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SOME COMMENTS ON MICAH BERDICHEVSKY'S *SAUL AND PAUL*

Daniel R. Langton[*]

Abstract: Although Micah Berdichevsky (1865-1921), a giant of Hebrew literature, never completed his book-length study of the apostle Paul, his literary executors ensured that Saul and Paul *was published in 1971. Like the better known study by Joseph Klausner,* From Jesus to Paul *(1939), Berdichevsky's work was a Zionist perspective on the founder of Gentile Christianity, written in Hebrew. Central to* Saul and Paul *is a mysterious document that Berdichevsky believed to be an ancient Jewish account of the conversion and missionary success of Paul, namely, the tale of the pagan priest, Abba Gulish. He went on to argue that Saul and Paul had been two different individuals, the one Jewish, the other pagan, and that Christian tradition had amalgamated them. Attributing historicity to a Hebrew legend rather than a Greek Christian one, Berdichevsky argued that Paulinism was an essentially pagan philosophical system. While many before and after him would find the seeds of Christianity in the Jewish Paul's adoption of non-Jewish, Hellenistic ideas, Berdichevsky went one step further and denied Paul even a Jewish birth. In addition to a comparison of Klausner and Berdichevsky's views of Paul, this short article includes the Hebrew text and translation of the story of Abba Gulish.*

In a recent article entitled 'Berdichevsky's *Saul and Paul*: A Jewish Political Theology' (2007),[1] Yotam Hotam argues that the apostle Paul had been portrayed by the Hebrew literary scholar as the villainous creator of Christianity. According to Berdichevsky's fiercely Zionist critique, Christian religion was to be explained as a Hellenistically derived form of 'spiritualism' whose origins had had little or nothing to do with the 'natural' religion of Judaism. In his concern to properly contextualize Berdichevsky's complex study, Hotam devotes only two pages to an overview of the work in question, and it seemed to the present author that the creativity and ingenuity of Berdichevsky deserved a slightly fuller treatment. A closer reading of the text of *Shaul ve-Paul* is also warranted since it is only available in Hebrew; it is largely incomplete and a more critical analysis of its coherence (or lack of) is called for; and the medieval source upon which Berdichevsky's theoretical edifice is founded is little known. Finally, while Hotam briefly mentions Joseph Klausner's better-known New

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[*]   Lecturer in Modern Jewish-Christian relations, Centre for Jewish Studies, University of Manchester. Email: Daniel.Langton@manchester.ac.uk

[1]   Yotam Hotam, 'Berdichevsky's Saul and Paul: A Jewish Political Theology', *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 6/1 (2007), 51-68.

Testament scholarship (which was also originally written in Hebrew), the similarities and differences between the two Zionist readings of Paul demand a few further observations. This short essay, then, should be regarded as complementary to, and is offered in support of, Hotam's interpretation of *Saul and Paul* as a political theology. As such, it is part of a growing body of studies that have sought to elucidate the ideological motivations that lie behind the tradition of Jewish historical consideration of Christian origins that goes back to the *Wissenschaft des Judenthums* (the historical study of Judaism), of which the best known example is Susannah Heschel's *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus* (1998).[2]

In order to understand just how radical an interpretation of Paul is offered by Berdichevsky, let us begin with a short overview of the interpretation offered by Joseph Klausner (1874-1956), the Jewish historian and prominent Zionist whose approach to Paul was also profoundly shaped by his nationalist ideology.[3] Born near Vilna, Lithuania, Klausner studied in Germany and became a committed Zionist, attending the first Zionist Congress in Basle in 1897. Following the Bolshevik Revolution (October 1917) he emigrated from Odessa, Russia, to Palestine. From 1925 he taught Modern Hebrew Literature and the History of the Second Temple Period at the Hebrew University. He became increasingly nationalist in his views and was regarded as the ideologue of the Revisionist Party, which from the 1920s and 30s was the principal *[2]*opposition to Weizmann's leadership. Not Orthodox, Klausner

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[2]   Susannah Heschel, *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). A useful introduction to the study of Jewish ideological approaches to the New Testament can be found in Jonathan Brumberg-Kraus, 'A Jewish Ideological Perspective on the Study of Christian Scripture', *Jewish Social Studies* 4/1 (1997), 121-152, albeit that this is a little dated now. In the specific case of the apostle Paul, one might point to: Daniel R. Langton, 'Modern Jewish Identity and the Apostle Paul: Pauline Studies as an Intra-Jewish Ideological Battleground', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 28/2 (2005), 217-258; Daniel R. Langton, 'The Myth of the "Traditional Jewish View of Paul" and the Role of the Apostle in Modern Jewish–Christian Polemics', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 28/1 (2005), 69-104; Pamela Eisenbaum, 'Following in the Footnotes of the Apostle Paul', in Jose Ignacio Cabezón & Sheila Greeve Davaney, eds., *Identity and the Politics of Scholarship in the Study of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2004), 77-97; Stefan Meissner, *Die Heimholung des Ketzers: Studien zur jüdischen Auseinandersetzung mit Paulus* (Mohr: Tübingen, 1996); Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer, 'The Essential Heresy: Paul's View of the Law According to Jewish Writers, 1886-1986', PhD thesis, Temple University (May 1990); Donald A. Hagner, 'Paul in Modern Jewish Thought', in Donald A. Hagner and Murray J. Harris, eds, *Pauline Studies: Essays Presented to F.F. Bruce* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1980), 143-165; Halvor Ronning, 'Some Jewish Views of Paul as Basis of a Consideration of Jewish-Christian Relations', *Judaica* 24 (1968), 82-97.

