

---

# Introduction

## **Toward a Considerate Reading**

In this commentary we restrict our attention to the authentic letters of the Apostle Paul. In the New Testament collection fourteen letters have traditionally carried the title “Letter of St. Paul to. . .” Of these fourteen documents, modern scholars, using philological methods and a critical sense of history, have determined that only seven of these letters are authentic, meaning that Paul was their author. The other letters are not authentic, meaning that Paul did not compose them. They were written by second- and third-generation members of Jesus groups who lived in the Pauline tradition. Historically, Christian churches have considered all these writings in the New Testament canonical, that is, inspired by God and therefore normative. It is important for Bible readers to understand that historical authenticity and canonicity are quite different. Similarly, it is important to realize that in the Christian tradition, an inspired writing is one coming from an author considered by the early Christian church to have been inspired by God. Inspiration, in this sense, has nothing to do with whether or not a contemporary reader feels inspired while reading such a writing.

Of these seven authentic letters, five deal with problems confronted by groups founded by Paul: 1 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, and Philippians. Romans is motivated primarily by Paul’s travel arrangements, while Philemon serves as a letter of recommendation on behalf of a runaway slave, asking his master to accept him back. Paul’s writings are second-generation Jesus-group documents in which Paul interacts with persons in the Jesus groups that he founded. Other letters ascribed to Paul, such as Colossians and 2 Thessalonians, are third-generation Jesus-group productions by other authors in the Pauline tradition that deal with the concerns of the generation immediately following Paul’s time and apply his teaching to that new situation. Finally, Ephesians (a sort of letter to non-Israelite Jesus-group members), Hebrews (a sort of letter to practicing Judean Jesus groups), and the letters to Timothy and Titus are fourth-generation Jesus-group documents in the Pauline tradition, dealing with different problems and situations in terms and perspectives of Pauline church members of the fourth-generation after Jesus (see Malina 2005). To repeat, our concern in this volume is with Paul’s authentic letters.

## 2 Introduction

In order to understand Paul and his concerns and behaviors, the first act is to read his letters. We offer this introduction as a “pre-reading,” however, since without such an explicit pre-reading readers invariably supply a pre-reading of their own. Long before any words are read people actually begin their reading, just as people who converse with others begin their conversation before any words are spoken. People who engage in a conversation learn to “read the situation” through stereotypes provided by the culture. For example, they know what to expect when they speak with an uninvited or unannounced salesperson at the door, or with a couple of Jehovah’s Witnesses canvassing their neighborhood, or with a pastor at church, another fan at a football game, and so on. These are called “contexts” of the use of language, and they largely limit what persons can say. The same is true with receiving an e-mail or a letter. As for “snail mail,” people engage in a pre-reading by looking at the letter: is it handwritten or typed, is it a personal letter or a business letter, is it an official government letter or a non-government letter? Upon opening the envelope the reader finds more clues in the salutation for what will likely follow. “Dear Mom and Dad” from a college student away from home invariably, even if implicitly, will contain a request for funds. A “Dear Occupant” letter will engage the recipient in some sort of commercial interaction. Those uninterested in a commercial transaction will simply throw the letter away without reading it, without interpreting it. They do not wish to engage in this context of the use of language.

The same was true of Paul’s letters. They had a context of use that enabled recipients to pre-read them. People receiving these letters in the first century knew what they generally were about before they had the letter read to them. (Only about 2 percent of the population was literate, that is, could read and write with some measure of proficiency; see Hopkins 1998.) This context of use in Paul’s letters was largely determined by who people thought Paul was. Paul was a Jesus-group “apostle,” authorized as such by the God of Israel. Readers also knew Paul’s proclamation, “the gospel of God.” The recipients’ social status and how and when they received the letter also determined the context of use. The addressees of Paul’s letters were his “clients,” the first ones to receive and accept the Good News communicated by Paul.

All these points indicate that reading is fundamentally a social act. Readers and writers always participate in a social system that provides the clues for filling in implicit information or for reading between the lines. Meanings are embedded in a social system shared and understood by all participants in any communication process. While meanings not rooted in a shared social system can sometimes be communicated, such communication inevitably requires extended explanation because a writer cannot depend upon the reader to conjure up the proper sets of related images or concepts needed to complete what is left unsaid.

This understanding of the social moorings of the reading process is confirmed by contemporary studies of reading (see Sanford and Garrod 1981). A “scenario model” drawn from recent research in experimental psychology suggests that readers understand a written document as setting out a succession of implicit or explicit mental pictures consisting of culturally specific scenes or schemes sketched

by an author. These in turn evoke corresponding scenes or schemes in the mind of the reader that are drawn from the reader's own experience in the culture. With the scenarios suggested by the author as a starting point, the reader then carries out appropriate alterations to the settings or episodes as directed by clues in the written document. In this way an author begins with the familiar and directs the reader to what is new and unfamiliar or unexpected. Because of the nature of this process, we might say that a kind of "agreement" exists between author and reader. Considerate authors attempt to accommodate their readers by beginning with scenarios those readers would readily understand. With such mutual understanding in place, an author can then proceed to the new or unfamiliar.

As modern readers, we do not enjoy such an author-reader agreement with Paul. Paul's letters neither begin with what we know about the world nor make any attempt to explain their ancient world settings in terms we might understand from our own contemporary experience. The letters presume that their readers are first-century, Eastern Mediterranean Israelites who are part of a particular social system. The letters further assume that their readers understand the intricacies of honor and shame, are fully aware of what daily life is like in a ruralized society and its pre-industrial cities, know how folk healers operate, believe in limited good, routinely experience interactions with patrons and brokers, and so on. The letters do not start with what is familiar to us in our present world. Another way of saying this is simply to remind ourselves that Paul, like other New Testament writers, did not have modern Americans in mind when he wrote.

In order to make this author-reader agreement work, therefore, modern readers of Paul will have to make the effort to be considerate readers. To this end, we will have to voluntarily—though temporarily—enter the world that existed when Paul was alive, the world that was very familiar to him and his readers. To be considerate, modern readers will have to be willing to do what is necessary in order to bring to their reading a set of mental scenarios proper to Paul's time, place, and culture instead of imposing the ones familiar to modern Americans, whether churchgoers or not. Modern Christianity in all its forms has little to do with its ancestral expressions in the Jesus groups of Paul's day, as we hope our commentary will demonstrate.

