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*Jews, Gentiles and Ethnic Reconciliation: Paul's Jewish Identity and Ephesians*. By Tet-Lim N. Yee. Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 130. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, xxi + 302 pp., \$75.00.

This offering by Tet-Lim Yee—a revision of his Ph.D. dissertation submitted to the University of Durham and supervised by J. D. G. Dunn—is an examination of Ephesians 2 through the lens of recent discussions involving the new perspective on Paul. As students of the New Testament are well aware, the conversation between alternative readings of Paul's discussions of the Mosaic Law and his opposition of faith vis-à-vis works has produced an overwhelming amount of literature in the last quarter-century. This scholarly output has focused mainly on Romans and Galatians, which is understandable given that Paul's discussions of justification by faith apart from works of law are limited to these two letters and that it is these epistles which seem to address most strategically the divisive issue of what to do with the distinction between Jews and Gentiles now that Christ has ascended and inaugurated the age of the Spirit. Yee, in the present volume, seeks to expand the range of the discussion to include other Pauline materials in the NT that might shed light on the debate between new perspective and traditional readings of Paul, and also to determine what light might be shed on Ephesians by applying insights from the new perspective on a Pauline passage that appears to have much to say about ethnic identity.

After a historical survey of various angles of approach to the relationship in Ephesians of Israel to the church, Yee claims that one neglected area of research is an examination of “the specific theme of Jewish attitudes toward Gentiles and ethnic reconciliation against the backdrop of such a Jewish perspective” (p. 31). This is the hole that Yee seeks to fill with this work. His thesis is that “Jewish attitudes toward the Gentiles had become the main factors which had led to Gentiles being excluded from the purpose of God before the latter had any positive connection with Christ. The Gentiles were excluded from Israel's God-given blessings on the basis of a particular *ethnos*” (p. 31). It was because of this inflated sense of Jewish self-confidence that Jews associated their election by God with their ethnicity, thus relegating Gentiles to the status of “the outsider,” or “the other.” The author of Ephesians utilizes this estranged situation in order to present Christ Jesus as the solution to this alienation, “whose reconciling work is marked by his undisguised inclusivism” (p. 32).

Yee begins by elaborating the Jewish character of Ephesians, noting several features that indicate that it is written from a Jewish perspective, including the *berakah* with which the letter opens, the language about God, and the mystery terminology employed throughout the letter. This last feature points to the apocalyptic frame of Jewish thought, which also includes the enslavement of humanity by the powers of evil and the call to warfare by the people of God. One further feature that demonstrates Ephesians' Jewish character, according to Yee, is the use of “aeon of this world” (Eph 2:2) to characterize the cosmic enslavement of Gentiles apart from Christ. He understands this term to refer to a deity that held the Gentile world in its grip (pp. 46-55), rather than a reference to the world-mindset that dominates the pagan world, “the norms and values of a spatio-temporal complex which is wholly hostile to God” (p. 48). That a personified deity is in view here is a minority opinion in Ephesians scholarship, but not by much, since there are a number of weighty commentators on the letter who have taken

this position, including Bruce, Gnifka, Schlier, Lindemann, and Schnackenburg. Yee distinguishes his view from these, and others, including M. Barth, by claiming that the author is not necessarily speaking of an ontological reality, an actual deity that stands in opposition to the one true God, but is simply expressing the Jewish viewpoint with regard to Gentiles—that they lay outside the realm of God (p. 49). “The main gist of the author’s message is to reduce the Gentile religion to the category of the false... The naming of a foreign deity reveals more about his religious convictions than about his personal interest in the deity” (p. 50).

While Yee does indeed present a good case for this interpretation, marshaling new evidence, not everyone will be convinced, which is only a matter of course. Many will regard Yee as pressing the “new perspective” approach a bit too much here, utilizing ethnic categories where they do not belong. It appears that in 2:1-10, the emphasis is on the enslavement of all humanity, and that ethnic categories are not yet in view, as they are in vv. 11-19, where they dominate the discussion.

His handling of Eph 2:8-10 is superb, noting that this is not merely a restatement of Paul’s contrasting “faith” and “works” from Romans and Galatians, but is a strategic statement with a doxological thrust. The author’s aim here is to uphold God’s gracious initiative in salvation, asserting “that God is in the truest sense the source or starting point of all things” (p. 68). Yee rightly notes that scholars often over-read the supposedly Pauline neat distinctions between “faith” and “works” into this text so that Paul is viewed as “attacking” a view that God’s verdict of justification is rendered on the basis of human effort (p. 69). While some may regard Yee’s own distinction as too finely cut, it certainly is the case that the force of Eph 2:8-10 within its own context has often been neglected in the drive to utilize texts for dogmatic polemics.

The full benefit of Yee’s angle of approach to Ephesians 2 becomes clear in his handling of the second half of the chapter, where ethnic categories come to the fore. His discussion of the importance of circumcision for the self-understanding of the Jewish people is thorough and compelling (pp. 76-81). It is “a *sine qua non* for Israel’s self-definition as the people of God,” one of the essential identity markers that “protected [the Jewish people] against the assimilation of foreign influences and customs into the Jewish way of life” (p. 80).

Yee, surprisingly, does not see the author’s depiction of circumcision in v. 11 (“the ‘so-called’ circumcision, done in the flesh by human hands”) as negative, but as simply “reinforcing group identification” (p. 84). While he is right to note that negative stereotypes of Judaism by Christian interpreters have offended devout Jews, it does appear that the portrayal of circumcision here is quite negative. Ephesians depicts Israel as a marked-off earthly people by virtue of their earthly practices, hiding from view their God-ordained origins in an effort to emphasize the gravity of the mistake of identifying election with ethnic identity, leading to Israel’s complacency and failure.

With regard to the continuity/discontinuity between Israel and the church, Yee situates his view against both a simple replacement of Israel with the church, and a direct line of continuity between the two. He claims, rather, that the church as “one body” is “community-redefining imagery.” Ephesians transposes “the exclusive ‘body politic of Israel’ into an inclusive (and non-ethnic) community-body in which the ‘holy ones’/Israel and Gentiles who believe in the Messiah could be together as a harmonious whole (hence, ‘in one body’)” (p. 176).

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With regard to the authorship of the letter, Yee refers throughout his work to “the author” of the letter in order to avoid distracting from the main point of his thesis (p. 33).

While this review has focused on several points of disagreement with Yee’s exegesis, this is only because his thesis is so compelling and faithful to the text of Ephesians 2. His work constitutes a vitally important engagement with Ephesians, which future scholarship on the letter simply cannot ignore. His various statements and restatements of Jewish exclusivism creatively express the Jewish attitudes that were up and running in the first century, which needed to be overcome by the death and resurrection of Christ. For this reason, future dialogue on the “new perspective” will also benefit greatly from Yee. This work, especially his discussion of “the law of commandments in ordinances” (pp. 154-61) shows how insights from the “new perspective” can bring to light features of the text that are relatively inexplicable on a “traditional” reading.

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