

The Origin of Paul's Religion

The Early Years (Part 2)

By [John Gresham Machen](#)

Enough has been said to show that the early Jerusalem residence of Paul stood absolutely firm in the tradition used by the author of Acts; the author has taken it as a matter of course and woven it in with his narrative at many points. Such a tradition certainly cannot be lightly rejected; the burden of proof clearly rests upon those who would deny its trustworthiness.

The only definite proof which is forthcoming is found in Gal. i. 22, where Paul says that after his departure for Syria and Cilicia, three years after his conversion, he was "unknown by face to the churches of Judea which are in Christ." If he had engaged in active persecution of those churches, it is argued, how could he have been personally unknown to them?

By this argument a tremendous weight is hung upon one verse. And, rightly interpreted, the verse will not bear the weight at all. In Gal. i. 22, Paul is not speaking so much of what took place before the departure for Syria and Cilicia, as of the condition which prevailed at the time of that departure and during the immediately ensuing period; he is simply drawing attention to the significance for his argument of the departure from Jerusalem. Certainly he would not have been able to speak as he does if before he left Jerusalem he had had extended intercourse with the Judæan churches, but when he says that the knowledge of the Judæan churches about him in the period just succeeding his departure from Jerusalem was a hearsay knowledge merely, it would have been pedantic for him to think about the question whether some of the members of those churches had or had not seen him years before as a persecutor.

Furthermore, it is by no means clear that the word "Judaa" in Gal. i. 22 includes Jerusalem at all. In Mark ii. 7, 8, for example, "Jerusalem" is clearly not included in "Judaa," but is distinguished from it; "Judaa" means the country outside of the capital. It may well be so also in Gal. i. 22; and if so, then the verse does not exclude a personal acquaintance of Paul with the Jerusalem Church. But even "Juda" is not used so as to exclude the capital, still Paul's words would be natural enough. That the Jerusalem Church formed an exception to the general assertion was suggested by the account of the visit in Jerusalem immediately preceding and was probably well known to his Galatian readers. All that Paul means is that he went away to Syria and Cilicia without becoming acquainted generally with the churches of Juda. It is indeed often said that since the whole

point of Paul's argument in Galatians was to show his lack of contact with the pillars of the Jerusalem Church, his acquaintance or lack of acquaintance with the churches of Judæa outside of Jerusalem was unworthy of mention, so that he must at least be including Jerusalem when he speaks of Judæa. But this argument is not decisive. If, as is altogether probable, the apostles except Peter were out of the city at the time of Paul's visit, and were engaging in missionary work in Judæan churches, then acquaintance with the Judæan churches would have meant intercourse with the apostles, so that it was very much to the point for Paul to deny that he had had such acquaintance. Of course, this whole argument against the early Jerusalem residence of Paul, based on Gal. i. 22, involves a rejection of the account which the Book of Acts gives of the visit of Paul to Jerusalem three years after his conversion. If Gal. i. 22 means that Paul was unknown by sight to the Jerusalem Church, then he could not have gone in and out among the disciples at Jerusalem as Acts ix. 28 represents but must have been in strict hiding when he was in the city. Such is the account of the matter which is widely prevalent in recent years. Not even so much correction of Acts is at all required by a correct understanding of Gal. i. 22. But it is a still more unjustifiable use of that verse when it is made to exclude even the persecuting activity of Paul in Jerusalem.

