

## **Paul's Background and World, Session 2**

### **Shammaite Phariseeism as opposed to Hillel Phariseeism, the Saducees, and the Zealots.**

#### **Two Kinds of Pharisees**

**Shammai** was a Pharisee and a teacher of the Israelite law. He and his followers, called Shammaite Pharisees, were the most rigorous of the main Jewish non-monastic groups at the time of Jesus and Paul. *They had a concern for purity, demanded Temple Reform, strict observance of the Law, all 613 codes.*

**Hillel and Jesus** taught a different understanding of Law. Jesus differed from Hillel in that Jesus taught about the coming Reign of God that would upend all earthly reigns, all political systems. The Reign of God, as Jesus taught it, was a restatement of the Hebrew Prophets, especially Jeremiah, whom Jesus quotes when he throws over the tables of the money-changers in the Temple. Jesus is calling for people to begin living the values of the coming Reign right now as part of becoming his disciple. The new values are *equality, taking care of the sick, the indigent, widows, and orphans, and the immigrants— all people who are despised and powerless in the current Roman-Jewish political and economic system.* The purpose of the Law could be summed up in one sentence: *love your neighbor as yourself, and that love fulfills the demands of the law.*

#### **Shammaites and Saducees**

This message put him on a collision course with two powerful groups in Israel: the Shammaite pharisees and the Saducees. The Shammaites taught that the Law must be fulfilled in literal terms, not the loose terms of Jesus who seemed to them to denigrate the Law. The Saducees, were the other powerful group in Israel, especially in Jerusalem, as the Saducees ran the Temple, organized the priests, controlled the sacrifices, and collaborated with the Roman governor.

Normally, Pharisees and Saducees hated one another, but Shammaite Pharisees shared one thing in common with the Saducees, whom they did mostly revile. They both came from wealthy land-owning families of Jews.

#### **Zealots and Shammaites**

There is a third group that is important to understand— the Zealots. The Zealots were an underground revolutionary movement that had been building over the previous 60 years. They were responsible for the deaths of many Roman soldiers and Jews they claimed were collaborators with the Romans, especially tax collectors. The Zealots and the Shammaites shared a common passion: to rid Israel of the pagan, unclean Roman presence, cleanse the Temple of its corruption and control by Rome and create an Israel that was pure and holy under the Law of Moses.

The Zealots, though, had armies and weapons and unstoppable courage. And a fierce and burning hatred of foreigners. They were the ones responsible for the ongoing Jewish-Roman wars that broke out shortly after Jesus execution, that resulted in the destruction of the Temple and finally the total destruction of Jerusalem, the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of Jews, and the expulsion of all Jews from Palestine. The Zealots and the Shammaite Pharisees believed

in the coming Reign of God which would defeat all Israel's enemies through slaughter, purify the land through total obedience to the Law of Moses, and establish a permanent theocracy in Jerusalem.

By the time of Jesus' arrest, Shammaites controlled the Sanhedrin and the Saducees controlled the Temple, the two most important institutions for the Jews. And the two groups possibly conspired to hand Jesus over to the Romans. We know that some Pharisees were friendly toward Jesus, probably the Hillel faction, and even tried to warn Jesus about danger from the authorities. The Shammaites were close to the Zealots, on one side, and close to those whom the Zealots hated, the Saducees, on the other. They were united with Zealots in zeal for the purity of the land in obedience to the Law and opposed to the Saducees for those reasons. Yet they were united with the Saducees because of their desire for power in Jerusalem and their shared economic interests that were threatened by the Zealots.

But they all hated Jesus. The Saducees because Jesus preached against Temple corruption and the increasing economic injustice of society. The Shammaite Pharisees because Jesus was too liberal toward observance of the Law. And the Zealots, who despised Jesus as a false revolutionary, who was all talk about the coming of God's Reign, but ate with tax collectors, had one in his closest circle of disciples, and opposed violence on behalf of God's people.

With such forces against him, Jesus was doomed. He was arrested and summarily executed by crucifixion to prove that Roman power was superior to any other power, that the Roman Emperor in whose name Jesus was executed was truly God, and that Jesus and his message were consigned for the dustbin of history.

