

Study 12: The Early Life of Paul

Introduction

The early life of Paul gives us quite some insight and information on his background and culture, although there are many pieces of the puzzle that are missing.

Body of the Study

Paul's Birth

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Homework:

Read the notes as a review of the study

Read chapter 9 in preparation for the next study:

- *Think about (and discuss with others) how the providence of God has worked in the life of Paul. How did his background prepare him for his future work?*
- *Considering the cultural background of Paul – What would be the chances of a person being born a Roman citizen, in a Greek language and cultural area, with such strong, conservative, and active Jewish parents?*

Notes for study 12: The Early Life of Paul

The apostle Paul first appears in scripture as “Saul” at the stoning of Stephen in Acts 7:58. There is no other person in the New Testament - except the Lord, about whom we know so much. His early life gives us quite some insight and information on his background and culture, although there are many missing pieces of the puzzle.

As we continue through our studies in Acts, we will look carefully at Paul’s life. His adventures in preaching the gospel to the world cover more than half of the book of Acts, and he penned around half of the New Testament. However, there are great gaps in our knowledge of Paul’s life. Some things written in the “Pastoral Epistles” (the epistles to Titus and Timothy) just don’t fit within the Acts record and chronology.

In early 2004 I put together a six-study series on the Life of Paul to complement the Acts studies. I have now incorporated that work into this revision of the Acts studies. I am indebted to David Owen from the Coulter St church in Brandon Florida for supplying me with a copy of his invaluable notes on the Life of Paul.

Paul’s Birth

At the time of Stephen’s stoning (Acts 7, around AD 33 or 34), Paul is described as “...a young man...” (Acts 7:58), which describes a man between the ages of 20 and 40 years. This would mean that Paul could have been born as late as AD 14, or as early as BC 7. Very shortly after this, Paul is given quite wide authority by the High Priests and the Sanhedrin to persecute the Christians for blaspheming the Law of Moses. Paul then goes out zealously and “rounds up” the Christians, and brings them back to Jerusalem for trial, punishment, and execution (stoning to death). It is highly unlikely that a “young man” who had just passed from “youth” would be given such authority. It is therefore more likely that Paul would be closer to 40 than to 20 at the time of Stephen’s stoning. This places Paul’s birth probably around 5 BC – about the same time that the Lord was born (4 BC – because of the changes to the calendar. Jesus was not born in the year 1, and there was no year 0).

Paul was born in the city of Tarsus in Cilicia, and describes himself as “...a citizen of no mean city...” (Acts 21:39). The region was famous for a type of cloth that was made from goat hair, known as Cilicium. It made a very dark coloured fabric, and was used for making tents. Linen cloth was also woven from the flax, which grew on the fertile plain.

The whole of Cilicia became a Roman Province in 67 BC with Tarsus as the capital, following Pompey’s victory over the pirates who had previously plagued the area. From about 25 BC, eastern Cilicia (including Tarsus) was united administratively with Syria. In AD 72 it was detached from Syria and united with Western Cilicia to form the province of Cilicia.¹

Tarsus was the famed meeting place of Antony and Cleopatra in 41 BC, when she rowed up the Cydnus river in the guise of Aphrodite. Augustus Caesar granted the city further privileges including exemption from imperial taxation.²

The people of Tarsus were strong in their pursuit of culture, and applied themselves to the study of philosophy, the liberal arts and “the whole round of learning in general”. In this respect, Tarsus rivalled even Athens and Alexandria. It was what we might describe today as “a University City”³ The City’s previous background in Greek culture prevailed, and the Greek language was commonly spoken in the city.

¹ Bruce (1) p 33

² Bruce (1) p 34

³ Bruce (1) p 35, quoting from Strabo, who wrote in the early 1st Century AD.

Roman citizenship in the city of Tarsus was bestowed upon property owners with a value greater than 500 drachma (1 drachma was approximately a day's wages). It would thus seem that Paul must have come from a well-off family, and one of distinction in the community⁴.

His Citizenship

Paul's parents were Jews, and also Roman citizens, so that he could say that he was "...*born a citizen...*" (Acts 22:28).

