

The Pharisee Paul said what? Paul's pharisaic background & his relationship to 'the Jews' of Romans

Paul a diaspora Jew, was born at the beginning of the common era, the child of Jewish parents, from the Greek speaking Cicilian town of Tarsus. He was brought up in a Hellenistic environment and, it follows from the text and style of his letters, that he learned both Hebrew and Greek and learned to write in Hellenistic literary styles. A further indication of Paul's origins, is that he uses the Septuagint in his quotations from scripture. From his comments on manual labour (1 Corinthians 9:19 and 2 Corinthians 11:7, Paul regards himself as well educated, an education which put him above manual labour, but gave him freedom to serve (or to be "enslaved").

Paul's background as a "zealous" Jew is established in his letters to the Galatians (1:14) and to the Philippians (3:4b-6). In Philippians 3:5-6, Paul says that he is not only "a Hebrew born of Hebrews" but also "as to the law, a Pharisee". From Paul's description of himself, the things that mattered to him, and the corroboration from Acts, it is reasonable to describe Paul as, at the least, having been a Pharisee.

Two common themes stand out as being duplicated in both Paul and in the later rabbinic practice.

The first is that Paul supported himself¹. Paul was a maker of tents, or a leather worker and Paul's trade of tentmaking can be equated too the (later) rabbinic custom of "combining the study of the Torah with the practice of a trade" (1 Thessalonians 2:9, 1 Corinthians 4:12).

A second common theme is that of scriptural interpretation, which might be a precursor of midrash, and this will be discussed with reference to Paul's letters to the Galatians and to the Romans.

Paul's practice² is one of many Judaisms practised at the beginning of the common era. We see other parallel examples in the Jesus family and Philo of Alexandria. All the varieties of Judaism understood themselves as Israel, but only the Pharisaic form of Judaism survived the catastrophe of the Jewish-Roman wars..

The relationship between pharisaic Judaism and the later rabbinic Judaism is not clear. Although it seems likely that forms of the precursors of rabbinic practices can be found in pre first Jewish-Roman war (66-73CE) Pharisaic rituals, it is not clear how the

¹ . Hock (1980 p11)

² Neusner (2002 p9)

dislocation to Judaism brought about by the destruction of the temple, affected Pharisees practices and rituals and/or contributed to the rabbinic forms. After the fall of Jerusalem³, “the Pharisees were forced to deal with a much wider range of problems...” than “the dietary laws; ritual purity for meals and agricultural rules governing the fitness of food for Pharisaic consumption” which by the number and predominance of laws dealing with these matters, had previously been their preoccupation.

There is a “chain of logic”⁴ which establishes that the “Masters of rabbinic Judaism stand in the chain of tradition from Sinai”, a chain which includes the Pharisees but, while Paul may have once been a Pharisee, it is not clear that at the time of his missionary journeys he continued to press that claim, and further Neusner (1973 p1) sums up the position of Pharisaic-rabbinic traditions with the following statement

“... rabbinic traditions about the Pharisees are cited as
though we know how they were shaped and handed
on, to what degree they may be relied upon for
accurate historical information, where and when
they were given the form in which we now have
them. But we do not have that information.”

Because there is no conclusive evidence or material available of either pharisaic or rabbinic thought before 70CE, and because many variants of Judaism were practiced, it seems more helpful, when thinking of Paul’s particular form of Judaic practice, to employ a thin description which is best described as three main streams of belief. Torah, (oral and written) God, and Israel.

These three broad streams of definition form the basis of Paul’s revelations or ideas, in his letters ·

Definition of Paul’s writings

There are thirteen letters in the New Testament attributed to Paul. The first epistle to the Thessalonians, Galatians, Philippians, the first and second Corinthian epistles, Romans and Philemon are regarded as authentic. Deutero Pauline, letters, written by disciples of Paul, include the second epistle to the Thessalonians, Colossians and Ephesians.

One other book of the New Testament refers to Paul, describing his journeys and

³ Murphy-O’Connor (1996 p55)

⁴ Neusner (2002 p8)

missionary experiences. The historian Luke wrote Luke/Acts, between 80 and 90 CE, at least some thirty years after the first epistle of Paul. Paul's letters, written about three generations earlier, are the more reliable record of Paul's insights and experiences and the primary source of Pauline understanding, thought and aspiration.

