

Meeting Paul Again for the First Time¹

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I can remember the day that I started reading the book “Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time.”² I was living in Massachusetts, a part-time pastor of a Friends meeting in a largely unprogrammed yearly meeting. I had finished my Ph.D. in Early Christianity at Brown University and was trying to figure out how to relate a purely academic study of early Christian writings to matters of faith and life. There I sat, waiting in the car in the parking lot of an outlet store, reading this book and discovering a reconnection between living faith in the modern world and the intellectual study of ancient history and religion.

I had grown up in fundamentalist Christianity – and had survived. By that I mean I didn’t feel antagonism towards my parents or the church like many others who move away from their conservative upbringing. I had done a good job while in the university of discounting what I had learned in my early years, but had not reformulated a sophisticated basis for what I did believe about the significance of the history and literature of early Christianity. Marcus Borg’s book was a beginning point for me.

I did meet Jesus again, but the Jesus I came to know was not completely the one Borg was introducing to me. Nevertheless I will always be grateful for the re-introduction. If we’ve learned anything from the quest for the historical Jesus, it is that we all have a tendency to construct the world according to our own experience, education and socialization. The Jesus I

¹ This paper was delivered at the Bible Association of Friends in America annual gathering, November 13, 2004.

² Marcus J. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus & the Heart of Contemporary Faith*, (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994).

imagine is still much more like the divine figure from my earliest recollections in Sunday School than the existential philosopher of a Bultmann³ or the peasant, freedom-fighter of a Crossan⁴.

Jesus studies have had our attention for the last several decades. Many new books were written about Jesus from a variety of approaches. The Jesus Seminar brought to the attention of the public the work of one group of scholars. People were able to watch TV specials on the historical Jesus. It has been a productive era in the field of Jesus studies. Not quite as familiar has been the work going on at the same time in Paul research.⁵

For many people Paul represents the beginning of the institution of the church. Jesus invited the marginalized people in society, but Paul seems to ostracize. Women have felt victimized by Paul's language about their role in the church and household. Slavery appears to be permitted. Who's right with God seems narrowly defined and Judaism gets portrayed as legalistic and replaced by Christianity. As Friedrich Nietzsche put it in 1888,

The "glad tidings" [of Jesus] were followed closely by the absolutely worst tidings--those of St. Paul. Paul is the incarnation of a type which is the reverse of that of the Saviour; he is the genius in hatred, in the standpoint of hatred, and in the relentless logic of hatred. And alas what did this dysevangelist not sacrifice to his hatred. He did more: he once more falsified the history of Israel, so as to make it appear as a prologue to his mission.⁶

If this is your acquaintance with Paul, then perhaps you don't want to meet this Paul again. We need to ask the question, what Paul is this? Is this the Paul of history or the historical Paul? Before you write off Paul, maybe you would like to be reintroduced to a Paul without the

³ Rudolph Bultmann's demythologization of the gospel narratives through form criticism produced a Jesus whose preaching emphasized authentic existence as espoused by 19th century existentialist philosophers like Martin Heidegger.

⁴ John Dominic Crossan's *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* develops a Jesus that would seem to fit with Crossan's own liberation theology.

⁵ Peter Jennings hosted a three-hour special "Jesus and Paul: The Word and the Witness," April, 2004.

⁶ From Nietzsche's 1888 essay, "The Antichrist. An Attempted Criticism of Christianity," sect. 42, in *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, vol. 16, ed. Oscar Low (New York, 1964), 184f as cited by John Gager, *Reinventing Paul*, p.3.

accretions of church history and Christian dogma. I can't guarantee that the Paul I introduce to you is the historical Paul or that it will be a Paul you want to know better. For me it is close to a Paul of the first century and a Paul whose writings merit being foundational for the Christian church.

Without going into great detail, I should introduce you to those who have been preparing the way for us to renew our understanding of Paul. At least let me mention representative figures whose work will lead you into the work of those on whom they have built. Each one has a piece of the puzzle. Like an episode of "Cold Case,"⁷ we're able to learn more about Paul from each witness until we are able to see Paul standing before us, not as he is now in the 21st century but as he might have been known in the first century.

One of the most prominent has been the relatively recent work of E. P. Sanders, primarily in his book *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*.⁸ Sanders' comparison of patterns of religion among Jews during the second temple period has been a watershed of renewed interest in Pauline research.

During the last century, scholars have become more and more aware that texts on Judaism (or late Judaism) described Judaism from the viewpoint of Christian theology.⁹ Rabbinic Judaism – the surviving form of Judaism following the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 C.E. and the Bar Kochba Revolt in 135 C.E. – was the type of Judaism made into a caricature.

⁷ CBS Sunday night television show in which unsolved cases are reinvestigated. At the end of the show the person who had died appears to the detective in a closing scene.

⁸ E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977). See also his *Judaism: Practice & Belief 63 BCE – 66 CE*, (London: SCM Press; Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992).

