Many of us have grown up hearing about Paul’s “conversion” to Christianity. We forget that Paul was a Jew. More important, we fail to recognize that Paul was always a Jew. Christianity, in the sense of an established religion, did not exist during Paul’s lifetime. Yet Paul did talk a great deal about Jesus Christ. How confusing to us today to hear about a religious Jew who spent so much time thinking and writing about the hero of Christianity, Jesus! It will be important at the beginning of our study, then, to practice this new kind of learning, where we simultaneously learn and unlearn some things. For, in order to learn about Paul’s Jewish heritage and message, we will have to forget our assumptions about the nature of Judaism and Christianity. At the end of this chapter you should be able to list at least three things that characterize Paul’s Judaism, as well as describe some of the differences between the Judaism and Christianity of today and the various Judaisms of the first century.
Paul the Jew

“I Am a Hebrew”

What does it mean for us to say that Paul was a Jew? Paul himself tells us that he was an ethnic Jew, that he was born to Jewish parents. He says that he was “of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews” (Phil 3:5). Not only was he born of Jewish parents, however; he also was a member of the religious community of Judaism: “circumcised on the eighth day” and trained as a Pharisee.¹ In his young adulthood, Paul says, he “persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it” (Gal 1:13). But something changed Paul’s mind about this Jewish movement that he called “the church of God.” He became not only supportive of it; he became one of its primary spokespersons. Here’s what Paul said about this change of mind:

He who had set me apart before I was born, and . . . called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles. (Gal 1:15–16)

Paul did not “convert” to Christianity. No, his change of mind had nothing to do with leaving one religion in order to follow a different God. The God of his people—the God of Israel—had “called” him to preach to the Gentiles concerning the Son of the God of Israel. Paul was an apostle² of the Jewish God, sent out to preach among the Gentiles. Paul was calling the Gentiles to worship the God of Israel.

PAUL’S JEWISH PROCLAMATION

Paul was a Jew who lived among non-Jews. Except for short periods, Paul lived his life as a Diaspora Jew.³ While some Jews of the Diaspora did try to blend in with the surrounding Greco-Roman population, it is clear from Paul’s own writings that—both before and after he threw his lot in with those who called Jesus the Christ—Paul was firmly committed to his Jewish heritage and
to living out his life in faithfulness to his understanding of this heritage.

It seems odd to us today that this person, who has been called the second founder of Christianity, was neither Christian nor Gentile. Paul was a Jew: He worshiped the God of Israel, lived out of and in relation to the history and traditions of the Jewish people, and held anticipations for the future that were deeply informed by his Jewish heritage.

**The God of Israel**

Those of us who live in Western societies are accustomed to assuming that there is only one God. To be a monotheist in our day and time and in this Western world is both to accept the dominant cultural assumptions about the nature of the divine and to express an enlightened tolerance for religious diversity. Such was not the case, however, for Paul and other Jews in antiquity.

To state it bluntly: To be a monotheist in the Greco-Roman world demanded a rejection of the dominant culture and of the religious confessions of one’s neighbors. By contrast, the defining religious confession of the Jews does not seem to represent any daring spirit of confrontation.

Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. (Deut 6:4)

When all are agreed that there is but one true God, this basic confession of the Jews seems almost commonplace. Perhaps even to those Jews in Paul’s day who by chance lived well-protected and provincial lives firmly within an all-Jewish community, this confession of the oneness of God seemed obvious and constituted no challenge, either for oneself or for one’s neighbors. But if, like Paul, you were a Jew who lived in the Diaspora, as a member of a minority population within Greco-Roman society, such a confession was curious at least, and radical and confrontational at most.

Two related factors within Greco-Roman society lent such a curious and even radical context to the Jewish confession of the oneness of God. First, Greco-Roman society was “populated with gods.” Every city boasted a multitude of temples, each temple to a different god or goddess. For a Jew to say solemnly, “There is one God,” when any observant soul could walk through the city and see prominent and manifold evidence to the contrary was at the very least odd. In our day, were we to assert that there were many gods and goddesses, we would have a real argument on our hands. We would be asked to offer proof. Why, even people of different religions—Jews, Christians, Muslims—acknowledge that they worship the same God! The currency of the United States, for example, implicitly acknowledges the singularity of God: “In God We Trust.” There is no need to name the god, to designate which god we trust. There is—this is our culture’s assumption—only one God. But in Paul’s society the situation would be just the reverse. The culture assumed that there were multiple gods and goddesses. To trust in a God, one would need to be explicit: In which deity do you trust? Thus, to assert that there is only one deity was, in itself, countercultural.

