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978-0-521-45824-5 - Jesus According to Paul  
Victor Paul Furnish  
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## Chapter 1

# From Jesus to Paul

### Introduction

Jesus and Paul are the two most imposing figures to emerge from the pages of the New Testament, although for very different reasons. On the one hand, Jesus is the *subject* of every New Testament writing. In each of them, Jesus is affirmed and celebrated as the one in whom life is given and through whom it is constantly renewed and enriched. On the other hand, Paul is the *author* of more New Testament writings than any other person – and of the earliest. In addition, he is the subject of much of the Book of Acts. And when it comes to plain historical facts, we know more about Paul than about anyone else in the early church. Indeed, we know more by far about his message and mission than about Jesus' own earthly life or teaching.

It is often forgotten that Paul, whom the church came to regard as the greatest apostle of Christ, had not been one of the disciples of the earthly Jesus. Had he, in fact, even known Jesus, or even seen him? Had he ever heard Jesus teach or watched him heal? Had he ever observed him in conversation with his disciples or in dialogue with his opponents? There is no indication of this in the Gospels, where Paul is not even named, nor in the Book of Acts, where we meet him first as an opponent of the church in Jerusalem.

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### **After Good Friday: The Church in Jerusalem**

From the stories told about Jesus in the Gospels, we gain the impression that anyone who heard his teaching and observed his actions came away with a definite opinion about him. Some, even if not many, eagerly embraced his message and became devoted followers. Other rejected him as a blasphemer. For the majority, perhaps, initial curiosity would have given way eventually to a mixture of fascination and puzzlement. It is not likely that anyone who encountered him soon forgot what they had seen him doing or heard him saying. Moreover, people would have exchanged their impressions of him, whether good or bad, and doubtless would have spoken about him to those who had never been in his presence. This, at least, is what the Gospel narratives concerning Jesus' ministry suggest.

The Gospels also provide rather extended accounts of Jesus' last days and hours. We see him journeying to Jerusalem for Passover. We overhear the farewell conversations with his disciples during his last meal with them. We witness the somber events in Gethsemane, the subsequent judicial proceedings, and finally Jesus' crucifixion and burial.

The Gospels, however, provide barely a hint of how the ordinary people of Jerusalem – as distinct from the religious officials – responded to Jesus' death. We can only imagine. The populace in general probably would have been curious about why and how he had been executed. His opponents, presumably, would have felt vindicated, even relieved. His closest followers were doubtless left stunned, especially by the manner of his death – an ugly, Roman-style crucifixion. More than likely, they were fearful about their own safety.

At the very least, the disciples' experiences with Jesus and their expectations about the future must suddenly have been thrown open to question. One remark in a story in the Gospel

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of Luke gives some inkling of this. On the third day after the crucifixion, two of Jesus' followers are talking about what has happened as they walk along the road to the village of Emmaus. When a stranger falls in with them and asks about their conversation, he is told: "We had hoped that [Jesus] was the one to redeem Israel" (Luke 24:21). They "*had* hoped" for so much! Of course, when the curious stranger is revealed to be Jesus himself, resurrected from the dead, the despair and disillusionment of these perplexed and grieving followers gives way to faith, and the church is born.

We are dependent almost entirely on the Book of Acts for what knowledge we have of the earliest church in Jerusalem. According to Acts, it was a group of "about one hundred twenty persons" (1:15), the core of which consisted of Jesus' eleven loyal disciples (1:13). To these eleven a twelfth was soon added, replacing Judas (1:15–26). We are informed that this circle also included some women (not named), as well as Mary the mother of Jesus and Jesus' brothers (1:14).

