

This new version of lecture one replaces the earlier version of lecture one.

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HISTORICAL SECTION

LECTURE: NEW PERSPECTIVES ON CHRISTIANITY'S BEGINNINGS

1. Judaism prepares the way for Christianity
2. Luke-Acts on the origins of Christianity
3. Paul as the promoter of Christianity

1. Judaism prepares the way for Christianity¹

The synagogue in the Diaspora was not only a major source of persecution for the ancient church but also an important prerequisite for the birth and growth of the Christian community in the Roman Empire. The network of synagogues provided both routes and centers for the spread of Christian propaganda. Thus, the mission of the new religion, carried out in the name of the God of Abraham and Moses, found a field ready for it.

The dispersion of the Jews in the first century CE

Jews were scattered throughout most of the Roman Empire, but their actual numbers can only be estimated. For instance, Philo (15/10 BCE–after 40 CE), a Jewish

¹ For the following section cf. Adolf von Harnack. *Die Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums*. 4th edition, 1924; Hans Lietzmann. *A History of the Early Church. Volume I. The Beginnings of the Christian Church*, Cleveland: A Meredian Book, 1961; Rodney Stark. *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996. Gerd Lüdemann. *The Acts of the Apostles*, Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2005. I thank Tom Hall for his help in matters of style and content.

philosopher from Alexandria, reports that of the five city districts of Alexandria two were called “Jewish” because they were inhabited predominantly by Jews (*In Flaccum* 43). “In both Egypt and Syria there may well have been 1,000,000 Jews; in Palestine 500,000; in the rest of the Roman Empire at least 1,500,000. If there were 55,000,000 inhabitants in the empire, at least 7 percent of them must have been Jews.”²

“In Rome at that time the male Jewish population was between 12,000 and 15,000. According to the most reliable information, the free population of Augustan Rome about 5 BCE was approximately 600,000. 12,000 to 15,000 Jews would represent between two and three percent of that number.” (Harnack)

What Christians inherited from Judaism

It is surprising that in the Diaspora a religion that not only maintained a wall between itself and all other religions, but also reflected a national tradition in its practices and promises, should have displayed such an active missionary impulse and had such great success.

Missionary effort alone cannot explain it. Rather, the evidence shows that Judaism’s blossoming resulted from its influence on others and from internal changes: that it had become both an ethnic *and* a world religion. Jews felt proud that they had a message and a program to bring to all of humanity: the One God, creator and judge, and his holy moral law, further a “spiritual quality of worship without images.”³ From this consciousness they derived a sense of moral obligation of which Paul reminds his fellow Jews:

You are sure that
you are a guide to the blind,
a light to those who are in darkness,
an instructor of fools, of the foolish,
a teacher of babes,

² Lietzmann, *A History of the Early Church* I, 76.

³ Lietzmann *A History of the Early Church* I, 81.

having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth.⁴

Other elements of the tradition were minimized. In many instances the primary goal may have been conversion.⁵

The Christian mission owed to the preceding Jewish mission religious communities already founded over all the cities, and previous knowledge of the Old Testament, with excellent catechetical and liturgical instruction about its details.

Thus Christian missionaries were able to employ Jewish practice with relatively few changes, and the easily adopted content included regular worship of God, as well as an impressive apologetic for monotheism, historical teleology, together with “judgment day” and a recognizably superior set of ethical principles.

The debt is so large that Ernest Renan sarcastically hails the Christian mission as a continuation of the Jewish propaganda: “A generation of fanatics has robbed Judaism of its wages and it was prevented from gathering in that which it prepared.”

To paraphrase Harnack: The injustice that the Christian church deployed against Judaism is almost unprecedented in history. It not only took possession of and transformed Judaism’s sacred foundational text, the Hebrew Bible, but went so far as to rebut the debt and to cut every connection with Israel. The daughter disowned the mother, and then she looted her.

