

Eating Meat Sacrificed to Idols: A Reading of 1 Corinthians 8-10 and *Marit 'Ayin*

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Abstract.

Paul, a former persecutor turned apostle to the Nations, experienced a transformative vision of the risen Jesus in the 30s CE, leading him to propagate the salvation of Jesus' death for the Gentiles. Paul remained an observant Jew, believing the Jesus movement fulfilled but did not replace Israel's covenant with God. His mission, therefore, was rooted within Second Temple Judaism. The emergence of mixed communities of proselytes ("strong") and semi-proselytes ("weak") in his congregations prompted practical questions about their religious status. Paul addressed issues such as whether believers could eat meat sacrificed to idols. Though the "strong" understood idols had no divine power, the "weak" retained lingering pagan beliefs. Paul advised all to avoid idol meat to prevent causing scandal, hoping to help the "weak" shed pagan identities and embrace full Christ-devotion and proselyte status, ensuring unity and faithfulness in the community.

Key words. Corinthians; Paul's Letters; Pagan Sacrifice; Christian Unity; Idol Meat; Theological Ethics; Jewish Law

INTRODUCTION

Paul, a self-described Pharisee and former persecutor of believers, experienced a vision of the risen Jesus of Nazareth in

the 30s CE.¹ He believed himself to have a unique calling to the Nations, the pagans of the ancient world.² Paul propagated the announcement of the death of Jesus and how it could bring salvation to the Nations.³ Paul is best understood *within* the confines of Second Temple Judaism. He did not believe that the Jesus movement had superseded Israel's covenant with God and still considered himself a practicing and observant Jew.⁴ His mission was *within* Judaism, rather than as antagonistic to it.⁵ Paul represents himself as an observant Jew for the standards of Second Temple Judaism.⁶ However, Paul's ambassadorship was not accepted by all that he encountered. Paul was not accepted as an ambassador in Corinth and was subjected to scrutiny by the believers there due to deficiencies

¹ Donaldson, Terence L. "Zealot and Convert: The Origin of Paul's Christ-Torah Antithesis." *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (1989): 668. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43717961>. That is, through his practice of *ioudaismos*, the zealous defense of Jewish law and customs and compelling of Gentiles to adopt the same; Sim, David. "Gentiles, God-Fearers and Proselytes." In *Attitudes to Gentiles in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity*, edited by David C. Sim and James S. McLaren, 1–20. London: T&T Clark, 2013; Thiessen, Matthew. *Paul and the Gentile Problem*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, 40; Collins, John J. *The Invention of Judaism: Torah and Jewish Identity from Deuteronomy to Paul*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2017, 18.

² Traditionally rendered, 'Gentiles,' throughout this work, I translate *ethne*, 'gentiles' as 'the Nations.'

³ *Evangelion*, translated as suggested by Mason, Steve. *Josephus, Judea, and Christian Origins: Methods and Categories*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009.

⁴ Levine, Amy-Jill. "Supersessionism: Admit and Address Rather than Debate or Deny." *Religions* 13, no. 2 (2022): 155.

⁵ Zetterholm, Magnus. "Paul within Judaism: The State of the Questions." In *Paul within Judaism: Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle*, 31–52. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015. This assertion can be understood in a number of ways, given the heterogeneous nature of Second Temple Judaism and some would place Paul in radically different corners of the time period, Boyarin, Daniel. *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.

⁶ Stendahl, Krister. *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles and Other Essays*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1976.

in his speech, physical appearance and financial status (2 Corinthians 10:10; 11:5–12; 12:13–18).⁷

This paper proposes to read both the “strong” and the “weak” in this section of Corinthians as types of proselytes to the messianic community, albeit with differing fidelities to Christ. The full believer or proselyte allowed them to take on characteristics of Israelite heritage and even be considered Israelites by Paul. Ethnic malleability was the ability to cross ethnic boundaries such as in the procession of Hellenization, which was enhanced in Corinth possibly through legends of genealogical connections between Jews and Spartans (Ant. 12.225–227; 1 Macc 12:20–23).⁸ The Corinthian assembly is constructed using these associations in mind and is presented as a new holy temple to Israel’s God, using the motifs of levitical religion (1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:19; 2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1).⁹

Paul addresses the practical issues that arose in his communities on an *ad hoc* basis.¹⁰ The first letter to Corinth

⁷ Jones, Catherine. Paul the Manual Labourer: Rereading 1 Cor. 9:1–18. In Zeichmann, Christopher B., and John A. Egger, eds. *Recovering an Undomesticated Apostle: Essays on the Legacy of Paul*. Vol. 3. McGill-Queen's Press-MQUP, 2023, 46–69, esp 52

⁸ Concannon, Cavan W. “When You Were Gentiles”: Specters of Ethnicity in Roman Corinth and Paul’s Corinthian Correspondence. Yale University Press, 2014, 16, 19, 40, 99, 156, 162.

⁹ Rowland, Christopher. “Paul as an Apocalypticist,” in Reynolds, Benjamin E., and Loren T. Stuckenbruck, eds. *The Jewish Apocalyptic Tradition and the Shaping of New Testament Thought*. Fortress Press, 2017, pp. 131–153, here 144. Some have even gone so far as to characterize faith in Jesus, especially in Matthew, as synonymous with conversion to Judaism, c.f. Repschinski, Boris. “Matthew and Luke.” In *Matthew and His Christian Contemporaries*, edited by Boris Repschinski and David Sim, 50–65. London: T&T Clark, 2008, here 55; Jackson, Glenna Sue. “Have Mercy on Me”: The Canaanite Woman in Matthew 15:21–28. PhD diss., Marquette University, 1993. For a full treatment of the distinction between Israel and Jew(s) in Second Temple literature, see, Staples, Jason A. *The Idea of Israel in Second Temple Judaism: A New Theory of People, Exile, and Israelite Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021.

¹⁰ This might mirror the practice of the early rabbinic sages; Brandes, Yehuda. “From Rulings to Rules: The Formation of (Some) Halakhic Rules.” *AJS Review* 42, no. 1 (2018): 65–87. Fredriksen, Paula. *Paul: The*

demonstrates patterns attributed to ancient discussions of factionalism and its goal is an appeal to unity and against sectarianism.¹¹ Paul used legal practice reflective of his day to address these cases individually. He addresses a problem that has a serious theological and philosophical core by offering a practical suggestion. The practical question is whether Jesus believers may eat meat sacrificed to idols. The question reflects the lingering pagan identities of members of his assemblies and whether or not pagan gods have any divine power. The knowledge that Paul teaches is that the idols do not have any power but certain members in his community have not yet grasped this proposition. That is, the identification of strong and weak presupposes a continuum of engagement with the movement, *similar to how other Jewish synagogues engaged*

Pagans' Apostle. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017, 59. Paul's acceptance of Gentile observance of the Torah was also an *ad hoc* conclusion that arose out of Paul's observation of righteous behavior from what he considered unrighteous people; c.f. Wilson, Annalisa Phillips. *Paul and the Jewish Law: A Stoic Ethical Perspective on the Inconsistency*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2020, 75. In this way, Paul's contributions to Second Temple Jewish literature resemble rabbinic literature which postdated him by more than a century in that the later rabbis also responded to issues and events in an *ad hoc* manner; c.f. Sanders, E. P. *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977, 120. This point is also supported by an analysis of the appearance of the term *convert* in the Mishnah, arguably the earliest layer of rabbinic literature. In that corpus, there is no description of *how* one becomes a convert or the level of observance required of a convert, except in a relatively few number of cases in which the Mishnah describes when a convert must make a sacrifice (m Pes 8:8; m Ed 5:2; m Ker 2:1). The majority of references to converts in the Mishnah describe more or less social interactions with converts and describe their place in Jewish society (m Hor 5:8), limiting who they can be married to (m Bikk 1:5; m Kidd 4:6-7) and how they can relate to the ancestral nature of Judaism (m Bikk 1:4; 4:10); Fishbane, Simcha, Calvin Goldscheider, Jack N. Lightstone, and Simcha Fishbane. "Marginal Person and/or Marginal Situation: The Convert in Mishnah." *Exploring Mishnah's World (s) Social Scientific Approaches* (2020): 95-117; Goldscheider, Calvin. "Inclusion and Exclusion in the Mishnah: Non-Jews, Converts, and the Nazir." *Studies in Judaism, Humanities, and the Social Sciences* 1, no. 1 (2017): 3-20.