Of course, making the effort to be considerate readers has not always been a priority of American readers of the Bible. Consciously or unconsciously we have often used mental images or scenarios drawn from modern American experience and denominational church traditions to fill in the undescribed pictures that are necessary to understand the complete text and its context. Thus when we read in our modern English translations that in Christ there is neither "Jew nor Greek," it is not difficult for most Americans to construct a reference. We do it from our modern experience of Jews and non-Jews (or Gentiles). That such a "scenario" is completely inappropriate, however, never dawns on most American readers. They simply do not know that in the first-century Mediterranean there really were no "Greeks" since there was no Greek nation nor any state called Greece. "The idea of a Greek nation is alien to the thought of most Greeks at most periods throughout

Greek history” (Walbank 2002:254–55). In fact, the word “Greek” referred to a status, to persons who were “civilized,” indicated by the fact that they spoke Greek and adopted Hellenic values and habits in interpersonal relations. Similarly, the reference to “Jews” in poorly conceived English translations actually refers to “Judeans,” people who followed the customs of one group of people living in that section of the Roman province of Syria called Palestine. The Hebrew term *yehudim* and the Greek *loudaioi* are simply erroneously translated in English (not necessary in other languages). To “Greeks,” including Israelite “Greeks,” Judeans were barbarians. Roman elites, who were “Greeks,” were poorly informed about Judeans. Cassius Dio, a late second-century Roman writer, observed:

This was the course of events at that time [Pompey’s conquest in 63 B.C.E.] in Palestine [Greek: *Palaistina*]; for this is the name that has been given from of old to the whole country extending from Phoenicia to Egypt along the inner sea. They have also another name that they have acquired: the country has been named Judea and the people themselves Judeans. I do not know how this title came to be given them, but it applies also to all the rest of mankind, although of alien race, who affect their customs. This class exists even among the Romans. (Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, 37, 17, LCL)

Thus Judeans were people who practiced the customs of Judea, while Greeks were people who practiced the customs of Hellenists, a broad configuration of “civilized” Mediterranean peoples characterized by their use of the common Greek language. Taking the phrase “Judean and Greek” to mean Jews and Greeks, or worse, Jews and Gentiles, is simply erroneous, as well as anachronistic and ethnocentric. **Jew and Greek/Judean and Hellenist.**

Such ethnocentric and anachronistic readings of Paul are nevertheless common enough in our society that they underscore our point that reading is a social act. Yet how can contemporary American Bible readers participate in that social act with Paul if for the most part they have been socialized and shaped by the experience of living in twentieth- and twenty-first century America rather than the first-century Mediterranean? Will we not continue to conjure up reading scenarios Paul and his first readers could never have imagined? If we do, of course, the inevitable result is misunderstanding. Too often we do not bother to fill in scenarios as Paul’s audiences did simply because we do not bother to acquire some of the reservoir of experience on which the authors expected their audiences to draw. For better or worse, we read ourselves and our world back into the text in ways we do not suspect. In social interaction this process is called “selective exposure,” defined as the tendency to attend to communication messages that are consistent with one’s existing knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs.

Obviously, reading is always a risky business, especially for writers. The same holds for learning. Classroom learning is a risky business, notably for teachers. The reason for this is that whatever writers or teachers say will always be interpreted according to the presuppositions of their audiences. (The medieval philosopher

and theologian Thomas Aquinas expressed it thus: *Quidquid recipitur per modum recipientis recipitur*; whatever one perceives is perceived in terms of one's presuppositions.) If this holds for modern writers and teachers, it holds all the more so for ancient writers and their modern readers. The problem is rooted in what social psychologists call "selective perception." Selective perception is the tendency to interpret what others say in terms of one's existing attitudes and beliefs. While selective perception is a problem for modern writers and classroom teachers, it looms as an insurmountable obstacle to the understanding of ancient authors, not excluding biblical authors. While in our social system we are expected to spell out clearly what we mean to audiences with whom we are unacquainted, the ancients presupposed that their audiences could always fill in the blanks and thus did not bother to articulate many of the dimensions of what they meant.

### **Paul's Context and Ours**

The New Testament was written in what anthropologists call a "high context" culture. People who communicate with each other in high context societies presume a broadly shared, generally well-understood knowledge of the context of anything referred to in conversation or in writing. For example, all ancient Mediterranean farmers used the same implements, in the same way, for the same purposes, and at the same season of the year. An ancient might say, "I farmed this plot last year," and all would know that the person was a tenant farmer in debt to a patron for seed, using a similar shallow plow, planting right before rainy season (beginning in October in the Eastern Mediterranean), then plowing the field after the seeds were sown. Obviously all of this could not be understood by a modern U.S. city dweller, and much of it would be mysterious even to modern U.S. farmers, who do not plant seeds before plowing. The point here is that cultures differ in the degree to which people are required to fill in the blanks for the persons with whom they communicate. Thus writers in such high context cultures usually produce sketchy and impressionistic writings, leaving much to the reader's or hearer's socially attuned imagination in rather static societies. Documents from high context cultures encode much information in widely known and understood symbolic or stereotypical statements. For this reason, these documents require the reader to fill in large gaps in what is left unwritten. All readers are expected to know the context and therefore to understand what is only implicit in the writing.

In this way biblical authors, like authors of most documents written in the high context ancient Mediterranean world, presumed readers to have a broad and adequate knowledge of the social context presumed in what those documents describe. Biblical documents offer very little by way of extended explanation. When Paul, a Pharisaic Israelite, writes that he was sent to "the (other) peoples" (usual English translation: "Gentiles"), for example, he feels no necessity to explain for his readers what going to "the (other) peoples" might concretely mean. He makes no mention of the crucial and salient ethnocentric social boundaries in antiquity between ingroup and outgroup, between Israelites and Everyone Else. Members of the



house of Israel lumped all the rest of the world's population into that rubber-bag word, "the (other) peoples" (Gentiles). The Greek word *ethnē* (Gentiles) literally means "peoples," and when used by Israelites to set themselves off from other peoples, the word meant Everyone Else (other peoples, peoples other than us).

It is very important to reflect on a fact of social psychology that, in ingroup contexts, any Israelite "going to the other peoples" would be presumed to be going to Israelites resident among those other peoples. To take a modern example, when Israelis speak of "going to Americans" to sell U.S. tax-exempt Israeli bonds, they are presumed to be going to Jews resident in the U.S., not to non-Jewish Americans. Most American non-Jews are totally unaware of Israeli bonds. So too most first-century Mediterraneans were totally unaware of the Jesus-group gospel spread among Israelites living in non-Israelite regions. Paul believed that in a few short years he actually fulfilled his commission of proclaiming the gospel of God among Everyone Else, since "from Jerusalem and as far round as Illyricum I have *fully* preached the gospel of Christ, thus having made it a point of honor to proclaim the gospel, where Christ has not already been named" (Rom 15:19-20). The fact is, however, that perhaps 99.9 percent of the non-Israelite population of the regions Paul traversed fell far beyond the pale of Paul's outreach and were fully unaware of his activity. Paul was, in fact, apostle to Israelite minorities living among non-Israelite majority populations.

Paul does not have to explain this since all first-century Eastern Mediterraneans were ethnocentric and cared little, if anything, for outsiders; each group interpreted the whole world in terms of its values, its viewpoints, its worldview. Under most conditions what others thought about their group was inconsequential and totally unimportant. With their concern for preserving ingroup boundaries along with prevailing ethnocentrism, people hearing of Paul's going to the *ethnē*, that is, among other peoples of the Mediterranean, would understand that Paul went to Israelites resident among other peoples of the Mediterranean. These included Israelites located in Greco-Roman cities, that is, Israelites found in non-Israelite regions, where Israelites were a minority. All of this, of course, is critical to understanding Paul's statement about his being an "apostle to the Gentiles." Paul (and the author of the Acts of the Apostles) simply assumed that readers would understand.

