

## Chapter 6

### Paul Sent to the Nations

“Unless we learn to think within first-century categories rather than medieval ones, we will never understand either the ancient Jewish world or Paul.”<sup>1</sup>

“One of the central arguments of this whole book, after all, is that Paul remained stubbornly and intentionally a deeply Jewish thinker.”<sup>2</sup>

“I am quite confident that Christianity will survive a completely Jewish Paul, just as it evidently survived a completely Jewish Jesus.”<sup>3</sup>

#### ***6.1 Paul Was Always a Jew: Seeing Muggles In God’s Story***

The story of Harry Potter begins on the eve of his 10<sup>th</sup> birthday when a letter of acceptance came from Hogwart’s School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. The only problem is that his Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia destroyed that first acceptance letter and all the others that followed on subsequent days. Finally, Uncle Vernon, in a desperate attempt to find a place where no letters could possibly be sent, escaped with the whole family to a cold miserable cabin on an isolated island. Then in the middle of their first night in a dark freezing cabin came the thundering presence of Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwart. Hagrid knocked down the door to that ramshackled cabin in order to personally deliver the invitation to Harry. That evening Hagrid told Harry that he was a wizard, and not a *muggle*, but Harry had never even heard the word “*muggle*.” Hagrid was looking at Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia when he explained,

“A Muggle...it’s what we call nonmagic folk like them. An’ it’s your bad luck you grew up in a family o’ the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on.”

The division between Muggles and Wizards is relevant to understanding Paul because it didn’t ever matter in the Harry Potter world where a Muggle lived, what language they spoke, or what was their race. From the wizard perspective, *all who weren’t wizards were Muggles*. They were defined simply as those who couldn’t do magic. The term was invented by the author, J.K. Rowling, based on the English word “mug” which meant “someone who is easily fooled.”<sup>4</sup> Paul didn’t know anything about Muggles, but it is a good way for us to understand the *binary nature of Paul’s world*.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Wright, N.T., 2015, 115.

<sup>2</sup> Wright, N.T., 2013, 1408.

<sup>3</sup> Zetterholm, Magnus, 2015, 34.

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/american-word-for-muggle\\_us\\_563a6b29e4b0b24aee489e20](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/american-word-for-muggle_us_563a6b29e4b0b24aee489e20)

<sup>5</sup> The reader should understand this wizard/muggle metaphor isn’t found in of the scholarly works that I have read. With a wider audience in mind I needed a way to explain the problem we have with the Greek word for nations (*ethné*).

Just as Harry Potter’s world had a sharp division between Wizards and Muggles, Paul was molded into the mindset of a Jewish heritage knowing and believing that Jews were different from all *others* in the world—or what is wrongly translated in most of our Bibles, as “Gentiles.” The Greek word *ethné* in most bibles is translated as “*gentiles*”. *Ethné* can easily be translated in its plural form as meaning “*nations*”, even though our concept regarding national governments was not operative in the first century. Ethnic identity thought as marked by language, dress, customs, story, and history was operative then as it is today.

This is clearly the picture we are given in the Acts account of Holy Spirit descending on the gathered followers of Jesus on the Day of Pentecost:

<sup>5</sup>Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. <sup>6</sup>And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. <sup>7</sup>Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? <sup>8</sup>And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? <sup>9</sup>Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, <sup>10</sup>Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, <sup>11</sup>Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” Acts 2:5-11

A further consideration regarding the problem of defining “*ethné*” as “Gentiles” is that wasn’t the way imperial Rome described the “*others*” in their world. It is one thing just to declare how different your people are from all others, but it is an entirely different matter if your sense of superiority leads you to claim dominance over all *others*. This is where we find Roman presumptions about the world.

Imperial Rome saw all of the other tribes and people who they had already conquered or those who lived in lands they hadn’t conquered as *inferior* to the race of Romans. In a number of different contexts, in the years preceding Paul and during his time, Caesar used the word “*ethné*” to declare he was the rightful ruler of the “peoples of the earth.”<sup>6</sup> Generally there was little respect in that first century world for anyone who didn’t belong to your tribe or speak your language. The Romans uniquely acted on that assumption with the power of their military might. That power, in a way unique to this story about Paul, would be challenged by a man called “Small.”

Earlier in Chapter 2 I discussed the possibility that Paul’s first Jewish name was Saul, and then in *a story lost to history* it became Paul. While we can only guess at what happened with his name change, we have more to work with in regard to Paul’s identity as an *apostolos*, literally as “one sent.” Prior to being an “*apostolos*,” though, he had to be called. He wasn’t the only one called! The Greek verb *kaleo* (*to call*) belonged, in Paul’s

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<sup>6</sup> Elliot, 2008, 99.

eyes, to all in the communities he founded. They were *ekklesia*<sup>7</sup>. It's a compound word in Greek. *Ek* means "out, from" while *klesia* means *called*. In order to understand Paul in relationship to the communities of faith he started we must emphasize the word "*called*," which is so frequent in his letters, was evocative of Paul's story, to be sure, but over and over he saw every believer as *called*. It was an *act* of God, through the Holy Spirit, best captured, perhaps, in the opening to 1 Corinthians:

"To the *ekklesia* of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called (*kletois*) to be saints, together with those who in every place call (*epikaloumevos*) on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours." (1 Cor. 1:2)

Various parts of the Greek word "*kletis*"<sup>8</sup> or *calling* act as the glue that holds that passage together. It just confuses things to translate *ekklesia* as *church*, which is common in most English translations, in part because the word "church" is singular, while the Greek itself can be both singular and plural. In addition what happened to Paul, "called to be an *envoy*," (*kletos apostolos*), is the story the Corinthians were sharing him.

To give Paul the title *envoy* instead of *Apostle* is contrary to nearly everything we read about Paul. Over and over he used the term *apostolos* to describe himself. Should we not do the same? Isn't it the best thing to be called an *Apostle*? A careful look at the way Paul actually used that title though is revealing of something probably basic to the more radical understanding of Paul that is found in my research.

We need to pay attention to the way Paul introduces himself in some of his letters, because on two occasions he begins by calling himself a *slave* first. To be sure many of our English translations use the word *servant* but the Greek is *doulos*, the word for a slave.

Paul and Timothy, slaves of Christ Jesus (Philippians 1:1)

Paul, slave of Jesus Messiah, called to be an *apostolos*, set apart for the gospel of God. (Romans 1:1)

I'm indebted to Bernard Brandon Scott for pointing out how jarring the introduction of Romans must have been to those who received that letter. Paul was writing, after all, to "God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints." (Rom. 1:7) but he called himself a *slave!*

What needs to catch our eye in these two introductions, and what should shock us, is Paul's reference to himself as well as Timothy as "slaves of Christ Jesus." A slave is a term I am taking very seriously in this book about finding Paul. Paul aligns himself with the most marginal in his world whose lives hardly matter. Even more significant for our

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<sup>7</sup> The reader will recall the discussion in the Introduction regarding the problem we have if we translate the word "ekklesia" with "church."

