

## THESSALONIANS AND PHILIPPIANS PAUL THE BRIDGE

### SUMMARY

#### *Thessalonians*

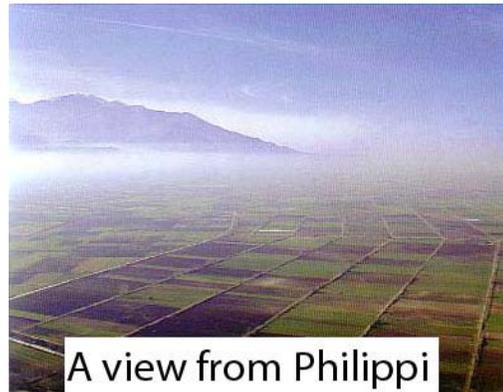
Paul's arrival in Europe, in Macedonia, at Philippi, is massively important, for him, and for Europe. Immediately, he spelt out the difference between the Emperor and Jesus. The Emperor was trying to dominate the world: Jesus was not: he joined the dominated people as one of them. That was better than being an Emperor! For saying this, Paul got into trouble with the Imperial (Roman) authorities and had to move on, to Thessaloniki. Later he wrote the community there a letter. There he dealt with a problem they had about the end of the world and the resurrection. They thought the world would be wiped out. They thought resurrection meant that they would have 'new' bodies like a new suit of clothes in some further world. Paul said no. **This world would not be destroyed, it would be transformed. The process of transformation was already beginning.** It would get a significant push forward when, soon, the risen Jesus would appear in a 'parousia'. ['Parousia' was the word for public appearances of emperors.] Those already dead would come with him, and they, and those still alive, would join him in completing the work of transforming this world. For that they would need a different kind of bodily and social presence, and Paul called that 'resurrectedness'. He saw **resurrection as a process, beginning now.**

#### *Philippians*

Paul liked these people – they had a permanent place in his heart, and he opened his heart to them. But they misunderstood him. The going religion there was Artemis (Diana) religion: with altered states of consciousness induced through frenzies and ecstasies. They thought Paul meant something like that when he talked about **union with the crucified Christ.** Paul said no. He insisted that his Christians empty themselves of all that sort of thing (kenosis) – he was not into 'spirituality' or 'mysticism' like that. Rather he was into **a political oneness with Jesus.** Jesus and Paul were both into open love and respect for all comers, in order to subvert every dominative system of living, whether from the Emperor or from Artemis, from the state or from religion. He told them that if you live kenosis like that, and join the dispossessed, what you will end up with is 'thlipseis' – trouble, problem, difficulty, in every turn of every ordinary day. But that is what union with Christ is all about! Living this subverts all empires....

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**'His state was divine,  
Yet he did not cling  
To his equality with God  
But emptied himself  
To assume the condition of a slave,  
And become as all men are,  
And being as all men are  
He was humbler yet,  
Even to accepting death,  
Death on a cross.  
But God raised him...'  
Phil 2, 6-9**



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### Introductory note

We look here at Paul's first ministry in Europe, in Greece, in **Macedonia**. The significant communities there were at Philippi and Thessaloniki. Paul wrote letters to these communities. I will look here at the two places first, and with them also Ephesus, the place from which, later, I think, Paul wrote the two letters called **First Thessalonians, and Philippians**. Paul's letters will be read in the context of events in the communities to which they were sent, and in the context of Paul's earlier presence among them.

[Most English commentators seems to think Philippians was written in Rome c.62. Many Continental commentators seem to think it was written in Ephesus c.55-57. The evidence is not determinative. Mark Goodacre has recently adopted the view that the letter to the Philippians is later rather than earlier, and comes after the Corinthian correspondence. This may well be true. I feel for simplicity's sake that it is easier to look at the letter to Philippi while talking about the situation in Philippi, and I feel it necessary to say something about Philippi at the beginning of Paul's ministry in Europe. It is the first place.]

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### **FIRST PLACE: PHILIPPI**

Paul was, early in his journeys, in Asia (Minor) – we now call it Turkey. He had a vision in Troas that told him to go to Macedonia (by ship from Troas). He took Timothy, Silas, and Luke. He then *left Asia for Europe*. [This is of immense significance for the historical concept of Europe.] Neapolis, modern Kavala, would have been the first place where Paul landed. There is no mention in Acts or elsewhere of any preaching or ministry by Paul in the port of Neapolis.

**PHILIPPI** is 16 km (less than a day's walk for people at that time) to the NW of this port of Neapolis in East Macedonia. Philippi is a vital link in road transport from west to east in the Empire, on the Via Egnatia. The stones on the Via Egnatia can still be seen, they

are the stones on which Paul would have walked. Today, a motorway from Belgrade and the Danube follows the same route to the sea. Philippi was neither the chief city of Macedonia at that time (Thessaloniki was the capital, Amphipolis the more developed city) nor the first place Paul set foot (Neapolis was). But it was the **first place where he gave his message**. Philippi was always special for Paul.