By contrast, "low context" societies are those that produce highly specific and detailed documents that leave relatively little for the reader to fill in or supply. In general the United States and northern Europe are typical low context societies. Accordingly, Americans and northern Europeans expect writers to give the necessary background if they refer to something unusual or atypical. A computer operator, for example, learns a certain jargon and certain types of procedures (e.g., computer operating systems) that are not widely understood outside the circle of computer initiates. Within that specific circle these concepts can be used without explanation because they are easily supplied by any competent reader of technical computer manuals. But since they are not yet part of the experience of the general public, when writing for a nontechnical (low context) audience, a writer must



explain the computer jargon and the technical information at some length if she or he wants to be understood.

A moment's reflection will make clear why modern industrial societies are low context and ancient ruralized ones were high context. Life today has complexified into a thousand spheres of experience the general public does not have in common. There are small worlds of experience in every corner of our society that the rest of us know nothing about. The worlds of the corporate CEO, the atomic or civil or electronic engineer, the plumber, the insurance salesperson, and the farmer, to name a few, are in large measure self-contained. Should any one of these people write for the "layperson" who is not a corporate CEO, engineer, plumber, insurance salesperson, or farmer, he or she would have much to explain. It was very different in antiquity, however, where change was slow and where the vast majority of the population had the common experience of farming the land and dealing with benefactors and patrons, with the Roman military, landlords, traders, merchants, and tax collectors. People had far more in common, and experience was far less discrepant. Thus writers could more nearly count on readers to fill in the gaps with some accuracy from behaviors into which Mediterraneans were socialized in their rather similar societies.

The obvious problem this creates for reading the Bible today is that low context readers in the United States frequently mistake biblical documents for low context documents and erroneously assume the authors have provided all of the contextual information needed to understand it. A survey by the Barda polling company found that in 2002, 76 percent of Americans believe the Bible is a perfectly adequate and thorough statement of Christian life and behavior that anyone can understand by just reading it (in English, of course, the language in which God "inspired" it). Such people assume they are free to fill in the gaps from their own experience because if that were not the case, the New Testament writers, like any considerate low context authors, would have provided the unfamiliar background a reader requires. Unfortunately, this is rarely the case because expectations of what an author will provide (or has provided) are markedly different in American and Mediterranean societies.

This point is not merely theoretical. When we consider the misery and suffering in the Middle East, for example, we are impressed that U.S. policies that we regard as particularly deleterious—in Palestine, Iraq, and elsewhere—nevertheless enjoy broad support among Americans, in part because they are so congenial to a particular Christian fundamentalist reading of the Bible. An insensitive, intolerant, and sometimes racist Christian Zionist perspective assents, in effect, in leaving millions of our fellow human beings at the mercy of broadly imperialist policies. Such misery-causing misunderstanding of the Bible derives from reading and interpreting a high context set of documents as though they were low context directives from God. While the foregoing example derives from U.S. civil religion (which now incorporates elements of Christian and Jewish Zionism), the same process has been going on in churches for centuries. People were little interested in what a writer like Paul said and wanted to say to his first-century Jesus groups. Rather,



they were interested in finding Paul relevant and useful in their contemporary situations. They were not interested in an inspired author, but in an inspiring text for an inspired reader. To do this, they adopted a common misconception of the reading process.

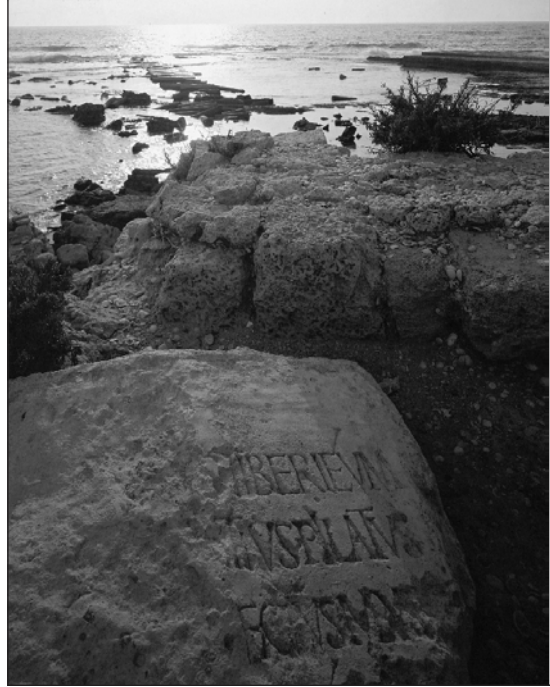
## Who Was Paul?

The question “Who was Paul?” can elicit a range of responses. Initially we can say that Paul was a second-generation Jesus-group member. Members of this second generation for the most part did not actually know Jesus personally, did not interact with him, did not actually hear him when he was alive on earth. In this they differed, of course, from Jesus’ first followers, their wives and children, and all those others who heard and interacted with Jesus. The distinctive thing about the second generation was that they took up the witness of the first generation yet were largely not concerned with what Jesus said and did. The story of the life of Jesus was not a primary focus for the second generation (see Malina 2005).

Second-generation interest was focused, rather, on what the God of Israel did in Jesus of Nazareth’s death and resurrection and on the fact that this act of God confirmed Jesus’ proclamation of a forthcoming theocracy, a kingdom of the God of Israel. As Paul witnessed, the second-generation Jesus groups were to be found in Palestine as well as among Israelites resident outside of Palestine. In Palestine, second-generation Jesus groups, like the first, had political-religious interests (see Acts 1–9). They in fact formed a political-religious party in Israel, like other parties: the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes. They believed that the kingdom of heaven, an Israelite theocracy, was coming, and they firmly believed that this would be ushered in with Jesus as Israel’s Messiah. Very definitely this would happen soon. Jesus groups outside of Palestine shared identical beliefs in the forthcoming kingdom of God in Israel. While they nurtured this Israelite political-religious ideology, they were in fact resident in locations with their own political-religious institutions and their own citizenry. As resident aliens, their favored social structure followed kinship lines; they formed fictive kin groups of brothers and sisters meeting in domestic space, whether tenements or houses.

It was to such fictive kin Jesus groups that Paul directed his letters. In those letters, Paul explains who he was based on the context of language use in first-century C.E. expectations: “circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law a Pharisee, as to zeal a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law blameless” (Phil 3:5-6). First-century persons defined themselves, as a rule, in terms of gender, genealogy, and geography (see Malina and Neyrey 1996). This was all that was required to know a person well. Here Paul implies gender and geography but specifies genealogy, first in terms of kinship—Israelite, Benjaminite, of a family practicing Judean customs devotedly (that is what “Hebrew” meant; see Harvey 1996)—then in terms of his associational or fictive kinship affiliation, namely, a Pharisee. He offers similar information in his Corinthian correspondence: “Are they Hebrews? So am I.

