

Paul and The Two Diasporas

There are reasons that things happen as they do, whether in the Bible or in our everyday modern lives. When we can discover the reasons that some of our greatest Bible characters made the choices they did, it removes them from the world of myth and legend and places them into a world of being real people. As concerns our subject today, there are reasons that Paul taught as he taught, whom he taught, and (equally as important) *where* he chose to take his message of the Good News.

The fact is that there is no more important writer of the New Testament portion of the Bible than Paul. Especially in the congregations of Europe and the Western Hemisphere, the Church as we know it today is often called by scholars the Pauline Church... that is, the Church of Paul. Undeniably it is Paul's teachings far more than Christ's that form the core doctrines and orthodoxy of the modern church that I have come to call the Constantinian Church because it did not exist until the 4th century. It is Paul's teachings that form the basis for virtually all modern Systematic Theologies (of which there are several) as taught by Theological schools and used by Seminaries. It is mainly for this reason that we have approximately 3000 different Christian denominations. Why do Paul's teachings lead to so much fracturing and disagreement within the Body of Christ? As Peter said:

CJB 2 Peter 3: 15-16 ***¹⁵ And think of our Lord's patience as deliverance, just as our dear brother Sha'ul also wrote you, following the wisdom God gave him. ¹⁶ Indeed, he speaks about these things in all his letters. They contain some things that are hard to understand, things which the uninstructed and unstable distort, to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures.***

For those of you who are avid Bible students, you know that Paul can indeed be difficult to follow at times and he is often accused of being maddeningly contradictory. So, you should take comfort in knowing that even Peter who knew him personally also struggled with some of the things Paul had to say. Was the struggle that Peter disagreed with Paul taught and so this troubled him? There is no hint that was the case. The matter, then, had to do with Paul speaking in a way that at times made it hard for Peter to follow and figure out exactly what it

was that Paul was explaining. So, it is no wonder that even beyond those Jewish teachers and leaders who Peter just called uninstructed and unstable and thus they distort all of Scripture (meaning the Old Testament), there are countless other teachers over the centuries who are good and faithful men and women who tried hard to reconcile the various things Paul had to say and yet can't even agree among themselves on any number of issues. Thus, the many and various Christian denominations can have vastly differing doctrines concerning almost any biblical subject or principle, even though all claim the authority of the same person... Paul... taken from the same writings... his Epistles... as their primary source of truth.

We'll certainly not resolve this challenge today. However, I would like to speak to you about an important piece of the puzzle that is Paul, which only recent scholarship has brought to light. It has to do not only with **what** Paul said, but also with **where** he said it. Understanding where Paul took his message, along with just who Paul (the man) was, helps to unpack what he intended to impart to his listeners 2000 years ago, and what those instructions necessarily mean in our day.

Before we begin with that, some foundation needs to be laid. First, Paul spoke in the context and vocabulary of a 1st century Jew (no big leap, there). It seems that Greek may have been his first language, but he was also fluent in Hebrew. The definitions of the terms he regularly used were not necessarily the same in his era as how we might think those same terms are to mean in our time. To demonstrate what I mean I have in the past used an example of the English word "meal" as found in the KJV. In speaking about the Levitical sacrifices, the KJV words include something called the meal offering. It is from this that the Western concept of saying grace before eating in time came into practice. That is, the meal offering is taken to mean offering up to God a prayer that is said prior to eating a meal: breakfast, lunch and dinner. However, this interpretation is due to a misunderstanding of the intent of the word meal. Meal was meant to denote crushed grain, as in the term corn meal. Meal was always to be included with one's offering of an animal when one sacrificed. So, from this we learn that a word (even in English) can mean one thing at one time, and then because languages evolve eventually take on an entirely different meaning at a different

time....or as here, it's meaning was altogether misunderstood. The result? A complete misunderstanding and even the beginning of a new tradition.

This being the case, when we add to this fact that Paul's letters (that we call Epistles) were intended for a primarily Jewish audience... people raised in a Jewish household, within a Jewish culture, who all attended synagogues, with their religious background and history being a Jewish faith, then we need to understand that he assumed that certain religious matters and terms were already universally known and understood and so needed no further explanation or definition. He was wrong in his assessment.

