

## Paul and Judaism

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March 28, 2004

Central States SBL, St. Louis, March 28-29, 2004

The title of this paper conforms to the others by design, with Paul on one side of the conjunction “and,” and on the other side, a topic in terms of which to measure Paul. In this case, although this observation applies to several other papers too, the conjunction is really understood to mean “or,” “against,” “outside of,” or even just “not.” Within the tradition of NT studies, a paper with this title would measure *the distance between Paul’s new religion* based upon Jesus Christ *and his former religion*, Judaism. The distance articulated will differ depending upon the presenter, but the perception that these terms signify two fundamentally different religious systems is agreed.

Most interpreters contend that Paul remained a Jew, but few have or would argue that Paul continued to practice Judaism after his experience of faith in Jesus Christ, except as judged necessary in the service of evangelizing those who did practice Judaism. To the degree that Judaism continued to be lived in a meaningful way by Christ-believers, that is, as an expression of faith, this was reserved for so-called Jewish Christianity, represented by James or Peter, a way of interpreting the meaning of Jesus Christ that Paul opposed. Hence, New Testament scholars speak of Paulinism, or Pauline Christianity, with its so-called Law-free Gospel, standing for a Judaism-free way of living because of faith in Jesus Christ.

The recent developments of the so-called new perspective on Paul have challenged the traditional characterizations of the Judaism of Paul’s time as legalistic and arrogantly self-righteous. To date this welcome historical and cross-culturally respectful development has done little to alter the view that Paul as a Christ-believer did not practice the Judaism or Judaisms of his day, and to a large degree even misunderstood them, albeit in different ways than traditionally conceived. For example, consider the often repeated statement by E. P. Sanders that cleverly posed the matter

this way: “*this is what Paul finds wrong in Judaism: it is not Christianity.*”<sup>1</sup> He defines this not to be a critique of “the means of being properly religious,” but of “the prior fundamentals of Judaism: the election, the covenant and the law; and it is because these are wrong that the means appropriate to ‘righteousness according to the law’ (Torah observance and repentance) are held to be wrong or are not mentioned” (551-52).

To my knowledge, what has gone unrecognized is the traditional assumption that remains necessary to Sanders’ turn of phrase. It not only requires the institutional development of Christianity to make sense, however historically unlikely this remains, but it requires a Paul who finds something wrong with Judaism, indeed, with the pillars of Jewish identity and religious values, such as election, covenant, Torah, and repentance—and who does so from outside Judaism rather than from on the inside, since the problem lies *in* the prior fundamentals of Judaism. The problem is not with some or other Judaisms, not with some Jewish people or ideas or institutions or practices, not with some or other Jewish Christians or groups, or their ways of interpreting the meaning of Jesus Christ—but with Judaism, period. Granted, this is not because Judaism was legalistic or based on achieving righteousness by fulfilling commandments rather than by grace, as those whom Sanders criticizes maintained, because he recognized that these were not how Judaism operated.

Sanders does mention the limitation of referring to “Paul and Judaism” in a way that fails to suggest something other than “Paul and *the rest* of Judaism,” but concludes that “the traditional terminology would seem to be justified by his being engaged in a mission which went beyond the bounds of Judaism” (1). For Sanders, Paul’s problem remains with or in Judaism as a system that does not offer salvation in Jesus Christ. But does it not do so? Is it not precisely *within* Judaism where Paul as well as all of the other Jewish and Judean believers in Jesus Christ understood themselves to find Jesus Christ? Did not Paul persecute groups within Judaism for the failure to exemplify Jewish values according to his Jewish group’s terms, and then later, was it not instead those persecuted groups’ values that he upheld as the most representative of Judaism—Judaism as it should and will be when the end of the ages has arrived, having now, however, within Judaism, already dawned? Was he not disciplined as a Jew

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<sup>1</sup> Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 552 (emphasis his).

within Judaism? Even Sanders' argues as much (when discussing Paul's five lashings as evidence that Paul was disciplined within; otherwise, it would not take place).

