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**THE USE OF “HELLENISTIC JUDAISM” IN PAULINE STUDIES**

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## CONTENTS

|   |    |
|---|----|
| INTRODUCTION .....                              | 1  |
| HEGELIAN BEGINNINGS .....                       | 2  |
| <i>DIE RELIGIONSGESCHICHTLICHE SCHULE</i> ..... | 5  |
| Wilhelm Bousset (1865-1920)                     | 5  |
| Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976)                     | 9  |
| Erwin R. Goodenough (1893-1965)                 | 13 |
| HENGEL'S PARADIGM SHIFT .....                   | 17 |
| Martin Hengel (1973)                            | 17 |
| John M. G. Barclay (1996)                       | 22 |
| CRITIQUE AND ASSESSMENT .....                   | 28 |
| FUTURE RESEARCH .....                           | 34 |
| Bible Knowledge of the Pauline Congregations    | 36 |
| The Role of the LXX in Lexical Studies          | 38 |
| Gentile Attraction to Judaism                   | 40 |
| Christian Analogues to the Diaspora Synagogue   | 41 |
| CONCLUSION .....                                | 42 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY .....                              | 44 |

## INTRODUCTION

The concept of “Hellenistic Judaism”<sup>1</sup> has played an important role in New Testament studies since the time of F. C. Baur. Typically, the phrase was paired with another phrase, “Palestinian Judaism,” which was viewed as the antithesis of “Hellenistic Judaism.” The two entities were conceptualized as binary opposites, which further exaggerated the scholarly conception of each entity. Since “Palestinian Judaism” was concerned to uphold the purity laws and the boundary markers that distinguished Israel from Hellenism, “Hellenistic Judaism” must have been open to assimilation with Gentiles. On the other hand, since “Hellenistic Judaism” had a freer cultural outlook, “Palestinian Judaism” must have been ingrown and legalistic. With these questionable assumptions in hand, New Testament scholars put the concept of “Hellenistic Judaism” to use in a variety of ways. My goal in this paper is to trace one particular use to which New Testament scholars put this concept – the attempt to explain the alleged “Hellenization” of Christianity that occurred among the Gentile Christian communities, particularly under the influence of the apostle Paul.

I begin my survey with Baur, since he set the agenda for New Testament scholarship for well over a century. After Baur, I survey three representatives of the

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<sup>1</sup> On “Hellenistic Judaism” generally, see P. R. Trebilco and C. A. Evans, “Diaspora Judaism,” in *DNTB* (ed. Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2000), 281-96; W. T. Wilson, “Hellenistic Judaism,” in *DNTB*, 477-82; and J. Andrew Overman and William Scott Green, “Judaism (Greco-Roman Period),” in *ABD* (ed. David Noel Freedman; New York: Doubleday, 1992), 3:1037-54.

*religionsgeschichtliche* school (Wilhelm Bousset, Rudolf Bultmann, and E. R. Goodenough) who made "Hellenistic Judaism" a linchpin in their understanding of Christian origins. All of this sets the context for Martin Hengel, whose work caused a paradigm shift in the early 1970s that has permanently changed the terms of the debate. No longer do scholars view "Palestinian" and "Hellenistic Judaism" as binary opposites. After summarizing Hengel's paradigm-altering work, I will take a look at what I consider to be the most important contribution to the discussion in the 30 years since Hengel, that of John M. G. Barclay.

With this historical survey in view, I offer a twofold critique of the *religionsgeschichtliche* approach. In addition, I argue that the term "Hellenistic Judaism" carries too much baggage, and propose that we discontinue its use. I will suggest instead that we speak of "Judaism of the Greek-speaking Diaspora." Finally, with this clearer understanding in view, I propose some avenues of future research that seem to me to have potential for Pauline studies.

## HEGELIAN BEGINNINGS

I begin with Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792-1860) because the critical approach to New Testament studies essentially begins with him, and his views have exercised a profound influence on New Testament studies ever since. Baur's view of "Hellenistic Judaism" is set within the context of his broader reconstruction of the history of early Christianity. For Baur, Christianity was born in the narrow, "cramping" environment of Judaism. The true "spirit" (*Geist*) of Christianity had to struggle to break free from that

environment in order to realize its full potential.<sup>2</sup> This struggle manifested itself in the famous conflict between Pauline Christianity on the one hand, which grasped the true "spirit" of Christianity, and Petrine Christianity on the other, which was still tied to the ceremonial law and Jewish exclusivism. Even before the advent of Christianity, according to Baur, there already existed a more liberal version of Judaism that was less tied to the ceremonial law and which had universalistic tendencies.<sup>3</sup> This more liberal Judaism is "Hellenistic Judaism." In Baur's scheme, "Hellenistic Judaism" functions as a preparation for Gentile Christianity. It provides a bridge from Judaism to the early Christian Hellenists and from there to the law-free Gentile mission. The primitive community of Christians in Jerusalem was of course entirely Jewish at the beginning, but the first converts to Christianity included both types of Jews – both the conservative Aramaic-speaking Jews and the more liberal Hellenistic Jews (the "Hebraists" and the "Hellenists" of Acts 6:1).<sup>4</sup> Thus the first Christian community reflected the larger division within Jewish society at large by containing both types of Jews.

Since the main spokesman for the theology of the Hellenistic Jewish Christians was Stephen, Baur believes that the chief characteristics of Hellenistic Jewish Christianity can be deduced from Stephen's speech in Acts 7. Hellenistic Jewish Christianity "had placed itself in direct opposition to the existing Temple worship," in

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<sup>2</sup> F. C. Baur, *Paul the Apostle of Jesus Christ: His Life and Works, His Epistles and Teachings* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2003), 1:60.

<sup>3</sup> By "universalism" Baur does not mean universal salvation but the extension of missionary efforts among non-Jews.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:39-42, 59-62.

contrast with the Hebraistic Jewish Christians who still respected the Temple.<sup>5</sup> Stephen's critique of the Temple was in continuity with that of the Hebrew prophets who spoke against Israel's externalism and formalism and in favor of a more spiritual worship. But Stephen went much further and initiated the separation of Christianity from Judaism.

That the essence of true religion did not consist in outward ceremonials, connected with a temple service confined to an appointed spot, was the one great idea, through which, at the time, Judaism saw itself superceded by Christianity. This inevitable rending asunder of Christianity from Judaism, whereby Judaism would be rendered negative as an absolute religion, and by which its final extinction was threatened, had been realized by Stephen.<sup>6</sup>

Now all of this is significant for Pauline interpretation, because Baur regards Stephen as "the forerunner of Paul."<sup>7</sup> The liberal ideas of Stephen continued to be maintained in the Hellenistic circle after his martyrdom and prepared the way for the Gentile mission which was later taken up by Paul. The transition from Stephen's critique of the Temple to the Gentile mission occurred as follows: "As soon as men felt, what had been so clear to Stephen, that they were no longer bound to the old cramping forms of Judaism, they also saw that the dividing boundaries between Jew and Gentile could no longer be considered as absolutely necessary."<sup>8</sup> This, in turn, led Paul to his signature contrast between Law and Gospel, Judaism and Christianity. Building on the Hellenistic Jewish Christianity that he himself once vehemently opposed, Paul now stands on a platform "where he has passed beyond all that is merely relative, limited, and finite in the Jewish religion, and has risen to the absolute religion."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 1:39.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 1:59.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 1:61-62.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 1:60.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 2:126.

Baur's reliance on Hegelian analytical categories causes him to paint with broad strokes as required by the thesis-antithesis-synthesis analysis. History is resolved into the simplistic picture of "Judaism versus Hellenism" or "Judaism versus Christianity." The transition from Judaism to Christianity is viewed as the struggle of grand, impersonal ideas on the canvas of history, the progressive evolution of religious consciousness toward the Hegelian climax of history, "the absolute Spirit."

### ***DIE RELIGIONSGESCHICHTLICHE SCHULE***

F. C. Baur initiated the use of "Hellenistic Judaism" as a historiographical category for explaining Christian origins, but *die religionsgeschichtliche Schule* at the turn of the century provided a more fully developed theoretical foundation. The specifically Hegelian form of the argument is discarded, but Baur's Judaism-Hellenism dichotomy will continue to dominate the next century of New Testament scholarship which repeatedly reveals its dependency on Baur's idealized categories.

### **Wilhelm Bousset (1865-1920)**

Although numerous scholars participated in this school and worked with the same general presuppositions, it was Wilhelm Bousset who brought that school's picture of "Hellenistic Judaism" into sharp focus. In his book, *Die Religion des Judentums im neutestamentlichen Zeitalter*,<sup>10</sup> Bousset provided a rich and detailed survey of the religion of Judaism in the New Testament period, paying close attention to the literary sources of

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<sup>10</sup> Wilhelm Bousset, *Die Religion des Judentums im neutestamentlichen Zeitalter* (2nd ed.; ed. Hugo Gressmann; Berlin: Reuther and Reichard, 1906).

