

PAUL, ARABIA, AND ELIJAH (GALATIANS 1:17)

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We don't know, say most of the commentators, why Paul went to Arabia or what he did there. We aren't even sure which bit of "Arabia" he visited.

In what is, for Paul, an unusually long autobiographical section (Gal 1:11–2:21), he describes the events leading up to and following from his dramatic experience on the road to Damascus, including two visits to Jerusalem, his confrontation with Peter at Antioch—and his trip to Arabia. Whatever precise reasons one gives for this lengthy account, it clearly has something to do with reinforcing the basic point he enunciates in 1:11–12: he received his gospel message not from other human sources (to whom, by implication, his hearers might appeal, over his head, for a more accurate version) but rather by "a revelation of Jesus Christ" (1:12).

What comes next is particularly significant. He first describes his "former life in Judaism," a life characterized by "extreme zeal for the traditions of my fathers" (περισσοτέρως ζηλωτής ὑπάρχων τῶν πατρικῶν μου παραδόσεων), which zeal led him "to persecute and ravage the church of God" (1:13–14; see also Phil 3:5–6). He then continues:

But when the God who set me apart from my mother's womb and called me through his grace was pleased to reveal his son in me, so that I might be his herald among the nations, at once I did not confer with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus. (Gal. 1:15–17)

Why Arabia? Some think it was a time of solitary meditation, in preparation for the Gentile mission; others, that it was Paul's first attempt at Gentile evangelism.¹ Where was "Arabia," anyway, at that time? No really precise or attractive

¹ On the meditation hypothesis, see, e.g., E. de W. Burton, *A Critical and Exegetical Com-*

answers have been forthcoming to these quite natural questions.² Most agree that the main point Paul is making in the passage is that he did *not* go to Jerusalem. But the question of Arabia is still a puzzle. I wish to propose a solution to it.

Paul indicates in 1:14 that he belonged, before his conversion, to the tradition of "zeal for the law." This zeal led him not just into zealous study and prayer but into violent action.³ Zeal of this sort was part of a long tradition within Judaism, looking back to particular scriptural and historical models. Of these, the best known was Phinehas, whose brief moment of glory appears in Num 25:7–13, when he intervened to kill a Jewish man consorting with a Moabite woman. As M. Hengel has shown in considerable detail, Phinehas remained as a model for subsequent "zealous" activity, not least in the Maccabean period, when the same issue (compromise with pagans and paganism) was perceived to be at stake.⁴ In these developed traditions, the other figure

mentary on the Epistle to the Galatians (ICC; Edinburgh: Clark, 1921) 55–57 (arguing that the trip to Arabia is governed by the previous phrase, in which Paul denies that he "communicated with flesh and blood"); Joachim Rohde, *Der Brief des Paulus an die Galater* (THKNT; Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1989) 62–63. On the evangelism hypothesis, see H. D. Betz, *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Churches in Galatia* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 74 (admitting that this is an assumption); F. F. Bruce, *Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 81–82; idem, *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 96; R. Y. K. Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 86; followed now by J. Murphy-O'Connor, "Paul in Arabia," *CBQ* 55 (1993) 732–37; S. A. Cummins, *Paul and the Crucified Christ in Antioch: Maccabean Martyrdom and Galatians 1 and 2* (D. Phil. thesis, Oxford University, 1994) 175–76. A commonly repeated argument is that this explains the subsequent hostility to Paul from the Nabatean king Aretas (2 Cor 11:32–33).

²They are left open, e.g., by H. Schlier, *Der Brief an die Galater* (MeyerK; 14th ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1971) 58; R. N. Longenecker, *Galatians* (WBC 41; Dallas: Word, 1990) 34; J. D. G. Dunn, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians* (Black's New Testament Commentaries; London: A. & C. Black, 1993) 70. On Arabia, see E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B. C.–135 A. D.)* (rev. ed.; Edinburgh: Clark, 1973) 1.574–86, and the discussions, with other literature, in Betz, *Galatians*, 73–74; Murphy-O'Connor, "Paul in Arabia."

