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**Saint Paul the Apostle and his theological opera between judaism and
hellenism.**

A diagnosis of modern biblical research

(work summary)

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CONTENTS

Introduction

A. **Judaism, Hellenism and Christianity**

- I. The relationship between judaism, hellenism and christianity in the history of modern critical research
- II. Judaism and hellenism - historiographic categories from the perspective of modern biblical research
- III. The phenomenon of hellenism in jewish history and culture
 1. The beginnings of hellenism as a historical and cultural phenomenon
 2. Entry of hellenism in Palestine
 3. The influence of hellenism in Judea
 4. Judea – a space of religious syncretism?

Conclusions

B. **Saint Paul the Apostle: paulinism, judaism and hellenism**

- I. Life and mission of Saint Paul the Apostle
 1. Birth and education of Saint Paul the Apostle
 2. The conversion of Saint Paul the Apostle. A new perspective on the impact of the Apostle's conversion
 3. Pauline apostolate and its controversies
- II. The Gospel of Saint Paul the Apostle and its main themes
- III. The opera of Saint Paul the Apostle in post-pauline era
- IV. Pauline opera in terms of modern critical research
 1. Apostle Paul and his work using a Judaic approach
 2. Apostle Paul and his work using feminist and liberal approaches
 3. Pauline epistles - parts of the Holy Scripture
 4. *A new perspective* on the opera of Saint Paul the Apostle
- V. Urban universe of Pauline Christianity
 1. The Greek-Roman urban world and pauline christianity
 2. Jewish urbanism and pauline christianity
- VI. The early Church reflected in the pauline epistles
 1. Models for early christian groups: ἐκκλησία and voluntary associations
 2. The Early Church organisation in light of Paul's epistles – overview
 - a. Members of the christian Church in pauline language
 - b. Those that did not belong to the christian Church
 - c. Issues of internal organization of the early Church as reflected in the pauline epistles
 - d. The universal dimension of early christianity

Conclusions

C. **Pauline theological themes in Jewish and Hellenistic alternation**

- I. Justification by works of the Law and justification by faith
 1. The meaning of δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ in the pauline sense
 2. Ἐξ ἔργων νόμου – in jewish view
 3. Justification by faith
- II. The report between the Law of Moses and the Law of Christ. A parallel between Fp. Ap. 13, 38-39 and Gal. 3,1 – 6,2.
 1. The curse of the Law (Gal. 3,10-12)
 2. The origin and purpose of the Law (Gal. 3,19-25 și 4,1-10)
 3. The law of Christ (Gal. 4,21 și 6,2)

III. The relationship between Christ – the New Adam and the old Law (Romans 5, 12-21)

1. Rom. 5, 12-21. A Christological and anthropological perspective
2. The relationship between Christ – the New Adam and Jewish Law.
3. Adamic humanity redeemed in Jesus Christ. A Pauline perspective

IV. God and Israel

1. Judaism and Hellenism on God and His relationship with the world
2. The relation between Israel and Gentiles in the light of God's call
3. Israel in the world economy of salvation

V. Pauline anthropology and eschatology under the sign of Judaic and Hellenistic influence

1. σῶμα , σὰρξ , νοῦς , καρδία , ψυχή , πνεῦμα
2. Pauline “anthropologic duality” in Cor. 4,16-5-10
 - a. ὁ ἔξω ἄνθρωπος and ὁ ἔσω ἄνθρωπος (4,16)
 - b. ἐκδυσάμενοι καὶ γυμνοὶ (5,3)
 - c. ἐνδημέω σι ἐκδημοῦντες (5, 6 – 10)

General Conclusions

Bibliography

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Introduction

The opera of Saint Paul the Apostle was, most often, assessed in the light of the Judaism-Hellenism dichotomy - the use of these terms being a common occurrence amongst the assessment of professional scholars of Pauline theology - whether it is in the case of Romanian scholars, or by some foreigners. Most of them have tried to emphasize the special and new character of early Christianity and of the Pauline opera by contrasting them against the two main cultures that have left their mark on the opera and Pauline personality: Judaism and Hellenism. In this approach, the two cultures, Jewish and Hellenistic, were often judged as being in opposition.

