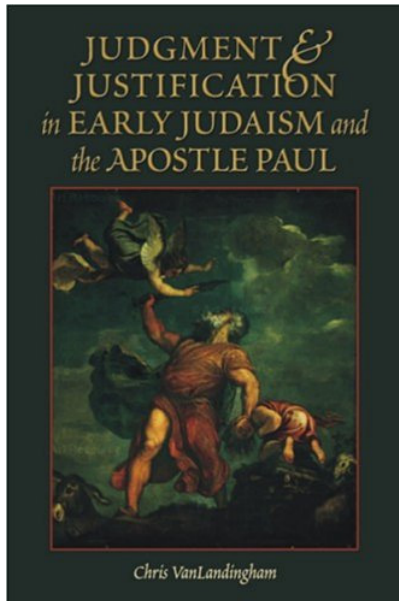


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**VanLandingham, Chris**

***Judgment and Justification in Early Judaism and the Apostle Paul***

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VanLandingham's book is a revised form of his doctoral dissertation, written under the supervision of George W. E. Nickelsburg in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Iowa.<sup>1</sup> Its thesis is nicely summarized in VanLandingham's own words:

My thesis is that in the letters of Paul and in much of the literature of Judaism from the Greek and Early Roman periods, a post-mortem or Last Judgment of God determines an individual's eternal destiny. Moreover, both corpora agree that an individual's behavior is rewarded with eternal life, bad behavior with damnation. Paul agrees with a significant number of his Jewish contemporaries on the subject. This book also examines the notion of divine recompense within the framework of God's grace and mercy as understood in early post-biblical Jewish texts and in Paul's letters. God's grace and mercy may be present throughout a person's life, working on his or her behalf; but one's deeds determine approbation at the

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1. A shorter version of this review will appear in the *Toronto Journal of Theology*. RBL thanks the *Toronto Journal of Theology* for granting permission to publish the longer version of the review.

final judgment. On this subject, I find no difference between Paul and his Jewish contemporaries. (15)

VanLandingham's primary interlocutor is E. P. Sanders, especially as represented in his influential book *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*. Sanders holds that Palestinian Jews in the period of Second Temple Judaism believe they have been saved by grace—grace that is grounded in God's election of their fathers. They must now maintain themselves by works. By contrast, VanLandingham argues in his first chapter that Sanders is merely presupposing a link between election and grace. His own reading of Jewish accounts of election find grace "remarkably absent" from the election of Abraham. God's favor toward Abraham is typically portrayed as the result of Abraham's noteworthy obedience. More generally, VanLandingham seeks to demonstrate that such Jewish readings of the Old Testament sources "are in fact accurate, or at least plausible, extrapolations of the biblical account of the axiom that God rewards the righteous" (16).

In his second chapter, VanLandingham turns from the theme of election to the theme of eternal life. The Jewish literature of the Greek and Roman periods pervasively picks up the theme of life from the Deuteronomic formulae for life and death, blessing and cursing, reward and punishment—only now the "life" in view is typically eternal life and the death is damnation. The criteria for eternal life, revolving primarily around obedience to Torah, are often articulated in the context of the Last Judgment. If divine mercy is mentioned, this is simply another way of referring to salvation, but such mercy is *not* adduced as the *ground* of salvation.

In the second half of his book, comprising chapters 3 and 4, VanLandingham turns to Paul. Chapter 3 surveys Pauline texts that link behavior to the outcome of the Last Judgment, especially focusing on passages that examine Paul's criteria for receiving eternal life. VanLandingham finds no substantive difference with Judaism; the crucial determinant is one's behavior. He follows this up with two further arguments: (1) At the Last Judgment God may well reject *believers* for their moral failures, as he does in Rom 2 with respect to some of the descendants of Abraham. Thus, even though in Paul only believers can be saved, it does not follow that all believers are saved. (2) It follows that the justice disclosed at the Last Judgment is retributive, both in Paul and in the (other) Jewish texts. "Appropriate reward and punishment result respectively in either eternal life or damnation, with one's behavior forming the sole criterion, though for Paul salvation comes only to one who is a believer" (17).

