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MAIN THEMES IN PAULINE THEOLOGY

2. Apostle or apostate?

2.1 Paul the apostle

In 1990 Alan Segal, a prominent Jewish scholar of early Christian and Jewish literature, wrote a book entitled, *Paul the Convert: the Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee*.¹ The title nicely sums up the ambiguity and contested character of Paul's identity and lasting significance – apostle *and* apostate? apostle *or* apostate? Jews who take any note of Paul have little doubt that he was an apostate – a traitor to the Torah, an apostate from Israel. And Christians equally have little doubt that he was an apostle, even if not one of the Twelve. But both remind us of Paul's changing identity, and both titles have greater problems and carry a greater weight of implication than most Jews and Christians realise.

We start once again with Paul's own estimate of who and what he was. In our previous survey of Paul's autobiographical claims we have omitted one which was of first importance for Paul himself – his self-claimed title 'apostle'. It is clear from the way he introduces himself in most of his letters that this was how Paul wanted to be heard and known:

- Rom. 1.1, 5 – 'Paul, a slave of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God . . . Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we received grace and apostleship with a view to the obedience of faith among all the nations for the sake of his name';
- 1 Cor. 1.1 – 'Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God';
- 2 Cor. 1.1 – 'Paul, apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God'
- Gal. 1.1 – 'Paul, apostle, not from human beings nor through a human being, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father'
- Col. 1.1 – 'Paul, apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God'.²

For convenience I repeat the relevant references from the first lecture –

- Rom. 11.13 – 'I am apostle to the Gentiles';
- Rom. 15.16 – 'a minister of Christ Jesus for the Gentiles, serving the gospel of Christ as a priest';
- 1 Cor. 9.1-2 – 'Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen our Lord? . . . If to others I am not an apostle, at least I am to you';
- 1 Cor. 15.8-10 – 'Last of all, as to an abortion, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, not worthy to be called an apostle . . . but by the grace of God I am what I am.

Here we have the answer to the earlier question, 'How would Paul have introduced himself?' 'Apostle of Messiah Jesus/Jesus Christ' was his chosen self-designation, what he would have printed on his 'calling card', and how he in fact did introduce himself in his letters.

There are two important implications of at least several of these references. One is that Paul thought it necessary to lay claim to this title ('apostle'), and the other that his claim to this title was contested by some, indeed by a significant group within earliest Christianity. The unusual opening

¹ New Haven: Yale University, 1990.

² Similarly Eph. 1.1; 1 Tim. 1.1; 2 Tim. 1.1; Tit. 1.1; if these letters are post-Pauline, the openings indicate how established the usage and status had become.

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to Galatians is itself quite remarkable. Paul does not even begin his letter with the usual (and his) courtesies of such a letter – reference to his thanksgivings and prayers on their behalf.³ Instead he swings at once, abruptly and discourteously, into a sequence of denials/affirmations – ‘an apostle not from human beings nor through a human being, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father’ (Gal. 1.1). And throughout the first two chapters it is clear that Paul was very much aware that his status as an apostle, independent of Jerusalem, was being questioned, at least by those ‘causing trouble’ in Galatia (Gal. 5.12). He asks, ‘Am I now seeking human approval . . .?’ (1.10). He insists, ‘The gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it . . .’ (1.11-12). He objects that after his conversion, ‘I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me . . .’ (1.16-17). Clearly there were those who claimed that apostleship belonged to the Jerusalem leadership, and that only if Paul had gone up to Jerusalem and been inducted there, could he claim apostolic authority for the gospel which he preached. So he protests with an oath, ‘I did not see any other apostle except James . . . In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie!’ (1.19-20). Clearly the apostolic authority behind Paul’s preaching to non-Jews was under serious question from the more traditionalist Jewish believers. This is no doubt why Paul was so relieved that at the Jerusalem council his commission and engracement for that mission to the uncircumcised was recognized and affirmed by the Jerusalem leaders, the ‘pillar apostles’ (2.1-10).

