

Practical Implications of God's Apocalypse of Jesus in Paul's Life

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1. A Historical Overview of Paul's Religious Background

Paul's Jewish pedigree is best illustrated in Phil. 3:5-6 when he says of himself, '... circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law a Pharisee, as to zeal a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law blameless.' As a Pharisee he learned the Mosaic Law at the feet of Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). In his Pharisaic life he persecuted those who professed Jesus as the Christ of God, because these disciples of the crucified Jesus, while being Jews, had made a deliberate choice as a matter of principle to ignore the Mosaic Law. The situation in Jerusalem during the heyday of Paul the Pharisee is best recounted in Acts 8:1-3,



And Saul was consenting to his death. And on that day a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the region of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. Devout men buried Stephen, and made great lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison.

2. Paul's Apocalyptic as an Event

God's apocalypse of his Son Jesus, now risen and enthroned at the right hand of God, was made to this Saul, the Benjaminite, who had been circumcised on the 8th day, and who has been schooled in the ways of the Mosaic Law at the feet of

Gamaliel (Acts 9:4). God's apocalypse of his Son blinded Paul (Acts 9:8-9), because he who had made the Sinaitic Law the absolute point of departure for his theology, was now told that all theology had to have the Crucified Christ as the epicenter of all theological teaching.

Paul used the Greek verb *Apocalypso* in order to describe God's apocalypse of Jesus Christ. The Greek verb means 'to reveal' or 'to unveil.' Paul's apocalyptic was not focused on God's unveiling of something that was hidden, as though it had been eternally standing behind a curtain (contrast 1 Cor. 2:9-10).

But, as it is written, 'What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him,' God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God
(1 Cor. 2:9-10).

The genesis of Paul's apocalyptic lies in Paul's certainty that God has invaded the present evil age, by sending Christ and the Spirit into it. There was a 'before,' the time when we were confined, imprisoned; and there is an 'after,' the time of our deliverance. The difference between this 'before' and 'after' is caused not by an unveiling but rather by the coming of Christ and his Spirit.

3. Consequences of Paul's Apocalyptic

The blindness that afflicts Saul for three days, until such time that Ananias lays hands upon him (Acts 9:17-19), demonstrates the total upheaval cause in his theological outlook by God's apocalypse of the Son. Saul must adjust his perspective; he must shift the absolute point of theology from the Sinaitic Law to the Crucified Jesus, the Messiah of God. The gift of the Holy Spirit restores sight to Saul. The three days of fasting was in preparation for the reception of the Holy Spirit, through whom he would be led by God in further revelation. Fasting and prayer are essential if one is to be led by God in further revelation.



When Paul speaks of being crucified with Christ, he does not refer to a private and mystical event experienced by him alone. He refers not only to his participation in the death of Christ, his participation in Christ's crucifixion is paradigmatic for all Christians. Participation involves his own death to the Law that previously formed his cosmos (Gal. 2:19; 6:14). God dispatched the Spirit into the believer's hearts transforming them into soldiers active on the Spirit's battlefield. God's new creation and the new apocalyptic community called to the front trenches in God's apocalyptic war against the powers of the present evil age, is the church.

4. Understanding Paul's Apocalyptic

Etymologically, the Greek noun 'apocalypse' means a revelation or an unveiling. However, today the understanding of apocalypse has recognized that it is a literary form or genre. Apocalypse is defined as a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal in so far as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial in so far as it involves another supernatural world. The form of the apocalypse involves a narrative framework that describes the manner of revelation. The main means of revelation are visions, and otherworldly journeys, supplemented by discourse or dialogue and occasionally by a heavenly book. The constant element is the angel who interprets the vision. Hence, the content of apocalypse has a temporal and spatial dimension. Apocalypses are of two types: historical (Daniel) and otherworldly journeys.

Ernst Kasemann stated that 'Apocalyptic was the mother of all Christian theology.' Klaus Koch distinguished between 'apocalypse' as a literary genre, and 'apocalyptic' as a historical movement. How is apocalypse related to apocalyptic? Does the literary type 'apocalypse' imply a social movement? Or does an apocalypse always contain apocalyptic eschatology (i.e. a historical movement towards final fulfillment at the end-times)?

