
Paul's Childhood at Tarsus

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Paul's Infancy

There is therefore little doubt that, though the native of a city filled with a Greek population and incorporated with the Roman Empire, yet Saul was born and spent his earliest days in the shelter of a home which was Hebrew, not in name only but in spirit. The Roman power did not press upon his infancy; the Greek ideas did not haunt his childhood; but he grew up an Israelitish boy, nurtured in those histories of the chosen people which he was destined so often to repeat in the synagogues, with the new and wonderful commentary supplied by the life and resurrection of a crucified Messiah. "From a child he knew the Scriptures," which ultimately made him "wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus," as he says of Timothy (2 Tim. 3:15). And the groups around his childhood were such as that which he beautifully describes in another part of the same letter to that disciple, where he speaks of "his grandmother Lois, and his mother Eunice." (1:5)

We should be glad to know something of the mother of St. Paul. But though he alludes to his father, he does not mention her. He speaks of himself as set apart by God "from his mother's womb," that the Son of God should in due time be revealed in him, and him preached to the heathen. But this is all. We find notices of his sister and his sister's son (Acts 23:16), and of some more distant relatives (Rom. 16:7, 11, 21); but we know nothing of her who was nearer to him than all of them. He tells us of his instructor Gamaliel; but of her, who, if she lived, was his earliest and best teacher, he tells us nothing. Did she die like Rachel, the mother of Benjamin, the great ancestor of his tribe; leaving his father to mourn and set a monument on her grave, like Jacob, by the way of Bethlehem (Gen. 35:16-20; 48:7)? Or did she live to grieve over her son's apostasy from the faith of the Pharisees, and die herself unreconciled to the obedience of Christ? Or did she believe and obey the Savior on her own? These are questions which we cannot answer. If we wish to realize the earliest infancy of the apostle, we must be content with a simple picture of a Jewish mother and her

child. Such a picture is presented to us in the short history of Elizabeth and John the Baptist, and what is wanting in one of the inspired books of St. Luke may be supplied, in some degree, by the other.

The same feelings which welcomed the birth and celebrated the naming of a son in the "hill country" of Judea (Luke 1:39), prevailed also among the Jews of the dispersion. As the "neighbors and cousins" of Elizabeth "heard how the Lord had showed great mercy upon her, and rejoiced with her," so it would be in the household at Tarsus when Saul was born. In a nation to which the birth of a Messiah was promised, and at a period when the aspirations after the fulfillment of the promise were continually becoming more conscious and more urgent, the birth of a son was the fulfillment of a mother's highest happiness; and to the father also (if we may thus invert the words of Jeremiah) "blessed was the man who brought tidings, saying, A man child is born unto thee, making him glad." (Jer. 20:15)

On the eighth day the child was circumcised and named. In the case of John the Baptist, "they sought to call him Zacharias, after the name of his father. But his mother answered and said, Not so; but he shall be called John." And when the appeal was made to his father, he signified his assent in obedience to the vision. It was not unusual to call a Jewish child after the name of his father; but it was a common practice, in all ages of Jewish History, even without a prophetic intimation, to adopt a name expressive of religious feelings. When the infant at Tarsus received the name of Saul, it might be "after the name of his father;" and it was a name of traditional celebrity in the tribe of Benjamin, for it was that of the first king anointed by Samuel. Or, when his father said "his name is Saul," it may have been intended to denote (in conformity with the Hebrew derivation of the word) that he was a son who had long been desired, the first born of his parents, the child of prayer, who was thenceforth, like Samuel, to be consecrated to God. "For this child I prayed," said the wife of Elkanah, "and the Lord hath given me my petition which I asked of Him; therefore also I have lent him to the Lord; as long as he lives he shall be lent to the Lord." (1 Sam. 1:27,28)

