

## Paul's Positive Evaluation of his Jewish Identity

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In order to discern Paul's attitude towards his Jewish identity, I wish to consider briefly three texts, one in each of three of his letters, all of which have something to say about circumcision. We note initially that all of Paul's letters are directly addressed to non-Jews, i.e. those from the nations, commonly called gentiles. We have no record of any letters of Paul to his fellow-Jews, so what emerges from his letters may be quite incidental or a minor comment as to how, in specific local circumstances, Christ-following gentiles are to relate to Jews or Judaism.

In a letter to the Galatian churches, Paul makes the striking statement, "For circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing" (Gal. 6.15). It appears that since 'uncircumcision' must clearly refer to the state of those from the nations, it is likely that by the use of the term 'circumcision' here, Paul means not only to refer to the act of being circumcised, but rather to the state of circumcision, possibly to Judaism or the Jewish people. We must be careful how we proceed here because Paul's own words have been notoriously misused to discredit both him and his message. This has often been achieved by citing only half of a text, and leaving the other half unnoted. Thus though Paul repeats the assertion that circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing also in 1Corinthians 7:19, despite this it is frequently claimed that Paul said 'circumcision is nothing' with no parallel to uncircumcision.

Another means by which Paul is misquoted is by citing his words out of context, so that the original situation to which he addressed his comments is ignored, as if Paul were making universally valid pronouncements when he is only giving local guidance on a specific issue. We will thus consider the two places where Paul makes these specific comments about circumcision and uncircumcision. In 1Corinthians 7:17-24, Paul argues that if someone is circumcised at the time of their call to follow Christ, "do not seek to remove the marks of circumcision" and if someone was called as uncircumcised, "do not receive circumcision". It is in this context in which Paul goes on to say that both circumcision and uncircumcision are nothing, but adds that what really matters is 'keeping the commandments of God' (1Cor. 7:19). Now this addition is certainly not an anti-Jewish comment, and in view of that we must try to interpret what precedes it in a similar non-prejudicial manner. We will return to this text in a moment, but first we will consider Galatians 6:11-16 where Paul makes an almost identical statement about circumcision.

The Galatian Christ-followers were being pressurised to accept circumcision by some group whose identity is unclear. Possibly they were Jewish Christ-followers who felt that gentile Christ-followers should also be circumcised. But it is by no means clear that this group were Jewish, because Paul says that they would try to force the Galatians to accept circumcision even though "they who receive circumcision do not themselves keep the law, but desire to have you circumcised that they may glory in your flesh". And so Paul asserts, "for neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision but a new creation". Thus Paul absolutely opposes circumcision for gentiles, but not because there is anything wrong with circumcision for Jews. To the Corinthians Paul sets out a rule he followed in all his churches,

“Let everyone remain as they were when called”. This makes Jewish and gentile Christ-followers truly equal in that each can retain their identity in Christ. There are two very interesting terms in Gal. 2:14 where Paul speaks of living ‘judaikos’ or ‘ethnikos’ (like a gentile), i.e. living Jewishly or ethnically, the implication of these terms being that these both describe how differing Christ-followers continue to live. The important issue for Paul is not whether one lives as a Jew or as a gentile in Christ, but whether each one recognizes that what is truly important is not their ethnic origins, though Paul respects and safeguards these, but rather the call of God by which all are enabled to do his will, to enter his kingdom. Yet in both Galatians and 1 Corinthians, we have found no evidence that Paul says anything derogatory about Judaism, or anything that does not observe the distinction between Jews and the nations. In this he was typically Jewish.

However, there is another passage where Paul seems beyond doubt to devalue his Jewish heritage. This is Philippians 3:2-13 where Paul first sets out a list of his cherished Jewish credentials. Circumcised on the eighth day, of the house of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, a Pharisee, and blameless in respect of the law as well as having been a persecutor of the Christ-movement. Having set out a balance sheet of those things he really counted as profitable in God’s sight, the shocking sequence is that Paul then proceeds to claim that these are as loss, rather than profit, in comparison with being in Christ. Not only are these worthless, they are like rubbish, or even as dung (Phil. 3:7-8). This statement by itself seems clear evidence that Paul denounced his Jewish pedigree, and that in no uncertain terms.

But, as noted previously in our discussion, we must read the whole of each verse or passage, and read it in context. Firstly, the context is one of comparison — these things are not loss or dung in and by themselves, but only so in comparison with Paul’s ultimate value, Jesus the Christ. Secondly, Paul not only compares his valued Jewish credentials with being in Christ, but he goes on to assert that he counts ‘all things’ as loss in comparison with the excellency of the knowledge of Christ, and of being found in him. We know enough of Paul to be certain that he is no world-denying ascetic in a grand sense, so when he says he counts ‘all things as loss’ this cannot mean he denies the whole world en bloc. Rather the context indicates that it is only in comparison with Christ that all things, both Jewish and gentile, are ‘as loss’ — and not absolutely worthless or useless in and by themselves — but only so in comparison with Christ. So Paul does not mean he denies or rejects the entire world, rather it is not his ultimate value which is Jesus, the Christ. But having recognized this value system, Paul can then begin to live in the world, receiving it back as of relative worth compared with Christ, but of positive value nevertheless. So too with his Jewish heritage. Paul continued to live as a Jew throughout his life — his last journey included visiting Jerusalem with the collection from his gentile churches for the ‘poor saints’ in Jerusalem, a journey with disastrous consequences (according to Acts). How could Paul have lived otherwise — how could he preach “remain as you were when called” if he failed to do so himself?

To conclude, if we take Paul’s statements out of context, or cite only one part of a two part saying, it is easy to misrepresent him as being anti-Jewish, or of devaluing his Jewish heritage. But if we read him carefully we will find that Paul consistently emerges as one who thinks that Jesus is the Messiah, faithful to his Jewish heritage and proud of that state in

which he was called, and in which he continued to be a follower of Christ. Paul never refers to his own Jewishness in the past tense — he says “I myself am an Israelite” (Rom. 11:1). Likewise of his people Israel, he says, “to them belong the promises, the worship, the glory etc. (Rom. 11:4-5), and it is his view that “the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable” (Rom. 11:29).

Paul did not succeed in convincing a majority of his own people that Jesus was the Messiah. But we must hear him as one who is certain that there is no incompatibility between being Jewish and following Jesus, evidenced not only in his fellow Jewish Christ-followers but also in similar Jewish groups who bore this allegiance for several centuries into the Christian era until they began to be marginalised and persecuted. We must give Paul the credit and recognition for holding on doggedly to God’s promises to the Jewish people, whilst simultaneously seeking to serve God’s purpose to include the gentiles, not within Israel, but alongside them, thus avoiding the risk of gentile supersessionism. Since Paul himself stressed that what is of primary importance is not being Jewish or gentile but rather answering to God’s call, perhaps this is where we can still stand today.