

Life and Teachings of Paul

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Saul of Tarsus: the Old Man "in Adam"

It is a matter of record that Paul persecuted the earliest Christians. Why would he have done such a thing to these people? Scholars who have studied Paul have suggested several possibilities: (1) his legalism; i.e. his attitude toward the *Torah* [the Mosaic Law] and the desire to attain righteousness through law-keeping; (2) his hatred of Jesus of Nazareth who he believed to be a messianic pretender; (3) his dislike of the rise of another Jewish sect, especially a messianic sect with beliefs so contrary to received messianic expectations; and (4) his lust for power or his ambition to establish himself within the Jewish power-structure of Jerusalem.

There is little doubt that Paul the apostle despised what he, as Saul of Tarsus, had done to these early Christians. It is important to understand the behavior of Saul of Tarsus and the causes underlying his actions; and further, to learn from him in all of this. We can all, in our religious zeal, become a Saul of Tarsus.

The Jews of the first century period shared a common belief that their suffering at the hands of the Romans and the occupation of their holy land would come to an end within that century. "When Messiah comes, God will restore all to Israel!" was the common hope of all Jews of Palestine and the Diaspora alike.

The Messiah was believed to be many things by first century Judaism, but dominant in Palestine was the belief that he would be a mighty military figure (a scion of David) who would lead Israel in

rebellion against Rome, driving them from their land as did the Maccabees with the Syrians. The Dead Sea sect believed that two Messiahs would come: one, a military figure who would restore national independence to Israel; and a second, a priestly Messiah who would be the rightful heir to the High Priesthood, driving out the false priests of the Annas family and restore Temple cultus to its purity. Another popular Messianic tradition, especially among the Rabbis, was that the Messiah would also bring about a universal understanding of God's will throughout the whole world; especially would he resolve all questions and controversies concerning the meaning of the *Torah* (cf. John 4:25).

In all probability, the brilliant Rabbi Saul of Tarsus, shared some of these messianic beliefs, and the likelihood that this Galilean carpenter, Jesus of Nazareth, would fulfilled any of them would have been nil. Herein lies the probable reason for Saul's persecution of these earliest Christians; as he says in Acts 26:9, "I verily thought with myself that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth."

Jesus of Nazareth fulfilled none of these deeply rooted hopes of Israel; especially, as the Judaism of Paul's time would have desired it. Rather than drive the despised Romans from Palestine they put him to death in the most humiliating way conceivable. Rather than exalt the religion of Judaism above all the religions of first century Mediterranean world, Jesus of Nazareth denounced the Judaism of his day and especially its religious hierarchy.

Rather than bringing enlightenment and exaltation to the teachings of Israel, with its central focus on the Law (*Torah*), Jesus of Nazareth taught that he had come with new revelation from God that fulfilled the very purpose of the *Torah* and hence rendered it "accomplished or fulfilled." He, in fact, claimed that God had sent a new revelation, a revelation of the Father, and that he was the very presence of that revelation - "In that you have seen me you have seen the Father" (John 14:9). He further claimed that God had given a new place of worship; an inner sanctuary within the heart of man, which

was to replace the Temple of Israel as the location of God's presence and power on earth (cf. John 4:19-24).

All of this was too much for orthodox Judaism; especially coming from a man who had incurred the curse of the law himself by being crucified as a criminal. Here was, in all probability, the most significant obstacle to Saul of Tarsus in believing what the Christians were saying about this messianic pretender, Jesus of Nazareth. Paul gives more time and attention in pen and ink to the meaning and interpretation of Jesus' death than any other writer. Perhaps, this is so because of the great difficulty he himself had in understanding how a crucified Messiah could be believed in as a savior. This is made even more difficult when one realizes that according to the first century Jew, a man whom God would allow to be executed by crucifixion was a man cursed of God.

This was the interpretation given Deut 21:22-23. The *Temple Scroll* of the Dead Sea sect (*Temple Scroll* 64:6-13) interprets this verse as a reference to God's condemnation of a man who is crucified. This view, then, was present in first century Judaism. Paul himself interprets this verse this way in Gal 3:13, as did others (cf. Acts 5:30; 10:39; 13:29; and 1 Peter 2:24). However, such passages as 1 Cor 1:23-25 and Gal 5:11, show that the common understanding of Jesus' crucifixion as a scandal was truly an act of divine reversal in God's resurrection of Jesus. What the Jews thought to be foolishness was wisdom in the actions of God. The foolishness of God was truly wiser than the wisdom of men.

