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Calvert-Koyzis, Nancy

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

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This volume offers a judicious and careful treatment of the figure of Abraham in early Judaism and the Pauline texts of Romans and Galatians. A revised doctoral dissertation supervised by Drs. Andrew T. Lincoln and Philip R. Davies and submitted to Sheffield University in 1993, it traces the centrality of Abraham in Second Temple Judaism and his role as a key to how the Jewish people perceived their identity and how the apostle Paul reinterpreted that tradition.

After setting forth the parameters of the discussion in a brief but helpful introductory chapter, the bulk of the ensuing chapters delineate how early Jewish writers employed Abraham as a model figure for Israel in general and as a salutary example by his monotheistic faith in particular. Calvert-Koyzis markedly concentrates on the latter topos, Abraham's singular discovery of the one (and only) God. She avers that New Testament scholars have yet to explore fully the insights that this tradition suggest for Paul's arguments or debates among the early Christian communities in Galatia and Rome (2). Hence, the writer supplies a key rationale for this study.

The five key texts that comprise five of the book's nine chapters were chosen because they provide the most extensive portrayal of Abraham with closest proximity to Paul, spanning roughly 170 B.C.E. to 100 C.E. The rabbinic texts were thereby excluded. A number of scholars have already tilled the soil of Abraham traditions in this corpus of literary works known as "rewritten Bible," as the author duly notes. Yet one largely successful ambition of this effort is its sensitivity to and patient understanding of these

writings from the context of Jewish concerns rather than from the standpoint of Pauline categories. This alone renders it a worthy contribution to biblical scholarship.

The first early Jewish work under review is *Jubilees* in chapter 2. This book portrays the function and significance of the patriarch Abraham as the proclaimer of the One God and the prototype for all in Israel. They would heed his warning against idolatries of those around them, holding true to their representative's monotheistic faith and obedience to God's covenant stipulations.

Chapter 3 discusses Abraham as the philosopher in the works of Philo. As in *Jubilees*, Philo is also seen to use the major tradition about Abraham as the exemplary model who apprehends and seeks after the one true God. Yet unlike *Jubilees*, Philo couches Abraham's thinking in the philosophical language of the day: the One Cause, the Intelligible, and the Creator exist apart from his creation (38). Calvert-Koyzis asks the appropriate question of how Philo's reader is meant to respond to his depiction of Abraham. The answer lies in acquiring a foundational and nonnegotiable monotheistic faith as did Israel's first member.

The author continues to focus upon the traditions of Abraham's association with monotheism and the law in early Jewish literature in Pseudo-Philo's *Biblical Antiquities* (ch. 4). Abraham's most notable functions in this work are, once again, his rejection of idolatry and his trust in the one God (49). In *Biblical Antiquities* one remains within God's covenant and among his true people by following in the footsteps of Israel's first and most illustrious monotheistic ancestor, who renounced assimilation into the pagan cultures around him by refusing to participate in the worship of tangible idols.

In chapter 5, following a succinct introduction to his life and work, the author offers an almost too brief apology for covering only Josephus's *Antiquities of the Jews*. Calvert-Koyzis maintains that the most distinctive element of Josephus's depiction of Abraham is his monotheism. P. Spilbury's extensive recent work on Josephus is quoted approvingly: "The most profound implication of descent from Abraham is that the Jew is a monotheist" (*The Image of the Jew in Flavius Josephus' Paraphrase of the Bible* [TSAJ 69; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998], 92). To her credit, Calvert-Koyzis resists superimposing upon Josephus the familiar script recited in each of the previous texts under investigation, namely, that all those not following after Abraham's monotheistic faith are not or cannot be members of God's people.

The sixth and final chapter on a Jewish "rewritten Bible" document investigates the *Apocalypse of Abraham*. Here, as the first patriarch and true Israelite, Abraham again serves to identify the true people of God as expressly displayed by his salutary behavior

in rejecting idols and believing in the one, Creator God. Calvert-Koyzis further avers that this apocalypticist views rejection of idolatry for monotheism after Abraham's example as "the ultimate and distinctive criterion for those who are faithful to God" (84).

In turning to Paul, the author asks four, partially overlapping questions that she then seeks to answer with detailed analyses of the pertinent passages in Galatians and Romans: (1) How may Paul's opponents in Galatia and the "weak" in Romans have used Abraham to define God's people? (2) Did Paul use or respond to the traditions of Abraham described above, and, if so, how? (3) How does Paul use Abraham to define the identity of God's people in Christ? (4) How does knowledge of popular traditions about Abraham add to our understanding of the changes in identity that Paul perceives are necessary for the people of God in Christ (85–86)?

