

Life and Teachings of Paul

Maurice W. Lusk, III

The Theme of Renewal

The concept of renewal and regeneration are closely related to the idea of divine reversal, a theme deeply rooted in Paul's thinking. This is what Paul believed happened in the transformation that takes place when one is converted to Christ.

The concepts of renewal and regeneration are found throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, but the theme of divine reversal is not so easy to see. Did it develop out of Paul's years of learning in Judaism? If so, where do we see this concept in the first century Mediterranean world? Did it come from the Hellenistic milieu of Tarsus in Cilicia where existed one of the largest universities of the Greco-Roman world. There was also in Tarsus a diverse presence of Greek, Egyptian, and Persian religions?

God's reversal of the fall of man was not a new idea; from what appears in rabbinic writings of later centuries, there was a good bit of speculation about the role of Adam in the coming of the messianic age. In one rabbi's comments on Isaiah 57:16, he interpreted the text to say, "*For I will not contend forever [with Adam] nor will I always be angry [with his descendents] for a Spirit (*ruach*) will go out from me,*" (*Genesis Rabbah* 24.4). Also, in the Pseudepigraphal book, *The Testament of Levi*, we find these words,

In his [the priest-Messiah] priesthood shall sin come to an end, and the lawless shall cease to do evil, and he shall open the gates of paradise, and shall remove the threatening sword

against Adam, and he shall give to the saints to eat from the tree of life, and the spirit of holiness shall be on them, and Beliar shall be bound by him (*The Testament of Levi* 18:10-12).

The rabbinic interpretation given these words was that the Messiah would restore Adam to Paradise or Eden, and the descendents of Adam (specifically, the children of Abraham) would join him, eat from the tree of life, and live forever. There was a good amount of discussion of Adam in the rabbinic writings, but none that spoke of a new or second Adam as is found in Paul, nor that through the death and resurrection of the Messiah a new creation of man would occur, this was the mystery (*muste'riion*) hidden within the mind of God from the time of man's fall only to be revealed in the fullness of time. That time was now and Paul was the one to whom the mystery was revealed.

The Concept of Divine Reversal

In the conversion of Saul of Tarsus he experienced a radical renewal in his thinking, his beliefs, emotions, and his whole interpretation of God's presence and activity in the world.

Saul of Tarsus saw what had happened to him as a radical change or transformation or, as he called it later, a renewal of his existence. Where would he have found answers to explain what had happened to him? In addition to the array of sources available to Saul of Tarsus, the weight of evidence points to the Scriptures, or for Paul, the Greek Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Scripture.

The most essential belief of Paul concerning man's salvation was that in the death and resurrection of Christ, God was acting out a divine reversal of the curse of Adam in deliverance of the race of man. In the resurrection of Jesus a divine reversal of the curse of death placed upon Adam occurred. The resurrection of Jesus was not a resuscitation, as had be experienced by Jairus' daughter, the son of the widow of Nain, or Lazarus. These restorations to life were short lived; they all experience death again. Not so with the resurrection of Jesus.

Paul was convinced that the one who appeared to him was a heavenly being, or as he says in 1 Cor 15:45, a *pneuma zoopoion* - a life-giving spirit - and the one who appeared to him had identified himself as "Jesus of Nazareth" (Acts 22: 6-9), whom Paul knew to have been a messianic pretender crucified outside to walls of Jerusalem.

The one who appeared to Saul of Tarsus was no longer a member of the race of Adam (a *benAdam* - son of Adam) in the sense he was in his incarnation; rather, through his resurrection a reversal of the curse of death had occurred by which Jesus had been created anew, and it was in this new existence state of being that he appeared to Saul of Tarsus. This concept of new creation is presented by Paul in his letters. Two of the most salient text on this new creation are: Rom 5:12-21 and 1 Cor 15:12-57.

God had reversed the death of Jesus through resurrection into new existence. His resurrection had brought forth a new humanity in the place of the fallen humanity of Adam. This concept is the core belief of Paul's theology so much so that it provides the basis for his view of everything God had done, was presently doing, and would do in the future.

Renewal in Writings of the Prophets

The concept of renewal was not new to Paul, it is found repeatedly in God's dealings with Israel; especially, as relates to the return of the remnant of the Judeans who were promised a return to their homeland following the Babylonian captivity of 586 BC. At this time there would be a renewal of the Jews as the people of God.

