

Paul, Jews, and Gentiles

Modern Jewish thinkers have sometimes drawn a sharp distinction between Jesus and Paul, arguing that while Jesus remained rooted in his Jewish context, Paul departed from it drastically and became the founder of a foreign religion. In contrast, Wyschogrod approaches Paul as a Jewish thinker whose views demand to be understood in Jewish terms. In this previously unpublished essay, Wyschogrod offers an extensive discussion of major issues central to Paul's apostolate, including the significance of the Christ event, the status of Torah obedience among Jesus' followers, and justification by faith. In each case, Wyschogrod holds that a proper understanding of Paul's thought demands taking into account the relevance of the distinction between Jew and gentile, which the Christ event modifies but does not erase.



WHAT WAS the significance of the Christ event for Paul? What had changed as a result of this event and what had remained the same?

There is no question that Paul's decisive message is contained in just this sense of newness, of something having happened which has drastically altered the human condition as it had never been altered before and as it will never be altered again. But what precisely is the nature of this alteration?

A preliminary and probably quite accurate answer to this question is this: Because of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus who was the son of God, humanity's sins were forgiven and it was therefore saved from the eternal death which was the fate that had previously awaited it. Before Christ, the human creature stood guilty before God for not fulfilling the demands of the Law, the obligation God had transmitted to Israel through Moses. Being a sinner, the individual was subject to the penalties prescribed by the Law, penalties very vividly detailed in Deuteronomy 28:15 through the end of the chapter. Because of the Christ event these penalties were no longer applicable. When Paul says in Galatians

3:13, "Christ bought us freedom from the curse of the Law by becoming for our sake an accursed thing," he does not mean that the Law is a curse, a thought that is pure madness and contradicts Paul's clear statement in Romans 7:12: "therefore the Law is in itself holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good." He does mean that there is a curse attached to disobeying the holy Law. "Curse of the Law" should perhaps even be translated as "the curse attached to disobeying the Law," which is undoubtedly more faithful to the meaning of the text than "Curse of the Law" which seems to imply that the Law is itself a curse rather than disobedience to it, a misinterpretation with wide currency.

Immediately, a number of questions present themselves. If the meaning of the Christ event is that the penalty attached to the Law is no longer in effect, how is this to be understood? Does it mean that indiscriminate transgression of the Law is no longer to be avoided since there is nothing to fear anymore? This would be one way in which the curse attached to disobeying the Law could be understood as having been lifted, but it is clearly not Paul's understanding in view of his extensive objections to antinomian and libertarian manifestations. Does it mean that the curse attached to disobeying the Law is lifted by the Christ event in quite another sense, namely, those who died and are reborn in Christ escape the curse attached to disobeying the Law by having obtained a power with the help of which they simply never disobey the Law and thereby escape the punishment that awaits those who do disobey it? This is a more likely interpretation in view of Paul's comments about the virtuous life led by those with faith in Jesus as the Messiah. But it is nevertheless not satisfactory because it would seem to imply that Christians never sin, a theme that runs counter to the forgiveness of sin motif that is also powerful in Paul. Finally, Paul must have been aware that the Law of Moses was never thought of as obligatory for non-Jews. As Apostle to the Gentiles, what possible significance could the message that the curse attached to disobeying the Law of Moses had been lifted have for Paul's gentile listeners who had never come under the jurisdiction of this Law in the first place? Obviously, there is something we are not grasping properly.

Central as the Christ event is in the thinking of Paul, it is incorrect to think of it as having the same effect for Jews and gentiles. The Christ event does narrow the gap between Jews and gentiles, perhaps very much so, as we will see. But it does not erase it. We will therefore examine the effect of the coming of Christ on gentiles and then on Jews, moving then to an examination of what these two segments of the Church have in common and

what distinguishes them.