In the same connection, we should also note that Paul did not meet the conditions for recognition/election of an ‘apostle’ as indicated by Luke. It should be recalled that, according to Acts 1.21-22, when Judas’ place as an apostle, one of the Twelve, was filled, the qualifications for apostleship were clearly defined. Candidates for the position vacated by Judas should have been with Jesus from the time of his baptism by John until his ascension; and they should have been witnesses of Jesus’ resurrection – that is, according to Luke, a witness of the resurrection appearances which lasted for 40 days before Jesus’ ascension (Acts 1.3). Paul, of course, would not qualify as an ‘apostle’ under such criteria. This probably means that Luke’s later description of Paul and Barnabas as ‘apostles’ (Acts 14.4, 14) was intended by Luke to be understood as denoting their function as ‘apostles or representatives of the church of Antioch’, missionaries sent out by the church of Antioch. Paul also knew that (as we might say) lesser ‘apostleship’ – ‘apostles or delegates of the churches’ (2 Cor. 8.23); Epaphroditus, the apostle or messenger from the church of Philippi (Phil. 2.25). But his consistent insistence that he was apostle by appointment of God indicates Paul’s unyielding refusal to be regarded as ‘apostle’ in any lesser sense than ‘those who were apostles before me’ (Gal. 1.17).

What, then, did Paul’s claim to apostleship and the title ‘apostle’ signify to Paul?⁴

2.2 Apostle of Christ

The basic sense of ‘apostle (*apostolos*)’ was ‘one sent out’, so ‘delegate, envoy, messenger, authorized emissary’.⁵ What gave it the weight which Paul obviously saw in it, and claimed by using it in self-reference, was the fact that the commissioning authority was *Christ*, ‘by the will of God’. It was as an emissary of Christ, in accordance with God’s will, that he was an apostle, and as such his appointment carried the full weight of that authority behind it. This was what he was insisting on so emphatically in the opening of Galatians.

³ Rom. 1.8-10; 1 Cor. 1.4; Phil. 1.3-5; Col. 1.3-10; 1 Thess. 1.2-3; 2 Thess. 1.3, 11; Phm 4-6.

⁴ The bibliography on ‘apostle’ is extensive; see e.g. the reviews by H. D. Betz, ‘Apostle’, *ABD* 1.309-11; J. A. Bühner, ‘*apostolos*’, *EDNT* 1.142-6; P. W. Barnett, ‘Apostle’, *DPL* 1.45-51.

⁵ BDAG 122.

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The act of authorizing appointment was still more restricted. Paul had not simply been appointed by Christ (a status and role which could legitimately be claimed for many pioneering evangelists in subsequent centuries). He had been *appointed by the risen Christ in the course of his resurrection appearances*. This is the claim that Paul explicitly makes twice in 1 Corinthians: ‘Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen our Lord?’ (1 Cor. 9.1); ‘Last of all, as to an abortion, he appeared also to me’ (15.8). In the latter passage Paul makes a threefold assertion and implication:

- the appearance to himself was of the same order and significance as the appearances to Peter, the twelve . . . and ‘all the apostles’ (15.5-7);⁶
- the appearance to himself was ‘last of all’, the almost explicit inference being that after Paul nobody else had been granted an appearance of the risen Christ;
- his description of his conversion as an ‘abortion’ is equally significant. An abortion is an unnaturally early birth. So the implication of the jibe is that Paul’s birth (as a believer) had to be unnaturally hastened in order to ensure his inclusion within the circle of apostles before that circle finally closed.⁷

On the first two points, we should note, Paul was in agreement with Luke. For Luke too, the qualification to be an apostle was a resurrection appearance, because the essential role of an apostle was to bear witness to Jesus’ resurrection (Acts 1.22). And the resurrection appearances as such continued only for a limited period (1.1-3); consequently after the end of the appearances there would be no grounds for the appointment of other apostolic witnesses.

Paul’s claim, therefore, was to a unique status and authority. That was no doubt one of the reasons why Paul’s claim to the status was questioned by some, although we have already noted that his claim was in effect acknowledged by the Jerusalem leadership, though possibly with qualifications.⁸ But probably the greater question mark was put against Paul’s *understanding* of his apostolic commissioning.

