

Chapter one: What Paul has to say

Reams have been written, some of it useful and much of it misguided, about the self-styled apostle Paul, chief instigator of a split within Judaism and founder of a movement that eventually became Christianity. This is a guide to what I see as the central issues and as such it cannot cover all of the ground.

From his own admissions, the comments of his detractors and the narrative conveyed in Acts, it is clear that Paul was ambitious but thwarted in some of his initial objectives. He may have wanted to improve his position through marriage into one of the more important priestly lines. Whether or not this was the intention, it never happened. He saw himself as a learned and important figure in Judaism. It would appear that this was only on his own recommendation.

He was early on involved in the persecution of fundamentalist, Nazarene Jews who practised a form of Judaism with elements that included property-sharing, communal meals, ritual cold bathing, strict observance of Jewish Law and severe punishments for infractions of the community's rules. After a vision (on the road to Damascus), he switched to siding with the Nazarenes. But it would appear that he was never fully accepted by them. He claimed visions of their martyred leader, Jesus, and thereby a commission, which in his eyes gave him parity with those who were now their leaders.

He sought initially to persuade other Jews of a form of Jewish monotheism for everyone, including Gentiles, shorn of some of the provisions of existing Jewish law, including dietary rules and the requirement for circumcision. After many often-violent rejections, he decided to focus on Gentiles including some who were 'god-fearers', associated with Jewish communities in the diaspora.

Jewish elders in Jerusalem may well at this point have been unaware of the extent to which Paul was teaching against the Law. But they did certainly know of his activities and felt it necessary to set out what should be required of Gentiles, short of full conversion. The judgement was delivered by James, as a figure of standing in the Jewish community, and sent out in the form of a letter. In a restatement of the old Noahide laws for non-Jews, the requirements included a prohibition on the worship of idols, 'blood', that is murder, and sexual immorality.

The consensus is that there are two contrasting accounts, both undoubtedly having been subject to some subsequent editing, of this same encounter. One given in Acts has, as I have outlined, Jewish elders determining what should be expected of Gentiles in the diaspora and sending out a letter to this effect. The other, by Paul himself in his letter to the Galatians, depicts it more as a gentleman's agreement that the Jewish elders would confine their activities to Jews, leaving Paul and his followers to preach to Gentiles.

It would indeed seem (from his letters) that Paul took the outcome as a dispensation to do much as he liked among Gentiles. Events suggest that what Paul was portraying was clearly was not what Jewish leaders intended or expected.

When news came that Paul was also teaching Jews that they need not observe all of the Law, he was summoned back to Jerusalem. Paul was made to join four other men in the Temple undergoing a vow (that is, a penance) and pay for their expenses, so in effect also paying a fine.

Towards the end of a seven-day purification period, Paul was seized and dragged from the Temple by Jews from Asia, concerned by rumours that Paul was preaching against the Law and also bringing Gentiles into the Temple. Paul was rescued by the Romans, taken into what amounted to protective custody and then sent with a massive protective escort to Caesarea and eventually on to Rome.

In Paul's own words (in another letter, to the Thessalonians), he was, along with his followers, driven out from Judea. This marked an irrevocable split between Paul, his followers and their new ideas on the one hand and the Nazarene Jews (known as poor ones, from their practice of pooling possessions) and Jewish leaders including James.

That is the sparse summary.

Now, for some of the many things that are troubling in the interpretations of Paul and of the beginnings of Christianity.

In the first place, Paul never described himself by this name but always as Saul. In Acts, he is at first described as Saul. Then from chapter 13 onwards, where it is noted that he 'was also called Paul', he becomes Paul. It has been suggested that he may have had two names, the latter as Paulus, for his participation in the wider Roman world and the former, reflecting his roots in the local Aramaic-speaking community. But it may be that the change of name rather reflects the perception of a change in character by the author of Acts. The good Paul on his later missions is in this way disassociated from the bad Saul who had earlier persecuted Nazarene Jews.

Paul claimed to have been an advanced scholar, learning at the feet of Gamaliel, but his arguments lack the rigour of a learned Pharisee. His quotes are all from the Greek Septuagint, rather than the original, written in Hebrew, which a Pharisee scholar would have used. Paul also claimed to have had Roman citizenship by birth, but he is described as a citizen of Tarsus and there is no indication that he had been born or brought up in Rome.

