

# Life and Teachings of Paul

*Maurice W. Lusk, III*

We introduced this discussion earlier but here we will attempt to do a more in depth search into the sources of Paul's insights into the message he calls, "the gospel of Christ." In the opening lines of Paul's letter to the Romans he writes,

*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, (Rom 1:1-4).*

Later, in the opening lines of this letter, Paul identified the gospel as "the power of God unto salvation," (Rom 1:16); and in verse 17 he states that, "in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed." In his letter to the Ephesians, he speaks of this message as "the gospel of your salvation" (Eph 1:13). Then, in the last part of this letter he speaks of this message as a revelation of "the mystery of the gospel," (6:19). There are numerous similar references to the gospel but what has been presented sets the stage for the primary question of this lesson, *viz*, how did Paul come by his insights into this message of salvation he calls "the mystery of the gospel?"

## The Source of Paul's Insights

Soon after Saul's conversion to Christ we are told, "But Saul was being empowered [*en-dunamouto* - in + to receive power - to empower], and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by

proving that Jesus was the Christ/Messiah, (Acts 9:19-22).

This empowerment was something Saul of Tarsus experienced immediately after his conversion and he informs us in his letters that he did not come by his insights into the mysteries of God through his own efforts. He was gifted with supernatural insights by means of revelation from God (Gal 1:11-12), but it is apparent that he also used what had earlier been revealed through the prophets of Israel through the Scriptures. We must remember that Saul of Tarsus had spent years as a rabbinic *talmid* (disciple) of Gamaliel (Acts 22:3; Gal 1:13). In addition, it appears that he had received from the believers in Damascus the oral tradition concerning Jesus that had been preserved and circulated by the early church (Acts 9:19-20, 26-30).

In his letter to the Galatians Paul claimed that his insights came from God by means of the Spirit of Christ:

*For I did not receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation [apokalupseos - to reveal that which is hidden] of Jesus Christ . . . 15 But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased 16 to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, (Gal 1:12, 15-16).*

### *Paul's Journey into the Desert*

It is worthy of note that Paul seems to have done the same as Jesus following his baptism. He went into the desert for a period of time. From Act 9:19b-23, it appears that Saul remained in Damascus for some time before returning to Jerusalem. In fact, from Gal 1:17-18, we learn that it was three years before he returned to Jerusalem.

During this time there was this mysterious excursion into Arabian. The Greek word used here, *arabian*, means "desert or wilderness." In the Septuagint (Greek OT) texts of Deut 1:7; 2:8; and 3:17, *arabia* is the word used to describe the area of the Sea of Salt (the Dead Sea), which was a desert area. This is also the word given to all the land on the east side of the Jordan river in Deut 4:41, 44-49. This

was where three of the cities of refuge were located: **Bezer** (in the tribal land of Ruben), **Ramah** and **Golan** (of the tribal land of Gad); all were east of the Dead Sea and were a part of what was called the *arabia* (desert) in the first century AD.

The word Paul used may simply mean a desert area and not a specific place as the kingdom of the Nabatans that some scholars insist upon. He could have simply gone into the Arabian Desert east of Damascus for a period of solitude, as did Jesus. Josephus (*Wars of the Jews* 1:89; 3:47) identifies the area east of the Jordan River from Damascus to everything east of the Dead Sea with the Greek *arabia* - desert or wilderness. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to locate Saul of Tarsus anywhere specifically within the territory called Arabia, most of which was desert or wilderness, as the Greek word *arabia*' suggests.

Some very reputable scholars are convinced that Saul of Tarsus went into the desert area to the west of Jerusalem (i.e. the region of the Dead Sea). It is clear from a study of Paul's letters that he shared several of the views of the community of the Dead Sea scrolls; especially his dualistic view of the world as a place of light and darkness or good and evil, that there were sons of light and sons of darkness, that man's flesh was in conflict with his spirit, that there was a concept of a Messiah who was not militaristic, that the search for insight from the Scriptures was the key to the mind of God, that baptism was by immersion and it was a rite of purification, and the use of typology to connect ancient biblical events to the present. Paul's concept of the purpose of the Law of Moses, especially as reflected in Gal 3, is present in the Dead Sea scrolls. His view of the priesthood, the temple, the ritual of sacrifice, the nature and function of the Holy Spirit, and other similar views can be found in both Paul's writings and the writings of the Qumran community.

