

Continuity and Disruption: An Analytical Evaluation of Paul's Dual Relationship With Second Temple Judaism

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Abstract

This paper examines the apostle Paul's complex relationship with Second Temple Judaism, arguing that it is best understood through a framework of both continuity and disruption rather than simple rejection or complete identification. Older interpretations, influenced by post-Reformation theological categories, frequently portrayed Paul as abandoning a legalistic Judaism of works in favour of a gospel of grace. The recovery of the diversity, theological coherence, and covenantal character of Second Temple Judaism, particularly through E. P. Sanders's concept of "covenantal nomism," has significantly challenged this traditional paradigm. Against this background, the study analyses the historical and religious contours of Second Temple Judaism as the essential context for evaluating Paul's Jewish identity and theological development. It subsequently explores the ways Paul remained deeply rooted in Jewish Scripture, monotheism, covenantal traditions, messianic expectation, and Jewish patterns of theological reasoning, while also identifying areas in which his Christological convictions, understanding of Torah, and inclusion of Gentiles created significant tensions with aspects of prevailing Jewish thought. Drawing on John M. G. Barclay's understanding of grace and insights from the "Paul within Judaism" school, the paper seeks to reconcile these apparently competing dimensions of continuity and disruption. It argues that Paul should neither be portrayed as a straightforward opponent of Judaism nor reduced to an uncomplicated representative of Second Temple Jewish thought. Rather, his theology reflects a Jewish reconfiguration of covenant, Torah, Messiah, and Gentile inclusion in light of his conviction concerning Jesus Christ. The study concludes that recognising this dual relationship provides a more historically responsible and theologically nuanced approach to Paul and offers important implications for contemporary Jewish-Christian interpretation and dialogue.

Keywords: *Continuity, Disruption, Analytical Evaluation, Paul's Dual Relationship, and Second Temple Judaism*

Introduction

The apostle Paul has long occupied an unstable position in the historiography of Second Temple Judaism, alternately claimed as one of its most representative sons and denounced, or celebrated, as its most decisive opponent. Older scholarship, shaped by post-Reformation categories, tended to resolve this instability by treating Paul's relationship to Judaism as one of straightforward rupture, a legalistic religion of works left behind for a gospel of grace. The recovery of Second Temple Judaism's own internal diversity and theological coherence, beginning decisively with E.

P. Sanders description of “covenantal nomism,” has made that resolution untenable.¹ However, the instability has not disappeared so much as relocated: contemporary scholarship increasingly recognises that Paul stood in a genuinely dual relationship with the Judaism of his day, one marked simultaneously by deep continuity and real disruption. This paper undertakes an analytical evaluation of that dual relationship. It begins by establishing the historical and religious contours of Second Temple Judaism itself, since any assessment of Paul’s continuity or disruption presupposes a clear account of the tradition against which he is being measured. It then examines, in turn, the positive and negative dimensions of Paul’s relationship to that tradition, how his thought remains recognisably and deliberately Jewish, and how it introduces genuine friction with prevailing Second Temple assumptions. The paper then turns to the more constructive task of resolving, where possible, the tension between these two dimensions, drawing especially on John M. G. Barclay’s influential reworking of Pauline grace and on the historical arguments of the “Paul within Judaism” school. It closes by considering what this dual-relationship model implies for how modern readers, Jewish and Christian alike, ought to approach Paul’s letters today.

Understanding Second Temple Judaism

“Second Temple Judaism” designates the religion of the Jewish people from the rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple under Persian sponsorship (c. 516 BCE) to its destruction by Rome in 70 CE. However, scholarly treatments, including Sanders’ own idea, typically concentrate on the final two centuries of that span, roughly 200 BCE to 70 CE, when the sources are richest and when the movements later associated with rabbinic Judaism and with Christianity took shape.² The label is in one sense a modern scholarly convenience rather than a category Jews of the period would have recognised; Cohen notes that the very identity of “Judaism” as a bounded system, as opposed to a way of life inseparable from ethnicity and land, is itself a matter of considerable definitional difficulty for this era. Institutionally, the period was dominated by the Jerusalem Temple, which functioned not merely as a site of sacrifice but as the central symbol of Israel’s covenant relationship with God, the locus of atonement, pilgrimage, and priestly authority. Sanders’ magisterial account of “common Judaism” reconstructs, from Josephus, Philo, and early rabbinic sources, the daily, weekly, and annual religious practices, prayer, tithing, purity observance, festival pilgrimage, Sabbath rest, that bound ordinary Jews together beneath the more visible disputes of the period’s various parties.³ Sanders’ central methodological claim, developed initially in his 1977 study and extended in this later work, was that the theological “pattern” underlying this common practice was covenantal nomism: election by God’s grace grounds the relationship, and obedience to Torah maintains rather than earns it, with atonement available for transgression through repentance and sacrifice. This common ground, however, coexisted with substantial internal diversity. Josephus famously catalogues four principal “philosophies”: Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and the more revolutionary “fourth philosophy” associated with Judas the Galilean, each holding distinctive views on providence, resurrection, and the authority of oral tradition alongside the written Torah. The Pharisees, the group with which Paul explicitly identifies himself in Philippians 3:5, were known for extending priestly purity concerns into everyday life and for supplementing the written law with an oral tradition of interpretation; the Sadducees, by