Second Temple Judaism available in Bousset's time.<sup>11</sup> This book is important because it is one of the first scientific surveys of Jewish religion in this period.<sup>12</sup> Although I am critical of Bousset's picture of "Hellenistic Judaism," this book is a careful examination of the sources that can still be used with profit a century later.

In contrast with the recent trend to analyze various "Judaisms" in an atomistic fashion, Bousset treats Judaism primarily as a single spiritual unity. Yet he does not overlook the variety within Judaism, a variety which Bousset regards as existing within a common religious heritage. It is when describing the varieties of Jewish piety that he explores the differences between "Hellenistic Judaism" (which he prefers to call "Diaspora Judaism") and "Palestinian Judaism." Bousset argues that the differences are "mannigfache und tiefgreifende" ("manifold and profound") and rooted in the "sehr andersartigen kulturellen Gesamtlage" ("very different cultural context") of Diaspora Judaism.<sup>13</sup> The Jews of the homeland belonged largely to the agrarian class; the Jews of the Diaspora were an urban population, mostly made up of craftsmen and merchants. The Jews of the homeland spoke Aramaic; the Jews of the Diaspora spoke Greek. For Bousset, the linguistic change was far from superficial and produced corresponding changes in "die Vorstellungswelt, die ganze Art zu denken, die Form der Begriffsbildung" ("the imagination, the entire style of thinking, the form of

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<sup>11</sup> Of course, the Dead Sea Scrolls had not yet been discovered when Bousset wrote.

<sup>12</sup> Stephen Neill and Tom Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861-1986* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 175.

<sup>13</sup> Bousset, *Die Religion des Judentums*, 497. Since no English translation of this work is known to me, the translations are mine.

conceptualization").<sup>14</sup> Bousset sees these conceptual changes in a number of areas: a reduced emphasis on the peculiarities of Jewish practice and an increased emphasis on the moral demands of the Torah; a reduced emphasis on apocalyptic theology, particularly the resurrection of the body, and an increased emphasis on the continuation of the soul after death; a reduced emphasis on Jewish nationalism and an increased emphasis on openness to the Gentiles. Diaspora Judaism also was influenced by the Alexandrian allegorical method of interpretation, thus enabling a more refined and spiritual concept of God than was common in Palestinian Judaism.

In addition, Diaspora Judaism was characterized by a much stronger missionary impulse than Palestinian Judaism.

Vor allem aber sammelte die Diaspora – namentlich in den Großstädten – einem sehr beträchtlichen Kreis von Proselyten um sich. Das Judentum erfasste hier mit besonderer Energie, so wie es ihn in der Vergangenheit niemals erfasst hatte, seinen Missionsberuf unter den Völkern. Und die Mission bekam hier einen Zug und Schwung ins Grosse, während das Judentum Palästinas, auch wo sich der Missionssinn regte, in den ersten kümmerlichen Anfängen stecken blieb.<sup>15</sup>

(But above all, the Diaspora, particularly in the large cities, gathered around itself a considerable circle of proselytes. Here the missionary task among the nations seized Judaism with particular energy, as it had never done before. And this mission gained significant momentum in the Diaspora, whereas Palestinian Judaism, which also stirred with missionary feeling, remained stuck in its first meager beginnings.)

This missionary zeal had profound ramifications, for in contrast with "die engen Verhältnisse des kleinen Heimatlandes" ("the cramped conditions of the small homeland"), Diaspora Judaism's out-facing attitude "weitete wieder den Gesichtskreis des Judentums" ("further widened Judaism's field of vision"). This in turn meant that

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 498.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 499.

Diaspora Judaism placed even less emphasis on its distinctive character and practices. "Je mehr Mission, desto weniger Streben nach Besonderheit und Exklusivität" ("The more it pursued missions, the less it pursued peculiarity and exclusivity").<sup>16</sup> In other words, the essential contrast between Palestinian and Diaspora Judaism is, as Baur had argued, a contrast between particularism and legalism on the one hand and universalism and freedom on the other.<sup>17</sup>

Bousset's picture of "Hellenistic Judaism" is continuous with that of Baur. Both emphasized the (alleged) missionary, universalistic impulse of Judaism in the Diaspora, but Bousset fleshed out the details and provided what appeared to be a secure scholarly foundation for Baur's theory. In so doing, he helped to cement in many scholar's minds a certain picture of "Hellenistic Judaism." Bousset's work was so effective that it wasn't until quite recently that scholars began questioning the assumption that Diaspora Judaism actively engaged in missionary activity.<sup>18</sup>

Bousset's work on Judaism is important, but *Kyrios Christos* was his most important contribution to New Testament scholarship.<sup>19</sup> In this volume Bousset maintains a sharp distinction between the primitive Palestinian community of Christians on the one

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Bousset's description of Palestinian Judaism as particularistic and legalistic was critiqued by George Foot Moore, "Christian Writers on Judaism," *HTR* 14 (1921): 241-8.

<sup>18</sup> Scot McKnight, *A Light Among the Gentiles: Jewish Missionary Activity in the Second Temple Period* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991); Martin Goodman, *Mission and Conversion: Proselytizing in the Religious History of the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994).

<sup>19</sup> Wilhelm Bousset, *Kyrios Christos: A History of the Belief in Christ from the Beginnings of Christianity to Irenaeus* (trans. John E. Steely; Nashville: Abingdon, 1970).

hand, and the Hellenistic churches on the other.<sup>20</sup> On the basis of this distinction, Bousset's thesis is that Jesus was first called κύριος in the Hellenistic churches, a title with cultic significance that was essentially borrowed from the mystery religions. In *Kyrios Christos* Bousset refers to Diaspora Judaism only occasionally, and spends most of his energy working with the pagan Hellenistic sources as a background for understanding Gentile or Hellenistic Christianity (e.g., an alleged pre-Christian Gnosticism). However, in his "Foreword" he makes one important reference to Diaspora Judaism as a background for understanding Paul. Perhaps someone might object, Bousset says, to the idea that Paul would adopt the theology and Christology of the Hellenistic churches. In response, Bousset says "one may point out now that Paul was a Jew of the Diaspora," who would have been exposed to the mystery religions and may have even read the Hermetic literature, Greek philosophers, and so on.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, Paul's connections with Jerusalem were in reality "of a most meager kind."<sup>22</sup> Therefore, Bousset concludes, given Paul's Diaspora background, it is not at all impossible or surprising that Paul readily adopted the theological formulations and emphases of the Hellenistic churches rather than those of the Palestinian community.

### **Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976)**

Bultmann accepted the view of "Hellenistic Judaism" set forth by Bousset without questioning. He simply took the concept as he had received it and put it to use.

Bultmann's specific thesis, also following Bousset, involves the assumption of a major

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<sup>20</sup> I will explain this distinction further in my treatment of Bultmann (next).

<sup>21</sup> Bousset, *Kyrios Christos*, 21-22.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

distinction between *die palästinischen Urgemeinde* ("the primitive Palestinian Christian community"), on the one hand, and *hellenistischen Christentum* ("Hellenistic Christianity") or *Heidenchristentum* ("Gentile Christianity"), on the other. Bultmann received this distinction from Bousset and Heitmüller before him.<sup>23</sup>

The primitive Palestinian community of Christians, according to Bultmann, was dependent upon the original disciples and treasured the traditions about the earthly Jesus' words and deeds. It had a low Christology, rooted in the Jewish concepts of Jesus as the Messiah and the Danielic "Son of Man." These primitive Christians did not have a complex system of soteriology but followed Jesus as simple disciples striving to obey the ethical teachings of Jesus that had been handed down to them by Peter and "the twelve." The primitive community was essentially an eschatological Jewish sect.

If the primitive community was an eschatological Jewish sect, Gentile Christianity lost all connection with Judaism and became a new religion. This occurred unintentionally, in accordance with certain religio-historical laws, because Gentile Christianity was separated geographically and culturally from the primitive community. In their Hellenistic environment Gentile Christians developed their own Christology and soteriology independently of the primitive community. Furthermore, due to their Gentile education and background, Jewish concepts like "Messiah," "Son of Man," and other

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<sup>23</sup> Wilhelm Heitmüller, Bultmann's predecessor in the Marburg chair, had argued that "die Entwicklungsreihe lautet: Jesus – Urgemeinde – hellenistisches Christentum – Paulus" ("the line of development goes: Jesus – the primitive community – Hellenistic Christianity – Paul"). Heitmüller, "Zum Problem Paulus und Jesus," *ZNW* 13 (1912): 330. Bultmann himself wrote: "This, in spite of all objection, seems to me an assured result of the research of Bousset and Heitmüller." Bultmann, "The Significance of the Historical Jesus for the Theology of Paul," in vol. 1 of *Faith and Understanding* (ed. Robert W. Funk; trans. Louise Pettibone Smith; London: SCM Press, 1969), 222.

apocalyptic notions did not resonate with them. So they took the primitive gospel and reconceived it along Hellenistic conceptual lines. The title "Son of Man" drops out completely from use. The word "Christ" remains, but has become merely a proper name having lost any connection with the Jewish concept of the Messiah. In the place of an apocalyptic structure there arises a complex soteriology of redemption through mystical union with a pre-existent divine redeemer who became man, died, and is now the risen cosmic Lord. The sacraments were also changed from their simple meaning in the original Palestinian context into mystery rites that automatically secure union with the dying and rising god. "The Gospel had to be preached in terms intelligible to Hellenistic audience and their mental outlook, while at the same time the audiences themselves were bound to interpret the gospel message in their own way, in light of their own spiritual needs."<sup>24</sup>

"Hellenistic Judaism" fits into this scheme in the following way. The primitive Palestinian community contained a few *hellenistischen Judenchristen* ("Hellenistic Jewish Christians"), as Acts 6:1 testifies. These were the first to carry the primitive gospel beyond the confines of Palestinian Judaism to the Gentiles. As a result of their early efforts, Gentile congregations began to spring up in the Greco-Roman world, a process to which Paul himself later made his life's contribution. These Gentile congregations consisted of both Hellenistic Jewish Christians and Gentile God-fearers from *die hellenistischen Synagogen* ("the Hellenistic synagogues"). From this base the Gentile population itself was eventually evangelized and many converts came into the

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<sup>24</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity in its Contemporary Setting* (trans. R. H. Fuller; London: Thames and Hudson, 1956), 176.

