

Introduction

JAMES D. G. DUNN

A 'TROUBLER OF ISRAEL'

Paul has always been an uncomfortable and controversial figure in the history of Christianity. The accusation against the prophet Elijah by Israel's King Ahab, 'you troubler of Israel' (1 Ks. 18:17), could be levelled against Paul more fittingly than any other of the first Christians. He first appears on the public stage of first-century history as a Jewish 'zealot' (Acts 22:3), one who measured his 'zeal' by his attempt to violently 'destroy' (Gal. 1:13; Phil. 3:6) the embryonic movement within Second Temple Judaism, then best characterized as 'the sect of the Nazarenes' (Acts 24:5, 14; 28:22), two generations later as 'Christianity'.¹ Following his conversion, when he turned round and joined those whom he had persecuted (Acts 9; Gal. 1:13–16), and when he then embarked on a highly personal mission to win Gentiles to the gospel of Christ (Rom. 11:13; 15:18–20), he displayed the same sort of passionate commitment, even 'zeal' (2 Cor. 11:2) on behalf of his converts and churches.

Such out-and-out commitment to his cause created tremendous resentment among his fellow Jews, including, not least, those Jews who, like him, had also come to believe in Jesus as Israel's Messiah.² One of the chief reasons why we still have so many of his letters is that his teaching was quickly challenged by varying opponents from both within and without the churches he established; it was characteristic of Paul that he did not hesitate to respond vigorously to such challenges.³ Similarly when his churches proved restive under his tutelage he saw it as part of his continuing apostolic vocation to write to further instruct, encourage and exhort them.⁴ The fact that most, though not all of his letters were preserved for posterity testifies to their effectiveness; they must have been treasured by those who received them, circulated round other churches and within a generation or so have been gathered into a single collection for wider use.

Paul remained a controversial figure in the generations immediately following him. One of the main reasons why most scholars regard the Pastoral

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Epistles (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus) as post-Pauline, though written from within the tradition he inaugurated, is that they seem to present a softer, somewhat idealized Paul, more amenable to the faith forms and structures of mainstream Christianity as it emerged from the first century. Similarly the Paul of Acts seems to have been stripped of much of the controversy known to us from his letters, even of some of his more distinctive teaching, and to have been shorn of most of his prickles. It should also be recalled that there were some strands diverging from mainstream Christianity in the second century which claimed that Paul was their principal inspiration (Marcion, Valentinian Gnosticism); Tertullian could even call Paul 'the apostle of the heretics' (*adv. Marc.* 3.5). Equally significant is the fact that the most direct heirs of the Jewish-Christian groupings within earliest Christianity regarded Paul as the great apostate, an arch enemy (*Epistula Petri* 2:3; *Clem. Hom.* 17:18–19). And so it becomes still more apparent that the Paul retained for Christianity was a domesticated Paul, Paul rendered more comfortable, an ecclesiasticized Paul.⁵

At the same time, the influence of Paul on subsequent Christianity has been incalculable. Not for nothing was he hailed a century ago as 'the second founder of Christianity'.⁶ And for the most part his influence has been positive and creative, challenging new generations as he did his own to a renewed appreciation of 'the truth of the gospel', provoking leading exponents of Christianity to fresh insights into what it means to be 'christian' and 'church', and stimulating again and again fresh theological syntheses at the fulcrum point of epochs in transition. It was under the influence of Paul that Irenaeus and Tertullian were able to steady the boat of Christianity, rocked as it was in the second half of the second century by 'heresy' and competing religious systems. The great paradigm formulated by Augustine which enabled western Christianity to survive the fall of the Roman Empire and to endure through 'the dark ages' owed much to Paul. The Reformation, built on the foundation of Paul's teaching on 'justification by faith (alone)', resulted in a Protestantism which can be justly characterized as a kind of Paulinism. Methodists delight to recall that it was when he had been listening to a reading of Luther's preface to Paul's epistle to the Romans that John Wesley felt his 'heart strangely warmed'. It was the commentary of Karl Barth on the same Pauline letter which fell like a bomb in the playground of Europe's theologians after the First World War, inaugurating a new phase in twentieth-century theology and churchmanship. And in the last two decades of the twentieth century the so-called 'new perspective on Paul' has been a major factor in reinvigorating interest in what had become a stereotyped appreciation of earliest Christianity and a rather moribund treatment of Pauline theology.

