



PROJECT MUSE®

Scholarship as Moral Vision: David Flusser on Jesus, Paul,
and the Birth of Christianity

John G. Gager

Jewish Quarterly Review, Volume 95, Number 1, Winter 2005, pp. 60-73 (Article)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jqr.2005.0007>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/177698>

Scholarship as Moral Vision

David Flusser on Jesus, Paul, and the Birth of Christianity

JOHN G. GAGER

IN HIS LANDMARK PRESENTATION of the Dead Sea Scrolls, first published in 1955, Edmund Wilson singles out the Israeli scholar David Flusser for special attention and praise.¹ “He was dynamic, imaginative, passionately interested . . . I have rarely known a scholar who expressed himself—with all this material at this fingertips—so brilliantly and so much to the point.”² Wilson added that he “was not surprised to learn that at some recent scholarly congress in India he was the only one of the delegates whose feet were kissed by the natives and who was regarded, with his genielike appearance, as a semi-supernatural being.”³ Indeed, Flusser emerges as something of a semidivine hero in Wilson’s own narrative—unburdened by ordinary manners, learned in an astonishing variety of fields, and prone to enthusiastic outbursts in Latin, Greek, English, French, and Hebrew.

Despite Wilson’s high regard for Flusser, in the English-speaking world of scholars who deal with the origins of Christianity, he has passed largely without notice. His work on Jesus, on Paul, and on the fateful separation of the Jesus movement from its Jewish matrix has left no discernible mark on Christian scholarship. In this, Flusser shares the fate of most Jewish scholars who have written on early Christianity. Until very recently, they have been passed over in silence: ignored, not even accorded the courtesy of counterargument or refutation.⁴

A version of this article was delivered as the Sternberg Lecture in Jerusalem at the Hebrew University on June 7, 2001. I wish to express my deep gratitude to David Satran, who issued the invitation and provided helpful criticism along the way.

1. Edmund Wilson, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: 1947–1969* (New York, 1969; first published in 1955).

2. Wilson, *Dead Sea Scrolls*, 80.

3. Wilson, *Dead Sea Scrolls*, 251.

4. Apart from scattered reviews of his book on Jesus, the one serious, though highly focused and largely theological discussion of Flusser’s work that I have been able to find by a scholar outside Flusser’s own limited circle of disciples is an

Flusser died in September 2000, two weeks before I arrived in Jerusalem for a year of study at the Institute for Advanced Studies at the Hebrew University. Several weeks later I attended the memorial ceremony held in his honor at the Israel Academy. Soon thereafter I decided to focus my attention on this remarkable figure. What it was that initially intrigued me about the man and his work was not at all clear beyond the obvious fact that we shared a common interest in the origins of Christianity from its Jewish matrix. Like most scholars of early Christianity in the English-speaking world, I had made virtually no use of his voluminous scholarship, nor had I been a member of the circle of disciples that had formed around him in Jerusalem and to a lesser extent in German-speaking Europe. As for personal contacts, I had met him only once, many years ago, as a young graduate student.

What I had learned of Flusser before I began to read his extensive list of publications was that he was a true character, a great eccentric. Having talked about him with many of his former students, I have no doubt that he was just such a character and it was as an eccentric figure that I expected to encounter him in his written work. What I found instead came as a great surprise. Yes, in his work on early Christianity and its Jewish roots he had adopted positions that stood somewhat outside the mainstream—he claimed that Jesus spoke Hebrew and not Aramaic; and he preferred the gospel of Luke as the most reliable source for learning about Jesus. But these are small matters and he has plenty of companions who stand with him on these issues. Moreover, he was not afraid to change his views when confronted by strong contravening evidence.⁵ Slowly I began to realize that if he was truly eccentric, at least in his written work, it was for quite different reasons and with quite different

article by Gerd Theissen, "Zur Entstehung des Christentums aus dem Judentum," *Kirche und Israel: Neukirchener Theologische Zeitschrift* 3 (1988): 179–89. The only other piece on Flusser that I have been able to locate consists of a series of personal reminiscences by his longtime friend Clemens Thoma, "David Flusser: Aussagen in Briefen und Vorträge," *Freiburger Rundbrief* 8 (2001): 86–93. Two *Festschriften* in his honor were published during his lifetime: *The New Testament and Christian-Jewish Dialogue*, ed. M. Lowe (Jerusalem, 1990; this title is volume 24/25 of the journal *Immanuel*) and *Messiah and Christos: Studies in the Jewish Origins of Christianity*, ed. I. Gruenwald, S. Shaked, and G. Stroumsa (Tübingen, 1992).

