

Putting Paul in His Place

Overview

This chapter considers the emergence and development of the Jesus movement within the context of first-century CE Judaism, as well as Paul's place within that movement. Next, it examines the sources of information about Paul and their relative value. Finally, the text discusses what is known about Paul's life before and after the event that led him to accept Jesus, the crucified and Risen One, as God's messiah.

The Jesus Movement before Paul

Paul's name is attached to almost half the documents in the New Testament, and his missionary work dominates the account in the Acts of the Apostles of how the gospel spread. Because of this, one can easily overlook the fact that the Jesus movement began before Paul, in Palestine, among devout Jews. Paul, also a devout Jew, was one of the Jesus movement's fiercest opponents before becoming one of its strongest advocates. Before examining his relation to the Jesus movement, it is important to consider the Jewish world of Palestine, where the movement began.

By the turn of the first century CE, the daily reality for Jews such as Jesus was Roman control of Palestine, the Jewish homeland, with all the oppression and violence that occurs when one nation imposes its will and presence on another. The Roman takeover began in 63 BCE when Pompey conquered Palestine, put an end to Hasmonean rule, and brought Palestine under Roman control. Before



the Romans, Palestine had been occupied by the Greeks and, before that, by a succession of foreign powers as far back as the sixth century BCE.¹ The imposition of Greek thought, language, and culture—a process began by Alexander the Great ca. 332 BCE and referred to

1. The period of Jewish history from 519 BCE (when the Jews built a second temple to replace the first, which the Babylonians destroyed in 587 BCE) through 70 CE (when the Romans destroyed that second temple), is known as the Second Temple Period. A concise review of this period is provided by Lester Grabbe in, *An Introduction to Second Temple Judaism: History and Religion of the Jews in the Time of Nehemiah, the Maccabees, Hillel and Jesus* (New York: Continuum, 2012).

as Hellenization—had transformed the entire Mediterranean world. Palestine had also been Hellenized, but not without Jewish opposition. Because Greek language and culture remained pervasive, even after the Roman conquest of the Mediterranean world, the period of Roman hegemony from ca. the second century BCE to the fourth century CE is commonly referred to as the Greco-Roman era.

First-century-CE Jews longed for liberation from foreign rule. Segments of the population banded behind various messianic figures who emerged at different times to lead popular uprisings, largely unsuccessful, against the Romans.² Others attached themselves to prophetic figures leading renewal movements.³ Some hoped for the coming of a new “anointed one” (Hebrew *mashiach*/messiah; Greek *Christos*/Christ), from David’s line, who would restore the kingdom to Israel (see Ps 89: 20–29; further 2 Sam 7:8–17) and be both king and shepherd (see *Pss. Sol.* 17:21–46).⁴ Some first-century Jews came to believe that the crucified and Risen One, Jesus of Nazareth, was the hoped-for messiah, or *christ*, from the line of David (see Acts 2:29–36; Rom 1:1–6). Most Jews did not. Among other things, the messiah was expected to bring about the political liberation of the Jewish nation now oppressed by Rome.⁵ Jesus had not done this.

2. For example, Simon, former slave of Herod, was acclaimed king by some Jews and led an unsuccessful revolt (see Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* (hereafter *Ant.*), 17.10:6), as did Anthronges, a shepherd, who declared himself king (*Ant.* 17:10.7). Concerning Judas, see *Ant.* 17.10:5. In this book all citations from Josephus are from William Whiston, trans., *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged One Volume*, new updated edition (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988). Josephus’ writings can be accessed at www.ccel.org/ccel/josephus/complete. Original language editions of Josephus’ works with translations are available in multi volumes in the Loeb Classical Library Series published by Harvard University Press.

3. For example, in the 40s CE, Theudas, a self-declared prophet, saw himself as a new Moses, leading a new Exodus. The Romans beheaded him; see Josephus, *Ant.*, 20.5:1.

4. The *Psalms of Solomon* (*Pss. Sol.*) are hymns written by pious Jews in the first century BCE in response to the Roman capture of Jerusalem. They are part of a corpus of valuable Jewish religious writings not included in the canon of the Hebrew Bible. The hymns, along with other noncanonical Jewish writings, are available in translation in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1983, 1985).

5. The idea of the messiah as a warrior king and liberator from the Davidic line was widespread in first-century Judaism. However, it was only one of four main ways Jews conceived the Messiah. An excellent discussion of messianic paradigms and expectations is provided by John J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star: Messianism in Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010).

In fact, the Romans had executed him. For the majority of Jews, this served as decisive evidence that Jesus was not the messiah.