2. Luke-Acts on the origins of Christianity

We read in the Book of Acts of an extraordinary happening that occurred at Pentecost, the festival fifty days after the Passover when Jesus was executed. Luke reports that the disciples met in a house in Jerusalem, when they were suddenly filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in diverse tongues recognizable to a polyglot group of auditors representing the languages of the known world. Thus filled with the Holy Spirit and emboldened by an exhortation by Peter, Luke relates, Jesus’ followers initiated a missionary campaign that immediately won 3,000 converts and day by day thereafter gained more awe-struck believers for the cause of Christ. From that time on, Luke assures us, the mission continued to expand under the directions of the

⁴ Rom 2:19–20.

⁵ Note Matt 23:15.

Spirit and by the unflagging efforts of the apostles and the other followers, all of whom acted in full accord and harmony. This united and essentially monolithic picture of early Christianity continues throughout Acts.

The truth was, of course, a much more colorful and complex phenomenon. The evidence points to a Christian movement that began in many different places, where various gatherings of disciples sought to understand what they had learnt from Jesus, how and why his life so suddenly ended.

The texts that have survived indicate that the several churches or communities had very different views of the import of Jesus, the meaning of his death, and the reports of his resurrection. Indeed some took these latter claims to reflect a revival of Jesus' body, some envisioned a spiritual exaltation, while others dismissed such ideas and concentrated on spreading his proclamation and his teaching.

Even Acts makes clear the existence of various Christians and their rivalry and disagreement with one another. Those favoring the continued observance of Jewish Law actively opposed those who would admit Gentiles without imposing on them the demands of the Torah. Still others retained the primitive traditions associated with John the Baptist and were unaware of Pauline canons of ritual and practice.⁶ And all this is apart from the thoroughly attested activity of the communities that produced the Gospel of Thomas and the Q document. Indeed, pluralism was typical of the early church: the movement was never the unified entity that Acts portrays.

And that is unfortunate, because the author of Acts intends his work to be taken as a historical reportage on early Christianity. The very first verse of Acts invokes the opening of his gospel which he claims to have critically evaluated all the available sources and goes so far as to attest the precision of the result.

¹ Since many have attempted to compose an account about the events which have come to fulfillment among us, ² as they have been handed down to us from those who from the beginning were themselves eyewitnesses and servants of the word, ³ I too have thought it good, since I have investigated everything carefully from the start, to write them out in order for you, excellent Theophilus, ⁴ in order that you know the certain basis of the teaching in which you have been instructed (*Luke 1:1–4*).

⁶ See Acts 18:25–19:1–17.

This same introduction plainly refers to previous accounts – none of which he deems satisfactorily accurate – and promises what today might be called a new critical edition. The opening words of Acts constitute a virtual guarantee that the same intention and criteria guided his account of the spread of Christianity in his second book.

We do know that Acts tells a straight-line narrative: the story proceeds without interruptions or subplots. But if only because it simplifies the actual sequence of events, it cannot be taken to be a valid history of early first-century Christianity. Besides, the story contains many unanswered questions that Luke did not bother to hide and poses obvious questions he ignored. Even more upsetting is the appearance of puzzling characters like Apollos, who knew only John’s baptism⁷ and the Ephesian disciples who had never heard of the Holy Spirit.⁸ Strangest of all, we learn nothing about Christianity’s arrival in Rome! How can these oddities be explained?

Luke uses carefully selected characters to demonstrate Christianity’s triumph. We meet “good guys” – like the disciples, Christian teachers, and martyrs –and “bad actors” – like heretics,⁹ unbelieving Athenians,¹⁰ unfriendly Roman officials,¹¹ and the inevitable but distasteful Jews.¹² Still, despite a few bumps in the road the path to ultimate salvation leads straight ahead and has no forks or detours.

