

## **Review**

*Jesus and the Forces of Death: The Gospels' Portrayal of Ritual Impurity Within First-Century Judaism.* By Matthew Thiessen. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020. xi + 256 pp. Hardcover \$39.99. ISBN 9781540961945.

Surely a difficult challenge for those writing a book about the Bible (and Jesus specifically) comes in attempting to make a unique contribution, to say something new, or to overturn long-held interpretations or perspectives. In more ways than one, Thiessen attempts just this feat in this book, which calls readers to examine Jesus more closely within his Jewish context. Specifically, Thiessen's goal is to work against the effort to remove or sanitize Jewish or Old Testament-oriented aspects of Jesus' person and movement, arguing that an accurate understanding of Jesus' significance as portrayed by the gospel writers is impossible apart from a right understanding of how Jews in his time lived and thought.

As the book's subtitle notes, the precise approach that Thiessen takes is an examination of Jesus' interactions with those who were ritually impure. Through this examination, he seeks to overturn the notion that Jesus dismantled the lifeless legalism of first-century Judaism or was opposed to the Jewish purity system. Rather, he argues that the gospels depict Jesus as working within that system and dealing with the source of ritual impurity in those with whom he interacted so they no longer suffered from its consequences. In this way, Thiessen presents a unique reorientation of perspective which considers Jesus as one abiding by and not abrogating his ceremonial context, and as one presented by the gospels as uniquely powerful and holy in eliminating the "forces of death" characterized by ritual impurity.

In the first chapter, Thiessen sets the stage by illustrating how Israel structured its existence around the binaries of holy/profane and pure/impure. He rightly explains how holiness is not the same as purity, nor is the profane equivalent to the impure, and notes that life (everything from speech to space) for an ancient Israelite would have been understood in view of these four characterizations. God's holy presence does not coexist with impurity, and thus Old Testament stipulations were fashioned to be respectful of these distinctions. Still further, he explains the important difference between ritual (unavoidable, associated with substances, not sinful) and moral (avoidable, associated with action, sinful) impurity.

The second chapter discusses Jesus' place within this context, arguing that the gospel writers clearly placed Jesus in this background, nowhere suggesting that he or his family broke with such customs. In this chapter, as throughout the rest, Thiessen's most helpful contribution was his thorough attention to detail in his discussion of the ancient context, appealing to a variety of ancient source material to support his assertions. For example, the second chapter contains an exceptionally helpful discussion of purification

language within Luke's infancy narrative in light of trends in first-century Jewish interpretation of the Pentateuch, as well as notions of purification in other ancient Near Eastern societies.

Chapters three through five describe Jesus' interactions with particular ritual impurities (skin conditions, discharges, and corpses, respectively), highlighting his goal as destroying their source. Thiessen begins with a helpful description of what the Greek word *lepra* would have meant in the first century, laboring to show that it was different (and broader) than what is commonly called leprosy. Thiessen then examines the accounts of Jesus' healings of skin conditions, focusing on Mark 1:40-45. He suggests an intriguing interpretation of Jesus' anger in that passage, arguing that rather than being angry at the condition or the system that excluded him, Jesus is actually angry at the man because of his doubt about whether Jesus wanted to heal his ritual impurity. In this way, Thiessen returns to his original contention, that Jesus was concerned about ritual purity and specifically set out to destroy it.

Thiessen then examines the account of the hemorrhaging woman, offering helpful background and context related to Jewish and other ancient views about women's impurities. He again uses this passage and its background to argue that Jesus was not repudiating the purity system in his interaction with and response to the woman but was working to destroy the long-term impurity that would have resulted in social and spiritual exclusion from the community. He similarly provides a helpful background to Jesus' interactions with dead bodies in the context of the ritual purity system, reviewing the significance of the Matthean and Johannine accounts of the dead being resurrected.

The final two chapters address Jesus' interactions with impure spirits and his actions on the Sabbath. Given a widespread, almost universal first-century belief in demonic spirits among both Jews and pagans, Thiessen rightly notes that the Christian claim of deliverance from demons was particularly important in its context. He explains that while different from physical impurity, pneumatic impurity still belongs among the "forces of death" that afflict people, and were essential to the synoptics' portrayal of Jesus as one embodying God's holiness and power. With respect to the Sabbath, Thiessen examines Jesus' various Sabbath-related controversies, arguing that Jesus again remains consistent with Jewish law regarding the Sabbath, and acts in a way that gives human life precedence over sacred time.

There is much to commend in the book. It succeeds in its purpose of more clearly situating and understanding Jesus within his Jewish context. Where Thiessen shines most is in his frequent reminders of how to see the biblical texts within their own world, rather than from a twenty-first-century perspective that imposes modern ideas about ritual purity onto them. Thiessen certainly shows how the Jewish system has been viewed wrongly, and makes a strong case that Jesus did not intend to oppose it or place himself against it. While Thiessen's conclusions will not convince every reader, the book is commendable for its exceptionally detailed use of ancient sources, as well as

Thiessen's lucid style which renders seemingly esoteric concepts (such as ritual bathing) more understandable. Beyond this, Thiessen's language is careful and fair, in that he is respectful both to the New Testament as scripture and to Jewish history and practices. Even so, Thiessen's work has its share of shortcomings. The book is about ritual impurity, but more indirectly (and perhaps more significantly) it is about the relationship of Jesus and the new covenant to the law and the old covenant. Readers who see the New Testament as abrogating (all or parts of) the Mosaic law will doubtless have problems with Thiessen's approach, as he seems to offer no middle ground between fully appreciating and situating Jesus within his Jewish context while also maintaining that aspects of the law were not intended to continue indefinitely. With respect to this relationship, some readers will find his arguments tenuous and his exegesis lacking.

For example, in an appendix following the conclusion, Thiessen argues that Jesus never rejected kosher food laws and that passages like Mark 7:19 (which suggests this) have been misinterpreted. In his view, Mark 7:19 only refers to the tradition of handwashing and the wrongheaded idea that a ritually impure person can defile food through touch. His analysis, however, fails to take into account Pauline texts (such as Romans 14:13-23) suggesting this view as original to the early Christians or the testimony of early Church fathers who understood Jesus as saying this. Thiessen's conclusion helps his point (that Jesus did not oppose the ritual purity system) but leaves much to be desired.

Similarly, Thiessen elsewhere comes to conclusions that support his larger argument but require more qualification to be convincing. An example of this is in the final chapter, where he claims that in the grain-picking episode, Mark both made a mistake in referring to Abiathar as the high priest and that Mark left out an additional premise that is implied in Jesus' argument, which Matthew later corrected. In his dismissal of Mark's Abiathar reference, Thiessen fails to reference any alternative interpretations of the passage which could undermine his conclusion (such as Nicholas Perrin's 2013 contribution to *From Creation To New Creation*). Additionally, it is purely conjectural to argue that Mark left out but intended to imply what Matthew later corrected. Some readers will be frustrated by such instances, which result in a few weak conclusions.

Although Thiessen argues in the book's preface that he is not intending to take a side in the endless debates about the historicity of the gospels, the book is noteworthy for its gentle but persistent call for readers to situate the Jesus of the gospels within his historical context. Even though every conclusion in the book is not equally strong, the book is an exceptional resource and a helpful contribution that is careful, detailed, and thorough but manageable in size. Thiessen's work is a reminder to every reader of the New Testament of the care that must be taken in understanding Jesus as a Jew, and that the message and enduring significance of the New Testament cannot truly be

understood and applied without an understanding of the message and enduring significance of the Old Testament.

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