

Life and Teachings of Paul

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Paul, an Apostle of Christ

Defining Terms

Luke 6:13 says, "He chose twelve **whom he also named apostles.**" The Greek verb *apostello* means, "to send forth." The term for the one sent forth is *apostolos*, "one sent forth." An *apostolos* was not just a person who carried a message from one person to another, like a courier or herald; rather, an *apostolos* was an ambassador or representative of someone: an official and faithful representative of the one sending him. Joseph Fitzmyer says of the title "apostle,"

The institution of "apostles" in Christianity has been traced to the Palestinian Jewish institution of *shaliahim*, "the (ones) sent," i.e., emissaries commissioned by the Sanhedrin or rabbis to represent them and act in their name with authority to settle calendaric, fiscal, or legal matters (see K. H. Rengstorf, *Theological Dictionary of the NT*, 1.404-420 . . .), (*The Gospel According to Luke I-IX*).

Josephus used the Greek *apostoloi* for the delegation of representatives of the Jews to Rome to plea for their right to live by the biblical laws of Judaism, i.e., the *Torah*. (Josephus, *Antiquities*, 17.11). In the Hebrew language, an *apostolos* would have been called a *shaliah*. In the first-century culture of Judaism, the *shaliah* was an official representative of the Sanhedrin - an authoritative figure. He spoke for them, his voice was as their voice, he never spoke on behalf of himself but only on behalf of those who sent him.

The *shaliahim* acted with the full authority of the whole council. Certain rabbis had their own *shaliahim*, who explained their messages with their approval. The *Mishnah* says of the *shaliah*, "The one sent by the man is as the man himself." Thus when Jesus appointed apostles (*shaliahim*), he was doing something very familiar to the people in that culture. They were his trusted *shaliahim*, (cf. John MacArthur, *Twelve Ordinary Men*, p 20-21).

The role of an *apostolos* was also similar to the role of the missionary of later times. There were *apostoloi* of the church sent out by an eldership of a church, as was the case with Barnabas as Paul in Acts, having been sent by the church in Antioch. The circle of twelve in Luke 6 were *apostoloi* in a more specific sense, they were the "*apostoloi tou Christou*" - apostles of Christ. This put them in the official position of leadership and teaching authority in the early church; they were the foundation upon which the church was built. As Paul says to the church in Ephesus concerning the role of the apostles of Christ,

. . . *you* (the gentiles of the community of believers-mwl) *are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's house, ²⁰built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone,"* (Eph 2:19-20).

In Luke 11, Jesus associated the prophets of old with this new set of messengers of God he called "apostles," or as the Jews would have called them "*ha shaliahim*," those who act in the name of someone of authority.

*Woe to you, because you build tombs for **the prophets**, and it was your forefathers who killed them. So you testify that you approve of what your forefathers did; they killed **the prophets**, and you build their tombs. Because of this, God in his wisdom said, 'I will send them **prophets and apostles**, some of whom they will kill and others they will persecute* (Luke 11:47-49).

The Prophets of Israel and the Apostles of Christ

The original group of apostles consisted of the twelve disciples Jesus selected early in his ministry and later commissioned in Mark 16; Matt 28; Luke 24; and Acts 1. These twelve, with Matthias replacing Judas, were the major players in the early beginnings of the messianic movement that became the religion of Christianity (Acts 2:42-43; 4:33; 5:12; 8:18; 9:27). At the time of his conversion Saul of Tarsus was given a similar apostolic commission by Jesus (Acts 26:12-19). At the time of Acts 14:4 and 14, Paul is referred to as “an apostle” and later in his letters identifies himself as an apostle of Christ (Romans 1:1; 11:13; 1 Cor 1:1; 9:1, 5; 12:28-29; 15:7-9; 2 Cor 1:1; 12:11-12; Gal 1:1, 17-19; 2: 8; Eph 1:1; 2:20; 3:5; 4:11; Col 1:1; 1 Tim 1:1; 2:7; 2 Tim 1:1, 11; Titus 1:1).

The texts most definitive of Paul’s understanding of his apostleship are 2 Cor 12 and Eph 3. In the first we read, “The things that mark an **apostle**—signs, wonders and miracles—were done among you with great perseverance,” (2 Cor 12:12); and in Ephesians 3: 2-6, we read:

*Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, **3**that 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, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus (Eph 3:2-6).*

Paul repeatedly associated the role of an apostle with the figure known as a “man of God” or “the prophet” in the OT Scriptures. In Eph 2:20, Paul refers to “the apostles and prophets,” in 3:5 he refers to “God’s holy apostles and prophets,” and in 4:11 he makes the claim that it was Jesus who appointed him an apostle,

*He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.) 11 It was he **who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets**, some to be evangelists, and some to be shepherds and teachers, 12 to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up 13 until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God, (Eph 4:10-13).*

The Apostle Peter makes a connection between the prophets of God of old and the apostles Christ. In his second letter he writes,

*Dear friends, this is now my second letter to you. I have written both of them as reminders to stimulate you to wholesome thinking. 2 I want you to recall the words spoken in the past **by the holy prophets** and the command given by our Lord and Savior **through your apostles** (2 Peter 3:1-2).*

The Apostle John also makes the prophet-apostle connection in Rev 18, wherein an angel descends from heaven and declares, "Rejoice, saints and **apostles and prophets!**" (Rev 18:20).

