

Paul & Judaism

Further, if Paul had been a Sadducee from the beginning, his subsequent laxity with respect to rules and rituals that were precious to Pharisees makes more sense. His extremism and his arrogance in presuming that he alone knew better than the ruling authorities how the new faith should proceed also make more sense coming from an elitist. And it would offer a new wrinkle to the change of heart Paul experienced on the road to Damascus. He did not lose beliefs precious to a Pharisee, for subsequent events describe no scintilla of internal struggle over his abandonment of circumcision, kashrut, Shabbat, and torah.

By Charles David Isbell

Louisiana State University

July 2017

In an earlier [article on this site](#), I addressed the understanding of Judaism on display by the authors of the Synoptic Gospels (Mark, Matthew, Luke).[1] In this article, I wish to examine the Judaism of Paul, his use of the Scriptures and methods of argumentation.[2] I will also take a brief look at the differences between his theology and the theological perspectives of the gospel writers, all of whom composed their works well after Paul had written his NT epistles.[3] Despite the endless jousting among modern Pauline theorists about what Paul really meant by what he said, it is advisable to keep in mind the judicious words of A. C. Purdy: “We can hardly mistake where Paul stood on the main issues he discusses.” But it is the truth of Purdy’s following statement that makes the reading of Paul both endlessly fascinating and almost unbearably frustrating: “The weakness of [Paul’s] method is the tendency to exaggeration.”[4]

Paul the Jew

Based upon some New Testament depictions of his education and experience, the common modern perception of Paul is that he was thoroughly Jewish in methods of argumentation, his approach to life, and his personal religious convictions. He was quite proud of his Jewish heritage and education (Gal. 1:14; Phil 3:4-5), and the story of his life recounted by Luke in the Book of Acts (5:34; 22:3) claims that he had studied at the feet of the great rabbinic scholar

Gamaliel, himself a prominent member of the famous Hillel school whose liberal opinions were often cited by the rabbis in the Mishnah. Surely a person trained in the Hillel school would be familiar with rabbinic methods of exegesis and would offer emic portrayals of Jewish life and culture. However, our expectations meet with some difficulties as we begin to analyze Paul's own words in comparison with the pictures offered in Acts.

First, when Paul describes himself, he has no hesitation about what can only be read as boasting. In Galatians 1:14, he insists that he "advanced in Judaism beyond many of my people the same age, because I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors." In Philippians 3:4a he boasts again: "If anyone else has cause to be confident in the flesh, I have more," before listing the personal qualities that back his claim—"circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the Israelite people, [a member] of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born to Hebrews. Regarding the law—a Pharisee; regarding zeal—a persecutor of the church; regarding righteousness under the law—blameless." And yet, despite his efforts to present himself in the best possible light, and despite the fact that naming one's teacher was the most widely accepted method of underscoring one's legitimacy and preparation for teaching, Paul makes no mention of the fact that he had studied under the most famous teacher of his generation! Only Luke, writing several decades after the death of Paul, offers this claim.

Second, Acts portrays Paul as residing in Jerusalem, specifically participating actively in and approving the stoning of Stephen (7:1-8:1). And since his "conversion"[5] a short time later occurs on the road "approaching Damascus" in search of Christians to haul back "to Jerusalem" (Acts 9:2), the common assumption is that he was traveling from his residence in Jerusalem. However, Paul's recollection is rather different. He insists that he was totally independent of the church in Jerusalem and asserts that after his conversion, he was "still unknown by sight to the churches in Judea" (Gal. 1:22). In fact, immediately after his conversion, he traveled to "Arabia" before returning to Damascus (Gal. 1:17). And it appears from Paul's own accounting that he visited Jerusalem for the first time only three years after his conversion (Gal. 1:18).[6]

Third, the fact that Paul, in agreement with Acts, twice describes himself as having persecuted Christians (Gal. 1:13; 1 Cor. 15:9), is difficult to square with what he surely would have learned had he been in Jerusalem studying with the widely respected Gamaliel. Two chapters before Paul is portrayed as approving the execution of Stephen as the prelude to his assault on Damascus to arrest Jewish Christians and haul them back to Jerusalem, Acts praises Gamaliel as the man who

had earlier stood against the execution of the apostles and offered a moderating position that was the polar opposite of the violence that Acts portrays Paul as first approving and then joining to add his personal participation in it.

In sharp contrast, Gamaliel is portrayed as the soul of tolerance. After noting the demise of two earlier messiah claimants, the wise teacher offered this counsel to his colleagues in the Sanhedrin about the apostles of Jesus who were attempting to spread the teachings of their master among Jews in Jerusalem: “Keep away from these men. Leave them alone. If this plan or this enterprise is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to overthrow them, and in such case, you may even be found fighting against God” (Acts 5:38-39). In this context, it is important to note that a sentence of execution required a unanimous vote of the Sanhedrin. Whereas the party to which Paul was soon to attach himself was the group that took the life of innocent Stephen, Gamaliel is portrayed as having saved the lives of the apostles!

A fourth issue that is troubling is the fact that Paul consistently cited the Greek LXX rather than the Hebrew Scriptures. It is quite impossible to imagine that any student of a teacher like Gamaliel[7] would have earned the title of “Rabbi” as a teaching Pharisee while studying the Bible in Greek.[8]

With these difficulties in mind, we are prepared to examine various teachings of Paul as they appear in his own epistles. We begin with three specific issues that are fundamental to Judaism.

Paul and Circumcision

Paul’s most complete statement on circumcision comes in Romans 2:25-29:

“Circumcision is of value if you obey the law (nomos), but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision. So if those who are un-circumcised keep the requirements of the law, will not their uncircumcision be viewed as circumcision! Thus those who are physically uncircumcised but keep the law will condemn you who have the written code (Torah, Pentateuch) and circumcision but break the law. A person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, and true circumcision is not anything external and physical. Instead, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly. And true circumcision is a matter of the heart. It is spiritual, not literal.”

In Romans 4:9-12, Paul denigrates circumcision equally bluntly with the argument that Abraham himself, the “founder” of the ritual (Gen. 17:10-14), “received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had via faith.” Since this righteousness had been earned by Abraham “while he was still uncircumcised,” obviously circumcision itself had never been anything more than a “sign” of something better that had already happened. Abraham, having become righteous before circumcision, was thus “the ancestor of all who believe without having been circumcised.” In short, the original circumcision should be viewed as at best secondary in importance to “faith.” And certainly by Paul’s era, the circumcision should be viewed as a passé custom that no longer performed even its original function as a witness to something greater. In addition, in light of the coming of Jesus, circumcision might even be a hindrance to faith: “If you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you” (Gal. 5:2).

The clearest example of how seriously Paul took his stance regarding circumcision is the case of Titus, an uncircumcised Gentile convert. When “certain individuals” visited Antioch from Judea and insisted that converts to the faith could not be “saved” unless they underwent circumcision (Acts 15:1), Paul and his missionary partner Barnabas engaged the visitors in vigorous debate and ultimately brought Titus with them from Antioch to Jerusalem to have the matter settled by “the apostles and elders” (15:2). After the Jerusalem group had considered the issue (15:6-7), a speech by Peter backed the Pauline position (15:7-11). Then Barnabas and Paul reported on their missionary activities among Gentiles (15:12), and finally James, the leader of the Jerusalem “church” issued his formal decision that “we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God” (15:19), clearly backing the position that circumcision was henceforth no longer to be considered mandatory for new converts. Paul’s own account of the conference in Galatians 2:10 notes that Cephas and John added their approval to the decision of James. He also notes that the conference agreed to raise money for the poor in Jerusalem.

Paul and Kashrut

While this Jerusalem “council” apparently began as a disagreement about circumcision, it is obvious from the declaration of James that the debate was far from a single issue matter. In addition to settling the question of circumcision as unnecessary for Gentile converts, James indicates clearly that kashrut was also a hot topic on the agenda. Withdrawal of the requirement of circumcision from potential converts was followed not by a sweeping exclusion applying to kashrut, but a modified, truncated version about food laws. “We should write to [the Gentiles] to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and

from whatever has been strangled and from blood” (15:20). A few verses later (15:28-29), this list is presented to the church in Antioch as “essentials” (epanankes).

Despite the clarity of the entire statement, it seems that Paul, upon returning to his missionary work, immediately ignored even the modified definition of kashrut approved by the Council in which he had been an active participant.

Two points of view appear here. James, expressing the majority view, separates circumcision from the list of “essentials” included in his statement.

Paul, however, clearly viewed circumcision as a symbol for the keeping of the whole of torah. “Once again I testify to every man who allows himself to be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the entire law” (Gal. 5:3). Thus for him, freedom from the requirement of circumcision appeared to imply freedom from torah in its entirety.