³Against, e.g., Longenecker, *Galatians*, 29–30, who opposes J. B. Lightfoot (*Saint Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* [8th ed.; London: Macmillan, 1884] 81–82) despite Longenecker's citing at length passages about "zeal" that show that its regular meaning was "violent action, defending Israel's purity." See too Burton, *Epistle to the Galatians*, 47; Schlier, *An die Galater*, 51; Bruce, *Galatians*, 91. Lightfoot, as often, seems to have gotten the measure of the historical situation, in which the more "zealous" wing of the Pharisees merged without difficulty into the general movement, part of which later took the name "Zealot." See N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) chap. 7; Dunn, *Galatians*, 60–62; idem, *The Theology of Paul's Letter to the Galatians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 67–69.

⁴Martin Hengel, *The Zealots: Investigations into the Jewish Freedom Movement in the Period from Herod I until 70 A.D.* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1961; reprint, 1989) 149–77. The link

who emerges prominently is Elijah. The reason is again obvious: Elijah, too, acted zealously, killing the prophets of Baal who were leading Israel into paganism.⁵ So strong, indeed, is the connection between Phinehas and Elijah in the popular consciousness of “zeal,” not least in the first century, that the two figures are actually merged in several traditions, with Phinehas-like attributes being credited to Elijah and vice versa.⁶

Elijah, too, was clearly a man of “zeal.” “I have been very zealous for YHWH of Hosts,” he says (LXX: Ζηλῶν ἐζήλωκα τῷ κυρίῳ παντοκράτορι) (1 Kgs 19:14). His zeal, of course, had consisted precisely in slaying the prophets of Baal, as recounted in the previous chapter. But he had been stopped in his tracks, confronted by Ahab and Jezebel with a threat to his life (19:1–2); and he had run away “to Horeb, the mount of God” (19:8), apparently to resign his prophetic commission.⁷ There, in the famous story, he was met by earthquake, wind, and fire, but YHWH was in none of them. Finally he heard “a still small voice,” inquiring why he was there.⁸ His explanation, as we just saw: great zeal, and now great disappointment. “I alone am left, and they seek my life.” Back comes the answer:

Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place. Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall kill; and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill. Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him. (1 Kgs 19:15–18)

What has this to do with Galatians?

Saul of Tarsus, prior to his conversion, was a “zealous” Pharisee. As I have

between the Maccabean revolt and Phinehas is made explicit in 1 Macc 2:26; in the next verse Matathias summons his followers with this cry: ὁ ζηλῶν τῷ νόμῳ καὶ ἰσταν διαθήκην ἐξελεύσεται ὀπίσω μου. See too Sir 45:23. Josephus in his parallel passage (*Ant.* 12 §271) has omitted the reference to Phinehas (for reasons discussed in Hengel, *Zealots*, 155–56), and has Matthias cry, εἴ τις ζηλωτῆς ἐστὶν τῶν πατριῶν ἐθνῶν καὶ τῆς τοῦ θεοῦ θρησκείας, ἐπέσθω. On the traditions of “zeal” in the Second Temple period, see the convenient summary in David Rhoads, “Zealots,” *ABD* 6.1044. A striking passage is Philo, *Spec. Leg.* 2.253: one who commits perjury is unlikely to escape human punishment, “for there are thousands who have their eyes upon him full of zeal for the laws (ζηλωταὶ νόμων), strictest guardians of the ancestral institutions (φύλακες τῶν πατριῶν ἀκριβέστατοι), merciless to those who do anything to subvert them.”

⁵ 1 Kings 18; cf. 1 Macc 2:58, where Elijah’s “zeal for the law” is the reason for his being taken up into heaven.

⁶ For details, see Hengel, *Zealots*, 156–71; see, e.g., *Ps.-Philo* 48.1. Among the remarkable things attributed to Phinehas is his “making atonement” for Israel; his zealous activity, it was believed in some quarters, turned away the divine wrath (see below).