The small Jewish group that formed around Jesus, at first known simply as “the way” (Acts 9:2), or the Nazarenes (Acts 24:1), was only one of a number of Jewish groups at the time. Other groups had come into existence during the brief period of Jewish self-rule that began in ca. 164 BCE with a successful revolt against the Seleucid Greeks. A family of pious Jews, the Hasmoneans, led the revolt.⁶ Before self-rule ended in 63 BCE when the Romans seized power, the Jews were governed by the Hasmonean kings for almost eighty years (ca. 142–63 BCE). However, not everyone recognized them as legitimate kings or agreed with their policies and practices, which led to further splintering of the population.⁷ By the time the Romans seized control, there were four main groups: the Sadducees, Pharisees, Essenes, and Zealots. These groups shared some core convictions; for example, the beliefs that there was only one God and that they were God’s elect people who expressed their love for God by obedience to the Torah. However, beyond a core of shared beliefs, each group had different ideas about what it meant to be a true Jew, what practices and beliefs were essential, and how to respond to the Roman occupation.

From the limited ancient sources available, one can glean a few broad insights about each group.⁸ The Sadducees comprised the elite strata of Jewish society. Some may have been priests associated with the Jerusalem Temple or members of the Sanhedrin, the ancient Jewish court system. To protect their interests, they apparently collaborated with the Romans, which did not put them in good standing with the rest of the Jews. The Sadducees rejected the resurrection of the dead, whereas the Pharisees believed in it. Moreover, the

6. This revolt is also referred to as the Maccabean Revolt. “Maccabee,” which means “hammer,” was the nickname given to Judah Hasmonean. He and his brothers continued the revolt started by their father, Mattathias. For information, see Uriel Rappaport, “Maccabean Revolt,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), vol. 4, 433–39.

7. On the Hasmoneans, see Tessa Rajak, “Hasmonean Dynasty,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), vol. 3, 67–76.

8. The main source of information about Jewish groups in the first century CE is the Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus. See *Ant. Bk. 18.1:1–6*

Sadducees rejected the Pharisees' innovative interpretations of the Torah and adhered to the text as written.⁹

Though portrayed negatively in the New Testament (see, e.g., Matt 23:1–39), the Pharisees were a widespread social and religious reform movement of laypersons who, unlike the Sadducees, enjoyed great popular appeal.¹⁰ In response to the upheaval the Roman occupation caused, they worked to maintain and reform Jewish identity around strict observance of the Torah, which they continuously interpreted and applied to their current circumstances. The Pharisees aimed to sanctify everyday domestic life and live the same holiness required of priests. According to Josephus, they were ascetic in their eating habits. They believed in God's preordained will, which, in their view, did not preclude human freedom. They also believed in a system of postmortem rewards and punishments based on how one lived. Josephus says they were admired for their virtuous conduct. The New Testament portrays the Pharisees as preoccupied with purity concerns and adherence to the Torah (see, e.g., Mark 2:18; 7:1–15; Matt 12:1–8). Within the Pharisaic movement, there were divergent views on the Roman occupation. Some advocated tolerance, while others inclined more toward revolution.

The Essenes, who flourished from the mid-second century BCE to the time of the failed Jewish Revolt against Rome (66–70 CE), opted out of mainstream urban life and society and formed intentional communities where members lived according to a set code of conduct. One could think of the Essenes as a kind of ancient religious commune whose members withdrew from what they perceived as a corrupt world in order to focus on the spiritual life. They were opposed to the priesthood and ritual system of the Jerusalem temple and were especially attentive to purity regulations and strict adherence to the written Torah. A major Essene settlement was located on the shores of the Dead Sea at Qumran. Most scholars maintain that this community produced the Dead Sea Scrolls, a collection of ancient texts and text fragments dating from ca. third century BCE to the first century CE, written in Hebrew, Aramaic,

9. See Josephus, *Ant.* 13.10:6.

10. *Ibid.*

and Greek and discovered near the western shore of the Dead Sea beginning in 1947.¹¹

Essenes referred to themselves as the “sons of righteousness” or “sons of light” (see 1QS III.13; 1QM 1:1, 8)¹² and believed they alone were the elect who represented the truest form of Judaism. Based on some text evidence from Qumran literature (e.g., 1QS 9:11; CD 9:b29), many scholars hold that the Essenes awaited two distinct “anointed ones,” or messiahs: a military leader from God who would intervene and destroy their enemies and a priestly messiah who would restore proper worship in the Temple. Finally, the Zealots seem to have been a heterogeneous group of fervent Jewish nationalists who sought to end Roman occupation through armed rebellion. The Zealots tolerated no ruler or lord but God, which meant the Romans had to be vanquished.¹³

It was within this world, where various ways of being Jewish coexisted, that the Jesus movement emerged as another reform movement in Judaism. This occurred sometime between 30 and 33 CE. The first followers of Jesus continued to understand themselves as Jews and to follow Jewish traditions, which they now reinterpreted in light of Christ’s death and Resurrection.¹⁴ Their movement, whose central proclamation was that the crucified and Risen Jesus was God’s messiah, started in Jerusalem among Jews, with James and Peter as its leaders. Within a short time, the Jesus movement spread beyond Jerusalem to other parts of Palestine, where even some Gentiles (a generic term for non-Jewish people), came to believe in the

11. On the scrolls, their provenance, content, and significance, see John J. Collins, “The Dead Sea Scrolls,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), vol. 2, 85–101.

