



Jewish Readings of Paul

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- 10 Here Breton (1988, ch. 2), Taubes (2004, 38–54), and Agamben (2005, 73–87) all display sympathetic and illuminating accounts of Paul's typological hermeneutic that stand in stark contrast to Boyarin's account of Pauline allegory. For "figural interpretation," see the important work of Erich Auerbach (1953; 1984). It involves perceiving a connection between two historical events in their spiritual relation to divine providence, a relation that therefore cannot be reduced either to historical causality or semeiotic representations of meaning. Figural interpretation relies upon a mimetic comprehension understood as a spiritual act that deals with historical events experientially rather than in conceptual abstraction. That is, the temporal participates in and points toward the eternal for its meaning, a meaning that requires spiritual attentiveness and imitation if it is to be apprehended.

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CHAPTER 29

Jewish Readings of Paul

Daniel R. Langton

Premodern Jewish Views of Paul

If the medieval *Toledot Yeshu*, or Story of Jesus, is to be believed, the apostle Paul was not only responsible for the establishment of Christianity, but actually did so at the instigation of the rabbis. Found in a variety of languages throughout Christian Europe, many versions of this notorious, anonymous, anti-Christian romance (dating to around the thirteenth century, although including much older traditions) reveal that Paul had been an agent of the Jewish sages who had sought to end the conflict between the followers of Jesus and the people of Israel by creating permanent religious divisions. The narrative explains how, in their desire to separate from Israel those who continued to claim Yeshu as the Messiah, Jewish religious leaders had called upon a learned man, Simeon Kepha, for help. This Kepha was able to heal a lame man (as was Simon Peter [or Simon *Cephas*; cf. John 1:42] in the book of Acts) and to convince the followers of Yeshu that he was one of them. Claiming to speak on behalf of Yeshu, he then introduced new festivals and rejected circumcision and the dietary laws. Such sensational claims are unhistorical, of course, as illustrated by the way in which Simon Peter and Paul were conflated in the text: "All these new ordinances which Simeon Kepha (or Paul, as he was known to the Nazarenes) taught them were really meant to separate these Nazarenes from the people of Israel and to bring the internal strife to an end" (Goldstein 1950, 153–154). Other versions of this account of a secret mole confuse Paul with another figure called Eliyahu rather than with Simon Peter. In any case, the *Toledot Yeshu* is the nearest thing we have to a widespread, popular, Jewish treatment of the apostle to the Gentiles.

Arguably, the idea that Paul had introduced innovations with regard to festivals and the law can be traced back to earlier Jewish writings. For example, it has been suggested that it was Paul who was described in the second-century Mishnah as one who "profanes the Hallowed Things and despises the set feasts and puts his fellow to shame publicly and makes void the covenant of Abraham our father, and discloses meanings in the law which are not according to the Halakhah" (*Avot* 3:11 [3:12 in Danby 1933]). Likewise, a later rabbinic commentary on Proverbs 21:8 has a familiar ring: "This man ... made himself strange to the circumcision and the commandments" (*Ruth Rabba* 3). But the difficulties in establishing the date and provenance of such fragments mean that there can be little confidence that they have any connection to Paul. Even in Jewish refutations of Christianity during the Middle Ages, Paul was very rarely referred to explicitly. Those few authors who did make brief mention tended to be Karaites (Jews who rejected rabbinic authority) or minor figures living in the relative safety of Muslim lands. The composite picture that emerges from such medieval sources is of a troublemaker who introduced the trinitarian conception of God, the atoning death of Christ, and celibacy, who had modified the calendar, and whose antinomian (anti-*Torah*) misreading of Scripture had led him to set aside practices that had traditionally separated the Jews from the other nations. But the rarity of such references means that all this falls far short of any kind of Jewish tradition regarding this central figure of Christian history.

While one might regard religious Jews as anti-Pauline in their traditional Torah-centricity and devotion to the commandments, this is not the same as saying that there was a true engagement with, or even a general awareness of, the apostle's teachings. Apart from the confused account of the *Toledot Yeshu* and a few scattered, unauthoritative comments, there is no tangible evidence of Jewish interest in Paul in the premodern period. This historical silence might reflect simple ignorance, a deliberate policy to ignore a dangerous opponent, or an awareness of the political danger of engaging with such an authoritative figure in Christendom. Whatever the reason, Jews have had little or nothing to say about Paul until very recently.

The Awakening of Jewish Interest in Paul in the Modern Period

Serious Jewish interest in Paul seems to have its origins in the nineteenth-century emergence of Jewish historicism (i.e., the recognition that one's understanding of the past is profoundly shaped by one's location in a specific historical, social, and intellectual setting). Increasingly, naturalistic, rational explanations of the history of the Jews and their religion were privileged over supernatural, providential explanations. Inevitably, the new assumptions led to a reappraisal of Christianity, with which Judaism had struggled for so many centuries. If the Jewish comprehension of Christianity and its relations to the Jews shifted at this point from an essentially traditional, providential perspective to an increasingly historicist, rationalist one, then it would make good sense that Jewish curiosity in Paul became apparent at around the same time. This was because German biblical critics' revisionist histories of the New Testament period, which appeared to undermine the religious unity of the early church and to emphasize

the influence of pagan thought within it, and which generated considerable enthusiasm among many Jewish observers, placed Paul at the center of this revolution. Paul was associated by both Gentile and Jew with many of the innovations that had led Christianity to break loose from its Jewish roots. So it was that when the apostle first captured the attention of Jewish writers, he was immediately located within an account of the parting of the ways (and Jewish history) that gave great weight to human thought and action. Insofar as its emphasis upon historicism characterizes modern Jewish thought, the study of Paul represents one important area in which the transition to modernity can be observed. Without an appreciation of this phenomenon, the nineteenth-century Jewish interest in Paul seems to come out of nowhere.

