THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF

PAULINE STUDIES
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PAULINE

STUDIES

Edited by
MATTHEW V. NOVENSON
and
R. BARRY MATLOCK

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Abbreviations in this volume follow the convention of *The SBL Handbook of Style*, 2nd ed. (Atlanta, SBL Press, 2014).
This volume has taken a rather circuitous path to publication. The project began under the wise editorship of Barry Matlock, who originally contracted most of the essays in the table of contents. A few years along the way, however, Matlock handed over editorship to me, Matthew Novenson. I brought the volume to completion by collecting the essays contracted by Matlock and contracting quite a few more. One happy consequence of this unusual process is that our contributors run the gamut from very senior professors to early-career researchers. Together they offer, in addition to their outstanding expertise in the subject matter, a valuable snapshot of the field in the early twenty-first century. I owe thanks to Barry Matlock for his outstanding formative work on this project and to Tom Perridge, Karen Raith, Katie Bishop, and Vicki Sunter, along with their crack team at Oxford University Press, for seeing the whole thing through from beginning to end. I wish that I had had this book years ago when I was a green graduate student trying to learn my way around the bewildering field of Pauline studies, and I hope that the book will now be a help to many others.

Matthew V. Novenson
Edinburgh, October 2021
The letters of the apostle Paul comprise a tiny corpus, even if we include the many pseudonymous ones (White 2014; Hart 2020; Petroelje forthcoming). The canonical ones make up not even half of the New Testament, itself a very small literary canon. It might seem strange, then, to compile a major reference work such as this, an entire Oxford Handbook, just on Pauline studies. So tremendously, inordinately influential, however, have the letters of Paul been—and continue to be—that it would take a book far bigger than this one to trace the lines of that influence (compare, for instance, the colossal *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception* [Allison et al. 2009–]). The more modest goal of this book is to give an early twenty-first-century snapshot of what we collectively know about the figure of Paul, his historical contexts, his literary output, his major ideas, and his relevance to other fields of human knowledge. That will be enough.

1. Circumscribing ‘Pauline Studies’

It matters that this is a handbook of Pauline studies. It could conceivably have been either narrower (e.g., a handbook of Paul) or broader (e.g., a handbook of New Testament studies). But ‘Pauline studies’—meaning, for our present purposes, the whole field of research around the apostle Paul, the authentic texts (more or less) from his own hand, other ancients texts falsely attributed to him, the numerous early Christian legends about him, and the many meanings that have been and still are made of these texts—is a fitting subject matter for a volume of this size and shape, as in the similar case, for instance, of the excellent *Oxford Handbook of Johannine Studies* (Lieu and De Boer 2018). Pauline studies as a field is just broad enough and narrow enough to warrant the amount and the kind of analytical attention given to it here.

For better or worse—in fact, I think, for better *and* worse, in particular respects—an immense and complex field of research has grown up around this very small corpus of texts. Paul has a reception-historical afterlife out of all proportion to his modest extant
oeuvre. In antiquity, this influence was related to Paul’s early date, the literary footprint of his letters in Christian canons, his popularity among diverse sects of Christians, and the importance of his ideas to Marcionism, anti-Marcionism, and other early Christian theologies (see Wiles 1967; Pagels 1975; Lindemann 1979; White 2014; Strawbridge 2015). In the modern period, Paul’s outsize influence has been closely related to the historical vicissitudes of the European churches, in particular the rise of global Protestantism downstream from Martin Luther, who adopted Paul as his apostolic muse (Allen and Linebaugh 2015; Chester 2017; Lincicum 2017; Novenson forthcoming). The institutional Protestantism of many modern European and colonial universities then paved the way for the embrace of Paul as a kind of secular saint (or sinner, depending on who is telling the story) in the humanities beyond theology and religion. So it came to pass that modern Pauline studies includes the work not only, as we might expect, of eminent theologians like Schleiermacher, Harnack, and King, but also towering philosophers and social scientists like Hegel, Nietzsche, and Freud (Blanton 2007; Gray 2016; Tofighi 2017).

The approach of this handbook is to take the field of Pauline studies as it is, in all its bewildering variety, and to orient the reader to it. This volume is not a manifesto for what I (the editor) or we (the contributors) think the field should be, although the individual contributors sometimes signal their respective views on that question. There is a long history of, and still today a vogue for, manifesto-writing in Pauline studies; indeed, that is no small part of the history of the field. (Nor am I completely innocent of it myself.) But a reference work such as this should, at the very least, do the reader the courtesy of orienting her to all corners of the field. And your editor is enough of a hermeneutical relativist to think that all those corners are there for a reason, that they represent the many different questions and interests that readers bring to the letters of Paul (Stout 1982; Stout 1986; Novenson forthcoming). There will always be some interpreters who judge some of those questions and interests to be too pious, or too impious, or too antiquarian, or too anachronistic, and so on. But most such complaints, in my view, come down to a failure to understand why another group of readers (historians, or theologians, or Catholics, or Pentecostals, or Jews, or women, or Black readers, or LGBTQ readers, etc.) might reasonably have the questions they do. My editorial approach, then, is to embrace the big tent of Pauline studies and to supply you, the reader, with expert tour guides to its many corners.

2. Whence, Where, and Whither

Any volume such as this will necessarily be a product of its own time, and this is a particularly interesting moment at which to take stock of Pauline studies. The field has always been pluriform, but there have been times when one could easily point to a single hypothesis or movement dominating discussion. As things stand presently, however, there arguably is no one centre to the field, but rather a number of important
conversations happening simultaneously, sometimes engaging with one another, sometimes not. Indeed, this state of affairs is in no small part a result of recent reckoning with earlier, more hegemonic movements in the field, e.g., interwar German theological interpretation, the late twentieth-century British ‘New Perspective’, and other such (see the century-old but still fascinating Schweitzer 1912). One might lament, and some have lamented, the current situation as an unfortunate balkanization of the field, but there are equally good or better reasons to welcome it as an expanding of Horizons. It just means that one must read a bit more widely in order to keep up (see Zetterholm 2009; Marchal 2012; Wright 2015).

In a sense, there have been ‘Pauline studies’, of a sort, almost as far back as the lifetime of the apostle himself. As Margaret Mitchell, in particular, has shown (Mitchell 2010), the hermeneutical struggle to make sense of Paul’s words is a feature already of Paul’s correspondence with the Christ-assembly in Corinth, in which we find multiple instances of understanding, misunderstanding, restatement, clarification, etc. This struggle continues and accelerates in first- and second-century Pauline pseudepigrapha and Acta, and it takes on an exegetical form in ecclesiastical writers like Valentinus, Marcion, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, and their many successors. In a sense, modern Pauline studies continues this very ancient conversation. Modern Christian theological interpreters, in particular, often express a strong affinity with (some of) these ancient Christian readers (Steinmetz 1980; Rowe 2016), even if they are separated—as in fact they are—by many centuries of cultural, philosophical, scientific, and other developments.

Because the letters of Paul are a prominent part of Christian Scripture, the study of Paul has for centuries been an especially Christian undertaking (but see Langton 2010; Gager 2015; Gray 2016; Akhtar 2018). And in the last five centuries, not just Christian, but specifically Protestant. As I have written elsewhere, ‘Because Protestants have done a great deal of their theology by reading Paul, the modern critical study of Paul has tended to happen especially (though by no means exclusively) in Protestant institutional spaces: Tübingen, Marburg, Cambridge, Durham, Princeton, New Haven, etc. Not so much Rome, Leuven, South Bend, or Jerusalem—until relatively recently, that is, much to the benefit of the discipline’ (Novenson forthcoming). The eighteenth-century rise of historical criticism of the Bible and the twentieth-century establishment of many non-sectarian departments of religious studies have nudged the study of Paul in a more diverse, less pious direction (McCutcheon 2001; Legaspi 2010; Moore and Sherwood 2011), but only nudged (he writes from his office in a historically Calvinist theological faculty in northern Europe).

It was in these European (especially German) Protestant universities that the modern critical study of Paul got up and running over the course of the nineteenth century. It was part of the project of the critical study of the Bible more generally (Purvis 2016; Kurtz 2018), but Paul always enjoyed a certain pride of place. F. C. Baur and his Tübingen school deserve no little credit, or blame, for this development (Bauspiess et al. 2017). Baur’s younger contemporary J. B. Lightfoot was a leading British counterpart to, and critic of, Baur (Neill and Wright 1988). And it is no accident that German and English
are still, far and away, the most used language mediums in Pauline studies today (exhibit A: this handbook). Over the course of the twentieth century, the centre of gravity in the field shifted, and is still shifting, in fits and starts, from Europe to the former European colonies abroad (Segovia 2000; Stiebert and Dube 2018).

Like languages, however, theological ideas are remarkably durable, so that even as Pauline studies has migrated to North America, Oceania, Asia, the Middle East, and elsewhere, much of the discussion has continued to run in the grooves carved out by Luther, Baur, and a few influential others. Indeed, it is still often said—not entirely inaccurately—that up until 1977 Pauline studies was dominated by a single, more or less homogeneous ‘Old Perspective’. That is a gross overstatement, but, again, not entirely inaccurate (Westerholm 2004). That 1977 watershed, which only attained watershed status in revisionist histories of the field from the 1980s (beginning with Dunn 1983), was E. P. Sanders’s remarkable book *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Sanders 1977), in which Sanders immodestly laid the axe to the root of the whole Luther- and Baur-inflected field of Pauline studies. Sanders rightly perceived that the field had long had a perverse fixation with Paul’s ostensible difference from and superiority to Judaism, and he exposed and deconstructed this fixation with devastating effectiveness.

If any twentieth-century work has a claim to have resounded throughout all of Pauline studies, it is surely Sanders’s, and yet even he does not speak for the field in toto. Very nearly contemporaneously with Sanders, there was epoch-making work happening in feminist criticism of Paul, represented in particular by the work of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1983 and 1984). Her research was arguably just as paradigm-changing as Sanders’s, and with the passage of time it is having just as seismic an impact on the field (Levine 2003; Levine 2004; Ehrensperger 2004; Sherwood 2017). But wait, there’s more. Lisa Bowens (2020) has recently documented how, right through the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, there was a vast, complicated tradition of African-American interpretation of Paul that only occasionally intersected with the better-known, university-based mainstream (cf. also Blount 2001). So even back in the old days when there was supposedly one dominant perspective, there was not just one dominant perspective.

In this sense, we might say that Pauline studies today is not actually more pluriform than it was in the past, just much more self-aware about its pluriformity. This is all for the good, but it makes the question what to do next more difficult. One cannot just take for granted what the questions are and then write the next response to Baur, or Bultmann, or Sanders, or whomever. One must—if one is to be responsible about it—think hard about which questions to ask, which reading strategies to use, which interlocutors to engage, which audiences to address, which projects to undertake. This can admittedly feel like an overwhelming prospect, but that way lies moral responsibility and interesting scholarship (Schüssler Fiorenza 1988; Bockmuehl 2006; Dinkler 2019). This handbook is, in a sense, a guide to the many different questions, reading strategies, interlocutors, audiences, and projects of which all readers should be aware and from which any reader might choose, depending on her particular goals. Such a guide, it seems to me, is something eminently worth having.
Far be it from me to prognosticate on the future of Pauline studies, but I am, at least, in favour of there being such a thing (cf. Matlock 1998; Concannon 2016; Concannon 2021). Because the field has grown so large and so densely populated while the corpus of source texts remains so very small, Pauline studies is one of those fields about which one hears occasional cries of ‘No more!’ And there is very good reason, indeed, to question the value added by ever more niche readings of ever smaller portions of text. But there is also some of the biggest, boldest new research in a generation or two happening at the very same time. Therefore I, for one, am chastened but optimistic. A moratorium on the study of Paul would be self-defeating, and not practicable in any case, like forbidding everyone from studying Plato, or Spanish, or violin. Pauline studies can, should, and almost certainly will continue. It is overwhelmingly likely to be a great deal more demographically diverse (in terms of race, gender, religious affiliation, and more) than in generations past, and the particular topics of conversation will change accordingly. Onward, then.

3. The Handbook in Outline

This handbook is subdivided into five main sections. Parts I and II together cover the waterfront of issues related to Paul as a historical actor. Part I: Paul the Person is largely biographical, sketching a life of the man himself to the (limited) extent that it is possible to do so. Calvin Roetzel and Julia Snyder discuss, from different angles, the historical challenges posed by the often quite fabulous early Christian accounts of Paul, while Paula Fredriksen, Eckhard Schnabel, Ann Jervis, and Loveday Alexander consider some key categories in which Paul can plausibly be said to fit. Part II: Paul in Context takes a wider-angle perspective on numerous aspects of Paul’s ancient Mediterranean context: archaeological (Cavan Concannon), imperial (Paul Trebilco), ethnic (Magnus Zetterholm), economic (Bruce Longenecker), philosophical (Troels Engberg-Pedersen), and religious (Emma Wasserman).

Part III: Pauline Literature takes a turn to the literary, looking in detail at the letters, manuscripts, and canons that constitute most of our extant evidence for the apostle. Laura Dingeldein discusses epistolography and Lauri Thurén rhetoric. Harry Gamble traces the formation of the Pauline corpus and Michael Holmes the text of that corpus. Andrew Das surveys recent scholarship on the authentic letters of Paul and Margaret MacDonald the Deutero-Pauline letters. Part IV: Pauline Theology examines a number of classic motifs in what moderns have called ‘Pauline theology’. Some of these essays take their lead from traditional theological loci: Richard Bauckham on Christology, T. J. Lang on cosmology and eschatology, Simon Gathercole on justification by faith, and David Horrell on ethics. Others take their lead from some of Paul’s own key words: Francis Watson on Scripture, Michael Thompson on Jesus, and Matthew Thiessen and Paula Fredriksen on Israel. Still others take up themes that are famously, specifically Pauline: Nijay Gupta on \textit{pistis Christou} (‘trust of Christ’), John Barclay on grace or gift, and Susan Eastman on participation in Christ.
Finally, Part V: Approaches to Paul considers the many productive reading strategies with which recent interpreters have made meaning of the letters of Paul. These include time-honoured approaches like theological interpretation (Stephen Fowl) and reception history (John Riches), other humanistic disciplines like social sciences (Todd Still) and philosophy (Ward Blanton), and a number of rubrics drawn in particular from literary theory: ethnicity (Caroline Johnson Hodge), spatiality (Jorunn Økland), politics (Davina Lopez and Todd Penner), colonialism (Joseph Marchal), feminism (Kathy Ehrensperger), and sexuality (Dale Martin). The lesson of Part V—which makes a fitting conclusion to the volume—is that 'reading Paul' is not, and never has been, just one thing. It has always been a matter of the particular questions and interests that the reader brings to these very generative texts.

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PART I

PAUL THE PERSON
1. **Introduction**

Pauline scholars once focused single-mindedly on his theology, and that focus though rich and sincere often pushed aside consideration of the man and his myths. This emphasis on his theology privileged Romans as the quintessential summary of Paul’s thought, and assigned to his other letters a provisional status. After Bultmann’s focus on Paul’s anthropology, however, students more often attended to the human Paul and the myths he inspired and inhabited. In this essay I join those students in my treatment of the man and the myth.

Paul’s seven undisputed letters offer our best portrait of a theologizer who profoundly influenced the early Jesus movement. He did not begin his ministry with a finished theology that he simply imposed as a template on every context. Through his letters we witness the refinement of Paul’s thinking in a crucible of fiery conflict and abuse. The letters chronicle the physical and psychological stress Paul suffered, the perils he faced, the urgent questions he heard, and the challenges he encountered as he advocated a radical apocalyptic gospel for non-Jews. The undisputed letters pull the veil aside so we can observe Paul’s apostolic mission, the responses it provoked, the genius it encouraged, the Jesus movement it shaped, and the early gospel tradition (for example, Mark) it influenced. The letter form he so skilfully employed took life after his death in six others interpreting Paul for another day. It is misleading, therefore, to ignore the dynamic of this sometimes ugly process in favour of the use of a theological finished product as the metric of truth in Paul’s letters.

While the casual reader may associate the word ‘myth’ with fantasy or untruth, I go with the root meaning of *mythos* as sacred ‘story’ or non-literal truth (Roetzel 2009b: 127–139). While stories of demons, gods, necromancers, conversing snakes, talking donkeys, flying magicians, and singing angels may belong to humanity’s naïve and ignorant infancy to some, to others they signify less a literal account of what happened than a poetic response to what happened; to others they offer signifiers of an
internal history of a people. These poetic imaginings often seem to transcend poetry and to be like the art that Picasso defined as ‘a lie that makes us realize the truth.’ Thus myth offers to a perceptive reader an insight into the inner meaning of history.

To be distinguished from metaphor that provokes thought (for example, ‘chauvinist pig’), myth informs the cult and imaginatively transports to distant times and places. For example, when untravelled participants in the Passover say, ‘We were slaves in Egypt’, a different level of reality emerges that informs, guides, shapes thought, and reminds who they are. When Christians break bread and drink wine to the solemn words, ‘This is my body’ and ‘This is my blood’, they enter a sacred time and space framing their identity. While such high ritualistic moments are mythic and provide an important bridge connecting the present to the past, some apprehension of myth is essential also for understanding Paul. Whether one actually places oneself in such a world of larval beasts fighting angels of light, to understand Paul aright one must suspend judgement on the reality of such a mythic contest and through active imagination image that world.

