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# Paul as Theologian: His Vocation and Its Significance for His Theology

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Few would dispute the claim of the British New Testament scholar James D. G. Dunn that “Paul was the first and greatest Christian theologian.”<sup>1</sup> But once that is settled, one has to acknowledge that there are major disagreements on how a person might even begin to describe Paul’s theology. What is the point of entry from which one might arrange a discussion of his major theological claims?

### THE SEARCH FOR THE THEOLOGICAL “CENTER” TO PAUL’S THEOLOGY

There are those who have looked for a “center” to Paul’s theology. Among Protestants in general, it has often been claimed that the center of Paul’s theology is justification by faith. Some continue to maintain that,<sup>2</sup> but others do not. Three of the most famous opponents of justification by faith as the center, who happen to have been Protestants themselves, are Albert Schweitzer, William Wrede, and Krister Stendahl. Schweitzer considered justification by faith a peripheral and subsidi-

<sup>1</sup>James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 2.

<sup>2</sup>Günther Bornkamm, *Paul* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971; reprinted, Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 116, 135–136; Ernst Käsemann, “Justification and Salvation History in the Epistle to the Romans,” *Perspectives on Paul*

*While the discussion about a “center” of Paul’s theology remains contentious, justification by faith remains a core conviction that disrupts and rejuvenates Paul’s entire theological world. His view of what God is up to in justification, however, is not merely anthropocentric and individualistic; it is theocentric, corporate, and cosmic.*

ary teaching in comparison to the doctrine of being “in Christ.”<sup>3</sup> Wrede considered it “the *polemical doctrine* of Paul” that “is only made intelligible by the struggle of his life, his controversy with Judaism and Jewish Christianity, and is only intended for this.”<sup>4</sup> He goes on to say that the doctrine of justification was Paul’s “weapon” to achieve his mission to the Gentiles, which “must be free from the burden of Jewish national custom.”<sup>5</sup> And Stendahl regarded justification by faith as a doctrine with the limited purpose of admitting Gentiles into the people of God. According to him, the “doctrine of justification by faith was hammered out by Paul for the very specific and limited purpose of defending the rights of Gentile converts to be full and genuine heirs to the promises of God to Israel. Their rights were based solely on faith. This was Paul’s very special stance, and he defended it zealously against any compromise that required circumcision or the keeping of kosher food laws by Gentile Christians.”<sup>6</sup>

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The theme of justification will be taken up later in this article, but for now we must simply acknowledge that the claim that justification by faith is the center of Paul’s theology has been affirmed vigorously by some and energetically rejected by others for a long time.

There have been a number of suggestions concerning a possible “center” to Paul’s thinking. Stanley Porter provides extensive documentation and comes up with a list of what interpreters have proposed as the center. He summarizes this way: “These include God, Christ or Christology, justification by faith, salvation history, reconciliation, apocalyptic, (mystical) participation in Christ, the cross, anthropology and salvation, resurrection and/or exaltation, ethics, and gospel,

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(Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) 74; Mark A. Seifrid, *Justification by Faith: The Origin and Development of a Central Pauline Theme* (Leiden: Brill, 1992) 270 *et passim*; Hans Hübner, “Pauli Theologiae Proprium,” *New Testament Studies* 26 (1990) 445–473; John Reumann, “Righteousness” in the New Testament: “Justification” in the United States Lutheran–Roman Catholic Dialogue (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) 105–120; Eduard Lohse, “Christus, das Gesetzes Ende? Die Theologie des Apostels Paulus in kritischer Perspektive,” *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 99 (2008) 18–32.

<sup>3</sup>Albert Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle* (first German ed., 1930; New York: Seabury, 1968) 225: “The doctrine of righteousness by faith is...a subsidiary crater, which has formed within the rim of the main crater—the mystical doctrine of redemption through the being-in-Christ.”

<sup>4</sup>William Wrede, *Paul* (first German ed., 1907; Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1908) 123. The italics are in the text. Similarly, according to W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism: Some Rabbinic Elements in Paul’s Theology*, 2d ed. (London: SPCK, 1955) 222, justification is “central” in contexts only where there are “certain polemical necessities.”

<sup>5</sup>Wrede, *Paul*, 127.

<sup>6</sup>Krister Stendahl, *Paul among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 2.

among others.”<sup>7</sup> Porter himself does not contend for a center, but holds that there are some assumptions, concepts, and developments in Paul’s thinking that can be described.

