

Marcin Kowalski

"The Cosmic Drama of Salvation :
a Study of Paul's Undisputed
Writings from Anthropological and
Cosmological Perspectives", Sang M.
Lee, Tübingen 2010 : [recenzja]

The Biblical Annals 4/1, 233-240

2014

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

Sang M. Lee, *The Cosmic Drama of Salvation. A Study of Paul's Undisputed Writings from Anthropological and Cosmological Perspectives* (WUNT II/276; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010). Pp. 371 + XVII. Sewn paper. € 74,00. ISBN 978-3-16-150316-0

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

Sang M. Lee (SML) works as a Professor of New Testament at Presbyterian Theological Seminary in America, Santa Fe Springs, California. *The Cosmic Drama of Salvation* is a revision of his doctoral dissertation submitted to Faculty of Claremont Graduate University in 2008. The purpose of the study lies in the investigation of Paul's view on the law and its relationship with Christ. The present volume, according to the author, is to fill the gap left by previous studies which focused exclusively on the Jewish side of the problem without considering its cosmological and anthropological dimension provided by Greco-Roman thought. The author's intention is to elucidate Paul's drama of salvation with the use of Judeo-Hellenistic traditions: principally Greek philosophical works, Jewish wisdom, apocalyptic literature, and Philo's writings. The study is based on the analysis of Greco-Roman and Jewish writings, and examination of Paul's undisputed writings. It consists of six chapters followed by bibliography and useful indexes of ancient sources, modern authors, and subjects.

In Introduction (Chapter I) the author in a concise way presents the task, the thesis, and methodology of his study giving also its outline. In Chapter II, "The Background of Paul's Cosmic Drama (1): The Old Testament and Greek Philosophy", SML focuses on the backdrop of the divine salvific drama, analyzed from the perspectives of Old Testament stories and Greek thought. According to the author, anthropology stands at the heart of Paul's theological vision and is of a cosmic scope. Paul, in conformity with the traditional Jewish apocalypticism, perceived humanity as being involved in conflict between two spheres of sovereignty, and expected the cosmic triumph of God foreshadowed in the death and resurrection of Christ. Christ-event is the climax of the OT history which unfolds from Adam to Moses and then

from Moses to the Messiah. As for Greek cosmology and anthropology, the author claims that there was no unhellenized Judaism in the first century CE and that Hellenistic ideas provided Paul with the most potent theological engines for his thought. First, with the advance of new cosmology, envisaging world as a geocentric universe, the idea of God perceived as substantial and material being evolved into the concept of God as *Monad* and spiritual entity. It will find its place in noncanonical Jewish literature and will be spelled out more clearly by Paul in 1 Cor 8:4-6, 15:40-41, and 2 Cor 12:2-4. Secondly, the Greek traditions of heroes and “divinized men” influenced Paul’s image of Jesus and his noble death on the cosmic battlefield (Phil 2:6-11). Additionally, the philosophical traditions of self-denial, struggle, and suffering in pursuit of truth and eternity also helped the apostle to shape the ideal of disciple. Third, Paul’s anthropological view bears significant marks of the Greek body-soul dualism. At the end of the chapter, the author acknowledges that Paul minimalizes the platonic, dualistic views, but their general presence in the apostle’s thought is for SML pretty clear.

In Chapter III, “The Background of Paul’s Cosmic Drama (2): Jewish Wisdom and Apocalyptic Literature, and Philo”, the author inquires into Jewish sapiential, apocalyptic, and Philonic traditions as the background of cosmic drama of salvation in Paul. This long chapter is divided into three parts. The first one deals with the Book of Proverbs, Job, Qoheleth, Sirach, and the Wisdom of Solomon. The author focuses on the Old Testament presentation of Wisdom, cosmology, and anthropology, and tries to show the points of contact between the sapiential traditions and Paul. The identification between Wisdom and Torah, as well as the close link between Wisdom and Spirit, has a significant influence on Pauline Christology.

In the second part of the chapter, the author proceeds to discuss on the cosmology and anthropology imprinted in Jewish apocalyptic literature which, being different from the perspective of the Old Testament, served Paul to interpret the epiphany of Christ. The elements that SML finds to be common for Paul and for the Jewish apocalypticism are: the vision of multiple heavens and heavenly journeys, the depiction of heavenly powers (background for the Pauline demonology), the idea of two *aeons*, and dualistic anthropology. The apostle adopted much of the Jewish apocalyptic expressions and in the same time modified them by adding a universal and Christo-centric dimension.