If, however, the words of Galatians are really to be taken in the strictest and most literal sense, what is to be done with Gal. i. 23, where (immediately after the words which have just been discussed) Paul says that the churches of Judæa were receiving the report, "He that persecuted us formerly is now preaching as a gospel the faith which formerly he laid waste"? What is meant by the pronoun "us" in this verse? Conceivably it might be taken in a broad sense, as referring to all disciples wherever found; conceivably, therefore, the persecution referred to by the Judæan disciples might be persecution of their brethren in the faith in Tarsus or Damascus. But that is not the kind of interpretation which has just been applied to the preceding verse, and upon which such a vast structure has been reared. It may well be urged against Heitmüller and those like him that if Paul's words are to be taken so strictly in one verse they should be taken in the same way in the other; if the "Juda" and "unknown by face" of verse 22 are to be taken so strictly, then the "us" of verse 23 should also be taken strictly, and in that case Paul is made to contradict himself, which of course is absurd. Verse 23 certainly does not fully confirm the representation of Acts about the persecuting activity of Paul in Judæa, but at any rate it tends to confirm that representation at least as strongly as verse 22 tends to discredit it.¹

Thus the early Jerusalem residence of Paul is strongly attested by the Book of Acts, and is thoroughly in harmony with everything that Paul says about his

¹ Compare Wellhausen, *Kritische Analyse der Apostelgeschichte*, 1914, p. 16.

Pharisaic past. It is not surprising that Bousset has now receded from his original position and admits that Paul was in Jerusalem before his conversion and engaged in persecution of the Jerusalem Church.

That admission does not necessarily carry with it an acceptance of all that the Book of Acts says about the Jerusalem period in Paul's life, particularly all that it says about his having been a disciple of Gamaliel. But the decisive point has been gained. If the entire account of the early Jerusalem residence of Paul is not ruled out by the testimony of his own Epistles, then, there is at least no decisive objection against the testimony of Acts with regard to the details. Certainly the common opinion to the effect that Paul went to Jerusalem to receive rabbinical training is admirably in accord with everything that he says in his Epistles about his zeal for the Law. It is also in accord with his habits of thought and expression, which were transformed and glorified, rather than destroyed, by his Christian experience. The decision about every detail of course depends ultimately upon the particular conclusion which the investigator may have reached with regard to the Book of Acts. If that book was written by a companion of Paul—an opinion which is gaining ground even in circles which were formerly hostile then there is every reason to suppose that Paul was brought up in Jerusalem at the feet of Gamaliel (Acts xxii. 3). Some important questions indeed still remain unanswered, even with full acceptance of the Lucan testimony. It can never be determined, for example, at exactly what age Paul went to Jerusalem. The words, "brought up in this city," in Acts xxii. 3 might seem to suggest that Paul went to Jerusalem in early childhood, in which case his birthplace would be of comparatively little importance in his preparation for his lifework, and all the elaborate investigations of Tarsus, so far as they are intended to shed light upon the environment of the apostle in his formative years, would become valueless. But the Greek word "brought up" or "nourished" might be used figuratively in a somewhat flexible way; it remains, therefore, perfectly possible that Paul's Jerusalem training began, not in childhood, but in early youth. At any rate, an early residence in Jerusalem is not excluded by the masterly way in which the apostle uses the Greek language. It must always be remembered that Palestine in the first century was a bilingual country;² the presence of hosts of Greek-speaking Jews even in Jerusalem is amply attested, for example, by the early chapters of Acts. Moreover, even after Paul's Jerusalem studies had begun, his connection with Tarsus need not have been broken off. The distance between the two cities was considerable (some four or five hundred miles), but travel in those days was safe and easy. A period of training in Jerusalem may have been followed by a long residence at Tarsus.

At this point, an interesting question arises, which, how-ever, can never be answered with any certainty. Did Paul ever see Jesus before the crucifixion? In the light of what has just been established about the outline of Paul's life, an affirmative answer might seem to be natural. Paul was in Jerusalem both before

² See Zahn, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, 3te Aufl., i, 1906, pp. 24-32, 39-47 (English Translation, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd Ed., 1917, i, pp. 34-46, 57-66).

and after the public ministry of Jesus—before it when he was being "brought up" in Jerusalem, and after it when he was engaged in persecution of the Jerusalem Church. Where was he during the interval? Where was he on those occasions when Jesus visited Jerusalem—especially at the time of that last Passover? If he was in Jerusalem, it seems probable that he would have seen the great prophet, whose coming caused such a stir among the people. And that he was in the city at Passover time would seem natural in view of his devotion to the Law. But the matter is by no means certain. He may have returned to Tarsus, in the manner which has just been suggested.

