

13. PAUL/SHAUL THE JEW

While the first chapters of Acts of the Apostles focus on the figure of Paul, from chapter 9 onwards the central character becomes Shaul/Paul. This central role was to become firmly established in history. Paul left a significant mark on Christianity through the letters written by him or attributed to him.

Although for almost two millennia Paul was seen as an opponent of Judaism and a denigrator of the *Torah*, recent findings have profoundly changed the interpretation of his character and role, showing that he was deeply attached to his roots. Indeed, many biblical studies, including those by Christian scholars, point to the ‘Jewishness’ of his life and thought. This development forms part of a broader movement - in both Christian and Jewish circles - for the rediscovery of the Jewish roots of Christianity.

Some of his autobiographical statements are an important starting point for establishing Paul’s Jewishness. Of particular interest is Phil 3:4-6, in which we read that Paul is proud of his Jewish heritage and faith (*see also* 2 Corinthians 11:22 and Gal. 1:14). Acts 22:3 tells us that he “studied with Gamaliel”, the son or grandson of the celebrated Hillel, who gave systematic validity to certain exegetical methods (*middot*) found in Paul’s own exegetical works (*see, for example, Rom 9:6-26*) and which were to become tradition in the so-called *midrashim*, the rabbinical commentaries on Scripture.

This means that the Apostle to the Gentiles should be placed in the diverse historical and religious context of first-century Judaism. In the process, discontinuities between Paul and the theological traditions of the past that developed in his environment clearly emerge.

In recent years, a new stream of scholarship called “Paul within Judaism” developed in the wake of the “New Perspective on Paul.” Mark D. Nanos describes it as follows: “My working hypothesis is that Paul’s letters were written by a Jew who remained Torah-observant after he came to believe that Jesus was the Messiah and was called to spread that message to the nations.”⁹²

Paul shared with other Jewish groups of his time an apocalyptic understanding of human history, according to which the world was coming to an end and a completely new reality was dawning, one in which the Divine power would be fully revealed. The prophets announced that the inclination to evil would disappear and everyone would spontaneously follow the path of good: the *Torah*, written on tablets of stone, would be written on human hearts.

92 www.marknanos.com. See M.D. Nanos – M. Zetterholm (eds), *Paul within Judaism. Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis 2015 e G. Boccaccini, *Paul’s Three Paths to Salvation*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan 2020.

The resurrection of the dead was an integral part of the apocalyptic hope and world-view. Moreover, apocalypticism had developed the relevant categories and vocabulary to express faith in the resurrection. And in fact, the salvific death and resurrection of Jesus Christ was at the centre of the preaching of the Apostle to the Gentiles (cf. 1Cor 15), together with the consequent fate of the dead in Christ at the end of time: “For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ shall rise first.” (1 Thess. 4:16; cf. 1 Cor. 15:23, where Christ is called “the firstfruits” (*aparchē*) because he prefigures the resurrection of all).

The encounter with the Messiah Jesus on the road to Damascus - which he never refers to as a “conversion” - transformed Shaul’s existence. From then on, like an ancient prophet, he felt the urgency of the mission to the nations, to ensure that the salvation given by God through his crucified Messiah reached the furthestmost corners of the world. A true son of Abraham, Paul believed that all the nations of the world should be blessed in Abraham. But it is not openness to the Gentiles that distinguishes Paul’s vision from that of the “pillars” of the Jerusalem community. In fact, James, Peter and John all shared this same vision.

Paul is not a convert. He is a redeemer. He is called to be a prophet to the nations: he desires to reach out to the peoples of the remotest areas of the world and to bring them together before the *parousia*, which he considers to be imminent, and in fact he includes himself among those who “are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord” (1 Thess. 4:15).

Having assumed the role of a new Jeremiah, Paul carries out his mission to bring the Gentiles into the history of salvation. His mission is the messianic conversion of the Gentiles in the short time remaining. He seeks to establish a new people *in addition to*, not as *a substitute* for, Israel. Furthermore, Paul maintained that non-Jews were not obliged to observe all the precepts of the Torah.

Shaul’s apocalyptic and mystical messianism played a major role in the history of Christianity. He understood that the religious life of the followers of the Messiah Jesus, once Gentiles, could not be limited to the observance of a few precepts. To live according to the Spirit means to renounce the things of the flesh, i.e. sins; the “new man” is “clothed” in the garments of Messiah-Jesus; faith, hope and charity are deeply rooted in the conscience (*synéidesis*) and are concretely communicated in the service of others. Piety (*eusébeia*) is to become a key concept that characterises this new life (cf. 1 Tim 4:8; 6:3; etc.).

Significantly, in the aftermath of the Shoah, when it became clear that anti-Judaism was a grave sin that had contributed to the tragic historical events, the Council’s declaration *Nostra Aetate* drew on Pauline texts (Romans 9-11) for a different understanding of Jewish-Christian relations.

Indeed, it is this reconciliation that gives hope to the encounter between Jews and Christians: “For if their rejection brought reconciliation to the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?” (Rom 11:15).

Bibliography

M.D. Nanos – M. Zetterholm (edited by), *Paul within Judaism. Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis 2015.

J. D.G. Dunn, *The new perspective on Paul: Collected Essays*, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 2005

A. Pitta, *Paolo, la Scrittura e la Legge. Antiche e nuove prospettive*, EDB, Bologna 2009.