Admitted into covenant with God by circumcision, the Jewish child had thenceforward a full claim to all the privileges of the chosen people. His was the benediction of the 128th Psalm, "The Lord shall bless thee out of Zion; thou shalt see the good of Jerusalem all the days of thy life," From that time, whoever it might be who had watched over Saul's infancy, whether, like king Lemuel,¹ he learned "the prophecy that his mother taught him," or whether he was under the care of others, like those who were with the sons of king David and king Ahab (1 Chron. 27:32; 2 Kings 10:1,5), we are at no loss to learn what the first ideas were with which his early thought was made familiar. The rules respecting the diligent education of children, which were laid down by Moses in the 6th and 11th chapters of Deuteronomy, were doubtless carefully observed; and he was trained in that peculiarly historical instruction, spoken of in the 78th Psalm, which implies the continuance of a chosen people, with glorious recollections of the past, and great anticipations for the future; "The Lord made a covenant with Jacob, and gave Israel a law, which He commanded our forefathers to teach their children; that their posterity might know it, and the children which were yet unborn, to the intent that when they came up, they might show their children the same; that they might put their trust in God, and not to forget the works of the Lord, but to keep his commandments (vv. 5-7).

The histories of Abraham and Isaac, of Jacob and Samuel, Elijah, Daniel, and the Maccabees, were the stories of his childhood. The destruction of Pharaoh in the Red Sea, the thunders of Mount Sinai, the dreary journeys in the wilderness, the land that flowed with milk and honey, this was the earliest imagery presented to his opening mind. The triumphant hymns of Zion, the lamentations by the waters of Babylon, the prophetic praises of the Messiah, were the songs around his cradle.

The Tribe of Benjamin

Above all, he would be familiar with the destinies of his own illustrious tribe.² The life of the timid

¹ Prov. 31:1; cf. 2 Tim. 3:15 with 1 Tim. 1:5.

² It may be thought that here too much prominence has been given to the attachment of a Jew in the Apostolic Age to his own particular tribe. It is difficult to ascertain how far the tribe-feeling of early times lingered on in combination with the

Patriarch, the father of the Twelve; the sad death of Rachel near the city where the Messiah was to be born; the loneliness of Jacob, who sought to comfort himself in Benoni "the son of her sorrow," by calling him Benjamin³ "the son of his right hand;" and then the youthful days of this youngest of the twelve brethren, the famine, and the journeys into Egypt, the severity of Joseph, and the wonderful story of the silver cup in the mouth of the sack; these are the narratives to which he listened with intense and eager interest. How little was it imagined that, as Benjamin was the youngest and most honored of the Patriarchs, so this listening child of Benjamin should be associated with the twelve servants of the Messiah of God, the last and most illustrious of the apostles!

But many years of ignorance were yet to pass away before the mysterious Providence, which brought Benjamin to Joseph in Egypt, should bring his descendant to the knowledge and love of Jesus, the Son of Mary. Some of the early Christian writers see in the dying benediction of Jacob, when he said that "Benjamin should ravin as a wolf, in the morning devour the prey, and at night divide the spoil," a prophetic intimation of him who, in the morning of his life, should tear the sheep of God, and in its evening feed them, as the teacher of the nations. When St. Paul was a child and learned the words of this saying, no Christian thoughts were associated with it, or with that other more peaceful prophecy of Moses, when he said of Benjamin, "The beloved of the Lord shall dwell in safety by Him; and the Lord shall cover him all the day long, and he shall dwell between His shoulders." (Deut. 33:12)

But he was familiar with the prophetic words and could follow in the imagination the fortunes of the sons of Benjamin, and knew how they went through the wilderness with Rachel's other children, the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh, forming with them the third of the four companies

national feeling which grew up after the Captivity. But when we consider the care with which the genealogies were kept, and when we find the tribe of Barnabas specified (Acts 4:36), and also of Anna the prophetess (Luke 2:36), and when we find St. Paul alluding in a pointed manner to his tribe (Rom. 11:1; Phil. 3:5; and compare Acts 13:21 and 26:7), it does not seem unnatural to believe that pious families of so famous a stock as that of Benjamin should retain the hereditary enthusiasm of their sacred clanship. See, moreover, Matt. 19:28; Rev. 5:5; 7:4-8.