While there have been a number of factors at work on Jewish commentators on Paul, including the influence of Christian Pauline studies, much of what has been written has undoubtedly been shaped by specific concerns raised by Jewish political and social emancipation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Since that time, Jews everywhere have debated hotly where the boundaries between Jew and Gentile should be drawn. To what extent should one maintain one's barriers? How much of the non-Jewish world should be embraced and how much guarded against? Which of Judaism's traditions were tenable in this brave new world? What, if anything, did Christianity and Judaism share in common? The basic strategies adopted by Jews committed to modernity have been either to hold Christian society at arm's length or to embrace it. Understanding this is useful in beginning to account, in broad outline, for the variety of Jewish attitudes toward Paul.

Paul and Jewish Criticism of Christianity

The most common response has been to utilize Paul as part of a wider program to stress the differences between Judaism and Christianity. Perhaps the best-known example of this was the German theologian and philosopher, Martin Buber (1878–1965). In 1923, Buber published (in German) *I and Thou*, which famously outlined his philosophy of dialogue and identified two types of interpersonal categories, namely, I-Thou and I-It. The first he described as a dialogue of two respectful partners, characterized by mutuality, openness, presentness, and directness. The second was something less, a monologue, a necessary and common form of relationship, but one without the potential for generating the radical development offered by the first. In *Two Types of Faith* (1950; English translation 1951), Buber brought his dialogical philosophy to bear directly on the two central figures of Christianity, Jesus and Paul. While he could reclaim his "great brother" Jesus as the embodiment of authentic Judaism, Paul was a "gigantic figure ... whom we must regard as the real originator of the Christian conception of faith" (1951, 44) and who therefore represented a quite distinct set of values.

Strictly speaking, Buber's treatment was focused more on the faith systems of these two figures than on any historical reconstruction of the men themselves. He contrasted the Hellenistic or Greek *pistis* (faith or belief in the truth of a proposition), which he argued was embodied in Paul, with the Jewish *emunah* (faith as trust), which was embodied in Jesus. Jesus's Jewish *emunah* reflected an intimate, trusting relationship with God,

and was paradigmatic of the I-Thou relationship. In this way, Buber "reversed the theological gaze" by turning on its head the traditional Christian interpretation of the antagonistic relationship between Jesus and the Pharisees, and emphasizing instead their similarities. In contrast to their spontaneous spirituality, Paul's Hellenistic *pistis* was predicated on the I-It relationship. Paul's doctrine of justification – the teaching that faith in Christ made one righteous and the denial that "works" (the fulfillment of the law) could bring about this transformation – had been a laudable attempt to replace the legalism of Hellenistic Judaism, which was characterized by judicial concerns with guilt and innocence (1951, 46–47). But, in fact, all he had done was replace the simple, biblical, face-to-face relationship between God and man with a relationship based on "faith and faith alone"; that is, he had replaced true dialogue with a kind of mysticism (1951, 47). Paul's mystical solution of faith-in-Christ had generated an intermediary between man and God, and thus it typified the I-It relationship. In contrast with Jesus (and the Pharisees), Paul had turned away from a biblical conception of the kingdom of God which emphasized the immediacy between God and man. And Paul's pessimistic worldview, described as "Paulinism," also indicated his movement away from the authentically Jewish, intimate, direct encounter with the Eternal Thou. As Buber saw it,

The Gnostic nature of the essential features of [Paul's] conception is obvious – the derivative powers, which, ruling the world, work against the primal divine power and waylay the human soul, the enslavement of the cosmos, the problematic character of the law, the overcoming of the "rulers" and the setting free of man ... None of this concerns the Godhead, but the intermediate being set up or permitted by Him. (1951, 83)

Thus, Buber concluded, "I no longer recognize the God of Jesus, nor his world in this world of Paul's" (1951, 89). While Jesus could be recovered as a good Jew, Paul had clearly stepped over the line.

A number of writers both before and after Buber reflected this impulse to demarcate the limits of Jewish compromise with the non-Jewish world, including Elijah Benamozegh (1823–1900) in Italy, and Heinrich Graetz (1817–1891), the younger Leo Baeck (1873–1956), Kaufmann Kohler (1843–1926) in Germany, joined later by Hyam Maccoby (1924–2004) in Britain. While fully engaged with Christian thought, they did not want to identify with it too closely; they were suspicious of the damaging inroads of assimilation and/or concerned to protect their own conceptions of Judaism from its disorientating influence. They instinctively realized that to undermine Paul, regarded as the moral and intellectual founder of the Gentile church, was to undermine its ubiquitous power, or at least to demonstrate that it did not have a monopoly on the truth. Consequently, Paul's Jewish credentials were only reluctantly acknowledged; while some attributed Paul's teachings to profound misunderstandings of Judaism, others (like Buber) pointed to the non-Jewish sources that they saw saturating the apostle's theology. By these means, the apostle's credibility as the critic *par excellence* of the Jewish law and religion was undercut, and a space for the legitimacy of the Jewish way of life carved out. Arguably, these barrier-builders are the scholars whose writings are responsible for the power and longevity of the negative Jewish image of Paul; their discrediting of Paul remains central to the Jewish critique of Christianity today.

