

Jason Maston, *Divine and Human Agency in Second Temple Judaism and Paul. A Comparative Study* (WUNT 11/297; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010). Pp. 218 + VIII. Sewn paper. € 54,00. ISBN 978-3-16-150570-6

MARCIN KOWALSKI

Institute of Biblical Studies, The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin  
address: Aleje Racławickie 14, 20-950 Lublin, Poland; e-mail: xmkowal@gmail.com

*Divine and Human Agency in Second Temple Judaism and Paul* by Jason Maston (JM) is a revised version of the PhD thesis discussed at Durham University in 2009. The purpose of the book is an examination and reassessment of the theses on human and divine agency advanced by scholars representing the so-called *New Perspective on Paul*. Instead of engaging in a heavy polemic with the scholarly proposals, the author goes to the source material to compare various looks at divine and human agency existing among the Jewish groups of the first century. The case texts are Ben Sirach, often considered as a forerunner of the Sadducees, the *Hodayot* by Essenes, and Rom 7:1–8:13. The study is a critical voice in the discussion on the role of grace and obedience inspired by Sanders's theses. It is also an attempt to set Paul's views more accurately into the spectrum of the opinions of Second Temple Judaism

The book consists of Introduction and three chapters followed by Conclusion, Bibliography, and Indexes of ancient sources, modern authors, and subjects. In Introduction the author provides the reader with an overview of the recent discussion on divine and human agency in Paul. JM pays special attention to the works by E.P. Sanders, J.D.G. Dunn, D.B. Garlington, K.L. Yinger, T. Engberg-Petersen, and F. Watson. Two of them appear to be a significant challenge and incentive for the author's study. The first one is E.P. Sanders with his claim that Judaism represented the "covenantal nomism" pattern where salvation was by God's grace, while obedience was the means to maintaining it. The second one is T. Engberg-Pedersen decreeing the topic of divine and human agency invalid, because there was no such dichotomy in the ancient world. To respond the latter challenge, JM examines Josephus's description of the Jewish schools. It proves that the emphasis on

theological and philosophical issues is not a “modern obsession of Christian scholars”. It also reveals a scope of opinions about divine and human agency among ancient Jews with the Essenes and Sadducees corresponding to the extremes (eliminating God or human agent respectively) and the Pharisees representing something of a compromise (the two agents cooperating). At the end, the author exposes Barclay’s model describing the relationship between human and divine agency as *competitive*, *kinship*, or *non-contrastive transcendence*. In the final point of Introduction, JM outlines concisely the argument of the study, proposes the texts to be studied, and qualifies his project as an attempt to critically reconsider Sanders’s arguments about grace and obedience in Judaism.

Chapter 1 explores Ben Sira’s understanding of the divine-human relationship. Ben Sira undertook the problem in response to some alternative theologies that denied any active role to the human agent. JM first identifies them by the use of specific literary formulas and then analyzes their content. The author contends that the problem underlying Ben Sira’s work is not God or theodicy, but rather human freedom and junction between divine and human agency. The active human agent will be defended in Ben Sira by pointing to the three aspects: Law capable of giving life, man capable of obeying its commandments, and God ultimately judging human deeds. They are all ingrained in the two-ways tradition comprised in Deut 30:15-20 which Ben Sira uses to establish the human agent (cf. Sir 15:14-20).

First, the law observance is the means to attaining life and blessing. JM argues for the close link between wisdom, life, and Torah in Ben Sira. Subsequently, using the example of Abraham from the “Praise to the Fathers”, the author shows how Ben Sira’s moral exhortations give priority to man’s action resulting in divine blessing (not the other way around as argued by Sanders). The situation with the Mosaic covenant is more complex, but it ultimately revolves not so much around the divine initiation, but the human act of obedience. The divine-human relationship is a subset of the Creator-creation relationship. God gives commandments that humans should obey to enjoy life, but the decision about it is left to their own will. It is not merely a response to God’s prior grace, but the true means to attaining life and blessing. The obedience is not also the outward expression of faith or fear of the Lord, but rather the foundation and prerequisite of these acts. In the same vein, the solution to the imperfection of sin is man’s return to the Torah. The author concludes that Ben Sira defines everything about the divine-human relationship in terms of human act of obedience to the commandments.

The second aspect, strictly related to the first one, is man’s ability to obey God’s laws. Ben Sira presumes his students are capable of obeying his

instructions. In many places of his book he portrays the human pursuit for wisdom and blessing which is not given freely, but attained through persistent obedience. Speaking of the convoluted issue of freedom and providence, Ben Sira states that God can move individuals as he pleases, but in general he does not interfere with their decisions. God's will does not determinate human destiny and human freedom does not negate God's providence. Here we come to the third aspect revealing the principal role of the human agent, namely, God's judgment. Ben Sira does not eliminate God entirely from the scene, ascribing him the ultimate authority to evaluate person's deeds. Patience is shown to those who accept God's discipline, and mercy is the reward for those who are obedient. The obedience is then not only the way to attaining life, but it is also consistently presented as the main criterion of divine judgment. What results from the analysis of Ben Sira is the crucial role of the human agent that by his deeds attains to God's graces, blessing and salvation.