on the march, and reposing with them at night on the west of the encampment. (Num. 2:18-24; 10:22-24) He heard how their lands were assigned to them in the promised country along the borders of Judah (Josh. 18:11); and how Saul, whose name he bore, was chosen from the tribe which was the smallest (1 Sam. 9:21), when "little Benjamin" (Psalm 68:27) became the "ruler" of Israel. He knew that when the ten tribes revolted, Benjamin was faithful (2 Chron. 11; see 1 Kings 12); and he learned to follow its honorable history even into the dismal years of the Babylonian Captivity, when Mordecai, "a Benjamite who had been carried away" (Esther 2:5,6), saved the nation; and when, instead of destruction, "the Jews," through him, "had light, and gladness, and joy, and honor;" and in every province, and in every city, wherever the king's commandment and his decree came, the Jews had a joy and gladness, a feast and a good day. And many of the people of the land become Jews, for the fear of the Jews fell upon them." (Esther 8:16,17)

Such were the influences which cradled the infancy of St. Paul; and such was the early teaching under which his mind gradually rose to the realization of his position as a Hebrew child in a city of Gentiles. Of the exact period of his birth we possess no authentic information.⁴ From a passage in a sermon attributed to St. Chrysostom, it has been inferred (on the supposition that he died AD 66, at the age of 68) that he was born in the year 2 BC of our era. The date is not improbable; but the genuineness of the sermon is suspected; and if it was the undoubted work of the eloquent Father, we have no reason to believe that he possessed any certain means of ascertaining the fact. Nor need we be anxious to possess the information. We have a better chronology than that which reckons by years and months. We know that St. Paul was a young man at the time of St. Stephen's martyrdom (Acts 7:58), and therefore we know what were the features of the period, and what the circumstances of the world, at the beginning of his eventful life.

He must have been born in the later years of Herod, or the earlier years of his son Archelaus. It was the strongest and most flourishing time of the reign of Augustus. The world was at peace; the

⁴ As regards the chronology of St. Paul's life, it is enough to refer to Chapter 4 and the chronology in the Appendix to this work.

pirates of the Levant were dispersed; and Cilicia was lying at rest, or in stupor, with other provinces, under the wide shadow of the Roman power. Many governors had ruled there since the days of Cicero. Athenodorus, the emperor's tutor, had been one of them. It was about the time when Horace and Maecenas died, with others whose names will never be forgotten; and it was about the time when Caligula was born, with others who were destined to make the world miserable. This is the epoch fixed in the manner in which the imagination most easily apprehends it. During this pause in the world's history St. Paul was born.

Social Position of St. Paul's Family

It was a pause, too, in the history of the sufferings of the Jews. That lenient treatment which had been begun by Julius Caesar was continued by Augustus;⁵ and the days of severity were not yet come, when Tiberius and Claudius drove them into banishment, and Caligula oppressed them with every mark of contumely and scorn. We have good reason to believe that at the period of the apostle's birth the Jews were unmolested at Tarsus, where his father lived and enjoyed the rights of a Roman citizen. It is a mistake to suppose that this citizenship was a privilege which belonged to the members of the family, as being natives of this city. Tarsus was not a *municipium*, nor was it a *colonia*, like Philippi in Macedonia, or Antioch in Pisidia; but it was a "free city,"⁶ like the Syrian Antioch and its neighbor city Seleucia on the sea. Such a city had the privilege of being governed by its own magistrates, and was exempted from the occupation of a Roman garrison, but its citizens did not necessarily possess the *civitas* of Rome.

Tarsus had received great benefits from both Julius Caesar and Augustus, but the father of St. Paul was not on that account a Roman citizen. This privilege had been granted to him, or had descended to him, as an individual right; he might have purchased it for a "large sum of money" (Acts 22:28); but it is more probable that it came to

⁵ Caesar, like Alexander, treated the Jews with much consideration. Suetonius speaks in strong terms of their grief at his death. Augustus permitted he largess, when it fell on a Sabbath, to be put off until the next day.

⁶ It appears that Antony gave Tarsus the privilege of an *urbs libera*, though it had previously taken the side of Augustus and been named Juliopolis.

him as a reward for services rendered, during the civil wars, by some influential Roman.⁷ We should not be in serious error if we were to say, in language suggested by the narrative of St. Stephen's martyrdom (Acts 6:9), that St. Paul's father was a Cilician *Libertinus*.⁸ That Jews were not unfrequently Roman citizens we learn from Josephus, who mentions in the *Wars of the Jews* (II:14.9) some even of the equestrian order who were illegally scourged and crucified by Florus at Jerusalem; and (what is more to our present point) enumerates certain of his countrymen who possessed the Roman franchise at Ephesus, in that important series of decrees relating to the Jews, which were issued in the time of Julius Caesar, and are preserved in the 14th book of the *Antiquities* [Joseph].