Paul was an unusually learned and formally trained man, and so he used a high and lofty vocabulary that was at times too high and lofty for his Jewish readers and listeners. He belonged to a particular sect of Judaism called the Pharisees. He even described himself as a Pharisee of Pharisees, which is a way of saying that he was not only affiliated with that group, but that he was also fully subscribed to the ways and beliefs of the Pharisees to the degree of being a passionate leader of it. We learn in the New Testament that Paul moved from his birth home in Roman Tarsus and lived in Jerusalem for some time in order to be taught by Gamliel, one of the two preeminent religious teachers of his day, the other being Shamai. Those students of Gamliel come to him not just for the sake of knowledge, but rather to put themselves into a position to become anointed Rabbis. Paul was an officially anointed Rabbi and an intellectual. It is no wonder that a simple fisherman like Peter had trouble understanding some of what Paul said. Paul's words and his arguments were said at such a high level and were often so complex that the difficulty of following his meaning and logic is not unlike a modern Bible student struggling with the words and thoughts of our highest Ph.D. level academics. It's not that a student is questioning or challenging what is being taught, it's that often they literally don't understand what is being said.

Now, 20 centuries removed, Christian scholars, pastors and students trying to dissect Paul too often want to pick him up lock, stock and barrel and transport him into the 21st century, into a Western culture, stick him into a 3-piece suit and understand him that way. This is a serious error and no scholar would think to do

that with any other ancient literary work and its author, other than for the Holy Bible and its several authors.

One day, on his way to Damascus, Syria, the Pharisee Paul was confronted by the risen Christ who spoke to Paul from Heaven. The encounter was so impactful that it changed him to a Believer; but, it didn't change who Paul fundamentally was. Rather, like us all, he still thought and spoke as he always had. The context of his education and the knowledge he held, and his personal history didn't change. In his case, his context was as a learned Rabbi whose life was completely synagogue oriented as opposed to being Temple and Priesthood oriented. This meant he was Tradition oriented and was a Jewish Law scholar (as opposed to a Torah scholar, even though he seemed to know the Torah and the Prophets pretty well). This would be the lens through which he would understand what Messiah's coming meant, and the filter through which he would explain it to others.

As we read in his letters about Paul and the spread of the Gospel message into the gentile world of the Roman Empire, we find the names of the many cities that he visited. Familiar places like Ephesus, Athens, Rome, Antioch, Philippi, Thessalonica, Phrygia, Corinth and so many others. What we find is that Paul journeyed almost exclusively to the Western part of the Roman Empire, apparently consciously avoiding going to the East. Why would he do that? It certainly was not by accident or serendipity...there had to be a reason for such a choice. The Eastern Roman Empire was as full of Jews who had left the Holy Lands, and of gentiles in need of hearing the gospel message, as were those Jews and gentiles who lived in the West. But invariably Paul went to gentile cities in the West that had sufficiently large enough Jewish populations for that city to have at least one synagogue. It was there, at the town synagogue, that Paul would speak to an audience of mostly Jews. The gentiles attending were often as not those who had already chosen to adopt the Hebrew faith that we might call Judaism.

The historical reality is that during the era known as the Hellenistic period, which ran from about 320 B.C. to 150 A.D., Jews had begun living all over the known world, and most of the time their emigration was purely voluntary. The Hellenistic period is that era when Greek culture was the preferred and predominant. This is the same period when the 2nd Temple was enlarged as

Herod turned it into an awesome edifice. It was the period when Yeshua was born and served out His ministry here on earth. It was the period when the Apostles of Christ lived, including Paul. It was when all the writers of the New Testament lived and wrote various documents that only well after the end of the Hellenistic period were these documents gathered together and then by means of rigorous debates among the church bishops, some documents were deemed as divinely inspired, canonized (that is, a body of church officials decided they were to be added to the Bible) and thus was born what we today call the New Testament. The earliest we can trace as the beginning of a New Testament as being added to the Bible is the first part of the 3rd century, but most scholars will choose to say it was the 4th century when a council of bishops appointed by the Roman Emperor Constantine convened and determined the composition of this newer Testament...generally in the same forme as we find it today.

