

About St. Paul

St. Paul, the great Christian missionary, was born perhaps in 10 CE, in the Cilician city of Tarsus. His family was Jewish and from them he inherited Roman citizenship. St. Paul was privileged to have been born a Roman citizen at a time when it was not yet a universal right for people in the empire. Initially confined to freeborn natives of the city itself, as Roman control was extended throughout Italy and then to the lands bordering the Mediterranean and beyond, certain individuals and communities were given this right. At the time of St. Paul's ancestors, one way of attaining to Roman citizenship was serving in the Roman army for twenty-five years. However, because of sabbath and Mosaic food prescriptions this profession would not have been normally possible for a Jew. The second way by which Roman citizenship could be gained was slavery. It was known that during the two centuries preceding St. Paul's time, thousands of people were deported from the eastern Levant to Italy and made slaves. In the course of time some of these were able to distinguish themselves by their skill and profession and were either freed by their masters or bought their freedom and thus were given Roman citizenship. A remote ancestor of St. Paul, after obtaining this citizenship, seems to have returned to his native city Tarsus and reestablished the family business. Neither Acts nor his letters give enough information about St. Paul's ancestors or parents. He is known to have had a married sister in Jerusalem and a nephew (Acts 23: 16). From one of his letters we learn that he had some distant relatives (Rom 16:7, 11, 21). The most important privilege that Roman citizenship conferred on a subject was that he enjoyed legal protection and could not be scourged and had the right of appeal to the emperor in person, hence St. Paul's journey to Rome to appeal to Caesar. It is thought that during the floggings he endured (2 Cor 11 :25), the Apostle may have not revealed his citizenship because of the fact that he wished to follow Christ in his suffering. Even if they were condemned to death, Roman citizens could not be crucified. In the course of time, however, it seems that the avaricious government officials began selling this right as admitted by the cohort commander Claudius Lysias to St. Paul: 'acquired this citizenship for a large sum of money' (Acts 22:28). A citizen's responsibilities included the performance of military service, from which Jews were exempted on religious grounds such as sabbath and kosher food. There are several theories about why the Apostle chose the name by which he is known today. St. Paul's cognomen, 'Paulus' the name by which he was known, was probably chosen because of its similarity to his Hebrew name 'Saul'; as it means 'small' it might also have been an allusion to his size. New citizens would take on the first two names, the praenomen and nomen, of the official granting their admission. Thus, 'St. Paul' might have also been the name of the patron of that unknown ancestor who granted the latter Roman citizenship. By the time of the early empire, when St. Paul was born, the use of two names seems to have been acceptable, at any rate in the New Testament, thus Judas called Barsabbas (Acts 15:22) etc. The Apostle must have had a second name which is not mentioned. Whatever the reason for choosing it, 'St. Paul' was a rare name even among Gentiles. It has also been suggested that the Apostle may have chosen the name after his first Gentile convert known by name, Sergius Paulus in Cyprus. St. Paul would probably have carried a birth registration certificate for identification purposes when traveling. The information of citizenship was included in the birth registers whose authorized copy could be obtained to be displayed when questioned by authorities. From the various references to his Roman citizenship in Acts, it is clear that St. Paul valued this privilege which certainly helped him at times of trouble. Acts and his letters make it clear that St. Paul worked to support himself and those who were with him. This was a period when boys usually learnt their craft from their fathers, which was often the family's business. The nature of his work is clearly stated as tent making when he stayed with Aquila and Priscilla: 'and, because he practiced the same trade, stayed with them and worked; for they were tentmakers by trade' (Acts 18:3). Given St. Paul's rabbinical background there is nothing extraordinary about this; Jewish sources indicate that rabbis were expected to work and not to profit from their study and interpretation of the Torah. This does appear to be the case and there are several references to working hands. In his address to the elders of Ephesus the Apostle reminds them of this, saying 'these very hands have served my needs' (Acts 20:34); also when he says 'we toil, working with our hands' (1 Cor 4: 12) or 'nor did we eat food received free from anyone. On the contrary, in toil and drudgery, night and day we worked, so as not to burden any of you' (2 Thes 3:8). These remarks also answer the questions about financial sources of the Apostle's missionary journeys. In spite of the gifts he seems to have received from Christian communities for which he expresses his gratitude, most of the time he relied on his own resources, a fact which is often hinted at in his letters and clearly expressed in the one addressed to the Philippians. 'I find myself, to be self-sufficient...still, it was kind of you to share in my distress' (Phil 4: 11,16). It is possible that St. Paul's family had made their money equipping the Roman legionaries, who used very large tents, made of leather panels stretched together so that rain water would run off. The Roman legions stationed in Syria may not have required leather tents but used the traditional goat-hair tents similar to those of the present day nomads. These are made of the rough cloth manufactured from goat's hair, which in the past was known as cilicium, and took its name from Cilicia. Tent making might well have embraced not only the manufacture and the repair of these large, military tents, but also a range of related leather and woven goods. Apart from military tents, there would have been considerable demand for awnings, booths and canopies from vendors at market places and elsewhere. Since there were many Roman legions based on the upper Euphrates and in Syria tent making was perhaps a very profitable profession, considering the flourishing animal husbandry in the region since early antiquity. Within the family and Jewish community he was called Saul, Paul being the latinized form he used when speaking Greek; this he did well and idiomatically, as befitted one who had grown up in a cosmopolitan and largely Greek city. He would probably also have spoken Aramaic, the language of Palestine and the whole Near East, where he spent fairly extended periods. As he had a strict Jewish upbringing, which was followed by study in Jerusalem where he trained to be a rabbi, he would have known Hebrew too. In the Jewish Diaspora he dwelled

