



Paul's Contradictions - Can They Be Resolved?

| Gager, John G.

John Gager, Professor of Religion at Princeton University and author of Reinventing Paul (Oxford University Press, 2000), proposes a method of resolving the seeming contradictions in Paul's attitude toward the Jews and Judaism.

Paul's Contradictions – Can They Be Resolved?

by John G. Gager

If we look at Paul's letters, it is not difficult to pull out what on the surface appear

to be directly opposing views, anti- and pro-Israel:

I. Anti-Israel:

- "All who rely on works of the law are under a curse" (Galatians 3:10).
- "No one is justified before God by the law" (Galatians 3:11).
- "For [some manuscripts add 'in Christ Jesus'] neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation is everything!" (Galatians 6:15).
- "No human being will be justified in his [God's] sight by works of the law, since through the law comes knowledge of sin" (Romans 3:20).
- "Israel, who pursued righteousness based on the law, did not succeed in fulfilling that law" (Romans 9:31).
- "But their minds were hardened. Indeed, for to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil is still there, because only through Christ is it taken away. Yes, to this day, whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their minds" (2 Corinthians 3:14-15).

II. Pro-Israel:

- "What is the advantage of the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? Much in every way" (Romans 3:1).
- "Do we not overthrow the Law by this notion of faith? By no means. On the contrary, we uphold the Law" (Romans 3:31).
- "What shall we say? That the Law is sin? By no means" (Romans 7:7).
- "Thus the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good" (Romans 7:12).
- "To the Israelites belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the Law, the Temple, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ" (Romans 9:4).
- "Has God rejected his people? By no means" (Romans 11:1).
- "All Israel will be saved" (Romans 11:26).
- "Is the Law then opposed to the promises of God. Certainly not!" (Galatians 3:21).

These two sets of quotations appear to contradict one another. But do they? Was the apostle to the gentiles incapable of consistent thinking? Some recent Paul scholars have made precisely this claim. The Finnish exegete Heikki Räisänen, for example, has taken what I call a "contradictionist" view of Paul's letters, insisting that "Paul's thought on the law is full of ... inconsistencies."¹

Other scholars have sought to resolve the dilemma by supposing that the problem was introduced by later editors. Thus the eminent Australian Bible scholar J.C. O'Neill has stated: "If the choice lies between supposing that Paul was confused and contradictory and supposing that his text has been commented on and enlarged, I have no hesitation in choosing the second."² And so O'Neill proceeds to eliminate many passages, arguing that they were introduced into the text by later editors who profoundly misunderstood him.

Still other scholars seek a way out of the problem by psychologizing about the apostle. Paul, they claim, was trapped in a psychological bind; he had abandoned Judaism and the Law, but he was unable to admit this either to himself or to others. This appears to be the view of Robert Hammerton-Kelly of Stanford University, who writes that Paul held onto "the role [of Israel] in the plan of salvation" owing to "powerful personal factors" and a "case of nostalgia overwhelming his judgment."³ The two sets of antithetical passages, accordingly, reflect the two horns of Paul's own religious dilemma.

The most common solution to the apparent tensions between the two sets of passages has been what I call the "subordinationist" solution – one set is subordinated to the other. In the subordinationist solution, however, it is always the pro-Israel passages that are subordinated to the anti-Israel passages. In short, the anti-Israel passages are representative of the true Paul; the pro-Israel passages are either explained away or ignored.

In the subordinationist solution, Paul is the father of Christian anti-Judaism. The great German historian Adolf Harnack put it this way: "It was Paul who delivered the Christian religion from Judaism ... It was he who confidently regarded the Gospel as a new force abolishing the religion of the law."⁴ Strangely enough, the subordinationist solution never starts with the pro-Israel passages and subordinates the anti-Israel ones.

More important, none of these positions considers the possibility that the apostle to the gentiles, writing to gentile churches and dealing with gentile issues, is, in the two sets of passages, addressing two different audiences about two different issues. Is it possible that in the pro-Israel set he is speaking of the Law/Torah as it relates to Israel and that in the anti-Israel set he is speaking of the Law/Torah as it relates to gentile followers of Jesus Christ? That is the position I would like to explore.