5. In a remarkable review of Geza Vermes' *Jesus and the World of Judaism* (Philadelphia, 1984) (the review appeared in *Judaism* 35 [1986]: 361–64), Flusser concedes to Vermes on a number of important issues, among them Vermes' contention that the term "son of man" in the gospels should be translated as "I," i.e., as a reference to Jesus himself, rather than as "Son of Man," i.e., a reference to a well-defined heavenly figure.

results. What emerged for me in the end was a very different picture of Flusser, and it is this image that soon became the focus of my attention.

I need to add a word of caution. I have not set out to present an exhaustive portrait of his work. Instead, I have allowed my own interests to shape the issues that I will emphasize. I believe I am following Flusser himself in this regard, for it was one of his fundamental beliefs that all scholarship was profoundly shaped by the circumstances of the individual scholar. The notion of a disinterested or purely objective scholar was as alien to him as it is to me. What we see and what we know is profoundly conditioned by where we stand and who we are. Moreover, for him this was not a matter for regret but a simply matter of a fact. For me—and here I am certain that this is in large part what has drawn me to Flusser’s work—the most interesting and challenging scholarship always bears the unmistakable mark of those who produce it.

Another way to state this issue is to underline Flusser’s sense of himself as a thoroughly engaged scholar, the very opposite of what he liked to call “the effete academic.” While he could pursue technical philological work of the highest order, he seems most at ease, most himself, in his more popular writings, where he addresses a broad public audience, as with his little book entitled *Jewish Sources of Early Christianity* (1989) that originated as a series of talks on Israel Army Radio. And this was just one of several talks on that network.

But there is more to Flusser the engaged scholar than his willingness to speak to a broad public audience. For him, true scholarship was a deeply moral undertaking. It could achieve its deepest scholarly goals only when it pursued the highest moral aims. Let me cite two examples that take us to the very core of his work. The first comes from a series of essays on the New Testament gospel of Matthew. His conclusions are that the anti-Jewish passages in the gospel belong to the latest stages of its production. And it is precisely these passages, the ones that speak of Israel’s rejection and condemnation, that have exercised the greatest influence in later Christianity. Flusser labels these later additions of the final redactor as a kind of pseudo-Christianity “in which properly Christian ideas (those of the authentic gospel of Matthew) are underdeveloped.”⁶ He calls the religion of this redactor a sect that was “not genuinely Christian and which did not pursue true Christian aims.”⁷ In short, the true, the original gospel of Matthew—the one not corrupted by

6. David Flusser, *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity* [henceforth *JOC*] (Jerusalem, 1988), 572–73.

7. Flusser, *JOC*, 573.

the final editor—makes it possible for Christian readers to reject the anti-Jewish passages as untrue to the gospel of Jesus in its original and authentic form. And he concludes with this telling remark: “This was not my intention [as he set out to study the gospel of Matthew] but it is a natural result of our research.”⁸ Here, I think, it is not going too far to say that in the final analysis, the measure of true scholarship lies in its moral consequences.

In all of this I see Flusser speaking to two different audiences—to Christians first, but also to Jews. To Christians his message was that true Christianity, as revealed above all in the figure of Jesus, has no room today and had no room in the beginning for any kind of anti-Judaism. True Christianity must reflect Jesus’ message of unconditional love for neighbor, which embodied what Flusser called the new sensitivity in post-biblical Judaism. To Jews—and he regularly used the figure of Jesus as an example of what true Judaism should be—the message was twofold: first, that true Christianity was and is a Jewish religion and thus remains tied inseparably to Judaism; and second, that for both historical and contemporary reasons, Jews cannot ignore Christianity. To put it in a somewhat different form, the two religions were born together as sisters in the beginning and are still linked as siblings today.⁹

In a word, the underlying goal of Flusser’s scholarship was to create a path beyond ignorance and prejudice, a path that would lead to understanding and reconciliation. “Sound scholarship,” he wrote, “removes obstacles and paves the way for truth and for mutual understanding.”¹⁰ This was the view of Erasmus, one of Flusser’s intellectual heroes. It was Flusser’s view and it is also mine.