A helpful example of the disparity between Luke/Acts description of an event and Paul's description can be found in the narrative of Paul's "conversion". Luke/Acts 9:1-21 describes Paul's "conversion" from "breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord"(v1) to "confounding the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Messiah" (v22). However, Paul describes his "conversion" in Galatians 1:13 –24 as moving from being "a Jew who was "advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors" (v14) to a plan of God "who set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace...so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles"(v 15,16).

The word "conversion" used in this connection is misleading, at the time it was written and in today's context it suggests that Saul converted from Judaism to Christianity. In the period in which Luke/Acts was written, this may have been the case, however, there is no evidence to suggest that at the time Paul wrote, that the church, was a separate religion from Judaism, to which one might convert.

A further inconsistency between Paul and Luke/Acts is Paul's education in the *schul* of Gamaliel. Luke/Acts 22:3 writes that Paul was educated by Gamaliel, (cf Acts 5:34ff) a Pharisee and head of the Sanhedrin. But it is hardly likely that a person of Paul's severity would have been educated in a school as liberal as that of Gamaliel⁵.

Within his writings, Paul understood a dual gospel. The *euvangelion* or good news for the Jews, who were required to keep the law and *euvangelion* or good news for the Gentiles who were "loosed" or exempt from the law .

Opinions vary as to the origin of those who formed the *ekklesia* that Paul wrote to; On the one hand⁶, "Paul's pagan or gentile mission focussed on "...those in-betweens known as God-fearers, God-worshippers or more simply sympathizers." Others⁷ believe the *ekklesia* contained people of Jewish origin. However, Paul's primary mission was to the Gentiles and to include those groups, who had varying status in the Synagogue, in the *ekklesia*.

⁵ Hock (1980 p22)

⁶ Crossan and Reed (2005 p38)

⁷ Byrne, (1996 p13) writing specifically of the house churches in Rome

Galatians and Romans as examples of Paul's writings, knowledge of scripture and precursor of midrash

With each letter he writes, Paul's theology and apocalyptic hope develops and matures. More importantly⁸ Paul's writing is hermeneutic. He is addressing problems and tensions within the church that he is writing to.

In his letter to the church at Galatia, Paul develops his teaching about the law and justification, in response to teachings by "teachers" who arrived in Galatia after Paul had left the area. The "teachers" taught that Jesus affirmed and confirmed Abrahamic and Mosaic law, rather than, as Paul taught, for Gentiles, belief in Jesus the messiah put an end to the need to keep the law, particularly the circumcision law. To refute the teachings, Paul relies on his knowledge and understanding of the Septuagint, interpreting scripture to fit his argument.

There are three actors in the Galatians scene. The dispute is between (1) Paul, the Jewish Pharisee, who has carefully nurtured the Gentile congregation at Galatia, consisting of God-fearers, God-worshippers and/or sympathizers, developing his understanding of a "law loosed church" with the congregation; and with the (2) Christian Jewish Teachers who have undermined Paul's mission and teaching, and in his absence taught a law observant understanding; to the (3) Galatian recipients of the letter.

The Teachers' sermon⁹ is based on Genesis 18:18,22:15-18, 28:2:4 is designed, with little need for the recipients of the sermon, to interpret the text. The aim is to convince the Galatians of the need to become law observant.

In the first chapter of his letter to the Galatians, in what is primarily an angry reply, Paul, after a very shortened greeting, speaks of his background, of the incompatibility of his persecution of the church with his Jewish traditions (v13), his revelation of God's Son (v15), his call to be a missionary to the Gentiles (v16), and his visits to Jerusalem. Paul writes that he changed from being a "zealous" Jew, trying to "destroy the church of God" (v13) to "one who might proclaim him (Jesus Christ) among the Gentiles" (v16). Paul moved from working to obliterate the church, in the form in which it existed at that time, to working to include Gentiles in the church.

In the second chapter Paul writes of the disagreement he had at Antioch with the other Christian leaders, about the change in the convention for Gentiles to keep the purity laws, which leads into a declaration on the difference between the law and the Gospel. Paul

⁸ Hays (1989 p11)

⁹ (re)constructed by Martyn (1985 p321)

states his basic principle of the difference between the law and the gospel, that Jew and Gentile alike are acceptable (before God) because of Christ Jesus death. (v15-21) In this passage, Paul speaks of his revelation of Christ's crucifixion as a form of death – in other words, Paul's world changed dramatically. The cosmos that formed the basis of his belief was shattered and he has had to reconstruct his world to take into account his belief that Gentiles are included in a relationship with God.