2.3 Servant of the gospel

Equally worthy of note is the degree to which Paul understood ‘apostle’ and ‘gospel’ as in a mutually reinforcing symbiotic relationship:

- in Rom. 1.1 the two self-introductory phrases, ‘called to be an apostle’ and ‘set apart for the gospel of God’, are coterminous;
- as ‘a minister of Christ Jesus’ his function was to ‘serve the gospel of Christ as a priest’ (Rom. 15.16);
- as apostle his role was to proclaim the gospel (1 Cor. 15.11);

⁶ ‘All the apostles’ seem to have included Barnabas (Gal. 2.9; 1 Cor. 9.5-6), and Andronicus and Junia (Rom. 16.7); see also W. Reinbold, *Propaganda und Mission im ältesten Christentum: Eine Untersuchung zu den Modalitäten der Ausbreitung der frühen Kirche* (Göttingen: Vandenoek & Ruprecht, 2000) 37-9, 40-1. Is the plural in 1 Thess. 2.1-12 ‘so personal to Paul that Silas and Timothy could not be included’ in 2.6-7 (an ‘epistolary plural’), as A. J. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians* (AB 32B; New York: Doubleday, 2000) 144 argues (similarly Reinbold 39-40)? And given Apollos’ relative late appearance on the scene, it is less likely that he would have been numbered among ‘the apostles’ referred to in 1 Cor. 15.7, though he may be included in the ‘apostles’ of 1 Cor. 4.9.

⁷ On ‘abortion’ see my *Theology of Paul* 331 n.87.

⁸ In Gal. 2.7-9 some hesitancy on the part of the Jerusalem leadership may be indicated by the fact that whereas Peter’s mission is designated as ‘the apostleship (*apostolēn*) of the circumcision’, Paul’s is described only as ‘for the Gentiles’ (*apostolēn* is not repeated) (2.8). ‘The agreement must have recognized Peter’s apostleship, but left Paul without a specific title’ – H. D. Betz, *Galatians* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979 82, 98). ‘. . . unmistakably failing to grant formal apostolicity to Paul’s labors’ – J. L. Martyn, *Galatians* (AB 33A; New York: Doubleday, 1997) 203.

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- Paul's insistence that he was an apostle, 'not from human beings nor through a human being, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father' (Gal. 1.1), is mirrored in his equally vehement insistence a few sentences later that his gospel was 'not of human origin; for it was not from a human being that I received it, neither was I taught it, but through a revelation of Jesus Christ' (1.11-12).

As has been pointed out by others, Paul's agitation in Gal. 1-2 was not so much in *self*-defence as in defence of his *gospel*, because he feared that 'the truth of the gospel' (2.5, 14) was being endangered by the attacks on his evangelistic success as falling short of what God demanded.⁹

The authority which Paul claimed as an *apostle*, therefore, was the authority of the *gospel*. In fact, 'the truth of the gospel' was his *first* concern; his own apostolic status was secondary to and in service of the gospel. Which explains

- why Paul was willing to acknowledge the prior status and authority of 'those who were apostles before me' (Gal. 1.17),
- why the thought that the Jerusalem apostles might not approve his gospel caused him such anxiety,
- and why in trumpeting the agreement achieved in Jerusalem, Paul in effect acknowledged the right of the pillar apostles to approve his preaching (2.2).

It was more important that the *same* message should be preached by *all* the apostles. So Paul ends his reference back to the gospel by which the Corinthians were being saved (1 Cor. 15.2) with the joyful affirmation, 'Whether then it was *I or they*, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe' (15.11). Just as later, when in prison, it was more important that Christ was being proclaimed, even if some of the proclamation was intended to increase Paul's suffering in imprisonment (Phil. 1.17-18).

In short, it was more important for Paul that his preaching of the gospel should be affirmed by the Jerusalem apostles (Gal. 2.6-9), than that his apostleship should be formally acknowledged. For the apostle was ever subservient to 'the truth of the gospel'. Which brings us to the really sensitive issue.

2.4 Apostle to the Gentiles

It would appear that Paul saw his commissioning, apparently from the first, as a commissioning to take the gospel to the Gentiles. We can never be sure when the full significance of Paul's conversion came home to him. But so far as our evidence goes, Paul never saw himself simply as 'apostle', with some roving commission. He had been specifically commissioned to preach the gospel *among the nations*:¹⁰

- he had 'received grace and apostleship with a view to the obedience of faith among all the nations for the sake of his name' (Rom. 1.5);
- in his major treatment of 'Israel' he does not hesitate to assert simply, 'I am apostle to the Gentiles' (Rom. 11.13);
- he was 'a minister of Christ Jesus for the Gentiles' (Rom 15.16);

⁹ 'Apostolic authority was conditional upon the gospel and subject to the norm of the gospel' (*Theology of Paul* 572; with bibliography in n.35); 'apostleship and the gospel were inseparable for Paul' – P. Stuhlmacher, *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (2 vols. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992, 1999) 1.249.

