

Whither the Paul within Judaism *Schule*?

Matthew V. Novenson

University of Edinburgh | matthew.novenson@ed.ac.uk

It was in Atlanta in November 2010 that the Paul and Judaism Consultation (latterly the Paul within Judaism Section) of the SBL, newly sprung — like Athena from the head of Zeus — from the heads of Mark Nanos and Magnus Zetterholm, had its first meeting. Several years later, the Section saw published an eponymous volume of essays representing the fruit of its work during that initial period: *Paul within Judaism: Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle*.¹ The research undertaken by this group had some notable twentieth-century antecedents, especially in the work of Krister Stendahl, Lloyd Gaston, John Gager, and Stanley Stowers. But in the 2010s there has emerged something that might be called, and has been called, a *Schule*: a team of scholars jointly advancing a particular large-scale hypothesis; in this case, that the apostle Paul should be understood as operating entirely within Judaism. Rather differently from the New Perspective on Paul, which James Dunn christened in 1982,² this twenty-first-century *Schule* has been slower to develop a consistent brand. In its infancy it was sometimes called just “the radical school” or, in a kind of portmanteau, “the radical new perspective on Paul.”³ But with an established SBL Section came the need for a proper name, and Paul within Judaism it was. We know, then, whence came this very interesting development in recent Pauline studies. But whither is it going? The present essay attempts a partial

¹ Mark D. Nanos and Magnus Zetterholm, eds., *Paul within Judaism: Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015).

² James D. G. Dunn, “The New Perspective on Paul,” *BJRL* 65 (1983): 95–122.

³ See, e.g., in Pamela Eisenbaum, “Paul, Polemics, and the Problem of Essentialism,” *BibInt* 13 (2005): 224–238; Magnus Zetterholm, *Approaches to Paul: A Student’s Guide to Recent Scholarship* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 127–163.

answer to this question by means of an engagement with two recent books from representatives of the *Schule*.⁴

In the course of researching and writing this essay, I reread the preface to Paula Fredriksen's Princeton PhD thesis on "Augustine's Early Interpretation of Paul,"⁵ in which she thanks her supervisor — John Gager — for pushing her "to get my languages in order, and to take full responsibility for my own intellectual development." So we have before us not just two important new books on Paul, but also a remarkable snapshot of an academic genealogy. Nowadays, Fredriksen and Gager are often mentioned together in print as representatives of the obstinately name-resistant radical new perspective on Paul, or Paul within Judaism *Schule*. This shared reputation of theirs is well earned, and I expect that both are happy to own it. But the appearance of these two important books around the same time also demonstrates the very interesting diversity of views within this *Schule* and, furthermore, provides an occasion for us to imagine possible futures for the scholarly discussion of Paul. More on this later, but first, I offer some comments on each book, in turn.

I think it is fair to say that, until this year, Paula Fredriksen was the most important contemporary interpreter of Paul who had never written a book about Paul. She had written important books about Jesus, early Christology, Augustine, and sin (among other topics),⁶ and in some of these books the apostle played a supporting role. Meanwhile, though, and especially over the last ten years, Fredriksen has authored a number of articles that quickly became touchstones in contemporary Pauline studies, for instance: "Judaism, the Circumcision of Gentiles, and Apocalyptic Hope";⁷ "Judaizing the Nations: The

⁴ Like the other essays in the present volume, this essay arose as part of a book review panel at the 2017 SBL Annual Meeting in Boston and has been lightly revised from that original format.

⁵ Paula Fredriksen, "Augustine's Early Interpretation of Paul" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1979).

⁶ Paula Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ: The Origins of the New Testament Images of Jesus* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988); eadem, *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews: A Jewish Life and the Emergence of Christianity* (New York: Knopf, 1999); eadem, *Augustine and the Jews: A Christian Defense of Jews and Judaism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010); eadem, *Sin: The Early History of an Idea* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

⁷ Paula Fredriksen, "Judaism, the Circumcision of Gentiles, and Apocalyptic Hope," *JTS* n.s. 42 (1991): 532–564.

