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PAUL THE PHARISEE

Lawrence E. Frizzell

St. Paul came from the Greek city of Tarsus in Asia Minor. Called Saul in Hebrew, Paul was probably his Greek name from childhood. He belonged to the Diaspora, or the Dispersion—the millions of Jews dwelling outside Palestine. Trained in the outlook of the Pharisees, the young Saul studied in Jerusalem with Rabban Gamaliel, an outstanding Pharisee teacher. After the crucifixion, Saul participated in the persecution of Jesus' Jewish followers, but then underwent a spiritual transformation and became a convert to Christ and a zealous missionary to both Jews and Gentiles. Lawrence E. Frizzell treats Paul's teachings, particularly his ethical outlook, in relationship to Judaism and Paul's acceptance of Jesus as redeemer.

St. Paul would never have dreamed that his words and work would be the basis for a literature of enormous proportions.¹ Even the simple question about the background of Saul of Tarsus, also known as Paul (Acts 13:9), can be the basis for investigating everything that he wrote, as well as the narratives from the Acts of the Apostles and other early Christian texts.² This paper will be divided into four major sections, reviewing the statements by and about Paul concerning his origins, evidence of his attitude toward prayer, his interpretation of the Hebrew Bible, and the thrust of his teaching concerning the moral order.

1. "A Hebrew of Hebrews..." (Phil 3:5)

At several points in the major epistles St. Paul alludes to his Jewish origins. The most detailed list is found in Philippians. "Circumcised on the eighth day, of the people (race) of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, in observance of the Law a Pharisee, in zeal I persecuted the church, in righteousness based on the Law I was blameless" (3:5-6).

Paul indicates first that he was not a proselyte, but was circumcised in infancy according to the law (Gn 17:12; Lv 12:3). This means that he belonged to the people of Israel (a title of honor often used in the liturgy). One recalls that only three tribes survived after the vicissitudes of the First Temple period

(the ten tribes of the North Kingdom disappeared in exile after 721 B.C.E.), each with its particular dignity: the Levites (with various privileges and functions relating to the Temple and Torah), the Judaeans (from whom the Messiah, Son of David, would come), and Benjaminites (whose ancestor was the only patriarch born in Israel, the tribe of the first king over Israel).³ "Hebrew of Hebrews" probably means that his parents maintained the custom of speaking Aramaic (and perhaps Hebrew) in their home, even when they lived in the dispersion.⁴ Only in Acts is there explicit reference to Paul's facility with "Hebrew," which may mean Aramaic (Acts 21:40; 22:2; 26:14), but letters written in Greek offered little occasion to demonstrate such knowledge.

During the late Second Temple period (after 100 B.C.E.), there were several approaches to the interpretation of the Torah or "instruction" preserved in the five books of Moses. Under priestly leadership, the Sadducees (who claimed to descend from Zadok, high priest in King Solomon's time), maintained that teaching was their prerogative. The Pharisees were educated laymen who believed that God gave Moses an oral Torah to complement the written Pentateuch. They considered themselves to be heirs of the prophetic tradition. The Pharisee Paul, like Jesus and the early disciples, recognized the legitimacy of Sadducean priestly leadership in the Temple; he held that earnest study under proper guidance would provide insights showing how to live according to the commandments. The priests were respected as mediators of cult but were not recognized to have an exclusive right to interpret the written Torah.

Although Paul does not give details about his education, Luke credits him with a statement that he was a Jew born in Tarsus in Cilicia but brought up in Jerusalem.⁵ "At the feet of Gamaliel I was educated strictly in our ancestral law and was zealous for God, just as all of you are today" (Acts 22:3). Although exegetes a generation ago were often skeptical about the historicity of material in Acts,⁶ this point about Paul's education is taken seriously by several noted scholars.⁷ Gamaliel I was a great teacher who flourished in Jerusalem from approximately 20-50 C.E. The wonderfully irenic plea to let the early Christians practice their faith because "if this activity is of human origin it will destroy itself" is attributed to him (Acts 5:38-39). Some have objected that the intolerant young man named Saul could not have studied under such a tolerant master.⁸ However, anyone in higher education during the past three decades knows that such inconsistencies can happen!

