

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“AN HEBREW OF THE
HEBREWS”: PAUL’S LANGUAGE
AND THOUGHT

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A discussion of the language and thought of the Apostle Paul would seem to be a rather straightforward matter. One of the few things upon which scholars of the New Testament agree is that Paul wrote or dictated his letters in Greek to audiences who were able to communicate in the same language. Most scholars, though not all, also believe that Paul is responsible for placing the teachings and practices of Jesus and the first disciples into a basic system of theology or doctrine upon which the later Christian Fathers built.

If we were to ask how Paul’s background prepared him to accomplish these tasks, the answer would be simple for the question of language and only somewhat problematic with regard to his thought. His having been born and raised in Tarsus, a major center of Greek culture, accounted for his training in the Greek language, and his later study in Jerusalem under the great Jewish teacher and sage Gamaliel instilled in him the philosophical foundation which he later used in formulating Christian theology. Those beliefs seem so reasonable and have been published for so long that questioning them might at first appear presumptuous or at least unnecessarily contentious.

We live in a time, however, in which change is occurring in all fields of study, including ancient history. Biblical manuscripts written in various

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languages and sometimes dating to early in the Christian era, the Dead Sea Scrolls and other Jewish documents from ancient Palestine and nearby areas, Christian and other religious writings from the same era and general geography, and ongoing archaeological work at many sites in the eastern Mediterranean all combine to necessitate a reevaluation of such questions as the background and training of Paul. As every student of the past knows, such reconsideration in all areas of history is a continuing activity, and our understanding of the New Testament will be enhanced by increased awareness of the setting in which Jesus and the Apostles lived and fulfilled their sacred callings to preach the gospel. Recent studies of the written sources, coupled with the results of archaeological work in the eastern Mediterranean, particularly in Israel, have demonstrated that perhaps the traditional views concerning Paul's background and training have been misunderstood and misrepresented.

A brief review of the trends of scholarship concerning Paul during the past century or so will not necessarily increase our faith, but it will be instructive to show how training and scholarly bias can influence one's perspective. We can also appreciate how scholarship that is not tempered by prophetic guidance and insight can wander off into nonproductive and meaningless trivia. If we have a knowledge of eternal gospel principles and practices as restored in modern times and believe that Paul knew and preached the same gospel, a study from that perspective of the same written and archaeological materials can provide insights into that Apostle's life which will enhance our understanding of and appreciation for his ministry in the New Testament Church.

In considering the relationship of Paul to the Judaism of his day, some major tendencies have emerged during the past century or so.¹ One of the most dominant views, characterized by H. St. John Thackeray,² considers Paul to have been antithetical to Judaism although originally dependent upon it. Still early in the twentieth century, C. G. Montefiore attempted to minimize the differences between Paul and rabbinic Judaism by arguing that the Judaism against which Paul objected was not traditional rabbinical Judaism but rather a Judaism weakened by the influences of Hellenistic syncretism.³ Although the distinction between Palestinian Judaism and Hellenistic Judaism (or Diaspora Judaism, as some identify it) has been appealing to some commentators, others, such as George Foot Moore, contend that Paul's criticism of Judaism was not directed at Jews to refute them because his position was inexplicable to a Jew. Rather, as

Moore puts it, Paul was writing to Gentile converts to protect them from the influence of Jewish propagandists who would try to persuade them that "observance of the law was necessary along with allegiance to Christ."⁴

In a work considered by many to be a turning point in the scholarship on Paul and Judaism, W. D. Davies denied the neat division of Judaism into separate Palestinian and Hellenistic or Diaspora components, showing the interpenetration of both without regard to geographical considerations.⁵ Despite Davies's arguments that many motifs in Paul, which were often viewed as being the most Hellenistic, can in reality be paralleled in or derived from Palestinian Judaism, E. P. Sanders claims that his mentor Davies "did not, however, deal with the essential element which Montefiore found in Rabbinic literature but which is not taken into account in Paul's critique of Judaism: the doctrine of repentance and forgiveness." Sanders faults Davies for using Judaism "to identify Paul's *background*, not compare *religions*."⁶ Sanders's own work, also perceived by many to represent a watershed in Pauline scholarship, goes beyond a comparison of Pauline motifs with rabbinic statements to describe and define the religion of Paul and the religion of Judaism, which can then be contrasted with each other.

