

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51740-9 - The Apostle Paul in the Jewish Imagination: A Study in Modern Jewish-Christian Relations

Daniel R. Langton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

Few Jews, historically speaking, have engaged with the first-century Apostle to the Gentiles. The modern period has witnessed a burgeoning interest, however, with treatments reflecting profound concerns about the nature of Jewish authenticity and the developing intercourse between Jews and Christians. In exploring these issues, Jewish commentators have presented Paul in a number of apparently contradictory ways. He is both a bridge and a barrier to interfaith harmony; both the founder of Christianity and a convert to it; both an anti-Jewish apostate and a fellow traveller on the path to Jewish self-understanding; and both the chief architect of the Judeo-Christian foundations of Western thought and their destroyer. The goal of the present volume is to outline and explain these aspects of the Jewish debate about Paul, as represented in the works of individual Jewish theologians, religious leaders, biblical scholars, artists, musicians, playwrights, novelists, philosophers, and psychoanalysts of the last 150 years.

We will begin with an account of the popular Jewish view of Paul, which is often understood to be derived from a premodern tradition of hostility towards the apostle and which regards him as the damnable inventor of Christianity and the ultimate cause of centuries of Jewish suffering.¹ Here it will be argued that claims for an ancient origin of this hostility have been exaggerated and that the real roots of modern popular Jewish antipathy lie in the apostle's association with much more recent sociocultural developments (Chapter one). At the heart of the study is an examination of the way in which Jewish religious leaders, theologians, and New Testament scholars have treated Paul, and in particular their focus on his background, his attitude towards the Law, the question of his originality, and his relationship to the Jewish Jesus. This will involve consideration of the apostle's place in the context of interfaith dialogue, where he is used both to encourage and to set the limits of understanding between Jews and Christians (Chapter two).² It will

¹ The brief survey of premodern contributors in Chapter one includes al-Mukammis, Kirkisani, Hadassi, Ibn Kammuna, Profiat Duran, and Isaac Troki, along with the notorious *Toledot Yeshu* (Story of Jesus).

² Chapter two includes Heinrich Graetz, Elijah Benamozegh, Kaufmann Kohler, Martin Buber, Leo Baeck, Abba Hillel Silver, Hyam Maccoby, Isaac Mayer Wise, Joseph Krauskopf, Claude Montefiore, Pinchas Lapide, and Mark Nanos.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51740-9 - The Apostle Paul in the Jewish Imagination: A Study in Modern Jewish-Christian Relations

Daniel R. Langton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

entail investigation of the disagreements between different Jewish constituencies in the post-Enlightenment world, and the way in which the Apostle to the Gentiles has been caught up in ideological battles concerning authority within Judaism (Chapter three).³ And it will draw attention to those radical thinkers who have seen parallels in Paul's theological struggles to their own search for Jewish meaning and who have come to regard him as a dialogical partner with whom they can meet the challenges facing the Judaism of their own day (Chapter four).⁴ Other kinds of Jewish intellectuals have also wrestled with the apostle. In the widely differing treatments of artists and literary figures, for example, can be found a common fascination with what has been described as the Judeo-Christian heritage and Paul's relation to it (Chapters five and six).⁵ Consideration will also be given to the humanistic discourses of philosophy and psychoanalysis, within which one can identify a Jewish interest in Paul manifested in a series of critiques of the place of religion in Western society (Chapters seven and eight).⁶

It is perhaps best to think of the book as a whistle stop tour of a select group of some of the most striking Jewish Pauline commentaries available, mainly, but by no means exclusively, from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Each of the thirty-nine thinkers was selected for having produced a dedicated, focused treatment of the apostle's life and legacy, rather than a tangential foray into some aspect of his teachings.⁷ Because it is impossible to introduce and contextualise all of them at this point (they encompass the ideological spectrum, from religious traditionalists to the antireligious), the *sitz im leben* or 'life setting' of each will be brought to bear at the appropriate moment. In contrast to earlier treatments of the subject, this study has little to say in terms of understanding Paul better, nor does it propose a blueprint for improving Jewish-Christian interfaith dialogue, nor can it offer a theological contribution to religious understanding.⁸ Instead, its aim is the more modest one of simply documenting the fitful emergence and uneven development of Jewish awareness of Paul in a variety of historical contexts. In

³ Chapter three includes Emil Hirsch, Claude Montefiore (again), Joseph Klausner, Micah Berdichevsky, Hans Joachim Schoeps, Samuel Sandmel, Alan Segal, Pamela Eisenbaum, Tal Ilan, Amy-Jill Levine, Paul Levertoff, Sanford Mills, and Joseph Shulam.