The family of St. Paul were in the same position at tarsus as those who were Jews of Asia Minor and yet citizens of Rome at Ephesus; and thus it came to pass that, while many of his contemporaries were willing to expend a "large sum" in the purchase of "this freedom," the Apostle himself was "free-born."

The question of the double name of "Saul" and "Paul" will require our attention hereafter, when we come in the course of our narrative to that interview with Sergius Paulus in Cyprus, coincidentally with which the appellation in the Acts of the Apostles is suddenly changed. Many opinions have been held on this subject, both the ancient and modern theologians.⁹ At present it will be enough to say that, though we cannot overlook the coincidence, or believe it accidental,

⁷ Great numbers of Jews were made slaves in the Civil Wars and then manumitted. A slave manumitted with due formalities became a Roman citizen. Thus it is natural to suppose that the apostle, with other Cilician Jews, may have been, like Horace, *libertino patre natus*."

⁸ This suggestion is due to Wieseler, who translates the verse which described Stephen's great opponents, so as to mean "Libertines" from "Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia, and Asia." We think that another view is more natural, but at least we should observe that we find Saul, a Roman citizen, actively operating in persecution with those who are called *Libertini*.

⁹ Origen says that he had both names from the first, that he used one among the Jews and the other afterwards; Augustine, that he took the name when he began to preach; Chrysostom, that he received a new title, like Peter, at his ordination in Antioch; Bede, that he did not receive it till the Proconsul was converted; and Jerome, that it was meant to commemorate that victory.

yet it is most probably that both names were borne by him in his childhood, that "Saul" was the name of his Hebrew home, and "Paul" that by which he was known among the Gentiles. It will be observed that "Paulus" the name by which he is always mentioned after his departure from Cyprus, and by which he always designates himself in his Epistles, is a Roman, not a Greek, word. And it will be remembered that, among those whom he calls his kinsmen in the Epistle to the Romans, two of the number, Junia and Lucius, have Roman names, while the others are Greek (Rom 16:7, 11, 21). All this may point to a strong Roman connection. These names may have something to do with that honorable citizenship which was an heirloom in the household; and the appellation "Paulus" may be due to some such feelings as those which induced the historian Josephus to call himself "Flavius," in honor of Vespasian and the Flavian family.

If we turn now to consider the social position of the Apostle's father and family, we cannot on the one hand confidently argue, from the possession of the citizenship, that they were in the enjoyment of affluence and outward distinction. The *civitas* of Rome, though at that time it could not be purchased without heavy expense, did not depend on any conditions of wealth, where it was bestowed by authority. On the other hand, it is certain that the manual trade, which we know that St. Paul exercised, cannot be adduced as an argument to prove that his circumstances were narrow and mean; still less, as some have imagined, that he lived in absolute poverty. It was a custom among the Jews that all boys should learn a trade. "What is commanded of a father towards his son?" asks a Talmudic writer. "To circumcise him, to teach him the law, to teach him a trade." Rabbi Judah said, "He that teaches not his son a trade does the same as if he taught him to be a thief;" and Rabban Gamaliel said, "He that hath a trade in his hand, to what is he like? He is like a vineyard that is fenced."

And if, in compliance with the good and useful custom of the Jews, the father of the young Cilician sought to make choice of a trade, which might fortify his son against idleness, or against adversity, none would occur to him more naturally than the profitable occupation of the making of tents, the material of which was hair cloth, supplied by the goats of his native province and sold in the markets of the Levant by the well-

known name of *cilicium*.¹⁰ The most reasonable conjecture is that his father's business was concerned with these markets and that, like many of his scattered countrymen, he was actively occupied in the traffic of the Mediterranean coasts; and the remote dispersion of those relations, whom he mentions in his letter from Corinth to Rome, is favorable to this opinion.

