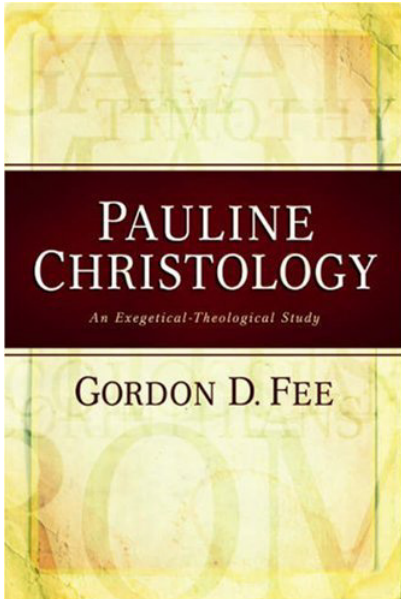


RBL 01/2008



Fee, Gordon D.

Pauline Christology: An Exegetical-Theological Study

Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2007. Pp. xxxii + 707.
Hardcover. \$39.95. ISBN 1598560352.

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I. H. Marshall's assessment of Gordon Fee's new book is much to the point. "Gordon Fee has done it again! Having given us the standard work of Paul's understanding of the Holy Spirit, he has now filled a surprising gap in Pauline studies by writing a remarkably comprehensive and detailed account of Pauline Christology." To this Paul Achtemeier adds: "Thoroughly researched, comprehensive, and wide-ranging, this solid study is arranged in such a way that it is useful not only for its impact pointing as it does to the coherence of Paul's christological thought but also for its careful exegetical studies of individual passages" (both from the dustjacket).

The "ground rules" of Fee's approach are set out in his introduction. First, Fee defines Christology quite traditionally as relating to the person of Christ, in distinction to his work. Yet it is acknowledged that such a distinction is not one that Paul himself makes, because "if Christ is the singular passion of Paul's life, the focus of that passion is on the saving work of Christ" (1-2). He admits that Paul's refusal to differentiate between Christ's person and his work makes for a difficulty, yet in a work of this sort the line must be drawn somewhere.

Second, while acknowledging that a narrative approach to Paul's Christology possesses some benefits, Fee opts for the combination of exegetical *analysis* of passages (even at the

risk of repetition) and a theological *synthesis* of the materials, the same structure as in his *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994). The analysis is discernibly more technical here and for that reason is likely to be less appealing to nonspecialists in the field. Consequently, some readers anyway may want to reserve this segment of the book as a commentary on the individual passages without necessarily poring over the details in a cover-to-cover reading. However, the synthesis lightens up and makes for easier sledding. Indeed, this portion of the book is not only theologically rich but devotional in tone. In any event, as a specialist in Paul, I value the attention to detail, along with the various chapter appendices serving as compendia of the relevant passages, especially the wisdom texts, which are not so readily available.

Third, of particular interest to readers will be the relation of exegesis to the traditional doctrines of the person of Christ and the Trinity. Fee is clear that the term *Christology* in the book expresses “a very focused theological concern.” The issues of Chalcedon and Nicaea are not raised, since they lie beyond Paul’s expressed concerns. At issue in Fee’s book is, in his words, “the singular concern to investigate the Pauline data regarding the person of Christ in terms of whom Paul understood him to be and how he viewed the relationship between Christ, as the Son of God and Lord, and the one God, as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is therefore now revealed as our Father as well” (9). For Fee, the questions with which these later councils wrestled were simply not addressed by the New Testament author. Later in the book Fee responds to some criticisms of his use of “Trinitarian” in *God's Empowering Presence* as proper nomenclature for Pauline theology, mostly because the word carries too much of “the baggage of later discussions that are concerned with how the three divine ‘persons’ cohere in unity of being.” In place of “Trinitarian,” Fee now prefers to speak of “proto-Trinitarian” (as borrowed from Stanley Porter) as “a way of designating those texts where Paul himself, rigorous monotheist though he was, joins Father, Son and Spirit in ways that indicate the full identity of the Son and Spirit with the Father, but without losing that monotheism.” But even with these qualifications, the synthesis portion of Fee’s study proceeds to demonstrate that Paul embraced a “high Christology.”