### **Two Years Later**

Now, perhaps two years later, a Shammaite Pharisee named Saul has heard the claim that Jesus has appeared alive to his disciples, his family, and to at least 500 others. More than that, Jesus' followers are claiming that God is at last fulfilling the promises given to Abraham, David and the prophets that all the peoples of the earth would be united under a Jew Anointed by God. And who is this Jew anointed by God? A Galilean Jew that everyone in Jerusalem saw scorned, humiliated, and tortured to death by the Romans. This Jesus, the false rabbi who encouraged people to break the law was being hailed by some Jews as God's agent to conquer the world's empires. Saul was furious. He must have been a Zealot without the dagger.

In rage he did everything he could to stamp out this heretical movement of Jews for the sake of purity of God's law given to Moses and the true meaning of the Reign of God as the Reign of Jerusalem over all the world, where there would be justice and peace under a Jewish Anointed King.

How did Saul the Shammaite zealot go from being the most hated opponent to the greatest proponent of the good news that God has acted to change the world through Jesus the crucified?

We have two accounts of the cause of Paul's transformation. One account is given by Luke in the second volume of his two-volume work, called the Acts of the Apostles. It is a sequel to his

earlier work we today call the Gospel According to Luke. The other account is given by Saul himself, who we know by his Greek name, Paul.

Luke's account, found in Acts 9:1-8 and repeated with some changes in Acts 22:4-16 and Acts 26:12-18 indicates that Paul saw a brilliant light and heard a voice. Well, what sort of experience is that? Did Paul see what Peter and John and Mary and James, the brother of Jesus, saw? Not hardly. Luke's own account in his Gospel tell of Jesus appearing to his disciple in some type of bodily form, not a typical physical body, but something like it. On the other hand, Luke tells us that all Paul got was a sound and light show. Hardly enough to put one in the same category with the disciples. And yet, that is what history seems to tell us, that Paul was seen by even his opponents as having authority similar to that of Jesus disciples, which, of course Paul had not been. And that is the basis of everything Paul does as a missionary and everything he writes to the churches he prays for. He is an Apostle, one who is sent by the Lord, that is, sent by the resurrected Jesus of Nazareth, now called the Anointed One, or the Messiah, or in Greek, the Christ.

Look at Paul's own account of the event that caused his transformation. You can find it in his letters:

1“Paul an **apostle**—**sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ** and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—”

11 For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is **not of human origin**; 12for I **did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it**, but I received it through a **revelation of Jesus Christ**. Gal. 1:1, 11- 12

“Am I not free? Am I not an **apostle**? Have I not **seen Jesus our Lord**?” 1 Cor 9:1

“For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, 4and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, 5and that he appeared to **Cephas**, then to **the twelve**. 6Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. 7Then he appeared to **James**, then to **all the apostles**. 8Last of all, as to someone untimely born, **he appeared also to me**. 9For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.” 1 Cor 15:3-11

Note how in 1 Cor 15, vss 3-8 the appearance narrative is formulaic. It is a piece of sacred story that is repeated over and over to point where it takes on a rather rigid form, like, for example, the Lord's Prayer. No matter how its translated, its form does not change. The appearance narrative starts with Cephas (Peter), goes to the rest of the twelve, then to the wider circle of believers, then to James, the Lord's brother. When we get to vs 8 (of course, there were no verse numbers in Paul's letters. They were added long after Paul was gone) an audacious claim is made. Paul is including himself in the list of those to whom Jesus appeared in some sort of bodily form. This claim would be scandalous and would utterly destroy Paul's authority and credibility if the leaders in Jerusalem and Antioch were to hear of it and it were not true.

By this time the term apostle had become essentially a technical term for a person who both saw the resurrected Jesus bodily (in other words, not an apparition or vision) and who was commissioned by Jesus to a task. So, every time Paul calls himself an apostle, usually because of his opponents challenging his teaching, Paul is reminding his readers that he had actually seen the resurrected Jesus. That was the basis of his authority.

Luke, writing a generation later, seems to downplay Paul's status. He's second to Barnabus, for example, who is sort of his mentor, according to Luke, and Barnabus is not an apostle, that is, he is not known for having seen the resurrected Jesus.

