

PAUL AND THE PARTING OF THE WAYS  
(Reprint from article in *The Jewish Heritage* by Dr. Ellis Rivkin)

How did Jesus who came as a Messiah for the Jews become Christ? How did an apocalyptic visionary with a message for the poor, the humble, the downtrodden, and the rejected of his people become the risen Lord? How did a helpless crucified victim of Roman power become the son of God whose death brought eternal life? How did a simple teacher from Galilee become the heir of the Roman Empire and redemptive God for much of mankind?

And some other questions. How did it come about that the redeeming Christ was irresistible in the pagan world and yet made little headway among the Jews? What was there about Judaism that enabled it to give birth to a religion that won a world, without itself being overwhelmed by its own creation? Yet why was Judaism no match for Christianity in the struggle for the souls of the decaying, pagan world?

These questions are indeed crucial ones, and they require answers adequate to the problems they raise. They must be answers that carry conviction because they clarify the phenomena and not because they underwrite our preconceptions. A depreciation of the Christian doctrine of the redemptive Christ makes its victory over paganism incomprehensible. Christianity must have been more adequate than Judaism for the needs of Gentiles suffering in the disintegrating societies of the ancient world. Otherwise Judaism not Christianity would have triumphed. Christianity therefore must have possessed certain crucial elements that were not present in Judaism. On the other hand, the Judaism that flourished in the Roman Empire must have been adequate to the needs of those who lived it, for there is no question that it maintained its integrity against the powerful doctrines of Christianity\*. The problem is therefore not to determine which is the truer religion but rather to comprehend the historical processes that brought about the separation of Christianity from Judaism, that enabled Christianity to be so successful, and that preserved Judaism as an independent and viable religion.

The historical Jesus belongs to Jews and Judaism even though most Jews rejected his claims, and even though his Judaism was a deviant form of Pharisaism. He came for Jews, he ministered to Jews, he sought to usher in the kingdom of God for Jews, his message was expressed in the language of Judaism, and his immediate disciples were Jews. The historical Jesus survives in the Gospels as a human being. The immediate disciples of Jesus had known him as a Jewish teacher who had come to his fellow Jews with the message of the imminent coming of the kingdom of God; and since they themselves were Jews, they were unable to disassociate their belief in the resurrected Jesus from their intimate knowledge of the Jesus who had healed the sick, driven out the demons, quarreled with the Pharisees, and who had been arrested and crucified.

Such a Jesus might have an appeal to some Jews, but little at all to Gentiles, especially if circumcision and the observance of the law were as essential for salvation as was the belief in Jesus as the resurrected Messiah.

#### PAUL THE FOUNDER OF CHRISTIANITY

Paul was the true founder of Christianity. He concentrated on the crucifixion of Jesus and its redemptive meaning, while he ignored the actual life and teachings of Jesus. What Jesus had said was of little consequence; but what had happened to him, for him, and by

him was the turning point in human history. God the Father had given His son to mankind so that through his-death sin—itsself might be crucified and the believing who had taken on Christ would be resurrected to life eternal. Faith in the redemptive power of Christ was absolutely necessary for salvation; the mitzvah (act of the Law) system of salvation of Pharisaic Judaism was rejected as a hindrance; all who believed in the Christ were the true members of Israel.

How did Paul come to such radical conclusions? Why did he reject so totally the Judaism of his earlier years? Paul had been a Pharisee (Philippians 3:4-6; cf. Galatians 1:13-14:1); he considered himself to have been more advanced in his Judaism than most of his fellow Jews (Galatians 1:14), he had been a rabid persecutor of the early Christians (Galatians 1:13» Philippians 3:6). Suddenly he had been transfigured, and he was totally transformed. The rest of his life was dedicated to fervent and agitated spread of the gospel, of the Christ crucified and the Christ resurrected, and this gospel he preached primarily to the Gentiles.

