

**Paul – A Legal Case Study**  
**Chapter 2**  
**The Initial Interview**

Sometimes it happens in jail, other times it happens in the office, but regardless of location, the initial interview of the client is critical. During this interview one begins gathering the information that will set the lawyer on course for her or his further work.

Surprisingly, while it is important to an interview that a client tell you the truth, it isn't absolutely necessary. If a client fails to be fully informative, or if a client "remembers" things differently than what is true, time and hard work will disclose that. The initial interview is a chance to get basic information and set up a road map of where case development best proceeds.

In addition to getting the information that will help me proceed with handling the case, I use the interview as a chance to find points of connection. I need to know where I can relate to the client. I also need to know the blind spots where I don't relate well.

The initial interview generally serves also as an "assignment interview. By that I mean it is the interview where I learn what the client's real desires are. I want to know why the client did what the client did that led to the legal difficulty, but I also want to know what the client wants from me. Is the goal a trial and vindication or is it a plea bargain with the smallest punishment possible?

Notes are extremely important during an interview. Lawyers must keep up with where information comes from so that they are able to use that information later. It does me no good to remember some key fact in a case if I can't remember where that fact comes from when I go to prove it up at trial.

In this case which I approach as if I am Paul's defense lawyer, I am going to need to do the same, albeit with a slightly different form. My plan to keep this readable is to provide major citations in footnotes while in real life I would likely scrawl them onto the side of the legal pad.

With Paul, we will be able to access certain information I would be seeking in the initial interview. Some information I'd like has been lost to time, but that doesn't thwart the goals of this study. Often there are huge holes in what you learn from clients, and the lawyer's job is to take the information available and work with it. That is what we will do here in the initial interview.

I break the interview into sections. I start with background and move on from there into areas of concern. I always keep a “TO DO” list on an alternate page as I realize work I will need to do to further my case development. This will become apparent to the reader.

### ***Background***

As I probe Paul’s background, I want to see the road he walked before the arrest. If you really want to know and understand someone, anyone, you need to know their life story. Who we are is determined not only by our DNA, but by the events of our lives. We become who we are from our interactions with our families, friends, enemies, and strangers. How we think, our interests and beliefs, are formed by these interactions as well as our upbringing and education.

I want to know this about Paul. This is the “background” of the interview of Paul.

#### *Name:*

Everyone needs to know the name of the client, and it is no less different with Paul. My legal team includes a “trial scientist.” We call him Dr. Bob. Dr. Bob is a lawyer, but before going to law school, he was a clinical psychologist. Dr. Bob explained to me long ago that we need to always be careful with people who change their names! That often happens when someone has something to hide or when they are escaping their past.

What about Paul? Many people believe that Paul changed his name when he “became a Christian” from Saul to Paul. It is as if the Christian transformation was so total and complete, that Paul chose a name that was “close” to his original name, but was different.

This inference is not a fair inference, and our initial interview would have rectified it. The inference comes from an inadequate reading of the New Testament as well as a deficient understanding of Roman society and culture in the first century.

The New Testament can be divided into four different kinds of writings: gospels (four of them), a history of the church (commonly called “Acts”), letters (also called “epistles”), and an apocalyptic piece called “Revelation.”<sup>1</sup> Paul features in the history book called Acts as well as authoring 13 of the letters. In the letters, each of which is written to churches in the mission field, Paul identifies himself as “Paul.” In Acts, he is “Saul,” until he goes out into the mission field. Then he is “Paul.” The exception comes in Acts when Paul is recounting the events encountering Jesus on the Damascus road. There

---

<sup>1</sup> How one divides the New Testament can differ. Some use a fifth division and consider the book of Hebrews a “sermon” rather than an epistle or letter.

Jesus calls him “Saul,” and Paul uses that name when retelling the story to the Jewish audiences in Acts 22 and Acts 26.

As for the cultural times, today, most western names are simple. For example, my name is William Mark Lanier. I have a first name, William, which comes from my father’s first name. My second name, Mark, is my familiar name that my parents have called me since birth. My last name, Lanier, is my family name, and all the people in my family have that name.

During the time of Paul, each Roman citizen also had three names.<sup>2</sup> The three Roman names were not set up like names in Western civilization today. The Roman process of three names died out with the Roman Empire in the 5<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>3</sup> but history has left us with evidence to clearly understand the naming at the time of Paul. To understand the Roman naming system, we will use the example of Gaius Julius Caesar. The first name<sup>4</sup> (Gaius) was the personal given name. Frequently, this is the name people would use to refer to a person either alone or in combination with one of the person’s other names. The second name (Julius in our example) typically denoted one’s heritage or clan affiliation (Caesar came from the Juliae clan). Typically, the last name was a nickname or sometimes a family name passed on.

We do not know all three of Paul’s Roman names. We only know his third Roman name, *Paullus* (in Latin, meaning “little”) while in Greek it was *Paulos* (Παῦλος). This name would be common and a label people would use for the apostle.

Paul would have had the three Roman names as part of his registration as a Roman citizen, but Paul would also have had an additional name. Being a Hebrew who was born into a devout family, Paul would have had a Hebrew name that was used in Hebrew circles. Paul’s Hebrew name was Saul.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Actually, people would frequently have more than just three names, but three names were required for registration of a Roman citizen. Wilson, Stephen, *The Means of Naming – A Social and Cultural History of Personal Naming in Western Europe* (London: Routledge 2004) at 4.

<sup>3</sup> With the Germanic invasion, most people had one name after the fall of Rome. Over time, that expanded with second/family names becoming common in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. Middle names were added after the Renaissance. For a full history on the naming process, see Wilson’s book cited above.

<sup>4</sup> The Latin term for this first name was *praenomen*. The Latin term for the second name was *nomen* or *gentilicium*. The Latin for the third name was *cognomen*.

<sup>5</sup> The Hebrew comes from *sha’al*, which means, “to ask.” It was the name of the first King of Israel. The Greek is spelled *Saoul* (Σαοῦλ) in places and *Saulos* (Σαῦλος) in others.

In Hebrew circles, Paul was called “Saul.” This explains the alternate usage. Paul was never changing his name because of a “conversion.” A close look at Acts shows Luke using Paul’s Hebrew name past his conversion up to the time where Paul (Saul) and Barnabas are on their first missionary journey. On the island of Cyprus, before explaining Paul’s interaction with a magician, Luke writes, “But Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him and said...” (Acts 13:9). After that, Luke uses Paul’s Roman name exclusively except when quoting Paul’s description of his conversion (Acts 22:7, 13; 26:14).

