

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
Third Sunday of Easter – Year C

RCL Readings – Acts 9:1–20; Psalm 30; Revelation 5:11–14; John 21:1–19

ACNA Readings – Acts 9:1–19a; Psalm 33; Revelation 5:6–14; John 21:1–14

Introduction. We continue the season of Eastertide, the 50 days from Passover/Resurrection to Shavuot/Pentecost. In this time, we pause to commune with Jesus and receive his commission.

Common Theme. In our readings, our God appears to us in personal, special and corporate ways. In our Gospel reading, we have a glimpse into the third appearance of Jesus after his resurrection and hear the words of our divine host: “Come and eat breakfast”. Communion is followed by commission. In the reading from Acts, we see another appearance of Jesus, but this time to Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus, following which he hears his commission to be “my chosen instrument.” Then, in the reading from Revelation, we see a slain Lamb on God’s throne! When we see Jesus, we are changed to be like him.

Acts 9:1–20. My Chosen Instrument. This is the fourth and last part of the second section of the book of Acts (6:8 to 9:31).¹ The first part (6:8–8:3) tells us about Stephen’s death who, “full of the Holy Spirit, looked intently toward heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God” (7:55) and about Saul’s involvement in Stephen’s death and his subsequent persecution of the Church. But this last part (9:1–31) reports the conversion of this same Saul, the persecutor, who saw a light flashing around him and heard the resurrected Jesus saying, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” The story is repeated with variations in 22:1–21, 26:9–18, and Paul describes his persecution of the church in Galatians 1:13–14 and Philippians 3:6. Paul was changed from being an executioner, “breathing out threats and murder” against all who called on Jesus’ name (9:1, 14), to an evangelist, a chosen instrument to carry Jesus’ name to all nations (v. 15).

Note that in the first part, Stephen preaches that “the God of glory appeared to our father Abraham” (7:2), and here in the last part, Luke seems to emphasize the significance of Saul’s conversion by paralleling it to Abraham’s experience: “suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.” The appearance to Abraham was the spiritual experience behind the birth of Israel as a nation, bringing Abraham out of the Gentiles to form a nation distinct from all others, unique in its testimony to the one true God, and its protest against Gentile polytheism. The command to Abraham was “Leave your country and people and father’s house and go to the land I will show you” (7:3). But here, the light around Paul began another phase of Israel’s history. Paul, a Hebrew of the Hebrews, was taken in the opposite direction, out of the Hebrew nation and back among the Gentiles “to carry my name before Gentiles and kings and the people of Israel.”

¹ You can read a good overview of this section in D.W. Gooding, D.W., *True to the Faith: The Acts of the Apostles: Defining and Defending the Gospel*. (Myrtlefield House, 2013), 127–133. Available as pdf online, if you don’t have the book: <https://www.myrtlefieldhouse.com/book-store/p/true-to-the-faith-digital>.

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Yet, the latter is not in contradiction of the former. Abraham was promised to be a blessing to all people of the earth (Gen 12:3), and now, Luke seems to be saying that, through Paul, there would be the fulfilment of the promise to Abraham, that all Gentiles would be blessed.

v. 2: The expression “the Way” in ancient religious literature refers at times to “the whole way of life from a moral and spiritual viewpoint” (BDAG 692 s.v. ὁδός 3.c), and it has been so used of Christianity and its teachings in the book of Acts (see also: 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22). “The way(s) of YHWH” is used in the OT to mean the instructions for his people to follow (e.g., 2 Sam 22:22; Ps 18:21; Jer 5:4–5; Hos 14:9), and walking in God’s ways is a common theme (Deut 5:33; 10:12; 30:16; Isa 42:24; Zech 3:7). Also the term “the way of life” (= the way that leads to life) is used in Psalm 16:11 and quoted in Acts 2:28. It is a variation of Judaism’s idea of two ways, the true and the false, where “the Way” is the true one (*1 En.* 91:18; *2 En.* 30:15) (NET, note 4). “The Way” has parallel in the Essene Qumran sect (1QS IX:17, 19; X:21; XI:13; CD-A I:13; II:6) (Beale). These people who follow the Way are also referred to as “saints” in v. 13, and “all who call on your name” in v. 14.