Before we can understand the significance of the coming of Christ for gentiles, we must understand the attitude toward gentiles in the Judaism of the period. Gentiles were under no obligation to obey the commandments of the Torah, an obligation which was the result of God's covenant with Israel and which did not apply to those outside of the covenant. Nevertheless, God was by no means indifferent to the conduct of gentiles. This conduct had to conform to the so-called Noachide commandments which bore Noah's name because, in rabbinic thinking, they were rooted in God's covenant with Noah and his descendants reported in the ninth chapter of Genesis. As understood by the rabbis, this covenant covered the basic moral law including such transgressions as incest, murder, robbery, and so on. Curiously enough, included among these was the prohibition against amputating a limb of a living animal for the purpose of eating it, while leaving the crippled animal alive, a practice the rabbis referred to as "a limb from the living." There is reason to believe that this practice was widespread in the ancient world with its absence of means of refrigeration so that a whole animal would go to waste if it was killed without all of it being eaten fairly quickly. Mutilation of the animal was therefore a commonly used method of preserving the unused portion of the animal for future use. The prohibition against this practice is included in the Noachide Commandments by the rabbis because of Genesis 9:4: "But you must not eat the flesh with the life, which is the blood, still in it," a verse which appears in the context of the covenant with Noah and which becomes the only prohibition that cannot perhaps be classified too easily as belonging to the basic moral law though, as a prohibition of cruelty to animals, it has a clearly moral dimension.

The Noachide Law is, then, the Torah of the gentiles. They are under obligation to obey it as the Jews are under obligation to obey all of the Torah. A gentile who obeys the Noachide Law pleases God and has a portion in the world to come. For this reason, it is not advisable for gentiles to convert to Judaism since, once circumcised, the gentile becomes a Jew and is under obligation to obey the whole Torah as are all Jews. Since the rabbis understood that obedience to the Torah is a difficult thing, so difficult that Israel has often failed to measure up to its demands and suffered grievously for it, they were of the opinion that gentiles were well advised to live a righteous life under the Noachide Commandments rather than to expose themselves to a much more difficult challenge. Nevertheless, even for the rabbis, gentiles who persisted in their desire to become Jews and place themselves under

the demands of the Torah were permitted to do so, as long as the implications of their contemplated course of action were fully understood. For the vast majority of righteous gentiles, however, the absence of circumcision and the need to accept the full Torah meant that they did not become members of the house of Israel, of the people elected by God, "a nation of priests and a holy people." The term used by the rabbis to describe such a righteous gentile was *Ger Toshav*, the indwelling stranger, to differentiate that individual from the *Ger Tzedek*, the righteous stranger, who had fully become a Jew. There is reason to believe that both in Palestine and the exile, fairly large numbers of *Gere Toshav* followers of the Noachide Commandments were at various times attached to the Jewish communities as sympathizers with the faith of Israel who had not fully embraced Judaism. In fact, there is reason to believe that it was precisely from this group that most of Paul's converts originated. As persons familiar with Jewish concepts and sympathetic to them, they were a natural audience for a message that would have been very difficult to grasp for persons totally unfamiliar with Jewish ideas.

We are now in a position to understand Paul's view of what the Christ event had done for gentiles. With the coming of Christ, a gentile who was willing to obey the Noachide Laws and who had faith in Jesus as the Messiah became an associate member of the house of Israel. I use the phrase "associate member" because it is the only expression I can think of to characterize the new standing of the gentile Christian. He was more than a *Ger Toshav*. A *Ger Toshav* was a righteous person who pleased God and had a portion in the world to come but he was not a Jew. A *Ger Tzedek* was no longer a gentile: as a result of circumcision and willingness to accept the Torah, he has become a Jew, a new birth to all intents and purposes. Prior to Paul there were therefore full members (*Ger Tzedek*) and non-members (*Ger Toshav*). For Paul, the Christ event had made possible a new category: gentiles who were not circumcised and not obedient to the Torah but who were still not excluded from the house of Israel. Because of their obedience to the Noachide Laws and their faith in Christ, they assumed the status of adopted sons, not to be confused with the natural sons who remained the root that sustains the branches (Rom. 11:18). But the gentiles in Christ have been grafted into the tree, even if it is as a grafting of a new branch into an old tree. They had become members of the household of Israel, something which prior to Christ could be achieved only by full conversion to Judaism.

It is further quite clear that this opinion of Paul's was not universally shared by Jewish

