Review of Judaism, Jewish Identities and the Gospel Tradition: Essays in Honour of Maurice Casey

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Maurice Casey is known for investigating the Jewish and especially Aramaic-language context of Jesus and the gospels. This volume honors Casey’s work with ten essays by nine authors, plus a Preface containing brief personal reflections by C.K. Barrett. If the book’s title seems to signal a special concern for matters of identity – a topic of major interest in contemporary scholarship – this reflects primarily an interest brought to the collection by the editor rather than a recurring focus in the actual essays (see Crossley’s lengthy introduction, “Identity, Judaism, and the Gospel Tradition” [pp. 3–42]). While the studies presented here might have implications for “Judaism” and “Jewish identities,” the essays are for the most part concerned simply to identify Jewish contexts that illuminate the canonical gospels.

Among the best essays is George Brooke’s “Eschatological Wisdom and the Kingship of God: Light from Some of the Dead Sea Scrolls on the Teaching of Jesus?” (pp. 45–61). Brooke opens with a brief methodological statement about comparison of the New Testament with the Dead Sea Scrolls that all would do well to consider when comparing the former with anything. Eschewing both an apologetic emphasis on difference (“to protect the uniqueness … of the early Christian project”) and a “too enthusiastic” move from observations of similarity to assertions of sameness, Brooke endorses an approach that tracks both similarity and difference for the purpose of “mutually illuminating” comparison (p. 45). The essay then identifies, albeit in a preliminary way, one particularly promising such comparison: the framing of wisdom instruction with reference to a divine kingdom that is simultaneously eschatological and presently accessible both in the Jesus tradition and in 4Q Instruction and Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice.

Two of the essays build closely on Casey’s work. Bruce Chilton reconstructs what he calls the “original wording” (p. 74) of the Lord’s Prayer in order to show that Aramaic retroversions of Jesus traditions can shed light not only the meaning of words but on the structure of larger units of discourse (“The Aramaic Lord’s Prayer” [pp. 62–82]). Mogens Müller (“Quotation, Concept, or ? The Expression ‘Son of Man’ in the Gospels” [pp. 83–94]), observing that “the Danielic [Son of Man] saying is never explicitly quoted in the New Testament” (p. 83), draws a subtle distinction between “imagery” and “concept” in order to argue that Tertullian was “the first to clearly endow the expression Son of man in the Gospels with a distinct Danielic content … making it signal the presence of a messianic concept” (p. 89).

Andrew R. Angel (“God Talk and Men’s Talk: Jesus, Tarfon and Ishmael in Dialogue” [pp. 95–117]) fruitfully compares Matt 5:27–30 with a Talmudic discussion of Leviticus 15 to show that the former’s reference to the “right hand” that “causes you to stumble” is likely a witty reference to masturbation. Roger David Aus compiles rabbinic parallels to various elements of the parable of the Prodigal Son to show how they interrelate (“Poverty, Hunger, Going Barefoot, and Homesickness in Lk. 15.11–32 [pp. 174–85]”). Catrin H. Williams offers a very illuminating study of the Fourth Gospel’s interest in Isaiah by situating it in early Jewish discussion of the tensions between Isaiah 6:1 and Exodus 33:20 about the possibilities of “seeing God” (“Seeing the Glory: The Reception of Isaiah’s Call-Vision in Jn 12.41” [pp. 187–206]).

A couple of essays get closer to the issue of identity. Wendy E.S. North examines the Fourth Gospel’s characteristic use of “asides” as a new entrée into problems of its literary construction of “the Jews,” concluding (remarkably) that the author’s intention was “to promote his own group as an alternative and authentic form of Judaism” (“The Jews’ in John’s Gospel: Observations and Inferences” [pp. 207–26]). A second essay by Crossley (“Mark’s Christology and a Scholarly Creation of a Non-Jewish Christ of Faith”) adduces a “propaganda model” developed by Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman to argue that “scholarship has imposed its own notions of Christian identity on to Mark” thereby reading
into it a non-Jewish Christ (p. 119). In a similar vein, Daniel Cohen – postulating “just for the sake of an alternative reading” a Galilean Jewish audience for Mark (p. 152) – argues that such an audience would have taken the story of the Gerasene demoniac not as the beginning of a Gentile mission, but as an indication that Jesus purges the unclean from Israel’s land (“The Gerasene Demoniac: A Jewish Approach to Liberation before 70 CE” [pp. 152–73]).

The reader who picks up this volume expecting to find sustained analysis of the gospels in light of contemporary discussions of Jewish identity will be disappointed. Those who are simply interested in the broader question of Jewish contexts for the Gospels, however, will find worthwhile reading.

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