⁴ Chapter four includes Hugh Schonfield, Richard Rubenstein, Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer, and Daniel Boyarin.

⁵ Chapter five includes Felix Mendelssohn, Ludwig Meidner, and Franz Werfel. Chapter six includes Sholem Asch and Samuel Sandmel (again).

⁶ Chapter seven includes Baruch Spinoza, Lev Shestov, and Jacob Taubes. Chapter eight includes Sigmund Freud and Hanns Sachs.

⁷ There are some important exceptions, such as Spinoza and Freud, who are included for the somewhat arbitrary reason that they are exceptionally influential thinkers for Western civilisation whose original views on Paul have gone largely unnoticed. The figure of thirty-nine is by no means exhaustive of Jewish commentators on Paul but provides a useful sample. At the same time, one must take with a pinch of salt the 'balance' of a survey that gives almost equal space to Zionist, anti-Zionist, Orthodox, Reform, Messianic, feminist, and historically and theologically oriented Jewish views.

⁸ For an overview of previous surveys of Jewish Pauline scholarship, see the conclusion to Chapter two.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51740-9 - The Apostle Paul in the Jewish Imagination: A Study in Modern Jewish-Christian Relations

Daniel R. Langton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

3

particular, it investigates the roles that ideology has played in generating the many different Jewish interpretations. As a result, the reader will learn a good deal more about the complex and shifting nature of Jewish identity in the modern world than about the first-century founding figure of Christianity.

The remainder of this Introduction will be mainly concerned with theoretical and methodological issues such as the impact of ideology and identity upon scholarship and the problem of defining 'Jewishness'. It will also provide a brief overview of the complicated relationship between Christian and Jewish Pauline studies. The impatient reader is advised to skip ahead to Chapter 1, where the Jewish commentary begins and where an historical outline of the phenomenon is offered.

PAUL AND THE LANDSCAPE OF JEWISH THOUGHT

What kind of insights into the world of Jewish thought might the reader hope to obtain from a study of Jewish attitudes towards Paul? At one level, the macro level, it will be argued that the very existence of a body of Jewish interpretations of Paul is best explained by reference to the Jewish historical confrontation with modernity. In particular, following the political and legal emancipation of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, great pressure was brought to bear on Jews to justify themselves to a hostile Christian world which regarded their emergence from the ghettos with suspicion. At the same time, their increased exposure to alien modes of thought provoked a wide variety of internal debates and responses, ranging from a rejection of modernity and all it stood for to a passionate embrace of all that was unfamiliar and an abandonment of tradition. More urgently than ever before, Western Jews found themselves forced to take a stand on many complex issues as part of a process of defining themselves in relation to the surrounding Gentile social and intellectual environments. These issues included, amongst others, how to relate to Christianity, whether or not to maintain religious practices that ensured social segregation, whether to stress universalist or particularist tendencies within Judaism, and how to counter the vastly increased threats of conversion and assimilation. In this situation it should come as no surprise that, for some Jews at least, the attempt to relate themselves to Christian history and culture brought them face to face with the iconic Apostle to the Gentiles who so powerfully embodied these very same issues. To study Jewish approaches to Paul, then, is to study some of the most profound forces acting upon and shaping the modern Jewish ideological landscape.

