

A CONTEXT FOR PAUL – ROMANS, JEWS, CHRISTIANS
A MAN ON THE EDGE

'A thoroughgoing Mediterranean person, functioning as a change agent among Israelites living in minority communities around the Greco-Roman world' (Richard Rohrbaugh)

SUMMARY

Before Paul, early Christianity was based in Jerusalem and then in Antioch. James the brother of the Lord, and then Peter, were the leaders. Paul made some converts to his 'resurrectional' way of living. He refused to make them Jews first, before they could be his kind of 'Christians'. He thought 'resurrectional' living dispensed them from that. After some verbal agreements, James and Peter really opposed this. So did the Antioch community, under their influence. As a result Paul no longer operated on a mission authorized by them or by that community. He went off on his own, with the risen Jesus (whom he had experienced) now his only authorization. He worked in wrote letters afterwards to the groups he had set up there.



Facial composite of Paul of Tarsus, Apostle, made by experts of the state police of NRW, Germany

'...so that all beings in the heavens, on earth, and in the underworld, should bend the knee at the name of Jesus and that every tongue should acclaim Jesus Christ as LORD, to the glory of God the Father...' Phil 2, 10-11

Until the last quarter of the 20th century, interpreters approached Paul mainly from a chosen theological or spiritual point of view. They never even considered that the **Roman Empire** had anything much to do with Paul. But since 1970s, thanks largely to archaeological discoveries and thanks to insights into Roman religion, scholars have begun to see the importance of viewing Paul from a **political** angle and to realize how much his writings reflected the struggle against the effects of the Roman Empire on ordinary people. In the 'new' interpretation of Paul, which has been developing over the past forty years, we are beginning to see Paul's links to the political and religious situation of his day. It is his relation to the politics, especially the religious politics, that is throwing a different light on Paul. Many will recall that, in recent years, beginning some 15 to

20 years ago now – much the same thing has happened in the studies of the historical Jesus. Unlike Jesus, who lived in a backwater in Galilee, Paul is wandering around almost the entirety of the eastern side of the Roman Empire. It is a complex piece of politics and religion. We have recently begun to see Paul in strong disagreement with that general political scene and as having found an alternative. In fact I think he didn't disagree with it very much, until he had found the alternative through his faith-experience of the risen Jesus.

Israel was one response to this political situation. I see Paul as realizing that Israel was all about an alternative political situation which it never quite achieved. Paul thinks he himself is really doing what Israel was trying to do and never quite succeeded. So there is less conflict between Paul and Israel than perhaps has been presented in the past. In that light there are **four things** that are emerging:

- * a new sense of Paul's option about life;
- * a new appreciation of how he understood resurrection;
- * a new appreciation of how he understood the Spirit of God – the Holy Spirit;
- * and lastly a fascinating realization that we are talking very much about our own situation today, because the present American Empire in our world is very like the Roman Empire in Paul's world. The parallels are easy to make.

These deeper and central intuitions developed slowly in Paul. There's a whole process of **development** in him as he gets older. In that process, we can appreciate the man. He is really a wandering Jew – emphasis on wandering, and emphasis on Jew – and he went to Europe, initially in Philippi and Thessalonika, and then went into the heartland of the Greek/Roman culture - into Achaia and Corinth, and he stayed longest in the largest growing city of the Middle East of the time, which was Ephesus. He specialized in cities and seaports and road connections on major East/West transport links.

He did it all. And in a strange thing, at the end of Romans, in 15: 23, he actually says he has done it all. He has achieved everything that he was on about. Yet his 'everything' comprised a few little groups of people, probably no more than fifty in any one place, spread around all of the Empire, numerically not very significant. But he said: "That's it. I'm going to the other half of the Empire. I'm going west to Rome and I'm going to Spain." He never made Spain, in my opinion, but he did make Rome, and that's where he died.

Interpretations of Paul have changed a lot over the years. For a long, long time, it was the Protestant Reformation that dictated our understanding of Paul, and it presented him as the champion of liberty in relation to Jewish legalism. What the reformers really meant was the champion of the Protestant emphasis on grace in relation to the Catholic emphasis on law (legalism). That was the underlying agenda, and that German Lutheran tradition has been the strongest one in Pauline studies for many centuries until quite recently. This argument is now virtually over (since the **Augsburg declaration** from both Lutheran and Catholic parties in 1999). The Augsburg declaration of 31st October, 1999, was signed by Pope John Paul II on behalf of the Roman Catholic Church, and by the Lutheran World Federation. The following are two key passages from the declaration:

- "Together we confess: By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works";
- "Grace, as fellowship of the justified with God in faith, hope and love, is always received from the salvific and creative work of God. But it is nevertheless the

responsibility of the justified not to waste this grace but to live in it. The exhortation to do good works is the exhortation to practise the faith.”