If engaged scholarship represents one broad stroke in Flusser’s life, his emergence as a historian of religion illustrates the second. Although he

8. Flusser, *JOC*, 573. Here I must note that recent scholarship on the gospel of Matthew has radically called into question this traditional view of Matthew as consisting of an earlier, pro-Jewish level of material, later overlaid, in the final stages of redaction, by an anti-Jewish framework. See in particular the profoundly revisionist work of the late Anthony Saldarini, *Matthew’s Christian-Jewish Community* (Chicago, 1994). Saldarini’s view is that Matthew is Jewish from start to finish, to be sure in a deviant and sectarian form, and that there is no hint or trace of anti-Judaism to be found anywhere in the gospel. He concludes as follows: “To say that Matthew, because he accords Jesus such a high status is not Jewish, but Christian, in his teaching about Jesus, anachronistically imposes on the late first century the clear identity that most Christians created for themselves during the second century” (193).

9. Flusser, *JOC*, xvi.

10. Flusser, *JOC*, 2.

describes his early training as that of a classicist, [and contrasts this with theology,] it seems clear to me that in the end he had become a historian of religion. Historians of religion are always comparative and theoretical—comparative in that they look at cultures far removed from their home base, and theoretical in that they make use of insights drawn from other academic disciplines: psychology, anthropology, and literary criticism, to name just a few. I do not mean to suggest that Flusser ever became a theoretician or a comparativist, but I do want to point out that along with his extensive knowledge of European art and literature, he was also reading studies of new religious movements in the United States and elsewhere.

At this point, I would like to turn from these broad features to a number of specific topics, albeit in a cursory fashion, even while trying to avoid becoming superficial. The topics are the figure of Jesus and the apostle Paul.

First, the figure of Jesus. In the manuscripts of book 18 in Flavius Josephus's *Jewish Antiquities* there appears a famous text, known as the *testimonium flavianum*:

About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one ought to call him a man. For he was one who performed surprising deeds and was a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. He was [called by his followers?] the Messiah. And when, upon the accusation of the principal men among us, Pilate had condemned him to a cross, those who had first come to love him did not cease. He appeared to them spending a third day restored to life, for the prophets of God had foretold these things and a thousand other marvels about him. And the tribe of the Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared.¹¹

While most scholars regard the whole passage as a later Christian intrusion into Josephus's text, Flusser made use of work by his longtime friend Shlomo Pines on a later Arabic source and reconstructed from this source the original version of Josephus's notice about Jesus.¹² The key to this original version is the description of Jesus as a wise man, a *sophos aner* in Greek. From this, and from various passages in the New Testament gospels where outsiders address Jesus as 'rabbi,' Flusser develops his full picture of Jesus:

11. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 18.63–64.

12. Flusser, *Jewish Sources in Early Christianity* [henceforth *JSEC*] (Tel Aviv, 1989), 14–15.

• He was not an ignorant *'am ha-'arets* but “perfectly at home in scripture and oral tradition.”¹³ More precisely—and here I still recall my astonishment on first reading this sentence—his “Jewish education was incomparably superior to that of St. Paul”;¹⁴

• As a first-century teacher of the Law, “his sayings become an invaluable sources for understanding the world of the sages, of the oral law and of the Jewish Midrashim.”¹⁵ Indeed, some later rabbinic texts can be understood only by relating them to sayings of Jesus; similarly, many sayings of Jesus can only be understood when read in the light of later rabbinic traditions.

