



## On Re-Reading Paul

31.03.2002 | Byrne, Brendon

**Prof. Brendan Byrne, S.J., reflects on the response to the Australian Council of Christians and Jews' study document *Re-Reading Paul*, of which he was a principal author, and reviews the chief elements of the 'New Perspective on Paul.'**

### On Re-Reading Paul

by **Brendon Byrne, S.J.**

I have been amazed at the reception given to [Re-reading Paul](#).

It has, I understand, had to be reprinted at least once – if not several times. I think this is a great tribute to those officers of the Council of Christians and Jews who conceived the project and especially to Rev. Prof. Robert Anderson who put disparate material so skillfully together, so that it reads as a coherent whole, greatly enhanced, I might add, by the Annotated Bibliography supplied with characteristic sound judgement by Dr. Nigel Watson. But, apart from the quality of the document, I've asked myself over and over, why such interest in Paul. I could understand this more readily in connection with the Christian Gospels, which would seem to be more approachable and hence to have been more influential than Paul. However, it is this document on Paul that has stirred up much interest and I can think of several reasons for that.

First of all, I do think there's still a strong sense around that Paul is the "2nd Founder" – or indeed "the Founder", full stop – of Christianity. Only a few years ago the popular British novelist and biographer A. N. Wilson published a very readable life of Paul rather much in this vein.<sup>1</sup> The idea is that Jesus of

Nazareth was a charismatic Jewish figure, who became the leader of a reform movement within 2nd Temple Judaism in a prophetic line, similar to that led by John the Baptist. Like John, he attracted the hostility of civil authorities – in his case the Roman occupying power and so, in contrast to John, suffered a Roman form of execution. However, again like John, Jesus was perfectly able to be accommodated within the rich diversity of 2nd Temple Judaism.

The extraordinary claims that came to be made about him after his death and the forging in his name of a new religion that soon began to spread across the Greco-Roman world: this was all the work of Paul, a Jew by birth, to be sure, but one deeply influenced by the religious beliefs and practices of various pagan cults with which he became familiar during his upbringing in Tarsus. Paul imposed upon Jesus quasi-divine attributes congenial to the religious temper of this Greco-Roman world. In this way he wrenched the movement that treasured the memory of Jesus away from Judaism and turned it into something quite other in religious terms.

On this understanding – which I would certainly challenge<sup>2</sup>

– to get Christianity right, you have to get Paul right, and hence the importance of works attempting to clarify the understanding of Paul.

Secondly – and this is amply catalogued, in *Re-reading Paul* – there is the centrality of Paul and Paul's writings to the Reformation, the most significant event in Western Christianity since the Middle Ages. It is well known that the original Reformer, Martin Luther, came to believe that what he found objectionable – and therefore clamouring

for reform – in certain aspects of late medieval Catholicism was exactly what Paul found objectionable in certain aspects of his own ancestral Judaism. Luther believed that in his personal struggle for righteousness by faith he was recalling Christians to the truth of the gospel as preached by Paul. This means, of course, that Paul – or a distinctive understanding of Paul – stands at the heart of the Reformation and so is absolutely central to the self-understanding and identity of the Christian confessions that are heirs of the Reformation. Touch Paul and you touch their very identity and self-understanding. Hence the controversy – and the delicacy – of the “New Perspective on Paul” for these churches, especially those of an Evangelical persuasion.

For Roman Catholics, Paul became much more significant in the latter years of the last century (20th) as a large part of the renewal movement associated with the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) was concerned with coming to terms at last with the Reformation critique and the Pauline insights that stood at its heart

A third factor, perhaps the most significant one, in this interest in Paul with regard to Judaism, is probably the sense that the interface, if that is the right word, between Judaism and Christianity is to be discerned most personally in the figure of Paul. His is the personality that emerges most strongly and directly from the pages of the New Testament because it is only in this regard that we have documents clearly written by an identifiable historical person. The letters written by him witness directly to the experience of a leading Jewish member of the Jesus movement in the mid first century of the common era. If we want to find out what happened in Jerusalem in Damascus , in Antioch , or in Ephesus , Athens , Corinth or Rome during those crucial early years of the movement, we are very much

reliant on Paul. Because we simply have nothing else or, at least, we have to read between the lines of documents written somewhat later (such as the Gospels), or glean what we can from writers such as the Jewish historian Josephus.