In the following pages we shall explore that dimension of Paul’s world. We shall overhear a conversation between Paul and a lion; we shall be privileged witnesses of the baptism of a talking lion; and we shall explore some but not all mythic aspects of the letters. The modern reader may cluck at stories of Paul shaking a biting poisonous snake into a campfire, or may think Paul’s view of evil personified quite strange, or may smile in amusement at conversations between Paul and a lion turned saviour, or wonder at Paul’s seemingly superstitious recall of bodily flight into a third heaven; but if we dismiss this type of thinking as only childlike fantasy we shall miss the depth of Paul’s thought altogether and also that of his later interpreters. I hold that during the demands placed on him by the confused and conflicting claims of the advocates of the emergent Jesus movement, Paul would hardly have had the leisure to finger Romans as the most apt and complete theological expression of his thought. Here we shall be sympathetic but not literal readers of these mythic constructions.

2. Paul of Tarsus

Our first task, however, will be to view Paul in his geographical context in Tarsus. His habitat was a Hellenized, cosmopolitan one that nurtured and shaped his outlook. There Paul heard and spoke Greek, attended his first school, learned the arts of persuasion (rhetoric), practised letter writing, studied mathematics and geography, and immersed himself in the study of Scripture and Jewish practice. No mere passive tool, stiff and mute, to be used and discarded after use, Paul’s Greek language shaped his thought as much as it expressed it. In that urban Tarsus he learned about categorization, that is, lists of virtues and vices, how catalogues of suffering functioned, and traits of friendship. He practised the illustrative powers of allegory, heard of the legacy of wars, and learned the concepts of athletic competition. This Tarsus experience would later rise up to insinuate
itself into Paul’s arguments (Rom 5–6; Gal 4:22–31, etc.) and guide his understanding of the religious and human.

The fruit of the exchange between the two worlds—Hellenistic and Jewish—that Paul inhabited lingered to enrich and inspire subsequent thought. The influence of the Hellenistic vernacular manifested itself robustly in the Greek translation of Paul’s Hebrew Scriptures (that is, the Septuagint, hereafter LXX). That language treasure bequeathed to him more than a simple translation of the primal Hebrew texts; it was itself an interpretation of those texts. In place of the Hebrew names for God—Yahweh, Elohim, El Shaddai, Yahweh Sabaoth, El Elyon, Adonai, and so forth—the Greek offered instead the generic theos (God) or kurios (Lord). The Septuagintal portrait of God was less anthropomorphic, more universalistic, more tolerant, more abstract, more prone to smooth out crudities, and more eager to solve the enigmas than its Hebrew source. The translators felt free to interpret, to improvise, to edit, to combine, to select, and to adapt the base text to meet new contingencies. While these insertions into the Hebrew text did aim to preserve the sense of the base, the LXX created its own idiom and led to some stunning changes. For example, where the MT (Hebrew text) has ‘Yahweh is a man of war’ (author’s translation) the LXX translators rendered, ‘The Lord is the one who causes wars to cease’ (author’s translation, Exod 15:3). Where the Hebrew name for God took the plural form, Elohim, ‘You shall not revile Elohim’ (Exod 22:28), the LXX offered a prescription for tolerance: ‘You shall not revile the gods’. Where the MT had a refusal to disclose the ineffable divine name Yahweh (‘I am who I am’), the LXX substituted an abstraction, ‘I am the Being (ho ōn)’ (Exod 3:14). In making these shifts, the translators often missed the nuance and subtlety of their base, but sometimes they gave it a more humanistic nuance, and a more inclusive reach. This LXX was in Paul’s blood; it shaped his vision of the world, informed his anthropology, inspired his gospel’s reach, and authorized his apostolic call. The language of the LXX was almost sacramental for Diaspora Jews like Paul. It was accessible to the average, literate person or illiterate person; it was publicly celebrated, and non-Jews read it with interest. Paul’s memory bank of scriptural texts was filled almost exclusively with Septuagintal texts.

While Paul fed on the alluring and culturally rich Hellenistic culture, the dominant political fact of his day was the Roman imperial presence. Messiah Jesus after all was condemned and crucified as a felon by Roman order. The burning and outstanding historical question vis-à-vis that hegemonic presence still remains unresolved, namely, was Paul a Roman citizen? Luke’s Acts unambiguously answers in the positive by having Paul claim citizenship status as a defence against false and malicious charges made ‘by the Jews’ (22:25–29). Since Paul’s undisputed letters nowhere claim Roman citizenship even when it would have helped, one’s decision on this issue depends almost entirely on a judgement about the historicity of the Acts account.

Some scholars argue that Luke’s attribution of Roman citizenship to Paul served his apologetic interest and is, therefore, historically suspect. By emphasizing his Roman citizenship, Luke was able to make a case for Paul’s innocence when members of the Jesus movement were under suspicion for rejecting the imperial cult, for refusing military service, and for following a crucified felon. Moreover, if Acts were a second-century
document (Pervo 2006), then a Christian martyr tradition was taking shape that included such notable figures as James, John, Peter, Paul, Ignatius, and other victims of Roman ‘justice’. This grim reality might easily have inspired Luke’s insistence on the ‘innocence’ of Jesus and Paul, and sparked his apology for Paul’s citizenship to suggest that the Jesus movement was innocent of any subversive activity.

Although the evidence weighs against Luke’s attribution of Paul’s Roman citizenship, an element of truth remains in this historical assertion nevertheless. From the time of Julius Caesar (d. 44 BCE) until after the time of Constantine, ethnic Jews enjoyed the guaranteed right to practise their ancestral religion, to govern themselves by their own laws, and to enjoy administrative and judicial autonomy so long as they remained loyal to Rome. In Tarsus Paul would have enjoyed membership in such an autonomous politeuma, that is, a colony or association that became the locus of Jewish identity. Membership in such a politeuma thus placed Paul in an intermediate position between Roman citizenship and resident alien, and would provide a basis for an appeal. Moreover, it is difficult to imagine Paul participating in an emperor cult that required that some token of reverence for Roman deities be given. Also, Paul’s report of imprisonment in Asia, his impending trial and the genuine threat of imminent execution (2 Cor 1:8–10) is difficult to understand if he were a Roman citizen. Luke’s insistence, however, on the innocence of both Jesus (Luke 23:47) and Paul (Acts 25:25; 26:31–32) sounds like an apology for a sect under suspicion that was unable to claim the rights to practise their ancestral religion that were guaranteed to Jews.

3. Paul, the ‘Pharisee’

Philippians 3:2–6 offers a glimpse of church ‘dogs’ ‘who mutilate the flesh’ and denigrate Paul. Their repudiation of Paul’s circumcision-free Gentile gospel sparked the retort:

If any other man thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcision on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law a Pharisee (kata nomon Pharisaios), as to zeal a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. (3:4–6; my emphasis)

Similarly, Luke’s Acts expanded Paul’s Pharisaic claim by giving voice to his retort, ‘Brothers, I [also] am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees’ (23:6, RSV adapted, my emphasis). Later, Luke set Paul before Agrippa and had him assert, ‘I have belonged to the strictest sect of our religion and lived as a Pharisee’ (Acts 26:4, my emphasis). Acts also expanded Paul’s defence before Jewish accusers claiming to have been ‘brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel educated strictly according to our ancestral law’.

While many take these Lukan accounts as historical, one wonders why Galatians 1:14 has Paul claim advancement in Judaism beyond ‘many of my own age among my people’
and boast of his zeal ‘for the traditions of my fathers’ (Gal 1:14) but did not mention his Pharisaism. To that *argumentio ex silentio* Luke’s filling the gaps the letters left and his discrediting Jewish opponents raise questions about the veracity of the claims he attributes to Paul. Moreover, Paul’s phrase *kata nomon Pharisaios* in Philippians 3:5 would be better understood as ‘in matters of law, I agree with the Pharisaic interpretation’ (Overman 2002: 182–192; Phil 3:5). Therefore, I take Paul’s Philippians remark to mean that he shared a Pharisaic point of view without necessarily implying that he was a ‘card carrying’ Pharisee.

While indisputably Paul’s letters do reveal certain Pharisaic inclinations, the evidence weighs against his being schooled in Jerusalem ‘at the feet’ of Gamaliel. Had he studied Hebrew texts there for years at the feet of Gamaliel, his almost exclusive appeal to the Greek scriptures would be unusual, and his statement that he was unknown by sight in Judaea (Gal 1:8) would sound strange had he spent years there studying. These points hardly prove that Paul could not have studied there. Given the currency of Greek in Jerusalem, his later preference for Greek over Hebrew is understandable. And years of study in Jerusalem could hardly guarantee that he would be known by sight by Jesus people years later. Nevertheless, Paul’s thorough Hellenization makes a Diaspora city (like Tarsus) more likely as the city of his formative years. That being likely, from whence then came Paul’s preference for Pharisaism? Even though Pharisaism outside Palestine in an impure land sounds unlikely, the clear preference for Pharisaic tradition by Josephus in Rome and Philo in Egypt makes Paul’s inclination towards liberal Pharisaic ways in Diaspora Tarsus credible.

### 4. Paul the Exegete: Spiritualization of Text and Tradition

The genesis of Pharisaism is most often traced to the mid-second century BCE, when Jonathan the Maccabean military governor presumed to claim also the powerful office of high priest. The combination of the two rendered impure all temple service over which he presided, and so offended priests *and* laity that both withdrew. Temple priests withdrew to the Dead Sea Qumran site to form an Essene community preparing for the end time. Laity separated to become Pharisees (that is, separated ones). To maintain a religiosity pure and undefiled, the Pharisees treated all daily life as a temple service. Board and bed, street and home, body and soul, work and play all were treated as arenas of a spiritualized temple service. Unsurprisingly, this egalitarian, lay, liberal sectarian movement became the most popular among the Jews (Josephus, *JW* 2.162–163); its readings were the preferred interpretations of the laws and its understanding of ritual purity extended far beyond the protocol for temple sacrifice.

The Pharisees espoused an outlook that was broadly text-based, extending far beyond the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible) to include the Prophets
(such as Jeremiah and Isaiah) and Writings (such as Psalms and Daniel). Paul’s Pharisaic inclinations, however, retained their rootedness in the Pentateuch. Note his frequent appeal to Genesis and Exodus and Leviticus. That rootedness manifested itself in his Pharisaic admonition to his readers to present their ‘bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God which is your spiritual worship’ (Rom 12:1). Like Philo, another Diaspora Jew with Pharisaic inclinations holding the soul as a temple of God (Spec. I, 66), Paul repeatedly called his Corinthians to their temple status (1 Cor 3:16f.; 6:19; 2 Cor 6:16) and its demand for purity (1 Cor 3:26; Rom 14:26).

Likewise, hardly any boundary marker was more definitive for Jews than circumcision. Recognized as a sign of inclusion in the embrace of God’s covenant people, both Paul and Philo spiritualized this sacred marker. Philo spoke of circumcision as the excision of unholy desire, whereas Paul so spiritualized the meaning to make it refer to ‘a matter of the heart, spiritual and not literal’ (Rom 2:29) and to refer to Gentile believers as those ‘who worship God in spirit’ (Phil 3:3).

5. The Quest for Holiness

Integral to Pharisaic piety was the divine imperative to ‘be holy’ (Lev 19:2; 20:7–8; 21:6, etc.). This command obligated Israel to separate itself from the profane world. It eschewed incest, temple prostitution, and sexual intercourse with a woman in her impurity, repudiated occult wizards and mediums (Lev 20:27), and prescribed love for the neighbour (Lev 19:11–18). It demanded reverence for the holy name, and an affirmation of the oneness and purity of the Holy One who keeps covenant and guarantees the future (Lev 26:44). Conceived in the Babylonian exile, a historical catastrophe of epic proportions, a holiness code (similar to Lev 17–26) operated to mark and maintain Jewish identity. The Babylonian Empire could destroy the holy place, uproot families, decimate the population leaving dead bodies stacked like cord wood, and leave starving parents to feed on the flesh of their children (Lev 26:29–30), but the conquerors could not rob the exiles of the laws that set them apart as God’s people. This mandate to holiness (Lev 20:26) ordered a chaotic world, separated the captives from the captors, and assured survival by reinforcing the distinction between the holy and the unholy, the sacred and the profane, the pure and the impure, the covenant people and the other. Observance of the holiness code was a defiant act; its emphasis on a covenant with the Holy One and its demand to perform holy deeds reminded the people of who they were, exposed the absurdity of Babylonian tyranny, and kept alive the hope of return.

As one partial to Pharisaism, Paul shared the emphasis on holiness. Paul shared the stress of Pharisaism on God as the source of holiness (Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:2), and to that he added an apocalyptic emphasis on the holy God’s current presence in a holy spirit (1 Cor 6:19; 3:17; 12:3; 2 Cor 13:13; Rom 5:5; 8:27; 9:1; 14:17; 15:13, 16, 19; 1 Thess 1:5; 4:8). That holy spirit interceded with the spirit of the believer ‘with sighs too deep for words’ (Rom 8:26) and spurred converts on to bear fruit for holiness (1 Cor 1:2, 30; Rom 1:6–7; Gal 5:22).
Paul shared the tradition that associated covenant with the holy God that shaped identity. In all of his letters save Galatians Paul addressed his cell of converts as 'holy ones' (hagioi) (not 'saints') in the process of learning who they were and what they were for. 1 Corinthians, for example, urged the assembly to actualize the connection between holy God and holy people by sharing a common mind for the common good (3:16–17).

Paul’s exhortations to holiness were context-driven. Injunctions to holiness in 1 Corinthians aim to maintain the unity of the church (3:17). Reminding converts that they once were ‘slaves of impurity’ (akatharsia) and that they now are ‘slaves to righteousness for holiness’ (hagiasmon) defended against the charge that his gospel of grace encouraged immorality (Rom 6:22, author’s translation). 1 Thessalonians scolded unchanged believers, urging them to prepare with acts of holiness for the imminent judgement (3:13; 4:3). Holiness distinguished the elect from ‘pagans’ (1:4). Paul’s stress on the imminent union of ‘the holy ones’ with deceased believers and holy angels offered an antidote to the pain of those mourning the death of loved ones (3:13).

While Paul’s letters contain other vestiges of Pharisaism, they differed as well. Two factors conspired to dictate important changes: (1) Paul’s apocalyptic view of Jesus as Messiah, and (2) his conviction that he was called to be an apostle to the Gentiles. That Gentile gospel pitted him against traditional Pharisaic purity laws separating the pure from the impure. Galatians 2:1–14 recalls how Paul’s eating with impure Gentile converts ignited an explosive exchange with the more observant Peter. Paul’s later statement that ‘in the Lord Jesus … nothing is unclean’ (Rom 14:14) put him on a collision course with conservative church factions and strict Pharisees. This radical revision of Jewish purity law was embedded in the conviction that the end time was dawning. Paul’s letters thus introduce a figure influenced by Pharisaic traditions that were revised to reflect a messianism and a Gentile mission.

6. The Persecutor

Our quest for the historical requires a consideration of the persecution of Jesus people by the early Paul. Acts lumps that early Paul with Jews who went about fulminating ‘threats and murder’ (9:1) and savagely persecuting Jesus followers. It sketches Paul’s complicity in the brutal murder of ‘saintly’ Stephen by the ‘Jews’ (7:58), pictures him dragging men and women off to prison without due process (8:3), and with orders from temple priests venting his fury in synagogues in foreign cities (26:10–11).

This popular portrayal, however, is at odds with Paul’s own accounts. His insistence on the primacy of his Gentile mission (Gal 1:16) stands opposite the Acts narrative pitting Paul against Jewish antagonists. Moreover, given Rome’s strict preserve of capital punishment for its own prerogative, the Acts ascription of a murderous persecution of Jesus people by Paul (22:4) is unhistorical. The synagogue could prescribe flogging (‘forty lashes less one’) for offences, but neither the high priests nor the Sanhedrin possessed the authority to prescribe or inflict capital punishment in Paul’s lifetime. In
rare instances an angry mob might stone a presumed offender (2 Cor 11:25), but the legal right to mandate capital punishment was exclusively Roman, and would not in any case allow arraignment of non-Jews in foreign provinces.

The reasons for Paul's persecution of Jesus followers are unclear. Both political and religious factors were probably in play. Paul may have persecuted the church because its 'faith' sounded dangerous in a politically charged environment (Hultgren 1976). Also Jesus’ Roman execution as a felon between two revolutionaries (lestai, Mark 15:27) could put his followers at risk, and brutal Roman reprisals for suspected revolutionary activity indiscriminately fell on the innocent and the guilty alike. So pressure on compatriots to avoid provocative behaviour was understandably intense (Fredriksen 1991: 556). While the reasons for Paul's vigorous persecution of Jewish Christ followers might have been multiple, it was during this fanatical persecution (or harassment) that Paul experienced an epiphany of Christ that radically changed his direction, placed him at odds with his Pharisaic peers, inspired resistance from the 'pillars' of the Jerusalem church, and altered the course of human history (Gal 1:11–16).

7. Apostle to Gentiles

The change from persecutor to apostle was so dramatic that many call it a 'conversion'. In the Acts portrait, they argue, Paul was struck down and 'converted' from Judaism to 'Christianity' while on the way to Damascus to persecute believers (9:1–9; 22:6–11; 26:12–18). They continue, he then traded a promise of salvation by law observance for one offering salvation by grace; he divided his life into two periods: one frustrated by his failure at law observance and the other that brought release from the bondage to law and sin; one was joyless, the other joyful.

Increasingly, scholars question this view. For example, nowhere does Paul say he found it impossible to keep the law; on the contrary, in Philippians 3:6 he wrote that he was 'blameless' under the law. 'Christianity' as a separate religious construction was not yet in existence. Moreover, instead of rejecting his Judaism, until the end he expressed appreciation for his Jewish heritage, and affirmed his current Israelite status (Rom 9:1–5; 11:1). His appeal to the prophets, the ancestral traditions, God's covenant with and promises to Israel, and God's promised embrace of this people in the end time (11:26–36) reveal no repudiation of Israel. Thus, the radical rupture posited between Judaism and Christianity in Paul's day is unhistorical. Paul's Gentile gospel did indeed generate quarrels between himself and synagogue leaders and the Jerusalem church, but these disputes were intramural rather than extramural.