There were (essentially) four ways that a person could become a Roman citizen:

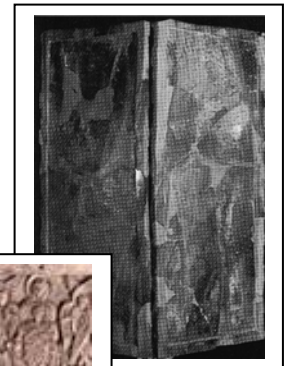
- Born in a Roman colony
- Born of Roman parents
- Purchase the right
- Be granted it for outstanding service to Rome

We know that Paul was *born* a Roman citizen, and coming from Tarsus in Cilicia, he was **not** born in a colony, so his parents must have been Roman citizens. Had Tarsus been a Roman colony, then Paul's statement to the commander in Acts 21:39 would have been sufficient for him to know of Paul's citizenship (however it was not, and Paul had to explain his citizenship to him in 22:25-29). Citizenship by birth was held in higher esteem than to have purchased the right.

It may be that Paul's father, his grandfather, or even his great grandfather had been granted citizenship. The circumstances of Paul's family acquiring citizenship are totally unknown.

Every five years, each male Roman citizen had to register in Rome for the census. In this he had to declare his family, wife, children, slaves and riches. Should he fail to do this, his possessions would be confiscated and he would be sold into slavery.

Proof of citizenship could be determined through reference to the census archives where the name of every citizen was kept (like the register of Births, Deaths and Marriages), or through the presentation of a diptych, a small wooden birth certificate (pair of folding tablets containing a certified copy of his birth and registration). The nobility had a bronze, silver or gold diptych indicating their citizenship status. A citizen who travelled frequently would carry such with him (effectively a passport).



Citizenship brought strong (and coveted) rights to the people. These rights included:

- The right to make legal contracts,
- The right to have a legal marriage,
- The right to stand for civil and public office,
- The right to sue (and be sued) in the courts,
- The right to appeal the decisions of the magistrates,
- The right to trial,
- The right not to be tortured or scourged,
- The right to immunity from certain state taxes.



It was expressly forbidden for a Roman citizen to be beaten. Whenever on trial, the Roman citizen could claim his legal rights by proclaiming "I am a Roman citizen". The rights included the ultimate appeal to Caesar if they felt that they were not being treated fairly in the courts.

Falsely claiming Roman citizenship was punishable by death.

⁴ Ramsay, p 31

Paul's Hebrew background

Paul was not only a Roman citizen, but describes himself as "...a Hebrew of the Hebrews..." (Php 3:5). He was not only Jewish, but he was Jewish *through and through*. We know that his parents (his father at least) was Jewish, since Paul was circumcised the 8th day in strict accordance with the Law of Moses. His father was also a Pharisee, as Paul himself was. This was "...the strictest sect of the Jews..." (Acts 26:5) which effectively tells us that Paul's parents (and he himself) was very conservative and diligent in applying and keeping the Law.

"...If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless..." (Php 3:4-6 NIV)

"...Then Paul, knowing that some of them were Sadducees and the others Pharisees, called out in the Sanhedrin, "My brothers, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee. I stand on trial because of my hope in the resurrection of the dead."..." (Acts 23:6 NIV)

The dispersion of the Jews (*the diaspora*) away from Palestine occurred from the beginning of the 6th century BC.⁵ Many of them had forsaken their religion, but not the family of Paul. The rise of synagogues occurred in the inter-testimonial period after 300 BC, and synagogues would be constructed in a town if there were more than 10 families in the city.

Paul was of the *tribe of Benjamin*, with the most outstanding Benjaminite being King Saul. It is likely that Paul's Jewish name *Saul* was given to him because of the great predecessor from the same tribe.

Paul's early education

Typical training for young Jewish boys would involve being taught to read the Hebrew scriptures, starting with Genesis. They would become proficient in the *Torah* (the five books of Moses), and the Psalms. By the time of Paul, the Jews had adopted a formal approach to education.

Paul often quotes from the Old Testament scriptures in his writings, and when he does it is usually from the Greek version (the Septuagint, which was translated into Greek for the great library at Alexandria. It is abbreviated as LXX after the seventy scholars who translated it). His learning of the Greek language scriptures would certainly have occurred during this period of his early education, whilst his later education under Gamaliel would have been learned in the Hebrew / Aramaic language.

Later education

If the young boy was to become a Rabbi, then he would undertake further education, most of which was located in Jerusalem. There were two major schools in Jerusalem (a bit like the "two" universities in England), the school of Hillel, and the school of Shammai. Gamaliel succeeded Hillel – and may have been his son or Grandson. Both schools were Pharisaic, and the school of Hillel having the greater influence⁶.