[3]   This short overview of Klausner was first published in Daniel R. Langton, 'Modern Jewish Identity and the Apostle Paul: Pauline Studies as an Intra-Jewish Ideological Battleground', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 28/2 (2005), 223-226.

would probably have identified with the Conservative movement if it had existed in Eretz Yisrael at that time.[4] His historical writings on Jesus and Christian beginnings were amongst the earliest comprehensive treatments in Hebrew; in addition to *Jesus of Nazareth* (1922) he wrote *From Jesus to Paul* (1939).[5]

Klausner's interest in both Jesus and Paul stemmed from a concern to reclaim influential Jews for Jewish history or, more precisely, to utilize them in the Zionist project to construct a strong nationalist identity. This involved contrasting Jewish and Christian worldviews, as Klausner made clear in his conclusion.

> My deepest conviction is this: Judaism will never become reconciled with Christianity (in the sense of spiritual [religious and intellectual] compromise), nor will it be assimilated by Christianity; for Judaism and Christianity are not only two different religions, but they were also *two different world-views*. Judaism will never allow itself to reach even in theory the ethical extremeness characteristic of Christianity; this extremeness has no place in the world of reality, and therefore is likely in actual fact to be converted into its direct opposite – into brutality such as has been seen in the Middle Ages and in our own time in any number of 'Christian' countries.[6]

The Zionist concern with the differences between Jewish and non-Jewish worldviews provides the key to Klausner's understanding of Paul. The apostle's background had been one of Hellenistic Judaism and paganism. Far from *Eretz Yisrael*, Paul had been 'detached from authentic, living Judaism, which was rooted in its own soil'.[7] This accounted for his message, 'a whole new doctrine which was not Judaism, [but] which was in fact anti-Judaism, the complete antithesis of Judaism'.[8] Specifically, it accounted for his teachings regarding dying and rising gods.[9] But Klausner was drawn to Paul for more than simply the opportunity to hold him up as a representative of a hostile Christian religion or non-Jewish worldview. At the same time, there was a

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[4]   Kling argued that, in matters of religion, Klausner was not an Orthodox Jew, and many of his friends were secular Zionists, although he himself was observant of tradition. Simcha Kling, *Joseph Klausner* (Cranbury, NJ: Thomas Yoseloff, 1970).

[5]   Joseph Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth: His Life, Times, and Teaching*, trans. by Herbert Danby (London: Allen & Unwin, 1925). Hebrew original *Yeshu ha-Notsri* (Jerusalem: Shtibel, 1922); Joseph Klausner, *From Jesus to Paul*, trans. by William F. Stinespring (London: Allen & Unwin, 1943). Hebrew original *Mi-Yeshu ad Paulus* (Tel Aviv: Mada, 1939).

[6]   Klausner, *From Jesus to Paul*, 609.

[7]   Klausner, *From Jesus to Paul*, 465.

[8]   Klausner, *From Jesus to Paul*, 443.

[9]   Klausner, *From Jesus to Paul*, 344-45.

desire to reclaim Paul the Jew as a significant player in world history, to recognize even in the apostle to the Gentiles the genius and power of authentic Judaism. Klausner was appreciative of certain of Paul's 'lofty and beautiful' teachings,[10] and he acknowledged that the influential Christian thinker's dependence upon Torah (and even the oral law) had helped protect Judaism down through the centuries.[11] In attempting to have his cake and eat it, Klausner explained:

> Intensive research over many years has brought the writer of the present book to a deep conviction that there is nothing in the teaching of Paul – not even the most mystical elements in it – that did not come to him from authentic Judaism. For all theories and hypotheses that Paul drew his opinions *directly* from the Greek philosophical literature or the mystery religions of his time have no sufficient foundation. But it is a fact that most of the elements in his teaching which came from Judaism received unconsciously at his hands *a non-Jewish coloring* from influence of the Hellenistic-Jewish and pagan atmosphere with which Paul of Tarsus was surrounded during nearly all of his life, except for the few years which he spent in Jerusalem…[12]

Klausner was prepared to accept that Paul had probably studied for a while under Gamaliel in Jerusalem, his Pharisaic training evidenced by his use of scripture.[13] While there, he had possibly met Jesus and had *[3]*come to vigorously oppose him.[14] A combination of Jesus' crucifixion and Stephen's martyrdom had provoked an epileptic fit or vision that had put Paul on a very different path, his guilt in opposing Jesus only being relieved by his devotion to the risen Christ.[15] Thereafter, Paul had devoted himself to the Gentiles, adopting a *Realpolitik* approach which Klausner recognized as making possible the success of Christianity, the contradictions he had introduced being both inevitable and necessary for that success.[16] The apostle's talent for adaptability ('a thorough-going opportunist … a clever politician') had allowed Paul to appeal to the Gentiles by teaching of the Jewish messiah without reference to

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[10]   Klausner, *From Jesus to Paul*, 603.

[11]   Klausner, *From Jesus to Paul*, 606-609. The early Church Father Augustine portrayed the Jews as guardians of scripture, and argued that they should be protected so that their Law, which they did not accept testified to the truth of Christianity, should not be forgotten: *City of God* 5 (414-25). Ironically, Klausner sees Paul in a similar role on behalf of the Jews, unwittingly acting as their protector as a result of his dependence upon the Law.

[12]   Klausner, *From Jesus to Paul*, 466.

[13]   Klausner, *From Jesus to Paul*, 309-12, 606-609.

[14]   Klausner, *From Jesus to Paul*, 314-15.

[15]   Klausner, *From Jesus to Paul*, 325-30.

[16]   Klausner, *From Jesus to Paul*, 429-30.