The dispersion of the Jews (again, mostly voluntarily) gained the name Diaspora; but what we find upon closer inspection is that this is too simplistic. Historically, there were two distinct Jewish Diasporas, and not one general Diaspora. There was an Eastern Diaspora and a Western Diaspora, and it was the Jews of the Western Diaspora and their gentile neighbors that Paul was led by the ***Ruach HaKodesh*** (the Holy Spirit) to approach.

If one could extend an imaginary line up the Jordan River, and all the way north, then we could generally define the Eastern Diaspora as all the continent of Asia that was to the east of that line. The Western Diaspora generally included all the lands surrounding the Mediterranean Sea: such as Greece and Italy, but this also reached as far as southern France, Egypt, and Asia Minor. The Holy Lands, which were but Roman provinces in New Testament times, was the unifying point for these two Diasporas. A unifying point was needed because of the great difference in the nature and character of the populations of Jews who made up each of these two Diasporas.

Sometimes modern historians look back in time and create labels for divisions of people in ways that the people who lived then would not have recognized or even considered. That is, historians will sometimes define elements of history, or locations, or people groups and give them names NOT because the people of that time defined things so sharply or in those terms, but rather because it is a

convenient tool to study and communicate information. However, that is not the case here concerning the two Jewish Diasporas. Documents and ancient artifacts from that time provide strong evidence that the Jews in NT times were quite self-aware of the significant differences between those Jews who settled in the east versus those who moved to the west inside the Roman Empire. And the primary difference involved language and the culture that was organically connected to it.

In the Western Diaspora the common language of the Jews was Greek, and to a lesser degree Latin. In the Eastern Diaspora the common language of the Jews was Aramaic and Hebrew. The land of Israel served as a kind of buffer zone or home base where some communities were predominately Greek speaking (such as Sepphoris) while others like Jesus' hometown of Nazareth were Aramaic and Hebrew speakers.

What is so significant about this reality is that as time passed, the language barrier among Jews created a deep cultural gap. As the historical results of Paul's travels show us, the culture of the Western Diaspora (that held a more Greek cultural orientation) was more open to the Messianic Hebrew faith than was the Eastern Diaspora (that held a more Hebrew cultural orientation). But again, the question is: why the huge difference? Why would language alone create an impregnable barrier to faith in Yeshua in one region, and be an open gateway for it in another?

No doubt the Tanach, the Hebrew Bible, was the central and common literature among all Jews whether of the Eastern or Western Diasporas and of course for those Jews living in the Holy Land. However, only the original Hebrew language Bible and its Aramaic translations were used in the east while it was the Greek translation of the Bible (called the Septuagint) that was used almost exclusively in the West. This is because in Paul's day few Jews among the Western Diaspora could even read or speak Hebrew or Aramaic; and within a few decades after Paul's day Hebrew was a dead language in the Western Diaspora (at least it was among the common Jews). That situation wouldn't change for several hundred years.

Let's push the pause button for a moment as I've hit you with a lot of information. Language is always a great separator of people in a society. If I can't communicate with you, then we can't form a relationship nor can we learn from one another or form a common culture. By a quirk in history, the Jews living in the western side of the Roman Empire found themselves in Greek speaking nations and so they adopted Greek as their first language for no other reason than everyone else spoke it. On the other hand, Jews in the eastern part of the Roman Empire found more Aramaic spoken. Since Aramaic and Hebrew are cousin languages, then it makes sense that in the eastern Roman Empire the Jewish population would speak one or both of these languages. Paul traveled, interestingly enough, to the Greek speaking part of the Diaspora who, for the most part, did not speak Hebrew.

To be clear, however, it needs to be said that this inability of the Western Diaspora Jews to speak Hebrew was not a rejection of their Hebrew heritage. Rather it was merely a reflection of the times, of the culture they lived in, and of geography. They lived within Greek and Latin speaking gentile cultures and so they adapted. This reality is proven in a number of ways. I've told many people that when traveling to a country you've never been in before, it can be very instructive to go to the local graveyards. Grave markers often contain a great deal of information about the culture and beliefs of those who are buried there. What has been found by archaeologists is that while the grave markers of Jews in the Western Diaspora during the Hellenistic period were inscribed in Greek, invariably there were some Hebrew symbols and often a few Hebrew words chiseled onto them as well. These Hebrew words were very simple Hebrew statements such as shalom (peace) or shalom al Yisrael (peace to Israel). Thus, these simple Hebrew phrases were not an indication of a working knowledge of the Hebrew language, but rather they were only mechanically written on tombstones as evidence of the deceased being a Jew and identifying with their Hebrew heritage. These Jews wanted to be remembered as Jews and so the few Hebrew words were essentially no more than the equivalent of well-known Jewish symbols like menorahs and palm branches.

