

BOOK REVIEW

Oliver, Isaac W., *Torah Praxis after 70 CE: Reading Matthew and Luke–Acts as Jewish Texts* (WUNT, 2.355; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013). xvi + 524 pp. Pbk. € 94.00.

*Torah Praxis after 70 CE* is a revision of Isaac W. Oliver's PhD dissertation, supervised by Gabriele Boccacini and submitted to the Department of Near Eastern Studies of the University of Michigan in 2012. Oliver added primary and secondary sources to his original dissertation during his postdoctoral fellowship at the Frankel Institute for Advanced Judaic Studies (University of Michigan) to make this monograph up to date with recent discussions on the topic. *Torah Praxis after 70 CE* is structured in the following way: Chapter 1 functions as an introduction to the three following parts—Part I, 'Sabbath Keeping in Matthew and Luke–Acts', Part II, 'Food Laws in Matthew and Luke–Acts', Part III, 'Circumcision in Matthew and Luke–Acts'—and chapter 13 concludes Oliver's argument.

Chapter 1 addresses the following issues: Oliver's (1) thesis statement, (2) primary scope of research, (3) history of literature, (4) designated corpus and (5) methodological approaches to the subject at hand. This monograph addresses the topic of the 'Jewishness' of the authors of Matthew and Luke–Acts. This is determined by the use of Oliver's criteria, which is based on these authors' adherence to Torah praxis. It seems that the Gospel of Matthew was used to establish these criteria. They were then applied to an analysis of Luke–Acts to determine the 'Jewishness' of its author. Oliver's 'primary goal...is first to demonstrate that the *perspective* formulated in the writings of Luke–Acts is indeed Jewish in its affirmation of Torah observance' (p. 31), and secondly, 'making claims about the identity of the author' (p. 32). Regarding method, Oliver uses three distinct methodologies. Oliver primarily applies a compositional critical approach to Matthew and Luke–Acts, the designated corpus. He assumes a synchronic approach to these books of the New Testament, but at times adopts a diachronic

understanding of Matthew's and Luke's stance toward the Law. As a result, he is forced 'to apply a redactional critical [approach to] Matthew and Luke with the aim to better [appreciate] their attitude toward the Jewish Law' (pp. 33-34). Furthermore, he also assesses Matthew and Luke-Acts from a 'halakic-critical' approach.

In Part I, Oliver primarily studies events in Jesus' ministry that took place on the Sabbath. He explains that the Gospels show Jesus to be a devout Jew in terms of his practices and adherence to Torah laws, especially to laws governing Sabbath observance. Oliver particularly notes that Matthew's Gospel consistently defends Christ's ministering on the Sabbath. He also notes that Matthew's arguments throughout his Gospel indicate that Christ's ministries on the Sabbath were lawful Torah practices. This section also reviews the actions of the early Church and the apostles in Acts that were done on the Sabbath. Oliver gives significant attention to the Sabbath, as he seems to think that the observation of a biblical character's adherence to Sabbath laws is fundamental for determining his or her Jewishness. Furthermore, Oliver suggests that an observation of Sabbath law is a good place to begin when searching for effective criterion that will be used later in his study.

Part 2 (chs. 8 to 11) addresses the articulation of food laws in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Oliver explores the topic of food laws in Matthew and Luke by establishing a fundamental definition of the term 'impure', which references 'non-kosher creatures' (p. 242). Oliver continues and clarifies that the term 'non-kosher' in reference to animals 'carries a special connotation: it refers to a *perpetual* or permanent type of "impurity"' (p. 242). This definition of non-kosher and his emphasis on the permanence of a creature's impurity are used throughout his study as a criterion for determining a biblical character's Jewishness. This section also traces the ritual practices of the people of the New Testament, such as those that pertain to hand washing and to non-kosher food preparation and storage in impure vessels. More specifically, this section deals with the dietary practices of kashrut, blood consumption, strangled animals and food offerings to idols.

Chapters 8 to 10 present Oliver's analysis of the apostolic decree in Acts 15 and 21.25. Oliver argues that the apostolic decree recorded in Acts 'proves pertinent not only for addressing the question of Gentile salvation but also concrete issues governing the daily interaction between Jews and Gentiles within the *ekklesia*' (p. 367). Food laws are

shown to be a significant issue in the Gospels because of its critical engagement within the apostolic decree.

Part 3 addresses a key issue concerning the distinguishing traits between Jews and Gentiles in the New Testament. Particular attention is given to the religious practice of circumcision. In this section, Oliver reviews the current scholarly discussions on Jewish circumcision. He notes its importance for establishing Jewish identity in the New Testament. Oliver quickly points out that some scholars do not attribute the development of circumcision as a religious practice to Jewish culture. Instead, they argue that circumcision was an adopted practice that was used to distinguish Jews from others. Unfortunately, this argument concerning circumcision as an adopted practice is underdeveloped. Further development of this idea would have benefited the overall argument of his scope of research by further developing the study in chapter 12. It is in fact unclear whether Oliver supports or rejects this idea of an adopted practice.