Jewish nationality.[17] In that he believed that Jesus' teaching would not have won over the non-Jewish world, Klausner regarded Christianity as the creation of Paul, 'who was much more denationalized and divided in soul than was Jesus – the latter being a Jew of Palestine only, and hence not affected by foreign or conflicting influences'.[18] At the same time, he accepted that, as far as Paul was concerned, his negation of the importance of Israel's Torah that he had taught and preached had not cut him off from the people of Israel.[19]

Klausner's use of Paul as an object lesson, illustrating the opposing worldviews of Judaism and Christianity, was fundamentally a Zionist critique. Paul's inauthenticity was, he claimed, rooted in his lack of intimacy with the Land. His creation of a world religion was made possible only by de-nationalizing Judaism, something that neither the prophets nor Jesus had sought to do. All the same, one is left in no doubt that any positive assessment of his significance should be understood in terms of the influence of authentic Judaism. After all was said and done, Paul was a Jew and a significant figure in the national history of the Jews. The unresolved tension accounts in part for Klausner's somewhat confusing claim that Paul's new religion was 'Judaism and non-Judaism at the same time'.[20]

Klausner's historical study is undoubtedly the best known Jewish nationalist critique of the co-founder of Christianity. Far fewer will have heard of the study of Paul by Micah Joseph Berdichevsky (1865-1921) or Mikha Yosef Bin-Gorion as he preferred to call himself.[21] While both men clearly expressed a political agenda through their readings of Paul, seeking to create a myth of Christianity for a Jewish audience, they did so in very different ways. In contrast to the studies by Klausner, who engaged with the wider historical scholarship of the day, Berdichevsky's work was very much the product of an individual novelist, journalist and folklorist, rather than an historian *per se*, with little interest paid to the researches of others, and with a much freer reign granted to his imagination.

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[17] Klausner, *From Jesus to Paul*, 312, 431, 446.

[18] Klausner, *From Jesus to Paul*, 309-12, 590.

[19] Klausner, *From Jesus to Paul*, 415-16.

[20] Klausner, *From Jesus to Paul*, 465.

[21] For both names there are many alternative spellings. Note that while 'Berdichevsky' is used in the text above, the relevant alternative will be given when citing works published under a different name.

Born into a *hasidic* rabbinic family in Ukrainian Medzibezh, Berdichevsky's traditional *yeshivah* education was undermined by his surreptitious reading of *Haskalah* works. These writings of the Jewish Enlightenment eventually resulted in rebellion and a life-long literary obsession with the inner turmoil of those individuals torn between modern ideas and traditional ways of life and thought. After leaving Russia he studied in both Switzerland and Germany, where he settled; his compositions in Yiddish, German and Hebrew included articles and stories, collections of Hebrew myths, and analyses of the origins of Judaism with particular emphasis on the Samaritans. He has been described as one of the founding fathers of secular Jewish nationalism, not least because his compilations of Jewish legends championed a nationalistic, worldly alternative to the religiously normative view of Jewish history.[22] But *[4]*it is for his scholarly writings on Christianity that this giant of modern Hebrew literature is of interest here. In addition to the posthumous *Jesus Son of Hanan* (1959)[23] – which controversially identified Jesus of Nazareth with the Jesus ben Hanan mentioned in Josephus *and* with the Actian character of the martyr Stephen – Berdichevsky also wrote the equally incendiary *Saul and Paul* (1971). Both were probably originally written in Berlin, shortly before the author's death.[24]

Shaul ve-Paul represents one of the most striking interpretations of the apostle to the Gentiles offered by any Jewish author, and one which ran entirely contrary to the traditional Christian account of the Jewish Saul who converted to become the Christian Paul and apostle to the Gentiles. The main idea appears to have been that Saul and Paul were two different individuals whose distinct traditions had been amalgamated by the early Christians into the familiar New Testament narrative. In developing his theory, Berdichevsky identified the earliest version of Paul's blinding and conversion as the mysterious Hebrew legend of Abba Gulish, a non-Jewish pagan priest who converted to Judaism and spread his teaching among the Gentiles of the Hellenistic world. Later, Berdichevsky suggested, the Gentile followers of Paul and follow

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[22]   M.Y. Berdichevsky, *Miriam and Other Stories*, trans. by Avner Holtzman (New Milford: The Toby Press, 2004), 9.

[23]   Micah Yosef Berdichevsky [Bin Gorion], *Yeshu ben Hanan*, ed. Immanuel Bin Gorion (Jerusalem: Mosad Ha-Rav Kuk, 1959).

[24]   Micah Yosef Bin Gorion, *Shaul ve-Paul*, ed. Immanuel Bin Gorion (Tel Aviv: Moreshet Micha Yosef, 1971). The fragmentary nature of the work makes dating difficult, with some parts self-evidently written long before the other parts.

the Jewish followers of Jesus merged this figure with another, a Jew called Saul, to create the composite, fictitious figure of Saul-Paul, who functioned as a unifying figure between the two groups and as a bridge between the Hellenistic and the Jewish elements of Christian thought.

As an uprooted, marginal thinker, capable of embracing logically contradictory positions and emotions, the nature of Berdichevsky's manuscript does not make for easy analysis.[25] To make matters worse, he failed to complete his study of Paul and it was left to his literary executors to collate the material and publish it in fragmented form.[26] His wife, Rachel Bin Gorion, translated some of the book from the original German into Hebrew and his son, Immanel Bin Gorion, finished the translation, arranged it, and added editorial comments together with a short introduction, summary chapter and an endnote. Of Micah's material, the first part, which was entitled Consecutive Chapters and which was almost completed, includes the story of Abba Gulish and analyses the different versions of the accounts of Paul's conversion, offers a commentary on a number of episodes in the book of Acts such as Paul's visits to Athens and Ephesus, and considers such themes as the distinction in Christian tradition between the killed hero (Jesus) and the escaped hero (Paul). The second part, which was entitled Diverse Chapters, includes standalone studies of various Pauline topics such as the purpose of Paul's visit to Jerusalem, speeches in Paul's defence,