The leadership of this congregation seems to have been at first in the hands of Peter (also known as Cephas), with whom John (a son of Zebedee) is often closely associated (Acts 3:1–11, 4:13–21; 8:14–17). Later, James, "the Just," a brother of Jesus (not to be confused with James the apostle, John's brother), comes to play at least as prominent a role (see especially, Acts 15:12–21). The special status of Peter, John, and James is also attested by Paul, who refers to them as the reputed "pillars" of the Jerusalem church (Gal 2:9). According to Acts, other important Jerusalem Christians were Barnabas (first mentioned in 4:36), John Mark (first mentioned in 12:21), Silas (first mentioned in 15:22), and a committee of seven "deacons" with Greek names (6:5). Among the latter were Philip "the evangelist" (see especially, 8:4–40) and Stephen, whose martyrdom and burial are described in 7:54–8:2). Of these other notables, only two are mentioned by Paul in his letters, Barnabas (for

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example 1 Cor 9:6; Gal 2:1) and Silas (evidently the “Silvanus” who is named, for example, in 2 Cor 1:19).

Paul himself is introduced to us in Acts as the “young man” Saul (his Aramaic name) who looked on approvingly as Stephen was martyred (7:58–8:1). After the account of Saul’s conversion to the gospel (9:1–19), Acts will refer to him by his Roman name, Paul (13:9 and following). But we are told that before his conversion, Saul was actively engaged in persecuting the church (8:3; 9:1–2). What do we know about this man and, especially, about his relationship to Jesus and to the earliest Christian community in Jerusalem?

##### **Paul the Pharisee**

Acts is not a “church history” in the modern sense. It was not written in order to provide a report of the who, what, when, and where of the church’s earliest years. Rather, its author has given us the “history of salvation” – that is, an account of how he understands *God* to have been working *through* the church. According to Acts, God’s Spirit had empowered the earliest Christian generation to bear witness to their Lord, and their witness had been part of God’s eternal plan for salvation. This was also the author’s interest when he wrote of Paul, whose life and career he presented as vital components of salvation history. In Acts we have been offered a portrait of Paul painted in bold strokes and vivid colors. Like any good portrait it represents the artist’s own conception and interpretation of the subject. For this reason, however, if we want something more like “biographical” information about Paul, we have to rely mainly on the apostle’s own writings.

Paul specifically identifies himself as an ethnic Jew: “a Hebrew born of Hebrews,” of Benjamin’s tribe (Phil 3:5), an “Israelite” descended from Abraham (2 Cor 11:22; see also Rom 9:3–5). That he had been ritually “circumcised on the

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eight day" after his birth suggests that he was the son of devout parents. He was, however, born outside of Palestine (a Jew of the Diaspora), probably in the latter years of the reign of Augustus, who died in A.D. 14. Paul's letters are written in Greek, which was apparently his first language, and he even read and quoted from a Greek version of the Jewish Scriptures. It is altogether possible that Acts (22:3) is correct in identifying his as a native of Tarsus in Asia Minor, which was an important center of Hellenistic culture.

Paul himself says that he had been "a Pharisee" as regards the law of Moses (Phil 3:5; see also Acts 23:6; 26:5). We know that Pharisaism was a lay movement, although it is unclear whether it had any kind of organizational structure. We also know that Pharisees were committed to a strict observance of the law, and that they were therefore diligent in their study of it. The Pharisees believed in a future resurrection of the dead, a final judgment, and an afterlife. Because these doctrines could not be derived from the Jewish Scriptures they were rejected by the Sadducees (another Jewish group, many members of which were priests in the temple at Jerusalem). Unlike the Sadducees, the Pharisees were guided not only by Scripture but also by unwritten traditions, the so-called "oral law." It may be this to which Paul refers when he writes of the intense devotion he once had to "the traditions" of his Jewish heritage (Gal 1:14).

How Paul learned these traditions is uncertain. We do not even know whether the Pharisees of his day had any formal training. Thus, although the Paul of Acts says that he had been tutored in the law by the noted Jerusalem teacher, Gamaliel (22:3), the apostle's own letters are silent on the point. First, he indicates that he had been an absolutely devout adherent of Pharisaism (Gal 1:14), "as to righteousness under the law, blameless" (Phil 3:6). Second, he is quite open about the fact that his commitment to the law of Moses had led him to

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become a determined persecutor of the church (Gal 1:13, 23; 1 Cor 15:9; Phil 3:6).