To understand my argument, we must understand that I want to read the text in a way in which we hear its voice and not just our own. We read all texts within some framework. We always start with assumptions. We never begin with a clean slate. And for the most part, when we deal with texts like the letters of Paul, written in a time and a place radically different from our own, our questions and concerns will be far removed from those of Paul and his earliest readers. Most of the time, our frameworks or assumptions or presuppositions are unconscious; they are so deeply imbedded in our culture and in our cognitive makeup that they have become part of the way we think about the world. Therefore, we often make the fatal mistake of assuming that they are not there at all, that they really are just a part of the way things are. Once we become conscious of these hidden assumptions, we become aware of the possibility of changing them. Changing them makes it possible for us to understand the text based on a new hermeneutic, or principle of interpretation.

Consider the assumptions we commonly bring with us when we read Paul's letters. First, we may read Paul's letters as scripture. This means that what he writes is true – perhaps not in the sense that modern biblical literalists mean when they speak of the Bible as true, but at the very least in the sense of being powerfully authoritative. Beyond this, as part of the Christian canon, they are assumed to stand behind the basic truths of Christianity.

Second, since the time of the early church fathers until recent decades, all interpreters of Paul have read him from the perspective of the triumph of Christianity, after the decisive break between Christianity and Judaism. The reigning Christian view of Judaism during this entire period has been that the Jews have been superseded as the chosen people

of God by the Christians (or Christianity), that the Jews are no longer the bearers of God's promise of salvation and that their only hope for salvation lies in becoming Christian. In this hermeneutic, it follows that Paul, too, with his canonical status, must have held to this dominant Christian view of Judaism. And this is exactly how Paul has been read throughout Christian history. Not just 80 or 90 or even 99 percent of the time, but 100 percent of the time, without exception – that is, until recently, when a few maverick scholars began not only to question that image but to reject it altogether.

One of them, Lloyd Gaston of the Vancouver School of Theology, has put it this way:

"It is Paul who has provided – historically – the theoretical structure for Christian anti-Judaism, from Marcion through Luther and F.C. Baur down to Bultmann."⁵

To summarize, what I call the old view of Paul is based on the following framework of assumptions: With the coming of Christ, Israel (or the Jews) has been rejected by God as the elect people of the covenant; Israel's faith and the law of Moses (including circumcision) has been declared invalid; Israel has been replaced as the people of God by a new people, called Christians, and from this point on, the sole path to redemption or salvation – for Jews and gentiles – is faith in Christ. According to this interpretation of Paul's teachings, Jews and Judaism no longer play any role in God's work of salvation.

This is the result when we approach Paul from our side of the time line. We live after the triumph of Christianity and the final parting of ways between Jews and Christians. Paul did not. Yet we bring that post-Pauline framework with us when we read him. And that framework has determined how we read him – at least until a few decades ago, when a number of scholars began to offer a new view of Paul.

Consider what would happen if, for just a moment, we were to consider Paul's letters from the other side of the time line, from Paul's time instead of our own. What would happen if we threw into doubt the triumph of Christianity in Paul's time, or even the notion of the final split between Jews and Christians? Or – since we have started to ask tough questions about our assumptions – what would happen if we were to recall (here I am not inventing but simply describing) that in Paul's time there was no Bible other than the Hebrew Bible, no New Testament, or even any idea of a New Testament, and no Christianity, or even any idea of Christianity? What difference would it make to our reading of Paul if we were to bring these assumptions, this framework with us when we read his letters? The result is not just a minor adjustment here or there on the fringes of the old image. What I and others have been arguing is that the old image, the image that has been 100 percent dominant from Paul's day to our own, is 100 percent wrong, from top to bottom, from start to finish.

The best argument against the old view comes from Paul's letters themselves. The old view represents a complete misreading of Paul that began not with modern Christian theologians or with Martin Luther or even with Marcion in the second century, but with Paul's own contemporaries. And he was well aware of it. In fact, he argues vigorously against it in his letter to the Romans. Romans itself is a systematic refutation of what I have called the old view, but now with the added claim that this old view was already in circulation – under Paul's name – in his own lifetime.

Some exegetes have argued that Paul was never really able to live up to the demands of Mosaic Law and that Christianity gave him the opportunity to throw off that intolerable burden. Others hold that he finally came to view Judaism as nothing more than a religion of arid formalism, mere outer observance devoid of any real spiritual substance. The origin of that view is often identified with Paul's blinding vision of the risen Christ on the road to Damascus.

