

Acts of the Apostles – Purpose and Overview

New Testament Survey – Lesson 16 (Part 3)

We have all seen the child's toy where you put blocks of various shapes into the corresponding hole. A number of us have watched with knowing anticipation as a child tries to put a triangle block into the square hole, finally realizing it just does not fit. I consider those infant puzzles.

My grandmother was also fond of puzzles, albeit hers had many more pieces and much higher degree of difficulty. She knew there was one piece that would fit each expectant place and one alone. There might be a wrong piece that seemed to fit, but the picture would never be right and the whole puzzle would never finish right if a piece were placed improperly.

Not surprisingly, God is the ultimate puzzle master. God is able to take every stray piece, every autonomous decision by independent humanity, and integrate it into the final perfect puzzle that expresses his will. Every piece has its place, and God is able to sculpt pieces that achieve the very specific purpose he wants accomplished. We see that incredibly clearly in the apostle Paul. As we explore the Book of Acts in overview, we have considered three blocks of material thus far:

1. The birth of the church (1:1 – 5:42).
2. Persecution and the church's expansion (6:1 - 9:31).
3. Actions of Peter and the entrance of Gentiles (9:32 – 12:24).

Beginning with Acts 12:25, we see the shift of the entire narrative into the growth of the church associated with Paul. We have outlined the material in three more blocks:

4. Paul's first missionary journey and the Apostolic Decree (12:25 – 16:5).
5. The church grows around the Aegean Sea (16:6 – 19:20).
6. Paul's unexpected route to Rome (19:21 – 28:31).

While the narrative imparts important and inspiring events and teachings, we risk missing critical insights if we fail to pause and examine the person Paul. While Scripture does not lay out an encyclopedic biographical sketch, we can glean a good bit of material about Paul by integrating Scripture with our other historical knowledge. It provides us a view of Paul as the perfect piece of the puzzle that not only holds together other pieces, but also fills in the picture.

Luke shows Paul as a major force behind the growth of the early church. While it may not be totally attributable to Paul, New Testament scholar Foakes-Jackson made a compelling point when he wrote that Paul,

found the Church a small Jewish community with crude Messianic conceptions; he left it a world organization in which there was neither Jew nor Gentile.”¹

How did God accomplish this transportation of his redemptive story from a few Galileans to the known Roman world principally through the mouth of one man? We shall see that Paul was made for the task! Paul had one foot firmly planted in the Roman world and one foot firmly planted in Judaism. Paul was uniquely fit for the purpose. We will explore these factors in this lesson.

While Paul was clearly God’s mechanism for fostering belief to many around the world in the first century, God still uses Paul today. Paul’s life and story are cited by many as significant in their decision making process about faith in the resurrected Lord. It is striking to study Paul and see one whose life was headed down a road of substance and success. He had family, pedigree, money, education, and placement in his circle of the world. Yet Paul gave that and more all up, even relished giving it up, for the surpassing value of a faith that left him beaten, abused, poor, outcast, and wandering over the earth. As many recognize when they study his life, he was a wise man in full control of his facilities, yet took a route for his life that, absent lunacy, one would take only if fully convinced he had seen the resurrected Lord.

WAS HE PAUL OR SAUL?

Let’s start our considerations by getting his name right! Was he “Paul” or “Saul?” Was his name changed sometime after his conversion? Why does Acts start with one name, Saul, and then shift and call him Paul?

Like so many other places in our study we need to understand the time and culture of the Biblical situation and then try to understand the text. In today’s times, 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.

¹ F. J. Foakes-Jackson *The Life of Saint Paul* (Boni and Liveright, Inc. 1926) at 15.

During the time of Paul, each Roman citizen also had three names.² 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 5th century,³ 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 name⁴ (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 know simply his third name, Paullus (in Latin, meaning "little") while in Greek it was Paulos (Παυλος). 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.⁵

In Hebrew circles, Paul was called "Saul." 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).

² 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.

³ 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 11th and 12th centuries. Middle names were added after the Renaissance. For a full history on the naming process, see Wilson's book cited above.

