Biblical Portrait of Paul, the Apostle

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Paul, The Apostle.
Known as Saul of Tarsus before his conversion to Christianity and the most influential leader in the early days of the Christian church. Through his missionary journeys to Asia Minor and Europe, Paul was the primary instrument in the expansion of the gospel to the Gentiles. Moreover, his letters to various churches and individuals contain the most thorough and deliberate theological formulations of the NT.

Most of the biographical material available comes from the Book of Acts. Though modern critics question the reliability of this narrative, there is every good reason to use it as the basis for outlining Paul's life. Moreover, the teachings of Paul, as set forth in his letters, are best summarized within the historical framework provided by the Acts narrative.

Background and Conversion.
Date of Birth. Little is known of Paul's life prior to the events discussed in Acts. He is first mentioned in chapter 7 in connection with the execution of Stephen. According to verse 58, “the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.” The term “young man” probably indicates someone in his 20s, though this is uncertain.

The events mentioned in Acts 7 may have occurred as early as a.d. 31 if Jesus’ death took place during the Passover of a.d. 30. On the other hand, if Jesus' death is dated in the year 33 then those events could have taken place no earlier than 34, but no later than 37. (Second Cor 11:32, 33 states that when Paul escaped from Damascus that city was being ruled by the Nabataean king Aretas, who died in the year 40. Since, according to Gal 1:17, 18, Paul left Damascus three years after his conversion, the year 37 must be regarded as the latest possible date for Stephen’s death.)

Using the year 34 as an approximate date for the time when Saul is described as a “young man,” and assuming that Saul was no older than 30 years at that time, then it can be concluded his birth took place no earlier than a.d. 4. And since it is very unlikely that he was younger than 20, a.d. 14 can be set as the latest possible date for his birth. This conclusion is supported by the knowledge that Paul studied under the famous Gamaliel I (Acts 22:3), who according to some scholars became a member of the Sanhedrin about a.d. 20. If Paul was 15 years old when he entered the school, the range of a.d. 4–14 for his birth fits all the information available. So it can be said with a degree of accuracy that Saul was born in the city of Tarsus about a.d. 9, but any estimates about his age should allow a leeway of 5 years either way.
Upbringing. The city of Tarsus was a major population center in the province of Cilicia in the southeastern region of Asia Minor. Lying on a significant commercial route, Tarsus felt the influence of current cultural movements, particularly Stoic philosophy. It is difficult to determine to what extent Greek thought affected Paul as a child. There is a possibility that his family had become “Hellenized”—after all, Paul was born a Roman citizen (it is not known how his father or ancestors acquired citizenship, though military or other notable service is a strong possibility); accordingly, he was given not only a Hebrew name (Shaul) but also a Roman cognomen (Paulus, though some have argued that he adopted this Roman name at a later point). At any rate, the fact that in his letters he shows great ease in relating to Gentiles suggests that he obtained a Greek education while in Tarsus.

A scene from Asia Minor, the location of Paul's birth (Tarsus) and much of his ministry. On the other hand, he describes himself as one “circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews” (Phil 3:5), and such a characterization, particularly the last phrase, perhaps served to distinguish him from those Jews in the Dispersion who freely adopted Greek ways. Moreover, according to Acts 22:3, he was actually brought up in Jerusalem (possibly in his sister's house, cf. Acts 23:16), and some scholars infer from that statement that Paul was brought up in a totally Jewish environment from earliest childhood.

It is worthwhile pointing out that Gamaliel is represented in later rabbinic literature as a teacher who had considerable appreciation for Greek culture. Besides, soon after his conversion, Paul spent at least 10 years ministering in Tarsus and its environs (cf. Acts 9:30; Gal 1:21; 2:1; see below). These questions are interesting for more than historical reasons. One of the most basic issues debated among modern interpreters of Paul is whether he should be viewed primarily as a Greek or as a Hebrew. The latter position has, with good reason, become more and more prominent, but the strong Hellenistic elements that formed part of the apostle’s total character should not be overlooked.

