

The Origin of Paul's Religion

The Early Years (Part 1)

By [John Gresham Machen](#)

Before examining the various hypotheses which have been advanced to account for the origin of Paulinism, the investigator must consider first the outline of Paul's life, at least so far as the formative years are concerned. Paulinism has been explained by the influence upon Paul of various features of his environment. It is important, therefore, to determine at what points Paul came into contact with his environment. What, in view of the outline of his life, were his probable opportunities for acquainting himself with the historical Jesus and with the primitive Jerusalem Church? Whence did he derive his Judaism? Where, if at all, could he naturally have been influenced by contemporary paganism? Such questions, it is hoped, may be answered by the two following chapters.

In these chapters, the outline of Paul's life will be considered not for its own sake, but merely for the light that it may shed upon the origin of his thought and experience. Many questions, therefore, may be ignored. For example, it would here be entirely aside from the point to discuss such intricate matters as the history of Paul's journeys to Corinth attested by the Corinthian Epistles. The present discussion is concerned only with those events in the life of Paul which determined the nature of his contact with the surrounding world, both Jewish and pagan, and particularly the nature of his contact with Jesus and the earliest disciples of Jesus. Paul was born at Tarsus, the chief city of Cilicia. This fact is attested only by the Book of Acts, and formerly it did not escape unchallenged. It was called in question, for example, in 1890 by Krenkel, in an elaborate argument.¹ But Krenkel's argument is now completely antiquated, not merely because of the rising credit of the Book of Acts, but also because the birth of Paul in a Greek city like Tarsus is in harmony with modern reconstructions. Krenkel argued, for example, that the apostle shows little acquaintance with Greek culture and therefore could not have spent his youth in a Greek university city. Such assertions appear very strange today. Recent philological investigation of the Pauline Epistles has proved that the author uses the Greek language in such masterly fashion that he must have become familiar with it very early in life; the language of the Epistles is certainly no Jewish-Greek jargon. With regard to the origin of the ideas, also, the tendency of recent criticism is directly contrary to Krenkel; Paulinism is now often explained being based either upon paganism or else upon a Hellenized Judaism. To such reconstructions it is a highly welcome piece of information when the Book of Acts makes Paul a native not of Jerusalem

¹ Krenkel, *Beiträge zur Aufhellung der Geschichte und der Briefe des Apostels Paulus*, 1890, pp. 1-17.

but of Tarsus. The author of Acts, it is said, is here preserving a bit of genuine tradition, which is the more trustworthy because it runs counter to the tendency, thought to be otherwise in evidence in Acts, which brings Paul into the closest possible relation to Palestine. Thus, whether for good or for bad reasons, the birth of Paul in Tarsus is now universally accepted and does not require defense.

A very interesting tradition preserved by Jerome does indeed make Paul a native of Gischala in Galilee; but no one to-day would be inclined to follow Krenkel in giving credence to Jerome rather than to Acts. The Gischala tradition does not look like a pure fiction, but it is evident that Jerome has at any rate exercised his peculiar talent for bringing things into confusion. Zahn² has suggested, with considerable plausibility, that the shorter reference to Gischala in the treatise "De viris illustribus"³ is a confused abridgment of the longer reference in the "Commentary on Philemon."⁴ The latter passage asserts not that Paul himself but only that the parents of Paul came from Gischala. That assertion may possibly be correct. It would explain the Aramaic and Palestinian tradition which undoubtedly was preserved in the boyhood home of Paul.

Tarsus was an important city. Its commercial importance, though of course inferior to that of places like Antioch or Corinth, was considerable; and it was also well known as a center of intellectual life. Although the dramatic possibilities of representing the future Christian missionary growing up unknown under the shadow of a Greek university may sometimes have led to an exaggeration of the academic fame of Tarsus, still it remains true that Tarsus was a real university city, and could boast of great names like that of Athenodorus, the Stoic philosopher, and others. The life of Tarsus has recently been made the subject of two elaborate monographs, by Ramsay⁵ and by Böhlig,⁶ who have collected a mass of information about the birthplace of Paul. The nature of the pagan religious atmosphere which surrounded the future apostle is of peculiar interest; but the amount of direct information which has come down to us should not be exaggerated.

The social position of Paul's family in Tarsus must not be regarded as very humble; for according to the Book of Acts not only Paul himself, but his father before him, possessed the Roman citizenship, which in the provinces was still in the first century a highly prized privilege from which the great masses of the people were excluded. The Roman citizenship of Paul is not attested by the Pauline Epistles, but the representation of Acts is at this point universally, or almost universally, accepted. Only one objection might be urged against it. If Paul was a Roman citizen, how could he have been subjected three times to the

² *Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, 3te Aufl., I, 1906, pp. 48-50 (English Translation, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed., 1909, I, pp. 68-70).

³ *De vir. Ill.* 5 (ed. Vall. li, 836).

⁴ *Comm. In Philem.* 23 (ed. Vall. vii, 762).