#### WHAT KIND OF THEOLOGIAN?

It is important to realize in all this that Paul himself never speaks of his theology; he speaks of his gospel (Rom 2:16; 1 Cor 9:18; 2 Cor 4:3; 11:4; Gal 1:18–19; 2:2, 7). Nevertheless, anyone who reads his letters knows that Paul was a profound theologian, the first major theologian in the history of Christianity to leave a literary legacy of his thinking that has remained for subsequent generations.

There was a time, exemplified by Philip Melancthon, when Paul was thought to be the first systematic theologian, who left a compendium of Christian doctrine when he wrote Romans.<sup>8</sup> But few would think of him that way any longer. In recent decades scholars have described Paul as a contextual theologian, as in the case of J. Christiaan Beker, James D. G. Dunn, and Calvin Roetzel,<sup>9</sup> or as a pastoral theologian, as in the case of Abraham Malherbe.<sup>10</sup>

Surely, the point that Paul expressed himself contextually and in practical, pastoral settings is an important and valid one. His letters show all the marks of being responsive to live issues in his congregations. But is it sufficient to say that Paul’s theology was given birth and growth as a response to issues raised within the contexts of his ministry? There is another way to look at the matter, and that is that the contexts in which he worked and the circumstances he faced brought his thinking to the fore, based upon some prior convictions. The fact is that, in spite of the differences that exist among his letters, there is a theological coherence—a family resemblance—among them. It is primarily that coherence, for example, that distinguishes his writings from others in the New Testament, including those judged to be deuterio-Pauline.

But if there is a coherence to Paul’s theology that is expressed in contexts and in practical situations, can anything be identified as that which drives and energizes him as a pastoral, contextual theologian?

Throughout history there has been a tendency to read and interpret Paul and

<sup>7</sup>Stanley E. Porter, “Is There a Center to Paul’s Theology?” in *Paul and His Theology*, ed. S. E. Porter (Boston: Brill, 2006) 9–11. Porter provides extensive documentation, which has been omitted here. Still other claims for a “center” are reviewed by Frank Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament: A Canonical and Synthetic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) 231.

<sup>8</sup>Philip Melancthon, *The Loci Communes of Philipp Melancthon*, trans. Charles L. Hill (Boston: Meador, 1944) 69.

<sup>9</sup>J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) 24; Dunn, *Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 11; Calvin J. Roetzel, *Paul: The Man and the Myth* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998) 93–94. Beker uses the terms “contingency” and “coherence” in regard to Paul’s theology and maintains that there is no abstract, coherent center that can be removed from Paul’s addressing a particular audience. There is no “universal, timeless substance” to “be poured into every conceivable situation regardless of historical circumstance.”

<sup>10</sup>Abraham J. Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians: The Philosophic Tradition of Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 1.

his letters from an anthropocentric and individualistic viewpoint. That is to say, Paul has been interpreted from the perspective of the human predicament, particularly the predicament of the individual, and how that is resolved through faith in Christ. That approach has been taken most stridently in modern times by Rudolf Bultmann, who has written:

Pauline theology is not a speculative system. It deals with God not as He is in Himself but only with God as He is significant for man, for man's responsibility and man's salvation....Every assertion about God is simultaneously an assertion about man and vice versa. For this reason and in this sense Paul's theology is, at the same time, anthropology....The christology of Paul likewise is governed by this point of view. In it, Paul does not speculatively discuss the metaphysical essence of Christ, or his relation to God, or his "natures," but speaks of him as the one through whom God is working for the salvation of the world and man. Thus, every assertion about Christ is also an assertion about man and vice versa; and Paul's Christology is simultaneously soteriology.<sup>11</sup>

There is something quite compelling in Bultmann's view. How people think of God or of Christ is often related in some way to how they think of the human condition and about themselves in particular. One sees that, for example, in some of the hymns of the church, such as one by the Anglican clergyman Henry Williams Baker (1921–1977):

The King of love my shepherd is,  
whose goodness faileth never;  
I nothing lack if I am his  
and he is mine forever.<sup>12</sup>

Whenever I sing this hymn, based on Ps 23, I affirm something about God. God is a God of love; God's goodness never fails. But I also say something about myself. I belong to this God, and therefore I lack nothing. Thoughts about God and the self are bound together. All that is done by a skillful choice of words and with an admirable economy of expression.