Now both sides, Catholic and Lutheran together, are looking together at the religious-political scene in which Paul lived.

When we talk of the political/religious situation, we are talking about the **Roman Empire**, and that's why we really need to step back and look at ancient history, just to feel and smell what it was really like. Then we need to look at **Diaspora Judaism** and its political place in this Empire. It is only then that we can get a really good look at **early Christian communities**, and see the place **Paul** had in it all. Paul is situated in a complex world, of the Roman Empire, Diaspora Judaism, and nascent Christianity. An introduction to each of them as the background of Paul is offered here.

ROMAN EMPIRE

‘understanding Rome is understanding Paul’ (R.Orlando)

NOTE. Roman emperors near and during the life-time of Paul:

Augustus (Octavian)	27 bce- 14 ce
Tiberius	14 ce – 37 ce
Germanicus/Caligula	37 ce – 41 ce
Claudius	41 ce – 54 ce
Nero	54 ce – 68 ce

THE BACKGROUND: GREECE

I would like to begin with a preliminary note on the relation of *Greek culture and Roman empire*. **Greece** is not originally a ‘nation’ or ‘state’, much less an ‘empire’. It was originally a number of ‘settlements’ in which commerce, military concentration, education and culture developed. The idea of a ‘city’ (polis) then emerged before there was a coordination of such ‘cities’ into a larger unity. This also meant that in each such ‘city’ there were sacred areas dedicated to local, and then more-than-local gods – many of them. Athens had its Akropolis, and Parthenon, and shrines to many deities, some of them imports from foreign territory like Egypt. The unification of the cities implied then a kind of unification of the many such gods. ‘Divinity’ became something that could then be shared around. It then went through an osmosis with military strength (and Alexander could be seen as divine – similar developments had occurred in Egypt with Pharaohs.) A similar thing happened with some of the philosophers. (They too could have a statue in the pantheon.) The de facto link between political and military power fostered the extension of divinity to major political leaders.

THE CONTEXT: ROME

The difference between Rome and Greece is interesting. **Rome** has a passion for unification. Its ‘emperor’ is a political and military chief. *The divinisation of the emperor had to come*. The Roman emperors who had claimed Greece had to be recognised as equals among the many Greek gods.... It is interesting to wonder if the creation of such an emperor-god was not necessary for

the emergence of the Roman system as an 'empire'. And in reverse, if *the emergence of a single outstanding emperor (Octavian, called Augustus)* did not bring with it a magnified concept of 'god'.

THE MAN: OCTAVIAN THE AUGUSTUS

Octavian was a consummate politician. He played a power game, and watched all the players and their constituencies. He got his power from the army. He needed to get legitimacy and authority from the senate: he managed to let them think they authorized him! He got his well-being from the gods: not family gods, but public ones that had public rituals and feasts – they gave a mandate and a blessing to the rulers. [If they did not do well, then the gods made the Tiber flood and the Nile dry up.] States and cities were quasi religious institutions: heaven underwrote the empire. The emperor was the visible presence of the gods, and was half-way to being 'divine' anyway.

A city like Athens had been favourable to Brutus and Cassius, for overcoming the 'tyranny' of Julius Caesar. Then it was favourable to Antony, the triumvir for the east, who overcame Brutus and Cassius. But when Octavian (Augustus) overcame Antony in the battle of Actium in 31 bce, Athens had to make peace with the new emperor-god. Octavian became Augustus. In fact, Augustus was good to Athens, as was Tiberius later. Some other emperors were not so positive (Caligula raided the city to embellish Rome). Hadrian was the emperor who did most for the improvement of Athens.

The fastest growing religion at the time of Jesus and Paul was the **Imperial Cult**, the worship of the Roman Emperor. Loyalty to the Emperor was shown by cult in his honor. The Caesar-cult was fast-growing, highly visible, extremely precise in its interweaving of politics and religion. You don't need a strong military presence to police an Empire if the citizens are worshipping the Emperor.

Rome, or more exactly Augustus, had done the *sort of things only gods are thought to be able to do*, that is, conquer the known world. The goddess Iustitia was an Augustan invention – what was just for the winners. Augustus' accession as Emperor and his birthday were hailed as euangelion – good news for the winners. The Emperor was called kyrios. His royal presence was called parousia.¹

For centuries the Roman Republic had been governed by two consuls. They were in office for a year at a time. When Rome conquered the known world in the first century bce, the two consuls got more and more power, and were less and less willing to share it. So, Brutus and Cassius, after the assassination of Julius (Caesar). The mighty military machine of Rome then split in two. The two parts fought each other. The unity of Italy, Greece, the Mediterranean world was split. Antony emerged as victor, but temporarily. It came to the last man standing, Augustus, the adopted son of Julius Caesar, who overcame Antony, and the wars were over, and there was 'peace'. This was after the *battle of Actium (outside Philippi) on September 2nd, 31 bce*. This is the central date in this whole panorama.

