Langton, Daniel R.

The Apostle Paul in the Jewish Imagination: A Study in Modern Jewish-Christian Relations


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One could hardly deny that, while Christians may think of Paul as a seminal figure in the history of Christianity, and indeed as the person who determined the shape it would take, Paul also belongs to the history of Judaism. Yet what are the implications of such an observation, and whither might it be taken? In this rich and innovative study, Daniel Langton explores how Paul has been used within Jewish intellectual history to address questions of Jewish identity both in the face of the encounter with Christianity and also in the competing internal configurations of being Jewish in the modern period, which themselves have often had to negotiate that encounter. As Langton himself acknowledges, this entails what might be seen as two contentious starting points: first, the author’s right to identify writers who qualify as “Jewish,” and, second, that contrary to the widespread contemporary claim that confessional allegiance is, at most, of secondary significance in a scholar’s interpretation of the past, careful analysis can demonstrate significant intersection between them.

Langton’s focus begins with the nineteenth century, dismissing the argument that there is an earlier long tradition of hatred of Paul, while tracing the highly negative picture of the “apostate” responsible for Christianity that does then emerge in the popular press. Among
Jewish intellectuals, however, he finds a much more complex reaction. His approach is to analyze significant thinkers, largely in chronological order within broad categories. Thus the first substantial chapter starts with those, from Graetz to Maccoby, who articulate the picture of a Paul who fundamentally misunderstood and misrepresented his Jewish heritage and so ensured Christian antipathy to Judaism; it then sets in contrast a more diverse set of attempts to affirm Paul’s Jewishness while acknowledging the impact of his identity as apostle to the Gentiles—from the probably unfamiliar Joseph Krauskopf to more household names in New Testament scholarship such as C. Montefiore, P. Lapide, M. Nanos, and A. Segal. Whereas among the former Christianity might be configured as a continuing threat, among the latter, with varying degrees of explicitness, a true understanding of Paul and his intentions might offer space for a sympathetic Jewish-Christian dialogue.

The next chapter examines an even more varied range of “uses” of Paul to address contemporary internal debates. Some, such as Montefiore, presented Paul as one who drew attention to aspects of Jewish belief that had sometimes been eclipsed and that, according to these thinkers, were or should be found at the heart of those trends within contemporary Judaism, usually progressive, that they themselves represented; others located Paul to configure an opposition within debates over Zionism, liberalism, the role and nature of the law, or the validity of inner diversity and personal experience—among others, Klausner, Schoeps, Flusser, Sandmel, and Segal. Two striking sections of this chapter highlight the contributions of feminist interpreters (Eisenbaum, Ilan, Levine) and those from a “messianic Jewish” perspective. The third chapter goes a step further, identifying scholars who, in Langton’s view, use an analysis and presentation of Paul in order to project their own more radical reconfiguration of Jewish identity as part of an exercise in self-location (H. Schonfield, R. Rubenstein, D. Boyarin).

While the thinkers surveyed in these three chapters all take as their starting point the New Testament, and many would be recognized as scholars of the New Testament—if of other things as well—the two chapters that follow look at how Paul as subject has been used as a means of self-understanding and -exploration in the arts and literature. Here Langton has to provide much more of the personal story that serves as the lens through which he interprets what the artist is doing, for example, showing how in his oratorio *St Paul* F. Mendelssohn struggles to make sense of his own Jewish heritage and his Christian baptism as a child in the broader context of his father and grandfather’s response to their Jewishness and of the German Lutheranism of his time. The rich exploration of Ludwig Meidner’s painting of Paul’s conversion, *Paulus Predigt*, is helped by a reproduction on the dust-jacket—which libraries who discard these would do well to bind in, while with F. Werfel’s tragedy, *Paul among the Jews*, most readers will again have to rely on the account Langton gives. Langton recognizes that these figures are idiosyncratic, while the novels of
S. Asch (*The Apostle*) and of the New Testament scholar S. Sandmel (*The Apostle Paul*) are both more sympathetic and fit more obviously within a broader range of twentieth-century North American Jewish literature.

The final section examines the work of some who might be dubbed “non-Jewish Jews” whose use of Paul in an analysis of the place of religion in society, Langton argues, can nonetheless be located within the dilemmas of Jewishness within the post-Enlightenment processes of secularization: B. Spinoza, L. Shestov, J. Taubes, S. Freud, and H. Sachs.

This review may suggest the book is something of an extended “review of scholarship,” a genre sometimes dutifully undertaken and rarely found inspiring by others. At times the need to explain and précis otherwise largely unknown works does lose freshness, but largely Langton maintains variety and a well-judged balance between information and interpretation. It may well be felt that the people brought together for study here constitute an almost unmanageable range; most would have found many of their companions uncomfortable bed-fellows, and some would have protested—perhaps will protest—at finding themselves here. For all this, in his conclusion Langton seeks both to acknowledge the diversity and to draw out some common threads. Inevitably, these threads trace the lines of tension in the politics of identity for Jews in a post-Enlightenment Christian and post-Christian world, lines of tension that could no doubt have been traced in other ways. By taking the apostle Paul as the constant fulcrum of this kaleidoscope, Langton is offering more than a history of this topic and more than an intellectual history. Whether deliberately or not, the book also presents a challenge to major current interests in biblical scholarship, particularly in reception history and also in recovering “Paul in (Palestinian) Judaism,” inviting them to examine the unreflected frameworks and agenda with which they work. It deserves to be read widely and to become a stimulus for further dialogue of the kind it so well models.