Christians. There were those who believed that to become a Christian involved everything that had previously been necessary in becoming a Jew: circumcision and acceptance of the Torah. For those who held this opinion — we hear of them in Acts 15 and in Galatians — there was no new category of membership in Israel. The coming of Christ had been an event in Judaism. It had produced a division among Jews — those who recognized what had happened in the person of Jesus and those who had not. But it had not produced a new category of persons — those who were not Jews but had ceased being gentiles who were external to the house of Israel. Rather, for Paul's opponents, becoming a Christian meant becoming a Jew, the kind of Jew who had recognized Jesus as the Messiah. And since becoming a Jew implied, and had always implied, circumcision and obedience to the Torah, it was perfectly clear to these Jewish Christians that those who called themselves Christians but had not been circumcised and did not obey the Torah had been profoundly misled. When they came across communities that had been converted by Paul, they found to their amazement communities that profoundly believed themselves to be Christian but which were not circumcised and which obeyed only the Noachide Commandments. These Jewish Christians who disagreed with Paul lost no time in informing these uncircumcised Christians that they had been misled, that they were not Christians at all since to become a Christian involved circumcision and the Torah. It is not difficult to imagine the distress that the news must have caused the new Christians. One can only compare it to the state of mind of a contemporary of ours who had been converted to Judaism by a reform rabbi and is then told, perhaps on a visit to Israel, that he is no Jew at all since Orthodox Judaism demands circumcision and the pledge to live in accordance with the Torah. From Acts 15 we know that Paul, in order to settle once and for all whether he or his opponents were right, submitted the matter to the Jerusalem church which, after extended debate, ruled in his favor. The ruling of Acts 15 specifically refers to the Noachide Laws as binding on gentile Christians and rejects the view that they were under obligation to embrace circumcision and the Torah.

Was Paul or were his opponents more continuous with rabbinic Judaism? This is an interesting question because there is no simple answer to it. In one respect, Paul's opponents were the more traditional since they adhered to the view that people were either Jews or they were not and if they were, they had to be circumcised and obey the Torah and if they did not do these things they were not Jews, though, of course, they could be righteous

gentiles. In another respect, it was Paul who was being more traditionally Jewish. The thrust of rabbinic Judaism had been to discourage conversion, as I have already explained. In rabbinic thinking, Nazirites, Jews who voluntarily imposed additional obligations on themselves, were not held in favor simply because it was not for human beings to increase their obligations, as if those that already applied to them were so easy to bear. In very much the same spirit, the gentiles, in the rabbinic view, ought not voluntarily to increase their obligations beyond the Noachide Commandments to which they were subject. Paul, in discouraging the circumcision of gentiles, was therefore acting within the traditional rabbinic framework. What was new about Paul's view, as we have already seen, was the belief that the Noachide Laws combined with faith in Jesus as the Messiah brought into being a new category of persons, associate members in the house of Israel. If this is the central achievement of Christ for gentiles, then it follows that a gentile who embraced circumcision and the Torah after the coming of Christ was in effect saying that Christ had not happened, that everything was as it had been before and that the only entrance into the house of Israel was through full conversion, i.e., circumcision and acceptance of the Torah. This is what, I think, Paul means when he says, "If you receive circumcision Christ will do you no good at all" (Gal. 4:2). He does not nor can he mean that Christ is not efficacious for those who are circumcised. He does mean that for those who are not circumcised, to travel the route of full conversion is to overlook the new route that Christ had opened to membership, albeit associate membership, in the elect people. Paul's mind on the circumcision question is therefore shaped by two considerations: the new route to associate membership in Israel opened by Christ and the traditional Jewish opposition to and discouragement of gentile conversion to Judaism. Paul's opponents, on the other hand, reject the new possibility of associate membership. To the extent that they advocate gentile circumcision as the only route to Christ, they are being untraditional in not discouraging gentile circumcision. We can therefore see that both Paul and his opponents are continuous with but also modify the traditional rabbinic approach to the problem of gentile conversion.

If gentiles needed Christ to achieve a kind of membership in Israel, surely this was of no great relevance to Jews who already were members of the people of election. The contribution of Christ for Jews lies in another direction: it has to do with Israel and its obligation — under the Torah, or *nomos*, the Law, in the Greek translation.

It is first necessary to clear up a view that I consider a misinterpretation: the view that

it was Paul's opinion that because of Christ, the Torah was no longer obligatory for Jews because it had been superseded by a new Law, the Law of love which was the Law of Christ rather than of Moses. There is no denying that there are seemingly good reasons for holding this view. Paul says many negative things about the Law. We have already spoken of his reference to the Deuteronomic curse associated with disobedience to the Law. The charge "that you teach all the Jews in the Gentile world to turn their backs on Moses, telling them to give up circumcising their children and following our way of life" is reported in Acts 21:21. Galatians, to which we have already referred, is a sustained polemic against a backsliding community which, after having embraced Christ, is attracted to circumcision and the Law. These are some of the reasons for the firm establishment of the view that Paul broke with the Law of Moses. And yet it is an incorrect view, if we understand the matter correctly.

