

# A Jewish Paul

WILLIAM RICHARD STEGNER

Will the real St. Paul please stand up?

This is not some television game show in which experts choose the real celebrity from among several look-alikes. This is the dilemma of modern Pauline scholars. Who is the real Paul? Our perceptions of Paul keep changing because the perspective from which scholars view him keeps changing.

Several examples of the shifting perspectives on Paul illustrate the problem. In the heyday of biblical theology, everyone agreed that the apostle was, above all, a theologian. With the rediscovery of ancient rhetoric and the rise of audience criticism, a new approach described Paul as a Rhetorician. Accordingly, many examples of the ancient rhetorician's art in his letters are cited. Today, the application of social-science methodologies to the study of the ancient world introduces still new perspectives.

Specifically, the application of the methodology of cultural anthropology to the quest for the real Paul seems to yield promising results. For example, one of the key categories employed by cultural anthropology is described by the phrase "symbolic universe." A "symbolic universe" is the world-view or view of reality that every people constructs for itself. A "symbolic universe" involves the way a people views such categories as the human body, purity and explanations for evil. Jerome Neyrey, a pioneer in this perspective, has shown how these categories open up the "symbolic universe" in which Paul lived.<sup>1</sup>

According to Neyrey's study, Paul's "symbolic universe" is primarily Jewish in view of his socialization "as an observant Jew of Pharisaic stripe" and his shared world-view is that of a "first-century, Eastern Mediterranean non-elite."<sup>2</sup> Consequently, Paul had a passion for boundaries between purity and pollution, for order and for hierarchy.

While Neyrey's research contains several significant implications for the study of Paul, only two can be mentioned here. The first implication concerns a growing area of agreement among a variety of perspectives—namely, Paul's Jewishness. This growing recognition stands in marked contrast to the scholarship of a previous generation, which emphasized the Hellenistic dimension of

---

*William Richard Stegner is professor of New Testament at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, Evanston, Illinois.*

---

Paul's heritage and thought. Even today the perspective which describes Paul as a rhetorician emphasizes Paul's indebtedness to Hellenistic rather than Jewish rhetorical forms. Still, today, scholars are finding the real Paul to be much more Jewish than scholars had previously supposed.

A second significant implication of Neyrey's perspective concerns the continuity between Paul the Pharisee and Paul the Christian. Paul's passion for boundaries and order and hierarchy was transferred, after his conversion, to the Church, as the following quotation explains: "As a follower of Jesus, Paul transferred the socialized sense of sacred space from Mount Zion and the temple building to the assembled Christian group."<sup>3</sup> However, the above emphasis on continuity is not meant to deny the significance of Paul's meeting the risen Christ and experiencing the Holy Spirit. Neyrey is simply denying that Paul became an entirely new kind of person and jettisoned everything from his preconversion past. (Paul's continuity with his Jewish past will be further illustrated in the concluding discussion concerning Paul and the Law.)

Let us now turn our attention to the Jewish dimensions of Paul's life and thought. Actually, Neyrey's conclusion about Paul's socialization as a Pharisee is found in one of the apostle's own autobiographical statements.

#### PAUL'S AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

In Phil. 3:4, Paul mentions his reasons for "confidence in the flesh..." and then, in vv. 5 and 6, gives the following list:

(5) circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee, (6) as to zeal, a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

Some of Paul's reasons for confidence are not clear to interpreters today. What distinction does birth from the tribe of Benjamin convey? Probably the words "a Hebrew born of Hebrews" means that Paul, a Jew of the dispersion, learned Hebrew from his parents.

Nevertheless, the main thrust of the passage is clear: Paul is thinking hierarchically in terms of values. His ancestry from Benjamin and his possible ability to use Hebrew elevated him above other "people of Israel." Of more value still is his membership among the Pharisees. Most valuable of all is his "righteousness under the law...." Of course, these reasons for confidence in the flesh also indicate boundaries.

While he abandons this particular hierarchy of values and these particular boundaries, Paul continued to draw other boundaries and emphasize other hierarchies after becoming a Christian.

Although scholars of previous generations read this same autobiographical statement, they did not take it seriously. Rather, they viewed Paul as a Jew of the Dispersion and, accordingly, emphasized the Hellenistic dimension of his heritage.

Let us now turn to another dimension of Paul's heritage from Judaism. Paul was an apocalyptic thinker.

