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Deines, Roland

Die Gerechtigkeit der Tora im Reich des Messias: Mt 5,13–20 als Schlüsseltext der matthäischen Theologie

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The Gospel of Matthew tends to have some reputation for its emphasis on “works” and “righteousness.” Particularly Matthew’s concept of righteousness is usually seen as a rather un-Pauline one, concerned more with ethics than with justification by faith. It is this fairly widespread conception that Roland Deines’s *Habilitationsschrift*, submitted in 2003–4 at the Faculty of Protestant Theology in Tübingen, sets out to challenge.

In the introductory chapter (1–39), Deines displays an uneasy feeling about the “social,” “political,” or “ethical” reading of Matthew’s Gospel and particularly of the Sermon on the Mount, which used to be very influential in the Peace Movement of the 1970s and 1980s (especially with the appeal to nonviolence). Deines obviously wishes to counter a reductionist view of this Gospel that would highlight only its ethics to the detriment of its theology, more precisely, its Christology and soteriology.

The second chapter (41–93), also part of the introduction, focuses on the literary character of the Gospel of Matthew and discusses some recent approaches from the field of reader-response criticism. However, Deines points out that a theoretical model with author, story, and reader is not entirely applicable for a text such as this Gospel, since the author could not freely create the story but was to a certain degree bound by tradition,

and the “reader” was, in antiquity, in the first instance a *hearer* who had *heard* the Christian proclamation before getting in touch with a written Gospel, and who would usually have *heard* this Gospel as it was read aloud. Lofty literary theories hence fail the test of realistic common sense and historical probability—a healthy warning against an all-too-theoretical exegesis.

The next nine chapters form the first main part of the book (95–451). This quite lengthy part is basically an exegesis of Matt 5:13–20, the crucial text in Matthew when it comes to righteousness and the position of the Torah. The first two chapters offer a survey of Matthew’s key conceptions of the βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν (103–20) and of δικαιοσύνη (121–36); then Deines studies the motif of righteousness in Matt 5:1–12, the passage that precedes the text in question (137–81). The sixth chapter (183–256) then interprets the address to the disciples in Matt 5:13–16 as their appointment to be missionaries for the righteousness that Jesus has already fulfilled (see Matt 3:15). Among other things, this detailed treatment of a few verses features some very interesting comments on the imagery of salt (185–217).

The next four chapters deal with the key passage of this study: Matt 5:17–20; each chapter covers one verse! Chapter 7 (257–87) is about the difficult passage of Jesus fulfilling the Law. Deines does not follow the usual “ethical” or “nomistic” interpretation of Matt 5:17 as a statement of strict observance of the Torah. Rather, he interprets it christologically and eschatologically: the fulfillment of the Law and Prophets indicates the decisive turn in the history of salvation. Far from “super-Pharisaism,” it is “ein grundsätzliches Bekenntnis zu Israels Erbe” (272).

The same understanding informs the interpretation of Matt 5:18 in the next chapter (289–370). A large part of this chapter is about the interpretation of ἰῶτα ἐν ἧ μία κεραία (294–335). Deines discusses a broad range of rabbinic texts that deal with the significance of single letters and parts of letters and thereby shows his stupendous learning in that field. Of course, he is wisely cautious when it comes to dating rabbinic texts, so the question remains largely open how exactly, if at all, the texts mentioned relate to Matthew. Deines concludes that Matt 5:18 does not express any narrow-minded legalism but a commitment to the significance of the Torah and, accordingly, a confession to the one God—and a defense against any suspicion to the contrary.

In chapter 9 (371–412), Deines studies Matt 5:19 as an instruction to Christian teachers. Again, this verse is not to be understood in a legalistic but in a christological sense. This depends mainly on the demonstrative pronoun that goes with the “commandments” in 5:19. In line with this, the “smallest” commandments are the smallest because they are actually Jesus’ “easy yoke” (Matt 11:29–30); however, they are at the same time “the

weightier things of the Law” (23:23) (404). One can get the impression that the argument becomes somewhat forced at this point. The concluding statement highlights the paradox: “Als ἐλάχισται sind *diese* Gebote bezeichnet, weil sie zu Jesus gehören, d.h. weil wie ihm wichtig und groß sind. Bei den Menschen dagegen sind sie ἐλάχισται, weil sie nicht dem eigenen Prestigegewinn dienen, sondern dazu auffordern, sich dem anderen dienend zu beugen” (406).

Chapter 10 (413–34) deals with the concluding statement Matt 5:20. The key to this verse seems to be the verb *περισεύω*. Deines understands it as an eschatological key term, due to its peculiar usage in Matt 13:12; 25:29, and also notes τὸ *περισεύω* in Matt 14:20; 15:37—in all these cases God is identified as the logical subject. The comparative *πλεῖον* is understood as expressing the contrast between Pharisaic theology and Jesus’ eschatological righteousness. “Es geht in dieser Auseinandersetzung mit dem Pharisäismus für Matthäus darum nicht um ein *Mehr oder Weniger* in Bezug auf die Erfüllung des Gesetzes, sondern um ein radikales Entweder-Oder” (424). Again, the argument appears somewhat forced, since it is by no means self-evident that *περισεύω* (which is used in the active voice here, not in the divine passive, as in Matt 13:12; 25:29) should have eschatological significance here. Further, when the righteousness of Jesus’ disciples and (that of) the Pharisees are compared (by the comparative *πλεῖον*), this rather seems to suggest that they belong to the same order, hence are indeed comparable.

The final chapter of this altogether impressive part (435–46) goes beyond the pericope of Matt 5:13–20 and focuses on the righteousness of Jesus’ disciples in Matt 6:1, 33: Again, righteousness is not one’s ethical achievement but the distinctive mark of the kingdom of God; the alternative “gift *or* task” would not be appropriate (esp. 440).

After all this follows the second main part: “Die Tora, David und die Gerechtigkeit” (452–638). In chapter 12 (469–500), Deines delineates Matthew’s christological motif of Jesus as the Son of David. Matthew’s “Davidic” redaction of the Mark 2:23–28 in Matt 12:1–8 is of particular interest, as it shows his bold and creative use of a story from the Old Testament.

Finally, chapter 13 (501–638) traces the concept of righteousness—mostly the root *קִטְוּ*—in the Old Testament but also includes the rewriting of the Psalter in 4Q171 and 11Q5. This massive and highly learned chapter could well have become a monograph in its own right, and it is not entirely clear how it serves the argument at this point. Accordingly, there are only few references to the Gospel of Matthew in this chapter (591–94, 616, 634, 638), and in these cases Deines does not concentrate on Matthew’s way of using the Old Testament but simply asserts that the references to (mostly God’s) righteousness in the Psalms confirm his understanding of it in Matthew (616).

All in all, this is a pointed and fairly provocative study that will certainly play a significant role in future discussions about the topic of righteousness and about the ethics of the Gospel of Matthew. Its sheer length and some terminological, grammatical, and stylistic infelicities make a not too easy reading, to be sure, but the wealth of learning that Deines discloses to his readers rewards the effort. Even if one does not fully accept his conclusions, his detailed exegesis demands respect, and it is a valuable contribution to the study of Matthew's Gospel.