

## Paul and Judaism

©Mark D. Nanos (May 8, 2009)

An essay for Paulus Codex

I am humbly grateful for the opportunity to participate in this the celebration of the Jubilee Year to the Apostle Paul declared by Pope Benedict XVI.

A celebration of Paul represents an interesting challenge. Jews have not generally studied Paul. When we have, he has been predictably approached as an apostate from Judaism. We instinctively respond to the prevailing Christian portrayals of the Apostle to the Nations, but from the opposite perspective. For the victories attributed to Paul's voice have traditionally been juxtaposed with negative assessments of the Jewish people and Judaism, at times accompanied by harmful policies. The celebration of his mission has been intimately connected with the idea of converting everyone from their religion, including Jews from Judaism.

Nevertheless, I join with those who believe that, in addition to the challenge to express goodwill between our religions in new ways, there is a historical basis for the reevaluation of Paul's voice that is in keeping with the Church's commitment to seeking the truth, which may challenge some traditional perspectives on Paul. This year's focus on Paul's letters highlights the need for Jewish scholars to vigorously undertake this task alongside of Christians.

In keeping with the call of Vatican II to attend to the historical context of the language of Scripture, and the many strides already taken, the sketch offered here briefly indicates some of the ways that re-reading Paul in his first-century Jewish, as well as Greco-Roman contexts, can continue to challenge previous interpretations. The implications are many, not only for the study of first-century Judaism and Christian origins, but also for improved understanding and relations between Christians and Jews in the years to come.

It is widely agreed that Paul was born and raised a Jew, and observed Judaism according to Pharisaic standards (Rom 9:1-5; 11:1; 2 Cor 11:22; Gal 1:13-16; Phil 3:4-6; cf. Acts 9; 21—26). The challenging question to pose is this: Following his encounter with Christ, did Paul continue to practice Judaism, albeit Christ-believing Judaism, rather than converting from Judaism to a new religion that no longer represented Jewish communal norms, including Torah? If he continued to be a part of Judaism, a reformer from within, in keeping with prophetic tradition,

rather than a critic from outside, then what are the implications for interpreting Paul's letters that follow from this insight?

There are many indications that Paul's way of living continued to be highly observant of Torah, similar to the representation of James and Peter in the Acts of the Apostles. In addition to constant appeals to the authority of Torah to make and prove his positions throughout all of his letters, Paul is portrayed introducing the Apostolic Decree, with its Torah-based norms for the guidance of Christ-believing non-Jews associating with the synagogue communities (Act 15–16), undertaking a Nazarite vow in the Jerusalem Temple to dispel rumors that he was teaching against Torah for Jews, which included a burnt offering (Acts 21), claiming to live blamelessly according to Pharisaic interpretation of Torah, by whose standards he legitimated his own belief in the resurrection of Jesus (Acts 23:6; 24:14-21; Phil 3:5-6), and planning his travel around Jewish festivals, including Shavuot/Pentecost, which celebrates Israel's receipt of Torah at Mt. Sinai as a gift from God (Acts 20:6, 16; 1 Cor 16:8). It is interesting to note that Augustine appealed to Paul's continued observance of Torah in his interpretation of the conflict between Peter and Paul at Antioch (Gal 2:11-15; Augustine, *Letter* 40.3-6, to Jerome), although Jerome took exception to the ideological risk of any Christian, much less an apostle, practicing Torah, an objection which has guided the prevailing views ever since (*Letter* 112.5-18).

The topic of proselyte conversion (signified by circumcision of males) highlights the issues under discussion in Paul's letters to the Romans and Galatians. The entrance of non-Jews into the family of Abraham discussed in these letters is not the same matter as whether Jews should observe Torah, which is not directly raised, but assumed. The implicit logic of Paul's position is that Jews, such as himself, are still to be faithful to their covenant obligations as Israelites, which by definition includes the faithful observance of Torah. It is because Israelites were and are entrusted with the "words of God" for the nations that Paul undertook his mission to declare the gospel to the nations, including to Rome itself (Rom 1:1-7; 3:2; 9:4-5; 10; 15:15-21). For Paul, this privilege constituted an irrevocable promise to Israel (11:28-29). He was certain that "all Israel" would be restored to exercising its special task, a mysterious twist in God's plan that he sought to reveal to the Romans (11:11-15; 25-32).

Note that in 1 Corinthians 7:17-24, Paul says his "rule" in all his assemblies is for everyone to remain in the state they were in when called, whether circumcised or not,

nevertheless that all must "obey the commandments of God." When this rule is coupled with Paul's attestation that anyone in a circumcised state is obliged to observe the whole Torah, in Galatians 5:3, it becomes evident that Paul worked from a propositional logic that required all Jewish Christ-believers to remain faithful to their Jewish covenant identity by the observance of Torah.

