

RBL 08/2005

Calvert-Koyzis, Nancy

Paul, Monotheism and the People of God: The Significance of Abraham Traditions for Early Judaism and Christianity

Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 273

London: T&T Clark, 2005.

Pp. xiv + 173. Hardcover. \$115.00. ISBN 0567083780.

Mark D. Nanos
Rockhurst University
Kansas City MO 64110

This investigation of the figure of Abraham in early Jewish and Pauline texts represents a revised version of the author's 1993 dissertation at the University of Sheffield, supervised by Philip R. Davies and Andrew T. Lincoln. In traditional form, the first 60 percent of the research surveys Jewish texts, and the balance applies the conclusions to the interpretation of texts from Paul. The investigation of Jewish texts includes chapters devoted to *Jubilees*, several by Philo, Pseudo-Philo's *Biblical Antiquities*, Josephus's *Antiquities of the Jews*, and the *Apocalypse of Abraham*. The Pauline text chapters are Galatians and Romans, followed by a brief conclusion. The price per page for this volume is remarkable.

Nancy Calvert-Koyzis uses "monotheism" to denote "the doctrine or belief that there is only one God." She cites Larry Hurtado for this language decision and otherwise eschews discussion of the current debates about the appropriateness of the terminology and concepts associated with this language. One of the results of this decision is that she begins from Paul's "*redefinition of monotheism and thereby Abraham*" (3–5, italics added), instead of considering a redefinition of the contemporary scholar's taxonomy and conceptualization of belief in the one God for Paul and other Jews of his period.

Calvert-Koyzis sets out to show that Jewish traditions built around Abraham's rejection of idolatry and turning to faith in the one God provide the basis for understanding Paul's arguments as well as the matters at issue in the communities to which he writes. Rabbinic texts are not discussed because Calvert-Koyzis wants to work with traditions she can be reasonably certain were active for Paul. Moreover, she undertakes to understand these

texts “from the standpoint of Jewish concerns rather than from the standpoint of Pauline categories” (4).

The endeavor to listen to Jewish texts “in their own right” is to be applauded, of course, although one notes here that this introductory language is set already in contrast to “Pauline categories.” Does this language not reveal a working assumption that adumbrates a traditional portrait of the “Christian” Paul of later “Paulinism” with which she will work? From the start can one know that Paul’s categories are not shaped by Jewish concerns, in contrast to the other (Jewish) writings explored? After all, are not the “Pauline” categories to which Calvert-Koyzis refers the product of later (non-Jewish) Christian traditions, which themselves should be subject to criticism, rather than fixed in the traditional ways they have been approached by interpreters? Should not the texts of Paul also be listened to “in their own right,” and not first (and only) in later Christian, bifurcated categories? Should one not at least hypothesize that the Jewish arguments about Abraham and the one God upon which Paul depends might arise because of Jewish concerns that still guide him and his communities? Could they be his and their own, and not simply arise in order to address the categories and concerns he is (supposedly) forced to deal with—and thus to seek to subvert—because they are essential to his supposed Jewish opponents’ arguments?

What Calvert-Koyzis finds in the Jewish texts is that Abraham is the ideal example of a person who forsakes idolatry for faith in the one God, exemplified by obedience to the Mosaic legislation. She discusses the way the figure of Abraham is shaped and used by the various authors to express each one’s rhetorical concerns. In *Jubilees*, Abraham is the ideal Jew, worshiping the Creator God, willing to destroy idols at the risk of losing his life. He is the one who remains faithful to God in the midst of the surrounding Gentile idolaters, even in the midst of other Jews who compromise faith and Torah-observance. He is not seduced by astrological reasoning. The reader is encouraged to suffer persecution to the point of death to remain faithful in the face of the compromises of the Hasmonean period. Philo’s Abraham is the prototypical proselyte, forsaking idolatry expressed in astrological determinism to turn to the one God. Before the Mosaic legislation was given, Abraham observed what it codified as (the only true) natural law, and was himself a living law. Looking to Abraham, the Alexandrian Jews are not to compromise their faith in the one God or observance of Torah, which exemplify the philosophical aspirations of the Gentiles among whom they are tempted to seek Greek citizenship status at the price of practicing civic idolatry, which also would shield them from certain taxes. In *Biblical Antiquities*, Abraham exemplifies a good leader in contrast to bad ones. He stands against idolatry and true to his faith in the one God. He will thus be rewarded according to the covenant God made with him, along with his descendants. The leaders of the people should adopt Abraham’s behavior and resist assimilation to the

surrounding Gentile nations and their practice of idolatry, in this case, the self-serving Romans who rule over them, regardless of the cost. Such idolatry involves abandoning allegiance to God and spurning God's covenant claim to them; it is the root of sin. For Josephus, Abraham exemplifies a Hellenistic philosopher, indeed, the first one to proclaim the one God by means of popular philosophic proofs. Writing for Gentiles, Josephus does not so much condemn idolatry as its presuppositions, which fail to recognize the existence and work of the one Creator God. Any Greek can see that this Jewish viewpoint is reasonable. Abraham's virtuous lifestyle expresses the essence of Torah; he becomes the vehicle for defining the attractiveness of Judaism. The people of God are defined by faithfulness to the one God. Circumcision sets apart those who follow Abraham's example. In the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, Abraham becomes the model for the faithful of Israel who resist idolatry, unlike the priests whom the author portrays as complicit. Ultimately, the people of God are those who resist the idolatrous oppressors (such as the Romans, who destroyed the temple in response to such resistance when mounted). But by keeping hope in the one Creator God, the faithful ones will be vindicated, as was Abraham.