⁹ G. F. Moore, "Christian Writers on Judaism," *HTR* 14 1921: 197-254; *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era: The Age of the Tannaim*, 3 vols., (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1927-30). Solomon Schechter, *Aspects of Rabbinic Theology*, (New York: Macmillan, 1909; reprint, New York: Schocken, 1961). A. Marmorstein, *The Doctrine of Merits in Old Rabbinical Literature*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1920; reprint, New York: KTAV, 1968). C. G. Montefiore, "On Some Misconceptions of Judaism and Christianity By Each Other," *JQR* 8 (1896): 193-216.

It was the perfect foil for Christian views about law and grace. Besides this tannaitic literature (Mishnah, Talmuds, Targums, etc.), there was also a large body of material that came to be associated with second temple Judaism. This was literature written in Greek by Jews subsequent to the hellenization program of Alexander the Great in the early fourth century BCE. It included such works as the philosophical writings of Philo from Alexandria, the collections we refer to as the Apocrypha and the Pseudepigrapha, and the historical works of Josephus from the late first century. To this literature in Greek was added the new Aramaic and Hebrew Dead Sea Scrolls material after its discovery and gradual publication over the last fifty years.

Sanders' main conclusion after comparing this body of literature comes to us in the expression "covenantal nomism." He defines it as "the view that one's place in God's plan is established on the basis of the covenant and that the covenant requires as the proper response of man his obedience to its commandments, while providing means of atonement for transgression."¹⁰ In other words, Judaism was not a religion based on legalistic works. The Hebrew people were transferred into this relationship with God by means of the covenant. Torah observance was the means to stay in right relationship with God as a people. This part of Sander's contribution has received wide acceptance, although some of the other things he had to say have not been as enduring.¹¹

Another important figure has been Krister Stendahl. To Stendahl should go an award for saying the least with the most impact. In several articles he crystallized an emerging paradigm

¹⁰ Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, p. 75.

¹¹ An alternate view is being developed in the series edited by D.A. Carson *et al* for Baker Academic Press: *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, v. 1: *The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism* and *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, v. 2: *The Paradoxes of Paul*.

shift from an Augustinian-Lutheran view of the Christian Paul to the Jewish Paul.¹² Stendahl shifted the focus from the Paul of Romans 7, who can't be right with God through the law, to the Paul of the robust conscience: "as to righteousness under the law blameless (Phil. 3:6)." Instead of the Paul who converted to Christianity, Stendahl described a Jew who became a follower of Jesus and received a prophetic call to be the apostle to the gentiles.

From this type of research going on in the early to mid-20th century has arisen what is being called the New Perspective on Paul. There is also what may be considered as an extreme branch of the New Perspective what I will call for the moment the Re- group (my terminology). I'll explain that in a minute. The term New Perspective is attributed to James D. G. Dunn from the University of Durham, England.¹³ Along with him is another Brit and fellow Anglican N. T. Wright, who taught New Testament for twenty years and is now Canon of Westminster.¹⁴ Both are well-regarded New Testament scholars as well as being popular authors. Both build on the work of Sanders and continue the thesis that Paul did not depict Judaism as a legalistic religion based on fulfilling works of the law.

It is the Re- group that I want to talk about the most. Two important exponents of this group have written recent books with Re- in the title. The small paperback published in 2000, written for a non-specialist audience, is titled *Reinventing Paul* by John Gager of Princeton.¹⁵ He does an excellent job explaining and summarizing this line of research. The other work is by Stanley Stowers, Professor of Early Christianity at Brown University, in his 1994 book, *A*

¹² Krister Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles: and other essays*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976). The section on "Call Rather Than Conversion" (pp. 7-22) and the essay "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West" (pp. 78-96) have been particularly influential.

¹³ James D.G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul, and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press), 1990.

¹⁴ N.T. Wright, *What St. Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co.), 1997.

¹⁵ John G. Gager, *Reinventing Paul*, (New York: Oxford University Press), 2000.

Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews, and Gentiles.¹⁶ Perhaps we could call this the Ivy League Reading of Paul, except that both authors are expanding on the earlier work of Lloyd Gaston, who is a Professor Emeritus of the Vancouver School of Theology, having taught New Testament there from 1973-1995.¹⁷ (He did get his Bachelors from Dartmouth College, so maybe the Ivy League name could work.)

In case you haven't figured it out, Stan Stowers was my mentor at Brown. I studied with him during the period he was developing his book on Romans. I had already been somewhat familiar with the approach having read Sanders' work on Paul, Gager's earlier work called *The Origins of Anti-Semitism: Attitudes Toward Judaism in Pagan and Christian Antiquity*,¹⁸ and some other works that bear on this issue. Yet it took me years before I finally started to get it. As I look through seminar papers I wrote, I see Stan's notes – in red of course – all over the margins, urging me to read the text not through the categories of Christian theology but as a first-century reader might have.

