

Lee Mount Baptist Church Bible Study

Extracts from 'The man and his background' (Hudson, 1966)

Paul's own statement about himself shows what he considered most important in his background, and is a useful starting-point. In Philippians 3:5 he claims to be 'of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee', whilst in Acts 21:39 he says he is 'a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no mean city', and in the next chapter he proudly asserts that he is a free-born Roman citizen. First and foremost he was a Jew, belonging to an orthodox family which was proud of its Jewish descent, and this fact colours both the fundamental ideas and the methods of thought of Paul himself. Secondly he was a Jew of the Dispersion,¹ brought up in an alien environment, against which he could not help but react, and which must have influenced his Jewish ideas. Thirdly he was a Roman citizen, which made him unusual even amongst Jews of the Dispersion.

Neither the date of Paul's birth, nor the date of his death is positively known, though the latter was almost certainly A.D. 64.

The fact that he claims Roman citizenship by birth shows that his father must have been a Roman citizen, and makes it likely that the family had been settled in Tarsus for some time. . . . the most likely way in which Paul's father acquired his citizenship is by public service in the city of Tarsus.

Paul tells us that his father was a Pharisee, one who held strictly to the Jewish Law, and did not give way to his Gentile environment, and for such a man to win the confidence of his fellow-citizens so that his position in the city of Tarsus, a city proud of its Greek culture, led to his acquiring Roman citizenship, proves that he was a worthy father of a great son.

Tarsus was one of the great cities of the Roman Empire, with a University which was a centre of Greek learning and culture, a stadium famous for its games, and a very flourishing trade in timber, which was floated down from the interior on the river Cydnus, and in goat-hair, which was used for weaving the cloth for tents and which was called 'cilicium' because this was its chief place of origin. It had a population of anything up to half a million, and since it was situated near to the 'Cilician Gates', the pass in the mountains through which ran the main road from Rome and Greece to Syria and the East, it was a meeting-place of many races, and a place where Hellenism and Orientalism met. Paul's father was probably a wealthy merchant, dealing in goat-hair or the cloth woven from it, and Paul himself had learnt his father's craft,

¹'The Dispersion' or 'The Diaspora' (the Greek form of the word) is the name given to the Jews who had been scattered through the nations as a result of the various conquests of Palestine, and as a result of their business Projects. Most Gentile cities had some Jewish community belonging to the Diaspora.

so that he could earn his living by his trade and need not be dependent on anyone for support (Acts 18:3, 20:34, 1 Cor. 9:12). He was intended to become a Jewish Rabbi, but no Rabbi expected to live on his teaching, and every Jewish boy had to learn some trade, so that his livelihood was independent of his study of the Law.

The only picture we have of Paul is in the apocryphal '*Acts of Paul and Thecla*', where he is described as 'small, bald, bow-legged, strong, with meeting eyebrows and long nose' — a description which is too unflattering to be fictitious, for any author who wished to make an attractive hero of fiction would paint him in heroic mould.

... in spite of all we know about Paul we do not know the very first thing — his name! For since he was a Roman citizen his 'proper' name must have had three elements, praenomen, nomen and cognomen, like Caius Julius Caesar, or Marcus Tullius Cicero, but the name by which we know him, 'Paulus', is only the cognomen. When a man from another race became a Roman citizen he put himself under the patronage of some noble family whose nomen and cognomen he took, so that Paul's cognomen is quite well known in Roman history, ...

His Hebrew name, Saul, had been borne by the first King of Israel, also of the tribe of Benjamin, perhaps an ancestor, ...

Paul's family, and he himself, must have been bilingual. It would have been impossible to trade, let alone to achieve any kind of civic position in Tarsus, without being fluent in the language of the Gentile majority. It is very likely that a man who had been given Roman citizenship would also be expected to cope with some Latin, but it is certain that his Greek would have to be fluent. Paul's preparation for becoming a Rabbi would mean study not only of the colloquial Aramaic, but also of the classical Hebrew, but his apprenticeship to the trade of tent-making would certainly involve fluency in Greek. Perhaps the best indication of which was the most familiar language is the fact that the quotations Paul makes from the Old Testament are very frequently from the Septuagint Greek version, the Scriptures of the Diaspora, though it is also clear that he was familiar with the original Hebrew. From the time when he turned to the Gentiles, at least, his normal language must have been Greek and the fact that he was involved in the controversy with Stephen suggests that at that time also his normal language was Greek.

Whatever may have been the name he commonly used in Tarsus, when he went up to Jerusalem to become a pupil of Gamaliel, under whom he was to study the Law, he must have used his Hebrew name. Gamaliel was called by his contemporaries 'The Beauty of the Law' and his brief appearance in Acts 5 gives an indication of his personality.

There, then, is the man, in the middle thirties of the first century A.D., proud of his descent from the tribe which had given Israel its first king, proud of his religious inheritance, proud of his own achievements as a student of the Law, proud also of the record of his family, and the Roman citizenship to which he had been born, proud of his upbringing in a great and prosperous city, and conscious that his position as the son of a wealthy family, and a zealous and brilliant student of the Law bore all the marks of the high favour of God. Unless we get that picture clear and vivid in our minds we cannot begin to understand the great reversal which turned the whole thing upside down and brought Paul to say as he looked back, 'I reckon all these things as dung that I might gain Christ.'

References

Hudson, D. F. (1966). *The life and letters of St Paul*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.