The difference between Paul and James is crucial to an understanding of what happened when Paul left the Jerusalem conference. When the initial question arose in the church whether Gentile (non-Jewish) believers in Jesus as the messiah would be required to follow Jewish practices before being accepted as Christians, clearly James, Cephas, and John ruled that they would not have to observe the entire Jewish law, but insisted that certain essential practices be retained. As noted, Paul, the chief missionary of the new group, had been an active participant in the meeting at which the agreement had been made, and is portrayed as accepting the ruling of the majority. However, upon leaving the meeting in Jerusalem, he promptly set about baptizing non-Jews without requiring even the minimal “essential” standards set by the council. His own words make clear that he believed his own interpretation of the Council statement was correct: “Food does not commend us to God. We are neither worse if we do not eat [i.e., keep kashrut], nor the better if we do” (I Cor. 8:8). Paul’s “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy[9] underscores his lack of concern for the fact that his complete dismissal of all Jewish food restrictions violated the strict interpretation of the agreement as it was understood by James.

And it is Paul’s own account of the actions of Peter (Cephas) that illustrates how sharp the division was between the two points of view.[10] Peter, visiting in Antioch, initially dined with Gentile Christians until “certain James people came” from Jerusalem and reproved him for his actions. Peter, “out of fear of the circumcision faction,” withdrew from dining with Gentiles and was accused by

Paul of hypocrisy for caving in to the stricter viewpoint of the Jewish visitors from Jerusalem. Although neither side cites the statement of James made at the conference in Jerusalem, this incident shows clearly the two different ways in which the statement was interpreted. It is fair to ask why this was so.

In rabbinic thought, recitation of the shema⁶ was connected to the act of accepting the “yoke of the kingdom of the heavens,”[11] and was perceived to presume the acceptance of God as one’s King. As a well-known Mishnaic passage makes clear, via the recitation of the shema⁶, the pious Jew both voluntarily takes upon himself the “yoke” of the kingdom of the heavens, and concordantly also accepts upon himself the obligation of keeping all the commandments of halakhah.[12] Furthermore, acceptance of “the yoke of the commandments” is one of three things (along with circumcision and miqvah, the ritual bath) expected of a convert to Judaism. And it is important to notice that a convert to Judaism may not recite the shema⁶ until he has been ritually (not merely medically) circumcised. But Paul does not offer any explanation of his actions. He simply does what he decides is best for his missionary work.

Now the Jerusalem decision had applied only to non-Jewish converts, and was not in any fashion a halakhic position being handed down for Jews to “soften” the manner in which they interpreted the rules of kashrut. The fact that Peter initially dined with Gentile converts in Antioch[13] fits with the Jerusalem statement that applied only to an obligation for non-Jews. And his “fear” is linked not to Jews who were demanding perfect kashrut observance, but pointedly to “the circumcision faction” (Gal. 2:12).[14] Again the link between fully torah-observant Jews and the issue of kashrut comes to the fore. Neither relaxed dietary rules nor the absence of circumcision intrudes on the conclusion of Peter’s sermon: “he ordered [the Caesarean Gentile converts] to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ” (Acts 10:48).

To review: circumcision and dietary rules are linked closely together on three separate occasions—the incident in Caesarea, the debate and decision by Jerusalem council, and the incident in Antioch with Peter following the council. The linkage of the three may help to explain why Paul felt justified in setting aside even modified dietary restrictions as he sought to win uncircumcised Gentile converts to the new faith.

Paul and Shabbat

The third fundamental pillar of Judaism treated oddly by Paul is Shabbat. While kashrut and circumcision take center place in the decision of the Jerusalem Council, there is no mention of Shabbat observance being named as obligatory for converts. And Paul never urges his followers to observe Shabbat in any form.[15] To the contrary, in Galatians 4:10-11, Paul rebukes the Galatians for thinking God expected them to observe special days (including Shabbat). In Romans 14:5, Paul forbids Shabbat observers (Jews?) from condemning those (Gentiles?) who do not observe. In deuterio-Pauline Colossians 2:16-17, Paul is described as explicitly including Shabbat as only “a shadow of what is to come,” and forbidding the condemnation of anyone for lack of Shabbat observance.

Few issues could be more fundamental to first century Judaism than the triumvirate of circumcision, kashrut, and Shabbat. Paul’s attitude toward all is noteworthy, especially if one presumes that he actually studied with so great a teacher as Gamaliel. At the very least, Paul’s significantly alternative views of these Jewish doctrines call for an inquiry into his view about the single most important idea in all of Judaism.

Paul and “Law”

The most unusual aspect of Paul’s teaching was his attitude toward “law.”[16] Well after the death of Paul, the legal rulings of Jesus portrayed in the gospels were calculated to produce appropriate observance of Jewish law among his followers, and Bart Ehrman is directly on point to note that “even when [Jesus] appears to abrogate the Law of Moses ... he does so in order to bring out what is, in his judgment, their true meaning and intent.”[17] The key phrase in Ehrman’s opinion is “in his judgment.” In sharp contrast to the attitude of Jesus as it will later be depicted in the gospels, Paul often seemed openly antagonistic to law as a controlling principle in life, and appeared to be more interested in showing that the law had become invalid than in trying to interpret it for his era. Such an attitude would have been anathema to the rabbis, of course, but the opinions attributed to Jesus in the gospels must also be seen as correctives to some of the more extreme positions of Paul.

The fact that Jesus held opinions against a majority of other rabbis, or even opinions shared by no other rabbi, would not have been unusual, and would not have caused him to be singled out for condemnation. But denial of the inspired Torah was one of only a few sins that the rabbis believed would deny a person a place in “the world to come.”[18] This rabbinic exclusion of a Torah rejecter from the future world follows closely on the heels of an extended discussion

demonstrating that even people who have committed horrible sins will enter into the world to come only if they have received adequate punishment in this life. For the rabbis, appropriate punishment for sin needed to be administered in this life so that the sinner could be “paid up” and ready to enter into the next life. But there could be no punishment stern enough for the person who denied the basic source of their entire system of belief. And it is significant that Jesus so pointedly affirms the centrality of Torah, even while he offers his unique interpretation of it. On this issue, Paul stands alone in his disdain for law among those claiming to be trained as a “rabbi” or teacher of Jewish law.

We are left to ask why this should have been the case. Why did Paul stand apart from the rabbis for whom a lifetime engaged in seeking “torah,” written and oral, was the highest and the most satisfying goal to which anyone could aspire? They were quite aware of the impossibility of complete and accurate observance of every precept found in biblical teachings (torah), yet remained committed to the effort.[19] Three points are significant here. First, the rabbis taught that a person who had sinned and then repented was more pleasing to God than a person who had never sinned.[20] Looking closely at their rationale, it is clear that they believed everyone had failed in some way to keep the whole of torah. A person who repented was one who had acknowledged his shortcomings and had taken steps to correct them, whereas any person who had not repented was simply one who had refused to admit his need of repentance and atonement before God in the first place.

The second point is a corollary of the first, for the rabbis believed that repentance was a necessary component of torah observance precisely because they agreed with Paul that no one could achieve perfection in this life.[21] Even an imperfect knowledge of torah taught them not only their failings but also the necessity and power of repentance. And repentance, “returning” to God, was an oft repeated and explicit commandment in Scripture.[22] In other words, because repentance was an integral component of torah, the rabbis were not free to experience personal failure, ignore the torah instructions about repentance and reconciliation with God and the community, and then conclude that torah had failed!

Third, they believed that true repentance could be verified only if a resulting change in life occurred whereby the repentant person turned his back on the sin for which repentance had been made.

Paul allowed no such latitude. Viewing his personal inability to keep torah fully as evidence that no one could be fully torah-observant, he overlooked the idea that repentance for failure to keep the law perfectly was an integral part of torah itself. This was largely due to the difference between the way in which the rabbis defined “torah” and Paul defined “law.” For the rabbis, the word “torah” carried at least five different definitions. First, “The Torah” was the name given to what modern scholars came to call “The Pentateuch” (five scrolls). Second, individual commandments within “The Torah” were also defined as torah or “instruction.” Thus each of the commandments in “The Torah” (the rabbis counted 613) was itself a “teaching” or a “torah,” and a group of commandments could be referred to with the plural form “torot.”[23] Third, during the period of persecution under Antiochus Epiphanes (175-163 BCE), when public reading from The Torah was forbidden by law, the rabbis sought for passages in prophetic literature that touched upon the subject of the Torah passage that would have been read on Shabbat except for the ban. When the ban ceased to be enforced, these prophetic comments upon Torah themes (haftarot) came to be venerated by the rabbis and granted the name “torah” (“instruction”) in their own right.

