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The Struggle to Define *Heilsgeschichte*:
Paul on the Origins of the Christian Tradition

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Abstract

The posing, refining and sometimes rejecting common explanations of origins may be a fundamental component of any shared human consciousness, relationship or religious community. This article studies Paul's occasional remarks concerning the origins of the Christian tradition with reference to (1) Judaism, (2) Jesus, (3) Paul's own authority, and (4) the faith of Pauline Christians. It is argued that although the NT book of Acts offers the earliest narrative account of Christian origins, Paul's occasional letters attest an even earlier point in the life of the early church when accounts of origins were a living part of the contested and evolving tradition. Understanding how Paul and Paul's opponents defined the past can shed light on how they addressed issues that they and their communities faced in the present.

1 Introduction

The recitation and continual reinterpretation of origins may well be a necessary part of every religious tradition. The present inquiry analyzes the extent to which debates about defining the origins of the Christian tradition were important for the apostle Paul. This study of Paul's occasional remarks concerning the origins of the Christian tradition takes its point of departure from Paul A. Holloway's approach to the apostle's rhetoric in Philippians and Arthur J. Droge's study of the (later) Christian apologists' interpretations of the history of culture.1

A. Addressing the Present Rhetorical Situation

Holloway's work on Philippians is noteworthy for moving beyond the methodological impasse of "mirror reading" a Pauline letter. According to

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1 Dedicated with thanks and appreciation to Gerald F. Hawthorne, whose many years of teaching and service at Wheaton College (IL) have touched so many, including the present author. This article is a revision of a paper presented to the Chicago Society of Biblical Research Winter 2003 meeting. The author is indebted to Troy W. Martin and Matthew C. Baldwin, whose comments have sharpened the analysis of the present study. The author is also grateful for support from the Catholic Biblical Association of America and the Society of Biblical Literature for research in this area.

Holloway, rhetoric serves to define the current situation, as the author wishes to present it to his/her audience. The attempt to analyze a particular rhetorical situation must be differentiated from historical reconstruction, which seeks to proceed beyond an author’s presentation of the situation and assess ‘what actually happened.’ The present study is interested in Paul’s attempts to define the distant past and how competing attempts to define the past affected sometimes-dueling theological statements and presentations of the rhetorical situation in the present.

B. Paul as Compared with the Later Christian Apologists

Arthur Droge’s innovative and erudite work on the Christian apologists’ indebtedness to Second Temple Jewish historiographers, such as Eupolemus, Artapanus and Philo, studies “how, in the last centuries of antiquity, Christianity was able to fashion a new beginning of the world and of mankind—a beginning based not on the myths of Homer or Hesiod, but on those of Moses.” Starting with Justin Martyr, Droge notes correctly the apologists’ desires “to refute the objection that Christianity was ‘new’ and therefore suspect,” to introduce “Greeks and Romans to the ‘history’ of Moses,” and “to explain why Christianity diverged from the traditional religion of the Jews.” Above all, these Christian apologists seem to have been concerned with demonstrating the historical priority of Christianity to Classical antiquity, thanks in large part to their supercessionist appropriation of a pre-Classical Moses. At the beginning of his study, Droge suggests that the quest for one’s “beginning” may be a universal characteristic of all humanity. Moreover, his conclusion intimates that within early Christianity such a development was the apologists’ innovation. The aforementioned two points stand in a tension with one another: Is the quest for beginnings or defining one’s origins to be found in all human experience—and thus, presumably, in much if not all religious literature, including the HB and NT. Or are these developments within Judaism and Christianity to be credited to post-biblical” authors, respectively Jewish historians like Eupolemus and Josephus and Christian apologists such as Justin and Theophilus?

The present study argues that well before the second-century apologists, the earliest surviving Christian author, Paul, had a vested interest in defining the distant past. Although Paul did not engage in the same range of issues that the apologists attempted to address, the work of Justin and others is not to be regarded as completely new within the Christian tradition but has dual roots in Hellenistic/Roman Judaism and questions about origins that are already present within the NT.

C. The Earliest Conceptions of the Origins of the Christian Tradition

A final prolegomenon concerns what the present study means by the origins of the Christian tradition (sometimes referred to in this study as ‘Christian Origins’). Specialists in Christian Origins seek to explain how a small group of Jewish followers of a prophet named Jesus eventually became a religion, separate from Judaism with its own rituals and literature. There is no shortage of learned studies explaining the origins of Christianity in terms of the early Christians in relation to non-Christian forms of Judaism and in ancient Greco-Roman society, as well as the reasons for the ‘success’ of the early Christian mission.

Most modern studies of Christian Origins, however, reflect little interest in whether, let alone how, the earliest Christians themselves construed the origins of their religion. The notable exception, of course, is the sometimes problematic depictions in the NT book of Acts. Accordingly, NT writings may be ‘harvested’ for the light they shed on Christian Origins, but the theological reflections on origins by the ancient authors themselves receive scant attention, if any. This study seeks to address this lacuna in NT studies, namely that the ‘NT’ and other early Christian authors had some conception(s) of ‘Christian

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2 Without this distinction between the goals of rhetorical analysis and historical reconstruction, the aims of mirror reading can be confused. See Holloway, Consolation, 34-41, esp. 35 n. 5, “that the ‘rhetorical situations’ exists ultimately as a conclusion in the mind of an author...” Cf. Scott Consigny, “Rhetoric and Its Situations,” Philosophy and Rhetoric 7 (1974): 175-86.

3 Droge, Homer, p. viii. Droge argues that such “explicit use of these Jewish writers” begins with Theophilus of Antioch (8; cf. 102-18).

4 Ibid. One can, of course, question whether introducing “Greeks and Romans ... to the ‘history’ of Moses” was for the benefit of outsiders or of the Christians themselves.

5 Ibid., quoting George Eliot: “Men can do nothing without the make-believe of a beginning.”

6 Droge, Homer, 200: “In the view of educated Greeks and Romans Christianity’s Hellenic credentials were at best suspect and at worst nonexistent. It was the achievement of the apologists to bring Christianity within the pale of Hellenism and antiquity.”
Origins.’ Understanding how these authors defined the past can shed light on how they addressed issues they and their communities faced in the present.

This study gives full weight also to debates concerning early Christian self-definition, which took place over time as a result of dynamic interactions with the Greco-Roman world, (non-Christian) Jews and ‘other’ sorts of Christians. To the extent that the earliest conceptions of the origins of the Christian tradition have been touched upon by scholarship, however, it has usually been in discussions of “NT Theology,” which all too often presume (or seek to establish) an essential unity of thought in the NT and other early Christian literature.

