

# PAUL

A BIOGRAPHY

TOM  
WRIGHT



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## The Challenge of Paul

**W**HAT WAS PAUL trying to do? What made him do it? Why did he keep on going back to the synagogue, even though they kept on beating him? Why did he keep on urging his message on non-Jews, even though they thought he was a crazy Jew and wanted to run him out of town? Why did he carry on relentlessly, with his apparent desire to be in three places at once, to write to five churches at once, to explain and to cajole, to teach and to proclaim, to travel and travel and travel some more? What was it, both about the initial event on the road to Damascus and about his subsequent sense of an inner compulsion flowing from that that kept him going? And, on the one occasion when even that ran out of steam, what was it that eventually regenerated his faith and hope? What assessment can we make of this brilliant mind and passionate heart? What motivated him in his heart of hearts, and how did the event on the Damascus Road set that in motion? And finally, out beyond all that, why did it work? Why did the movement he started, against all the odds, become in a fairly short time the church we see in the fourth and fifth centuries? What was it about this busy, vulnerable man that, despite everything, seems to have been so effective?

It may help a little to explain why Paul has not had an easy ride in the modern church and world if we recall his moment of greatest crisis in Ephesus, where he experienced terrible depression and then the regeneration of faith and hope. Those who like their metaphysics or philosophy simple and clear-cut will find, like Festus in Caesarea, that when they hear Paul, they find it all so complicated and confusing that they want to wave it away angrily—it's just a lot of madness. Festus has had plenty of successors in the modern world. Those who like their religion, or indeed their friendships, served at medium temperature may find Paul's personality hard to take: at once eager and vulnerable, both bold and (in his own words) "in your face" and then liable to serious self-doubt ("Was it all for nothing?"). One might suppose that, as a friend, he was, as we say, high maintenance, though the reward would be high performance.

But are those even the right questions to ask? Why should Paul's ideas and personality be placed on the Procrustean bed of our modern likes and dislikes? He might well have a sharp retort for any such suggestion. Why should *he* not question *our* criteria, our ideas, our preferred personality types? Where does one even start to ask such questions?

For Paul there was no question about the starting point. It was always Jesus: Jesus as the shocking fulfillment of Israel's hopes; Jesus as the genuinely human being, the true "image"; Jesus the embodiment of Israel's God—so that, without leaving Jewish monotheism, one would worship and invoke Jesus as Lord *within*, not alongside, the service of the "living and true God." Jesus, the one for whose sake one would forsake all idols, all rival "lords." Jesus, above all, who had come to his kingdom, the true lordship of the world, in the way that Paul's friends who were starting to write the Jesus story at that time had emphasized: by dying under the weight of the world's sin in order to break the power of the dark forces that had enslaved all humans, Israel included.

Jesus, who had thereby fulfilled the ancient promise, being

“handed over because of our trespasses and raised because of our justification.”<sup>1</sup> Jesus, who had been bodily raised from the dead on the third day and thereby announced to the world as the true Messiah, the “son of God” in all its senses (Messiah, Israel’s representative, embodiment of Israel’s God). Jesus, therefore, as the one in whom “all God’s promises find their yes,” the “goal of the law,” the true seed of Abraham, the ultimate “root of Jesse.”<sup>2</sup> Jesus, then, the Lord at whose name every knee would bow. Jesus, who would reappear in a great future event that would combine the sense of a true king coming to claim and establish his kingdom and the sense of the long-hidden God at last being made visible. Jesus, whose powerful message could and did transform lives in the present time ahead of the final moment when he would raise his people from the dead. And, in and with all of this, Jesus not just as the label to put on an idea, a theological fact, if you like, but as the living, inspiring, consoling, warning, and encouraging presence, the one whose love “makes us press on,” the one “who loved me and gave himself for me,” the one whom to know, Paul declared, was worth more than all the privileges that the world, including the ancient biblical world, has to offer. Jesus was the starting point. And the goal.