The fourth meaning of “torah” is the well-known designation as “oral torah” (torah še-be-‘al peh), of Mishnah, Tosephta, and Gemara (Talmudim), reflecting their authoritative nature as well as their status of teachings instructing Jews and Judaism. And finally, the rabbis used the term “the life of torah” to imply a life lived in harmony with the totality of instruction to be found in all four of the other meanings.[24]

But though the referential field of the Hebrew word “torah” encompassed these five possibilities for the rabbis, the Pauline view of Greek nomos was far more limited, touching only upon a set of rules and regulations, each one a “do” or “do not” in nature. When Paul sketches a broad view of human history, he sees the disobedience of Adam causing humans to become sinners and the obedience of Jesus providing the avenue to righteousness (Rom. 5:19). But in the interim, then “law (nomos) entered [the world],” and the result was “trespass (paraptoma[25]) multiplied” (5:20). Only because as Christians his Roman readers “are not under law” could sin lose its power over them (6:14). Thus it was that Paul came to view “law” as “the dispensation of death” (2 Cor. 3.7) or “the dispensation of condemnation” (3.9); described the Israelite covenant as “bondage” (Gal 4:1-7) or “slavery” (4:21-23); and ultimately labeled the law itself a “body of death” (Rom 7:24), “the law of sin” (7:25), or “the law of sin and death” (Rom 8:2).

To be sure, in Romans 7:13-8.11, Paul speaks of two different laws: “the law of God,” with which he agreed in his mind (Rom 7:22) and “a different law” in his body that fights against this law of God (Rom 7:23).[26] For Paul, the “inner person” or mind (nous) agrees with the law of God but is prevented from following it by “the law of sin” in the body. The law of God is thus a good thing for Paul, but another law prevails because of the flesh/body, and this law for Paul is what Jews refer to as “torah.” For Paul, “the law of God” is not co-terminous with the Torah of Moses (Pentateuch) or with the larger “Oral Torah,” and the extent to which either the Torah of Moses or “Oral Torah” reflects the “law of God” (if at all) can only be inferred.[27]

Paul’s refusal to accept even the minimal tenets of Jewish dietary law agreed upon by the first council apparently stemmed from his belief that he knew better than the majority how missionary activities should be conducted. And it is clear that his method of ignoring Jewish law more broadly made possible his great success in attracting Gentiles to his version of the new faith. But it is also appropriate to note that the Pauline methods of evangelization contributed directly to the final break between Judaism and Christianity. Paul’s arguments about Judaism must be seen in the context of his urge to missionize. He believed that the Torah had become invalid, and argued that it did not really matter anyway, because Abraham had become righteous without the Torah.[28] This led Paul to the conclusion that, “No mortal can be acceptable to God by observance of the Torah” (Gal. 2:17), a view that enabled him to form “entire communities of Gentile Christians with little or no attachment to Judaism.”[29] This was in part because Paul believed that even before the rise of Christianity the Torah had been little more than an instrument of death, or in his words, “this body of death,” from which he longed to be liberated.[30] It was this “law,” this dead body that had to be shed so that all Christians could live a life of freedom.

Still, this is an astonishing disconnection between Paul and the Jesus seen in Matthew, a difference that may be attributed only partly to the different audiences each was addressing. And it must also be remembered that all of the writings of Paul precede the Gospel of Matthew by decades. Paul was attempting to jump-start a mission to non-Jews, while those who came later, like Matthew and the other gospel authors, were attempting to retain some link between Jesus and Judaism to provide a cover of legitimacy for the new faith. By abolishing the entire system, Paul did exactly the opposite of what the gospels describe Jesus as having done.[31] Unlike Jesus, Paul thereby removed the ancient foundation upon which he claimed to be building his personal theology. In citing proof texts from both “The Torah” and “torah” to cinch his arguments, he may have been doing what his

own teachers had taught him. But in rejecting the authority of both insofar as they reflect the “law of God,” Paul undercut his own arguments via sheer circularity. What must be noted is that while Paul rejected the conclusions of his teachers, offering ideas that lay well outside of traditional Judaism, he nevertheless employed methods that would not have been unfamiliar to Jews. This may be demonstrated in three specific ways.

First, Paul was an expert in a method of argumentation known among the rabbis as “haraz,”[32] the ornamental stringing together of biblical verses, phrases, or even single words for the purpose of clinching an argument. Among numerous Pauline examples that could be cited, one of the most inventive is Second Corinthians 6:14-18, where Paul makes a passionate argument against marriage between Christians and “unbelievers.” As proof of the validity of his argument, he follows his opening statement (“Do not be yoked together unequally with unbelievers”) with allusions to or direct citations from the books of Deuteronomy, Leviticus, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Isaiah, 2 Samuel, and Hosea. Similarly, in Romans 3:10-18, to recommend the condemnation of anyone who argued, “let us do evil that good may come” (Rom 3:9), Paul cites proof texts from Psalms 14, 53, 5, 140, 10, 59, and 16.

Second, Paul frequently employed questions much in the way that the ’Amoraim would do in the Gemara when they considered a teaching of the Tanna’im in the Mishnah.[33] Their most frequent opening question whenever they considered a mishnaic teaching was, “How [or from what source] do we know this?”[34] Such a question enabled them to offer answers to their own questions, founded upon biblical citations and logic. Paul’s writings are filled with such questions. “What shall we say then” (Rom 4:1)? “Is the law sin” (Rom 7:7)? “Shall we continue to sin that grace may abound” (Rom 6:1)? These rabbinic-like questions cry out for Paul’s answers, which he then offers. We do not know how Paul might have fared in a debate against his peers, but it is safe to conclude that were Paul debating other rabbis, they would be asking questions of him and he of them, demanding “proof” according to their accepted rules.

Third, he matches his negative statements about the law with equally positive statements in other contexts, essentially contradicting himself on the significance of “law:” “The entire nomos is fulfilled by one word, ‘You will love your neighbor as yourself.’” Not only does this statement from Galatians 5:14 acknowledge what Paul elsewhere asserts is impossible (fulfilling torah), it echoes a famous ruling by Rabbi Hillel, the teacher of Gamaliel and thus the supposed intellectual grandfather of Paul (see Acts 22:3).[35] Elsewhere, Paul makes

seemingly unequivocal statements about the law. “The nomos is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous, and good” (Rom 7:12). “The Torah is spiritual” (Rom 7:14). Perhaps it was this side of his feelings about law that kept Paul interested in citing Scripture as proof of his personal theological positions.

Paul and “torah”

Recent New Testament scholarship has been divided in its assessment of Paul’s attitude to Jewish law. But taken as it stands, Paul’s view of “Law” in the Book of Galatians[36] created several fascinating new definitions of significance for the emerging Christian faith. To argue that Paul was rabbinic is to dismiss the way in which he uses the LXX translation of the Hebrew Scriptures exclusively as his point of departure for whatever issue he discussed. And when he moved to his own personal specific definitions and explanations to plough new and unfamiliar ground, i.e., when he considered not merely “law” in a generic sense, but specifically manifold Jewish law (The Torah [Pentateuch] and “oral torah”) he reached conclusions that can only be described as radical.

Paul’s quotation of and subsequent explanation of Deuteronomy 27:26 is a case in point. What Deuteronomy enjoins as a sacred obligation upon Israelites to keep the teachings of the Torah carefully, Paul simply asserts meant the opposite. So “Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the Law, to perform them” Paul took to mean that everyone who was attempting to live according to the teachings of the Torah was under a curse (3:10). He offers no specific reason why the verse should mean the exact opposite of what it says,[37] but from statements made elsewhere, it is apparent that the Law was a curse for Paul because of his own professed inability to keep it in every detail. This is the position that he spelled out in some detail in Romans 7, arguing that although he did not do what he wanted to do (7:15), he was not personally at fault. Rather, “sin that dwells in me” (7: 17; 20) was the culprit. Here, of course, Paul departs from the rabbinic position that sin is a wrong action, and sets the stage for what would become the Christian conception of sin as a “condition” from which sinful actions were derived. Since Paul “would not have been aware of sin except for the Law” (7:7), law for him was nothing more than a “body of death” that made him “wretched” [talaiporos] (7:24).[38]

When we attempt to discover the source from which such a perspective on law could have arisen, Paul’s autobiographical reflections are of little assistance. “Advancing in Judaism beyond many of [his] contemporaries, being more extremely zealous for [his] ancestral traditions” (Gal 1:14), Paul could assert that

he had been “blameless with respect to righteousness that is in the Law” (Philippians 3:6). Yet he longed for a greater righteousness, not found in the Law, but only in Christ (Philippians 3:9). As we noted above, here is where Paul deviated from the rabbinic perspective on two counts. In the first place, the rabbis never imagined the possibility that any individual could or would fulfill every requirement of the Torah perfectly at all times, as we noted above.[39]

But Paul’s second deviation from the rabbis about Torah was his concentration only on the keeping of commandments, ignoring in the process a major component of that Torah which provides specific remedies for failures of personal performance. The rabbis understood not only that every individual Jew would fail in the attempt at perfect compliance, but also that the Torah itself provided for repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation at the very junction of non-compliance.[40] For the rabbis, the moment of failure was not the time to abandon the Torah, but the time to turn to the legal correctives that were an integral part of the Torah itself. The heroes of rabbinic faith were not those who had kept the Torah perfectly, but were those who, in the moments of their failures, had sought and acquired reconciliation through the Torah.[41]

The steps taken by Paul to derive his position are difficult to square with rabbinic thought. First, as we have seen, Paul did begin by citing the Torah,[42] clearly implying that any successful refutation of the common rabbinic view of Torah must be taken from it. Second, Paul chose a single word from Genesis 15:6 (“believed”) and linked it with another word from Habakkuk 2:4 (“faith”), setting in opposition the concepts of “doing” and “believing.”[43] But while the rabbis understood *’emunah* in the Hebrew sense of “faithfulness,” i.e., the keeping or doing of the Torah, Paul latched on to the Greek sense of *pisteuein*, “to believe,” or even “to be convinced” of a propositional truth.