Chapter 7 commences with discussion of Paul's opponents in Galatia. As documented in a content footnote (see 86, n. 5), the author affirms the general consensus that Abraham is central to Paul's argument in Galatians and to the arguments of his opponents as well. The author employs, among others, J. D. G. Dunn and N. T. Wright to attest to the idea that Paul puts forth a new definition of God's people as it pertains to Abraham no longer on the basis of ethnic distinctions or righteous deeds, but on the basis of his active faith in the one true God. The author appropriately begins discussion of Galatians with Paul's allegory of Sarah and Hagar in 4:21–5:1 because there the apostle confronts most directly the existence of those who are championing law obedience for potential Gentile converts. The writer capably notes here and in the ensuing exegetical analysis of 3:1–14, 15–18, 19–22, 23–29; 4:1–11; 5:1–12 a uniform and striking contrast to the previous Jewish works that set Abraham's monotheistic faith and his works *together*. Instead, Paul depicts Abraham's faith over and against his works, thus engaging Israel's first patriarch in a decidedly new way. Indeed, Paul radically reshapes what it now means to be a descendant of Abraham. The author heightens the contrast yet further by noting a striking irony: obedience to the law is now actually a form of idolatry that God's true people must reject for faith in the one God (113). This observation stems from her earlier publication on the same subject ("Abraham and Idolatry: Paul's Comparison of Obedience to the Law to Idolatry in Galatians 4:1-10," in *Paul and the Scriptures of Israel* (ed. J. Sanders and C. Evans; JSNTSup 83; SSEJC 1; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 222–37, here 172, 174).

Chapter 8 takes up Paul's interpretation of the Abraham traditions in Rom 3:27–4:25; 14:1–15:6, where Abraham is brought to bear on the "weak" and the "strong" in the Roman house churches. Here the author acknowledges the contribution of her mentor's seminal study on Rom 4 with its grasp of the implications Paul's comments had about Abraham for the Romans themselves (A. T. Lincoln, "Abraham Goes to Rome: Paul's

Treatment of Abraham in Romans 4,” in *Worship, Theology and Ministry in the Early Church* (ed. M. J. Wilkins and T. Paige; JSOTSup 87; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), 163–79, here 169–72). After noting the significant verbal similarities between chapter 4 and the latter two chapters of the epistle, the author also cites Lincoln’s summary observation: “Paul signals clearly ahead of time where he stands theologically in the debate in Rome. Abraham does not merely exemplify the Pauline gospel as one who is righteous by faith, but he also joins the debate in Rome on the side of the strong in faith” (137–38). The chapter ends by noting the same irony as discovered in Galatians where those who see themselves as Abraham’s children by virtue of their deeds are, for Paul, those who bring division and ultimately deny their identity as the people of God.

The concluding chapter (ch. 9) draws together in five pages a terse summary of the previous investigation. In early Jewish literature Abraham was the first and consummate example of monotheistic faith. He served to define the true Jew and thereby included or exclude individuals from the people of God (141). The apostle Paul also used the first patriarch to identify who were true members of God’s people. Yet Paul no longer considered Abraham’s nomistic obedience as necessary. On the contrary, Paul reshaped this Jewish paragon of virtue so that he represented the very opposite: Abraham’s righteousness was based on faith in the one God alone, apart from adherence to the Mosaic law. To maintain obedience to Torah became a contradiction of the oneness of God and was contrary to the monotheistic faith of Abraham himself.

As earlier noted, this is a sound and objective handling of an important Jewish tradition and theme that is taken up and reshaped by the church’s earliest theologian. But questions and issues remain. A blunt, unclarified definition of what is meant by the term “monotheism” in one short sentence of the entire book hardly suffices. Perhaps interaction with L. Hurtado’s recent magisterial tome on the subject may have avoided this lacuna (*Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003], cf. esp. 29–53, 204–5 on Jewish monotheism; 528–29, 606–8 on early Christian). In this regard, another helpful work is *One God or Many? Concepts of Divinity in the Ancient World* (ed. B. N. Porter; Bethesda, Md.: CDL, 2000). Some would deem appropriate more discussion or at least more debate on the merits of the rabbinic material and other significant works such as the *Testament of Abraham* that were excluded. Others would wish for discussion, if not critical argument, regarding the conviction that monotheism developed comparatively late within Judaism. Although making the work longer, some engagement with issues of monotheism and the unparalleled innovation of cultic devotion to Christ by the earliest Christian writer seems appropriate. Moreover, seeking to answer not only how (this reviewer found just two places) but more definitively *why* Paul set Abraham in an eschatological framework could only strengthen this work. Thus, it is perhaps more than coincidental that new

perspective advocates are cited or referred to overwhelmingly more than critics of this view (e.g., Dunn is cited most of all scholars, more than Beker, Martyn, and Moo combined!).

Nonetheless, this volume is both well informed and informative. Calvert-Koyzis provides a model investigation of Second Temple Jewish literature on an important tradition and theme in its own right. The measured analyses of Pauline texts that readdress these same traditions are also exemplary. Anyone interested in monotheism and the significance of Abraham for early Judaism and Paul will profit richly from reading this learned effort.