
Paul within Judaism: A Critical Evaluation from a “New Perspective” Perspective

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My assigned role in this project is to engage in a critical evaluation of the main chapters, as someone who is identified with the (now no longer quite so) New Perspective on Paul. I need to reserve most of the space that has been allotted to me for the task of critical engagement, rather than that of mapping the New Perspective or of promoting my own reading of Paul. Nevertheless, to provide a framework for my discussion of the preceding chapters, it seems appropriate to begin with a few comments about the New Perspective and my own approach.

As a category or label, “new perspective” has become increasingly problematical, in that it has come to be used in several different ways

and thus is being applied to scholars whose interpretations of Paul differ from each other in significant aspects.¹ Popular use of the term goes back to a 1983 article by James Dunn,² where it was used to refer to the work of E. P. Sanders.³ Since then, however, it has also come to be associated with Dunn's own attempts, along with those of N. T. Wright and others, to correct what they see as a deficiency in Sanders's argument (the correction centering on the idea that Paul's polemical discourse about "works of the law" is directed at misplaced Jewish confidence in ethnic "boundary markers" or "badges of membership"). In addition, the term is used more broadly and less precisely with reference to scholars who have not so much a shared position as a shared interest in a set of related questions stimulated by Sanders's trailblazing work.⁴

1. In a paper presented at a recent scholarly conference, I found myself sharing space in a list of New Perspective scholars with Neil Elliott, Lloyd Gaston, Richard Hays, Elizabeth Johnson, and Mark Nanos—congenial colleagues all, but hardly of the same mind on how to understand Paul.
2. James D. G. Dunn, "The New Perspective on Paul," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 65 (1983): 95–122. Dunn has since pointed out, however, that it was used earlier by N. T. Wright, in Wright's article "The Paul of History and the Apostle of Faith," *Tyndale Bulletin* 29 (1978): 61–88. Wright, in turn, noted that the term had already appeared in Krister Stendahl's influential article, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," *Harvard Theological Review* 56 (1963): 214; see N. T. Wright, *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 28.
3. E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977); Dunn also had access to the pre-publication manuscript of Sanders's *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).
4. Included in this set of questions are: the nature of covenantal Judaism; the place of "Jews" and "gentiles" in Paul's structures of thought and activity; the nature of his "conversion" (his transformation from "zealot for the traditions of his ancestors" to "apostle to the gentiles"); the relationship of Paul's juridical language to other aspects of his discourse; the significance of Romans 9–11. See Magnus Zetterholm's chapter, "Paul as a First-Century Jew: The State of the Questions," in this volume for a more detailed account of the New Perspective and its place in the history of Pauline interpretation.

My 1997 monograph *Paul and the Gentiles*⁵ was significantly influenced by the work of Sanders, though it was also an attempt to address a question that was left hanging in his seminal book *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*. While this means that my work is analogous in some respects to that of Dunn and Wright, I differ with them considerably in my sense of where Sanders needs to be corrected or supplemented.⁶ Whether this qualifies me for a New Perspective badge of membership depends, I suppose, on how the boundary is drawn.

In the monograph just mentioned, I readily adopted, at least in broad terms, a number of Sanders's distinctive insights and arguments:

- his depiction of Judaism as characterized by what he termed “covenantal nomism”;
- his argument that for Paul the “solution preceded the problem”—that is, that Christ represented not the solution to some already perceived failing or inadequacy in his own native Jewish “pattern of religion,” but a new conviction;
- his insistence that interpreters of Paul need to make a distinction between surface rhetoric and underlying convictional structure—that is, between Paul's fundamental convictions and the arguments he used to defend them in specific contexts;

5. Terence L. Donaldson, *Paul and the Gentiles: Remapping the Apostle's Convictional World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997); summaries of the position taken there can be found in Donaldson, “Israelite, Convert, Apostle to the Gentiles: The Origin of Paul's Gentile Mission,” in *The Road from Damascus: The Impact of Paul's Conversion on His Life, Thought and Ministry*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 62–84 and, to some extent, in Donaldson, “Introduction to the Pauline Corpus,” in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, ed. John Barton and John Muddiman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1062–83.

6. In addition to the material listed in the previous footnote, see Donaldson, “In Search of a Paul Neither Lutheran nor Idiosyncratic: James D. G. Dunn's *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*,” *Critical Review of Books in Religion* 11 (1998): 35–55.

- as a particular instance of this, his insistence that Paul’s juridical language (e.g., “justification by faith”) should be seen not as a theological first principle or fundamental conviction, but as an argument used in certain circumstances to defend a fundamental conviction;
- his characterization of the “pattern of religion” that arises out of Paul’s fundamental convictions as “participatory eschatology”;
- and finally, his identification of Paul’s most fundamental conviction as the belief that God has provided Christ as a means of salvation for all, gentiles as well as Jews, on equal terms.

It was this final item, however, that served as the point of departure for my own work. Sanders demonstrated to my satisfaction that, if we take this as Paul’s governing conviction, we can make good sense of the often perplexing and apparently disjointed arguments that we encounter at the surface level of his letters. But he provided us with no real explanation of how Paul arrived at this conviction in the first place. Key elements of the conviction, namely “for all” and “on equal terms,” are simply assumed. How are we to understand Paul’s transition from “a zealot for the traditions of [his] ancestors” (Gal. 1:14)⁷ to “the apostle to the gentiles”? As Dunn observed, in Sanders’s reconstruction this transition appears to have been “arbitrary and irrational,” the exchange of a “Lutheran Paul” for an “idiosyncratic Paul.”⁸ One might say that, for Sanders, this new conviction seemed