¹⁰ The Greek *ethnē* can be translated equally 'nations' or 'Gentiles', 'the Gentiles' being one way of describing all the (other) nations (other than Israel). See also D. J.-S. Chae, *Paul as Apostle to the Gentiles* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997); Reinbold, *Propaganda* 164-81.

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- God chose to reveal his Son in Paul, in order that Paul might preach his Son ‘among the Gentiles’ (Gal. 1.16);
- The later letter to the Ephesians emphasizes that ‘the mystery of Christ’ had been especially revealed to Paul, and that he had been specially commissioned to enact the mystery. This mystery was that ‘the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel’ (Eph. 3.2-6).

It is sufficiently clear from Gal. 1-2 that this was where ‘the shoe began to pinch’ for Paul, where the problems arose, when his role as apostle and servant of the gospel came to be evaluated by others. The point is too important for our appreciation both of Paul’s self-understanding and of how he carried out his commission, to be passed over. For one thing, it was precisely this commission which Paul claimed to have received, to take the good news of Jesus to non-Jews, which proved so controversial in the beginnings of Christianity. So controversial was it indeed, that it caused a schism in the early Jesus movement, a schism which stretched into the next three centuries in the hostile relations between what became the mainstream of Christianity and the so-called Jewish-Christian heretical sects. And for another, it was precisely this commission which caused Paul to formulate ‘the truth of the gospel’ so clearly and definitively – as an offer of God’s acceptance to *all* who believe, without further qualification, ‘justified through faith in Jesus Christ and not by works of the law’ (Gal. 2.16). In these words Paul crystallized the heart of the Christian gospel in effect for all time. We return to this theme so central to Paul’s apostleship in the third lecture.

It was this understanding of his commission, apostle = missionary = evangelist, which gave the Christian concept of ‘apostle’ its distinctive sense. And not only distinctive, but ground-breaking sense. For while the concept of ‘apostle’ = ‘messenger, emissary’ was self-evident (*apostolos* from *apostellō*, ‘send’), and *apostolos* was used in that sense, the sense of ‘apostle’ as one commissioned to win adherents to one’s faith, to convert others, was new. We know of Jewish apologists, concerned to help their fellow-Jews to take a proper pride in their religion and to explain its peculiarities to others. We know of wandering philosophers who sought to persuade others of the wisdom of their views. To be sure, the model provided by Jesus, of a summons to radical trust in God in the light of the coming kingdom, had already broken old moulds, and was resumed by the first believers in the risen Jesus in their initial preaching in Jerusalem and Judea. But it was this sense of commission to convert others, to win adherents to the new movement from well beyond the boundaries of Second Temple Judaism by summoning them to faith in Israel’s Christ, which gave the Christian understanding of ‘apostle’ its distinctive character.¹¹

Here we should recall that Judaism was not a missionary religion.¹² Pharisees and Essenes were more naturally concerned to win fellow Jews to a stricter devotion to their covenant obligations;¹³

¹¹ Cf. E. J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission: Vol.1. Jesus and the Twelve; Vol. 2. Paul and the Early Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004) 536-45; C. Roetzel, *Paul: The Man and the Myth* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999) ch. 2.

¹² See particularly S. McKnight, *A Light among the Gentiles: Jewish Missionary Activity in the Second Temple Period* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991); M. Goodman, *Mission and Conversion: Proselytizing in the Religious History of the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994); R. Riesner, ‘A Pre-Christian Jewish Mission?’, in J. Ådna and H. Kvalbein, eds., *The Mission of the Early Church to Jews and Gentiles* (WUNT 127; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000) 211-50; L. J. L. Peerbolte, *Paul the Missionary* (Leuven: Peeters, 2003) ch. 1; Schnabel, *Mission* ch. 6.

¹³ This is probably where Matt. 23.15 comes in. The readiness of ‘scribes and Pharisees’ to ‘cross sea and land to make a single proselyte’ probably refers to the zeal of an Eleazar to ensure that would-be converts to Judaism, like Izates, were converted all the way (Josephus, *Ant.* 20.38-46).