"In zeal I persecuted the church..." (Phil 3:6). This brief statement reminds us of an earlier description of Paul's young adult life. "You have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it; and I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers" (Gal 1:13-14).⁹ Although Paul was not a "Zealot" (i.e. a member of the group committed to expulsion of the Roman presence from Judaea) he did belong to a long tradition of total adherence to the God of Israel. "Zeal was more than just

a fervent commitment to the Torah; it denoted a willingness to use violence against any—Jews, Gentiles, or the wicked in general—who were contravening, opposing, or subverting the Torah. Further, a zealot was willing to suffer and die for the sake of the Torah..."¹⁰ The description in Acts 8:3; 9:1, 14; and 26:9–12 implies that Saul was very active and commissioned by the chief priests to persecute followers of Jesus far and wide. One has the impression that this covered a considerable period of time. Most scholars consider the statement that Saul cast his vote for the death penalty (Acts 26:10) to mean that he was a judge in the tribunal but construe this to be Luke's literary creation. There are two opinions among those who accept its historicity. Jerome Murphy-O'Connor calls Saul a junior colleague of Gamaliel in the Sanhedrin; however, Simon Legasse thinks that the "vote" may have been only his personal consent to a decision of higher authority. The death of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was approved by Saul in this way (Acts 8:11; 22:20).¹¹

As a Christian, Paul on occasion manifested a fiery temper, leading him to write some things that embarrass his readers in our age when people value tolerance (at least in theory). Reacting against other Christian teachers, possibly converts from gentile background, who call Gentiles to full observance of the Torah, Paul calls them dogs (Phil 3:2) and wishes that they mutilate themselves (Gal 5:12). The invective against "the Jews" (perhaps to be rendered "Judeans" in the geographical sense of dwellers in Judaea) in the first letter to the Thessalonians (2:14–16) is not only extremely violent but includes a gentile accusation that the "Jews oppose all men," an unjustified general statement that Jews were obnoxious and intolerant. Some have argued that this is an interpolation by a scribe of gentile origin, but every manuscript contains the passage.¹² It is common in many cultures for an angry person to use labels and "racist" statements against one of his own group. However, no weight would be given to those phrases when calm has been restored. Paul exhibited a Mediterranean temper on occasion and perhaps is to be credited with the sage advice: "Do not let the sun go down on your anger!" (Eph 4:26). In any case, since passages like 1 Thessalonians 2:13–16 are part of the canon of the New Testament, Christians must grapple with them. In no case should they be a basis for anti-Jewish sentiments of theological judgment;¹³ there are other more detailed texts (such as Rom 9–11) which provide elements for a balanced synthesis.

In ancient as well as modern times, religious (and political) groups use titles descriptive of their ideals and role in society. As the Qumran Scrolls indicate, such names were often contrasted with descriptions of others. "Sons of light" evokes the title "sons of darkness" for Qumran's enemies; "sons of righteousness" are contrasted with "sons of iniquity." In his letter to the Romans, Paul purports to address "a Jew" about the danger of complacency regarding his knowledge of God's will. He seems to turn some of the titles (such as "guide for the blind") used by Pharisees and other Jews against them. "If you are sure that you are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, a corrector of

the foolish, a teacher of children...you who teach others, will you not teach yourself?" (Rom 2:19-21). While the people of Qumran had little hope even for their fellow Jews, let alone the Gentiles, the Pharisees and Jews in the Diaspora actively sought out and encouraged those searching for enlightenment. Several scholars ask: Was Saul a Jewish missionary? Ernest Best writes: "If before his conversion Paul had been a Jewish missionary seeking to win converts to Judaism, his conversion would have made it reasonably easy for him to understand the need to win them to Christ."¹⁴ If we take seriously the statements in Acts about Saul's education followed by his service of the high priest in attempting to subdue Jewish Christians and then add years as Jewish missionary, we portray an extremely active young man! Why not suggest that he learned about such proselytizing efforts from Jewish visitors to Jerusalem?

