

In my evaluation, a high Christology gains more merit when it argues for what Jesus has done, identifies Him with the God of Israel, and incorporates Him in the divine identity, including the devotion and worship reserved for God alone. The good thing is that Porter and Dyer have acknowledged the strength of these approaches (pp. 228, 231–32), though in the present volume they choose to provide a strong footing for the titles approach by means of exploring the traditions that NT writers have applied to Jesus.

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Thiessen, Matthew. *A Jewish Paul: The Messiah's Herald to the Gentiles*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023. Pp. xii + 187. Hardcover, \$49.99. Paperback, \$24.99. Kindle, 24.99.

In *A Jewish Paul: The Messiah's Herald to the Gentiles*, Matthew Thiessen examines the Apostle Paul's identity in relation to first-century Judaism. Thiessen contends that Paul was thoroughly Jewish, operating within the diverse landscape of Jewish culture, maintaining his Jewish identity and practices. However, Paul asserted that Gentile converts to the Messiah need not fully embrace Judaism, such as through circumcision, which he regarded as unnecessary "cosmetic surgery" (pp. 83–100). This book is significant because it challenges traditional views that depict Paul as breaking away from Judaism to establish a new religion, namely, orthodox Christianity.

The book is structured into several well-organized chapters, framed by an introduction and conclusion. In the introduction, Thiessen clarifies that his work aims to introduce readers to the question of Paul's relationship to Judaism (p. 3). He sets the stage by engaging with various scholarly perspectives, such as the Lutheran, covenantal, ethnocentric, and apocalyptic views, ultimately rejecting the notion that Paul perceived any inherent flaws in Judaism. Thiessen argues that Paul remained an observant Jew until his death, aligning with modern interpretations like the Sonderweg ("special path," a kind of view) reading of Paul, the radical new perspective, and Paul within Judaism, while uniquely emphasizing Paul's adherence to Jewish customs as portrayed in the Acts of the Apostles (p. 10).

Thiessen begins the main body by situating Paul within the first-century Jewish context (chap. 1). He argues against the view that Judaism required

Gentiles to become Jews for salvation, positing that this was a Christian re-interpretation rather than a universal belief among Jews. He highlights that Paul's refusal to impose circumcision on Gentile converts aligns with pre-existing Jewish practices, rather than indicating a departure from Judaism (p. 19). In discussing how Paul is to be read (chap. 2), Thiessen argues that while Paul's letters, especially Romans and Galatians, might portray him as opposing legalism or works of righteousness, Acts depicts him as an observant Jew. This contrast, he suggests, can serve as a reading strategy to understand Paul's stance on Jewish law and practices (p. 28). For example, the issue of circumcision, if imposed on Gentile converts, has adverse theological implications, portraying Israel's God as exclusivist, which is incompatible with the image of a God who desires all to be saved.

Thiessen then delves into the diversity of Jewish beliefs and practices in Paul's time (chap. 3), emphasizing that Judaism was far from monolithic "in what they thought and believed or how they acted" (p. 39). He illustrates this with the varied beliefs of groups like the Pharisees and Sadducees on issues such as the resurrection, and by Paul's differentiated approach to circumcision for Jews and Gentiles (p. 39). As he continues to argue for a Jewish Paul, Thiessen connects Paul's teachings with his eschatological convictions (chap. 4), arguing that Paul believed he was living in the end times. Notably, Thiessen claims Paul's stance that non-Jewish followers of the Messiah need not be circumcised evolved after his conversion, with the question of male Gentile converts' circumcision developing only after Paul's visit to Arabia (pp. 55–56).

In addressing the "Gentile problem" (chap. 5), Thiessen offers a fresh interpretation of Rom 1:18–32, arguing that Paul's focus was specifically on Gentiles who fell into idolatry, rather than making a general indictment of all sinners (pp. 59–69). This analysis leads into a discussion of Paul's message about the Messiah (chap. 6), where Thiessen places Jesus's messiahship within the broader Abrahamic promise, identifying him as Abraham's seed (Gal 3:16). Thiessen asserts that, according to Paul, those who wish to inherit God's promises to Abraham must unite with the Messiah, as this is the only way Gentiles can become fellow heirs and sharers of the promise (pp. 78–81).