To be sure, such basic narrative strategies yield stories that are easily remembered and reiterated, and thus likely to be influential. Unfortunately, by avoiding the nuances and complexities that are part of human history, such simplistic dramatization necessarily distorts the truth. The abundant evidence of Christianity’s early diversity compels us to adopt a highly critical view of Acts because it shows how much Luke has left out. Above all, we may find ourselves reluctant to accept his biases concerning Jews and other troublemakers who hinder what he sees as the monolithic and inevitable progress of Christianity.

⁷ Acts 18:24–28.

⁸ Acts 19:1–7.

⁹ Acts 20:29.

¹⁰ Acts 17:16–34

¹¹ Acts 24:24–27 (Felix).

¹² Acts 20:19.

Today, the good/bad, orthodox/heretic distinctions are at last coming to be seen as judgments made after the fact by those who wished (and still wish) to promote the winners – among whom they see themselves.

Luke interprets the continuity of salvation as a “course” or “way.” In a sermon – which he puts into Paul’s mouth in Pisidian Antioch –the apostle speaks of John the Baptist’s “entrance” into the world¹³ and says, “As John was finishing his course ...”.¹⁴ Acts perceives Christian life generally as a “way”¹⁵ and in looking back on his missionary activity in his farewell speech at Miletus,¹⁶ Paul describes the end of his missionary work as the completion of his course.¹⁷

As was the case with Jesus, John the Baptist, and the apostles, Luke has a theological purpose for recounting the activity of Paul: he is committed to explaining and defending his concept of salvation history. This history is to be seen in the movement from Galilee to Jerusalem¹⁸ and from Jerusalem to Rome.¹⁹

The worldwide scope of the mission encompasses the whole Roman Empire²⁰ and Paul emerges as the central character in the spread of the good news. Every element of the story – the Galilean genesis; the crisis, tragedy, and exaltation in Jerusalem; the establishment there of the first community; and what Luke sees as the experimental mission of the Hellenists – leads towards the universal availability of salvation. Halfway through Acts, the Jerusalem conference serves as a pivotal event, distinguishing the primitive church from that of the present and laying the foundation for Paul’s independent mission.²¹ The Pauline era grows out of and is validated by the sacred history of the Jerusalem community.

Because Paul’s “first missionary journey”²² antedates the Jerusalem

¹³ Acts 13:24.

¹⁴ Acts 13:25.

¹⁵ Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22.

¹⁶ Acts 20:18–35.

¹⁷ Acts 20:2.

¹⁸ Luke 4:14 and 24:47

¹⁹ Acts 1:8 and 28:16–30.

²⁰ See Luke 2:1.

²¹ Note Acts 15:39–40.

²² Acts 13:1–14:28.

conference, it has a transitional function. First, it illustrates the issues that provoke the conference: the fact and the success of taking the gospel to the Gentiles in Antioch²³ were in effect charted by the geographical scope of the new itinerary. Second, Luke uses the journey to present the well-known transformation of Saul into Paul²⁴ and elevate Paul's status to that of "The Apostle to the Gentiles"²⁵

Thereafter, Paul advances alone to center stage, and his mission carries him all the way to Rome. Clearly, this narrative strategy has theological motives, for Luke's placing it *after* the Jerusalem conference emphasizes his congregation's roots in the primitive church and thus the continuity of salvation history. Luke's motives are *not* primarily chronological; chronology is pressed into the service of theological meaning. He is an apologist, not a secular historian. When he has found out the theological significance of an occurrence, he is able to derive from it the "correct" chronology. We would do him an injustice to scrutinize a report of his on the basis of historical research alone, for the litmus test must always be theology: namely, how does this or that fit into the history of salvation.

These results indicate that we should look at the journeys of Paul in the framework of Luke's theology of salvation history. Moreover, the *relationship of salvation history and profane history* in Luke-Acts raises a fundamental question concerning the use of secular historical data gathered from Luke-Acts in any valid history of early Christianity.