vv. 3–4: The appearance of Jesus is described in the same language as elsewhere used of a revelation of God (Beale). The word “appear” used by Ananias (v. 17) is also used of “YHWH, the God of your fathers ... the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” *appearing* to Moses in the bush (Exod 3:2, 16 LXX), but it is a frequent word in many contexts, so it may be an echo but not a certain allusion. The double vocative, “Saul, Saul ...” suggests emotion in the context (Gen 22:11; 46:2; Exod 3:4; 1 Sam 3:4, 10) and the Lord indicates that to persecute his community was to persecute him.

v. 7: Those travelling with Saul were speechless from fear or amazement, hearing a voice (the word *phōnē* could mean “sound”) but not seeing anyone in the blinding light. Paul’s re-telling in 22:9 suggests they saw the light and maybe heard sound, but could not understand the meaning (NET Acts 22:9, note 35). The resonance with the experience of the people standing at the foot of Mount Sinai (Deut 4:12) is another indication of the significance of this appearance of the Lord to Paul. See also Daniel 10:7; Wis 18:1.

v. 8: Saul was temporarily blind till verse 18. Whilst he waited for further instruction, he no doubt reflected on what he had seen and heard. Compare also Zechariah who was struck with temporary deafness in Luke 1:59–67. The connection between physical and spiritual sight is seen also in Luke 24:16 and 31.

vv. 10–16: The Lord is acting on both sides of this story, revealing himself to Saul *and* to Ananias. Divine instruction comes through visions also in 10:3, 17, 19; 16:9. Ananias’ response to the Lord, “Here I am,” is a common response to God (Gen 22:1; 31:11; 46:2; Exod 3:4). Note too the way Ananias calls the Lord’s people “saints” (v. 13)—this term only occurs rarely in Acts (9:32; 26:10), but frequently in Paul’s writings (JANT). The fulfilment of the prophecy here: “how much he must suffer for the sake of my name” is detailed by Paul in 2 Corinthians 11:24–29.

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v. 15: Notice, Paul is to be a witness to all nations including Israel (Rom 1:16–17). He is the Lord's "vessel of choice ... to me" (literally), emphasizing the Lord is sovereign in the choice of his instruments.

v. 20: The syntax in the original suggests what was proclaimed is a direct (albeit summarized) quotation of Paul: "This one is the Son of God" (NET, note 43). This is the only use of the title *Son of God* in Acts.

Psalm 30. A Song for the Dedication of the House. The title, which was probably added later, is unusual in form, content and significance. It says literally: "A Psalm, a song of the dedication of the house, of/for David." The word "house" means house generally, or if a king lives in it, it means "palace," or if a deity lives in it, it means "temple" (DDH). Sometimes, it can be used with the sense of "household, line or dynasty," as in the phrase "the house of David." It is possible that David wrote this psalm for the dedication of Solomon's temple, or it could have been written for the dedication of the second temple following the national calamity of exile in 515 BC (JSB). Following the Talmud (Tractate Soferim), it is read in the synagogue at the Hanukkah festival as the title refers to the dedication of the temple. However, the psalm seems to be a song of thanksgiving for deliverance from some dire illness or near-death experience rather than for the dedication of a temple. So a possibility is it was written to dedicate David's palace after he returned to it from the attempted coup by Absalom (2 Sam 15–20, note the use of "house" to mean palace and household), or after a near-death illness and so dedicating his household to the Lord in thankfulness for life.

Stanza 1²

vv. 1–3: the verb *dālāh* is used of drawing water from a well (Exod 2:16, 19; Prov 20:5). The psalmist was trapped in the pit leading to Sheol (v. 3), but the LORD hoisted him up (NET, note 1). The Hebrew verb-form (*piel*) used here, suggests he was lifted vigorously. Verse 2: "you healed me" is the verb *rāph'ā*. *YHWH Rapha* is at work here. The verb usually means healing from physical illness or wounds, so the psalmist thanks God for saving him from some dire illness that almost led to death. However, it can be used metaphorically, as with the Lord healing Israel from spiritual depravity (Isa 6:10) or the wounds of backsliding or exile (e.g., Hos 6:1; Jer 30:17). So it could apply here to David's deliverance from exile and heartbreak related to Absalom's attempted coup. There are two possible translations of the end phrase in verse 3, depending on the pointing (vowels) in Hebrew: "from the ones going down to the pit" or "from me going down to the pit." As the first/parallel half of the verse is referring to the psalmist alone, "my soul," it makes it more likely that the second half continues this with "you kept me alive from me going down to the pit." It seems to be talking of rescue from serious illness or some calamity, but in the light of the resurrection of Jesus, who is the "firstfruits of those who have fallen

