

Paul's Vision of the Unity of Israel and the Nations

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Having heard that Paul did not consider Judaism to be overcome in Christ nor presenting an anti-thesis between Judaism and being in Christ, but that he remained a Jew and did not consider this a problem for his understanding of the implications of the coming of the Messiah, rather the other way round – he could not have understood these implications without his own tradition – I would now like to focus on how Paul envisaged the unity of Israel and the nations in light of the coming of the Messiah/Christ.

Introduction

The fact that Paul considered himself to be a messenger to non-Jewish people in the Roman world meant that he lived mostly on the road and his role rendered him a mediator between peoples, traditions and cultures. It has long been noticed and acknowledged that in the processes that led to the emergence of Judaism and Christianity as two separate religions, the interaction of people of different linguistic, cultural and ethnic traditions played a significant role. The Christ-movement was part of, and emerged from within a specific cultural and religious tradition, the tradition of the Jewish people, and developed into a movement, which encompassed people of different linguistic, cultural, and ethnic traditions. Intercultural interaction and communication lie at the core of this movement and contributed significantly to the formation of its self-understanding. I am aware that I am not the first to notice this and that this states the seemingly obvious. Whilst traditionally it has been argued that the blended milieu of Hellenism facilitated such interaction I propose to read this process as informed by recent sociolinguistic and cultural studies research of bilingualism and biculturalism as a cultural translation process.

Paul had a vision of the unity of Israel and the nations which was rooted in his Jewish tradition and which he (and his colleagues in the movement) thought had now been actualized through the arrival of the Messiah Jesus, for whom he used the Greek label the Christ.

The fact that he transmitted this message into a non-Jewish world which was mainly dominated by Roman power significantly influenced the translation process in which Paul was involved.

In this talk I will thus focus on the three dimensions of Paul's endeavour:

1. Brief sketch of what I mean by cultural translation
2. The unity of nations under Rome
3. The unity of Israel and the nations

1. Cultural Translation

There is a long tradition of analysing the interplay of Greek, Roman, Jewish, and other cultural and ethnic traditions in Pauline studies in particular, with various emphases proposed as having had the decisive impact in the development of 'Christian' identity. Mostly the interplay of the diverse traditions relevant here has been analysed through paradigms of fusion or blending, with Hellenism as the most accepted of these paradigms.

Although I do not deny that cultures and languages influence each other, and are thus all hybrid in that sense I consider research into bilingualism and biculturalism to have illuminating potential for understanding Paul as a mediator between peoples and cultures. It has been demonstrated that people who are rooted in, and familiar with, more than one language and culture, rather than blending these different traditions, have an enhanced sense for the differences between them. This draws attention to the fact that where people of different cultural, ethnic, and linguistic contexts come into contact with each other, even when they are familiar with more than one tradition, the question of mutual understanding rather than being self-evident is recognized as being a challenge. Bilingual and bicultural studies emphasize that understanding (even in the same language) is a kind of translation, turning other people's concepts and practices into their equivalents in their own vocabulary. Understanding involves a process of negotiation – and translation is thus a shift not only between languages but also between cultures. If we take into account that we are not dealing with the level of words or grammar here but with the level of meaning which involves the entire symbolic and social universe of a community, the relevance of the context of any communication becomes evident.

The significant evidence for bilingualism and biculturalism for the period in question is clear indication for the linguistic and cultural diversity in the Roman Empire despite the use of Greek and Latin as dominating lingua franca. This has significant implications not only at the linguistic but also at the cultural level. Translations between different traditions must have been a matter of everyday life, common shared practice, at linguistic, and to some extent also at the level of cultural and ethnic traditions. Whether this facilitated mutual understanding is another question. Particularly where the encounter of different traditions is involved, even when communicated through a shared language, this is not automatically the case.

Although he was familiar with aspects of the 'world of the nations', Paul in my view was and remained primarily and firmly embedded in his Jewish social and symbolic universe, as was the message he felt called to transmit into the world of the nations. This transmission was a process of cultural translation, 'loss and gain' in translation can easily be envisaged, new understandings in new contexts as well as misunderstanding and non-anticipated effects be expected. Paul's call as apostle to the nations implied a role as translator and mediator, that is, as a go-between between cultures, traditions, peoples, and languages, including all the challenges this involved. The challenge of the task should not be underestimated. Paul's letters precisely witness to the challenge inherent in this endeavour: they communicate both, his and his colleagues' concerns and struggles in their attempts to succeed in the translation process, and to get the Christ-followers from the nations to understand what the gospel implies in their lives.

The question is how people from the nations, familiar with the concept of united nations under Rome might have understood a vision of unity of Israel and the nations rooted in Jewish tradition.

