Chapter One

SETTING THE STAGE

1. Introduction

If Paul had never been heard of, and his letters had suddenly come to light in a hoard of papyri long buried in the sands of Egypt, there are certain questions we would want to ask about them. Who was the author? Did the same person write all these letters, or only some? In what culture did the author(s) live, and how might that culture help us understand what was being said? When were they written? Were they real letters, or was the literary form simply adopted as a teaching tool? Supposing them to be real letters, who were they addressed to? How would they have been understood? Can we get a sense, from the letters, of the larger world in which the author and the readers lived? What human motivations can we discern both in the letters themselves and in their circumstances, so far as we can reconstruct them? Historians ask questions like these all the time. Any academic study of Paul, a letter-writer from two thousand years ago, must be grounded in the attempt to answer such questions with all the tools available to us. The aim, all along, is ‘exegesis’: to get out of the text what is there, rather than, as with ‘eisegesis’, to put into it ideas from somewhere else.

We engage in this historical task neither out of mere antiquarian curiosity nor out of nostalgia for a long-forgotten past. We do it because we crave genuine understanding, a real meeting of minds and even of worlds. As soon as we think about it, we know we should do our best, in reading any texts from other contexts, to avoid two dangers: anachronism, imagining that people in a former time saw the world the way we do, and what Coleridge called ‘anatopism’, imagining that people in a different place saw things the way we do.¹ Of course, we are at liberty to read the texts how we like – just as, notoriously, the guardians of ancient scrolls and manuscripts have sometimes been known to use them for shoe-leather, or for lighting the fire. But we know instinctively, I think, the difference between use and abuse. History is about what happened, and why it happened. We do not advance that quest by projecting our own personalities, or cultural assumptions, on to material from other times and places.

Of course, we see things through our own eyes, and imagine them within our own worlds of understanding. But history is about learning to let the

¹ Coleridge 1836, 1.317: librarians who arrange books by geographical subject-matter ‘must commit an anachronism in order to avoid an anatopism’. 
evidence guide us into seeing with other people’s eyes, and into imagining the world in other people’s visions. The task is to understand, so far as we can, what it was like to live, to think, to imagine and to believe within worlds other than our own. The otherness is important, and remains so. We can never attain complete knowledge, a ‘God’s-eye view’. But nor does the act of knowing collapse into the projection of our own prejudices. We are not positivists; but nor are we solipsists.

Part of the historical task, when one is faced with a new document from an older world and a different place, is to try to understand the train of thought expressed in the writing, and, behind that again, the mind of the writer. We usually assume that there is a train of thought that made some sense to the writer. People do sometimes deliberately write ‘nonsense’, but even this is usually for a purpose. In other words, within the general historical questions about who, when, where and how, there are the more focused questions of what and why: what is being said here, and why is it being said? Often, with ancient papyri, this is quite easy: a short letter home from a soldier, a shopping list, an IOU. But with many documents, be they poetry or philosophy, plays or biographies, it may take time to get inside the flow of thought, to see how the various ideas expressed relate to one another. The aim, however, is the same: to move towards an historical description of the themes and ideas in the document. When, as is the case with Paul, the subject-matter is regularly and emphatically concerned with a being referred to as ho theos, ‘the god’, and with what this divinity has done and is intending to do, and with how both writer and readers are supposed to be relating to this being, then we naturally give a particular label to the themes and ideas we are finding. We call them ‘theology’.

And now the danger of anachronism or anatopism comes back with a vengeance. We in the western world know a bit about ‘theology’, at least if we belong to some tradition that teaches it or perhaps sings about it. (The same problem would occur, of course, if the subject-matter appeared to be medical, and we knew a bit about medicine; or philosophical, and we had studied philosophy.) We will easily assume that technical terms mean what similar terms mean in our world; that ideas we are accustomed to think of as compatible, or indeed incompatible, will be seen in that way in the text; that arguments we find convincing now would be found convincing then. But the point for the moment is that in order to listen to the text, to let it be itself, to engage in dialogue with it, and to advance towards understanding it, we must allow the basic questions (who wrote it, to whom, at what time, and by what means) to lead us to the historical questions: what is being said, what it meant at the time to the writer and indeed to the readers, and not least why this writer wanted to say these things to these people at that moment. (Actually, in practice things do not move in a straight line. Often the way to find out who wrote the letter and why is first to be sure we have picked up the train of thought.) Historical study of our hypothetical new-

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2 See my discussion in *The New Testament and the People of God* (NTPG) ch. 4, itself predicated on the discussion of knowledge in ch. 2; also *PFG* 48–56.
found texts thus necessarily includes historical study of meaning and motivation. When the subject-matter has to do with ho theos, the meaning and motivation have to do with theology.

This task always involves the interpreter. We never have a mere fly-on-the-wall role, let alone, as we said, a God’s-eye view. This involvement, the dialogue between text and interpreter, can easily get muddled up with the question of ‘what might this mean for us today’, but wise interpretation will always recognize the difference between ‘granted I am looking through my own eyes, what seems to be going on in this text?’ and ‘granted this text says X, how does X apply in my world today?’ The task of interpretation thus involves going to and fro, as in a real-life conversation. Our culture supplies us with other models, for instance the dialogue of the deaf one sometimes hears when a politician is interviewed on the radio. Real dialogue is the path to understanding; it is the task of ‘interpretation’, of ‘hermeneutics’. (There are cultural differences here in our own world. Montreal has – at least, it had when I lived there – two radio stations offering classical music. The English-language one told us who was ‘playing’ the music; the French-language one told us who was ‘interpreting’ it.)

This task is often focused not simply on the question as to whether we have understood this text. As I have just suggested, it frequently looks in the other direction: what has this text to say to us in our own world here and now? That question might well emerge, not simply from ‘religious’ or specifically Christian texts, but from any discovery. An ancient philosophical text might be hailed as offering good advice about happiness, or relationships, or money. An ancient poem might shed light on dark corners of human experience. An entire genre of fantasy novels, of which Dan Brown’s The Da Vinci Code is the best known example, works on the assumption that a new discovery from the ancient world might radically transform not only how people today understand the first century but also how they understand themselves, and the church they belong to (or perhaps don’t belong to), today. This is one of the reasons people do history and indeed archaeology: in the hope of a moment of rich connection, of water from an ancient spring slaking our modern thirst.

But now at last we must give up the pretence that we have just discovered these Pauline letters, making us the first people to read them. We are simply the latest in a long line of readers. And the question, What might this mean for us today? is one we share with that long line. Serious readers have pondered these questions before us. We do not want to be enslaved by their ideas, but nor should we suppose that we have nothing to learn from them. We do not want to end up reinventing the wheel.

I approach the matter like this because it might be easy to imagine that the question of ‘What does this mean today?’ confronts us in the Bible in a way that is not true with other writings. Though I believe that there is indeed a sense in which this might be so, that sense is found within, not detached from, the wider truth that the letters of Paul meet us as documents from the past, and that our engagement with them has a lot in common
with our engagement with all other documents from the past. Biblical hermeneutics is a sub-branch of hermeneutics more generally. Careful thinking about the nature of our engagement with texts from the past ought not to diminish any sense that the early Christian documents are *sui generis*. It ought to enable us to be much clearer as to where exactly that supposed uniqueness might lie.