7. Since zeal generally refers to a willingness to use force to defend Torah-centered Judaism against a perceived threat, Paul’s role as a zealous “persecutor of the church” (Phil. 3:6; cf. Gal. 1:14) means that he initially perceived the movement of Jewish Christ-believers as somehow outside the bounds of tolerance. While a distinction needs to be maintained between community discipline and exclusion, Paul’s zeal-motivated opposition to Jewish Christ-believers needs to be accounted for in any account of this transition, and thus of any attempt to locate Paul the apostle “within Judaism.”
8. “The Lutheran Paul has been replaced by an idiosyncratic Paul who in arbitrary and irrational manner turns his face against the glory and greatness of Judaism’s covenant theology and

to have functioned as a kind of interpretive “black box,” a theoretical construction that, while providing a convincing explanation of other things, is itself closed off from investigation.⁹

My approach, then, might be seen as an attempt to open up this black box—an attempt to reconstruct the cognitive dynamic by which Paul arrived at this new conviction. Implicit in Sanders’s reconstruction, it seemed to me, especially in his theme “the solution as preceding the problem,” is the idea that prior to his Damascus experience Paul had been fully at home in the world of covenantal nomism. The question, then, concerns Paul’s transition from covenantal nomist (to use Sanders’s term) to apostle to the gentiles. How are we to understand the shift of convictions involved in a transformation from covenantal nomist to preacher of this particular message—that is, that God has provided Christ as a means of salvation for all, gentile as well as Jew, on equal terms?

The search for an answer, I felt, needed to begin in Paul’s native world, specifically in the range of Jewish conceptions about the religious status of non-Jews that I came to call “patterns of universalism.” While the choice of term might require reconsideration,¹⁰ I used it to refer to the various ways in which Jews were able to conceive of non-Jews as standing in a positive relationship with the God of Israel. In my earliest attempts to explore

abandons Judaism simply because it is not Christianity”; Dunn, “The New Perspective on Paul,” 101.

9. A more generous way of putting it would be to say that it was not part of Sanders’s purpose to reconstruct Paul’s transition. His project was more synchronic and comparative—namely, as his subtitle indicates, to compare what he called “patterns of religion.” In his follow-up book, however, he did take up the question of the origins of Paul’s new convictions to some extent, in passing comments about eschatological traditions concerning the place of non-Jews in the age to come: “Paul’s entire work, both evangelizing and collecting money, had its setting in the expected pilgrimage of the Gentiles to Mount Zion in the last days” (*Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*, 171). In addition, in an ironic reversal of “solution” and “problem,” he speculates about the possibility that, prior to his Christ-experience, Paul had experienced dissatisfaction with negative and exclusionary Jewish attitudes toward Gentiles (pp. 153–55).

10. Perhaps “patterns of inclusion” would be more appropriate.

Paul's concern for non-Jews, I thought that it could be understood as a fairly straightforward consequence of Jewish anticipations of the "eschatological pilgrimage of the nations" or, more generally, Jewish restoration eschatology.¹¹ Eventually, however, I found myself forced to abandon this approach in favor of a more complex reordering of Paul's convictional world.

This is not the place to attempt a description of this reordering as I came to understand it. Some of it will come into play in the critical engagement to follow, and what I have said to this point will be sufficient to set it into a clarifying context. Before turning to specific points of critical engagement, however, I want to express my appreciation to the editors for the project as a whole and to the individual authors for a set of bracing and invigorating essays. Reading them has provided me with a welcome opportunity not only to reexamine my previous thinking about Paul but also to refine it and move beyond it in some ways.

With respect to the project as a whole, I applaud wholeheartedly the desire to locate Paul "within Judaism," which here carries with it the shared perception that his mission among non-Jews is not to be set over against his Jewishness. Like many of his contemporaries within Judaism, Paul was concerned to locate his Judaism within the wider world—or, to draw on Paula Fredriksen's way of putting it, to locate the wider world within a map drawn with Israel at the center. While I will return to the issue later, looking more closely at the various dimensions of what the phrase might mean, I appreciate the insistence that Paul can be—is to be—seen as "within Judaism."

11. See Terence Donaldson, "The 'Curse of the Law' and the Inclusion of the Gentiles: Galatians 3.13–14," *New Testament Studies* 32 (1986): 94–112. While Jewish restoration eschatology does not always envisage the participation of non-Jews in end-time salvation, and while such participation is not always envisaged in terms of a pilgrimage to Zion, in what follows I will use these terms more or less interchangeably, without attempting to make any significant distinctions among them.

I also appreciate the attention that is given to terminological matters. Many of the terms and categories used in critical reconstructions of the past are laden with meanings and connotations that have accumulated through centuries of subsequent use, which readily leads to anachronisms, distortions, and false assumptions. As Krister Stendahl has observed, “Our vision is often more obstructed by what we think we know than by our lack of knowledge.”¹² One aspect of the problem has to do with the terms “Christianity” and “Judaism” themselves, which are often used in essentializing and anachronistic ways to denote two “religions,” clearly demarcated from each other by distinct and separate essences. The problem is explored in detail in Neil Elliott’s chapter, “The Question of Politics: Paul as a Diaspora Jew under Roman Rule,” and is addressed in helpful ways by others (Magnus Zetterholm, Caroline Johnson Hodge, Anders Runesson). Another aspect concerns the translation of terms that appear in our primary sources, several of which are subjected to fruitful examination in the volume, such as “church” for *ekklēsia* (Runesson) and “gentiles” for *ethnē* (Mark Nanos, Paula Fredriksen, Johnson Hodge). With respect to the latter, while I have for reasons of convenience used “gentile(s)” up to this point, for the rest of the paper I will use either *ethnē* itself or other formulations (non-Jews, non-Jewish nations, members of non-Jewish nations).¹³

Finally, I appreciate the way in which the chapters, taken cumulatively, serve to dislodge the question of “Paul and Judaism” from its traditional and tiresome location in a world of abstract concepts and rarified theological debates, and to place it squarely in the context of social realities and lived experiences—the practical decisions and situational accommodations that are part of everyday

12. Krister Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 7.

13. See Terence Donaldson, “‘Gentile Christianity’ as a Category in the Study of Christian Origins,” *Harvard Theological Review* 106, no. 4 (2013): 433–58.

life for the Torah observant (Karin Hedner Zetterholm); the omnipresence of gods and cult in the urban fabric (Fredriksen); the embodied realities of gender and ethnicity (Kathy Ehrensperger); and so on.

