

## **ST PAUL BETWEEN SLOVENIA AND NORWAY**

Ole Jakob Løland, *The Reception of Paul the Apostle in the Works of Slavoj Žižek* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2018. \$84.99. pp. xiii + 224. ISBN: 978-3-319-91727-6).

One of the most exciting as well as contested grounds of convergence between philosophy and theology in recent years has been the appropriation of the thought of Paul the Apostle by continental philosophers, such as Alain Badiou, Giorgio Agamben, and Slavoj Žižek. Ole Jakob Løland's new book makes a significant contribution to this literature by enhancing our understanding not only of the Pauline motifs in the works of Slavoj Žižek, but also of what is at stake in the dialogue between the philosophical treatments of theological ideas and their reception by biblical theologians and New Testament experts.

Løland's book approaches his subject methodologically through Brennan W. Breed's reception history. The idea here is that one needs to study 'sacred texts' free from hermeneutic anxieties regarding their original meaning and embrace the play between the layers of interpretation that make up its reception history in different contexts. Løland then does not contest Žižek's historical reconstruction of Paul from the perspective of a more accurate historical representationalism. Instead, he challenges Žižek's anti-historicism not *per se* but only to the extent that the philosopher's formalism suppresses the semantic surplus of the Pauline letters, thus limiting its emancipatory potential.

Having established his methodological credentials, Løland turns to a critical engagement with Žižek's Paul. In Chapter 3, his target is what he describes as Žižek's 'consistent Paul'. The philosopher's Badiouan reading of Paul as the archetypical figure of militant universalism that breaks with Judaism's ethnocentrism is appreciated for its radicalism. Yet, it is also criticised for missing out on certain interpretive ambiguities in Paul's treatment of wisdom that may undermine the image of the Apostle as the radical egalitarian Žižek would like to project.

A similar criticism is raised in Chapter 4 with regards to Žižek's reading of Romans 7. Žižek's psychoanalytically-inflected antinomianism is reproached for ignoring the reformist possibilities inherent in a less sweeping rejection of the Law. However, Løland is perhaps here too quick to dismiss Žižek's approach as a Badiou-like antinomianism. Žižek might be an antinomian of sorts, but he is more concerned, given his Lacanian reading, with deactivating the Law's obscene supplement (the perverse logic of inherent transgression) that obstructs the transition to a politics of Love, rather than outrightly equating the Law with sin and death, as Badiou unambiguously does. Žižek is certainly not consistent in his oscillation between Badiouan antinomianism and a more Agambenian/Benjaminian reading of Love as fulfilment, not abolition of, the Torah. His 'introspective' Paul may even be guilty of reproducing complacent interpretive legacies such as those of Augustinian/Lutheran psychologism or Christian supersessionism. Yet, his psychoanalytically nuanced reading of Romans 7 is arguably no less ambiguous than Paul's own equivocations in this passage.

Finally, in the last substantial chapter Løland justly voices reservations against Žižek's recruitment of Paul as a proto-Leninist militant advocate of a radical politics of universalism and egalitarianism, dismissive of claims to difference, based on a selective and wilful reading of Galatians 3:28. Instead, Løland defends an interpretive approach that would authorise a productive combination of a class politics of economic redistribution coupled with an appreciation of culture- and gender-based

claims for recognition as equally important dimensions of the struggle for the alleviation of human suffering.

This is a valuable book that offers an engaged critique of Žižek's Paul-inspired anti-historicist argument without being unfair to its subject. It is also a powerful call for theology (and biblical criticism) not only to re-align itself with philosophy but also to recover, through such an engagement, its kerygmatic urgency and public relevance.

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