

BOOK REVIEW

Wendel, Susan J., and David M. Miller (eds.), *Torah Ethics and Early Christian Identity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016). xiii + 271 pp. Pbk. \$35.00.

In a fitting tribute to a scholar they clearly admire and respect, Wendel and Miller have gathered a useful set of arguments and studies regarding early Christian interpretation of Torah into a thematically unified Festschrift for Stephen Westerholm.

The volume is divided into three sections: 'Torah Ethics in Early Judaism', 'Torah Ethics in the New Testament' and 'Beyond the New Testament'. In each section, the essays relate to or address Wendel and Miller's central question: 'In what way did the Mosaic law continue to serve as a positive reference point for Christ-believers regardless of whether they thought Torah observance was essential?' (p. xiii). This central question is a valuable one, because it breaks down a problematic but still very common assumption that early Christians either wholly embraced or wholly rejected the enduring authority of the Torah. For example, in recent work by 'Paul Within Judaism' proponents, the tension among the New Testament authors is in some ways exacerbated unhelpfully. Rather than arguing that Paul or any other early Christian could only accept or reject the Torah in its entirety, volumes like this provide a depth of nuance from a variety of perspectives that moves the discussion forward by describing the various ways that Torah was in fact a positive 'reference point' for early Christian ethics. By describing the Torah's anchoring effect in various contexts, a broader picture emerges of a complex and ongoing negotiation between the past and the future of the Jewish sect that came to be known as Christianity.

Opening the first section, Anders Runesson examines the question of 'Who is a Jew?' (p. 11). He argues that the issue of Torah interpretation is integrally tied to ethnicity. In the first century there was, however, no supra-local, authoritative tradition that determined the nature of Torah observance. The context of observance, he claims, was Jewish associations, which were

diverse in their views on observance, and not the public municipal synagogue. This diverse, non-official context was, Runesson claims, the institutional context of Paul's teaching and the setting that 'eventually gave rise to what is today known as Judaism and Christianity' (p. 26). Runesson's argument is compelling, especially in regard to the institutional context of early Christianity. Yet it seems to conflict with the fact that rabbinic Judaism, with close ties to ongoing temple worship (before 70 AD), is what gave rise to today's Judaism, and larger, supra-local authorities played an important role in the development of the nascent Christian movement. Saul's persecution of the Way was sanctioned by Jerusalem authorities; the apostles and elders in Jerusalem wrote letters with authority for assemblies in Antioch; and the early Christian church both preceding and following Constantine offered institutionalized arguments against various teachings they deemed heretical (cf. the Johannine corpus). In fact, it seems more plausible to see local variation as an essential characteristic of the doctrinal civil war within Second Temple Judaism, but not to the exclusion of supra-local authorities who sought to and often succeeded in establishing widespread norms.

Within the context of Hellenistic culture and its philosophical questions about particularity and universality, John Martens argues that Philo and Josephus both consider the Jewish law to be essential and important to Judaism. Josephus, he claims, describes the law mainly as a Jewish 'constitution' (pp. 33, 40), but Philo sees it as the written form of the law of nature. In both cases, as Martens points out, 'When you consider your law, revealed by the one, true God, to be in accord with the will of God, it is difficult to maintain your polity as simply one among many' (p. 37). While Josephus maintained this tension more easily than Philo, both found themselves faced with the need to reconcile theological monotheism and philosophical universality.

In the second and largest section of the volume, Wesley Olmstead argues that Jesus is the one who determines how Torah is to be obeyed in the new age. This question about the manner of obedience obtains its answer from Jesus in the imitation of God's covenant fidelity and mercy. The point is reasonable, but the question is whether the specific 'how' of obedience changed, or if the situation changed while the requirements of obedience remained clear, even if abstracted from their original context to some extent.

S.A. Cummins offers a valuable synopsis of the many episodes in Mark where the nature of faithful Torah observance is in dispute. Cummins effectively argues that the Markan Jesus maintains the role of Torah as the means

of creating a pure people, while also bringing out the implicit value positions in each of these episodes.