⁷ See E. von Nordheim, “Ein Prophet kündigt Sein Amt auf (Elia am Horeb),” *Bib* 59 (1979) 153–73; Jerome T. Walsh, “Elijah,” *ABD* 2.465.

⁸ קָרָא בְּקוֹל קוֹל קָטָן: LXX φωνὴ αὐρᾶς λεπτῆς (the translation is disputed).

suggested elsewhere, this means that he belonged to the Shammaite school and was ready to take the law into his own hands and act even when the official authorities were apparently negligent.⁹ One who had “advanced beyond most of his contemporaries” in his study and knowledge of Jewish law and lore would undoubtedly have been well aware of the Phinehas/Elijah tradition; one who had come to the conclusion that “zeal” was the only proper response to the crisis facing Israel would have been ready to follow the Maccabees in imitating Phinehas/Elijah. This did not mean that Saul was a member of something called “the Zealot party,” for at that time it is quite likely that things were not so formalized.¹⁰ It does mean that he sympathized, and acted in tune, with those who were choosing the route of violence against Jews who were regarded as traitors. Someone in this position would naturally choose certain appropriate styles of action, based on scriptural and traditional models, in the belief that Israel’s God would vindicate such action. That, it appears, is what Saul of Tarsus did.

Saul saw himself, I suggest, acting out the model of Phinehas and/or Elijah. His zeal led him into physical violence against those whom he saw as the heirs and successors of the compromised Jews of Numbers 25 and the Baal worshipers of 1 Kings 18 (see Acts 22:3–5). He “was persecuting the church with great violence and was trying to destroy it” (καθ’ ὑπερβολὴν ἐδίωκον τὴν ἐκκλησίαν τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ ἐπόρθουν αὐτήν [Gal 1:13]). However, when stopped in his tracks by the revelation on the road to Damascus, he again did what Elijah did. He went off to Mount Sinai.¹¹ The word “Arabia” is very imprecise in Paul’s day, covering the enormous area to the south and east of Palestine; but one thing we know for sure is that, for Paul, “Arabia” was the location of Mount Sinai. Indeed, Gal 1:17, our present passage, and 4:25, “for Sinai is a mountain in Arabia,” are the only two occurrences of Ἀραβία in the whole New Testament.¹² Saul of Tarsus then “returned to Damascus” (καὶ πάλιν ὑπέστρεψα εἰς

⁹ Wright, *People of God*, 192, 202. On Saul’s “zeal,” see too Acts 22:3; Phil 3:6. See too the Philo reference in n. 4 above.

¹⁰ See Wright, *People of God*, 177–81.

¹¹ Bruce allows for the possibility that Saul “communed with God in the wilderness where Moses and Elijah had communed with him centuries before,” but, seeing no reason for this, he prefers to think of the Arabian trip as evangelistic (*Galatians*, 96).

¹² The only occurrence of Ἀραβία is of course Acts 2:11. The place-name Ἀραβία occurs in Gal 4:25, the preferred reading being τὸ γὰρ Σινὰ ὄρος ἐστὶν ἐν τῇ Ἀραβίᾳ with $\kappa\epsilon\phi\alpha\lambda\alpha$, Origen, and others (so T. Zahn and Lightfoot, following Bentley and Lachmann); P46 has the same, only with δέ instead of γάρ. The other readings in this textually confused verse are easily explicable from this, emanating (no doubt) from scribes who had not grasped Paul’s meaning. Expecting to see the word Ἀγάρ, a scribe, faced with ΤΟΓΑΡΕΙΝΑ κτλ., would easily write ΤΟΓΑΡΕΙΝΑ; puzzled by the lack of a connective, another scribe would write ΤΟΔΕΑΓΑΡΕΙΝΑ, thus producing the reading of ABD and many others, favored by Nestle-Aland; recognizing that δέ was the wrong connective, another would add a γάρ to replace the one the first erroneous scribe had personalized, producing ΤΟΓΑΡΑΓΑΡΕΙΝΑ, the reading of Ψ and the majority. Lightfoot’s discussion, both of text and meaning, is still worth consulting (*Galatians*, 180–81, 192–93). For the main alternative view, see