3. Paul – the Promoter of Christianity

For the study of Christian origins, seven undisputed letters of Paul, being the only firsthand sources from the first generation among 27 texts of the New Testament, occupy a special position. They allow us to read what Paul thought, to hear his own voice, and tentatively to date the foundational events of earliest Christianity. In short, *work on these important documents provides the basis for nearly every other question related to Christian origins*. Taking 1 Thessalonians, the earliest of Paul's letters, as a vantage point, I will deal first with his role as a founder of Christian

²³ Acts 11:20–21.

²⁴ Acts 13:9.

²⁵ See Acts 13:13, 16, 43, 45, 50; 14:20.

communities and as a missionary, second with his role as apostle and his vision of a new humanity, and third with his relationship to Israel.

(a) Paul's role as a founder of Christian communities and as a missionary

1 Thessalonians is a cordial letter from Paul to a recently founded community, but also one in which the apostle uses all his skill and charm to induce the Thessalonians to take his message to heart. Nothing was more important to him than that the Thessalonians should be persuaded of his love, his longing, and his concern for them. For in a very real sense he and they were inseparably united, and every aspect of their relationship reflects a reciprocal giving and taking.

The letter also illustrates Paul's pastoral side.²⁶ The apostle has skillfully deployed his co-worker Timothy to inform him about the situation at Thessalonica, and now he offers his counsel, and with both overflowing empathy and firm insistence reminds his young community of the rules of conduct and faith he had transmitted to them during the founding visit.

Despite the harmonious tone, 1 Thessalonians is a "fire letter"²⁷. Viewing it as a whole, we can see that in it Paul looks into the future more than in any other of his preserved epistle. He expects the second coming of Jesus to happen during his own lifetime and threatens all non-believers – Gentiles and Jews alike – with the certainty of condign judgment. On the other hand, he assures the Thessalonians of their faith and its guarantee of salvation, for unlike the two aforementioned groups they had accepted the gospel message that would save them from the imminent wrath of God.

Of course, Paul tried to establish and solidify his contact with other people, for he confesses a compulsion to preach the gospel.²⁸ And though he was an effective

²⁶ In modern scholarship especially Abraham Malherbe (*Paul and the Thessalonians: The Philosophic Tradition of Pastoral Care*. Philadelphia 1987) has drawn attention to Paul's pastoral side.

²⁷ This designation goes back to Arnold A. T. Ehrhardt: *Politische Metaphysik von Solon bis Augustin*. Vol. 2. Tübingen 1959, 21.

²⁸ 1 Cor 9:16.

promoter of a new and very different message, this message no doubt struck most of his audience as not only radical, but indeed exotic. Still, Paul considered the needs of his hearers and was willing to meet them halfway. He openly avows that to the Jews he became a Jew and to the Gentiles, a Gentile.²⁹ Yet he himself was neither a real Jew nor a real Gentile, and in this, his earliest letter, he even played the part of a secular philosopher.

Paul used every means at his disposal so that he “might save some”.³⁰ “He was an eminent man of action; of powerful soul ... a conqueror, a missionary, a propagator.”³¹ Paul’s burning commitment to the Gospel and his apostleship meant that throughout his public life he displayed both a streak of arrogance and a tendency to vacillate. No doubt some were perplexed, but his accomplishments suggest that this adaptability was a good way to succeed.

Gentile Christian communities to whom he introduced the Gospel (Philippi and Thessalonica are two good examples) served as bases for his missionary work of proclaiming both the one God of the Jews and Jesus Christ the future savior whom God had raised from the dead. Indeed, he felt called to make Gentiles worship the God of Israel.³²

His preaching in the newly founded congregations included Jewish teachings of sanctified living that both affirmed the validity of specific parts of the Law in the form of a catechism and reminded spiritually inclined Christians of their duties in daily life. And while from the very beginning circumcision was not practiced, Paul introduced baptism and the Lord’s Supper as Christian variations of rites that were at home in mystery religions familiar to all. It is interesting to note that he does not explicitly mention any of these practices in 1 Thessalonians.³³ Obviously Paul regards the performance of baptism and the Lord’s Supper as self-evident.

²⁹ 1 Cor 9:20–21.

