Review of Biblical Literature

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BOOKS RECEIVED

Wander, Gottesfürchtige und Sympathisanten: Studien zum heidnischen Umfeld von Diasporasynagogen

Wander, Bernd
Gottesfürchtige and Sympathisanten: Studien zum heidnischen Umfeld von Diasporasynagogen
WUNT 104. Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1998. Pp. xiv + 176. DM 178.00.

Reviewer: David Trobisch
Bangor Theological Seminary, Bangor, ME 04401

Bernd Wander's study was accepted as Habilitationsschrift by the theological faculty of the University of Heidelberg in 1997. The terms "Gottesfürchtige" and "Sympathisanten" are used by German scholars consistently to describe God-fearers, proselytes, God-worshippers, pagan adherents or the Gentile movement. The study takes as its starting point the observation that the term God-fearer is used in three different ways in the pertinent literature. It is sometimes used as an honorary title for specific Jews, it sometimes denotes Gentiles who sympathize with the Jewish community, and in other cases it refers to a complex and not clearly-defined group. This vague, unsatisfying terminology complicates the scholarly dialogue.

After giving a survey of modern studies, Wander describes the historical interaction between Jewish communities living in the Diaspora and their social environment. He concentrates on questions of separation and participation in social events, and touches on Jewish mission endeavors and their relevance for early Christianity. Wander then reviews the literary evidence in biblical and rabbinic passages and concludes with a thorough lexicographic analysis of the Greek terms used. In all of this literature, Wander does not find a solution to the problem of terminology. The various equivalents denoting God-fearers are not even necessarily confined to Jewish communities but appear in many different religious contexts.

Wander then turns to the evidence provided by inscriptions, which has fueled recent debates. He finds that the term "God-fearer" is not used consistently in inscriptions but allows for three legitimate interpretations. It is used as an honorary title within the Jewish community, or it denotes an uncircumcised Gentile with a specific function within the Jewish congregation, or it is an honorary title for Gentiles who were benefactors of a Jewish congregation.

Wander relates these results to the references in Acts and concludes that the historical value of these references can neither be established nor dismissed with certainty. His final chapter concentrates on the Judaizers mentioned in Galatians 2:14 and the Jewish mission reflected in Matthew 23:15. Wander suspects that Paul's willingness to accept Gentiles into Jewish communities without requiring the observation of Jewish law was radical and not practiced by Jewish Diaspora congregations until later. And he warns against taking Matthew's comment as historical proof for an organized missionary effort within ancient Jewish

communities.

Wander's book does not promote a new theory or an original methodology, and it does not uncover new data. Its strength lies in the thorough discussion of primary evidence and the extensive bibliographical references to modern studies. Although the difficulties raised by the term "God-fearer" are dealt with often by many different scholars, Wander's study is the first comprehensive monograph on the question.

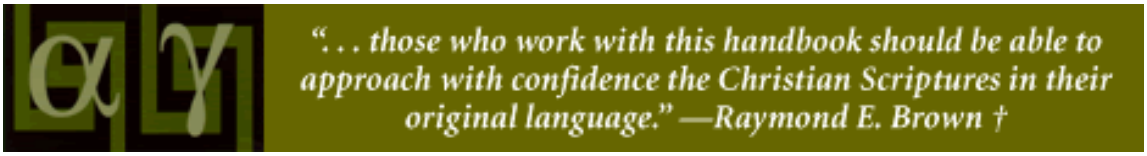
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