

Paul the Prophet – a Challenge to Jews and Christians

An Introduction to *Re-reading Paul: a fresh look at his attitude to Torah and Judaism*
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In the long history of mutual misunderstanding and suspicion between Christians and Jews, Paul has often been given a central place. Just two texts (read a certain way) would be enough to establish his culpability as a rejecter of Torah: 'We know that a person is justified, *not by works of law* but by faith in Jesus Christ' (Galatians 2:16) and 'Christ is *the end of the law* for those who believe' (Romans 10:4). The image of Judaism as a religion of perfectionist 'works-righteousness', 'self-salvation', 'legalism', 'slavery', 'Pelagianism in ancient dress' (NT Wright) is largely the shadow side of the Pauline understanding of Christianity as a religion of freedom, divine gift, grace received through faith. If now Christians are coming (slowly!) to a different perception of the faith and practice of Israel, they must also look afresh at what Paul said about Torah. Was Paul wrong about Torah, or have we been misreading him all these centuries?

The research of EP Sanders is central here. In *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (1977), he showed that the classic view of first-century Judaism is simply wrong. Torah is not a ladder, a set of laws offering salvation to anyone who is perfectly obedient, and damnation to those who fail; think of it rather as a circle, a fence around the community of those who dwell in covenant-relationship with God. The 'law' is then the God-given means of pursuing this relationship, but the law itself allows for failure and repentance within the circle of God's care. This pattern of religion, which he calls 'covenantal nomism' (ie the *nomos*, law, is a function of the covenantal relationship, not a primary structure) later reproduced itself in the Church. With two communities of flexible belief and obedience loyal to different revelations, how could rivalry not result?

Did Paul then reject Judaism? Krister Stendahl (*Paul among Jews and Gentiles*, 1976) has shown how much of the Western Christian picture of Paul's struggles with Judaism reflects the struggles of Martin Luther in the 16th century with the Catholic Church of his day. Rather than think of Paul as undergoing a 'conversion' on the road to Damascus (for which there is no NT word), he himself speaks of a 'call' (Gal 1: 15-16), modelled on that of Hebrew prophets (Isaiah 49:5-6; Jeremiah 1:4-5), a summons from his God, the God of Israel, 'to proclaim among the Gentiles' the Good News of God's Son. Like most New Testament authors, Paul was a Christian Jew and he affirms this Jewish identity (eg Phil 3:6). He also affirms that Torah has been given by God: 'for the Law is holy and just and good' (Rom 7:12). In his encounter with the risen Christ he passed, not from bad to good but from good to better.

What then was wrong with Torah, in Paul's view? He has two main arguments. In Rom 7:12 – 8:4 he dramatises the human condition as wrestling with the powers of 'Sin' and 'Death', which he depicts rather like mythological monsters that have invaded God's

creation, undermining human happiness and well-being. Torah too has been undermined and is powerless to help – we know what we ought to do but we can't do it (Romans 7: 15-24) – but Christ is given to enable humanity (the whole of humanity) to make a fresh start and live by God's Spirit. Through Christ, God can do what the Law could not (Romans 8:3). This is about Torah's *weakness*; but in Galatians 3 (vv.19, 24-26) he argues, secondly, that Law had a *definite but limited purpose*, now expired. Humanity before Christ was like a child in need of a custodian (a *paidagogos*- part teacher, part disciplinarian, part bodyguard, 3:24), but now has come of age in Christ. The law, which was good but temporary, functional and restricted to Israel, has given way to the eternal, the complete and the universal. It follows that human beings, who in Paul's understanding need to be 'justified', set right with God, can no longer rely for this on 'works of law' but only on 'faith in Jesus Christ' (Galatians 2:16). However, the Law remains, and retains its 'disciplinary' value for Jewish Christians, and there is evidence that Paul himself continued to practise those parts of the Law which did not exclude Gentiles (eg circumcision and the food laws).

The sense of urgency and crisis which runs through Paul's letters, the weight of sinfulness and the need of salvation, are typical of some strands of Judaism in the first century. The gospel he proclaimed among the Gentiles was a very Jewish gospel, rooted in prophetic eschatology. Denigration of Israel's faith and practice was no part of his mission. Only when he saw others setting up Law as a salvific principle in rivalry with Christ, or when Christ was subordinated to Torah, then he found a need to drive a wedge between the two, demanding a choice. This choice is the main thrust of Galatians and Romans (but really only those two letters), presented with his characteristic sharpness (Gal 2:21).

Did he believe God had rejected Israel? The Christian habit of reading Romans 1-8 as Paul's classic statement of personal salvation makes it hard to see the relevance of chapters 9-11. They are a passionate, scripturally rooted defence of an unshakeable belief that God means to save all Israel along with those gentiles who respond to Christ – or even 'to have mercy on all'. How this might happen is far from clear, but that is his dazzling, unifying vision: the 'mystery of God' (11: 25-36). There is no room here for vilification by either side (though he saw his purpose as challenging Israel to repentance, and like Israel's prophets his language in debate was seldom polite). Nor is there room for the view advanced in recent years that he envisaged two parallel covenants continuing indefinitely (Torah for Israel, Christ for the gentiles), a view which would rule out any attempt at 'mission'.

In his own day Paul was an uncomfortable presence for his friends as well as his foes, and today he remains a challenge for both Jews and Christians. As a Jewish prophet he points both Jews and gentile Christians to the 'rich root' of Israel's history and scripture which both share and need. He reminds us that if Christian culture fights against God's people, God's law, God's scripture, it fights against God. Compare George Steiner's claim that antisemitism is the world's revenge on those who by their very being set before us the intolerable demands of the God of Sinai.

But Paul also points both Jews and Christians to the action of the living God in history. Twenty centuries have passed, life goes on and evil flourishes, but these are still the 'end-times' in which God's justice comes to pass. Though Christians identify God's justice / righteousness with Christ we have to accept that we have not yet seen the fulness of what God is doing, which will transcend any image of 'Christ' we carry in our mind. Does Judaism encourage merely routine obedience? I don't know, but I know that Christianity has often encouraged a 'faith' which is static and self-absorbed and detached from faithfulness in action. Paul the prophet calls us beyond all such limitations, to look for the revealing of the mystery of God in the world.