

# Getting to know Saint Paul today: A change in paradigm?<sup>1</sup>

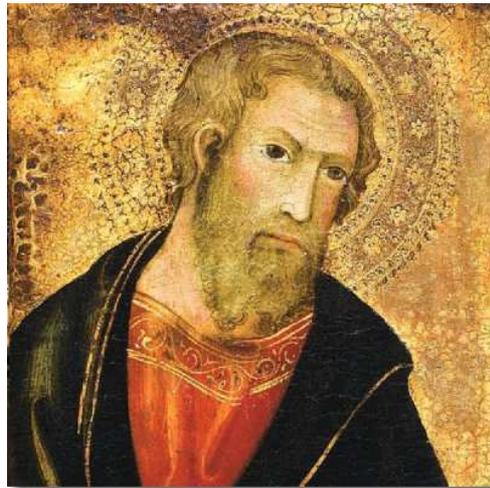
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Recent Pauline scholarship has revealed new perspectives from which we can examine the life of the apostle and the world he lived in, claims David Neuhaus SJ. What are these developments, and how can they change our traditional understanding of Saint Paul?

## Introduction: Who is Saint Paul?

The figure of Paul marks the passage from Jesus of Nazareth, recognized after his death by his disciples as the promised Messiah of Israel, to the Universal Church that preached the Gospel to all the nations. Paul has been seen as the pioneer of Christian mission<sup>2</sup>, the father of Christian theology<sup>3</sup> and even the real founder of Christianity<sup>4</sup>. Some have seen him as a apocalyptic thinker<sup>5</sup>, others as a Pharisee rabbi become Christian<sup>6</sup>, yet others as a cultivated Hellenist<sup>7</sup> or a Gnostic syncretist<sup>8</sup> or an incoherent religious fanatic<sup>9</sup>.

Getting to know Paul has never been easy. It is difficult to derive a clear autobiographical picture from his own writings. There are contradictions between these writings and the supposedly “biographical” presentation of Paul by Luke in Acts. In addition to this, in the past few decades, new historical and exegetical perspectives have changed how we understand the world in which Paul lived and worked. These perspectives have undermined at least some of our most basic suppositions in getting to know Paul. They would seem to necessitate a change in paradigm in order to read Paul and ascertain his role. I will propose here four aspects on which our understanding of Paul and his world have changed in the past decades. The question I pose here is: have the consequences of these changes been integrated into our reading and understanding of Paul? Can we integrate them without a new paradigm in Pauline studies? What can the new paradigm be?



## Identifying the traditional paradigms

Before entering into the present state of affairs, it might be helpful to point out that certain paradigms have dominated the understanding of Paul in the history of Christian interpretation. Sanders, in his ground breaking study *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (1977)<sup>10</sup>, has shown how the socio-political and theological context of those reflecting on Paul has always influenced their understanding of Paul. In addition I suggest here

that these past paradigms are based upon certain pre-suppositions about Paul that are no longer acceptable in our present understanding of Paul and his world.

A first paradigm is based on the presentation of Paul by Luke in Acts<sup>11</sup>, a presentation that was adopted by many of the early Church Fathers. Paul is a man of the Church and a model for all Christians, perfect Jew, perfect Hellenist and perfect Roman – each identity underlined at the appropriate place in the Acts narrative and each identity in harmony with the others. The Fathers adopted this Paul in the face of Marcion who emphasized a reading of the tempestuous and conflicted Paul of his letters. Marcion and the Gnostics were fascinated with the polar dichotomies between spirit and flesh, spirit and letter that Paul seemed to be promoting, a Paul of rupture between Judaism and faith in Christ, between the God of the Old Testament and the Father of Jesus.