But whatever might be the station and employment of his father or his kinsmen, whether they were elevated by wealth above, or depressed by poverty below, the average of the Jews of Asia Minor and Italy, we are disposed to believe that this family were possessed of that highest respectability which is worthy of deliberate esteem. The words of Scripture seem to claim for them the tradition of a good and religious reputation. The strict piety of St. Paul's ancestors has already been remarked; some of his kinsmen embraced Christianity before the Apostle himself (Rom. 16:7), and the excellent discretion of his nephew will be the subject of our admiration, when we come to consider the dangerous circumstances which led to the nocturnal journey from Jerusalem to Caesarea (Acts 23).

Paul's Boyhood in Tarsus

But, though a cloud rests on the actual year of St. Paul's birth, and the circumstances of his father's household must be left to imagination, we have the great satisfaction of knowing the exact features of the scenery in the midst of which his childhood was spent. The plain, the mountains, the river, and the sea still remain to us. The rich harvests of corn still grow luxuriantly after the rains in spring. The same tents of goat's hair are still seen covering the plains in the busy harvest.¹¹ There is the same solitude and silence in the intolerable heat and dust of the summer. Then, as now, the mothers and children of Tarsus went out in the cool evenings and looked from the gardens round the city, or from their terraced roofs, upon the heights of Taurus. The same sunset lingered on the

¹⁰ Hair cloth of this kind is manufactured at the present day in Asia Minor, and the word is still regained in French, Spanish, and Italian.

¹¹ "The plain presented the appearance of an immense sheet of corn stubble, dotted with small camps of tents; these tents are made of hair cloth, and the peasantry reside in them at this season, while the harvest is reaping and the corn treading out.", Beaufort's *Karamania*, p. 273.

pointed summits. The same shadows gathered in the deep ravines. The river Cydnus has suffered some change in the course of 1800 years; instead of rushing, as in the time of Xenophon, like the Rhone at Geneva, in a stream of two hundred feet broad through the city, it now flows idly past it on the east.

The channel, which floated the ships of Antony and Cleopatra, is now filled up; and wide unhealthy lagoons occupy the place of the ancient docks.¹² But its upper waters still flow, as formerly, cold and clear from the snows of Taurus; and its waterfalls still break over the same rocks, when the snows are melting, like the Rhine at Schasshausen.

We find a pleasure in thinking that the footsteps of the young apostle often wandered by the side of this stream, and that his eyes often looked on these falls. We can hardly believe that he who spoke to the Lystrians of the "rain from heaven," and the "fruitful seasons" and of the "living God who made heaven and earth and the sea," (Acts. 14:15,17) could have looked with indifference on beautiful and impressive scenery. Gamaliel was celebrated for his love of nature; and the young Jew, who was destined to be his most famous pupil, spent his early days in the close neighborhood of much that was well adapted to foster such a taste. Or if it be thought that in attributing such feelings to him we are writing in the spirit of modern times; and if it be contended that he would be more influenced by the realities of human life than by the impressions of nature - then let the youthful Saul be imagined on the banks of the Cydnus, where it flowed through the city in a stream less clear and fresh, where the wharves were covered with merchandise, in the midst of groups of men in various costumes, speaking various dialects.

St. Basil says that in his day Tarsus was a point of union for Syrians, Cilicians, Isaurians, and Cappadocians. To these we must add the Greek merchant and the agent of Roman luxury. And one more must be added - the Jew - even then the pilgrims of commerce, trading with every nation

¹² In Strabo's day there was an inconvenient "bar" at the mouth of the Cydnus. Here (as in the case of the Pyramus and other rivers on that coast) the land has since that time encroached on the sea. The unhealthiness of the sea coast near the Gulf of Scanderoon is notorious, as can be testified by more than one of those who visited there.

and blending with none. In this mixed company Saul, at an early age, might become familiar with the activities of life and the diversities of human character, and even in his childhood make some acquaintance with those various races which in his manhood he was destined to influence.