Sanders takes positions different from those of Davies, both in many of his perceptions of what constitutes first-century Judaism in Palestine and in how Paul differed from the Judaism of his day. Two of his conclusions that emphasize Paul's differences with Palestinian Judaism would be expected because of Paul's encounter with the resurrected Christ on the road to Damascus and the subsequent reordering of his religious beliefs according to the gospel which was revealed to him (see Galatians 1:12–16). Whereas Davies had stated that "Paul carried over into his interpretation of the Christian Dispensation the covenantal conceptions of Judaism,"⁷ Sanders takes an opposite position: "Paul's 'pattern of religion' cannot be described as 'covenantal nomism,' and therefore Paul presents an *essentially different type of religiousness from any found in Palestinian Jewish literature*."⁸

Despite that negative assertion, Sanders states that in many ways Paul reflects Palestinian Judaism more than Hellenistic Judaism. One example relates to defining righteousness: "The righteousness terminology is related to the righteousness terminology of Palestinian Judaism. One does not find in Paul any trace of the Greek and Hellenistic Jewish distinction between

being righteous (man/man) and pious (man/God); nor is righteousness in Paul one virtue among others. Here, however, there is also a major shift; in Jewish literature to be righteous means to obey the Torah and to repent of transgression, but in Paul it means to be saved by Christ."⁹

Is it really possible to draw such distinctions between Judaism and Hellenistic culture in the first century? "The works of E. Bickerman, D. Daube, S. Lieberman, and M. Smith have abundantly established the interpenetration between Hellenism and Judaism by the first century, so that Pharisaism itself can be regarded as a hybrid."¹⁰ Even Sanders, whose cited book focuses on Paul and Palestinian Judaism, admits the problem of identifying to what extent Hellenistic culture may have influenced the thought and language of Paul:

Paul does not have simply a "Jewish" or a "Hellenistic" or a "Hellenistic Jewish" conception of man's plight. It appears that Paul's thought was not simply taken over from any one scheme pre-existing in the ancient world.

In claiming a measure of uniqueness for Paul we should be cautious on two points. One is that we must agree with the common observation that nothing is totally unique. Indeed, with respect to man's plight, one can see relationships between what Paul thought and various other conceptions in the ancient world. What is lacking is a precise parallel which accounts exhaustively for Paul's thought, and this has partly to do with Paul's making use of so many different schemes of thought.¹¹

Although some commentators drew sharp distinctions between Judaism, Hellenism, and Christianity and thus had Paul move through some version of the first two on his way to becoming the first Christian theologian, Krister Stendahl deemphasizes the formality of religion in the first century. Admitting that the vision on the road to Damascus resulted in a great change in Paul's life, Stendahl characterizes the change as more like a "call" than a "conversion" from one religion to another, for "it is obvious that Paul remains a Jew as he fulfills his role as an Apostle to the Gentiles."¹² The question Stendahl raises is not mere pedantry, for Christian missionaries of every age have had to distinguish between cultural mores that must be abandoned at conversion and those that can be retained. Furthermore, given the increasingly anti-Semitic position of many Christian churches in late antiquity, it is of more than idle interest

to see whether the noted Apostle to the Gentiles himself exhibited any tendencies to turn away from or renounce Judaism.

Establishing Paul's relationship to the Judaism of his day and also establishing the relationship of Judaism to the Hellenistic world of the first century, therefore, continues to be of interest to students of the early Church. Even the confrontations between Paul and the so-called Judaizers are seen by some to be problems with other Christians rather than with Jews. Lloyd Gaston represents that position when he notes that "the opponents seem to be in every case rival Christian missionaries, and it is not at all sure either that they represent a united front, or that all of them are Jewish Christians." He further asserts: "Even if some of Paul's argumentation should be directed against individual (Christian) Jews, Judaism as such is never attacked. Paul's letters cannot be used either to derive information about Judaism or as evidence that he opposes Judaism as such."¹³

The difficulty of trying to fit Paul into one or another category of Judaism, such as Palestinian or Hellenistic (if they really are discrete and identifiable entities), is increased by statements found both in the Apostle's letters and in Luke's Acts of the Apostles. Luke quotes Paul telling the military tribune in Jerusalem that he is "a man, a Jew of Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no insignificant city" (Acts 21:39),¹⁴ supposedly placing him squarely in the context of Diaspora Judaism. Nevertheless, Luke records Paul telling the audience in the temple courtyard: "I am a Jew, and though I was born at Tarsus in Cilicia I was brought up in this city and was educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of our ancestral law, being zealous for God as all of you are this day" (Acts 22:3).