<sup>8</sup> The noun.

understanding of Paul's surprising self-identification of himself as slave is the knowledge people in Rome had to understand regarding the claims of the Roman Empire with laws that "...provided a basis for the ideology that justified Rome's rule as a universal slave master."<sup>9</sup>

As we take Paul's claim to be a "slave of Christ" seriously we also need to understand the revolutionary character of his understanding of a community shaped by faith in Christ. It meant laying aside all the usual aspects of ethnic and gender prejudice so common in his world. We will have occasion throughout this account to reflect on his stunning declaration in his letter to the Galatians:

"There is no longer Jew nor Greek, there is not longer slave nor free, there is no longer male nor female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

I was reminded by Christopher D. Stanley that Paul wasn't distinguishing Jews from Gentiles. He had real Greeks in mind!<sup>10</sup> Paul's ministry, up until he intended to go to Rome, had been in primarily Greek cities, or at least those with Greek rulers in extremely diverse multi-ethnic cities. Paul's vision of a new society without the usual hierarchical and patriarchal differences had to be the cause of much conflict and persecution he and his followers experienced in a world just as conflicted as ours is by similar conflicts. Particularly galling had to be Paul's inclusion of slaves as equal members of this new family defined by faith in Christ.

Slaves in Paul's world were living in what the Romans called "a suspended state of death." They deserved to die, but for the time being, could live. Lest any caused the least bit of trouble, or did something clearly criminal, they knew their fate. Their lives didn't matter. The Romans were ready to crucify any slave in order to warn all slaves what might happen to them were they found in the wrong. As a consequence of this terrible form of the death penalty, the scholar Bryant noted, "The possibility of death by crucifixion created an unimaginable anxiety among slaves."<sup>11</sup>

Going back to the way Paul introduced himself to the Philippians and the Romans we have a "slave of Christ" who is an *apostolos*. Rather than simply using the title "Apostle" at this point I am following the lead of Scott to call Paul an *envoy*, a term which heightens the tension: for what is with Paul's God entrusting him, a slave, as an envoy with a life and death message to the nations? It is his vulnerability and his downward mobility, shaping his story in the image of Christ crucified, that will allow us to retrieve a truer picture of Paul in contrast to the more traditional stories that have distorted what we actually can find in his letters. So he said he was a "slave of Christ" and an *envoy*. Basic to his story was that he was *called* by God.

From this point on I will be referring to Paul as the *envoy* sent to the *nations*. In some

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<sup>9</sup> Bryant, 2016, 20.

<sup>10</sup> Stanley, 1996, 123.

<sup>11</sup> Bryant, 2016, 48.

instances it seems better to simply use the Greek word for nations which is *ethné*. In some places it also made sense to simply refer to “*others*” as that is a more common way we all have about talking about those who are not like us. Paul, as you will see, seemed to have an affinity for those *others*!

An argument further reinforcing a refusal to translate *ethné* as *gentiles* comes from a journal article by James La Grand regarding the problem with the term. The roots of the word *gentile* coming from the Latin root (*gens/gentilis*) was really a homonym—a word with opposite meanings. On the one hand the word can mean *noble, decent, or kind*. On the other hand the word means *heathen, pagan, non-Jew*. What needs to be particularly troubling is that in the context of the New Testament and in all the English translations that use “gentiles” instead of nations the meaning is on a whole series of negatives: “non-Israelite, non-Jew, non-Christian, heathen, pagan, unbeliever.”<sup>12</sup> Seeing Paul as sent to the *nations* helps frame his mission in a much more positive light. It also meant that Paul could see Israel as one of the nations in the context of his calling.<sup>13</sup>

What happens when this *calling* of Paul is understood as *vocation*, which comes, appropriately, from the Latin word “to call”? What may be missing, though, from our sense of vocation, is what the philosopher Agamben notes is *revocation*. “*The messianic vocation is the revocation of every vocation.*”<sup>14</sup> This is the hidden story actually found in the opening of Romans where Paul described himself as one “set apart for the gospel of God.” (Rom. 1.1) The Greek word for “set apart” in the past participle form found there is “*aphorismenos*.” It means separated. This is the Greek word that translated the Hebrew word “*parush*” which is the source for *Pharisee*, namely someone who lived their life in a separate way from others. That was true for most Jews living in the diaspora, even though in their daily lives they constantly encountered people they considered as *others*.

In this chapter I am trying to correct many of the assumptions Christians were taught to believe about Judaism. What I will keep repeating throughout is that Paul (along with Jesus) were Jews. What they knew was that Jews were a minority in the Roman empire. To be sure, as Sanders emphasizes Jews did practice *separatism* and within Judaism it involved *pride*.<sup>15</sup> It did not mean, however, misanthropy which is the hatred of humanity, or others.<sup>16</sup> We know from Isaiah, for example, that Isaiah was to be as a light to the nations. (Is. 49.6)

What needs to be realized with regard to the opening of Romans, is that Paul was saying that he was essentially separated *from his past* in which he had been separated from *others*. Now in a complete reversal, as we shall see, he embraces the formerly “*others*” as his brothers and sisters in Christ. The little verb *called* in the opening verse of 1 Corinthians spoke volumes about the way Paul realized how his life in the shadow of

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<sup>12</sup> LaGrand, 1996, 80.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 84.

<sup>14</sup> Agamben, G., 2005, 23 (Italics in the original.)

<sup>15</sup> Sanders, 2016, 300.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 302.

Jesus Messiah was to be lived, and even more importantly for how he was to live that story with *others*—those others he may have despised or avoided as part of his life prior to being *called*.

The other factor at work in Paul’s story of *being called to be an envoy of Jesus Messiah* regards what Horrell described as “...the construction of an always vulnerable social identity...”<sup>17</sup> Using Paul’s own words he went from being a “Hebrew born of Hebrews” (Phil. 3:5) to “being all things to all people.” (1 Cor. 9:22) This wasn’t the Paul who earlier had sought to persecute those Jews declaring that Jesus had risen from the dead and was the Messiah. In that part of his life his identity as a Pharisee protecting Judaism was clear. He had changed. Certainty about Jesus as Messiah led him to see all others, especially *ethné* in a whole new light. He was inviting all people to share in a new *vulnerable social identity* Paul experienced and celebrated as one who was *in Christ*.

## 6.2 What did Paul’s claim to be a Pharisee mean?

Both Paul (in Phlippians) and Acts agree that he was a Pharisee. But what was a Pharisee and is Acts correct that he became one by studying in Jerusalem? We need to begin with what Paul said about his Pharisaic past:

“If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee...” Philippians 3:4-5

We don’t learn much about Paul’s Pharisaic past from his own words, except for that fact that he wasn’t ashamed of it. It was something he was proud about. He had a kind of Ivy League education. We just cannot get much of a picture of a Pharisee in the first century from this brief biographical description. We need to look elsewhere.

If we look to New Testament synoptic gospels for our a picture of the Pharisees we find them constantly arguing and following Jesus around Galilee. Some recent studies of Judaism in that time, however, raise some questions about this picture as an accurate description of Pharisees.

According to Richard Horsely it was rather unlikely that the Pharisees were based in Galilee, as they were part of what would “have constituted the intellectual-legal-clerical “retainers”<sup>18</sup>. The Pharisses weren’t even those with the most narrow interpretations of the Jewish Torah. Those with the more strict interpretations of Torah were the priests and scribes associated with the Qumran Community, who considered the Pharisees as lax and casual when it came to matters of how to practice the Jewish laws for living.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Horrell, 2016, 114

<sup>18</sup> Horsely, Richard., 2014, 132.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 133.