• But Jesus was not a Pharisee in the strict sense. He belonged to the circles of charismatic figures like Honi the circle-drawer and others who regarded the Pharisees with deep suspicion.¹⁶ In line with this charismatic tradition, Jesus could refer to God with the familiar term “Abba” and he could also criticize the Pharisees for their hypocrisy in exactly the same terms used later against the Pharisees in rabbinic texts!¹⁷

• On some issues Jesus stood close to the school of Hillel, especially in his emphasis on love for one’s neighbor¹⁸, but on others he agreed with the school of Shammai. Thus he had a poor opinion of Gentiles.¹⁹ He did not heal non-Jews; and he worked only among the people of Israel.²⁰

There is still more to the picture of Jesus, for he was associated not just with the sages and the charismatic healers but also with John the Baptist and through him with the Essenes of Qumran and the Dead Sea Scrolls. Like the Essenes, Jesus valued poverty and saw worldly possessions as a threat to true piety;²¹ and like the Essenes he believed that good will eventually overcome evil. But unlike the Essenes, who remained an isolated group of sectarians, confident in their own piety and in the wickedness of all others outside the sect, Jesus broke completely with the old morality. In other words, Jesus not only embodied the new spirituality of Second Temple Judaism, summarized in the love commandment, but with him love becomes absolute and unconditional, extending even to one’s enemies. “All of the norms of God’s righteousness are abrogated.”²²

13. Flusser, *Jesus* (Jerusalem, 1998), 30.

14. Flusser, *Jesus*, 30.

15. Flusser, *JSEC*, 19.

16. Flusser, *Jesus*, 114–15.; idem., *JSEC*, 33–34.

17. Flusser, *Jesus*, 69–70.

18. Flusser, *Jesus*, 92.

19. Flusser, *Jesus*, 76–77.

20. Flusser, *Jesus*, 78.

21. Flusser, *Jesus*, 94.

22. Flusser, *Jesus*, 101.

This new view is at once profoundly moral, yet somehow beyond good and evil.²⁵ But at the same time—and here Flusser parts company with many New Testament scholars—this new morality never led Jesus to criticize or abrogate the Torah in any way. Jesus was no reformer. As noted earlier, all of the negative statements about Torah and Israel in the gospels belong to later stages of the tradition, to a generation that no longer stood within Judaism and thus no longer understood the radical message of Jesus. Indeed, Flusser notes, “we find in the New Testament hardly any trace of Jesus’ personal message.”²⁴ Thus—and this I believe to be essential in appreciating Flusser’s remarkable personal stance toward Jesus—Jesus is not merely rooted completely in the world of Second Temple Judaism but at the same time he is radically separated from most of his early followers and from much of later Christianity.

All of this brings me to the question of Flusser’s personal attraction to the figure of Jesus. And let there be no doubt about this attraction. In the preface to his book on Jesus, he writes this: “I readily admit that I personally identify myself with Jesus’ Jewish Weltanschauung, and I believe that the content of his teaching and the approach he embraced have always had the potential to change our world and prevent the greatest part of evil and suffering.”²⁵ Elsewhere he speaks of “the enormity of Jesus’ life which speaks to us today.”²⁶ And again, “My ambition is simply to serve as a mouthpiece for Jesus’ message today.”²⁷

Now the question before us is this. How are we to understand these words from someone who describes himself in the same breath as “a practicing Jew and not a Christian”?²⁸ Part of the answer lies in my earlier observation that for Flusser, Jesus stands apart from and is misunderstood by virtually all of later Christianity. Here Flusser is part of a long line of modern Jesus research that has produced many different images: Morton Smith’s Jesus the magician; Geza Vermes’ Jesus the charismatic wonder-worker; John Dominic Crossan’s Jesus the popular Cynic philosopher, and so on. The one thread that unites all these images is that in the final analysis Jesus stands alone, isolated and misunderstood from the very beginning, above all by those closest to him (as also and repeatedly in the gospel of Mark).

23. Flusser, *Jesus*, 102.

24. “Theses on the Emergence of Christianity from Judaism,” *Immanuel* 5 (1975): 74.