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The following pages reflect something of the fascination that Paul exerts, as well as something of the irritation he causes. Many of the issues are relatively humdrum – particularly the ‘who wrote what where and when and why’ questions which Introductions to ancient writings have to ask. Were all thirteen letters attributed to Paul actually written by him? There has rarely been much doubt about the principal letters (*Hauptbriefe*) – Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians and Galatians; 1 Thessalonians and Philipians usually slip easily under the rope too. And not many have the heart to deny Paul the intriguing personal note to Philemon. But for nearly two hundred years there have been weighty voices raised against the Pauline authorship of 2 Thessalonians and Colossians, and still more against the Pauline authorship of Ephesians, even though it can be justly described as a classic exposition of ‘Paulinism’. And it is probably a minority of modern scholars who would regard the Pastoral Epistles as penned or dictated by Paul himself. Over that period the debate on Pauline authorship has ebbed to and fro, without much final resolution being achieved, beyond the universal agreement that the letter to the Hebrews was not by Paul, despite old church tradition reflected in the heading of the King James Version (KJV). The chief factors to be considered in such introductory questions regarding the thirteen letters of the Pauline corpus, together with an analysis of each letter, can be followed through in Part two below.

Of more intrinsic interest are the larger questions regarding Paul’s life and role as ‘apostle to the Gentiles’, the distinctive character of each of the letters, the themes of Christian teaching and practice which he addressed, and the heritage which he left behind him through these letters. Since these questions provide the principal subject matter for this *Companion*, and since most of the current thinking on these questions reflects in greater or less degree the influence of earlier phases of thinking on them, it is important that readers of the *Companion* have some idea of that earlier thinking.

F. C. BAUR

There is one overarching question which more than any other has dominated the study of the historical Paul during the last two centuries. That is the issue of Paul’s role in transforming a Jewish messianic renewal movement into a religion which captured the allegiance of most of the Graeco-Roman world within three centuries and so became the dominant religious and intellectual influence on European thought and culture.

The question was first posed in the modern period by F. C. Baur. As he expressed it at the beginning of his treatment of Paul, the principal challenge is to understand ‘how Christianity, instead of remaining a mere form of

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Judaism . . . asserted itself as a separate, independent principle, broke loose from it' and became a new religion.⁷ Baur had already found the clue to Paul's role in the references to conflict between different parties in 1 Cor. 1:12. Hence the second part of the title of his most famous article: 'The Opposition between Petrine and Pauline Christianity in the Earliest Church'.⁸ Baur's thesis was that this conflict between two factions, one with distinctive Jewish tendencies, and the other, Pauline Christianity, shaped the history of Christianity for the first two centuries of its development. And who made the ultimately decisive contribution to free Christian universalism from Jewish particularism? Paul, of course. So too it was Baur who insisted that the opponents of Paul in all his letters were 'judaizers', proponents of a stultifying Jewish Christianity who insisted that Paul's Gentile converts conform to the restrictions of the Jewish law.⁹ Not altogether surprisingly, Baur saw in this conflict a foreshadowing of the Reformation conflict between Catholicism (characterized as like Judaism in its attachment to the formal and external) and Protestantism (regarded as like Pauline Christianity in its attachment to the inner and spiritual). Well into the twentieth century, indeed, the key question was when 'old Catholicism' or 'early Catholicism' (*Frühkatholizismus*) first emerged – only after Paul (the Pauline epistles) or already within Paul's own church organization.¹⁰

THE HISTORY OF RELIGIONS SCHOOL

The terms of the debate only began to change in the late nineteenth century when the developments in embryonic Christianity began to be looked at from the opposite direction; that is, when the focus began to shift from asking how Christianity emerged *from Judaism* to asking how Christianity became influenced *by Hellenism* (the Greek culture which had increasingly pervaded the eastern Mediterranean since the conquest of Alexander the Great nearly four centuries earlier). This was the phase in the study of Christianity's origins identified with the 'History of Religions School'. The *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* was a movement which insisted that Christianity should be seen not simply as a list of *doctrines* believed but as a *religion* practised. To understand earliest Christianity it was necessary to look at it in relation to other religions and religious currents of the time, that is, to see Christianity not as separate from but as part of the history of its times, not as something unique but as one religion among many. Here again, in the 'hellenization' of Christianity, Paul was the one to be credited with making the decisive breakthrough.