### PAUL'S APOCALYPTIC THINKING

The word apocalyptic is hard to define, and has not been used with precision. Actually, the word designates three interrelated phenomena.<sup>4</sup> First, it designates a kind (or genre) of literature like the revelation of John in the New Testament. Secondly, it designates "a religious perspective" that deals with the end of this present age. Thirdly, apocalyptic designates the world-view or view of total reality that an apocalyptic movement shares. Paul's apocalyptic thinking falls most naturally under the second category.

Paul's debt to the "religious perspective" known as Jewish Apocalyptic is best approached, not in abstraction, but exegetically. For example, in Romans 9 through 11, Paul is struggling with the relationship between the Church and Israel; namely, those Jews who chose not to believe in Christ. A climactic sentence in Rom. 11:25f. reveals Paul's debt to this Jewish perspective on God's purpose for history and the nearness of the end. "...I want you to understand this mystery, brethren: a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles come in, and so all Israel will be saved...." The key word is "mystery." The term "mystery" designates a purpose or secret of God which cannot be known by reason; God must reveal it to humans.<sup>5</sup> The term and the concept are central to Jewish Apocalyptic thinking.

Whether the "mystery" has been given to Paul by God or to some other person is not altogether clear from the passage. Also, Paul does not clarify what he means by "the full number of Gentiles." A more literal translation is "the fullness of the Gentiles." It can mean "the full number of the elect from among the Gentiles," or "the added number needed in order to make up that full total," or even "the Gentile world as a whole."<sup>6</sup> Despite these obscurities, the meaning of the passage as a whole is clear. In the end times "all Israel"—that is, the Jewish people who do not yet believe in Christ—will be drawn by faith in Him by God. The incoming of the Gentiles through the missionary activity of the Church points to the coming end of history.

An integral part of the Apocalyptic world-view of the time (the third phenomenon designated by the term apocalyptic) was the belief in a resurrection. Indeed, the end of history and the resurrection of the dead belong together. Further, the Gospel of John witnesses to this Jewish belief in a resurrection. It is found in Martha's reply to Jesus' statement: "Your brother will rise again" in John 11:23. Martha responds, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day" (John 11:24).

While we do not know how much of the Apocalyptic world-view Paul shared in his preconversion days, we do know that Paul, as a Pharisee, would have believed in the resurrection. We know from the New Testament that the belief in a resurrection was one of the points of contention between Pharisees and Sadducees. Thus, Paul's belief in the resurrection is another indication of his heritage from Judaism.

Paul's belief in the resurrection was a central motif in his theology—as 1 Corinthians 15 amply shows. Further, Paul again and again turns to the motif of the resurrection in his letters. Romans 6 illustrates the point. In discussing the significance of baptism, Paul compares it to dying and rising with Christ. "For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his" (Rom. 6:5).

However, an additional point must be made about Paul's dependence upon Jewish Apocalyptic thinking. While Paul's belief in the resurrection points to his dependence upon his Jewish heritage, the above two passages also illustrate how Paul's own experience of the risen Christ modified that heritage. Whereas Jewish Apocalyptic anticipated a general resurrection at the end, Paul now views that general resurrection from the perspective of Christ's resurrection: the Jews did not believe in the resurrection of an isolated individual. Paul interprets Jesus' resurrection as the "first fruits" that foreshadow and guarantee the resurrection of all those in Christ (1 Cor. 15:23). Moreover, the general resurrection is tied to the second coming of Christ in 1 Thes. 4:13-18.

How could Rudolf Bultmann and his school ignore Paul's apocalyptic thinking? Actually, they recognized Paul's indebtedness to the first-century apocalyptic world-view. However, they felt the real Paul's insights were disguised by this world-view: the real Paul was wrestling with questions of "human existence," such as a "new self-understanding" of ourselves in Christ. Under such existentialist reinterpretation, Paul turned out to be surprisingly like Rudolf Bultmann and his school.

While more could be said about Paul's dependence on Jewish Apocalyptic, we should turn our attention to Paul and his relationship to the Jewish Law or Torah. Here a distinct shift in understanding is taking place. Again, this shift in the scholarly perspective emphasized Paul's continuity with his Jewish heritage rather than his discontinuity. Whereas Rudolf Bultmann and his Existentialist followers emphasized Paul's discontinuity with the Law—Christ being the "end of the law" (Rom. 10:4) in the sense of its termination—today more and more scholars point to dimensions of Paul's continuity with Torah.

