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Matthew Thiessen, *Paul and the Gentile Problem*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2016. ISBN: 978-0-19-027175-6. Pp 336. \$74.00. Hardcover.

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In conversation with a wide range of scholars, Matthew Thiessen presents a rich volume in which he offers a systematic understanding of Paul's solution to "the gentile problem." The key focus in his monograph is the genealogical linking of gentiles in Christ to Abraham as part of the solution to this problem. The book is densely argued and incorporates a vast array of sources from antiquity deemed relevant to the question. It is divided into two major parts, part 1, "Jewish Universalism and the Gentile Problem" (chapters 1–3), and part 2, "Abraham's Seed and the Gentile Solution" (chapters 4–5), followed by a conclusion. In the Introduction, Thiessen sets out aspects of the presuppositions that guide his interpretation of the Pauline texts. With a particular focus on aspects of Romans and Galatians, he contrasts his approach to traditional interpretations which consider the letters as being addressed to both Jews and gentiles in Christ. Over against these he joins in the chorus of those scholars who emphasize that Paul's intended audience is composed of gentiles only, rather than Jews and gentiles alike. Thiessen draws attention to the fact that this intended audience needs to be differentiated from the actual audience, which in his view is difficult to identify. He thus considers it possible that there were Jews and gentiles present in the communities to which the letters are sent, but that the intended addressees are exclusively gentiles. It is thus vital to interpret consistently the letters as addressed to non-Jews, in accordance with Paul's own claim that he is divinely entrusted with the gospel for non-Jews as Peter is for Jews (7-11). This presupposition guides Thiessen's reading throughout the monograph.

Chapter 1, "Jewish Solutions to the Gentile Problem," sets the tradition-historical context for Paul's solution to the gentile problem with an overview of Jewish ways of relating to or perceiving non-Jews in the period of the Second Temple, mainly summarizing and following the comprehensive work and analysis of Terence L. Donaldson. With reference to Josephus's example of Izates, some gospel narratives, and rabbinic literature, Thiessen asserts that Pharisees in particular were open to accepting proselytes and incorporating former gentiles into the people

Israel, whereas significant other strands of Judaism rejected such an option, predominantly based on genealogical reasons. Since Paul as a Pharisee is seen as initially having shared this openness if not advocated it, the Chris-event must have marked a fundamental change in Paul's perception. In a brief initial analysis of some Galatian texts (which is expanded in chapters 2 and 3) Thiessen concludes that Paul is not concerned with Jewish practice per se but "with gentiles who adopt Jewish practices" (40). Gentile practice of circumcision and their adoption of the Jewish law was a problem not because of their assumed legalistic or ethno-centric nature but because they could not solve the gentile problem. The assumption that Jewish tradition was either legalistic or ethno-centric marks the key positions of many current approaches to Paul, which, according to Thiessen, fundamentally misunderstand him; he identifies these as the "anti-legalistic" Paul, that is, the Paul of the Lutheran reading, and the "anti-ethnocentric" Paul, that is, the Paul of the New Perspective) (5). It is mainly over against these two positions that Thiessen presents what he sees as Paul's solution to the gentile problem.

In chapter 2 "The Gentile Identity of the 'So-Called' Jew in Romans," Thiessen builds on Runar Thorsteinsson's identification of the interlocutor in Rom 2:17-29 as a Judaizing gentile; the passage thus does not attack Jewish practice but the futile practice of Jewish traditions by a gentile. The root of the gentile problem is identified in Rom 1:18-32 as idolatry. Thiessen understands this first section of Romans as clearly indicating that the gentiles are the target also of what follows. Thiessen here builds on Kathy Gaca's work which demonstrates that early interpreters such as Tatian, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and others held the view that Paul here addresses and attacks gentiles, rather than Jews. The subsequent passage, Rom 2:1-6, does not change the addressee but continues the previous chapter and still addresses gentiles. Hence the so-called Jew of 2:17-29 is "someone of non-Jewish descent who believes that he has become a Jew – that is, a gentile who has adopted the Jewish law, including circumcision." The problem with this person is, that by practicing circumcision he actually transgresses the very law he is trying to fulfill. Taking seriously that Paul in Rom 3:1-2 asserts the value of circumcision, Thiessen argues that for Paul the issue at stake is the conviction that circumcision has to be circumcision on the eighth day, hence by practicing adult circumcision, this law is actually broken. Paul thus does not disagree with this practice because there is a problem with circumcision per se, but because he, like some contemporary fellow Jews, considered it impossible for a gentile to become a Jew. This problem could not be solved by the law. Surprisingly Thiessen concludes this convincingly argued chapter with the note that there is still a significant degree of uncertainty concerning the identity of the interlocutor in Rom 2 and maintains that this uncertainty can be overcome by turning to Galatians, where he is of the view that "interpreters of that letter are certain that Paul's primary readers were gentiles-in Christ" (70). I am in no doubt that Paul addresses gentiles in Galatians, but I am not as convinced as Thiessen is that this is shared unanimously in the guild. Moreover, I doubt that the implications of this recognition have had wide bearings on the interpretation of this letter, in that Paul's arguments against gentile circumcision are being universalized and interpreted as an attack on this Jewish practice and the Torah per se. Thiessen seems to recognize this himself when he later notes that "...anti-legalist and anti-ethnocentric proponents have universalized Gal 4.21-31, a universalization that unavoidably leads to the conclusion that Paul misused Genesis 16-21" (75).