Paul declared the strictness of his Jewish upbringing. In beginning his speech before Agrippa II and Berenice, he said: "My manner of life from my youth, which was from the beginning among my own nation and in Jerusalem, is known by all the Jews. They have known me for a long time, and should they wish to testify, that according to the strictest party of our religion I lived as a Pharisee" (Acts 26:4-5). When Paul addressed the Jewish council of Pharisees and Sadducees, he declared that he was "a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee" (Acts 23:6) and that he had lived in good conscience before God up to that time (see Acts 23:1), making a claim of such strict obedience to Jewish law that the high priest had someone strike (backhand) him on the mouth.

Paul did not refer to his origins outside of Palestine, and his own statements emphasized his strict adherence to Jewish law and practices before

his encounter with the resurrected Christ. In Galatians, to give an example, Paul summarized his pre-Christian life: "For you have heard of my former way of life in Judaism, . . . and I progressed in Judaism beyond many of those of my same age in my race, because I was far more zealous for the traditions of my fathers" (Galatians 1:13–14).

Later, when writing to the Philippians from Rome, where he was awaiting trial, Paul again declared his earlier strict adherence to Jewish law: "Although I have confidence in the flesh. If someone else thinks he has confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day; a member of the race of Israel; of the tribe of Benjamin; an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee, as for zeal, one who persecuted the church; and as to uprightness according to the law, I was blameless" (Philippians 3:4–6).

Even conversion to Christianity did not cause Paul to denigrate or repudiate his Jewish origins: "Therefore, I say, has God rejected his people? Far from it! For I am also an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not cast aside his people whom he knew beforehand" (Romans 11:1–2).

If one agrees with Davies that the distinction between Palestinian, or rabbinic, and Diaspora, or Hellenistic, Judaism is not easily defended, Paul's birth in Tarsus and his education in Jerusalem would not necessarily represent a significant shift in religious orientation or training. Such an observation does not by itself clarify or explain how much exposure to Greek culture Paul experienced in his pre-Christian years or whether he was likely to have had more of such exposure in Tarsus before moving to Jerusalem than he would have encountered in Palestine. Behind that question is an even larger one for students of the New Testament: how likely was any Jew in Palestine, either from Jerusalem or the Galilee, to have significant and continuing interaction with Hellenistic culture? We might add, parenthetically, that to answer the question for Paul brings us closer to having to answer it as well for Jesus and His Apostles in the early Church.

It must be obvious by now that despite claims in both Luke's Acts and Paul's letters that Paul was raised in the strictest form of Judaism of his day, commentators have not arrived at a consensus about his relationship to the Judaism they encounter in the documentary evidence. In an assessment of the problem, Victor Furnish stated in his presidential address to the Society of Biblical Literature: "In short, the more that historical

research has been able to uncover about the varieties and complexities of first-century Judaism, the more difficult it has become to put Paul in his place as a Jew." Furnish further stated that the same difficulties exist when evaluating Paul's relationship to early Christianity or the Hellenistic world in general:

As research has taught us more about the diversity and complexity of nascent Christianity, it has become harder to put Paul in his place within it.

The same is true of attempts to situate Paul more generally within the Hellenistic world. It is no longer necessary, or even plausible, to attribute the Hellenistic characteristics of Paul's letters and thought to his direct and deliberate borrowing from the philosophical schools and mystery religions. Research has shown that one must first reckon with his background in Hellenistic Judaism, and also with the time that he spent in the mixed community of Antioch. . . .

Considering all of this, must one conclude that the historical Paul is still on the loose, successfully evading every effort to put him in his place in history?¹⁵

Given a common scholarly compulsion to identify and explain everyone and everything in terms of previously defined categories, the problem of a century of scholarship may be an attempt to force Paul into a Jewish, ecclesiastical, or Hellenistic mold established by the research of the period. It is certain that Paul did not see the gospel of Christ as fitting into such limiting categories, and as an emissary of the Lord he must, as he said, transcend the very classifications into which modern scholars have tried to place him:

For while I am free from all men, I made myself a servant to all, in order that I might gain more of them. And I became as a Jew to the Jews, in order that I might gain Jews; as one under the law to those under the law, although I am not under the law, in order that I might gain those under the law; as one without the law to those without the law, although I am not without the law of God but am subject to the law of Christ, in order that I might gain those without the law. I became weak to those who are weak, in order that I might gain the weak; I became all things to all men, in order that I might at least save some. Now I do all things on account of the Gospel, in

order that I might become a fellow participant in it. (1 Corinthians 9:19–23)

If indeed Paul was taught the strictest (generally understood to be synonymous with the narrowest, or most parochial) form of Judaism in Jerusalem as a student of Gamaliel from his youth, how are we to explain his developed ability to express himself in the Greek language? Even though Davies makes a strong case for not making great distinctions between rabbinic, or Palestinian, Judaism and Hellenistic, or Diaspora, Judaism, few in the scholarship of the past would go so far as to argue for Greek-teaching synagogues in Jerusalem or chief rabbis whose mother tongue was Greek rather than Aramaic and whose primary scriptural source was a revised Septuagint translation rather than a Hebrew text.

Before proceeding with the question of Paul's language and education, an explanation of the rabbinate in the first half of the first century is in order. Martin Hengel trenchantly observes that "in fact before [A.D.] 70 there was still no rabbinate and no ordination of scholars who then were given the right to bear the title 'rabbi.'"¹⁶ However, there were numerous synagogues in Jerusalem with schools and houses of learning attached to them (one later rabbinic text states that there were 480 before the Roman War¹⁷), and they were likely less institutionalized and more free than in the second century when the victorious Tannaites were producing the Mishnah.¹⁸ So little is known of Gamaliel I, under whom Paul studied, that were it not for mention made of him in Josephus,¹⁹ confusion with his famous grandson Gamaliel II might have caused scholars to dismiss him as Luke's invention. Jacob Neusner collected the traditions relating to Gamaliel I, and he notes that his task was "complicated by the existence of traditions of Gamaliel II of Yavneh, by the absence of references to Gamaliel in accounts of the debates of the contemporary Houses of Shammai and Hillel, by the end of the system of listing pairs, and most of all, by the failure of the tradents everywhere to distinguish carefully among the Gamaliels." Neusner further states that his account of this great teacher, the first of the Pharisees before AD 70 to be honored with the title Rabban and probably the most famous instructor in the Judaism of his day, "can by no means be so comprehensive and reliable as those of earlier masters."²⁰

If so little can be stated with certainty regarding Gamaliel, and if the Jewish rabbinate was so ill-defined and unstructured before AD 70 as Hengel observes, what evidence can be produced to clarify the language of

the biblical texts to which the young Saul would have been exposed in Jerusalem? The student of Hellenistic history will know that in the three centuries following the death of Alexander the Great, Greek culture penetrated deeply into Egyptian society, as vividly brought to light through the tens of thousands of papyri discovered in Egypt during the last century. Eastward toward India, though the evidence is less well preserved, Tarn could note that "to parts of India, perhaps to large parts, [the Greeks] came, not as conquerors, but as friends and 'saviors.'"²¹ Greeks ruled in India "until well into the first century," and Greek culture is described as being firmly established in India by the second century before Christ.²² If those regions were significantly Hellenized before the first century, should one expect less in Palestine, which is between Egypt and India and closer to Greece? Has far too much been made through the centuries about the supposed, and perhaps erroneous, dichotomy between Judaism and Hellenism? (The later church fathers labeled it the dichotomy between Athens and Jerusalem for somewhat different reasons.)

The primary meanings given in Liddell and Scott for *Hellenizein* are "to speak Greek, write or read correct Greek," and so forth.²³ A large body of material relating to Hellenistic culture in Palestine is the inscriptional evidence. For there "the triumphal progress of Greek makes an impressive showing in *inscriptions*," and "if we disregard later Nabaatean inscriptions in Transjordan and the typically Jewish tomb, ossuary and synagogue inscriptions . . . from the third century BC, we find almost exclusively Greek inscriptions in Palestine."²⁴ More recently, Hengel stated that about 33 percent of the nearly 250 inscriptions found in or around Jerusalem from the Second Temple period are in Greek.²⁵

