

THE FIRST PAUL

*Reclaiming the Radical Visionary
Behind the Church's Conservative Icon*



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PAUL: APPEALING OR APPALLING?

PAUL IS SECOND ONLY TO JESUS as the most important person in the origins of Christianity. Yet he is not universally well regarded, even among Christians. Some find him appealing, and others find him appalling; some aren't sure what to think of him, and others know little about him.

The cover of *Newsweek* for May 6, 2002, asked, "What Would Jesus Do?" The story inside referred to Paul as well, citing passages attributed to him on slavery, anti-Semitism, misogyny, and heterosexism:

The Biblical defense of slavery is: "Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart as you obey Christ," writes Saint Paul. Anti-Semitism was long justified by passages like this one from I Thessalonians: the Jews "killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets." And the subjugation of women had

a foundation in I Timothy: “As in all the churches of the saints, women should be silent in the churches. . . . If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.” And yet in each case, enlightened people have moved on from the worldview such passages express. . . .

And if science now teaches us that being gay may be a “natural” state, how can a reading of the Bible, including Saint Paul’s condemnation of same-sex interaction in Romans, inarguably cast homosexuality in “unnatural” terms?

These are among the passages in letters attributed to Paul that many find more appalling than appealing. So we begin our story of Paul by speaking about his importance, the reasons for his mixed reputation, and the foundations for our way of seeing him.

Paul’s importance is obvious from the New Testament itself. There are twenty-seven books in the New Testament, though to call them “books” is a bit of a misnomer, for some are only a page or a few pages long. Of these twenty-seven, thirteen are letters attributed to Paul. Not all were actually written by Paul, as we will soon report, but they bear his name. To these add the book of Acts, in which Paul is the main character in sixteen of its twenty-eight chapters. Thus half of the New Testament is about Paul.

Moreover, according to the New Testament, Paul was chiefly responsible for expanding the early Jesus movement to include Gentiles (non-Jews) as well as Jews. The result over time was a new religion, even though Paul (like Jesus) was a Jew who saw himself working within Judaism. Neither intended that a new religion would emerge in his wake.

This does not mean that Christianity is a mistake. But it does mean that the two most important foundational figures of Christianity were Jews whose passion was the God and the people of Israel. When Paul spoke to non-Jews, it was to the God of Israel as disclosed in Jesus to whom he called them. Nevertheless, Paul more than any other figure in the New Testament was responsible for the emergence of Christianity as a new religion that, though it included Jews, became increasingly separated from Judaism.

Paul's importance extends beyond the New Testament into the history of Christianity. Many of its most important theologians and reformers were decisively shaped by Paul's letters. St. Augustine (354–430) was converted to Christianity by a passage from Paul. Before his conversion he was a gifted, brilliant, and troubled young man who fathered a child with a woman to whom he was not married. His spiritual journey led him through philosophy to Manicheanism, a religion that emphasized that the flesh was bad and spirit was good.

Then one day, as Augustine tells the story, he heard a child singing, "Pick it up, read it." He picked up a copy of the New Testament, and his eyes fell upon Romans 13:13–14:

Let us live . . . not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ . . .

In his *Confessions*, commonly seen as the world's first spiritual autobiography, he reports:

Instantly, as the sentence ended, there was infused in my heart something like the light of full certainty and all of the gloom of doubt vanished away.

After this experience mediated by Paul, Augustine became the most influential theologian of the first millennium of Christianity.

In the more than thousand years from Augustine to the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, Paul continued to be revered because his writings were part of Christian sacred scripture. But during the Reformation, he became decisively important for Protestants. Martin Luther (1483–1546) had his transforming experience of radical grace while preparing lectures on Paul. Paul became the foundation of his theology, especially the Pauline contrasts between grace and law, and faith and works, language that has been paradigmatically important for Lutherans ever since.

John Calvin (1509–64), the other most important Protestant Reformer, also made Paul central to his theology. Calvin's theological descendants include millions of Protestants: Puritans, Presbyterians, Baptists, Congregationalists (today's United Church of Christ), and other Reformed denominations.

Two centuries later, Paul played a central role in the birth of the Methodist church. Its founder, John Wesley (1703–91), was converted to his mission to reform the Church of England while listening to a reading of Luther's commentary on Paul's letter to the Romans. His life's work eventually led to a new denomination, now the second largest Protestant denomination in America. Thus hundreds of millions of Protestants around the world, whether they know it or not, have Paul as their primary theological ancestor.

To say the obvious, Paul matters. But how he matters and how much he matters vary greatly among Christians. There are very diverse understandings of Paul's importance, message, and character. To some extent, the same could be said of Jesus, for he is diversely interpreted as well. But all Christians agree that Jesus was admirable, attractive, and appealing. Not so with Paul.

