

Life and Teachings of Paul

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Following Saul's baptism into Christ, he spent time with the disciples in Damascus, then immediately went to the assemblies of the synagogues of Damascus and proclaimed that he had seen "the Son of God," who had identified himself as Jesus of Nazareth, the one Saul was persecuting through his assault on the church.

For several days he was with the disciples at Damascus. 20: And in the synagogues immediately he proclaimed Jesus, saying, "He is the Son of God." 21: And all who heard him were amazed, and said, "Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called on this name? And he has come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests." 22: But Saul was being empowered and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving/demonstrating that Jesus was the Christ/Messiah (Acts 9:20-22).

Of major significance here is the expression "Saul was being empowered," and he claimed that he now believed that Jesus was the "Son of God," which gives us significant insight into his understanding of what he believed he had seen. The rabbi Saul of Tarsus also entered into discussion with the Jews of the Damascus synagogue community confounding (*sugcheo* - to refute through argumentation) and by demonstrating (*sunbibazon* - another word for argumentation) that Jesus was the Messiah. Saul appears to have been using methods typical to the argumentation of the rabbis in their discussions of the meaning of Scripture. An excellent presentation of the types of reasoning used in Jewish interpretation is given by Joseph Shulam, a messianic Jew who is a missionary in Jerusalem, in his book on rabbinic hermeneutics, *The Hidden Treasure: The First Century Jewish Way of Understanding the Scriptures*, published

by Netivyah Bible Instruction Ministry, Jerusalem, Israel, 2008).

From the very beginning, Peter and the other apostles had been proclaiming Jesus to be the fulfillment of the messianic expectations drawn from the Hebrew Scriptures. In Peter's sermon on Pentecost he proclaimed Jesus to be: a man accredited by God through miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through him, (Acts 2:22), that the Jewish leaders had rejected him and demanded that he be crucified (2:23), that God had raised from death (2:24-32), that God had exalted him to his right hand (2:33-35), all of which led to the conclusion that God had made this Jesus to be "both Lord and Christ/Messiah" (2:36), or "the Lord Messiah!"

In Peter's second sermon (Acts 3), Peter had identified Jesus as "the Holy and Righteous One" (3:14), "the prophet" who was prophesied by Moses [Deut 18:15-18; 3:21-23], and had identified Jesus with "the suffering servant" of Isaiah 52-53 (3:24-26), and declared that Jesus of Nazareth was the only name in heaven by which men could be saved (4:12). Peter, however, had not proclaimed Jesus to be the "Son of God," as did Saul of Tarsus.

Saul of Tarsus Proclaims Jesus, "the Son of God"

Following the revelation of the risen Jesus to Saul of Tarsus he entered the Jewish synagogues of Damascus and publically proclaimed him to be "the Son of God," a designation not yet given to Jesus by the early community of believers; especially as Paul appears to use the term. Was there a significance to this?

The Sons of God by Adoption

It is true that during his ministry, Jesus was confessed by Peter to be "the son of the Living God" (Matt 16:16), and he was condemned by the Sanhedrin for blasphemy, accusing him of claiming to be "the Son of God" (Matt 26:63), or "the Son of the Blessed" (Mark 14:60-61); but these references are most probably drawn from Psalms 2:6-7, where "the Anointed One" – the King of

Israel, became the adopted son of God.

Only the Apostle John and the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews gives as much attention to the messianic title "Son of God," as Paul. Why did Saul of Tarsus go immediately to the synagogues of the Hellenistic Jews of Damascus to publically proclaim that Jesus of Nazareth was the "Son of God?"

The Semitic Use of "Son"

To understand this title as used in the NT, one must understand the way the designation "Son of God" was used in the Greek language of the Mediterranean culture as compared to the Semitic languages of Hebrew and Aramaic. The titles "*ben*" in Hebrew, and "*bar*" in Aramaic, were commonplace expressions in Palestine proper. Simon Peter was called *Shemon BarJonah*, which is Simon the son of Jonah. James and John, the sons of Zebedee were James and John - *ha beni Zebedee* (*beni* the plural of *ben*).

But Saul "of Tarsus" is never so designated; rather, he is called Saul of Tarsus, in the tradition of the Hellenistic culture of Diaspora Judaism. Saul was a Diaspora Jew; he was born and raised in Tarsus of Cilicia in Asia Minor. The way he is identified reflects his Hellenistic culture, and this is important for our understanding as concerns Paul's ways of thinking and expressing himself.

In the Hebrew Scriptures the angels of God are sometimes called *Beni Elohim* - "the sons of God," with the understanding that the person so designated was, in some way, an offspring of the one to whom he was related as a "*ben*" or son. The Messiah was to be *Ha BenDavid*, "the son of David," and Jesus often called himself *BenAdam*, "son of Adam," or as it is translated in our English versions of the NT, "the son of man."

So, to speak of someone as a *ben Elohim* (a son of God) in the Semitic culture was to identify him as "an offspring of God," in that all human beings created in the image of God were, essentially, sons and daughters of God. This is an essential part of understanding the

NT usage of the title "Son of God."

