

IS PAUL THE FATHER OF MISOGYNY AND ANTISEMITISM? by Pamela Eisenbaum

What was Paul talking about, anyway? Not what you might think.

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I have a passionate interest in the apostle Paul. Many people think this passion is unusual because I am a Jew not a Christian. What's more, I like to think of myself as a feminist. What's a nice Jewish feminist doing studying the apostle Paul? After all, from a Jewish perspective, Paul is a heretic who had a demented view of Judaism. From a feminist perspective, Paul is an ally of Christian conservatives who wish to keep women in a subordinate position to men.

Nevertheless, my interest derives naturally from my professional commitments. I am a Jewish New Testament scholar who teaches in a Christian seminary,⁽¹⁾ and, after some years of studying and teaching Paul, I have come to the conclusion that Paul was a committed, well-intentioned Jew, even if the subsequent uses of his teachings were abominable where Jews and women are concerned. Moreover, I believe Paul was largely driven by the fact that he was both a Jew and a citizen of the wider Hellenistic world that encompassed the ancient Mediterranean in his day. These two components of his identity caused him to realize that the world is a diverse and complex place. In my view, Paul is one of the first people in the history of Western civilization to deal directly with the problem of multiculturalism. As a modern American Jew, I do not end up in the same place Paul ends up (with Christ), but I appreciate how he wrestled with life in its multitudinous complexity and how boldly and constructively he faced questions about human diversity. In my view, Paul's theological vision can be summed up by Galatians 3:28: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."⁽²⁾ Exploring the essence of this dictum, particularly the implications for gender and intercultural relations, is the driving force behind my passion for Paul. Because my understanding of Paul deviates rather significantly from traditional as well as *au courant* scholarly views, I will begin by briefly describing the typical understanding of Paul and his writings.

Old and New in the Study of Paul

Under the influence of Augustine and Luther, Christians have traditionally viewed Paul as the exemplary convert, the one who was transformed by a vision of the resurrected Jesus on the road to Damascus, who went from being an unbeliever and vicious persecutor of Christians to recognizing Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior; in other words, Paul converted to Christianity and left his Judaism behind. Furthermore, Paul's newfound religious commitment is evident in that he traveled the world preaching Christ, establishing churches, and "making disciples of all

nations." Thus, he became the quintessential Christian believer, leader, and teacher, and the writings attributed to him, which attest to the superiority of Christianity over Judaism, make up a substantial portion of the New Testament.

From a Jewish perspective, Paul has traditionally been viewed as an apostate from Judaism, a self-hating Jew, and a master manipulator of others. Jews have often used Paul as their primary target in anti-Christian polemics, claiming that while Jesus was a good Jew who never meant to found a new religion, Paul manipulated Jesus's message for his own gain and glory. Paul deceived Gentiles who did not know any better and undertook to start a new religion that was antithetical to Judaism (as well as Jesus).⁽³⁾ This view of Paul holds him single-handedly responsible for two thousand years of antisemitism and Christian brutality toward Jews.

At first these two views may look mutually exclusive, but in fact they are mirror images of one another. They both assume Paul left his Judaism behind once he "found Christ" and consequently turned toward communities of gentiles, where he became a leader and made large numbers of converts. From the Christian perspective, Paul's experience is true and he is sincere; he simply found something better and wanted to share it with the rest of the world. Christians view Paul's work positively, since it resulted in the salvation of the Gentiles. From the Jewish perspective, Paul is a manipulative fake, or at least seriously misguided. What he did resulted not in the salvation of the world, but in the condemnation of millions of Jews. (Interestingly, some mainline Christians of a liberal ilk have taken up a version of this view. They tend to revere Jesus and see him as a teacher of love, while feeling skeptical about Paul and viewing his teachings as intolerant, divisive, and unforgiving.)

Over the last twenty-five years many scholars have begun to view Paul differently. Commonly designated "the new perspective on Paul," this wave of scholarship signifies a rejection of the traditional Christian portrait of Paul and the reconstruction of Paul as a Jew.⁽⁴⁾ Scholars who align themselves with the new perspective pride themselves on having liberated Paul from the dominant interpretive lens created by Augustine and Luther. They have benefited from dialogue with Jewish scholars and by an honest engagement with ancient Jewish literature that has resulted in a vision of first-century Judaism that makes it impossible to see Paul as completely alienated from his Judaism. It is clear from the way Paul speaks that he thinks of himself as a Jew, not just before his experience of the risen Jesus, but throughout his life (see, for example, Rom. 9:3; Gal. 2:15; Phil. 3:5). Moreover, in the middle of the first century when Paul is writing his letters, "Christianity" does not yet exist. Jews who believe in Jesus do not yet understand themselves as members of a distinct religion -- they are simply followers of Jesus. Not all scholars, of course, accept this new view. Critics of the new perspective claim that it is motivated more by contemporary Jewish-Christian relations in light of the holocaust than by an accurate reading of Paul.⁽⁵⁾

