

# Review of: David Lincicum, Ruth Sheridan, and Charles M. Stang, (eds.). Law and Lawlessness in Early Judaism and Early Christianity

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In David Lincicum, Ruth Sheridan, and Charles Stang’s anthology, *Law and Lawlessness in Early Judaism and Early Christianity* (hereinafter, *L&L*), a spectrum of scholars in Second Temple Judaism (STJ) and early Christianity discuss the legal and antinomian dimensions of both religious traditions. Structurally, the anthology covers in its introduction and eleven essays the gamut of law and lawlessness from the perspectives of STJ—as evinced in Qumranic and Enochic literature—the New Testament (NT), early Christian and rabbinic literature, as well as its reception history (first-century Galatia to contemporary Germany).

*L&L* covers numerous ethical themes from Judeophobia (204), sexuality (170–71), bodily integrity and infant rights (195–98), to animal cruelty (46, 204) and dispels the long-standing notion of Judaism’s “legalism” vis-à-vis the NT’s—especially, Paul’s—so-called, “law-free gospel” (1). Consequently, *L&L* is a valuable resource for contemporary interreligious dialogue.

At issue is the question of “immorality” or “injustice” surrounding the gradual antinomian supersession within Christianity that took root in the second century (69–72) and gained traction during the Reformation and Antinomian Controversy (seventeenth century)—resulting in the bifurcation between “law and grace” in Christian praxis (3, 176–79). *L&L* reveals that supersessionism’s supposed “exemption” from torah-abidance was often viewed/presented as

an ethical affront to God by *insiders* and *outsiders* of these religious traditions (3–4). Given JEAC’s thrust, this review summarizes ethical issues/concerns in essays by Lutz Doering, Paula Fredriksen, Christopher Rowland, and Michael Peppard.

Doering’s chapter (“Law and Lawlessness in Texts from Qumran”) successfully shows the variance in STJ regarding the understanding and consequences of lawlessness (21), and that lawlessness was ethically “immoral” (11). Doering’s description is three-dimensional—viewing lawlessness via “historic Israel,” relapsed [insider] “group members,” and “contemporary others” (12). Doering demonstrates that “lawlessness” denoted insider and outsider identities both “socially and halakhically” (28).

Fredriksen (“Origen and Augustine on Paul and the Law”) presents the variegated patristic presentations of “lawful” and “antinomian Pauls” from the second to fourth centuries—sketching Origen and Augustine as “lawful Paul” proponents (87). For Fredriksen, such divergent Pauline portraits stem from theological and hermeneutical shifts—moving from allegorical and spiritual readings to literal and historical hermeneutics—with religious tradition coloring one’s interpretation (68, 188).

Rowland’s chapter—“... A perspective [*sic*] from Reception History on the New Testament and Antinomianism”—begins by referencing John Knox’s comparison of Jesus’s lawfulness with Paul’s perceived “antinomianism.”<sup>1</sup> While revealing Paul’s implied “dynamic of repentance and forgiveness” as reflecting Jesus’s ethics, Knox’s monograph—and subsequent Festschrift—failed to adequately address Paul’s tension between law and lawlessness, according to Rowland (173). Rowland concludes: “none of the [NT] authors would have considered himself as defending an antinomian position,” yet Rowland questions “the adequacy of ‘antinomianism’ as being ‘anti-law’ or ... ‘immoral’” (174). Rowland differentiates between communal and individual inspirational understandings of law—e.g., Israel’s reception of Torah vis-à-vis individualized revelation in visions/dreams—termed, “immediate revelation” (174–75). Rowland’s comparison reveals the prioritization/primacy of the impulsive latter—termed, “weak” antinomianism (175, 191–92)—and notes two dichotomies: the supremacy of Scripture (lawful, submissive, and external) and the supremacy of the divinely inspired self (antinomian, spiritual, and internal) (192). NT theology—for Rowland—teetered between “novelty [internal, individual inspiration] and continuity [external, law-abidance]” (191), and internalizing the external (Jer 31:33–34; Ezek 36:25–27)—that is, writing Torah upon the heart (175).