Paul and Jewish Interest in Improving Interfaith Relations

The other way to locate oneself as a Jew within a wider Christian society, and to maintain a legitimate space for Jewish life within it, is to emphasize what is shared in common between Jews and Christians. Perhaps the earliest example of the use of Paul to this end was the North American Reform rabbi, Isaac Mayer Wise (1819–1900). In a series of public lectures published in 1883 as *Three Lectures on the Origin of Christianity*, Wise set out to encourage his congregants to engage with the non-Jewish world around them. The apostle to the Gentiles was a case in point, earning him a dedicated lecture entitled "Paul and the Mystics." Paul could easily be contrasted negatively with Jesus in terms of the law (and the comparison was made), but this was not as important to Wise as was the presentation of Paul as a "master machinist ... one of those brilliant stars in the horizon of history" whose contribution to world history could be attributed to his Jewishness (Wise 1883, 53). Wise's main source of information for Paul was not the New Testament or early Christian writings, but the rabbinic literature. Identifying Paul with a heretic referred to in the Talmud, Wise explained:

The rabbis called him *Acher*, "another," i.e., one who passes under another or assumed name. They [the rabbis] maintain that his name was Elisha ben Abujah. But this name must be fictitious, because it is a direct and express reference to Paul's theology. It signifies "the saving deity, son of the father god," and Paul was the author of the "son of God" doctrine. The fact is, he was known to the world under his assumed name only. (1883, 55–56)

Wise's hypothesis and almost exclusive dependence upon the Talmud is unique among the Jewish writers on Paul. It enabled him to argue (anachronistically) for a Pharisaic-kabbalistic background for Paul. For Wise, Paul's vision of Paradise in 2 Corinthians 12 ("I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven ...")¹ correlated with Acher's experience of Paradise as mentioned in the Talmud (*b. Hagigah* 14b), and he argued that at the time of Paul-Acher there had been a growth of superstition and mysticism among the Jews. When one also took into account the similarity of Paul's conception of Christ with the mystical semi-divine figure of the "Saar Haolam" (Prince of the World), it seemed only sensible to conclude that Paul's background had been one of Jewish mysticism (1883, 57–59). Not only was this central figure of Christianity recognizably Jewish, but Paul's motivations were entirely comprehensible to modern Reform Jews. According to Wise, Paul's particular greatness rested in his attempt to extend the knowledge of God to all the nations (53–54). In addition to his universalism, his rejection of Jewish nationalism and his preparedness to compromise regarding the law to promote progress were also admirable. While Wise echoed others in attributing originality to Paul for paganizing the gospels – the apostle was responsible for the Christian idea of the Son of God, for vicarious atonement, for abrogation of the law, and for beginning a new covenant (62–64) – he did not do this in order to attack Christianity. Wise anticipated later Jewish commentators in claiming that Paul was the author of Gentile Christianity, but this did not prevent him from partly reclaiming Paul as a Jewish hero, explaining (if not justifying)

Paul's teachings as a result of a Jewish mystic's attempt to offer the Gentiles something of the gift God had granted Israel.

Close contemporaries who emulated Wise's efforts at bridge-building included Joseph Krauskopf (1858–1923) in the United States and Claude Montefiore (1858–1938) in Britain. They, too, offered historical accounts that praised Paul's universalism, ethics, and religious sincerity, and were generally prepared to confirm his Jewish education and background (although neither followed Wise's eccentric emphasis on *kabbalah*). Their goodwill toward Paul was in part an expression of their confidence in religious progress and political emancipation. Their quickness in distancing themselves from the classic, negative view of Paul was a signal of their commitment to the modern non-Jewish world. In their optimism, they believed that by contributing to the historical reconstruction of Paul's Jewishness, and by demonstrating their appreciation for him, they could inoculate the Gentile world against an anti-Jewish reading of the apostle. Theirs remain among the most sympathetic portrayals of Paul, although later scholars, including Pinchas Lapide (1922–1997) in Israel and Mark Nanos (1954–) in the United States, have been committed to bridge-building within a specifically modern interfaith context. For these, Paul's attitude toward observance of the Torah could be recast to become authentically Jewish. Lapide argued that the apostle's abrogation of the law was relevant only to Gentile Christians while it retained its full validity for Jews; and Nanos has gone so far as to argue that not only was Paul himself a fully Torah-observant Pharisee who expected Jewish believers to follow suit, but that he even required the Gentile Christians to keep the (Jewish) Noachide laws. Thus, an attempt was made to transform the law into an instrument of Jewish-Christian rapprochement.

In a way, the older Leo Baeck (1873–1956) had pre-empted them when he interpreted Paul's view as valid from the perspective of one who believed that the messianic age had come. In his 1952 article "The Faith of Paul," the German Reform rabbi had suggested that, like many of his contemporaries, Paul had expected the law to be transcended (not abrogated) when the messianic age began; the only difference was that, for Paul, this new age had arrived with Jesus. Consequently, it had not been un-Jewish for him to exclaim, "All things are lawful for me" (1 Cor 6:12), since this closely paralleled the rabbinic teaching that in the "Days of the Messiah ... there will be no merit or guilt" (*b. Shabbat* 151b).

