

Winter Reading

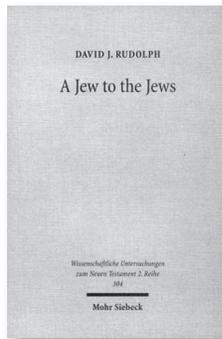
First Fruits of Zion reviews three new books.

A Jew to the Jews: Jewish Contours of Pauline Flexibility in 1 Corinthians 9:19–23

BY JACOB FRONCZAK

Of all the passages in the Pauline corpus that have been instrumental in shaping scholarly approaches to Paul, there may be none more influential than 1 Corinthians 9:19–23. This single four-verse passage is commonly cited to reconcile passages in which Paul is portrayed as favorable to Jewish practices (particularly those in the book of Acts) with the traditional view of Paul as a repudiator of Judaism, the Torah, and the Temple service.

For example, Luke records in Acts 16:3 that Paul had Timothy circumcised—an act that, to the surrounding Jewish community, would have been interpreted as an act of covenant fidelity. However, this provides no difficulty for the traditional view of the “Law-free” Paul—he “became like a Jew, to win the Jews.” Again, Paul offered animal sacrifices at the Temple in Jerusalem many years after the Damascus Road experience (Acts 21). But again, there is no difficulty—Paul “became like one under the law ... to win those under the law.” It seems there is no



A JEW TO THE JEWS: JEWISH CONTOURS OF PAULINE FLEXIBILITY IN 1 CORINTHIANS 9:19–23

By: David J. Rudolph

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passage, however perplexing to the traditional viewpoint, that cannot be explained through the lens of 1 Corinthians 9:19–23.

As a result, most commentators on Acts never seriously consider the possibility that Paul remained a practicing Jew. To them, Paul, like a chameleon, can pretend at times to keep the Torah and practice Judaism, and at other times jettison the constraints of Torah in order to adapt to non-Jewish environments. So though Paul might sometimes seem to practice Judaism, in no way did he remain faithful to the Torah, Judaism, or the customs of his ancestors. He was, as conservative Evangelical

commentator F. F. Bruce famously put it, “the apostle of the heart set free.”¹

This viewpoint is troublesome for Messianic Judaism. We believe that God’s standard, the Torah, is eternal, and that Yeshua and all the apostles, including Paul, continued to keep the commandments. While Bruce can look at the Jerusalem community, full of Jews who are zealous for the Torah, and sum it up in the word *naïveté*² – immaturity – this explanation, however common, falls short for those who respect the authority of the apostolic community and the witness of the Tanak. If Paul was truly a chameleon and was not really the kind of person he portrayed himself to be, we are in trouble.

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However, a new publication has the potential to change the face of Pauline scholarship in this area. Messianic Jewish Rabbi David J. Rudolph’s *A Jew to the Jews: Jewish Contours of Pauline Flexibility in 1 Corinthians 9:19–23*³ explores this key passage from a post-supersessionist perspective. In line with the most recent scholarship from what Zetterholm has termed “the radical new perspective”⁴ on Paul, Rudolph writes with the conviction that Paul never abandoned his ancestral faith, but rather operated within clear halachic boundaries in his efforts to win both Jew and Gentile to faith in Messiah.

As a trained rabbi with a PhD in New Testament Studies from Cambridge University, Rudolph is uniquely qualified to assess the

Jewish framework within which Paul worked during his ministry and to do so in an academic format. While there are many works analyzing the “Jewishness” of Paul and advocating a more or less Messianic Jewish viewpoint, *A Jew to the Jews* stands out as a highly precise work of scholarship, and has been included in the prestigious *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament* series.

A significant contribution to Pauline scholarship, *A Jew to the Jews* is one of only a few scholarly contributions by practicing Messianic Jews to the ongoing Jewish/Christian dialogue on Paul:

*Over the past twenty years there has been a veritable explosion of theological forums designed to facilitate exchange between Jewish and Christian scholars who share overlapping interests in the New Testament as Jewish literature. In these hundreds of colloquia ... one rarely hears Messianic Jewish voices. Messianic Jews are the natural bridge between the synagogue and church but they have been largely absent from the dialogue.*⁵

That such a significant monograph on Paul has come from a Messianic Jew makes this a particularly significant book for the Messianic Jewish movement. Not only does *A Jew to the Jews* represent a substantial vindication of Messianic beliefs and practices, but Rudolph’s erudition reflects well on the movement as a whole.