Certainly, when we read Paul at his most personal, as in places in his letter to the Galatians, that to the Philippians, and in the later chapters of his letter to Rome , we find someone wrestling in anguish as he stands at the interface and tries to grapple – personally, spiritually, pastorally and theologically – with what has happened. He has come to believe that Jesus of Nazareth, the man crucified by the Roman governor Pontius Pilate at a Passover in the early 30's, is the Messiah of Israel. The great bulk of his Jewish brothers and sisters do not share this conviction and, in all likelihood, never will. On the other hand, increasing numbers of non-Jews are finding peace, hope and conversion of life through that same belief. This is a situation totally contrary to expectation. It has thrown into confusion his understanding of Torah, of <st1:country-region>

Israel , indeed of the faithfulness of God. His passionate adherence to his ancestral people and faith, his concern for their welfare remains as strong as ever. In the latter part of Romans he severely warns Christians of non-Jewish background against any tendency to reject, despise or write off Israel: they must never forget that they are the “wild olive” that has been grafted on to the original stock that draws the sap of life from the “fathers” (Rom 11:11-32).</st1:country-region>

So I think Paul, read comprehensively and not just selectively, does communicate to us a

powerful sense of the very poignant transition going on in his personal life. In him the anguish and dilemma of what it means to be a Jew and a believer that Jesus is both Messiah and Saviour of the entire world, is most personally seen and testified to in writings of very considerable power. It is hard for any Christian or any Jew to be indifferent to Paul. What, of course, *Re-reading Paul* is trying to do is communicate to a larger audience – clergy, teachers, interested lay persons – a sense of what is termed in Pauline New Testament scholarship “the New Perspective on Paul”, that is, the radical reassessment of his distinctive concerns, self-understanding and relation to Judaism that has emerged and strongly encased itself in Pauline scholarship in the last three decades.<sup>3</sup>

Let me list a number of points I would see to be characteristic of the New Perspective:

1.

On the more negative side there is a sustained critique of the *Lutheran* tradition of interpretation, with its classic antithesis of Gospel and Law.

2.

More positively, there is a tendency to stress the *continuities* between Paul and his ancestral religion—to try to see him *within* the broad range of Second Temple Judaism rather than as a “convert” from it to another, basically critical religion.<sup>4</sup>

3.

In line with an earlier shift in Pauline interpretation,<sup>5</sup> the new perspective stresses the *occasional* nature of Paul’s letters, including the densely theological letter to Rome: the long theological passages do not arise out of theological concerns aired for their own sake, but from the need to rationalise and justify the terms upon which non-Jewish converts should be admitted to the community of faith and allowed a full share in its life alongside believers of Jewish background.

4.

There has been increasing recognition that believers of *Gentile* origin are the *primary* addressees of Paul’s letters, including Romans and that when Paul addresses Jewish issues, especially that of the Torah, he does so for the benefit of these Gentile members and with their concerns chiefly in mind. Any anti-Jewish sounding polemic principally targets fellow Christian missionaries who would seek to impose upon Gentile converts practices that were never intended for them. When he speaks to Gentile believers about that bulk of that has not come to faith in Jesus as Messiah, his intent is to evoke sympathy,

understanding and respect and to counter any suggestion that God has abandoned, or ceased to regard as special, the people called by God's name.<sup>6</sup>

5.

The new perspective tends to see the major failure of Israel in Paul's eyes as consisting less in being bound up with the general sinfulness of humankind (though this is not denied) and more in an *ethnic particularism* and pride that fails to recognise God's gracious eschatological designs in favor of the Gentile world in accordance with the promises to Abraham.<sup>7</sup>

Readers of *Re-reading Paul* will know that there are aspects of the New Perspective concerning which I do in fact have reservations. Let me simply mention what I see to be the two main impulses behind the New Perspective on Paul so conceived.

