

## Paul: Fresh Perspectives

By N.T. Wright (SPCK, 2005)

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### *Part I* THEMES

#### 1. Paul's World, Paul's Legacy

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##### 1. The Three Worlds of Paul

Paul straddled three worlds:

- The world of **Judaism**

Second Temple Judaism was struggling with such questions as what it meant to be part of God's people, to be loyal to Torah, to maintain Jewish identity in the face of pagan pressures and to await God's coming kingdom.

- The world of **Greek/Hellenistic culture**

Greek was everyone's second language, like English today. Paul was also at home with Greek rhetorical style.

- The world of the **Roman Empire**

This was the political sphere. Paul was a Roman citizen, with all its privileges. But he viewed Christ's lordship as challenging that of Caesar.

To these three we must add...

- The world of the **church**

It is essentially the ongoing story of *creation* and *covenant*. Jesus' death and resurrection bring the story to a head in new creation and new covenant.

The *narrative* dimensions of Paul's thought are important. An allusion to, say, the exodus, Abraham or the exile is meant to trigger the wider associations of that story—this was the style of his day. Paul saw himself to be living in the radical extension of the OT story triggered by the resurrection of Jesus, and that story colours his treatment of topics like the law and justification. So in Romans 4 (Abraham) Paul has the whole Genesis 15 story in mind; he is not just using Abraham as a handy illustration.

##### 2. Fighting over Paul's Legacy: Perspectives Old, New and Different

Huge strides have been made in the last 200 years in Pauline studies, especially re history, theology, exegesis and contemporary relevance. All writers on Paul seem to have some axe or other to grind. All agree, however, that the Reformers didn't have the last word on the meaning of his writings.

Things have gone full circle in terms of opinions on Pauline authorship. Many expressed doubts, for example, that Paul was the author of Ephesians and Colossians. Not many would agree with them today.

There has been a false dichotomy, too, between seeing his letters as situational, 'occasional' writings and seeing them as, at least in part, statements of systematic theology. We should not drive a wedge between the two.

#### 2. Creation and Covenant

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##### 1. Creation and Covenant in the Old Testament

These two themes were central to Paul's outlook. They are commonly joined in the OT. E.g.

- *Psalm 19* devotes half to each, v1-6 being praise to God for his creative power and v7-14 praising him for his covenant law.
- *Psalm 74*. Israel, battered by their enemies, appeal to the creator God to act on their behalf, to exercise in their interests now the same power that brought order out of chaos at the beginning.
- *Genesis* follows a similar pattern. Abraham (covenant) has been raised up to solve the problems that followed Adam (creation).
- *Deuteronomy* brings the two themes together in respect of the Land. If people keep the covenant law, their fields will be fruitful. There are many other OT examples.

The creator God is the covenant God and vice versa. The covenant is there to solve the problems in creation: through Israel God will solve the world's problems, bringing justice and salvation. And creation is invoked to solve the problems within the covenant: when Israel is in trouble they appeal to the powerful creator-God.

These twin themes are summed up in the phrase *tsedaqah elohim*: the 'righteousness' or 'justice' or 'covenant faithfulness' of God. And its NT equivalent: *dikaionē theou*. No single English word is sufficient to convey the full meaning of it. It 'springs not from some abstract ideal but from the creator's obligation to the creation and from the covenant God's obligation to be faithful to his promises.'

## 2. Paul: Three Central Passages

...in which the themes of creation and covenant sit side-by-side—though the words themselves may not necessarily occur.

### Colossians 1:15-20

I believe Paul wrote Colossians.

This is the famous poem about Christ's supremacy. It falls into two halves. He is, first, the agent of creation then, second, the one through whom the redeeming, covenant God has reconciled things to himself. Jesus is the one through whom both creation and covenant redemption have come about.

### 1 Corinthians 15

This is an appeal to Genesis 1-3 in the light of the events concerning Jesus.

All will be made alive in Jesus—new creation, contrasting with the original creation of Adam, in whom all died. That original creation, marked by sin and death, had been put to rights (the covenant promises) through the Messiah.

God's fulfilment of the covenant promises has established creation's renewal.

### Romans 1-11

God's goodness in creation calls all people to account for their wilful sinfulness. Israel, who were meant to be a light to the nations, have instead become part of the problem: as sinful as the rest. How then can God remain faithful to his covenant and just in his dealings with the whole of creation? God has unveiled his 'righteousness' in Jesus, the true Israelite, through whom he has established a new people where all are welcomed on equal terms.

Chapter 4 brings creation and covenant together. It deals with Abraham, through whom God made the covenant in the first place, and which is now fulfilled in Jesus. Abraham's faith, described in 4:18-21, is the reversal of humanity's unbelief spelled out in chapter 1. And that impinges on the creation theme: by the power of the creator-God Abraham is enabled to have a son.

Jesus achieved what the covenant was put in place to do. But where does this leave the law, which was such a key element of the covenant? Chapter 7 spells out its effect in consigning everyone to sin, followed in chapter 8 by Paul's great piece of creation theology, where the whole creation is liberated (exodus terminology) from its bondage to decay.

Chapter 9 begins a treatment of 'the righteousness of God'—how his covenant justice has been expressed. Paul explains in 10:6-10 (expounding Deut 30) how covenant renewal has come about through Christ, resulting not in the

return of Jews to Israel but of salvation for all people throughout the earth. The whole world has become the Holy Land. Saved human beings are the firstfruits of redeemed creation.

Chapter 11 ends on a triumphant creation note: praise to the one from whom are all things.

In all the above passages Paul moves from creation to new creation and from covenant to renewed covenant. Both fulfilment and surprising renewal are the constant themes that Paul develops.

### 3. Evil and Grace, Plight and Solution

God's solution to what went wrong involved starting a family and promising them a land—indicating his purpose of mending the fractures in relationships between people, and between people and the material world.

Man's insistence on refusal to worship God and insistence on worshipping some substitute is idolatry, and it guarantees his corruption and death, as well as the bondage of the material world. It is the *sarx* ('flesh') problem central to Paul's theology. That problem is Israel's as well as everyone else's. Israel made the Law itself an idol, a claim to national privilege.