¹¹ Mitchell, Margaret M. *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation: An Exegetical Investigation of the Language and Composition of 1 Corinthians*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993, 180-182.

with gentile sympathizers.¹² The mixed nature of the community was important within the cosmic orientation of the Corinthian correspondence which can be seen as evidence of Paul's conceptualization of his mission as spiritual warfare and a cosmic battle in the human mind and its knowledge of God which extends into the heavenly realm and is waged against Satan and his emissaries.¹³

Because the strong believers are not *technically* bound by Jewish law, they are *permitted* to eat *any* meat they choose, but *out of concern for the weak*, i.e. to avoid the appearance of wrongdoing, Paul encourages all members to avoid eating meat sacrificed to idols. Paul hopes to encourage the weak to drop the last vestiges of pagan identity from their life and bring them into the full life of the announcement of Christ to the Nations at the end of ages by embracing full fidelity to Christ-devotion and full proselyte status within the community. This concern

¹² There is some debate in scholarship surrounding the existence of godfearers as a distinct social identity category. The mainstream view is that proselytes and godfearers were separate social identity groups, the latter characterized as a "half-paganized Jew" or "judaizing pagan," c.f. Reynolds, Joyce, and Robert F. Tannenbaum. *Jews and Godfearers at Aphrodisias: Greek Inscriptions with Commentary*. Cambridge: Cambridge Philological Society, 2020, 110. There are textual references to godfearers in Acts (10.1-2, 22, 35; 13.16, 26, 43, 50p; 16.14; 17.4, 17; 18.7) in Josephus of half-converts (BJ 2.463, 560; 7.45; AJ 20.34, 41) evidence against is the late date of Aphrodisias; inconsistent terminology in Acts and the use of godfearer to refer to Jews (AJ 7.130, 153; 12.285; C Ap 2.140), c.f. Paget, James Carleton. *Jews, Christians and Jewish Christians in Antiquity*. Vol. 251. Mohr Siebeck, 2010, 172. Some have suggested that Paul's mission consisted mainly of outreach to godfearers, c.f. Dunn, James D. G. *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1998, 30. Some suggest that "godfearer" was a Lukan literary invention, c.f. Kraabel, A. Thomas. "The Disappearance of the 'God-Fearers.'" Pages 119–129 in *Diaspora Jews and Judaism: Essays in Honor of, and in Dialogue with, A. Thomas Kraabel*. Edited by John R. Overman and Robert S. MacLennan. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992; MacLennan, Robert S., and A. Thomas Kraabel. "The God-Fearers—a Literary and Theological Invention." Pages 233–247 in *To See Ourselves as Others See Us: Christians, Jews, 'Others' in Late Antiquity*. Edited by Jacob Neusner and Ernest S. Frerichs. Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985.

¹³ Bowens, Lisa M. *An Apostle in Battle: Paul and Spiritual Warfare in 2 Corinthians 12:1–10*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017, here 33, 36.

for the appearance of wrongdoing is similar to the later rabbinic concept of *marit 'ayin*, the avoidance of technically permissible actions but which seem to break *halakhah* out of concern for that action being misinterpreted as permitting the violation of Jewish law. That is, Paul demonstrates an incredible pastoral sensitivity to the religious identities of the new believers in Corinth and subjects the more mature believers to a set of prohibitions which are not technically required of them. In another sense, Paul's comments in 1 Corinthians 8–10 also demonstrate a *rationale* for the halakhic decisions made by the Jerusalem meeting as recorded in Acts 15.

PAUL'S ANNOUNCEMENT TO THE NATIONS

Paul's revelation or announcement rested within a long Jewish tradition of interaction with individuals of the Nations. Many pagans had grown attracted to Jewish laws and customs in the Greco-Roman period and became involved in Jewish assemblies in various cities of the Roman Empire. Some only occasionally frequented assemblies, or *synagogues*, whereas others adopted some or all Jewish laws and customs upon themselves.¹⁴ These were *ad hoc* arrangements between members of the Jewish assemblies and the pagans themselves, with no formal requirement that the pagan abandon his or her cultic obligation to their native gods.¹⁵ These behaviors can and should be called *judaizing*, which often led to full judaization in the adoption of Jewish *ethnic* identity, becoming ex-pagans. This process made little sense to their neighbors and family. It was considered as

¹⁴ Nor was Paul the first Jew to promote Judaism among the Gentiles; c.f. Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 2.282–284; 2.210); Philo *Spec.* 1.66; 2.163, 1.96–97; Boccaccini, Gabriele. *Paul's Three Paths to Salvation*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2020, 263. Gentiles were attracted to Judaism and affiliated in a variety of different ways, David C. Sim, "Gentiles, God-Fearers and Proselytes," in *Attitudes to Gentiles in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity*, ed. David C. Sim and James S. McLaren (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 15.

¹⁵ Fredriksen, Paula. "Judaizing the Nations: The Ritual Demands of Paul's Gospel." *New Testament Studies* 56, no. 2 (2010): 239.

similar to changing one's ethnicity, forging a political alliance, changing one's πολιτία from Greek to Jewish.¹⁶

Paul deviated from his fellow coreligionists by mocking the pagan gods, by demeaning their status, but *not* by denying their existence. The pagan gods are really nothing more than *daimones* (δαίμονες), lesser deities.¹⁷ Paul's attitude towards the gods of the Nations came from his strong apocalyptic thinking, which saw the coming destruction of idols at the arrival of the Kingdom. The προσήλυτοι were former pagans and a new class of Jew but the god-fearers were still considered pagans and still worshiped their native gods, even if showing a special devotion to the Jewish deity. Paul's pagan believers adopted a new social identity, either as full proselytes to Judaism or as pagan god-fearers, contra the "mainstream" view of PwJ which considers Gentile believers as "ex-pagan pagans" or "ex-pagan Gentiles."¹⁸

Paul's dealing with the weak believers resembles the later rabbinic framework in the legal category of the *ger toshav*.¹⁹ This was a kind of "partial or potential" Jew, a non-Jew who had taken on some of the customs and laws of the Jews.²⁰ This

¹⁶ Fredriksen, Paula. "Judaizing the Nations: The Ritual Demands of Paul's Gospel." *New Testament Studies* 56, no. 2 (2010): 239.

