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## Overview

Our knowledge of Paul's life is fragmentary, and for some parts we can give only the barest sketch, though some aspects of his life permit more detailed examination. First I shall give a very brief overview of Paul's life. The following two chapters will give fuller descriptions of Paul's life, first before his call to be an apostle, and then after his call.<sup>1</sup> I shall put the appropriate chapter numbers or page numbers in parentheses.

### A Brief Sketch

Paul was a Greek-speaking Jew from Tarsus (Acts 22:3), a city near the southeast corner of Asia Minor (present-day Turkey). The date of

1. On Paul's biography, see especially John Knox, *Chapters in a Life of Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1950). The book is still well worth reading, especially for the question of the use of Acts in reconstructing Paul's biography. See "The Nature of our Sources" and "The Use of our Sources" on pp. 13–43. More recently, see Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul: A Critical Life* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996); Martin Hengel, *The Pre-Christian Paul* (London: SCM, 1991); Martin Hengel and Anna Maria Schwemer, *Paul Between Damascus and Antioch* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997). For the very difficult problem of chronology (matching the events in Paul's life to precise dates), see the Introduction n. 9.

his birth is unknown, but he was in the prime of life in the 40s and 50s of the first century CE. From this we may infer that he was born about the same time as Jesus or a little later, let us say between the year 4 Before the Common Era (BCE) and 4 CE. Most scholars put his death in Rome in the year 62 or 64.

In his childhood and youth, Paul learned a trade, how to “work with [his] own hands” (1 Cor. 4:12; cf. 9:6). As an apostle, he often continued to work at his trade, as these passages show. According to Acts, his trade was tentmaking, which presumably meant that he could do various kinds of work with leather.<sup>2</sup> Such an occupation makes very good sense and helps to explain important aspects of his apostleship (see chap. 4). Since he could do work that requires not only dexterity but also a lot of practice, it is doubtful that he was from a wealthy family.

His letters show that he had total command of the text of the Jewish Scripture in Greek translation. This means that he had studied it from an early age (pp. 17–18; 22–28).

His Greek (except for a few lapses) is good *koinē* (common) Greek, grammatically and syntactically sound. It is not the elegant literary Greek of his wealthy Jewish contemporary, Philo of Alexandria, and this too argues against the view that Paul was from a rich family. Additionally, he found it worthy of comment that he sometimes worked with his own hands, which is adequate proof that he was not a common laborer. Moreover, he knew how to dictate; he could if need be write with his own hand in large letters (Gal. 6:11), though not in the small, neat letters of the professional scribe. In the ancient world, reading was learned by reading aloud in school, and learning to write was a separate process, unconnected with reading, and involving various technical skills with knife, pen, ink, and

2. In the ancient world cotton was rare and very expensive, and so canvas was not available. Animal hides were plentiful.

papyrus.<sup>3</sup> Being able to write quickly and neatly, in small letters, was a specialized skill (see further pp. 169–71).

Paul also had a high level of organizational ability. Guessing wildly, we might suppose that his father owned a small business and that Paul knew how to do the work, but that he had also been equipped with managerial skills, such as ordering materials and supervising employees.

During approximately the first half of his adulthood, Paul was a Pharisee. Very little is known about Paul the Pharisee (except that he was, on his own report, outstanding, Gal. 1:14), but we have enough information about Pharisaism to allow us to examine this topic more fully (pp. 28–54).

The only activity that can be ascribed to the first part of Paul's adult life with certainty is that he persecuted Jews who had accepted Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah and Son of God, having been convinced by the former disciples of Jesus (pp. 76–81).

Paul's autobiographical statements in Galatians 1 and Philippians 3, which we shall study in detail (pp. 22–27; chap. 3) indicate that he had a vision that transformed his life. It is probable that this vision occurred in the 30s of the first century, presumably when he was in his thirties. By this date, and for the rest of his life, he appears to us as a full-time religious zealot, first as a persecutor of Christianity, next as an apostle on its behalf. We shall see that his career as a persecutor depended on his individual zeal, not on his Pharisaism (pp 32–33; 78–81).

The revelatory experience that changed his life seems not to have altered his character and personality. He was full of zeal and gave his life to his cause—even when the cause changed.

3. For detailed information about writing materials, see Hans-Josef Klauck, *Ancient Letters and the New Testament: A Guide to Context and Exegesis* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006), chap. 2.