The impact of the History of Religions movement changed the face of New Testament study, particularly in regard to Paul, to whose writings most

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attention was given. For example, by reading Paul's account of the effects of the Spirit within his churches Hermann Gunkel shifted the perception of 'spirit' from the idealized world spirit of Hegel to something much more primitive – the experience of empowering.¹¹ In effect Gunkel's changed focus anticipated the emergence of Pentecostalism in the early twentieth century, characterized by a similar emphasis on the experience of the Spirit. The emphases cut little ice for the mainstream theological and ecclesiastical developments of the first half of the twentieth century, but the growth of the 'charismatic movement' in the second half aroused an equivalent interest in the charismatic and experiential dimension of Paul's writings in Pauline scholarship.¹²

Not unrelated was a famous debate between Rudolph Sohm and Adolf Harnack which spanned the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century – in effect complementary to the *Frühkatholizismus* debate. Sohm sharpened an already recognized contrast between 'function' and 'office' in early church organization into a sharp antithesis between 'charisma' and 'canon law' (*Kirchenrecht*). His argument, based principally on Paul, was that 'the organization of Christendom is not a legal one, but a charismatic organization'; 'Christendom is organized through the distribution of spiritual gifts'.¹³ For Sohm the displacement of charismatic structure by human *Kirchenrecht*, first visible in 1 Clement (late first century AD), marked a 'fall' from the apostolic to subapostolic age. In contrast, Harnack recognized the tension between Spirit and office, but saw it not as sequential but rather as simultaneous, charismatic functions and administrative offices operating in tension more or less from the first.¹⁴ This too is a debate which revived in the second half of the twentieth century.¹⁵ On the one hand, the tension in Paul has been mirrored in the equivalent tensions within and between the ecumenical and charismatic movements – always with the challenge, implicit or explicit: does the character of Christian community as envisioned in 1 Corinthians 12 provide a continuing model for the church as 'the body of Christ'?¹⁶ And on the other, the *Frühkatholizismus* issue has been restated in terms provided from the sociology of Max Weber, as to whether the 'routinization' or 'institutionalization' of charisma is best conceived as a second-generation development or as a feature within Paul's own churches.¹⁷

Too much of that debate was a throwback to the earlier period marked by introverted navel-gazing, as though early Christianity's history were something quite separate from the history of its time. More typical of History of Religions' concerns was interest in early church organization as influenced by and reflective of contemporary social structures. The path was pioneered by Edwin Hatch before the emergence of the History of

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Religions School,¹⁸ but was surprisingly even more neglected until the later decades of the twentieth century.¹⁹ However, since the pioneering studies of the Corinthian church by Gerd Theissen,²⁰ the sociological path has become a major highway for scholarly monographs.²¹ The concern has been to understand better the social dynamics of small groups meeting in private houses, sometimes small tenement apartments. What was the proportion of well-to-do and low born, of slaves and slave-owners, of Jews and non-Jews? What did it mean for Paul to work with his own hands to support himself? How did the patron/client and honour/shame conventions of the Mediterranean world impact on the conduct and relationships within the Pauline churches? What about the status of women within the house churches and their role in ministry within these churches? How did the first Christian groups survive or thrive within often hostile environments: what boundaries did they draw round themselves and what movement did they permit through these boundaries? Such questions continue to fascinate students and scholars, not least for the lessons which might be gleaned from a pre-Christendom church of possible relevance to a post-Christendom church.

An older interest which was reinforced by History of Religions' motivation was in the influence of ancient rhetoric on Paul. This was another way of approach to Paul's letters, other than viewing them as primarily statements of theology, which came to the fore in the great commentary on 1 Corinthians by Johannes Weiss.²² But here once again it was an interest which sputtered only fitfully during the middle decades of the twentieth century when the programmes of Barthian theology largely dominated university faculties of theology. However, it too has revived in the closing decades of that century, kick-(re)started by Hans Dieter Betz,²³ and much stimulated by interaction with the lively postmodern debates within the field of literary criticism. That highly illuminating readings of Paul's letters can be achieved by familiarity with ancient epistolary and rhetorical conventions, by noting carefully the terms, idioms, and strategies employed by Paul, and by listening attentively to the effect he sought to evoke in his readers has become increasingly apparent.²⁴ In at least some occasions, after all, Paul's letters were but one side of an often contentious and passionate dialogue. It does *not* follow – especially for those who want to hear afresh the controversial Paul for themselves – that their content (*die Sache*) is best grasped by a dispassionate exposition.