Chapter 2, "God's Gracious Act of Deliverance in the *Hodayot*", deals with the hymns of the Essenes which, pointing to human sinfulness, stress God's gracious act of salvation. In the introductory section, the sources, origins, and literary genre of the *Hodayot* material are presented. Subsequently, the author moves to the description of the divine saving act and the pessimistic anthropology that underlies it. First, JM focuses on the creaturly limitations of humanity described in the *Hodayot* as predisposed to weakness and destined for death. The human is a product of the earth and exists as a frail and perishable flesh. This sort of existence entails the moral weakness of humanity which makes everybody guilty before the God's judgment seat. The problem of humanity, then, is its dusty origins and iniquity that accompanies it from birth until death.

The depravity of mankind, which keeps it from attaining salvation, is remedied not by a renewed human effort, but by divine intervention. The *Hodayot* portrays the human who endowed with God's spirit is empowered to obey commandments. Yet, the significance of man's action is not lessened this way. Man is meant to act in accordance with God's will. The *Hodayot* presents this will in terms of predestination, the concept which emphasizes God's sovereignty and in the same time establishes human ability. When God chooses a person for righteousness, he also enables him/her to obey his demands. The focus on election and predestination serves to counter the pessimistic anthropology and reach the human at his dusty origins. The intervention of God overcomes human creaturly condition and makes man a real agent capable of obeying the Torah. Two other aspects of God's saving act are the gift of knowledge and purification from sin. Both of them come

with the gift of God's spirit, while the former one is also the corner stone of obedience. JM concludes that the *Hodayot* hymns do not fit the pattern of "covenantal nomism" which lacks the eschatological perspective and the room for the spirit as an enabling agent, and, least but not last, distinguishes too sharply between divine and human action.

In chapter 3, "Sin, the Spirit, and Human Obedience in Romans 7–8", the author discusses the Pauline understanding of relationship between divine and human agency. The point of departure is once again the "covenantal nomism" model which puts in contrast not faith and "doing", but rather Christ and law (Sanders, Dunn). The author states that it is no longer profitable to arrange the discussion on the divine and human agency in terms of antithesis, and proposes Rom 7:7–8:13 as the text in which Paul explores two patterns for obedience: the vain human effort to obey the Torah and the Spirit-endowed human agency in Christ.

The chapter starts with the exposition of Rom 7:7-25 where, according to the author, Paul mounts a critique against the two-ways theology. The apostle declares that the law is incapable of dealing with the problem of sin, and, despite being holy, remains intimately connected with transgression. In the realm of the Torah the obedience is not possible; actually, the Torah makes the problem even worse. The *ego* which in Rom 7:7-25 follows the two-ways tradition comes under sin's rule. The aforementioned tradition, as presented by Ben Sira, is based on two premises: the first one saying that life is contingent on law observance, and the second one stressing the moral capacity of humans to obey the law. In Rom 7:7-25 Paul retains the symmetrical relationship between life and law observance, yet, in the same time, he shows how the Torah fails to accomplish its goal and, instead of leading to life, empowers sin and death. The moral optimism of the *ego* is shattered by Paul arguing that, being left on its own, it is destined to death. It is because it fails to take an account for the radical nature of sin which invades the human realm and asserts its rule over it.

The sin is portrayed by Paul in a personified way and understood more than just a mere act of disobedience. It is rather a being that is able to deceive, enslave, and kill. Such a portray of sin has significant parallels with the Qumran literature (Two-Spirits Treatise) and rabbinic teachings on the Evil Inclination equated with Satan and the Angel of Death. In Rom 7:7-25 sin is depicted as invading the human and taking up residence within him. It frustrates one's will and determines one's actions by making him/her a slave and a prisoner. Paradoxically, it is with the arrival of the Law that sin gains its own agency. The Torah imposes its demands, but it gives no power to the human to satisfy them, which results in the fact that *ego* is

entirely incapable of bringing his will to do good. The *ego* does not cease to act, but its ethical categories, having been reversed by sin's deception, make it engage in evil against its own will. The human loses his free will; he desires good, but is not capable of pursuing it.

