

# PAUL AND MISSION

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## PRELUDE

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## *“A Chosen Instrument”*

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“A chosen instrument”: this is how Paul is introduced at the beginning of his ministry in Acts 9:15. Indeed, young Saul was endowed with outstanding human qualities when he met the Risen Lord on the way to Damascus. They were the fruits of a complex socio-economic background.

### The Milieu

#### *Tarsus of Cilicia*

Tarsus, where he was born, was a fairly important city in the northeastern corner of the Mediterranean Sea. Situated on the border between Asia Minor, facing the West, and Syria, turned toward the East, it was a transit point for trade between Asia and Europe. It was the capital of the rich province of Cilicia, well watered by rivers flowing from the Anatolian highland. Its population of one hundred thousand made it one of the most populous cities of the Mediterranean world, next only to Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch. Paul could rightly claim to be the “citizen of no mean a city” (Acts 21:39).

The city owed its importance not only to its geographical position but also to its recent history. Cilicia had long been a battle ground between the surrounding Hellenistic kingdoms before it

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came under Roman control in 103 BCE when Marcus Antonius Orator conducted a victorious campaign against the pirates who had taken shelter in Cilician coves and bays. Should we say that Cilicia fell under the Roman yoke or that it entered the protective fold of *Pax Romana*? Provinces had to pay heavy taxes to Rome, but Rome assured security to business and trade. We may likely presume that Tarsian weavers and traders preferred to be under Roman authority rather than being at the mercy of pirates' exactions. A few years afterward, in 85 BCE, they would have greeted with a sigh of relief the victory of Sulla over Mithridates, king of Pontus, who had attempted to add Cilicia to his kingdom.

In 64 BCE, Pompey conferred to Cilicia the status of Roman province. The leading classes of Roman provinces could claim Roman citizenship. According to the Acts of the Apostles, Paul's family was sufficiently affluent and socially positioned to claim the title (Acts 16:37; 22:27–29). It means also that the family had opted for integration in Greco-Roman society. It was this attitude inherited from the family background that finds an echo in the Apostle's advice to pay taxes and "pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed" (Rom. 13:6–7). Paul did not intend to elaborate a treatise of political theology. He just gave the commonsense advice that guided family dealings.

The unification of the Mediterranean world and of western Asia under Roman control contributed to shape the mind of the young Tarsian. Tarsus was also known as a booming intellectual center. Strabo, the author of a world *Geography* toward the beginnings of the Common Era, wrote about the Tarsus people:

The inhabitants of this city apply to the study of philosophy and to the whole encyclical compass of learning with so much ardor, that they surpass Athens, Alexandria, and every other place which can be named where there are schools and lectures of philosophers. It differs however so far from other places that the studious are all natives, and strangers are not inclined to resort thither. Even the natives themselves do not remain at home, but travel abroad to

complete their studies, and having completed them reside in foreign countries. Few of them return. . . . They have schools of all kinds, for instruction in the liberal arts.

Strabo follows with a list of Tarsian celebrities:

The Stoic philosophers Antipater, Archedemus, and Nestor were natives of Tarsus: and besides these, the two Athenodori, one of whom . . . was the preceptor of Cæsar, who conferred on him great honors. . . . These men were Stoics, but Nestor, of our time, the tutor of Marcellus, son of Octavia, the sister of Cæsar, was of the Academic sect. . . . Among the other philosophers . . . were Plutiades and Diogenes, who went about from city to city, instituting schools of philosophy as the opportunity occurred. Diogenes, as if inspired by Apollo, composed and rehearsed poems, chiefly of the tragic kind, upon any subject that was proposed. The grammarians of Tarsus, whose writings we have, were Artemidorus and Diodorus. But the best writer of tragedy, among those enumerated in “The Pleiad,” was Dionysides. Rome is best able to inform us what number of learned men this city has produced, for it is filled with persons from Tarsus and Alexandria. Such then is Tarsus.<sup>1</sup>

Living in Tarsus could not but open the mind of its young citizen.