The working hypothesis of this study is that questions of self-definition and of origins vis-à-vis defining the past are dynamically related. That is, as soon as an author or a community begins to define who ‘we’ are, questions pertaining to ‘our’ origins are bound to follow (or vice-versa). Thus, the title given to this study (“The Struggle to Define Heilsgeschichte”) is intentional and gives full weight to the diversity known to have existed in earliest Christianity and the impact of that diversity upon early Christian self-definition.

Statements pertaining to origins did not occur in a vacuum and oftentimes reflect an author’s attacks on a competing construction of ‘origins’ or a rejoinder to another’s objection (whether actual or anticipated).

For the purpose of analyzing Paul’s presentations of the origins of the Christian tradition, this study gives particular attention to the ways in which the apostle appealed to the following topics to forge explanations for the origins of the Christian tradition:

- Hebrew Scripture
- Traditions about Jesus
- Apostolic Figures and Their Authority
- (Usually Gentile) Converts

Whereas most scholars have tended to focus upon the current situation addressed by an early Christian author, this study considers how definitions of the past pertaining to these four areas impacted subsequent issues addressed in early Christianity. The following investigation of Paul’s undisputed letters will proceed inductively through portions of each of these seven letters, and then at the end consider synthetically what can be said about Paul’s presentations of the origins of the Christian tradition.

II. Defining the Recent Past: 1 Thessalonians, Philippians, Philemon and 1 Corinthians

A. First Thessalonians: A Positive Example of a Congregation’s Origins

Paul shows concern for the origins of individual Christian communities and of his relations with them in 1 Thess 1:9-10, Phil 1:3-6, Phlm 10-19, 1 Cor 6:9-11 and Gal 3:1-5, 4:8-20. For example, toward the beginning of what is likely Paul’s earliest surviving letter, the apostle summarizes a report of the Thessalonian Christians’ conversion:

For they report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead... (1 Thess 1:9-10)

Besides affirming the Thessalonians’ turning from idols, Paul emphasizes his earlier warm reception from the Thessalonians, who are now confused about ‘Paul’s’ teaching about the end of the world. Paul’s response in 1 Thess 4:13-5:11 reveals that the deaths of some of the Thessalonian Christians gave rise to the fear that either the dead had been lost or those still alive had missed Christ’s return. Consequently, Paul’s highlighting this community’s origins in 1 Thess 1:9-10—in particular, their waiting “for [God’s] Son from heaven”—has the pragmatic value of narrating Paul’s past role in the Thessalonians’ (still) legitimate faith and of making a connection with the Thessalonians’ continued hope for the parousia.

In the body of this letter, Paul develops the former point concerning his past and more recent relations with this community (1 Thess 2:3) before turning to the latter issue, which requires a clarification concerning Paul’s teaching about Christ’s imminent return (1 Thess 4:13-5:11). If Paul cannot affirm the two central tenets of 1 Thess 1:9-10 concerning the Thessalonians’ legitimate conversion and the sincerity of his relations with them, he will not have credibility when seeking to address the grief and perplexity of those who lost loved ones before Christ’s anticipated parousia. Thus, Paul goes to great length to argue for continuity between the well-founded origins of the Thessalonians’ conversion and their relationship with the apostle Paul (1 Thess 1:9-10), and Paul’s consistent sincerity toward them since their conversion (1 Thessalonians 2-3). Without this definition of the past, Paul does not dare proceed to address contemporary questions about the parousia in 1 Thess 4:13-5:11.

B. Philippians: Optimism Rooted in Past Faithfulness

A second example of Paul’s referring to a congregation’s origins is Phil 1:3-6. In his expression of thanksgiving (the proemium) to Philippians, Paul writes, “I thank my God every time I remember you ... because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now” (Phil 1:3, 5). Because of the Philippian Christians’ promising beginning in the faith and their continued faithfulness, Paul can be “confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil 1:6). This formulation in the statement of thanksgiving again attests Paul’s eagerness to address issues of origins early in most of his surviving letters (cf. 1 Thess 1:9-10 and below on Gal 1:1; Rom 1:2-4).

8 In 1 Thess 1:9a, Paul alludes to the saints in Macedonia and Achaia, mentioned explicitly in 1:7-8. That this account of the past is told also by other believers lends additional credibleness to Paul’s implicit claims about the past in 1 Thess 1:9-10.
C. Philemon: The Priority of Past Conversions over Past Socio-economic Interactions

In Philemon Paul serves as a civil mediator between Philemon and Philemon's slave, the fugitius Onesimus (v. 10). According to Philemon, Onesimus has been 'useless' and untrustworthy in some financial matter and thus deserves Philemon's severe treatment (vv. 11, 18-19a). In seeking to set aside the determinative force of these past occurrences for Philemon's present attitude toward Onesimus, Paul states that two other things from the past warrant a different perspective, namely Paul's converting first Philemon and, more recently, Onesimus (vv. 19b, 10).

Although Paul addresses the house church as a whole at the beginning and end of this letter (vv. 3, 22b, 25), the consistent use of the second person singular in vv. 4-22a indicates that the body of the letter addresses only Philemon, the benefactor (and leader?) of this community. Thus, mention of Philemon's conversion is tantamount to alluding to the origin of the congregation as a whole—where would they be without their benefactor, Philemon? Concerning Philemon's treatment of Onesimus, then, two past occurrences—the conversions of Philemon and Onesimus—should take precedence over other past social and economic interactions—most notably, Onesimus' failure as a slave. Such a re-definition of the past is arguably the dominant force in this short letter of Paul. Since Onesimus and Philemon—and by extension the congregation as a whole—owe their existence in Christ to Paul, Paul has the authority to redefine the past and offer different ethical mandates for the present.

D. One Conception of a Congregation's Origins Is to Replace Another: 1 Cor 6:9-11

In 1 Corinthians 6, Paul first reminds the Corinthians of their former ways as fornicators, idolaters, etc.: 9

Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God. And this is what some of you used to be [καὶ ταῦτα τυφέ πήτε]. (1 Cor 6:9-11a)

Because of the Corinthians' more recent experiences in Christ, these Christians should not return to their former ways: "But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified [ἀλλὰ ἐπελουθάσθησθε, ἀλλὰ ἐλευθέρωθε, ἀλλὰ ἐδικαιώθηστε] in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor 6:11bc).

According to 1 Cor 6:9-11, then, one conception of origins (washing, sanctification, etc.) is to replace another (identity derived from a 'pagan' way of life). Paul further implores that the Corinthians choose between two different modes of conduct that follow from these two mutually exclusive explanations of origins. Even if some of the Corinthians may have cried foul—retorting that Paul poses a false dichotomy in 1 Cor 6:9-11—Paul senses that he now has the upper hand in the argument and in 1 Cor 6:12 has confidence to parody the slogan of some in this congregation, that "All things are lawful for me."