This countercultural religious affirmation of the Jews was also a radical, and some might say intolerant, stance to take within the pluralistic society of the Roman Empire. For not only did the Greeks and Romans accept that there were many different gods and goddesses; they assumed that one’s religious life would consist of worshiping several of these deities. That is, Greco-Roman religions were, generally speaking, not exclusivistic in character. An individual might be active in the civic cult, maintain certain household gods, and participate in one or more of the mystery religions. The religions’ gods and goddesses did not demand that
their devotees be exclusively committed to them.

In contrast to this religious openness, the God of Israel demanded Israel’s exclusive worship. This God declares, “I the LORD your God am a jealous God” (Exod 20:5). Israel was to worship no other God but YHWH. To do so was to violate the covenant that Israel had made with this God at Sinai. The Greeks and the Romans might play the field, but Israel’s God demanded faithful religious monogamy. Thus, the Jews’ declaration that God was one, that their God was the only true God, constituted an implicit, if not an explicit, judgment on the religious beliefs and practices of their neighbors. Further, to deny that YHWH was the only God, or to suggest that YHWH was not a single God, would be to reject the very foundation of Judaism. To be a Jew meant—at the very least—to worship solely the God of Israel. The Jewish religious life was defined solely in relation to this God.

Thus, Paul was Jewish: He maintained his faith in, and his relation to, this one God, YHWH. “For us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist” (1 Cor 8:6). It was this God and no other that Paul preached. Yes, he preached Jesus Christ. But this preaching centered around the proclamation that God—that is, the God of Israel—had raised this Jesus from the dead. Paul, like any other faithful Jew, rejected the existence of other gods and goddesses. He insisted, as had his Jewish ancestors, on the exclusive worship of the one true God. Throughout, his thought depends upon this assumption: There is one true God, the God of Israel, the God of Abraham and Sarah, of Isaac and Jacob, the God of the Jews.

**The Traditions of Israel**

Each of us is informed by the culture in which we live. This is a commonplace. But what is frequently missed is that most of us are surrounded by several different cultures. There is no monolithic, monochrome Culture. This fact is especially obvious for those who are minorities. An African-American surely knows this, as do Latinos/Latinas or Asian-Americans. Even the name indicates the cultural plurality: African and American; Asian and American. These multiple ethnic and national identities cause explosions among us. What does it mean to be African? To be American? To be African-American? Which identity informs you when you are a person of multiple identities? From which culture do you derive your script for how to live life, for how to think about life?

The issue of cultural plurality was alive in Paul’s world as well. It was certainly an issue for Jews who lived as a minority within Greco-Roman society. According to whose script should a Diaspora Jew live? Are Ho-
mer and Socrates models for Jews as well as for Greeks? Or do Abraham and Moses define a Jew—even a Jew who lives among the Greeks? For Paul, at any rate, the answer is clear. Paul persistently draws his material from the history and literature of Israel, rather than from the history or literature of Greece. He did not aim to translate the Jewish faith into the terms of Greek philosophy or relate this faith to Roman history. This Apostle to the Gentiles brought his own history and traditions and literature to the Gentiles. He wanted to communicate the richness of his own faith to the Gentiles and to include them in his own heritage. He spoke and wrote in the Greek language, but the vocabulary of his Greek reflects the thought and story of Israel.

All of the key terms that we will be studying are key terms within Judaism, and Paul’s thinking about these terms is informed by that Jewish conversation. Thus, although Greeks had long valued righteousness as a virtue and as a necessity of justice, Paul does not emphasize this virtue of righteousness but, rather, invokes the “righteousness of God”—that is, the God of Israel. Greeks and Romans had law—both in legal systems and in cultural traditions—but Paul’s discussion about the law derives from his reflections on the Jewish law, the Torah. Similarly, for Paul sin is a barrier that erodes one’s relationship with YHWH, while for the Greek philosophers a sin is simply a mistake (albeit sometimes a serious mistake). And Christ is a word that is taken directly from Jewish thought; it is simply the Greek translation of the Hebrew for “Messiah.”

Thus, any understanding of Paul’s thought requires that we learn something about the history and tradition of Israel. The next two chapters narrate something of this history and illustrate some of the logic of the thought that had emerged in this tradition. As we move through succeeding sections, we will see how this basic foundation within Judaism informed Paul’s interaction with the Gentiles and how his interaction with the Gentiles cast new questions for him to address to his own traditions.