¹ In Rome (and Greece, and the ancient world generally) the tendency to do an apotheosis of emperors had a background in mystery cults of resurrecting gods, and cults of demigods born of unions between deities and mortals. My sense is that present scholarship is concentrating more directly on 'emperor cult' without too much of this background. Something seems to have happened to the notion of 'emperor' with the rise of Augustus that changed the status of the ruler, and changed the character of the language that called him divine. It was meant in a more direct way. Augustus was more than a hero of a gnostic mystery cult.

The economy boomed, the sea-lanes were free of pirates, the roads were free for commerce. For doing all that **Augustus** was called a god incarnate. In Latin he was called 'divus' rather than 'deus', but Greek doesn't have the terminology to make a distinction like that: he was a god, a son of a god. He put his divine image and divine title on coins. [Sometimes it is hard to tell if a given statue is that of an ancient god or more recent emperor.] The name indicated his job: to do god-like things, and run the whole world in a god-like way for the human race. He believed he did! He rebuilt the roads, re-established industry. He set up the infrastructures. All this as a result of being victorious. Our sources for this imperial theology are Suetonius and Tacitus. Suetonius tells his story, and at the end, says how Augustus was conceived. His mother, Atia, was impregnated by the god Apollo: so he is son of a god, directly, and not just because he was the actual son of Julius Caesar, whom he had declared divine. The 'new testament' so to speak of this 'theology' is Virgil's Aeneid: **arma, virumque cano.**²

THE CAPITAL: ROME

The height of Augustan prominence is seen in **Rome**. The forum of Augustus (and the temple of Mars Ultor) was vowed by Octavian at Philippi in 42 bce and completed in 2 bce. Mars was named 'Ultor' to avenge the murder of Julius Caesar. The forum of Augustus was a civic place as well as a religious place. There both court-hearings and sacrifices took place. Religious rites and priestly offices were set up. In it in the centre place was a single sculpture of Augustus, on a four-horse chariot. Aeneas, who originated, according to the myth, from Venus and Anchises the Trojan, escaped Troy and began a new race on Italian soil. Romulus, who originated from the god Mars and Rhea Silvia (a descendant of Aeneas), was suckled by a she-wolf. They and Julius Caesar had statues in the forum of Augustus. The statue of Augustus dominated their statues. Augustus wanted to be seen as the heir of Roman history and the re-founder of Rome. He built 82 new temples in the city. He was named Pontifex Maximus in 12 bce. The statues were in Carrara marble on Corinthian columns. The Altar of Augustan peace was decreed by the senate in 13 bce and dedicated in 9 bce. Augustus restored the republic, and the pietas, and the pax deorum; he expanded the forum, the city, and the empire; he consolidated the empire (orbis terrarum). In Rome, among his monuments, were statues of Alexander the Great (divine). Augustus got back the military standards that had been lost in battle and put them in the forum. Pietas led to victory. He was the Princeps – the leading citizen. Augustus had one child, Julia, and no son survived him. His role as Emperor went to Tiberius, his stepson from Livia's previous marriage to Claudius. Tiberius's nephew was Germanicus. Germanicus' son was Caligula (little boot) who became emperor in 37 ce and was assassinated by the army. Claudius succeeded Caligula. He held the Saeculum Games on the Campo Marzo in 47 ce for the alleged 800 years since the foundation of Rome. Nero is the last of the Julio-Claudian Emperors.³

Every coin said Caesar was god, the son of god, the redeemer.

THE PATHOLOGY: WHAT CIVILIZATIONS DO

² In 17 bce Augustus adopted the two sons of his daughter Julia and her husband, the general Marcus Agrippa. They were Gaius (b.20 bce, d.4 ce), and Lucius (b.17 bce, d.2 ce). Their father died in 12 bce. Augustus brought them up and groomed them for leadership. Both died very young. Augustus then looked for an heir to his wife Livia's son Tiberius.