But we find an entirely different scenario in the Eastern Diaspora. There the Jewish grave markers were written entirely in Hebrew and/or Aramaic. Greek was not used because these Jews of the east didn't speak Greek. Because the

Holy Land Rabbis were Hebrew speakers they quite naturally were much more connected with the Eastern Diaspora than with the Western. The result of the Rabbis of Judaism's deeply rooted connection with the Eastern Diaspora, but the equally disconnected relationship with the Western Diaspora Jews, wound up creating two very different Jewish cultures. Especially after 70 A.D. when Jerusalem was destroyed and most Rabbis were chased out of the vicinity, even out of the Holy Lands altogether, the firmly entrenched Rabbinical system that Yeshua had little good to say about, extended its reach and control and authority into the Eastern Diaspora, but was not able to do the same in the West. Why? Language.

This resulted in Paul having an advantage in the West. Few Rabbis spoke Greek, but Paul was a proficient Greek speaker. So, when Rabbi Paul offered to come to synagogues in the West, he was most welcome and the people were grateful since Rabbis had shunned them for a very long time.

Well before Christ was born a new Jewish literature created by these Holy Land Rabbis had been developing. Without going into great detail, this religious literature was the earliest stages of what eventually was called **Halachah**: Rabbinic Law. When this literature was gathered together many decades later it became known by names such as the Mishna and later still the Talmud. But the key to our lesson, today, is that the Rabbinical Law was taught only in Hebrew, because it was written only in Hebrew. This, of itself, made it more suitable to the Aramaic and Hebrew speaking Jews of the Eastern part of the Jewish Diaspora. Although its originating documents were from the Holy Lands, even the Jews living in Babylon eventually got into the act and contributed to the Talmud's development. Regardless, because it was written in Hebrew only the Hebrew speaking Jews of the Eastern Diaspora could use it. The Greek speaking Jews of the West had no ability to unlock its deep teachings and rulings.

In the West, however, the Jewish leadership also developed their own new Jewish literature called the Apocrypha and the Pseudepigraphica. It was (naturally) written in Greek... the language of the West... and so it was entirely rejected by the Rabbis of the Eastern Diaspora. Thus, in time the trusted and authoritative religious literature relied upon by the Eastern Diaspora became entirely different from what Western Diaspora Jews looked to. This reality

brought on yet another quite predictable consequence; the strict and voluminous Rabbinic Law that today dominates Judaism, and that became the common Jewish Law Code for the Eastern Diaspora, wasn't able to penetrate the Western Diaspora Jewish communities. In fact, records from the Hellenistic period show that even details of just how the Jews of the West celebrated Passover were quite different from how the Jews of the East celebrated it.

There is yet another factor that we need to consider; it was that during the Hellenistic period (the NT period) the Rabbinic Law was yet to be fully written out and so it was transmitted mostly by word of mouth... orally (thus the term Oral Law). On the other hand, Greek speakers of the Western Diaspora (including Greek speaking Christ followers) tended to write their traditions and doctrines down in Greek so that they could be more easily reproduced and transmitted. Although we won't pursue it today, when one studies the earliest so-called Church fathers we find that those church leaders who lived in the West seemed totally unfamiliar with Rabbinic Law and Tradition, while those in the East seemed to be acquainted with it.

