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Parallels:
Use, Misuse and Limitations
by T. L. Donaldson

The proper use of comparative material in biblical studies is a thorny problem, but Dr. Donaldson, who is Professor of New Testament studies in the College of Emmanuel and St. Chad in Saskatoon, offers us a useful study of it, the value of which is enhanced by his extended discussion of parallels to the Christian conception of the apostolate.

I INTRODUCTION

Although twenty years have passed since Samuel Sandmel delivered his celebrated Presidential Address entitled 'Parallelomania' to the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature,[1] the problem to which he drew attention continues to be a pressing one for NT scholarship. By 'parallelomania' Sandmel meant 'that extravagance' among practitioners of the comparative study of religions

> which first overdoes the supposed similarity in passages and then proceeds to describe source and derivation as if implying literary connection flowing in an inevitable or predetermined direction (p.1).

As is made clear at the outset, he by no means wanted to deny the existence of discernible points of contact between distinct religious traditions; the study of parallels, in his view, is valid and should be encouraged. His criticisms were directed, rather, at what he saw to be misuses of this kind of comparative study. These misuses fall generally into two categories.

    The first of these concerns those instances where parallels are adduced which, on closer inspection of their respective contexts, turn out to be more imagined than real. Decrying the practice of 'juxtaposing mere excerpts', Sandmel warned that

> two passages may sound the same in splendid isolation from their context, but when seen in context reflect difference rather than similarity (p.2).

Only detailed study can demonstrate the existence of the organic relationship that distinguishes a true parallel from a mere surface similarity.

    The second kind of criticism levelled by Sandmel generally dealt with situations where true parallels exist, but where exaggerated and unrealistic claims are made about their significance. Comparative study by its very nature tends to place an inflated value on parallels and similarities, often overlooking the fact that in the history of a religious tradition it is usually the differences that are more significant. This is true, said Sandmel, even in the case of first-century Judaism, where the area of distinctiveness within its various sects and groups (including Jewish

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[1] The text of this address appears in *JBL* 81, 1962, 1-13.

Christianity) is a much smaller proportion of the whole than the areas of overlap:

> In the variety of the Judaisms, as represented by such terms as Pharisees, Sadducees, Qumran, Therapeutae, it is a restricted area which makes each of these groups distinctive within the totality of Judaisms; it is the distinctive which is significant for identifying the particular, and not the broad areas in common with other Judaisms (p.3).

Consequently, parallels between, say, Paul and Qumran, though real, may be of little significance, arising not from direct influence but from joint participation in the common stock of Jewish tradition.

In addition to differences in content, there are also differences in context to be taken into account. Even where a case of 'borrowing' can be identified, one cannot assume that the borrowed element has the same function or significance in the new context as in the old. Citing Paul as an example, Sandmel asserted that

> Paul's context is of infinitely more significance than the question of the alleged parallels. Indeed to make Paul's context conform to the content of the alleged parallels is to distort Paul. The knowledge on our part of the parallels may assist us in understanding Paul; but if we make him mean only what the parallels mean, we are using the parallels in a way that can lead us to misunderstand Paul (p.5).

In Sandmel's terms, then, 'parallelomania' consists not only of the tendency to see parallels where no parallels exist, but also of the failure to recognize the limitations of comparative study.

Sandmel's criticisms were not new. Similar statements were being made early in this century by a number of critical observers of the emerging *religionsgeschichtliche Schule*.[2] Like Sandmel, these scholars were not denying the value of comparative study, for in their own way all of them wanted to see themselves as practitioners of the *religionsgeschichtliche* method.[3] In their evaluation of the approach taken by Pfleiderer, Bousset, Reitzenstein and others, they objected, rather, to what they saw as an illegitimate and uncritical application of the method.

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2 See, e.g., A. Schweitzer, *Paul and His Interpreters*, trans. W. Montgomery (London, 1912), esp. 177, 191-206; A. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, trans. L. R. M. Strachan (2nd. ed.; London, 1927), 264-267; H. A. A. Kennedy, *St. Paul and the Mystery Religions* (London, 1913), esp. viii-x; and W. G. Kümmel's discussion of A. Harnack, A. Jülicher, E. von Dobschütz and others in his *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of its Problems*, trans. S. McLean Gilmour and H. C. Kee (Nashville — New York, 1972), 309-324.

3 Kümmel said of Weiss' eschatological approach to the NT that Weiss wanted to show 'that this [i.e. the approach of Boussett *et al.*] did not have to be the only and unavoidable way of practising the history-of-religions method'; *The New Testament*, 276.