III. Defining both the Recent and the Distant Past: 2 Corinthians, Galatians, and Romans

A. Second Corinthians

1. Second Corinthians 10-13: Paul and the 'Super-apostles' at Corinth

Given the perhaps inevitable existence, and eventual recognition, of diversity in the early church, different versions of the 'good news' would eventually come into conflict with one another. Such conflict would naturally give rise to the comparison of the origins of Christian leaders' associations with the faith. A prime example of such a debate about dueling conceptions of apostolic authority concerns Paul's defense against the accusations of the 'super-apostles' who had come to the Corinthians subsequent to his own stay with them (2 Cor 10-13). Paul's remarks concerning both his authority and that of the super-apostles are linked to different conceptions of the origins of one another's authority. In seeking to define the past, Paul is concerned with the source of his own calling and its relevance for the apostle's continued authority within the Pauline congregations and other Christian communities.

At an earlier point in time, when Paul wrote his second letter to the Corinthian Christians (our 1 Corinthians; cf. 1 Cor 5:9), he reflects an awareness only of this congregation's internal problems. 10 Subsequent to the visit of Paul's co-worker Timothy (1 Cor 4:17) and, later, Paul's own 'painful' visit to Corinth (2 Cor 2:1-3), the apostle must engage the Corinthians on a different front concerning his own authority in 2 Corinthians 10-13. Understandably, the 'laundry list' of individual and community issues that Paul had presented in 1 Corinthians did not initially receive a favorable response, at least in part because there was not adequate support in the Corinthian church for Paul's apostolic standing to issue such directives.

a) Charges to Which Paul Does Not Respond Directly

Two of the charges that Paul names in 2 Cor 10-13—concerning Paul's lack of eloquence and not collecting money from the Corinthians—offer a definition of the past that counts against Paul's apostolic authority. Of interest to this study is Paul's inability (or choice not) to redefine some of his past dealings with this congregation. For example, from the beginning of 2 Cor 10-

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9 This shortcoming—and Paul's affirmation that it would otherwise be regarded as such—is historically credible, since Paul in Phlm 18-19a does not dispute that it occurred. Cf. John G. Norgling, "Onesimus Fugitius: A Defense of the Runaway Slave Hypothesis in Philemon," JSNT 41 (1991): 97-119.

10 Paul wrote 1 Corinthians largely in response to the Corinthians' letter to him (e.g., 1 Cor 7:1) and oral reports he had received, e.g., from those sent by Chloe (1 Cor 1:10-11).
Paul is on the defensive: “I who am humble when face to face with you, but bold toward you when I am away!” (2 Cor 10:1b). The central problem that he must address is the Corinthians’ perception of other Christian leaders, whose preaching differed from that of Paul. Since Paul is accused of being “bold” in his letters but unimpressive as an impromptu interlocutor, he reverts that, even if he himself is not an eloquent rhetor, he is nonetheless not inferior to the super-apostles. Perhaps because Paul cannot deny the Corinthians’ observation about his meek face-to-face demeanor, he seeks to dismiss its importance. An additional unanswered charge against Paul was that, because Paul did not take advantage of the patron/client relationship offered to him by the Corinthians to collect money in support of his ministry, Paul thus did not have the authority of a legitimate apostle to do so (2 Cor 11:7-11). At this charge as well Paul can only balk, stating simply that his opponents, who apparently did collect money from the Corinthians, are “false apostles” no less deceiving than Satan himself.

b) Charges to Which Paul Does Respond

Paul does, however, respond to three other charges—concerning Jewish ethnicity, the reception of visions and performing miracles. Like the others, these three accusations are intricately related to different conceptions of apostolic authority and its origins. First, Paul’s Jewish-Christian opponents apparently boasted of their ethnicity: “Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I. Are they ministers of Christ? I am talking like a madman—I am a better one” (2 Cor 11:22-23). At face value, Paul’s rejoinder does not make a lot of sense, for Paul’s opponents would certainly have known about his “former way of life” as a Pharisee. The opponents must have claimed a greater significance from their origins than Paul is willing to acknowledge in rhetorical definition of the present situation. If the claim of the super-apostles involved not only Jewish ethnicity but also association with the earthly Jesus (cf. Acts 1:21-22, discussed below), such a claim would explain Paul’s need to boast about his sufferings for Christ in 2 Cor 11:16-33. In this case, Paul’s argument would be that, even if his opponents can claim to have known Christ ‘according to the flesh’ (cf. 2 Cor 5:16), Paul too has attained such knowledge through his sufferings as an apostle. Thus, in 2 Corinthians 11 Paul maintains that his claim to authority is different from, but nonetheless equal to, that of his opponents, who wished to exclude Paul on the bases of his inferior origins as a late-comer minister of Christ.

Two additional criteria for a legitimate apostle concern the reception of “visions and revelations from the Lord” and the performing of miracles (2 Cor 12:11-13). With regard to the latter, Paul writes:

I have been a fool! You forced me to it. Indeed you should have been the ones commending me, for I am not at all inferior to these super-apostles, even though I am nothing. The signs of a true apostle (σημεῖα τοῦ ἀποστόλου) were performed among you with utmost patience, signs and wonders and mighty works. How have you been worse off than the other churches, except that myself did not burden you? Forgive me this wrong! (2 Cor 12:11-13)

When Paul claims that the “signs of a [genuine] apostle were performed among” the Corinthians, he acknowledges that he lives up to the criterion of performing miracles offered by the rival apostles and that this criterion was apparently accepted also by many of the Corinthians. Such broad acceptance of this standard suggests that the phrase τα σημεία τοῦ ἀποστόλου was “a slogan” of Paul’s opponents and that the criterion of 2 Cor 12:12a did not originate with the apostle himself.


2. 2 Cor 11:4: “For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus (ὁ διάφορος Χριστός) than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit (πνεῦμα ἄλλο) from the one you received, or a different gospel (εὐαγγέλιον ἄλλο) from the one you accepted, you submit to it readily enough,” Paul hopes that the Corinthians will not be deceived as Eve was in Genesis 3 (2 Cor 11:1-3).

3. In 2 Cor 10:10, Paul summarizes this charge: “For they say (ὅτι...φωνεῖ) ‘His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible.’” See further on this point Donald Dale Walker, Paul’s Offer of Leniency (2 Cor 10:1-11): Populist Ideology and Rhetoric in a Pauline Letter Fragment (WUNT 2.152; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), esp. 299-312.

4. 2 Cor 10:12: “We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some of those who commend themselves. But when they measure themselves by one another, and compare themselves with one another, they do not show good sense.”

5. 2 Cor 11:12-15: cf. 1 Cor 9:1-18. Paul must revisit a problem that he had acknowledged previously in 1 Corinthians 9, but now in 2 Cor 11:12-15 with greater awareness of the charges laid against him. Seemingly related to this second charge is the allegation, addressed in 2 Cor 12:14-18, that Paul had taken financial advantage of the Corinthians.

