

Introduction to Saint Paul

Rev. Sebastian Carnazzo (steliasmelkite.org)

I. The Man

Saul or Paul? Saul of Tarsus is called 'Saul' in the narrative of Acts up until 13:9, where after he is called 'Paul.' The name '**Saul**' is from the Hebrew *sha'ul* (שאול), which means 'requested one.'

The name '**Paul**' is from the Greek *Paulos* (Παῦλος) of the popular Roman family name *Paulus* (Lat. 'little'), as seen in the figure Sergius Paulus of Acts 13:7. It was a common practice among Semites of the period to have two names, one Semitic, and the other Greek or Roman (cf. Acts 1:23; 9:36, 39; 10:18; 12:12; 13:1, 9; see also John 1:42).

Place of Birth: According to Acts, Paul was born in **Tarsus** (c. AD 5-15), a town of Cilicia (Acts 9:11; 21:39; 22:3, 6). Greek coins from the 5th and 4th centuries attest to its early Hellenization. The city was further Hellenized by Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175-164 BC). During Pompey's reorganization of Asia Minor (66 BC), Tarsus was named capital of the province of Cilicia. Later, Mark Antony granted freedom, immunity, and citizenship to the town, which was confirmed by Augustus, hence Paul's frequent appeal to **Roman citizenship** (Acts 16:37; 21:39; 22:25-29; 23:27; 25:10). Tarsus became a well-known center of Hellenic education, philosophy, and culture (Strabo *Geogr.* 14.673).

Jerusalem Residence: Paul moved from Tarsus to Jerusalem sometime before the martyrdom of Steven (cf. Acts 7:54-60).

Religious Affiliation before Christianity: Either in Tarsus or after moving to Jerusalem, Paul joined the Pharisees (Acts 23:6; Phil 3:5), and studied under Gamaliel (Acts 22:3, see also 5:33). The word **Pharisee** is often misunderstood in the modern reading of the NT. When we think of Pharisees, we usually think of self-righteousness and hypocrisy, as exemplified in the story of the Pharisee and the Publican (Luke 18:11). The Pharisees were a religious party (Heb. הפרושים '*separate ones*'), that advocated total commitment and obedience to the Torah. Not because they were a bunch of legalistic hypocrites, but because they loved God and his commandments. This is why they appear all over the place in the NT. Where Jesus was, they followed. They were interested to see if this new rabbi had something to offer, possibly a deeper and clearer interpretation of the Law, that they might follow the commandments of God even better. Unfortunately, since they are the ones who knew the Law, they also always end being the one who speak up and challenge Jesus when he appears to be doing something to break it. Nobody else gets involved in the debate because they either didn't care or had no idea what the issue was about.

Conversion to Christianity: Paul was converted in a miraculous event on the road to Damascus and Baptized by Ananius (Acts 9; 22:6-16; 26:12-18; c. AD 34-36), after which he spent three years praying and meditating in the Arabian Desert (cf. Gal 1:17-18).

II. The Mission

First Missionary Journey (Acts 13:1-14:28; AD 45-49): In his first missionary journey, Paul, accompanied by **Barnabas** and **John Mark**, was sent by the Holy Spirit, from the church at Antioch (cf. Acts 13:1-5). From the port at Seleucia, they traveled to Cyprus, Perga in Pamphylia, Pisidian Antioch, and the three cities of Lycaonia: Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. On his trip back into Palestine, Paul encountered Judean Christians in Antioch, preaching the need for Gentile Christians to be circumcised and to keep the rest of the Law of Moses (cf. Acts 15:1-5). Paul's 1st missionary journey drew to a close with his trip to Jerusalem to resolve the matter. The controversy was so significant that it required an apostolic council (cf. Acts 15).