The goal? Yes, because Paul never wavered in his sense that Jesus would reappear. He would “descend from heaven,” though to get the flavor of that we have to remind ourselves that “heaven” is not “up in the sky,” but is rather God’s dimension of present reality. Jesus would come *from* heaven *to* earth not—as in much popular fantasy—in order to scoop up his people and take them back to “heaven,” but in order to complete the already inaugurated task of colonizing “earth,” the human sphere, with the life of “heaven,” God’s sphere. God’s plan had always been to unite all things in heaven and on earth in Jesus, which meant, from the Jewish point of view, that Jesus was the ultimate Temple, the heaven-and-earth place. This, already accomplished in his person, was now being implemented through his spirit. Paul always



believed that God's new creation was coming, perhaps soon. By the time of his later letters he realized that, contrary to his earlier guess, he might himself die before it happened. But that the present corrupt and decaying world would one day be rescued from this state of slavery and death and emerge into new life under the glorious rule of God's people, God's new humanity—this he never doubted.

This, moreover, gave his work its particular urgency. Here there has been a serious misunderstanding throughout the last century. Insofar as there was a view we might label "apocalyptic" in Paul's day, he shared it. He believed that Israel's God, having abandoned the Temple at the time of the Babylonian exile and never having fulfilled his promise to return in visible and powerful glory, had revealed himself suddenly, shockingly, disruptively, in Jesus, breaking in upon an unready world and an unready people. Paul believed that this had happened not only in the events of Jesus's death and resurrection and the gift of the spirit, but in his own case, and perhaps in other cases, in a moment of blinding and life-transforming glory. He believed in a new creation already begun and to be completed in the future. He believed that a great transformation *had* taken place in the entire cosmos when Jesus died and rose again, and he believed that a coming great transformation *would* take place at his "return" or his "reappearing," the time when heaven and earth would come together at last.

The last few generations of students and clergy have often been taught, however, that Paul, and indeed Jesus and his earliest followers, believed two things about all this: first, that this coming great event would involve (in some sense or other) the end of the known world, and, second, that this coming event would take place within a generation. So, because the world did not end after the first Christian generation, it has been common coin, particularly among those who have wanted to distance themselves from early Christian ideas in general and Paul's in particular, to say, sometimes with kindly and sometimes with patronizing intent,

that "They expected the end of the world and they were wrong, so perhaps they were wrong about a lot of other things too." The irony of this position is that the idea of the "end of the world" is neither biblical nor Jewish nor early Christian. It comes from the secular world of nineteenth-century Europe fueled by dreams of revolutions past and still to come. When, toward the end of that century, some writers began to take seriously the Jewish contexts of the kingdom language of Jesus and his first followers, they were attuned not to the way such language worked in the first-century Jewish world, but to the way such language worked within current European ideologies. They projected that back onto Jesus, Paul, and the rest. It made a good story at the time, particularly when Europe then plunged into a horrendous, "apocalyptic" century with wars, rumors of wars, and worse. But this didn't help with the essentially historical question of what motivated Paul.

What, then, caused the urgent note in Paul's eschatology? The main point is that the long-awaited event could occur *at any time*, not that it had to occur within a specific time frame. The event that *was* to occur within a generation was not the end of the world but, according to Mark 13 and the parallels in Matthew and Luke, *the fall of Jerusalem*. This was woven deep into the structure of early Christianity in a way that until recently, with the rise of contemporary studies of the Jewish world of the time, was not usually appreciated. But Jerusalem, and the Temple specifically, had always been seen as the place where heaven and earth met; so much so that when Isaiah speaks of "new heavens and new earth," some commentators will now say, without the need for much elaboration, that this is referring to the ultimate rebuilding of the Temple, the heaven-and-earth building.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, that would in turn point ahead to heaven and earth themselves being renewed and ultimately united. But the Temple, and before that the Tabernacle in the wilderness, had always had that meaning, a forward-looking signpost to the Creator's ultimate intention. It was clear enough in the gospel traditions: Jesus

had warned that the Temple was under judgment; not one stone would be left upon another. That would indeed be “the end of the world”—not in the shallow, modern sense of the collapse of the space-time universe, but in the Jewish sense that the building that had held heaven and earth together would be destroyed. As Jeremiah had warned, chaos would come again.

I have suggested above that in 2 Thessalonians Paul had seen this moment coming, quite possibly through a Roman emperor doing what Caligula had so nearly done. The monsters—presumably the ultimate monster from the sea, Rome itself—would draw themselves up to their full height, demolishing the heaven-and-earth structure that had (according to Jesus) come to embody Jeremiah’s “den of robbers.” Jesus, as the true Lord, would then set up a kingdom of a different sort, a kingdom that could not be shaken. But if *this* was going to happen within a generation—if Jerusalem was going to fall to the Romans—then Paul had better get busy, because he knew, better perhaps than any of his contemporaries, what reactions such a terrible event would produce.

