

# Paul within Judaism? A Response to Paula Fredriksen and John Gager

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## Introduction

Paula Fredriksen and John Gager are two of the most important scholars of Christian origins over the past few decades, particularly on issues relating to eschatology, Jewish-gentile interaction, anti-Judaism, and, of course, Paul. I am effectively an outsider to Pauline studies, but I have always an eye on developments in that particular subfield because of my own interests in the Torah, Christian origins, and scholarly constructions of Judaism and Jewish identity. One advantage of being among those with less investment in the central questions of Pauline theology is that I am someone who could potentially be persuaded by the idea that Paul did not think Israel should give up the Law and that the question of the Law is aimed rather at gentiles/pagans, a view that, one hundred years after the Russian Revolution, I will henceforth refer to as Gagerism-Fredriksenism as a representative tendency in the so-called “Paul within Judaism” school.<sup>1</sup> In this respect I think Gager’s slight pessimism needs some qualification — I think there are plenty of others who are persuadable, though no doubt being in the heart of Pauline studies will have its own, let us

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<sup>1</sup> John G. Gager, *Who Made Early Christianity? The Jewish Lives of the Apostle Paul* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); Paula Fredriksen, *Paul: The Pagans’ Apostle* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017). This is not, of course, to deny the differences in nuance, or the important contributions, among other Pauline scholars, or to deny the differences between Gager and Fredriksen despite their close affinities. For a taste of different approaches within this significant scholarly tendency, see Mark D. Nanos and Magnus Zetterholm (eds.), *Paul within Judaism: Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015).

say, idiosyncrasies and powerful theological agendas which might lend themselves to a certain pessimism for one tirelessly promoting such a view over several decades.

Indeed, both these books have tempted me further in the direction of Gagerism-Fredriksenism for reasons I will touch upon. I will also provide some speculations based on only some of their arguments, namely the background to such ideas in the Synoptic tradition and how we might read Paul and his audience in terms of the social history of the Christ-movement. Before I turn to these issues, I should add that this response does not do justice to the variety of interesting arguments presented by both Gager and Fredriksen. In another world, I might have expressed sustained support for Gager's important engagement with the history of interpretation and reception of Paul, more of which is badly needed in mainstream (ancient-)historical criticism,<sup>2</sup> or Fredriksen's convincing presentation of ideas about loyalties to gods and what we might call "civic religion" as a way of understanding why Paul was initially controversial. While I would refrain from language about "authentic Judaism" or the like — I think we must analyse how people self-identified and were identified by others rather than impose what we think Judaism essentially was — both these books provide a healthy antidote to a strong tendency in the often duplicitously philo-Semitic New Perspective on Paul, in that they are not covertly presenting a myth of Christian superiority behind the sociological language of "ethnicity" and Paul's supposed critique of such essentially Jewish beliefs.<sup>3</sup> These books do not make claims of "grace, not race."<sup>4</sup>

### **The Significance of the Gospel Tradition**

First, I want to look at a broader first-century context for such a reading of Paul and Gager's notion of a counternarrative that he labels "Jewish Christian."<sup>5</sup> This includes the idea of Matthew as a "halakhic hard-liner, a pious Jew who insisted

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<sup>2</sup> An important but unfortunately isolated example of incorporating ideological critique, reception history, and historical critical scholarship of Christian origins is John S. Kloppenborg *The Tenants in the Vineyard: Ideology, Economics, and Agrarian Conflict in Jewish Palestine* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> See further James G. Crossley, "Other Problems from a British Perspective: 'Jewishness,' Jesus, and the New Perspective on Paul," in Katherine M. Hockey and David G. Horrell (eds.), *Ethnicity, Race, Religion: Identities and Ideologies in Early Jewish and Christian Texts, and in Modern Biblical Interpretation* (London: Bloomsbury/T&T Clark, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> N.T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 247 (cf. 194, 240). See Fredriksen, *Paul*, 109–10, 227 n. 28.

<sup>5</sup> Gager, *Jewish Lives of the Apostle Paul*, 92.

on total observance of the Mosaic Law (*halakhah*) and on internal state of purity.”<sup>6</sup> Gager brings in the idea that Mark’s Gospel might also represent something similar to Matthew on the Law and suggests, with reference to the recent work of Yair Furstenberg, Menachem Kister, and Daniel Boyarin, that a text such as Mark 7:15 was a critique of handwashing rather than the Law per se. I would add to this that this sort of view has even more support than Gager implies, and indeed has been discussed or entertained by non-Jewish scholars from different perspectives.<sup>7</sup> If this is correct, as Gager argues, then we have another text which adds to the counternarrative, to which he further adds Pauline letters and noncanonical material.

