

On St Paul's Attitude towards Israelite and Jewish Identity

I am speaking the truth in Christ. I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit. I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh. They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed for ever. Amen. Romans 9.1-5

The Apostle Paul speaks here of his fellow Jews – ‘Israelites’ – as people for whom he would be willing to be *accursed*, if only their faith might be awakened as his has been, ‘in Christ’. He longs that they might come to understand in Jesus Christ what he himself has come to understand. It matters to him because he is still a loyal *Jew*; but his understanding of the full *meaning* of his Jewish faith has come in and through *Jesus Christ*. As a consequence, his relations with Jews and Judaism are *complicated* – one reason why relations between *Christians* and *Jews* are also complicated.

When Paul writes of the *Israelites*, he is describing a people who have a specific identity as *Jews*, but not as *citizens* of a state as *Israelis* are today. Instead, the identity is *ethnic* (the Jews are Paul’s ‘kindred according to the flesh’), but it is mainly *religious*, defined by the *covenants of God* (the Jews inherit ‘the law, the worship, and the promises’ contained in the Torah). Paul goes on to specify his recognition of Jesus Christ as the *Messiah*, defined by the Torah and the prophets. Jesus Christ is the *embodiment of the Jewish faith*, and in that sense its fulfilment – although not all Paul’s fellow Jews agreed about this: we can trace some of the discussion and debate about whether Jesus Christ is the ‘fulfilment of the law’, and if so, *what does this mean*, in the Acts of the Apostles.

The name ‘Israel’, of course, comes from *Jacob*, son of Isaac and grandson of Abraham, one of the Patriarchs. There is a mysterious encounter where Jacob wrestles with ‘a man’ whose angelic qualities reveal him to be an ambassador from *God* (Genesis 32.24): Jacob is left with a dislocated hip and a new name, Israel, that is, ‘*the one who strives with God*’.

As the Apostle Paul’s thinking about Jewish identity moves from the *ethnic* sense of what it means to be ‘Israelite’ to one which is based in our response to *God’s covenants*, he comes to believe that *faith in Jesus Christ*

is the means by which we are ‘adopted’ as inheritors of God’s covenant (cf Galatians 4.5). Jesus Christ becomes the guiding light, so that even non-Jews may be adopted into the covenant (which is why Paul spends so much time discussing whether or not circumcision really matters). It is *Jesus Christ* who has awakened the depths of his sense of faith; it is *Jesus Christ* who has assured him that his sins are indeed forgiven; it is *Jesus Christ* in whom and through whom he has re-evaluated his entire experience and understanding of himself – no longer in terms of his own ‘identity’, but defined by his relation to Jesus Christ. We can see how this *Christ-centred* faith lends extra weight to a covenantal rather than ethnic sense of what it means to be an inheritor of the Israelite traditions. For Paul, it continues to make sense within his own perception of Judaism precisely because of his recognition of Jesus Christ as the *Messiah*, whom both the *law* and the *prophets* have awaited. So the distinction between



early Christians and their Jewish neighbours was brought into focus by the question at the heart of the Gospels, where Jesus asks, ‘who do people say that I am?’ (e.g. Matthew 16.13-16). Do we, or do we not, behold Jesus Christ as the Messiah?

That is a very polarizing question. The answer is a definite ‘yes’ or ‘no’. But everything in the Apostle Paul’s mature understanding of the Christian faith remains open to the possibility of God’s welcoming the maximum number of people from the widest diversity of backgrounds into his *covenant of grace*, based not on inheritance or ethnicity, but on faith and hope. Paul continues to have the highest possible regard for Judaism and the Jewish heritage itself. He knows that it is through the Jews that God’s covenant has come into the world, that they are and remain God’s chosen people – a people he would *die* for, that their faith may be awakened as his has been. Paul has no concept of ‘Israel’ as a political entity like the State of Israel today. Such a thing is far removed from his own interests and priorities. But for his Jewish *heritage*, as an *Israelite*, he has the highest regard. But most of all he longs that our faith as Jews or Gentiles may be awakened and kindled into *life*. May that be so also in you and in me.