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## THE SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS SETTING

### PAUL: A MAN OF HIS TIMES

It is not possible to understand a person and his activities apart from the times in which he lived. This is especially the case with Paul. In responding to the call of Jesus he did not withdraw from the world about him; rather, he found himself thrown more violently into it. As a consequence he crisscrossed vast tracts of the Mediterranean region several times over in the course of the next thirty years. In doing so he met people from a variety of racial and national backgrounds, among them Jews from the Dispersion; homeland and immigrant Greeks; Romans at the heart of the Empire and in some of its distant outposts; Cypriots, Macedonians, and the inhabitants of local districts in different parts of Asia Minor; even small groups from Egypt, Crete, Malta, and apparently, Scythia. On these travels he encountered competing philosophical schools, in particular Stoicism and Epicureanism, and alternative religious movements, especially traditional Greek city-state cults and imported Oriental mystery religions. At different points in his journeyings he also came into conflict with a wide range of civil and political authorities and experienced first hand the ramifications of a variety of legal processes and deci-

sions. So Paul was extensively involved in, and affected by, many of the significant tendencies and tensions of his day and cannot be studied in isolation from them.

There is a further reason for insisting that Paul be approached in this way. He did not merely encounter the ideas and institutions of the people amongst whom he moved; he adopted a deliberate policy of accommodation to them. This comes out most clearly in his first letter to the Christians at Corinth. "I have become all things to all men," he says, "that I might by all means save some" (1 Cor 9:22, RSV). This does not mean that Paul compromises his beliefs and practices by simply conforming them to those he happens to be addressing at any particular time. It means that he is always taking such beliefs and practices into account and making them the starting point for his own message and behavior. Wherever he can do so, he acknowledges the validity of other approaches and incorporates them into his own (Acts 17:22-34). Where he cannot, he asserts the superiority of his approach over others and argues that it fulfills the aspirations that have been misguidedly invested in the other approaches (Col 2:8-23). Either way the things he is saying and doing cannot be properly appreciated without reference to the context in which he is speaking and acting.

Another reason Paul should be studied in the context of his culture is his frequently expressed concern with the social attitudes and structures of his day. On some occasions he calls these into question and contradicts them by his own statements or behavior (1 Cor 6:1-6); on others he insists they be carefully noted and followed (11:14-15). Where accepted conventions come into conflict with a basic implication of the gospel message, there is no doubt in his mind as to which has to give way (10:14-22). Where less central implications of the gospel are concerned and where there is the likelihood of causing offense among those outside the Christian group, there should be a willing avoidance of practices that, all things being equal, are quite legitimate in themselves (8:7-13; 10:23-30). This means that in some measure the activities of Christians in his communities were conditioned by the values and patterns of the society around them and cannot be rightly understood unless considered in relation to them.

Many treatments of Paul's view of community are inadequate in this respect. Instead of seeing Paul's views in their historical setting they discuss them independently of the wider

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context in which they emerged. This results in a primarily doctrinal study of Paul's outlook, unrelated to many of the circumstances that played a part in its development. Yet it was through interaction with the society about him, as well as involvement with his communities, that Paul came to hold the views expressed in his letters, not through theological contemplation removed from the cut and thrust of daily life. This is why they have the stamp of reality about them and are so full of life and creativity. He was constantly being forced to justify conclusions he had already reached and to demonstrate their relevance in situations that had arisen. He was also frequently under pressure to deepen his convictions in order to deal with new difficulties that had appeared. Paul's understanding of community is never static or frozen into a theological system. It is a living thing, always open to development and in touch with the practicalities of the moment.