Finally, the third part of the chapter analyzes Philo’s cosmology and anthropology in which one can see the effort to reconcile Greek philosophy (Plato) and Jewish theology (Torah). The author builds a conceptual link between Philo and Paul with the only difference that Paul’s interest in

philosophy is covert. First, Philo's account of creation is discussed with the vision of one world as geocentric universe and one God perceived as *Monad*, the Creator and direct agent of everything. Second, Philo's theology and the triple function of *Logos* is exposed: cosmological (an agent of creation, preserver of the order), anthropological (immortal part of the soul), and anagogical (enabling men to perceive God). The *Logos* in Philo shows an intimate relation with Wisdom and the Spirit. Third, Philo's anthropology is described with the sharp stress on body-soul dualism, distinction between heavenly man (living soul in Gen 1:26-27) and earthly man, (corruptible body in Gen 2:7), and three different kinds of human beings (immaterial, men of mixed nature, and evil men). Fourth, his view of two laws is presented: the natural law, supreme and perfect one, engraved on the immortal mind, and the Mosaic law, a reflection of God's higher law of nature. Fifth, the analyses of Philo concludes with a glance at his conception of *paideia* in which the lower, philosophical education serves the higher knowledge that can be achieved only through the *Logos*. Summing up the content of Chapter I, the points of contact between Paul and Philo as envisaged by the author are: the transcendental conception of God; the idea of the *Logos* as divine principle of the world, the image of God and the agent of creation; the distinction between a heavenly man and an earthly man; superiority of the law of the spirit over the law of the letter; the interpretation of Abraham as a representative of the higher law of faith.

Chapter IV, "Paul's Narrative World as the Cosmic Drama", discusses the three main elements of Paul's salvific drama: God's master plan as its plot, time and space as its stage, and its various characters. In the first part, the author focuses on Paul's vocabulary connected with God's salvific plan, in which those who have been first predestined to sin, now have been elected to find salvation in Christ. Time of Paul's drama, contrary to Greek concept of eternal recurrence, is marked by the eschatological dualism of two *aeons*, while its space is shaped after the Hellenistic model of planetary spheres, which makes Paul's thought more open and universalistic. Finally, describing the actors of Paul's drama, the author divides them into evil characters (Satan and his servants, principalities, powers, authorities, rulers, sin, and death), double-faced characters (the law, angels, and flesh), and good characters (The Spirit, God, and Christ). The last part of Chapter IV is dedicated to the examination of Paul's anthropology which is presented in terms of binary model. Paul tones down Plato's radical dualism of body and soul, introducing instead flesh-spirit dichotomy. Man is torn between the two laws, the law of sin and the law of God, and the two Adamic figures. He is also exposed to the two *paideia*, the one connected with the Jewish Torah, and the one

coming with the Gospel of Christ. The Torah had a temporary pedagogical function bringing men to Christ who is the climax of God's salvific drama.

Chapter V, "Paul's Four-staged Cosmic Drama, the Law, and Christ", is, in the opinion of the author, the heart of the entire study. SML interprets Paul's drama of salvation being unfolded in the four acts: the lawless period, from Adam to Moses (Act I), the law period, from Moses to Christ (Act II), the Christ event and the age of the church (Act III), and the Parousia (Act IV). The leading roles in the four-act drama are assigned to three main figures – conscience, law, and Christ. In Act One, the author starts from the presentation of Adam, the originator of sin and death, whose image, juxtaposed to Christ, appears in 1 Cor 15:21-22; Rom 5:12-21, and in the background of Rom 7:7-25. Then he moves to Abraham, the father of the faithful, portrayed by Philo as one who lived in accordance with the universal law of nature. The author brings to light Philo's allegory of Hagar and Sarah where Hagar illustrates the encyclical *paideia*, preliminary studies, and Sarah stands for the true wisdom, philosophy. In the same vein, Paul would regard his Christian *paideia* with the preparatory function of law and Christ as its final goal. At the end, the concept of conscience in Philo and in Paul is analyzed. Philo describes it as a transcendent gift of God or even a transcendent being, and Paul likens it to the law written on man's heart (Rom 2:14-15).