Gentile Jesus-followers would say that God had finally cut off those Jews, leaving “the church” as a non-Jewish body. Christianity would become “a religion,” to be contrasted (favorably, of course) with something called “Judaism.” Conversely, Jewish Jesus-followers would accuse their Gentile colleagues—and particularly the followers of that wretched compromiser Paul—of having precipitated this disaster by imagining that one could worship the true God without getting circumcised and following the whole Torah. And Jews who had rejected the message of Jesus would be in no doubt at all. All this happened because of the false prophet Jesus and his wicked followers, especially Paul, who had led Israel astray.

All this is supposition, but it is rooted at every point in what we know about Paul and his gospel. He was therefore determined *to establish and maintain Jew-plus-Gentile communities, worshipping the One God in and through Jesus his son and in the power of the spirit,*



*ahead of the catastrophe.* Only so could this potential split—the destruction of the “new Temple” of 1 Corinthians 3 and Ephesians 2, no less—be averted. This is why Paul insisted, in letter after letter, on *the unity of the church across all traditional boundaries.* This was not about the establishment of a new “religion.” It had nothing to do—one still meets this ill-informed slur from time to time—with Paul being a “self-hating Jew.” Paul affirmed what he took to be the central features of Jewish hope: One God, Israel’s Messiah, and resurrection itself. For him, what mattered was *messianic eschatology* and the community that embodied it. The One God had fulfilled, in a way so unexpected that most of the guardians of the promises had failed to recognize it, not only a set of individual promises, but the entire narrative of the ancient people of God. That, after all, was what Paul had been saying in one synagogue after another. And it was because of that fulfillment that the Gentiles were now being brought into the single family.

People have often written as if Paul believed himself to be living in the *last* days, and in a sense that was true. God had, in the Messiah, brought the old world of chaos, idolatry, wickedness, and death up short, had taken its horror onto himself, and had launched something else in its place. But that meant that, equally, Paul was conscious of living in the *first* days, the opening scenes of the new drama of world history, with heaven and earth now held together not by Torah and Temple, but by Jesus and the spirit, pointing forward to the time when the divine glory would fill the whole world and transform it from top to bottom. You would not find this vision in the non-Jewish world of Paul’s day. It is Jewish through and through, including in the fact that it has been reshaped around the one believed to be Israel’s Messiah.

Paul’s motivation and mindset, then, was shaped centrally and radically by Jesus himself as crucified and risen Messiah and Lord and by the new shape that the Jewish hope had as a result. This is why his loyalty always appeared contested. And this is where we can understand, in its proper context, what he had to say about



human beings, their plight, and their rescue. This has been central to most accounts of Paul from the sixteenth century to the present, and as we look back over his life it is important to display this theme in its true colors by placing it in its historical context.

Paul had always believed that the One God would at the last put the whole world right. The Psalms had said it; the prophets had predicted it; Jesus had announced that it was happening (though in a way nobody had seen coming). Paul declared that it *had* happened in Jesus—and that it *would* happen at his return. In between those two, the accomplishment of the putting-right project first in cross and resurrection and then in the final fulfillment at Jesus's return, God had given his own spirit in the powerful and life-transforming word of the gospel. The gospel, incomprehensibly foolish to Greeks and blasphemously scandalous to Jews, nevertheless worked powerfully in hearts and minds. Listeners discovered that it made sense and that the sense it made transformed them from the inside out. This is the great "evangelical" reality for which Paul and his letters are famous.

Our problem has been that we have set that powerful gospel reality in the wrong framework. The Western churches have, by and large, put Paul's message within a medieval notion that rejected the biblical vision of heaven and earth coming together at last. The Middle Ages changed the focus of attention away from "earth" and toward two radically different ideas instead, "heaven" and "hell," often with a temporary stage ("purgatory") before "heaven." Paul's life-changing and world-transforming gospel was then made to serve this quite different agenda, that is, that believing the gospel was the way to escape all that and "go to heaven." But that was not Paul's point. "You have been saved by grace through faith," he writes in Ephesians. "This doesn't happen on your own initiative; it's God's gift. It isn't on the basis of works, so no one is able to boast."<sup>4</sup> As it stands, that statement can easily be fitted into the going-to-heaven scheme of thought, but a glance at the wider context will show that Paul has very differ-

ent ideas. In the first chapter of Ephesians he insists that the entire divine plan “was to sum up the whole cosmos in the king—yes, everything in heaven and on earth, in him.”<sup>5</sup> Here, in the second chapter of the letter, he explains the purpose of “being saved by grace through faith”:

God has made us what we are. God has created us in King Jesus for the good works that he prepared, ahead of time, as the road we must travel.<sup>6</sup>

*God has made us what we are; or, to bring out a different but equally valid flavor of the Greek, we are God's poetry, God's artwork.* God has accomplished, and will accomplish, the entire new creation in the Messiah and by the spirit. When someone believes the gospel and discovers its life-transforming power, that person becomes a small but significant working model of that new creation.