Gentile churches directly from paganism without first making a stop in the Hellenistic synagogue.

The Hellenistic synagogue played a key role in shaping the character of Hellenistic Christianity. Through its mediating influence, Gentile Christianity received the Septuagint as well as a whole raft of Hellenistic philosophical ideas that had already been assimilated within the Hellenistic synagogue.

This adoption of the Old Testament followed as a matter of course in those congregations which grew out of the Synagogue. The latter was also the medium by which Hellenistic Christianity adopted conceptions emanating from [the] philosophical enlightenment, conceptions which the Synagogue itself had assimilated at an earlier stage.<sup>25</sup>

The end result is that for Bultmann, Hellenistic Christianity is a "syncretistic phenomenon." This explains why it is full of contradictions. On the one hand, the world is God's good creation; on the other, it is all under the dominion of Satan. On the one hand, the New Testament teaches the traditional two-age eschatology inherited from Judaism; on the other hand, the Fourth Gospel has translated apocalyptic ideas into the timeless register of Gnostic dualism. These tensions provided the fertile soil out of which sprang the various heresies that plagued the church in its first centuries.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 177. I have inserted a "the" in brackets because Bultmann's original German seems to require it: "Die Synagoge vermittelte dem hellenistischen Christentum aber auch Gedanken und Begriffe der philosophischen Aufklärung, die sie selbst schon übernommen hatte." Bultmann, *Das Urchristentum im Rahmen der antiken Religionen* (Zürich: Artemis-Verlag, 1949), 197. Bultmann had earlier referred to *die griechischen Aufklärung* in which popular Stoicism and Platonism led to a more spiritual conception of the gods, even a kind of philosophical monotheism, combined with a doctrine of virtue similar to Jewish morality (Bultmann, *Das Urchristentum*, 104 = *Primitive Christianity*, 94-95).

<sup>26</sup> Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity*, 175-79.

### Erwin R. Goodenough (1893-1965)

With Erwin Goodenough we come to the most famous example of the *religionsgeschichtliche* approach among English speaking scholars. Although there were others in the *religionsgeschichtliche* school who employed the concept of "Hellenistic Judaism" to explain the alleged "Hellenization" of Christianity, it was Goodenough who made the most substantial use of this concept. Goodenough made his mark by publishing Jewish art from the Greco-Roman Diaspora. The archaeological findings from Dura Europus and elsewhere seemed to indicate that many Jewish communities in the Roman Diaspora were apparently not inhibited by the traditional Rabbinic prohibition of the use of images for religious purposes. Goodenough collected and interpreted this evidence in 13 volumes published under the title, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*.<sup>27</sup> Although his use of Jungian psychoanalysis to analyze the meaning of the symbols has not been accepted by most scholars,<sup>28</sup> Goodenough's great contribution was to prove the unexpected fact that Jewish communities in the western Diaspora expressed their faith through a wide variety of representational art forms.

Goodenough's point in collecting this Jewish art was to demonstrate that the Judaism of the Greco-Roman period was not the uniform "normative Judaism" championed by his revered teacher George Foot Moore. Goodenough wanted to show that there existed a widespread marginal version of Judaism which he called "Hellenized or mystical Judaism." Normative Judaism later hardened into Rabbinic or Talmudic Judaism, which become the standard Judaism of the Christian era. Mystical Judaism,

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<sup>27</sup> Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period* (13 vols.; New York: Pantheon Books, 1953-1968).

<sup>28</sup> See Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, vol. 4, for an exposition of his psychoanalytic methodology.

though submerged by the rabbis, persisted on the margins in the medieval period in the form of *merkavah* mysticism, Cabala, and Hasidic Judaism. In the pre-Christian era, Goodenough believed that Philo was the prime example of mystical Judaism. In *By Light, Light*,<sup>29</sup> he argued that mystical Judaism created a synthesis of Judaism and the pagan mystery cults, with the result that they created a Jewish mystery religion complete with its own mystery cult. Goodenough appealed to Philo's use of mystical language as evidence that this reflected an actual mystery cult practiced in "Hellenistic Judaism." It should be noted that most scholars today believe that by inferring the existence of an actual Jewish mystery cult Goodenough pressed Philo's metaphorical language too far.<sup>30</sup>

The significance of mystical "Hellenistic Judaism" for the study of Christian origins and of Paul, according to Goodenough, is that "Hellenistic Judaism" solves the problem of the rapid Hellenization of Christianity. Goodenough presents the problem as follows. Jesus was a simple Galilean peasant who had no thought of departing from Judaism. Yet the very earliest Christian documents seem to Goodenough to be "completely oriented to Hellenism."<sup>31</sup> As examples of this, he argues that the sacred cup of the Lord's Supper is borrowed from the cult of Dionysis, the virgin birth from the myths of a god impregnating a human mother to produce a famous hero, baptismal regeneration from any number of pagan sources, and a savior who conquered death from

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<sup>29</sup> Goodenough, *By Light, Light: The Mystic Gospel of Hellenistic Judaism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1935).

<sup>30</sup> Gregory E. Sterling, "The Place of Philo of Alexandria in the Study of Christian Origins," in *Philo und das Neue Testament: Wechselseitige Wahrnehmungen* (ed. Roland Deines and Karl-Wilhelm Niebuhr; Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 2004), 27.

<sup>31</sup> Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 1:3.

the Egyptian-Roman-Syrian mystery religions. As for Paul, who is the earliest Christian Hellenizer of all, Goodenough regards the essence of Paulinism as the typically Greek desire to experience escape from the body ("flesh") into the realm of the soul ("spirit") – an idea that had absolutely no basis in the teaching of Jesus. All of this Goodenough takes as a matter of course without offering much proof, presumably because he felt that the writers of *die religionsgeschichtliche Schule* had already proved the point.

But here is the problem, as Goodenough sees it: Christianity inherited from Judaism its detestation of paganism and idolatry. How, then, could Christianity become Hellenized so quickly – within three decades? The problem, for Goodenough, is not the fact of the Hellenization of Christianity, but "the speed with which the transition was made."<sup>32</sup> The answer, in Goodenough's theory, is the prior existence of mystical

Hellenistic Judaism:

The hellenization of Christianity had been made possible because Jews in the pagan world had opened doors through which pagan notions had come into their Judaism.... When such Jews became Christians these notions were already at home in their minds as a part of their Judaism itself, and so *at once* became a part of their Christianity.<sup>33</sup>

Paul was a particularly potent force in the early and rapid Hellenization of Christianity. Paul took the mystical "Hellenistic Jewish" tradition and "Christianized" it. In his essay on Paul's Epistle to the Romans,<sup>34</sup> Goodenough begins by affirming the Tübingen approach that the authentic picture of Paul must be derived from his epistles rather than from the Acts of the Apostles. Goodenough accepts this methodology and

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 1:4.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 1:6. Emphasis added.

<sup>34</sup> Erwin R. Goodenough with A. T. Kraabel, "Paul and the Hellenization of Christianity," in *Religions in Antiquity: Essays in Memory of Erwin Ramsdell Goodenough* (ed. Jacob Neusner; Leiden: Brill, 1968), 23-68.

concludes that the picture of Paul in Acts as a disciple of Gamaliel and a Jewish conservative is unhistorical. In reality, Goodenough believes, Paul was a mystical Hellenistic Jew with little connection to Palestinian Judaism. With this premise in hand, Goodenough provides a running commentary on Romans, which he takes to be Paul's most didactic statement of the gospel. Going through the first eight chapters in sequence, Goodenough argues that at each step of Paul's argument in Romans 1-8, the key motifs are best illuminated, not by reference to Rabbinic parallels, but to parallel passages from Philo. In particular, Goodenough sees Philonic ideas in the theme in Romans 7-8 that sin resides in the "flesh" (body) and is in constant warfare with the "spirit" (the higher mind).