Turning from general appreciation to critical engagement, I will begin with two issues pertaining to Paul's convictions about the *ethnē* and then make some comments about ways in which the question "Paul within Judaism?" might be conceived.

Eschatological Inclusion of the *Ethnē*

To the extent that they address the question of the framework within which Paul conceived his mission to non-Jews, the contributors to this volume are unanimous: for Paul, his communities of non-Jewish Christ-believers represented the fulfillment of the Jewish expectation that in the end times the nations would abandon their idols, worship the God of Israel, and so share in the promised blessings of the age to come. So, for example:

Paul allies himself here with the Jewish eschatological expectation that God will establish his kingdom for Israel and for favored nations. As the apostle to the gentiles, he sees himself in the tradition of the prophets who call gentiles to Jerusalem on the Day of the Lord, when "all the nations shall stream to [the Lord's house]" (Isa. 2:2). (Johnson Hodge)

[These believing non-Jews] represented a population long anticipated within centuries of Jewish restoration theology: they were pagans-saved-at-the-End. (Fredriksen)

Once such a vision made clear to him that God had raised the martyred Jesus from the dead—again, a realization that would have been intelligible within the bounds of Jewish apocalyptic experience—the consequences would have followed a thoroughly Jewish apocalyptic logic: "The vision would have confirmed to [Paul] that what the apocalypses promised God *would* do *someday*, God had in fact begun to do *now*." (Elliott)

. . . the chronometrical claim of the gospel that the time when the nations will worship God alongside of Israel has arrived. (Nanos)

In addition to this general claim that Paul's mission to non-Jews is to be accounted for in this way, the contributors are also unanimous in drawing on such eschatological pilgrimage expectations to account for a more specific aspect of Paul's gospel. For those who want to understand Paul from a location "within Judaism," his position with respect to the Torah and the *ethnē* presents a puzzle. Why was he adamantly opposed to any suggestion that non-Jews should become full Torah observers? As he says to his Galatian readers: "If you let yourself be circumcised," you will "have cut yourself off from Christ" (Gal. 5:2, 4). Why was it that Christ belief and full Torah observance were set out in such oppositional terms? On one hand, non-Jewish Christ-believers are worshippers of Israel's God, intimately linked with Israel's messiah (*en christō*) and qualified to view Abraham as their father; yet on the other, they are to remain as non-Jews, forbidden on pain of exclusion to become full Torah-observing proselytes. How are we to account for the distinctive profile that Paul imposes on his non-Jewish Christ-believers?

The answer, according to several of the contributors to this volume, is that this is a straightforward consequence of eschatological pilgrimage patterns of thought. As Johnson Hodge puts it:

For in Paul's view, God's larger plan requires gentiles to worship the God of Israel *as gentiles*, not as proselytes or something else. Paul allies himself here with the Jewish eschatological expectation that God will establish his kingdom for Israel and for favored nations. As the apostle to the gentiles, he sees himself in the tradition of the prophets who call gentiles to Jerusalem on the Day of the Lord, when "all the nations shall stream to [the Lord's house]" (Isa. 2:2). As Paula Fredriksen has argued, this eschatological pilgrimage tradition—both in Paul and in earlier Jewish literature—envisions gentiles turning to God as non-Jews, not as proselytes.

Similar arguments are put forward by Nanos,¹⁴ Fredriksen,¹⁵ Elliott¹⁶ and Ehrensperger.¹⁷

As I have indicated already, I find this an appealing reading of Paul, and I continue to wish that I could find it persuasive. One of its appealing features is that it allows us to construct a smooth and non-disjunctive alignment between Paul's new gospel and his "former life in Judaism."¹⁸ But two difficulties present themselves to me—one lighter, the other more fundamental. First, after spending a lot of time investigating the place of non-Jews in Jewish eschatological expectations, I remain unconvinced that the status of non-Jews in this material is as sharply delineated as has been made out here.¹⁹ To be sure, there was a widespread expectation (albeit not universal) that non-Jews would share in the benefits of Israel's end-time redemption; in this I agree fully with the contributors under discussion here. But I am not as sure that these end-time pilgrims are necessarily expected to be categorically differentiated from Jews as far as Torah observance is concerned. Ehrensperger herself has observed, for example, that Philo anticipates a time when "each nation would abandon its

14. "Paul's argument here [Rom 3:29–31] revolves around the conviction that the awaited time of restoration of the nations as well as of Israel has begun, so that one need no longer be a member of the nation Israel to be reconciled to the God of all creation."
15. "Neither 'Jews' of a special sort (that is, *prosēlytoi*) nor 'normal' pagans (that is, people who showed respect to their own gods), they occupied a social and religious no-man's land. *Eschatologically*, however, they represented a population long anticipated within centuries of Jewish restoration theology: they were pagans-saved-at-the-End." Further, "these end-time pagans do not thereby 'become' Jews. Rather, they enter God's kingdom *as ethnē*, but they do not worship idols any more."
16. "In a variety of traditions, Jewish literature gives evidence of the expectation that at the last days, non-Jews would turn from idols to recognize the true God. That did not mean that they would stop being non-Jews."
17. "These people are not seen as becoming part of Israel, but they worship God as foreigners because God's house is now a house of prayer for all peoples (Isa. 56:7)."
18. As Elliott observes, "The consequence [of Paul's vision] would have been an abrupt about-face from persecuting the assemblies, but this turn would have been motivated and remains completely explicable within categories supplied by the Jewish apocalypses."
19. See Terence Donaldson, *Judaism and the Gentiles: Jewish Patterns of Universalism (to 135 CE)* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), 503–505.

peculiar ways, and, throwing overboard their ancestral customs, turn to honoring our laws alone” (*Mos.* 2.44). Similar expectations (i.e., of Torah-observing *ethnē* in the end times) are found in a number of other texts from the Second Temple period.²⁰ Given that one of the central biblical accounts of the end-time pilgrimage of the nations describes them as journeying to Jerusalem to learn God’s ways, “for out of Zion shall go forth the law (*tôrāh*)” (*Isa.* 2:2–4),²¹ this should not be surprising.