Or one can take other familiar illustrations, including several from Luther's *Small Catechism*. A good example is what he says in regard to the first article of the Apostles' Creed. The creed itself says simply, "I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth." But what does that mean? Luther writes: "I believe that God has created me together with all that exists. God has given me and still preserves my body and soul: eyes, ears, and all limbs and senses; reason and all mental faculties"<sup>13</sup> and so on. In other words, when I speak of God as Creator, I also say something about myself. Bultmann stands, then, in the Reformation tradition when he says that Paul's theology is, at the same time, anthropology.

<sup>11</sup>Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951–1955) 1: 190–191.

<sup>12</sup>Hymn 502, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006).

<sup>13</sup>In *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 354.

The anthropological approach has not been limited to the work of Bultmann. It can also be found lurking beneath the surface of other treatments of Paul's theology, whether older or newer. To take an old example, we can return to Albert Schweitzer. In his way of thinking, the center of Paul's theology is what he called a "Christ-mysticism." By means of that term, he says: "I am in Christ; in Him I know myself as a being who is raised above this sensuous, sinful, and transient world and already belongs to the transcendent; in Him I am assured of resurrection; in Him I am a Child of God."<sup>14</sup> Here, as in Bultmann, the focus is on the human subject—the human being—and therefore it is an anthropological approach.

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The anthropological approach appears also in works so widely divergent as the studies of Paul by Günther Bornkamm, W. D. Davies, and Douglas Campbell. According to Bornkamm, "every statement" that Paul makes in his letters "about God, Christ, Spirit, Law, judgment, and salvation is at the same time one about man in his world, the old lost man and the new one set free by God."<sup>15</sup> According to Davies, what animated Paul's thinking was the concept of one's dying and rising with Christ, by which one becomes obedient to God in a disobedient world.<sup>16</sup> Again, the focus is on the believer, whose life is conformed to a pattern we see in Christ's own. More recently, Campbell has called for another type of anthropological approach. He uses a long, torturous phrase to propose the most adequate way to understand Paul. For him, the most satisfactory approach is to grasp on to Paul's "pneumatologically participatory martyrological eschatology." The way he describes all that is to say that at the center of Paul's thinking, believers participate "in a martyrological set of events focused on Christ and his cross and crucifixion, as well as in the resurrection." All that is enabled by the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>17</sup> The emphasis in Campbell has shifted somewhat from the Christ-mysticism of Schweitzer to participation in Christ. That way of thinking, however, still tends to be anthropological in character because of its stress on the believer's coming to participate in Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection, aided by the Spirit; and by that same Spirit the believer lives a life that is transformed into something radically new.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, the anthropological approach appears under a different formulation in the work of E. P. Sanders. According to Sanders, Paul's primary concern is how

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<sup>14</sup>Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, 3; cf. statements also on pp. 124 and 225 on the centrality of Christ-mysticism for Paul.

<sup>15</sup>Bornkamm, *Paul*, 118.

<sup>16</sup>W. D. Davies, *Invitation to the New Testament: A Guide to Its Main Witnesses* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966) 345–355.

<sup>17</sup>Douglas A. Campbell, *The Quest for Paul's Gospel: A Suggested Strategy* (New York: T & T Clark, 2005) 41–42; cf. 262–263.

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

persons can “get in” and “stay in” the people of God. The question is: How can one be assured of the favor of God, and thus become one of those being saved? The matter has been expressed by Sanders in this way:

Much of what Paul wrote falls within a framework which I call “getting in and staying in.” The framework, besides those two topics, includes what happens to those who do not “get in” and what happens to those who get in but who do not behave in the way which Paul considers appropriate to life in the Spirit.<sup>19</sup>

Although the anthropological, individualistic approach continues to have an appeal, it is one-sided. It also tends to be overly anthropocentric, placing so much emphasis upon the human being, particularly the self, and failing to take into consideration those accents in Paul’s work concerning the work of God for the redemption of all that God has made. The point that will be made in what follows is that Paul’s theology is first of all theocentric, not anthropocentric, and that it is corporate and cosmic, not just individualistic, in its scope. The question for Paul is not how the individual person “gets in and stays in” the company of those who are saved. The primary question is theocentric: *How can God reclaim the creation?* And in regard to human beings: *How can God get us in and keep us there?* To go in that direction, I think, is to go back not only prior to the Reformation, but also prior to Constantine, when there were so very few Christians.