There are three propositions that Paul everywhere presupposes:

1. 'God made the covenant with Abraham as the means of dealing with evil within the good creation, which meant dealing in particular with evil within human beings, God's image-bearers.
2. The family of Abraham, who themselves share in the evil, as well as in the image-bearing vocation, of the rest of humanity, treated their vocation to be the light of the world as indicating exclusive privilege. This was their own meta-sin, their own second-order form of idolatry, compounding the basic forms they already shared with the Gentiles. This further point is basic to Paul's critique of Israel in such passages as Romans 2, 7 and 10 and Galatians 2, 3 and 4.
3. When God fulfils the covenant through the death and resurrection of Jesus and the gift of the Spirit, thereby revealing his faithful covenant justice and his ultimate purpose of new creation, this has the effect *both* of fulfilling the original covenant purpose (thus dealing with sin and procuring forgiveness) *and* of enabling Abraham's family to be the worldwide Jew-plus-Gentile people it was always intended to be. Indeed, when we rightly understand the matter, we shall see that from Paul's perspective at least these two effects were so closely aligned with one another that they not only could be spoken of in the same breath but demanded to be thought of as the same thought.'

Paul has an integrated vision of (1) *human* sin and redemption, and (2) *Israel's* fall and restoration. The must not be separated, controlled as they are by his twin themes of creation and covenant. The 'righteousness of God' is about how the creator God can be true to creation and how the covenant God can be true to the covenant—which are not two things but one. And it is grace that achieves it.

### 4. Conclusion: Jesus within Creation and Covenant

For Paul, the questions raised by Psalms 19 and 74 (mentioned in the opening section) have been dealt with through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

## 3. Messiah and Apocalyptic

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### 1. Introduction

This is the second pair of themes around which Paul's thought was organised. (It is helpful, whenever we read in Paul 'Jesus *Christ*' to read it as 'Jesus *the Messiah*'). Paul told the Corinthians he wanted to know nothing among them except 'Jesus the Messiah and him crucified' (1 Cor 2:1-2). He saw Jesus as indeed the Messiah promised to Israel.

'Apocalyptic' has been used with varying emphases. I use it in a sense fully compatible with the idea of covenant, where the two notions are mutually reinforcing.

### 2. Jesus as Messiah in Paul

Second Temple Judaism's expectations, which Paul shared, can be summarised in six points:

- He will be a *royal* Messiah. This figure is Israel's true king, and since Israel is the people of the one creator-God, also the world's true Lord.
- He will *successfully fight Israel's great and ultimate battle* against the forces of evil and paganism.
- He will *build the Temple*, to which Israel's God will at last return and live.
- He will *bring Israel's history to its climax*, fulfilling the Messianic prophecies and ushering in the prophesied new world.
- He will act in all this as *Israel's representative*.
- He will act as *God's representative* (or agent) to Israel and hence to the world.

All these are implicit in Paul's use of *Christos*.

Messiahship is key in Romans. 1:3-4 sets the tone for the whole letter with a mention of Messiah as David's descendant; near the end, too, is a quote of Isaiah's ref to 'the Root of Jesse'. Then 9:5 says that 'of their [the Jewish] race is the Messiah'. This is key in the Romans 9-11 section. Note also 10:4, which says, 'the Messiah is the end (Gk *telos*) of the law'—where *telos* is well translated 'climax'.

In Galatians (chs 3-4) the moment of maturity at the end of the story of Israel is described in terms of the coming of the Messiah.

In 1 Cor 15, without using the actual word 'Messiah', Paul draws on OT messianic texts (Pss 8, 110) to show how Messiah has won the great battle, which has been now redefined. There are echoes of this battle theme in Col 2:14-15.

Paul's use of *Christos* is sometimes *incorporative*—referring to those who are 'in' him, i.e. who belong to the people who are summed up 'in him'. Romans 6-8, for example.

When Paul uses *pistis Christou* (literally 'the faith of Christ' but often questionably translated 'faith *in* Christ') he normally means the *faithfulness of the Messiah* to the purposes of God. In this, Jesus is the true Israelite who succeeds in living God's way when all the others failed, enabling God to remain true to his covenant.

Paul also calls Jesus God's 'son', reflecting the Messianic use of that term in, e.g., Ps 2, 2 Sam 7, Ps 89. But the meaning of it expands to Trinitarian levels.

Paul saw Jesus, then, as the true Messiah promised to Israel—and through them to the world. Some scholars have missed this by mistakenly seeing Paul's mission to the Gentiles as drawing him away from Jewish themes like Messiahship. Or they have created a false dichotomy between Messiahship as 'political' and the 'religious' or 'spiritual' role of Jesus, a distinction absent from Paul's thinking and drawn more from the age of the Reformers.

### 3. Apocalyptic in Paul

Apocalyptic is a literary genre and by definition an 'unveiling' of things otherwise kept hidden, especially the plan of God. In Second Temple tradition it 'represents what happens to prophecy under certain historical and theological circumstances, notably continued oppression and the puzzle of what God is going to do about it and how.'

Some scholars (wrongly) have seen it as a divine breaking-in that pushed the aside the idea of covenant and the gradual working of God and brought something totally new: Becker, Martyn and Käsemann.

Paul's use of 'mystery' points to the 'unveiling' that God has done in Christ (Eph 3:8-11). The great apocalypse has already come about in the events surrounding the Messiah, Jesus. Those events, one could say, are the apocalyptic 'vision', and Paul is in the role of the traditional 'angel', explaining their meaning: how the covenantal plan has been worked out. See Romans 1:17—'God's righteousness is *revealed*' (*apokalyptetai*), i.e. his faithfulness to his covenant plan.

Notice Paul's quasi-apocalyptic retelling of the story of Israel from Abraham to the present in Romans 4, and more fully in chapters 9-10. 'Paul believes *both* that the covenant promises were at last fulfilled *and* that this constituted a massive and dramatic irruption into the processes of world history unlike anything before or since.'

What of the future? Paul's was an *inaugurated eschatology*. He looked for an ultimate 'coming' of Christ. It will be his *parousia*, i.e. his 'royal presence', when the veil between earth and heaven ('overlapping and interlocking

dimensions') is removed. It is described in 1 Thes 4, with its evocation of Daniel 7 and the revelation or apocalypse on Mount Sinai.