- Second Missionary Journey** (Acts 15:36-18:22; AD 49-52): After having delivered the letter written from the apostles in Jerusalem to the church at Antioch, along with **Barnabas**, Judas Barsabbas, and **Silas**, Paul then decided to revisit the places where he had preached in his first trip. Paul took Silas with him, and began his second trip through Syria and Cilicia. Paul traveled to Lycaonia and was joined in Lystra by **Timothy**. He traveled through Phrygia and **Galatia** and eventually to Troas, and being joined by **Luke**, he then went into Macedonia, where he founded churches in **Philippi**, **Thessalonica**, and Beroea. Paul eventually traveled to **Corinth**, and there wrote his **two letters to the Thessalonians** c. AD 51 (considered the first two books of the NT canon).
- Third Missionary Journey** (Acts 18:23-21:15; AD 53-58): Paul began this trip by crossing Phrygia and Galatia and eventually traveling into Ephesus. While in Ephesus he wrote his letter to the **Galatians** and first letter to the **Corinthians**. After leaving Ephesus (cf. Acts 19:23ff), he joined up with **Titus** in Macedonia, and was told about more problems at Corinth. He then wrote his second letter to the **Corinthians**. Finally, toward the end of the winter of 57, Paul came to Corinth, and there wrote his letter to the **Romans**.
- Voyage to Rome** (Acts 27:1-28:16; AD 60-61): Leaving Corinth, Paul made his way back to Jerusalem where he was soon imprisoned and brought to Caesarea (Acts 21:16-26:32). After two years of interrogations Paul appealed to Caesar's judgment and was sent to Rome. The narrative of Acts closes with his arrival in Rome.
- 1st Roman Captivity** (AD 61-63): During his 1st captivity in Rome, Paul wrote **Ephesians**, **Philippians**, **Colossians**, and **Philemon**, commonly known as the **Captivity Letters**.
- Final Trip and Captivity**: It appears that after Paul was in prison in Rome, he somehow managed to get himself released, and made one last trip down into Macedonia, where he wrote his first letter to **Timothy** whom he had left as a bishop in Ephesus, and his letter to **Titus** whom he had left as a bishop in Crete. Paul's final letter, at least the last that we have, is his second letter to **Timothy**, from which we know that shortly after his trip through Macedonia he was again imprisoned and most likely in Rome (cf. 2 Tim 3:6-22). How he got there or the cause of this second imprisonment we do not know.
- Martyred for the Faith in Rome** (AD 67-68): According to Eusebius (*HE* 2.25.8), both Peter and Paul were martyred in Rome during Nero's persecution.

III. Acts: the Key to Paul's Epistles

Acts of the Apostles 10

- 1** **Caesarea...Cornelius...Italian Cohort**: The Church is now moving into the fourth and final stage of the mission enunciated in Acts 1:8: "...to the end of the earth." Luke indicated with three narrative clues. Caesarea was a port city north of Joppa, and had been made the Roman capital for Judea. This would stand in stark contrast to the Jewish capital Jerusalem. Thus Caesarea was a symbol of gentile presence among the Jews. This is further emphasized by the Latin name Cornelius, and that he is the centurion of an 'Italian' cohort. Cornelius is the symbol of the gentiles living among the Jews.
- 2** **feared God**: This is a technical term for a gentile who worshipped the God of Israel but remained ritually unclean. That is to say that they did not keep the entirety of the Torah in such things as circumcision or the kosher laws governing what you could and could not eat (cp. 13:16, 26, 43; cp. Exod 1:17; Job 1:1). Cornelius is the perfect narrative symbol of the tension that will exist in the book of Acts from this point on until the council of Jerusalem (cf. Acts 15).
- 14** **unclean**: The laws of what one could or could not eat, that which is clean and unclean are given in Leviticus 11.
- 15** **What God has cleansed**: The declaration about the kosher laws speaks to the greater context (cp. v. 28). The two most significant distinctions that separated a Jew from a Gentile who believed in the God of

Israel, were the kosher laws and circumcision (See note at 10:2). Peter was told that God has proclaimed all animals clean (cp. Mark 7:19), thus the only thing separating him now from the gentile who feared God is circumcision. God will show circumcision to be inconsequential for the New Covenant by pouring out his Spirit upon even the uncircumcised (cf. 10:45; 11:18).

28 Peter understood the dream and its greater meaning (cp. v. 15).

37-38 **baptism...anointed:** Jesus' baptism was his public anointing, when the presence of the Spirit was made manifest to all (See note at 4:27; Luke 3:22; 4:18).

44 **all:** cp. 11:14.

45 **the circumcised:** The problem, to which Luke was previously alluding, has now been made explicit.

47 **just as we have:** God revealed to Peter that there was no longer any difference between the Jew who feared God and believed in Jesus and the gentile who feared God and believed in Jesus, made evident by the fact that both received the Holy Spirit in the same way, through 'faith in Jesus.' Thus what one eats or does not eat, whether one is circumcised or not, are inconsequential in the New Covenant. And while this may be clear to the readership 2000 years later, it was not so clear for the early Church. This tension will continue to be worked out through the rest of the narrative of Acts and became a major theme of many of Paul's letters.

Acts of the Apostles 11

2 **circumcision party:** This is Luke's designation for the Christian Jews who believed that Gentiles had to be circumcised to enter fully into the Church (cp. Acts 15:5; Gal 2:12; Tit 1:10).

14 **all your household:** There is no indication in the New Testament that there was ever any restriction on Baptism concerning age of reason. Babies, children, and adults appear to have all been baptized alike (cf. 10:44; 47; 16:15; 33; 18:8; 1 Cor 1:16).

19-20 **Greeks:** The term Greek here is being used to refer to uncircumcised, as 'gentile' was used earlier (cp. 10:45; 11:1-2,18).

Acts of the Apostles 13

4 **sailed to Cyprus:** This is the beginning of Saul's first missionary journey.