### *Pax Romana*

Tarsus was flourishing at the time when Roman history had reached a glorious climax. Saul of Tarsus was born under the reign of the great Emperor Augustus, who ruled from 27 BCE to 14 CE. He was martyred under the reign of Nero in 67. His life and ministry correspond to the Julio-Claudian dynasty. This period, and especially the reign of Augustus, is the golden age of Roman history. The authority of Augustus, combined with his political acuteness, had put an end to the convulsions of the

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1. Strabo, *Geography* 14.13–15.

republic and restored peace all over the empire. The boundaries of this empire spread out from the Atlantic Ocean to Mesopotamia, and its influence extended even beyond. As proudly proclaimed in the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, engraved on bronze tablets at the entrance of the emperor's mausoleum,

I restored peace to all the provinces of Gaul and Spain and to Germany, to all that region washed by the Ocean from Gades to the mouth of the Elbe. . . . My fleet sailed along the Ocean from the mouth of the Rhine as far towards the east as the borders of the Cimbri. . . . On my order two armies were led . . . into Ethiopia and into Arabia which is called "the Happy." . . . Ethiopia was penetrated as far as the town of Nabata, which is near Meroe.<sup>2</sup> In Arabia, the army advanced into the territory of the Sabaei to the town of Mariba. In the case of Greater Armenia, I preferred to hand that kingdom over to Tigranes. . . . I recovered all the provinces extending beyond the Adriatic Sea, and Cyrenae. . . . I settled colonies of soldiers in Africa. . . . The Parthians, I compelled to restore to me the spoils and standards of three Roman armies. . . . Embassies were often sent to me from the kings of India. . . . Our friendship was sought, through ambassadors, by the Bastarnae and Scythians, and the king of the Sarmatians who live on either side of the river Tanais, and by the kings of the Albani and of Hiberi and of the Medes. . . .<sup>3</sup> From us the people of the Parthians and of the Medes received the kings for whom they asked.<sup>4</sup>

Young Saul was privileged in being born and brought up in this widened world which, without cancelling local particular-

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2. Meroe, on the fourth cataract of the Nile, a former capital of the Nubian Dynasty; Nabata or Napata on the Upper Nile, some 300 kilometers north of Meroe; Mariba, presently Maribu in Yemen.

3. Bastarnae lived along the Danube, Scythians along the Don (River Tanais), Albani around the Caspian Sea, and Hiberi in present Georgia.

4. Text quoted in A. H. M. Jones, *A History of Ancient Rome through the Fifth Century*, 2. *The Empire* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 14–23.

isms, was not torn by narrow minded chauvinisms or aggressive forms of racism. When Paul speaks of unity in Christ, nationalist hostilities do not even come to his mind. He knows only of a single ethnic difference, that of Jews and Gentiles (Gal. 3:28). It is as though all the other ethnic oppositions had already been done away with by the *Pax Romana*.

### *The Diaspora*

But the ethnic border between Jews and Gentiles, between Chosen People and *go'im* did subsist. The Jewish population scattered among the nations was quite substantial. The Dispersion had begun with the Babylonian Exile. It was followed by successive migrations caused by various social and political troubles. A more or less voluntary migration also engaged merchants, craftsmen, and mercenaries in foreign armies. It extended mostly eastward where, beyond Mesopotamia, it reached Media and Persia as illustrated in the books of Esther and Tobit.<sup>5</sup> In those countries it constituted a substantial minority.

It is generally reckoned that Jews could have numbered one million in the Parthian Empire. In Egypt, they would have also counted one million out of a population of seven million. In Alexandria, they formed the bulk of the population of two districts out of five, which leads to an estimate of two hundred thousand to four hundred thousand, depending on whether the total population of the town is reckoned to have reached seven hundred thousand or a million people. Another three to four million Jews lived in Asia Minor, Greece, Cyrenaica, and in a few Italian towns.<sup>6</sup>

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5. The St. Thomas tradition presumes the existence of a Jewish community in India. Cochin Jews claim to have arrived in India together with King Solomon's merchants.

6. M. Stern, "Diaspora," in S. Safrai and M. Stern (eds.), *The Jewish People in the First Century* (Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum I/1; Assen: Van Gorcum, 1974), 117-215; E. Schürer and G. Vermès, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, 3/1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986), 291-363; C. Saulnier and C. Perrot, *His-*

A letter of Agrippa I to Caligula, reported by Philo, makes a proud statement of this situation:

(Jerusalem) is the mother city, not of one country, Judaea, but of most of the others in virtue of the colonies sent out at divers times to the neighboring lands Egypt, Phoenicia, the part of Syria called Hollow and the rest as well and the lands lying far apart, Pamphylia, Cilicia, most of Asia up to Bithynia and the corners of Pontus, similarly also into Europe, Thessaly, Boeotia, Macedonia, Aetolia, Attica, Argus, Corinth and into most of the best parts of Peloponnese. And not only are the mainlands full of Jewish colonies but also the most highly esteemed islands of Euboea, Cyprus, Crete. I say nothing of the countries beyond the Euphrates, for except for a small part they all, Babylonia and of the other those where the land is highly fertile, have Jewish inhabitants.<sup>7</sup>

Carried by his enthusiasm, Philo goes to the extent of claiming that the children of Sarah formed “the most numerous nation on earth.”<sup>8</sup> His claim may be overstated. But it did refer to a significant and influential Jewish presence in the Greco-Roman world

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*toire d’Israël, III. De la conquête d’Alexandre à la destruction du Temple* (Paris: Cerf, 1985), 287; P. Trebilco, *Jewish Communities in Asia Minor* (SNTSMS 69; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); L. H. Feldmann and M. Reinhold (eds.), *Jewish Life and Thought among Greeks and Romans: Primary Readings* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996); I. Levinskaia, *The Book of Acts in Its Diaspora Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996); J. M. G. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora: From Alexander to Trajan (323BCE–117CE)* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996).

7. Philo, *Legat.* 281–82; cf. *Flacc.* 45–46.

8. *To polyanthrōpopaton tōn ethnōn* (*Congr.* 3). “The multitude which constitutes this people is such that, unlike other nations, it could not be contained within the confines of a single territory. It had to spread all over the world for it spread throughout all the continents and all the islands to such an extent that it seems almost to outnumber local population” (*Legat.* 214).

and beyond. It did not function as a secluded ghetto and did not adopt the warlike stand of the Maccabees in Palestine. Living in symbiosis with the surrounding peoples, Diaspora Judaism was necessarily conditioned by this daily sharing with the life and culture of these lands. It followed the advice once given by Jeremiah to the Babylonian exiles: “Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. . . . Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare” (Jer. 29:5–7). However, integration did not mean assimilation. Though merged into the surrounding world, the Jewish Diaspora remained solidly attached to its spiritual roots. Hostile reactions did take place. Philo himself recalls a pogrom that happened in Alexandria in 37 A.D.<sup>9</sup>

Alexandria was the most active center of the Diaspora. Its community spoke and wrote in Greek. It produced an extensive Greek literary output. To explain the Jewish Law to the Hellenistic world, Philo wrote seventy-seven treatises of unequal length in Greek. Other Jewish writers like Aristoboulos, Artapan, Aristreas, and Ezekiel the Tragedian tried to connect the Law of Moses with the Egyptian and Greek wisdoms. The Wisdom of Solomon was received in the Alexandrian canon.

The most outstanding work of the Hellenistic Diaspora was the Greek translation of the Bible called the Septuagint. Moving from Hebrew to Greek was a risky venture. A typical instance is the translation of YHWH as *kyrios*, Lord. The cryptic tetragrammaton carried an aura of mystery. This aura was lost in the Greek translation of “Lord, master,” which could apply to any superior being, pagan god, emperor, or simply house lord. So, it was also for the translation of *Torah* as *nomos*. The *Torah* was grace and revelation: it expressed the way in which God guided his Chosen People with infinite love. The *nomos* was the rational law, social expression of the *logos*. Substituting *nomos* for *Torah*

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9. Philo, *Flacc.* 29.



amounted to a secularization of social life. We understand the lament of an old rabbi. “The day when the Bible was translated into Greek was as disastrous as the day of the Golden Calf.”<sup>10</sup> Yet this semantic loss was the cost to pay if the biblical message could enter the vast world of nations, and not appear like the strange dialect of an obscure West Asian tribe.

In Corinth, Paul met a representative of this Diaspora in the person of Apollos, an Alexandrian Jew converted by Aquila and Priscilla (1 Cor. 1:12; 3:5–6; cf. Acts 18:24–28). However, the Jewish community of Tarsus would have been more closely connected with their neighbors in Antioch than with Alexandria.

