

Lesson 1. Saul of Tarsus: a Jewish Rabbi.

# Life and Teachings of Paul

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## Saul of Tarsus: a Jewish Rabbi

The name "Paul" (*paulos*) is the Greek transliteration of the Latin *paulus* meaning "small" or "little." He was earlier in his life called by the Hebrew name *Shaul* meaning, "to ask of the Lord." Paul could have been a man of small stature (cf. 2 Cor 10:10). There is a second century apocryphal writing called *The Acts of Paul* that describes him as,

. . . a man small of stature, with a bald head and crooked legs, in a good state of body, with eyebrows meeting and nose somewhat hooked, full of friendliness; for now he appeared like a man, and now he had the face of an angel (*Acts of Paul* 1:3)."

Paul was a Diaspora (Hellenistic) Jew; i.e., a Jew born and raised outside of Palestine. He spoke Greek, wrote in Greek, quotes from the Greek Septuagint (translation of OT from Hebrew into Greek) in his letters, and reflects a very impressive Greek vocabulary. He appears to be clearly at home in the atmosphere of the broader first century Mediterranean world, even possessing a good knowledge of the beliefs, practices, and terminology of the pagan religions of the gentiles (*ethnoi* - literally, "nations"). Yet, he was a Jew by race, a Jew by religion, and he never ceased to think of himself as belonging to God's people the Jews; i.e., a son of Israel, cf., Rom 11:1ff.

There are two distinct periods of Paul's early life: (1) his early years in Tarsus, and (2) his years of theological training in Jerusalem (cf. Acts 21:39; 22:5, 28; 23:6; Phil 3:4-7; Gal 1:13-14; 2 Cor 11:21-22).

## His Early Years in Tarsus

Tarsus was a major city of the Roman government due to its location as a land route from Palestine to the West. Not only was it a center of trade, it was one of the most prestigious university centers of the Greco-Roman world. Paul's family possessed Roman citizenship (Acts 22:25-29). It is highly probable that he came from a well to do bourgeois (middle-class) home. Roman citizenship for Jews usually indicated some level of wealth and a degree of community standing, which would also assure a good deal of exposure to the Hellenistic culture of the *ethnoi* (nations/gentiles). In Acts 17:28, Paul demonstrates a knowledge of the writings of the Greek poet Epimenides and in Titus 1:12, we have a reference to the poet Arat'us, suggesting that Paul appears to be more at home in the culture of the city and urban Greek culture. He uses only a few analogies drawn from agrarian life (e.g., 1 Cor 9:8-10), but places and persons drawn from city life are in abundance: the athletic activity of the arena or Olympics, the Roman court system, the Roman military, the educators, scholars, and philosophers who were located in the cities (cf. 1 Cor 1:20; 3:10-15; 4:9; 9:26-27).

Saul's early education would have begun at home in Tarsus. According to the *Mishnah* (*Pirke Aboth* [perkay aboth] 5:21) a Jewish boy had an allotted times for differing events in his life; especially, times for study of the Law (*Torah*) and the traditions.

At five years old one is fit for Scripture, at ten years for the *Mishnah*, at thirteen for the fulfilling of the commandments, at fifteen for the *Talmud*, at eighteen for the bride chamber, at twenty for pursuing a calling, at thirty authority, at forty for discernment, at fifty for counsel, sixty for to be an elder, at seventy for grey hairs, at eighty for special strength, at ninety for bowed back, and at a hundred a man is as one that has already died and passed and ceased from the world (*Mishnah*, *Pirke Aboth* 5:21; also see Josephus' "Life," chapter 2, for similar data.)

At five the young Jewish boy was to be taught from Scripture; viz the memorization of stories and various verses, usually taught by his mother (cf. 2 Tim 1:5). At ten he was to begin learning the oral traditions, as later written down in the *Mishnah* (the traditions of the elders - Matt 15:2-6; M 7:3-9), and at fifteen he was to begin studies of the advanced rabbinic tradition as later

recorded in the *Talmud*. Both of these collections of rabbinic tradition were "oral traditions" at the time of Paul, although neither the *Mishnah* nor the *Talmud* became written traditions until the late second and early third centuries AD. There is little doubt that much of what is found in these later collections existed in the first century as oral tradition, which was an art form in first century Judaism. The format of the text of both the *Mishnah* and *Talmud* is to introduce the preserved tradition with such expressions as, "It was said by the notable Hillel," or "the elder Gamaliel has said," followed by an interpretation or opinion of the sage, all of which indicates that there was a strong oral tradition in existence during the second temple period; the time in which Jesus lived.