Several other far-fetched explanations have been proposed for Paul's supposed rejection of Judaism, which underlies what we have been calling the old view. For instance, according to one story, Paul was born a gentile, fell in love with a Jewish woman and, as part of his efforts to win her affections, undertook a half-hearted effort to observe the Mosaic law. When she finally rejected him, he turned back to his old pagan ways and vented his frustration by attacking Judaism. This is not just a joke: It is a story that actually circulated in anti-Pauline circles shortly after the apostle's death.⁶

All of these explanations, ancient and modern, have one thing in common: Each presupposes that Paul rejected Judaism and substituted Christians for Jews as the new people of God.

However, the evidence for this comes, not from Paul's letters (the only evidence that comes from Paul himself), but from other parts of the New Testament (a collection that was not even envisioned in Paul's lifetime), especially the Acts of the Apostles. Both Acts and the New Testament as a whole are far removed from Paul in time and circumstance, yet they

gave birth to the traditional view of Paul. The unmistakable message of Acts – repeatedly placed in the mouth of Paul – is that gentiles have replaced the Jews as the people of God. And Acts is strategically placed before the letters of Paul, so that it is through Acts that we first meet Paul. In other words, a clear image of Paul is presented to us that preconditions our response to his letters.

Like Acts, the overall message of the New Testament regarding Judaism is that Judaism is rejected, invalidated and replaced by Christianity. And if this is the message of the New Testament as a whole, how can we doubt that its central figure (13 of its 27 writings claim to be written by Paul, and Acts is about him) preached this same message? In short, the other parts of the New Testament, particularly Acts, have always served as the lens through which Paul has been read and interpreted.

But does this lens provide an accurate picture of Paul or a distortion of his thought? A number of recent interpreters – including Lloyd Gaston, already mentioned, Krister Stendahl,⁷ my own former teacher at Harvard, and more recently, Stanley Stowers⁸ of Brown University – have begun to doubt everything about the old view: its assumptions, its questions and its answers – not just details, but everything.

A pretty clear indication that Paul has been terribly misinterpreted is reflected in the

fact that the defenders of the traditional interpretation of Paul as the father of Christian anti-Judaism never come to terms with the central pro-Israel passages in Paul's letters (quoted at the beginning of this article).

These passages flatly contradict the traditional view of Paul as the author of Christian anti-Judaism. There is simply no way to reconcile the pro-Israel passages with that view. Indeed, they all seem to be directed against that view, as if Paul were listening to his later interpreters and shaking his head in dismay at their profound misunderstanding of his position. And that, as I shall show, is almost exactly what was happening. For the traditional view was circulating in Paul's own time. The letter to the Romans is nothing if not a systematic – though ultimately unsuccessful – attempt to correct what Paul took to be a profound distortion of his teachings in his own lifetime.

At this point, we need to establish an entirely new framework for reading Paul. Instead of using a framework outside Paul's letters, whether in Acts or in the character of the New Testament as a whole or in pseudo-psychological efforts to read his inner thoughts, let's look for a set of starting points within his letters.

Who is Paul speaking to in his letters, especially in Galatians 5:6 and 6:15, where he states that circumcision is no longer essential to salvation? And why does he insist so angrily, again in Galatians, that for gentiles a new path to redemption has been opened up, a path different from the path of Israel but also testified to and predicted by the Law and the prophets? And finally, does Paul (who always refers to himself as the apostle to the

gentiles) believe that the allegiance of gentiles to Jesus Christ leads to a repudiation of Israel and of circumcision (which for him is clearly a major symbol of Israel's relationship to God) as the pathway to redemption for Jews?

Before his calling to be the apostle to the gentiles, while he was still a Pharisee, Paul was anything but neutral in his feelings about the new Jesus movement. Indeed, he had been an active persecutor of Jesus-followers (Philippians 3:6). Following his call, or conversion, Paul came to see himself exclusively as the apostle to the gentiles. As he states in Galatians 1:15-16: "God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his son to me, in order that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles." In other words, his divinely appointed task was to bring a new message regarding the status and salvation of the gentiles, a status different from the old covenant with Israel, but not against it. As he states in Romans 3:31: "Do we then overthrow the law by this notion of faith? By no means. On the contrary, we uphold the law."

Paul's message was intensely eschatological: The end of the world was at hand. Within his own lifetime, the trumpet would sound, the dead would be raised, and this age would come to an end. Everything was happening at a fever pitch. "The appointed time has grown very short," as he states in 1 Corinthians 7:29.

