

# Introduction

Two person dominate the pages of the New Testament. The first is Jesus, the second is Paul. After Jesus, Paul is the most important figure in the New Testament. He wrote more books of the Bible than anyone else. Thirteen of the twenty-seven books that make up the New Testament are authored by him while a large portion of the book of Acts is devoted to the story of his missionary work among the Gentiles. Together with Peter, Paul is regarded as the greatest and the best loved of the apostles of Jesus Christ.

The apostle Paul has fascinated scholars for centuries. He has captured the imagination and interest of Christians down through the centuries and been the subject of countless books. Paul's contribution and influence on the development and spread of Christianity is unsurpassed. A former arch-enemy of the faith, Paul turned out to be the greatest missionary of all time. When Christianity first emerged within the Jewish community in Judea, its early disciples proclaimed the good news only to Jews. It was because of Paul's zealous and tireless labour that Christianity spread to the Gentiles and became established as a new religion that shook up the Roman Empire and changed the course of history. The shape of Christian belief and the course Christianity took would have been very different without the very significant role played by Paul.

What was Paul the apostle like? How much do we know about his life story? When we read Paul's letters and the book of Acts in the Bible, we only get scattered images of parts of Paul's life, not an overall picture. It is hard to figure out at what point in Paul's life and ministry each of his letters was written and where it fits into Luke's account of Paul's story. We only get passing glimpses into the kind of man Paul was.

This book seeks as far as possible to present Paul's life as an integrated whole and give a more complete picture of the overall story of Paul's life, his person and his ministry. Then when we read Paul's letters, we are able to place them in the context of where he was and have a clearer understanding of why he wrote them. And when we read the book of Acts, we are better equipped to picture the situation and understand what Paul went through, the struggles, joys and disappointments he experienced as he travelled around preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. May this book help us to become more intimately acquainted with the story of this amazing man of God, to recognise the passion, the labour and the sacrifice of a life lived in total surrender to his Lord and Master and be inspired and challenged to live our lives like he did, striving to be the 'utmost for His Highest'.<sup>1</sup>

Goh Kim Guat

<sup>1</sup> This phrase is taken from the title of the book 'My Utmost for His Highest' by Oswald Chambers.

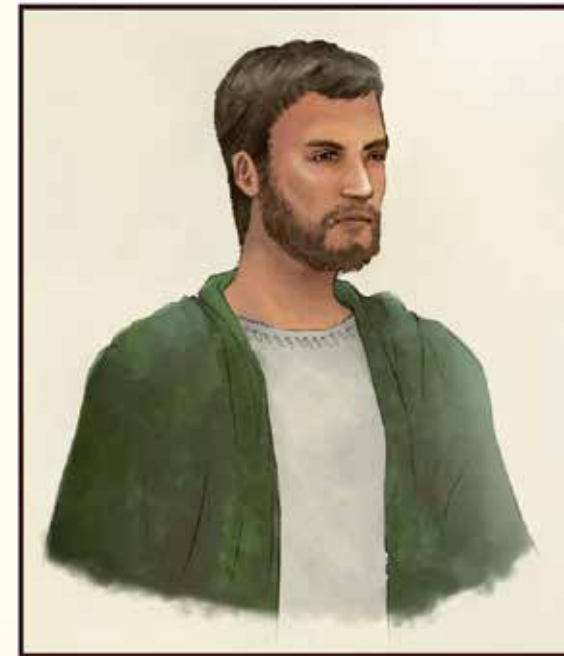
## Chapter 1 Strong Roots

"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 22:3

"... 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." Philippians 3:5-6

### Saul or Paul?

We first know Paul by his Jewish name Saul which means 'asked for' or 'desired' in Hebrew.



Young Paul

His parents' choice of Saul as his Jewish name could be because of their tribal connection. They

were descendants of the tribe of Benjamin whose most outstanding figure in Jewish history was Saul, the first king of Israel. It is very possible that his parents, proud of their tribal heritage, named their son after their famous ancestor, King Saul.

Saul had another name by which he was more commonly known in the New Testament. Because he was born a Roman citizen, Saul also had a Roman name *Paul*. That was the name that he himself used in his writings. Paul or *Paulos* was a common Greco-Roman name. It is likely that his parents chose this name because it sounded like his Hebrew name *Saul*.