6. 2 Cor 12:1-10. In 2 Cor 12:5, Paul claims to make a distinction between himself and the individual who was called up to the third heaven fourteen years ago. Because this may be a literary device, Paul may well be referring to his own ecstatic experience(s). This is especially the case, since Paul returns to the first person in 2 Cor 12:6-10 and mentions his own sufferings (cf. 2 Cor 11:23-33).

Moreover, Paul’s moving effortlessly in 2 Cor 12:11-13 from addressing the performing of miracles (vv. 11-12) to his not having asked the Corinthians for money (v. 13) can be understood in light of Lucian of Samosata’s parody of a certain exorcist, the Syrian from Palestine, who is said to restore the demon-possessed “for a large fee.” Lucian’s poking fun at the greediness of exorcists may well account for a connection between miracles (vv. 11-12) and asking for money (v. 13). It is plausible to envision the claim of Paul’s opponents that, because Paul does not accept the Corinthians’ offer of patronage and ask for money, he thus does not act as a genuine worker of signs who merits compensation.

Thus, 2 Cor 10-13 reflects a battle of dueling presentations concerning the authority of both Paul and the super-apostles and the differences between their relations with the Corinthian Christians. What Paul seeks to accomplish in this partially-preserved letter fragment is to criticize some of the super-apostles’ credentials and defend his own. The credentials of both Paul and his opponents are linked to different conceptions of the origins of one another’s authority.

Paul himself have invented the label?” It is highly unlikely that Paul’s opponents would have applied to themselves (but not to Paul!) a slogan that ultimately stemmed from Paul himself. Cf. J. A. Kelhofer, “The Apostle Paul and Justin Martyr on the Miraculous: A Comparison of Appeals to Authority,” GRBS 42 (2001): 163-84; esp. 165-7.

18 Gk. ἔστιν ὦθος μεγάλον, Lover of Lies 16. This Syrian communicates directly with the demons, asking them whence and how they came into the patient, and subsequently drives them out. Lucian quickly dismisses his character Ion’s credulous ‘testimony’ to having seen “one coming out, black and smoky in color” as unremarkable (οὗ μεγάλα) and the type of phenomenon readily discerned from Platonism philosophy. The remainder of this passage is also helpful for understanding Lucian’s critique of exorcists and their adherents in Lover of Lies 16: “It is nothing much (οὗ μεγάλα). I remarked, ‘for you, Ion, to see that kind of sight, even when the ‘forms’ that the father of your school, Plato, points out are plain to you, a hazy object of vision to the rest of us, whose eyes are weak.’” Greek text and ET: A. M. Harmon, LCL, Vol. 3.

19 Paul has already mentioned the latter problem of his ‘robbing’ other churches in order not to be a burden to the Corinthians (2 Cor 11:7-12) and returns to this issue again concerning his own conduct (12:13-16) and that of those Paul sent to Corinth (12:17-19).

20 These signs would presumably, but not necessarily, include exorcism. The inference that these two items, miracles and entitlement to payment, were linked in the minds of Paul’s opponents as a basis for critiquing Paul cannot be proved, but Lucian’s Lover of Lies 16 suggests the plausibility of such an explanation. In addition, this solution accounts for why Paul would move so quickly between the apparently unrelated subjects of miracles (2 Cor 12:11-12) and his not asking for money (2 Cor 12:13-16).

21 Pace Paul’s earlier statement in 1 Cor 11:17, which may be the only place where the apostle resists that too much authority be attributed to him.

22 To these observations could be added Paul’s redefinition of his (now past) conflict with the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 1-7.

B. Galatians

1. The Origins of Paul’s Authority and the Galatian Crisis

Paul begins his letter to the Galatians with a central affirmation concerning the origins of his own authority, that he is indeed an apostle sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through ὠνόμα τοῦ θεοῦ ἐκ τῆς ἀποστολῆς τοῦ θεοῦ ἡ τηρομένος, the Father, who raised him from the dead.

(Gal 1:1)

Paul writes in the wake of rival missionaries who have preached a gospel that was “different” from his own message to the Galatians. These other missionaries not only advocated circumcision as a necessary rite of passage for Gentile converts, but also would not accept the conclusions that Paul drew from his calling concerning his own authority.

The apostle’s response in Gal 1:11-2:10 elaborates why his gospel “is not of human origin” (Gal 1:1). Paul’s gospel is not subject to the scrutiny and approval of the Jerusalem church because Paul “received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.” Paul’s opening statement in this letter (Gal 1:1) anticipates the later point about Paul’s deriving authority on the basis of his calling.

Paul’s remarks in Gal 1:15-17 emphasize further his distance from the Jerusalem church, highlighting periods of approximately three years spent in Arabia and Damascus and another fourteen years in Syria and Cilicia. These activities outside of Palestine stand in sharp contrast to his two brief visits to Jerusalem, one lasting just fifteen days and the other having occurred “in response to a revelation” (Gal 2:2).

Accordingly, both Paul and his opponents had presented to the Galatians conflicting depictions of the origin of Paul’s calling and Paul’s subsequent interactions with the Jerusalem church. In the view of Paul’s opponents, Paul’s agreeing to collect money from Gentile congregations for the poor saints in

25 Gal 1:6-7: “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel εἰς ἐξήνυθεν εἰς αὐτοῖς — not that there is another gospel (6 ὦκε ἐξήνυθεν ἄλλοι), but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ.”

26 Gal 1:11-12. Paul may not have been entirely consistent on this point, however. According to Gal 2:2b, during an earlier visit to Jerusalem Paul felt the need to have his message examined by the leaders in Jerusalem. “Then I laid before them [οὐκ ἔχεις οἰκονόμους σύντομος] (though only in a private meeting with the acknowledged leaders) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure that I was not running, or had not run, in vain.” By the time he writes Galatians, Paul seeks to redefine what happened, now repudiating the connection between his revelation (Gal 1:11-12) and the need for authentication by human authority (Gal 2:2b) that he had apparently once, presumably in agreement with the Jerusalem leadership, affirmed.

27 Gal 1:15-17: “But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal ἀπὸ κοινωνίας ὑμῶν to me [ἐν ὑμῖν], so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem [οὐδὲ ἐκ οἰκονομίᾳ ἐκ λεποτικοῦ] to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus.”

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Judea (cf. Gal 2:10) reflected his submission to the authority of the Jerusalem church. Paul, of course, presents an opposite view in Gal 2:9-10. Thus, depending on what conceptions of origins were (or were not) attached to Paul’s authority, calling and interactions with the Jerusalem church, both sides (Paul and his opponents) had much to gain (or lose) in terms of the acceptance of their overall messages by the Galatian churches.

