Celebrating Paul

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Paul and the Jewish Tradition:
The Ideology of the *Shema*

MARK D. NANOS

šēmaיִשְׂרָאֵל יהוה אֵל יְהוָה אֶלֹהֵינוּ אֹהֶד
“Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One”

The *Shema Israel* is arguably the most important ideological claim of Judaism in early Israelite history.¹ This call to listen to God is followed by the injunction to love God, that is, to be loyal and serve with all of the effort one can summon.² It includes observance and reflection, *kavannah*, the intention of the heart. It captures the very essence of Torah, the Teachings of God that Israel is privileged to have on behalf of all humankind, but also responsible to listen to and embody.³

The *Shema Israel* is uttered in sacred prayer twice a day. Jewish children learn it as their first prayer, and Jews hope that it will be the last words on their lips. R. Akiva recited the *Shema* when executed by the Romans following the failed second revolt against Rome, understanding the com-
mandment to loyalty “with all thy soul” to signify “even if He takes thy soul,” and the call to martyrdom is repeated in subsequent interpretive tradition.⁴

The claim that God is “One” affirms Israel’s choice of her God “alone,” or “only” in response to God’s choice of Israel, regardless of the claims of other nations on their gods, or their gods on those nations. The natural sense of the declaration of Deut 6:4 in its own context is not the denial of the existence of other gods, but the prescription for Israel to only look to her God (see Exod 15:11). It is analogous to a person declaring that a certain mate is the only one for him or her.⁵ Such a proposition does not rest upon denying the existence of other men or women, but affirming, in spite of their existence, that the one in view is singularly of interest to him or her, the one he or she loves like no one else, to whom he or she will be loyal, regardless of the circumstances. Marriage rituals are constructed around just this dynamic—so too is the Israelite conception of the covenant relationship between God and Israel.

Although the Shema is mentioned only once in Torah, the redactor of the Mishnah, R. Judah the Prince, made it the opening balakah for the Talmud.⁶ The call to hear is a call to obey. Yet, we do not always “do” as we ought to do according to what we have “heard” to be right. Thus, Midr. Deut. Rab. 3.11 reminds that even when Israel failed to “do” (naʻăsheh) what it ought to do by making the Golden Calf, it was nevertheless still responsible to “hear” (nišmāš), to “listen” (see Exod 24:7). The Shema thus includes the call to obedience and to reflection on the meaning of that calling in spite of falling short of perfection, for as Eccl 7:20 recognizes, “there is not a just person on earth who does good and sins not.” Yet Israel is called—on behalf of all humankind—to attend to the doing of that which is right. Hence, the Talmudic expression, the Shema is qābbalāt ʻol malkût šāmayim, “the acceptance of the yoke of the kingdom of heaven.”⁸

The Shema reminds Israel not only of God’s loyalty and promises but also of the love of God that is central to Jewish identity. It encompasses

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⁴. b. Ber. 61b; y. Ber. 9.5; Lamm, The Shema, 135–40.
⁷. Ibid., 9–10.
⁸. See, e.g., y. Ber. 2.1.
the responsibility to do God’s will and serve one’s neighbors (see Mal 2:10). It embodies the ideals of Jewish spirituality. In Biblical Hebrew, there is—surprisingly, for a religious tradition so attentive to the obligation of obedience—no specific word for obedience, but rather words such as šĕma ᄗ (hear). In English, it is highlighted when a parent rebukes a child with, “Did you hear what I said?”—an ironic turn of phrase from one who knows the child heard what was said, yet feigns ignorance to rebuke the child indirectly. The ironic approach nevertheless communicates that “you did not respect my intentions,” or, “you understood the responsibility to which hearing what was said, by definition, committed you as a member of this family unit, yet you eschewed your obligation.” Indeed, the Sages ruled that the recitation of the Shema is more concerned with “understanding” than “hearing.” Thus, while the ideal is to annunciate the Shema with intention, nevertheless, even if it is recited inaudibly, one can fulfill this halakhic requirement.\(^9\) Obedience is intended to express heartfelt commitment to the ideals embedded in the action, even when the heart is heavy, or distant.

