

Article

Was Paul Within Judaism, Within Israel or Within Israel's Messiah?

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Abstract: In NT scholarship, the Paul Within Judaism approach has gained considerable momentum. In this approach to Paul's discourse on identity, a distinction is drawn between "Jewish" and gentile followers of Christ. "Jewish" followers, including Paul, are considered those that remain fully Torah-observant, whereas gentile followers are regarded as not fully Torah-observant, especially with respect to circumcision. In this contribution, Paul's identity in relation to first-century "Judaism" and/or historical Israel is reconsidered. The main question that is asked in this regard is whether the Paul Within Judaism approach is a viable position in light of the hermeneutical difficulties surrounding first-century "Judaism", as well as Paul's own rhetoric around the Ἰουδαῖοι ("Jews"/"Judeans"). Another question that is asked is whether Ἰσραήλ ("Israel") and the Ἰουδαῖοι point to the exact same entity. Would it be more accurate to see Paul as being within Israel as one of God's covenant people than as remaining a Ἰουδαῖος ("Jew"/"Judean")? Or did Paul leave his identity as a Ἰουδαῖος or as part of Israel behind for a new identity to be defined around Israel's Messiah only? Lastly, it is considered whether Paul's discourse on identity leaves room for an identity in Christ that is inclusive of an identity as a Ἰουδαῖος or as being part of Israel, or whether the identity in Christ excludes the latter.

Keywords: Paul; Paul Within Judaism; ethnicity; Judaism; Radical New Perspective on Paul; Pauline theology; religion; Israel



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1. Introduction

The "Paul Within Judaism" (PwJ) approach, also known as the Radical New Perspective on Paul (RNPP), has gained considerable momentum in Pauline research. The basic claim of this approach is that after Paul's encounter with Christ, he continued to practice "Judaism" and thus did not become a "Christian" as such, which is held to be an anachronistic designation. Paul rather remained fully Torah-observant, which included unique marks of identity such as circumcision, food purity laws and Sabbath observance. According to the PwJ position, Paul's discourse in Romans and Galatians is understood as solely directed to a gentile audience, and the main problem that he addresses is bringing gentiles into a covenant relationship with the God of Israel without having them become Ἰουδαῖοι ("Jews"/"Judeans") or fully Torah-observant. Paul advocates tolerance and unity between the Ἰουδαῖοι and gentiles, where all have an allegiance to Christ, although each retains their own ethnic and cultural identity. In this understanding, instead of the requirement of full Torah observance or taking on a "Jewish" identity, gentile followers of Christ are accommodated as God's people based on a minimum set of requirements or a "relaxed *halakah*", often referred to as the "Noahide Laws" or "Noahic Covenant", which are said to be based on the so-called Apostolic Decree (Acts 15:19–32; 16:1–5; 21:25). By implication, different criteria are applied for membership as one of God's covenant people for Ἰουδαῖοι and gentiles (e.g., Nanos 1996, pp. 50–56; 2012, pp. 123–24; Campbell 2008, pp. 89–93; Eisenbaum 2009, p. 252; Rudolph 2011; Tucker 2011, pp. 62–114; Nanos and Zetterholm 2015; Thiessen 2016; Zetterholm 2020; Fredriksen 2022; Novenson 2022; Bird et al. 2023; Runesson 2023).

The first question that is asked in this article is whether it is hermeneutically justifiable to see Paul's identity as being "within Judaism". Is "Judaism" an appropriate translation for the Greek Ἰουδαϊσμός (Gal 1:13)? In this discussion, the hermeneutical intricacies surrounding the designations Ἰουδαῖος and Ἰσραήλ ("Israel") are revisited. Subsequently, the theological principles behind Paul's conception of identity are tested against the idea that Paul remained a Ἰουδαῖος and thus retained such an identity. Within this discussion, it is considered whether it is a better option to see Paul as remaining within Israel than in a new "Israel". Lastly, it is considered whether it is more appropriate to see Paul's identity as solely defined around Israel's Messiah. Paul's relationship to the Torah is also part of the equation here, although it does not constitute the main focus of this article.

2. Revisiting the Terms "Judaism", "Jew" and "Judaean"

There has been considerable debate on how to translate Paul's references to Ἰουδαῖος/Ἰουδαῖοι and Ἰουδαϊσμός. In a seminal article, Steve [Mason \(2007\)](#) argued that the Ἰουδαῖοι in the first century cannot be seen as representing a "religion" as we know it today but rather an *ethnos*, although an *ethnos* might also consist of religious elements. Much of Mason's reasoning is based on Shaye [Cohen's \(1999\)](#) argument that Ἰουδαῖος in antiquity was primarily an ethnic-geographic term, similar to terms such as Egyptian, Edomite, Syrian, Lydian and so on. Being a Ἰουδαῖος constituted an *ethnos* based on living in one's ancestral land. Since the term "Jew" has stronger religious connotations in contemporary society, [Cohen \(1999, pp. 69–70\)](#) suggested that the term should be translated as "Judaean" rather than as "Jew". Similarly, [Mason \(2007\)](#) proposed that the translation "Judaean" is a more appropriate translation for the Greek Ἰουδαῖος in Paul's time in order to account for the hermeneutical distance between first-century Ἰουδαῖοι and contemporary Jews.

In the same vein, Mason advised that Ἰουδαϊσμός (Gal 1:13) be translated as "a Judaean way of life" rather than as "Judaism". This line of reasoning and the suggested translations were followed by several others (e.g., BDAG, s.v. Ἰουδαῖος; [Malina and Rohrbaugh 1992, p. 32](#); [Esler 2003](#); [Elliott 2007](#)). PwJ proponents, however, prefer the translations "Jew" and "Judaism" in relation to the Ἰουδαῖοι in Paul's time. For example, [Runesson \(2015, p. 65\)](#) claims that "in Late Antiquity, Judaism never rejected the ancient connection between a people, their land, laws, and god(s). Although Christians have, through the ages, tried to redefine Judaism as a 'religion', a negative mirror image of themselves, mainstream Jews never accepted this rewriting of their identity and have continued to understand their *ethnos* as intertwined with the Jewish law, the land, and the God of Israel". On the one hand, Runesson is critical of the idea that "Christianity" as such can be traced back to Paul, and on the other hand, he argues that "the majority of the phenomena we call 'Judaism', in all their diversity and developments, have kept the basic characteristic traits of their *ethnos* since before the time of Paul" ([Runesson 2015, p. 66](#)).

While not a PwJ proponent as such, the Jewish scholar Daniel [Schwartz \(2014\)](#) argued against Mason's proposal to disassociate the concept of "religion" from the designation Ἰουδαῖος. [Schwartz \(2014, p. 91\)](#) contends that the categories of "religion" and "Judaism" did exist in the Greco-Roman world. He specifically states that his intention is not to contradict Mason's arguments, and he admits that, in antiquity, the term did denote an *ethnos*. Schwartz's intention is, rather, to focus on the "modern English" usage of the term. When discussing the English term "Jew", he indicates that it points to a people "not only with regard to their religion ... but also with regard to their ethnicity, *insofar as latter regards their pedigree*" ([Schwartz 2014, p. 87, emphasis added](#)). Although arguing against Mason's disassociation of religion from ethnicity, Schwartz still seems to associate ethnicity with matters that primarily involve pedigree, and not so much with a full-scale religion as such. Nevertheless, when [Schwartz \(2014, pp. 93–94\)](#) moves on to the Second Temple period, he argues that scholars of ancient Greek regularly define the Greek term θρησκεία as "religion". Although these scholars agree that its original meaning was "worship" or "cult", referring to "rituals performed to show reverence to a god", around Josephus's time or even before, it came to be used in a broader sense. He thus differs from Mason's notion

and views θρησκεία in Josephus's writings "as an item in a list of terms that relate to sacrificial worship". In essence, Schwartz (2014, p. 100) reasons that although ancients "deal with God via sacrificial worship while moderns prefer prayer, philosophy, or morality", this is not enough reason not to associate the Second Temple Ἰουδαῖος with a religion. It is noteworthy, however, that Schwartz admits to a qualitative difference in what "religion" entailed in antiquity and what it entails in modern times. More recently, Jason Staples (2021, p. 17) has protested the ethnic–religious distinction as being anachronistic, arguing that, in the Second Temple period, an *ethnos* included "observing cultural and cultic practices", which in itself does not differ that much from what Mason argued on this point. Mason (2007, p. 488) argued that "'religious' activities were everywhere, but there was no phenomenon understood as 'religion'". Although Staples disagrees with Mason's "religion"–"religious" distinction, according to Mason (2007, p. 484), an *ethnos* included "cultic practices", which "were part and parcel of a people's founding stories, traditions, and civic structures". Yet, Mason (2007, p. 486) rightly differentiated the *nature* of the "religious" acts akin to cultic practices of antiquity from modern conceptions of religion. More recently, Mason and Esler (2017, p. 497) maintained that "ethnic identity and religion remain separate", and that "religion" remains "a problematic category when applied to the ancient Mediterranean world".