We should not make the mistake of thinking that addressing the question of contemporary relevance is only done by those who read Paul within a faith-community committed to regarding his letters as authoritative. Many today want to learn from Paul, but to be selective about which parts of his writings they will embrace and which they will decline. Many want to apply a hermeneutic of suspicion, exposing his supposed prejudices and shortcomings both personal, intellectual and perhaps cultural. This, too, is a form of ‘interpretation for today’: it is a way of saying, ‘Yes, these texts have been important’, but also ‘That has been a disaster.’ My point here is not to adjudicate between such approaches; simply to point out that all readers of any text worth reading, whatever its content, are engaged in this fourfold task: history, content (in Paul’s case, ‘theology’), exegesis and application. These four strands intertwine like the four parts in a string quartet. You can study them individually, you can write out the separate parts; but you only get the music if all four are playing simultaneously.

The people who have read Paul’s letters before us include scholars, both ancient and modern; and all such scholars have their own contexts, their own cultures, their own reasons for wanting to study Paul, their own hopes and fears about what he might be saying. The movements of scholarship which have been most influential in the last two hundred years have again and again been attempts at *historical* analysis, often in the belief that such work, by proposing different analyses of *content*, will challenge certain elements, perhaps foundational elements, within the Christian church. Some have, for that reason, done their best to ignore what has been called ‘historical criticism’, or even to vilify it: those scholars, they suppose, are always undermining the gospel! But the protest is in fact very similar, in form though not in content, to the protests of Luther and Calvin against the mediaeval church. Read the Bible afresh, they said, and you will see that things have gone wrong. Such a protest cannot be ruled out a priori. Even if it is ultimately wrong, it may have important points to make.

All this leads to the underlying thesis of this book. First, many of the roots of contemporary discussions of Paul go back to one such movement in the nineteenth century, which was offering a new would-be historical reading of Paul through which he would appear differently from how people had seen him before. Second, the main movements of Pauline scholarship in our own day have launched a similar, supposedly historically based protest, against that dominant nineteenth-century construct. The middle term in all this is Bultmann: it is only a slight oversimplification to say that he sums up in the middle of the twentieth century the movement that began in the nineteenth, thereby raising questions for the twenty-first. Certainly the three
main movements I shall chronicle (those focused on Sanders, Martyn and Meeks) are all reacting to him, albeit in strikingly different ways. Since these more recent movements form the main subject of this book we need to understand why the nineteenth century said what it did, and why its legacy in the first half of the twentieth century was found to be historically inadequate in the second half.

Here is an irony, one of many within this story. More ‘conservative’ readers of Paul have often ranged themselves against Bultmann, but they have often been closer to him than they might have cared to acknowledge. Some at least of the reaction against Sanders (the ‘old perspective’) has come from such quarters. These great movements of thought have not taken place in a rarefied atmosphere, detached from or irrelevant to the ‘popular’ use of Paul’s letters in preaching, teaching, counselling and evangelism. Such activities have regularly been far more bound up with the larger currents of modern thought than is usually supposed. The ‘popular Paul’ has all too often been addressing sixteenth-century questions in a nineteenth-century tone of voice, whether philosophical or pietistic. This book is about the struggle to hear his first-century voice as part of our own task of addressing twenty-first-century questions.

But is even this task appropriate? There was a short period, in the 1960s and 1970s in particular, when some scholars challenged the viability of any such reading of the New Testament. Since (they said) the writings came from a culture so different from our own, and especially since they were rooted in the ancient world (sometimes people added, ‘in the ancient Jewish world’, or ‘in the ancient apocalyptic worldview’), whereas we are rooted in the modern world, the best we can do is to demythologize them, that is, to discern what they might be saying about some timeless or abstract truth and then to try to re-express that in ways appropriate for our own day. That was of course central to Bultmann’s agenda, and was picked up by some in the English-speaking world to raise the question like this: granted that the early Christians saw the truth through their spectacles, how can we, whose spectacles are so different, say in our own way the core of what they were saying? Hence the quest for the ‘centre’ or ‘core’ of Paul, which continues to this day. But most readers of Paul, whether friendly or hostile to his central claims, have made more direct connections. There has always been a strong sense that his writings do in fact pose questions which retain a sharp relevance and challenge across time and across cultures. So exegesis, as a branch of history, has regularly been accompanied by what we might call ‘application’, both inside the Christian church and outside it. Almost all exegetes look over their shoulder at this question, whether or not they address it specifically. It is better, in my judgment, to bring it out into the open.

All history, after all, at least glances at the question, not just ‘How can we best describe what we are seeing?’, but ‘How might this be relevant to us?’

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3 One of the most enthusiastic advocates of this extreme relativism was D. E. Nineham: see e.g. Nineham 1976.
Historians and biographers both ancient and modern have hinted at, or even highlighted, parallels between societies, empires, leaders, popular movements, cultural forces and pressures, in the world they are describing and in their own. Plutarch was one of the first, but hardly the last, to sketch ‘parallel lives’. One of the greatest ancient historians of the twentieth century, Ronald Syme, offered a dramatic and disturbing parallel between Augustus and Hitler. Sometimes the question is not so much about parallels as about appropriate continuity: American and French theorists look back to the late eighteenth century, and to what their founding fathers did and said at that time, in order to discern what should be done today. Even those weary souls who declare that the only thing history teaches us is that we never learn from history are paying lip service to the possibility that the study of the past might have relevance for the present. Thus a specifically Jewish, Christian or Muslim invocation of a sacred text is a special case of a much broader phenomenon, however many other dimensions it may also possess. One of the ironic features of the movement mentioned earlier (the new interest in Paul on the part of atheistic philosophers) is that it has skipped right over the agonized wrestlings of some liberal Christians (‘we can’t let the past dictate to the present’) and is doing with Paul what many today do with Epictetus or Marcus Aurelius, studying them not because they will tell us everything we need to know but because they resonate, they carry weight, they stimulate thought and sometimes give it a new sense of direction.

Thus the four tasks facing all serious readers of Paul are history, theology, exegesis and ‘application’. These four intertwine and impinge on one another, however hard we might try to stop them. But there is a problem with how this has been done. Understanding this problem, and its lasting effects, will occupy us for the rest of the present chapter.

2. History and ‘History of Religion’

(i) Introduction

The problem to which I refer has to do with the fact that when people have tried to locate Paul in ‘history’ they have often done so in terms of a larger implicit project about the history of ‘religion’, or indeed ‘religions’. This, though understandable at one level, has been thoroughly misleading at some others. For a start, the word ‘religion’ means something quite different, in the modern western world, from anything that would have been recognized in the first century. Anachronism here is therefore both easy and fatal for any fully historical study of Paul. Talking of Paul and ‘religion’ while ignoring the huge differences between his day and ours first narrows

4 Syme 1939.
5 See PFG chs. 4, 13.
the historical focus, screening out everything else that might be relevant, and then gives that focus a modern meaning.