THE CATHOLIC PAUL AND THE PROTESTANT PAUL

Catholics and Protestants see Paul's importance quite differently. For Protestants (at least historically—we're not sure about the present), an interpretation of Paul's theology and language is foundational for understanding Christianity. Not so for Catholics. Though they see Paul as a saint and his letters as sacred scripture, they have not made Paul central in the way that Protestants have. This difference can easily be seen in the history of Protestant and Catholic theology since the Reformation. But we illustrate it by speaking autobiographically.

Borg: In the Lutheran form of Christianity in which I grew up, Paul was more important than Jesus. Of course, none of my pastors or Sunday school teachers ever said this. Indeed, they would be puzzled by the statement. But as I look back on my experience of growing up Lutheran, it is clear that I was taught to see Jesus, God, and the Christian gospel through a Pauline lens as mediated by Luther. I was blissfully unaware of this, of course. I took it for granted that *our* way of seeing Jesus, God, and Christianity was not *a* way of seeing them, but *the* way.

For me as a Lutheran, the foundational Christian message was "justification by grace through faith," a Pauline and Lutheran phrase often shortened to "justification by faith." What this meant to me was that I would be accepted by God "by faith"—and faith meant believing in Jesus and God as understood by Paul and Luther.

Not until I went to seminary in my early twenties did I realize how Lutheran my way of seeing Paul and the gospel was. Not that the Lutheran view is simply wrong—it's much better than some. But I learned that there are other vantage points for seeing Paul, some that add greatly to his richness and fullness.

In another seminary decades later, I encountered the difference between Catholic and Protestant perceptions of Paul first-hand. While I was a visiting professor of New Testament in a theological consortium that included three Catholic seminaries, a number of Catholic students attended my courses. As I was lecturing about Paul's understanding of justification by grace, I noticed that several of the Catholic students looked puzzled, and then one asked, "What's all this about 'justification by grace'? Why is this important?" I realized that the phrase was largely foreign to them. Their puzzlement did not reflect theological naiveté, but the different significance of Paul for Protestants and Catholics.

Crossan: I, on the other hand, grew up blissfully unaware of those battling interpretations of Paul or even of the fierce Reformation controversies about him. As a Catholic, I knew him first as the latter half of a June 29 feast day dedicated to Sts. Peter and Paul, and my memory says that in the Ireland of the late 1930s and early 1940s that was a Holy Day of Obligation—like a Sunday. Then, in 1945, in a classical boarding school in Ireland, I ran into "Romulus et Remus" and realized that the twin heroes of pagan Rome had been displaced by "Petrus et Paulus," the twin heroes of Christian Rome—the double *R* ceding smoothly to the double *P*—with both individuals always in that given order.

Next, in 1959, when I first stood in St. Peter's Square in Rome and looked at the statues of St. Peter (on the basilica's primary, or gospel, side) and St. Paul (on its secondary, or epistle, side), I realized that their unity was as apostles martyred together in Rome. Paul was not there as an author or a theologian, but as a martyr. But, of course, while Peter held his keys, Paul did not hold his epistles.

I knew, by then, that there was already tension between Peter and Paul within the New Testament itself. Paul accused Peter "to

his face” of “hypocrisy”—twice (Gal. 2:11–13). And, later, an author writing in Peter’s name noted that “our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him . . . in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures” (2 Pet. 3:15–16). So those twin Roman statues in front of St. Peter’s represented a visual reconciliation of a process that went back to the fourth century, when Peter and Paul were emphasized together as the martyred founders of the new Christian Rome (match that, Constantinople!).

Finally, then, I conclude with an iconic image of that foundational reconciliation from the later fourth century. It is a bronze hanging lamp from the villa of the aristocratic Valerii on the Celian Hill in Rome, now preserved in the National Archaeological Museum in Florence. The lamp is shaped like a boat. Peter is seated in the stern at the tiller. Paul is standing in the prow looking forward. Peter steers. Paul guides. And the boat sails full before the wind.

In coauthoring this book in the “Year of Paul,” June 29, 2008, to June 29, 2009, as proclaimed by Pope Benedict XVI, our common hope is that we can get Paul out of the Reformation world and back into the Roman world, to see him properly as contrasting not Christianity to Judaism or Protestantism to Catholicism, but Jewish covenantal traditions to Roman imperial theology.

Even though Protestants agree about Paul’s importance, they see his message very differently. Two visions are especially divergent. For some, Paul has been a mediator of radical grace, unconditional grace—grace without conditions. So it was for Luther. Paul’s message of justification by grace through faith brought about a joyous liberation from his anxious effort to be right with God by meeting God’s requirements, a fear-filled task that

tormented him into his thirties. Radical grace meant for Luther that God accepts us just as we are, and the Christian life is about living more and more fully into this realization, not about measuring up to requirements. For Luther, Paul's message was about the end of requirements as the basis of our relationship with God.

