12-2008

Book Review: Paul, the Pastoral Epistles, and the Early Church

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From Elaine Pagel’s Gnostic Gospels to Dan Brown’s DaVinci Code (and the many “discoveries” and associated “documentaries” stirred up in their wakes), the present moment has spawned a near-renaissance of interest in the early development of Christianity. Fueled by the explosive combination of sensational, paradigm-overturning claims and a deconstructively-disposed milieu in the West, more and more conversations are taking a serious interest in what used to be the domain of only a select few of the “faithful.” James Aageson’s monograph is a welcome entry into this fray. His relatively modest aims, irenic tone, and reserved conclusions are a breath of fresh air and hold out the promise of separating at least some of the chaff from the wheat. Using the Pastoral Epistles as his point of entry, he hopes to shed some light on this broad and complex discussion. In particular, he focuses narrowly on the patterns of theology and thought in the Pastoral Epistles to gain insight into how Paul and his writings came to shape early church tradition as it developed along the trajectory set by the Pastoral Epistles. In the end, he wants to place the images of Paul and the theological patterns found in Pastoral Epistles “in their rightful place in the developing Pauline tradition and in the emergence of the Christian church” (p. 56).

He begins by establishing the “basic contours of the discrete theological patterns in the three Pastoral letters” (p. 55). He approaches each document on its own terms rather than reading them as a literary corpus in some sense. As the “contours” emerge, 2 Timothy stands out from the large degree of homogeneity in outlook found between 1 Timothy and Titus. These analyses form the basis of the subsequent comparison of each to the other and to their “most immediate Pauline counterparts” (1 Timothy to 1 Corinthians; 2 Timothy to Philippians; and Titus to Galatians; p. 71). He next broadens his base for comparison by examining the image of Paul portrayed in the Pastorals. This “Paul” is an authoritative figure who conveys by life and word a fixed body of teaching meant to function as authoritative, if not yet fully as Scripture, in shaping the life of the household of God. This portrait is then compared to that found in Acts and the Deuto-Paulines in order find its place among the other NT appropriations of Paul’s image. Finally, these refined conceptions of the theological patterns in the Pastorals along with their conception of Paul are brought up against the “patterns found in important figures from the second and third centuries of the early church” (p. 157).

What emerges is a pseudonymous perspective on these letters, though their pseudonymity is most likely not monolithic. They all assume the same theological world of thought where “doctrinal correctness” as essential to faith is assumed by all (p. 70), one compatible with the church of the late first century (e.g. 1 Peter). At the same time, 1 Timothy and Titus are more similar in their emphases and outlook on the nature of the church’s engagement with the world. Their conservative ethic advocates conformity to Greco-Roman societal structures in building up the household of God. Moreover, they share no substantive contacts with the theological worlds of their “most immediate Pauline counterparts.” In contrast, 2 Timothy’s non-conformist emphasis on suffering strongly suggests a separate author. It closely matches Philippians in regard to the paradigmatic function of Paul’s example and the counter-cultural emphasis on suffering, while still sharing enough of a theological affinity with 1 Timothy and Titus to rule out Pauline authorship. Consequently, though these pseudonymous letters represent perspectives that are not necessarily incompatible within one group or with regard to one author, they are incompatible enough to see probable grounds for different authors and different developing strands in the Pauline tradition.

Widening the circle of comparison, Aageson goes on to argue that not only do 1 Timothy and Titus differ from 2 Timothy to a lesser (though significant) degree, they all differ even more significantly from the undisputed letters of Paul, Acts, and the
Deutero-Paulines in their images of Paul, his authority, and his theology. Key examples include the following: Philippians allies with 2 Timothy in its call to suffer as Paul suffered, but it shares no concern for the type of doctrinal correctness evident in the Pastorals generally (p. 78); Galatians has “real but very limited” points of contact with 1 Timothy and Titus in its Christology and treatment of the law (p. 82); and 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy possess distinct structural and functional conceptions of the church; use distinct language but share the same soteriological intent; may both deal with an over-spiritualized eschatology though in very different ways; and differ in the latter’s lack of concern for doctrinal orthodoxy and conformity to divine order. Finally, Aageson demonstrates points of convergence and divergence between the “theological patterns” found in the Pastorals and those evident in the important figures of the second and third century church. Here, in terms of a concern for good order in the church, a notion of a fixed orthodoxy, and their view of Paul’s writing as Scripture (or nearly so) that needs to be authoritatively passed on, he finds the nearest theological heirs to be Ignatius, Polycarp, Tertullian, and Irenaeus.

In a review of this size, it is impossible to address the many interpretive insights and issues raised in this study. One will certainly find plenty with which to agree or disagree given the numerous interpretive assumptions and stances demanded by a study of this breadth. Aageson is to be commended for addressing the interface between the apostolic and post-apostolic eras, given the current cultural milieu and the ongoing importance of these issues for our understanding of Paul and the nature of the NT canon. Any serious student of the Pastoral Epistles will want to give the book a close read. Nevertheless, in my opinion, the promise of this study is largely unrealized. With a study such as this, the value of the overall endeavor is tied most closely to the initial stages of the argument. Establishing the baseline for comparison through studying the theological patterns of the Pastoral Epistles is the first and most crucial step. The validity of all future comparison, backwards or forwards, rests on whether or not you have, so to speak, “got it right.”

However, though the views of Aageson are certainly representative of a significant strand of modern scholarship, they are presented as established fact with little or no interaction with literature running contrary to his view of the Pastoral Epistles. His initial development of the theological contours of these letters—which sets the trajectory of the whole study to a significant degree and largely determines the value of its contribution—lacks the kind of close, detailed interaction with the scholarly literature and argumentation that would seem appropriate given the crucial role these initial stages play. Interaction with important and apropos works by I. H. Marshall, P. Towner, A. Lau, R. Kidd, H. von Lips, R. Van Neste, S. Westerholm, and R. Mounce, to mention a few of the most prominent omissions, is surprisingly absent. Important, trajectory-setting texts are explained as if there are no interpretive issues to be dealt with (e.g. 1 Tim 2:2). Discussions of the theology of the letters reflect a puzzling marginalization of key texts (e.g. 1 Tim 1:17 and 6:15–16 play no real role in the conception of God in this letter). Critical assumptions about the nature of the argumentation in these letters (e.g. p. 31: “the discourse is linked together by a complex interweaving of terms and ideas that provides a kind of rhetorical coherence for a text that otherwise often appears quite random”) go untested.

In the end, if you grant the author’s starting points, there is much to be gained for our understanding of the Pastoral Epistles and their place in the development of early Christian tradition. However, if you see significantly different theological patterns in the Pastorals and, thus, very different starting points, as I do, the realization of the essential goal of the study remains in question.

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