Now my intention here is not to argue the opposite case—that this material expects such participating non-Jews to become end-time proselytes, as it were. As I have pointed out elsewhere, there are a number of other texts that seem to imply that participating non-Jews would not become full Torah observers.²² My point is that the pertinent material is ambiguous. Indeed, in most cases one gets the impression that the writers of this material were not very interested in the question.

If this is so, it makes it difficult to argue that anyone who (1) expected non-Jews to participate in end-time redemption, and (2) who believed that the age to come was beginning to dawn, would conclude, as a necessary inference, that (3) non-Jews who had turned to the God of Jacob should be forbidden to learn God’s ways as they were set out in the Torah (to echo the language of *Isa.* 2:2–4). Of course, Paul (or anyone else “within Judaism”) may have had his own reasons for interpreting Jewish restoration eschatology in this way. If so, however, these reasons would need to be identified and articulated. The “gospel that [he] proclaimed among the *ethnē*” (*Gal.*

20. *T. Levi* 18:9; *T. Naph.* 3:2; *Sib. Or.* 3:791, 757–758; 5:265.

21. If Johnson Hodge is right in saying that Paul “sees himself in the tradition of the prophets who call gentiles to Jerusalem on the Day of the Lord, when ‘all the nations shall stream to [the Lord’s house]’ (*Isa.* 2:2),” one might readily expect him to encourage—rather than prohibit—full observance of the Torah that goes forth from Zion.

22. *Pss. Sol.* 17:28, 34; *Sib. Or.* 5:493; *Tob.* 14:5–7; *1 En.* 90:30–38; *2 Bar.* 72.

2:2) cannot be derived from eschatological pilgrimage traditions *tout court*; some intervening step would need to be added.

But is it even the case that Paul's gospel to the *ethnē* is to be accounted for on the basis of these particular eschatological expectations at all? This is the more fundamental question that I want to raise. Of course, eschatology has to be part of it. Paul sees Jesus as Israel's messiah, after all (Rom. 9:4-5); Christ-believers are those "on whom the ends of the ages has come" (1 Cor. 10:11); Christ's resurrection makes him "the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Cor. 15:20); and so on. I have no quarrel with Nanos's "chronometrical gospel"²³ or Fredriksen's description of Paul and the other early apostles as "[k]nowing what time it was on God's clock (Rom. 13:11), racing in the (for all they knew) brief wrinkle in time between Christ's resurrection and his second coming (1 Cor. 15)." My question has to do with how Paul arrived at "the gospel that [he] proclaimed among the *ethnē*" (Gal. 2:2), with its peculiar profile, and whether his arrival point was determined by a route that went through the territory of Jewish restoration eschatology.

Given the importance of Romans 11 for contemporary endeavors to locate Paul "within Judaism," this is an appropriate place to start. How does Paul envisage the relationship between "Jewish restoration" and the inclusion of the *ethnē* in the eschatological scenario that is sketched out in the chapter? Several aspects are particularly striking.

First, Paul states—and repeats the statement two additional times for good measure—that the inclusion of the *ethnē* has been made possible by Israel's "stumbling," "defeat," or "rejection": through Israel's "stumbling" (*paraptōma*), "salvation has come to the *ethnē*" (v.

23. "The message in which they have believed involves the (chronometrical) propositional claim that the end of the ages has begun within the midst of the present age, initiating the reconciliation of the *kosmos*."

11); Israel’s “defeat” (*hēttēma*) has produced “riches for the *ethnē*” (v. 12); Israel’s “rejection” (*apobolē*) has brought about the “reconciliation of the world” (*katallaγē kosmou*; v. 15). To be sure, in each case the emphasis lies elsewhere. In each case these statements form the protasis of a simple conditional sentence, the sentence as a whole carrying out an *a minore ad maius* form of argumentation. If Israel’s current negative situation (stumbling / defeat / rejection) has produced such positive results (salvation / riches / reconciliation for the *ethnē* and the world), how much greater will be the results of the emergence of a more positive situation (Israel’s “fullness” [*plērōma*; v. 12] / “acceptance” [*proslēmpsis*; v. 15]).²⁴ The way in which Paul states his argument in verses 11–15 indicates clearly that he fully expects the change in Israel’s situation to take place. In other words, the emphasis falls not on present failure but on future blessing. This leads, however, to a second aspect.

In verses 25–26, Paul returns to this line of argument but takes it one step further. This time what has opened up the possibility of salvation for the *ethnē* is described as a situation of “hardening” (*pōrōsis*) that has come upon Israel (more precisely, “part of Israel”). Again, we find the expectation that Israel’s current negative situation will be replaced by a positive one, though here stated more explicitly. Indeed, what comes into view here is a clear statement of Jewish restoration eschatology: “And so all Israel will be saved; as it is written: ‘Out of Zion will come the Deliverer . . .’” This eschatological state of affairs has already been hinted at, in that in verse 15 the expected “how much greater” state of affairs seems to be the resurrection era itself (“life from the dead”). Taken together with the previous point, this seems to suggest that what made salvation possible for non-Jews was the postponement or delay of Israel’s

24. For a more detailed analysis of this argument, see Donaldson, *Paul and the Gentiles*, 215–23.

restoration. If Israel had not stumbled, there would have been no opportunity for the *ethnē* to get in the race at all. Looked at from a different angle, it is when the “fullness (*plērōma*) of the *ethnē* has come in” that the salvation of Israel will take place. The achievement of the “fullness (*plērōma*) of the *ethnē*” serves to trigger the full appearance of the eschatological age.