Fourth, in a preview of his ensuing analysis of texts, Fee demonstrates that Paul’s christological thought is rooted particularly in the LXX. He argues quite convincingly that Paul knew and drew upon the text commonly identified as the LXX and that his readers would have picked up on echoes from it. Fee illustrates with such well-known historical documents as the Declaration of Independence, Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address and Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech that anyone familiar with these documents and the culture from which they arose would have no difficulty in recognizing distinctive words and phrases. Likewise, Paul’s readers would have been able to hear “echoes” from

the LXX that modern readers may not necessarily be capable of recognizing. In the exposition of texts, these observations are applied, for example, in the way in which Paul uses the title *kyrios* (“Lord”), most notably without the definite article and with certain prepositions. In other words, *kyrios* as the LXX’s rendering of the divine name Yahweh means that Jesus is Lord in the same sense that God is. Additionally, Paul’s familiarity with the LXX, Fee argues, accounts for Paul’s reminder to the Galatians (4:14) that they received him as “the angel of God,” a recurring Old Testament phrase that in English is usually rendered “the angel of the Lord.” This identification, says Fee, is supported by the next phrase, “as Christ Jesus” (229–31). If true, this is a remarkable insight.

Moving to the body of the book, the investigation yields expected results from an evangelical scholar such as Fee, who is fully supportive of Paul’s “high Christology.” In summary: (1) Christ is the preexistent and eternal Son of God (King of Israel); (2) as “equal with God,” Jesus is Lord in the “fully loaded” sense of the term (= Yahweh); (3) he is the incarnate redeemer (savior); (4) he possesses divine prerogatives and attributes, such as God’s glory and faithfulness; (5) he shares in divine activities and purposes, including creation, forgiveness, and resurrection; (6) he is a member of the “proto-Trinity”; (7) he has now been exalted on high at God’s right hand and given the name above all names; (8) to him prayer may be addressed; (9) he is an object of worship, to whom Paul is completely devoted; (10) ultimately, every knee will bow to him and every tongue confess that he is Lord. In contending for such *theologoumena*, Fee is not content to fall back on orthodox assumptions regarding Christ’s person; rather, the materials are examined methodically and microscopically with the aid of the best of contemporary scholarship. The aggregate of the evidence is overwhelming: Paul had a very high Christology indeed!

To take the analysis first, individual comments on the Pauline texts contain numerous insights for the commentator. As noted above, one of these is the translation of Gal 4:14 as “the angel of God,” a reference to the Angel of the Lord in the Hebrew Bible. Also in Galatians there is the matter of Paul’s singular phrase “faith of Jesus Christ” (*pistis Iēsou Christou*). At least since the publication of Richard Hays’s Yale dissertation, there has been, as Fee observes, a groundswell of the New Testament scholarship that interprets the phrase as subjective genitive: *pistis Iēsou Christou* speaks of Christ’s own covenant fidelity. Fee, however, takes issue with the growing consensus and argues persuasively for the traditional objective genitive understanding of Paul’s choice of words. I personally like “adjectival genitive,” as suggested by Arland Hultgren, meaning that our faith is “Christic,” directed specifically to Jesus as the Lord of the new covenant. But in the end, objective and adjectival genitives come down to pretty much the same thing.

Another instance is that in responding to those commentators on Phil 2:6–8 who have an aversion to the idea of imitating Christ, as though ethics were based finally on self-effort rather than on grace, Fee responds: “But these objections are based on a fundamental misunderstanding of *imitatio* in Paul’s thought, which does not mean ‘repeat after me’ but rather (in the present context) ‘have a frame of mind which lives on behalf of others the way Christ did in his becoming incarnate and dying by crucifixion’” (372 n. 6). Thereafter, Fee explains, Paul follows up 2:6–8 with his own story in 3:5–14 as one who lives out the Christ-paradigm and urges the Philippians to follow his example of following the primary example, Christ, (3:15–17) and thus to live in the present in a cruciform manner. The disputed term *harpagmos* in Phil 2:6b is correctly taken by Fee to be a “matter seized to be upon” in the sense of “taking advantage of it.” In other words, Christ’s equality with God was something that he refused to exploit for selfish ends. Rather, “he poured himself out” and became the obedient Servant of the Lord.

The synthesis brings together the exegetical data as they form a biblical theology of the person of Christ in Paul’s letters. At the forefront stands soteriology: the central role of Christ in salvation. As Fee expresses it, the phrase “salvation in Christ” serves as the basic summing up of Paul’s central theological concern. He makes four points. (1) There is a consistent “grammar” of salvation that takes a triadic form: salvation is predicated on the love of God the Father, is effected through the death and resurrection of Christ the Son, and is made effective through the Spirit of God, who is also the Spirit of the Son. (2) The ultimate goal of salvation is not simply the saving of individuals but the creation of a people for God’s name, reconstituted in terms of a new covenant. (3) The framework of God’s salvation in Christ is thoroughly eschatological, meaning that Christ’s death and resurrection and the gift of the Spirit mark the turning of the ages, whereby God has set in motion a new creation, in which all things eventually will be made new at the eschatological conclusion of the present age. (4) The means of salvation in Christ is his death on the cross and his subsequent resurrection, whereby people are redeemed from enslavement to self and sin and death itself has been defeated. This summary is then followed by a discussion of re-creation into the divine image as the ultimate goal of salvation.

