

New Creation in Paul's Letters and Thought

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CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	page xi
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	xiii
1 Introduction: the current debate	1
PART I	
NEW CREATION: CENTRAL JEWISH TEXTS	
2 New creation in the Jewish Scriptures: an overview	11
3 New creation in apocalyptic Judaism: <i>Jubilees</i>	26
4 New creation in Diaspora Judaism: <i>Joseph and Aseneth</i>	54
PART II	
FROM DEATH TO LIFE: NEW CREATION IN THE CONTOURS OF PAUL'S THOUGHT	
5 From death to life: insights from cultural anthropology	79
6 Newness of life: Romans 6.1–11	91
7 Newness of the Spirit: Romans 7.1–6	104
8 Spirit, newness, life: the Pauline antecedents	113
9 Crucified with Christ: Galatians 2.19–20	123

PART III

**THE OLD AND THE NEW: NEW CREATION IN THE
CONTEXT OF PAUL'S LETTERS**

10	If anyone be in Christ: 2 Corinthians 5.17	133
11	Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision: Galatians 6.15	188
12	Summary and conclusions	233
	<i>References</i>	242
	<i>Index of passages cited</i>	268
	<i>Index of modern authors</i>	287

1

INTRODUCTION

The current debate

The biblical story, from beginning to end, can rightly be described as an epic of *new creation*. As its prologue opens with Elohim's creation of heaven and earth, so its epilogue closes with the dramatic appearance of the new heaven and the new earth – a place where sorrow and death are no more, and where the dwelling place of God is with his people. *Creatio originalis* gives way to *creatio nova* as the one seated upon the throne announces, “Behold, I make all things new!” (Rev. 21.5). But this grand inclusio, while hopeful in its preface and jubilant in its finale, brackets a history of *tohu wabohu*. As early as Genesis 3 the battle lines are firmly fixed. The creature has shunned the creator, the creation groans in bondage to decay (Gen. 3.17–18; Rom. 8.19–22), and posterity is left with a legacy of despair: “O Adam,” laments Ezra, “what have you done? For though it was you who sinned, the fall was not yours alone” (4 Ezra 7.117; cf. Rom. 5.12–21). But before we let *Heilsgeschichte* degenerate into *Angstgeschichte*, it is worth recalling that the biblical story is a drama of *redemption*. And while the plot is not without its twists and turns, it does reach a fitting and moving climax in the passion narratives.

The motif of “new creation,” however, is not confined to the opening and closing chapters of the Christian Scriptures. The prophets, the psalmists, the evangelists, and so on, all exhibit a robust faith in the creative activity of God, and this faith was not focused solely on the remote past or the distant future. The prayer of the penitent sinner that God would “create a pure heart, and grant a new spirit” (Ps. 51.10), as well as the bold declaration of the prophet that Yahweh was, even now, “making something new” (Isa. 43.18), reflect a deep-seated belief in the continuing new-creative work of God, and form part of the vibrant, if variegated, biblical witness to *new creation*.¹

¹ Cf. Ps. 104.29–30; Matt. 19.28; John 3.1–8; Acts 3.21; Rom. 6.4; 2 Cor. 4.16; Eph. 2.15; 4.23–24; Titus 3.5; 2 Pet. 3.13.

The scope of this present study, however, is far more modest than this sweeping summary of Scripture and salvation-history might suggest. The primary focus of this monograph is the motif of “new creation” as it is found in Paul’s letters, specifically the meaning of *καινή κτίσις* in 2 Corinthians 5.17 and Galatians 6.15. This short, two-word expression admits of several interpretations, and I will simplify and synthesize these under the headings Creature, Creation, and Community.

New creature

Any historical survey of Paul’s new-creation motif would have to grant pride of place to the anthropological interpretation “If anyone is in Christ, that person is a new creation.” This reading finds support in Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Jerome, Augustine, and many others.² The comments on these passages from the Greek fathers, as collected by Karl Staab,³ show no deviation from this pattern, and here Paul’s terse phraseology is regularly expanded to make this reading more apparent. Compare, for instance, the illuminating emendations of Severian (fourth–fifth century) and Oecumenius (sixth century):⁴

2 Corinthians 5.17	Severian
εἴ τις ἐν Χριστῷ, καινή κτίσις	εἴ τις ἐν Χριστῷ ζῆ καὶ βαπτίζεται οὗτος καινή ἐστι κτίσις
Galatians 6.15	Oecumenius
οὔτε γὰρ περιτομή τί ἐστιν οὔτε ἀκρόβυστία ἀλλὰ καινή κτίσις	πάντες γὰρ οἱ τε ἠμπερίτομοι καὶ ἀκρόβυστοι πιστεύοντες καινή κτίσις γεγόναμεν

The commentaries of Calvin and Luther, along with Luther’s translation of the Bible, perpetuated an anthropological reading of *καινή κτίσις*, which was the standard interpretation of the great German theologians and monographs of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁵ Reference to

² Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 3.8; 5.5; Tertullian, *On Modesty* 6; *Against Marcion* 4.1.6; 4.11.9; 5.4.3; 5.12.6; Jerome, *To Oceanus*; Augustine, *On the Baptism of Infants* 1.44; *Reply to Faustus* 11.1; 19.10; *Grace and Free Will* 20; *Sermons* 26.12; 212.1. But cf. Tertullian, *On Fasting* 14.2; Clement, *To the Greeks* 11; *The Rich Man’s Salvation* 12.

