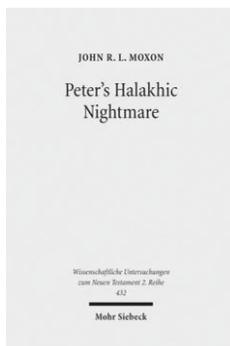




## *Reviews of the Enoch Seminar 2018.04.04*

**John R. L. Moxon, *Peter's Halakhic Nightmare: The "Animal" Vision of Acts 10:9–16 in Jewish and Graeco-Roman Perspective*. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2. Reihe 432. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017. ISBN: 978-3-16-153301-3. Pp. XXV + 638. 129 €. Sewn Paper.**

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Peter's vision in Acts 10, in which he is commanded to "slaughter and eat" (Acts 10:13) animals descending from heaven in a sheet, has long frustrated interpreters because of its ambiguity and its seemingly poor fit with the surrounding context, which focuses not on food but people. As a result, many earlier interpreters have suggested that the vision is originally extraneous to the Cornelius story, with the difficulties it causes being the result of editorial lapses as Luke attempts to reshape multiple, potentially competing traditions.<sup>1</sup> Others have contested this approach, regarding the vision as integral to the Cornelius tradition functioning in support of Acts 10:28.<sup>2</sup> In either case, the vision's apparent abrogation of the dietary laws (and perhaps the Torah in general) has continued to cause problems for recent (post-Jervell) reevaluations of Acts as advocating a "dual identity" model rather than

advocating abolition of the Torah for Jewish believers in Jesus.

In *Peter's Halakhic Nightmare* (a revision of his 2011 University of Durham dissertation directed by Loren Stuckenbruck and Robert Hayward), John Moxon reevaluates Peter's vision in light of Greco-Roman dream/vision accounts, enigmatic divine communication in Greco-Roman traditions, and examples of Hellenistic "double dreams" (two visionary experiences paired together in a narrative). Unsatisfied with both redactional solutions reliant on editorial inconsistency and the assumption that Peter's vision straightforwardly advocates abrogation of the Torah, Moxon proposes that the difficulties caused by the

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., Martin Dibelius, "Style Criticism of the Book of Acts," in *The Book of Acts: Form, Style, and Theology*, trans. and ed. K. C. Hanson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 32–48; first publ. as "Stilkritisches zur Apostelgeschichte," in *Eucharistérion: Studien zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments; Herman Gunkel zum 66. Geburtstag, dem 23. Mai 1922, dargebracht von seinem Schülern und Freunden*, ed. Hans Schmidt (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1923), 2:27–49; idem, "The Conversion of Cornelius," in *The Book of Acts*, 140–50; first publ. as "Die Bekehrung des Cornelius," *ConNT* 11 (1947): 50–65.

<sup>2</sup> E.g., François Bovon, "Tradition et Rédaction en Actes 10,1-11,18," *TZ* 26 (1970): 22–45; Klaus Haacker, "Dibelius und Cornelius: Ein Beispiel Formgeschichtlicher Überlieferungskritik," *BZ* 24 (1980): 234–51.

vision are not something to be explained away but instead are an essential part of Acts's rhetorical strategy throughout the Cornelius episode, thus allowing "Luke to retain his positive view of the Law, whilst purposely including a vision of this kind" (43).

The volume comprises seven chapters, including an introduction and short concluding summary chapter, and four lengthy appendices, which contain many of the supporting details for the chapters. The introduction succinctly introduces the *status quaestionis* on Peter's vision, with Moxon concluding that "many of the problems raised by the commentators may stem from not observing what is genuinely unusual about the vision, and perhaps not asking what kind of literature it really is" (43). The rest of the volume sets out to demonstrate that the vision borrows from "affective" traditions, setting up Peter's vision to be uncertain by design, challenging the protagonist (and the reader) to grapple with "an unresolved, even unresolvable intellectual challenge that nevertheless enables him to recognize a soon-to-unfold but surprising development" (45).