³ Hadrian thought Rome had a universal mandate. He wanted Jews to stop being circumcised. He wanted everyone to have temples of the sort he liked. He toured the Empire and tried to unify it and keep other people out. He built a wall across the narrow part of England to keep the barbarians to the north out of his civilised world. (Journal of Philosophy and Scripture, an interview with E.P.Sanders, vol.2, issue 2, 2005)

The Roman Empire, represents the **'normalcy of civilisation'**. Crossan uses the term, 'the drag of normalcy'. Paul thinks that the Roman Empire under Augustus and Nero represents what 'civilisation' unfortunately but normally comes to, if nothing stops it. The American Empire today stands in its line (as did the Greek Empire before the Roman one, perhaps also the Holy Roman Empire, and the British Empire in the 18th-19th-early 20th centuries). The empire-system advocates **peace (pax Romana) through (military) victory**: it goes from pietas to war to victory (and the superiority of the winners, in a hierarchy) to that kind of peace, with the aid of Aeneas (pietas), Mars Ultor (war), the goddess Roma (victory), and goddesses of Fertility (peace). The rules are written in marble. The culture includes patriarchy and slavery. The way of life is explicitly a religion, with forum and altar, worshipping a man as Emperor and God. The result is SenatusPopulusQueRomanus (or today, perhaps SPQAmericanus).^{4 5}

Imperialism is the term to describe the way the world has been dominated like this until the 20th century. Now we have totalitarianism and terrorism. What has changed is our capacity for violence, and our technology: we now have more dangerous weapons of mass destruction. Some say, and they have a point, that such imperialism in the last 200 years of the western world is the result of options taken in Enlightenment philosophy.

Peace has become ambivalent for us, and somewhat empty. Crossan: 'Peace becomes the great ornament we hang each Christmas on the tree of the world, only to pack it away again in the basement of history'.

Order in the Roman Empire was maintained through the **patronage system**, a web of social and economic relationships whose cumulative effect was the enforcement of the status quo. This system covers 'politeia' (institutions of the republic), 'oikonomia' (household community), and 'koinonia' (unofficial associations).

In movies, Romans dress differently from everyone else, and often have a British accent, while the good, liberty-loving slaves speak with an American accent. It is oral code for different peoples. In I Claudius, Herod Agrippa comes on stage with prayer curls like a Polish Jew in the 18th century – but he had been home in Palestine for years. Paul, like most others, would have been clean shaven. Despite many artists!

NOTE

Currently, summer 2008, there is an exhibition of the emperor Hadrian at the British Museum, which shows how he was venerated as one of the gods. Exhibits can be seen on the web.

DIASPORA JUDAISM

We tend often to think of Judaism/Christianity as the 'main event' in religion in the early centuries. Actually their adherents represented only a small fraction of the total population of the empire. Jewish/Christian presentations often call the rest 'pagans'. I prefer 'Gentiles': for us now, the English word 'pagan' suggests no belief in a god, whereas the 'pagans' of old were 'religious' and had their many 'gods'. But that 'paganism' did survive – its high culture survived

⁴ S.Patterson (*Beyond the Passion: rethinking the death and life of Jesus*, Fortress 2004) says that 'the Pax Americana is no less insidious and exploitative of the world's people than was the Pax Romana'.

⁵ Cf. Richard J. Neuhaus, *America as a Religion*, First Things, 2005, March.

as Christian theology, and its low culture survived through astrology, popular medicine, magic, divination, exorcism, and arguably, the cult of important and holy people (local celestial patrons).

The paideia (education program of the empire, basically Greek) rested on a different story from that of the Jewish (and Christian) tradition. There is a distinctive Greco-Roman intellectual vision.

Since Marcion, there has been an assumption, corrected only recently, that both Jesus and Paul were against Judaism, and its practices and understanding of scripture. Indeed sometimes, Jesus and Christianity itself were presented as a model of imperial culture – see Luke and Acts!

The **Jews** had a peculiar problem with the Roman Empire. In the Empire, religious pluralism was admitted and observed, and there were more and more gods in the pantheon, as long as everybody was prepared to worship the Emperor as one god with the others. The Jews were not prepared to do this. But they were given the status of an ‘exception’ and excused, because of their ancestral traditions. They worshipped only their one true God. But they were required to live at peace with the Roman system, and not object to Romans who worshipped their Emperor.

Paul is a Jewish thinker.⁶ He lived and died a Jew. He is not just a Jew who thinks, he thinks like a Jew. We need to pause, and realise what Jewish thinking is. Jewish thinking is built on some central stories. He uses these **Jewish stories**. He uses the Jewish story of **creation**, that is, the **creation (at any time and especially now) of a new political order**. He uses the Jewish story of the **covenant**, in which **God’s plan for political order** was continually thwarted by rebellion, and in which God chose to redeem the rebellious through **a new exodus (into a new political order)**. He uses the Jewish story of **eschatology**, as it was developed in his time. It is the story of **an eventual entry into God’s kind of political order**. **It is that last story that we need to know, most of all, to understand the position of Paul.**

I do not suggest that the ‘stories’ of creation and exodus are less central to Judaism: I rather suggest that they come to their own fullness in the story of ‘eschatology’, and that in that form they had a major influence on Paul.