The Antiochian Diaspora was as important as that of Alexandria. As reported by Josephus,

The Jewish race, densely interspersed among the native populations of every portion of the world, is particularly numerous in Syria, where intermingling is due to the proximity of the two countries. But it was at Antioch that they specially congregated, partly owing to the greatness of that city, but mainly because the successors of King Antiochus enabled them to live there in security. For, although Antiochus surnamed Epiphanes sacked Jerusalem and plundered the Temple, his successors on the throne restored to the Jews such votive offerings as were made of brass, to be laid up in their synagogue, and, moreover, granted them citizen rights on an equality with the Greeks. Continuing to receive similar treatment from later monarchs, the Jewish colony grew in numbers, and their richly designed and costly offerings formed a splendid ornament to the temple. Moreover, they were constantly attracting to their religious ceremonies multitudes of Greeks, and these they had in some measure incorporated with themselves.<sup>11</sup>

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10. Quoted by E. Nida, *Towards a Science of Translating* (Leiden: Brill, 1964), 2.

11. Josephus, *Jewish War* 7.43–44 (trans. H. S. J. Thackeray; Loeb Classical Library; Cambridge, MA: William Heinemann, 1961).

However, important as it was, the Antiochian Diaspora does not seem to have equaled Alexandria in intellectual creativity. Was it because it was more conservative in outlook? Were the family of Saul and their co-religionists of Tarsus particularly “zealous for the ancestral traditions” (Gal. 1:14)? At the risk of being anachronistic, can we say that Alexandria stood for some form of liberal Judaism whereas Antioch was more orthodox? It may be rather that, belonging to the same Semitic linguistic area as Palestine, Syrian Antioch did not feel so acutely the need for acculturation. It had no need of a Septuagint Greek version; Aramaic targums were sufficient. As for Paul, his attitude toward the Greco-Roman world is not “Alexandrian.” When compared with the Judaism of Alexandria, he appears to be an “abnormal” representative of the Diaspora. But, actually, he was more an Antiochian than an Alexandrian Jew.

### Formation

The first setting of young Saul’s education was the complex framework of a Jewish Diaspora of the Antiochian type, living in the midst of Hellenistic culture and well integrated in the socio-economic life of the Roman Empire.

### *At Home*

According to Acts 18:3, Saul’s family ran a small business of *skēnopoioi*. Literally the word means “tent makers.” But the term extended to the weaving of any kind of canvas-covering goods in ships and chariots, to festive hangings and even to the vast *velum* that sheltered big meetings from sun and rain. Tarsus was a center of the textile industry. Goats of Anatolia and flax from Sicilia provided its workshops with needed raw material.<sup>12</sup> Young Saul grew up in this familial and social setting. From the family workshop he received a professional training that he will use to sup-

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12. J. Murphy-O’Connor, *Paul: A Critical Life* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 32–70.

port his apostolic campaign.<sup>13</sup> The family business taught him also to run a budget and turn money into an apostolic tool.<sup>14</sup>

### *Paideia*

From the Hellenistic milieu of Tarsus, he received a good Greek education. How long did he stay in Tarsus and at what age was he sent to Jerusalem? The question is debated. One opinion is that he would have been sent to Palestine at an early age to shelter him from Hellenistic contamination.<sup>15</sup> But the general opinion is that, as a teenager, he was in Tarsus and had the same schooling as any youth belonging to a well-to-do family. What is sure is that the Greek he writes is good, educated Greek. It has a rich vocabulary. It uses the resources of Greek rhetoric. The syntax is correct unless he gets excited! His letters follow the structure of classical epistolography, even though he does not remain corseted by the structure.<sup>16</sup> The influence of prevailing Stoicism can occasionally be perceived (Gal. 5:19–23; 1 Cor. 7:32–34).<sup>17</sup>

Are we to imagine young Saul attending the local high school?<sup>18</sup> Or was he sent for private coaching to a grammarist who, for a few coins, would teach the children of the neighborhood? Or

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13. O'Connor, *Paul: A Critical Life*, 170–71.

14. O'Connor, *Paul: A Critical Life*, 89.

15. Such is the opinion of W. C. Van Unnik, "Tarsus or Jerusalem, the City of Paul's Youth," in *Sparsa Collecta. Part One* (Leiden: Brill, 1973), 259–320, on the basis of Acts 22:3. "Brought up in this city" (of Jerusalem) would imply that Saul's family returned to Jerusalem at an early stage and that he "spent all the years of his youth in Jerusalem" (p. 296). Whatever may be the semantic value of Van Unnik's interpretation of the participle *anatethrammenos* ("brought up"), can we take at its face value Luke's rendering of what could have been Paul's speech at that time? In general, Van Unnik's opinion has not been retained.