A friend of mine who gave me some guidance, but who holds no responsibility for what is in this chapter, reminded me of the ancient rabbinic discussion between followers of two rabbis in the first century: Hillel and Shammai. Described as friendly adversaries they had some differences regarding certain Jewish practices especially in relationship to the outside world.<sup>20</sup> Shammai represented a stricter interpretation of the law, which as my friend reminded me was the reality of Jesus who couldn't support divorce. (Mark 10:2-12)

Pamela Eisenbaum, a Jewish Pauline scholar, reminds us of that curious statement on the lips of Jesus, “unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:20) The usual interpretation is that Jesus considered the scribes and Pharisees as hypocrites, who said one thing about the law, and then didn't practice it. Jesus held a more traditional view of Jewish practices regarding family solidarity—true to Moses we can say. Eisenbaum noted, for example, “The Pharisees are regarded as too permissive when it comes to the interpretation and application of Torah to marriage and divorce.”<sup>21</sup> Our view of them meeting Jesus in Galilee and seeming to find Jesus guilty of lacking respect for Jewish laws is erroneous.

Paul's view regarding marriage and divorce are found concentrated in a question he addressed in the first letter to the Corinthians (Chapter 7). Paul was not offering an easy way out of marriage when he wrote “the husband should not divorce his wife.” The wife who is a believer, he went on to state, should not divorce her unbelieving husband. It's doubtful, of course, that she even had that right under Roman law. This is just one example of Paul's high ethical standards that are so clear in nearly all of his letters. Further on in this book we shall be looking much more closely at the standards and expectations Paul had for those who were *called* to the Jesus story.

We also can't really compare Paul to other Pharisees because we only have first person accounts from two Pharisees in the first century. Paul is one and the other is the historian Josephus. No other Pharisee left any written documents.

A reconceptualization of the role of Pharisees in Jewish lives in the first century includes our understanding that they weren't a reclusive withdrawn sect like those in the Qumran community who saw the entire Jewish establishment, including Pharisees and scribes as corrupt. While the Pharisees should not be considered a distinct party within Judaism, we need to understand them as offering a more inclusive story reaching all Jews. Pharisees, in addition to believing in the resurrection of the dead, also seemed to embrace a vision for Israel that Eisenbaum compared the concept of a “priesthood of all believers.”<sup>22</sup> It was to be a shared life of faith possible for everyone to live.

What is probably not to be contested is that Paul's claim of a zeal for the traditions of his faith. He did not deny that he tried to persecute the early followers of Jesus. His claim to

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<sup>20</sup> <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/hillel-and-shammai> (found on 9/10/2018)

<sup>21</sup> Eisenbaum, 2009, 122.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 129-130.

his past story was “You have heard no doubt of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors.” (Gal. 1:13-14). What is significant for our understanding of the “early Paul” is that his Judaism was grounded in an *ethnic* identity of being Jewish. It was the *ethnic* side of that identity which would be challenged with God’s revelation of Jesus as Messiah.

From violent acts against Jewish followers of Jesus Paul was led to his own separation from practices that defined the boundaries for Jews as clear identity markers of identity. Segal suggests that Paul the Pharisee had actually assumed the identity of a *gentile* god-fearer.<sup>23</sup> His understanding of Jesus as Messiah became his defining faith. What cannot be said of Paul, however, is that he *converted* to Christianity. “... Paul lived and died convinced that he was a Jew living out Judaism. He represents, then, one option which Judaism could take in the first century.”<sup>24</sup> Paul was essentially asking people from many nations to be part of a community reflecting Jewish beliefs about God’s story and how to practice the ethics of that story, without certain markers that other Jews accepted as normative in their understanding of being Jewish. Paul clearly was as he was called in the title of Boyarin’s book “A Radical Jew.”

### ***6.3 Paul would not be Separated from Others or from his Jewish Story***

From a life defined by ethnicity to declaring that categorical distinctions like Jew or Greek no longer existed (Gal. 3:28), Paul was telling a profound story. What he wasn’t saying, however, is that his Jewish identity had come to an end, as so many have often assumed. Karen Armstrong is a biblical scholar who stated that Paul’s call to follow Jesus meant abandoning his Jewish identity. She said of Paul’s call that “...it snatched Paul away from everything that had hitherto given meaning to his life...”<sup>25</sup> How do we account for what Paul said in Romans that God has never rejected “his people” (Romans 11.2; meaning Paul’s brothers and sisters, the people of Israel)? Paul wasn’t “snatched away”, but deeply connected to the story of God grounded in a covenant which meant that “all Israel will be saved.” (Rom. 11.26)

What changed for Paul was an understanding of *who belonged* to God’s covenant story — namely everyone in the world. He would be God’s emissary making friends with those from whom he once was separated. Having been devoted to maintaining purity and holiness apart from all who were “*ta ethné*”, he now was called to bring to gospel to all *ta ethné*. I think it is helpful to revisit my decision to translate *ethné* as *nations*.

Remember no one in Paul’s world would have said, of their own identity, that they were *ethné*. The term “*ethné*” was the Jewish way of saying “people not like us.” Stanley pointed out that the term *gentiles* is constructed from a Judeocentric point of view,

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<sup>23</sup> Segal, 210.

<sup>24</sup> Boyarin, 1994, 2.

<sup>25</sup> Armstrong, Karen, 2016, 26.



defining all others by an identity they did not have. It wasn't a "cohesive ethnic identity held by individuals"<sup>26</sup> but only a derisive term meaning "non-Jews." The choice to use the term "*nations*" is far more positive and fitting with Paul's missionary aims.

The same problem would occur if you asked someone if they were a pagan. They would disagree and defend whatever God or temple where they worshipped. Some of those translations referring to "heathens" or "pagans" may have helped 19<sup>th</sup> century missionary organizations recruit missionaries. In that time sincere Christians went to reach and save *pagan* people, many of whom didn't know they needed to be saved.<sup>27</sup>

Most in that first-century Roman Empire would have been perplexed, however, by a Paul who insisted that there *one* God, even if there wasn't a thing called *paganism* that any ordinary Roman citizen would claim for themselves. To be sure they knew of a phenomena still happening with a process that added "...yet more 'gods' and 'lords' to an ever-widening pantheon."<sup>28</sup> Paul reminded his friends in Thessalonica they no longer belonged to that world. They had "...turned from idols (*plural*) to serve a (*singular*) living and true God." (I Thess 1:10)

While struggle we for a proper term to describe "others" from a Jewish perspective we must also consider a Roman term for "others." It was *barbarian*. From a *Roman perspective* all those other tribes of people, Celtic and Germanic tribes on the borders of the empire, as well as all the Greeks and others, whether recently conquered or next on the list, were considered "*barbarians*." Diodorus of Sicily, a Greek historian writing during the reign of Caesar Augustus "...tells us that Ethiopians feel neither pain, fear, nor any other emotion..."<sup>29</sup> It meant they were sub-human. Romans would have thought of Jews also as "*barbarians*."

What Rome brought to these so-called "*barbarians*" was civilization and what Rome called peace only came with their domination of those *barbarians*. Peace was actually a code word for "now you have been conquered, placed into slavery, and through your work and taxes you support the Roman empire." Little dignity or respect was accorded to people who were not truly Romans. It was precisely all those discounted by Rome that were to be reached with the Jesus story in Paul's ministry.