Some of Paul's statements commonly applied to that event probably do not refer to it at all but to the coming judgment of AD 70, e.g. 1 Thes 2:16.

## 4. Gospel and Empire

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### 1. Introduction

The categories mentioned above—creation, covenant, Messiahship, apocalyptic—all reflect Paul's Jewish frame of thought. Now we turn to how he articulated his message in subversion of the ideology of the Roman Empire.

In preparation for looking at this:

- We must not attribute to Paul our received view of a left-right political spectrum, which dates from the Enlightenment rather than Second Temple Judaism.
- We must recognise that modern distinctions between theology, science, religion and politics did not exist in Paul's day.
- We must allow the existence of echoes and allusions, both political and biblical, behind explicit statements.

### 2. Caesar's Empire and Its Ideology

At Paul's conversion the Roman Empire as such was only two generations old. It boasted of the benefits—the *euangelion*, 'good news'—it had brought: freedom, justice, peace and salvation (Augustus was hailed as 'saviour' for rescuing Rome from civil strife and external enemies). Poets and historians were constructing a new narrative of empire, of which Rome was the climax.

The emperor-cult was growing fast in Paul's world, the eastern Mediterranean, with the emperors calling themselves 'son of god'. Cities like Corinth and Ephesus were strongly into this.

Into this setting Paul declared another 'good news': that Jesus, crucified by the Romans, had been raised from death and was the world's true Lord.

### 3. Jewish Critique of Pagan Empire

The Jews had had lots of experience of living under pagan empires. The prophets had condemned these empires as enemies of God's people, even though God made use of them for his own ends. Jeremiah had told the exiles to settle down in Babylon and seek its welfare while living there. God will punish these empires for their ill-treatment of Israel, but at the same time God wants order, not chaos, and his people must learn to live under them, though without compromise.

The writings of Second Temple Judaism—e.g. the *Wisdom of Solomon* and some Qumran texts—picked up both themes. After AD 70 such writing tried to explain, as well as lament, what was happening, and to promise a future vindication of the Jews.

### 4. Paul's Counter-Imperial Theology

Paul approached his situation from the point of view of the four themes mentioned above:

- *Creation*. God was responsible for the whole world and would one day put it right.
- *Covenant*. God would rescue his people from pagan oppression.
- *Messiahship*. Jesus was King, Lord and Saviour, and every knee would bow to him.
- *Apocalyptic*. God had unveiled his saving justice in the death and resurrection of the Messiah.

For Paul, then, Jesus is Lord and Caesar is not (and Acts 17:7 shows that that's how his message came over). If Jesus is Israel's Messiah—and the resurrection says he is—he is also the world's true Lord (because Israel's purpose had always been to reach the whole world).

In line with his Jewish pedigree, Paul expressed an essentially Jewish political theology: he critiqued the pagan power of Rome but also spelled out the duty of God's people when living under its rule (Rom 13, Col 1, 1 Tim 2). In Acts, Paul himself submits to the courts but is also ready to remind them of their business and call them to account when they overstep their duty.

We will look at some key passages:

**Philippians.** In **3:20-21** Paul is drawing strongly on imperial keywords, while also using Jewish categories: the citizenship of heaven, drawn from Daniel, where the 'God of heaven' is sovereign over human kingdoms. Jesus reigns from there as 'Saviour' and 'Lord'—both Caesar-titles—and will one day come to finish the job.

In **3:17** Paul asks the Philippians to imitate himself by holding lightly onto their status as loyal subjects of Rome and be prepared to hail Jesus, not Caesar, as Lord—and if necessary to suffer for it.

His famous poem in **2:5-11** has been shown to have many verbal connections with the imperial ideology: Caesar had been a servant of the state, winning military victories, providing funds for public works etc., and as a result he is now hailed as lord and trusted in as saviour.

- Paul is drawing on Isaiah 40-55 (e.g. 45:23 and 49:7), a classic passage on the critique of pagan empire.
- He is identifying Jesus as *Kyrios*, 'Lord'—a term used in the LXX of Yahweh himself, as Paul knew.
- In speaking of 'the death of the cross' he is giving new significance to a well-known symbol, the cross. It had symbolised Caesar's might; now it spoke of God's love in Jesus.
- In v12, in inviting them to 'work out their salvation' he is urging them to transfer to Christian living the attentive effort demanded of them by the Roman state.

**Thessalonians.** As we have seen, **1 Thes 4** is based on the metaphor of the emperor's visiting a city in his empire.

Then in **1 Thes 5** we have the phrase 'peace and security' (v3)—a clear reference to the promises of the state to its citizens. It is almost a definition of the *sotēria* ('salvation') it offered, a kind of global protection racket, and Paul mocks it as a hollow sham.

**Corinthians.** Corinth in Paul's day prided itself on being more Roman than Rome itself. **Ch 15** describes how Jesus will eventually have all things under his feet—including the likes of Rome. In **Ch 2** Paul says that the rulers of this age would not have crucified Jesus if they had known the wisdom of God.

**Galatians.** Paul shows in **Ch 4** Christ spells the end of the rule of the *stoicheia*, the 'tutelary deities of the nations'. Behind Galatians is the question whether the church was seen as a sect of Judaism, and thus exempt from taking part in emperor-worship. This was already the case in Corinth, but there was so far no such ruling in Galatia, which may be one reason why the 'circumcision party' were so insistent.

**Romans.** The introduction to the letter in **Ch 1** contains a large number of apparently counter-imperial signals that would have been obvious to readers at the time. The risen Jesus calls the whole world to the 'obedience of faith' that rises above the loyalty demanded by Caesar. Hints continue throughout the letter.

Things become more explicit in **13:1-7**. On this, notice:

- It belongs with the end of ch 12. Private vengeance is forbidden; lawful authorities are there to handle disputes.
- Earthly rulers are accountable to the one true God—which reduces them to a lower place than they would themselves have claimed.
- Being a Christian does not legitimise revolution or civil disobedience. While Jesus is ultimate Lord, believers are not thereby exempted from due regard for temporary authorities.