Defining the “oneness” of God is the subject of a rich interpretive tradition. Deut 4:39 tells how Moses taught the people to “realize today and turn it over in your mind: the Lord is indeed God, in heaven above and on earth below; there is no other.” Maimonides (ca. 1135–1204) emphasized that God is incorporeal, indivisible, and completely unique. Rashi (ca. 1040–1105) observed that oneness includes the recognition that Israel’s God is the only God of all the nations. The Shema became the rallying cry for Israelites in the face of polytheism. The call is to hear, not to see. There is no statue to behold. The sense of hearing involves not only cultivating hearing apart from seeing, but also commitment to that which others have not similarly witnessed. When Isaiah proclaimed that Israel’s God declares, “I form the light and create darkness; I make peace and create evil” (45:7), he formulated a polemical challenge to the regime of the Persians, with the two gods of Zoroastrianism, one of light and goodness, the other of darkness and evil. Later, this declaration naturally expressed a polemical sense of singularity in the face of Christian Trinitarian claims. The Shema functions not only theologically, but also socially. It defines group identity and values.

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What Does the Jewish Tradition about God’s Oneness Have to Do with Paul?

Most interpreters of Paul, and most discussions of the topic, “Paul and the Jewish tradition,” explain how Paul emerged from the Judaism of his time. The Paul conceptualized is no longer a representative of Judaism; he exemplifies a new religion, Christianity. I maintain instead that Paul and his audiences practiced Judaism,\(^{10}\) that his groups represented a Jewish coalition upholding that the end of the ages had dawned, the awaited day when members of the other nations would turn to Israel’s God as the one God of all humankind. He spoke for a Jewish subgroup that upheld faith in Christ, to be sure, but this was not a new religion, nor did he imagine that it would ever be one. He was involved in the restoration of Israel and the gathering of the nations initiated thereby.

I submit that the \textit{Shema Israel} is the central conviction of Paul’s theology.\(^ {11}\) He often refers to God’s oneness at critical points in arguments. It functions theologically and polemically in the cases he makes; but Paul does not really explain the \textit{Shema} as much as appeal to it, which suggests that for him the concept of God’s oneness functioned at the ideological level. He assumed its explanatory power was self-evident. This assumption was true not only for himself, but his arguments also presume his audiences would understand the logic of this theological proposition without explanation. Yet that would not work for those unfamiliar with its propositional bases or its importance in Jewish communal life and liturgy. Paul presumes that his audiences perceive reality in Jewish communal terms, either as a direct result of his own teaching or the teaching of others that is to be


expected in their communal life, which presupposes that they live and worship within Jewish communities, that they are being socialized into Jewish ideological patterns of thought and life as normative.

If we turn to Paul’s letter to the Romans, we can see Paul’s direct appeal to the *Shema* as the basis for his judgment about the standing of non-Jews within the community of the people of God. The text of Rom 3:29–31 reads:

> Or is God the God of Jews only? Not the God of members of the other nations also? Yes, of members of the other nations also, since God is one, who will justify the circumcised out of faithfulness and the foreskinned through the faithfulness [of Christ]. Do we then nullify the Torah by the faithfulness [of Christ]? By no means! On the contrary, we establish the Torah.¹²

One might expect Paul to reason from the oneness of humankind that we are all one, or to elaborate at least that because God is one therefore humankind is one, neither Jewish nor non-Jewish, which would reflect the way that Paul’s theology has been most often presented, as if he believed that ethnic difference was nullified; but he does neither of these things. Rather, Paul simply appeals to the logic of God’s oneness without further explanation. Paul pronounces a statement that is at once simple and complex—one that, for a Jew, is almost too close to the bone to be able to explain because it is self-evident, and at the same time, it is one that is too all-encompassing to ever finish explaining.

The discovery of the *Shema Israel* as central to Paul’s theology was a profound moment for me as a Jewish reader of these texts, and has shaped my reading of him ever since. If I were to write a theology of Paul, it would be the center around which all the other topics turned. Here we see Paul employ it at a pivotal point in his argument in Romans for why non-Jewish

¹². The translation of ἔθνη as “members of the other nations” instead of “Gentiles” emphasizes that Paul’s logic works around a contrast between Israel and the other nations. The choice of “faithfulness” for πίστις without the article in the case of the circumcised, and “the faithfulness [of Christ]” for the case of the foreskinned, which has the article, is based on Paul’s grammar and argument here and throughout the letter (see esp. Rom 15:8–9 and discussion of that passage below). From Paul’s perspective, a Jew faithful to Torah will undertake to declare the faith of Christ to the nations, and thus be faithful to the covenant obligation and privilege of being entrusted with the oracles of God for the nations (3:2), which is the way of life to which Torah points.
believers in Christ must remain non-Jews and not become proselytes, and by the implication of his logic, why Jews remain Jews after faith in Christ: “since God is one.”