Modern biblical research abandoned this approach of the Pauline context, considering such an opposition as unrealistic: when it comes to how the relationship between the two cultures was felt in the social and religious relations of early Christian community members or when it comes to how this relationship was felt in the work and personality of Saint Paul.

One such perspective was underlined in the Romanian research since the year 1973 when Father Constantin Gheorghe, in his article *Iudaism și elenism în epistolele Sfântului Pavel* (ST, 1973, nr. 9-10), reminds of the exact words of Saint Paul the Apostle from his first epistle towards the Corinthians: *Cu iudeii am fost ca un iudeu, ca să dobândesc pe iudei; cu cei de sub lege, ca unul de sub lege, deși eu nu sunt sub lege, ca să dobândesc pe cei de sub lege;/ Cu cei ce n-au Legea, m-am făcut ca unul fără lege, deși nu sunt fără Legea lui Dumnezeu, ci având Legea lui Hristos, ca să dobândesc pe cei ce n-au Legea;/ Cu cei slabi m-am făcut slab, ca pe cei slabi să-i dobândesc; tuturor toate m-am făcut, ca, în orice chip, să măntuiesc pe unii./ Dar toate le fac pentru Evanghelie, ca să fiu părtaș la ea. (I Cor. 9, 20-23), concluding that *nici iudaismul și nici elenismul nu au fost deci hotărâtoare, ci totul în el a fost Hristos.**

What is evident from this assessment is that Paul the Apostle had to often shift between Judaism and Hellenism in his desire and attempt to answer the call that Jesus Christ addressed to him on the Damascus road. In this respect, we must not forget that Paul the Apostle was a diaspora Jew who tried to form a community that was meant to include both Hebrews and nations, the community had to be united by him into a new and an emerging self-determined Church. Moreover, Saint Paul the Apostle never gave, in his Gospel's message, the sentiment that his followers were placed before a pro-Jewish or pro-Hellenist election. For the Apostle, important issues are beyond the two dominant cultures of his world.

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- II. Judaism and hellenism - historiographic categories from the perspective of modern biblical research
- III. The phenomenon of hellenism in jewish history and culture
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The two great cultures, Jewish and Hellenistic, were assessed in biblical research, as the protagonists of a fight, starting with Ferdinand Christian Baur, his proposals and conclusions, and of those that followed him, strongly influencing the way in which modern scholars interpreted early Christianity. In his view, on the one hand, there is the Judeo-Christian community led by Jesus, the Apostles, and on the other side, were the Christian Hellenistic Jews with a vision of a universal religion; a group that, after conversion, included Paul the Apostle. This view was continued and emphasized by J.G. Droysen, a younger contemporary of Baur.

The History of Religions School stressed the importance of Hellenism that influenced early Christianity, which, in its perspective, appears as a cult of mysteries, being the result of the Hellenistic syncretism. The reaction was that other scholars focused towards a hypothesis about the profound Jewish influence on early Christianity, developing an interest in late Judaism, in the hope to demonstrate the distinct character of Christianity compared to the pagan environment.

This new attitude, which regarded Judaism as the background of Christianity, has been criticized by Professor George Moore who stressed the need for operating with essential and recognized documents of Judaism. Moore's student, Erwin R. Goodenough, said that Christianity was born out of a mystic and Hellenistic Judaism relying on the archaeological discoveries of the time. The findings proved a strong Judaic interaction with the Greek pagan environment.

The newest orientation of scholars, regarding the era of Saint Paul the Apostle, is focused, as suggested by Mihail Rostovtzeff, on the experience of the other 99 % of the population, as being very important in highlighting the features of the Pauline era.

Mediterranean peoples lived within a single culture, uniform to the whole region, where many groups adapted to the dominant culture and, in this sense, the terms Judaism and

Hellenism cannot be accurately outlined and they must be used with great caution when they are used to represent historiographical categories. It must not be forgotten that the Roman and Syriac cultures had an important role in this area, thus, making it difficult to speak of a dualism in terms of influences on the Pauline thought.

