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Paul the Jewish Theologian

Let us plunge straight in and begin with Paul's origins. It must be stressed quite emphatically, against a current trend in scholarship which seeks to see Paul exclusively as a "Hellenistic Diaspora Jew," that in his own testimonies, in the letters, the Pharisee connected with Jewish Palestine stands in the foreground, to whom Jerusalem seems to be more important than anywhere else. Only from Luke do we learn that he came from Tarsus, the capital of Cilicia, and that he was a citizen of both Tarsus and Rome. Paul the author of the letters no longer thinks this part of his past worth mentioning; it seems to him to be much more remote than his time as a Pharisee in Palestine.

Martin Hengel

PAUL was Jewish. He was a theologian. But is it possible to describe Paul as a Jewish theologian? Sometimes Paul's rich Hebrew heritage has been hidden from view because of his work among the Gentiles. After all, first and foremost Paul is remembered as a Jewish apostle to the Gentiles. Such a career is doomed to stir up debate. Paul's life has never disappointed the journalist breed of individual who is looking for some kind of religious or political ruckus. As a pioneer theologian, Paul created problems for his own people—the Jews—as well as for the Gentiles. Going beyond his own culture and faith, Paul crossed over into diverse cultural settings and interfaith relationships. Yet he still referred to himself as a Pharisee.

Paul stepped outside his own Jewish environment to assume a leading role in an international outreach to the multi-ethnic peoples of Asia Minor. He was sent to the Gentile nations. So perhaps the first question that we should ask relates to Paul's own background: Was Paul influenced more by Tarsus or Jerusalem? While he was born in Tarsus, Paul lived and studied in Jerusalem.¹ Was he authentically Jewish in his approach to his religious teachings and efforts to bear witness to his experience? Later in life, Paul worked primarily among the Gentiles. Indeed, he challenged the dominant religious views of his time, preaching against the syncretistic religious pluralism and various forms of idolatry he encountered everywhere he went.² Through the coming of the Jewish Messiah he saw the righteousness of God revealed to those who were far away. Clearly Paul's work among the Gentiles and our unfamiliarity with ancient Judaism make understanding his Jewish theology difficult. In spite of this, his mission to the Gentiles is deeply rooted in his Jewish way of thinking. His upbringing as a Pharisee molded his character and guided his teachings. His writings, moreover, have both captured the hearts of many disciples and enraged numerous antagonists.³ As a religious genius who built bridges between diverse communities and as a letter writer who treated complex issues of faith and practice, Paul has always excited lively debate within his circle of followers as well as among his adversaries. Often we misunderstand Paul: first, because we do not know the problems he was trying to solve, and second, perhaps even more significantly, because we do not know very much about his Jewish faith and culture. The Judaism of Paul must be the starting point for any serious analysis of his writings.

Reading the epistles of Paul with comprehension, consequently, presents quite a challenging undertaking. After all, reading someone else's mail tends to be confusing and often-times reveals some unexpected surprises. Studying the Pauline epistles has been compared to the popular television game

show *Jeopardy!*. To play this game, contestants are given an answer to a hidden question. Then they must guess what the question is, based upon what they can learn from the answer. The audience delights in watching the contestants struggling with the answers, trying to identify the questions. It is much more entertaining than simply asking the contestants questions that they are expected to answer. By way of comparison, studying Paul's correspondence is like reading answers without the questions. The student of Paul's writings is forced to guess what the original questions surrounding his correspondence really were.

In a similar way, eavesdropping on one side of a phone conversation can be a very perplexing enterprise. One cannot always be sure of the topic under discussion. In the Epistles, one line is open, and modern-day readers are eavesdropping. Paul answers questions for his friends and treats serious matters of faith and practice for the congregations with whom he corresponds. The other line, however, is not connected.⁴ Today no one knows what was the exact nature of the diverse problems confronting the original readers of Paul's epistles. That line is closed.

Nonetheless, one thing is certain. The Jewish apostle to the Gentiles is well known for the controversy he stirred up wherever he traveled. Times were changing in the Roman Empire, and Paul was a major figure in the blossoming movement of Jesus' followers, which was spreading beyond the borders of the land of Israel. Paul's teachings flow from what David Flusser has called the second stratum of Christianity.⁵ The first stratum was laid in the life of Jesus and in the movement of his earlier followers, who were active before Pauline thought became so influential. Jesus labored among his own people on the soil of the land of Israel, whereas Paul crossed the border, breaking down walls of separation between Christians, Jews, and Gentiles. But surely the message of Paul would be better appreciated if the questions he treated were more accessible to

later readers. No doubt the apostle invited dialogue with his correspondence and sometimes desired an interactive response. The reader of Paul's congregational correspondence must remember that these epistles are open letters. Each reader must try to decipher the message and understand its significance within Paul's original context.

What makes Paul so difficult to understand? Why do scholars and ordinary readers of the apostle's letters come up with such different answers to questions concerning Paul's life and teachings? First, as has been mentioned already, a number of key issues can be resolved only by correctly identifying those questions Paul was answering. But the major difficulty in grasping Paul's thought is really context. We misunderstand Paul because we do not understand his Jewish faith. Without esteeming Paul's Judaism, we cannot comprehend his message. Striving to identify the questions Paul was answering is a first step. But the serious reader of Paul's letters must struggle with the thinking of a Pharisee who studied in Jerusalem. A more intimate knowledge of Paul's Judaism unlocks the mysteries of his religious experience. So the Judaism of Jerusalem, rather than the paganism of Tarsus, seems to be the foundation for Paul's approach to the problems besetting the early Christian congregations to whom he directed his correspondence.

Much of the controversy ultimately stems from questions concerning Paul's own background. Was Paul a hellenized Greek Jew from Tarsus? Or was he a Pharisee trained by Gamaliel in Jerusalem? Did he cancel the Torah once and for all? Have works of Torah lost significance because of faith? Did he exclude the Jewish people from the family of God by speaking of the church as the new Israel that completely replaced the old? Did he deny the teachings of Jesus and become the second founder of Christianity? What is crucial for Pauline theology? What would be his "ultimate concern"—to use the overly burdened terminology of yet another famous theologian named Paul but with the family name of Tillich?

The Apostle Paul did not belong to the circles of systematic theologians from Germany or any other Western nation. This Paul's theology was rooted in Judaism from late antiquity, and his family heritage was Jewish stock. He was from the Middle East. His mentality was quite different from that of the West. How, then, can the modern reader of Paul, whether he or she ascribes to the apostle's doctrine or admittedly feels uncomfortable with some of his ideas, make peace with the enthusiastic Jewish preacher to the Gentiles?

To make peace with Paul, we must listen carefully to the apostle's message in his original cultural context. The starting point is crucial. When the starting point is Paul's Jewish theology, many issues of his cultural environment are resolved. To study Paul, we must begin somewhere. Where we begin, moreover, determines the course of research and the impact of the final conclusions. Most scholars begin in Tarsus. Here, however, I will contend that Paul's theology is more a product of Jerusalem than of Tarsus. Paul never canceled Torah, but made the necessary distinctives between Jews and Gentiles in the mysterious plan of God. He taught that the Gentiles were grafted into the olive tree Israel, and he never intended for a replacement theology to take root in the Christian church. In dealing with matters of concern among the Christian communities, Paul upheld the teachings of Jesus as well as the authority of the law and the prophets. Ultimately, Paul discovered self-fulfillment and personal pride in his mission of leading the pagan Gentiles into the family of God by faith in Jesus the Messiah. The resurrection power of Jesus flowed through his life in a deep spiritual experience in which Paul felt the presence of God. At least in Paul's view, the Holy Spirit empowered him to live a life pleasing to God. By dying to himself and experiencing the Messiah's resurrection through faith, the apostle could obey God. All the while, he was filled with expectancy as he looked ahead to the final redemption that would appear in the future when all Israel would be saved.

The contours of Paul's thought must be sought in his cultural setting. Jerusalem is the starting point. The Apostle Paul, moreover, is a conceptual theologian. He makes use of interactive theological concepts. Paul's theology begins with an unshakable faith in the one God of Israel. Paul possesses a great love, derived from his rich Hebrew heritage, for all humanity. Indeed, Paul himself tells his followers that, concerning the law, he is a Pharisee.

Like other Pharisees, Paul believed in reward and punishment from God. Every human being will experience either God's abundant grace or divine wrath in the day of retribution. When dealing with the towering issues of his day, he affirmed the validity of Torah in his teachings and practical theology. Because of his belief in the goodness of God, Paul, like other Pharisees, had looked for a future redeemer who would resemble Moses and bring help to people in need. Paul's approach to the Bible is paralleled in similar interpretations among the sages of ancient Israel as well as in the precious manuscripts of the Dead Sea Scrolls. But in contrast, Paul focused upon Jesus as the anointed one designated to bring God's goodness to all humanity, including the pagan Gentiles. He struggled with the seeming contradiction of a suffering Messiah and a future redeemer. After the experience with Jesus on the road to Damascus, Paul was driven by a renewed, heightened awareness of the divine presence and a consuming desire to bear witness to the pagan cultures of the world. In any event, as can be seen in his writings, Paul quoted the Bible frequently and discussed its application among Jews and Gentiles. Indeed, he talked about Torah constantly. His incessant occupation with the biblical foundation of his beliefs and his conceptual approach to his interactive theology might even be described as a passion. Why would Paul talk about Torah so much? Because he was a Jewish theologian. He was a Pharisee who sought the wisdom of Torah for guidance and direction.