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[25] For example, Berdichevsky's primary interest in the parallels between Paul and Abba Gulish are undermined by his speculative identification of Paul with several other individuals including Apollos in the New Testament and possibly even rabbi Akiva in the Talmud: M.Y. Bin Gorion, *Shaul ve-Paul*, 36, 127, 129-130. More difficult still is the confusing interchangeability of the names Saul, Saulus, Paul, Paulus, Saul-Paul and Abba Gulish. It appears that Berdichevsky had not entirely decided upon the strict distinction between the Jewish figure of Saul and the Gentile figure of Paul or Abba Gulish. Within the first part of the book, he could write, for example, 'Another detail which may give proof of Abba Gulish and Abba Saul being identical: Paul the Apostle was also slandered against in that he had embezzled funds meant for the poor': M.Y. Bin Gorion, *Shaul ve-Paul*, 18. Within the Notes section, he explicitly identifies Abba Gulish with both Abba Saul and Paul (e.g. ibid., 126, 127) and explicitly distinguishes between Saul and Paul (e.g. *ibid*., 127, 128, 129). Nevertheless, Berdichevsky's son and editor, Immanuel Bin Gorion, understood the two-person theory to be his father's main thesis, explaining, 'The book was to be given the title *Saul and Paul* in order to demonstrate from the start that, in the author's opinion, these are two traditions; not necessarily a case of Saul the Jew turning into Paul the apostle to the Gentiles, but a case of the original figure being one of a non-Jew … [Only later] was created that intermediate figure, Saul of Tarsus.' Comments by Immanuel Bin Gorion in M.Y. Bin Gorion, *Shaul ve-Paul*, 7. See also *ibid*., 145. The two-person theory is also the reading adopted in, for example, Yotam Hotam, 'Berdichevsky's *Saul and Paul*: A Jewish Political Theology', *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 6/1 (March 2007), 51-68, and Jonathan D. Brumberg-Kraus, 'A Jewish Ideological Perspective on the Study of Christian Scripture', *Jewish Social Studies* 4/1 (1997), 124.

[26] Comments by Immanuel Bin Gorion in M.Y. Bin Gorion, *Shaul ve-Paul*, 7.

and his views on baptism. It begins with a short introductory piece in which Berdichevsky *[5]*offers a critical reading of Acts. The third part, which is entitled Notes, is a set of jottings from his work journal which includes possible alternative versions. Berdichevsky had to both write another section that identified traces of Paul (and Peter) in the writings of Josephus and also include an appendix devoted to the epistles attributed to Paul and demonstrating that 'Pauline' polemic had been directed again the Samaritans (this being a favourite subject in Berdichevsky's researches).

In terms of sources for the life of Paul, Berdichevsky's interest in the New Testament is limited. His use of Acts is focused primarily upon passages where the apostle is involved in mission to the Gentiles and where he confronts Hellenistic worship and ritual. He is also suspicious of the epistles, which are regarded merely as literary forms expressing the views of a fictional character.[27] Nevertheless, he accepts that the New Testament does offer evidence of a Jew called Saul, about which little is actually known, who was also mentioned in Jewish sources. According to Berdichevsky, the first authentic reference to this Saul is Acts 13:2-3, where he is said to have been chosen by the Holy Spirit;[28] just as significantly, Christian tradition held that he had received his divine calling from the risen Jesus.[29] The same character could also be found in Jewish literature. No doubt referring to a sage from the mishnaic period called Abba Shaul, Berdichevsky stated, 'Abba Saul is a figure of importance among the tannaim [sages]'.[30] He also makes the unsubstantiated assertion that '[i]n modern

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[27] 'More than once (in the books of the New Testament) we have before us a fictional apostle's letter': M.Y. Bin Gorion, *Shaul ve-Paul*, 102. According to Immanuel Bin Gorion, his father also searched for traces of Paul and his teachings in Flavius Josephus, although with what success we do not know since he never wrote the chapter. He had been particularly interested in the case of the unknown man on whose account the Jews were expelled from Rome (*Antiquities* 13.3.5). Comments by Immanuel Bin Gorion in M.Y. Bin Gorion, *Shaul ve-Paul*, 7.

[28] M.Y. Bin Gorion, *Shaul ve-Paul*, 126. In fact, according to Berdichevsky, the Saul of the New Testament is himself a composite character. He regards the young man at whose feet Stephen's executors laid their cloaks (Acts 7) to be a distinct figure from the Saul who persecuted the early Christians. Although 'later legend combined them into a single figure', Berdichevsky was not convinced that 'the same young man who looked after the garments became the zealous persecutor of Stephen's followers and the destroyer of the community'. M.Y. Bin Gorion, *Shaul ve-Paul*, 32.

[29] '[Saul] had the privilege to be called, according to legend, by Jesus ... Jesus appeared to him ['Saul-Paul'] after his [Jesus'] death'. M.Y. Bin Gorion, *Shaul ve-Paul*, 127-128.

[30] 'Tannaim' refers to the sages living in the first- to second-centuries who were involved in the compilation of the Mishnah. For Abba Saul, see Niddah 24b and Avot 2:8: M.Y. Bin Gorion, *Shaul ve-Paul*, 18, 21-22. Later, he asserts that the story of Paul (Abba Gulish), who had opposed pagan idols with the knowledge of the one true god, had influenced talmudic and midrashic tales of Abraham attacking statues of idols. Such influence was suggestive to him of an early date for the story of Abba Gulish. M.Y. Bin Gorion, *Shaul ve-Paul*, 129.