For the last ten years I've been taking this radical New Perspective on Paul approach as a working model. My description of it will not do it justice, for it requires a careful and close reading of the texts and, as you'll see, a familiarity with a wide-ranging body of scholarly research.. The objections I have had to it in the past have turned out to be ones based on my own assumptions and anachronisms. When I'm working from this view and something clicks for me, I discover it's because the interpretation fits with the first-century. This perspective has consistency, solves many of the interpretive dilemmas where Paul seems to be contradictory, and

¹⁶ Stanley K. Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews, and Gentiles* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

¹⁷ Lloyd Gaston, *Paul and the Torah*, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1987).

¹⁸ John G. Gager, *The Origins of Anti-semitism: Attitudes toward Judaism in Pagan and Christian Antiquity*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

has the potential to improve Christian teaching about sin, salvation, and Jewish-Christian relations.

For the radical New Perspective group, the New Perspective group doesn't go far enough. Sanders for instance draws the conclusion, "In short, this is what Paul finds wrong in Judaism: it is not Christianity."¹⁹ Another New Perspective scholar is Morna Hooker, Lady Margaret's Professor of Divinity Emerita at Cambridge University. She writes in *Paul: A Short Introduction*,

It might seem as though the law had a design-fault built into it, but though Paul's argument seems, at times, to imply this, he never draws this conclusion. Indeed, he could not, for the law had been given by God! If there is a fault, it is not in God himself or in his *purpose*. If the law has been unable to give what it appeared to promise, that is the fault of sin which, as we have seen, exploited the weakness of the flesh. But since God is God, he must have known that this would happen. Perhaps, then, the problem was that Israel misunderstood the true *purpose* of the law.

Far from being necessary, retorted Paul, it was – as a system of rules – out of date, belonging to a bygone age. Life under the law belongs to the age of weakness, the age of the flesh, 'the present evil age' (Gal. 1:4) from which the Galatians have been set free.²⁰

The more radical new view argues that Paul never says anything negative about the Law except as it pertains to Gentiles. Paul writes letters to gentiles to further establish his gospel mission that, though they had been excluded from God's covenant with Israel and therefore had no means for being right with God or dealing with sins apart from becoming a Jew through circumcision and law-keeping, Jesus by his obedience and faithfulness to God in death had provided the means for gentiles to be right with God as they participate in the new life in Christ.

In order to identify the pieces of this puzzle and try putting them together into a coherent image of a historical Paul, I will first describe in more detail how this new view is constructed. Then I want to talk about some key issues that support and further develop the view.

¹⁹ Sanders, *Paul*, p. 552.

²⁰ Morna D. Hooker, *Paul: A Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2003), p. 64.

Ethnological Approach

Another way to think of this new view is to think of it as an ethnological approach. Maybe that's not the right term, but it gets to the crucial point. We must not read back into the ancient text modern categories like the human condition, universal guilt, individual conscience, or even the term Christian. Paul doesn't distinguish between Jews and Christians, only Jews and gentiles. The modern concept of the individual doesn't appear until at least Augustine. Paul writes as a Jew to non-Jews.

Paul within Judaism

A critical piece of the puzzle is to recognize Paul within Judaism.²¹ It isn't until sometime later that Christianity becomes separate from Judaism. The Apostle Paul proudly asserts his pedigree as a "Hebrew of Hebrews." He adds, "as to the righteousness which is in the law, found blameless." (Phil. 3:6) In Romans, Paul concludes that "the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good" (Rom 7:12) and that the "Law is spiritual." (Rom. 7:14) When the rhetorical question is asked, "What advantage has the Jew?" Paul responds, "Great in every respect." The Jews were the ones who were entrusted with God's law. Again a question is raised, "Do we nullify the Law through faith," and the response is, "No way. Just the opposite, we establish the Law." (Rom. 3:31) Later Paul reminds his readers that God has not rejected His people (Rom. 11:1), that "they did not stumble so as to fall" (Rom. 11:11), that "all Israel will be saved" (Rom. 11:26), and that "the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable." (Rom. 11:29)

²¹ Here I'm alluding to the book by Charlesworth called *Jesus Within Judaism*.)

Apostle to the Gentiles

In the point of view of the Bible, the center of the world is the temple in Jerusalem. At the heart of Judaism was the Holy of Holies, the sacred center where existed the ark of the covenant above which would appear the glory of Yahweh. Only the High Priest could enter this focal point of God's presence. Surrounding that area was the Court of the Priests where the Levites performed the sacrifices and their other sacred duties. The Israelites would enter into the temple area with a separate section for the women. Outside that perimeter was the Court of the Gentiles. This is as close as non-Jews could get.

This picture of the sacred center of the world is played out in a larger perspective with Jerusalem as the center. Proceeding outward is the holy land of Israel. Outside those boundaries were the Jews of the dispersion, the Diaspora. They lived among the surrounding gentile nations.