Paul and Modern Jewish Identity: Intra-Jewish Debate and Zionism

Almost by definition, modern Jewish identity has been constructed in a world where the idea of a normative Judaism can no longer be taken for granted, and the various approaches to Paul mirror this reality. It has been suggested that the three most important factors acting upon and shaping modern Jewry have been *anti-Semitism*, which both strengthened and weakened Jewish ties, the *Enlightenment*, which encouraged Jews to identify with a larger world beyond the boundaries of Judaism, and *Zionism*, which offered the hope of a shared national identity. The remarkable figure of the

apostle resonates in each of these contexts. For those who attributed Gentile hostility and Jew-hatred to Christianity itself, and who sought to protect themselves from it or to draw its sting, Paul's relevance lies in his role in the emergence and success of the new religion. This we have already noted in the work of the barrier-builders and bridge-builders. The two other factors, the Enlightenment and Zionism, provide the essential backdrops for the way in which Paul featured in what might be described as intra-Jewish ideological debate.

For those who sought to define Judaism in terms of Enlightenment values or otherwise to reconcile the best thought and attitudes of their own day with the truths of Judaism, there has been a fascination with the apostle's endeavors in the centuries-old pursuit of synthesis between the Hellenism dominant in his day and Jewish tradition. One example of such a reformer was the founder of Anglo-Liberal Judaism, the aforementioned Claude Montefiore (1858–1938). A clear indication of this English scholar's position can be seen in his warning about directly comparing Paul's writings with those of the rabbis. While recognizing the "contradictions and antinomies" in Paul's theology, he felt that there was an overall coherence which made Paul far more systematic than the rabbis, and thus superior to them (Montefiore 1901, 170). In the context of the theological debates raging between progressive and traditionalist apologists, such an observation would have been provocative. As a liberal, Montefiore maintained that inspiration and wisdom could be drawn from sources outside the corpus of traditional Jewish religious writings. In seeking to introduce Paul to a Jewish audience, Montefiore had been well aware of the obstacles in his path, not least those teachings that could only be regarded as fatally flawed, including the apostle's pessimism, his Christology, much in his conception of sin and of the law, his demonology, and his view of human destiny (Montefiore 1914, 141). Even so, there were fragments of Pauline theology that attracted him. At the top of this list was Paul's introduction of a practical (although imperfect) universalism. He himself had come to the same conclusion as Paul, namely, that "Judaism could not become a universal religion together with its inviolate Law" (1914, 145). He believed that Paul's knowledge of the Hellenistic mystery cults had influenced his pre-Christian thinking and made him ready and eager to discover a universal method of salvation, suited and predestined for all humankind. But while he commended Paul for preaching universalism and solving the "puzzle of the universal God and the national cult" (1918, 119), he could not accept the new form of religious particularism that Paul had forged "in Christ." Neither could he credit Paul for originating the idea. Recalling Old Testament universalist passages, he felt that "one has to acknowledge that Paul has only smoothed more completely, more definitely, what these others had begun to smooth before him" (1923, 287). To his mind, liberal Judaism and its teachings of ethical monotheism polished off the job, and presented the clearest expression of this important Jewish tradition. Another valuable element of Paul's thought was the apostle's rationale for the incorporation of the vernacular in worship, useful for justifying contemporary progressive synagogue practice. There was even one aspect of Paul's objection to justification by works that was worth salvaging. According to Montefiore, the apostle had taught that one failed to win righteousness by fulfilling the law because one could never fulfill it; worse still, one failed to win righteousness even if one did fulfill the law. In spite of his recognition that "no Jew ever looked at the

Law from this point of view," Montefiore admitted that he felt there was, indeed, a danger that "works righteousness" could lead to self-righteousness and self-delusion (1894, 443-444). Thus, Montefiore approached Paul as a source of inspiration and religious insight. More significantly, Pauline studies provided him with an opportunity to articulate progressive, liberal Jewish ideas.

It is not difficult to find other progressive theologians in Montefiore's day, such as Emil Hirsch (1851-1923) in the United States, who were just as likely to use their engagement with Paul to upbraid their Orthodox opponents, especially with regard to the *halakhah* or religious law. (More traditional Jewish Pauline commentators have also made the connection between Paul's view of the law and that of Progressive Judaism, although they have attributed a negative value judgment to such liberal attitudes, of course.) Likewise, whether consciously intended or not, the Pauline studies of later North American progressive Jewish New Testament scholars, with their casual presumptions of the apostle's Jewishness, also contributed to the undermining of traditionalist conceptions of Jewish history. Samuel Sandmel (1911-1979) is a case in point. While his book *The Genius of Paul: A Study in History* (1958) emphasized the difference between Palestinian Judaism and Hellenistic Judaism, and identified Paul with the latter category, he did not do so to undermine Paul's Jewishness.

To call Paul a Hellenistic Jew is not to put a value judgment on the nature of his Jewish fidelity, but is only to state a fact. The Hellenistic world into which Paul was born, we know now, was one of many religious expressions and of earnest philosophical disputations ... There is no reason to be sceptical of his statement that in his study of Judaism he had surpassed his fellow students of his own age. Nor should we doubt that he had achieved a skillful knowledge of Judaism. His statement that he had learned the traditions of his fathers is to be accepted - but the content of those Graeco-Jewish "traditions" is not to be confused with that which later centuries recorded as the product of the Jewish schools in Palestine and Babylonia. (Sandmel 1958, 16-17)

Despite this emphasis on Hellenistic Judaism, Sandmel went on to place Paul in the Jewish prophetic tradition. In so doing, he offered a very different perspective on Paul's view of the law. In order to understand any prophet, Sandmel argued that one needed to take into account the historical situation, for this determined his message. He proceeded to compare Paul with the eighth-century prophets.

