



BOOK REVIEW

Matthew Thiessen, *A Jewish Paul: The Messiah's Herald to the Gentiles*

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Donghyun Jeong

Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Austin, TX, USA (djeong@austinseminary.edu)

A Jewish Paul is a concise but solid introduction to Paul that focuses on one question: 'How does Paul relate to the Judaism ... of his day?' (p. 3). Drawing upon his previous works (e.g. *Contesting Conversion* and *Paul and the Gentile Problem*), Matthew Thiessen adeptly guides readers through 'a way of reading Paul that does not make Judaism into a foil for Christianity and that does not denigrate Jews, the Jewish law, or Judaism to make Paul appear like a hero' (p. 160). Paul was a first-century Jew, living as the Jewish Messiah's herald to the gentiles.

Chapters 1–4 contain Thiessen's methodological presuppositions. In chapter 1, he sets about 'making Paul weird again' to modern readers, by situating Paul in the 'genus of Second Temple Jewish thought' (p. 18). In chapter 2, the author claims that his seemingly radical reading of Paul as a law-observant Jew is in fact an ancient (often neglected) view of Paul, tracing back to the Acts of the Apostles. Chapter 3 examines Jewish diversity, and the various ways Jews relate to gentiles. Chapter 4 connects this diversity to Paul's context, suggesting that before and after his encounter with Jesus, Paul remained within the spectrum of Judaism.

The following chapters are thematically arranged to demonstrate what Paul thought he was doing as a divinely authorised, Jewish envoy to gentiles. Thiessen describes Paul's gentile project: the starting point, the end goal and the key to achieving said goal. Chapter 5 surveys the deprived state of gentiles due to their idolatry that resulted in immorality, whereas chapter 6 discusses Paul's messianism and what Paul hopes for gentiles (i.e. their full participation in the Abrahamic promises). The crucial question is, How is this possible? Since gentile circumcision is not a circumcision performed on the eighth day as required by covenant, it is merely a 'cosmetic surgery' in Paul's view; it cannot convert gentiles into Jews (chapter 7). The genuine solution for gentiles is 'pneumatic gene therapy' (chapter 8). Paul teaches his gentile audience that the Messiah's *pneuma* (brought by faith) is the right way for gentiles to become Abraham's seed.

From chapter 8 onward, the author details some of the important assumptions shared by scholars who read Paul through the lens of the material *pneuma* (as fine matter) in Stoicism. Chapters 9–12 explore further implications of the interpenetration between the divine *pneuma* and the gentiles. Chapter 9 presents various embodiments of the Messiah to help one understand Paul's notion of the *ekklēsia* as the Messiah's body. Chapter 10 discusses how *pneuma*-infused gentiles are now able to live a moral life, and chapter 11 envisages their future resurrection/transformation into a

pneumatic body, i.e. a body consisting of the 'best matter' (*pneuma*). Chapter 12 ponders what this would mean for Jews (and not only for gentiles) in the end.

This book has many good attributes. While many recent monographs, edited volumes and articles have successfully situated Paul within his first-century Judaism, readers have been waiting for an accessible introduction to Paul that incorporates these insights. Thiessen's book meets the expectations, presenting a coherent and intelligible construct that readers can use to make sense of Paul 'without the common anti-Jewish baggage' (p. xi). Also, the author's attempts to discover early readings of Paul that resonate with his interpretation invites further interdisciplinary study. Finally, the author's vivid writing style, including ingenious examples and his personal anecdotes, is engaging and enlightening.

A few suggestions can be made. First, I am unconvinced by his use of Stoic physics for unpacking Paul's thought. For example, it is unlikely that *sōma pneumatikon* means a body solely made up of *pneuma*, unless one demonstrates *sōma psychikon* is a body consisting of *psychē* as matter, both for Stoics and for Paul. Second, the prevalent use of modern scientific analogies, such as the infusion of the *pneuma* as 'gene therapy' and 'moral steroids', is a double-edged sword. Despite his intention to 'make Paul weird again', to 'let Paul speak his own' and to avoid anachronism, Thiessen's analogies modernise Paul. Since the author admits that it is hard to 'shed [our modern] expectations' (p. 2), why not engage a more dialogical hermeneutical model than that of 'historical paleontology' (p. 17)?

Due to the book's focus, it lacks some material that one might expect to see in newer introductions to Paul, such as the political implications of Paul's messianic ambassadorial work within the context of the Roman empire, or the social-historical realities of Paul's communities, or the new rituals performed in the Messiah's name, or Paul's 'others' and their unheard voices. However, this book does not pretend to be comprehensive. In his conclusion, Thiessen predicts that readers might raise several 'what abouts', and he modestly notes, 'I am merely *introducing* readers to a particular approach to Paul, not providing a definitive defense of it' (p. 161). Despite possible criticisms, Thiessen's contributions will remain. His particular approach and provocative insights will undoubtedly inspire many scholars and general readers to freshly engage Paul's letters.

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