³⁰ 1 Cor 9:22.

³¹ Ernest Renan. *Saint Paul* New York, NY, 1869, 329.

³² Cf. Rom 1:15–16; 1:13–15; 11:13.

³³ On the introduction of baptism in Corinth during the founding visit see 1 Cor 1:13–16; on the introduction of the Lord’s Supper see 1 Cor 11:23–26.

(b) The apostle and his vision of a new humanity

Paul regarded himself as the agent of Jesus Christ, called by God and committed to God's cause. Along with his risen Lord he claimed to be part of a cosmic drama under the direction of God almighty. He did not consider the life of Jesus of Nazareth to be an important topic.³⁴ Paul never met Jesus personally and had little familiarity with his deeds and teachings. In short, he cared but little about the itinerant preacher from Galilee; it was the risen, heavenly Lord that mattered above all else, yet only as the crucified One³⁵ whose death offered atonement to humankind.

We encounter in Paul a tremendous degree of self-consciousness and self-importance; his emphatic statement that he was superior to many of his contemporaries in observing the law³⁶ is not only a reflection of his Pharisaic sense of superiority, but also has a basis in his character; as a Christian he would later say of himself that he worked more than all the other apostles,³⁷ or spoke in tongues more than all the Corinthians together.³⁸ It is easy to see from this how difficult he must have been at times as a person.

Nonetheless, he dominated his communities by insisting on his wishes and authority and requiring the compliance of others. His claims of apostolic authority reinforced his sense of infallibility and often led him to bully any who disagreed. As one would expect, he thus gained devoted followers among docile members but also repelled many who were not easily swayed.³⁹

³⁴ Yet according to Paul the cosmic Lord Jesus was at the same time the crucified One and therefore a human being. Cf. 1 Cor 1:23; Gal 3:1.

³⁵ Gal 2:2.

³⁶ Gal 1:14.

³⁷ 1 Cor 15:10.

³⁸ 1 Cor 14:8).

³⁹ Cf. William Wrede. *Paul*. Boston 1908, 37–38. See also Renan, *Saint Paul*, 327: “Paul was personally too energetic to form an original school. He always crushed his disciples. With him they only fill the characters of secretaries, servants and couriers.”

He could not take an even course because his desire for an absolute faith was too strong and his experience near Damascus too overwhelming. One could be certain that as an apostle of Jesus he would show the same burning zeal that he showed as a persecutor of Christians. “Paul the apostle shared many of the characteristics of Paul the Pharisee. One of the principal ones was that he was a zealot fully and totally committed to the course to which he felt called by God. Further, in both his careers he was, by his own modest estimate, the best there was.”⁴⁰

As a Christian, his fanaticism merely changed its focus.⁴¹ “Though the call to be an apostle had reversed the direction of his life, Paul in many ways remained the same.”⁴² If Paul's conversion and ongoing dedication to Christianity had granted him the authority to do so, he would certainly have undertaken harsh retaliatory measures against the Jewish Christians who sought to undermine and disrupt his missionary efforts.⁴³

Why, then, did Paul seek to eradicate Christianity? It might seem that his fanaticism sprang from the exclusivist conviction that this new sect sullied God's honor and annulled the divinely enjoined purity of the Jewish community. Such a challenge to God's supremacy would have to be eradicated. But such a view makes it difficult to understand the *sudden* change from persecutor to preacher, especially since the about-face involved a debilitating emotional and physical breakdown.

His acquaintance with Christian practice and preaching surely took place at both cognitive and precognitive levels – as is probably true of all social and religious experiences. The explanation suggests itself that Paul's vehement rejection of Christians and his aggressive attitude towards them was based on an inner tension in his person, one of the kind that numerous studies in depth-psychology have identified in other cases as a motivation of aggressive behavior. Is it too much to suggest that the basic elements of Christian practice and preaching subconsciously attracted Paul? Fearing his hidden strivings in this direction, he projected these onto Christians so that he could attack them all the more intemperately?