It is fascinating to reflect that Philippi was the beginning of the evangelization of Europe. On a plain outside Philippi, in 42 bce, Antony and Octavian overcame Brutus and Cassius, and history was made. Perhaps another kind of history was made when Paul saw that plain. Philippi today is a ruin.

Many think that there was no sizeable Jewish population there at the time, despite what Acts (ch. 16) says. No archeological or literary data would suggest that there was. This explains why Paul does not deal in his letter to the Philippians with Jewish questions (like circumcision or food laws): they were not important there. It could reasonably be said that there may have been less than ten Jewish males: they needed such numbers to have a synagogue, and they appear to have had no synagogue, neither a building, nor a gathering. Paul walked a mile or so to the east, to a place on the river where some gathered for prayer. It was a branch of the river Strymon, and only several women were there. Acts tells us of the first recorded baptism of a European by Paul, just outside Philippi. It is that of a rich business woman, Lydia, and her family. (The faith is Europe and Europe is the faith...) [For the beginning of this year of Paul, some Christians came there, and held a baptism ceremony in the place known as the 'baptistry of Lydia'.]

It is good to realize that **Paul brought nothing with him to Europe, but a message**. He knew no one. He walked usually (was there Avis Rent a Horse? – usually only the military used horses). He often walked for several days successively. He did not 'preach' on a 'soap-box'. He networked with families he met from his work scene as a tentmaker and around their gatherings.

Paul told these people how he felt with all the frustrations he met elsewhere. He told them, as we have just seen, how he identified with Jesus, in Jesus' own kenosis.

But this was **misinterpreted** at Philippi itself. The local religion there was predominantly that of **Artemis (or Diana)**. This was a goddess religion. It encouraged ecstasy, almost mystical ecstasy, with frenzy and orgies. When Paul talked about identifying with Christ, he was thought to be coming up with another religion like that. They thought he was trying to have an alternative state of consciousness, a kind of spiritual ecstasy.

He had to tell his friends there that what he meant was **political rather than spiritual**. He was taking the same political position that Jesus took, in favour of the downtrodden, so that there would be no discrimination. As a result, what he got was not ecstasy, but what Jesus got – trouble. All the energy of the negative system focused on Jesus, and it often focused on Paul now. It emptied out all his dreams, even his dreams about what resurrection could do for the world. He started to realize that it would all come about one day, but not through the achievement of his programs, or through his successes, but rather through the emptying out of all his dreams. This was a kenosis to the power of Jesus' resurrection, not a triumph of his own talent. All he got was a series of headaches and heart-aches (the Greek word he used for them was **thlipseis**).

His prayer was not an 'ecstasy': he was reduced to having no spiritual experiences that did anything for anyone, or even for himself, and to having no words to talk about what wasn't there. He could just believe, and look into a future that wasn't there yet... Maybe that is a more realistic way to be a real mystic! But it's not great advertising for enthusiastic beginners!

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## SECOND PLACE: THESSALONIKI

He left Philippi for **THESSALONIKI** (by the via Egnatia). The Roman Governor lived there. The Romans had been a heavy presence there: the traditional ethnic identities and practices had been pulverized by them. Paul spoke there of Jesus as the real Lord and Christ. This was an implicit and perhaps explicit critique of the Emperor. It may well have been because of this, that he was forced to flee Philippi by Roman authority. Paul also freed a slave-girl, thereby making a case against slavery and upsetting the going social scene. There may have been another reason for which he had to flee from Philippi (quickly, by night). In a Roman military action there, some of Paul's converts may have been martyred. Some may have blamed Paul for that. Such news would have reached Thessaloniki before Paul got there. Paul then had to establish his credit with those in Thessaloniki (they may have suspected him to be someone who could have been martyred in Philippi but escaped to save his skin – they would also have seen him as potential trouble for themselves).

To say that Paul set up 'communities' in Philippi and Thessaloniki is something of an exaggeration. The situation seems to have been much more informal. It was **a first introduction to 'risen Jesus' thinking**. Paul called it in Phil 4,15 'the *beginning* of the gospel'. We can reconstruct what happened. About 50 ce three men, Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, walked into Thessaloniki from the east, from Philippi, along the via Egnatia. They spoke about an unknown Jew (Jesus) who had done and said wonderful things, been crucified by the Roman authority, and been resurrected by God. They insisted that this meant that the coming age, or 'future', was already within the present one. They said that this, in contrast to the imperial propaganda, was the true good news. If Acts can be believed on this point, and I think it can, this happened just prior to the proconsulate of Gallio, which we know from inscriptions to have been just for one year, 51-52.