Someone unfamiliar with Jewish logic based on this “oneness of God” theme might find it difficult to follow Paul’s reasoning. After all, what does “God is one” have to do with the warrant for the inclusion of non-Jews? If they become proselytes, that is, Jewish converts, how does it follow that God would not be one? But for Paul and other Christ-followers, with the coming of Christ to redeem Israel and the nations, the logical answer is, “No, that would undermine God’s oneness.” Why? Because it would signify that even in the awaited age—which they claim has begun—God is only the one God of Israelites. Thus, all others would have to join the people Israel by way of proselyte conversion, leaving the members of the rest of the nations turning to God in Christ without a legitimate claim on Israel’s God apart from becoming Israelites, as if there were some other god for those who are not members of Israel.

The Relationship of Christ-Followers to Jewish Identity and Conduct

A critical issue in Christian theology arises concerning the relationship of its members to Jewish identity and behavior. For the original audiences of Paul’s letters, that concern about identity arose from their self-understanding as participants in Judaism, a Jewish communal way of life that applied even to the non-Jewish members who joined themselves to these communities as guests, members from the other nations. In Paul’s time, although no longer, for Christ-followers who were not Jews the first question was whether they could or should become members of Israel, Jews, which is


14. One should also consider the Greco-Roman idea of a supreme deity emerging among Stoics and other philosophical groups (see, e.g., Frederick E. Brenk, “We Are of His Race”: Paul and the Philosophy of His Time,” in *Unperfumed Voice: Studies in Plutarch, in Greek Literature, Religion and Philosophy, and in the New Testament Background* [ed. K. E. Brenk; Potsdamer Altertumswissenschaftliche Beiträge 21; Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2007] 402–40); but telling are the differences between features of those traditions compared to the very similar elements and developments of themes in Paul and in the rabbinc tradition; see Lamm, *The Shema*; Dahl, *Studies in Paul*, 178–91.
accomplished by completion of the rite of proselyte conversion. For males, this includes circumcision at the conclusion of the conversion process. Circumcision thus functions in Paul’s time as a metonym for the rite of proselyte conversion. It is a rite or work or deed prescribed by Torah to become a member of Israel, and thereafter, a person is obliged to observe Torah, that is, responsible to practice Jewish behavior on the same terms as naturally born Jews.

Since the Church Fathers, the traditional Christian answer to whether proselyte conversion should be undertaken by Christ-followers has been a definitive “No.” The traditional reason offered is that the time of Judaism and Torah has ended with the coming of Christ. They are finished—at least for Christ-followers—and Christians should not, indeed, cannot become Jews or observe Torah as a matter of faithfulness. This has been applied to Jewish believers in Christ as well as to non-Jewish believers. It has been universalized so that Christianity has no place for Jewish identity or Torah defined lifestyles. It is thereby made clear that Christianity is not Judaism. Jewish tradition has answered that ideological stance in kind, making it clear that Judaism is not Christianity. And these communities and their religious practices have become very different, indeed. Obviously, then, when the topic, “Paul and the Jewish tradition,” arises, it posits an essential contrast and refers to Paul’s former religion—one that perhaps continues to surface in his life and teachings because of his past, or occasionally when seeking to mimic Jews in order to evangelize among them—but not to a religious way of life or community to which he still seeks to be faithful in his “Christian” life.

15. The exception proving the rule is Augustine’s proposal that the first generation of apostles continued to practice Judaism (related to their habits when becoming Christians, and to their mission to Jews, as long as it was not as an element of their salvation), although this was not to be extended to subsequent generations of Christians (Augustine ep. 40.4.6; in Joseph W. Trigg, Biblical Interpretation [Message of the Fathers of the Church 9; Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1988] 252–95). But even this concession for the first generation was strongly opposed by Jerome on the grounds that it would have compromised Christianity to allow any level of Jewish practice to continue in the church beside the pretense necessary to move among Jews to persuade them of the gospel message (Jerome, ep. 104.13, 17; in Trigg, Interpretation, 283, 289).