In the last of Paul's letters (1 and 2 Timothy), he says in the first letter, "I was appointed a **herald and an apostle**—I am telling the truth, I am not lying—and a **teacher of the true faith** to the gentiles" (1 Tim 2:7). And in the second letter he writes,

*So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God, 9 who has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, 10 but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. 11 **And of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher** (2 Tim 1:8-11).*

The “Man of God” in OT

Paul saw himself as a prophetic agent or “man of God” in the sense that term was used of “a man of God” in the Hebrew Scriptures. The word prophet is used first of Abraham (Gen 20:7), then Aaron in (Exodus 7:1), and in Exodus 15:20, Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron, is called a **prophetess**. In Num 12:6, God says, “If there be a **prophet** among you, I the LORD will make myself known unto him in a vision, and will speak unto him in a dream.” In Deut 13, references are made to **prophets** (Deut 13:1, 3, 5). Most significant for our purposes is his reference in 18:15-23, to “the prophet like unto Moses,” who fulfill the prophecy of Moses in Deut 18:17-18, thus receiving the prophetic mantle of Moses.

From the time of the exodus the figure of the prophet became a part of Israel’s history, called a “man of God,” as one empowered to speak for God through revelation and to work wonders as the credential of his office. Chief among them was Elijah (cf. 1 Kings 17:18-24; 2 Kings 1:9-13; see also 2 Kings chapters 2-23, *passim*).

Essentially, Paul identifies himself with the prophets or the men of God of the OT tradition; i.e. those sent from God to speak to the people on behalf of God. This is reflected in numerous texts. To the church in Galatia Paul identifies himself as, “an apostle – sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead (Gal 1:1). In 2:8, he speaks of himself and the apostle Peter as one’s who had been sent, “For God, who was at work in the ministry of Peter as an apostle to the Jews, was also at work in my ministry as an apostle to the gentiles.” In fact, the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews identifies Jesus an apostle, in that he was “one sent” with a message from the God, “Therefore, holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess,” (Hebrews 3:1).

The Characteristics of the Representative of God

There were always identifying characteristics that distinguished the ancient man of God as a person of the prophetic tradition. The role of the prophet in the OT served as the opposite of the priesthood. The role of the priests was that of agent of the people who went to God on behalf of the people. The sacrifices and prayers offered by the priests were a part of the imagery associated with sin and its consequences. The priestly offering was associated with the acknowledgement of sin and the request for forgiveness. On the Day of Atonement the High Priest stood before God as the representative of the people and confessed their sins a representative figure of the people. The prophet, on the other hand, was an agent of God who came before the people as the spokesman or representative voice of God.

The apostles of Christ were prophetic figures who possessed the characteristics of the prophet or man of God, as recipients of revelation from God. They gave voice to the word given them to carry to the people on behalf of God. The authentication of this message was often accompanied by manifestations of power in the form of wonders or signs that identified the agent and his message as having been sent from God. This was not always the case as with the Major Prophets, also known as the writing prophets. The prophet whose message was to be addressed to the people in person were often given signs to confirm their message; as with Elijah and Elisha.

Paul possessed the characteristics of a prophet. He was in communication with God and evidenced the presence and power of God in his words and deeds. He gave evidence of the source of his special message and inspired insight into the meaning of Scripture and the actions of God: 1 Cor 2:6-16; Eph 1:7-9, 17-19; 3:1-13; 6:19-20; Col 1:9-10, 25-29; 1 Thess 2:13; 4:2; and 1 Tim 4:1-3. He received visions and revelations from God or a angel of God: Acts 9:3-6; 16:7-10; 18:9-11; 27:23-25; 2 Cor 12:1-7; as well as having the gift of prophecy: 1 Thess 4:13-17; 2 Thess 1:2-10; 2:1-5; and 1 Tim 4:1-5.

He was a man of moral courage ready to confront error in any form or under any circumstance. He was a man of great faith, so much so that he could do wonders by simply believing that all he needed to do was to will them. He would confront demonic forces or the principalities and powers of the air, whether a Jewish priest, a Roman magistrate, or a demonic agent of Satan.

In all these things this apostle of Christ was in the same company as Moses, Joshua, Samuel, Elijah, Elisha, the Major Prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, as well as the Minor Prophets. Paul possessed the same gifts as these “men of God” in miracles, wonders and signs authenticating him as “a man of God:” Acts 13:9-12; 14:3; 15:12; 19:11.

Conclusion

Paul is remembered more, however, as a trustee of the message of deliverance and a minister of reconciliation, as he says in 2 Cor 5:18-20.

*Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us **the ministry of reconciliation**, 19 that is, **that God was in Christ** reconciling the world to himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and **has committed to us the word of reconciliation**. 20 Now then, **we are ambassadors for Christ**, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ’s behalf, be reconciled to God.*

Paul saw himself as a trustee of the message of the deliverance of the human race from the power of sin and the curse of death. This redemption of mankind had been in the mind of God from the time of man’s fall, writes Paul, but now,

*. . . has now been revealed by the appearing of our Savior Jesus Christ, who has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel, **to which I was appointed a herald, an apostle, and a teacher of the Gentiles**. For this reason I also suffer these things; nevertheless I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have*

believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day (2 Tim 1:11-12).

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