Some believed, mostly from non-Jewish (Gentile) backgrounds. The largely Gentile population was mostly of the artisan class – there were also shopkeepers, farmers, and slaves.

Soon there was much opposition to Paul and to them, and Paul was forced to leave the city, and move much further south, to Achaia.

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## THIRD PLACE: CORINTH

Eventually, when he was in Corinth, he sent Timothy back to Thessaloniki to check out the situation there. Timothy reported in due time that there was confusion within the believing group about **those among them who had died**. Did death remove them from

God's blessing and favor? Did it take them away from the eschatological salvation assured by Jesus when he rose from the dead? This is the main point picked up in the letter Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, some time later, from Corinth. [We will have much to say about Corinth, but can leave it until we look at Paul's presence there, and look at his correspondence with that community. For now, we note that Corinth is the place of origin of the letter to the Thessalonians.]

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#### FOURTH PLACE: EPHEBUS

[Cf.P.Trebilco, The Early Christians in Ephesus from Paul to Ignatius, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2004. Cf. the recently set up 'Ephesos Museum' in Vienna... ]

I want to introduce Ephesus here, not because Paul was there in his early ministry, but because it was the place from which he later wrote back to the Philippians.

In 29 bce, Augustus made Ephesus the capital of the Roman province of 'Asia'. It was one of the really great urban centres of that world. Under Augustus it enjoyed unprecedented peace and growth.

Ephesus is in what we now call Turkey, and is now almost completely Islamic. Turkey is now post-Christian. It has never been sure if it is in Europe or in Asia.<sup>1</sup> [It was called Asia Minor in Paul's time.] It was the third largest city anywhere (after Alexandria and Rome) and had a population of over 200,000. It had a temple of Artemis that was the size of a football field. It was the biggest temple in marble in the ancient world. It was on the road from east to west. It was the centre of religion, power, and money (the silversmiths there produced memorabilia of Artemis/Diana and it was a thriving industry). We need to realize that in the ancient world everything is religion and everything is politics: they are not considered to be separate from each other, as we think after the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It was an open-attitude, multi-cultural city: there were many gods and cults, and you could do what you preferred religiously as long as you said the Roman Emperor was god.

Paul stayed here over 2 years. It was his headquarters. A large part of the New Testament was written by him here.

Here, as in most places, Paul was a troublemaker. He was a serious threat to one of the city's biggest industries (the silversmiths). He was a menace to those who were responsible for civic order. He wanted to overthrow the openness to religious cults, and the allegiance to the Emperor.

Paul was 'imprisoned', or better, *put in chains*, at Ephesus. He was not put in the existing large underground prison with many others. He was rather in 'custody', or a kind of house arrest, shackled to a military guard, but allowed visitors, even if he was under daily threat of execution, should he or his ilk give any trouble. [He seems to have been allowed the services of his friend Epaphras.] Why?

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<sup>1</sup> It is in the process of applying for membership of the European Community.

Let us come back to the *basic conflict* in Paul's life. You could say it is **between the imperial control of a false god and the divine 'uncontrol' of the God of the risen Jesus. It is between the normalcy of imperial self-glorifying (as a model of divinity) and the challenge of kenotic self-emptying (as a paradoxical new model of divinity). It is between dominating and being crucified. It is between Caesar enthroned in Rome, and Paul 'imprisoned' (by Caesar) in Ephesus.**

[There was also a difference, and a parallel, between Rome and Judaism. Rome thought that the emergence of Emperor-religion was the beginning of 'salvation' for the whole known world. Judaism thought the Torah was the true beginning of that 'salvation'. Paul, of course, disagreed with both; it was neither; it was Jesus. It was a different sort of 'salvation'.]

Rome generally tried to integrate local religions (such as the worship of **Artemis/Diana** in Ephesus) into Roman worship. It had an aristocratic contempt for eastern charismatic religion. It wanted to be understood by the public at large as always in control, in charge, dominating every fringe group. That almost constituted and defined 'divinity'! It was in effect a violent conquest all round – something very male, very sexual. Augustus would be the new male god. He would control the Ephesian goddess ('great is Artemis/Diana of the Ephesians'). Artemis, twin sister of Apollo, was an inviolate virgin huntress, who had a temple called the Artemesion, a 'safe place' or 'asylum' for all, within the largest metropolis of Asia. Augustus let it deteriorate and become a den of robbers, and then built a new civic centre there. [Later, male Nero would rape female Brittainia.]