From Pharisaism to Christianity. In addition to the statement in Philippians 3:5, Paul makes some biographical comments in Galatians 1:13, 14: “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. I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers.” It is clear that Paul had made a total religious commitment to his Pharisaic heritage. But what precisely did that mean? The difficulty in answering that question arises from two problems. One is the issue of how 1st-century Pharisaism should be characterized; the other is the debate that has raged over the relation between Paul's religious background and his conversion to Christianity. The first issue may be dealt with briefly. Paul's own statement in Galatians 1:14 provides an important key, namely, his reference to “the traditions of my fathers.” That phrase is equivalent to “the traditions of the elders,” used by the Pharisees to criticize Jesus’ conduct (Mk 7:5). It refers to the rabbinic “oral law,” a body of legal biblical interpretation that played an authoritative role among the Pharisees. Unfortunately, much of that interpretation was characterized by a tendency to relax the stringency of God’s commands, and the Pharisees were often in danger of thinking that they had
satisfied the divine requirements (cf. esp. Mt 5:20, 48; Lk 19:9–14). This religious background is clearly reflected in Philippians 3:9, where Paul, obviously referring to his pre-Christian experience, speaks of “a righteousness of my own that comes from the law.”

This fact leads naturally to the second difficulty: how do we relate Paul’s background to his conversion? Some scholars have argued forcefully that Protestants have interpreted Paul’s conversion in the light of Martin Luther’s experience. This reading, they add, is quite misleading, for there is no evidence that Paul was moved to embrace Christianity out of a sense of guilt. In fact, they say the term “conversion” should not even be used since Paul himself speaks rather of a “call” (e.g., Gal 1:15).

There are some valid insights in the charge that Protestantism has placed too much emphasis on “the introspective conscience of the West” (so Krister Stendahl), but it would be a serious mistake to suggest that Luther and the Reformers misunderstood Paul’s experience at a fundamental level. Part of the debate focuses on the meaning of Romans 7:7–25, especially such a statement as the following: “Once I was alive apart from law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died” (v 9). Whether this and subsequent verses should be understood as biographical or not is a question that has divided exegetes for a long time.

However, the significance of Philippians 3 is clear. In verse 6 of that chapter Paul characterizes his pre-Christian life as “blameless” with reference to legal obedience. Since he can hardly mean that he was (or had earlier thought he was) free from sin, the statement reflects the same attitude expressed by the Pharisee in the parable of Luke 18:9–14, namely, religious self-satisfaction and a lack of sense for the need to cry out for divine mercy. Whether Paul went through a period of guilt (comparable to Luther’s) before he surrendered to the claims of the gospel is not known. What matters is that he came to view the knowledge of Jesus Christ as incomparably superior to what he had earlier known. In the light of the gospel, his previous advantages and accomplishments, great as they were, could only be regarded as rubbish (Phil 3:7, 8).

With regard to Paul’s pre-Christian attitude to the gospel, one thing is certain—he was opposed to it with his whole heart. In his apostolic letters he speaks of his previous hatred for the church (e.g., Gal 1:13; Phil 3:6). Paul does not say explicitly why he felt this way, but there are some hints. In 1 Corinthians 1:23, for example, he speaks of the crucifixion of Christ as a stumbling block to the Jews; and in Galatians 3:13 he quotes Deuteronomy 21:23 (“Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree”) as evidence that Christ, by dying on the cross, became a curse for us. It seems reasonable to infer that Paul, along with many other Jews, viewed the preaching of the gospel as blasphemy. How could these Christians regard as Messiah (God’s anointed) a lowly man who suffered a criminal’s death and received the divine curse itself? Not surprisingly, this theme would become a basic one in Paul’s own proclamation of the gospel.

