



# Paul and Judaism: The Apostle in the Context of Recent Interpretation

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**I**F WE WERE TO CHARACTERIZE, IN A SENTENCE, THE HISTORY OF PAULINE INTER-pretation we could do no better than echo the words of the writer of 2 Peter when he wrote: “So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, speaking of this as he does in all his letters. *There are some things in them hard to understand...*” (2 Pet 3:15-16, emphasis added). Paul has both stimulated and vexed generations of interpreters—St. Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Wesley, and Karl Barth, to mention only a few of the giants of the Christian tradition. Without any doubt, there is enough in these few letters from Paul to excite, offend, and puzzle virtually anyone who takes time to read them; and the issue of Paul and Judaism is no exception.

Yet it is precisely at this point that we must be clear and make a sharp distinc-

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*A generation of new scholarship challenges a traditional “Lutheran” view of Paul, especially with regard to the relation between Paul and Palestinian Judaism. Paul contends not against a works-righteousness Judaism; he forges a new community in Christ made up of Jew and Greek, male and female, slave and free.*

tion. What was it, on the one hand, that Paul said and did, and what was it that motivated and shaped him as his missionary work unfolded; and, on the other hand, how have his words been understood and used by later interpreters? As we all are, Paul is accountable for what he said and did, but it may be too much to hold him strictly accountable for what others have done to him and his letters. We rarely remember the rest of the rather cutting statement in 2 Peter: “There are some things in them hard to understand, *which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures*” (emphasis added). Whatever the relationship between the theology of Paul or the theology of his letters and the theologies imposed on Paul, it is clear that trying to understand Paul in his interpretive context is as important as trying to understand him in his historical and social context.

### I. PARTICIPATIONIST ESCHATOLOGY

The modern era in scholarship on Paul and Judaism dawned in 1977—roughly a generation ago—with the publication of Ed Sanders’s groundbreaking study, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion*.<sup>1</sup> In that book, Sanders sought to challenge what is often called the Lutheran view of Paul with its anti-Jewish and negative implications: that prior to the Damascus Road experience Paul was a guilt-ridden Jew, who was burdened by his own inadequacy before the law and who, as a Jew, lived in a religious world shaped by works righteousness. Sanders was not the first to contest these ideas. Krister Stendahl, a Lutheran himself, had done so more than a decade earlier.<sup>2</sup>

Sanders was the first, however, to subject the Pauline material and the Palestinian Jewish material to thoroughgoing analysis as religious systems. He described his approach as a holistic comparison of the patterns of religion. In other words, he wanted to understand how Paul’s religion and how Palestinian Judaism worked as religious systems. In that way, he could see Paul more clearly in relation to the Judaism of his day and presumably challenge the negative views of Judaism that had come to dominate the reading of Paul. Perhaps above all, Sanders wanted to know how the religions were perceived to function by their adherents. To get at these patterns of religion, he asked two questions: (1) How does one get into the religion? and (2) How does one stay in the religion? What Sanders did not realize fully at that point was that to pose the first question in this way was a rather more Pauline way of framing the question than it was a Palestinian Jewish way. For the vast majority of first-century Jews, the issue was not “How do I get in?”—they were simply in. In practical reality, it was not a question of transferring from being an outsider to being an insider. But having said this, Sanders’s conclusions were to have an enormous impact on future thinking about Paul and Judaism.

<sup>1</sup>E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977).

<sup>2</sup>Krister Stendahl, “The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West,” in *Paul among Jews and Gentiles, and Other Essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 78-96.

He concluded that Paul's religion could best be characterized as *participationist eschatology*, whereas Palestinian Judaism could be described as *covenantal nominalism*. But what does this mean? In light of God's covenant, the Judaism of Paul's day was not a works-righteousness religion. To put it directly, Jews did not merit God's favor by doing good works. The problem with the law was not that it somehow ensnared one in the web of self-righteousness but that it could not lead to a relationship with Christ. That could only happen through faith. Hence, for Sanders, justification by faith is not the center of Pauline theology, as much of Christian theology had maintained since Luther, but simply transfer terminology used to describe how one goes from being an outsider to being an insider, a part of the body of Christ. To remember his now famous distinction, Sanders argued that Paul did not, theologically speaking, move from *plight or problem to solution*, as Bultmann, Conzelmann, and Bornkamm had argued, but rather from *solution to problem*. From this perspective, Paul was not a dissatisfied Jew, overcome by the burdens of keeping the law, who found the fresh air of freedom in Christ. As an apostle of Christ he was not a refugee from Judaism. The only thing wrong with the law, for Paul, is that it is not faith, to use Sanders's language. So what Paul says about the law is clearly a retrospective from the point of view of faith. In that sense, it is not a raw, historical description of Judaism and how Judaism functioned or how it was perceived by Jews themselves. Paul's conviction that Christ was God's savior for both Jew and gentile transformed his view of divine initiative as well as divine law. Faith alone is necessary for gentiles to be included in the body of Christ. So when Paul argues that the gentiles do not need to be Torah observant, he is really arguing against those Jewish followers of Christ who take the opposite position, rather than arguing against Judaism in general. Paul was not so much anti-Jewish as he was forging a new community in Christ, made up of Jew and Greek, male and female, slave and free.