*This stone inscription (Caesarea Maritima) honors Emperor Tiberius and Pontius Pilate, prefect of Judea (26–36 C.E.), where Paul reported he persecuted Jesus groups.*



Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I” (2 Cor 11:22, with emphasis on genealogy and implicit geography). The geography in both instances is Judea (not Tarsus, as in Acts 9:30; 21:39; 22:3).

Paul was an Israelite. He was formed in the Pharisaic style of living the Mosaic Torah; hence he believed that “as to righteousness under the Law” he was “blameless.” In terms of the values embodied by Pharisaic ideology (**Pharisaic Ideology**), his zeal moved him to become “a persecutor of the church,” that is, of the members of the Jesus group he encountered in Judea. He refers to this phase of his life as follows: “For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it; and I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers” (Gal 1:12-14) Paul intimates that his “violent” persecution of the “church of God” took place in Judea. After a period in “Arabia,” three years in Damascus, and a period “in the regions of Syria and Cilicia,” he specifies, “and I was still not known by sight to the churches of Christ in Judea,” the members of which said: “He who once persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy” (Gal 1:22-23; Acts 7:48—8:3 similarly recalls that Paul was present at the stoning of Stephen in Jerusalem, then participated in doing violence to Jesus-group members in Judea and Samaria). The point to note from all this is that Paul was an Israelite who persecuted Jesus groups in Judea.

The significant event in his life that accounts for his letters is that he believed he was called by the God of Israel as an Israelite prophet, to proclaim the gospel of God to Israelites resident among non-Israelites (see Pilch 2003). Paul recalls, “But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me” (Gal 1:15-17, NRSV). This passage underscores two important features about Paul: first, he believed he was called to be an Israelite prophet (the phrase “he who had set me apart before I was born and called me” traces back to the prophetic call of Jeremiah; Jer 1:5; see Isa 49:1). This means Paul did not “convert to Christianity” but rather continued to obey the God of Israel as he had previously done, this time with a prophetic mission. Second, in this call the God of Israel revealed his Son along with the task of proclaiming this “revelation.” The “revelation” Paul refers to belongs to a category of human experiences called altered states of consciousness. Research into altered-state events has demonstrated that such experiences are always shaped by previous personal and social events. **Altered States of Consciousness.** That means that if Paul had a vision of the resurrected Jesus through whom the God of Israel authorized Paul to proclaim “the gospel of God,” Paul must have known something about the Israelite Jesus, specifically as a person raised from the dead by the God of Israel.

### **What Was the Nature of Paul's Call?**

Where did Paul learn about the Jesus he experienced in his altered state of consciousness experience? The answer is not difficult to find. After all, Paul tells us he persecuted Jesus-group members, those who believed the God of Israel had done something in and through Jesus of Nazareth. Unless we imagine Paul was a psychopathic murderer, we can presume that he persecuted them because he was aware of their agenda to some extent. He presumably knew what he was doing. What, then, did he know about Jesus?

What was distinctive about Jesus groups was that they had a new message for Israel. They were not simply revitalizing Israel. They had a gospel, Good News, something new, an innovation. If we assume that Paul was a rational person, and his letters indicate that he was, we may further assume that he had knowledge of what these Jesus-group members believed: that the God of Israel had raised the crucified Jesus from the dead, indicating that Jesus was Israel's Messiah to come and that an Israelite theocracy was in the offing. These people whom Paul persecuted were surely motivated or persuaded to believe what they did. Initially Paul found their ideas and arguments wanting, even preposterous, and this to such an extent that he felt their activities had to be suppressed.

Given his self-attested behavior, Paul rejected this Jesus-group innovation, and not only that: since he entered into conflict with Jesus-group members, we can be sure that their position made him feel aggrieved in some way. **Dispute Process.** He had a grievance against them. This meant at least that what they said about the

God of Israel and their proclamation of a forthcoming Israelite theocracy were blasphemous and insulting. It was a threat to Israel's political religion and dishonoring to the God of Israel. Thus if Paul persecuted "the church of God," he surely was exposed to the innovation proclaimed by Jesus-group members. He surely gained some understanding of the theoretical and practical significance of this innovation for Israel. At some point, he formed an unfavorable attitude toward the Jesus-group innovation. To develop such an attitude, he presumably discussed the existence and activity of Jesus groups with others sharing his Pharisee orientation, and they judged the Jesus movement's proclamation unfavorably.

Interpersonal channels are usually at work in the persuasion process. The result was that Paul was persuaded to implement his assessment of Jesus groups by engaging in activities that supported his choice to reject the Jesus group's innovation (see Rogers 1995). He sought out Jesus-group members to force them to discontinue the innovation they had adopted. His "persecution" sought to force the discontinuance of the Jesus group's innovation, specifically by punishing Jesus-group members for their decision to discontinue previous Israelite practices and for putting their fellow Israelites at risk. Obviously Paul sought out and received reinforcement from his fellow Pharisees for the decision he had made.

Since Paul previously knew about the gospel of God from the people he persecuted, when he had his "call" in an altered state of consciousness experience, he did not need to get any new knowledge about this gospel. Rather this revelation of Jesus by God led him to discontinue his previous position and replace it with a new posture. What followed in his life was implementation, putting his decision about God's gospel into practice. After a period he began to seek out Israelites in non-Israelite cities. His goal was to disseminate the innovation of what the God of Israel had done to Jesus, raising him from the dead as Israel's Messiah and cosmic Lord, with a view to a forthcoming theocracy for Israel. He believed that his task to inform his fellow Israelites of this innovation was God-given, hence God-driven and directed to regions where Israelites were a minority, that is, among non-Israelite majorities (the *ethnē*).

We think all would agree that if Paul's letters attest to anything, they indicate his concern to spread what he called the gospel of God. This gospel, the Good News, was that the God of Israel would soon establish a theocracy for Israelites, "the kingdom of God." The trigger event behind this news was that the God of Israel had raised Jesus (of Nazareth, a geographical reference Paul does not use), an Israelite, from the dead. Jesus would be Israel's Messiah with power, ushering in the forthcoming theocracy. It is quite significant to note that Paul's proclamation was Israelite-specific in all of its dimensions: in its means of transmission (Paul received it through a revelation ascribed to the God of Israel who calls prophets), in its origin (the God of Israel), in its medium (a revelation of Israel's Messiah, the crucified and resurrected Jesus), in its content (an Israelite theocracy), and in its rationale (spelled out according to Israel's scriptures). Hence it is fairly obvious that this proclamation was meant specifically for Israelites. There are other indications of the exclusively Israelite nature of Paul's task. Consider the following features:

- Paul’s use of Israel’s scriptures follows Israelite usage. These scriptures would hardly be authoritative or probative for non-Israelites. Wherever non-Israelites appear in these scriptures, it is only as supporting cast to applaud the God of Israel, who lavishes such benefits on his own people. Non-Israelites are expected to give a grant of honor to Israelites. This of course is the role of non-Israelites throughout the Bible, in all the books of the Bible including the allegedly universalistic outlooks of Second Isaiah.
- Paul’s references to God are references to the God of Israel and of Israel’s ancestors, the God who sent his son to Israel for Israel. This is Israel’s henotheistic God of the Israelite confession of faith (Deut 6:4; “the Lord *our* God is one”). What characterized Israel is that it was a people with a single God. If this God were a monotheistic, universal, and sole God, there would be nothing special about Israel. Such a God would be the God of all people, not of a single chosen people. The creed would be “the Lord God is one,” not “the Lord *our* God is one.”
- Paul describes his call to be “apostle” as a prophetic call. That is typical of Israel’s prophets, who were called by the God of Israel to proclaim God’s message to Israel alone.
- The God of Israel is in covenant with his people Israel, and not with any other people in the rest of the world. There is really no biblical indication that Israel’s God has any concern for those not in covenant with him.
- The God of Israel raised Jesus of Nazareth from the dead for the benefit of his people Israel, specifically with a view to a forthcoming “kingdom of heaven/God,” an Israelite theocracy, centered in Jerusalem in the land of Israel, with Jesus as Israel’s Messiah..
- Paul’s use of the “we” versus “they” language sets Israelites off from Everyone Else. For Paul the population of the world consisted of two peoples: Israel and Everyone Else, that is, the other peoples (NRSV: “Gentiles”). For all practical purposes Everyone Else form an undifferentiated mass, all equal, all the same, all non-Israelites. Israel, on the other hand, has differentiation and graded distinctions of clean and unclean, sacred and profane. This is typically ethnocentric.
- Paul was punished by Israelite communities, that is, synagogues (2 Cor 11:24: “Five times I have received at the hands of the Judeans the forty lashes less one”). These events point to the fact that he perceived himself as a member of these communities and interacted with them as an ingroup member. Israelite communities would not bother to single out any Israelite member unless he belonged to their communities and was judged to be doing damage to their communities.
- Paul’s clients were Jesus-group Israelites. But there were other types of Jesus-group Israelites seeking clients of their own. These were the traveling “Judaizers” who sought to have Paul’s clients adopt one of their Judean versions of the gospel of God. Their goal was not to convert Paul’s clients

to some uniform, basic Judaism but to direct them away from Paul's gospel of God, adapted as it was to Israelites living among majority non-Israelite populations.

- The difference in theology between Israelites and non-Israelites is that Israel worshiped one and only one God in monarchy, while non-Israelites worshiped many gods in hierarchy. Greeks, that is, civilized people, had no difficulty in identifying the God of Israel with Zeus or Jupiter, thus identifying the God of Israel with the most high god of their own systems. Israelites, on the other hand, while denying the reality of other gods in the forms of statues, nonetheless believed in entities with all the features of lesser deities, whom they called “archangels” and “angels” (see Barker 1992; Davidson 1992; Gieschen 1998). In other words, apart from different labels, we have the same sort of entities functioning in the world in the first-century Eastern Mediterranean world no matter in which cultural context—Greek or Israelite or other. While fights about labels might be significant, in practice, as Paul says, “there are many lords and many gods” (1 Cor 8:5). This is henotheism.

Israelite adherence to this monarchical, exclusive tribal god breaks down as Israelites have recourse to angels and archangels (whom non-Israelites would call lesser deities) for specialized purposes. Clement of Rome quotes a Jesus-group document called the *Preaching of Peter* (*Kérygmata Petrou*, dating to the turn of the first century C.E.), which describes Judean customs as follows: “for the Judeans (*Ioudaioi*) [who] think that they only know God, do not know Him, adoring as they do angels and archangels, the month and the moon” (*Stromata* 6.1; Sources Chrétiennes 446, p. 145). And when colonial Israelites encountered these lesser deities with Greek and Roman names, they likewise felt free to have recourse to them and to build altars to them much as they did at home for their angels and ancestors (see Kant 1987).

### **Israelites among Non-Israelites: Paul's Audience**

Because of the nature of his “gospel of God,” according to which the God of Israel revealed his intention of establishing a theocracy for Israel by raising Jesus from the dead in Jerusalem, Paul's obvious addressees were his fellow Israelites. The question here is, What were these first-century Israelites like, these Israelites resident among non-Israelite majorities?

Cohen notes that Israelites and Everyone Else “were corporeally, visually, linguistically, and socially indistinguishable” (Cohen 1999:37). There were no genealogical records that would have proven who was an Israelite and who was not. And if Israelites in the first-century Mediterranean world “looked like everyone else, spoke like everyone else, were named like everyone else, and supported themselves like everyone else,” then how would one know an Israelite when one saw one? (Cohen 1999:53). Many modern readers of Paul confuse twenty-first-century Jewishness, based on the sixth-century C.E.

Talmud, with the Judean customs of antiquity. Many think that in antiquity, the main infallible and usable marker distinguishing an Israelite from a non-Israelite was circumcision. **Circumcision.** But as Cohen further notes, such was not the case at all. As a matter of fact, infant genital mutilation as a distinguishing Judean marker was rather late in Palestine (ca. 150 B.C.E.), and perhaps several centuries later, if at all, among Yahweh worshipers far from the region of Judea. About this time Judea proper was a small part of Palestine almost identifiable with the territory of the city of Jerusalem, as we learn from Polybius in the middle of the second century B.C.E. (16, fragment 39). Samaria and Galilee were outside it (Momigliano 1975:88). The point is that one cannot presume Israelite identity was evident because of circumcision. Many Yahweh worshipers were spread around the Mediterranean centuries before the Maccabean reforms of 150 B.C.E. that introduced circumcision as a distinguishing marker of Judean identity.

Further, cultural boundaries between Israelites and non-Israelites were often quite blurred, indicating far more diversity than generally imagined, as for instance indicated by Aune and Kant (the following data are taken from Aune 1997 *passim* and Kant 1987:617–713). In their enclaves in Greco-Roman cities, Israelites were frequently indistinguishable from their non-Israelite neighbors in their religious customs. They inscribed many of their funerary monuments with the polytheistic *D M (diis manibus)*, i.e., to the divine shades or spirits) to Roman ancestral deities, at other times to the spirit gods, the Junonian spirits. Israelite slaves were sold to Apollo, and an Israelite sold his slaves to Apollo. Israelites signed oaths to Jupiter, Gaia (Earth), Helios (Sun), as well as to the Highest God (presumably the God of Israel). One Israelite from Boeotia, upon being manumitted, set up an altar to the Greek gods Amphiarus and Hygeia, after being commanded to do so in a dream (Kant 1987). In Upper Egypt, Israelite inscriptions are found in a temple dedicated to the god Pan, while another speaks of Moira (divine fate), of crossing the underworld river Lethe, with Hades as the final destination of the dead. In typical Hellenistic fashion (also characteristic of non-Judeans), the inscriptions speak of tears, grief, laments, and the swiftness of death. In Italy Israelites believed graves were imbued with divine power and were subjects of propitiation; they even considered graves as sacrificial altars, a place for funerary meals (see Jer 16:7; Ps 106:28; Tob 4:17: “place your bread on the grave of the righteous, but give none to sinners”). Graves were shrines for the dead, a place to worship the dead, a habitation of the dead. Those who tampered with graves would have to answer to God or the gods, and they and their families would be cursed.