**The Expectations of Israel**

It was not, however, only Israel’s past that determined Paul’s thought. Paul also claimed from his Jewish culture Israel’s expectations
for the future. These expectations have been given a technical name by scholars: apocalyptic eschatology. Eschatology means “the study of last things.” That is, eschatology deals with the end of time: What will happen at the end of history—both corporate human history and individual human life? Whenever you talk about subjects such as heaven or hell, reincarnation or an afterlife, you are (although you probably didn’t know this) engaging in an eschatological discussion.

Apocalyptic eschatology is a particular kind of eschatological thinking that focuses on at least two items. First, apocalyptic thinking assumes that some crisis will bring this present world to an end and inaugurate a new world. Second, it emphasizes the cosmic nature and purpose of the crisis, rather than just an individual (or national) transformation. Perhaps a comparison with other types of eschatology will help to illustrate these features of apocalyptic eschatology.

The simplest type of eschatology may be called promise-fulfillment eschatology. Something is promised and then the promise is fulfilled. Imagine that you become engaged. You are then living “eschatologically”—in anticipation of the marriage. You have received a promise that will be fulfilled in due time as things follow their natural course.

Illustration 1
Promise-Fulfillment Eschatology

Promise ———> Fulfillment

Promise-fulfillment eschatology is a simple eschatology that asserts that what has been promised in the past will be fulfilled in the future.

Such is the case in the earliest experience of Israel. God promises that Israel will enter the land of Canaan and will live in a “land flowing with milk and honey” (Exod 3:7–8). God has promised, and Israel agrees with this promise of God (Exod 19:3–8). And Israel does, indeed, arrive at the land of Canaan (Joshua).

But just as might happen in a marriage, the Israelites’ arrival in the land of Canaan did not prove to be quite the fulfillment that they had anticipated. Imagine that, after the engaged couple marry, now living on the promise of “love, honor, and cherish,” they begin to have marital difficulties. The fulfillment is somehow escaping them. What do they do? Well, they may decide to go to a minister or a therapist for counseling. And if the counseling is helpful, the spouses can return to renew their vows, their promise to love, honor, and cherish each other. This type of eschatology recognizes that things are not quite so simple as promise-fulfillment. Life is complicated and difficult, and we frequently need to return to the original promise and reaffirm it.

Such was the message of Israel’s prophets. They proclaimed that the people had failed to experience the fulfillment of the promise because they had neglected to attend to the original promise.

And I brought you into a plentiful land to enjoy its fruits and its good things. But when you came in you defiled my land, and made my heritage an abomination. (Jer 2:7)

Thus, because Israel veered away from the original promise that God and Israel had made (Exod 19:3–8), it now received this word:

Return, faithless Israel, says the LORD. I will not look on you in anger, for I am merciful, says the LORD. I will not be angry forever. Only acknowledge your guilt. . . . Return, O faithless children, says the LORD. (Jer 3:12–14)

Thus, we might call this promise-return-fulfillment eschatology a prophetic eschatology.
Illustration 2  
Prophetic Eschatology

Promise → Fulfillment

Return [=Repent]

Prophetic eschatology recognizes that life sometimes veers off course and away from the fulfillment. Repentance is necessary in order to return to the original promise and be "back on track" toward the fulfillment.

But, alas, what happens when you return and return and return and simply can’t ever seem to stay on track, much less arrive at the fulfillment? In the case of a marriage—at least in our society—this frequently means that the married couple get a divorce. Whatever the legal arrangements, however, it is certainly clear that a crisis has been reached. The fulfillment of the promise is unattainable through repetitious efforts to return to the original promise. It becomes clear that some kind of break is necessary; and perhaps on the other side of this shattering crisis, there will emerge a new hope, a new possibility for fulfillment.

Illustration 3  
Apocalyptic Eschatology

Promise → Crisis → Fulfillment

Apocalyptic eschatology emerges when efforts to repent appear to be ineffectual. Because there are mighty forces at work that prevent fulfillment, a crisis develops. Some outside force intervenes and destroys the situation where repentance has become ineffectual and inaugurates a new situation with fulfillment that would have been impossible within the original situation.

The history of the Jewish people had not been a happy one. Indeed, it had been a very difficult and trying history. For only two short periods in their existence had they been a truly independent people. The texture of their lives was determined by foreign rulers. And now, half a millennium later, the promise was still not fulfilled. They still lived in subservience to others. Even their repentance did not seem to be sufficient.