### *Appearance*

We’ve all heard the adage, “You can’t tell a book by its cover.” That doesn’t change the fact that we often form impressions about people by visual cues. Almost subconsciously, we note how people look. We consider their dress, mannerisms, and behaviors, and make assumptions about the person that might be born out through further interactions or modified. Either way, first impressions are important.

One of the judges before whom I have spent a good bit of time refers to people who get “sentencing haircuts.” He explained that almost every time, whenever a person appears before him for sentencing (the hearing where the judge assesses what sentence a criminal will get), the person has a brand-new haircut, looking clean and good. It is common for lawyers to “clean up” their clients because looks matter.

I can’t really determine what Paul looked like. Some might think based on his letters and influence that he was a huge fellow, overpowering in his demeanor and able to wow and impress folks. I don’t think that assessment is right, however. His letters intimate that he wasn’t overpowering and that his enemies used that to trumpet their own credibility over Paul’s.<sup>6</sup>

Paul’s message had power *in spite* of his appearance. Our best assessment of Paul’s appearance comes from outside the Bible. Our earliest non-Biblical writing on Paul comes from the later part of the first century (some scholars date it in the second century), in a book titled the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. The book received wide circulation in the Eastern Church.

---

<sup>6</sup> For example, in 1 Corinthians 3:2, Paul spoke of his initial time with the fledgling church as one where his presence was “in weakness and in fear and much trembling.” In his second letter to that church, Paul would call himself a “jar of clay” seeking to proclaim Jesus as Lord rather than himself (2 Cor. 4:5,7). He also spoke of his physical life as a “burden” of this earthly “tent” (2 Cor. 5:1-4). Later in that chapter he compared himself to those who have cause to boast about their appearance.

While detailing the interactions of Paul with a virgin named Thecla, the book contains our oldest description of Paul. Paul is described in chapter 1, verse 7 as,

a man of middling size, and his hair was scanty, and his legs were a little crooked, and his knees were projecting, and he had large eyes and his eyebrows met, and his nose was somewhat long, and he was full of grace and mercy; at one time he seemed like a man, and at another time he seemed like an angel.

Scholars believe the account in the Acts of Paul and Thecla is not historically valid. It is seen as an attempt to pass off a wonderful story about Paul as if it were true and written by Paul himself.<sup>7</sup> That makes one question the narrative, but since the story was likely written at a time when people were still alive who had known Paul, one figures the physical description is fairly accurate. If you wish to sell a story, your chances are greatly diminished if you give the wrong physical data about the man you write up!

One might think that with all the success Paul had on the mission field, that he was someone that drew people in with his magnetism and physical beauty. Ultimately as a lawyer, however, I safely assume that Paul was not an overly impressive physical specimen, but one whose strength and believability stemmed from his convictions, not his debonair appearance.

### *Family history, childhood, and education*

One summer I taught a law school class on jury selection. In the class, I taught the prospective lawyers not only the rules and mechanics associated with jury selection, but also a bit of the art. Selecting a jury involves trying to determine what jurors might be favorably disposed toward your client and case, and what jurors carry a deep-seated bias that would preclude them from being fair and impartial.

One day, I brought in one of my mentors, Ernest, to speak to the class. Ernest came by his name honestly. His genuineness was never doubted by anyone who spent much time with him. That was one feature that made him a strong lawyer. Another was his perspective on jury selection (“voir dire” is the proper legal term).

---

<sup>7</sup> The early church leader (and lawyer) Tertullian wrote around 190AD that the work was falsely named as “Acts of Paul,” and that “the presbyter who compiled that document, thinking to add on his own to Paul’s reputation, was found out, and though he professed he had done it for love of Paul, was deposed from his position.” *De Baptismo Liber 17* (Evans’ translation 1964).

Ernest explained his key to voir dire. “I want to know about people’s past. I want to know the road they’ve walked. If I can figure out the road people have walked in their lives to get to the present, I can reasonably predict what they will do and where they will go in the future.

Personal history is very important to trial lawyers. It would be a major focus in my initial interview with Paul/Saul. I can draw a good bit of the information I would get in an initial interview by looking closely at the basic storyline given in Acts 21-23, considered in the first chapter. Here there are notable comments about Paul’s personal life.

In Acts 21:37, when Paul said to the Roman tribune, “May I say something to you?” The tribune was startled to hear Paul speak to him in Greek. He asked Paul, about his Greek and in Paul’s reply we learn of his past. Paul said, “I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no obscure city.”

After Paul got permission from the tribune to address the Jewish masses that were assaulting Paul before the tribune interrupted by arresting Paul, Paul shifted from Greek to Hebrew (or Aramaic) as he addressed the Jews. Paul told them, “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel...” (Acts 22:3).

Paul then recounted his conversion experience, adding that God had sent Paul to share the news of Jesus as Messiah to the Gentiles. At this point, the crowd grew mad with anger and the tribune ordered his men to examine Paul under torture (flogging with whips).

Paul stopped the torture before it began by telling the soldiers he was a Roman citizen. (That made the torture illegal.) The Tribune had come and asked Paul about Paul’s citizenship when we read Paul’s claim, “I am a citizen by birth.” Later, the tribune set Paul before the Chief Priest and ruling council of the Jews. During Paul’s discussions with the council, we read Paul explaining, “Brothers, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee” (Acts 23:6), giving us a bit of insight into Paul’s parents. A bit later, the council plots to ambush Paul and the attempt is thwarted because “the son of Paul’s sister heard of their ambush” (Acts 23:16).

Sometime later, as Paul appeals through the Roman judicial system he makes an appearance before King Agrippa in Caesarea. Paul begins his defense telling Agrippa, “My manner of life from my youth, spent from the beginning among my own nation and in Jerusalem, is known by all the Jews” (Acts 26:4). It is during this speech to Agrippa that Paul confesses, “I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them” (Acts 26:10).

Paul also gives us some insight into his upbringing in his letter to the church at Philippi. In Phil. 3:5-6, Paul writes that he was, “circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.”

## **Implications**

From these passages, one can learn a great deal about Paul’s early life. One learns that:

- Paul was born a Roman citizen (which tells us Paul’s father was also a Roman citizen);
- Paul was born in Tarsus of Cilicia (Paul was a citizen of Tarsus as well as a Roman citizen);
- Paul’s father was a devout Jew (Pharisee);
- Paul was not an only child, having at least one sister (and through her a nephew);
- Paul spoke Greek fluently as well as Hebrew/Aramaic and at least a good measure of Latin;
- Paul moved to Jerusalem at some point and continued his studies under Rabbi Gamaliel;
- Paul’s family kept their heritage and could trace their lineage to the tribe of Benjamin throughout the centuries, even through the captivities and dispersion; and,
- Paul cast his vote against saints of the church; possibly indicating Paul was a member of the Sanhedrin.