One of the Jews of this category was Saul of Tarsus who later became known by his Greek name Paul. He was an observant Jew who had the job of chasing down Jews who were not following the Torah properly. During one of these trips he was stopped by the voice and appearance of the risen Christ and called to stop persecuting his followers. Paul's mission became to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ among the Gentiles. Paul traveled throughout Asia Minor and Greece proclaiming the message of Christ and establishing groups of churches in the cities. Saul not only had become convinced that Jesus Christ had been raised from the dead and had appeared to him, but also that Jesus had called him to be an apostle to the gentiles.

We know from the book of Acts that some gentiles had become proselytes to Judaism. For a gentile to be a "god-fearer" meant that he revered the God of the Jews and adopted some of

their religious practices.²² To become a proselyte involved a lot more. At the top of the list of requirements was a little minor surgery called circumcision. As far as we know, there weren't many gentile men who became full proselytes.

Early in his ministry, Paul confronted the obstacle of the gentile inclusion into the household of faith. In spite of the opposition he experienced, Paul taught the gentile believers that they were not bound by the requirements of Jewish law, but still needed to live lives of purity and morality. Paul's letters reveal to us how Paul persuaded gentile believers to change from their idolatrous ways to serve the living God in decency, not by legal prescriptions, but by fulfilling the life of the Spirit.

A great debate in early Christianity occurred in Jerusalem around A.D. 49 over the issue of what to do about the gentiles. Some of the Jews were going around saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them, and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses" (Acts 15:5). The apostles and the elders in Jerusalem had become convinced that God was "taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name" (Acts 15:14). The signs of the Spirit that had marked the beginning of their movement had now been evident among the gentiles. Rather than requiring that the gentile converts undergo circumcision and follow purification rituals, the council decided to pass along a few important guidelines in a letter: "For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well" (Acts 15:28,29).

²² See the fuller treatment of this concept in John Dominic Crossan, Jonathan L. Reed, *In Search of Paul: How Jesus' Apostle Opposed Rome's Empire with God's Kingdom*, (San Francisco: Harper, 2004). I did not have this book available to me when writing this paper.

From the evidence of the book of Acts – and I consider it to be fairly reliable -- and Paul's letters, he encountered opposition throughout his ministry and eventually was arrested in Jerusalem on the false charge of bringing an uncircumcised Greek into the temple. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul writes about this problem of gentiles following the Jewish Law.

Paul faced two related problems with the churches in the region of Galatia. One is that there were troublemakers, most likely Jews like Paul who were followers of Jesus, that had gone to the churches trying to get them to follow Jewish laws and customs in order to fulfill their duties as part of the people of God. The other problem that Paul deals with is that some of the Galatians were actually going along with this Judaizing tendency. Paul is so upset with them that he barely begins his letter before he gets right to the point.

Paul considers them to be abandoning the gospel that he preached to them. He describes how it came about that he was called to preach this gospel to the gentiles and what struggles he went through. He says that when he presented his gospel to the pillars of the church in Jerusalem, they sanctioned his ministry to the gentiles. Paul illustrates, however, that hypocrisy in this matter is not tolerable. He chewed Peter out (pun intended) because Peter stopped eating with the gentiles when some Jews were visiting. Treating believers with a double-standard causes the gentiles to think they are second-rate unless they become full proselytes to Judaism.

With possibly the most powerful rhetoric in his letters, he scolds them saying, "You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you. . . . This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh" (Gal. 3:1-3)?

Paul considered it ridiculous for Gentiles to want to follow the Jewish Law as a means of moral advancement and spiritual perfection. Paul puts it this way in Romans.

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit” (Romans. 8:1-4).

Paul tells the Galatians that “It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery” (Gal. 5:1). However, Paul warns them, “do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh” (Gal. 5:13).

Paul has argued on the negative side, showing the gentiles that they are not to take upon themselves the yoke of Jewish law. How then will Paul be able to persuade these gentiles to live moral lives and what will be the standard. If it is not a Jewish context for ethics and morality, what would it be? Paul was not interested in having gentiles become Jews to be part of the people of God. The mutilation of the flesh had no significance for gentiles. The only part of the Torah that Paul mentions is “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Gal. 5:14).

Hellenism

When we say that Paul was a Jew, it causes people to think of the image of the rabbi reading Hebrew scrolls, debating fine points of law in Hebrew or Aramaic, and whatever else we have come to associate with that image. For some time scholars have used terminology like Palestinian Judaism and Hellenistic Judaism. Jacob Neusner has helped us think about Judaisms in the first century and before.²³ The collection of essays published in 2001 called *Paul Beyond the Judaism/Hellenism Divide*²⁴ reminds us that the Hellenistic world in the late republic and

²³ For example, Jacob Neusner, *Judaisms and their Messiahs in the beginning of Christianity*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

²⁴ Troels Engberg-Pedersen, ed., *Paul Beyond the Judaism/Hellenism Divide*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

early Roman empire is not just a background to Paul or his setting, it is Paul's world. It's not that Paul was a Jew who was influenced – or tainted, depending on your perspective – by Hellenism, but Paul exhibits the characteristics of a Jew who is a part of this Hellenized Jewish society. He's a Roman citizen, he reads the Bible in Greek, he uses a Latin name in Greek, he writes in literate Greek with evidence of Greek education in rhetoric and philosophy.