#### PAUL’S VOCATION

In trying to understand Paul, there are two irreducible facts about him, since he mentions them in his letters. One is that he persecuted the church in his early years. He refers to it three times (1 Cor 15:9; Gal 1:13; Phil 3:6). The other fact is that he was called and sent as an apostle to the nations of the world. Like the prophets before him, who were called to their prophetic tasks (see especially Isa 46:1–6; Jer 1:5), Paul claimed that he was called by God for a particular vocation. In Gal 1:15–16 he declares that God had set him apart before he was born, revealed his Son to him, and called him to proclaim the Son of God among the nations. His language recalls that of Jeremiah, who says that God consecrated him before he was born and appointed him to be a prophet to the nations (Jer 1:5). The parallel is obvious. Paul, like Jeremiah, claimed to have a vocation—prenatal in origin, but given by divine revelation when he was an adult—to be God’s envoy among the nations of the world. Paul understood himself to be a child of Israel’s heritage, standing in a succession of persons called and commissioned by God for special roles, a succession that reached far back into the history of the people of God.

What is striking about Paul’s call as an apostle is that it came about when he was least likely or ready to receive it. He was a persecutor of the church and zealous for the ancestral traditions. But in spite of that, God revealed his Son to him and

<sup>19</sup>E. P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 6; for similar expressions, see his *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 544.

called him to be an apostle to the nations of the world. It is appropriate to call him apostle to the nations, rather than simply apostle to the Gentiles. He says that he is apostle to the ἔθνη (Rom 11:13), a Greek term that can be translated either as “Gentiles” or “nations.” He was indeed an apostle to the Gentiles, but not simply an apostle to individuals of non-Jewish birth. If that were so, there were plenty of Gentiles in Roman Palestine and Syria to occupy him for a lifetime. But he proclaimed the gospel to various ethnicities, the nations of the world in which he lived, including Syria, Cilicia, central and western Asia Minor, Macedonia, Greece, perhaps even Arabia, while he resided there, and he hoped to get to Rome, go on to Spain—and perhaps beyond. Indeed, he declared at one place that his travels as an apostle were intended to follow an arc or circle (κύκλῳ) from Jerusalem to Illyricum (modern Albania) and then on to Spain (Rom 15:19, 24, 28), encompassing the northern semicircle of the Mediterranean world. And if we are allowed to speculate, it is possible that after his work in Spain, he would have crossed the Straits of Gibraltar and gone across northern Africa back to Jerusalem, completing the circle.<sup>20</sup> In any case, Paul says that his ambition was to preach the gospel in places where it had never been preached before (Rom 15:20; cf. 2 Cor 10:15–16); he is apostle to the nations.

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In order to understand Paul as a theologian, it is necessary to take his call into serious account—an experience that determined the course of his life, an event that Luke relates three times over (Acts 9:1–9; 22:4–16; 26:9–18), and what we usually call the Damascus Road experience. The risen Christ appeared to Paul the persecutor and commissioned him to be an apostle to the nations. That was his vocation, his calling. He also speaks of the appearance of Christ to him twice in his letters (1 Cor 9:1; 15:8). For him that appearance was undeserved and astonishing.

The result of the divine initiative in calling him was that Paul had a sense of dynamism in God like never before. Even as an apostle of the good news of redemption in Christ, Paul continued to center his thoughts upon God, the God of Israel. To be sure, he could speak of Christ as one who acted in the drama of human redemption; so Christ is the subject of some sentences. He says that Christ “died for us” (Rom 5:6; 14:9; 1 Thess 4:14; 5:10), that he “emptied himself, taking the form of a servant” (Phil 2:7), and that he “redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” (Gal 3:13). But generally and more characteristically, when he speaks of redemption, the subject of the sentences is God, not

<sup>20</sup>John Knox, “Romans 15:14–33 and Paul’s Conception of His Apostolic Mission,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 83 (1964) 11. For more on this hypothesis, see Arland J. Hultgren, “The Scriptural Foundations for Paul’s Mission to the Gentiles,” in Porter, *Paul and His Theology*, 27–29.

Christ. And so he says: God did not withhold his Son (Rom 8:32); rather, indeed, God put forth Christ as a means of atonement (Rom 3:25); God sent his Son (Rom 8:3; Gal 4:4); God condemned sin in the flesh of his Son (Rom 8:3); and God raised him from the dead (Rom 4:24; 10:9; 1 Cor 6:14; Phil 2:9).

