

How and Why Does Paul Defend His Status as an Apostle to Jesus in His Letter to the Galatians?

Assessment 2

(Essay)

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To examine how and why Paul defended his status to the Galatians, we will look at who Paul was before he became an Apostle, what his place was within his community, including his values and religious beliefs, and describe the events that took place which reformed his religious beliefs and led him to follow Jesus' teachings. We will look at some significant events throughout his Apostleship, and the struggles he faced whilst on missionary journeys. We will then look at the actions he took to defend his status, the type of communication he conveyed, and why he felt the need to do so. Throughout the examination, we will review works of authors on the subject and refer to Biblical text in line with the topic.

The Apostle Paul was originally a Pharisee with a dual name Saul, who came from Tarsus in Turkey. The name Saul was his given Hebrew name, whereas the name Paul (or Paulus) was his Latin name given as he was as Roman citizen due to his residence in a Roman ruled nation. He followed the laws and practices of Judaism devoutly, which led him ultimately to the persecution of Jesus' followers and assisted in putting many to death. One notable killing he participated in was that of Stephen, who was a leader of Jesus' followers.¹

Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he died. And Saul approved of their killing him.²

He saw their belief in Jesus as blasphemy and travelled around gathering Jesus' believers to take them to be stoned.³ As a Pharisee, Paul could only accept his place as part of the family of Abraham, who's devotion was to the one true God. Jesus' teachings did not follow the Jewish tradition in this respect. Paul's dramatic conversion to Christianity occurred whilst travelling to areas to expose Jesus' followers.⁴

Whilst travelling to Damascus on his quest to uncover more of Jesus' followers, he encountered what would be the beginning of a newfound faith, and reformation of his current practices and principles. As he travelled, a light began to emerge from the sky, which was so bright that it damaged his vision. The light he saw was a vision of Jesus, who revealed himself to Paul when Paul asked who he was. The story of this encounter is described in Acts 9: 3-6,

Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul,

¹ Catrin, H. Williams, Professor, 'Introduction to the New Testament', *Module Webinar*, [video], 2024, <<https://uowtsd-my.sharepoint.com>> [accessed 19 January 2025].

² Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Acts 7: 58; 8: 1, (Hendrickson Publishers: 2004).

³ Ibid. Acts 26:10

⁴ Jerome, Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul: A Critical Life*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

Saul, why do you persecute me?” He asked, “Who are you, Lord?” The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.”⁵

This experience markedly impacts Paul and is a well-known story within the Bible about Paul. Andrew Torrance writes about how this is not merely a portrayal of Paul’s conversion, but more importantly an example of the Trinity which is God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit, and its power to instil the message.⁶ When the encounter was over, Paul opened his eyes but could no longer see. His companions, who were left speechless due to the encounter, assisted Paul to the city. After reaching the city, Paul remained without sight for three days and he was also unable to eat or drink following his experience. As Paul was in the city the Lord commanded the disciple Ananias to go to him. Ananias said to the Lord that he knew of Paul and that he was a persecutor of those following Jesus’ teachings. The Lord then told Ananias that he had chosen Paul to declare the name of the Lord to the people of Israel. Acts 9:17-19 describes Ananias’ visit with Paul,

So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul, and said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

Brittany Wilson describes how this may be viewed as God’s way of imposing the need for Paul to be dependent on others with both the assistance he needed to complete his journey to Damascus, and having his sight restored by Ananias, and ultimately his dependence on God.⁷

Paul then spent time in Damascus, preaching the word of God to the Jews at the synagogues. Many of the Jews did not take kindly to his preaching and conspired to kill him. Assisted by his followers, Paul safely made his way out of the city and travelled to Jerusalem. At Jerusalem, Paul tried to join with the disciples, but they were reluctant to believe that he was genuine and would not accept him. It wasn’t until Barnabas explained how Paul had been visited by the Lord, and that he had been preaching in his name that he was accepted.⁸ Paul then continued to preach to the Jews, but as in Damascus, his life was threatened, and so he journeyed to Tarsus with the assistance of the believers.⁹

⁵ Ibid. Acts 9: 3-6.

⁶ Andrew, B. Torrance, ‘The Story That Turned Paul’s Life Around’, *Accountability to God*, (Oxford, 2023; online edn, Oxford Academic, 20 Apr. 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/> <[accessed 21 January 2025]>.

⁷ Brittany E. Wilson, ‘The Blinding of Paul and the Power of God: Masculinity, Sight, and Self-Control in Acts 9’, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 133 (2014), 367-368 (p. 373). <DOI:10.1353/jbl.2014.0022.>.

⁸ C.W. Stenschke, ‘When the second man takes the lead: reflections on Joseph Barnabas and Paul of Tarsus and their relationship in the New Testament’, *Potchefstroom, South Africa*, Vol. 75 (2010), 503-525. <<https://doi.org/10.4102/koers.v75i3.94>>.

⁹ Ibid. p.506.