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but they were not in the business of trying to win *non-Jews* to adopt their praxis.¹⁴ Judaism was, after all, the national religion of the Jews; it was not a matter of going out to convert non-Jews to a non-ethnic religion. Israel was very welcoming of God-fearers and proselytes, and looked for an influx of the nations to Zion as part of the eschatological home-coming of the diaspora; but an outgoing to persuade Gentiles to come in was not part of the script. So what the Paul believed himself called to do was exceptional and mind-blowing and established Christianity's character as essentially a missionary religion.

2.5 Apostle of Israel

Less explicit, but, we may judge, equally important for Paul, was the conviction that his commission as 'apostle to the Gentiles' was not only in accordance with the will of God, but was also *an extension of Israel's own commission from God*. This inference is clearest, once again, in Galatians.

Gal. 1.15-16 contain clear echoes of Jer. 1.5 and Isa. 49.1-6 in Paul's description of his conversion/calling.

- Gal. 1.15-16 – '... the one who set me apart (*aphorisas*) from my mother's womb, and called me through his grace ... in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles ...'
- Jer. 1.5 LXX – Jeremiah expresses his sense of call: 'Before I formed you *in the womb* I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations'.
- Isa. 49.1-6 LXX – The Servant of Yahweh = Israel (49.3) speaks: '*From my mother's womb* he called my name. ... Behold I have set you for a covenant of the people, to be for a light of the nations/Gentiles, for salvation to the end of the earth'.

There can be little doubt, therefore, that Paul saw his conversion as a prophetic commissioning – a prophetic commissioning like that of Jeremiah in Jer. 1.5 ('appointed a prophet to the nations');¹⁵ and more specifically in terms used for Israel, the Servant of Second Isaiah (to be given 'as a light to the nations' – Isa. 49.6). This continuity between his own vocation and that of Israel (the Servant of Yahweh – Isa. 49.3) was evidently an important part of Paul's self-understanding. What happened on the Damascus road *was* a conversion, a conversion from Saul's previous understanding of how God's will and purpose for Israel was to be carried forward. But Paul saw it as a conversion *to* a better, the correct understanding of that will and purpose for Israel. Apostle to the Gentiles, yes; but not thereby an *apostate from* Israel; rather an *apostle of* Israel, commissioned to carry forward Israel's destiny as 'a light to the nations'.¹⁶

Equally striking is Paul's handling of the original promise made to Abraham in Gen. 12.2-3 and repeated to Abraham and to the patriarchs regularly thereafter. The two most prominent strands of the promise were the promise of seed for Abraham, descendants from Abraham;¹⁷ and of land, the promised land, so prominent once again in the politics of modern Israel.¹⁸ Paul takes up both strands, in the slightly curious argument of Galatians 3 that the promise of 'seed' is fulfilled in and

¹⁴ 4QMMT can now be seen as a classic example, written with the explicit hope of persuading fellow Jews to accept and follow the rulings listed in the letter (C26-32).

¹⁵ See further K. O. Sandnes, *Paul – One of the Prophets?* (WUNT 2.43; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1991) ch. 5 (but he fails to bring out the 'to the nations' dimension integral to the call). The *aphorisas* ('set me apart') of Gal. 1.15 may also be a deliberate play on the word which gave the Pharisees their nickname (= 'separated ones'): his 'separatism' as a Pharisee in service of the law was replaced by his 'separation' to be an apostle in service of the gospel.

¹⁶ See further my 'Paul: Apostate or Apostle of Israel?', *ZNW* 89 (1998) 256-271.

¹⁷ Gen. 13.16; 15.5; 17.2-4, 19; 18.18; 22.17; 26.4.

¹⁸ Gen. 12.7; 13.14-17; 15.18-21; 17.8; 26.3.

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through Christ (Gal. 3.16), and in the parallel argument of Romans 4, where the promise of land is also expanded to the promise that Abraham ‘would inherit the world’ (Rom. 4.13).¹⁹ But here our interest is particularly in the way Paul takes up the *third* strand of the promise to Abraham, the covenant promise that ‘In you shall all the nations be blessed’.²⁰ This third strand is not much mused upon in Israel’s scriptures, though implied in the commissions of Jeremiah and the Servant to go to the nations, and in the story of the prophet Jonah.²¹ But Paul goes much further. Indeed, he describes the promise that the Gentiles will be blessed in Abraham as ‘the gospel preached beforehand’ (Gal. 3.8). Here it is clear that Paul identified the *gospel* as the good news of God’s covenant grace *extending to the Gentiles*. This he no doubt saw as an integral part of Israel’s commission. And clearly, from what Paul says in Galatians 3, he understood his own role as carrying forward precisely that agenda, God’s own agenda for *Israel*, the gospel for Gentiles as well as Jews.

