

BOOK REVIEW

Runesson, Anders, *Divine Wrath and Salvation in Matthew: The Narrative World of the First Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016). xxxii + 544 pp. Hbk. \$99.00

Runesson views Matthew as a Jewish, rather than Christian, text. Matthew is thus a Jewish writer dealing with Jewish questions, exhibiting traits of the Hebrew prophets in the Tanakh and qualities found in Tannaitic and Rabbinic literature. The monograph is divided into two main sections, the first one dealing with the judgment of Jews and the latter with the judgment of the nations. Runesson primarily employs a narrative approach to the Gospel, and he fundamentally views it in light of E.P. Sanders' notion of 'covenantal nomism'. Runesson's main interlocutors are David Sim, Nathan Eubank, Blaine Charette and Ulrich Luz. The book's main focus on judgment is supposed to lead one to appreciate 'Matthew's theological pattern' (p. 25), which retains a distinction between Jews and other peoples. Matthew's theological pattern culminates in the command to make disciples of all nations, which means making all nations 'adhere to the Jewish law in every detail' (p. 34).

In Chapter 1, Runesson deals with the timing of different judgments as well as the idea that rewards and punishments are dependent on 'works of the law' (p. 42). The author distinguishes between rewards and punishments in this world, the final judgment and the world to come. Chapter 2 treats the subject of judgment in this world and how people are granted access into the coming kingdom, or world to come. Runesson goes on to say that Jesus does not intend to overthrow or abolish the law, but rather to properly interpret and implement it around the principles of justice, mercy and faithfulness. The law is thus still in effect and remains the standard by which judgment is dispensed. In this Matthean system of judgment, guilt and unrighteousness are the reasons Jesus has to save the Jews from their sins. Jesus thus has to die a sacrificial death because the Jewish leaders, in the past and present,

have stored up a 'critical mass' of unatoned sin/guilt, which means that God cannot dwell with his people and that the defiled temple has to be destroyed (p. 91).

Repentance is a key motif in Matthew's Gospel, and the kingdom will not be a reality for those who do not repent and receive forgiveness. John's baptism of water in Matthew does not bring forgiveness but purifies the believer so he or she can draw near the altar without defiling it and there present his or her sacrifice. Runesson argues that the sins of the people have caused God to depart from the temple (Mt. 23.28), thus leading to its inevitable destruction. Consequently, the temple is not destroyed because of Jesus' death; rather, Jesus dies to be the atoning sacrifice for his people because the temple has already been defiled and condemned and therefore cannot serve as a place of atonement.

Runesson argues that Jesus and the Jewish law are the criteria of judgment. The criterion of Jesus in this regard is meant to be one of imitation; only those who imitate Christ, including a willingness to die, are worthy of the kingdom. In the final judgment, it is one's acknowledgment of and loyalty to Jesus that must be expressed in obedience to the law as interpreted by Jesus. In relation to judgment and salvation, the author suggests a distinction between rewards and salvation, the latter always being called 'inheritance'.

Chapter 3 begins with a treatment of the main groups depicted in Matthew, namely Gentiles and Jews, as well as other subgroups within Judaism. Runesson argues that not all of Israel is judged in Matthew, but specifically the leaders of the people. The Matthean Jesus opposes the Jewish religious leaders' teachings, which seem to abuse the power of public institutions and disenfranchise the marginalized in society. It is important to understand that Matthew holds different groups responsible for different types of sins, and it is clear that the subgroups of the elders, Pharisees, chief priests and scribes are responsible for Jesus' death, not the entire people of Israel. One should thus be careful not to say categorically that Israel rejects Jesus in Matthew's Gospel.

The author further deals with Israel and Jews when he notes that the Gospel of Matthew depicts an *intramuros* debate of *halakhah*, meaning that the Gospel itself does not signify a parting of the ways. According to this Gospel, Pharisees do not keep the law strictly enough, which emphasizes that sin is breaking the Torah and not a power/condition as in Pauline literature. Importantly, the author notes that divine judgment

is not the destruction of Jewish leadership, but rather the replacement of corrupt Jewish leadership with new righteous Jewish leadership.