There is even evidence that Israelites took part in Greek athletics and were spectators at Greek athletic events. These events were intimately bound up with rituals directed to various deities. A menorah incised on the wall of the gymnasium at Priene, a Hellenistic city on the Maeander southeast of Ephesus and a few miles downstream from Tralles, intimates Israelite presence. The Alexandrian Israelite Philo was familiar with the intimate details of athletic events and must frequently have been a spectator himself (Philo, *Agr.* 11.1–17). This is not very surprising, since even in Palestine, where Paul presumably grew up, literary evidence suggests that many young Israelite men participated in Greek athletics in Jerusalem when



it was under the control of Antiochus Epiphanes, 175–163 B.C.E. (2 Macc 4:7-20; *Ant.* 12.241; 19.335–337). Greek games, held in specially constructed amphitheaters, hippodromes, and stadiums, are attested in Caesarea Maritima (*War* 1.415; *Ant.* 15.341) and Jerusalem (*Ant.* 15.268–273). Athletic buildings are also attested for Tiberias (*War* 2.618–619; 3.539; *Life* 92) and Tarichaeae, both on the shore of the sea of Galilee (*War* 2.599; *Life* 132). Stadiums (which had to be two hundred yards long) were outfitted with seating that typically accommodated ten thousand spectators. Since the population of Sepphoris and Tiberias was predominantly Israelite, the spectators at such events must have been predominantly Israelite (Harris 1972).

Guilds in Greco-Roman cities were generally under the patronage of deities and local patrons. Israelites had guilds of purple dyers and carpet weavers (Hierapolis, Phrygia), goldsmiths (Corycus, Cilicia), and fishermen (Joppa, Palestine). They also worked as merchants and traders of spices, perfume, wine, linen, cloth, and silk. Others were bakers, boot makers, physicians, and bankers. Several of the nearly one hundred inscriptions (three in Hebrew, the rest in Greek) discovered in connection with the excavation of the Sardis synagogue reveal that eight synagogue members were also members of the municipal council, which routinely involved oaths and prayers to the local protective gods. Such provincial councilors (*decursiones*) were hereditary positions held by people of wealth. Other elite members of Sardis included Aurelius Basileides, a former procurator, and Paulus, a *comes* (i.e., a



*The ancient harbor of Caesarea, built by Herod the Great in 22–10 B.C.E., was the Roman administrative center of Judea. Paul was judged here.*

“count”). Other wealthy donors were citizens of Sardis, like Hippias the Second.

Israelites also served in the Roman Army: an Israelite commander and officer are mentioned in Egypt; a centurion in Palestine and soldiers in the Roman army are mentioned in Italy. There were even a Judean military unit and one Israelite service in the Roman navy. Of course, all these military persons had to take an oath to their officers and a vow to the Roman deities. Other Israelites who paid homage to local deities included the city councilmen of Sardis, Acmonia (Phrygia), Corcyrus (Cilicia), Cyrene, and El Hamman (Palestine). Even Philo calls the Israelite God “the Supreme father of the gods” (*Spec. Laws* 2.165). Israelite associations (collegia, synagogues) were often modeled on Greco-Roman patterns of club organizations (collegia), with a set of offices bearing Greco-Roman names. In sum, all this suggests that Israelites both in Palestine and in Israelite colonies were far more enmeshed in Hellenistic culture than had been previously thought possible.

### Israelites among Other Ethnocentrics

Genealogy rooted in geography was a fundamental marker of group identification in antiquity. Paul’s Israelite ethnocentrism—his concern exclusively for Israelites—is no different from the viewpoint revealed by Jesus in his commissioning the apostles in Matthew (10:5: “Go nowhere except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”), a commissioning taken up again at the close of the Gospel (Matt 28:16: “make disciples of all nations,” meaning, of course, “of Israelites living among all nations.” By our standards, ancient ethnic divisions clearly underscore the unsurprising ethnocentrism of learned ancient Mediterranean writers. A fundamental cultural presupposition of the culture area was the ingroup/outgroup perspective. Ingroup feelings are rooted in the perception of similarity with others, specifically with one’s gender, family, extended family, neighborhood, town or city section, and ethnic group (see Esler 1998:29–57). Ingroup members are treated with loyalty, openness, solidarity, and support. Those falling outside the ingroup boundaries are the outgroup. With the outgroup, almost “anything goes.” Dealings with outgroup persons are indifferent, even hostile. For practical purposes they are, again, a different species of being. Ingroup and outgroup lines were not entirely fixed. To an outsider they seem constantly shifting.

By way of comparison with Paul’s focus on Israel, consider what elite Romans thought (see Malina 1992). Plutarch, for example, advised:

When differences arise against brothers, we must be careful especially at such times to associate familiarly (*plēsiazēin*) with our brothers’ friends, but avoid and shun all intimacy with their enemies, imitating at this point, at least, the practice of Cretans, who, though they often quarreled with and warred against each other, made up their differences and united when outside enemies attacked; and this it was which they called “syncretism” (*sygkretismos*). (*On Brotherly Love* 19.490B LCL)

Being of similar genealogical and geographical origin meant to harbor ingroup feelings, especially when away from that place of origin and even when long departed from it, for it was the place of origin that endowed group members with particular characteristics. Pliny, for example, considered Europe the significant part of the world and Italy as the center of Europe. Rome, of course, was the center of Italy:

To begin then with Europe, nurse of the race that has conquered all the nations, and by far the loveliest portion of the earth, which most authorities not without reason have reckoned to be not a third part, but a half of the world, dividing the whole circle into two portions by a line drawn from the river Don (Tanaus) to the Straits of Gibraltar (Gadatinum). (Pliny, *Natural History* 3.1.5)

And further on:

I am well aware that I may with justice be considered ungrateful and lazy if I describe in this casual and cursory manner a land (Italia) which is at once the nursling and the mother of all other lands, chosen by the providence of the gods to make heaven itself more glorious, to unite scattered empires, to make manners gentle, to draw together in converse by community of language the jarring and uncouth tongues of so many nations, to give mankind civilization, and in a word to become throughout the world the single fatherland of all the races. But what am I to do? The great fame of all its places—who could touch upon them all? And the great renown of the various things and peoples in it give me pause. . . . The Greeks, themselves a people most prone to gushing self-praise, have pronounced sentence on the land by conferring on but a very small part of it the name of Great Greece! (Pliny, *Natural History* 3.5.39–42)

For Pliny, “The one race (*gens*) of outstanding eminence in virtue among all the races in the whole world is undoubtedly the Roman” (*Natural History* 7.40.130 LCL). This was not difficult to prove, in his view. “There is a countless series of Roman examples (of men of intellectual excellence), if one chose to pursue them, since a single race (*gens*) has produced more men of distinction in every branch whatever than the whole of the other lands (*terrae*)” (*Natural History* 7.30.116).