² Following the Stanza structure (and Strophe sub-structure) according to J.P. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Poetry: An Introductory Guide*, (Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

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asleep,” this verse could be applied to all God’s people, as Jesus is the guarantor of the resurrection from dead (1 Cor 15:20, 23).

vv. 4–5: The command here is to the Lord’s faithful people, those who do right in God’s eyes and remain faithful to YHWH. The word is *hāsîd/im*³ (חֲסִידִים with a guttural ‘h’ like in *Bach*) and strictly refers to those who follow the Lord’s *hesed* or faithful lovingkindness. The verse finishes with a command to give praise, literally, “to/for his holy remembrance” or “to/for the remembrance of his holiness.” The noun זִכָּרוֹן (*zekher*, “remembrance”) here refers to the name of the LORD as invoked in liturgy and praise (Ps 6:5; 97:12). The LORD’s “name” is “holy” in the sense that it is a reminder of his uniqueness and greatness. It is interesting that Absalom set up a pillar of remembrance as a monument to himself (2 Sam 18:18), and if we take this psalm in this context, then the psalmist is insisting that it is YHWH, not Absalom, who is worthy of such remembrance. Verse 5: literally, “in the evening weeping comes to lodge, but at morning a shout of joy.” “Weeping” is personified here as a traveller who lodges with one temporarily (NET, note 9). Evening and morning is the pattern of the day in the Bible, in Genesis 1 and the Sabbath and the festivals. The darkness bursts forth into light. Alter translates: “At evening one beds down weeping, and in the morning, glad song,” and comments, “this upbeat vision of life has, of course, been manifested in the recent experience of the speaker.”

Stanza 2

vv. 6–7a: literally, “and I, I said, in my ease/prosperity, I will not be shaken/totter for ever.” It seems the psalmist had been arrogant and self-confident, and he recognises now that the Lord had allowed trouble to invade his life (NET, note 10). Verse 7a: literally, “YHWH, in your favor you caused to stand for my mountain strength.” If this is the king, the mountain may be Mount Zion and be a metaphor of his rule and security. He recognizes his peace and prosperity and security come from the Lord’s favour on him.

vv. 7b–8: the verbs probably have the sense of continuous past, so “I cried and cried ... and pleaded again and again” (DDH).

vv. 9–10: these verses give expression to the words the psalmist prayed from his depths. Alter says: “These verses appear to be a self-quotation, the speaker now rescued from death, recalls the word of desperate supplication he addressed to God from his straits.”

“What profit is there in my blood?” means the taking of his life. Another word is used here for the grave—note Sheol and pit/cistern in v. 3, and this word for pit in v. 9, in parallel with the words for death: “blood” and “dust.” The rhetorical questions anticipate the answer, “Of course not!” Dead people do not praise God! (NET, note 18).

³ It is used today of the Hasidic Jews, who are a sub-group within Haredi Judaism (ultra-orthodox Judaism. *Hared* refers in Hebrew to “those who *tremble*” at God’s word).

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Stanza 3

vv. 11–12: the Hebrew text has the word “glory” here (*khāvod*), so literally: “so that it will praise your glory, and not be silent.” The word “glory” here could be acting as a metonymy for the heart, as the source of our praise. Some argue for a vowel change (supported by an ancient LXX version), and it then reads *kévēdiy*, “my liver,” which is used in biblical psychology as the source of honour and glory. Alter says, “[A person] cannot fulfil his vocation of celebrating God if he is engulfed by death,” and adds: “the giving of praise to God is imagined as a replacement of the pagan idea in which the sacrifices were thought of as food necessary to the gods.” And further, “Like many other thanksgiving psalms, this one exhibits an envelope structure, beginning and ending with the declaration that the speaker will exalt God for his mercies granted” (Alter).