The question could only be decided on the basis of actual testimony either in Acts or in the Epistles. One verse has often been thought to provide such testimony. In 2 Cor. v. 16, Paul says, "Even if we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now we know him so no longer." Knowledge of Christ after the flesh can only mean, it is said, knowledge of Him by the ordinary use of the senses, in the manner in which one man in ordinary human intercourse knows another. That kind of knowledge, Paul says, has ceased to have significance for the Christian in his relation to other men; it has also ceased to have significance for him in his relation to Christ. But it is that kind of knowledge which Paul seems to predicate of him-self, as having existed in a previous period of his life.

He does not use the unreal form of condition; he does not say, "Even if we had known Christ after the flesh (though as a matter of fact we never knew Him so at all), yet now we should know Him so no longer." Apparently, then, when he says "if" he means "although"; he means to say, have known Christ after the flesh, yet now we know Him so no longer." The knowledge of Christ after the flesh is thus put as an actual fact in Paul's experience, and that can only mean that he knew Him in the way in which His contemporaries knew Him in Galilee and in Jerusalem, a way which in itself, Paul says, was altogether without spiritual significance.

One objection to this interpretation of the passage is that it proves too much. If it means anything, it means that Paul has extended personal acquaintance with Jesus before the crucifixion; for if Paul merely saw Him for a few moments—for example, when the crowds were surging about Him at the time of the last Passover—he could hardly be said to have "known" Him. But, for obvious reasons, any extended intercourse between Paul and Jesus in Palestine is exceedingly improbable. It is natural, therefore, to look for some other interpretation.

Other interpretations undoubtedly are possible. Some of the interpretations that have been proposed must indeed be eliminated. For example, Paul cannot possibly be contrasting a former immature stage of his Christian experience with the present mature stage; he cannot possibly mean, "Even if in the first period after my conversion I had a low view of Christ, which made of Him merely the son of David and the Jewish Messiah, yet now I have come to a higher

conception of His divine nature." For the whole point of the passage is found in the sharp break which comes in a man's experience when he appropriates the death and resurrection of Christ. Any consciousness of a subsequent revolution in the thinking of the Christian is not only unsupported anywhere in the Pauline Epistles but is absolutely excluded by the present passage. Another interpretation also must be eliminated. Paul cannot possibly be contrasting his pre-Christian notions about the Messiah with the higher knowledge which came to him with his conversion; he cannot possibly mean, "Even if before I knew the fulfillment of the Messianic promise I cherished carnal notions of what the Messiah was to be, even if I thought of Him merely as an earthly ruler who was to conquer the enemies of Israel, yet now I have come to have a loftier, more spiritual conception of Him." For the word "Christ," especially without the article, can hardly here be anything other than a proper name, and must refer not to the conception of Messiahship but to the concrete person of Jesus.

But another interpretation remains. The key to it is found in the flexible use of the first-person plural in the Pauline Epistles. Undoubtedly, the "we" of the whole passage in which 2 Cor. v. 16 is contained refers primarily to Paul himself. But, especially in 2 Cor. v. 16, it may include also all true ambassadors for Christ whose principles are the same as Paul's. Among such true ambassadors there were no doubt to be found some who had known Christ by way of ordinary intercourse in Palestine. "But," says Paul, "even if some of us have known Christ in that way, we know him so no longer." This interpretation is linguistically more satisfactory, perhaps, than that which explains the sentence as simply a more vivid way of presenting a condition contrary to fact.

"Granted," Paul would say according to this interpretation, "even that we have known Christ according to the flesh (which as a matter of fact we have not), yet now we know him so no longer." But our interpretation really amounts to almost the same thing so far as Paul is concerned. At any rate, the passage is not so clear as to justify any certain conclusions about Paul's life in Palestine; it does not clearly imply any acquaintance of Paul with Jesus before the passion.

