

Excerpt 3: Unit 2, chapter 2, section 2

From Opponent to Apostle

From what we have just said you will see why it makes sense to look at Paul next. After our imaginative account last time of what an interested observer might have picked up about the story of Jesus, we come to a person who did more than any other to shape the way in which Jesus' story and its significance would be understood. Paul was not the only person who sought to explain the good news of Jesus, but the depth of his thought made such a profound impression on those who heard and read what he said, that his writings became treasured documents of the church.

In Paul's letters we meet a vigorous, energetic and passionate advocate of the new faith. Before that he had been an equally vigorous, energetic and passionate opponent of the new faith. He was born in Tarsus, the capital of Cilicia in Asia Minor. His two names, Saul (Jewish), and Paul (Greek), show he lived in two cultures. In thought and attitude he was thoroughly Jewish. He was well educated and may have gone to university in Tarsus. From his parents he received the status of a Roman citizen. None of this is as important as his Jewish training. According to Acts (22:3), he studied under one of the great Jewish teachers, Gamaliel. But where Gamaliel leaned in a liberal direction, Paul leaned in the direction of stricter Pharisaism. He described himself as zealous.

In Paul's day, many Pharisees were zealous for God, zealous for the Law, and with a sense of right and duty to express that zeal in practice. Their reading of scripture and their religious practices sustained their zeal. They were not unlike religious revolutionaries in the modern Middle East. In Paul's day, not all Pharisees were like that, though most probably were. The more moderate approach of Gamaliel, who was content to wait and see whether the new Christian movement would thrive or wither (Acts 5:34-39), represents the other end of the scale. The moderates won the day in the period after the war with Rome in the 60s.

Like other zealous Pharisees, Saul read the scriptures with a clear understanding of their message. God had called Israel into existence both as a special people and to be a light to the Gentiles. Israel failed to live up to the covenant, went into exile and returned in the dream of restoration. But the covenant remained incomplete. Israel continued to be unfaithful; the Gentiles showed no sign of looking to Israel for enlightenment as Isaiah had hoped. The temple was splendid, but had been built by Herod, who was scarcely a model of faithful Jewish piety. Perhaps worst of all was the failure of some Israelites to do what God expected of them. The message was clear and simple: there is but one God; Israel is God's people; God will soon act to restore Israel, punish the nations, and defeat evil. What Israel must do was keep the Law, otherwise it would be condemned along with the nations.

This is the context for understanding a key word that will crop up in Paul's Christian writings, "justification". There was a clear understanding of what this meant in Judaism. God as judge would deal with the nations who oppressed Israel, and set Israel free. The punishment meted out would also encompass unfaithful Jews. The faithful Jews would finally be vindicated or "justified". Their redemption would mean political liberation, restoration of the temple and, ultimately, resurrection of the faithful.

This provides the background to Saul's harassment of Jesus' followers. His passion and zeal lay in stamping out any disloyalty to the Law. He did that by whatever means he could find. Later, he would write to the church in Galatia:

You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors. (Galatians 1:13f.)

In his zeal he approved of the stoning of Stephen (Acts 8:1). As a Pharisee he had no rightful authority so he went and obtained letters of authority from the priests to carry out what might be thought of as a search and rescue mission among Jews in Damascus (Acts 9:1f.) who were in danger of departing from the faith. In this way he intended to hasten the time when God would act and Israel would be saved.

On his way to Damascus, Paul's world was turned upside down. There are three quite detailed accounts of the event in Acts (9:1-22; 22:4-16; 26:9-18), but Paul's own account is quite brief:

But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus. (Galatians 1:15-17)

To Paul, what happened was an encounter with the risen and living Jesus. To describe it as a conversion can suggest that Paul stopped being a Jew and became a Christian. That is to misunderstand what happened. Paul never ceased to be a Jew, but his reading of Israel's story and its hoped for conclusion was radically revised. What previously he thought God would do at the end of time, God had in fact done in the present through the person of Jesus. God's way of vindicating Israel was to vindicate Jesus. The new age that Paul expected had indeed begun, but with this one man, Jesus. Because of his resurrection, Jesus was now the key to the story's hoped-for conclusion.

SIDE TRACK

In Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol it took visits from the ghosts of Christmas past, present, and future to convince Scrooge to look at the story of his own and his relatives' lives afresh. That is a personal story, but the same is true of bigger stories. Even nations find they have to re-tell their story from time to time. Should we read our New Zealand story afresh as Paul did Israel's story?