Next ensues a section on the place of “Christ devotion” in Paul, including Christ as an object of worship. Fee writes: “All of this seems natural enough to those of us who have been raised on the Christian Scriptures; but careful reflection causes one to think again. Here is a thoroughgoing monotheist, raised in a context of absolute theocentrism, who now turns the larger part of his devotion to God toward the Lord Jesus Christ. This is Christology in evidence without Paul trying to make it so, and therefore it is all the more telling” (490).

Thereafter comes a chapter on Christ the preexistent and incarnate Savior. Of the essence of Fee's approach is the significant point that Paul does not seek to demonstrate preexistence and incarnation as something to be argued *for*. Quite the opposite. In every case Paul argues for something else on the basis of a commonly held belief in Christ as the incarnate Son of God. As Fee explains, it is precisely this reality that makes the cumulative effect of the texts carry so much christological weight.

After that, the treatment of Jesus as Second Adam is conducted along the lines of a "middling" position, which does not limit itself to explicit references to Adam but is still less inclusive than other approaches to what *else* in Paul's writings actually makes a comparison of Christ with Adam viable, based on what appear to be *certain* connections made by Paul between Christ and the actual *language* of Gen 1–3. There is here a renewed discussion of the new creation and Christ the image of God. The upshot is that Jesus is a truly human/divine savior.

The final two chapters are concerned with Jesus the Jewish Messiah and Son of God and Jesus the Jewish Messiah and exalted Lord. Here Fee examines what the data suggest are Paul's primary categories for understanding the person of Christ, that is, *who* it was who functioned as Redeemer and Creator of the new humanity. The answer of these chapters is twofold: (1) the risen Jesus is none other than the preexistent Son of God who came present among us to redeem; (2) the risen Jesus is the exalted Lord "seated at the right hand of God," in fulfillment of Ps 110:1. In the first instance, the emphasis is on the relationship of the Son to the Father; in the second, the stress is on the exalted Christ's relationship to us and to the world. Both themes have their deepest roots in Jewish messianism, as based on the Davidic kingship. In a manner akin to N. T. Wright, Fee surveys the Jesus story as it forms the culmination of Israel's story: creation, Abraham, exodus, the law, kingship, and the eschatological inclusion of the Gentiles. The outcome is that Jesus as the true Israel, as well as God's true Son, is where all Son of God Christology in the New Testament must begin, certainly including Paul. It is biblical at its very core: the messianic king of Israel, God's true Son, is not simply one more in the line of David; he turns out, in fact, to be the incarnate Son, who in his incarnation reveals true sonship and true kingship.

There is little to say but that these chapters make not only for a rich and expansive exposition of Jesus' messiahship for Paul but also for an ideal introduction to the apostle's theology of the new creation. In fact, this entire synthesis portion of the book should be required reading for students of biblical theology.

Some readers may be surprised that in the two places where Paul appears explicitly to call Christ God, Rom 9:5 and Titus 2:13, Fee denies that such is the case. As regards the

former, Fee concludes: “It seems incongruous both to the letter as a whole and to the present context in particular—not to mention Paul’s usage throughout the corpus—that Paul should suddenly call the Messiah *theos* when his coming in the flesh is the ultimate expression of what God is doing in the world” (277). All things considered, he may very well be right, in spite of the fact that the majority of evangelical commentators favors the opposite conclusion. Paul’s objective in Rom 9-11 is to pursue his salvation-historical argument that believers in Christ constitute the true remnant; they are the elect within the elect. As a kind of table of contents, Rom 9:1-5 sets the stage for this agenda. Paul commences by expressing his perpetual sorrow for his “kinsmen according to flesh” (9:3). His grief is intensified by the fact that his generation has failed to enter into the historic privileges of the Jewish people, the most conspicuous of which is “the Christ (Messiah) according to the flesh” (9:5). But the mention of the Christ, the apex of all of God’s good gifts to Israel, causes the apostle to burst out in doxology to the God who is over all, blessed forever. As Fee puts it, at this phase of the argument: “Paul now puts his emphasis on the fact that the Creator God is himself *over all things*, including especially the list of Jewish privileges that climaxed with the gift of ‘the Messiah in his earthly life’” (277).