### When Was Paul Born?

Paul was most likely born around the same time as Jesus, give or take a few years. There are two clues as to Paul's age in the New Testament. The first clue concerns Paul's possible age at the time of the death of Stephen, the first martyr of the early church. At the scene of Stephen's<sup>1</sup> martyrdom, Luke the author of Acts, describes

<sup>1</sup> Some scholars believe that Stephen's death took place no later than one and a half years after Jesus' death and resurrection. See James D.G. Dunn, *Christianity in the Making. Volume 2. Beginning from Jerusalem.* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), p. 257.

Paul as a young man, standing there holding the clothes of those who were stoning Stephen. In the Jewish context, a 'young man' would refer to someone between twenty-four to forty years of age.<sup>2</sup> The second clue concerns Paul's age when he wrote the letter to Philemon. In his letter to Philemon, Paul describes himself as an 'old man', and that would probably put him in his late fifties according to how the Jews reckoned the different ages of men.

Based on these two clues, scholars have tried to work out a possible date of birth for Paul depending on when they think the letter to Philemon was written. A generally accepted view is that Paul was probably born during the first few years of the first century AD, possibly between 2 BC to AD 5, around the same time as Jesus.

### Where Was Paul Born?

As people living in a modern world, we often imagine the people of Paul's time as being very backward and living in small towns or villages. This is far from the reality of the ancient Roman world. The important cities were often huge metropolises and very cosmopolitan, not too different from our modern capital cities such as Kuala Lumpur or Singapore. One such city was Tarsus, the birthplace of Paul.

Tarsus was the capital of the Roman province of Cilicia, a thriving and prosperous commercial city, greatly influenced by Hellenistic or Greek culture. It is estimated that its population was about half a million people and that was considered very huge for those days. Like many of the major cities in the Roman Empire, Tarsus had a fairly large number of Jewish inhabitants, most of whom had settled there during the time of the Seleucid Greeks.<sup>3</sup> Paul's family was most

likely part of a Jewish colony that had been placed in Tarsus with full rights of citizenship by one of the Seleucid kings in order to strengthen their hold on the city.

Later when Tarsus came under the Romans, Roman citizenship was given to many of its leading inhabitants because of the city's loyalty to Rome. We do not know if it was his immediate parents or his ancestors before him who were granted this citizenship. Whoever they were, it is probably because they did some great service to the state and were rewarded with their citizenship. Unlike the twelve apostles of Jesus who were Jews from Palestine, Paul was a Diaspora Jew who was a citizen of both the cosmopolitan cities of Tarsus and Rome. He had all the qualities and qualifications needed to be an apostle to the Gentile world.



### CHECK IT OUT

#### *Paul, A Roman Name*

A foreigner who becomes a Roman citizen will take a Roman name as a mark of his citizenship. Roman names have three parts: (1) a 'praenomen', the first part of the name which is a personal name that distinguishes an individual from other members of the same family; (2) a 'nomen' which is like a clan or family name; and (3) a 'cognomen' which began as a nickname and later became a family name that is passed down from father to son. A cognomen was often chosen based on a person's physical or personality trait, or some important thing the person has done.

'Paul' is Saul's 'cognomen'. Unfortunately we do not know his two other names. The name 'Paul' means 'small' and whether that is because he was small of stature we cannot be sure of.

### FROM PAUL'S WORLD



#### Tarsus, No Mean City

Tarsus in what is now Southern Turkey has a rich history stretching back some 4000 years. It was the capital of the Roman province of Cilicia Pedias. Apparently the famous Mark Antony and Cleopatra had their romantic first meeting in this city. When Tarsus became part of the Roman Empire, Mark Antony granted it freedom and immunity from imperial taxation as a reward for its loyalty after Caesar's assassination in 44 BC. Later, Roman citizenship was given to the leading personalities of the city.



*Ruins of the old agora market place in modern Tarsus, Turkey*

Tarsus lay on one of the great trade routes of the ancient world. A prosperous city, it was well-known for its linen and cilicium, a cloth made from the hair of the black goats found in that area. It was a thriving university town with numerous 'schools of rhetoric', the ancient equivalent of our modern-day liberal arts colleges. It ranked after Athens and Alexandria as the third most important centre of learning.



*Paul's Well in Tarsus, Turkey*

### FROM PAUL'S WORLD



#### The Jewish Diaspora

The Jews, over the course of their history as God's nation, had scattered to many countries outside Palestine.<sup>4</sup> During the first century AD, there were more of them living outside than in their homeland. They were called the Diaspora Jews and were found all over the Roman Empire and beyond. Besides Palestine, more Jews lived in Egypt than in any other country. The cities of Antioch and Damascus in particular were home to a large Jewish community.

