

THE NATIONS IN
THE DIVINE ECONOMY



PAUL'S COVENANTAL HERMENEUTICS
AND PARTICIPATION IN CHRIST

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*The Nations in the Divine Economy: Paul's Covenantal
Hermeneutics and Participation in Christ*

Lanham, MD: Lexington/Fortress Academic, 2018. Pp. xii
+ 411. Hardcover. \$120.00. ISBN 9781978700758.

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William S. Campbell is Reader in Biblical Studies (Emeritus) at the University of Wales, Trinity Saint David and author of three previous volumes on Paul, numerous shorter studies, and the forthcoming commentary on Romans in the Social Identity Commentary of the New Testament series. His latest monograph reinforces his reputation as an independent, insightful, and irenic interpreter of Paul. Since his 1972 doctoral dissertation on the purpose of Paul in Romans, Campbell has made a distinctive contribution to the continuing conversation about Paul's probable audience, principal aim(s), and contextualized theology in Romans.

The Nations in the Divine Economy is a substantial volume of ten chapters, encompassed by an introduction and a conclusion. A brief preface identifies personal and academic commitments that inform Campbell's hermeneutical stance, among them the cruciality of continuity between Israel and the church, the abiding character of God's covenant with Israel, and the positive value of diversity, including difference at the interpretive level. A longer introduction identifies Campbell's eclectic interpretive method, combining historical-critical, theological, and socioscientific approaches; it also clarifies key terms and outlines the plan of his book. For Campbell, contextual contingency is a critical feature of Paul's letters, which he considers to have been addressed to non-Israelite Christ followers, or "*ethnē* (those from the nations) in Christ." This viewpoint has considerable interpretive impact because it enables Campbell to envisage Paul's letters as one early

expression of commitment to Jesus as Messiah, thereby creating room to read Paul as not only amenable to the maintenance of Jewish traditions among Israelite Christ followers but also concerned to contest anti-Israelite chauvinism within early Christ-oriented communities. Galatians clearly reveals Paul's insistence to non-Israelite Christ-followers that they are not to demonstrate their allegiance to Jesus by means of torah observance. Campbell acknowledges this point but identifies texts within Paul's letters that reveal a different stance toward Jewish Christ-followers. On Campbell's reading, Paul held a nuanced position wherein Israelite Christ-followers should express their allegiance to Jesus Messiah by means of torah observance, whereas non-Israelite Christ-followers were not obligated to abide by Jewish law but should still consider themselves as beneficiaries of God's continuing covenant with Israel.

Campbell's opening chapter offers a distinctive perspective on reasons why the earliest Christ movement so quickly morphed from an intra-Israelite renewal movement into a predominantly non-Israelite sociality that was inimical to Israelite tradition. Appealing to Ephesians as a case study of post-Pauline ecclesial developments, Campbell postulates that *ethnē* in Christ may have sensed an identity deficiency when advised that they could no longer participate in social activities that involved idolatry, a deficiency exacerbated by little or no attachment to the Jewish roots of their new religious allegiance. Any such sense of identity deficiency may have fostered self-definition over against Jewish Christ-followers, leading to a devaluation of Israel's heritage and also to supersessionist tendencies.

Chapter 2, "The Hermeneutics of Antithesis," begins by sketching anti-Judaic receptions of Paul from the second century onward. For Campbell, "What is significant in the history of the reception of Paul is the tenacious continuity that emerges in the anti-Jewish reception of his thought and actions" (51). This chapter also examines five features of Paul's letters that have been interpreted as inimical to the continuing status and role of Israel in God's redemptive purposes: Paul's self-understanding as apostle to the (non-Israelite) nations; his varied but frequently negative assertions about the torah; his gospel's universal scope; his conversion, perceived as a turning away from his Israelite heritage; and his challenging, often hyperbolic, rhetoric. With respect to each point, however, Campbell argues for a contextual interpretive stance capable of perceiving Paul's continuing concern and regard for Israel within the purposes of God. As he puts it later, "Paul held to the conviction that the covenant differentiated between Israel and the nations in the divine economy and that this was the basis for the apostle's conviction that Christ-followers from each of these groups should remain in the state in which they were called [see 1 Cor 7:17–20], whether as Jew or as non-Jew" (129).

Campbell's third chapter documents an anti-Judaic bias in the origins, development, and continuing practice of historical-critical biblical interpretation. Even scholars such as E. P. Sanders and James Dunn are found, in differing ways, to be "unable to present a Paul whose deepest convictions are *positively* related to Jewish thought" (83, emphasis original). By contrast, Campbell

advocates for an interpretation of Paul in which both Israelite and non-Israelite Christ-followers are recognized as integral to communities in Christ, inclusive of their diverse ethnic identities. The universal scope and appeal of the gospel proclaimed by Paul are not grounds for achieving uniformity in Christ; rather, at least with respect to identity markers named by Paul, genuine universality in Christ is inclusive of particularity, pluriformity, and nondiscriminatory differentiation.

