

Paul the Apostle

A Jew Confronts Caesar with the Cross of Jesus Christ, 1

“He ‘invented’ Christianity. He arrogantly took the religion of Jesus and turned it into a religion about Jesus, distorted Jewish biblical faith, and created a hoax. His authoritarian rants denigrated his opponents, derided Jews, and denied women the equality that Jesus demanded.”

These are only some of the charges brought against a first century Jew by the name of Paul, originally from what is now Turkey— an extraordinary traveler through the Mediterranean world and prodigious writer of letters. Others consider Paul a faithful interpreter of the message that the first followers of Jesus handed on to him, and more than that, that Paul himself received a direct revelation from the resurrected Jesus. And from him we get the clearest picture of what salvation through faith in Jesus Christ means, how it is accomplished, and what it requires.

We will look at the controversy that has swirled around Paul since his own lifetime to the present. We will consider the claims made about Paul and try to assess them using the tools of modern historical research. We will look at the core of his thought and trace how it changed over his life, ending in his execution by the man he hoped to convert, the Emperor of Rome, Caesar. And we will ask why he was executed. In this question we will discover perhaps the most surprising connection to the historical Jesus that virtually all commentators of the past didn't see, and that we only know now because of new methods of social and historical research. We will see that it made sense for Caesar to execute Paul, for Paul represented a kingdom that was diametrically opposed to almost everything that Caesar stood for. If Paul's message were true it would mean the end of the system of domination that Rome embodied.

No matter what one thinks about Paul and his writing, he is a giant, intellectually, spiritually, even poetically. His importance may be impossible to overstate, as there simply is no way to understand or account for the rise of Western civilization and Christianity around the world without coming to grips with the figure of Paul the Apostle.

Three Misunderstandings of Paul

1. He taught how a sinful individual can get to a heaven guarded by a righteous, angry God.
2. He invented a new religion called Christianity, whose teaching justified slavery, the oppression of women, unqualified obedience to tyranny, and promoted the hatred of Jews?
3. He was a prophet of the interior life who struggled with guilt and the fear of death and found freedom from anxiety through faith in Jesus Christ.

How to understand Paul: Understand the actual world in which he lived and worked

To understand Paul you must understand *the world in which he lived and worked, the people to whom he directed his activity, and the goal of his activity, what he hoped to achieve.*

The Old Approach: Disembodied, timeless religion

In the past we looked at Paul by himself, apart from his world, his audience, and what he hoped to achieve and found exactly what our assumptions created: a disembodied, a-historical, timeless question to which he gave a complicated theological answer. Our approach to Paul was as if he were not a person, but a theology professor who was consumed with one question: “How does a sinful person appease a holy, sinless God and get into heaven?” And for 2000 years theologians and scholars, preachers, and teachers have struggled to figure out Paul’s answer to that question. Tens of thousands of books or more have been written about it. Entire denominations were created by differing answers to that question. The 16th Century Reformation itself was shaped by the debate about what did Paul mean. But, after all that, is he really that hard to understand?

A Traveling Salesman and Letter Writer: Were his readers theologians and philosophers?

Going from city to city earning his living selling awnings for shops and buildings, Paul wrote short to medium-long letters to the groups of people he’d taught in the churches he’d started or had some concern for. These were ordinary people, not scholars. Most were uneducated.

Paul was on the move constantly, traveling from one major Roman city to another. He was either fleeing persecution or heading into more persecution. He was either making and selling awnings or he was preaching and teaching. He was either meeting in one of the “shop-churches” (probably not that many “house-churches, except where there were wealthy converts) in a large Roman city, or he was in prison. When he wasn’t teaching, preaching, debating, working, or traveling he was writing letters to the gatherings of new believers in the Way of Jesus. His letters were as short as a single page to as long as 14-15 of our pages; they averaged about 4-5 pages.

How is it possible that Paul could have been understood by the people to whom he sent the letters if the greatest minds in the last 2000 years— we’re talking Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Wesley— and more, have not been able to agree on what those letters say? Have you ever seen a commentary on the letter Paul wrote to the Romans? Few of them are under 400 pages.

Why is there still so much disagreement over what Paul meant?