As I lawyer, I would set my assistants to work on “scrubbing” these facts to see what is fairly learned from other historical sources.

## **The historical insights**

**Tarsus** If I sent someone to research Tarsus, “no obscure city,” it would produce some useful information. Tarsus was an ancient city, already several thousand years old at the time Paul was born. It was located near what is now the southeast coast of Turkey. The town was inland ten miles from the coast on the Cydnus River, and the river formed a lake, which served as a naval station. Although historically, Jewish people in Israel were not typically seafarers, Paul was from an area where the sea was seen as a natural resource for transportation and commerce.

Tarsus had a storied past. It had seen the Assyrian King Shalmaneser in the 800’s B.C. as well as King Sennacherib in the 600’s B.C. Alexander the Great had saved the city from burning in 333 B.C. Julius Caesar spent time in Tarsus, and it was Tarsus where Cleopatra, dressed as Aphrodite, sailed in to meet Marc Antony in 41 B.C.

Tarsus was a city of learning and culture. Strabo (64/63 B.C. – 24 A.D.), a Roman writer of geography during the early years of Paul’s life recorded that, “The people of Tarsus have devoted themselves so eagerly, not only to philosophy, but also to the whole round of education in general, that they have surpassed Athens, Alexandria, or any other place that can be named where there have been schools and lectures of philosophers.”<sup>8</sup>

New Testament scholar F.F. Bruce (1910-1990) called Tarsus a “university city,”<sup>9</sup> noting that Tarsus famously exported scholars into the Mediterranean world.<sup>10</sup> As a cultural and educated city, Tarsus had an early influence on Paul such that one is not surprised that Paul was able to converse with the educated philosophers of Athens. No doubt even the most important Greek philosophers in Athens would have respected Paul’s educational roots in Tarsus. Paul’s “resume” would make him worthy of any scholar’s listening. Paul could quote Greek poets from memory and understood the implications of the latest Greek philosophies.<sup>11</sup>

Paul could easily come by this knowledge as well as great dexterity with the Greek language in Tarsus. As Strabo noted, “the city of Tarsus has all kinds of schools of rhetoric; and in general it not only has a flourishing population but also is most powerful.”<sup>12</sup> Tarsus was the perfect place for one who was to grow up and take the gospel to a Greek world.<sup>13</sup>

Knowing Tarsus as a philosophy and rhetoric center with a strong influence on Paul (Paul also spent time there after his conversion – Acts 11:25-26) puts emphasis behind Paul’s

---

<sup>8</sup> Strabo, *Geography*, 14.5.13 (Loeb Classical Library, H.L. Jones transl.).

<sup>9</sup> F. F. Bruce, *Paul – Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Eerdmans 1977) at 35.

<sup>10</sup> Strabo is Bruce’s source as well. Strabo wrote that in Tarsus “the men who are fond of learning are all natives, and foreigners are not inclined to sojourn there; neither do these natives stay there, but they complete their education abroad, and but few go back home.” *Geography* at 14.5.13.

<sup>11</sup> See Acts 17:16-34.

<sup>12</sup> *Geography* at 14.5.13.

<sup>13</sup> Some scholars argue that Paul moved from Tarsus to Jerusalem in infancy, or at such an early age, that any Tarsian influence on Paul is unlikely. See e.g., W. C. van Unnik, *Tarsus or Jerusalem, The City of Paul’s Youth*, (Epworth Press 1962). We find these arguments unpersuasive in light of the exegesis other scholars offer of the Acts passages noted above as well as the clear non-Jerusalem influences shown in Paul’s life.



comments on philosophy and rhetoric. In one of Paul's letters to the church he started in Corinth, Paul wrote,

And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech [*rhetoric*] or wisdom [*philosophy*]. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God (1 Cor. 2:1-5).

Paul knew the power of rhetoric and philosophy. He also knew something he considered much stronger.

**Citizenship** Paul was a citizen of Tarsus as well as a Roman citizen. These two citizenships came about through different manners. The cost for Tarsus citizenship was fixed at 500 drachmae according to Dio Chrysostom, a first century Greek writer/orator from nearby Bithynia (now Northwestern Turkey).<sup>14</sup> This was no small amount, and scholars generally consider that Paul must have come from a family of some wealth.<sup>15</sup>

As for Paul's Roman citizenship, Paul explained he was born a citizen. This means Paul's father was a Roman citizen. (When Roman citizens had children, those children were automatically Roman citizens.) Citizenship would pass by birth. There were several other ways to get citizenship, including purchase, reward by the emperor, or certain completions of military service.<sup>16</sup>

Roman citizenship offered many privileges in Paul's day.<sup>17</sup> Roman citizens were entitled to fair public trials, while non-citizens were not. Roman citizens were also immune from certain types of punishment (including crucifixion and flogging), and were entitled to appeal any punishment or conviction straight to Caesar.

Interviewing Paul, I would learn that Paul's Roman citizenship served him well in his ministry. The New Testament records three times when Paul invoked his rights as a

---

<sup>14</sup> Dio Chrysostom Oration 34.23 (Loeb Classical Library No. 358).

<sup>15</sup> See Bruce at 36.

<sup>16</sup> John McRay, *Paul, His Life and Teaching* (Baker Book House 2003) at 24.

<sup>17</sup> For a full discussion of these privileges and duties see J. A. Crook, *Law and Life of Rome, 90 B.C.-A.D. 212* (Cornell Univ. Press 1967) pgs 72-74, 250ff.

Roman citizen. Acts 16 reports Paul's imprisonment with Silas in Philippi, after receiving beatings at the hands of the local magistrates.<sup>18</sup> Around midnight, while Paul and Silas were praying and singing, an earthquake shook open the jail, offering Paul and the others freedom. The jailer, who no doubt should not have been sleeping without a watch over the prisoners, awoke to the discovery of open doors. Fearing the prisoners had fled, and knowing his own life would be forfeited, the jailer started to kill himself. Paul shouted for the jailer to stop, telling him no one had fled. This led to the jailer's conversion along with that of his household.

The next day, the magistrates ordered Paul's release, but Paul refused to leave the cell! Paul said, "They [the magistrates] have beaten us publicly, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and do they now throw us out secretly? No! Let them come themselves and take us out" (Acts 16:37). The magistrates were fearful over their deeds and came to Paul with apologies, giving Paul a personal escort out of town.

The second time Acts speaks of Paul invoking his Roman citizenship came in Jerusalem during the arrest discussed in chapter one. After Paul's arrest, the soldiers were ordered to torture and question Paul, Luke records,

But when they had stretched him [Paul] out for the whips, Paul said to the centurion who was standing by, "Is it lawful for you to flog a man who is a Roman citizen and uncondemned?"