As noted earlier, some of the characters in the gospels and Acts are mirrored by people with the same names and the same or similar characters in the writings of Josephus. These could, as equally imperfectly as Acts and the gospels, be portrayals from another perspective of the same individuals. This applies very much to Paul/Saul, whose namesake Saul or Saulus in Josephus was descended in the female line from Herod the Great and so was therefore a minor member of the Herodian family. Together with his brother Costobarus, Saul is described by Josephus as being 'lawless and quick to plunder the property of those weaker than themselves'. He escaped with a few others at the outset of the Jewish uprising in CE 66 and went over to the Roman side.

The Herodians practised both uncle-niece and first cousin marriage extensively, such that many of the relatives of the Saul portrayed in Josephus were linked to him by multiple ties. The most closely intertwined were the son of the Roman client King Herod of Chalcis, Aristobulus, and his three children, one of whom was called Herod. In his letter to the

Romans, the biblical Paul/Saul wrote ‘Greet those who belong to the family of Aristobulus. Greet my relative Herodion (little Herod)’.

This is possible as simply a coincidence, though it is unlikely. The more straightforward understanding is that the depictions in different sources refer to Paul/Saul as one character. There is moreover some significant circumstantial evidence. The Roman Senate had granted Herod the Great and his sons the honour of citizenship for restoring Judea to Roman rule. If Paul were the minor Herodian, Saul/Saulus, described by Josephus, then there would have been some basis for Paul’s claim, made in Acts, to Roman citizenship. This would have been by virtue of the honour granted by the Romans to the family of Herod. It might not have been that strong a basis, given that one or two more generations had passed and there was a female link in the line. But it may have been sufficient to enable Paul to avoid a scourging under Roman interrogation, after escaping from a mob of angry Jews.

Paul/Saul and Saulus operated in the same context, in the same places and in the same time frame. They had similar attributes and they were engaged in persecutions. So, there is a case that there was originally one person behind these twin portrayals. If Paul were also the Saulus portrayed in Josephus, then he must ultimately have gone back to Judea from his (possibly protective) custody in Rome. This would, however, have been beyond the point in time where the narrative in Acts ends.

Note that Acts, in promoting an agenda, may also have rearranged reality somewhat. The really ‘bad’ Paul could have been manifested when Paul, beyond the time frame of Acts, went back to Jerusalem and confronted James ...

One of the purposes of Acts was to downplay the split between Paul, along with his followers, and other Jews, especially the Nazarenes who held Jesus in high regard. This is though the evidence which Act itself presents, supported by what Paul has to say in his letters, is at odds with this intention. It was a climactic breakdown, which represented a parting of the ways.

The issue for the author of Acts, and also subsequent Christian writers, is that a realistic interpretation of this conflict supports the idea that Christianity developed post the split, rather than as something that had predated it and thus could have generated Christianity on both sides of an angry divide. Hence, the portrayal in Acts of Temple-going Nazarene Jews as Christians, when in reality they were not. Hence also the fiction, developed by Eusebius centuries later, of a line of Christian ‘bishops’ (episcopoi) in Jerusalem who were in actuality, prior to the second uprising, Jewish administrators looking after the interests of Jews.

Now, more recently, the labels ‘Jewish Christians’ and ‘Christian Jews’, have been created with the same apologetic intent, to enfold within one categorisation groups that were distinct and opposed. Christians who disavowed elements of the Law and who had discordant beliefs and practices were barred from, and driven from, synagogues. Jews who kept the Law, with a tradition of a non-divine Jesus, remained as Jews, though ultimately also suffering persecution from other Jews, through the stigma of association.

The term Christian was first applied to the pagan gentiles who were attracted to Paul’s communities (ekklesiae) set up at Antioch and elsewhere. These new followers brought with them a belief in a dying-and-resurrecting godman into which the Jesus, who had been known

to the Nazarene Jews, was incorporated. They also adopted a meal in which the body and blood of the sacrificed God/Jesus was ritually consumed.

This meal was not advocated by Jesus, but by Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians. It represents, whether initially proposed by Paul or added later through an amendment to the letter, a giant step away from the beliefs and practices of the Nazarene Jews. The Nazarene followers of a Jewish Jesus continued with Temple worship. They saw their revered leader, like the Ebionite Jews who followed them, as great and good though probably not as divine. They would have regarded as sacrilegious a meal in which participants metaphorically ate the body and blood of their dead former leader.