Two generations earlier, Cicero too noted that Rome’s preeminence was due basically to the moral virtue of its inhabitants: “However good be our conceit of ourselves, conscript fathers, we have excelled neither Spain in population, nor Gaul in force (*robor*), nor Carthage in cleverness (*calliditas*), nor Greece in technology (*ars*), nor indeed Italy and Latium itself in the innate sensibility (*sensus*) characteristic of this land and its peoples; but in piety, in devotion to religion (*pietas et religio*), and in that special wisdom which consists in the recognition of the truth that the world is swayed and directed by the disposal of the gods, we have excelled every race and every nation” (Cicero, *De haruspicum responsis* 9.19 LCL).



*This inscription is a copy of a plaque (called a tabula ansata) that was part of a mosaic floor in an assembly hall (see photo on page 22). It reads, “Porphyrius, bishop, made the mosaic of the basilica of Paul in Christ,” thus honoring Paul, who was the founder of the church in Philippi.*

Romans, like the other empire builders of antiquity, considered their empire as the only “state” in the world: there simply was no civilized, humanized world apart from Rome. Thus people did not come under Roman rule or Roman oppression. Rather to be “Romanized” was to be civilized, that is, to become “Greek,” immersed in worldwide values and behaviors. The normative set of civilizing qualities derived from Hellenic civilization. As Veyne has observed,

the words “Roman,” “Latin,” or “Pilgrim” indicate a status, not an ethnic origin: and no difference was made among Roman citizens of Italic origin and those of provincial origin. Ethnic differences counted so little for Romans that at the end of antiquity, they felt no repugnance in recruiting their soldiers and generals from among the Germani. . . . Republican Rome, that people who had had as its culture that of another people, the Greeks, did not feel this culture as strange, but simply as civilization. Likewise, in the Empire and outside its frontiers, Greco-Roman civilization was civilization itself; one did not Romanize or Hellenize, one civilized. (Veyne 1989:410–11)

In sum, as we shall see from Paul's usage, "Judean" and "Greek" indicated a status. To designate genealogy, the words "Israelites" and "(other) peoples" were used ("Jew and Gentile" was not an acceptable linguistic collocation).

What characterized the various Israelite groups and their Judaisms was a common "genealogical" story of mythical origin rooted in Abraham. Some of Paul's Israelite clients would know Israel's scriptures, but for Paul's audience these would be in Greek. When it came to Judaism, that is, the customs of Judea practiced by Israelites, there was little unity or commonality around the Mediterranean. In a world based on gossip and networking, such unity would simply be impossible. In his approach to Israelite residents among non-Israelites, Paul presumed, it seems, that his audience held Israel's story as sacred along with Israel's ancient sacred writings and that his essential task was to proclaim how the God of Israel was revealed in the resurrection of Jesus, thus appointing Jesus Israel's Messiah with a forthcoming Israelite theocracy. This presumption makes it quite clear that Paul's message was meant exclusively for Israelites. And because of the range of Israelites in the first century, the perception both of the message and of approaches to the message would follow the patterns of the recipients of this innovation spread by Paul, a change agent in Israel.

### **Paul the Apostle as Change Agent**

Paul insists that he was an apostle. "Apostle" is a transliterated Greek word (*apostolos*). The Greek word refers to someone commissioned by someone else for some mission. Apostles can be sent for various reasons. Some philosophers thought themselves apostles of Zeus to make people aware of how to live. Paul believed he was an apostle of God because he was commissioned to proclaim the "gospel of God." Commissioning by one with authority is sufficient to constitute a person an apostle. But Paul was not simply authorized to make a proclamation on God's behalf but to proclaim something new, hitherto unheard of. People commissioned to make known something new are called change agents today. The task of a change agent is to communicate and diffuse some innovation. And this is precisely what Paul was about. The emphasis on the new aspect is what sets Paul apart from other apostles or commissioned messengers who communicate information from some authorizing agency about some ongoing agenda (tax rates, king's family, etc.). Such messengers really have nothing significantly new to communicate.

If the "gospel of God" proclaimed by Paul had any distinctive quality, it was the fact that it was something new, something unheard of, perhaps even something inconceivable. We believe all would agree that Paul was communicating an innovation to his fellow Israelites. Paul's letters are evidence of his attempts to diffuse the innovation revealed to him. Since the 1970s much research on the communication of innovation has been accomplished. To understand what the diffusion of an innovation entails, we shall employ such models from the social sciences that have

been cross-culturally verified with a range of data drawn from all over the world. The diffusion of an innovation follows a rather fixed social pattern of interaction (the models come from Everett Rogers [1971, 1995]; see his bibliography for comparative data).

Paul was a Jesus-group change agent of a distinctive sort. As a rule, a change agent is an authorized person who influences innovation decisions in a direction deemed desirable by a change agency (the one who proposes the change, in this case the God of Israel). The change agent thus functions as a communication link between two or more social systems, that of the receivers of the communication (the clients) and that of the change agency (the ones sending). In the New Testament story, authorized change agents include the Twelve sent by Jesus during his career (Matthew 10); those sent by a Jesus-group agency, such as the Twelve in Jerusalem (Acts); and Israelite scribes sent by some Pharisee group (mentioned in Matt 22:16).

Paul was not sent by any such group. Rather, he insists that his authorization and commission came from the God of Israel through an altered state of consciousness experience. In this he was just like Jesus and John the Baptist, both of whom were authorized to proclaim God's Good News through altered states of consciousness experiences. **Altered States of Consciousness.** Since these change agents were not sponsored or authorized by any observable change agency, they had to face questions of authorization or authority by those who inquired about or rejected the innovation (see Matthew 11 relative to Jesus [vv. 2-6] and John [vv. 7-15]). Paul, like Jesus and John the Baptist, was a change agent, "unauthorized" (by human authorities); all three communicated information about an innovation and influenced innovation decisions in a direction deemed desirable in terms of his experience of God. The God of Israel was the change agency behind the symbol system that all three constructed on the basis of their experience of God. The urgency that Paul, like John and Jesus before him, intimates in his activities derives from the charge he had received from the change agency, the God of Israel.

This feature underscores the conviction of early Jesus-group members that the "founder" of the task and gatherings inaugurated by Jesus, as well as of the post-resurrection Jesus groups, was none other than the God of Israel. The innovation that Jesus proclaimed was a forthcoming Israelite theocracy or the kingdom of heaven/God. The innovation Paul proclaimed was that the God of Israel raised Jesus from the dead, thus revealing Jesus to be Israel's Messiah (Christ) and cosmic Lord, with a view to the forthcoming Israelite theocracy (1 Thessalonians and frequently). According to these New Testament witnesses, then, the founder or change agency of Jesus groups and their ideology is God, the God of Israel. God's directly authorized change agents were individuals, such as John the Baptist, Jesus, and Paul. All functioned for the same change agency, the God of Israel. To shift the thrust from the agency (God) to the agent (for example, Jesus or Paul) is to miss the thrust of early Jesus groups that emerge eventually as "Christianity." **Change Agent.**



### Paul's Political Message for His Israelite Clients

As a change agent authorized by the God of Israel, Paul approached Israelite groups in majority non-Israelite cities throughout the northeastern Mediterranean. These Israelite groups were to be found largely in Israelite enclaves in Greco-Roman cities. We find valuable information about these groups and their locations offered by the author of the Acts of the Apostles. In this commentary we will use the book of Acts as a source for early Jesus-group memories. It would be anachronistic to expect them to be direct historical remembrances. Like other historical writings of the period, Acts surely offers compressed, telescoped, simplified, stripped-down stories of remembrances of the story of Paul. We do not believe the accounts of Acts are fictional, however, since the categories of fact and fiction are nineteenth-century etic inventions. Appropriately, in Luke's emic terms, he was interested in presenting the truth, as opposed to lies, a more appropriate first-century contrast (Luke 1:1-4). Perhaps what the author of Acts describes may not have happened in the way he says, but his way was exactly the way a first-century Mediterranean would describe what truly happened.