I not only think Gager is broadly correct but also that his argument can be reinforced, even with reference to Luke (to which he might object), as we see in the development of the Synoptic tradition, which I do not think includes a single example of Jesus advocating a breach of the Law. My own view on Mark 7:1–23 is that after carefully laying out a distinct “commandments” versus “tradition” binary, and some very precise (and accurate) points about handwashing and immersion of dining couches and vessels in Mark 7:1–5 (cf. *m. Miqw.* 7:7; *m. Kel.* 19:1, etc.), the passage then disagrees with the view that impurity does not pass from hands to food to eater and thus all (kosher) foods are to be deemed clean. Matthew 15 has the same logic but makes it clearer: “These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile” (15:20). Luke removes the passage entirely as part of the Great Omission and no

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<sup>6</sup> Gager, *Jewish Lives of the Apostle Paul*, 93.

<sup>7</sup> E.g. James G. Crossley, *The Date of Mark’s Gospel: Insights from the Law in Earliest Christianity* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 191–204; James G. Crossley, “Mark 7:1–23: Revisiting the Question of ‘All Foods Clean,’ in Michael Tait and Peter Oakes (eds.), *Torah in the New Testament* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2009), 8–20; Steve Moyise, *Evoking Scripture: Seeing the Old Testament in the New* (London & New York: T&T Clark, 2008), 27; Markus Bockmuehl, “God’s Life as a Jew: Remembering the Son of God as Son of David,” in Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Richard B. Hays (eds.), *Seeking the Identity of Jesus: A Pilgrimage* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2008), 60–78, esp. 69–70, n. 19; Richard Bauckham, “In Response to My Respondents: Jesus and the Eyewitnesses in Review,” *JSHJ* 6 (2008), 225–53 (233–35); John van Maaren, “Does Mark’s Jesus Abrogate Torah? Jesus’ Purity Logion and its Illustration in Mark 7:15–23,” *JMJS* 4 (2017), 21–41. See also the discussions in David Catchpole, *Jesus People: The Historical Jesus and the Beginnings of Community* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 196–201; David A. Fiensy, *Jesus the Galilean: Soundings in a First Century Life* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2007), 147–86.

doubt because he thought Peter was the originator of the critique of food laws and wanted no misunderstanding (Acts 10–11:18).

We can see this tendency in other aspects of the Synoptic tradition. Jesus' defence of his disciples plucking grain on the Sabbath in Mark 2:23–28 is reminiscent of legal debates about whether fruit can be picked up on the Sabbath (e.g. CD 10:22–23; *m. Pesah.* 4:8), a debate that emerged partly because there is no biblical prohibition of plucking on the Sabbath. Matthew and Luke both make this clearer still to show that no biblical commandment was being challenged: the disciples ate the grain there and then (Matt. 12:1; Luke 6:1) rather than (say) collecting grain and carrying it somewhere. What such examples show is that there was indeed a tendency in different and possibly even independent traditions that one Jewish person in Jesus (at the very least) was to be Law observant. It is striking that in the Synoptics there is no attempt to ground in the teachings of Jesus a Law-free mission or a mission with partial aspects of the Law. On the contrary, the tendency is the opposite and perhaps the best explanation is that there was indeed a strong inclination or assumption in the Christ-movement towards the idea that Jewish believers were expected to keep the Law.

We might also add to this a bit of speculation which, while hardly a definitive contribution to the debate (to put it mildly), still adds something: with one possible exception there is not one clear-cut example of a first-century Jewish person (fictional or otherwise) associated with the Christ-movement who openly flouts the food laws. Even Peter, who was, according to Acts 10–11:18, permitted to eat as he saw fit despite previously always being observant, is not quite recorded as actually eating pork or the like (though it was arguably assumed). As most, sometime close to the end of the first century, John's Jesus seems to endorse a man carrying a burden on the Sabbath (John 5:1–18) but not even John can present the food law as obsolete and the reason may be as straightforward as Jewish people close to the movement unable to stomach things like pork and/or an established and inherited tradition of Jews expected to observe the Law. It may not be high theology, but basic, everyday habit-keeping might be worth bearing in mind behind the complexities of Pauline thought—was Paul flexible enough to eat pork in certain circumstances or was it too much to tolerate even for him?