⁴ 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*.

⁵ 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* (Σαουλ) in places and *Saulos* (Σαυλος) in others.

SOURCES FOR STUDYING PAUL

So, how do we learn of Paul? What can we know about Paul? Quite a bit! He is introduced in Acts, but we also learn more of him beyond Luke. Of the 27 books in the New Testament, Paul wrote thirteen. (Fourteen if you give him credit for Hebrews, but most scholars of all persuasion seem to doubt that Paul wrote Hebrews.) Luke spends over half of Acts on Paul, and his insight seems especially personal. Sir William Ramsay's wrote of Paul in Luke,

The characterisation [*sic.*] of Paul in Acts is so detailed and individualised [*sic.*] as to prove the author's personal acquaintance. Moreover, the Paul of Acts is the Paul that appears to us in his own letters, in his ways and his thoughts, in his educated tone of polished courtesy, In his quick and vehement temper, in the extraordinary versatility and adaptability which made him at home in every society, moving at ease in all surroundings, and everywhere the centre [*sic.*] of interest, whether he is the Socratic dialectician in the Agora of Athens, or the rhetorician in its University, or conversing with kings and proconsuls, or advising in the council on shipboard, or cheering a broken-spirited crew to make one more effort for life.⁶

Ramsay's insight is especially poignant if we know the route by which he came to form his opinions. Ramsay was a professor of classical archaeology at Oxford University who spent a great deal of his life in archaeological work in the areas of Greece and Turkey, the area of Paul's missionary works. Ramsay started his work believing that Acts was a third rate history written sometime in the second century by someone far removed from the events recorded. Years of archaeological work forced Ramsay to change his view. Research and science led Ramsay to write,

Acts was written by a great historian, a writer who set himself to record the facts as they occurred, a strong partisan indeed, but raised above partiality by his perfect confidence that he had only to describe the facts as they occurred, in order to make the truth of Christianity and the honor of Paul apparent.⁷

Our earliest non-Biblical writing on Paul comes from the later part of the first century (some scholars date it in the second century), a book entitled the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. The book received wide circulation in the Eastern Church.

⁶ Ramsay, Sir William. *St. Paul the Traveller and Roman Citizen* (Edwards Brothers, Inc. 1949) at 21-22.

⁷ *Ibid.*, at 14.

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, but rather an attempt to pass off a wonderful story about Paul as true and written by Paul himself.⁸ That makes one question the narrative, but since the story was likely written at a time when some might still be 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!

PAUL'S GREEK/ROMAN BACKGROUND

The relevant passages

As we look for the passages that directly bear on the issues of Paul's background and childhood, we have several important statements, almost made in passing, that reveal insight into Paul's particular fit for God's purposes. In addition Luke's writings in Acts, we have a number of other almost invisible references in Paul's writings that give indirect information about Paul from which we perceive relevant facts of Paul's early life.

One major scripture that gives us insight comes from an account in Acts 21 detailing Paul's arrest in the Temple in Jerusalem. The Romans began to escort Paul to the barracks. Luke wrote in verse 37 that Paul said to the Roman tribune, "May I say something to you?" The tribune was startled to hear Paul speak to him in Greek and thinking Paul was an Egyptian, asked Paul, "Do you know Greek?" Paul response shows he not only knew Greek, but much, much more. Paul informed the soldier that he was not an Egyptian. Paul was blunt,

⁸ Tertullian (see Church History Literacy lessons 10 and 17) wrote around 190 A.D. that the work was falsely named as "Acts of Paul," that "the presbyter who compiled that document, thinking to add of 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).

I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no obscure city. I beg you, permit me to speak to the people.

Paul received permission from the tribune to address the Jewish masses that were assaulting Paul prior to the tribune's interruption and arrest of Paul. Paul then shifted from Greek to Aramaic as he addressed the Jews.

Paul began by telling them,

I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day (Acts 22:3-4).

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), leaving to move on to other business before the beating began.