Ritual Demands of Paul's Gospel";⁸ and "Paul's Letter to the Romans, the Ten Commandments, and Pagan Justification by Faith."⁹ Reading, citing, and interacting with those articles, I (like many other interpreters, I am sure) have often wished that I had a fuller account from Fredriksen: one that included her reading of this or that passage, or her engagement with this or that scholar. And now, at last, we have it. With *Paul: The Pagans' Apostle*,¹⁰ Fredriksen does for Paul what she had done for Jesus and for Augustine. She gives him a full and sympathetic reading, but one that situates him squarely in his ancient (read: strange, foreign) ideological context. She makes Paul weird again.

Her chosen subtitle, "the pagans' apostle," is jarring, and intentionally so. Even as many of us have been put off using the term "pagan" by warnings (from the likes of Christopher Jones and others)¹¹ that it concedes to ancient Christian apologists and heresiologists their rhetorical claims to superiority, Fredriksen undertakes to resuscitate the term as a translation for Greek *ethnos* (plural *ethne*). She points out that our usual rendering of *ethne* as "gentiles" leaves out the sense of religious obligation to ancestral deities that was everywhere assumed in antiquity — the idea that "gods run in the blood," as she memorably puts it. The term "pagans," precisely because it has these religious overtones, captures the dilemma faced by the apostle Paul's *ethne*-in-Christ. They were (in theory, at least) no longer proper gentiles, but not yet (indeed, not ever) Jews. They were "ex-pagan pagans," to use another Fredriksenism. And Paul was their apostle.

Fredriksen makes her case as follows. A brief Introduction takes us from Jesus announcing the kingdom of God to Paul (a few years later) announcing the risen Jesus, sketching how the proclaimer became the proclaimed. Chapter 1, "Israel and the Nations," is Fredriksen's account of the imagined scriptural world within which Paul sees himself operating: the stories of the nations and their gods, Israel and its god, kingdom, exile, and hope for redemption. Chapter 2, "Fatherland and Mother City," is her account of the actual social world within which Paul operated, a world where Jews frequented

⁸ Paula Fredriksen, "Judaizing the Nations: The Ritual Demands of Paul's Gospel," *NTS* 56 (2010): 232–252.

⁹ Paula Fredriksen, "Paul's Letter to the Romans, the Ten Commandments, and Pagan Justification by Faith," *JBL* 133 (2014): 801–808.

¹⁰ Paula Fredriksen, *Paul: The Pagans' Apostle* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

¹¹ E.g., Christopher P. Jones, *Between Pagan and Christian* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014).

pagan places (agora, hippodrome, gymnasium, etc.) and pagans Jewish places (the court of the gentiles in Jerusalem, and urban synagogues everywhere). Chapter 3, “Paul: Mission and Persecution,” considers why Paul would have harassed the Christ assemblies before his revelation and why he found himself on the receiving end of such harassment after. She especially emphasizes the agency of hostile gentile gods in this picture. Chapter 4, “Paul and the Law,” is a sure-footed and economical treatment of the thorny problems surrounding righteousness, law, and faith in Paul. Fredriksen argues that *diakiosune* refers to the second table of the Decalogue, and that Paul’s gentiles, once made righteous by Christ-faith, become capable of keeping it. Chapter 5, “Christ and the Kingdom,” emphasizes the frantically eschatological context of Paul’s apostolic labours. Here Fredriksen argues that the controversy surrounding gentile circumcision was an accident occasioned by the unforeseen, ever-lengthening delay of the kingdom. A Postscript briefly, provocatively argues that next-generation, gentile Christian thinkers such as Valentinus, Marcion, and — lest one think the proto-orthodox are being let off the hook — Justin Martyr all get Paul wrong in the same way: they identify the (middle Platonic) transcendent high god as someone other than the god of Abraham.