TARSUS OR JERUSALEM?

What was Paul really like? Many have tried to describe him, and probably every reader of his epistles creates his or her own mental picture of the fiery Jew from Jerusalem. Though he was born in Tarsus, he grew up in Jerusalem. His parents may have brought the young Paul to Jerusalem solely for the purpose of Jewish education. Many residing in the Jewish communities outside the land of Israel went up to Jerusalem in order to study and learn. It is likely that Paul's father brought Paul, a Pharisee among Pharisees, to the national homeland for the sake of Torah learning. Paul studied under the grandson of Hillel, Gamaliel the Elder, and possessed an overriding zeal for his faith. Hillel himself came to Jerusalem from the Jewish Diaspora in Babylon. Hillel is sometimes referred to as "the Babylonian," especially in the Babylonian Talmud. It should not be surprising, then, that Acts refers to Paul as "Saul of Tarsus." The move from Tarsus to Jerusalem, nonetheless, most likely occurred very early in Paul's childhood. Paul himself never mentions Tarsus in his letters.

While we learn something about Paul's background and upbringing from the New Testament, it does not reveal the way Paul looked. Probably the earliest physical description of Paul is found in the apocryphal *Acts of Paul*:

A man of little stature, thin-haired upon the head, crooked in the legs, of good state of body, with eyebrows joining, and nose somewhat hooked, full of grace: for sometimes he appeared like a man, and sometimes he had the face of an angel.⁶

Paul's mother would not have been too pleased with this description of her son's physical features, but she may well have sensed the boy's strong-willed personality at a tender age. He was short, balding, and bowlegged, and his bushy eyebrows joining together remind one of a modern-day villain. But the

inward force of Paul's personality is emphasized in this apocryphal depiction.

At Lystra, during Paul's first missionary journey, the people assumed Paul to be the Greek god Hermes. Was this because of his eloquent speech or his clean appearance? Paul displayed humility about his eloquence. Perhaps his appearance reminded the people of the many artistic expressions of Hermes in the popular religious cults of the area. Barnabas, Paul's distinguished traveling companion, was taken for Zeus. No doubt it was Barnabas' older and more mature dignity that invited such an association between him and Zeus. The book of Acts records that when Paul came to Lystra, he observed a crippled man who possessed faith. He looked at him and said, "Stand upright on your feet" (Acts 14:10). Seeing that the man had been healed, the people of the city rushed over to Paul and Barnabas. They wanted to deify the pair and offer sacrifice to them as gods. Imagine the shock! Paul was a Pharisee. From his earliest days he had been inculcated with the reality that there was only one true living God.

In any case, much more can be learned about Paul's background as a Pharisee than can be known about his appearance, which is merely speculation. But probably most students of the New Testament already have developed firm ideas concerning the controversial apostle. Some view him as a traitor. Still others see him in a positive light as a great teacher or an evangelist. For many he is a model missionary. In popular discussions, he assumes various roles and takes on quite strong characteristics. He lived life boldly and has become as much a legend as he was a historical figure.

Two types of evidence will be considered here to describe Paul. One source is the record of the book of Acts. The other is what he tells his readers about himself in his epistles—this is of primary importance. Many of his readers knew him personally. Therefore, he could not speak about himself in wildly exaggerated terms. At any rate, one discovers many differences

between modern popular descriptions of Paul and what the apostle actually tells us about himself. In the case of Paul, the many inconsistencies between Tarsus and Jerusalem are decisive.

It is from the book of Acts that we learn that Paul was born in Tarsus (Acts 9:11). And only through the record of the book of Acts is Paul's Roman citizenship revealed (Acts 22:25).⁷ On his final trip to Jerusalem, Paul was arrested in the temple and carried away by Roman soldiers. When he was being arrested on the Temple Mount, Paul fearlessly made a request to the Roman cohort. The military commander apparently noticed Paul's accent. He asked the apostle, "Do you know Greek?" He appeared surprised that Paul addressed him in the Greek language. Paul wrote Greek as if it were his mother language. Even if his style would not be described as eloquent by a classicist, he possessed an extensive knowledge of Greek. And when the Roman soldier heard Paul's question, he detected the accent of a foreigner speaking Greek.

A notorious messianic pretender, known as the Egyptian, was wanted by the Roman authorities. The Egyptian had led a sizable group of his followers into the desert, where he promised to bring redemption to his people in the same way another Egyptian, Moses, had led the people of Israel into the desert for their deliverance. The Romans captured and slaughtered many of this notorious false messiah's followers, but the so-called Egyptian himself escaped. When the Roman commander was quick to accuse Paul of being the Egyptian, Paul denied the charge. It was a case of mistaken identity. Paul explained to the Roman military man, "I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no mean city" (Acts 21:39).

Indeed, Tarsus was no mean city. Connected to the Mediterranean Sea by the Cydnus River, it was strategically located, a thriving center of commerce, Greek culture, and philosophic learning. The city had a university and was greatly influenced by the Stoic philosophical schools. It was the birthplace of

Chrysippus, the well-known leader of the Stoic movement in the third century BC. Many scholars have detected an element of Stoic philosophy in Paul when he wrote, “Not that I complain of want; for I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content. . . . I can do all through Christ who strengthens me” (Phil 4:11–13). A Stoic philosopher could accept hardship with serenity and a sound mind, though the Stoic would not look for inner strength from Jesus. Certainly Paul’s birthplace had its impact upon the apostle. The ancient geographer Strabo praised the keen educational interest of its citizens:

The people at Tarsus have devoted themselves so eagerly, not only to philosophy, but also to the whole round of education in general, that they have surpassed Athens, Alexandria or any other place that can be named where there have been schools and lectures of philosophers.⁸

The Roman cohort who had arrested Paul apparently was so impressed with Paul’s courage, background, and knowledge of Greek that he allowed him to address the crowds in the temple that day. The shock, however, is that Paul spoke to the crowd in Hebrew, not in Greek or Aramaic. On the one hand, the Roman soldier seemed surprised that Paul could speak Greek so well; on the other, the people whom he addressed on the Temple Mount seemed impressed that he could speak to them in the Hebrew language. In this scene from the Acts of the Apostles, the connection between Tarsus and Jerusalem is illuminated. In some ways Paul was at home in both cultures. The content of his speech definitively demonstrates that he was bilingual, fluent in both Greek and Hebrew. Paul clearly told the people that although he was born in Tarsus of Cilicia, he had been raised in Jerusalem. Moreover, he studied at the feet of Gamaliel. The phrase “at the feet of” is a technical expression found in Jewish literature to indicate serious discipleship.

Paul also revealed on this occasion that he was “educated according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers,” which most probably was a reference to the spiritual heritage of the Pharisees. But unlike most other Pharisees, and especially his reputed teacher Gamaliel, who protected leaders of the Jesus movement such as Peter and the apostles, Paul had collaborated with the Sadducees.⁹ In his zeal for God, he had once felt that it was his duty to persecute the early church. Paul’s sincere “no” to Jesus and his followers was his “yes” to God, although it seemed greatly misguided in the eyes of the Christians. All this changed when he had an experience on the way to Damascus. Ironically, Paul’s personal encounter with the risen Lord occurred as he was carrying letters, written by the high priest himself, sanctioning the arrest of believers in Damascus. The high priest was a Sadducee, and the Sadducees were closely linked to the Roman authorities. Paul’s motivation for persecuting the Christians was fueled by the politics of the Sadducees and the Romans rather than by the religious piety of the Pharisees.

A PHARISEE AMONG THE CHRISTIANS

Paul’s background in the book of Acts is very informative for a careful reading of his epistles. In contrast to popular depictions of the apostle in modern times, Paul in his epistles gives a quite distinct portrayal of himself. He does not describe himself as a Hellenistic Jew or a Gnostic believer. According to Paul, he was born of the people of Israel and circumcised on the eighth day. In his family tradition, he knew that he came from the tribe of Benjamin. Paul describes himself as a Hebrew of the Hebrews, which probably reflects a cultural disposition as well as linguistic ability. It may well indicate that Hebrew was his mother tongue or the language spoken in his home. He is a Pharisee in his religious orientation. Paul is even bold enough to say that he is blameless

before the law. Such a remark only reflects his strong commitment to orthodox religious observance. Paul was not without sin, but he could be forgiven, like all members of the Jewish community. After all, according to the teachings of the Pharisees, God's great compassion is revealed when people ask for forgiveness. No one could live a life without sin, but each individual could be blameless before God as he or she asked for forgiveness and lived an observant life. Paul celebrated the Jewish festivals.

The apostle does not refer to himself as a Stoic philosopher. It is perhaps worthwhile to observe what he does *not* say about himself. Paul does not claim to be a Greek of the Greeks or even a Jew who is conversant in Greek language and culture. He does not emphasize any training he received in philosophy. According to the two best sources for his life—the book of Acts and his own writings—Paul is a Pharisee. The scholar should pursue every discipline of research that may shed light on Pauline thought, including Stoic philosophy, Epicureanism, Greek mystery religions, Gnostic religious systems, Hermetic writings, and the rich imagination of the religious minds who created such masterpieces as have recently been discovered in the Nag Hammadi codices—all fascinating currents of comparative study. Spheres of influence outside the parameters of ancient Judaism or those only indirectly touched by Jewish thought should never be ignored. Nevertheless, even though all of these studies may provide insight into Paul's thought and his work among the pagan nations, the apostle's own self-portrait is of foremost importance. Paul describes himself as a Pharisee.