Thinking of Paul as the Jewish envoy to the *nations* means he was willing to telling *anyone* who wasn't a Jew about Jesus the Jewish messiah. Something dramatic seemed to have changed for Paul to see a ministry to the entire world when, at the very same time, he refused to turn his back on his personal identity as a Jew. The major question had to be

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<sup>26</sup> Elliot, 2008, 99.

<sup>27</sup> Davina Lopez has noted that those Biblical translations of *ethné* that used the term "heathens" actually helped the missionary enterprise which sent Western educated missionaries into the third world countries in those nineteenth century attempts to convert all in the world. [Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered*, between p. 121]

<sup>28</sup> Wright, 2015, 725-6

<sup>29</sup> Secret, 2009, 66.

how he could be a Jew living with others and not expecting them to *become* in any ethnic sense Jews but still *have* this Jewish story to guide and define their lives?

There may have been a clue to his initial willingness to step outside his comfort zone in our previous chapter regarding Paul's visit to Arabia. There he encountered the closest semitic neighbors immediately to the south of Judah. With the similarities between Arabic and Aramaic they may have been a people to whom he could relate. We have no way of knowing if this was a logical or easy step for Paul to make, but we do know that his trip to Arabia defined the rest of his life.

Maybe, though, Paul's choice to go to Arabia wasn't all that strange. According to what we know based on his letters, his early life was *not* centered in a totally Jewish world. Acts offers a different picture giving us a Paul supposedly taught by Gamaliel in Jerusalem, maybe as a teenager. The author of Acts first described Paul as the enemy of the gospel *but then* an enemy of the Jews. In Acts 9 (the first of three similar conversion stories) Paul is described as "still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord." (Acts 9:1)

Toward the end of Acts the narrator places on Paul's lips "Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees." (Acts 23:6) Two things need to be pointed out. One is that Paul didn't claim to be a son of a Pharisee in Phillipians 3:4-5. The second point is that there is a real inconsistency in the way the narrator of Acts informs us about Paul's Jewish credentials. Right after Paul declared his Pharisaic background "certain scribes of the Pharisees group stood up and contended, "We find nothing wrong with this man." (Acts 23:9). If that really was the case what are to make of the comment regarding what happened the next morning? "In the morning the Jews joined in a conspiracy and bound themselves an oath to neither eat nor drink until they had killed Paul." (Acts 23:12) What is most likely historically accurate in this account is that within Judaism in the first century there were serious disagreements and arguments among various factions but it was an intra-family quarrel. They really weren't trying to kill each other, which is where Acts is wrong.

Another important problem with relying on Acts as an authoritative account of Paul's story is the way that story keeps Paul so tied to Jewish authorities in Jerusalem. All of the many trips that Paul made in Acts to Jerusalem stand in stark contrast to the two occasions he acknowledged in his letters of going there. A third prospective trip is mentioned in Romans (15:25). Paul was very clear that his missionary work was separate from any other of the apostles, and that he was not sent by any other authority than that of his Lord. Hultgren observed "he was in no way dependent on the Jerusalem apostles at any time in his own work as an apostle. He went directly to Syria and Cilicia; he did not serve an apprenticeship first under the aegis of Jerusalem."<sup>30</sup>

Placing Paul in the province of Cilicia and its capital city Acts has Paul declare that he was born in Tarsus, but brought up in Jerusalem." This can't be confirmed from any of the existing letters we have from Paul. What we must remember in our journey of finding

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<sup>30</sup> Hultgren, 1976, 105.

Paul is that it is impossible, for the most part, to verify the sources that the author of Acts used for his account.<sup>31</sup> Thus even though Acts leads us to think that from an relatively early age he was going to Hebrew university in Jerusalem in his formative years (Acts 22:3), we can more confidently state that Paul was a Jew living in the diaspora.

The word *diaspora* (a Greek word) meant “to scatter” or “spread about.” Jewish communities and settlements in the 1<sup>st</sup> century would found in nearly every city in the Roman empire of any size and also reached even beyond the borders of the Roman Empire, including Mesopotamia (beginning with the Babylonian exile), and far to the north in the Caucasus, in modern-day Georgia, where archeologists have discovered Jewish burial sites.<sup>32</sup> Even in the first century, as it is true in our world, more Jews lived outside of Judea and Jerusalem, than lived in the “Holy Land.”<sup>33</sup> Jews in that world were not afraid of travel, and neither was Paul.

We can only make some educated guesses about Paul’s travel to Arabia, but I suspect he hitched a ride with a group of Nabataen traders. Upon arriving, perhaps in the capital of Petra, Paul would have been able to find a group of Jews who had settled there, as they did in so many places. We don’t know how long he would have stayed there, but we can reasonably conclude something happened there to make him “a marked man.” We know from Chapter 2, *Paul in Arabia*, that waking up one morning in the city of Damsacus he discovered the presence of “...the governor under King Aretas [who] guarded the city of Damascus in order to seize me...” (2. Cor. 12:7). It was really helpful to his account of Paul to know that there was an account in Acts confirming this event. We’re on less solid ground wondering what happened while Paul was in Arabia.

Here is what I believe we can logically presuppose about Paul’s mission to Arabia. First of all, it was simply the first of many destinations throughout the Roman Empire that Paul would visit and where he would put down roots. Based on the way Paul made friends it’s highly unlikely he went to Arabia on a private spiritual retreat. He must have been *talking* about what God had revealed to him about Jesus to others. He may have even had to explain the change of his name, but that is pure speculation on my part. We know he went to a land where people spoke a semitic language similar to Aramaic, and we can presume that Paul, the Pharisee not only spoke Greek but also coming from Syria he was probably fluent in Aramaic.<sup>34</sup>

The Nabataen traders also most likely were fluent in Greek, for it was the language of trade extending far to the East. “The Greek language could be heard—and seen—all over Central Asia and the Indus valley. At Ai Khanoum in norther Afghanistan —a new city

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<sup>31</sup> Gaventa, 1985, 441.

<sup>32</sup> Frankopan, 2016, 39.

<sup>33</sup> Crossan, John Dominic and Reed, Jonathan L, 53.

<sup>34</sup> John Yoder noted that the early followers of Jesus left no scriptures written in Aramaic but they made sure to teach Greeks and Romans to say “Abba” and “Maranatha” [Yoder, Meeting after Babel, Note 10]

founded by Seleucus—maxims from Delphi were carved on to a monument...<sup>35</sup> Paul’s facility with the Greek language would serve him well wherever he went in the diaspora.

At the same time by virtue of his dress and his accent, everyone in Arabia knew he was a Jew. It’s easy to image Paul making friends with the Jewish traders who had to be there. Maybe that’s when he began to work with his hands. While there he had to see people who came from many parts of the world—few of whom were actually kin to Paul.

Another term needs to be added to our discussion. It is the Greek word “*genos*”. In short it means a social group sharing a common history and a common name that sees themselves unique and different in significant ways from all others. Kinship, in Paul’s world, was *genos*.