On another level, the micro level, it will be argued that when it comes to understanding *individual* Jewish interpretations of Paul, the *individual's* historical and social contexts, and especially his or her ideological perspective, will often provide the key explanatory factors. The reason is simple enough, having to do with the paucity and notorious complexity of the evidence upon which scholarly conclusions about events and ideas dating back two thousand years must be based, and the natural inclination to fill in the gaps according to one's particular biases. Jews who

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51740-9 - The Apostle Paul in the Jewish Imagination: A Study in Modern Jewish-Christian Relations

Daniel R. Langton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

dedicated themselves to the examination of the life and teachings of the apostle believed that they offered fair and objective accounts, whatever conclusions they reached. But along with the Christian scholars whose historical researches antedated them, they have frequently deceived themselves on this account. The number of conflicting interpretations and theories that have accrued over the centuries is impressive, and it would be a brave soul who sought to explain the discrepancies and variations within Pauline studies without reference to the profound impact of ideological bias and scholarly fashions.⁹ It is not only the dearth of evidence that allows so much room for intellectual manoeuvring. The fact that Paul himself is a towering figure whose indisputable millennia-old influence upon Western civilisation is, in modern times at least, as likely to be reviled as it is honoured, also means that passions run high and that scholarly objectivity is that much more elusive. In the context of the study of Jewish interpretations of Paul, the reader should expect to encounter, again and again, echoes of Jewish ideological developments in a variety of historical backgrounds. Thus this study reflects many of the intra-Jewish conflicts which arose within the community concerning, among other things, whether or not to attempt to modernise religious traditions and to try to reconcile traditional authorities with the findings of biblical criticism, whether or not to champion a shared Judeo-Christian heritage or to challenge Christian political authority, and whether to abandon or augment Judaism in the light of a plethora of -isms including Zionist nationalism, existentialism, pluralism, and feminism.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN IDENTITY, IDEOLOGY, AND SCHOLARSHIP

Much has been written on the relationship between identity, ideology, and scholarship.¹⁰ Here, 'ideology' is defined somewhat loosely as a body of ideas that

⁹ For a study of reception history which highlights developments in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century approaches to New Testament studies brought about by changes in the wider sociocultural and international spheres, see John K. Riches, *A Century of New Testament Study* (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 1993). For a survey specifically focusing on the ideological interplay among commentators on Paul, and one which includes the classic formulations of Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and Wesley in addition to twentieth-century scholars, see Stephen Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The 'Lutheran' Paul and His Critics* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2004). For a brief introduction to the variety of contemporary scholarly approaches to Paul, which include Jewish, feminist, and liberationist perspectives alongside a renewed interest in the Pauline letters as Holy Writ or as studies in rhetoric, all of which produce quite different ways of thinking about the apostle to the Gentiles, see Ben Witherington, 'Contemporary Perspectives on Paul', in James D. G. Dunn, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to St Paul* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

¹⁰ Ideological scholarship that seeks to redress power differentials between social groups (defined in terms of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or sexuality) falls under the rubric of 'identity politics'. In the context of the study of religion, for example, see the collection of essays in Jose Ignacio Cabezon and Sheila Greeve Davaney, eds., *Identity and the Politics of Scholarship in the Study of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2004).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51740-9 - The Apostle Paul in the Jewish Imagination: A Study in Modern Jewish-Christian Relations

Daniel R. Langton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

5

reflect the political or social needs and aspirations of individuals, groups, and cultures. Very often an ideology can be characterised in terms of a conscious programme for change, although not always. It might even be thought of as the institutionalisation of a worldview. Examples of different types of ideologies might include Zionist nationalism (political), Orthodox Judaism (religious), and Jewish feminism (gender), though one should bear in mind that these subcategories are not absolute or exclusive. 'Identity' is another amorphous, imprecise concept. In practice, an individual's identity is usually described in terms of race, nationality, ethnicity, culture, religion, gender, and/or sex. It is not always easy to differentiate between an ideology and an individual's identity. Which category should be applied to describe an Orthodox Jewish Zionist feminist, for example? For our purposes, it does not make much difference. Insofar as a scholar is firmly located in a specific time, place, and social setting, and insofar as such systems of belief and constraints encourage certain interpretations of evidence and preclude others, it follows that ideology and identity will almost certainly have some impact upon the scholar's writings, whether consciously acknowledged or not. There is nothing remarkable about this observation. Historians have been trained for generations to allow for different kinds of biases in their sources, and today no academic domain has been left untouched by the winds of postmodernism and religious pluralism, which emphasise the subjectivity of knowledge itself. The rise of Cultural Studies, with its interest in the relation between sociopolitical power and cultural practices such as scholarship, and its privileging of the local and relative over the universal and absolute, is testimony to the widespread recognition of such issues. Few today would admit to being indifferent to the dangers of failing to recognise multiple ideological perspectives or 'truths' concerning any object of study.