In terms of its overall outlook, *Paul: The Pagans’ Apostle* reminds me a great deal (indeed, far more than any other recent treatment of Paul does) of Albert Schweitzer’s classic *Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*.¹² Almost ninety years ago, Schweitzer wrote, “The fact that even the second [Christian] generation does not know what to make of his [Paul’s] teaching suggests the conjecture that he built his system upon a conviction which ruled only in the first generation. But what was it that disappeared out of the first Christian generation? What but the expectation of the immediate dawn of the messianic kingdom of Jesus?”¹³ And now Fredriksen: “Why, how... can Paul still be so sure that he knows the hour on God’s clock? This is the question that drives the present study. It will lead us into a Jewish world incandescent with apocalyptic hopes.... Only in [this context] can we begin to see Paul as he saw himself: as God’s prophetic messenger, formed in the womb to carry the good news of impending salvation to the nations, racing on the edge of the End of time.”¹⁴ Fredriksen, more than any other contemporary interpreter, perhaps more than any interpreter since

¹² Albert Schweitzer, *Die Mystik des Apostels Paulus* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1930); ET *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle* (trans. William Montgomery; London: A. & C. Black, 1931).

¹³ Schweitzer, *Mysticism*, 39.

¹⁴ Fredriksen, *Paul*, xii.

Schweitzer, reads Paul unflinchingly in terms of thoroughgoing eschatology. This is, in the opinion of the present reviewer, a great triumph. It also generates sharp conflict with readings that Fredriksen calls Christian-theological, inasmuch as the latter identify the *Sache* of Paul's message with something other than the imminent kingdom of God.¹⁵ But is this sharp conflict also inevitable? This is a fascinating question to which I genuinely do not know the answer. I can conceive of a Christian reading of Paul that grasped the nettle of thoroughgoing eschatology, but empirically I can think of almost none that do so. Fredriksen's fundamental disagreement with some of the most important recent works by Christian interpreters of Paul¹⁶ highlights a significant rift within our subfield. *Rapprochement* may be possible, but not, I think, otherwise than by following Fredriksen's argument all the way through to the end.

John Gager's new book, *Who Made Early Christianity? The Jewish Lives of the Apostle Paul*,¹⁷ had its genesis in the author's prestigious American Lectures in the History of Religions for 2013, and the book appears in the eponymous series from Columbia University Press (in the distinguished company of Peter Brown's *The Body and Society* and Wendy Doniger's *The Implied Spider*, among others).¹⁸ Gager has for more than thirty years been one of the architects of a putatively new or radical perspective on the apostle Paul. The fourth and final part of Gager's landmark 1983 monograph *The Origins of*

¹⁵ E.g., Fredriksen, *Paul*, 230, note 43: "Two of the most recent — and longest — works arguing that Paul is a Christian theologian who repudiates Judaism, Wright (2013, 1,660 pages) and Barclay (2015, 656 pages) — do not bring Paul's vivid eschatology into view at all in their respective depictions.... Seeing Paul's letters as examples of 'Christianity,' they fail to consider eschatology as an important factor shaping Paul's message, and they see him as addressing his theology to Jews as well as to gentiles." And similarly *ibid.*, 228, note 36: "[According to Barclay,] Paul the Christian theologian 'radically redefines' Jewish identity and thinks that fleshly circumcision is of no consequence for Jews as well as for gentiles.... Barclay's Paul, like Wright's, is a Christian theologian."

¹⁶ Especially N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (2 vols.; London: SPCK, 2013); and John M. G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015).

¹⁷ John G. Gager, *Who Made Early Christianity? The Jewish Lives of the Apostle Paul* (American Lectures in the History of Religions; New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

¹⁸ My comments on Gager's book here appear in slightly different form in my published review in *Theology Today* 73 (2017): 396–397.