Take the first point, the narrowing of focus. Why limit historical study of Paul to ‘religion’? There are much wider historical questions to ask: Who was this man? What can we know about him? What sort of family was he from, where did he grow up, was he rich or poor or not really either, what outline sketch can we give of his life and work, who did he engage with both positively and negatively, and what impact did he have on subsequent history? Any interesting figure who emerges from the shadows of history generates questions like these. There is nothing here specific to Paul’s being a ‘religious’ figure. ‘Religion’ in the ancient world touched all aspects of life. Even the rather few genuine atheists usually kept up ‘religious’ appearances; and religious appearances were all over the place, woven into every aspect of life. There was no separate sphere in the ancient world called ‘religion’. Or, for that matter, ‘politics’; or indeed ‘economics’. Life may not have been completely seamless, but it was, more or less, a complex whole. Historical enquiry, at least in the modern western world which has regarded its habitual separation of these ‘spheres’ as a virtue, needs constantly to be reminded of this. By all means let us study the ‘religious’ element in any given society, particularly in studying the ancient world, we will radically distort the whole picture, and fail to understand even the ‘religious’ bit we were trying to look at.

Of course, once we discover that a particular historical figure had an impact in a particular area of life, we might, as historians, home in on that area and ask more questions. But which area should that be? Some might want to say that Paul resembles most closely the founder or teacher of a philosophical school. Like the philosophers, Paul had plenty to say about cosmology, epistemology and ethics, none of which featured prominently in ancient ‘religion’.6 Or perhaps we might see him as a ‘political’ person, either as a thinker (with his views about God’s kingdom administered through Jesus) or as a doer (setting up communities that sat at an awkward angle across the political landscape), or both.7 In each of these areas, philosophy and politics, it would be appropriate to ask how Paul came by his ideas, whether he had a moment of sudden enlightenment, whether what he said placed him within one of the well-known schools of ancient thought and practice, whether his ideas and beliefs changed and developed, whether we can give a clear and consistent account of them, and indeed whether they were, from his own point of view, consistent within themselves. In particular, as historians we would undoubtedly want to situate him within a larger context: what strands of thought or life was he particularly indebted to, which did he resist, where was he prepared to compromise, and so on?

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6 See PFG chs. 3, 14; and below, ch. 10 in relation to the proposals of Edwin Judge.
7 See PFG chs. 5, 12; and below, ch. 12.
he, like many philosophers, political thinkers and activists in antiquity, part of a ‘school’ from which he then developed in his own new way?

I have tried to address these questions in the main volume, but I raise them here for a different reason: to show that, though we have been accustomed to thinking of Paul as a ‘religious’ figure, that is a function of the way our culture has seen things in the last two hundred years, not a necessarily ‘correct’ way to approach him. Separating out anything to do with ‘God’ and calling it ‘religion’, assuming that it has nothing much to do with the rest of real life, is a distinctly modern western phenomenon, part of the movement we loosely call ‘secularization’. The roots, causes and deep problems of that movement are beyond our scope here, but it is important to note that this was the wider context for what, by the early twentieth century, came to be seen as the natural way to approach someone like Paul.8 Thus if you want to study Paul in a modern university you would probably find your way to the Faculty of Religious Studies, or of Theology, or even (as in my own institution) ‘Divinity’. You would not so naturally go looking in Ancient History, Middle Eastern Culture, Philosophy or Politics. All of these, however, might have a good claim to Paul, and such claims have recently been made.9

A telling sign of what has been taken for granted is that if you wanted to make a television programme about Paul you would probably be directed to the ‘religious’ department of the broadcasting company. A strong case could be made, however, for making a film or series of programmes about Paul in terms of his social, cultural, political and economic impact. Large elements of the western media are still controlled by the simplistic divisions of modernist thought. I was shocked when I learned that the British Broadcasting Corporation, for all its highly sophisticated technology (funded by the licence-payers, which means almost all British households), retains a clunky modernist division of material into ‘Factual’ and ‘Non-Factual’. No prizes for guessing which side of the line St Paul would come; he is bound to be seen as part of ‘religion’, and therefore ‘Non-Factual’. If, however, you were planning a documentary on Cicero or Seneca, showing how their public life and philosophical thought had to be seen together as part of a complex whole which had an equally complex impact on their entire social environment, the decision would go the other way. They, at least, would be ‘factual’. To protest against the division might be difficult. It has often been reinforced by the churches and theologians themselves.10

But Paul was a public figure. He was not inviting people into a private ‘religious’ world. That was the gnostic fantasy, cherished by some from the second century onwards, and embraced too eagerly, as an explanatory hypothesis, by some Pauline expositors in the early twentieth century, notably the great Rudolf Bultmann himself. But it has nothing to do with the

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8 On secularism the obvious and challenging texts are Milbank 1990; Taylor 2007.
9 See ch. 12 below.
10 I think of the basic position of e.g. Barth 1963, 109, insisting on clear water between ‘theological knowledge, thought, and speech’ and ‘general truths’ or ‘general knowledge’. Barth’s well-known and long-lasting hostility to ‘natural theology’ gave hostages to fortune, to put it mildly.
relentlessly Jewish message of the Apostle, which was about the real creation of the one and only God, and the real new creation which was already transforming it. Perhaps, after all, this is why some earlier writers were eager to distance the historical Paul from, say, the Areopagus Speech in Acts 17. Their ‘Paul’ would not have accepted the invitation to speak in such a forum; not that Paul seems to have had much choice, since he was not there as a ‘visiting lecturer’, but was, at least implicitly, on trial for serious social and cultural (and hence also ‘religious’) offences! The ‘Paul’ of this essentially modern ‘religious’ imagination would certainly not have wanted to explain his message in the philosophical and cultural terms of his day. But the real Paul seems to have done exactly that. Here both ‘history’ and ‘application’ urge us into areas, and in directions, which many classic studies of a ‘religious’ Paul, not least in Germany, have not wished to go.

My point in all this is that we meet Paul primarily as a figure in ancient history. Ancient history includes everything from dates and events (such as the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70) to the social, cultural and political climate of the times, and on to the reconstruction of the ideas and beliefs of particular actors (whether Paul, Nero, Seneca or anybody else) within the multiple dramas of the day. This is the sort of thing that ‘history’ does, and the broader we make the basis of that historical study the better. What seems to have happened, however, is the double movement in which, first, the most influential Pauline studies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century created certain problems from which, second, more recent scholarship has been trying to escape, in different ways and with different results. The first part itself is what we must now examine, and it too divides into two parts: the ‘secularization’ that has forced the ‘historical Paul’ to appear simply as a ‘religious’ figure, and the Hegelian Idealism which analysed ‘religion’ itself into two broad hypothetical streams: ‘Judaism’ and ‘Hellenism’.

(ii) Paul between ‘Judaism’ and ‘Hellenism’?

Once historical study has narrowed its focus to the ‘religious’ question, this generates the more specific puzzle: What kind of ‘religion’ did Paul teach and practise, with what ‘religious’ ideas as its core? What was the origin of these ‘religious’ ideas? Can we give a clear and coherent account of them? Was there a moment when they appeared to him in a new way? How did his ‘religious’ thought develop? In particular, where can we place him within the ‘religious’ world of late antiquity, and especially within the developing early Christian movement? Was he – here comes the all-important but highly misleading either/or! – essentially a Jewish religious thinker or a hellenistic one? These questions have generated debates over the last two centuries. Such questions distort, but these are the distortions we have lived with for a long time, and which have shaped today’s debates. Even when we

11 See e.g. Vielhauer 1966. Vielhauer is now well answered by many, esp. e.g. Rowe 2011.
try to get out of their grip, it is this prison, rather than some other, from which we are trying to escape.