The Greek Use of "Son of God"

In the Greek language and culture, the expression "son of God" (*huios theou*) was used in a more restricted way, more commonly understood as, "an offspring of deity," distinct from human beings who in their thinking were beings that emerged from the mud, not beings created in the image of the gods. Someone who was an offspring of deity was essentially, deity him or herself. This distinction is of critical importance to an understanding the title Saul of Tarsus used to speak of who he believed Jesus of Nazareth to be. Even though Saul of Tarsus was a Hebrew, was not a Palestinian Hebrew, he was a Hellenistic Hebrew, who was chosen by Christ because of he was of both cultures, Jewish and Hellenistic.

Saul of Tarsus would have understood the nuances or the subtle distinction in the meaning associated with the various christological titles used by the Jews of the first century. A Messiah or Christ (*christos*) to a typical Greek would not have been understood as a long awaited deliverer of the lineage of king David, as was understood by the Jews; especially those of Palestine. The Greeks may have understood the title as referring to someone who had a special "anointing," which is what the Greek word "*christos*" meant, and as one anointed to a given task, he would have abilities that made him special or chosen in some way.

The Title "Son of God" in Paul's Letters

When the Apostle John, a Galilean, and most likely one who spoke both Aramaic and Greek, calls Jesus the Son of God in a way unique from the way other men may be called sons of God, he used the Greek expression "the only begotten son" (*ho monogenes huios*), not a son in the sense of an offspring of God's creation, but a son in the sense of having been uniquely begotten of God as an incarnation of God.

So, when Saul of Tarsus, in Acts 9:20, addressed the Hellenistic

synagogues in Damascus of Syria, his use of the designation "Son of God" could have been a profession of belief in Jesus as a divine being, who was in some mysterious way identified with God. Saul had seen the glory of God on the road to Damascus. In fact, in his first letter to the Corinthians, he identified Jesus as the "Lord of Glory," (1 Cor 2:8). From the very beginning of Paul's journey of faith he believed Jesus to be one with God in some inexplicable way and spent the rest of his life trying to make what he had seen intelligible to the rest of the world. This is exemplified in Phil 2:5-11, where Paul writes,

Have this mind in you which was in Christ Jesus: 6 Who, existing in the form [a state of being] of God, did not consider the sameness with God something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form [a state of being] of a servant [incarnation], being made in human likeness [he became one of us]. 8 And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross! 9 Wherefore God exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, 10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord [Kurios], to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2:5-11).

Here Jesus is portrayed as one who existed in the form of God, who emptied himself of that which prevented him from becoming "one of us," a human being - an incarnation of God. Phil 2:5-11, may easily be thought of as Paul's version of John's prologue to his Gospel in John 1:1-18. To both Paul and John, Jesus was not only like God, he was God; but what would this have meant to Paul's monotheism?

If he believed Jesus was a revelation of God more a violation of his monotheism than to believe that the *Ruach HaQadosh* (Holy Spirit) was a manifestation of God who was revealed as a personality of both the Old and New Testament Scriptures. This can be seen from the opening lines of the Hebrew Scriptures: "In the beginning God (*Elohim*) created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God (*Ruach Elohim*) was hovering over the waters," (Gen 1:1-2). Surely, no one would suggest that there are two gods present

in this text, *Elohim* (God) and the *Ruach Elohim* (the Spirit of God)!

Conclusion

Paul's addresses the church in Rome was a statement of faith:

*Paul, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated to the gospel of God **2** which He promised before through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures, **3 concerning His Son** Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, **4 and declared to be the Son of God** with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead. **5** Through Him we have received grace and apostleship for obedience to the faith among all nations for His name (Rom 1:1-5).*

As mentioned earlier, in describing what he had seen on the road to Damascus Paul says, "it pleased God **to reveal his Son** in me, that I might preach him among the gentiles," (Gal 1:15).

Even though he believed he had seen a heavenly being, he also believed that he had seen Jesus of Nazareth (Acts 22:8) resurrected from death. In Rom 8:3, he says that God had sent his own Son "in the likeness of sinful flesh."

*But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, **5** to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. **6** And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, "Abba, Father!" **7** Therefore you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ, (Gal 4:4-7).*

In Romans 8:29, Paul says that when God sent his Son into the world his intent was that he become a paradigm or exemplar of what man was intended to be and that man was "to be conformed to the image of his Son," and thus be restored in the image of God (Rom 8:29). By his death and resurrection, Jesus became the firstfruit of a new act of creation by God.

One of the most important passages of Paul's insight into the identity of Jesus is found in 1 Cor 15, where Paul speaks of Jesus as the one through whom new existence became possible to all men:

*Now Christ is risen from the dead, and **has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.** 21 For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. 22 For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. 23 But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming (1 Cor 15:20-23).*

In verses 44-49, Paul reveals that through Jesus' resurrection he had become "a life giving spirit" and it was through becoming one with him that we receive life, now and into eternity. Paul writes,

*There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body. 45 And so it is written, "The first man Adam became a living being," [Gen 2:7]. **The last Adam became a life-giving spirit.** 46 However, the spiritual is not first, but the natural, and afterward the spiritual. 47 The first man was of the earth, made of dust; **the second Man is the Lord from heaven.** 48 As was the man of dust, so also are those who are made of dust; and as is **the heavenly Man**, so also are those who are heavenly. 49 And as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear **the image of the heavenly Man** (1 Cor 15:44-49).*

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