With respect to the PwJ position, it is a question whether the *hermeneutical distance* that makes these scholars argue for a discontinuity of contemporary Christianity with Christ-believers in the first century is applicable only to Christianity and not to Judaism also? Can modern Judaism(s) be readily identified or even equated with first-century "Judaism(s)"? Neusner (1984, pp. 1–5) argued that Rabbinic Judaism as it is known today was born with the origination of the belief that by studying the Torah and keeping the commandments, people would play a critical role in the coming of the Messiah, which started at about 70 CE, just prior to the destruction of the temple. Neusner (1984, p. 1) proposed "that Judaism took shape in late antiquity", for certain "definitive traits of Judaism" were *missing* in early antiquity. According to Neusner, these definitive traits include a rabbi as a model of authority, the Torah as the principal and organizing symbol, the study of the Torah as a capital religious deed, and a holy life or religious discipline as the "prime expression of what it means to be Israel, the Jewish people". He argued that the evidence of the twin notions of the "oral Torah and rabbinical authority" (the doctrine of the dual Torah), as they defined Judaism for about twenty centuries, are not found in the first century. Pointedly, Neusner (1984, p. 2) states that "Rabbinic or talmudic Judaism pretends that nothing happened between the time of the prophets after the return to Zion and the time of the composition of the Mishnah, that is, from the sixth century B.C. to the early third century A.D". But that was not the case. Just as Christianity as we know it today took shape over time, so is the case with Judaism. The authoritative writings of the Talmud, the Mishnah and the Midrashim that are at the heart of Judaism as we know it today came into existence in the common era, constituting formative Judaism, which has to be distinguished from the kind of "Judaism(s)" of the first century. In distinction from formative Judaism, the principal institutions of Israel "remained priesthood, monarchy, Scripture and its way of life, holy Temple, land and people" (Neusner 1984, p. 4). Neusner thus confirms the qualitative difference in the religious elements that were part of the identity of the *Yehudi/Ioudaios* as recorded in antiquity and contemporary Judaism.

Daniel Boyarin (2018b) is even more pronounced on the discontinuity between contemporary Judaism and the Ἰουδαϊσμός of the first century. He argues that the utilization of "Judaism" to refer to a kind of essence or a "timelessly normative Judaism" as something that persists from "Moses our Rabbi" right up to "Moses Mendelssohn" is reminiscent of the introduction of the Mishnah (known as the Chapters of the Fathers) or Rabbinic sources, which came into existence much later (Boyarin 2018b, pp. 75–77). For Boyarin (2018b, pp. 78, 87), the signifier "Judaism" is anachronistically applied to the first century, and he argues that the term Ἰουδαϊσμός in the first century or before was not used as "an abstract name for a 'religion'". The concept of Ἰουδαϊσμός, such is found in 2 Mac-

cabees, rather denoted “an existing thing” for which soldiers fought, namely, “the social order that obtained in Judea in the time of Seleukos IV and Onias” (Boyarin 2018b, p. 90). Ἰουδαϊσμός involved “following the Judean way of life, sacrifices, temples, kings, taxes, everything, what Josephus refers to as the *nomoi* of the Fathers and the practices of the *politeuma*” (Boyarin 2018b, p. 91). Similarly, the Bauer lexicon interprets Ἰουδαϊσμός as “the Judean way of belief and life” (BDAG, s.v. Ἰουδαϊσμός; cf. also Niebuhr 2022, p. 2). It is a question, however, to what extent “faith” as such was part of the intended meaning of this term.

The idea of associating the so-called Apostolic Decree (Acts 15) with the “Noahide Laws” (or the “Noahic Covenant”), as is often referred to by PwJ proponents (e.g., Tomson 1990, pp. 50, 273–75; Nanos 1996, pp. 50–56; Campbell 2008, p. 6; Eisenbaum 2009, p. 252; Tucker and Cirafesi 2023, p. 139), which would imply that gentiles could be accommodated as God’s people on the basis of this decree, is a good example of how a later idea akin to formative Rabbinic Judaism is anachronistically retrojected into the time of the New Testament. In this approach, gentile Christ-believers are sometimes referred to as “Noahides” (Nanos 1996, p. 50) or “Noachians” (Tomson 1990, p. 272), in distinction from the Ἰουδαῖοι. In Rabbinic Judaism, all descendants of Noah are considered *b’nei Noah* or “Noahides” (Foley 2003, p. 45). But such an idea is not found in the time of the Second Temple or before that, even though Talmudic Judaism claims that it has ancient origins. It has to be noted though that not all PwJ proponents interpret the so-called Apostolic Decree (Acts 15) in terms of the “Noahide Laws” as such. Zetterholm (2023, p. 495) rather identifies the laws in the decree as representing the Holiness code of Leviticus 17–18, “and includes precisely those laws that are applicable not only to Israel but also to the *gerim*, the resident stranger in the Land of Israel”.

Apart from claiming discontinuity between contemporary Judaism and the Ἰουδαϊσμός of the first century, Boyarin (2018a, pp. 105–29) reasons that the concept of “Judaism” originated out of the entrails of Christianity as that which is in opposition to Christianity. He motivates this idea from the writings of Church Fathers such as Ignatius, Jerome and Epiphanius, in which “Judaism” is a kind of “anti-Ekklesia”, a term that signifies practices that are against the practices of the *ekklesia*. For Boyarin, this would help define Christianity in opposition to Judaism. Similarly, Cynthia Baker (2017, p. 4) argues that almost “all modern Western forms of the word—*Jew*, *Jude*, *juif*, *Judío*, *giudeo*, *jood*, *Zsidó*, etc. (and even the Yiddish word *yid*)—came into being in decidedly Christian-dominant societies and geopolitical contexts ... in which *the Jews* functions foundationally as a kind of originary and constitutional alterity, or otherness” (emphasis original; cf. also Fredriksen 2008, p. 308). In some respects, the inverse might be true as well. N. A. Dahl (1992, p. 382) contended that “Jewish messianic ideas were to a large extent read in light of and in contrast to, faith in Jesus Christ” (cf. Charlesworth 1992, p. 30). Similarly, Neusner (1984, p. 12) maintained that “Rabbinic Judaism ... would set itself up as the alternative to all the forms of messianic Judaism” (cf. also Runesson 2023, p. 311). There are thus sufficient grounds to make a single use of the Ἰουδαῖοι vocabulary across different epochs problematic. Given the hermeneutical intricacies within this debate, which are too vast to discuss in detail here, it seems safer to hermeneutically distinguish contemporary Judaism from the Ἰουδαῖοι of the first century by employing the term “Judaean” for a Ἰουδαῖος and “a Judaean way of life” in reference to Ἰουδαϊσμός. The idea that Paul “remained” within “Judaism” can create the impression that “Judaism” has always been a stable ethno-religious category that did not change (much) over time, or that (elements of) the definition of contemporary Judaism can be superimposed onto Paul, both of which can be seen as anachronistic.