## 5. Conclusion

The existence of frequent echoes of imperial rhetoric in Paul's letters is beyond question.

## **Part II**

# **STRUCTURES**

## **5. Rethinking God**

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### **1. Introduction**

This is about the ‘shape’ of Paul’s theology, which must start with classic Jewish theology—a neglected aspect of OT studies. Its main components are *monotheism, election and eschatology*: one God, one people of God, and one future for God’s world.

Paul redefines these components around the Messiah and the Spirit. He roots each of the three in a re-reading of Israel’s Scriptures. As he does so, his polemical target is not Judaism but paganism. And he gives expression to them in declaring the gospel to the world, and in building up the churches.

### **2. Monotheism: The Jewish Roots**

There were variations on monotheism in Paul’s day, as there are now. His was a *creational and covenantal* monotheism: the one God of Israel made the world and remains in dynamic relationship with it, and in order to further his world purposes he has entered into covenant with Israel in particular.

This monotheism has a particular view of evil and how God will in the end deal with it. And it ranges itself against paganism in all its forms, which was marked by idolatry and immorality, especially as expressed in the great empires, with Babylon as the archetype and, in Paul’s day, Rome as the current expression.

Paul remained a monotheist of this classic Jewish kind.

### **3. Monotheism and Christology**

Paul argues from this basic monotheism in passages like Romans 3 and Galatians 3. But then he begins to redefine it—with Jesus at the centre.

**Romans 10:5-13.** Here Paul quotes Deut 30, which he reads as laying out a historical programme that Israel was going to follow, with the curse of exile to follow disobedience and restoration from exile if they obeyed the Law, which God would put in their very hearts. Many Jewish writers of the time (e.g. Baruch) saw the restoration as not yet having happened.

Paul reads it as having happened now *in the Messiah*. He takes the LXX’s *Kyrios* and applies it to Jesus, redefining his monotheism to embrace him.

**Phil 2:6-11.** Following his sufferings, ‘Jesus is now exalted to the position of supreme honour, sharing the glory that the one God will not share with another, *because* he has done what only the one God can do.’ Paul quotes Isaiah 45:23, one of the OT’s most strongly monotheistic passages, knowing full well what he is doing in referring it to Jesus.

**1 Cor 8:6.** We Christians, Paul is saying (in the context of eating pagan food etc.) are Jewish-style monotheists, not pagan polytheists. He hints very strongly at the Shema of Deut 6:4, which in the LXX is *kyrios ho theos hēmon, kyrios heis estin* and puts Jesus right in the middle of it. It is an ‘explosive redefinition of the Shema’.

**Col 1:15-20.** Paul’s statement, modelled carefully on Proverbs 8 and Genesis 1, names Jesus as God’s agent in all that he does, the role of Wisdom in Prov 8. Paul’s use of ‘Son of God’ is significant. In Judaism it was chiefly a reference to angels, but Paul sees its roots in two other uses: Israel as God’s son (Ex 4:22 etc.) and the Messiah as ‘son of God’ in 2 Sam 7:14, Ps 2:7 and Ps 89:27.

God sending Messiah, and God coming himself to do the job, are intertwined in Paul’s usage. He seems to have settled for ‘father’ to refer to God the creator and ‘son’ for Jesus not just as God’s messianic agent for Israel and the world but of God’s second self, his ultimate self-expression as a human being.

The *cross*, representing Christ’s death, is central to all Paul’s theology. In Rom 3:21-26 it is this that reveals ‘the righteousness of God’—his faithfulness to his promise and his ultimate justice.



## 4. Monotheism and the Spirit

Two great passages redefine monotheism in terms of Jesus and the Spirit together.

**Gal 4:1-7.** Israel were kept under the babysitter, the Law, until the time came when Abraham's universal family would be revealed. Now, those who believe are 'sons', endowed with the Spirit. Paul shows God to be the God who sends the Son and the Spirit of the Son. Behind all this is exodus vocabulary: Israel kept under pagan dominion in Egypt until the time of the release from slavery.

**Romans 8.** Here again is exodus language. Here, though, the Spirit takes the place of the Shekinah glory of the tabernacle, leading the people to the promised land, which is the renewed creation. The Spirit given to believers now is the 'guarantee' of the larger harvest to come, the firstfruits. In v3-4 the Spirit enables them to do what the Torah could not accomplish.

Other references to the Son and Spirit together redefining Jewish monotheism are found throughout Paul's letters: Rom 10:13; Rom 2:25-29; 2 Cor 3 etc.

Paul's evangelism was the message that God had made himself known in a crucified Jew, who had been raised from the dead and was the world's true Lord—a crazily radical message for his times. It was by the Spirit alone that such a strange message could be accepted: people could only say 'Jesus is Lord' by the Spirit (1 Cor 12:3). The message came to Thessalonica in the Spirit's power (1 Thes 1:5).

**Eph 1:13-14.** This is a *berakah*, a prayer of blessing to the one God for his mighty acts in creation and redemption. He has done all this 'in Christ', i.e. 'in the Messiah' (5x).

## 5. Scriptural Roots, Pagan Targets, Practical Work

These are the three contexts in which Paul's redefined monotheism was worked out.

**Israel's Scriptures.** The fresh revelation in Christ of God's covenant faithfulness is 'apart from Torah, though Torah and the prophets bear witness to it' (Rom 3:21). Those OT Scriptures—gathered round Israel's story—are there to give us encouragement and hope (Rom 15:4).

In Rom 9-10 Paul tells Israel's story, showing how God has indeed restored the fortunes of his people in a dramatic new way through the Messiah and the Spirit. Contemporary Jewish retellings of that story focused on the Law as almost the personification of God. Some scholars have said that Paul puts Messiah and the Spirit in its place, but this is too extreme. Paul retains a clear and positive view of the Law (Rom 7), even when it is performing a negative task, but it can't give the life it promised; only Christ and the Spirit can bring that about.

**Pagan targets.** Paul's targets were the pagan deities, systems and behaviour patterns of his day. These were sham, unreal gods who could still enslave people but not save them. Thus the Thessalonians had 'turned to God from idols' (1 Thes 1:9-10) in response to the gospel. The 'principalities and powers', whatever these were, had been defeated by Jesus.