The third instance occurred about two years later. Luke gives an account of Paul before the rulers Festus and Agrippa. Festus had intended to send Paul back to Jerusalem where some of the Jews were waiting to kill him. Instead of returning, Paul declares, "I appeal to Caesar!" With that automatic right of appeal, Paul was shipped off to Rome, taking the gospel with him.

### ***Pharisee***

Paul repeatedly says that he was a Pharisee. While Paul speaks of his past in Acts 26:5 saying he "lived as a Pharisee," Paul also uses the *present tense* in Acts 23:6 saying, "***I am*** a Pharisee." Notably Paul was not a first-generation Pharisee because he also called himself a Pharisee of Pharisees, specifying his lineage in that sect of Judaism.

---

<sup>18</sup> Paul could have invoked his citizenship and prevented the beatings, but for reasons we do not know, Paul chose not to.

Paul knew his Pharisaic heritage was significant in the ears of his Jewish listeners. Why? This is important to Paul, and I would immediately send someone to research Pharisees to see what Paul meant when he made such a claim. This investigation would reveal a lot.

Josephus explained that the Pharisees were one of the main powerful sects within Judaism in the first century. According to Josephus, Pharisees had been influential for two centuries before Paul and Christ as they sought to ensure the Jewish way of life against external and internal forces.<sup>19</sup> Josephus noted that after the death of Herod (4BC), the Pharisees were scheming for power in Herod's replacement. Josephus writes,

for there was a certain sect of men that were Jews, who valued themselves highly upon the exact skill they had in the law of their fathers, and made men believe they were highly favored by God.<sup>20</sup>

This perception of the Pharisees is consistent with what we read in the gospel accounts. The Pharisees were concerned that Jesus ate with the unholy (Mt. 9:11; Mk 2:16; Lk 5:30); the Pharisees were consistent with fasting (Mt. 9:14; Mk 2:18; Lk 5:33); the Pharisees took offense at indications they were less than appropriately holy (Mt 15:11-13); the Pharisees sought to challenge Jesus on issues of the law and custom (Mt. 19:3; Mk 2:24; 10:2; Lk 6:2); the Pharisees tithed down to the very herbs they harvested (Mt 23:23; Lk 11:42); by all outward appearances, the Pharisees seemed pure and holy (Mt. 23:27); and they would always wash their hands before eating (Mk 7:3, 5).

This effort to ensure the Jewish law and way of life among the Pharisees also led to tension between some members and Jesus. Jesus was concerned with the tendency of some Pharisees to elevate the law and its finer points over people. For example, Jesus points out to the Pharisees who were upset over his disciples plucking grain to eat on a Sabbath that, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mk 2:23-28).

Jesus was also concerned that some Pharisees had a tendency to externalize their religion into the list of do's and don'ts that forgot the need to purify and live holy in the heart. In Matthew, we read Jesus saying:

You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness (Mt 23:26-28).

---

<sup>19</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 13 §288-298.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 17 §41.

Yet, not all interactions with the Pharisees were negative in the gospels. Some Pharisees would have Jesus over for dinner (Lk 7:36; 11:37; 14:1; 17:36); and while some plotted to kill Jesus (Mt 12:14; Mk 3:6; Jn. 7:32), other Pharisees warned Jesus about death threats (Lk 13:31). It was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, John tells us, that came to Jesus by night and got to hear the wonderful words of John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” This same Pharisee Nicodemus brought expensive treatments for the body of Christ following the crucifixion (Jn 19:39).<sup>21</sup>

Josephus also sets out basic beliefs of the Pharisees. According to Josephus, Pharisees believed in life after death and a resurrection for reward and punishment. Josephus contrasted this belief with that of the Sadducees who did not believe in such a resurrection with corresponding rewards/punishments.<sup>22</sup> Hand in hand with their belief in the afterlife, Pharisees firmly believed in the world of hierarchy among demons and angels, in contrast to the Sadducees who held no such beliefs. Pharisees also were believers in God’s divine provision (we might use the term “predestination”) that somehow combined with man’s free will while the Sadducees emphasized the free will of man and human responsibility.<sup>23</sup>

This is consistent with what scripture relates about the Pharisees, at least as far as believing in the resurrection of the dead and the hierarchy of demons. The Pharisees accused Jesus as working under “Beelzebub, the prince of demons” when casting out demons (Mt. 12:24). In the last chapter I referenced Paul using the Pharisees’ views on the resurrection to incite a shouting match over the issue between the Pharisees and the Sadducees. As Luke told the story:

---

<sup>21</sup> In Acts 15:5, we read that in the Jerusalem conference, some of the Pharisees in the church believed that Gentiles needed to first convert to Judaism before becoming Christians. “But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, ‘It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses.’”

<sup>22</sup> Josephus, *Wars of the Jews*, 2.8.14, “the Pharisees ... say that all souls are incorruptible; but that the souls of good men are only removed into other bodies, -- but that the souls of bad men are subject to eternal punishment. But the Sadducees ... take away the belief of the immortal duration of the soul, and the punishments and rewards in Hades.” (Whitson translation).

<sup>23</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 13.5.9, “Now for the Pharisees, they say that some actions, but not all, are the work of fate, and some of them are in our own power, and that they are liable to fate, but are not caused by fate... And for the Sadducees, they take away fate, and say there is no such thing, and that the events of human affairs are not at its disposal; but they suppose that all our actions are in our power, so that we ourselves are the cause of what is good, and receive what is evil from our own folly.” (Whitson translation).

Now when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, "Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial." And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all. (Acts 23:5-8)

We see this confirmed when we probe the rabbinic sources on Pharisees.<sup>24</sup> In the "Babylonian Talmud" (a discussion of legal debates on the law finally put into final form around 700 A.D. but dating back several centuries before), we read of seven types of Pharisees, almost all of which are not praiseworthy! Only the Pharisees who study the law out of love, out of fear, or simply because it is the law of God are praiseworthy.<sup>25</sup>

In Pharisees, as in other religious groups, we have a wide variety of people. But, we find people who are convinced that God is holy, that God is to be obeyed, that a resurrection follows death, that reward and punishment are found in the resurrection, that angels and demons are working on earth in the lives of humanity, and that the hand of God is active in protecting and providing for people. The variations come from motives and finer points of "doctrine." No doubt many Pharisees acted out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, envy, or even rivalry. Yet, those same motives Paul found among those carrying the Christian gospel message, with no Pharisaic affiliation whatsoever (Phil. 1:15-17). I dare say, we could probably find it in the midst of most Christian groups even today.