Paul's gospel apocalyptic involves the motif of 'new salvation.' Paul's experience on the road to Damascus was apocalypse as well as apocalyptic. As apocalypse the divine messenger was the Son of God himself. The transcendent reality revealed was that eschatological salvation consisted in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Paul's apocalyptic consisted in a historical movement that sought to initiate a Law-less way of life in discipleship as opposed to the Law observant way of life. Paul's apocalyptic initiated a historical movement that was manifested in the way of life of the Pauline churches – which were not established as 'daughter churches' of the Law observant Jerusalem and Antioch churches. Paul's apocalyptic (i.e. a historical movement sparked by a revelation) would result in all nations profiting from the promise to Abraham that was fulfilled in Christ (). Paul's apocalyptic is captured in Gal. 3:26, 'for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith.'

How do we understand God's apocalypse of his Son to Paul? In ancient Israel, the king was said to become God's son at his *enthronement* (Psa. 2:7). From the formula quoted by Paul in Rom. 1:3-4, Jewish Christians prior to him celebrated Jesus' resurrection, as in effect his enthronement. For these Jewish Christians, Jesus was already descended from David according to the flesh. So, when God raised him from the dead, God declared him to be Son of God with power. Ancient Israel in 8th Century BC understood herself to be descended from God (Ex. 4:22-23; Hos. 11:1). There was also a tradition about God sending Moses

and the prophets to Israel (Ex. 3:10; Isa. 6:8; Wis. 9:10, 17) References to God sending from heaven into this world his angel, his wisdom, his Spirit are also found in the OT (cf. Gen 24:40; Wis. 9:10, 17). All three elements in the background of the title son of God, are reflected in Paul's reference to the Son in Galatians. But apart from these three, the most significant is Paul's reference to Son in terms of love unto death – the Son's faithfulness. In this apocalypse of Jesus, Paul sees the Lord alive, present and enthroned by God, having been raised from the realm of those who have died (Gal. 1:1, 3). Paul draws on Jewish traditions in which the merciful and righteous person is called God's son (cf. Sir. 4:10; Wis. 2:18). Ancient Israelite portrait of Israel as God's son must also be kept in mind (Ex. 4:22). Paul insists with great emphasis that the church has become the community of God's sons by its incorporation into God's son (Gal. 2:20; 4:6-7;). God's redemptive invasion of the cosmos is the sending of his Son, and he the Son, is faithful unto death. And so, in Gal. 2:20, Paul will speak of the Son's love and the Son's faithfulness, both being enacted in his giving up of his life for the salvation of the world.

5. Paul's Apocalyptic as Radical Gospel Life

When God's apocalypse of Jesus was made known to Saul, it concerned *the truth of the gospel*. This is best understood by reference to Gal. 1:6-7. In Gal. 1:6-7, by the reference to 'a different gospel ... another gospel ... the gospel of Christ' Paul identifies the central issue as being that which was at stake earlier at the Jerusalem conference and in the incident in the Antioch church, namely, '*the truth of the gospel*' (Gal, 2:5, 14). It is the *truth of the gospel* that is now at stake at the Galatian churches throughout Asia Minor. Many in these churches are 'defecting from' (Greek - *metatithesthai*) the *truth of the gospel*. In certain regards, the situation Paul later faces as he writes 2 Cor. 11, is similar. Some evangelists who call themselves 'descendants of Abraham' and who are Jewish Christians, have come into the Corinthian church preaching a different gospel (2 Cor 11:4, 22).