### **Paul the Persecutor**

#### *The Portrayal in Acts*

The author of Acts depicts Paul the Pharisee as having ruthlessly and singlemindedly persecuted the Christians of Jerusalem. He had dragged Christian men and women out of their synagogues and even out of their own homes, beating them and taking them off to prison (8:3; 22:4, 19; 26:10–11). He had been in favor of putting them to death (26:10), just as he had approved and abetted the stoning of Stephen (8:1; 22:20). He was feared by Christians as far away as Damascus (9:13–14, 21), and he had even set out for that city in order to continue his evil work (9:1–2, 21; 26:11). Although many of the details of this portrayal are historically dubious, within Acts it effectively heightens the drama of Paul's own later espousal of the very gospel that he had once so strenuously opposed.

#### *Paul's Own References*

What we learn from Paul himself about this period of his life is more historically credible. In one letter, looking back, he notes the "zeal" which had moved him to persecute the church (Phil 3:6). In another letter he says that this made him "unfit" to be an apostle, so he is able to fulfill his office only "by the grace of God" (1 Cor 15:10).

Paul himself never indicates where he carried on his activities against the church, although some believe that a remark in Gal 1:22–23 provides a clue. There he quotes a report circulating among the Judean Christians: "The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to

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destroy." If the "us" in this statement includes the Judean Christians themselves, the passage confirms the location portrayed in Acts – that is, Jerusalem and its environs. This is unlikely, however, given Paul's main point in Gal 1:22–23. He claims that even after his conversion and first meeting with Peter (and James) in Jerusalem, he was "*still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea that are in Christ*" (v. 22), and that "*they only heard it said, 'The one who formerly was persecuting us ...'*" etc.

Paul is also silent concerning the means by which he had "tried to destroy" the faith. It was perhaps by flogging and imprisonment, since those were the prescribed Jewish methods of punishment in his day. However, he would have had to administer these according to due process, and not (as in Acts) singlehandedly, or as one driven by a blinding rage.

In this connection, it is easy to be misled by a remark in Gal 1:13, often mistranslated. Here Paul is not saying that he had once persecuted the church of God "*violently*" (NRSV), or "*savagely*" (REB). The phrase in question is best translated "*intensely*" or "*superlatively*." Given the context (see v. 14), it seems clear that he is representing himself as having persecuted the church with unmatched zeal (thus Phil 3:5).

Why had Paul the Pharisee been so zealous in persecuting the church? It was not because Christians had in principle rejected the validity of the law. We know that the earliest Christians continued to observe even the regulations about circumcision and unclean foods. Nor was it simply because they believed that God's "anointed one" (in Hebrew, *Mashiah* ["Messiah"]; in Greek, *Christos* ["Christ"]), expected by many Jews, had already come in the person of Jesus. In fact, the Judaism of Paul's day tolerated various kinds of messianic sects and claims.

What was not generally tolerated, however, was belief in a Messiah who had *suffered* and who had been *crucified*. By and

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large, the Jewish expectation was that God's anointed would come as a king like David, a figure of heroic stature. True, Paul says nowhere that his hostility toward the church had been fueled by its belief in a crucified Messiah. We may infer that this was the case, however, from certain points that he comes later to emphasize about Jesus. One passage in particular deserves our careful reading.

### *Galatians 3:10–14*

Here, as in most of Galatians, the apostle is writing about faith and righteousness. Against the position that he had held as a Pharisee, he now argues that righteousness is not established by obedience to the law. Rather, he says, righteousness comes only as a gift, received through faith. He supports this by appealing to several passages from the Jewish Scriptures. First, he interprets Deut 27:26 to mean that the law itself lays a curse upon those who rely upon it (v. 10). Next, he cites Hab 2:4 which links faith and righteousness ("The one who is righteous through faith will live"), and with that he contrasts Lev 18:5, which commends obedience of the law without saying a word about righteousness (vv. 11–12).