Acts 15 is decisive in this respect. We are told about a dispute occasioned by "certain persons who had come down from Judaea" (Acts 15:1) who taught "that those who were not circumcised in accordance with Mosaic practice could not be saved." Since this teaching, as we have already seen, conflicted with that of Paul, who believed that circumcision (and obedience to the Law, since these always go together — see Gal. 5:3) was not necessary for gentiles, it was arranged that the matter be brought to the attention of the Jerusalem church for adjudication. After *lengthy* debate (Acts 15:7) the decision is reached, and communicated in a letter, that no further burden beyond the Noachide Laws is to be placed on gentiles. In so doing, Paul's position on the matter is fully vindicated by the authoritative Jerusalem church. It is not difficult to infer from this episode that for Jews the Torah obviously was thought of as remaining obligatory in the view of the Jerusalem church. Had the thought that with the coming of Christ the Law had been abolished entered anyone's mind in Jerusalem, there could clearly not have ensued a long discussion, settled with some difficulty, as to whether circumcision and the Law ought to be made obligatory for gentiles. If it was no longer obligatory for Jews, how could it possibly become so for others? The only possible explanation dictated by the facts is that the possibility of the Torah not remaining binding for Jews never occurred to anyone in Jerusalem. With this as the basic background fact, we can understand how a debate could have arisen and apparently did arise about whether the Torah was obligatory for gentiles. And we can, furthermore, also understand how the mistaken impression that Paul considered the Law abrogated for Jews

was generated. We have already referred to Acts 21:21 in which the Jerusalem church cautions Paul that this slander against him is abroad and suggests a method, accepted by Paul, to lay the slander to rest. It is worth noting, parenthetically, that the Jerusalem church prefaces its report of the slander against Paul by a remark about how "many thousands of converts we have among the Jews, all of them staunch upholders of the Law" (Acts 21:20). In any case, because Paul preached against circumcision and the Law for gentiles and clearly came into conflict with Jewish Christians who believed that circumcision and the Law was essential for gentiles also, it is easy to imagine how this position could have generated the mistaken or perhaps willful misinterpretation that Paul was preaching against circumcision for Jews as well as gentiles. But the fact remains that this is not what he believed or preached.

With this in mind, we can also better understand Paul's comments on the Law, particularly his emphasis on the Deuteronomic curse (Deut. 28:15- 68). To the Jewish reader of Paul, the most immediate question is why Paul emphasizes the Deuteronomic curse and totally ignores the blessing which precedes the curse (Deut. 28:1-14). Chapter 28 of Deuteronomy consists of a blessing and a curse: a blessing if Israel obeys the commandments contained in the Torah and a curse if it does not. Must not both be spoken of if Paul's readers are to get a complete picture of the Law, of the implications of being subject to the Law, as Israel is? The answer is simple, though, I believe, most significant. Paul is writing to gentiles. He is attempting to discourage them from circumcision and acceptance of the yoke of the Law. In so doing, he is continuing the rabbinic tradition of discouraging gentiles from conversion to Judaism and accepting and putting themselves under the judgment of a set of demands considerably more stringent than the Noachide Laws. When doing this, it is necessary to stress the negative aspect of coming under the Law, the danger of punishment when the Law is violated. It is perhaps even permissible to exaggerate the negative so as to dissuade the gentiles. At the very least, it is necessary not to discuss the positive aspects of coming under the jurisdiction of the Law. If the gentiles persist in spite of all the discouragement, if they embrace the faith of Israel in spite of everything they have heard, then the time has come to tell them of the blessing which flows from the Law, from obedience to it and the love of it. Prior to that point, however, the note to be struck is one of discouragement, not as a falsehood but because there are grave dangers associated with being bound by the Torah, dangers which Israel has experienced firsthand, again and

again, because of its disobedience. This is exactly what Paul is doing. He is pointing out the disadvantages of being bound by the Law, so as to discourage gentiles from coming under its jurisdiction. He is not — though this is how he was understood for many centuries — giving a total picture of the Law. Here and there, in spite of this, as a Jew raised in and respectful of the Law, he cannot help but say some good things about it. Basically, however, Paul is the Apostle to the Gentiles and therefore the negative side of the Law, the side that must be displayed to the potential gentile convert, predominates.