The point of being human, after all, was never simply to be a passive inhabitant of God's world. As far as Paul was concerned, the point of being human was to be an image-bearer, to reflect God's wisdom and order into the world and to reflect the praises of creation back to God. Humans were therefore made to stand at the threshold of heaven and earth—like an “image” in a temple, no less—and to be the conduit through which God's life would come to earth and earth's praises would rise to God. Here, then, is the point of Paul's vision of human rescue and renewal (“salvation,” in traditional language): those who are grasped by grace in the gospel and who bear witness to that in their loyal belief in the One God, focused on Jesus, are not merely beneficiaries, recipients of God's mercy; they are also agents. They are poems in which God is addressing his world, and, as poems are designed to do, they break open existing ways of looking at things and spark the mind to imagine a different way to be human.

That is what Paul's gospel and ethics are, at their heart, all about. *God will put the whole world right* at the last. He has accom-

plished the main work of that in Jesus and his death and resurrection. And, through gospel and spirit, *God is now putting people right*, so that they can be both examples of what the gospel does and agents of further transformation in God's world.

This is the heart of Paul's famous "doctrine of justification," which is so important in Galatians, Philippians, and Romans, though remarkably inconspicuous (until we realize how it is integrated with everything else) in the other letters. Once again the problem has been the wrong framework. If we come with the question, "How do we get to heaven," or, in Martin Luther's terms, "How can I find a gracious God?" and if we try to squeeze an answer to those questions out of what Paul says about justification, we will probably find one. It may not be totally misleading. But we will miss what Paul's "justification" is really all about. It isn't about a moralistic framework in which the only question that matters is whether we humans have behaved ourselves and so amassed a store of merit ("righteousness") and, if not, where we can find such a store, amassed by someone else on our behalf. It is about the *vocational* framework in which humans are called to reflect God's image in the world and about the rescue operation whereby God has, through Jesus, set humans free to do exactly that.

For Paul, therefore, questions of "sin" and "salvation" are vital, but they function within a worldview different from the one Western Christians have normally assumed. For Paul, as for all devout Jews, the major problem of the world was idolatry. Humans worshipped idols and therefore behaved in ways that were less than fully human, less than fully image-bearing. That was a core Jewish belief, and Paul shared it. What he did not share, as he thought through his tradition in the light of Jesus and the spirit, was the idea that the people of Israel, as they stood, constituted the answer to this problem—as though all one had to do was to become a Jew and try to keep the Torah, and all would be well not only with Israel, but with the world. Paul knew that view, and he firmly rejected it.



Paul believed, not least because he saw it so clearly in the scriptures, that Israel too was in Adam. Israel too had its own brand of idolatry. But the point of Jesus's rescuing death, which Jesus himself had seen as the new Passover, was that the powerful "gods" and "lords" to which humans had given away their own proper authority had been defeated. The resurrection proved it and had thereby launched a new world and a new people to reflect the true God into that new world. That is why Paul's Gentile mission was not a different idea from the idea of "forgiveness of sins" or the "cleansing of the heart." It was *because* the powerful gospel announced and effected those realities that the old barriers between Jew and Greek were abolished in the Messiah. It was *because* in the Messiah the promises of Psalm 2 had come true—that God would set his anointed king over the rulers of the nations, thus extending into every corner of the world the promises made to Abraham about his "inheritance"—that Paul could summon people of every kind of background to "believing obedience." That is why Paul's work must be regarded just as much as "social" or "political" as it is "theological" or "religious." Every time Paul expounded "justification," it formed part of his argument that in the Messiah there was a single family composed of believing Jews and believing Gentiles, a family that demonstrated to the world that there was a new way of being human. Paul saw himself as a working model of exactly this. "Through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God."<sup>7</sup>