¹ E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (London: SCM Press, 1977), 75, 422.

² Shaye J. D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 1-25.

³ E. P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief, 63 BCE-66 CE* (London: SCM Press, 1992), 55-76.

contrast, rejected doctrines such as bodily resurrection that lacked clear scriptural warrant, while the Essenes, plausibly connected to the Qumran community that produced the Dead Sea Scrolls, withdrew from what they regarded as a corrupted Temple establishment to await eschatological vindication. Beyond the land of Israel, the Jewish Diaspora added a further layer of diversity. John J. Collins' study of Hellenistic Jewish literature demonstrates that Jewish communities in cities such as Alexandria negotiated their identity through sustained and sophisticated engagement with Greek philosophy, historiography, and rhetoric, producing authors such as Philo and the tragedian Ezekiel who articulated Jewish monotheism and ancestral law in categories borrowed from, even as they resisted assimilation into, the dominant Hellenistic culture.⁴ Paul, a Diaspora Jew from Tarsus, trained, on his own testimony, in the Pharisaic tradition and fluent in Greek rhetorical conventions, must be located within precisely this negotiated space between Jerusalem and the wider Hellenistic world, rather than assigned exclusively to either pole.

Theologically, several convictions can be identified as broadly shared across this diversity and therefore as the baseline against which Paul's continuity or disruption must be measured: the exclusive worship of the God of Israel; the election of Israel as God's covenant people through the promises to Abraham and the Sinai covenant; the authority of Torah as the expression of that covenant relationship; hope for God's eschatological vindication of Israel, variously imagined as national restoration, resurrection, or cosmic renewal; and the conviction that Gentiles, while capable of a right relationship to the one God, stood outside Israel's covenant unless they underwent proselyte conversion, most visibly signified for males by circumcision.⁵ James D. G. Dunn's influential 1983 essay proposed that certain practices, circumcision, food laws, and Sabbath observance in particular, functioned within this system less as abstract legal requirements than as social "boundary markers" distinguishing Jew from Gentile, a functional description that will prove significant for understanding Paul's later polemics.⁶ It is against this composite portrait, a common covenantal theology instantiated through genuinely diverse sectarian, regional, and cultural expressions, that Paul's own thought must be situated. He was not a rebel against a monolithic legalistic system, since no such system existed; rather, he was one interpreter among several competing interpreters of what covenant fidelity required in a period of acute eschatological expectation, Roman occupation, and internal Jewish debate.

Paul's Positive Relationship with Second Temple Judaism

Paul's continuity with Second Temple Judaism is evident first in the categories of thought through which he articulates his gospel. His argumentation in Romans and Galatians proceeds almost entirely through scriptural exegesis, of Abraham, of Deuteronomy, of the prophets, conducted according to interpretive conventions recognisable from contemporary Jewish exegesis, including typological reading, catena-style scriptural chains, and a robust doctrine of Israel's ongoing election (Romans 9:4-5; 11:29). Paula Fredriksen's account of Paul's apocalyptic self-understanding situates this exegetical continuity within a broader theological one: Paul understood his gentile mission as the fulfillment, not the abandonment, of Israel's prophetic expectation that

⁴ John J. Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem: Jewish Identity in the Hellenistic Diaspora*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 3-25.

⁵ E. P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief, 63 BCE-66 CE* (London: SCM Press, 1992), 55-76; Shaye J. D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 1-25; and John J. Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem: Jewish Identity in the Hellenistic Diaspora*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 3-25.

