

Understanding the Apostle Paul as a Greek Jew

Christian and Jewish New Testament scholars often and rather casually speak of Paul's "conversion on the road to Damascus", as if he converted to Christianity. Indeed, when I first began to seriously study Jewish scholarship on Paul in the early 70's, reading Samuel Sandmel's *The Genius of Paul*, he wrote "...the most crucial aspect of Paul is his conversion to Christianity." [p. 24, Schocken 1970]. He did, however, correct himself forty pages later writing "...to speak of Paul the 'convert' is to use an uncertain word and to trespass into ambiguities." [p. 63]. I would argue strongly against the notion that Paul converted, if for no other reason than that Paul would have been particularly offended by it! Paul never saw himself outside of Judaism. He never expresses a desire or inclination to leave Judaism or to start another religion. Paul believed his message to be authentically Jewish. And he believed it to be a message from God, an invitation to the non-Jewish world to become part of Israel, fully affirmed in the *brit kodesh*, the 'holy covenant' God first made to Abraham and confirmed through Moses.

And yet, as we read his letters it is equally clear that his theology and message are not Jewish, that his audience is not the Jewish community, and in fact Paul's letters become the foundation for Christianity. If Paul thinks that his interpretation of the death and resurrection of Jesus is the fulfillment of God's plan, that he is preaching authentically within Judaism, how are we to understand, comprehend, much less appreciate, the thinking and theology of Paul? Unless we want to dismiss him as a charlatan, which I don't, how are we to explain and maintain the integrity of this man who believes he's proclaiming authentic Judaism?

The generally accepted primary sources on Paul are his seven acknowledged New Testament epistles and the Book of Acts, which is an unknown author's companion text to the Gospel of Luke. But Acts is not a reliable source, written some forty years after Paul died, with its own agenda and bias. Paul in his own letters only once references his early background. In Philippians 3:5 he writes "[I was] circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee."

In order to understand and appreciate the theology, and thus the mission of Paul we must first acknowledge that he was a Pharisaic Jew, and secondarily a well-educated and acculturated Greek citizen, raised and educated in Tarsus (across the bay from Antioch a significant center of Hellenistic Judaism). Paul's inherent Jewish identity seems to be forgotten by readers of his letters to the Christ-communities he founded.

Paul and "Sacrifice"

Most significantly Paul is misunderstood in his proclamation that Jesus' death was a "sacrifice of atonement". He wrote:

Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. (Romans 3: 23-25)

Paul does not mean that Jesus "died for or was sacrificed for our sins", or that Jesus is "payment for our sins". That would be a misreading of the meaning, worth and value of "sacrifice" in Biblical and Temple-centered Judaism. In fact, even to use the word "sacrifice" is misleading because of how we read it today. We think of "sacrifice" as giving up something, usually valuable, in order gain or save something of greater value.

But that's not what "sacrifice" in the Bible was all about. "Sacrifice" from Latin *sacrum facere* means "to make something sacred" by offering it to God. For the Biblical community an animal or bushel of grain was made sacred when it is used as an offering to God. It represented the intention and commitment of the one offering it.

In Leviticus the word *korban* which is often translated as "sacrifice", is the generic word for one's offering that was given to the Levitical priest. Its verb-root *k-r-v* means to "draw near", thus the *korban* is the means by which one "draws near" to God, makes "communion" with God, finds at-one-ment with God. It is not in any sense a "sacrifice". It was never something one gave up in order to gain (or save) something of greater value. It was a demonstration of one's commitment to the God of Israel, an experiential expression that one has

“drawn near” to God in response to God’s call. It was only much later in the development of Christianity that “Jesus as a sacrifice” means something much different.

In 1097 Anselm of Canterbury wrote in his treatise *Cur Deus Homo?*/Why Did God Become Human? that because we have disobeyed (through “Original Sin”) and continue to disobey (because of human frailties) God—we are all sinners, and forgiveness requires compensation. (When one commits a crime, one pays a fine and/or serves time in jail) Without compensation neither the sin nor asking forgiveness matters very much to the sinner or the one sinned against. (Like insisting your son tell his sister “I’m sorry I hit you” and his says without conviction “I’m sorry!”) Therefore, Anselm wrote, our sins before God require a price/compensation to God in order for God to know our repentance is sincere. And because God is infinite our finite beings cannot provide adequate compensation, only an appropriately infinite compensation can be made to our Infinite God. Since Jesus is an incarnation of God, his infinite being serves as an appropriate substitutionary sacrifice for our sins. Thus God (in God’s grace) provided an proper sacrifice for our atonement.