In this book, considerable emphasis has been placed on the ways in which individuals' self-identity, ideology, and cultural context have shaped their worldview in general, and their ideas about Paul, Judaism, and Christianity in particular. For those interested in Jewish history and thought, Jewish commentaries on the Apostle to the Gentiles represent a rich source of information about the kinds of anxieties implicit in nineteenth- and twentieth-century discussions concerning the nature of the Jew and Judaism. Paul becomes a familiar figure in debates about how far one should extend the hand of interfaith friendship to Christianity, what distinguishes Judaism from other faiths, and where the borderline between spiritual exploration and apostasy lies. Such debates about Paul and Jewishness provide useful insight into the world of Jewish ideology and identity, and for historians, theologians, and cultural critics this kind of study is to be regarded as an end in itself. For Pauline scholars, however, it might be regarded more usefully as an extended work of historiography, a survey of the intellectual currents that have shaped the modern Jewish study of early Christian origins and Paul's place within it. For them, ideology is less the object of study and more a potential threat to the furtherance of knowledge. As they would see it, Paul himself is of greater

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51740-9 - The Apostle Paul in the Jewish Imagination: A Study in Modern Jewish-Christian Relations

Daniel R. Langton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

interest than the biases bedevilling the scholars who study him. In this context, one particular question about the relationship between scholarship, identity, and ideology has been raised by several Jewish Pauline scholars, and merits further consideration here.¹¹

It has been argued that although religious identity and ideology are significant factors in terms of explaining nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Jewish views on Paul, this is less true of later commentators. One suggestion is that scholars have become increasingly aware of their own prejudices and intellectual constraints, and, as professionals, have sought to take these into account.¹² Another is that the religious identity of modern Pauline scholars has been largely irrelevant since the 1950s, since when the wide variety of Jewish ideological perspectives among New Testament scholars has meant that there is little or no predictive value in knowing whether or not a scholar is Jewish.¹³ Either way, support is found in the historical observation that circumstances have improved since the days when the prevailing conditions provoked ideological apologetics or polemics:

Where . . . scholars within a particular religious tradition have not enjoyed the benefit of commonly agreed-upon scholarly standards among people of diverse perspectives, or where a religious perspective has been either threatened or persecuted, or, conversely, has gone unchallenged by other views, religious identity is more likely to be predictable, and apologetics rather than scholarship are more likely to prevail.¹⁴

Such circumstances, the proponents of this view suggest, were more characteristic of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries than of the second half of the twentieth century onwards. Although in the past many Jews were precluded from

¹¹ Two scholars in particular are relevant to this debate. See Alan Segal, 'Paul's Religious Experience in the Eyes of Jewish Scholars', in David Capes, April D. DeConick, Helen K. Bond, and Troy A. Miller, eds., *Israel's God and Rebecca's Children: Essays in Honor of Larry W. Hurtado and Alan F. Segal* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), 321–44; the French version includes an expanded conclusion: Alan Segal, 'Paul et ses exégètes juifs contemporains', *Recherche de science religieuse* 94:3 (2006), 413–41; and Pamela Eisenbaum, 'Following in the Footnotes of the Apostle Paul', in Jose Ignacio Cabezon and Shelia Greeve Davaney, eds., *Identity and the Politics of Scholarship in the Study of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2004), 77–97.

¹² Segal observes, 'Reading the earlier [Jewish] treatments of Paul, one is struck by how much they tell us about the predicament of modern Jewish life and how little they tell us about Paul. Of the most recent discussants, one is struck about how professional they are.' Segal, 'Paul's Religious Experience in the Eyes of Jewish Scholars', 322. He also writes, 'Jewish scholars writing on Paul have progressed from expressing more general intellectual issues and problems in modern Jewish identity to more professionally disciplined NT agenda.' Segal, 'Paul et ses exégètes juifs contemporains', 437.