In addition to the new perspective on Paul, another trend in scholarship has impacted the study of Paul within the Christian community -- feminism. Some feminist scholars claim that Paul represents a kind of proto-feminist who preached radical egalitarianism.⁽⁶⁾ Such a claim depends primarily upon Gal. 3:28, since there Paul proclaims "no longer male and female" (in older translations, this phrase was commonly rendered "neither male nor female"). Paul is still a

favorite of conservative Christians, however, who think Paul teaches that women are inferior to men and thus wives should "obey their husbands." [\(7\)](#)

While in my view these recent interpretive trends are welcome, they have also complicated the issues that surround the study of Paul. Indeed, neither feminism nor the new perspective have displaced the old way of reading Paul; conservative interpreters who defend the old view abound. Although a multiplicity of interpretations may give readers of Paul's letters interpretive options, commentators are simultaneously making diametrically opposed claims, creating serious confusion for readers of Paul's letters, specialists and nonspecialists alike.

Why is it that some people can believe fervently in Paul's commitment to egalitarianism among the sexes while others believe just as passionately that Paul puts men above women? Why is it that Paul is viewed by some as the quintessential Christian in a world in which Christianity trumps Judaism, while others argue passionately for seeing Paul as a Jew who has been misunderstood by subsequent Christian readers? While diverse interests often lead readers to draw differing conclusions, the whims of readers are not solely to blame for such widely divergent views of Paul.

Paul himself is partly to blame. He seems to speak out of both sides of his mouth; he has good as well as bad things to say about women and Jews. Ambiguity plagues both subjects in the writings of Paul (a good reason to look at both issues together). For example, compare the verses in each of the following sets:

- A. Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews are entrusted with the oracles of God. (Rom. 3:1-2)
- B. For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, and do them." (Gal. 3:10).
- A. They are Israelites, and to them belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; and to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ. (Rom. 9:4-5)
- B. I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing. (Gal. 2:21)
- A. The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not rule over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not rule over his own body, but the wife does. (1 Cor. 7:3-4)
- B. For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. (1 Cor. 11:7)

In each of these sets, the verse labeled "A" coheres with more recent views of Paul as someone who felt positively toward Jews and Judaism and promoted egalitarianism. The verse labeled "B"

reflects the traditional perspective, which sees Paul as rejecting Judaism in favor of Christ and upholding a hierarchical relationship between men and women. Although we can debate the subtleties of any or all of these statements, the point is that they are all authentically Pauline, even though they appear -- at least on the surface -- to express contradictory points of view.

Liberal interpreters of Paul who prefer to view him as inclusive, fair-minded, and egalitarian must either ignore any statements that controvert their point of view or explain them away. Conservative interpreters who view him as a Christian triumphalist who upheld the superior position of men must explain away his inclusivist/egalitarian statements. A few argue that we should give up trying to figure Paul out, that he is hopelessly inconsistent or insane or an idiot or a rhetorically self-serving chameleon.[\(8\)](#)

But the problem is not merely one of inconsistency among various passages. Like many biblical texts, the same Pauline passages can be interpreted in varying ways. Take, for instance, Gal. 3:10, quoted above, which includes a quotation of Deut. 27:26. Traditionally, commentators have assumed that Paul believes that Jews ("all those who rely on works of the law") are cursed because nobody can do "all things written in the book of the law" -- the emphasis being on the "all."[\(9\)](#) Unless one keeps every single commandment perfectly, one is irredeemably condemned. Therefore, as Paul seemingly goes on to argue in Gal. 3:11-14, Christ was needed to redeem people from this otherwise inescapable curse created by the law. This interpretation assumes a negative view of Jewish law, in keeping with the traditional portrait of Paul.[\(10\)](#) But some Pauline scholars influenced by the new perspective point out that Paul's argument in Galatians (or elsewhere, for that matter) never articulates the impossibility of keeping the law perfectly. In fact, in Phil. 3:6, Paul claims that he was "blameless as to the law." To ascribe to Paul the belief that God gave Israel a law the people were incapable of living up to is to ascribe a very perverse view of God to the apostle. It seems more probable that Paul understood the verse from Deuteronomy that he quotes in Gal. 3:10 as other Jews would have understood it: the curse applies to people who do *not* observe Jewish law, i.e., either deviant Jews or Gentiles. The emphasis, then, is not on "*all* things written in the book of the law" but on "*everyone* who does not abide." According to this interpretation, Paul's concern is not with the law itself, but with people who have not had the benefit of God's law, and are, therefore, under a curse. The reason Christ is needed to redeem the so-called "curse of the law" is to make possible the righteousness of the Gentiles before God, not the Jews.