Modern scholars have emphasized, in recent years, the need to examine the 400 years between the time of the liberation of the Jews by the Persians and up to the events of the New Testament, a period that was characterised by many changes at the religious level, the emergence of new social and religious groups, as well as concepts that were addressed to a lesser extent in the Old Testament. In this sense, it must be appreciated the way in which the influence of the Greek culture was experienced when it met with the Jewish one. Greek elements like the polis or gymnasium were representative for the socio-religious climate of the Pauline era; their influence being perpetuated in numerous traditions and events of Judaism from the Pauline time.

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2. The conversion of Saint Paul the Apostle. A new perspective on the impact of the Apostle's conversion
3. Pauline apostolate and its controversies

II. The Gospel of Saint Paul the Apostle and its main themes

III. The opera of Saint Paul the Apostle in post-pauline era

IV. Pauline opera in terms of modern critical research

1. Apostle Paul and his work using a Judaic approach
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4. *A new perspective* on the opera of Saint Paul the Apostle

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1. Models for early christian groups: ἐκκλησία and voluntary associations
2. The Early Church organisation in light of Paul's epistles – overview
 - a. Members of the christian Church in pauline language
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 - d. The universal dimension of early christianity

Saint Paul the Apostle is *an Israelite, from descendants of Abraham, the tribe of Benjamin* (Rom.11,1), having *a great zeal towards parental traditions* (Gal. 1,14). This zeal of Saint Paul the Apostle is assessed by modern scholars as a reflection of God's zeal. From

this new perspective, provided by E.P. Sanders, Saint Paul is appreciated as being an heir and bearer of Maccabeus tradition, in defence of Judaism. Due to the fact that those men who were converted did not require circumcision and specific practices of the covenant, as Maccabees understood and founded the idea of Judaism, Hellenists altered the borders that Moses laid down to protect Israel. On the road to Damascus, Saint Paul was converted from his zeal, a zeal for Judaism, a Pharisaic Judaism, that kept him separate even from other Hebrews, thus, not losing the faith of his people. This zeal is to be understood in the context of Simeon and Levi (Fac. 34) or of Finees (Num. 25, 6-13).

The main themes of the Pauline Gospel were given to the Apostle by his Christian predecessors (I Cor. 15,3), and these are the fact that Christ came for our sins, was buried, came back to life on the third day and showed Himself to Cephas and to the twelve Apostles. His Gospel is of divine origin (Rom. 1,16-17), a discovery of God's justice, of His care through Christ (Rom. 1,17).

Many scholars considered that, after his death, the Apostle was often misunderstood, sometimes even being regarded as a servant of evil with a false Gospel. In the IInd century, Ignatius of Antioch and Polycarp make reference to Saint Paul's Epistles, but on less important issues. Saint Justin the Martyr and the Philosopher or Theophilus of Antioch make reference to the Pauline Epistles, but without mentioning Saint Paul's name. This was considered by modern research being intentional. Those who brought the work of Saint Paul to the core of Christianity were Saint Clement of Alexandria and Origen.

In modern Jewish biblical research, after 1940, there was a special concern for texts that could have been used in an anti-Semitic way. In this context, it was sometimes considered that Apostle Paul converted to Christianity because he considered the Mosaic Law as being inferior to the Law of Christ (the opinion of A. Segal), that Saint Paul the Apostle worked with the idea of two peoples of God and with a double model of salvation - one for those in Christ and one for Jews that are not in Christ (the opinion of those like K. Stendahl, J. Gager, L. Gaston), or that Saint Paul promoted an universal religion, wishing to decrease the importance of Judaism in the economy of Christian history (D. Boyarin).