This brings us to the topic of non-Jewish Christ-believers. In all of Paul's extant letters, he addresses non-Jews and their concerns, and his for them. Paul believed that he and his fellow Israelites had a special privilege to announce that it was time for the nations to turn to Israel's God as the One God of all humankind. The members of the nations do not become members of the nation Israel when that day arrives; rather, they must remain members of the other nations. But they do become fellow-members of the Jewish communal way of life, of Judaism. They become the rest of the children of Abraham he was led to hope for, because the promise was that he would be "the father of many nations" (Gen 12:1-3; 17; 22:15-18; Rom 4; Gal 3:6-9). As Luke explains in Acts 15, these non-Jews were not to undertake proselyte conversion (i.e., males were not to be circumcised) to become Jews, and thus they were not obligated to observe Torah on the same terms as Jews. But they were obliged to observe Jewish purity norms for righteous members of the nations, because they were entering into a religious life that takes place within the Jewish communities (cf. Rom 6; 14).

It is thus imperative when reading Paul's letters to keep the contextual distinction between instructions designed for these non-Jews, who must remain representatives of the other nations, and thus not become Israelites through proselyte conversion, and the norms upheld for Israelites, such as himself. It is useful to note that there is evidence of other Jewish teachers among Paul's contemporaries who were also against proselyte conversion of non-Jewish worshippers of the One God, albeit for different reasons, as in the example of King Izates discussed by Josephus (*Antiquities* 20.38-42).

One way to help us accomplish this nuanced but historically and theologically important task when reading Paul is to add "for Christ-believing non-Jews" to virtually all of his statements of instruction. Otherwise, the universalizing of such comments as if inclusive of Jews, of everyone regardless of this distinction, misses the thrust of the proposition of his gospel, and leads often to the implicit, when not explicit, view that Paul was against Jewish identity and behavior for Jews.

Paul's basis for his policy of maintaining ethnic (and gender and other forms of) difference in the assemblies of Christ, at the same time denouncing the discrimination generally associated with difference, is based explicitly on the Shema Israel, the sacred prayer of Judaism that declares the oneness of God. Roughly halfway between our time and Paul's, Rashi similarly upheld that the God whom Israelites worship in the present age will be known to be the one God of all the other nations when the age to come arrives (Rashi on Deut 6:4; cf. *Sifre* on Deut 6:4 [Piska 31]). In other words, it was not that other Jews and Jewish groups did not share Paul's conviction that non-Israelites will remain non-Israelite brothers and sisters who will worship together the One God in the age to come, but that other Jewish groups did not believe that the time had come to make this the communal norm in the present age. Paul believed that this age had in fact dawned, but at the same time, paradoxically, that it had not yet arrived in full—in the meantime, it was the responsibility of Christ-following groups to demonstrate the truth of that proposition by remaining different, yet equal: "since God is one" (Rom 3:29-31; 4:9-12; 15:5-12; 1 Cor 8:5-6; Gal 3:28-29). For when that day arrives, just as the wolf will lie down with the lamb, not becoming a lamb, but no longer a threat to it either, so too the members of the nations will join alongside of Israel in worship of the One God of all the *kosmos*, and practice righteousness thereafter (Isa 65:25; cf. 65–66; 2:2-4).

Much has changed since Paul's time and initial understanding of his calling within Judaism to bring about the restoration of all of humankind. Christianity emerged from this subgroup movement among Jews within Judaism, and it found its own voice as a religion that is not Judaism, and that became almost entirely comprised of non-Jews, of people from the nations other than Israel. Rabbinic Judaism has similarly developed in ways that make it quite distinct from Christianity. Nevertheless, there is a symbiotic relationship that cannot be denied in the inceptions of both of these religions during the time that Paul was traveling and writing, prior to the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE.

This relationship has had many dark moments, some painfully recent, and Paul's voice has been all too often invoked by some of the perpetrators. At the same time, it is from the original vision and language of the apostle Paul that *Nostra Aetate* (No. 4) framed a new and promising outlook on Jews as brothers and sisters in the faith of the One God, and Judaism as a sibling's way of expressing that conviction in the world.

Jews and practitioners of Judaism are enormously grateful for the results of such re-interpretations of the Apostle to the nations in the pursuit of truth as well as mutual respect. It is my hope that we can help you nurture new engagements with Paul's letters that will uphold the ideals of the age to come, while earnestly awaiting, and working together, *mutatis mutandis*—for the hope of eternal *shalom*.

For more detailed discussion and bibliography, see Mark D. Nanos, "Paul and Judaism: Why Not Paul's Judaism?," in *Paul Unbound: Other Perspectives on the Apostle* (ed. Mark Douglas Given; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2009).

Mark D. Nanos, Ph.D. (University of St. Andrews, Scotland; [www.marknanos.com](http://www.marknanos.com))  
Rockhurst University, 1100 Rockhurst Road, Kansas City, Missouri 64110, USA

Author: *The Mystery of Romans: The Jewish Context of Paul's Letter* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), winner of The 1996 National Jewish Book Award in Jewish-Christian Relations; *The Irony of Galatians: Paul's Letter in First-Century Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002).