

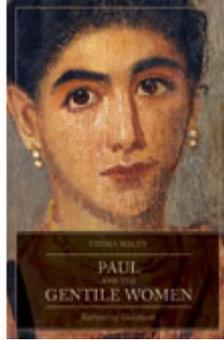
○ REVIEW OF TATHA WILEY, *PAUL AND THE GENTILE WOMEN*

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Jeanne Evans reviews Tatha Wiley's *Paul and the Gentile Women: Reframing Galatians* (New York: Continuum, 2005).



This recent study of Paul's Letter to the Galatians offers a thoughtful and provocative new angle on the intent and focus of Paul's debate with the Jerusalem Church. Tatha Wiley, who is at United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities, Minnesota makes the case that the debate about circumcision in Galatians is about the importance of women's equality that Paul bases in the spirit of the *ekklēsia's* embrace of Jesus as the Messiah. Paul's egalitarian commitment does not allow male members of the Galatian assembly to return to circumcision. To do so endangers the meaning of full and equal membership of all before God, particularly gender equality.

Paul's egalitarian understanding of membership is not a debate between the merits of Judaism, as opposed to Christianity, Wiley argues, but between the sects of Second Temple Judaism. Among those who accepted Jesus as Messiah, the conservative position is represented by the Jerusalem evangelists of Palestine, led by James. On the other hand, the more liberal Diaspora Judaism evangelists, as Paul, held an opposing view. Those who challenge Paul, therefore, are fellow evangelists of the Jesus movement, but who had maintained a more conservative interpretation and practice of Torah's obligations. Thus the historic and social context of the Galatian debate should be understood in the larger context of Second Temple Judaism. It was an argument among Jews, generally, as well as Jewish followers of Jesus.

Wiley's argument offers better grounds for understanding the Torah and Paul's position that circumcision was not obligatory for Gentile converts. Recent studies of Diaspora Judaism also show evidence that supports the emergence of leadership roles for women in the Diaspora synagogues. Paul's position therefore was in continuity with these Diaspora practices.

Paul's interpretation of baptism serves as a gender-neutral ritual of initiation that sanctions an inclusive interpretation and radical acceptance of women as members of Jesus' movement. Wiley's analysis raises the importance of women and their functions within the Jesus movement and clarifies that Paul's approach is in keeping with the larger Diaspora practice. The Letter to

the Galatians is not a polemic against Judaism, therefore certainly not a supersessionist argument that Christianity is superior to Judaism. Paul's focus upon the question of circumcision is rather a polemic for liberty and women as full members, although women are not explicitly mentioned. This focus upon equality of membership and the social dynamics of Paul's milieu has been obscured by earlier generations of traditional interpretation (as well as contemporary interpretations) that ironically have subverted and obscured Paul's message, as an argument for women's subordination and beg the supposed primacy of Christianity over Judaism. Wiley's analysis integrates new scholarship developed after Auschwitz and the post-World War II attempt to address the prior misuse of Paul's letters to support and fuel anti-Judaism and religious intolerance. She incorporates as well feminist biblical scholarship that questions the invisibility of women in textual interpretation.

Wiley's book offers a clear rendition of the complex and diverse historical, and religious situation of the period. She incorporates deftly the work of an array of scholars to support her analysis of Galatians based upon the practices of Diaspora Judaism in relation to Gentile converts. She offers a compelling analysis for Judaism. Palestinian Judaism was not an absolute norm. The diversity and complexity of the milieu also supports a far more nuanced understanding of the role and place of women in this environment. Many Greco-Romans, particularly women, were attracted to Judaism as an ancient religion, precisely because it offered standards of justice and compassion as well as community that had strong appeal. It was these Gentile God-fearers whom Paul met in his various journeys and were to become the foundation for his movement.