In the case of the new perspective regarding Pauline theology the one who raised the problem for the first time was W. Davies, taking a stance against the focus of the History of Religion on the Hellenistic basis of Pauline theology, emphasising that the understanding of Apostle Paul must be connected with his Judaic origins. In this sense, he raised two issues regarding Apostle Paul: if he denied or not his Judaism and if his doctrine, of justification through faith, was formulated in opposition to Judaism which considered that justification was

dependent on the personal efforts of men. The one who developed this new perspective on Pauline Judaism, with consequences to Saint Paul's persona, was E. P. Sanders who emphasized the fact that the moment when Judaism started to consider itself as being the people of God was when God made the covenant with Israel. This covenant was not considered anywhere in Jewish writings as an achievement due to people's merits. Judaism received the responsibility of keeping this covenant by maintaining an obedient attitude towards the Law, through repeated emphasis on repentance and the certainty of a sacrificial system. In this context, Sanders considers that assessing the religion as legalistic or based on merits is a wrong approach and it is unjustified and it creates harmful.

The one who stressed, in particular, the effects of this new perspective was James Dunn who says that it brings light and clarity to the Pauline theology showing that its polemic aspect was directed not so much against the idea of winning approval of God through acts of personal merit, but especially against the Judaic intention to maintain its privilege as a member of the covenant so that other men, except Hebrews, cannot contaminate it. Thus, Apostle Paul, appears to react against the exclusivist character generated around this covenant, against the beliefs that the *acts of the Law* continued to set the terms of the relationship of this covenant for peoples as well as Hebrews. In this context, the Pauline doctrine of justification through faith only developed in particular (Gal. 2,1-21).

Saint Paul's world was largely constituted in cities of the Roman Empire where Paul organised small groups of Christians in meeting houses. These cities had many common elements: the Greek language, the existence of associations and clubs, town boards announcing various decrees, craftsmen involved in pottery, glass, furniture, decoration, sculpture or painting, etc. Different religious cults also followed on the footsteps of an expanding commerce between these cities, from one region to another, those of a certain ethnicity and faith often finding themselves in different cities, a model also used by Christianity.

The community formed by Apostle Paul was multi-ethnic in character, mainly composed of pagans (like the one in Corinth), a community that received proselytes - the community itself being also formed of proselytes. The baptise act and the Holy Dinner had an effect of dissimilation, which created the necessary borders for the process of self-determination of the early Church.

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- I. Justification from the works of Law and justification by faith
 1. The meaning of δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ in the pauline sense
 2. Ἐξ ἔργων νόμου – in jewish view
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- III. The relationship between Christ – the New Adam and the old Law. A text perspective from Romans 5, 12-21
 1. Rom. 5, 12-21. A Christological and anthropological perspective
 2. The relationship between Christ – the New Adam and jewish Law.
 3. Adamic humanity redeemed in Jesus Christ. A pauline perspective
- IV. God and the creation
 1. Judaism and Hellenism on God and His relationship with the world
 2. God of Israel is also the God of all men
 3. Israel – the people of God's calling
 4. Israel in the world economy of salvation
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This *new perspective* regarding the opera of Saint Paul the Apostle is the most famous discussion in the study of the New Testament. According to E.P. Sanders, Judaism was always a religion of grace that involved listening to man as an answer to grace, the covenant being given by divine initiative and the Law offering the cadre for living the life within the Covenant. In this light, following the Law guarantees a place inside the Covenant, but does not bring the gift of grace, but rather it maintains a status. To understand such a perspective, one must understand the meaning of some expressions such as: *God's Justice* or *acts of the Law*. *God's Justice* must be understood as the fulfilment by God of His assumed obligations made at the creation of man and when He chose Israel as His people, to protect, save and heal Israel, including that the work of God also implies to attract men and support them towards Him, action that must be perceived as the power of God towards salvation. The expression, *acts of the Law*, refers to what the Law considers as being the required acts for Hebrews, a part Israel had to fulfil from the covenant with God, as an answer from Israel to the gift.

These *acts of the Law* were meant as a restrictive protection of this privilege (circumcision, respecting Sabbath, purity and impurity laws).

