

‘WRITTEN FOR OUR INSTRUCTION’¹

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As a Jew who became the apostle to the Gentiles, Paul stood between the Jewish and pagan worlds. Consequently NT scholars have long debated the question of the sources of Paul’s thought. To which sphere was he more indebted? In particular there is perennial interest in the extent to which Paul uses the Jewish Scriptures when he regulates conduct in his churches.

The view that Scripture did not play an important role in the formation of Paul’s ethics is held by a host of not only Protestant but also Roman Catholic and even Jewish students of Paul’s letters. It is represented on both sides of the Atlantic but is especially strong in Germany. Evidence for this position may be marshalled from many quarters. The following three points are often adduced: (1) Paul makes some very negative statements about the Law of Moses, cites Scripture rarely and frequently appears to depart from its teaching (eg. ‘circumcision is nothing’); (2) Paul’s ethics, it is believed, are fundamentally indebted to sources and factors other than Scripture, such as the words of Jesus, a belief in the impending return of Christ, and the non-Jewish ethics of his time; and (3) the Scriptures, many scholars would argue, were Paul’s ‘witness to the Gospel’ (Rom. 3:21), but when it came to questions of conduct, Paul did not consider them to have been written for the ethical instruction of Christians.

The thesis attempts to evaluate this widely held view by investigating a representative sample from Paul’s ethics, 1 Corinthians 5-7. Most commentators indicate by their silence that the Old Testament has little to do with Paul’s instructions here, and for each section several scholars emphatically deny that Scripture has played a formative role. The conclusion to which the research has led is that in spite of the few quotations of Scripture in 1 Corinthians 5-7 and other indications to the contrary, Scripture is nevertheless a crucial and

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formative source. It not only influenced Paul's ethics through Paul's use of it directly, but also indirectly through Paul's familiarity with Jewish moral teaching, which itself distilled and developed the moral teaching of the Scriptures. Jews in the ancient world had incorporated the main ethical teachings of their Scriptures in writings which presented the Jewish inheritance to the reader (Jew or non-Jew) familiar with Greek traditions and customs. Such teaching can be found in the Apocrypha, the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, the Dead Sea Scrolls, Philo, Josephus, Rabbinic literature and in the Jewish Greek Scriptures themselves. The influence of Scripture on Paul's ethics can only be fully appreciated when considered in conjunction with the influence of this post-Biblical Jewish moral teaching. This early Jewish teaching in which Paul was immersed was, in effect, the 'filter' through which he heard the moral demands of the Scriptures.

It is demonstrated that the major lines of Paul's ethics in 1 Corinthians 5-7 can be reliably traced back into the Scriptures, in most cases by way of Jewish sources. In 1 Corinthians 5 a case of incest is condemned and discipline employed because of the teaching of pentateuchal covenant and temple exclusion. Breach of the covenant, guilt by association, and the maintenance of holiness are three major reasons for exclusion from the community taught in the Pentateuch. Each of these motifs is reflected in Paul's instructions. In 6:1-11 going to court before unbelievers is prohibited with the Scripture's teaching on judges in mind. Just as Moses appointed wise and righteous laity to decide lesser civil cases (including fraud) between their brothers (Ex. 18; Dt. 1), so also Paul rejected unrighteous judges and told the Corinthian Christians to appoint wise laity to decide such cases between their brothers. In 6:12-20 going to prostitutes is opposed using the Scriptural doctrine of the Lord as the believer's husband and master, and with advice which recalls early Jewish interpretation of the Genesis 39 story of Joseph fleeing Potiphar's wife. And in 7:1-40 several key texts from the Torah (as understood by much early Jewish interpretation) inform what is said about marriage. Most of Paul's teaching throughout the chapter, including the 'ascetical' notes, is comprehensible in terms of contemporary Jewish interpretation of Torah. Paul's occasional failure to follow

Scripture as his moral guide in 7:1-40 is to a large extent due to specific, identifiable circumstances, namely, apostolic tradition which dissented from the majority Biblical/Jewish position, and extenuating circumstances in Corinth ('the present distress'). To sum up, in 1 Corinthians 5-7 we discovered significant links between Ezra and Paul excluding sinners (both depend on Pentateuchal legislation), Moses and Paul appointing judges, Joseph and Paul fleeing immorality, and between the Torah and Paul on the subject of marriage. Plausible connections to Paul's Scriptural inheritance for most of the details of 1 Corinthians 5-7 are also supplied.

Thus the view that Paul's dependence upon the Scriptures for ethics is negligible and incidental is seriously challenged by the thesis. The Scriptures were for Paul not only 'witness to the Gospel' (Rom. 3:21), but also, at least in the case of 1 Corinthians 5-7, 'written for our (ethical) instruction' (1 Cor. 10:11; Rom. 15:4).

This work has considerable implications for the study of Christian origins as well as for the interpretation of the New Testament. On the argument advanced in the thesis, Paul the Christian appears to owe much more to his Jewish environment than has often been supposed, and Pauline churches, for all their distinctiveness, appear historically as part of the broad spectrum of movements in ancient Judaism. On the side of interpretation, the Pauline writings turn out to be integrally related to the Scriptures regarded by Jews as normative and not simply as documents brought into an artificial relation with the Old Testament by the later Christian Church.