

# Is there a Key to Pauline Theology?

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## ABSTRACT

Pauline theology is to be found in the beliefs and doctrines expressed in the New Testament writings of Paul, the former Jewish Pharisee and later Christian apostle. This article will attempt to assess the influences upon Paul or from where we can trace the roots of his theological thinking. Paul's past and present links with his Graeco-Roman environment, and his Jewish heritage are first discussed. But it is suggested that the real key to his theology is his experience in meeting the risen Christ on the Damascus Road. Paul theology is rooted in a sudden conversion experience. Two passages of Scripture, Galatians 1v10-24 and 1 Timothy 1v 12-17 are expounded to reveal Paul's radical new personal understanding and world view. Added to these influences was finally the rich heritage upon which he drew as he became part of the Christian community. He takes over this teaching on Christ's person and saving work even though he supplemented it. We will suggest that Paul is more an interpreter of Christ in his theology, influenced by what he has found in Church tradition, but adding to it that extra dimension which came uniquely from his conversion and calling as an apostle.

**KEY WORDS:** Theology, Hellenistic environment, Jewish heritage, conversion, Christian tradition.

## INTRODUCTION

Pauline theology or Paulism is the theology and form of Christianity which developed from the beliefs and doctrines espoused by the former Jewish Pharisee and Christian apostle. This theology is expressed by Paul in the New Testament writings traditionally attributed to him. In our attempt to assess this theology we must ask about the influences upon Paul or where can we trace the roots of his theological thinking?

### (1) THE NATURE OF OUR SOURCES

There are certain difficulties when one begins to speak in terms of "Pauline Theology." This is due to the nature of our sources. First, Paul's epistles are not theological treatises but living, personal correspondence written to churches

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with particular problems and needs. He has not left us therefore with a systematic theology. Again, we do not have Paul's complete thought. He discusses subjects only because a particular problem in a church required his instructions (e.g., the Lord's Supper at Corinth). What understanding we have of Paul's thought we owe to what scholars have called "the accidents of history" which drew a response from him in dealing with various doctrinal and practical problems. Because certain questions were never raised, they were never discussed. There is the loss of the historical setting or situation for some of his teaching which may have given us more understanding. Also, we must be careful therefore in assuming that because a matter was not taken up, it had no place in his thought. Providentially, we have of course in Paul's writings all that the church needed.

## (2) PAUL'S SENSE OF AUTHORITY

Paul wrote with a great sense of authority. This authority was based on his sense of divine vocation and appointment as an apostle. One important aspect of Paul's apostleship was his consciousness of being a medium of revelation (Rom.16v25-26; Eph.3v5). He has the conviction that he writes the commands of God (2 Thess.3v6,14; 1 Cor.14v37). His letters are to be read publicly and heeded (Col.4v16-17; 2 Cor.2v9). He claims to have the Holy Spirit (1 Cor.7v40) and the mind of Christ (1 Cor.2v16). He emphasises his divine call and authority to build up Christ's church (2 Cor.13v10; Gal.1v6f.). Paul's immediate successors recognised that authority (2 Pet.3v15).

## (3) INFLUENCES ON HIS THEOLOGY

Paul was a Jew who became a Christian and lived most of his life in a Greek environment. Influences are therefore threefold i.e., Jewish, Greek and Christian.

### (a) *Paul's Graeco-Roman Environment.*

Paul was from Tarsus (Acts 21v39), a typically Greek city, highly civilised and a sophisticated centre of Greek learning. Some suggest as W. C. van Unnik,<sup>2</sup> that he came to Jerusalem as a small boy, which, in their opinion would have protected him. For van Unnik, the only text which gives definite information about Paul's early youth (Acts 22v3) mentions Tarsus but points us in an altogether different direction, namely, to Jerusalem. He claimed that if Paul spent his early years in the holy city of Judaism, he would have found himself

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<sup>2</sup> W. C. Van Unnik, *Tarsus or Jerusalem: City of Paul's Youth*, (London, 1962).

in an atmosphere completely different from that of paganism, dominated by the Law and the Temple. This therefore would have far-reaching consequences for his theology. But simply being in Jerusalem would not of course shelter him. After four centuries of Hellenistic influence in Palestine even Jerusalem was no protective cocoon. Martin Hengel's<sup>3</sup> work *Judaism and Hellenism* clearly established the fact that Hellenistic influences were, and had been for centuries, penetrating Judaism even in Jerusalem. Paul also spent most of his life as a Christian in lands where Greek culture and civilisation met him at every turn.

Paul uses examples of the Greek Games (I Cor.9v24; Phil.3v14; I Cor.15v32; 2 Tim.4v7) and employs common adoptive procedures and contemporary practices for the release of slaves (e.g.. Gal.4v1-7) to illustrate spiritual truth.

Stoicism was popular in Paul's day. The stoics preached about moral reformation, "spiritual" conversion, victory over life and death, humanitarianism. These would rub off on Paul in a superficial way. Stoics used the rhetorical question (Rom.6v1), short disconnected sentences, the use of the imaginary objector (I Cor.15v35), down to earth illustrations and contrasts (Rom.8v38-39). The word conscience (*suneidēsis*) is thought to be stoic in origin. See also Rom.2v14 - Stoics spoke of living according to nature (a law indwelling every man); Col.1v17 all things hold together (*sunestēken*); Phil.4v13 being content, self-controlled, self-sufficient (*autarkēs*) is also a stoic concept - here for Paul sufficiency is through Christ. Paul therefore adapted himself to the hearing of the ordinary people and used the style, forms of speech and concepts familiar to his readers.