This is not to suggest that Saul of Tarsus was a member of the Dead Sea sect. However, it is believed by most Dead Sea scholars that the people who lived in Qumran on the Dead Sea were Essenes. There were Essene communities throughout Palestine. Jerusalem and Damascus had significant communities. The Jerusalem community

was prominent enough to have a gate to the city named, "The Essene Gate." Could it be that it is significant that Paul was located in both places for a time. Given the eclectic nature of his theology, it would not be unusual for him to have spent time in the Essene quarter of Jerusalem or to have even gone into the desert to Qumran to discuss their messianic views. Also of significance is the Qumran community's views on the *Torah*, the Jerusalem Temple, and the sacrificial system, all of which have some affinity to Paul's views as expressed in his letters. Paul's views of the apocalyptic judgment to come are similar to the Armageddon beliefs of the Dead Sea sect, which was to be a battle between the sons of light and the sons of darkness, made up of both earthly and heavenly beings.

None of this means that Saul drew his theology from the Dead Sea sect, but it would not be uncommon for Saul to have wanted to hear the thoughts of these people, especially as related to their well known messianic beliefs and their claims that the once head of the Qumran community, the Teacher of Righteousness, had received revelation from God.

Where Saul could have gone in the desert region east of Damascus is a question that draws a complete blank with Pauline scholars. This period of time was critical for the development of the content of Saul's faith. It was, no doubt, during this time that Saul of Tarsus developed into the messianic theologian the world came to know as "Paul the Apostle of Christ," the one who carried this "godstory" he had discovered into the Mediterranean world of the gentiles.

### *Paul the Recipient of Revelation from God*

It is significant that Paul calls his teaching an "*apokalupsis*" - a revelation of God, which was hidden for ages but now had been made known to the world through the messengers of God (Rom 16:25-27). In Gal 1, Paul says that during this three year period he received his insights into what he preached by special revelation from Christ himself, "I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it

from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ," (Gal 1:11-12).

In his first letter to the Corinthians we may have a clue as how Paul perceived of his gift of inspiration. In 1 Cor 2:6-14, which is most probably autobiographical (i.e. he is speaking of himself), he says that his message to them was, "a message of wisdom," a term understood by both Hebrews and Greeks as a higher level of insight received from God or the gods. Here Paul says that his insights came from God by means of the Spirit of God:

*. . . we speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. 8None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. 9However, as it is written: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him" – 10but **God has revealed it to us by his Spirit**. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. 11For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. 12We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, **that we may understand what God has freely given us**. 13This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but **in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words** (1 Cor 2:6-13).*

In the letter to the Ephesians, one of Paul's later letters, he makes the same claim,

*Surely you have heard about the communication of God's grace that was given to me for you, 3that is, **the mystery made known to me by revelation**, as I have already written briefly. 4 In reading this, then, you will be able to understand **my insight into the mystery of Christ**, 5 which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. 6 This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel [through new creation the*

Jews and Gentiles are the same], *members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus, (Eph 3:2-6).*

## Conclusion

In Matthew 13:52, Jesus says concerning the wise scribe:

*. . . Therefore every teacher of the Law (a scribe or Torah scholar) who has been instructed in the things concerning the coming rule of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasure as well as old.*

This appears to be exactly what Paul did, drawing on every source of knowledge of Christ and the scheme of redemption available to him. His use of the ancient revelation preserved in the Hebrew Scripture is extensive but his use of the inspired revelation given to him by the risen Jesus was unquestionably his primary source.

It would have been wonderful to have received direct revelation from God, but, in reality, what the early believers used as proof of the messianic identity of Jesus of Nazareth actually came from the Scriptures given to Israel, the same Scriptures Jesus had opened to them in his appearance following his resurrection from death (Luke 24:25-27, 32, 45-47).

The weight or authority of indirect revelation from God, as preserved in our written copies of the Old and New Testament Scriptures, is as valuable and authoritative in informing us of the will of God as the direct experience of revelation from God in the forms of visions, dreams, and divine inspiration - God breathed insights (Deut 29:29). Of particular interest is the insight Paul came to concerning the curse of the man hanged on a tree found in Deut 21:22-23. The problem of this text would most assuredly have been of concern to the rabbi, Saul of Tarsus. From what he says in Galatians 3:10-14, it appears that he found the answer he desired.

What does all this mean to us as saints of the twenty-first

century? Everything! We say, "If I knew what they knew, I would do this, that, and the other," but, do we not know that we have the same revelation the people of the first century had. In fact, we have access to more than they did in that the whole collection of the NT Scriptures is available to us. They only knew "in part" where we know "the whole," using the analogy Paul uses in 1 Cor 13:8-10,

*Whether there be prophecies [supernaturally given], they will be done away, or tongues/languages [supernaturally given], they will stop, or knowledge [supernaturally given], it will be done away, for we know in part [ek merous - of a part, or a portion of] and we prophecy in part [ek merous - a part or portion of], but when that which is complete [teleion - the whole of something] is come the things being given in portions will be done away.*

The early Christians were blessed to have "been there!" But, we are more blessed because we have the completion of what they only had in part. An essential application of this lesson is to ask, "What are we doing with what we have?" Many of these early Christians were dying for it; but we are not asked to die for it, rather, we are to live for it, or, better, to live out of it!

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