¹³ Eisenbaum's argument is that because one can no longer speak of a single Jewish perspective, but rather must speak of multiple perspectives among Jewish scholars, the Jewishness of a scholar is effectively meaningless in terms of predicting how it will affect his scholarly judgement. '[T]here is no essential Jewish perspective on Paul if by Jewish we mean a dominant perspective on Paul, developed, articulated, and widely shared by Jewish scholars. . . . [T]he recognition that there can be multiple perspectives among Jewish scholars only bolsters my argument that there is no single Jewish perspective and therefore that religious identity does not determine one's scholarly judgement in any predictable way.' Eisenbaum, 'Following in the Footnotes of the Apostle Paul', 91–2, 93.

¹⁴ Eisenbaum, 'Following in the Footnotes of the Apostle Paul', 78.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51740-9 - The Apostle Paul in the Jewish Imagination: A Study in Modern Jewish-Christian Relations

Daniel R. Langton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

7

university education and suffered social deprivation and persecution, and although Christians were once untrained in rabbinic thought and their religious prejudices went unchallenged, this is no longer true to the same extent today. Nowadays, the professionalisation of the academic study of Christian origins means that standards are largely agreed upon, few groups are threatened, and no one ideological perspective is believed to hold a monopoly on truth. One's identity as an outsider need no longer preclude one's expertise in the study of any particular religious tradition. In principle at least, a Christian who has access to the necessary tools, resources, and training can be as good a specialist in Jewish studies as any Jew (and *vice versa*), and one's religious perspective by no means automatically determines one's conclusions. From this point of view, of course, any attempt to try to present an overview of the history of Jewish commentary on Paul primarily in terms of Jewish identity or ideology will appear too deterministic or simplistic.¹⁵

At first sight it seems reasonable to agree that Jewish religious identity and ideology play a less obvious role in modern New Testament scholarship than they did in the past. But the claim that Jewish students of the New Testament have de-Judaised themselves (at least to the extent of refusing to allow their Jewishness to interfere with their professional judgement) is problematic on several counts. After all, one can make a distinction between approaches which express an explicit ideological, polemical agenda, and approaches which eschew such hostile activities but which are nonetheless shaped by those particular worldviews. This difference between stronger and weaker manifestations of an individual's identity means that it is logically possible to speak of a Jewish perspective without implying, for example, an overtly anti-Christian one. In addition, historical scholarship can be too easily caricatured as the practice of uncovering a universally true understanding of the past that will be acknowledged by all neutral observers who are given the time and resources to examine properly the evidence. Although our collective knowledge of the past grows all the time, serious differences in the interpretation of the facts remain. No doubt this is partly due to the inherent complexity of the task of trying to reconstruct a comprehensive understanding of the past from fragmentary remains, but it also suggests that knowledge is not neutral and that

¹⁵ On balance, Eisenbaum is critical of what she describes as 'the deterministic view of the relationship between identity and scholarship'. She points out that although on one level she is an outsider in the sense that she is a Jewish scholar of Christian texts, nevertheless on other levels she is an insider: first, the New Testament period was a period when the boundaries between Jews and Christians had not yet been established and therefore the identity of the authors is actually ambiguous; and second, within scholarly circles, she regards herself as an equal to her Christian colleagues, because the quality of the argument is based on scholarly criteria and not religious affiliation. Eisenbaum, 'Following in the Footnotes of the Apostle Paul', 80–81. Segal agrees with Eisenbaum, noting, 'It is certainly correct to see ideological considerations in the earlier and self-acclaimed spokespersons for the Jewish community . . . [who] have explicit agendas which speak to Jewish life, Jewish authenticity, Jewish law in modernity, marginality, and support for the state of Israel, among others. But are all Jewish interpreters of Paul involved in the same apologetic?' Segal, 'Paul et ses exégètes juifs contemporains', 438–9.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51740-9 - The Apostle Paul in the Jewish Imagination: A Study in Modern Jewish-Christian Relations

Daniel R. Langton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

identity and ideology can play a crucial role in the process. (For some scholars who have internalised the idea of the subjectivity of knowledge, one viable response is to write from their own specific perspective, offering no pretence of neutrality.)¹⁶ In any case, it is by no means self-evident that professional Pauline scholars share an agreed-upon consensus concerning the kinds of questions to be asked and the nature and limits of academic enquiry.¹⁷ The second claim – that it is in fact the diversity of Jewish perspectives that make Jewish identity irrelevant in terms of predicting an individual's scholarly conclusions – should also be treated with caution. For although the undoubted phenomenon of Jewish ideological fragmentation implies that any talk of *a* Jewish perspective is largely redundant, it is by no means self-evident why the variety or kinds of Jewish identity or ideology should therefore be disregarded, as if they cannot determine an individual's research agenda and its paradigms and framework assumptions, to a significant extent.¹⁸ In which case, Jewish identity *does* matter.