Paul turned next to a historical argument, noting that Abraham could not have been “righteous” as a result of keeping the Torah, which was received more than four centuries after he lived (3:17). In other words, for Paul, Abraham was not the first Jew, whose keeping of the Torah earned him righteous status before God, but the first Christian, whose belief in God merited that status. And that means that others who followed in the footsteps of Abraham (and Paul!), i.e., those who believe as Paul did, were “the children of Abraham” (3:7), not those who keep the Torah.

Yet Paul did not simply ignore the Torah, he addressed what he believed to be its incorrect interpretation, basing his entire argument for the setting aside of

Torah on the Torah itself. Accordingly, the fourth step of his argument was linked to another important word in Genesis 13:15 (“seed”). In Hebrew, singular zera‘ is a collective noun referring to the innumerable descendants of Abraham who will inherit the land promised to the first patriarch. Paul, arguing from the Greek text, noted that the promise to Abraham had not been made to seeds plural (tois spermasin), but “to one” (‘ep’ henos), who was none other than Jesus (3:16). In other words, the promise in the Torah was not invalidated, but it needed to be re-interpreted. The original promise may have been about numerous offspring from Abraham who would inherit a physical territory, but in light of the life and teachings of Jesus, it needed to be understood as a promise about a single “seed” (Jesus) and his spiritual kingdom. In other words new times and circumstances demanded from Paul a reformulation of the Genesis promise. In other words, the rabbinic interpretation of Genesis 13:15, while not incorrect, was incomplete because the singularity of Jesus (“the seed”) was a concept that could not have been grasped until the advent of Jesus (3:19). “Before faith” (3:23), the Torah served temporarily as a “tutor” (paidagogos) leading inexorably to Jesus (3:24). “But now that faith has arrived, we are no longer under a tutor” (3:25).

These four steps in the argument of Paul about the Torah lead to a truly innovative fifth step. Not only was Abraham the progenitor of Christian faith, but his son Isaac was also an integral link in the chain leading from Abraham to Jesus to Paul. Abraham, Paul recalled, had fathered two sons, “one by a slave woman and one by a free woman” (4:22). For Paul, “these things are allegorical utterances” (4:24). The promise to Abraham was about a single son only, and that son clearly was Isaac. But just as Abraham was not a true link to Torah Judaism (having become righteous centuries before the Torah existed), neither was Isaac. He was, in fact, the first child of promise, even as Paul and his Galatian readers were to be considered later children of promise (4:28). The Torah, far from traveling through the “seed” (Isaac) promised to Abraham, actually had developed through the slave line of the descendants of Ishmael. Thus Jews who follow the Torah are slaves, as was their progenitor Ishmael, while Christians who replace the Torah with Paul’s idea about “faith,” are the children of promise descending from Abraham and Isaac. In short, while Christians, not Jews, are the descendants of Isaac, Jews descend from Ishmael. And Jews, again following the example of their progenitor, persecute Christians, as Ishmael had once persecuted Isaac (4:28-31).

This link between Ishmael and the Torah depends upon the relationship between Ishmael and the woman presented in the Genesis narratives as his mother, Hagar. “The equating of Hagar with Sinai is suggested either by the location of Sinai in Arabia ... or by the linguistic similarity of an Arabian word hajar (rock or

cliff), with which certain place names on the Sinaitic peninsula seem to be related.”[44] Whereas the biblical link between Abraham and Moses (the Torah) is established by Exodus 6:2-3 (and see also Exodus 3:6), Paul’s argument depended upon negating any relationship between the two men, which he accomplished by reference to the wide gap of centuries between their two lives.

The contrast between the rabbinic and this Pauline view of Ishmael and the Torah could not be sharper. A midrash found in the second (or early third) century CE Mekhilta deR. Ishmael[45] relates the following:

Before Israel was asked, the nations of the world were asked in the presence of God to receive the Torah, so that they could not have an opportunity to say: If we had been offered the Torah we would have already accepted it upon us. In fact, they were asked and they did not accept the Torah upon themselves, as it is said: “The Lord came from Sinai and shone from Seir [homeland of Esau’s descendants] for them” (Deuteronomy 33:2). This means that God revealed himself to the children of Esau the wicked [descendants of Seir] and said to them: Will you accept the Torah? They said to him: What’s written in it? He said to them: “You shall not murder” (Exodus 20:13). They said: But this is the inheritance which our father bequeathed us, as it is said: “By your sword shall you live” (Genesis 27:40).

God then appeared to the children of Amon and Moab. He said to them: Will you accept the Torah? They said to him: What’s written in it? He said to them: “You shall not commit adultery” (Exodus 20:13). They said to him: All of us are born from adultery, as it is written: “The two daughters of Lot became pregnant by their father” (Genesis 19:36).[46] How can we accept the Torah?

God then appeared to the children of Ishmael. He said to them: Will you accept the Torah? They said to him: What’s written in it? He said to them: “Do not steal” (Exodus 20:13). They said to him: But this was the very blessing with which our father was blessed, as it is written: “He will be a wild man, his hand against everyone”[47] (Genesis 16:12).

When God came to Israel, “from his right hand was a fiery law for them” (Deuteronomy 33:2). They all opened their mouths and said: “All that the Lord has spoken we will do and will obey” (Exodus 24:7). And thus it says: “He stood and measured the earth, he looked and dismissed the other nations” (Habakkuk 3:6).

In sum, then, the Torah, which was a “tree of life” for the rabbis,[48] became “the body of this death” (Rom. 7:24) for Paul. The blessing of rabbinic Judaism became a curse (Gal. 3:10), and salvation became the possession of non-Jews through acceptance of the Christian meaning of the Torah (Gal. 5:19-22). This was clarified by Paul’s assertion that “Christ is the goal (telos) of the Law [leading] to righteousness for everyone who believes” (Rom. 10:4).

It is difficult to assess the motivation of Paul in arguing as he does in Galatians. Many scholars have noted his personal difficulty with the Jewish Torah, which he restricted narrowly to his own idea of “law.” But clearly Paul was disillusioned about far more than Jewish law. In Galatians, he dismisses not just the Torah, not just circumcision, kashrut, and Shabbat, but indeed the foundational story of the Old Testament in its entirety. In the context of the biblical narratives recalling the activity of God on their behalf—gracing them with the divine name of the deity who had appeared to Abraham, adopting them as His own “son” (Exodus 4:22), freeing them from Egyptian slavery, designating them as His “special possession” charged with the responsibility of becoming a “holy nation” (see Exodus 19:1-6)—nothing could sound more shocking to a Jew than the idea that Jews had never been and could never become anything but slaves because they are the offspring of the slave-child Ishmael. For Paul thus to denigrate so many foundational aspects of Jewish (Old Testament) teaching can only be viewed as the first step in the process that led to the final break between Judaism and Christianity.

In addition to his rejection of circumcision, kashrut, Shabbat, and his perception of “law” and the rabbinic idea of fivefold “torah,” there are several specific instances of the ways in which Paul attempted to transvalue the Hebrew Scriptures in the process of forging the theological underpinnings of his new faith.

Paul and the Virgin Birth

The treatment of the Virgin Birth serves as a primary example of generic New Testament transvaluation flexibility, and testifies to the freedom that NT authors granted themselves to reconstruct the Bible in a way that served their special ideological needs. To deal with the burning question of how Jesus became God, one can scarcely imagine a more powerful tool than a biography founded upon a birth narrative designed to explain the deity of Jesus by means of the patrimony of the divine Holy Spirit. Yet here, for all its desire to base itself upon the Hebrew Scriptures, the need for early Christianity to articulate a Virgin Birth concept ran into a solid roadblock. There is nowhere in the Hebrew Scriptures, or

indeed anywhere in Second Temple Judaism/Judaism, anything that may serve as justification for what appears in Matthew and Luke as unambiguous doctrine.