When Saul had shown himself to be intellectually advanced as a young student in Tarsus he was sent to Jerusalem to study with one of the rabbinic sages, who took young men as *talmidim* (disciples) in preparation for advanced *Torah* studies. Those who showed exceptional ability were allowed to enter into a higher level of study with another sage of more notable standing, as Saul appears to have done with Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). Since twenty was the age of choosing a career, Saul's decision to become a rabbi (in addition to as a worker in leather) was probably made while a young student in Jerusalem; or, perhaps, it was his ambition from his years in Tarsus. It is very unlikely that Saul would have undertaken theological studies under Gamaliel while still a child (as the KJV, ASV and other translations of Acts 22:3 indicate). Such an honor was for the much advanced student. See also Acts 26:4 where Paul distinguishes between his educational process in Tarsus ("my own nation") and at Jerusalem (later education).

### Later Years in Jerusalem

In Acts 22:3, Paul identified himself as, "a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up (or better, "educated") in this city. Under Gamaliel I was thoroughly trained (instructed) in the law of our fathers." The difficulty here is found in the Greek word "*anatrepho*," which means, "to raise up, train or educate," and "*paideuo*," which means, "to teach or instruct as a tutor to student." In view of the historical factors considered above, it would appear that Paul was saying that he was born in Tarsus, but he was educated (*anatrepho*) in Jerusalem, being instructed (*paideuo*) at the feet of Gamaliel. In Acts 9:11, Jesus calls Saul "a man of Tarsus." Saul was a man of Tarsus, who

came to Jerusalem in his young adulthood to undertake advanced studies as a *talmid* to Gamaliel, in the study of Scriptures and the traditions.

Saul of Tarsus, the *talmid* or *mathates* (disciple) of Gamaliel states that he was “advanced beyond” his fellow *talmidim* (fellow students),

*For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. 14 I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers (Gal 1:13-14).*

Paul’s knowledge of the Scriptures is evident from a reading of his letters. In his thirteen letters Paul quotes from the Scriptures in at least 357 occurrences. There are 203 references to the *Torah* (in Genesis 66 refs, Exodus 44 refs, Lev 16 refs, Num 20 refs, and Deut 57 refs), which would be expected from a scribe trained as a torah-scholar (*nomodidaskalos*). However, Paul refers to the prophetic writings in over 150 references, where the greatest numbers of messianic texts are found. The greatest number of references comes from Isaiah (75 occ), Jeremiah (29 occ), 14 from and Ezekiel, and 36 references from the minor prophets (Daniel - Malachi).

Saul of Tarsus was a biblical scholar *par excellence*, a good reason for why Jesus appeared to him to send him to the nations (*ethnoi* - gentiles). Following his conversion, Saul spent ten years (from 33 AD to 43 AD - the lost years) in areas as Arabia (the word simply mean “the desert”) and Tarsus before returning to Palestine to begin his ministry as the apostle to the gentiles. The roots of Paul’s theology are found in the Jewish Scriptures (OT); but his insights into the messianic meanings of the many prophetic texts of the Hebrew Scriptures were given him by Christ by means of revelation and inspirational insight.

Gamaliel I, the sage of Israel and master teacher of Saul of Tarsus was the grandson of the famous Rabbi Hillel (60 BC - 20 AD). Hillel was considered to be less bound by traditionalism than many of his fellow rabbis. Even though Gamaliel was one of the leading rabbis of the Pharisees, he was, like his grandfather Hillel, very innovative in his thinking, non-traditional in his theology, and open in his attitude toward the gentiles. In fact, he advocated the evangelization of the gentiles, a thing condemned by the more

legalistic members of the Pharisaic party (see Acts 5:34-40 for a brief glimpse of Gamaliel).

### A Scribe of the Pharisees

Saul of Tarsus was a Hellenistic or Diaspora Jew, toward whom Gamaliel was said to be more popular than many of the sages associated with the more conservative schools. Saul was a member of the sect of the Pharisees, which may help explain why he would have been accepted as a *talmid* of such a prestigious sage as Gamaliel, a member of the same sect (Acts 5:34). We see numerous references in the Gospels to “the scribes and the Pharisees,” and some references to “the scribes of the Pharisees” (Mark 2:16; 5:1; Matt 5:20; 12:38; 15:1; 23:2, 13, 14, 23, 27, 29; Luke 5:21, 30; 6:7; 11:44, 53; 15:2; Acts 4:5; 6:12). The history of the scribes is the early history of the rabbis, and Saul of Tarsus was an advanced rabbinic *talmid* (disciple) of Gamaliel at the time of the execution of Jesus of Nazareth and the events in Jerusalem recorded in Acts 2 through 9; in short, Saul of Tarsus was a scribe or member of the guild of scribes known as the *sopherim*.