In the first place, they charged that the history-of-religions school had failed to demonstrate the existence of real parallels between early Christianity and the Hellenistic world. Deissmann pointed out, for example, that more than a mere similarity is required in order to demonstrate the existence of a true parallel, for in addition to genea- logical parallels, which are truly related, there are also unrelated analogical parallels, which owe their similarities only to common human reactions to similar religious conditions.[4] He was saying, in effect, that the influence of one religion on another needs to be demonstrated, not assumed. In the case of the mystery religions of the Hellenistic world, Schweitzer argued on the basis of the nature of the sources that the history-of-religions interpreters had failed to demonstrate the plausibility of such an influence on NT thought. One problem concerned chronology. He complained that many of the sources used in the *religionsgeschichtliche* approach were from the second century AD and later, so that the relevance of the parallels was in serious doubt:

> Another point which calls for close attention is the chronological connection with the history of the Mystery-religions. It is from the beginning of the second century onwards that these cults become widely extended in the Roman empire ... Paul cannot have known the mystery-religions in the form in which they are known to us, because in this fully developed form they did not yet exist.[5]

Noting the fragmentary and incomplete nature of our sources for mystery religions, Schweitzer also charged that the history-of-religions school had often succumbed to the temptation to reconstruct the mystery religions with an eye to the desired NT parallel, so that parallels were created rather than discovered.[6]

The relevance of the Hellenistic material for the study of the NT was also challenged on the grounds that more immediate and obvious parallels were available in the Jewish world. In his work on Paul, for example, Deissmann emphasized the influence that Paul's Pharisaic background had on his theology, arguing that 'to understand the whole of St. Paul, and not merely a part of him, from the point of view of religious history, we must know the spirit of the Septuagint'.[7] Kennedy also charged that the more obvious Jewish background of Paul had been overlooked:

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4. See *Light from the Ancient East*, 265.

5. *Paul and His Interpreters*, 191f.

6. *Ibid.*, 192f.

7. A. Deissmann, *Paul: A Study in Social and Religious History*, trans. W. E. Wilson (2nd ed.; New York, 1957 [1927]), 99.

> The chief defect in the [religionsgeschichtliche] process is the failure to be sufficiently rigorous in the application of the historical method. The more immediate background of the Christian faith is apt to be strangely neglected. It will appear again and again in the course of the present investigation that the Old Testament supplies a perfectly adequate explanation of the ideas and usages in the Epistles of Paul which it is the fashion to associate with Hellenistic influence.[8]

Schweitzer for his part, while not wanting to deny the existence of Hellenistic influence in Paul's thought, asserted that such influence took place not directly, but only through the mediation of Judaism, particularly the apocalyptic strain.[9]

Secondly, these critics charged the proponents of the history-of-religions approach with overestimating the significance of such parallels as did exist; that is, with failing to recognize the limitations of comparative study. Harnack, for example, drew attention to the cavalier lack of interest among history-of-religions scholars in the possibility of transformation:

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> However, with reference to all the derivatives and borrowings from ancient religions by Judaism and Christianity (in practices, customs, sacred narratives, and formulae), there has been no carefully controlled investigation of whether and in what order the meaning and value of what has been appropriated has been transformed to the point of total sublimation and poetic arabesquerie. The fact that the duty of inquiring into this is not recognized as urgent is characteristic of the romanticism that would still like to enjoy as though it were an original crud₋ product what has ever been in the process of change.[10]

Ernst von Dobsc̈ütz went one step further in his assertion that the problem with the history-of-religions movement was that it was not historical enough. By focussing only on the similarities between early Christianity and the Hellenistic mystery religions, this approach failed to face — let alone to ans̈.er — the fundamental historical question: Why was it that Christianity, and not one of these other religions, eventually triumphed in the Roman empire? In his words:

> In our attempt to put ourselves back entirely into that ancient time, we must gradually come to the point where we are struck no longer by what Christianity of those days had in common with the religiosity of the time, but by what distinguished it, by what in Christianity attracted the people of that time. Only

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[8] *St. Paul and the Mystery Religions*, viii.

[9] *Paul and His Interpreters*, 176f.

[10] Cited by Kümmel, *The New Testament*, 311; from A. von Harnack, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, vol. 1 (4th ed.; 1909), 46.

then shall we be justified in speaking of a truly historical history-of-religions view of things.[11]

The problem of 'parallelomania', then, is one of long standing. The solution, however, does not lie in the direction of treating religious traditions as isolated entities. There is no gainsaying the fact that comparative studies have thrown fresh light on the NT at a great many points. And the basic insight of the *religionsgeschichtliche* school — that to be properly understood a religion must be seen against the broader background of its whole social, cultural and religious environment[12] — would be assented to in some form by most NT scholars. Nor is the solution to be found, as Sanders might be taken to suggest, in restricting comparative religions study to the 'holistic comparison' of overall 'patterns of religion'.[13] While such macro-comparison is certainly valid, there is still a place for the sort of micro-comparison between pairs of

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[11] Also cited by Kümmel, *ibid.,* 314; from *Probleme des Apostolischen Zeitalters* (Leipzig, 1904), 78.

