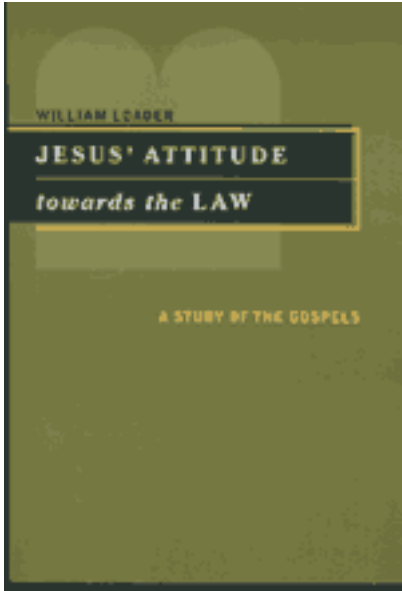


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**Loader, William**

*Jesus' Attitude Towards the Law: A Study of the Gospels*

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002. Pp. x + 563. Paper.  
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*Jesus' Attitude Towards the Law* is a reprint by Eerdmans of the book published by Mohr Siebeck in 1997. I could not find any trace of changes made to this edition by Eerdmans. Nevertheless, I have read this book with great pleasure, not only because of the clarity but also because of the vast amount of information presented and the thoroughness, creativity, and novelty with which a well-known scholar such as Loader treats this information. Although, as Loader indicates, there are studies treating the law in the Gospels, it remains a topic that is largely associated with Paul (as well as with his relation to James). This book by Loader reminds us again of the richness of this theme in the Gospels.

Loader's concern in this book is Jesus' attitude toward the Torah as it is presented in the Gospels. (Loader defines Torah as the laws and provisions within the Pentateuch, seen as a whole. As an expression of God's will it formed the basis of the Jewish identity as the people of God.) He focuses on the Gospels themselves, not being so much concerned with the traditions lying behind the Gospels or with the attitude of the historical Jesus. He approaches the text of each Gospel individually and surveys the ways in which these texts portray an image of Jesus' attitude toward the law. He does not construct inner attitudes but

as a historian investigates what is reflected in the preserved material. In other words, how do the Gospels portray Jesus' attitude toward the law? Although he does not embark on a detailed study into the questions of the pre-Gospel traditions of the attitude of the historical Jesus, he is concerned with the attitude of Jesus toward the law behind the Gospels. In his concluding chapter he has a section that he calls: "Jesus' Attitude towards the Law behind the Gospels—An Approach." He argues that a reconstruction of such an attitude needs to take into account "diverse strands of tradition: the radically humane Jesus; the culturally conservative Jesus; the theologically strict Jesus in issues of morality; the Jesus who is like popular Hellenistic preachers, Jewish and non-Jewish; the Jesus who give priority to ethical behaviours and attitudes above ritual and cultic Law; the Jesus who shares John's eschatology, but claims its partial fulfillment" (523–24).

Loader approaches the theme in an interesting way: by doing a sequential analysis. This means that he does not choose certain important verses or paragraphs ("obvious passages," as Loader calls it) to discuss but moves gradually through the different Gospels, picking up all the references as well as the nuances to the law as they appear, disappear, and reappear in the narrative of the Gospels. This results in discussions on sections where the law is not really mentioned explicitly but where there is implied or contextual information. It does lead to longer and more "commentary-like" discussions, but the results are satisfying. It gives a balanced and nuanced view in which the reader gets the feeling that "you have not missed anything." This approach, of course, might also lead to uneven results where the nuances may be treated on the same level as the direct or even emphasized statements or discussions in the Gospels. Fortunately, Loader keeps the balance and in the end weighs all his material in a responsible and plausible way within the perspective of the whole.

Another plus is the separate discussions of Q, the *Gospel of Thomas*, and the use of the law in the apocryphal Gospels. When he draws his results at the end of the book, the extra nuances that result from these documents make for interesting reading. It widens the total picture.

