

BOOK REVIEW

James G. Crossley. *The New Testament and Jewish Law: A Guide for the Perplexed*. London, New York: T. & T. Clark International, 2010. Pp. viii + 133. Pbk. US\$18.21. ISBN 978-0-567-03434-2.

According to James G. Crossley, Judaism, with its laws, rituals and practices, had been generally characterized as harsh, legalistic and opposed to Christianity until the publication of E.P. Sanders's revolutionary *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* in 1977. Sanders's view, called 'covenantal nomism', argues that Jewish laws and rituals are necessary practices in maintaining God's covenant with Israel. His view has won many supporters, and as a result, detailed studies of Jewish laws proliferate in New Testament scholarship today (e.g. Jackson, Vermes, Neusner, Bockmuehl, Instone-Brewer, Sanders). But according to Crossley, the present volume differs from many others in the field by virtue of its further contribution to an understanding of Jewish law for students of the New Testament.

Crossley's twofold objective indicates this distinctiveness. First, he intends to present a simplified introduction to Jewish Law. Besides brief exegesis of selected New Testament texts throughout the book, Crossley's second objective is to provide sample ancient texts, themes and Jewish legal sources for the benefit of New Testament studies. His teaching experience in Jewish Law and early Judaism, as well as the concern to make students become aware of the primary sources in ancient texts, make this introductory book to Jewish Law a handy reference for the student, the pastor and the scholar.

Crossley points out that the specifics of Jewish law are still often misunderstood for two critical reasons. First, biblical studies construe Jewish laws in terms of the language of law and grace, terms more appropriate to Christian theology. These studies, according to Crossley, often assume that 'works' are somehow either theologically or morally wrong. Secondly, some who praise Jewish laws conceal their theological agendas behind their studies. This second reason, according to

the author, has been the practice of many scholars since Rudolf Bultmann. Citing N.T. Wright as an example, Crossley says that, while giving high praise for Jewish laws, Wright ignores the details of Jewish laws in his work on Jesus' attitude towards the law. He further comments that Wright's study of the 'Jewish family and ethnicity may be based on fair generalizations but he focuses on the details of the New Testament texts while avoiding the details of the *Jewish* texts'. As such, he continues, 'is not Wright simply perpetuating the old idea of Judaism as a backdrop to make Christianity better?' (p. 3).

With these two critical misconceptions apparently serving as the rationale for this volume, Crossley asks two respective questions in response to them. First, what would we do if ancient Jewish sources conclusively showed that much of Judaism really did believe that works were the way to salvation? Secondly, 'what if Jesus' sayings were sentiments paralleled in Jewish laws and early Judaism?' Crossley tackles these misconceptions and queries through his twofold objective in five evenly distributed chapters. He begins by dealing with Jewish laws in general in chapter 1, followed by more specific legal topics in the next four chapters, ending with concluding remarks.

Chapter 1 traces the development of the interpretation and re-interpretation of the law from the final form of the biblical texts (the Pentateuch) in the Persian period (538–322 BCE) to the expansions of the law in the rabbinic literature period (late first century BCE—early first century CE). Although the laws as stated in the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament serve as the authority within these various stages of development, most interpretations of these laws were based on the interpretive traditions of various sectarian groups. During the time of Ezra–Nehemiah, creative application and reinterpretation of the biblical texts took place to accommodate new historical and social circumstances. During the Maccabean period, various sectarian groups disputed over the legal interpretation of the law for reasons of politics and popularity alike. Hence, it seems clear that by the time of the New Testament, interpretations of the law based on 'traditions' were in place. Nevertheless, Torah observance remained the flashpoint when Jewish and Gentile practices came together, especially in the Jewish Diaspora.

Chapter 2 defines Sabbath in both a narrow and a broad perspective. The narrow perspective finds its foundational texts in Exod. 20.8-11 and Deut. 5.12-15, where Sabbath is grounded in God's activity in

creation and in the exodus respectively. The broader perspective takes into account the complexities of a non-Jew's observance of the Sabbath. In both versions of the Ten Commandments, the Sabbath is a day of rest for the whole of God's creation. The key issue in dispute, however, is how to define 'work' more precisely; in other words, what constituted 'work'? In response to this, Crossley takes into account a range of interpretations from the Old Testament and the rabbinic literature on Sabbath observance, the exemptions to it and the penalties for breaking it, to demonstrate how and why this range of interpretations was carried over to the New Testament.