Paul stopped the torturer's whip before its first lash claiming the torture illegal since Paul was a Roman citizen. Upon finding out that Paul was claiming Roman citizenship, the Tribune returned to cross-examine Paul about it. In Acts 22:27-28 we read,

"Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?" And he said, "Yes." The tribune answered, "I bought this citizenship for a large sum." Paul said, "But I am a citizen by birth."

Luke then detailed the tribune's fear over having earlier bound Paul even though Paul was a Roman citizen (We also read in Acts 16:37-38 of Paul's Roman citizenship.)

As the saga continued, the tribune had Paul set before the Chief Priest and ruling council of the Jews the next day. During Paul's discussions with the council, we read Paul explaining, "Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees" (Acts 23:6), giving us a bit of insight into Paul's parents. A bit later, when the council plotted to ambush Paul, the attempt was thwarted because "the son of Paul's sister heard of their ambush" (Acts 23:16).

Some time later, Paul was appealing through the Roman judicial system and made an appearance before King Agrippa in Caesarea. Paul began 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 confessed,

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 himself gives us some insight into his upbringing in his letter to the church at Philippi. In Phil. 3:5-6, Paul wrote 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, we learn a great deal about Paul’s early life. We learn 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; likely indicating Paul was a member of the Sanhedrin.

We can take these facts and consider them in light of other historical knowledge we have and learn a great deal more about them.

The historical insights

Tarsus: Let us start with Tarsus, “no obscure city.” 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 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.⁹

Bruce calls Tarsus a “university city,”¹⁰ noting that Tarsus produced scholars that went out into the civilized world taking their Tarsian heritage with them.¹¹ As a cultural and educated city, Tarsus was an early influence on Paul that leaves us with no surprise at Paul’s ability to converse with the educated philosophers of Athens. No doubt even the most important Greek philosophers in Athens must have respected Paul’s educational roots in Tarsus. Paul’s “resume” would make

⁹ Strabo, *Geography*, 14.5.13 (Loeb Classical Library, H.L. Jones transl.).

¹⁰ F. F. Bruce, *Paul – Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Eerdmans 1977) at 35.

¹¹ 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.

him at least worthy of their listening. Paul could quote Greek poets from memory and understood the implications of the latest Greek philosophies.¹²

Paul came by this knowledge as well as Paul's great dexterity with the Greek language quite honestly! 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."¹³ Tarsus was the perfect place for one who was to grow up and take the gospel to a Greek world.¹⁴

Knowing Tarsus as a philosophy and rhetoric center that strongly influenced Paul (Paul also spent time there after his conversion – Acts 11:25-26) puts emphasis behind passages like 1 Corinthians 2:1-5 where Paul writes,

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.

Those are especially powerful words from a Tarsian, a famous seat of philosophy and rhetoric.

Metaphors: The Australian scholar David Williams put together a book from lectures he gave on Paul's metaphors. Ranging from such diverse subjects as city life, the marketplace, courts, business, warfare and the army, Williams opens Paul's metaphors as windows into Paul as a person, and in the process, by teaching the metaphors' historical context, Williams spreads greater light on Paul's points behind the metaphors.¹⁵

¹² See Acts 17:16-34 and Biblical Literacy lessons 32 and 33 at www.Biblical-Literacy.com.

¹³ *Geography*, at 14.5.13.

¹⁴ Some scholars argue that Paul moved from Tarsus to Jerusalem in infancy, or at such an early age, such 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.

¹⁵ See also H. Weinell, *St. Paul, The Man and His Work* (Williams and Norgate 1906) at 18-19 where he lists many of Paul's metaphors that, "come to him so naturally that it is extremely probable he was acquainted with these things before he started on his missionary journeys, that these pictures from the life of a Hellenistic city impressed themselves on his soul while he was still a child, and therefore that Tarsus was not only his birthplace but also his home." Weinell

If we consider Paul as one who had one foot in the Greek world and one in the Jewish world, we can see in many of these metaphors the “Greek” aspect of Paul’s life (we will consider the Jewish aspect in the next lesson). For example, in Galatians 3:24-25 we read Paul writing that,

the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.