NECESSARY INTERLUDE: Jewish eschatology⁷

Resurrection is a central concept in 1st century ce Jewish thinking.⁸ It is the key to the Jewish vision of a new political order. It refers to something that is happening now, and needs to be done now.

In a post-Enlightenment world, we tend to argue that resurrection is impossible, or at best a unique privilege for Jesus (how very nice for him...). In a pre-Enlightenment first century Jewish world, the real issue is not the fact of this resurrection, or the meaning of it, but the *relevance* of resurrection to the real political world now. Why care about it? Why call what happened to Jesus

⁶ It is important to realise how small Israel was in those times. It was not exported internationally, except in very small ways in the diaspora. It was really Paul who spread it into the Roman world.

⁷ J.D.Crossan, The resurrection of Jesus in its Jewish context, *Neotestamentica*, 2003, 29-67.

⁸ For a larger view, see Alan F.Segal, *Life after death: a history of the afterlife in western religion*, Doubleday, 2004,

a 'resurrection'? Why not settle for 'exaltation' or some other word? What difference does it make to present politics?

Prior to the first century of the common era, almost all Jews *disbelieved* in an after-life. They had heard about it. They branded it as a pagan idea that usurped the rights of their God. They positively rejected it. Sheol meant Never No More. Life here is enough, and all you get. All sanctions for good and evil happen here. Not later. Nothing then.

In actual Jewish history, things worked out roughly for the Jews, very often. Israel thought it must be sinful and was being permanently punished here in its history. It was always asking forgiveness. Deuteronomic theology (for all the positive aspects of it) worked out a theory of these external punishments of Israel by its God... Only the covenant saved Israel from extinction.

Things changed with the problems of (Maccabean) *martyrs for Jewish faith in mid second century bce*. Up till then it was thought that Jewish heroes were saved by God before and from death. But these were dead. How could they be saved? Here is where the word '*resurrection*' came in. There might be a 'resurrection' from death itself, after it had happened, into an 'after-life' or 'after-death'. It was not for all, only for martyrs. It was bodily. It was not about a survival for them. It was about the *justice of God*, who needed in justice to give them a public visible bodily vindication, otherwise God would not look just and would not be honoring the covenant. [Note: in one or other text of 4 Macc, around 100 bce, martyral death is seen not on the model of the noble death of Socrates, but on the model of the vicariously atoning death of the suffering servant in second Isaiah.] In this early stage, some imaginative ideas of afterlife, from other cultures, colored Jewish thinking. They had inherited no patterns of their own.

From this beginning of a vague idea of resurrection, came *major developments*. In the justice of God, there would be a final eschatological event leading to a final utopia *here on earth*. God would have to do this: God couldn't really think of annihilating this earth. So the final situation is not a heaven replacing earth, but heaven *transforming earth, this earth*. It is not a case of destroying space and time. It is a case of *destroying violence and unrighteousness on this earth*. That is the transformation. This is what creation and covenant and exodus had been about in the first place.

There was a problem about *Gentiles*. The above was ok for Jews, because of the covenant. What about pagans? Two theories. One, God will destroy them all in the final war at Mt. Megiddo. Two, God will *convert them all (to God, not to Israel, which is historically over) for the final banquet at Mt. Zion*. It is probable that James of Jerusalem held the second view, which then let him allow uncircumcised males into full fellowship and table fellowship in the Jewish-Christian community. [So Paula Fredriksen].

Views of resurrection were developed to fit in with either of the above theories about Gentiles. In the second view, *resurrection occurred to allow the resurrected to share in the final banquet in the utopia*.

It is necessary to say that resurrection so understood is not the same as bodily resuscitation as most people now would understand that term. You were really dead and gone after three days.... It is also necessary to say that resurrection is not the same as, or proved by, post-mortem apparitions of the deceased: that is a well-known and non-pathological phenomenon, but it does not prove resurrection. It is also necessary to say that 'exaltation' (even into 'heaven', or 'being with God') is not the same as resurrection. [Enoch had heavenly exaltation...but he made no

difference to the political issues here.] Resurrection was dressing up for a banquet...for *the* banquet.

It is interesting to note that Jews of the first century did not put to themselves the questions that medieval or modern Europeans have asked about resurrection. They were not interested in the physical shape of a risen body, or what it looked like. [Some Gentile Christians in Corinth were interested, and Paul rubbished them for asking that question!] They took a much more functional approach to the dynamics involved. The more recent questions are valid, but did not affect how ancient Jews thought about resurrection.