What is also appealing is the presentation of the material. The chapters start with a discussion on the relevant and available research material up to date. It is not just a matter of mentioning the material but of really discussing the relevant research. Working with texts as Loader does obviously requires constant choices, which inevitably lead to differences of opinion. The fact that Loader pays such thorough attention to the history of research gives the reader a chance to properly evaluate and appreciate the position Loader takes. His opinion is now

part of this chain of research and should be weighed as such, as becomes evident from his syntheses at the end of each discussion.

Loader argues his position from the text of the Gospels. He has the ability to read a text within its historical, social, literary, and grammatical contexts and illustrates that in this book again. He presents his argument with a combination of considerations and presents it in a logical and clear way. He treats a central theme in all four Gospels and some noncanonical material, which obviously means that there will be several points where one could differ from Loader and even take a different direction in one's interpretation. (His own survey on the history of research presents the reader with different options.) Even if one differs from Loader, one would first have to indicate the weaknesses in his argument. For that matter, in presenting his views he is in constant discussion with other views, clarifying his own position. (His bibliography is impressive, and knowledge of these books is reflected in his discussions.)

Loader starts with Jesus' attitude toward the law according to Mark (ch. 1). He divides the Gospel into sections (1:1–3:6; 3:7–6:6; 6:7–8:26; 8:27–10:52; 11:1–13:37; 14:1–16:8) and gives a brief summary after each section. He ends the chapter with "conclusions," where he discusses Jesus' attitude toward the law in Mark. This is the pattern that he follows strictly with all the Gospels. In the case of the Gospel of Luke, he has a section on "Perspectives from Acts." Some of the noncanonical Gospels he discusses are Pox 840, Papyrus Egerton 2, P.Ox. 1224, and the *Gospels of the Nazareans*, the *Ebionites*, *Philip*, and *Peter*. He even discusses John 7:53–8:11 under this heading. The book ends with the appropriate indexes and lists.

His concluding chapter is of particular interest. He compares the different approaches in it and shows that no two Gospels are the same in their approach to Jesus' attitude toward the law. Mark focuses on Jesus' authority in deed and word and his ultimate authority under God. Much of the law is consequently rejected. The concern lies more with love and human relationships under the authority of Jesus. According to Q, Jesus upholds the law entirely and emphasizes its continuing validity. It is therefore interesting to see how Matthew and Luke bring Mark and Q together. Matthew opts for the approach of Q. He even has a place for the cultic and ritual laws. In reworking Mark, Matthew removes all statements disparaging the law and cult. In this way Matthew asserts the continuing validity of the law but does not diminish the authority of Jesus. Luke also opts more for the approach of Q and gives attention to ritual and cultic law, although Acts contains some contrary currents. John's Gospel is distinct but stands closer to Mark. The validity of law is recognized up until the time of the

new. In the new time law and scripture can only witness about Jesus and provide divinely inspired patterns and predictions. The authority in the new time lies with Jesus. In the case of the *Gospel of Thomas*, the law is rejected outright: there is no need for the law.

Loader tries to show how the different concerns of the Gospel writers shape their attitude toward the law: Matthew tries to gain the high ground over against the Pharisaic interpretation of law, while John's presentation reflects a history of a painful separation from the synagogue.

I have briefly summarized these conclusions to illustrate the challenges and insights that this book offers. The analysis of the different Gospels is a monumental work. Having it available in a thorough and well argued form such as this invites researchers to address different questions with new insight, questions such as the unity or diversity of the message of the New Testament, whether or not Christians should obey the law, the significance and role of the situation in formulating the message of Jesus, even today and in cross-cultural situations, and the implications for the authority of Scripture. In addition, why did the second-century church keep all four Gospels and resist a harmony? Were they not aware of the differences, and what are the hermeneutical consequences for today? What was the real attitude of Jesus? Is this the only theological difference between the different Gospels' representations of the attitude of Jesus?

Loader has indeed taken our knowledge a step forward with this provocative and informative book.