A second paradigm emerges with Augustine and Martin Luther. Here the focus is on Paul as a man torn apart by his consciousness of sin. The historical

perspective of Acts gives way to the psychological perspective. Paul, a “religious” man (the fanatic Pharisee), is brought to the point of spiritual and psychic despair by the inefficacy of the law in Judaism and is liberated by his coming to faith in Christ. The relationship between Paul the Jew before conversion and Paul the Christian after conversion is characterized by rupture. The existentialist theologians (Barth, Bultmann, Käsemann) of the 20<sup>th</sup> century reformulated this paradigm, making Paul an existentialist confronted with human despair and healing.

A third paradigm emerges from a philosophical reflection on Paul, in the light of 19<sup>th</sup> century Hegelianism.<sup>12</sup> Paul is the theologian of a universal religion that supersedes the particularism of Judaism, bringing Greco-Roman cultural universalism to the ethnic narrowness of Judaism. Paul’s vocation to be an apostle to the Gentiles is at the heart of this drive towards the universal.

A fourth paradigm has emerged recently. Paul is presented by continental European theologians like Moltmann<sup>13</sup> and Stendahl<sup>14</sup> as a prophet of reconciliation between Jews and Christians. Romans 9-11 is mobilized to promote a Paul who understood that the covenant with the Jews is irrevocable. As Becker has pointed out, this reading is grounded in the history of European anti-Semitism<sup>15</sup>.

What are the elements that undermine these paradigms and oblige a new paradigm for getting to know Saint Paul?

#### *Evaluation of the sources: Is Acts of the Apostles an historical biography?*

The New Testament does provide us with passages that purport to be Pauline biography – a major part of the Acts of the Apostles. Recent studies have clearly illustrated the problem of using Acts as a historical source.<sup>16</sup> Luke is a “theological historian”<sup>17</sup>, his theology being an important part of how he retells history. Lucan concerns for compromise, harmony and the presentation of Paul as perfect Jew, perfect Hellenist and perfect Roman frame his presentation of Paul in Acts. Luke adds many details about Paul’s Jewish background including a Jewish name (Saul), a Jewish formation at the feet of Gamaliel and an ability to speak “Hebrew” (or Aramaic), all details absent from

the authentic writings of Paul himself. Paul is also a perfect Hellenist, at home in the Greek world and capable of holding his own with Greek philosophers in the very heart of Hellenism – Athens. Finally Paul is a Roman, a citizen when even those Roman officials who arrest him are not. All this is absent from Paul’s writings. In understanding the theological premises of Luke, the principle established by Knox is a decisive one, i.e. “a fact only suggested in his letters has a status that even the most unequivocal statement of Acts, if not otherwise supported, cannot confer”.<sup>18</sup> Even though the vast majority of contemporary exegetes repeat this principle, few are able to resist the seduction of the wonderful, supposedly biographical narrative Luke provides. The oft-repeated features of Paul’s life in Luke’s account must be submitted to renewed critical scrutiny in constituting a biography of Paul.

An additional problem in interpreting Paul in Acts relates to our tendency to read Acts against the background of an already accomplished separation between Judaism and Christianity. We tend to see in Stephen’s speech and in Paul’s “conversion” the emergence of a Christianity distinct from its Jewish roots. Recent studies, however, insist that this separation took centuries to work itself out. According to some, by the end of the second century, Judaism and Christianity were still not two separate religions.<sup>19</sup> In fact, Christian Orthodoxy and Jewish Orthodoxy defined themselves in relation to one another and spent centuries fighting other versions of Christian belief and Jewish practice defined as heretical. The clear borders that were erected and remain in place today did not figure in the world of Paul nor in that of Luke and our reading of Luke’s theological history as well as Paul’s letters should take this into account.