[12] Perhaps the most clearly-formulated statement of the presuppositions underlying the *religionsgeschichtliche* method is to be found in E. Hatch's Hibbert Lectures of 1889 [see E. Hatch, *The Influence of Greek Ideas upon the Christian Church,* ed. A. M. Fairbairn (London, 1890)]. The first of these presuppositions is a statement of genealogical connection: since any religion is closely bound up with the life, customs and thought forms in which it exists, it can be understood only against this cultural background:

> The religion of a given race at a given time is relative to the whole mental attitude of that time. It is impossible to separate the religious phenomena from the other phenomena, in the same way that you can separate a vein of silver from the rock in which it is embedded. They are as much determined by the general characteristics of the race as the fauna and flora of a geographical area are determined by its soil, its climate, and its cultivation ... They are separable from the whole mass of phenomena, not in fact, but only in thought. We may concentrate our attention chiefly upon them, but they still remain part of the whole complex life of the time, and they cannot be understood except in relation to that life (2f.).

Hatch's second presupposition was a statement of evolutionary development: changes or developments in a religion do not occur out of thin air, but are rooted in pre-existent elements:

> No permanent change takes place in the religious beliefs or usages of a race which is not rooted in the existing beliefs and usages of that race. The truth which Aristotle enunciated, that all intellectual teaching is based on what is previously known to the person taught, is applicable to a race as well as to an individual, and to beliefs even more than to knowledge. A religious change is, like a physiological change, of the nature of assimilation by, and absorption into, existing elements (4).

[13] See E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia, 1977), 12-18. But Sanders' negative comments about the study of 'individual motifs' are in essence criticisms of a failure to recognize the limitations of parallels-study, rather than of the validity of such study *per se.*

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individual elements from distinct religious traditions that parallels-study represents.

What is needed, rather, is a more sober and critical approach to the use of parallels — one characterized by both a concern for rigorous demonstration of the existence of true genealogical parallels, and a more modest and realistic appraisal of what parallels-study can be expected to accomplish. In the remainder of this paper, I intend to examine the nature and significance of parallels in more detail in order to set out some methodological principles, and then to illustrate these principles by looking at a specific example — *viz.* the origin of the NT idea of ἀπόστολος.

II. METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

(i) *Nature of Parallel*

On the basis of the foregoing discussion, it is evident that a detailed consideration of the nature of the parallel is foundational for any use of religious parallels in NT interpretation. More specifically, it is necessary first to demonstrate that the two elements under discussion are indeed genealogically related (for genealogical parallels are the only ones of any real significance for history-of-religions study), and then to specify the precise nature of the relationship.

As has been made clear, to demonstrate the existence of a genealogical parallel, it is first of all necessary to show a substantial similarity between the two elements under discussion when seen in their contexts. Imaginary parallels, drawn on the basis of highly selective use of source material ignoring wider contexts, are no parallels at all.

The casual reader may be impressed, for example, with the fact that both Philo and Paul develop allegorical interpretations of the Biblical account of Sarah and Hagar, with its contrasts and conflicts, for contemporary apologetic purposes.[14] Closer inspection of the relevant passages, however, reveals almost no common elements that could be taken as evidence for the knowledge of one by the other. Apart from surface similarities that arise naturally from the Genesis account itself, the two allegorical interpretations are divergent and independent.[15]

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[14] For Paul, see Gal. 4:21-31. The allegory is widespread in Philo, providing the basis for an entire treatise (*De Congressu Eruditionis Gratia*), and appearing frequently elsewhere (e.g. *Cher.* 3-10; *Fug.* 209-213; *Leg. All.* iii.244; *Mut. Nom.* 261; *Post C.* 130-131; *Quaest. in Gen.* iii. 19-33; *Sacr.* 43-44; *Sobr.* 8; *Som.* i. 240).

[15] For Philo, Hagar symbolizes the preliminary learning obtained in the schools of philosophy which must give way to deeper wisdom (i.e. Sarah). The fundamental differences between this interpretation and that of Paul in Gal. 4 are patently clear.

But it is not enough to demonstrate substantial similarity, for there are analogical parallels as well as genealogical ones. In Metzger's words,

> the uniformity of human nature sometimes produces strikingly similar results in similar situations where there can be no suspicion of any historical bridge by which the tradition could have been mediated from one culture to another.[16]

The use of ritual washings as a symbol for purification, for example, arises so naturally from universal human experience that no true genealogical parallel should be assumed between, say, early Christian baptism and Hindu ceremonies in the Ganges. While some scholars seem to work with the assumption that if they have demonstrated a similarity they have proved a connection, it is necessary to take the further step of establishing, on geographical and chronological grounds, the possibility of such a 'historical bridge' by which the two religions might have come into contact. We will leave until later the place of chronology in the determination of which religion borrowed from which. All we mean to say here is that it must be demonstrated that the religions could have come into close enough contact for borrowing to occur.

In the last analysis, though, the identification of a genealogical parallel requires some hard evidence of a relationship between the two elements in question. It is necessary to provide some reason for believing that religious cargo has passed over the bridge. The nature of this evidence will, of course, vary from case to case. It may consist of conceptual similarities, such as the eschatological interpretation of Dt. 18:15, 18 found in Qumran, Samaritan and Christian sources. Or it might be a matter of terminology, as can be seen in the Jewish appropriation of the mythological concept of the 'navel of the earth' as a description of Jerusalem (e.g. LXX Ezk. 38:12; Jub. 8:19; Josephus *War* iii. 52; Pirke R. El. 11). But in any case, some evidence of derivation or influence needs to be presented.