25. Flusser, *Jesus*, 15.

26. Flusser, *Jesus*, 23.

27. Flusser, *Jesus*, 16.

28. Flusser, *Jesus*, 15.

Another part of the answer lies in Flusser's early years in Prague, where he tells us that he experienced unusual warmth and acceptance from a group of Bohemian Brethren. Here, I believe, he found the true disciples of Jesus—small in numbers, persecuted by worldly powers, and committed to an ethic of love. When asked once by a member of the Mennonite church, an American cousin of the Brethren, whether his Jesus book was Jewish or Christian, he replied, "If Christians would be Mennonites, my work would be a Christian book."²⁹

I suspect that the complete answer to our question is even more complicated. And so, before we leave Flusser's Jesus, let me hazard two or three short observations. The first is a question: Does he escape what I call Schweitzer's law? Albert Schweitzer once wrote that no task so reveals a person's own self-understanding as the writing of a life of Jesus. In other words, no one can escape the tendency to project his or her own views onto the figure of Jesus. Personally, I waver between viewing this tendency as very powerful and all-powerful. In the end, I am not sure that Flusser has managed to escape this law. His Jesus may tell us as much about himself as it does about Jesus. My second observation is that despite his repeated insistence that he was not a theologian, he never hesitated to enter into the heart of profoundly theological matters, and he did so knowingly. In 1975 he delivered a series of lectures in Switzerland and Germany on Jesus as a rabbinic Jew. The uproar following one of these lectures was so heated that the session had to be ended abruptly, with Flusser biting his hand and insisting that he only wanted to lead Christian faith in the direction set out by Jesus. And in Geneva, when the audience protested in dismay at his portrait of Jesus as a rabbinic Jew, Flusser began to remove his jacket, tie, and shirt, insisting that he was not carrying any hidden anti-Christian items.³⁰ These admittedly extreme audience reactions—extreme no doubt because the bearer of the message was Jewish—are well known to all scholars of the New Testament and early Christianity, whose scholarly work often generates resentment among believers, but especially so when we put forward the view that Jesus was a Jew; or that the book of Revelation is a Jewish, not a Christian text;³¹ or that Paul was not a Christian and had no notion whatsoever of creating a new religious movement.³² The feeling seems to be

29. Flusser, *Jesus*, 16.

30. See the account in C. Thoma, "David Flusser: Aussagen in Briefen und Vorträgen," *Freiburger Rundbrief* 2 (2001): 86–93.

31. See, for example, the persuasive argument made by John Marshall in his *Parables of War: Reading John's Jewish Apocalypse* (Waterloo, Ontario, 2001).

32. For example, Lloyd Gaston, *Paul and the Torah* (Vancouver, 1987), and John Gager, *Reinventing Paul* (New York, 2000).

that we are somehow robbing Christians of their beloved figures: Jesus, the gospels, and more recently Paul. And there is some truth in this. But most of us recognize that if we were to be brutally honest with ourselves, we would have to admit that there is often a high level of personal ambivalence underlying all our labors. We are drawn to Christianity at some level, but in other ways we are highly critical. We spend much of our time, usually with little success, trying to live comfortably between these two poles. So, I believe, it was with Flusser. A wonderful anecdote (for which I have to thank my friend Ora Limor) illustrates how this ambivalence could express itself in a public setting. Flusser walked into his class on Christianity one day and reported that he had suffered a terrible nightmare. "I dreamed," he said, "that all of you who have been listening to my lectures went out to the Jordan River and got yourselves baptized!" In short, he lived in constant fear of being misunderstood.

If, as I have just suggested, Flusser's work on Jesus represents a certain ambivalence toward Christianity, or rather toward what he would have called true, authentic Christianity, we can say that his affinity for Jesus represents the positive pole of that ambivalence. But ambivalence always requires a counterbalancing negative pole, and it will come as no great surprise to hear that in my view his treatment of the apostle Paul represents that negative pole. At one level, this claim simply places Flusser among the many Jewish scholars whose motto has long been "Jesus, yes; but Paul never."³³ Jesus remained within the setting of ancient Judaism. It was Paul who created Christianity, who forced the split between Jews and Christians, and who created the foundations of Christian anti-Judaism. But here I want to underscore two refinements in Flusser's position within this traditional framework. First, he is positioned at the extreme end in terms of his positive view of Jesus. While many of his predecessors among Jewish interpreters of Jesus, beginning in the nineteenth century, have emphasized Jesus' Jewishness, none to my knowledge have been so extreme or outspoken in their expressions of personal appreciation, or better, attachment to him as a bearer of authentic faith.³⁴

33. See the useful surveys of Jewish scholarship on Paul by Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer, "The 'Essential Heresy': Paul's View of the Law according to Jewish Writers, 1886–1986" (Ph.D. dissertation, Temple University, 1990), and S. Meisner, *Die Heimholung des Ketzers* (Tübingen, 1996).