### WHY PAUL REACTED AGAINST PHARISAISM

Paul's transformation from persecutor to persecuted, from a zealous devotee of the law to its annihilator, from a Hebrew of the Hebrews to the apostle to the Gentiles is closely bound up with the character of Pharisaism. The Pharisees were the intellectual and religious leaders of the vast majority of the Jews .in the days of Jesus and Paul. They were the *hahamim* and the *soferim*, i.e., the sages and the scholars. Hillel had been one of the great Pharisaic teachers. Gamaliel another. These Pharisaic teachers had developed Judaism into a mitzvah system of salvation, one that insists that personal salvation in the world to come is dependent on performing the *mitzvot*, i.e., the authoritative religious acts. These *mitzvot* were assumed to have divine authority, whether they were specifically commanded in the Pentateuch or by the Oral Law of the Pharisaic legislators. This was the only way an individual could achieve salvation or find favor in the sight of God. It was a system that placed full responsibility on the individual. No intermediary stood between the individual and God, who had commanded the *mitzvot*.

The *mitzvah* system is thus dependent on internalized authority. The young child incorporated into himself the teaching of his parents as to which acts (*mitzvot*) please God and which acts (*averot*, sins) displease Him. Failure to keep the *mitzvot* creates feelings of guilt; the fulfillment of the *mitzvot* gives comfort and reassurance. For most Jews this was highly satisfying precisely because it was an internalized religion offering individual salvation to its faithful adherents. But what of an individual whose early life experiences were such that he had great difficulty in the process of internalizing the religious demands taught by his parents? What if in such a person the wish to overthrow and to defy first parental authority and then God's authority was so powerful that the demands of the *mitzvot* became a relentless source of guilt and pain? Such an individual might fight his rebellious impulses by being over-zealous in the performance of the *mitzvot* and by becoming an archpersecutor of those who deviated in any way from the *mitzvah* system. This very over-zealousness which aimed at stilling the impulses to rebel might actually make these impulses more powerful, even though they had been disassociated successfully from the rest of the personality. Under certain conditions, a complete reversal might occur if the disassociated impulses burst through the restraining defenses. The persecutor might then seek persecution; the zealot for *mitzvot* might become the arch

enemy of the *mitzvah* system; the champion of the chosen people might turn into an apostle to the Gentiles.

#### PAUL BECOMES APOSTLE TO THE GENTILES

It would seem that something of this sort must have happened to Paul. He felt that the Law itself had stirred up within him the wish to sin and violate it. He says that if the Law had not commanded "thou shalt not covet," he would not have felt covetousness. Behind the Law lurked sin. The Law did not destroy the sinful impulses; it evoked them. Only when he had experienced Christ crucified and had freed himself from the Law - only then were the demands of the flesh crucified. Christ had redeemed him from the internal struggle with the demands of the mitzvah system and had given him the feeling that he was indeed a new creation. So thorough had been his transformation that he dedicated all his energies to the spread of his gospel (cf. Romans 7; Galatians 2; 15-21).

And Paul's gospel touched many an agonized soul in the Mediterranean world. Not that the Gentiles to whom he preached had undergone Paul's experience with the *mitzvah* system of salvation. Indeed, Paul had the least influence over those who lived the *mitzvah* system of salvation. The Gentiles who were drawn to Paul's teaching benefited by the emancipation from the Law only in the sense that it was no longer a hindrance to becoming a believer in Christ. The doctrine of Paul that had deep meaning for them was the emphasis on the redemption from sin that was made possible by God's grace through His son who was crucified so that eternal life would be assured for all those who believed. Paul's inner struggle with the *mitzvah* system was the means whereby he came to those beliefs which were to have such a vast influence, but in itself it was not the crucial message. Those converted to his gospel had never lived under the Law.

#### WHAT PAUL'S GOSPEL OFFERED

Paul's gospel promised triumph over death through identification with the crucified and resurrected Christ. But other religions offered equivalent promises. The mystery cults that flourished at this time promised immortality through participation in the rites of the living, dying, and resurrected gods of the cults. These cults were extremely popular.