Galatians 3:28 and the Problem of Human Difference

Not only can Paul's statements be interpreted in diverse ways, they can be interpreted in opposite ways. When Paul says in Gal. 3:28, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus," does he mean to suggest that these distinctions between people should be eradicated -- and thus Christians should work to break down these barriers in society? Or does he mean that these distinctions are irrelevant as far as God and the church are concerned and thus Christians need not bother about them? This text has been used throughout history with equal vehemence by both those who seek political liberation for all peoples and those who wish to maintain the status quo.[\(11\)](#)

Interpreting Gal. 3:28 has become even more complicated in our modern context. Modern liberal commentators, particularly those influenced by recent scholarly trends, see in Gal. 3:28 three primary categories of human classification -- race, class, and gender -- and understand it as a call to break down the barriers that divide and exclude people. Enacting such a call would mean the liberation of peoples of color, poor people, and women. This liberal tradition goes back at least as far as the abolitionists, but it recently has been bolstered by the work of new-perspective scholars. Many new-perspective scholars claim that the issue fundamentally preoccupying Paul is the seemingly impenetrable boundaries human beings erect between themselves, and that Torah ("law") constitutes one of these boundaries. In other words, Paul's problem with Jewish law is that it limited interaction between Jews and Gentiles; the observance of dietary laws, for example, meant that Jews would not or could not eat with Gentiles. There is nothing inherently wrong with Torah, as the Lutheran interpretation advocated, but it is applicable only to Jews and as such creates barriers between Jews and others. Thus, it gets in the way of building the kind of inclusive community Paul desires.

Although I generally position myself with liberal commentators and am profoundly influenced by the new perspective in my reading of Paul, I am troubled by the inclusive reading of Gal. 3:28. At the turn of the twenty-first century, I imagine that most Americans would agree that the elimination of slavery and the obliteration of all master-slave distinctions between people is a social good, such that we feel no ambiguity about proclaiming "no longer slave or free" and meaning it literally. But how about "no longer male and female"? Do we feel the same unambiguous enthusiasm for collapsing those distinctions? Can such a claim function as part of the utopian vision for modern Americans, even those of liberal leanings? If by "no longer male and female" we mean equal political, social, and vocational opportunity for all women and men, then perhaps we might find it easy to subscribe to the dictum. But Paul does not use the language of equality; rather, he issues a call for erasing the distinguishing marks between people (if one accepts the liberal reading). Some liberal intellectuals, many who identify themselves as feminist, believe there are essential differences between men and women, differences which may or may not be complementary but which in any case cannot be transcended.⁽¹²⁾ In other words, erasing the distinction between women and men is neither attainable nor desirable.

The problem is even more acute when it comes to "no longer Jew or Greek." Do we really want a world in which there is neither Jew nor Greek? Certainly not from a Jewish perspective! But even, I imagine, from a Christian one. It seems to me that the value of the slogan "no longer Jew or Greek" as a broad universalist claim has become compromised. While perhaps at an earlier time people desired human homogeneity, most Americans have now come to embrace multiculturalism. We recognize there are profound differences between people, and furthermore we do not lament these differences but celebrate them. But if we follow the liberal reading of Gal. 3:28, which calls for the breaking down of barriers as a precondition for liberation, then, ironically, Gal. 3:28 undermines the goal of liberation, insofar as our contemporary understanding of liberation includes an appreciation of cultural difference, rather than a desire to eradicate it.

One may object that I am pushing the liberal interpretation of Gal. 3:28 to absurdity, or taking it too literally, that by "no longer Jew or Greek" Paul does not mean the obliteration of cultural difference, but rather the establishment of an equitable human community based on our common

humanness. But therein lies the problem: What exactly is our common humanness? Does it not imply that deep down we are all the same? If so, then reading Paul's proclamation in Gal. 3:28 necessarily implies that human equality is predicated upon human sameness. (Compare the prelude to the declaration of independence!)

Daniel Boyarin, a Jewish scholar influenced by the new perspective, has provided the most incisive critique of this problem in his book, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity*.⁽¹³⁾ According to Boyarin, Paul's theological project aimed primarily at overcoming human difference. Human difference became a problem for Paul because, as a Hellenistic Jew, he believed in a fundamental distinction between spiritual reality and material reality and, more importantly, he valued the spiritual over the material. He assumed human beings must share some common essence, but it must be a spiritual essence because actual embodied human beings come in a variety of shapes and sizes and colors and genders. One's primary goal, therefore, must be to transcend human difference by aspiring to the universal human essence, and Paul thought this could be achieved by being "one in Christ." According to Boyarin, Paul was

motivated by a Hellenistic desire for the One, which among other things produced an ideal of a universal human essence, beyond difference and hierarchy. This universal humanity, however, was predicated (and still is) on the dualism of the flesh and the spirit, such that while the body is particular, marked through practice as Jew or Greek, and through anatomy as male or female, the spirit is universal.⁽¹⁴⁾

Boyarin does not think the quest for a universal human essence is necessarily bad; part of Paul's motivation was to equalize the standing of all human beings before God. Boyarin thinks, however, that Paul confused equality with sameness. Because there is no such thing as a generic person or culture, sameness has meant the imposition of the dominant culture or gender upon everybody else. Because human difference is manifest in embodiment, in the concrete delimitation of people and things, Paul's message relegates these very real differences between people to a low order of significance -- so low, in fact, that they become irrelevant to the true spiritual nature of human beings. Once irrelevant, human differences become devalued. The Pauline gospel then, for Boyarin, encourages sameness rather than celebrating diversity. Furthermore, since the spiritual essence of the supposed generic human ends up looking male and Christian, women and Jews become the devalued other.