Anti-Semitism was a close consideration of “the case of Paul.”¹⁹ And his *Reinventing Paul* (2000) offered a book-length exposition of what Gager calls “the new view of Paul,” taking stock of developments in the 1980s and 1990s (especially Stowers’s 1994 *Rereading of Romans*).²⁰ The newness or radicalism of Gager’s interpretation of the apostle has to do with his central claim that Paul was not the father of Christian anti-Judaism, nor indeed a Christian at all, but simply a Jew, full stop. (Thus the author’s answer to the question posed in the title of this new book — Who made early Christianity? — is: not Paul.)²¹

This newest book is a further contribution to Gager’s revisionist project, but from a quite different angle. Of the six chapters that comprise the book, only one does any first-order interpretation of the Pauline letters. The rest are concerned with what Gager calls “the Jewish lives of the apostle Paul,” that is, the reception and assessment of Paul in a number of relatively lesser-known Jewish sources from across the centuries. Perhaps the closest bibliographical peer to this book is Daniel Langton’s fine 2010 study *The Apostle Paul in the Jewish Imagination*.²² But whereas Langton examines the many post-Enlightenment Jewish readers of Paul, Gager mines the late antique, medieval, and early modern archives for Jewish perceptions of Paul attested in the Pseudo-Clementines, Toledot Yesu, Abd al-Jabbar, Profiat Duran, and Jacob Emden (as well as modern Jewish critics including Graetz, Klausner, Buber, Taubes, Lapide, Flusser, and Wyschogrod). Gager’s key finding is that the familiar Jewish image of Paul as an apostate is actually a nineteenth-century innovation. Prior to that time, Gager argues, most Jewish thinkers ignored Paul altogether, and those few who took notice mostly recognized him as a co-religionist in good standing.²³

¹⁹ John G. Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism: Attitudes toward Judaism in Pagan and Christian Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 193–264.

²⁰ John G. Gager, *Reinventing Paul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); and see Stanley K. Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews, and Gentiles* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

²¹ Gager, *Who Made Early Christianity*, 12–13: “Not only did Paul not make early Christianity, he had no conception of what we call Christianity.... What we call Christianity is not just post-Pauline; it is un-Pauline.”

²² Daniel R. Langton, *The Apostle Paul in the Jewish Imagination: A Study in Modern Jewish-Christian Relations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

²³ See Gager, *Who Made Early Christianity*, 40: “My claim here is that... [1] There is no perennial Jewish debate with or about Paul through the centuries. [2] The Jewish view of Paul before the modern period is anything but negative. [3] Numerous Jewish thinkers

The book unfolds as follows: An Introduction shows that the classical narrative of the supersession of Judaism by Christianity is given the lie already by Origen, Jerome, and Augustine, and (the book will argue) by Paul himself. Chapter 1, “Was the Apostle to the Gentiles the Father of Christian Anti-Judaism?,” briefly rehearses the argument of Gager’s *Reinventing Paul*: that Paul’s supposedly anti-Jewish sayings are actually directed only at gentile judaizing. Chapter 2, “The Apostle Paul in Jewish Eyes: Heretic or Hero?,” argues that the so-called new view of Paul — that he remained ever a Jew in good standing — was in fact the predominant view among Jews in the middle ages, so far as we can tell from the patchy sources. Chapter 3, “Let’s Meet Downtown in the Synagogue: Four Case Studies,” argues from the Acts of the Apostles and from remains at Antioch, Aphrodisias, Sardis, and Dura Europos that, against the protestations of some bishops and rabbis, Jews and Christians commingled long into late antiquity. Chapter 4, “Two Stories of How Early Christianity Came to Be,” posits a choice between two narratives of Christian origins: first, the classical narrative of the rise of Christianity and attendant decline of Judaism and, second, an alternate narrative of “the ways that never parted,” abuzz with liminal groups of Jewish Christians, Christian judaizers, and others. Chapter 5, “Turning the World Upside Down: An Ancient Jewish Life of Jesus,” is a brief but thorough account of the Toledot Yeshu, arguing that its longer recensions portray Peter and Paul as Jewish sleeper agents among the Christians. Chapter 6, “Epilogue,” makes the case that the thesis argued in the book is no mere historical curiosity but stands to aid the contemporary ethical project of extirpating anti-Semitism.