3. Differences between the Designations “Judaean” and “Israel”

Several differences in the connotations of the designations “Judaean” and “Israel” in the first century can be pointed out. A long tradition of scholars (e.g., Gutbrod 1965; Tomson 1986; Elliott 2007) have argued that, in antiquity, “Judaean” was generally used as an *outsider* term, whereas “Israel” was used as a self-identifying *insider* term, albeit with

notable exceptions.¹ Yet, Staples (2021) has fundamentally taken this perceived distinction into question. To be sure, he acknowledges that the terms יְהוּדָיִם/Ιουδαῖος and לְיִשְׂרָאֵל/Ισραήλ or Ισραηλῖτης “tend to occur in different texts and contexts” (Staples 2021, p. 37), and that the term לְיִשְׂרָאֵל/Ισραήλ is normally used in prayers, whereas יְהוּדָיִם/Ιουδαῖος “never occur in such contexts” (cf. Baker 2017, p. 3), but he argues that there are otherwise too many exceptions and theoretical problems with the model for it to be accepted (Staples 2021, p. 40). It still remains a question, however, whether the insider–outsider distinction can totally be ruled out in certain contexts, especially in the New Testament, such as the Gospel of John,² even though such a distinction cannot be seen as absolute.

More importantly, another distinction between the two terms is that the designation “Judaean” was more of an *ethnic* designation (Kuhli 1991, p. 204; Campbell 1993, p. 441), although ethnicity might include cultic or “religious” elements as part of the culture, whereas the term “Israel” had stronger theological and covenantal connotations, especially in the Pauline corpus. Although Staples (2021, p. 179) critiques the insider–outsider distinction and includes religion as a part of ethnicity, he nevertheless argues that, in early Judaism, the term “Israel” “is the covenantal term for the people of YHWH as a whole”, and that “identification with ‘Israel’ was always a theological claim in the Second Temple period, tying the individual or group in question to the biblical people in covenantal relationship with YHWH”.

Last but not least, it is noteworthy that, in Christian writings, the term “Israel” was mostly employed to denote *ancient, historical Israel*, whereas “Judaean” was used more in reference to Judeans that lived *in the time of the Second Temple*. The latter tendency could especially be derived from the writings of Josephus.³ The first record of applying the term “Israel” to Christians as the “true spiritual Israel” is in the writings of Justin Martyr (*Dial.* 11.5; cf. 100.4; 123.9) around 160 CE. Another notable example in which the terms “Judaean” and “Israel” represent earlier and later people, respectively, is Philo’s writings. Staples (2021, p. 258) rightly notes that, for Philo, “*Ioudaios* is the proper term for the contemporary people, while “Israel” is used in past, allegorical, philosophical, spiritual, or eschatological contexts”. I have argued (Du Toit 2019) that in all of Paul’s references to Ισραήλ (Rom 9:6, 27, 31; 10:19, 21; 11:2, 7, 25, 26; 1 Cor 10:18; 2 Cor. 3:7, 13; Gal 6:16; Phil 3:5; cf. Eph 2:12), he probably has historical Israel as *God’s elect people* in mind. Yet, he uses the term Ιουδαῖος almost exclusively to denote an *ethnic group* without pertinent covenantal or theological connotations,⁴ especially when used alongside other terms that refer to other nations, such as Ἕλλην (“Greek”) and ἔθνος (“gentile”; see Rom 1:16; 2:9, 10; 3:29; 9:24; 10:12; 1 Cor 1:22, 23, 24; 10:32; 12:13; Gal 2:13, 14, 15; 3:28; cf. Col 3:11).⁵

Staples (2021) argues that the marked difference in Josephus’s application of the terms Ιουδαῖος and Ισραήλ is based on the distinction between the northern and southern tribes. For Staples (2021, pp. 45–65), Josephus consistently uses Ισραήλ to denote the whole people, including both the northern and southern tribes, whereas Ιουδαῖοι is used to indicate a subset of Ισραήλ. The exiles who returned to Judah were formerly part of the southern kingdom. In other words, in Staples’s estimation, the term Ισραήλ could be used for the people that formerly belonged to both kingdoms, but the term “Israelites” would be the wrong term for a limited portion of Israel. After the fall of the northern kingdom, the Judaeans laid claim to the heritage of Israel, which was also the case with the Samaritans. Staples (2021) continues by arguing that the idea of the restoration of the whole of Israel in which the term “Israel” acquired theological and eschatological connotations of God’s restored people, can be identified in Josephus, Philo, the Dead Sea Scrolls, Second Temple narrative literature, Second Temple eschatological and apocalyptic literature. The idea that the term “Israel” would later acquire stronger covenantal and theological connotations is not new in itself. Although Von Rad (1965, p. 357) reasoned that the designation “Israel” was only transferred to the southern kingdom after the fall of the northern kingdom, he stated that, in that later period, it was used “not as a political title, but as the name of the people of God as such”.⁶

The different connotations of the terms “Judaean” and “Israel” in the Second Temple period, which also seem to be reflected by Paul’s use of the terms, as well as the hermeneutical distance between contemporary Judaism and Second Temple Judeans, should make one hesitant to see Paul as remaining within “Judaism”. Would it not be more accurate for PwJ proponents to see Paul as remaining within “Israel”, for example?

4. Paul’s Own Conception of His Identity

While the broader conceptions of the terms “Judaean” and “Israel” as discussed here already pose considerable challenges to the idea that Paul was “within Judaism”, the true litmus test for the feasibility of such a proposition must be sought after by assessing the Pauline material itself.

4.1. Did Paul See Himself as “Within Judaism” or within the Judaean Identity?

Paul uses the term Ἰουδαϊσμός twice in Galatians 1:13–14 (and nowhere else), in which he writes about his “former life in” (ἀναστροφὴν ποτε ἐν) Ἰουδαϊσμός and that he “advanced” (προκόπτω) in Ἰουδαϊσμός. The line of reasoning that is followed by PwJ proponents is normally that Paul did not leave “Judaism” as such but rather a coercive stream therein that involved persecuting the *ekklesia* (Porter 2023, p. 99). Boyarin (2018b, pp. 92–93), however, insists that Paul’s reference to Ἰουδαϊσμός must also be read in conjunction with the verb ἰουδαῖζω in Galatians 2:14, in which Paul reprimands Cephas with the words “If you, though a Judaean, live like a gentile and not like a Judaean, how can you compel the gentiles to ἰουδαῖζειν?”. Here, Boyarin argues, Paul clearly has “to live according to Judean ways as the opposite of living in a gentile manner” in mind (Boyarin 2018b, p. 92). He continues, “*Ioudaismos*, the noun derived from this verb, clearly means as well, then, Judaizing, living according to Judean ways and not being a member of an institution called ‘Judaism’” (Boyarin 2018b, p. 93). Craig Keener (2019, p. 79) makes the interesting remark that Paul does not refer to “Judaism” as “a former ethnicity or faith” but “to Jewish practice” that appears “in context of nationalistic resistance against foreign cultural impositions (2 Macc 2:21; 8:1; 14:38)”, whereas the cognate verb (ἰουδαῖζω) refers to “gentiles practicing Jewish customs” (cf. Dunn 1993, pp. 56–57). Several commentators contend that Paul radically departed from his past life and did in fact undergo a conversion of sorts, albeit not from “Judaism” to “Christianity” (e.g., De Boer 2011, pp. 89–91; Moo 2013, pp. 102, 105; Das 2014, pp. 124, 126, 128–29, 147–49; DeSilva 2018, pp. 145–46). Such a notion can especially be derived from the subsequent verses (Gal 1:15–16) in which Paul reports the revelation of God’s Son to him, which he received not from people but directly from God, signifying a definite turning point in his life.