Should one take remuneration for teaching about God and the Torah? This question is answered in the gospels and Paul's letters. Because Levites had no share in the land, the ancient tradition sanctioned tithes for their maintenance, and Jesus taught that spiritual blessings could be best appreciated when a mutual sharing taught people to be responsible for each other. The best way to understand Jesus' "mission sermon" (Mt 10:5-42 and Lukan parallels) is from the background of pilgrimage within the Judaism of his time.¹⁵ The apostles sent on mission by Jesus were focused on the kingdom of God like pilgrims on the way to Jerusalem. This dedication precluded working for a livelihood.

As laymen, however, the Pharisees may have sensed the danger inherent in linking spiritual and economic orders. "Excellent is the study of Torah together with a secular occupation" (Mishnah Abot 2:2). This statement is attributed to Rabban Gamaliel, son of Rabbi Judah the Prince; therefore it is dated to the early third century C.E. The idea could well have its roots in the Second Temple period, when priestly privileges and the tithing system were still in place. Paul acknowledged the right to receive his livelihood from the community but did not take advantage of it (1 Cor 9:1-5).

Although some scholars debate whether young Saul would have learned a trade while studying with Gamaliel, he could well have acquired his skill as a tentmaker from his father. "Whoever does not teach his son a trade teaches him to be a robber" (Tosefta Qiddushin 1, 11).¹⁶ Where he learned his craft is of little importance. The reason he practiced it was to avoid being a burden on the communities where he taught (1 Thes 2:9; 2 Thes 3:6; 1 Cor 9:1-5). Of course, the workshop would be a place for Paul to meet a wide range of people and an appropriate setting for discussion.¹⁷

2. The Man of Prayer

As a pious Jew, Saul would have cultivated the habit of praying at certain times of the day. He would have recited the *Shema*' (Dt 6:4-9, etc.) in the evening

and morning; no doubt he linked his prayer with the offering of sacrifices in the Temple at the appropriate hours. He would have developed a deep appreciation for the sabbath and the annual cycle of feasts and fast days. Both in daily prayers and on the feasts he would have sensed a union with Temple worship. The history of Israel's movement from Egyptian servitude to the covenant at Mount Sinai and the gift of the land would have been experienced in the three great pilgrimage feasts (Dt 16).

In the synagogue and probably in daily life the psalms would have been an inspiration to the young Pharisee; he would have blessed God in gratitude and praise, both in formal benedictions and spontaneous acts of praise. A century later Rabbi Meir would declare that each person should utter a hundred spontaneous blessings each day. No doubt the practice of expressing gratitude to God, not only at meals but on many other occasions, would have been taught already in Saul's time. He would have fasted on Mondays and Thursdays (the days half way between the previous and coming sabbath) and so prepared for the celebration of God's gift of sabbath peace.

The mature missionary, dictating letters required because of absence from communities he had founded, manifests both his Jewish heritage and his commitment to Jesus as the Christ. He must have instructed his communities in the use of the Jewish Scriptures, in their Greek garb known as the Septuagint, especially the Psalms. He would have taught them that all prayers of petition must be in the plural and placed within the framework of the blessing (eucharist) for gifts already received. Everything in life must be submitted to the divine will.

Paul's style of writing is saturated by prayerful language, shaped and formed by his awareness of divine presence and activity in the world.¹⁸ His greetings in the introduction to a letter include both Greek and Hebrew elements (grace and peace), both imbued with the spiritual meaning of the biblical heritage.¹⁹ Each letter (even the one to the Galatians, which does not have an initial greeting) has a prayer-filled petition or doxology (Rom 16:25-27) as its conclusion. The mention of a divine title is completed with a blessing (Rom 1:25; 9:5; 2 Cor 11:31). A doxology will complete a major reflection (Rom 11:33-36; 16:27; Phil 1:11).