Rather than seek to discuss the various recent works, which to my mind have not offered significantly different perspectives on this topic, I want to try to identify one issue that might advance the discussion if the various Pauline interpreters would bring research to bear upon it in particular. Let's look a little closer at what Sanders' did. He compared "how *one* gains righteousness" in Paul's system to that of so-called Palestinian Judaism (12; emphasis mine). The Paul he constructed did not share many of the values of the Jewish religious systems to which he compared him. Besides approaching Paul as outside Judaism, I propose that Sanders makes another decisive error that continues to reverberate not only in the work of those who constitute the so-called new perspective, but for those who oppose it too. The question to search out is not how *one* gains righteousness, which poses the topic in universal terms for *everyone*, but how *one not born Jewish* gains equal standing among the righteousness ones. In other words, Sanders should not pose the soteriological concerns of the rabbis in such universal terms as "when a man" (*Paul*, 75); the question, to the degree that male circumcision is central to the discussion, should be either "when a Jewish man," or in this case, since it is to be compared to the "when a non-Jewish man" context of Paul's rhetoric, it should be "how does a non-Jewish man gain righteousness."

When Sanders does look specifically at the question of the inclusion of non-Jews as righteous ones both in this age and in the age to come, he readily admits that unlike the literature addressing the members of the covenant from which he develops the notion of covenantal nomism, "the Gentiles are dealt with only sporadically, however, and different Rabbis had different opinions about their destiny" (207). This fact profoundly alters the interpretive landscape for comparing Paul and Judaism. Unfortunately, to date this distinction, which should be central to the "Paul and" debates, continues to be obscured in the way that the discussion unfolds.

Paul's position should not be universalized across this ethnic boundary; his rhetoric does not do so. And thus it should not be compared to other Jewish sources without this qualification. But it continues to be. So we do not read of "Paul against Torah-observance for non-Jews as if they were under Torah on the same terms as are

Jews,” but of “Paul against Torah-observance,” inferring, “Paul against Torah-observance for all humankind.” But if we were to limit the comparisons to those within Paul’s rhetorical sphere we would find that other Jewish sources also do not believe that non-Jews are obliged to observe Torah on the same terms as Jews. Where we would find a difference is on the question of the standing of non-Jewish people within the community of the people of God in the present age—not even in the age to come, because according to some Judaisms, if you will, the righteous non-Jew can gain equal or even higher standing than (Isa 66:18-20; Zech 2:15; cf. *t. Sanhedrin* 13.2; *b. Megilla* 13a). It is on the question of what is appropriate *now* regarding non-Jews turning to Judaism’s God that a comparison of Paul’s Judaism with other Judaisms exhibits a salient difference of opinion, although not universally, because his Judaism claims that the end of the ages has dawned, and thus, that re-identification of non-Jews takes place on new age terms.

We thus encounter a familiar difference between Jewish groups, one that turns around eschatological convictions; not whether the Torah obtains, but how it functions in the present age, for Jews and non-Jews alike, with differences of opinion emerging along the line marking the views of where humankind is on God’s timeline. It was because of dissident answers to these kinds of questions that the Qumran community of the Righteous Teacher withdrew from the Temple worship of its time. It was because of a deviant answer to the question of what God was doing among the nations that the Christ-believing Jewish groups suffered. Neither group opposed Torah-observance, but they disagreed with the way that other Jewish groups interpreted how Torah was to be observed, given the present circumstances.

Here is a simple suggestion. To be more faithful to the contextual usage of Paul’s language, the interpreter of Paul’s rhetoric should add, “for non-Jewish believers in Jesus Christ” to the end of virtually every characterization of Paul’s position. “Why did Paul oppose circumcision?” misses the point; one should ask “Why did Paul oppose circumcision of non-Jewish believers in Jesus Christ?” There is no reason to believe that Paul opposed circumcision of Jewish born children, and good reason to suppose that he did not. And there is no reason to suppose that he opposed circumcision of non-Jews who were not Christ-believers. At many points the logic of his position suggests that Jewish believers in Christ, including Paul, observed his instruction to remain in the state in which they were called (1 Cor 7:17-24; Gal 2:15; 5:3). In any case, pursuing

clarification of these matter for Jews is not the same task as investigating that which his rhetoric directly addresses, which is about non-Jews.