The Jewish roots of his "ultimate concern" are sometimes neglected. Yet the value of the Jewish background to Paul's teachings cannot be overemphasized. Indeed, the religious literature of the treasured Dead Sea Scrolls demonstrates remarkable parallels between Paul and the authors of these Hebrew manuscripts. Paul is a Hebrew of the Hebrews. Paul

was much more in his element when he sat at the feet of Gamaliel in the academies of learning in Jerusalem than when he was placed in the halls of the philosophic schools of thought influenced by Chrysippus in Tarsus.

PAUL AND JERUSALEM

Paul was from Jerusalem. In Acts, he says that he grew up in Jerusalem. His relatives were living in the holy city. The son of Paul's sister was residing in Jerusalem when Paul was held in custody in the Roman prison, which was probably located in the fortress of Antonia (Acts 23:16). His nephew caught wind of a murder plot: the plotters planned to ambush Paul during a prisoner transfer. How did the nephew find out? The family of Paul seems to have had some influence in the city and been acquainted with the local gossip. At any rate, Acts suggests that Paul and his family were not at all strangers to the holy city. During his confinement, Paul's nephew was able to visit him and explain the scheme to kill him. When Paul asked the Roman guard to take the young man to the Roman cohort, the centurion obeyed.

Paul's connection to Jerusalem ran deep into the political organization, the social structure, the religious institutions, and the centers of learning in the city. Paul knew the operation of his place of confinement. His family had connections in the city. Earlier, Paul had been authorized to persecute Christians in Damascus. He had studied at the feet of Gamaliel. Furthermore, he knew enough about the differences between the Pharisees and the Sadducees to use their strong theological disagreements among themselves for his own advantage in the judicial proceedings against him (Acts 23:6–10). When he was led before the council, he realized that some were Pharisees and others were Sadducees. So Paul mentioned the resurrection, and a great clamor of debate arose between the factions of the Sadducees and the Pharisees.

The members of the council were more interested in debating the theological issue of the resurrection than in dealing with Paul's case. Paul was at home in the tense atmosphere of religious debate. He was familiar with the inner workings of the different factions in Jerusalem, and he knew that his friends among the Pharisees would support him. He was not disappointed. The Pharisees argued on Paul's behalf; they stood up and contended, "We find nothing wrong in this man" (Acts 23:9).¹⁰ After all, Paul had already declared, "I am a Pharisee." This declaration, moreover, was made many years after his Damascus Road experience.

PAUL AND TORAH

Paul's Jerusalem connection is essential for a proper understanding of his theological writings. One feature of Paul's correspondence is unmistakable—his extensive use of the Bible. For him all authority is derived from the teachings of Torah. In Torah he unravels the promise of the coming Messiah, whom he has discovered through his personal experience to be Jesus. But the teachings of the Bible are more to Paul than proofs for the messianic mission of Jesus.¹¹ The Torah, Prophets, and Writings are not merely a reservoir of proof texts from which Paul draws to inculcate would-be converts. On the contrary, Paul employs the Bible as his primary source of faith and practice.

The Hebrew Scriptures are the foundation of his teachings. In Gal 5:3 he writes, "I testify again to every man who receives circumcision that he is bound to keep the whole law."¹² Was Paul circumcised? Did he ever stop obeying the teachings of Torah? This verse from Galatians must be recognized for its far-reaching implications. It suggests that Paul continued to live an observant life even after his experience on the road to Damascus. Though he became all things to all people so that he might win them for the Lord (1 Cor

9:19–23), this does not mean that he stopped living an observant life. He would not rob a bank to win a bank robber or commit murder to convince a murderer. Paul was a man of integrity.

Like other Pharisees and religious Jews, the Apostle Paul would deal with issues of ritual practice in each situation according to his understanding of Torah. Other Pharisees had relationships with non-Jews and traveled in areas that restricted their freedom of ritual observance. Religious Jews were required to know Torah and its accepted interpretations in order to properly adjust their ritual observance in different circumstances. As a Pharisee, eating pork would be a very troublesome proposition for Paul; he would probably much prefer a vegetarian menu as an alternative. Upholding the commandment of love, however, was pivotal in the apostle's relationships with others. Indeed, Paul never denies the validity of Torah as revealing God's will. Even in Galatians, he affirms that the whole law is fulfilled in the commandment "Love thy neighbor as thyself" (Lev 19:18).¹³ By strictly observing the principle of love, a person is able to fulfill all the requirements of Torah regarding interpersonal relationships.

Paul did not want the non-Jew believing in Jesus to be circumcised and take on the ceremonial observance of all the laws of Torah. But would he seek to remove the marks of circumcision in his own body and deny the essence of the covenant God made with the Jewish people? The apostle was proud of his heritage, which attained deeper meaning for him in the coming of Jesus. His job was teaching Gentiles about the Lord and winning acceptance for them in a community of faith where many thought that circumcision and total observance of Torah should be a required of each individual believer: both Jews and proselytes esteemed the covenant of circumcision. The proselytes who believed in Jesus were the strongest opponents of Paul's gospel of grace, which allowed Gentiles to enter the community without circumcision. Alan

Segal notes the irony of the situation: “Paul’s preaching would have offended the circumcised, ex-gentile Christian.” After all, the ex-Gentile believers had become proselytes to Judaism first. They had already been circumcised and had accepted the difficult challenge of living everyday life as religious Jews. Should other Gentiles be accepted in any other way? “Paul took the role of representative of Gentile Christianity seriously. Thus we have a double irony. Circumcision was defended by gentiles who had undergone circumcision to become Jews, and the gospel of the uncircumcised was defended by a former Pharisee.”¹⁴

Perhaps some Pharisees would have rejected him, but Paul does not seem to reject Pharisaism. Even his doctrine of the coming of the Messiah is rooted in Pharisaic teachings, though many of Paul’s Pharisee colleagues would take issue with his final analysis. In any event, Paul, the Pharisee among the Christians, was trying to build a bridge between the diverse groups flowing into the popular Jesus movement. He was spearheading the missionary outreach to the pagan Gentiles. As a Pharisee, born in Tarsus but educated in Jerusalem, he was able to reach out to the different factions, seeking reconciliation between them. Paul argued vigorously his very strong opinions concerning this issue.

Paul did not cancel the law. In Galatians he is not opposed to the observance of Torah. On the contrary, he upholds the teachings of Torah. But in Jewish theology the teachings of Torah have a different application for Jews, who are from the circumcision and thus part of the covenant relationship, than they have for non-Jews, who have not entered fully into God’s covenant with the people of Israel. Can they, too, be included?

Paul’s answers to questions concerning the life of the Christian communities were rooted in Torah interpretation and underscore his background as a Pharisee. He possessed a bubbly personality. The words of the Bible flowed through his thought patterns as if they came straight from his heart. In

accordance with Jewish practice, Paul must have memorized much Scripture and oral tradition. Gnostics might be interested in the Bible to understand the creation of the world. Greek philosophers sought wisdom where it might be found, even in the Bible. But Paul studied Torah for a different reason. First, he affirmed the validity of Torah for illuminating the significance of the coming of Jesus. But he did not begin there, because he was a Pharisee with a strong education in the Bible in his pre-Christian days. Paul did not stop there, because as a Pharisee, Paul viewed Torah as giving divine revelation for holy living. Paul learned the teachings of Torah in order to understand the mystery of God and to revere him by entering into a life of obedience. The apostle loved the Hebrew Scriptures and lived his life in accordance with the moral and spiritual values expressed in them.

LAW OR TORAH?

Paul's view of Torah and his whole cultural orientation evolved during the years he trained in Jerusalem under the guidance of Gamaliel, and presumably other Pharisaic leaders as well. His approach to the Bible and the system of interpretation he used to expound it was basically that of the Pharisees. While scholars have struggled with the possible meanings of the law in Paul's theology, a Jewish view of Torah closely associated with rabbinic-Pharisaic thinking provides the most productive model. Why must there exist different meanings for the Greek term *nomos* in Paul's letters? When Paul used *nomos*, he was referring to Torah within the context of Judaism. Paul does not mean natural law, as distinct from spiritual law, or the various other suggestions for the meaning of *nomos*. The Hebrew concept of Torah is Paul's intended meaning. Law is a poor translation of *nomos* in Paul's writings. This translation stems from the Latin Vulgate. In it *nomos* is translated by the Latin word *lex*, which means "law." For Paul

nomos has a vastly greater significance than the concept of law. Although in his letters Paul quotes the Bible according to the Septuagint as the accepted translation for his Greek-speaking congregations, his theology is thoroughly Hebraic. He is thinking Torah, not law.