But Paul did not depend on the Stoics for his message and much of his theology is in stark contrast to the views of the Stoics. For example, Paul taught a personal God revealed in Christ, while the Stoics thought of God as world soul, vague and dim, highly pantheistic and often equated with fate. Their view of sin was very different. For the Stoics one could control sin by one's own efforts. Also, the Stoics despised the body, whereas in Paul the body has been redeemed, and will share in the resurrection, (Rom.8v23; 1 Cor.15v35-54).

The Mystery Religions were everywhere in the first century. Two well-known examples are Mithraism (of Persian origin and popular among Roman soldiers) and the Isis mysteries of Egypt. They had some very crude ideas. There were different means of initiation by which one is said to come more and more into

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<sup>3</sup> M. Hengel *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in their Encounter in Palestine During the Early Hellenistic Period*, 2nd edition tr. John Bowden, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974).

contact with the deity and escape fate and share immortality with the one worshipped e.g., eating bull's flesh, being immersed or sprinkled in water or blood. Some have suggested a relationship between these "sacramental" acts and communion and Christian baptism, which are of course connected by Paul with Christ's death and resurrection. Ridderbos<sup>4</sup> suggests that beyond the general fact of a sacred eating and drinking most scholars see no real connection. He also maintains that nowhere in the Mystery Religions is the symbolism of death present in the baptismal ritual. One term Paul shared with the Mystery Religions is the word mystery itself (*mustērion*). They used it of a sacred rite for the privileged few, but Paul used it of a hidden counsel of God now revealed.

Paul really owed nothing to the Mystery Religions. For Paul one knows God, through Christ, by faith. Salvation for Paul is salvation from sin, not from fate or ignorance. In the Mystery Religions God was never thought of as dying in history but rather in nature, vegetation or the natural process. The Mystery Religions were a cult for the privileged few but the Gospel was for everyone.

What of Gnosticism? In the past certain scholars (e.g. Bultmann<sup>5</sup>) claimed that Gnostic themes like the Heavenly Redeemer, flesh and spirit, formed the background for Paul's Christology and anthropology. In fact, a whole series of ideas, the doctrine of the fall of the creation (Rom.8v19f.) and of Adam (Rom.4v12-17), the contrast of the natural and the spiritual (I Cor.2v14ff; 15v21,44-49) of light and darkness and demonic rulers of the aeon (I Cor.2v6-8; 2 Cor.4v4) were said to be related to Gnosticism. The false doctrines with which Paul had to contend with at Corinth and Colossae were said to have been of a Gnostic character and gave Paul occasion to employ Gnostic schema in a Christian re-interpretation.

Partly because of new discoveries at Qumran and Nag Hammadi (1946, Upper Egypt Coptic Gnostic Writings), Ridderbos<sup>6</sup> has explained that unrestrained talk about Gnosticism as a system of thought already fully developed or worked out in Paul's day had long since passed its high-water mark. Rather than being fully developed before Christianity it was taking shape simultaneously and the Christian elements were yet to be added. Therefore, Paul's theology does not represent a form of Christianised gnosis. In addition, as Ridderbos<sup>7</sup> maintains,

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<sup>4</sup> Herman Ridderbos, *Paul, An Outline of His Theology*. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1975), 24f.

<sup>5</sup> R. Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity: In Its Contemporary Setting*, Trans. R. H. Fuller, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1956).

<sup>6</sup> Ridderbos, *Paul, An Outline of His Theology*, 34.

<sup>7</sup> Ridderbos, *Paul, An Outline of His Theology*, 35.

it appears to be firmly established that the Redeemer myth is not antecedent to Christianity but is borrowed from it. Yamauchi<sup>8</sup> has shown that Gnosticism in any clearly developed form is later than the NT.

*(b) Paul's Jewish Heritage.*

Paul's Jewish background and upbringing left a deep mark on his life. He had everything as far as a Jew was concerned (Phil.3v5-6). He was more zealous than many others in his day (Gal.1v14). Did he come to Jerusalem as a small boy, Acts 22v3?

Paul was an uncompromising monotheist (Gal.3v20, Rom.3v30, I Cor.8v5-6) and never relaxed his belief in the One God although he came to see that God was revealed in Christ. His mind was saturated by the Old Testament and he believed it to be holy scripture, a real revelation of God, (Rom.1v2, 4v3; 2 Tim.3v16). He came to see that one needed the light of Christ to illuminate it. Like the Rabbis he would often quote without reference to the immediate context (Rom.9v24/Hos.2v3). Again, like the Rabbis he argued *a fortiori* i.e., if this is true then... See Paul's "much mores" (Rom.8v32, 5v8). Rabbis used to take arguments from the law/prophets/writings and build up a case - see Rom.10v19-20, 3v10-20. Paul used the rabbinical practice of allegory (Sarah and Hagar) in Gal.4v21f, but sparingly, and only in matters of secondary importance. It has been argued that an allegory can be used as an illustration, (Gal.4v21). Like the Rabbis, he spoke of the Old Testament in personal terms (Rom.11v2, Gal.3v8).

As a Pharisee he shared the belief in the importance of the Law. The law to a Pharisee meant both the written law of Moses and the oral traditions of the fathers (Gal.1v14). Being zealous for the law, Paul was intent on rooting out members of the new religious movement whom he understood to be challenging it. His persecuting zeal should be seen in this light. As Hunter<sup>9</sup> had established, "Though the surface of Paul's thought may owe much to Hellenism, its sub-soil remained Jewish," He would come to see that the law was fulfilled in Christ (Rom.10v4) and in his community, living in the power of the Spirit of Gpd, (Rom.8v4).