The relevance of Philo for gaining interpretive insights into Paul's gospel is questionable. Nevertheless, I do think Goodenough was on to something when he urged scholars to pay more attention to "Hellenistic Judaism" as an important context for understanding the New Testament. He wrote:

It has always been supposed that the Jewish background of Christianity was rabbinic Judaism. But since Christianity used the Septuagint as its Bible, wrote all its earliest documents in Greek for pagans or Greek-speaking Jews ... it is much more profitable to look for the immediate Jewish background of Christianity in this Hellenized Judaism than in rabbinism.<sup>35</sup>

As we will see in our survey of the next scholar (Martin Hengel), Goodenough has here overstated the contrast between "rabbinic Judaism" and "Hellenized Judaism." In addition, Goodenough's scholarly reconstruction of "Hellenized Judaism" is itself open to serious criticism, particularly in light of his idiosyncratic interpretation of it as a mystery religion. Nevertheless, Goodenough's plea that scholars pay more attention to

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<sup>35</sup> *Goodenough on the Beginnings of Christianity* (A. T. Kraabel, ed.; Brown Judaic Studies; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 94-95.

Greek-speaking Judaism as one important context (among others) for understanding the rise of Pauline Christianity needs to be given serious consideration. Goodenough's plea makes good sense in view of the fact that "Christianity used the Septuagint as its Bible" and "wrote all its earliest documents in Greek."

### **HENGEL'S PARADIGM SHIFT**

Each of the views we have examined so far agree on a number of points. They all agree that Paul's theology reflects the influence of "Hellenistic" ideas, resulting in a departure from the strictly Jewish character of the primitive Palestinian church. They also agree that "Hellenistic Judaism" is to be distinguished sharply from "Palestinian Judaism," and that "Hellenistic Judaism" (rather than "Palestinian Judaism") played the decisive role in imparting a "Hellenistic" cast to Pauline thought. With the work of Martin Hengel this cluster of presuppositions was subjected to searching criticism and the opportunity for fresh thinking in this area was opened up. Indeed, it would not be going too far say that Hengel's work created a paradigm shift that continues to influence New Testament studies today.

#### **Martin Hengel (1973)**

The ground-breaking work which had this effect was his *Judaism and Hellenism*, published in English in 1974, based on the second German edition of 1973.<sup>36</sup> Looking

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<sup>36</sup> *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in their Encounter in Palestine during the Early Hellenistic Period* (trans. John Bowden; vols. 1-2; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974). Translation of *Judentum und Hellenismus, Studien zu ihrer*

back more 30 years after the publication of *Judaism and Hellenism*, Hengel provides a later window into his aim in writing this book. He explains that he had "a theological, a New Testament" motivation. At the time, all of his colleagues at Tübingen were "intoxicated by the sweet wine from Marburg." In line with the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, they "saw in early Christianity predominantly a syncretistic Hellenistic religion ... strongly influenced by mystery religions and a pre-Christian Gnosis."<sup>37</sup> To Hengel, these suppositions are improbable, given that early Christianity originated in Jewish Palestine. After all, Jesus, Paul, and the first Christians were all Jews. Therefore, to understand the origins of Christianity, Hengel believes that one must understand the precise nature of the Judaism out of which it arose. Hengel's thesis is that the Judaism out of which Christianity arose was deeply influenced by Hellenism.

As we have seen, New Testament scholarship prior to Hengel had operated with simplistic categories, positing a binary polarity between "Judaism" and "Hellenism" or between "Palestinian Judaism" and "Hellenistic Judaism." Hengel's work broke down this binary schematization and showed that Palestinian Judaism was not a pristine phenomenon uninfluenced by its Hellenistic environment. *Judaism and Hellenism* forcefully makes a single, simple point: "The usual distinction between Palestinian and Hellenistic Judaism needs to be corrected .... From about the middle of the third century BC all Judaism must really be designated 'Hellenistic Judaism' in the strict sense."<sup>38</sup>

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*Begegnung unter besonderer Berücksichtigung Palästinas bis zur Mitte des 2. Jahrhunderts vor Chr.* (2nd ed.; Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1973).

<sup>37</sup> Hengel, "Judaism and Hellenism Revisited," in *Hellenism in the Land of Israel* (ed. John J. Collins and Gregory E. Sterling; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 8.

<sup>38</sup> *Judaism and Hellenism*, 1:104.

Hengel's analysis of Palestinian Judaism is not that it is a syncretistic mixture of Jewish and Hellenistic ideas. Rather, it remains Judaism, but a Judaism that has been shaped, consciously and unconsciously, by its interaction with Hellenism. Judaism's interaction with Hellenism occurred in a variety of ways, from the extreme Hellenization of Jason and Menelaus who tried to transform Jerusalem into a Greek city in the lead-up to the great Hellenization crisis of 167-63 BCE, to the zealous rejection of Hellenism on the part of the pious faithful – some of whom employed Greek language and rhetoric to advance their rigorous interpretation of the Torah and to brand the Hellenizers as apostates.

In *The 'Hellenization' of Judea in the First Century after Christ*, published in 1989 in collaboration of Christoph Marksches, Hengel continues the theme of *Judaism and Hellenism* by bringing the discussion down to the first century. His main concern in this book is to argue, on the basis of physical and literary remains, for the presence of a sizeable community of Greek-speaking Jews in Jerusalem comprising approximately 10-20% of the population (about 8,000 to 16,000 persons in real numbers), who had their own synagogues and synagogue schools.<sup>39</sup> A subset of this group was converted to Christianity in the early years of the Jerusalem church, and probably had their own Greek worship services separate from those of the Aramaic-speaking Jewish Christians. Hengel suggests that parts of the Jesus tradition were translated into Greek early on by these Greek-speaking Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, rather than decades later in Antioch as typically suggested.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Hengel, *The 'Hellenization' of Judaea in the First Century after Christ* (London: SCM Press, 1989), 10-11.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

The theme of a Greek-speaking Jewish community in Jerusalem is continued in *The Pre-Christian Paul*,<sup>41</sup> a volume written in collaboration with Roland Deines and published in 1991, only two years later. In this book, Hengel is zealous to combat the *religionsgeschichtliche* approach that views Paul exclusively in terms of his background in the alleged "Hellenistic" syncretistic environment of Tarsus, the capital of Cilicia. In order to combat this approach, he makes a two-pronged attack.

First, Hengel reexamines the evidence from Luke's accounts in Acts concerning the pre-Christian Saul's education under Gamaliel in Jerusalem. Of course, in so doing, Hengel must go against the grain of the extreme skepticism with which scholars have treated Acts ever since F. C. Baur. Hengel makes a good case that such extreme skepticism is unwarranted and that Luke's information about Paul's pre-Christian upbringing is plausible and credible. Hengel concludes that Paul's mother tongue was Greek, that he was raised on the Greek Bible, but that due to an extensive Rabbinic education in Jerusalem, he also knew Aramaic and Hebrew. Paul is thus bi-lingual and bi-cultural, "a wanderer between two worlds."<sup>42</sup>

Second, Hengel attacks the assumption that Paul's "Hellenistic" roots involved exposure to a fundamentally syncretistic form of Judaism. Picking up on the theme of *The 'Hellenization' of Judea*, Hengel argues that Paul's habitat in Jerusalem was probably Greek-speaking Jewish communities in which the Greek Bible was used. The type of Greek that was spoken in this habitat was not the high literary Greek of the more educated elites, nor was the full canon of pagan Greek literature from Homer to Plato

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<sup>41</sup> Hengel, *The Pre-Christian Paul* (London: SCM Press, 1991).

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 37-39.

studied. Rather, the Greek spoken was Septuagintal and practical, although a modest degree of rhetorical skill shows through in his epistles. Hengel hypothesizes that after his Pharisaic training, Paul found himself mainly among the Hellenistic (that is, Greek-speaking) Jewish synagogues in Jerusalem. Paul may even have been a teacher in a Hellenistic synagogue in Jerusalem, "where he may have seen his task as being that of a teacher communicating the Pharisaic understanding of the law to the Diaspora Jews who streamed to Jerusalem in large numbers."<sup>43</sup> It was precisely because of Paul's pre-conversion membership in the Jewish Hellenistic community in Jerusalem that he became involved in the persecution of Stephen and the Greek-speaking Jewish Christians in Jerusalem.<sup>44</sup>

Hengel's overall thesis has been well received and essentially vindicated in its main outlines.<sup>45</sup> Contemporary mainstream scholarship on Second Temple Judaism supports Hengel's main point that Palestinian Judaism at the time of Jesus and Paul was itself a form of "Hellenistic Judaism." The binary, either-or categories are now passé. With regard to some of the details of Hengel's argument, specific points have been called

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>44</sup> Hengel regards the persecution described in Acts 8:1-3 as directed primarily against "the Hellenists."