Chapter 3 presents issues and debates over purity laws, which have thematic links to New Testament texts. Defining impurity as 'a kind of unseen contamination', Crossley explains the various sources from which impurities could have been contracted by a person (e.g. bodily discharge and bleeding, leprosy, corpses, etc.). Other issues, such as the archaeological discovery of immersion pools and the development of purity laws in the Essene community, are also noteworthy. The issue of 'washing of hands and utensils' is given extensive treatment, as transmission of impurities from hand to food (via liquid) to the person seems to be the most common cause of the person's becoming contaminated. Furthermore, transmission of impurities is based on a graded scale in rabbinic literature, as degrees of impurity are assigned to certain objects. For instance, whereas third and fourth degree impurities are usually assigned to things associated with the Temple and priests, first and second degree impurities are often assigned to foods and the hands respectively.

Chapter 4 discusses three categories of the so-called 'civil laws'. Whereas the New Testament adheres to the stricter view of divorce, the 'something objectionable' phrase found in the foundational divorce text, Deut. 24.1-4, has been variously defined and interpreted. In the case of 'an eye for an eye', the New Testament seems to favour 'terms of compensation', rather than a literal violent retribution. Lastly, biblical laws apparently teach people to avoid giving oaths and vows, for the penalty of not being able to keep one's oaths and vows is severe (Deut. 23.21-23) and could lead to all sorts of problems.

Chapter 5 looks at some of the issues related to an insider's perspective on Jewish ethnicity, such as biological links and family, circumcision and becoming a Jew, social interaction between Jews and Gentiles, and Jewish perception of Gentiles. While it is a common

assumption today that Jewish identity comes from having a Jewish mother, this was unknown during the Second Temple period. Nevertheless, whatever the case may be, family and blood lineage play an important role in Jewish thought (e.g. Exod. 20.12; Mt. 8.21; Lk. 9.59). Circumcision was crucial in defining who might be considered a Jew, although cases of its reversal were also seen among those who wanted to become Gentiles. Although not as significant as circumcision, food laws are an important marker in distinguishing a Jew from a Gentile. The extensive discussion here deserves careful attention, since contrary to common perceptions, the issue of a Jew not eating with a Gentile was not because the person of the Gentile per se was unclean, but because the food that Gentiles ate was considered unclean.

This book is certainly commendable in providing various new insights for our understanding of Jewish laws through its presentation of primary sources in ancient texts. However, apart from these discussions of Jewish laws in the major section of the book, the author leaves the reader perplexed as regards the aim, purpose and goal of his endeavour. First, while the book claims to be interested in presenting Jewish laws in their own right, it seems to have an extensive interaction with New Testament views (see, e.g., ch. 4). Secondly, Crossley seems to be arguing against a certain group of scholars (e.g. Wright) in his introduction and concluding remarks, yet he does not engage them very directly or clearly. It was not always clear to me what the relation was of the introduction to the conclusion and of both to the major section of the book about Jewish laws.

For instance, whereas in the conclusion he is saying that there is still a lot of groundwork to be done in order to bring about a fair rendering of the Jewish laws in the New Testament, he does not seem to tie this in to chapters 1 to 5 very well, for he only vaguely addresses the content of these five chapters in the first sentence of his final paragraph. Additionally, this same conclusion seems in contrast to the stated aim in his introduction: 'to provide texts and themes which can then be used by readers to interpret NT texts'.

In addition, the two questions he proposes (see above) leave one confused as to whether he is indeed working with a neutral assumption of who is right on this issue, for these two questions may suggest an implicit answer as to his own stance on or understanding of 'salvation'. More significantly, he neither provides additional comments nor does he offer a clear answer to these two queries after the evidence has been

presented. In short, do these evidences show that Jewish laws and rituals were seen as a means of salvation to the ancient Jews? Sanders's covenantal nomism seems to make a distinction between 'getting in' and 'staying in'. Similarly, while Wright may have avoided the details of Jewish laws to conceal his theological agenda and to promote Christianity at the expense of the old idea of Judaism, as the author asserts, how is this statement or argument relevant to the twofold objective of the book? It appears that the author intends to demonstrate the importance and significance of Jewish laws and rituals against those who are actively misinforming others because of their theological agenda or to those who are passively misinformed as a result of their faulty assumptions (i.e. that 'works' are theologically or morally wrong). Whatever the case may be, it would have been helpful if the author had stated the thesis and the purpose of his book in such a way as to cover all he attempts here more accurately and explicitly.

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