*(c) Damascus.*

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<sup>8</sup> E. Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism*, (London: Tyndale Press, 1973).

<sup>9</sup> A.M. Hunter *The Gospel According to Paul*, (London: SCM Press, 2012), 11.

While, as we have discussed, Paul's Hellenistic background and Jewish heritage no doubt influenced his theology, they may not provide the real key to its uniqueness. Jeremias<sup>10</sup> has maintained in his significant article, "There is only one key to Pauline Theology. It is called Damascus," Jeremias understood Paul as one of those men who have experienced a sharp break with their past. Paul's theology is a theology rooted in a sudden conversion. He explained the great influence that this dramatic event had on Paul's whole thinking and theology.

Shortly we will comment directly on the main points which Jeremias highlighted. But first it will be helpful to note how Paul himself viewed his conversion experience on the way to Damascus, as he sets it out in two of his Epistles, Gal.1v10-24 and 1 Tim.1v12-17. In both of these passages Paul gives thanks to God for his own purpose in grace, how he worked in his life and had mercy upon him. He sets out the record of the man he was; the man God made him by grace to become and God had also transformed his whole understanding and world-view.

#### *Gal. 1v10-24.*

Paul has written to his Galatian converts because he had heard of the arrival of visiting preachers, Jews, who while professing to be Christians, had not been fully delivered from Jewish legalism. They were misleading his Galatian converts. No doubt they had a real desire to live a holy life and were open to be taught how this was possible. In order to really advance in the faith, they were listening to those who told them that they must be circumcised and keep the law of Moses (Gal. 4v10, 11; 5v2, 3). In reality, they were being led back to the law and its prescribed celebrations to trust in their own works to continue to be accepted by God. F. F. Bruce<sup>11</sup> makes clear the reality of the situation. This "full" gospel of the Judiazers (adding circumcision with the commitment to law-keeping) for Paul was no gospel at all. The apostle knew that it really denied the all-sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice and the grace of God. A commitment to keep the law, which in reality they could not do, was a return to legal bondage, and a denial of the message of justification by grace through faith. Rather than the true gospel it was a perversion (1v7) and did not come from God (5v8). Paul insists that there is only one true gospel; it was the gospel which was revealed to him by God and that gospel he had been called to preach.

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<sup>10</sup> J. Jeremias, "The Key to Pauline Theology", Exp. T. (Oct. 1964), 27-30.

<sup>11</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1982), 79.

## THE GOSPEL WAS BROUGHT BY HIM.

In 1v10-11 Paul explains how he had proclaimed the gospel message to the Galatians when he first came to them. His whole emphasis is to make clear that his Gospel came from God, not from men, cf. 1v11 where he insists that it “is not man’s gospel ... I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.”

He still refers to the Galatians as *adelphoi* “brothers,” expressing his loving concern for them even although they may have been moving away from him theologically. Literally, he says, “I make known to you” and the direct object is the gospel. This message is of course centred upon the cross, as 3v1 tells us, with its focus on “Christ crucified,” emphasising the need to “boast” in the cross, (6v14). This is a message completely distinct from that of the Judaizers i.e., it is the work of Christ which paid the price for sin (1v4) needed nothing added to it, whereas, as we noted, they insisted that it be supplemented with special days and circumcision.

In this gospel he was not just telling the people what they wanted to hear. He was not just seeking to “please man” so that they would look after him well, as often travelling preachers would expect. In his preaching he had to be Christ’s servant; he had to be bringing the true message to please God and he insists that he was. In v10 *peithō* means “persuade” men, but not “conciliate,” which would imply relaxing the relationship with those who insisted upon the circumcision requirement. This would be a denial of the true gospel. All this had been made clear to him through his encounter with the risen Lord on the Damascus Road.

## THE GOSPEL WAS REVEALED TO HIM.

Longenecker, Silva<sup>12</sup> and other scholars actually take verse 11-12 as setting forth the thesis of the letter in formal and solemn terms i.e., it is about the true gospel. Note how at this point Paul uses the first person singular “I.” Witherington<sup>13</sup> makes two points here. This is “a personal letter from Paul alone, not a joint communication.” Again, in calling his readers “brothers,” “The family language which he uses is not just conciliatory but it makes clear a fundamental conviction of Paul’s...that the family of God is composed on the

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<sup>12</sup> R. N. Longenecker, *Galatians*, WBC 41 (Dallas: Word, 1990), 20-21; M. Silva, *Explorations in Exegetical Method: Galatians as a Test Case*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1993), 153.

<sup>13</sup> B. Witherington, 111, *Grace in Galatia: a Commentary on Paul’s Letter to the Galatians* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), 91. He mentions Jesus’ own teaching about the family of God, Mk. 3v31-35 par. Matt. 23v8.

basis of faith, not heredity or other factors.” This is Paul’s new conviction through his encounter on the Damascus Road.

Paul affirms that the message was not his gospel, nor did he get it from any man or human source who taught it to him – it came by direct revelation. Paul has already stressed this in v1, with both verses focusing upon source and denying that his message originated in mere human ideas or any human tradition. Paul did not invent it nor was he taught it but God revealed it.

Silva,<sup>14</sup> after a careful discussion of the options, suggests that the phrase “the revelation of Jesus Christ” should be interpreted as an objective genitive. Elsewhere Paul views God as the source of revelation, when he expresses the subject of *apokaluptō* it is always God (1 Cor. 2v10; Gal. 1v16; Phil. 3v15). So also many modern commentators,<sup>15</sup> follow Silva’s objective sense. Longenecker,<sup>16</sup> differs from others in that he sees this statement of the revelation as setting out the *means* rather than the *content* i.e., Jesus Christ is the agent and God the Father is the source. But the main point here is the source of the revelation – it has a divine origin.

