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John Lierman. *The New Testament Moses: Christian Conceptions of Moses and Israel in the Setting of Jewish Religion*. WUNT 137. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004. XIV+368 pp., € 64.00.

How is it possible that rigorously monotheistic Jews came to worship Jesus as God? John Lierman has offered an intriguing hypothesis in this learned work, which is a revision of his Cambridge dissertation under the supervision of William Horbury. His proposition is that the first (Jewish) Christians found in the Moses traditions a way to describe their beliefs about Jesus. Earlier scholars have also explained the picture of Christ as that of a new Moses (e.g., the Matthew commentary of Davies and Allison), but they tend to see this as an early stage of the development, before (presumably) Christians believed in the divinity of Christ. Lierman argues that the Moses traditions have had a more far-reaching influence on Christology, including the belief in Jesus as divine.

Following an introduction with a useful survey of recent scholarship, three chapters explore the ideas regarding Moses as prophet, priest and apostle, and king. In the fifth chapter, about Moses as lawgiver, Lierman reads Deut 4:13-14 to distinguish between the ten commandments which were given directly by God and the other “statutes and judgments” which were given by Moses. Nothing is made out of this distinction in the Old Testament, but Lierman finds that it has been exploited in the *Letter of Aristeas* (130-171) and especially in Philo to present Moses with an “independent authority in the making of the Law” (p. 133), a view he also finds reflected in the synoptic gospels.

Chapter six, about baptism into Moses, intends to demonstrate that Paul in 1 Cor 10:2 makes a direct reference to proselyte baptism. Having reviewed the traditional arguments for the antiquity of proselyte baptism, Lierman’s new contribution is to argue that Moses was understood as such a unifying spiritual figure that it was possible to be in a mystical union with him, an idea that would explain the expression “baptism *into* Moses.”

In the seventh chapter, about Moses as the focus of Jewish loyalty, Lierman shows that Jews could be said to believe in Moses and argues that some of them even believed in his divinity. By downplaying the discontinuity between Christianity and Judaism with respect to the confession of Jesus as God, Lierman joins a growing band of scholars, such as Christopher Rowland, Jarl Fossum, Alan Segal, Margaret Barker, J. C. O’Neill, and Charles Gieschen.

Lierman’s chief evidence for an early belief in Moses’ divinity is three-fold. First, he refers to Philo’s *Mut.* 128 which in turn discusses Exod 7:1 where Moses is said to be god to Pharaoh. Lierman is aware that Philo understands this to mean “god” only in a relative sense, as compared to the foolish man Pharaoh. Nevertheless, he insists that such language “was not used lightly” (p. 231). Lightly or not, however, Philo is compelled to use it here, as he discusses the biblical saying, a saying he downplays to the maximum extent possible. Second, 4Q374 2.ii.6 states that Moses was made “like a God over the powerful ones, and a cause of reel[ing] (?) for Pharaoh.” Third, in Eusebius’ quotation of Pseudo-Orpheus’ poem, Moses may be described as being in heaven exercising control of the winds and the waters of the earth. An alternative interpretation holds,

however, that there is a change of subject at this point in the poem and that the ruler of the earth is God.

I have quibbles with several of the conclusions Lierman draws on the basis of the evidence, but there is no doubt that this erudite study has shown that the points of contact between New Testament Christology and Jewish Moses traditions extend further than previously acknowledged. I question, however, whether Lierman has adequately explained the significance of his findings. He claims: “Christology must from the first have been undertaken with the strongest possible consciousness of Moses, and with explicit borrowing from Moses to describe Christ” (p. 293).

But Lierman does not discuss the possibility that the New Testament Christology owes its origin primarily to Jesus’ unique self-understanding. Accordingly, he does not explore the possibility that the allusions to Moses traditions are intended polemically. That is to say, not that Christians came up with this Christology by reflecting on Moses traditions, but that they chose to present their beliefs about Jesus in language that some readers would associate with Moses traditions. In effect, they were saying: it is Jesus, not Moses, who deserves this honor (cf. the more cautious conclusion of Wayne Meeks).

In his introduction, Lierman explains that he does not attempt a diachronic study because he wants to show the wide distribution of individual motifs (p. 2). I wonder, however, if the study could have benefited from a reflection on possible historical developments. Anyone who attempts to explain New Testament Christology must come to grips with the fact that most scholars find that Christ’s preexistence is affirmed in the earliest written records (James Dunn is an exception). This is a serious problem with Lierman’s thesis. Even if his interpretation of all the Jewish texts be granted, the Jewish Moses traditions cannot explain the ideas of Jesus’ preexistence. Lierman cites evidence for Samaritan belief in the preexistence of Moses, but it only amounts to his primacy in creation and his foreordination (pp. 212-213). Jesus’ preexistence involved a conscious choice on his own part (2 Cor 8:9; Phil 2:6-7). He was God and became a human being. The Moses of Lierman’s book was a human being and became a God.

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