

FROM JESUS TO CHRIST:  
THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE  
APOSTLE PAUL

PAULA FREDRIKSEN



The transformation of Jesus of Nazareth, the historical figure, into Christ, the subject of revelation and object of faith and hope, takes place during the prehistoric period of Christianity. By "prehistoric" I mean before the written record. In this essay, I investigate the growth of this new religious movement during those decades between the resurrection of Jesus and our earliest documented interpretation of it, namely, the letters of Paul. In that relatively brief time—between, let us say, 30 C.E. and 50 C.E.—this Jewish messianic movement had crossed several important frontiers. It had moved from Aramaic, the primary language of its rural Galilean phase, to the flexible *koiné* Greek spoken throughout the Eastern Mediterranean. It had moved out from its native Jewish homeland to the cities of the Western Diaspora. And, on the evidence of Paul, it had crossed a crucial ethnic and cultural frontier, from

being primarily a Jewish movement to a movement made up largely of Gentiles.<sup>1</sup>

Our best evidence for reconstructing these lost decades at the dawn of Christianity is preserved in the New Testament. An anthology of late first- and early second-century texts collected and definitively canonized only in the fourth century, the New Testament contains no firsthand eyewitness accounts of the life and teachings of Jesus.<sup>2</sup> For our purposes, what matters most is not what Jesus himself might have thought or taught during his lifetime, but the claims made about him after his death, namely, that he had been raised, and that this fact had universal significance for humankind. And to this message, Paul, not the evangelists, is our earliest witness.

Scholarly consensus takes seven of the fourteen canonical letters attributed to Paul as authentic: 1 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Philippians, Philemon, Galatians, and Romans.<sup>3</sup> Paul states clearly that he had never known Jesus “according to the flesh,” but he at least knew others who had, and he was in some kind of collegial contact with them—Peter, John, and James, to name a few. Earlier by a good fifteen years than our next earliest evidence, Mark’s Gospel, Paul’s letters are nonetheless some twenty years late in terms of the period of Jesus’ activity. If all we had were Paul’s letters and for some reason lacked the Gospels, we would know almost nothing about Jesus—not where he was from or what he did, and very little of what he said.<sup>4</sup> The human figure of Jesus does not concern Paul; the focus of his attention and commitment is the risen Christ.

Paul met the risen Christ at a moment that scholars refer to as his “conversion,” although Paul thinks of it as his “call”—a call specifically to be God’s *apostolos*, or messenger, to the Gentiles. He spends very little time in his extant correspondence describing either this figure, the risen Christ, or his experience of him. In fact, all we have securely is two clauses in two different letters. In Galatians, he says, “When he who had set me apart before I was born

and had called me through his grace was pleased to reveal his son to me in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles . . .” and then the sentence goes on, concluding on the point that Paul was at least the equal of those who had preceded him in the Jesus movement (Gal 1:15-17). In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul passes on a tradition he has about the sequence of Christ’s postresurrection appearances: first to Peter (Cephas), then to “the twelve,” then to 500 brethren, then to James, then to all the apostles. “Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me” (1 Cor 15:1-8). Last, but not least—certainly not, in Paul’s own opinion. “[God’s] grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I work harder than any of them”—that is, than his colleagues in the movement. This is pure Paul.

So Christ, not Jesus, is at the heart of Paul’s proclamation. What does he say about this figure? As John Donahue points out (chap. 6), Paul uses the term “Christ”—the Greek translation of the Hebrew *Messiah*—without ever unpacking what he means by it or why he confers it on Jesus. Why on earth a Jew who had been crucified and then raised should be designated *Messiah* by another first-century Jew who obviously knew his scriptures is a question scholars have had a hard time answering. Paul uses the title “Christ”—*christos*—virtually as Jesus’ last name, and except for one brief clause as he opens his letter to the Romans—“descended from David according to the flesh” (1:4)—Paul nowhere tells us what he means by “Christ.”