Let's look at how Paul used the term Judaism and see if my proposition can be initially sustained in that context. Paul uses the word we translate Judaism only two times, and both cases are in Galatians 1:13-14. He writes of "my way of living formerly in Judaism" (ἐμὴν ἀναστροφὴν ποτε ἐν τῷ Ἰουδαϊσμῷ). The clause appears in the midst of a sentence describing a certain feature of his former way of living Jewishly with which his addressees are familiar. That way of living was specifically as one who persecuted the Jewish subgroup communities of believers in Jesus Christ. In further describing that time, he writes that he advanced in the Judaism of his former way of life beyond many of his contemporaries in his ethnic group (προέκοπτον ἐν τῷ Ἰουδαϊσμῷ ὑπὲρ πολλοὺς συνηλικιώτας ἐν τῷ γένει μου), because he possessed more zeal for the "traditions of my fathers."

Traditionally, interpreters have understood Paul to be describing himself as now no longer living in Judaism. But the language Paul uses here arguably describes a certain way of living in Judaism that no longer characterizes the way he lives in Judaism now, one that included a more zealous approach than that of his fellows to protecting the traditions of the fathers against what was considered by him to be a threat posed by the Christ-believing Jewish subgroups. Paul does not specify what they were doing that he deemed so threatening, but interpreters have generally understood it to be a lax attitude toward Torah observance, perhaps even outright renunciation—proto-Paulinism, you might say.<sup>2</sup> The issues of the letter,<sup>3</sup> and the topic of his calling as described in v. 16, to proclaim God's son to the nations, suggest to me that Paul objected specifically to the policy of regarding non-Jews who believed in Jesus Christ as full equal members without becoming Jews, as children of Abraham apart from proselyte conversion. If so, what motivated Paul's zealous response was not a failure to observe Torah by Jewish members, but a change of policy toward the identification of non-Jewish co-participants, who would be regarded in the state that they were not as mere guests, as they were in other Jewish groups when not proselytes,

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<sup>2</sup> Traditional views and her interesting proposal are described by Fredriksen, "Another Look," 248-55.

<sup>3</sup> Nanos, *Irony*.

but as members in full standing on the same terms as proselytes, while insisting that they were not proselytes, not members of Israel, but representatives of the nations.<sup>4</sup>

Paul refers to a specific way of living Jewishly, that is, among those Jews who looked to the traditions of the fathers for authority. Based upon his arguments throughout Galatians, and especially the dissociating of his authority as directly from God and not human agencies and agents, I believe that Paul seeks to remind the addressees that what he taught them ran against the prevailing views of Jewish groups that looked to the traditions of the fathers on the matter at hand, the place of proselyte conversion for non-Jewish believers in Christ. In the present age those who protect this view among Jewish groups may have the authority to compel compliance, but the non-Jewish addressees are to resist that authority and suffer any consequences required, awaiting God's vindication of their righteous standing according to the message he had proclaimed. He argues that he too suffers for this policy, and does not alter his course to seek the relief that could be gained by relaxing it (5:11).

Paul does not expect approval by other Judaisms for his way of incorporating non-Jews according to the revelation of Christ, and he tells this story to serve as an example to his non-Jewish addressees that they should not expect approval of their identity claims by other Judaisms either. This intra-group disapproval extends not only to Paul, however independent his ministry among the non-Jews has been, but to the other apostles of this coalition too, who stand up for the same principle truth of the message Paul delivered to the Galatian addressees, albeit sometimes a bit too tentatively for Paul's taste (cf. 2:1-21).