Once the existence of a true genealogical relationship has been established, it is then necessary to determine with greater precision the nature of the relationship. Questions such as — Which religion has influenced which? Was the influence direct or indirect? etc. — need to be asked. Of course, it is often the case that in the process of demonstrating the existence of a genealogical relationship, the nature of the relationship is determined as well. Nevertheless, the two steps are distinct logically and, at least sometimes, in practice, and so can be considered separately.

At least two types of genealogical parallels can be identified; for

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[16] B. M. Metzger, 'Methodology in the Study of Mystery Religions and Early Christianity', in his *Historical and Literary Studies: Pagan, Jewish and Christian* (Grand Rapids, 1968), 10f.

convenience we shall describe them as stronger and weaker parallels. Simply stated, the difference between the two rests on the extent to which a direct influence is involved. A stronger parallel can be said to exist where there is a direct, straight-line influence from one element of the parallel to the other; one religious tradition has been directly influenced by, or has clearly appropriated something from, the other at this point. For example, we might consider the case of John the Baptist and Qumran. W. H. Brownlee is one of a number of scholars who feel that the somewhat strange and mysterious role of John the Baptist as recorded in the Gospels can best be explained by the hypothesis that 'he spent his childhood in the wilderness, being brought up by the Essenes'.[17] To support his contention, he pointed to John's preference for the wilderness of Judea, to his concern for preparation in the face of imminent eschatological events, and to his emphasis on baptism, suggesting that these elements are all closely paralleled in the Qumran literature. We do not have to concern ourselves here with the validity of the parallel.[18] But if Brownlee were right, we would have here an example of the direct influence that characterizes a stronger parallel.

200 In the case of weaker genealogical parallels, this element of direct influence is lacking. This type of parallel is to be found in religious contexts — such as is the case in first century Judaism — where several related yet distinguishable religious groups share a common milieu with a greater or lesser degree of overlap. Here mutual dependence on a common stock of floating tradition can result in the appearance of similar elements in more than one group. In such a situation the genealogical connection is there, but it is diffuse and mediated through an indirect process. Or it may be the case that similar concepts appear independently in separate groups because they are easily derivable from the common stock of religious tradition. This situation might be described as one of analogical parallel in a common milieu, but since a genealogical connection is present, in the interest of clarity it is better to describe this as a form of weaker genealogical parallel. It should be apparent that stronger parallels are possible in this common-milieu situation as well. But as the area held in common decreases, as religious groups become more distinct, the possibility of weaker parallels also diminishes.

In order to establish the existence of a stronger parallel, then, it will be necessary to demonstrate the *direct* influence of one religious tradition on

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[17] 'John the Baptist in the New Light of the Ancient Scrolls', in *The Scrolls and the New Testament*, ed. K. Stendahl (New York, 1957), 35.

[18] For a discussion of the differences between the Baptist and Qumran, see F. F. Bruce, *Second Thoughts on the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Grand Rapids, 1956), 128-131.

another. Again, the nature of such demonstration will be a function of the particular situation. But it is to be noted that questions of relative chronology and of the dating of source material assume an importance here that they do not have in the case of weaker parallels.

To illustrate, consider the case where similar elements appear in religion A and religion B. Before a case can be made for the influence of A on B at this point, it must be demonstrated that the element in question was present in A prior to its emergence in B. If the sources for A are prior, as is the case in the comparison of John and Qumran, then this poses no problem. But if the sources for A are later, then the situation is a little more difficult. The possibility of an influence of A on B is by no means ruled out, for material that is late can preserve traditions that stem from an earlier period. But since the element in question may in such a case have been a later development — and may even have been the result of influence moving in the opposite direction (i.e. from B to A) — strict and rigorous controls need to be applied to the process of identifying earlier tradition, if an argument of derivation or influence is to carry any weight.

The comparison of John the Baptist and Qumran, for example, would be significantly altered if G. R. Driver were correct in his (unlikely) assertion that most of the Dead Sea Scrolls date from after AD 70.[19] In this case the priority of the Qumran parallels could not be taken for granted, and detailed criteria would need to be developed in order to identify pre-war strata in the Scrolls.

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Now it is highly unlikely that such considerations need to enter into the comparative study of John and Qumran (Driver is almost certainly wrong!). But they are definitely pertinent in those areas of NT study where comparative use is made of Rabbinic and Gnostic sources, both of which date from the second century AD and later. The problem is especially acute in the case of Gnosticism, which may well have pre-Christian antecedents but which is known to us primarily in forms that have been heavily influencd by Christian tradition.

In any case, the first step in the use of parallels for purposes of Biblical interpretation consists of a determination of the nature of the parallel. The existence of a genealogical relationship needs to be demonstrated, and the precise nature of this relationship must be spelled out.

(ii) *Significance of Parallel*

The second step in the process is to assess the significance of the parallel for our understanding of the matter under consideration. To do this

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[19] See *The Judean Scrolls* (Oxford, 1965), esp. 359-373.

properly, it is necessary to be clear about what parallels-study can and cannot be expected to accomplish. Perhaps the best way into the subject is to consider two of the most common misunderstandings surrounding the significance of parallels.