But the notion that the offering we once brought to God (in Temple days) was proper payment and punishment for what I have done is simply not how the *korban* functioned or was understood. God didn’t punish the animal (or the grain offering) for the sins of the petitioner! It’s not about the animal (or the grain offering!) suffering (and dying) instead of the petitioner! The offering is not “payment” for what one does, it does not fix the wrong one does, or compensates for the wrong one does-- it represents one’s acknowledgment of wrong-doing and one’s sincere desire to come close again to/with God. It represents one’s sincere intention to be in communion again with God. So what did Paul mean by

Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. (Romans 3: 23-25)

Paul would have understood that bringing an offering to the Temple was an expression of one’s commitment to and identification with the God of Israel. It was an expression of intention. So when God “offers up” Jesus as a *korban*, it is a dramatic display, pointedly designed to impress humanity with the reality of God’s ultimate love and desire to “draw near” to us, to bring humanity close. Paul believed that it was meant to produce in humanity a deep and abiding moral impression of God’s newly revealed intention to welcome non-Jews into the community of Israel.

Paul understood that beginning at Sinai, one brought offerings to God as tangible demonstrations of repentance (as well as praise and thanksgiving). Repentance/*t’shuvah* or a “return” to God was a return to at-one-ment with God. (The verb-root *kaper*, as in *Yom Kippur*/Day of Atonement is thought to originally mean “to cover”, but came to mean “reconcile” or “atone”). Offerings were the means by which one repaired one’s relationship with God, a demonstration of one’s sincere intent to be right again with God.

Paul believed that these tangible demonstrations of repentance were never particularly effective because the individual was not transformed, and our mortal frailty meant that we were likely to continue behaving badly. God had given the laws of the sacrificial cult to Israel in the hope that we, in recognizing and then atoning for “sin”, would be transformed and not “die” (meaning be cut off from God). But in reality, the Law only made us think more about “sin”, thus defeating its original purpose (see Romans 7: 7-20)

Paul’s message to the Hellenistic world of Asia Minor was the “Good News” that at-one-ment with the God of Israel was now available to non-Jews, an announcement exemplified by the self-sacrifice of Jesus and the reward of his resurrection. Paul believed that God’s message to the Gentile world was:

- Let Me show you how much I love you! (I delivered my Son as a demonstration of my intention)
- You no longer have to worry about your sins.
- You are now and always will be forgiven in my gracious love.
- This promise was publicly confirmed with the resurrection of my Son.
- You need only acknowledge me by affirming (believing in) that resurrection.
- Thus atonement, communion and covenant are now available to all of humanity, not just the Jews.
- And you don’t have to be Jewish! (ie. follow the 613 *mitzvot*) to receive it.

Paul believed that when non-Jews heard that God's arms were open to them, that God was willing and wanting to embrace all of humanity, they would then open themselves to God, fully and faithfully accepting God's invitation and inclusion. They would then want to thank and please God by striving not to sin. Paul's message was that when non-Jews fully and faithfully believe and accept God's infinitely gracious gift of salvation from the consequences of sin their transformative response would be to consecrate their lives to God in gratitude for what God has done for them. Because God had lovingly and graciously forgiven them their past, they would inherently and innately never again offend God.

Who Jesus was and what happened to Jesus demonstrated the full extent of God's love for humanity. Thus, the example of Jesus' crucifixion, and primarily his resurrection promising atonement, would relieve the fear and alienation that we as sinners feel towards God. Thus:

in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. (II Corinthians 5:19).

When Paul talks about Jesus offered as a "sacrifice" it is a demonstration of how much God loves us: a demonstration, a proof of this wonderful opportunity for "at-one-ment" with God. Accepting the Risen Christ within oneself brings "new life", meaning a new and reconciled relationship with God. The crucifixion of Jesus is therefore in every sense a *korban*, the vehicle by which God "draws humanity near" – a reconciliation of at-one-ment". The resurrection then is the tangible proof to the Gentile world that this reconciliation is at hand and is real.

Paul and "Redemption"

Paul doesn't tell us much about himself, and even his revelation that God's Kingdom is at hand through the resurrection of the Christ is told in only the vaguest of terms. Paul, writing in the 50's and early 60's CE, never tells us where he's from. For that we have to rely on the tradition that he grew up and studied in Asia Minor in the area of Tarsus, a thoroughly acculturated Hellenistic community. So Paul's education would certainly have included Greco-Roman philosophy which proclaimed that one's body is bad, evil, temporary and finite—subject to animal appetites, cravings and desires. One's soul, however, is good, pure, holy, and eternal. Life therefore is a constant struggle wherein the tender and holy soul doesn't stand a chance against the hunger and passions of the body. A single, mortal individual is powerless to control the frailty of one's evil body, one's urges and sordid thoughts, appetites and desires.