As mentioned above, the interest reflected in Galatians 1-2 and 2 Corinthians 10-13 in Paul’s calling was perhaps inevitable, given the diversity of earliest Christianity. Once two (or more) versions of the ‘good news’ come into conflict with one another, the origins of Christian leaders’ associations with the faith are bound to be compared with one another. Since Paul could not derive authority from association with the earthly Jesus (cf. Acts 1:21-22), discussed below), his plea for recognition stands or falls with the unprovable claim to direct ‘revelation’ from the risen Christ.27


Of the various arguments Paul offers for his theology in Galatians 3-4 only two (Gal 3:1-5 and 4:8-20, discussed below) do not concern OT interpretation. In what follows, it will be argued that Paul’s interpretation of the OT in Gal 3:6-4:7 and 4:21-31 should not be understood as an attempt to ‘prove’ the fulfillment of scripture as, for example, in Matt 1:18-2:23. Rather, the apostle wishes to argue that the Pauline gospel itself is rooted in and consistent with Hebrew scripture. To the extent that Paul can trace the origins of his message to Abraham and this patriarch’s legacy, he denies the attempts of his Christian opponents to do the same.

In fact, in Gal 3:6-4:7 and 4:21-31 Paul is arguably more interested in Abraham than in Christ. The origins of Abraham as the first believer (cf. Gen 15:6, cited in Gal 3:6) and first justified person (cf. Gen 12:3, cited in Gal 3:8) set the paradigm for the apostle’s argument that those who have faith in Christ are Abraham’s legitimate heirs and descendents: “Those who believe [οἱ ἐκ πίστεως] are the descendants of Abraham,” and “those who believe [οἱ ἐκ πίστεως] are blessed with Abraham who believed” (Gal 3:7, 9).

Both Paul and his opponents would agree that the origin of Abraham’s status as a person of faith is the archetype and standard for faithful Christians—whether Jews or Gentiles—in the present. The paradigmatic interpretation of

the covenant of circumcision in Gen 17:1-14 that was advocated by Paul’s opponents, however, would stipulate that becoming circumcised and adhering to the Law follow necessarily from the promises given to Abraham and his descendants in Genesis 12 and 15. In order to circumnavigate this competing account of origins, Paul argues for the chronological priority of the promise and belief credited to the uncircumcised (!) Abraham.28 Dispensing with a universal application of the rite mandated in Genesis 17, Paul can state that the distinctions resulting from the different classifications of human beings under the covenant of circumcision have been abolished in Christ: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”29

After mentioning the Galatians’ former ways and Paul’s past relations with them (Gal 4:8-20), Paul again returns to the subject of Abraham and Abraham’s offspring with reference to Hagar and Sarah (4:21-31). Throughout this allegory, Paul offers a dichotomy of origins concerning the two women who conceived in states of slavery and freedom (Gal 4:22) and their sons born either “according to the flesh” [κατὰ σάρκα] or “through a promise” (δι᾽ ἐπαγγελίας, 4:23). Paul’s allegorical interpretation of offspring in terms of two mutually exclusively covenants (δύο διαθήκαι, Gal 4:24) supports the apostle’s present intolerance of the other gospel proclaimed by his opponents (cf. Gal 1:6-7). Just as there can only be one true covenant, so there can be only one sanctioned version of the (Pauline) gospel and one legitimate account of origins connecting contemporary people of faith with the patriarch Abraham.

The Galatians must thus choose between gospels whose origins are rooted in either slavery or freedom. Paul’s final mandate leaves no middle ground for how these emissaries from the Jerusalem church are to be treated: “Drive out [ἐξβάλλω] the slave and her child; for the child of the slave will not share the inheritance with the child of the free woman” (Gal 4:30bc, citing Gen 21:10). Because the Galatians should accept Paul’s stipulation that the Abrahamic covenant is rooted in freedom, they can turn away from the arguments of the agitators and claim identity as “children, not of the slave but of the free woman” (Gal 4:31b). It follows, moreover, that Paul’s interpretations of the OT in Galatians 3-4 cannot be simplified in terms of an attempt to ‘prove’ the fulfillment of scripture. Rather, this part of Paul’s letter argues that the Pauline

26 “When James and Cephas and John, who were acknowledged pillars, recognized the grace that had been given to me, they gave to Barnabas and me the right hand of fellowship, agreeing that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcision. They asked only one thing, that we remember the poor, which was actually what I was eager to do [οἱ καὶ ἐπιτύμβωσαν αὐτοῦ τὸ ὅσιόν τοῖς παίσασιν].”
28 Cf. Matthew’s formulaic reference to such instances of fulfillment associated with the birth of Jesus. E.g., Matt 2:23b (RSV): “. . . so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, ‘He will be called a Nazorean.’" Cf. Matt 1:22-23, 2:6, 14, 18.
29 E.g., Gal 3:17: “My point is this: the law, which came four hundred thirty years later, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise.”
30 Gal 3:28, and following Troy W. Martin, “Covenant of Circumcision (Gen 17:9-14) and the Situational Antitheses in Gal 3:28," forthcoming in JBFL; cf. idem, “Pagan and Judeo-Christian Time-keeping Schemes in Gal 4:10 and Col 2:16,” NTS 42 (1996): 105-19. According to Genesis 17, Jewish men and male slaves owned by Jews were compelled to be circumcised, while Gentile and freeborn men could choose to become circumcised. Women (whether Jewish or Gentile, slave or free), however, could not receive the sign of the Abrahamic covenant. Martin’s interpretation of Gal 3:28 explains Paul’s use of οὗτος...οὗτος...καί in this verse (οὗτος ἐν Ἰουδαίοις οὐδὲ Ἑλληνικῷ, οὗτος ἐν δουλοῖς οὐδὲ ἔλεγχος, οὗτος ἐν ἀρσεν καὶ θηλίῳ. Cf. Gen 1:27b, LXX: ἀρσεν καὶ θηλίᾳ ἐποίησεν αὐτούς."
gospel itself—and not the message of his opponents—is rooted in Hebrew scripture.