The analysis of the Act Two, that is the Law Period, starts with examining the two different scholarly approaches to Paul's view of the law. The first one is represented by the proponents of development theories (John W. Drane, Hans Hübner, and Ulrich Wilckens), while the second one is propelled by the adherents of the so-called New Perspective (E.P. Sanders, Heikki Räisänen, W.D. Davies, and James D.G. Dunn). The first group claims that Paul's view of the law is evolving but coherent, and should be interpreted in the context of the situation by which he was confronted. The other group perceives the apostle as an inconsistent thinker and tries to explain his conflicting statements on the law by his Christological principles and psychological or cognitive conditioning. In author's opinion, a solution to the present stagnant discussion can be offered by the study of the Hellenistic *paideia* and its curricula. According to SML, "Paul perceived his two-step *paideia* to be Torah and its final goal Christ as the true *Sophia*" (p. 234). Paul speaks positively of the law when stressing its educative value, but when, in the hands of his opponents, it becomes an obstacle to the supremacy of Christ, the apostle presents it as a negative entity (pp. 237-239). Subsequently, the author shows how the Pauline view of the law is born and developed out of the Damascus experience which changes the "zealous guardian of the Jewish Law" into a "Cosmic Warrior" of Christ.

The last part of the profuse analysis of the Act Two is dedicated to examining the polemical context of Paul's undisputed letters where the issue of law emerges. In 1 Corinthians the apostle argues that Christ, not the Law, is the pre-existent Wisdom, while in 2 Corinthians he states that the Lord, not the Law, is the true image and glory of God. In Galatians Paul perceives the law as a custodian/disciplinarian leading up to the advent of Christ, in Philippians it is rendered obsolete because of the *kenotic* Jesus whom the disciple imitates, and in Romans it is too weak to restrain sin and to lead to salvation.

The final pages of Chapter V are dedicated to the Acts Three and Four of Paul's drama, that is, to the age of church and to the Parousia. These two overlapping eras, marked by the constitution of new cosmic family, are treated by the author only in a very general way. SML begins with a brief reflection on the Christ-event which surpasses Jewish national borders and is directed toward the entire cosmos. It pushes Paul to project his redemptive drama onto a cosmic canvas. The Pauline *paideia* consisting in *imitatio Christi* makes it possible to transform believers into the image of God. It is a process during which a new cosmic family is born. It begins with the believer's adoption and sending of the Spirit into their hearts. Christ as God's Firstborn enables those who follow him to become sons of God, while the Spirit comes as a guarantee and harbinger of their future glory. Paul describes the new cosmic family as living in an eschatological tension, between the "already fulfilled" and "not yet completed". The divine cosmic drama of salvation inaugurated with Christ's resurrection will be brought to completion only at the Parousia. New creation has to go through a lengthy process during which new man modeled after Christ will be "injected into human history".

The Cosmic Drama of Salvation by Sang M. Lee comprises an ambitious project. The author tries to elucidate one of the most intricate problems of Pauline scholarship, namely, the relationship between Christ and Torah. The Greek model of the two-staged *paideia* which SML puts forward as the key to understand Paul's teaching on the law is surely a novel approach. The author may also be praised for trying to depict a holistic image of the apostle's view of the history of salvation framed interestingly in the concept of cosmic drama. Consequently, the merit of the book consists in opening before the reader the rich world of the Greek philosophy and cosmology that to some extent must have shaped Paul's thought. The close reading of Philo also shows how deep the Hellenistic ideas infiltrated into Jewish socio-religious texture. Among the strong points of the analyzed volume one could also enumerate the dynamic understanding of the process of "new creation" and the contextual approach to Paul's theological message.

With all its merits, *The Cosmic Drama of Salvation* may also raise some doubts and critical questions. The qualification “drama” comprised in the title is to some extent misleading, because the author does not apply the classical drama structure and genre to analyze Paul’s thought. SML employs in a very general way the drama categories like plot, stage and actors with no examples of topics, thread development, or protagonists taken from the ancient writers. The Greek notion of drama could be substituted with the “apocalyptic scenario” which, as a matter of fact, corresponds better to the set of characters appearing on the stage. Subsequently, in Chapter II, the author might be criticized for a lack of balance in the presentation of the Old Testament narration (pp. 10-14) and Greek thought’s influence on Paul (pp. 14-38). The same lack of balance one will find in Chapter V, where the two first acts of Paul’s drama will be analyzed on eighty pages, with only several pages dedicated to Acts III and IV.