In chapter three, Paul focuses on the communities descent and inheritance from Abraham. In a passage that is clearly exegetical and equally, hermeneutic Paul manages to combine both study and interpretation of the Torah (vv 6-14). Paul reinterprets Deuteronomy¹⁰, using the Teachers' sermon as a basis (vv 10 –14), then moves to a new legal example, which builds on the Gentiles as legal heirs to Abraham (vv 15-18).

Paul writes that the gift of the covenant (and indeed, life) to the faithful Abraham (Genesis 22) is a gift in response to testing and faithfulness. Because of Abraham's faith, it is a gift promised to both Abraham and his offspring (v 18).

In the third chapter, Paul differentiates between the covenant which was received first and the law which was received "430 years later" (v17). The flexible covenant means that God will continue to test Israel. Paul then moves to a new legal example, which builds on the Gentiles as legal heirs to Abraham. In effect, God's promise is given at defined historical points to particular people (vv 15-18). (In other words, the same exclusive gift to Abraham is received again in Jesus Christ)..

In the final chapters, four and five, Paul refers once more to the Septuagint, to the allegory of Sarah and Hagar, showing that those who rely solely on the law will be excluded from God's inheritance.

Paul has insights or revelations, which are based on his wide and detailed knowledge of Torah; revelations which are applied to the situation in hand and are seemingly not fully understood and/or are not fully developed in his writings. Paul's revelations must have shocked his audiences for although they were (Jewish) apocalyptic in origin, they were anything but traditional, interpreting a past, (old aeon of sin, wrath and death) and a present of Christ's faith and hope, and a future (new aeon of God's invisible rule). The new age has been brought about by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

¹⁰ Martyn (1997 p309)

The Letter to the Romans

In the later letter to the church in Rome, reworking and expanding on his letter to the Galatians, Paul states that God chose ancient Israel, and that God continues to elect Israel. However, in Paul's thought, being Israel is not a matter of ethnic origin, but because God is a God of grace, it is a matter of being chosen by God to be God's people and thereby becoming Israel.

If we read Romans through the lens of Paul's orthodox Judaism, rather than as a foil to Jews then it becomes far more intelligible, and we can see that if in Paul's eyes, the mission to the Jews fails, then it is a cause of shame (1:16).¹¹ Using this idea of reading the Romans Letter through the lens of an observant Jew, our concern must switch to understanding the relationship between Paul and the Torah and Israel (rather than non Jewish Christians and Mosaic law). It follows then that Paul is concerned with 'the Gentile question'. In other words what is proper behavior in the context of the Jewish communities in Rome.

Paul addresses proper thinking that leads to proper behavior in the context of the gentiles in Rome. His message is both prophetic and specific. The Christian gentiles this letter is addressed to are thought to be part of the synagogue, 'righteous gentiles'. But within the synagogue community, they are developing into a subgroup and developing a disregard for Jewish behaviours and habits and falling under the spell of a 'law free Gospel'.

Paul may have originally understood that the Gospel was 'to the Jew first and also to the Greek', but his thinking in Romans has moved and he now believes the gospel is 'to the gentile first and also to the Jews', which, if you are heading a mission to the Gentiles would be an entirely pragmatic and understandable attitude.

Further, if the salvation of 'all Israel' is possible, it will only be possible as a result of some eschatological miracle, instead of through his (Paul's) preaching, that is if the gospel goes to the Jews at all. Romans shows that Paul is the Jews champion, he is on their side.

Paul believes that the covenant, first received by Abraham, and then through each succeeding generation by God's election, reveals that God invites both Gentile and Jew to be God's people in parallel streams. The particularity of Paul's revelation is that Gentiles are included in this election, superfluous of their keeping the law, a superfluity brought about by the imminence of the parousia. But the point of Paul's letter is the importance of behaving properly. (Indeed Paul's criticism of Peter in Galatians was not that he ate

¹¹ Nanos (1996 p14ff)

unclean meat, but that he changed his habits according to who he was eating with.)

Unlike Paul's other letters, his letter to the Romans was written to a community he did not know, in a place he had not visited and was his "self presentation to the believers in Rome"¹². However, he certainly knew of them, or had perhaps met them in other places. And he certainly was addressing difficulties that he perceived they were having.

By the time he came to write to the community in Rome, Paul's apocalyptic understandings were maturing. He was embarking on a new part of his journey, moving to the west from the east. Paul's experience with the Galatians and the teachers who came after him lay in the recent past. writes that Paul "addresses himself to Israel as a theological issue."¹³ At that time, Paul has two thoughts to convey. The first is that the Gentile Christians are becoming superior in their treatment of the Jewish Christians and the second is that Paul is beginning to sense that in the plan of God, the Jesus movement was developing into a gentile movement.