Hebrew literature, Paul the apostle is sometimes called Abba Saul.'[31] In summary, the only thing known for sure about this Saul (from Berdichevsky's point of view) was that he was Jewish.[32]

Berdichevsky's conceit is that one need not identify the Jewish Saul with the figure of Paul. To learn more about Paul, one should rather turn to the tale of Abba Gulish. This apocryphal story is valued very highly by Berdichevsky because he believes it to be derived from a Hebrew tradition that was ancient enough to be taken seriously as an alternative to the New Testament account(s) of Paul. Although the legend was discovered in a medieval manuscript, he emphasises that it is 'written in the Hebrew of the *[6]*Mishnaic and Talmudic period', that is, it possesses an ancient pedigree.[33] Since it was not to be found in the talmudic literature, he is also hopeful that it was relatively free from religious bias.[34]

> In the story of Abba Gulish we have a Hebrew text about Saul-Paul and his path to the faith … But it is no secondary [or derivative] text of Paul's conversion as presented in Acts of the Apostles. The story of Abba Gulish needs to be seen as a relic from an earlier time ... [A] picture emerges which is nearer the historical background than that presented in Acts.[35]

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31   M.Y. Bin Gorion, *Shaul ve-Paul*, 17.

32   As Immanuel Bin Gorion notes, '[W]e can only say with certainty about … the one called Saul, that he was Jewish, which is obviously not the case with Paul': Comments by Immanuel Bin Gorion in M.Y. Bin Gorion, *Shaul ve-Paul*, 145.

33   The story was included in a collection of *aggadot* in Moses Gaster, *Sefer hamaʿasiyot* ('The Book of Tales', Ramsgate: 1896), republished as *Sefer hamaʿasiyot: The Exempla of the Rabbis* (London: 1924), which Gaster had printed from a manuscript which he had dated variously from the ninth- to the thirteenth-centuries. Berdichevsky was delighted to discover that the story was also to be found in the *Midrash ha-Gadol* (published as David Hoffman, *Great Midrash: Exodus* [Berlin, 1913]), a compilation of commentaries on the Torah dating to perhaps the fifteenth-century which apparently drew upon a lost source that included the tale of Abba Gulish and whose text is identical to that of the *Sefer hamaʿasiyot* (except for its attribution): M.Y. Bin Gorion, *Shaul ve-Paul*, 11, 13, 15-16.

34   Berdichevsky explains his rationale: 'It will not be surprising to say that Rabbinical texts, written in the Talmudic and Midrashic period, are capable of reflecting a much earlier period. Ancient themes, excluded from the Holy Scriptures due to dogmatic or historical tendencies, have come up again and become preserved in Talmudic literature, some in disguised and some in open fashion. In the body of religious tractates whose main aim is to strengthen and exalt monotheistic faith, you occasionally come across idolatrous residues form the earlier days, and these residues completely contradict the book's intentions and morality': M.Y. Bin Gorion, *Shaul ve-Paul*, 18.

35   M.Y. Bin Gorion, *Shaul ve-Paul*, 17. Rather confusingly, Berdichevsky says in this paragraph: 'Abba Gulish is to be read as Abba Saul.' Since his main thesis is to *distinguish* between the Jewish Saul and the Gentile Abba Gulish or Paul, this must be put down to a copying error or confusion or evidence of Berdichevsky's experimentation with an alternative theory.

This story tells of a pagan priest called Abba Gulish who served as a priest in 'an idolatrous temple' in Damascus and who used to pilfer the donations. Habitually calling upon his idol for healing and receiving none, he one day called upon 'the Sovereign of the Universe' who promptly cured him. Moving to Tiberias he converted to Judaism where 'he ran after the *mitzvot* [commandments]' and began a new life as an administrator for the poor. Eventually he was overcome by temptation and began embezzling money again – with the consequence that he went blind. Returning to Damascus, he stood before the Gentiles (who believed that he had lost his sight because he had scorned the idol) and delivered a public speech. Pointing out that in all the time he had stolen from the temple donations the idol had never punished him, he went on to confess that he had resumed his criminal activities in Tiberias until struck down. He therefore attributed his condition not to the idol but to the One 'whose eyes roam the whole world and no misdeed is beyond Him to see [and punish]', whereupon, having witnessed to God's power and judgement, his sight was miraculously restored. And 'from the nations thousands and tens of thousands … [found] shelter under the wings of the shekhinah', that is, converted to Judaism.[36]

According to Christian tradition Paul had been a Jewish convert to Christianity, while Abba Gulish was a pagan who converted to Judaism. What, then, made Berdichevsky think that Abba Gulish and Paul were one and the same person? His evidence was a string of intriguing parallels in the stories. He highlights the importance placed in both accounts upon Damascus,[37] and notes that both Paul and Abba Gulish had been treasurers[38] associated with accusations of embezzlement of funds meant for the poor.[39] Both men are described as zealous against idolatry,[40] both became fully convinced of the new faith's power and truth having had their blindness miraculously

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[36] See my appendix 'The Story of Abbu Gulish in *The Book of Tales*' for the Hebrew text and translation.

[37] M.Y. Bin Gorion, *Shaul ve-Paul*, 126.

[38] M.Y. Bin Gorion, *Shaul ve-Paul*, 126.

[39] Berdichevsky infers this from 2 Corinthians 8:20-21 where Paul writes, 'taking precaution so that no one will discredit us in our administration of this generous gift': M.Y. Bin Gorion, *Shaul ve-Paul*, 18.