#### *Evaluation of the sources: Relying on the “authentic” Epistles*

It is today generally accepted that the primary source for understanding Paul must be his authentic letters. The traditional corpus of 14 letters is reduced to 7 authentic letters: Romans, the two letters to the Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, First Thessalonians and Philemon. Exegetes continue to argue the authenticity of some of the other letters, particularly Colossians. What is striking in the Pauline letters is that Paul speaks very little of himself. When he does give biographical information it is to illustrate

his discipleship of Christ and his mission as God's apostle. In this scarcity of autobiography, Paul is comparable to the prophets in the Old Testament who likewise restrict autobiography to those moments when their lives were integral parts of their message. In fact, Paul seems to understand himself as a similar prophetic figure.

Three themes can be examined in order to illustrate the problem involved in comparing Paul's own writings and the life of Paul as presented in Acts. The first issue is Paul's so called "conversion" experience. He speaks about this experience only in the most generic terms in his letters, and his description matches the vocation calls in the Old Testament prophetic literature (cf. Gal 1). There is little in the letters to historically establish the Lucan drama on the road to Damascus. A second theme is Paul's insistence in his letters on his identity as apostle. Luke is very reticent about giving Paul the title apostle (and only does so in a very general way in Acts 14). For Luke, an apostle is one who was called to be one by Jesus during his earthly life. The third theme is the division of the early mission into a mission to the circumcised and a mission to the uncircumcised. Paul insists on this division in Gal 2 (and elsewhere). However, Luke ignores this division and in his presentation Peter is the first to baptize an overt pagan. In his presentation of Paul, Paul preaches to the Jews as well as to the Gentiles right until the end of his narrative.

Despite the paucity of autobiographical information, the letters do reveal a Paul who is totally Jewish and who lived according to Jewish practice according to the Pharisaic understanding before encountering Jesus. He is a Paul who knows the Scriptures well. This is a Paul who never cites Greek philosophical or literary sources but who does use the Greek translation of the Jewish Scriptures and who writes a sophisticated and complicated Greek that bears no trace of translation.

### *Healing a false dichotomy: Paul between Judaism and Hellenism*

It has been common to debate whether Paul was more Jewish or more Hellenistic in his basic outlook. This has led to an evaluation of Paul within the spectrum of varying shades of "Jewish" and "pagan" Christianity. However, recent studies<sup>20</sup> have insisted on two

additional factors that must now be taken into account. The first is the relationship between Judaism and the Hellenistic world. The second is the relationship between Jewish believers in Jesus Christ and Jews who did not believe in Christ in the first century or two of the Christian era.

Much of the classical literature on Paul assumes a dichotomy between Judaism and Hellenism that is artificial for the period of Paul's life. Paul is a Greek-speaking Jew but no less Jewish for that. From the Pauline letters it is clear that Paul thinks, speaks and writes in Greek. Acts insists that Paul knows Aramaic (or Hebrew) too. There is no evidence of this in Paul's writings and this is probably part of the presentation of Paul as perfect Jew (according to Luke) in Acts. Stanley has shown that Paul's Bible is the Septuagint.<sup>21</sup> Of the 83 explicit citations of Scripture in the authentic letters only 5 diverge significantly from our known version of the Septuagint and they probably derive from other Greek versions of Scripture in Paul's day. In fact, Stanley concludes that "Paul's use of the Septuagint is no mere concession to the ignorance of his Greek speaking Gentile readers but reflects his own pattern of study, in the standard Greek of his day".<sup>22</sup> This would be true for another illustrious figure of first century Judaism too, Philo of Alexandria.

What seems clear from Hengel and his students is that Paul's Jewish world (including the world of Jerusalem) was profoundly Hellenized by the time of the first century AD. One can no longer assume a dichotomy between Judaism and Hellenism (although such a dichotomy does become a serious issue in a later rabbinic period) nor a dichotomy between a supposedly Semitic Palestinian Judaism and a Hellenistic Diaspora Judaism. Judaism, and Judaism in Palestine too, had adapted itself profoundly to Hellenistic culture in this period. Paul's "Hellenism" then is not a sign that he is any less Jewish than his contemporaries. On the contrary, the authentic Paul shows a rootedness in Jewish Scriptures and tradition and no equivalent rootedness in the Greek or Roman philosophies of his day. The only clear citation of a Greek philosopher is one put into the mouth of Paul by Luke in Acts 17:28. However, there the figure of Paul is exactly the figure of the perfect Hellenist, at the time of his discourse on the Areopagus in Athens.

