

St. Jerome Adult Bible Study

Introducing Paul in Acts

From Fr. Kenneth Morman, S.S.L.¹:

1. This is what accounts for the differences that are noted between what Luke tells us and what Paul does in some cases – e.g.,
 - a. Luke does not want Paul's preaching to the Gentiles to be seen as some kind of rogue operation, like Ollie North conducting his own foreign policy out of the White House basement, just his own private idea.
 - b. So writing 20 years later, what he emphasizes is Paul's close cooperation with Jerusalem in order to show that Church authorities [i.e., God!] were in complete agreement with what Paul was doing.
 - c. But at the time, Paul's enemies in Galatia were accusing him of not being a real apostle, just a flunky of the Jerusalem church, and claiming that therefore they did not have to respect him; so in his letters Paul tries to emphasize just the opposite of what Luke does: i.e. his independence of the Jerusalem Church! – so in Acts Luke shows Paul in frequent contact with the apostles in Jerusalem, exactly what Paul in his own letters tries to downplay!
 - *[NB: it should be kept in mind that Luke did not have access to Paul's letters the way we do! In fact one hypothesis is that Paul's letters were collected because of Luke's Acts!]*
2. This leaves us with the following general principle which we must follow with regards to the apparent discrepancies between Acts and the Letters:

Principle: As *primary sources*, Letters have priority over Acts. Thus:

- (1) When Paul and Acts agree, Acts confirms what Paul says.
- (2) When they differ, Paul must override Acts.
- (3) When there's no evidence to the contrary in Paul's own letters, the information in Acts is to be taken at face value.

Compare:

Acts 9:19-22, 22:6-11, 26:12-18 with Galatians 1:13-17

Acts 9:23 with Galatians 1:17-18

Acts 9:23-25 with 2 Corinthians 11:32-33

Acts 9:29-30, 11:25-26 with Galatians 1:21-24

Acts 15:1-12 with Galatians 2:1-10

Acts 15:36-40 with Galatians 2:11-14ff

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Again, from Fr. Morman:

PAUL'S YOUTH AND EARLY LIFE

1. Birthdate

Paul was probably born a few years after Jesus, around the turn of the era. Luke refers to him as "a young man" at the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:58) in the early 30's, and Paul himself refers to himself as an "old man" in Philemon 9, which was written in the mid-50's.

2. Birthplace: Tarsus

Though Paul says nothing about it himself, Luke tells us that he was born in Tarsus, in south-eastern Turkey, and this becomes a familiar epithet for him: "Saul of Tarsus" (Acts 22:3; 21:39; 9:11). It was, as he says in Acts 21:39, "*no minor league city*" –

- a. It was the capital of the Roman province of Cilicia, a bustling trade center at this time, with a population of something like 300,000 inhabitants. (*Nothing to sneeze at – approximately the size of Toledo [313,000] or Cincinnati [335,000] today!*) It was a port city at the mouth of the Cydnus river, in the foothills of the Taurus mountains, so a constant stream of commerce kept passing through.
- b. Moreover, like Bowling Green or Oxford or Athens here in Ohio, it was a university city famous for its culture, and its schools were said to rival the schools of Athens and Alexandria. Since it also boasted a very large Jewish population, it served as a crossroads of two civilizations, the Jewish and the Gentile. *God prepared Paul well for his mission!*

3. Hebrew of Hebrews

Paul tells us (Phil 3:5; Rom 11:1) that he was born a "Hebrew of Hebrews," of the tribe of Benjamin, circumcised on the 8th day – *i.e., thoroughly Jewish and proud of it*; from Acts 23:16 we learn he had at least one sister. That's all we know about his family.

4. Roman Citizen

Acts tells us that he was a Roman citizen from birth (22:28). We do not know exactly how Paul's family got their citizenship; by this time his father may even have been able to buy it. In any case, when Paul's birth was registered with the authorities, he would have been given papers that he would have carried with him like a passport to substantiate his claim to citizenship in his various arraignments.