THE ORIGIN OF THE SACRAMENTS

The thesis which most characterized the History of Religions contribution to study of Christianity's origins was the claim that Christianity's

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two (chief) sacraments (baptism and sacred meal) were deeply influenced in derivation by the equivalent rites of contemporary mystery cults. Where did Paul get the idea that Christians had been 'baptized into Christ Jesus (and) into his death' (Rom. 6:3)? A parallel with initiation into the cults of dying and rising gods, typically celebrating the renewal of spring (Easter!), immediately suggested itself. The Attis cult with its ghastly taurobolium, where the initiate was 'reborn' by being drenched in the blood of a bull, drew particular attention. And does not talk of eating the body and drinking the blood of Christ in the Lord's Supper suggest the idea of devouring the god which characterized the frenzied ritual of the cult of Dionysus?²⁵

As so often when parallels catch the eye, however, the initial excitement pushed the thesis too far. We know too little of the mysteries of the cults; for the most part they succeeded in keeping their 'mysteries' secret. But on some of the key issues, at least, we can be fairly confident. For example, where ablutions were involved they were likely to be preparatory for initiation rather than part of the initiation itself. The suggestion of a mystical identification with the cult god is more read into than out of the texts in question. And the function of any symbolic eating and drinking within any mystery, and therefore the extent and significance of any parallel, is quite unclear.²⁶

At the same time, it is true that Paul seems to acknowledge a parallel between the Lord's Supper and meals eaten in temples dedicated to gods like Sarapis (1 Cor. 10:20–1). The suggestion that the bread and wine, consumed in a wrong spirit, could have a destructive effect (1 Cor. 11:29–30) has an unnerving ring. And Paul evidently saw a dangerous parallel between the chaotic enthusiasm of the Corinthian worship (14:23) and the abandoned ecstasy of the Dionysiac cult (12:2). Yet, some such phenomenological parallels are hardly unexpected. And if the issue is the originating impulse for the Christian sacraments, the background of Jewish washings (Heb. 6:2) and Passover meal (1 Cor. 5:7) is a much more obvious source of influence. Consequently, few now find any cause to look further than Christianity's own foundational tradition of John's baptism as the beginning of the gospel (cf. Mark 1:8; 10:38; Rom. 6:3) and the last supper of Jesus with his disciples before his death (1 Cor. 11:23–6).

THE ORIGINS OF CHRISTOLOGY

Where the History of Religions approach made its greatest impact, however, was in the area of christology. The debate following Baur had brought to increasing recognition that the development of earliest Christianity could not be conceived satisfactorily simply in terms of two great blocks (Petrine

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and Pauline Christianity) grinding against each other. There were more layers involved: James and the primitive Jerusalem church for a start, and Gentile factions more radical than Paul; but then also the overlap of Judaism and Hellenism which was already a feature of 'the Hellenists' (Acts 6:1) and of diaspora Judaism prior to Paul. The effect was to distance Paul even more from Jesus. The more Jesus was seen simply as a Jewish teacher of love-moralism, as in late-nineteenth-century Liberalism,²⁷ the more difficult it was to explain where Paul was coming from in developing his conception of Christianity as a religion of redemption focused on Jesus' death and resurrection. Paul's seeming disregard for Jesus during his earthly ministry, 'Christ according to the flesh' (2 Cor. 5:16), simply reinforced the problem. A great gulf was fixed and many were the attempts made to bridge the gap between 'Jesus and Paul'.²⁸

Initially, and still with the mysteries in mind, the decisive development in the Christian way of thinking about Christ was attributed to the mystical experience of Christ as a supra-terrestrial power which was thought to have characterized the worship of the early Christian cult. Paul's own distinctive conception of being 'in Christ' was seen as a direct reflection of this cultic mysticism.²⁹ This line of exposition reflected a wider interest in mysticism before the Second World War, an interest which has diminished greatly since, being either diverted into a reinvigorated theology of church and sacrament, or largely overtaken by the renewed interest in the charismatic experience of the Spirit.³⁰

Of weightier and more enduring influence was the growing History of Religions conviction that Gnosticism, previously regarded as simply a Christian heresy, had much deeper roots, represented a quite independent religious philosophy, and, putting the theory of influence into reverse, had been the *source* of Christianity's own theology of salvation. The high water mark of this particular tide of speculation was Rudolf Bultmann's famous claim that behind Paul's christology lay the Gnostic Redeemer myth.³¹ This was the belief that the human condition was one of imprisonment and ignorance, the spirit within ('sparks of light') needing to be enlightened, given knowledge (*gnosis*) as to its true nature and origin. In the myth, salvation is brought by the 'light-person' who enters this lower world to bring the saving, life-giving *gnosis*. Bultmann was sure that passages like 2 Cor. 8:9, Phil. 2:6–11 and Eph. 4:8–10 reflected the Gnostic myth of the descent and re-ascension of the Gnostic Redeemer.