Paul's method of relating to the gentiles in the Roman world bears similarities to the social conventions of the moral philosophers of Paul's day. One could cite a long list of authors who have helped us understand Paul in his historical context, besides those already mentioned. Since I've already talked about Ivy League schools, let me narrow it down to Yale and what I think of as the Yale school of Paul research. The credit for that seems largely to go to the professor that a number of current New Testament scholars had by the name of Abraham Malherbe. Besides his numerous articles, Malherbe published a little book in 1987 called *Paul and the Thessalonians: The Philosophic Tradition of Pastoral Care*.²⁵ Another highly significant professor at Yale was Wayne Meeks. His work from 1983, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*²⁶ has become a standard in Pauline studies. A host of New Testament scholars have carried on this tradition of broadening our understanding of Paul in the Greco-Roman world. Stowers' first book was his published dissertation *The Diatribe and Paul's Letter to the Romans*.²⁷ Also a significant piece of the puzzle in understanding Paul

²⁵ Abraham J. Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians: The Philosophic Tradition of Pastoral Care*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).

²⁶ Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*, (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1983).

²⁷ Stanley K. Stowers, *The Diatribe and Paul's Letter to the Romans*, (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1981).

was Stowers' book *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity*.²⁸ It's texts like these written in the 80's and 90's that help us formulate an image of an historical Paul.

The tradition of letter writing to guide another's character development was firmly established in Paul's day. Letters were considered to be personal conversations and the close relationship between the writer and reader was clearly understood. It is crucial to our understanding of the message of Paul's letters to place them in the proper cultural context.

Paul certainly does use his letters to teach his audience and to report activity. But at the heart of his letters is persuasion. Paul urges his readers, at times to adopt a particular view, at other times to do or not to do a particular thing. The technical term for the first type is *protreptic*. Paul's letter to the Romans is *protreptic* as he introduces the believers in Rome to his teaching and attempts to persuade them to accept it. The other type is *paraenetic*, which, like First Thessalonians and First Corinthians, uses "precepts, examples, discussions of moral topics, and encouraging reminders of what the readers have already known and have accomplished, and reasons for recommended behavior."²⁹

An important aspect of letter writing is the use of praise and blame. In the culture of Paul's day, the most valuable commodity for people was their honor. Praising someone had the effect of honoring them, but using blame and censure brought about shame. Paul applies these conventions as he praises them for the good they have done and how they have remained faithful, and as he admonishes them for falling away or misunderstanding an important concept. Praise and blame are valuable tools in Paul's letters for bringing about the desired behavior.

In Galatians Paul uses severe admonishment for their error. Philippians, however, contains much praise and some blame. The pastoral epistles, First and Second Timothy and

²⁸ Stanley K. Stowers, *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986).

²⁹ Stowers, *Letter Writing*, p. 96

Titus, are great examples of paraenetic letters: they are filled with exhortation, commands, examples, and reminders.

The structure of the groups that Paul formed was modeled after the most basic institution of the society of that day, the household. The center of the believers' activity was someone's house. Although a number of these cell groups were active in one city, Paul appears to have written a single letter to the believers of a city with the intention that it would be circulated among them. These households consisted of the immediate family, the extended family, slaves, hired workers, and friends. Meals were special events which brought everyone together. Often the owner of the house acted as patron for the group and sometimes philosophical groups were formed around a household.

One of the most important elements of social convention was to maintain proper relationships within the household. Philosophers would write about how each member of the household should conduct him- or herself. These household codes were a vital part of keeping respectability within society, something especially important in the Augustan revolution.³⁰

Many of the letters in the New Testament contain these household codes. Ephesians and Colossians, for example, both have instructions for wives, husbands, children, fathers, slaves, and masters.

Another convention Paul used was the virtue and vice list. This served to identify the particular deeds which should be encouraged and those which should be discouraged. In Galatians Paul lists the vices as immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying drunkenness,

³⁰ Stowers develops the role of self-mastery in the Augustan Revolution as it pertains to Paul. cf. Rereading, pp. 52ff.

carousing, etc. He then gives the virtues of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

By using these methods of persuasion, Paul diverted his audience from trying to take upon themselves a moral code which could not be divorced from its ethnic and religious structure. In its place, Paul substituted an ethical code based on an outworking of God's Spirit that fostered proper behavior of individuals and formed kinship ties among the group. Their example of living should not only keep them out of trouble, but should also attract new members as they seek to share in the community of faith.