The basic pluralism within what is broadly called Judaism in the first century, Paul's world, should be the backdrop to a reading of Paul that sees Paul as he saw himself, a Jew. Hellenistic Judaism in its plurality of forms is no less Jewish than the plurality of Aramaic (and perhaps Hebrew) forms of Judaism. The delegitimization of Hellenistic Judaism is an important factor in later generations of Rabbinic Judaism as the rabbis' sought to assert their own authority. Paul's Christ-focused interpretation of Judaism expressed in Greek is still very much Judaism I dare suggest.

### *Evaporating a phantom: Paul a rabbi?*

Paul states (in Philippians) that before his call he had been a Jew who practiced the Law like the Pharisees did. Whether this means that he was actually a Pharisee has been debated by some. The more serious problem is in the reconstitution of what it meant to be a Pharisee in Paul's time. Some of the classical studies of Paul, like Bonsirven<sup>23</sup> and Davies<sup>24</sup>, have insisted that Paul was a rabbi who became a Christian evangelist. Here we are in the midst of a passionate debate about the identity of Rabbinic Judaism and to what extent Rabbinic Judaism can be regarded as continuous with Pharisaism. Be that as it may, one can at least argue that references to Paul (and Jesus too) as rabbis are anachronistic (even if some of the Gospel writers refer to Jesus as rabbi, evidence of their later redaction). The rabbis only became an established class of teachers after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 AD and thus in the period after Paul, the period of the Gospel writers<sup>25</sup>.

The continuity between Pharisaic Judaism and Rabbinic Judaism is no longer as obvious as it might have seemed and contemporary research questions whether the Rabbinic sources in the Mishna can be used to reconstruct Pharisaic thought<sup>26</sup>. Some have even insisted that Rabbinic Judaism is a post-Pauline phenomenon and a reaction to it<sup>27</sup>. It is Rabbinic Judaism that succeeded in discrediting the Hellenistic Judaism, which Paul, like Philo, represents. In reconstructing Pharisaism, Paul is certainly an important source as he is one of the few self-proclaimed Pharisees who have left us a series of religious writings. The Rabbis who were supposedly Pharisees (like Yohanan ben Zakkai) have left no writings at all and their sayings are recorded in much later Rabbinic sources.

The analysis of Paul's writings according to Rabbinic literature must be done with the utmost prudence as the two sets of writings largely date from different periods, separated by the destruction of the Temple and decades of religious and theological reformulation. The rabbis too inherited much from the Jewish-Hellenistic culture that surrounded them, however it is that culture that should be the first treasury into which one delves in order to understand Paul in his own terms. This understanding of Paul raises many questions about the utility of searching for keys to his thought in Rabbinic writings.