This eschatological intensity is especially relevant to two central themes in Paul's

thinking. The first is the expectation in numerous Jewish texts of the time when the inclusion of the gentiles as children of God will take place at the end of history.⁹

The second is the elaborate scenario that maintains that the temporary blindness of the Jews is a divinely ordained precondition for the inclusion of the gentiles (Romans 11). According to the final stage of this scenario, once the gentiles are brought into a new relationship with God, Israel will come to its senses, and "All Israel will be saved" (Romans 11:26). Note that he does not say, "All Israel will come to believe in Jesus or Christianity," just "All Israel will be saved."

All of this was supposed to happen in Paul's lifetime. When it didn't happen and when later Christians began to read Paul outside his own intense eschatological framework, what was left? Just the blindness and the exclusion of Israel! But for Paul himself, to think of Israel's blindness as a permanent condition, or as anything other than a divinely chosen device for bringing salvation to the gentiles, would have been the height of folly.

Yet this is precisely how the traditional view interprets him.

One final factor is important in understanding Paul's letters from Paul's viewpoint:

Paul's message to and about gentiles – that they were being offered salvation outside the covenant with Israel – was actively and vociferously resisted by others within the Jesus movement. These anti-Pauline groups, whom Paul himself connects with Peter and James (the brother of Jesus) insisted that gentile followers of Jesus could be saved or redeemed only by becoming members of the people of Israel. For adult males, that meant circumcision. We also know that these anti-Pauline leaders from within the Jesus movement followed Paul from town to town, trying to impose their gospel of circumcision on his gentile believers. The

issue between Paul and his opponents was not whether gentiles could become followers of Jesus. They could. The issue was whether they first had to become Jews or whether, as Paul insisted, a new way for them had been opened up by the faith and death of Jesus.

It is these anti-Pauline apostles within the Jesus movement who are the targets of Paul's anger. It is against them that his arguments are directed. His concern with circumcision has nothing to do with Jews outside the Jesus movement (as he tells us explicitly in Romans 2:25-3:4). As the apostle to the gentiles, he is concerned exclusively with the issue of the circumcision of gentiles within the Jesus movement.

Two recent interpreters have addressed these questions in a way that is worth a brief detour. The first is Michael Wyschogrod, an Orthodox Jewish philosopher and longtime student of Paul. "Early in my career as a student of Paul," he writes, "I was deeply perplexed by his attitude to the law. To be quite frank about it, I could not understand how a religiously sensitive Jew such as Paul could speak about the law as he did."¹⁰

Wyschogrod's anguish is of a piece with the reaction of most Jewish readers and some Christians as well. What I find to be nothing short of astonishing is that until very recently no one has thought it worthwhile to consider Wyschogrod's simple solution, which I quote:

The question for Paul is not mainly the significance of Torah for Jews but its significance for Jesus-believing Gentiles ... [A]ll the nasty things Paul says about the law are intended to discourage Gentiles from embracing the law and are thoroughly misunderstood if they are read as expressions of Paul's opinion about the value of the law for Jews.¹¹

In other words, Paul did not say nasty things about the Law as related to Israel: He did not draw the inference that the Law brought death to Israel, and he did not ignore or deny the biblical doctrine of repentance and forgiveness for Israel.

I am prepared to take the next step: Whenever any statement supposedly explicating Paul's thought begins with words like "How could a Jew like Paul say X, Y, Z about the Law," the statement must be regarded as misguided. In all likelihood, Paul is not speaking about the Law and Israel, but rather about the Law and gentile members of the Jesus movement.

One of the major figures in the creation of what I call the "new Paul" is Lloyd Gaston, who puts it this way:

Paul writes to Gentile Christians, dealing with Gentile-Christian problems, foremost among

which was the right for Gentiles qua Gentiles, without adopting the Torah of Israel, to full citizenship in the people of God. It is remarkable that in the endless discussion of Paul's understanding of the law, few have asked what a first-century Jew would have thought of the law as it relates to Gentiles.^{[12](#)}

If we take these facts and this framework as our starting point for reading his letters, it becomes clear that Paul's primary – I would say his exclusive – concern was the new status in Christ of gentiles, not the status of Israel.

Paul was constantly on the defensive, not so much against Jews outside the movement as against other apostles within it. Especially in Galatians, his opponents should be understood as anti-Pauline apostles bent on undermining Paul's Gospel in any way possible. These people are the targets of his anger and his arguments. Thus the anti-Israel statements quoted at the beginning of this article apply only to the status of the Law for gentiles within the Jesus movement. They have no bearing whatsoever on their validity for Israel.