Now, the point of all this is as follows. Not only was belief in this crucified Jesus of Nazareth blasphemy for a Jew, and grounds for disciplining action on the part of the synagogue authorities; but more, the Christians' endorsement of Jesus' attitude toward the Law (Sermon on the Mt) and the Temple of God (Jesus and Stephen) gave further counts for incrimination and discipline. This was the charge against Stephen (cf. Acts 6:8-14), he spoke words against "this holy place" (the Temple) and "the Law," and Saul of Tarsus was present at the stoning of Stephen. In the *Mishnah* (*Pirke Aboth* 1:2) the world is said to be sustained by three things: by the Law, by the Temple, and

by deeds of loving-kindness. For a Jew to reject the authority of the Law was blasphemy. This was the very sin resulting in the captivity of the Jewish nation by Babylon in 586 BC, and the Maccabean Wars of the second century BC. To reject the *Torah* and the Temple, the very symbols of God's presence and power in Israel, would have been certain grounds for discipline in the thinking of Saul of Tarsus.

Add to this the early Christians' rejection of the authority of the Jewish hierarchy as reflected in early chapters of Acts (cf. 2:22-24, 36; 3:13-26; 4:1-2, 5-12; 5:17ff [esp. vv 27-33]; 6:8-15; 7:41-8:1), there can be little doubt as to what justification Saul of Tarsus entertained for his violent pursuit and persecution of these earliest Jewish disciples of Jesus of Nazareth. Here, in all probability, we meet the psychological dynamics out of which Paul's theology of redemption and regeneration developed. The man Saul of Tarsus was completely changed from who he was and what he believed into someone entirely different with radically transformed beliefs. In the conversion of Saul of Tarsus a recreated man emerged - Paul the apostle, a new creation "in Christ."

Paul the Apostle: the New Man "in Christ"

If any man ever thought he could attain righteous before God through law-keeping it was Saul of Tarsus. He was so loyal to the *Torah* he tried to destroy fellow Jews he through were in violation of it's commands. Why? His legalistic mind-set drove him to be filled with a duty to violence against those he believed in violation of the will of God, as expressed in the Law. Paul's legalistic mind-set became more important to him than people. One of the greatest lessons learned by Saul of Tarsus was that God does not love law, doctrine or dogma, he loves people; and he reveals his will to people in various forms for their well-being or happiness.

The *Torah* and the body of traditional interpretations surrounding it (the oral *torah*) had been given the status of "lord" in pharisaic Judaism. It governed their moral and ritual behavior. The Law of Moses (*Torah*) defined and interpreted human action as good or bad, and one sin was all it took to condemn the sinner. As James

2:10 says, "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it." If one kept ninety-nine commandments and transgressed one, he or she becomes a transgressor of the law; only one transgression makes one a transgressor of the Law. In 1 John 3:4 says, "Whosoever commits sin transgresses also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law." It was impossible to attain righteousness by means of law-keeping, the only person who did so was Jesus of Nazareth, but Paul, as a typical Jewish legalist, was trying to do just that.

Deliverance for Paul came when he came to the realization that he had become enslaved by his legalism - the Law had become his lord, a lord that could only conform those submitted to it and condemn those who didn't. The revelation Paul received on the road to Damascus resulted in a transfer of lordship. The Lord Paul met in the person of Jesus of Nazareth saved him through transforming him, not conforming him; and this transformation took place through "new creation," (cf. 2 Cor 5:17).

Paul's most extensive discussion of this topic is found in Rom 6. In conversion, according to Paul, one experiences a death to his existence in Adam, a burial of that existence, and resurrection in spirit into a new existence. The result of this is "change," a dynamic, transforming alteration of man in Adam. There are three major aspects of this recreation:

One's spiritual Existence Is Created Anew. One dies to his or her old existence "in Adam," is symbolically buried in the waters of baptism, and is raised out of the water into new existence "in Christ," (cf. 2 Cor 5:17; Rom 6:1-4; Gal 2:20; 6:15; Eph 4:23-24; Col 3:10).