Like other early Christian teachers, Paul explained aspects of Jesus' life and work, especially his death and resurrection, with reference to the Temple, the sacrificial worship, and the feasts.²⁰

3. Teacher of the Jewish Scriptures

Early in this century it was suggested that "a scholarly Christian Jew raked through the Old Testament in order to write a handbook for Paul to carry around on his journeys. In fact Paul did not need one. With his own thorough training as a Pharisee, he had his own vast store of knowledge both of the Old Testament

itself and of contemporary exegesis, which he drew on constantly in the course of his missionary labours. He made use of texts already well established in Christian discourse, and also added to this much further biblical material, as the need arose."²¹

Where did Paul stand in relation to the other apostles in education? Would he have been the equivalent of a graduate student under Gamaliel, while the others were in high school? One should not underestimate their exposure to the Jewish heritage, biblical and liturgical, in the synagogue service and *beth-midrash* or classroom. Moreover, they were in the company of Jesus for a considerable length of time. The gospel traditions show that he used the Bible in its liturgical context as the foundation for many of his teachings and debates. He is presented as having precise methods for interpreting the scriptures.²² Already the House of Hillel in the Pharisee tradition is credited with having hermeneutical principles for grappling with problems in the biblical text.²³ If one accepts the statement of Acts 22:3 that Saul studied under Gamaliel, even for a brief period, and if the master was the grandson of the famous Hillel the Elder, then one may look for examples of the seven *middot* (rules) of Hillel in the epistles of the mature Paul. The great scholar Joachim Jeremias, who delved more into the Jewish tradition than most New Testament scholars of the period between 1920 and 1960, did just that.²⁴

Jeremias began his study with a general reflection, the substance of which reads as follows:

The Pauline letters show that their author not only lived his Bible but also possessed the contemporary tools for its interpretation. He knew *midrashim* (developments of the text to apply it to current needs of the community—Gal 3:19; 4:29; 1 Cor 10:1–4; 2 Cor 11:3).... He linked key words of different passages and joined a Torah passage with a text from the prophets or writings (Rom 4:1f; 9:12f; 10:6f, 19, 21; 11:8; 12:19f; 15:9–12; 2 Cor 6:16–18).... While he is indebted to Hellenistic allegory in 1 Corinthians 9:9f, Paul's spiritual home is Palestinian exegesis, as shown by his preference for typology which sees the events of salvation history as portrayals of the end-time (1 Cor 10:1f; Gal 4:21–31; Rom 9:13).

Any Jew who frequented the synagogue during the Second Temple period could develop a certain facility with linking passages from different parts of the Hebrew Bible, as this was probably the practice of at least some homilists. In the texts of the Aramaic translation (*targum*) the Torah passages are sometimes expanded, and Paul seems to have drawn upon the amplification of Deuteronomy 30:11–14 in Romans 10:6–8.

The Aramaic translation of Deuteronomy 30:12–13 reads as follows, with additions to the Hebrew text in italics:

The Instruction [Torah] is not in heaven that one might say: would that we had one *like the prophet Moses* who would ascend to heaven and bring it back for us and make us hear the commandments that we might do them. Neither is the Instruction beyond the Great Sea that one might say: Would that we had one *like Jonah the prophet* who would descend into the depths of the Great Sea and bring it up for us and make us hear the commandments that we might do them (Targum Neofiti at Dt 30:12-13).

After quoting Leviticus 18:5 (Rom 10:5; see Gal 3:12) to show that Moses taught that Jews practice the righteousness that is based on the Torah, Paul makes use of this passage in Deuteronomy. "But the righteousness based on faith says, Do not say in your heart: 'Who will descend into the abyss?' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart (that is, the word of faith which we preach)..." (Rom 10:5-8).²⁵

Paul refers the ascent to Christ, the one like unto Moses (Dt 18:15, 18) who brought the Torah from heaven. The descent of Jonah into the sea (exaggerated as "the abyss") is a sign of Jesus' descent into the grave and the underworld (see Mt 12:39-40; 14:4; Lk 11:29). So Paul points to the death and resurrection of Jesus, already accomplished, as the basis for righteousness rooted in faith as fulfillment of the work begun by Moses and Jonah.

Jeremias also tried to show that in his letters Paul used five of the seven rules of Hillel. The apostle argued from a minor premise to a conclusion, because a restriction regarding a small matter would certainly apply as well to something important (Rom 5:12-17; 11:12; 2 Cor 3:7-8; 9:11). On the other hand, if a permission is granted for something very important then the same should apply to a minor matter (Rom 5:6-10; 8:32; 11:24; 1 Cor 6:2-3). Analogy was used to show that a decision in a certain case would apply to a similar one. Thus, Paul uses Psalm 32:2-3 in Romans 4:1-12 to argue that forgiveness of sin applies to Gentiles because Abram was righteous before his circumcision, when his name was changed to Abraham (Gn 17:5). The relation between the general and the particular allowed Paul to teach that the detailed commandments of the Decalogue develop from the principle "Love you neighbor as yourself" (Lv 19:18 in Rom 13:9; Gal 5:14).