The same point follows from what Paul says about his role as ‘apostle to the Gentiles’ in Rom. 9-11. For there he is clear that his role vis-à-vis the nations/Gentiles is part of God’s great scheme – the ‘mystery’ of the divine purpose – to extend mercy to *all*, not least, including Israel (11.13-15, 25-32).²²

In short, Paul would have strongly resisted the charge that historic Judaism has laid against him, that he was an ‘*apostate* from Israel’. To the contrary, Paul’s claim is in effect that he was not only an apostle of Christ Jesus, but also an ‘apostle of *Israel*’.²³ Sad to say, this self-claim, and claim for his apostleship and gospel, has not been adequately appreciated within historic Christianity and ignored within historic Judaism. On this point not least, Paul needs to be listened to afresh, and in his own terms.²⁴

2.6 Eschatological apostle

If we are to understand the first generation of Christianity adequately it is of crucial importance that we take into account the eschatological temper and perspective of the first believers. For they believed that in Jesus Messiah the new age had dawned – not just *a* new age, but the final age, the *eschaton* (= ‘last’) in which the ultimate promises of God and hopes for Israel would be realized. This conviction focused on two features:

- Jesus’ resurrection as the beginning of the general/final resurrection;²⁵
- and the soon-coming return of Jesus as manifestly Messiah and Lord (Acts 3.19-21).

¹⁹ Cf. Sir. 44.21; 2 Bar. 14.13; 51.3; see further my *Romans* 213.

²⁰ Gen. 12.3; 18.18; 22.18; 26.4. The Genesis texts can be variously understood (see e.g. G. J. Wenham, *Genesis* [WBC 1; Waco: Word, 1987] 277-8), but Paul’s interpretation is clear.

²¹ See further J. R. Wisdom, *Blessing for the Nations and the Curse of the Law: Paul’s citation of Genesis and Deuteronomy in Gal. 2.8-10* (WUNT 2.133; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001) 36-42.

²² See also A. J. Hultgren, ‘The Scriptural Foundations for Paul’s Mission to the Gentiles’, in S. E. Porter, ed., *Paul and His Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2006) 21-44.

²³ The case was pressed earlier, particularly by J. Munck, *Paul and the Salvation of Mankind* (London: SCM, 1959), and J. Jervell, *The Unknown Paul: Essays on Luke-Acts and Early Christian History* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984) chs. 3-4.

²⁴ See further my ‘Paul: Apostate or Apostle of Israel?’; also ‘The Jew Paul and his Meaning for Israel’, in U. Schnelle & T. Söding, eds., *Paulinische Christologie: Exegetische Beiträge*, H. Hübner FS (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000) 32-46; reprinted in T. Linafelt, ed., *A Shadow of Glory: Reading the New Testament after the Holocaust* (New York: Routledge, 2002) 201-15.

²⁵ Rom. 1.4; 1 Cor. 15.20, 23.

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Luke does not make much at all of this emphasis – presumably because Luke chose not to highlight the eschatological motivation, which we may assume to have been a factor in that expansion, beyond the echoes in old traditional forms that he took over (Acts 2.17; 3.19-21).

With Paul, however, we can see how this eschatological perspective shaped his understanding of his calling as an apostle – again, not from what Luke tells us of Paul, but from his own letters.

- He recalls how the Thessalonian believers had ‘turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to await his Son from the heavens’ (1 Thess. 1.9-10; as in Acts 3.19-21);
- He seems to have believed that he would still be alive when Jesus returned: ‘we who are alive, who are left until the coming (*parousia*) of the Lord . . .’ (1 Thess. 4.15); similarly, 1 Cor. 15.51: ‘we will not all die, but we will all be changed’;
- Christ’s resurrection was the ‘first-fruits of those who have died’, that is, the beginning of the (general/final) resurrection (1 Cor. 15.20, 23);
- He encouraged his converts in Corinth to refrain from marriage, because ‘the time is short’, ‘the form of this world is passing away’ (1 Cor. 7.29, 31);
- He believed that ‘the night is nearly over, and the day (of complete salvation) is near’ (Rom. 13.12).