The first can be described as a tendency towards reductionism, i.e. the assumption that the function and meaning of a 'borrowed' element is essentially determined by its function and meaning in the original setting. Such an assumption is explicitly affirmed by Hatch in the case of Ante-Nicene Christianity:

> A large part of what are sometimes called Christian doctrines and many usages which have prevailed and continue to prevail in the Christian Church, are *in reality* Greek theories and Greek usages changed in form and colour by the influence of primitive Christianity, but *in their essence* Greek still (italics mine).[20]

But such a naïve view of the nature of the development of religious traditions overlooks completely the fact that religious and social terms and practices can be appropriated, 'baptized', and used in decidedly different ways. Many examples could be cited. Circumcision, for example, is a common North American practice, even among Gentiles. In these cases, none of the religious or social connotations connected with circumcision in, say, Paul's Galatian churches are relevant. Again, recent excavation of the Rabbinic tombs at Beth She'arim has shown that even the most conservative rabbis could be buried in tombs and coffins decorated with clearly pagan themes and symbols.[21] This should not be taken to mean that the Judaism of Beth She'arim was very Hellenistic. In fact, this was the home of many conservative rabbis, including Judah ha-Nasi, under whose direction the Mishna was compiled. Rather, as Avigad wrote in the excavation report,

> the tolerance of the Jews of that period in matters of fine art is explained by the fact that the various representations were deprived of their pagan character and original symbolic significance. Many symbols which had their origin in pagan beliefs had acquired a universal character. They were cut off from their original source and became conventional forms of ornament ... So long as there was no suspicion of idolatry, [the rabbis] were not strict.[22]

Of course, it is not always possible to baptize away all of the old connotations of a religious symbol. Borrowed elements inevitably bring

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20 *The Influence of Greek Ideas and Usages*, 350.
21 See N. Avigad, *Excavations at Beth She'arim, 1955: Preliminary Report* (Jerusalem, 1958). Sarcophagi found in the tombs were decorated with bulls' heads, scenes from Greek mythology, and faces of Zeus.
22 *Ibid.*, 35.

with them some of their old meanings. So, for example, while anti-Gnostic Fathers like Irenaeus and Tertullian wanted to resist dualism and to defend the goodness of the body, they could not entirely remove dualistic overtones from their use of σῶμα and ψυχή as basic anthropological categories.[23] A study of the borrowed element in its original setting, therefore, can help to throw light on its new use. But this should not be to the exclusion of a study of the parallel in its new setting, taking into account differences in form and function.

In his significant book, *The Semantics of Biblical Language,* James Barr has made the important point that the meaning of a word is to be determined not solely from its etymology, but in the final analysis from its contextual use in living language.[24] The point being made here about religious concepts, symbols and forms is somewhat similar: while the 'etymology' of such religious elements is not to be overlooked, their significance is to be determined ultimately from their contextual setting in living religious usage.

The second misunderstanding is the belief that the demonstration of the existence of a stronger parallel fully accounts for the presence of the 'borrowed' element in the new religious setting. In reality, however, the more fundamental reasons are to be found within the 'borrowing' religion itself. A religion appropriates elements from external sources not simply because they are there, but because they prove useful in the expression of more basic aspects of its own religious insight and experience.

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Take, for example, the variety of titles and texts that are used in the christological formulations of the early Church. Any study that attempts to account for NT christology simply by laying bare the Jewish or Hellenistic antecedents of its technical language without taking into account the Easter event will have missed the point. The Church's endeavour to give terminological expression to its beliefs about the person of Jesus of Nazareth was motivated not by the terminology itself, but by its prior and more fundamental encounter with the risen Christ. To identify the forest where the wood was obtained is of little help, really, in determining why the house was built! Both the meaning of an appropriated element and the reason for its appropriation, then, are to be determined on the basis of its new contextual setting. The function and meaning of the element in its original setting is of secondary importance in the process of interpretation.

Once these limitations are recognized, however, the subsidiary explanatory potential of parallels-study is not to be minimized. Parallels,

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[23] Cf. D. R. G. Owen, *Body and Soul* (Philadelphia, 1956), 50-56.
[24] (Oxford, 1961), esp. 107-160.

both stronger and weaker, are important for the illumination and insight that they can provide in the study of specific aspects of the NT. The study of such parallels can lead to a firmer grasp of the 'semantic range' of a given religious symbol; it can open up new interpretative possibilities that had hitherto not suggested themselves; it can suggest the presence of deeper structural links between elements that might, on the surface of it, appear unrelated. Where such parallels are of the stronger type, the presence of direct influence lends greater precision to such insights.

Further, parallels-study can serve the broader function of identifying the milieu within which a given religious movement or piece of literature should be seen. In this process weaker parallels are as important as stronger ones. The study of John's Gospel provides a relevant example. Before the discovery of the Qumran scrolls, it was assumed by many that the Fourth Gospel could not possibly represent Palestinian Jesus-tradition because of the prevalence of dualistic categories (light/darkness, below/above, etc.) in the Johannine material. Such dualism, it was assumed, was Hellenistic and could not have arisen on Palestinian soil.