Paul was pragmatic in feeling free to affirm and reuse certain elements of paganism, taking every thought captive to obey the Messiah (2 Cor 10:5). He saw the need for the world to be ruled in an orderly way, even though pagans may be the ones doing it (Rom 13:1-7; Col 1:15-20). Confrontation does not mean dualism.

We see all this worked out in Paul's Athens speech in Acts 17:22-31 (an extremely compressed summary, no doubt). He can speak approvingly, for example, of an altar to an Unknown God and quote the pagan poet Aratus, while at the same time sweep away the whole tradition of temples and images for which Athens was famous. He also calls the highest courts in the land to be answerable at last to the court over which the risen Jesus will preside.

**Practical work.** How did Paul's redefined monotheism work itself out practically? Much social life of the day was ordered round allegiance to various pagan deities. Those who embraced the gospel formed new groupings and networks as Christians, which Paul must have known would be viewed by the authorities as subversive.

His views shaped his own prayer-life; note his many invocations in the name of God-and-Jesus. And it shaped his passionate commitment to sanctity—reflecting the Jewish call to holiness, but undergirded now by what Jesus had done, and energised by the Spirit. And it shaped his public preaching. The nature of his revelation was such that it could never be kept secret. And it led him to care for, in a particular way, the communities that sprang up in response, the churches.



## 6. Conclusion

Many of the above themes require further scholarly examination.

## 6. Reworking God's People

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### 1. Introduction

Rethinking the word 'God' required Paul also to rethink what it meant to be God's people.

His new understanding of God's people was not theoretical; it determined how he handled them in terms of oversight and pastoral care—hence the use of 'reworking' in this chapter rather than just 'rethinking'.

### 2. Election: Jewish Views of God's People

It was a central belief in the OT and in Second-Temple literature that Israel was the creator-God's chosen people. He had given them a land to live *in* and the Law to live *by*. He had chosen them purely out of love (Deu 7:8). Their annual stories were designed to celebrate and reinforce this belief, often in the teeth of contrary evidence like oppression by pagan nations.

What was God's purpose in choosing them? It was to resolve the problem of Adam, according to Genesis. Israel was chosen out of the world but also for the sake of the world. They would show the world the benefits of knowing the one true God, so that they would turn to him for themselves. To that end God gave them the Law. But the bearers of God's solution were themselves part of the problem. Nevertheless, God will fulfil his original purpose *through* Israel and the contingent purpose *for* Israel.

In Second Temple Judaism the Jews still believed that God would soon act to vindicate them by freeing them from their pagan oppressors.

### 3. Election Reshaped around Jesus

Paul reaffirmed Israel's election: Rom 9:4. God will be true to his original promises even though all humans, Israel included, may be false (Rom 3:1-4). Paul refers at length to Abraham, the father of the nation, in both Romans and Galatians, thus affirming Israel's election from the patriarchs onwards.

But election has been redefined. In **Galatians 2:11-21** is the dispute between Paul and Peter in Antioch: what does it mean, practically, to be a member of God's people? The discussion only makes sense if the community there had been living as in some sense as the renewed Israel, now having to decide whether or not uncircumcised Gentiles could be part of it. The question is, 'What does it mean to be a Jew?'

Then follows Paul's first ever statement of justification by faith, and it refers to how God's people have been redefined (v15-16). Note three important points:

- *Pistis Christou* is better translated 'the faithfulness of the Messiah' (the literal sense of the Greek) rather than 'faith in Christ'. It is his faithfulness to the divine plan for Israel.
- '*Justified*' is best seen, not as a statement about how someone becomes a Christian but as one about *who belongs to the people of God, and how you can tell that in the present*.
- '*Works of the Law*' are not the works required in order to *become* a member of God's people but the works you have to perform to *demonstrate that you are* a member.

The rest of the passage explains how this amazing redefinition of God's people has been effected through the Messiah, specifically through his death. If we revert to the Law, all we find is that it declares us to be sinners. Instead we are joined to Jesus—'crucified with Christ' (2:20) and risen with him to a new life defined not in terms of Jewish ethnicity but of Messiah's own resurrection life, in which people of all nations may share.

'If righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing' (v21). In context, 'righteousness' here can only refer to *one's status as a member of God's people*. It means 'covenant status' or 'covenant membership'. 'The doctrine of justification by faith was born into the world as the key doctrine underlying the *unity* of God's renewed people.'

Paul works this out in the following chapter (Gal 3). God has one family, not two, and it consists of all who believe the gospel. Faith, not the possession or practice of Torah, is their badge. He traces this principle all the way back to Abraham, to whom God promised a single family.

Then in Gal 6:14-16 Paul widens things out to embrace, not just a narrow Jewish field, but the whole of creation. God's purpose has always been that, *through* Israel, he would restore the whole cosmos. When a person is 'in Christ' there is 'new creation' (2 Cor 5:7)—not just in that one person's experience, but ultimately of the whole cosmos, of which that person is now a sample.

Paul rounds off Galatians by calling the one new family 'the Israel of God' (6:16). 'I cannot agree with those who have pleaded that "the Israel of God" in this verse denotes some subset of ethnic Judaism *over against* the people of God renewed in the Messiah. Paul has spent most of the letter explaining that God always intended to give Abraham a single family, and that he has now done so in the Messiah. It is special pleading, based shakily on a misreading of Romans 9-11, to suggest that "God's Israel" here is anything other than the renewed family, the Messiah and his people. It is of course a polemical redefinition. Paul has saved it as a final, crucial point with which to round off the letter.'

**Philippians 3.** 'The circumcision? That's us!' is what Paul is saying of believers in Christ (v3). The people of God has been redefined.

Paul then offers a mini-autobiography, in which he outlines the privileges and pride of status that were his as a Jew. The crown of the list is in v6: the status of *dikaiosynē*—covenant membership, defined by Torah. Instead he now enjoys a new covenant status (v9): 'the righteousness (*dikaiosynē*) that comes from God', which is based on faith.