Paul describes his turn from villain to apostle not as a 'conversion' but a 'call'. Paul's own words put it thus: ‘When it pleased God who separated me from my mother's womb and called me by his grace to reveal his son in me so that I might proclaim him among the gentiles . . . ’ (Gal 1:14–15, my emphasis). Now compare those from Jeremiah: 'And the word of the Lord came to him saying: ”Before I formed you in the belly, I knew you, and
before you came forth from the womb, I consecrated you. I appointed you a prophet to the Gentiles” (1:4–5 LXX; cf. Isa 49:6, author’s translation). Through this close identification with Jeremiah Paul set himself in the company of the prophets, and may have fancied himself a kind of Jeremiah redivivus called and sent to preach to the Gentiles.

The early contest to define the markers of authentic apostleship was indeed bitter and protracted, and Paul’s claim was suspect. His credentials to be an apostle of the risen Christ were weak. He had never known Jesus in the flesh. He was at odds with the Jerusalem circle; a trusted co-worker had abandoned him; his physical presence and rhetorical skills suffered when compared with those of wandering super-apostles (2 Cor 11); Jewish antagonists found his Gentile gospel dangerous, and Gentile sectarianists suspected that the collection for the Jerusalem poor was a scam (2 Cor 8). Opponents cast him as a reckless antinomian, and slandered him as a weak, womanish, uncharismatic, unreliable, duplicitous, and unreliable pretender. Paul so regularly defended his apostleship because it was challenged so often. When he wrote 2 Corinthians 10–13, he could not have been very certain that his Gentile mission would succeed. Yet it did eventually succeed after his death and succeeded so well that later generations stood in its shadow, wrote letters in his name, and interpreted his gospel for their day. But, in Paul’s own time its future success was nowhere as inevitable as Acts would have us believe.

8. Letter Writer

In his trail across Asia and Europe Paul left behind cells of converts who would struggle to maintain the Christ-experience, to deal with desertion, to interpret and apply Paul’s gospel to new situations, to understand the life of faith without Paul, and to face recurring doubts about Paul’s gospel and apostleship. Paul wrote to remind these converts of his teaching, to deal with the problem of his absence, to respond to critics, and to correct misinterpretations of his message. While the form of the Hellenistic letter was his model, Paul bent its epistolary conventions in ingenious ways to face new challenges (Roetzel 2009a).

In compensating for absence the letters bridged religious, psychological, geographical, and cultural distance. They provided space for a theologizing that cast Paul as a powerful actor in the last scene of a breathtaking eschatological drama. They invented fresh interpretative schemes to respond to religious adversaries, charismatic splinter groups, sceptical converts, disillusioned believers, and popular religionists, and they comforted, consoled, encouraged, and instructed his converts (Roetzel 1999, 2009b: 4.404–420). Through the letters Paul secured the identity of the early church, the success of the Gentile mission, the later enhancement of the role of women as apostles, priests, deacons, and clerics, a viable martyrlogical tradition, and even the later formation of the New Testament itself.

To be sure, the letters do betray vestiges of Paul’s anti-Gentile bias of a Jewish provenance. Even though that bias oft characterized Gentiles as immoral, idolatrous,
subhuman, and other (for example, 1 Thess 4:3–5; 1 Cor 6:9–11), it also flowed out of the great inclusive visions of prophets like Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and Joel. And although from his Jewish upbringing he learned to despise craven behaviour, crass immorality, religious arrogance, unlimited greed, blatant self-absorption, dark human propensities, and human vulnerability, he also embraced traditions suffused with hope and redemption for all peoples. The letters reveal this Paul fixed on a God of Israel who in these last days through grace and the faithfulness of Christ embraced the whole ugly human lump.

Less certain is the chronology of the letters themselves (see Appendix). Attempts to date the seven ‘undisputed’ letters are frustrated by the absence of dates in the letters, and by references to missing letters in the corpus (for example, 1 Cor 5:9 and possibly 2 Cor 2:4). But the outer chronological parameters of the letter corpus are more secure. Scholars agree that Paul’s first letter (1 Thess) appeared around 50 CE and his last (Rom) near the end of the decade. The undisputed seven (1 Thess, 1 Cor, Phil, Philem, Gal, 2 Cor, and Rom) in toto, however, open a window onto the landscape of Paul’s theologizing, his disappointments, his personality, his Gentile mission, his gospel, his strategies of defence, early liturgical and confessional formulas, and his role in defining the early church.

9. **The Mythic Miracle Worker**

In 1 Corinthians 2:4 Paul wrote his converts, ‘My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and power’ (cf. 1 Cor 12:9, 28, 30; and Gal 3:5; my emphasis). Yet Paul’s letters leave unmentioned any specific miracle he performed. Luke’s Acts, however, filled that void by offering a portrait bigger than life (Pervo 2006: 309–342). Having access to a Pauline tradition if not copies of the letters themselves, Luke fleshed out a portrait that rehabilitated the Paul of rivals and ‘heretics’. His construction captured an ‘internal history’ not easily accessible in the letters themselves. The legends he recorded not only entertained, they also instructed the confused, engaged the imagination of believers, and offered encouragement and consolation to those who felt choked in the clutches of dark powers. And while miracles did offer evidence of the truth of a message, they also articulated core beliefs about the triumph of divine power; and they gave that godly power a compassionate face. To those who felt imprisoned the stories promised freedom, and to the helpless went strength to struggle against the demonic. These stories provided group affirmation and held up a future in which chaos, oppression, injustice, despicable meanness, and despair were not the final realities of human life. They expressed confidence that justice, mercy, and deliverance could invade a world governed by different concerns. At some level these stories mediated the very power to which they testified. It is hardly accidental, therefore, that Luke embroidered this aspect of his narrative of Paul or that later apocryphal writers captured its spirit.
Luke’s portrayal of Paul in Acts was hardly a simple ‘filling up of the pauline one’ (Jervell 1979: 300); it elevated the importance of the fabulosity of Paul’s mighty works, and displayed him to advantage against the divine men (theoi andres) of Hellenistic popular religions. He offered a vivid, appealing account of Paul’s prodigies: he noted how Paul struck a Jewish false prophet blind (13:4–12); healed a man crippled from birth (14:8–18); exorcized an evil spirit (16:16–18); imbued handkerchiefs Paul touched with healing magic (19:11–12); raised the dead (20:7–12); healed a father of dysentery (28:7–8); and miraculously shook a biting snake into a blazing campfire. While such prodigies evoked acclamations of divinity from many believers, they remained ambiguous; for antagonistic ‘Jews’ and pagans saw in them signs of a sinister, demonic presence (Acts 14:4, 18–20; 16:16–40). The point is that miracles required community affirmation to assume validity. We see, therefore, how when Acts was written Paul was already well on the way to becoming a mythic figure of legendary proportions for believers.

10. Celibacy’s Legendary World

Paul’s expressed preference for celibacy as a superior ‘spiritual gift’ (1 Cor 7:7) informed all Christian thought on marriage and the single life for centuries after (Brown 1988: 54). Marcion, Montanus, Tertullian, Pseudo-Clement, Jovinian, the apocryphal Acts of Paul, and the Acts of Thomas all claimed the virgin life as a superior expression of the Christ existence. Even after the fading of the fever of apocalypticism bestowing on celibacy a practical option for the end time trauma, the Syrian church made the celibacy vow a requirement for baptism (Roetzel 1999: 157). Some in the Syrian church held that belief in the single God with no consort required a like singleness from believers as the quintessential expression of the Christian life.

The Acts of Thomas called marital sexual intercourse ‘a deed of shame’ and a ‘dirty and polluted pleasure’ (Vööbus 1951: 1.15–30). Following Paul’s claim that in Christ there is ‘neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free, male and female’ (Gal 3:28), disciples of Marcion sought to construct a community in the mid-second century in which gender distinctions played no role in deciding who was authorized to perform priestly functions. And the Marcionite church also elevated celibacy as a quintessential expression of Christian life.

Likewise, the second-century Acts of Paul portrayed the apostle as the legendary teacher of the gospel of the virgin life. Echoing the beatitudes of Matthew 5, the Acts of Paul blessed those who kept ‘the flesh pure’, who remained continent, and promised a divine reward for pure virgins (Hennecke 1965: 354). It set the celibate apostle on the path to recover the innocence of the primordial period, with its peaceful union of the human and non-human worlds. One story held that on a journey from Damascus to Jerusalem near Jericho when Paul was at prayer a ‘great and terrible lion’ met him, and instead of devouring him bowed down asking to be baptized (Hennecke 1965: 388). Praising God for giving speech to the beast, Paul baptized the lion into a life of celibacy.
Thereafter true to his vow, the baptized lion turned aside the advances of a lioness in heat. The same baptized, celibate lion later returns as saviour when he miraculously appears to rescue Paul condemned to die before wild beasts in a public spectacle. Facing down the wild beasts in the Colosseum and sharing with Paul the divine deliverance effected by a hailstorm, the lion took on the role of the legendary animal helper that in folklore always guarantees success.

A companion of this story appears in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* (a part of the *Acts of Paul* that also circulated separately). Thecla, a privileged, attractive, marriageable woman forcibly secluded to keep her pure for her impending marriage to a city notable, embraced Paul’s gospel of the virgin life that she heard wafting through the window of her upstairs room. She bribed her way out of her detention and into Paul’s prison cell where she spent the night with him being instructed into his counter-cultural gospel of the virgin life. When she was arrested and brought before the judge for this breach of her betrothal, her mother testified against her, exclaiming ‘Burn the lawless one’ (Hennecke 1965: 358). Sentenced to die, the judge delivered Thecla to the guard for execution by burning. Atop the pyre with flames licking at her feet and inspired and emboldened by a vision of Paul, she too enjoyed a miraculous rescue when a downpour extinguished the flames. Once free she set out to find Paul to gain ordination to the apostolate. But Paul declined to ordain her, objecting, ‘thou art comely’ (Hennecke 1965: 360). But the reader knows her success was assured. So it was, for after passing another test of her devotion, Paul would relent. To gain access to this sacred office, she first had to spurn unwanted advances by a powerful public official smitten by her beauty. She too after being thrown to the wild beasts was miraculously saved by the lioness to whom she was tethered and who turned protector. A curtain of fire miraculously descended to shield her nakedness from the prurient gazes of Colosseum spectators. Being stubbornly indomitable, she confirmed her celibacy vow by flinging herself into a seal-infested water pit in an act of self-baptism. The women of the city, including the queen, created an uproar and intervened to set her free. Once more at liberty, she set out to find Paul, imploring him to ordain her as an apostle. Unsurprisingly, Paul granted her request, and her future success as an apostle the story leaves to the imagination.

While these legends appear as silly tales to some, their canonical status in the third-century Syrian and Armenian churches suggests they carried a deeper meaning. Their portrayal of Paul and Thecla as model ascetics in the company of angels forged an identity that transcended gender specificity and allowed for a life in but not of the world. The accounts of the talking, friendly, and celibate lion helpers may sound fanciful to modern ears, but in their context, they opened a door to paradise where the painful fissure between creature and creation, or between the human and non-human world could be overcome (cf. Isa 11). These stories inspired resistance to worldly powers so great they could hardly be faced alone, and they elevated women to positions of authority. In some cases they offered women an escape from undesirable unions and from the risk of premature death at childbirth. They provided examples that ordinary women and men could aspire to or dream of. And as fanciful as they were, these legendary constructions were not totally disconnected from the teachings of Paul. For he too claimed celibacy as
a charismatic gift (1 Cor 7:7); only he in the entire New Testament named and claimed interaction with Junia (Rom 16:7), a female apostle; only he named with gratitude the female deacon (not deaconess) Phoebe (Rom 16:1); and only he recited the baptismal creed professing that ‘in Christ, ‘there is neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free, male and female’ (Gal 3:28).

11. The Legendary Martyr

Paul’s letters name suffering and death as constant companions and as inevitable during the end time birth pains. They catalogue afflictions that mythically share in the death of Jesus (for example, 2 Cor 6:4–5; 11:23–29; 12:10; Rom 8:35; and 1 Cor 4:9–13). They name onerous toil, sleeplessness, hunger, cold, bruising insults, imprisonments, execution, mob threats, beatings, and angst as a mystical participation in the crucifixion of Jesus (Gal 6:17). These catalogues secured a bond of apostle and converts with the beaten and executed Jesus and with each other (1 Thess 1:6; Rom 6:3–8), and they did more. They emboldened young converts to remain true to their new calling even though they were ridiculed, harassed, disowned, shamed, and physically abused.

Later generations more interested in Paul’s person than his theology found inspiration in this emphasis on suffering. His proclamation of strength in weakness survived and became the thematic core of later martyrrological traditions, and the stories of the martyred few rose up to substitute for the Roman pornography of violence and its ideology of masculinity, a completely different understanding of power.

This recasting of Paul’s portrait is obvious already in Luke’s Acts. Luke surely knew of Paul’s martyrdom, but never spoke of it. He did, however, allow his character to hint at it in his sombre valedictory: ‘you will see my face no more’ (Acts 20:25). Luke’s reluctance to refer to Paul’s execution in Rome reflects an eagerness to avoid accusing Rome of complicity in an unjust execution of a heroic and revered figure. While Luke allowed no prediction of Paul’s martyrdom, he did cast Paul as a fearless advocate of the gospel with no regard for his own safety. He blamed Jews not Romans for Paul’s apprehension. His pro-Roman bias would explain the Roman protection, guarantee of due process, safe passage, and relative freedom to welcome visitors, and to preach and teach at will once in Rome (Matthews 2010).

While Luke avoided reference to Paul’s martyrdom, later authors felt no such constraint. Although empire-wide persecution of Christians was rare, episodic, and localized, the martyrdom of the few provided occasion for the inspiration of the many. Gripping stories about such notables as Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna (d. 156), Blandina, a simple, pious, slave girl who was crucified, and Perpetua, a nursing mother of privilege who was martyred, were joined to those of Jesus, Peter, James, John, and Paul to develop a hagiographic model for daily life.

The legend of Paul’s martyrdom received its most grandiose development in the Acts of Paul. The saga privileges the hearer/spectator to eavesdrop on Nero’s command
that Paul be beheaded, but the courageous and defiant apostle had the last word. Once beheaded, not blood but a pure, milk-like substance spurted onto his executioner’s clothes. The next morning the resurrected Paul met the emperor Nero in his garden. ‘Caesar’, Paul said, ‘here I am—Paul, God’s soldier. I am not dead, but alive to God. But for Thee, unhappy man, there shall be many evils and great punishment, because thou didst unjustly shed the blood of the righteous, and that not many days hence!’ (Hennecke 1965: 386).

These stories comforted those who suffered loss, and emboldened many thousands to challenge traditional views of power. This legendary account portrayed Paul on trial before the emperor as a confident, composed, fearless, and pious ambassador of a king outranking Nero. It was Paul, not Emperor Nero, who was in command. These stories lent special issue to Paul’s words that gave participation in the death of Jesus relevance for everyday life (Rom 6:3–8). Recall Paul’s words: ‘we [that is, believers] have been buried with him by baptism into death in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the father thus also we might walk in newness of life’ (Rom 6:4, my emphasis).

12. Conclusion

As powerful as these legendary accounts were, the difference between these constructions of the mythic Paul and the Paul of the undisputed letters is striking. In his own autobiographical accounts we see a Paul who sometimes failed, a theologizer who changed his mind, a physically weak figure burdened by a mysterious thorn in the flesh, a marginal Jew, a brilliant scriptural exegete, and a preacher unskilled in speech. In the legendary portrayal, these traits are missing entirely. It is difficult to know which was the ‘real’ Paul. The times, the contexts, and the demands of the emergent Jesus movement were all different. Moreover, facing new challenges, Paul’s own thinking sometimes changed. Paul’s letters were occasional documents focusing on different issues in different churches.

Although there were differences, there were also similarities between the Paul of the undisputed letters and the Paul of the later legends. Even though the Paul of the letters and the mythic Paul of the Acts of Paul were worlds apart, the Paul of the undisputed letters and of the legends betray a striking resemblance at points. They shared emphases on Jesus’ death, the importance of celibacy, and on miracles. Both belong together; a construction of the ‘historical’ Paul needs an accounting of the sacred world he inhabited, a graphic vision of the dawning of a new world and the passing of a world burdened by horror, threatened by a demonic presence, and frustrated by antagonistic rivals. Paul’s Jewish identity, Pharisaic legacy, divine commission, Gentile gospel, and apocalyptic vision of the letters were enriched and sometimes expanded by later Pauline interpreters. The anthropology of Paul gained by being held in tension with his theology. True, the Paul offered without an appreciation of his theological genius is a caricature,
but the opposite is also true. Theologies of Paul that ignore his humanity are docetic and unrealistic. It is best to view the intersection of Paul’s social and theological worlds as the locus of his emergent genius. And as fanciful as these portraits of the mythic Paul may sound to the modern ear, in their time they offered an account of the internal history of Pauline interpretation that illumined, entertained, contemporized, and contested accepted understandings of power.