According to the law of Moses, all male Jews were required to go to Jerusalem to celebrate the three major festivals of Passover, Pentecost and the Feast of Tabernacles. Devout Diaspora Jews would make at least three yearly pilgrimages to Jerusalem in obedience to the law of Moses thus keeping strongly their connection and loyalty to their heritage and their motherland.

<sup>2</sup> Since many scholars would generally date Jesus' crucifixion as taking place on Nisan 14 (April 7) in AD 30 and the stoning of Stephen between AD 31-33, it would mean that Paul was between 24 to 40 years old during that period of time.

<sup>3</sup> The Seleucid Empire was founded by Seleucus I, one of the leading generals in the army of Alexander the Great. After Alexander's death, there was a fight for power over the different parts of his empire. Seleucus received Babylonia and from that point on went to expand his dominion over a major portion of the eastern part of Alexander's empire. The Seleucid Empire finally collapsed with its defeat by the Roman general Pompey in 63 BC.

<sup>4</sup> Judea which encompassed the ancient Israelite kingdom of Judah was conquered by the Romans in the first century BC. In AD 132 Emperor Hadrian, in his effort to wipe out the identity of the rebellious Jews, combined the provinces of Judea and Syria and named this new province 'Syria Palaestina' or Palestine.



## What was Paul's Family Like?

We do not know very much about Paul's family directly. Jerome, an early church theologian and historian, records a tradition that Paul's parents originally came from a town in Galilee called Gischala. It claims that they fled to Tarsus during the Roman devastation of Judea around the first century BC. There is, however, no evidence of that. Much of our knowledge about Paul's family life is inferred from Paul's own writings.

The way Paul describes himself in his letter to the Philippians<sup>5</sup> suggests that his parents were devout Jews who followed faithfully the laws and traditions of Judaism and raised him accordingly. Religious Jews living in a Gentile world would zealously guard their children against the influence of the Gentile world around them and raise them to be rooted in their faith and their traditions. His parents circumcised him on the eighth day<sup>6</sup> as is required by the law of Moses. They made sure that he grew up knowing and taking pride in his Jewish roots and identity. That probably contributed to how he became such a zealous Pharisee in his later years.

## Paul's Education

Well-educated and multilingual, Paul was equally fluent in Hebrew, Aramaic,<sup>9</sup> Greek, and possibly Latin since he was a Roman citizen. From his childhood, Paul would have been taught to read and memorise the Septuagint both at home and in the synagogue school. The Septuagint was the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures for the Diaspora Jews most of whom did not know Hebrew. He would also have studied the Scriptures in Hebrew as well. Growing up in a cosmopolitan city, Paul could not fail to have

His family was most likely well-to-do because they were Roman citizens. Jews who became Roman citizens must either possess some wealth and standing or have provided a great service to the Romans. Some scholars have suggested that his family could have regarded him as an apostate and a disgrace to the family when he became a Christian and thus disowned him. As a result, Paul had to support himself by working as a tentmaker<sup>7</sup> during his missionary journeys. All these, however, are mere speculations because Paul never mentioned anything at all about his relationship with his family in his letters.

Paul did allude to other family members that he had. He had a sister<sup>8</sup> living in Jerusalem whose son saved his life by giving private information concerning the secret conspiracy against him. Some scholars believe that Paul's nephew acquired his information from the house of some Jewish leaders, and that possibly his sister and nephew belonged to an influential family.

acquired some knowledge of Greek philosophy and Greco-Roman rhetoric.

Paul thus grew up fully Hebrew at heart and in lifestyle but had adapted himself to live in a Hellenistic world and to use its lingua franca, the Greek language. His background prepared him well for God's plans in the future for him.



Paul's Growing-Up Years

### CHECK IT OUT



#### Education in the Ancient World

Ancient education was based on reading aloud, repetition and memorisation. Having the knowledge in one's head is much easier than carrying heavy scrolls around when in search of a particular passage. The elite young males of the Greco-Roman world memorised tons of Greek or Latin poetry.

The importance of an early start and a thorough grounding in Jewish traditions was impressed upon the Jews in Palestine and the Diaspora, not least because they feared being assimilated into the syncretistic Greco-Roman culture. Scholars believe that Jewish students were taught in the same way: reading aloud, repetition and memorisation. Jewish law prescribes that a boy begins the study of Scriptures at the age of five and the study of the legal traditions at the age of ten. Girls, unfortunately, did not receive formal education outside the home in the first century.