⁵ *The Cities of St. Paul*, 1908, pp. 85-244.

⁶ *Die Geisteskultur von Tarsos*, 1913.

Roman punishment of beating with rods (2 Cor. xi. 25), from which citizens were exempted by law? The difficulty is not insuperable. Paul may on some occasions have been unwilling to appeal to a privilege which separated him from his Jewish countrymen; or he may have wanted to avoid the delay which an appeal to his privilege, with the subsequent investigation and trial, might have caused. At any rate, the difficulty, whether easily removable or not, is quite inadequate to overthrow the abundant evidence for the fact of Paul's Roman citizenship. That fact is absolutely necessary to account for the entire representation which the Book of Acts gives of the journey of Paul as a prisoner to Rome, which representation, it will be remembered, is contained in the we-sections. The whole account of the relation between Paul and Roman authorities, which is contained in the Pauline Epistles, the Book of Acts, and trustworthy Christian tradition, is explicable only if Paul possessed the rights of citizenship.⁷

Birth in a Greek university city and Roman citizenship constitute the two facts which bring Paul into early connection with the larger Gentile world of his day. Other facts, equally well-attested, separate him just as clearly from the Gentile world and represent him as being from childhood a strict Jew. These facts might have been called in question, in view of the present tendency of criticism, if they had been attested only by the Book of Acts. But fortunately it is just these facts which are attested also by the epistles of Paul.

In 2 Cor. xi. 22, Paul is declared to be a "Hebrew," and in Phil. iii. 5 he appears as a "Hebrew of Hebrews." The word "Hebrew" in these passages cannot indicate merely Israelitish descent or general adherence to the Jews' religion. If it did so it would be a meaningless repetition of the other terms used in the same passages. Obviously it is used in some narrower sense. The key to its meaning is found in Acts vi. 1, where, within Judaism, the "Hellenists" are distinguished from the "Hebrews," the Hellenists being the Jews of the Dispersion who spoke Greek, and the Hebrews the Jews of Palestine who spoke Aramaic. In Phil. iii. 5, therefore, Paul declares that he was an Aramaic-speaking Jew and descended from Aramaic-speaking Jews; Aramaic was used in his boyhood home, and the Palestinian tradition was preserved. This testimony is not contrary to what was said above about Paul's use of the Greek language-not improbably Paul used both Aramaic and Greek in childhood-but it does contradict all those modern representations which make Paul fundamentally a Jew of the Dispersion. Though he was born in Tarsus, he was, in the essential character of his family tradition, a Jew of Palestine.

Even more important is the assertion, found in the same verse in Philippians, that Paul was "as touching the law a Pharisee." Conceivably, indeed, it might be argued that his Pharisaism was not derived from his boyhood home, but was acquired later. But surely it requires no excessively favorable estimate of Acts to give credence to the assertion in Acts xxiii. 6 that Paul was not only a Pharisee

⁷ Compare Mommsen, "Die Rechtsverhältnisse des Apostels Paulus," in *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*, ii, 1901, pp. 88-96.

but the "son of Pharisees"; and it is exceedingly unlikely that this phrase refers, as Lightfoot⁸ suggested, to teachers rather than to ancestors. For when Paul says in Gal. 1. 14 that he advanced in the Jews' religion beyond many of his contemporaries, being more exceedingly zealous for his paternal traditions, it is surely natural, whatever interpretation may be given to the word "paternal," to find a reference to the Pharisaic traditions cultivated in his boyhood home.

There is not the slightest evidence, therefore, for supposing that Paul spent his early years in an atmosphere of "liberal Judaism"—a Judaism really though unconsciously hospitable to pagan notions and predisposed to relax the strict requirements of the Law and break down the barrier that separated Israel from the Gentile world. Whether such a liberal Judaism even existed in Tarsus we do not know. At any rate, if it did exist, the household of Paul's father was not in sympathy with it. Surely the definite testimony of Paul himself is here worth more than all modern conjectures. And Paul himself declares that he was in language and in spirit a Jew of Palestine rather than of the Dispersion, and as touching the Law a Pharisee. According to the Book of Acts, Paul went at an early age to Jerusalem, received instruction there from Gamaliel, the famous rabbi, and finally, just before his conversion, persecuted the Jerusalem Church (Acts xxii. 3; vii. 58-viii. 1; ix. 1, etc.). In recent years, this entire representation has been questioned. It has been maintained by Mommsen,⁹ Bousset,¹⁰ Heitmüller,¹¹ and Loisy¹² that Paul never was in Jerusalem before his conversion. That he persecuted the Church is, of course, attested unequivocally by his own Epistles, but the persecution, it is said, really took place only in such cities as Damascus, and not at all in Palestine.