APPENDIX ON PAULINE CHRONOLOGY

Challenges

The paucity of historical and internal evidence makes the construction of a chronology of Paul’s life and letters difficult. Not one of Paul’s letters is dated, and the dates of his birth and death are unknown. The exact sequence of the letters is uncertain, and some letters (2 Cor and Phil) may actually be composed of fragments of many letters. Although Acts often disagrees with Paul’s accounts in the letters (for example, in Acts Paul makes five visits to Jerusalem, in the letters only three), some evidence from Acts can be used with caution to confirm data from Paul or to provide chronological pegs for the construction of a tentative chronology of Paul’s life. Attempts to construct a chronology of Paul’s life divide on the confidence in sources used. For example, F. F. Bruce constructed a chronology that relied heavily on Acts, a source compiled sometime between one and three generations after Paul’s death, and G. Lüdemann constructed a chronology relying almost entirely on the undisputed letters of Paul as a primary source. My own construction combines both sources for its construction. The following narrative attempts to explain the logic of this combination.

Key Historical Data

Second Corinthians 11:32–33 refers to the ethnarch of Damascus, presumably King Aretas IV of Nabatea who ruled Damascus from 37–39 CE and from whose attempted capture Paul escaped through the wall at night (2 Cor 11:32–33; Gal 1:17–18). Before this nocturnal escape, which could have been in 37 at the earliest, he had been in Arabia (Nabatea) after his call for three years, 34–37 (Gal 1:17). Thus we may hypothesize that his call came c.34 (Gal 1:17–18). If we tie the reference ‘after three years’ to his call in 34, Paul’s first trip to Jerusalem to consult with Peter and Jesus’ brother James (Gal 1:18) came in 37/38 after his expulsion or escape from Damascus. His ministry in Syria and Cilicia would have followed sometime in 38–47 (Gal 1:21). His second visit to Jerusalem came ‘after fourteen years’ (Gal 2:1), and given the practice of counting any part of a year as a year, could have been as early as 46 or as late as 48 if also measured from the call in 34. A 17-year gap between Paul’s call and his second visit to Jerusalem (3 plus 14 years) has
led some to set an earlier date for the call (‘conversion’). While the hypothesis suggested here seems plausible, it is unprovable.

The Edict of Claudius mentioned by the Roman historian Suetonius (c.120 CE) refers to the expulsion of Jews from Rome to quell the ‘disturbances’ that they were making ‘at the instigation of Chrestus’ (Claudius 5.25.4). This is probably a reference to unrest in the synagogues in which followers of Christ and non-believers were still meeting together. A date of 49 for the Edict fixed by the Christian historian and theologian Orosius (d. 420) accords well with Paul’s collaboration with Aquila and Priscilla (Prisca) in Corinth, whom Acts 18:2 identifies as Jews expelled under Claudius’s order. Most scholars prefer the 49 date for the expulsion, but an increasing number (for example, Lampe, Lüdemann, Richardson, and Hurd) go with 41 and shift the chronology backward accordingly.

The Gallio inscription dates Gallio’s tenure as proconsul in Corinth as 52/53, but illness forced him to leave his post after only a few months and before the winter weather would end the sailing season in late autumn of 52 (Fitzmyer 1993: 46). This is an important chronological peg, for Acts 18:12–17 tells of Paul’s arraignment before Gallio in Corinth, and many use this date to locate Paul’s time in Corinth and to chart his previous and future activities accordingly. If Acts is correct that Paul was in Corinth for 18 months (18:11), then his ministry there began in 50. Previously he had been in Antioch and had founded churches in Galatia, Philippi, and Thessalonica (Gal 2:11–14). A further difficulty with the Gallio reference is that we know from Paul’s letters that he was in Corinth three times, and there is no way to be sure on which visit he was arraigned before Gallio. As shaky as it is, the fourth-century testimony of Orosius tilts the balance in favour of 52. For if the Edict of Claudius was in 49 and Jewish Christian refugees joined Paul in Corinth and Ephesus, then tying Paul’s arraignment to 52 seems more likely.

Once Paul leaves Corinth for Jerusalem to deliver the offering, the record from his own hand falls silent. Acts 23 and 24 recount Paul’s arrest and imprisonment in Jerusalem under two proconsuls (Felix and Festus, 52–60 and 60–62, respectively) and his being sent to Rome for trial. A late second-century text, the Acts of Paul, offers a legendary account of his beheading under Nero, an event, if historical, that is notoriously difficult to locate chronologically. The best guess is that he was executed in Rome under Nero between 60 and 64, the date of Nero’s persecution of the Jesus people. Within those broad parameters, 34 as the beginning of Paul’s apostolic activity and 60–64 as the end, we can attempt to place the letters chronologically.

The Order and Approximate Dates of the Epistles

The task of constructing a credible chronology of Paul’s life and letters is complicated by evidence of later redaction (in Romans) and that two letters (Phil and 2 Cor) were probably later compilations of multiple letter fragments (Sellew 1994: 17–28; Mitchell 2005: 307–338). By scholarly consensus, 1 Thessalonians is Paul’s earliest surviving letter, which was written after stops in Philippi and Thessalonica (Phil 4:15–16; 1 Thess 2:2),
meeting resistance to his message (though probably not from Jews as Acts 17:1–9 has it; cf. 1 Thess 2:14), leaving Thessalonica under pressure, and heading south. From Achaia, he dispatched Timothy to Thessalonica and, in response to news Timothy brought on his return (1 Thess 1:1, 3:1–6), Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians (c.50/51).

After Paul’s 18-month ministry in Corinth and arraignment before Gallio, he left in the autumn of 52. Thereafter ensues a long period of exchanges between Paul and the Corinthians by letter and oral communication that stretched from 53–57, interrupted by a short and ‘painful’ visit (2 Cor 2:1). Paul wrote one letter now lost soon after leaving Corinth (1 Cor 5:9), then oral communication was followed by 1 Corinthians, dispatched with Timothy from Ephesus (c.53; 1 Cor 16:8–11, 19).

The collection of letters in 2 Corinthians contains portions of as many as five letters written after Paul’s founding mission to Corinth and before his final visit to prepare for the journey to deliver the offering to Jerusalem (53–57). All of the fragments were probably written from Ephesus and Macedonia.

With only Paul’s words about the founding of the assembly in Galatia (Gal 4:12–20) and the absence of chronological allusions, the place Galatians occupied in the sequence is uncertain. After Paul left Corinth a visit to Galatia from Ephesus to face hostile Judaizing critics is plausible and would account for the angry missive (Galatians) that Paul dispatched later (c.55). Although neither Acts nor any of Paul’s letters explicitly refer to an Ephesian imprisonment, a detention during his 27-month stay there (53–56) after his long mission in Corinth is probable (Acts 18:19–20:35). He does speak of fighting with beasts there (1 Cor 15:32) and of being so ‘utterly, unbearably crushed’ and in such despair that he felt he was under a death sentence (2 Cor 1:8–9). His reference to being in prison many times (2 Cor 11:23) leaves room for the Ephesian imprisonment suggested much later by the apocryphal Acts of Paul.

From that imprisonment, it is likely that Paul wrote the Philippian letter(s), provoked by Jewish ‘Christian’ opposition to his gospel and apostolic claim, in 56. Judicial hearings had taken place and execution loomed (2 Cor 1:8–11) but release remained possible (Phil 1:20, 25; 2:17, 24; 2 Cor 1:8–11). Philemon also may have been written during this imprisonment, though that cannot be proved (Philem 9). Paul wrote Romans on his third and last visit to Corinth after having passed through Macedonia from whence he wrote a circular letter to the churches of Achaia (2 Cor 9) urging the completion of the offering and a reconciling letter to the Corinthians (2 Cor 1:1–2:13; 7:5–16).

When we next catch sight of Paul, the collection project is complete and delegates have gathered for the journey to Jerusalem to present the gifts to the ‘poor among the saints’ (Rom 15:26). On the brink of departure, perhaps in early April when the shipping season opened, Paul writes Romans, the last letter we have from his hand (57). On the cusp of fulfilling a project so long in completing, Paul worries that the delivery of the offering will be seen as a hostile and provocative act. In fear of the ‘unbelievers’ in Jerusalem (Rom 15:31), he solicits prayers for the successful reception of this gift from the Gentile churches. There Paul’s own account ends, but Acts fills out the story, suggesting that Paul’s worst fears were realized. After his arraignment, he first faced the proconsuls Felix and then Festus (Acts 23:33–24:26 and 25:6–26:32), possibly in 59 and/or 60. He was
brought to Rome for trial, and according to the apocryphal Acts of Paul, was executed under Nero c.60–64.

**Chronological Outline**

1. **Date of crucifixion:** c.30
2. **Paul's call (‘conversion’):** c.34 (Gal 1:15, 16)
3. **Paul's ministry in Arabia/Nabatea:** 34–37 (Gal 1:17)
4. **Paul's escape from Damascus ruled by an ethnarch, presumably Aretas IV of Nabatea:** 37/38 (2 Cor 11:32–33)
5. **First trip to Jerusalem (two-week stay):** 37/38 (Gal 1:18)
6. **Mission in Syria and Cilicia (Paul's home province):** 38–47 (Gal 1:21)
7. **Second trip to Jerusalem, Paul's Gentile mission ‘endorsed’:** c.47 (between 46 and 48) (Gal 2:1–10)
8. **Edict of Claudius expelling Jews:** 49 (Acts 18:2 and Suetonius)
10. **Ministry in Achaia, including Corinth: autumn 50–summer 52 (Acts 18:1–3);** 1 Thessalonians
11. **Arraignment before proconsul Gallio:** summer/autumn 52 (Acts 18:12–17)
12. **Paul in Ephesus: autumn 52–56**
   - Lost letter written to Corinth (1 Cor 5:9): 52
   - 1 Corinthians: 53
13. **Letters from Ephesus and Macedonia collected in fragmentary form in 2 Corinthians:** 54–57
14. **Galatians:** c.55
   - Imprisonment: late 55 into early 56 (2 Cor 1:8–11)
15. **Philippian correspondence from prison, probably in Ephesus:** c.56
   - Philemon possibly came from this imprisonment
16. **The ‘painful letter’ to Corinth:** 56 (2 Cor 10:1–13:10)
   - Reconciling letter to Corinthians from Macedonia: autumn 56 (2 Cor 1:1–2:13; 7:5–16)
17. **Circular letter to churches in Achaia urging completion of offering:** autumn 56 (2 Cor 9)
18. **Paul winters in Corinth preparing the offering and delegation for delivery to Jerusalem:** 56–57
19. **Paul departs with delegation for Jerusalem with offering for the ‘poor among the saints’ and final visit to Jerusalem:** spring 57 (Rom 15:25–33)
20. **Arrest, imprisonment, and transfer to Rome:** c.57–59 (Acts 25:4–28:16)
21. **Execution:** 60–64 (Acts of Paul 11:1–7)
While this construction is hypothetical, most scholars agree that Paul’s apostolic activity began in the 30s and ended in the early 60s. And almost all agree that the evidence of the letters is to be preferred over that of Acts. While some scholars would arrange the letters in a different order, most agree that the majority of Paul’s letters were written in the 50s, though a few place all of the letters in the 40s. Given the complexity of Paul’s case, it is amazing that we have the agreement that we do.¹

**Note**

1. This section on Pauline chronology is drawn from Roetzel (2009a), adapted and used with permission.

**Suggested Reading**

For fuller treatment from the present author along the lines sketched here, see Roetzel (1999). Murphy-O’Connor (1996) offers a recent critical biography of Paul; studies of Paul’s early years include Hengel (1991); Hengel and Schwemer (1997); and Riesner (1998). Guidebooks that treat Paul’s life and thought together include Bruce (1977); Becker (1993); and Schnelle (2005). On Pauline chronology, the influence of Knox (1987 [1950]) can be differently seen in the book-length treatments of Jewett (1979) and Lüdemann (1984); Alexander (1993) is a helpful introductory account.

**Bibliography**


Chapter 2

Paul the ‘Convert’?

Paula Fredriksen

‘Paul’s conversion is to Pauline scholarship what the Big Bang is to physics: the thing itself is an enigma, but somehow it is supposedly the explanation for everything else.’

Eisenbaum (2009: 133)

Paul has long figured in church tradition as the prototype of the Christian convert, a great sinner redeemed from the error of his earlier life by a single, dramatic moment of conversion. Support for this image derives first of all from his own letters, which emphasize his initial, and zealous, persecution of the ekklēsia (Gal 1:13; Phil 3:6; 1 Cor 15:9) and a divine moment of reversal, which Paul himself understands within the larger context of his mission to the Gentiles (Gal 1:15‒16). Acts amplifies these elements, luridly expanding upon Paul’s persecuting activities (7:58 and 8:1. Paul is present at Stephen’s lynching and consents to it; 9.1–2 ‘breathing threats and murder’, he seeks to extend the persecution from Jerusalem to Damascus), and repeating in three iterations the divine transformation of Saul into Paul (9:1–19; 22:3–16; 26:4–18).

Some three centuries later, Augustine read these New Testament texts together with the canon’s deuto-Pauline letters, wherein ‘Paul’ describes himself as ‘once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slavishly serving various passions and pleasures’ (Titus 3:3). Meditating on these passages, identifying with Saul the sinner, the bishop of Hippo shaped his famous account of his own conversion from Manichaeism to Roman Christianity by appeal to his construction of Paul’s (Confessions VII–VIII, esp. VIII.12; cf. ad Simplicianum I.2, 22; Stendahl 1963; Fredriksen 1986 and 1988). More portentously, Augustine eventually came to understand the conflicted ‘I’ of Romans 7:5–25 as Paul’s own self-description (Contra ii epistolos Pelagianorum 1.8.13–14; De praedestinatione sanctorum 1.2.4; 1.4.8; Fredriksen 1988: 110–111). This exegetical legacy transformed a now-confessional Romans 7 into the letter’s centre of gravity. It defined Paul’s
‘conversion’ as his abrupt transfer from sinfulness ‘under the Law’ (i.e., Judaism) to justification through faith in Christ. And it cast a long shadow, passing from Augustine through Luther to Reformation Protestant theology, and thence to modern NT scholarship (Kümmel 1929: 139–160; Munck 1959: 11 and n. 2; cf. Smith 1990: 34, on this Law/Faith dipole as constitutive of Reformation anti-Catholic invective).

Understanding Paul as a ‘convert’ thus did double duty. The construct provided (or generated) biographical detail about Paul and religious detail about his environment. (For a review of early twentieth-century scholarship on this issue, see Pfaff 1942; for later, Betz 1979: 64 n. 82.) Before his conversion to Christ, zealously enmeshed in Judaism, Paul had experienced guilt, anxiety, and turmoil: the Law could only articulate sin, but it could not help him to stop sinning. (Here Augustine’s reading of Romans 7 was pressed into service.) Encountering ‘Law-free’ Jewish Christian Hellenists as represented in Acts by Stephen, Paul the Pharisee had lashed out, ‘zealous for the traditions of my fathers’ (Gal 1:14). ‘Conversion’ therefore also helped fill in the blanks about Paul’s motivation for persecution, about the practices of those (Jewish) Christians whom he accordingly persecuted, and about Paul’s own practices once, as a Christian, he himself was persecuted: to be Christian meant to abandon Jewish law.

Finally, ‘conversion’ provided content for both of Paul’s religious options, which were seen as mirror-images of each other. The religion that he left behind, Judaism, was both deadening and dead. The Torah only entangled a person in self-righteousness, inducing him to think that he could earn salvation through the accumulation of good works (‘legalism’; see Sanders 2002: 48–54). The spiritual result was hypocrisy (doing good for the wrong reason, that is, for one’s own benefit), complacency (‘Since I did these works, I am righteous’), or anxiety (‘How can I ever do enough?’). Indeed, zeal for the Law, motivated by this desire to earn salvation, led (and leads) to sin. (For critiques of this Christian description of Judaism, see Moore 1921; Sanders 1977: 33–59, 434–442, and passim; for ‘Jews’ coding for 16th-century Catholics, Smith: 1990.) Attempting to fulfil the commands of the Torah through one’s own efforts brings sin and death; righteousness, thus salvation, comes only through the unmerited gift of God’s grace—the position that Paul, in becoming Christian, embraced, championed, and heatedly defended (Barclay 2015: 331-422). For Paul, the ’Israel of God’ (Gal 6:16) was no longer the Jews, but the church. When he asserted that ‘all Israel will be saved’ (Rom 11:26), Paul did not mean ‘Israel according to the flesh’, ethnic Israel, but rather that unified collectivity of Gentiles and Jews who together were now constituted ‘in Christ’.

1. Paul’s Commission and Call

Three Scandinavian scholars, mid-twentieth century, significantly challenged this reconstruction of Christian origins, thus its centrepiece construct, Paul the convert. Johannes Munck, in Paulus und die Heilsgeschichte (1954; E.T. 1959) argued against the high-contrast picture of ‘Hebrews’ versus (Law-free) ‘Hellenists’ (Acts 6:1–8:3); against
seeing Paul as opposed to a conservative, Law-observant ‘Jewish Christianity’ (as represented by James and Peter); and against viewing Paul’s ‘Christianity’ as somehow over-against Judaism, all of which views had been promulgated especially by Baur and the Tübingen School (1959: 69–86). Munck emphasized, rather, the continuities between these different groups and the ideas and behaviours that they represented (1959: esp. 247–281). And against a then-prevailing academic consensus that saw Hellenistic Judaism itself as a missionary religion (hence in fierce competition with the Christian Paul), Munck insisted that no such missions had ever existed (1959: 264–271; cf. Parkes 1961 [1934]; Simon 1986 [1948]).