I suggest that the traditional approach conceptualizes Paul and his contemporaries anachronistically, including the members of his communities. Yes, Paul did teach non-Jews believing in Christ that they could not become Jews, members of Israel, but he did so for a very different reason than is usually proposed. Paul argues not on the basis that Jewish identity and Torah are detrimental to Christian life, or passé, but rather that their role is specifically designed for Israelites and not for the members of the other nations. In terms of the *Shema*, Paul is developing a tension between the special privilege of being Israel because the Lord is *our* God—the God of the covenants made with *our* fathers—and God’s role as the creator of all humankind: the Lord *alone*. God is the God of all the nations, in whose service God has called and set apart the people of Israel to demonstrate righteousness and express lovingkindness or grace, as well as to declare God’s words to all of the other nations. Here we meet so-called particularism and universalism in unison, not as binary opposites, as they are so often treated. We can thus understand Paul’s sharp denial that faithfulness to God in Christ nullified Torah or, rather, his claim that it established Torah. Torah (God’s “Teaching”) guides Israel to live faithfully to the one God, which includes bearing witness of God’s faithfulness to the nations; for Paul, that includes declaring the good news of God’s rescue of the nations in Jesus Christ.

The Shema and Eschatological Expectations

Paul’s argument is consistent with other Jewish interpretations of the *Shema* not connected to Christ-faith. Consider the language of the *Sifre* on Deut 6:4 (*Piska 31*) discussing why the Scripture says the Lord is both “our God” as well as “One.” The rabbis conclude first that “‘our God’ serves to teach us that His name rests in greater measure upon us … upon Israel,” and then offer this interpretation:

“The Lord, our God,” over us (the children of Israel); “the Lord is one,” over all the creatures of the world. “The Lord, our God,” in this world; “the Lord is one,” in the world to come, as it is said, “[T]he Lord shall be king over all the earth. In that day shall the Lord be one and His name one” (Zech 14:9).  

The concern for the universal as well as the particular is contextualized in terms of the awaited future. Israel presently has a special relationship with the One God who is the master not just of Israel, but of all of the other nations, too.

Similarly, roughly halfway between Paul’s time and our own, Rashi explained the repetition of “The Name” (Haššêm, a rabbinic circumlocution for Yhwh/Lord) in the Shema as follows:

The Lord who is our God now, but not (yet) the God of the (other) nations, is destined to be the One Lord, as it is said, “For then will I give to the peoples a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the Lord, to serve Him with one consent” (Zeph 3:9). And (likewise) it is said, “And the Lord shall be king over all the earth; on that day shall the Lord be One and His name One” (Zech 14:9).18

The eschatological expectation expressed by Rashi also explains the confession that Israelites make today, and ultimately also the confession that all the other nations will make; but they do not do so “yet.”

Paul’s argument is based upon the same logic, but to a different conclusion, because of his understanding that Jesus Christ has brought the dawning of that awaited day. As Paul brings his argument in Romans to a close, he sets out a graphic social portrait of non-Jews joining together with Jews in praise of the One God with one voice that mirrors the language of Rashi, although predating it by a millennium. In Rom 15:5–12, drawing from Torah, the Writings, and the Prophets, Paul exclaims:

May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, “Therefore, I will confess you among the Gentiles, and sing praises to your name”; and again he says, “Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people”; and again,

“Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise him”; and again Isaiah says, “The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope.” (NRSV)

For Paul, if non-Jews in-Christ would become Jewish proselytes, and thereby Israelites, they would not bear witness to the arrival of the day when representatives from all of the nations are expected to turn from idols to the worship of the One God, but simply to the truth that, for them, in the present age Israel represents the righteous ones of God, which members from the other nations also can become by proselyte conversion. That identity transformation for non-Jews is available apart from the confession of faith in Jesus Christ in most other Jewish groups of Paul’s time. They provide for proselyte conversion to join the family of Abraham, of God, within the present age, and await with Israel the hope of the day of the reconciliation of the nations. Then the “wolf” (such as is Rome) will lie down to eat with the “lamb” (Israel) without devouring her (Isa 11:6; 65:25), but until that time such behavior would be foolish for “lams” to indulge.

Paul’s logic is this: If all who worship the One God are Israelites or become Israelites, then God is only the God of one nation, not of all the nations. But if the non-Jews who turn to Israel’s God do so while remaining non-Jews, not as members of the nation Israel, then they worship the God of Israel as the one God of all the nations also. That is the point of Paul’s argument. No matter how many difficulties this poses for these members from the other nations and the Jews who affiliate with them as co-members of this Jewish coalition, God’s oneness must not be compromised by the proselyte conversion of non-Jews who turn to God by way of Jesus Christ. For Paul, that they remain members from the other nations joining alongside of Israelites constitutes an important proof of the propositional claims of the gospel; it signals the arrival of the awaited day when all of the nations will worship the Creator God together.