¹⁷ 1 Corinthians 10:20–21; Fredriksen, Paula. "Judaizing the Nations: The Ritual Demands of Paul's Gospel." *New Testament Studies* 56, no. 2 (2010): 241. But, worship of other gods was strictly prohibited, Fredriksen, Paula. *Paul: The Pagans' Apostle*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017, 111.

¹⁸ Or even "eschatological Gentiles," c.f. Fredriksen, Paula. *From Jesus to Christ: The Origins of the New Testament Images of Jesus*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008.

¹⁹ Found even in early tannaitic sources, "Who is a *ger toshav*? Whoever has resolved to convert and has renounced idolatry but who still has not actually converted. We allow him twelve months to do so. This applies to a *ger toshav*, but as for a gentile it is forbidden for him to dwell among Jews and to work on the Sabbath lest the Jews learn from his deeds." Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer, Section 20

²⁰ The category of *ger toshav* ultimately is derived from the references to non-Israelites in the Torah. Non-Israelites should be circumcised if they offer the Passover sacrifice (Exod 12:48-49; Num 9:14), non-Israelites rest on Shabbat (Exod 20:10). Israelites are required not to abuse him and he should be treated as a citizen (Lev 19:33-34) and God is said to

practical institution led to a theoretical development of the *halakhah* of Jew/Gentile relations in later periods. Most importantly, the concept of “partial” or “potential” Jews reflected a way of thinking about non-Jews that aspired for their eventual assimilation into the Jewish population.²¹

Even the later Rabbinic reading of *ger toshav*, and ultimately the Noahide Laws, was seen as a “minimal prerequisite for naturalized citizenship in a Jewish state.”²² The Rabbis saw a fourfold division of non-Jews who could be: 1) full proselytes; 2) resident aliens (*ger toshav*); 3) ordinary gentiles; 4) devotees of idolatrous cults.²³ However, the category of *ger toshav* was likely only a theoretical category and should not be equated with Godfearers. The former is an abstract legal category, whereas the latter is based on real experiences in the Diaspora.²⁴

The Corinthian assembly was not a novelty in the religious or social framework of Greco-Roman society; it existed within the context of the associations of that time. These were cultic and trade associations that served many needs of the members of each group. Each assembly had a set of by-laws (*nomoi*) which governed the members of the association, including regulations around entrance requirements, the conduct and nature of meetings, behavior expected at common meals, disciplinary

be a friend of “strangers” (Deut 10:17-19; Ps 146:9). Israelites are to treat non-Israelites as equal under the law (Deut. 1:16; cf. Lev. 24:22; Num 35:15). The Prophets also add to the overall vision of the Torah seeing the Gentiles having a role to play in future times. Isaiah sees Gentiles keeping Shabbat and offering sacrifices in Jerusalem (Isa 56:6-7).

²¹ Novak, David. *The Image of the Non-Jew in Judaism: The Idea of Noahide Law*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011, 31.

²² Novak, David. *The Image of the Non-Jew in Judaism: The Idea of Noahide Law*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011, 20.

²³ Novak, David. *The Image of the Non-Jew in Judaism: The Idea of Noahide Law*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011, 21, c.f. Sifra, Behar 110a

²⁴ Novak, David. *The Image of the Non-Jew in Judaism: The Idea of Noahide Law*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011, 28.

practices, and the financing of the association.²⁵ Associations collected dues and benefited from endowments for their perpetuity. People joined associations because they offered a sense of connectivity in which people from different walks of life, different social statuses, different ethnicities, and legal statuses could interact.²⁶

MEAT CONSUMPTION AND CLASS

The traditional assumption made by biblical scholars is that meat was not readily available in the Greco-Roman diet, especially for lower classes, who would have had a mostly vegetarian diet.

Many scholars assume that meat was available through pagan temples who used meat in sacrifices to the gods. The common person attained meat through sacrificial rituals²⁷ or through voluntary associations, where private meals were hosted by members of said associations.²⁸ Associations could take a number of forms including the following: (1) diasporic or immigrant associations organized around a common ethnic identity, (2) cultic associations devoted to the worship of a deity or hero, (3) occupational or professional guilds organized around a common trade or profession, (4) neighborhood clubs composed of people who lived on the same street or in the same block (called an *insula*), and (5) associations of people

²⁵ Kloppenborg, John S. *Christ's Associations: Connecting and Belonging in the Ancient City*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019, 41. The meaning of the word *nomos* vis-a-vis association by-laws has been under-appreciated in scholarship and leads to a different reading of the situation in Galatia as a case of conflicting by-laws or halakhic dispute, c.f. Lavender, Jordan. "Nomos and the Dispute in Galatians 2: A Case of Conflicting By-Laws." *Religions* 14, no. 12 (2023): 1449.

²⁶ Kloppenborg, John S. *Christ's Associations: Connecting and Belonging in the Ancient City*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019, 55.

²⁷ Gooch, Peter D. *Dangerous Food: 1 Corinthians 8–10 in Its Context*. Studies in Christianity and Judaism 5. Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1993.

²⁸ Theissen, Gerd. *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2004, 127–128.

associated with large Roman households (*collegia domestica*).²⁹ Associations were known to have lavish banquets that were held in high esteem.³⁰ Meat served at such dinner parties would have come from the marketplace (*macellum*; μάκελλον³¹) which was acquired from merchants who bought the leftovers from sacrifices at pagan temples. Corinth probably had more than one *macellum* to accommodate the needs of a city of that size.³²

This implies that *all* meat consumption would have had a cultic association with pagan gods. This is perhaps especially the case for poorer members of society. This would frame the religious debate about consuming meat and the social boundaries of the Corinthian assembly vis-a-vis commensality on occasions in which meat was served and the sacral nature of such occurrences.

The ideas here open two avenues of questioning. First, was meat available or not? Second, was it restricted by class? Third, how did class function in that society?

Many have seen Paul's use of the terms "strong/weak" to refer to an economic distinction in the assemblies. Theissen, in particular, has argued that sacrificial meat was available only to the elite classes.³³ Paul is seen as a challenge to Roman socio-economic norms by proposing abstaining from meat for

²⁹ Kloppenborg, John S. *Christ's Associations: Connecting and Belonging in the Ancient City*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019, 24.

³⁰ Van Nijf, Onno M. "The Civic World of Professional Associations in the Greek East." In *The Civic World of Professional Associations in the Roman East*, 241–247. Leiden: Brill, 1997; Ascough, Richard S. *Paul's Macedonian Associations: The Social Context of Philippians and 1 Thessalonians*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2020.

³¹ cf. 1 Cor. 10.25

³² Willis, Wendell. *Idol Meat in Corinth: The Pauline Argument in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10*. Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 68. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2004, 224; Winter, Bruce W. *After Paul Left Corinth: The Influence of Secular Ethics and Social Change*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001, 293–294.

³³ Theissen, Gerd. *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2004, 127–128.

wealthier members of his associations.³⁴ Tite summarizes the question of analysis if these assumptions are taken as valid: how can one continue to participate in the social networks of Corinthian society – a society based on prestige and hierarchical networks of relations – if one does not participate in commensal relations and civic functions?³⁵

There might be room to question the strict economic nature of the strong/weak divide. It seems there were five distinct “ranks” (*ordo*) in the Roman empire: senatorial, equestrian, decurion, freeborn, freed and slave.³⁶ Each *ordo* would exist in a continuum with different degrees in each category. However, there was not anything resembling modern middle class or social mobility. It might be that associations primarily served the lower classes in society.³⁷ The main point is that there was not a sharp “elite/low” divide in Roman economic class structure and there was quite a bit of variation in economic status. Tite mentions textual evidence in papyri to note the complexities in class relations.³⁸

³⁴ Lim, Sung Uk. “The Political Economy of Eating Idol Meat: Practice, Structure, and Subversion in 1 Corinthians 8 through the Sociological Lens of Pierre Bourdieu.” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 34, no. 2 (2012): 155–172.