Paul's particular vocation, then, was to found and maintain Jew-plus-Gentile churches on Gentile soil, and to do so while "the restrainer" was still holding back the cataclysm that was coming all too soon. And since he could not in fact be in more places than one and could not write nearly as much, even in his longest letters, as he would ideally have liked (we think again of that long, hot night in Troas and of Eutychus falling out of the window), he realized early on that it was his job not just to teach people *what* to think and believe, but to teach them *how*. How



to think clearly, scripturally, prayerfully. How to have the mind renewed and transformed so that believers could work out for themselves the thousand things that he didn't have time to tell them. How to think with "the Messiah's mind," especially as it was shaped around the story of the cross: "This is how you should think among yourselves—with the mind that you have because you belong to the Messiah, Jesus."<sup>8</sup> This is the only way in which the church would be either united or holy, and since both were mandatory—but very difficult—it was vital, Paul recognized, that those "in the Messiah" should acquire the discipline of the Christian mind. In that quest, he drew on all the resources he could find, including ideas and phrases from contemporary philosophy. "We take every thought prisoner," he writes, "and make it obey the Messiah."<sup>9</sup> This, I submit, is part of the reason for the remarkable success of his work.

All this might seem to imply, however, that Paul was primarily, and perhaps only, a "thinker"—a detached brain box, a computer on legs. Not so. As we have seen repeatedly, he defined himself in terms of love: the love of God in the Messiah, the debt of that love which only love could repay, the love that bound him in a rich personal relationship with Jesus himself ("knowing him, knowing the power of his resurrection, and knowing the partnership of his sufferings"<sup>10</sup>). The love that constantly overflowed into what we might call "pastoral" activity but that, for Paul, was simply love in action. We see that powerful but also vulnerable love in his very explicit anxieties over the Thessalonian church in the early days after its founding and in his deeply troubled reaction to the Corinthian church as he made his final journey from Ephesus to confront them once more. We see that love, powerfully and shrewdly in action, in the little letter to Philemon.

It is out of that love and pastoral concern that there flowed simultaneously the constant question of whether he was "running to no good effect" and the constant scriptural answer: *You are my servant*. Isaiah 49 played around and around in his head—

along with many other passages, of course, but this one, and some phrases from it in particular, formed a lifelong mental habit. Isaiah's vision of the servant who would bring God's light to the Gentiles and of the troubles that this servant would have to undergo—including doubt about whether his work was actually doing any good at all—was Paul's constant companion. This was one of the things that made him tick.

It is from within the servant vocation that we can best understand Paul's central concept of *pistis*, which as we have seen means both "faith" (in the various meanings of that English word, all of which come into play at various points) and "loyalty" or "trustworthiness." This helps us to address one of the central questions asked in our own day, as in many earlier days, about Paul: Was he, did he think of himself as, a loyal Jew?

If *pistis* can mean "loyalty" as well as "faith," might one express Paul's most famous doctrine as "justification by loyalty"? That might be too much of a stretch, but for Paul "justification" itself meant something rather different from its normal Western meaning, framed as that has been by a moralistic vision ("Have I done all the things God wants me to do?") linked to a platonic eschatology ("How can I go to heaven?"). For Paul, justification was about God's declaration that this or that person was a member of the single family promised to Abraham—which meant that, though "ungodly" because they were Gentiles, such people had been "justified," declared to be in the right, to be within God's covenant family, by God's overthrow of the enslaving powers, by his forgiveness of sins, and by the powerful cleansing work of the spirit. What was said of Phinehas and before that of Abraham would be said of them: "It will be reckoned to them as righteousness." They will be members of the covenant. The "zeal" of Phinehas, the "zeal" of Saul of Tarsus, had been translated into a zeal for the gospel. The point was that one could then recognize members of the family by their *pistis*, which could be expressed as "believing in the God who raised Jesus from the dead" or

confessing Jesus as Lord and believing *that* God raised him from the dead. Titus shared that *pistis*; that is why Paul and Barnabas insisted that he should not be circumcised. The Gentile believers in Antioch shared that *pistis*; that is why Paul confronted Peter when by his behavior he seemed to suggest otherwise. And so on.