To interpret Romans correctly is to read, as much as it is possible, as a first-century reader. An inner-textual reading of Romans brings to our attention the encoded readers of the text. They are identified as gentiles. Whether or not it makes sense to imagine Jews among the churches in Rome, Paul explicitly refers to his readers as gentiles. An inter-textual reading draws comparisons to other types of literature, primarily those written by philosophers to students. There are several important features of that literature

One is the diatribe. Stowers has carefully worked out the form and function of the diatribe. A casual reader of Romans would overlook this. The author will switch to the singular pronoun and address an imaginary discussion partner who exhibits the characteristics the author is intending to censure. Stowers gives this example of Romans 3:1-9:

Interlocutor: Then what (ti oun) advantage does the Jew have? Or what good is circumcision? (A)

Paul: Much in every way! Above all, the Jews were entrusted with the words spoken by God himself. For how else could it be (ti gar)? If some Jews were unfaithful, their unfaithfulness doesn't nullify God's faithfulness, does it? (B)

I: God forbid (me genoito)! Let God be true and every man a liar, as it is written, "so that you may be justified in what you say and win when you are challenged." (C)

- P: But if our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God, what shall we say (ti eroumen)? Is God unrighteous when he expresses his anger? (I am speaking in a human way.) (D)
- I: God forbid (me genoito)! For then how will God judge the world? (E)
- P: But if the truthfulness of God is magnified by my falsity and increases his glory, why should I still be judged a sinner? And shall we then say (as certain people also slanderously charge us with saying), "Let us do evil that good may come"? (Those who slander us in this way are justly condemned.) (F)

The place this is the most important is in 2:17: But if you call yourself a Jew and rely upon the law and boast of your relation to God.... Isn't Paul addressing Jews in his audience? No, Paul is in the midst of an "apostrophe," a "turning to the side," in the singular speaking to this imaginary interlocutor who represents a caricature of the boastful teacher.

Another feature in the rhetoric of Paul is "speech-in-character," in Greek termed *prosopopoiia*. Romans 7 has been compared to the famous conversion speech of Augustine. Paul appears to be in anguish over his inability to keep the law in Romans 7:14-17 .

14 We know that the law is spiritual; but I am carnal, sold under sin. 15 I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. 16 Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. 17 So then it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me.

Stowers states, "Fortunately, there is a solid place to stand in trying to contextualize chapter 7 and treat it in a nonanachronistic way: 7:15 and 19 contain a ubiquitous Greek saying that is central to the Greco-Roman ethic of self-mastery."³¹ Euripides' *Medea* 1077-80: "I am being overcome by evils. I know that what I am about to do is evil but passion is stronger than my reasoned reflection and this is the cause of the worst evil for humans." Stowers is able to show that this context of speech-in-character, on a common topic of Greco-Roman philosophy,

³¹ Stowers, *Rereading*, p. 260.

moves the interpretation away from being an example of the failure of a Jewish system of legalistic works.

One more feature of Paul's letters is adaptability. We've already talked about Paul's use of the second-person singular pronoun in diatribe. Paul also frequently uses the first-person plural pronoun. In a context talking to his readers as gentiles, he will say "we" and "us." This has been taken to mean that Paul is saying "we Christians." What else could Paul have meant? In a text like Galatians 3:14 "that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith." Paul models the esteemed quality of the philosopher in his adaptability. As Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 9:19-22:

19 For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more. 20 To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews; to those under the law I became as one under the law -- though not being myself under the law -- that I might win those under the law. 21 To those outside the law I became as one outside the law -- not being without law toward God but under the law of Christ -- that I might win those outside the law. 22 To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.

Stowers concludes, "Scholarship has not appreciated the centrality of this issue to the apostle who became all things to all people (1 Cor 9:19-23). Paul's genius was in his using this concept of adaptability to interpret the meaning of the crucified messiah, to define his self-understanding as an apostle, and to provide a paradigm for social relations in his Gentile communities."³²

This is a brief overview of the pieces to the puzzle and the scholars who are putting the pieces together for us. I want to turn now to give a summary of what this means at some key points.

³² Stowers, *Rereading*, p. 222. A fellow-student at Brown published his dissertation on this topic. Clarence Glad, *Paul and Philodemus: Adaptability in Epicurean and Early Christian Psychagogy*, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995).

Key Points

Whole books could be written on any one of these. In fact, many books have been written on these topics even in recent years. Space does not permit me to give a full analysis or literature review – even if I could do it. These are topics that are directly impacted by the radical new view and the implications have not been completely developed.

Sin

What Paul does talk about in his letters is the Gentile predicament. This is most clearly spelled out in the Letter to the Ephesians (a letter some do not regard as Paul's, but nevertheless elucidates his teaching). In chapter 2 he clearly indicates that he is speaking to a Gentile audience. "Therefore, remember, that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh . . . were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:11,12). In Romans 5, one of the most important passages of the New Testament, Paul describes the gentile predicament: "For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the godless. God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." Paul uses the term "sinner" as a synonym for "gentile" as can be seen in Galatians 2:15 when Paul tells Peter, "We are Jews by nature, and not sinners from among the Gentiles." Paul also describes the gentile condition as being enemies of God (Rom 5:10).