Chapter 4 elaborates on three factors necessary for an adequate appreciation of Paul's abiding attachment toward and association with his Israelite heritage: that diversity rather than uniformity was characteristic of early Christianity; that the addressees of Paul's letters were non-Jews only; and that one must be ever mindful of the pre-70 CE context of Paul's mission and letter writing. Then follows a brief section that provides an illuminating window into Campbell's conception of the nature of the relation between Pauline assemblies and "Judaism." Non-Israelite *ethnē* in Christ were in some sense "subgroups within the overarching umbrella of Judaism" (114) but had to develop a self-understanding and group identity distinct from—but not separate from and over against—Jewish institutions and torah-prescribed practices. In relation to local expressions of Judaism, *ethnē* in Christ necessarily differentiated themselves so as to comprehend their distinctively new social identity, but such clarifying comparison need not have entailed alienating contrast or hostile opposition. "Thus Paul is constantly involved, and deeply implicated, in the development of the self-understanding of *ethnē* in Christ to prevent them being compelled to become Jews and to create for them a distinct identity, alongside of, and not in opposition to, the other diverse groups within Judaism" (115).

The burden of chapter 5 is to demonstrate that Paul did not oppose ethnic differentiation but recognized and affirmed such distinctiveness, subject to the christological criterion for (re)evaluating all things (Phil 3:7–8). Affirming divine impartiality, Campbell argues for interpreting Rom 3:22 and 10:12 as Pauline negations of divine discrimination against either Jews or Greeks, despite their evident ethnic distinctions. Paul's mission to the nations was concerned to broaden the benefits of God's continuing covenant with Israel, but not by obliterating ethnic differences between Israel and the nations. In Campbell's view, Paul continued to affirm ethnic differences between Israelites and non-Israelites but disavowed divine discrimination on the basis of such differences.

Campbell's sixth chapter focuses on 2 Cor 3. Contending against Christian supersessionism, buttressed by the notion of a new covenant in Christ displacing and replacing God's old covenant with Israel, he reads 2 Cor 3:1–4:6 through the lens of a hermeneutic of comparison that emphasizes commonality grounded in an appreciation of continuity between the Testaments. Cognizant that Paul makes various contrasts at this point in his letter, Campbell nevertheless sets out to demonstrate that Paul's scripturally grounded argument together with key themes within the passage tell against positing a "strong contrast" between Old and New Testament scriptures. Within the context of an apparent request for letters of commendation, perhaps occasioned by

Paul's appeal for contributions to his collection and on the supposition that the question of the role of Moses in the transmission of the torah was posed by status-oriented Corinthians themselves, Campbell contends that Paul's contextually provoked inferences from Exod 34 function within a *qal wahomer* (lesser to greater) comparison between Moses's "letter" ministry and Paul's "ministry of the Spirit" rather than contributing to a condescending contrast between old and new covenants in which the new annuls the old for all Christ-followers.

In chapter 7 Campbell continues to argue for continuity of divine revelation across the Testaments, here focusing on the themes of divine faithfulness and the remnant as these relate to the nations. In his view, the promises of God to Israel were transmitted by historical Israelites, as recorded in the scriptures of Israel. Moreover, the biblical remnant is an Israelite remnant, even in Paul's day, although for Paul the remnant comprises Israelite Christ-followers—through whom God shows continuing faithfulness to Israel, through whom the promises of God are extended to the nations, and through whom continuity of divine disclosure may be traced from the covenant with Israel to the renewed or reratified covenant in Christ.

Chapter 8 maintains Campbell's focus on continuity in divine purpose between historic Israel and *ethnē* in Christ, as construed by Paul in his appeal to Abraham as the father of all who are in Christ. Focusing on Rom 4 and 9, he argues that Paul articulated a version of restoration eschatology in which Israelite Christ-followers were perceived as the faithful remnant through whom the nations would be drawn to experience God's saving benefits, which would lead to the salvation of all Israel. In this connection, although non-Israelites may become heirs of God's promises to Abraham through Christ, they must still be inducted into Israelite traditions and maintain a positive posture toward Israel's heritage. *Ethnē* in Christ need to be socialized into a Jewish symbolic world by means of instruction in Israelite scripture and tradition so as to be able to appreciate and, in some sense, to participate in the narrative of Israel, albeit without becoming Israelites.