Chapter two focuses on the complicated halakhic subject matter undergirding both the imagery of Peter's dream and the larger narrative. This is of course fraught territory for most New Testament scholars, as Moxon himself recognizes, noting that "unwitting anachronism and/or inexpert grasp of halakha by NT scholars has almost certainly caused confusion" when interpreting Acts 10–11 (53). For his part, Moxon ably navigates this halakhic terrain, highlighting many common pitfalls and anachronisms along the way. Moxon argues that although ritual purity (holiness/profanity), food laws, and morality are properly separate domains, the terminological overlap among these categories led to blurred boundaries in practice, such that concerns about gentile association "most likely involved moral precaution and popular perceptions as much as formal halakha" (94). Moxon then reexamines Peter's vision through more precise halakhic lenses, arguing that "its target is not the Jew-gentile distinction so much as the illegitimate ascription of *uncleanness* to gentiles" (68). That is, the vision does not abolish the Torah or food laws but rather subtly corrects Peter's inappropriate application of uncleanness to gentiles, paving the way for legitimate association between Jews and (God-fearing) gentiles while nevertheless leaving Peter in "a state of distressed impasse" (96). This chapter is the strongest and most tightly written in the volume, worthy of use as a stand-alone reading assignment on halakhic matters in an upper-level New Testament seminar.

Chapter three turns to consider form-critical questions, arguing that interpretation of Peter's dream has suffered from the application of a dream model derived from ANE court material in which there are only two formal options, "message dream" and "symbolic dream," leading to an overly simplistic understanding of Peter's vision as little more than a divine command. To address this problem, Moxon first summarizes and critiques these old form-critical categories (derived from Oppenheim) and then undertakes the massive task of surveying dream/vision material from the ANE, Hebrew Bible, ancient and Classical Greek traditions, later Hellenistic and Roman evidence (including the Epidauros inscriptions, Aelius Aristides, Artemidorus, rabbinical dream-books, and more), apocryphal works, Josephus, the Gospels, and Acts.<sup>3</sup> Moxon does omit the majority of apocalyptic works from his discussion, arguing that "making an overly strong connection [in Peter's vision] to so-called 'apocalyptic ideas' may be misleading even if the imagery and idiom owe something to the genre" (119). Moxon bolsters his summary analysis (which contains a running commentary on features and forms relevant to Peter's vision) with extended categorizations and summaries of dream/vision content throughout this extended corpus in the second appendix. The chapter ultimately argues that later Greco-Roman literature (and Jewish literature indebted to that tradition) shows

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<sup>3</sup> A. L. Oppenheim, *The Interpretation of Dreams in the Ancient Near East, with a Translation of an Assyrian Dream-Book* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1956); idem, "Mantic Dreams in the Ancient Near East," in *The Dream and Human Societies*, ed. Gustave E. Von Grunbaum and Roger Caillois (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 341–50. Moxon follows Hanson in not belaboring the distinction between these terms, noting that for their interpretation the distinction is rarely relevant (104–7). Nevertheless, appendix one addresses the terminology used for dreams and visions across the literature covered in the book.

“varieties of hybrid, intermediate or uncertain forms that allow for more complex patterns of interaction” (99), even to the point of blurring the distinction between divine and natural causality—and that “the unusual features of Peter’s vision might be better understood in relation to these wider developments” (164).

The fourth chapter discusses perspectives on natural dreaming and how anxiety dreams and nightmares are portrayed in Hellenistic literature from the classical period onwards, arguing that the “curious naturalistic touches” (175) in the frame surrounding Peter’s vision is a means by which the narrator “*adds ambiguity to Peter’s experience*” (181, emphasis original). That is, “by underlining the human dimension, the dream draws back from a mandate for Torah abolition whilst allowing its terrifying spectre to haunt Peter and insinuate his personal inconsistency” (181).

The fifth chapter (supplemented by appendix three) builds on this ambiguity by investigating traditions of enigmatic divine speech, primarily focusing on Greco-Roman materials as a lens through which to view later Hellenistic Jewish and early Christian examples of enigmatic dreams or divine speech. Moxon argues that although Jewish traditional material typically avoided riddling or obscure divine speech, Acts adopts “more specifically Greek features” on several occasions, “of which the case in Acts 10 with its impenetrable dialogue is the most elaborate” (268). Speculating on a possible reason for employment of such a device, Moxon suggests that the difficulty of the vision serves to engender sympathy for Peter and to lighten an otherwise overwrought dispute.