2. Unity of Nations on Roman Terms

Rome claimed to have united the conquered nations under its dominion, thus securing pax et iustitia for all under its rule, but this pax was enforced by violence and the iustitia was what benefited the conquerors. The ending of a murderous civil war, which had dragged in allies from all sides into battle against different Roman parties and thus against each other, must have had a

somewhat positive impact on the economy and living conditions around the Mediterranean. But the peace mainly benefitted Roman and some local elites. It was achieved by violence, and was secured by ideological claims and notions of assimilation to the Roman way of life for those who sought respect and acceptance by the Roman elite.

The unity of the conquered nations was a unity of control, with Rome having developed its notion to dominate according to the slogan 'divide et impera'. Unity and solidarity among the nations Rome had submitted was feared, as a passage by Tacitus demonstrates, *Long may last, I pray, and endure among the nations, this – if not love for us – at least hatred for each other; since now that the fates of empire drive it on, Fortune can guarantee us nothing better than discord among our enemies.* (Germ 33.2). (We also know that Nero had nightmares dreaming of conquered nations uniting against him in rebellion.) The unity was a unity for the sake and benefit of Rome, and consisted in the enforcement of recognising the Caesars as their pater patriae as the only legitimate link between them. What the nations shared was conquest, capture, and enslavement displayed in Roman triumphal processions, arches and propaganda, rather than solidarity as siblings.

Moreover, to be recognised in the first century CE, if not as equals by Rome, then at least as 'civilized' and 'human', was only possible on the condition that those from conquered nations accepted this 'civilising' force and turned 'human' according to the Roman concept of humanitas, that is, became the same by copying the Roman way of life.

Of course, some upward mobility was possible as examples like the rise to fame of the former slave Epictetus demonstrates. And although this did not mean that previous traditions and aspects of one's identity had to be completely abandoned, there was no room for these other traditions within the 'civilised' life and discourse of the Roman elite. Acceptance into the circle of the Roman elite was only possible through assimilation, through becoming 'Roman,' which means by embracing Roman traditions, values, and virtues. Difference (alterity) from the Roman or Greek way of life was noted, mostly as a curiosity. Sometimes the courage of defeated nations was noted as in the case of the Gauls, but only to enhance the bravery and grandeur of Roman conquest; it had no value in itself. Unity of nations under Rome meant the control of conquered nations by Roman power and if one wished to gain some recognition by Rome assimilation to the Roman way of life and its value system, that is, one had to become like them – the same. It was a unity of hegemonic sameness to which Rome aspired.

3. Paul's Vision of the Unity of Israel and the Nations

In Paul's perspective the association of non-Jews to the God of Israel through Christ is part of the Jewish tradition of hope for life in and beyond the constraints of destructive powers and domination. The relationship between Israel and the nations is perceived by Paul through a Jewish perception of the world, and so is the association of people from the nations with the God of Israel in and through Christ. This aspect of the gospel does not emerge out of nowhere with the advent of Christ. The association of the nations is interpreted by Paul from within existing Jewish traditions. In his perception it is not novel to, or inconsistent with Jewish tradition. It is part of a narrative which begins with God's creation and humankind as a whole as part of it. In this narrative all peoples, rather than only a few, are seen as related to each other, through their common descent. It is a perception, which in its universality, is not shared with traditions of other peoples. Thus, it is feasible in this tradition, to see the election and particularity of one people,

Israel, in conjunction with openness to other nations. The particular relationship of God with his people, through election, covenant and guidance through the Torah, and the perception of 'the other' as nevertheless part of God's creation and divine economy in some sense, are not in contradiction with this tradition. There are numerous trajectories which envision non-Jews, rather than joining Israel through conversion to Judaism, as joining themselves to the Lord as 'others', as e.g. in Isa 56.6 where we read 'and the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants', and in Zech 2.11-12, 'Many nations shall join themselves to the LORD on that day, and shall be my people; and I will dwell in your midst. And you shall know that the LORD of hosts has sent me to you. The LORD will inherit Judah as his portion in the holy land, and will again choose Jerusalem' (similar traditions can be found in Isa 2.3, Mic 4.2, Ez 47.22-23, Ezra 6.21, Tob 14.6-7). These people are not seen as becoming part of Israel, but they worship God as foreigners because God's house is now a house of prayer for all peoples (Isa 56.7).¹ There are traditions in these narratives which envision non-Jewish peoples joining in the worshipping of the God of Israel without becoming members of the people Israel, that is, without becoming like them. The distinctions between, and diversity of, nations is maintained and so is their specific way of life, and of relating to the Lord/the Eternal one.

It cannot be discerned precisely which specific traditions of this narrative were influential for Paul's understanding of his call to the nations. But it can hardly be denied that such traditions were of decisive importance for him. His understanding of the Christ-event, including the implications this had for the relationship between Israel and the nations, was embedded in, and infused with the cultural encyclopaedia of such traditions.