When the translation of *nomos* as “law” becomes normative in English discussions of Pauline thought, a great deal of the apostle’s Hebrew heritage is eradicated from his life experience. He could only see the world through his understanding of Torah. For a Pharisee such as Paul, Torah was an all-consuming passion. It was the apostle’s cherished tradition. It guided his way of living from day to day. Torah for Paul, as it was for Israel’s sages, is as vast as God himself. Torah teaches God’s higher purposes and reaches far beyond a simple enumeration of the five books of Moses.

Torah is spiritual. When Paul writes, “The law of the Spirit of life,” in Rom 8:2, he is referring to the higher meaning of Torah. It is a spiritual force. The same Torah that gives life through Jesus the Messiah, in Paul’s thought, also exposes human need and moral failure. Torah is both the “law of the Spirit” and the “law of sin and death” (Rom 8:2). All depends upon the human response to the divine initiative. In Paul’s thinking, Torah is good. The apostle declares, “So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good” (Rom 7:12). The problem is human weakness. In his weakness Paul had failed to live by the higher principle of God’s reign, and in this respect Torah had shown his own shortcoming. Only because of human weakness can Torah be spoken of within the framework of sin and death. But because of God’s mercy, it is spirit and life. Hence, Torah means both the “law of the Spirit” and the “law of sin and death.” Through his experience with the power of the Holy Spirit, Paul reached beyond to the greater force of Torah in his personal encounter with daily living. Holding Torah in high esteem, he applied it in every aspect of life. Paul revealed an intense passion for the higher meaning of Torah.

The anti-Judaism of the church has roots running deep into the core of her history. The early-second-century heretic Marcion completely rejected the Hebrew Bible. Although many church leaders fought his doctrines, at times Marcion's theology managed to infiltrate orthodox teachings.¹⁵ As Christians, we have learned about Judaism from one-sided accounts of inner struggles within the church and have viewed Jews and Judaism from our own biased perspective. We receive a derivative view of Judaism based upon false evidence. Without having read the ancient literature Israel's sages left behind, we malign Judaism as a religious system of legalism with a salvation-by-works infrastructure.¹⁶ The heresy of Marcion's teachings tainted unfavorably the progression of ecclesiastical doctrines. Christianity became defined as the antithesis of the faith experience of the Jewish people. The acknowledgment of roots relatedness and interconnectedness between the mother—Judaism—and her daughter faith was obscured by a battle of hate and polemic. Paul's experience, nevertheless, was vastly different. He experienced Torah learning at the feet of Israel's most notable sages. Perhaps the time has finally come for us as Christians to learn about Judaism firsthand from the rich sources of Jewish belief rather than from the prejudices of the past. We can study the sayings attributed to Gamaliel in the talmudic literature for our own enrichment and understanding of God's nature and, of course, for better comprehension of Paul.

PAUL'S CONCEPTUAL APPROACH

In Paul's day, the essence of Jewish faith had little to do with an earn-your-salvation religious system. Jewish faith begins with the nature of God. He is one. He is compassionate and full of grace. In Exod 34:6, this high, lofty Hebrew idea of God is expressed: "The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering and abundant in goodness and truth."

The Hebrew mind viewed God quite differently from the systematic theological thinking of the West, which defines God and his work with creation in a linear manner. The Western-style treatment of the divine character attempts to explain inconsistencies and harmonize contradictions systematically. The Hebrew mind was filled with wonder at the mystery of God. The vastness of God and his inscrutable ways left them awestruck. Inconsistencies and contradictions are intimately related to human, finite understandings of the infinite God. He is beyond human comprehension. First-century Jews approached God through an interactive associative mentality. The fact that God is incomprehensible is very much a part of Jewish thought processes. The Western mind, however, explains everything but understands so little of the divine nature. The Hebrew mind, on the other hand, is overpowered by a sense of wonder and amazement.¹⁷ It thrives on the inconsistencies and contradictions of the one awe-inspiring God.

Paul has a conceptual approach to theology. It is not linear. His theological worldview is circular and interactive. A systematic approach to Paul draws a straight line and follows his reasoning from creation and the fall all the way along to the redemptive suffering of Jesus and the second coming. But Paul is much more complex and far less linear and systematic. On the one hand, Paul views history as moving toward the goal of God's final redemptive plan, which will culminate in the Parousia and the eschatological judgment; on the other, he views God through the prism of perplexing curiosity, which inspires wonder. He does not preach a cycle of salvation history, but the apostle does conceive of the divine ways in a circular dynamic process. In his contemplation of the mystery of God, like other Jewish theologians of his day, the apostle is content to leave questions unanswered and inconsistencies unresolved. He views theology as a conceptual whole.

Torah encompasses so much of what can be known about God in the conceptual worldview. Max Kadushin has tried to

describe rabbinic theology in these terms.¹⁸ As will be seen, this approach is quite effective for Paul's view of Torah. Paul focuses on the sum of the whole instead of dissecting the individual parts. As Kadushin points out, the rabbis could not speak about the kingdom of heaven without a myriad of verses coming into their minds. Not only did they realize that these Bible passages possess a literal meaning, but they pushed beyond to deeper realms of Torah learning. It is a conceptual approach. The mere mention of the term "kingdom of heaven" brought to their minds verses such as "The LORD reigns forever and ever" (Exod 15:18) and "The LORD reigns" (Ps 93:1). Although these passages mention only that the Lord reigns, for the rabbis they refer to the kingdom of heaven. Through the conceptual approach of the rabbinic mind, many other meanings were associated with God's reign. The kingdom conveys a cluster of theological ideas. In the higher view of Torah, God's reign means affirming who God is by praying, "Hear O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one." The kingdom of heaven means obedience to the commandments. It refers to the deliverance of the people from the yoke of bondage in Egypt and their great liberty when they entered the promised land. It is divine protection and God's salvation. In Jewish thought, one discovers a rich associative method. The theological ideas come in clusters. So it is with Paul. His theology is not systematic; rather, it comprises clusters of associated concepts. Describing the vitality of Paul's flowing discussions, Hans J. Schoeps has revealed the apostle's vibrant persona:

Paul was a dynamic personality, on whom thoughts rained so that he was driven ceaselessly from one to the other. Moreover, his thought was penetrating, leading us to well-nigh unfathomable depths. Often he merely suggests and instead of a whole chain of thought will give us flashes of ideas.¹⁹

Torah for Paul cannot be defined simply by the term *law* in English. The term *Torah* expresses the highest dimension of

Jewish experience because it reveals the nature of God to his people. Torah encompasses all that is known about God and his love for each individual created in the divine image. Paul possesses a passion for Torah as the quintessential self-disclosure of God and the divine will. Its preeminent purpose is found in Jesus the Messiah because, as Paul declares, now the Gentiles have been grafted into the olive tree (Rom 10:4). He glories in his ministry as the Jewish apostle to the pagan nations. For Paul, Torah has not lost its force after the coming of Jesus, but now Jews and Gentiles occupy their distinctive positions in the mystery of God's higher plan.

As a Pharisee, the focal point of Paul's thought was Torah. After his experience on the road to Damascus, Torah for Paul took on a deeper meaning in the coming of Jesus. Paul's Torah-centered theology was eclipsed with an understanding of the Messiah as the higher purpose of Torah. The great vision of the Hebrew prophets is realized when the Gentiles come into a relationship with the one God of Israel.²⁰

REPLACEMENT OR ENGRAFTMENT?

Has God rejected his people? The mere idea of God's rejection of his people was repugnant to Paul. The apostle declares, "The gifts and call of God are irrevocable" (Rom 11:29). In Paul's mind, God does not break his promise to Israel in order to reach out to the Gentiles. Paul prefers to speak of a great mystery. Instead of explaining everything like a brilliant theologian, Paul is awestruck at the mystery of God. In the passion of a Hebrew prophet, he is filled with wonder and amazement.

Paul makes one thing clear for his Gentile readers concerning the people of Israel, for whose sake Paul would wish that he himself could be cut off from Jesus.²¹ The depth of Paul's emotion is overwhelming. Despite the fact that the Jewish people as a whole have not come, like himself, to a faith

in Jesus, he possesses an all-consuming and unconditional love for his own. The apostle is referring to the Israelites according to the flesh who have not come to believe in Jesus. The one major point for him is that God has not rejected the people of Israel. Paul begins his discussion of the great mystery of God's higher purposes by affirming the irrevocable divine call that was made to the Jewish people.

They are Israelites, and to them belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh is the Christ. God who is over all be blessed for ever. Amen. (Rom 9:4–5)

God has not rejected his people. The Jewish people are the true Israel according to Paul. God's call cannot be lifted. Traditionally Christians have tended to divide people into two groups, believers and nonbelievers. The Jewish people were placed in the second group. But Paul would never feel comfortable with such a neat category for the Israelites according to the flesh. In Paul's metaphorical way of thinking in Rom 11:17, they represent the olive tree. He does not speak of replacement. Instead he describes engraftment, which joins the wild olive shoot to the tree. Moreover, the comparison of the Gentiles to a wild olive branch is not altogether flattering.²² Clearly the church has not replaced Israel. On the contrary, for Paul the destiny of the church and the synagogue is interrelated in the incomprehensible mystery of the divine purpose. He warns the church, however, against choosing to follow the precarious path of pride. Arrogance has characterized the church's attitude to God's people Israel. Indeed, historically speaking, Christian anti-Semitism always begins with the so-called Jewish rejection of Jesus when Christians cannot tolerate a Jew who refuses to accept Christ. In perspective, however, the Jewish "no" to Jesus is in reality a "yes" to

the God of Israel. Christians cannot hate Jews who seek to serve the God of the Bible in good conscience.