## THE GRAECO-ROMAN WORLD: CHANGING CONCEPTIONS OF COMMUNITY

The Graeco-Roman world in the middle of the first century was characterized by great variety and vitality. Although Rome now dominated the whole of the Mediterranean region and Greek culture had penetrated to the furthest reaches of the Empire, not only did local patterns of rule and ways of life continue to survive, but relatively new trends in social organization began to flourish and attract an increasing number of people. Traditionally there had been two main types of community with which people might associate themselves: *politeia*, the public life of the city or nation state to which people belonged; and *oikonomia*, the household order into which they were born or to which they were attached. For some, involvement in communities of both types could be a very full and satisfying affair. The Greek citizen in fifth-century BC Athens played a vocal part in the *polis*, the city-state where he lived, as well as a leading role in the *oikos*, the family unit that he headed. His Jewish counterpart in eighth-century BC Israel, as an elder in his local town or village, made a real contribution to civic affairs and had important obligations to fulfill within the extended family that he was responsible for. But there were always others who were unable to participate in the life of either of these

two kinds of communities in a freely-chosen or meaningful way. Among them were the majority of slaves, dependents of various kinds, adults who remained unmarried, and outcasts of society.

By the first century, even those who had previously played an influential part in their respective civil and household communities found their freedom to do so dwindling in the face of changes that were overtaking both institutions in society. Well before the rise of Rome, but accelerated by the growth of the Empire, political power tended to become concentrated in fewer and fewer hands and to remain in those hands for longer and longer periods. This was so even in Rome itself. In the wake of the victorious legions, traditional republics were still often created, but independence was never fully granted to them, and authority was generally vested in an aristocratic, often self-advancing, minority. Disenchantment with the *polis* not only took place among the politically disadvantaged sections of society but also increased among those who, in earlier days, had found their identity partly within it. To some extent the household community was the beneficiary of this exclusion from the real bodies where civil power resided. What people could not find in the wider community to which they belonged they sought in the smaller community in which they lived. Its breadth of membership and intimacy of relationship lent itself well to this. Yet the desires of many could not long be satisfied within so narrow a sphere, while the hopes of others were forever being frustrated by the subordinate position they occupied within the household framework. For these reasons people's aspirations and allegiances tended to drift away from the *oikos* in another direction.

Some of the more thoughtful and devout members of society began to look beyond the public life of their *polis* towards a cosmopolitan order that would encompass all people. They wrote or dreamt of a universal commonwealth, an international brotherhood, in which the basic divisions that recently separated people had been, or were to be, resolved. Whether this was viewed as a Stoic commonwealth governed by reason or as an international theocracy ruled from Jerusalem by the Messiah, this idea maintained a powerful grip on the minds of many Greeks, Romans, and Jews.

However, for others these expectations proved too abstract and elitist on the one hand, or too violent and utopian on the other. In increasingly greater numbers people began to find their desires fulfilled in a variety of voluntary associations that multiplied in cities all over the ancient world, especially in Greek

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centers. Though these associations had their precursors in groups formed for various purposes among the social elite in earlier centuries, it was in the late Hellenistic period that they came into their own and attracted a wide following—in part from the socially disadvantaged members of society. The novel feature of these groups was their basis in something other than the principles of *politeia* or *oikonomia*. They bound together people from dissimilar backgrounds on a different basis than that of geography and race, or natural and legal ties. Their principle was *koinonia*, i.e., voluntary partnership.

This does not mean that every such association was open to all who wished to join it. Many restricted entry to a certain nationality, family, class, or gender in society and excluded all others. Only a few appear to have opened their doors, in some respects at least, to all. I say "in some respects," for the majority were in any case established around a particular interest, vocation, or commitment. These were extremely varied: political, military, and sporting concerns; professional and commercial guilds; artisans and members of crafts; philosophical schools and religious societies. Although only some were purely religious in character (a religious dimension was present in nearly all such organizations, generally through the patronage of a deity and attachment to a shrine), the bulk were primarily designed to meet the social, charitable, and funerary needs of their members. It was in such voluntary fraternities, which could number anything between ten and one hundred members but mostly averaged around thirty to thirty-five, that many people in the Hellenistic world began to find their personal point of reference and to experience a level of community that was denied to them elsewhere. In this proliferation of small clubs or associations, and in the significance they possessed for those who belonged to them, there is an interesting link between the first century and our own.