There are some uncertainties about just what the experience was, but in this Overview we leave them aside. Either on the road to Damascus (so Acts), or in Damascus (the inference from Gal. 1:15–16), God revealed Christ to him and called him to be an apostle to the gentiles (chap. 4).

His visionary experience convinced him that the followers of Jesus were right: Jesus had been raised; he was “Son of God,” “Lord,” and “Christ” (“Messiah” in Hebrew). He would soon return, and he would save those who put their faith in him.

During the next twenty years or so, Paul worked his way west from Syria to Greece, establishing congregations in several cities in Asia Minor and in at least three cities in eastern Europe—two in Macedonia and one in Greece. His westward progression was occasionally interrupted by the need to visit Jerusalem and Antioch (in Syria) and to revisit former churches. We shall see that there was a lot of traffic between Paul and his churches (chap. 5), and that he sometimes made two or three brief visits after his founding visit (the chapters on the Corinthian correspondence and Philippians).

One of his efforts during the last years of his itinerant apostleship was to take up a collection for the Christian community in Jerusalem. In approximately the year 53 or 54, he traveled to Jerusalem, with some companions, and delivered the collection. While there, he was arrested and charged with taking a gentile into the temple, which was forbidden. After a series of trials in Caesarea, on the coast of Palestine,<sup>4</sup> he was finally sent to Rome to be tried by the emperor. We lose sight of him after his arrival in Rome. When the book of Acts ends, Paul is still in prison in Rome. It is probable that he was executed there in 62 or 64 CE, though it is conceivable that he was released and lived for several more years.

4. On the use of the word “Palestine,” see immediately below.

Both opinions can appeal to *1 Clement*, a letter from the bishop of Rome to the Corinthian church in about the year 96. Clement wrote this:

[S]even times he wore fetters, he was exiled, he was stoned, he was a herald both in the east and in the west, he gained the noble renown of his faith, he taught righteousness throughout the whole world and, having reached the limit [*terma*] of the West, he bore testimony before the rulers, and so departed from the world and was taken up into the holy place—the greatest example of endurance. (1 Clem. 5:1-7)

The phrase “*terma* of the West,” if taken to mean “physical limit,” inclines the reader to think that Paul reached Spain. If it means “goal of the West,” in the sense of “Paul’s fixed destination” or “the obvious goal of any traveler from east to west,” then Rome will do very well. The reference to “testimony before rulers” could refer to those of Rome, though the governors of the Roman provinces in Asia Minor and Greece, or even the local magistrates in various cities, would do just as well (chap. 21).

The implication of Acts is that Paul was in Rome for only two years. Counting from his second trial in Caesarea (Acts 24–26), and allowing for the journey to Rome, some put his death in the year 62. It is often supposed, however, that both he and Peter died in the first Roman persecution of Christians. Rome suffered a major fire in July of 64. Though Nero had been away, rumor fastened the blame for the fire on him. He needed a scapegoat, and he settled on followers of the new “superstition”—the movement that came to be called Christianity. This is the description of Tacitus, a Roman historian:

Their execution was made a matter of sport: some were sewn up in the skins of wild beasts and savaged to death by dogs; others were fastened to crosses as living torches, to serve as lights when daylight failed. Nero made his gardens available for the show and held games

in the Circus, mingling with the crowd or standing in his chariot in charioteer's uniform. (*Annals* 44.3-8)

If Paul did so end his days, the hideous suffering would not have surprised him. We shall note as one of the abiding themes of his letters that he expected Christians—and especially apostles—to suffer and thus become, in that way, too, one with their Lord (1 Thess. 2:1-2, 14-15; 2 Cor. 1:3-7; and elsewhere). And he believed that he and others would be “fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him” (Rom. 8:17). Throughout his career he saw himself as being always “given up to death for Jesus’ sake” (2 Cor. 4:11), but suffering—and, no doubt, death itself—he met with this confidence:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? . . . No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life . . . nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 8:35-39)<sup>5</sup>

Paul's long-term influence was so enormous that many have considered him to be a kind of second “founder” of Christianity. In his own day he was certainly a major figure within the very small Christian movement. On the other hand, he also had enemies and detractors, and his contemporaries probably did not accord him as much respect as they gave Peter and James (see “The Church in Jerusalem,” chap. 4). In studying Galatians, Romans, and the Corinthian correspondence, we shall see that Paul felt compelled to fight for his own worth and authority.