It seems to me that Paul's position implies that his focus of thinking is geographically distant from Jerusalem and its temple and priesthood. The 'body of the living Jesus' is the kenotic community, and it is everywhere, and it is not the old temple, and it eliminates purity as a category, and it has no further need of sacrifices, or go-between priests. Paul does not make all this explicit in every letter, but his overall viewpoint implies it. Later New Testament writers modify it more than a little. Paul never actually says the temple system must be replaced. After all, throughout Paul's life, the temple was in full business daily in Jerusalem.

NASCENT CHRISTIANITY - BELIEVERS IN JESUS

Jesus is a Jewish teacher with a distinctive agenda, preaching an idiosyncratic Jewish message. Jesus was a charismatic moralist who attracted a small following of Galileans by healing their sick and embracing society's pariahs. He respected, and observed, the Torah.⁹ Unlike Paul, who worked as an apostle for thirty or more years, he had a ministry of at most a couple of years. He never traveled to any of the cities of the Greek or Roman world, and even seems to have avoided the two cities in Galilee, Sepphoris and Tiberias.

Jesus, in this Jewish perspective, was not teaching a timeless system of religion or ethics, or even a message about how human beings are to be saved and 'go to heaven'. (Nor was Paul.). He thought of himself as an actor in the drama staged by Israel's God in fulfillment of his historical promises. This is 'Jewish eschatology'. Jesus believed he had a particular role in that drama. Jesus believed he was the one through whom God's strange purposes for Israel (and the world) would reach their climax. He announced that the Kingdom had arrived. It would not look like the kingdom that many of his contemporaries had imagined. It would not endorse their agendas. It would not endorse especially their desire to have a war of liberation from Rome, and beat Rome on Rome's terms. Jesus rightly thought that would be an unmitigated disaster. It would only add violence to violence. Jesus in his entry to Jerusalem and in his cleansing of the temple there, knew, implicitly at least, that he would suffer as a Jewish martyr, for his belief that the Kingdom had arrived. He enacted the great symbol of the new exodus, the great liberation, encoded in a final Passover meal with his followers. He had a deeper vocation than the vocation to be Messiah. He symbolized and enacted God's return in person to Israel, to fulfill the whole divine plan.

⁹ It is not historically accurate to call either Jesus or Paul a 'rabbi'. 'Rabbi' literally means 'my master/teacher'. It came to mean someone designated by learning and office as a guardian and propagator of halakhah. This use of the word had not largely emerged in the times prior to the fall of Jerusalem. Even Gamaliel (alleged in Ac as the teacher of Paul) is not called Rabbi Gamaliel, but Gamaliel the Elder.

This, in Roman terms, was an indictment of everything the Empire and the Emperor stood for.¹⁰ The crucifixion of Jesus was the crucifixion of a ‘nobody’. His executioners were Roman. His crime was sedition, that is, the crime of not believing in Empire. He was a victim of the Pax Romana. He was a dissident, and had to be put away.

The idea of a crucified god could not make sense in a first century world. What a silly god would it be that got itself crucified? And what good would that do for all of us? Even more basically, Jesus was seen as someone who dared to be human, among humans who were afraid of being human and wouldn’t mind being divine.

Without **Paul**, most of the Mediterranean might well have never heard of Jesus.

Paul has no hesitation in saying that he knew Jesus better than the people who historically knew Jesus best, who knew him for some years and followed him around, and that he understood his message better, and could put the point of it better.

Paul must have amazed people: a ‘weird-looking guy, running around talking about this other guy who was some god raised from the dead?’

PAUL THE JEW

Paul is a Jew, born¹¹ and bred.¹² His initial synagogue-schoolhouse Jewish education included reading and writing the Torah. He would then have had a first class Jewish education at the synagogue of Tarsus.¹³ Greek would have been the normal language he used with people, anywhere. It was the language in which he read the Scriptures. He would have been trained in apologetics for Judaism, and polemics against paganism (i.e., Roman religion).¹⁴ He would have been given Greek/Roman education too, in the *paideia*.¹⁵ He not only spoke Greek well, he had read Greek literature. He was probably (?) not a Pharisee,¹⁶ not educated under Gamaliel in Jerusalem, not a ‘citizen’ of Tarsus, not a ‘Roman citizen’.¹⁷ [This other view of Paul comes from *Luke in Acts*: the attitude of Crossan and Reed is not to trust the Lukan narrative very much,

¹⁰ Tom Wright: BBC April 2004, and What Saint Paul Really Said, Eerdmans.