In chapter 4 VanLandingham probes what “justification by faith” means and how in his understanding it might be reconciled with the notion that judgment is according to deeds. In the dominant view, justification is essentially forensic, a proleptic verdict of acquittal. VanLandingham argues that “justification” is an improper translation and that in any case the notion is not forensic. The verb should be rendered “to make righteous.” What is in view is the “righteousness” of individual believers at the beginning of their Christian existence as they stand forgiven of their sin and freed from sin’s power. Clearly such forgiveness and freedom have a bearing on what occurs at the end, at the Last Judgment, but the Greek terms are not forensic and in no way refer to the Last Judgment.

The work of Christ has made it possible to receive approbation in a judgment according to deeds, but not because God is merciful toward the Christian based on Christ’s merit, nor because in God’s perception Christ’s death has made it as though the Christian has never sinned. Rather, the process of salvation is worked out as follows: At the time of faith, a person who has been “made righteous” is forgiven of past sins (which then become a dead issue), cleansed from the guilt and impurity of sin, freed from the human propensity to sin and then given the ability to obey. The Last Judgment will then determine whether a person, as an act of the will, has followed through with these benefits of Christ’s death. If so, eternal life will be the reward: if not, damnation. (335)

The thesis is nothing if not bold.

I frequently tell my doctoral students as they embark on their research that dissertations in the broad field of the arts disciplines, including biblical and theological disciplines, can, at the risk of slight oversimplification, be divided into two camps. In the first camp, the student begins with an idea, a fresh insight, a thesis he or she would like to test against the evidence. In the second, the student has no thesis to begin with but would like to explore the evidence in a certain domain to see exactly what is going on in a group texts and admits to uncertainty about what the outcome will be. The advantage of the first kind of thesis is that the work is exciting from the beginning and directed by the thesis that is being tested; the danger is that, unless the student takes extraordinary precautions and proves to be remarkably self-critical, the temptation to domesticate the evidence in order to defend the thesis becomes well-nigh irresistible. The advantage of the second kind of thesis is that it is likely to produce more even-handed results than the first, since the researcher has no axe to grind and is therefore more likely to follow the evidence wherever it leads; the danger is that there may not be much of a thesis at

the end of the process, but merely a lot of well-organized data. In reality, of course, dissertation projects regularly straddle both camps in various ways. But VanLandingham's work neatly falls pretty exclusively into the first camp. That makes for interesting reading. Unfortunately, VanLandingham's work also demonstrates in a superlative fashion the dangers of this sort of approach.

Probably his most accurate treatment of texts is found in his handling of the literature of Second Temple Judaism. He is right to point out, for instance, how many of these texts ground election in the superior character of those chosen. I pulled together many of the same texts more than twenty-five years ago (in *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Themes in Tension* [London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1981]). Here and there one could quibble: for example, I am not sure that VanLandingham has rightly understood how election functions in 1QS3 and elsewhere. Considerably more disputable, however, is his insistence that these Jewish writers from the Greek and Roman worlds have *rightly* captured the priorities of the Old Testament. His treatment of the Old Testament itself—as he acknowledges—is pretty slender. When Abram is chosen by God while still in Ur of the Chaldees, the text does not say he was chosen by merit, VanLandingham acknowledges, but neither does it make clear he was sovereignly chosen by grace, so VanLandingham infers the former is more likely, or at least equally plausible. That in turn informs his reading of passages such as Deut 7–10. Whatever else these passages say about God showing mercy to his enslaved people or choosing them despite the fact that they were not mighty, numerous, or righteous, VanLandingham focuses on the fact that God was fulfilling his oath to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—so if that initial choice of the patriarchs was not necessarily grounded in grace but on their good behavior, neither is this. As for *ḥsd*, he follows the line made popular by Nelson Glueck decades ago: he thinks of this as divine “loyalty” rather than grace, a loyalty grounded in God's covenant faithfulness toward those who keep the covenant.