So we see Paul, who was raised a Pharisee, but who has no trouble calling himself a Pharisee deep into his years as a Christian. Paul carried the core Pharisaic beliefs. He not only believed in the resurrection for humanity, but he also knew he had witnessed a resurrected Lord. Paul says without that resurrection, Christians "are of all people most to be pitied" (1 Cor. 15:19).

---

<sup>24</sup> The rabbinic literature about the Pharisees is subject to significant scholarly debate. Many of the references to 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish laws and customs some scholars deem appropriately understood as that of the Pharisees. Others dispute these conclusions. There are a few times, however, when early Jewish writings actually reference the Pharisees by name. The dates of these entries are also subject to heated debate.

<sup>25</sup> See the Babylonian Talmud, *Sotah* 3:4. There are seven types of Pharisees: One who does the right thing for the wrong reason; one who walks with exaggerated humility; one who does right to his own hurt; one who does right to the hurt of others; one who does right out of duty; one who does right out of love; and one who does right out of fear.

## *Gamaliel*

From Acts 22:1-3, it is clear that Paul studied under one named Gamaliel. Paul says this with clear pride, expecting it to have an impact on the listeners. This would be important to Paul's defense, and I would send a researcher or two to investigate who Gamaliel was, and what his students might have learned from him. It would not be hard to gather a lot of information about Gamaliel. Both the Bible and ancient Jewish non-Biblical writings give a lot of information about Gamaliel.

Research would quickly show that there were at least six sages in Hebrew history named Rabbi Gamaliel. Paul's mentor was the oldest one, "Rabban Gamaliel ha-Zaken," OR Rabbi Gamaliel the elder." Paul's Rabbi Gamaliel was so famous, that one epitaph for him is recorded in Jewish writings we still have today. The sages that followed Gamaliel wrote,

When Rabban Gamaliel the elder died, the glory of the Torah [the Jewish Law books commonly called Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy] ceased, and purity and saintliness perished.<sup>26</sup>

To more fully understand Rabbi Gamaliel, it is helpful to understand his heritage. Shortly before Gamaliel, during the turn of the era from BCE/BC to CE/AD, there were two prominent rabbinic schools of thought in Jerusalem. One was that of Rabbi Shammai; the other was Rabbi Hillel's. These two rabbis debated many different positions which we can still read today. Not only were these two scholars pinnacle figures in interpreting the law, but their students became famous as well.

Shammai was the stricter of the two; Hillel the more accommodating. Jewish writings kept an example of the difference in approach to conversion between Shammai and Hillel. In the Babylonian Talmud,<sup>27</sup> we read of "a gentile who came before Shammai." The gentile says he will convert to Judaism if Shammai can teach him the whole law while the gentile stands on one foot. Shammai drives the gentile off with a stick. The gentile then goes to Hillel with the same offer. Hillel tells the gentile, "What is hateful to you, to your fellow don't do." Then, Hillel adds, "That's the entirety of the Torah; everything else is elaboration. So go, study."<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> *Sotah*, 9:15.

<sup>27</sup> The Jews kept oral traditions and commentaries for decades and centuries before finally reducing them to writing. The Babylonian Talmud was such a written product. Scholars debate the final dates of the Babylonian Talmud, but it was finished in different sections starting around 200 A.D. and finished likely by 500 A.D.

<sup>28</sup> *b. Shabbat*, Chapter 2, I.12 (Hendrickson Publishers 2005) Neusner translation.

Paul's mentor and teacher Gamaliel was Hillel's grandson<sup>29</sup> and, after Gamaliel's father, became the head of Hillel's school. Gamaliel, like his father and like Hillel his grandfather, carried the honorific title from Jewish rabbis of "the Elder." A successor of Hillel, and head of his school was Gamaliel, at whose feet Paul studied. Like Paul, Gamaliel was a devout Pharisee, and one can readily see the teachings of Hillel in the approaches of Gamaliel.

Like Hillel, Gamaliel brought a more pragmatic and moderate view towards life and faithful practice than that of Shammai. Some examples of Hillel's "laxity" are found in teachings on the Sabbath. Since the law allowed an ox to be taken out of the ditch on the Sabbath, Hillel believed that one could eat an egg that a chicken laid on the Sabbath.

Gamaliel took a similar pragmatic approach as recorded in Acts 5. Peter and the apostles were called before the High Priest and council for questioning. The reaction of the council and priests was murderous rage. But Gamaliel entered the picture with words of practical advice. As Luke records it, Gamaliel says,

take care what you are about to do with these men...keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!" (Acts 5:33-39)

The importance of Gamaliel's views on Paul becomes apparent from looking at Gamaliel's teaching. McRay perceives an example of Gamaliel's influence on Paul in the issue of divorce in mixed marriages. McRay writes,

Gamaliel, was a representative of the Hillel point of view, and Paul's approach to Jewish law seems to have been the same. In dealing with the question of divorce among believers, Paul could draw on Jesus' teaching to Jews, and so he wrote: Now this says the Lord, not I (see 1 Cor. 7:10). But in dealing with mixed marriages, those in which one of the partners had converted to Christianity, Paul could only say, as Gamaliel or Hillel would have said: 'To the rest I say, not the Lord...' (1 Cor. 7:12). Jesus never taught on the subject, since marriage outside the Jewish religion was not permitted (Ezra 10:11; Neh. 13:25). Paul, facing a new situation, the inclusion of the Gentiles in the new faith, which the law did not envision, had to make the necessary adjustments to embrace the new circumstances.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> *Babylonian Talmud*, b. Shabbat, Chapter 15:1, II.16G.

<sup>30</sup> John McRay, *Paul, His Life and Teaching* (Baker Academic 2003) at 45.

Gamaliel's influence is not surprising because Gamaliel stressed the importance of the teacher-student relationship.<sup>31</sup>

Alan Segal, a Jew who has written on Paul, notes that Paul's placement in the school of Hillel/Gamaliel put him in a Pharisaic branch that was supportive of and even seeking Gentile conversion into Judaism.<sup>32</sup> This made it an easy step for Paul to understand his own mission to fulfill the words of Jesus,

And he [Jesus] told me, "I will send you far away to the nations/gentiles"  
(Acts 22:21).

Apparently, the school of Shammai was in power and prominence during the ministry of Jesus and subsequent years of Paul's ministry. Hillel's school was in the minority.<sup>33</sup> This explains not only the violent opposition Paul faced, but also some of the more intense run-ins the Pharisees had with Jesus and the apostles during Christ's ministry years.

Before leaving our investigation of Gamaliel, there are three other facts that are relevant in my hypothetical legal work for Paul. Each of these facts bear on Paul's work, and how he was "trained" for it, even before he changed his mind on whether Jesus was the Messiah.