Paul, rather, describes the *function* of this figure, whom he also refers to as “Lord” and “Son.” This figure “*died for our sins* in accordance with the scriptures” (1 Cor 15:3), but Paul does not reveal what scriptures support his claim. He would have had difficulty finding anything about a crucified messiah in the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament). But Paul’s main point about this Christ is not so much that he was crucified as that *he was raised* and that *he is about to come back*. Paul, further, felt compelled by his reception

of this message to preach Christ *to the Gentiles*, and we must infer from his frequent recourse to scripture when he writes to his communities that these Gentiles were not ignorant of the idea of Israel and of God's election of Israel as expressed in the scriptures. Paul may be taking his message to Gentiles, but these are Gentiles *who also have some knowledge of the Bible* (Hebrew Scripture).

Bear these linked facts in mind as we proceed: Paul believed Jesus to be raised and to be about to return; he proclaimed this good news to Gentiles, and these Gentiles were themselves in some degree familiar with the biblical promises to Israel. Paul, further, continued to regard himself as a Jew—"a Hebrew born of Hebrews" (Phil 3:5) and one of the elect of Israel (Rom 11:2, 7)—and he constructed his mission and message entirely within Judaism.<sup>5</sup> We know that this movement would eventually become independent of Judaism and even hostile to it; but nothing would have surprised Paul, his other Jewish colleagues in the movement, and even his Gentiles in Christ, more. These new communities were called by Paul and by others<sup>6</sup> into the redemptive history of Israel, although *they were not thereby converted to Judaism*. As we see how this was so, as we reconstruct the prehistory of Christianity, we shall reconstruct as well the transformation of Jesus into Christ.

Let us consider, for the moment, not ideas so much as social reality. Who are the people we are investigating—Jews and Gentiles—and how did they regard each other? Jews were a minority in the Roman Empire; particularly Jews who lived in the Diaspora, in and among Gentiles, had plenty of time to contemplate gentile culture and the sort of people it produced. What did they think? Here is one mid-first-century opinion from a Greek-speaking, well-traveled Jew. I translate loosely:

Gentiles do not know God; or, rather, they see him through creation but then do not honor him nor give him thanks. Instead, they exchange the glory of the immortal God for images of mortal man, or of birds, animals, and even reptiles. They are, consequently, impure in

the lusts of their heart. They worship the creature rather than the Creator and for that reason God has handed them over to their own dishonorable passions. The women are sexually perverse; the men lust after one another. Their minds are base and their conduct indecent. They are filled with all manner of wickedness, evil, covetousness and malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malignity. They gossip and they slander. They hate God. They are insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents. Foolish. Faithless. Heartless. Ruthless.

Paul vents this opinion in chapter 1 of Romans. Gentile culture—the only option to Jewish culture in the mid-first century—perceived as perverse religiously and therefore socially, expressed its spiritual perversion particularly, in Jewish eyes, in sexual misconduct.<sup>7</sup> We've just heard what Paul thinks of this sort of thing. Why and how, then, does he spend time with such people?

The abstract middle distance separating Gentiles from Jews in this sort of cultural polemic disappears in the real environment of the Mediterranean city.<sup>8</sup> Both social and religious reality conspired to bring these groups into close contact. Jews in the Diaspora organized their community life around the synagogue, and Gentiles, ecumenical to a fault,<sup>9</sup> evidently felt free to visit these if they so chose. Synagogues attracted interested outsiders, and Jews did not discourage outside sympathy. We have a range of evidence from antiquity attesting to a gentile penumbra around diaspora synagogues, within which we find grades of interest and affiliation, from mild curiosity to the threshold of conversion.

Philo of Alexandria, for example, an elder contemporary of Jesus and Paul, mentions the "multitudes of others" who joined with Egyptian Jews in their annual celebration of the miracle of the Torah's translation from Hebrew to Greek, "to thank God for the good gift so old yet ever new."<sup>10</sup> Others, as the Greek magical papyri perhaps evince, might attend synagogue services out of professional interest, to acquire knowledge of a powerful god in whose name they

could command demons.<sup>11</sup> Philo and especially Josephus, the historian of the Jewish war against Rome, claim that judaizers—pagans voluntarily attached to the synagogue and interested in Jewish religious practice—could be found in numbers in urban centers throughout the Empire.<sup>12</sup> Hostile gentile witnesses also report the same: Horace, Juvenal, and, later, Tacitus all comment without enthusiasm on this gentile habit of judaizing.<sup>13</sup>

