

**Matthew J. Thomas**  
*Paul's 'Works of the Law' in the  
Perspective of Second Century Reception*

(WUNT II 468; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), softcover, xvi + 269 pp.

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What were the “works of the law” rejected by Paul in favor of justification by faith? According to adherents of the so-called “old perspective on Paul,” looking back to the Protestant Reformers’ interpretation of the apostle, “works of the law” are any and all human acts involving moral effort, regardless of the specific legal code guiding that effort. By practicing these works, one attempts to earn salvation from God—a futile and unnecessary undertaking, because salvation is a gift from God, received through faith. By contrast, adherents of the “new perspective on Paul” argue that “works of the law” are more specific. The “law” is the Torah, and the “works” are the observance of food laws, circumcision, and festivals. Those who practice these works seek to demonstrate their connection with Jews rather than Gentiles. For Christians, Paul says, they are no longer necessary because, for some reason (proponents differ significantly here), these Jewish particulars have been set aside for Gentile followers of Jesus.

Matthew J. Thomas approaches this question through a study of early reception history. Second-century Christian authors provide valuable evidence, he argues, because they lived within the “living memory” of the apostles and those who knew them (pp. 4-8). If there was a generally understood definition of these “works of the law” within the Christian communities of Paul’s day, Thomas reasons, it is likely that authors within living memory of that time would understand (or at least not significantly misunderstand) the correct meaning of the term.

Unfortunately, the surviving second-century authors rarely discuss “works of the law” explicitly. Thomas therefore carefully distinguishes between three categories of texts, each with its own heuristic value. Category A (Justin Martyr, Irenaeus) is defined by (1) evident conflict regarding law or works with “Jewish parties” (a term Thomas consciously leaves ambiguous), (2) demonstrable use of

Galatians and Romans, and (3) direct use of the phrase “works of the law” or citations of Pauline verses that do so. Category B (Ignatius, *Diognetus*, Melito) fulfills criteria (1) and (2) but not (3). Category C (*Didache*, *Barnabas*, *Aristides*) has only (1). Thomas also includes short excurses on second-century fragments and the evidence available for the views of Ebionites, Marcion, and Ptolemy. His goal is to prioritize direct discussions (category A) without ignoring circumstantial evidence (B and C).

Thomas begins by introducing the modern dispute over the phrase “works of the law,” summarizing the views of Luther, Calvin, Bultmann, and Douglas Moo (representatives of the “old perspective”) and E. P. Sanders, James D. G. Dunn, and N. T. Wright (representatives of the “new perspective”). Thomas next moves to the early Christian sources. He poses the same three questions to each author or text: What works of what law? What does practice of those works signify? Why are those works not necessary for Christians?

Thomas discerns important patterns. When “law” is rejected, it is consistently the Mosaic law given at Sinai. When specific practices are rejected, they are Jewish practices of circumcision (even though circumcision was commanded before Sinai), calendar observances, food regulations, and sacrifices. (Many texts clearly distinguish between this rejected category of law and good works more broadly.) All view these works as demonstrating an identification with the Jewish community. On why they are unnecessary for Christians, though, there is far less consistency. Suggestions include that they were never intended to be observed literally (*Barnabas*), or that the biblical prophets rejected them and suffered persecution as a result (Ignatius), or that they were directed to angels and not God (*Aristides*), or that they were tailored by God for a particularly hard-hearted people—the Israelites after the golden calf—and are therefore unnecessary for those transformed by Christ (Justin, Irenaeus). Thomas judges the most important motif, however, to be that of Christ the lawgiver of the new covenant. The fundamental disagreement, then, concerns whether or not Jesus is the Jewish Messiah.

From all this data, Thomas synthesizes an “early perspective” on works of the law and concludes that the modern “new perspective on Paul” is closest to this “early perspective” regarding the referents of “works of the law” and the significance of practicing them. As for the reasons given for rejecting these practices, Thomas finds Wright’s covenantal view closest to that found in the second-century sources. Nevertheless, he suggests that Pauline scholarship would do well to explore more deeply the second-century theme of Christ as the new lawgiver implicit in the phrase “law of Christ” (e.g., Gal 6:2).

Thomas’ readings are careful, nuanced, and conversant with secondary scholarship. He is aware that he is investigating a topic that was not the primary focus of many of the early authors. I found his readings of individual texts to be strong and his concluding synthesis thought-provoking. The following are some of the questions this study raised for me.

First, if there was general consensus on the referent and significance of “works of the law,” why did early Christians give such diverse reasons for rejecting them? For post-Reformation polemics, the important point is that these sources did not

reject the necessity for salvation of good works outright. But for this period itself, the diverse and often frankly strange arguments offered by Christian sources for rejecting practices like circumcision—especially in the earliest texts like *Barnabas*—invites further analysis.

Second, what, precisely, is the value of the “living memory” time period? Thomas wisely avoids claiming that these authors are correct on any specific point simply because of when they lived. He is looking instead for broader patterns, shared assumptions, and repeated topics of debate (second-century smoke that can help locate first-century fire). Yet Irenaeus, whose place within the “living memory” of the apostles is important to Thomas’ argument, appeals to apostolic living memory to support his claim that Jesus lived until close to the age of 50 (*Against Heresies* 2.25.5-6). Some have used this datum to dismiss the value of any notion of a living apostolic tradition whatsoever, which surely goes too far. Nevertheless, given the role of living memory in framing this study, acknowledgment of this issue by Thomas would have added important nuance.

Third, what is the significance for Thomas’ argument of the fact that Irenaeus (category A) appealed to and used Justin (the only other category A source)? The “early perspective” on the works of the law in its most coherent, developed form, then, might basically be Justin’s perspective, which was then adapted by Irenaeus. This is not to deny the value of the circumstantial evidence provided by the other, earlier texts, especially on the referent and significance of “works of the law.” It is only to note a limitation of the fully-developed synthesis, particularly on the controverted question of why these works are unnecessary for Christians. This limitation is, of course, a product of the available evidence, from which Thomas has successfully gleaned what information can be had on “works of the law.”