A critical chapter in Thiessen's work is his treatment of circumcision (chap. 7), which he dismisses as mere "cosmetic surgery" with no spiritual significance for Gentiles. He supports this by highlighting Ishmael, Abraham's firstborn through Hagar, whose circumcision did not make him the heir of the covenant promise (pp. 97–98). He contrasts this with what he terms "pneumatic therapy" (chap. 8), the transformative work of the Spirit,

which he claims is essential for Gentiles to become true descendants of Abraham. However, against those who view the Spirit as immaterial, Thiessen argues that for Paul, the Spirit is the finest material in the cosmos, crucial for true spiritual transformation (pp. 108, 117).

Thiessen continues by explaining that both Gentiles and Jews who identify with the Messiah become part of the Messiah's flesh-and-blood body (chap. 9). He argues against interpreting Christ's body purely metaphorically. Since for Paul "the Messiah is a receptacle that contains the bodies of his followers," and the *pneuma* that envelops believers is material, the Messiah's body is flesh and blood, as believers are materially connected in the Messiah (p. 120). In the following chapter (chap. 10), Thiessen emphasizes that the Messiah's followers participate in His resurrected life, adopting a divine identity that is ethically and morally manifested in the present, with full divinity achieved in the resurrection (p. 126).

Revisiting the subject of resurrection in the previous chapter, Thiessen focuses on the nature of the body believers will possess in the resurrection (chap. 11). He describes this as a pneumatic body, perfectly suited for heavenly habitation. Just as God has designed different types of bodies for various earthly environments, so He prepared a body fit for life in heaven. After addressing how Gentiles are saved and become followers of the Messiah, Thiessen shifts to the relationship between Jesus and the Jews (chap. 12). Expounding on Rom 9–11, he argues that the Jews' rejection of Jesus as the Messiah is not due to legalism or ethnocentrism. Instead, Thiessen posits that their stumbling over the "stone" (the Messiah) is a divinely orchestrated partial hardening, allowing salvation to extend to the Gentiles (pp. 155–56).

The conclusion of *A Jewish Paul* reiterates Thiessen's argument that Paul saw no inherent flaws in Judaism. Paul's debates concerning Jewish laws were part of broader discussions about the relationship between Gentiles, Israel's God, and Jewish law. Thiessen asserts that this approach to reading Paul provides a deeper understanding of his relationship to Judaism (p. 159).

In evaluation, Thiessen skillfully situates Paul within his Jewish milieu, offering a nuanced understanding of how Paul's stance on Jewish law and practices aligns with broader discussions on Gentiles' relationship to Israel's God and their laws. This is the book's primary strength. Thiessen's observation on the futility of circumcision as a basis for identifying with the Messiah, given that it did nothing for Ishmael, is particularly insightful. Methodologically, his approach to understanding Paul's relationship to Judaism by drawing extensively on Acts' depiction of a Jewishly observant Paul is,

in my estimation, the main contribution to the scholarly debate on Paul's identity and mission. This reliance on Acts distinguishes him from those who also argue that Paul remained entirely Jewish in identity and practice until his death, but who do so without appealing to Acts as a reliable source. Moreover, he also departs from these scholars by claiming that Paul's refusal to require Gentile converts to embrace full Judaism, such as through circumcision, should be understood as consistent with certain pre-existing Jewish practices, rather than indicating a radical break from Judaism.

However, Thiessen's book is not without limitations. His assertion of Paul's thorough Jewishness is complicated by his discussion of Paul's material understanding of the *pneuma*, a concept that Thiessen acknowledges was shared by Stoics and supported by Aristotle, who linked *pneuma* to *aether* as "indivisible, unchanging, eternal" (p. 107). Thiessen's frequent engagement with Greek philosophers raises questions about whether Paul was entirely Jewish in his thinking. Is Paul a Jewish theologian in Greek clothing? To what extent is Paul's theology genuinely Jewish, and how much of it is influenced by Greek philosophical language and concepts? Thiessen's ambiguous handling of this issue weakens his argument for Paul's thorough Jewishness. Additionally, Thiessen is unclear about the body metaphor in 1 Cor 12, seemingly applying it to different flesh-and-blood bodies (with different ethnicities) in the Messiah, while Paul likely used it to explain God's varied gifts for the church.

Overall, *A Jewish Paul* is a compelling and thought-provoking work that offers a fresh perspective with a different approach to Paul's identity and relationship to Judaism. It contributes significantly to the ongoing scholarly efforts to reframe Paul within his Jewish context and challenges readers to reconsider traditional interpretations. This book is particularly beneficial for students and scholars of early Christianity, Jewish-Christian relations, and New Testament studies, as well as anyone interested in the historical and theological complexities of Paul's identity and theology.

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