Now, the word the ESV translators have translated as “guardian” is the Greek *paidagogos* (παιδαγωγός) or “pedagogue.” No one used it in the Bible except Paul. He used it both in Galatians and also in 1 Corinthians 4:15 (“For though you have countless *guides* in Christ, you do not have many fathers”).

What was a pedagogue? A pedagogue accompanied a child to school through the primary and secondary years. This was an important chore requiring care. Children on the street alone were frequently victims of molestation and abuse. The pedagogue also taught the child basic manners and the decency of good behavior. The pedagogue could and would discipline the child. Once the child reached adulthood, the pedagogue’s role was over.

Understanding this aspect of Paul’s culture brings to light not only the passage of the law’s role in Galatians, but also the difficulty of the translators’ chore to find an English equivalent word for the Greek word Paul used!¹⁶ Paul was writing that the law was given to take care of us until we reached adulthood in Christ. The law taught us manners and good behavior, brought necessary discipline, protected us and guided us on our way. We do not leave behind the lessons of the law/pedagogue when we reach adulthood. We live with decency and good deportment because we had a wonderful pedagogue. But, we also never confuse our Christian life as one under the authority of the law/pedagogue. We walk by faith under the authority of the Spirit of God!

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).¹⁷ This was no small amount, and scholars generally consider that Paul must have

cites Paul’s usage of images from the soldier’s life, the legal world, the theater, the racecourse, the wealthy houses and commerce of a city, the letters of the literate, *etc.*

¹⁶ In other words, study the Bible and used multiple translations as well as good commentaries!

¹⁷ Dio Chrysostom Oration 34.23 (Loeb Classical Library No. 358).

come from a family of some wealth, even though Paul did not purchase his citizenship.¹⁸ Paul explained he was born a citizen. This means Paul's father was a Roman citizen, for when Roman citizens had children, those children were automatically Roman citizens. In addition to purchase and birth, there were several other ways to get citizenship. It could come as a reward from the emperor for some special service or devotion, or from completion of certain military service.¹⁹

Roman citizenship offered many privileges in Paul's day.²⁰ Roman citizens were entitled to fair public trials (non-citizens were not!), were immune from certain types of punishment (including crucifixion), and were entitled to appeal any punishment or conviction straight to Caesar.

Paul's Roman citizenship served him well in his ministry. We know of three times that Paul invoked his rights as a Roman citizen. In Acts 16, we read of Paul imprisoned with Silas in Philippi, after receiving beatings at the hands of the local magistrates.²¹ 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 forfeit, 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 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.

¹⁸ See Bruce at 36.

¹⁹ John McRay, *Paul, His Life and Teaching* (Baker Book House 2003) at 24.

²⁰ 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), at 72-74, 250ff.

²¹ Paul could have invoked his citizenship and prevented the beatings, but for reasons we do not know, Paul chose not to.

A second time we know of Paul invoking his Roman citizenship came in Jerusalem. Luke recorded in Acts 22:25-29 the interchange between Paul and the Tribune noted earlier. After Paul was ordered to be taken into custody for torturing and questioning, Luke recorded,

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?"

Needless to say, the flogging went no further!

About two years later, we have Luke's account of Paul before Festus and Agrippa noted earlier. Festus had intended to send Paul back to Jerusalem where some of the Jews were waiting to kill him. Instead of returning, Paul declared, "I appeal to Caesar!" With that automatic right of appeal, Paul was shipped off to Rome, taking the gospel with him. As a side note, we should notice that Paul had earlier written the church at Rome and told them he had longed for years to visit Rome (Rom. 15:33). Using his Roman citizenship privileges, Paul finally got to make that ministry trip. Acts closes with Paul in Rome for several years preaching the gospel.

PAUL'S JEWISH BACKGROUND

Paul was God's key missionary piece, called and prepared for taking the gospel to the Greeks. We see that preparation in Paul's Roman and Tarsian citizenships along with the Greek cultural exposure he likely received, discussed above. But, we are amiss if we fail to focus on another reason Paul was so clearly God's missionary for the job. Paul had the Hebrew language, culture, and understanding that allowed him to discern the basics as well as the intricacies of God's work through the Jewish faith and through Jesus, the pinnacle of Judaism.