³⁵ Tite, Philip L. “Roman Diet and Meat Consumption: Reassessing Elite Access to Meat in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10.” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 42, no. 2 (2019): 185–222.

³⁶ Ascough, Richard S. *Paul’s Macedonian Associations: The Social Context of Philippians and 1 Thessalonians*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2020, 47–54.

³⁷ Ascough, *Paul’s Macedonian Associations*, 61–64.

³⁸ (e.g., P.Oxy. 1.119 [where the boy Theon writes a letter complaining to his father, Theon, for not being taken on a business trip to Alexandria]; BGU 2.632 [giving thanks to Serapis for safe travels when in danger at sea]; P.Oxy. 42.3069 [note the closing travel plan and exhortation]; P.Mich. 8.474 [discussing travel of her brother]; and P.Berenike 2.129 [Hikane rebukes her son for not writing while she is now at a distance in Berenike]), but even looking at such first- and second-century Christian figures as Paul, Valentinus and Proteus Peregrinus should force us to appreciate that people lived, traveled and worked along a more fluid class continuum than Ehrman, Theissen and others suggest. The papyri evidence includes people traveling on business, moving goods,

It also seems plausible that the lower classes enjoyed meat with some regularity contra Theissen. Textual evidence seems to indicate that lower classes did eat meat on occasions other than civic festivals. The kinds of meat available would have been sausages and blood pudding (Martial 1.41.9) or “sickening and imperfect meat” (Ammianus Marcellinus 28.4.34). These options would have been offensive to elite members of society, much in the same way that the elite of today’s society look down on fast food. However, these meat options were a regular feature of lower-class diets.³⁹ Archeological studies also confirm the consumption of meat with some regularity, with pork, beef, and caprine being common options.⁴⁰

Given the kind of options available, it is also possible to see how these options offended Jewish sensibilities and begs the question of Paul’s opposition to this kind of meat and the possibility that the status of the meat as non-kosher had some effect on his opposition to it.

The Cynics seemed to have had a positive valuation of meat. Tite offers further evidence regarding meat in the ancient world,

maintaining contact and requesting people to return or visit.” Cited in Tite, “Roman Diet and Meat Consumption,” 192.

³⁹ Meggitt, Justin J. “Meat Consumption and Social Conflict in Corinth.” *The Journal of Theological Studies* 45, no. 1 (1994): 137–141.

⁴⁰ Salazar-García, Domingo C., Lidia Colominas, and Xabier Jordana. “Food for the Soul and Food for the Body: Studying Dietary Patterns and Funerary Meals in the Western Roman Empire: An Anthropological and Archaeozoological Approach.” *PLOS ONE* 17, no. 8 (2022): e0271296. In a study of Roman Britain, a similar study found the consumption of beef, pork, and mutton to be common and highlighted the importance of food in identity construction, Hawkes, Gillian. “An Archaeology of Food: A Case Study from Roman Britain.” Pages 94–103 in *TRAC 2000: Proceedings of the Tenth Annual Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference, London*. Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2001. Meat consumption is debated among archeologists but it does seem that at least pork was commonly available, albeit a more expensive type of meat than beef or mutton for Romans, additionally, the cuts of meat available varied according to social class, Van Limbergen, Dimitri. “What Romans Ate and How Much They Ate of It: Old and New Research on Eating Habits and Dietary Proportions in Classical Antiquity.” *Revue belge de philologie et d’histoire* 96, no. 3 (2018): 1049–1092.

especially the following: “For me, a Scythian cloak serves as my garment, the skin of my feet as my shoes, the whole earth my resting place, milk, cheese and meat as my favorite meal, hunger as my main course.” The attitude expressed here is a rejection of elite culture for the simple life of the lower-class man. A poor diet includes milk, cheese, and meat. Tite suggests that this might have been boiled together in a simple meat stew,⁴¹ reflecting the commonplace diet of the poor.⁴²

Rabbinic Judaism prohibits meat and dairy products consumed together.⁴³ The Torah does not *explicitly* prohibit these combinations, but the prohibition is *derived* through the rabbinic interpretive framework. The Torah states, “Do not cook a kid (young goat) in its mother’s milk” in three separate instances. The triple repetition of the prohibition in the Torah was interpreted as the prohibition of three distinct activities: cooking meat and milk together, eating such mixtures and deriving benefit from said mixtures.⁴⁴ While it is not known if these laws were held in the same form as in the rabbinic proscription in the Mishnah and Talmud, some have marked the Hasmonean era as the origin of the system of *kashrut*.⁴⁵ While there was a distinction between “holy food” (*termuah*), eaten by priests, and “profane food” (*hullin*), eaten by lay Israelites, at least by the late Second Temple period, it seems

⁴¹ Finn, Richard Damian. *Asceticism in the Graeco-Roman world*. Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 19-20.

⁴² Tite, "Roman Diet and Meat Consumption," 194.

⁴³ Among other things and benefiting from such mixtures. The prohibition is derived from Ex 23:19 & 34:26; Deut 14:21

⁴⁴ Mazokopakis, Elias E. "The Prohibition of Meat and Milk Mixing in the Same Meal: A Brief Theological and Medical Approach to a Jewish Dietary Law." *European Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 3, no. 1 (2023): 19-21.

⁴⁵ Schmidt, Francis. *How the Temple Thinks: Identity and Social Cohesion in Ancient Judaism*. Vol. 78. London: A&C Black, 2001, 217; Dunn, James D. G. *Jesus, Paul, and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990, 193.

that both had to conform to the laws of *kashrut*.⁴⁶ If these laws were in effect, we could see the reason why Paul *might* have steered the Corinthians away from these types of prohibited food combinations.

Some have seen the issue of identity formation at the heart of the question of the relation between the strong/weak dichotomy, proposing it as an in-group vs. out-group conceptualization of the group's social identity, rather than socio-economic status.⁴⁷ Paul emulates the behavior he wishes for the group and tells the Corinthians to imitate him.⁴⁸ His behavior, as the group's founder, is to serve as an example for all.⁴⁹

Tite reads the use of words ἐσθίω,⁵⁰ βρῶσις⁵¹ and δειπνέω⁵² as indicative of Paul's attitude vis-a-vis the freedom principle. The main issue seems to be the impact of commensal relations in the community, in other words, *who* one dines with as being more important for the Corinthian believers than *what* is being consumed. Social relationships are formed through commensality and meal rituals.⁵³ The thanksgiving meal shared by the Corinthians has this exact purpose, to merge the individual and the whole community.⁵⁴

In summary, Tite reads the issue at the heart of the question about consuming meat offered to idols as being a matter of in-group vs. out-group identity. Within the community, there are

⁴⁶ Cromhout, Markus. "Religion and Covenantal Praxis in First-Century Judeanism." *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 63, no. 1 (2007): 196.

⁴⁷ Tite, "Roman Diet and Meat Consumption," 209.

⁴⁸ 2.3-4; 4.9-13; 8.13

⁴⁹ Tite, "Roman Diet and Meat Consumption," 209.