I wish you would bear with me in a little foolishness. Do bear with me! I feel a divine jealousy for you, for I betrothed you to Christ to present you as a pure bride to her one husband. But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if some one comes and preaches another Jesus than the one we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you submit to it readily enough. I think that I am not in the least inferior to these superlative apostles. Even if I am unskilled in speaking, I am not in knowledge; in every way we have made this plain to you in all things. Did I commit a sin in abasing myself so that you might be exalted, because I preached God's gospel without cost to you? I robbed other churches by

accepting support from them in order to serve you. And when I was with you and was in want, I did not burden any one, for my needs were supplied by the brethren who came from Macedonia. So I refrained and will refrain from burdening you in any way. As the truth of Christ is in me, this boast of mine shall not be silenced in the regions of Achaia. And why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do! And what I do I will continue to do, in order to undermine the claim of those who would like to claim that in their boasted mission they work on the same terms as we do. For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is not strange if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds (2 Cor. 11:1-15).

These persons who have come from Jerusalem to Antioch are portrayed as being far more than confusing Christians there. They are creating mental anguish among Gentile members of the Antioch church by threatening them with exclusion from salvation, unless they undergo circumcision. For Paul, the *truth of the gospel* is at stake because a move into the realm of cultic religion is a move away from the realm of Christ (Gal. 1:6), a retrogression into the enslaving state of affairs that reigned before Christ's coming (Gal. 4:9; 5:4). Having had an apocalyptic encounter with the resurrected Jesus (Gal. 1:12), Paul was compelled to see in it a clear sign that God stood on the side of the Crucified Messiah, who was the Messiah of God who proclaimed the church as the church of God. Hence, Paul understood the gospel as synonymous with the message about the cross (1 Cor. 1:18). Hence, for Paul, gospel life consisted in being crucified with Jesus. Gospel living renders disciple vulnerable. He is sent like a lamb among wolves. He will be exposed to unmitigated suffering, betrayal and rejection. Thus will he carry in his body the crucifixion of Jesus, and thereby experience in his body the resurrection of Jesus, also. Gospel life places us squarely in the midst of life, and demonstrates the inherent incompatibility between apocalypse and cultic religion.

For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we are weak in him, but in dealing with you we shall live with him by the power of God (2 Corinthians 13:4).

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Galatians 2:20).

... always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies (2 Corinthians 4:10).

Testimony to *the truth of the gospel* brought Paul face to face with his fragility. He was conscious that he bore the treasure of *the truth of the gospel* in an earthen vessel. He was also convinced of such necessity because it would demonstrate that the excessive power inherent and operative in the proclamation of the gospel, belongs to God alone. Gospel life was established on the basis of the sustenance provided to the evangelist amidst trials and tribulations in the course of the proclamation of *the truth of the gospel*.

6. Paul's Apocalyptic and a Cross Centered Spirituality



In his account of the Jerusalem conference Paul says his participation was an apocalyptic matter (Gal. 2:2), and that he rejected the attempts of False Brothers to subject the truth of the gospel to the Law. For Paul, the gospel is God's immediate word. It is the word that God Himself speaks at the present moment. It is apocalypse. Therefore, the transmitter in OT parlance – the messenger, must remain faithful to the content of the message in the interpretation. In his consideration of gospel as apocalypse, Paul is essentially concerned with the manner of interpretation, not as we understand the difference between Scripture and Tradition.

Paul when he was known as Saul, had spent much energy persecuting the church on account of his fidelity to 'religion' (Gal. 1:13-14). But with God's apocalyptic call he saw that in his earlier life he was tragically mistaken as to the 'locus' of God's activity. As a zealous Pharisee Paul viewed Judaism as the true way of worshipping and pleasing God. But after his apocalyptic call at God's hands, he saw that Judaism was being revealed as only a 'religion' as distinguished from God's apocalypse and new creative act in Christ. When God himself stepped in on the scene of Paul's life, Paul saw that in the head on collision between the Law (in its interpretation and practiced in Israel) and Jesus, God stood on Jesus' side, not on the side of the condemning Law. Paul's call to be an 'apostle' did not come in what he perceived to be and human religion, but in God's immediate apocalypse of his son. So, in Gal. 1:15-16 Paul does not speak of being converted from one religion to another – from Judaism to Christianity. He says with the advent of Christ acts of religion end – acts of religion as seen personified in the insistence of the Mosaic Law, particularly circumcision.