First, Gamaliel reached out to the Jews beyond the area of Jerusalem. The Jewish Talmud has preserved three different letters that Rabbi Gamaliel sent to Jews who were outside Jerusalem. Two of those letters were sent to Jewish communities in Galilee, northern Israel. One of the letters we still have Gamaliel sent to Jews in the broader Mediterranean community. He addressed it to, "our brethren of the exile of Babylon, the exile of Media, and the other exiles of Israel."<sup>34</sup>

This becomes something I would note in Paul's files for later use. It would explain why Paul was also well-versed in letter writing to the faithful outside of his immediate presence. We have a number of Paul's letters preserved in the New Testament. It also explains why Paul so readily received an audience in the many synagogues he visited throughout the Mediterranean world. Those were Jews who had received letters from Paul's mentor, the great Gamaliel. They would naturally be ready to hear from the prize student.

---

<sup>31</sup> *Babylonian Talmud*, 'Abot R. Nat. A.40; 'Abot 1:16; Pe'a 2:6; 'Or. 2:12; Yebam. 16:7.

<sup>32</sup> Alan Segal, *Paul the Convert, the Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee* (Yale 1990) at 96-105.

<sup>33</sup> See discussion and footnotes of W.D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* (S.P.C.K. 1955) at 9.

<sup>34</sup> *Sanhedrin. 11b; Tosefta, Sanhedrin 2:6; TJ, Sanhedrin 1:2, 18d.*



Second, Gamaliel was tolerant of Gentiles, much as Hillel sought to make Gentile conversion into Judaism an easy matter.<sup>35</sup> I would note this for later as Paul frequently explained his calling to be a missionary to the Gentiles.

Finally, “Gamaliel stood almost alone in his love for the Greek language. It was studied in his ‘school’ and he even declared it the only language into which the Torah [the Old Testament Law] could be perfectly translated.”<sup>36</sup> This I would note not only because Paul wrote his letters we still have in Greek, but also because over and over in those letters, Paul used a Greek translation of the Old Testament Scriptures.

### *The Sanhedrin*

After Paul’s arrest, events will lead him to plead his case before the local Roman Governor Felix in nearby Caesarea (a coastal town near Jerusalem). At one point in Paul’s stay there, King Agrippa visited the governor and Paul had an audience before the king and the governor. Agrippa’s fuller name was Herod Agrippa II, and he was the son of Herod Agrippa I, the grandson of Herod the Great. The Roman emperor Caligula gave Agrippa I the title of “king” and made him Rome’s ruler over ancient Palestine. Agrippa I was responsible for many persecutions of Christians, including the death of James, the apostle and brother of John. After his death, his son Agrippa II took his father’s title and responsibilities. Born in Rome in 27AD, the 30-year old King Agrippa II would have doubtlessly been familiar with Christian persecution policies of his father when he met Paul.

During that visit, Paul was giving a bit of his history to the king. Paul told the king,

My manner of life from my youth, spent from the beginning among my own nation and in Jerusalem, is known by all the Jews. They have known for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that according to the strictest party of our religion I have lived as a Pharisee. And now I stand here on trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers, to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly worship night and day. And for this hope I am accused by Jews, O king! Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead? I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to

---

<sup>35</sup> *Babylonian Talmud, t. B. Qam. 9:30; y. ‘Abod. Zar. 1:9; Sifre to Deut. 38; Ber. 27a.*

<sup>36</sup> *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, (Eerdmans 2000), “Gamaliel” with citations to the *Babylonian Talmud* at *Soṭa 49b; cf. Gen. Rab. 36:8; Deut. Rab. 1:1; Meg. 1:8.*

death I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities (Acts 26:1-11, ESV).

One issue that has caused a fair amount of scholarly discussion is Paul's claim, "I cast my vote against them." On face value, the statement indicates that Paul was a voting member of the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was the highest leadership/judicial court within Jerusalem's Jewish circles at the time of Christ and Paul. It was the Sanhedrin that Luke terms the "council" in Acts 6:12 that had the power to vote for the stoning of Stephen. The word translated "vote" is *psephos* (ψηφος). It was the Greek for a rock or pebble, typically used in voting. A black pebble would mean conviction and a white one acquittal. Paul was saying he was voting in the Sanhedrin and he placed a black pebble, voting to convict.<sup>37</sup>

What would it mean to our investigation of Paul to learn he was a member of the Sanhedrin? The Sanhedrin was composed mostly of people from the Jewish elite (mainly Sadducees) and from the legal circles (the lawyers being mainly Pharisees).<sup>38</sup> There was a great deal of antagonism between the two groups. Shortly after Paul's audience with Agrippa II, according to the Jewish historian Josephus, the Sanhedrin was convened by the Sadducean high priest Ananus condemning James, the brother of Jesus. The Pharisees on the Sanhedrin used this as a time to depose Ananus, and it was Agrippa II who removed him from the office to the pleasure of the Pharisees. Agrippa II also made many other rulings in concert with the Pharisees' desires.<sup>39</sup>

Paul was honest about his role in the Sanhedrin, and as a legal prosecutor of Jewish Christians. Paul never forgot his life as a persecutor of the church. In what we believe is Paul's earliest letter to survive, he wrote to the Galatians saying,

---

<sup>37</sup> Some scholars opt against the idea of the common meaning of Paul's phrase "cast my vote." The main reason concerns requirements for membership in the Sanhedrin. There are some later rabbinical writings that indicate prerequisites for membership in the Sanhedrin included being married and being at least 40. Many scholars refuse to believe that Paul was married or that he was quite that old, even though scripture never tells us Paul's age or whether he had at one point been married. I believe these scholars are mistaken. King Agrippa had the authority to appoint the high priests (elite or chief priests) that presided over the Sanhedrin (See, Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, at XX.i.1-3; viii.8; ix.7). For Paul to even suggest that he "voted" if he didn't, would have caused Agrippa to dismiss Paul immediately. Paul would be scrupulous to avoid even the appearance of anything false. Agrippa knew precisely what it meant for Paul to cast his "stone."

<sup>38</sup> We must not think of lawyers simply in our 21<sup>st</sup> century frame of mind. A lawyer in Palestine at the time would have been trained first and foremost in the Torah, the Jewish Law. This training would be at the feet of a rabbi learned in the Law. As noted earlier, Paul's training as a "lawyer" was under Gamaliel.

<sup>39</sup> See, Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 20.197-203.

You have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it (Gal. 1:13).

For Paul, these actions of persecution and violence were not from a pagan life devoid of God. Paul saw it as part of his spiritual calling! Paul adds to the Galatians passage that his violent attempts to destroy the church were evidence of,

advancing in zeal beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers (Gal. 1:14).