The first impulse is *historical*: a revisioning of Paul and his concerns in the light of the far greater knowledge scholars now have of Judaism in the Second Temple period and its place within the wider Greco-Roman milieu of the classical and post-classical world. A large element in the increase of that knowledge has been Jewish scholarship or, more precisely, a greater readiness on the part of non-Jewish scholars to engage with, and learn from Jewish colleagues. It is interesting, for example, with respect to the Dead Sea Scrolls from the Judean Desert that whereas scholarship on the Scrolls for the first three or four decades after their discovery was almost entirely Christian, it is now very significantly Jewish. If you can't read unvocalised modern Hebrew don't think of a career in studies on Qumran .

The second impulse is *ethical* – the belated and long overdue realisation in

Christian biblical and theological learning of the extent to which particular traditional interpretations of the New Testament had contributed to and indeed legitimated the mindset, caricatures and prejudice that led to the Holocaust in Christian Europe. We have come to realise that no reading of scripture is neutral; much reading is fraught with danger; all reading raises ethical issues, and that readings that create freedom for some almost always create captivity and oppression for others. Reading Scripture in a post-Holocaust situation should always lead us to ask: Who might be victims, as well as who might be beneficiaries, of this reading, this interpretation?

The more I proceed in my own work the more I realise how difficult it is for me, as a Christian scholar, to really place myself in Paul's Jewish shoes – to accurately grasp his concerns, his anguish, his passion, especially with regard to the *Torah*. Of course, a modern Jewish scholar will have difficulties too; because, just as I look at Paul through the thick, and often distorting lens of my Christian cultural and theological formation, so a modern Jewish scholar will have to confront the fact that Paul, as a representative of Second Temple Judaism, stands on the other side of the development of the Rabbinic Judaism, to which every strand of modern Judaism is heir. But I suspect I may have more difficulty because of the need to overcome, or at least take into account, an abiding Christian sense that Paul is “our man”, that we know who he is and what to do with him. Whereas the historical Paul, if he had been vouchsafed a glimpse of Christianity as it eventually developed in the years after his death, may well have said, “No thanks! That's not what I want to belong to at all”. I suppose it's a case of the more you come to know about someone or something, the more you realise how little you really know and how much you still have to learn.

Further, we must face the fact that really we have at least three “Pauls” emerging from the New Testament. First, there is Paul of the seven or so letters that almost everyone agree were written personally by him (Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians and Philemon). Second, there is “Paul” of the letters that almost all, though by no means everyone, agree were written by later adherents of a “Pauline school” in his name, the so called Pastoral Letters (1 & 2 Timothy, Titus); the ones that have particularly given Paul a bad name because of their negative judgements and instructions concerning women, and their strong reinforcement of adherence to traditional doctrine and discipline. (Letters such as Colossians and Ephesians fall somewhere in between these two categories; but it’s a bit too complex to go into them here). Thirdly and finally, there is the portrait of Paul constructed and presented very tellingly in the document known as the Acts of the Apostles, as a sequel to what we call the Gospel of Luke (Acts 9-28).

You might say, Oh well the Paul of the authentic letters – the ones he wrote himself – is the real Paul, while the other two presentations (that of the Pastoral Letters and that of Acts) are interpretations. But, not so fast, say the practitioners of the literary approach to biblical texts. The way a writer presents himself or herself in a literary composition is just as much an interpretation as any other. When we compose a CV, write a letter applying for a job, for example, are we really presenting ourselves exactly as we are – warts and all? Not likely. And the “Paul” who comes across in Galatians is rather different from the “Paul” who presents himself in the letter to Rome . Each is different again from the much more personal presentation in Philippians or the brief letter to Philemon. So we really have at least three “Pauls” in the New Testament and whether we can ever get to the “real Paul” beneath them, is a good question. We are not so much

dealing with Paul, as with a variety of “Pauls” – and the crucial issue is one of accurate, responsible and ethical interpretation.