Paul has thus been studied, for better and for worse, within the ‘history-of-religions’ movement of European scholarship, which flourished a century or so ago but whose influence is still strongly felt.\(^\text{12}\) As we have noted, ‘religion’ as seen by the eighteenth-century Enlightenment is, by definition, that which is not about ‘public life’, not about ‘politics’, not about anything much in human life except those moments when the individual (or, sometimes, a group of individuals meeting for worship) believe themselves to be in touch with, worshipping, invoking or celebrating some divinity or other. The history-of-religions paradigm posed questions to do with the historical origins and setting of the ‘religion’ of a figure like Paul. Was his ‘religion’ basically Jewish or basically hellenist? Where did it belong on the map? And, granted that at least by the middle of the second century the Christian movement seemed to show a strange blend of both Jewish and non-Jewish elements, how was this to be explained? Furthermore – since the other questions cannot be ignored – how does any answer to this historical question impinge on theology, on exegesis, and on ‘application’?

(iii) F. C. Baur

A particular set of answers to all these questions emerges from the stream of scholarship going back to the remarkable work of Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792–1860).\(^\text{13}\) Baur taught in Tübingen from 1826 to his death in 1860, working tirelessly on the history of the early church as well as preaching regularly in the university church. He was the centre of the ‘Tübingen School’ which is perhaps the best-known of all nineteenth-century German theological and exegetical movements.\(^\text{14}\) Baur stood firmly in the tradition of Hegelian Idealism, and his entire reconstruction of early Christianity was shaped according to these principles. As Baur himself put it on the first pages of his monumental work on Paul, reflecting on the independent mood of thought in his own day:

This independence of thought, attained after such great effort ... naturally turns its gaze back into the Past, the spirit reposing in the self-certainty of its consciousness, is now first placed on a standpoint from which it can review the paths along which it has passed, driven by the force of circumstances, and it reviews them in order to illumine the unconscious Past with the consciousness of the inward necessities of the Present ... Christianity is on one hand the great spiritual power which determines all the belief and thought of the

\(^{12}\) See Neill and Wright 1988 [1964], 367–78. Schweitzer’s account of the main elements in the history-of-religions approach to Paul in the late C19 and early C20 remains clear and helpful (Schweitzer 1931 [1930], 26–40). See too Kümmel 1972/3 [1970], Part V.

\(^{13}\) See particularly Baur 2011 [1873].

present age, the ultimate principle by which the self-consciousness of the spirit is produced and maintained . . .\(^{15}\)

This meant, more or less, a collapsing of history and theology into one another. History was not simply the sphere in which one might occasionally encounter the divine, but ‘the self-expression of God as Absolute Spirit in the unfolding process of history’, so that ‘God lives in history, and history is the life of God.’\(^{16}\) We note that the word ‘history’ here basically means ‘what has happened’, rather than the historian’s task of reconstructing it or the work in which that reconstruction is written down, though of course Baur did a great deal of reconstruction and writing as well. He believed his work to be constructive, aiding an apologetic for the truth of the essential Christian mystery.

A vital part of this task, one which would prove fateful a century after Baur’s day in social and political life (ironically!) as well as in theology and exegesis, was his insistence that it was essential to break Christianity off from its Jewish roots. The crucifixion put an end to the particularity of Jewish hopes, including messianic hopes, so that the resurrection, which Baur took to be an event in the experience of Jesus’ followers, was the moment when Jesus’ spirit was made available to all humanity. Thus...

... there next follows the historical and critical enquiry into the question how Christianity, so closely interwoven with Judaism, broke loose from it and entered on its sphere of world-wide historical importance ... becoming of itself a living power, the idea found in the bounds of the national Judaism, the chief obstacle to its universal historical realization ... How Christianity, instead of remaining a mere form of Judaism ... broke loose from it, and took its stand as a new enfranchised form of religious thought and life, essentially differing from all the national peculiarities of Judaism is the ultimate, most important point of the primitive history of Christianity.\(^{17}\)

The echoes of this basic principle continued to resonate through much German scholarship throughout the twentieth century.

Baur recognized only four of Paul’s letters as original: Romans, Galatians and the two Corinthian epistles. From these he sketched a basic conflict ‘between Pauline and Jewish Christianity’, which was the point at issue in the apostolic debate in Jerusalem and also in the row at Antioch.\(^{18}\) It was also what was at stake in the party squabbles in Corinth. In a famous article, Baur saw the four ‘parties’ which Paul mentions in 1 Corinthians 1.12 (the Peter party, the Paul party, the Apollos party, and the ‘Christ party’) as basically two: Paul was the representative spokesman for something called ‘gentile Christianity’, with Apollos taking his side, while Peter, who articulated the position of the ‘early Jewish Christians’, was joined by the ‘Christ party’, stressing contact with Jesus himself and his first apostles. This enabled Baur to make another Hegelian move. The ‘spirit’ at work within the dialectical

\(^{15}\) Baur 2011 [1873], 1.1f.
\(^{16}\) Baird 1992, 259.
\(^{17}\) Baur 2011 [1873], 1.3.
historical process made its way by ‘thesis’, followed by ‘antithesis’, and then ‘synthesis’: thus, for Baur, the ‘thesis’ of Petrine (i.e. Jewish) Christianity and the ‘antithesis’ of Pauline (i.e. gentile) Christianity were destined eventually to reach a ‘synthesis’ in the ‘early Catholicism’ of the second century. This, Baur thought, could already be seen in Acts and the Pastoral Epistles.

This essentially Idealist scheme provided Baur with his supposedly ‘historical’ analysis of early Christianity in general and Paul in particular. It also provided him with a theological focus: the new experience of the spirit which Paul referred to as ‘justification’.19 Baur held together Paul’s language about ‘justification’ with the idea of ‘union with Christ’ and indeed with God, all being accomplished by the spirit (remembering that for Baur the word ‘spirit’ was heard in Hegelian terms):

Thus the spirit, the principle of the Christian consciousness, which is the highest stage of justification, is also the principle in which the adequate relation in which justification places man towards God, is practically realized. The spirit presupposes faith as the subjective form in which man takes up the spirit into himself. Through the spirit, that which he is as a justified person in his relation to God, in his consciousness of sonship of God, is practically operative.20

Thus, as Baird comments (following Schweitzer), Baur makes it sound as though Paul had been reading Hegel (and, we might add, thereby reinforcing a cultural version of Lutheranism’s ‘freedom from the law’):

The principle which takes possession of his consciousness is now the immanent principle of his own self-consciousness; he knows himself free from everything by which he was formerly constrained; he is conscious of his own independence and autonomy. The position which the apostle took up as the logical and necessary consequence of his conversion, involved of course that all those shackles of religious authority which he had recognised up to that time at once fell away.21

Thus the breaking away from ‘Judaism’, and the authenticity and autonomy of Paul’s experience, were both bound up with ‘justification’. This, in a sense, is all we need to know about Baur: the lines from here to Bultmann and beyond are clear, as is the hostile reaction of Nietzsche to such an Idealist Paul. Baur stands, in fact, at the fountain-head of that Idealist strain of western Protestantism against which the historical protests of the last generation, in their multiple ways, have been launched.