Most other Jewish groups probably would not disagree with Paul’s proposition that such reconciliation will occur when that day arrives, when members of other nations will not join Israel but will join alongside Israel in worship of the One Creator God of all humankind. Paul most likely held this
view even before he was called to proclaim Christ, when he was involved in seeking to stamp out these communities, which was presumably in reaction to the earliest Christ-followers’ inclusive policies toward these non-Jews apart from proselyte conversion, which were based on the very same propositional claims for the gospel that he later promoted, and for which he similarly suffered (see Gal 1:12–16 with 5:11). In addition, some Jews may have believed that day would be accompanied by the conversion of the nations in the sense of proselyte conversion to Israel; others might have awaited the destruction of the other nations. These expectations and others can be gleaned from the Scriptures and other writings of Paul’s time.\footnote{See Terence L. Donaldson (Paul and the Gentiles: Remapping the Apostle’s Convictional World [Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1997] 60–74) for a discussion of various expectations for non-Jews, including a natural law non-Jew who turns from idolatry but is not identified with circumcision and other special laws for Israelites (e.g., observing dietary customs), righteous gentiles, and eschatological pilgrimage scenarios. Examples include Josephus A.J. 20.41 (34–48); Philo Q.E. 2.2; Mos. 2.4; Abr. 3–6, 60–61; Virt. 102, 181–82, 212–19; Spec. 1.51; 2.42–48; 4.178; Jos. Asen. t. Sanh. 13.2. See Paula Fredriksen, “Judaism, The Circumcision of Gentiles, and Apocalyptic Hope: Another Look at Galatians 1 and 2,” in The Galatians Debate (ed. M. D. Nanos; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002) 235–60, here 236–47; Michael Wyschogrod, Abraham’s Promise: Judaism and Jewish-Christian Relations (Radical Traditions; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004) 162–63, 190–95; Lamm, The Shema, 31–37.}

The Unique Character of Paul’s Groups among Jewish Groups

The important point to stress here is that although members of other Jewish groups similarly hoped for reconciliation with the nations and expected them to remain non-Israelites at that time, unless they shared the conviction of Paul and other Christ-following Jews that this moment had already arrived through Jesus Christ, or had begun to arrive and to be witnessed in the lives of the communities of believers in that proposition, they would not have agreed with this change of policy, that is, to including these non-Jewish Christ-followers as full members of the Jewish communities apart from proselyte conversion. In their groups, the religio-ethnic distinction between Gentiles (however welcome as friends and guests) and Jews or Israelites, a category that included proselytes, was important to maintain. For them, any non-Jews who turned from idolatry to worship the One God and thus now seek full membership in the Jewish community would com-
plete the rite of conversion so that they are no longer regarded as mere guests. It is on this matter of timing, that is, where Israel and the nations stand on God’s timetable—at the dawning of the awaited day, and thus making halakhic decisions appropriate to its arrival, or not—that Paul’s (and other Christ-following) groups appear to have been “unique” among Jewish groups of his time.

That decision carried profound implications. Paul sought to proclaim this “truth” and bring his communities into conformity with his teaching so that they would exemplify its merits. In his view, it required subordination to the Spirit of God to live in the present age according to the dynamics of the age to come, a spiritual way of life that is available to Gentiles in Christ on the same terms as Israelites and apart from them becoming Israelites. In particular, the challenge for Christ-following Jewish communities is to live out the “truth of the gospel” proposition that, among them, discrimination is no longer practiced even though social difference remains among them in this age. Of course, since they were but humans—and in human society, where discrimination often arises when there is difference, as Social Identity Theory demonstrates—Paul recognizes that this ideal can only be achieved by dedication to God according to this proposition, and by yielding to God’s Spirit in their lives together.

I disagree with the view of many interpreters of Paul—Jewish as well as Christian—that Paul taught the dissolution of religio-ethnic differences among Christ-followers, that there were no longer Jews and Gentiles in Christ, but a kind of new, third race, as some have phrased it. Paul does write famously in Gal 3:28, “There is not Jew or Greek, there is not slave or free, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Whereas here we see again the theme of oneness, Paul cannot mean that these different identities no longer exist among Christ-followers. There are very real biological, cultural, and socio-economic differences that are not dissolved. Slaves are not by definition freed in these groups, and Jews do not become Gentiles any more than Gentiles become Jews. There remain fundamental biological differences between women and men, for example, and a man has either been circumcised or remains in his foreskinned state.