Our term “ethnic” as in “ethnic food” or “ethnic dress” has connotations of belonging to a specific group of people, but in Paul’s mindset *ethné* meant *all* other peoples or *nations*. Two thousand years ago *genos* referred to what we would call a specific ethnicity, while *ethné* referred to “all others”, particularly those not like us, even barbarians and pagans.<sup>36</sup> This contrast between ancient and contemporary definitions of *ethné* and *genos* is important because Paul made a rather stunning redefinition regarding Jewish identity.

There is an interesting use of the concept of *ethné* in Paul’s letter to the Galatians which illustrates his approach to gentiles. Paul and Peter’s relationship came to a serious confrontation in Antioch when Paul saw Peter withdraw from common table fellowship (i.e. the Lord’s Supper), while at the same time maintaining that *ethné* were required to live like Jews (i.e. become circumcised—obviously a command only for the males). The problem was this: *Peter had been sharing the Lord’s table with (ethné)*, and thus was living as an *ethné*. We might say, he had a *worldly* way of living. (Gal. 2.14) It is a matter of seeing *ethné* not as a noun (all the people’s of the world) but as an adverb<sup>37</sup>. What matters to our story is that this was also Paul’s way of living (*a worldly way*) with Torah. There were some compromises that obviously had to be made, but it also included an enlarged concept of family.

What we see in two of Paul’s most important letters, Galatians and Romans, is a focus on the story of Abraham as singularly significant for Jews and for all followers of Jesus—i.e. the *ethné* (or those from all nations). In *Paul was Not A Christian* Eisenbaum makes a stunning comparison between Paul and Abraham. “Like Abraham, God’s call to Paul resulted in his living an life among people who were not his kin.”<sup>38</sup> The key word to be considered is “*kin*” or what I earlier identified as “*genos*”—that factor of identity and shared story and history, that gives any community is unique identity.

Paul was essentially challenging the narrow definition of “*genos*” in his world. I believe

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<sup>35</sup> Frankkopian, 8.

<sup>36</sup> Secrest, Love L. 2009, 107-108.

<sup>37</sup> Hodge, Caroline, 2005, 278

<sup>38</sup> Eisenbaum, 174.

he first explored this idea in Arabia,. There, at least, in contrast to other places where he would go, were people who knew Abraham's story. By emphasizing Abraham as the singular father for every one in the world Paul was crossing all the boundaries of "us" and "them" that defined all loyalties and oppositions in Paul's world. [It's the same today!] Here is what Paul said in Romans about God's purpose in calling Abraham:

"The purpose was to make him the ancestor of all who believe without being circumcised and who thus have righteousness reckoned to them, and likewise the ancestor of the circumcised who are not only circumcised but who also follow the example of the faith that our ancestor Abraham had before he was circumcised." (Romans 4:11-12).

In the letter to the Galatians, Paul said: "And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the gentiles (*nations*) by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "All the gentiles(*nations*) shall be blessed in you." (Galatians 3:8) Paul carried this whole idea to a level of identity astounding to many of his contemporaries: he was a Jew living like a gentile (*ethné*)! "Friends, I beg you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are." (Gal. 4.12) What we must not forget is that he still lived, breathed, and taught the Jewish story now framed in the shadow of the crucifixion and resurrection.

As I have already stated we have no way of knowing what Paul said and did while he was in Arabia, but in his letters he saw Abraham as the spiritual father of *all* the peoples of the world. He saw himself with the rather unexpected task of taking this Jewish story—now framed by the story of Jesus—to the nations. At the same time he expected his new friends in Christ to embrace and understand themselves in and through that Jewish story, especially as it related to the stories of creation and God's covenant with Abraham.

To what extent, then, was it incumbent upon Paul, to first teach the Jewish story those outside of Judaism? In some instances Paul probably didn't have to do much teaching, as there were numerous people throughout the Roman Empire interested in the Jewish story and the way its people lived that story. They were often referred to as "God-fearers." There is much evidence pointing to the so-called "God-fearers" who attended Jewish synagogues in the first century. There were probably no communities of some size in the Roman world without some Jewish community or more likely *communities* (plural). Neither were there Jewish communities without some outsiders supportive of their rights to worship, or more importantly, curious enough to want to learn more.

The ease with which Paul could hold up various names like Moses, David, or Abraham, when writing to communities of believers from the nations suggests that he knew his readers were aware of the basic story, either because the core of his ministry involved teaching those stories, or what they had already experienced and learned through a nearby welcoming synagogue community. The most important part of this story is that Paul was teaching *ethné* to think of themselves as *belonging* to the story of Israel, not defined by land per se, but by the kind of family God intended all along. Richard Hays explained it this way:

“...the “Israel” into which Paul’s Corinthian converts were embraced was an Israel whose story had been hermeneutically reconfigured by the cross and resurrection. The result was that Jew and gentile alike found themselves summoned by the gospel story to a sweeping reevaluation of their identities, an imaginative paradigm shift so comprehensive that can only be described as a “conversion of the imagination.””<sup>39</sup>

We have to be careful, I believe, with this concept of a “conversion of the imagination” but only because of the extreme individualism that marks our contemporary world. “Finding yourself” is supposedly that adventure of personal discovery. Such an idea would have been extremely perplexing to Paul, raised up as a Jew with a story extending back to the creation of the world. It was also never a Jewish story closed to others per se, though it’s obligations extended to practices (circumcision, food restrictions, and Sabbath practices) often at odd with non-Jewish cultural practices. Paul as we find him in his letters never left Judaism behind. Daniel Boyarin has written, “I treat Paul’s discourse as indigenously Jewish... This is an inner-Jewish discourse and inner-Jewish controversy.”<sup>40</sup>

One thing that is often missing in our understanding of Judaism is that it has always been possible to convert and thus to become a Jew. One word of caution is needed here, however. From a Christian perspective there is an emphasis on conversion meaning that someone makes a new confession regarding what he or she believes. As Boyarin points out, however, “...Jews do not sense of themselves that their association is confessional...”<sup>41</sup> There are Jews he noted who do not practice Judaism but still consider themselves Jewish.

There was something else in Boyarin that is even more relevant to our discussion of Paul the Jewish envoy to the nations. It is simply—but maybe not so simple after all—that when one is a convert to Judaism there is a name change. You are either “ben Avraham” or “bas Avraham”, which is to say you become either a “son or daughter of Abraham. The convert is adopted into the family and assigned a new “genealogical” identity.”<sup>42</sup> Boyarin added that in the Genesis story Abraham represents the first convert to the Jewish tradition.

What surprised me is that Boyarin didn’t make a connection at this point to Paul’s emphasis on the Abraham story as the doorway through which any and all could belong to the Jesus community rooted in the same stories that had shaped Paul. What is most helpful, though, is that Boyarin wants us to see that Jewish identity is akin to that of other marginalized groups who experience a kind of domination that seeks to remove their differences from sight. He called it a “subaltern identity” meaning one’s identity as a Jew, as a woman, as a gay person (his examples) serve as a point of resistance and affirmation over against a system of domination.<sup>43</sup> This is exactly where we can come out with Paul,

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<sup>39</sup> Hays, Richard B, 2005, 5-6.

<sup>40</sup> Daniel -rin, 1994, 205

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. 241

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. 241.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. See especially 236-242.

but only when we realize how much he aligned himself with the most marginalized and vulnerable in his world. Paul wasn't the culprit trying to diminish the importance of people already dominated and dismissed in his world. Rome was!