It is important to see who the scribes were in order to have a full appreciation for who Saul of Tarsus was before his conversion to Christ. During the lifetime of Jesus one of the most influential groups of religious leaders in Israel was “the *sopherim*” or “the scribes.” The lower ranks of the scribes were the copyists of the biblical scrolls and other important writings, others were biblical scholars who were the recognized interpreters of Scripture, then the “lawyers” or *nomodidaskaloi* - “torah-scholars” who were counselors to the Sanhedrin and advocates in legal matters associated with the Jewish community. Following the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, it was this “guild of scribes,” who took the leading role as the religious leaders of Judaism within the Mediterranean world, saving the religion of Judaism from extinction.

There is a direct connection between the scribal community of the first century and the rabbinic community from the second century to the present day. In the world of first century Israel the Jewish hierarchy was associated with the priesthood and the Temple system, those of the sect of the Sadducees. The guild of scribes, however, was more associated with the sect

of the Pharisees, whose activity centered in the synagogue and its emphasis on the study of Scriptures.

During the siege of Jerusalem by the Roman General Vespasian, Rabbi **Johanan ben Zakkai**, a leading scribe of the Pharisees, slipped through the Roman lines in a coffin and persuaded the General Vespasian to allow him to leave Jerusalem and locate himself and a large contingent of scribes on the Eastern Coast of the Mediterranean Sea. There he established an academy at the seacoast village of **Jamnia** (now call *Yevneh*). He took as many of the scribes as would go and all the scrolls they could carry (scrolls of the Hebrew Scriptures and the traditions of the sages), and establish the academy of Jamnia on the Coast. It was this body of scholars that resulted in the tradition of the *Sopherim* (the rabbinic scholars) and the *Massorettes*, the copyists that produced the official Massoretic Text used in Judaism today. This was the body of Jewish scholars responsible for the preservation of Judaism as we know it today. Some contemporary scholars of the Dead Sea Scrolls are convinced that during the siege on Jerusalem between 66 and 70 AD, many of the scrolls found at Qumran were carried to the Dead Sea area to be hidden in the caves to preserve them from destruction by the Romans.

It was at **Jamnia** that the canon of Hebrew Scripture was established. Following the destruction of the Temple the synagogue became the major institution of Judaism. From this time many Jewish rabbis developed into a guild of scribes or scholars called in Hebrew the *Sopherim*. When one is reading about the scribes in the Gospels and Acts in the NT, one is reading about those who later became known by the official title, "the rabbis." Prior to that the term was more of a descriptive or honorific designation for those scribes who became Judaism's official teachers and preservers of the traditions found in the Mishnah and Talmud.

The significance of all this for our purposes is that Saul of Tarsus was a scribe or scholar of the Pharisees, those who were the primary antagonists of Jesus of Nazareth prior to his entry into Jerusalem, his confrontation with the **Sanhedrin**, and his execution by the Romans.

The Pharisees with whom Saul of Tarsus was identified were considered the most conservative in their beliefs, especially in adherence to oral tradition known as the traditions of the elders; supposedly given the

seventy elders who went up with Moses on Mt Sinai (Exodus 24:1-2, 9-14)-. The Pharisees believed in the resurrection of the dead, the immanence of the coming of the kingdom of God, the messianic expectation, the superiority of the Jew to all other races, the inspiration and authority of the written Torah, and the authority of the oral Torah. Paul identifies himself on more than one occasion as a Pharisee (Acts 23:6; 26:5); here is, no doubt, a major source for answers to many of the questions concerning Paul's theology.

## Conclusion

According to Gal 1:14, Paul claimed to be "advanced in the Jews' religion" beyond many of his own age." This statement may be interpreted as advancement in theological standing but may also have reference to political advancement to a high position within powerful Jewish circles (i.e., authoritative councils as the Sanhedrin). It appears that he enjoyed a good bit of authority among the Jerusalem hierarchy, in that he was placed in charge of destroying what they believed to be a heresy movement among the Hellenistic Christians living in Palestine (cf. Acts 9:1-2, 13-14; 22:4-5; and 26:9-11); even possessing the authority to persecute to the death Jews professing belief in the messiahship of Jesus of Nazareth (Acts 22:4).