³ Staab (1933).

⁴ See also Didymus of Alexandria on 2 Corinthians 5.17 in Staab (1933: 29).

⁵ E.g., B. Weiss (1882: 463–64; first edition, 1868), Pfeiderer (1877: 207–8; first edition, 1873), Gunkel (1979: 104, 110–11; first edition, 1888), Deissmann (1892: 108), Holtzmann (1911: 66, 165, 225, 305; first edition, 1897), Bousset (1970: 241; first edition 1910), Schlatter (1922: 327; first edition, 1910), Schweitzer (1931: 15–17, 119; first edition, 1930).

a specific Jewish background to this idea was rarely made by these authors, though Adolf von Harnack is an important exception. In a study entitled “Die Terminologie der Wiedergeburt und verwandter Erlebnisse in der ältesten Kirche” (1918), von Harnack treated *καινή κτίσις* with other renewal terminology (*παλιγγενεσία*, *ἀναγεννάω*, etc.), and suggested that Paul was using a traditional rabbinic motif unfamiliar to his readers. According to von Harnack, while the rabbinic notion of a “new creature” referred only to the new situation of the proselyte,⁶ this subtlety was lost on the Corinthians and Galatians, who understood Paul literally: in Christ they had been newly created.⁷

Von Harnack’s contribution is important for at least two reasons. First, while others had made the connection with the rabbinic material before him,⁸ von Harnack made it crucial for the interpretation of Paul’s terminology. This shifted the discussion away from the related soteriological symbolism of Paul’s letters, which had dominated the analyses of, for example, Pfeleiderer, B. Weiss, and Holtzmann, and placed all the emphasis on understanding the Jewish context of Paul’s thought. Second, von Harnack’s admirable attempt to take Paul *seriously* without taking him *literally* brought out the larger theological dilemma implicit in Paul’s language. Von Harnack’s forensic interpretation of Paul’s new-creation motif stood in stark contrast to the ontological interpretation of his contemporaries, and labored to preserve Paul’s indicative–imperative dialectic, which the alternative view threatened to undermine. It has the disadvantage, however, of tacitly acknowledging that if Paul had intended what von Harnack believes he did, one would never know it from what the apostle wrote.

The anthropological interpretation of Paul’s new-creation motif was certainly the dominant view of commentaries and monographs through the post-World War II era, and many of its supporters will be mentioned in the following pages. The seeds of its demise, however, were sown by von Harnack himself. In anchoring this motif so firmly in the (then) prevailing consensus regarding the socio-religious context of the pre-Christian Paul, von Harnack’s interpretation was destined to be only as convincing as the Jewish background he assumed. As the one has fallen, so has the other, as the quest for the historical Paul moved steadily forward.

⁶ The rabbinic material is collected by Strack and Billerbeck (1924–26) and treated in conjunction with the “new birth” imagery of John 3.3 (vol. II, 421–23; cf. vol. III, 519) and painstakingly analyzed by Sjöberg (1950).

⁷ Von Harnack, (1918: 106–8).

⁸ Most notably J. B. Lightfoot in his commentary on Galatians, first published in 1865.

New creation

In 1935 R. H. Strachan's commentary on 2 Corinthians appeared, and his interpretation of 2 Corinthians 5.17 would prove to be a harbinger of the exegesis of subsequent generations. Making reference to Paul's "apocalyptic thinking, which represents Jewish cosmology," Strachan argues that Paul adopts "the language of current Jewish thinking," and so defines ἐν Χριστῷ in 2 Corinthians 5.17 as "being in a 'new world,' a 'new creation.'"⁹ Applying this to both 2 Corinthians 5.17 and Galatians 6.15, Strachan defines καινή κτίσις soterio-cosmologically as the advent of the new age: "There is a new creation whenever a man comes to be in Christ."¹⁰

The rise of the "apocalyptic Paul," however, is inevitably associated with Ernst Käsemann, who endeavored to demonstrate that apocalyptic was truly "die Mutter der christlichen Theologie." In his comments on Romans 4.16–17, Käsemann describes justification as "the restitution of creation," which he takes to be "the decisive motif of Paul's soteriology,"¹¹ and it is through Käsemannian lenses that many interpret Paul today. To be sure, the (soterio-)anthropological interpretation of Paul's new-creation motif was only gradually dislodged from its position of preeminence, and still has important proponents,¹² yet the clear trend of recent monographs and commentaries is toward a soterio-cosmological interpretation of καινή κτίσις,¹³ and this is largely the triumph of one historical background over another.