⁴⁰ E. P. Sanders. *Paul*, Oxford 1991, 12.

⁴¹ Cf. Renan, *Saint Paul*, 329.

⁴² Sanders, *Paul*, 12.

⁴³ Cf. Wrede, *Paul*, 32.

But his calling as a Pharisee came to an abrupt end. Paul is one of those people whose life is bifurcated by a single inner catastrophe. Paul had loathed Jesus as a sham messiah and battled against his disciples, but near Damascus in the middle of a persecution that he himself had initiated, he “saw” Jesus in his heavenly glory and heard himself called to be the apostle to the Gentiles. This vision of “God’s Son” determined his future life.

Paul considered his own preaching to be God’s word and praised the Thessalonians for accepting it as such (1 Thess 2:13). He even stood up to the Roman Empire by periodically appropriating its slogan “peace and security,”⁴⁴ and then predicting its total destruction in the near future. In 1 Thess 1:1 we see an unmistakable act of political resistance, for he suggestively identifies the Thessalonian community he had founded as the *ekklesia* of Thessalonians – a term we translate as “church,” but the primary meaning of which was “civic assembly.” It was a good thing for Paul that no Roman authority took notice of this.

But of course Paul’s work was directed mainly at religious goals. His special commission, assigned him by God almighty, was to bring the gospel to the Gentiles in order to inform them that from then on they were included in God’s plan of salvation. They did not have to become Jews first, and even though not circumcised, they could obtain the same status as Jews. Henceforth the two groups would belong equally to the church, for together they comprise the new Israel and are one in Christ; and accordingly they ate with one another, dispensing with Jewish dietary and purity laws: gone was the distinction between clean and unclean.⁴⁵ This praxis had a dynamic of its own and prompted the claim of the church universal that all differences of gender, religion, and status were eliminated.

“When Paul discusses membership in the people of God he always insists on the equality of Jew and Gentile and faith in Christ alone. ... (T)hese are the two interrelated convictions which lie immediately behind his denial of righteousness by the law.”⁴⁶ In this way Paul – though insisting always to have remained a Jew – willy-

⁴⁴ 1 Thess 5:3.

⁴⁵ Cf. Lev 11; Deut 14:3–20.

⁴⁶ Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*, 208.

nilly denies “two pillars common to all forms of Judaism: the election of Israel and the faithfulness to the Jewish law.”⁴⁷

No wonder, then, that they undertook strong and even violent measures to keep him from pursuing his work. But they were as unsuccessful as Paul the Pharisee had been in attempting to eradicate the Christian community of Damascus.⁴⁸ Indeed, the utopian notion of the church universal had already gained many sympathizers from Judaism and paganism alike, and could hardly be stopped. Let me try to explain the dynamics of the nascent church by comparing it to a huge covered kettle full of water at a rolling boil: to the energy generated by a growing number of Jewish disciples was suddenly added an influx of Gentile converts, and the kettle boiled over, the hissing and bubbling water creating new channels as it cooled – and new communities composed of both Jews and Gentiles sprang up.

(c) Paul and the people of Israel

In 1 Thessalonians Paul assails the “unbelieving” Jews more sharply than any other Christian in the first two centuries. He uses polemic that stems from both Jewish and pagan sources. The Jewish attacks employ the well-known theme that having killed the prophets, the Jews deserve God’s punishment. The pagan assaults combine a broad spectrum of anti-Semitic stereotypes to claim that the Jews do not please God and are hostile to all other human beings. Thus Paul lets Jewish and pagan battering amplify one another.

To my knowledge Paul is the only Jew from antiquity to direct traditional anti-Semitism of pagan origin against his own people (*asebeia* [impiety or godlessness] and *misanthrôpia* [hostile refusal to have dealings with other people]).⁴⁹ He was clearly outraged when Torah-observing Jews obstructed his efforts to proselytize Gentiles, and incorporated several tried and true anti-Jewish formulae into his letter

⁴⁷ Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*, 208.