## DISENCHANTMENT WITH TRADITIONAL RELIGION

### The Jews

Bearing in mind the wide range of associations that existed during this period, we need to look more closely at those which were predominantly religious in nature. A word first, however, about the religious scene in general during this time. Among the

Jews there was widespread dissatisfaction with the priestly hierarchy in Jerusalem, particularly in view of its collaboration with the Roman authorities and its absorption of Greek culture. In reaction against this, brotherhoods were formed to preserve the purity of the traditional faith, maintain the vigor of their messianic hope, and promote adherence to the ethical code enshrined in their sacred books. To ensure this they developed an extensive network of regulations to protect their members against the encroachment of foreign influences or the relaxation of their religious obligations. For some, so apostate were the religious leaders and their cultic practices, and so impure the society around them, that they withdrew into monastic communities on the fringes of civilization or as conclaves within urban life. This was the course of action adopted by the Qumran community on the shores of the Dead Sea, and by the associated "Essene" communities scattered throughout Jewish cities and colonies. Others formed fraternities within the flux of everyday affairs to educate and encourage their members in ways to live a holy life in the midst of the world about them. Such, among others, was the practice of the "Pharisees," a term that probably embraces a number of like-minded, though not identical, puritan groups in Jewish society. These formed themselves into *haburoth* in order to maintain rigid standards of purity and celebrate religious meals together.

Apart from the brotherhoods, there was another institution within Judaism that became a center of religious and communal life, namely, the synagogue. Its origin lay several centuries in the past and is partly clouded in obscurity. With the dissolution of the Israelite monarchies in the late seventh and early fifth centuries BC and the consequent exile of the people from the land and Temple, the need for a new framework for preserving and nurturing the Jewish faith became evident. It was probably at this time that local gatherings of Jews began to take place where the Law could be read and expounded and prayer made. It is not clear which of these two elements, the educational or liturgical, was primary or whether both were inseparable from the beginning. After the return of the exiles from Babylon these gatherings seem to have continued, at least outside Jerusalem. In the capital, except for foreign residents, the rebuilt Temple provided a focus for worship and instruction.<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere, in northern districts like

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<sup>1</sup> Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews*, 15.380–425.

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Galilee,<sup>2</sup> Hellenistic centers like Caesarea,<sup>3</sup> and in cities throughout the Diaspora, synagogues (or “prayer-houses” as they were often called outside Judaea) multiplied, particularly during the second and first centuries BC.<sup>4</sup> The term *sunagoge* at first referred to the gathering itself (Acts 13:43), then by association to the community who met together,<sup>5</sup> and finally, as mostly in the NT, to the buildings that were provided especially for this purpose.<sup>6</sup> There is evidence to suggest that near the synagogue other buildings were sometimes constructed, e.g., a guest house, baths, rooms, etc., that could be used in association with it, especially by travelers.<sup>7</sup> While Pharisees were warmly welcomed by such groups because of their pious, thoughtful, and practical approach to religion, they were not chiefly responsible for the proliferation of synagogues—although they frequently made use of the synagogues to disseminate their teachings.

### The Greeks and Romans

Disenchantment with traditional religions also existed among Greeks and Romans. The reality or relevance of the official gods had been queried by the philosophers, and the ritual associated with their worship failed to satisfy the needs of those who were being awakened to greater individuality. Into the vacuum that was created stepped two main claimants for people's allegiance. First were the various philosophies of the day, which provided both an all-embracing world view and practical advice on the well-ordered life. These appealed to more thoughtful Greeks and Romans, their religious overtones strengthening their capacity to satisfy other aspects of the personality. Far and away the most influential of these in Paul's time, and the one that most seriously grappled with the communal tendencies within human beings, was Stoi-

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<sup>2</sup> Matt 4:23; 9:35; Luke 4:15.

<sup>3</sup> Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.285, 289; cf. *Antiquities* 19.300.

<sup>4</sup> Philo, *On the Embassy to Gaius* 156, 311; *On the Life of Moses* 2.215; Flaccus 45.