The effort to turn Gentiles to the god of Israel, Munck urged, originated uniquely within Christianity, and even then only because it was linked there, from the beginning, to the over-arching faith of these earliest Christians as Jews in the biblical promises of (Jewish) Israel’s redemption (1959: 264–271). The apostles’ conviction that they stood at the edge of the end of time, between Christ’s resurrection and his imminent parousia, said Munck, fuelled their missions, and Paul’s as well (‘Christ will return soon’, 1959: 276; recalling Schweitzer 1912 and 1930). Thus ‘Paul is in many respects at one with the first disciples. For him too Israel and Jerusalem are the centre of the world; and Israel’s salvation is therefore the most important aim in the short interval between Resurrection and return’ (1959: 275; cf. 36–68). In this reading, in other words, the centre of gravity for the epistle to the Romans shifted from the portrait of individual torment and turmoil of chapter 7 to the eschatological clarion of chapters 9–11, ending as they do with the full incoming of the Gentiles (plērōma tōn ethnōn) and the redemption of all Israel (pas Israēl). ‘Jesus, earliest Christianity, and Paul know no limits to God’s love of the chosen people. For God, the salvation of the Gentiles is bound up with the salvation of Israel, just as Israel’s salvation is of importance to all the Gentiles’ (1959: 259; further developed in Munck 1967; earlier, Schweitzer 1930: 84).

What then of ‘Paul the convert’? Insisting that Paul saw Christianity as entirely within and consonant with his native religion (Munck 1959: 279), reconfiguring the imagined relationships between Jews, Jewish Christians, and Paul as contiguous rather than contrasting, Munck urged as well that Paul’s ‘Damascus experience’ be seen not as a ‘conversion’ but as Paul’s reception of his prophetic ‘call’. (Indeed, Munck’s chapter, ‘The Call’, opens his book, 11–35; see too Roetzel 1998: 44–68.) Paul’s own description of his experience in Gal 1:15—‘God... set me apart in my mother’s womb and called me [kalesas] through his grace [revealing] his son in me so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles’—echoes the language of Isaiah 49:1–6, when the prophet received his call to preach salvation to the Gentiles, and the language of Jeremiah 1:4, whom God also knew ‘before I formed you in the womb and I appointed you a prophet to the Gentiles’ (Munck 1959: 24–26; enriched by further consideration of traditions in Ezekiel and in Enoch, 31–33). Paul’s apostleship in his own view, insisted Munck, began with this commission, not with a ‘conversion’.

The work of Nils Dahl and of Krister Stendahl variously reinforced Munck’s arguments. While Dahl held that ‘conversion’ was the term appropriate to Paul’s life-changing experience, he also emphasized that it should not connote a ‘change of religion’
Paul and his fellow apostles, Dahl insisted, remained committed to the eschatological redemption of Israel, and it was to this end that Paul engaged in his mission to Gentiles (1991 [orig. pub. 1953]: 22). In this reading, no less than in Munk's, Romans 9–11, with its conviction that ‘all Israel will be saved’ (Rom 11:26), set the plumb line for Pauline interpretation. Stendahl, meanwhile, building upon Munk, championed ‘call’ over ‘conversion’ in his important essay, ‘Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West’ (1963; orig. Swedish 1960). Paul, observed Stendahl, pointing to Philippians 3:6 (‘as to righteousness under the Law I was flawless’), did not suffer from pangs of anxiety or guilt (1963: 200; also 210–214, for consideration of other Pauline verses). That picture was Luther’s contribution, drawing on Augustine’s (mis)interpretation of Romans 7. On the contrary: ‘Paul was equipped with what must be called a “robust” conscience’ (1963: 200). ‘We look in vain for a statement in which Paul would speak about himself as an actual sinner’ (1963: 210). Paul’s call was itself his moment of dramatic reversal, his transition from persecutor to apostle. And Paul saw his mission, and the message of the gospel, as finding a place for the nations within Israel’s coming redemption. Thus, Stendahl concluded, ‘Romans 9–11 is not an appendix to chs. 1–8, but the climax of the letter’ (1963: 205).

In sum, these three scholars relocated Romans’ exegetical vanishing point from the Augustinian–Lutheran understanding of Romans 7 (with its emphasis on conflicted personal sinfulness) to an eschatological understanding of Romans 9–11 (with its emphasis on the impending resolution of history and on the redemption of Gentiles together with all Israel). More particularly, they understood the salvation of ‘all Israel’ in Rom 11:26 to mean not the church, but the Jews. (‘There ought to be no doubt’, Dahl opined, ‘that the statement in Romans 11.26, that all Israel will be saved, applies to the people of Israel, and not to the church as a new Israel’, 1977 [1972]: 138.) This exegetical refocusing had the effect of diminishing the high contrast between Paul’s original religious commitments and his newer ones: the redemption of Jewish Israel remained his priority, and his mission to the Gentiles—to turn them, through Christ, to the god of Israel—was his way of effecting that goal. Using ‘conversion’ to describe Paul’s turning point (so Dahl) emphasized the radical change in Paul’s life, when he moved from persecuting outsider to committed insider. Using ‘call’, however, had the virtue of drawing on Paul’s own vocabulary and his own conceptualization of his transformation (Munk, Stendahl): Paul placed himself upon the trajectory of Israel’s continuing prophetic role vis-à-vis the nations. And ‘call’, unlike ‘conversion’, implied no break with Paul’s patrikai paradoseis (‘ancestral customs’; cf. Gal 1:14). Neither in ca.50 C.E., when Paul wrote about his call, nor in ca.34, when he experienced it, did the movement ‘in Christ’ stand outside of, much less over-against, Judaism.

The three salient points made by these scholars were these:

1. *Paul constructed his mission within, not against, Judaism.* For that reason, ‘conversion’, if used to describe his transition from persecutor to apostle, should not be understood as his move from one religion to another. Better, Paul’s experience should be described as his ‘call’.
2. Paul’s transformation had nothing to do with a sense of personal sinfulness and frustration with the Law. Rather, its focus was his receiving his commission to be an apostle to the nations.
3. Paul’s time-frame was utterly eschatological. He lived and worked, he was convinced, within history’s final hours.

2. The New Perspective on Paul

In 1977, E. P. Sanders published *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*. The book’s effect on the study of Christian origins generally, and on Pauline studies in particular, cannot be overstated. Reading broadly and deeply in late Second Temple Jewish literature (1977: 1–428), unabashedly exposing the deep and defining anti-Judaism of so much of Christian scholarship, especially on Paul (1977: esp. 33–59 and 434–442), Sanders radically undermined the old, theologically generated caricature of Judaism as a ‘legalistic’ system of works-righteousness. In its place Sanders proposed ‘covenantal nomism’, a pattern of religion resting on grace, faith, and obedience (1977: 75, 81–85). God graciously chose Israel from among the nations, binding Israel to himself in a covenanted relationship. Israel’s grateful response to God’s gracious election is to live faithfully according to the covenant’s commands. ‘Obedience maintains one’s position in the covenant, but it does not earn God’s grace as such’ (1977: 420).

Sanders’s informed argument in so reconstructing Second Temple Judaism revitalized the study of Paul’s historical context. Its effect on reconstructions of Paul himself, however, and of Paul’s transformation from persecutor to apostle, was more complicated. If Judaism was not a legalistic religion of works-righteousness, then whence all of Paul’s negative remarks about Torah, and his tendentious contrasts of the works of the Law to grace and faith? In becoming the new movement’s champion, did Paul not then repudiate the Law?

Designating Paul’s transformation a ‘conversion’, Sanders focused for explanation on Paul’s experience of the risen Christ. This experience, Sanders claimed, charged and changed everything for him. Paul indeed condemns Judaism, but not because he misunderstood it (as Sanders’s careful reconstruction of Second Temple Judaism might imply; cf. Schoeps 1961: 213–218). Rather, after encountering the risen Christ, Paul condemned as useless for salvation anything other than being ‘in Christ’. The attempt to find historical antecedents in Judaism itself to explain Paul’s position is thus doomed to frustration, because there is none. Paul never held that the Law was inherently bad or inherently impossible to fulfil (Phil 3:6; this point gives the measure especially of Stendahl’s influence); but, said Sanders, after the revelation of Christ, Paul was convinced that the Law was irrelevant to salvation, and that therefore it should be abandoned. The Law indeed, Paul readily admits, has many advantages (Rom 3:9), but not with respect to salvation. In turning to Christ, Paul *in effect* turned from the Law, at least as an entrance
requirement into the community of the saved (1977: 500; see too Sanders 1983). Paul thus reasoned backwards, from solution (his encounter with Christ as universal redeemer) to plight (all humanity, indeed the universe, stands in need of redemption; 1977: 443), a plight that Torah could not assuage. ‘This is what Paul finds wrong in Judaism: it is not Christianity’ (1977: 552, original emphasis).

Sanders’s reconstruction of Paul thus worked at cross-purposes to his great contribution to Pauline studies. To hold that Paul’s ‘conversion’ resulted in an unprecedented and otherwise unexplainable position vis-à-vis Judaism in effect rendered Paul’s historical context—the great achievement of Paul and Palestinian Judaism—essentially irrelevant to his theology. Other scholars, positively influenced by Sanders’s redescription of Judaism, cast about for other objects for Paul’s opprobrium. Perhaps Paul condemned not the Law itself, but rather his fellow Jews’ ethnic pride, their insistence on their own ‘covenant distinctiveness’ (Dunn 1998: 350 and passim; Dunn 2008; Hill 2008: 311–318; Wright 1993, 2013). Thus Paul targeted not the Law itself but the ‘works of the Law’, which expressed and preserved this ethnic distinctiveness: circumcision, calendar, Sabbath observance, food ways, Temple sacrifice, and so on. (Dunn and Wright seem not to notice that this list of mitzvot essentially describes the content of the Law.) Paul, said New Perspective scholars, thus never disavowed Jewish law as such, but rather the ethnic Jewishness enabled by living according to the Law. Or perhaps Paul’s theology, despite his best efforts, was irreconcilably riddled with inconsistencies (Räisänen 1983; Gager 2002: 68–69).

‘There can surely be no possibility of scholarship in the Christian tradition going back to the old portrayal of Judaism, either now or in the first century, as an arid, sterile and narrowly legalistic religion,’ Dunn optatively opined. ‘Likewise there can surely be no going back to an interpretation of Paul’s doctrine of justification which depends upon sharp antitheses between Judaism and Christianity, between law and grace, between obedience and faith, and which feeds on and perpetuates the shameful tradition of Christian anti-Judaism’ (Dunn 2008: 96). To the degree that Dunn’s statement is true, it is in no small way due to Sanders’s 1977 publication. The so-called New Perspective on Paul altered the terms of traditional Pauline scholarship’s virtually constitutive anti-Judaism. Much, unfortunately, still remains (Johnson Hodge 2007: 6–7). Is it possible, then, to hold a strong understanding of Paul’s transformation from persecutor to apostle without imagining that it entailed as well a repudiation of Torah? Can ‘Paul the convert’ not be anti-Judaic?

3. Paul the Supersessionist Christian

For some scholars, the answer to this question is ‘No’. Paul’s new allegiance to the gospel meant that he repudiated the observance of the Law in principle—for himself, for all other Jews, and certainly for those Gentiles whom he brought into the new movement. ‘Judaism’ traditionally conceived had no place in redemption by Christ: Paul worked, in fact, for the suppression of difference within the new community, thus for
the suppression of Jewish particularity. The title and subtitle of Alan Segal’s important book well summarize the orientation of this view: *Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee* (1990; see Hurtado 1993).

Paul repudiated the Law because it worked against the central vision of his mission: the eradication of difference between groups. Galatians 3:28 in this construction (‘there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus’) stands as a sort of policy statement. (So too Boyarin 1994, Barclay 2015, Wright 1993 and 2013. While mobilizing different details, these authors, like Segal, argue that Paul’s new vision of a unified redeemed community, granted in his conversion experience, propelled his personal and principled repudiation of the “defunct currency” and demolished authority of Jewish law, Barclay 2015: 383, 385.) To achieve this new unity, the Law had to be dropped, and Paul himself no longer observed it. ‘By proclaiming his new idea of community, [Paul] alerted the Jewish community to what they could see as a potential new apostasy’ (Segal 1990: 205).

Paul had come to this radically new idea through his conversion, which was ‘a wrenching and decisive change’: ‘from the viewpoint of mission Paul is commissioned, but from the viewpoint of religious experience Paul is a convert’ (Segal 1990: 6; cf. 21, on ‘conversion’ as an etic term). Segal enriches this concept of conversion—and thereby increases the number of places where he takes Paul to refer to this experience—by placing it within the context of ‘Jewish apocalyptic mysticism’ (Segal 1990: ch. 2 *passim*, entitled ‘Paul’s Ecstasy’, focusing especially on 2 Cor 12:1–9). Paul’s conversion was just the beginning of a series of visions and mystical experiences (Segal 1990: 37–38), similar to those described in Enochic literature. Like the Merkevah mystics, Paul apprehended the enigmatic human appearance of God (1990: 41), whom he identified as Christ (cf. 1990: 47, on God’s kavod). It was the radical effect of this ecstatic experience that utterly changed Paul’s previous, Pharisaic disposition towards Torah (1990: 71).

Why? How? Because Paul the former Pharisee had moved from one community—Pharisaic and Jewish—to another—Gentile and Law-free. Paul’s ‘education in Christianity comes from a gentile community’ (Segal 1990: xii), where he lived ‘during his formative years as a convert’ (1990: 26). ‘The influence of the gentile community on Paul’s understanding of the content of his religious vision is crucial to explaining his religious vision’ (1990: 117). From that point on, for Paul ‘faith, not Torah observance, defines the Christian community’ (1990: 128). In this formulation, in other words, Paul as an apostle of Gentile Christianity essentially converts to it. His radically new position thus puts him at odds not only with the Jewish world in general, but also with the Jewish Christian world (which, unlike the gentile Christian world, still observed Torah; e.g., 1990: 143). Both of these Jewish groups considered Paul an apostate (1990: 223). Taking a stand against circumcision (1990: 187–223) and against Jewish food laws (1990: 224–253), Paul articulated ‘his belief that all Jews must convert to become truly faithful Christians’ (1990: 166), bound together with Gentiles into a single, unitary, Law-free community (1990: 264). When Paul asserts that ‘all Israel’ will be saved in the End (Rom 11:26), he hopes that ‘the remaining Jews will come to Christ as he did’ (1990: 280), though he prescinds from guessing how God will bring about this final salvation. (Cf. Wright
1993: 249–251: ‘all Israel’ means the Christian church, comprised of believing Jews as well as Gentiles.) Paul the convert, recipient of ecstatic visions, apostate malgré lui, was first of all a convert from something (namely strict, Torah-focused Pharisaism) to something else, Torah-free, which ‘he spent the rest of his life trying to express’ (1990: 283). While ‘his mystical vision of metamorphosis left much unexplained’ (1990: 283), it did crystallize around a particular and firmly held conviction: outside of the community in Christ, nulla salus (see too Zoccali 2008).

### 4. The Sonderweg Paul

If ideas can have opposites, then the Sonderweg or ‘two covenant’ approach to Paul represents the opposite of the sort of neo-traditionalism offered by Segal, Wright, and Boyarin (as well as that implicit in so-called the New Perspective). This interpretation is associated primarily with the work of Lloyd Gaston (1987), John Gager (1983, 2000), and Stanley Stowers (1994; Stendahl, initially identified with this position, distinguished his own views from it, 1995: x, cf. 7). ‘If the three pillars on which Judaism stands are God, Torah and Israel, then a fundamental attack on any of the three would be anti-Judaism, a denial of the right of Jews to exist in terms of their own self-understanding’, Gaston observes, and then asks: ‘Is Paul guilty?’ (1987 [1979]: 17). Drawing their interpretive principles in part from the pioneering work of Munck, Dahl, and Stendahl, these scholars answer, No. They do not deny that Paul says as many negative things about the Law as positive ones (Gager 2002: 68–69); but by focusing resolutely on Gentiles as the sole addressees of Paul’s remarks, these scholars hold that when Paul speaks of the Law’s negative effects—that it cannot make alive; that it can only bring knowledge of sin—he is speaking to its effects only for Gentiles, not for Jews.

Paul himself did not have a problem with the Law (Phil 3:6; Stendahl’s influence, again), so some supposed dissatisfaction or frustration with the Law cannot provide an explanation for his transition from persecutor to apostle. Rather, Paul thought that Gentiles have a problem with the Law. But God, graciously, through Christ, has brought Gentiles a way to salvation apart from the Law, though the Law and the prophets bear witness to it (cf. Rom 3:21), namely salvation through faith in Christ. In other words, Paul’s letters express a vision of two separate paths to salvation: Torah for Jews, and Christ for Gentiles (Gaston 1987 [1979]: 33; cf. Donaldson 2006).

To explain how Paul arrived at his negative views about Torah for Gentiles, and about Gentiles alone as saved in Christ, Gager in particular appeals to a high-contrast model of Paul’s conversion. ‘This much seems certain: both before his conversion and after, following Christ and obedience to the Torah stood as mutually exclusive values in Paul’s heart and mind’ (2002: 64). Paul himself, Gager explains (mobilizing the older idea of Hellenistic Jewish missions to Gentiles) had as a Pharisee been engaged in such missions, requiring that Gentiles convert fully to Judaism and thus, for men, receive circumcision. Perhaps Paul persecuted the early (Jewish Christian) ekklēsia because it admitted Gentiles without requiring that they observe Torah (2002: 62–63).
And then, abruptly, Paul’s vision of the risen Christ changed everything—and not. The conversion reversed the valences of Paul’s thinking, so that what he once held to be right he now regarded as wrong and vice versa. But the structure of Paul’s thought remained the same: Torah—Gentiles—Christ. ‘After his conversion, Christ and Torah remained polar opposites and the pivotal issue remained Gentiles. The center of his new gospel was the redemption of Gentiles by Christ—not by its polar opposite, observance of the Torah. Once the axis rotated 180 degrees, Christ replaced Torah as the gateway to salvation, not for Jews, but for Gentiles’ (2002: 62–63; for more on this so-called ‘transvaluation’ model of conversion, see Gager 1981). ‘There is no doubt that Paul’s conversion was a dramatic turning point in his life’ (2002: 65).