Yet, it is especially in Galatians 2:15–21 in which Paul sets his new-found identity in contrast to his former identity as a Ἰουδαῖος, which involves the role of the Torah in demarcating his identity in particular. He starts by using the first-person plural (“we”) and thereby includes himself: “We ourselves are Judeans by birth and not gentile sinners” (ἡμεῖς φύσει Ἰουδαῖοι καὶ οὐκ ἐξ ἐθνῶν ἁμαρτωλοί, emphasis added). The expression “φύσει Ἰουδαῖοι” is best translated as “Judeans by birth” (BDAG, s.v. φύσις, §1), which clearly indicates his ethnic heritage, especially in its contrast to “gentile sinners”. The epithet “sinners” was commonly equated with gentiles who did not obey the Mosaic law (e.g., Pss. 1:1, 5; 37:34–36, Das 2014, p. 239). In verses 15–16, Paul argues that in spite of being a Judaean by birth, he and his fellow believers were also justified by believing in Jesus Christ, and not by the “works of the law” (ἐργων νόμου, emphasis added), for they were also found to be sinners (v. 17). In other words, Paul did not consider himself to have been in a privileged position with respect to justification merely for being a Judaean by birth. He also had to come to faith in Christ to receive justification. By implication, having the law or being under the law did not or could not secure justification as such. The latter notion is hard to reconcile with the PwJ idea that Bird (2023, p. 17), in his critical evaluation of the PwJ position, describes as the idea that Judeans “remain ‘saved’”, while “Israel’s Messiah opens a path of salvation for Gentiles”. Zetterholm (2020, p. 188) objects to the notion that

with traditional scholars, “there seems to be almost an obsession that Jews and non-Jews must be saved in the same way—through faith alone”. Similarly, Eisenbaum (2009, p. 255) contends that, in the Pauline discourse, “nothing ... forces a reader to adopt Paul as saying Israel—that is, Jews—must convert to Christianity to be saved”. Additionally, Paul’s inclusion of himself that needed justification (vv. 15–16) also goes against the notion proposed by PwJ proponents that Paul’s discourse is solely directed to a gentile audience.

Much has been written about the expression “works of the law” (ἐργων νόμου) in the Pauline corpus, especially since the dawn of the so-called New Perspective on Paul (NPP), a debate into which I will not venture here. Suffice it to say that although earlier NPP proponents tended to confine the “works of the law” to Judaeans identity markers such as circumcision, food laws and Sabbath observance (e.g., Dunn 1988a, pp. 153–60; Wright 2002, pp. 460–61), in later reflections, some NPP proponents admit that the “works of the law” in Paul cannot be confined to these markers of identity but have to refer to the whole law, including the moral commands by implication (e.g., Dunn 2009, p. 475; see Moo 2018, pp. 216–20).⁷ This is especially the case in Galatians 2:15–21 and Romans 3:19–24, in which the expression “works of the law” (ἐργων νόμου) is used interchangeably with references to the “law” (νόμος) in general and is related to justification (δικαιόω/δικαιοσύνη) and sin or sinfulness (ἁμαρτάνω/ἁμαρτία/ἁμαρτωλός), which can be seen as immoral conduct. Here, in Galatians 2, after Paul juxtaposes justification by faith to justification by the “works of the law” (ἐργων νόμου, v. 16), he contrasts justification in Christ with being found a sinner (ἁμαρτωλός, v. 17), and he then continues by stating that, in Christ, he has died through “the law” to “the law” (νόμος, v. 19) in order to obtain righteousness through grace and not through “the law” (νόμος, v. 21). In context, Paul’s references to “the law” have to be read as *interchangeable* with his earlier references to the “works of the law” (v. 16). In other words, in Paul’s use of the expression “works of the law”, he is not merely arguing against Judaeans exclusivism as such, as some NPP proponents contend, but is problematizing a whole existence under the law and the moral requirement to adhere to the whole law in order to be justified (Rom 2:13) or obtain life (Gal 3:12; see Moo 2013, pp. 208–9). Although PwJ proponents do not necessarily confine the “works of the law” to the marks of Judaeans exclusivism either (e.g., Thiessen 2016), the Pauline notion that all of the “works of the law” have to be kept in order to be justified is presented as belonging to a previous epoch that specifically includes “Judaeans by birth” (v. 15).

In verse 18, Paul switches to the first-person singular (“I”), stating that he does not intend to rebuild (reliance on) the law (Moo 2013, p. 166), which he tore down (v. 18). He continues that, through the law, he (“I”) died to it so that he might live to God (v. 19). He (“I”) has been crucified with Christ so that it is no longer him (“I”) who lives but Christ who lives in him. The life he now lives in the flesh, that is, in his current bodily existence (Moo 2013, p. 171; cf. Das 2014, p. 271; Keener 2019, p. 196), he (“I”) lives in the Son of God who loved him and who gave himself for Paul (v. 20). He ends with the statement “I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose” (v. 21). All of these “I” statements have to do with Paul’s *identity* (Hays 2000, p. 244; Das 2014, p. 270), and specifically his *self-identification*. He considers his old identity and his old “self” to have died in Christ. In other words, he died to whom he formerly was. In Paul’s previous life as a Judaeans, his identity was partially inherited (his pedigree) and partially self-determined, shaped by his reliance on the law (Hays 2000, p. 244). Now his identity is solely determined by Christ himself. With respect to this passage, the fact that “antinomian-sounding sentiments” can also be found in the long history of Judaism is not a sufficient reason to argue that Paul remained “within Judaism”, as Novenson (2022, p. 81) contends. Whether Paul remained within a Judaeans way of life should be sought after by considering his own rhetoric around the law. In light of Paul’s statements in Galatians 2:15–21, one is hard-pressed to envision Paul’s continued reliance on the law to shape his identity. In fact, Paul reasons in 1 Corinthians 9:19–23 that although he is not “under the law” himself (μὴ ὢν ὑπὸ νόμον, v. 20), he became a Judaeans for the Judaeans or as one “under the law” in order to “win” them for the gospel. Paul’s remark here is based

on his view that the era under the law belongs to a previous age in the history of salvation (Rom 6:14; 7:5–6; Gal 4:4–5).⁸

A passage that often features in discussions about Paul's identity is Philippians 3:3–9. In verse 3, Paul uses the first-person plural ("we") to include himself, stating "we are the circumcision who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh". Since circumcision was originally intended to demarcate people as God's covenant people, with this statement, Paul implies that natural circumcision does not secure one's identity as one of God's covenant people. Now, real circumcision that identifies someone as God's covenant people entails worship by God's Spirit and glorying in Christ (cf. Hansen 2009, pp. 220–22; Halloway 2017, p. 154). It is clear that Paul recasts the concept of circumcision within a spiritual context. According to the Bauer lexicon, ἐν σαρκί ("in the flesh", vv. 3, 4) in this context points to "earthly things or physical advantages" (BDAG, s.v. σάρξ, §5). Paul then elaborates on what these identity markers and accomplishments are (Halloway 2017, p. 158). The four identity markers entail being circumcised, being of the people of Israel, being from the tribe of Benjamin and being a Hebrew of Hebrews. The three accomplishments consist of being a Pharisee according to the law, as to zeal, being a persecutor of the *ekklesia*, and as to righteousness in/under the law, being blameless. The intention here is not to flesh out all the intricacies surrounding these designations but to point out that all of these things can be considered aspects that made up Paul's identity and defined his way of life as a Judean. Fredriksen (2022, p. 377) contends that Paul is speaking in "relativizing terms" and "not absolute ones" here and then jumps to Romans 9:4 and 11:1 to prove that Paul still sees himself as a Benjaminite and/or Israelite. But as has already been pointed out, these designations point to his pedigree and biological descent rather than to his current covenantal status before God. Paul considers these as a loss not only because his knowledge of Christ surpasses his cultural heritage but also because he does *not identify* with these identity markers anymore. He now *only identifies with Christ*, to be "found in him, not having a righteousness that comes through the law" (v. 9). Fredriksen admits that Paul's reference to being a persecutor of the *ekklesia* (v. 6) has to lie in his past and thus considers it as an exception to the list in this regard, but rather than helping the PwJ position, this item on the list rather begs the question as to why not all of these identity markers and accomplishments lie in Paul's past.

The flesh–Spirit contrast is a prominent contrast in the Pauline corpus. Paul often juxtaposes the former life under the law with a new life under the reign of the Spirit, signifying an eschatological contrast between two distinct *ages* and *modes of existence* on either side of salvation history (esp. Rom 7:5–6; 8:1–16; Gal 5:16–25; see Ridderbos 1959, pp. 145–47; Käsemann 1980, pp. 190, 210; Fee 1994, pp. 469–70, 553; Hansen 2009, p. 221; Das 2014, p. 593; Moo 2018, pp. 47–48).⁹ Here, in Philippians 3, the same underlying contrast can be detected (Fee 1995, pp. 300–2). This eschatological or salvation–historical contrast does not so much contrast that which is bad or sinful (flesh) with that which is good (Spirit) but rather contrasts a mode of existence that relies on human possibility ("in the flesh") with a new mode of existence based on the grace that believers receive in God's Spirit, working in and through them. In the old era, identity was marked off by natural or human-made identity markers such as circumcision, ethnicity or one's ability to adhere to the law, whereas in the new era, identity is marked off by the Spirit, as Paul states in Romans 8:16: "The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit *that we are children of God*" (emphasis added).