This, in turn, leads to the third striking aspect of the scenario. Paul’s identification of the eschatological trigger event as the “incoming” (*eiselthē*) of the “fullness of the *ethnē*” seems to suggest that at this point the period of gentile salvation will come to an end. In this point, at least, an aspect of the Romans 11 scenario finds its counterpart elsewhere in Paul’s letters. It is those who are “of Christ” who will be made alive at his Parousia (1 Cor. 15:23); it is the “sons of light” who can anticipate salvation, while “sudden destruction” will come upon all others (1 Thess. 5:3–10); “now is the acceptable time, now is the day of salvation” (2 Cor. 6:2). Although Romans 11:11–26 seems to anticipate a future day of salvation for Israel, there is little indication, either in Romans or elsewhere, that Paul expects any grand pilgrimage of the nations on the other side of the Parousia.²⁵

For present purposes, what is particularly striking about these three aspects is that, taken together, they represent an eschatological scenario that does not readily conform to the pattern of Jewish restoration eschatology. In the latter, the future inclusion of the *ethnē* is predicated on the restoration of Israel. The issue is not simply one of sequence, though it is that: the redemption of the *ethnē* follows

25. This is not to overlook Paul’s universalist-sounding language (see, e.g., M. Eugene Boring, “The Language of Universal Salvation in Paul,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 105 [1986]: 269–92), although I do not think that it provides counter-evidence here. I do, however, recognize the force of Fredriksen’s objection: “The resurrection of the dead, the transformation of the living, of history and of the cosmos, of heaven and of earth, all culminating in the redemption of, say, some three to four thousand people? It is possible, of course. But it is hard to imagine Paul’s thinking so small, especially when we consider the traditions of Jewish restoration theology in which he stands.”

the restoration of Israel (e.g., Tob. 14:6; *1 En.* 90:30–38).²⁶ Rather, it is precisely the restoration of Israel that brings about a change of heart among the *ethnē*. In Zechariah 8:20–23, for example, it is because “we have heard that God is with you” that “many peoples and strong nations” join them “to seek the Lord of hosts in Jerusalem.” Likewise in *Sib. Or.* 3:702–723, it is precisely the divine preservation of the “sons of the great God” through a time of final judgment that leads “all islands and cities” to worship God at the temple and to “ponder the Law of the Most High God.” Speaking in a different register, Philo suggests that, when the prospects of the Jews begin to flourish, “each nation [will] abandon its peculiar ways and . . . turn to honoring our laws alone” (*Mos.* 2.43–44).²⁷ In the strand of Jewish restoration eschatology that anticipated a positive place for the *ethnē*, then, the inclusion of the *ethnē* comes about as a result of the restoration of Israel. Paul’s scenario, in which the inclusion of the *ethnē* is made possible by the failure of Israel²⁸ seems to turn this (eschato-)logic on its head.

Of course, the basic shape of early Jewish Christ-belief, with two eschatological focal points (resurrection and Parousia) in place of a more singular end-time restoration, would necessarily require some reformulation of Jewish restoration eschatology and the place of non-Jews within it. Still, the fact that Paul is prepared to predicate the inclusion of the *ethnē* not on Israel’s restoration but on their rejection (albeit temporary)²⁹ means that any attempt to derive his gospel to the

26. Indeed, the sequence is readily apparent in virtually all the pertinent material; see the summary in Donaldson, *Judaism and the Gentiles*, 499–502.

27. On the eschatological underpinnings of this passage, see *ibid.*, 231–35.

28. However this is to be understood, see Donaldson, *Paul and the Gentiles*, 219, and Donaldson, “Jewish Christianity, Israel’s Stumbling and the *Sonderweg* Reading of Paul,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 29 (2006): 27–54.

29. Here one might also mention the fact that Paul is ready to see this scenario as a mystery (v. 25)—that is, something unknown in the past but recently revealed. His description of the

ethnē from Jewish restoration eschatology needs to argue the case, not simply assume it.

Here a point of clarification is in order. I am not necessarily wanting to argue that this scenario in anything like its form in Romans 11 predates the writing of the epistle or represents the framework within which he carried out his mission to the *ethnē* from the outset. I am fully prepared to see his argument here as a contingent formulation in the context of an occasional letter. My point has to do less with the surface of his argument and more with the underlying convictions that seem to shape and constrain it. That is, the logical moves that he is prepared to make in this chapter are not easily accounted for if one assumes that his convictions about the inclusion of the *ethnē* arise from Jewish restoration eschatology or end-time pilgrimage patterns of thought.

In addition to this point of clarification, a concession. There are places where Paul seems to be prepared to describe the blessings enjoyed by non-Jewish Christ-believers as somehow derived from, or a participation in, blessings that belong in the first instance to Jewish Christ-believers. One instance of this is his rationale for the collection project in Romans 15:25-27. This material gift to the saints in Jerusalem, he says, is an appropriate way for non-Jewish Christ-believers to acknowledge their indebtedness, since they as *ethnē*, “have come to share in their spiritual blessings.” Another is the olive tree analogy of Romans 11:17-21, where the wild olive shoot (non-Jewish Christ-believers) have been grafted in to join the branches that remain³⁰ in their enjoyment of the tree’s richness. Yet another is the statement in Galatians 3:13-14 that “Christ redeemed

mission to the *ethnē* as a *mustērion* makes it difficult to see it as a smooth and straightforward inference from Jewish restoration eschatology.