⁶ James D. G. Dunn, "The New Perspective on Paul," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 65 (1983): 95-122.

the nations would ultimately stream to Zion to worship the God of Israel.⁷ This eschatological framework, rather than being a Pauline innovation, draws directly on prophetic and apocalyptic traditions already present in Second Temple Judaism.

Paul's own self-description reinforces this continuity. In Philippians 3:5-6, he lists his credentials: circumcision on the eighth day, membership in the tribe of Benjamin, Pharisaic training, and blamelessness under the law, not as a catalogue of errors renounced but, on a plain reading, as claims still relevant to his argument. In Romans 11:1, he offers himself, in the present tense, as proof that God has not rejected Israel: "I myself am an Israelite." Mark Nanos and Magnus Zetterholm's edited volume collects a range of essays arguing, on the strength of texts such as these, that Paul continued to understand himself as a practicing Jew throughout his apostolic career, and that his letters give no positive evidence of his having abandoned circumcision, Sabbath, or dietary observance for himself.⁸

Paul's theology of grace, moreover, is continuous with rather than opposed to Second Temple Jewish conceptions of divine mercy, once those conceptions are properly understood. John Barclay's comprehensive study of the anthropology of gift-giving in antiquity demonstrates that grace (*charis*) as "incongruity," a gift given without regard to the worth of the recipient, was already a live and debated theological option within Second Temple Judaism, articulated with particular clarity in texts such as the *Qumran Hodayot* and in Paul's own scriptural standard, the Abraham narrative of Genesis 15, and especially, Barclay's comparative survey of six Jewish texts on grace in chapters 3-4.⁹ Paul's insistence on grace apart from prior merit, in other words, was not an imported novelty but an intensification of one strand already available within Jewish covenantal reflection, even as other Second Temple authors emphasised different configurations of the same concept. Finally, Paul's ethical instruction remains deeply indebted to Jewish moral tradition. His vice and virtue lists, his appeals to the Shema's monotheism as grounds for ethical exclusivity (1 Corinthians 8:6), and his repeated invocation of love of neighbor as the summation of the law (Romans 13:8-10; Galatians 5:14) all draw directly on Levitical and prophetic ethics rather than constructing an ethical system *de novo*. Taken together, these lines of continuity, Scriptural, autobiographical, theological, and ethical, establish that whatever disruption Paul introduces must be understood as arising from within a fundamentally Jewish framework rather than as its wholesale replacement.

Paul's Negative Relationship with Second Temple Judaism

Against this considerable continuity, however, stand genuine points of friction that cannot be interpretively dissolved without doing violence to Paul's letters. The most obvious concerns are circumcision and the status of Gentile converts. Where the dominant Second Temple position, reflected for instance in the conversion narrative of Achior in the book of Judith and in various rabbinic-era proselyte traditions, held that a Gentile could join the covenant people through circumcision and adoption of the law, Paul argues forcefully, particularly in Galatians, that gentile circumcision is not merely unnecessary but actively severs the circumcised Gentile from the benefit of Christ (Galatians 5:2-4). Matthew Thiessen situates this polemic within an internal

⁷ Paula Fredriksen, *Paul: The Pagans' Apostle* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 131-145.

⁸ Magnus Zetterholm, "Paul within Judaism: The State of the Questions," in *Paul within Judaism: Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle*, ed. Mark D. Nanos and Magnus Zetterholm (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 31-51.

⁹ John M. G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015). Barclay especially made a unique comparative survey of six Jewish texts on grace in chapters 3-4 of this book.

Jewish debate over whether adult gentile circumcision was even a valid means of ethnic transformation, arguing that Paul sided with a minority Jewish position holding it invalid, however even on this more conciliatory reading, Paul's practical conclusion diverged sharply from what most of his Jewish contemporaries, and evidently some Jewish members of the early Jesus movement, took to be the obvious solution to the gentile question.¹⁰

A second point of disruption concerns Paul's argument, especially in Romans 2-3 and Galatians 3, that "works of the law" cannot justify. Dunn's boundary-marker thesis reframes this argument as directed at the ethnocentric misuse of Torah rather than at Torah observance as such, but even on this reading Paul's rhetoric goes further than a mere critique of misuse: he asserts a universal indictment of both Jew and Gentile under sin (Romans 3:9), relativises the salvific significance of the Sinai covenant in relation to the earlier, unconditional Abrahamic promise (Galatians 3:17), and describes the law's historical function in strikingly negative terms, as a temporary "guardian" or even, in Galatians 3:19, as something "added because of transgressions." No mainstream Second Temple Jewish source treats Torah in comparably provisional terms.