12. References to texts from Qumran generally mention the number of the cave in which a text was found, then a descriptive name or a number that identifies the text, and then the column of the text and lines. In the citation above, 1QM 1:1, 8, “1Q” means the scroll was found in Qumran cave 1; “M” is the designation for the “War Scroll” and 1:1, 8 means Column 1, lines 1 and 8. On how texts are designated, and for an index of titles, see Florentino García Martínez and Eibert J. Tigchelaar, eds. *The Dead Sea Scrolls: Study Edition* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 1998), vol. 2, 1325–59.

13. See Josephus, *Ant.* 18.1:6.

14. The resemblance of the early Jesus movement to other Jewish groups is discussed by Daniel C. Harlow, “Early Judaism and Early Christianity,” in *Early Judaism: A Comprehensive Overview*, ed. John J. Collins and Daniel C. Harlow (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2012), 391–419, esp. 397–400.



The Jesus movement emerged within Palestinian Jewish society. However, its diffusion across Asia Minor led to its rapid growth and increased diversity. The community at Syrian Antioch supported missions throughout Asia Minor.

gospel proclamation (Acts 10:40). The inclusion of the Gentiles and the terms of their inclusion were a major source of contention among the earliest followers of Jesus and had significant implications for the development of Christianity.

The movement also spread beyond Palestine. One of the largest and most important communities of believers flourished in Antioch, Syria, the third major city of the Roman Empire. At Antioch, according to Acts 11:19, Jews were the first to receive the gospel. Then Gentiles were evangelized and joined Jews in accepting the gospel proclamation that Jesus was God's messiah. This mixed community of Jewish and Gentile believers advocated and financed a mission to the Gentiles. Eventually Paul was invited into the community at Antioch, where he lived and worked for one year. The Antioch community then sent Paul out on a mission team led by Barnabas to bring the gospel west, into Asia Minor (see Acts 13:2–3).

Though the pre-Paul period of the Jesus movement was relatively brief—perhaps no more than three or four years from the death and Resurrection of Jesus until Paul’s entry into the movement—it was a time of growth and development. During this period, the movement had spread not only beyond the physical borders of Palestine but also beyond the religious border of Judaism to include Gentiles. The practices and ideas that developed during this period influenced Paul’s own formation in the faith. In fact, he states in some of his own letters that he was passing on traditions that he had received from the Christ-believers who came before him (see, e.g., 1 Cor 15:3).

Where to Find Information about Paul

Paul’s own letters in the New Testament are the most important source for information about his life, thought, and work. Thirteen New Testament letters name Paul as author. However, based on some notable differences in style, vocabulary, and theological outlook, most scholars agree that not all of these letters were authored by him.

Few scholars believe that Paul authored 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, known together as the Pastoral Epistles. Most assume they were written in Paul’s name *after his death* by one or more followers to promote Paul’s legacy and to gain his authority for their own teaching. With regard to Ephesians, Colossians, and 2 Thessalonians, scholars continue to debate whether Paul is the author of these letters or whether they postdate Paul’s life. In recent years, more scholars have come to accept that Paul authored Colossians during his lifetime.¹⁵ However, this is still far from a majority. If these six letters, collectively referred to as the deutero-Pauline letters, were authored by others after Paul’s death, then they do not contain Paul’s own theological thought or his responses to questions and issues that arose during his lifetime among the communities of believers he knew or knew about. For these reasons, scholars rely on the seven letters universally considered to have been authored by Paul during his lifetime as the primary source of knowledge about him.

15. See Maria Pascuzzi, “Reconsidering the Authorship of Colossians,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 23.2 (2013): 223–46.

The Primary Evidence: The Seven Undisputed Letters of Paul

No one disputes that Paul was the author of the following seven letters: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon. With the exception of Romans and Philemon, addressed to communities Paul had not founded, his other authentic letters were written to communities of Christians among whom he had lived and worked. However, Paul hoped to pay a visit to Philemon and the church that met in his house (see Phlm 22) and planned to stop in Rome on his way to Spain. Among other reasons, he wrote the letter to the Romans to announce his planned visit (Rom 15:22–24).