#### ***6.4: Coming a more holistic understanding of Torah and Judaism in the First Century***

If we are going to understand how Christianity broke away from Judaism the most important part of this story is that it happened *after* Paul, and not during his lifetime. It was a process, as Boyarin points out in *Border Lines* that took over three centuries. For our purposes here we need a more nuanced understanding of what is meant for any Jew in the first-century to maintain a Jewish identity.

In large part Jewish identity in the time of Paul was more cultural and ethnic. It was not a slavish obedience to a prescribed set of ritual laws. Except for living in Jerusalem or the more clearly defined Jewish communities in Judea, all other Jews were negotiating their daily lives in a Greek-speaking world.

We can understand Paul as defining himself as Jewish in the sense that he was part of a *faction* of Jews who believed in Jesus Messiah, who felt at home sharing that story, and shared their common life with *others*. I like the term *faction*. It would easily apply to Pharisees or those in the Qumran Community. Each faction would represent a particular understanding of their faith and commitments to a form of life all the while claiming a particular stake in the Jewish story.<sup>44</sup>

The relevance of Paul's missionary work among the *ethné* is relevant to our world, because we find so much emphasis on both ethnic identity and national identity as markers defining one's status in the world. It is ironic that the Olympic Games, which ostensibly are about athletic ability, are the forums for nations to act out their aggressions and presumptions of superiority. It was equally true in Paul's world as Greek athletes would take particular satisfaction in besting Romans competing against them. "Athletics was one of the central ways in which Greeks could express and claim the Hellenic identity in the face of Roman rule."<sup>45</sup>

What was radical about Paul involved his deconstruction of ethnic identity (*genos*) as constitutive of Jewish identity. What ultimately mattered were a set of beliefs and behavior that were essentially Jewish<sup>46</sup>, which bound *ethné* and Jews together with the dramatic story of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. Undoubtedly those others attracted to this Jewish story and this Jewish Messiah were dealing with their own questions of identity, perhaps entering what sometimes is called a "liminal zone."<sup>47</sup> Perhaps many of them were in what Caroline Hodge called an "inbetween space"<sup>47</sup> with regard to their identity, moving as it were toward a monotheistic faith and a way of life

<sup>44</sup> Zetterholm, Magnus, 2015, 49. (This is the way he used the term *faction*.)

<sup>45</sup> Arnold, Bradley, 2017, 108.

<sup>46</sup> Nanos, Mark, 2015, 136-7

<sup>47</sup> Hodge, Caroline, 2015, 154.

embracing long-held Jewish principles.<sup>48</sup> Hodge concluded that the *ethné* in Paul's communities were specifically charged to not become Jews in any ethnic sense—*genos*—(thus circumcision was not for *ethné*) but they were to become Jewish by belonging to the story through their baptism. “This complex and mixed status for gentiles-in-Christ is crucial to Paul's argument: their separateness is necessary for God's plan for Israel, as Paul sees it.”<sup>49</sup> In the end Paul's own brothers and sisters will come into the full story of Christ! Indeed, Paul saw the day coming for the “full inclusion” of all Jews in the Jesus story. (Rom. 11.12)

When we want to understand Paul's relationship to Torah the problem is that we are haunted by centuries of scholars creating a Judaism that didn't exist in Paul's world. It was as if they created a Judaism they needed as a kind of “fall guy” so that Christianity could be elevated as not only distinctive from its Jewish roots, but qualitatively, even light years, ahead of what many Christians were taught was a defective way of worshipping God.

This is where we need to enter into conversation with scholars (Jewish and Christian alike) who *counter* the dominant image of Paul being a convert *from* Judaism. To be sure that's the picture we have with the account in Acts, but there is nothing about conversion language in *any* of Paul's letters. It's absence, along with the lack of any references to repentance need to alert us to a more Jewish Paul. Eisenbaum has written, “Christian tradition was solely dependent on the undisputed Pauline letters, it is difficult to imagine how the image of Paul the convert could have been constructed in the first place. Paul does not use the language of conversion of himself in his undisputed writings. He never uses the language of repentance in reference to himself.”<sup>50</sup> Segal also noted that Paul never used the terms found in born-again Christianity.<sup>51</sup>

If Paul didn't convert from Judaism how do we explain what happened to him? I think Segal gets it right. It was a transformation. That indeed is the very language Paul used in many of his letters. The rational didactic Paul was in reality deeply mystical. No abstract heady theologian would have written “For it is God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” who has shone in our hearts to give the light of knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” (2 Corinthians 4:6) Along with his love of the Jewish narrative of God's story he was grounded in experiences of the spirit: “”And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual.” (1 Cor. 2:13)

To be sure Paul was something of an anomaly to other Jews. As framed by Bird in his book *Paul and Anomalous Jew* “It wasn't that Paul converted one religion to another, but he ventured beyond the margins of conventional Judaism.”<sup>52</sup> The places where he

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<sup>48</sup> See also Nanos, Mark. 2015, 136-7.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. 172

<sup>50</sup> Eisenbaum, 2009, 42.

<sup>51</sup> Segal, 1990, 21.

<sup>52</sup> Bird, 2016, 46.



“ventured” were for the most part his adoption of living with others which meant not keeping up traditional markers of Jewish identity or what Boyarin called “...those observances of Torah which were thought by Jew and gentile alike to mark off the special status of Jews: circumcision, kashruth, and the observances of Sabbath and the holidays.”<sup>53</sup> [*Kashruth* refers to the foods that are prohibited, and to all matters relating to keeping Kosher.]

It is clear, especially in Galatians, that Paul was not insisting that his *ethné* male friends believing in Christ needed to be circumcised, though he caustically remarked in Galatians that he wished his opponents in those communities would castrate themselves. (Gal. 5:12) Also, in his discussions about eating food offered to idols he did not see any particular problems with it for himself, but he wanted to protect those who we assume were keeping Kosher which would mean not offending them. The entire argument is centered in 1 Corinthians 8. For the matter at hand, the issue isn't about *what* Paul ate, but rather *who* was at the table with him. He was sharing the Eucharist with anyone. As we read in Galatians Peter had been doing the same, and then withdrew from that fellowship “for fear of the circumcision faction.” (Gal. 2.12)

Our understanding of Paul as a Jew is made a little clearer, perhaps, by noting the distinction in Judaism between *aggadah* and *halakha*, which is to say the difference between *telling* the story (and being shaped by it) and *practicing* the story according to certain commandments and traditions. Even Jews have their differences regarding *halakha* as Reform Jews may honor with respect what those traditional practices mean, but they don't necessarily follow all of them. In light of this distinction Segal concluded, “...Paul reveres Torah *aggadah*, story, and prophecy, but he ceases to practice it as *halakha*.”<sup>54</sup>

In reference to how this chapter began we might say that Paul (still Jewish in his thinking) became a *muggle* who wanted everyone to know the story of the world of *magic* (meaning his understanding of scripture). The *story* that mattered went back to creation but was culminated with what God had done in Christ! Even though many of the early Jesus Messiah people were Jewish, it is clear that Paul saw his mission was to reach the nations including those few (God-fearers) already interested in that ancient religion which they saw lived out by their Jewish neighbors in the diaspora. What they observed was the *practice* of that faith. What they were curious about was the *story*—the *aggadah*. It is important to add something quite notice quite unique and rare in that world. Jews were marked by a set of values regarding family and had, as we shall emphasize further on, an ethical focus on the poor, the orphans and widows. Such values were not evident in much of the Roman world. We clearly see Paul sharing the *story* (*aggadah*) in his letters and we will, additionally, discover his ethical advice mirrors Jewish values as well. As I suggested in chapter four it is reasonable to assume that on a daily basis working alongside others Paul most likely was teaching them the Jewish story of God. They were also being taught to live the story in a communal way, if not marked by certain practices

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<sup>53</sup> Boyarin, 1994, 53.