For other Protestants, including even many descendants of Luther, Paul's theology has been understood not as the abolition of requirements, but as the new requirement—namely, believing his theology is what we must do in order to be saved. In its Lutheran form, despite the emphasis upon God's grace, "justification by grace through faith" was heard as "justification by faith" and thus as involving a fearful form of works righteousness: the "work" was "to believe." Faith meant believing in a correct set of doctrines (which happened to be Lutheran), and this was the gateway to salvation. What Luther experienced as joyful liberation from anxiety became the source of deep anxiety. Faith—believing—became the new requirement we are to fulfill and by which we are to measure up.

This notion—that we are saved by believing a set of teachings about Jesus, God, and the Bible—continues among many Protestants in our time. It is especially prevalent among those who emphasize "believing the right things" as foundational to being Christian and thus as a requirement for salvation.

PAUL THE SPOILER

In addition to those with divergent interpretations of Paul that are positive, a growing number of Christians have a negative impression of him. For some, the reason is the difficulty of reading and understanding Paul's letters. They are very unlike the gospels, which are full of stories and memorable teachings. Rather, as letters written to Christian communities that had already been

taught about Jesus, they do not often refer to his message and teaching. They strike many readers as “theological” in the negative sense of the word—as abstract rather than concrete, wordy rather than memorable.

Moreover, Paul’s letters deal with local matters in these communities, including their questions and conflicts, and so they do not make much sense unless we know the local context in some detail. When we read Paul, we are reading somebody else’s mail—and unless we know the situation being addressed, his letters can be quite opaque.

A third reason was mentioned at the beginning of this chapter; namely, passages from letters attributed to Paul endorse slavery, subordinate women, and condemn homosexual behavior. They have been used for much of Christian history to justify systems of oppression. As recently as a hundred and fifty years ago, some Christians used passages from Paul to defend slavery. Howard Thurman, a well-known twentieth-century African American pastor, theologian, and mystic, reported that his mother, a deeply devout Christian, would not read Paul because of the passages on slavery.

The subordination of women within the church and society lasted even longer than slavery. Only in the last forty years did most mainline Protestant denominations begin to ordain women as clergy. The Catholic church does not, most conservative Protestant churches do not, and many teach the subordination of wives to husbands. For these positions, passages from Paul’s letters provide the primary justification. And the condemnation of homosexuality continues in many churches. Even within churches in which the attitude toward homosexuality is changing, the change often causes conflict.

Thus Paul has been used to support systems of cultural conventions oppressive to more than half of the human race. No

wonder slaves, women, gays and lesbians, and those who care about them have often found Paul appalling.

In addition, we note a passage from Paul, not mentioned in the *Newsweek* article, that has been used in a comprehensive way to justify systems of oppression. The full passage is Romans 13:1–7; we quote its well-known opening lines:

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.

In the familiar and succinct phrase from an older translation, a portion of the first verse reads, “The powers that be are ordained by God.” For centuries, this passage was used by Christian rulers to legitimate their rule and to demand obedience to it. Ordinary Christians understood it to require political quiescence.

We will return to this passage in Chapter 4. For now we note that during World War II, many German Christians used this passage to justify obedience to the Third Reich. Closer to our own time and place, many Christians in this country used it to oppose civil disobedience during the civil rights movement. More recently, a number of well-known evangelical preachers used it to legitimate supporting the American government’s decision to invade Iraq: Christians are to obey their governments, whatever they do. But this is increasingly unpersuasive to many Christians.

Beyond these passages, some see Paul not simply as being wrong about specific issues in specific verses, but as the “spoiler” who pervasively distorted the message of Jesus. Several books, some written by scholars, argue that Paul changed the teaching

and message *of* Jesus into a set of abstract doctrines *about* Jesus, and thus transformed the religion *of* Jesus into a religion *about* Jesus. For these, Paul was wrong not just in a few passages, but comprehensively. Jesus is good, but Paul is bad.

We do not share these negative views of Paul, even as we are quite willing to say he was wrong about some things. To see Paul positively does not mean endorsing everything he ever wrote.

But we are among his admirers. We see him as an appealing apostle of Jesus whose vision of life “in Christ”—one of his favored phrases—is remarkably faithful to the message and vision of Jesus himself. When we take into account the different circumstances of their activity—Jesus addressing Jews living in the Jewish homeland and Paul addressing Jews and Gentiles in the cities of the Roman Empire beyond the Jewish homeland—Paul emerges as a faithful apostle of the radical Jesus who became his Lord. For many people, meeting this Paul will be like meeting Paul again for the first time.

MEETING PAUL AGAIN

We begin by placing Paul in time and space. In Chapter 3, we will treat the life of Paul in some detail. For now, we provide some markers, beginning with Jesus.