A third and more structural disruption concerns Paul's apocalyptic Christology. His conviction that the crucified and risen Messiah constitutes the decisive turning point of the ages relativises every other marker of identity and status, Jewish or Gentile, before the singular category of being "in Christ" (Galatians 3:28; 2 Corinthians 5:17). Daniel Boyarin, while insisting throughout on Paul's essential Jewishness, argues that this universalising impulse generates real and unresolved tension with the particularism that undergirds covenantal identity in the rest of Second Temple literature: a gospel in which ethnic difference becomes, in Christ, theologically indifferent stands in some tension with a tradition for which ethnic and genealogical particularity is the very mechanism of election.¹¹ Finally, Paul's grief-laden argument in Romans 9-11 that "not all Israelites truly belong to Israel" (9:6) and that a "hardening has come upon part of Israel" (11:25) reflects a genuinely painful renegotiation of covenantal boundaries from within, prompted by the empirical fact that most of his fellow Jews had not accepted the gospel he proclaimed. However, this argument is ultimately resolved within Romans itself, its very existence testifies that Paul's gospel produced a disruption within the Jewish community serious enough to require sustained theological justification, not merely rhetorical colour. These four points of friction, gentile circumcision, the provisional status of Torah, the relativising force of "in Christ" identity, and the fracture within Israel itself, constitute the negative pole of Paul's dual relationship with Second Temple Judaism.

Resolving the Tensions of Paul's Dual Relationship with Second Temple Judaism

The preceding two sections might appear to reproduce, in more careful form, the old opposition between a Jewish Paul and an anti-Jewish Paul. A more adequate resolution requires distinguishing the several registers on which continuity and disruption operate, since much of the apparent contradiction dissolves once these registers are kept separate. Barclay's gift-theory offers the most sophisticated tool available for this task. Barclay demonstrates that ancient discussions of grace or gift could vary independently along several distinct "perfections," superabundance, singularity, priority, incongruity, efficacy, and non-circularity, and that Paul's distinctive contribution was to "perfect" the incongruity of grace (its total disregard for the worth of the recipient) to a degree

¹⁰ Matthew Thiessen, *Paul and the Gentile Problem* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 73-82.

¹¹ Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 180-200.

unusual, though not unprecedented, within Second Temple Judaism, while leaving other perfections, such as grace's ultimate efficacy in transforming the believer's life, articulated in terms fully continuous with Jewish moral expectation.¹² On this analysis, what looks like wholesale disruption is, more precisely, the radicalisation of one strand of Jewish theology (grace as unmerited) applied polemically against another strand (ethnic privilege as a condition of covenant membership), rather than a rejection of Jewish theology as such.

A second resolving strategy, associated with the "Paul within Judaism" school, addresses the tension by attending carefully to Paul's implied audience. John Gager and Mark Nanos both argue that the overwhelming majority of Paul's polemical statements about the law's inadequacy are addressed specifically to gentile audiences tempted to complete their standing before God through circumcision and proselyte conversion, not to Jewish believers debating the ongoing validity of their own ancestral practice.¹³ On this reading, the disruption Paul introduces is real but bounded: it concerns exclusively the terms on which gentiles may be incorporated into the people of God, and does not extend, as later Christian interpretation assumed, to a general verdict on the value or validity of Jewish law observance as such. This audience-sensitive resolution accounts for much of the positive material surveyed in Section III without requiring the negative material of Section IV to be explained away. A third resolving strategy locates the tension within Paul's eschatological timetable rather than within a static theological system. N. T. Wright's extensive treatment of Paul's thought argues that Paul understood the Christ-event as the fulfillment, in an unexpected and Messiah-shaped form, of Israel's own scriptural narrative, the story of a single, faithful, covenant God bringing his covenant purposes for Israel and the world to their intended climax.¹⁴ In this narrative-historical account, disruption and continuity are not competing descriptions but two necessary features of any genuine fulfillment: a climax that merely repeated what came before would not be a climax at all; a climax that abandoned the story's own internal logic would not be a fulfillment. Paul's dual relationship to Second Temple Judaism, in other words, is structurally what one would expect from a writer convinced that his own moment constituted the decisive, if paradoxical, culmination of Israel's story rather than its replacement by an unrelated one.