¹¹ I am not sure of his dob. Many writers say, perhaps 6 bce.

¹² There is no discussion here about his birth place, and it is assumed to be Tarsus. Murphy -O’Connor accepts a stray suggestion from St.Jerome that it was Gischala in Galilee, the family being deported into slavery in 4 bce, and gaining their freedom later, and with it Roman citizenship. Paul himself makes no mention anywhere of a Roman citizenship. Luke produces it as a rabbit out of a hat to get Paul out of two tight corners. Is it compatible with Phariseism?

¹³ Tarsus at this time was a university town, on the borders of what we now call Syria and Turkey. It was a centre for the Stoic philosophy of Epictetus. Paul’s language is often like that of a street philosopher of this type.

¹⁴ His family was ultra-conservative, orthodox Jewish.

¹⁵ This usually included athletic games like running, wrestling and discus throwing. Athletes competed naked – which pious Jews did not allow in public.

¹⁶ I am not sure if we ought to call him ‘Rabbi’ or even a ‘proto-Rabbi’. If he was one, it was normal that he also have a trade....and a wife!

¹⁷ Most authors assume he was celibate. Murphy O’Connor thinks he was married, and that his wife and perhaps child were killed possibly in an earthquake in Jerusalem. There is no documented evidence for this.

and to rely on what Paul says about himself in his letters, and leave out what he does not say.] Paul believed that Israel had been chosen by God as the spearhead of God's action in the world. He believed in the God-givenness of Israel's vocation to be the people of God for the world. He believed Abraham was in a much more privileged position than Adam or the founders of Rome. He saw Israel as the faith-people of God, and as the hope of a better humanness than Adam or the Romans had handed down.

He knew about the new communities of Jews who believed in Jesus. He looked on these 'Jews for Jesus' as Jews (with special beliefs). Early in his adult life, he objected strongly to these groups. We have no sure knowledge of why he did that. Some think their relationship to Jesus was too different from 'normal' Judaism. Some think their breaches of Torah (if any?) were too much for Paul. Some think their behavior might threaten the liberties granted to Jews by the Romans. Some think they were a surrogate object of his un-worked-through personal anger. My own idea is that their inclusion of Gentiles in their young Jewish-Christian community was too much for Paul. He would then have persecuted their community for being too open – true Jews should not be so open. [After his encounter with Jesus on the Damascus Road, this is the very thing he advocated!] He knew all about these Christians, enough to be thoroughly mad at them. What made him so mad was their saying that Gentiles can now be full members of the people of God.

Persecution of Jesus-believers in Jerusalem drove many away from there to the cities and territories of the Empire. Some went to the coast of Phoenicia. Some went to Cyprus. Some went to Antioch. Antioch was on the Orontes river, and had a population then of about 500,000. It was 18 miles from the sea. It had its own seaport, Seleucia. Herod the Great, the builder of Jerusalem, had paved and put colonnades on the main street of Antioch. There were a number of synagogues there. There you could find diaspora Jews whose first language was Greek; proselytes (converts) – Gentiles who had adopted Judaism; God-fearers – pagan Gentiles who acknowledged the God of Israel as the one true God but who did not become Jews; and other pagans who were just curious.

Paul probably did not have an authorisation from high priests in Jerusalem to persecute such Jews in Damascus. He went to Damascus when it was under Nabatean control, under King Aretas. The Jerusalem priesthood would hardly have had much influence there, and the Jewish Jesus-groups in Damascus cannot be presumed to have been totally conforming to the demands of the Jerusalem priesthood.

Paul was probably an ecstatic, a mystic, an ascetic –and had visions long before the one on the Damascus road. And on the strength of 2 Cor, some visions afterwards.

I have wondered how much of Jewish practice Paul still did. Did he say the Shema in his prayers each morning?

PAUL'S BACKGROUND IN 'christianity'

Paul's background is that of a Jew who took Torah very seriously. That seems to be why he was opposed to a group that seemed to mount an attack on the Torah way of life, by teaching a significantly different and too open an understanding of it. At issue were the purity laws, tithes, and other 'boundary mechanisms' for maintaining the integrity of God's people. Paul kept the law as one was supposed to, and achieved the righteousness from the law that was proper to it.

He lived a good life according to the rules. He was humanly acceptable according to the ordinary Jewish norms for proper behavior towards God and other Jews.

Paul never mentions Galilee, or Herod or his sons, he never mentions the High Priests of the time, or Pontius Pilate. He never mentions the parents of Jesus, or John the Baptist. He does mention James the brother of the Lord, twice, but not in the context of that person's early life, only in the context of his leadership of the community in Jerusalem later. The only apostles he mentions are Kephas, James, and John. In contrast, he explicitly names many of his own pupils and helpers. Barnabas, Timothy, Titus, Luke the physician, Silvanus, Sosthenes, Apollos of Alexandria, Aquila and Priscilla from Rome, Mark, Aristarcus, Demas.