<sup>45</sup> Peder Borgen states that "scholars no longer regard the distinction between Palestinian Judaism and Hellenistic Judaism as a basic category for our understanding of Judaism." *The New Testament and Hellenistic Judaism* (ed. Peder Borgen and Søren Giversen; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1995), 11. Similar assessments of Hengel's work may be found in Tessa Rajak, *The Jewish Dialogue with Greece and Rome: Studies in Cultural and Social Interaction* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), and Lee I. Levine, *Judaism and Hellenism in Antiquity: Conflict or Confluence?* (Seattle: The University of Washington Press, 1998).

into question or corrected.<sup>46</sup> Hengel does not think these criticisms call into question the validity of his broader thesis.<sup>47</sup>

The significance of Hengel's paradigm shift extends beyond his own specific thesis that Palestinian Judaism was itself influenced by Hellenism. For by showing the inadequacy of the Judaism-Hellenism dichotomy, Hengel has opened the way for a more careful and nuanced understanding of Diaspora Judaism as well. A reconstruction of the scholarly understanding of Diaspora Judaism, and of the various ways in which Jews living in the western Diaspora negotiated life within their Hellenistic cultural contexts, is not a task that Hengel himself undertook in any detail, but Hengel's paradigm shift demands it.

### **John M. G. Barclay (1996)**

A number of scholars are currently working on various post-Hengel reconstructions of Diaspora Judaism,<sup>48</sup> but the one whose work is most relevant to Pauline studies is John M. G. Barclay, whose interests bridge both fields. His acclaimed book, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, both builds on and moves beyond Hengel in a number of important ways.<sup>49</sup> Barclay states early on that Hengel "decisively shattered"

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<sup>46</sup> Lester L. Grabbe, *Judaism from Cyrus to Herod, Vol. 1: The Persian and Greek Periods* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 148, 153, 251. See also James K. Aitken's critical reassessment of *Judaism and Hellenism* over 30 years later in *JBL* 123 (2004): 331-41.

<sup>47</sup> Hengel, "Judaism and Hellenism Revisited," 29.

<sup>48</sup> For example, John J. Collins, Martin Goodman, Erich Gruen, William Horbury, Pieter van der Horst, Tessa Rajak, Gregory Sterling, Paul Trebilco, Walter Wilson, and others.

<sup>49</sup> John M. G. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora from Alexander to Trajan (323 BCE – 117 CE)* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1996).

the old scholarly dichotomy between Palestinian and Hellenistic Judaism.<sup>50</sup> Due to the complexity and variety of Jewish cultural engagement with Hellenism, Barclay argues that we need to "break away from the neat but misleading construct of the Maccabean literature that 'Judaism' and 'Hellenism' stood against one another as unitary phenomena in mutual antagonism."<sup>51</sup> Building on Hengel's pioneering work, Barclay then moves on to provide some important theoretical tools gleaned from the realm of sociology that enable a more fine-grained analysis of the variety of ways that Jews interacted with their Hellenistic environment. Barclay isolates three distinct scales for describing that interaction: assimilation, acculturation, and accommodation.<sup>52</sup>

The "assimilation" scale refers to the degree of social integration, with the Jew living in an isolated Jewish ghetto at the bottom of the scale and the fully integrated Jew who has abandoned all Jewish distinctives at the top. Barclay is careful to avoid using the loaded term "apostasy" to describe Jews at the top, since "apostasy" is not an objective sociological term but merely tells us what Torah-observant Jews thought about fellow Jews who submerged their Jewish identity in order to get ahead in pagan society. In spite of his reserve in using that term, it is clear that under the "assimilation" scale Barclay is attempting to develop an objective way of analyzing the scale from Torah-observant to non-Torah-observant. Torah-observant Jews tended to be more isolated from the Gentile world. They scrupulously avoided idolatry and contact with "unclean" Gentiles, and they practiced circumcision, the Sabbath, and the dietary laws. Other Jews, by contrast, were willing to set aside these ancestral traditions that socially separated Jews from Gentiles in

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 87-88.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 82-102.

order to achieve a higher degree of integration and acceptance within Gentile society, often for financial gain.

The "acculturation" scale describes the degree of skill in the employment of Hellenistic culture. In this case, a Jew who doesn't know any Greek would be placed at the bottom of the scale, a Jew who had attended a Greek grammar school or gymnasium would be in the middle, and a Jew like Philo who had mastered Greek literature, rhetoric, and philosophy (i.e., the whole panoply of the Greek *paideia*) would be at the top. Paul clearly spoke Greek fluently, had a basic facility in the use of rhetorical conventions, and employed some terminology gleaned from popular philosophy, but he does not demonstrate the kind of profound knowledge of Greek literature and philosophy that Philo does. Paul would be somewhere in the middle of the "acculturation" scale.

The "accommodation" scale has to do with the use to which a Jew put his or her acculturation. This scale differs from the other two in that it does not go from zero to 100%, but starts in the middle with a neutral stance to Hellenistic ideals and philosophy, and from that point moves in two opposite directions, upward toward increasing cultural convergence or downward toward increasing cultural antagonism. Jews like Philo and the author of *The Letter of Aristeas* sought cultural convergence between their Judaism and the reigning ideals of Hellenistic philosophy and ethics. By contrast, the authors of 4 Maccabees and *The Wisdom of Solomon* – although highly acculturated in terms of their fluency in Greek and their ability to employ rhetoric and philosophy – used their acculturation to warn their fellow Jews against becoming too assimilated to Gentile society. These Jews are cited by Barclay as examples of cultural antagonism.

With these analytical tools in hand, Barclay describes individual Diaspora Jews about whom we have some knowledge from literary and archaeological remains, and places them on various places on these scales. Of particular interest is the chapter on Paul, whom Barclay calls "an anomalous Diaspora Jew" (from the title of chapter 13). He points out that Paul was born in Tarsus and can therefore be regarded as a Diaspora Jew by birth. It is true that at some point early in life he moved to Jerusalem and received considerable rabbinical training there (Acts 22:3). Yet after his conversion he spent the remaining 30 years of his life outside of Palestine (aside from occasional visits to Jerusalem), typically visiting cities that had sizeable Greek-speaking Jewish communities. For Barclay, "the Paul who preaches, disputes with Jews and Gentiles and writes to members of his churches is a Jew at work in the Diaspora." The Diaspora is Paul's "primary social context." Therefore, to shed light on Paul's socio-cultural location Barclay compares him with other Diaspora Jews, a comparison that Barclay believes has not received sufficient attention.<sup>53</sup>

With regard to Paul's degree of acculturation, Barclay places Paul somewhere in the middle of the scale. Paul was probably bilingual at a minimum, knowing both Greek and Aramaic, and probably Hebrew as well. However, his Greek, while solid, does not display the same degree of sophistication as a Philo. Barclay suggests that Paul's rabbinic training in Jerusalem was probably in a Greek-speaking Pharisaic school.

In terms of assimilation, Barclay argues for a high degree of assimilation, pointing to two main pieces of evidence. First, there is the well-known fact that Paul clearly did

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 381. Barclay points out that W. D. Davies, E. P. Sanders, and Alan Segal focused their efforts on comparing Paul with rabbinic or Palestinian Judaism.

not consider himself to be bound to the Torah and practiced a policy of becoming "to those who are under the Law, as under the Law though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those who are under the Law" (1 Cor. 9:20). Although Paul did not encourage other Jewish Christians to abandon the ancestral traditions prescribed in the Torah, he did not normally observe them himself and he clearly believed that they had no binding theological significance in Christ.

Second, Barclay points to another piece of evidence for Paul's high degree of assimilation – the fact that he spent a significant amount of time in very intimate relationships with Gentile Christians. In the house churches, Paul mingled freely with non-Torah-observant Gentiles, calling them "brothers," sharing the same sacramental table with them (commensality), and enjoying close friendships with them. This degree of socialization with Gentiles would have been taboo for most Torah-observant Jews. Paul not only engaged in this intimacy with Gentiles, but he advocated it on the grounds that in Christ there is no theological significance to the Jew-Gentile racial distinction (Gal. 3:28).

The evidence is overwhelming, then, that Paul was highly assimilated, that, in fact, he forthrightly advocated the breaking down of barriers between Jews and Gentiles to a shocking degree, at least from the perspective of most Torah-observant Jews.

So far, there is nothing particularly odd about a Diaspora Jew with a medium degree of acculturation and a high degree of assimilation. Yet Barclay finds Paul to be "an anomalous Diaspora Jew." Why? Because when we place Paul on the third scale (accommodation) his unique socio-cultural stance is revealed. Unlike other highly assimilated Jews, Paul was on the "cultural antagonism" end of the accommodation scale.

Rather than using his acculturation and assimilation to promote cultural convergence with Hellenism, Paul used them in precisely the opposite way. For although Paul advocated the breaking down of the Jew-Gentile barrier in racial terms, and although he argued that the Torah's dominion had come to an end in Christ, he maintained that the identity of Christians (both Jew and Gentile) in Christ stands over against the pagan world. Paul took all of the biblical labels normally associated with Israel ("Jew," "circumcision," "people of God," "temple," "holy ones," etc.) and applied them to the communities of Gentiles believers in Jesus. Interestingly, Paul even claimed that these Gentiles who have now been incorporated into the body of Christ are no longer Gentiles in the spiritual sense. For example, he spoke of the Corinthians as pagans in the past tense: "You know that when you *were* pagans (ὅτε ἔθνη ἦτε), you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak" (1 Cor. 12:2). Paul spent a significant amount of time trying to inculcate into his Gentile converts a sense of distinctiveness from the surrounding pagan culture, most notably in terms of ethics and sexual morality.