David Miller argues that Luke expected Jewish believers to follow the Torah as ‘law’. Gentiles, by contrast, ought to follow the Torah as ‘prophecy’. For both groups, he argues, Torah still played a paradigmatic role. This bifurcation is challenging precisely because it maintained a strict distinction between Jew and Gentile, which is not less than a religious distinction, for otherwise the ‘race’ of a Gentile would be meaningless in terms of the source of their ethical direction. Miller is on firm ground within the guild in reading this distinction prescriptively for today’s readers. It remains open to irrelevance, however, to the degree that today’s religious distinction between Christian and Jew is anachronistic to the first-century religion that became Christianity.

According to Adele Reinhartz, Jesus in John’s Gospel contravenes ethical norms such as the obligations of friendship because, as the son of God, he is directed by a higher purpose and is ‘above’ the law. Here the notion of ‘ethical norms’ (p. 106), however, conflates an important distinction between moral norms and cultural expectations. These are not coextensive, though they may at times overlap, and Reinhartz makes far too much of Jesus’ disregard for some cultural expectations when she describes, for example, ‘the Gospel’s willingness to show Jesus’ ethical shortcomings’ (p. 106). As interesting as the argument is, the value positions she stakes out regarding contemporary implications of this conflation appear to be related more to contemporary political questions than to the first-century context.

Scot McKnight argues that James’ theory of Torah is that Torah is ‘Shema revised’, or Torah reduced. This in turn is Jesus’ hermeneutic, which in turn is a *λόγος-νόμος* (in McKnight’s terminology). He claims *λόγος* is *νόμος*, though he seems to mean this the other way around and differently, namely that *νόμος* is Jesus, or some other formulation of that nature. He claims the *λόγος-νόμος* is the Shema revised, which is to say it is a kind of ‘Jesus-creed’ or Torah reduced to an essential core. James has, he says, a ‘Jesus-shaped Christian hermeneutic’, which follows Jesus’ interpretation of Torah, with which ‘Jesus “hermeneuts” the *νόμος* through the dual commands of loving God and loving others’ (p. 112). The *λόγος-νόμος* for James, McKnight says, ‘is the Shema revised by Jesus’ (p. 112). Finally, all of these observations converge in the argument that James is written in a wisdom genre, where James is not the sage but the receptive student of Jesus the sage.

There are both lexical and conceptual gymnastics involved in this essay. For McKnight, the lexeme *logos* is ‘The Logos’, and the lexeme *nomos* is ‘The Torah’. Thus, he claims, ‘the Logos is the Torah’ (p. 108), and finally, ‘The *Logos–Nomos* is Shema Revised’ (p. 109). His piling up of neologisms (cf. pp. 117, 119) makes one suspicious that a more straightforward rewording would be transparently false or unconvincing. McKnight claims, ‘the Shema was the core of the earliest followers of Jesus’ formation’, and ‘the Shema locates James in [Torah-]observant Judaism; the addition of [Jas] 2.8 locates James in Jesus-based Judaism’ (p. 113). Juxtaposing these ‘parts’ of Judaism provides the clearest engagement with the social divisions implied in different visions of Torah observance, but McKnight would do well to examine what Runesson says earlier in the volume about local variation as opposed to reconstructing all-or-nothing views of Torah observance in the first century. His basic argument seems to be that James agrees with Jesus, who reduces the law and prophets to two central commands, and by this implied agreement James is thus best read as an example of wisdom literature (perhaps from the pupil’s perspective).

Beverly Gaventa argues that Rom. 10.4, which refers to Christ being the *τέλος* of the law, leaves scholars in an interpretive rut. On the face of it, ‘attending more closely to the larger context of Paul’s remarks’ (p. 121) is always a sound strategy but hardly an unexplored one. She employs an array of metaphors to make her point. For example, Paul does not ‘sing in unison’ or in ‘harmony with other canonical voices’, and sometimes he is ‘on a different page of the songbook’, etc. (p. 122); ‘positive or negative valence of *τέλος*’ (p. 123); ‘Paul is walking an argumentative tightrope’, he ‘sprinkles the argument’ and ‘increases the volume on the provocation meter’ (p. 124). Despite these rhetorical distractions, she argues that Paul does not continue to discuss the role of the law for Israel throughout Romans 9–11. Instead, she says, he raises questions about the law that are not direct answers but instead redirections through a discussion of God’s action in Christ. She makes a strong and valuable point when she argues that certain tensions in texts may not be directly addressed but instead raised as questions and left unaddressed or indirectly addressed. She says, ‘The prolonged quarrel actually reflects the obliqueness of Paul’s argument’, and this is precisely right (p. 134). She concludes, however, that Paul’s change in focus implies that Rom. 10.4 is best understood as claiming Christ as ‘the end of the law’ (p. 133, cf. Westerholm, p. 219 n. 34). Has the rut been evacuated? The air remains muddy on that note.