The seven undisputed letters were written in the span of a decade or so, sometime between ca. 49–50 and 60 CE. Unlike typical modern letters, Paul's letters are not dated; moreover, the location from which he writes a particular letter is not always evident. Both the dates of the letters and their places of origin have to be established using clues within the letters and information from Acts, which helps establish a chronology for Paul's life and work. In terms of the chronological order of Paul's letters, scholars generally agree that First Thessalonians came first, written ca. 49–50 CE, and Romans last, written perhaps as late as 58 CE.

Paul's Gospel

The four New Testament texts, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, referred to as Gospels, were written between 70 and 100 CE; that is, after Paul had died. When Paul used the Greek term *euangelion* (English “gospel” or “good news”), it was not yet a technical term for the four written narratives about Christ's life, death, and Resurrection. By “gospel,” Paul meant his proclamation or teaching about the significance of Christ's life, death, and Resurrection. In Galatians, for example, Paul insists only his gospel, or preaching, which was “not of human origin” (Gal 1:11), and which was received “through a revelation of Jesus Christ” (Gal 1:12), is valid.

The letters vary in length, ranging from sixteen chapters (Romans and 1 Corinthians) to just one (Philemon). In the letters, Paul is often involved in passionate arguments over controversial issues and is insistent that his gospel, and no other, is the right one (see Gal 1:6–9). Therefore, it is important to keep in mind that even though the letters are primary sources and offer the best access to Paul's thought, they are not dispassionate, objective accounts of what went on among the earliest communities of believers. They are Paul's presentation of what others said and did. They give Paul's point of view and were written with the expectation that his first readers would agree with him.

The Acts of the Apostles

After Paul's seven undisputed letters (Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, Philemon), scholars consider Acts of the Apostles the next most important resource for the study of Paul. Luke, whose name is attached to the third Gospel, is also considered the author of the Acts of the Apostles. In Acts, which is presented as a sequel to the Gospel of Luke, the author tells the story of how the small Jewish Jesus movement grew to include Gentiles and spread from Palestine throughout the Mediterranean region as far as Rome. Though entitled Acts of the Apostles, the work is mostly about Paul. The author of Acts briefly recounts Paul's activity as a zealous Pharisee, as well as his life-changing encounter with the Risen Jesus, and then provides extensive coverage of Paul's life as a traveling missionary, including the suffering he heroically endured in order to spread the gospel.

When reading Acts, one can get the impression that Luke provides an unbiased, factual history of the spread of earliest Christianity, with special attention to Paul's contribution. However, readers should exercise caution when using Acts to construct a picture of Paul's life. First, unlike the undisputed letters, which provide Paul's firsthand accounts of his own life and work, Acts is a third-person account *about* Paul, written perhaps two or more decades after his death. Second, when Luke speaks in the first person plural "we" in Acts (see, e.g., Acts 21:1–17), he portrays himself as Paul's traveling companion, someone who knew Paul well

and was an eyewitness to the events he narrates. But certain things do not square with Luke's self-portrait as a close associate of Paul. For example, Luke omits mention of Paul's letter-writing activity, while featuring Paul as a miracle worker and powerful orator. By contrast, Paul only once makes a general reference to having done "signs, and wonders and mighty works" (2 Cor 12:12). Further, he distances himself from powerful speechmaking (1 Cor 2:1–4) and admits to being an unskilled speaker (2 Cor 11:6). Although Paul is the hero of Acts, Luke only twice (Acts 14:4,14) refers to him as an apostle, a title Paul claimed and fiercely defended throughout his letters (see, e.g., 1 Cor 9:1–2). One of Paul's key projects had been a collection for the poor in Jerusalem. In narrating Paul's final journey to Jerusalem (Acts 21:1–26), Acts omits mention of the delivery of the collection, which was the purpose of this visit (see Rom 15:25–29). Moreover, Luke seems to suggest that after failing to persuade Jews to accept the gospel, Paul invested himself in a mission directed exclusively to the Gentiles. Yet even in Romans, his last letter, Paul remains concerned about the salvation of both Jew and Gentile. These observations raise doubts about Luke's actual knowledge of Paul. In fact, many now believe that the presentation of Paul in Acts as a perfect Jew, Roman citizen, and Hellenist, who is perfectly comfortable with non-Jews, has more to do with Luke's own theological purposes than facts about Paul.¹⁶ In addition, Acts contains biographical data Paul never mentions in his own letters, such as Roman citizenship (Acts 22:25–29) and birth in Tarsus of Cilicia (cf. Acts 21:39; 22:3). Paul's silence about these details does not mean that Luke's data should be rejected as undependable. In fact, sometimes Luke's account confirms what is found in Paul (see, e.g., Acts 9:23–25 and 2 Cor 11:32–33). However, for these reasons and others, the information in Acts needs to be used with caution when constructing a portrait of Paul's life and work.

