

BOOK REVIEW

Barclay, John M.G. *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015). xvi + 656 pp. Hbk. \$70.00.

John M.G. Barclay is the Lightfoot Professor of Divinity at Durham University in the UK. Barclay notes in the preface that this book was the product of, besides over a decade of study and writing, several lectures in various places followed by helpful feedback and comments. I had the opportunity to hear his lecture when he came to McMaster University in 2011 for the Hooker Lectures.

The central objective of the book is to revisit the idea of gift/grace in Paul's letters (mainly Galatians and Romans), considering the paradigm of the ancient practices of gift-giving and reciprocity. In other words, Barclay looks at the concept of grace through the lens of gift in this study. In his conclusion, he writes: 'This book has offered a new approach to the concept of "grace", a new analysis of Second Temple Jewish theologies of divine beneficence, and a new reading of Galatians and Romans through the lens of Paul's theology of grace' (p. 562). But it is more precisely through the lens of ancient gift-giving that this new approach is presented; the book is largely based on Marcel Mauss's classic book *Essai sur le Don* (ET, *The Gift*), which is the basis of social theories of reciprocity and gift exchange. Based on ethnographic studies of people groups around the Pacific Rim, Melanesia and Polynesian islands, among others, Mauss concludes that the gift is not necessarily a physical object but includes a wide array of favors and services as well, and the practice of gift-giving contributes to a 'unifying social choreography' (p. 13).

The first ten pages of the book provide an appropriate introduction to the study, giving its rationale and setting its stage. Part 1 (chs. 1-4) describes an anthropology of gift-giving (beginning with Mauss and extending to Greco-Roman and modern practices) and perfections of gift/grace (describing grace in its 'purest' form), and a survey of interpretations of Paul's understanding of grace. Part 2 (chs. 5-10)

examines evidence of divine gifting in Second Temple literature, namely the Wisdom of Solomon, Philo, 1QH^a, Pseudo-Philo and 4 Ezra, with a summative chapter comparing his findings with E.P. Sanders's notion of covenantal nomism. Barclay goes 'beyond' covenantal nomism to argue for congruous grace, that is, that God gives his greatest gifts to those who are deserving of them, in line with ancient conventions of gift-giving. Part 3 (chs. 11-14) examines gift in the letter to the Galatians, and Part 4 (chs. 15-17) examines gift in Romans, with a summary chapter (ch. 18) to conclude the book.

While the value of this book is its provision of a comprehensive summary of material on ancient gift-giving and its historical context, a major fault of Barclay's main argument and thesis is methodologically related—more specifically, lexical semantics—a misunderstanding of the meaning(s) of words and distinguishing (or lack of distinguishing) between word and concept. One example of this is when he states that God's 'grace' is 'articulated sometimes as *χάρις*, sometimes as *ἔλεος*' (p. 310). While these two words may contain *some* semantic overlap, and may *refer* to the same thing in a particular relevant context, they do *not* have the same meaning (hence, we typically allocate two different English words, 'grace' and 'mercy', to these words, respectively). This type of lexical fallacy illustrates the illegitimate identity transfer that James Barr warned against many decades ago. Scholars have for decades quoted him, and yet these fallacies still pervade current biblical scholarship. He wrote: 'An object may be signified by word *a* or by word *b*. This does not mean that *a* means *b* ... The identity of the object to which different designations are given does not imply that these designations have the same semantic value. The mistake of supposing that it does we may for convenience call "illegitimate identity transfer"' (James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961], pp. 217-18).

Barclay extends the meaning of 'gift' to 'grace', and illegitimately transfers the meaning of one word to another as if their identity is identical. He states his objective: 'the conceptual field we are studying, with its varied terminology [of "gift"], is best captured by the anthropological category of gift' (pp. 2-3). But even though he claims that his study is not focused on words but concepts (p. 3), his study is largely a focus on the word *χάρις*, and he also amalgamates the meanings of the words *gift* and *grace* as being synonymous to each other (often using them interchangeably in the same context), as well as

lumping other words into this semantic category. *Grace* is one type of gift that God gives his people, as *peace* is another gift, and *mercy* is another gift, and so on and so forth. So while it may be legitimate to talk about *the gift of grace* and how *grace* is a *gift* of God (probably extending *gift* as a metaphor), it is not legitimate to interchange these two words together as if they mean the same thing. *Grace* is not a *thing* to give, but a characteristic of what is given. *Grace* is a gift, but it is much more than a gift, and it is imprecise (not to mention that it does not work in certain contexts like Eph. 2.8-9) to amalgamate the meanings of these two words and use them interchangeably.