This might seem ironic, in that Baur was supposedly himself an historian. But his ‘history’ was, relentlessly, the projection onto the ancient world of the Idealist scheme we have just described. Documents were dated early or late, ascribed to this author or denied to that one, on the basis of this grand scheme.

19 See Baur 2011 [1875], 2.135–68.
20 Baur 2011 [1875], 2.168.
21 Baur 2011 [1875], 2.271f.; cf. Schweitzer 1912, 15; Baird 1992, 263, 265: ‘In this justification, the believer is united with the Divine Spirit so as to become a new creation: justification is union with God.’
One particular long-term result of Baur’s picture must be noted here. Baur used his vision of history progressing as the incarnation of the divine spirit in the service of a radical Protestantism which broke decisively with Judaism. But in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries there was another movement which likewise saw God at work in history, only this time including the Jewish history as a ‘salvation history’ which would eventually culminate in Jesus. This movement is not so well known as that from Baur to Bultmann, and was routinely marginalized no doubt because it presented a kind of shadow side to all that Baur and his successors stood for.22 But in our own day, when the protest of Käsemann against Bultmann matched the protest of Walter Benjamin against all theories of ‘historical progress’, any and all such ideas of an immanent historical process have been cast aside in the name of an ‘apocalyptic’ which, as with Barth’s protest against a post-Baur liberalism, denies any sense of an immanent or divine progress within ‘history’. The distinction which has to be made today, as I shall argue in Part II of the present book, is that between any Baur-like suggestion of an immanent ‘process’, on the one hand, and a genuinely Pauline view of the providentially guided, though often dark and twisted, Israel-narrative to which the Messiah really does provide the telos. In rejecting Baur, in other words, one is not rejecting everything that might usefully be named by the shorthand ‘salvation history’.

Baur’s agenda, to separate off Paul from ‘Jewish Christianity’ on the one hand and ‘early Catholicism’ on the other, had a philosophical and theological outworking. It went, rather obviously, with a particular sort of liberal Protestantism which wanted to retain something approximating to Paul’s doctrine of ‘justification’, not least his rejection of ‘works of the (Jewish) law’, and which saw the history-of-religions proposal about Paul’s battle on two fronts as being a way of gaining that point. Just as Martin Luther opposed the Roman Catholicism of his day, aligning it more or less with the ‘works-righteousness’ of Judaism against which Galatians in particular had protested, so Paul, opposing Peter and ‘those who came from James’ in Antioch (Galatians 2.11–14), was standing out against much the same sort of thing in the first century. Paul thus stood in the middle, between the ‘early Jewish’ Christianity and the (later) ‘early catholic’ variety, opposing them both and for broadly the same reasons. And just as Martin Luther also opposed the radical ‘enthusiasts’ of the Reformation period,23 so Paul firmly resisted those, especially in Corinth, who supposed themselves to have already attained a higher spirituality. This was the picture that dominated German scholarship in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: (a) a focus on ‘religion’ as the primary category; (b) a sharp distinction between ‘Judaism’ and ‘Hellenism’, with Paul as the pioneer of ‘gentile Christianity’; (c) the centrality to Paul of ‘justification’, in Baur’s sense of a new spiritual

22 See the detailed description and discussion in Yarbrough 2004.
23 The word ‘enthusiasts’ is used in the sense of the German Enthusiasmus, and the eighteenth-century English ‘enthusiasm’ as described and criticized by Knox 1950, and as exemplified in Wesley and others; the point being the claim to special divine inspiration or illumination.
experience. Sanders, Martyn and Meeks do not often refer to Baur, but his picture is the one they are ultimately rejecting.

(iv) Life after Baur

The picture drawn by Baur has now been discredited on historical grounds, though like a not-quite-exorcised ghost it still haunts the libraries and lecture-halls of New Testament scholarship. The ancient evidence, both Jewish, Christian and pagan, is stacked against it. Baur’s categories do not in fact correspond to, or well describe, any actual phenomena in the first century or the centuries on either side. Study of the nineteenth century itself, however, indicates that the construct emerged quite naturally from within certain cultural and philosophical contexts which were, indeed, those which shaped Baur himself. A recent major study of this point has argued that Baur shared with Hegel and others certain fundamental ideas we now see as ‘Orientalist’,

which are inherently racist, presupposing that in order to attain ‘freedom’ the Jews or Jewish-Christians must be influenced by Greek thinking. Being a main architect of such Orientalist thinking in New Testament exegesis, Baur had created a dialectics where Jews would continue being the antithesis of everything Christian theology deemed valuable … Thus … historiography like Baur’s resulted in a systematic marginalisation of Jews and Judaism within Enlightenment theology.

The writer concludes that by putting Baur in his own historical and cultural context, tracing the strands that made him think as he did and the further strands by which he influenced others, we see the urgent need for ‘a reconstruction of profound structures in New Testament historiography’.

The need for this is everywhere apparent in the scholarship of the twentieth century. Baur’s model did not disappear when the social and cultural landscape shifted. From the middle of the nineteenth century until at least the great Romans commentary of Ernst Käsemann his picture of Paul continued to be massively influential. The apostle has continued to be seen as the antithesis of everything Christian theology deemed valuable … The apostle has continued to be seen as the antithesis of everything Christian theology deemed valuable … The apostle has continued to be seen as the antithesis of everything Christian theology deemed valuable … The apostle has continued to be seen as the antithesis of everything Christian theology deemed valuable … The apostle has continued to be seen as the antithesis of everything Christian theology deemed valuable … The apostle has continued to be seen as the antithesis of everything Christian theology deemed valuable … The apostle has continued to be seen as the antithesis of everything Christian theology deemed valuable …

The great many students in the Anglophone world have no idea that when they are reading scholars in the tradition from Baur to Käsemann these are the supposedly historical parameters within which they are working. The fact that such categories fail

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24 See esp. e.g. Meeks 2001; Martin 2001.
25 Gerdmar 2014, 125f. The whole article is important for understanding this seminal moment in scholarship.
26 Gerdmar 2014, 127.
on all fronts as history (long before we begin to ask theological questions) ought to make us wary of any supposed ‘results’ that emerge from such analysis. That in no way implies, however – and we must emphasize this – that the scholars who addressed the questions did not, at the same time, produce a great deal that remains both useful and important. To that we shall return.

We must now, however, investigate the way in which this history-of-religions task dominated the landscape in the generations following Baur. The underlying question was, What sort of a thing is genuine Christianity? How can it be preached today, and how can its key texts best be understood? But the way to those questions was perceived to be through the prior challenge: was earliest, somehow ‘normative’, Christianity basically Jewish or non-Jewish? There was always an assumption, appealing tacitly to the protestant return to scripture against tradition and, behind that again, to the Renaissance return ad fontes, that one should go in search of some kind of ‘original’ form and make that the norm. Since the putative ‘Jewish Christianity’ had not yet fully thrown off the shackles of ‘Judaism’, one would then look to Paul’s developed view as the true ‘original’ of the worldwide movement. However misleading we now see that way of looking at things to be, that is how the question of Christian origins, and particularly of Paul’s writings, has been approached.