Beyond these passages that speak directly of the redemptive work of God in Christ, there are other passages in which Paul speaks about God as actor in a drama. And so he says that: God reveals both his righteousness and his wrath (Rom 1:17–18; 3:21); God gives life to the dead (Rom 4:19) and will raise us (1 Cor 6:14; 1 Thess 4:14); God gives/sends the Spirit (Gal 4:6; 1 Thess 4:8); God sanctifies believers through the Spirit (1 Thess 5:23); God has reconciled the world unto himself; and God has commissioned us to be his ambassadors of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18–20).

Paul's primary emphasis is on God, rather than on Christ or the Spirit. That should not come as a surprise. Paul was a child of Abraham, a Benjaminite (Phil 3:5), and an heir of all that he had learned from the traditions of Israel. He could not for a moment abandon that heritage; he was not severed from it. He thought of himself as standing at another point along the way of God's story, a stage at which the fullness of time had come. He was more theocentric than christocentric in his thinking. But his theocentric thinking did not end up with speculations about God in abstraction. No, God is the living and active God of Israel's story, culminating in the sending of his Messiah Jesus. So Paul's theology was not only theocentric but theopractic as well. That is to say, although Christ is the means by which redemption is carried out, the major actor in the drama of redemption is God. God is a redeeming God.

## PAUL'S VOCATION AND HIS THEOLOGY

Paul's call to apostleship had a decisive effect upon the way he does theology. By referring to his call, I am referring specifically to the event itself, God's revealing his Son to him and commissioning him, as a defining moment. It is there that Paul discovered that God breaks down barriers of unbelief and acts of defiance and rebellion. That event, with all its overwhelming features, affected Paul's thinking, and that can be traced out in several ways, but limited here to only four: his understanding of the righteousness of God first of all, and then its implications for the nations of the world, for the people of Israel, and for the creation.

### *The Righteousness of God*

In one of his best-known passages within Romans, Paul declares that "the righteousness of God" has been disclosed in the coming of Christ into the world (Rom 3:21–26). In using the phrase "the righteousness of God," Paul speaks of the right-wising activity of God, God's saving work. Its background is not first of all the law court, as the Reformation tradition has usually held, but the Old Testament and intertestamental writings where a plethora of passages speak of the righteousness of God. A classic text that demonstrates this is Ps 98:2 (LXX, 97:2):



The LORD has made known his salvation (יְשׁוּעָה/σωτηριον);  
 he has revealed his righteousness (יְצִדִּיקָהוּ/δικαιοσύνην) in the sight of  
 the nations.

The parallelism between the biblical words for salvation and righteousness is clear enough; the righteousness of God and God's saving activity are the same thing. That is exemplified even further in that there are passages in the Old Testament where the writers speak of God's righteousness as God's saving deeds in delivering his people from their oppressors and enemies (1 Sam 12:7; Dan 9:15–16; Mic 6:5). On the basis of these and other passages, Gerhard von Rad concludes that "from the earliest times onwards Israel celebrated Jahweh as the one who bestowed on his people the all-embracing gift of his righteousness. And this יְצִדִּיקָהוּ bestowed on Israel is always a saving gift."<sup>21</sup>

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Moreover, there are passages aplenty in the Old Testament and other writings that speak of the revelation of the righteousness of God in the coming of the Messiah or the messianic age. Those texts existed prior to Paul, contemporary with him, and even after him in rabbinic sources.<sup>22</sup> In those places the authors speak of the advent of the righteousness of God with the coming of the Messiah. A few examples can be cited.

Jeremiah speaks of the coming of a righteous descendant of David who will reign and "do justice and righteousness upon the earth"; and he will be called "Lord of righteousness" (Jer 23:5–6). Isaiah declares that in the days to come a branch shall arise from the family of David, God's spirit will rest upon him, and he will be girded with righteousness (Isa 11:1–5). The author of Third Isaiah declares that in some future time, a messianic era, the Lord will cause righteousness and gladness to spring up before all the nations (Isa 61:11). And he says that God's righteousness and salvation will go forth to all the world (Isa 62:1–2).

Similar messianic ideas can be found in intertestamental literature. In the *Testament of Judah*, commonly regarded as coming from the second century B.C.E., it is said that the Messiah will walk in righteousness and save all who call upon the Lord (24.1–6). And in the century prior to the rise of Christianity, the work known as the *Psalms of Solomon* refers to the Messiah and his righteousness. The book is thought to have been produced in a circle of Pharisees. As Pharisaic, it stands in Paul's spiritual and intellectual tradition, for he had belonged to the Pharisaic

<sup>21</sup>Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper & Row, 1962–1965) 1:377.