⁵⁰ 8.7, 10, 13; 9.4, 7, 13; 10.18, 25, 27; 11.20, 21, 22, 28; 15.32

⁵¹ 8.4

⁵² 11.25

⁵³ Fischler, Claude. "Commensality, Society, and Culture." *Social Science Information* 50, no. 3-4 (2011): 528-548.

⁵⁴ Tite, "Roman Diet and Meat Consumption," 210.

those who require *endo-commensal relations*, maintaining rigid social boundaries around food and prohibiting eating with outsiders. Others hold *exo-commensal relations*, allowing for food to be shared with outsiders, without concern for the manners and values of eating sacrificial meat, which was prohibited by the former. This should be viewed considering Corinthian factionalism addressed at the beginning of the letter. Paul ends up denying both positions and promotes ambiguity as the community principle for the maintenance of group identity and cohesion.⁵⁵ Tite does not deny the possibility of dietary restrictions at play within this complex web of social identity formation, noting that especially given Paul's use of Israel as an example in 1 Corinthians 10, it is quite possible that some members of the assembly chose dietary restrictions that "serve to establish and protect identity constructions vis-à-vis covenant relationship with God and, by extension, the community's social cohesion."⁵⁶

THE WEAK AND THE STRONG

Returning to the issue of identifying the ἀσθενής in 1 Corinthians 8, the identification of this group must still be described. In the previous section, their identity as the socioeconomically "lower class" was rejected. Are the "weak" even believers? Nanos rightfully criticizes the socioeconomic dimensions of the strong/weak dichotomy and proposes that the ἀσθενής are polytheists who are associated with the group but who have not (yet) come to believe all its tenets. For Paul, the polytheists are also brothers (ἀδελφοί) and can be members of the community because Christ died for them. Because of their lingering belief in pagan gods, i.e. their "weak" status, to eat meat sacrificed to idols, while technically permissible, would cause them to continue in their belief in the power of pagan

⁵⁵ Tite, "Roman Diet and Meat Consumption," 212.

⁵⁶ Tite, "Roman Diet and Meat Consumption," 215.

deities.⁵⁷ Nanos refers to the groups as the “impaired” and “knowledgeable” because the issue at hand is the believers’ knowledge that the pagan gods are meaningless, something the impaired have not yet realized. The impaired assign religious value to food, which Paul is denying. To see one of the knowledgeable people eating meat sacrificed to idols would *confirm* the religious sensibilities of the polytheists in the Corinthian assembly. It is very well possible that the impaired in Corinthians are Christ believers who also still sacrifice to pagan gods. That is, they might be Godfearers who have not yet been convinced of the Pauline message or who are newcomers to the Corinthian assembly under his tutelage. Therefore, they would not yet understand that Jesus requires exclusivistic adherence to the Jewish god over other deities. Unlike the strong, *who are fully embracing Judaism and exclusively loyal to Israel’s deity and law*, the weak are semi-proselytes who are not exclusively loyal to Israel’s god or law.

The identification of the weak with polytheists contrasts with interpretations that see the strong and weak as revealing something about the food itself. Some have seen the weak as those who ate only vegetarian food, still clinging to some form of the dietary restrictions of Judaism and some degree of separation with Gentiles and the strong as those who embrace Paul’s law-free message.⁵⁸ However, the text itself does not indicate this. There is a strong *monotheistic* bent of Paul’s argumentation in this section of the letter. A version of the *Shema* is contrasted with the polytheism of the day. He is drawing from the Deuteronomistic tradition when making these statements. Paul clearly adapts the text of the *shema* in 1 Corinthians 8:4-6, taken from Deut 6:4, and again in his

⁵⁷ Nanos, Mark D. "The Polytheist Identity Of The “Weak,” And Paul’S Strategy To “Gain” Them: A New Reading Of 1 Corinthians 8: 1–11: 1." In *Paul: Jew, Greek, and Roman*, pp. 179-210. Brill, 2009.

⁵⁸ Segal, Alan F. *Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990, 234.

warning against idolatry in 10:20-22, taking from Deut 32:17-21.⁵⁹

A RE-READING OF 1 CORINTHIANS 8–10

This section of 1 Corinthians begins with Paul's answer to the inquiry about eating meat sacrificed to idols (v. 4). In verses 1–3, Paul contextualizes his response by requiring those with knowledge (gnosis) to embrace humility, likely referring to the belief held by Pauline Jesus believers that the pagan gods are powerless (v. 4). The practical, halakhic question has arisen vis-a-vis community behavior and standards: may semi-proselytes eat meat sacrificed to idols? Paul might be quoting his Corinthian interlocutors' statements when he says "all of us have knowledge," implying this was a slogan, of sorts, used by some in Corinth.⁶⁰ Paul quickly reminds the Corinthian believers that knowledge is a double-edged sword. His comments on knowledge reflect the Hebrew Bible because knowledge is said to come from God (1 Sam 2:3; Prov 2:6; 8:9; Qoh 2:26; Isa 11:2). The Psalmist implores God to teach him knowledge (119:66) but also proclaims that the knowledge of God is "too wonderful" for him to fully comprehend (139:6). Qohelet includes a warning against knowledge, saying, "those who increase knowledge increase sorrow" (Qoh 1:18). Paul must have had these, and other, statements about knowledge in mind when responding to the general attitude of the Corinthians.

Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge." Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary

⁵⁹ Oropeza, Brisio J. "Laying to Rest the Midrash: Paul's Message on Meat Sacrificed to Idols in Light of the Deuteronomic Tradition." *Biblica* 79, no. 1 (1998): 57–68.

⁶⁰ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians* (Anchor Yale Bible; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008); Holloway, Paul A. "Religious 'Slogans' in 1 Corinthians: Wit, Wisdom, and the Quest for Status in a Roman Colony." *The Journal of Theological Studies* 72, no. 1 (2021): 125–154.

knowledge, but anyone who loves God is known by him. 1 Corinthians 8:1-3⁶¹

In the next few verses, Paul begins to address the concerns. He reiterates the knowledge that the Corinthian believers have that the idols so prevalent in their city and culture are only so-called gods. This is because there is “no God but one.” Behind the question, a number of assumptions are being made. First, the Torah firmly rejects idolatry (Exod 20:5; Lev 20:2–5; Deut 7:1–6, 25–26). Second, there is the calling back to the idea that idols are nothing more than the products of human hands (Isa 40:18–20; 1 Chr 16:25-26; Jer 10:3–11). In the next few verses (vv. 4–6), Paul notes that the gods of the nations are nothing to the Corinthian believers because they have one God, essentially recalling the *Shema*, “Hear, O Israel! יהוה is our God, יהוה alone” (Deut 6:4, JPS).⁶² The monotheism of the *Shema* is tied to faith in Jesus, because, for Paul, it is through Jesus that “all things” exist. This framing indicates it is the *weak believers* who are the subject of the inquiry.

Therefore, regarding the eating of things sacrificed to idols, we know that “there are no idols in the world” and that there is “no God other than one.” For, if there are those called gods either in heaven or on the earth, even though there are many gods and many lords but for us, there is one God, the Father of all things and we are for him, and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom and by him all things exist, as do we. (vv. 4–6)

This is where Nanos’ reading of the weak and the strong is correct over socio-economic readings of the dynamic at play. The next verse makes that abundantly clear because Paul refers

⁶¹ NT quotations from the NRSV-UE, New Revised Standard Version, Updated Edition. Copyright © 2021 National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

⁶² C.f. the variant reading in the Song of the Sea, “See, then, that I, I am the One; There is no god beside Me” (Deut. 32:39, JPS).

to the previous statements as the *knowledge* that some in the community lack. These must be polytheists who have become associated with the group, but who have not become fully initiated. They still cling to the belief in the power of pagan deities. The issue of the “strong” eating meat sacrificed to idols is one of communal group identity and one of proselytization, because the polytheistic members of the association can be won over to belief in Jesus through the right action of the Corinthian believers.