#### THE GOSPEL WAS EXPERIENCED BY HIM

In v13-24 Paul writes, ‘You have heard...’ (v13) which makes clear that others (the Judaizers) will have given the Galatians information about him. He of course wishes to outline the crucial events in his life to make sure that they know the real facts especially as they relate to his affirmation in v11-12 concerning the revelation he received from God and not from any human agency. Witherington<sup>17</sup> makes the important point that “...Paul is not writing an autobiography here; he is arguing a particular case and trying to persuade his audience to adhere to the one true gospel of grace, adhering to his own personal example.” There are then three chapters in his life here – although the narration of Paul’s “story” continues into 2v1-21.

(a) *In the Jewish Religion.*

In v13 and 14 Paul uses the word “Judaism” which is found only here in the NT. We note that it is used in the Jewish literature of the times (cf. 2 Macc. 2.21;

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<sup>14</sup> Silva, *Explorations in Exegetical Method: Galatians as a Test Case*, 64-68.

<sup>15</sup> E.g., R. Y. Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, NICNT, (Michigan, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 54.

<sup>16</sup> Longenecker, *Galatians*, 24.

<sup>17</sup> Witherington 111, *Grace in Galatia*, 96.



8.1; 14.38; 4 Macc. 4.26), as Witherington<sup>18</sup> points out. He sees the word as describing “a Torah-true Jewish lifestyle and belief system as contrasted to Seleucid Hellenism.” This was where Paul once was, but he had now through his Damascus Road encounter come to see that birth as a Jew, Torah observance or living under the Mosaic law was not what fitted him to be a member of the people of God. As he will affirm in the Galatian Epistle the true “Israel of God” (6v16) is composed of those who have been delivered from the condemnation of the law by the cross, share Abraham’s faith and live a Spirit enabled lifestyle.

The term used to describe his former “manner of life” is *anastrophēn* which, while it will be grounded in certain belief systems, emphasises more praxis. For a Jew, it was essential to walk in God’s statutes, keeping all God’s commandments, (1 Kings 6v12). The problem is that our fallenness means we have no power to do this (Rom. 8v3). But now in this Epistle Paul will reveal that the true children of faith have the enabling Holy Spirit (Gal. 5v16-26).

Paul writes about the dark history of his former life before he met the Lord. The memory of it must have grieved and humbled him many times. He was a fanatic in persecuting. Note that *ediōkon* and *eporthoun* are both imperfects, “persecuting” and “seeking to destroy,” suggesting a period of persistent persecution and the phrase *kath’huperbolēn* which is only in Paul in the NT (Rom. 7v13; 1 Cor. 12v31; 2 Cor. 1v8, 4v17) signals an “intensity” in persecution which was undiminished. Witherington<sup>19</sup> explains that the above adverbial phrase, “indicates the level to which the persecution reached. Paul went to extremes, the persecutions being not merely extensive (in and beyond Jerusalem) but also intensive.” We also know that when he had ravaged Jerusalem, he set out for Damascus (Acts 9v1-2). So, he “tried to destroy” ESV, but did not succeed<sup>20</sup> the church he now knew to be “the church of God” (Acts 8v1-3; 9v1, 13; 22v4).<sup>21</sup> Through his Damascus Road experience he now realised that the Christian community was God’s church and he had come to see that he had dared to set himself against God!

Paul also informs us that he was extremely zealous – a “zealot,” not for political ends but for the traditions of his fathers, advancing in Judaism, outstripping his

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<sup>18</sup> Witherington 111, *Grace in Galatia*, 98.

<sup>19</sup> Witherington 111, *Grace in Galatia*, 100.

<sup>20</sup> See also Silva, *Explorations in Exegetical Method: Galatians as a Test Case*, 71.

<sup>21</sup> Note Paul’s use of the phrase “the church of God” of a number of local communities which help to make it up. After Damascus he is beginning to think more “universally” of a single entity existing over against Judaism – the church of God.

young friends as he progressed as a Pharisee in the “strictest party” of the Jewish religion. Fung makes the point that to a Jew, a crucified Messiah was in itself a decisive refutation of any claim to messiahship – as in effect, Paul himself points out in 1 Cor. 1v17-24. A crucified Christ was an insult to every Jew and “impelled him (Paul) to give himself wholeheartedly to what he considered the unmistakable duty and sacred duty of uprooting the pernicious sect of Jesus’ followers.”<sup>22</sup>

The verb *prokoptō* in its imperfect form (*proekopton*) will express the continuing religious and moral progress or “advance” of Paul’s development in Judaism which was unparalleled among his contemporaries. The same word is used of Jesus’ advancement as he grew “in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man,” (Lk. 2v52). Regarding the reference to the “traditions of my fathers” Longenecker<sup>23</sup> suggests that Paul will be referring to (1) the teachings and practices developed in the Pharisaic schools of Second Temple Judaism, later codified in the Mishnah, Palestinian and Babylonian Gemaras, Midrashim, and various individual halakic and haggadic collections of rabbinic lore, plus (2) the more popular interpretations in the synagogues of the time, represented in the extant Targumim. Stott<sup>24</sup> affirms, “No conditioned reflex or other psychological device could convert a man in that state. Only God could reach him – and God did!” One should also note that if Paul the Jew had made as we shall see such a radical break with Judaism then the Galatians, as McDonald<sup>25</sup> points out, “should realise that to allow themselves to be induced into supposing that the gospel needed any Judaistic additions was sheer folly.” The Galatian Epistle with its content demonstrates that Paul had moved in exactly the opposite direction from them in his conversion from Judaism to Christ. Damascus moved Paul to insights that led him to warn the Galatians how they must not turn back from their Christian freedom to the slavery of the law (2v4; 4v9, 22-31; 5v1, 13).