This elimination of the early residence of Paul in Jerusalem is no mere by-product of a generally skeptical attitude toward the Book of Acts, but is important for the entire reconstruction of early Christian history which Bousset and Heitmüller and Loisy propose; it is made to assist in explaining the origin of the Pauline Christology. Paul regarded Jesus Christ as a supernatural person, come to earth for the redemption of men; and toward this divine Christ he assumed a distinctly religious attitude. How could he have formed such a conception of a human being who had died but a few years before? If he had been separated from Jesus by several generations, so that the nimbus of distance and mystery would have had time to form about the figure of the Galilean prophet, then his lofty conception of Jesus might be explained. But as a matter of fact he was

⁸ On Phil. lii. 5.

⁹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 85f.

¹⁰ *Kyrios Christos*, 1913, p. 92. Bousset's doubt with regard to the early Jerusalem residence of Paul extended, explicitly at least, only to the persecution in Jerusalem, and it was a doubt merely, not a positive denial. In his supplementary work he has admitted that his doubt was unjustified (*Jesus der Herr*, 1916, p. 31).

¹¹ "Zum Problem Paulus und Jesus," in *Zeitschrift für die neutestament-liche Wissenschaft*, xiii, 1912, pp. 320-337.

¹² *L'épître aux Galates*, 1916, pp. 68-73; *Les mystères païens et le mystère chrétien*, 1919, pp. 317-320.

actually a contemporary of the Jesus whose simple human traits he obscured. How could the "smell of earth" have been so completely removed from the figure of the Galilean teacher that He could actually be regarded by one of His contemporaries as a divine Redeemer? The question could perhaps be more easily answered if Paul, before his lofty conception of Christ was fully formed, never came into any connection with those who had seen Jesus subject to the petty limitations of human life.

Thus the elimination of the early Jerusalem residence of Paul, by putting a geographical if not a temporal gulf between Jesus and Paul, is thought to make the formation of the Pauline Christology more comprehensible. Peter and the original disciples, it is thought, never could have separated Jesus so completely from the limitations of ordinary humanity; the simple memory of Galilean days would in their case have been an effective barrier against Christological speculation. But Paul was subject to no such limitation; having lived far away from Palestine, in the company, for the most part, of those who like himself had never seen Jesus, he was free to transpose to the Galilean teacher attributes which to those who had known the real Jesus would have seemed excessive or absurd.

Before examining the grounds upon which this elimination of Paul's early Jerusalem residence is based, it may first be observed that even such heroic measures do not really bring about the desired result; even this radical rewriting of the story of Paul's boyhood and youth will not serve to explain on naturalistic principles the origin of the Pauline Christology.

Even if before his conversion Paul got no nearer to Jerusalem than Damascus, it still remains true that after his conversion he conferred with Peter and lived in more or less extended intercourse with Palestinian disciples. The total lack of any evidence of a conflict between the Christology of Paul and the views of those who had walked and talked with Jesus of Nazareth remains, for any naturalistic reconstruction, a puzzling fact. Even without the early Jerusalem residence, Paul remains too near to Jesus both temporally and geographically to have formed a conception of Him entirely without reference to the historical person. Even with their radical treatment of the Book of Acts, therefore, Bousset and Heitmüller have not succeeded at all in explaining how the Pauline Christology ever came to be attached to the Galilean prophet.

But is the elimination of the early Jerusalem residence of Paul historically justifiable? Mere congruity with a plausible theory of development will not serve to justify it. For the Jerusalem residence is strongly attested by the Book of Acts. The testimony of Acts can no longer be ruled out except for very weighty reasons; the history of recent criticism has on the whole exhibited the rise of a more and more favorable estimate of the book. And in the case of the early Jerusalem residence of Paul the testimony is so insistent and so closely connected with lifelike details that the discrediting of it involves an exceedingly

radical skepticism. The presence of Paul at the stoning of Stephen is narrated in the Book of Acts in a concrete way which bears every mark of trustworthiness; the connection of Paul with Gamaliel is what might have been expected in view of the self-testimony of the apostle; the account of Paul's vision in the Temple (Acts xxii. 17-21) is based, in a manner which is psychologically very natural, upon the fact of Paul's persecuting activity in Jerusalem; the presence of Paul's sister's son in Jerusalem, attested in a part of the narrative of which the essential historicity must be universally admitted (Acts xxiii. 16-22), suggests that family connections may have facilitated Paul's residence in the city. Finally, the geographical details of the three narratives of the conversion, which place the event on a journey of Paul from Jerusalem to Damascus, certainly look as though they were founded upon genuine tradition. One of the details—the place of the conversion itself—is confirmed in a purely incidental way by the Epistle to the Galatians, and the reader has the impression that if Paul had happened to introduce other details in the Epistles the rest of the narrative in Acts would have been similarly confirmed. Except for Paul's incidental reference to Damascus in Gal. i. 17, the conversion might have been put by Heitmüller and others in a place even more conveniently remote than Damascus from the scene of Jesus' earthly labors. But the incidental confirmation of Acts at this point raises a distinct presumption in favor of the account as a whole. The main trend of modern criticism has been favorable on the whole to the tradition embodied in the accounts of the conversion; it is a very extreme form of skepticism which rejects the whole framework of the tradition by eliminating the journey from Jerusalem to Damascus.

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