Paul’s conversion/transformation, which convinced him to take a Law-free message to Gentiles, ‘led to persistent and bitter opposition to him from within the Jesus movement itself’ (Gager 2002: 66). Those who opposed Paul were other Jews within the movement who retained the position—unlike, evidently, those Jews-in-Christ whom Paul may have persecuted earlier, in Damascus—that Gentiles, to join the ekklēsia, had first to convert fully to Judaism (2002: 66). This situation of argument internal to the Jesus movement about how to integrate Gentiles gives the actual context for most of the negative remarks that Paul makes about circumcision and Torah (2002: 66–73). Paul is against Gentiles-in-Christ Judaizing—voluntarily assuming some but not all of the commandments. (Hence his warning in Gal 5:3: ‘Every man who receives circumcision is bound to keep the whole law.’)

Though because of his work among Gentiles—the direct result of his conversion—Paul himself ceased to observe Jewish law (1 Cor 9:20; Gaston 1987: 76–79; Stowers 1994: 156, 329; Gager 2000: 86), Paul did not, as later Christian tradition will hold, teach against Judaism per se, thus, with respect to Jews as well. Rather, he saw the redemption of Gentiles through faith in Christ as the End-time realization of God’s promise to Abraham, ‘the father of many nations’ (Gen 17:4; Rom 4:17; Stowers 1994: 176–193; Gaston 1987: 45–63). The redemption of Israel, on the other hand, rests securely and irrevocably on the promises to the fathers, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and so on (epangeliai, Rom 9:4; irrevocable gifts, 11:29; promises to the patriarchs, 15:8; Stowers 1994: 132–133). Paul thus ‘does not say, “All Israel will have faith in Christ” or “All Israel will become Christian.” Paul never speaks of Israel’s redemption in terms of Christ’ (Gager 2002: 74–75). The fullness of the nations, through Christ, will enter into Israel’s redemption; and it is all of Jewish Israel that will be saved (Rom 11:26; cf. Staples 2011).

5. ‘Conversion’, Ethnicity and Eschatology

Their differences notwithstanding, these four modern interpretive positions—Call/Commission, New Perspective, Supersessionist, and Sonderweg—all triangulate between the same three questions in order to define Paul’s ‘conversion’.
(A) Why did Paul persecute the early ekklēsia, why was Paul himself later persecuted, and how do these two persecutions relate to each other (2 Cor 11:23‒27; Gal 5:11, cf. 6.12)?

(B) How did Paul’s experience of the risen Christ affect his subsequent convictions and behaviours?

(C) What, in light of this defining experience and his later mission, did Paul mean when he taught that ‘all Israel will be saved’ (Rom 11:26)?

With few exceptions (notably Wright, who strips the term of temporality, e.g., 2013: 165, 1047-49, 1061-65; cf. Barclay 2015, declining to address the issue), most of these scholars take Paul to be an apocalyptic thinker, expecting the return of Christ within his own lifetime (1 Thes 1:9-10, 4:14-17; 1 Cor 10:11, 15:51-52; Rom 13:11-12. Gager describes Paul’s eschatological commitment as ‘intense’ and ‘all-consuming’, 2000: 61–62). Especially after Stendahl, scholars by and large no longer focus on Paul’s supposed personal sense of sinfulness, frustration, and failure as read into Romans 7 to explain his turning to Christ. Especially after Sanders, scholars by and large avoid deploying gross caricatures of Second Temple Judaism to focus their explanations (again, Wright excepted, e.g. 2013: 89, 93, 177). A strong tendency to imagine Judaism as Christianity’s diminished spiritual and moral opposite, however—particular rather than universal; ritually oriented rather than faith-oriented; exclusive rather than inclusive; focused on race, not grace (Wright again, 1993: 194, 240, 247; 2013 passim)—still affects too much of the discourse.

Despite their commonalities, these scholarly reconstructions, as we have seen, remain disparate. Some of the confusion seems to be the historiographical consequence of the idea of ‘conversion’ itself. For the better part of the last century, that idea has been dominated by the work of A.D. Nock. In his great classic, Conversion, Nock foregrounded the heroic individual as the site of a defining psychological moment, ‘a reorientation of the soul… a consciousness that a great change is involved, that the old was wrong and the new is right’ (1933: 7). In this construction, ‘conversion’ is to ‘religion’ what ‘the moment of dramatic reversal’ is to literature: a punctiliar event structuring, indeed defining, the architecture of a narrative account. For writers of fiction, this stylistic device entails no epistemological or ethical complexities. For writers of history, it does.

‘The Damascus event’ as a singular, discrete episode has characterized all of the modern historical reconstructions of Paul’s ‘conversion’ surveyed in the current essay. ‘Conversion’ implies something both about Paul’s social-historical context, and about Paul himself. ‘Conversion’ in Paul’s case presupposes the existence of two distinct, even oppositional religious choices: ‘Judaism’ and ‘Christianity’. But ca.34, when he began to experience the risen Christ, there was no ‘Christianity’ for Paul to ‘convert’ to (so too Gager 2002: 66; Stowers 1994: 23–26; Boyarin agrees, but his concept of Paul’s supposed ‘universalism’ retrojects a paradigmatic Protestant construction of later Christianity back into Paul’s first-century Jewish context). Further, if we take seriously Paul’s language of continuing empowerment by in-dwelling pneuma, the discrete narratological punctum of ‘conversion’ dissolves into a charismatic, trans-temporal and translocal
zone. Looked at in this way, Christ’s cosmic Parousia in effect becomes his third manifestation. His second (post mortem) coming, together with its confirming conferral of divinatory charismata, was Christ’s continuous empowering material presence as pneuma within the bodies of Paul, of those who were apostles before him, of Paul’s co-workers and competitors, and within the bodies of those constituting Christ’s ekklēsiai (Eyl 2019; Bazzana 2020).

Nock’s definition of conversion also entailed a presupposition about Paul-the-convert’s subsequent behaviour. ‘Conversion implies turning from something to something else. You put your earlier loyalties behind you’ (Nock 1933: 134). But Paul lived in a world of two religious options: his own Judean traditions, and those of all other peoples (lumped together by scholarly convention as ‘paganism’). Vis-à-vis the Christ movement, Paul indeed shifted from antagonist to advocate. But why presuppose that in so doing he left his traditional practices behind? To either side of his commitment to Christ, Paul worshiped the same god as before. He esteemed the same divine graphas and logia as before (1 Cor 10.11, 15.3-4; Rom 3.2). He praised eighth-day covenantal circumcision for Jews (Phil 3:5; Rom 3:1; 9.4-5, lauding Israel’s law and the covenants, both sealed with circumcision). He continued to frequent synagogues, even submitting to corporeal discipline administered by them (2 Cor 11.24). He expected Christ to manifest from Jerusalem’s temple mount (Rom 11.26). And he proudly enumerated the many privileges—including ‘sonship’—granted to his people directly by God himself (Rom 9.3-5). His Jewish achievements shrank in importance, Paul claimed, compared with the importance he now attached to knowing Christ; but comparison is not rejection (Novenson 2020: 239-59). On the evidence, pace Nock, Paul never put his earlier loyalties behind him (Fredriksen 2017; Thiessen 2016).

Paul’s apocalyptic convictions further support this conjecture of continuity. The first generation of the Jesus movement was committed to the belief that it would be the only generation of the Jesus movement. How likely is it, then, that Paul went about establishing some radically new, absolutely unprecedented Gentile biblical community in opposition (or at least in contradistinction) to Judaism? (Wright, who does hold that Paul did this, seems to see the problem, and so stretches out Paul’s timeframe, e.g., 1993: 251; 2001: 691–93; 2013: 1089, 1138, 1251.) Nowhere in his letters does Paul teach that Jews ought to stop circumcising just because he urged Gentiles not to start. Quite the contrary: by teaching Gentiles to turn from their own gods and to worship only his god, Israel’s god, Paul advocated a radical form of ‘Judaizing,’ requiring Gentiles-in-Christ to assume this defining, ritual, Jewish behaviour (Fredriksen 2010).

5.1 Gods in the blood

Thinking with the category ‘religion’ also occasions difficulties for reading Paul without anachronism—in this particular instance, in order to interpret his change from hostile outsider to committed insider. ‘Religion’ as defined for the purposes of academic study was born within Enlightenment period universities affected and configured by
post-Reformation Christianity. ‘Religion’ thus privileges ‘belief or ‘faith’, a mental operation indexing conviction, the intellectual assent and the psychological and emotional commitment to a proposition. (One ‘believes’ sincerely or strongly.) Religion is, thus, in a primary way, the domain of the individual. It strives for doctrinal clarity and coherence. It is embodied socially in institutions and communities that one can move into and out of: modern religion is a detachable aspect of individual identity. Finally, because (early modern forms of) Christianity served as the academic template for ‘religion’, we think of ‘salvation’ as religion’s purpose and its goal.

Relations between heaven and earth, in antiquity, were configured otherwise. For Jews as for other ancient peoples, syngeneia, ‘kinship’ bound peoples together horizontally across human generations and vertically, with their god(s). (Israelites were “sons” of their God; kings of David’s lineage, especially so; e.f., Ex 4:22; 2 Sam 7.14. Some pagan groups considered their peoples or at least their leaders to be actually, biologically descended from the god(s). For them, gods really did run in the blood: Jones 1999.) In this way, different ancient ethnē, Jews included, were born into their relationship with and their obligations to their god(s). Worship—latreia, “cult”—was thus an ethnic designation, and ethnicity was a cult designation (Fredriksen 2010a: 235–40; Johnson Hodge 2007: 49–50; Stowers 1994: 23–29, 227–250; Runesson 2008: 62–77; Fredriksen 2018). Innocent of any (Reformation) opposition between ‘faith’ (pistis) and ‘works’ (erga, ‘deeds’), ancient ethnic groups (Judeans included) enacted their allegiance to their deities through performances of loyalty and respect according to protocols, often revealed by the deity, and transmitted from one generation to the next. These religious protocols defined and expressed group identity, and coordinated good relations between heaven and earth.

In short, what moderns think of as ‘religion’ ancient people experienced as an ethnic and cultic patrimony. Paradosis tōn paterōn (cf. hoi patrikōn mou paradoseis, Gal 1:14), ta patria ethē, ta patria, mos maiorum, hoi patrioi nomoi: all these terms for ‘religion’ translate as ‘ancestral custom’. Pistis, often in Paul’s letters rendered as ‘belief’ or as ‘faith’, actually indexed ‘loyalty’, ‘trust’, or ‘faithfulness’. One did not ‘believe’ in one’s ancestral customs: one was faithful or loyal to them (Morgan 2015). Further, and finally, these ethnically specific customs were not focused on ‘salvation’. What to do in order to attain a happy state post-mortem was the specialized concern of philosophy and of mystery cults. Life, not afterlife, motivated living according to ethnic paradosis and nomoi. (Nongbri 2013 on ‘religion’; 2015, on ‘salvation’).

Finally, in antiquity—unlike in modernity—one’s ‘religion’ qua defining aspect of one’s ethnicity, was considered ‘natural’, innate, given (Esler 2003: 40–76; Matlock 2012; Isaac 2004; Johnson Hodge 2007). So also, said ancient ethnographers, were the moral, physical, and cultural characteristics of people groups, the genos or ethnos or natio or gens (Isaac 2004). All of these dimensions, numinous and human, were conceptualized as embedded in a kinship-group’s physis, their ‘nature’. Physis, ‘nature,’ was in other words itself an essentialist category of ancient anthropology.

‘We are Jews physei’, Paul says to Peter in Antioch, “and not gentile sinners”—who, by implication, were sinners physei, that is, ‘by nature’ (Gal 2.15; cf. Rom 11.24, where
non-Jews are grafted into the eschatological olive tree of Israel para physin, ‘against’ their ‘nature’). Paul takes a dim view of the ways that non-Jews ‘by nature’ behave (e.g. Rom 1.18-32; 1 Cor 6.9-11; Gal 5.19-21). Such behaviours, he was convinced, were linked to the Gentiles’ allegiances to the wrong gods.

Far from being non-ethnic or trans-ethnic (as the tired ‘universalist’ vs. ‘particularist’ contrast would have it), and notwithstanding the single sentence of Galatians 3:28, Paul, apostle to the ethnē, structured his world according to ethnic distinctions. Like many of his contemporaries, Paul too was an ethnic essentialist, thus (as we have just seen) an ethic essentialist: a people’s behaviours were no less blood-born than were its gods.

Paul’s ethnic essentialism in turn explains his resistance to proselyte circumcision (Thiessen 2016): flesh—the site of circumcision—cannot change Gentile physis. But it also explains his confidence that his ex-pagan Gentiles had indeed received divine (thus ‘Jewish’) spirit. Spirit enabled his Gentiles to stop acting like ethnē, and to start living more-or-less as (idealized versions of) Jews. Through Christ and ‘in’ Christ, gentiles could now ‘fulfill the [Jewish] Law’ (e.g., Rom 13.8-10; Gal 5.14; 1 Thes 4.3-12). Paul’s mission to Gentiles might have been circumcision-free; but in terms of the domestic, communal and ritual behaviours that he demanded of his ex-pagans, his gospel was certainly not ‘Law-free’. Divine spirit did not ‘convert’ pagans to Judaism; but it did enable them, insisted Paul, to live like Jews, dedicated to the exclusive worship of Israel’s god. In both the etic and emic senses of the term, and no less than his circumcising competitors, Paul too preached a Judaizing gospel.

5.2 The gods, the Christ, and persecution

If ‘religion’ imports distortion when considering Paul’s letters, ‘monotheism’ does so no less. In antiquity, all gods were assumed to exist. This is so even for people—like ancient Jews and, eventually, Christians—whom we habitually designate ‘monotheists’. Such people might deem their own god the highest or most powerful or the best god; but they knew that many other gods, lesser in power, ranged closer to hand. These lower gods, often named by both pagans and Jews as daimonia (cf. Ps 95:5 LXX; 1 Cor 10:18‒21), typically associated and identified with particular places and ethnic groups. They also savoured blood sacrifices. (For this reason, non-Jews familiar with Jewish scriptures might designate the Jewish god a ‘demon’, e.g., Faustus apud Augustine, c. Faustum 18.2.) Lines of kinship diplomacy between cities and peoples—such as the syngeneia created by Second Temple Jews between Jerusalem and Sparta (Josephus, AJ 1.240-241, 12.226; 1 Macc 12:21; 2 Macc 5:9)—could be established by appealing to these gods as common ancestors to the parties of a treaty (For the Sparta-Jerusalem connection, Heracles and a granddaughter of Abraham were mobilized; Jones 1999: 72–80.) Displays of courtesy to gods not one’s own went far in establishing good relations between heaven and earth, and between one human group and another. Thus Jews, living in the cities of the diaspora, showed respect (if not full cult) to foreign gods; and pagans, whether in diaspora synagogues or at Jerusalem’s temple, showed respect to the Jewish god (Fredriksen
Paula Fredriksen

To use first-century terms, Jews ‘Hellenized’ and pagans ‘Judaized.’ Ancient people lived and moved within a god-congested universe, and they knew it.

This is the social world, superhuman as well as human, in which Paul lived, both as a ‘persecutor’ of the ἐκκλησία and later as its champion. When Paul took his mission to Graeco-Roman cities, he encountered these lesser gods as he encountered their people. And since he told their people to stop honouring their gods’ images and to cease participating in sacrifices to them, Paul (naturally) got on the gods’ bad side. These lower cosmic gods, the archontes tou aiōnos toutou, had crucified the son of Paul’s god (1 Cor 2:8); now they persecuted Paul and Paul’s Christ-following Gentiles, all of whom thereby shared in the sufferings of Christ (2 Cor 4:4; cf. Gal 4:8-9 on cosmic stoicheia; 1 Cor 10:20–21 on lower gods as ‘godlings’). ‘Indeed, there are many theoi and many kyrioi’, Paul tells his Corinthians (1 Cor 8:5–6); but soon, these lower powers will themselves acknowledge the god of Israel when Christ defeats them and establishes the Kingdom of his father (15:24–27; for lexicography, see BDAG; cf. the ‘principalities and powers’ of Eph 6:12). In the End, these beings, wherever they are—above the earth or upon the earth or below the earth—will acknowledge the returning Jesus (Phil 2:10; cf. Livy 1.32.9-10 wherein Augustus invokes Jupiter, and all other gods, omnes caelestes vosque terrestres vosque inferni.). The coming parousia of Christ, in short, besides raising the dead and transforming the living (1 Cor 15:23, 51–54), would bring about a Götterdämmerung for the Hellenistic cosmos.

How had Paul come to his conviction that the gods of the nations were about to submit to the son of his god? He inferred it, he says, from his experience of the risen Christ:

[Christ] appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve then to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the ekklēsia of God… Now if Christ is preached as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins…. But Christ has in fact been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep…. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his manifestation those who belong to Christ. Then comes the End, when he delivers the Kingdom to God the Father after destroying every archē and every exousia and every dynamis. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is Death … Lo, I tell you a mystery! We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall all be changed…. Marana tha! (1 Cor 15:5–21).