The world and its rulers were powerful and destructive. The trauma of Israel’s failure to know the fulfillment of God’s promise was so great that Israel’s prophets turned to using fantastic language to describe the helplessness of their situation. (See the text of Zechariah in sidebar 1:3.) Just as shows like Star Trek imagine evil forces as strange creatures such as the Borg, so Israel’s prophets resorted to bizarre images (e.g., the four horns in Zechariah) to describe the forces in the world that thwarted the fulfillment of God’s promise. But just as the starship Enterprise always wins in the end, so Israel’s prophets proclaimed that God would bring a dramatic destruction of those evil forces and bring fulfillment to Israel.

Only the cosmic power of God could alter this impossible situation. The fulfillment would come as apocalypse—as catastrophe and as new fulfillment. Israel waited for a Messiah, who would rule Israel in God’s kingdom. When that day arrived, the entire cosmos would be the realm of God. The creation in all its parts would, at long last, honor the Creator.

This, then, was the apocalyptic expectation of the Jews—and of Paul. The future is in God’s hands. The fate of Israel, of the world, indeed of the entire cosmos, will be determined by a great action of God, wherein God will establish God’s own sovereignty once again over all creation. The Messiah will be the herald and sign of that apocalyptic moment. This was Paul’s expectation for the future.
WORSHIPING THE GOD OF
ISRAEL: THEN AND NOW

One of the reasons a study of Paul’s thought can be challenging to us today is that we live in a different culture than did Paul. The section above on Paul’s Jewish heritage provides a basic introduction to the intellectual heritage of a Jew such as Paul in the first century. But another factor complicates our attempt to hear Paul’s thought: Although our culture(s) today is significantly different from that of Paul, it has itself been influenced both by Paul himself and by the larger heritage within which Paul stood. We know today, for instance, what it means to be a Jew or to believe in Christ. Many of us continue to worship the God of Israel. Yet the twenty centuries that separate us from Paul and the Judaism of the first century have wrought some significant changes in Judaism, as well as in what came to be called Christianity.

Judaism: Then and Now

Although we cannot at this juncture take the luxury of describing or analyzing the complexity of first-century Judaism, a few comments may highlight some of the differences between the Judaism of Paul’s day and that of our own. For one thing, the Judaism of Paul’s day might more accurately be described as Judaisms than as a singular Judaism. That is, the centuries around the turn of the era (third century B.C.E. to second century C.E.) were volatile ones for the Jews who lived throughout the Roman Empire and beyond. Even in Palestine there were several different ways of being Jewish, that is, of understanding what it meant to be Jewish. Many thinkers were attempting to define Judaism, and these different definitions competed with one another. Paul’s “Christianity” was, during these early days of the first century, yet one more attempt to define Judaism.⁵

1:3 An Apocalyptic Prophet

The Lord Conquers Evil—
And I lifted my eyes and saw, and behold, four horns! And I said to the angel who talked with me, “What are these?” And he answered me, “These are the horns which have scattered Judah, Israel, and Jerusalem.” Then the Lord showed me four smiths. And I said, “What are these coming to do?” He answered, “These are the horns which scattered Judah, so that no man raised his head; and these have come to terrify them, to cast down the horns of the nations who lifted up their horns against the land of Judah to scatter it.” (Zech 1:18–21)

God’s People Rejoice—
Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion; for lo, I come and I will dwell in the midst of you, says the Lord. And many nations shall join themselves to the Lord in that day, and shall be my people; and I will dwell in the midst of you, and you shall know that the Lord of hosts has sent me to you. And the Lord will inherit Judah as his portion in the holy land, and will again choose Jerusalem.

Be silent, all flesh, before the Lord; for he has roused himself from his holy dwelling.
(Zech 2:10–13)
With all these different and competing definitions of Judaism, what held the various Judaisms of the first century together in one unit? The temple in Jerusalem. To be sure, the different varieties of Judaism maintained different views about the centrality of the temple. But its—and Jerusalem’s—physical existence functioned, in some ways, as the unquestioned core of Judaism. Thus, the destruction of the temple by the Romans in 70 C.E. constituted a major crisis for Jews throughout the ancient world. One of the significant consequences of this crisis was the establishment of an academy at Yavneh, a city near the Mediterranean coast in Palestine, where some key Jewish leaders gathered together in 90 C.E. to redefine Judaism in a world without a temple and without a physical center in Jerusalem.