(b) *On the Damascus Road.*

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<sup>22</sup> Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 59.

<sup>23</sup> Longenecker, *Galatians*, 30. Fung sees the “tradition of the fathers” as “Pharisaic traditions and more particularly those enshrined in the oral law transmitted and expounded in Pharisaic schools, which comprised the 613 prescriptions (248 positive commands and 365 prohibitions) of rabbinic exegesis,” *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 57.

<sup>24</sup> J.R.W. Stott, *The One Way: The Message of Galatians* BST (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1974), 32.

<sup>25</sup> H. D. McDonald, *Freedom in Faith: A Commentary on Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians*, (London: Pickering and Inglis, 1973), 29.

Before this it was “I,” “I” (v13-14). Now the subject of the two participles is no doubt “God” (v15-16) – recognised by this addition in a A, D and *et al.* In every stage of Paul’s experience God’s initiative and grace are mentioned.

In v15 he testifies that he was the object of God’s special electing purpose. He was once a Pharisee, a separatist, now he discovers that he himself was destined, “separated” before he was born, to be like both Jeremiah (Jer. 1v4f.), the prophet to the nations, and the Servant of the Lord (Isa. 49v1-6) to be God’s chosen instrument as a light to the Gentiles.<sup>26</sup> Here on the Damascus Road we have a calling by grace to preach the gospel of grace.

Paul explains in v16 that there was a revelation made *en emoi* literally, “in me.” We do know that there was a great revelation made *to him* on the Damascus Road – he saw the risen Christ (Acts 9v5, 27; 1 Cor. 9v1; 15v8). But this moment also involved inner illumination – something like 2 Cor. 4v6, or the removal of the veil from his heart, 2 Cor. 3v14. Paul also on the way to Damascus received a new understanding of Jesus Christ, his person, also the reason for his death and of course his gracious calling to be the apostle to the Gentiles. For Bruce,<sup>27</sup> Jesus Christ is revealed, but the gospel and Jesus Christ are inseparable. The ESV uses the simple dative in the text i.e., “to me,” but “in me” as the footnote. Are there not two aspects to the one revelation? Fung<sup>28</sup> also insists that:

...the phrase should not however, be taken to suggest a merely inward revelation without a corresponding external object, for there is little doubt that the preceding phrase (“to reveal his Son”) refers to Paul’s vision of the risen Christ (also attested in 1 Cor. 9:1; 15:8) on the road to Damascus...the inward illumination and the physical vision were alike part of God’s revelation to him.

The statement is that the revelation by God was of “his Son.” Note in Galatians the other references to Jesus as “Son of God,” 2v20; 4v4, 6. This should not be understood as merely a reference to the incarnation for it is used in a resurrection context – here, following the encounter on the Damascus Road (Acts 9v20) and in Galatians 4, where God sends “the Spirit of his Son” into their hearts – a sending subsequent to the redemption of v4. It is Sonship in the ontological sense (see also Rom. 1v3f; 1 Cor.1v9; 15v20-28; 1 Thess. 1v10). “Paul is

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<sup>26</sup> Witherington, 111, *Grace in Galatia*, 105; Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 64, points to other similar references, cf. Rom. 15v21 with Isa. 52v15; Acts 13v47 with Isa. 49v6; Acts 18v9f. with Isa. 43v5.

<sup>27</sup> Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 89.

<sup>28</sup> Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 64.

claiming that he received insight into the unique nature of Jesus' sonship."<sup>29</sup> If Paul had met Jesus of Nazareth risen on the Damascus Road, how would you not come to this understanding?

Stendhal<sup>30</sup> is an example of scholars who consider that what happened on the Damascus was only a call, like other prophetic calls in the OT (e.g., Jer. 1v5-6; Isa. 6; Ezek. 1). It is true that the experience involved a call, but it was much more: first of all, it was primarily a conversion. O'Brien<sup>31</sup> can affirm:

To describe the Damascus Road experience as *simply* Paul's "call" to the Gentiles does not account for the revelation of Christ and his gospel in which there was a radical change in Paul's thinking about Jesus as the Messiah and the Son, about the Torah, the messianic salvation, and not least Israel's and the Gentiles' place within the divine plan. In the Damascus encounter Paul underwent a significant "paradigm shift" in his life and thought; his own self-consciousness was that of having undergone a conversion.

So also with Witherington<sup>32</sup> we can say that:

Paul's Gospel of grace is bound up with Paul's experience of grace and is grounded in the content of God's revelation of his son in Paul, which Paul then worked out the implications of for his beliefs about God, messiah, law, salvation, who God's people are and a host of other subjects.

We can see in reading Galatians that many of these were actually worked out in this Epistle. Paul's symbolic universe was radically affected, we could say "turned upside down."<sup>33</sup> So his conversion and call coincided in time, and the sightless days at Damascus gave him opportunity to reflect on his experience and confirmed to him all that Jeremias will now explain to us. In fact, Luke records, "...For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus. And *immediately* he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, 'He is the Son of God'" (Acts 9v19b-20).

The purpose of his call was "to preach him among the Gentiles." Note the present tense (compared to the aorists, "set apart" and "called") affirms Paul's

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<sup>29</sup> Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 65.

<sup>30</sup> K. Stendal, *Paul among Jews and Gentiles*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 7-23.