Having cleared away this misunderstanding, we must now ask: what has Christ done for Jews? We know what he has done for gentiles. He has made it possible for them to receive a kind of membership in the house of Israel. But what has he done for Jews? They obviously don't need to be added to the family that is Israel since they already are that family. For a long time, it was thought that with the coming of Christ, the Law had ceased to be relevant to Jews. We now know that this is not so. What difference had Jesus then made to Jews?

The answer is that he had brought them out from under the curse of the Law, the threat of punishment that, according to the Hebrew Bible, hangs over every Jew who tries to fulfill the demands of the Law but who is in constant danger of punishment when he transgresses it, as he will more or less inevitably do. To understand this properly, we must approach it from the rabbinical framework in which God's dimension as the giver of Law stands in tension with God as the father of mercy.

The rabbis noticed that in the Hebrew Bible God was sometimes referred to by J and sometimes by E. Modern biblical scholarship explains this by positing different traditions or texts which were woven into a more or less continuous narrative which nevertheless retains the marks of its composite origins. The rabbis knew nothing of this explanation. They saw in J and E two aspects of God: J was the aspect of mercy, E of Law. The world was created by E, God in his aspect of Law. His original intention was to create human beings, lay down a Law to govern their conduct, and then to judge them in justice in accordance with the Law, dealing out to them what they deserve in accordance with their actions. God found that this course led to the flood because humankind transgressed the Law and brought disaster on itself. God then decided that justice must be tempered with mercy if the experiment that was humankind was to continue. We therefore hear of J, God in his aspect of mercy who acquits humans when justice would dictate their conviction. And for the rest

of the Bible, J and E appear together, sometimes actually joined and sometimes alternating. At times, God metes out justice. At other times, his mercy gains the upper hand and humans receive more than they deserve; life when they deserve death, acquittal when they deserve condemnation. Jewish existence is thus a very insecure one. There is no way of knowing whether, in any given situation, the justice or the mercy of God will predominate. Israel always beseeches God to be dealt with in mercy, not to be held accountable by the strict application of the criterion of justice. But there is no way of assuring that this will be the case. At times, God permits mercy to triumph and the judgment is averted. At other times, often after repeated exercises of mercy, justice is permitted to exact its demands and then it goes hard with Israel. When Israel begs for mercy, most characteristically the patriarchs are invoked, because God loved them especially and sometimes, for their sake, tempers his justice with mercy. Because mercy is something undeserved, Israel cannot demand it but only beg for it and be grateful when it is dispensed.

It is this situation that is radically changed by Christ, in Paul's view. For Paul, Jesus means *Midas Horachamim*, God's aspect of mercy. Where previously the aspects of justice and mercy alternated, with Israel sometimes receiving what it deserved and at other times the recipient of God's mercy, with the Christ event and with faith in Christ, God's aspect of mercy becomes the permanent and exclusive mode of his relationship to Israel. There is no longer any alternation between mercy and justice. Now only mercy is applicable and therefore the curse that is attached to disobedience to the Torah becomes inoperative because the curse, as punishment, is possible only when the justice of God is active. Jesus on the cross was the lightning rod which drew all punishment to itself, thereby protecting all others (Gal. 3:13). Once and for all, the terrible danger of living under the Law is lifted because God's *Midas Hadin*, his aspect of justice, has permanently yielded to his mercy.

This, then, is the significance of the Christ event for Jews, in Paul's theology. Gentiles are brought into the house of Israel by Christ, which previously they could only achieve by circumcision. Jews are freed from the danger of punishment if they disobey the Torah because God is all mercy now. It must be added that in one respect God's justice remains operative. Those who are outside Christ (however "outside" is to be defined) are not assured of God's mercy. "There is no condemnation for those who are united with Christ Jesus," writes Paul in Romans (8:1) but the same may not be the case for those not so united. God as mercy is therefore true only within the Church, that island of redemption established by

Christ but surrounded by a world in which the wrath of God is still operative. Nevertheless, since access to Christ is open to all, in a significant way the justice of God can be escaped for his mercy.

It is therefore true that in one sense Paul sees the Law as abrogated to the Jews, if by “abrogated” we mean that it is no longer demanded of the Jews that they be obedient to it. Now it might be argued, and Paul is well aware of this possibility, that if God’s mercy is assured, if there is no danger of punishment, why should sin be resisted? Is sin then not merely an opportunity for God to exercise his guaranteed mercy? Paul rejects this line of reasoning vigorously (i.e. Rom. 6:1-23). Christians are assured of God’s mercy but they must also be sinless. I dare say that early Jewish Christians were particularly devout followers of the Law. We need only remind ourselves again of Acts 21:20 where the Jerusalem church speaks proudly of its “many thousands of converts we have among the Jews, all of them staunch upholders of the Law.”