This is the experience that scholars variously designate Paul’s ‘conversion’ or his ‘call’. We cannot know what it was that Paul (or these others) thought he saw. And his language when he speaks of this experience in Galatians—‘God revealed his son in me (en emoi)’—suggests a mental rather than a visual apprehension. (Indeed, given his constant insistence that he ‘has the spirit of Christ’—and is able to communicate such spirit
to his assembles, wherein Christ’s spirit also dwells—Paul’s experience might well be best characterized as a continuous ‘possession’ by spirit; Bazanna 2020.) But the cognitive content of Paul’s vision is clear. The risen Christ told the time on God’s clock. The End of the ages was at hand (cf. Allison 2010: 59; Fredriksen 2017:131-66).

Paul’s vision, and the apocalyptic conviction that it conveyed, united him with those Christ-following Jews in Damascus whom he had originally ‘persecuted’: indeed, they would have been its source. The ‘persecution’ Paul gave was probably the same as what he eventually got, namely, disciplinary flogging, up to the maximum allowed, thirty-nine lashes (2 Cor 11:24; cf. Hultgren 1976; Fredriksen 1991: 548–550). This means as well that the objects of his actions could only have been other Jews who, as emissaries of Christ, still affiliated with the synagogue: as Sanders famously observed on this issue, ‘punishment implies inclusion’ (1983: 192, emphasis original). As both agent and recipient of such discipline, Paul himself stood within synagogue communities.

What had motivated Paul, and the diaspora community in Damascus on whose behalf he had acted, to subject Jewish Christ-followers to such punitive discipline? As we have seen, scholars speculate either that these Christ-following Jews were themselves no longer Law-observant, or that they affronted and alarmed the larger synagogue community by accepting Gentiles into the ekklēsia without requiring that these Gentiles be Law-observant. But the normal, widespread, and long-lived synagogue practice of receiving interested pagans as god-fearers makes this second explanation extremely implausible: Why object to the ekklēsia’s following the same practice as did the synagogue itself (not to mention, mutatis mutandis, the temple in Jerusalem; Fredriksen 2017: 49-60)?

We are left then with the first speculation: Paul and his synagogue’s authorities flogged these Christ-following Jews because they were no longer living according to Torah. But this answer is fatally flawed for two reasons. First, it is generated by circular reasoning, the widespread scholarly conviction that Paul himself, after his experience of the risen Christ, also ceased to observe Torah; and by the even more widespread conviction that Law-observance is, precisely, what distinguishes Christianity from Judaism. As we have seen, however, Paul’s Gentiles were expected to live according to quite a few of the Laws’ mandates. Second, this explanation presumes what we know was not the case: that there was some sort of uniform and translocal standard of Torah observance. In fact, vigorous variety prevailed (Goodman 2018). Absent these presumptions, the warrant for thinking that the Jews whom Paul had initially ‘persecuted’ were themselves ‘Law-free’—thus somehow transgressive—also dissolves.

We should focus for explanation on what we know, not on what we do not know. And what we know beyond doubting from Paul’s letters is that Christ-fearing Gentiles had to renounce the worship of their native gods, while not, via circumcision, ‘becoming’ Jews themselves. How would Paul, and those who were apostles before him, have come to such a concept? From long-standing Jewish traditions about the fate of Gentiles at the End of the Age. These traditions were mixed, some negative and exclusive, some positive and inclusive; both sometimes appearing within the same texts. But the tradition that mattered to the new movement—as to later rabbinic Judaism—was the one that foretold
the nations’ inclusion, together with a redeemed Israel, once God’s Kingdom dawned (Fredriksen 1991: 543–548 with many references; Donaldson 2007: esp. 499–512).

Such ‘ex-pagan pagans,’ these eschatological Gentiles, originally had only a literary life: populating some of these prophetic texts, they were an apocalyptic trope, and an apocalyptic hope. They do not become a social reality until the Jesus movement penetrated the Diaspora and began to encounter significant numbers of interested, already ‘Judaized’ Gentiles, which is to say, once the movement established itself through the networks of Mediterranean synagogue communities. This is the apocalyptic tradition that informs the first generation’s ‘Gentile policy,’ which was operative even in those communities not founded by Paul (Damascus; Antioch; Rome). Knowing what time it was on history’s clock; racing in the (for all they knew) brief spirit-charged period between Christ’s resurrection and his final Parousia; seeing in the pneumatic behaviour of their new Gentile members confirmation of their own eschatological convictions: these Jewish apostles (as, eventually, Paul) welcomed these ex-pagan Gentiles as adelphoi— brothers adopted into God’s family kata pneuma; still distinct and different kata sarka (such adelphoi were not circumcised).

The Gentiles’ inclusion in the mission tells us nothing about levels of Jewish observance among these Jewish apostles, Paul included. The source of the Gentiles’ ‘Law-free-ness’—that is, their not receiving proselyte circumcision—was Jewish apocalyptic expectation, not apostolic apostasy. To make the same point slightly differently: to hold that Jewish ancestral traditions were not incumbent upon non-Jews would have been a tautology in antiquity (and remains so today): only Israel is responsible for Israel’s law (Rom 9:4). And this position held true even when—or especially when—the non-Jews who joined the Jesus movement were viewed from the perspective of Jewish apocalyptic expectation.

What does the Gentiles’ inclusion, via pneumatic adoption (huiothesia, ‘son-making’), tell us about Paul as an ancient religious thinker? Paul’s Jewish apocalyptic convictions were also traditional in terms of the broader, pagan, Mediterranean construction of divine/human relations: gods and their humans form family groups. If the nations, through an eschatological miracle, now worship Israel’s god alone, then even though they remain ethnically distinct, they are spiritually adopted into the family: they now, like Israel, can also call God ‘Abba, Father’. Paul’s discourse of ethnicity allows for difference as well as for inclusion, diversity as well as unity (Johnson Hodge 2007: 149–153).

If it is indeed the case, as I have argued here, that the so-called ‘Law-free’ mission to Gentiles, since based in and on Jewish apocalyptic traditions, implies nothing about the level of Jewish observance on the part of those apostles bringing the message—if indeed the Gentiles’ inclusion was contingent upon their adopting certain Jewish behaviors (like avoiding idol-worship)—then we still have to answer our question: Why did Paul initially persecute the ekklēsia? And why, later, did synagogues persecute Paul?

We return to our earlier observation about the relation between gods and humans in antiquity: the fact that ancient gods ran in the blood meant that people were born into their obligations to particular deities. Pagans who joined the Jesus movement in principle had to cease honouring their native gods with cult—which would make the
god(s) angry. Because these non-sacrificing pagans refused to honour their gods, the Tiber might overflow or the Nile might not, the earth might move or the sky might not (Tertullian, Apol. 40.2). ‘No rain, because of the Christians!’ (Augustine, civ. Dei 2.3). The problem with Christ-fearing Gentiles, in the eyes of the pagan majority, was not that these people were ‘Christian’, but that they were deviant pagans. That is to say, the problem was that, whatever the new religious practices that these people chose to assume, they were nonetheless, in the eyes of their neighbours, still obligated to their native gods as well. The wellbeing of the city depended upon heaven’s good will.

A male Gentile’s extreme affiliation to Jewish traditions via circumcision was tolerated, if resented, because Judaism itself was familiar, and widely recognized as ancient and ancestral, the two criteria of respectable cult. But in the first generation of the Christ movement, there was no term for these anomalous pagans. By century’s end, they will be identified by a Latin-root term, Christianoi (Townsend 2008). For this same reason, we have no Jewish term for these people either: since they were neither proselytes (for men, circumcised) nor god-fearers (pagans who added the Jewish god into their own pantheons), they fit no previously known social category. Paul, who calls them adelphoi (‘brothers’) and hagioi (a Temple referent, Fredriksen 2010a: 244–249; Horn 2007) also uses the same term for them as for their idol-worshipping kinsmen: ethnē (e.g., Rom 1.6)

Not requiring complete affiliation with Judaism via circumcision, insisting nonetheless that native cult be renounced, the early apostles walked these Christ-fearing pagans into a social and religious no-man’s land. These apostles themselves as well as their Gentiles may not have been too worried: after all, Christ was on the verge of returning, of gloriously summing up the ages, and of submitting all to the Kingdom of his father. But the pagan majority was worried. The anger of their gods would affect everyone. The problem with the ekklēsia’s Gentiles, in the eyes of the Gentile majority, was that they were deviant pagans. Their impious behaviour put the whole larger community at risk (Fredriksen 2010b: 25–39, 88–98; Goodman 2005: 376–387).

Jews who were Christians in later centuries are invisible in the evidence for pagan anti-Christian persecutions: Jews had long had the option not to sacrifice to the gods of the majority. (For this reason, reports Eusebius, a Gentile Christian during a period of pagan persecution had considered converting to Judaism, in order to be spared harassment as a Gentile, HE 6.12.1.) But in the early decades of the new movement, Jewish apostles were targeted—hence Paul’s being beaten with rods three times (2 Cor 11:25), a Roman punishment; hence his being the object of mob fury (vv. 25-26)—precisely because they were raising pagan anxieties by drawing pagans away from their ancestral practices, something that the synagogues with their god-fearers had never done. For this same reason diaspora synagogues subjected Jewish apostles to disciplinary flogging, up to ‘thirty-nine lashes’. Such a destabilizing and inflammatory message—no more latreia to the gods!—radiating from the synagogue could make the larger Jewish urban community itself the target of local anxieties and resentments. Alienating the gods put the city at risk; alienating the pagan majority put the synagogue at risk, especially when the behaviour occasioning that risk—urging affiliated Gentiles to eschew traditional cult for exclusive devotion to the god of Israel—was so universally associated with Jews themselves.
This real and serious threat—aggressive pagan anxieties caused by fear of divine anger—was the reason both for Paul’s giving this synagogue discipline and for his getting this synagogue discipline. And the social situation that called forth these persecutions—the committed response of the ekklēsia’s pagans to the apocalyptic demand that they renounce the worship of their own gods—had everything to do with the early apostles’ experience of the risen Christ, which served for them as a vindication of Jesus of Nazareth’s core message: the Kingdom of God truly was at hand. Jewish apocalyptic convictions, not some imagined apostasy, stand to either side of Paul’s Damascus experience, provide its content, and contextualize his own subsequent activity as an apostle to Gentiles.

To speak of Paul’s advocacy of these convictions as his ‘conversion’ rather than as his ‘call’ introduces a level of high contrast that inevitably ends up refracted through the issue of ‘Judaism’/‘Christianity’ or (its coded form) ‘particularism’ vs. ‘universality’ (Brakke 2001; Johnson Hodge 2007: 149–153; Eisenbaum 2009: 142). Paul the itinerant Jewish apocalyptic visionary thus becomes Paul the Christian theologian. His own highly charged statements about the Law—that he has ‘died’ to the Law (Gal 2:19), or that he lives ‘as a Jew’ in order to win Jews (1 Cor 9:20), or that he regards his former achievements in living Jewishly as ‘refuse’ (skubala) compared with the value of knowing Christ (Phil 3:8)—are wrested out of their context of addressing pagans about his mission to pagans, and taken as his personal repudiation of Law observance (Fredriksen 2014). His insistence that Gentiles-in-Christ not circumcise is seen as his commitment to universalism and unity, instead of what it is, the preservation kata sarka of Gentile/Jewish difference. (Paul thinks in terms of a single generation, and he does not preach epispasm.) The core message of his Gentile mission transforms from ‘No more latreia to daimonia!’ to ‘Do not do the works of the Law!’ And Paul the apostle himself becomes ‘Law-free’, which in turn becomes the reason why synagogues go after him.

Because of this habitual high contrast between Law and Gospel, we overemphasize the degree to which Paul felt (or actually was) persecuted by diaspora synagogues. Often, that presumption of persecution leads us to overstate or to presuppose a much greater degree of difference between Paul’s Jewish practice and that of (his host?) synagogue communities. We need to take Paul at his word, and so widen our view of his ‘persecutors’. He feels no less oppressed by Gentiles, he says in 2 Corinthians 11. Wind, weather, and water also ‘persecute’ him: these are the domain of lower gods. And he feels much more persecuted by his superhuman cosmic opposition, all of those divine entities whose active existence our attachment to the idea of modern monotheism makes harder to see. The issue, for Paul, is not the Law, but Christ’s impending victory over these gods. Paul’s worst enemies, in short, are also the chief enemies of Christ. Victory is assured, though salvation—transformation of the quick and the dead from bodies of flesh to bodies of pneuma—is not yet. Once Christ triumphs over the gods, the plērōma of the Gentiles will come in, and God will stop his providential hardening of the majority of Israel, so that all Israel will finally be secured (Rom 11:25‒26). (On this summary reference to all humanity in terms of the seventy Gentile nations descended from Noah and the twelve tribes of ‘all Israel’, long traditional by the time Paul uses it, see Scott 1995;
Fredriksen 2017: 159-166.) True to his promises, God redeems his people Israel; true to the euangelion, he redeems those who were not his people through his son (Eisenbaum 2009: 250–255).

5.3 Paul within Judaism

We have seen how scholars have positioned Paul, post-Damascus, against Judaism (the 'New Perspective on Paul', the Supersessionist Paul, and Paul-as-Christian theologian). We have seen how scholars have attempted to consider Paul alongside Judaism (The two-covenant or Sonderweg Paul: Torah for Jews, Christ for everyone else).

Over the past several decades, looking back to the ‘Call, Commission’ model, another way of interpreting Paul has emerged: ‘Paul within Judaism’. (E.g., Johnson Hodge 2007: 6–9; Eisenbaum 2009: 216–249; Elliott 1990, 1994; Fredriksen 2017; Zetterholm 2009: 161–163; Nanos 1996, 2017; Novenson 2018, 2020; Runesson 2008; Thiessen 2016; Campbell 2018; Ehrensberger 2013) Those scholars associated with this view combine some of the signature elements prominent in several of the other interpretive approaches that we have examined. Like the mid-twentieth-century Scandinavian scholars, they see Paul's transformative experience not as his ‘conversion’, but as his commission and call; and they emphasize eschatology. Like the Sonderweg scholars, they underscore the Gentile audience of Paul’s letters, and his focus on the question of how Gentiles relate to Jewish law. They see Paul as thinking in terms of ethnicities rather than as attempting to somehow transcend, evade, or undo them.

But the particular commitment of this scholarly movement—its energetic internal variety notwithstanding—is to the thoroughgoing Jewish interpretive context and content of Paul's message and mission. In this respect they take their cue from Paul himself. In his own view, Paul was always a Jew, in both phases of his life. In fact—and again in his own view—Paul was always an excellent Jew in both phases of his life. Before receiving his call, 'I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people' (Gal 1:14); 'As to righteousness under the Law, I was blameless' (Phil 3:6). And given his own understanding of the message of Christ, Paul was also convinced that he was a superior Jew: chosen before birth by God himself to be an apostle to the Gentiles (Gal 1:15–16); empowered by God’s own spirit to prophesy and to teach (1 Cor 14 passim); superior to other missionaries to an extraordinary degree on account of his fortitude in suffering (2 Cor 11 passim) and on account of his elevated visions and revelations (2 Cor 12:1–5). 'By the grace of God I am what I am', Paul proclaimed, adding (with no false modestly) 'and God’s grace toward me was not in vain' (1 Cor 15:10). Paul saw the message of Christ as absolutely synonymous with his native traditions and scriptures, thus with God’s ‘irrevocable’ promises to Israel, his ‘kinsmen by race’ (Rom 9:3; 11:19; cf. 15:8).

Thinking of Paul as a ‘convert’ thus obscures the very perspective that he saw himself in. Whatever its putative utility as an etic term, ‘convert’ pulls Paul out of his own cultural, historical, and religious context. What changed most fundamentally for him
in light of his experiences of the *pneuma* of Christ were not his religious principles and practices so much as his sense of time, or rather his sense of the times. Paul’s committed conviction that the Endtime was fast-approaching was validated and confirmed by his success among Gentiles. A flawless Pharisee, he was likewise a flawless apostle, living as a Jew while teaching a radical form of messianic Jewishness to non-Jews. Was Paul ‘called’ or ‘converted’, then, to the kerygma of Christ? To avoid anachronism, false contrasts, and chimerical reconstructions, the better assessment is ‘called’.

**Suggested Reading**


**Bibliography**


The missionary work of Paul has inspired countless missionaries in the history of the church, but it has been only relatively recently that his missionary activity has become the focus of academic study. Recent biographies of Paul include chapters on his missionary work (Bornkamm 1971; Bruce 1977; Becker 1989, 1993; Légasse 1991; Gnîlka 1996; Lohse 1996; Murphy-O’Connor 1996; Wick 2006; Thielson 2010), as do textbooks on Paul (Ebel 2006) as well as histories of the early church (Conzelmann 1973; Barnett 1999; M. Mitchell 2006; Dunn 2009; Freeman 2009). Many studies on Paul as missionary have a theological, sociological, or pastoral focus (Oepke 1920; Schrenk 1954; Hock 1980; Gilliland 1983; Pesce 1994; O’Brien 1995; Little 2005; Plummer 2006; Burke and Rosner 2011; Gorman 2015), as do discussions in books that discuss missions in the New Testament (Hahn 1963, 1965; Zeller 1982; Larkin and Williams 1998; Nissen 1999; Köstenberger and O’Brien 2001). Studies of Paul’s theology rarely comment on his missionary work (an exception is Schreiner 2001). Scholars discuss Paul’s travels (Reynier 2009), his missionary speeches (Wilckens 1974), his missionary strategy and methods (Allen 1912; Haas 1971; Ollrog 1979; Scott 1995; Riesner 1998; Reinbold 2000; Dickson 2003; Gehring 2004; Magda 2009), and his missionary work in a particular city or region (Gärtner 1955; Pillai 1979; Buss 1980; Murphy-O’Connor 1993; Bormann 1995; Pilhofer 1995–2000; Breytenbach 1996; Fournier 1997; Bechard 2000; Witulski 2000; Brocke 2001; Witetschek 2008). A. von Harnack devotes only a short chapter to Paul’s missionary work in his classic study (Harnack 1924: 79–107; later chapters on the missionary methods and the message of the early Christians regularly refer to Paul). Lietaert Peerbolte discusses Paul the missionary only in the final chapter of his monograph with the same title (Lietaert Peerbolte 2003). For a comprehensive study of Paul’s missionary work see Schnabel (2002: 887–1424; 2004: 923–1485; 2008).