At any rate, Paul did become a Christian, and thanks to the Book of Acts we are well informed regarding this event. According to chapter 8, not only did he give approval to Stephen’s stoning, but soon after that he “began to destroy the church. Going from
house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison” (vv 1, 3). Not satisfied, he decided to pursue the disciples as far away as Damascus. The sequel is familiar to all Bible students. As he and his traveling party approached Damascus, a light flashed and a voice said to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” The One speaking identified himself as “Jesus, whom you are persecuting” (Acts 9:1–5; cf. also 22:4–8 and more fully 26:9–18). Unable to see anything, he followed the Lord's instructions and waited in Damascus. Ananias, a disciple, was sent to speak to Paul, restore his sight, and baptize him (Acts 9:6–19).

Early Ministry

**Damascus.** To the surprise of everyone who had heard of Paul's enmity toward the church, the new apostle began to preach the gospel vigorously and convincingly. According to Galatians 1:17, 18, Paul spent some three years in Damascus and its environs. His ministry, however, eventually drew opposition and he had to escape from Damascus. Upon his return to Jerusalem, the Christians at first could not bring themselves to trust the one who had earlier persecuted them so fiercely, but Barnabas, a highly respected leader in the church, made it possible for Paul to receive a hearing (Acts 9:23–27).

**Jerusalem.** At once he resumed his preaching, and the Acts narrative gives us a significant clue regarding the distinctiveness of Paul's ministry. According to 9:29 Paul “talked and debated with the Grecian Jews, but they tried to kill him.” The significance of this statement is that it draws a suggestive parallel between Paul's preaching and Stephen's ministry. The story that describes Stephen's selection as a deacon is set in the context of conflicts within the church between Greek-speaking, partially Hellenized Jews and those who spoke Hebrew or Aramaic (Acts 6:1; the latter were natives of Palestine and probably stricter in their observance of the Jewish ceremonies). Since Stephen himself belonged to the Greek-speaking community, this is where he took his ministry; indeed, he spoke powerfully as he presented the gospel to the Jews of Cyrene, Alexandria, and other foreign places (vv 8, 9).

To judge by the Jews' subsequent accusations (that he spoke against the temple and the OT customs, vv 11–14), it seems that an important theme in Stephen's preaching was the newness of the gospel message and therefore the secondary importance of the Jewish traditions. This is probably the best explanation for the violent reaction of the Jews against him. Up to this point, the Jewish leaders, though annoyed by the preaching of the apostles, put up with it (see esp. Acts 5:27–40). Now, however, that preaching may have taken a new twist that threatened in a fundamental way the Jewish establishment. So significant was this turn of events that it led to Stephen's death and the persecution of the Christians.

It can be said that, in a very important sense, Paul took up Stephen’s mantle. Bible students have long recognized that Luke, as he wrote the Book of Acts, appears to picture Stephen as a precursor of the great apostle to the Gentiles. More recently, scholars have become increasingly aware of the significance of this connection in the
light of the serious Jewish-Gentile conflicts experienced by the early church. During its first years the Christian church was totally Jewish and it was taken for granted that it would remain so. In spite of persecution from their countrymen, it does not seem to have occurred to the early Christians that the gospel might affect their evaluation of Jewish observances. They continued to circumcise their boys, to attend the sacrifices at the temple, to keep the sabbath, to make Nazirite vows, to avoid association with Gentiles, and so on.

Probably because of his Hellenistic background, Stephen was apparently one of the first Christian leaders to raise questions about these matters. Perhaps reflecting Jesus' own remarks about the transitory character of the temple (cf. Jn 2:19; 4:21–24), Stephen challenged his hearers' assumptions in clear terms (Acts 7:44–53). Paul too had a Hellenistic background, and one wonders whether his earlier enmity toward Stephen may have been occasioned in part by fear that Stephen was possibly correct. Whether guilt over Stephen's death played a part in Paul's conversion—and in his later decision to take up the ministry to Hellenistic Jews—is much too speculative.