It is hoped that the following chapters will convince the reader that, as explanatory factors, ideology and identity remain as useful for making sense of the Jewish engagement with Paul today as they did for the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the period covered by the bulk of this work. In the end, the proof of the

¹⁶ Segal distinguishes between a work of 'disinterested scholarship' and 'a memoir and an exercise in ideology', which is how he regards Daniel Boyarin's *A Radical Jew*, for example. Although he accepts that 'either path is possible, although they may demand different skills and be directed at different audiences and towards entirely different purposes', it is clear that Segal's sympathies lie with the scholarly pursuit of historical truth, or the 'technical study of the NT', rather than in seeking 'to interest a sympathetic audience with ideology' or offering 'social criticism [from with]in the Jewish community'. Segal, 'Paul's Religious Experience in the Eyes of Jewish Scholars', 342–3. Another way of putting this is to say that Segal stresses the difference between scholars who study Paul for his own sake and 'scholars who turn to Paul to illustrate their theories on other, more properly Jewish subjects.' Segal, 'Paul et ses exégètes juifs contemporains', 439.

¹⁷ Eisenbaum holds up modern Pauline scholarship in order to illustrate that 'inside a broad scholarly arena, one with commonly agreed-upon scholarly standards but that also encompasses a diversity of perspectives, personal religious identity is not determinative of scholarly opinion.' Eisenbaum, 'Following in the Footnotes of the Apostle Paul', 78. But Eisenbaum's 'diversity of perspectives' is composed mainly of liberals and secularists. Segal is more interested in the 'professionalisation' of New Testament scholarship, by which he appears to mean the refusal to offer a value judgement; he maintains that none 'of the more professionally trained scholars attribute any error to Paul or to the Jewish community.' Segal, 'Paul et ses exégètes juifs contemporains', 439. Arguably, Segal's examples have simply offered analyses of what Paul or his contemporaries believed rather than value-laden judgements on the religious veracity or utility or historical legacy of such views, and there is nothing wrong with this. But nor is there any obvious reason that scholarship should be defined exclusively in this way or that a study that included or was even motivated by a strongly held appreciation or condemnation of Pauline thought need be regarded as necessarily unprofessional.

¹⁸ Eisenbaum admits as much. 'Some might argue that the diversity of perspective seen among [modern Jewish Pauline scholars] . . . is due to the different brands of Judaism they represent. . . . I think their individual orientations towards Judaism probably [do] influence them in some way or other. . . .' Although she believes that the shackles of religious (specifically, Jewish) identity and ideology have been largely cast off, nevertheless she does not doubt for a moment the 'perspectival nature of all knowledge.' Eisenbaum, 'Following in the Footnotes of the Apostle Paul', 77, 93–4.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51740-9 - The Apostle Paul in the Jewish Imagination: A Study in Modern Jewish-Christian Relations

Daniel R. Langton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

9

pudding will be in the eating. We will certainly meet contemporaries whose Jewish self-identity and personal ideological programmes appear to have influenced the choice of Paul as a subject of study, the questions asked of his theology, and the assumptions brought to bear in establishing his place in history. Not infrequently, their influence will also be apparent in a strongly held appreciation or condemnation of the apostle in general. We will also see the relevance of Jewish identity and ideology for understanding the reception and perception of the individual's work by others. One has little difficulty in imagining any number of research topics for which a thinker's identity, whether Jew or Greek, bond or free, male or female, would be regarded as irrelevant. But in the light of the history of Jewish-Christian relations, it is a little naïve to think that an individual's Jewish identity could be dismissed as inconsequential when the focus of debate is Paul. The subject is too highly charged for too many Jews and Christians, both within the scholarly community and outside in the wider world.

