

# Paul within Judaism: The State of the Questions

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## Introduction

I may not be inclined to agree with the late Christopher Hitchens that religion poisons *everything*,<sup>1</sup> but in the case of Pauline studies it could, however, easily be argued that this research discipline has indeed been negatively affected by Christian normative theology.

The study of the New Testament in general is, and has always been, a predominantly Christian affair. *Christians* study the New Testament, often within theological departments of seminaries and universities. Indeed, many scholarly commentary series are for

1. Christopher Hitchens, *God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (London: Atlantic Books, 2008).

*Christians*: The New International Greek Testament Commentary specifically states in the foreword that “the supreme aim of this series is to serve those who are engaged in the ministry of the Word of God and thus to glorify God’s name.” Similarly, in the editorial preface to the Word Biblical Commentary, it is stated that the contributors all are “evangelical,” understood “in its positive, historic sense of a commitment to Scripture as divine revelation, and to the true power of the Christian gospel.”

Furthermore, it is not unusual to find that *methodological atheism*, a quite natural assumption in most scientific research,<sup>2</sup> is challenged from scholars advocating what must be understood as an alternative theory of science, where supernatural events are possible, and where gods and angels intervene in human affairs. For instance, in his, in many ways excellent treatment of the resurrection of Jesus, presented as a scholarly contribution, N. T. Wright states in the introduction that he will argue “that the best *historical* explanation is the one which inevitably raises all kinds of *theological* questions: the tomb was indeed empty, and Jesus was indeed seen alive, because he was truly raised from the dead.”<sup>3</sup> Theological conviction drives a comment expressed as if it were merely a historical reflection. From a methodological point of view, the Christian ideological perspectives that continue to characterize much of the ostensibly historical work done in New Testament studies is problematic.

This close connection between New Testament studies in general and normative Christian theology is itself, of course, the result of historical developments. Biblical exegesis started as a way for people to understand and explain what they perceived as divine revelation,

2. See Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1969), 100.

3. N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God: Christian Origins and the Question of God: Volume 3* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 10.

or as the *Mekilta* puts it: “when they [the Israelites] all stood before mount Sinai to receive the Torah they interpreted the divine word as soon as they heard it.”<sup>4</sup> Jewish biblical interpretation was eventually carried over into the Christian church with the same aim of interpreting the word of God, but it found new expressions, for instance in the famous Alexandrian and Antiochean schools of interpretation.<sup>5</sup> It is even possible to talk about a rudimentary “scientific” form of biblical exegesis in connection with the formation of the canon.<sup>6</sup>

It would, however, take to the Enlightenment before any real attempts to read the biblical text from other points of departure than theological ones. In terms of radicalism, it is hard to imagine any modern biblical scholar creating stronger reactions from the audience than, for instance, Herman Samuel Reimarus (1694–1768), David Friedrich Strauss (1808–74), or indeed, the representatives of the famous Tübingen School.<sup>7</sup> However, in spite of the ambition to deconstruct and criticize influences from normative theology, New Testament scholarship during the nineteenth century and onwards was ironically heavily influenced by one of the most influential master narratives within Western culture—the theological dichotomy between Judaism and Christianity. This theme has determined the outcome of several important subfields within New Testament Studies, such as the historical Jesus, the historical Paul, the rise of Christianity, and the separation between Judaism and Christianity. On scientific grounds, the impact on normative Christian theology

4. *Mek.* Bahodesh 9 (trans. Lauterbach).

5. See, e.g., Anthony C. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 104–14.

6. For an overview, see Einar Thomassen, “Some Notes on the Development of Christian Ideas about a Canon,” in *Canon and Canonicity*, ed. Einar Thomassen (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2010), 9–28.

7. Overviews in William Baird, *History of New Testament Research* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 1:170–74, 246–58, 269–78.

obviously should not guide historiography, including historical-critical treatments of the biblical and related literary and material remains. Christian theological interests require cross-cultural constraints.

Only during the last decades has the theological enterprise's determination of what is historical been profoundly challenged from new, avowedly scientifically based perspectives. The so-called Third Quest of the historical Jesus is one example where the opposition between Jesus and Judaism has been replaced by a historically more likely view where Jesus is placed *within* Judaism and understood as representing Judaism. The same is now happening with Paul, but in his case the resistance from normative theology seems stronger. It is not hard to understand why. The binary ideas that Christianity has superseded Judaism and that Christian grace has replaced Jewish legalism, for example, appear to be essential aspects of most Christian theologies. Nevertheless, as in the case with the Jesus, proponents of the so-called Radical Perspective on Paul—what we herein prefer to call Paul within Judaism perspectives—believe and share the assumption that the traditional perspectives on the relation between Judaism and Christianity are incorrect and need to be replaced by a historically more accurate view. It is Christian theology that must adjust, at least learn to read its own origins cross-culturally when demonstrated to be necessary on independent scientific grounds. I am quite confident that Christianity will survive a completely Jewish Paul, just as it evidently survived a completely Jewish Jesus. Religions tend to adapt.