Runesson begins Part 2 of the book by reemphasizing Matthew's Jewish narrative world and how it is mainly concerned with Jewish groups and with maintaining Jews as the people of God. The author investigates whether or not Gentiles are judged and rewarded based on the same criteria as Jews, and he argues that the word *ethnos* is often used as a negative term in the narrative and therefore that Matthew shows a Gentile-negative bias. Gentiles are called to serve the God of Israel the way Jewish Jesus did, which means there is no distinction between Jews and Gentiles in post-resurrection Matthew. The author underlines that Jesus' interpretation of the law represents Judaism to its fullest and shows how it was 'meant to be' (p. 351).

Based on Runesson's notion of characters and groups, one should not take the good minority sample of Gentiles and compare them to the bad minority groups among the Jews (Pharisees and their scribes) to determine the general Matthean outlook on Jews and Gentiles. Doing so presents an invalid comparison, because the majority of Gentiles are viewed as impure and unrighteous, whereas the majority of Jews (the crowds) are viewed favorably.

Runesson argues that 'salvation reaches beyond ethnicity and categorization as God's people' (p. 372), and when he deals with salvation and mission, he proposes three kinds of missions that the disciples could be commissioned to do according to Matthew 28. Runesson argues that the Great Commission is an instance of what he calls 'proselytizing mission', which includes circumcision of the Gentiles and full entrance into the original Jewish group. Another option is 'Ethno-Ethic mission', which does not require others to embrace the Torah in its totality, but merely in its ethical dimensions. Finally, the author defines 'Inward Mission' as a group's attempt to influence the behavior/worship of the larger group to which they all belong.

For Runesson, Jesus' post-resurrection endowment of 'all authority in heaven and earth' (Mt. 28.18) provides a watershed moment in the narrative, pushing believing Gentiles to move past their status as righteous because the Jewish Messiah now rules over everything. Since Jesus now rules over all, the nations must fully adapt to Jewish law within the Mosaic covenant and 'become Jews in order to be among the saved' (p. 413).

I consider Runesson to have written an insightful book that merits close attention from those interested in New Testament and Jewish studies and the Gospel of Matthew in particular. Runesson expertly employs narrative criticism to investigate various Matthean themes, plots, group identities and social dynamics. This is a welcome contribution to the field, and Runesson uses these tools in order to renounce emphatically many of the pernicious anti-Jewish sentiments that scholars and laypeople have derived from Matthew's Gospel throughout history. Runesson's interpretative solution to the Jewishness of Matthew, along with his view of the law and Gentile inclusion, succeeds in avoiding anti-Jewish elements while perhaps creating an unnecessary anti-Gentile bias.

Runesson is to be commended for his insistence that we pay attention to the message of Matthew, namely the teachings of Jesus, rather than merely focus on Jesus' identity. Another positive aspect of Runesson's work is his careful explanation of how Jesus functions as an atoning sacrifice in light of the temple's defilement. The insistence on understanding Matthew from within a Jewish framework is to be welcomed, yet we must remember that Runesson presents *a* Jewish interpretation, but not *the* Jewish interpretation, of Matthew. While we should welcome Runesson's interpretation, there are several other possible and plausible ways of interpreting the text from a Jewish perspective.

I found that Runesson's rather sporadic anti-Pauline references often deter from his narrative approach to the Gospel and sometimes even distract the reader from the book's main thesis. While Runesson says we must not impose Pauline ideas on Matthew, we also should not read anti-Pauline sentiments into the text. Matthew clearly did not have a problem haranguing the Pharisees, and one wonders why he would not explicitly mention Paul or some of Paul's writings if he wanted to take issue with him. In response to Runesson's anti-Pauline view of sin, we must seriously consider the notion that the Sermon on the Mount (esp. Mt. 5.21-28) reveals a deeper sinful condition in people. Further, given Runesson's interaction with Eubank, it is puzzling why he cannot conceive of Israelite debt/sin as a condition from which liberation is needed (see Mt. 18.23-35). It is difficult to refute the assertion that passages such as 9.1-8, 10-12 and 17.17 portray sin as a condition, and Runesson does not adequately deal with the pertinent passages that appear to work against his position. The author does not argue his

position well enough, and there is no reason why sin in Matthew cannot be both the breaking of the Torah and a power/condition. Runesson presents a false dichotomy, and his argument therefore fails to convince.

I wonder why Runesson insists on a ‘proselytizing mission’ that includes circumcision (p. 378) even though it is hardly supported by the text. The Matthean Jesus extends mercy to the Canaanite woman based on her *pistis*, acknowledging her participation in the world to come (Mt. 15.21-28). Why would this general outlook be thwarted? While Runesson hints that the genealogy indicates proselytization, I find it ironic that those proselytes are all women, which means they are not circumcised. The fact remains that Jesus commissions his disciples to teach the nations to ‘observe all that I commanded you’ (Mt. 28.20) and that Jesus nowhere commands anyone to be circumcised. Runesson assumes that circumcision is what ‘making disciples’ means, but this is an argument from silence. We must accept that we do not know what making disciples of the nations entails ritually, other than baptism (Mt. 28.19).

Part of the problem, as I see it, is based on the author’s implicit premise that in his first mission to the Jews, in ch. 10, Jesus emphasizes a law-observant message that is then carried over into ch. 28. But even if we assume a law-observant mission to the lost sheep of Israel and not one reinterpreted around mercy, why would we assume that the mission to the nations should likewise include law observance? The mission in ch. 28 is to another people group, and we may thus reasonably assume two different missions in Matthew. One can make sense of Runesson’s proposal only if one presupposes that salvation can come only through the Mosaic covenant, which was made exclusively to Jews. This raises the question of whether or not the covenant and entrance into the kingdom change with Jesus’ interpretation of the Jewish Scriptures.

Although Matthew is not a systematic theological treatise, we may suitably look for interpretations that make sense theologically. In light of Matthew’s introductory chapters and how pre-conversion Gentiles are treated, how exactly does the narrative warrant the change that Runesson suggests takes place in Mt. 28.18? One answer would be that it does not. I question how we can make sense of Runesson’s proposal in light of the good Gentile believers and the message to the nations in Mt. 12.18-21. These passages say nothing about Gentiles becoming Jews. Runesson does not adequately address Matthew’s allusions to

Isaiah, and when he does address them, he assumes Gentiles must be part of the Jewish covenant and keep the Torah. Given Matthew's frequent use of the Old Testament, I wonder if Matthew's allusions to Isaiah 40–58 do not indicate that Gentiles come to God as Gentiles and remain Gentile worshippers of the God of Israel. What are we to make of the use of Isa. 56.7 in Mt. 21.3? It is difficult to ignore the motif of Gentile inclusion in Isaiah, yet Runesson fails to address the matter in much detail.

While Runesson's interpretation is possible, it seems strained to suggest that so much of what Matthew has done in treating Gentiles exhibiting *pistis* is overturned solely because of 28.18. On a broader level, one also wonders why the earliest Jewish believers in Jesus would have welcomed Matthew as an authoritative text and eventually included it in the canon if it essentially contradicts Luke–Acts and Paul. While Runesson seeks to overthrow traditional Christian readings by his Jewish interpretation, we must acknowledge that other Jewish readings are available. Sanders' framework is not the only Jewish one, and I consider Runesson's lack of engagement with Jewish apocalyptic traditions and lack of a thorough definition of 'apocalyptic' (it is most often used synonymously with 'eschatological') to be sorely missing elements.

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