Three final examples of origins in Galatians pertain to this congregation and the apostle’s experiences with them. In Gal 3:1-5, 4:8-11 and 4:12-20, Paul includes in a series of arguments two references to the origins of this congregation (Gal 3:1-5, 4:8-11) and a retelling of his own experience with the Galatians (Gal 4:12-20). These assorted arguments pertaining to a congregation’s conversion from paganism (Gal 3:1-5), to the patriarch Abraham (Gal 3:6-4:7, 4:21-31) and to the apostle’s own dealings with the Galatians (Gal 4:12-20) are intrinsically linked to one another. That is, throughout Galatians 3-4 Paul moves effortlessly from recounting the distant/primal past to the more recent events, and in so doing tries to forge a cogent narrative linking the Galatians to Hebrew scripture and his own apostolic authority.

a) Gal 3:1-5: Reception of the Spirit and of Paul

The first such reference to this congregation’s origins begins Paul’s rejoinder to his opponents’ criticisms.34 At the beginning of this passage (3:1-2), the apostle narrates the Galatians’ first acquaintance with the gospel and pleads that they recall their reception of the Spirit at that time.35 Because they received the Spirit at the beginning with Paul present, and because of the continued presence of the Spirit working miracles (δυνάμεις) in their midst, the Galatians should realize that the ‘gospel’ more recently preached to them by others does not add anything to what they have already received. Betz appreciates well Paul’s connecting the past to the Galatians’ present situation: “‘Miracles’ (δυνάμεις) can be named as evidence for the fact that the Spirit is ‘at work’ (ἐργάζεται) among them. Consequently, God must now be at work among them.”36 Such wonders should serve as a reminder that the Pauline gospel still has validity in the face of the ‘other’ gospel which the apostle seeks to dismiss in this letter. Maintaining continuity with the Galatians’ reception of the Spirit is tantamount to a contemporary call to action: The earlier conversion experience defines proper conduct in the present.

34 Gal 4:8-9: “Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to beings that by nature are not gods. Now, however, that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again (πάλιν ἐπιστρέφετε πάλιν) to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits (στόχευτα)? How can you want to be enslaved to them again?”
35 Moreover, the argumentation of Gal 3:1-5 and 4:8-9 anticipates the dichotomy Paul makes between slavery and freedom in Gal 4:21-31 (also discussed above).
36 Gal 4:10-11. With T. W. Martin, “Apostasy to Paganism: The Rhetorical Sasis of the Galatian Controversy,” JBL 114 (1995): 437-61; idem, “Pagan and Judeo-Christian Time-keeping Schemes.” The plausibility of the Galatians’ having relapsed into paganism (and not having been converted to the different form of Christianity preached by Paul’s opponents!) is strengthened by Paul’s charge that his opponents wish to ‘exclude’ the Galatians: “they want to exclude you [ἐξελευθερωθῆτε ἐπὶ ἡδονὴν ὑμῶν] so that you may make much of them” (Gal 4:17). The opponents’ desire for separation rather than for unity because of the Galatians’ aversion to becoming circumcised would be excluded by the Pauline gospel, however.
so doing and chooses to appeal to the differences between this congregation’s pagan (Gal 4:8-11) and Christian (Gal 3:1-5) religious roots.

c) Gal 4:12-20: Continuing to Receive Paul

Following a reference to the former (and present) status of the Galatians (Gal 4:8-11), Paul’s personal appeal in Gal 4:12-20 develops further the origins of the apostle’s relationship with this congregation.37 In shifting the discussion from the Galatians’ reception of the Spirit (Gal 3:1-5) to their reception of Paul (Gal 4:12-20), the apostle argues implicitly that just as they have continued to enjoy manifestations of the Spirit, so should they continue to welcome Paul as their sincere and beneficent apostle. Accordingly, the one narrative concerning origins (receiving the Spirit) supports an implied narrative (receiving Paul). Since Paul from the beginning has looked out for the good of the Galatians, they should be reticent to follow the other teachers, who “make much of you, but for no good purpose; they want to exclude you, so that you may make much of them” (Gal 4:17).

Thus, arguments pertaining to a congregation’s conversion from paganism, to ‘our father Abraham’ and to the apostle’s own dealings with the Galatians are intrinsically linked to one another in Galatians 3-4. It follows that these and other arguments in Galatians concern first and foremost the re-definition of origins—those of Paul’s authority, the Pauline gospel and the faith of the Galatian Christians—and therefore of the Christian tradition as a whole.

Excursus: Acts 1:21-22 as a Pre-Lukan Criterion for Apostolic Authority

Such problems with the origin of Paul’s authority, which Paul himself had to address in Galatians and 2 Corinthians 10-13, are later recognized implicitly by none other than the author of Acts, himself a Paulinist. When placing in the apostle Peter’s mouth a criterion for candidates who might ‘replace’ the apostle Judas, the author of Acts assumes that legitimate apostles trace the origins of their authority back to the beginnings of Jesus’ public ministry.38 According to this standard, Paul would not have qualified to be considered for the position given to Matthias. Perhaps for this reason, in Acts Paul is not counted among the apostles, except in Acts 14:4 and 14:14.39 Although Paul is explicitly named as an apostle in Acts 14:14a (“When the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it…”), Acts 15:2-4 implies that Paul actually does not belong to this group.40 If Paul is to speak “with the apostles” (15:2) and be “welcomed by … the apostles” (15:4), he is not one of them. Thus, even an advocate of Paul like the later author of Acts sensed the very tension addressed by Paul himself concerning the origin of Paul’s authority.

C. Romans

1. The Origins of Traditions about Jesus

Concerning Hebrew scripture and traditions about Jesus, the apostle Paul, like most of the early Christians, was concerned to affirm the continuity of his gospel about Jesus with what God had “promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures” (Rom 1:2). Early Christians stressed both Jesus’ lineage from the Hebrew king David and, concerning Jesus’ origin, the authentication God offered for God’s Son through the resurrection. Paul’s epistolary prescript to the Roman Christians reflects his eagerness to affirm this continuity in: the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord (Rom 1:3-4). In fact, if Paul cannot show how his understanding of Jesus stands in agreement with the probably pre-Pauline formulations of Rom 1:2-4, his message and work as a missionary run two risks: rejection by the Roman Christians he hopes to meet (Rom 15:22-29) and continued opposition from other Christians.41 Significantly, the same authentication offered for Christ—that is, the resurrection—in Rom 1:3-4 is connected to Paul’s own calling by the

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37 Gal 4:12-16, 20: “Friends, I beg you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. You have done me no wrong. You know that it was because of a physical infirmity that I first announced the gospel to you; though my condition put you to the test, you did not scorn or despise me, but welcomed me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus [ἀλλὰ ὥστε ἐγγέλου θεοῦ ἐκάθεσε με, ὃς Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦν]. What has become of the good will you felt? For I testify that, if it had been possible, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me. Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth? ... I wish I were present with you now and could change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.”

38 Acts 1:21-22: “So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that [ἐν παντὶ χρόνῳ ὧν] the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these must become [ὅτε... γενέσθαι] a witness with us to his resurrection.”