## PAUL AND THE LAW

Difficulties with Paul's attitude toward the Law (or Torah) begin with his own statements. They are not always easy to understand or easy to reconcile with each other. For example, in one passage Paul says, "So the law is holy and the commandment is holy and just and good" (Rom. 7:12). In another passage he speaks negatively of the law: "...Because by works of the law shall no one be justified" (Gal. 2:16c). He seems both to affirm and reject the law!

Further, the perspective from which Paul's statements have been interpreted complicates our attempt to understand his intentions. Since the leading interpreters of Paul have been German Lutherans, they have tended to read into Paul the conflicts between Luther and the Roman Catholic Church. Accordingly, Paul rejected the law entirely—both as a means of earning merit with God and as a guide for conduct. There is a sharp distinction between law and grace. If people

are under grace, they are led by the Spirit and there is no need for law. Indeed, the whole issue is set in a wider perspective; there is almost total discontinuity between the rather positive view of the law in the Old Testament and the negative view of the law in the New Testament.

How can one get behind the disputes of the Reformation to the intention of the real Paul? The issue of continuity in Paul's attitude to the law seems to be the place to begin. What continuity is there between Paul the Pharisee and Paul the Christian? Should the law ever be a guide to Christian conduct?

The recent exegetical work of Peter Tomson has done much to undermine the traditional Reformation view cited above. Tomson stresses the continuity between the two Pauls.

In order to clarify the discussion, we must introduce a technical term—*halacha*. The word *halacha* is derived from the Hebrew verb "to walk," and defined how a faithful Jew should "walk" (that is, conduct himself) before God. *Halacha* is best defined as "the legal tradition of Judaism."<sup>7</sup>

A specific example from 1 Corinthians best illustrates the continuity between the two Pauls. In 1 Cor. 5:1-5 Paul judges that a man who "is living with his father's wife" (v. 1) must be excommunicated from the church. The issue is forbidden sexual relationships and is treated in Lev. 18:1-18. Leviticus uses the phrase "uncover the nakedness of" to warn against illicit unions with "anyone near of kin" (v. 6). In telling his Gentile converts how they should walk before God, Paul draws on *halacha*.

The discussion of these forbidden sexual relationships occupied a prominent place in post-biblical and rabbinic writings. Moreover, this category of the law was extended to Gentiles who attached themselves to the synagogue. Hence the extension of the prohibition of forbidden unions to Gentiles in the Corinthian church also agrees with halachic teaching.

Specifically, Paul is concerned about the category of "the father's wife" in his interpretation of correct conduct. Since this category is discussed immediately after that of the "physical 'mother'...the stepmother is meant."<sup>8</sup> Palestinian sources extended this prohibition to Gentiles also. Now Paul's discussion in 1 Cor. 5:1-6 becomes clear. Paul is concerned about someone living with "his father's wife"—that is, someone who is not his real mother. In addition, Paul's solemn pronouncement of excommunication agrees with Jewish practice.

Tomson's presentation of this point by point agreement between Paul's teaching and *halacha* is a breakthrough in scholarship. In addition to this case, Tomson cites numerous other cases of continuity between *halacha* and Paul's ethical teachings.

However, Tomson's findings must be set in a larger context to appreciate fully the shift in understanding that is taking place. More than a decade ago, E. P. Sanders called into question the traditional German Lutheran interpretation that observant Jews used the law to accumulate merit and thereby earn salvation for themselves. Sanders's exhaustive examination of the relevant Jewish literature led him to far different conclusions. God had already chosen the Jews to be his own people. The Covenant and the law were gifts of his grace to Israel. How

could Jews use the law to earn the special status with God that they already possessed? Rather, the law was the means whereby they affirmed and maintained their status as God's own people. Sanders used the phrase "Covenantal nomism" to describe the kind of Judaism he found in the primary sources.<sup>9</sup>

However, Sanders has not spoken the last word in describing the relationship of Paul to the law. In a recent book, James D. G. Dunn largely affirms the position of E. P. Sanders, but then goes beyond it. Specifically, Dunn has subjected Paul's phrase "works of the law" to a rigorous examination. Paul used this particular phrase three times in Gal. 2:16. Here, the context is important. The issue was fellowship meals within the Galatian church. How could Jewish Christians, who still observed the dietary laws (kosher), eat with Gentile Christians, who did not? Further, how could Jewish and Gentile Christians worship and coexist in the same church? Dunn concludes that, given the context, "we may justifiably deduce, therefore, that by 'works of the law' Paul intended his readers to think of *particular observances of the law like circumcision and the food laws*."<sup>10</sup>

Consequently, Paul was not referring to any and all observances of the law. He was referring to those observances which writers of the time "regarded as characteristically and distinctively Jewish."<sup>11</sup> Those observances, of course, set boundaries between Jewish and Gentile Christians and reduced the Gentiles to second-class status in the church.