30. The key phrase in v. 17 is *en autois*; the NRSV rendering “in their place” (i.e., in place of the branches that have been cut off) is untenable.

us from the curse of the law . . . in order that the blessing of Abraham might come to the *ethnē*.” The distinction that he makes at the outset of this section (2:15–3:29) between “we ourselves [who] are Jews by birth” and “sinners of the *ethnē*” (2:15) provides grounds for seeing a similar ethnic distinction in the “us” / *ethnē* contrast in 3:13–14.³¹

In each of these passages, then, the blessings currently experienced by non-Jewish Christ-believers are made possible in some way by blessings already bestowed on Jews. Such passages, together with the fact that Paul sees the existence of a Jewish “remnant” as significant (Rom. 11:1–10) and sees the “hardening” as applying only to “part” of Israel (11:25), might provide an opportunity to derive his mission to the *ethnē* from Jewish restoration patterns of thought. That is, the community of Jewish Christ-believers represents the “remnant” of Israel, the present “part” of the “all Israel” that will eventually experience salvation. Their present experience of the blessings of salvation thus represents (in this line of argument) the kind of “restoration of Israel” that opens the door to the inclusion of the *ethnē*. While I am not convinced that such an interpretation can be carried out in a thoroughgoing way, this is one aspect of Paul’s discourse in which it might find some traction.

The *Ethnē* and the Fatherhood of Abraham

The second issue that I want to explore here has to do more directly with the distinctive profile that Paul imposes on his non-Jewish Christ-believers. One aspect of this has been touched on already: Paul’s insistence that these non-Jewish believers are not to undergo circumcision or to take on any of the other aspects of the Torah that serve to differentiate Jews from non-Jews; that is, they are not to

31. Of course, this would also have the effect of seeing Jews as (also) under the “curse of the law,” which may be problematical for some attempts to locate Paul within Judaism.

become proselytes. In the previous section I argued that this cannot be accounted for in any straightforward way from expectations about the inclusion of non-Jews in Jewish restoration eschatology. Here I want to pick up a second aspect of the profile—Paul’s insistence that such uncircumcised believers can nevertheless call Abraham their father (*patera pantōn tōn pisteuontōn di’akrobustias*; Rom. 4:11).

Several contributors have commented on the distinctiveness of this profile, noting that it results in an ambiguous or even anomalous status for Paul’s non-Jewish Christ-believers. Nanos, for one, speaks of their “anomalous identity.” For Fredriksen, they “occupied a social and religious no-man’s land.” Johnson Hodge, in turn, describes Paul as “constructing an identity for these gentiles-in-Christ that resists classification. These gentiles occupy an in-between space, hovering around the borders of identities that they are not quite.” As we have seen, there is a general agreement among the contributors that this status is to be understood as the appearance in the present of a category that originated as an expectation pertaining to the eschatological future. Nevertheless, there are differences among them as to the specific character of the anomaly.

In Fredriksen’s characterization of Paul’s perspective, the profile of these non-Jewish Christ-believers conforms neither to that of the proselyte nor to that of the god-fearer:

It is on this point precisely that the radical novelty of the gospel message made itself socially felt. Yes, pagan culture—and Diaspora Jewish culture—were long familiar with “converts” and with god-fearers. But Paul’s pagans fell into neither category. *Like* converts, his pagans made an exclusive commitment to the god of Israel; *unlike* converts, they did not assume Jewish ancestral practices (food ways, Sabbath, circumcision, and so on). *Like* god-fearers, Paul’s people retained their native ethnicities; *unlike* god-fearers, they no longer worshiped their native gods. *Paul’s pagans-in-Christ are neither converts nor god-fearers.*

For her part on the other hand, Johnson Hodge is prepared to align such “pagans-in-Christ” with “god-fearers”: “Thus Paul’s portrayal of gentiles-in-Christ fits into a larger trend among Jewish writers who tend to view the status of sympathetic gentiles as in-between.” She adds to this, however, the fact that Paul is also prepared to see these believers as part of Abraham’s “seed” (*sperma*). Noting that, in one strand of Jewish tradition (e.g., *Jubilees*), this idea is used to construct an identity for Israel as the “seed of Abraham” that categorically excludes the *ethnē*, she sees Paul as engaging in a different kind of identity construction, one in which “gentiles are actually included in the blessed lineage from the beginning.” Nanos’s description of Paul’s non-Jewish believers in Christ as “neither guests nor proselytes but full members alongside of Jews” seems to be depicting the same sort of unprecedented and anomalous identity.

For my part, while I agree that there is an anomaly in Paul’s categorization of the *ethnē*-in-Christ that deserves our attention, I remain unconvinced about Fredriksen’s description of “god-fearers.” To be sure, the material dealing with non-Jewish sympathizers reflects a considerable range; there certainly were those who associated with the Jewish community without ceasing to worship their own native gods—and, apparently, without any Jewish insistence that they do so.³² At the same time, however, there is considerable evidence indicating that many did abandon polytheistic worship—those satirized by Juvenal, for example, who, without having yet undergone circumcision, “worship nothing but the clouds and the spirit of the sky” (*Satires* 14.96–106); or Izates, who like his mother had come “to worship God after the manner of the Jewish tradition” and for whom the only remaining step in becoming “genuinely a Jew” was circumcision (Josephus, *Ant.* 20.34–38).³³ In

32. See the evidence summarized in Donaldson, *Judaism and the Gentiles*, 473.

addition, one can also adduce the extended Jewish polemic against polytheism and “idol worship,” especially in texts that at least envisage the possibility of non-Jews actually giving exclusive devotion to Israel’s God yet without becoming full converts.³⁴ I remain unconvinced, then, that this combination (non-Jewish sympathizers who were not proselytes but who nevertheless gave exclusive devotion to Israel’s God) represents an anomalous aspect in Paul’s construction of identity. The combination was not the only acceptable option to be sure, but it certainly was not without precedent.