<sup>31</sup> T. O'Brien, "Was Paul Converted?" in D. A. Carson, T O'Brien, and M. A. Seifrid, *The Paradoxes of Paul*, Vol. 2 (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2004), 390. See also 1v6 where Paul describes the "conversion" of the Gentiles as their "calling" by God.

<sup>32</sup> Witherington, 111, *Grace in Galatia*, 115.

<sup>33</sup> Witherington, 111, *Grace in Galatia*, 115.

continual preaching of Christ – or more precisely “Christ crucified” (1 Cor. 1v23; 2v2; Gal. 3v1). The area of his ministry is identified as a Gentile area (2v2, 8). Here he is claiming that his conversion and calling has been all of God. But what about after it? Was not that from man? Again, Paul denies it.

(c) *On the Missionary Trail.*

Paul reveals in v17-24 that first there were some things he did NOT do. Since his conversion he had remained independent of all human authority. What he did not do was to confer with flesh and blood. Nor did he go up to Jerusalem. The mention of apostles “before me” implies that he is also as much an apostle as they are (the words *pro emou* are temporal – time – not status). But then there were things which he did do. Instead of “going up,” he “goes away.” He went to Arabia – see Acts 9v19, 23, and note the “some days” he was with the disciples in Damascus, followed by the “many days,” implying a leaving from and a returning again to Damascus after his time away from the city.<sup>34</sup>

Arabia is generally understood as the Nabataean kingdom east of the Jordan valley established in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC. Bruce<sup>35</sup> points out that there were many Gentiles there, settled and Bedouin and no doubt Paul preached to them. But Arabia should also be understood for Paul as a contemplative retreat – considering and reflecting on all that had happened to him on the way to Damascus, all that the risen Lord said to him and revealed to him through Ananias (Acts 9v10-19).<sup>36</sup> So he returned from Arabia with his commission and message confirmed to the very city he had formally set out for intent upon the destruction of the church.

Paul certainly in Galatians testified to what the grace and purpose of God had done in his life – and clearly revealed in his warnings and theological teaching something of his new world-view and insights concerning salvation and the gospel he had come to firmly hold. However, we can also add what Paul in writing to Timothy expressed of the mercy of God he had received. Jeremias’

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<sup>34</sup> Witherington, 111, *Grace in Galatia*, 116 suggests that the word “immediately” v16 has an emphatic position and seems to go with what follows it. “Paul is denying any immediate consulting with humans including any immediate going up to Jerusalem. And by contrast an immediate departure to Arabia.”

<sup>35</sup> Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 96. See also Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 69.

<sup>36</sup> That Paul’s presence in Arabia was more than a time for contemplation is revealed by the reference in 2 Cor. 11v32 which showed that he had attracted the hostile attention of the governor. There was a time around 37CE when Caligula was emperor that Aretas was in control of the city of Damascus and because of Paul’s preaching in Arabia the Aretas’ Ethnarch went after Paul so he had to escape in a basket.

article which we will yet consider will resonate with these two passages helping us appreciate more fully the significance of what Damascus meant for Paul.

### *1 Timothy 1v12-17*

Paul's own conversion shows how one can be guilty or condemned as a sinner by the law as he set out in 1v8-11 and yet be saved by God's mercy and grace. He actually presents himself as "a paradigm of the saved sinner"<sup>37</sup>. Paul focuses on his personal experience of God's mercy – in fact, mercy to the greatest of sinners - emphasising that this same mercy can be experienced by "all who believe," (v16).

Paul reminds Timothy of what the Lord has done for him "appointing" him to be his servant. He is filled with wonder and gratitude for his salvation and at the fact that Christ should have considered him at all. He testifies to:

#### *What he had received.*

First, he writes of God, "who has given me strength ... appointing me to his service." He refers to the inner strength the Lord had given him. Timothy is learning that if God gives him a work to do for him, he will give him the strength. Paul writes, "he judged me faithful." It was faithful commitment to God's word and his commandments that was the reason why God took him up and used him.

#### *Where he had been with God.*

Where did he previously stand with God? "Formally" *to proteron*, he had spoken evil of Jesus Christ and his messianic claims – thus he was "a blasphemer, persecutor and insolent opponent." The last word is *hybristēs*, violent, seething in anger, vicious, finding satisfaction in insulting and humiliating other people. In Rom. 1v30 it is a sin characteristic of the pagan world.

#### *How he was saved.*

He knew God's "mercy" and then "the grace of the Lord overflowed" to him – Paul is using language which suggests an abundance, *huperepleonasen* - the compound verb means to abound "above its usual measure" in an attempt to express the superabundance of God's grace to him (1v14). He was saved

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<sup>37</sup> P.H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006), 105.

through faith which led him on to a heart filled with love for the Lord. Or alternatively as Knight<sup>38</sup> proposes, Paul's experience of Christ brought him from unbelief and hatred of God's people into the realm of faith, not just the initial act but the sphere of faith, in an ongoing relationship with Christ, plus love for the Christian community (1 Cor. 13v13; Eph. 1v15; 1 Thess. 1v3, 3v6; 2 Thess. 1v3).

Towner<sup>39</sup> comments upon the new manner of existence for Paul, "in Christ Jesus." Surprisingly for some the phrase is nine times in the letters to Timothy. "Despite less diversity of application...there is little to suggest that these letters to Timothy reflect a non-Pauline use of the phrase." Twice we have the sphere of life or faith "in Christ Jesus," 2 Tim. 1v9; 3v12; the rest express certain qualities basic to Christian existence, "faith and love," 1Tim.1v14; 2 Tim. 1v13; "faith," 1 Tim. 3v13; 2 Tim. 3v15; "life," 2 Tim. 1v1; "grace," 2 Tim. 2v1; "salvation," 2 Tim. 2v10. The phrase sets out Paul's understanding after Damascus of the mystery of our union with Christ and the sense of our new and renewed status, "expressing a dynamic existence that is eschatological, relational and existential."