Revelation 5:6–14. Worthy is the Lamb. Chapter 5 shows that Christ is the only one worthy to open the scroll, that is, to inaugurate God’s kingdom on earth.

v. 6: “In the middle of the throne” probably means the throne *area*. “A Lamb that appeared to have been killed” is not saying this was not true, but that this was what John saw (NET Rev 5:6, note 14). The term refers to “the crucified messiah in risen, heavenly form” (JANT). The slain lamb seems to have two backgrounds in the Hebrew Scriptures, that of the Passover lamb and the lamb of Isaiah 53:7. The latter particularly includes the atoning aspect of the sacrifice and includes Root (Rev 5:5) and Lamb in this context. Also, the worthiness referred to in v. 9 could hint at the sinlessness of Isaiah 53:9 (Beale). Beale also says: A lamb with horns, indicating a conquering messianic lamb, is found in Jewish tradition (1 Enoch 90; *T. Jos.* 19) and adds that horns represent power (Dt 33:17; 1 Kgs 22:11; Ps 89:17; Dan 7:7–8:24; *1 En.* 90:6–12, 37). The term “seven eyes” is dependent on Zech 3:9; 4:10 and 2 Chron 16:9 and seems to suggest both omniscience and omnipotence (Beale). The seven spirits of God could be seven angelic beings, or the seven-fold ministry of the Spirit of God (NET Rev 4:5, note 17). The tradition of seven archangels is found in Tobit 12:15 and 1 Enoch 20.

v. 7: Beale says: “Daniel 7:13 is the only text in the OT where a divine messianic figure is portrayed as approaching God’s heavenly throne in order to receive authority. The description of ‘the one sitting on the throne’ is now related specifically to Dan 7:9–28. Thus, Christ is the fulfilment of the prophetic portrayal of the ‘Son of Man’ coming to God’s throne to be granted authority over an eternal kingdom.” The right hand is seen as the hand of power (Ps 89:13), favour (Ps 80:15), and blessing (Gen 48:17) (JANT).

v. 8: incense and prayers—incense was a temple offering (Exod 30:6) and was taken to symbolise prayer (Ps 141:2) (JANT).

v. 9: A new song refers to a new beginning or era (Is 42:10; Ps 33:3; 40:3) (JANT). Beale says: “In the OT, the ‘new song’ was always an expression of praise for God’s victory over the enemy, which sometimes included thanksgiving for his work in creation ... Therefore the ‘new song’ is used

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analogically or even typologically here since the powers of evil and sin have been conquered. Note that the ‘new song’ in some [OT] passages is related by Judaism to the coming messianic age (e.g., *Midr. Rab.* Num. 15:11; *Midr. Tanhuma* Gen. 1:32; b. *‘Arak.* 13b).” The clause “purchased in his own blood”—the “in” is taken to indicate price and instrument here, so “with the price of his own blood” (NET, note 26).

v. 10: “kingdom and priests” is probably a hendiadys here, meaning a “priestly kingdom”, as in Exodus 19:6. The verb for “reign” is the same root as “kingdom.” “The eschatological age will be established in earthly rule” (JANT). The prophesied kingdom of the saints of Israel (Dan 7:22b, 27a) may stand behind the saints ruling here (Beale). The rule becomes democratized here from Israel to all people (1 Pet 2:9) (JANT). And Beale adds: “This means that the Exodus idea of the kingdom and priesthood has been universalized and woven in with the concept of the saints’ universal kingdom of Dan 7, which has been inaugurated in the church.”

v. 11: the number of myriads here is meant to indicate an incalculable number (see Dan 7:10). Such expressions are used frequently in Jewish apocalyptic literature when talking of the countless number of angels in the celestial temple, especially in the inner throne room.

vv. 12–13: “The heavenly song makes a clear distinction between the enthroned one and the sacrificial Lamb” (JANT). Power, wealth, might and glory are used in 1 Chron 29:11–12 LXX, while wisdom goes back to Dan 2:20. “And it is probably not accidental that ‘might,’ ‘glory,’ and ‘honour’ are found together in Dan 2:37 LXX and 4:30 LXX” (Beale).

v. 13: “The fivefold expression of praise here may be a collective reflection of Ex 20:11; Neh 9:6; Ps 146:6 (cf. Dan 2:38; 4:37 LXX). God is praised both as creator and as king of Israel who has delivered his people from bondage. God and the Lamb now receive this praise because they have accomplished an even greater deliverance” (Beale).