204   But with the discovery of a very similar form of dualism (moral-eschato-logical, not cosmic-ontological) in the Qumran writings, the possibility of a Palestinian milieu for some of the Johannine material could no longer be ruled out in an *a priori* fashion. In fact, the Qumran parallel provided the stimulus for a 'new look' on the Fourth Gospel, in which many of its features have been thrown into new perspective.[25] Now this new perspective does not depend on the presence of a direct link between Qumran and John. All that the Qumran parallel does is demonstrate the possibility that Johannine thinking could have developed in a Palestinian milieu. This demonstration has been one of the more striking accomplishments of the application of parallels-study to the investigation of the NT.

III. EXAMPLE: THE ORIGIN OF THE APOSTOLATE

In order to illustrate these methodological considerations at more length, we might examine two widely-divergent approaches to the question of the origin of the NT ἀπόστολος concept — *viz*. Schmithals' suggestion of a Gnostic origin,[26] and Rengstorf's attempt to ground the apostolate in the Jewish *šālîaḥ* institution.[27] The issues are complex and we will attempt

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25 See, e.g., R. E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (Anchor Bible; Garden City, N.Y., 1966), I, lii-lxvi, along with the literature cited there.

26 W. Schmithals, *The Office of Apostle in the Early Church*, trans. John E. Steely (Nashville — New York, 1969).

27 K. H. Rengstorf, "Ἀπόστολος', *TDNT*, I, 407-445.

neither to examine the Biblical data in any detail nor to come to conclusions on the early history of the apostolate. Our intention is more modest: to examine from a methodological perspective the use made of parallels in these two reconstructions. We look first at their attempts to establish a genealogical parallel.

In Schmithals' reconstruction, the origin of the apostolate is to be sought not in the ministry of Jesus, nor in Jerusalem-centred Jewish Christianity, but in the pre-Pauline Hellenistic Christianity of Syria, where the institution developed under the influence of a Gnostic model. He argues for the existence in the first century of a well-defined Gnostic apostle-figure

> who not only actually represents the precise counterpart of the primitive Christian apostle, and who not only (like the Christian apostle) is native to the Syrian setting, but who indeed employed the title 'apostle' as a self-designation with great emphasis (p.115).

As this quotation suggests, Schmithals built his case on the basis of formal, geographical, terminological and chronological considerations. 205 With respect to form, he argued that, in addition to a heavenly redeemer, Gnosticism also knew of an earthly emissary, a 'redeemed redeemer', 'one who receives the Gnosis with the commission to pass it on to other men' (p.148). He presented evidence to show that, like the NT apostolate, these people were missionaries, were appointed for a lifetime, and were eschatological figures in that they moved toward the goal of awakening all true Pneumatics into a body that would not be complete until all were redeemed.

Geographically, he argued that in our earliest sources, the Pauline corpus, the original apostles were all Hellenistic Jewish Christians, and were all missionaries whose base of operations was not Jerusalem, but was to be found, rather, 'in and around Antioch, the actual missionary centre of primitive Christianity' (p.92). He suggested that this region of Syria was also the area where Gnosticism in general and Gnostic apostles in particular were active.

Now the possibility that Antioch-centred Christianity came into contact with a Syrian form of Gnosticism need not be questioned here. But in view of Gal. 1:17-19, Schmithals' insistence that the term ἀπόστολος originated in Antioch and was only later appropriated by Jerusalem-centred Christianity is questionable. The casual way in which Paul speaks of Jerusalem as the place where οἱ πρὸ ἐμοῦ ἀπόστολοι were to be found clearly indicates that apostles, in whose number Peter was to be counted (cf. vv. 18f), were known in Jerusalem at this early date. His

argument to the contrary, that Gal. 1:17-19 is an isolated instance,[28] has to be seen as a form of special pleading.

The real breakdown in Schmithals' argument, however, occurs at the terminological and chronological levels. The terminological basis of his argument boils down to a handful of patristic texts in which heretics are denounced as 'false apostles' or are compared in unfavourable terms to true apostles.[29] Examination of these passages reveals little evidence that Gnostic emissaries 'employed the title "apostle" as a self-designation with great emphasis' (cf. p.115). As often as not, the term is used of 'heretics' in general rather than of Gnostics in particular.[30] Further, when Hegesippus describes a collection of heretics as 'false Christs, false prophets, false apostles' (*Hist. Eccl.* IV.xxii.5), when Dionysius describes heretics as 'apostles of the devil' (*ibid.* IV.xxiii.12), or when Origen says of Heracleon that 'he is asking us, in fact, to trust him as we do the prophets or the apostles' (*Joh.* ii.8), they appear to be doing nothing more than using Christian categories to denounce their opponents. One could just as easily use such references to argue for a Gnostic origin for 'prophet' or even 'Christ'! Now it is true that less ambiguous evidence for heterodox use of 'apostle' can be found in Eusebius' statement that Cerinthus claimed to be following the writings of 'a great apostle' (*Hist. Eccl.* III.xxviii.2), and it may be that Tertullian's challenge to heretics to 'prove themselves to be new apostles' (*De praesc.* 30), or 'Peter's' admonition to 'shun apostle or teacher or prophet who does not first accurately compare his teaching with that of James' (Ps.-Clem. *Hom.* xi.35) point in the same direction. Nevertheless, since these were *heterodox Christian* groups, it would seem more natural to conclude that the direction of influence moved in the opposite direction to that which Schmithals suggests. Even if one grants the possibility of using these later Christian sources to throw light on pre-Christian Gnosticism, the absence

