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Introduction

Intensive research over many years has brought the writer of the present book to a deep conviction that there is nothing in the teaching of Paul—not even the most mystical elements in it—that did not come to him from authentic Judaism.

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THE New Testament describes the Apostle Paul as a Pharisee who comes to faith in Jesus as the Messiah, boldly proclaiming the gospel as the power of the God of Israel unto salvation, to the diverse peoples in distant parts of a Gentile world. Working in a largely pagan environment, the one who is referred to in the book of Acts as Saul of Tarsus establishes churches as the Apostle Paul. Paul has been referred to as the “second founder of Christianity.” He has been called a “mystic.” Now he is referred to as a “Gnostic.”¹ The consensus of scholarship has come to view him as a Hellenistic Jew who departed radically from his Judaism. Scholars view him as being influenced by his upbringing in the Stoic environs of Tarsus and various streams of thought flowing forth from paganism, Greco-Roman culture, popular Hellenistic philosophy, mystery religious cults, and Gnostic systems. Seldom is the origin of Paul’s faith seen as rooted in Pharisaism.

This book begins with a different set of presuppositions. Paul calls himself a Pharisee. We should listen to what Paul tells us about himself. In fact, there is no evidence anywhere in the New Testament that he departed from his firm convictions as a Pharisee. Paul is a Jewish theologian who anchored his beliefs in the Hebrew Bible and the teachings of his eminent

mentors in Jerusalem. He is a Hebrew of the Hebrews rather than a Hellenist of the Greeks. Fresh evidence from the literary discoveries of the Dead Sea Scrolls as well as renewed interest in the analysis of rabbinic literature place the Apostle Paul squarely within the Judaism of the land of Israel and not the Hellenism of Asia Minor, although surely there was much interaction between Hellenism and Judaism in the first century and this influenced Pharisaism.

Paul is a Pharisee who has been rejected by the synagogue and misunderstood by the church. The synagogue could not accept the profile of Paul's style of Pharisaism. For one thing, under the direction of the Sadducean high priests, he persecuted the early church. The leader of the Pharisees in those days, Rabban Gamaliel, fought hard against this type of religious persecution. For another thing, many Pharisees could not accept Paul's messianism based on his vision as he traveled the road to Damascus.² The early church, on the other hand, largely rejected the Jewish heritage of Paul by denying his Pharisaism. For the church, Paul is a former Pharisee. When he stopped persecuting the church, he departed from his Pharisaism. As a Pharisee, he was evil. As a Christian, he parted ways with his Judaic heritage to become a Christian.

Paul, however, considered himself to be a Pharisee throughout his entire life. He was proud of his Judaic heritage and his upbringing in Jerusalem. He studied the sources of his faith diligently. In many ways, Paul should qualify as a valuable source for the study of Pharisaism. He proclaimed himself to be a Pharisee in the line of Pharisees. He was dedicated to his faith and lived an observant life. In modern times, few people are as dedicated to their religious convictions as Paul. He practiced the life of Pharisaism in accordance with his family background and his training in the land of Israel.

By his belief in Jesus on the basis of his own dramatic encounter with the risen Messiah, Paul's religious fervor reached a higher plateau. For him, faith in Jesus as Messiah brought

deeper conviction and enrichment. Above all, his energies were redirected toward the Gentile world. The Jewish apostle sought to call the pagan nations to a faith in the one God of Israel by preaching the message of Jesus the Messiah, “For, ‘everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved’ ” (Rom 10:13).

By rejecting the Judaism of the Apostle Paul, unwittingly the church has adopted an anti-Semitism that echoes the teachings of Marcion, the second-century heretic who rejected the Old Testament for his interpretation of Paul’s writings. Sometimes, as Christians, we have accepted Paul’s teachings about Jesus while rejecting his love of the Hebrew Bible as well as his Judaic heritage. Abraham Joshua Heschel has noted the difficulty with this approach to Christian theology:

The Christian message, which in its origins intended to be an affirmation and culmination of Judaism, became very early diverted into a repudiation and negation of Judaism; obsolescence and abrogation of Jewish faith became conviction and doctrine; the new covenant was conceived not as a new phase or disclosure but as abolition and replacement of the ancient one; theological thinking fashioned its terms in a spirit of antithesis to Judaism. Contrast and contradiction rather than acknowledgement of roots relatedness and indebtedness, became the perspective. Judaism a religion of law, Christianity a religion of grace; Judaism teaches a God of wrath, Christianity a God of love; Judaism a religion of slavish obedience, Christianity the conviction of free men; Judaism is particularism, Christianity is universalism; Judaism seeks work-righteousness, Christianity preaches faith-righteousness. The teaching of the old covenant a religion of fear, the gospel of the new covenant a religion of love . . .³

Today people long to understand Paul and his teachings. The time has come for a reevaluation of the foundation pillars of Paul’s thought. His theology is rooted in Torah-true Judaism. His Pharisaism is evident in his teachings concerning the

resurrection of the dead and in his interpretation of the Bible. He reveals knowledge of Jewish hermeneutics and halakah. When Paul is viewed as a Pharisee, many aspects of his teachings concerning grace and law are better understood. This is especially true when one realizes that the apostle was solving problems in congregations made up of both Jews and Gentiles.

Krister Stendahl has reminded us of the necessity for reading Paul's message in context:

The main lines of Pauline interpretation—and hence both conscious and unconscious reading and quoting of Paul by scholars and lay people alike—have for many centuries been out of touch with one of the most basic of questions and concerns that shaped Paul's thinking in the first place: the relation between Jews and Gentiles.⁴

The context is the social and theological upheaval created among the early Christians when the pagan Gentiles began to enter the fellowship of believers. Paul approaches the situation from his Jewish heritage.

After all, Paul is a Pharisee living among the Christians, Jews, and pagan Gentiles. He is a bridge builder. He confronts hostilities from many factions in the church as well as from the Greco-Roman world in which he ministers. As a Jewish theologian, he labors diligently to win acceptance for non-Jews among all Christian believers, some of whom are most assuredly proselytes who converted to Judaism before they believed in Jesus. These ex-Gentile believers as well as many Pharisees in the early Jesus movement would demand total conversion, including circumcision for all Gentile converts. Paul the Pharisee argues against the requirement of circumcision for non-Jews coming to faith in the Messiah. Many would be offended by his gospel of grace. So Paul is a Pharisee among the Christians. It is his liberal attitude and free interpretation of the Torah that invites trouble for the apostle to the Gentiles.

Gaining awareness and insight into Paul's Jewish background promises to open new horizons for interpreting the message of this most controversial figure in nascent Christianity.

INTRODUCTION: NOTES

1. See E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977); and P. Tomson, *Paul and the Jewish Law* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1990). Tomson points out (p. 1) that regarding Paul, scholars routinely begin with three assumptions: "(1) the centre of his thought is a polemic against the Law; (2) the Law for him no longer had a practical meaning; and (3) ancient Jewish literature is no source for explaining his letters." All three of these presuppositions are wrong. Paul's Jewish theology is seldom appreciated. Cf. also the stimulating work and creative thought of Krister Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976).
2. See the record of the New Testament: Acts 9:1–9, 26:12–23; Gal 1:12. Cf. the discussion of F. J. Foakes Jackson and Kirsopp Lake, *The Beginnings of Christianity* (5 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979) 4.99–102; F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984) 196–200; and Otto Bauernfeind, *Kommentar und Studien zur Apostelgeschichte* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1980) 129–35.
3. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Insecurity of Freedom* (New York: Schocken, 1972) 169.
4. Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*, 1.