<sup>54</sup> Segal, 139.

identified as *halakha*.

What is important to this account of Paul's reading of scripture are those passages of scripture which described the entrance of the nations, or what Sanders acknowledged might also be called their "submission"<sup>55</sup> at the last days marked by the coming of the messiah. There was, however, no *hallakah* or a set of procedures for such admission into Jewish identity and community. Those Jewish believers in Jesus Messiah who followed Paul into Galatia affirmed the resurrection but expected loyalty to key markers of Jewish identity. They were saying from a *hallactic* perspective that others from outside Judaism, especially the men "had to be circumcised." Paul differed! The question then and now is always to what extent religious practice and belief allows for a certain kind of diversity and openness to some different understandings about a faith story or the way to practice that story in community. One term that applies to this reality is *hybridity*.

Hybridity is a concept used to explicate the reality of colonialism as one of those historical cultural realities where a culture or tribal group is overtaken either by force or by circumstance which requires both sides to meet, but rarely as equals. The encounter is more often marked in a context of unequal power and unequal access to resources. Boyarin uses this concept to discuss the emergence over four centuries of a distinct Christianity which defined itself eventually separate from and different from Judaism. In a sense, his argument is that both groups were shaping the identity of the other—it just took over three centuries to accomplish this fact. He wrote, "One might say that Judaism and Christianity were invented in order to explain the fact that there were Jews and Christians."<sup>56</sup> Ironically in the time of Paul even the term *Jews* is inadequate given the various social groups that defined different loyalties, practices, and arguments swirling in Jewish circles, including the newest one regarding Jesus called *Messiah*. . It is enough for us that we can say Paul was Jewish, just as the Saducees, and the Essenes were Jewish. None of them, though, were in full agreement about how to be Jewish.

Going a little deeper with this concept of hybridity and how it relates to understanding Paul in the context of the first century it helps that there is hardly a place in any of his letters when we are *not* aware of precarious situation in which the early Jesus followers found themselves. There in the first chapter of Paul's first letter—or the first we have—we find a mention of persecution affecting the followers of Jesus. "And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of the persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit." (I Thess. 1:6)

There is a kind of in-between space when two or more cultures meet. Boyarin quotes from Mary Louise Pratt who defined that space as one "...where disparate cultures meet, clash, grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination."<sup>57</sup> One consequence of hybrid interactions on the cultural or religious

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<sup>55</sup> Sanders, 1983, 19.

<sup>56</sup> Boyarin, 2004, 21.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. Quoting from *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992).

level in many contexts is that one side disowns the other. “Hybridity is the disowned other.”<sup>58</sup> We will be dealing with the concept of those who are considered “other” in some detail, especially when we confront Paul’s understanding of *justice*. For now we still need to place Paul in a context where Jewish identity itself was having its own internal struggles of identity—most of which we can understand (internally) as family quarrels.

One of the challenges in understanding what Judaism was in the first century is that there are scholars like E. P. Sanders who have said, “Thus I do not think that I know what the essence of Judaism was.”<sup>59</sup> This is from one of the leading scholars who has devoted his academic career to the study of Judaism in the time before and after Jesus. Most importantly for our considerations in this chapter is the way Sanders objected to any generalizations applied to Jews in the first century. Most Jews he explains were monotheists, for example, but some were not. Most observed the Sabbath or didn’t eat pork, while some ate the pork and didn’t observe the Sabbath.<sup>60</sup>

We actually have to realize that the word “religion” might even be a foreign concept to Paul. He didn’t choose to be Jewish as if it was a choice one made. It was his story. It was the way to live his life. If he saw any difference it was the clarity coming from Judaism that there was just one God. Period. “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.” His roots were deeply imbedded in this monotheistic faith. Pamela Eisenbaum captured this commitment best:

In theological terms, Paul's theology is fundamentally not *christocentric*; it is *theocentric*. Inspired by the fundamental conviction of aniconic monotheism, best captured by the Shema, and the closest thing Judaism has to a creed: “Here O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one word test one (Deut.6:4), and the knowledge of God's final reckoning with the world was imminent, Paul passionately took up the task of proclaiming to the nations the oneness of God.”<sup>61</sup>

That proclamation was framed in Paul’s ministry as *the* story of God beginning in creation, shaped by the Abrahamic covenant, and culminating in the death and resurrection of Jesus. This was the story Paul was sharing with the nations. Looking at Paul’s letter to the Romans the scholar N.T. Wright has written that its singular purpose as addressed to the world calling all people to see themselves in terms of the “only story

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>59</sup> Sanders, 2016, 49.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 42.

<sup>61</sup> Eisenbaum, 2009, 173-4. The term *aniconic monotheism* refers to the ban on any artistic representations of the supernatural world, i.e no graven images! At another point she muddies the water, so to speak, with regard to Paul’s monotheistic commitment. She suggests he wasn’t a pure monotheist because he saw other deities, demons, and spheres of heaven and earth. 192.

within which their own standing as Christians makes sense is precisely the Jewish story. They do not support the root; it supports them.”<sup>62</sup>

Paul was also challenging them to think of Jerusalem as the *center* of the world, and not Rome. Only when we come to chapter 15 in Romans, though, do we discover his goal was first to go to Jerusalem. (Rom. 15:25) It was the center of *his* world. Furthermore, he wasn't coming to Rome as a tourist to see the sights. He was only passing through on his way to Spain and was soliciting their support for the next part of his gospel venture. He looked forward to enjoying their company for a while (Romans 15:24), with Spain as his main goal. Having taken the gospel from Jerusalem to Illyricum,<sup>63</sup> his intention was to go to places where he knew Christ was not known. “Thus I make it my ambition to proclaim the good news, not where Christ is already been named, so that I do not build on someone else's foundation.” (Romans 15:20) In a very real sense Spain was the “*end*” of Paul's world, centered, once more, in Jerusalem—not Rome! The question arises at this point if Paul had the skills necessary to take the gospel to Spain.

### ***6.5 Paul's Bi-Cultural and Bi-Lingual Skills.***

Paul's status and story was also most likely akin to many, of not most, immigrants and refugees in our world—needing new skills and language to make a new story for themselves and their loved one. In Paul's case he would tell us he was “called” into his new story. What made Paul different from more contemporary refugees is that he wasn't escaping from terror and violence. He wasn't seeking new opportunities for freedom. With his roots in what is modern day Syria he already spoke more than one language, and knew well what it meant to live as one of the many conquered and ruled by Rome. He would also become the wanderer and the great traveler. By some estimates traveling over 10,000 miles in his ministry, again and again he would walk into trouble and persecution, even spending considerable time in various prisons.