34. The body of Jewish literature on Jesus is extensive. See the excellent treatment by Susannah Heschel, *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus* (Chicago, 1998). Less critical but still useful as a survey is Donald Hagner, *The Jewish Reclamation of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1984). Trude Weiss-Rosmarin has published an anthology of standard texts, *Jewish Expressions of Jesus: An Anthology*

And second, his negative assessment of Paul is both complex and to some extent confused—complex because he emphasizes over and over Paul's commitment to Israel; confused because in the end his ambivalence forces him to stop short of a complete, and seemingly inevitable, breakthrough in his reading of Paul's letters. In other words, I see a double ambivalence at work here: one in which Jesus and Paul occupy opposing evaluations of Christianity, Jesus positive and Paul negative; and a second one regarding Paul himself, positive in some respects but negative in others.

Let me try to lay out Flusser's view of Paul and my own assessment of its mixed results. I believe that I have detected a certain movement in his view of Paul over the years. In 1972, for instance, he wrote, without any qualification, that Paul opposed the Law of the Jews.³⁵ But in a German essay of 1990 he is much more nuanced—and more positive. In the earlier essay, he paraphrases Paul's statement in Romans 11.26 ("All Israel will be saved") with the words "Israel would become Christian."³⁶ But in later writings he honors Paul's own language and writes, "All Israel will be saved."³⁷

One theme remained constant: he always placed great emphasis on Paul's positive view of Israel as a people. At the same time, and this too remains constant in his work from the beginning, he held to the view that for Paul, Christ's death had abolished the Law of Moses not just for Gentiles but for Jews as well. The commandments cannot justify any person—Jew or Gentile—before God. Paul thus identifies the commandments with the lower realm of the flesh and develops a highly spiritualized view of the Law that stands in contrast to and above the particular commandments.³⁸ Faith emerges as the antithesis to the Law and in the

(New York, 1977). Shorter but interesting are essays by Philip Alexander, "Yeshu/Yeshua ben Yosef of Nazareth: Discerning the Jewish Face of Jesus," *The Birth of Jesus: Biblical and Theological Reflections* (Edinburgh, 2000), 9–21; and S. David Sperling, "Jewish Perspectives on Jesus," *Jesus Then and Now: Images of Jesus in History and Christology*, ed. M. Meyer and C. Hughes (Harrisburg, Pa., 2001). Of the major Jewish writers on Jesus, the one who comes closest to Flusser in tone is Martin Buber. "From my youth onwards I have found in Jesus my great brother . . . My own fraternally open relationship to him has grown ever stronger and clearer . . . I am more certain than ever that a great place belongs to him in Israel's history of faith" (Buber, *Two Types of Faith* [London, 1951]).

35. In his article on Paul in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (New York, 1972), 13:190–91.

36. *Ibid.*, 192.

37. Flusser, *Das Christentum* (Munich, 1990), 95.

38. Flusser, "'Durch das Gesetz dem Gesetz gestorben,'" *Judaica* 43 (1987): 35–36.

end utterly transforms the understanding of the Law that was characteristic of ancient Judaism in general and of Jesus in particular. Here Flusser discovers a great paradox: Paul, the fervent apostle of Jesus, actually turns the views of Jesus upside down. How, asks Flusser, does this paradoxical reversal come about? Here again he stands in a long tradition of scholarship that locates the dramatic turning point in Paul's conversion. "We can understand Paul's thinking in psychological terms. The former Pharisee is forced to turn against his own past as a result of this overpowering experience."³⁹ From that point on, Paul broke with his Pharisaic and Jewish past. Nowhere is this break more evident than in his tortured interpretation of biblical texts, which he distorts in a futile effort to justify his new orientation. Flusser speaks repeatedly of Paul's transformation and inversion of Jewish values. Time and again he uses German words with the prefix 'um,' which incorporates both inversion and distortion: *umdeuten*, *umformen*, *umwerten*, *umkehren*. In the end, Flusser, along with many others, is left with a divided Paul, a man committed to his people and to their final salvation on the one hand, but critical of their Law and their piety on the other.