In **1 Cor 10:1** Paul addresses a largely Gentile church, saying that 'our fathers' were under the cloud and went through the sea. This church, then, is part of the redefined Israel. It is the family rescued from Egypt, now transformed and expanded but still the same people. In v18 he contrasts this family with 'Israel according to the flesh', and in v32 says not to give offence 'to Jews, Greeks, or to the church of God'.

In **Eph 2-3** Paul describes how Gentiles, formerly excluded from the covenant, are now full and equal members of it. He has a similar message in **Col 2**.

**Romans.** This is where Paul's redefinition of God's people reaches its full height. In **ch 2** he examines the Jewish claim to special status based on election and the covenant. It is undermined by Israel's sins—he is not talking about every individual Jew but about the *national* boast that declares ethnic Israel as a whole to be inviolate. Through such a people God cannot reach the world at large.

Then he goes on to explore what it means to be circumcised. True circumcision is of the heart, not of the flesh, and the true Jew is a person who has received this (v28-29).

In **ch 3** Paul deals with how Israel's faithlessness has threatened God's elective purpose, and describes the solution God has found—remaining faithful to his purpose of election despite their faithlessness. In **v2-3**, 'entrusted' points to the fact that Israel was never called for its own sake but to be the light of the world. The Jews had been unfaithful to *this commission*, but God, in his *righteousness*, had remained faithful to his plan to save the world through them, even though they had become part of the problem. The solution has involved a redefinition of the people of God.

**Verses 21-26** show how 'God's covenant faithfulness is revealed, through the faithfulness of the Messiah, for the benefit of all who believe, Jew and Gentile alike.' Christ's faithfulness was his obedience (Rom 5:12-21; Phil 2:8) even to the point of death. 'The Messiah has done that for which Israel was chosen in the first place.' **Ch 4** goes on to affirm that the inclusion of the Gentiles had been God's plan from the start, and that from Abraham onwards faith was their defining mark.

How does justification by faith work?

In Rom 2 Paul shows how God's people are finally justified *on the basis of their whole life* (v5-11). This will take place at the end, with Messiah as judge. 'The point of justification *by faith* is that, as he insists in 3:26, it takes place *in the present time* as opposed to on the last day. It has to do with the questions, "Who now belongs to God's people?" and "How can you tell?" The answer is: all who believe in the gospel belong, and that is the only way you can tell... *Justification, for Paul, is a subset of election*, that is, it belongs as part of his doctrine of the people of God.'

This does not in any way take away from the need for sinners to put their faith in Christ. The point is that the *word* 'justification' does not itself *denote* the process by which, by grace, a person is brought from a place of unbelief to one of trust. Paul uses the word 'call', clearly and unambiguously, for that. "Those God called, he also justified" (Rom 8:30). In other words, those who hear the gospel and respond to it in faith are *then* declared by God to be his people, his elect, "the circumcision", "the Jews", "the Israel of God". They are given the status *dikaïos*, "righteous", "within the covenant".

The purpose of their call is not just for their personal benefit; it is that through them, and the new community they form, God's purpose to rescue the *whole world* might be advanced. They 'reign in life' (Rom 5:17), ruling God's new creation.

#### 4. Election Reworked around the Spirit

A key passage among the many relevant ones is **2 Cor 3**.

The contrast here is not between the Law itself and the gospel, nor between Moses and Jesus, but between the *hearers* of Moses and those who believe in Jesus. God's Spirit enables Paul and his converts to see in each other God's glory and thus be transformed.

Paul draws on Ezekiel 36 and Jeremiah 31 to describe the new dispensation that has come about, in which condemnation and death are replaced by vindication and righteousness—which now belong to the people being renewed by the Spirit.

Paul explores similar themes (without in every case explicitly mentioning covenant renewal) in Romans 7, Galatians 2 and 2 Corinthians 3. He touches on it, too, in Rom 8:5-8, where God's people are redefined by 'the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus'. Connected with this, in 1 Cor, are the concepts of the renewed temple (chs 3 and 6) and the body of the Messiah (ch 12).

A renewed call to *holiness* is central to Paul's theology of a people renewed through the Spirit. It is a heart-holiness, not a legalistic one. It is not even, 'Now you are saved, this is how to behave'. 'It is a matter of the genuine humanness envisaged as God's will for Israel being attained through the Spirit by God's renewed people.'

#### 5. Redefinition of Election Rooted in Scripture

Here we look at a major passage: Paul's treatment of the problem of Israel in **Romans 9-11**. The Messiah and the Spirit are hardly mentioned, but their presence and influence is everywhere presumed. The passage is a massive retelling of the OT narrative.

The point of 9:6-29 is that what has happened to Israel is what God always intended. The big question, posed in ch 10, is that if God has made Israel jealous by bringing in Gentiles to share the covenant privileges, what is now to happen to 'Israel according to the flesh'? Some have tried, wrongly, to argue from 11:25-26 that God has provided a separate, parallel way of salvation for Jews and Jews only. Are they not, after all, still 'beloved because of the patriarchs'?

Yes, but Paul's argument is a different one. 'The promise Paul holds out for at present unbelieving Jews is not that they are actually all right as they are, but *that they are not debarred, in virtue of their ethnic origin*, from coming back into the family, their own family, that has been renewed in the gospel.' They can be grafted back in *if they do not remain in unbelief*.

Today we tend to look at the issue in the light of our post-holocaust situation, over-sympathising with Jewish ethnic solidarity. Paul, by contrast, is looking at it in the light of the situation he suspected obtained in Rome, where people thought God had ditched the Jews completely and transferred their privileges to Gentiles only. Both miss the point.

#### 6. Conclusion

Paul never renounced 'the people of God'; instead, he redefined what that means: those who believe in the Messiah. All forms of supersessionism would have been unthinkable to him.

The church communities he established were to order their lives as those who can trace their origins to Abraham, the exodus, the Law (in its true fulfilment) and the prophets, standing out as children of light in a dark world.

## 7. Reimagining God's Future

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### 1. Introduction

Now we come to Paul's reworked eschatology. 'Reimagining' because he wished to lift his converts' eyes beyond the small horizons of their previous worldviews. God must act in the future to put things to rights.