Rudolph’s thesis is simple, yet profound: 1 Corinthians 9:19–23 does not necessarily hold up, under close scrutiny, as a lens through which New Testament scholars can understand (or dismiss) Paul’s Jewish practices as recorded in Acts. Instead of a principle of flexibility by which Paul blithely put on or took off Torah observance in order to minister to different groups of people, this passage can rather be understood as a principle of accommodation, by which Paul was able to have table fellowship with a variety of people: ordinary Jews,

strict Jews who required higher standards of purity, and Gentile sinners.⁶ Hence, according to Rudolph, Paul consistently operated within the boundaries of the Mosaic law.

A Jew to the Jews addresses the three basic reasons scholars have traditionally understood 1 Corinthians 9:19–23 as a statement of Paul's freedom from Judaism and consequent adaptability. First, Rudolph demonstrates that the intertextual argument for the traditional interpretation is weaker than scholars have made it out to be. As 1 Corinthians 9:19–23 stands at the “hub of a wheel,”⁷ influencing scholarly attitudes toward many other passages, Rudolph takes the opportunity to address the traditional interpretations of several important passages, such as Timothy's circumcision (Acts 16), Paul's sacrifices (Acts 21), and Peter's vision (Acts 10–11), as well as some of the more difficult passages in Galatians and Romans which have been traditionally understood as exemplifying Paul's “freedom” from Torah observance.

Rudolph's alternative explanations for each of these passages make *A Jew to the Jews* an invaluable reference tool for anyone interested in demonstrating the logical congruence and Scriptural validity of the Messianic Jewish viewpoint on Paul and the Torah. As a product of the academic community, *A Jew to the Jews* has undergone an extensive peer-review process and cannot be dismissed by critics as mere speculation. Point by point, passage by passage, Rudolph destabilizes the traditional view of the “flexible” Paul, backing up each statement with references to an extensive bibliography.

The second major part of *A Jew to the Jews* addresses the contextual argument for the traditional view of 1 Corinthians 9:19–23. This passage sits right in the middle of a longer discourse on idol food (1 Corinthians 8:1–11:1). A majority of scholars—even conservative scholars—believe that in 1 Corinthians, Paul repudiated the decision of the Jerusalem Council and allowed the Corinthians to eat meat sacrificed to idols. It is thought that Paul's principle

of flexibility, by which he temporarily pretended to be Torah observant to keep from offending a “weaker” brother, applies naturally to the situation in Corinth; Paul supposedly argued that idol food is acceptable for the “strong” to eat, but that they should refrain in order to keep from offending the “weak,” who believe that eating idol food is sinful.

In response to this contextual argument, Rudolph offers a different interpretation of 1 Corinthians 8:1–11:1, based in part on Alex Cheung's landmark study, *Idol Food in Corinth*.⁸ Paul, in accordance with the apostolic decree of Acts 15, did not permit the knowing consumption of idol food under any circumstances. Only in cases of doubt—i.e., unknowingly—did Paul permit the Corinthians to eat idol food.⁹ 1 Corinthians 9:19–23 as a principle of accommodation to different standards for table fellowship in different venues fits quite well within the context of such an argument.

Finally, Rudolph addresses the textual argument for the traditional interpretation of 1 Corinthians 9:19–23. Paul's nomistic language, it is traditionally argued, precludes any other interpretation; the repeated use of the term νόμος (“law”) indicates that Paul is speaking of Torah observance, and his assertion that he *became as one who is ὑπὸ νόμον* (“under the law”) must mean that he is not Torah observant. D. A. Carson has taken this argument a step further, arguing that since Paul *became as a Jew* to win Jews, he no longer considered himself Jewish!¹⁰

Rudolph explores each of the key Greek words in 1 Corinthians 9:19–23 and demonstrates that, contrary to the traditional understanding, Paul is not necessarily referring to Torah observance. In fact, if the traditional view is correct, Paul's use of ἄνομος (“lawless”) in this passage is almost completely unique; ἄνομος is normally used to describe someone who is wicked and sinful, rather than someone who is not under the jurisdiction of the Mosaic law.¹¹ Here, as in the previous two chapters, Rudolph

makes a strong case that an alternative interpretation of 1 Corinthians 9:19–23 is warranted.