The Judaism that resulted from the efforts of these rabbis at the academy of Yavneh is frequently called rabbinic Judaism. This eventually came to serve as the foundation of all the later Judaism in the West. The academy determined the canon of the Jewish Scriptures, or Tanak. Its leaders maintained the earliest parts of the oral traditions that were eventually codified in the Talmud. It was also at this academy that the primary locus of Jewish worship and ritual shifted to the home (since the temple was now destroyed).

For our purposes, it is important to remember that rabbinic Judaism served as the source for all varieties of Judaism after the first century. It did not, however, serve as the source for Paul’s Judaism—for the simple reason that Paul died before the destruction of the temple and before the academy at Yavneh. Thus, when we say, “Paul was a Jew,” we do not mean that he was a Jew like the Jews who worship in synagogues today. The Judaism that Paul practiced still had a temple and temple sacrifices. His Judaism had not yet given final canonical form to its Scriptures, and thus many other Jewish...
writings were, during Paul’s day, considered quasi-scriptural. But if Paul did not worship or live as a Jew in the same ways that Jews worship or live today, neither was Paul a Christian in the same ways that people are Christians today.

Paul’s Faith in Christ and Christianity Today

Paul was a Jew who believed that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ—a simple statement that conceals great complexity. For just as Paul’s Judaism was different from the Judaism of today, so Paul’s “Christianity” was quite different from any of the multitude of expressions of Christianity today. The differences between Paul’s faith and practice and those of Christians today are many. Fortunately, for the purposes of the present study, we do not need to delineate them all. Here, however, are a few of the things that most Christians in the West take for granted today but that Paul would never have known:

1. The classical definitions of the Trinity and the nature of Christ were not formulated until three or four centuries after Paul lived. The language and thought of the Nicene and Chalcedonian creeds would have been quite foreign to Paul.

2. Paul’s churches were not public institutions with any social power or influence. They were small, socially marginal groups of people who, to a greater or lesser extent, associated with the Jewish synagogues. Indeed, it would be two centuries and more before the Christian churches would be recognized as a legitimate religion in the Roman Empire.

3. The organization of the churches of Paul’s day was very fluid and undefined. There were no formal buildings (the groups met in homes), no ordained ministry, and no established liturgy.

4. Finally, the New Testament had not yet been written. Paul himself wrote letters that would, in the coming centuries, be considered by Christians to be Scripture. His letters are the earliest of the writings making up the New Testament, which means Paul had not read any of the Gospels, because none had yet been written!

Even if these four items were the only differences between the faith and practice of Christians today and those of Paul, the effects would be astonishing. Simply put, Paul would recognize almost nothing of the ways that Christians talk and worship today.

These differences do not mean, however, that Paul would necessarily disagree with all the practices or language of Christianity today. But we must be very careful about assuming that “Paul was a Christian.” Paul did believe that Israel’s God had revealed himself in Jesus, the Christ. And Paul called others, both Jew and Gentile, to share in this belief. Those who shared this experience with Paul were not called Christians but believers. When Paul addressed his letters to these believers, he called them simply “the saints.” They, too, in Paul’s view, were followers of the Jewish God, believers that the God of Israel had been revealed in Jesus of Nazareth, who was the Christ.

CONCLUSION

Our aim is to understand the thought of the Apostle Paul. Any philosophy or theology is, in some sense, a map of the world. It is an attempt to describe what the world is and how to move about in that world effectively. How do we find our way together in this world? How do we negotiate the terrain of life, recognizing the significant landmarks, the obstacles, and the good land? If we are to “read the map” of Paul’s thought, we need to be able to understand his language and his symbols. This chapter has sought to provide
background to the language and symbols that Paul uses as he draws his “map of the world.”

A study of Paul’s map drawing can be particularly fruitful for anyone who wishes to understand Western thought better, because Paul stood at a critical juncture in Western religious history. When “Christianity” was not yet Christianity but still a form of Judaism, there stood Paul, revising the maps of Judaism at his disposal, using the language and symbols from his Jewish heritage to redescribe his world. The map that Paul sketched out as he worked among these “saints” provided the intellectual foundation for what would eventually be a new religion. Paul drew, then, a particularly potent map of the world. It has influenced generations of thinkers (both positively and negatively) and has become one of the fundamental intellectual structures of the West.

READING CHECK:

- Why was the Jewish affirmation of the oneness of God a radical statement in the Greco-Roman society of the first century?
- From what culture did Paul draw his major examples and stories?
- Define apocalyptic eschatology.
- How was the Judaism of Paul’s day different from the Judaism of today?
- How did Paul’s “Christianity” differ from Christian experience and belief today?