When Paul thus considers these old, "fleshly" identity markers and accomplishments in Philippians 3 as a loss (ζημία, vv. 7, 8), or even as rubbish or excrement (σκύβαλον, v. 8), he has a mode of existence under the law in mind in which one's identity is determined by ethnicity, human possibility and man-made accomplishments. All of these can be considered as within the natural, human sphere. Even righteousness under the law is confined to this realm. In contrast, in the new era in Christ, identity is determined by God's grace in Christ, in which believers receive a righteousness that is not based on the law or human accomplishments but on faith (v. 9). These identity markers and accomplishments that belong to the eschatologically old era are thus insignificant and even considered by Paul

to be a hindrance in marking off his new-found identity in Christ.¹⁰ Now, the knowledge of the resurrected Christ (v. 8) and to be “found in him” (v. 9) surpass all of these.

Regarding the designation Ἰουδαῖος, Paul tends to reduce this designation to the ethnic or social realms without any inherent constitutive value in securing membership as one of God’s people. As already mentioned, this tendency can especially be seen in the way in which Paul uses Ἰουδαῖος alongside ethnic terms such as Ἕλλην (“Greek”) and ἔθνος (“gentile”; see Rom 1:16; 2:9, 10; 3:29; 9:24; 10:12; 1 Cor 1:22, 23, 24; 10:32; 12:13; Gal 2:13, 14, 15; 3:28). In Galatians 3:28, other social designations such as slave, free, male and female are added to the list (Gal 3:28). The same logic is present in Colossians 3:11, in which circumcised, uncircumcised, barbarian and Scythian are part of the list.¹¹ Ethnic or social identities are acknowledged but, in Pauline terms, they are not considered as constitutive of the in-Christ identity, which is on another level than social identities. Fredriksen (2022, p. 376) is thus right to argue that, in Galatians 3:28, Paul is not talking about “the erasure of social distinctions within the Christ-assemblies” but about a “pneumatic unity”. But in Paul’s inclusion of other social identities, his argument is more than merely “stylistic” (Fredriksen 2022, p. 376); it entails, on the one hand, that the Judaeans is reduced to a mere social identity, and, on the other hand, that none of these social identities is of inherent value to contribute to one’s status before God in Christ. In the PwJ approach, the “Jewish” identity is very much understood as constituting a right covenantal standing with God, which would be at odds with the other social identities on Paul’s list.

An important question that needs to be asked at this point is whether, according to Paul, one could fully retain one’s ethnic or cultural identity in Christ. To an extent, this is true, for Paul had a policy of leniency and tolerance for people of different ethnic or cultural backgrounds within the believing community. So, for example, according to Romans 14, members of the congregation had to show mutual tolerance if they had different convictions about which kinds of food to eat. It is significant, however, that Paul did consider all food to be pure in the light of Christ (Rom 14:14, 20), which can be traced back to Jesus’s teachings (Mark 7:15–23; Mat 15:11–20; Moo 2018, p. 869; Schreiner 2018, p. 707; Thielman 2018, p. 644) and/or Peter’s vision (Acts 10:15; 11:9; Middendorf 2016, p. 1420). Significantly, the “weak” are presented as those who, apparently, did not see all food as pure but held unto their purity laws. Paul advised that these “weaker” members were to be accommodated or tolerated within the community of believers for the sake of conscience and the unity of the body. It is thus not that Paul set different standards for food purity for congregants of different cultural backgrounds. In Romans 14, the underlying tension of the new era in Christ with the old era under the law does ring in the background. While there should be tolerance for “weaker” persons, the ideal is ultimately that all congregants are “strong” (Rom 15:1) and embrace their freedom in the new dispensation in Christ (cf. Schnabel 2016, p. 779; Schreiner 2018, p. 707).¹² In other words, the principle of tolerance within the believing community that Paul advocates in Romans 14 is more of a behavioral measure to keep unity in Christ than a tolerance for conflicting convictions about identity, purity and/or justification.¹³

The question is still whether Paul’s accommodation of cultural remnants within the believing community, such as conceptions about food purity, was absolute? Could everything that was considered to be cultural be retained within the believing community? With respect to the gentiles, this could not be absolutely true, for Paul condemned practices that were part of Greek culture, such as idolatry, sorcery and sexual immorality, which often took place at feasts. These practices had to cease in Christ (e.g., Rom 1:23; Gal 5:19–20; 1 Cor 5:1; 1 Cor 6:12–20),¹⁴ for they could not all be considered as morally or spiritually neutral and in fact were considered sinful and against the gospel. Yet, many of these practices could be considered “religious” even though they were part of Greek culture. Arguably, very little if any Greek cultural elements were to be retained in Christ. The same principle applied for Judaeans if they wanted to retain cultural elements that entered their culture via pagan influence when they were in exile.¹⁵

But what about Judaeon cultural elements in general? Could all of them be retained in Christ on Pauline terms? The distinctive *cultural elements* of the Judaeon identity were things such as circumcision, food laws and the observance of Sabbaths and feasts. Yet these cultural elements *were not merely cultural* but also had *theological significance* under the old covenant. In fact, in their original meaning, they demarcated God's people and confirmed God's covenant with his people. With respect to circumcision, its covenantal and theological connotations can especially be derived from Paul's insistence that it obliges one to keep the whole law (Gal 5:3; Rom 2:17–29). In Galatians 5:1–6, Paul links circumcision with (an attempt at) justification by the law.¹⁶ It is unlikely that Paul meant that if gentiles were to circumcise, they would attempt to be justified by it, whereas if Judaeans were to do it, or accept the practice of circumcision, there would be no connotations of justification attached to it, especially if it is considered that Paul repeatedly includes himself by using the first-person plural (“we”) in Galatians when justification apart from the law is addressed (Gal 3:13, 23–25; 4:2, 4, 5; 5:1, 5).¹⁷ The idea that “Paul’s argument in Gal 5:3 ... derives from Paul’s maintaining his own Jewish identity” (Nanos 2009, p. 4) is contrary to Paul’s use of the first-person plural in Galatians 5:1 in which he states that “Christ has set *us* free” (ἡμᾶς Χριστὸς ἠλευθέρωσεν), and in verse 5 in which he states that through the Spirit, “by faith, *we ourselves* eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness” (ἡμεῖς ... πνεύματι ἐκ πίστεως ἐλπίδα δικαιοσύνης ἀπεκδεχόμεθα, emphasis added) in particular. Paul’s use of the first-person plural in both verses 1 and 5 rather implies that he includes himself (a Judaeon by birth) with “every man” (v. 3) who accepts circumcision. Again, Paul’s repeated use of the first-person plural in itself goes against the PwJ idea that his discourse is solely directed towards gentiles.

With respect to food purity laws, the original intention was to confirm God’s people’s separation from other nations (see esp. Lev 11:44; 20:25–26; Deut 14:2). The same theological connotation about God’s people being set apart from other nations was part of the meaning of the Sabbath observance (Exod 31:13–14; Ezek 20:12, 20). The close relationship between justification, sin and the (works of the) law (esp. Gal 2:15–21; Rom 3:19–24), as well as the covenantal and theological connotations attached to the distinctive Judaeon identity markers, are at odds with Collins’s (2017, p. 172) notion that “Jews could continue to observe their traditional customs, but this would not “justify” them before God or bring them to salvation”. In Pauline terms, the Judaeon “traditional customs”, which included circumcision, food laws and Sabbath observance, cannot be dislodged from justification itself.