So, most historians side with Paul when his account and Luke's disagree on details. And this makes sense because much of Paul's teaching doesn't make sense without his having seen the resurrected body of Jesus. For example, one of the most important chapters in the New Testament is in 1 Cor 15 where Paul talks about the resurrection of the dead, the resurrection of dead believers in Christ. The entire discussion presupposes some sort of visual experience that Paul had that would give him insight into what a resurrected body would be like. Furthermore, it is unlikely, that a mere mystical experience of light and sound would be enough to so totally transform Paul from being a Shammaite Pharisee to being an apostle of a crucified rabbi who had played fast and loose with law of Moses. Paul had certainly had mystical experiences before the Road to Damascus, and we know he continued to have them throughout his life. It wasn't a mystical experience, but the very real presence of the resurrected rabbi of Galilee, the one who had been executed by Rome.

After this powerful transforming experience through which Paul was commissioned to take the good news of Jesus Christ inaugurating the Reign of God through the whole earth, to whom was he sent? And why would this message of God's promises to raise up the poor and despised of the earth, to unite all the peoples into one household, one family under the reign of a Jewish Anointed One be a message that his audience would want to hear?

### **Who was Paul's audience, to whom was he sent?**

“5But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, 17nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus” Gal 1: 15-17

Paul was commissioned to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to the gentile world. He chose to do so by going to the urban working class of the major Roman capital cities. It made sense, because that's what he was, even though he was learned. He was an awning maker who could travel with his trade, set up in any city and make a living. He would perhaps find a shop and work for a local business. We know that he worked with and possibly for Prisca and Aquila who also were awning makers. Through his work he would immediately be immersed in networks of urban working class gentiles in the big cities of the Empire. Who are these people, the “urban working class?” What do we know of them?

First, of course, they lived in cities. What were the cities like in which Paul brought his gospel?

Take Antioch of Syria, where he first encounters his new community of Jewish followers of Jesus and perhaps meets his first gentile believers. It is a city of 150,000. 2 square miles in size.

Cities were small in size because to be a city meant to have a wall surrounding it. Building walls is expensive, so cities remained small in geographic size no matter how populous it became. Making matters worse, in the Roman capitol cities, as much as 40% of the land went to public buildings, mostly for temples for worship of the local gods, and especially temples for the worship of Caesar, but also buildings for public office holders and politicians, libraries, schools, amphitheaters, zoos, and the like. Another few percent of land were devoted to the magnificent villas of the wealthy.

Only a little more than half of the space of a city was available for the urban working class and poor.

So, for example, Antioch of Syria, where the Jews following Jesus now include Paul, had an area for housing of only a little more than a square mile. That means the majority of the population of 150,000 lived in a very crowded part of town. The world's densest city today is probably Mumbai or Bombay, India. It has the almost unimaginable density of about 75,000 people per square mile. Compare that to Brookline, for instance, that has an area of just under 7 square miles and a population of about 58,000. That gives Brookline around 8500 people per square mile. Compare that to Boston which has about 12,000 people per square mile.

What was the population density of the section of Antioch where most of the people lived, the people among whom is carrying out his ministry? Probably over 100,000 people per square mile!

Most lived in tenements (insulae) of three to five stories made of stone and concrete. Apartment buildings in Rome outnumbered single-family dwellings by a ratio of 26:1. Most only had a single room for an entire family of perhaps five or six members. There might be a latrine, usually a cesspit that had to be cleaned out by hand, on the ground floor, but not above. Instead there would be chamberpots that got dumped out the window to fall on the street below. A typical street in the neighborhoods was teeming with raw sewage, millions of flies and mosquitoes and wild dogs, cats, mice, and rats.

In Rome, aqueducts channeled thousands of gallons of fresh water into the city each day, supplying hundreds of public water-basins and bathing establishments throughout the city. For a nominal fee average Romans could refresh themselves at a large imperial bath building (thermae) –like the Baths of Caracalla\_ or a small privately owned neighborhood establishment (balnea). The Romans associated the baths with hygiene and health, and the place to encounter the gods--Asclepius (the god of healing) and his daughter Hygeia (Good Health) were to be found in the baths. In or near the baths there would be a public latrine that could take 10 to 20 people at a time with no privacy. Underneath the seats a channel of water ran to remove the waste and then you could pay to use a toilet sponge to clean up, hoping the attendant had rinsed off most of the material from the previous user.