In the following, I will try to explain why I believe the dichotomy between Paul and Judaism to be incorrect and why most New Testament scholarship has been influenced by it.<sup>8</sup> I will also try to

8. For a more thorough presentation, see Magnus Zetterholm, *Approaches to Paul: A Student's Guide to Recent Scholarship* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009).

show how the interpretation of Paul is completely dependent on the overarching perspective of the individual scholar. If we alter the perspective, the result changes dramatically. If our goal is to get Paul right, it is important to apply historiographical rigor, including self-awareness of our own interpretive interests, which we ought to be willing to subordinate to outcomes that we might not actually prefer. Theological interest in Paul's voice should be conducted with respect for the cross-cultural nature of the historical discipline required for his later interpreters.

## **The Development of an Anti-Jewish Paul**

### **Anti-Jewishness as an Ideological Resource**

Anti-Jewish propaganda started promptly within early Christianity. However, Paul's infamous statement in 1 Thessalonians 2:14-15 on the Jews, "who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out; they displease God and oppose everyone,"<sup>9</sup> is probably best seen as mirroring intra-Jewish disputes within a highly rhetorical context.<sup>10</sup>

But beginning in the early second century we find harshly critical statements from *non-Jewish* followers of Jesus that seem to indicate that some form of division based on ethnicity has taken place. On his way to martyrdom in Rome around 115, Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch, wrote several letters to communities of followers of Jesus whom he sought to convince of their Christian as opposed to Jewish communal identities, warning them to beware of continued influence from Judaism. In his Letter to the Magnesians (8:1), Ignatius exhorts the community "not [to] be deceived by strange

9. Biblical quotations are from the NRSV.

10. On "anti-Judaism" in the New Testament in general, see Terence L. Donaldson, *Jews and Anti-Judaism in the New Testament: Decision Points and Divergent Interpretations* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010).

doctrines or antiquated myths, since they are worthless. For if we continue to live in accordance with Judaism, we admit that we have not received grace.”<sup>11</sup> In 10:3, he states that it is “utterly absurd [*atopon estin*] to profess Jesus Christ and to practice Judaism.” The negative, binary terms around which Ignatius worked his prescriptions likely betray how blurred the emerging communal boundaries remained over fifty years after Paul’s letters were written.

Somewhat later, around 160, another bishop, Melito of Sardis, apparently invented the deicide, the idea that “the Jews” collectively were responsible for executing not only Jesus, but God himself (*Peri Pasha* 96):

He who hung the earth is hanging;  
 he who fixed the heavens has been fixed;  
 he who fastened the universe has been fastened to a tree;  
 the Sovereign has been insulted;  
 the God has been murdered;  
 the King of Israel has been put to death by an Israelite  
 right hand.<sup>12</sup>

This Christian anti-Jewish propaganda developed into an extensive literary genre, the so-called *adversus Iudaeos* tradition.<sup>13</sup> I have argued, however, that the emergence of Christian anti-Judaism was not originally only theological, but the result of a particular historical situation.<sup>14</sup> During the first decades, non-Jewish adherents to the Jesus movement were probably seen as part of the Jewish community

11. Michael W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).

12. Melito of Sardis, *On Pascha and Fragment: Texts and Translations* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979).

13. For a collection, see A. Lukyn Williams, *Adversus Iudaeos: A Bird's-Eye View of Christian Apologiae until the Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012 [1935]).

14. Magnus Zetterholm, *The Formation of Christianity in Antioch: A Social-Scientific Approach to the Separation Between Judaism and Christianity* (London: Routledge, 2003).

and were in fact considered as Jews by outsiders. This has to do with the religio-political system in the Greco-Roman city-states. All inhabitants in a city were expected to express loyalty to the religion(s) of the city. Jews were exempt from this through locally issued decrees,<sup>15</sup> and seem to have found other ways of expressing loyalty to the city and to Rome that did not challenge Jewish sensitivities regarding “idolatry.”<sup>16</sup>

Since all Jews within the early Jesus movement seem to have agreed that non-Jews should refrain from what from a Jewish perspective was considered “idolatry,”<sup>17</sup> this evidently left the non-Jewish adherents of the movement in a rather vulnerable situation, especially in Paul’s communities, since he argued that although non-Jews should convert to Judaism they should nevertheless remain non-Jews.<sup>18</sup> The most reasonable strategy for such non-Jews would be to pretend to be Jews in relation to the civic authorities.