Paul confronts a situation different from that of Amos, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. These pre-exilic prophets denied the validity of ritual ceremony or of a written code at a time previous to the existence of the Pentateuch ... But by Paul's time the Pentateuch had become the very center of his religious heritage. Amos could ignore it, for it did not exist; Paul (and Philo) must deal with it and account for it. Paul's denial of the validity of the Pentateuchal legislation is akin to Amos' denial of ritual sacrifice (5.21-22) and to Jeremiah's denial of the existence of any valid written code (7.21-22). The impetus in all the cases was identical; the end result was the same: Communion is the only essential, and ritual is useless. What is different is only the environment and the particulars confronted. (1958, 77-78)

As a result, the common charge that Paul had abrogated the law was, in Sandmel's opinion, a misunderstanding. Any negative remarks Paul had made about the law had

been provoked by the negative reception of his message and possibly as a result of psychological trauma (1958, 56). It was a kind of critique of institutionalized religion (1958, 218). In reality, Paul had simply sought to emphasize internal over external worship, as had the prophets before him, and had done so in terms of the law, living as he had in an age of law. Despite any reservations he harbored concerning the apostle to the Gentiles, the liberal Jewish scholar was prepared to give Paul the benefit of the doubt. He was reluctant to condemn Paul as an inauthentic kind of Jew or as an enemy of the Jewish people, to the extent that he criticized the use of the term "Christian" in connection with him (1958, 21). More recently, Alan Segal (1945-) has claimed that Paul's letters represent the best evidence extant for Jewish mysticism in the first century. Such interpretations are framed in a way that simply dismisses out of hand the assumptions on which many conservative, traditional Jewish attitudes and claims rest, especially with regard to marginal Jewish figures.

For those consumed by the nationalist dream of Zionism, the third factor shaping modern Jewry, Paul could be credited with the invention of Gentile Christianity, an essentially *diaspora* enterprise, which would be forever hostile to the authentic Judaism of *eretz Yisrael* (the Land of Israel). While some liberals might have doubted this, such as Hans Joachim Schoeps (1909-1980) in Germany, who argued vehemently in his own treatment of Paul that authentic Judaism *could* be detached from Jewish nationalism, others could not help but interpret history through this ideological lens. For Joseph Klausner (1874-1958) in Palestine, Paul was at once a member of the Jewish nation who had shaped world history and, as a universalist visionary, a betrayer of the Zionist soul of the Jewish people. The revisionist history offered by his compatriot, Micah Berdichevsky (1865-1921), went even further. In an uncompleted work probably composed in Berlin shortly before his death, Berdichevsky suggested that Saul and Paul had been two different individuals whose distinct traditions had been amalgamated by the early Christians into the familiar New Testament narrative. Uniquely, he identified the earliest version of Paul's blinding and conversion as the mysterious Hebrew legend of Abba Gulish, which, although regarded by others as medieval, Berdichevsky believed to be of ancient pedigree. This story tells of a pagan who served as a priest in "an idolatrous temple" in Damascus and who used to pilfer the donations. Habitually calling upon his idol for healing and receiving none, he one day called upon "the Sovereign of the Universe," who promptly cured him. Moving to Tiberias, he converted to Judaism where "he ran after the *mitzvot* [commandments]" and began a new life as an administrator for the poor. Eventually he was overcome by temptation and began embezzling money again - with the consequence that he went blind. Returning to Damascus, he stood before the Gentiles (who believed that he had lost his sight because he had scorned the idol) and delivered a public speech. Pointing out that in all the time he had stolen from the temple donations the idol had never punished him, he went on to confess that he had resumed his criminal activities in Tiberias until struck down. He therefore attributed his condition not to the idol but to the One "whose eyes roam the whole world and no misdeed is beyond Him to see [and punish]"; whereupon, having witnessed to God's power and judgment, his sight was miraculously restored. The account concludes: "from the nations thousands and tens of thousands ... [found] shelter under the wings of the shekhinah," that is, converted to Judaism (Berdichevsky 1971, 13).

Later, Berdichevsky suggested, the Gentile followers of Paul and the Jewish followers of Jesus merged this figure with another, a Jew called Saul, to create the composite, fictitious figure of Saul–Paul, who functioned as a unifying figure between the two groups and as a bridge between the Hellenistic and the Jewish elements of Christian thought. Berdichevsky highlighted the importance placed in both accounts upon Damascus, noting that both Paul and Abba Gulish had been treasurers (1971, 126) associated with accusations of embezzlement of funds meant for the poor (18). (Berdichevsky infers this from 2 Cor 8:20–21, where Paul writes of taking precaution so that “no one should blame us about this liberal gift which we are administering.”) Both men were described as zealous against idolatry (1971, 126), both became fully convinced of the new faith’s power and truth having had their blindness miraculously healed (34), and both were responsible for the conversion of many Gentiles (149). In the end, of course, Berdichevsky’s reconstruction must be regarded as entirely fanciful. It is clear that the underlying motive was his concern to preserve the Jewish land, religion, and people from the charge that they had given birth to Christianity; he could not tolerate the idea of Israel tainted by the link to the diaspora religion *par excellence*. In his determination to lay bare the essentially non-Jewish origins of Christianity, he went so far as to deny Paul Jewish origins whatsoever. Berdichevsky can thus be seen as a somewhat extreme example of how, in the context of debates about the impact of anti-Semitism, the Enlightenment, or Zionism upon Judaism, the apostle to the Gentiles has been interpreted in such a way as to facilitate and reinforce a wide variety of perspectives within the modern Jewish ideological landscape.