The stench must have been over-powering, especially in the summer months. In fact, in Rome, the period between July and October was the deadliest time of year, with over 30,000 people dying during that time each year, mostly of typhus, tuberculosis, malaria, and diarrhea. Children and pregnant and nursing women were at special risk. The chance of a child living past ten was not high.

With such high death rates why weren't the cities depopulated? Because every day thousands of new immigrants were coming into the cities. Many had been farmers on their family plots that had been in the family or clan for generations, but they were being driven off by the new economy and its masters. For the first time land had become a commodity; the value of farmland was no longer what it meant to the people, their identity, their history, and their means of livelihood. Now the value of land was seen in terms of price. So land could be bought and sold, used as credit for loans or to pay off debts. It was easy to fall into debt. If you had a bad harvest you might have to borrow money to buy seed at high interest rates that you could never pay off. That would be enough for you to lose your land. In fact, this was the reality for many of the people in the villages and small towns in which Jesus ministered.

As these new people poured into the great cities of the Roman Empire, they were usually without friends, sometimes without family and easy prey for swindlers, thieves, and corrupt officials. Because of the poor nutrition and appalling sanitary conditions, the death rate for new-comers was high. Families were decimated. Husbands lost wives, wives lost husbands, children lost their parents and parents watched as their children died.

When newcomers arrived in the city, they would naturally seek out people from their own village, town, or ethnic group, or at least people who might have spoken the same language and worshiped the same gods. There would be terrible rivalries among ethnic groups for places to sleep, places to work, even which market to go to. There would be fights over the monthly grain distribution that provided the primary source of nutrition for 95% of any Roman city. Fighting and bribery, threats and grudges were the order of daily life. Hobbes might have been referring to 1st Century Roman cities when he described life as "nasty, brutish, and short."

Paul's audience was made up of people who lived in these circumstances, often unhappily, but preferring urban life with the chance of getting a job and feeding a family to death from hunger in their former villages. What kinds of work did they do? Here's a list of typical occupations of the urban classes from Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan from their book, *The First Paul*:

*drivers of ox and donkey carts, pullers of carts, porters, cleaners, custodians of public buildings, bathhouse attendants, construction workers, bricklayers, masons, carpenters, tanners, butchers, bakers, spinners, weavers, makers and sellers of fabric, leather, pottery and workers in wood, stone, gold and silver. They are artisans and traders, small entrepreneurs and shop-keepers and day-laborers (p. 82)*

Examine that list of jobs. In virtually every one the chance of accident and injury are very high, especially for men in the mines and in, jobs that required heavy labor or work around dangerous materials, like molten material— iron, gold, silver, copper and lead. Women worked as maids, janitors, bath attendants, latrine attendants, mid-wives, wet-nurses for the wealthy, and in their

own or for others businesses. When they worked for others they were hardly better than slaves, and in some ways worse off. Rome's major industry, apart from warfare, was mining the stone and marble out of which the great public buildings were constructed. While much of the worst work was done by slaves, freed slaves, day-laborers, and others without particular skills also worked there. The injury and death rate for such occupations was high and if you were injured, it was up to your family to take care of you. Within very little time your whole family might become destitute and reduced to begging on the streets, turning to crime and prostitution. If you didn't have a family, you didn't survive at all.

When you died, if you were well-off and had joined a burial society and paid all your fees, you were cremated and put into a jar and stored in a crypt in a Columbarium outside the city. There would be paid women who marched in your funeral procession to mourn your passing and to bring you to your final resting place where there would be an epitaph reminding the world who you were. The worst thing that could happen to a person was to die anonymously, for your life was bound up in those who remembered you. If there was no one, you were no one.

So, what happened if you were not wealthy? Most working class people in the great cities had little hope of being remembered. Many did die anonymously, their bodies, like the bodies of slaves essentially thrown out with the trash. They might be found and carried to a big common pit, like a garbage dump, and burned without ceremony or care.

Such is the world and the people who first heard Paul's message of a loving God who calls all people into a single family in the name of a crucified Roman convict whose own message was one of love and justice for the poor.

For next week, please read Philemon and 1Cor 12-14 and ask how these passages might sound to the people we've just described, above.