The theme of renewal is found repeatedly in the prophetic book of **Jeremiah** 16:14-15; 17:4-10; 23:1-8; 24:1-7; 27:19-22; 29:10-14; chapters 30 through 31; 32:36-41; 33:14-26; and also in **Ezekiel** 11:16-21; 18:31; 34:11-31; 36:16-21, 22-32; 39:25-29. The vision of the dry bones in chapter 37, was about the renewal of the Jews as the people of God.

The theme of renewal is also expressed in **Isaiah**, “Behold, the former things have come to pass, and new things I declare; before they spring forth I tell you of them,” (Isaiah 42:9); and in 43:18-19,

Do not remember the former things, nor consider the things of old. 19 Behold, I will do a new thing, now it shall spring forth; shall you not know it? I will even make a road in the wilderness and rivers in the desert (see also 51:4-8, 11, 16; 55:3-11; 61:1-9; 62:1-12).

The Apostle Peter used the text of Joel 2:28-29, to describe what was happening on Pentecost (Acts 2). The text he quotes is prefaced with God’s promise of renewal of his relationship to his people (2:12-19). It would be difficult to believe that Saul of Tarsus would have had no knowledge of the presence of the theme of divine reversal in the Joel 2 text. Paul refers to the prophetic writings in his letters in 150 occurrences; all do not contain the theme of renewal or divine reversal, but they do evidence Paul’s extensive use of this collection of Scripture in themes, motifs, and terminology, especially the poetic metaphors drawn from these writings.

In Jewish hermeneutics biblical prophecy, as contained in statements of God found in Scripture, has an ongoing life. The word of God never ceases to have life and may be fulfilled over and over again. Many sayings of God were considered to have a life of their own. The words of God in the form of promises or prophecies do not necessarily have a final fulfillment. A promise of God is true (or is a truth), and never stops being true; or one could say that God’s promises to Israel are considered to be a collage’ or compendium of promises that never stop being fulfilled, as are the blessings and curses promises of Deuteronomy, chapters 28 through 30.

The Western mind thinks more discursively than the Eastern or Middle Eastern mind. In Western thought a promise that is kept is a promise fulfilled; here such concepts as “dual fulfillment prophecy,” are used for finding more than one fulfillment of a prophecy of Scripture, as Deut 18:17-19; 2 Sam 7:12b-16; Isaiah 7:13-16; 9:6-7. The body of rabbinic interpretation of Scripture called *midrash* (commentary) contains multiple references to the fulfillment of God’s

promises; many of which are considered futuristic prophecies. If God made a promise to bless Israel if they walked in his ways, such a promise was not fulfilled in a final sense when the promise was received, it may be fulfilled over and over again as God wills. Such is the nature of God's word; it keeps on fulfilling itself.

We can read in Scripture numerous references to Israel and see their immediate fulfillment, but then we can go back to them after having read the NT and see many of these promises fulfilled anew. It is like what C. S. Lewis has Aslan say concerning the deep magic of Narnia; there can be a hidden or deeper application of the words or a rebirth of the promise that becomes another prophecy of something God will or is going to do.

Perhaps, Paul saw many of the promises of God made through Isaiah, and other writing prophets, fulfilled anew in the new covenant, which he saw to be made with mankind instead of Israel exclusively. Asking what the text says is the task of exegesis; asking what the text means is the task of hermeneutics. From this discipline comes many typological applications found throughout the New Testament, in the letters of Paul and especially in the epistle to the Hebrews.

The roots of Paul's theology are found in the Hebrew Scriptures and their Greek translation called the Septuagint. Especially is this the case with the themes of renewal and divine reversal. That renewal of the human race would come through an incarnation of God, and that the recreation of man through the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth was new, and Paul saw it as a revealed mystery (*muste'riion*) with which he was entrusted, but the concept of renewal as a promise God makes to man is as old as the Scriptures themselves.