The problem is that no extant version of the Gnostic Redeemer myth predates Christianity. The Jewish talk of divine Wisdom's descent to earth (as in Sir. 24:8–12 and 1 Enoch 42) is best seen not as the broken fragment of some complete, earlier myth, but as the sort of building block out of

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which the later myth was constructed. The fact that redeemer figures (like Simon Magus) only appear subsequent to Jesus probably indicates that early Christian, not least Pauline christology, was itself another of the building blocks which second-century Gnosticism built into its syncretistic myth. The Nag Hammadi codices (discovered in 1945) have provided a life-support system for Bultmann's thesis (particularly *The Gospel of Philip* 58:17–22; 71:9–17 and *The Sophia of Jesus Christ* 100–1), but the thesis still depends on the false premise that 'independent means prior'. It is hardly to be denied, of course, that Paul shared with his environment language and concepts like 'knowledge' (*gnosis*) and 'spiritual' (*pneumatikos*). But it is now widely agreed that the quest for a pre-Christian Gnosticism, properly so called, has proved to be a wild goose chase. As with the sacraments, there are far more obvious roots for Paul's christology, particularly the already well-developed Jewish reflection on Adam and Wisdom.³²

THE NEW PERSPECTIVE ON PAUL

On the issue of the decisive influences on Paul's theology, the tide began to turn with the work of W. D. Davies, who protested against the undue History of Religions concentration on Paul's Hellenist background and insisted that the key to understanding Paul was his Jewish origins.³³ However, there was a major stumbling block in any attempt to shed light on Paul from that source – namely, the deeply rooted, albeit unconscious, prejudice in so much Christian scholarship against Judaism. Judaism was what Paul had turned away from, was it not? His conversion had surely liberated Paul from the slavery of the law and from a legalistic Pharisaism. Was not his central doctrine, justification by faith, formulated precisely in opposition to a Judaism which taught that justification depended on one's own efforts ('works')? Thus it could be said that the History of Religions School had in effect continued to be motivated by Baur's conception of Christianity as a universal religion which could become itself only by freeing itself from the narrow particularistic bonds of Judaism. So far as the History of Religions School and its heirs were concerned, it was the influence of the universal spirit of Hellenism which had saved infant Christianity from a Jewish childhood of stunted growth and enabled it to achieve maturity.

Every so often voices were raised against such a parody both of second temple Judaism and of Paul's debt to his Jewish heritage.³⁴ But it was not until E. P. Sanders attacked the parody in a bare-knuckled way that the wrong-headedness of much of the earlier disregard of Paul's Jewish background became widely recognized, although the bluntness of his polemic provoked considerable resentment, particularly within German scholarship.³⁵

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Sanders observed that the starting point for Judaism's self-understanding as the people of God (both second Temple Judaism and rabbinic Judaism) was the covenant made by God with Israel; the covenant was nowhere regarded in Jewish writings as an achievement of human merit. And although Jews had the responsibility to maintain their covenant standing by obedience to the law, the repeated emphasis on repentance, and the centrality of a sacrificial system which provided atonement for the repentant within Israel's pattern of religion, meant that the characterization of that religion as legalistic and merit-based was misconceived, unjustified, and prejudicial. Sanders coined the phrase 'covenantal nomism' to embrace both aspects – the divine initiative of God's choice of a 'not people' (covenant), and the response of obedience required from that people (law/nomism).

This was 'the new perspective on Paul'. In reality it was a new perspective on Paul's 'Judaism'. But it called for a new perspective on Paul himself. If Paul was not reacting to a legalistic Judaism which understood salvation to be dependent ultimately on human achievement, then what was he reacting to? Sanders himself saw Paul's reaction to be essentially confused.³⁶ But James Dunn argued that the new perspective shed light on Paul's theology by allowing us to see that its polemical thrust was directed not against the idea of achieving God's acceptance by the merit of personal achievement (good works), but against the Jewish intention to safeguard the privilege of covenant status from being dissipated or contaminated by non-Jews. Paul was reacting primarily against the exclusivism which he himself had previously fought to maintain. In particular, he was reacting against the conviction (shared by most other Christian Jews) that 'works of the law', such as (or particularly) circumcision and laws of clean and unclean, continued to prescribe the terms of covenant relationship for Gentiles as well as Jews. It was in and from this conflict that Paul's doctrine of justification by faith alone achieved its classic expression (Gal. 2:1–21).³⁷

THE ONGOING DEBATE

The contours of the ongoing debate remain unclear. An overdue response to Sanders from German scholarship, from Friedrich Avemarie, observes that the rabbinic evidence is more mixed and argues that Sanders has pushed the covenant side of his 'covenantal nomism' too hard.³⁸ It has been more fully recognized that the language of 'justification' should be used in reference not only to the initial acceptance through faith but also to the final judgment. Also that the central Jewish idea of salvation, as a balance between divine initiative and human response, a status both received as a gift (election) and to be maintained (by doing God's will), is not