

CRITICAL BOOK REVIEWS

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Hebrews, Christ and the Law: The Theology of the Mosaic Law in Hebrews 7:1-10:18, by Barry C. Joslin. Paternoster Biblical Monographs; Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008.

Biblical law is an issue always relevant to believers as it directly impacts the way we live our daily lives. Any study that aims to elucidate the importance of biblical law, therefore, hits a sensitive chord, at least for me. Joslin's book, *Hebrews, Christ and the Law*, is no exception. The work is an adaptation of Joslin's doctoral dissertation at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. As such, the book is not for the faint hearted, it involves fairly detailed and specialized work and assumes a minimal acquaintance with biblical Greek on the part of the reader. Yet, his writing style is smooth and easy to follow making for an overall comfortable reading.

Joslin's study is divided into eight chapters. In chapter 1 he introduces the topic and overviews trends in the interpretation of law in Hebrews. In chapter 2 he explores law in non-biblical second temple Jewish literature. Chapter 3 is taken up with a discussion of the structure of Hebrews. Chapters 4 to 6 form the core of the study where Joslin interacts with the text and does exegesis on key verses. The study concludes with chapter 7 where he brings together the threads into a coherent conclusion.

Joslin can be highly commended for his love for biblical law. In a context of increasing theological antinomianism within Christian churches, Joslin not only tackles the topic of law, but does so from a

decidedly positive outlook. His passion reverberates throughout the study. Chapter 2 is a valuable contribution and outlines clearly the high esteem Jews had for biblical law around the time of Jesus. In his exegetical section he correctly notes that the levitical priesthood and sacrificial system have been done away but refuses the temptation to which many others have succumbed to see either in a negative light. The levitical priesthood including the sacrificial system was not bad; it was rather a good system that served as a shadow of the greater priesthood and sacrifice of Jesus. Its time was up and it was replaced by something better.

He also gives Jer 31:31-34, its proper place. This OT passage contains a promise that God would write His law on the heart of believers. Joslin correctly brushes aside notions that Hebrews follows allegorical, hellenistic, philonic, or other exegetical approaches and demonstrates that the writer is fully rooted in sound OT exegesis. He also argues successfully that the law of Jer 31:31-34 was the law that God gave through Moses. Contrary to many popular approaches Joslin highlights the importance of this law and its positive attributes. He argues that many of the laws we find in the Pentateuch are carried over into the new covenant. He calls the "carried over" laws, the Christologized law, and maintains that it is written on the heart of the believer.

Despite his passion and the merits of his work, this study falls short of satisfaction. Joslin has brought believers who "delight in the law of the Lord," to the spring but he has failed to serve refreshing water. The main problem lies with his conclusion. His assertion throughout is that the law is valid and good, but the law has been changed. Yet, he fails to define what aspects of the law have been changed. He only mentions two: the priestly sacrificial system and the food laws. The former is self-evident and no serious student of Hebrews or of the New Testament for that matter would question that. The latter is not a conclusion that flows out of his study since nowhere does Joslin discuss the idea of clean and unclean foods in any depth or through exegetical analysis. Rather it appears as a statement out of the blue, and one that sounds tenuous given the importance Hebrews places on ritual purity (9:13,14,22,23; 10:2,22). Apart from the priestly sacrificial system and clean and unclean foods presumably there are other aspects of law that have changed, but he does not name them. He once hints that the Decalogue may have changed too (p. 175), yet, amazingly whatever this change involves is not discussed.

It is very unlikely that the writer of Hebrews, well conversant with the OT and writing to Jewish Christians who might have been tempted to revert to Judaism, as Joslin asserts, would announce something as foundational as the change of the law, without defining what the change involves. What would be the point? If something has changed but the nature of the change has not been defined, the reader will be left

wondering, bewildered and unsure of what to believe. Furthermore, by stating that something has changed but not defining what and how, Joslin leaves the readers make up their own mind as to which parts of OT law are valid and which have been abolished. By making the reader the final arbiter, Joslin ultimately undermines rather than establishes biblical law.

The weakness of his conclusion rests on at least two weak exegetical foundations. The first is his assumption that the word "law" is a reference to the whole Mosaic legal establishment, not to its individual components. He rejects the division into moral, ceremonial, and civil aspects, which has been foundational to Reformation theology. Yet in his chapter 2 that deals with the extra-biblical Jewish background, he admits that "law" can relate either to the whole Mosaic corpus, or to individual components. Furthermore, in chapter 4 he discusses Heb 7:12, the only text where any change in the law is intimated, and assumes that the whole Mosaic law is in view. But alas, regarding 7:11 and 7:16, the only two other verses where the word "law" appears in Heb 7, he asserts that law refers only to regulations concerning the levitical priesthood. So, his own exegesis of 7:11 and 16 undermines his assumption on 7:12, as well as the overall thesis of his book.

The second exegetical weakness is Joslin's treatment of the phrase *nomou metathesis*, often translated "change of law" (Heb 7:12). On its basis he speaks of a "transformation" of law. However, etymologically, *metathesis* is made up of the preposition *meta* ("with" or "by") and the noun *thesis* ("place or position"). Literally, the word means, "to relocate" or "change the position" of something, not to change its essence or make up. It is used consistently with this meaning both in the NT and outside it all the way to modern Greek. Hebrews 7:12 forms the hinge on which his whole thesis on the change of law depends, yet, surprisingly he fails to discuss the full gamut of meaning of the word and determine its importance in the specific context. He rather speaks of Christological transformation, Christologizing, or the whole law being affected with change, reading into the word *metathesis* concepts that are not there; he is using enticing theological terminology but essentially builds a theological straw man.

Hebrews is clear: one thing has changed. This one thing is the OT priesthood and sacrificial cultus which has been replaced by Jesus our one and only High Priest, and His sacrifice on the cross offered once and for all. On this I will wholeheartedly agree with Joslin. To speak of changes beyond this on the basis of Heb 7:1-10:18 means to read into the text something that is not there.

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