For Boyarin, Paul's flaw -- the confusion of equality with sameness best expressed in Gal. 3:28 -- becomes a pathology in Christianity. Christianity came to understand religiousness as faith in Christ which was not concretized in the kinds of prescriptions Jews followed. In other words, Christianity began to see itself as a purely spiritual religion able to encompass all the diverse peoples of the world, while it saw Judaism as inordinately preoccupied with its peculiar ways of doing things and thus devoid of the spirit. Similarly, women became associated with the material body, and men with the transcendent spirit. Thus, Boyarin argues, Paul marks the beginning of the dominant male, Christian perspective of Western culture. This perspective imagined human essence as the white civilized Christian male and viewed both women and Jews as, at best, limited kinds of persons farther removed from the ideal human essence and, at worst, as the

particularized "other" in relation to the universal human being (in other words, the opposite of the ideal). Thus, Boyarin thinks Paul is the father of misogyny and antisemitism.

While I have been profoundly influenced by Boyarin, his reading of Paul appears to me to be aimed at countering a tradition of Pauline interpretation in the Christian West more than it addresses Paul's own biases. When Paul says "There is no longer Jew or Greek,. . . no longer slave or free,. . . no longer male and female,. . ." the ideal human being is indeed not somewhere halfway between each of these conditions. Paul is not simply mentioning complementary pairs of equals. One term in each pair represents the ideal, the desired status for the believer (from Paul's perspective): Jew, free, and male (which, by the way, equals Paul!). Boyarin is absolutely right that there is no such thing as a human essence that is truly universal, because such essences are always envisioned with some particular template of what constitutes a human being, but he projects back upon Paul the wrong template. Boyarin works with essentialized notions of "Jews" and "Christians" that are anachronistic. For Paul, the prototypical human ideal is best represented by the free Jewish man. When Paul juxtaposes "Jew" and "Greek," he means that the *Jew* possesses the preferred condition. As Paul says in Rom. 3:1-2, "What advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? Much in every way." It is the Greeks who are underprivileged. Being "in Christ" allows Gentiles to be part of the people of God, a privilege Jews already hold.

Paul did not relegate Jewishness to a lower order of being; it is his interpreters who do that. Boyarin's contribution, however, lies in his having highlighted a major flaw in the new perspective on Paul by following that perspective to its logical conclusion. Even for new-perspective scholars, Jewish law is still seen as an obstacle to the goals that Paul is trying to promote. And if law remains the fundamental problem for the apostle, then when he says "no longer Jew or Greek," he must mean the eradication of Jewish law as the primary means of eradicating difference.

Having taken seriously the new-perspective critique of the old reading of the "law" in Paul, I think it implausible that Paul's "problem" is with Jewish law. Rather, his problem is what to do about the people who do not have it, i.e., the Gentiles. I do not think Paul preaches the collapse of all human difference; this interpretation is simply a more benign expression of Christian imperialism, and Boyarin is right in his critique of it, even if I do not think he is right to ascribe this view to Paul. **I think, rather, that Paul assumed human difference is a God-given part of creation, and more importantly, that it is an essential aspect of Paul's utopian vision.**

My first piece of evidence for this claim comes from 1 Corinthians:

Let each of you lead the life that the Lord has assigned, to which God called you. This is my rule in all the churches. Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. Was anyone at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision. Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing; but obeying the commandments of God is everything. Let each of you remain in the condition in which you were called. (Similar comments about slaves follow; 1 Cor. 7:17-20)

This text would seem to militate against the reading of Gal. 3:28 that claims Paul was trying to change the social order by literally eradicating distinctions among people. Rather, these comments support the conservative interpretation I discussed earlier, that Paul never meant to reorder society at large; he simply meant that "in Christ," in the Church community, these distinctions are irrelevant. Such distinctions will continue to exist in this world -- as Paul says, "Let each of you remain in the condition in which you were called" -- but they are of no consequence to God and have no bearing on one's salvation.