Δαμασκόν), just like Elijah in 1 Kgs 19:15, where he is told Πορεύου ἀνάστρεφε εἰς τὴν ὁδὸν σου καὶ ἤξεις εἰς τὴν ὁδὸν ἐρήμου Δαμασκοῦ.¹³ And, in case this remarkable coincidence of themes is still unconvincing, we may note that in the same passage Paul describes his call in “prophetic” terms: “the God who set me apart from my mother’s womb . . .” (Gal 1:15; cf. Isa 49:1; Jer 1:5). Even though the Hebrew scriptures are silent about Elijah’s birth or call, this locates Paul firmly within the prophetic tradition of which Elijah was one of the supreme members.

If this is correct, Saul certainly did not go to Arabia in order to evangelize. He might have been doing what a puzzled zealous prophet might be expected to do: going back to the source to resign his commission. Alternatively, and perhaps preferably, he might be conceived of as doing what a puzzled, newly commissioned prophet might do, complaining (like Moses, Jeremiah, and others) that he is not able to undertake the work he has been assigned.¹⁴ And whatever still, small voice he may have heard, it was certainly not underwriting the kind of zeal in which he had been indulging up until then. His zeal was now to be redirected (Gal 4:18; see also 2 Cor 11:2). He was to become the herald of the new king.

At this point, of course, the parallel with Elijah suddenly ceases to be exact. Saul of Tarsus was being told, through his whole Damascus Road Christophany, that the way of zeal was not the way by which the eschatological mission was to be accomplished. Nevertheless, a parallel still holds. Elijah was sent with a message to anoint Hazael king of Syria and Jehu king of Israel; they, and Elijah’s own successor Elisha, would complete the work that Elijah’s zeal had begun. Saul was sent back from Arabia to be the herald of the newly anointed Messiah, Jesus (1:16, 23). His was the kingship that would challenge all pagan powers (4:1–11), that would create the true community of the people of God.¹⁵ Saul, having taken the Elijah of 1 Kings 18 as his role model in his persecuting zeal, took the Elijah of 1 Kings 19 as his role model when confronted, after his zealous triumph, with a totally new reality that made him

B. M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (London/New York: United Bible Societies, 1971) 596, and the discussions, e.g., in Betz, *Galatians*, 244–45; Dunn, *Galatians*, 250–52. On the meaning of this compressed verse, see below.

¹³ Thus, the argument that if Paul had gone so far south a return to Damascus would have been improbable misses the point (see Burton, *Epistle to the Galatians*, 58).

¹⁴ See N. Habel, “The Form and Significance of the Call Narratives,” *ZAW* 77 (1965) 297–323; B. J. Hubbard, *The Matthean Redaction of a Primitive Apostolic Commissioning: An Exegesis of Matthew 28:16–20* (SBLDS 19; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1974). I owe these references, and this point, to Prof. C. C. Newman.

¹⁵ See N. T. Wright, “Gospel and Theology in Galatians,” in *Gospel in Paul: Studies on Corinthians, Galatians and Romans for Richard N. Longenecker* (ed. L. A. Jervis and P. Richardson; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994) 222–39.

question his whole life and mission to date.¹⁶ If R. B. Hays is right that Paul saw Isa 49:1–6 as setting out his apostolic agenda,¹⁷ Paul may here be indicating that he had exchanged the role of Elijah-like zeal for the role of the servant. Instead of inflicting the wrath of YHWH on rebellious Jews, he would become the light of the nations.¹⁸ He now had a new role model, a new job description.