<sup>5</sup> *Corpus Inscriptionum Graecarum*, 9909, in C. K. Barrett, *The New Testament Background: Selected Documents* (rev. and exp.; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989) 56. Acts 6:9; 9:2; Rev 2:9; 3:9.

<sup>6</sup> Philo, *Every Good Man is Free* 81. Josephus, *Antiquities* 19.305. Acts 13–19 passim.

<sup>7</sup> Theodotus Inscription, in Barrett, *Background*, 53–54.

cism. This had its origins in the late fourth century. However, it was Posidonius in the first century BC who did much to revitalize Stoic thought, giving it a more transcendental thrust and deeper religious character than it had previously possessed. This so-called Middle Stoicism can be found in the writings of Paul's contemporary, the Roman philosopher-statesman Seneca. Representatives of a more traditional approach were also active, for example, Musonius Rufus and later Epictetus. There were other philosophical outlooks but, unlike Stoicism, these had either failed to grip popular imagination—the fate of Epicureanism—or had not yet filtered down to the general educated consciousness—as with the revival of Platonism. Mention should also be made of the Cynics, those nonconformist itinerants who often shocked their contemporaries by their message and manner of life and who had an influence on Stoic ideas and practice. So much did these share in common in the first century AD that Cynicism may be aptly described as a kind of “radical Stoicism.”

For some, these philosophies were too cerebral a solution. A quest for an assurance of immortality and a place in the scheme of things led some individuals to investigate the promises made by the various “mystery” or secretive religions that poured into the Western Mediterranean world from the Eastern provinces. These had a long history, some originating in Greek folk-religions that persisted alongside the setting up of the official cults. At an early stage Eleusinian mysteries were integrated into the city cult at Athens, but for the most part mysteries continued alongside the official worship and did not demand withdrawal from it as a prerequisite for membership. One thinks here of the Dionysiac festivals or, a very different phenomenon, of the Orphic brotherhoods. Particularly from the third century BC a variety of Near Eastern local religions—Egyptian,<sup>8</sup> Phrygian,<sup>9</sup> Persian,<sup>10</sup> and others—spread throughout the Hellenistic world. They were brought by emigrants, merchants, soldiers, even slaves, but by the second century AD were being promoted by some intellectuals and rulers as well. They established themselves as *thiasoi*, private cultic associations, though again participation in the official worship, or for that matter other mystery cults, was not forbidden. So it was that

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<sup>8</sup> Plutarch, *Isis and Osiris* passim.

<sup>9</sup> Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* 2.2.22ff.

<sup>10</sup> *Mithras Liturgy*, in Barrett, *Background*, 132–33.

the rites associated with such foreign deities as Cybele, Attis, Isis and Serapis, Adonis, and, at a later date, the figure of Mithras, spread throughout the Empire. These catered to the psychological needs of people in a much more substantial way than the philosophical schools, chiefly through various dramatic rituals in which adherents participated and vivid mystical experiences to which they aspired.<sup>11</sup> Since such religions possessed a democratic tendency—they opened their doors to people of all nationalities, and to women and slaves as well—and maintained firm secrecy about their activities, they held a powerful attraction and fascination for many.

## PAUL'S CONTACT WITH THE NEW RELIGIONS

How much contact did Paul have with these different groups? It is unlikely that he had been himself a member of anything but a *haburah*, a Pharisaic fellowship, and an attender of anything but the synagogue and Temple. He came to Jerusalem from Tarsus (the capital of Cilicia) at a young age, probably undergoing all his formal education there (Acts 22:3; 26:4). His Pharisaic training in Jerusalem would not have permitted him to belong to any other association. His Diaspora origin also brought him into contact with synagogue life in Jerusalem, certainly with the synagogue of those from Cilicia and Asia, mentioned by Luke (6:9; cf. 24:19). He was converted journeying to Damascus with an official commission to seek out Christians in the synagogues there, but he proceeded to preach the gospel in these instead (Acts 9:2, 20). Later he preached to the Hellenistic Jews in Jerusalem, probably in their synagogues (v. 29). When he subsequently returned to Tarsus (and perhaps also initially at Antioch)<sup>12</sup> he presumably moved in synagogue circles. Once his wider missionary work had begun in earnest, synagogues consistently provided the contact point with potential converts (Acts 17:2), e.g., at Salamis (13:5), Pisidian Antioch (13:14), Iconium (14:1), Philippi (where no building existed but simply a place of prayer, 16:13), Thessalonica (17:1), Berea (17:10), Athens (17:17), Corinth (18:4), and Ephesus (18:19;