The Jews of Paul's day believed that the history of the Jewish people indicates God's punishment for their sins. In his mercy he punished his people as they went along. He did not store up his anger against them but dealt with them as he saw fit. On the contrary, God has held back his wrath against the gentile nations.

Several texts help us to show similarities among various Jewish authors during second temple Judaism. The first is 2 Maccabees 6:12-16

12 Now I urge those who read this book not to be depressed by such calamities, but to recognize that these punishments were designed not to destroy but to discipline our people. 13 In fact, not to let the impious alone for long, but to punish them immediately, is a sign of great kindness. 14 For in the case of the other nations the Lord waits patiently to punish them until they have reached the full measure of their sins; but he does not deal in this way with us, 15 in order that he may not take vengeance on us afterward when our sins have reached their height. 16 Therefore he never withdraws his mercy from us. Though he disciplines us with calamities, he does not forsake his own people.

In the Wisdom of Solomon chapter 12, the author is speaking about the gentile nations.

“But judging them little by little thou gavest them a chance to repent, though thou wast not unaware that their nature was evil and their wickedness inborn, and that their way of thinking would never change. For they were an accursed race from the beginning, and it was not through fear of any one that thou didst leave them unpunished for their sins” (Wisdom of Solomon 12:10,11).

Paul has this idea in mind when he writes, “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness” (Rom 1:18). He then goes on to describe how the gentiles ignored God in their pursuit of idolatry. Repeatedly Paul states that “God gave them over” (Rom. 1:24, 26, 28). In chapter two he turns to an imaginary discussion partner who typifies the rebellious gentile and castigates him, “Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance? But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God” (Rom. 2:4,5).

The gentiles had no part in God’s covenant people. They had no access to God’s throne in the temple. They were enemies of God against whom he had been storing up his wrath. Still

under the obligations of the Law of God, they felt only its curse and enjoyed none of its promises.

If the sin Paul is talking about in Romans is the stored up sins of the gentiles, what happens to the Christian dogma about universal guilt and original sin? Paul isn't talking about the human condition. That interpretation ignores the context of Jews and gentiles, creates the figure of the modern person who feels guilt before God, and reads back into the text an entire theological system.

Faithfulness Of Jesus

The process of interpretation and translation may have introduced a phrase into Paul's letters because it was made to sound like the Gospel of John and to fit Christian theology. We are familiar with the phrase "believe in Jesus" in some form or another. A similar phrase occurs in Paul's letters: "faith in Jesus." But is this what it means? Is Paul's expression the same as John's?

There are two issues at work here. One is that this is a special grammatical construction of the possessive case. This construction can either be taken as a subjective genitive where the noun in the genitive case produces the action "Who will separate us from the *love of Christ*" (Rom 8:35), or the objective genitive where the noun in the genitive case receives the action, "the *blasphemy of the Spirit*" (Matt 12:31; literally rendered).

The other issue is that the Greek word *pistis* can mean, among other things, faith or faithfulness. Put simply, is this expression in Paul "faith in Christ" or "faithfulness of Christ?"

Scholars have debated this in recent years. In fact, another Yale connection is the book by Richard Hays (To be fair, his B.A. and M.Div. are from Yale and he taught at Yale, but he did his doctoral work at Emory). Hays' published dissertation is *The Faith of Jesus Christ*.³³

An important piece of evidence here is that the same expression is used in Romans to refer to Abraham (Romans 4:16): That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants -- not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham, for he is the father of us all." We do not translate this to read, "those who have *faith in Abraham*." But that's how the rest of these expressions get translated when it refers to Jesus. Instead, Hays, Stowers and numerous others draw the parallel between Christ and Abraham. It was by Abraham's faithfulness that he was considered to be righteous and because of him that the nations of the earth would be blessed. So it is that through Christ's faithfulness to God in death on the cross that the gentiles have access to God.

Galatians 3:14 then would be read in this way: "that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit *by means of Christ's faithfulness* (paraphrase).

Death Of Jesus

The theme of Jesus' faithfulness in death only really makes sense when we understand Jesus' death, not as a substitutionary sacrifice, but the death of the martyr whose death has benefits for others.

According to Paul, Jesus' death made a way for the gentiles. What he does not say is that it had anything to do with Jesus dying in fulfillment of Jewish sacrifice. The gospels themselves

³³ Richard B. Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: An Investigation of the Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1-4:11*, (Chico: Scholars Press, 1983).

show Jesus dying not on the Day of Atonement, but on Passover. Jesus' death from the Jewish standpoint is to be understood with regard to national redemption, rather than as a sacrifice on the temple altar. Rather than interpreting the meaning of Jesus' death in the semitic concept of animal sacrifice, we can better understand its context in the world of hellenistic Judaism.³⁴

There are indications that Paul understood Jesus' death in the Greek tradition of the saving death of a person having benefit for others. We find it frequently in the Greek poets such as Euripides' "The Children of Heracles" in which Macaria offers her life so that her brothers may go free.