The Hebrew Bible indeed has its own miraculous birth narratives relating especially to Isaac (Genesis 18:1-20; 21:1-3) and later to Samuel (1 Samuel 1:1-20). But the natural birth credited to a one-hundred year old father and a ninety-year old mother does not address the question of the divinity of the child thus produced. But the very idea of sexual union between divine and human beings is bluntly denounced by the same book of Genesis in which we learn about Abraham and Sarah and Isaac,[49] a denunciation greatly expanded in the First Book of Enoch, composed only slightly earlier than the NT. This may explain why the concept of a son born from Mary, “conceived from the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 1:20) did not become a major topic for all writers of the NT narratives about Jesus. Neither the earliest gospel, Mark, nor the latest one, John, appears to know anything of a virgin birth. In fact, while Mark was silent on the question of the virginal birth of Jesus, implying that the idea was unknown or at the least unimportant to him, John contravened the idea of divine impregnation directly, reporting that Philip testified to Nathaniel about “Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph” (1:45). Similarly, Peter does not mention the Virgin Birth in any of his sermons recorded in Acts.

It was Paul, composing epistles much earlier than any of the gospels or Acts, who authored two statements that directly contradict the idea of a virgin birth. In Galatians 4:4, Jesus is clearly described as “born of a woman” (gegomenon ek gynaikos). Only much later would Matthew 1:23 transvalue Paul’s generic gynē into parthenos. Even more pointedly, Paul’s understanding of the patrimony of Jesus is offered in Romans 1:3 as “born from the sperm of David.”[50] Then in the following verse, Paul notes that this person born by entirely natural means “was appointed to be[51] the Son of God ... via the resurrection from the dead.” In other words, the resurrection, not a miraculous birth, made Jesus unique and divine for Paul.

Paul and the Resurrection of Jesus

The virgin birth that begins the life and the resurrection that follows the death of Jesus are the two trickiest issues in the NT, and it is significant that both topics fail to receive a singular unified theological explanation among all the writers of the NT. The earliest NT treatment of the resurrection is that of Paul, found in First Corinthians 15, an authentic Pauline epistle composed well before the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. As we have noted above, for Paul, the

divinity and power of Jesus were certified by the resurrection rather than by the virginal birth.[52] Thus it is of great significance that in dealing with what he perceived to be the central event of the Jesus story, Paul never indicated in any of his writings a belief in the physical resurrection of Jesus. For him, the resurrection was a mystical, spiritual event. In general terms, i.e., not limited to Jesus alone, the physical body of even the average person, “is sown as a natural body, but it is raised as a spiritual body” (I Cor 15:44). This led naturally to the conclusion Paul reached at the end (15:50): “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God.” That the term “spiritual body” is difficult to imagine was admitted freely by Paul: “Look, I am speaking a mystery to you” (15:51).[53]

This Pauline perspective on the spiritual aspect of the resurrection of Jesus is later mirrored in three of the gospels. Mark assumed that Jesus was capable of morphing into an alternate form and materializing at will among his disciples (16:12). Luke described Jesus as capable of invisible movement (24:15-16), and reported in Acts that Jesus levitated into the air (1:9). In a similar vein, John described Jesus as a disembodied spirit that could pass through locked doors (20:19).

But the gospels also contain another perspective, one lacking in Paul. Mark described an empty tomb (16:8), clearly implying that the physical body of Jesus was now absent. Matthew, who omitted references to a spiritual dimension of the resurrection, described a physical Jesus who could be detained when his feet were grasped (28:9). Luke described the order of Jesus to his amazed disciples: “Handle me and see. A spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have” (24:39). And John portrayed Jesus offering the ultimate proof of his physical resurrection to Thomas by instructing him to insert his fingers into the nail holes in his hands and the spear hole in his side (20:19).

It is difficult to harmonize these two different views of the resurrection of Jesus. Surely the gospel accounts of Jesus having raised three dead people physically[54] were designed to illustrate his power over physical death. And biblical precedents for such miracles were available from the lives of Elijah (I Kings 17:21-23) and Elisha (II Kings 4:32-37).[55]

In short, by arguing for the physical nature of the resurrection of Jesus, the gospel writers could find adequate precedent in their own textbook, the “Old” Testament.[56] But Paul clearly has the better of the argument here, for the first time that a Christian believer died without being raised again physically, the gospel emphasis on physical resurrection would have lost much of its appeal. Only a

spiritual resurrection (which could be neither proved nor disproved) could serve as a universal paradigm offering hope to believers in the new religion that they too could experience a similar fate. Here too we find a point of similarity with Judaism. Paul, claiming himself to have been a Pharisee at one time, and the rabbis shared this perspective about the doctrine of resurrection, which neither he nor they expected immediately upon death. But the rabbis seem not to have anticipated an imminent eschatological judgment, as did Paul, and they offered no discussion about how soon after death such a judgment might occur. With this important difference noted, their conviction that an eschatological judgment followed by resurrection was congruent with what Paul expressed.

Paul and the Ten Commandments

The New Testament does not include a listing of the Ten Commandments in their complete form, following either Exodus or Deuteronomy. “However, the individual precepts of the decalogue are more frequently cited in the NT than they are in the OT.”[57] Further, the NT citation of or allusions to the Hebrew Ten often contain subtle variants. It is not that these variants are substantive but that they occur at all that is significant.[58] In Matthew 19,[59] Jesus responded to a question about how to inherit “eternal life” (16) with a short answer, “If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments” (17), which he then proceeded to list. Five of the commandments mentioned by Jesus are part of the biblical Ten, but a sixth is not. “You will love your neighbor as yourself” is a citation from Leviticus 19:18.

Paul, who elsewhere argued the impossibility of fulfilling the Torah, stated in Romans 13:8 that “he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the Law,” and noted in 13:10 that, “love is the fulfillment of the Law.” In this short pericope, Paul also mentioned four of the Ten Commandments specifically, three of which he shared with those cited by Jesus (adultery, murder, stealing). He then added a commandment not mentioned by Jesus (coveting), before citing Leviticus 19:18 as Jesus had done.[60]

Paul, Christ, and Water in the Desert

We turn now to one example of Paul’s possible familiarity with rabbinic positions as well as his desire to go beyond them in search of a Christological interpretation. In First Corinthians 10, drawing lessons from early Israelite disobedience, Paul reminded his readers of the corporate nature of the early events in Israelite history stretching from Egypt and the Exodus well into the time of

wandering in the wilderness. “All of our Israelite ancestors were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, all ate the same spiritual food,[61] and all drank the same spiritual drink” (10:1-4). Even with these convincing experiences, Paul notes, most of the Israelites failed to please God (10:5). To what was Paul referring?

The Torah contains two different narratives chronicling the actions of Moses in striking a rock to draw water from it. The first event occurred at a place named Rephidim (Exod: 17:1-7), while the second was located at Kadesh (Num. 20:1-12). Because of the complaints of the people, Rephidim was renamed Massah (“test”) and Meribah (“quarrel”) in Exodus 17:7. The incident at Kadesh was specifically tied to Meribah in Numbers 20:13. This Meribah link between the well at Rephidim and the later incident at Kadesh, has led modern source critics to view the two narratives as alternate accounts of the same event, and attribute them to two different Pentateuchal literary sources.[62] Before the dawn of source criticism, however, the rabbis posited another theory, according to which the water-producing rock struck by Moses originally in Rephidim followed the Israelites in the desert to Kadesh, and may have supplied them with water on numerous occasions, not all of which are specifically chronicled in the Pentateuch. Paul seemed to have been aware of this rabbinic idea of a single rock following the Israelites, and assigned to it a figurative interpretation with which the rabbis would have had little disagreement: “they were drinking from a spiritual rock that followed them” (10:4b). But Paul’s unique contribution to the rabbinic idea was his specific identification of the rock: “the rock was the Christ” (10:4c).

Future Directions

In my analysis of the gospel authors, I pointed to evidence that indicated their etic (outsider) understanding of Judaism. By contrast, it is clear that the “Jewishness” of Paul cannot be doubted despite the fact that certain aspects of his career are clouded if not presented misleadingly by the author of Acts. These include his clear identification with early persecution of Jewish Christians, his domicile in Jerusalem, his education under Gamaliel, and his standing as a Jewish scholar or “rabbi.”[63] In short, while Paul was clearly Jewish, he was not, as he claimed, particularly observant or concerned with traditional values that Pharisees in particular were debating during his lifetime. What is fascinating is the manner in which his non-Palestinian treatment of Jewish ideas has been taken almost without question as somehow a normative step progressing past the narrowness of the gospels. Thus Paul has come to be regarded as the ultimate authority on the true

meaning of Christian faith, eclipsing the ideas of Jesus and his earthly disciples about law, kashrut, circumcision, Shabbat, etc.

To be accurate, we are forced to note that Paul was a more marginal Jew than Jesus, Peter, or the other original disciples, all of whom had difficulty with the idea of abandoning the customs with which they had grown up, the traditional practices they had followed throughout their lives. Indeed, it is hard to imagine anyone except Paul pushing against traditional Judaism so hard as to cause a complete break with it, becoming fully comfortable with a non-Jewish lifestyle, and ultimately rewriting the foundational story of the Torah to justify the breach that his own teachings had precipitated with no link to any known rabbinic stratum of the day.