Paul's reflections on these matters in Romans, are contained in a commentary on passages from the Hebrew Bible which address the situation of the Gentiles in the light of the coming end times. At least some of the first four chapters are rhetoric – addressing a fictional Jewish teacher, perhaps with the experience of the "teachers" of Galatians in mind. This technique of censure and diatribe is typical of a philosophical education and is used in this case, because of Paul's lack of knowledge of the Romans community¹⁴.

Paul's inclusive Gospel to the Romans, has three main parts set out in the following way¹⁵:

Romans 1-8	Romans 9-11	Romans 12-15
Inclusion of Gentiles ("Rejection" of Israel)	Inclusion of <i>Israel</i>	Parenesis "Live 'inclusively'"

The first chapter and up to Chapter 2:16 is a description of the state of Gentiles. From there, in a piece of rhetoric, a fictional Jewish teacher urges the Gentiles to keep the law. Paul, referring to first century traditional Jewish thought, responds that God promised Abraham that he would be the father of many Gentiles and that this has been satisfied through belief in Jesus Christ. In the final question of the rhetorical dialogue, Paul uses

¹² Byrne (1996 p1)

¹³ Stendahl (2005 p2)

¹⁴ Murphy-O'Connor (1996 p334)

¹⁵ Byrne (1996 p283)

quotations from Isaiah 52:5; 45:14-25 and Ezekiel 36:23-26. (The Gentiles are led to repentance as a result of witnessing God's salvation of Israel.) Paul reverses the order of the Hebrew scripture stating that the Gentiles will cause Israel to repent and be saved, there is no connection between Israel's punishment and salvation.

From Chapters 5 to 8, Paul says that since Adam Gentiles were condemned to death. Through faith in Jesus Christ Gentiles have been justified.

Chapters 9–11 is the pinnacle of Paul's argument¹⁶. Paul presents himself as a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. He warns his Gentile audience against arrogance toward the Jews (and suggests that Israel's temporary disobedience is part of [God's] plan to save all Israel, an Israel which by faith, includes Gentiles. Perhaps Paul was beginning to realize , having finished his ministry in the East and moving to the West that the Jesus movement might eventuate as a gentile movement. However, in the meantime, Paul encourages co-existence between Jews and Gentiles.

Paul's genius of interpretation is his reversal of the expected order of salvation. He perceived that the order might be: Gentiles first, then Israel second (after a period of rejection).

Whilst Paul's writings are not traditionally referred to as midrash, midrash having started much later after Paul, there are some interpretations of the Hebrew Bible which would lead one to suggest that midrash was a natural development from these kinds of writings

Summary

Paul is an educated diaspora Jew, who is, or was at least, a Pharisee. The primary evidence of Paul is his letters. Some secondary evidence available are the deuterio Pauline letters and the book of Acts, written by the historian Luke, some thirty years after Paul. Luke/Acts, often varies from the genuine Pauline writings and is regarded as less reliable on the subject of Paul. Paul brings to his hermeneutical letters his knowledge of the Septuagint and his exceptionally subtle and precise exegesis.

Although there is no evidence to suggest a link between Paul's practices and the later rabbinic practices, two common themes emerge. The first is that of having a craft or trade which supports oneself in mission, thereby not relying on those around for support. Paul obliquely refers to this a number of times.

The second common theme is Paul's interpretation of scripture in an exegetical manner,

¹⁶ Stendahl (2005)

which may be understood as a precursor to midrash.

Conclusion

Apart from the time constraints, of Paul's writings (the last being the letter to the Romans dated at around 56CE), compared to the absolute earliest dating for the development of rabbinic Judaism, after the fall of the Temple 70CE, Paul's writings do not indicate that he was a rabbinic Jew.

Paul's letters however, may suggest some traces of precursors of rabbinic thought, ideas which would take the destruction of the centre of Judaism, the Temple, and three Roman Jewish wars to mature into a form that might be described as rabbinic Judaism.

A more appropriate way of understanding Paul is that his form of Judaism is one representative of forms of Judaism that existed in the first part of the first century in the common era, and is an apocalyptic form of Judaism practised before the Jewish-Roman wars and the destruction of the Temple, in what might well have been considered the end times.

Jenny Chalmers

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