and theologies dealing with the Shoah”] open the door for significant new avenues of research, particularly in relation to issues of power’, one might expect a significant assessment of power relations. But it is not until chapter six that she approaches power dynamics, and then it is difficult to know how she understands them to be at work within the Roman community. The point she does make is that whoever is ‘strong’ in the community is expected to give deference to those who are ‘weak’, and thus Paul is a proponent of ‘mutuality and accommodation rather than of hierarchical dualism’ (p. 183). But does she mean strong/weak in faith, or social clout, or political influence or in some other form? The power dynamics that I understand feminists to be most interested in are of the relational, political, or social form, not that of the faith realm, of being ‘strong in Christ’. It is true that a person who is considered ‘strong in faith’ may be granted social power on this basis, but Ehrensperger does not make it clear that she is speaking of this connection. Thus, again, the insights offered here could contribute significantly toward the dialogue on power relations as they play out within communities on various levels.

The third comment is perhaps an addendum to the first. I noted that Ehrensperger uses B.C. / A.D. instead of B.C.E. and C.E. for dating purposes (p. 89), which is a curious choice for someone specifically drawing attention to anti-Judaism in its various forms.

Ehrensperger writes in a manner that is consistent with a feminist outlook, if one can make such a subjective claim at all. Throughout the book she continually weaves together the implications of one area of study with another, highlighting the benefit of such an interdependent approach. Her writing gives the impression that the reader is engaging in a conversation with the author and her thought processes, an active engagement with issues relevant for life instead of a dry formulaic recitation of ideas. Ehrensperger has begun inroads to a new realm of Pauline studies, roads that I hope will be well traveled in the near future.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ I debated about sharing this piece of information and decided that due to the impact it had on me and my (seemingly ‘objective’) approach to the text, it is actually significant enough to share. I also had a brief correspondence with the author on the matter of the cover. While she did not have any say in the cover’s design, she did think it was better than some, shall we say, ‘boring’ covers one encounters now and then. She, too, was intrigued by the fact that the cover had produced any significant reaction one way or the other.