Even VanLandingham begins to sense that he is squeezing the evidence of the Tanak pretty hard. He is unequivocal about what he finds in Second Temple Judaism, but he is forced to admit that the Old Testament itself is not quite so easily tamed. In the summary of his treatment of the former, he writes, “I attempt to show that, contrary to being free and unmerited works of God's grace, God's election of Abraham is nothing short of a reward offered in response to Abraham's righteousness. The notion that God's grace precedes human obligation is nowhere to be found” (64). Then he adds:

If this notion occurs in Gen 11–12, it is thoroughly and consistently corrected in post-biblical literature to conform to the pattern of why God establishes covenants with other renowned biblical personalities. Clearly, later Jews wanted to show that God is one who rewards righteousness and punishes wickedness, that God’s actions conform to what is just and fair (64).

A page later he says, with respect to the Hebrew Scriptures, “I have tried to establish a pattern, not to account for every exception” (65)—and then in a footnote asserts that Ezek 16, “which my teacher, George Nickelsburg, has drawn to my attention, may be an exception.” It is not hard to think of other “exceptions.” Equally disappointing is the failure to interact with important literature that challenges VanLandingham’s thesis root and branch. One thinks, for instance, of the literature that has refuted Glueck’s understanding of *ḥsd* (beginning with the important essay by Francis I. Anderson, “Yahweh, the Kind and Sensitive God,” in *God Who Is Rich in Mercy* [ed. Peter T. O’Brien and David G. Peterson; Homebush West: Anzea, 1986], 41–88) and of the many essays and books that point out how Deuteronomy, despite its straightforward antitheses between blessings and cursings, is structured to show how systematically everyone fails: not even Moses makes it into the promised land (of the many contributions, see, e.g., Paul A. Barker, *The Triumph of Grace in Deuteronomy* [Bletchley: Paternoster, 2004]). Perhaps Paul is closer to a faithful reading of crucial Old Testament passages than are some of his fellow rabbis after all, for certainly he does not think he has to “correct” the Scriptures on such matters.

Turning to the New Testament, one is not more happily reassured that VanLandingham has avoided the temptation to squeeze the evidence into the mold of his thesis. Passages such as Phil 2:12–16 and 1 Cor 15:10 do not encourage VanLandingham to work through the notoriously complicated issues surrounding compatibilism. Rather, he simply comments,

In his autobiographical statements, sometimes Paul emphasizes his role in his endeavors ... sometimes God’s grace. Paul views himself as neither “possessed” or controlled by the deity nor as constrained or overpowered; rather he is inspired. If one’s deeds rely solely upon God’s doing, then the logic of God’s commandments is lost and responsibility for one’s behavior at the Last Judgment is moot. (187)

This is not exegesis; it is assertion of the desired conclusion on the basis of an unacknowledged preunderstanding regarding libertarian assumptions about how

responsibility is grounded. VanLandingham's treatment of the *dik*- word-group is not sophisticated. As far as I can see, he manages to discuss Paul's understanding of election without so much as referring to, let alone discussing, Rom 9:11–12: "Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls—she was told, 'The older will serve the younger.'" He does not see that in its context Rom 4:5 presupposes that Paul understands God's "justification" of Abraham to be the justification of the *wicked*; he does not detect how far removed from Josephus Paul is in his understanding of "grace." On differences between Paul's understanding of election and that of his Jewish contemporaries, see especially Sigurd Grindheim, *The Crux of Election: Paul's Critique of the Jewish Confidence in the Election of Israel* (WUNT 202; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), which apparently appeared too late for VanLandingham to make use of it.

Exactly how one should understand Paul's references to rewards and to final judgment and integrate them with everything else the apostle says is not an easy topic. Certainly it is much discussed in contemporary literature, not least some of what has been written on the new perspective on Paul. VanLandingham can certainly be praised for tackling a subject that is both important and difficult: not for him the obscure dissertation on esoteric minutiae. But the theological reductionism required to make this thesis hang together—Christ's cross-work pays for our sins up to the moment of our conversion but not for postconversion sins—approaches the bizarre. It remains unclear to me whether VanLandingham thinks only those who have "followed through" (his expression) with their commitment to Christ *in sinless perfection* will be saved (in which case postconsummation existence is going to be singularly devoid of human beings) or those who have "followed through" with a respectable balance of good behavior over bad behavior. In either case, the thesis is driving toward a frame of reference far removed from that of the apostle.