The major theological battle of his career was whether or not gentiles (non-Jews) who accepted Jesus must also become Jewish by

5. This section is copied from E. P. Sanders, *Paul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 16-17.

being circumcised and accepting other parts of the Jewish law that separated Jew from gentile. Paul argued vociferously that his converts could remain gentiles, though they had to accept Jewish monotheism and most aspects of Jewish ethics. In the long run, his position prevailed: Christianity became a religion separate from Judaism and dominated by gentiles, though the gentiles accepted some aspects of Judaism. It is not clear that Paul won the argument at the time, nor can we say that he was the main person whose work led to the substantial “gentilization” of Christianity. The outcome was the result of many more factors than Paul’s own direct work and arguments.

### **Two Controversial Terms: “Christianity” and “Palestine”**

In what follows I shall routinely use two words to which some people object, for quite different reasons.

The first is “Christianity,” which appears early and often in the following pages. Many scholars have emphasized that the word *Christian* does not appear often in the New Testament. According to Acts 11:26, “it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called ‘Christian.’” In Acts 26:28, Agrippa asks Paul, “Are you so quickly persuading me to become Christian?” “Christian” otherwise appears only in 1 Pet. 4:16. In Acts 24:14, Paul uses “the Way” to designate the sect. Acts 9:2 mentions belonging “to the Way,” and the term occurs elsewhere (e.g., 8:25, 26; 19:23; 22:4; 24:14; 24:22). This has made many scholars reluctant to use “Christian” and “Christianity” to designate members of the church in its early days, preferring “the Way” or “the Jesus movement.”

Turning to Paul’s own usage, we note that Paul often calls the group “the congregation” (*ekklēsia*), a word that occurs alone and in a variety of phrases, such as “the congregations of God” (1 Thess. 2:14; 1 Cor. 10:32; 11:16). This word is usually translated “church,” and I

often use the word *church*, but “congregation” is a better translation. The word *church* to us now means a building used for Christian worship, but Paul’s “churches” were really only “congregations” of people who met wherever they could, presumably in someone’s house.

In 1 Thessalonians, he also calls his group “those who believe” (1:7; 2:10, 13; also Rom. 1:16).

He often, however, designates his group by a phrase that includes the word *Christ*, such as those who are “called of Jesus Christ” (Rom. 1:6); those who are “baptized into Christ Jesus” (Rom. 6:3); those in whom Christ dwells (Rom. 8:10); “joint heirs with Christ” (Rom. 8:17); “one body in Christ” (Rom. 12:5); “the body of Christ” (1 Cor. 12:27); those who are “sanctified in Christ” (1 Cor. 1:2); “members of Christ” (1 Cor. 6:15); those who are “Christ’s” (2 Cor. 10:7; Gal. 3:29); those who are “in Christ” (Gal. 3:27, 28); and “the saints in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 1:1). The “dead in Christ” have a special status when the Lord returns (1 Thess. 4:16).

In light of Paul’s own usage, I see no reason to avoid the use of the term “Christian” when discussing his converts. In this book, I use several of Paul’s own terms, but I unhesitatingly use the term “Christians” for people who belong to Christ.<sup>6</sup> For the sake of convenience, I also refer to the early followers of Jesus (e.g., Peter and John), who started the “Jesus movement,” as “Christians.” They all held that Jesus was the Christ, and I think that they deserve the title, though they themselves probably did not use it.

The second word is “Palestine,” the use of which sometimes produces bitter denunciations. Apparently the thought is that calling the region “Palestine” means that “the Palestinians” have sole rights to the land now controlled by the state of Israel. Someone even started

6. See E. P. Sanders, “Paul’s Jewishness,” in *Paul’s Jewish Matrix*, ed. Thomas G. Casey and Justin Taylor (Rome: Gregorian & Biblical Press, 2011), 64–65.

the rumor that the name was never used before Hadrian, early in the second century CE, who used it pejoratively.

In fact, the word *Palestine* has been used to refer to this region at least since Herodotus (fifth century BCE): “The Phoenicians and the Syrians of Palestine” practiced circumcision (Book II §106). Texts could be cited from a long list of ancient writers after Herodotus, beginning with Aristotle. Since Palestine is geographically a specific part of Syria, it was often called “Syrian Palestine,” as it was by Josephus (*Antiq.* 8.263 and about fourteen more times). Moreover, major works by modern Jewish scholars refer to the region as “Palestine,” as does Saul Lieberman in *Greek in Jewish Palestine*.

I use “Palestine” to indicate the geographical region and “Jewish Palestine” to indicate the parts of the geographical area that were occupied largely by Jews in the days of Jesus and Paul. These terms are historical and have no reference to the modern world.