



Daniel Wayne Roberts, *The Pastoral Epistles and the New Perspective on Paul*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2021, xx + 210 pp., \$28.00.

I write this review with great envy and admiration. This book encapsulates the dissertation I wanted to write, but my advisers rejected the proposal, saying it was too much terrain to cover. Instead, they advised that I write commentaries on each of the Pastoral Epistles (PE) and then engage the so-called New Perspective on Paul (NPP) from the perspective of each letter. Having just completed my “trilogy,” I was ready to begin this process. Alas, but surely for the best, Roberts beat me to it.

As I’ve suggested already, and as Roberts’s title itself indicates, the goal is ambitious. For starters, it’s highly contested whether 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus should be viewed collectively as a monolithic entity, given each has different emphatic messages and unique structures. To be sure, they have some thematic and linguistic overlap, but perhaps not enough to place them into a bucket and then to compare this elusive entity (the PE) to another subject whose main proponents find themselves in significant disagreement with one another. Roberts himself states, “The NPP is a multifaceted, complex system of interpretation, which is evidenced by the writing of the three major contributors” (8).

Nevertheless, the basic impetus, namely that the “focus on only a small portion of Pauline documents has led many scholars to consider what the NPP might look like if other letters were brought into the discussion” (3), is valid. Roberts narrows the scope of “other letters” to just the PE and explores key NPP proposals through a canonical perspective. The four selected NPP themes are “justification and salvation,” “law and works,” “Paul’s view of Judaism,” and the “opponents.” These subjects function as a rubric for choosing what Roberts deems the most relevant passages in the PE.

The book itself follows a straightforward arrangement. It begins with an introduction to the book itself (ch. 1), a summary of the history of research on both the NPP and PE (ch. 2), an examination of some key NPP themes against the PE (chs. 3–5), and summary reflections on the NPP in relation to the PE (ch. 6). To be sure, Roberts asserts that “this project is designed to test the basic hermeneutic of the NPP within the PE by way of the canonical perspective” (177). That is, “this project has not been designed to validate, invalidate, or otherwise apologize for the NPP, or the traditional perspective” (177). Nevertheless, it is difficult to entirely separate the two. In the end, Roberts’s views on the NPP, or the traditional perspective, seem clear.

This is perhaps most evident in what is perhaps the most invaluable contribution of this book, namely, Roberts’s assertion of “A Contextual Shift” (183–89). Roberts rightly observes that Pauline theology is “quite adaptive” (183), meaning that “Paul did not so much change, amend, or develop his theology, as the context with which his theology was faced shifted” (184). Thus, “the theology of the PE represent[s] a shift in context, not a maturation of theology” (185). Roberts contends that the NPP reading is not necessarily wrong but, rather, too reductionistic because it centers its understanding of Paul mainly on established letters like Romans, Galatians, and Philippians. As such, NPP proponents fall prey to imposing their interpretation of key terms (e.g., “justification”) and phrases (e.g., “works of the law”) on the PE. In the process, they can fail to appreciate the unique situation, features, and teaching of the PE. Roberts asserts:

What one is left with is that the NPP, if too rigidly dependent upon Romans and Galatians alone, is not able to incorporate the theology of the PE. There are too many words and phrases defined so sharply based on those situations to account properly for the nuances of words and phrases shared in the PE. What has become clear in this study is that the more closely tied to the polemic of Romans, and especially the more narrowly focused Galatians, justification (or even salvation) becomes, the harder it is to maintain the position outside them (185–86).

Roberts proposes an understanding of Paul that is wide enough to include both the insights of the NPP on the well-known letters of Paul and the distinctive elements of the PE.

Perhaps the clearest example of what Roberts has in mind involves his comparative study of the phrase “works of law,” which does not occur explicitly in the PE. Rather, we find “works” (2 Tim 1:9) and “works we did in righteousness” (Titus 3:5). Roberts rightly notes that if we limit “works” in Paul to Torah-keeping, as is the tendency of the NPP, then we miss its more general sense of any human works in the PE or equate it to early second-century Catholic dogmatism.

It is worth highlighting that Roberts offers similar “feedback” to the traditional perspective: “The traditional perspective needs also to reckon how the early sociological issue of gentile inclusion into the people of God influenced Paul’s articulation of his theology” (188). In doing so, Roberts rejects the “either/or readings” between the NPP and the traditional perspective some students of Paul feel bound to make. Roberts recognizes that some might charge him with a proposal that is nothing more than a “cop-out” (186), a simplistic attempt to reconcile two warring camps. Nevertheless, through his careful study of relevant sections in the PE, he gives a credible case to the view “that Paul’s theology was big enough to incorporate both of what is now called the NPP and the traditional perspective” (186).

Overall, I commend Roberts’s book as a primer to further exploration on the overlaps and differences between the NPP and the PE. I say “primer” because, as Roberts himself notes, his study was purposefully limited to PE passages that exhibit “similarity to NPP characteristics” (188). A much larger project is possible where a more extensive and detailed comparison is made between each letter in the PE corpus and the NPP. Such an endeavor would likely refine and perhaps even correct some of Roberts’s original findings (e.g., Roberts’s view that the PE, unlike Galatians, are not polemical in nature).

I also commend this work because Roberts accomplishes his stated task, namely to bring the PE into the NPP discussion. Doing so corrects a significant but unapologetic shortcoming of NPP proponents, due in no small part to a misplaced rejection of Pauline authorship of the PE. Roberts does so without creating any caricatures of the NPP and the traditional perspective. Those who are relatively new to either the NPP or the PE (or both) will find this book challenging, given the weight of both subjects. Nevertheless, if ever there was an ideal pastor-theologian to introduce both parties, Roberts proves to be a model candidate.

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