



Paul the Jew

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Brendan Byrne, S.J., of the Jesuit Theological College, Melbourne, offers reflections on the study document 'Re-Reading Paul' issued by the Council of Christians and Jews, Victoria, Australia.

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**by Brendan Byrne,
S.J.**

In August 1998 I took part in a day-long symposium organised by this Council of Christians and Jews in St. Kilda around the topic of the Torah. My colleague and friend Frank Moloney, now a professor in Washington, spoke on "Jesus and the Torah". I spoke on "Paul and the Torah". But before both of us, Rabbi Philip Heilbrunn had been asked to speak on the topic "Israel and the Torah". Very forcefully and vigorously, as many here present this evening may recall, he began by dismissing out of hand the title proposed to him. "I cannot speak on "Israel and the Torah". The

conjunction 'and' is totally out of place. Israel and Torah are not two separable entities. Israel is Torah and Torah is Israel. That is the only matter I can address".

As a New Testament scholar and a Pauline scholar I learned a very great deal from that opening to Rabbi Heilbrunn's talk. I learned a lot from the rest of it too. But the impact of that opening salvo was very great. I don't think I had ever appreciated why the issue of "Torah" bulked so large in the writings of Paul and roused such passion. I learned – or at least had strongly reinforced – that when Paul was talking about Torah or "law", he was inevitably talking about Israel. You cannot have Israel without Torah and you cannot have Torah without raising the issue of Israel.

The document that is being launched this evening [[Re-Reading Paul](#)], in so far as I have had a hand in it, owes a good deal to that exchange in August 1998. It attempts to

summarise and convey a very significant change that has developed in Christian understanding of Paul in the scholarship of recent decades. For far too long Christians, led to some extent by Augustine but much more by Martin Luther, read out of Paul a caricature of Judaism which it was certainly not Paul's intention to convey. Luther felt that what he found objectionable in certain aspects of late medieval Catholicism was exactly what Paul found objectionable in certain aspects of his ancestral religion. This gave rise to the belief that Paul was somehow against Judaism as his major antagonist. It led to the classic Lutheran dichotomy of "Gospel" and "Law".

It is strange that Christian interpreters so long neglected Paul's repeated assertions in his major writing, the Letter to the Romans, about the holiness and essential goodness of the Torah (Rom 7:12,14); his denial that he was trying to overthrow it (3:31); his repeated

statements of anguish at any suggestion that he believed God had abandoned his people (Rom 11:1). In fact, far from being a document hostile to Jews and Judaism, we now understand the Letter to the Romans as largely an attempt to commend to Gentile believers in Jesus as the Christ a positive, respectful and sympathetic attitude to that great bulk of Israel that had not come to such a belief. Paul is in fact at great pains to correct any impression that he is indifferent to the fate of his own people (Rom 9:1-5; 10:1). He severely admonishes his readers against taking up any attitude of superiority, insisting that they are the "Johnnie come lately"s" (Rom 11:17-25) and that Israel remains holy, chosen and beloved because of the fathers (Rom 11:15; 11:28-29). Would that Christians down the ages had spent as much time on chapter 11 (especially verses 25-26) of the Letter to the Romans as they did on earlier ones and also on the Letter to the

Galatians.

Paul was, of course, projecting a great vision of God's people that, in the end, proved impossible to realize. He wanted to see his Gentile Christian converts included among the endtime People of God specifically as Gentiles, that is, without compulsion to take on Jewish identity as proselytes by submission to circumcision and the full requirements of Torah. He tried to forge and commend an expanded concept of "Israel" that would include Gentile believers in this sense. He knew, as Rabbi Heilbrunn reminded us, that you could not have Israel without Torah. So he maintained that the Spirit functioned as "Torah" (cf. Rom 8:2), justifying his claim on a particular combination of prophecies from Ezekiel and Jeremiah (Ezek 36:26; Jer 31:33).

But Paul was stretching things too far. You couldn't put that much fresh air into the "Israel" balloon and not have it burst – which, imaginatively at least, it eventually

did. But that rupture
– I mean the coming
to be of Christianity
as a new religion
distinct from
Judaism – occurred
well after his death.
So that in the end,
as the Jewish
Pauline scholar
Alan Segal has
maintained, you had
Rabbinic Judaism
and Christianity
coming into being
as the distinct
adolescent offspring
of Second Temple
Judaism, with all the
mutual loves and
hates that mark
adolescent striving
for identity. But Paul
would never have
thought of himself
as critiquing
Judaism from
without; rather, he
saw himself in the
line of prophetic
figures who
critiqued it from
within –
passionately and
vigorously, it is true,
but with appeal
above all to the
sacred Schema of
Deuteronomy 6 and
to the vision of God
that it enshrines.

That is the new
vision of Paul which
we have tried to
encapsulate and
convey in the
document that Prof.
Robert Anderson
and others have so
labored to put
together. Our
concern has not
been so much to

defend the reputation of Paul. Paul can look after himself. The question is the use that Christians make from now on of his writings. Those who saw the film *Titanic* had conveyed to them very dramatically how difficult it is to alter the course of a great ship steaming full speed ahead. Traditional Christian interpretation of scripture has something of the momentum of a great ship like that. It takes a lot to alter its course – even more to set it in a wholly new direction or put it astern. We hope that [Re-Reading Paul](#) may do its bit, as its elder sibling [Rightly Explaining the Word of Truth](#) has already done to set it on a more correct and responsible course.

Brendan Byrne, S.J., is professor at the Jesuit Theological College, Melbourne, Australia. This talk was given at the launching of the new *Guidelines for Christian Clergy and Teachers in their use of the New Testament with reference to the New Testament's presentation of Jews and Judaism*. Source: [Gesher](#)