It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. “Food will not bring us close to God.” We are no worse off if we do not eat and no better off if we do. But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? So by your knowledge the weak brother or sister for whom Christ died is destroyed. But when you thus sin against brothers and sisters and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never again eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall. (vv. 7–13)

It is unclear how Diaspora Jews handled eating meat from the marketplace. In general, the focus of keeping the dietary laws could be characterized as an avoidance of *Gentiles*, as food itself became defiled by being the food of foreigners (Jud 11; Tob 1:10–11).⁶³ The food laws were an important aspect of Jewish identity since the Hasmonean times and served a boundary

⁶³ MacDonald, Nathan. *Not Bread Alone: The Uses of Food in the Old Testament*. Oxford University Press, USA, 2008, 199–201).

marker in the Hellenistic age (*Ap* 2:173–174; 3 *Macc* 3:4; 4 *Macc* 1:34; *Jos. Asen.* 7:1; 8:5).⁶⁴ The rabbinic legislation of *shechita*, specialized ritual slaughter (c.f. *m. Hullin* 1:1) does not appear in relevant literature of the time. It is also unclear if Diaspora Jews regularly ate meat from the market, with some scholars suggesting that Jewish associations provided their own meat.⁶⁵

Paul seemingly mentions the strong and weak in one other context in his letter corpus in *Rom* 14. However, the context seems to be markedly different. In *Romans*, there are believers who abstain from meat altogether and eat only a vegetarian diet. Lower classes might have enjoyed pork sausages and blood pudding (*Martial* 1.41.9) or have eaten “sickening and imperfect meat” (*Ammianus Marcellinus* 28.4.34), perhaps alerting Jewish sensibilities (c.f. *nevelah* *Lev* 11:39–40; *Deut* 14:21; c.f. *b. Pes.* 21b). Lower classes might have also enjoyed meat stews boiled in milk and cheese.⁶⁶ While these delicacies would have offended rabbinic tastes, it is unclear that Second Temple Jews more broadly interpreted the Torah to prohibit all these options.

The context in *Romans* additionally might suggest an educated pagan monotheistic class background to the “weak” mentioned there, who held a different view of monotheistic divinity than Jews.⁶⁷ Paul’s arguments in *Romans* seem to be crafted against

⁶⁴ Dunn, James D. G. *Jesus, Paul, and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians*. Westminster John Knox Press, 1990, 193; Baumgarten, Albert I. *The Flourishing of Jewish Sects in the Maccabean Era: An Interpretation*, Vol. 55. Brill, 1997, 92; Schmidt, Francis. *How the Temple Thinks: Identity and Social Cohesion in Ancient Judaism* Vol. 78. A&C Black, 2001.

⁶⁵ Theissen, Gerd. *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth*. Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2004, 127–128.

⁶⁶ Finn, Richard Damian. *Asceticism in the Graeco-Roman World*. Cambridge University Press, 2009, 19–20; c.f. Tite, Philip L. “Roman Diet and Meat Consumption: Reassessing Elite Access to Meat in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 42, no. 2 (2019): 185–222, here 194.

⁶⁷ Athanassiadi, Polymnia and Michael Frede eds. *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990; Yadin, Azzan. “Rabban Gamliel, Aphrodite’s Bath, and the Question of Pagan Monotheism,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 96, no. 2 (2006): 149–179; Van Nuffelen, Peter.

pagan vegetarianism and not any principled opposition to meat consumption based on the Torah.⁶⁸

The context in 1 Corinthians suggests a more sacrificial undertone than what exists in Romans, which supports the claim of a separate argumentation in each case with differing underlying issues at play.

The two instances are united in their consideration of sacrifice, albeit in different directions. In Romans, Paul's argumentation presupposes a pagan opposition to sacrifice based on pagan philosophical opposition to meat consumption and animal sacrifice (Plut. Numa 16.1 (transl. Perrin); cf. Quaest. Rom. 15 (267C); cf. Ant. Rom. 2.74.4). It is nearly the opposite case in Corinth, where the weak believers have an overly attached stance to the pagan gods and the temple sacrifices. Second Temple Judaism was a sacrificial religion, and Paul accepted this system and used metaphors of the Temple and its sacrifices in his writings.⁶⁹ It is quite possible he viewed his entire ambassadorship within sacrifice terms as he strived to collect the offering of the Gentiles to deliver to the Temple in Jerusalem (1 Corinthians 16:1–4; 2 Corinthians 8:1–9:15; Rom 15:14–32).⁷⁰ Within a broader Second Temple context, priests offered animals every day to the Jewish god in Jerusalem and Diaspora Jews sent dedicatory offerings and the half-shekel tax (Ant. 18.312; c.f. Exod 30:13; Neh 10:32; Philo; Flaccus 7.46; Embassy 36.281; Providence 2.64). The focus of the passage is

"Pagan Monotheism as a Religious Phenomenon," *One God: Pagan Monotheism in the Roman Empire* 16 (2010): 33.

⁶⁸ C.f. Lavender, Jordan. "Paul and the Observance of the Torah by Gentiles." *Neotestamentica* 57, no. 2 (2023): 293-323.
<https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/neo.2023.a943179>.

⁶⁹ Basham, David Anthony. *Paul, the Temple, and Building a Metaphor*. PhD diss., McGill University, 2022.

⁷⁰ Downs, David J. *The Offering of the Gentiles: Paul's Collection for Jerusalem in its Chronological, Cultural, and Cultic Contexts* Vol. 248. Mohr Siebeck, 2008.

on orienting the weak believers *away* from pagan sacrifice towards worship of Israel's deity.

However, there could have been halakhic opposition to issues of meat consumption from the market by some. Perhaps the fraternization with Gentiles was frowned upon and some might have insisted on the use of Jewish wine at thanksgiving meals.⁷¹ They might have insisted on vegetarian options in company with pagans because Gentile meats and wine were considered impure (c.f. Jdt 12:1–4; Esth 14:17, LXX; *Life* 14, etc.).

Paul's previous comments regarding *liberty* warrant further discussion. The Torah does not regulate issues of how to consume meat products in a Hellenistic *polis*, which results in legal innovation from Paul here. His community consists of proselytes (strong) and semi-proselytes (weak) and his legal framework suggests that eating meat from the market is generally permissible. However, he suggests a voluntary abstinence *for the sake of the semi-proselytes* to encourage them in abandoning fidelity to the lesser gods.

Paul's guidance follows the edicts issued by the pillars in Jerusalem, as reported by Acts. If this report of the decisions of the meeting is accurate, this suggests broad agreement between Paul and the pillars.⁷²

We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials: that you abstain from what has been

⁷¹ Alan F. Segal. *Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990, 232.

⁷² While the early movement was not harmonious, it is important to note Paul's essential agreement with the leaders in Jerusalem surrounding the precise means of initiation into the messianic community, c.f. Zetterholm, Magnus. *The Formation of Christianity in Antioch: A Social-Scientific Approach to the Separation between Judaism and Christianity*. London: Routledge, 2003, 144.

sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well.
Acts 15:27-29.