Titus 2:13 is understood along similar lines. The interpretation of Rom 9:5 hinges to a large degree on punctuation and word order, and Titus 2:13 also entails a certain element of ambiguity. A straightforward translation would be: “Awaiting the blessed hope and manifestation of the glory of our great God and savior, Jesus Christ.” But as is frequently the case, there is more than meets the eye in the underlying Greek. What we can state for certain is that the verse contains two pairs of unified concepts. For one, “the blessed hope and manifestation” are bound together by one article and the conjunction “and” (*kai*), thus making them essentially one and the same. The “blessed hope” is the “manifestation of the glory.” The other part of the sentence is likewise a grammatical unit. It is here that the famous Granville Sharp Rule comes into play: two nouns controlled by a single article and joined by *kai* are understood as one entity, not two. Not only so, remarks Fee, the combination of adjective-noun and noun-adjective occurs elsewhere in Paul’s writings. To cut to the case, the understanding of the verse hinges on the question of apposition. At first I was reluctant to accept Fee’s proposal, but on closer examination it appears that he is right. In terms of both syntax and conceptuality, Jesus the Christ is the blessed hope/manifestation of “the glory of our great God and savior.” Although on this reading Paul does not call Christ God as such, here is still, as Fee maintains, a very high Christology.

My qualification is that, even given the likelihood of Fee’s interpretation of Rom 9:5 and Titus 2:13, it is not necessarily out of place for Paul (suddenly or otherwise) to call Jesus God, if in fact his Christology is as high as Fee says. If Christ is the manifestation of God’s glory, then who else but God could be the demonstration of God’s glory? It is not at all inherently improbable or “anomalous” that Paul should denominate Jesus as God,

especially in light of Fee's efforts to demonstrate that *kyrios* for Paul is tantamount to Yahweh. Of course, texts must be subjected to a penetrating analysis. But even after that, we are not in a position to assume what Paul *may* or *may not* have written. It must be remembered that, even with all the wealth of the Pauline epistles, we would need an even larger corpus of literature to determine what is actually anomalous and what is not. Even then, there is a limit to what can be deduced, since an occasional reference is not necessarily an anomaly.

Another factor that gives one pause is Fee's insistence that there is no wisdom Christology in Paul. In the discussions of 1 Corinthians, Colossians, and at more length in appendix A, Fee categorically denies that Christ is depicted as personified Jewish wisdom. In a nutshell, the comment on 1 Cor 1:30 tells the whole tale: "The net result of a close look at this passage, therefore, with personified Wisdom in view brings only negative results. Paul neither here nor anywhere else in his letters makes even the remotest allusion to 'her.' She simply is not on his radar screen" (107). Since it would take a separate essay to engage the details of the argument, suffice it to say here that Fee has made a strong case that wisdom is not a *dominant* motif in Paul's letters. However, the problem is one of overkill. I should think D. J. Moo's assessment, as quoted by Fee (597 n. 11), is more to the point: "The evidence for wisdom influence on the Christology of the early Pauline Letters is slight and allusive." Fee follows up with the comment: "One might add that the same holds true of the latter letters as well." But, in point of fact, he is not even willing to allow this much. His motivation, I think, is laudable enough: as personified wisdom, Christ is not to be reduced to a creature. Nevertheless, it is not necessary to dispense with every potential allusion to wisdom in order to maintain this conviction. As for the Jewish materials, Paul may not *derive* his conception of Christ from Wisdom of Solomon or Sirach, but the Second Temple texts do provide important context for Paul, a context that is not to be dismissed lightly. By way of support, numerous works could be cited, but one that comes immediately to mind is that of E. J. Schnabel, *Law and Wisdom from Ben Sira to Paul: A Tradition-Historical Inquiry into the Relation of Law, Wisdom, and Ethics* (WUNT 2/16; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1985). Interestingly, Fee does not interact with Schnabel's book at all (Schnabel's name is listed in the author index as appearing on 398, but in fact there is no reference to him on that page).