The Concept of Regeneration

The term "regeneration," although a term heard often as a major theme of Christian doctrine, is found in only two occurrences in Scripture. The first occurrence is in Matt 19:28, where it is used for

the time span of a group of people – a new generation that follows an older one. The second occurrence is in Titus 3:5, which in the KJV reads,

*Not by works of righteousness that we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of **regeneration**, and **renewing** of the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5).*

The Greek word translated “regeneration” in this text is *palingenesi'as* (to be born again), used with the word *anakaino'seos* (to become new). The repetition of synonyms is often used to give emphasis to a statement. The repetition here gives emphasize to the concept of renewal. This text is often used in discussions of “regenerational baptism,” in that the word washing (*loutros*) suggests water. The most significant text on the doctrine of regeneration is found in John 3:3-5, where the idea of “new birth” or “being born again” is found on the lips of Jesus in his discussion with the Jewish scholar Nicodemus, who came to Jesus by night saying:

*"Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him. 3In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God **unless he is born again.** 4"How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!" 5Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God **unless he is born of water and the Spirit.** 6Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. 7You should not be surprised at my saying, '**You must be born again.**' 8The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone **born of the Spirit.**" 9"How can this be?" Nicodemus asked. 10" You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? (John 3:2-10).*

The expression “born again” translates the Greek *gennethe anothen*, which may also be translated “born anew,” or “born from above.” The translation “born again,” seems to better fit the context

of John 3, where the renewal of one's spirit was under discussion rather than a descent of the Spirit of God. The motif of new birth, rebirth, or being born again is also seen in John's letters where the expression appears as "born of God." John writes,

*Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is **born of God**, and everyone who loves him who begot also loves him who is **begotten of him**. **2** By this we know that we love the children of God [those born again-MWL] when we love God and keep his commandments. **3** For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome. **4** Because all having been **born of God** overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world – our faith. **5** Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? (1 John 5:1-5; cf. 3:9; 4:7; 5:18)*

The expression "born again" or "born of God," is the same as Paul's "new creation" terminology. The expressions "new birth" and "new creation" are interchangeable terms for "regeneration," which Paul develops in his letters, where he writes, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a **new creation**; the old has gone, the **new** has come (2 Cor 5:17). In Gal 2, he writes,

*For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, ¹⁵by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. **His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace** (Gal 2:14-15).*

In his letter to the Ephesians he writes,

*This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, **that you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk**, in the futility of their mind, **18** having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart; **19** who, being past feeling, have given themselves over to lewdness, to work all uncleanness with greediness. But you have not so learned Christ, **21** if indeed you have heard him*

and have been taught by him, as the truth is in Jesus: 22 that you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, 23 and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, 24 and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness (Eph 2:17-24).

Then, in Col 3, Paul instructs the church at Colossae, “Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on **the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator,**” (Col 3:9-10).

The Apostle Peter expresses this concept in his writings,

*Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart, 23 **having been born again**, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever (1 Peter 1:22-23).*

In all of this there runs throughout the joint-theme of “divine reversal” in the terms conveying the idea of “renewal,” born again, new birth, and new creation in Christ; all summed up under the heading of, “regeneration.”

Conclusion

As mentioned earlier, Paul’s concept of divine reversal is the core belief that runs throughout his interpretation of the ways and means of God’s salvation of man. This he does through the use of metaphorical figures or imagery, drawing from events of the world with which his readers would be familiar, to show presence of divine reversal in each of the figures, which are as follows:

There is the use of “Redemption” or “Ransom,” in which Paul borrows from the slave market. In this metaphorical imagery man is portrayed as one freed from enslavement to the satanic powers of sin and death by the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Another is "Conquest," in which Paul portrays Christ as having destroyed the power of sin and the satanic forces that enslaved man through the powers of sin and death. This also was accomplished by means of divine reversal.

Perhaps one of his most involved and misunderstood images is that of "Justification," which Paul borrows from the courts of law and Jewish apocalyptic literature, which portrays man standing before the judgment seat of God. In this image the concept of new creation is presented as the means by which man who stands before the court as guilty is declared "not guilty." Again, a matter of divine reversal, which was accomplished through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

One of the most misinterpreted of all the metaphorical figures used by Paul is that of "Sacrifice," taken from the sacrificial ritual of the Temple and its rituals. Here the death of Jesus is interpreted as the ultimate act of self-sacrifice, which was the antithesis of man's greatest problem in his relationship with his fellowman and his Creator; *viz.* that of his self-willed, self-serving behavior; in a word "selfishness." Man was created in the image of God, which is reflected in his moral character. The self-willed, self-serving, and self-centered behavior of man is his most self-destructive characteristic. Paul portrays the sacrifice of Jesus as one of the most powerful examples of God's benevolence and compassion, which Paul characterizes with the word *aga'pe*, meaning "selfless good-will toward others."

These are all images drawn from life in the first century Mediterranean world. Paul was a master in the use of the language and metaphorical figures of both the Jewish Scriptures and the cultures in which he found himself. These metaphorical figures will be developed in the following lessons.

MWLIII