Paul recognizes these differences in his arguments. In his letters, he addresses people and groups composed of these different identities specifi-

cally, and with different instructions for each. He explains the world from an Israelite-based conceptualization of reality: he does not address anyone as “Christian,” but as Jew or non-Jew, circumcised or foreskinned. Apart from an Israelite worldview, such categories do not carry meaning; and it is only within these categories that being named a loyal follower of Jesus Christ (Messiah), or not, arises meaningfully. Thus, his rhetoric must signify something other than the end of religio-ethnic difference. Rather, it signals that these different people and groups, although different, are not to continue to discriminate among themselves based on prevailing cultural valuations of those present differences, as they had previously done “in the present evil age.” They are to live in community, to eat together at the messianic banquet of the awaited age, bearing witness to the propositional claim of the gospel that the age to come has arrived with Christ in the midst of the present age. That is the truth of the gospel to which they are called (see Gal 2:14–16).

Paul’s position in Romans 3 and Galatians 3 is in keeping with his argument in 1 Corinthians 7:17–24, that everyone who comes into the Christ-following subgroups should remain in the state in which they were when called. Thus, those circumcised remain Jews obligated to observe Torah, on the logic of Paul’s own declaration of this concomitant obligation in Gal 5:3, that those who are circumcised are responsible to observe the whole Torah. At the same time, those who are not Jews remain not-Jews and not under obligation to observe Torah as if they were Jews. What is paramount, Paul declares, which may surprise many, is not one’s relative social identity or status, but that everyone put first “keeping the commandments of God.” It is hard to believe that this Paul has become the apostle of freedom polemically juxtaposed with the value of faithful action, including the observance of Torah; the champion of faith alone, rather than of faithfulness.

It should also be recognized that, in the Christian tradition, the notion that Christians are neither Jews nor Gentiles, circumcised nor foreskinned, has actually meant that they are not to be Jews or circumcised. For Paul, Christians did not constitute a third ethnicity, but in later theological developments of Paul’s argument Christians in effect privilege the ideal of Gentile identity; consequently, the notions of “Gentile” and “Christian” are conflated in contrast to Jew and non-Christian. This conflation has created a struggle with Jewish identity and behavior, including how—and, in some cases (such as for Marcion), even whether—Christians should use the
Tanakh. In sharp contrast to Paul’s argument and the implicit logic that God is the God of Jews, the logic of the Christian abrogation of Jewish identity and Torah-based lifestyles for Jews (as if both Torah and Mosaic covenant-based identity has ended in Christ) is that God is only the God of non-Jews, that Christianity is a Gentile religion.

But this assumption turns Paul’s argument from the Shema on its head. That God is the God of Jews was the logical premise for his question (Rom 3:29) about whether God is also the God of non-Jews. He argued for the inclusion of non-Jews as equal co-members in the people of God, as children of Abraham but not of Israel—not for the exclusion of Jews thereby! He argued for the unequivocal continuation of all Israelites in the family of God as “beloved,” including those who did not share Paul’s faith in Christ, because of the gifts and promises made to the fathers (Rom 9:4–5).23 Indeed, concern to nip in the bud any potential arrogance toward those presently “stumbling” Israelites was one of Paul’s central messages throughout the letter, made explicit in the olive tree allegory and other arguments of 11:11–36.24

For Paul, what sets this Jewish community and the practice of Judaism by its non-Jewish members apart from all other Jewish groups is the maintenance of religio-ethnic difference without hierarchical advantage among them because of the reconciliation of all humankind in Jesus Christ. These non-Jews are not merely guests of the Jewish communities or practitioners of some religious way of life other than Judaism. By being in-Christ they have become children of Abraham, children of the One God of all humankind as proclaimed in Israelite terms for the awaited age to come. It is the truth of this proclamation’s claims in Jesus Christ to which they must be dedicated in all of their thinking and behavior by the “renewal of their minds” (see, e.g., 12:1–2). Otherwise, this claim’s witness to the Jewish people and the rest of the nations in Israelite-based terms will not be borne out. In the meantime, these Gentiles—regardless of their disputed identity (in Jewish communities, in which their subgroups dwell) because of their failure to become proselytes—must not think of themselves, or

23. Note the present tense possession of these gifts; see Rom 11:26–29.

try to gain standing in this-age terms, as either Jews, or alternatively, as mere guests still obliged to participate in idolatrous practices when among family and fellow townspeople. Rather, they must stand fast in the truth of their identity in the new-age terms of Christ, and thus “out of faithfulness to the Spirit, wait for the hope of righteousness” (Gal 5:5)—which is the argumentative goal of Galatians, in my view.25

Conclusion

In a title like I have chosen for my essay, “Paul and the Jewish Tradition,” the conjunction usually serves to mark a contrast between Paul, the Christian apostle and founder of a new religion, Christianity, and the Jewish tradition that he supposedly left following his “conversion.” While interpreters might note some similarities, the focus frequently is on how different these groups were, and how different they continue to be precisely because of Paul’s influence. But Paul’s arguments indicate that after his “calling” to proclaim Christ to the nations he continued to live and teach from within Judaism, albeit from within a specific group affiliation based on a shared conviction about the meaning of Jesus Christ. Paul still thought and argued and acted from the ideology of the Shema, appealing to Judaism’s ideals and seeking to embody them, and he called for the members of his groups to do so as well.

