

Paul and his Religious Heritage in Judaism

Key Passages:

Galatians 1:13-16

I Corinthians 9:1 and 15:8

2 Corinthians 11:22; 12:1-5

Romans 11:1

Philippians 3:4-6

Acts 22:6-11

Paul frequently emphasised his very devout upbringing in Judaism. In religious terms and from a Jewish perspective, he excelled. He was a member of the tribe of Benjamin (Rom. 11:1), a member of his people Israel before and after his call. Even as a young man, he had advanced in his ancestral tradition beyond his peers, being exceedingly passionate for its traditions (Gal. 1:14).

But the Judaism of Paul's time was very diverse, having several major and other minor strands. Paul did not belong to the priestly Sadducean party who were very conservative in outlook and cooperated to some extent with their Roman overlords in governing the country. This party regarded only the first five books of Moses as their scriptures and were not willing to accept new religious developments in the same way as Paul's group, the Pharisees. Unlike the Sadducees, this group was a lay movement, dedicated to being the true and pure people of God. In order to achieve this, they had developed oral traditions which elaborated the meaning of the Torah very precisely in order to enable people to keep it and to avoid transgressions. Also, unlike the Sadducees, the Pharisees believed in resurrection. To some extent, this belief in an afterlife made the Pharisees less militant because they held that God would eventually vindicate the righteous. It is not likely, therefore, that Paul's religious zeal should be equated with the intolerance and fanatical aggression of the party known as the Zealots which was to emerge after Paul's death in the conflict with the Romans in the Jewish-Roman war of 66-70 CE.

Paul, it seems, was not conscious of any deficiencies in his religious practice until he had a vision of Christ which changed his understanding of God's purpose for both the Jewish people and the Gentiles. His religious practice of the Torah was, in his own opinion, blameless (Phil. 3:6). It is somewhat surprising and also difficult to understand that such a devout person should suddenly be able to embrace a new religion. But this is by no means an accurate picture. The Christ movement was not yet separate from Judaism, nor would it become completely separate from it for many years, even centuries in some regions. At this time in history, the Christ movement was one of the many religious movements within Judaism. It would be better to say that there were many 'Judaisms' or forms of Judaism and the (Christian) Way just one of them.

So even when Paul began his mission to the Gentiles, he did not see himself as starting a new religion. He saw these new developments as consistent with and as a confirmation of the true meaning of his ancestral faith.

But if this is so, then how did Paul interpret the meaning of his vision of Christ? What needs to be made clear at this point is that Paul interprets his experience as somewhat akin to that of the great prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah or Ezekiel. When they were called by God, according to the scriptures they experienced a vision, sometimes seeing God in an exalted state, seeing a bright light and hearing a voice. Usually, like Paul, they fell down and felt completely overwhelmed. But they were also reassured by God that he would empower them to do the task to which they had been called. Like Jeremiah, Paul is called to be God's messenger to the nations (Jer. 1:5-10). It is important not to forget these parallels with the great prophets when we consider Paul's Damascus experience.

However, Christian tradition has tended to see Paul as the first great Christian theologian and to interpret his experience as a conversion out of one religion into another. Historically, this view has had the effect of separating Paul from his religious roots and of making him unintelligible in terms of historical development.

The closest parallel with Paul's experience is probably that of the prophet Ezekiel. Ezekiel, like Paul, believed in God's intervention in history to restore and deliver the people of Israel. Such an outlook on history is termed apocalyptic, emphasizing God's revelation or appearance. Like Ezekiel, Paul experienced a mystical vision of God on more than one occasion (2 Cor. 12:1-5). It would appear therefore that we can link Paul with an apocalyptic-mystical strand of Judaism going back to the time of the exile when Ezekiel was active as a prophet. There was in this tradition the belief that God would intervene in history to redeem and vindicate the faithful in Israel.

It was in this tradition that Paul had been brought up and it was within the framework of its worldview that Paul would interpret the experience of Christ at Damascus. We need to recognize that a framework is necessary by means of which people can make sense of their experiences in life. If they do not have this, then they have no means of understanding the relative significance of experiences. If one has no knowledge of spirits and yet sees a ghost, one would have no idea what it was or how to describe it. Paul, however, grew up in the very religious atmosphere of a particular strand of Judaism and this gave him the religious background for understanding and interpreting what happened to him in his Damascus vision.

This tradition held that the very righteous would be vindicated in the Day of the Lord, and some outstanding figures might even be elevated to sit at God's right hand. Jesus, however, had been crucified as a rebel by the Romans, probably with some collusion by some of the Jewish leaders, the High Priest and his associates, and would not therefore have been seen as a likely candidate for exaltation by God, especially in the opinion of Saul of Tarsus who was engaged in seeking to destroy his followers and their movement. It must have been an enormous shock for Paul that in his vision he was confronted by none other than a vindicated Jesus exalted at the right hand of 'the Most High'. Thus Paul had to drastically revise his estimate of Jesus and to recognize that he had been wrongly persecuting the believers out of a mistaken zeal.

What is important to note, however, is that it was his Jewish religion and spirituality that enabled Paul first to have a vision of Christ and then to be able to interpret its true significance. The vision was something both radically new but also something in continuity to Paul's previous life in Judaism.

Paul describes it in his own words as a revelation – 'it pleased God to reveal his Son in me that I might preach him among the Gentiles' (Gal. 1:15-16). Acts paints a more vivid picture, probably in analogy to the great prophets, claiming that Paul saw a bright light which temporarily blinded him (Acts 22:6-11). Paul says elsewhere that it was the risen Lord that he saw (I Cor. 9:1) and also that he, like the other apostles, had experienced a resurrection appearance of Jesus (I Cor. 15:8). What is important to note is that Paul associates his commission as apostle to the Gentiles as having originated in and with his vision of Christ (Gal. 1:16).