16. There is no scholarly consensus regarding the literary genre of Acts or its precise theological purpose. For more on these matters, see Luke Timothy Johnson, "Luke—Book of Acts," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), vol. 4, 403–20; see also, Joel B. Green, "Acts of the Apostles," in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 7–24.

Other Useful Resources outside the New Testament

Resources other than those directly related to Paul shed light on the social, religious, and cultural contexts in which he and the first believers lived. One can learn about the world of Jewish thought in Paul's day from many sources including the writings of the Jewish intellectual Philo, the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, and the Dead Sea Scrolls. An abundance of literature about Greco-Roman culture exists, ranging from the works of great statesmen and orators such as Cicero to those of philosophers such as Seneca and satirists such as Juvenal. The *Geography*, a work by the Greek writer Strabo, is a first-century-CE travel guide to the major cities and cultures of the Greco-Roman world. In addition, frescoes, inscriptions, mosaics, statues, pagan temples and sanctuaries, jewelry, coins, and a host of other material remains offer insight into Paul's world. That world was dominated by the Roman Empire. Among the abundant primary sources about the empire are the histories of Suetonius and Tacitus and the patriotic poetry of Horace and Virgil. Material remains of the empire can still be seen across Europe, Asia Minor, the Middle East, and North Africa.

Pauline scholars regularly go outside the texts of the New Testament to study extant writings and material culture that can help in understanding Paul's letters. This activity is not unique to Pauline scholars or even to New Testament scholars. Just as students of Charles Dickens better understand his writings by reading about the social, cultural, and political conditions of nineteenth-century



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Silver coin, Ephesus ca. 50–51 CE, British Museum, London, featuring Emperor Claudius and the goddess Diana (Greek Artemis). Artemis' cult flourished in Ephesus, where Paul's successful evangelization incited a riot (see Acts 19:21–41).



Remains of a Roman aqueduct that carried fresh water from Mt. Carmel to Caesarea Maritima, Rome's provincial headquarters in Palestine beginning in 6 BCE.

Victorian England, so do students of Paul gain insight into his writings by examining the extant literary and material evidence of his world.

Paul's Life before and after the Damascus Road Experience

Paul was probably born sometime in the first decade of the first century CE in Tarsus, located in Southeast Asia Minor, which is now southeast Turkey. Tarsus was a heavily Hellenized city that the Romans later made the capital of the province of Cilicia. In addition to Paul, a Latin name, he was also known by his Jewish first name, Saul. As a native of Tarsus, Paul was a diaspora Jew. His first language was Greek, and, like other Greek-speaking Jews, Paul's Bible was the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. In his *Geography*, Strabo wrote that Tarsus rivaled Athens and Alexandria as one of the great centers of learning and that Rome was filled with educated Tarsians.¹⁷ No one can be certain whether Paul was educated in the Greco-Roman educational system of his day, but it seems likely. Besides reading and writing, that education would have included rhetoric, the study and practice of how to argue persuasively.

17. Strabo, *The Geography*, trans. Horace L. Jones (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), 14.5:12–15.

Diaspora Jews

The Greek word *diaspora* means “scattered” or “dispersed.” It is used to distinguish Jews of Palestine from Jews who forcibly or voluntarily left Palestine and resettled in other locations in and around the Mediterranean basin. They and their descendants are called diaspora Jews. By Paul’s day, more Jews lived outside Palestine than within. In most of the major cities where they settled, diaspora Jews represented a distinct minority. However, they were visible and cohesive enough to impact the social and political order. Diaspora Jews, like their fellow Jews in Palestine, had different attitudes toward the surrounding culture. Some were more open to Hellenistic influences; others were less receptive and focused on strict adherence to the Law of Moses.

In one of his few autobiographical statements, Paul says he was a Pharisee (Phil 3:5; Acts 23:6, 26:5), and certain Pharisaic influences are notable in his letters. For example, throughout his letters Paul has recourse to scripture to sustain his arguments. Like the Pharisees, he believes in the resurrection of the dead and interprets Jesus’ Resurrection as the guarantee of the future resurrection of believers (see 1 Cor 15:20). He exhibits Pharisaic concern for holiness (see, e.g., 1 Cor 5:1–13) and, like the Pharisees, believes that true worship of God does not consist in performing rituals in the temple but in doing what is right and acceptable according to God’s standards (see, e.g., Rom 12:1–3).