Pagans could judaize without making an exclusive commitment to the religion of Israel. Luke, for example, both in his Gospel and in the book of Acts, mentions such Gentiles who on the one hand voluntarily assume aspects of Jewish piety but, nonetheless, remain public pagans, worshiping traditional gods. Thus the centurion at Capernaum who “loves our nation [Israel] and built us our synagogue” (Luke 7:1-10), whether fictive or not, would have been understood by Luke’s ancient audience to be a practicing pagan, responsible for performing the cult that would have attended his military unit. So too the centurion Cornelius in Acts 10, “a devout man who feared God . . . gave alms . . . and prayed constantly . . . well-spoken by the whole Jewish nation” (10:2, 22). A third-century inscription from Aphrodisias in Turkey preserves an index of Jewish–Gentile interaction. It lists Jews, names members of a prayer or study group, designates converts as such (*proselytoi*), and separately lists fifty-four *theosebeis*—pagan Godfearers. Nine of these are likewise given as members of the city council, and thus responsible for the sacrifices to the gods (of the city and of the empire) that were incumbent on a town official.<sup>14</sup> Later Christian writers—in the second, third, and fourth centuries—complain about the synagogue’s toleration of Gentiles, both pagan and Christian. Apparently, this gentile habit of judaizing continued even after conversion to Christianity.<sup>15</sup>

The point of our overview is that Gentiles could be both practicing pagans and public affiliates of the Jewish community. Further, although the synagogue allowed gentile adherents, it did not

demand that Gentiles relinquish their own traditional religions. Gentiles’ allegiance to Judaism was various, idiosyncratic, and completely voluntary. They remained pagan, but, through the synagogue, where Moses was “read every Sabbath” (Acts 15:21), such Gentiles would have acquired some knowledge of the Bible. It was among Gentiles such as these, I believe, that Paul built up the *ekkle-sia tou Christou*, his communities in Christ.

How would the Bible have provided both Paul and his gentile audience with a religious framework for understanding the purpose and meaning of their new community? Here we have to consider the biblical story of God and Israel, and the ways that Gentiles figure into that relationship.

Genesis begins with God’s creative action. Only God is god. He makes everything that is, the whole universe and all people. As the story unwinds, it establishes a moral resonance between the Creator—just, kind, merciful—and his particular creature, made uniquely in his image. Humanity generally, and Israel in particular, must acknowledge a certain divinely established standard of religious and ethical behavior.<sup>16</sup> This moral dynamic presupposes that God, who acts in and through history for the benefit of his creation, is neither arbitrary nor perverse. He has an investment in human society and history, and will not indefinitely countenance the hegemony of evil. Ultimately, he will see that good prevails.

The God of the Bible is the author of a divine comedy in which good *will* win out in the end. This is a normative view within Judaism to this day, expressed in synagogue prayer service in the *Amidah*<sup>17</sup> and the *Alenu*,<sup>18</sup> and anticipated in the traditional grace said after meals. This same theme, set within a dramatically foreshortened time frame, likewise defines biblical *apocalyptic eschatology*, the expectation that God will realize final redemption *soon*. Apocalyptic eschatology as a religious sensibility describes an arc that passes through the later books of the classical prophets of the Jewish canon—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel,<sup>19</sup> the twelve minor

prophets—through the letters of Paul, certain evangelical passages, and finally the book of Revelation, which closes the Christian canon. Along this arc, we can plot the convictions of John the Baptist, the Qumran sectarians, Jesus of Nazareth, and Paul himself.

Apocalyptic eschatology presents a vision of salvation in a historical idiom: its images are profoundly inspired by the experience of the Babylonian captivity.<sup>20</sup> Redemption is imaged concretely: not only from sin or evil, but from exile. The twelve tribes are restored (ten, remember, had been missing since the Assyrian conquest of the North in 722 B.C.E.), the people are gathered back to the land, the temple and Jerusalem are renewed and made splendid, a pure priesthood is established, the Davidic monarchy is restored. Social justice and true religion prevail, as God's lordship is universally acknowledged.