Ethically, the most salient chapter is Peppard’s (“Law and Liberty”), which traces the theme of circumcision from first-century Galatia to contemporary Germany. Peppard posits that gentile circumcision was *adiaphoric* in the NT—with the exception of Galatians’ “intra-Jewish” rhetoric—and a morally indifferent, parental “aesthetic decision” in America today (194). However, Europe’s legal landscape differs: circumcision contradicts “*European national law*” and infant rights (195, emphasis original)—a sacred (“religious liberty”) versus

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<sup>1</sup> See JOHN KNOX, *The Ethic of Jesus in the Teaching of the Church* (Nashville; New York: Abingdon 1961); and the subsequent Festschrift discussing the issues of law and lawlessness in the NT: WILLIAM R. FARMER, C. F. D. MOULE, and RICHARD R. NIEBUHR, eds., *Christian History and Interpretation: Studies Presented to John Knox* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1967).

secular (“Western democracy”) debate (194). Peppard concludes that the family—not government—“is the primary community in which a child needs to feel a sense of belonging” (203), and stripping religio-cultural identifiers like circumcision from families resembles the dehumanizing caricatures of racist propaganda (206–09).

Numerous strengths mark these chapters. Doering dispels the shallow stereotype of “Jewish legalism” by sketching the complex contours and depths of “lawlessness” in the Qumranic literature in kaleidoscopic—rather than monochromatic—hues. Fredriksen’s chapter exposes numerous ethical issues: ethnocentrism, Judeophobia and dehumanization by those hijacking the scriptures, traditions and gods of other cultures to transform them (69–71). Fredriksen implicitly addresses ethnocentric and politicized depictions of God that ignore injustices suffered by global image-bearers (82). Moreover, Fredriksen indirectly chides those employing individualized readings of Scripture—contradicting orthodox Christianity—to justify deviant behaviors (82–84). Rowland helpfully categorizes antinomianism (186) and rightly links antinomianism to individualism and spiritualized, personally subjective understandings of ethics and revelation. Lastly, Peppard surveys the growing sacred and secular debate—noting the ethical nomenclature used to question and crack once-marmoreal traditions (198–204).

However, *L&L* also has weaknesses. Doering raises numerous keen observations but assumes a “predestinarian” reading of debated Qumranic passages without addressing the ethical implications, such as an ethnocentric, biased view of YHWH (14–15, 17, 28). While Doering concedes that the ethics of the “elect” often opposed YHWH’s character—resulting in a “relapse” of “lawlessness” (17–24, 28)—Doering fails to consider the implications of YHWH’s “electing” unrepentant, “insincere initiates.” Was YHWH somehow “wrong” or not omniscient? The texts Doering cites depict—in this reviewer’s estimation—outsider imposters infiltrating the in-group rather than “backsliding” insiders. Fredriksen’s otherwise excellent chapter is plagued by her presupposition of the soteriological necessity of torah-observance and failure to consider texts (Gen 15:6 *et passim*), which seemingly suggest otherwise. The inclusion of a chapter discussing the descriptive and prescriptive elements of torah-abidance would have benefitted *L&L*. Rowland does not adequately synthesize the ethical implications and subjectivity in prioritizing “internalized” inspiration above Scripture and interpretive communities (175). Finally, Peppard skirts important ethical topics—e.g., adolescent transgenderism, hormone therapy, and gender-affirmation/-reassignment surgery—while lightheartedly questioning the ethics of orthodonture (199).

In sum, *L&L*’s ethical implications are far-reaching—highlighting the linkage between antinomianism and spiritualized, individual interpretations of divine inspiration, which were often elevated above community, tradition, and Scripture. Cautious scholars should pause, asking—“Is this what the writer of Joel 2:28–32 envisioned by the Spirit’s outpouring and what Joel’s interpreter in Acts 2:16–21 meant?” Such reflection may dissuade deluded claims of divine (or devilish) inspiration for unorthodox and criminal behavior—religiously and socially (185). Were Jesus and Paul antinomian? The question remains complex and beckons further research. However, one must remember Jesus upholds Torah, and Paul sternly rebukes the idea of living a Torah-exempt, immoral, “law-free” life: μή γένοιτο (“Impossible!”).