As one might imagine, this argument resulted in a dramatic repositioning of Paul with respect to the Judaisms of his day. And it challenged some deeply held theological convictions, especially those represented in Lutheranism. While the responses to Sanders's book were not uniformly positive—and rightly so in some respects—he reframed the discussion in a way that could not be ignored. He followed that earlier work in 1983 with a study of the place of the law in Paul's theology.<sup>3</sup> Even where Sanders may have failed to make his case, he was always provocative and stimulating.

## II. CONVERSION OR CALL?

Building on the work of Ed Sanders, yet taking it in a somewhat different direction, is another important player in the reassessment of Paul, the prolific British scholar James D. G. Dunn. Through a series of books and essays over many years,

<sup>3</sup>E. P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).

culminating in his massive study, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*,<sup>4</sup> Dunn argues that Paul's emphasis on divine grace, within his theology of justification, did not first emerge in response to his opponents who wanted gentiles to be circumcised upon entering the church. On the contrary, it is simply a restatement of his own Jewish faith, a faith that understood only too well divine grace in the context of covenant. The grace of God is not something that Paul first discovered as a follower of Christ. It was already deeply rooted in his ancestral Jewish faith, long before he had his experience on the Damascus Road.

If that is so, we can ask what in fact happened on the road to Damascus? Johannes Munck<sup>5</sup> and Krister Stendahl<sup>6</sup> had already raised that question and concluded that what happened to Paul was less a conversion than it was a call to a new mission. Their point was that Paul did not convert from Judaism to Christianity as a result of his encounter on the Damascus Road. There was not as yet a Christianity that was separate and independent from Judaism. Rather Paul was called to a new mission—to carry the name of Jesus to the gentiles—and that meant implicitly that Paul was a Jew before his encounter with Christ and that he remained a Jew after that experience, albeit a peculiar kind of Jew. This is a critical distinction, and it makes clear that Paul's arguments concerning Jews and Judaism, insofar as he presents them at all, are not polemics directed by a Christian against Jews. Thus, they are not Christian against Jew, as they would later be seen. Quite the contrary, they are better seen as intra-Jewish debates and discussions. One kind of Jew engaged in debate with Jews of a different stripe.

While the spirit of Munck's and Stendahl's claim is on target, we may agree with Alan Segal<sup>7</sup> that the term conversion is still appropriate if we understand clearly what we are talking about. Paul did not convert from Judaism to Christianity, even though that is the way the Damascus Road event came to be understood by the second century. He did convert, however, *from* Pharisaism *to* the Jesus community, the difference being that both of these groups represented different forms of Judaism. What made Paul peculiar and controversial in his own day, of course, was that he believed that God's grace had been made available to Jew and gentile alike and that gentiles did not need to observe the requirements of Torah for inclusion in the community. Paul clearly considers the law to be good and holy. But he does not see the law as an entrance requirement into the community of Christ. In fact, the parts of the law that most troubled Paul in this respect were circumcision, the sacred calendar, and dietary regulations. What these parts of the law have in common is that they most visibly separate Jews from gentiles and thereby threaten the unity of the body of Christ, the church. As Alan Segal has so graphically put it,

<sup>4</sup>James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

<sup>5</sup>Johannes Munck, *Paul and the Salvation of Mankind* (London: SCM, 1959).

<sup>6</sup>Krister Stendahl, "Paul among Jews and Gentiles," in *Paul among Jews and Gentiles*, 1-77.

<sup>7</sup>Alan Segal, *Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee* (New Haven: Yale, 1990).

the question for a church made up of both Jews and gentiles is, who will sit down and have lunch with whom?