What matters is that Paul did in fact pick up where Stephen had left off. This ministry once again aroused the ire of the Jews, and so the believers in Jerusalem, concerned for Paul's life and no doubt fearing that a new wave of persecution might be unleashed, sent the apostle off to Tarsus (Acts 9:30). According to Galatians 1:18–24, Paul's stay in Jerusalem had lasted only two weeks, and most of the Christians there and in the outlying areas had no personal acquaintance with him. Subsequent events suggest strongly that from the beginning of his ministry Paul's distinctive interests and emphases created special tensions. While it would be an exaggeration to say that the Jerusalem church was opposed to him (note esp. Gal 1:24), it is certain that some individuals and groups entertained doubts about his ministry. The Christians in Judea had no desire to break off their ties with Judaism, and preachers like Paul who emphasized the antithesis between it and the gospel could easily be perceived as troublemakers or worse.

**Tarsus and Antioch.** The time Paul spent in Tarsus and other parts of Cilicia must be regarded as “dark years” in his ministry, since virtually nothing is known about his activities during this period. Luke gives us no information in Acts, and the casual reader might infer that this was a relatively brief period. In Galatians 2:1, however, Paul says that 14 years elapsed from the time of his conversion (or possibly from the time he was sent off to Tarsus) to the time of an important meeting with the Jerusalem apostles. The identification of this visit to Jerusalem is a major point of controversy among scholars, but even if the earliest possible date for it is taken, the year a.d. 46, it appears that Paul spent at the very least 9 years in Tarsus before he became a prominent figure in the early church. It has been suggested that some of the experiences listed by Paul in 2 Corinthians 11:23–27 (perhaps also the revelations mentioned in 12:1–10) may have taken place during these “dark years,” but even if this thesis is correct, there are little more than generalities to back it up. It is a most intriguing fact that the great apostle to the Gentiles spent the first decade of his ministry in relative obscurity, virtually unknown by the vibrant early church in Jerusalem.
At least one leader in the Jerusalem church, however, had not forgotten Paul. Barnabas—himself a Hellenistic Jew from Cyprus—was sent by the church to Antioch of Syria, a large metropolitan center in the Middle East and the third largest city in the Roman Empire. The Christians in Jerusalem had heard that the gospel was being preached with great success in Antioch. Some of them probably were concerned about reports that this evangelistic effort had been extended to the “Greeks,” and this represented quite an innovation.

Some time earlier Peter had by revelation brought the gospel to Cornelius, a “God-fearer,” that is, a Gentile who was sympathetic to Judaism and probably attended the synagogue services but who was not willing to adopt Judaism completely. The Christians who accompanied Peter were astonished to find out that a non-Jew was granted the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:44–46), and when the church in Jerusalem heard about his visiting a Gentile, Peter was under considerable pressure to explain his actions (11:1, 3). His explanation satisfied the church (see v 18), but obviously not everyone was happy.

In any case, the news that Antiochene Gentiles (presumably “God-fearers” too, though there is some disagreement about this) were being received into the church suggested that some supervision might be required. The Jerusalem leaders wisely chose Barnabas, no doubt because he, like some of the “evangelists” in Antioch, was from Cyprus; certainly someone was needed who enjoyed the confidence of both parties. Barnabas was greatly encouraged by what he saw in Antioch (Acts 11:22–24). The work was so large and promising that he traveled to nearby Tarsus and persuaded Paul to help him with this work. “So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people” (Acts 11:26).

Because of the great famine of a.d. 46, predicted by the prophet Agabus, the Christians in Antioch sent a gift to Jerusalem by the hand of Barnabas and Paul (Acts 11:27–30). According to some scholars, this “famine visit” is to be identified with that related by Paul in Galatians 2:1–10. In any case, Barnabas and Paul returned to Antioch, taking along with them John Mark, Barnabas’s cousin (Acts 12:25).

Ministry in Asia Minor and Syria.