Although the misreading of Paul began in his own time and, until very recently, was subsequently adopted by virtually all interpreters, Paul himself is as clear as anyone can be: "Circumcision is indeed of value if you follow the Law" (Romans 2:25).

Paul never speaks of gentiles as replacing Israel. (Note that Paul never refers to gentile members of the Jesus movement as Christians; for him, humanity is always divided between Jews and gentiles.) And Paul never speaks of God as having rejected Israel in favor of a new chosen people.

I cannot deny that interpreters throughout the ages have read him in this way, but once again, I believe that Paul vehemently repudiates this misreading of his thought: "I ask, then, has God rejected his people [Israel]? By no means!" (Romans 11:1).

Above all, Paul never speaks of Israel's redemption in terms of Jesus. Just as he can no longer think of salvation for gentiles in terms of the Mosaic covenant, so he does not imagine salvation for Jews occurring through their acceptance of Jesus. Or to borrow a line from Lloyd Gaston, for Paul, Jesus was not the Messiah of Israel.

How, then, can twenty centuries of interpreters be so wrong? The answer is that the misreading is not only understandable but inevitable given the framework within which Paul has been read in the time following his death. When people lost sight of the immediate circumstances of the letters and began to assume that his opponents were Jews outside the Jesus movement instead of other apostles within, when Paul was read through the lens of Acts and the New Testament, when Paul's intense eschatological worldview had to be abandoned, then the old traditional reading of Paul became inevitable. It is the result of reading Paul within a distant, alien framework, rather than the apostle's own, and of forgetting that Paul is the apostle to the gentiles and is dealing with gentiles and their new status in

Christ.

It is my view that the new reading of Paul that I am advocating is not simply one among several alternatives, but the only historically defensible reading. This is a bold stance, perhaps even a foolish one. It is certainly out of step with modern theories that regard all views as possible and allow no ultimate adjudication among them. It is also highly presumptuous, even arrogant, in its insistence that twenty centuries of interpreters have been mistaken. But if I am right, all readers, Jewish as well as Christian, will need to confront the reasons for the origins of the old view in the first century and for its continuance ever since.

-
1. Heikki Räisänen, *Paul and the Law* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1987), p. 264.
 2. J.C. O'Neill, *The Recovery of Paul's Letter to the Galatians* (London: SPCK, 1972), p. 47.
 3. Robert Hammerton-Kelly, *Sacred Violence: Paul's Hermeneutic of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), pp. 11-12.
 4. Adolf von Harnack, *What Is Christianity?* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1901), p. 190.
 5. Lloyd Gaston, *Paul and the Torah* (Vancouver: Univ. of British Columbia Press, 1987), p. 15.
 6. The story is preserved in the writings of the fourth-century Christian bishop Epiphanius of Salamis, *Panarion* (also known as *Refutation of all Heresies*) 30.16.6-9. For a translation, see *The Writings of St. Paul*, ed. Wayne A. Meeks (New York: Norton, 1972), pp. 177-178.
 7. Krister Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles and Other Essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976); *Final Account, Paul's Letter to the Romans* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995).
 8. Stanley Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews, and Gentiles* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1994).
 9. See the discussion of W.D. Davies in "Paul and the People of Israel," *New Testament Studies* 24 (1977), pp. 7-8.
 10. Michael Wyschogrod, "The Impact of Dialogue with Christianity on My Self-Understanding as a Jew," in *Die Hebräische Bibel und ihre zweifache Nachgeschichte*, ed. Erhard Blum et al. (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1990), p. 731. Wyschogrod wavers a bit, but in the end seems convinced (p. 733). George Foot Moore, in his magisterial *Judaism in the First*

Centuries of the Christian Era: The Age of the Tannaim, 3 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1962), made a similar observation, but like much else in his work, no one bothered to follow up on it: "He [Paul] was, in fact, not writing to convince Jews but to keep his Gentile converts from being convinced by Jewish propagandists, who insisted that faith in Christ was not sufficient to salvation apart from the observance of the law" (vol. 3, p. 151). The "Jewish propagandists" are Paul's opponents in the Jesus movement.

11. Wyschogrod, "Dialogue," p. 723.

12. Gaston, *Paul and the Torah*, p. 23.

Reprinted by permission from Bible Review 14, 32-39. Copyright © 2000 Biblical Archaeology Society.

John G. Gager