For a non-Jew in Hellenistic Palestine, "the principle could probably very soon be applied that anyone who could read and write also had a command of Greek."²⁶ Further, within Judaism, Hengel asserts, "The high priest and the financial administrator of the temple will also have had impeccable Greek-speaking and Greek-writing secretaries for their correspondence with Ptolemaic offices and the court. If one goes on to include members of the Ptolemaic garrison, officials and merchants, even the Jerusalem of the third century BC may be assumed to have had a considerable Greek-speaking minority."²⁷

By the time of the Roman conquest (in the first century before Christ), we must add an influx of hundreds of thousands of Jews to Jerusalem for various festivals, most Greek-speaking, and the need for the local

inhabitants to know Greek to accommodate their needs. Josephus claims that on the basis of a count taken of Passover sacrificial lambs, greater Jerusalem contained more than 2.5 million people during that celebration.²⁸

Not only did the visitors to Jerusalem speak and write Greek, but in the second century before Christ, Jerusalem itself was becoming a Greek polis. According to Hengel, "the process of Hellenization in the *Jewish upper class* then entered an acute phase, the aim of which was the complete assimilation of Judaism to the Hellenistic environment. . . . Presumably Greek 'education' in Jerusalem not only led to training the ephebes in sports but also had intellectual and literary elements."²⁹

All of this presupposes the existence of a Greek school in Jerusalem, with some evidence that a knowledge of Homer was part of the curriculum.³⁰ Some remnants of Jewish literature written in Greek in Palestine can be found in Josephus (the romance concerning the Tobiad Joseph and his sons, composed in Egypt, but perpetuated in Palestine³¹) and Eusebius (fragments of the Jewish historian Alexander Polyhistor and fragments of an anonymous Samaritan³²). That anonymous Samaritan writer quoted in Eusebius wrote in the second century before Christ, determined to glorify Abraham and substantiate the truth of the Old Testament. In the quotations from Alexander Polyhistor in Eusebius are statements from another Jewish historian, Eupolemus, who appears to have been a Greek-educated Palestinian Jew.³³ Second Maccabees contains a summary of yet another Jewish writer, Jason of Cyrene, and, though he was trained in rhetoric outside of Palestine, it is assumed by its detail and historical vividness to have been written in Palestine soon after the Maccabean Revolt.³⁴

The countermovement to the Hellenizing forces in Jerusalem that was victorious after AD 70 gave rise to the rabbinate and resulted in the suppression of the explicit Hellenization of the earlier era.³⁵ Once Judaism lost two of the key elements of its identity after AD 70, through the destruction of the temple and the dispossession of the Jews from their land, new identifying elements had to be found. The establishment of the Jewish canon of scripture near the end of the first century and the rise of rabbinic Judaism in the first centuries of the Christian era, as expressed in the Mishnah, the two Talmuds, and related literatures, have provided a Jewish identity that has persisted through the centuries. It has been difficult until very recently to penetrate the historical barriers resulting from the Jewish-Roman war of AD 66–70 and to see the diversity and pluralism in Judaism

of the first half of the first century. Rabbinic Judaism, which defined itself at the end of the first century and suppressed the pluralism and Hellenization that characterized prewar Palestine, was the normative Judaism which scholars used in their analysis of Paul's background. With the recent archaeological discoveries in the region and the resulting studies relating to Judaism in the prewar period before the destruction of the temple, the cosmopolitan nature of Palestine in general and of Jerusalem in particular during the New Testament era is much more evident than it was previously.

Because Paul is from the earlier period, there is no reason to deny that he could have received a good education in the Greek language and culture in Jerusalem. Remembering that the primary meaning of *Hellenizein* is to speak, read, and write Greek, and not necessarily to embrace Greek history or literature, we need not assume that Paul studied Homer, Euripides, Plato, or any other authors in the traditional curriculum of the Greeks. In point of fact, awareness of those sources in Paul is usually denied.³⁶ Yet, given the subject matter of Paul's epistles and the epistolary style in general, any argument relating to the substance of Paul's education based on his writings in the New Testament would be like reconstructing Elder Bruce R. McConkie's law school curriculum from his book *Mormon Doctrine*. Paul's awareness of Greek literature, as suggested above, may have been considerably greater than would be displayed in his letters to Christian congregations and close friends.

To say that Paul spoke and wrote Greek as a native tongue in no way argues against his also knowing Aramaic and Hebrew. Indeed, he stated that the resurrected Lord spoke Aramaic to him in the vision he had while traveling to Damascus (see Acts 26:14), and Paul spoke in Aramaic to the crowd in the temple courtyard after his first arrest (see Acts 21:40; 22:2). There can be no doubt that he knew some Hebrew text of Old Testament writings, even if in his speeches and letters he favors a revised version of the Septuagint. One should not underestimate Paul with regard either to his Judaism or to the influence of Hellenism in his life.