Paul mentions nothing about being a son of Pharisees, as indicated in Acts 23:6. Nor does he ever state that he was educated according to the strict manner of the law in Jerusalem under the supervision of Gamaliel, a Pharisee and expert in the interpretation of Jewish religious law, as reported in Acts 22:3. Beyond self-identifying as a Pharisee, he says only that he outdid his peers when it came to being a devoted Jew (Gal 1:14), was blameless with regard to observing the law (Phil 3:6), and was extremely zealous with regard to Jewish tradition (Gal 1:14). From these few remarks, it is

clear that Paul was a conscientious, Torah-observant Jew, passionately committed to Jewish law and tradition. In these same texts where Paul speaks about his fervor for the law and Jewish tradition, he also discusses his role in persecuting Christ-believers. This fervor apparently drove Paul to persecute the church, which he says he wanted to destroy. His self-description as a zealous persecutor of believers, at Galatians 1:13 and Philippians 3:4, squares with information at Acts 8:1–3, 9:1–2, 22:4–5, and 26:9–11.

The fact that Paul felt so compelled to stamp out the Jesus movement exposes at least two important considerations:

1. The first believers were still recognized as a group within Judaism and therefore subject to Jewish authority. Otherwise Paul, with the backing of Jewish authorities (see Acts 9:1), would have had no reason to take action against them. Despite the widespread and incorrect assumption to the contrary, at this stage of persecution, in the early to mid-30s CE, believers in Christ were not looked upon as a separate, new religion called Christianity. Even after Paul joined the Jesus movement and had been evangelizing for more than a decade, it was still viewed as a group within Judaism (see Acts 18:12–16; see further 2 Cor 11:24).
2. In contrast to the other groups within Judaism, this particular group was apparently perceived as radically departing from acceptable Jewish beliefs and practices. This required disciplinary action to bring the group back into line or even suppress it.

Paul never states exactly what he found so objectionable about the Jesus movement. Among other things, Paul, a devout Jew, would have rejected the movement's claim that a man the Romans crucified as a common criminal could be the Jewish messiah.¹⁸ Deuteronomy

18. The offense to Jews by the proclamation of a crucified messiah is frequently cited as a motive for Paul's persecuting activity. The Jesus movement's relaxation of Torah requirements for pagans has also been cited as a possible motive. See, e.g., John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L. Reed, *In Search of Paul: How Jesus' Apostle Opposed Rome's Empire with God's Kingdom* (San Francisco: Harper, 2004), 6. It has also been suggested that Paul sought to stamp out the Jesus movement to avert Roman reprisal against the Jews because of the political claims made about Jesus by his followers. See, e.g., Pamela Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian: The Original Message of a Misunderstood Apostle* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), 146. These reasons are not mutually exclusive.

21:23 states anyone hung from a tree—that is, a sinner executed for transgressing the law—was under God’s curse. In Jewish thought, therefore, it would be simply inconceivable that Jesus, or anyone deemed deserving of crucifixion, could ever be God’s messiah. But this is exactly what Jesus’ followers believed and proclaimed: Jesus the crucified and Risen One was messiah and Lord. At Galatians 1:23 Paul says he was known among believers as the one “now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.” From a Jewish perspective, this faith rested on a claim both false and offensive, and Paul was bent on stopping its spread. In fact, later in life when Paul was preaching “Christ-crucified,” he acknowledged that Jews could not conceive of a crucified messiah. To Jews, he says, it was a “stumbling block” (1 Cor 1:23). And Paul would know. For a long time, it was a huge stumbling block for him until the revelatory event that changed his perspective.

Paul’s Revelatory Experience

In the detailed account of Paul’s life-changing experience in Acts (9:1–19), the author narrates how, as Paul traveled to Damascus to persecute Christians, the Risen Jesus revealed himself. After this event, Paul came to believe. Over the centuries, Luke’s dramatic presentation of the event with sound and blinding light has been the source of countless renderings from Renaissance masters to contemporary artists. Paul, by contrast, offers few details about why he stopped persecuting Christ-believers, embraced the faith he sought to destroy, and became one of its strongest advocates and fiercest defenders.

In only three places in his letters does Paul very briefly refer to the event that changed his heart and mind: Galatians 1:15–17, Philippians 3:7–11, and 1 Corinthians 15:8–11. From these three texts, a few important ideas emerge about his life-changing experience. First, Paul owed his changed mind and heart to God, who graced Paul with the revelatory opportunity enabling him to understand that Jesus, crucified and risen, was the Christ. Second, Paul was graced with this revelation for the purpose of spreading his newly acquired knowledge of Christ to others. As Paul understood it, his commission to preach the gospel to the Gentiles was intrinsically linked to this revelatory event. Third, as one commissioned by God to preach the gospel, Paul considered himself to be an apostle by the will of



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Caravaggio's 1601 painting of Paul's conversion for a chapel in Rome's Santa Maria del Popolo church features a supine Paul blinded by a heavenly light. Countless artists have embellished the Acts narrative by showing Paul thrown from a horse.

God. He stresses this point in the opening verses of Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Galatians, all of which begin with the notice that he is an apostle, called by God.