The “faith” in question is thus the response of the whole person to the whole gospel. In traditional Latin tags, it can be *fides qua*, the faith *by which* one believes, that is, the actual human trust, the personal response to the message of the gospel. Or it can be *fides quae*, the faith *that* one believes, that is, the specific things to which one gives assent. But “assent” is only ever one part of it. The gospel does not merely produce a mental reaction, a calculation and a conclusion. That matters but it never happens alone, and perhaps only a certain type of late medieval philosopher could imagine that it might. Mind and heart are inextricably linked. And that is why “loyalty” is also a vital part of *pistis*. “Believing obedience”—the obedience of faith, in more common translations—is the full-hearted, full-person response of loyalty to the message about Jesus. A contested loyalty, of course, but loyalty nonetheless.

For the Jews of Paul’s day, this “loyalty” was expressed day by day, indeed several times a day, in the prayer we have seen Paul use in his younger days and then, in its radically new form, in his mature following of Jesus. As with several psalms, with the prophets, with the whole style of Jewish worship and liturgy, Paul had reworked these acts and words around the gospel events. And this was, and remained, central to his self-perception, his own deep inner sense of what made him who he was. He was a loyal Jew.

Again and again in the closing chapters of Acts this is reemphasized, and we should resist any attempt to play this picture in Acts off against the letters of Paul himself. Of course, he had redefined what that loyalty would mean. It did not mean that, when eating with Gentile friends, he would avoid their type of food. It



did not mean that he would keep the Sabbaths and the festivals the way he had kept them as a young man. When the reality has come, the signposts are no longer needed, not because they were misleading, but because they have done their work. One does not put up a sign saying, "This way to London" outside Buckingham Palace. Paul took the stance he now did neither because he was some kind of a "liberal"—whatever that might have meant in his day!—nor because he was making pragmatic compromises to try to lure Gentiles into his communities, nor, to say it again, because he secretly hated his own culture and identity. It was all because of the Messiah: "I have been crucified with the Messiah. I am, however, alive—but it isn't me any longer; it's the Messiah who lives in me."<sup>11</sup> *If the Messiah has come, and if God has marked him out in his resurrection, then to be a loyal Jew is to be loyal to this Messiah and to the God who has acted in and through him.*

But if the Messiah had been crucified and raised, then the question of what being a loyal Jew actually meant had itself been radically redrawn. It now meant following this pattern of crucifixion and resurrection—reflecting, Paul would have insisted, the pattern of Israel's scriptures themselves. It meant discovering the deep truth of baptism: that one was now "in the Messiah," a member of his extended and multinational family, and that what was true of the Messiah (crucifixion and resurrection) was true of oneself. This is where the act of "calculation" belongs, carrying with it later dogmatic overtones of "imputation." *Calculate yourselves as being dead to sin, he says to those in the churches, and alive to God in the Messiah, Jesus.*<sup>12</sup> What is true of him, Paul would have said, is now true of them, and they must live accordingly. They *have already* been raised "in him"; they *will one day* be raised bodily by his spirit; therefore, their entire life must be lived in this light. This takes faith, in all its usual senses, and when that faith is present, it is in fact indistinguishable from loyalty, loyalty to the Messiah, loyalty to the One God through him. This, ultimately,



is what Paul learned on the road to Damascus and in his lifelong reflection on that shattering and blinding event.

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All this points to the answer I believe Paul would have given and to the answers we ourselves might want to give to our “extra” question: Why did it work? Why was his labor ultimately so fruitful?

There are two quite different ways of approaching this question, and I think Paul would have wanted to have both in play. He would have known all about different levels of explanation. He undoubtedly knew what 2 Kings had said about the angel of the Lord destroying the Assyrians who were besieging Jerusalem, and he may also have known the version in Herodotus, in which mice nibbled the besiegers’ bowstrings, forcing them to withdraw.<sup>13</sup> He would certainly have known that one could tell quite different stories about the same event, all equally true in their own way. Luke’s account of Paul’s appearance before Agrippa and Bernice would be significantly different from what Paul himself might have told his jailer that night, and different too from what Agrippa and Bernice might have said to one another when talking it over the next day.

So what might be said, from different angles, about the reasons for the surprising long-term success of Paul’s work? To go a step farther, helping us to get a sense of the significance of the apostle’s work, let’s ask: How might Paul himself assess this success if he could have seen it?

Paul would probably begin with a theological answer. There is One God, and this God has overcome the powers of darkness through his son; we should expect that by his spirit he will cause the light of the knowledge of his glory to spread throughout the world—through the faithful, suffering, and prayerful witness of Jesus’s followers. Or, to put it another way, the One God has already built his new Temple, his new *microcosmos*; the Jew-plus-