(v) A Gentile Origin?

The scholarly endeavour to uncover the ‘religious’ roots of Christian origins included many very different emphases which we cannot track here. At the risk of oversimplification (unavoidable in a task like our present one), we can see the work proceeding in two great waves. First, there was the relentless quest for the supposed hellenistic, non-Jewish, sources of Paul’s religion. If Paul had opposed ‘Judaism’, he must have got his basic ideas from somewhere else. The mystery religions of Egypt and other parts of the ancient Near East were combed for signs of what we find in Paul’s ‘being-in-Christ’ language and similar phenomena. (Perhaps, people thought, Paul’s idea of ‘baptism into Christ’ was borrowed from the mystery religions.) The gnostic movements, known principally at that time through the writings of the early Fathers, were projected back into the pre-Christian period and probed for signs of a pre-Pauline religion which focused on a redeemer coming down from heaven and returning there with his work complete. This, famously, was the line taken by Bultmann, particularly in his commentary on John, but also in the expectation, continued by Bultmann’s followers, that the roots of Pauline Christology might be found in the same material. (The search for gnostic origins received an unexpected boost with the discovery of the Nag Hammadi texts in 1945.)

Other non-Jewish elements were brought into the picture, not least the burgeoning cult of Rome and the emperor. Perhaps, it was thought, these
provided Paul with some of his raw material. Perhaps it was the familiar title used for Caesar that gave Paul the idea of Jesus as 'son of God'. But the main point was to demonstrate historically that Paul was not primarily a Jewish religious figure. Explain him in terms of Hellenism and you have explained the break with Judaism – and thereby, perhaps, justified it: Judaism was still seen, after all, in more or less the way Baur had seen it, as the religion of 'works' rather than faith, of a material culture rather than a spiritual one, a messianic religion looking for a this-worldly kingdom rather than a religion of the heart looking for the kingdom of heaven or a religion of the spirit looking for union with the divine ('the unity of the subjective spirit with the objective spirit', as Schweitzer summed up Baur’s Hegelian doctrine27). Hind-sight quickly perceives the dark side of all this in the European culture of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. So, in ways which still emerge (for instance, in the resolute refusal to let Christos mean ‘Messiah’ in Paul!), the quest was on not so much for a ‘neutral’ historical analysis which would place Paul firmly outside 'Judaism', but for such an analysis as a way of saying, ‘There, that’s what Christianity was supposed to be; that’s how the narrow particularistic religion of Israel was gloriously transformed into the worldwide faith of the church.’ There are echoes of this even in Schweitzer’s more nuanced study, whose conclusion is that though Paul’s own view of Jesus remained firmly rooted in Jewish thought, the way he expressed ‘Christ-mysticism’ meant that the new faith could the more easily spread into the non-Jewish world. Thus Schweitzer took the antithesis of Deissmann ("The dogmatic Messiah of the Jews is fettered to his native country. The spiritual Christ could move from place to place"28) and explained both halves in terms of the contemporary Jewish world, even while showing that the second part could prove more accessible outside it.

This kind of history-of-religions research was then developed two significant notches further. First, it was suggested that within Paul’s own writings we could detect signs of an earlier 'Jewish-Christian' theology, which Paul sometimes quoted in order to relativize or refute it. Thus the apparent echoes in Paul of, say, ‘covenantal’ ideas are to be explained as the residue of a pre-Pauline Jewish Christianity. Second, it was suggested that, although Paul was the centre of one kind of ‘hellenistic Christianity’, there was another variety, which he opposed, which held an over-realized eschatology and a kind of super-spirituality which, as we saw a moment ago, could be labelled ‘enthusiasm’. These constructs, for which the only evidence is the angled mirror the scholar applies to Paul’s own writings, were then used to ‘position’ Paul in opposition to both of these hypothetical groups – a difficult and exegetically dangerous task, since most of the ‘evidence’ consists of things that he actually wrote, from which we have to ‘deduce’ things he only

27 Schweitzer 1912, 15.
28 Deissmann 1926 [1912], 133. For Schweitzer’s criticism: Schweitzer 1931, 33–6.
mentioned in order to undermine them. All this is well known as part of the 'back story' of modern scholarship.29

(vi) A Jewish Origin?

Such agenda-driven historiography has invited an equal and opposite response. Faced with the post-Baur proposals just outlined, it was not difficult for others, particularly from within the world of modern Jewish scholarship, to respond that if Paul really did find an early Jewish religion and transform it into an essentially pagan one we shouldn’t be surprised at the muddles and confusions that Christianity then got into. Such critics have developed the point: Paul, they assert, seems not to have known much about pure and genuine Judaism, the real Palestinian article; he was, after all, from southern Turkey, where no doubt there was a form of Judaism but not a very fine example of the genre; so what else could you expect? Thus the whirligig of historical study brings in its own revenges.30 It is only in the light of these much longer debates that we can appreciate the significance of Sanders’s protest in 1977. Those who have rushed to attack Sanders without noticing the longer scholarly narratives and debates to which he was contributing have inevitably missed at least some of the point.

But revenge comes in different forms. Several factors combined to move the historical study of Paul’s religious setting from a relentlessly hellenistic project to a relentlessly Jewish one. W. D. Davies’s ground-breaking book *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* was more than a straw in the wind. It was part of the wind itself, blowing freshly through the academic corridors and reminding everybody that Paul was a Jew, spoke like a Jew, thought like a Jew, and reasoned like a Jew – and that when he became a Christian he did not put away any of these things, but continued in the same way, only now with the belief that the Messiah had come at last.31 Some rabbis had spoken of a new Torah for the messianic age; this, Davies suggested, was at the heart of Paul’s vision, explaining both his rejection of the Mosaic law as it stood (in other words, this was no Marcionite or antinomian move) and his embracing of the *nomos Christou*, the ‘law of the Messiah’.32 Here at last was a very Jewish Paul, for an age that had suddenly woken up, too late, to recognize the earlier dark prejudices for what they were.

Davies at least broke the log-jam of hellenistic interpretations of Paul: perhaps, after all, Schweitzer was right, and a Jewish context would explain

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29 An obvious example is the work of Käsemann, for instance his surgical operation to separate an earlier Jewish-Christian formula in Rom. 3.24–6 from what Paul then makes of it (Käsemann 1980 [1973], 95–101), and his insistence that a passage like Rom. 8.31–4 (‘if God is for us, who is against us?’, etc.) is a quotation by Paul of an ‘enthusiastic’ slogan which the apostle counters: ‘though the enthusiasts raise their cry of victory, … believers are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered’ (Käsemann 1971 [1969], 68).

30 See again Moore (as above); also e.g. Montefiore 1914; Schoeps 1961 [1959]; Maccoby 1986, 1991.


32 As, for instance, in 1 Cor. 9.21 or Gal. 6.2.
things that had previously been thought to need a gentile one. But what sort of Jew might Paul prove to be? If not an apocalyptist, then a rabbi? If not one of those, then what? There were, and are, plenty more options to choose from. But a start – or at least a return in outline to Schweitzer’s start – had been made. There remain all kinds of questions, about (for instance) the dating of rabbinic material. But Davies was a pioneer, going boldly where few mainstream western scholars had ventured before. (Quoting Strack-Billerbeck’s monumental collection of ‘parallels’ hardly counts, and was, in any case, put very firmly in its place by a now famous article decrying what has become known as ‘parallelomania’.)