After having argued in Rom 7:7-25 that the two-way tradition does not produce an adequate obedience, in Rom 8:1-13 Paul moves to show that the problem can be solved only by the empowering gift of God's Spirit. According to the author, the pattern adopted in Rom 8:1-13 bears a remarkable similarity to that of the *Hodayot*; both of them highlight the divine action, role of the divine Spirit, and human incapacity. However, Paul modifies the Jewish pattern in a significant way by placing God's saving act in the precise moment of history, instead of pre-temporal predestination, and by organizing it around Christ. The Christological modification results in the new position of mankind which now, freed from the power of sin, is capable of leading obedient life in Christ's Spirit. The Spirit establishes human ability, which is not an independent response to God's gracious deliverance, but rather a continuation of his work. It unifies the divine and human agent in a single purpose of attaining life. Thus also the human freedom and the act of obedience are put in the proper limits of God's grace, without being negated or unduly prioritized.

The book finishes with Conclusion which aptly summarizes the main points made by the author: the importance of the topic of divine and human agency in the ancient literature, the two-ways model adopted by Ben Sira, and the *Hodayot* pattern stressing God's gracious saving acts. "Covenantal nomism" does not seem to do justice either to the former or to the latter model of Second Temple Judaism. According to the author, it would be equally inaccurate, however, to describe entire Judaism as "legalistic". One should seriously take into account the diversity of the first century Judaism. JM portrays Paul as a vigorous participant of intra-Jewish debate about human ability and divine intervention. In Rom 7 the apostle engages in a polemic with Ben Sira's moral optimism, while in Rom 8 he adopts a perspective similar to that of the *Hodayot*. Paul's polemic is not solely Christological, anthropological or Gentile-oriented, but encompasses all those levels.

The final part of the book contains some remarks on the orientation of the further study on divine and human agency. The issue revolves around important scriptural passages like Deut 30:15-20, Gen 2:7; 3,19; Ps 8; 103; Ez 11; 36-37. The author indicates that a profitable research could be still carried out in this field. Another direction for future study is, according to JM, the set of texts on the two-ways tradition like *1 Enoch* 94-104, *Psalms of Solomon* 9:1-5, and *4 Ezra* 7:3-24.127-129. The Palestinian perspective

dominating in the present volume could also be broadened by Diaspora Jewish and Greco-Roman sources. Finally, a number of issues connected with the divine-human agency and Pauline soteriology still waits to be addressed, like e.g. the rhetorical function of antitheses in his rationale and the broader context of Ga 2:20 and Phil 2:12-13 together with the concepts of grace and judgment by deeds. The study is but a starting point for a broader research on how Paul could perceive interaction between divine and human agent.

*Divine and Human Agency in Second Temple Judaism and Paul* by Jason Maston is surely a valuable book presenting in a marvelously clear and concise way one of the most convoluted biblical issues, namely, the relationship between divine and human agency. The author questions the “covenantal nomism” pattern proposed by Sanders as too general and hardly applicable to multifaceted Judaism of the Second Temple period. The systematic reading of Ben Sira against the background of the two-ways tradition is certainly innovative and gives the reader a valuable key to understand it better as a part of the complex Jewish tradition. The chapter on the *Hodayot*, with the rigorous analysis of the original texts, also makes one realize the diversity of the first century Judaism and brings us closer to the Pauline milieu. The antithetic comparative lecture of Ben Sira and the *Hodayot*, which by force contains generalizations and shortcuts, definitely enables one to grasp the difference between the two currents. The greatest merit of the present volume is the way in which the author carries out his research, focusing on the texts, rather than theological discussions, picking up only the most important names and hypotheses, and providing his reader with multiple summaries scattered all over the book. Sometimes it may give an impression of repetitiveness, but they definitely help to keep the reader on track.

Saint Paul is presented by the author not only as a participant of the Jewish debate on the divine and human agency, but also as the one who modifies it in a significant way. Paul does not disappear or does not blend in his Jewish context. He is portrayed as a distinct thinker and theologian dealing with the existential and universal issues of human freedom and ability to obey or to disobey God’s laws. The parallels between Paul and the *Hodayot* may seem a bit overdrawn, especially the issues of predestination and negative human anthropology, yet, even here the originality of Paul is stressed strong enough. The problems the apostle is pondering on, as the author successfully shows, cannot be confined solely to Christology. Thus, the famous statement by Sanders that Paul criticizes Judaism simply because it is not Christianity, completely loses its grounds. Summing up, *Divine and Human Agency in Second Temple Judaism and Paul* is a great scholarly book written in a way that makes it accessible to the lecturers, students and people interested in

*Jason Maston, Divine and Human Agency in Second Temple Judaism and Paul*

recent discussions on Paul and Second Temple Judaism. It is by all means worth recommending as a serious and fresh look at the apostle's conception of sin, human obedience and salvation. It also provides a challenge to the widely accepted views of the so-called *New Perspective on Paul* which clearly need a deep revision.