

### How St Paul understood the Bible

Paul had been brought up as a pious Jew, he had trained as a Pharisee in what we might now call rabbinic method and, until his conversion, he was 'zealous for the Law' – meaning the Torah, the Hebrew Bible. All that changed after his encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, when he embraced Jesus as his lord and used his considerable theological skills to preach the good news to non-Jews (Gentiles) as well as Jews in Asia Minor. But just how much did he really change? Throughout his life Paul regarded himself as a Jew, but a Jew who found in Christ the fulfilment of God's covenantal promise as revealed in the Hebrew Bible.

We can't know exactly how Paul used the Bible in his public preaching, but we do have his letters where he addressed specific issues and set out his pioneering theology. What we immediately notice is that although his letters are not peppered with *quotations* from the Bible, there are biblical *ideas* everywhere. As a Jewish scholar Paul had two major tasks to resolve: firstly, to show how the Bible allowed non-Jews to be included in God's covenant; secondly, that Jesus' life, death and resurrection had transformed the world for ever.

The way Paul tackled these two tasks was by using two characters from the Bible: Abraham and Adam.

Let's look at Abraham first. Here's the situation: Paul has been preaching the good news of the risen Christ to the people of Galatia but since he last visited them, they have been told by a group of conservative Jewish missionary converts to Christianity that in order to be full members of the church they needed to conform to the Torah or Law and that meant being circumcised. In his response Paul had to tread very carefully - he couldn't reject the Torah because it was revealed to Moses by God, but on the other hand it clearly made no sense to insist that non-Jews keep to Jewish laws. We sense his frustration, as he says to them in his letter to the Galatians, 'You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?' (Galatians 3:1).

Paul's justification is presented in a careful dissection of the Abraham story. Paul uses a rabbinic method of argument which strings together a series of Bible proof texts, which literally prove his point. The chief Bible proof texts he uses are from Genesis. Paul's argument in Galatians 3 is far from easy but it goes something like this: God made a covenant promise with Abraham that his descendants would become a great nation (Genesis 15:5) for *all* people (Genesis 18:18) - Gentiles and Jews. God made this covenant with Abraham long before he gave the Torah to Moses, so salvation does not depend on keeping to the Law but on having faith; Abraham had faith in God which God judged was sufficient to be treated as righteousness (Genesis 15:6).

And as for the ritual of circumcision which God commanded Abraham (Genesis 17:11) as a sign of the covenant, this is now optional, because Christ is the sign which replaces it. So, Paul concludes: 'For [in Christ Jesus] neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything' (Galatians 6:15).

So, what Paul has done is to give the Galatian Christians a ready-made response to the Jewish-Christian missionaries to prove biblically that obedience to the Law is not an entrance requirement into the Church and salvation.

Paul's treatment of the Bible raises several significant issues for us. Christians today sometimes use the proof-text method, but what are dangers of using the Bible in this way? The story of Abraham also makes us consider who are the insiders and who we treat as outsiders: what makes someone a Christian - do we continue to set up false 'entrance' requirements in terms of gender, sexuality, class, race and so on?

Paul's use of the figure of Adam to solve another theological issue is perhaps one of the most original aspects of his theology. Whereas Abraham is often mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, after Adam is introduced in Genesis 1-5 the Hebrew Bible remains almost silent about him, but for Paul the figure of Adam explains why it was necessary for God to send Jesus Christ to the world, to be crucified and then resurrected.

This time Paul does not use proof texts to present his ideas but another method - analogy. In his Letter to the Romans he says:

Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come. (Romans 5:14)

How can Adam be the type or analogy of the one to come? The answer is that although Adam sinned and Christ did not, both had a fundamental effect on the world and human existence. As Paul says a few verses earlier, 'Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man ... so death spread to all because all have sinned' (Romans 5:12). The Fall of Adam brought death and sin into the world, the resurrection of Christ, the 'last Adam' (1 Corinthians 15:45), brought life and grace. It is from his 'two Adam' analogy that Paul has created the idea of original or first sin – an idea very different from his rabbi colleagues who preferred to see in Adam 'original perfection' subsequently marred by sin.

So, what do you think of Paul's idea of original sin? Are we to take it literally or should we see it metaphorically? Is original perfection preferable?

Paul sometimes gets a bad press today and he is accused of inventing a Christianity very different from Jesus' message in the Gospels. I leave it to you to decide whether that is so, but without Paul we would not have a *framework* of thought rich in biblical language and ideas which presents Christ as the one who liberates us from sin and offers us the Easter gospel of hope.

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