

Association of Hebrew Catholics

New Zealand Branch

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"Meet St. Paul!"

A Hebrew Catholic Perspective

(How to Read his Letters)

Meet St. Paul

An Essential Understanding of St. Paul

(“How to read his letters”)

As we make our way through the letters of Rabbi Shaul (St. Paul) we meet the full power of his vehement statements opposing, as any Christian rabbi must, the serious error of maintaining that Gentile converts to Christ must undergo traditional Jewish rites of initiation. Commentaries on Scripture sometimes reflect a common theological position held, and thus sometimes display such headings as “Circumcision Repudiates Grace”.

Any statements like that represent St. Paul’s strong reaction to the lobbying of the Judaisers. Whenever he is challenged by these well-intentioned but misguided converts, St. Paul states in the most emphatic manner humanly possible, that when a Gentile becomes a Christian (in baptism) they fulfil every requirement in Jewish Law by virtue of their new bond with Christ. Thus to turn around and then seek circumcision of non-Jews would be tantamount to denying the power of the Holy Spirit in bringing about their baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ. All Hebrew Christians would agree with that.

Quite some time later, St. Paul wrote to the Church at Colossae, which he had not founded, but in which certain errors were emerging:

In Christ you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting on the body of flesh in the circumcision of Christ. You were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead. (Colossians. 2: 11)

Our commentary and annotations are especially important if we are to study and understand St. Paul’s letters. He was a very great rabbinic scholar and a much esteemed rabbi. There would be few rabbis, even in our times, who do not take a close look at his writings at some stage or other in their career. St. Paul venerated his Jewish Faith and never, ever deviated from this position of profound respect and gratitude for his membership of it; though some commentators read into his lines a cut-off point with Judaism.

All of St. Paul’s vehement statements about Jewish Law and Practice refer to two very specific contexts:

- After what is usually referred to as his “conversion” (an often somewhat misrepresented experience) he boldly distanced himself from much of the popular teaching of a section of Pharisees who He believed, buried God's Torah — His Holy Teaching — under layers of man-made, burdensome religious practice.

- His personal and dramatic encounter with Jesus Messiah made such an impact upon him that he constantly and consistently — powerfully and persistently — emphasised two non-negotiable principles:
 - It is right and proper for Jews to live their whole Torah-compliant Judaism #, as members of the Christian Church in the light of Christ! This could include circumcision, mikvah, or any other Jewish religious customs seen, in the light of Christ, to preserve the Hebrew cultural heritage; but the binding nature of the Ceremonial Law was abrogated by the Death and Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. In other words, Jews who came to follow the Messiah of God (Luke 9: 20) were not bound to maintain the full span of Jewish practice which they previously followed. If they chose to do so, it was entirely permissible when viewed and interpreted in the Light of Jesus Messiah.

Torah-compliant as in the original intentions of God in giving His Sacred Law.
 - It is right and proper for non-Jews to be equal members of the Church by being incorporated into Christ by baptism and thus meeting all the requirements of God’s Holy Torah as fulfilled in Jesus Christ! [Thus requiring no other Judaic compliance].

St. Paul’s justification for this position was always to be found in his glorious teaching about the Mystical Body of Christ. At baptism we all become members of His Body, the Church. We can enter as Jews or Gentiles — but we all become members of One Body.

Hebrew Christians are very proud of Rabbi Shaul, St. Paul, who manifested intense love for and loyalty towards Judaism yet was empowered by our Lord to become such a gifted agent in His grafting of the Gentiles on to the well cultivated “olive tree”, Israel, as children of Abraham. This ingrafting of the Gentiles is explained in two publications:

“**Many Religions — One Covenant**” by Cardinal Ratzinger page 23;
and
“**Nostra Aetate**”, **Second Vatican Council**.

In reading St. Paul’s Epistles, it is easy to take quite the wrong message from his apparent negative comments about Jewish Faith and practice. The reasons for this include differences in translation together with the absence of education of Christians in the fundamentals of Judaism. For this reason we try to assist the reader with annotations throughout the readings. These seek to demonstrate that St. Paul’s vivid comments and criticisms are directed, not at Judaism itself, but the incorrect application of its teaching by (perhaps sincere but) misguided opponents.

St. Paul, filled to overflowing with zeal for the in-grafting of the “wild shoots”, the Gentiles, on to the “olive tree Israel”, saw and understood so very clearly the opportunity for non-Jews to enjoy the privileges of being children of Abraham. He saw how they could fulfil all the obligations in the Torah by developing “the mind of Christ” (Philippians. 2: 5) and listening to Him” (Luke 9:35), for Jesus the Messiah is Torah — Christ the Anointed is our Torah!

We close this note with a beautiful paragraph (1968) from the Catechism of the Catholic Church:

The Law of the Gospel fulfils the commandments of the Law [= the Torah]. The Lord’s Sermon on the Mount, far from abolishing or devaluing the moral prescriptions of the Old Law, releases their hidden potential and has new demands arise from them: it reveals their entire divine and human truth. It does not add new external precepts, but proceeds to renew the heart, the root of human acts, where man chooses between the pure and impure, where faith, hope and charity are found The Gospel thus brings the Law to its fullness through imitation of the perfection of the heavenly Father.

Shalom!

Read the entire collection of St. Paul’s Epistles In modern English, with section by section commentary —

[“It Is Paul Who Writes”](#)