For Paul, the gospel truth is apocalyptic, which he refers to by the phrase 'my gospel' (Rom. 2:16; 16:25). It was apocalypse (Gal. 1:1, 11-12) that made Paul and apostle of the Gentiles (Rom. 11:13), set apart for the gospel of God (Rom. 1:1).

The apocalyptic gospel truth convinced Paul that the gospel is God's power for salvation ... for in it (the gospel), the righteousness of God is revealed through the faith of Jesus Christ (the Greek rendition – *dia pisteos Yesu Christou* – means the faith that belongs to Jesus as a subjective genitive, and therefore, refers to the faithfulness of Jesus manifested in his obedience to the Father's will unto death). Hence, Paul deliberately chose to preach nothing other than Jesus Christ crucified (1 Cor 1:22-24; 2:2).

*For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom,
but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to
Gentiles,
but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power
of God and the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:22-24)*

*When I came to you, brethren, I did not come proclaiming to you the
testimony of God in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know
nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Cor. 2:2)*

7. Paul's Apocalyptic and Isolation

Not long after his call to preach the gospel to Gentiles, Paul spent the next decade of his life 38-48 AD as an Evangelist of the Antioch church working in collaboration with Barnabas, preaching Christ both the areas surrounding Antioch in Syria, and in the region somewhat further to the west, Cilicia, Galatia (cf. Gal. 1;21-24; 2:11). This period ended when not long after the conference of Jerusalem Paul experienced a traumatic estrangement with the church of Antioch and a painful break with Barnabas (Gal. 2;11-14). It was around the beginning of this second period 48-49 AD that Paul came to Galatia.

The Paul we know from Acts of the Apostles is a collaborator of Barnabas, who acts as the junior partner in a Gentile mission sponsored by the Antioch church (Acts 13:1-5). Luke portrays Barnabas as one of the giants of the Early Church. His name at birth was Joseph but fellow Christians called him in Aramaic, Barnabas, a name given him by apostle in Jerusalem, translated by Luke for his Greek readers as 'son of encouragement' (Acts 4:36). Luke presents him as a man of thoroughly Jewish lineage, a prosperous Levite, who functions as a well known leader among the Jews who form the Jerusalem church. When news reached Jerusalem that the Hellenists broke the boundary of Judaism by preaching the gospel to Gentiles in Antioch, the Jerusalem church dispatches the trustworthy Barnabas to look into the matter (Acts 11:22). There in Antioch, Barnabas perceives the grace of God and enters himself into the Gentile mission as it is pursued in that church (Acts 12:25-13:3; 14:4, 14). Now held in high respect by the Antioch church, Barnabas is dispatched back to Jerusalem for the conference (Acts 11:30, 15:2). For Luke, Barnabas proved trustworthy for the churches in Jerusalem and Antioch. Luke

portrays the extensive evangelical team work carried out by Barnabas and Paul. Initially, Barnabas was the senior partner, because he refers in the first stages to Barnabas and Paul (Acts 11:30; 12:25; 13:2,7 – It is only during the 1st missionary journey that Luke will change the sequence of name, and begin to refer to Paul and Barnabas – Acts 13:43, 46, 50; but the order is briefly reversed in Acts 14:12, and 14 (B & P), before it is resumed in Acts 14:20; 15:2 (P & B); - the order is reversed again in Acts 15:12 (B & P) – reversed again in Acts 15:22 (P & B) – and again in Acts 15:25 (B & P) – and in Acts 15:35 it is Paul and Barnabas once more). It is our view that the repeated reversal of the sequence of the two names back and forth from Barnabas and Paul to Paul and Barnabas, reflects the simmering tension between the two men on account of the circumcision free Gentile mission in the face of opposition from those within the Jerusalem church who advocated a Law observant mission to Gentiles. It also reflects the emerging leadership of Paul, as an evangelist, who is breaking free from the shadow of Barnabas. It is another hint that the Pauline churches were not established as ‘daughter churches’ of Antioch and Jerusalem which were Law observant. The Pauline churches were not begetting children into the tyranny of Law observance (Gal 3:24-26, 31; 4:25) and therefore into slavery, unlike the Jerusalem church. One recalls how Paul recounts the falling away of Barnabas in Gal. 2:13, which is also narrated in Acts 15:37-41.