### III. PAUL'S UNIVERSALISM

Dunn has his own twist on this. He argues that what Paul converted from was a kind of Torah-keeping Judaism that caused Jews to focus on their own distinctiveness over against non-Jews and a kind of competitiveness within Judaism where Jews sought to outdo each other in their Torah observance. It was this kind of zeal that Paul converted from, a zeal that, according to Dunn, separated Jew from gentile and a zeal that Paul turned against. Hence, the problem that Paul sees is not the achievement of righteousness based on self-merit or self-righteousness but the idea that God's righteousness is only for Israel or for gentiles if they convert to Judaism. Ethnic identity does not count for more than the grace and the call of God, and, where the latter is obscured by the former, Paul objects, says Dunn.

In seeking to unlock the mystery of Romans, Mark Nanos situates the problem of exclusivism not with the Jews but with the gentiles in Rome. He writes:

Indeed, I believe that the mystery of Romans is revealed when we realize that the Paul we meet in this letter is engaged in confronting the initial development of just such a misunderstanding of God's intentions in Rome manifest in Christian-*gentile* exclusivism. In Rome, gentiles are being tempted to consider Jews excluded from God's purpose (Rom. 11): Israel has rejected the gospel; God has rejected Israel. The gentiles in Rome think Israel has now been replaced as God's people by gentiles who believe in Christ Jesus.<sup>8</sup>

Nanos asserts that Paul was "a good Jew," a Jew shaped by his belief that Jesus is Israel's Messiah, and that he did not break with the basic truths of Judaism. According to him, Paul was not in dispute with righteous Torah-observant behavior, as though Jews who did so were trying to earn God's favor. Paul knew that Torah was God's gift to the covenant people of Israel and that Jews observe the law in response to God's grace. What he objected to was exclusivism, and in Rome it was gentile exclusivism that had to be addressed.

In a markedly different way, another Jewish scholar, Daniel Boyarin, takes Paul's assertion in Gal 3:26-29, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus," as the interpretive key to Paul's universalism, which, for him, stands as a critique of Jewish particularism. By means of the distinction between spirit and flesh, Paul allegorizes Israel according to the flesh, and the law for that matter, into a universalized conception of one faithful humanity where there is neither Jew nor Greek. In that frame of reference, Jewish particularism is clearly transcended. As Boyarin writes: "Thus, just as the materiality of the language is transcended in the spirituality of its interpretation, so also the materiality of physical, national, gendered hu-

<sup>8</sup>Mark Nanos, *The Mystery of Romans: The Jewish Context of Paul's Letter* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 10.

man existence is transcended in the spirituality of ‘universal faith’....It was Paul’s genius to transcend ‘Israel in the flesh.’”<sup>9</sup> This causes Boyarin to part company with Ed Sanders on the issue of Paul’s conversion and places him somewhat closer to James Dunn. Boyarin says, referring to Paul’s experience on the Damascus Road:

If we, however, reverse the logic, as I do, then he was prepared for his experience by a deep sense of plight—not personal, but theological. We can account for Paul’s putting everyone in the same situation by assuming that this was exactly what was bothering him about Judaism, namely that it *did not* “equate the status of Jew and gentile.”<sup>10</sup>

If Boyarin is correct, Paul did in fact move from plight to solution as a result of what happened on the road to Damascus. But Boyarin refuses to call Paul anti-Semitic or anti-Judaic. He has simply allegorized the particularity of Judaism out of existence.

Still others have read Paul as advocating what is in effect a “two-track” approach to salvation:<sup>11</sup> one for Jews according to Torah and another for gentiles according to faith. This stems from Paul’s argument in Rom 11, where Paul speaks directly about the priority of Israel in the economy of salvation, arguing that when the full number of gentiles comes in “thus all Israel will be saved.” These arguments have failed by and large to persuade that Paul is in fact a “two-tracker.” It is unlikely that this was Paul’s view, as expressed in Romans and Galatians, even though as an interpretive impulse it is provocative and laudable, and in some form it may be the theological approach that contemporary Christianity ought to take.

#### IV. RECENTERING THE DRAMA OF SALVATION

Paul the apostle is not simply a first-century pharisaic Jew plus Jesus. Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus resulted, as I have said elsewhere, in a dramatic recentering of the divine drama of salvation.<sup>12</sup> The conviction that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God, led him to the conclusion that Christ is also the wisdom of God, as he says in 1 Cor 1:30. If he is the wisdom of God, he also assumes the symbolism associated with Torah in Judaism. For Paul, what had been a Torah-centered religious system in the context of covenant has become a Christ-centered system in the context of covenant, though still Jewish in his eyes, I would argue. In fact, what had been written about Torah in Scripture could now be understood, according to Paul, as pertaining to Christ.