Jesus was born around 4 BCE, possibly a year or two earlier. In the late 20s, he began his public activity and was soon executed by Roman imperial authority, most likely in the year 30 CE.

We don't know when Paul was born, but the most probable guess is the first decade of the first century. The basis for the guess is simple. Paul lived, and lived robustly, into the 60s of the first century. It is unlikely that he was in his seventies or eighties by then. Thus, Paul and Jesus were roughly contemporary, Paul not much younger than Jesus.

Though both were Jewish, they grew up in very different settings: Jesus in a small Jewish village in Galilee; Paul in Tarsus, a significant city in southern Asia Minor, modern-day Turkey. Jesus lived his life in the Jewish homeland. Paul was a product of the Jewish “Diaspora,” a term referring to Jewish communities outside of the homeland.

We first hear of Paul in Acts a few years after Jesus’s crucifixion. In Acts 7, in Jerusalem, he is present at the killing by stoning of a follower of Jesus named Stephen, commonly spoken of as the first Christian martyr. The story of Stephen’s martyrdom ends in Acts 8:1 with the terse comment: “And Saul approved of their killing him.” Saul—his name would be changed to Paul after his conversion—was probably in his twenties and almost certainly not much over thirty.

We next hear of him in Acts 9. Still named Saul, he is now himself persecuting followers of Jesus. Then, three to five years after Jesus’s death, Saul had a life-changing experience of the risen Christ near or in Damascus in Syria. It transformed him from Saul, the persecutor of Jesus, to Paul, the apostle of Jesus to the Gentiles. For about twenty-five years thereafter, on foot and by sea, Paul traversed the eastern Roman Empire, mostly in Asia Minor and Greece, finally ending up in Rome. There, according to Christian tradition, he was executed, most likely in the early 60s.

During his lifetime, the written gospels did not yet exist. The first gospel, Mark, was written around the year 70, and the other three gospels in the New Testament—Matthew, Luke, and John—in the final decades of the first century. Paul’s genuine letters, most or all written during the 50s, are thus the earliest writings in the New Testament.

With this chronology in mind, we turn now to the foundations of the way of seeing Paul that we develop in this book. They are not peculiar to us, but shared by mainstream New Tes-

tament scholarship—by which we mean the kind of scholarship taught in nonsectarian universities and colleges as well as seminaries of mainline denominations.

What differentiates mainstream scholars from fundamentalist and many conservative scholars is that the former do not begin with the presumption that the Bible is unlike other books in that it has a divine guarantee to be inerrant and infallible. Rather, mainstream scholars see the Bible as a historical product that can be studied as other historical documents are, without specifically Christian theological convictions shaping the outcome.

It is the approach described by the contemporary Catholic scholar John Meier, who begins his multivolume study of the historical Jesus by asking us to imagine four highly competent historians, all specialists in the study of Christian origins—a Catholic, a Protestant, a Jew, and an atheist—locked in a library until they can arrive at a consensus statement about Jesus. What could they agree on? What they could agree on, of course, would be those matters about which their specific religious beliefs would not be the deciding factor. It might not be much, but it would be foundational.

In this approach, three foundational statements form the basis of our way of seeing Paul. First, not all of the letters attributed to Paul were written by him—there is *more than one Paul* in the New Testament. Second, it is essential to place his letters in their *historical context*. Third, his message—his teaching, his gospel—is grounded in his life-changing and sustaining experience of the risen Christ; Paul, we will argue, is best understood as a *Jewish Christ mystic*.

THREE PAULS

Mainstream scholarship as it has developed over the last two centuries has concluded that the thirteen letters attributed to

Paul fall into three categories: letters written by Paul, those *not* written by him, and ones about which there is uncertainty. According to a massive scholarly consensus, at least seven letters are “genuine”—that is, written by Paul himself. These seven include three longer ones (Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians) and four shorter ones (1 Thessalonians, Galatians, Philippians, and Philemon). Written in the 50s of the first century, plus or minus a year or two, they are the earliest documents in the New Testament, earlier than the gospels (recall that Mark, the first gospel, was written around 70). Thus the genuine letters of Paul are the oldest witness we have to what was to become Christianity.

According to an almost equally strong consensus, three letters were not written by Paul: 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, commonly known as the “pastoral letters” or simply the “pastorals.” Scholars estimate that they were written around the year 100, possibly a decade or two later. These are seen as “non-Pauline” because they have what looks like a later historical setting and a style of writing quite unlike Paul’s in the seven genuine letters. Thus the letters to Timothy and Titus were written in the name of Paul several decades after his death. In case some readers may think that writing in somebody else’s name was dishonest or fraudulent, we note that it was a common practice in the ancient world. It was a literary convention of the time, including within Judaism.