Paul as a Dialogical Partner for Jewish Self-understanding

Doubtless, the classic, negative Jewish view of Paul is alive and well, and there is every reason to believe that Paul will continue to function as a figure of abuse in public discourse, in Jewish-Christian religious polemic, and in intra-Jewish debate for a long time to come. But at the same time, others will join with those who see in the first-century apostle a pioneer in the quest to find a meaningful sense of historical continuity between the Jewish past and the Jewish future. At a time when the chasm between the modern and pre-Enlightenment Jewish worlds appears so daunting and unbreachable, the figure of Paul, who himself traversed far-flung cultures and was acutely aware of the challenges facing Judaism, looks beguilingly familiar. The study *My Brother Paul* (1972) by the anti-establishment conservative rabbi and academic Richard Rubenstein (1924–) is an excellent example of how Paul can be presented as a fellow-traveler, in that the issues that most concerned “one of the most influential Christian theologians of all time” closely paralleled his own (Rubenstein 1972, 5).

Paul’s chief concern, according to Rubenstein, was the question of how to defeat death (1972, 41). Rubenstein maintained that Paul had initially persecuted the church in order to reduce the tension arising from internal conflict between his hopes that the Messiah had come and his worldly realism. His attraction to the new movement was ultimately due to a fixation with his own mortality, a fixation with which, as Rubenstein suggested, one could readily empathize.

Like the rest of us, Paul did not want to die. Until Paul learned of the Resurrection, it is likely that he was convinced that death was inevitable for all men. There may have been a time when he harbored the secret hope that, were he to fulfill the Law perfectly, God might save him from death. Some rabbis maintained that were a person to lead a sinless life of complete obedience to God’s will, he might not die ... Eventually he must have concluded that no matter how scrupulously he kept God’s commandments, he too was going to die. One can safely guess that Paul’s first response to the reports of Jesus’ Resurrection was intense scepticism if not derisive rejection. Still, some part of Paul must have wanted the report to be true, for *if Jesus had been victorious over death, there was also hope for Paul.* (1972, 42–43, emphasis in original)

Again, one of the most powerful themes dominating the apostle’s thought, according to Rubenstein, was Jewish messianism. Citing Freud, he presented a psychoanalytical account of Judaism, arguing that, unlike other religious systems that allowed periodical infringements of the rules, Judaism did not. The psychological release was instead relegated to the future, namely, to the messianic age when the inhibitions and frustrations of the day-to-day world would finally be annulled. This was why “Jewish messianists from the time of Paul to Sabbatai Zvi and even some of the early reform rabbis have seen the ‘end of the Law’ as one of the most important consequences of the Messianic Age” (1972, 36). From this perspective, the traditional view of Paul and the law appeared unworthy. As Baeck and others had done, Rubenstein argued that it had been a mistake to view Paul as antinomian. Rather, Paul had believed that the Messiah had abolished the authority of the law (39). In Rubenstein’s reading, Paul’s frustration in failing to observe the law is empathetically portrayed as a natural and not uncommon reaction to the *halakhah*, and the fault is laid at the door of institutional Judaism, which had failed to provide a religious outlet for such psychological tension. At the root of Rubenstein’s psychoanalytically orientated appreciation was his belief that Paul had had the profound insight that our common perception of reality was only a part of the story. This recognition of “*the deeper and truer meaning of the human world*” was a Jewish revolution that would be echoed in the writings of later Jewish mystics and, ultimately, “anticipates the work of the twentieth-century’s most important secularised Jewish mystic, Sigmund Freud” (22, emphasis in original).

While not sharing his interest in psychology, one can point to Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer (1952–) and Daniel Boyarin (1946–) in the United States as other Jewish thinkers for whom Paul has inspired far-reaching personal reflections, which have bound him to each as a fellow-traveler on the path to religious self-understanding. They, too, were convinced that contemporary Jews could benefit from thinking about the questions Paul asked (if not always his answers), whether the issue be, respectively, how to retrieve as a Jewish theological truth the idea of God’s grace and to find a theological space for the non-Jew; or how to begin to counter the gender biases and ethnic bigotry of a traditional system to which one is committed without threatening its foundations. Such individuals are not ashamed to articulate such concerns in the language of the apostle precisely because he is perceived to be a serious partner in a perennial dialogue concerning the very nature of Judaism itself.

Paul and Jewish Treatments from Non-religious Perspectives

In addition to the contributions of Jewish theologians, religious leaders, and scholars of religion who tend to dominate interfaith dialogue, important and distinctive Jewish perspectives on the dramatic events of the ancient "parting of the ways," and on the controversial figure of Paul, can be found elsewhere. Among those offering artistic, literary, philosophical, or psychoanalytical interpretations of the apostle are a number whose idiosyncratic self-identities and complicated backgrounds often frustrate easy categorization. For obvious reasons, they have been uncomfortable championing the Jewish community's received traditions and dialoguing with representative members of the Christian fraternity. But there are many ways to define Jewishness, and exploration of the intellectual worlds of those who regard themselves as Jewish in some sense, even if they are not committed to any kind of Judaism, is a very worthwhile endeavor. The fact that, along with so many other Jews in the modern world, they cannot easily be fitted into religious or national pigeonholes is precisely what makes them so interesting when studying their empathetic interpretations of the similarly complex character of the apostle. Their works are especially useful for illustrating two themes that are common to the majority of Jewish studies of Paul.