To say that justification is the result of acts means to state that God belongs only to Hebrews and nations need to take the practices of the Hebrew people at a personal level. Saint Paul the Apostle shows that the Gospel is for all who believe (Rom. 1,16) and that God's Justice is for all who believe (Rom. 3,22), Abraham is the father of all those who believe (Rom. 4, 11). Abraham was reckoned as just before the time of circumcision moment that was only a sign and seal of a right relationship won by faith (Rom. 4, 10-11). If justification is based on faith before the facts and whether the faith of Abraham was the answer to the promise of God, then, faith must be the basis for the promised inheritance (Rom. 4:12). Faith is more important and deeper than the faithfulness of Abraham and also compared to Israel's covenant with God, it is the faith in Him whom has raised Jesus from the dead, our God (Rom. 4 23-24). God's covenant with Abraham was based primary on faith and this could not have been amended by the Law that came 430 years later.

Law tells people what to do and not to do and thus, it comes into opposition with the Law of God, proposing a different decree that asks and imposes on people obedience, making them disobedient towards God (Rom. 7,17). Thus, people become slaves to the Law. It is inefficient in dealing with sin and death and it cannot win over them, being without life. Therefore, Apostle Paul is opposed to how Judaism understands the Law - as a means to resist sin and guard us from it.

The text from Rom. 9-11 answers to the tension created by the statement of Saint Paul regarding the idea that the special status of Israel before God is no longer valid; statement that raises a question mark regarding the faith of God towards His chosen people, towards God's Justice, which implies that *the adoption and glory and the covenants and law and worship and the promises* (Rom. 9,4-5) are owned by the Hebrew people. The Church is not defined by Paul through an opposition with Israel, but through the inclusion of it in Israel and identifying it with the blessings inherited by Israel, a different approach to the one used by scholars whom over centuries were opposed to the Christianity of Judaism. The identity of Israel is determined by the calling of God, Israel being defined by promise (Rom. 9,8) and choice (Rom. 9,11) and not through a physical descending. The ethnic identity, loyalty and dedication to the covenant does not bring anything which constitutes the base for this identity, they are not essential to this identity.

The Gospel of Christ brought justice to all those who believe (Rom. 10,4). The search for justice by following the Law did not fail because the Law would have been a wrong

purpose; instead, the way it was followed was wrong. (Rom. 9,37). The finality of the Law looks at its role to keep the special status of Israel. The faith Saint Paul's speaks about is the devotion to Jesus as a Lord raised from the dead.

Saint Paul the Apostle has achieved and emphasized the idea of an anthropological duality on the one hand, as an answer to a tension that could have been expressed daily between the reality of death and physical suffering, and on the other hand, through faith in a living and working inner presence of God. In this sense, death is perceived by the Apostle as being the beginning of life and at the same time, a solution to the tension between experience and faith. This Pauline conception has both Hellenistic and Judaic components and it is not totally involved with any of them. This conception is common to both the Judaic and Hellenistic cultures, which have considered, since antiquity, that the physical dimension of the human being (the body) is corruptible and passing while the one within (the man within the body) is eternal.

General Conclusions

In modern biblical research the feeling is that it is necessary to renounce the dichotomy *Judaism – Hellenism* because such an approach has proven, over time, to be inconsistent with historical events. There is a need for an approach that can go beyond this dichotomy, renouncing any kind of interpretation concerning Paul the Apostle. All cultural ideas and practices of the Pauline context should be appreciated, with all openness, regardless of their roots. Doing so and by renouncing the Judaism-Hellenism base, scholars have the opportunity to capture Saint Paul in his true cultural context which he is part of and in this perspective, to use this research to clarify, by comparison, his ideas and practices.

Saint Paul the Apostle must not be seen and appreciated through an opposition to his contemporaries or with a specific context of his era because this would isolate him and it would harm the way in which the Apostle has interacted with his contemporaries. Saint Paul the Apostle must be regarded, increasingly, as one of the participants to the context of his era, a participant that has the possibility to distance himself from this context or to come back to it, just like all the people that have lived and participated in that context.

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