### CHECK IT OUT



#### Gamaliel I, Paul's Famous Rabbi

Gamaliel is mentioned in the book of Acts as the rabbi under whom Paul studied when he was in Jerusalem. Known as Gamaliel the Elder, he was a leading authority in the Sanhedrin in the mid-first century AD. He holds a reputation for being one of the greatest teachers in the annals of Judaism. Once when the early apostles of Jesus were arrested by the Sanhedrin, Gamaliel spoke in their favour and asked for their release.

## Paul the Hebrew

Paul took great pride in his Jewish ancestry and lineage. Unlike many Diaspora Jews who assimilated into the culture of the society they lived in, Paul chose to identify himself as a Hebrew-speaking Jew who could speak fluently in his mother tongue. He described himself as part of 'the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews'. Much as he

<sup>5</sup> Philippians 3:4-6

<sup>6</sup> Philippians 3:5

<sup>7</sup> Acts 18:3

<sup>8</sup> Acts 23:16

<sup>9</sup> It is generally believed that by the beginning of the first century AD, Aramaic was the main lingua franca spoken by the Jews in Palestine with a decreasing number using Hebrew as their native language. Many learned Hebrew only as language for worship.



## FROM PAUL'S WORLD



## Hebrew vs. Hellenist

In Paul and Luke's writings, 'Hebrew' is probably a more specialised term than 'Israelite' or 'Jew' referring to the language and culture. The Hebrews or Hebraic Jews attended synagogues where the service was conducted in Hebrew and they used Aramaic as their normal mode of speech. The Hellenists or Hellenistic Jews spoke Greek and attended synagogues where the service and prayers were conducted in Greek.

In the Diaspora throughout the Greco-Roman world, the Hellenists would be the majority of resident Jews while the Hebrews would be recent immigrants from Palestine or members of families who made a special point of preserving their Jewish ways. We know from inscriptions in synagogues in Rome and Corinth that each of these Gentile cities had a synagogue for the Hebrews.



Hebraic and Hellenistic Jews

## CHECK IT OUT

## Was Paul educated in Tarsus or Jerusalem?

There is a long-running debate on whether Paul received his basic education in the Greek city of Tarsus or whether he was sent to Jerusalem to receive his education. Some scholars have argued that Paul had a classical Greek education in Tarsus because he could write good Greek and knew the Greek Septuagint very well (he quoted it almost ninety times). There is evidence that Jewish children among the elite learned to read not only the Torah but also some of the Greek classics. Others, however, do not see many signs of Hellenistic influence on him that could be attributed to a classical education. They have argued that Paul was brought up in Jerusalem and spent his most formative years of education and training there.<sup>10</sup> Then at some point in his teens, he trained as a Pharisee under Gamaliel I.

was a Tarsian and a Roman, he was first and foremost a Hebrew at heart. It is similar to modern-day immigrants who might be patriotic citizens of the countries they live in but who still identify strongly with their ethnic roots and heritage.



Gamaliel I - Paul's teacher

## Paul the Pharisee

Being a true thoroughbred Hebrew was not enough for Paul. He became a Pharisee who trained under the famous rabbi Gamaliel I. In his letter to the Galatian church, he wrote: 'I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors.' As a young man full of idealism and passion, he was not satisfied with being just a Pharisee. He wanted to be the best and most righteous among them.

In Jerusalem he distinguished himself through zealous devotion to the service of Israel's God. His dedication to Judaism was outstanding even

among his fellow Pharisees. In his fanatical zeal and passion, he surpassed all his contemporaries in his knowledge and practice of Judaism. He saw himself as blameless and faultless for no one could charge him with any violations of the Mosaic law or accuse him of any wrongdoing. Among the spiritual elite, Paul stood out as the first and the best.

Overzealous Pharisees like Paul would have zero tolerance for fellow Jews who violated the law or who compromised Israel's purity or opposed God. It was this kind of mindset that drove Paul to carry out his violent persecution of the early disciples of Jesus and set him on the path to that epoch-making encounter with Jesus himself.