Paul's cultural antagonism is further evidenced, according to Barclay, in the fact that Paul explicitly rejects the values of Greek wisdom and philosophy and over against them proclaims the folly of the cross (1 Cor. 1-3). Barclay makes some helpful observations directed against the *religionsgeschichtliche* view that Paul "Hellenized" Christianity. For example, in his argument on the resurrection of the body, Paul makes no concession to Hellenistic anthropology but insists on a bodily resurrection that flies in the face of the Greek denigration of the body (1 Cor. 15). Another example is Paul's alleged use of the terminology of Stoicism. Barclay argues that Paul's occasional usage of Stoic

terminology does not "touch the fundamentals of Paul's thought."<sup>54</sup> Barclay concludes: "To turn to Paul after reading most other Diaspora literature is to be struck by his minimal use of Hellenistic theology, anthropology or ethics."<sup>55</sup> In a separate article, Barclay puts it even more eloquently: Paul's "thought represents not some cultural fusion with Hellenistic values but a wholesale re-evaluation of both Hellenistic and Jewish traditions from a new vantage point, created by his Christology."<sup>56</sup> This assessment seems correct to me.

### CRITIQUE AND ASSESSMENT

Although there have been other uses,<sup>57</sup> the dominant use of the concept "Hellenistic Judaism" in Pauline studies has been the *religionsgeschichtliche* approach which tried to explain Pauline theology as a syncretism of Jewish and pagan ideas, resulting in the progressive "Hellenization" of the primitive Palestinian gospel. Even though F. C. Baur ante-dated the rise of the *religionsgeschichtliche* school, he laid down the lines of its basic approach by arguing that both "Hellenism" and "Hellenistic Judaism" were characterized by a universalistic interest coupled with a feeling of

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<sup>54</sup> Pace Troels Engberg-Pedersen, *Paul and the Stoics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000).

<sup>55</sup> Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, 390-91.

<sup>56</sup> Barclay, "Paul Among Diaspora Jews: Anomaly or Apostate?" *JSNT* 60 (1995): 109.

<sup>57</sup> The most notable examples are the Jewish scholars Claude Montefiore and Hans Joachim Schoeps, who argued that Paul's critique of Judaism was based on a fundamental misunderstanding caused by his upbringing in "Hellenistic Judaism," which these scholars regarded as a legalistic distortion of authentic Rabbinic Judaism. In my opinion, these scholars failed to provide convincing evidence to support their claims. Montefiore, *Judaism and St. Paul: Two Essays* (New York: Arno Press, 1973); H. J. Schoeps, *Paul: The Theology of the Apostle in the Light of Jewish Religious History* (trans. Harold Knight; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961).

freedom from the nationalistic particularism of Palestinian Judaism. The primitive Palestinian church would have remained confined to its particularistic Jewish roots had it not been for the liberalizing influence of "Hellenism" via "Hellenistic Jewish Christians" like Stephen and later Paul.

When we come to the *religionsgeschichtliche* school proper, we find a similar three-stage scheme – first the primitive Palestinian church, then the Hellenistic Jewish Christians, and finally the Gentile church. The *religionsgeschichtliche* school differed from Baur in that it didn't merely employ this scheme to explain the transition from particularism to universalism, from Jews to Gentiles, but to explain the (alleged) theological transformation of primitive Christianity from the simple religion of Jesus into the complex, mystical theology of Paul. None of the traditional theological loci were left untouched. Paul's theology (proper), his anthropology, his Christology and soteriology, his ecclesiology, his view of the sacraments, and his ethics – all could be explained by the influence of Hellenistic ideas, whether in the form of the Hellenistic mystery religions, the so-called "Redeemer myth," pre-Christian Gnosticism, or Stoic philosophy. In essence, they argued that Pauline Christianity is the product of syncretism with Hellenism.

I have two broad criticisms of this approach:

First, the scholars of the *religionsgeschichtliche* school focused too much on the similarities between Paul and his environment. Paul surely had much in common with his Jewish context (both Palestinian and Diasporan). To a limited extent he probably even had things in common with his pagan Greco-Roman context, at least at the level of acculturation (though surely far less at the level of theology and religion). Paul was after

all situated within the specific historico-cultural context of the first century Greco-Roman world. Yet it is just as important to weigh these contextual data not only for the ways in which Paul was similar to his environment, but also for the ways in which Paul was distinctive. Had the scholars of the *religionsgeschichtliche* school done this, they would have found a significant amount of evidence that contradicts their thesis. For example, there may seem to be a formal parallel between Paul's notion of union with Christ and mystical union with the gods of the mystery religions. Yet there is a major difference just at this point: none of the gods on offer in the pagan mystery religions claimed to be the eternally pre-existent Son of the one Creator God who had become incarnate as a specific human being who lived, died, and rose again. These events are not a timeless myth spiritually reenacted in the cult but actual events of very recent history and memory, concerning which living eyewitnesses can be named. By focusing on that which Paul has in common with his cultural context, the *religionsgeschichtliche* scholars missed the big, obvious differences.

Not only ought the *religionsgeschichtliche* school to have explored the differences as well as the similarities, it seems to have operated with the astonishingly naive methodological assumption that a parallel constitutes historical influence. But the mere existence of a verbal or conceptual parallel between something Paul wrote and a pagan Greek source does not ipso facto constitute evidence that Paul was influenced by that pagan concept. Given the important differences between Paul and his pagan context, and given the fact that those differences are often substantive and not superficial, scholars should have been much more cautious about inferring historical influence from verbal or conceptual parallels. It is in fact entirely possible that the alleged parallels are in many

cases irrelevant ghost patterns inevitably created when any two symbolic systems are compared with one another. Such ghost patterns are even more likely to arise if the two systems being compared are both religions. This is why it is possible to find parallels between Christianity and Buddhism, for example, even though no one would argue for a genetic relationship.

But the problem isn't merely methodological. For the *religionsgeschichtliche* approach is even more problematic in that the very phenomenon it seeks to explain – the so-called "Hellenization" of Christianity – is itself a mirage that lacks historical plausibility. Long ago Albert Schweitzer offered what seems to me to be a compelling objection to all who think that Paul was deeply influenced by "Hellenism." He pointed out that the Jewish Christian community in Palestine only accused Paul of keeping back something from his churches, namely, the Torah. They never accused him of adding something to the primitive gospel or of corrupting it with Hellenistic ideas. Given the suspicion with which certain segments of Jewish Christianity regarded Paul, surely they would have charged Paul with "heathenizing" the gospel if he had made even the slightest use of pagan ideas.<sup>58</sup>

My second broad criticism of the *religionsgeschichtliche* approach has to do with the binary polarity it posited between "Judaism" and "Hellenism." Prior to Hengel, scholars tended to speak of "Judaism" and "Hellenism" as if they were opposing ideological forces operating on the same plane, within the same universe of discourse. Even Hengel has a tendency to speak this way, which is probably a relic from his German

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<sup>58</sup> Schweitzer, *Paul and His Interpreters: A Critical History* (trans. W. Montgomery; London: Adam & Charles Black, 1948), 79.

educational background. But it is quite misleading to think of "Judaism" and "Hellenism" as interacting on the same level as antithetical ideological forces. To put it simply, what we have here is a classic case of comparing apples and oranges. Judaism is primarily a religion with cultural dimensions, whereas Hellenism is primarily a culture with religious dimensions.<sup>59</sup> Instead of plotting Hellenism and Judaism as points along a single line, with Hellenism on the left and Judaism on the right, it is better to think in terms of an x-y graph with a religious axis and a cultural axis. Along the religious axis, one can move from orthodox Judaism to pagan syncretism. Along the cultural axis, one can move from being unable to understand Greek to being fully acculturated to Hellenism. With this revised graph in mind, it is clearly possible for someone to be thoroughly Hellenized on the cultural axis and to remain thoroughly Jewish on the religious axis.

Because of the mistaken assumption that Judaism and Hellenism are opposing ideological forces operating on the same plane, scholars also tended to view "Hellenistic Judaism" as a syncretistic mixture of Judaism and pagan Hellenism. Yet this was little more than an assumption. Scholars did not carefully document the supposed syncretistic character of "Hellenistic Judaism" from the actual texts of Greek-speaking Judaism. The picture of "Hellenistic Judaism" presupposed by Baur, Bousset, and Bultmann is one that cannot be confirmed by the sources. There is little evidence that Greek-speaking Jews were, as a group, more "liberal" with regard to Torah-observance or that their religion was more universalistic than their Palestinian counterparts. Indeed, assuming the historical reliability of Acts, Luke contradicts this view when he describes the non-

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<sup>59</sup> Lester Grabbe argues that "Hellenism was a culture whereas Judaism was a religion." See "The Jews and Hellenization: Hengel and His Critics." Available online in the archives of the Ioudaios Listserv: <ftp://ftp.lehigh.edu/pub/listserv/ioudaios-l/Articles/lghellen.Z> (accessed October 30, 2005).