What Rome wanted was **state control of religion(s) – so that all worship would be done with proper ritual decorum.** Male senators were the civic priests. Vestal virgins (committed to live without sex for thirty years) tended the flame, and the fascinum (erect phallus). There was a special effort to control foreign near-eastern religions, in particular, those of Dionysos (Bacchus) and Cybele (Magna Mater). No Bacchanalia, please, we're Romans!

*The underlying real issue was a **refusal of ecstasy, charisma, and shamans (and of women?)**.* There was to be no frenzy, no orgy. All was to be repressed, and dominated. [Even to the extent of castration of some of the ministers of the liturgy, the galli.] This attitude to control needs to be understood, if we are to appreciate Rome's conflict with Paul. Paul had gone beyond both control and ecstasy.

Why was he so arrested? Probably because of the (rightly) perceived opposition he had with Caesar, because of the way he talked about Jesus. It may also have been because his enthusiasm for Jesus sounded to Romans like another case of eastern ecstatic religion.<sup>2</sup> While he was in prison, he wrote his letter to the Philippians.

We now turn to **the two letters** from Paul to his earliest communities. They are not the highpoint of his writing, but they are significant early contributions.

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<sup>2</sup> J. Ashton, *The Religion of Paul the Apostle*, shows how closely Paul's own career resembles that of a typical shaman. This is the basis of his language of spirit-possession: 'Christ lives in me'.

## THE FIRST LETTER TO THE THESSALONIANS

Paul decided to write a letter back to the Thessalonians. This was written 50-52 at **Corinth**. It seems to be written in the name of Paul, Silvanus and Timothy, but the dominant hand, at least, is that of Paul. We have textual surety of the existence of this letter, back as far as 200 ce (Chester Beatty Papyrus). It is a single letter, not a compilation of parts of a number of letters. It is written according to the protocols of letter writing at the time.

The letter shows us that opposition had arisen again from outside the Pauline-Christian community, from 'the locals', a phrase which includes both Jews and Gentiles. The opposition is not to the personal integrity of Paul or his companions or the believers. It is to the gospel message itself, as it seems unbelievable. Add to this, the fact that **living according to 'resurrection demands' did dislocate the community socially, so that their primary social networks changed, even dramatically.** The focus of the trouble was reflection on **deaths in the community.**

We know nothing specific about these deaths in the community – how they happened, how many they were, who they were, or if they were martyrs? This does not affect the argument of the letter. The problem is rather that the Christian Thessalonians were **grieving without hope.** They were doing this because of their pre-Christian non-Jewish world-view – the one they had assumed correct before they turned away from their idols and turned to the risen Jesus. Paul tells them in the letter not to grieve like the others... Jesus, who is risen and is with God, will rescue not only them **but their dead as well.** His resurrection means that he saves all from sin and death. He will do this dramatically and visibly at his future royal arrival. Then the living and the dead will share in the Kingdom of God. [Paul as a result exhorts this group to be strong in its monotheistic faith, and to be moral in its sexual practice: with a moral approach that stems directly from resurrection faith.]

The Thessalonians had been agitated about ideas about **the end of the world, about the resurrection,** and how it would work out, especially for their dead.

First Thessalonians signals the momentous entry of Christianity into the literary world of antiquity. Paul, in creating a letter for the first time, forged for himself a powerful political weapon. First Thessalonians is in the words of Helmut Koester, **'the Christian letter in the making'**. These are the first lines of the New Testament.

*A preliminary word to Paul's letter.* There was a **'religious marketplace'** already there: itinerant philosophers, mendicant prophets, magicians, charlatans. *Paul dissociates himself from all these.* There were **charismatic phenomena** in the community there: *Paul is distant in relation to them.* The Christians (and the Jews) all **expect the coming of the Lord:** *Paul agrees, and thinks, as they do, it is within his lifetime.* They wonder about deceased Christians then: *Paul says they rise first and all together meet the Lord*

Paul replied to the Thessalonians with a statement about resurrection through a brilliant use of a well-known metaphor – an interpretation of resurrection in terms of the **'parousia'** (imperial presence) of a conquering Roman emperor. Paul (and the kerygma) had been telling everyone that just as the Roman Emperor had a 'parousia' in each place he had conquered, so Jesus would have a final, determining Parousia everywhere. In it, those who had died (especially the martyrs, like those in Philippi) would meet him