That this perspective shaped Paul’s understanding of his apostleship²⁶ is clearest from three passages in particular:

(1) 1 Cor. 4.9:

it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display as the grand finale [*eschatous apedeixen*], as those doomed to die [*epithanatiou*], because we have been made a spectacle [*theatron*] in the eyes of the world, of angels, and of humankind (Thiselton).

Here Paul takes up ‘the metaphor of a great pageant, in which criminals, prisoners, or professional gladiators process to the gladiatorial ring, with the apostles bringing up the rear as those who must fight to the death’.²⁷ In other words, he conceives of the whole sweep of history, or of God’s programme for the world, as climaxing in the acts of the apostles. The apostles constitute the last act on the stage of cosmic history (watched also by angels). The imagery is somewhat vainglorious, though the imagery is hardly of a ‘stage triumph’. In the terms of the metaphor they have been ‘condemned to death’ (*epithanatiou*) in the eyes of the watching cosmos; their public execution would ‘bring the curtain down’ on the pageant of history.

(2) Rom. 11.13-15:

I am speaking to you Gentiles. So then, inasmuch as I am apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry, in the hope that I might provoke my kindred to jealousy, and might save some of them. For if their rejection means reconciliation for the world, what shall their acceptance mean other than life from the dead?

The point to note here is Paul’s hope and expectation for his apostolic ministry. He pressed forward with his mission to the Gentiles, not because he believed his own people had been cast off by God, and therefore had turned to the Gentiles in despair of his own people. Rather, his hope was that his success as apostle to the Gentiles would ‘provoke his kindred to jealousy’ and bring them to the faith which he preached. In Paul’s perspective that ‘acceptance’ by and of his own people would

²⁶ My interest in this aspect of Paul’s self-understanding goes back to A. Fridrichsen, *The Apostle and his Message* (Uppsala, 1947) – ‘this idea that an *apostolate* is to stand in the centre of the eschatologic development between the resurrection and return of the Messiah’ (4); O. Cullmann, *Christ and Time* (London: SCM, ³1962) 157-66; and Munck, *Paul* 36-55, though their interpretation was too heavily dependent on a very disputable interpretation of 2 Thess. 2.6-7.

²⁷ A. C. Thiselton, *1 Corinthians* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 359; see further W. Schrage, *1 Korinther* (EKK VII/4; Düsseldorf: Benziger, 2001) 1.340-2.

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mean something still more wonderful than ‘reconciliation for the world’. In fact, it would mean nothing less ‘than life from the dead’, that is, the final resurrection at the end of the age/history.²⁸ In other words, Paul hoped that his own mission would trigger the end events, including the coming of the deliverer out of Zion (11.26). That was why his mission had such overwhelming priority for him.

(3) Col. 1.24:

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake and I fill up what is lacking of the afflictions of the Christ in my flesh for the sake of his body, which is the church.

Here Paul, or his co-writer, probably takes up the imagery of Christ’s sufferings and death as the eschatological tribulation (commonly referred to as ‘the messianic woes’) expected as a crucial antecedent to the age to come.²⁹ Paul himself had no qualms about the thought of sharing Christ’s sufferings,³⁰ or indeed of himself in some measure fulfilling the role of the Servant of Yahweh. The logic of a suffering still being shared, of course, is of a suffering not yet ended, an incomplete suffering. The writer of Colossians, however, is bold enough to regard Paul’s apostolic sufferings as actually completing, ‘filling up’ this *hysterēma* (‘lack or deficiency’), with the corollary that the work of redemption/salvation would then be complete.³¹ Here again the claim smacks of a vainglorious exaltation of Paul’s role.³² But it is simply the most striking expression of Paul’s conviction regarding the importance of his apostolic mission. It was this last apostolic act on the stage of cosmic history which would complete God’s purpose in history and trigger ‘the consummation of all things’.