Acts' historical reliability should be questioned, but that does not mean that it is completely devoid of historical value, only that its value points in the direction of what it can tell us about the audience at the time of publication.⁷³ The harmonious nature of the issue in Acts need not presuppose a complete agreement among the movement in Paul's time, only on this one issue. Paul seems to suggest that eating market meat is *theoretically possible* but not ideal due to the practical concerns of the weak. That is, from Paul's Second Temple Jewish halakhic framework, there was no problem with eating meat from the marketplace *in theory* because there were no dietary concerns with the meat and Paul did not think that the fact that the meat had been sacrificed to idols made the meat prohibited to eat.

Looking at other pieces of evidence from later rabbinic literature, Novak suggests that there was a practice among non-Jews, at least in Palestine, of sacrificing the heart of a living animal to a deity.⁷⁴ This might be the source of the referent in Acts to refraining from "strangled things." Novak offers additional evidence surrounding rabbinic leniencies, particularly in the exemption from martyrdom if forced to participate in public idolatry (y. San. 3:6; y. Shebi. 4:2), as only native-born Jews were exempt from the public cult.⁷⁵ These regulations might reflect the types of expectations of the *sebomenoi*, God-fearers, the "quasi-Jews" who attached

⁷³ Trobisch, David. "The Book of Acts as a Narrative Commentary on the Letters of the New Testament: A Programmatic Essay." *Rethinking the Unity and Reception of Luke and Acts* (2010): 119-27.

⁷⁴ Novak, David. *The Image of the Non-Jew in Judaism, Second Edition*. Portland, Oregon: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2011, p. 136; c.f. t. Abod Zar. 4:7; m. Abod Zar. 2:3; y. Abod Zar. 2:3.

⁷⁵ Novak, *The Image of the Non-Jew in Judaism*, 25-26.

themselves to synagogues without formal conversion (*Contra Apionem* 2:123; *Satires* 14:96), this group of people was also mentioned in other tannaitic sources (*Mekhilta*, Misphatim 312).⁷⁶ Novak further suggests that the *sebomenoi* were seen as *gerai toshav*, and potential Jews and sees certain alternative opinions, either that the *ger toshav* must accept all of the commandments (y. Abod. Zar. 2:1) or a list of thirty (b. Hul. 92a-b) as means of *detering* Gentiles from adopting Judaism. Above all, the regulations affecting *sebomenoi*, if they existed, were *ad hoc* arrangements and not formalized regulations as in rabbinic literature, that is by the time of the rabbinic legislation, there had ceased to be any real movement of *sebomenoi* as in earlier times. However, the attitudes of early rabbinic voices *might* point towards the attitude of earlier Jews and help to situate Paul's own thinking. This paper argues that the weak believers should be mapped onto the category of "godfearer" rather than the strong believers.

The archeological record can tell us a bit more about the possible social category of "godfearer." The most significant archeological finding related to this social category is the inscription from Aprodias, a city in modern-day Turkey.⁷⁷ The inscription is dated from the third century to sixth century CE, when Christianity was already established in the city, with its first bishop being installed in 325 CE. On the inscription, various individuals are labeled as θεοσεβής. Within a Jewish context, the word θεοσεβής is used in the LXX to describe God-fearing Israelites typically. Additionally, the word προσήλυτος was only used in Jewish and Christian writings, whereas the term ἔπηλυς or ἑπηλύτης were used by non-Jewish writers, although Paul uses neither word. Kostrešević offers several interpretations of θεοσεβής.⁷⁸ Many scholars are skeptical of the

⁷⁶ Joyce Reynolds and Robert F. Tannenbaum, *Jews and Godfearers at Aphrodisias: Greek Inscriptions with Commentary*, Cambridge Philological Society (Cambridge: Cambridge Philological Society, 2020), 110.

⁷⁷ Reynolds and Tannenbaum, *Jews and Godfearers*, 56–57

⁷⁸ Kostrešević, "Godfearers and Religious Syncretism," 345.

existence of a category of semi-proselytes, as described by Luke-Acts.⁷⁹ When this archeological evidence is combined with literary evidence from both the LXX and other contemporary sources, many scholars have rejected any skepticism of the category of “god-fearer,” pointing to Josephus’ description of the “worshiper of God,” Poppaea, wife of Nero (*Ant.* 20.195), as an example.⁸⁰ While archeological evidence points towards at least recognition of this social identity category by the third century CE, the ambiguous nature of the textual evidence leaves room for doubt regarding the salience of this term as a possible means of classifying Paul’s Gentile followers.

Paul appears to make an argument like the later concept of *marit ‘ayin* (Heb. “appearance of the eye”), as defined, “All that the sages prohibited [here] is because of appearance to the eye (m. Kil. 3:5).” The concept is mentioned in the Tosefta,⁸¹ with the formula: X is permissible, but the rabbis forbade it due to *marit ‘ayin*.⁸² As the Mishnah states, “For it is one’s duty to be free of blame before others as before God, as it is said: “And you shall be guiltless before the Lord and before Israel” (Num 32:22), and it says: “And you will find favor and good understanding in the eyes of God and man” (Proverbs 3:4) (m. Shek. 3:2).” The same tradition is included in later Talmudic material in a different context, “Rav Yehuda said that Rav said: Wherever the Sages prohibited, due to the appearance, even in the innermost chambers, it is prohibited (b. Shab. 64a).”⁸³

Marit ‘ayin can be thought of as a type of *legal loophole*, albeit in a counterintuitive sense. Roman law developed a very

⁷⁹ MacLennan and Thomas, "The God-Fearers,"; Kraemer, "Giving up the Godfearers."

⁸⁰ Gupta, "The Thessalonian Believers, Formerly “Pagans” or “God-fearers?”

⁸¹ t. Shev. 2:2; 2:11; 2:15, t. Shab. 4:9; t. Yoma 4:1; t. B. Mes. 5:18; t. B. Mes. 8:10; t. Bekh. 5:2

⁸² Tong, M. Adryael. ""Given as a Sign": Circumcision and Bodily Discourse in Late Antique Judaism and Christianity." PhD diss., Fordham University, 2019, 163.

⁸³ The translation is my own of the Munich manuscript.

sophisticated legal system based on deduction and logical reasoning⁸⁴ like the rabbinic system. The types of legal loopholes in Roman law are the following: 1) replacing prohibited transactions with identical permitted ones; 2) a “straw man” who performs a transaction on behalf of someone else when the second party is prohibited from doing so; 3) granting new legal status in name only.⁸⁵ Cicero (d. 43 BCE) spoke against an overly literal application of the law.⁸⁶ Under Roman law, a judge was required to be considered impartial or the litigants could seek another.⁸⁷ The thrust of Roman law seems to place the avoidance of impropriety upon legal officials, whereas Paul’s usage of the legal concept mirrors more the (admittedly later) rabbinic application of the concept.

The fundamental crux of the issue seems to be to avoid suspicion of sinning by those who know the full extent of the law and subsequently think that said action is permissible. In this case, if the weak see the strong eating meat in pagan temples, they will assume that is an acceptable action and therefore their beliefs *about* the pagan gods and temples will be confirmed. Paul puts his “money where his mouth is,” saying that he would rather never eat meat again than see the weak stumble.