first. [This is suggested by the fact that when the Emperor arrived in procession anywhere, he first went past the graves on the outskirts of the town.] They would go into the city with Jesus. It was not a case of their permanent relocation in heaven with Jesus, but of their cooperation with Jesus, and with those still alive in the city, in the transformation of the city here on earth (socially and politically). For that, they would need renewed bodies – their own, because it was they themselves doing it, and renewed, because they were to participate in a new way in making a whole new ‘body’ politic. There would only be one Parousia: there is only one process of transformation throughout the whole world. In fact, this process began with the resurrection of Jesus, and still goes on. It will become dramatically visible at the Parousia of Jesus. ‘Resurrection’ is then – in a typically Jewish way – seen as the general resurrection of all, and it is seen as a process begun in the resurrection of Jesus. This would make the whole world a place of peace through justice. The result is love all round. Paul imagined a visible Parousia of Jesus to kick this along, seemingly within his own lifetime or that of his contemporaries. He was wrong about the dates. But he had been **innovative in using the basic metaphor.** To see the general resurrection as a process already dynamically at work and in place, is *quite new in (Pharisaic) Judaism and in early Christian thought.*

‘So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation’ Thess 5, 5-8

At the same time, there is a strong position underlying the use of the metaphor of parousia here. Through his living experience of resurrection, Paul actually does not believe that death occurs any more – at least, death in the sense of a final full stop. Don’t worry about it. It isn’t happening now at all!! We are past all that...

But the point that troubled the Thessalonians was a suspicion that the actual troubles in Thessaloniki were an index of divine disfavor. If that is right, would the dead miss out on the royal arrival of Jesus and so miss out on the salvation brought with him then? Paul is emphatic: no, there will be a full share of those already dead in this salvation when Jesus comes. Paul tells them to count their positives. Their faith is fine, adequate if incomplete. Their love is taught them by God’s presence among them. But their hope needs renewing. Surely, he says, their election by God has been made clear by the manner in which they received the gospel from the beginning?

There has sometimes been a confusion about Paul’s meaning here. There is an impression in translations that the day of the Lord will come suddenly, to trap us. This comes from an ambiguity in the Hebrew/Aramaic that Paul spoke in when he was in Thessalonika. The same word ‘hebel’ means both a trap, and labor pains. Paul meant that the present difficulties were labor pains, and that the world was not dying, it was giving birth – even to the Parousia.

Paul does not miss the chance of exhorting them to a better moral life here. To do so, he recalls the dominant Jewish apocalyptic worldview. This says that we are living in an evil world dominated by evil forces. There is a constant struggle between these evil forces and the forces of good, and evil seems at times to have the upper hand. Humans are part of this ongoing dualistic struggle and take sides as either the righteous (e.g.

sons of light) or the wicked (e.g. sons of darkness). But God has a plan to end that ongoing struggle.

God will intervene in a cataclysmic way and the final massive battle between good and evil will end in the triumph of good over evil. This will happen very soon. Through God's wrath, evil forces, under the leadership of Satan (or Belial, or some other name for evil personified) will be obliterated forever. The going worldview of the Jews said that some important figure (or figures) sent by God, such as an anointed priest or prophet or king or warrior or all of the above, will play a key role in the final triumph of God. [For Paul, of course, this is the risen Jesus returning in the Parousia.]

God or his messenger will judge and separate the righteous people from the wicked people. In line with a view within Jewish thinking, he says that there may be a resurrection of all the dead who will also face such categorization into 'righteous' and 'wicked'. The righteous (whether alive at the time or raised then) will go on to live forever in bliss with God in his new creation or kingdom or paradisiacal world – our world transformed. The fate of the wicked will be the same as the evil forces, such as Satan, who will face the wrath.

Paul is fumbling for both words and ideas here. He is not taking a final position. He suggests that both living and dead will be 'caught up' together into the living Jesus. As perhaps he himself had been caught up into him on the Damascus road. He thought of a 'magnification' of Christ in his body whether in life or in death, (1,20) but he did not know how that would happen, either in life or especially in death.

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It is not clear how successful this letter was. It appears that some time later similar apprehensions revived at Thessaloniki. Some message had come to them saying that the Day of the Lord had already come. In that case, not only the dead, but also the living, are in real trouble for their salvation. To counter this, **Second Thessalonians** was written. Most say, not by Paul himself, but by others later in the longer Pauline tradition. There are differences in tone between the two letters. First Thessalonians is against speculating about the details of the future (even of the coming of Jesus). Second Thessalonians rather encourages such speculation and contributes to it...

Second Thessalonians begins: 'Paul and Silvanus and Timothy, unto the church of the Thessalonians in God our father and the Lord Jesus Christ'. It ends with 'the salutation of Paul with mine own hand, which is the token in every epistle: so I write'. There has been a swing in scholarly opinion, from an earlier acceptance of Paul as author, to a present consensus that it is not written by Paul. It may well be a deliberate imitation of 1 Thess, updating it. Those who accept Pauline authorship locate the writing at Corinth, a few months after 1 Thess. Apparently, 1 Thess was misunderstood, about the second coming being soon, and 2 Thess is a corrective of that view.