[40] Citing the Actian accounts of Paul's speeches to the pagans in Athens (17:16-34) and in Ephesus (19:23-41), Berdichevsky points out that Paul's theology simply focuses on idolatry and is therefore a lot less refined than in other speeches, implying greater authenticity: M.Y. Bin Gorion, *Shaul ve-Paul*, 126.

healed,[41] and both are responsible for the conversion of many *[7]*gentiles.[42] Pointing out that, as a convert, Abba Gulish would not have been appointed administrator of poor money entrusted to the temple priest, Berdichevsky comes to the conclusion that the text as it stands does not make sense, and that it must be referring to 'a *new* community whose members, who had just come to the faith, appointed him their treasurer'.[43] The conversion of Abba Gulish, he argues, had been from idolatry to an early form of Christianity rather than to Judaism. Thus the story was in fact a *Christian* one, albeit preserved in modified form by a Jewish source. In Berdichevsky's mind, the legend of Abba Gulish represents an alternative but more authoritative version of the conversion of Paul. He argues that the recognition of Paul's pagan background also explains his success among them, for real influence over the Gentiles could only have been exerted by one who had emerged from among them, and all the more so by a former priest.[44] When properly reconstructed, the story ran as follows.

> [Paul] was an idolatrous priest in a temple in Damascus; and there appears to have been there a small Christian community, which was persecuted by the idolatrous priests, and especially by [Paul]. At a time of severe illness and inner distress, [Paul] appealed to the god of the Christians and was healed; at that moment he became a Christian. On behalf of the Christian community he was appointed as treasurer, became blind, went back to Damascus and could see again. Thanks to the miracle, he succeeded in converting Damascenes to Christianity.[45]

The Hebrew version of the story might have been adapted by its editors so that the name 'Jesus' had been replaced by 'Sovereign of the Universe' but the essence of the

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41   Saul's three days of blindness are also compared to the Jewish tradition that Joseph held his brothers under arrest for three days and Jonah's three day sojourn in the bowels of the fish: M.Y. Bin Gorion, *Shaul ve-Paul*, 34.

42   Comments by Immanuel Bin Gorion in M.Y. Bin Gorion, *Shaul ve-Paul*, 149.

43   M.Y. Bin Gorion, *Shaul ve-Paul*, 18.

44   M.Y. Bin Gorion, *Shaul ve-Paul*, 126.

45   M.Y. Bin Gorion, *Shaul ve-Paul*, 126. This is one of several occasions when, rather confusingly, Berdichevsky writes 'Saul' despite the fact that the logic of the two-person theory requires 'Paul'. It may be a copying error or reflect some confusion in his thought. Possibly this is a draft in which Berdichevsky was experimenting with an alternative theory in which Saul, Paul and Abba Gulish are one person. According to the two-person theory, he cannot actually mean 'Saul', since he argues elsewhere that Saul was a distinct person, a Jew who is referred to in the early part of Acts and (as Abba Shaul) in a few tractates in the Talmud. He cannot mean 'Saul-Paul' since he is explicit elsewhere that this character of Christian tradition is a fictional construct that amalgamates the Jewish Saul with the Gentile Paul. In this quotation, then, 'Saul' has been replaced with 'Paul.'

story remained the same: the hero was a pagan who became an emissary to the pagans on behalf of a community of the faithful.[46] Without explaining how there came to be an embryonic Christian community in Damascus for Paul or Abba Gulish to join in the first place, Berdichevsky was nonetheless convinced that the former pagan priest was soon leading this Gentile Christian group and, ultimately, should be held responsible for its spectacular success.

Over time, Berdichevsky suggests, this new anti-idolatrous Gentile movement sought to attach itself to the existing monotheistic tradition of Judaism.[47] With the destruction of the Temple, Judaism itself had become fragmented and it so happened that the form of Judaism that the Gentile Paulinists found most conducive was the Jewish-Christian movement, that is, the followers of Jesus.[48] The Gentile known as Abba Gulish or Paul and the Jew Saul were two different people, but, as a means by which to give Gentile Christianity greater credibility, they were merged within Christian tradition. Berdichevsky argues that 'only after the characters of Saul and Paul were joined together was a story of conversion attributed to Saul, also.'[49] As he explains,

> A religious movement became attached to Abba Gulish the convert. The circle of the followers of Jesus … which converged after his death, was initially independent and developed separately. Later on the two movements merged … Paul, the gentile, became connected with the figure of Saul since the latter had the privilege to be called by Jesus, according to legend.[50]

*[8]*The predominance of the miraculous conversion story within Christian tradition could be explained psychologically in terms of the desire of many early Christians to sever their oppressive ties to their past, 'and Paul's example served as a source of encouragement for them.'[51]

Berdichevsky is keen to stress several key findings. Firstly, Christianity's roots had been pagan, not Jewish. Secondly, Gentile Christianity's ancient strategy to invest

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[46]   M.Y. Bin Gorion, *Shaul ve-Paul*, 126.

[47]   'Paulinism and Islam are two religions which arose by themselves and only later sought to become tied to Judaism': M.Y. Bin Gorion, *Shaul ve-Paul*, 129.

[48]   M.Y. Bin Gorion, *Shaul ve-Paul*, 128.

[49]   M.Y. Bin Gorion, *Shaul ve-Paul*, 126-127.

[50]   M.Y. Bin Gorion, *Shaul ve-Paul*, 127, 128.

[51]   M.Y. Bin Gorion, *Shaul ve-Paul*, 37.

itself with authority by associating with Judaism had now been revealed and discredited. Thirdly, the universalist tendency of its founder, Paul, had been trumped by the Jewish nationalist spirit for, according to Berdichevsky, the historical development had been from the notion of a cosmic Christ to that of a Jewish messiah, and not *vice versa*, as many scholars would have it. According to his own researches,

> Gentile Christianity won 'ordination' from Judaism after the fact … Christianity did not reach the Gentiles via Jewish Christianity. It stands more to reason that Christianity, which was Gentile from its beginning, succeeded in gaining followers among the Jews. Accepted opinion indicates, of course, a reverse process: Jewish Christianity existed first, and then a Gentile Christianity was added to it; the two competed and finally the Gentile Christianity won. But it is near certain that things occurred in a different order. It appears that Christianity was born within Diaspora Jewry; through the conversion of many Gentiles, new ideas and redemptive hopes arose. These *general* ideas slowly took on a *national* form; thus it turned out that the saviour of humankind gradually became the saviour of Israel ... [T]he Jewish-national Christianity rose up against the international ambitions which had preceded it.[52]

