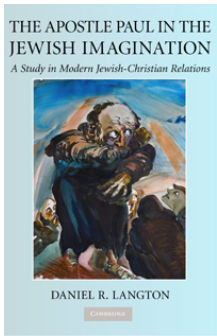
The Apostle Paul in the Jewish Imagination: A Study in Modern Jewish-Christian Relations, by Daniel R. Langton



Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010 | viii + 311 pages | ISBN: 978-0-521-51740-9 (hardback) $100.00

Daniel Langton, Professor of the History of Jewish-Christian Relations at the University of Manchester, has followed up his biography of Claude Montefiore, the founder of Anglo-Liberal Judaism (2002), and *Children of Zion: Jewish and Christian Perspectives on the Holy Land* (2008), with a project that combines both Jewish cultural studies and the study of Jewish-Christian relations. His latest book examines multiple Jewish views on the apostle Paul from the realms of religion, art, literature, philosophy, and psychoanalysis. What emerges is a fascinating mosaic of a growing and diffuse Jewish interest in Paul during the modern period (thus from the eighteenth century onwards). Paul is normally perceived as a person traditionally shunned by Judaism for having betrayed his faith. Yet it is precisely this notion of a traditional Jewish antipathy to Paul that Langton sets out to question. What is even more interesting about Langton's analysis is that modern Jewish treatments of the apostle Paul actually reflect deeper underlying concerns within the community about the nature of Jewish authenticity amidst growing self-assurance, acceptance, and emancipation in European Christian societies.

The book consists of eight chapters, divided into four parts, along with an introduction and conclusion at the beginning and end. The first part (ch.

1) explores how Paul has figured in popular Jewish imagination and reaches the conclusion that Jewish treatments of Paul only really began to emerge following the crisis of confidence among post-Enlightenment Jews, brought on by the demise of the authority of religious communal memory, and the desire to reassess the Jewish relationship with Christian history and culture. This then sets the stage for the book's second part, which examines how Paul has been used in modern Jewish articulations of religious identity. Three chapters make up this part, each looking at a different Jewish construction of Paul—in interfaith relations, in intra-Jewish debate, and finally as a dialogical partner.

Thus, in the second chapter, Langton argues that the Jewish construction of Paul that emerges in the field of Pauline studies, an area mostly dominated by Christian scholars, is best understood as falling under the ideological strategies available to modern Jews in relating to the Christian 'other.' This argument goes against the trend to discern a "paradigm shift" from Jewish anti-Christian polemic in the nineteenth century towards a warmer Jewish appreciation for Paul after the Second World War. Langton's own overview carefully unearths the diversity of approaches taken to Paul among the Jewish scholars (from Heinrich Graetz to Mark Nanos), and suggests that their ideology and worldview plays into each scholar's choice in portraying Paul as either a bridge or barrier between Judaism and Christianity. In that sense there has not really been a Jewish reclamation of Paul, since both antipathy towards, and appreciation for, Paul continues to exist in contemporary Jewish treatments of Paul.

This ideological insight is taken even further in chapter 3, when Langton examines how the apostle is made to function in the authenticity debate among various Jewish movements. One rightly expects the opinions here to be extremely divided and so the reader is taken through the many Jewish movements that employ Paul in this way. Thus one is informed of older British and North American progressive perspectives, Zionist perspectives, even a 'Protestant' Jewish perspective (Hans Joachim Schoeps, while born of Jewish parents, was in fact intellectually influenced by the Swiss theologian, Karl Barth), a possible Orthodox Jewish critique of Progressive Judaism (David Flusser), followed upon by modern North American Progressive perspectives, gender perspectives, and finally, Hebrew Christian and Messianic Jewish perspectives. The inclusion of this last group might surprise some, since the majority of the Jewish community dismisses them simply as Christians in Jewish garb. However, it is to Langton's credit that he consistently extends