Davies’s project, to explain Paul in terms of rabbinic Judaism in particular, coincided with an explosion of interest in second-Temple Judaism brought on by the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. This was important because it soon became clear, even to the non-expert, that one could not simply pick up rabbinic texts which might well have been written several centuries later and assume that they reflected the views and practices of Paul’s day. The twin disasters of AD 70 and 135 changed the Jewish world for ever; the rabbinic texts reflect the later world in which they were produced, rather than the time of Jesus and Paul. One could not simply appeal to the rabbis’ own strong sense of tradition as evidence that sayings in the Mishnah (roughly 200) or the Talmud (roughly 400) did in fact reflect first-century reality, any more than one could appeal to the strong sense of tradition in Irenaeus or subsequent Christian writers as evidence that their second- and third-century views were accurate reflections of what the first apostles had said in the middle of the first century. Once, however, you raise the question that maybe Paul was a much more deeply Jewish thinker than had been supposed, newly-discovered texts such as the Scrolls, and new editions of other second-Temple works such as the Pseudepigrapha, could provide some solid help where the rabbinic material might be less reliable.

The question of continuity and discontinuity between Jewish thought and practice in the first century and in the later rabbinic period has itself become further confused by the problem of labelling. We have learned to shudder at the word Spätjudentum, ‘Late Judaism’, because of its associations with the older view in which post-exilic Judaism became corrupt and degenerate, declining away from the supposedly pure early religion of the prophets, and then contributing to all those features of the hypothetical ‘first-century Judaism’ against which Jesus and Paul were thought to have reacted. It is not clear, however, at least not to me, that the currently favoured alternative, ‘Early Judaism’, is any better at achieving appropriate historical clarity. It tends to lump together everything from immediately after the Babylonian exile to the early mediaeval period, and to assume (for instance) that the Pharisees in the days of Herod the Great were pretty much the same as the later rabbis themselves, who of course liked to cast

33 Davies was a pupil of C. H. Dodd, whom we have not discussed but who perhaps deserves more notice, particularly in his reading of eschatology: see Matlock 1996, 76–100.
34 Sandmel 1962.
themselves as their successors. Some have proposed ‘Middle Judaism’ as a compromise, though this has not caught on.35

I have in the past tended to prefer the phrase ‘Second-Temple Judaism’ because it labels the period in terms of its own central institution rather than through an implied relationship, whether positive or negative, with an earlier or later stage of Jewish life. It does, of course, have the very considerable drawback that the second Temple itself ceased to exist once the Romans had destroyed it in AD 70, whereas arguably many features of the pre-70 period – not least a strong revolutionary element, allied to a strict Torah-piety, and for that matter a tradition of ‘apocalyptic’ writing as evidenced by 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch – continued until the doomed bar-Kochba revolt.36 It also has the drawback of the very word ‘Judaism’ itself, which, despite its regular use by Jewish scholars themselves, can be shown to carry overtones (especially because of the give-away implication of the ‘ism’) of much later categorizations.37 But all this only goes to show that, however much one might applaud Davies’s attempt to align Paul with ‘rabbinic Judaism’, if one really wanted to earth the apostle in his own first-century Jewish environment things would have to be made more complex before they could once more be clarified. When studying Jesus, we have learned that it isn’t enough to speak of ‘the Jewish Jesus’; one must enquire as to what sort of ‘Jewish Jesus’ one might be talking about. So it is with Paul: we may agree with Schweitzer and Davies that the apostle is best explained from within the first-century Jewish world, but we cannot assume that either Schweitzer’s blend of apocalyptic and mysticism or Davies’s hypothetical rabbinc thought will by themselves provide the right historical, cultural and theological setting.

That is why, soon enough, others came forward to declare that Paul wasn’t simply, or even primarily, a rabbi, but rather a Jewish sectarian not too unlike an Essene, though again with a particular belief in the Messiah.38 Similarly, other Jewish ‘backgrounds’ have been tried out: Josephus, Philo, the apocryphal literature, and so on. One of the greatest agents of transformation in New Testament studies has been the ready availability, in good new editions and translations, of texts such as the Pseudepigrapha, hitherto much harder to obtain and use.39 One might also cite the massive impact made by the work of Martin Hengel in Tübingen, particularly his studies of the Zealot movement and his monumental survey of Judaism and Hellenism – arguing, in great detail, that all Jewish life and thought of the period had to be seen as part of the wider hellenistic world, rather than as a separate and detachable entity.40 But the main point was this: Paul was a Jew, he still saw himself as a Jew while working as the Apostle to the Gentiles, and he

35 See e.g. Boccaccini 1991.
36 On all this see esp. NTPG Part II; and now PFG ch. 2.
38 See e.g. Murphy-O’Connor 1995. For a nuanced Paul-as-rabbi see e.g. Chilton 2004.
had to be seen as such if one was to understand what he was talking about. The impact of these studies was immeasurably heightened by the slow but horrified awakening of Europe and America to the facts of the Nazi Holocaust, and the gradual realization that the ideology which had been able with comparative ease to dehumanize the Jewish people and so to justify killing millions of them was no mere contemporary aberration, but had at least some of its roots deep within western culture, not least western Christian culture in both its catholic and its protestant forms.

The world was thus ready for a hasty inversion of the earlier prejudice: Paul the Hellenizer is bad, Paul the Jewish thinker is good! To praise Paul, you now had to go by the second route; to blame him, the first. Albert Schweitzer had long ago said much the same, but it was only after the Second World War that popular opinion came into line.

(vii) Beyond ‘History-of-Religions’?

There are many comments one might make on this whole way of studying early Christianity in general and Paul in particular. But we must confine ourselves to a few pertinent observations. One might comment already on the danger of allowing agendas of the kind just mentioned to influence not only the subject-matter of historical study but also, in a measure, its results. We should not of course be naive. Agendas are what get people, even historians, out of bed in the mornings, though one might hope that, once at the desk, they allow the data to challenge the hypotheses they have dreamed up overnight. These agendas have produced, among other things, the set of history-of-religion categories which we mentioned earlier when discussing F. C. Baur (‘Jewish Christian’, ‘gentile Christian’, ‘enthusiast’ and ‘early catholic’), which are still regularly employed and invoked.\(^{41}\)

In particular, there is the obvious but devastating mistake of imagining that once you have discovered where an idea has come from you have found out where it’s going to.\(^{42}\) Just as, in lexicography, the etymology of a word does not necessarily provide a reliable guide to current usage, so it is with beliefs and ideas. In particular, just because something (an idea, a symbol, a story) is demonstrably ‘Jewish’, that does not mean it has no critique of Judaism. In fact, one of the main characteristics of Judaism from at least the time of the eighth-century prophets onwards was critique from within, something a normal ‘history-of-religions’ analysis has always found hard, if not impossible, to allow for. Thus, just as Baur, Bultmann, Bouset and others eagerly produced ‘hellenistic’ contexts for Paul’s ideas because they knew he was opposed to ‘works of the (Jewish) law’, W. D. Davies produced a would-be

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\(^{41}\) These formed the backbone, for instance, of Dunn 1977.