The Impact of Paul's Revelatory Experience

The word most often used to describe Paul's change of heart and mind is "conversion," a word that this text has so far avoided. For many people, *conversion* connotes, with reference to Paul, something like this: Paul was a Jew, who as a result of his God-initiated revelatory experience, rejected Judaism and became a Christian. This understanding of conversion is imprecise on two counts. First, historically speaking, when Paul received his revelation, estimated to be as early as 34 and possibly as late as 36 or 37 CE, there was no distinct entity called Christianity to which he could convert. As previously discussed, the Jesus movement existed as a movement within Second Temple Judaism. Second, Paul did not reject Judaism. This

misperception has allowed both Christians and Jews to consider Paul the father of anti-Judaism and to lay the blame for the subsequent history of Christian anti-Judaism at his feet. Like Jesus, Paul was born, raised, lived, and died a Jew. Before his revelatory experience, he rejected the idea that the crucified Jesus was the Jewish messiah or *christos*. After the revelatory experience, Paul accepted this and, as a result, can be considered a Christ-believing Jew.

Paul's faith remained centered in the One God of Israel, the source of all creation, who had promised to redeem and save that creation. However, Paul's thought about God and how God was acting to redeem creation underwent a significant change in a number of areas. First, Paul's Christology radically shifted. As a result of his revelatory experience, Paul came to understand that God's plan to redeem creation was being accomplished through the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus. By accepting this, Paul acknowledged that the crucified and Risen One, Jesus, was indeed God's messiah/*christos*. This required Paul to reassess everything he believed about the messiah's identity and role and to grapple especially with the scandal of the cross. Second, like so many Jews in his day, Paul awaited that moment when God would intervene through the agency of his messiah to vanquish Israel's enemies, bring an end to the old age of evil and oppression, and inaugurate a new age. Paul now understood that Jesus was God's messiah and that he and other Jews were actually witnessing the inauguration of the long-awaited new age of redemption, which would be complete when the messiah returned again. Third, Paul's view of the law changed. While he continued to believe that the law was given by God through Moses, that it was holy, and that the commandments of the law were good and just (see Rom 7:12), Paul came to understand that the law had no power to save. Its function was to guide people (see Gal 3:23–26) until the coming of Christ, through whom God brought about redemption.

It remains uncertain whether all of Paul's views immediately changed as a result of this one revelatory experience or whether that initial experience began a process of personal and theological transformation that continued over time. Some, following Paul's own language of "call" (see Gal 1:15), prefer to describe Paul's revelatory experience as a call or commission to bring the knowledge of the God of Israel to the Gentiles, in fulfillment of the Old

Testament prophecy that all nations would one day know Yahweh.¹⁹ In fact, in a number of texts Paul seems to cast himself in the role of prophet, asserting that his purpose was to bring the Gentiles to worship the God of Israel (see, e.g., Rom 1:5, 11:13; cf. further 1 Thess 1:9). Others prefer the term *conversion*, which they believe better expresses the radical shift in Paul's thinking. Regardless of the term adopted, scholars agree that Paul, the Jew, joined other Jews, as well as pagans, in becoming a Christ-believer. Both before and after the revelatory event through which he came to know Christ, Paul remained a Jew. He never turned his back on his fellow Jews or abandoned his ancestral religion in order to join a completely new one.

Perceptions of Paul

Paul in His Own Eyes

Paul insisted that both his apostolic calling and the content of his gospel came directly from God. He was aware that he was called *after* the twelve apostles who had accompanied Jesus during his lifetime. Paul also knew that his activity as a persecutor of the followers of Jesus made him unworthy of this call (see 1 Cor 15:8–9). However, Paul never considered himself a second-class apostle, nor did he believe that the gospel message entrusted to him to preach to the Gentiles was inferior or deficient. On the contrary, he was not only proud of his apostolic calling but considered himself the best, “having worked harder than any of them” (1 Cor 15:10). Likewise, he considered the gospel he preached the only true gospel (Gal 1:6–7) and traveled thousands of miles throughout the Mediterranean, suffering physical and emotional hardship, in order to preach it.

If Paul believed others had compromised the truth of the gospel or excluded anyone from the salvation offered in Christ, he fought to defend the truth of the gospel and the rights of both Jew and Gentile to belong to the community of God in Christ (see Gal 1–2).

19. See, e.g., Krister Stendahl, *Paul among Jews and Gentiles and Other Essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), esp. 7–23.

Paul saw himself as a rather flexible and transparent person. In his own words, he became “all things to all people” to save whomever he could (1 Cor 9:22b). He considered his own life so conformed to that of Christ that he proposed himself as a model to imitate, exhorting believers, “Be imitators of me as I am of Christ” (1 Cor 11:1; Phil 3:17). His name, Paul, from the Latin *Paulus*, means humble or insignificant. Paul was neither, although he always credited God with giving him the grace and strength to preach the gospel (see, e.g., 1 Cor 15:10).