Both Klausner and Berdichevsky had sought to criticise Paul from a Zionist perspective. But whereas Klausner had ultimately found fault with the Diaspora Pharisee in his lack of nationalist feeling yet, at the same time, had been uncomfortable about disowning him entirely, Berdichevsky's critique was quite unambivalent. Attributing historicity to a Hebrew legend rather than a Greek Christian one, Berdichevsky saw Paulinism as an essentially pagan philosophical system. But while many before and after him would find the seeds of Christianity in the Jewish Paul's adoption of non-Jewish, Hellenistic ideas, Berdichevsky went one step further and denied Paul even a Jewish birth. In this way he refuted the idea that Christianity was simply Judaism polluted by pagan thought; rather, by attributing its emergence to a pagan priest, the Zionist scholar sought to demonstrate the fundamentally non-Jewish, alien nature of Christianity.

In his article, Hotam is eminently sensible to stress the ideological significance of Berdichevsky's incomplete work over the quality of the scholarship. Certainly there

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[52] M.Y. Bin Gorion, *Shaul ve-Paul*, 128. This was reflected in the Christian literature: 'In the Acts of the Apostles, the figure of Paul became secondary in importance compared to the figure of Saul; in other words, Saul overcame Paul'. *Ibid.*, 129.

has been no interest among New Testament scholars in the Abbu Gulish / Paul thesis since it was first published in 1971. No doubt this is because it appears as a quaint throw-back to some kind of nineteenth-century speculative scholarship, such as the Life-of-Jesus genre, whose authors breathlessly asserted the conspiratorial links between Jesus and secret Jewish societies and who proffered conspiracy theories for his death and resurrection. One might argue that a similar fate has befallen Hyam Maccoby, whose own revisionist history of Paul as a gentile-born opportunist, *The Mythmaker*, was also dependent upon an ancient account of dubious historical import.[53] Fundamentally, however, the logic of Berdichevsky's anti-Christian polemic fails at an internal level, about which Hotam has nothing to say. Berdichevsky assumed three concentric rings of Jewish authenticity in the ancient world (that is, Palestinian Jewry, Diaspora Jewry, and converts to Judaism) and stressed that the first two had already diverged considerably in the first-century. It was the third circle, that of the pagan converts to Diaspora Judaism, he says, that had been the source of early *[9]*Christianity.[54] It is therefore difficult to see how, if Berdichevsky had finished his book, he would have reconciled the claims that Paul converted to Christianity *and* that he was responsible for its pagan origins. If the 'small Christian community' in Damascus which Abbu Gulish / Paul joined was 'Christian' in any meaningful sense, then where did they get their ideas from if not from a Jewish-Christian source? Why call them 'Christians' (*notzrim*) if they are understood to have no connections to Jesus of Nazareth? If, on the other hand, these 'Christians' whom Abba Gulish / Paul joined as a convert had been composed of pagan converts to Judaism who had veered away to create a new universalist religion (a kind of proto-Christianity), why not say so, and why not explicitly define which of their beliefs should be regarded as foundational for Christianity?

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[53] In *The Mythmaker: Paul and the Invention of Christianity* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1986) and *Paul and Hellenism* (London: SCM, 1991), Maccoby augments the epistles and some of Acts with Epiphanius' (315-403) *Refutations of Heretics*, which records the accusations of the Ebionites (an early Jewish sect) against Paul. Maccoby concludes that Paul had no Pharisaic background, had Gentile parents, converted to Judaism in Tarsus, worked for the temple Police in Jerusalem and, having been disappointed in his advancement, founded a new religion in his search for fame. Amy-Jill Levine has described the later work as 'an assertive amalgam of insightful observation, historical fancy, and inconsistent argument'. *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 86:1-2 (1995), 230.

[54] M.Y. Bin Gorion, *Shaul ve-Paul*, 128.

Berdichevsky's *Saul and Paul* is certainly a political theology of sorts, but it is also a useful reminder of the power of rhetoric. The breathtaking audacity of the central claim is all the more effective because it is communicated by a world-class writer. Arguably, it is only because it comes to us in an incomplete form that we are able to see so clearly how Berdichevsky's obsession with questions concerning Jewish authenticity coloured the study. The unresolved tensions that proliferate throughout the work reveal the Zionist author's primary concern, namely, to preserve the Jewish land, religion and people from the charge that they had given birth to Christianity; he could not tolerate the idea of Israel tainted by the link to the Diaspora religion *par excellence*. Berdichevsky's determination to rewrite the history of Christian origins is shared in common with many other Jewish commentators on the New Testament, including Klausner, but the extraordinary lengths he would go to achieve this end, in distinguishing Saul and Paul, make him unique.