<sup>22</sup>For various references, see Arland J. Hultgren, *Paul's Gospel and Mission: The Outlook from His Letter to the Romans* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 21–26.

movement (Phil 3:5). In these psalms it is said that the Messiah will be a “righteous king” (17.32); that “he will gather a holy people whom he will lead in righteousness” (17.26); and he will be endowed with “strength and righteousness” (17.29).<sup>23</sup>

In the entire collage of passages, it becomes apparent, in the words of Sigmund Mowinckel, that “the term [righteousness] is closely associated with salvation....The righteousness of the Messiah consists of his saving his people: righteousness and salvation are identical.”<sup>24</sup>

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It has to be granted that the pictures of the Messiah and the messianic age that are portrayed in these and other texts are varied and that a straight line cannot be drawn from them collectively to any portrait that resembles Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah in the canonical gospels. But that is true with connections made to many texts considered messianic in the Old Testament. If one places all the passages of the Old Testament and intertestamental texts that can be considered messianic end to end and reviews them, one does not get a portrait corresponding to Jesus in the canonical gospels—one who was born in a stable, an itinerant preacher who had no place to lay his head (Matt 8:20//Luke 9:58), was rejected by most, followed by so very few, and finally crucified. Jesus’ ministry, death, and resurrection redefine messiahship in a new key, having a resemblance to some passages in the Old Testament that can be considered messianic (e.g., Jer 11:19), but not to most. One has to give even Jesus some slack here and allow for a canon within the canon to make this work. But what is important to observe in the Old Testament and intertestamental literature is that the term “righteousness” is associated with the Messiah and the messianic age. Righteousness or salvation is to be a major caption placed under any portrait of the Messiah or the messianic age. One can expect that the association between the Messiah and righteousness would be familiar to Paul, the former Pharisee and student of Israel’s Scriptures.

The significance of this for understanding Paul as a theologian is that, for him, the righteousness of God, God’s saving activity, is at or near the center of any constellation of concepts about God and about the Lord’s Messiah. After he had experienced the revelation of the risen Lord, Paul understood that the righteousness of God had already appeared in Christ. It was all in line with what the Scriptures of Israel had taught all along. God had the sending of a Messiah, a righteous king, in view from days long past, and that Messiah would establish righteousness in the world; he would come as Savior. And now he has come.

<sup>23</sup>The texts for these two books are available in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth, 2 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1983–1985) 1:801 and 2:667, respectively; their dates of composition are discussed in the same volumes by H. C. Kee (1:777–778) and R. B. Wright (2:640–641).

<sup>24</sup>Sigmund Mowinckel, *He That Cometh* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1954) 308–309.

That means that Paul's concern as a theologian was to work out the implications of the revelation of the righteousness of God in the sending of his Son. He had to do that as an apostle to the Gentile nations where people had never heard of Jesus, and most had never heard of Abraham, Moses, or any of the prophets. The exception would be those Gentiles known as "God-fearers"<sup>25</sup>—persons on the fringe of Jewish communities—who had a rudimentary knowledge of the major events, figures, and religious terms in the Scriptures of Israel, but were still Gentiles.

### *The Gentiles/Nations*

The problem that Paul had to face, and then explain, was how God can include the Gentile nations in final salvation. The answer came to him through at least two sources. First, the appearance of the risen Christ to him must in itself have changed his thinking from making the traditional Pharisaic distinction between Jews and Gentiles. Although we cannot know exactly what was communicated to him when the risen Christ appeared to him, Paul knew from then on that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, and he knew enough about the earthly Jesus to know that he consorted with persons who did not observe the law according to Pharisaic standards, and who could be considered by the Pharisees as no different from Gentiles.

Second, another source supported the first, and that was the Scriptures of Israel. The Scriptures speak of the inclusion of Gentiles in the time of the Messiah or messianic age.<sup>26</sup> They also teach justification by faith. In one of his most clever and enchanting passages, located in Rom 4, Paul puts forth a fascinating rabbinic-styled argument. He observes that even the great patriarch of the Jewish people, Abraham, was accounted righteous by faith while he was still a Gentile. Paul points out that Abraham was considered righteous, or justified, by believing the promises of God (Gen 15:6). But Abraham was not ritually circumcised—and therefore he was not a son of the covenant—until the story in chapter 17, which tells of his circumcision at the age of ninety-nine (17:24). That means that Abraham was a Gentile and had been justified by faith for many years. The Old Testament text does not tell us how many years there were between chapters 15 and 17, but there is one time indicator in chapter 16. That is that when Ishmael was born, Abraham was eighty-six (16:16), so there had to be at least thirteen years between Abraham's justification and his circumcision. But a rabbinic text goes further than that. According to that text,<sup>27</sup> Abraham was seventy years old at the time that he was declared to be justified in 15:6. That would mean that Abraham was a justified-by-faith Gentile for twenty-nine years—an entire generation—prior to his circumcision at

<sup>25</sup>God-fearers are mentioned by Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 14.110, at Acts 10:2, 23, 25; 13:16, 26, 50; 16:14; 17:4, 17, and in inscriptions.

