

The Calling of St. Paul

Background

Now to look at the call of Saint Paul. First, to compare briefly his Godly encounter with that of Samuel. The prophet matched with the saint. Their comparison may help understand what occurred to both men. Differences there will be. In fact, few similarities exist but many differences. Both were called by name, which implies something particular. Another common characteristic, rare to the Scripture, God mentions their name twice. As though they did not hear their name the first time. (Moses, the exception, also called twice). Samuel and Paul also caused major changes in the status quo. Samuel guides leadership in Israel from judges to anointed kings. Paul becomes a major catalyst, opening the infant Church to Gentiles and inviting them to full discipleship in Christ.

But there are differences. God calls Samuel as a child, Paul is a grown man. Samuel's call is an initiation. Paul's world changes radically, from persecutor to proclaimer of Jesus and his message. Samuel encounters the Lord within the Temple during night hours. Paul meets the Lord while traveling to Damascus during daylight. Samuel suffers no physical effects. Paul is knocked off his feet and blinded. Samuel receives his revelation simply and shares it with Eli when asked. Paul received his message but also sees the Risen Lord. And more like Moses than Samuel, Paul responds to the question: "Why do you persecute me?" with his own question: "Who are you?"

There is little we know of Paul's early life. He was born Saul, later to be called Paul. Paul may have been his Greek name, identifying him as a citizen of the Roman Empire. He grew up in the town of Tarsus, located on the river Cydnus in Asia Minor. That location is now a part of Turkey. Trade routes passed through the town, providing an informed atmosphere. Jews comprised only a portion of the citizenry. Paul writes of himself born a Pharisee, receiving formation at an early age. He comes to Jerusalem for greater training. He arrives some years after the death of Jesus. He himself mentions a sister living in the city. He arrives already trained a craftsman in leather and /or tent making.

The Pharisees play an important role in understanding the motivations behind Paul taking upon himself the responsibility of arresting Christians in Damascus. His zeal may have been fueled by his religious formation. It is during this trip that he is called. The Pharisees lived a strict manner of Jewish life. They understood the Law as an agenda for holiness. Such a mentality comes rooted in the Book of Leviticus, chapters 17 to 27. These pages are termed The Code of Holiness. It lays out a path that connects what is legal with what is holy. Pharisees were trained in the Law but also in Jewish procedure. Regulations for Temple worship took on as much importance for the Pharisees as for priests. They took seriously not only moral purity but ritual purity as well. They also brought acts of purity into daily life and what to avoid. The Pharisees possessed no

formal political power as the Sadducees enjoyed but they enjoyed representation in the council of the Sanhedrin. The Gospels portrays the Pharisees as heartless legalists and hypocrites — men who were overly scrupulous. These charges tended to be exaggerated but may have found some basis.

One may look upon the Pharisees with a more sympathetic eye when one remembers the elephant in the room — the Roman Empire. Israel existed as an occupied country during the time of Jesus and St. Paul. The Romans brought with them the Greco-Roman culture which could be very attractive. Jewish leaders must have realized the danger of Jews being infected by an alien culture. The Pharisees also must have seen this danger and responded by intensifying communal commitments to a strict form of Jewish living. They sought to strengthen Jewish identity. They saw greater need to intensify national and religious feelings for those living among Gentiles. This religious concern may have fed into the reasons Paul entertained for traveling to Damascus and arrest those slipping away from the faith of their families. Paul may have understood his actions as clipping in the bud a movement getting out of hand. He first enters the Scripture narrative at the execution of Stephan, the first Christian martyr (Acts 7, 54-60).

Paul later portrays his role in the death of Stephan as a dark beginning. The Acts of the Apostles relate Paul's part in the killing not merely as condoning. His role as witness leads to becoming an active agent in persecuting Jesus' followers. He goes house to house arresting these religious rebels. He adds to those events by things more damaging. He recalls later not only the arrests but even putting some people to death. These memories show his similarity with Moses. Both men came to their conversion and their ministries with blood on their hands. We know Moses murdered an Egyptian mistreating a Jewish slave (Exodus 2, 11-14). Paul orders killings, although never carrying them out himself (Acts 26, 9-11). Such dark moments never seemingly left his memory.

The journey to Damascus begins with Acts 9,1. It begins with Paul "still breathing murderous threats". He still had not drunk his fill. The killing of Stephan merely created an increased thirst for blood. His motivation stands naked and alone. Breathing threats evokes a negative version of the Genesis story. God breaths into Adam the spirit of life. Paul breaths the spirit of death. Murder comes alive and takes hold of him. The human spirit, when added to murder, creates a dangerous combination. It has resulted in religious wars. Spiritual warriors believe they fight for just causes and therefore eliminate what they judge evil. Self-righteousness justifies their actions. Paul had received letters from the high priest. They gave permission to carry out what he was to do. The Temple supported him. What he would do would be for God and the people of Israel. He leaves Jerusalem and turns his face toward Damascus, sure of his intent and mission. He did not expect what was waiting for him.