Paul as Others Saw Him

Some New Testament writings that postdate Paul’s death, as well as later Christian writings from the first few centuries CE, embellish Paul’s reputation. They showcase his miracle-working (see, e.g., Acts 14:8–13, 28:7–9), acclaim his fidelity to orthodox doctrine (see, e.g., 1 Tim 2:5–7; 2 Tim 3:10) and hold him up as a model of Christian perfection.²⁰ However, not all of Paul’s contemporaries who knew him and heard his message liked him or what he had to say. In fact, he often found himself at the center of controversy. Within circles of Jewish Christ-believers, Paul’s outreach to the Gentiles caused great disagreement. Jews did not allow pagans full participation in Jewish religious life unless pagans adopted the Jewish religion and its customs and agreed to live under its laws. Many Jewish Christ-believers insisted on maintaining some distance from pagans who had not converted to Judaism. Paul disagreed, and this caused him to clash with other Jewish Christ-believers—including, most notably, Peter (cf. Gal 2:1–14).

In addition to their concerns about his message, Paul’s contemporaries also questioned his credentials as an apostle. Rival apostles were quick to disparage him (see, e.g., 2 Cor 10:10–11). He had been a violent persecutor of the church, but he now insisted that his apostolic calling and gospel message were as valid as that of the twelve and their associates. Moreover, although Paul claimed to be a genuine apostle,

20. Among the Apostolic Fathers, Clement of Rome considered Paul a hero and the greatest example of endurance (1 *Clement* 5:6–7; cf. further Ignatius, *Letter to the Ephesians* 12); Polycarp likewise considered him an example of endurance (cf. *Letter to the Philipppians* 9:1) as well as a teacher of orthodoxy (3:2).

his apostolic practice failed to convince many of his contemporaries. True apostles received financial support from the communities. This expectation apparently derived from Jesus' own statements about a preacher's right to compensation for the work of preaching the gospel (see Luke 10:7 and Matt 10:8–10). Paul apparently refused such support (see 2 Cor 11:7, 12:13–16). Especially among Gentiles, the expectation was that true apostles would preach eloquently, powerfully, and persuasively. Paul, by his own admission, was an ineloquent speaker who preached what most Jews and pagans considered an absurd message about a crucified messiah (see, e.g., 1 Cor 2:1–5; 2 Cor 11:5–6). These and other aspects of Paul's practice raised suspicions about his apostolic credentials. Finally, to Jews who refused to accept Jesus as the Messiah and supported Paul's efforts to stamp out the Jesus movement, his sudden turn from persecutor of that movement to its staunchest defender branded him as an apostate, a traitor to the Jewish faith.

While Paul saw himself as a dedicated apostle, committed to bringing Christ's salvation to all, his contemporaries had some serious reservations about his credentials, message, and apostolic methods. In their view, Paul was a conundrum: Jews considered him an apostate; many Jewish Christ-believers thought him too "Gentile-friendly"; and some Gentile Christ-believers probably perceived Paul as a bit too Jewish! Christian history has transformed Paul of Tarsus into Saint Paul, with all the positive connotations the term *saint* conjures, perhaps blurring the reality that Paul was something of a misfit who often found himself opposed and unwelcomed.

Summary

Any study of Paul must consider a number of factors. First, Paul must be considered within the trajectory of the development of the Jesus movement. Although Paul strongly advocated for the movement, it emerged within the context of Judaism and had its beginning before Paul. Second, any attempt to construct a Pauline biography depends on the cautious use of sources. Among sources, the most important are Paul's own letters, followed by Acts of the Apostles. Sources outside the New Testament also are necessary to understand the society and culture that formed the framework of

Paul's life and work. Third, at some point while engaged in stamping out the Jesus movement, Paul had a revelatory experience that brought him to accept the crucified and Risen Jesus as Lord and Messiah and initiated a transformation in his thinking about a number of Jewish beliefs and practices. On account of both the content of his gospel and his apostolic practice, Paul attracted some and alienated others. He was a sincere but complicated man, and many tried, although ultimately unsuccessfully, to counter his impact within the early Jesus movement.

Questions for Review and Discussion

1. Was Jesus accepted by all Jews as the Messiah? Why or why not?
2. Name a few characteristics of the four main Jewish groups active during the first century CE and indicate how each group responded to Roman rule. To which group did Paul belong, and how do you know?
3. What are the sources for the study of Paul? What is the value of each source?
4. Which letters are considered "indisputably" Pauline and why?
5. On what did Paul base his belief that he was an apostle commissioned to preach to the Gentiles? What are a few reasons that caused some in the movement to disagree with him?
6. In what sense is it correct to say that Paul was not a Christian?

Opening Other Windows

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