We do not have a full detailed account of all Paul did to destroy the church, but what we do know certainly gives enough detail to understand his later reflections. In Acts 6 and 7, we read Luke's history of Stephen being seized by certain Jews and brought before the Sanhedrin. This is likely the source of Paul's reference to Agrippa II about casting his vote.

During Stephen's trial, Stephen bore witness to Jesus as the Righteous One, betrayed and murdered by supposed keepers of the Law. As Stephen delivered his impassioned speech, among the council were those "enraged, and they ground their teeth at him." At that point, Stephen had a vision of Jesus, the "Son of Man standing at the right hand of God" (Acts 7:54-55).

Luke then records:

But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul [aka Paul]. And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep (Acts 9:56-60).

What happened? What did Paul vote for or condone? This seems foreign to most any understanding in the 21<sup>st</sup> century of holy and right behavior! It is important in understanding Paul that we try to put these events into some historical and religious context.

### *PAUL'S MOTIVE*

Why had Paul been willing to support killing Christians? Why would Paul use violence to stamp out the church?

We must return to Paul's life as a Pharisee. Paul frequently tied his role as a persecutor to his zeal as a Pharisee (Phil. 3:5-6) Paul told the Jewish crowd as much, reminding them that he studied at the feet of the Pharisee Gamaliel,

According to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day. I persecuted this way to death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women" (Acts 22:3-4).

While the beliefs of Pharisees are set out earlier, a bit more history of the Pharisees is important to help understand this link and Paul's motives. The importance of the history is magnified when we remember that Paul was proud that not only was he a Pharisee, but he also came from Pharisaic heritage ("I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees" Acts 23:6.)

As a lawyer, I would send out my researchers to answer several questions: Where did Pharisees come from? What was their history?

The answers would be informative, but not fully conclusive. We do not exactly know where Pharisees had their beginning, but scholars have deduced certain ideas that evidence some of what could have been in Paul's mind as he opposed the church.

F. F. Bruce sets forth a good argument that the Pharisees were originally a part of the Hasidæan movement that arose in the second century before Christ.<sup>40</sup> The Hasidæans were Jews fully devoted to the Law of God for governing life and religion. During the time between the Old and New Testaments, the Greek way of life (with a good bit of Greek religion) became fashionable in Israel.

In the apocrypha, we read of this Greek influence:

In those days there appeared in Israel men who were breakers of the law, and they seduced many people, saying: 'Let us go and make an alliance with the Gentiles all around us....Some from among the people promptly went to the king, and he authorized them to introduce the way of living of the Gentiles. Thereupon they built a gymnasium in Jerusalem according to the Gentile custom. They covered over the mark of their circumcision and abandoned the holy covenant (1 Maccabees 1:11-15).

Things reached a point where the ruler Antiochus Epiphanes issued a decree forbidding the practice of the Jewish faith. This decree brought about a revolt spearheaded by Judas

---

<sup>40</sup> F. F. Bruce, Paul, *Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Eerdmans 1977) at 47ff. See also *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (Doubleday 1992) III at 66.

Maccabeus. The Hasidaeans, who gladly sacrificed themselves to keep the religion of Moses from extermination, aided the revolt.<sup>41</sup>

From these roots came the Pharisees. In other words, Paul was from a heritage that had already saved Judaism from changes brought by religious corruption. Paul had been weaned on stories of the heroes who had stepped up and offered their lives to prevent the traditions and teachings of Moses and the Prophets from deterioration. We can easily see in Paul, a Pharisee who came from Pharisees, a pure motive of protecting the true Jewish faith and practice stemming from his personal zeal as a Pharisee.

### *WHY WAS STEPHEN STONED?*

After considering Paul's motive, I would then assign my legal team to research several more questions: What law was Paul seeking to uphold? How was the church a threat to Jewish law and tradition?

I suspect the team would find some fairly logical straightforward answers to this question. They center on Jesus as "Christ" ("Christ" meaning "Anointed One" or in Hebrew, "Messiah"). The church worshipped Jesus as the Son of God. Paul would have seen this as a direct violation of Deuteronomy 17:2-7:

If there is found among you, a man or woman who...has gone and served other gods and worshipped them...and it is told you and you hear of it, then you shall inquire diligently, and if it is true and certain that such an abomination has been done in Israel, then you shall bring out to your gates that man or woman who has done this evil thing, and you shall stone that man or woman to death with stones.

To worship Jesus as Messiah was an offense that demanded stoning under the law of Moses – unless, of course, Jesus actually was Messiah!

Paul lets us know in his writings why he thought it impossible for Jesus to actually be Messiah. When writing to the Galatians, Paul reminded them of the passage in Deuteronomy 21:23 where we read, "a hanged man is cursed by God."<sup>42</sup> Scholars

---

<sup>41</sup> This is the same revolt from which came Jewish Hanukkah celebrations, commemorating the lasting of oil for the lamps during the rededication of the temple.

<sup>42</sup> Paul quotes the passage as, "cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree" (Gal. 3:13). Some might wonder why the words read differently in our English translation of Deuteronomy from our translation of Paul in Galatians. The answer comes from the way Paul is quoting the Old Testament. Paul uses the Septuagint for his translation here, rather than the Hebrew. Most all of our translations come straight from the Hebrew with the Septuagint as an aid where the Hebrew is ambiguous. Paul uses the version with which the Galatians would have had familiarity. Paul also changes the

recognize in the passage that Paul is using a text that originally served him as a reason for believing Jesus could not be Messiah. To Paul – pre-Damascus road conversion – it was simple logic:

- Jesus was crucified
- Anyone crucified was cursed by God
- Therefore, Jesus was cursed by God
- The Messiah could not be one cursed by God; by definition, the Messiah was blessed by God
- Therefore, cursed Jesus could not have been the blessed Messiah.

Fung writes in his commentary on this Galatians passage, “He [Paul] must have made use of this text himself to refute the early Christians’ claim of a crucified Messiah.”<sup>43</sup>

Also, we see here why Paul would call the crucifixion of Jesus a stumbling block to the Jews. “But we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews” (1 Cor. 1:23). Jews could not see how a cursed man would be a blessed Messiah. Ultimately, we will see that Paul got a fuller understanding that Christ was cursed, but it was our curse he bore, not his own. That must come later in our investigation, however.

#### *HOW WAS STEPHEN STONED?*

Paul must have burned into his memory the events involved in Stephen’s stoning. When Luke writes his history, and when Paul references the event in his letters, the readers were generally much more familiar with the stoning than we likely are.

The story of Stephen’s stoning is at once moving and appalling. I would immediately want researchers to figure out what happened. The best source for this is from the Hebrew Mishna. The Mishna is a collection of sayings from 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. that set out the law Jews practiced at the time. In a sense, it is a commentary or explanation of the Old Testament law as applied in Jewish society. The Mishna was put into written form by 200AD.