John 21:1–19. Communion and Commission. In our Gospel reading, we hear about the third appearance of Jesus after his resurrection and the call of Jesus to his disciples to come and eat breakfast with him on the beach—communion indeed! For those following the RCL, we also read about the commission of Peter to follow the Good Shepherd (John 10) and to become a shepherd himself.

v. 9–13: Jesus performs the act of the Jewish host pronouncing the blessing at a meal (see also 6:11, 23) (Beale, 507). The number of fish and the net not being torn in verse 11 has attracted countless symbolic interpretations. It certainly indicates an eyewitness account, but maybe we are to understand it simply “as the abundance which results from obedience to Jesus, much as with the amount of wine generated in the water jars in Cana at the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry (2:6)” (NET, note 26).

vv. 15–19: The precious story of the conversation of Jesus with Peter contains much food for thought (and sermons!). Certainly, “the triple question undoes the triple denial (18:17, 25–27; JANT, 196). As

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often mentioned, there are two verbs used here for love (*agapaō* and *phileō*), but the evidence from elsewhere suggests that the uses should be taken as minor stylistic variations (NET, note 31).

Jesus' shepherd-call to Peter almost certainly alludes to the rich Shepherd theme in the Tanakh. God himself was known as Israel's Shepherd, and his people were called "the sheep of his pasture." David, who was a shepherd before becoming king, was the prototype of God's shepherd. Jesus picks all this up in chapter 10, where he declares himself to be the good shepherd, and almost certainly contrasts himself with the failing religious leaders criticized in OT times (Ezek. 34; Jer 3:15; c.f. Isa 44:28), and in his own time (Beale, 507). The leading of the shepherd was used as a metaphor of exodus (Ps 77:20; Isa 63:11, 14; Ps 78:52) and of end-time deliverance (Mic 2:12–13), not like the hired hand who abandons the sheep (John 10:2 and Jer 10:21; 12:10; 23:1–4; Ezek. 34; Zeph 3:3; Zech 10:2–3; 11:4–17) (Beale, 461–63).

v. 15: The phrase "more than these" is ambiguous, and some take it to mean *fishing and fishing gear*, or the other *disciples*, but it is most likely that it refers to the love of the other disciples for Jesus, so meaning "Do you love me more than these other disciples do?" The NET Bible notes: "It seems likely that there is some irony here: Peter had boasted in 13:37, 'I will lay down my life for you,' and the Synoptics present Peter as boasting even more explicitly of his loyalty to Jesus ('Even if they all fall away, I will not,' Matt 26:33; Mark 14:29). Thus the semantic force of what Jesus asks Peter here amounts to something like: 'Now, after you have denied me three times, as I told you you would, can you still affirm that you love me more than these other disciples do?'" (NET, note 29).

v. 19: The term "by what kind of death" is parallel with similar terms used of Jesus' death (John 12:33; 18:32) and has suggested to many, from the early church onwards, that Peter would not just suffer martyrdom but crucifixion. Those who take this view also argue that "stretch out your hands" and "tie you up" may refer to the victim being tied to the cross-beam and forced to carry it to the place of crucifixion, and even to the crucifixion itself.

ACNA Reading

Psalm 33. Praise for God's Faithful Care. This is a psalm of praise for God's faithful care and for the joy of trusting in God. The Creator of the world also maintains it, and, in contrast to him, all human power pales in significance. The psalm is incorporated into the morning service of Sabbath and the festivals (JSB).