All this having been said, it is important to stress that a focus on the identity and ideological biases of Jewish Pauline commentators should not be interpreted as an attack on the standard of scholarship discussed. It is logically consistent to speak of bias without doing violence to a researcher's reputation. Good scholarship is characterised by competence in interpreting the evidence as fully as possible in the light of historical knowledge, willingness to follow wherever the evidence leads, coherence and plausibility of argument, independence of mind, and critical awareness of the constraints imposed by the scholarly standards of the day and one's own cultural setting. But one should never forget that the passage of time, the paucity of evidence, and the influence of identity and ideology do mean that whatever scholarly image we have now of Paul is one 'we see through a glass, darkly'. More than that: as we shall discover, the figure who stares back through the glass is very often a reflection in a mirror, however much we might like to think otherwise.

THE PROBLEM OF DEFINING 'JEWISHNESS'

This book is an exploration of the place of the apostle Paul in the Jewish imagination, that is, a study of Jewish interest in Paul. How, precisely, should one understand the term 'Jewish'? When it comes to defining Jewish identity or 'Jewishness' in a systematic way, one's assumptions play a major role. One tendency, not uncommon among theologians, is to essentialise by classifying people and phenomena as Jewish only in so far as they conform to an assumed essence of a normative Jewishness. This essence may or may not be related to theologically derived criteria such as matrilineal descent, conversion to a particular tradition or set of beliefs, adherence to a certain body of law, or a role in salvation history, or to nontheological criteria such as racial, national, or cultural characteristics. From

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51740-9 - The Apostle Paul in the Jewish Imagination: A Study in Modern Jewish-Christian Relations

Daniel R. Langton

Excerpt

[More information](#)

this perspective, responsibility for determining Jewish authenticity rests entirely with the observer, irrespective of whether his views originate from within the community or from outside. For the essentialist, anything or anyone who does not correspond to the given definition is to be excluded as marginal at best and deviant at worst. One might imagine a core of authenticity surrounded by concentric circles of ever decreasing legitimacy. The problem, of course, is that observers do not agree on what exactly constitutes the core of authenticity. Which definition is to be regarded as authoritative depends upon one's existing biases. Furthermore, proponents of essentialism do not tend to recognise the historically conditioned nature of such definitions and often assume that the characteristics of Jewish authenticity have remained fundamentally unchanged down through the ages.¹⁹

An alternative method of categorisation is that of 'self-definition', the approved method for many social scientists and historians. This nonessentialist approach does not predetermine the outer limits of Jewishness and so 'deviancy' and 'marginality' are terms free of negative connotations. The inclusion of those who define themselves Jewishly can lead to political controversies, such as the acceptance of Messianic Jews despite their dismissal as Christians-by-another-name by a broad spectrum of the Jewish community. But the advantage of a self-definitional approach is that it largely frees the observer from the responsibility for selection and minimises the projection onto the subject of his own ideological biases. For some, 'self-definition' implies that the individual defines himself *primarily* in Jewish terms, but this need not be the case. Arguably, an individual can possess a self-image that includes a Jewish *component*, however he defines it. This is an important point, especially in the context of intercultural studies which take for granted overlapping or hierarchical identities. Nor should one forget that an individual's self-image evolves and transforms in real time and changes according to social context. The self-definitional approach is commonly used because it attempts to accommodate the complex, shifting reality of Jewish identity.²⁰

Unfortunately, 'self-definition' excludes many who do not appear to see themselves in Jewish terms and yet who live lives and produce works that strike the sensitive observer as inexplicable without reference to a Jewish dimension of some sort. Celebrated examples include the seventeenth-century philosopher Baruch Spinoza and the nineteenth-century composer Felix Mendelssohn. A work of monumental Jewish scholarship such as the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* will include such problematic individuals because of its working principle that 'anyone born a Jew' is qualified for inclusion, even if he later converted or disassociated himself

¹⁹ For a powerful critique of the essentialising tendency, see Laurence J. Silberstein, *Mapping Jewish Identities* (New York: New York University Press, 2000).

²⁰ For a survey of the changing understandings of Jewishness, especially in the ancient world, see Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).