One recurrent theme is the attempt of Jewish intellectuals to map out the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in a context where the centuries-old rules no longer seem to apply. The difficulty for those who inhabit the cultural borderlands is how to achieve a coherent, satisfactory personal narrative. The common intellectual conundrum is whether or not there exists a common religious essence between Judaism and Christianity. Arguably, this goes back as far as Felix Mendelssohn's oratorio *Paulus* (1836), but it certainly dominates the work of an artist such as Ludwig Meidner (1884–1966) and the novels of Sholem Asch (1880–1957) and Samuel Sandmel.

Perhaps the most positive affirmation in response to the question came from the Austrian playwright Franz Werfel (1890–1945), whose play *Paul among the Jews: A Tragedy* (1926; English translation 1928) is the only example of a theatrical treatment of the subject by a Jewish playwright. The key moments of this play, which is essentially a series of debates between Paul and various first-century figures, are the discussions between Paul and his former teacher, Rabbi Gamaliel the Elder, who is portrayed as the wisest Jewish mind of his day, and who sits in judgment over him. At first, the only thing that seems to separate the two men, whose respect for each other is profound, is the classic distinction between the Jew and Christian: one believes that the Messiah has come, the other that he will come. But the original cause of Paul's dissatisfaction with his former life is soon revealed to have been frustration at his inability to observe the law. Sympathetic to this torment, which Paul claims was only assuaged by his discovery of the Messiah, the old sage Gamaliel offers support and encouragement before hinting that he is prepared to call for a rapprochement between the Jewish people and Jesus, whom he describes as "a holy man of God" (Werfel 1928, 136–137). When Paul insists that the Messiah has brought about the end of the law, Gamaliel counters by reminding Paul that Jesus, Messiah or not, would have disagreed. Paul justifies his distinctive teaching by setting aside the limited knowledge of the man Jesus, merely a rabbi from

Nazareth, in favor of his own understanding of "the Messiah, the incarnate Shekina, God's Son, [existent] before the world came into being" (1928, 139). In the face of such presumption, Gamaliel retracts his offer. Perhaps, he agonizes, it would be better to sacrifice one soul for the sake of the purity of God's Torah. In the end, however, he spares Paul, despite being prophetically aware of the fatal consequences for the world of his failure. He prays:

Can I let Thine enemy go, my God? Let him go to a strange land, him, who wishes to destroy thy inexhaustible Torah and our holy responsibility toward men, in order that he may preach his phantom gospel? Oh, they will listen to him, and the phantom will become their Law, for a shadow lies but lightly, but Thy Law lies heavily! (1928, 143)

At this moment of the parting of the ways, Werfel refuses to condemn Paul for his beliefs or for the establishment of a religion that will triumph at the expense of the Jewish people. The apostle's raw passion and spiritual sincerity exonerate him, just as the wisdom and patience of his teacher support the moral claim of the stance adopted by the Pharisees. That these two "men possessed by religion," these equally admirable representatives of Christianity and Judaism, fail to reconcile is, for Werfel, the tragedy of Jewish history (preface, ii, iv). At the same time, there is no doubt that in the playwright's mind, Israel's loss is world religious civilization's gain. The play certainly did not call for a religious synthesis, for its author did not believe that one could logically reconcile Jewish and Christian theologies; this is made clear in the extensive debates between Paul and Gamaliel. But Werfel did hint at their complementary roles: Christianity going on to conquer the pagan world in demonstration of its spiritual potency; Judaism going on to suffer centuries of degradation with a dignity that expressed just as powerfully its own spiritual purity. Both witnessed to the reality of the presence of the Spirit of God. From Werfel's unsystematic, mystical perspective, the tragedy that the story of Paul symbolized was (as he put it in personal correspondence) the failure of the two "conscious manifestations" of the split "Jewish being," that is, Judaism and Christianity, to recognize in each other the mystery of true faith.

Another running theme within modern Jewish thought has been the gnawing tension between the need to criticize Christian thought and authority, on the one hand, and the desire to demonstrate one's commitment to Western society, on the other. Paul's revolutionary zeal and iconic status attracted the attention of some who saw him as an ally for their own countercultural endeavors. Again, while this adoption of Paul as an ideological supporter could be said to apply to many, it was a particularly potent dimension of the work of so-called "non-Jewish Jews," including the German and North American psychoanalysts, Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) and Hanns Sachs (1881–1947), for whom Paul's power lay in his psychological insights into the human condition, especially with regard to guilt and the fear of mortality. Sachs was effusive in his appreciation of Paul's attempt to free the individual from the unnatural constraints of civilized life and his resolution of existential anxiety, couched as it was in the theological language of love. Freud was more cautious; while he certainly acknowledged the power of the apostle's image of the sacrifice of the Son in making restitution

for the ancestral murder of the Father, he never forgot that it represented a truly formidable obstacle in his mission to rid the world of the illusion of religion. Similarly, the Dutch and Russian philosophers, Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677) and Lev Shestov (1866–1938), approached Paul as a counterpoint around which they could debate the rationality of Western civilization's political and intellectual foundations, and he was called into service as an opponent of superstition and dogma, respectively.