Seneca (4 BCE-65 CE), a contemporary of Paul wrote "Why do we deceive ourselves? Evil is not without us, it has its seat within us, in our inward part. And therefore it is [because of that it is so hard for us to heal], because we know not that we are sick." Death is the termination of the struggle between the soul and its imprisoning body.

This Hellenistic struggle of body v. soul was incorporated into the philosophy of 1st C Jewish communities in Asia Minor and Egypt where Philo, a contemporary of Paul writes that Torah in its outer values and inner interpretations is the model by which the soul might win its battle over the body. Both Paul and Philo see the Sinai revelation as God's gifted response to this unfortunate human condition. For Philo Torah is the ultimate answer, but for Paul, Torah is only a temporary solution, given by God through Moses to hold us together just long enough until God's final resolution and solution.

For Paul the Pharisaic Jew that ultimate resolution would come with the expected arrival of the *Moshiach* (Anointed One/Messiah) who would bring *Olam Haba* (The World to Come) in which all evil would be gone, and ours would be a transformed world, a paradise without conflict or labor. Transformed humanity would never harm another and there would be no need for laws or rules. The unfortunate but inherent struggle of body v. soul would no longer plague the human condition. The Risen Christ for Paul was notice that *Olam Haba*, or the "Kingdom of God" as he called it, was at hand.

Through the Risen Christ the Gentile world was invited into the righteousness of communion with God. Forgiven their sins as pagans, they were cleansed. Realizing God's embrace they would love God and humanity. Accepted into the Covenant of Israel prior to the imminent coming of the Kingdom of God when all evil and conflict would vanish, they would in the "End of Days" live forever in Eden, protected and provided by God, only "doing the good", a spiritual perfection of life with God.

Paul and “The Law”

Which brings me to our second misunderstanding of Paul, namely how he understood *Torah*. The noun *torah*, first used in Hebrew Scripture to mean “directive” and sometimes “teaching”, it was later expanded (probably in the 6th C BCE, the time of Ezra) to include divine teaching, prophetic preaching, and moral exhortation. Eventually it becomes synonymous with divine revelation as a whole. Paul’s community, like others in Asia Minor and Egypt, used the Greek Septuagint translation of *Torah* in its synagogues, and studied the text in Greek. And in the Septuagint the word “Torah” is translated into Greek as *Nomos*, “Law” 200 out of 220 times.

Though we (meaning Jews) don’t give it much thought, we refer, think of, and use that Hebrew word untranslated, which prevents us from narrowly defining what it is and means to us. In our synagogues *Torah* can mean the scroll itself that sits in the ark, it can mean the text contained in that scroll, whether in book form or not, and it can mean Jewish learning in general, as in the phrase *torah lishma*, “learning for its own sake”.

But for Paul and his community living in Asia Minor, where *Torah* was spoken of and referred to as *Nomos*, “The Law”, there would have been this unintended consequence: characterizing *Torah* as “The Law” would have rendered it a two-dimensional set of rules and regulations, most of which (namely the Levitical laws of the cult and priesthood) would have had no practical meaning, application or value outside the Land of Israel.

Imagine the consequences of teaching our children today, from Nursery School on, that the centerpiece of our tradition and religion, the focus of our attention in the sanctuary was “The Law”! And if God’s revelation is primarily and principally “The Law”, with the vast majority of the laws only applying to the sacrificial cult led by the Levitical priests— our folks (like Paul and his community) would never have developed an endearing attachment to *Nomos*. The consequences of understanding *Torah* only as *Nomos* is nicely expressed by C. H. Dodd, a Welsh Protestant theologian and Bible translator of the mid-20th C.

Thus . . . the rendering of torah as nomos is thoroughly misleading, and it is to be regretted that the English versions followed the Septuagint (via the Vulgate) in so many cases [thereby] giving a misleading legalistic tone to much of the Old Testament. Once the Torah and the Hebrew Bible are represented as “The Law,” then the isolation of its narratives from its laws, and the reductionist dichotomization of Old Testament Law (and “legalism”) vs. New Testament Spirit are not far to follow. It is precisely this terminological disintegration of the laws and narratives of the Bible that permitted the former to be largely abrogated while the latter to be typologized in what came to be the dominant, supersessionist narrative of Christianity-with grave historical consequences for the fate of Jews at Christian hands. [C. H. Dodd, The Bible and the Greeks, pp 33,41 (1935).]