Supporting evidence that this train of thought, this intertextual echo, was indeed intended by Paul comes, as often enough with Galatians, in a parallel in Romans.¹⁹ In Rom 11:1–6, Paul faces the question: Granted the failure of Israel to believe in its Messiah, is salvation now impossible for a Jew? Paul replies with an indignant denial. He is, himself, the living proof to the contrary. But, though he may sometimes feel totally alone, he has heard the Sinai oracle that assures him this is not the case. He quotes from 1 Kgs 19:10 (repeated in 19:14): “Lord, they have killed your prophets and thrown down your altars; I alone am left, and they seek my life.” Paul stands as Elijah stands, the lonely representative of the true Israel. But he has discovered, as Elijah discovered, that this was in fact a considerable exaggeration: “I have left for myself seven thousand men, who have not bowed the knee to Baal” (1 Kgs 19:18; Rom 11:4). Even so, he says, in the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace (11:5; the last phrase presumably expounds “I have left for myself”). But, he concludes, if it is by grace, it is no longer by works, otherwise grace would not be grace (11:6). In other words, the parallel with Elijah must be understood in a way quite different from how Saul of Tarsus would have read it. The true, loyal people of YHWH are not, after all, defined by their allegiance to “the works of Torah,” the badges of Israel’s distinctiveness.²⁰ That is the route Paul has just described in Rom 10:2–4:

¹⁶ Professor Charles F. D. Moule, in a letter of 18 October 1995, suggests that Paul might have meant “going to Arabia” metaphorically. If his awareness of Elijah as a role model was sufficiently strong, he might have used the phrase to denote, simply, a period of Elijah-like questioning and, in a sense, recommissioning. I think this is unlikely. The whole context is anything but metaphorical; it purports to describe actual journeys to actual places. If Saul of Tarsus could set off hot-foot to Damascus (roughly 130 miles, as the crow flies), he could presumably travel to Sinai (roughly 240 miles, admittedly with less inhabited terrain en route).

¹⁷ R. B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1989) 168–73, 225–26 n. 48.

¹⁸ Gal 1:16b reflects Isa 49:6, increasing the probability that Paul’s reference to his “prophetic call” has Isaiah 49, not Jeremiah 1, as its primary reference. See esp. C. C. Newman, *Paul’s Glory-Christology: Tradition and Rhetoric* (NovTSup 69; Leiden/Berlin/Cologne: Brill, 1992) 205–6.

¹⁹ For what follows, see N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Edinburgh: Clark; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) chap. 13; Wright, “Romans and the Theology of Paul,” in *SBL 1992 Seminar Papers* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992) 184–213. On “intertextual echo,” see Hays, *Echoes of Scripture*, 70: “Paul’s sentences carry the weight of meanings acquired through earlier narrative and liturgical utterance.”

²⁰ For this understanding of “works,” see Wright, *People of God*, 238, and other references there.

μαρτυρῶ γὰρ αὐτοῖς ὅτι ζῆλον θεοῦ ἔχουσιν ἀλλ' οὐ κατ' ἐπίγνωσιν ἀγνοοῦντες γὰρ τὴν τοῦ θεοῦ δικαιοσύνην καὶ τὴν ἰδίαν δικαιοσύνην ζητοῦντες στήσαι, τῇ δικαιοσύνῃ τοῦ θεοῦ οὐχ ὑπετάγησαν. τέλος γὰρ νόμου Χριστός. . . .

We are surely right to catch here an autobiographical echo, looking back to Gal 1:14. The Christian Paul's verdict on the pre-Christian Saul is this: he had a zeal for Israel's God, but it was an ignorant zeal, seeking to establish a covenant membership for Jews and Jews only, and to see that identity marked out by the works of Torah. What Saul learned on the road to Damascus, and perhaps on Sinai too as he reflected on Elijah's post-zeal humiliation, was that the true remnant was a remnant defined by the divine call, not by works.²¹

How then does this reading of Gal 1:13–17 clarify the developing argument of the letter? Like so many of Paul's deliberate intertextual echoes, it undergirds and gives added depth to the surface meaning of the text. On the surface, Paul is saying:

I did not learn my gospel from other human beings, but from the one true God, through the revelation of his son. You Galatian ex-pagans need not suppose that you must go over my head to a message from Jerusalem, a message about Jewish ethnic identity, zeal for Torah, and the victory of the true God against paganism. I know all about that battle, and it was that that I renounced because of the gospel revelation.