In my view, the truly anomalous aspect is Paul insistence that uncircumcised *ethnē*-in-Christ are at the same time full members of Abraham’s “seed” (*sperma*). While Johnson Hodge has rightly called our attention to this, its significance has not been fully recognized.

In both Galatians and Romans, the climax of Paul’s argument about the inclusion of non-Jews is that *ethnē* who are “in Christ” are *ipso facto* part of Abraham’s “seed” (*sperma*; Gal. 3:29; also Rom. 4:13–18). Now most of Paul’s argument in Galatians 3 and Romans 4 falls within the traditional structures of the discourse in Genesis about Abraham and the *ethnē*—Abraham as the “father of a multitude of *ethnē*” (Gen. 17:4–5); Abraham and his family being a source of blessing for “all the *ethnē*” (Gen. 22:18; cf. 12:3; 28:14); and so on. The Genesis narrative makes a sharp distinction, however, between these *ethnē* and Abraham’s seed (*sperma* in Greek, rendering the Hebrew *zeraʿ*). In Genesis 17, Abraham’s “seed” is linked categorically with the covenant of circumcision: “This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your seed after you: Every male

33. See also Shaye J. D. Cohen’s category “Venerating the God of the Jews and denying or ignoring all other gods”; Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 150–54.

34. See, e.g., Philo *Virt.* 65; *Sib. Or.* 3:544–550, 624–629; and Donaldson, *Judaism and the Gentiles*, 493–98.

among you shall be circumcised. . . . Any uncircumcised male . . . shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant” (vv. 10, 14).³⁵ While uncircumcised *ethnē* might be able to call Abraham “father,” apart from the covenant of circumcision they are categorically excluded from Abraham’s “seed.”³⁶ In addition to the key passage in Genesis 17, *sperma*, *zera’* and equivalents are used consistently to denote Israel as a distinct covenant people, often in explicit contrast with *ethnē* or *goyim*.³⁷

Paul could hardly have been unaware of the significance of *sperma*, given that he cites Genesis 17 in the context of an argument about Abraham’s “seed” (in Rom. 4:17–18, where 17:5 is cited twice). What is striking, however, is that the passage he cites—“I have made you the father of many nations”—provided him with a much simpler way of identifying uncircumcised *ethnē*-in-Christ with Abraham and establishing their right to call him “father.” He could simply have argued that Christ was the means by which the promises made to Abraham—that he would be the “father of a multitude of *ethnē*” and that “by [his] seed (*sperma*) all the nations of the earth shall gain blessing for themselves” (LXX Gen. 22:18; also 26:4)—was being fulfilled. Instead, he makes an exegetical move that lands him on untenable ground. He attempts to square the covenantal circle by applying to uncircumcised *ethnē* an identifier to which non-Jews were not entitled unless they ceased to be *ethnē* and became proselytes. The move seems not only to be one that could have been

35. *Sperma* appears seven times in LXX Genesis 17.

36. In LXX Gen. 22:18, for example, it is by Abraham’s *sperma* that “all the nations of the earth [shall] gain blessing for themselves”; similarly LXX Gen. 26:4; 28:14.

37. *Sperma* appears in explicit contrast with the *ethnē* in LXX Gen. 26:4; Deut. 10:15; 1 Esd. 8:67; Ps. 105 (106); 27; Isa. 61:9; Wis 10:15; *Pss. Sol.* 9:9; presumably the same *zera’* / *goyim* binary underlies *Jub.* 2:20–21; 15:11–14; 16:16–18, 25–26. Where *sperma* appear without this explicit contrast to the *ethnē* (e.g., LXX Esther 9:27; Ps. 104 [105]:6; Isa. 41:8; Ezek. 20:5; 4 Macc. 18:1; *Pss. Sol.* 18:3; also *Jub.* 1:7–8), an implicit contrast is nevertheless present. Johnson Hodge has drawn our attention to the idea of the “holy seed” in Ezra and *Jubilees*.

easily avoided, but also one that Paul was determined to make: in both Romans 4 and Galatians 3 it comes as the climax or ultimate goal of his argument.³⁸ Why then did he choose such a difficult move when a simpler alternative was ready to hand? It is also worth noting in passing that this simpler alternative (“by [Abraham’s] seed (*sperma*) all the nations of the earth shall gain blessing for themselves” [LXX Gen. 22:18]) readily lends itself to eschatological pilgrimage patterns of thought.

This is not the place to try to make sense of this puzzling aspect of the identity that Paul constructs for his *ethnē*-in-Christ. For present purposes it is sufficient to observe that the simpler option—that is, Christ as the means of fulfillment for the promise made to Abraham that he would be the father of many *ethnē*—would have provided a much more appropriate basis for any of the interpretations of Paul’s project of identity construction that have been carried out in preceding chapters. To make the point more forcefully, the argument in these interpretations—that Paul’s distinctive approach to the *ethnē* can be accounted for on the basis of an eschatological model that requires the distinction between non-Jews and Jews to be maintained—faces significant obstacles. It simply does not work, at least in any straightforward way. If this were Paul’s starting point, why would he then ascribe an identity (*sperma Abraham*) that blurs this (supposedly essential) distinction in a fundamental way, especially when a simpler and more straightforward option was available? In short, to place Paul appropriately “within Judaism,” I think more work needs to be done to make sense of his project of identity construction, a project that seems to have no real precedent or analogy within Judaism.³⁹

38. It is probably also connected with his repeated assertions that, in some respects at least, there is “no distinction” (*ou gar estin diastolē*) between Jews and non-Jews (Rom. 3:22; 10:12; also Gal. 3:28).

