

PAUL AND HIS WRITINGS

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According to Acts, Paul was born in Tarsus, a city on the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea, in what is now Turkey, around AD 10. He was a Roman citizen from birth, a status that carried certain privileges. He was also, according to Acts, a student of Gamaliel, a renowned rabbi, and a Pharisee, that is, a member of a strictly observant Jewish party. His own writings indicate that he was well educated in the Greek language and in Pharisaic methods of biblical interpretation. Both Paul and Acts say that he was so zealous for the Jewish Law before his conversion that he persecuted those who, he believed, had strayed from the Law by believing that Jesus was the Christ. During this earlier part of the sketch of Paul's life in Acts, he is called by his Jewish name, Saul. When in the narrative he begins to encounter the Roman world (13:9), Luke calls him by his Roman name, Paul.

After experiencing a revelation of the Risen Christ from God, however, Paul himself joined these followers of "the Way" as a young adult, about AD 34. He firmly believed that his conversion included a call to preach the Christian message of salvation to all people, including the Gentiles. Paul spent the rest of his life, about thirty years, in pursuit of this mission. After three years in Arabia and a brief visit to Jerusalem, he embarked on his missionary career. After some years working in the Eastern Mediterranean area as far west as Greece, he visited Jerusalem to deliver relief funds collected in Asia Minor and Greece. He then intended to visit Rome and Spain, but in Jerusalem he met with increasing opposition from some Jewish leaders and was arrested and brought to Rome around AD 60. Between AD 48 and his death around AD 62, Paul wrote letters to communities with which he had worked, answering their questions and preaching the gospel as he understood it to have been revealed to him.

Sources

We learn about Paul's life from his own letters and from Luke's account in the Acts of the Apostles (cf. Acts 9:1-30; 11:1-28:31). There are some discrepancies between what Paul says and what Luke records about certain incidents of Paul's career: for example, Luke and Paul do not agree about whether the Council of Jerusalem, around AD 50, stipulated that the Gentiles should keep some aspects of the Jewish Law (see Acts 15 and Galatians 2:1-10). We must remember that when Luke writes about Paul's life, his account is a secondary source: it was written more than a generation after Paul (about AD 85), at a time when the major issue of non-Jewish converts was no longer as pressing. Luke minimizes the tensions involved in integrating the Gentiles into the church.

The Epistles of Paul

There are thirteen letters or epistles ascribed to Paul, but most commentators recognize only seven of these as definitely written by the apostle; the others are attributed to disciples of Paul. The seven letters certainly written by Paul himself are Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon. The remaining six letters (that is, Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus) are often called "Deutero-Pauline." Among the latter group, the Pauline authorship of 2 Thessalonians and Colossians is most disputed. For various reasons commentators believe that these six letters were not actually written by Paul but instead were written by later Christians familiar with his teachings. Disciples could have claimed to be writing in Paul's name in order to gain authority for their own adaptations of his teaching, an accepted practice among the ancients. In the New Testament, the Pauline writings are arranged in two groups: first, letters to communities; second, letters to individuals. Within each group they run roughly from the longest to the shortest. The letters are not arranged in the order in which they were written.

Letters and Epistles

Paul's letters follow the fairly simple structure of a letter in Greek or Roman culture. Such letters were not placed in envelopes, so the address is given right at the start. Then follows the body of the letter; finally, the conclusion contains personal greetings and instructions. Some scholars have suggested a distinction between more formal, systematic "epistles" and informal "letters." In this way of thinking, Romans would be an example of a formal epistle, whereas Philemon or Titus would be examples of an informal letter. Even some of these letters supposedly written to individuals may really be formal "epistles" intended for wider circulation. Many interpreters have also noted a fundamental structure discernible in many of Paul's writings, but most clearly in Romans. Paul first outlines his most basic teachings in a section sometimes called the doctrinal or "indicative" part. This is followed by an application of these teachings in Paul's exhortations to the community, a section called the "imperative" or "parenetical" (that is, exhortatory) part of the letter.

The Apostle and His Gospel

Much of the Christian vocabulary we have become familiar with and associate with the ministry of Jesus actually originated with Paul. For example, Paul was, as far as we know, the first to coin a Christian meaning for the words *apostle*, *gospel*, *charism*, *ministry*, and many doctrinal phrases such as "justification by faith." As the first Christian writer, Paul began to develop Christian terminology, even though many of the terms he uses will have roots in Judaism, or other meanings in secular Greek.

Paul's writings predate any of our written Gospels. Paul is the first to speak about preaching the gospel, although he does not conceive this as a story about the life and ministry of Jesus. The idea of the gospel, which appears even in the Old Testament (see, for example, Is 61:1-2, "glad tidings") means the "good news." For Paul this is the message of salvation now accessible to all through faith in Jesus Christ. In Romans, Paul describes the gospel as the "power of God" to save all who believe (Rom 1:16). Thus, Paul does not think of the gospel as a story of the events in Jesus' life, nor even as a set of beliefs about Jesus. Rather, the gospel is the "good news" that all who believe in Jesus are already saved.

Paul rarely speaks of any actions or words of Jesus during his lifetime. Rather, he focuses on God's power, working through the death and resurrection of Jesus, to save Jews and Greeks (that is, all people) alike. While reading Paul it is well to remember that, for him, the term *gospel* means the proclamation of faith in God's forgiveness or the realization in human life of the "good news" that Jesus Christ has come to bring salvation to all people.

In his writings, Paul usually identifies himself as an apostle (Rom 1:1; 11:13; 1Cor 1:1; 4:9; 9:1f, 5; 15:9; 2Cor 1:1; 11:5, 13; 12:11, 12, and so on). The term *apostle* literally means "one sent," who represents the sender and is entrusted with the sender's authority and message. God is the source of Paul's apostleship.

The Letters in Circulation

The apostle's authority was in his words and example. It became real when the community as a whole discerned Paul's meaning and decided on the actions, which they as believers should derive from Paul's words. In his letters, Paul teaches, exhorts, encourages, and corrects. The communities revered his instructions, reading and preserving them. They circulated these letters, sharing them with other communities. In this way the letters eventually gained the authority of Christian Scriptures as the communities were increasingly strengthened, formed, and informed by a common tradition. Most people in Pauline communities probably could not read, so a reader would read Paul's letter aloud to the assembly of believers. There they reflected together on its contents. From Paul's writings we can get a picture of how the early church operated, how it worshipped and governed itself, and how it grew.