In any discussion of wisdom Christology, surely Prov 8:22–31 must be given its due: wisdom, the master builder, was present with Yahweh at the time of the creation. Of course, Fee does deal with this text, but he denies that it has any particular bearing on Paul's conception of Jesus as God's wisdom. By contrast, Bruce Waltke's exposition of this passage favors seeing wisdom not simply as a literary device but as a genuine hypostasis. Its first stanza, 8:8:22–26, is summarized by Waltke in these terms: "The first stanza establishes that wisdom's precedence in rank and dignity over the rest of the

creation is both qualitative (i.e., begotten, not created) and temporal (i.e., existing ‘before’ any other creature).” Then, after a survey options regarding the operative verb *qānā*, Waltke opts for “bring forth” in the sense of “begetting.”

The metaphor “brought me forth” signifies that Solomon’s inspired wisdom comes from God’s essential being; it is a revelation that has an organic connection with God’s very nature and being, unlike the rest of creation that came into existence outside of him and independent from his being. Moreover, since this wisdom existed before creation and its origins are distinct from it, wisdom is neither accessible to humanity nor can it be subdued by human beings, but it must be revealed to people and accepted by them. (*The Book of Proverbs* [NICOT; 2 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004–2005], 1:409)

If Waltke is right, then we are not so far removed from Nicaea after all: wisdom (the Son) is “begotten not created.” Consequently, it is not a stretch to see in the words of Col 1:16 at least an oblique reference to wisdom’s role in the creation: “all things were created *through* him and for him.” Fee concedes that wisdom in Prov 8 may indeed be the master worker at God’s side, but it is not the mediator *through whom* creation *came into being*. Rather, the whole created order is so full of evidences of design and glory that God’s own wisdom, now personified in a literary way, can be the only possible explanation for it. This, he thinks, falls considerably short of Paul’s understanding of Christ’s role in creation as expressed in Col 1:16 (1 Cor 8:6). Yet here is a case of putting too fine a point on the language of Proverbs in denying the equation of Christ = wisdom simply because of the absence of “through” in the text, as though this is the only way of expressing agency. If wisdom was not instrumental in some way in the creation, then what was it doing beside God—simply observing? That hardly seems to be the case; there must have been some “creative” involvement. Moreover, rather than falling considerably short of Paul’s understanding of Christ’s role in creation as expressed by Paul, the activity of wisdom in Prov 8 would provide a confirmation and buttressing of the very high Christology of Col 1:16 (1 Cor 8:6): the wisdom that designed the universe is none other than Christ! If Prov 8 has such a bearing on the Pauline passages, then Prov 3:19-20 and Ps 104:24 can be read in the same terms as well.

Finally, 1 Cor 1:24, 30; 8:6 may come in for a word or two. In the first two verses, the “wisdom” of God, as Fee maintains, is God’s attribute of skillful design—he has done things well, in spite of human (mis)perceptions of his plan, the outgrowth of arrogant and self-serving pseudo-wisdom. Likewise, the whole passage of 1:26–31 plays on Jer 9:23–24, as the latter decries human wisdom and calls for Israel to glory in the Lord. So, ironically, God’s wisdom has been displayed in and through the hated and despised cross—it is just the *crucified Christ* who is God’s very wisdom. It is in this capacity that he has been made

our wisdom (1:30). I would ask, however, is the “worldly” wisdom to be renounced by the Corinthians only of the Greek variety? We need to recall that, according to Acts 18:1–11, the Corinthian church was in part composed of converts from the synagogue, including its leader. And given the rather widely known equation of wisdom with Torah (Ben Sira, Baruch, etc. = Deut 4:6) in the Judaism of this period, it is not out of bounds to suggest that Christ has not only taken the place of *sophia* as the epitome of all Greek philosophical, cultural and scientific endeavors but that he is also the one who has come to displace the *hokmah* commonly equated with the law of Moses. It can be both/and at the same time.

As for 1 Cor 8:6, Fee is right that Paul has the Shema in his sights: Israel’s primal confession of the oneness of Yahweh (although this is the Christian version of Deut 6:4, wherein Christ assumes the place of Lord alongside the Father). Yet intermingled with this equation of Christ with the Father is the language of creation, the final point of reference being the Genesis creation account (with its various parallels in the Old Testament). There is predicated respectively of the Father and Jesus: “from whom are all things and for whom we exist”; and “*through* whom are all things and *through* whom we exist.” Again with Prov 8 and the *persona* of wisdom in mind, there is no reason why Paul could not be making the same allusion here as in Col 1:16: Christ as God’s wisdom is the agent of creation, although, like Col 1:16, creation expands beyond the material universe to comprehend the new creation, of which Christ also is the prime agent.

All in all, the bottom line is that Fee’s book is the most thorough and compelling account of Paul’s Christology to date and is nothing short of a great achievement. It is sure to remain the standard in the field for some time to come.