In this context, it is appropriate to examine the “conversion” of Paul. Was he, in fact, a true Torah observer at first who adopted such a cavalier attitude towards anything that smacked of “law” only after his vision en route to Damascus? If Paul’s affiliation with Gamaliel is retained stubbornly because Luke/Acts claims it,[64] the question arises as to how such a moderate teacher should have produced such a ferocious and extremist student. In fact, given the different reactions of Gamaliel and Caiaphas to the preaching of Peter and other apostles in Acts 5, Paul’s subsequent mission to Damascus under authority of the high priest makes it seem more likely that Paul had studied under Caiaphas than under Gamaliel.

There is more. Since Paul always cites only the LXX, and since most of his citations are paraphrases at best, where is the evidence that “memorized Scriptures...came easily to him?”[65] Where is the evidence that Paul had even a cursory familiarity with “oral Torah?”[66] And where is the evidence to support the assertion that hearing Stephen quote from the prophet Isaiah “drove Rabbi Paul” to switch his allegiance from the most famous teacher of his day to follow the high priest Caiaphas?[67] None of these assumptions is supported either by Luke/Acts or by the words of Paul in his own descriptions of what happened to turn him into a persecutor.

“The most striking feature of consensus among the Gospels and Josephus in respect to Caiaphas is his close relationship with the Roman administration.”[68] Now the party of Jews most closely affiliated with the Romans was not the Pharisees but the Sadducees,[69] and Caiaphas is explicitly identified as a Sadducee in Acts 5:17.

What then can be said about Paul's "conversion," the experience that turned him from being a persecutor of those whose faith he had despised into a zealous missionary for that very faith? Since Judaism and Christianity were not yet separate religions, the NT accounts of his Damascus experience appear to imply that Paul simply "changed brands of Judaism, switching from Pharisaic to Christian Judaism." [70] Surely it is fair to ask whether a Sadducean high priest would authorize a zealous Pharisee to conduct a mission on his behalf! And if Paul was on a mission in support of the most powerful Sadducee of his day, from what to what did he "convert?" Pharisees were far more rigorous in observing basic Jewish rules than Sadducees. And since Paul cared so little about circumcision, kashrut, Shabbat, and Jewish law, it is hard to imagine that he had ever been a truly zealous Pharisee, as he claims.

Conversely there was only one point about which the Sadducees would have cared enough to oppose the particular brand of Judaism being exhibited by Jewish Christians, and Caiaphas' opposition to Jewish Christianity was surely based more on his denial of the resurrection than on any other single factor. Much has been made of the fact that Paul was an elite Roman citizen. If Paul's sympathies had been elitist and Sadducean all along rather than Pharisaical, this would explain his initial willingness to participate in a campaign led by the Sadducean high priest against vocal proponents of resurrection, especially the extreme and violent nature of his opposition that was so different from the attitude of the most famous Pharisee of his day with whom he supposedly had studied. [71]

Further, if Paul had been a Sadducee from the beginning, his subsequent laxity with respect to rules and rituals that were precious to Pharisees makes more sense. His extremism and his arrogance in presuming that he alone knew better than the ruling authorities how the new faith should proceed also make more sense coming from an elitist. And it would offer a new wrinkle to the change of heart Paul experienced on the road to Damascus. He did not lose beliefs precious to a Pharisee, for subsequent events describe no scintilla of internal struggle over his abandonment of circumcision, kashrut, Shabbat, and torah. That is, the NT offers no hint that Paul ever agonized over these issues in a fashion similar to the struggle Peter had about the idea that it would be OK to dine on un-kosher food with a non-Jew. Thus in the home of Cornelius, Peter protests three times, "I have never eaten anything un-kosher or unclean" (Acts 10:14) before becoming convinced that the strict Jewish dietary laws he had observed all his life were to be set aside. And torah-observant Jews back in Jerusalem were concerned enough about Peter's actions to question him. And only after Peter offered a detailed explanation of his heavenly vision that the entire group accepted as divine in origin was his decision

accepted (Acts 11:1-18). By contrast, the alacrity with which Paul jettisoned these most basic customs indicates how little he had ever actually cared about them.

On the other hand, if he believed he had heard the voice of someone who had been put to death by Rome, he might well have changed his mind about resurrection. To this point, it is critical to note that the initial account of the conversion in Acts 9 explains that although Paul “heard a voice” (9:4), he was unable to see after being blinded by the great light from heaven that “flashed around him” (9:3). But in his comments about his experience to the Corinthians, he makes it clear that he did see the Lord—none other than the resurrected Jesus who had appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve, then to 500 brothers and sisters at one time, then to James, and finally “to all the apostles” (I Cor. 15:3-7). “Last of all,” Paul adds, “as to one born untimely, he [the resurrected Jesus] appeared also to me” (15:8). Clearly, a visionary experience of a resurrected Jesus was central to Paul’s experience on the road to Damascus.

A fascinating account of Paul before the Sanhedrin bears on this exact issue. When the Sadducean high priest Ananias ordered that Paul be struck on the mouth for his braggadocio, Paul reacted angrily: “God will strike you, you whitewashed wall” (Acts 23:2-3). Informed that Ananias was the high priest, Paul immediately apologized for his outburst, explaining, “I did not realize, brothers, that he was high priest” (23:5a). This is a remarkable statement for a Pharisee to make about a Sadducee, even more remarkable when Paul coupled his apology with a respectful reference to Ananias as “a leader of [the Jewish] people” (23:5b). It is hard to think of any Pharisee acknowledging any Sadducee of the era as a spiritual leader of Jews worthy of respect.

But Paul’s odd acknowledgement and apology have purpose. Noticing that the Sanhedrin included both Sadducees and Pharisees, he easily lured the court into an argument so violent that armed soldiers were called to escort Paul out of court back to his prison barracks. The argument was about “resurrection” (Acts 23:6-10)!

This was a clever tactic, to be certain. But the tactician inciting violence in court was the man who could testify without apology that he had no hesitation in pretending to be “a Jew in order to win Jews,” torah-observant to one audience and torah-free to another crowd, even pretending to be “weak” to appeal to others who were “weak,” before announcing that he could become whatever was necessary for the success of his mission: “I have become all things to all people in order that by any means I might win someone” (I Cor. 9:20-22).[72]

The purpose of Paul's conversion is also the subject of various NT interpretations. The three accounts in Acts (9:1-18; 22:1-16; 26:1-18)[73] all link Paul's visionary experience with his sense of mission to Gentiles. Despite this, the initial account in Acts 9 states clearly that after he had regained his sight, "immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues" (9:20). Then the version offered in Acts 26 includes Paul's own conclusion: "After that, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision. I preached first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem, and throughout the countryside of Judea," but only then "also to the Gentiles" (26:19-20).

Elsewhere in Acts we find additional evidence of this second, far different picture. When the church in Antioch was commanded by the "Holy Spirit" to "set apart Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them" (13:1), the two men traveled to the island of Salamis and "proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews" (Acts 13:5).[74] Their mission in Antioch in Pisidia began in synagogues in exactly the same way (13:14). But when their second Shabbat sermons there attracted such large crowds that "the Jews...were filled with jealousy, blasphemed, and contradicted what was spoken by Paul" (13:46), Paul and Barnabas announced the following: "It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken first to you [Jews]. But because you reject it...we are now turning to the Gentiles" (13:46). Yet even that experience did not bring about a change in pattern. "The same thing happened in Iconium" (14:1), Lystra, and Derbe (14:6). Likewise, Romans 11 repeatedly underscores Paul's feeling that only because Jews ["Israel"] rejected the gospel was it possible for Gentiles to be offered the chance at salvation.

This is a far different picture from the simplistic explanation that sees Paul receiving his calling to the Gentiles at the same time he experiences a vision of Jesus. In city after city, Paul began his missionary activities in synagogues. Taking his own words cited above at face value, in synagogues he was presumably presenting himself as a torah-observant Jew who was seeking to convert other torah-observant Jews to his new conception of appropriate torah observance. In city after city, these initial activities fail, so he turns to the Gentiles to whom he presumably presents himself as free from torah-obligations of any sort, or even "weak" with respect to rules and regulations that might become burdensome to those who were contemplating conversion. Goaded forward perhaps by his belief that the resurrected Jesus was soon to return to gather together all members of his flock, Paul became willing to morph into whatever theological shape might resonate with his audience of the moment, the preacher to whom they might be

expected to respond best. Again, this flexibility he granted to himself, as he himself explains, “in order that by any means I might win someone.”