After the tens of thousands of books about Paul, and the tens of thousands of books about the theologians who’ve tried to understand Paul, and the theologians who tried to understand those theologians, how on earth did Phoebe, the woman to whom Paul entrusted the letter to the Romans, and who had to explain it to the Roman churches, get it? (*Romans 16:1*)

Assumptions in the New Perspective on Paul

What I am sharing with you is new, not with me, but is the result of the best historical scholarship of the last 25-30 years. It is now the mainstream view of most New Testament scholars and those who study Roman history. And it begins with this one underlying assumption: You can only understand Paul by understanding *the world in which he lived, the people to whom he was sent, and the goal of his work, that is, what he hoped would result from his work and God's action*. All attempts to understand Paul that do not start with the actual circumstances of his life, his audience, and his hope are doomed to fail for they lift Paul's writing out of its context, as if the circumstances he was writing about are unimportant. They turn the man into a set of timeless religious principles. Instead, informed by this assumption, we approach Paul by understanding

- the *actual circumstances* of his life as a Jewish missionary in an overwhelming hostile Roman Empire,
- his *audience of Gentiles* attracted to Jewish religion and way of life
- and his *hope* that God was going to *fulfill the promise given to Abraham* that all the nations of the world would be blessed through the Jews, that God's raising Jesus from the dead was vindication of Jesus' message and life, and that Jesus was going to return and fulfill that promise very soon.
- This hope and expectation led Paul into *an anti-Empire, anti-Caesar movement*—considered at the time a conspiracy— that had a wide-ranging network throughout the Empire, stretching from West Asia to the capitol city, Rome, itself. This movement, conspiracy, if you will, eventually transformed the greatest, most powerful Empire in history.
- Paul didn't die by accident. He was *arrested and executed* for the same reason that Jesus was arrested and executed: *he was identified as a threat to Imperial order, thus a threat to Roman Peace, Roman Salvation, and Roman Justice*.

Paul's Worlds

Paul lived in two worlds simultaneously, two worlds in mortal combat. Only one would survive.

1. the world of Jewish faith, grievance, and expectation, and
2. the world of Roman Imperial power.

Two Worlds, Two Stories

Paul's Jewish world was the Shammaite Pharisee movement. It had a story of creation and fall, slavery and liberation, destruction and exile, and final vindication when God will defeat all Israel's enemies, raises the righteous dead, with Israel's kingship restored by a "Messiah" to rule all the nations of the world in peace and justice.

Paul's other world, his Roman world began with almost universal acclaim for Caesar embodied in the fast-spreading religion of Caesar worship. Caesar worship was the fastest-growing religion in the world at that time, and the first truly universal religion. It, too, had a story of creation and fall, destruction and disorder caused by unending war and injustice, and final vindication through military victory that brought salvation (peace, justice, and prosperity) to all peoples.

The tension between those two worlds must have created unbearable conflict, not just in the life of Paul, but also among his fellow Jews and the Gentiles to whom he was sent.

Key Words in Conflict: Rome's Gospel vs Paul's Gospel (see Keywords handout)

In his letter to the Romans, Paul's threat to Roman power, embodied in Caesar worship – your civic duty if you lived in the Roman Empire – was delivered to the very center of Roman Power: *See Romans 1:1-17; 15:7-13*

To Repeat and Look Forward

1. Paul can only be understood by understanding his social, political, religious environment.
2. Paul was not a Christian. He did not create Christianity. As a follower of Jesus, he was a Jew.
3. Paul demanded equality between men and women, slave and free, Gentile and Jew as a sign of the Kingdom shortly to be ushered in by Jesus Christ. *cf. Rom 15:7-13*

In these sessions we will see that far from being the originator of Christianity, turning the religion *of Jesus* into a religion *about Jesus*, Paul is very much in line *with Jesus*, a faithful interpreter and follower of Jesus. The decisive demonstration of that connection is that Paul was executed by Rome for the same reason as Jesus; it was because of what bound him to Jesus that he was executed.

Paul is accused of denigrating, even hating women, supporting slavery, and hating Jews and Judaism. We will see that these accusations are false and that, in fact, the exact opposite is true: Paul was thoroughly egalitarian and to his last breath a devout Jew looking for and working for the redemption of Israel. However, we will see how the generation after Paul took a very different view and tried to reverse Paul's efforts, more in line with the dominant Roman social and political values that Paul, following Jesus, abhorred. *cf. 1 Timothy, Titus.*