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28 'Gal. 1 is nevertheless the only passage in which Paul presupposes apostles in Jerusalem or gives the title of apostle to Christians resident in Jerusalem — Peter and James — while elsewhere he plainly distinguishes Peter and James, as he does the twelve, from the apostles (1 Cor. 9:5, 15:1ff.). If the title of apostle had been established in Jerusalem early or even originally, Paul could not have wavered, as he does, in the use of the title for Peter and James. Also the fact that the *certainly* proved apostles are without exception Hellenistic Jewish Christians argues decisively against an early apostolate established in Jerusalem.' *The Office of Apostle*, 86f.

29 Tertullian *De praesc.* 30; Origen *Joh.* ii.8; Eusebius *Hist. Eccl.* III. xxviii.2, IV.xxii.5, IV.xxiii.12; Ps-Clem. *Hom.* xi.35; *Apost. Const.* vi.8; *Ep. Ap.* 1.

30 Origen speaks of Heracleon, an associate of Valentinus; Eusebius *Hist. Eccl.* III. xxviii.2 refers to Cerinthus; Ps.-Clem. *Hom.* xi.35 is addressed to Simon; *Ep. Ap.* 1 refers to Simon and Cerinthus. The other references concern more generalized lists of heterodox groups.

of any independent evidence for the use of ἀπόστολος in non-Christian Gnosticism outweighs whatever there is of value in Schmithals' argument on the basis of form.[31] Without such evidence, his study of the NT apostolate, insightful as it may be in other regards, must be seen as an example of the misuse of parallels.

Rengstorf's reconstruction, however, rests on a more solid foundation. He argues that the Jewish institution of the šālîaḥ, in which a person authorized another to act on his behalf in a specific matter, served as a model for Jesus when he commissioned the twelve disciples, first in a temporary way during his lifetime (Mk. 6:30 par.), and then after the resurrection in a full commissioning as missionaries. According to Rengstorf, Jesus very probably used the Aramaic šelîḥa' in this respect, which was later translated in the Antioch Church by the rare Greek term ἀπόστολος. He concluded that the šālîaḥ institution is 'the closest parallel to the NT ἀπόστολος' (p.414).

In order to show the existence of a stronger genealogical parallel, Rengstorf attempted to exhibit a linguistic relationship between ἀπόστολος and šālîaḥ, to show a similarity in form between the two concepts and to demonstrate that the šālîaḥ institution was in existence in NT times. With respect to the term itself, he pointed out that, as far as our sources indicate, ἀπόστολος is known but is not common in both secular Greek and Hellenistic Judaism. Because of this, he felt justified in looking for a Hebrew/Aramaic parallel. He attempted to show a connection between ἀπόστολος and šālîaḥ by pointing out that the related verbs ἀποστέλλω and šālaḥ are closely related in the LXX;[32] that in one LXX instance (1 Ki. 14:6) ἀπόστολος is used to render šālûaḥ, the passive participle of šālaḥ which also serves in its plural form šelûḥîm as the plural of šālîaḥ; and finally that Christian writers later use ἀπόστολος to refer to the šālîaḥ institution.[33] He was thus able to advance solid linguistic and terminological evidence for a link between the two concepts.

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He also argued for a formal similarity between the two concepts. He conceded that there were differences. In the Jewish institution the appointment of the agent was always a temporary thing; when the job was completed the commissioning was over. There is simply no Jewish parallel

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[31] This lack is by no means remedied by appeal to the 'super-apostles' of 2 Cor. 10-13; cf. 173-179.

[32] While ἀποστέλλω can on occasion render other Hebrew verbs, in the great majority of its occurrences it is used to translate forms of šālaḥ.

[33] E.g. Jerome compared the 'slias' (Latin form of šālîaḥ.) to the Christian apostle (*Ad. Gal.* i.1). Rengstorf noted also that in the Syrian Church an apostle was known as šelîḥa' (414).