As apocalyptic literature develops and flourishes in the period between, roughly, the Maccabees and the Mishnah, 200 B.C.E. to 200 C.E., we find emphases on various combinations of traditional themes. Typically, we might find a battle between Good and Evil just before the End. Sometimes a messiah leads the battle; sometimes an archangel; sometimes God himself. The *War Scroll*, from Qumran, expects two messiahs, one priestly and one military; the *Assumption of Moses*, a pseudepigraphical text, none; later Christian texts, a messiah who comes twice, his more military role relegated to his second coming. Terrestrial and celestial disturbances signal the onset of the End of the Age: eclipses, falling stars, earthquake, famine, plague, war.<sup>21</sup> We might find a resurrection of the dead, or perhaps of only the righteous dead, and some kind of judgment. God reveals himself in glory; he vanquishes evil and pours his spirit out upon the people; he establishes Peace.

Where are the Gentiles in this picture? Different texts present different views, and frequently one text, like Isaiah, presents many views. Wicked Gentiles, particularly those who had persecuted Israel, are destroyed or are led captive to Jerusalem. Foreign monarchs

lick the dust at Israel's feet (Isa 49:23; cf. Mic 7:16-17); gentile cities are devastated, to be repopulated by Israel (Isa 54:3; Zeph 2:1-3:8); God destroys the nations and their idols (Mic 5:9, 15). Yet this literature also anticipates gentile inclusion in redemption. The nations gather together with Israel to worship God in his temple (Isa 2:2-4); on God's mountain, the temple mount, they feast together on the meal God has prepared for them (Isa 25:6). Gentiles will shake off their idols and accompany Jews on their homeward journey. Here is one of my favorite passages, from Zechariah:

Thus says the Lord of hosts: Peoples shall yet come, even the inhabitants of many cities. The inhabitants of one city will go to another, saying: "Let us go at once to entreat the favor of the Lord, and to seek the Lord of hosts; I am going." Many peoples and strong nations shall come and seek the Lord of hosts in Jerusalem, and to entreat the favor of the Lord. . . . In those days ten men from the nations of every tongue shall take hold of the robe of a Jew, saying, "Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you." (Zech 8:20-23)

At the End, the nations (in Hebrew, *goyim*) will turn to God. Jewish apocalyptic hope, in other words, anticipates a *double* redemption: Israel (both the living and the dead) returns from exile, and the Gentiles turn from idolatry. Note, though, that the nations do not thereby *become* Jews. This is not a story about universal religious conversion in that sense: the texts still speak of the nations *as* Gentiles. These Gentiles, however, experience a *moral* conversion, *from* the worship of idols *to* the worship of "the God of Jacob."

Some Jews thus expected the Kingdom of God to be ethnically diverse. His people would comprise at least two nations: Israel, and everybody else (e.g., Zech 2:11; also, as we will see momentarily, Rom 11). Much like the diaspora synagogues in normal time, God's kingdom at the end of time would encompass both Jews and Gentiles. But the apocalyptic scenario anticipates a religious reorientation that the quotidian synagogue neither expected nor demanded:

Eschatological Gentiles, unlike their quotidian counterparts, will have renounced their traditional gods. Once the Lord of the universe had revealed himself in glory, how could they do otherwise?<sup>22</sup>

The social reality of diaspora Godfearers and this religious tradition of eschatological Gentiles together provide the explanatory context for Paul's (and other Jewish apostles') policy toward Gentiles "in Christ." *Paul demands of his Gentiles something the synagogue never did:* They absolutely *must* relinquish their idols. His unambiguous demand gives us the measure of his absolute conviction that he lived at the end of the age, at the cusp of the great transformation anticipated by Jewish tradition.<sup>23</sup> With the resurrection of Christ, the end of the age *had already come* (1 Cor 10:11). True, Christ had to return to sum things up, to clearly and once-for-all defeat evil and even death itself (1 Cor 15); but in the meantime, those baptized into Christ's resurrection—namely, Paul's Gentiles—along with the believing remnant of Israel, lived in a wrinkle in time. And if, by participating in Christ's death and resurrection through baptism, these Gentiles were in some sense proleptically in the Kingdom, there was no room for idols—or social indifference, or sexual sin—any more.