How differently we think of “Torah” today. I like especially this description from Steven Fraade:

Torah is understood not as a law book encased in a narrative wrapper, but as a grand narrative of God’s relationship with humanity and, at its center, with Israel in particular. . . . The laws and narratives of the Bible (in general, but Torah in particular) are both literarily and theologically inextricable from one another. . . Israel’s acceptance and fulfillment of its covenantal obligations is the primary condition for the eventual completion of that narrative... [Steven Fraade, “Nomos and Narrative before Nomos and Narrative”, Yale Journal of Law and Humanities (Winter 2005)]

In other words, the commandments are central to Torah’s salvific narrative, while the narrative confers historical value and meaning to the commandments.

It is very easy for me to imagine Paul seeing *Nomos* from God as only a temporary set of laws and regulations that in his day had already become superfluous. And as a Pharisee he expected the arrival of *Moshiach* (Messiah) who would bring with him *Olam Haba* (World to Come). And in that transformed world of an idyllic garden, we would live forever without struggle or conflict between people or within ourselves. In that new world we would no longer need imposed laws to regulate our behavior or subdue our corrupting desires because we, like the world, will be transformed.

In the coming Kingdom laws are superfluous for all, and while the Jews are bound by them before the Messianic transformation, non-Jews are not and never were. God has graciously justified them by faith, brought into covenant communion, prepared and ready for the Kingdom.

Paul and the “Last Days”

Paul and his Jewish community hoped for and expected the imminent arrival of God’s great redemption. We are familiar with the apocalyptic poetry of the Prophets, especially these two often quoted passages from Isaiah:

And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the house of YHVH shall be established on the top of the mountains and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow to it. And many people shall go and say, “Come, and let us go up to the mountain of YHVH, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths; for from Zion shall go forth Torah, and the word of the YHVH from Jerusalem. [Isaiah 2: 2-3]

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of YHVH has risen upon you. For, behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the people; but YHVH shall arise upon you, and his glory shall be seen upon you. And the nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising. Lift up your eyes around, and see; they all gather themselves together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far, and your daughters shall be nursed at your side. Then you shall see, and be filled with light, and your heart shall fear, and be enlarged; because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. [Isaiah 60: 1-5]

Paul would have believed that Prophetic promise that when the Messiah came, all nations will “come to Zion” and affirm God. And Paul, not a humble or modest man, saw himself as the most logical agent to bring the “good news” to “the nations”. And since Jewish laws and rituals were never meant for the Gentile world anyway, they (non-Jews) would logically not have been expected to follow them even prior to the “end of days”, much less after, when no one, Jew or Gentile would need them.

Paul’s “Jewish” solution to the body/soul conflict and his disaffected attitude toward “The Law”/Torah and its *mitzvot* (“commandments”) ready-made him to be God’s agent, a 1st C Isaiah to the Gentile world, telling them that God is waiting to redeem them with the imminent arrival of *Olam Haba*. Someone, after all, had to reach out to the non-Jews with the “good news” that they should “come as they are” to the party.

Paul’s message to the non-Jewish world is two-fold: it is an invitation to the End Times party before the End Time arrives. With open arms God forgives and welcomes non-Jews into the covenant. Grafted as branches onto the tree of Israel (see Romans 11), it is then a promise to those who accept and affirm the risen Christ that they are first in line to enter the transformed, perfect, eternal existence of the coming Kingdom of God when Jew and Gentile alike will live forever in paradise.

Paul takes to heart the message of Isaiah that the “end of days” are at hand (Isaiah 2:2-3) and in preparation, there is new universal access for communion with the God of Israel:

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise. (Galatians 3:23-29)

Paul himself never thinks he is leaving Judaism or creating a new religion. He believes that his interpretation of the resurrection of the Risen Christ is meant to be God’s invitation to the Gentile world to join the People of Israel before the arrival of *Olam Haba*. Paul believes that he was “awakened” by God to this revelation, that he was chosen God’s agent to bring the “Good News” that the Risen Christ will enable Gentile humanity to overcome the inherent sins of mortality and the conflict of body v. soul. Eternally grateful to God for the gracious gift of forgiveness we will no longer be tempted to sin, we will be transformed in nature to do the good, for the power of God’s gracious love will enable us to overcome the frailty of one’s evil body, its urges, appetites and desires. All in preparation for the coming Kingdom of God,

Though Paul perceives that his is a thoroughly Jewish message and a necessary mission to the non-Jewish world to bring all people into the covenant of Israel, in the years that follow it becomes a message and mission beyond Judaism. Paul's communities refocus themselves in the absence of the imminent arrival of the Kingdom of God. And because they claimed covenant without conversion or commandments, they were rejected by the Jews of the synagogue, and were forced to establish their own community, parting ways from Judaism by the end of the 1st C.

Rabbi Joe Klein
February 2020
rabbi@rabbiklein.com
www.rabbiklein.com