Terence Donaldson is more precise about this as he lays out Paul’s underlying

<sup>9</sup>Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California, 1994) 36, 38.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>11</sup>See, e.g., the arguments of Lloyd Gaston, *Paul and the Torah* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1987), and John Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism: Attitudes toward Judaism in Pagan and Christian Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University, 1983).

<sup>12</sup>See my *Written Also for Our Sake: Paul and the Art of Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993).

convictions in this process of recentering.<sup>13</sup> Donaldson argues that before his conversion Paul lived in the world of covenantal nomism where God was thought to have chosen Israel from the nations of the world for a special relationship. In that world, Paul also played an active role in trying to make converts to Judaism. With his conversion and the conviction that Christ is at the center of his theological world and that faith in him marks the boundary between who is in the church and who is not, it is clear that the law could no longer function as the center or as the marker separating insiders from outsiders. Christ now functions in that way. Gentiles could share in the hope of salvation but only by being “in Christ.” If Donaldson is right, we can see that Paul’s faith in Christ is the precipitating cause for his radical readjustment with respect to the law and Judaism. It is not a struggle against the law or some dissatisfaction with Judaism as a legalistic religion.

I do not like the metaphor of the “key,” as in a key concept that can be identified in Paul’s thinking that will unlock his entire theology. I prefer to think rather in terms of a structured collage of elements; but, without any doubt, Paul’s conversion to Christ is critically important in forming the collage that we see in his letters. Paul’s convictions about Christ redefine his view of the law and the gentiles. His convictions about Christ redefine his view of the community, understood as the body of Christ rather than simply the ethnic people of Israel. What recent scholarship has enabled us to see more clearly is the social and ecclesiastical character of Paul’s theology. His theology is forged in community, and to a large degree it is about the community of Christ. If justification by faith has in some sense been dethroned as the center of Paul’s theological collage by much of recent scholarship, it has been repositioned squarely in the social context of the church’s inclusion of the outsider. Moreover, we do well to remember what happened to the figure of Abraham in the early church—that figure so important not only to Judaism and Christianity but to Islam as well. Abraham in Galatians and Romans, as we know, is that great exemplar of faith and gentile inclusion, but within a hundred years after Paul wrote those letters Abraham had been turned into a symbol of Jewish exclusion.<sup>14</sup> This, of course, was part of a larger pattern of developing anti-Judaism in the early church, but it shows how Pauline language and categories shift, take on new meaning, and sometimes run counter to the spirit of Paul’s texts.

For much of the church’s history, theology has shaped how Christians have looked at the history of the early church and the relationship of Christianity to Judaism, perhaps unavoidably so. However, to put it bluntly, that theology has most often been a supersessionist one. The new covenant in Christ has, in effect, replaced the old covenant. The church has replaced the synagogue as the people of God. And Jews, as Jews, have no future in the scope of God’s salvation. If this is the

<sup>13</sup>Terence Donaldson, *Paul and the Gentiles: Remapping the Apostle’s Convictional World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997).

<sup>14</sup>See Jeffery S. Siker, *Disinheriting the Jews: Abraham in Early Christian Controversy* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991).

interpretive presupposition that one brings to the reading of Paul, it is easy to see Paul as anti-Jewish, indeed hostile to Judaism. The problem with this, as I see it, is twofold. First, if the scholarship that has been done on Paul and early Judaism in recent years is moving in the right direction at all, then the supposed religious inferiority of Judaism that undergirds much Christian supersessionist theology has little support historically or religiously. Moreover, Paul's idea of justification by faith is more than a matter of "me and Jesus" and a person's private relationship with God. It has social and communal implications for Christians. It pertains to the way people relate in community and how they are included in the community of faith. God's grace is for all (Jew and Greek, male and female, slave and free) without regard to the distinctions that are imposed on people. Paul's notions of faith and justification are at their base much more communal than we are often inclined to think, given our highly individualistic North American views of religion. Second, the consequences of seeing early Judaism as an inferior legalistic religion have been devastating—obviously so for Jews, but also for Christians. The seed bed of Christian anti-Semitism has given rise to all sorts of noxious weeds. Because of that, the ethical implications of Pauline interpretation cannot be ignored in Christian preaching and teaching. ⊕

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