5. Name

As a Roman citizen Paul would have had three names: praenomen (1st name), nomen gentile (clan name), and cognomen (family name) – thus the familiar pattern of Roman names: Gaius Julius Caesar, Marcus Tullius Cicero, etc. NB that in the case of Paul, all we know is his cognomen. – *i.e. "Paul" is his last name, rather than a first name, as it is with us. – ≅ "Beethoven" or "Mozart."*

- a. In his letters he calls himself Paulos, the Greek form of a Latin surname. His other name, Saulos, which is used in Acts up until 13:9, is the Greek form of Shâ l, King Saul, which is of course Hebrew, the name of the most illustrious member of his family's tribe, Benjamin.
- b. There is no indication that his name was changed from Saul to Paul at any point – NB the way Acts 13:9 is phrased, "*Saul, also called Paul*" – so the most likely explanation is that this is the familiar case of the same person having a double name, one in use with his own people, the other with the larger population (*cf. John Mark or José/ Joe*), very frequently the second name being chosen because it sounded similar to the first. (*compare: Hispanic men named Jesús often go by Jesse among their Anglo colleagues*)

6. Paul's Language

Paul must have been at least bilingual, more likely trilingual – his letters are written in Greek, but he boasts about his zeal in studying the Law and that would have required that he learn Hebrew well, because the method of studying the Law required that he be able to carry on arguments in it, which, like all arguments regarding law, often turned on the precise significance of words. Furthermore, since he was studying in Jerusalem, he would have had to speak Aramaic as well since that was the local language at the time. Since his Greek is so good and he tends to prefer the Septuagint when he quotes Scripture, that suggests his family spoke Greek as its mother tongue and that he learned the other two.

7. His Education

- a. It's a safe assumption that Paul received a typical Jewish boy's education in the faith, and that he was taught his father's trade; in Paul's case that was tentmaking. (Acts 18:3 says that in Corinth he stayed with the tentmakers Aquila and Priscilla "because he was of the same trade" as they. This is quite plausible because Cilicia was famous in Antiquity for the coarse hair of its goats which made very high quality tent and sail material.)
- b. At age 15 he would have begun further studies in rabbinic teaching under a master. In Acts 22:3 Paul tells the crowd that he did this under Gamaliel *in Jerusalem*. Did his whole family move there? We know from Acts 23:16 that at least his sister was there later on.
- c. More intriguing: Was Paul in Jerusalem while Jesus carried on his ministry there? He says nothing about this in his letters, and because of this silence commentators assume that Paul never met Jesus.
 - i. Actually, it is intriguing that unlike the Gospels, Paul very seldom explicitly quotes anything Jesus said or did; Garry Wills provides just nine examples, though he does not claim the list is complete. And even in these cases, it's often simply "an echo" of Jesus' teaching, a repetition of the distinctive things Jesus taught without saying specifically, "as Jesus said," or equivalent.

8. At the Feet of Gamaliel

The fact that Paul is said by Luke to have studied under Gamaliel would be significant because it would explain the tradition out of which Paul came to understand Christianity. He says himself in Phil 3:5 that "*in legal observance I was a Pharisee.*" As mentioned in the class on Matthew, this he would have had in common with Jesus himself and most of the early Church.

- a. As a Pharisee, Paul believed in the Prophets and Writings as inspired parts of the Scripture; he accordingly believed in the coming of a Messiah, the resurrection of the dead, the existence of angels in close to a modern sense, etc., all of which are taught only in these latter books, as well as in the binding power of the *oral law*. [*Contrast the Sadducees in all these respects.*]
- b. But also as mentioned in that treatment, there were a number of schools even within Phariseism. Gamaliel the Elder was the son and successor of Hillel the Great. As a student of this school, Paul was taught a form of Pharisaism that was kind and lenient, relatively open to Greco-Roman culture, having a positive attitude toward making converts – *leading to the realization that Paul may well have been a missionary even before he became Christian!*

9. Was Paul a Rabbi?

Did he take his training to its conclusion and become a rabbi? It's hard to say. On the one hand, in Acts 26:10, according to Luke Paul says:

"In Jerusalem I not only shut up many of the saints in prison by authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blasphemous; and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities."

- a. We are not sure where Luke got this information. If Paul really voted, then he was a member of the Sanhedrin, and that would imply that he was indeed a rabbi. His mission to Damascus would be another argument

for this conclusion, because such judicial authority would not be given to one who was not qualified. (*Ordinary citizens cannot just go out and arrest people because they are not behaving correctly.*)

- b. However, on the other side, if Paul indeed were a rabbi, the implication would be that he would have been over forty years old at the time he became Christian (the minimum age for membership in the Sanhedrin,) and this fits uneasily with the datum that he was a "young man" at the stoning of Stephen.
- c. Furthermore, it would imply that he was married because this was a virtually a requirement for rabbis (the very first commandment of the Torah is *Be fruitful and multiply!*), though there was a small precedent for celibacy. (From the way 1Cor 7:8 is phrased it's not clear whether he was unmarried or widowed.)