What we find, then, is that as early as Paul's day, the Western Diaspora was cut-off from, and nearly unaffected by Rabbis, who went by Rabbinic law and tried to make that the ruling documents for the synagogues. By going to the West Paul didn't have to contend with a Jewish culture that was ruled by the Laws of Rabbinic Judaism. The people there were more in tune with the Torah Law (the Law of Moses) and as a result practiced a much simpler brand of Judaism, being totally unencumbered by the massive and growing volume of rules and regulations of Judaism. Ironically, if any disciple of Yeshua could have had some success in the Eastern Diaspora it might have been Paul since he was trained in the prestigious Rabbinical school of Gamliel in Jerusalem. He spoke Hebrew and Aramaic, and was himself a renowned Rabbi! On the other hand, the saved Paul would have easily surmised that his brethren in the East would probably have considered him a traitor to his faith of the highest degree, and he well understood that Rabbinic Judaism of itself had built a strong wall against the very message of Yeshua's redemptive acts that he was divinely commissioned to speak about. Result: Paul went West where the Jews were more receptive to his message.

In the end it was the lack of the ability of the Western Diaspora Jews to speak Hebrew that led to the Holy Land Rabbis inability to take a strictly Hebrew language Rabbinic Law to them. Thus, while there were numerous Yeshivas (Jewish religious schools) established in the east to produce more Rabbis, there is no record of even one school in the west until several centuries after Paul's time. This created a space for Paul to travel and deliver the message of Good News to the West and not surprisingly many thousands of the Jews living there were open to accepting it, especially since it came from the mouth of a Rabbi. While we read in the NT of so-called Judaizers that tended to follow after Paul and try to undo his teachings, they didn't seem to represent very much of a threat because they didn't hold much if any authority in the West. More than likely these Judaizers were not Rabbis but rather were a handful of zealous Jews who had learned the Rabbinic ways either in the Holy Lands or in the Eastern Diaspora, then moved to the West for some reason, and tried to convince their peers that what Paul was teaching ran counter to Rabbinic Judaism and thus ought to be rejected as heresy.

It also explains why the oldest extant New Testament documents were written in Greek; it was because that was the language of the Western Diaspora. But we need to also grasp that when we read Paul, he was a kind of hybrid individual who was comfortable in both Diasporas. He was born in Tarsus, not in the Holy Lands; so, Paul himself was a Western Diaspora Jew. Even so, he had bought into Rabbinic Judaism, which would have been his training from his great teacher, Gamliel. He apparently was a prize student, highly regarded, and with great zeal for his Rabbinic Judaism pursued new Believers in Yeshua in order to arrest them. Naturally he did his persecuting of Believers in the Holy Lands and in the Eastern Diaspora (not in the West). In fact, when we first meet Paul he was on the road to Damascus, Syria (part of the Eastern Diaspora) in order to hunt down some Jews that were suspected of following the teachings of this now dead carpenter from Nazareth, instead of adopting Rabbinic Judaism as was the accepted norm in that region.

Paul, of all the early apostles, understood well the schism between the Eastern and Western Diasporas, and he also well knew the underlying reasons for it. But, in some ways he also was responsible for widening this chasm between the 2 Diasporas with his message of Good News that at first went only to the West.

Therefore, when we read his writings in his several letters, we must take into account his worldview and his circumstances. For instance: for him, because he was a Rabbi, the term "the law" could mean essentially two different things depending on the context and on his audience. The Western Jews of course were aware of this strict Rabbinical law code that the Jews of the Eastern Diaspora had to adhere to; but they didn't know much if anything about its workings and they weren't made subject to them by their synagogue and community leaders. Therefore, when Paul spoke, he would at times speak of the Law of Moses and call it the law, and at other times speak of the Rabbinic Law and call it law, allowing the context to define which law he was referring to. This is some of what confused Peter (a Holy Land Jew) and Peter's disciples, and it's largely responsible for what has confused Christian scholars and Bible students over the last several centuries. That is, this has much to do with why Paul is interpreted in so many ways, almost all of them incorrect.

I hope this gives you a little more information to better understand Paul and to help explain his words to others and why the Gospel of Christ developed mostly in the Western Roman Empire before eventually spreading elsewhere. Without Bible history and Jewish history as a background, one cannot properly understand the meaning and intent of the biblical writers because they were operating in cultures and political scenes totally different than anything we know today. Paul is chief among those New Testament writers who can be the most challenging to ascertain his meaning and intent even in the best of circumstances. Nonetheless, all the writers of the Bible must be interpreted based upon their Hebrew faith and Hebrew historical background, or meaning is lost.