### **The Significance of the Antioch Incident**

With this context in mind, we can turn to Paul and in particular the Antioch incident (Gal. 2:11–15) and the issue of certain people associated with the movement insisting on gentile circumcision. Fredriksen (rightly, in my view) dismisses the arguments that some kind of gentile impurity or even proximity to

gentiles was the problem, not least because gentiles who renounced their old deities were not likely to be a problem.<sup>8</sup> She also (again rightly, I think) rejects the argument that those from James were insisting on circumcision of Antiochene gentile believers because it would mean James reneged on his previous agreement, and because there is a lack of supporting evidence for such views. To this, I would stress, “Judaizing” would not be the language used; the language of circumcision would (cf. e.g. LXX Esth. 8:17; *War.* 2:454, 462–463). Instead, Fredriksen suggests, the problem was what was eaten and where. In terms of the “where,” James’ men were uncomfortable with gatherings in a pagan household with images of other gods and consuming food and wine that could have been offered to idols, as well as such activities potentially compromising a Jewish mission. However, and in line with her stress on a public presentation of loyalty to gods, Fredriksen seems to downplay the issue of food:

If the issue was what was consumed, the problem would have come from the food or, more likely, the wine. (Meat was extremely expensive and rarely on offer outside of major urban festivals and the banquets of the wealthy; wine, by contrast, was ubiquitous.)<sup>9</sup>

However, I think a case for heightening the importance of food can be made, and in line with Fredriksen’s overall point. Whenever Jewish sources discuss the issue of Jews and gentiles eating together, the problem is the food and wine. While a consistent thread involves libations and problematic other gods (e.g. Add. Esth. C 14:17a; *Jub.* 22:16–17), a view also found in non-Jewish sources (e.g. Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius* 5:33), the importance of keeping the food laws or avoiding non-permitted food is also present, not least for the presentation of Jewish identity, and if Jews get the right food then table fellowship is not really a problem. Daniel 1:3–17, for instance, has Daniel refusing to defile himself with the royal food and instead he and his companions ate (literally) “seeds” and water (cf. Lev. 11:37–38). Similarly, Judith also ate different food from gentiles, but this still allowed her to participate in a degree of table-fellowship (Judith 12:17–19). In Nineveh, Tobit did not eat the food of the gentiles but instead observed the dietary laws (1:11). *Aristeas* is particularly interesting in this regard because of the role of the Egyptian king:

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<sup>8</sup> Fredriksen, *Paul*, e.g. 96–97.

<sup>9</sup> Fredriksen, *Paul*, 97.

‘Everything of which you partake,’ he said, ‘will be served in compliance with your habits; *it will be served to me as well as to you.*’ They expressed their pleasure and the king ordered the finest apartments to be given to them near the citadel, and the preparations for the banquet were made. (*Aristeas* 181, my italics)

On the level of ideology and discourse, at least, the notion of eating permitted food was an issue in understanding how Jews and non-Jews could eat together. Indeed, the issue of legally permitted foods and social interactions is one that emerges in Christian origins (cf. Acts 10–11:18; Rom. 14:1–6).

However, even if Jewish and gentile Christians did continue the observance of the biblical food laws, there must have been gentiles who did not. Here we might speculate a little. If it were only gentile Christians eating forbidden food in Antioch, and once this starts happening in contexts that were deemed to be *too* public, then the community could start looking like a non-Jewish community or one that embraces avoidance of the Law *too much*. It might have been thought a wonderful thing that gentiles were being saved but we might infer from this that those associated with James (and others) would have been disturbed by this development if things looked wrong. And this does not have to be a contradiction of James’ and Peter’s earlier acceptance of the gentile mission and Paul’s position: changes of mind would have been possible once the community started giving the impression to others, especially Jews, that the community as whole was eating food forbidden by Jewish law. This would have caused even more problems: after all, Paul’s mission was indeed accepted with the assumption of Jews observing the Law. If it looked otherwise, even in presentation and perception, then this could have been perceived as a serious threat to established perceptions of Jewish identity.

### **The Importance of Social Proximity**

Related to such issues, Fredriksen asks the following (also picked up by Gager):

why does the Jesus movement in the Diaspora produce our only clear evidence for Jewish circumcising missions to gentiles? What motivated them? Why, *midcentury*, do they suddenly and unambiguously appear?<sup>10</sup>

In addition to Fredriksen’s stress on the problem that time was stretching out a little too long for enthusiasts of imminent eschatology (and here we might note parallels with the classic argument associated with one John

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<sup>10</sup> Fredriksen, *Paul*, 100.