Paul understood the relationship more clearly than later church leaders because of his powerful love and personal involvement. As a Jewish theologian from the East, Paul speaks of the relationship between the people of Israel and the followers of Jesus in metaphoric language. His message is clear. Arrogance is not an option for the followers of Jesus.

But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place to share the richness of the olive tree, do not boast over the branches. If you do boast, remember it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you. (Rom 11:17–18)

As Christians, we have often viewed ourselves as the true Israel. We have claimed that the Christians have replaced the Jewish people as God's chosen. Paul teaches a different approach. Engraftment is not the same as replacement.²³ Paul cannot accept God's rejection of his people Israel. On the one hand, the apostle affirms his strong belief in Jesus as Messiah. On the other, he declares that God did not and will not violate his word to the Jewish people. Even Paul's ministry to the Gentiles is based upon his understanding of the root and the branches. While Paul did not believe that God had rejected his people, he was very much aware that many of the faithful within Israel had rejected Jesus.

Perhaps Paul foresaw the danger. The so-called Jewish rejection of Jesus would become the foundation of Christian anti-Judaism. Perhaps he realized that hatred would be generated by the perception that the Jewish people had rejected what is so obvious for the Christian, namely, that Jesus is the fulfillment of messianic expectation in Hebrew prophecy.

Throughout history, Christians have resented Jews because they have not accepted the gospel. Paul recognized the serious

nature of the problem. In his wisdom and foresight, Paul warned against such an attitude of arrogance, which he knew would eventually foster hate. Today Christians should realize that many of the Jewish people living in the first century had good reasons for rejecting Jesus. Paul himself was sincere in his rejection of Jesus before the vision on the road to Damascus. John the Baptist himself developed severe skepticism concerning the messiahship of Jesus.²⁴ Jewish views concerning the messianic idea were diverse, and the words of the Hebrew prophets were always subject to different interpretations. Even in our day and age, some within the Jewish community cannot resolve why so many Jews accepted Jesus in the first century. Nonetheless, wide Jewish acceptance of Jesus as Messiah is a fact of history. Jesus himself defined the meaning of his mission by word and deed in a way that his early disciples could comprehend and follow. In any case, Paul warned the church against ignorant arrogance. His teachings were designed to create genuine love and respect rather than contempt. In the mystery of God, the church and the synagogue are tied one to the other. Not everyone embraced the preaching of Paul, and the apostle could accept this. Paul recognized that when some of the Jewish people rejected his preaching of Jesus, they were really only reaffirming their own strong faith in God. Their “no” to Paul’s preaching was not synonymous with a “no” to God almighty. In their minds, they were saying “yes” to God.

Paul’s anguish and frustration seem to be directed mainly toward an arrogant church at Rome that was distorting the relationship between Jews and non-Jews. Above all, Paul longed to see this relationship characterized by unconditional love. Love is more powerful than theological dogma and must flow from the heart of faith. Paul was willing to sacrifice a part of his theological integrity in order to achieve the higher goal of unrestricted love. He could agree to disagree on some theological issues in order to pursue the objective of God-like love in his relationship with all people. Indeed, the relationship

between Jews and Gentiles occupies a significant portion of Paul's epistle to the church at Rome.²⁵

Paul was sensitive to people's backgrounds. In Rom 1:16, when the apostle speaks to the "Jew first and also to the Greek," he recognizes the unique cultural and ethnic heritages of two distinct peoples. The crucial issue for the congregation at Rome revolved around the fellowship of Jew and non-Jew in a culturally biased society. Too often Paul has been read to exclude the Jewish people. A more careful study of Romans would demonstrate that he intended, rather, to include the Gentile. The root supports the branch. The people of Israel have not been replaced, but the Gentile nations have been grafted into the olive tree. For Paul, through Jesus the door had been opened for the Gentiles to reject idolatry and enter into a relationship with the one true God through faith.

Often Rom 10:4 has been translated improperly, "For Christ is the end of the law . . ." The Greek word *telos*, which is translated as "end" in this verse, is better understood in its wider meaning, "goal" or "purpose."²⁶ Paul viewed the coming of the Messiah as the climax of salvation history. When the New International Version, New American Standard Bible, Revised Standard Version, and King James Version translate the Greek word *telos* with "end," the result is devastating. Instead of stressing the crucial significance of reaching the ultimate goal of Torah, which is indeed foremost in Paul's thought, Christians fall prey to Marcionism: the "end" of the law means license; the law has been canceled and has lost its practical application in living. On the contrary, through Jesus, Paul argued, Torah had reached its objective by bringing the Gentiles into a right relationship with God.²⁷ Paul is the Jewish apostle to the Gentiles, and the higher purpose of Torah is achieved as the pagan nations reject idolatrous practices and accept Jesus. Through faith they reject idolatry and come into a personal relationship with God. In the mind of Paul, Jesus the Jewish Messiah makes this possible. Earlier in the epistle he

declares, “Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law” (Rom 3:31; cf. Matt 5:17). Paul upholds the goal of Torah. The wild branch has been grafted into the olive tree.

THE MYSTERY

Hence the great mystery involves both Israel and the non-Jews who have been grafted into the tree. Yet in Paul’s theology, the mystery also involves the fact that “a hardening has come upon part of Israel.” Paul does not explain the mystery. Apparently the apostle could not fully grasp the complexity of all the far-reaching ramifications of the situation. He himself no doubt had experienced personal suffering, intense hardship, immense pain, and emotional stress as a result of his work among the Gentiles. He would cut himself off out of love for his own people (Rom 9:3). In Paul’s thought, they are true Israelites, whether they accept Jesus or not. Nonetheless, he offers praise for the depth of God’s wisdom. To achieve his higher purpose, God expresses his compassion to all people in need. Paul describes the divine mystery in bold words:

Lest you be wise in your own conceits, 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. (Rom 11:25–26)

The Christians must learn to love the Jewish people without condition. According to Paul, the people of Israel have not been replaced or rejected. Indeed, in an unfathomable mystery, both the church and the synagogue are inextricably bound together in the final drama of redemption. Paul does not explain it. He merely pronounces a blessing of praise to God because he recognizes that God’s way is unsearchable and incomprehensible for the finite human mind (Rom 11:33–36).

The apostle is not a systematic theologian. Paul possesses an Eastern mentality that thrives on contradictions and cherishes the element of mystery in religious faith. In essence, Paul stands in awe and astonishment at the magnitude of God. Let the Master of the universe be God: “To him be glory for ever. Amen” (Rom 11:36).

MARCION OR JESUS?

Since he was a Pharisee, the center of Paul’s theology was Torah. After his experience on the road to Damascus, Torah took on new significance because of Jesus. For Paul, Jesus the Jewish Messiah brought a deeper meaning to Torah by his teachings, his life, and his suffering. While it would be wrong to say that Torah had been replaced by Jesus in Paul’s theology, the apostle saw Jesus as the culmination of the divine redemptive purpose. Jesus who died will return to complete the messianic task. The drama of salvation is moving toward the goal. Paul affirms the historical teachings of Jesus as well as the redemptive nature of his sufferings on the cross. Jesus died, rose on the third day, and promised to return. Paul even goes so far as to identify with the physical sufferings of Jesus: “I am crucified with Christ” (Gal 2:20). He says that when he is weak, like Jesus who suffered, then he is made strong. The life of Jesus means that God participates with his people in their pain, sharing in their suffering all the while he works to reach the objective of his higher redemptive purpose. Paul was a disciple of Jesus. Jesus brought about the actualization of Torah through his message, model conduct, suffering, and triumph.

While Paul was a disciple of Jesus, Marcion (ca. 130 CE) was a follower of Paul. Marcion, however, distorted the original thrust of Paul’s teachings. On the one hand, early church leaders condemned Marcion as a heretic (144 CE), but on the other, they were influenced by his theological reflection. Even

today Marcion-like ideas continue to circulate, exerting influence in Christian teachings. The habit of referring to the Hebrew Bible as the Old Testament, so common among Christians, creates the image of obsolescence. The idea that God's grace is first revealed in the New Testament countering the legalism of the old covenant is a dangerous doctrine linked to the heretical theology of Marcion, who rejected the Hebrew Bible and the God of Israel. The Jewish people were despised by God in his teachings. In a similar fashion, many in today's church adamantly contend that the New Covenant (the New Testament) supersedes the Old Covenant (the Hebrew Bible), even though this attitude does not reflect historical orthodoxy. Hence a prominent Christian minister could confidently declare, "God doesn't hear the prayers of a Jew." In such an approach to salvation history, the church has completely replaced the synagogue in God's strategy of redemption. Even Martin Luther described the letter of James as a "right strawy epistle," calling for its removal from the canon because of the message, "So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (Jas 2:17).

