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The Antithesis of the Ages: Paul's Reconfiguration of Torah

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CBQ webpage at <http://cba.cua.edu>.

In this revised Marquette dissertation, directed by Carol Stockhausen at Marquette University, Davis seeks to recast the traditional perception of Paul's polarization of the Torah and Christ in terms of an inherent antithesis of history ("this age") and eschatology ("the age to come"). In the early chapters he investigates the role of Wisdom and Torah in biblical and in Second-Temple literature in order to construct a context for interpreting Paul's view of the Torah. In the balance, he applies his conclusions to three Pauline texts understood to express this antithesis. By concentrating on the link he perceives between Paul's rejection of "eternal Torah theology" and its replacement with Christ—thereby allowing Paul to reconfigure the place of Torah apart from those elements—D. wants to offer a new way to construe the "Paul-and-Torah riddle."

Davis begins with an investigation of the figuration of Torah as personified Wisdom in Proverbs 1—9, especially 8:22-31, and the projection of Torah into the primordial narratives in the biblical to rabbinic traditions. The discussion includes Sirach 24; Bar 3:9—4:4; and *I Enoch* 37—71. D. discusses the theological concept of “eternal Torah,” including the ambiguities explored by various Jewish interpreters, e.g., the differences imagined to exist between the two sets of Mosaic tablets, the significance of the Qumran *Temple Scroll*, the visionary wisdom of *I Enoch*, and the secret books of 4 Ezra 14. In D.’s view, “in different ways each claims to have access to a source of wisdom superior to the Mosaic Torah” (p. 116). This makes for very interesting reading, and D.’s exegetical skills are evident throughout.

For Davis, Paul aligns primordial Wisdom and the eschatological Word with Christ, in contrast to the Sinai Torah, which is limited to this age. Paul’s ostensibly negative comments about the Torah are understood to clarify that Torah is not, for Paul, what D. has found it to be for other Jewish groups: “eternal,” “cosmic,” or “ontological,” acting as an intermediary or as the Word or Wisdom of God by which the world was created and will be restored. Instead, the anti-Torah rhetoric explains that Gentiles participate in the eschaton that has dawned by way of Christ, not the Torah, since the latter is not the “repository of divine Wisdom.” Each of these interpretive moves is likely to be challenged by specialists on the particular topics and texts, including the proposition that the theological axiom of these traditions is that “Torah was God’s eternal Wisdom,” so that this is what Paul “contradicted,” or that he did so by “replacing Torah with Christ” (p. 116).

Davis denies that Paul “proclaimed Torah’s abrogation [or] assumed its endurance into the eschatological age” (p. 158), but this view conflicts with many other statements, and the overall thrust of his work. Moreover, reference to “Torah” is often made without mention of which Torah is being discussed, causing confusion for this reviewer. For D.’s Paul, the Torah has reached its “end” in Christ, and he notes that “although I see Paul ultimately maintaining a continuity of Torah and Christ, the continuity is of a lesser-to-greater sort—that is, real supersession” (p. 119). The Sinai Torah is terminated in Christ, but the eternal Torah is not. His place in respect to both is the topic of the several Pauline texts D. examines, namely, Romans 9—10, especially 9:33; Galatians 3—4; 2 Corinthians 3. But are not both conceptions of Torah nullified by D.’s Paul with the coming of Christ?

It is surprising to find in this well-researched work, claiming sensitivity to postcritical hermeneutics, the constant judgement of contrary views as “inadequate,” “wrong,” and “fatally flawed,” in contrast to D.’s “real” solutions. Moreover, if things were as “clear” and “certain” as D. often claims, then why are there so many views contrary to his and so many scholars who fail even to give consideration to his approach?

In this reviewer’s opinion, D. has shown not so much a new solution to the traditionally framed polarity of Paul and the Torah as a different way of expressing it. Yet he has written a work full of useful material, with several new twists for the study of Paul and Judaism.