39 E.g., Acts 14:4-6a: “But the residents of the city [Lystra] were divided; some sided with the Jews, and some with the apostles [τοὺς τῶν ἀπόστολον]. And when an attempt was made by both Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to mistreat them and to stone them, [the apostles] learned of it and fled (συνανάγακται κατέθηκαν) to Lystra and Derbe...” In Acts 14:6a, a subject is not specified for συναναγκάζονται κατεθήκαν. The supplying of a subject ("the apostles") in the NRSV offers a clarification in English that runs contrary to the preferred terminology of the author of Acts. In Acts, moreover, only the plural "apostles" (ἀπόστολοι) occurs. A better clarification in the English translation of Acts 14:6a would list the names “Paul and Barnabas” (cf. 14:4a) rather than their usual designation as “the apostles” (cf. 14:4b) in Acts. Cf. Kelhoffer, Miracle and Mission: The Authentication of Missionaries and Their Message in the Longer Ending of Mark (WUNT 2.112; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 268-71.

40 Acts 15:2, 4: “And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles [τοῖς τῶν ἀπόστολοι] and the elders... When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles [ὅπως τῆς ἑκκλησίας καὶ τῶν ἀπόστολοι] and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them.”

41 Concerning Paul’s opponents, see the following section on the (earlier) conflict Paul addresses in Galatians.
risen Christ in Gal 1:1. Thus, in two Pauline epistolary precepts, Paul shows his eagerness to address questions of origins concerning Christ (Rom 1:3-4) and his own apostolic authority (Gal 1:1). Later in Romans, Paul states that Christ came as a servant of the circumcised and for the benefit of Gentiles (Rom 15:8-9a). Christ’s benefits for both Jews and Gentiles are offered as fulfillment of Hebrew scripture:

“For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised [οἱ ἄνακοι...περιτοµη] on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs [τὰς ἐπαγγελίας τῶν πατέρων], and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, ‘Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles, and sing praises to your name’ and again he says, ‘Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people’; and again, ‘Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise him’; and again Isaiah says, ‘The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rules to the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope.’”

Paul marshals proof for 15:8-9a by citing four passages of OT scripture that mention inclusion of the Gentiles (Ps 18:49; Deut 32:43 [LXX]; Ps 117:1; Isa 11:10 [LXX]). Despite the apostle’s relative lack of interest in ‘the earthly Jesus’ (but see Phil 2:5-8; 2 Cor 8:9), Paul goes to great length to show how his understanding of Jesus and gospel to the Gentiles are rooted in the promises of Hebrew scripture. Inasmuch as Paul is in dialogue with pre-Pauline Jesus traditions, he affirms that his gospel stands in continuity with the conceptions of origins of non-Paulinist Christians.

2. Chronological Priority Revised and Augmented with Reference to the Origins of Evil: Romans 4-5

Elsewhere in Romans, Paul refines topics he had previously addressed in Galatians 3-4 concerning Abraham’s faith and justification. Such modifications indicate that questions concerning origins continued to be the subject of reflection for the apostle after the Galatian crisis. As in Gal 3:6-4:7, Paul calls attention in Rom 4:1-5 to the chronological priority of the promises Abraham received before the patriarch became circumcised. Differently from Galatians, however, Paul drops the allegory of Sarah and Hagar (Gal 4:21-31) and instead emphasizes Abraham’s faith as an old man who trusted the Lord’s promise of offspring. In Romans 4 Paul also offers for the first time an analogy between Abraham’s faith and the Christian’s belief in Christ’s resurrection. Moreover, the apostle offers some reflections on the new life given Christians reconciled to God by Christ (Rom 5:1-11).

In addition, Paul offers an entirely new discourse concerning Adam in Rom 5:12-21. In this passage, the apostle augments his earlier arguments in Galatians concerning the chronological priority of the uncircumcised Abraham’s faith (Gal 3:6-4:7; 4:21-31; cf. Romans 4) with recourse to an even earlier—indeed, the earliest—figure, namely Adam. By turning to Adam, the first human being, Paul takes refuge in an additional pre-Mosaic figure. Although Paul’s detractors may indeed, have been interested in the observation that “death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses” (Rom 5:14a), Paul finds great significance in “Adam, who is a type [τύπος] of the one who was to come” (Rom 5:14c). Adam’s sin, moreover, offers a window into the origins of evil: And the free gift is not like the effect of the one man’s sin [ἀνελάβη ἡ ἀμαρτία τοῦ ἑνός] for the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. If, because of the one man’s trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ. (Rom 5:16-17)

For Paul, such origins of evil find their ultimate solution in Christ. Thus, Genesis 3 is directly connected to the contemporary situation of Paulinist Christians.

E. P. Sanders is on the right track in his attempt to understand the reasoning behind Paul’s soteriological statements in Romans 4-5 and the other undisputed letters:

Paul’s logic seems to run like this: in Christ God has acted to save the world; therefore the world is in need of salvation; but God also gave the law; if Christ is given for salvation, it must follow that the law could not have been [for salvation]; is the law then against the purpose of God which has been revealed in Christ? No, it has the function of consigning everyone to sin so that everyone could be saved by God’s grace in Christ.

42 Rom 4:24b-25: “it will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.”

43 The above statement does not attempt to interpret Romans in light of the (earlier) situation addressed in Galatians. Rather, it infers that Paul’s experience during the Galatian crisis naturally shaped the presentation of his views in Romans. The writing of Galatians did not ipso facto silence Paul’s opponents. On the contrary, in Romans Paul must continue to be aware of his detractors’ potential or actual objections.

44 Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 475, emphasis original. It does not necessarily follow, as Sanders states, that “Paul did not preach about men, but about God. It is true that, in the press of explaining the implications of his gospel, he comes closer to working out what can be
Paul’s statements in Galatians 3:1-4 and Romans 4:5 have sometimes been interpreted as suggesting that the apostle’s opponents did, in fact, regard the Law as a solution for sin and a source of righteousness. Against this inference is that non-Christian evidence supports the existence of such a ‘legalistic’ perspective in ancient Judaism. Paul’s motivation for probing—some might say exploiting—the origins of evil in Rom 5:12-21 is to be found in this very point, that the Law does not offer a solution for sin. As a consequence, Paul argues that the bridge his Christian opponents would like to make with the pre-Mosaic patriarch Abraham is untenable. In Rom 5:12-21, Paul is not mirroring the actual theology of his opponents but rather exploiting a ‘hole’ that he perceived in a rival Christian theological system.

These observations on Romans 4-5 indicate that, for Paul, questions concerning origins—in this case, the origins of the Pauline Gospel—were never fixed in stone but were rather the subject of continued reflection, reformation, evolution, and debate. The revised and expanded arguments of Romans 4-5 seek to put additional distance between Paul’s gospel and a normative interpretation of Genesis 17 that would require circumcision for all Gentile converts to Christianity. Accordingly, many, but not all, of Paul’s arguments concerning origins in Gal 3:6-4:7 and 4:21-31 (discussed above) remain constant in Romans 4-5. The interest in Adam and the origins of evil are augmented with yet another new (for Paul) venture into the Jewish origins of the Pauline gospel in Romans 9-11 (discussed immediately below).