Although one could argue that these cultural distinctives were part of Judaeon ethnicity in as far as one allows for religious elements to be included in ethnicity, if their theological significance is considered, they were also intended to *transcend their ethnic identity*. According to Paul’s argument in Romans 2, although a doer of the law could be justified in theory (Rom 2:13), no one could (perfectly) keep the law under the old covenant, for all people are under sin, inherently corrupt by default, and in need of justification apart from the law (Rom 3:9–20).¹⁸

Regarding the question as to what Paul found to be “wrong” with the Judaeon identity, a question that features in both the NPP (e.g., Sanders 1977, p. 552) and PwJ discourse (e.g., Nanos 2015), it is not that he presents the Judaeon identity as inherently based on legalism, such as was the traditional, Lutheran interpretation. Given the hermeneutical difficulties surrounding the terms “Christianity” and “Judaism”, it is neither that the Judaeon way of life was not “Christianity” as if it replaced “Judaism” (Sanders 1977, p. 552) nor was “Judaism” simply retained in Christ, as PwJ proponents would argue. Paul did find something wrong. What he found wrong was, on the one hand, that Judaeans claimed a privileged position and a right standing with God based on their circumcision and their possession of the law, but without (fully) adhering to the covenantal conditions that the Judaeon markers of identity evoke. In other words, they transformed *covenantal, theological signs that were intended to help secure their status as God’s people and point them towards adhering to God’s commandments into mere cultural or ethnic identity markers that would confirm their covenant status by default* (Rom 2:17–29). On the other hand, Paul did *not* consider that anyone

was able to be justified by adhering to the law, for all people are fallible and under sin, falling short of God's glory (Rom 3:9–20). What Paul found “wrong” was thus not the Judaean identity per se but the fallible human condition that affected both the Judaean and gentile under the era of the law, which necessitated the revelation of God's righteousness through faith (Rom 3:21–30). In this equation, the law is not nullified but is in fact confirmed (Rom 3:31) in its function to know sin (Rom 3:20) and to necessitate the eschatological revelation of God's righteousness in Christ, based on faith (Rom 3:21). The contrast that Paul draws between the old mode(s) of existence under the law, which included gentiles (Rom 2:14), and the new faith-era in Christ is ultimately *salvation–historical and eschatological*. In other words, the mode of existence under the law inevitably had to culminate in the Christ event.

In Pauline terms, an identity under the law could thus not ultimately be retained. The idea that Judeans could keep their cultural distinctiveness in Christ, including adherence to circumcision, food laws and Sabbath observance, would imply that different covenantal conditions and even different principles around justification would apply for different people groups in Christ, which would go against the grain of Paul's gospel. In other words, since the distinctive Judaean markers of identity transcended the cultural or ethnic sphere, they could not have continued significance in Christ. This does not mean, however, that everything cultural or ethnic had to cease in Christ. It means that cultural markers of identity, whether having theological/covenantal connotations or not, would not be considered constitutive of the in-Christ identity. The markers of identity that pertained to the eschatologically old era culminated and were fulfilled in the revelation of God's righteousness in Christ. Such an underlying principle can especially be detected in Galatians 3, in which Paul portrays the conditions or criteria for covenant membership as having changed in Christ. After the era under the law, the “faith” that “came” (ἐλθεῖν, Gal 3:23; ἐλθούσης, Gal 3:25) is best understood as representing *the new criterion for covenant membership*, which coheres with the inauguration of the eschatological Spirit (Gal 3:2–3, 14; cf. Fee 1994, pp. 382–86, 394–95; Silva 2001, p. 176; Moo 2013, p. 216; Das 2014, p. 295). It is also important to note here that Paul nowhere establishes the principle of justification by faith apart from Christ, as if Judeans could be saved by faith before the Christ event. According to Paul's logic in Galatians 3:23 and 25, faith as a principle for justification *only arrived* at the Christ event.

4.2. Did Paul See Himself as “Within Israel”?

If it is hermeneutically and theologically problematic to envision Paul as remaining within “Judaism”, or even within the “Judaean” identity, would it be a better proposal to see him as remaining “within Israel”? In other words, can Paul's identity be seen as continuing to be defined by the covenantal markers of identity that were laid down in the Hebrew Bible for God's people Israel? Given the fact that the designation “Israel” seems to carry stronger theological connotations in its general usage than the designation “Judaean”, as already discussed, such a proposal seems more promising. Paul did refer to himself as an Ἰσραηλίτης (“Israelite”) in Romans 11:1 and 2 Corinthians 11:22, and in Philippians 3:5 by implication. In Romans 9:6–8, he argues that not all who descend from the patriarch Israel are Israel. According to Paul's logic, there is an “Israel” within the “fleshly” people of Israel that are considered God's real people, the people of the promise. Paul thus envisioned an *inner elect* people within the broader sphere of election (Cranfield 1979, p. 471). He elsewhere refers to an Ἰσραὴλ κατὰ σάρκα, an “Israel according to the flesh” (1 Cor 10:18), which clearly indicates national Israel without pertinent theological or spiritual connotations. In other words, depending on the context, Paul could use the term to designate God's *inner elect* people (Rom 9:6) or merely to indicate the national people of Israel. In Romans 9:4, Paul refers to Ἰσραηλίται (“Israelites”) in the context of “my kindred according to the flesh” (τῶν συγγενῶν μου κατὰ σάρκα) and is thus referring to the national people of Israel. In Romans 11:1, Paul uses the term Ἰσραηλίτης to designate his biological descent from Abraham and his membership in the tribe of Benjamin, thereby also lending an ethnic or national connotation to the term. Similarly, in 2 Corinthians 11:22, the term is

used alongside being a Hebrew and the physical offspring of Abraham. In both instances in which Paul applies the term Ἰσραηλίτης to himself, it identifies his membership as one of the national people and thus his *physical/biological connection to national, historical Israel* rather than conveys his current covenantal identity in Christ.

The question is, however, whether one can construe an “Israel according to the Spirit” in Paul, and, if so, whether such a designation would apply to believers in Christ? The idea of a spiritual Israel is not that evident from the Pauline discourse, however, other than what Justin Martyr implied (*Dial.* 11.5; cf. 100.4; 123.9). In another discussion, I posit that, apart from references to the patriarch “Israel” in Romans 9:6b and 27b and Philippians 3:5, references to “Israel” in the Pauline corpus (Rom 9:6a, 27a, 31; 10:19, 21; 11:2, 7, 25, 26; 1 Cor 10:18; Gal 6:16; cf. Eph 2:12) are best understood as referring to the *ancient, historical Israel* that mainly lived before or up to the Christ event, even with respect to Romans 11:26¹⁹ and Galatians 6:16²⁰ (Du Toit 2019). There are no clear indications that Paul envisioned a “spiritual Israel” or a “new Israel” as a designation for Christ-believers. Paul seems to present Israel and the Christ-believing community as two distinct entities on either side of salvation history, where the people of Israel are God’s covenant people under the law, whereas those of faith are God’s people in the new era in Christ. In other words, Paul’s identity is no longer defined by the covenantal markers of identity that were meant for the ancient people of Israel.

4.3. Did Paul See Himself as within Israel’s Messiah?

It is quite clear that Paul did perceive a profound continuity of the Christ-believing community with God’s historical people. This can be detected on several levels. A prominent way in which the believing community is portrayed in continuity with God’s historical people is the portrayal of those who believe in Christ as the “sons” (υἱοί) or “offspring” (σπέρμα) of Abraham before he was circumcised (Gal 3:7, 9, 29; Rom 4:11–16). It is not so much that believers are regarded as the fictive kin of Abraham but rather that they share in the blessing to Abraham (Gal 3:8–9) and that their faith is modeled on Abraham’s faith (Rom 4:20–25; Dunn 1993, p. 162). Since Paul argues that the law came after Abraham and kept Israel under a guardian until faith “came” eschatologically (Gal 3:23–25), with believers’ direct connection to Abraham, it is as if Israel’s history is bracketed out of the equation. Apart from the direct connection that Paul draws between Abraham and Christ-believers, he presents Christ as the single seed of Abraham (Gal 3:16), which further seems to take the people of Israel out of the equation.