This gospel message was not, in its own origin, a Greek message. The gospel grew out of the Hebrew faith, and was a living expression of Hebrew ritual, scripture, and custom. To fully understand the religious context of the gospel message, one needed to understand both contemporary and historical Judaism. In this sense, one who was to take the gospel to the Greek and Roman world, needed to be fully bilingual – not only in vocabulary, but in culture and religious understanding. We have seen Paul's Greek culture and exposure. We have examined his familiarity with Greek life that enabled his fluent use of Greek metaphors and education. To fully appreciate Paul's perfect fit into the puzzle, we should examine all of Paul's Hebrew qualifications as well. Paul was not merely fluent in Hebrew culture and doctrine; he was a master!

The relevant scriptures

Most of the relevant Scriptures are already set out because of their Greek implications, but we reference them once more below for clarity's sake:

"Brothers and fathers, listen now to my defense." When they heard him speak to them in Aramaic, they became very quiet. Then Paul said: "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. Under Gamaliel I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers and was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. (Acts 22:1-3).

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).

"The Jews all know the way I have lived ever since I was a child, from the beginning of my life in my own country, and also in Jerusalem. They have known me for a long time and can testify, if they are willing, that according to the strictest sect of our religion, I lived as a Pharisee." (Acts 26:4-5).

"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).

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. (Phil. 3:4-6).

Implications

These scriptures teach us much about Paul's Hebrew background and training, especially when viewed in light of the context and information history provides us. We can fairly determine that:

- Paul moved to Jerusalem early in life;²²
- Paul and his family were Pharisees;

²² Scholars debate over how early Paul moved. There is a considerable debate over whether Luke's terminology means a very early move such that Tarsus really had little to no impact over Paul, or whether the move was at a time around adolescence. We find greater strengths in the arguments of a later move, but the evidence can be read fairly either way. We do know that Paul returned to Tarsus after his conversion for some period of time. It is there that Barnabas went to find him as Luke details in Acts 11:25. Certainly, Paul had exposure to the Greek education and culture on a significant level, for he quotes Greek teachers and writes in Greek metaphors.

- Paul trained under Gamaliel;
- Paul was zealous in his Judaic faith and life; and
- Paul “cast” his “vote” against the Christian martyrs.

The historical insights

Pharisees: What are your reactions to that noun: Pharisees? Does the term leave a bitter taste in your mouth? Does it make you wonder whether there might be anything good or useful we can say about them?

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.” This provides us a great starting point as we seek to understand just what was a Pharisee. In so doing, we hope to understand Paul’s meaning that he had lived as a Pharisee as well as his contemporary claim to still be a Pharisee.

We have a number of places where we learn of Pharisees in the 1st century. One source is the New Testament. The gospels give us a number of encounters Jesus and his disciples had with the Pharisees. In addition to those references, we have some good insight from some writings outside of the New Testament, yet still made contemporarily with the Pharisee movement. The main sources outside the New Testament are the Jewish historian Josephus²³ and the early rabbinic literature.

Scholars have written books of speculation and historical observations trying to reconstruct exactly who the Pharisees were, where they came from, and what they believed. We are not in a position in this lesson to wade through those debates beyond noting that they exist. What we do here is note some of the generally accepted information, especially by looking directly at the original source material.²⁴

Josephus provides the information that scholars use to deduce the history of the Pharisees. Through his writings, we read of Pharisees as one of the main powerful

²³ Josephus (37- after 100 A.D.) wrote Jewish histories following the Jewish revolt against Rome (66-73 A.D.).