In light of this divided NT view of the Gentile mission as the chief purpose of Paul’s conversion experience, it is safest to conclude that Paul himself believed the significance of his vision was his authentication as an apostle (I Cor. 15:8-9). Whatever else might have been true, it would have been necessary for the new faith to grant him such an exalted title to equip him properly for missionary activity either to Jews or to non-Jews. Acts 13:1 fits this idea well via the description that Saul/Paul was divinely “called” to his work as a missionary, and thereafter, the most frequent self-reference Paul made in his extant letters was to describe his calling to be that of an apostle.[75]

It is also noteworthy that neither the early church nor Paul employed the title (“Rabbi”) by which Jesus would later be designated often in the gospels and by which Paul surely would have been called had he been a Pharisee! Taking Acts along with his own words seriously impels us to grant him the title that he coveted most of all: “apostle of Jesus Christ.” Although no less an authority than “the Holy Spirit” referred to him by his Jewish name Saul (Acts 13:2), as soon as he began his career as a Christian missionary, all references to him were changed to “Paul.”[76] This Paul of the NT is revealed to be not terribly torah-observant; not very knowledgeable about rabbinic teachings; not conversant with the Hebrew Scriptures except in their Greek translation; and only too happy to adjust his presentation to fit the audience of the moment. However one may feel about his methods, the great success of his life remains the triumph and explosive growth of the new movement of Jesus followers to which he devoted his life.

Conclusion

To many readers, it may seem as if the ideas being proposed here are unnecessarily skeptical of the reliability of the NT. Some of the interpretations are contradicted by a clear NT statement and as a result, it might be assumed that I disrespect the NT. But the issue is not that simple. What seems obvious to me is that the NT contradicts itself in certain places. As a Jew, this fact may bother me less than some. One of the thirteen basic principles of interpretation that guided the early rabbis in their discussions about biblical interpretation was what to do when two verses contradict each other. They knew, and I know, that contradictions do occur in the Hebrew Bible, so finding a few in the NT is not worrisome. What to do with contradictions is the key, and it is not appropriate simply to practice “selective literalism”[77] in an attempt to shoot down a theory one does

not like. So, for example, it is easy to answer doubts about Paul's training with Gamaliel by quoting Acts directly. But it is a fact that Paul's own failure to cite this most impressive aspect of his academic and spiritual training is troubling. And this omission is not of my making, it is part and parcel of the NT witness itself. Add the fact that Paul appears ignorant of the Scriptures in Hebrew and that he shows little familiarity with well-known rabbinic teachings, and the thought of his education taking place at the feet of Gamaliel becomes difficult for me to sustain. My theory is thus not grounded in skepticism about Acts but in what it means to take Paul's own words seriously.

The same is true with regard to the purpose for Paul's "conversion" experience. Acts does indeed indicate that it was the grounding of his mission to the Gentiles. But Acts also portrays Saul/Paul and Barnabas going first to synagogues and seeking an audience of Gentiles only when their Jewish audience did not respond as they hoped. Again, Acts contradicts Acts, and I am free to seek an alternative purpose for the conversion. I find it in the importance of the title "Apostle" to the new faith, and I link it with the number of times Paul refers to himself in this manner. My theory offers me the added benefit of noting that only a person highly enough respected by the new faith to justify such an honorable title could expect to be taken seriously on missions either to Jews or to non-Jews.

What should be clear is that skepticism of Acts is warranted in instances where Acts itself is unclear, where it contradicts its own testimony or Paul's testimony about himself in his letters. My reasons for doubting Paul's affiliation with Gamaliel should be clear, and each person who disagrees must accept the burden of answering why a Palestinian-trained Pharisee should evince no familiarity with the Hebrew Scriptures or with widely held rabbinic positions, and should show no reluctance (as did Peter and other apostles!) over the loss of core rabbinic teachings like circumcision, kashrut, Shabbat, and torah.

If my positions cannot be sustained in the light of NT teaching as a whole, then they cannot be sustained. But the challenge is to the person who must explain how the most famous teacher in the Jewish world, a modest and conciliatory peacemaker, should have produced a student who was among the most violent of his generation. And the burden also rests on someone who can come forward with a credible explanation as to why a confirmed braggart would neglect to tell the world of his most praiseworthy academic achievement.

I do not know of anyone else who has claimed that Paul's initial willingness to join a party using violence against a new faith smells like Sadducees

rather than Pharisees. I am given pause at the idea that a Sadducean high priest would entrust a Pharisee with the authority to carry out an important mission, especially one that involved the competing ideas of resurrection favored by the two parties. And I find it difficult to imagine a Pharisee apologizing to and praising a Sadducee as a great leader of Israel. I also know that the common perception of the Pharisees as narrow-minded bigots is simply not correct. I need mention only Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea, and Gamaliel as evidence of the fact that Pharisees were more progressive, and open to the ideas of others than elitist Sadducees[78] whose quest for power over other people seemed to lead naturally to their violent attempt to quash a new group, especially if the actions of that group might hint to the Roman overlords that the Sadducees could not keep their end of the deal to maintain Pax Romana perfectly throughout the land.[79]

Of course I cannot sustain my thesis that Paul might have been a Sadducee with a direct quotation from the NT. I can only note that Paul's actions appear to me to have been quite in harmony with the black/white world of the elitists and that they would not have been taught to him by Gamaliel. And I can note the emphasis placed on resurrection after Paul heard the voice of a man he believed dead as well as Paul's insistence that it was this man who spoke to him.

I freely admit that I am not a fan of Paul. I think his willingness to pretend to be whatever he thought would lead to more converts was deceitful and mean. I cannot imagine what someone might have thought if after hearing Saul tout his Judaism in a synagogue he would later hear Paul trumpet his freedom from everything Jewish in a church. But I know success when I see it, and I am willing to give Paul his due. He separated the new faith from Judaism. And he made it a triumphant force in the Roman world. Without his efforts, the new faith might have remained merely a small sect within Judaism, perhaps as little known as the Essenes or the Sadducees themselves are today. Christianity today owes its very existence to him, and that is an important reason why he continues to fascinate and intrigue interpreters.

If victory at any cost is the criterion, Paul wins hands down.

[1] "Emic or Etic? Interpreting the Hebrew Scriptures," July, 2015.

[2] I have addressed this issue more broadly in *How Jews and Christians Interpret Their Sacred Texts: A Study in Transvaluation* (Eugene, Oregon: Resource Publications, 2014). Hereafter, *Jews and Christians*.

[3] I have revised, expanded, reorganized, and updated my comments on Paul first published in *Jews and Christians*.

[4] “Paul the Apostle,” IDB 3:688.

[5] We will examine this experience in greater detail below.

[6] In *Rabbi Paul, An Intellectual Biography* (Doubleday: 2004), p. 32, Bruce Chilton cites Jürgen Becker’s position that Paul was not a resident of Jerusalem, but of Damascus, but accuses him of inventing readings of Paul, “in order to contradict Acts” (sic). My reasons for doubting the Gamaliel/Jerusalem part of the Acts story are given in more detail below.

[7] Or indeed any student studying with any Palestinian rabbi/teacher.

[8] But this is the title that Bruce Chilton insists Paul merited in his *Rabbi Paul*. Despite his engaging and lively writing style and his inclusion of innumerable valuable insights, I find Chilton’s view that Paul studied for years with Gamaliel ultimately unconvincing.

[9] “If an unbeliever invites you to a meal and you want to go, eat whatever is set before you and do not raise any question on the ground of conscience” (I Cor. 10:27).

[10] See Galatians 2:10-14.

[11] Ber. 13 b.

[12] Ber. 2.2. We should also compare the expression ‘ol torah (“the yoke of torah”) in ’Avot 3.6, which is juxtaposed to ‘ol malkhut (“the yoke of the kingdom”) and ‘ol derekh ’eret (“the yoke of appropriate behavior”).

[13] As he had done earlier at the home of Cornelius in Caesarea (Acts 10:1-16).

[14] And see also Acts 11:2). Here too it is noteworthy that the episode in Caesarea made no mention of circumcision until “the circumcised believers [Jews] who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even upon Gentiles” (Acts 10:44-45).

[15] Nor does any other NT writer! The only portrayal of an early church service of worship is a meeting on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7).

[16] About which see more below. In the discussion that follows, I have used Torah to describe the Pentateuch, and torah to include both written Scripture and “Oral Torah,” the rabbinic teachings that came to be published in the Talmudim.

[17] Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (Oxford University Press, 2003), 232.

[18] See Mishnah San. 10.1. The other such offenses are denial of the resurrection, using the name of God inappropriately so as to profane it, teaching doctrine from books other than the Bible, and using “charms” while chanting Scripture to cure physical ailments.

[19] Note for example, the saying attributed to Rabbi Tarfon: “You are not obligated to complete the task, but you are not free to abandon it either” (ʿAvot 2.21).

[20] Ber. 34b. And cf. also the discussion in Mishnah Makkot 3.14-16.

[21] See the lengthy discussion in Yoma 86a-b; 87a. Note also Ecclesiastes 7:20: “There is no one on earth so righteous as to do good without sinning.”