Gager’s revisionist interpretation of Paul is, still today as in 1983, both powerful and controversial. I recently read where Glenn Bowersock, reviewing *Who Made Early Christianity?* in *The New York Review of Books*, commented, “The new Paul, both Jewish and universalist, as... Gager and others have delineated him, is attractive, but Paul’s own writings remain an immovable obstacle to accepting this view. The contradictions and inconsistencies in his preaching still provide ample support for the old Paul, the Paul of Tertullian, who was the apostle of the heretics, and the Paul of Harnack, who delivered Christianity from Judaism.”²⁴ Now, there is an important idea worth discussing

have sought to reclaim Paul as a Jew — and in the process have managed to recover what I take to be the core of his original preaching.”

²⁴ G. W. Bowersock, “Who Was Saint Paul?” *New York Review of Books* (November 5, 2015).

here,²⁵ but Bowersock's review also misses Gager's point in *Who Made Early Christianity?* What Gager does in this book is not to reiterate his well-known account of Paul (although he certainly stands by that account) but rather to show that that account is not in fact new, but very old, indeed. Gager's excavation of Jewish perceptions of Paul in the middle ages and early modern period is a genuinely novel contribution, one that must now figure in the lively discussion of the apostle's place in the intertwining histories of Judaism and Christianity.

Reading Fredriksen's and Gager's books together raised for me a number of interesting questions. I conclude by posing two of them for the reader's consideration. First, what do these two books tell us about the present state and the possible futures of the Paul within Judaism *Schule*? Both of the authors under review here are leading lights in that *Schule*, and yet, reading them closely side by side, one becomes aware of many particular texts and issues in Paul about which they differ, sometimes quite significantly. For Fredriksen it is crucial that Paul thinks of Jesus as the messiah son of David who will usher in the kingdom of God; while for Gager it is equally important that Paul *not* think of Jesus as the messiah of Israel, but only of the nations. For Fredriksen, Paul's gentile mission may be (in certain respects) law-free, but Paul himself is altogether law-observant; while for Gager (following Lloyd Gaston) Paul strategically transgresses Torah, making himself an apostate for the sake of his gentiles-in-Christ. And I could cite other examples.

Perhaps, as with the so-called New Perspective on Paul, there never really was just *one* radical new perspective. Rather, there was and is a network of interpreters reading Paul together in new (or perhaps very old) directions, in parallel but not actually in agreement with one another. In hindsight, we can now see how, say, E. P. Sanders's and James Dunn's accounts of Paul together moved the field in a certain direction, but when it comes to actually interpreting any particular text, Sanders often differs from Dunn at least as much as either of them differs from Bultmann. And perhaps the same is true of Fredriksen and Gager, and, for that matter, Magnus Zetterholm, Mark Nanos, Pamela Eisenbaum, et al. All of these scholars (and many others, myself included) can rally around the claim that Paul lived his life and discharged his apostolic office within the ambit of his native Judaism. But in fact, it seems to me, radical new perspective scholars actually mean many different things by that (very broad)

²⁵ Margaret Mitchell gets at this idea quite perceptively in her essay in this volume of *JMJS*.

claim, e.g., that Paul's cosmology and eschatology were Jewish not Christian (thus Paula Fredriksen); or that the social context of Paul's Christ assemblies was the synagogue rather than the household (thus Mark Nanos); or that Paul himself kept kosher (thus Karin Hedner Zetterholm); or that Paul opposed any Christ mission to Jews (thus John Gager). But none of these more precise sub-claims entails any of the others, and in fact radical new perspective scholars disagree vigorously about all of them. So how far is it useful for us to continue to think of a perspective or a *Schule*?