Some passages in Paul's letters might be understood to acknowledge his lack of familiarity with Greek literary sources or training in rhetoric. The most famous of these are found in the Corinthian correspondence, in which Paul testified of the superiority of God's wisdom to that of man: "And when I came to you, brethren, I came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, because I was declaring to you the mystery of God. . . . And

my speech and my preaching were not given in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and power, in order that your faith might not be in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God" (1 Corinthians 2:1–5). In 2 Corinthians, Paul strongly defended his apostolic calling, quoting his critics who spoke condescendingly of him: "For his letters, they say, are weighty and powerful; but his bodily presence is weak and his manner of speech is contemptible" (2 Corinthians 10:10). Paul acknowledged that he was a layman in the matter of public speaking, but he denied that he was deficient in knowledge: "But although I might be unskilled in speaking, I am not unskilled in knowledge, for in every way we have made knowledge known to you in the presence of all men" (2 Corinthians 11:6). Elsewhere Paul warned against being led captive by the learning of the world, although he did not devalue the acquisition of such knowledge: "Beware lest there be one who will lead you captive through philosophy and the vain deceit according to the tradition of men, according to the rudiments of the world and not according to Christ" (Colossians 2:8).

Such disclaimers of his rhetorical skills and of the value of philosophy are not the same as saying he was ignorant of such matters. In their commentary on 1 Corinthians, William Orr and James Walther argue that Paul must have received a good Greek education, even if he didn't parade under its banner:

It may be significant that Paul never felt moved to mention any Greek education he may have received. But the thoroughness of his instruction in contemporary Koine Greek is demonstrated by the fact that he could occasionally rise to true eloquence while using this language to express warm religious conviction and subtle points of doctrine and morals (e.g. 1 Corinthians 13, 15; Romans 8, 12; 2 Corinthians 3). It is hard to believe he could have mastered an alien language to this degree without having received considerable instruction in its literature, particularly that of the Hellenistic Greek communities, such as Alexandria or Tarsus. His description of his early life and instruction appears to include him among those Jews of the intellectual ghetto who had extensive knowledge of their own history and culture, but had completely cut themselves off from any knowledge of Greek or Roman paganism. However, the quality of the letters themselves leads us to believe that his experience somewhere and somehow enabled him to break out of this insularity.³⁷

Hans Dieter Betz places 2 Corinthians 10–13 in the Socratic tradition, stating that these chapters compose an apology, or defense, written in letter form.³⁸ It is not necessary to assume that Paul read a Socratic apology (though he very well may have done so) to express some of the sentiments found there, for it was common for philosophers in the Socratic tradition to disavow the pretentiousness of the rhetoricians and sophists.³⁹ Plato has Socrates tell the jury in his trial that he will not try to emulate the professional orators: "Now they, as I say, have said little or nothing true; but you shall hear from me nothing but the truth. Not, however, men of Athens, speeches finely tricked out with words and phrases, . . . for surely it would not be fitting for one of my age to come before you like a youngster making up speeches."⁴⁰

Socrates was seventy years old at his trial, and he had held interviews with the leading intellectuals of Athens,⁴¹ which certainly exposed him to the best speakers of the day. He nevertheless denies having any knowledge of their rhetorical skills in his jury trial, a setting in which orators were famous for showing off their skills. Just as Paul will later tell the Corinthians to concentrate on truth more than on language, so Socrates speaks in his defense: "This is the first time I have come before the court, although I am seventy years old; I am therefore an utter foreigner to the manner of speech here. Hence, just as you would, of course, if I were really a foreigner, pardon me if I spoke in that dialect and that manner in which I had been brought up, so now I make this request of you, a fair one, as it seems to me, that you disregard the manner of my speech—for perhaps it might be worse and perhaps better—and observe and pay attention merely to this, whether what I say is just or not."⁴²

One could debate endlessly—and uselessly—whether the obvious echoes from the Apology of Socrates on the theme of content over form found in Paul's Corinthian letters demonstrate his familiarity with the Greek literary tradition. Even if training in and exposure to the Greek literary tradition were part of Paul's educational background, he makes it abundantly clear that his apostolic calling does not require him to refer to such materials in testifying of the Savior and His gospel or in counseling Christians on how to improve their lives. Most of Paul's writings in the New Testament are composed to give advice and correction in response to specific problems. There would be little need or opportunity for the Apostle to draw upon the poetry, philosophy, or history he might have learned as a student.