In short, Paul and his groups practiced Judaism, even though, for subsequent generations representing the tradition known as Paulinism, and in the religion that became Christianity, this proposition was so fundamentally out of step with what Paul represented that it might have seemed impossible to imagine, much less maintain. Nevertheless, I conclude by highlighting eight dynamics of this interpretation.

25. Mark D. Nanos, The Irony of Galatians: Paul’s Letter in First-Century Context (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2002). There are other texts in which Paul explicitly or implicitly appeals to the Shema that do not bear as directly on this discussion. In Gal 3:20 (NRSV), Paul writes, “Now a mediator involves more than one party; but God is one.” The oneness of God is also central to the argument in 1 Cor 8:4–6 (NRSV): “Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that ‘no idol in the world really exists,’ and that ‘there is no God but one.’ Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.”
(1) Paul supposes that appeal to Judaism’s ideals—in the case of this essay, the *Shema*—will carry authority with his Christ-following audiences, whether or not he has founded and worked among them. He does not explain the theological foundations for such an important assertion as the *Shema*, around which his arguments turn, but he expects his audiences to respond positively to this way of seeing the world, and to behave accordingly.

(2) Paul was not against social difference in the lives of Christ-followers, including gender, ethnicity, economic means, cultural norms, location, or Jewish identity and concomitant observance of Torah. Rather, social difference played a role in expressing the fundamental truth of his gospel proposition that the Creator God was not confined to one people or culture. Although God is the God of Israel and best characterized by the righteousness expressed in Torah, the ideals of Torah (of God’s Teachings for Israel) could be expressed in other cultural ways too. What Paul disallowed among Christ-followers was the hierarchical discrimination that social difference normally represented in cultures of the present age. Social difference was to remain; but because God is one, in the communities of those devoted to God, there is to be no intra-group discrimination based upon difference. This particular matter makes the interpretation of Paul advanced here relevant for Christians today, not only with respect to the religio-ethnic categories of Jew and non-Jew, but for all relationships that take place across lines of social difference.

(3) The *Shema* was a central element in Paul’s *eschatological* reasoning. Although Paul aspired to the universal hope for the future restoration of the nations before he came to believe in Christ, until that day arrived he believed that Israel alone represented the righteous family of God’s people, and anyone from the other nations must join Israel to claim such identity. He now understood that ideal to be dawning already among Christ-followers. For him, the age to come has begun with the resurrection of Christ; the messianic banquet has started. Both Israel and the other nations turn to the One God equally. When the Christ-believing sub-groups of the Jewish community meet, they represent the demonstration of this propositional truth—or they should. It is from this propositional base that his specific teaching of Jewish values in cross-cultural terms proceeds. Thus, we find him explaining the theological premises from which they should think, and by which their behavior should be guided. The *Shema* involves not only a statement of central theological truths, but also offers guidance for how to
live in the present evil age as if they already were members of the community of the blessed age to come.

(4) Reasoning from these points, rather than from the premise that he regarded Jewish identity and behavior to be inferior or obsolete and, thus, undesirable for Christ-followers, helps explain why Paul opposed the circumcision or proselyte conversion of his non-Jewish audiences. Paul was not the champion of Christian universalism versus Jewish particularism. Paul’s gospel and teaching were formulated around Jewish as well as non-Jewish particularism based on age-to-come Jewish universal aspirations. It is not the case that Paul argued Gentiles “need not” become Jews, as if it represented an option if undertaken for the right reasons instead of, for example, to gain salvation (as normally formulated); rather, he insisted that Gentiles in Christ “cannot” become Jews (Gal 5:2–6). They were, and were to remain, non-Jews, and thus not to undertake the rite of proselyte conversion. In this sense, they were not to become identified under Torah, obliged to observe it on the same terms as Jews. They must represent the nations turning to God with the arrival of the awaited age. At the same time, it follows that Jews were to continue to circumcise their sons and to observe Torah as Jews (1 Cor 7:17–24 with Gal 5:3), just as did Paul, who continued to practice prevailing Jewish dietary norms as a matter of covenant faithfulness.26 They were the ones announcing this good news to the nations precisely as representatives of the nation Israel, the nation who God called and gave the gift of Torah, the nation entrusted with the words of God to be announced (Rom 1:1–5; 3:2, 31; 9:3–5; 10:15–18; 15:8–12). Thus, the non-Jewish Christ-followers were to respect the righteousness embodied in these Teachings (Rom 13:8–14; Gal 5:13–14), and to respect their explicit practice in the lives of Jews; non-Jews were to practice Jewish communal ways of living developed for non-Jewish guests (Rom 14:1–15:13).27