However, after the Jewish War in 70 CE, negative feelings toward Jews (no longer carefully distinguished from the Judean Jews who had revolted) permeated Roman society at several levels. In this situation, it is reasonable to assume that some non-Jews who were followers of Jesus developed another strategy—to separate from the Jewish Jesus movement. Such an enterprise involved several difficulties. On the one hand, Rome was quite suspicious of new so-called *collegia*, or voluntary associations, the normal form of

15. Mikael Tellbe, *Paul Between Synagogue and State: Christians, Jews, and Civic Authorities in 1 Thessalonians, Romans, and Philippians* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2001), 37–59.

16. Philip A. Harland, *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations: Claiming a Place in Ancient Mediterranean Society* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 215–28.

17. See, e.g., Acts 15:19–20; 1 Cor. 6:9, 10:14. There seems, however, to have coexisted several ideas on how this should be achieved; see Magnus Zetterholm, “Will the Real Gentile-Christian Please Stand Up!?: Torah and the Crisis of Identity Formation,” in *The Making of Christianity: Conflicts, Contacts, and Constructions: Essays in Honor of Bengt Holmberg*, ed. Magnus Zetterholm and Samuel Byrskog (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2012), 373–93.

18. 1 Cor. 7:17–24, but cf. Acts 15:1, 5. See also J. Brian Tucker, *‘Remain in Your Calling’: Paul and the Continuation of Social Identities in 1 Corinthians* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011).

organization for cults, burial societies, or social clubs. In the decades after the war it is hardly likely that a *collegium* involving Judaism would be approved. On the other hand, Romans admired ancient traditions, sustaining the advantage of practicing Judaism. The emerging non-Jewish part of the Jesus movement made the most of the circumstances by combining the ancient traditions of Judaism with a vigorous denial of Jews. In effect, early Christianity emerged as a form of Judaism stripped from Jews, and anti-Judaism became an important ideological resource for non-Jewish followers of Jesus in their effort to become a legally recognized religion.

Now, this would take some time. Only with the decree of 311, which legalized Christianity, did the church achieve these aims. However, by then, the church's own propaganda against Jews and Judaism, originally motivated by *political* circumstances, had created a *theological* problem. How would it be possible to explain the fact that Judaism still existed considering that the grace of God now had been transferred from the Jews to the new and "true Israel"?<sup>19</sup>

### From Augustine to Luther

During Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages this theological problem would find several solutions partly depending on theological changes. While Paul's problem seems to have been how to include the nations in the final salvation or how the categories "Jew" and "non-Jew" would be rescued from their respective constraints, the interest changes to the salvation of the individual. An important part of this development was the so-called Pelagian controversy. The monk Pelagius, who appeared in Rome around 380, argued that humans had to be capable of doing what God expected from them since

19. A concept introduced in the second century CE by Justin; see Peter Richardson, *Israel in the Apostolic Church* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 9–14.



they were equipped with free will; otherwise, they could not be held accountable by a just God. Pelagius also denied any form of original sin that had so corrupted the human soul that it was impossible for one to choose to do what God commanded. Against this, Augustine claimed the opposite: humans can in no way please God, even choose to want to please God, and are, precisely because of their corrupted nature, incapable of doing what God demands. Human salvation is in every way a result of God's grace. The problem of free will, the extent of God's grace, the conditions of human salvation, and predestination (a consequence of Augustine's argument) would dominate the theological debate for many centuries.

As for the Jews, Augustine developed a somewhat different approach than his predecessors. Using a verse from Psalm 59:11 ("Do not kill them, or my people may forget; make them totter by your power, and bring them down, O Lord, our shield"), Augustine argued that the Jews were still chosen by God, but dispersed over the world, where they now served as eternal witnesses to the truth of Christian claims; they should thus be left alone.<sup>20</sup> This "doctrine of Jewish witness" may have helped save Jewish lives but it also gave a new theological reason for despising Jews and Judaism.