Appendix: The Story of Abbu Gulish in *The Book of Tales*[55]

Rabbi Pinchas said, There was a story in Damascus about an idolatrous temple there. It had a priest whose name was Abba Gulish and he served before the idol many years. One time, a spirit of distress came upon him, and he cried for help before the idol for many days but to no avail. After that he went outside one night and said, 'Sovereign of the Universe, hear my prayer and redeem me from my distress.' And he was cured. He stole away and came to Tiberias and converted [to Judaism] and he ran after the *mitzvot* [commandments]. He was appointed administrator for the poor [but as soon as] monies were entrusted to him, the hands that had been accustomed to pilfer when they had been in the idolatrous temple, began to pilfer the dedicated money [once more]. Immediately he felt [pain] in one of his eyes and it became blind. Again, he reached out for the dedicated [funds] and felt [pain] in the other one and it became blind. And those from his [previous life and] place would come to Tiberias and see him blind and tell him, 'Abba Gulish, what were you thinking, that you scorned the idol and abandoned it so that it punished you so?' And more and more others [came and

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[55] Story 131 in M. Gaster, *Sefer hama'asiyot* or *The Book of Tales* (Ramsgate: 1896), 90-91, reproduced in M.Y. Bin Gorion, *Shaul ve-Paul*, 13. My thanks to Noam Livne for his help in translating this text and for his insightful comments on my analysis of Berdichevsky in general.

reproved him]. What did he do? He said to his wife, 'Stand! Put all other business on hold until we have been to Damascus.' And she took hold of his hand and they set off. As they arrived at the small towns within the environs of Damascus, people gathered about him and said, 'Here is Abba Gulish. The idol did right to you in that he made you blind.' He said to them, 'I have not come [for any reason] other than to seek him and to make peace with him, [and then] perhaps he will open my eyes for me!' But he was scorning them [in saying this] all the way to Damascus. Having entered [the city], the people of Damascus gathered about him, and said to him, 'Master Abba Gulish, what is the purpose of your visit?' He said to them, 'What does it look like?' They replied, '[If] you think you are scorning the idol, he is scorning you more.' And mocking them, he said, 'I have come to make peace with him, perhaps he will take pity on me. Only go and bring together all the people of the city.' They gathered crowds upon crowds on the roofs and on the ground and inside the temple to watch Abba *[10]*Gulish [and what would happen] in the idolatrous temple. He told his wife to stand him on the platform that he knew was there. He went and stood on it and said to them, 'My brothers, people of Damascus, while I was a priest and serving this idol, people used to entrust me with deposits. And I was able to betray them, since the idol has no eyes to see, nor ears to hear, so as to punish me. Now I have gone to [the One] whose eyes roam the whole world and no misdeed is beyond Him to see [and punish]. And my hands wished to pilfer and take [again], as I had been accustomed, but before I even had a chance to do it, he punished me. Therefore *He* blinded my eyes.' Rabbi Pinchas ha-Cohen ben Khama said, He did not come down from the platform until the Holy One, blessed be He, restored his sight and doubled his honour and authority with the people, so that His Name was sanctified in the world. And there thousands and tens of thousands from the [Gentile] nations converted [to Judaism] and they attained [the blessing] of finding shelter under the wings of the *Shekhinah* through him.

מ ע ש ה. ת נ ו ר ב נ ן. אמ' ר' פינחס מעשה היה בדמסקיה שהיה שם בית צלם אחד. והיה לו
כומר ושמו אבא גוליש. והיה משמש לפני הצלם שָׁנִים הרבה. פעם אחת הגיעו אננקי[1] שלצער צעק
לפני הצלם ימים הרבה ולא הועיל לו. אחר כך יצא לחוץ בלילה ואמ' רבונו שלעולם שמע תפלתי.
ופדני מצרתי, ונתרפא. גנב עצמו ובא לו לטבריה ונתגייר. והיה מרדף אחר המצות. נתמנה פרנס
על העניים. כיון שנכנסו מעות תחת ידו. הידים שהיו למודות למשמש כשהיו בבית הצלם. התחילו
להיות ממשמשות בקדש. מיד חשש באחת מעיניו ונסמית. שוב שלח ידו בהקדש וחשש בשנייה
ונסמית. והיו בני מקומו באין לטבריה ורואין אותו שהוא סומא. ואומרין לו אבא גוליש. מה ראית
שהיית שוחק בצלם ומניח אותו. ולא היה גובה ממך. וכן אחרים. וכן אחרים. מה עשה. אמ' לאשתו
עמדי ‖ עד שנלך לדמשק. ואחזה בידו והיו מהלכין. כיון שהגיעו לעיירות שבתחום דמשק היו
מתכנסין עליו ואומרין הרי אבא גוֹלְיָש. יפה עשה לך הצלם שסימא את עינך. אמ' להן אני לא
באתי אלא לבקשו ולהשלים לו שמא יפתח לי עיני. והיה שוחק עליהן. עד שנכנס לדמשק. כיון
שנכנס. נתכנסו עליו אכלוסי דמשק אמרו לו מרי אבא גוליש מה אתה עושה. אמ' להן מה שאתם
רואין. אמרו לו סבור אתה שאתה מלעיג בצלם אף הוא מלעיג בך יתר. ושיחק בהן ואמ' להן
להשלים לו באתי. שמא ירחם עלי. אלא לכו קבצו כל בני המדינה. נתכנסו חיילות חיילות על הגגות
ועל הארץ. ובתוך הבית. לראות לאבא גוליש. כיון שנתמלא בית ע"ז. אמ' לאשתו שתעמידהו על העמוד
שהיה מכיר שם. הלך ועמד עליו. ואמ' להן אחי בני דמשק בשעה שהייתי כומר ומשמש לצלם הזה.
היו בני אדם מפקידין אצלי פקדונות. והייתי כופר בהן לפי שאין לצלם עינים לראות. ולא אזנים
לשמוע. כדי שיפרע ממני. עכשיו הלכתי אצל מי שעיניו משוטטות בכל העולם ולא יבצר ממנו
מזמה. ובקשו ידי לעשות ולמשמש וליטול ‖ כמו שהייתי למד. ולא הספקתי לעשות עד שנפרע
ממני. לפיכך סימא את עיני. אמ' ר' פינחס הכהן בן חמא לא ירד מן העמוד. עד שהאיר לו הקב"ה
את עיניו. וכפל כבודו ומוראו על הבריות. כדי שיתקדש שמו בעולם. ונתגייר[ו] מן האומות אלפים
ורבבות. וזכו להסתופף תחת כנפי השכינה על ידו.

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