Today Judaism is portrayed as teaching a God of wrath, and Christianity, a God of grace. Marcion loved Paul according to his own interpretation of the apostle's teachings—but he hated the Bible. He nullified the divine word spoken to Moses and the Hebrew prophets. For Marcion, Jesus became a revealer of hidden truths. In Marcion's interpretation, it was only in Paul's writings that the truth about grace and works was revealed. In his Bible, he accepted only an edited version of Luke's gospel and ten epistles of Paul. To him the historical life and teachings of Jesus were not relevant. Marcion emphasized knowledge from personal revelation. Knowledge was the way of salvation. When reading Paul, Marcion taught that the law was canceled and that the God of Israel was the evil deity of creation. He longed for the true God of light, a God he supposed had nothing to do with the God of Israel and who was approachable only with the assistance of revelation.

The decisive difference between Marcion and Paul is captured in one word—Jesus. Marcion taught a different way of salvation. His approach had deep roots in anti-Judaism and hatred of the Jewish people. In contrast, Paul makes constant reference to Moses and the prophets and also affirms God's promises to Israel. Paul was a disciple of Jesus because he recognized the authority of his Master's teachings on issues such as marriage and divorce or the observance of the Last Supper. First, Paul affirmed the teaching of Jesus, but he also recognized the deep significance of Jesus' physical sufferings. Moreover, Paul emphasized the message of the early movement of Jesus' disciples. He was not a maverick like Marcion, who rejected all other apostolic teachings. Paul affirmed the tradition that he had received and passed it on to others.

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. . . . Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. (1 Cor 15:3–9)

Here Paul employs what may be called technical language. In Jewish literature, the verbs *deliver* and *pass on* are used to describe a chain of tradition and how it is preserved from one generation to another.²⁸ According to traditional Judaism, Moses received the oral teachings of Torah on Mt. Sinai. He delivered what he received to Joshua. Likewise, the oral law has been received and passed on to each subsequent generation.

Paul received a revelation of Jesus the Messiah on the road to Damascus. It was a call to take God's message to the Gentile world. Although Paul received a special revelation of Jesus that was independent of the Jerusalem fellowship of disciples, he still wrote about the tradition that he received, and he passed it on to the congregation at Corinth. Clearly Paul received

teachings concerning Jesus from others; in Corinthians, he mentions Cephas, that is, Simeon Peter and the twelve. Paul should not be viewed as an independent freethinker who isolated himself from other leaders in the Jesus movement. Paul's controversial ministry, however, reached out to the pagan world and built bridges between different cultures. The most pressing issue confronting the early movement was what should be required of the new believers from a non-Jewish background. Should they observe the law like Jews and proselytes to Judaism? The issue of the new, non-Jewish believers ultimately had to be decided by the Jerusalem council.

THE JERUSALEM COUNCIL

Because of the success of the mission to the non-Jewish world, social and theological problems erupted within various groups of the early followers of Jesus. Socially it was difficult for Jews and non-Jews to interact with each other. Theologically, the Jewish believers had to determine whether the non-Jews would be required to convert to Judaism in order to follow Jesus. Paul was caught in the middle of the maelstrom. Peter was more ambivalent. The example of Peter will illustrate the problem.

On one occasion, Peter went to Caesarea to visit the home of a Gentile named Cornelius. According to Acts, Peter had to be convinced by a vision to make the trip to a non-Jewish household. In the vision, he was told to eat food that was unclean. When Cornelius's messengers found Peter, he realized that the vision pertained to visiting a Gentile's home. He decided to follow the messengers in spite of his traditional reservations. As a guest of Cornelius, Peter interacted socially with a Gentile who feared God. Though a God-fearer, Cornelius had not converted to Judaism. In other words, he had rejected idolatry but had not passed through the whole process of formal conversion, which would have included circumcision. But to Peter's utter amazement, the Spirit fell mightily on

uncircumcised men. His response captured the essence of the moment: “Surely no one can refuse water for those to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?” (Acts 10:47). Because of a dramatic demonstration of the Holy Spirit’s presence during his visit in this Gentile home, Peter instructed Cornelius to be baptized even though he had not been circumcised.²⁹ Hence, Cornelius was accepted into the full fellowship of the followers of Jesus without formal conversion to Judaism.

A convert to Judaism had three requirements: he was first required to be circumcised, then to undergo ritual immersion in baptism, and finally to offer a sacrifice in the temple. Peter himself instructed Cornelius to be baptized without circumcision. So, on the one hand, according to Acts, Peter accepted Cornelius without circumcision; but on the other hand, later Peter refused to eat with non-Jewish believers in Antioch. Paul complained about Peter’s hypocrisy when he refused to eat with uncircumcised disciples in Antioch. The raging argument came to a head at the Council of Jerusalem. The heart of the problem is described in Acts 15:1: “But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brethren, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.’”

What is the significance of Acts 15:1? One needs to understand the problem. The council is considering the question of non-Jews. If they are circumcised first, they have undergone conversion to Judaism before being accepted into the full fellowship of the disciples of Jesus. If they have not been circumcised, they are still considered pagan Gentiles. Perhaps they are still worshiping false gods? But there is another status in Jewish thought represented by an individual such as Cornelius: the God fearer. God fearers are referred to in the book of Acts and are mentioned in rabbinic literature. They have not converted to Judaism. But they have rejected all idolatrous practices and have become devoted to the one true God of Israel. In Jewish law, they were not expected to keep all the

commandments that the Jewish people observed. They were like the children of Noah. God made a covenant with Noah that focused on the basic moral and ethical requirements that uphold the high spiritual values of the worship of the one true God.

The decision of the Jerusalem council resolved the issue for most of the conservative members of the community, who were stringent in the moral requirements for non-Jews, as well as for the more liberal members of the debate, such as Paul, who desired a more lenient ruling. Moreover, the council's decision is fascinating because of its parallels in Jewish literature. In essence, the council came to a compromise. The decision had roots in Jewish legal discussion. The non-Jews from a pagan background would be viewed more like God fearers than like converts to Judaism. The Apostle Paul and his companion Barnabas, as well as the leaders representing the more conservative side of the issue, such as James and Peter, could reach an agreement to write a letter to the non-Jewish believers: "For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from unchastity. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell" (Acts 15:28–29). The strongest point of the letter is the reference to avoid idolatrous worship.

In Jewish law there are references to the laws for the children of Noah. In some sources there are seven such laws.³⁰ But probably the earliest reference to these commandments makes mention of three: idolatry, shedding of blood or murder, and unchastity.³¹ People who feared God would obey these fundamental ethical requirements.

One of the greatest of all the commandments was considered to be the fear of the one true God. Perhaps this vital characteristic contributed to the use of the designation "God fearer" in many Jewish sources from late antiquity. The God fearers had rejected the ubiquitous idolatry of the ancient

Greco-Roman world. Because they had abandoned the idolatrous practices of their secular environment, confessed the one true God of Israel, and committed themselves to a moral lifestyle, the God fearers were welcomed into the synagogue. The Jerusalem council did not encourage circumcision for the non-Jew. For an uninitiated person, observance of all the Jewish customs would be too burdensome. For a Pharisee such as Paul, the observance of Torah was integrated into every aspect of daily life and was not a burden, but rather, a delight.

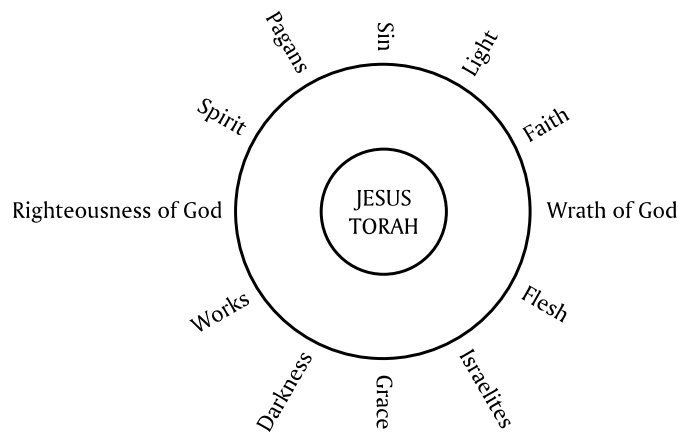
Some important New Testament manuscripts of the decision of the Jerusalem council are even nearer to the Jewish literature. In Codex Bezae, the same three commandments appear as are enumerated in the Jewish sources. The manuscript mentions idolatry, shedding of blood, and unchastity, which are the same three sins as preceded the flood.³² Codex Bezae also mentions the negative version of the Golden Rule, “Whatsoever you do not want others to do to you, do not do to them.” It may be that Codex Bezae represents a more original form of the council’s decision. In any case, the outcome of the council was something of a compromise. Paul would probably view these legal requirements as a maximum for the non-Jews to observe. Peter, on the other hand, would tend to view these laws as a minimum. He would hope that the new believers from pagan backgrounds would adopt more of the Jewish religious observance.

The model of Paul in Romans is very instructive. He captured a vision of the mystery of God’s higher redemptive purpose. Paul did not want to compromise the sacred identity of the Jewish people by asking the Gentiles to imitate Judaism. In his wisdom, the apostle desired to preserve the special distinctions between Jews and non-Jews as they both worshipped the one true God.³³ Let Jews be Jews and let Gentiles be God fearers! In Paul’s teachings, no one possesses an inferior status when the redemptive plan of God is implemented. While Jewish identity is preserved, Paul does not

teach inequality. On the contrary, the coming of Jesus creates a powerful invitation to the Gentile nations. The time has come for them to believe in God by faith in the Messiah. Jesus shows them the way. The theology of replacement does not originate with Paul. In the final analysis, Paul preserves the national character and unique distinctions of the Jewish people in their covenantal relationship with God.