⁴⁸ Gal 1:17.

⁴⁹ 1Thess 2:5–6.

to the Gentile Christians of Thessalonica, his earliest extant epistle. In this way he incited Thessalonian Christians against non-Christian Jews.

In ensuing fights with Torah-observing Jewish Christians, Paul maligned his Jewish birth-religion by calling it “dung.”⁵⁰ Moreover, he slandered his opponents as servants of Satan⁵¹ and in the bitterly sarcastic Gal 5:12 urged those who wanted the Gentile Christians to get circumcised, “Let them cut their own whole thing off”.⁵²

More than a decade after the composition of 1 Thessalonians and shortly before the third journey to Jerusalem that he undertook as a Christian, Paul was in Corinth and dictated his letter to the Romans.⁵³ In chapters 1–8 of this letter he develops his message of justification by faith and free grace through the atoning death of Jesus – a gift that Jews and Gentile alike are welcome to accept.

But he seems strangely unaware that in the following three chapters, and especially at the end of chapter 11, he effectively cancels a great deal of what he has just written. Indeed, a sort of Jewish patriotism seems to flow back over him. For here in 11:25–26 he tells the Romans about a revelation of God he has received to the effect that “a hardening has come upon part of Israel until the full number of Gentiles determined by God has come in” and that thereupon, “*all* Israel will be saved”.

Paul is introducing here a Jewish “creed” about the fate of all Jews in the future world.⁵⁴ “We have here simply the clearest and most concise statement of a view which in fact seems to have been universal.”⁵⁵ Suddenly belonging to Israel through birth would carry as much weight as justification through faith; and not only

⁵⁰ Phil 3:8.

⁵¹ 2 Cor 11:14–15.

⁵² Gal 5:12. Sanders, *Paul*, 53, calls this “the nastiest statement in [Paul’s] letters.” The Greek verb is *apokoptomai* (“to cut off” [the genitals of the males]). NRSV uses the verb “to castrate” which is both anatomically ambiguous and not strong enough.

⁵³ Tertius wrote the letter as he himself says (Rom 16:22). Paul was lodging at the house of Gaius (Rom 16:23), whom he had baptized during the founding of a Christian congregation there (1 Cor 1:14).

⁵⁴ On this “creed” see further below, **.

⁵⁵ E. P. Sanders. *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*. Philadelphia 1977, 149.

that, but *all* Jews will be included in the promised salvation while only a predetermined number of Gentiles will be so rewarded.

This strange about-face has an identifiable reason: the evident fact that most of Paul's own people have not accepted the gospel of Jesus Christ. Indeed, the Apostle says, his anguish is so strong that he would be willing suffer the unthinkable consequence of being cut off from Christ if he could thus effect the conversion of his non-believing Jewish brothers.⁵⁶

Here we see another side of Paul and may find relief and reassurance in the willingness of a one-time hater of the Jews to give up his own salvation for that of his friends. For a moment, at least, he has claimed reconciliation with his own people – and thereby perhaps also with himself.

Note that Paul wrote Romans at a time of increasing tension between him and non-Christian and Christian Jews. His opponents knew that Paul had written words critical of the law;⁵⁷ these had come to the notice of Jerusalem Christians who had sent spies into the Pauline churches. There they had observed abominations against the law involving people who had been born Jews: Jewish Christians no longer circumcised their sons⁵⁸ and regularly ate with Gentile Christians.⁵⁹ On the other hand, the situation in Jerusalem had become radicalized in the run-up to the Jewish War (66–70 CE). And perhaps the collection was not even called for at the Jerusalem conference (48 CE), but was first brought into play by Paul in order to gain an edge in the negotiations on that occasion over the circumcision of Gentile Christians.

Eighteen Halakhot⁶⁰ that were issued before the Jewish War (66–70 CE) included a prohibition against accepting gifts from Gentiles.⁶¹ One might see here a clue to the attitude of the Jerusalem church to the collection of the Pauline churches: what once had been acceptable had now become intolerable as a result of

⁵⁶ Cf. Rom 9:1–5.