Yet, Paul elsewhere speaks positively about the law in that it provides the knowledge of sin (Rom 3:20) and is inherently good (Rom 7:16, 22). In Romans 10:4, however, Paul states that Christ is the τέλος of the law, which means that Christ is both the goal (Wright 2002, p. 657) and the culmination (Moo 2018, pp. 659–60) of the law. In other words, the law was fulfilled and reached its intended “goal” or “end” in Christ for everyone who believed. Christ, being the τέλος of the law, essentially indicates the end of an epoch, inaugurating a new epoch in which identity is demarcated by faith in Christ (Dunn 1988b, pp. 600, 611–12). When Paul discusses historical Israel’s privileges in Romans 9:4–5 (the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, the promises, the patriarchs), he includes that the Messiah “according to the flesh” is from them (ἐξ ὧν ὁ Χριστὸς τὸ κατὰ σάρκα). In other words, their own Messiah came from the biological nation of Israel.²¹

In Romans 9:30–33, Paul portrays historical Israel as pursuing righteousness through the law²² but not as succeeding at reaching that law, for they did not pursue it by faith, but by works. But since, according to Paul, righteousness based on faith was revealed in the Christ event (Rom 3:21–22), or faith “came” in Christ (Gal 3:23, 25), Israel’s history and the era under the law culminated in Christ (cf. Moo 2018, p. 646). In Israel’s history, they stumbled over the stumbling stone, Christ, who was both a stumbling stone and the one in whom people trusted or believed unto salvation (Rom 9:32–33). Christ was thus, first and

foremost, Israel's own Messiah (Wright 2002, p. 625; cf. Niebuhr 2022, pp. 219–20), who became the Messiah of the whole world.

Rather than perceiving the continuance of the nation or the covenant people of Israel as a separate entity alongside believers in Christ, Paul envisions all of God's people as being within Israel's Messiah, Jesus Christ. Anyone who is in Christ takes part in the new creation, where the old has passed away and the new has come (2 Cor 5:17), which points to a new, eschatological order established by Christ (Guthrie 2015, p. 308). For Paul, in Christ, there is no distinction between ethnic groups or cultures, and none of the latter is constitutive of God's people in Christ (Gal 3:28), for the conditions for covenant membership changed in Christ (Gal. 3). A mode of existence or an attempt to obtain a right standing with God based on "flesh", which points to the *natural, human sphere* and includes external covenantal signs such as circumcision, the adherence to food laws and the keeping of Sabbaths, ended in Christ. In other words, the "flesh" era culminated in Christ. Now, in the new era in Christ, identity is not demarcated by human-made identity markers but by dying to the old "self", the law and human possibility. Now, identity is solely defined by the *indwelling Christ* in whom righteousness is bestowed by God through faith (Gal 2:19–21). The indwelling Spirit is the new marker of identity, demarcating the people of God (Rom 8:16; Fee 1996, p. 88).

5. Conclusions

The notion that Paul perceived himself to be "within Judaism" cannot ultimately be upheld, especially if the hermeneutical difficulties surrounding the concept of "Judaism" are considered. The tendency exists in the PwJ position to retroject contemporary Judaism or principles derived from Rabbinic Judaism into New Testament times. The idea of retrojecting the principle of the "Noahide laws" into New Testament times, or the notion that gentiles are "Noahides" and seeing them as accommodated as God's people based on a principle that is derived from contemporary Judaism, are good examples of this kind of anachronistic practice. While there is certainly continuity between contemporary Judaism(s) and the Judaeans way of life in the time of the first century, the elements of discontinuity between them, as well as the way in which Paul gives expression to the concepts Ἰουδαῖος and Ἰουδαϊσμός, do not warrant seeing him as "within Judaism". Apart from the problematic notion of confining the direction of Paul's discourse solely to a gentile audience, especially if his inclusive language is considered, the other problem is that Paul seems to reduce the designation Ἰουδαῖος to a mere ethnic or social identity, without pertinent connotations about their covenant relationship with God or having constitutive status in demarcating covenant status. The only principle for justification that Paul lays down is God's righteousness that is received through Christ, based on faith.

Regarding the relationship between ethnicity and religion, I am not arguing against the notion that ethnicity involves religious elements but that ethnicity has more to do with that which is within the sphere of *natural* (e.g., things that are naturally inherited) or *human* (e.g., conduct or actions taken) possibility. In other words, one can keep "religious" practices as part of human, cultural practice without necessarily having a spiritual or personal connection to God. In contrast, Paul's gospel in Christ and the new identity in Christ are within the sphere of that which *God* does, in spite of any human marks of identity, be they naturally inherited or based on human works. My point is that, for Paul, the original deep religious and even theological significance of markers of identity such as circumcision, food laws and the Sabbath merely became cultural or ethnic markers of identity in the eyes of Judaeans who claimed covenant status or even salvation based on them. In other words, Paul seems to reduce circumcision, food purity laws, Sabbath observance and even any other moral law to the *human sphere*, including the idea of ethnicity. According to Paul, the core problem with these markers of identity is that their ability to secure covenant status ultimately rests on human possibility, which is always fallible and sinful, and not on God's perfect actions in Christ. There is thus some truth in the parallel that Baker (2017, pp. 25–27) draws between the ethnic–religion dichotomy and the flesh–Spirit dichotomy

or inward–outward dichotomy, which she specifically ascribes to Paul, a dichotomy which she ultimately aims to dismantle. But instead of seemingly categorizing Paul’s dichotomy as equivalent to that which is inferior or derogatory versus that which is superior, as stated above, I would rather categorize Paul’s flesh–Spirit dichotomy as that which is within the *human* sphere versus that which is within the *divine* sphere.

Although the idea that Paul remained within Israel is more promising, and although Paul did envision a profound continuity of the Christ-believing community with Israel, the designations “Israel” and “Israelite” in the Pauline corpus can consistently be identified with the historical Israel that lived before or up to the Christ event. In Paul’s theological reflection, the era of God’s people under the law ended and culminated in Christ, and the criteria for covenant membership fundamentally changed. Identity markers based on “flesh”, that is, identity markers based on human possibility, ended in Christ, whereas in the new era in Christ, identity is based on God’s provision in Christ, through his Spirit. Since, in the new era in Christ, identity is solely defined around Israel’s Messiah, the best proposal is the more emic description of seeing Paul as *within Israel’s Messiah*.

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Notes

- ¹ As Miller (2010, 2014) pointed out, the insider–outsider distinction was not absolute, since “Judaean” was also used as an insider term (e.g., 2 Macc 1:1–10; 8:32; 10:8; 3 Macc 4:21).
- ² Staples (2021, p. 15) mentions John 4:9; 6:41, 52 and 19:19 as counter-examples in that Jesus is called a Ἰουδαῖος, but Jesus never confirms this notion or self-identity as a Ἰουδαῖος. In fact, when Pilate asks Jesus if he is the king of the Ἰουδαῖοι, he answers that his kingdom is not of this world (John 18:33, 36).
- ³ Josephus used Ἰσραηλιταὶ 188 times in *Antiquities* 2 to 6 when describing the ancient time, but predominantly employed Ἰουδαῖοι from *Antiquities* 6.6 onward and exclusively from 6.317 right up to the end (Kuhli 1991, p. 205).
- ⁴ The “ethnic reasoning” approach or the notion that Christianity is an *ethnos* of sorts (e.g., Buell 2005; Horrell 2016; Johnson Hodge 2007; Sechrest 2009) can be taken into question. Mason and Esler (2017) rightly argued for seeing an *ethnos* as a stable and accepted category that was mainly determined by origin and background. They argued for Christianity being opposed to settled *ethnos*–polis life and thus as trans-ethnic, solely defined by a common devotion to Christ. From a Pauline perspective, ethnicity, race, culture and even religious or cultic practices can be viewed within an anthropological domain in distinction from the theological domain. Additionally, the “ethnic reasoning” approach can arguably be related to a naturalistic epistemology that underlies most religious studies (Sherman 2018, p. 342).
- ⁵ One theoretical exception would be Rom 2:28–29, in which Paul utilizes a play on words with the etymological meaning of the word Ἰουδαῖος (“praise”/“give thanks”) in order to argue that if one claims the title Judaean by circumcision or possession of the law (v. 17), such a person also ought to be circumcised in the heart. But, as discussed in some detail elsewhere (Du Toit 2019, pp. 54–68), in the Hebrew Bible, the latter concept actually refers to keeping the law (Lev 26:41; Deut 10:16; 30:6; Jer 4:4; 9:13–14, 25–26). In other words, according to Paul’s logic, claiming possession of the law is not enough, as one has to keep the law. The term Ἰουδαῖος is thus not applied to Christ-believers as such, and Paul neither aims to redefine who or what a Ἰουδαῖος is. He rather delivers a kind of ironical critique against the Judaean who claims a righteous status based on circumcision and possessing the law. This play on the etymological meaning of the term Ἰουδαῖος can hardly be seen as paradigmatic of the way in which Paul generally uses the term.
- ⁶ It can also be asked whether Staples’s (2021) insistence on the difference in the connotations between Ἰουδαῖος and Ἰσραήλ has to be understood as rigid, as he seemingly proposes, and whether Josephus’s distinctions should be seen as paradigmatic of how the difference in the connotations between the two terms should be understood in the entire Second Temple period. The differences in the connotations between these terms have to be determined by the context in which they are used, and one can, at most, point out tendencies, rather than interpret them within a rigid frame of reference.
- ⁷ Moo (2018, pp. 216–18) discusses how Dunn’s view shifted in this regard over the years.