The third group, letters about which there is no scholarly consensus, are, however, seen by a majority as *not* coming from Paul. Often called the “disputed” letters, they include Ephesians, Colossians, and 2 Thessalonians. We are among those who see these as “post-Paul,” written a generation or so after his death, midway between the genuine letters and the later pastoral letters.

Thus there are three “Pauls” within the letters attributed to him. To give names to these “Pauls,” we call the Paul of the seven genuine letters the *radical Paul*. We call the Paul of the three pastoral

letters the *reactionary Paul*, for the author of these letters is not simply developing Paul's message, but countering it at important points. What we see, as we shall illustrate in Chapter 2, is a strong accommodation of Paul's thought to the conventional mores of his contemporary time. In comparison to the radical Paul, we name the Paul of the disputed letters as the *conservative Paul*.

Our purpose is not to raise a debate about the use of terms like "radical," "reactionary," and "conservative." Rather, it is to insist that the post-Pauline, pseudo-Pauline letters are anti-Pauline with regard to major aspects of his theology. They represent, as we argue in the next chapter, a taming of Paul, a domestication of Paul's passion to the normalcy of the Roman imperial world in which he and his followers lived.

We do not want to complicate matters too much by introducing a *fourth Paul*, but the nature of our sources requires it. As mentioned earlier, over half of the book of Acts is about Paul. By the same author who wrote the gospel of Luke, Acts was most likely written near the end of the first century, some thirty years or so after Paul's death.

The literary form of Acts is very different from that of the letters, for it is a narrative—indeed, the only narrative about Paul that we have in the New Testament. It focuses more on Paul's activity than on his message. In it are the stories of Paul's conversion to be a follower of Jesus, told three times; his three missionary journeys; and his arrest in Jerusalem, imprisonment, and appearances before a variety of officials. Then he is taken to Rome as a prisoner to make his appeal to the emperor. Acts ends with Paul under house arrest in the capital of the empire, still preaching the gospel.

Because Acts does not report Paul's death, some scholars have argued that Acts must have been written while Paul was still alive, which would mean the early 60s at the latest. This argument

presumes that the purpose of Acts was to provide a “life of Paul” and that the most plausible explanation for the lack of mention of Paul’s death is that he hadn’t yet died. But the purpose of Acts, the plan of the book, is to tell the story of the spread of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome (see, for example, Acts 1:8). And so Acts ends appropriately with Paul preaching the gospel in the capital of the empire. For the author to have ended with, “And then Rome executed him,” would have been an odd climax, to say the least.

To return to the question of the use of Acts as a source for Paul, there is significant scholarly disagreement about the degree to which the portrait of Paul in Acts is consistent with or different from the radical Paul of the genuine letters. Acts reports much that Paul’s letters do not. This is neither surprising nor particularly significant, given the different literary genres. However, when there is overlap between Acts and the letters, Acts is sometimes consistent with the letters and sometimes not, making it difficult to assess the historical accuracy of Acts when there is *no* overlap.

Some scholars think that Acts and the letters can be harmonized quite nicely. Others argue that there are major differences. Because of this disagreement, we will not use Acts as a primary source for Paul, but as an important secondary source. Our primary source will be the seven genuine letters, supplemented when appropriate by Acts. We will have much more to say on this subject in Chapter 3.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Our second foundational concept is also shared in common with mainstream scholarship. It is the basis of all historical study of ancient texts, namely, the importance of setting texts within historical context. What was going on at the time? What were the

circumstances that the author addressed? What did the author's words and allusions mean in their ancient historical and literary setting? Without context, one can imagine that a text means almost anything.

The context of Paul's letters involves a set of concentric circles. The center circle is the context of the communities to which he wrote. This is set within and surrounded by the context of the early Jesus movement, which is set within the context of Judaism, which is set within the context of the Roman Empire.

Though we know most of his letters by the names of cities, Paul was not writing to cities, but to small communities of early followers of Jesus within them—in Thessalonica, Corinth, and Philippi in Greece; Galatia in Asia Minor; and in Rome itself. The one genuine letter addressed to an individual, Philemon, was also meant for a wider group, for it was to be read to the community. In these letters written to Christian communities, Paul's purpose was not to proclaim the message of and about Jesus as a whole. The recipients of his letters had already been instructed about that.

Moreover, with the exception of Rome, Paul had been active in these communities. His letters were written to people he knew, and for the most part they addressed questions or problems that had arisen in these communities in his absence. They are “conversations in context,” to use a phrase from the contemporary Paul scholar Calvin Roetzel, conversations in the context of Paul's relationship to these communities. To understand them requires setting them in the context of this conversation.

The second concentric context is the early Jesus movement, a phrase commonly used by scholars to name the followers of Jesus in the first decades after his death. The use of this phrase recognizes that calling them “Christians,” as if they had become members of a new religion distinct from Judaism, is anachronistic.