<sup>11</sup>Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 11 passim.

<sup>12</sup>Acts 9:30, 11:25, 26. Cf. Josephus, *Jewish War* 7.44.

19:8). There can be no doubt about Paul's wide acquaintance with synagogue practice.

It is more difficult to judge how much he knew about other voluntary associations in these areas, including the mystery cults. He certainly came into conflict with them on occasions, directly with the guild of silversmiths at Ephesus (Acts 19:24–27), and indirectly through his injunctions to the Corinthians about banquets in idols' temples and through other references to the ecstatic and sensual character of cultic worship.<sup>13</sup> The widespread existence of such associations and the increasing penetration of the cults throughout the whole Mediterranean region suggests that Paul had other opportunities to learn about them, even if the secrecy imposed upon members of the mysteries made their affairs less public. The polemical use of their terminology at various points in his letters suggests this, e.g., mystery,<sup>14</sup> knowledge,<sup>15</sup> visions (2 Cor 12:1; Col 2:18), though it is just possible that such language was in more general use. His encounters with members of the philosophical schools were probably less frequent, if for no other reason than their small following. Alongside his well-known meeting with the Stoics and Epicureans at Athens (Acts 17:18), contacts with such people can probably be deduced from his use of their venues, e.g., the hall of Tyrannus in Ephesus (Acts 19:9), reference to their activities (1 Cor 1:20; 2:4–5), and echoes of their teaching (e.g., Acts 17:28; 1 Cor 15:33). While we should not overlook the possibility that some acquaintance with the teachings of these groups formed part of Paul's education in Jerusalem, it seems likely that most of his information would have been gathered on his travels in a rather ad hoc fashion, supplemented by occasional debates with their representatives and discussions with converts from their way of life.

## THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

The presence of different voluntary religious associations in the ancient world during this period means that, from one point

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<sup>13</sup>1 Cor 8:7–13, 10:14–22; 12:1–3; 13:1.

<sup>14</sup>Rom 16:25; Col 1:26–27; Eph 3:3–4, 9; 5:32.

<sup>15</sup>See pp. 70–71.

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of view, there was nothing particularly novel about the appearance of Christian communities alongside them. Judaism had its parties and, in the early days at least, the Nazarenes were regarded as an additional sect within Israel, not as a heretical departure from it. Hellenism had its cults and in the initial stage of their development Christians had their private gatherings. Because it centered around an Eastern divinity, Christianity may well have been regarded by some in terms of the mysteries, though the absence of normal cult-practices within it might have led others to view it as primarily a social rather than religious phenomenon or perhaps as a new philosophical school. In retrospect, quite apart from the way in which they were perceived at the time, Paul's communities must be seen as part of a wider movement towards the spontaneous association of individuals in society and as a parallel development to the religious fellowships that were growing in popularity within Judaism and Hellenism during that period. While, in view of Paul's preconversion background and missionary environment, it is the synagogue and mystery cult that must be brought into closest comparison with his idea of community, the monastic fraternities and philosophical schools form part of the wider background to his approach. How far was it removed from the monastic order established at Qumran and how much does it have in common with the Stoic expectation of a universal commonwealth? How largely did it draw upon patterns of authority, worship, and organization characteristic of the synagogue, and how extensively did it accommodate itself to the practices and structures of the mystery cults? In other words, how genuinely distinctive was it? These are questions that we must now examine.