It is interesting to ask how much Paul learnt from the Jews-for-Jesus people in Jerusalem, how much he wanted to know about the earthly life of Jesus, how much it meant to him, how much these people told him. We have no evidence about these things. In fact, we have no direct evidence about these Jerusalem Jesus-believers that is earlier than Paul. How much did they believe? Some are now thinking that questions about, say, the divinity of Jesus, the virginal conception, the last supper, even aspects of the resurrection, would not have been raised among them at that early time. It is not easy for us to imagine a 'Christian' group that didn't raise them! But we tend to underestimate the role of Paul in all this. Much of all this originated with Paul, not with the early Jerusalem group. That group is a Davidic-Messianist group, and their interests are contained within that framework. If we move away from a general assumption that it was from them that Paul learnt a lot, how did Paul come to know what he did know? Was it through direct revelation? A good example might be the Eucharist. We have no documentation about the early Eucharist before Paul. Most commentators say Paul received his teaching about it, and his practice of it, from the Jerusalem believers. He would have passed it on as such. Geza Vermes and others now suggest it came to him from a direct revelation. Paul would then be at the origin or all our ritual practice of Eucharist. The other groups would eventually have picked it up from Paul. Likewise, we have no documentary reference to the resurrection of Jesus prior to Paul. Paul does refer to the right of a preacher to be maintained by the community (a right he refused to use) as coming from Jesus: it may have been general Jewish practice. He does refer to teaching on divorce (from Jesus) but in his practice he feels free to modify it. Where there is no textual evidence, it is hard to resolve such questions.

AND PAUL HIMSELF?

I would prefer not to summarize what Paul preached and wrote about until we have had a look at his key experiences and letters. It was original, and different from the groups that were formative of his earlier faith.

But the church that we know continues, thanks to the powerful theological vision and organizational skill and wisdom of this Turkish Jew, the real founder/presenter of the world-dimension of the religion called Christianity.

Paul did not invent Christianity, as Benedict XVI says. He received the Christian tradition from the twelve, and Peter, and transmitted it while transforming its meaning

FOOTNOTE

Early Christians, up to about the middle of the third century, worked the system and got the same privilege as Jews, in regard to a dispensation from worshipping the Emperor. They were considered a fringe of Judaism, anyway. Even if they did not have an ancestral tradition, as Jews did. Eventually, in mid third century, under Decius, laws of universal participation in emperor worship were enacted. Non-conforming Christians were then thrown to the lions. [It was still ok to be a Christian as long as you conformed.] This persecution died down, until Diocletian moved again against the Christians in 303. This resulted in a surge of public opinion in favour of Christians. Constantine read this politically and became a Christian...with an enlarged constituency! He recognised the bishops, leaders of the Christian communities, as having some administrative talent, and as being a set-up alternative judicial system. But the bishops were not going to be pawns in C's game, and ended up using him for their purposes. Their intention was to enforce party discipline with the church(es). This means that they wanted to coerce deviants into conformity within their own church ranks. This means, persecute the heretics, that is, those Christians who had beliefs different from the mainstream! The strong bishops then got C to call an ecumenical council (Nicea) to define the boundaries... It also means that they claimed the right to grant legitimacy to any emperor – or to refuse it. The persecuted church had become a church persecuting... Bishops were known for violence... They even went to the extent of directing the mob's destruction of pagan temples and synagogues. By the reign of Justinian from 527 to 565 recalcitrant pagans risked crucifixion by the Christian state!

It is important not to trace back this situation into the times of Paul....

FOOTNOTE

There was always a practical question of the way Jews believing in Jesus could mix with Gentiles believing in Jesus. The issues were cultural. The focus was a meal. Often Jews would reject the oil Gentiles used at a meal as impure; sometimes they would reject the wine they brought to the meal. At times Jews would eat only vegetables with them. At times they would not say prayers or join in libations at a joint meal. At times they would sit at separate tables. And at times they would not eat with Gentiles at all.

FOOTNOTE

The face of Paul (file 3.2) comes from an identikit constructed (February 2008) by the crime department of the North Rhein/Westphalia police, with information from German historians.

READINGS

John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L.Reed, *The Normalcy of Imperial Divinity*, in [In Search of Paul](#), pp.284-288, with Overview, *ibid.*, pp.74-75.

N.T.Wright, [What Paul Really Said](#), 1997, pp.63-75.