

# The Vision of St Paul

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Continuing *Thinking Faith's* series on St Paul, Nick King SJ looks at the change effected in the apostle by his encounter with the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus, and the demands that St Paul's letters still place on their readers, two millennia after they were written.

## Introduction

This year, the Catholic Church is celebrating the "year of St Paul". This is presumably based on a calculation that Paul may have been born in about 8 or 9 AD, and that we are in consequence celebrating his two thousandth birthday. It is not clear what the evidence for this might be (Pauline chronology is notoriously tricky to establish), but it is no bad thing to draw Paul's to people's attention, whatever time of day it is.

For Paul has enormously influenced the history of the Church and the world; but at the same time he can be very difficult, both to understand and to manage, and there is a risk that even quite serious-minded Scripture scholars may opt to browse in what seem like more rewarding pastures. One problem is that a good many people (including, I have to say, some quite well-known New Testament professionals) don't actually like St Paul all that much. They find him prickly, authoritarian and in places downright obscure. And some people regard him, unfairly in my view, as 'anti-feminist'. My own stance is that (after many battles) I like Paul very much indeed, on at least the following three grounds: first, he is a gifted translator. That is to say, he took a gospel that was originally preached in Jesus' native Aramaic, with its confusion over guttural consonants that made Judean speakers of Aramaic laugh so much, and translated it into the lively Greek of the Hellenistic cities in which Paul was so very much at home, and through which he spent his life travelling, and preaching about the Risen Jesus. Secondly, he is one of the three most original minds in the entire New Testament (the other two being, of course, the authors of the Fourth



Gospel and the Letter to the Hebrews), with the added distinction that we can often hear Paul 'thinking on his feet', as he tries to work out the implication of his message about Jesus for different Christian communities in cities with different problems. Thirdly, and some Scripture scholars will squirm with embarrassment as they read these words, but they must be said or we shall not understand Paul at all, Paul is a great lover. He is, quite simply, head-over-heels in

love with the Jesus whom he said he saw; and that is the secret of the adventures of the rest of his life.

What I propose to do therefore here is to give one person's overview of Paul, a kind of revision tutorial for those who have not glanced at Paul in a while. Quite deliberately, I shall avoid footnotes, except for NT references; for there is so much literature on the subject that anyone who claims to have mastered what is written about Paul is a knave or a fool. At the end, however, I shall list some books and articles that you might find helpful. The overview will take the form of brief glances, first at Paul's background, second at the fact that Paul undeniably persecuted the infant group that had gathered round Jesus' memory, and that would later be called 'Christians' or 'Messianists'<sup>1</sup>, and third at the fact that he undoubtedly changed his tack (some scholars are coy about using of him the word 'conversion', for understandable reasons). This change of tack involved five electrifying and bewildering discoveries, and we shall look briefly at each of these. These discoveries in turn had implications for Paul, of which we shall mention four. Finally, we shall list some consequences for a committed reader of Paul today, if they are to make sense of the thirteen documents ascribed to his name.

Once again some professional scholars will shift uneasily – but Paul expected his letters to have an effect on his readers and hearers (though he might have been startled by the tidings that they would exercise influence two millennia down the line), and we are not properly hearing or reading the text if we do not consider what he might have thought the effects to be.

### *The Paul who met Jesus*

#### 1. **Where Paul came from**

We do not well understand Paul unless we realise that there are three formative elements in his background. In the first place, he was a Jew, properly brought up as a Pharisee<sup>2</sup>. If Luke has it right<sup>3</sup>, he was given his religious training in Jerusalem, so he had seen Herod's spectacular and beautiful reordering of the Second Temple, and knew intimately the Pharisees, the party within Judaism that was to take on the mantle after that Temple was destroyed (some years after Paul's own death).

Secondly, he was a product of Greek culture. He may well have known Aramaic and Hebrew (one would rather expect that to be the case); but to read his letters is to be certain that here is one who handles Greek with a skill and originality that suggests a native speaker. Many scholars today will argue that Paul had at least some training in Greek rhetorical techniques. So he was a man who, precisely as Luke depicts him in Acts 17, is entirely at his ease in the dazzling Greek-speaking society that inhabited the principal cities of the Mediterranean world, though he undoubtedly had reservations about some elements of that Hellenistic society, as indeed he did about the Judaism in which he had been brought up.