It is difficult for us who read such language nearly twenty centuries later – especially when neither the end of history nor the coming of Christ has taken place. It is difficult for us to enter with much sympathy into such a conception of Paul’s apostolic role. But we need to make the attempt, since it presumably provided much of the motivation and energy which brought about such major results and such lasting effects. Paul’s eschatology was integral to his sense of apostolic mission. At the same time, it should always be recalled that the decisive eschatological consideration for Paul was not what was still to happen, but what God had already done in and through Christ, particularly in raising him from the dead. That was the eschatological act which determined all else. ‘Paul’s gospel was eschatological not because of what he still hoped would happen, but because of what he believed had already happened’.³³

²⁸ ‘The eschatological force here is put beyond dispute by the *ek nekrōn*, which elsewhere always denotes resurrection. [And] the rhetorical structure demands that the final phrase should describe something which outstrips the earlier . . . ; here “life from the dead” presented as something more wonderful still than “reconciliation of the world” (Dunn, *Romans* 658; where I also note that most commentators agree that final resurrection is in view here); see further D. J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 694-6; B. Witherington, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) 269.

²⁹ For details see my *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) #11.4c and 395.

³⁰ Particularly Rom. 8.17; 2 Cor. 4.10-12; Phil 3.10-12; see further my *Theology of Paul* #18.5.

³¹ See further my *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 114-6; H. Stettler, ‘An Interpretation of Colossians 1:24 in the Framework of Paul’s Mission Theology’, in Ådna and Kvalbein, eds., *Mission of the Early Church* 185-208; J. L. Sumney, ‘“I Fill Up What is Lacking in the Afflictions of Christ”: Paul’s Vicarious Suffering in Colossians’, *CBQ* 68 (2006) 664-80.

³² ‘A theologically untenable glorification of the apostle by one of his followers’ (H. Hübner, *EDNT* 3.110); others in my *Colossians* 116.

³³ Dunn *Theology of Paul* 465.

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2.7 Apostate or apostle?

So our question about the status of Paul, ‘apostate or apostle’, can be answered so far as Paul’s (and Christianity’s) relation to Judaism (or Second Temple Judaism) is concerned. As Paul understood his mission he was no apostate from Israel. On the contrary, he was engaged in endeavouring to fulfil Israel’s own apostolic mission – to be a light to the nations, to proclaim the good news of God’s covenant love and, as we shall see, of God’s saving righteousness to Gentiles as well as Jews. As such he is an authentically Jewish voice, drawing his inspiration and motivation in large part from Israel’s own scriptures. He is a Jewish contributor to a Jewish debate – as to how Israel remains true to its gifts and calling. His voice has been almost wholly ignored within that debate. He is still predominantly regarded as an apostate from Israel. But in fact he is one of numerous other voices from Second Temple Judaism – also in that debate, also disputing among themselves and with one another. Paul deserves to be brought back into that debate and his voice heeded – argued with, no doubt, but not ignored.

But the question ‘apostate or apostle’ also has to be asked and answered within Christianity. For Paul seems to have moved on well beyond Jesus’ own message. He was an awkward voice within earliest Christianity, calling in question the mother church’s understanding of the gospel. In opening the door to the wider world he began a process of transforming an eschatological messianic sect into a predominantly non-Jewish religion. He was not one of Jesus’ own immediate circle of disciples, and his status as apostle was questioned from within infant Christianity itself. His claim to apostleship direct from Christ and independent from the mother Church of Christianity sets an uncomfortable precedent for similar claims in later years. Indeed it is arguable that Paul was only retained within the New Testament because it is the milder, more eirenic Paul of the Acts and the Pastoral epistles who was canonized, whereas the Paul of the earlier epistles was too controversial, too demanding for the Church’s peace of mind. If truth be told, Paul is an awkward and somewhat uncomfortable member of the New Testament canon. It is little wonder that many Christian traditions effectively ignore him. The Gospels provide all the material for our homilies that we could ever want. A homily on an early epistle of Paul is too demanding to contemplate.

And yet, what do we thereby miss? What do we miss by reading Paul only canonically, an ecclesiasticized Paul – that is, softening his awkwardness by reading him only through Acts and the Pastorals? Israel, I claim, by dismissing Paul as an apostate, may be missing those emphases of their own scriptures and tradition which inspired Paul. So today, in a similar way, by largely ignoring Paul, we may be ignoring the voice of the Spirit who inspired Paul. The diversity and tensions within the New Testament canon are what help to prevent us falling asleep and remaining content with the old ways, even when they are demonstrably failing to give effective voice to the gospel, even when they no longer express the vitality of mission. And here is where we need to listen again to Paul with new ears, to ask why his gospel was so effective, his mission so vital, and whether his gospel and mission can point the way forward for us and for the Church of the twenty-first century.