Underneath this, the Elijah motif is saying:

I stood in the tradition of "zeal" going back to Phinehas and Elijah, the tradition that the Maccabean martyrs so nobly exemplified.²² Indeed, my persecution of the church was inspired by exactly this tradition. But the God of Israel called me, like Elijah, to step back from this zeal and to listen to him afresh. When I listened, I heard a voice telling me that the messianic victory over evil had already been won, and that I and my fellow Jewish Christians were the true remnant, saved by grace and marked out by faith, apart from ethnic identity and works of Torah. I therefore had to renounce my former zeal, and announce the true Messiah to the world.

The tension between Paul and Jerusalem then looks forward, as is often

²¹ See Rom 9:12. Is it a coincidence that Paul uses the motif of "making jealous" (παραζηλοῦν) in the same passage as his charge of "zeal" and his explicit evoking of 1 Kings 19? See Rom 10:19, quoting Deut 32:21 (ἐγὼ παραζηλώσω ὑμᾶς ἐπ' οὐκ ἔθνη), and 11:11, 14.

²² For the fusion of horizons between Maccabean martyr cult and the message of Galatians, see Cummins, *Crucified Christ in Antioch*.

enough observed, to the allegory of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar in chap. 4. In the middle of that we arrive at Sinai at last, not by an intertextual echo but, this time, on the surface:

Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman, one by the free. But the slave woman's son was born according to the flesh; the free woman's, through promise. Which is an allegory: for these two women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, born for slavery, which is Hagar. For Sinai is a mountain in Arabia; and [Sinai] corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is the mother of us all. (Gal 4:22–26)²³

In setting up the allegory of the two sons, Paul puts Mount Sinai, the place of Torah, along with Hagar, the Arabian woman. “For Sinai is a mountain in Arabia”; that is, Sinai is located in the Hagar country. Sinai, with these Hagar overtones, then corresponds to “present Jerusalem,” that is, the city from which, as the erstwhile Saul of Tarsus knew only too well, the children “according to the flesh” mounted persecution against the “the Israel of God” (6:16). Small wonder, then, that he did not go to Jerusalem to get his gospel investigated or validated. That, ironically, would have been to court a new sort of compromise. Paul's own trip to Sinai, still more ironically, had taught him that the regular appeal to Sinai—the appeal to Torah and all that it had come to stand for within the traditions of “zeal”—was standing in the way of the fulfillment of the very promises for which that tradition thought it was fighting. There was, to be sure, still something to be “zealous” about, but it did not correspond to the zeal either of Saul of Tarsus or of the “troublers” in Galatia:

ζηλοῦσιν ὑμᾶς οὐ καλῶς, ἀλλὰ ἐκκληῖσαι ὑμᾶς θέλουσιν, ἵνα αὐτοὺς ζηλοῦτε· καλὸν δὲ ζηλοῦσθαι ἐν καλῷ πάντοτε καὶ μὴ μόνον ἐν τῷ παρεῖναι με πρὸς ὑμᾶς, τέκνα μου, οὓς πάλιν ὠδίνω μέχρις οὗ μορφωθῇ Χριστὸς ἐν ὑμῖν. (Gal 4:17–18)²⁴

As with several other aspects of his thought (such as, for instance, the famous δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ²⁵), Paul was able to reuse the concept of “zeal” within his reworked theology and praxis.

If this overall hypothesis about Paul, Arabia, and Elijah is correct, three concluding reflections may be in order. First, the picture of the pre-Christian Paul comes into considerably clearer focus. He was on the “zealous” wing of the Pharisees: a Shammaite, in fact, despite the gentler Hillelite leanings of his

²³ On the reading of v. 25, see n. 12 above.

²⁴ The punctuation is, of course, controversial. See too 2 Cor 11:2; and, for the tensions implicit in the early church at this point, see Acts 21:20.