We have seen what his infancy was; we must now glance at his boyhood. It is usually the case that the features of a strong character display themselves early. His impetuous fiery disposition would sometimes need control. Flashes of indignation would reveal his impatience and his honesty.¹³ The affectionate tenderness of his nature would not be without an object of attachment, if that sister, who was afterwards married (Acts 23:16), was his playmate at Tarsus. The work of tent-making, rather an amusement than a trade, might sometimes occupy those young hands, which were marked with the toil of years when he held them to the view of the Elders at Miletus.¹⁴

His education was conducted at home rather than at school; for though Tarsus was celebrated for its learning, the Hebrew boy would not lightly be exposed to the influence of Gentile teaching. Or, if he went to a school, it was not a Greek school, but rather to some room connected with the synagogue, where a noisy class of Jewish children received the rudiments of instruction, seated on the ground with their teacher, after the manner of Mahomedan children in the east, who may be seen or heard at their lessons near the mosque.¹⁵

At such a school, it may be, he learned to read and write, going and returning under the care of some attendant, according to that custom which he afterwards used as an illustration in the Epistle to

¹³ See Acts 9:1,2; 23:1-5. Compare Acts 13:13 and 15:38 with 2 Tim. 4:11.

¹⁴ Acts 20:34, "Ye yourselves know that *these hands* have ministered to my necessities, and to them that were with me." Compare 28:3; 1 Cor. 4:12; 1 Thess. 2:9; 2 Thess. 3:8.

¹⁵ This is written from the recollection of a Mahomedan school at Bildah in Algeria, where the mosques can now be entered with impunity. The children, with the teacher, were on a kind of upper story like a shelf, within the mosque. All were seated on this floor, in the way described by Maimonides. The children wrote on boards and recited what they wrote; the master addressed them in rapid succession; and the confused sound of voices was unceasing.

the Galatians¹⁶ (and perhaps he remembered his own early days while he wrote the passage) when he spoke of the Law as the slave who conducts us to the School of Christ. His religious knowledge, as his years advanced, was obtained from hearing the Law read in the synagogue, from listening to the arguments and discussions of learned doctors, and from that habit of questioning and answering, which was permitted even to the children among the Jews. Familiar with the pathetic history of the Jewish sufferings, he would feel his heart filled with that love to his own people which breaks out in the Epistle to the Romans (9:4,5) – to that people "whose were the adoption and the glory and the covenants, and of whom, as concerning the flesh, Christ was to come" – a love not then, as it was afterwards, blended with love towards all mankind, "to the Jew first, and also to the Gentile," – but rather united with a bitter hatred to the Gentile children which he saw around him.

His idea of a Messiah, so far as it was distinct, would be the carnal notion of a temporal prince – a "Christ known after the flesh" (2 Cor. 5:16) – and he looked forward with the hope of a Hebrew to the restoration of "the kingdom of Israel." (Acts 1:6) He would be known at Tarsus as a child of promise, and as one likely to uphold the honor of the Law against the half-infidel teaching of the day. But the time was drawing near when his training was to become more exact and systematic. He was destined for the school of Jerusalem. The educational maxim of the Jews, at a later period, was as follows: "At five years of age, let children begin the Scripture; at ten, the Mishnah; at thirteen, let them be subjects of the Law."¹⁷

There is no reason to suppose that the general practice was very different before the floating maxims of the great doctors were brought together in the Mishnah. It may therefore be concluded, with a strong degree of probability,

¹⁶ Gal. 3:24, where the word inaccurately rendered "schoolmaster" denotes the attendant slave who accompanied the child to the school. A Jewish illustration of a custom well known among the Greeks and Romans is given by Buxtorf. He describes the child as taken to the preceptor under the skirt of a Rabbi's cloak, and as provided with honey and honeycakes, symbolizing such passages as Deut. 32:13; Cant. 4:11; Ps. 19:10.

¹⁷ We have learned from Buxtorf that at 13 there was a ceremony something like Christian confirmation. The boy was then called a "Child of the Law" and the father declared in the presence of the Jews that his son fully understood the Law and was fully responsible for his sins.

that Saul was sent to the Holy City between the ages of ten and thirteen. ¹⁸ Had it been later than the age of thirteen, he could hardly have said that he had been “brought up” in Jerusalem.

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¹⁸ That he came from Tarsus at an early age is implied in Acts 26:4, “My manner of life *from my youth*, which was at the first among mine own nation at Jerusalem, know all the Jews, which knew me from the beginning.”
