

By What Law?: The Meaning of *Nomos* in the Letters of Paul, by Michael Winger. SBLDS 128. Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1992. Pp. xiv+236. \$44.95/\$29.95 (\$29.95/\$19.95 members). Dissertation, Union Theological Seminary (Robin Scroggs).

Ever since E. P. Sanders published his ground-breaking book Paul and Palestinian Judaism, the debate over Paul's conception of the law has been at the forefront in Pauline scholarship. Michael Winger, in this dissertation completed under Robin Scroggs, attempts to determine the meaning of the term *nomos* in the letters generally accepted as Pauline. The substance of the book (chapters two through four) is devoted to discerning the "meaning" of and "referents" for the term *nomos*. The basic conclusions reached regarding meaning and reference are elucidated in chapters five and six through an intensive study of *nomos* in Gal 2:15-21 and Rom 7:14-25.

One of the virtues of this work is the linguistic study of the term "law" in Paul. Winger uses the methodology of lexical semantics in his attempt to discover more precisely the meaning of and referents for the term *nomos* in the undisputed Pauline letters. The methodology used enables Winger to approach traditional texts from a fresh perspective. For instance, he groups the syntagmatic patterns of *nomos* into seven categories in order to establish its meaning: the law 1) speaks and is perceived; 2) is a standard of

judgment; 3) is a guide to conduct; 4) controls; 5) is tied to a particular people; 6) has a source; and 7) people put themselves under the law.

The seven components listed above comprise the meaning of the law, according to Winger, but to what does *nomos* refer in the undisputed Pauline letters? He argues that in the majority of cases that the *nomos* refers to the Jewish law, although there are also instances in the letters (e.g. Rom 3:27; 7:22, 23, etc.) in which the term is used in a more general sense. Since Paul uses *nomos* both of the Jewish law and of law generally, Winger concludes that the Pauline conception of Jewish *nomos* is shaped by his universal comprehension of *nomos*. In other words, the overarching category was the general conception of law which was common to various peoples. The Jewish law is simply a subcategory of law in general. What distinguishes the Jewish law from the law in Gentile cultures is that the Jewish *nomos* describes what Jewish people do, or at least what their law says they "should" do. The "law" in other cultural groups describes what is practiced by people in their various settings. What is unique about "Jewish" law is that it depicts what is practiced in Jewish culture.

Winger's work is instructive methodologically, for there is a significant need for scholars with a knowledge of linguistics to bring their expertise to biblical literature. Despite the value of many of his insights, the central theses of the work, in my opinion, were either not persuasive, or they were not of much help in understanding Paul. For example, much of the book hangs on the seven components of meaning established by Winger, but the adequacy of these seven categories is questionable. It is instructive and important to note the specific wording associated with *nomos* in the various passages, viz.,

it speaks, testifies, brings wrath, is transgressed, etc. But Winger seems to assume too quickly that the wording associated with *nomos* is the key to assigning it to a particular category. In other words, the various categories are assigned too easily on the basis of the syntagmatic patterns. Much more exegetical work is needed to support the validity of these categories. One example will have to suffice. Winger assigns 1 Cor 9:8; 14:34 and Rom 7:7 to the "verbal" category because the law "says" something in these texts. It is doubtful, though, that this is the salient feature of these texts. I would argue instead that what is prominent in each of these passages is that a "command" of the law is given. Winger's work is not sophisticated enough linguistically, for he moves too quickly from syntagmatic patterns to the delineation of categories. A convincing linguistic analysis of *nomos* must be rooted in exegesis which takes the entire context into account. The specific wording associated with *nomos* is not necessarily crucial for placing it into a particular category. Such decisions must be exegetically vindicated.

The distinctive contribution of Winger lies in his conclusion that the Jewish *nomos* refers to what the Jewish people do. Thereby he can offer an explanation as to why Paul refuses to impose the law on Gentiles. The *nomos* for Paul is the "Jewish" law, and it does not make any sense to demand Gentiles to keep the Jewish law. The reason the Gentiles are free from the "law" is because it is not theirs.

The definition suggested by Winger is not so much wrong (although Winger's claim [p. 100] that Jewish oral traditions are included in Paul's view of the law is highly questionable) as it is incomplete and remarkably reductionistic. The Jewish law does describe what the Jews do, but the question is whether this is the salient point in Paul's use

of *nomos*. Winger's study goes astray in that he minimizes again and again the divine origin of the law for Paul (pp. 99, 111-112, 123, 153, 167, 199, 201). Paul believed the Jewish law was qualitatively different from the law of other peoples because the Jewish law was from God. Paul's struggle with his opponents and his churches on an issue like circumcision was so difficult precisely because he was persuaded that the Torah was God's Torah. His task would have been much simpler if he had merely believed that the Jewish *nomos* was not binding on Gentiles because it belonged only to the Jews. Instead, Paul tried to show why a law which came from God was no longer binding on the Gentiles. Indeed, the whole discussion is even more complex because he also claims that Gentile believers should keep the law (Gal 5:14; Rom 8:4; 13:8-10). Winger (111, 199-200) waves this problem away too easily by asserting that there can be no distinctions in the law, and by claiming that this poses no problem for his definition of the law. But if Paul believed that Gentiles should keep at least some of the law, then Winger's view that the Gentiles do not have to keep the law because it is Jewish collapses.

Winger's study is helpful in that it reminds us that any definition of $\square\square\square\square$ in Paul must be established on an adequate linguistic basis. His own work, however, suffers from a facile use of lexical semantics. The reduction of the law to sociological categories also fails to convince. No solution which eliminates or downplays the theological dimension from *nomos* in Paul is satisfactory.

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