Two more points before our concluding comments. As I read it, Paul thought of the church as made up of two complementary portions. One portion of the church was to consist of former gentiles who were bound by the Noachide Laws and believed in Jesus as the Christ. The other portion was to consist of Jews bound by the Torah and believing that Jesus was the Christ. These two segments of the church had their faith in Jesus in common and, for Paul, this was the decisive factor. But there was also a difference in that Jews in the church remained loyal to the Torah. They were the original household to which the gentiles had, through Christ, been admitted. This was their blessing in Christ. The blessing that Christ conferred on Jews was that he freed them from the dire dangers that resulted from violation of the Torah. Once and for all, Jewish Christians knew that God’s mercy and not his justice would be meted out to them. It might be interesting to speculate which of the blessings, that of the gentiles or the Jews, was the more overwhelming. I rather think that for Paul they were both approximately equal.

It follows that if this analysis is correct and if Paul remains authoritative for the church, Jews who embrace Christ must be persuaded by the church to retain their identity as the seed of Abraham, as Jews always have, by rejecting intermarriage. They must also remain loyal to the Torah and its commandments, with their faith in Jesus as the Christ as the only characteristic differentiating them from other Jews. It might be thought that such a retaining of Jewish identity in the church contradicts Paul’s assertion (Gal. 3:28) that in the

church “there is no such thing as Jew and Greek, slave and freeman, male and female.” This passage, important as it is, must not be read to introduce a rigid uniformity into the church. Elsewhere, Paul identifies the role of women in the church and it is not the same as that of men. Similarly, Paul advises Christian slaves to be good slaves and Christian masters to be good masters. In the ultimate sense, the most important sense, all people are the same for Paul in Christ. But in any sense other than the most ultimate, differences remain with the difference between Jews and gentiles certainly not qualifying, for Paul, as an ultimate difference but neither as no difference at all.

And now for the second of my pre-concluding remarks. One of Paul’s most telling arguments against those who insist that circumcision and the Law are a prerequisite of salvation is that a human being is not justified by the Law but only by faith. It has been traditional to think of Judaism as preaching that humans are justified by the merits accruing from doing good deeds in accordance with the commandments of the Torah while Christianity clings to faith rather than good deeds as the way to salvation. There is some truth in this but also much misunderstanding.

What does justification by works of the Law mean? What would someone be believing who believed that a person is justified by works of the Law? We must turn once again to the difference between *Midas Hadin* and *Midas Horachamim*, God’s aspect of justice and of mercy. A person who believed that he was justified by works of the Law alone would, in effect, be saying to God: “Judge me in accordance with my deeds, give me what is coming to me, but I do not ask for mercy, for anything more than what I deserve.” I suppose that from time to time there have been such proud defendants who have refused to beg for mercy, whatever their reason may have been, be it confidence in the unassailability of their case or plain pride that made begging for mercy an intolerable option for them. Whatever the case may have been in such situations, it is unthinkable for Judaism or a Jew to strike such a pose before God. Judaism has always understood that if judged by the strict demands of the Law, no Jew can prevail. We are all sinners who must beg for the mercy of God; without it, we are lost. In the morning liturgy, we find the following: “Master of all worlds! It is not on account of our own righteousness that we offer our supplications before thee, but on account of thy great mercy.” When Paul says that humans are not justified by works of the Law, this is exactly what he means. He is saying nothing that is in any way different from common rabbinic opinion. It must be added, of course, that this does not

mean that we may therefore discontinue obeying the Law and fulfilling its demands. We must do the best we can, striving in every way possible to fulfill the Law, even while we know that we will fall short of its demands and therefore have to beg for God's mercy. It is true that Judaism has cherished the mitzvah, the deed done in accordance with God's command. But this has not meant that it has therefore felt it unnecessary to appeal for God's mercy. To the best of their ability Jews must strive to fulfill the mitzvot; but it is also most advisable for them to beseech God's mercy.