Rabbi Cohn-Sherbok concludes his study on Paul and rabbinic exegesis by remarking that "certain aspects of rabbinic exegesis, such as the expansion of Scriptural law, are absent from the Epistles. Yet like the Rabbis, Paul attempted to show that Scripture is sacred, that it is susceptible of interpretation, and that properly understood, it guides the life of the worthy. In proclaiming his Christian message, he employed standard techniques of Scripture exegesis, occasionally even using some of the rules of rabbinic hermeneutics. In this sense Paul's teaching and preaching are rooted in Pharisaic Judaism."²⁶

These hermeneutical norms do have points in common with Greek approaches to logic and discourse.²⁷ It is possible that Paul acquired them from the heritage of Greek learning to which he was exposed. However, the Qumran Scrolls bear witness to the penetration of Greek ideas into the Jewish culture long before the time of Paul. Perhaps earlier Jewish teachers integrated these norms into their teaching, the tradition crediting Hillel the Elder with expressing them in a list of seven. Since Paul's use of the rules do not seem as refined as that of the rabbis, he has at times been called an amateur. On that point it might be noted that he was dictating letters destined for his congregation, not his peers. Moreover, the rabbinic examples were honed during a long period of oral transmission, wherein it is likely that only the most polished gems survived.

Shortly after Jeremias published his essay, Klaus Haacker objected that the points enumerated above need not indicate Paul's dependence on Hillel. Paul may have learned the argumentation from the early Christian community, not only for content but also the form. The love commandment is the nucleus of the early Christian interpretation of the law, just as it was stressed in Judaism, so the comprehensive commandment embracing the particular is not *Paul's* application of a Jewish principle. Use of such principles to develop an argument is not unique to Hillel and his school. Perhaps the young Saul belonged to the House of Shammai, which was strict and conservative on most issues where it differed from Hillel.²⁸

About the same time Jacob Neusner questioned whether Gamaliel even belonged to the school of Hillel. "If Gamaliel was a member of the House of Hillel, the traditions never reflected it. The references to the members of the House of Gamaliel may mean that he himself conducted his own 'House'. All we know for sure is that Gamaliel traditions are curiously silent on the House of Hillel, but both make Gamaliel an authority for a member of the opposition, and have him rule like a Shammaite."²⁹

Hans Hübner follows Haacker in linking Saul's background with the Shammaites.³⁰ However, it seems that the evidence he adduces, "the all-or-nothing" stance of Galatians 3:10 and 5:3, is too slight to allow such precision. The statement "Every man who receives circumcision is bound to keep the whole Law" (Gal 5:3) would surely be held by Hillel as well as Shammai, by the Sadducee as well as the Pharisee, and it would be stressed by the Qumran community as well. Differences would come when one asks how a particular commandment is to be observed. Those who acknowledge that Paul was Gamaliel's disciple can say that both were Pharisees. Evidence is scanty for giving greater precision to this affirmation.³¹ Even if one is skeptical about Paul's dependence on Hillel and his school, the apostle's use of the same principles for interpreting scripture as did the rabbis should be maintained.

Recently two scholars have used the Psalms of Solomon to provide background for appreciating Paul's heritage as a Pharisee. Investigation of this possibility would require another study.³²

4. The Torah and its Precepts

For many Christians and Christian scholars, the letters of Paul have constituted the center of the New Testament. An unfortunate aspect of the Lutheran tendency to pit law against grace, works against faith, was a reading of Paul that was often antinomian. Since 1977 a veritable revolution has taken place, provoked by the work of E.P. Sanders.³³ He studied the wide range of Jewish literature from the Second Temple period and also the traditions preserved in the Mishnah. Rather than dry "legalism" and a stultified religious experience, he found that George F. Moore (1851-1931) and Travers Herford (1860-1950) were right in their nuanced and positive presentations of the Pharisees.