Paul can now affirm that this salvation from God came through Jesus Christ, the Christ of the Damascus Road. He makes this clear in a "trustworthy" saying – with four more in the Pastorals (1 Tim. 3v1; 4v9; 2 Tim. 2v11; Tit. 3v8). Why the use of this affirmation in these Epistles? Paul's gospel or his teaching had experienced many attacks in the past. The "trustworthy saying" formula is a way whereby he can add affirmation to its apostolic authority, and by using this formula for the various aspects of his teaching reject the heretical alternative of the false teachers as that which does not belong to this category. We can note that "When Paul states that the *logos* is *pistos* he is saying that it is a faithful presentation of God's message (cf. 2 Tim. 2v2)."<sup>40</sup> Only his gospel is "deserving of full acceptance" with *pas*, literally, "all" meaning wholehearted appropriation and application to yourself.

Paul has since Damascus come to clearly understand that the law brings condemnation, but the good news/gospel announces salvation. "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." Paul has created a new saying which really

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<sup>38</sup> G.W. Knight, 111, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC, ed. I. Howard Marshall and W. Ward Gasque, (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids; The Paternoster Press, Carlisle, 1992), 98.

<sup>39</sup> Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, 142.

<sup>40</sup> Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 99.

reflects the existing tradition with regard to the coming of Christ, see Mark 2v17, “I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”; Luke 19v10 “for the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost”; and John 18v37 “You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world - to bear witness to the truth.” The mission of God in Christ concerned his “coming into the world,” which for Hendriksen<sup>41</sup>, includes incarnation, suffering, death. The “world” is an important emphasis in light of what appears to be the exclusivist and elitist nature of the heresy in the Pastoral Epistles. “The juxtaposition of *world* and *sinners* shows that *world* is an *ethical* concept. The reason for his entrance into this realm of sin is given in the words ‘sinners to save’...the paradoxical *coming* was, after all, fully justified and gloriously motivated.”<sup>42</sup>

In a remarkable admission, concerning “sinners,” Paul claims that he was the worst - here the word is *protos*, meaning not first in this context, but foremost or chief. Remember his admission in Acts 22v4 to the Jerusalem mob, “I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women.” See also 1 Cor. 15v9-10 where Paul insists that he was “the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.”

*Why he obtained mercy.*

Paul gratefully announces in 1v16, “But I received mercy.” To what purpose? Paul continues, “For this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.” His conversion was an example of what God – here it is Jesus Christ - could do. He demonstrated his unlimited patience, the full extent of his forbearance. He did this *prōtos* “first” in Paul for others to see, those who would also believe| *ep’ autō* “in him” lit. “on him,” depicting saving faith in Christ, using the prepositional phrase “to repose one’s trust upon.” From Damascus, this was therefore Paul’s glorious mission message. The whole passage, showing Paul’s sin and Christ’s saving work, which in believing results in everlasting life, is meant to be seen to discredit the law teachers. They have no

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<sup>41</sup> W. Hendriksen *1 & 11 Timothy and Titus*, (London, Banner of Truth Trust, 1972), 78.

<sup>42</sup> Hendriksen, *1 & 11 Timothy and Titus*, 78-79. Note how he continues, “It was *to save* sinners that Christ Jesus came into the world. He did not come to help them save themselves, nor to induce them to save themselves, nor even to enable them to save themselves. He came *to save* them!” This was his understanding since Damascus.



such clear message of good news. How Paul's encounter with Jesus Christ on the Damascus Road has radically changed his understanding and his message!

*What was the result?*

In 1v17 Paul breaks out into a spontaneous doxology. Here God is affirmed as "King," (see Ps. 10v16; 74v12; Jer. 10v10) but in distinction from all earthly rulers, even the emperor, he is "the King of the ages." Also, he is the "immortal" God, a quality proper to God alone and "invisible" in contradistinction from the materialistic views of gods in pagan idolatry. Finally, Paul affirms that he is "the only God," highlighting his supremacy.<sup>43</sup> To such a one must be ascribed all "honor and glory," an esteem for which he is alone worthy. It is clear from the various references in his Epistles that Paul never forgot what the Lord had done for him at Damascus. That such a great God could send his own Son, demonstrate in him mercy and impart to him eternal life demands the response of the highest praise. The Greek says "to the ages of the ages" ESV "forever and ever" – praise beyond time and on into eternity. The final *amēn* means that Paul is looking for a response from Timothy and the hearers of the letter as well.

*The all-importance of Damascus for Paul's life and theology.*

As we noted earlier, it was Jeremias<sup>44</sup> who pointed us to Damascus as the real key to the transformation in the life of Saul the persecutor to Paul the preacher of the gospel. His world-view and theological understanding were radically changed through this encounter with the risen Christ. As Gal. 6v23 states, "He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy."

As we stated earlier, Jeremias understands Paul as one of those men who have experienced a sharp break with their past. It can be maintained that as far as Pauline theology is concerned Damascus is the key. Jeremias' main insights are here highlighted – with my additional comments occasionally added.

(a) His fellowship with Christ had its roots in the Damascus experience. From the time he saw Jesus in his glory, the exalted Lord becomes the great reality of his life. The centre of Pauline theology is to be found in Paul's thought regarding Jesus Christ, and is expressed in the apostle's frequently repeated phrase "in Christ" with a number noted in the Pastoral Epistles. So, it can be affirmed that Paul's theology is Christocentric. His was a life lived in communion with and

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<sup>43</sup> Knight makes the point that adding *sophos* "wise" probably reflects the influence of Rom. 16v27, Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 105.

