

The Life and Theology of Paul: From Persecutor to Pastor

Review

- Paul wrote (23.4%) or influenced (27.4%) more than half of the New Testament.
- Born a Jew and a Roman citizen, he was multilingual, a craftsman, and a scholar. He knew the pagan classics, and “he gives every impression of having swallowed the Bible whole,” (Wright).
- As a 1st century Pharisee, Paul believed the time was very near when God would return to his people in a history-changing way – ending the Exile and leading them on a new Exodus that would solve not just the rebellion of Israel, but the rebellion of humanity as a whole.
- Knowing that disloyalty to God had ruined Israel’s hopes in the past, Paul was very zealous to prevent any delay of God’s return, and thus saw Christian claims about Jesus as a direct threat...

From Footnote to Foe

- Paul enters the Bible as a footnote under a different name, at the end of Stephen’s martyrdom:
 - While on trial for “speak[ing] words against this holy place and the law” (Acts 6.13), Stephen testified that he saw Jesus standing at God’s right hand (Acts 7.56).
 - When the enraged Sanhedrin drags him out of Jerusalem and stones him to death, “the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul,” (Acts 7.58).
- We are told Saul “approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem,” during which “Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison,” (Acts 8.1, 3).
- Yet we are also told that persecuted believers “scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria” and “went about preaching the word,” (Acts 8.1, 4). Being a systematic thinker even then, Saul was determined to root out even those Christians who had escaped Jerusalem.
- Thus “Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem,” (Acts 9.1-2).
- What happened next is written for us in detail: Acts 9.1-20.

Understanding Paul’s Conversion

- Years later, Paul wrote to his protégé: “Formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief,” (1 Tim. 1.13).
- This is a key statement for understanding what happened on the road to Damascus. While confessing his guilt, