

BOOK REVIEW

James W. Thompson, *Moral Formation according to Paul: The Context and Coherence of Pauline Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011). xv + 256 pp. Pbk. US\$24.99.

James Thompson, in partnership with Baker Academic, has released another volume that may be accurately described as a ‘cross-over book’—the first was his *Pastoral Ministry according to Paul*. Such volumes are meant to reflect current issues in scholarship and careful and robust research, yet engage topics that can be of interest to a more pastoral audience. *Moral Formation according to Paul* fits this description well as it is fundamentally a book on Pauline theology (or at least Pauline ethics), and is easily applicable to inherently pastoral concerns. Thompson’s volume reflects certain trends in Pauline scholarship that seek to locate Paul within his Jewish socio-cultural milieu, a practice often at odds with older attempts to read a Paul who is heavily influenced by Greek philosophical thought. As such, a consistent thread within this volume is the appeal to particular Jewish texts that grew out of Diaspora Judaism.

Thompson argues that minority communities must develop particularized practices so as to maintain their social identity. This is an important feature of early Christianity, especially as exemplified in Pauline moral instruction. Pauline attitudes in this vein have an important antecedent in Hellenistic Judaism. In his first main chapter, then, Thompson briefly articulates the early Hellenistic Jewish attitudes as exemplified in select early Jewish literature. The chapter develops through a survey of key texts including Philo’s *Hypothetica*, Josephus’s *Against Apion*, *Tobit*, *4 Maccabees*, *Wisdom of Solomon* and *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*. Each of these texts reveals how certain Jewish thinkers understood the intersection of Jewish and Gentile culture. Writers often implicitly relate their ethical judgment to the Torah—Thompson is clear that writers seldom *quote* the Torah—though the adoption of Greek values is present as well. Jewish ethical teaching is an important ante-

cedent to Paul's own thought, and Thompson does well to devote a chapter to it. The question remains whether or not these texts are truly representative of Jewish ethical attitudes, especially conduct, by the time of the first century, or whether these are simply idealized pictures within a particular tradition.

Moving beyond the Bultmannian distinction of indicative–imperative in Pauline ethical description, Thompson prefers to conceive of Pauline ethics according to *identity* and *ethos*. These concepts, borrowed from recent trends in anthropology, imply that the *ethos* of a community is inherently derived from its social identity. Thus, in Chapter 2, Thompson seeks to provide insight into how Paul shapes the identity of early Christian communities. Thompson illustrates this mainly from examples in the Corinthian correspondence and suggests that the vocabulary of Pauline identity formation is derived from the Jewish Scriptures. For example, Thompson suggests that the description of the Corinthian Christian's affair with his 'father's wife' is a purposeful invocation of the Levitical Holiness code. This vocabulary contrasts with 'the usual Greek term for stepmother (*mētryia*)' (pp. 47-48). Thompson goes on to explicate social metaphors used by Paul to describe the church that come directly from Old Testament social metaphors. The metaphors, such as temple, priesthood, family, etc., serve to articulate in-group and out-group dynamics, as well as appropriate conduct that corresponds with the metaphor. Thus, Paul can appeal to Philemon to accept Onesimus due to the Christian fraternal metaphor.

In Chapter 3, Thompson uses 1 Thessalonians as a model of how epistolary correspondence is used to maintain catechetical continuity. First Thessalonians functions as a third-order ministry tool that follows Paul's direct presence in conversion and instruction, as well as the sending of Timothy in the early stages of the church's existence. For Paul, ethics is communal and formulated again in kinship terms. The ethics of the community is contrasted to the conduct of the out-group, particularly Gentiles. Thompson highlights the faith, hope and love triad present throughout this letter (it is also present in other Pauline texts, particularly 1 Corinthians), and situates Paul's language in that of the Septuagint. While community identity is important to the moral formation of the Thessalonian church, Thompson rightly articulates the divine dimension as well, as it is made explicit starting in 1 Thessalonians 4. In keeping with Jewish tradition, Paul joins together divine agency and human obedience, manifested in the metaphor of 'walking'

(which Thompson also notes in Chapter 2). The sanctification of believers, and thus their moral progression, is intimately connected to God's will. At this point, Thompson addresses ethical issues as they appear chronologically: sexual ethics, brotherly love and the expression of love. For Thompson, 1 Thessalonians serves as a rubric for the reiteration of ethical catechesis that has striking similarities to Diaspora Judaism. Thus, as Thompson writes, 'The community's moral behavior is the expression of its identity within Israel's narrative world' (p. 86).

Vice and virtue lists make up an important part of Pauline ethical discourse and also have analogues in Greco-Roman literature. Thompson devotes an entire chapter to this issue. He immediately acknowledges the extensive use of such lists among the moral philosophers, identifying typical conceptions of what constitutes vice and virtue. However, Thompson is quick to point out that while the form of the lists appears similar to Greco-Roman practice, the content of these lists (contra Betz) is somewhat divergent, especially considering that the Greek cardinal virtues are consistently absent in Pauline instruction. Rather than simply appealing to the moral conventions of the time, Thompson argues that, while Paul maintains the Greco-Roman form, many of the specific virtues or vices have Jewish antecedents. Especially compelling is Thompson's point that Paul's virtue and vice lists often appear in contexts where the Christian community is being differentiated from Gentile communities. Even so, it is difficult at times to negotiate Paul's 'source' when specific virtues and vices occur among both the Jewish and Greco-Roman moralists. This tension is mediated somewhat by the end of the chapter. Thompson sees Paul's instruction as an arbitrator amidst mixed (Jew and Gentile) churches that take from either tradition and are fundamentally concerned with relationships within the community—an important Pauline distinctive.

Chapter 5 engages the relation between Paul's moral instruction and his attitudes towards the Jewish law. Two main issues surface throughout the various sections of this chapter: Paul's attitude toward law-keeping and Paul's use of Scripture in his ethical prescriptions. Thompson views Paul's statement in 1 Cor. 7.19—that 'circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but keeping the commandments of God is everything'—as programmatic of his moral instruction. Thompson works through any apparent interpretive tension by suggesting that Paul expects Christian communities to keep the law, except for those commands that serve as Jewish social boundary markers (food laws,

Sabbath, and circumcision). In Thompson's mind, this seems to account for the occasions that Paul has negative feelings towards the law (especially in Romans and Galatians), and Paul's use of the law (through quotations and allusions) at other points in his letters. The most significant portion of this chapter is Thompson's comments on sexual ethics and gender roles in Rom. 1.18-32/1 Cor. 11.2-16. Here Paul appeals to 'nature' and portions of the law as the basis for his injunctions, the former being primarily a Stoic strategy. Thompson suggests that this combination has precedent within Diaspora Judaism—particularly in Philo—as the Torah is seen to be consistent with God's general revelation in nature.

Overcoming the passions is an important issue in ancient ethical discourse, as Thompson observes in Chapter 6. He begins by identifying the various trends in Jewish and Greco-Roman thought in order to provide a backdrop to Paul's own answer to this question. Greco-Roman philosophical schools were not unified in their answer, though the application of reason to overcome the passions was a common thread throughout. On the other hand, Judaism's answer to the passions was correct obedience to the law. Thompson does point out, however, that some Diaspora Jewish texts, such as *4 Maccabees*, viewed reason in conjunction with the law as an appropriate counter against the passions. Paul's anti-passion strategy is divergent from both these traditions in two major ways. Contra Jewish and Greco-Roman thought, Paul's appears to be pessimistic as to whether humans can overcome the passions. Consequently, Paul sees the need for divine agency, specifically via the indwelling of the Spirit, to aid humanity in this attempt. Thus, entrance into the Christian community through baptism strictly demarcates the old life and the new; the new life is characterized by moral progression away from the passions. As Thompson consistently remarks throughout the volume, the law continues to play a part in this aspect of the moral life, again minus the social boundary markers of Judaism.

In Chapter 7, Thompson deals with the Pauline love ethic. One of the primary ways in which Paul distinguishes himself from the moralists is in his use of *agapē* rather than any of the other vocabulary choices at his disposal. Thompson then proceeds to investigate this theme in crucial love-centered passages. Love plays an important role in the central chapters of 1 Corinthians; its practical outworking is an important counter to potentially divisive issues such as meat sacrificed to idols

and abuses of spiritual gifts. In the latter chapters of Romans, Paul's attempts to unite Jews and Gentiles culminate in particular community-centered ethical injunctions that are generally characterized by sacrificial love. Such recommendations have implications for relations with outsiders as well. While Thompson is quick to identify similarities with Jewish ethical teaching, especially in terms of vocabulary, he does highlight the importance of Christ's example in the Pauline love ethic: Christ's sacrificial death becomes programmatic.

Thompson's final chapter engages the Pauline ethical tradition reflected in the disputed Pauline Epistles. Except for a brief but judicious footnote, Thompson is not overt regarding his opinions of the authorship of these letters. However, he does treat them as a new and developing stage in the Pauline ethical tradition in which there are new issues to be addressed. The chapter is well placed, especially since, as Thompson notes, the topic of moral formation has been a significant point of departure for authorship debates. Holiness and the household code are important features of Colossians and Ephesians. Particularly in Colossians, metaphors of 'walking' and 'putting-off' are descriptive of the avoidance of vice and the adoption of virtue. As with his discussion of vices and virtues earlier in the book, Thompson notes similarities between the Pauline tradition and the Decalogue and Jewish Wisdom literature. The treatment of the household code is divided between the search for its origin (it does not appear in the authentic letters) and the implications for family relationships. Thompson does well to note that Christ's example is occasionally appealed to regarding specific instructions (e.g. the husband-wife relationship). With respect to the Pastorals, Thompson sees the greatest amount of discontinuity from the authentic letters. This is reflected especially in the expansion of household codes. Consistent comparison to Jewish texts is seen throughout this chapter, though Thompson does identify that Christ has replaced the Torah as the content of teaching. This chapter is followed by a brief conclusion that sums up Thompson's basic arguments and provides some brief recommendations and observations regarding the contemporary applicability of the Pauline ethical tradition.

Thompson's assertions are generally well argued and, although this work toes the line between scholarly monograph and popular-level pastoral aid, they reflect a depth of research. Perhaps my biggest concern is one that could be directed at contemporary Pauline studies in general; there is a concerted effort among Pauline scholars to situate Paul within

his particular socio-cultural milieu. Authors like Malherbe and Engberg-Pedersen have done well to relate Paul to his Greco-Roman moralist counterparts, and here, Thompson has attempted to tease out the relationship between Paulinism and Diaspora Judaism. While I appreciate this effort, I wonder to what extent studies like this, which emphasize particular similarities and analogies, fail to fully appreciate Paul as a creative and paradigm-shifting thinker. The nagging question I am left with is whether Paul is truly a Christian ethicist (the first one?), or whether he is just another run-of-the-mill Jew, spiced with some Greek tendencies? That is, is Paul merely one more voice within the Diaspora Jewish milieu or, while firmly situated within this line of thinking, does he trace a new or developing ethical path? I suspect that if Thompson had made more of an effort to address the impact of the Christ Event in Paul's ethical thought, these questions may have been more thoroughly addressed. Perhaps such questions would have detracted from Thompson's thesis, and, indeed, Thompson does not ignore the Christ Event. Regardless, I see this as a pressing concern. Even with these questions left unanswered, *Moral Formation according to Paul* is a worthwhile read for those who wish to learn more about the role of Diaspora Jewish thought in Paul, and especially those pastors and students with an interest in Christian ethics.

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