So, how did Paul see Jesus and what part did he see Jesus as playing in the cut-down Jewish monotheism he was promoting?

As already noted, Paul had very little to say about Jesus, very surprising if this were then (as it did indeed come to be) the central focus of a new religion. He offered no biographical details. He noted briefly that Jesus was crucified and blamed the Jews, rather than the Romans who were actually responsible.

Paul claimed to have seen Jesus and been directed by him in visions. Seeing dead people and spirits in this way, and also in dreams, was not at the time uncommon. The self-elected Paul was seeking to establish a claim of at least parity to those followers (apostles) who had actually known Jesus. So, what if some of them had known Jesus in his lifetime? Now, Paul asserted, Jesus was after his death talking to him!

Paul may have been the prime mover in instituting a ritual communal meal, or this may have come about, as former devotees of Mithras brought with them and adapted their existing practices.

Paul consistently stated that Jesus was born naturally, according to the flesh, that is of a woman. But he seems to waver at points towards a gnostic view that Jesus may have been only in the 'likeness' of a human. Jesus could in this way possibly be regarded as a spiritual being, sent by God. This would have been more in accordance with the godman view, coming to predominate among the new recruits at Antioch and elsewhere.

Paul was arguably having to come to terms with events, especially the direction in which belief was travelling, which were not entirely within his control. The position which he ultimately reached, in his efforts to reconcile the demonstrably human Jesus acknowledged by the Nazarenes with the godlike being, enthusiastically embraced by his former Mithraian recruits, may be that set out at the outset of his letter to the Romans. This was that Jesus (though human) was 'declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead.' That is, Jesus achieved the status of Son of God by earning it!

It must be wondered how much of this Paul/Saul actually believed or, for that matter, how much of it he actually wrote in the original versions of his letters, before these were over time altered and edited? How much of the changing positions he took was an attempt to accommodate with his expanding pagan clientele?

If the core letters attributed to Paul are read carefully, it can be seen that Paul was primarily motivated to develop his brand of monotheism, shorn of what he regarded as the more irksome and unnecessary aspects of Judaism. He used the character of Jesus through the claims he made, particularly that Jesus was appearing to him in visions and had given him a special commission, to advance his position.

Though there were evident disagreements, these centred on the rules that should be followed by Gentile god-fearers attracted to Judaism and the question whether Paul was seeking to persuade Jews not to follow some of the requirements of Jewish Law. This latter was so serious a matter that Paul was summoned to appear before Jewish elders in Jerusalem and sanctioned. There is however no suggestion of any disagreement with these same elders over the characteristics of Jesus.

This is because the identity of Jesus was not then a matter at issue. The character was one of a number of past figures, including John the Baptist, seen as important by Jews. Jesus only became a focus for further dispute, as he was attributed a god-like status.

There are two passages, in the first letter to the Corinthians, which represent the elements that initially set Paul's communities apart from the Nazarene Jews, among whom may have been an historical Jesus. The first is the description of a ritual meal which Paul claims to have received from Jesus himself and therefore, since the two never met, in a vision. Paul commends this to his community at Corinth. This is though it seems as if, from the description, that the Corinthians were already practising some kind of celebratory meal, in Paul's eyes, very badly.

The drinking of the bread and wine as symbols of the body and blood of the crucified Jesus is not however something, with its pagan overtones, that the Nazarenes would have done as Jews:

When you gather together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. For each one goes ahead with eating his own meal and one goes hungry and another is drunk. What! Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink? Or do you despise the church (ekklesia) of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Shall I commend you? In this respect, I do not!

For I received from the Lord, what I also passed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread and, when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body which is on behalf of you'. Do this in remembrance of me.' Similarly, he took the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant, in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.'

For, as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

The second passage is a statement of core beliefs (kerygma), beginning with the assertion that Jesus had been resurrected, following his death, and then continuing with a list of the people to whom he had then allegedly appeared. There is some overlap in the listing suggesting that two separate versions may have been amalgamated. On this basis, one list ran from a person identified as Cephas, then the twelve (apostles) and then five hundred brethren, some of whom were still at the time living witnesses. The other list begins with James, then has all the apostles and lastly has Paul himself (through his visions):

For, I handed to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures and that he was buried and that he was raised on the third day according to the scriptures and that he was seen by Cephas and then by the twelve.