There was no tradition in antiquity that Gentiles affiliated with the synagogue should give up their traditional religious practices. Only in the instance of *conversion*—that is, becoming a Jew and therefore assuming responsibility for the divinely revealed *mitzvot* of the Torah—was such a demand made. For male converts, this entailed circumcision as well.<sup>24</sup> Evidently, by mid-century (c. 49 C.E.), some other Jewish apostles within the Jesus movement—made anxious, perhaps, by the continuing delay of Christ's return and the intrinsically unstable situation of affiliated but nonintegrated Gentiles in their new communities—began to press for full conversion to Judaism, that is, circumcision for men. Paul, as we know from his report of this situation in his letter to the Galatians, condemned this position; so did James, Peter, and John (Gal 2:1-10). Traditional

biblical expectation held against this innovation—preaching Judaism to Gentiles<sup>25</sup>—that the "circumcision party" had improvised. For Gentiles to participate in the Kingdom, the other apostles held, relinquishing idols would suffice.

Paul expected this awkward stage between the resurrection and the Parousia to be brief—coincident, perhaps, with the duration of his own mission—and many of his comments give us his gauge. His earliest letter, 1 Thessalonians, reveals that his community there had expected Christ's return so shortly that they were troubled by the unanticipated deaths of some community members: Would they thus not participate in redemption? Paul writes to assure them that they would (4:13-18; 5:9-10). 1 Corinthians 11:30 refers to a similar situation—Christian Gentiles dying before the return of Christ. Paul suggests there that such deaths might be punitive, hence exceptional. Elsewhere in 1 Corinthians, he states that "the form of this world is passing away" (7:31); so close is the "impending distress" (the travails before the Endtime? 7:26) that Paul can reasonably suggest that his Gentiles refrain from sexual intercourse and devote themselves to prayer (7:1-7, 25-31). Repeated references to the "day of Christ" in Philippians<sup>26</sup> culminate in his assertion, "The Lord is at hand" (4:4). In view of "what hour it is"—how soon before final redemption—Christians should pay taxes and avoid tangling with the government (Rom 13:1-12). "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet" (16:20).

The resurrection of Jesus, experienced by those who had originally followed him and also by Paul (1 Cor 15), had plunged his earliest apostles into the charged expectation of imminent redemption. But as the time lengthened between Jesus' resurrection and the coming Kingdom, these apostles had to revise the traditional scenario, which had presented resurrection as a communal Endtime event.<sup>27</sup> Jesus' resurrection, reinterpreted, was seen as the sign and surety of the general resurrection, and transformation of reality, about to come.<sup>28</sup> In the interim, these apostles felt called to take the

good news of the coming Kingdom—now linked to Jesus' second, glorious coming—to the rest of Israel: Judea, Samaria, back to Galilee, thence to the synagogues of the Diaspora,<sup>29</sup> where Gentiles, too, would be encountered in numbers. Hence the ready and early inclusion of Gentiles in the Jesus movement: Jewish tradition had long anticipated their participation in eschatological redemption. We still feel the sweep of this stage of the early movement, the energy and confidence of its revision of Jesus' message of the Kingdom,<sup>30</sup> when we read Paul's letters.

But these letters are late. By the time we have them, we also have another major revision, this one Paul's own. We see it most clearly in his final letter, to the Romans. But here we must exercise historical imagination, and not be fooled by the distance—cultural and chronological—that stretches between us and Paul. To us, in the perspective of twenty centuries, any ancient evidence coming from within twenty years of Jesus' execution may look comfortably close to originating events. But try to imagine things from Paul's perspective. By the time he composed the letters that remain in our canon, he had been a member of a movement that had been preaching the imminent return of the Lord and the coming of the Kingdom *for almost a generation*. Not only had the Kingdom not come, but, as time passed, fewer and fewer within Israel were finding this message of a crucified and coming messiah credible.

Time drags when you expect it to end. How had Paul managed, despite the counterevidence of his own experience, to assert with conviction right to the end that the Endtime was on the way? How could he be so certain, after two decades of preaching this message, that "salvation is *nearer* to us than when we first believed" (Rom 13:11)?