During the Reformation, the already wide gap between Judaism and Christianity would widen further and find new theological bases upon which to build. While the church had adopted a modified form of Augustinianism, according to which God's grace and human efforts interacted in salvation, Martin Luther returned to Augustine's original doctrine of justification. Luther, however, developed several dialectical relations that would result in an even sharper contrast between Judaism and Christianity. While "gospel" and "law" interact in bringing a person to Christ, "faith" and "works" must be separated

20. Paula Fredriksen, *Augustine and the Jews: A Christian Defense of Jews and Judaism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

when it comes to justification. For Luther, “works” are always a consequence of “faith” and the opposite relationship, that is, to believe it possible to please God through good deeds represents the worst sin of all: self-righteousness.

Thus, the normal way for a Jewish person to express his or her relation to the God of Israel by faithfulness represented by Torah observance, can, from Luther’s perspective, only lead to condemnation. Luther’s view on Jews and Judaism is rather well covered in his pamphlet *On the Jews and Their Lies*.<sup>21</sup> Here he suggests, among other things, that synagogues and Jewish schools should be burnt, rabbis should be forbidden to teach, and that Jewish writings should be confiscated. By stressing that “the doctrine of justification by faith” not only constituted a theological *interpretation* of Paul, but the correct understanding of the *historical* Paul, Luther’s interpretation of Paul became established as an indisputable historical fact.

### The Formation of a Scholarly Paradigm

During the nineteenth century the idea of a distinction between Judaism and Christianity was theologically well established. This dichotomy would eventually develop a kind of scientific legitimacy, predominantly within German scholarship.<sup>22</sup> One of the most important members of the so-called Tübingen School, Ferdinand C. Baur, drew on Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s idealistic proposition that the “Absolute Spirit” manifested itself in history through a dialectical process in which it always encounters

21. Martin Luther, *Von den Jüden und iren Lügen* (Wittenberg: Hans Lufft, 1543).

22. On German scholarship on Jews and Judaism, see Anders Gerdmar, *Roots of Theological Anti-Semitism: German Biblical Interpretation and the Jews, from Herder and Semler to Kittel and Bultmann* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

oppositions. Baur applied Hegel's theory to the early church history, and found two opposing forms of Christianity: Jewish and gentile.<sup>23</sup>

Furthermore, in 1880, Ferdinand Weber published a study that would function as the standard work for anyone who wanted to know something about ancient Judaism.<sup>24</sup> Weber, who originally wanted to become a missionary to the Jewish people, had actually consulted original rabbinic texts, but it is hard to avoid the impression that he was heavily influenced by the theological *zeitgeist* of the period. Weber found that the God of the Jews was distant and that Judaism was a legalistic religion in which pious Jews strove to earn their righteousness through observing obsolete commandments.

Weber's reconstruction of ancient Judaism was passed on to new generations of scholars. Thus, in Wilhelm Bousset's and Emil Schürer's presentations of ancient Judaism we basically find Weber's view reiterated.<sup>25</sup> Through their students, these and other scholars perpetuated the idea of the sharp contrast between Judaism and Christianity and the inferiority of Judaism into the twentieth century. In the middle of the twentieth century we find a scholarly paradigm fully compatible with the traditional negative Christian theological understanding of the nature of Judaism and its inferiority in relationship to Christianity. This development was of course fueled by general changes in society: during the nineteenth century, Christian anti-Semitism merged together with secular, scientifically legitimated anti-Semitism based on racial-biological ideas. In connection with nationalistic ambitions around the time of the

23. See, e.g., Ferdinand C. Baur, "Die Christuspartei in der korinthischen Gemeinde, der Gegensatz des petrinischen und paulinischen Christenthums in der ältesten Kirche, der Apostel Petrus in Rom," *Tübingen Zeitschrift für Theologie* 4 (1831): 61–206.

24. Ferdinand Weber, *System der altsynagogalen palästinischen Theologie aus Targum, Midrasch und Talmud* (Leipzig: Dörffling & Franke, 1880).

25. Wilhelm Bousset, *Die Religion des Judentums im neutestamentlichen Zeitalter* (Berlin: Reuther & Reichard, 1903); Emil Schürer, *Geschichte des jüdischen Volkes im Zeitalter Jesu Christi* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1866–90).

unification of the German states in the 1870s, European Jews became increasingly marginalized and were perceived as an alien body. The picture of Jews and Judaism transmitted throughout the centuries was now developed within ideological contexts that essentially opposed Jews and Judaism within Western culture.