Sanders calls the Jewish way of life "covenantal nomism." This pattern attributes salvation to God's gracious election of Israel, to its covenant status, and upholds obedience to the law as necessary not to *gain* but to *maintain* this covenantal status. "Paul used the term *nomos* in at least two quite distinct contexts, one discussing how one gets 'in' (not by works of the law) and the other in discussing how one who is 'in' behaves (keeping the law)."³⁴ This last rather colloquial statement means that entry into the covenant with God is a divine gift, whereas obedience to the commandments is the response upon which each person will be judged.

Sanders considers that Paul's thinking begins from a coherent center, which is the position that sharing in life through Christ is the only way to salvation. A generation ago some scholars sketched a psychological portrait of Paul in order to expose his quirks; others asked whether as a Diaspora Jew he was frustrated because of distance from the Temple. Now scholars are again reflecting primarily on the conversion-call that Paul designated as "a revelation of Jesus Christ" (Gal 1:12).³⁵

We emphasize that the thrust of Paul's moral teaching bears the imprint of the gospel message, and that Jesus became his model as he continued to aspire for fulfillment of the great commandment to imitate God (Lv 19:2). However, just as Jesus built on the millennial heritage of the Jewish people, so did Paul.

The work of the English anthropologist, Mary Douglas, is very helpful in trying to enter the world-view of the Jewish people in the Second Temple period, and especially to recognize that the interpretation and application of the commandments constitute a cohesive whole.³⁶ Whether everyone in the tradition saw this picture clearly need not concern us, because they were *living* it.

The center of focus for Jewish life during this Second Temple period was the Temple, the place of God's dwelling with Israel and the unique place for sacrificial worship. The community's leaders were very concerned about the worthiness of all its members in relation to God. Ritual purity law prepared people for worship and for application of God's will to their daily lives. As devout lay people, the Pharisees held that the entire community constituted "a kingdom of priests, a holy nation" (Ex 19:6).

As much as possible, the Pharisees extended the ideals of priestly holiness and worship into the synagogues and homes of their communities. Of special importance were the laws regarding diet and marital life.

The pattern might be presented as follows:

place:	Temple	field-kitchen	home
agents:	priest-people	farmer-homemaker	husband-wife
focus:	altar	table	bed

The commandments governing service at the altar have their parallels for the Pharisees in those governing preparation of food (so that every meal can reflect God's presence) and sexual activities (so that the partners in marriage reflect the covenant bond between God and Israel). In the same way, the farmer and the person purchasing food as well as the husband and wife in marriage have particular responsibilities and roles, so that laws of tithing and cleanness of food and the commandments governing the menstrual cycle be respected. One might see all aspects of daily life as pointing to the Temple in Jerusalem, and this may have been the vision of many who united spiritually with the hours of sacrifice. "It is equally plausible that the Temple stands for the pure consecrated body of the worshipper and that the rules which protect sanctuary from defilement repeat by analogy the rules which protect the purity of the human body from wrong food and wrong sex, and the people of Israel from false gods."³⁷

Although Paul fought to exempt the Gentiles who accepted Christianity from the detailed way in which eating was governed, he did wish to foster a sensitivity to the presence of God in all creation and especially in the Christian community. So he used Temple imagery to describe both the community and the individual Christian (1 Cor 3:9-17; 6:12-20). Each Christian is consecrated to God by baptism, plunging symbolically into the mystery of Christ's death-and-resurrection (Rom 6:1-4). This consecration must be lived out in the pilgrimage of human life, whether one is married or single (1 Cor 7:1-40). Paul continued to live according to the principles of the Pharisee tradition; even though he set aside the precepts of the Torah in certain areas of daily life, he instilled in his communities the insight rooted in the Bible and Jewish tradition that all human beings are created in the divine image and therefore are equal in God's sight and should be united in divine service. He deduced that the work of Jesus and the gift of union with God through baptism caused all political, social, and gender divisions to give way to a new situation willed by God. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28).³⁸ Through faith all believers are united as children of one God (3:26); the union with Christ in baptism also makes them children of Abraham (3:29), heirs of him whose name means "Father of many nations" (Gen 17:5). This should

lead Christians to appreciate their spiritual union with God's great olive tree, the people of Israel (Rom 11:17-24).