

REVIEW

Michael Bachmann

*Anti-Judaism in Galatians? Exegetical Studies
on a Polemical Letter and on Paul's Theology*(trans. Robert L. Brawley; Grand Rapids, Michigan:
William B. Eerdmans, 2008), paperback, xiii + 234 pp.Reviewed by Joshua D. Garroway,
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This translation of Bachmann's 1999 German volume features six loosely-organized essays addressing knotty exegetical issues in Galatians. The first and second studies deal with the expression *erga nomou*, or "works of the law"; the third tackles the relationship between Abraham and the Law in Gal 3:15-29; the fourth the "mediator" in Gal 3:20; the fifth Paul's allegory of Sarah and Hagar in Gal 4:21-31; and the sixth the "Israel of God" in Gal 6:16. Through these investigations, Bachmann aims to discredit the prevailing view of Galatians as the *locus classicus* for Paul's supposed anti-Judaism. Bachmann's response to the title question, in other words, is *me genoito*—Heavens, no.

First, a word about the translation: Brawley faced quite a challenge because Bachmann's German style is dense and difficult. Rather than simplifying the original to produce crisper and clearer prose, however, Brawley has opted for a faithful translation. The resulting text successfully conveys the complexity of Bachmann's thought, but it also makes for difficult reading. The sentences are long and frequently marked by unusual constructions or word order, as well as numerous dependent, appositive, or parenthetical clauses. In some cases, readers may find themselves revisiting a sentence several times in order to understand it. A few sentences proved impenetrable to me. (I noted, too, many peculiar uses of the exclamation mark.)

Those who brave the demanding prose will be rewarded with rich exegesis. Bachmann is methodical and thorough. Every argument is developed meticulously from beginning to end and supported by extensive engagement with (primarily German) scholarship. His interpretations are generally fresh and provocative, too. For example, he sees *erga nomou* as the "regulations of the Law," the *halakhot*, rather than as particular actions aimed at fulfilling the Law. The difference between these alternatives is slight but crucial, according to Bachmann, because it means Paul does not view observance of the Law as inherently evil, sinful, or undesirable; the Law simply cannot save as faith can. Bachmann also takes the unconventional view that the plurality mentioned by Paul when describing the delivery of the Law through a mediator in Gal 3:20 refers to the *recipients* of the Law—i.e., the Israelites—and not to the supposed *providers* of the Law—i.e., angels, demons, etc. There is thus no reason to doubt that Paul thought the Law came directly from God at Sinai. As for the allegory in Gal 4:21-31, which is usually read as an opposition between things Jewish (e.g., slavery, flesh, Sinai, the present Jerusalem) and things Christian (e.g., freedom, spirit, promise, the Jerusalem above), Bachmann sees in Sarah and Hagar a contrast between freedom and slavery. The purpose of the biblical allusion is to admonish Paul's mostly Gentile audience from returning to their former enslavement, not to compare Judaism to slavery straightforwardly. Finally, Bachmann bucks the majority of interpreters when

it comes to the “Israel of God” in Gal 6:16. Paul’s prayer at the close of the letter is not for the church-qua-Israel but for all Jews, Christian or not, because it is they who constitute God’s authentic Israel.

The studies vary in their persuasiveness. The discussions of *erga nomou* and Gal 3:20 are convincing, but less so the reading of the Sarah/Hagar allegory. The aspect of Bachmann’s work which I would have liked to have engaged the most, however, is conspicuously absent. Even if one were to accept all of Bachmann’s interpretations, the answer to his title question may not be as obvious as he supposes. Bachmann himself concedes that “anti-Judaism” is “not a particularly clear concept itself” (p. xi). However, he never considers competing definitions of the term, clarifies his own definition, or provides criteria by which one might determine whether or not a particular text exhibits anti-Judaism. A chapter addressing these issues is in order. Bachmann’s Paul, at least as he appears in Galatians, does indeed seem less critical of Jews and Judaism than generations of readers have made him out to be: Paul retains for Jews their role as God’s elect people Israel; he considers the Law to be a holy expression of God’s will and not antithetical to the promise; and he never suggests that performance of works is inherently sinful or bad. But do these views absolve him of the charge of anti-Judaism? Perhaps, perhaps not. After all, Bachmann’s Paul still opposes particularly “Jewish” works like circumcision quite vehemently; he rejects the idea that salvation is possible apart from Christ; he supposes that the Law has been obviated in the wake of Christ; and he describes adherence to Jewish ways, at least in some sense, as slavery. Are these views indicative of anti-Judaism? Again, perhaps, but perhaps not. Without a thorough discussion of what anti-Judaism means, it is difficult to discuss the applicability of the charge to Paul.

Despite this shortcoming, the exegetical strength of Bachmann’s essays should ensure their abiding value as an important resource for interpreters of Paul and Galatians. It is thus a benefit that their translation into English has now made them available to a wider readership.