The answer, again, lies with his Gentiles. Think back to his social context, to his scathing opinion of gentile society in Romans 1, which I quoted above. Now recall what he thinks he can reasonably demand of *his* Gentiles: No more fornication (1 Cor 5:1-2, 11; 7:2).

Forget about going to prostitutes (1 Cor 6:15-20). Sexual modesty should be observed even within marriage (1 Thess 4:4 RSV). Communities should have their own law courts (1 Cor 6:1-6; cf. 2 Cor 13:1). The community as a whole is responsible for widows, orphans, and the poor, both at home and in Jerusalem (1 Cor 11:17-22; 16:1-3; Rom 16:1-3; Gal 2:10). Absolutely and unequivocally abandon idols (1 Cor 5:11). Be slaves to righteousness (Rom 6:18). One can fulfill the Law without circumcision (Rom 2:14-16, 26-29).

Given Paul's estimate of the sort of person produced by gentile culture, it would take a miracle for his Gentiles to act the way that he insists they do. And that, in Paul's estimate, is exactly what it was: the degree to which they met his demands was the degree to which they were enabled by God's Spirit, given them through the death of his Son, in baptism (e.g., Rom 6:3-18, 22). In other words, the success of the Christian mission in turning these pagans into eschatological Gentiles who kept to a religious and moral standard never required of them by any synagogue, was proof for Paul that, through the Spirit, humanity had crossed the threshold into the next age. This gentile transformation justified Paul's religious convictions *as a Jew* that, in the death and resurrection of Jesus, God had begun the final transformation of the world, as he had promised Israel long ago: "For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy" (Rom 15:8-9).

The first Christian revision of the traditional prophetic scenario had been the interpolation of a missionary stage between Jesus' resurrection and his Parousia, his Second Coming.<sup>31</sup> The second revision, Paul's own, reordered the sequence of saved populations. Traditionally, Gentiles were to be the beneficiary of Israel's redemption. In Paul's view—the product of his experience, his unshakable confidence in his own convictions, and the facts of the Christian mission mid-century—Israel's redemption would follow

from the Gentiles'. This is the scheme he works out in Romans 9–11. Now God has chosen only a remnant within Israel, such as Paul, but the rest he has divinely hardened so that the gospel can go next to the Gentiles. When the “full number” (*pleroma*) of Gentiles has come in, then God will cease hardening Israel. At that point, all Israel, and indeed all humanity, will be saved. “For God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon all” (Rom 11:32).

The Endtime, I note, is upon me too: I shall sum up. Whatever constituted his experience of the risen Christ sometime around the year 30 C.E., it was the moral and religious transformation of his gentile communities in the following decades that confirmed Paul in his conviction that, through the death and resurrection of Jesus, the End really was at hand. This conviction articulates the profoundly optimistic, profoundly Jewish commitment to a God who works redemption within history, for the benefit of his entire creation. And it is this message, the message of biblical religion itself, that despite the gaps yawning between them unites Jesus, the charismatic prophet from Nazareth, to Paul, the apostle of the risen Christ.

### For Discussion

1. Why was Paul not concerned with the human figure of Jesus, but rather with the risen Christ?
2. How did Paul use the term “Christ” in relation to Jesus? Did Paul tell his audience or subsequent readers what he means by the term “Christ”?
3. What is the function of the figure “Christ” whom Paul also refers to as “Lord” and “Son”?
4. Did Paul continue to regard himself as a Jew even after his “conversion” to the Jesus movement?

5. What was the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in the ancient world at the time of Paul? How does this relationship shed light on Paul’s practice of preaching to and working with the Gentiles?
6. How would the Bible have provided a base for both Paul and his gentile audience for developing various “communities in Christ”?
7. What role does the apocalyptic literature and its understanding of eschatology play in the early inclusion of Gentiles into the Jesus movement?
8. What is it that Paul demands of his Gentiles that the synagogue never demanded? What is the significance of his demand for Gentiles to participate in the kingdom?
9. How does the gentile transformation confirm Paul in his conviction that, through the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Endtime was at hand?
10. From this chapter, what new understandings and insights do you have about Paul, the Gentiles, and the movement from Jesus to Christ?