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Saul, Saul, Why Do You Persecute Me?

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I discuss the connections between Saul of Tarsus and King Saul.

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Transcript

Welcome back. The last couple of days I've been thoroughly enjoying the start to the inaugural Theopolis Institute Junior Fellows Program. As part of this, we get to explore scripture in more depth as a group.

We get to know each other and to discuss some of the aspects of scripture that we're looking into together within the course. In the informal times of fellowship, which are quite extensive, we talk about the passages. We have time to fellowship and hear about what God is doing in our various contexts.

One of the questions that was raised last night after I was discussing the story of Acts in one of the classes was the question of Saul of Tarsus. Is Saul of Tarsus related in any way to the character of King Saul? Should we see a typological connection between

these two figures? And it would seem that there would be a promising connection between these two. Now, it's not something I've looked into enough, so I'm going to lay out a few thoughts here.

And I would love to hear any thoughts or reflections that you might have that could develop these in various ways and maybe unpack some of the comments that I have. If you look at the story of the book of Acts, you will notice that Saul is referred to as Saul until chapter 13, after which point he's generally referred to as Paul. He's referred to as Saul not just by the narrator, but also by Christ and also by God as he sends him out with Barnabas.

So this seems to be his name. It's not just many have suggested that his name is changed by God as he becomes an apostle. I don't think that's the case.

But yet there is something, it seems to me, that the narrator is doing by calling him Saul. The narrator, since his name is also Paul, could have gone through calling him Paul throughout. But the fact that he begins by calling him Saul and only switches to calling him Paul later on in the story suggests that there might be a reason for him doing that.

And I think the reason is that he wants us to see some sort of parallel between the Old Testament Saul and the New Testament Saul. If we look through the Old Testament, we will see that Saul, King Saul, is in many ways a paradigmatic persecutor. He's the one who fights against the true king.

He's the king of Israel, but he's the one who opposes David, the rightful successor. He fights against David. He tries to kill him with his spear.

He tries to put him in harm's way fighting the Philistines. He tries to pursue him to Niath and other places like that. He's throughout, he's implacable in his pursuit and opposition to David.

And yet God arrests him in his steps at various points. And there are very strange twists in that story. As we look through the story of Saul of Tarsus, we'll notice similar things.

Saul begins as this zealous persecutor of the church, breathing out murderous threats, seeking to take the disciples into prison, bring them before the high priest, and eventually put them to death. There is a similarity between these two characters. And within the book of Acts, this is presented not just as persecuting the individual disciples, but persecuting Christ himself.

Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? Not just my disciples, but why do you persecute me? The greater David is asking Saul of Tarsus why he is pursuing him, why he is persecuting him, what he has done to deserve his opposition. As we look in 1 Samuel chapter 20, we have David asking a similar question about Saul to Jonathan. Then David fled from Niath in Ramah and came and said before Jonathan, what have I done? What is

my guilt and what is my sin before your father that he seeks my life? Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? In the previous chapter, there is also an interesting incident that might remind us of the events concerning Saul's conversion, or at least his illumination on the road to Damascus.

Saul, King Saul, goes to pursue David to Niath in Ramah. As he goes there, he comes before Samuel and the Spirit of God comes upon him. As he goes there, he prophesies until he comes to Niath in Ramah.

He strips off his clothes and he too prophesied before Samuel and lay naked all that day and all that night. Thus it is said, is Saul also among the prophets? It is a remarkable event. It might recall some of the things that are described of Saul's conversion event on the road to Damascus.

There is some interruption of his course in persecution and pursuit. And there is a period of waiting all day and all night in the story of King Saul. And then the number of days before Ananias comes and baptizes him in the story of Acts.

As we think about those stories as well, there might be other things that come to mind. Saul of Tarsus is of the tribe of Benjamin and he is pursuing the lion of the tribe of Judah. That is what we see in the book of 1 Samuel as well.

Saul is a Benjamite. He is one of the first king who is associated with the tribe of Benjamin. Benjamin is associated with beginnings of kingship in the story of Genesis, particularly chapters 35 and 36.

There are hints of that initial connection between Benjamin and the kingship. And then later on in chapter 49 and 38 as well in various ways, there are connections with the tribe of Judah and the kingdom. Looking through 1 Samuel, you are seeing this play out on another level.