<sup>26</sup>This theme is explored in Hultgren, "The Scriptural Foundations for Paul's Mission to the Gentiles," 21–44. The eschatological conversion of Gentiles is also envisioned by Philo, *On the Virtues* 119–120; *On the Life of Moses* 2.44.

<sup>27</sup>*Olam Rabbah* 1; quoted in Hermann L. Strack and Paul Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, 6 vols. (Munich: C. H. Beck'sche, 1922–1961) 3:203.

ninety-nine. Whether that tradition existed at the time of Paul, and whether he was aware of it or not, cannot be known. What is certain is that Paul was aware of the general time frame, and he made a point of it, namely, that the promise to Abraham, and the declaration of his righteousness by faith in the divine promise, was prior to his circumcision. Therefore circumcision and the corollary that flows from that—observing the Torah—were not, and are not, a precondition for righteousness. From this Paul draws a sweeping conclusion. He understands Abraham to be the father not only of the people Israel but of all who believe the promises of God. As Abraham believed in the God who gives life to the dead, and so was accounted righteous, so all those who believe that God gives life to the dead in the resurrection of Jesus are accounted righteous as well (Rom 4:24; cf. Gal 3:6–9).

For Paul, all believers in Christ form a new humanity. The distinction between Jew and Gentile is overcome within the body of Christ (Gal 3:28). Paul speaks of the new community as distinct from unbelieving Jews and pagan Gentiles, calling it “the church of God” (1 Cor 10:32), “the Israel of God” (Gal 6:16), and its members a new creation (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15). Here is the beginning of the concept of the church as a distinct body in the world, which is called the “third race” or “new race” of humanity by some writers of the second century, referring to a people distinct from both Jews and pagan Gentiles.<sup>28</sup>

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***What then of the Jewish people who have rejected the gospel and continue to do so? How can God get them in or keep them there?***

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### *Israel*

But what now can one say about unbelieving Israel? Paul takes up the question in Rom 9:1–11:36. He must feel compelled to do so after his amazing crescendo at the end of chapter 8, where he says so eloquently that nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ. That leads to the question: What then of the Jewish people who have rejected the gospel and continue to do so? How can God get them in or keep them there? Paul spends more time, effort, and ink on this question than on any other in all of his writings. In these 90 verses of chapters 9 through 11, making up about 20 percent of the 432 verses in the letter, Paul quotes from the Old Testament directly no less than 35 times, which is about 39 percent of all quotations in his letters,<sup>29</sup> and he alludes to the Old Testament many more times. He begins with a lament of sorrow for the Jewish people.

<sup>28</sup>Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 6.5.41 (quoting from the earlier *Preaching of Peter*); *Epistle to Diognetus* 1.1.

<sup>29</sup>The figure of 35 quotations is based on a count of verses identified as Old Testament quotations in the 27th edition of the Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament. Quotations can be seen at 9:7, 9, 12, 13, 15, 17, 20, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 33; 10:5, 6, 7, 8, 11, 13, 15, 16, 18, 19, 20, 21; 11:2, 3, 4, 8, 9, 10, 26, 27, 34, 35. According to Dieter-Alex Koch, *Die Schrift als Zeuge des Evangeliums: Untersuchungen zur Verwendung und zum Verständnis der Schrift bei Paulus* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1986) 21–24, Paul quotes from the Old Testament 89 times in his undisputed letters; 51 times in Romans alone.