However, Gentile converts to Judaism, once accepted as members, did not have equality among Jews. For Greco-Romans the conversion posed possible problems and sacrifices. On a civic legal level of social and political privileges, conversion to Judaism represented downward social mobility. Jews were given protections and not required to adhere to the Roman Empire's civic religion, but converts were in a more nebulous situation. 'Circumcision' was a significant symbol of membership, recognised by both the Jewish synagogue and the Greco-Roman judiciary system. It qualified one for legal status and protection as a Jew. Did an uncircumcised Gentile convert have the same rights? We are not sure, but Wiley suggests possibly not.

Wiley relocates the debate about circumcision within patriarchal culture, both Judaism's and the Greco-Roman's, and the pressures that existed to return to and maintain a conservative, legalistic and literal reading of circumcision in the practice of Torah. Paul's polemic is against those Jewish Christian evangelists who held to a more juridical, fundamentalist reading of Torah that preserved patriarchal privilege and set women apart as subordinate to men in their religious life as in their secular life. Wiley interprets Galatians as an argument that the role of the Spirit opens up a new understanding of the eschatological reign of God through Jesus' death and resurrection. This coheres with the developments of Diaspora Judaism's interpretation of Torah in a social milieu that incorporated new vistas for women to function as leaders. Paul sees the Jesus movement as forwarding this egalitarian vision. Wiley notes the dialectic between the identity and influence of Judaism as an ancient religion and the liberating spirit promoted by the Jesus movement that supported new found opportunities for women because of the Spirit's promise of equality. Prominent Greco-Roman women were attracted to Paul's communities and their capacity to empower women in the public religious realm as well as the private, domestic sphere.

Wiley very effectively develops her argument in five chapters (Galatian Disputes, Paul's Context, Challenges and Challengers in Galatia, Women in the Galatian Assemblies, Recovering

Paul and the Gospel). She offers an adept overview of the bases for this complex reinterpretation of the period prior to the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. The analysis is an instructive use of recent social and urban analyses of the period and makes its case well that Judaism is the umbrella under which Paul's Galatians discussion emerges. Paul's polemic is reframed not as a divorce from Judaism; rather Paul seeks to incorporate 'liberal' Diaspora Judaism's practices. Paul's embrace of Jesus as Messiah announcing the reign of God and that all are equal before God was not a rejection but an interpretation of Judaism. In light of this new eschatological hope found in Jesus, circumcision is not adequate to signify full and equal membership that the new age represented. However the ritual of baptism, which also has its antecedents in Judaism, Wiley argues, serves Paul as a gender-neutral ritual of commitment to acceptance of the covenant and the new life embodied in the experience of Jesus.

Wiley carefully delineates Paul's notions on membership as she reviews his use of inclusive and androcentric language in relation to circumcision. Equality through a removal of barriers is the base of the new *ekklēsia*. Like Jesus, Paul was born a Jew and died a Jew who interpreted the liberation brought by Jesus as a reflection of Diaspora Judaism's expectations. But a patriarchal culture in which Paul lived, and the loss of privilege that this culture exacted, buttressed the persuasiveness of Paul's Diaspora Judaism opponents. That culture also fostered a tradition that continues to misread Galatians, as Wiley notes, 'to justify religious control, interreligious intolerance and male privilege.' Later generations, she points out, will use Genesis 16, 'he shall rule over you' as the basis for women's subordination and the consequence of their punishment for sin. Wiley speculates that Galatians' women surely were inspired by Paul's teaching in Galatians 5:1, 'For freedom in Christ has set us free, stand firm therefore and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery.'

Wiley's work opens up Galatians to a renewed recognition of the radical challenge the early church offered the world in which it lived. The challenges of Galatians are ones with which we continue to struggle.

Paul and the Gentile Women is a bold book and one that will stir others to return to the text and address the range of questions it unleashes about the early church, the divide between public and private, Paul's teaching of *ekklēsia* and its practice of liberty for all regardless of gender. What role did the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E. play in the process that led to a reaction to gender equality and separation of the Jesus movement from Judaism is left to be explored more fully.

This book is an excellent resource for undergraduate, graduate and seminary classes in New Testament and Pauline Studies. Particularly helpful is its feminist reading that makes visible the role of women and gender in the early church. The index and notes offer important guides for the argument. It is a rich synthesis of scholarship at the service of an original thesis.

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