²⁴ Much of the fuss over Pharisaic issues comes in spite of the clear statements in these sources. Scholars debate the statements using a “critical approach” they bring to the sources. They examine the authenticity of the statements, the purpose behind the statements, and the agendas that might influence the adequacy of the information and portrayals therein. These debates we avoid here, beyond recognizing they do exist.

sects within Judaism in the first century. According to Josephus, Pharisees were influential two centuries before Paul and Christ as they sought to ensure the Jewish way of life against external and internal forces.²⁵ Josephus notes that after the death of Herod (4 B.C.), the Pharisees were scheming for power in Herod's replacement. Josephus writes,

There was also a group of Jews priding itself on its adherence to ancestral custom and claiming to observe the laws of which the Deity approves, and by these men, called Pharisees, the women were ruled.²⁶

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).

When we read of the negative interactions between Jesus and the Pharisees, we find several concerns Jesus shows with Pharisaical living. 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 that 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).

A third problem Jesus had with the Pharisees concerned some of them who viewed themselves the moral police of others, rather than teachers who through word and example lead people in morality. These Pharisees often came to test Jesus on

²⁵ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 13 §288-298.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 17 §41.

points of law (Mt 19:2-4; Mk 10:1-3; Jn. 8:12-14). Remember the story of the moral police catching the woman in adultery and bringing her before Jesus to test him as well as execute her? They were Pharisees! (Jn. 8:3)

Yet, not all Pharisees are so poorly betrayed 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). One wonders if Nicodemus was among the Pharisees in the church Luke referenced in Acts 15:5!²⁷

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.²⁸ 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.²⁹

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”

²⁷ 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.’”

²⁸ 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).

²⁹ 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).

when casting out demons (Mt. 12:24). Paul was able to use the Pharisees' views on the resurrection to benefit from a shouting match over the issue between the Pharisees and the Sadducees in Acts 23. As Luke recounted the story:

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)

Paul's usage of the ideas and language of predestination and man's choices will come in later classes, but we do well to note that the issues were ones Paul studied as a Pharisee.

What all do we do with this material? How does Paul consider himself a Pharisee when a Christian? Why are some Pharisees so poorly portrayed and others portrayed somewhat positively? We find some answers to these questions from common sense, as well as from some other sources.

First, anyone who studies a modern Christian denomination will quickly find diversity in the midst of the group. For example, were one to study the Baptists, one would have difficulty ever assigning a full set of beliefs and behaviors that would cover all Baptists 100 percent.

We see this also true when we probe the rabbinic sources on Pharisees.³⁰ 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.³¹

³⁰ The rabbinic literature about the Pharisees is subject to significant scholarly debate. Many of the references to 1st 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.

³¹ 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.

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 finds among those carrying the Christian gospel message, with no Pharisaic affiliation whatsoever. 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. For Paul, he 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, Christian “are of all people most to be pitied” (1 Cor. 15:19).

Gamaliel: In Acts 22:1-3, Paul reminds the crowd that he studied under the feet of Gamaliel. We know of Gamaliel both from scripture and from Jewish writings.

During the turn of the era from B.C. to A.D., there were two prominent rabbinic schools of thought in Jerusalem. One was that of Shammai; the other was that of Hillel. These two scholars 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 more strict of the two; Hillel the more accommodating. Jewish tradition kept an example of the difference in approach to conversion between Shammai and Hillel. In the Babylonian Talmud,³² 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.”³³

³² 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.

³³ b. Shabbat, Chapter 2, I.12 (Hendrickson Publishers 2005) Neusner translation.

A successor of Hillel, and head of his school was Gamaliel, at whose feet Paul studied. History teaches that Gamaliel was either Hillel's son or grandson. Gamaliel was a devout Pharisee of whom we can read about both in the New Testament and in Hebrew histories. One can readily see the teachings of Hillel in approaches of Gamaliel.

Just as Hillel brought a more moderate view towards life and faithful practice than that of Shammai, so did Gamaliel. McRay writes "Hillel realized that the law must take account of actual conditions rather than imposing regulations and making demands on people that are impossible for them to fulfill."³⁴ 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 are called before the High Priest and council for questioning. The reaction of the council and priests was one of murderous rage. But Gamaliel enters the picture with sound 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!"³⁵ (Acts 5:33-39)

McRay perceives an example of Paul's influence from Gamaliel on 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

³⁴ John McRay, *Paul, His Life and Teaching* (Baker Academic 2003) at 45.