[22] The Hebrew word *šûv* means either to turn or to return. Thus repentance (*tašûvah*, the noun formed from the root *šûv*) involved turning away from wrongdoing and towards God.

[23] See especially Exod. 18:16, 18:20, 44:5; Ezek. 44:5, 44:24; Isa. 24:5; Ps. 105:45 which pair *torot* with *ḥuqim* (“statutes”); Neh. 9:13 with *mišpatim* (“judgments”); Lev. 26:46 with *mitzvot* (“commandments”) and Gen. 26:5 and Exod 16:28 with both *mitzvot* and *ḥuqim*.

[24] See Jacob Neusner, *The Life of Torah* (Wadsworth, 1974).

[25] Usually used in the plural, but here signifying the collective trespass of Judaism, unbelief in Paul’s Christ.

[26] Here Paul has adapted Plato's body/soul dualism, probably from Stoic philosophers. In this perspective, the mind is the part of human nature that partakes of the divine nature, while the body is the seat of passions that keep the mind from being in tune with God.

[27] I am indebted to my colleague Delbert Burkett for some of the points made in this paragraph.

[28] His argument is found in Galatians three.

[29] Brown, Intro to NT, 431.

[30] Romans seven.

[31] Note Matthew 5:17: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets. I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill."

[32] The full Hebrew phrase is *haraz bedivrei torah*.

[33] This may also be connected to a style of disputation familiar in the Greco-Roman world known as the "diatribe," a form of debate with an imaginary opponent. But neither Paul nor the rabbis seem to have had imaginary opponents in mind when framing their questions. A biblical precedent may be found in Micah 6:1-8, where the prophet formulated both sides of an argument before arriving at his conclusion. Neither the 'Amoraim nor Paul were employing a particular hermeneutical rule with such questions, but were wrestling in general with the contextual meaning of biblical principles.

[34] See *Jews and Christians*, pp. 18-20.

[35] In Shabbat 31a, Hillel tells a potential convert, who demanded to be taught the Torah while he stood on one foot, that the entire Torah was, "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor." He then adds, "Everything else is commentary. So, go study the commentary."

[36] Unless otherwise noted, subsequent chapter and verse references are to Galatians.

[37] Note here the similar rabbinic overturning of the clear meaning of Exodus 34.6-7 discussed in *Jews and Christians*, pp. 170-171.

[38] Even if we recall the earlier distinction between divine law and the law of Moses, we must also note that the Mosaic Law was at least in part a reflection of God's law.

[39] In *Paul, the Law, and the Covenant* (Hendrickson, 2001), A. Andrew Das argues that there are numerous instances where "all the Law" had to be kept by members of the Qumran sect. But the appeal to the Qumran community to argue that some Jews insisted on keeping all the Law strictly does not change the fact that numbers of commandments within the law require specific procedures for failure to have kept the law. Nor does it alter the fact that the Qumran Community was very much a minority sect (that refused even to enter the Temple in Jerusalem) and did not represent the typical attitude of the rabbis who created the Talmudim that would come to define normative Judaism. The presence of clearly defined required procedures for breach of the law would have no meaning if everyone adopted the attitude of Paul and decided that the Law was useless because it could not be perfectly followed in each instance. But the Qumran community is a false parallel for another reason. Members who were found guilty of trespassing the law never testified that their excommunication or other harsh punishment did not matter because they had found a better way to rectify sin.

[40] A point firmly established by E. P. Sanders in *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Fortress Press, 1977).

[41] See A. C. Purdy, "Paul the Apostle," IDB 3:684: "Paul's rigoristic interpretation of Judaism—especially his statement that failure to keep the whole law brings the legalist under a curse (Gal. 3:10)—disregards the Jewish emphasis on repentance and forgiveness."

[42] I.e., the Pentateuch. His knowledge of "oral torah" appears quite limited.

[43] Both in Hebrew and in Greek, the verb from Genesis and the noun in Habakkuk derive from a common root (he'emin and 'emunah from 'm-n, episteusin and pisteos from pisteuein).

[44] "Agar," TDNT I:56.

[45] BaḤodesh 5 (commenting on Exodus 12.1-20).

[46] Lot's daughters gave birth to Amon and Moab. This was both incest and adultery, because according to Rabbinic tradition, Lot's daughters were engaged to be married, and in Jewish law engagement was equal to marriage. If a woman had sexual relations with another man while engaged, she committed adultery.

[47] I.e., he will make a living through theft.

[48] A phrase attested in Proverbs 3:18, where it describes "wisdom;" 11:30, where it describes "the fruit of the righteous;" 13:12, where it symbolizes "desire realized;" and 15:4, where it characterizes "a healing tongue." In Jewish liturgy, the Torah is celebrated as "a tree of life" during the ceremony of its return to the ark after it has been read to the congregation.

[49] See Genesis 6:1-9.

[50] gegomenou ek spermatos David.

[51] oristhentos, from oristhein, "to constitute, appoint."

[52] And we will have more to say about Paul and resurrection below.

[53] Donald Harmon Akenson (*Surpassing Wonder: The Invention of the Bible and the Talmuds*, New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1998, p. 254) sees a link between Paul's view of the spiritual resurrection of Jesus and the fate of Enoch and Elijah in the Hebrew Scriptures. The link is not obvious to me. Neither Enoch nor Elijah was reported to have died!

[54] The twelve year old daughter of Jairus (in all three synoptics), the adult son of a widow who lived in Nain (only Luke 7:12-15), and Lazarus, a member of his inner circle from Bethany (John 11:43-44).

[55] In fact, Elisha had retained his power over physical death long after his own burial (II Kings 13:20-21)! Of course, neither of these two great Hebrew prophets was himself resurrected, and neither became the pattern by which their disciples could hope for their own resurrection.

[56] Except perhaps in the late Book of Daniel (12:2), which they do not cite.

[57] Raymond F. Collins, "Ten Commandments," ABD VI, 386.

[58] See Jews and Christians, pp. 145-148.

[59] See also Mark 10:17-31 and Luke 18:18-30.

[60] Jesus included the honoring of parents and the bearing of false witness which Paul omitted. In Ephesians 6:1-4, Paul cited the honoring of parents from Deuteronomy, but included the phrase, “that it may be well with you,” absent from Exodus.

[61] See above on “manna.”

[62] See Milgrom, Numbers, 448-456 for a masterful treatment of two accounts as duplicates.

[63] To be doubted at least because of his lack of Hebrew language skills, his apparent lack of concern about basic Jewish beliefs, and his ignorance of or lack of respect for oral torah.

[64] Commonly the case among NT scholars, and done most vociferously by Bruce Chilton in Rabbi Paul.

[65] Chilton, Rabbi Paul, 48. Again, it is to be doubted whether Gamaliel would be teaching Scripture in Greek!

[66] Chilton, Rabbi Paul, 48.

[67] Chilton, Rabbi Paul, 49.

[68] Bruce Chilton, “Caiaphas,” ABD I:805.

[69] What is more, the high priest of this era was a Roman political appointee.

[70] Hans Dieter Betz, “Paul,” ABD V:187.

[71] Again in contrast to Chilton’s position that “Profound loyalty to the Temple, not malice, had led Paul to serve Caiaphas, to resist the malcontents from Galilee and the Diaspora who claimed that their dead rabbi’s authority trumped the high priest’s” (Rabbi Paul, 53).

[72] It is astounding that Paul's callous proclivity to deceive his audience by pretending to be someone other than his true self in order to gain a hearing should be seen as "a fundamental and exemplary accommodation to people as and where he finds them" or a "principle of accommodation...so fundamental to life lived in the gospel." See J. Paul Sampley, *The First Letter to the Corinthians: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflection* (The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. X), pp 907, 908.

[73] Galatians 1:16 makes the same claim.

[74] Nothing is said about preaching to Gentiles until the notation that the Roman proconsul at the far end of the island in Paphos "believed" because of his astonishment at the message of Paul to the false Jewish prophet who was famous as a magician (13:6-12).

[75] Note "Called to be an apostle in Romans 1:1 and I Corinthians 1:1. Note also "I am an apostle to the Gentiles (Rom. 11:13); "I am the least of the apostles" (I Cor. 15:9). Similarly, "Paul an apostle of Christ Jesus" (II Cor. 1:1); "Paul an apostle" (Gal. 1:1; Eph. 1:1; Col. 1:1; I and II Tim. 1:1; Titus 1:1).

[76] See Acts 13:9.

[77] This is the effective phrase of William Sloan Coffin, *Credo* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2004), p. 159.

[78] Although he does not cite specific references to prove his point, Bruce Chilton describes Paul's father as "wealthy," and his family as "prominent citizens of Tarsus—and Roman citizens [who] shared a huge tax advantage...profitable [business] contacts...and [financial] means" (Rabbi Paul, 13)! This is a textbook description of "elitist."

[79] Note John 11:48!