\(^{42}\) See the parallel comment of Geertz 2000 [1973], 23 about ‘social actions’: ‘where an interpretation comes from does not determine where it can be impelled to go’.
'Jewish' Paul from whom more or less all critique of Judaism had been removed. Misleading categories produce misleading analyses.

But there are two more subtle dangers here as well. First, there is the obvious problem that history and ‘application’ will be linked up without even a proper glance at theology. One might simply assume that to be basically Jewish (or basically non-Jewish) is bad, or, as it may be, good; and Paul might then be fitted into whichever box is preferred, with evidence duly marshalled, but without real reflection on what those boxes might mean, how Paul’s thought-patterns fit together when seen from that angle, why we are assuming a certain moral judgment on particular cultures, or the extent to which Paul, like so many other Jewish thinkers ancient and modern, resists our attempts to flatten him out in such a way.

In particular, such a move assumes that the way to find the appropriate ‘application’ of Paul’s letters to today’s world is first to discover the ‘right’ sort of ‘religion’ and then to attempt to reproduce it. This assumption cuts both ways. Some have assumed that the main thing about Paul is that he discovered and propagated a new sort of ‘religion’; others, indeed, that he gave up something called ‘religion’ and had something new, perhaps a ‘revelation’, instead (an antithesis favoured by some early twentieth century theologians, and now retrieved by some ‘apocalyptic’ interpreters). Others have seized upon some elements of the twentieth-century ‘Jewish Paul’ (Schweitzer, Davies, Stendahl, Sanders) as a sign that scholarship was now moving inexorably and irreversibly towards the view that Paul had no critique of ‘Judaism’, so that any attempt to see him as a nascent ‘Christian theologian’ would represent a regressive move against the tide of scholarship, and perhaps society – though one would have thought that such polemics would recognize the analogy with Hegelian developmental schemes and prefer to keep clear. Anyway, the attempt to jump straight to an ‘application’ of Paul’s work on the basis simply of a would-be ‘history-of-religions’ analysis must be resisted, especially when the analysis in question, like Baur’s, was rather obviously a back-projection of views reached on other grounds. History sets the context for exegesis, and must always remain in close dialogue with it; history and exegesis together must always remain in dialogue with theology itself. And theology, as I have argued in Paul and the Faithfulness of God, shows that the reasons for Paul’s stance had to do, not with a ‘religious’ critique (‘you have an inferior kind of religion, but I’ve discovered a superior one’), but with the eschatological belief that the crucified Jesus had been raised, and was Israel’s Messiah. Only in the light of that belief, and its theological outworking, can appropriate ‘application’ begin.

The second more subtle danger has to do with the point we made earlier: the limiting of ‘history’ to ‘history of religion’. This as we saw belongs with

43 Davies 1980 [1948]: there is no discussion, for instance, of Rom. 2.17–29 or Phil. 3.2–8, and no mention at all of anything in Rom. 9.6–10.4 except for one cursory ref. to 10.3. This continues to be a problem in today’s Jewish ‘retrievals’ of Paul: see PFG ch. 15.

the post-Enlightenment ideology, according to which ‘religion’ becomes detached from all other aspects of life, and especially from politics. This bears no relation to Paul’s world. Any attempt to impose a modern meaning of ‘religion’ on Paul or anyone else in his day is bound to fail. Any attempt to build an ‘application’ out of such an analysis will fail with it.

Perhaps partly because of this latter danger, more recent study has seen various attempts to locate Paul historically in relation to the philosophies of his day, particularly Stoicism. I have written about this elsewhere. The danger here is that we fall back into the false either/or in which Paul must either be a ‘Jewish’ thinker or a ‘hellenistic’ one – or into an equally damaging antithesis in which Paul must be either a ‘political’ thinker or a ‘religious’ one. I have argued that he is both. Paul himself, however, given half a chance, will remake all our modern categories around his gospel.

What is needed is history, genuine history, multi-faceted history, ‘thick description’ history that takes seriously the full range of human life and culture. We need to ask, not simply ‘who did what’, ‘who ruled when’ and ‘who won which battles’ – or, in the case of the New Testament, ‘who wrote what’, ‘what were their main ideas’, and ‘where did they clash?’ but, more particularly, why did people think and behave as they did? What motivated them, and why? What were they aiming to do? For this, I have employed the ‘worldview’ model, which I use heuristically, not to import any particular philosophical framework but to make sure, as with the social map-work of writers like Clifford Geertz and Charles Taylor, that we pay attention to cultural elements like narrative and symbol.

3. From History to Theology?

If the historian is to make headway with exegesis, it is vital to understand the nature of the subject-matter. In the case of Paul, that will include all sorts of things about the ancient world, including tent-making and travel as well as politics and philosophy. But it will also include, centrally, what we broadly call theology. I have made this case in *PFG*. But how can we put the history and the theology together? They have been uncomfortable bedfellows for a long time, and particularly since the Enlightenment in which they were consciously split apart. We cannot pursue that long and complex story here, but we must note it as the wider context of historical scholarship on the New Testament. The results of the separation of history and theology, of faith and public life, are inscribed across western culture, biblical scholarship included. When this post-Enlightenment division is combined with a Lutheran ‘two kingdoms’ theology, the conclusion is even more inevitable.

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45 See *PFG* ch. 14; and see now esp. Rowe 2015.
46 See *PFG* chs. 5, 12.
47 See Geertz 2000 [1973]; Taylor 2007. See too Barclay’s exposition of the notion of ‘habitus’ as found in Bourdieu (Barclay 2011, 26f.); this is an attempt to achieve the same kind of wider cultural grid of interpretation. See further ch. 10 below.
And when, as in Bultmann and some of his followers, history itself has been under suspicion lest, in offering an apparent foundation for faith, it might turn that faith into a ‘work’, it appears that much of the mainstream scholarly enterprise has been proceeding with unchallenged and unquestioned assumptions that have made it impossible to understand some of the key texts. The so-called ‘new perspective’ on Paul, to which we shall presently turn, ought not to be seen simply as a rejection of some older perspectives about justification, faith, the law and so on. It ought to be seen as part of a much larger turn, away from the Idealist world where ‘history’ in the sense of ‘the immanent progress of the divine spirit’ called the tunes and ‘history’ in the sense of ‘what we can say about what actually happened’ had to dance to them.

The present state of Pauline studies, then, emerged from many agendas and many aspirations, mixed with a great deal of historical research. The complex world we have sketched can neither be placed on a pedestal as the ‘objective’ results of ‘neutral’ scholarship nor dismissed as the mere ‘subjective’ projections of various cultural, ecclesial and theological movements. We must not absolutize our predecessors; nor must we ignore them.

They appealed, ultimately, to history. If we disagree with their findings it must be because, grateful for the stimulus of their labours, we ourselves are engaging in that same historical task, and attempting to do it more thoroughly. And that thorough task, applied to Paul, will quickly reach one particular historical question: what was Paul’s ‘theology’, and what sense did it make to him and his hearers?