It is allegedly sent by Paul, Silas and Timothy (the senders of 1 Thess) but the address may be a literary fiction. Its purpose is the opposite of 1 Thess. It is about the final days. It opposes thinking that the Parousia is imminent. This is because the many signs that are expected to accompany the Parousia have not yet happened. It is thought to be delayed. As a result there is need of an orderly church community, with due organization. [Among the signs to come, are an apostasy, a general moral corruption,

and the emergence of a 'man of lawlessness', the equivalent of what is elsewhere called the anti-Christ. ]

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## THE LETTER TO THE PHILIPPIANS

It is from the letter to the **Philippians** that we see something further about Paul. Paul is in prison in Ephesus. Ancient prisons were not comfortable places, but dirty institutions where the prisoners were dependent for food and the necessities of life on friends kind enough to visit them. The Philippians sent him money by the hand of Epaphroditus. Paul is suffering and afflicted because of his faith in the God of justice-for-the-crucified and his opposition to the Roman god of domination. Jesus suffered for the same cause. Paul *identified with Jesus*. It is true that this identification can and must be objectivated and seen on a **political** frame. They were politically on the same cross. But there became a lot more to it. He used the expression that he was *now 'in Christ' and 'in the Spirit'*.

This explains his significant use of what is usually taken to be a **pre-Pauline hymn** (Phil 2,6-11).

He had every right to be given divine status (like Roman soldiers in a triumph after a military campaign – not technical theology), but he did not cling to that, and emptied himself, assuming the condition of a slave, and became as human beings (not emperors or triumphant generals) are; and he was humbler yet, and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a Roman cross. This is how (rather than why) God gave him the name that is of a different order from all names – and this is how he is Lord (Kyrios)

[Jean-Noel Aletti has recently suggested that this is less a hymn than a piece of rhythmic prose, in the manner of an 'encomium'. He thinks Paul himself may have composed it in an excited moment when composing the letter to the Philippians.]

*Paul lived this kind of identification with Jesus*, so that it did not matter whether he talked or thought about himself or Jesus: they were together in the same political position. This he called his 'consolation'. It must have been somewhat visible to others, and we can imagine the Romans thinking it was one more manifestation of eastern ecstatic religion, one more case of induced altered consciousness. Paul can indeed be seen as *a mystic, and an ecstatic, but with a mysticism and an ecstasy that can only come through the cross, which liberates from all other forms of mysticism and ecstasy, as it liberates from all forms of domination (imperial or Torah).*<sup>3</sup> The way of life that Paul learns is neither esoteric nor in an ancient sense, religious.

It is precisely in his suffering that Paul experiences this. He may have thought that one day he might experience something like this union with Jesus, positively, when he would

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<sup>3</sup> I do not think this altered consciousness need be understood in the same way as trance states in later Christian mystics. For Paul, it is always earthed into the political realities around him, as is Jesus through resurrection. There is always a both/and approach in Paul: Jesus-in-the-political-realities. He does not sublimate, he does not reduce, he holds both together. Which, for him, is mysticism.

have achieved the work of his apostolate and unified God-worshippers and Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. It didn't work out like that. Instead, the Romans 'got' him, just as they 'got' Jesus. It was **a kenosis, an emptying out of his apostolic dreams.** Somehow he knew Jesus was like that too, and somehow he knew that God and the Spirit were like that too. It was not in going up to the seventh heaven (or higher?) but in going down kenotically to the Roman prisons that the whole mystery was taking place. **This – not some imagination – was the general resurrection process alive and at work.** All Christians were called into living it. Now. Here. This way.<sup>4</sup>

In Philippians, you have two central ideas: kenosis, and epectasis. Kenosis. The self-emptying of Christ is a very powerful motif – it is the pre-eminent figure of spiritual poverty. Wallace Stevens: "It is poverty's speech that seeks us out the most". It is a figure of prayer. To pray is to give oneself over to poverty's speech: the poverty of the Christ, the spiritual poverty of talking to God outside the sphere of experience, the linguistic poverty of praying with no words and few images. Epectasis. A stretching out to the future, because one is called into the (dark) love of God. [K.Hart, interview, Journal of Philosophy and Scripture, vol.2, issue 2, spring 2005.]

Cf. L. Ann Jervis, At the Heart of the Gospel: Suffering in the Earliest Christian Message, Eerdmans, reviewed by Dan Harrington, s.j., America Magazine, May 21, 2007.

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EXCURSUS:

**THE PEOPLE IN PAUL'S GROUPS – JEWS AND GENTILES; HOUSEHOLDS AND FAMILIES; WOMEN.**

I think it is good to realize who the people were, who were attracted to Paul and received him. They were Jews and Gentiles; they lived in households; they lived their family life; many of them were women. Recent writers have given us a social picture of such living. I would like to mention some of their writings, and hope it contributes to a socially-real picture of Paul's early groups.