### *Restoring a unity: Paul was a "Christ centered" Jew*

Paul is a Greek speaking Jew like many of his fellow Jews from the cities of the Greco-Roman world both in Palestine and in the Diaspora. The fact that two worlds coincide in Paul is not remarkable but rather he is the product of a world in which Judaism is impregnated with Hellenism. His contemporaries are Philo and Josephus rather than the rabbis of a later period, when Greek culture and language were rejected. Paul, as a Greek-speaking Jew, does not represent a rupture with Judaism at ease in the culture that surrounded it. Paul's formulation of faith in Christ is one heir to a Second Temple Judaism that had its own Bible, the Septuagint, its language, Greek, and a heightened concern for the universality and coherency of the divine message. Paul's missionary activity is then a Jewish mission to the Gentiles, to include them in God's divine plan for the restoration of all humanity. In this sense, Paul's energetic approach to the Gentiles, for whom he was the Apostle of the Good News of the Resurrected One, is an important key in getting to know Paul within his world. Paul believed that his way was the correct way to be Jewish and that now the Gentiles he converted were called to be part of God's people too, grafted on to the cultivated olive tree that is Israel.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. D. NEUHAUS, "A la rencontre de Paul. Connaître Paul aujourd'hui : un changement de paradigme ?" *Recherches de Science Religieuse*, 90/3 (2002), 353-376.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. G. BORNKAMM, *Paul* (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1995) F. WATSON, *Paul, Judaism and the Gentiles: A Sociological Approach* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986), G. THEISSEN, "Judaïsme et christianisme chez Paul," in *Histoire sociale du christianisme primitive* (Geneva, Labor et fides, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. R. BULTMANN, *Theology of the New Testament* (London, SCM Press, 1952).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. H. MACCOBY, *Paul the mythmaker and the invention of Christianity* (New York, Barnes and Noble, 1987).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. A. SCHWEITZER, *Paul and His Interpreters* (London, Adam and Charles Black, 1912), E. KÄSEMANN, "Paul et le précatholicisme," *Essais exégétiques* (Neuchâtel, Delachaux et Niestlé, 1972), 256-270, J. BECKER, *Paul: Apostle to the Gentiles* (Westminster, John Knox Press, 1993).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. J. BONSIRVEN, *Exégèse rabbinique et exégèse paulinienne* (Paris, Beauchesne, 1948), W. D. DAVIES, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism: Some Rabbinic Elements in Pauline Theology* (London, Cambridge University Press, 1948), H-J. SCHOEPS, *Jewish Christianity: Factional Disputes in the Early Church* (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1986).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. N. HUGEDE, *Saint Paul et la culture grecque* (Geneva, Labor et fides, 1966), D. BOYARIN, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1994), J. MURPHY-O'CONNOR, *Paul: A Critical Life* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1996).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. O. CULLMAN, "Courants multiples dans la communauté primitive," *Recherches de Science religieuse* – 60 (1972), 1, 55-68.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. H. RÄISÄNEN, *Paul and the Law* (Tubingen, J.C.B.

Mohr, 1983).

<sup>10</sup> E.P. SANDERS, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (London, SCM Press, 1977).

<sup>11</sup> J. LENTZ, *Luke's Portrait of Paul* (London, Cambridge University Press, 1993).

<sup>12</sup> See in particular the writings of F.C. Baur, a Pauline scholar of the Hegelian school.

<sup>13</sup> J. MOLTSMANN, *The Way of Jesus Christ* (London, SCM Press, 1990).

<sup>14</sup> K. STENDHAL, *Paul among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1976).

<sup>15</sup> BECKER, 10.

<sup>16</sup> M. HENGEL, *Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity* (London, SCM Press, 1979).

<sup>17</sup> See HENGEL, 61.

<sup>18</sup> Knox quoted by MURPHY O'CONNOR, 32.

<sup>19</sup> See BOYARIN and J. DUNN, *The Partings of the Ways* (London, SCM Press, 1991).

<sup>20</sup> M. HENGEL, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in their Encounter in Palestine during the Early Hellenistic Period* (London, SCM Press, 1981).

<sup>21</sup> C. STANLEY, *Paul and the Language of Scripture* (London, Cambridge University Press, 1992).

<sup>22</sup> STANLEY, 67-68.

<sup>23</sup> See BONSIRVEN.

<sup>24</sup> See DAVIES.

<sup>25</sup> See the early studies of J. NEUSNER including *From Politics to Piety: The Emergence of Pharisaic Judaism* (New Jersey, Prentice-Hall, 1973).

<sup>26</sup> The foundational study for this critique is the three volume early work of J. NEUSNER, *The Rabbinic Traditions about the Pharisees before 70* (3 volumes) (Leiden: Brill, 1971).

<sup>27</sup> See BOYARIN.