And yet there are moments when an altogether different image threatens to break through. Here and there along the way Flusser comes close to a radical break with this traditional understanding of the Pauline paradox. Let me focus on just two central issues where he parts company with the traditional view. One of the classic prooftexts in the anti-Jewish version of Paul (the Paul who rejects the Law and sees Israel's salvation as possible only through faith in Christ) is a passage in his letter to the Galatians (2.15–16), with parallels in the letter to the Romans:

We ourselves, who are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners, yet who know that no one (*anthropos*) is justified by works of the law but rather through the faith of/in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by works of the Law, because by works of the Law no one (*ou pasa sarx*) can be justified.⁴⁰

39. Flusser, *Das Christentum*, 128.

40. From the language of the text as well as the immediate context of the passage, it is undeniably clear that Paul is here speaking of Gentiles. As Lloyd Gaston and others have argued, the phrase "works of the Law" is not to be taken as synonymous with the Law/Torah but rather with partial observance of commandments by Gentiles; see Gaston, *Paul and the Torah* (Vancouver, 1987), 69–70. In his essay "Paul's Jewish-Christian Opponents in the Didache," in *Gilgul: Essays on Transformation, Revolution and Permanence in the History of Religions*,

The text makes two assertions, although virtually all exegetes distort the first and miss the second. The first point is that no one is justified by virtue of doing works of the law; and the second point is, in Paul's words, "we who are Jews know this to be true." Here Flusser, along with a small number of others, comments that Paul was absolutely correct. As he puts it, "any Jew would find it most curious if a rabbi were to say, 'You are redeemed by doing the Law'."⁴¹ In other words, not only is this passage not an argument against the Law, it is in harmony with virtually all forms of ancient Judaism. And so, one of the central pillars of the Pauline paradox collapses. But if this verse is not an argument against the Law or against observance of the Law, what is going on here?

This brings me to the second issue that carries even more weight. In his early writings on Paul, Flusser pays almost no attention to the concrete circumstances of Paul's letters. To whom are they addressed? What controversies lie behind them? Who are his opponents? Why is circumcision such a recurrent theme? And what are we to make of the fact that he always calls himself the apostle to the Gentiles? Over time, however, these circumstances began to make an impression on Flusser and slowly forced him toward a new understanding of Paul and the Law. Already in an essay from 1983,⁴² but with even greater emphasis in his German book of 1990,⁴³ he began to modify his notion of Paul's views on the Law. What I have in mind is a series of statements in which it becomes clear that Paul's view is not that the Law is no longer valid for Jews, not that the Law brought condemnation and slavery to Jews, but rather, as Flusser puts it, "that *Gentile Christians* should [not] accept Jewish ritual obligations."⁴⁴ Or again, "Paul's view was that *Gentile Christians* should not live like Jews."⁴⁵ These sentences take us—and they began to take Flusser—far beyond the image of Paul as an enemy of the Jewish Law.

And he takes these observations one step further by commenting that the setting for this view is not a debate with Jews outside the Jesus-movement but rather a debate entirely within. It is an *internal* struggle

Dedicated to R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, ed. S. Shaked, D. Shulman, and G. Stroumsa (Leiden, 1987), Flusser addresses the issue as it arose in ancient Judaism. "Paul and the medieval Rabbis wanted to separate the Jews from non-Jews and the most dangerous obstacle in the way of achieving this aim was when Gentiles began to fulfill, even partially, the Jewish law . . . Thus Gentile 'Judaizers' became non desirable for both sides" (p. 80).

41. Flusser, "Das Gesetz," 33.

42. "The Jewish-Christian Schism," reprinted in *JOC*, 630ff.