Thus chapter 3, "Do You Not Hear the Law?" deals particularly with Gal 3-4. The focus lies on Gal 4:21-31, which is regarded as Paul's interpretation of Gen 16-21. Thiessen analyses the

interpretation of the opponents reading of Gen 17 as rendering support for gentile circumcision. He then turns to the LXX text of Gen 17 and draws attention to the differentiation between the circumcision of Ishmael and the circumcision of Isaac within the narrative, with its explicit focus on the eighth day, and the accompanying promise that in him Abraham's name will be called. Thiessen demonstrates that this is also the focus of Jubilees's retelling of the narrative. In light of this, the allegory of the two motherhoods, of Hagar and Sarah respectively, stands for two competing missions among the gentiles (the Jews are not in view at all). Sarah and Abraham's attempt at "creating" a son and heir through Hagar are considered to represent the Judaizing missionaries whereas Isaac, the child who emerges out of nothing, is the child of the promise, and thus heir and Abraham's seed. Thiessen concludes that "God's creating Isaac out of nothing prefigures Paul's mission to the gentiles." (97). Undergoing circumcision and adhering to the Jewish law did not transform gentiles into heirs and seed of Abraham, and hence are futile in Paul's view. Thus, as in his analysis of Rom 2, Thiessen does not find Paul attacking Jewish law or Judaism in Gal 3–4 but only what he considered to be a misapplication of the Jewish law to gentiles, for whom it was never meant and who could not achieve anything by adhering to it.

The question addressed in Part 2 in chapters 4 and 5 then is how, in Paul's view, a status as Abraham's heirs could be attained by gentiles. Chapter 4, "Gentile Sons and Seed of Abraham," argues with Caroline Johnson Hodge for the relevance of genealogical descent in Paul's thinking. The key argument here is that it is not faith as such that transforms a gentile into a son of Abraham rather faith transmits *pneuma* (left deliberately un-translated to avoid the dichotomy of flesh and spirit, fleshly/spiritual) and through receiving the *pneuma* of Abraham's seed, Christ, the recipients become Abraham's seed. Through this *pneuma* they are now genealogically linked to Abraham. The respective passages in Rom 4 and Galatians are interpreted in tandem, with a particular focus on Gal 3–4. The focus of the significance of *pneuma* in the Pauline letters is well advocated, as is the rationale for leaving *pneuma* untranslated. *Pneuma* is interpreted as resonating with Stoic material perceptions (a significantly debated issue in New Testament scholarship). Based on this assumption the gentiles are seen as materially infused and thus transformed through being in Christ, that is, through being *in* Abraham's seed, into Abraham's seed themselves. Stoic theories of mixtures are applied to understanding this transformation of gentiles in Christ since, although being infused with the material *pneuma*, this dimension is not fused with their gentile identity to create a third entity but is mixed in a way that the substances remain separate. Thiessen thus proposes the use of the hyphenated term 'gentile-Abrahamic sons' for gentiles in Christ. As such they receive through the *pneuma* of Christ Abraham's substance and thus become his descendants. Thiessen also addresses the conundrum of the singular seed of Gal 4:6 where he identifies allusions to the messianic interpretation of 2 Sam 7:12–14, and posits the existence of potential exegetical traditions which made a connection between Gen 15:1–15 and the *sperma* of 2 Sam 7:12–14 before Paul's time or even before the Jesus movement (125–26). This seems to be a rather speculative approach to the issue, since Thiessen himself acknowledges that no literary evidence for such a connection exists. The preposition *en* is interpreted as referring to biological and bodily existence within the seed and thus as an indication that Paul and his audience understood gentiles being blessed "in Abraham" in line with a prevalent contemporary understanding that "a man's descendants pre-exist in him." If this is the understanding and the descendants, here gentiles, pre-exist in the ancestor, it remains unclear why gentiles now have to "become" seed of Abraham via Christ. The genealogical link to Abraham, however, is established through the *pneuma* triggered by the