27. See Nanos, Mystery, 166–238.
Paul wrote his letters to resolve the uncertainties and difficulties resulting from the application of this Jewish utopian ideal to the people in his groups, non-Jews in particular. We have a very limited and highly contextualized corpus of literature upon which to construct our portrayals of Paul as well as our histories of the origins of this movement. The explanatory phrase, “for non-Jews in Christ,” should be added to most of Paul’s statements to retain the specific, historical focus of his teachings. Particular care must be taken when one moves across the line that extends between the world of Paul and his assemblies, which were still part of Judaism, and the movement that sprung from them, which became Christianity. Exegesis, or historically oriented interpretation, and hermeneutics, or contemporary application oriented interpretation, are both cross-cultural enterprises.

That Paul works from the Shema and the ideals of Judaism has profound implications for Christian identity, for the ways with which Christians look at their own sense of self and ideals for living in the present age. Christian foundational truths, as far as the voice of Paul is concerned, arise from within Judaism, not to oppose it or begin a new religion, but to exemplify its ideals. Granted, within roughly fifty years of Paul’s death, Ignatius declared that anyone not named a Christian does not belong to God, and more pointedly, that “[i]t is utterly absurd to profess Jesus Christ and to practice Judaism. For Christianity did not believe in Judaism, but Judaism in Christianity, in which ‘every tongue’ believed and ‘was brought together’ to God” (Magn. 10.3). That central religious ideals, including God’s oneness, were developed in this way should provide reason for pause, and reconsideration. If this was not the probable intended result of Paul’s thought and teaching, then it should be the subject of investigation when and how this change came about. Instead of attributing to Paul the founding of Christianity as a new religion free of Judaism, it is time to seek to discover just how and why this change occurred, and to reconsider these decisions and their implications. Paul’s values and the values embodied in Paulinism are not one and the same.

Similarly, this historical challenge to the meaning of Paul and the interpretation of Christian origins calls for a reconsideration of the voice of Paul in Jewish historiography. Jews should become aware of so-called Paulinism, which represents an interpretive trajectory in Christian teaching.

to which Jews have responded without adequate recognition of the historical gap between Paul himself and the later schools of thought that claim to represent him. Jews need not agree with Paul to seek to translate his language and its meaning in historical context, including where the results might differ from the prevailing Christian translations and interpretations of him. Just as in the study of Jesus, the study of Paul offers data that is important for filling in the map of the Judaism (or Judaisms) of this critical period, the time just before the final destruction of the Second Temple and the subsequent emergence of rabbinic Judaism. Jesus is studied by Jews as well as Christians attentive to the difference between the study of the historical figure and the religious traditions that emerged thereafter: should Paul not be studied attentive to this dynamic?

(8) It follows that, in addition to calling for historical reevaluation of the Judaism of Paul’s time and his own expression thereof, the reading proposed here overcomes the obstacle Paul’s voice has represented to date for Christian-Jewish dialogue and relations. Today, there are significant differences between these two faith traditions, but the origins of Paul’s faith were not based on a fundamental rejection of Judaism in the way so often imagined and taught. What was at issue was whether this propositional “truth of the gospel” was to be expressed in age-to-come terms in the present age.

What stood between these originally Jewish groups continues to be the main difference between the two present day religions, one Jewish, and the other no longer so. Their foundational ideals are not in dispute, but the meaning of Jesus Christ. The point is not to ignore all the differences that now exist between the members of these two religions, but to get the differences right. The approach offered here provides a way to recognize and seize upon the similarities from which we can work together to bring about mutual respect—a level of much needed shalom arising from shared identity in the present age as fellow witnesses to the One God, in spite of different opinions about whether the awaited age has dawned in Jesus Christ, or not.