

BOOK REVIEW

Joshua W. Jipp, *Pauline Theology as a Way of Life: A Vision of Human Flourishing in Christ*

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In his newest monograph, *Pauline Theology as a Way of Life*, Joshua W. Jipp makes an excellent contribution to the trend of biblical scholars bringing their scholarship to contemporary life. Jipp facilitates a ‘three-way conversation’ between ancient philosophy, current positive psychology and the letters of Paul on human flourishing and the good life (p. 9). The book draws a reader into the world of Paul and ancient philosophical schools, while also bringing these to bear on the highly recognisable wisdom from the popular publications of positive psychologists. Thus, Jipp highlights the nodes of agreement and disagreement between these three conversation partners and the reader encounters a robust account of how Paul’s letters reveal ‘a way of life centered upon sharing in the life of God through the person of Christ’ (p. 241).

After an opening chapter sets expectations for what this book is (‘a sketch of Paul’s theology’, p. 17) and isn’t (‘disinterested historical and exegetical descriptions’, p. 6), six additional chapters unfold using a series of descriptive theses. Chapter 2 sketches ancient philosophy, chapter 3 positive psychology and each of chapters 4–7 sketches one node of Pauline theology. For example, thesis 3 in chapter 2 is ‘Human flourishing requires cultivating good relationships among friends and family’ (p. 34). This thesis is then explored through representative texts from Cicero, Plutarch, Aristotle, Epicurus, Seneca, etc. Chapter 3’s treatment of positive psychology deserves special note, as Jipp does not claim an insider’s knowledge of positive psychology and helpfully (rightfully) limits the discussion to the popular level works of five major positive psychologists, with footnotes referencing more technical studies. So, while a positive psychologist might nuance further Jipp’s five theses, this biblical scholar found the treatment illuminating and helpful.

Each of the five numbered theses in chapters 2 and 3 concern roughly the same ideas: (1) grounding human flourishing, (2) the necessity of virtue/character for flourishing, (3) the necessity of good relationships for flourishing, (4) how flourishing relates to adversity and (5) practices/exercises for flourishing. The four chapters on Paul’s theology correspond roughly to theses 1, 2, 3 and 5: chapter 4 on transcendence (thesis 1), chapter 5 on moral agency (thesis 2), chapter 6 on love (thesis 3) and chapter 7 on spiritual practices (thesis 5). Each of these four chapters proceeds in two parts: an exposition of Paul’s theology in three theses followed by the three-way conversation between Paul, ancient philosophy and contemporary positive psychology. A final concluding postscript sums up Jipp’s hopes for the book: first, that Paul’s theology is best approached ‘by attending to what Paul posits as humanity’s supreme good: sharing

in the life of God through Christ and the gift of the Spirit' and, second, that this approach 'can stimulate us to reflect upon how Pauline theology might be recontextualized as a way of life for our current times' (pp. 239–40). The postscript then offers an incomplete summary of the book in paragraphs listing Paul's theology according to the fivefold thesis schema of chapters 2 and 3.

There is much to commend in Jipp's work, not least of which is his accomplishment of the two hopes mentioned in his conclusion. I am also left with a few questions. The first concerns the organisation of the book. Its parallel structure is effective, with the exception of two irregularities. First, Paul's own understanding of adversity and human flourishing is woven throughout all four chapters on Paul. Jipp is accurate and compelling in arguing that Paul's view here is distinct from that of his other two conversation partners, especially since Paul's view is that persons-in-Christ 'cannot obtain full flourishing in this world' (p. 241). Given that this is a final summary point and thus parallels the fivefold pattern, I wanted a more direct focus here. In addition, such a focus would allow some exploration of the debate concerning Romans 7. Jipp's reading of Romans 7 is a good one and plays an essential role in the book, but there isn't even a footnote recognising the extent of scholarly debate about this passage. Second, the ancient philosophers worm their way into the description of Paul's theology. Of course, they are helpful for historical comparison, but the lack of positive psychology playing a similar role is striking. I wonder whether it might also reveal aspects of Paul's thought. Finally, I am left wondering whether Jipp sees anything lacking in Paul's theology that ancient philosophy or positive psychology might add. Somewhat regularly, Jipp shows Paul exposing the shortcomings of the other two. Yet, instead of Paul's own thought having shortcomings one or both could meet, positive psychology and ancient philosophy serve only to educate the contemporary person trying to understand and apply Paul's thought.

Pauline Theology as a Way of Life is an excellent study of Paul's theology that provides a compelling account of a dominant voice in Christian thought. Jipp expertly shows some weaknesses of contemporary positive psychology for which Christians in particular, and those interested in ancient wisdom more broadly, will find in Paul's thought answers. Most profoundly, Jipp shows at every turn how and why a vision of human flourishing founded on a crucified Messiah will always read as foolishness to some, even as he convincingly argues that this vision is deeply sagacious.

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