**PAUL'S CONCEPTUAL APPROACH:
A JEWISH WAY OF THINKING**

PAUL'S CONCEPTUAL THEOLOGY
Circular Thought—Not Linear



*The Concepts are interactive:
in circular thought the conceptual theological ideas
are connected together in continuous motion.
The focal point is Jesus as the goal of Torah.*

As a Jewish theologian, Paul pursues a conceptual approach to his teachings. His thought processes are not linear but circular (see above). His theological concepts are interactive. Indeed, they are connected one with another in continuous motion.

Paul's keen intellect works quickly. The apostle understands God and his great love for all humanity as a vibrant whole. One concept belongs to a complex of interactive ideas. Each term he uses to communicate his thought is clustered with other interactive concepts concerning God's relationship to people.

Paul often uses contrasts to express his Jewish theology. The employment of antonyms to define lofty themes is not unusual in early Jewish thought. What is holy? The opposite of profane. What is the good way to which a person should cleave? It is the opposite of the evil way from which a person should flee. What is the good inclination? It is the opposite of the evil inclination. In a similar vein, Paul speaks of the flesh, which for him is the opposite of the spirit. The juxtaposition of terms with opposite meanings is not dualism of the same order as that seen in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Rather, Paul's dualism represents more an antithetical parallelism, which the apostle uses in describing his conceptual approach. Nor is it the same type of dualism found in Gnostic theosophical speculation. Yet Paul would be much closer to the Essenes of the Dead Sea Scrolls than to the Gnostics.³⁴ The Essenes would never approve, however, of Paul's accommodating approach to the Gentiles. The apostle actively sought the full inclusion of the Gentiles. In sharp contrast, the Essenes believed in double predestination, which is to say that already God has predetermined who will be saved and who will be damned. In other words, with Essene dualism the sons of light and the sons of darkness have already been predetermined. Paul's universal view of God's love is not compatible with the sectarian religious system of Qumran, which even excluded most Jews from the favored lot of the "children of light."³⁵ The Jewish apostle to the Gentiles calls all people to a loving God who has revealed his goodness in Jesus. Paul endures great hardship to persuade the Gentiles into a decision for God. The gospel is the power of God to the Jew first but also to the Gentiles (Rom 1:16). He contrasts the righteousness of God with the wrath of

God. Paul focuses on God's strategy for the final redemption. He discusses sin as it must be viewed in the context of God's grace, which is made manifest through Jesus.

When the contours of Pauline thought are considered in a cycle of interactive concepts rather than in a straight line where each new idea supersedes and eliminates the previous one, the apostle's conceptual approach to God is given fresh vigor. It is a Jewish way of thinking. Paul, for instance, does not annul Torah by the preaching of grace. Was not the giving of Torah a powerful manifestation of divine grace? In reality, grace and Torah are interrelated. He recognizes that the flesh continues to function even though the power of the spirit is given greater force by faith through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. He cannot understand the righteousness of God apart from the wrath of God. They have been revealed through the coming of Jesus. Jesus has shown God's righteousness and will demonstrate divine wrath.

The center of Paul's conceptual way of thinking is Jesus, both as he is seen in his life and teachings and as he is revealed in Torah. All of Paul's theological expressions have their origins in his Pharisaic background. As a Pharisee, the central focus of his theology was Torah. From that epicenter he developed all other theological motifs. But with his new belief in the Messiah and his already firm commitment to Torah, the person of Jesus has invaded the epicenter. The notion of a messianic deliverer, it must be remembered, also has its roots in the teachings of the Pharisees. Even while focusing on Jesus, Paul did not see a break in the continuity of his thinking from his Hebrew heritage as a Pharisee. Now he has received a special task because of his call to preach to the Gentiles. Paul's destiny was rooted in the visions of the old Hebrew prophets. At least some of them foresaw the day when the Gentile nations would serve God. The Apostle Paul told his story to the Jew first but also to the Greek. He was the apostle to the Gentiles, and he glories in his call. His career was based upon

the foundation of calling the pagan nations to a new understanding of the one true God of Israel through faith in Jesus the Jewish Messiah.

At this juncture we discover the major distinctions between Jesus and Paul. Jesus spoke to his people living in the land of Israel. He would have taught them primarily in Hebrew (and/or Aramaic). Jesus was provincial. Paul was international. The apostle worked outside the land of Israel, teaching and preaching in Greek. Jesus spoke to the Jews. Paul, on the other hand, spoke mainly to the Gentiles. Nonetheless, both Jesus and Paul possessed a high view of Torah. Gospel teachings such as the Sermon on the Mount indicate that Jesus had a far superior understanding of Torah.³⁶ His educational background in Hebrew literature and oral tradition greatly surpassed that of the Apostle Paul. But Torah gave Jesus and Paul a common bond. In contrast to Jesus, Paul's epicenter of Torah had absorbed a new and powerful theological component. The messianic idea as it revolves around the person of Jesus became dominant in Paul's thinking. The Messiah had come. Both Jesus as the anointed one of God and Torah occupy the position of centrality for the theology of the Apostle Paul. He is called to preach the message of Jesus the Messiah to the Gentile nations. Paul may indeed be described as a Pharisee, a Jewish theologian living among the diverse groups of early Christians in the Greco-Roman world. He was trying to bring the Jews and non-Jews tightly together into the circle of early Christian community through a more meaningful relationship one with the other, based upon their common faith in God, the message of Jesus, and the teachings contained within the Hebrew Bible.

PAUL THE JEWISH THEOLOGIAN: NOTES

1. See W. C. van Unnik, *Tarsus or Jerusalem* (London: Epworth, 1962) 32–33. On the basis of the three verbs in Acts 22:3—“brought up,”

“educated,” and “being zealous”—as well as Paul’s own words in Phil 3:4–5, van Unnik is correct in stressing Paul’s educational and cultural background in the Jewish city of Jerusalem. Indeed, it is only from Acts that we learn that Paul’s birthplace was Tarsus. The apostle himself never mentions this detail of his life in his own writings. For him, it was not worth mentioning. Paul’s heritage is a source of great debate. See H. J. Schoeps, *Paul: The Theology of the Apostle in the Light of Jewish Religious History* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961); W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* (New York: Harper, 1948); and the very important work of Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*.

2. The purely Hellenistic approach, which divorces Paul from his Jewish background, must lose favor among scholars when the issues surrounding his epistles are understood properly. Paul’s solutions to problems are anchored in Torah and the teachings of Jesus. Hence, Schoeps, *Paul*, 48, has rightly observed, “The talk of Paul’s acute Hellenization of Christianity which has sprung up in consequence of the Tübingen school must, however, be rejected, for this phenomenon is post-Pauline only, and its first signs are to be found in the Deutero-Pauline writings.” See also Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*, 323, who concluded, “The gospel of Paul was not the annulling of Judaism but its completion, and as such it took up into itself the essential genius of Judaism.”
3. Cf. S. Sandmel, *The Genius of Paul* (New York: Schocken, 1970) 1: “Paul was a religious genius. In that eminence his position is secure from the assaults of his detractors. . . . Some opponents wanted to discredit the man, but others sought to distort not Paul but his teachings.”
4. See Jakob Jonsson, *Humour and Irony in the New Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1985) 223.
5. See David Flusser, “The Dead Sea Sect and Pre-Pauline Christianity,” in *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1988) 23–74; cf. Flusser’s Hebrew discussion, “Paulinism in Paul,” in *Yahadut Umekoret Hanatzrut* (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat Hapoalim, 1979) 359–80.
6. See the *Acts of Paul* 2.3, in *The Apocryphal New Testament* (ed. M. R. James; Oxford: Clarendon, 1980) 273; cf. the revised edition, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (ed. J. K. Elliott; Oxford: Clarendon, 1993) 364.
7. See also Acts 21:39; 22:3. Cf. Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*.
8. Strabo, *Geography* 14.5.15, in *The Geography of Strabo* (LCL; trans. H. L. Jones; Cambridge: Harvard University, 1960) 6.347. Strabo observes that it was not unusual for a native of Tarsus to study abroad.
9. See Acts 5:34–39, where Gamaliel ardently defends the apostles. Many people in Jerusalem supported the apostles against the attempts of the

Sadducees to arrest them (Acts 5:17). See Acts 5:26, where the police who arrested Peter and the apostles feared being stoned by the people, many of whom were probably Pharisees who opposed the actions of the priests and the Sadducees.