the descriptive approach even to this, admittedly anomalous, group (even going to the lengths of respecting the distinction between Hebrew Christian and Messianic Jewish). Thus it is their own definition of themselves as Jewish, rather than their perception by the rest of the community, which renders them eligible for consideration alongside other Jewish perspectives, and prevents Langton from having to impose essentialist categories of "who is a Jew?" onto any group. What then emerges from this chapter is that the apostle Paul finds a place in the debate concerning Jewish authenticity because of his traditional symbolism as a personification of a break with the Law. This sentiment resonates among progressive movements within Judaism because of their own critiques on the Law, their corresponding emphasis on Jewish diversity, and their tendency to support a universalist understanding of Judaism.

In chapter 4, the third construction of Paul that emerges in modern Jewish articulations of religious identity is somewhat similar to the preceding chapter, except that now Langton takes a closer look at individual authors' treatments of Paul and discerns how the apostle has been made a part of their transformative approaches to Jewish self-understanding. These authors are the Anglo-Jewish Bible scholar and broadcaster, Hugh Schonfield (1901–1988), the anti-establishment theologian, Richard Rubenstein (b. 1924), the Reconstructionist Rabbi, Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer (b. 1952), and the professor of Talmudic culture, Daniel Boyarin (b. 1946). Whether casting Paul as a fellow existentialist or cultural critic, what unites each of these different approaches is that they all consider Paul to be a misunderstood figure within the Jewish community and display no hesitation about incorporating him into their explorations of Jewish religious identity.

The third part of the book takes us further afield into artistic and literary depictions of the apostle Paul, which Langton situates more broadly within a Jewish interest in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Langton is of course aware that the idea of a seamless Judeo-Christian heritage may be problematic to those who view it as an artificial construct and so, before launching the reader into the two chapters that form this part of the book, he draws attention both to the origin of the idea and its critiques. Langton explains that the construction of a shared body of Western attitudes and values clearly indicates the nature of the exchange taking place between Jews and Christians in post-Enlightenment European culture.

Chapter 5 then proceeds to examine three artistic examples from German-speaking figures of Jewish heritage, the *Saint Paul* oratorio (1836) by Felix

Mendelssohn, the painting of "Paul's Sermon" (1919) by Ludwig Meidner, which can in fact be seen on the book's jacket cover, and the play *Paul among the Jews: A Tragedy* (1926) by Franz Werfel. Langton readily admits that these three artistic treatments are unrepresentative of Paul's place within the wider Jewish cultural imagination, and that in these instances Paul has in fact been used as a mirror of each artist's own personal and sociocultural backgrounds. What is interesting to notice from this, however, is that the three artists' emphasis on the commonalities, rather than differences, between Judaism and Christianity, is in itself reflective of the assimilation of Christian culture into their own Jewish backgrounds. Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847) was the Christian grandson of the Jewish Enlightenment philosopher, Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786); Ludwig Meidner (1884–1966) was the son of assimilated Jewish parents, and himself left Judaism in his youth only to return to it later in life; Franz Werfel (1890–1945) also came from a culturally assimilated Jewish family and, while always maintaining his Jewishness, espoused a worldview that allowed him to see his faith as both Jewish and Christian. In this way, all three artists exemplify how their portrayals of a shared Judeo-Christian heritage in the person of Paul had roots in the internal negotiation and reconciliation of the two traditions within their persons.

Chapter 6 takes a look at literary works on Paul that appeared on the North American Jewish scene, represented by the novels of Shalom Asch (1880–1957) and Samuel Sandmel (1911–1979). Asch's sympathetic portrayal of Paul in his novel, *The Apostle* (1943), was received with deep suspicion by the Jewish community, particularly since it appeared at a time when Jews in Europe were being murdered and persecuted. As a result, Asch never succeeded in convincing his fellow Jews of his vision of the common Jewish-Christian spirit that he believed Paul exemplified. By contrast, Sandmel's historical novel, *The Apostle Paul*, remained unpublished and undated, despite being more intellectually rigorous than Ash's novel, given Sandmel's expertise in first-century Judaism. Sandmel had already conducted his own historical study of Paul in *The Genius of Paul* (1958), which Langton had already argued should be understood within the context of the intra-Jewish debate on what constitutes authentic Judaism. A work of fiction, though, allowed Sandmel to speculate on how complex Paul's identity would have been. The art of storytelling provided Sandmel the opportunity to humanise a person he had already studied academically. At the same time, Sandmel's Paul reflected the challenges that North American Jewry was facing in the 1960s: assimilation, alienation from institutional religion and traditional mores, and the desire