16 **you that fear God:** Gentiles who worshipped the God of Israel (see note at Acts 10:2).

46 **first to you...we turn to the Gentiles:** Paul always went first to the Jews of a city, then after having exhausted that avenue, he turned to the Gentiles. This does not mean that from this point on he gave up on the Jews as a whole, but rather he had exhausted his missionary efforts with the Jews of Psidian Antioch (cp. 14:1; see note at Acts 9:20).

Acts of the Apostles 14

17 **witnesses:** Paul argued similarly elsewhere (cp. Acts 17:29-31; Rom 1:20).

22 **tribulations:** Paul was shown at the very beginning of his ministry that he would have to suffer much for the body of Christ (cf. Acts 9:16). He has already suffered much since his conversion. This suffering came to a high point when he was stoned in Lystra (cf. Acts 14:19), continued throughout his ministry (cf. 2 Tim 3:10-11; 2 Cor 11:23-33), and climaxed in his martyrdom for the Faith in Rome. Paul understood such suffering as an integral part to the Christian life, and thus redemptive, since every Christian, being part of the body of Christ should expect to suffer unjustly, just as Jesus did (cf. Col 1:24; Phil 1:29).

26 **sailed to Antioch:** They returned to the place from where they had begun their first journey (see note at 13:4). This is commonly called the first missionary journey of Paul (c. AD 45-49).

Acts of the Apostles 15

5 **Pharisees:** See p. 1.

necessary to circumcise: Circumcision had been given as a sign of the covenant with Abraham (cf. Gen 17).

law of Moses: The Law of Moses in general refers to the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. It was called the Law of *Moses* because the Jewish tradition held that Moses was the primary human author of these first five books. Therefore, when the Law of Moses is mentioned in the New Testament, it is not just referring to the 10 commandments (Exod 20), but every regulation given in all five books (cf. Matt 5:17; 7:12; 11:13; 22:40; Luke 16:16; 24:44; John 1:45; 7:22-23; Acts 13:15; 24:14; 28:23; Rom 3:21).

This includes the prohibition against eating blood (Gen 9; Lev 17), keeping the law of circumcision (Gen 17), observing all the Jewish feasts, including the Sabbath (Exod 23; Lev 23), keeping all of the dietary regulations concerning clean and unclean animals (Lev 11), and observing regulations of lawful marriage (Lev 18).

As in chapters 8-15 of Acts, the issues of circumcision and the kosher laws, or even the Law of Moses in general, caused great tension in the early Church. The early Church was thoroughly Jewish. Jesus was a Jew, his mother was a Jew, the twelve apostles were Jews, the first three thousand converts were Jews, etc. It was not until the Baptism of Cornelius and his household that the question of gentiles arose. And while a few gentile converts like Cornelius floating around might not have caused too much of a stir, Paul's missionary journey had resulted in an overwhelming number of Gentile conversions. The questions now had to be answered. After Baptism, was there need of anything else? Did the Gentile have to be circumcised? Did he have to keep the Law of Moses (cf. Acts 15:5)? To all of these questions Peter and Paul believed the answer was "no." But James recommended something further:

1. Do not eat meat offered to idols
2. Do not marry within unlawful degrees of relation (*porneia*)
3. Do not eat what has been strangled or died on its own
4. Do not eat blood

Acts 15 lists four prohibitions by which Gentile Christians were to abide in order to live in harmony with their Jewish Christian brethren, at least as long as those Jewish Christian brethren continue to attend the local Jewish synagogue where "Moses is still read" (v. 21). The list describes the four prohibitions of the **Holiness Code** of Leviticus which were not only required of Israel, but of the 'sojourner who was living among them': meat offered to idols (Lev 17:8-9), the eating of blood (Lev 17:10-12), the eating of strangled animals, that is animals that were not properly butchered (Lev 17:15), and marital union within close degrees of consanguinity (Lev 18:6-18; 1 Cor 5:1-2). James suggested that Gentile Christians should abide by these four regulations from the heart of the Law of Moses to put their Jewish Christian brethren at ease, especially when it came time to sit down to the Lord's Supper and eat together as Christians.

IV. Confusing Passages when Read out of Historical Context

St. Paul on the declarations of the Council

RE Circumcision: Gal 1-3; 5:1-25; 6:1-18; Rom 2:1-29; 3-4; Eph 2:1-22; Phil 3:1-20; Col 2:1f; Titus 3:4-5

RE Food: 1 Cor 8:1-13; 10:1-33; Rom 14:1-4

St. Paul on 'works' but not 'works of the law': Rom 2; 1 Cor 6:9-11; Gal 5:19; Rom 13:8-10; Eph 4:10;

Titus 3:8-14; for more on this see the study titled "Faith Alone" here

<https://steliasmelkite.org/educational-resources/bible-study/>