²⁵ Rom 1:17; 3:21–26; and esp. 9:14; 10:3–4. See N. T. Wright, “‘That We Might Become the Righteousness of God’: Reflections on 2 Corinthians 5.21,” in *Pauline Theology, Volume II* (ed. D. M. Hay; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 200–208.

teacher Gamaliel. Saul belonged to the majority party among the pre-70 Pharisees, who, when given a chance, were prepared to use violence to defend the honor of their God and his Torah. Like many others in this movement, he looked back to the great heroes of zeal, Phinehas and Elijah, and almost certainly to Mattathias and Judas Maccabeus as more recent representatives of the same tradition. Actually, this not only sheds light on Saul of Tarsus but, by bringing Gal 1:13–17 into clearer focus, also illuminates the complex story of first-century Pharisaism itself.²⁶

Second, Saul's reasons for persecuting the young church are likewise clarified. It was not just that early Christianity followed a crucified Messiah, blasphemous though that idea would have seemed.²⁷ It was, more specifically, that the (Jewish) Christians, by denouncing the Temple and going soft on the Torah, were behaving in the compromised and traitorous way associated in Jewish tradition with the wilderness generation in the time of Phinehas, the Baal worshipers in the time of Elijah, and the hellenizers in the Maccabean period. Jesus was, for them, taking on the role of Temple and Torah; he was the place where the living God was made known. They were thus renegade Jews of the worst sort. They were, in Saul's eyes, no better than Baal worshipers. It was the divine mission of the zealous Shammaite to cut them off, root and branch. We may refer again to 4:17–19, and to the warning against "devouring one another" in 5:15.²⁸

Third, the Phinehas/Elijah tradition has interesting implications for the early Jewish atonement-theology that may have influenced Paul and others. As we saw, Phinehas's action was interpreted in an atoning sense within various rabbinic traditions. His zeal had the effect of "turning wrath away from Israel"; *Sipre Numbers* connects his action with Isa 53:12, "because he exposed his life to death."²⁹ So too Elijah, according to Sir 48:10, is destined to turn away the divine wrath before it breaks out in fury. Thus might zealous actions in any age be seen as part of the divine purpose, dealing with sin and so saving the people of God. But, for Paul, it was the death of Jesus at the hands of the pagans, not

²⁶ See Wright, *People of God*, 181–203.

²⁷ Gal 3:13 is regularly cited in this sense (M. Hengel, *The Pre-Christian Paul* [London: SCM; Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991] 83–84), though the matter is actually more complex than that (see Wright, *Climax of the Covenant*, chap. 7).

²⁸ This article was conceived, and the first draft written, before the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin on 4 November 1995. For students of the first century, not least of the internecine "zeal" of 66–70 CE, it was shocking and tragic, but not, alas, very surprising, to discover that a zealous young Torah student would kill someone offering peace with Israel's traditional enemies at the cost of a major Jewish symbol (in this case, land).

²⁹ See G. F. Moore, who points out that this intertextual echo "is meant to bring up the following context, 'and was numbered with the transgressors; he bore the sin of many, and intervened on behalf of transgressors.'" (*Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era: The Age of the Tannaim* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927–30] 1.549; 3.165 n. 252).

the defeat of the pagans at the hands of the heaven-sent zealous hero, that defeated evil once and for all: "he gave himself for our sins, to deliver us from this present evil age" (1:4). The cross offered the solution to the problem that "zeal" had sought to address. The revelation of the crucified, and now risen, Messiah was therefore sufficient to stop the zealous Saul in his tracks, to send him back like his role model to Sinai, and to convince him that the battle he was blindly fighting had already been won, and indeed that by fighting it he had been losing it. This gloriously paradoxical conclusion has, I submit, such a typically Pauline ring to it that it might even be regarded as an extra argument in favor of the hypothesis as a whole.³⁰

³⁰ I am grateful to Professors C. F. D. Moule, R. B. Hays, and C. C. Newman for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper. They are not, of course, responsible for its contents.

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