Thirdly, Paul was a Roman<sup>4</sup> citizen. Paul knew how to use the infra-structure of the Empire, its postal and travel services, and both Acts<sup>5</sup> and Romans<sup>6</sup> represent Paul as determined to get to Rome. Indeed in Romans 13:1-7 Paul seeks to solve a difficult problem in Rome by insisting that the Roman authorities are put there by God; and they must be obeyed and taxes paid to them. This is not a line that all NT authors would take.

#### 2. **Paul persecuted the church**

There can be no doubt at all that Paul persecuted the infant church. He tells us so, at times with regret<sup>7</sup>, so we do not need the evidence supplied by Acts<sup>8</sup> to that effect. Why was this? Presumably, because these 'Jesus-people' not only claimed that a criminal hanged on a tree was the long-awaited Messiah, but also started to use of Jesus language that had hitherto been reserved for God. For someone like Paul, accustomed to praying the Shema ('the Lord your God is one God') three times a day that was simply impossible, a betrayal of all that he had been brought up to believe.

#### 3. **And yet he changed**

Something happened, though. Luke regards it as so important that he describes Paul's encounter with Jesus no less than three times<sup>9</sup>, with some small variations in detail, placing it on the road from Jerusalem to Damascus, presumably quite near to Damascus. Paul himself does not tell us where it took place, though he certainly went to Damascus as a Christian<sup>10</sup>, and there are no strong arguments against the encounter taking place in those parts. The way Paul describes it is that he 'saw Jesus our Lord'<sup>11</sup>. And he fell in love<sup>12</sup>. From this, it followed that these Jesus-people were after all correct in what they had been saying. And this led to some astonishing discoveries for Paul.

### *Paul's five discoveries*

In consequence of this encounter, Paul found himself unexpectedly believing five things that he had not believed before. Firstly, it was true, after all, this absurd talk of Resurrection (and we must not find ourselves thinking that it was easier for our silly forebears of pre-Enlightenment times, so ignorant that they would believe anything; they were no more credulous than we are). Jesus had risen, and Paul had, unambiguously, seen him<sup>13</sup>. Secondly, when these Christians addressed Jesus as *Kyrie* or 'Lord', they were doing the right thing, and for the rest of his life, that was the principal way in which Paul addressed Jesus<sup>14</sup>. It was not without its cost, however, for although the title *Kyrios* can be used for any presumed social superior, such as a passing gardener<sup>15</sup> or a

heavenly presbyter<sup>16</sup>, when it is used in its fullest sense, it is exclusive. This meant that Paul was going to run up against the traditions of his native Judaism, for whom there was only one 'Lord' (indeed it looks as though in the Greek translations of the Hebrew Scriptures known to Paul, *Kyrios* is the way the Tetragram, the sacred name of God, is expressed in Greek). He was also, inevitably, going to run up against the Roman Imperium, now vested, no longer in consuls who were in power for no more than a year, but in individuals, all (in Paul's day) from one family, the Julio-Claudians, who would hold it, bolstered by their command of the formidable Roman legions, for life, even if 'life' might be a precarious and unpredictable term. The stage was set for the clashes that would follow Paul for the rest of his life, on two fronts.

Thirdly, it was now clear to Paul that Jesus was indeed the Messiah that Israel had been waiting for. This was quite impossible, of course, because, as Paul cheerfully admits to the Galatians<sup>17</sup>, 'accursed is everyone who hangs on a tree'; and you can bet your last denarius that this will have been part of the argument that Paul mobilised against the Jesus-people, back in the days when he was convinced that they were harbingers of the end of Judaism-as-we-know-it. So, characteristically, Paul is even more emphatic than he might otherwise have been in asserting Jesus' Messianic claims<sup>18</sup>. He also claims, like all the early Christians, that Jesus is going to come back<sup>19</sup>.