10. The declaration of the Pharisees regarding Paul, “We find nothing wrong in this man,” should not surprise the serious historian of the Second Temple period even if it might shock the student of the history of the relationship between the church and the synagogue.
11. See, e.g., Rom 1:2. Cf. 2 Tim 3:16; 2 Timothy is one of the Pastoral Epistles, which many scholars have argued are derived from Paul’s followers. In his epistles, Paul also makes use of the sayings of Jesus as a source of authority in the life of the community.
12. Paul compelled Timothy to be circumcised when he accompanied Paul and Silas. Although Timothy’s father was Greek, his mother was Jewish. In Jewish law, the mother determines the legal status of the child. Since Timothy’s mother was Jewish, according to the religious law of the halakah Timothy also would be considered Jewish. On the other hand, Paul would not ask a non-Jew to be circumcised (Acts 16:1–3).
13. Gal 5:14. Hillel, the grandfather of Paul’s teacher Gamaliel, taught a similar principle; see *b. Šabb.* 31a and parallels. On Hillel and his teachings see Nahum Glatzer, *Hillel the Elder: The Emergence of Classical Judaism* (New York: B’nai B’rith Hillel Foundations, 1956); and Yitzhak Buxbaum, *The Life and Teachings of Hillel* (London: Jason Aronson, 1994). The positive version of the Golden Rule is the summary of Torah and the prophets in Matthew’s version of the commandment (Matt 7:12).
14. Alan Segal, *Paul the Convert* (New Haven: Yale University, 1990) 206. Segal has grasped the paradoxical situation with insight, but I believe that the apostle would probably be offended by his designation “a former Pharisee,” because Paul considered himself to be a Pharisee.
15. Cf. the important discussion of Raymond E. Brown, “The Roman Church near the End of the First Christian Generation,” in Raymond E. Brown and J. Meier, *Antioch and Jerusalem* (New York: Paulist, 1983) 105–27.
16. See David Flusser, “A New Sensitivity in Judaism and the Christian Message,” in *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity*, 469–93.
17. Perhaps there is a touch of the modern Jewish philosopher and rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel in Paul. Both the Apostle Paul and Heschel seemed to feel a sense of wonder at the mystery of God. Cf. the thought-provoking studies by Heschel, e.g., *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of*

- Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1955); *The Insecurity of Freedom* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1966); and *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).
18. See Max Kadushin, *A Conceptual Approach to the Mekilta* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, n.d.) 7, where he explores the kingdom-of-heaven theme. Kadushin has discussed the methodology of the rabbis more extensively in some of his other works, e.g., *The Rabbinic Mind* (2d ed.; New York: Blaisdell, 1965); and *The Theology of Seder Eliahu: A Study in Organic Thinking* (New York, 1932). On the kingdom, cf. Gösta Lundström, *The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus* (Richmond, Va.: John Knox, 1963); and Brad H. Young, *Jesus and His Jewish Parables* (New York: Paulist, 1989) 189–235.
 19. See Schoeps, *Paul*, 49.
 20. After all, Isaiah spoke of the temple as a house of prayer for all peoples and conceived of the Jewish people as a light to the Gentiles. Zechariah envisioned the day when the Gentile would grasp the coattail of the Jew and be led up to the temple of the Lord for worship. See also Lloyd Gaston, *Paul and the Torah* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1987) 116–34; cf. Edward Schillebeeckx, *Paul the Apostle* (New York: Crossroad, 1983) 26.
 21. See Rom 9:3; cf. Moses in Exod 32:32. Paul uses the Greek term *anathema*, which has a wide range of meanings. Paul would make himself an *anathema* for his brothers and sisters in Israel who do not believe in Jesus. He would give himself for them. Often this is understood as accepting eternal damnation. While the apostle seems willing to do anything, even sacrifice himself, for his people, it is quite likely that the word *anathema* here does not mean suffering in the fire of hell forever but, rather, a change in spiritual status. The word, like its Hebrew equivalent *cherem*, can refer to something dedicated to God (see Luke 21:5); cf. W. Bauer, W. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, F. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Early Christian Literature* (2d ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979). Paul would be setting himself apart from Jesus, i.e., cutting himself off from the Messiah (cf. 1 Cor 16:22). He would not, however, annul the blessings promised by God to the Israelites (Rom 10:4f.). After all, the apostle affirms God's faithfulness to his people in Rom 11:26, "and so all Israel will be saved." As James Dunn observed, "The climax will be the fulfillment of his [Paul's] heart's prayer (10:1)—Israel's salvation, Israel's restoration to full communion with its God. Whatever is happening to Israel now, Paul has been given the divinely revealed assurance that all will come out right for Israel in the end, that God's faithfulness to his first love will be demonstrated for all to see." See James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9–16* (WBC; Dallas:

- Word, 1988) 691–93. On the use of the term *anathema* in 1 Cor 16:22, see the excellent commentary by Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 837–39.
22. The Gentiles are an amorphous group committing sin, denying God, and persecuting the Jewish people. But the ancient Hebrew prophets envisioned a day when Gentiles would come to faith in the one true God. Paul's intense love for the diverse Gentile nations is a genuine expression of this old prophetic vision.
 23. Cf. Marvin Wilson, *Our Father Abraham* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) 3–18.
 24. Matt 11:2; Luke 7:19. See Brad H. Young, "The Kingdom Breaks Forth or the Kingdom Suffers Violence?" in *Jesus the Jewish Theologian* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1995). Cf. also David Flusser, *Jesus* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969) 84–92.
 25. Markus Barth, *The People of God* (Sheffield, England: University of Sheffield, 1983) 72, has observed, "Even by taking offence at Jesus Christ and rejecting the gospel, the Jews render the church a service for which she owes it gratitude, love and respect. Without the Jewish people there is no church. Conversely, the church is a detour for the salvation of Israel. Where men meant to do evil, God meant to do good. . . . With the complete physical extinction of all Jews from the face of the earth the demonstration and proof of God's existence would collapse and the church would lose its *raison d'être*: the church would fall. The future of the church lies in the salvation of all Israel."
 26. See Hendrikus Boers, "The Problem of Jews and Gentiles in the Macro-Structure of Romans," *Svensk Exegetisk Årsbok* 47 (1982) 187.
 27. George Howard, "Christ the End of the Law: The Meaning of Romans 10 4ff.," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 88 (1969) 331–37, observed, "Christ is the goal of the law to everyone who believes, because the ultimate goal of the law is that all nations are to be blessed in Abraham. The passage is one of the greatest of Paul's statements concerning his doctrine of the inclusion of the gentiles. In fact, it is becoming increasingly clear that this doctrine permeates the entirety of his letter to the Romans" (337). This is a foundational study of Paul's main thesis in Romans. Cf. also R. David Kaylor, *Paul's Covenant Community: Jew and Gentile in Romans* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988) 159–93; and J. Christian Beker, *Paul the Apostle: A Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) 85.
 28. See, e.g., the language of ²Abot 1:1: "Moses received the Torah from Sinai and passed it on to Joshua and Joshua to the elders and the elders to the Prophets; and the Prophets . . ."

29. This description is a fine example of how the wall dividing Jews and Gentiles was brought down in early Christianity. Paul and his disciples would certainly agree. Cf. Eph 2:14–15: “who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law of commandments.” Through death to the flesh, the Christian is made free to follow the teachings of the Bible with the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. The death of Jesus brings unity for all peoples in the plan of redemption. Cf. M. Barth, *Ephesians* (AB 34–34A; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1982) 1.260–65; and J. Gnilka, *Der Epheserbrief* (Freiburg: Herder, 1982) 138–43.
30. See, e.g., *b. Sanh.* 56a: “Our rabbis taught: Seven precepts were the sons of Noah commanded: social laws; to refrain from blasphemy; idolatry; adultery; bloodshed; robbery; and eating flesh cut from a living animal.”
31. See *Jub.* 7:21, where three categories of sins are said to have brought about the flood. See R. H. Charles, *The Book of Jubilees* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1902) 61.
32. The variant manuscript text according to Codex Bezae on Acts 15:20b reads, “to abstain from pollutions of idols, from fornication, from blood[shed] and whatsoever you would that men should not do to you do not to another.” (Similar readings according to Bezae appear in Acts 15:29b and 21:25.) See also A. Resch, “Das Aposteldekret nach seiner ausserkanonischen Textgestalt untersucht,” in *Texte und Untersuchungen* (new series; Leipzig, 1905) 3.1–179; David Flusser and Shmuel Safrai, “Das Aposteldekret und die Noachitischen Gebote,” in “*Wer Tora vermehrt, mehrt Leben*”: Festgabe für Heinz Kremers zum 60. Geburtstag (ed. E. Brocke and H. J. Barkenings; Neukirchen: Vluyn, 1986) 173–92; and David Flusser, “Paul’s Jewish-Christian Opponents in the Didache,” in *Gilgul: Essays on Transformation, Revolution, and Permanence in the History of Religions, Dedicated to R. J. Zwi Werblowski* (ed. S. Shaked, D. Shulman, and G. Stroumsa; Leiden: Brill, 1987) 71–90. On the negative version of the Golden Rule, see *The Authorized Daily Prayer Book* (ed. Joseph H. Hertz; New York: Bloch, 1948) 644f.
33. In Gal 3:28 Paul declares, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” While the apostle does not teach inequality, he recognizes ethnic and cultural distinctives. He can rejoice in the differences. The apostle maintains Jewish identity within the joining together of diverse peoples in Jesus (see Gal 5:3). True unity means rich diversity within the divine purpose.
34. See Flusser, “The Dead Sea Scrolls.” Flusser’s brilliant study shows the beginnings of Christianity in two strata that are understood in the light of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

35. Cf. P. Benoit, "Qumran and the New Testament," in *Paul and the Dead Sea Scrolls* (ed. J. Murphy O'Connor and J. Charlesworth; New York: Crossroad, 1990) 1–30.
36. See David Flusser, *Jewish Sources in Early Christianity* (Tel Aviv: MOD, 1989) 19, 62.