to the lifelong calling of the NT apostle. Further, the task of the šālîaḥ was not necessarily a religious one; in particular, the term was never used in Judaism to refer to missionaries, proselytizers or prophets. Nevertheless, Rengstorf argued that at the most fundamental level the two concepts were grounded on the idea of delegated authority. The centrality of this notion to the šālîaḥ institution is summed up in the oft-repeated dictum: 'A man's šālîaḥ is as the man himself'.[34] According to Rabbinic sources, a man could appoint a šālîaḥ to enter into an engagement of marriage for him (Ḳid. 2.1, 43a), to serve a divorce notice for him (Giṭ. 3.6, 4.1, 21a-23b), to perform ceremonial rituals (e.g. the heave offering: Ter. 4.4), to deal with economic matters (B.K. 102a-b), and so on. The authority of the sender is so tied up with the role of the šālîaḥ that as long as the latter did not exceed the bounds of his commission, if his task led him to perform a sacrilege, it is the sender who is responsible (Me'il. 6.1f; Keth. 98b). With respect to the NT, Rengstorf pointed in particular to the emphasis on ἐξουσία in the accounts of the commissioning of the Twelve (Mk. 6:7; Mt. 10:1; Lk. 9:1), and concluded:

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> This shows us that we have here an authoritative sending in the sense of full delegation. From the way in which their mission is described, the men thus sent out are to be described as šelûḥîm in the legal sense of the term (p.425).

In order to demonstrate that the šālîaḥ institution was in existence in NT times, Rengstorf had to depend largely on Rabbinic sources, since no earlier references to the institution are extant. Nevertheless, within the limitations of an argument based on internal considerations alone, he was able to make an impressive case for a first-century šālîaḥ institution. One's judgement of the strength of his case will vary directly with the assessment made of the validity of such a methodology to recover earlier strata of Rabbinic tradition.

In the first place, Rengstorf dealt with the possibility that the institution arose in response to post-AD 70 circumstances. It is true that the messengers who were sent out by the Patriarchate to the Diaspora after AD 70 were called šelûḥîm.[35] But since in most instances, šālîaḥ refers to a more generalized legal function, he concluded that there is no *a priori* reason for denying a pre-war šālîaḥ institution. In addition, he pointed to the fact that there are many Tannaitic references to šelûḥîm.[36] It would be difficult to account for the sheer number of these references if the institution were a post-AD 70 innovation. Moreover, some of these refer-

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[34] E.g. Ber. 5.5; Ned. 72b; Naz. 12b; Ḳid. 43a; B.K. 113b; B.M. 96a.

[35] E.g. Dt. R. 4.8.

[36] E.g. Ber. 5.5; Ter. 4.4; Yom. 1.5; Suk. 26a; R.H. 4.9; Keth. 4.5, 33b; Giṭ. 3.6, 4.1; Ḳid. 2.1, 4.9, 43a; B.K. 9.5; B.M. 8.3, 96a; Men. 9.8; Me'il 6.1f.

ences are assigned to Rabbinic figures who were contemporaries of Jesus and Paul. Gamaliel I pronounces on one aspect of the *šālîaḥ* function in R.H. 4.9, and in Kid. 43ᵃ the schools of Hillel and Shammai dispute another aspect. Admittedly, this latter reference does not tie *šālîaḥ* to the time of Hillel and Shammai. Nevertheless, since the dispute between Beth Hillel and Beth Shammai was essentially settled (in favour of Hillel) at the Council of Jamnia, it is likely that this reference provides evidence for a first-century *šālîaḥ* institution.

Thus Rengstorf is able to advance solid terminological, formal and chronological arguments for the direct influence of the Jewish *šālîaḥ* institution on the formation of the NT apostolate. This is not to say that he is necessarily correct. But his attempt to establish a true genealogical parallel rests on a more sober and controlled history-of-religions method-ology than is the case with Schmithals' work.

As far as the significance of the parallel is concerned, both Schmithals and Rengstorf recognize that the significance and function of the aposto-late in the NT cannot be fully understood and accounted for on the basis of the respective parallels that they propose. Both make some attempt to take the new Christian context into account.

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Schmithals for his part recognizes differences between the Pauline and Gnostic concepts of apostle,[37] concluding that Paul and the early Church were not able to take over the institution intact.[38]

Perhaps because he was more controlled by his sources, Rengstorf has to concede even more striking formal differences between the *šālîaḥ* institution and the NT apostolate. As noted above, neither the perman-ence nor the missionary aspect of the NT apostolate find any parallel in Jewish tradition. Rengstorf recognized that the missionary element in particular 'radically distinguishes the NT apostolate from the Jewish *šālîaḥ* institution' (p.432). And he found it necessary to look to prophetic parallels to explain Paul's understanding of his own apostolic role (pp.439-441).

His work thus serves as a reminder of the limitations inherent in the use of parallels. Not every feature of the primary religious element was taken over, and those that were appropriated were adapted, re-defined and supplemented, resulting in a new and distinct entity. In order to fully

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[37] See *The Office of Apostle*, 198ff, esp. §3, §6 and §17.

[38] 'The original conception of the apostle is Gnostic. The various gaps and discontinuities of the ecclesiastical concept of the apostle, which become apparent especially in the dispute of Paul with the Gnostic apostles, are explained as a necessary consequence of the transplanting of the office, which was first conceived for the essential mythological thought of Gnosticism, into the world, conditioned by historical thought, of Jewish-Hellenistic, characteristically Pauline, Christianity.' *Ibid.*, 229; cf. also 56.

account for the origin of the NT apostolate and to understand its particular features, we need to see it in the context of the early Church. Comparative study is helpful, but it takes us only part way.