Finally, Paul makes use of a statement from Deut 21:22–23. It had been customary, after the execution of a criminal or an enemy, to display the corpse by hanging it on a tree (as in Josh 8:29, for example). However, the passage in Deuteronomy provides that the body is to be left there no more than one day. Otherwise, it would defile the whole land, since (according to the Greek version of Deut 21:23) "whoever is hung on wood has been cursed by God." This is the statement echoed by Paul in Gal 3:13: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us – for it is written 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on wood.'"

The scriptural passages that Paul has introduced into his



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discussion have involved him in some rather precarious reasoning. We see this especially in his use of the passages from Deuteronomy, and above all when he quotes the statement about a corpse hanging on wood. Why has Paul been drawn to this particular text? Could it not have been used *against* the church's faith that Jesus was the Messiah (in Greek: "Christ") of Jewish hopes?

The second question suggests an answer to the first. The statement of Deut 21:23 could have been, and probably was, quoted by Jews as a decisive objection to the church's proclamation of Jesus as Messiah. From their point of view, this crucified man of Nazareth could not have been the Messiah, since Scripture declares that a curse attaches to anyone who hangs on wood. It is likely that Paul himself, when a Pharisee, had employed the passage in this way, and that his concern to "destroy" the church had been prompted largely by its preaching of a crucified Messiah. This would help to explain why, once he has come to believe in Jesus as the Christ, he continues to refer to Deut 21:23. Now, as an apostle, he is concerned to show that the passage does not refute the gospel but supports it.

When Paul comments in another letter that the preaching of "Christ crucified" poses "a scandal [stumbling block] to Jews" (1 Cor 1:23), he knows whereof he speaks. That must have been exactly his own experience while he was still a devout Pharisee and a dedicated persecutor of the church.

### Paul's Apostolic Call

What caused Paul to begin preaching the very gospel that he had formerly denounced as blasphemy? What changed this persecutor of the church into an apostle of its Lord? It is usual, in this connection, to speak of Paul's "conversion." The term is somewhat misleading, however, since it implies that he had

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abandoned one religion in favor of another. That is definitely not his own view of the matter. Rather, Paul came to believe that the real children of Abraham are those who have received the gospel and who live by faith in Christ (see, for example, Gal 3:6–9; Rom 2:28–29).

Therefore, in keeping with Paul's own emphasis, it is better to speak of the decisive turning-point in his life as constituted of a *revelation* and a *call*. Before examining the apostle's own remarks on the subject, however, we must consider how his radical turn-around is portrayed in Acts.

### *The Accounts in Acts*

According to the narrative account in Acts 9:1–19, a blinding light from heaven strikes Saul down as he journeys toward Damascus in pursuit of Christians (vv. 1–3). Then he hears Jesus' voice asking him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (v. 4), and instructing him to proceed into Damascus where he will receive further directions. Unable to see, he is guided by his friends to the house of a certain Judas in "the street called Straight" (vv. 8–9, 11). Meanwhile, a follower of Jesus named Ananias has seen the Lord in a vision, and has been directed to find Saul in the house of Judas (vv. 10–12). Somewhat reluctantly, Ananias obeys the Lord's command and, when he has located Saul, restores his sight (vv. 13–18a). Thereupon Saul is baptized, eats, and regains his strength (vv. 18b–19).

This story, with a certain variation of details, is told twice more in Acts, both times as a first-person account from Paul himself (to the "Hebrews" of Jerusalem, 22:6–16; to King Agrippa, 26:12–18). Common to all three accounts is the point that Paul's missionary service is in response to a divine call and commissioning. In chapter 9 we learn of this call only indirectly, in the report of what the Lord told Ananias about