## CHECK IT OUT



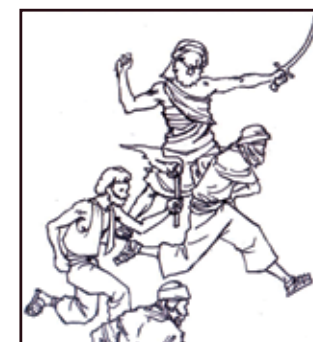
## Four Major Groups within Judaism



1. The Pharisees



2. Essenes



3. Zealots



4. Sadducees

Of the four major religious groups within Judaism during the time of Jesus and Paul — Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Zealots — the Pharisees were often the most vocal and influential. The Pharisees (meaning "set apart," one who was separated for a life of purity) were particularly concerned about following strictly the law and the traditions and separating themselves from anything unclean or impure. They wanted to keep the Jewish nation holy and distinctive at a time when foreign influences were very strong. They would not associate freely with many among their fellow Jews, especially the peasants and craftsmen who were not so particular about following the traditions. They were convinced that such people were incapable of true piety. Although they numbered only around 6,000 during the first century AD, they were an influential minority.

<sup>10</sup> Acts 22:3 and 26:4

### Snapshots of Paul

**Character:**

- Highly intelligent, competent and confident leader with great discipline and drive
- Deeply passionate with a strongly emotional temperament who was honest and open about his feelings
- Possessed practical wisdom and sound judgment
- Tough and resilient and able to persevere under the hardest of circumstances and extreme difficulties without complaints
- Man of great vision for God’s work

**Relationships:**

- A great capacity for cultivating deep friendships. Wherever he went on his missionary travels, he made friends who were faithful and close to him
- Held in great esteem and affection by many in the churches founded by him
- Cared deeply for those churches that he had established, like a father cares for his children, often writing long letters to encourage them to remain faithful to Christ

**Physical Appearance:**

- Small in stature
- Possibly not very striking in looks
- Could have a physical ailment that affected his body which some scholars thought was ‘his thorn in the flesh’

# Chapter 2 Out for Blood

“For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it.” Galatians 1:13

Paul’s story starts with him as Saul watching the Jewish mob pelting Stephen with stones. He stood there guarding the clothes of the executioners. As the stones rained down on Stephen, Saul could not help feeling a great sense of satisfaction. To this young zealous Pharisee, blasphemers must be punished. The purity of Judaism must be maintained at all costs.

What were the events that led to Saul being a witness at the stoning of Stephen? How did Saul start to cross paths with the followers of Jesus?

had occasionally troubled Jewish history but with time had all died out. By having Jesus killed, the authorities thought that they had settled the problem. This time round, though, things turned out differently. His disciples empowered by the Holy Spirit, went around boldly proclaiming that Jesus was the promised Messiah sent by God to redeem His people. Jews started converting by the thousands to follow what became known as the Way - the way of faith and life initiated by Jesus.

As the number of converts grew rapidly, the Jewish authorities became more and more furious and upset. Saul felt exactly the same way. As a zealous Pharisee dedicated to maintaining the purity of the law and traditions, he regarded the followers of this Nazarene sect as deviants who had gone astray. Although the religious authorities made sporadic attempts to stop the progress of this growing movement, they had not started any major persecution as yet. Trouble, however, was brewing in the background. It was about to reach a boiling point and Saul would be right there in the centre of it.

### The Nazarene Sect – The Way

We do not know whether Saul ever came into contact with Jesus. He never hinted in his letters that he had heard about Jesus before the incident with Stephen. Even if he had, Saul might not have wasted his time seeking out and listening to an uneducated carpenter who did not keep the Jewish law and traditions stringently. To a zealous Pharisee and upright Jew like Saul, Jesus would have been dismissed as a young upstart, a ‘nobody’ from Nazareth.

Jesus’ teaching and ministry, however, had created great hostility and reaction from the Jewish religious authorities in Jerusalem. They regarded him as another of those radical troublemakers leading Messianic movements that

### CHECK IT OUT



#### Paul, Short and Bald?

A second-century AD apocryphal writing, “The Acts of Paul and Thecla,” tells the story of Paul’s influence on a young woman named Thecla from Iconium. It has a detailed description of Paul’s physical appearance but we do not know whether the description is purely fictional or whether there are some elements of truth in it:

“And a certain man named Onesiphorus, hearing

that Paul was coming to Iconium, went out speedily together with his wife Lectra and his sons Simmia and Zeno, to meet him and invite him to their house. . . . At length they saw a man coming (namely Paul), of a small stature with meeting eyebrows, bald (or shaved) head, bow-legged, strongly built, hollow-eyed, with a large crooked nose; he was full of grace, for sometimes he appeared as a man, sometimes he had the countenance of an angel.”