If such acquaintance is to be established, therefore, it must be established on the basis of other evidence. J. Weiss³ seeks to establish it by the very fact of Paul's conversion. Paul, Weiss believes, saw a vision of the risen Christ. How did he know that the figure which appeared to him in the vision was Jesus? Why did he not think, for example, merely that it was the Messiah, who according to one strain of Jewish Messianic expectation was already existent in heaven? Apparently, he recognized the person who appeared to him as Jesus of Nazareth. But how could he have recognized Him as Jesus unless he had seen Jesus before?

³ *Paulus und Jesus*, 1909, pp. 22, 23. Compare Ramsay, *The Teaching of Paul in Terms of the Present Day*, 1914, pp. 21-30.

This argument depends, of course, altogether upon the naturalistic conception of the conversion of Paul, which regards the experience as an hallucination. In the account of the conversion given in the Book of Acts, on the contrary, it is distinctly said that far from recognizing the person who appeared to him, Paul was obliged to ask the question, "Who recognizing question, art thou, Lord?" and then received the answer, "I am Jesus." Such a conversation between Paul and the One who appeared to him is perfectly possible if there was a real appearance of the risen Christ, but it exceeds the ordinary limits of hallucinations. Weiss has therefore merely pointed out an additional psychological difficulty in explaining the experience of Paul as a hallucination, a difficulty which, on naturalistic principles, may have to be removed by the assumption that Paul had seen Jesus before the passion. But if Jesus really appeared to Paul in such a way as to be able to answer his questions, then it is not necessary to suppose that Paul recognized Him. The failure of Paul to recognize Jesus (according to the narrative in Acts) does not indeed positively exclude such previous acquaintance; the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, for example, also failed to recognize the Lord, though they had been acquainted with Him before. But, at any rate, if the supernaturalistic view of Paul's conversion be accepted, the experience sheds no light whatever upon any previous personal acquaintance with Jesus.

Thus there is no clear evidence for supposing that Paul saw Jesus before the passion. At the same time there is no evidence to the contrary, except the evidence that is to be found in the silence of the Epistles.

The argument from silence, precarious as it is, must here be allowed a certain amount of weight. If Paul had seen Jesus before the crucifixion, would not so important a fact have been mentioned somewhere in the Epistles? The matter is by no means absolutely clear; a brief glimpse of Jesus in the days of His flesh would perhaps not have seemed so important to Paul, in view of the richer knowledge which came afterwards, as it would seem to us: The silence of the Epistles does, however, render improbable any extended contact between Paul and Jesus, particularly any active opposition of the youthful Paul toward Jesus. Paul was deeply penitent for having persecuted the Church; if he had committed the more terrible sin of having helped bring the Lord Himself to the shameful cross, the fact would naturally have appeared in his expressions of penitence. Even if Paul did see Jesus in Palestine, then, it is highly improbable that he was one of those who cried out to Pilate, "Crucify him, crucify him!"

One thing, however, is certain. If Paul never saw Jesus in Palestine, he certainly heard about Him. The ministry of Jesus caused considerable stir both in Galilee and in Jerusalem. These things were not done in a corner. The appearance of Jesus at the last Passover aroused the passions of the multitude and evidently caused the deepest concern to the authorities. Even one who was indifferent to the whole matter could hardly have helped learning something of the content of Jesus' teaching, and the main outline of the story of His death. But Paul, at least at a time only a very few years after the crucifixion, was not indifferent; for he

was an active persecutor. If he was in Palestine at all during the previous period, his interest probably began then. The outlines of Jesus' life and death were known to friend and foe alike and certainly were not unknown to Paul before his conversion, at the time when he was persecuting the Church. It is only a woeful lack of historical imagination which can attribute to Paul, even before his conversion, a total ignorance of the earthly life of Jesus.

The opposite error, however, is even more serious.

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