One's Moral Character Is Created Anew. If Christ has become a person's Lord (Rom 10:9-10), that person's life has been transformed by the lordship of Christ. This means that we are saved by a relationship, a relationship with a loving Lord, and our transformation into his image (Rom 8:29; Col 3:10). This occurs by submission to his transforming power. This was a radical change in Paul's thinking. Rather than becoming acceptable to God by

conformity to a collection of codes: statutes, judgments, and commandments, we are transformed in moral character by a relationship with a loving God, who has become our Lord, our Savior, and the paradigm of moral character (cf. Rom 6:11-23; 8:9-11; Eph 2:1-10; 4:17-32; 5:3-14; Col 2:3-11).

One's Relationship with a View to Lordship is Created Anew. In conversion to Christ a transfer of lordship occurs. This was the issue between man and God in the Garden of Eden - lordship. Satan persuaded man that he could be his own lord if he ate of the fruit of the tree. This is yet the issue. In Christ the issue is resolved - he becomes our Savior by becoming our Lord (cf. Matt 28:18; Luke 6:46; Phil 2:5-11; Rom 10:9-10).

We are created or recreated anew as: (1) spiritual beings, (2) as moral beings, and (3) as redeemed beings - beings redeemed or delivered from the lordship of Satan and the power of sin to the lordship of Christ. One thing is clear in Paul's thinking: Jesus is both our Lord and our Savior, but he will not become our Savior unless he first becomes our Lord.

Conclusion

Paul's concept of what happens to man in conversion to Christ is based on what had happened to him. Saul of Tarsus thought of himself as a son of Abraham, who was a son of Adam. In Hebrew thought, based on what is taught in the early chapters of Genesis, all men are descendents of Adam and all, with exception of Noah and his family, had become so corrupted by evil that God had destroyed them and repopulated the earth with the sons of Noah, the offspring of Shem becoming the people from whom God chose a people to be "a peculiar people," to whom he would reveal himself and through whom he would restore man to his original state as a being created in the image of God.

Of course, Saul of Tarsus believed that only man "as a descendent of Abraham" would experience this restoration. All men,

however, were descendents of Adam and were one with Adam or “in Adam” in this sense. With Paul’s conversion the whole of his understanding of God’s intention toward man was changed.

Paul does not directly discuss how this change in his thinking occurred, but he does say in various places that he received his insights by revelation from Jesus Christ (Gal 1:11-12). According to Gal 2:1-2, there was a period of fourteen year from the time of his conversion in Damascus to his return to Jerusalem for the conference recorded in Acts 15. Ten of these years are considered lost years (from the time he return to Tarsus following his conversion until the time he was retrieved from Tarsus by Barnabas - Acts 9:29 to 11:25-26). Perhaps it was during this time that he developed his insights into how God had entered into human history to accomplish the redemption of mankind. This is why his ministry as apostle to the gentiles does not appear to have begun until he returned to Antioch of Syria with Barnabas.

Paul repeatedly mentions his revelations from Christ and the inspirational insights given him (1 Cor 2:6-16; 2 Cor 5:16-20; Gal 1:11-12; Eph 1:7-9; 3:1-13; Col 1:25-29). Throughout his ministry, in his preaching and teaching in Acts and in his letters, Paul’s message centered in who Jesus of Nazareth was and how God through him had redeemed the human race. All of what is recorded in Paul’s letters appear to be autobiographic; what Paul says concerning the redemption of every man is a report of what had happened to him.

He believed himself to have been transformed through a transfer from his existence in Adam to a new existence in Christ. Through this transformation his moral character had be created anew; his moral behavior was no longer controlled by the codes of Moses, but was under the influence of the moral character of Jesus, which has transformed him. Further, the influence of the power of sin, which Paul believed to be the result of the lordship of Satan, had been transferred to the lordship of Christ. His conversion to Christ had resulted in a relationship with Christ as his Lord and Savior.

This was the beginning of his journey as a man recreated in Christ. For the remainder of his life his transformed existence in Christ was in constant tension with the existence he had known in Adam. He was yet under the adamic influences of the desires of his flesh, but he now was able to overcome that influence through the power of his new spiritual existence in Christ. The possibility of new existence in Christ was the heart of the good news Paul believed to be the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believes (Rom 1:16).

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