



Reviews of the Enoch Seminar 2014.06.09

Isaac W. Oliver, *Torah Praxis after 70 CE: Reading Matthew and Luke-Acts as Jewish Texts.* Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2. Reihe 355. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013. Pp. xvi + 524. ISBN 978-3-16-152723-4. Sewn Paper. € 94.00.

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Comparing Matthean and Lucan treatments of Sabbath observance (healing, plucking grain, burial, travel limitations), dietary practices (kashrut, food offered to idols, blood consumption, strangled animals), and circumcision, Isaac W. Oliver seeks to demonstrate that Luke is just as “Jewish” as Matthew. Indeed, he finds “that both Matthew and Luke were born and raised Jewish” (448) and that they continued to uphold, for their Jewish audiences, these “fundamental markers of Jewish identity and expression” (9). Thus, for Oliver, Jewish followers of Jesus, in the purview of Matthew and Luke, would have affirmed a maximalist measure of Torah praxis, and that such affirmation was well represented in the churches of the late first century and following.

By seeking to read both Matthew and Luke as “Jewish” texts, and by identifying this “Jewishness” according more to cultural than primarily religious (i.e., creedal or doctrinal) categories, Oliver’s monograph comports with the recent trend in studies of the New Testament as well as of the Patristic and Rabbinic periods to move from the “partings of the ways” to the “ways that never parted.” Oliver finds himself in the company of those who see the continuity of Jewish practice by Jewish Jesus-followers, including Paul, as a, if not the, way of covenantal fidelity in what they perceived to be the messianic age. He also, consequently, finds the need to address the practical implications of such on-going halakic endeavor: what do the followers of Jesus, both Jewish and Gentile, eat when they meet at table; how do they understand the Sabbath; with what communities outside of the ecclesia do they affiliate?

There is much to appreciate in Oliver’s revised version of his University of Michigan Ph.D. thesis directed by Gabriele Boccacini. The lucid style, detailed notes and comprehensive multilingual bibliography (I do wish he had gotten my name correctly [cf. p. 22], but I am being picky), accurate grasp of the dominant scholarly claims, and careful attention to the Greek text create a 450pp. monograph in which few words are wasted. At several places, I found myself shouting hallelujah, including the eschewal of the category “Jewish Christian,” the use of rabbinic literature as a “*heuristic device....for imagining and exploring halakic scenarios*” in the

NT (38, italics his); the notice of how *chutzpadik* it is for Jesus to heal an individual in a Pharisee's home on the Sabbath (142ff.); appeals to 2 *Baruch* as an intertext for understanding Matthew's Gospel; reading the disciples' question of Israel's restoration (Acts 1:6) as legitimate rather than as a piece of misguided Jewish nationalism to be rejected; the demolition of the view that Jews regarded tanners as unclean and that Peter, by lodging at the home of Simon the tanner (Acts 10:6), was deliberately transgressing Jewish purity laws; the distinction between "unclean/impure" and "profane" and the notice that Gentiles are not ritually impure per se; and using NT material for locating Jewish practice, e.g., naming a son on the eighth day.

Concerning the thesis itself: few readers would disagree with regarding Matthew as Jewish. Few also today would disagree that both Matthew and Luke present a continuity between Jesus' message and the Jewish tradition, especially if that tradition is predominantly defined as related to the Scriptures of Israel. Both evangelists go out of their way, from their first chapter on, to demonstrate the link between Israel's legacy and Jesus, and by extension between the followers of Jesus and the history of as well as promises to Israel. Oliver could even have strengthened his case for Matthew's Jewish orientation by noting, in his discussion of Jesus' burial, that the women in *Matthew* go to the tomb not to anoint the body (*contra* p. 149), but to "see" it (Matthew 28:1), a point in line with *Semahot* 8.1 (a late text, to be sure, but one Oliver cites elsewhere). He could also have adduced more of Matthew's familiarity with Targumic and Rabbinic readings, so that for the First Gospel, the contents reflect substantial post-biblical Jewish concerns.

Nor would most readers, I think, see Luke as at all interested in dissuading Jews from following Torah (so p. 301). The argument that Luke is to be seen as a Jew—not a godfearer or proselyte—is a tougher case to make. Oliver gives it a dandy shot.

Intriguing is Oliver's insistence that the Gentile Jesus-followers would provide kosher food for their Jewish guests, and thus there would be no problem for Jewish missionaries to eat whatever is set before them (Luke 10:8). Intriguing as well is his assertion that the Apostolic decree (Acts 15:20, 29; 21:25) only refers to kosher animals and so is designed to facilitate table fellowship between Jewish and Gentile Jesus-followers; the reason Luke does not specify that the animals to be served should be kosher is that it would not occur to a Gentile Jesus-follower to serve a Jewish guest a pork roast. Also within the category of "could be" is the notice that Matthew and Luke do not "oppose spontaneous and voluntary adoption by Gentiles of Jewish customs such as the Sabbath" (111), a view that would have given Paul fits.