And with him the rest of the Jews acted insincerely, so that even Barnabas was carried away by their insincerity (Gal. 2:13).

And Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark, But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them to the work, And there arose a sharp contention, so that they separated from each other; Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and departed, being commended by the brethren to the grace of the Lord. And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches (Acts 15:37-41)

The Paul known to the Galatians is not an evangelist working shoulder to shoulder with Barnabas, nor a missionary acting under the authorization of any church (Gal. 1:1). So, he tells the story of the Jerusalem conference in a form suited to the Galatian setting. In Jerusalem the *truth of the gospel* demanded that he wage war against False Brothers who were intent on *compelling* the circumcision of Titus (Gal. 2:3). In Galatia that same truth of the gospel makes it necessary that he now wage war against the Teachers who were intent on compelling the circumcision of Galatians (Gal. 6:12).

No longer working in the company of Barnabas, Paul now he was isolated as a lone Evangelist. The divorce from the Antioch church and the mutual suspicion between himself and the Jerusalem church, deepened his major theological conviction that God was making things right in the world by the faithful death of Christ rather

than by the observance of the Sinaitic law (Gal. 2:11-21). Extremely confident of his own call directly from God quite apart from ecclesiastical sponsorship (Gal. 1:1; 4:27), Paul was also convinced that God was creating his world wide church both from Jews – assuming their continuance of law observance so long as it did not hinder fellowship with Gentile Christians, - and from uncircumcised Gentiles (Gal. 2:7, 9). The Galatian churches Gentile in their entirety, were not founded ‘daughter churches’ either of Jerusalem or Antioch. They understood themselves to be the children of God himself born by the power of the Pauline Gospel. It is our hypothesis that churches evangelized during the first missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas recounted in Acts 13-14, at Derbe, Lystra, Iconium and Antioch of Pisidia were part of the Galatian churches spanning Asia Minor. Even in the Antioch church, there were uncircumcised members. The Jewish Christians observed the Law, while the Gentile Christians were circumcision free. As the Jerusalem council concurred there were thought to be two separate lines of mission: one Law observant and to Jews, the other Law less and to Gentiles.

When Paul left Galatia and for sometime there after, the churches were stable and at peace, Spirit filled and enthusiastic in their life (Gal. 1:6; 4:14-15). Not very long after Paul’s departure a group of Christian Jewish Evangelists – The Teachers – came to Galatia preaching with considerable effect a gospel quite different from that proclaimed by Paul. First the Teachers claimed to be connected in a significant way to the church of Jerusalem. Second, they centered their message in the covenantal Sinaitic Law, identifying as the venerable and permanent word of God, confined to eternity by God’s Messiah. We do not know where Paul was when he received the bad news; we presume he was in Macedonia or Achaia. The tranquility of the Antioch church as well as the Galatian churches were shattered when the Teachers who insisted on circumcision threatened Gentile with expulsion from God’s people. Paul was isolated by his conviction founded on apocalyptic *truth of the gospel*.

8. Conclusion

Unless *the gospel truth* becomes my personal apocalyptic, as it was in the life of Paul, a disciple will not be freed from cultic religion. The ultimate test remains in the personal experience of Paul’s apocalyptic baptismal formula ‘There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus’ (Gal. 3:28). Gospel as apocalyptic is the key to be liberated from the tyranny of enslavement to cultic religion. Gospel as apocalyptic becomes the stepping stone to worship ‘in spirit and in truth.’ Fasting and prayer must prepare for the apocalyptic – open our minds and hearts to ‘what no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor heart of man conceived!’ Such is the liberative power of the gospel apocalyptic!

Adveniat Regum Tuum Eucharisticum