Christian Diaspora Jews of Jerusalem (explicitly called "Hellenists") as among those who were the first to stir up persecution against the newly-converted Saul (Acts 9:29), thus demonstrating that "Hellenistic Jews" could be just as "conservative" and "particularistic" as Palestinian Jews.<sup>60</sup>

In addition to Acts 9:29, a cursory examination of the most Hellenized Jew, Philo, would have called the syncretistic picture into question. Philo was massively influenced by certain aspects of Hellenistic philosophy, specifically middle Platonism. Yet he managed to adapt middle Platonism to his Judaism in such a way that at least in his own eyes and in the eyes of his fellow Jews, he remained a faithful, monotheistic, Torah-observant Jew. Philo was never accused of apostasy or with having compromised with Hellenism at a religious level. It is true that in one polemical passage Philo takes issue with those Jews who took the allegorical method to an extreme and argued that literal observance of certain laws in the Torah, e.g., circumcision and the food laws, was unnecessary. But the very fact that Philo argues against them shows that these extreme allegorists were not representative of "Hellenistic Judaism" as a whole.<sup>61</sup>

The concept "Hellenistic Judaism" has been overloaded with theological and ideological freight. So eager have scholars been to provide an explanation for Paul and the so-called "Hellenization" of Christianity, that they have all too often allowed the

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<sup>60</sup> "So [Saul] went in and out among them in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. He spoke and argued with the Hellenists (πρὸς τοὺς Ἑλληνοστᾶς); but they were attempting to kill him. When the believers learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus" (Acts 9:28-30). These "Hellenists" are not Christians and are thus not the same as "the Hellenists" mentioned in Acts 6:1. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles* (AB 31; New York: Doubleday, 1998), 440.

<sup>61</sup> Philo, *Migr. Abr.* 89-93.

concept of "Hellenistic Judaism" to serve as an ideological tool rather than as a cultural description. What *religionsgeschichtliche* scholars could not bring in the front door by means of full-blown syncretism, they tried to bring in the back door via the tamer "Hellenistic Judaism." In this way, a supposedly "Hellenized" form of Judaism becomes a conduit to explain the introduction of Greek ideas into Christianity. As a result, the term "Hellenistic Judaism" has taken on so much ideological baggage that it cannot be safely used to refer simply to the phenomena of Diaspora Judaism. For this reason I suggest that we discontinue the use of the term altogether. In its place I recommend that we speak of "Judaism of the Greek-speaking Diaspora" or simply "Greek-speaking Judaism." I prefer to leave out the loaded term "Hellenistic," which, through its long history of usage in New Testament studies, has come to imply assimilation, accommodation, and syncretism. My suggested language avoids these negative and question-begging connotations and focuses our attention on the linguistic and educational acculturation of Diaspora Jews who, for the most part, remained faithful to their ancestral traditions while living amid Greeks and Romans.<sup>62</sup>

## FUTURE RESEARCH

Rather than using "Hellenistic Judaism" to explain the origin of Paul's theology or the alleged "Hellenization" of Christianity, we should take a more restrained approach that focuses less on grand conceptual schemes and more on the linguistic and cultural context of Paul and his churches. I see many avenues of fruitful investigation here. The

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<sup>62</sup> John J. Collins retains the term but defines it in a manner similar to what I am advocating: "Hellenistic Judaism is simply the form taken by Judaism in Greek-speaking environments in the Hellenistic age." Collins, *Jewish Cult and Hellenistic Culture: Essays on the Jewish Encounter with Hellenism and Roman Rule* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 5.

more we familiarize ourselves with the literature of Greek-speaking Diaspora Judaism, the more light will be shed on the background, character, issues, and identity of the Pauline Gentile churches.<sup>63</sup> I want to indicate briefly some areas of future research in the area of Pauline interpretation vis-à-vis the context of Greek-speaking Diaspora Judaism that seem to me to have potential.

Many scholars believe that Paul's converts were originally Gentile "God-fearers" with varying degrees of attachment to or sympathy with Greek-speaking synagogues in the Mediterranean Diaspora.<sup>64</sup> The foundational membership of the Pauline churches came out of Diaspora Judaism. If this is true, then a number of exegetical, sociological, and theological issues in the field of Pauline studies could potentially receive clarification:

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<sup>63</sup> The literature of Greek-speaking Judaism, besides the Philonic and Josephan corpora, can be accessed in the following: James H. Charlesworth, ed., "Supplement: Fragments of Lost Judeo-Hellenistic Works," in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (2 vols.; New York: Doubleday, 1985), 2:773-918; Carl R. Holladay, *Fragments from Hellenistic Jewish Authors* (vols. 1-4; Chico: Scholars Press, 1983-96). In addition, see John J. Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem: Jewish Identity in the Hellenistic Diaspora* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

<sup>64</sup> The literature on this subject is large and growing, but the following provide a helpful point of entry: Martin Goodman, "Jews and Judaism in the Mediterranean Diaspora in the Late-Roman Period: The Limitations of Evidence," in *Ancient Judaism in its Hellenistic Context* (ed. Carol Bakhos; Leiden: Brill, 2005), 177-203; Irina Levinskaya, *The Book of Acts in its Diaspora Setting* (vol. 5 of *The Book of Acts in its First Century Setting*; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996); Scot McKnight, *A Light Among the Gentiles: Jewish Missionary Activity in the Second Temple Period* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991); idem, "Proselytism and Godfearers," in *DNTB*, 835-47; J. Reynolds and R. F. Tannenbaum, *Jews and Godfearers at Aphrodisias: Greek Inscriptions with Commentary* (CPSS 12; Cambridge: Cambridge Philological Society, 1987); Paul R. Trebilco, *Jewish Communities in Asia Minor* (SNTSMS 69; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

## Bible Knowledge of the Pauline Congregations

Paul’s letters presuppose a high degree of familiarity with the basic traditions of Judaism as contained in the Scriptures of Israel. Romans, for example, is addressed to a largely Gentile community of Christians. Yet Paul identifies them as “those who know the [Mosaic] Law” (Rom. 7:1).<sup>65</sup> Romans contains extended Scriptural argumentation using rabbinic rules of exegesis – some would even use the term “midrash.” In a letter addressed to Gentiles this may be surprising, but it makes sense if we assume that the majority of Gentiles addressed were former God-fearers who had attended the Jewish synagogue prior to joining the Christian community and so were already familiar with the Scriptures in Greek translation. It is also likely that they were familiar with many of the interpretive traditions of Judaism – both haggada and halakah – that circulated within the Diaspora. Some of these oral traditions may even have originated in Palestine and made their way into the Diaspora. The supposition of a God-fearer foundation of the Gentile portion of the Roman churches is now common in scholarship on Romans.<sup>66</sup> But what about Paul’s epistles to the Christian communities of Galatia, Philippi, Thessalonica, and

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<sup>65</sup> Some commentators think that at Rom. 7:1 Paul is narrowing his address to the Jewish Christian component of the Roman house churches. E.g., Philip F. Esler, *Conflict and Identity in Romans: The Social Setting of Paul’s Letter* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 225. However, Paul’s wording (“I am speaking to those who know the Law,” γνώσκουσιν ... νόμον λαλῶ) does not seem to allow for such a narrowing. As Douglas Moo points out (citing Theodore Zahn), if Paul intended to narrow his address, he probably would have written (τοῖς ὑμῖν γνώσκουσιν νόμον). Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 411.

<sup>66</sup> Peter Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries* (trans. Michael Steinhauser; ed. Marshall D. Johnson; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003); Thomas H. Tobin, *Paul’s Rhetoric in its Contexts: The Argument of Romans* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2004); A. Andrew Das, *Solving the Romans Debate* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007).

Corinth? Assuming the verity of the south Galatian hypothesis in the case of Galatians, all four of these communities were originally established by Paul's initial preaching among Diaspora synagogues in those cities, with a handful of Jews and a large number of Gentile God-fearers converting to Christianity as a result of Paul's missionary efforts. Luke tells us that when Paul preached in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch, he addressed both "Israelites, and others who fear God" (οἱ φοβούμενοι τὸν θεόν, Acts 13:16), and after his message, "many Jews and devout converts to Judaism" (πολλοὶ ... τῶν σεβομένων προσηλύτων) followed Paul and Barnabas (13:43). Next, Paul and Barnabas entered the synagogue at Iconium and "a great number of both Jews and Greeks (Ἰουδαίων τε καὶ Ἑλλήνων πολὺ πλῆθος) became believers" (14:1). The Lucan accounts of the founding of the other three Pauline churches also indicate that Gentile God-fearers were among their founding members: Philippi ("Lydia, a worshipper of God," σεβομένη τὸν θεόν, 16:14), Thessalonica ("a great company of the devout Greeks," τῶν σεβομένων Ἑλλήνων πλῆθος πολὺ, 17:4) and Corinth ("Titius Justus, a worshipper of God," σεβομένος τὸν θεόν, 18:7). I know of no good reason to question the historical reliability of Luke's account of the founding of these churches. Of course, the Lucan picture needs to be verified by a careful scrutiny of the actual contents of Paul's letters to these churches. But I suspect that the letters themselves contain little that would disconfirm the hypothesis and much that would confirm it. Indeed, new interpretive light might be shed on these letters should my hypothesis be confirmed.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> For example, Gregory Sterling suggests that Paul's dispute with the Corinthians over the resurrection required him to correct an Alexandrian (pre-Philonic) exegesis of Genesis 2:7 that had made its way to Corinth. This