Gamaliel was a member of the Sanhedrin, and one its leaders. It was said that "When Rabban Gamaliel the elder died, the glory of the Torah ceased, and purity and 'separateness' died"⁷.

The youths who would become Rabbis were sent to one of these schools to have a detailed education in the Jewish religion. They would already have had a good background in the Torah and books of wisdom, and it was now time to learn about *the traditions*.

⁵ Bruce (1), p 30

⁶ Coneybeare and Howson, p. 47

⁷ Mishnah, Sotah 9:15

The Sanhedrin has its origins in Exodus 24, where God calls 70 of the elders of Israel, and appoints them for a special work. God gave Moses the Law, which he wrote down (the first five books of the bible – the Jews called it the Torah, and we sometimes call it the Pentateuch). But God gave to the elders an Oral Law – *the traditions*. The Oral Law was to complement the written Law, and in a lot of ways explained how the written Law (especially the ordinances) were to be carried out. The Pharisees corrupted the Oral Law (the Sadducees did not recognise it as authoritative at all), and Jesus condemned them for making their traditions (the Oral Law) of more authority than the written word. Jesus' condemnation was not for having an Oral Law – but rather for what they had done with it.

The Oral Law was never written down until AD 185. Jerusalem had been lost to the Romans, and all of the elders had been dispersed. There was a very real chance that the traditions would be lost forever, and so it was written down for the first time. It is called The Mishnah.

The young Jewish boys at the rabbinical school would study and learn the Oral Law, and what it meant. This would most likely be when the boy was between 10 and 13 years old⁸. Modern Jews study the Talmud, which is a commentary, not on the Torah, but on the Mishnah. The Mishnah is about as thick as the Old Testament, and the Talmud is about as thick as the Encyclopaedia Britannica. So, essentially what Paul would have studied under Gamaliel would have been initially what is now contained in the Mishnah, and then what is now contained in the Talmud. These studies would have taken many years. If Paul began at 13, he would have still been studying at least into his twenties.

Paul writes concerning his studies:

“...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 NIV – emphasis mine)

Paul's early adulthood

We have no certainty about Paul's early adulthood. If he went to Jerusalem to “university” at the age of 13, and stayed there until the age of (say) 20 or 25, then where did he learn his trade of tentmaking?

If Paul was born around the same time as the Lord, then the church was established, grew and prospered when Paul was around 33 years old. It was not very long after this that Paul was found persecuting the christians (AD 34). This leaves a period of 10 or so years in Paul's life that is not accounted for.

His home was in Tarsus, and it's fame for the Cilicium cloth would suggest that it was here that he learnt his trade. He most likely went “home” to his family (remember they were strongly Jewish) and it was at that time that he learnt his trade. If Paul's family were tentmakers, then Paul would have already had a strong knowledge of the fundamentals of the craft before he left for Jerusalem – even if he did not have the skills. (In exactly the same way, I learned a lot about engineering fundamentals from my father without having done an apprenticeship). It seems reasonable then that he came back to work in the family business, and learned the skill of his craft during this period.

Paul was not acquainted with Jesus, which provides evidence of his absence from Jerusalem. Jesus' appearance to Paul (Saul) on the road to Damascus was to provide precisely this evidence

⁸ Coneybeare and Howson, p. 43

to him (Acts 26:16). If Paul had remained in Jerusalem, it is certain that he would have seen Jesus during the three years of his public ministry.

At some point then, Paul is drawn back to Jerusalem, and it is at this time that he goes to “round up” the christians. He may have heard of the new religion (the new “sect”) that had begun in Jerusalem, and had come to find out for himself what had caused it.

Whatever happened in between, Paul is placed in Jerusalem about 1 year after the church began.

Summation of Paul's background

Paul was born of strict Jewish parents, who brought him up in the strictest learning and tradition of the Jewish religion. He then went to the most conservative highest education facility of the Jewish religion, where he excelled. His parents also happened to be Roman citizens, which gave Paul enormous rights as he travelled around the Roman world. The city where he was born was a “University City” embroiling the Greek culture and language.

So Paul not only had a thorough knowledge of the Jewish Religion, but he also had a thorough knowledge of the Greek philosophy and culture, and spoke Greek fluently. A Roman, a Greek, and a Hebrew all in one. But not *just a Roman* – but one who was born free. And not *just a Hebrew* – but a Hebrew of the Hebrews. And not *just a Greek* – but one who had come from the heart of the Greek culture in Tarsus.