43. Flusser, *Das Christentum*.

44. Flusser, *JOC*, 631 (emphasis added).

45. Flusser, *Das Christentum*, 93 (emphasis added).

between Paul, defending his law-free gospel to the Gentiles, and other believers (among them Peter and those whom Paul calls “false brethren”), insisting that Gentile followers should be circumcised and follow a certain minimum of the ritual laws.⁴⁶ Though he does not cite Paul’s answer to Peter, it is worth noting that Paul adopts a thoroughly Shammaite position against Peter: “I declare that every man who has himself circumcised is bound to observe the whole law” (Gal 5.2). In other words, the entire debate, and thus all of Paul’s critical comments about the Law, has nothing whatsoever to do with the Law and Israel. The issue is totally internal to the Jesus-movement and has as its exclusive focus the question of the Law and Gentiles. They are the ones now freed from the Law. They are the ones for whom the Law had brought sin, slavery, and death. And they, Paul’s Gentile believers, are the ones who are threatened by that same fate as a result of the insistence by Peter and others that Gentile followers of Jesus needed to be circumcised and to follow parts of the ritual law.

Note Flusser’s comment about all of this: “One thing is clear: Paul uses Jewish legal arguments to establish his claim that Christians need not observe the law, since they have been freed from the law and stand now under the grace of Christ.”⁴⁷ I cannot stress too strongly how much this remark undermines the traditional anti-Jewish, anti-Law view of Paul. And if Flusser had taken one more step in this direction—and not a very big one at that—the entire edifice of the Pauline paradox would have crumbled into dust. All of Paul’s criticisms of the Law would have been seen as having nothing to do with the Law in relation to Israel. Indeed, Flusser comes tantalizingly close to this view when he comments, “Paul never says in so many words that there is anything that can release a Jew from his observation of the Law and its works . . . Paul accepted and delivered to the Churches the rule that Christians from Jewish stock should practice what they did before their call.”⁴⁸ Yes, Paul says different things about the Law and its effects. But the negative effects apply only to Gentiles (in line with well-established Jewish traditions), whereas Paul waxes rhapsodic about its positive effects for Israel: all Israel will be saved; circumcision is of great value for those who obey the Law; the Law is holy; the commandments are holy, just, and good; God has not rejected his people Israel.

With this one additional step, Flusser would have been able to answer

46. Flusser, *Das Christentum*, 90ff.

47. Flusser, *Das Christentum*, 131.

48. Flusser, “Pauls’ Opponents,” 80–81.

his own questions: How could any Jew conceive of the Law as valid only for a limited period of time?⁴⁹ How could any Jew set the divine spirit against the commandments of the law?⁵⁰ The answer would have been—indeed I believe that it must be—that these were not his views about the Law and *Israel*. As the apostle to the Gentiles, his gospel is that the commandments no longer applied to Gentiles. But they remained fully valid and binding for Jews. With this step, I believe he would have reached conclusions regarding Paul very similar to those he reached for Jesus. Both were firmly rooted in Judaism of the first century, each was misunderstood and misinterpreted by his followers, neither one can be properly regarded as a founder of Christianity.⁵¹ And finally, it makes no real sense to speak of Paul's faith as "Christianity" or of his own congregations as "Christian."

In closing, I want to raise the question of why Flusser failed to make this final break with the anti-Jewish view of Paul, though he came so close. Why, after demonstrating that the followers of Jesus distorted his message by turning it against the Law, did he not pursue the same course with Paul, showing how *his* followers distorted *his* message in precisely the same way, by turning it against the Law? Especially since on many other issues he argues that Paul was widely misunderstood by later Christianity.

Here I feel my way out on a limb while I recur briefly to my earlier discussion of ambivalence. Let me suggest that Flusser, the observant Jew, having lavished such extraordinary praise on the figure of Jesus, having placed so much weight on the Jesus side of the equation, needed an anti-Jewish Paul to balance out the positive side of his ambivalence. Or, to put it somewhat differently, having torn down one of the pillars of Christian anti-Judaism, with the restoration of a fully Jewish Jesus, he found it difficult, perhaps at an unconscious level, to bring down the other pillar in that wall of separation.

For Christians and Jews—as well as for those like me who are neither one nor the other—the collapse of this wall would represent a huge break with the past, a leap into an unknown future with no clear path to follow. Who among us would not hesitate before jumping into this void? David Flusser took us to the edge and pointed the way. It is now up to us to follow where he himself did not go.

49. Flusser, "Pauls' Opponents," 135.

50. Flusser, "Pauls' Opponents," 124.

51. Flusser, *JOC*, 631; compare also *idem.*, *Das Christentum*, 93 and 97.