The legal argumentation is on a fuller display in Chapter 9. For the sake of brevity, I will summarize the portions of the chapter that refer to the concept. First, Paul outlines his privileges and rights as an apostle, which implies a certain type of responsibility that he has towards the Corinthians (v. 1). He refers to the right of having a wife as an apostle but notes that

⁸⁴ Fritz Schulz. *History of Roman Legal Science*. London: Oxford University Press, 1946, 24-30.

⁸⁵ David Daube, “Fraud No. 3,” *Collected Studies in Roman Law*, Eds. David Daube, David Cohen, Dieter Simon, Frankfurt am Main: V. Klostermann (1991) 1410.

⁸⁶ Vaughn, John W. “Law and Rhetoric in the *Causa Curiana*.” *Classical Antiquity* 4, no. 2 (1985): 208–222.

⁸⁷ Harrington Putnam, *Recusation*, 9 Cornell L.Q. 1, 3 n. 10 (1923) (quoting *Corpus Juris Civilis*, Codex, lib. 3, tit. a, no. 16).

he and Barnabas have foregone that right to work for the announcement (vv. 5-6). Paul then quotes from the Torah, Deut. 25:4, “You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.” The original context of this verse is economic, and Paul uses it to establish his and Barnabas’ right to live off their work as apostles and to be supported by the assembly financially.⁸⁸ The text in Deuteronomy was read literally in rabbinic law, to prohibit the muzzling of oxen and other animals. Paul’s reading reflects his own halakhic thinking and development in this letter, as he charts out a path for non-Jewish participation in the movement.⁸⁹

After enumerating a list of rights available to him, Paul proclaims, “I have made no use of any of these rights, nor am I writing this so that they may be applied in my case. Indeed, I would rather die than that—no one will deprive me of my ground for boasting!” (9:15). That is, he is avoiding doing things that are permissible to him to avoid being seen as boastful or other negative consequences. This is an argument from *marit ‘ayin*, the appearance of evil.

This leads to, perhaps, one of Paul’s more famous declarations, where Paul describes his own rationale in all of his decisions, which is his devotion to the revelation of the announcement he received.

For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might gain all the more. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to gain Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might gain those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not outside God’s law but am within Christ’s law) so that

⁸⁸ Verbruggen, J. L. (2006). Of Muzzles and Oxen: Deuteronomy 25: 4 and 1 Corinthians 9: 9. *Journal-Evangelical Theological Society*, 49(4), 699.

⁸⁹ Instone-Brewer, “Paul’s Literal Interpretation of ‘Do Not Muzzle the Ox,’” *The Trustworthiness of God*, 152.

I might gain those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might gain the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I might become a partner in it. 1 Corinthians 9:19-23

The subsequent chapter relies on comparisons with Israel's history to note the behavior of the Corinthians in acknowledging the power of idols by eating meat sacrificed to them. This is akin to idolatry. There are numerous connections in 1 Corinthians 10 to Deut 32, particularly in noting the blessings bestowed on by God to those who are faithful. Paul warns the people of the dangers associated with idolatry throughout Israel's history and the implication of breaking their covenant with God, which, for the Corinthians, comes through Christ. This could be read as a warning against apostasy, especially if Nanos' assertions about the lingering presence of polytheistic believers in the assembly is taken seriously.⁹⁰

Both texts are concerned with the people offering sacrifices to other gods, reinforcing the monotheistic nature of the Israelite religion and the fidelity required to its god. The fact of the Corinthians being immersed ties them to the people of Israel and makes them subject to the ritual requirements of only worshiping the god of Israel over other gods. God is called the "rock" in Deuteronomy (32;4:15;18:30-31, cf. v. 3), yet Paul equates the "spiritual rock" that followed them to be Christ himself.

The direction to the history of Israel leads Paul to an ethical goal of his comments to them regarding the issues at play in the community. He directs them to not engage in sexual immorality, as some of the Israelites did (v. 8) and from the worship of idols

⁹⁰ Oropeza, B.J. "Laying to Rest the Midrash: Paul's Message on Meat Sacrificed to Idols in Light of the Deuteronomic Tradition." *Biblica* 79, no. 1 (1998): 62. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42614027>.

(v. 14). That is, Paul uses this moment to reinforce the obligations that *were* in effect on the weak Corinthians' behavior from the standpoint of the requirements expected by the *ger toshav*, which included a minimal set of ethical requirements, although the exact nature of what was expected on them was debated. Additionally, the Jerusalem meeting requires Gentiles to refrain from idolatry (Acts 15:27-29), further suggesting Paul's concord with the Jerusalem pillars. That is, Paul's reference here is to what is expected of the *semi-proselytes* the weak brothers, and not the strong.

The Corinthian believers are directed not to offend anyone. "Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage but that of many, so that they may be saved (10:32-33)." This reflects the ethnic diversity in the association, which consisted of members from multiple *ethne*, including Jews. The directions that Paul has given here will serve to keep the community intact, as one community, with unity. Ethnic division was one of the more likely outcomes of the revolutionary ethnic expansion promoted by the Jerusalem meeting. Maintaining the balance of that decision was a difficult one, and Paul's letter to the Corinthians shows the practical ramifications of implementing such a decision.⁹¹

Finally, Paul does mention the issue of *blood*, also mentioned in the Jerusalem meeting. Paul references the sacrifices that Israelites eat and how this binds them together. The Corinthians must choose between being *partners* with God or demons, i.e. the pagan gods. If they choose to eat of the pagan sacrifices, they will be partners with demons and not be able to drink the cup of the Lord (10:21). Just as the Israelites eat the sacrifices and this binds them together, so too do the believers

⁹¹ Bennema, C. (2013). The Ethnic Conflict in Early Christianity: An Appraisal of Bauckham's Proposal on the Antioch Crisis and the Jerusalem Council. *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 56(4), 753.

who partake of the cup of blessing and the common bread (10:16-17).

The framing of this section of the letter is toward the halakhic expectations of semi-proselytes, the weak, and how the strong are meant to modify *their* behavior for the *benefit* of the weak. It is expected that the weak will follow the example of the strong and undergo complete Judaization and exclusive loyalty to Israel's god and customs in the future.

CONCLUSION

Paul's writing to the Corinthians revealed the practical issues that began to arise in the communities that he created, where Jews and members of the Nations worshiped together and followed the directives of Paul as they awaited the end of the ages. Nonetheless, Paul was not eschewing the practical, day-to-day implications of his religious program. They sent Paul a number of practical questions that arose from their new religious life and the pluriform nature of the Corinthian association, composed of proselytes and semi-proselytes.

Paul addresses a theological and philosophical problem underlying a practical problem which is encapsulated in the question: may Jesus-believers eat meat that has been sacrificed to idols? The question reflects the leftover paganism of the "weak" in the assembly who still ascribe divine power to the pagan gods and sacrifices to them. The "strong" in the community know that the idols are nothing and assume that they may eat the meat from pagan temples because the idols are "nothing" to them.

Paul knows that permitting this type of action could cause a number of problems in the association. He relies on the concept of *marit 'ayin* from Jewish law which exhorts the Jews to walk blamelessly and avoid the mere association with sin. By encouraging the strong to avoid eating meat sacrificed to idols, an action that *they* are technically permitted to do as non-

Judaized members of the Nations, Paul hopes to encourage the weak to drop the last vestiges of pagan identity from their life and bring them into the full life of the announcement of Christ to the Nations at the end of ages.