Like all of his Jewish brothers and sisters, even those who never ventured outside the walls of Jerusalem, Paul was navigating a Greek culture, under the military rule of Rome, with a Jewish story and way of life. A key question regards how Paul adapted himself and his way of life to that world. To what extent did he become at home in the Greek world? Do we end up with a Hellenistic Paul more than a Jewish Paul?

In asking these questions we find ourselves inside what N. T. Wright describes as “the old divide between those who suppose Paul to be basically a Jewish thinker and those who see him as having borrowed his fundamental ideas from Hellenism.”<sup>64</sup> It should be obvious that I am making the case that Paul was a Jewish thinker. At the same time we must recognize that he had the skills to communicate and probably be fairly convincing when addressing people who didn't know the Jewish story. He was also able to adapt

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<sup>62</sup> Wright, 1995, 120.

<sup>63</sup> A reference to a Roman province including what today includes Albania, Bosnia, and coastal Croatia.

<sup>64</sup> Wright, 1994, 80.

himself to cultural practices that put his Jewish credentials in doubt in the eyes of some in those early Jesus communities.

With Paul we have someone with skills in two of more languages. We don't know exactly what the level of competence was, but we must begin with his facility with the Greek language, which was almost a requisite for most in that world connected in any way to commerce, trade, and politics of Rome. While Romans tended to see Greek as a lesser language than their own Latin, it was nonetheless common for those seeking any "linguistic prestige and socio-economic advantage"<sup>65</sup> to have facility in both Greek and Latin.

Wright suggests that in the history of interpreting Paul one tendency was to read Paul in a context of Hellenistic philosophy. Paul, he suggests is "if not actually a hellenizer, at least not a particularly Jewish thinker."<sup>66</sup> This happens with more traditional scholars who either believe Paul's idea of justification by faith was framed in opposition to the Jewish law, or who think of Paul as an apocalyptic theologian seeing that in Christ there is a clean break with Jewish history. As I am trying to make clear in this chapter Paul is grounded in the Jewish story from a historical perspective, and most important of all is that his reading of Abraham story is foundational to understanding the messianic event.

The Jewish scholar Daniel Boyarin, a more contemporary student of Paul, sees vast depths of Platonic thought in his letters which means that Paul bought into a dualistic philosophy which valued the invisible world more than the visible physical world. (Boyarin, 1992, 61). Regarding Paul who said that differences of gender, ethnicity, and status didn't matter (Gal. 3:28), Boyarin sees "the general Hellenistic longing for the univocal and the universal" (p. 24). Fundamental to his argument is that Paul, in claiming a Jewish identity that wasn't in accord with traditional Jewish practices was essentially denying the value of those practices to Jewish identity. He suggests that Paul offered a bitter gospel to Jews because it meant abandoning the very markers of identity and difference held so dear in Judaism. (p. 152).

My disagreement with Boyarin isn't regarding his understanding of Paul as a Radical Jew. Clearly Paul's opponents in Galatians, for example, represented a more strict or traditional orientation to Jewish practice and faith. By his own admission Paul didn't object to eating meat offered to idols, but he *was* concerned about the offence this might cause those who did practice Kosher in the new Jesus Messiah communities. (1 Cor. 8:1-13). As I suggested in the introduction to this chapter Paul was most likely a Jew living among many others with some flexibility questionable the eyes of some.

Paul was not, however, offering a gospel that valorized all the differences that existed in his world. He was clearly contending against the hierarchical and male-dominated assumptions that suggested that within those categories (male, Greek, and free) were those whose lives were more valuable and significant. To those without credentials, Paul

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<sup>65</sup> Porter, 2008, 135-6.

<sup>66</sup> Wright, 2015, 41.

gave them a more distinguished identity shaped in the image of Christ-crucified. Culturally he was adaptable, and it was same with his language skills as I noted earlier.

There is one more language group that must be considered in this analysis and that is the language used in Galatia. It was a Roman province in the time of Paul but it had been settled by Celts following the dissolution of the Alexander's kingdom. Galatians were originally Gauls or Celts. We learn from Brigett Kahl's brilliant work on the letter to the Galatians about the reputation of the people of this region in the eyes of Rome. She writes, "they long occupied the Roman imaginations as archetypical enemies, quintessential barbarian intruders, remaining dangerous even after their defeat."<sup>67</sup>

I think there is a reason to wonder if Paul ever heard Celtic spoken. An ancient Roman historian, Diodorus, reported that Celtic was spoken in Galatia even as late as the fifth century A.D. He also noted that the Galatians were hardly considered civilized by the Romans who had conquered their territory and turned it into a Roman province. Paul, as is clear from the letter to Galatians, had brought the Jesus story to that part of the world.<sup>68</sup> We have to wonder if he heard Celtic/Galatian dialects and learned the language while living in Galatia. Having learned a little Celtic could have helped frame his vision for going to Spain, where he would encounter people speaking, if not the same, at least a similar Celtic language.

There is one other interesting fact regarding Paul's bringing the Gospel story to the Galatians, coming from the scholar Murphy-O'Connor. "Northern Galatia was one of the few places in the Graeco-Roman world that did not have a Jewish population. How Paul got his message across remains a mystery, because there would have been little or no common ground on which to build."<sup>69</sup> Enough of the message had arrived, as well some opponents of Paul to cause him that caustic letter which is so essential this story because of its important autobiographical details from Paul.

One topic to which we will frequent in finding Paul is that his primary address was to those who experienced oppression and subjugation within Rome, to be sure, but also in the context of Hellenistic culture that was male dominated and ruled by violence over women, conquered people, and slaves. Ehresperger emphasized that Paul was part of a discourse from below. "It was a discourse about subjugated people accommodating and distancing themselves from dominant power claims; inside their own communities and stories."<sup>70</sup> Adding more depth to this observation is that of Agamben who noted that Paul's frame of reference was the exile<sup>71</sup> which I take to mean having the context of the defeated and the excluded.

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<sup>67</sup> Kahl, 2008, 2.

<sup>68</sup> Murphy-O'Connor, 58.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ehresperger, 2013, 217.

<sup>71</sup> Agamben, 2005, 4.

One rather unusual privilege was accorded Jews by Emperor Augustus for Jews living anywhere in the empire were allowed to send an annual temple tax to Jerusalem—which was theologically their center of their world.<sup>72</sup> Even with the unusual permission to practice their faith, it was nonetheless clear, to all Jews that they were still in exile. The land of Israel was occupied by Roman soldiers. Lest we think that the Romans were somehow unusually tolerant “it was a tolerance “entirely dependent on submission to Roman domination.”<sup>73</sup> We will explore this topic in much greater detail at a number of places in this book, because in the end we will discover Paul was radically subversive with his use of language especially when it came to according to Jesus the title of *Kurios* (Lord) and to his communities which he called *ekklesia*. Both terms were politically charged and dangerous. Paul the Jewish envoy to the nations was reaching into those segments of society where there was the least promise of life and only a dismal future. Paul, the man of hope, would inspire them with words like these: “And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.” (1 Cor. 13:13)

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<sup>72</sup> Eisenbaum, 2009, 70-1.

<sup>73</sup> Erensperger, 181.