to experiment and innovate. Unfortunately, Sandmel's novel never found a publisher. Assessing both treatments of Paul, then, Langton shows how Asch's work used the strategy of emphasising the commonalities between Judaism and Christianity, whereas Sandmel chose not to cover up the differences between them, but rather to demonstrate how these particularities were ultimately non-threatening. Both, however, acted out of the desire to improve relations between Jews and Christians.

The fourth, and final, part of the book takes us to the outer limits of Jewish cultural imagination on Paul. Here Langton examines examples of the so-called "non-Jewish Jew" (a term coined by Isaac Deutscher in 1968) who no longer feels bound by nationalism or religion. Chapter 7 takes us through the philosophical writings of Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677), Lev Shestov (1866–1938), and Jacob Taubes (1923–1987), each representing a different philosophical programme: rationalism, antirationalism, and messianic apocalypticism. Langton argues that Spinoza's positive portrayal of Paul in the *Theological-Political Treatise* should more likely be seen as a strategy by a seventeenth-century marginal Jew to place his own philosophical ideas on rationality in the mouth of Paul the apostle in order to make them more palatable to his Christian audience. By contrast, Shestov regarded Paul as part of a long-term Judeo-Christian critique of Western rationality. While Paul was not that integral to his philosophical programme, Shestov recognised, as Spinoza did, Paul's usefulness as a common frame of reference within wider Christian society. But, unlike Spinoza, Shestov saw Paul's abrogation of the Law as a critique on reason, which thus made him diametrically opposite to Paul's place in Spinoza's philosophical programme. Another instance of Paul emerges in Taubes's *Political Theology of Paul*, which was published posthumously (1993). As a post-Holocaust Jew, Taubes reflected the distrust towards the foundations of political authority and its theological legitimation in history. For Taubes, then, Paul's advocacy of liberation from the law was understood as signifying freedom from political authority.

In chapter 8, Langton surveys the psychoanalytical writings of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) and Hanns Sachs (1881–1947). Freud's attitude to Paul was ambiguous. On the one hand, Freud used him as a powerful tool in support of his psychoanalysis; he understood Paul, in his *Moses and Monotheism* (1937), as having released people from the collective guilt of murdering the Primal Father, God (but also an amalgamation of Moses and Jesus). On the other hand, Paul's role in inventing Christianity contributed to Western civilisation continuing to live in the grip of illusion, namely religion,

which thus made Paul into an arch-opponent. In turning to the psychoanalysis of Sachs and his chapter on Paul in *Masks of Love and Life* (published posthumously in 1948), Langton discerns a different understanding of Paul's role, namely his role in liberating people from the anxiety of death. Though arriving at different psychoanalyses of Paul, Langton nonetheless sees both Freud and Sachs as subverting traditional Protestant understandings of Paul's position on sin and faith with their own unorthodox readings of the psychodynamics of the father-son relationship (Freud) and the liberating power of love (Sachs). More importantly, Langton surmises that both these thinkers latched on to Paul because they saw reflected in him their own marginal existence on the borderlands between Jewish and Gentile communities.