Afterwards, he was seen by other five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died.

Afterwards, he was seen by James, then by all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he was also seen by me.

This is evidence which may either have been from the hand of Paul or have been later interpolated. There are advocates for each of these ideas. The I Corinthians kerygma has elements which provide clues in respect of other post-crucifixion accounts and the identities and interrelation of some key characters.

One of these was James, sometimes called ‘James the Just’, a figure of great standing among Jews. James was able to determine what should be required of Gentile god-fearers and, along with other Jewish elders, pass judgement on Paul. Accord to early church sources (notably Hegesippus quoted by Eusebius), on the Day of Atonement James entered the Holy of Holies, in fulfilment of the role of High Priest. James is not listed by Josephus or in any other source as one of the Jewish High Priests. This suggests, if the description is accurate, that he may well have been carrying out his priestly duties in the capacity of deputy/temple captain.

Given the evidence, it is lax for apologists to suggest – and to go on and on suggesting – that James was instead leader of a Christian or proto-Christian community! It would not be possible for him to have been this and to have carried out his duties in the role of a senior Jewish priest in Jerusalem.

The reason for persisting in the false argument is plain. It is to seek to bolster an even larger false position, that Christianity arose immediately on the death of Jesus and persisted in Jerusalem after Paul had been driven from Judea. The Nazarene Jews, it would appear, looked up to and were looked after by James. They were quite likely the (property-pooling) ‘poor’ whom James had asked Paul, in his fund-collected expeditions, to ‘remember’. But the Nazarenes were not Christians, went on worshipping at the Temple and had their own perception of Jesus, who had been a Jew and one of them.

James’ high-level place in the Jewish hierarchy also rules him out as brother of a Jewish rebel, who had caused a lot of trouble to the Jewish authorities and to the Romans and had consequently been executed. Jesus may, as recorded in some of the gospel accounts, have had a brother called James. But this name, in its original Aramaic form as Jacob, was a common name at the time. The James who came into conflict with and disciplined Paul was not the brother of the rebel Jesus. Nor, for that matter, and on similar lines, could he have been yet another James, son of Zebedee, captured and put to death by Herod Agrippa I many years before.

As pointed out at the beginning of this guide, it is (with the exception of some clearly impossible events) all a question of probabilities. It is not beyond the bounds of possibility that all the contra-indications are mistaken or faked. But I would give it a far less than one percent chance that James was a Christian with beliefs akin to Paul or that he led a proto-Christian community. It is also extremely unlikely that James the Just was the brother of the rebel Jesus.

Paul, I have argued, was concerned to promote his version of Jewish monotheism and make himself its central figure. He used his claimed visions of the dead Jesus to leverage his position, putting himself (in his own eyes) on a par with those followers who had known Jesus. The dispute with Jewish leaders was however not about Jesus, but about the application of Jewish Law.

Paul necessarily came to focus more on Jesus as, partly through his own efforts and partly through the synthesis of ideas fashioned by pagan converts, the fallen Jewish Messiah became a dominant figure in terms of ritual and belief in the religious life of his new communities.

It is conceivable that all the ritual and the beliefs originated with Paul. But it is, I suggest, a little more likely that some of it came from pagan beliefs centred on a Dionysus-style godman. The fathering of a Son of God through congress with a mortal woman, sacrifice of the God or godman, the ritual meal, symbolic consumption of his body and blood, all have overtones that are pagan in origin.

But, if Jesus were in actuality a figure with real grounding, someone with historical origins among the Nazarenes, just like say John the Baptist, Paul should have wanted to find out more. He might well have chosen to search out someone who would have been in a position to know and so could have told him.

It does not appear that Paul was motivated to write up a biography or narrative, perhaps because he was too busy promoting his message. It is not known whether he did go looking for more factual information or what if anything he found out. This is because he says so little about Jesus. Of course, if Jesus were entirely mythical, a creature of the imagination then he did not need to look far, or even go looking at all.

So, who would he have asked? Who might have been in a position to supply him with information?