While distinctions between persons may be irrelevant before God, it is a mistake to assume, as conservative interpreters have throughout history, that these distinctions are irrelevant for Paul's mission. Perhaps one cannot or should not change one's social or ethnic status, but Paul strongly advocates *changing the relationships between people of different status*. Such a change in relationships is only significant if people are, in fact, different. A perusal of the Pauline corpus would quickly confirm that ameliorating relationships between different kinds of people is one of Paul's top priorities. [\(15\)](#)

Human difference is an essential part of Paul's worldview. As a Jew, Paul assumes some differences exist because that is the way God made the world. We live in a time when we have become increasingly aware of our human social constructions, how what looks and seems natural may, in fact, not be natural at all, but a product of our culture and social habit. The different clothes people wear, for example, would not typically be deemed "natural" by modern Americans. With the possible exception of a few extremists, who today would claim that the clothes we wear or our hairstyles are somehow "natural" or biologically determined? We recognize that fashion derives from social convention. Furthermore, we operate with a notion of the difference between nature and nurture (even if we cannot always agree on what is the result of "nature" and what depends on "nurture"), between what we carry with us in our genes and what is environmentally and socially variable. I believe Paul, too, would have seen some distinctions among people as essentially determined by nature and others as culturally arbitrary and changeable, but, typical of a person in antiquity, Paul classified many more things as natural than modern people would.

The best example of this comes from 1 Corinthians 11, where Paul's teaching about women's veils demonstrates his belief that clothing and hair are determined by natural gender distinctions:

Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head unveiled? Does not *nature* itself teach you that if a man wears long hair, it is degrading to him, but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering. If anyone is disposed to be contentious -- we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God. (1 Cor. 11:13-16; emphasis added)

I would paraphrase Paul's teaching here as follows: "Cross-dressing is a sin, because it is a violation of God's created order. There are no exceptions to this rule." In other words, Paul does not ascribe fashion to social convention. What men do they do because they are men; what women do they do because they are women. This same logic applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to Paul's teachings about Jews and Gentiles. In Gal. 2:15, Paul refers to himself as a Jew "*by birth*" and not

a gentile sinner." The phrase "by birth" (*phusei*) can also be translated "by nature" and is the same expression Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 11 (v. 14) to validate first-century hairstyles.

Paul believes Jews and Gentiles, like men and women, are fundamentally different kinds of people. Paul recognizes the inevitability of peoples' differences and even shows genuine respect for those who are different from him. Paul's teachings about circumcision confirm that he perceives a fundamental distinction between Jew and Gentile. As is commonly known, Paul often speaks negatively of circumcision, as, for example, in Gal. 5:2: "Listen, I Paul say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you." At best, he seems to say it is irrelevant; "Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything" (Gal. 5:6). Understandably, comments like these have led interpreters to believe that Paul denies the importance of cultural or religious practices. But that is why it is important to remember that Paul writes as a Jew, more specifically a Jewish man, addressing Gentiles. Paul calls himself the apostle to the Gentiles (Gal. 1:16; 2:9), because he founded Gentile congregations; Gentiles are consistently Paul's primary concern.

As was surely typical of Jewish men in the first century, circumcision was the central symbol of Judaism, so central that Paul sometimes uses the word to denote the entire Jewish community. In Gal. 2:7, where Paul compares his mission to Peter's, he says that, while Peter's mission is to the "circumcised," Paul's mission is to the "uncircumcised."[\(16\)](#) In spite of the fact that such designations are exclusively male, they presumably stand as equivalents to Jews and Gentiles.

Paul thinks of circumcision as the natural condition of Jews. This claim may initially sound strange, since circumcision is not a natural state. One is not born circumcised; it is a religious practice that reflects particular religious commitments. But I do not think Paul thinks of circumcision in these terms; this is how we think of it. In Paul's day, being Jewish, or being pagan for that matter, was not thought of as a question of personal choice. It is only in this very period, the first few centuries of the common era, that one's religious orientation comes to be seen as something distinct from one's ethnic, political, and geographic identity, as something one can choose to become. But Paul still thinks there are essentially two species of people, the circumcised and the uncircumcised. Jews are circumcised; Gentiles are not.[\(17\)](#)

As Paul writes his letter to the Galatians, he addresses a particular problem. Missionaries of whom Paul did not approve visited Galatia sometime after Paul founded churches there. These missionaries argued that the Galatians had to be circumcised, that this was an essential part of their Christian salvation. Paul is adamantly against it; in Gal. 5:2 he states, "if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you." Such a comment suggests that Paul's position about circumcision is so negative that he thinks circumcision is not only of no help in one's salvation, it is a hindrance. It undoes the good that has already been accomplished. It is no wonder that Christian readers of Paul in later centuries had such a negative view of Jewish religious observances like circumcision. But Paul's comments on circumcision in this letter were originally directed to Gentiles *only*. Paul objects to Gentiles' having to be circumcised; he does not condemn circumcision per se. In other words, Paul's message to the Galatians advocates the inclusion of Gentiles *as Gentiles* into the community of the people of God; he does not think Gentiles should first have to become like Jews by being circumcised in order to become members of God's people.