⁵⁷ Cf. Rom 8:2; Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 263.

⁵⁸ Acts 21:21.

⁵⁹ Cf. Gal 2:12.

⁶⁰ Laws by which to go which are not found in Jewish Scriptures but in the oral tradition.

⁶¹ Cf. Martin Hengel. *The Zealots*, Edinburgh 1989, 200–206.

developments in Pauline mission territory; indeed, the collection had turned into a “tainted business.”⁶²

Paul evidently expected the worst, since shortly before his fateful journey to Jerusalem he asked the Roman Christians for supporting prayers “that I may be delivered from the unbelievers (= Jews) in Judaea, and that my service (= the collection) for the Saints (= the community in Jerusalem) may be acceptable”.⁶³ In other words, he knows of the indignation of the non-believing Jews in Jerusalem but also the Christian community’s reservations regarding both his person and the collection.

To quote Jacob Taubes: “Whoever accepts *this* money accepts it from Gentile Christians. For the Jewish Christian congregations in the diaspora, the Pauline groups, the Pauline congregations, were the devil himself.”⁶⁴ Why, then, did Paul himself go to Jerusalem to deliver the money? Why not send trusted co-workers? Most likely Paul wanted to hand over the money himself “in order to obtain legitimation for himself. If someone brings along a decent sum, then it’s also a matter of legitimation, and not just philanthropy. Not of philanthropy at all, but of legitimation.”⁶⁵

By promising the non-believing Jews salvation without faith in Christ, Paul tried to turn the tide. However, his fellow-Jews who did not regard Jesus as the Messiah had good reason to count Paul’s supposedly friendly sentiments as nothing, indeed as the hypocritical words and acts of a man who throughout the Roman empire lured proselytes and God-fearers alike from their synagogues. For in fact he taught born Jews to associate without scruple with Gentiles and to give up strict observance of the law.

Paul constantly ignored the reality that his missionary work created. It necessarily led to an alienation of Jews from their religion and thus to the diminution

⁶² Jacob Taubes. *The Political Theology of Paul*, Los Angeles, 2004, 17.

⁶³ Rom 15:31.

⁶⁴ Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 17.

⁶⁵ Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 18–19.

of Judaism.⁶⁶ Not much later many of these converts sided with their non-Christian fellow Jews and like them permanently stamped Paul as an apostate.

Nor could Gentile Christians have been overjoyed with Paul's new ethnocentrism; they may even have doubted whether they could continue to trust him. In short, Paul had likely suffered a falling-out not only with those closest to him but also with the Jewish Christians and the Jerusalem Jews. These latter two groups clearly saw that Paul's activity was ultimately destructive of Jewish customs and threatened an end to the law of Moses.

Until the end Paul claimed that he never consciously abandoned the faith of his fathers and never forsook Judaism.⁶⁷ That now seems difficult to sustain; but rather than charge him with duplicity, might we see it as an almost involuntary but strategic "flip-flop" on Paul's part? Did he, in a time when things were not going terribly well in the mission field, deem it advantageous to curry a bit of favor with the Jewish converts⁶⁸ who constituted a significant minority presence in the Roman community?

Or if that seems too calculated a motive, can we imagine an elderly and battle-weary apostle creating yet another "truth" to satisfy a sentimental attachment to the people and faith of his youth? At any rate it probably strengthened both the Roman congregation and the movement as a whole, and few can imagine that Gentile Christianity fared any the worse for Paul's "Jewish patriotism."

⁶⁶ Cf. Harnack, *New Testament Studies IV. The Date of the Acts and of the Synoptic Gospels*. New York 1911, 66.

⁶⁷ Cf. Riddle, *Paul – Man of Conflict*, 147.

⁶⁸ Cf. Prisca and Aquila (Rom 16:3); Andronicus and Junia (Röm 16:7), etc.