According to Acts 9:2, they were known as followers of “the Way,” the way of Jesus. However, despite the risk of anachronism, we will sometimes call them “Christians” or “Christian Jews” or “Christian Gentiles.”

After Paul’s dramatic experience of the risen Christ, he became part of the movement. Though Paul knew enough about Jesus before his Damascus experience to become a persecutor of his followers, his transformation into an apostle of Jesus involved learning more about Jesus from those who were part of the movement. It is intrinsically what we would expect, and Acts does in fact report it. Moreover, Paul was sustained by his involvement with Christian communities. As the contemporary scholar Peter Berger puts it, Saul became Paul in a moment of religious ecstasy; but Paul could remain Paul only in the context of Christian community. In his life as an apostle, Paul sought to express in the larger Mediterranean world what the Jesus movement meant for both Jews and Gentiles.

The third concentric contextual circle is first-century Judaism. Like Jesus, Paul was passionately Jewish. Jewish scripture (for Christians, the Old Testament) and Jewish practice shaped his life and thought, both before and after he became a follower of Jesus. Indeed, to the end of his life, Paul thought of himself as Jewish, not as having converted to a new religion. Without an understanding of Paul’s Jewish context, much in his letters is opaque.

The fourth concentric contextual circle is the Roman Empire. Though it is not more important than the other circles, it is the largest and most comprehensive context. Paul and all of his communities lived under Roman rule.

This matters not simply as information about Paul’s time and place. Rather, it matters because Roman rule was legitimated by an imperial theology that proclaimed that the emperor was the

Son of God, Lord, Savior of the World, and the one who had brought peace on earth. It also proclaimed, as we will see especially in Chapter 4, that peace and justice came through military victory and imperial order.

For now, we simply note that Paul's proclamation of Jesus as Son of God, Lord, and Savior directly countered Roman imperial theology. For Paul as a follower of Jesus, God as known in Jesus was Lord, and the emperor was not. In this context, Paul's most concise affirmation about Jesus—"Jesus is Lord"—was high treason. It is not surprising that Paul, like Jesus, was eventually executed by Rome.

In this fourfold context, much of what is in Paul's letters becomes luminous. Though the meaning of some passages remains uncertain, either because we don't know enough about the circumstances or because Paul was sometimes unclear, his genuine letters generate an understanding of Paul and his message that is remarkably consistent with the message of Jesus. Paul's message challenged the normalcy of civilization, then and now, with an alternative vision of how life on earth can and should be. The radical Paul, we are convinced, was a faithful follower of the radical Jesus.

A JEWISH CHRIST MYSTIC

In the rest of this book we will be discussing Paul's life and letters, mission and theology. But here, immediately, we emphasize the most important foundational fact about him: Paul was a Jewish Christ mystic.

We begin with the word "mystic" and its cousins "mystical" and "mysticism." Because of their diverse and ambiguous connotations in contemporary culture, they need explanation. The most common connotation of these words in popular usage

is dismissive. To say something “sounds mystical” or “sounds like mysticism” means you don’t need to take it seriously. It is something vague, fuzzy, ungrounded, perhaps otherworldly, and irrelevant.

In the academic world, the term is not dismissive, but ambiguous. It is used by some scholars in a very narrow and precise sense and by others in a much broader sense. Those who define it very narrowly see it as an unusual and very specific religious phenomenon. They see mysticism within Judaism and Christianity as a postbiblical development and would not use the terms “mystic” or “mysticism” for anything stemming from as early as the biblical period.

We are among those who define it more broadly. In five words, which of course need to be expanded, *mysticism is union with God*. A mystic is one who lives in union or communion with God. The difference between union and communion is relatively minor: the first involves a sense of “one-ness” with God; the second, a sense of connection with the sacred that is deep, close, and intimate, even though a sense of “two-ness” remains.

Most mystics have mystical experiences—by which we mean ecstatic experiences in which there is a vivid sense of the presence of God, or the Sacred, or the Real, terms that we use interchangeably here. An ecstatic experience, as the roots of the Greek word suggest, is a nonordinary state of consciousness. One is “out of” or “beyond” ordinary consciousness and in this state has an overwhelming sense of experiencing God. God becomes an experiential reality. In this sense, mystics *know* God. They do not simply believe in God, but have moved from believing to knowing.

A century ago, William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* provided the classic broad definition of mystical experiences. Such experiences, he said, involve a vivid sense of *union*

and *illumination*. Since we have just spoken about the former, we turn to the latter.