Coming from Pauline studies, I must confess that it was difficult to engage with several parts of the book until I relinquished my own occupational desire to understand the historical Paul better. That is ultimately not the purpose of the book. Readers wanting to know more about Paul himself or trying to make sense of the newer approaches to Paul within Pauline studies would be better served by consulting a book like Magnus Zetterholm's *Approaches to Paul* (2009). Similarly, an edition like *Paul's Jewish Matrix* (2011) indirectly attests to the current climate of Jewish-Christian relations through managing to bring together in one volume contributions from Jewish and Christian scholars who wish to understand Paul within his first-century Jewish context better, without any hint of confessional triumphalism. By contrast, Langton's book, as a work in cultural studies, is more accurately understood as a reception history of Paul, admittedly a specific kind of reception history, but a very pertinent one, since Langton helps us to see how different groups of Jewish individuals in the modern period have each contributed to a different construction of Paul. While some individual chapters of the book may sometimes strike one as eclectic, the book's introduction and conclusion neatly frame the book's guiding methodology and findings.

I must also admit that I was already familiar with Langton's 2005 *JSNT* articles on the myth of the traditional Jewish view of Paul and how modern Jewish identity interfaced with Paul, both of which prepared me for their inclusion in more complete form in the present book where I could now also appreciate the wider framework of which they form a part. I also found two other books helpful in contextualising Langton's book as a cultural study of Jewish-Christian relations in the modern period. Elisheva Carlebach's historical analysis of German-speaking converts from Judaism to Christianity in the early modern period, *Divided Souls: Converts from Judaism in Germany*

1500–1750 (2001), has a chapter on how Jewish converts based their narratives on Paul's conversion when writing their own convert biographies. This chapter was helpful for me to go along with Langton's suggestion to view the various Jewish treatments of Paul as strategies used by individuals on the margins seeking admittance to, or staking a claim to greater acceptance by, the wider (usually Christian) collective. Likewise, Susannah Heschel's study of *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus* (1998) indicated how the Jewish reclamation of Jesus initiated by Geiger should more accurately be understood as an instance of "reversing the gaze," an early example of postcolonialist writing meant to subvert the status quo. Many of the individuals studied by Langton in their portrayals of Paul would seem to fit this category equally well.

Because the canvas on which Langton has chosen to display the many constructions of Paul is so vast—he really does seem to have taken us from the inner to the outer reaches of the Jewish cultural imagination by the time he ends with analyses of the psyche—it goes without saying that Langton is unable to give an in-depth treatment of every construction that he discusses, even though he manages the task very thoroughly and admirably all the same. Just to give one example of what I mean: my research colleague spent four years on his PhD just studying the implications of the so-called "New Perspective on Paul" for contemporary Jewish-Christian dialogue. In the end, his dissertation amounted to no less than 364 pages, considerably more than the forty pages that Langton devotes to the study of Paul and interfaith relations in chapter 2 of his book. But there is an immediate advantage to condensing such a discussion in the way that Langton has: it answers directly to the puzzlement that some Christian New Testament scholars experience when faced with Jewish scholars' simultaneous uncovering of Paul's authentic Jewishness and continued rejection of his theology. That is because such Christian scholars are not sufficiently aware that what they consider to be the so-called "Jewish reclamation of Paul" is actually only part of a wider series of continuing Jewish constructions of Paul, not all of them in harmony with one another. Christian scholars could stand to learn from this for, although the key proponents of the so-called "New Perspective on Paul" (Krister Stendahl, E. P. Sanders, and James Dunn) called attention to the "Lutheran" construction of Paul, New Testament scholars still seem to nourish the optimistic view that their own studies of Paul are untouched by any such constructivist tendencies.

My general assessment of the book is that it rewards multiple readings and would serve well as a textbook for the teaching of courses in Jewish-

Christian relations, particularly of the modern era. If I am allowed to end on a personal note, I missed the opportunity to meet Daniel in person at a conference on Paul and Jewish-Christian relations I helped to organize in 2009. However, the pleasure of reading and reviewing his book has helped make up for our missed encounter in the flesh. I believe the book is a worthy testimony to the author's calibre as a scholar and another strong affirmation of the publisher's sound choice in accepting this monograph into its fold.

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