Although he explicitly defined himself in Jewish terms, the Austrian philosopher of religion Jacob Taubes (1923–1987) might also be discussed in this context, having added politico-legal authority to the list. In *The Political Theology of Paul* (1993; English translation 2004), Paul is represented as an exciting opportunity to return to a time when what was "Jewish" and what was "Christian" had not yet been decided (2004, 20–21). If the apostle had believed that he was a Jew with a very special mission, Taubes could see no compelling reason to regard it as anything other than a Jewish mission. What precisely had this mission entailed? Taubes read Romans 9–11 as Paul's declaration that, like Moses, he was nothing less than the founder of a new people and the representative of a new law (2004, 40–41). What most interested Taubes in Paul's opening up of the covenant to the Gentiles was the authority he claimed for the consequent creation of a new community. In Paul's day, he observed, there had been only two models of human relations: the ethnic community, such as the people of Israel, and the imperial order of the Roman Empire. Paul was understood to have offered a third option, which he had defined against both. Thus, the epistle to the Romans relativized Rome's world imperialism with the Messiah's claim to world dominance, and at the same time challenges Israel's self-understanding by asserting the New Israel's independence of law (*nomos*) and peoplehood (*ethnos*). His image of Paul was of a revolutionary thinker who, having rejected all political and ethnic conceptions of identity, went on to disregard any authority that defined itself in these terms.

This was, moreover, the context in which the Jewish philosopher offered a corrective to the traditional Christian understanding of Paul and the law. For Taubes, it was important to jettison the traditional dichotomy of law and works righteousness and to acknowledge the error of regarding Pauline theology as, essentially, a critique of the Torah or Jewish religious law. Instead, he believed that the "nomos" or "law" that Paul had condemned should actually be understood as referring to the "Hellenistic theology of the sovereign" (2004, 116). Taubes maintained that Paul's critique of the law represents a negation of the use of law *per se* – whether imperial or theocratic – as a force of political order: for the apostle, legitimacy was denied to *all* sovereigns of the world. Taubes's Paul offered, then, a "negative political theology" in that he offered no *political* alternative in his program to undermine the law as a power to dominate; and this, said Taubes, had important implications for those interested in using Paul for their political theologies, for while many oppressed groups might identify with his revolutionary objectives, they could not claim the authority of Paul for the new political orders for which they called.

In offering this interpretation of Paul's view of the law, Taubes not only tried to develop a political-theological critique of the foundations of legal authority, but also to build a case for the categorization of anti-nomism as a legitimately *Jewish* enterprise. He accomplished this by challenging the traditional stereotypes of Judaism and

Christianity as two different approaches to religion, with Judaism exemplifying "reconciliation by ritualization" or ritualistic religiosity, whereby obedience to the law is prized above all else, and Christianity exemplifying "redemption by liberation" or spiritual religiosity, whereby freedom from the law is regarded as the key. And yet, historically, both approaches have had proponents within each of the two religious systems. Taubes's original contribution was to focus on "redemption by liberation" in the *Jewish* context, for which he held up Paul as his Jewish champion. (Traditionally, of course, Paul had been regarded as the *Christian* exemplar of "liberation" from the law.) For Taubes, Paul's critique of the law had *not* been a Christian polemic against Judaism or Jewish law or Torah, but rather one of a series of Jewish attempts to find freedom from the law itself (2004, 116–117); another famous example was Nathan of Gaza, apostle to the seventeenth-century self-proclaimed messiah Sabbatai Zvi (2004, 124–125). Thus, Taubes found Paul most useful in criticizing the Christian community for having missed the political import of the apostle's language of "faith" and "law," and chiding the Jewish community for having regarded anti-nomism as entirely alien to Judaism and Jewish thought.

Conclusion: Paul as an Intersection of Jewish and Christian Cultures

As has been well observed, no culture is an island unto itself and, consequently, there are no identity boundaries that are truly impermeable. For a long time now, thoughtful observers have acknowledged the symbiotic relationship between Judaism and Christianity; that is, between Jewish and Christian religious cultures. They have noted the interdependence of ritual practices, the shared vocabularies, the common fascination with "the other," the antagonistic counter-histories, and the blurred theological boundaries. It has been suggested that it is through the process of engaging with Christian culture, of exploring the intersecting boundaries, that Jewish identity is formed (and vice versa), for one is repeatedly obliged to adopt a stance in response to the challenge posed by "the other." One might agree, disagree, or compromise, but for self-reflective Jews living in a (historically) Christian society, it is simply not possible to ignore the ever-present challenges. From this point of view, Saul–Paul could be thought of as an important point of overlap between Jewish and Christian cultural boundaries. Arguably, it is precisely because the apostle *is* located at an intersection between Jewish and Christian cultural boundaries that he has proved so attractive to the Jewish commentators discussed and has facilitated so powerfully their exploration of questions concerning Jewish authenticity. For those Jewish inhabitants of modernity who have been both attracted to and critical of the non-Jewish world, there are powerful resonances with the state of mind of the first-century apostle who sought to be "all things to all men" (1 Cor 9:19–22), and yet who also refused to "be conformed to this world" (Rom 12:2). In working out their relation to Paul, there is unquestionably a sense of profound consequence in their deliberations and an awareness that their views about him are important for how they understand their own Jewishness, and for how others will perceive them.

Note

- 1 Biblical quotations are taken from the Revised Standard Version.

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