“Illumination” has more than one connotation in the context of mystical experiences. The experiences often involve light. Sometimes they involve seeing light or a being of light—a *photism*, to use James’s word. They can also involve seeing the world as radiant, as full of light. The earth is “full of God’s glory” (Isa. 6:3), that is, full of the radiant luminosity of the sacred. Because the light sometimes becomes yellow or golden in these experiences, Mircea Eliade, the twentieth century’s best-known scholar of comparative religions, called them “experiences of the golden world.”

“Illumination” has yet another connotation in the context of mystical experiences. They often include a sense of “enlightenment,” a vivid sense of seeing more clearly than one ever has before. And what one sees is “the way things are.” To use another word from William James, they are *noetic*—they involve a strong sense of *knowing*, and not simply ecstatic feeling. People who have such experiences experience a radical perceptual shift—they see differently.

Enlightenment as a transformed way of seeing is not only part of mystical experience, but continues afterward. Common images speak of this as like moving from darkness to light, from blindness to sight, from sleeping to being awake. Thus, for example, the Buddha after his mystical experience under the Bo tree, became the “enlightened one,” the “awakened one.” In the New Testament, the same effect is spoken of with the image of blindness and sight in a verse familiar from the hymn “Amazing Grace”: “I once was blind, but now I see” (see also John 9). Seeing is transformed; mystics see differently because of what they have seen.

In this broad sense of the word, texts in both Acts and Paul’s letters show that Paul was a mystic. On this crucial foundational

fact, Acts and Paul agree. (Later, in Chapter 3, we will also see certain differences between them.) According to Acts, Paul had a mystical experience of Jesus that was the transformative event of his life. It changed him from Saul the persecutor of Jesus to Paul the proclaimer of Jesus. In Acts, it happened on the “road to Damascus,” a phrase that has entered popular language to describe a radical, life-changing experience. We refer to it in shorthand as Paul’s Damascus experience.

The author of Acts tells the story three times, once as part of his narration (Acts 9) and twice in speeches attributed to Paul (Acts 22; 26). There are differences in details, such as what the men traveling with Paul experienced, which rules out taking the three accounts as exact factual reporting. Obviously the author of Acts was not concerned with factual inerrancy, or he would have harmonized the three stories. But on the main points the accounts agree: Paul saw a great light; he heard a voice and addressed it as “Lord”; the voice identified itself as Jesus; and the experience transformed him.

We illustrate with the first and fullest story. Paul was on his way from Jerusalem to Damascus in Syria to find followers of Jesus and bring them bound to Jerusalem. Then:

As Paul was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” He asked, “Who are you, Lord?” The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” (Acts 9:3–5)

Paul experienced “a light from heaven,” a *photism*, to use William James’s term. He also heard a voice, what James calls an *audition*, sometimes but not always part of a mystical experience.

Paul addressed the light and the voice as “Lord” and asked, “Who are you?” This suggests that Paul had not seen a visual figure, but a light, as the text itself says. Then the voice announced, “I am Jesus,” identifying the light as Jesus. Of course, this is the post-Easter Jesus, the risen Christ; the historical Jesus, the pre-Easter Jesus, had been dead for at least a few years.

As the story continues, the theme of illumination appears again. The light was so brilliant that it blinded Paul (Acts 9:9). Then, three days later, he was led to a Christian Jew in Damascus named Ananias. Ananias laid his hands on Paul and said, “The Lord Jesus, *who appeared to you on your way here*, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit. *And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored*” (Acts 9:17–18; all italics in biblical quotations have been added). Paul now saw differently—the light that was Jesus, and the Spirit with which he was now filled, had brought enlightenment: “something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored.”

The story in Acts 9 ends with Paul being baptized, the early Christian rite of incorporation. Paul had become “in Christ,” as he puts it in his letters. “In Christ” was for Paul a new identity that involved a new community and way of being.

So decisive was this experience that it divided Paul’s life into two parts, the pre-Damascus Paul and the post-Damascus Paul. Commonly called his conversion experience, it is and it is not, depending upon what we mean by “conversion.” In a religious context, the word has three meanings, not all of which apply to Paul. The first is conversion from being nonreligious to being religious, the second is conversion from one religion to another, and the third is conversion within a religious tradition.

Paul’s experience was neither of the first two. Clearly, he was deeply religious before his Damascus experience. In his own

words, he was filled with religious passion: “zealous for the traditions of my ancestors”; “as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless” (Gal. 1:14; Phil. 3:5–6). Moreover, he did not convert from one religion to another. Not only was Christianity not yet a religion separate from Judaism, but Paul thought of himself as a Jew after his conversion and for the rest of his life. Paul’s was a conversion within a tradition: from one way of being Jewish to another way of being Jewish, from being a Pharisaic Jew to being a Christian Jew.

Paul’s Damascus experience was his “call” to the rest of his life. It called him to his vocation, just as the “call stories” of the great Jewish prophets were calls to a vocation. All three accounts in Acts report that his Damascus experience was his commissioning to his vocation as an apostle to the Gentiles.