According to Dunn, Paul could make this judgment concerning the law because Paul is thinking in terms of sociology and not in terms of salvation. Since these particular "works of the law" set boundaries between Christians, they should no longer be observed by Jewish Christians. So Paul is saying *no* to the law as it divides the church, and *yes* to the aspects of the law which express the will of God. Yet, how could Paul make such a judgment? Who gave Paul that right?

Again, how could Paul dare to make such a decision concerning the law and thereby concerning observant Jewish Christians? Paul's apocalyptic thinking supplies the answer. In this new age, the law still defines God's will, but it no longer defines membership in God's people; faith in Christ does that. Let us return to Paul's statement in Rom. 10:4: "For Christ is the end of the law, that everyone who has faith may be justified." God's new way of justifying, or setting people right with himself, is through faith in Christ and Christ is the fulfillment or goal of the law. The new age has been inaugurated by Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God and God's raising of Jesus from the dead. Who gave Paul the right to abrogate the sociological aspects of the law? The risen Christ, who appeared to Paul, gave him the apostolate to the Gentiles.

What have we learned about Paul's Jewishness from the new perspective advanced by Sanders and Dunn and illustrated exegetically by Tomson? Again, the issue of continuity is central. The traditional Reformation view posed discontinuity between Paul and the law, and hence between Paul and first-century Judaism. That misperception is now being corrected. There is both continuity and discontinuity in Paul's teaching about the law. That accounts for Paul's positive and negative statements about the law. There is discontinuity between Paul and the law when the law functions sociologically and sets

boundaries between the holy people and all others. On the other hand, there is continuity between Paul and the law in that the law defines God's will for ethical living, as Paul's letters illustrate. The primary difference between Paul and first-century Judaism lies in the apocalyptic thinking of Paul and the church. God's act of deliverance in Christ has inaugurated the new age of the Kingdom and has opened the Covenant people to Gentiles. Now faith in Christ determines the new boundaries for God's people. Certainly all questions concerning Paul's relationship to the law have not yet been answered. Much more work is yet to be done in this area.

## CONCLUSION

In this brief survey we have seen a significant shift in Pauline studies. Pauline scholars are increasingly aware of Paul's Jewishness and his debt to first-century Judaism. A recent study employing the insights of cultural anthropology stresses Paul's socialization as a Pharisee and shows that one of Paul's autobiographical statements must be taken seriously. Paul's apocalyptic thinking derived largely from first-century Judaism. The new elements are his experience of the risen Christ and his insight into the "mystery" of God's plan of salvation for both Jews and Gentiles. Still, the most significant shift has taken place in our new perception of Paul and the law. Hitherto, Jewish scholars have portrayed Paul as a kind of marginal Jew whose view of the law was totally at odds with that of first-century Judaism. That view is no longer viable. There is considerable continuity between Paul the Pharisee and Paul the Christian. Today, Paul fits much more comfortably into first-century Judaism than he did just two decades ago. Indeed, the chasm between Judaism and Christianity has been somewhat narrowed.

## Notes

1. Jerome Neyrey, *Paul, in Other Words: A Cultural Reading of His Letters* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990).
2. Ibid., pp. 17 and 12. Others have legitimately criticized Neyrey's work for its heavy reliance on theory and its lack of documentation. However, numerous quotations from Paul's letters support his conclusions about boundaries and order and hierarchy.
3. Neyrey, op. cit., p. 50.
4. Paul Hanson, "Apocalypticism," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Supplementary Volume* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), pp. 29-34.
5. C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle To The Romans*, I.C.C. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1979), p. 574.
6. Cranfield, op. cit., pp. 575f.
7. Peter Tomson, *Paul and the Jewish Law: Halakha in the Letters of the Apostle to the Gentiles*, "Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum" (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), p. XIV.
8. Tomson, op. cit., p. 100. My discussion is closely following Tomson, pp. 97ff.
9. E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (London: SCM Press, 1977).
10. James D.G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), p. 191.
11. Ibid. I am following Dunn's argument closely here.