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**JEWS AND GENTILES**

Bruce Malina, and John Pilch,  
Social-science Commentary on the Letters of Paul  
Fortress, 2006

We ought to get rid of the distinction between Jew and Greek. We ought rather to use the distinction between **Judean and Hellenist**. 'Greek' as an ethnic category did not exist in the first century world. It was then a general designation for 'being civilized', or living in a Hellenistic way. When NT texts use 'Greeks', they mean Israelites resident outside Judea in Hellenistic areas. Ioudaios does not mean 'Jew', the term Jews only came into existence after the fifth century (ce) with the Babylonian Talmud. Ioudaios means pertaining to Judea. Judea (Yehud) is a geographical designation. Israelites, especially when they lived in the Greek colonies, did not distinguish themselves from non-Israelite

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. L. Salah Nasrallah, "an ecstacy of folly", prophecy and authority in early Christianity, Harvard University Press, 2004.

neighbours in any striking fashion. They were pretty much assimilated into the local Hellenistic culture.

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### HOUSEHOLDS

Carolyn Osiek, and Margaret Y. MacDonald, with Janet H. Tulloch, *A Woman's Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity* Fortress, 2005.

In earliest Christianity, the Roman 'house' is 'where it was at'. Imagine an empty house, and build it up, piece by piece, with life, colour, smell, and sound. The assumed model for it is the Roman family and household. In them, people were arriving and leaving more or less constantly. In them, there were many women, some pregnant, some birthing, some lactating. There were babies and orphans. In a typical such house, there were, apart from the freeborn woman of the house, concubines, divorcees, widows, itinerant ascetic missionaries, itinerant married missionaries, wet-nurses, mid-wives, various types of servants and slaves, young girls, etc. Girls grew up in houses, or house churches, like that. There they received their care, health, socialization and education. Slave and freeborn children grew up together as equals. In the Roman world, there was an expectation that slaves were to be obedient to their masters in everything, including sexual matters. [This does not seem to have been explicitly challenged in early Christianity.] The head of the house, or host of hospitality, would often have been the woman, since men died early, or were often away. The house was a woman's place. It is a place of hospitality, education (including basic socialization and character formation of children), communication (including news), social and charitable activities. There were some ascetic women among the Romans in those times. In Roman towns, many women fluctuated between sexually ascetic and non ascetic states. Young widows were reluctant to remarry, since they would then lose control over the affairs of their children.

Early Christian houses in this culture were called house churches (ekklesiai). The simplest meaning of the word, would be 'meeting places'. It is not clear that all households in which there were Christians were 'house churches'? It is also possible that Christian meetings (ekklesiai) took place in baths and laundries as well as 'houses'? Was a house church a house church every day, all day? In a Christian house, often the man of the house was not a Christian. Domestic women had a very crucial role in early Christianity. The woman of the house 'ran' the house church.

Some wealthy women were patrons of Christian missionaries and Christian groups. Phoebe and Chloe might be good examples. Paul saw himself as Phoebe's client. The lady of the house was the leader in the assembly, in the meals, in the Eucharistic gatherings, in what we now like to call evangelization and mission. Ascetic women are mentioned in early texts, but they were probably a minority among early Christian women. Many women who are named in the texts (especially by Paul and Ignatius) are not linked with a husband: we cannot assume they were unmarried, or that they were ascetic. They are rather just mentioned as persons. Some ascetic women had households as their base (like Thecla). Young Christian widows were urged to remarry in 1 Tim 5,14 ( a post-Pauline letter).

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## FAMILY LIFE

Deirdre Good,  
Jesus' Family Values,  
2007

This writer finds nothing in the New Testament about family life, in the sense we use the word today. The word 'family' does not occur. There is nothing about the qualities of family life. Our Victorian understanding of family values has skewed our reading of the bible, and a closer reading of it reveals 'shocking' truths. 'Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death' (Mt 10). Families were not usually nice places!

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## WOMEN

J.Murphy O'Connor, C.Militello, M-L.Rigato,  
Paolo e le Donne,  
Assisi, 2006

Paul wanted full equality for women, not subordinate roles. He did so because this was what he knew of the actual attitude of Jesus. There are examples: Junia, Priscilla, Phoebe, Evodia and Syntyche...etc....

Re 1 Cor 11: men were not to wear their hair long, and women not to wear their hair short: to do so would be taken as a sign of homosexuality. The Greek here (kalumma) does not mean veil, it means hair. The angels referred to are messengers and visitors from other communities – they could be scandalized.