³⁵ It is worth noting that while Paul trained in his growing years under Gamaliel, Paul certainly did not follow Gamaliel's advice here. Paul chose to persecute the church, proving the truth of Gamaliel's position. Paul's efforts to destroy the church were both futile and were in opposition to God!

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.³⁶

Alan Segal, a Jew who has written on Paul, notes that Paul's placement in the school of Hillel/Gamaliel was placement into a Pharisaic branch that was supportive of and even sought Gentile conversion into Judaism.³⁷ We see God's provident hand on Paul's life prepared him for a fuller understanding of the gospel as a fulfillment of Jewish history, even as God was preparing Paul to be His voice in interpreting and spreading that gospel in a Gentile world.

As we read about Gamaliel in historical writings he had a number of habits that are echoed in the life and practice of Paul in the church. Gamaliel would travel to local synagogues to encourage the congregations. He wrote follow-up letters after his visits. He collected money for the poor in Jerusalem. He was an encourager for his students to be conversant in both Hebrew and Greek.

It is worth noting, having spent time looking at the Pharisees in the gospel accounts, that the school of Shammai was in power and prominence during the ministry of Jesus. Hillel's school was in the minority.³⁸ This might help explain some of the more intense run-ins the Pharisees had with Jesus and the apostles during Christ's ministry years.

Paul's Vote: In Acts 26:10, we read Paul telling Festus and Agrippa about casting his vote against the Christians martyrs. Scholars differ on the meaning of Paul casting his vote. The standard face meaning of the passage would imply that Paul was a voting member of the Sanhedrin.³⁹ 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.

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

³⁶ McRay at 45.

³⁷ Alan Segal, *Paul the Convert, the Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee* (Yale 1990) at 96-105.

³⁸ See discussion and footnotes of W.D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* (S.P.C.K. 1955) at 9.

³⁹ The Greek word used is *psephos* (ψηφος). Moulton and Milligan give the standard for translation in *The Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament* (Eerdmans 1952) at 698.

though scripture never tells us Paul's age or whether he had at one point been married.

CONCLUSION

What a phenomenal resume Paul had for his mission. Paul was God's perfect puzzle piece. He could go to synagogues throughout the Greek/Roman world and attend services as a man who had studied under the great Gamaliel. Paul had impeccable rabbinical credentials! Not surprisingly, every synagogue offered Paul a chance to teach. Then Paul, the resurrection believing Pharisee, could speak of the resurrected Christ! We can find many layers of how God's Spirit used Paul and worked through Paul. That same Spirit is at work in us! (Phil. 2:13 "For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure"). We are remiss if we fail to see how God sculpts each of us uniquely for his purposes and work. Too many of us convince ourselves that God cannot use us, either because of lousy past choices, inadequate training, addictions, or whatever. Truly there is nothing in our pasts, sin and all, that God will not use in powerful ways to bless others and glorify Him.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *"Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him"* (Acts 9:3).

God was preparing Paul for his tasks long before Paul saw Christ on the road to Damascus. This is worthy of more thought than we could put here in words. Because the implication is clear. God has done no less with anyone of us. All that we have done, all that has happened, good and bad, praiseworthy deeds and scandalous mistakes, God can and will put all to work in making us his piece to complete his puzzle.

2. *"My brothers, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee"* (Acts 23:6).

It is good to seek holiness before God. ("You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" Lev. 19:2). It is right to have zeal about how we live our lives, but we must never forget that our motive is one of love (1 Jn 5:3 "For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments") growing out of God's love for us. (1 Jn 4:19 "We love because he first loved us."). Paul never left his Pharisaic concern for holiness; he just found its place in God's order of things. Every one of Paul's letters to churches starts with a section on doctrine and teaching, followed by a section on holiness and moral living!

3. *“Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true” (Acts 17:11).*

Amazing thought, isn't it? The Bereans checked out Paul's teaching with their Bibles! No doubt they found the same things we do (and will in further lessons). Paul's message is the Old Testament on steroids! I am personally renewing my commitment to study the Bibles like a Berean!