Gager in *Kingdom and Community: Social World of Early Christianity* [Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1975]), let me suggest an additional and necessarily speculative emphasis here.<sup>11</sup> If we think of the earliest movement and the involvement of gentiles in terms of networks, then we can begin to see how certain issues would have arisen.<sup>12</sup> The first Godfearers, Judaizers, and interested gentiles (as understood in the senses that Gager and Fredriksen do) would in the 30s and 40s, and with some connection with the Christ-movement, have no doubt been observant of the Law (kept Sabbath, observed food laws, etc.) when present at a synagogue gathering or even other places of Jewish-gentile social interactions. But they were not necessarily so observant in other contexts, particularly where Jews may not have been present. Indeed, with increased gentile interest, there would have been increased connections with gentiles less connected to the movement and its dominant figures.

As with other perceptions of Judaism in the ancient world, questions about the point of avoiding pork or shellfish or resting on the Sabbath would have come up. With networks of friends of friends of friends, we might reasonably speculate that there was less interest in such things and strong countervailing influences on Godfearers and Judaizers. What could make matters worse for some in the early movement were competing loyalties within a given family. Paul was clearly aware of this and did not require a stark choice to be made between spouse and the movement in 1 Cor. 7:12–16 — after all, the unbelieving spouse might come around. If we think about the emergence of the movement in these terms, then by the mid-first century parts of this movement we now call Christianity must have been looking to some more gentile than Jewish or even something different still (“Christian,” perhaps). If, from such perspectives, this movement is not looking like a Jewish movement, then what? The incident at Antioch potentially represents one reaction, as does a circumcising mission to gentiles, which would have taken up one available ideological justification for a line of thinking associated with Eleazer (rather than Ananias) and the circumcision of Izates (*Ant.* 20:34–48).

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Fredriksen, *Paul*, 104.

<sup>12</sup> See e.g. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Jack T. Sanders, *Charisma, Converts, Competitors: Societal and Sociological Factors in the Success of Early Christianity* (London: SCM, 2000); Carolyn Osiek and Margaret Y. MacDonald with Janet H. Tulloch, *A Woman's Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006); James G. Crossley, *Why Christianity Happened: A Sociohistorical Account of Christian Origins* (Louisville: WJK, 2006).

And this suggestion might also provide a qualification or addition to Gagerism-Fredriksenism: if the reactions to Jewish identities and gentile identities were becoming stark, we can see how texts could soon be read in terms of (what we would call) the more traditional readings of Paul. If there was a predominantly gentile movement, or at least pockets of the movement that were predominantly gentile, then what happened when these controversies were re-read? Could not — indeed, would not — the reading of Paul as expecting Jews to abandon the Law as a means of salvation have potentially taken off in the first century once the demographics begin to weigh heavily in favour of gentile participants? This is not only one way of developing Gager’s earlier work on Paul, but it is the photo negative of an ancient equivalent of Gager’s argument in chapter 2 about Jewish readers coming to, or touching upon, the conclusion of a reading of Paul similar to Gager’s famous reading, i.e., a predominantly non-Jewish audience might come to the conclusion that favours their interests. But this could also address the potential for similar “mistaken” Jewish readings of Paul. One such reading is represented in Acts 21:20–21 and the allegation by Jews zealous for the Law that Paul encouraged Jews living among the gentiles to forsake the Law and circumcision, and which the Paul of Acts seeks to counter (Acts 21:24–26).<sup>13</sup> Whatever the precise situation that gave rise to this passage in Acts, it is clear that idea of certain Jewish “misunderstandings” of Paul and the Law were present *and* needed to be countered. Once the *perception* is in place that Paul wanted Jews to abandon the Law (or parts of it), then stories from, or about, certain Jewish perspectives could therefore emerge, and they presumably emerged among some of the earliest readers of Paul. And perhaps this too explains why the Synoptic writers felt the need to make it clear that Jesus-as-a-Jew observed the Law.

### **Concluding remarks**

Put another way, Gagerism-Fredriksenism may well be the correct line on Paul and the Law in terms of what Paul himself would have made of his own argument, but the potential for the alternative reading(s) was “there” — perhaps right from the start. Indeed, as I noted, this reading is already “there” in Gagerism-Fredriksenism, but its potential for understanding Christian origins in terms of networks and social interactions is significant. Perhaps the next stage of Pauline studies could be to move beyond strict notions of what Judaism allegedly was and was not (according to scholarly imaginations) and beyond scholarly adherence to “definitive” readings of Paul, and towards mapping out and

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Fredriksen, *Paul*, 169.



investigating the messiness and contradictions of social realities. Once that process is understood, then scholarship can go further still and begin to provide a sustained social history explaining why this movement would become what would be known as “Christianity” without resorting to theological bolts from the blue for causal explanations.