<sup>44</sup> Jeremias, "The Key to Pauline Theology," *Ex T. Oct.* 1964, 27-30.

response to his risen, exalted Lord. Evangelical scholars have affirmed this understanding of Paul in opposition to contemporary religious existentialism which seeks to explain Paul's theology along the lines of anthropology. It can be maintained that Paul's doctrine of man is only a part of his total thought, as are other proposals regarding the centre of Paul's theology. Everything is subservient to and should be understood in relation to Paul's conception of Jesus Christ.

(b) His understanding of the cross and its saving power is anchored in the Damascus experience. He was convinced that the Christians were adherents of a false Messiah. He understood that God has cursed Jesus by death on a cross. But now he saw Jesus as the risen Christ exalted by God. At that moment it became clear to Paul that the persecuted Christians were right in claiming that Jesus as the Servant of God, died on the cross as a substitute for the sins of many. Paul knew the truth of Gal.2v20 – Jesus was the Son of God who “loved me and gave himself for me” and 3v13 ‘Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, *by becoming a curse for us.*’

(c) His knowledge of the omnipotence of grace or the greatness of God's mercy and God's gracious selection and predestination was born on the Damascus Road. These are all themes highlighted in the passages we have considered from Galatians and 1 Timothy.

(d) His understanding of the fearfulness of sin stems from Damascus. He had believed he was blameless by the law's standards. Now suddenly he sees he has blasphemed the Messiah and endeavoured to wipe out his community.

(e) From Damascus we understand his radical opposition to legalism. We can comment that there are two aspects to Paul's convictions. A negative aspect - it was not through his law-keeping he found acceptance. Compared to his contemporaries he had reached the highest achievement, but in seeking to “establish” his own righteousness he had missed “God's righteousness” (Rom. 10v3); a positive aspect - he came to realise that he was actually justified by faith, on the basis of Christ's sacrifice for him (see e.g., Galatians 2v16).

(f) His future hope was rooted here. He had met the risen Lord as the firstfruits of them that sleep. He had seen the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (1 Cor.15v20, 2 Cor.4v6).

(g) His sense of missionary obligation and his role as an apostle stem from Damascus. He was converted on the road to Damascus but also called by God

to be the apostle to the Gentiles as the Lord had revealed to him from the very beginning, (Acts 9v15-16; 26v17-18).

(h) His doctrine of the church has at least one root here (Acts 9v4; 22v7; 26v14). The Lord identifies himself with his church, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting *me*?”

Another work centered on the influence of the Damascus event on Paul’s life is that of Longenecker’s, *The Road from Damascus*. In this book there are 11 contributors who examined the nature of Paul’s Damascus Road experience and the impact of that experience on his thought and ministry as revealed in his Epistles and transformed worldview. The contents are set out as follows:

- Interpreting Paul’s conversion: then and now / Bruce Corley
- A realized hope, a new commitment, and a developed proclamation: Paul and Jesus / Richard N. Longenecker
- A new understanding of the present and the future: Paul and eschatology / I. Howard Marshall
- Israelite, convert, apostle to the Gentiles: the origin of Paul’s Gentile mission / Terence L. Donaldson
- Paul and justification by faith / James D. G. Dunn
- God reconciled his enemy to himself: the origin of Paul’s concept of reconciliation / Seyoon Kim
- Contours of covenant theology in the post-conversion Paul / Bruce W. Longenecker
- Sinai as viewed from Damascus: Paul’s re-evaluation of the Mosaic law / Stephen Westerholm
- Paul’s conversion as key to his understanding of the Spirit / Gordon D. Fee
- Paul on women and gender: a comparison with early Jewish views / Judith M. Gundry-Volf
- Paul’s conversion and his ethic of freedom in Galatians / G. Walter Hansen.

But there is more to Pauline theology than the evidence of Hellenistic influence, Paul's Jewishness and Damascus. There were Paul's contacts with the Christian community which welcomed him.

*(4) Paul's use of Christian Traditions.*

Paul at his conversion entered an already existing Christian community. He warmly pays tribute to the existence of this fellowship in Romans 16. Of Andronicus and Junia he writes "they were in Christ before me," (16v7). Paul's debt to his predecessors in the early Christian communities is one of the firmest conclusions established in recent study.

We must not think of him as a sort of spiritual Columbus. He was not in splendid isolation when converted. There was a church at Damascus and Jerusalem ready to receive him, if cautiously at the beginning. He had contacts with the churches in Jerusalem and Judaea (Acts 9v26-28; Gal.1v18-24) and greetings sent to the recipients of Romans 16 represent a great host of men and women already Christian before he came on the scene. From all these sources he "received" much of the apostolic teaching he was content to acknowledge as common property and a shared possession (I Cor.15v11) and then to "hand on" this teaching to his converts (I Cor.15v1ff.; I Thess.2v13, 4v1; 2 Thess.3v6; Col.2v6).

Therefore we must recognise that there was a rich heritage already there for Paul (Rom.1v3; I Cor.11v23ff.; 15v3ff). He gratefully took over the teaching on Christ's person and saving work even though he supplemented it. He must be seen as no innovator or arch-corrupter of the gospel. Paul is more an interpreter of Christ on the basis of Church tradition than an innovator, though we need always to keep in view the extra dimension of his theology which came uniquely from his conversion on the Damascus Road and his calling as an apostle.

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