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Rudolph provides just such an interpretation in the penultimate chapter of his work. As discussed above, Rudolph argues that 1 Corinthians 9:19–23 is an articulation of Paul’s principle of accommodation, by which he is able to eat in the homes of regular Jews, strictly-observant Jews who have adopted high standards of ritual purity, and Gentile sinners. By accepting the hospitality of these diverse groups, and participating in the lives of people with differing purity standards, Paul was able to more effectively spread the gospel; however, this meant that at times Paul had to lower his Pharasaic (extrabiblical) standards of ritual purity.

This mirrors the practice of Yeshua Himself, who was known to eat with tax collectors and sinners (Mark 2:15–17) as well as Pharisees (Luke 7:36, 11:38). Rudolph even notes important lexical links between Luke 10:8, in which Jesus adjures his disciples, “ἔσθίετε τὰ παρατιθέμενα ὑμῖν” (“Eat what is set before you”), and 1 Corinthians 10:27, in which Paul applies his principle of accommodation to the Corinthians: “πᾶν τὸ παρατιθέμενον ὑμῖν ἐσθίετε” (“Eat whatever is set before you”).¹²

Rudolph’s interpretation of 1 Corinthians 9:19–23 is tentative, and invites further discussion. One can only hope that future commentators on 1 Corinthians and Acts will reckon honestly with Rudolph’s work. Nevertheless, only time will tell whether the interpretation

presented in *A Jew to the Jews* is accepted by the rest of the academic world, though it certainly deserves serious consideration.

If Rudolph is correct, the idea that Paul lowered his standard of ritual purity (without violating the Mosaic law) in order to enter into the lives of less-observant Jews and Gentile sinners has powerful ramifications for the modern Messianic Jewish movement, especially for Gentiles who identify themselves as part of the Messianic community. Since the dietary laws of Torah have limited application for Gentile believers, they are in a position to take Paul’s principle of accommodation to heart in this area.

It is unfortunate that many Messianic Gentiles have separated themselves from the wider Christian community over issues like holidays and dietary laws. How much greater would their impact be if Messianic Gentiles considered adopting Paul’s principle of accommodation, and were open to sharing food and sharing life with those around them? Table fellowship is a great venue for committed believers to influence their friends and neighbors to take on the yoke of the kingdom themselves.

On the other hand, when we spurn others over ritual concerns, and neglect the “weightier matters of the Law,” we unnecessarily limit our influence for the kingdom and depending on our attitude, we may even hurt the cause of Messiah. If Paul found a way to accommodate Gentile sinners in table fellowship without breaking the Mosaic Law, how much easier should it be for us to accommodate our brothers and sisters in Messiah who do not keep the dietary laws?

The implications of this work for Jewish-Christian dialogue are also immense. “Jewish writers have understandably described Paul as a proponent of ‘trickery,’ ‘deceit’ and ‘pious fraud’”¹³ based on the traditional interpretation of 1 Corinthians 9:19–23. However, if it can be proved that Paul did not deceitfully pretend to be Torah observant in order to beguile Jews into becoming believers, a significant stumbling

block can be removed from the Jewish community's perception of Christianity.

A Jew to the Jews represents a great step forward for the Messianic community and for Messianic Jewish scholarship. Rudolph's work has far-reaching implications that scholars will be wrestling with for years. As a resource for the well-read Messianic Jew or Gentile, *A Jew to the Jews* has few peers; one would be wise to acquire a copy while it is still in print. 🕎

Endnotes

- 1 F.F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977).
- 2 Idem., *The Book of the Acts*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 406.
- 3 Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011.
- 4 Magnus Zetterholm, *Approaches to Paul: A Student's Guide to Recent Scholarship* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2009), 161. This viewpoint is represented by scholars like Mark Nanos, Peter Tomson, Pamela Eisenbaum, and many others.
- 5 David J. Rudolph, "Messianic Jews and Christian Theology: Restoring an Historical Voice to the Contemporary Discussion," *Pro Ecclesia* 14:1 (2005): 61.
- 6 Rudolph, *A Jew to the Jews*, 19.
- 7 Ibid., 18.
- 8 Alex Cheung, *Idol Food in Corinth* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).
- 9 Rudolph, *A Jew to the Jews*, 101.
- 10 D. A. Carson, "Pauline Inconsistency: Reflections on 1 Corinthians 9.19–23 and Galatians 2.11–14," *Churchman* 100:1 (1986): 12, in Rudolph, *A Jew to the Jews*, 5.
- 11 Rudolph, *A Jew to the Jews*, 159.
- 12 Ibid., 188.
- 13 Ibid., 211.