These traditions of a unification of nations to jointly worship the God of Israel in itself presents an alternative scenario to the scenarios of empires.² Admittedly not all of these Jewish traditions envisage a peaceful relationship between Israel and the nations. There are those which, rather than presenting an alternative merely present inversions of the domination-subjugation scheme with the non-Jewish nations being subjugated now under the rule of the God of Israel.

Paul is drawing on those other traditions which envisage the unification of the nations not by force but by them responding to the call to serve the God of Israel, in the vein seen by Tobit in his blessings before his death, 'And all the nations will turn to the Lord God in truth and will turn away from their idols and all the nations will praise/bless the Lord [Tob.14.6]. The earliest Christ-followers saw this call actualized in and through the Christ-event, that is, the implications of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the first century CE, to envisage a non-violent unification of the nations actually presented a powerful alternative to the notion of their unification under the 'civilising' force of Rome.

The scriptural traditions of the nations joining Israel in glorifying their God do not presuppose such assimilation; in these visions the nations are not required to become the same, that is Jews, in order to do so, nor does Israel become like the non-Jewish nations in this process.

It seems evident that Paul is drawing on such visions of the unification of the nations and Israel. The already of 'the world to come', seen as revealed in the Christ-event, for him actualizes such visions. Based on these, the envisaged unity presupposes and actually supports the diversity and particularity of these nations, and of Israel. The non-Jewish nations are precisely not to become the same as Jews. They are not to convert to Judaism, nor is Israel to become like the non-Jewish nations. The paradigm of sameness, promoted by the imperial power is precisely *not* what these

people from the nations were to follow as followers of Christ. They are to join Israel in the worshipping of God as non-Jewish nations, as Galatians, Greeks, etc.; the distinction between circumcision and uncircumcision is to be maintained. The unity of Israel and the nations is not achieved by the eradication of cultural and ethnic distinctions, but by affirming their validity and value in Christ.

The respect for people in their difference sets out an alternative discourse to the Roman imperial ideology of sameness. Recognition, even of members of the provincial elite, by Romans presupposed the assimilation of the former. There was no equality between those who were and remained different on Roman terms, even among the elite. Gal 3.26-28 is a call to unity and equality, not to sameness, and as such it is a challenge to the prevalent Roman paradigm.

It is evident from Paul's way of arguing that this was not easy to understand. To translate this alternative understanding of unity among the nations, and between Israel and the nations, into a social and symbolic world permeated by the universalising unification ideology of the empire implied a steep learning curve by Christ-followers from the non-Jewish nations, and possibly also for some Jews.

On the other hand, there may have been non-Jewish Christ-followers who may have understood unity and equality in Roman terms as only being possible through full assimilation, that is, conversion to Judaism as the paradigm they were accustomed to. The struggle with them had most likely to do with issues of cultural translation. Paul has to try to explain that the imperial paradigm of unity was very different from the envisaged unity of life in Christ.

Although those called from the nations may have shared with Jews experiences of conquest, violence and humiliation, for them to relate to this alternative tradition must have been challenging. Given the dominance of the visual display of their power in statues, inscriptions and great buildings, Paul's vision of the unity of Israel and the nations which was embedded in Jewish traditions of resistance, of 'playing and not playing the game', must have been difficult to grasp for people from the nations. To come to an understanding of a unity of Israel and the nations, which differed so fundamentally from the imperially enforced unity would have been a major challenge for both, the apostle and the addressees, although its actualization had liberating and empowering potential.

The Roman unity of the nations was based on violent conquest, economic exploitation and, in order to gain a minimum of respect from their conquerors, on assimilation to the Roman image of humanitas, that is, on becoming the same for members of the local elites.

The Pauline vision of the unity of Israel and the nations could not have been more different: in terms of structure, there was no army or economic power which could have coerced those called into the relationship with the God of Israel through Christ; and in terms of content there was no request to become the same in order to be accepted and respected but the opposite. Those called from the nations should precisely not become like those who had been entrusted with τὰ λόγια τοῦ Θεοῦ (Rom 3.2), that is the Jews. As a core dimension of the gospel they were called as people from the nations in their particularity and diversity.

The unity of conquered nations, that is of Israel and the non-Jewish nations, so feared by Rome, was a unity in diversity, a unity achieved not by coercive force nor assimilation to sameness but

envisaged by trust, that is by the liberation from the crippling power of sin, which prevented people and nations from seeing each other as part of the human family, created by God in their diversity as brothers and sisters.

Paul could not see beyond his horizon – but his vision did not exclude the members of his people who did not share in his perception of Jesus as the Christ. Unlike in later Christian interpretation – they remain beloved as God’s called – thus their difference and diversity may well be understood as included in Paul’s vision – and in today’s world may provide a template for Christians to relate to those who are and remain different of whatever religious tradition.

¹ Cf. Kaminsky is of the view that even a text like Lev 24.22 which refers to ‘one law for natives and resident aliens’ implies ‘that the group boundaries remain intact.’ (2011:20).

² Harrison 2011:36, Kahl 2010:242-43.