- 8 Paul's willingness to take vows with Judaeans, as reported in Acts 18:18 and 21:17–26, his circumcision of Timothy (Acts 16:3) and his references to himself as a Judaeon (Acts 21:39; 22:3) and even as a Pharisee (Acts 23:6; 26:5) can all be understood as adhering to the principle of becoming everything to everything, as laid down in 1 Cor 9:19–23, especially if the polemical and even life-threatening contexts of these occurrences are taken into account. In another discussion, I argued that Paul's reference in 1 Corinthians 7:19 to the keeping of God's commandments can be understood as a passing reference to the idea that circumcision requires one to keep the whole law under the old covenant, rather than the notion that Judaeon believers ought to keep the whole law in distinction from gentile believers (Du Toit 2015).
- 9 In Rom 7:5–6, the eschatological contrast is especially indicated by the imperfect tense ἤμεν (v. 5), in which an existence in the flesh is set in the past. In verse 6, "but now" (νυνὶ δέ) follows, indicating the new eschatological reality in Christ in which believers are discharged of the law, in the new way of the Spirit. In Rom. 8:1–16, the eschatological contrast and two modes of existence can especially be seen in the reference in v. 9 to the congregants that are "not in the flesh but in the Spirit" (ὁμοῦς δὲ οὐκ ἐστὲ ἐν σαρκὶ ἀλλ' ἐν πνεύματι) if the Spirit dwells within them. In Gal 5:16–25, the eschatological contrast is mainly indicated by the notion that people who succumb to the desires of the flesh will not inherit God's kingdom (v. 21), and that those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions (v. 24). The Spirit–flesh contrast is thus presented as ultimately absolute.
- 10 Contra Niebuhr (2022, p. 403), who argues that all of these identity markers and accomplishments pertain to his current identity.
- 11 Although Colossians' authenticity is disputed, it is added here to show that the same kind of social or ethnic identities are featured here. Interpreters that have fairly recently argued for Colossians' authenticity include McKnight (2018), Beale (2019), Wright and Bird (2019).
- 12 Campbell's (2023) notion of seeing both the "weak" and the "strong" as gentiles is reliant on his earlier choice to see the Letter to the Romans as exclusively written to a gentile audience, an idea that seems to be at odds with the fact that pure versus unpure food is at stake and that Paul now declares all food to be pure (vv. 14, 20).
- 13 In a sense, Nanos (2009, p. 20) is right to argue that the division between the groups in Rom 14 is not so much between "their relative degree of Torah-observance" but rather "their expression or lack thereof of the identity markers of Christ-faith", but what Nanos seems to miss is that the ability to believe in the gospel in Christ, which he argues constitute the strong, also involves the acceptance of the principle that "nothing is unclean in itself" (v. 14) and that "everything is indeed clean" (v. 20), which rather implies that Paul does not adhere to food purity laws himself.
- 14 A good example is the association of the Greek goddess Aphrodite with secret prostitution (Beard and Henderson 1997).
- 15 There is archaeological evidence, for example, of pagan symbols that were incorporated into Judaeon worship, such as the zodiac mosaics found in ancient synagogues (Magnes 2005). Cf. the reference in Acts 7:43 to Israel taking up the tent of Moloch and the star god Rephan, as well as the pagan images they worshipped.
- 16 It has to be noted that it is not so much infant circumcision that is at stake here but "if you be circumcised" or "if you let yourselves be circumcised" (ἐὰν περιτέμνησθε), which clearly points to a scenario in which Paul's opponents would compel believers to do so.
- 17 Cf. other theological connotations that Paul attached to circumcision in Rom 3:1; 4:11; 15:8. Cf. also Acts 7:8, in which circumcision is presented as a covenant.
- 18 The PwJ idea that Paul's interlocutor in Romans 2:17–29 is a gentile who takes on the identity of a Ἰουδαῖος and adopts the Judaeon law (e.g., Thiessen 2016) is not easily reconcilable with the notion that they "have" (ἔχω) the law as the embodiment of knowledge and truth (v. 20). The latter notion is repeated in Romans 3:2, in which Paul confirms that the oracles of God are entrusted to the Ἰουδαῖοι themselves, which makes it more likely that Paul is indeed addressing Judaeans rather than gentiles.
- 19 The salvation of "all Israel" in Rom 11:25–27 can be understood as the realized salvation of the inner elect historical Israel that lived before the Christ event in its diachronic entirety, who are saved in addition to descendants of historical Israel who accepted Christ in faith at the time of the Christ event. This conclusion is mainly based on (1) the probability that within the build-up of Romans up to this point, Paul never addressed the underlying question regarding the salvation of historical Israel even though it is an underlying question; (2) the connection of the mystery (v. 25) to the gospel; (3) the hardening (v. 25) that is historical (cf. Rom 10:19–21; 11:1–10; 2 Cor 3:14); (4) the "coming in" of the gentiles (v. 25) that, in context, points to the generic inclusion of the gentiles within God's salvific economy, which was already realized in Christ; (5) that σωθήσεται (v. 26) can be understood as a logical future, following the prior conditions (indicated by οὕτως and καθὼς: the coming in of the gentiles and the prophecy in Scripture); (6) the prophetic language around the Deliverer (vv. 26–27) that pertains to the Christ advent, which includes the Deliverer being the subject of all the actions (not pointing to Israel's repentance as such, see esp. Isa 27:6–13); (7) the term Ἰακώβ (v. 26) that corresponds to inner, elect Israel (see Rom. 9:13); (8) the way in which Paul's perception of identity in the new era in Christ, defined by the indwelling Spirit, eschatologically supersedes a "flesh" identity, which excludes the possibility of a future Israel whose identity would be based on "flesh"; and (9) a tradition within the early church that God would remember his dead people of Israel, lying in the graves, to preach and administer salvation to them (Justin, *Dial.* 72; Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.20.4; 4.22.1; 4.33.1; 4.33.12; 5.31.1; *Epid.* 78). Although salvation in Rom 11:26 is argued to pertain to historical Israel, it does not exclude a future dimension to salvation itself (Du Toit 2019, pp. 276–324).

- ²⁰ The blessing that is extended to include Israel by the phrase “and upon the Israel of God” (καὶ ἐπὶ τὸν Ἰσραὴλ τοῦ θεοῦ) can be understood as a reference to God’s historical people Israel that lived prior to the era of the new creation. The third καὶ in this verse then has its normal bearing (not expegetical) and separates those who walk according to the rule of the new creation in the new era (Christ-believers) and God’s people of the old era (Israel). Both of God’s people of the new and old eras are thus blessed, and both people groups are, in fact, brought together within this blessing (Du Toit 2019, pp. 338–45; cf. Campbell 1993, p. 442).
- ²¹ It can be noted here that none of these privileges inherently point to Israel’s salvation, their status before God or their relationship with God. All of national Israel shared in these privileges by default (Gutbrod 1965, p. 387; cf. Wright 2002, p. 629; Moo 2018, pp. 580–82).
- ²² As Moo (2018, p. 944) indicates, the phrase νόμον δικαιοσύνης (“law of righteousness”, v. 31) probably points to “the law whose object is righteousness”, which “‘promises’ righteousness when its demands are met”. Israel’s inability to reach the law can hardly be reduced to Israel’s failure to “fully comprehend God’s action in Christ as now requiring the in-bringing of the *ethnē* as *ethnē*, and without the Law” (Campbell 2023, p. 270, emphasis original).

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