As a sidelight to this discussion and with reference to the larger question of Hellenism and the New Testament, let me note that if Jerusalem had become a Hellenistic city where the common language of general discourse was Greek, the situation in the Galilee was perhaps even more likely to have been Hellenized. There was a large Gentile population in the Galilee, and Matthew, quoting Isaiah (9:1–2), referred to a large part of the region as the “Galilee of the Gentiles” (Matthew 4:15). Eric Meyers, in an article strongly critical of the degree of Hellenization claimed for Palestine by Hengel, still admitted that “there is no doubt that Greek language was widely used in Palestine by the first century, especially in daily commercial settings and in simple forms of communication.”⁴³ Meyers does not define “simple forms of communication,” except, perhaps, to note that one should not believe that a high degree of Greek literacy (presumably of Greek literature) dominated a society in which most of the people were Jews. For some time, the belief prevailed that Galilee was simply a rural region populated by farmers, fishermen, and others who were tied too closely to the land or the lake to be interested in or aware of the Hellenistic world around them. Recent and continuing excavations, however, at such sites as Caesarea Philippi, Beth-Shean, and Sepphoris (where Meyers is one of the codirectors) demonstrate a thriving Hellenistic presence in these Galilean cities. Can we truly agree with Stuart Miller and others that Jesus and His disciples avoided going into Sepphoris, some three miles from Nazareth, or Caesarea Philippi, or any of the other Hellenized cities?⁴⁴ If Jerusalem were as Hellenized as even Meyers is willing to suggest,⁴⁵ and if Jesus spent as much time in Jerusalem as the Gospels suggest, surely it was not to avoid contact with non-Jewish culture that kept Jesus from entering Galilean cities that had a strong Hellenistic influence. The argument from silence in the scriptures about visits to those cities is inadequate because the scriptures certainly do not attempt to provide a complete list of places Jesus visited. Even Jesus’ statement that He was to minister only among the house of Israel (see Matthew 15:24) does not preclude his finding Israelites throughout Palestine, including places where Gentiles and Hellenized Jews might be found.

The chief purpose of this presentation is not to assert categorically that Paul studied in a Greek school or a Greek-speaking synagogue in Jerusalem, though he may well have done either or both. Neither can we assert with confidence that Jesus actually gave the Sermon on the Mount (or on the Plain) in Greek, even though he may have done that very thing, or

perhaps he gave it in Aramaic on one occasion and Greek on another. The main point is that our understanding of the past is changing rapidly, and, therefore, we should distinguish between what is spiritually enduring and unchanging and what is subject to modification with new discoveries. The New Testament and early Christian landscapes appear quite different now from how they appeared half a century ago, and the dynamic forces of intercultural contacts were greater than we previously understood. That Jesus and His Apostles, including Paul, ushered in and spread abroad a dispensation of the eternal gospel in such a world should be both exciting to study and encouraging to members of the restored Church in a rather similar contemporary setting.

NOTES

1. See Ed Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 2–13.
2. Henry St. John Thackeray, *The Relation of St. Paul to Contemporary Jewish Thought* (London: Macmillan, 1900).
3. C. G. Montefiore, *Judaism and St. Paul: Two Essays* (London: Max Goschen, 1914).
4. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 6, referring to George Foot Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era: The Age of the Tannaim*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927–30), 3:151.
5. W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), 1–16.
6. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 7, 10.
7. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*, 259–60.
8. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 543.
9. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 544.
10. W. D. Davies, “From Schweitzer to Scholem: Reflections on Sabbatai Svi,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 95, no. 4 (December 1976): 532n14.
11. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 555.
12. Krister Stendahl, *Paul among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 11.
13. Lloyd Gaston, *Paul and the Torah* (Vancouver, B.C.: University of British Columbia Press, 1987), 3, 4.
14. This and all other quotations from the New Testament are translations by the author unless otherwise noted.
15. “On Putting Paul in His Place,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 113, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 9–11.
16. Martin Hengel, *The Pre-Christian Paul* (London: SCM Press, 1991), 28.

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