3. The Jewish Origins of the Pauline Gospel: Romans 9-11

An additional example of the way Paul appeals to and creates explanations of origins concerns the apostle’s affirmation of the roots of the Pauline gospel within Judaism. In Romans 9-11, Paul must demonstrate that, despite the unbelief of many non-Jewish Christians, “It is not as though the word of God has failed” (Rom 9:6a). Paul writes in response to a perceived (or an anticipated) critique of his own conception of origins, that is, a critique that denied the continuity between OT promises and Paul’s claims to their fulfillment in his gospel. To Paul’s detractors, the disparity between the success of Paul’s missionary endeavors among the Gentiles, on the one hand, and the enduring reality of many Jews who had not become Christian, on the other, meant that one of the following propositions must be true:

1. Paul’s theology of justification is correct (cf. Romans 1-8), and thus the word of God to ancient Israel has indeed ‘failed’ because so many Jews remain excluded by the Pauline gospel.

2. The promises to ancient Israel do remain valid, indicating that Paul’s theology of justification is seriously flawed, because Paul allows that (uncircumcised) Gentiles not obey numerous aspects of the Mosaic law.

Paul defends the statement of Rom 9:6a—that “it is not as though the word of God has failed”—with the dual arguments that “not all Israelites truly belong to Israel” (Rom 9:6b) and that at the eschatological end of history “all Israel will be saved” (Rom 11:26). With this ‘both-and’ approach to welcoming uncircumcised Gentiles into the church and affirming the continued validity of OT promises, Paul can account for the origins of the Pauline gospel within Judaism, the continuing validity of promises made to ancient Israel, and the ‘unbelief’ of many Jews in Paul’s day.

IV. Synthetic Analysis: Paul on the Origins of the Christian Tradition

The recitation and continual reinterpretation of one’s origins may be a vital and necessary part of every religious tradition. This article has argued that Paul’s occasional letters assume, interact with, revise, and attempt to forge explanations for the origin of his gospel vis-à-vis (1) Judaism, (2) the origins of Jesus, (3) Paul’s own authority and (4) the faith of Paulinist Christians. It has also been argued that these explanations were both interrelated and of central concern to the apostle’s definitions of the rhetorical situations in his occasional letters.

With regard to (1) the roots of the Pauline gospel within Judaism, Romans 9-11 and Gal 3:6-4:7, 4:21-31, as well as the revisions of Paul’s arguments in Romans 4-5, illustrate Paul’s concern to show that his message to the Gentiles stands in continuity with promises and precedents in Hebrew scripture. In addition, Rom 1:2-4 and 15:8-12 shed light on the importance Paul placed on elucidating (2) the origins of his Christology. For whatever reason, Paul discusses christological origins far less than the origins of his own authority and of his congregations. Although traditions about Jesus would eventually receive much more attention in early Christian ‘Gospels,’ it was nonetheless important for Paul to show his understanding of Jesus and gospel to the Gentiles are rooted in the promises of Hebrew scripture. The message of the ‘good news’ is presented as a continuation of, and thus assumes continuity with, the OT.

Moreover, Gal 1:2 and 2 Cor 10-13 highlight Paul’s concern about (3) the source of his calling and its relevance for his continued authority within the Pauline congregations and elsewhere in the early church. It was also noted that

50. For example, Mark, the earliest Gospel, explains the beginning of Jesus’ ministry in terms of the coming of John the Baptist in fulfillment of the Jewish scriptures (Mark 1:4, citing Mal 3:1 and Isa 40:3).
a criterion like the one attested in Acts 1:21-22—that legitimate apostles validate their authority from association with the earthly Jesus—which Paul’s opponents apparently used against him, best accounts for Paul’s assertions concerning the origin of his authority in Galatians and 2 Corinthians.51

Finally, Paul shows concern for (4) the origins of individual Christian communities and of his relations with them in 1 Thess 1:9-10, Phil 1:3-6, 1 Cor 6:9-11 and Gal 3:1-5, 4:8-20. Paul’s explanation of the Thessalonians’ origins (1 Thess 1:9-10) affirms both Paul’s past role in their (still) legitimate faith and the Thessalonians’ continued hope for Christ’s return. In Phil 1:3-6, Paul’s confidence about these Christians’ past faithfulness to “the one who began a good work among” the Philippians will continue until “the day of Jesus Christ.” In his moral exhortation to the Corinthians, however, Paul contrasts one conception of origins (identity derived from a ‘pagan’ ways of life) with another (washing, sanctification, etc.; 1 Cor 6:9-11). Finally, throughout Galatians 3-4, it is clear that Paul presumes a system of interrelated accounts of origins concerning a congregation’s conversion from paganism, connection with the promises of Hebrew scripture and the apostle’s own dealings with the Galatians. One implication of this study is that debates concerning the interpretation of ‘the Christ event’ (however construed) cannot be separated from what came before (ancient Israel/HB) or after (apostolic authority and the origins of congregations). When the various explanations assumed and argued in Paul’s letters about the origins of the Christian tradition are understood, these arguments shed much light on the present disputes the apostle addresses.

Accordingly, this article demonstrates that, although the New Testament book of Acts offers the earliest narrative account of Christian origins, Paul’s occasional letters attest an even earlier point in the life of the early church when accounts of origins were a living part of the contested and evolving tradition. A key difference between Paul’s statements and the allegedly coherent narrative of Acts should not be effaced, however. The allusions and brief references to origins in Paul’s occasional letters, although numerous, do not allow for an exhaustive reconstruction of Paul’s conceptions of Christian origins, as the apostle does not communicate these en toto. Despite the contentious nature of many of his statements concerning origins, Paul himself did not sense the need to offer a systematic explanation of Pauline Christian origins. The closest Paul came in this regard is Galatians 1-4. Such a literary enterprise concerning the origin of the church and its apostolic authority would be left to the later author of Acts and, after him/her, to apologists like Aristides and Justin Martyr and the authors of the various apocryphal acts.

As mentioned at the beginning of this conclusion, the posing, refining and sometimes rejecting common explanations of origins may be a fundamental component of the human psyche and of any shared human consciousness,

51 Much could also be said about the NT Gospels’ interest in the authority of Jesus’ disciples (e.g., Mark 6:7-13 par.; 10:35-45 par.; Matt 16:13-19; 18:15-20; John 20:21-23; cf. John 21:20-24, which shows the growing tenacity of this tendency in this secondary addition to the Fourth Gospel).

52 Disputes about origins and their interpretation are, of course, not limited to the earliest Christian writings. The types of disputes outlined above in Paul’s letters are a main concern in more recent conflicts, as, e.g., the ongoing conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians: The dispute over land is intertwined with the right to a particular narrative about one’s origins and past, and therefore to legitimacy.