He hopes that he can even save some by means of the gospel. But as the chapters unfold, it becomes clear that Paul knows full well that the gospel will not be accepted by most of the people of Israel. In the end he resorts to telling his readers a “mystery” (μυστήριον, 11:25–32), using an apocalyptic term that signifies a divine mystery disclosed only by revelation.<sup>30</sup> That mystery includes *the way* that Israel will be saved. Its salvation will come not by its observance of the Torah, not by its conversion, but only by the grace of God, even though most of the people of Israel are still hostile to the gospel—indeed, “enemies of God” in regard to the gospel, as Paul calls them (11:28). But salvation shall come even to them. “For,” he says, “the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (Rom 11:29). As God has consigned all to disobedience, Jews and Gentiles alike, so God will have mercy on all. One has to look to the parousia, when Christ will come and Israel’s disobedience will be overcome (11:26). Paul’s own autobiography becomes a clue to Israel’s story. As Christ appeared to him, and his defenses gave way, so there will be another moment when the Messiah will appear, and Israel’s defenses will give way.

### *The Creation*

Finally, Paul envisions the redemption of the creation as a whole. He spells that out in Rom 8:18–25. There he speaks of the creation as groaning, like a woman in labor pains. In other words, there is a time for deliverance to come beyond human and cosmic history and its suffering. Paul declares that “the creation was subjected [by God] to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God” (8:20–21).<sup>31</sup> God’s hope is not an idle dream, but an expectation, a certainty: in due time the creation as a whole will be set free from its groaning to enjoy the liberty that the children of God have already by faith. Paul’s own calling was a moment when he experienced God as living and active, a God who right-wised the ungodly and called him (Paul) to newness of life. And so he can envision that same God as one who will renew the creation. God has not abandoned it. God redeems what God has made. Ultimately, the Son whom he sent to redeem the world will be subjected to God’s own self “that (ὅτι) God may be all in all” (1 Cor 15:28).

### AND WHAT ABOUT JUSTIFICATION?

In closing, we should return to the question left dangling earlier: Where is justification in the thinking of Paul? Is it the “center” of his thinking or not? In my view there is a problem with using the term “center,” since it tends to make every-

<sup>30</sup>Raymond E. Brown, *The Semitic Background of the Term “Mystery” in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968) 1–30.

<sup>31</sup>There are translation issues in these two verses. The RSV is quoted here, but the NRSV reflects a different understanding of Paul’s use of ὅτι in 8:21, translating it as “that” instead of “because” (or “for”), resulting “in hope that” instead of “in hope; because.” Some ancient texts (including Sinaiticus and D) have διότι, which is definitely “because,” a scribal interpretation.

thing else less important, and that won't do. Surely, Paul's conviction that the God of the patriarchs is living, reigning, and righteous can be considered every bit as central as anything else. His conviction that Jesus is the Messiah sent by a gracious God can be considered central too. Moreover, if we want to talk about a center to Paul's whole world of thought, consciousness, and experience together in one constellation, it is more likely that its center would not have been a doctrine so much as a person, the crucified and resurrected Christ, and a particular, utterly transforming experience: the appearance of Christ to him.

But finally, we have to think about his theology, if we are to interpret Paul as an apostle, preacher, and writer. At that point it is better to think not so much of a center to his theology, but of a central core of convictions. And within that core, justification has a pervasive and metadoctrinal function. Once justification enters the world of theological concepts, it disrupts and then rejuvenates the entire ecosystem. In the case of Paul, it affected how he thought theologically about God, for example, whom he calls the God "who justifies the ungodly" (Rom 4:5); and justification by faith affects how he thinks about Christ (Phil 3:9), the law (Gal 2:16), salvation, baptism (Rom 6:7), the church (1 Cor 6:11), the unity of Jew and Gentile in the church, a mission to the Gentiles, and more. No description of Paul's theology can get along without taking justification by faith into account and giving it its due as a dynamic force.<sup>32</sup>

But my argument in this article is that, if we are to deal with Paul's theology, we ought to get our bearings, first of all, with what Paul tells us about himself—something that happened to him at the very beginning of his apostleship, and was the reason for his apostleship and for his theology. That was the event at which he was called by the God of Israel into his apostleship and consequently his life as a theologian. God disclosed his Son to this one who said of himself: "I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God" (1 Cor 15:9). In Paul himself we see a prime illustration of a God who justified the ungodly and called him to serve. From the very beginning, then, Paul's theology and his proclamation set forth the good news of what God has done in Christ to get us in and keep us there. ☩

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<sup>32</sup>It is not simply a weapon used in controversy with those outside the Pauline communities; it is employed by Paul in subtle ways for insiders. He calls the Corinthian believers persons who have been washed, sanctified, and justified (1 Cor 6:11); it designates their identity. It is implicit in a statement such as "welcome one another...just as Christ has welcomed you" (Rom 15:7).