### 2. Jewish Eschatology in the First Century

Second Isaiah and Daniel typically show how Israel's God is committed to the ultimate defeat of pagan idols and their devotees. When he does, that will be 'new creation'. It will be 'the day of Yahweh'. Second Temple Judaism regularly quoted the relevant OT passages.

The post-exilic prophets rejoiced at the degree of restoration that had taken place, while still lamenting the fact that God had not returned to his temple—the restoration was still somehow incomplete. A majority of Jews at the start of the NT period 'understood the time in which they were living as a long story still in search of an ending and...this story was often thematized as one of continuing exile, despite geographical return.'

Two OT passages were often quoted at the time: Deut 30 and Daniel 9.

**Deut 30** is part of a narrative about the blessings and curses of the covenant. God would bring his people back from exile if they turned to him. Jews of Paul's day saw this as not yet having happened in the true sense. Though in their own land, the people were still slaves (cf. Ezra 9:7; Neh 9:36ff)—and slaves need an exodus.

**Daniel 9.** Daniel, still in Babylon, enquires when the exile will be over. When will Jeremiah's 70 years be up? The answer: the exile will last, not just 70 years, but for seventy weeks of years—a kind of ultra-jubilee. Then details of the anointed prince etc. This prophecy was probed for clues in Paul's day, as to when the ultimate return from exile would take place.

It would be a new exodus. Thus pagan rulers should fear the fate that came on Pharaoh. God will come to his people to comfort and bless them. The resurrection of the dead is another theme that fits into the picture.

### 3. Eschatology Reimagined around the Messiah

Paul saw all this as having come to pass in the Messiah. He retains his Jewish perspective. God's own future has burst into the present, and Israel's future has at last come to pass. The complex Jewish eschatological expectations had found fulfilment in the events of Jesus. It was an inaugurated eschatology.

The still-future judgment will also take place through the Messiah, who will receive homage from the whole of creation, then hand over the kingdom to the Father so that God will be 'all in all'. Paul's main item of redefinition is that what Israel expected God to do for all his people at the end of time, God has done for the Messiah in the middle of time: resurrection, messiahship. Kingdom, too; the fact that he mentions it relatively little is because he takes it for granted. It is future (1 Cor 6:9) but already present (Rom 14:17).

The new exodus has been launched in the work of Jesus. He is the Passover lamb (1 Cor 5:7), and Gentile believers can talk about *their* ancestors being baptised into Moses (1 Cor 10). Romans 6-8 develops the whole exodus theme at length with relation to Christian believers.

For Paul, Israel's disobedience, and thus the 'exile' began with the arrival of Torah at Sinai. To be in exile is to be 'under the curse', as described in Galatians 3:10-14. The curse on Israel meant that the promises to all nations due to come *through* Israel had now got stuck. It is from this curse that the Messiah has redeemed us by becoming a curse for us. As a result, the blessing of Abraham can after all come to the Gentiles and, second, 'that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith'—the 'we' being ethnic Jews who, by believing, have their membership in God's people renewed.

And what of still-future eschatology based on the Messiah? 1 Thes 4:16-17 is crucial here. Paul reworks four aspects of Jewish eschatology round Jesus:

- The 'day of Yahweh', now 'the day of the Lord'—which for Paul did not necessarily indicate the end of the world. It could happen during the lifetime of his readers. Had he been around in AD 70 he would probably have said, 'This is it.'

- His *parousia*. Emperors might have their *parousia* moments but the ultimate one belonged to Jesus. 1 Thes 4 and 1 Cor 15 are central here. The vocabulary indicates, not our being taken away to heaven, but the King's arrival on earth to renew it and give us new bodies.
- His judgment, brought to the whole creation. Paul describes a 'works' judgment at the 'judgment seat of Christ'—of the Messiah, made in accordance with the entirety of a person's life. Paganism had no such concept, but Rome exercised ruthless judgments in the present which, Paul is saying, are not the last word.
- The renewal of all creation, paying homage to him. There is no dualism in Paul. Creation will not be rejected and abandoned, but fully renewed: 'one future for the one world made and loved by the one God'.

#### 4. Eschatology Reimagined around the Spirit

In Gal 4:6-7 Paul links the bringing together of Jew and Gentile in the church with the giving of the Spirit, by which they all call God '*Abba*'. The Spirit enables believers to live in accordance with the new age that has broken in. If they will live this way, the problems touched on in 1 Cor will sort themselves out.

The Spirit is the 'down payment' of what is to come (2 Cor 1:22; 5:5). In Gal 5 Paul makes clear that if we walk by the Spirit we are clearly already part of God's new age and his renewed people, delivered from the present evil age and 'not under law'. We are being put to rights in advance of that day when God will put everything to rights. Christian ethics is not living under a new law, it is living in the new age. We have not so much a new duty as a new destiny, a life of love (1 Cor 13).

'The Spirit is the path by which Paul traces the route from justification by faith in the present to justification, by the complete life lived, in the future.'

**Rom 8:12-30** is a key passage where the Spirit has redefined Jewish eschatology. 'The Spirit is...the one who conforms the Messiah's people to his suffering and glory, so that the Jewish expectation of the coming Messiah is fulfilled not just in the Messiah himself, but, extraordinarily, in his people as well.' Our ethical struggles are the start of our rule over the whole creation that the new world will bring.

The Spirit helps our praying, which is made difficult by the fact that we live in the overlap of the ages.

#### 5. Eschatology in Context

In his eschatology Paul remains in dialogue with both the OT itself and other first-century readings of it. Focusing on Jesus and the Spirit, he says, '*This is how the OT has been fulfilled.*'

He is clear that paganism is bankrupt and must at the end give account to God himself in Christ. Meanwhile, God's people, belonging as they do to the new age, can no longer live the way the pagans live.

The way Paul serviced the churches reflected his eschatological convictions. 'He exercised authority over the churches with that strange mixture of weakness and power, rooted in the death and resurrection of Jesus and energised by the Spirit, of which he writes so movingly in 2 Corinthians.'

#### 6. Conclusion

I have laid out in outline the Jewish doctrines and monotheism, election and eschatology as Paul would have known them and shown how he has refined them all around the twin poles of Messiah and the Spirit.