New community

Ernst Käsemann's exegetical agenda was, to some extent, a response to the theological program of his teacher, Rudolf Bultmann, and Paul's new-creation motif has often been caught in the cross-fire of this great debate.¹⁴ Regrettable though it may be, John Reumann is probably correct in noting that translating καινή κτίσις as "new creature" versus "new creation," "is precisely a point at issue in interpreting Paul."¹⁵ Yet Käsemann's cosmological horizon is not the only interpretive option for those wishing to

⁹ Strachan (1935: 113–14).

¹⁰ Strachan's translation of 2 Corinthians 5.17 (1935: 113).

¹¹ Käsemann (1980: 123). ¹² E.g., Thrall (1994), Witherington (1995, 1998).

¹³ See the doctoral dissertations of Aymer, and Hoover; the commentaries of Barnett, Cousar, Dunn, Furnish, R. P. Martin, and Martyn; the recent *New Testament Theology* of Caird (1994: 161); and the literature cited in chapters 10 and 11.

¹⁴ Cf. H.-J. Kraus (1964), Reumann (1973: 8–15), Mell (1989: 2–7), G. Schneider (1992: 368–70).

¹⁵ Reumann (1973: 14).

avoid an alleged anthropological narrowing of Paul's gospel. An increased awareness of corporate themes in Paul's letters has given rise to the view that *καινή κτίσις* in Galatians 6.15 expresses a "Gemeindewirklichkeit," and that Paul's new-creation motif speaks of a new community.¹⁶ While this recent position trails far behind the other two in number of supporters, it has found an important advocate in Wolfgang Kraus.¹⁷ Kraus argues that Paul derived this theme from Isaiah 66.18–23, where cosmos and community are seamlessly joined in the eschatological vision of the prophet: "As the new heavens and the new earth that I make [will] endure before me," declares the LORD, "so will your name and descendants endure" (Isa. 66.22).

While far from comprehensive, this introductory survey outlines in broad strokes the contours of the current debate. The critical consensus today regards early Jewish apocalyptic as the theological matrix from which Paul derived his new-creation motif, and some have gone so far as to designate *καινή κτίσις* a *terminus technicus* of apocalyptically oriented Judaism.¹⁸ Moreover, this *traditionsgeschichtliche* background is assumed by almost every recent discussion of this motif, even by proponents of an anthropological interpretation, who argue that Paul has radically modified its original cosmological dimensions.¹⁹ The resulting soterio-cosmological reading of *καινή κτίσις* understands this phrase as a pregnant allusion to the advent of the new age, and it is this position that will be critically appraised in the following pages.

Method and sources

While there is still room for argument concerning the precise meaning of Paul's elusive *καινή κτίσις*, all would agree that the correct approach to the problem is via the well-trodden path of the history-of-traditions methodology. The governing assumption of this school of thought is that every idea has its prehistory, and the key to understanding significant ideas is to discern and trace their historical development. In this scenario, knowing the Jewish context of the pre-Christian Paul is absolutely critical, in that this alone provides the definitive point of reference for understanding the apostle's subsequent thought and terminology.

While not questioning the basic soundness of this approach, when applied to Paul's new-creation motif it has almost always resulted in

¹⁶ Citing W. Kraus (1996: 251). Similarly Klaiber (1982: 97–101).

¹⁷ W. Kraus (1996: esp. 247–52).

¹⁸ So Stuhlmacher (1967: 1), Mell (1989: 254) and now Adams (2000: 227).

¹⁹ E.g., Baumgarten (1975), Aune (1993: 32–33).

a circular exegesis, in which the key to this idea is discovered, not surprisingly, in the prevailing consensus regarding the socio-religious background of the apostle. Paul's new-creation motif has been explained with reference to Hellenistic mystery religions,²⁰ rabbinic literature,²¹ Qumran,²² and apocalyptic,²³ and if none of these fully persuade, Peter Stuhlmacher's article on the subject offers a magisterial compromise: "Wir müssen Paulus aus einer zwischen apokalyptisch-essenischer und hellenistisch-jüdischer Denkweise vermittelnden Zwischenposition heraus zu begreifen suchen."²⁴

The history-of-traditions approach to *καινή κτίσις* reaches its apex in the work of Ulrich Mell, who discerns (divines?) numerous specific lines of development of this motif from (so-called) Deutero-Isaiah into the literature of Second Temple Judaism. More comment will be offered on Mell's contribution at the close of this study; its strengths and weaknesses are succinctly expressed in Jerome Murphy-O'Connor's review:

It is a classical German doctorate thesis, predictable in method, complicated in argument, and one-sided in documentation. Over half the book (257 pages) is devoted to a detailed examination of every known mention of new creation from Deutero-Isaiah to the tannaitic rabbis and the hellenistic synagogues of the Diaspora. This is done with exemplary care and in itself is a most useful compilation. Its irrelevance to the elucidation of Galatians 6.15 and 2 Corinthians 5.17 is underlined by the meagerness of M[ell]'s conclusions.²⁵

Murphy-O'Connor's criticism may be overstated, but it does highlight the pitfalls of the methodology Mell has chosen: it forces the exegete to concentrate on secondary sources, leaving much of the primary source material (Paul's letters) untouched. Yet for all Mell's apparent comprehensiveness, it is nonetheless stunning that he focuses solely on the Isaianic oracles in his examination of new creation in the Jewish Scriptures, while also ignoring the anthropological new-creation texts of, for example, *Jubilees* and *1 Enoch*. This prejudicial selectivity not only affects Mell's conclusions, it was probably the *function* of

²⁰ Reitzenstein (1910: 192–99), H. A. A. Kennedy (1913: 220). While not stated explicitly, this derivation is implied in the writings of Bousset, Pfeleiderer, and others of the history of religions school.

²¹ In addition to numerous commentaries, see Strack and Billerbeck (1926: 519), W. D. Davies (1955: 119–23), Schwantes (1963: 26–31), Reumann (1973: 96–97).

²² Kuhn (1966: 120–23), Stuhlmacher (1967: 8–10); cf. Sekki (1989: 221–23).

²³ E.g., Furnish (1984), Martyn (1985), Barclay (1988), Mell (1989), etc.

²⁴ Stuhlmacher (1967: 20). ²⁵ Murphy-O'Connor (1991b: 150).

these (predetermined?) conclusions, and further illustrates the *de facto* circularity of this approach.

The following analysis will proceed on the assumption that the primary context for explicating Paul's new-creation motif is the letters of the apostle Paul.²⁶ While there is no need to replicate the wide-ranging *traditionsgeschichtliche* analyses of Mell and his predecessor Gerhard Schneider,²⁷ there is a pressing need to improve on their approach to this important Jewish background material. Rather than offering a superficial examination of isolated texts, this study will select two important works of Second Temple Judaism and attempt to understand the motif of new creation as it functions in the argument, strategy, and literary structure of these books. Rather than positing complex and imaginative lines of development which are neither verifiable nor falsifiable, my goal is simply to compare Paul's new-creation motif with two of his Second Temple counterparts. This cannot be done by examining brief extracts of these works, but through understanding the work as a whole and relating new creation to the dominant themes of the work in question.²⁸

After surveying the motif of new creation in Jewish Scriptures, I will focus attention on the book of *Jubilees* and the book of *Joseph and Aseneth*.²⁹ Representing both Palestinian and Diaspora Judaism, the former is the work most often used to explicate Paul's new-creation motif, while the latter is the work least often used. Because I will be critically interacting with the conventional wisdom regarding the connection between Paul's new-creation motif and that of apocalyptic Judaism, it is important that I examine the strongest possible link in the proposed history-of-traditions chain. Of the apocalyptic works usually cited in reference to 2 Corinthians 5.17 and Galatians 6.15, *Jubilees* lies in closest chronological proximity to Paul, and is the only work where the precise phrase "new creation" occurs *twice*. While *Joseph and Aseneth* is not often noted in the commentaries on 2 Corinthians 5.17 and Galatians 6.15,³⁰ its

²⁶ Although the argument of this monograph could be supported by considering the evidence of Ephesians and Colossians, my conclusions will be based only on the undisputed letters of Paul.

²⁷ G. Schneider (1959).

²⁸ The error of Taylor (1958), Rey (1966), and Gloer (1996) must also be avoided, who all but ignore the relevant Jewish background material.

²⁹ Material from Qumran and the Rabbis could be marshaled in support of the following argument, though I will have to leave these to one side in order to evaluate adequately the dominant "apocalyptic" view of contemporary scholarship. The difficulties inherent in using rabbinic texts to illustrate NT material are widely accepted, and the "dunklen Stellen" from Qumran (Baumgarten's term [1975: 165]) are fraught with interpretive and textual problems.

³⁰ But see Furnish (1984) and Thrall (1994).

elaborate description of Aseneth's re-creation contains striking parallels to prominent themes in Paul's letters, and deserves more than the passing reference it occasionally receives.

Following this analysis of select Jewish material (part I), I will then try to understand "new creation" in the contours of Paul's thought (part II) and the context of his letters (part III). In keeping with my methodological critique of previous work on this subject, the bulk of the study will be devoted to an in-depth examination of "new creation" in the letters of Paul.