These three strategies, Barclay's differentiated grace, the PWJ school's audience-sensitivity, and Wright's narrative-eschatological fulfillment, are not mutually exclusive, and a comprehensive resolution likely requires elements of all three. What they share is a refusal to collapse Paul's relationship to Judaism into either a single continuous line or a single decisive break, insisting instead that continuity and disruption operate simultaneously, at different levels of Paul's argument, without contradiction.

Implications for Modern Views and Readers of Paul

This dual-relationship model carries significant implications for how Paul is read today, both within the academy and within faith communities that continue to treat his letters as scripture. The most immediate implication concerns the long history of Christian supersessionism, in which Paul's negative statements about "works of the law" were detached from their original gentile-directed context and generalised into a verdict on Judaism as a whole, a misreading with a documented and, at points, catastrophic history in the development of Christian anti-Judaism.

¹² John M. G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 66-78, 331-446, 449-561.

¹³ John G. Gager, *Reinventing Paul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 77-144; and Magnus Zetterholm, "Paul within Judaism: The State of the Questions," in *Paul within Judaism: Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle*, ed. Mark D. Nanos and Magnus Zetterholm (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 31-51.

¹⁴ N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 117-120.

Brian Tucker's post-supersessionist reading of Romans, explicitly indebted to the PWJ paradigm surveyed above, models one way contemporary theological readers might recover Paul's positive affirmations of ongoing Jewish covenantal identity without thereby erasing the genuine disruptive force of his gentile-inclusive gospel¹⁵.

For Jewish-Christian dialogue specifically, the recognition that Paul's disruptive statements were addressed to a narrower question, the terms of gentile inclusion, than later Christian theology assumed opens space for contemporary readers to distinguish Paul's own arguments from the uses to which they were subsequently put. This distinction matters practically: a Christian reader convinced that Paul's critique of "works of the law" was never a critique of Jewish observance as such has considerably less theological warrant for treating contemporary Judaism as spiritually deficient or superseded, and considerably more warrant for approaching Jewish tradition, in Pauline terms, as a still-standing olive tree into which gentile believers have been grafted (Rom. 11:17-24) rather than a tree that has been uprooted and replaced.

For academic biblical scholarship, the dual-relationship model counsels methodological humility toward any reading of Paul that resolves too neatly in either direction. Readings that emphasise continuity exclusively risk flattening the genuine, sometimes anguished, novelty of Paul's gentile mission and its consequences, evident not least in his own grief over Israel in Romans 9-11. The readings that emphasise disruption exclusively risk reproducing the very anachronism, a Paul who has already become a "Christian" standing outside Judaism, that historical criticism, from Stendahl onward, has worked to correct. Barclay's own methodological caution is instructive here; that is, his differentiated account of grace's several "perfections" allows scholars to say precisely which aspects of Paul's thought are continuous with Second Temple Judaism and which are distinctively, even disruptively, his own, rather than offering a single global verdict.

Finally, for general readers encountering Paul outside specialist debates, the dual-relationship model offers a corrective to two equally reductive popular pictures: Paul as the founder of a religion opposed to Judaism, and Paul as simply and unproblematically a first-century rabbi whose Jewishness resolves every interpretive difficulty. Both pictures, in their different ways, obscure the historically demanding but theologically productive complexity of a writer who understood himself, without apparent contradiction, as both a faithful Israelite and the apostle charged with disrupting Israel's settled expectations for the sake of the world's nations.

Conclusion

Paul's relationship to Second Temple Judaism cannot be reduced to either simple continuity or simple rupture. He remained, on the evidence of his own letters, a scripturally saturated, covenantally-minded, ethically Jewish thinker, even as his gentile mission generated real friction with prevailing Jewish assumptions about circumcision, the status of Torah, and the boundaries of covenant identity. Also, Barclay's differentiated theology of grace, the PWJ school's attention to Paul's gentile-directed audience, and Wright's narrative-eschatological account of fulfillment, and all of these suggest that this duality is not a flaw to be resolved away but a structural feature of Paul's own self-understanding as an apostle standing at what he believed to be the climactic and disruptive fulfillment of Israel's continuous covenantal story.

¹⁵ J. Brian Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism: The Continuation of Jewish Covenantal Identity* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018), 244-248.

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