This thesis now raises three questions:

- What is the relation of Paul to Jesus?
- How did his actual practice embody the theology he expounded?
- How does this theology relate to the church today?

These I will now attempt to answer.

## 8. Jesus, Paul and the Task of the Church

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### 1. Introduction

A key issue, much discussed by scholars, is how Paul related to Jesus himself.

### 2. Jesus and Paul

Many have proposed that there is a mismatch between the teachings of Jesus and Paul: Jesus preached about God; Paul preached about Jesus. Jesus announced the kingdom of God; Paul announced the Messiahship of Jesus. Jesus called people to repentance, faith and Sermon-on-the-Mount living; Paul developed a complex theology of justification by faith.

This is unhelpful and the wrong approach. The relationship between Jesus and Paul was not that of a second-generation rabbi passing on his mentor's teachings. It was more like that of a composer and conductor, or an architect and builder. Jesus brought God's programme to a climax; Paul called people to recognise that and to live according to its implications in the new age that Christ had inaugurated.

**The kingdom of God.** Why does Jesus say so much, and Paul so little, about it? In Jesus' day 'kingdom of God' was *the* slogan among the Jews, taken by most to mean the overthrow of Rome and Jewish supremacy. Jesus gave it a new slant altogether, in both his teaching and his acts. Paul was called to work in the very different world of the eastern Roman empire. His message was true to its Jewish origins but focused on Christ's lordship over the whole world.

**Justification by faith.** Why is this so important for Paul but apparently not for Jesus? Paul's justification teaching was never about how a person could become a Christian but about how one could *tell*, in the present, who God's true people were. The inclusion of Gentiles was a massive issue. Jesus hinted at it (e.g. Mat 8:11) but it was not at that stage the big issue. Circumcision was a huge item for Paul in his setting, but Jesus, working among Jews, doesn't refer to it.

**Ethics.** Why doesn't Paul quote Jesus more when touching on ethical issues? Paul's emphasis is not so much on how to behave as on *why* people should live that way—he is keen to give the broader picture, to 'teach them how to fish' rather than 'give them a fish'.

### 3. The Work of an Apostle

What was the nature of the work Paul felt called to do? The opening phrases of Romans will help us to see what his apostleship meant.

#### a. Servant, apostle, set apart

'*Paul...a servant.*' He followed the servant-path trod by Jesus himself, following the line of Isaiah's Servant Songs. His sufferings were in part because he and his colleagues were acting out the part of the true Israel, afflicted both by pagans and by renegades within Israel itself.

'*Called to be an apostle.*' Paul saw himself as a royal emissary; his vocation was rooted, not in himself, but in the one who had commissioned him to do a specific, unique and irreplaceable job (Rom 15:20). He is a pioneer, called to take the message to new places.

'*Set apart for God's gospel.*' The good news was 'that the covenant had been fulfilled and that new creation had begun. The great apocalypse had occurred, revealing Jesus as Israel's Messiah. Jesus was therefore Lord of the world, and Caesar was not.'

#### b. Redefinitions in practice

Paul's monotheism adapted to draw in Jesus (1 Cor 8:6). God was the world's ruler, but Jesus would stand as judge, and the Spirit would empower his people.

The communities of believers were activated by *agapē*—which by definition means being networks of practical support and help, including financial support.



Paul encouraged the church to see itself as God's redeemed humanity, the new model of what it means to be human (Rom 12:1-2). This meant, above all, *unity*, as expressed in baptism—not just between Jews and Gentiles but between all the many groupings susceptible to division. This extends to differences over meat-eating and the observance of holy days (1 Cor 8-10; Rom 14-15). The Collection was a major expression of unity, a great prophetic sign aimed at both the demonstration of the message and the strengthening of the church's togetherness across the ancient world.

This common life would have seemed very Jewish in the eyes of pagans, and very pagan in the eyes of Jews—which is why Paul speaks of the church as a third entity (1 Cor 10:32).

Paul gave short shrift to Christians who read too much into his command to 'wait for [God's] Son from heaven' and stopped working. He himself aimed at being self-supporting.

Paul seems to have believed that Jerusalem was under threat of imminent judgment (1 Thes 2:14-16 and the predictions of Jesus in Matt 24 etc.). He knew it would cause problems: Jews blaming the church for letting the side down; Gentile Christians celebrating the overthrow of the nation that had opposed the gospel from the start. This would possibly lead to splits in the churches. He knew he had only a generation to establish sound Jew/Gentile churches across the world strong enough to withstand these pressures when they came.

#### **4. Conclusion: Paul and the Task of the Church**

How does all this impinge on the church's task today?

God's purpose can be likened to a five-act play, still unfinished,<sup>1</sup> in which the last act began with Jesus' resurrection. The ultimate outcome is clear (Rom 8; 1 Cor 15; Eph 1; Col 1; Rev 21-22), and the church's job, with the Spirit's help, is 'to improvise a way through the unscripted period between the opening scenes and the closing one.'

We belong to the same 'act' as Paul and his letters thus 'belong' to us in a way which Leviticus, or even Isaiah, do not belong in the same way. Part of our task today is 'to pioneer a way through postmodernity and out the other side', shaping a new approach to life and society with God's mark on it. Paul can help us with three aspects of this:

- The reconstruction of *the self*. We don't need to ask, 'Who am I?' We are Christ's redeemed people, finding our true identity in him and motivated by God's love: 'I am loved, therefore I am.'
- The reconstruction of *knowing*. Postmodernity has lost all sense of true knowing. But the Christian mode of knowing is love. 'That knowing of God, the world and one another for which Paul strived will see us go forward intellectually and culturally.'
- The reconstruction of *the great story*. The 'story' of modernity, based on the rise of man, has long since run out of steam, and postmodernity has nothing to offer. But Paul offers us the story of God's love, worked out down the centuries and guaranteed success.

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<sup>1</sup> Outlined in his book *The New Testament and the People of God*. The five acts are: 1. God's original good creation; 2. The Fall; 3. Israel before Christ; 4. The life of Jesus; 5. The death and resurrection of Jesus, and the era of the Spirit thus introduced.