Nothing suggests that Paul condemned Jews for being circumcised or for circumcising their sons. Indeed, circumcision is an honor and a privilege for Jews. As Paul says in Rom. 3:1, "What advantage has the Jew? What is the value of circumcision? Much in every way. . ." Paul takes for granted that Jews are circumcised. The rejection of circumcision for which Paul is so well known derives from Paul's respect for Gentiles, not his disrespect for Judaism. He does not condemn Jews for circumcision; he condemns Jews who want to condemn Gentiles for their uncircumcision. His seemingly nasty comments about circumcision, which are implicitly directed at other Jewish teachers who may have even tried to coerce the Galatians into circumcision, indicate his willingness to accept Gentiles, uncircumcised as they are, into the community of God's people alongside Jews. Circumcising Gentiles would have made Jews and Gentiles all the same. Paul's vehement rejection of circumcision demonstrates his commitment to maintaining Jews and Gentiles as different and distinct, and militates strongly against seeing Paul's goal as creating human homogeneity. Thus, the purpose of Paul's argument against the Galatians' becoming circumcised remains the amelioration of the relationship between two *different* peoples, Jews and Gentiles, a relationship not marked by the same status -- for the Jews have been granted privileges by God such as the covenant symbolized by circumcision -- but by generosity on the part of the privileged party, which, by bringing the less privileged into their family, enable them to become children of God.

The Metaphor of Family

The standard liberal interpretation of Gal. 3:28 -- that Paul wanted to break down barriers or erase human differences -- is not a helpful way to understand Paul's vision. "Neither Jew nor Greek" ought not be read as Paul's attempt to transcend ethnic and cultural difference so that we might all live in one equal but homogenous society. Paul does not think in terms of "society" or "community," at least not as we moderns do anyway. **The alternative metaphor I would like to put forth for describing Paul's vision in Gal. 3:28 is the building of family.** Actually it is God's family, but it is a family nonetheless. While people, both ancient and modern, think of families as biologically related groups of people who are, in fact, alike or at least similar, families generally are made up of people who are by some measure different. Families sustain themselves or grow larger by having children, to be sure, but conventional social wisdom usually first requires that two people not currently related (or at least not closely related) marry. Although marital custom varies widely from one culture to another, anthropologists have long noted the taboo against marrying members of one's immediate family. Many cultures require marriage outside of one's own clan. Why did medieval kings and queens of Europe marry their children off to royalty of other countries? The simple answer is that they needed to construct political alliances in the hope of avoiding war. The principle that underlies the answer is that royal medieval marriages were attempts to construct families that would transform relationships between different and potentially warring peoples into related groups of people committed to each other's well being.

The language of family construction is so ubiquitous in Paul's writings that readers scarcely notice it. Not only does he frequently address his fellow believers as "brothers and sisters," Paul calls himself "father" (rather than "teacher" or "master" as might have been expected, and as Jesus apparently was called), while calling his congregants "children." [\(18\)](#) Because commentators tend to think Paul uses family terminology metaphorically, they do not see it as

significant and often overlook some important details, including one very important detail present in Gal. 3:28.

I have been quoting the NRSV translation of Gal. 3:28: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you one in Christ Jesus." But this translation differs in an important way from older English translations, which tend to translate the verse as follows: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female. . ." The NRSV provides the more literal translation, the significance of which resides in the last phrase, "no longer male and female." This phrase is awkward in both Greek and English because of the switch from the disjunctive "neither/nor" to the conjunctive "and." Because of this mismatching and the fact that Paul does not normally use the words "male" (*arsen*) and "female" (*thelu*), it seems that the last clause constitutes a not-so-subtle allusion to God's creation of the first human beings in Genesis 1. The Genesis text from which the phrase is taken reads as follows:

So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply. . ." (Gen. 1:27-28)

God creates man and woman and then commands them to reproduce. These verses reflect the first of two stories found in Genesis concerning the origins of the human family. In the first story, God creates an ordinary human being, called *adam* in Hebrew, and then divides *adam* into two genders. The second story of human origins appears in the next chapter of Genesis where a similar event is described as the two becoming "one flesh." While "one flesh" has sometimes been interpreted in the modern context as a romantic vision of two people uniting sexually, it most likely refers to children, or, more broadly, to the creation of a new human family resulting from marriage.

Since the final pair of the saying in Gal. 3:28, "male and female," constitutes an allusion to the story of creation in Genesis, "male and female" serves as the paradigm through which we may interpret the other two pairs. In other words, what Paul means by "no longer Jew or Greek" ought to be interpreted in terms of what he means by "male and female." And since the latter refers to the Genesis passage cited above, it is reasonable to think that Paul envisions the same sort of family inauguration for "Jew or Greek" as he does for "male and female." Although Paul speaks in the negative ("no longer male and female") his point is not to deny the reality or importance of sexual differentiation, neither is it to negate the practice of marriage.⁽¹⁹⁾ Rather, Paul uses the negative formulations to express how different kinds of people can be brought together into a unity. It is not two identical creatures who come together to create family, but two different ones. "Male and female" means difference is required at a fundamental level for the construction of family. Of course, part of the point is that although men and women are different, they are interdependent. Paul puts it nicely in 1 Cor. 11:11: "in the Lord, woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman."