In the Mishna section that deals with civil and criminal law (the *Nezikin*), we have a section on the Sanhedrin. Chapter 6 sets out the procedure for stoning. It begins:

---

Septuagint slightly to make the passage more understandable. In the flow of his writing, Paul slightly modifies the verb form.

<sup>43</sup> Ronald Y. K. Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, NICNT (Eerdmans 1988) at 151.

[When] the trial is over, they take him out to stone him. The place of stoning is well outside the court, as it is said, *Bring forth him who cursed to a place outside the camp* (Lev. 24:14).<sup>44</sup>

We read this in the case of Stephen in Acts 7:57-58, “But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him.”

The Mishna gives us important information that we can insert into the time between the people dragging Stephen out and the actual stoning. Section E provides that after being hauled out to the place of stoning, if the convicted party says, “I have something to say in favor of my own acquittal,” the Jews must “bring him back” to the court. Yet, Stephen makes no such proclamation. Even though his life is on the line, Stephen’s heart is focused on the vision he had just experienced, as Luke recorded it, “But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God” (Acts 7:55). So, Stephen endures the stoning, rather than recant his worship of Christ as error.

The Mishna then provides that when the convicted “was ten cubits [about 15 feet] from the place of stoning, they say to him, ‘Confess,’ for it is usual for those about to be put to death to confess. For whoever confesses has a share in the world to come” (6:2A-B). Stephen does not confess himself wrong for worshipping Jesus. Instead, Stephen cries out to Jesus as Lord, committing his share in the world to come to Jesus! “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”<sup>45</sup> Stephen would follow this up, again, not with a confession, but with a plea that echoes Jesus’ from the cross. Stephen cries out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:59-60).

The stoning procedure continues, “[When] he was four cubits [six feet] from the place of stoning they remove his clothes” (6:3A). We should not confuse this with the clothes laid at Paul’s feet, for Paul those were the clothes of the chief executioners (See Acts 7:58 and 22:20).

The initial act in the stoning actually involved pushing the convicted from what was in essence a cliff. “The place of stoning was twice the height of a man,” so perhaps roof top height is a good image for us. “One of the witnesses pushes him over from the hips, so [hard] that he turned upward [in his fall]. He turns him over on his hips again [to see

---

<sup>44</sup> *M. Sanhed.* 6:1A-B.

<sup>45</sup> This significance is magnified as we read the Mishna teaching one “how” to confess. It provides, “if he does not know how to confess, they say to him, ‘Say as follows: ‘Let my death be an atonement for all my transgression’” (6:2D). Stephen’s atonement was the death of Jesus, not his own death! To have made the Jew’s confession would have been the ultimate blasphemy!

whether he had died]. [If] he had died thereby, that sufficed” (6:4A-D). We are then told of the process of throwing a rock down onto the heart in the event the fall did not kill the convicted. Should that fail to kill the person, then all the people were to pick up rocks and throw them down on him.

We do not know at what point Stephen died, but we do know that Paul witnessed and even cast his vote for the death of Stephen. No doubt this memory haunted Paul and never left his mind. Paul was in the midst of pursuing similar violence and persecution of the early Christians when Jesus met Paul on the road to Damascus.

Paul later wrote to the Corinthian church, “I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God” (1 Cor. 15:9). Now that passage gives punch, as Paul calls himself “the least” and “unworthy to be an apostle,” but the real punch is in the verse before! In verse 8, we read in the English Standard Version, “Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.” Paul then continues with “For I am the least....”

In verse 8, Paul is using the Greek word *ektroma* (εκτρωμα) which is translated “one untimely born.” The word literally means a dead fetus ejected from a woman’s body or aborted. Paul was working on killing the church, but would later see that he was the one actually dead. Paul saw himself in comparison to the other apostles. The others were selected by Jesus, trained and prepared for their mission. Paul, however:

was a persecutor of the church, a vile, dead thing spiritually, fit only to be carried out and buried from sight. Yet to *him*, to him while being *such*, the risen Lord also appeared. He, the abortion, placed at the side of these living men, treated, honored, dignified like them by the Lord!<sup>46</sup>

Paul knew first-hand the atrocious deeds he committed. One must wonder if Paul did not at times reflect on his failure to follow the guidance of his teacher Gamaliel. Gamaliel had warned the Jews to leave the Christians alone, “for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!” (Acts 5:39). Gamaliel was right.

***To be continued....***

## POINTS FOR HOME

---

<sup>46</sup> R. C. H. Lenski, *Commentary on the New Testament, the Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians* (Hendrickson 1998 printing) at 640.



1. *“I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God”* (1 Cor. 15:9).

So, what is your worst moment? Does it measure up to Paul’s? Do we consider ours worse because Paul’s motives were “good?” First, I’m not so sure we should label Paul’s motives as “good.” Paul was moved out of zeal, but that does not eliminate the selfishness and self-promotion that often come from zealous actions.

Paul never forgot his deeds. Paul never excused them out of “pure motives.” Paul never sought to soften them. Toward the end of his life, Paul emphasized this in writing to Timothy, saying, “Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst” (1 Tim. 1:15).

2. *“In Him (Jesus) we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace”* (Eph. 1:7).

Let us NEVER EVER think that our worst is too much for God’s best! Whatever we are, whatever we have done, God waits to forgive – to wash us clean – to make us whole – to create in us a clean heart – and, to prepare us for his eternity. What a wonderful promise we have in Ephesians 1:7, “In Him (Jesus) we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace.”

Some really bad things can be done in the name of religious zeal. Let us always measure our actions by Jesus’ standard of love. There is a considerable body of work setting out the Jewish understanding that with the advent of the Messiah, the Age of the Law and Torah comes to an end. As Christians, we understand that Jesus brought the law to an end, not by abolishing it, but by fulfilling it. For example, we are no longer tied to the Law’s requirements of stoning or of sacrificing. Instead, we see in Jesus a fuller understanding and explanation that binds us not to an eye for an eye, but out of love, if one slaps us on one cheek, then we turn the other! We treat people as we would like to be treated. This is some of the significance of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7!

3. *“Lord, do not hold this sin against them”* (Acts 7:60).

There is no question that Paul’s actions in the stoning of Stephen affected him. They affect us. But we should also be affected by the actions of Stephen. Stephen never sought the executioner’s mercy, never wavered, and never faltered. Stephen beheld the glory of Jesus and went home, dying with a prayer for Paul and others on his lips, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:60). God answered that prayer for

Paul, to the benefit of church and history. Lord, may we have the faith and courage of Stephen. May we have courage to pray for your mercy for those who persecute us, and may we see them in heaven in eternity, through Jesus and his death's atonement! Amen!