Chapter 9, "Participation in Christ and the Transformation of Identity," contends that, in Christ, Israelites retain their social identity as Israelites and non-Israelites retain their ethnic identity as non-Israelites, despite the need for the latter group to learn to inhabit a Jewish symbolic world by becoming familiar with Israel's scriptures and traditions. For *ethnē* in Christ, then, participation in Christ entails participation in the narrative of Israel but without adopting an Israelite identity. Within the larger community of Christ-followers, social or cultural identity is not transcended but remains differentiated; even so, such differentiated identity, while retained, is also transformed in accordance with the reconfiguration of values and priorities that necessarily comes from reevaluating all things in light of Jesus as Israel's Messiah. In Paul's letters, unity in Christ does not imply uniformity, nor does oneness in Christ imply homogeneity. "Transformation in Christ is an imperative for Paul," according to Campbell, "but transformation involves both continuity and change" (273). This chapter also critiques contemporary discourse on ethnicity and identity in Paul, themes of longstanding concern to Campbell.

Chapter 10, “Covenantal Hermeneutics in Paul,” opens by considering the role of covenant in Paul’s letters and thought. For Campbell, the available evidence indicates that covenantal categories remained important to Paul, for whom the Christ event facilitated covenant renewal rather than an entirely new covenant. Although *ethnē* in Christ are not incorporated into God’s covenant with Israel, their incorporation in(to) Christ implies their receipt of God’s covenantal promises to Israel. Through Christ, God renews the covenant with Israel, so that *ethnē* in Christ share with Israelites the blessings of the reratified covenant. In short, God’s covenant with Israel remained central to Paul, but this theme played but a minor role in his letters because his audience was composed of non-Israelites who were not called into the covenant with Israel, which even after the Christ event remains God’s covenant *with Israel*.

In a brief concluding chapter Campbell identifies several themes central to comprehending Paul’s hermeneutical and theological emphases: the contextual contingency of Paul’s letters, all addressed to non-Israelite *ethnē* in Christ; God’s abiding covenant with Israel, reaffirmed and renewed through the mission of Jesus Messiah, in whom the blessings of the covenant are extended to the nations; the continuing differentiation (without accompanying denigration either way) between Israelite and non-Israelite Christ followers; contemporary interpretation of divine agency in history; the collective and corporate, no less than individual, dimensions of Paul’s gospel; and the focal point of Paul’s hermeneutics: the glory (and glorification) of God, toward which both Israel’s continuing role in the purposes of God and Paul’s proclamation of the gospel to the nations point as their ultimate goal. The chapter ends with a brief postscript outlining Campbell’s *desiderata* for future Pauline interpretation.

On reflection, a noteworthy aspect of *The Nations in the Divine Economy* is Campbell’s case for a hermeneutics of commonality and comparison (rather than contrast), in contradistinction from what he terms a “hermeneutics of antithesis.” As one who identifies peace as a core Pauline concern, Campbell’s advocacy of a hermeneutics of commonality, continuity, and positive comparison may be seen as an extension of the Pauline imperative regarding reconciliation. Conversant with the fraught reception history of Paul’s letters, especially with respect to Jewish scripture and tradition, Campbell reads for peace. This interpretive stance is by no means the only notable feature of his contribution to Pauline studies, but it is one deserving of continuing attention and engagement on the part of his scholarly peers.

Throughout this book Campbell attaches particular significance to his considered opinion that Paul’s undisputed letters were addressed to non-Israelites, *ethnē* in Christ. Especially with respect to Romans, however, this judgment is not as secure as he claims. When Paul directly addressed his audience at Rom 1:7, he apparently had in mind *all* loved by God in Rome called (to be) holy ones, not only non-Israelite Christ-followers. Surprisingly, Rom 1:7 is mentioned only in passing within a single note (284–85), albeit with a reference to his prior study on “The Addressees of Paul’s Letter to the Romans,” wherein he is not quite so assertive about an exclusively non-Jewish audience for

Romans. Together with other data from Romans suggestive of a more differentiated audience, especially in its final three chapters, Rom 1:7 remains a thorn in the side of one of Campbell's major premises.

Scholars familiar with Campbell's body of work may wonder whether they will encounter much by way of new thought in his most recent book. In many respects, *The Nations in the Divine Economy* is a refined and occasionally revised restatement and defense of various long-held interpretive convictions about Paul. That said, perhaps a new accent in this book is Campbell's foregrounding of Paul's own covenantal hermeneutics characterized by positive comparison rather than by antithetical contrast, especially with respect to Israelite scripture and tradition. Whatever the case, within the pages of this book one encounters a nuanced, contextually sensitive, and challenging perspective on Paul and his mission to the nations.