Terence Donaldson suggests that Paul argued against the scriptural tradition that Gentile believers are of the Jewish *ethne*, the seed of Abraham. He claims that Paul's pre-conversion view was that the law simply condemned those outside, whereas after his conversion he may have seen the Torah as being closely related to a kind of natural revelation that might lead to ethical monotheism. This argument thus exhibits an intriguing segue between the view of Torah within the New Testament and the claim of Martens earlier in the volume concerning Josephus and Philo. The implication is that the overlap, at times a conflict, between Torah and a philosophical natural law formed a broad cultural discussion within Hellenistic Judaism at the very least. Many fruitful lines of research could be developed on this point in terms of how Paul's formulation actually compares with other culturally relevant positions on the topic.

Richard Hays includes an abridged version of one of his earlier essays. He argues that Paul in 1 Corinthians is seeking to instruct his readers in a reconfiguration of their identity. Paul's goal is for his audience to see themselves as eschatological Israel and shape their behaviour accordingly in their obedience to the admonitions of Israel's scripture. This point becomes clear, says Hays, when Paul's citations of the Old Testament are read as metaleptic allusions, which are allusions that imply the relevance of some broader section of their original literary contexts. Hays' analysis depends completely on an interpretive model of textual references that does not consider citations of older texts primarily in terms of their cultural significance at the time the citation was made, but instead considers them purely on the basis of their originating textual contexts. Because of this, his interpretations are contingent on the validity of each specific claim. Hays himself characteristically points out that the interpreter must have 'ears to hear' the metalepsis properly in order to truly, finally understand the text Paul wrote. Something is missing from this picture, however, and it is Paul's cultural context as it engages with those textual traditions in ongoing debates and disagreements.

According to Susan Wendel, Justin, Aristides and Theophilus present the Mosaic law as the justification of Christians before their Greco-Roman culture. The law, these ancients argue, must be interpreted according to the teaching of Christ. It is a form of philosophy, promoting virtue, wisdom and justice. Christians, for their part, correctly understand this law and rightly practice it. This makes them superior to others, whether Jews or Greeks, according to Greco-Roman culture's own canons of virtue, wisdom and justice. This helpful overview raises interesting questions regarding the ongoing

cultural justification of Christians in terms of current canons of social justice, among other contemporary virtues.

Peter Widdicombe outlines one of the key developments in the way law operated in Christianity after the first century by focusing on Clement, for whom the law was an expression of the divine Logos. What Moses mediated in the law, namely the eternal order and rationality of God, was made present in Christ. Law is a witness, then, to right reason, a concept taken from Stoicism. With the incarnation of reason, however, the law eventually recedes into the background in terms of its revelatory role. Perhaps, I might add, this development played a role in the parting of the ways between Christianity and Judaism, since the development of Mishnaic Judaism in no way seems to have paralleled a similar shift in focus away from law as revelation.

In a final contribution, Stephen Westerholm brings later premodern perspectives to bear on the issue of law. He demonstrates that Luther read the rest of the Bible in light of Paul, whereas Calvin read Paul in light of the rest of the Bible. Neither solution was entirely adequate, he argues, as Luther failed, in his opinion, to find a single hermeneutical key to the entirety of Scripture in the law–gospel distinction. Calvin, likewise, failed to integrate the entirety of Scripture into a single scheme, most notably in regard to Paul’s discussion of law. Their efforts, Westerholm argues, were not entirely misguided. The search for coherence among diverse texts is inevitable and essential to Christian reflection on scripture.

On Westerholm’s advice, I will not attempt a facile harmonization of so many disparate essays. Nevertheless, each of the essays is a quality contribution to this area of ongoing disagreement. Scholars interested in the topics of biblical law and early Christianity’s relationship to Judaism will benefit from engaging in the range of issues addressed within. One note of clarification: the term *ethics* applies to this volume in a broad sense. While not misleading as regards to the book’s content, since ethics is a major aspect of the discussion insofar as obedience to Torah is an ethical issue, perhaps *Torah Theology* would have been more reflective of the ultimate collection.

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