Paul’s genuine letters confirm the picture created by Acts. Paul had experiences of Jesus as a living reality, and these experiences transformed him. We begin with Galatians 1:13–17, simply because it is one of only two places in Paul’s letters in which he mentions Damascus. He describes his earlier life as a zealous persecutor of the Jesus movement. Then he writes:

God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles.

In his own words, Paul testifies that he had an experience of divine revelation (“God was pleased to reveal his Son to me”) that transformed him and gave him his vocation. Two verses later, in 1:17, he connects this experience to Damascus. After referring to some subsequent events in his life, he says, “Afterwards, I returned to Damascus.”

In other letters Paul also speaks of having experienced Jesus. He does so twice in 1 Corinthians. In 9:1, he says that he has “seen Jesus our Lord.” Nothing in Acts or his letters suggests that Paul had ever seen the pre-Easter Jesus. The passage must refer to seeing the post-Easter Jesus—the risen Jesus as Christ and Lord.

Later in the same letter, he speaks of Jesus appearing to him. In 15:3–8, he names people to whom the risen Christ appeared and includes himself in the list: “He appeared also to me.” Paul has had firsthand experience of the risen Christ—and, interestingly, one that he says belongs in a list of resurrection experiences had by Peter and other Christian apostles.

In 2 Corinthians (which may combine several letters), Paul says he “will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord.” Note the plural: we should not imagine that the Damascus experience was his only experience of the risen Christ. Then he speaks of “a person in Christ who . . . was caught up to the third heaven.” Though Paul uses third-person language here, he almost certainly refers to himself. “Such a person,” he continues, “whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows—was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat” (12:1–4).

The passage speaks of entering another level of reality (“the third heaven,” “Paradise”), in an ecstatic state (“whether in the body or out of the body, I do not know”), where he heard “things that are not to be told.” We do not think that the last phrase means secret information that could in principle be disclosed. Rather, it is best understood as something beyond words—“things unutterable,” as an earlier translation put it. Again to use William James’s language, this is mystical experience as ineffable—as impossible to put into words, as beyond words.

Another passage in the same letter uses the language of mysticism:

And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit. (2 Cor. 3:18)

“Unveiled faces” is a mystical image—the veil has been removed. So also is “seeing the glory of the Lord,” the radiant luminosity of the Lord “as though reflected in a mirror” (see also 1 Cor. 13:12: “For now we see in a mirror, dimly”). The result is that we “are being transformed.”

All of these passages—and more could be cited—indicate that Paul had mystical experiences of the risen Christ. He experienced the post-Easter Jesus as the light and glory of God, the one who enlightened and transformed him.

Paul was not simply a mystic. More precisely, he was a *Jewish Christ mystic*. He was a *Jewish Christ mystic* because, as already mentioned, Paul was a Jew and in his own mind never ceased being one. He was a *Jewish Christ mystic* because the content of his mystical experiences was Jesus as risen Christ and Lord. Afterward, Paul’s identity became an identity “in Christ.” And as a *Christ mystic*, he saw his Judaism anew in the light of Jesus.

We cannot claim this foundation as a consensus view. Scholars and theologians have often written about Paul without grounding his vocation and message as an apostle of Jesus in his mystical experience of the post-Easter Jesus. They have treated Paul’s letters as if they were primarily about a set of ideas that need to be systematized and explained.

But our view is neither new nor idiosyncratic. A century ago, the German New Testament scholar Adolf Gustav Deissman wrote in his book *Paul: A Study in Social and Religious History*: “Whoever takes away the mystical element from Paul, the man

of antiquity, sins against the Pauline word: ‘Quench not the Spirit’” (1 Thess. 5:19). Deissman also affirmed that Paul’s phrase “in Christ” (which occurs over a hundred times in the genuine letters) “is meant vividly and mystically, as is the corresponding ‘Christ in me.’”¹ We explore these phrases in Chapters 5 and 7.

In addition to seeing Paul’s mystical experience of the risen Christ as transforming him from a persecutor of Jesus’s followers to a proclaimer of Jesus, there is one more crucial transformation to underline. And that is that his experience of the risen Christ transformed his perception of the authorities, the powers, that had crucified Jesus.

Paul’s experience of the risen Christ carried with it the conviction that God had raised Jesus, that God had vindicated Jesus, that Jesus is Lord. But if God has vindicated Jesus, then the powers who killed him—Roman imperial authority in collaboration with Jewish high-priestly authority—are wrong. This sets up the fundamental opposition in Paul’s theology. Who is Lord, Jesus or empire? In Paul, the mystical experience of Jesus Christ as Lord led to resistance to the imperial vision, and advocacy of a different vision of the way the world can be.