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Stanza 1⁴

vv. 1–3: A call to praise. This psalm presents as a hymn, with a collective and choral setting, so the thanksgiving is not individual, but national and global. The first three verses suggest public performance with orchestra and chorus. Verse 3b calls the orchestra to play the music well, that is, skillfully.

vv. 4–5: After the call to praise, the psalmist now gives a series of reasons why the Lord is worthy of praise. Literally, verse 5 describes YHWH as: “loving righteousness and justice”—what an amazing expression of his nature! The verses argue that the world was created on the principles of righteousness, justice and *hesed*! What a contrast to so many modern arguments! Verses 4, 6: his *work* and his *word* made the heavens, referring back to Genesis 1:1 and Day 2 (Gen 1:6–8) and the *host* of the stars on Day 4 (Gen 1:14–19; and 2:1)

vv. 6–7: “[He] gathers like a pile the waters of the sea.” Some prefer to emend נִי (ned, “heap, pile”; cf. NASB) to נִי (nod, “bottle”; cf. NRSV; NIV “into jars”), but “pile” is used elsewhere to describe water that the LORD confines to one place (Exod 15:8; Josh 3:13, 16; Ps 78:13). This verse appears to refer to Genesis 1:9, where God decrees that the watery deep be gathered to one place so that dry land might appear. If so, the participles in this and the following line depict this action with special vividness, as if the readers were present on the occasion. Another option is that the participles picture the confinement of the sea to one place as an ongoing divine activity (NET, note 11). The word in 7b for oceans is the same word as in Gen 1:2b “the deep” or abyss (*tehōm*). Verse 7 is a double pun, picking up day 3 of creation and also Exodus 15.8 in the exodus, that the reed sea “streams stood up as a mound.” The phrase “the breath of his mouth,” is a parallel to “the word of the Lord,” but also picks up the use of “breath” (*ruach*) in Genesis 1:2 and in 1:27.

Stanza 2

vv. 8–9: No comment.

vv. 10–12: Verse 12 literally: “O the blessednesses/happinesses of the nation whose God is YHWH; the people he chose for an inheritance for him.” What an amazing expression! It states Israel’s special relationship as a nation with YHWH. The blessedness it refers to comes from God-given security and prosperity (NET, note 19). Verses 10–11: The Lord thwarts the counsel of nations, but his counsel stands forever.

vv. 13–15: Verse 15, literally, “the one forming together their heart.” Heart refers to human nature, but “together” is not so clear, maybe meaning the Lord forms every human person. The whole verse says he

⁴ Following the Stanza structure (and Strophe sub-structure) according to Fokkelman (reference above). I have shown the Strophes, even if there is no comment.

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forms every heart, and he knows all their actions! These verses are not national, as above, but globalist and universal (Alter).

Stanza 3

vv. 16–17: Humans amass vast armies and warriors built up great strength. How this contrasts with the Lord in the previous verses, who brought about creation and salvation by the word of his mouth! Verse 17 literally says, “a lie [is] the horse for victory/salvation.” Even in the greatness of its strength, the horse will not be able to deliver! Trusting in human weapons for salvation will always disappoint!

vv. 18–19: Notice the broad terms here, “those who fear him” and “those who wait for him.”

vv. 20–22: Literally, “our nephesh,” meaning soul, life-breath, our very selves (Alter). YHWH is described as “our help and our shield.” The word for “help” (*ēzer*) is the same as used of the woman for the man in Eden (Gen 2:18).

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- **DDH:** *Daily Dose of Hebrew*. <https://dailydoseofhebrew.com/>
An excellent resource for those who have studied basic Hebrew, giving a 2-min exposition of a Hebrew verse every day. You can listen to the recordings of previous ones such as Psalm 30 here: <https://dailydoseofhebrew.com/psalm-30/>

About the author. Dr Paul Hocking has had a varied career in education, leadership and management development, planting and pastoring of a social-enterprise church, supporting the leadership of many churches and Christian charities under the auspices of Evangelical Alliance Wales, and directing the Cymru Institute for Contemporary Christianity (2010-2019). He has qualifications in Microbiology, Public Health and Action Research, and a PhD on the Hebrew Bible focusing on the composition of the book of Leviticus. He has publications in health services management and the Hebrew Bible, including two papers for CMJ on the Decalogue and Leviticus. Paul is married with two adult children.