When Gal. 3:28 is read within its context in Galatians, it becomes easier to see it in terms of family construction:

For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.[\(20\)](#) And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

Paul, who is already a member of Abraham's family, is attempting to make his Gentile followers members of Abraham's family, which essentially means they would become members of God's family, with all the rights and privileges thereof. Notice that, while verse 28 ends with "for you are all one in Christ Jesus," it is not the end of the story. Being "in Christ" is only the penultimate goal as Paul states it here. The purpose of being "in Christ" is that one then belongs to Abraham's family. Christ is the means by which one becomes a member of the Abraham family.

In Genesis 17, God promised Abraham that he would be the father of many nations. But in Paul's time, Abraham was known as the patriarch of the Jews only. Like many of the Jews of Paul's day, Paul sometimes understood scriptural texts as adumbrations of later events. Since God had promised to make Abraham the father of many nations, at some point that promise had to be fulfilled, otherwise the promises of God would have failed. Paul, believing he lived at the dawn of a new age (see, for example, Romans 8:18-25), understood the coming of Christ as the ritual event that allowed for members of other nations to become part of Abraham's family.

Just as in marriage, where people come together ritually in order to create a new family, Christ's sacrifice inaugurated the unity of Jew and Greek. "No longer Jew or Greek" does not, however, mean that Jew and Greek are no longer distinct from one another, so long as the paradigm of "male and female" operates in our reading of this text. The enactment of marriage does not deny the essential difference between woman and man; on the contrary, their complementarity has traditionally been viewed as essential to the creation of the family.[\(21\)](#) Marriage binds the man and woman in a new kind of relationship that entails a reprioritizing of loyalties so that they can build a common life.

Similarly, Jew and Gentile coming together in harmony while remaining distinct is the goal of Paul's mission.[\(22\)](#) Paul's vision encompasses Jew and Gentile because, as a monotheist, Paul understands all peoples as part of God's creation. If Gentiles become circumcised and thus become like Jews, that implies that God's sovereignty does not extend to other peoples, which would be a theological contradiction for Paul. As Paul himself says, "Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also" (Rom. 3:29). Christ has enabled Jews and Gentiles to become related to each other as children of Abraham, but they do not cease to be Jews and Gentiles. As Paul himself says,

Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another. . . . Welcome one another, therefore, as Christ 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. (Rom. 14:12-13; 15:7-9)

In sum, I do not believe the dictum in Gal. 3:28 as used by Paul was meant to articulate the destruction of human categories of existence so that people might share the same human essence. Rather, he articulated the construction of new human social relations based on the model of family. Gal. 3:28 encapsulates the message that people who are different can, if they so choose, come to understand themselves as meaningfully related to each other, committed to their well being, and part of a shared world.

Notes

1. [\[Back to text\]](#) The Iliff School of Theology, a seminary of the United Methodist Church in Denver, Colorado.
2. [\[Back to text\]](#) All biblical translations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), unless otherwise indicated.
3. [\[Back to text\]](#) This is essentially the view of Hyam Maccoby, *The Mythmaker: Paul and the Invention of Christianity* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986).
4. [\[Back to text\]](#) The new perspective on Paul has many representatives, see, for example, the works of J. D. Dunn, J. Gager, L. Gaston, W. D. Davies, and F. Theilman, to name just a few. The credit for inaugurating this paradigm shift goes above all to two men: E. P. Sanders who wrote a magisterial volume entitled *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) and Krister Stendahl for *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976). Interestingly, the new perspective cuts across theological lines; one finds both evangelical and mainline Christians advocating readings of Paul consistent with the new perspective. In spite of its over-reaching title, a recent, readable, and solid overview of Paul written by an evangelical influenced by the new perspective can be found in N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997). Another excellent, accessible, new-perspective introduction to Paul from the mainline perspective is the recent book by J. G. Gager, *Reinventing Paul* (New York: Oxford, 2000). See also the website maintained by Mark M. Mattison, "The Paul Page: Dedicated to the New Perspective on Paul" (www.angelfire.com/mi2/paulpage/).
5. [\[Back to text\]](#) The most thoughtful critique of the new perspective is given by Stephen Westerholm in *Israel's Law and the Church's Faith: Paul and His Recent Interpreters* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988).
6. [\[Back to text\]](#) E. Schüssler Fiorenza takes this position in *In Memory of Her* (Boston: Beacon, 1983). Not all feminist biblical scholars concur with Fiorenza. Some of them agree with conservatives that Paul believed in the validity of gender hierarchies, but they also argue that Paul cannot be the ultimate authority for modern Christianity regarding the liberation of women, because he lived in a different time with different views of the role of women.
7. [\[Back to text\]](#) This phrase comes from Eph. 5:22 and Col. 3:18, texts that many scholars (who are often, though not always, theologically liberal) do not think are written by Paul. If one accepts Ephesians and Colossians as pseudonymous, as does Fiorenza, then Paul never made any comments about wives obeying husbands.