### Paradigm Shift

There can be no doubt that this synthesis of theology and scholarship on Paul's relation to Judaism creates a logical Paul. Assuming that ancient Judaism really was a legalistic religion, without any chance for individuals to experience grace, mercy, or love, it follows that any decent person, including Paul, would naturally fight against such an ideology, and thus, attribute a negative value to the Torah. There are, of course, quite a few texts that seem to support such an interpretation. According to the NRSV, Paul states that "no human being will be justified in his sight by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin" (Rom. 3:20); that "Christ is the end of the law" (Rom. 10:4); that "all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse" (Gal. 3:10). Translated in these ways, Paul seems to oppose the Jewish way of life based on Torah.<sup>26</sup>

It is, of course, fully possible that the theological interpretation of Paul that has developed over the centuries represents an accurate reconstruction of the historical Paul's thought world. However, if the fundamental assumption in this reconstruction—the vile character of ancient Judaism—would turn out to be mistaken, what would then happen to the reconstructions of Paul that were based on this assumption? As a result of E. P. Sanders's publication of *Paul and*

26. Each of these translations represent choices that have been challenged in ways that suggest instead that Paul is not opposing or degrading the role of Torah for guiding life for Jews, but the necessity of circumcision for Christ-following non-Jews; see Nanos's contribution in this volume, "The Question of Conceptualization: Qualifying Paul's Position on Circumcision in Dialogue with Josephus's Advisors to King Izates."

*Palestinian Judaism* in 1977,<sup>27</sup> combined with the challenges mounted by Krister Stendahl in several essays,<sup>28</sup> Pauline scholars began to question many time-honored truths regarding Paul (and Jesus for that matter).

Sanders did what Weber had done, but not so many after him<sup>29</sup>—he reread the Jewish texts in order to see if he could find a religious pattern, common to all texts from 200 BCE to 200 CE. What he found he labeled “covenantal nomism,” by which he meant that there exists a relationship between covenantal theology and the Torah. In contrast to the prevalent view of first-century Judaism, Sanders found that the pious Jew does not observe the Torah in order to earn his or her righteousness, *but to confirm his or her willingness to remain in a covenantal relationship with the God of Israel*. Also, the Torah evidently presumes that it will not be observed perfectly since it includes a system for atoning sin:

God has chosen Israel and Israel has accepted the election. In his role as King, God gave Israel commandments which they are to obey as best they can. Obedience is rewarded and disobedience punished. In case of failure to obey, however, man has recourse to divinely ordained means of atonement, in all of which repentance is required. As long as he maintains his desire to stay in the covenant, he has a share in God’s covenantal promises, including life in the world to come. The intention and effort to be obedient constitute the *condition for remaining in the covenant*, but they do not *earn* it.<sup>30</sup>

27. Edward P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).

28. Collected in Krister Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles, and Other Essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976).

29. Similar ideas had indeed been expressed before without making any major impact; see, e.g., Claude G. Montefiore, *Judaism and St Paul: Two Essays* (London: Goshen, 1914); George F. Moore, “Christian Writers on Judaism,” *Harvard Theological Review* 14 (1921): 197–254.

30. Sanders, *Palestinian Judaism*, 180.

Moreover, Sanders found, again in contrast to the standard view, that ancient Judaism comprised forgiveness, love, belief in a personal God who was active in the history of the Jewish people, and salvation within a covenantal context.

This revision of ancient Judaism changed the rules of the game quite significantly for New Testament scholars. It now seemed apparent that previous scholarship on Paul was based, not on an adequate description of ancient Judaism, but on a Christian caricature. In his own interpretation of Paul, Sanders reached the conclusion that Paul represents another type of religion than the one found in almost every Jewish text from the period, that is, his was not a system characterized by *covenantal nomism*. For Paul, *justification* meant “being saved by Christ,” whereas in all other texts the word referred to someone who observed the Torah. However, according to Sanders, Paul found nothing wrong with the Torah; rather, God apparently had chosen to save the world through Christ and not through the Torah. In short: *the problem with Judaism is that it is not Christianity*.

### From New to Radical Perspectives on Paul

Not entirely convinced by Sanders’s reading of Paul, but accepting his critique of Protestant scholarship, James D. G. Dunn published a very influential article in 1983 that would give a name to a completely new scholarly approach—the so-called New Perspective on Paul.<sup>31</sup> Unlike Sanders, Dunn believed that Paul’s “religion” very well could be characterized by covenantal nomism. Departing from Galatians 2:16 (“a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ”), Dunn argues that previous scholarship

31. James D. G. Dunn, “The New Perspective on Paul,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 65 (1983): 95–122.