Oliver's arguments do occasionally take the form of what is not said. For example, referring to Peter's vision in Acts 10, he points out that "*kashrut is never explicitly denied*" (325, his italics). Alas, *kashrut* is also not explicitly affirmed either, which given the time-frame of the post-Pauline churches and Luke's own concern to present Paul in continuity with the history and traditions of Israel, would have been a nice addition. Nevertheless, the adage that absence of evidence is not evidence of absence works to his advantage.

Oliver is correct that the Pharisees in Luke-Acts are "not set on *eliminating* Jesus" (296), and his point that Luke does not, like Matthew, appear to condemn *all* Pharisees is well taken. Then again, the jury on Luke's treatment of Pharisees is still out. While they do not seek to kill Jesus,

they are hardly members of his fan club; Jesus in turn accuses them of greed, hypocrisy, lack of compassion, and even bad hospitality. By the end of Acts, there is no good Pharisee, and perhaps no good Jew, except for Paul. We might also question how we are to understand Luke's depiction of Paul's Pharisaic background: what, for the narrative of Acts, compelled him to persecute Jesus' followers? What *did* he learn from Gamaliel? Of course, by the time we reach the middle of Acts, Luke has set us up to distrust anything having to do with Pharisees, and thus as soon as we read that Pharisaic Jesus' followers have a concern, we have been prepped by the narrative to see it as misguided.

Were Oliver to have remained on the question of the continuity of Jewish practice for Jewish Jesus-followers, he'd have made his contribution. I am less inclined to follow him to the conclusion of the "Jewishness" of the texts and at least of the author of Luke-Acts. Perhaps my disagreement with his conclusion is based on the question of method. I very much appreciated the fact that, unlike a number of recent dissertations, Oliver does not spend 100 pages on theory—distinguishing ideal from real readers, setting up multiple sociological categories, appealing to detailed anthropological systems or ritual models, etc.—only at the end to tell us what we already know. He does the hard work of Hebrew and Greek philology, of thoroughly mining the primary sources, and of addressing even the more obscure periodical literature. Oliver's method is a broadly defined composition criticism, and this allows him to attend to redactional elements, especially for Luke-Acts (he accepts Marcan priority), while allowing for an assessment of the texts as literary wholes.

What I find missing is a sense of both Matthew and Luke-Acts as complete narratives. The parts that address halakah, which Oliver often brilliantly describes, are not the sum of story. That story, in its entirety, should be considered in any move from text to author, or from text to audience. The complete narratives of Matthew and Luke-Acts do show continuity by Jews of Jewish practice, especially when that practice is located in the Scriptures of Israel; they do not however necessarily (or even plausibly) suggest a target Jewish audience or, for Luke, author. If Luke and Matthew are writing to a target group of Jews, their mission will (and did) fail. If they are writing to a target group of Gentiles, their mission will (and did) succeed.

Both Gospels as well as Acts present the synagogue as a place at best of hostility, and more generally of persecution; the impression all three writings give is hardly an incentive for Jews to participate in local Jewish community affiliation. If the Gospels are suggesting continuity of Jewish practice for Jewish followers of Jesus, they are at the same time suggesting sociological separation. For example, Oliver finds congenial viewing "Matthew as participating within an intra-Jewish debate between Pharisees and followers of Jesus who were (formerly) related to the Pharisaic party" (25; cf. Anders Runesson). Missing is attention to Matthew's own rhetoric, in which the followers of Jesus are not part of a synagogue but of an *ekklesia*, and in which, by the end of the Gospel, it is not just Pharisees but *Ioudaioi* (whether "Jews" or "Judeans") who claim the disciples removed Jesus' corpse from the tomb (Matthew 28:15). This line, five verses from the end of the narrative, is Matthew's summation of the distinction between *ekklesia* and *Ioudaioi*. Although the mission to the Jews (10:5b-6; 15:24) is not abrogated, the ultimate focus of the narrative, and so on its readers, is to *panta ta ethne*, all the Gentiles (28:19).

The same language of separation coupled with a denouement solidifying the separation is found

in Acts. For Oliver, “Luke’s use of the term ‘Christian’ need not refer to a group outside Judaism” (17 n. 50). On the other hand it may: Acts 11:26 is set in Antioch and it follows the news of preaching to the Gentiles. The “great many” whom Paul taught were distinguished from the *Ioudiaoi*, in part because of the Gentile presence. Acts ends with Paul in Rome—the Jewish contingent of the Jerusalem church has entirely disappeared, the gates of the Temple are closed, and Paul’s last words are the repetition of Isaiah’s condemnation of his fellow Jews and an explicit turn to the Gentiles (Acts 28:26-28). For both Luke and Matthew, Jewish Jesus-followers are primarily in the past, not in their audiences.