gentiles' faith in Christ according to Thiessen. The cumulative argument emphasizes that by becoming *pneumatic* rather than *fleshly* seed the gentiles are in no ways less material seed than Israel. By entering "into Abraham through Abraham's seed, Christ," gentiles "access the blessing God had promised long ago to Abraham" (129).

The issue of the nature of this blessing and the solution to the gentile problem are addressed in chapter 5, "Abraham, the Promised *Pneuma* and the Gentile Solution." This chapter presents a creative interpretation of Gal 3:14–16, based on the presupposition that the reception of *pneuma* is what was promised to Abraham in the Genesis narratives. Thiessen notes that *pneuma* is not mentioned in these narratives. However, there is evidence that the promise that Abraham's seed will be like stars has not merely been understood in a numerical but also in a qualitative way in contemporary Jewish interpretations, and that stars were considered to be pneumatic or angelic beings in antiquity. This leads Thiessen to the conclusion that such views must have been at least beneath the surface of Paul's arguments in Gal 3. The conclusion he draws from this is that "Paul sees the fulfilment of God's promises that Abraham's seed would become star-like pneumatic beings in the Galatian assemblies' reception of the *pneuma* out of faith, not of works of law" (147). They have received the *pneuma* of the seed of Abraham, that is, Christ, and thus as heirs they will become indestructible, star-like seed who will inherit the cosmos. The *pneuma* also provokes their moral transformation and enables them to live a virtuous life. This, in Thiessen's view, implies that Paul thought that Christ followers, by becoming like stars, become divine or semi-divine beings like angels; the reception of the *pneuma* in that sense divinizes them (155). Thiessen concludes that the gift of the *pneuma* thus "brings about four significant and substantive changes that remedy the gentile problem" (160). It brings gentiles into a genealogical relationship with Abraham; through the *pneuma* they become sons of God and are thus freed from the *stoicheia*; this freedom enables a change in their moral behaviour; they can thus now partake in the indestructible life of the *eschaton* and rule the *cosmos*.

In his conclusion Thiessen describes the two main aims of his densely argued volume: a) to present a coherent reading of Paul's view of the Jewish law as exclusively related to its function (or absence of such a function) for gentiles; the Torah is for Jews, and due to a divinely genealogical division it was impossible for gentiles to overcome that division; and b) to demonstrate the uniqueness of Paul's gospel, that is, his belief that Jesus was the Christ and hence would bring about the obedience of the gentiles. This is achieved through the reception of Christ's *pneuma* which materially related gentiles-in-Christ to Abraham and hence to the promises. This pneumatic link overcomes the divinely ordained genealogical division of Jews and gentiles through an act of God. The genealogical link via Christ's *pneuma* is essential for understanding Romans and Galatians.

This is a bold volume, which certainly provides food for thought for further debates. Thiessen substantiates his interpretations by discussing contextual material widely. The emphasis on the gentile addressees is consistently thought through in a commendable way, thereby shedding light on numerous passages of Romans and Galatians which in other readings appear to denigrate Jewish law. There is also hardly any doubt that the role of *pneuma* is vital in Paul's arguments. To leave *pneuma* untranslated is helpful, and to approach it from a Stoic understanding is certainly legitimate, although not uncontested. The same should be noted concerning the function of genealogical reasoning in Paul. The volume is organized strictly along thematical lines, which

at times gives the impression of moving between scriptural passages almost arbitrarily and with little regard for the rhetorical structure of Pauline reasoning. In an attempt at providing a coherent image of Paul's thought and solution to the gentile problem, a tendency to systematize Paul's thought may be unavoidable. But cautions raised by previous scholarship concerning systematizing Paul's theologizing should not be forgotten in attempts at overcoming anti-legalistic and anti-ethnocentric readings of Paul. These critical notes are not meant to distract from the value of a creative and stimulating contribution to the important conversation about the role of the apostle to the nations within his first century context.