Re 1 Cor 14, 24-5: this is not Paul, it is an interpolation from the same hand as the author of the pastorals. It tells women to be quiet in the assemblies, which contradicts Paul.

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## WOMEN IN THE GOSPELS

F.Scott Spencer,  
Dancing Girls, Loose Ladies, and Women of the Cloth: the Women in Jesus' Life,  
Continuum, 2004

In **Matthew's** genealogy of Jesus, there are four women mentioned – Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and the wife of Uriah. It is often said that they were 'sinners', or 'strangers' (not Jews), or characters in a scandalous, provocative story. Rather, each of them stands out due to her shrewd dealings with bungling male authorities. Matthew mentions them, as an introduction to Joseph (not Mary). Joseph deals justly, heroically, and indeed shrewdly with the (male-oriented) demands of the Torah when he discovers Mary's pregnancy. You might even see him as becoming a 'eunuch for the sake of the kingdom of heaven' – an idea that turns the usual notions of masculinity on their head.

In **Mark**, we have the episode of Herodias and her dancing daughter. [For interesting backdrop, read the stories of Judith, Jezebel, and Esther.] Note that the episode is placed by Mark just after that of the hemorrhaging woman, and that of the daughter of Jairus. The hemorrhaging woman, just like Herodias and her daughter, manipulates

male power to secure what she wants. In Mark 7, soon after these incidents, the (foreign) Syrophenician woman with the demonized daughter, holds Jesus to his commitment to loving service and prods him into healing her daughter. This leads in Mark to the second feeding miracle which takes place in the (foreign) Gentile region of the Decapolis. [Perhaps it is the third feeding – Jesus has already fed the woman's dog, too!] Jesus in Mark is a developing, maturing figure, open to woman's leadership and guidance.

The episode of the 'loose' woman at the house of Simon the Pharisee is interesting. The narrative is read as presenting the woman as deviant, not observing the proper barriers between men and women and exhibiting varying forms of female erotica. [Cf. the seductive woman of Prov.7 and Sirach 9; the female partner in the Song of Songs; the Woman Wisdom in Prov 1-9] She kisses and caresses, and weeps and wets with tears. But she is unnamed, unvoiced, and the text would seem to prefer it if she were unmentioned.

In **John**, we have Cana, and the Samaritan woman, and Martha and Mary (at the raising of Lazarus). In the last mentioned incident, the sisters challenge Jesus' honor by faulting him for failing his obligations as both Lord and friend. Jesus responds to Martha in a dominant, male-oriented way, whereas he responds to Mary with sympathetic emotion. Overall, Jesus is a more complex figure than any of the woman characters in John: he is more unstable, vacillating between authority and intimacy. This may tell us more about the evangelist than about Jesus.....

In **Luke-Acts**, there are woman prophets, and there are slave girls, but they are little more than window-dressing. The prophets say nothing and are overshadowed by the men. There is an unnamed slave girl in the passion narrative, there is Rhoda, the slave girl in Acts 12, and there is the slave girl who is silenced by Paul (Acts 16). In Acts, Luke does not liberate women from domestic duty, but he does ennoble household service. [Lydia, often seen as a prominent member of society in Philippi, is perhaps on the lower ledges of the social hierarchy, outside the city walls. Priscilla is the most liberated woman in Acts, but she functions more as a private tutor than a public teacher.]

It is interesting that behind many of the texts there is a strong allusion to the Song of Songs and to the Wisdom literature.

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#### WOMEN AND PAUL

Barbara Reid, [America Magazine](#), November 10, 2008

This is a valuable look at **particular women linked with Paul.**

**Phoebe** was the deacon (diakonos) of Cenchreae, the servant or minister of the community, perhaps in financial matters as well as in other ways. She was a leader of many, and supplied her home for worship, and there would have a presidential place at the home eucharist. There were others, who worked hard in the Lord, who risked their necks for Paul's life, who gathered the church community in their home, who helped Paul found the church at Ephesus, who taught Apollos the Christian life. There were others like Prisca: **Nympha** at Colossae,

Mary the mother of John Mark in Jerusalem, Lydia (of the purple dye trade) at Philippi – Paul went to her house when he got out of prison there.

Euvodia and Syntyche are mentioned at Philippi, too, since they struggled beside Paul there, in the work of the gospel. Andronicus, her husband, and Junia (Joanna) are prominent among the apostles, and as Paul says, were in Christ before I was...

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#### READINGS

Helmut Koester, First Thessalonians: an Experiment in Christian Writing, in Paul and his World, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2007, p.15...

John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L.Reed, Mystics and Ecstatics, in In Search of Paul, pp. 279-280, and In Christ, *ibid*, p. 278.