Until now, I have been trying to penetrate the mind of Paul, attempting to understand him from within the framework of Judaism which was, after all, his framework. We have learned that the Christ event was for Paul a very crucial event, having decisive significance for Jews and Gentiles, though in somewhat different ways. Because Christ is so central for Paul, it is easy to forget the effects of the Christ event and, instead, concentrate exclusively on Jesus as the Christ. Judaism is in little danger of this temptation because it does not share Paul's evaluation of Jesus as the Christ. For this very reason, it becomes particularly important for Judaism to examine what Christ is alleged to have accomplished, even if Judaism maintains its dissent that it is he who accomplished it. Just as Judaism, as I have argued [elsewhere](#),¹ cannot claim on *a priori* grounds that God could not have become incarnated in a Nazarene carpenter since to do so would be to make of Judaism a philosophic system rather than the story of the free acts of God, so, it seems to me, Christianity cannot argue on *a priori* grounds that God could have admitted the gentiles to the house of Israel and suspended the wages of sin only by means of an incarnation and crucifixion. It is for this reason that I will restrict myself to the consequences of the Christ event, as Paul conceived them.

Judaism has rarely understood the depth of the gentiles' feeling of exclusion. Because Jews have experienced persecution and rejection for so long, it has been difficult for them to understand that there are gentiles, and not a few, who wish to become members of the family that is the Jewish people, the seed of Abraham elected by God for his service. Judaism has never elaborated the Noachide covenant as a form of election, not unrelated to the election of Israel. It has not, for example, found a place in the synagogue for the Noachide converts, not as Jews, but as gentiles who love and are obedient to the God of Israel who is also the God of all humankind. I must reiterate that this has not been due to any real theological objections to such a course, but to a kind of disbelief that Jews have of

the concept that there are gentiles who deeply desire to enter into Israel's relation with God. While there have always been converts received by Judaism, they have been few and scattered. The thought that there might be such a movement toward its God by large numbers who are not prepared nor required to become Jews has not seemed real to Judaism. This is what we can learn from Paul. We can learn from him that Israel has a responsibility to enable gentiles to obey its God and live in covenant with him. For Paul, this possibility centers on and is inconceivable without Christ. But it must also become a possibility for Judaism within its own framework. The God of Israel is a God who chooses the least likely: Moses the stutterer; Saul of the tribe of Benjamin, the smallest of the tribes of Israel and of the least important family in that tribe; and David, the youngest of eight brothers. If the gentiles today are the non-elect, then that is the more reason for Israel to pay special attention to them since the God of Israel has so often made the first last and the last first. I say this with the full belief that Israel's election is eternal. But the election of Israel was so that "in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed" (Gen. 12:3). The non-election of the gentiles cannot be as deep and permanent as Judaism has often assumed. This is the truth of Paul.

And now, let us look again at the thesis that the God of mercy has permanently displaced God in the aspect of justice and that therefore the curse of the Law, the punishment for transgressing the Law, is abolished. Israel does not believe this because it knows in its flesh that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob punishes and punishes terribly. We live in the light of the terrible seriousness of the Torah. Our transgressing it is not a small matter; our lives and the lives of our children depend on it. The God of Israel is not a permissive grandfather who no longer knows what is right and wrong and who is, in any case, too busy to punish his children. Israel pleads for mercy because it knows the alternative as a real possibility. History has proven this beyond doubt.

It may be asked: how can Israel live with this, with the knowledge that the wrath of God may erupt at any moment, that there is no knowing when his mercy will suspend the requirements of justice or when, God forbid, he will exact what the Law requires in full measure? The answer is this: Israel can live with this because it feels itself so deeply loved that the wrath of God is never experienced as total. However terrible it may be, it is a passing fury while his love is forever. Had Israel not known this in its bones, it could not have survived, it would have turned against itself in the fury of God, hating itself as

children who are not loved hate themselves. And here and there, there have been manifestations of such Jewish self-hatred. But basically, the Jewish people has loved itself, and its individual members each other, because it felt itself loved by God irrevocably, eternally, and absolutely. It is understandable that children by adoption are somewhat less certain of this love and are therefore much more frightened by the wrath and must therefore believe that the wrath is gone forever. Perhaps as they come to feel more at home, they will more easily accept the wrath which is the other side of God's love.

Nevertheless, Paul is right in one way. God's wrath and mercy are not equal. Mercy is deeper than Law, more final, destined to triumph and to redeem Israel and humankind. Humanity will be redeemed, preferably in accordance with their merit, because they will deserve it. But if not, God will redeem them in his mercy anyway. We do, therefore, have a guarantee of mercy, even if only finally, as the last act. That is how Judaism understands it.