Book Review

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Matthew Thiessen, *Jesus and the Forces of Death: The Gospels' Portrayal of Ritual Impurity within First-Century Judaism*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020.

It is not very often that a meme goes viral on social media among New Testament scholars. Recently, however, one struck a nerve. The image is a professor playing a massive tuba toward a student whose head is stuffed inside the horn's bell. The musician represents New Testament professors, and the horn represents their message to students: "They're Jewish texts!"

The meme's message is simple yet profound. Centuries of de-Judaizing Jesus have distorted the Jewish world of Jesus and the schools of Jewish disciples who wrote his life, death, and resurrection into history. It was not until the past fifty years that scholars have begun to confront and correct such anti-Judaism. Yet cracks in our understanding remain. One place where these cracks are felt is Jesus's attitude toward Jewish purity laws—ancient Levitical codes that Christians have caricatured as legalistic, cumbersome, and even embarrassing. In portraying Jewish purity laws as legalistic, Christians have built a dangerous binary: Jesus represents love and compassion, while Judaism represents legalistic religion. Put differently, Jesus represents grace and inner spiritual flourishing, while Judaism represents tired, works-based righteousness.

In *Jesus and the Forces of Death*, Matthew Thiessen sets out to correct this caricature. At the heart of Thiessen's thesis is the claim that Jesus was not operating *against* Jewish purity laws but, rather, *within* them. To substantiate this thesis, Thiessen maps Jesus's world, showing how Jewish purity laws reflect a holy God who cannot co-exist with ritual impurity (that is, unavoidable and contagious contamination with the impure—for example, corpses, skin disease, death, reproductive or genital discharges) or moral impurity (that is, avoidable contamination with idolatry, adultery, murder, and so on). To expunge the harmful effects of such impurities from among the people of God, purity laws were enacted to "preserve God's presence among his people" (11). The context here is key: for Thiessen, Jewish purity laws were a "compassionate" and "benevolent" system designed to empower the people of God to co-exist with a holy

God, whose presence "could be of considerable danger to humans if they approached God wrongly" (11). Ritual impurities, then, "represent the forces of death," and the ritual purity system was "foremost about life with God and was therefore a matter of life and death" (16, 18). Herein lies our paradigm shift: Jewish purity laws exist to empower relationship with God rather than detract from it.

With this context in mind, Thiessen interrogates Jesus's confrontation with the ritually impure in the gospels. In these well-known stories, Thiessen argues that Jesus is not challenging or replacing the temple's role in removing the effects of sources of impurity. Instead, Jesus goes for the jugular, unleashing a force of holiness "that goes on the offense against impurity" at its source—namely, death (180). In going for the source of impurity, Jesus reflects the arrival of God's kingdom, a sphere of holiness where death will no longer exist. The logic here is key: Jesus does not supersede Judaism (supersessionism); rather, the "old cosmos was being superseded by a new creation in which Satan and his demons, death and sin . . . would no longer exist" (183). Jesus, then, does not operate in opposition to the Jewish law and the Jerusalem temple. Rather, "they are all on the same side in a battle—a battle between Israel's God and the forces of impurity" (180).

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So what does *Jesus and the Forces of Death* mean for pastor-theologians leading out under the crushing weight of an international pandemic? Three things stand out for me. First, the COVID-19 virus has confronted our daily routines with the insurmountable challenge of death. At no point in my lifetime has death by disease felt so pervasive, lurking at our doors. While the modern world has developed ingenious tools to mitigate death's devastating effects, we ultimately cannot escape its grasp. This reality is a sobering reminder of our mortality. On the other hand, it reminds us that the church *really does have a message of good news to offer the world*. Perhaps some of us are jaded (myself included) by the ways Christians have reduced the gospel to eternal life (while turning a blind eye to the suffering of our neighbors in this world). Still, I am left wondering what it would like for us to craft fresh language about God's unleashing of holiness against death for this moment—for a world caught in the gaze of our mortality. *Jesus and the Forces of Death* begs us to do this hard work.

Second, life under pandemic has animated the death-dealing structural inequalities that pervade our globally connected world. Death is sneaky. It creeps into our corporate identities, creating hierarchies of power and systems of domination. Here I am especially thinking of health care systems and predatory insurance companies who have commodified the sick and vulnerable for personal enrichment. Jesus had a lot to say about money; he also had a lot to say about death and exploitation. Not once, to my knowledge, did Jesus commodify the vulnerable for monetary gain. What would it look like for the church to contest the powers that exploit by giving freely to the vulnerable in abundance, by advocating for equitable vaccine distribution, and by confronting death's structural inequalities by paying off medical debt? *Jesus and the Forces of Death* paints a portrait of a God who cares deeply about our bodies—warts and all.

Third, *Jesus and the Forces of Death* reminds us that the church has a shameful history of caricaturing Judaism. Thiessen illuminates how pervasive anti-Judaism is in Christian interpretations of Jewish purity laws. But there are other binaries in discourses of Christian anti-Judaism to which we need to attend as well. For example, some Christians caricature Judaism as xenophobic or ethnocentric and Christianity as inclusive and universal. Still others paint Judaism as inherently violent and Christianity as peaceful. These binaries contribute to toxic theologies that can produce gross distortions of Christian origins. They can also lead to perverse manifestations of racialized power, including white supremacy. As Willie Jennings has forcefully argued, to worship the God of Israel as a gentile is to worship someone else's God. We are guests at the table, and learning to read the Bible responsibly as a guest demands (re)learning to read the life of Jesus with Jewish sensibilities. We are indebted to Matthew Thiessen for pushing us in this direction.

About the author

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