In Paul's Judaism, non-Jews do not become proselytes after becoming believers in Jesus Christ, for doing so would undermine the propositional truth upon which their faith is based, namely, that in Jesus Christ the end of the ages has dawned. Incorporating non-Jews into the people of God in the present age as proselytes according to the traditions of the fathers is no longer halakhically warranted. This is not because Paul or the non-Jewish addressees are no longer a part of Judaism, but because

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<sup>4</sup> I am suggesting here an alternative that Fredriksen, "Another Look," does not discuss, although a variation of one she dismisses on 251, on the grounds that it was not objectionable for Jewish groups to include Gentiles. The difference is that she is dealing with a proposition that these Gentiles were merely guests, while I am proposing that the Gentiles in these groups were being identified and treated as full members in a way other Jewish groups reserved for proselytes.

they are members of a particular Judaism, a Jewish coalition which understands itself in the role of the remnant representing the interests and eventual destiny of the whole cloth, of every Jewish group and way of living Jewishly, in other words, it lives on behalf of every Judaism and every Jewish person, not against them (Rom 9—11). In this service it does not reject Torah, but develops halakhah that articulates the appropriate way to observe Torah now, in view of the revelation of Christ that the representatives of the nations are not to become Israelites, but to join with Israelites in a new community adumbrating the restoration of all humankind.

The evaluate Paul's rhetoric we must decide or otherwise assume what his audience knows about him, often firsthand. Paul's interpreters have proceeded on the basis that his addressees know him to live a Torah-free life. However, the opposite hypothesis should be tested. For if Paul writes from within a Judaism, if, for example, he is Torah-observant, eating according to prevailing halakhic conventions for Diaspora Jews in each location he visits, respecting the ideals of Temple worship in the ways that religiously observant Diaspora Jews do, then his polemical language would carry a very different valiance for those it addressed. Consider, for example, Gal 5:3, where Paul seeks to undermine the addressees' confidence that they have proper motives for considering the social advantages proselyte conversion appears to offer, putting in doubt the motives of those influencing them also, he argues that if they are circumcised they will be responsible to observe the whole Torah. To carry weight this rhetoric bespeaks knowledge of Paul as a Torah-protector, since he is a Jewish person by birth, one who has, in keeping with his teaching, remained in that circumcised state in which he was called (1 Cor 7:17-24; 2 Cor 11:22; Phil 3:4-7). Otherwise, they would be expected to reply that they simply want what Paul has achieved, the advantage of traditionally accepted social identity for those claiming to be full members within these Jewish groups, without the obligation to observe the Torah. Consistent with this observation, Paul instructs his non-Jewish addressees to remain in their non-Jewish state, although, importantly, in a way that represents righteousness according to Jewish norms for defining human behavior (further evidence of his continued perspective from within Judaism). Even the love to which they are called to work out their faith by way of is an articulation of the Torah (Gal 5:6, 13-14). In doing so, they represent the nations turning from idolatry to worship Israel's Lord as the One God of all humankind (Rom 3:29-31).

The investigation of Paul *and* Judaism has traditionally proceeded as if what was written was Paul *or* Judaism, with the understanding that these referents represent two different religious systems, but in the sense of Paul *within* or *for* or *representing* Judaism, even a Judaism, little work has been done to date. Interpreters do not write of Paul's Judaism or the Judaism of Paul, and never of Judaism's Paul. The two are different, and something must be wrong with one or the other. I believe that this essentializing of difference and concomitant requirement to find fault will continue to the degree that the ethnic division that Paul's letters draw along a Jew/Gentile and Israel/other-Nations line within a Christ-believing Judaism continues to be approached by his interpreters as if drawn along a Judaism/Christianity line instead. Successfully challenging the implicit as well as explicit negative valuations of Judaism that persist in most work on this topic, especially among Paulinists who embrace this view as ideologically important, depends upon attending to the particular contexts of Paul's rhetorical concerns for non-Jews, instead of universalizing them to everyone, Jew and non-Jew alike. The particular should not be confused with the absolute. In my view, this is what Paul would find wrong with Paulinism: it is not a Judaism.

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