on his Jewish background. Elsewhere, in conversing with Greeks he spoke their native tongue and in the world of Romans he would emphasize his Roman citizenship. If St. Paul's family were not members of the Pharisees, then at some stage he became one; this was a sect that observed strict ritual purity and adherence to Mosaic law. Its members thought that they alone could interpret the Torah correctly and felt their responsibility to teach other Jews the ways of living righteously. Saul, the name chosen for him, was the name of the first king of the Jews about a millennium before. The Pharisees and other such Jewish sects regarded the Christian movement as a threat and so it is as a persecutor of the Christians and witness to the death of St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr, that St. Paul first appears in Acts. The only available physical information about the Apostle comes from the apocryphal Acts of St. Paul. Here, Onesiphorus, a man of Iconium, who wants to receive St. Paul in his house, waits on the 'king's highway' coming from Lystra, for 'a man of little stature, thin-haired upon the head, crooked in the legs, of good state of body, with eyebrows joining, and nose somewhat hooked, full of grace: for sometimes he appeared like a man, and sometimes he had the face of an angel', his description by Titus whom St. Paul had sent before him to the city to announce his arrival. The fact that the commander of the soldiers who arrested St. Paul in Jerusalem thought that his prisoner may have been 'the Egyptian' they were looking for (Acts 21 :38), may imply that the Apostle had a wheat-colored complexion. The Apostle himself may have been conscious of his insignificant physical look because he admits that this could be used against him by his enemies (2 Cor 10: 10). The 'short dark hair, domed brow and black, pointed beard' became the distinct features of his physiognomy in Byzantine art. St. Paul is not included among the Twelve Apostles, but regarded as the Thirteenth Apostle. By the sixth century he replaced St. Matthias, who had taken the place of the traitor Judas Iscariot after the latter's death (Acts 1 :26). Byzantine iconography usually depicted the Apostle looking to his right, with the book of his letters in his left hand, garbed in a dark green or dark blue tunic on which he wears an open dark red cloak. As is well known, St. Paul was converted to Christianity after a vision of the risen Christ appeared to him on the road to Damascus. Blinded, he was led to Damascus and there, after three days of fasting and praying, he recovered his sight, was filled with the Holy Spirit and then baptized (Acts 9:3-19; 22:6-16; 26:12-18). There have been innumerable attempts by theologians and others to understand and explain precisely what happened at this turning point in his life. All that can be said briefly, is that St. Paul's theology should perhaps be traced to his experience of conversion. He claimed to have received his gospel 'through a revelation of Jesus Christ' (Gall: 12); this in turn led to his proclamation of salvation through the reconciling grace of God; thus the death of Christ for the atonement of sins was God reconciling the world to himself through Christ. In whichever way St. Paul's vision and conversion are understood, it is clear, that like the prophets of the Old Testament, he saw himself as chosen by God for a specific task, namely, to be an apostle (messenger of the church) to Gentiles. For him the Christian message, that Christ died to atone for the sins of man and for the salvation of man, was resurrected and ascended to heaven, was both the fulfillment of Jewish messianic hopes and the basis for a united humanity; love, reconciliation and salvation were central themes of his theology. This clear message of the Apostle may have been the reason why he did not become an object of a separate Christian cult, such as that of St. John in Ephesus, St. Barnabas in Cyprus or St. Peter in Antioch. After his conversion, there followed a period of solitude in Arabia, a word which is probably to be understood as somewhere in Syria, before he returned to Damascus, where he spent three years preaching the doctrine of the crucified and risen Christ. This antagonized the Jews of Damascus. 