Paul within Judaism

The preceding two sections have been engaged with the identity that Paul ascribes to his *ethnē*-in-Christ and its relationship with Jewish patterns of thought and expectation concerning the inclusion of non-Jews in the blessings of the age to come. I would like to conclude by placing this discussion within the more general question of what it might mean to talk about “Paul within Judaism.”

To this end, it is apparent that a number of elements were intertwined in the preceding discussion that might helpfully be separated out. One distinction has to do with the conceptual and the sociological. The chapters themselves and my discussion here have dealt both with conceptual matters (symbolic universes, ethnic maps, eschatological scenarios) and with the lived experiences of human groups. In asking whether Paul and his mission to the *ethnē* can be located “within Judaism,” are we asking about whether it is simply consistent with Jewish symbolic worlds, or about whether it took place in any real way within a Jewish social world? Another distinction is between Paul on one hand and his communities on the

39. My argument has been that prior to his Damascus experience Paul can be identified with a strand of Judaism that held that the only way in which non-Jews might have a portion in the age to come was to become proselytes in this age. In the terms of Galatians 5:11, he used to “preach circumcision” or, with reference to Josephus’s account of King Izates, he used to play a role akin to that of Eleazar. The effect of his Damascus experience was to alter some of the convictional substance of his previous approach to the *ethnē*, but not its structure. That is, he continued to believe that for non-Jews to have a portion in the age to come they needed to become full members of Abraham’s *sperma* in the present, and that this opportunity would come to an end with the future redemption of “all Israel.” However, Christ had come to replace Torah as the means by which non-Jews could become incorporated into Abraham’s *sperma*. For details, see Donaldson, *Paul and the Gentiles*. While this reconstruction continues to make sense to me, I realize that its primary value has to do with explaining how Paul might have arrived at his anomalous position about the status identity of his *ethnē*-in-Christ. It is not adequate in itself as an account of the position itself—how it played out on the ground; how it would have been perceived by others (Jewish and non-Jewish Christ-believers; Jewish and non-Jewish outsiders). In particular, while many of his later interpreters have understood Paul to be saying that in Christ any distinction between Jew and not-Jew was done away with, it is clear that for Paul *Ioudaioi* and *ethnē* continue to be distinct and fundamentally significant identity markers.

other. In asking whether Paul can be located “within Judaism,” are we thinking just of Paul himself or are we asking about the location of his communities of *ethnē*-in-Christ as well?⁴⁰ Both options are complicated, but they are distinct. One could imagine, for example, a Paul who remained embedded within a Jewish world but communities of *ethnē*-in-Christ who existed quite apart from Jewish communities. A third distinction has to do with the perceiver. In asking whether Paul and his mission can be located “within Judaism,” we need to ask who is doing the locating: Paul himself? The *ethnē*-in-Christ themselves? Jewish Christ-believers? Other Jews? Other *ethnē*? Modern scholars? One can well expect that perceptions will differ considerably from one to the next.

What emerges from this is a recognition that “Paul within Judaism” is a complex question, with sets of variables (or at least distinct points) arrayed along three axes:

1. *Domain*: If “Judaism” is a domain that someone can be “in,” is it primarily (1.1) conceptual or (1.2) social?
2. *Entity*: What is it that might be located within this domain—(2.1) Paul or (2.2) his communities of *ethnē*-in-Christ?
3. *Perceiver*: From whose point of view is the determination of

40. In their chapters, K. Hedner Zetterholm and Runesson (who, because of the topics I wanted to explore in my response, regrettably did not come into my discussion to the same extent as the others) are interested both in Paul and in his congregations. Hedner Zetterholm’s discussion of the practical realities of living in accordance with the Torah in concrete human situations probably pertains more to the Jewish Paul than to his non-Jewish congregations (“nothing in his reasoning seems to indicate that he had abandoned Jewish law”). Still, the congregations come into view in her discussion of 1 Corinthians 8–10, which is to be seen “an example of first-century Jewish halakah for Jesus-oriented gentiles” and not as a case of “a violation of Jewish law.” Runesson’s chapter represents preliminary ground-clearing work, as he demonstrates that use of the terms “Christianity” and “church” have the functional effect of locating Paul “outside Judaism” from the outset. By choosing to deal with “church” (in contrast to synagogue) as well as “Christianity” (in contrast to “Judaism”), he necessarily includes Paul’s congregations within his purview: “Paul’s use of *ekklēsia* indicates that as the ‘apostle to the nations’ he is inviting non-Jews to participate in specific Jewish institutional settings, where they may share with Jews the experience of living with the risen Messiah. . . .”

location being made—that of (3.1) Paul, (3.2) *ethnē*-in-Christ, (3.3) Jewish Christ-believers, (3.4) other Jews, (3.5) other *ethnē*, or (3.6) outside scholarly observers?⁴¹

Of course, the alternatives in each case are legitimate ones; there is no single “right choice” and all of the possible combinations are worth pursuing. At the risk of straying too far into the mathematical realm, then, one can say that the answer to the question is likewise complex, depending on the coordinates that result from choices made along the three axes.

Or perhaps there should be four, since both “Paul’s mission” and “Judaism” were caught up in the flow of time. With respect to Paul’s communities of *ethnē*-in-Christ at least, we must expect that their location with respect to the Jewish world was likewise in flux. What did the picture look like as we move from point to point along this axis—after Paul’s death? After the destruction of Jerusalem? When the Pastoral Epistles were composed? At the time of Justin Martyr and Marcion? In other words, what was the fate of Paul’s project throughout the process that led from “apostolic Judaism”⁴² to “Christianity”?

41. This set of alternatives leads to another distinction, namely, between “categorization” (identities ascribed from without) and “group identification” (internally constructed self-definitions). For the distinction, see Richard Jenkins, *Social Identity* (London: Routledge, 2004), 20–22, and chapter 8 (“Groups and Categories”). Of course the two are not isolated but instead are integrally related in a dialectical process.

42. To use the term proposed by Nanos and Runesson.