Paul's teachings led to him continually having to defend both his faith and his past. His defensive stance was not directed only to non-believers, but also to those of faith who had known of his past as a Pharisee. Anders Runesson writes that, 'There are no signs in Paul's letters that his addressees understood themselves as practicing anything else than a (Christ-oriented) form of Judaism...'.¹⁰ If this was the case, it would add extra cause for concern to the followers, as it may instil doubt. Paul travelled to many places to spread Jesus' teachings, but he faced a lot of resistance along the way. A notable defence of his faith as explained in Acts, was when he spoke with Agrippa at Caesarea to put his case forward. Paul's words were strong, and as relayed in Acts, Agrippa told Paul that his words had almost persuaded him to become a Christian. Paul's letter to the Galatians is another example of how he attempted to defend himself and his faith. Written to churches in the Galatia area where Paul had undertaken missionary work, Paul's letters were an attempt to redefine what the people in the churches had been told by the Jewish Christians.¹¹

As Christianity first started primarily amongst the Jews - who followed the practices outline in the Torah – these Jewish Christians had informed the people in Galatia that practices such as circumcision, recognising the sabbath, and following a Kosher diet must still be adhered to. Initially, Paul writes to them re-asserting the gospel message about Jesus' crucifixion, and the power of the Holy Spirit. He then reminds them of Abraham, who was declared righteous, simply by having faith in God and God's son. He explains to them that adherence to the Torah is misunderstood, as God only intended the Torah to be temporary until sin was eliminated through the Messiah. Now that Jesus had taken on the sins of the people, they were free to follow the positive teachings in the Torah. G Pelser states '...Paul was seriously concerned with the question as to how the non-Jewish Christians could become members of the people of God and heirs of God's promises without the obligation of also adopting the Jewish way of life'.¹²

As described by Gert Malan, Paul's way of communication with the Galatians resembled that of a legal proceeding, but that it was also reminiscent of writings from the Old Testament, having an air of prophecy.¹³ Why Paul used this style of communication is unclear, although it was important to him to maintain his apostolic status, especially as this had been put into question due to his teachings not being completely in line with the teachings delivered from Jerusalem. The leaders in Jerusalem such as James and Peter were still adhering to many practices from within the Torah, whereas Paul's teachings were based upon Jesus' death and resurrection, and the new world of love and understanding that people could now experience because of Jesus' sacrifice. This is mentioned by N H Taylor, when he describes the Temples

¹⁰ Anders Runesson, Judaism for Gentiles, Reading Paul beyond the Parting of the Ways paradigm, *Studies in Christian-Jewish relations*, Vol. 19 (1), (2024), 1-391, p. 49. <DOI:10.6017/scjr.v19i1.17603>.

¹¹ Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Acts 26: 1-25, (Hendrickson Publishers: 2004).

¹² G, M.M. Pelser, 'The Opposition Faith and Works as Persuasive Device in Galatians', *Neotestamentica*, Vol.26 (2), (1992), <<https://research-ebSCO-com.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk>> [accessed 20 January 2025].

¹³ Gert Malan, 'Calling and conscience: Paul as an example', *Verbum et Ecclesia*, Vol.45 (1), (2024), 1-6, <DOI:10.4102/ve.v45i1.3150>.

at Jerusalem as ‘conforming to the Temple-oriented Judaism of its day.’¹⁴ Taylor also describes how John the Baptist, like Paul, had alternative practises outside of the Temples at Jerusalem. Paul wished to maintain his status so that people would afford him an audience. He wanted Jesus’ teachings to reach everyone, regardless of their differences and current understanding, and wished to promote salvation to all.

Paul’s missionary journeys were extensive and led him to many places which had varying belief systems. After leaving Jerusalem and returning to Tarsus, he then set out on many missions. He travelled with Barnabas to Cyprus and preached in several synagogues before journeying back to modern day Turkey. They made their way to Anatolia, and then on to Antioch for a time, where Paul successfully shared his beliefs before some of the people turned on him. Moving on to Konya they were forced to leave and went to Lystra where Paul healed a sick man, prompting the pagan community there to believe he was indeed sent by God. Travellers from Konya came there and persuaded some of the people to join with them in an attempt to stone Paul, forcing him to leave there also. They continued to travel, visiting Derbe, back to Lystra and Konya, and eventually back to Antioch.

Paul then took a second missionary journey with Silas and Timothy, revisiting many of the places he had travelled to with Barnabas. After having a vision, Paul then set out to Greece, where they encountered a hostile group who tried to have them arrested. They escaped arrest due to an earthquake in the area, allowing them to allude capture. They arrived at Thessaloniki but were forced to leave again. They moved on to a couple of cities where they were again forced to leave until they reached Athens where Paul gave a speech at the Acropolis. After travelling from there to Corinth, they sailed to Ephesus in Turkey and reached Antioch after first visiting Caesarea.

After visiting Galatia, in modern day Ankora at the start of his third journey, Paul then made his way to Ephesus again. His time at Ephesus was very successful, converting many locals and baptising twelve disciples. After some time back in Corinth, he returned again to Ephesus but was forced to return to Antioch. He then travelled to the Greek islands of Lesbos and Samos before returning to Turkey. Paul then decided to travel to Jerusalem after visiting Kos and Rhodes. It was at Jerusalem that he was arrested and put in jail to face torture and eventual death at the order of the Roman Emperor Nero.^{15 16 17 18 19 20}

¹⁴ N H Taylor, ‘Jerusalem and the Temple in early Christian life and teaching’, *Neotestamentica*, Vol. 33 (2), (1999), 445-461, p.45, <<http://research-ebSCO-com.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk>> [accessed 24 January 2025].

¹⁵ Jerome, Murphy-O’Connor, *Paul: A Critical Life*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

¹⁶ Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Acts 9:1-31, (Hendrickson Publishers: 2004).

¹⁷ Ibid. Acts 13:1-14:28.

¹⁸ Ibid. Acts 15:36-18:22.

¹⁹ Ibid. Acts 18:23-21:16.

²⁰ Ibid. Acts 21:17-28:31

We have seen that Paul originally followed the Jewish religion so devoutly that it led to his involvement in the persecution of Jesus' followers. The event on the road to Damascus appears to have been the intervention by the Holy Spirit which impacted Paul to such a degree that he turned his religious faith around completely to follow in the path of Jesus. We see the contrast between his former life and his newfound faith which led him on many missionary journeys. His struggles along the way have been apparent, and we see how he faced criticism and hostility and the threat of death in an endeavour to share his beliefs. The reasons for his letters to the Galatians have been explored in detail which provided an explanation for his defence.

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