Barclay's argument stands (or falls) on the idea that *gift* and *grace* mean the same thing and that they are interchangeable. This is seen on the first page, as Barclay begins by stating, 'Paul is famous for speaking the language of gift', citing 2 Cor. 9.15, which uses the word δωρεά (gift), then states that a 'variety of gift-terms pepper Paul's discourse', identifying among them χάρις, which he states is a 'common word for gift or favor [...] traditionally translated (via the Latin *gratia*) as "grace"' (p. 1). In a summary of the first part, he writes: 'The three interrelated chapters of this Part have laid the foundations for the following parts of this book by establishing a new frame in which to analyze "grace." We have located this topic within the anthropology of gift' (p. 183). A danger, however, in granting synonymous status to these two words—perhaps it is not explicit in this particular quotation, but it is throughout the book—is illustrated in his conclusion. After having concluded that the ancient practice of gift-giving contained within it (1) an expectation of reciprocation and, as a result, (2) a more discriminate practice of gift-giving, he states: 'Although Christian theologians (and modern dictionaries) regard it as self-evident that "grace" means a benefit to the unworthy, in ancient terms this was a striking and theologically dangerous construal of the concept' (p. 563). He seems to confuse, again, word versus concept, when he identifies 'grace' and calls it a concept, but he also confuses the modern word 'grace' with the ancient Greek word χάρις (although that definition for χάρις is not too far off), as if these two words have the exact same semantic range. Barclay, in my estimation, has not proved necessarily that the ancient practice of gift-giving—if there was such a rigid practice—entailed the above two characteristics, and he has also confused lexicographical categories when he interchanges words with each other and words with concepts.

Related to this illegitimate identity transfer is the omission of what constitutes the ‘language of gift’ or ‘gift-language’ and what does not. Perhaps it is intuitive, and the reader should know this already. But it seems that, given the broad parameters for what constitutes a gift, one could include a whole array of things as gifts, such as love, grace, mercy, kindness, goodness, patience, a smile, a holy kiss, a prophetic word and so on. Why is grace (or χάρις) the central focus of gift-giving, and why not other gifts? Barclay does explain that the notion of ‘gift’ is not a single phenomenon nor is it a stable category, and that ‘gift’ should be interpreted broadly here, including acts of service. But there is a lack of any constraints on what is *not* a gift, and there should be a clear set of criteria to determine what type of *language* constitutes ‘gift-language’. In other words, according to his definition of gift, almost anything could be a gift, and there should be a statement of what does *not* constitute a gift; and then the criteria on what constitutes ‘gift-language’ need to be clarified.

Finally, while Barclay’s diachronic study of gift-giving practices is interesting, I am not sure if the ‘pure’ gift idea is necessarily a modern invention as he asserts (p. 59). The ‘pure’ gift, according to Barclay, is ‘the notion of gift as ideally “free” from obligation, and unreciprocated, given *without a return*’ (p. 52; italics original), and he asserts this is a more modern idea. But it seems to me that the descriptions given in the ancient literature regarding reciprocity and expectation (e.g. p. 25) are not mutually exclusive of the prescriptions laid out by (the modern) Kant (pp. 57-58) and others. In other words, it may be the case that the ancients were not *prescribing* reciprocation as an ethical standard, but simply *describing* a cultural expectation. Additionally, if the teachings of Jesus and Paul are counted, there were ancient teachers who prescribed their followers to give ‘purely’ (cf. Mt. 6.2-4; 10.8; Rom. 12.20). Would God prescribe his followers to give ‘purely’, yet not give ‘purely’ himself?

But aside from the lexical semantic issues I have mentioned above, another important and relevant question is whether *grace* accurately fits that category of expectant reciprocity and discriminate gift-giving, and whether the criteria for ancient gift-giving harmonize with the gift of grace. But possibly a more crucial question that needs to be answered is this: does God, as a gift-giver, give his grace within this paradigm, or does he do something completely different than what *may* have been currently practiced? If reciprocity and discrimination were indeed the

dominant cultural description for gift-giving (I am not convinced there was such a pervasive convention of gift-giving in ancient times), would we not expect a counter-cultural God to subvert the current paradigm in order to present a radical Christian ethic?

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