Second question: What is the place of *Wirkungsgeschichte* in Pauline studies today? Before reading these two books, I thought, and would have said, that there was a relatively tidy division in our subfield between those who think the future of the study of Paul lies in mining his reception history and those who think it lies in bracketing out that history and pressing back *ad fontes*. Under the former heading, I would have cited Cavan Concannon's clever essay "Paul Is Dead. Long Live Paulinism!" and recent books by Benjamin White (*Remembering Paul*), Jennifer Strawbridge (*The Pauline Effect*), and T. J. Lang (*From Paul to the Second Century*).²⁶ Under the latter heading, I would have cited, well, Paula Fredriksen ("How Later Contexts Affect Pauline Content, or: Retrospect Is the Mother of Anachronism") and John Gager (his broadside against "the traditional view of Paul"), as well as Stanley Stowers, Albert Harrill, the new SBL Consultation on "The Historical Paul," and more.²⁷ In fact, I would have classed most or all of the Paul within Judaism *Schule* among those who put no confidence in reception history. But reading these two books disabused me of that (perhaps naïve) diagnosis of the field. Indeed, Gager's book positively exploded it. *Who Made Early Christianity?* is just as much a reception history of

²⁶ Cavan Concannon, "Paul Is Dead. Long Live Paulinism! Imagining a Future for Pauline Studies," *Ancient Jew Review* (November 1, 2016); Benjamin L. White, *Remembering Paul: Ancient and Modern Contests over the Image of the Apostle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Jennifer Strawbridge, *The Pauline Effect: The Use of the Pauline Epistles by Early Christian Writers* (SBR 5; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015); T. J. Lang, *Mystery and the Making of a Christian Historical Consciousness: From Paul to the Second Century* (BZNW 219; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015).

²⁷ Paula Fredriksen, "How Later Contexts Affect Pauline Content, or: Retrospect Is the Mother of Anachronism," in *Jews and Christians in the First and Second Centuries: How to Write Their History*, eds. Peter J. Tomson and Joshua Schwartz, CRINT 13; Leiden: Brill, 2014), 17–51; Gager, *Reinventing Paul*; Stowers, *Rereading*; J. Albert Harrill, *Paul the Apostle: His Life and Legacy in Their Roman Context* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

Paul as Benjamin White's and Jennifer Strawbridge's books are. It is just that Gager focuses on a different group of recipients: not Tertullian and Augustine but the Toledot Yeshu and Profiat Duran. Fredriksen's book does not scupper my tidy twofold rubric quite so obviously, but it does do so more subtly. Make no mistake: in this book Fredriksen's watchword is still "retrospect is the mother of anachronism." She dedicates the book to the blessed memory of Krister Stendahl, who of course taught us not to assume that Paul understood himself the way Augustine, using Paul's words, understood himself.²⁸

And yet. Here we recall that Fredriksen wrote her PhD on Augustine's early interpretation of Paul, and that her first published book was a Latin edition and English translation of Augustine's *Propositions on the Epistle to the Romans* and *Unfinished Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*.²⁹ It turns out that, at a few key moments in this new book, Fredriksen appeals to Augustine's commentaries against standard modern interpretations of passages in Paul. One of the *cruces*, on which she has persuaded me entirely, is Romans 1:4, where Fredriksen, citing Augustine, argues that Christ is appointed son of God in power not *at the moment of his resurrection from the dead* but *by virtue of his effecting the general resurrection of the dead*.³⁰ This is an ingenious reading, with very important consequences for Paul's understanding of Jesus, and it was there in Augustine's second-hand Latin all along. So perhaps, with apologies to Cavan Concannon, Paul is not dead after all, and perhaps we have Paulinism to thank for resuscitating him.

²⁸ Most famously in Krister Stendahl, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," *HTR* 56 (1963): 199–215.

²⁹ Paula Fredriksen, ed. and trans., *Augustine on Romans* (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1982).

³⁰ See Fredriksen, *Paul*, 141–145.