16. Van Unnik, *Sparsa Collecta*, 172–74.

17. On the influence of the Greco-Roman context on Paul, see L. Legrand, *The Bible on Culture* (New York: Orbis Books, 2000), 127–51, and the papers of the 62nd Colloquium biblicum lovaniense, *Paul's Graeco-Roman Context* (ed. C. Breytenbach; BETL 277; Leuven: Peeters, 2015).

18. O'Connor, *Paul: A Critical Life*, 49–51.

again, was Saul’s family sufficiently affluent to own an educated slave to serve as a pedagogue to the family children?<sup>19</sup> At any rate, it appears that young Saul’s childhood and early youth in Tarsus imbibed him with the wider horizons of the Greco-Roman world.

Living in Tarsus, following the Hellenistic schooling cursus, sharing in the open atmosphere of Mediterranean Diaspora, reading the Greek Bible of this Diaspora, the young Tarsian, even though unawares, was being readied to become a minister to the nations.

### *Jerusalem*

Open as it was to the world at large, the Jewish Diaspora remained all the same faithful to its religious roots. Saul’s family did not only abide by its Jewish faith, it remembered also with pride its belonging to the tribe of Benjamin. In each generation, it gave one of its sons, probably the eldest one, the name of the most famous representative of the tribe, King Saul, who had been anointed by Prophet Samuel as the first king of Israel. The family sympathized with the movement of the Pharisees and its strict obedience to the demands of the Law. It will remain a matter of pride for Paul the Apostle who will boast of being “a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees” (Acts 23:6; cf. Phil. 3:5–6).

This zeal for the Law took him to Jerusalem in quest of a rabbinical formation “at the feet of Gamaliel” (Acts 22:3). There could not have been a better master. Gamaliel was a highly reputed rabbi. He belonged to the liberal tendency as opposed to the rigorous interpretations of Shammai. The Acts report an example of his tolerant attitude toward the budding Christian movement (Acts 5:34–39). However, young Saul does not seem to have inherited this open-minded attitude. He describes himself as an extremist, “advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers” (Gal. 1:14). The stay in the Holy City hard-

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19. M. F. Baslez, *Saint Paul*, 40.

ened this “zeal.” His character was too passionate and his youth too fiery to adopt an indulgent position. The Acts describe him as “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” (Acts 9:1). He committed himself fully to the fight against Jesus’s followers and sided with Stephen’s executioners. He might have been too young to be on the front row and was only entrusted with looking after the garments of those who were throwing the stones. But he was not too young to be put in charge of the posse sent to put an end to the Christian movement in Damascus. He acknowledges it with humility: “I persecuted the church of God” (1 Cor. 15:9).

Even though he did not share in the moderate stand of his master, he received at least a solid rabbinical training. While his style and thought were imbibed with Greek culture, his heart and mind remained fundamentally Jewish. As a good Jew and a trained rabbi, he based his arguments on Scripture and applied them to the text with the help of midrashic techniques. When we read his comments on Exodus in 1 Corinthians 10:1–10, we feel like we are sitting in the synagogue listening to the Sabbath sermon. As for the discussion on the two wives of Abraham in Galatians 4:21–31, it recalls the rabbinical debates in which learned doctors of the Law exchanged ever more sophisticated speculations on the text.

Mostly and more deeply, Saul inherited from his family and from his Jerusalem studies a passionate attachment to his people, Israel. It will remain engrained in the soul of the Apostle. Even when facing the sorrowful failure of the gospel among the Jews, he will keep his sense of Israelite identity:

I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit—that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh. They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their

race, according to the flesh, is the Christ who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen. (Rom. 9:1–5)

This is no renegade language. Paul’s faith in the Risen Christ remains through and through a Jewish faith.

Birth and childhood in a practicing Jewish family, early youth in the context of a Diaspora coexisting with the Hellenistic world, rabbinical formation in Jerusalem under famed rabbis, all these factors combined together in the mind and heart of young Saul. His style will weave together Hellenistic rhetorical skill and rabbinical subtlety. But it was mostly his mind that benefited from this rich multiculturalism. Two main directions will result: a visceral attachment to the people of Israel and a readiness to meet the Hellenistic world. Saul may not have been aware of it, but the Spirit was preparing him as a chosen instrument to bring to the Greco-Roman world faith in Jesus Christ, the Messiah promised to Israel and to the world.