8. [\[Back to text\]](#) The scholar best known for this view of Paul is Heikki Raisanen, *Paul and the Law* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986)
9. [\[Back to text\]](#) Interestingly, the Hebrew of Deut. 27:26 does not contain the word "all." Thus, the NRSV, because it translates directly from the Hebrew, reads as follows: "Cursed be anyone who does not uphold the words of this law by observing them. . ." However, the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, seems to have added the word "all," and that is the version Paul quotes.
10. [\[Back to text\]](#) The traditional understanding of this verse, as the impossibility of keeping the law perfectly, is found commonly among many liberal commentators (including some who would align themselves with the new perspective) not just among premodern exegetes. See, for example, the notes to this verse in a modern, sophisticated study Bible recently produced by Oxford: *The Access Bible* (New York: Oxford, 1999).
11. [\[Back to text\]](#) Denials that Gal. 3:28 has real political and social implications can be found strewn throughout the pages of nineteenth- and twentieth-century commentaries. For a notable exception, see H. D. Betz, *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Churches in Galatia*, Hermenia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 189-95.
12. [\[Back to text\]](#) Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982).
13. [\[Back to text\]](#) Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California, 1994).
14. [\[Back to text\]](#) *Ibid.*, 7.
15. [\[Back to text\]](#) In many, if not most, of his letters, Paul's ethical exhortations are focused on counseling the members of his congregations, which seem to have been made up of diverse and often conflicted people, to behave better toward one another. See, for example, Rom. 14:1-15:7 (part of which is quoted at the end of this article); 1 Corinthians 6, 7, and 12; and Philemon.
16. [\[Back to text\]](#) In Greek, the words are literally the "circumcision" and the "uncircumcision."
17. [\[Back to text\]](#) The distinction is similar to the way ancient Greeks (Romans, too, though to a lesser extent) distinguished themselves from "barbarians."
18. [\[Back to text\]](#) See, e.g., Gal. 1:2; 4:19, 28; 1 Cor. 4:14-15.
19. [\[Back to text\]](#) It is important that I distinguish my interpretation here from the work of other scholars who have argued compellingly that Gal. 3:28 is indeed a proclamation of the eradication of all human differences. Most of these scholars, however, interpret Gal. 3:28 in its pre-Pauline context, because it is commonly recognized that Paul is quoting a baptismal formula. See, for example, the work of W. Meeks, "The Image of the Androgyne: Some Uses of a Symbol in Earliest Christianity," *HR* 13 (1973): 165-208; and D. MacDonald, *There Is No Male and*

Female: The Fate of a Dominical Saying in Paul and Gnosticism (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987). I do not wish to argue against the position that Paul is quoting an earlier baptismal saying here, and that in its liturgical context it may have been used to proclaim the transformed state of the baptized individual which was now devoid of sex, social status, and other identities based on the earthly world. In this essay I am addressing the rhetorical use *Paul* makes of this saying, and, in my view, his focus in Galatians is on relations between people and their collective identity, not the existential human condition after baptism.

20. [\[Back to text\]](#) Interestingly, the word "one" does not appear in the oldest, most important manuscript of Paul's letters that survives, commonly called The Chester Beatty Papyrus, or P⁴⁶. The end of Gal. 3:28 in P⁴⁶ reads "for you are all in Christ." I suspect that this reading of the verse could be more authentic, especially since the following verse continues with "And if you belong to Christ," which is literally "And if you are *in* Christ. . ." Paul's point is not that people are "one," but that they are "in Christ," which enables them to become children of Abraham.

21. [\[Back to text\]](#) However, I would not want this observation to be used to deny the validity of unions between people of the same sex.

22. [\[Back to text\]](#) When Paul says in Rom. 3:22 "there is no distinction" between Jew and Greek, he is not claiming that the two are or should be identical to one another. Rather, he means there is no distinction in terms of God's grace. Paul also wavers on this very question at times, revealing his Jewish perspective. As he says in Rom. 2:10-11: "Glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality." Some have tried to reconcile the implicit contradiction by claiming that Paul is referring to a temporal distinction; chronologically speaking, Jews come first. But this is too wooden an interpretation. I think, rather, that Paul means simply that the Jews are instrumental in bringing salvation to the Gentiles. In other words, Jews are not just another one of God's peoples (in this sense, then, they are privileged), they are God's emissaries in accomplishing God's purpose. Ultimately, however, all stand equal before God.

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