Macaria

This volunteer is quite prepared to die,
And let herself be led off to the slaughter.
I hereby put
Myself on record that of my free will
I volunteer to die for these and for Myself. The brave have found no finer prize
Than leaving life the way it should be done.

Chorus

A girl who gives her own life to save these
And says such things leaves nothing unsaid.
No words could be compared to hers; no acts
Of flesh and blood rank higher than her own.

Macaria (before exiting)

If the gods will let
You find relief and see your home again,
Remember to give the girl that save your lives
The kind of funeral that she deserves,
Since she played fair with you and gave hers up.

Funeral speeches performed at annual celebrations use this type of language also. Plato has Socrates deliver a funeral speech in the *Menexenus*.

A word is needed which will duly praise the dead and gently admonish the living, exhorting the brethren and descendants of the departed to imitate their virtue, and consoling their fathers and mothers

³⁴ Sam K. Williams, *Jesus' Death as Saving Event: The Background and Origin of a Concept*, (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1975; Martin Hengel, *The Atonement: The Origins of the Doctrine in the New Testament*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981). cf. Stowers, Rereading, pp. 206ff.

and the survivors, if any. In their life they rejoiced their own friends with their valor, and their death they gave in exchange for the salvation of the living.³⁵

These concepts became part of Jewish literature as well, as Judea was influenced by Greek culture and language. In the text entitled 4th Maccabees, the story is told about the resistance against Antiochus Epiphanes' attempt to introduce pagan customs in the temple. Seven brothers, their mother and the elderly Eleazar suffer martyrdom instead of eating pork sacrificed to idols. In Eleazar's prayer he says, "You know, O God, that though I might have saved myself, I am dying in burning torments for the sake of the law. Be merciful to your people, and let our punishment suffice for them. Make my blood their purification, and take my life in exchange for theirs" (4th Macc. 6:27-29). The author concludes that "because of them our enemies did not rule over our nation, the tyrant was punished, and the homeland purified -- they having become, as it were, a ransom for the sin of our nation. And through the blood of those devout ones and their death as an expiation, divine Providence preserved Israel that previously had been afflicted" (4 Macc. 17:20-22).

The theme of the righteous person dying for the benefit of others is the one we find in Paul's letters. Paul refers to Jesus as one who was "faithful" to God in his obedience to suffer death on the cross. Jesus' death was an "expiation (same word as in 4th Macc.) in His blood by means of his faithfulness" (Rom. 3:25). This demonstrated God's righteousness, "because in the forbearance of God he passed over the sins previously committed" (Rom. 3:25). God's wrath stored up against the gentiles for their sins was appeased by the death of Jesus. By this act was made possible the righteousness of the gentile who believes (Rom 3:22). So Paul can say, "Therefore having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus

³⁵ Plato, *Menexenus*, 236e-237a.

Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God” (Rom 5:1,2).

“For while we (adaptable Paul with the gentiles) were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly (gentiles). For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet (gentile) sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by his blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God (stored up against the gentile nations) through him. For if while we were (gentile) enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life “ (Rom. 5:6-10 with my expansions).

I want to read the way in which Stowers pulls this altogether, after all my mentor can say it better than I.

My hypothesis is as follows: Paul believed that God commissioned the man Jesus, chosen descendant of Davidic lineage, to be his messiah. Jesus was sent with a mandate to rectify the domination of the wicked over the righteous and to restore God's people, the Jews, by overthrowing unfaithful Jews and the Roman oppressors. God gave Jesus Christ his Spirit and divine powers to accomplish this task of judging (that is, of bringing justice), punishing the wicked, and protecting and rewarding the faithful. In other words, Jesus had been granted the authority and power to bring about God's righteousness in fulfillment of God's promises. Jesus, however, out of faithfulness to his mandate, chose not to exercise the awesome divine powers available to him. Jesus did not exercise the powers given to him because if he had, much of Israel and most of the gentiles would have been lost. Jesus died and postponed the world's judgment out of love for the ungodly. In accord with God's purposes and out of faithfulness to God's promises and believing that God would vindicate him and allow him to fulfill his messianic role in the future, Jesus refused to use his divine powers to the point even of not escaping capture and execution by the Romans. In forgoing his messianic prerogatives, Jesus was allowing Jews and gentiles an opportunity to repent and trusting that God would delay his mission until God's righteousness could be effected. Jesus' refusal to take the easy way out was an act of faithfulness to God's commission and God's purposes. He died on behalf of others. God vindicated Jesus by raising him and making him the pioneer of the world's renewal. Jesus, like Abraham, was not just a

passive object of faith but one whose faithfulness actually effected the merciful justice toward the world's peoples that God intended.³⁶

It may seem that I've only given you a brief glance at a complex figure rather than given you a full introduction. However, I think there are many who have been estranged from the Paul of history who will find this historical Paul someone you will want to get to know. Maybe the Paul you'll construct will look somewhat different. Maybe the Paul I will come to know more will look different than this Paul. In any case, I think this is a fruitful place to start that relationship.

³⁶ Stowers, Rereading, p. 213,214.