Following Rick Strelan, Oliver asks, “How credible would a Gentile author arguing on behalf of the community of the Jesus movement with its Jewish heritage appear to those Jews of the end of the first century C.E. who were suspicious of the apostasy of Jewish followers of Jesus . . . ?” (31). The answer may well be “not much,” although the question itself prompts another: why would we think that Luke-Acts was directed toward a Jewish audience rather than toward readers, like Theophilus (whether real or ideal), who are already part of the group sympathetic to claims by and for Jesus? The same question of audience holds for the approach to Matthew. For Oliver, it is “precisely this segment of the Jewish people, the so-called ‘people of the land,’ that Matthew could have been seeking to win over by appealing to their customs and ‘common sense’” (p. 53). Again, why presume Matthew is writing to the *amme ha’aretz*? We have no evidence that this Gospel took root in Galilee among Jews, but we do know, from manuscript attestation and perhaps from Ignatius, that it was widely popular among the Gentile churches.

Nor do I find convincing the view of Luke-Acts as directed toward Diaspora contexts while Matthew is internal to “Palestine” (not a term Matthew uses). The focus in Matthew is away from Jerusalem, toward the Gentile nations, and toward the Gentile mission. The First Gospel’s anti-Pharisaic polemic need not require any local Pharisees or their descendants, any more than any polemical literature requires real as opposed to rhetorical targets. Claims that Matthew is combating synagogues run by Pharisees (another suggestion from Runesson) have no backing in any sources, since Pharisees are not found controlling synagogues; nor by the way are “rabbis” (who are found primarily in the study hall, not the house of worship).

For Oliver, Acts 15:10—Peter’s question to the Pharisaic followers of Jesus, “Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear?”—“really betrays a Jewish perspective and bitter recognition of Israel’s corporate and historical failure to observe the Torah” (446). I do not see how so. First, Luke has not shown that Jews have had difficulty following the Torah; that is not his focus. Simeon and Anna, Mary and Joseph, Jesus himself, do not represent a “collective failure to follow God’s Law” (447). Second, other texts do refer to Israel’s apostasy, but even *4 Ezra* still can separate the many from the few. Third, Peter’s comment is all encompassing: those ancestors would include everyone from Moses to himself, and he finds no one able to bear the yoke: that is, the Torah is too difficult to follow. These are not expected words from a Jew who takes delight in Torah and finds the yoke a guide and a blessing, not a burden that cannot be born. The problem, at least for this verse, is not personal apostasy; it is the impossibility of following Torah. And if Torah is an impossible burden, why continue to follow it? While it is true that in Acts Paul does prove to be a super-Jew, he does not teach Torah; he rather proclaims Jesus.

Finally on the question of what the Jews have failed to do: for Luke and for Matthew, the ultimate sin of Israel is not failing to follow Torah, it is killing Jesus. Matthew tells us that “all the people” (*pas ho laos*) clamored for Jesus’ crucifixion (Matthew 27:25). Luke places on Peter’s lips the accusation that “You that are Israelites . . . you crucified and killed” Jesus (Acts 2:22-23, cf. 3:12-16).

Although Oliver sees Luke as “consistent about postponing encounters with Gentiles until the book of Acts” (295 n. 1; cf. p. 441]), he ignores Luke 8:26-37 (cf. Mark 5:1-20), which is clearly set in Gentile territory, and where Jesus exorcises a demon-possessed man and permits the demons to flee into a herd of (decidedly unkosher) pigs. The setting is Gerasa, “opposite Galilee,” in a non-Jewish area populated by non-Jews.

On Luke’s identity, Oliver is correct that Luke does not explain Jewish holy days and practices, but this lack of explication tells us nothing about either Luke’s own experiences or the knowledge of his readers. Lack of detail is simply that. Followers of Jesus would have received some sort of catechetical training (as the missionary speeches as well as the appeal to Priscilla and Aquila in Acts 18:26 demonstrate); they are not alone with the Gospel texts and Acts. The Gospel and Acts do not show that “Luke is thoroughly familiar with synagogue life—an indication of his own interaction with such settings on the Sabbath” (73-74; cf. p. 210). There is nothing about the presentation of an individual being handed a scroll, reading it, and then making a statement about it that requires any more description. One could just as easily suggest that Luke does not have the details of “synagogue life” in that he may presume Jesus can read whatever passage of Isaiah strikes his fancy, or that he can without explanation merge passages or omit verses. It would be nice, by the way, to know how the passage Jesus reads in Luke 4 fits into any Jewish liturgical cycle—it is not found in any *haftarah* reading today.

The questions Oliver poses are not merely ones of history or ancient theology. With the increasing interest of Christians (especially Evangelical Protestants) in Jewish practices such as wearing prayer shawls, blowing shofars, celebrating the Sabbath in more meaningful ways, adhering to certain halakic concerns, etc., and the growth of various messianic Jewish movements that have to negotiate their relationships to the (Gentile) churches on the one hand and the broader Jewish community on the other, Oliver’s study is both timely and helpful. Christians today who, following a particular reading of Galatians, want Jews to avoid any practice that would distinguish them from their Gentile brothers and sisters, would find Oliver’s text a challenge. Similarly, those Jews today who regard Matthew and Luke-Acts as anti-Jewish invective, may have second thoughts after reading Oliver’s volume. *Yasher koach*, Dr. Oliver, and many thanks.