Chapter 13 presents the concluding arguments of Oliver's study. I note the typographical error on the heading of the even pages of this chapter, which reads 'Chapter 12: Circumcision in Matthew and Luke–Acts' rather than 'Conclusion'. Returning to the question he sought to answer at the beginning of the book—the 'Jewishness' of Matthew and Luke–Acts 'Jewishness'—Oliver concludes that the author of Luke is just as Jewish as the author of Matthew. Both evangelists, according to Oliver, were born and raised as Jews, and both continued to observe Torah laws during the time of these Gospels' composition. Oliver arrives at this conclusion based on the criteria he developed through his established methodology.

I commend Oliver for his clear, creative and progressive study in the area of Torah praxis in the New Testament. First, his argument is well structured and easy to follow. Most aspects of his monograph's content point back to his scope of research presented in chapter 1. Second, Oliver's use of Torah laws as a criterion for determining an author's Jewishness is unique and 'outside-the-box' thinking. Third, I consider *Torah Praxis after 70 CE* to be of value to the ever-progressing state of New Testament biblical scholarship. Not only is Oliver's argument exceptional, but also his methodological application of his criteria is of special note.

Nevertheless, I also have several questions and comments on the book. Oliver's monograph is titled *Torah Praxis after 70 CE*. Because

the scope of his research is to present criteria that could be used to determine the 'Jewishness' of some of the New Testament authors in this time period, Oliver asserts that the Gospels of Matthew and Luke–Acts were most probably written after 70 CE. But Jesus' ministry was prior to this time period. Thus, I am confused with his in-depth engagement with the ministry of Christ. Let us now turn to my questions and comments.

If Torah praxis differs between pre- and post-70 CE, and the Gospels of Matthew and Luke–Acts were written after 70 CE, does this later date impact the authors' presentation of Jesus' adherence to the teachings of Torah? Furthermore, if a later date does impact the authors' depiction of Jesus' actions, are the Gospels then the best corpus for such research? Additionally, as Oliver appears to deeply engage with the ministry of Jesus, it appears that there is an additional unvoiced or underlying argument throughout his study. It seems that Oliver is concerned with more than just determining the 'Jewishness' of these New Testament authors, but also with determining the 'Jewishness' of Jesus. This underlying or secondary thesis is especially present in chapter 2. Oliver highlights sections in Matthew and Luke where the authors defend or emphasize Jesus' adherence to Mosaic laws. But how does Jesus' 'Jewishness' impact one's interpretation of the Gospels?

At the beginning of Oliver's monograph, he lists a set of variables that indicate the difficulty in determining the 'Jewishness' of any given text in the New Testament. He states, '[P]ractices will vary according to location, social conditions, and religious beliefs' (p. 15). Oliver cites Marcel Simon as a predecessor who pointed to Acts 15 as a means to drawing the line of determining criteria that acknowledges these variables. While Oliver cited Simon, there were points in Oliver's research where the variable of 'social condition' was not fully realized.

From my reading of *Torah Praxis after 70 CE*, I am left with another question having more to do with the future of research on this subject of determining Jewishness. If Oliver's criteria were carried forward and pressed onto other books in the New Testament, what would such an exercise reveal? If the Gospel of Matthew was written before the Epistles, and they have distinct authors, would Oliver's criterion reveal a movement away from an author's adherence to Torah law, or would this discovered trend continue? Furthermore, how would Part III interact with this criterion when Paul begins his ministry around the Mediterranean? In Part III, Oliver interacts with the issue of social

identity between Jews and Gentiles. As Paul moves around the Roman empire and enters synagogues outside of Israel, how would these different social environments impact the authorship of his letters? I am interested to see a more developed social critical method adopts Oliver's criterion in an observation of Paul's Epistles. This criticism is a result of my list of variables presented above.

Finally, Oliver also seems to be greatly concerned with the social identity of Jewish Christian followers. This topic appears in every chapter of the book, but it is not acknowledged as an important part of the scope of research apart from a brief discussion of the 'Jewish-Christian era'. Readers would have expected a fuller explanation of the significance of this topic for the development his criterion.

In conclusion, I recommend *Torah Praxis after 70 CE* to any person who is interested in the study of Matthew or Luke-Acts. Oliver's work will certainly pave new avenues of research for New Testament scholars. *Torah Praxis after 70 CE* may also be a good resource for anyone studying the Jewishness of Jesus of Nazareth.

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