It is sometimes said that Paul does not describe himself as a ‘missionary’ (e.g., Barton 2003: 35). However, since the Latin verb mittère (‘to send’) is a sufficiently accurate translation of the Greek verb apostellô, the noun apostolos can very well be translated with the English term ‘missionary’ (which derives from the post-classical
Latin term *missionarius*, attested ca. 1620) denoting the sending of an envoy or ‘emissary’ who has been commissioned to carry out a specific task. While we certainly need to be cautious not to interpret Paul in terms of modern categories and institutions, Paul’s self-understanding as an ‘apostle’ (Rom 1:1; Gal 1:1; 1 Cor 1:1 etc.) is doubtlessly that of a missionary.

1. **Sources**

The extant writings of Paul are the most important primary source for a description of his missionary work. Paul’s letters inform us about his call and commission as Jesus Christ’s envoy to Jews and Gentiles, his self-understanding as a missionary, the message that he proclaimed, the conditions of missionary work, his co-workers, and the financial aspects of his work. Paul alludes only sparingly to the geographical scope of his work, most famously in Rom 15:19 (see section 4). The value of the Acts of the Apostles for a description of the early years of the Christian movement and for a description of Paul’s missionary work in particular is disputed. Some (mostly German) scholars remain sceptical, highlighting the historical distance between Paul and the author of Acts, the reliance of the latter on various later traditions (‘Paul legends’), and asserting that the author of Acts was not a historian in the modern sense (Becker 1993: 13–15). But even such sceptics allow that we cannot do without the Acts of the Apostles, especially if we reckon with a source containing an itinerary of Paul’s journeys as the basis for Acts 13–21 (Becker 1993: 15–16). In the English speaking world, New Testament scholars have more sympathy for the historical reliability of the Acts of the Apostles (Ramsay 1896; Marshall 1970; Hemer 1989; Winter 1993–1996; Keener 2012–2015; see also Hengel and Schwemer 1997: 15–21; Frey, Rothschild, and Schröter 2009). The latter is considerably strengthened if one accepts the argument that the so-called ‘we passages’ are based on Luke’s written notes as an eyewitness of Paul’s last years (Thornton 1991). If Acts is included as a primary source for a description of the life and missionary work of Paul, the information provided by Paul’s letters is substantially augmented, especially as regards the particulars of Paul’s missionary work.

2. **Conversion and Commission as Apostle**

Paul’s letters inform about the life-changing revelation of the risen Jesus which he received on the road to Damascus (Gal 1:11–16; 1 Cor 9:1) and about his conviction of being commissioned by Jesus Christ as an ‘apostle’ (*apostolos*) according to the sovereign will of God (Gal 1:1; Rom 1:1–5; 15:15–16). An ‘apostle’ is best described as an
envoy sent as the representative of a higher authority and commissioned to convey a particular message and accomplish a particular task. He ‘works as an ambassador’ (presbeuō) for Christ, ‘God making his appeal through us’ (2 Cor 5:20): he is God’s representative who brings the most significant message of reconciliation to God through Christ to all nations (cf. Bash 1997). Paul emphasizes that he was tasked to proclaim the fulfilment of Israel’s messianic hopes on account of Jesus’ death and resurrection, the dawn of the new age of God’s rule, and the salvation for the Gentiles (Gal 3; Rom 4) as Jesus Christ’s messenger to both Jews and Gentiles. Paul’s encounter with the crucified, risen, and glorified Jesus Christ who commissioned him to preach the good news of forgiveness of sins for Jews and Gentiles remained a fundamental motivation in his ministry. He emphasizes in his first letter to the Corinthian Christians, written twenty or so years after the Damascus event, that ‘If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for an obligation is laid on me, and woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel! For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward; but if not of my own will, I am entrusted with a commission’ (1 Cor 9:16–17). Paul’s work as a missionary is not a matter of personal preference but a necessity, a compulsion that God has laid upon him. Like Jeremiah (Jer 1:5; 20:9), Paul is constrained by God: he has to do what God commissioned him to do. However, unlike Jeremiah, Paul does not lament the ‘coercive’ nature of his calling nor the hardship of his God-given task. Paul’s description of the obligation under which he works as an apostle is connected with his description of his status as a ‘slave’ (doulos) of Jesus Christ (Rom 1:1; Phil 1:1; the traditional translation ‘servant of Jesus Christ’ is too tame). Paul obeys Jesus as a slave obeys his master. This does not mean that Paul is a reluctant missionary; on the contrary, since his status as a slave is determined by the status of his master, he regards it as a privilege to speak for Jesus Christ, the exalted Lord (Phil 1:20–24). Paul is motivated by other factors and realities as well: e.g., by his desire to win Jews and Gentiles for Christ (1 Cor 9:20–23), his yearning for the salvation of the Jewish people (Rom 9:2–3), his concern for the believers’ progress in the faith (Rom 1:11; Phil 1:8–11), the reality of the power of God who alone can convince Jews and Gentiles of the good news of Jesus, Israel’s crucified and saviour of humankind (1 Cor 1:18–2:5), the transforming power of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 2:4; 2 Cor 3:8; Gal 3:3, 5; 5:25; Eph 6:17; Phil 1:19; 1 Thess 1:5), the example of Jesus (Phil 2:5–11), and by his past experiences (compare 1 Cor 3:10, 13–15 with 9:1; also 15:10).

The Acts of the Apostles provides a narrative account of Paul’s conversion and commission (Acts 9:1–21), repeated as a first person account in Acts 22:4–16; 26:9–18. Luke’s accounts highlight the following elements. The impetus for Paul’s missionary work is the fact that he has been chosen by God to be an ‘instrument’ in the hands of the risen Jesus Christ, carrying out the tasks given to him by Jesus. The new purpose of Paul’s life is the proclamation of the message of Jesus as Israel’s messiah and saviour. The focus of Paul’s proclamation is people who have not yet heard the message of Jesus, in particular the Gentiles, but also the Jewish people. The corollary of Paul’s ministry is suffering which accompanies his preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ.
3. Paul’s Description of the Missionary Task

In 1 Corinthians 3:5–16, Paul provides an extended description of his understanding of missionary work. Missionaries and local pastors and teachers of the church are servants (diakonoi), which means that ministry consists in getting work done at the behest of God, rather than in rivalries about prestige and status. God is the Lord (kyrios) of missionary and pastoral work: he directs the work of his ‘assistants’ who serve him in the particular tasks that God has assigned and with the individual gifts that God has granted. Paul and other teachers and pastors are thus ‘fellow workers’ (synergoi): the missionary who ‘plants’ a church, and the teachers and pastors who instruct the new believers are involved in one and the same task: they have a common purpose and they are both dependent upon the Lord. Paul’s role as a missionary is that of a ‘master builder’ (architektōn) who ‘lays the foundation’: he establishes new churches by proclaiming the message of the crucified, risen, and exalted messiah who forgives the sins of Jews and Gentiles, brings about reconciliation with God, and transforms the lives of the new believers. The foundation of the new community is Jesus Messiah, specifically the message that the crucified Jesus is Israel’s messiah and the saviour of all people (1 Cor 1:23; 2:2). The ‘success’ of missionary work, i.e., the establishment of new communities of believers in Jesus, is due to the power of God (and not due to the rhetorical capabilities or the argumentative brilliance of the preacher; note the context in 1 Cor 1:18–2:5). The church that emerges as the result of missionary work does not belong to the missionary: the church is ‘God’s field, God’s building’ (1 Cor 3:9). Missionaries are accountable to God: God alone decides what constitutes ‘success’ of the work of missionaries, pastors, and teachers, not individuals in the congregation, particularly if they use secular criteria of success (such as the traditional conventions of Graeco-Roman rhetoric; cf. Winter 1997). The missionaries’ and teachers’ theological perspectives, strategic priorities, motivations, and methods must be based on the reality of Jesus’ death and resurrection. Missionaries and teachers in whose ministry the message of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ is central do not have to be afraid of the fire of the Last Judgement, unlike those who marginalize the message of the crucified Jesus Christ in exchange for a different focus, e.g., on rhetorical effectiveness. The ‘building’ (oikodomē) that the church represents is specifically God’s ‘temple’ (naos): the church is the place of God’s presence who ‘dwells’ among his people by his Spirit (1 Cor 3:16). Paul has been given the important task of establishing communities of God’s new messianic people (cf. 2 Cor 6:16; Eph 2:21–22). Paul’s statements in 1 Cor 6:19; 8:1; 10:23; 14:3, 4, 5 demonstrate that he regarded himself not only as a pioneer missionary who establishes a new community of God’s people and then leaves, but also as a teacher and pastor who ‘builds up’ (oikodomeō) the church nurturing the believers in Jesus.
In 1 Corinthians 9:19–23, Paul gives a more personal description of his missionary work. It is a basic rule of his missionary work that he takes his audience seriously: he subordinates his personal behaviour to the preaching of the gospel. He makes himself dependent upon the audience in the sense that he listens to the people and lives with the people. Paul emphasizes that he does not exclude anybody from his preaching since he is obligated to preach the gospel to all people, irrespective of ethnic background, social status, or gender. He preaches to Jews and Gentiles, to the freeborn, freedmen, and slaves. He becomes ‘all things to all people’ (1 Cor 9:22): among Jews he lives as a Jew, among Gentiles he lives as a Gentile (although without engaging in the sinful behaviour in which Gentiles often engage). The goal of his missionary work is to ‘win’ people, to rescue Jews and Gentiles, freeborn and slaves, men and women, so that they will receive salvation and be granted adoption into God’s family. Paul ends with the emphasis that the benchmark of his missionary work is not pragmatic effectiveness but the gospel: ‘I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings’ (1 Cor 9:23). The gospel of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ determines the broad scope and as well as the limits of missionary accommodation.

4. Missionary Activities

In Romans 10:14–17 Paul affirms the central role of the oral proclamation of envoys sent by Jesus Christ who have been called to proclaim ‘good news’ (euangelion, ‘gospel’; the verb euangelizō ‘to bring good news’ or ‘announce good news’ is repeatedly used by Paul, cf. Rom 1:15; 15:20; 1 Cor 1:17; 9:16, 18; 15:1, 2; 2 Cor 11:7; Gal 1:8, 9, 11, 16, 23; 4:13). In Isaiah 40:9–11 (cf. 52:7), the ‘herald of good news’ (Greek ho evangelizomenos) announces the new era of God’s kingly rule which is inaugurated by the messenger’s announcement. According to Luke, Jesus had understood his ministry of preaching and healing as fulfilling the role of the ‘herald of good tidings’ of the prophet Isaiah (Luke 4:18–19, quoting Isa 61:1–3). Paul understands his role in a similar vein, albeit as Jesus’ ambassador: he announces the good news of the coming of Jesus, Israel’s messiah, and of the salvation that God offers through him—a message that he conveys as fulfilment of God’s promises and thus with the authority of the word of God. Paul ‘proclaims’ (katangello) the good news: he makes it known in public, he disseminates it broadly (Rom 1:8; 1 Cor 2:1). He ‘announces’ (keryssō) the good news: he makes an official declaration in public, speaking for Jesus, messiah and saviour, as authorized by God himself (Rom 10:8, 14, 15; 1 Cor 1:23; 9:27; 15:11, 12; 2 Cor 1:19; 4:5; 11:4; Gal 2:2; 5:11; Phil 1:15; Col 1:23; 1 Thess 2:9).

4.1 Paul’s audiences

Paul preaches before Jewish as well as Gentile audiences (Rom 1:5, 16; 11:13; 9:1–3; 10:12–13; 1 Cor 9:19–23). As God addresses the Jews first (Rom 1:16; 2:9–10; 9–11), so does
Paul. As both Jews and Greeks are under the power of sin, needing forgiveness and salvation and reconciliation with God (Rom 3:9), as there is no distinction between Jews and Greeks as regards their status before God (Rom 1:18–3:20) who is the ‘same Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him’ (Rom 10:12), Greeks need to hear the saving news of Jesus Christ as well. Paul’s missionary ‘strategy’ was to preach the good news of God’s saving revelation in Jesus Christ to as many people as possible, irrespective of ethnicity (Jews, Greeks, barbarians), social status (free and slaves), gender (men and women), and education (the wise and powerful, and the uneducated and powerless; cf. Rom 1:14, 16; 1 Cor 1:23; Col 3:11), particularly in areas in which it had never been proclaimed (Gal 2:7; Rom 15:14–21).

4.2 Geographical scope

According to Rom 15:19, Paul worked as a missionary ‘from Jerusalem and as far around as Illyricum’, an expression that describes a semi-circle in the eastern and northern regions of the Mediterranean. It remains unclear whether this description implies a deliberate strategy of Paul. Some suggest that Paul engaged in missionary work among the territory of Japhet, Noah’s third son, whose descendants settled in Asia Minor and in Europe (Gen 10:2–5; Scott 1995: 135–180). Others suggest that Paul pursued a geographical programme based on the mission of Isaiah’s Servant of the Lord that reaches ‘the end of the earth’ (Isa 49:6) and on the mission of the ‘survivors of the nations’ (Isa 66:19; Riesner 1998: 245–253). More likely, Paul travelled to cities in geographically adjacent areas. The evidence of Acts suggests that this is exactly what Paul did (see section 4.4).

4.3 Conversion of individuals and establishment of churches

Paul missionary work aimed at the conversion of individuals. He points out that when Jews ‘turn’ (epistrephō) to the Lord, God removes the ‘veil’ that had covered their eyes and prevented them to understand the Scriptures as pointing to Jesus of Nazareth as the messianic saviour (2 Cor 3:16). When Greeks are converted, they ‘turn’ (epistrephō) to God from the idols which they worshipped, ‘to serve a living and true God’ (1 Thess 1:9). Paul asserts that it is the goodness and the patience of God that leads people to repentance (metanoia; Rom 2:4), a term that involves regret about former opinions, attitudes, and behaviour, and a change of mind and conduct. In particular, the conversion of Gentiles involves abandoning behaviour that their contemporaries, many of whom celebrated wine and Venus, found acceptable and enjoyable (1 Cor 6:9–11). Gentiles who come to faith in Jesus come to recognize that the power of God’s Spirit transforms their lives so that they manifest in their behaviour the ‘fruit of the Spirit’ rather than the ‘works of the flesh’ (Gal 5:19–24; cf. Rom 12:1–2). Conversion happens through the act of confession (homologia) by which individuals turn to God and his messiah (Rom 10:9). A corollary
of conversion is joy (1 Thess 1:5–6), a gift of God’s Spirit that transcends the anxieties of human existence (Rom 8:18, 22). Paul’s missionary work did not end with the conversion of individuals: he established communities of men and women who had come to faith in Jesus as messiah and saviour, that met—in private homes (Gehring 2004)—to study the Scriptures, to be instructed in the whole counsel of God, to learn and to remember what Jesus Christ had done, to discover the will of God for their lives, and to celebrate God’s salvation in prayers, hymns, and spiritual songs (Rom 12:4–8; 1 Cor 12–14; Col 3:16; Eph 5:18–20). Paul gives theological instruction (e.g., through his letters), ethical instruction (e.g., 1 Cor 5–11), and instruction for the understanding of the leadership and the life of the church (e.g., 1 Cor 1–4; 12–14). And Paul's missionary work involved the training of new missionaries, seen in his recruitment of and work with a long list of co-workers, including Timothy and Titus and women such as Phoebe and Junia (also note the names of co-workers in Rom 16; cf. Ollrog 1979; Köstenberger 2000).

4.4 Paul’s missionary work in geographical perspective


1. Damascus (AD 32; this date assumes that Paul’s conversion took place in AD 31/32, the second year after Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection; cf. Riesner 1998: 64–74). Paul proclaimed the gospel in the synagogues of Damascus soon after his conversion (Acts 9:19–22) and again after he returned from Arabia before he went to Jerusalem (Gal 1:17; Acts 9:23–25). The fact that the Jewish community of Damascus cooperated with the local representative of Aretas IV, the Nabatean king, in an attempt to arrest Paul (2 Cor 11:32), suggests that the Jews of Damascus regarded Paul’s activities as a threat. This implies that Paul’s preaching in the synagogues of Damascus had met with some considerable success. Paul began his missionary work in Damascus because here he received the commission to be Jesus’ witness among Jews and Gentiles, prompting him to immediately carry out the task that God had given him.

2. Arabia/Nabatea (AD 32/33). Paul references the fact that after his conversion he went to Arabia (Gal 1:17). According to 2 Cor 11:32–33, the ethnarch of King Aretas wanted to arrest him in Damascus (cf. Acts 9:23–25), which suggests that Paul’s activities in Arabia were regarded as a serious disturbance, suggesting that he preached the gospel (Murphy-O’Connor 1993). Paul would have been active in cities to the south of Damascus (Selaima, Shahba, Kanatha, etc.), and perhaps, further south, in Petra, the Nabatean capital (Hengel and Schwemer 1997, 113–120). Paul presumably went to Arabia because it was adjacent to Damascus, allowing him to reach not only Jews but also Gentiles. Also, the Jews regarded the Nabateans as descendants of Ishmael the son