Chapter six evaluates the Peter-Cornelius pair of visions in light of other examples of “double dreams” across a broad spectrum of analogous material. The chapter is supplemented by appendix four, which exhaustively lists and analyzes double dreams in ANE, classical, Greco-Roman, and Jewish literature, again including popular and therapeutic dream corpora; the appendix also provides a simplified reference schema for the chapter itself. After an extended and somewhat belabored analysis of other examples of double dreams, Moxon argues that the Peter-Cornelius pairing aligns nicely with a “common device” of “pairing an enigmatic dream in one limb and rather straightforward one in the other,” and that these examples show a pattern in which “the dreamer who has the difficulty is given the more coded revelation” (315; see also 324–25). Moreover, by giving Peter the more enigmatic dream while Cornelius receives a more prototypical “biblical” theophany, the narrative exhibits precisely the reversal of “outsider” and “insider” responses reflected elsewhere in Acts while eliciting sympathy for Peter’s plight. Finally, the chapter concludes by showing a number of parallels between the Peter-Cornelius double dream and the Paul-Ananias pairing, with protagonists Peter and Paul each getting the more difficult visionary experience that serves to correct them from their present path.

Moxon thus concludes that, far from being an example from a prior source that fits poorly with the rest of the narrative, “to remove the animal vision from the account would break this sense of matching ‘conversions’ [of Peter and Paul] that delineate a path of painful humility to be followed by all” (338). Rather than being the result of an editorial lapse, the uncertainty surrounding the vision is by design, serving the larger rhetorical and apologetic aims of Acts, not advocating abrogation of the Torah (or food laws for Jews) but rather pointing toward “a Roman model by which common belonging permitted reciprocal hospitality whilst fully respecting differing local or ethnic obligations” (344).

Moxon’s analysis is careful and thoughtful throughout, and he makes a compelling case for an interpretation of Peter’s vision as an integral component of a non-abolitionist, “dual identity” apologetic perspective in Acts. The study is also valuable in several areas beyond its central thesis. One obvious benefit of the study is its demonstration of the inadequacy of rigid form-critical categories borrowed from ANE materials for analyzing this and other dream/vision accounts from Hellenistic and Roman periods, where such material was employed with significantly more sophistication. It also provides another significant data point about the style of Acts, suggesting not only that the author is willing and able to work within contemporary literary trends, but also that more attention should be paid to his “lighter, ironic touch” (328) than is often the case.

(Moxon also rightly points to the playful, ironic nature of much rabbinic literature as a model for such an approach.) The idea that Acts pushes forward a positive role for human experience and emotion in the revelatory process is also an important contribution that will need more thorough examination by future studies.

Nevertheless, despite Moxon's creativity in attempting to streamline the book through the use of highly-organized appendices, the "extensive survey work" (45) does get unwieldy and repetitive at times, particularly in chapters three through five. Given the contested nature of the territory, the inclusion of these detailed surveys was almost certainly necessary, but it does make the book significantly longer than it would need to be for those already familiar with much of this material and already amenable to Moxon's "affective" interpretation of Peter's vision. For such readers, chapters two and six, along with select portions of chapters four and five (sections 4.5–4.6, 5.4, and 5.7) would be sufficient to gain good familiarity with the larger argument. That said, the inclusion of all the additional detailed survey material, particularly in the appendices, should prove quite helpful to those doing research in the areas of dreams and visions in this period.

On the flip side, Moxon's exclusion of apocalyptic material is a significant—and somewhat artificial—limitation. For one thing, "apocalyptic" is a modern scholarly category, not an ancient one, and he does not explain how ancient readers would have distinguished between this modern category and other visionary literature. He does suggest that the details of the vision "may constitute humorous glances in the direction of apocalyptic" (266) but argues that the vision should instead be classified as didactic or halakhic. But a halakhic vision—even an uncertain one—still qualifies as revelatory, which is the very definition of the word "apocalyptic." Moreover, to acknowledge "humorous glances" toward imagery familiar from apocalyptic literature amounts to recognizing apocalyptic influence, so entirely ignoring this body of literature does leave a gap in Moxon's analysis.

In summary, in *Peter's Halakhic Nightmare*, Moxon has provided a learned and admirable study, making a strong case with an extensive (sometimes over-extensive) array of persuasive evidence, thoroughly engaging with the prior scholarly discourse throughout, a study that should provide numerous fruitful avenues for further research in Acts and elsewhere. Future interpreters of Acts 10–11 will certainly need to engage with Moxon's reading of Peter's vision and can no longer simply assume that the vision advocates an abrogation of the food laws or the Torah in general.