The point I would like to make is that the three Pauls emerging from the New Testament in this way are in fact rather different. I think most people who have familiarity with the New Testament have a homogenised, composite picture of Paul; put together largely from the first and the third (the Paul of the authentic letters and the Paul of Acts). Perhaps the latter, in the end, calls the shots because of Luke’s ability to sketch character and tell a good story. But the Paul of the Letters and the Paul of Acts are different – different precisely in the area that concerns us: Paul’s relation to Judaism. The “Paul” of Acts is a Paul, yes, who fights (as he does in the Letters, especially Galatians) to have Gentile believers attracted to the Jesus movement accepted without the imposition upon them of the ritual prescriptions of the Torah – notably circumcision (see Acts 15). But, whatever of his Gentile converts, this “Paul” remains personally a faithful, practising Jew. He scrupulously circumcises a young convert of mixed descent, Timothy, on the grounds that his mother was a Jew (16:3); at Cenchreae he takes a Nazirite vow, to be discharged later in the Temple at Jerusalem (18:13); arrived in Jerusalem, as an act of piety he pays the expenses for the purification of four others similarly under vow (21 :23-24). All this is to rebut a calumny that Paul teaches Jews living amongst the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to have their children circumcised (21:21).

The question is, of course, whether what Acts describes as a “calumny” was not, in fact, more true to the Paul that emerges from the Letters, a picture which the author of Acts is trying to rebut by depicting a much more “centrist” Paul: a Paul committed to a *Torah-free*

way of life for Gentile Christians but to a *Torah*-observant way of life for Christians of Jewish origin such as himself. It is interesting that, whereas for decades, if not for the last two centuries, critical Christian scholarship in search of the historical Paul has favored the non-*Torah* observant Paul of the Letters over the *Torah*-observant Paul of Acts, a Jewish Pauline scholar, Mark Nanos, a recent, if somewhat way-out representative of the New Perspective, has argued very strongly for the validity of the presentation of “Paul” in Acts.<sup>8</sup> It is not that we must accept Acts and reject the Paul of the Letters. Rather, we must see that, read aright, as Nanos understands, the Letters present a “centrist” Paul far more aligned, as Acts presents him, to *Torah*-observant Judaism. I am not sure whether Nanos is going to win many to his interpretation. But he has certainly caused a stir and is taken seriously. Again, he illustrates the challenge that comes when people approach Paul from a perspective other than the conventional — in Nanos’ case, of course, that of Judaism.

1. A. N. Wilson, *Paul: The Mind of the Apostle* (London: Sinclair-Stevens, 1997).
2. See my review of Wilson’s book in *The Australian’s Review of Books*, June 1997, 24-25.
3. See E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, London: SCM, 1977); also *Paul, the Law and the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983); J. D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8* (WBC 38A; Dallas: Word Books, 1988) lxiii-lxxii; *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 1998) 335-40; D. A. Hagner, “Paul and Judaism: The Jewish Matrix of Early Christianity: Issues in the Current Debate”, *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 3 (1993) 111-30.
4. The stress upon continuity is perhaps less pronounced in Sanders’ own work with its pointing to the significance of “transfer” categories in Pauline soteriology and its insistence upon “solution” before “plight” (see esp. *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 463-51).
5. See the studies on the purpose and occasion of Romans gathered together in the collection edited by K. P. Donfried, *The Romans Debate: Revised and Expanded Edition* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991).
6. The full extent of this tendency can be seen in the work of Mark Nanos: *The Mystery of Romans: The Jewish Context of Paul’s Letter* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1996); “The Jewish Context of the Gentile Audience Addressed in Paul’s Letter to the Romans,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 61(1999) 283-304.
7. Cf. Dunn, *Theology of Paul* 118-19, 145, 363, 368-69.
8. *The Mystery of Romans* (see n. 6 above).

Source: Gesher