Fourthly, this is all God's doing, not something that human beings can bring about for themselves. The name for this idea is, in Greek, *charis*, God's unconditional love, something which, as a matter of fact, human beings accustomed to organising their lives for themselves, find impossibly hard to believe or even understand. A frequent translation of this word *charis* is 'grace', which we read so often that we no longer take note of the theological weight that it bears. Instead of offering you references, let me invite you to read Paul, looking out for the places where he uses the word, and work out what he understands by it.

His fifth discovery moves somewhat in the opposite direction, for even if Christians cannot manage it by the strength of their own will-power, they have, as far as he is concerned, to be different. Christ is *everything* for Paul<sup>20</sup>, and, without a hint of a blush, he can

exhort his readers in Corinth to 'become imitators of me, just as I also am an imitator of Christ'<sup>21</sup>.

### *The Consequences for Paul*

What effect did these electrifying discoveries have on Paul? Several, and his life was utterly transformed by them. Four are worth mentioning, however, to adumbrate what underlay the direction that his life took hereafter.

#### **1 Everything is relativised by Christ**

If what Paul has discovered about Jesus is true (and he is in no position to doubt it), then nothing else matters. In the Letter to the Romans he has to do a good deal of rather smart work on the question of the Law. His fellow-Jews will have interrogated Paul, 'so, you say that the Law is no longer compulsory? Does that mean that God has made a mistake?' So you will find that Paul uses the word *nomos* (Law in Greek, but it does not always come out that way in English translation) in about seven different ways in the Letter to the Romans, which is perhaps his most considered letter; what he is trying to say, in all his conceptual wriggling, is that the only thing wrong with the Law is that it is not Jesus Christ. Likewise, the circumcision on which Paul used to insist has become irrelevant, possibly even dangerous<sup>22</sup>.

#### **2 The Gentiles belong in God's story**

One thing that Paul has to say is that the story of God has not changed; God cannot change his mind, and at some points<sup>23</sup> Paul has to go in for some very fancy footwork to demonstrate this. One question on which Paul (not God) has changed his mind, however, is the discovery that the Gentiles belong in God's story. When Paul met Jesus, one result of the encounter was his certainty that he was missioned to talk about Jesus to non-Jews<sup>24</sup>. Paul was convinced that he was the apostle to the nations<sup>25</sup>.

#### **3 Letters have to be written**

Paul was an inveterate traveller. He wanted to cover the whole Mediterranean world, telling people about Jesus<sup>26</sup>. If however you are travelling, then you cannot remain in one place, building relationships, correcting

aberrations, and spelling out the implications of Jesus' Resurrection and Lordship for the young Christians there. So you write letters. Now there were plenty of letters written in the ancient world, from the rather urbane (even contrived) examples that came from the pen of Cicero, or his secretary-slave Tiro, to the fascinating discoveries, from the pens of more ordinary people, that ended up in the rubbish-dump of Oxyrhyncus. No one, however, ever used the letter-format with the creative originality that Paul managed. He had something new to say to the communities that he had founded, as they met with new problems in their following of Jesus, and he used the letters, without which we should probably never have heard of him, as his entirely novel way of keeping the faith going. Paul uses secretaries; one of them even puts his head above the parapet to wish us well<sup>27</sup>. Paul also knows that letters can be forged, and tends to add an authenticating line or two in his own hand, to make it clear that it really is the Apostle talking<sup>28</sup>.

#### 4. The whole world belongs to God

Finally, an inevitable consequence of Paul's encounter with Jesus is that Jesus is lord of all creation, not just of his beloved fellow-Jews. It is for that reason that Paul must preach the gospel to the Gentiles, for that reason that he is determined to travel at least as far as Spain; and, finally, that is what he means when he envisages the whole of creation as in its birth-pangs, waiting for what God in Christ is going to bring<sup>29</sup>.

#### Conclusion

This has been something of a gallop through the principal features of the Pauline landscape, leaving unsaid much that could be said; and I hope that it has not left the reader too breathless. The reader aforesaid is not permitted, however, to sit back and mop his or her brow at Paul's energy, and do nothing about it all. For Paul writes for an audience; he did not for one second imagine that people would still be reading his rapidly dictated words in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, wherever you are reading these words; but he was quite clear that his words were for doing something about. So what does he invite you to do?