The relationships between the two tribes are important. Benjamin is interceded for by Judah later on when he is threatened as a result of his possession of the silver cup. Also to bring him down into Egypt in the first place.

Judah vouches for him and will stand for him. Looking then at these parallels, I think that there is a sort of, we could see a potential conversion event that happens to Saul, the king. He, the spirit comes upon him.

He prophesies. Is Saul also among the prophets is the question that's asked. And the question that David asks of Jonathan, why is your father persecuting me? What have I done? These things recall the event on the road to Damascus.

But whereas Saul's arresting of his pursuit is abortive, King Saul's, the arresting of King Saul, it doesn't actually amount to anything in the end. The arresting of Saul of Tarsus

leads to a complete change. And from that point on, there's something that he, his character is completely transformed.

He becomes the chief, the key apostle. Even though he was the least of all the apostles on account of his persecution of the church, Saul says that he was from the least tribe. He was from the least family of that tribe in Israel.

And yet God raises him up to be king. And there's something similar in the story of Saul of Tarsus. He's the least qualified, the least worthy to be an apostle.

But God raises him up in many ways to be the greatest of the apostles or a leader among the apostles. Other things to notice about these parallels. That David, as he is pursued by Saul, is let down through a window by Michael and he escapes.

There is a similar thing that happens to Saul after his conversion. He is let down through a gap in the wall of Damascus in a basket and he escapes when they're guarding the gates. That pursuit of Saul might remind us of the pursuit of David and his escape from King Saul.

There is a switch of the characters. This king who pursued the line of the tribe of Judah is now changed to one who is converted, who's now a true servant of the king and who takes on the character of the king. He too is trying to escape like King David.

No longer the persecutor, but the one who is being pursued. What else can we see? When his name changes in the narration in chapter 13, it's shortly before the context of his... shortly before he delivers a sermon where he talks in... he talks to the men of Israel and he says, recounts the history. All this took about 450 years and after that he gave to them judges and told Samuel the prophet.

Then they asked for a king and God gave them Saul, the son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, for 40 years. And when he had removed him, he raised up David to be their king, of whom he testified and said, I have found in David the son of Jesse, a man after my heart, who will do all my will. Of this man's offspring, God has brought to Israel a savior, Jesus, as he promised.

Now, there seems to be again a connection here that Saul is the king who is removed in order that David, from whom comes the Messiah, will come on the scene. And so that framework of Saul replaced by David is at play within the book of Acts. And there I think that might help us to understand why in that same passage there's a switch from Saul to Paul.

That switch of name draws our mind back to that replacement, that changing of the character of Saul. Now, Saul stands also for the persecuting Jewish leaders, the ones who are seeking to take the life of the early church, seeking to oppose, who opposed Christ and seek to destroy his people. Likewise, in the story of Saul, he's the one who's the

paradigmatic persecutor, the one who seeks to destroy David.

Putting all these things together, I think we have a characterization of Saul of Tarsus that does not just present him as a random person bearing a message, but someone who might have significance typologically in a wider framework of redemptive history. And there are many other ways that we might think about that, particularly as we look through Galatians, as we might think about the connections with him, with the character of Jonah, the characters of Elijah, the characters of Jeremiah called when he was still in the womb. All of these characters in the Old Testament are connected typologically in some way or other to Paul the apostle.

Exploring these themes, we also see God's concern with the tribes. The story of the tribes does not end. There is a relationship between the tribe of Benjamin and the tribe of Judah that is fraught with significance.

We see that in the book of Genesis. We see it in the story of Samuel. We also see it in places like the book of Esther, as Esther and Mordecai, the Benjamites, intercede for and protect the Jews, the Judeans, the people of Judah, the people who are associated particularly with that tribe.

And there is a deliverance affected through the Benjamites. Elsewhere in the New Testament, we have another significant relationship between a Benjamite and a person of Judah, Jesus, the Messiah, the true descendant and heir of David. Thank you very much for listening.

If you have any thoughts on this question, I'd love to hear any reflections you might have. I really don't believe I've gotten to the bottom of this. There are some very tantalising connections that maybe might draw us further.

But thank you for listening. If you'd like to support this and other podcasts like it, please do so using my Patreon or PayPal accounts. The link to those are in the notes below.

God bless and thank you for listening. God bless.