Pharisaic Judaism likewise offered immortality through the *mitzvah* system. It taught that there was one God and Father who had revealed His will in the written and the oral Torah. This will involved the carrying out of *mitzvot* which affected all aspects of life. Among the *mitzvot* were those which provided for visiting the sick, burying the dead, ransoming of captives, and dowering of brides. Thus though Pharisaic Judaism lacked a dying and resurrected god, it offered that which the mystery cults did not have; a single cosmic God, yet a Father vitally concerned with the salvation of every individual, a system of *mitzvot* which was internalized and not limited to the cultic moments, and a religion which was very much concerned with social responsibility to the suffering and less fortunate.

#### WHAT PAUL TOOK FROM JUDAISM

Pauline Christianity uniquely combined certain features that were characteristic of Judaism with certain other features that had affinities to the mystery cults, and added that which was qualitatively different. The one cosmic yet fatherly God who had revealed His will in Scriptures is preserved by Paul. True, the Law of Scriptures is abolished, but its

promises are used to justify faith in the Christ. So too, the internalized character of Pharisaic Judaism is preserved even though the *mitzvot* are no longer internalized. When one truly accepted Christ, one's whole life was transformed by the Holy Spirit. Salvation was dependent on continually being in Christ. No true Christian was a Christian on a part-time basis. In this sense, Christianity maintained Pharisaism's emphasis on the total character of God's demands.

Similarly, Pauline Christianity preserved the tightly knit social character of Judaism. Every Jew who accepted the *mitzvah* system felt a closeness and responsibility for every other Jew who accepted the binding character of the *mitzvot*, the works commanded by the divinely revealed Written and Oral Law. So, too, every true Christian considered every other Christian as his brother in Christ, and he felt a responsibility for his welfare. Like the Jew under the *mitzvah* system, so the Christian who was in Christ visited the sick, clothed the naked, ransomed the captive, buried the dead, and aided the poor. Just as the Synagogue of Israel expressed the unity of those who sought salvation through *mitzvot* so the Church of God bound together those who sought salvation through faith in the Christ.

#### WHERE PAUL PARTED COMPANY

But the Pauline doctrine of the Christ also had close affinities to the mystery cults. Although Christianity was not a mystery cult, some of its doctrines and practices had the appeal of the latter. Jesus could certainly be viewed as a savior God who had lived, had died, and had been resurrected. Like the savior gods of the mystery cult, he could bestow eternal life on those who, through baptism, died with him and who thereby gained immortality through his resurrection. The communal meal of the true Christian believers likewise resembled cultic practices. In eating the bread, the Christian ate the body of Christ; in drinking the wine, they drank his blood. In this way Christ entered their bodies and transformed them.

An additional link between Pauline Christianity and the mystery cults was the appeal to an ancient god whose power to save was attested by ancient revelations and a devoted priesthood. Too much was at stake for the individual to trust his immortality to an untried savior God. Paul pointed to the ancient God of Israel and to his revealed Scriptures as proof that Jesus was the very son of this renowned God and therefore no upstart or usurper. The Christ was the fulfillment of the promise made by God to Abraham, and he was therefore prior even to the giving of the Law (cf. Galatians 3). Thus Jesus was the very embodiment of the eternal God and Father of the Scriptures and of the traditions of the Pharisees.

Links and affinities unquestionably exist which bind Pauline Christianity to both Judaism and the mystery cults. These, however, were not elements that Paul mechanically combined into a composite. Paul's teachings contain these elements, but they are transmuted by the formative principle of the redemptive Christ. It was this principle that ultimately was responsible for Christianity's great success. The appeal of the mystery cults with its savior gods and the appeal of Judaism with its one God and Father, its revealed Scriptures, its ethical, moral and social concern, its emphasis on religion as permeating all of life, and its promise of salvation in the future life - these were experienced through the Christ who had died to free man from sin. The actual identification of the true believer with a man-God who had so recently lived and suffered

as a human being and yet was the son of the Father God of ancient Judaism was the crucial feature that made Paul's doctrines virtually irresistible. Here were the promises of Judaism without the *mitzvah* system; here was the mystery cultic experience without its polytheism, its amorality, and its social disinterestedness; here too was the overcoming of sin, death, and suffering through a human God who had personally experienced agony and death for *each* individual -such a vital and intense formulation that structured both

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