The Israelite innovation communicated by Paul to Israelite groups located in non-Israelite majority cities of the Eastern Mediterranean was a piece of radically



*This Christian church of Philippi can be dated from approximately 313–350 C.E. on the basis of the floor's foundational mosaic inscription (see photo on page 19). It is the earliest known public gathering place for Christians in Greece and Macedonia that can be dated with some certainty.*



new political-religious news of relevance to Israelites. The God of Israel was on the verge of instituting an Israelite theocracy. The harbinger of this event was the act by which this God raised a person named Jesus from the dead, thus constituting him Lord and Messiah—all with a view to the forthcoming theocracy.

First-century Mediterraneans were collectivistic persons. **Collectivistic Personality.** Group integrity was far more important than individual self-reliance. When collectivistic persons and their communities adopt an innovation, research indicates that adopting the innovation (the decision to accept an innovation) is far less significant than actually putting the innovation to use, that is, implementation. On this basis, we may suppose that upon hearing Paul's proclamation, a number of fellow Israelites (called "innovators and first adopters" here) would decide rather quickly that because of the events occurring in Jerusalem, Paul made sense and that God's "kingdom of heaven" was something soon to occur in Jerusalem and Judea. **Coworkers: Innovators and First Adopters.** What was required now was for those who accepted Paul's message to behave in a way that would conform to the implications of the proclamation, specifically by forming a support group (a local "church") and expressing their trust in the God of Israel by proper behavior toward one another and toward God. Thus a new moral posture and worship form indicated implementation, putting the innovation to use.

As a change agent focused upon Israelites living among non-Israelites, Paul proclaimed his gospel that the God of Israel was about to bring redemption or restoration of honor to Israel. The message was a solution to an Israelite problem. The problem was Israel's situation both in Judea as well as outside Judea. Paul was one of those who believed God's raising Jesus signaled Israel's forthcoming redemption. Hence the people Paul approached were an Israelite minority living in Hellenistic societies, and his message to his fellow Israelites was that God's redemption of Israel had dawned by means of Israel's Messiah raised by God. The Israelites who found this message a solution to their problem would fit this information into their traditional ancestral kinship religion. Paul (and others in Jesus groups) helped them make sense of how this experience or this event could fit into their ancestral kinship religion and its expanded political religion. Their ancestors (in Paul's estimation) included Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and the Covenant and Torah.

### **Was Paul Winning Converts?**

It may be useful at this point to make a distinction between conversion, that is, transfer from one group to another, already existing group, and innovation adoption. Paul was not converting Israelites in Thessalonika or Corinth to another group competing with Israel. Rather he announced a new stage in Israel's corporate history, a new development in Israel launched by the God of Israel. He was communicating an innovation. The adoption of an innovation by an existing group is not exactly what people mean by conversion. The problem with conversion studies applied to the New Testament, apart from the fact that they are anachronistically psychological (see Pilch 1997), is that they presume conversion similar to the

modern experience associated with that label. In this anachronistic perspective, when Paul came to town, he was urging Israelites to join the local Jesus group, hence to change from one group to another, from Israelite groups to Jesus groups. This model is misplaced. There were no Jesus groups when Paul went to proclaim the innovation the God of Israel had wrought in Israel. Social conversion is a choice between this group or that one, either/or. In contrast, the innovation Paul presented was a choice to adopt or not to adopt a change within the same group, a yes or no, not a choice of this group or that group, since there was no other group to choose.

Among the authentic letters, Paul's missive to the Romans does not fit into this model of Paul's change-agent activity. The reason for this is that the letter to the Romans is really about travel arrangements. Paul writes to a Jesus group or collection of groups that he himself did not found. In this letter, in the process of requesting hospitality, Paul wishes to show Jesus-group members in Rome (none of whom seem to be Romans but rather Israelites living there) that he has lots in common with them. If there is anything they heard about him that was negative in their estimation, it really was either not true or not what he said or not what he meant. So he makes travel arrangements and intends to rectify the distorted gossip they may have heard about him.

## **Conclusion**

Paul's letters lack any direct information about the initiation stage of his groups' innovation adoption, just as they lack direct information about the forming stage of his groups' establishment. **Small-Group Development.** We must presume, on the basis of the existence of those Jesus groups to which Paul wrote, that there was an initiation stage, a period of forming. Yet in Paul's letters there are all too brief hints of those early stages. For example, Paul states that his initial presence among the Corinthian Israelites was not marked by rhetorical niceties (we might say "advertising gimmicks") "in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and power." Yet demonstrations of the Spirit and power are already part and parcel of group experience when Paul writes at the later phases of group formation, the phases of mutual accommodation and assimilation (1 Corinthians 12; Romans 14).

### **Small-Group Development.**

What the models we adopt underscore is that it was not Paul's theology that was of interest both to Paul and to his fellow Jesus-group Israelites, but rather the exchange relationship that his letters were meant to maintain with a view to group stability. To focus on Paul's "theology" rather than on the social interrelationship between the change agent and his clients is to miss the thrust of his letters.

In summary, we offer the following chart comparing the prevailing modes of interpreting Paul's letters and the viewpoints adopted here:

<b>Received View</b>	<b>Social-Science View</b>
Paul is the apostle to the Gentiles.	Paul is the apostle to Israelites living among non-Israelite peoples outside Judea.
Paul is an apostle with a ministry.	Paul is a change agent with an innovation to communicate to Israel.
Paul is the source of theology.	Paul is focused on interpersonal relations in Jesus-group formation.
Paul is the second founder of Christianity, after Jesus.	God is the founder of Christianity.
Paul is apostle to heterophilous groups, that is, non-Israelite Gentiles.	Paul is a change agent to homophilous groups, that is, Israelites living among non-Israelite peoples.
Paul's doctrine is eschatological, sometimes apocalyptic.	Paul's doctrine is political religion, proclaimed theocracy, for fictive kin groups.
Paul writes to religious groups.	Paul writes to fictive kin groups with a domestic religion, awaiting the kingdom of God (political religion in abeyance).
Paul is directly and immediately relevant to twenty-first-century churches.	Paul was directly and immediately relevant to first-century Jesus groups.
Paul is a monotheist.	Paul is a henotheist.
Paul is a universalist.	Paul is an ethnocentric particularist.