### The Role of the LXX in Lexical Studies

If Paul's audiences were familiar with the Scriptures in Greek, then it stands to reason that we ought to pay more attention to the role of the Septuagint in influencing the semantic content of various Greek words used in the New Testament. Many of the lexemes used in the New Testament are non-technical terms the meanings of which are best defined by their usage in secular Koine Greek. However, there are certain terms, particular those with theological significance, whose meanings may be influenced by their usage in the Greek Bible as used by Greek-speaking Jews. For example, the old debate over whether ἰλαστήριον in Rom. 3:25 denotes the mercy seat receives fresh illumination when we presuppose a God-fearer base in the Christian community at Rome. The arguments fall into two main camps. Traditionally, commentators believed that the term should be interpreted in light of its usage in the Septuagint, where, in 21 of its 27 occurrences, it is used as a technical term for the mercy seat on the ark of the covenant. But ever since Deissmann, many scholars began to turn away from this interpretation, arguing that the absence of the definite article suggests that the term is merely a substantived, neuter form of the adjective ἰλαστήριος ("propitiating"),<sup>68</sup> which is well-attested in ordinary, secular Greek. On this view the word in Rom. 3:25 would best be

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would then explain what Paul was arguing against in 1 Cor. 15:44-49. Sterling, "'Wisdom among the Perfect: Creation Traditions in Alexandrian Judaism and Corinthian Christianity," *NovT* 37 (1995): 355-84.

<sup>68</sup> I am convinced that Leon Morris was correct in arguing (*pace* C. H. Dodd) for the meaning "propitiating." Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (3rd ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 144-213.

translated "means of propitiation."<sup>69</sup> Some have urged that this view best fits the largely Gentile character of the Roman church who, it was believed, would be unable to catch the allusion to the mercy seat.<sup>70</sup> However, if we assume that the Gentile Christians in Rome were in contact with the Diaspora synagogues in Rome prior to their conversion, then the traditional view becomes less unlikely. It would be possible, in fact, to argue for a combined position in which the modern translation "means of propitiation" is maintained, but at the same time acknowledging that Paul's Septuagint-savvy audience would have been able to catch the allusion to the ἰλαστήριον that stood at the very heart of Israel's cultic relationship with God.<sup>71</sup> This conclusion is supported by the fact that Philo and the author of Hebrews (both of whom used the Septuagint as their Bible) employed ἰλαστήριον to refer to the mercy seat. This suggests that, for a wide cross-section of Greek-speaking Judaism, the Septuagint exercised a considerable influence upon the semantic domain of this particular lexeme. After Deissmann's work proving that the Greek of the New Testament is ordinary Koine Greek rather than some specialized Semitic Greek, scholars have tended to downplay the role of the Septuagint in New Testament lexicography, believing that contemporary Koine usage is the final

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<sup>69</sup> Adolf Deissmann, *Bible Studies: Contributions Chiefly from Papyri and Inscriptions to the History of the Language, the Literature, and the Religion of Hellenistic Judaism and Primitive Christianity* (2nd ed.; trans. Alexander Grieve; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1903), 124-35. In rejecting an allusion to the mercy seat, Leon Morris agreed with Deissmann. Morris, 184-98.

<sup>70</sup> Moo asserts that some scholars have made this argument. *Romans*, 233.

<sup>71</sup> This view seems to be making something of a comeback in recent years. It is defended cautiously by Moo (*Romans*, 236). It is independent of the "expiation/propitiation" debate. E.g., Fitzmyer, who opts for "expiation," endorses an allusion to the mercy seat via the LXX. Fitzmyer, *Romans* (AB 33; New York: Doubleday, 1993), 350.

determinant of meaning.<sup>72</sup> Deissmann's work was a needed corrective in his day. But scholarship has over-corrected. The need now is to bring back a cautious use of the Septuagint to the discipline of New Testament lexicography.<sup>73</sup>

### **Gentile Attraction to Judaism**

The God-fearer background of many of Paul's converts might explain some of the issues that Paul had to confront in his churches, as evidenced particularly in his epistles to the Galatians and the Romans. As Paul's polemic in these epistles show, some Gentile Christians were attracted to aspects of the Jewish Torah. But why were the Gentiles at Galatia even open to the idea of getting circumcised in the first place? The pressure exerted by the circumcision party, by itself, is not a sufficient explanation. I have the suspicion that the Galatian Christians' openness to circumcision is explainable, at least in part, with reference to their pre-Christian God-fearer status in which the offer of becoming a proselyte – a full member of God's covenant people – was always on the table. In a similar manner, the Roman Christians were attracted to the Torah's moral requirements, and some even to the Sabbath and dietary restrictions. (Submitting to circumcision for soteriological reasons does not appear to have been an issue at Rome.) If my theory that many Christians were formerly God-fearers is correct, the "weak" Christians in Romans 14 are just as likely to have been Gentiles as Jews. There is no valid reason for assuming, as most commentators do, that they were primarily Jewish

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<sup>72</sup> E.g., Karen H. Jobes and Moisés Silva, *Invitation to the Septuagint* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 184-9.

<sup>73</sup> David Hill, *Greek Words and Hebrew Meanings: Studies in the Semantics of Soteriological Terms* (SNTSMS 5; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967); R. Timothy McLay, *The Use of the Septuagint in New Testament Research* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 146-8.

Christians. It is entirely plausible that some Gentile God-fearers would have brought a variety of Jewish practices over into their Christian context.<sup>74</sup>

### **Christian Analogues to the Diaspora Synagogue**

The Pauline churches were voluntary religious associations which some scholars characterize as Christian analogues to the Greek-speaking Jewish synagogues. John M. G. Barclay is working on a sequel to *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora* in which he intends to compare Diaspora Jewish communities with Paul's churches.<sup>75</sup> Although we will have to wait for his volume to see what he finds, it is possible to speculate what such a comparison might yield based on the limited work that has already been done in this area. For example, Wayne Meeks sketches out various aspects of the social structure of the Pauline churches which were analogous to that of the Diaspora Jewish communities – e.g., resolution of their own disputes; reliance on wealthy patrons; and weekly meetings characterized by prayers, Scripture readings (from the Septuagint), and common meals.<sup>76</sup> James Burtchaell argues that the manner in which leadership was exercised in the Jewish synagogues of the Diaspora was appropriated as a model for leadership in the Pauline house churches.<sup>77</sup> In addition, as I mentioned above, Barclay is concerned with the issue

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<sup>74</sup> Tobin, *Paul's Rhetoric*, 23-34, 407-8.

<sup>75</sup> Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, xi.

<sup>76</sup> Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (2nd ed.; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003; originally published, 1983), 32-39, 80-81. More recently, Meeks "Corinthian Christians as Artificial Aliens," in *Paul Beyond the Judaism/Hellenism Divide* (ed. Troels Engberg-Pedersen; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 129-38.

<sup>77</sup> James T. Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church: Public Services and Offices in the Earliest Christian Communities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

of the theological self-identity of these Christian groups as distinct from both pagan and Jewish identity.<sup>78</sup> It would be enlightening to compare and contrast the various strategies employed by Gentile Christians and Diaspora Jews to negotiate their communal identity as minority groups within the Roman empire. I suspect that some of the strategies employed by Diaspora Jews will find a degree of correspondence within the Gentile Christian communities. Yet I also suspect that this comparison will also reveal much that is novel about the Christian communities. Such a compare-contrast method could be useful in highlighting these early Christians' sense of identity, not only against the backdrop of the dominant culture of Greco-Roman paganism, but also vis-à-vis Judaism.

## CONCLUSION

These are just a few of the avenues of research on the Judaism of the Greek-speaking Diaspora that seem to me to have potential. The list could be expanded. What is significant, I believe, is to observe the shift that is occurring in this area of New Testament research – a shift from "Hellenistic Judaism" to "Diaspora Judaism," from hunting for "parallels" to setting the "context," and from "Paul" to the "Pauline communities." I am convinced that in spite of the many false starts and dead ends that have characterized past research, the topic itself is legitimate. Given that the New Testament was written in Greek, mostly by Greek-speaking Jews, should we not expect that the Greek-speaking Judaism of the western Diaspora would shed light on the New

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<sup>78</sup> Barclay takes up this issue again in "Matching Theory and Practice: Josephus's Constitutional Ideal and Paul's Strategy in Corinth," in *Paul Beyond the Judaism/Hellenism Divide* (ed. Troels Engberg-Pedersen; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 139-63.

Testament, especially on the social and linguistic setting of Paul's mission and churches?

A positive answer to that question, distinct from the misguided answers of previous generations of scholarship, is just beginning to emerge. This area of New Testament studies is ripe for further investigation.

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