There are three things, it seems to me, and you may react irritably to such Pauline hectoring. First, the invitation is to believe in the resurrection, and to live out the implications of that 'news too good to be true'. Second, and this is not something that we can manage for ourselves, but perhaps we can dispose ourselves towards it, we are invited to 'fall in love with Christ'. Thirdly, we are to 'live in Christ', which means living an appropriate life-style, including the very Pauline marks of sinlessness and purity, and living in fellowship with other disciples of 'their Lord and ours'<sup>30</sup>. Paul offers us a daunting challenge.

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### Recommended Reading

If you would like to follow this article up by reading some recent work on the subject, try some of the following:

James D.G. Dunn

*The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, T & T Clark, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 2003.  
ed., *The Cambridge Companion to St Paul*, CUP, 2003

Morna D. Hooker

*Paul, A Short Introduction*, Oneworld, Oxford, 2003

Jerome Murphy-O'Connor

*Paul His Story*, OUP, 2004  
*St Paul's Corinth*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, 2002

N.T. Wright

*What Saint Paul Really Said*, Forward Movement Publications, Cincinnati, Ohio, 1997  
*Paul: Fresh Perspectives*, SPCK, 2005

John Ziesler

*Pauline Christianity*, Revised Edition, OUP, 1990

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 11:26

<sup>2</sup> Philippians 3:5

<sup>3</sup> Acts 22:3

<sup>4</sup> Acts 22:25-29, where Paul boasts of being born a Roman

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citizen, as opposed to the tribune, who had bought his citizenship. Once again, one must add the rider 'if Luke has got it right'. But there is a growing number of scholars who are prepared to consider this possibility.

<sup>5</sup> 23:11; 25:10

<sup>6</sup> 1:13; 15:23-24

<sup>7</sup> Galatians 1:13; Philippians 3:6; 1Cor 15:8-9.

<sup>8</sup> E.g. Acts 9:1-2

<sup>9</sup> Acts 9:1-19; 22:6-16; 26:12-18

<sup>10</sup> Gal 1:17; 2 Cor 11:32-33

<sup>11</sup> 1 Cor 9:1; this is in the form of a rhetorical question, but don't even think of answering it in the negative. See also Galatians 1:16.

<sup>12</sup> See Romans 8:35-39 for one of several 'purple passages' where he gives expression to this love that transformed his life.

<sup>13</sup> 1 Cor 15:1-8; Philippians 3:10-11; Romans 4:23-25, 6:4-5.

<sup>14</sup> Look practically anywhere in the Pauline corpus, but important evidence of Paul's new lived reality can be found at Romans 6:9; Philippians 2:9-11, and Philippians 3:8.

<sup>15</sup> John 20:15

<sup>16</sup> Revelation 7:14

<sup>17</sup> 3:13, citing Deuteronomy 21:23

<sup>18</sup> 2 Cor 1:19-21; and we must remember to think 'Messiah' every time we read 'Christ' in Paul.

<sup>19</sup> Passim, but see, for example, 1 Thessalonians 1:10.

<sup>20</sup> Galatians 1:6-7, but look almost anywhere in the Pauline corpus.

<sup>21</sup> 1 Cor 11:1.

<sup>22</sup> Galatians 5:2-4. Pause on these verses, and notice that Paul is using extremely strong language. And it gets worse; see verse 12, which is often more coyly translated than it deserves.

<sup>23</sup> Romans 9-11, for example.

<sup>24</sup> Galatians 1:16 is the most obvious place where he says this.

<sup>25</sup> Romans 1:5, 13; 2:14; 1 Thessalonians 1:9; Galatians 2:6-10. And for a very emphatic statement of the same point, see Romans 11:13. For a different angle on it, see Romans 15:16 – here it is important to notice that the language is drawn from the cult of the Jerusalem Temple that Paul had known so well.

<sup>26</sup> Romans 15:19, 23.

<sup>27</sup> Tertius, at Romans 16:22.

<sup>28</sup> Galatians 6:11, for example.

<sup>29</sup> Romans 8:18-24

<sup>30</sup> 1 Cor 1:2, and if one reads this instead as 'their place and ours', then that is something to which Paul will also encourage us.