Another fault coming up continuously in the author’s reasoning are overdrawn and unsubstantiated parallels between Paul and Greek world. The first one regards the concept of the transcendental God which does not have to be a product of the Hellenistic culture only, but it is also found in Old Testament, e.g. the priestly account of creation (Gen 1). On what grounds can SML argue that Paul understood “God as the perfect, transcendent deity of Greek philosophy, not in accordance with anthropomorphic idea of the Old Testament” (p. 185)? How then shall we explain God’s wrath appearing in Rom 1:18? Further, the author, following Dennis M. McDonald (*The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark*) and Hans Dieter Betz, claims that Paul portrayed Jesus in accordance with the Hellenistic convention of hero’s noble death (pp. 28, 187, 188, 189, 202, 266, 276). The idea is simply taken for granted and in no way proved by the analysis of Pauline texts. It also stands in stark contradiction to 1 Cor 1:23 where Paul states that Christ crucified is “folly for Gentiles”. The author’s reasoning seems to be built more on the quotations taken from other authors, inserted regularly in the book, than on a thorough exegetical analysis of Paul’s texts.

Passing to Chapter III, one may wonder if the conception of *Logos* in Paul has to be necessarily linked with Philo, as the author claims. First, *logos* often stands simply for the apostolic preaching, as in 1 Cor 1:18. Secondly, the idea of *Logos* as “immanent aspect of the transcendent God” (p. 106) is neither synonymous nor even close to Paul’s theology of the incarnated and crucified Lord. Similarly doubtful seems to be the conjecture that the passages like 1 Cor 15:53 and 2 Cor 12:2-4 display “a good understanding of the seven planetary spheres of Greco-Roman cosmology (p. 149)”. They are infused with the Jewish apocalyptic and Greek mythical motives, not

astronomical knowledge characteristic for Pythagoras, Plato, or Philo. The persistent fault of SML consists in pointing to parallels that are not substantiated by textual analysis.

Further, in Chapter IV one may raise the question of methodology employed by the author. The interpretation of Pauline letters as “mini-narratives that can be assembled into a well-knit drama” (p. 134) is to some extent legitimate and could be accounted for as a “theological reading”. Yet, some attention should also be paid to the rhetorical and epistolary genre of the analyzed writings which the author completely disregards mixing up the texts from different letters and from various argumentative units (e.g. pp. 166-167, 183). Similarly questionable is the author’s methodology applied in Chapter V to read Paul’s understanding of the law. Here, SML deduces Paul’s thought from highly hypothetical reconstructions of Paul’s opponents (pp. 245-285). The author refers in a very modest way to the profuse bibliography on that matter, and arbitrarily qualifies some texts as the Pauline quotations of the adversaries (cf. e.g. 1 Cor 6:12; 10:23; 6:13; 7:1; 8:1; 8:4; 8:8) (p. 249). 2 Corinthians can be taken as an example of highly questionable conclusions which SML arrives at. According to the author, Paul’s adversaries in 2 Corinthians are Judaizers who “by presenting the law as a means of salvation, reduced the contribution of Christ to insignificance” (p. 264). As a matter of fact, the crucial issue of this letter is not the law but apostolic authority, and Paul’s opponents seem to rely more on the Greco-Roman than on the Jewish values (cf. 2 Cor 10–13). Without going into details and questioning the results of the author’s analysis of the undisputed Pauline letters, one can simply ask if Paul’s view on the law can be inferred from such a hypothetical and disputable matter as the identity of his opponents. Once again, it would be better to analyze thoroughly Pauline correspondence in terms of its content and rhetorical shape to arrive at its theological message.

The last objection regards the two-staged *paideia* which the author proposes as the model explaining the relationship between Christ and the law. This model has its serious limitations which SML indirectly points at. It does not explain the texts where Paul describes the Torah in negative terms. At that point the author shifts to contextual analysis, qualifying the negative statements on the law as a response to Paul’s adversaries. Whenever their vision threatens the supremacy of Christ, Paul feels obliged to denounce the law as bringing curse and damnation. First, such a shift to another interpretative model proves insufficiency of the *paideia* in dealing with Paul’s criticism of the law. Second, Paul’s negative view on the law cannot be limited only to the polemical texts. It is also found in Rom 7 which is practically left untouched by SML. Third, the *paideia* model does not ultimately explain

why the law should be replaced by the Gospel of Christ. According to the two-staged *paideia*, the Torah should be rather incorporated and connected with the Gospel as its preliminary and preparatory stage.

Summing up, the ambitious project comprised in *The Cosmic Drama of Salvation*, extremely vast area of research, and intricate net of theological issues connected with Christ and law make this volume vulnerable to many criticisms. The author could have set more modest boundaries for his inquiries which, especially in case of Pauline texts, can delude the reader with their general character, lack of methodological gird and little attention paid to the textual analysis. Anyway, the book is worth recommending to those who want to learn more about Greek thought and its possible influence on Paul.