'But his disciples took him one night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket' (Acts 9:25). He returned to Jerusalem where he met St. Peter and James, the brother of Christ, and he was then sent as an apostle to his native city of Tarsus. He was subsequently fetched and brought to Antioch on Orontes by St. Barnabas to help him there. At Antioch, the converts included many Gentiles, a situation which ultimately led to a crisis from which St. Paul emerged as the advocate of Gentile conversion. The controversy, which lasted several years, had at its heart Jewish purity laws, which made Jews reluctant to eat with non-Jews. The latter, not being circumcised or bound by the obligations of Mosaic dietary observances, were regarded as impure. As the breaking of bread and the drinking of wine were central to Christian fellowship, there was clearly an impasse. The resolution of this, St. Paul's decision to convert Gentiles, ensured that Christianity did not remain just another Jewish sect, but in time became a universal religion. From Antioch on Orontes, in about 47, St. Paul and St. Barnabas set out on their first main missionary journey to Cyprus and then to Pisidia and southern Galatia in central Anatolia, returning to Antioch on Orontes next year by sea from the Pamphylian city of Attaleia by way of Palestine. On a second journey, about 49-52 accompanied by Silas - and Timothy after Lystra - St. Paul traveled through Cilicia to Galatia, then to Alexandria Troas and on to Greece, once again returning by sea to Caesarea and from there to Antioch on Orontes, this time by way of Ephesus. On St. Paul's Third Journey, 53-57, St. Paul again visited the Galatian cities on his way to Ephesus, where he remained for about three years. From there he visited Greece to which he returned again, by way of Alexandria Troas, on finally leaving from Miletos. His last brief visit to his native land was whilst being taken as a captive to Rome, when ships were changed at Andriace, port of Myra in Lycia. The date of most of St. Paul's journeys corresponds to the reign of the emperor Claudius (41-54) whose rule was known to be milder and more peaceful than that of his predecessor Gaius Caligula (37-41) and his successor Nero (54-68). When the latter succeeded Claudius in 54, St. Paul was on his third journey. It is not known if he would have been able to carry out his journeys during the persecutions of Caligula or Nero. After his third journey, St. Paul went to Jerusalem. There he caused a riot by the Jews, who thought, mistakenly, that he had broken Jewish law by taking Gentiles into the Temple. He was arrested, but as a Roman citizen, was treated fairly. St. Paul was then taken to Caesarea, where the Roman governor kept him in prison to avoid problems with the Sanhedrin. When the next governor tried to send him to the Sanhedrin for trial, St. Paul claimed his right as a Roman citizen to be put on trial at Rome. He arrived there about 60 and lived under house arrest for two years. The unfinished narrative of Acts closes with him awaiting trial. The circumstances of St. Paul's death are not known and there is conflicting evidence. According to one tradition he made a further missionary journey before being re-arrested, imprisoned in Rome and sentenced to death. The most widely accepted view is that he was killed in about 62 during the persecution of Christians in Nero's reign as

told in the apocryphal Acts of St. Paul.

Journeys of St. Paul

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