Paul also appeals to the figure of Abraham to identify the people of God. But according to Calvert-Koyzis, Paul does so for different reasons. He seeks to subvert the surveyed Jewish claims that Abraham represents faithfulness to the one God by way of a lifestyle exemplifying Torah-observance. In Galatians, Paul's appeal to Abraham arises because he must counter the claims of his opponents. They appeal to Abraham's obedience to the Torah as concomitant with his faith in the one God to persuade these Christ-believing Gentiles to undertake Torah-observance in addition to faith in order to gain standing as members of God's people (apparently overlooked by Calvert-Koyzis is the implication that Paul warns the addressees that the price of proselyte conversion under consideration involved full Torah-observance thereafter in order to surprise them, which suggests that those he opposes are not teaching Torah-observance, just conversion [cf. 5:3]). Paul argues that God's promise to Abraham that Gentiles would be included in the people of God is being now realized through the inclusion of the Gentiles who believe in Christ without "taking on" Torah. Requiring Gentiles to observe Jewish laws like circumcision and festival days is not in keeping with Abraham's faith in the one God, but a modification thereof, because it means that they become Jews first and thus are not Gentiles who by faith are receiving what was promised. (And yet, is not Paul's argument rather that after having become children of Abraham by faith they are not to later become members of Israel by proselyte conversion, because that would undermine their claim to receipt of the Spirit already by faith in/of Christ?) For Paul, obedience to the law signifies living according to the former era of law, which Calvert-Koyzis analogizes with pagan astrological idolatry of the kind that Abraham rejected instead (based on her interpretation

of 4:8–10). (I have argued that the calendrical reference is to the Roman calendar [drawing on Troy Martin’s work], which is idolatrous. Missing from Paul’s list is the distinctive feature of a Jewish calendar: weeks! If a Roman calendar is in view, this undermines her whole line of argument. Like some of the Jewish texts surveyed, Paul is calling for resistance to [re]turning to the practice of Roman civic cult being urged upon them since they are unwilling to become proselytes and thereby excused. They are, like Christ crucified, and Paul bearing stripes, to pay the price that may be required for this deviance, because now they know the Creator God, or rather, God knows them, and God will provide vindication.) Moreover, Calvert-Koyzis understands the language of 3:19–20 to indicate a plurality of mediators in contrast to Abraham’s encounter with the one God (a reading of Abraham’s encounter with the divine figure[s] in Genesis alone would undermine this contrast; in addition, note that Paul does not write that there are multiple mediators but that a mediator indicates that there are multiple parties and thus competing interests to be mediated, whereas God is one party, with one interest—in all of humanity, whether circumcised or not).

According to the Paul of Calvert-Koyzis, obedience to the Torah is a contradiction of God’s oneness. Those who continue to live and teach Jewish law reject the claim that the promise made to Abraham has been fulfilled in Christ. Consequently, they are excluded from the people of God. So while in Galatians Paul appeals to Abraham’s monotheistic faith, he does so unlike other Jews, for Abraham was righteous apart from acts of Torah, as should be those who believe in Christ, since Torah-observance represents idolatry of the sort that Abraham refused. I do not see where Paul treats Abraham as Torah-observant, as might be important for Jews within other Judaisms engaged in polemics against other Jews (or later, against Christians), and thus nowhere that he treats Torah-observance as analogous to idolatry. Rather, he deals with Abraham as pre-Mosaic legislation, as should be those who join Abraham’s family from among the nations other than Israel, to whom alone the Mosaic covenant applies.

In Romans, Calvert-Koyzis understands Paul to analogize the idolatry of the Gentiles in spite of God’s revelation to all of creation with Jewish Christians’ observance of Torah practices such as Sabbaths and festivals and dietary regulations. When they engage in such activities, ironically, they practice idolatry rather than avoid idolatry as intended, because then Torah-observance is combined with faith in the one God. But faith should instead be the sole criterion for membership. (This interpretation depends upon taking the “weak in faith” to be Christ-believing Jews who are understood to fail to be free of Torah, as Paul is supposed to be, and thus “strong.”) To be persuaded to undertake Jewish practices would be to behave unlike Abraham, although he is upheld by the Jews with whom they interact as the example of both faith and obedience to the Torah. “Paul turns the law, which was formerly a characteristic of God’s people, into the idolatry that God’s

people are now to avoid” (144). I cannot find anything resembling this point in Paul’s language.

The treatment of Abraham by Paul is as the introduction led me to expect. His is not a Jewish approach comparable to (other) approaches of the period but serves as a contrast, a redefinition of terms, indeed, what is better described as emptying them of meaning. Paul mines Jewish texts when forced to in order to express a new and superior religious identity and sensibilities that would hardly make sense to the writers of the (other) Jewish texts examined. This seems to be a Paul who would hardly write that Torah is spiritual (Rom 7:14) or that faith in the one God works through love of the neighbor, which exemplifies the very essence of Torah (Gal 5:6, 13-14), or who would make essential “keeping the commandments of God” (1 Cor 7:19). I do not understand how Calvert-Koyzis’s Paul thought this made sense to Jewish people of his time or how it makes sense of Paul’s language today.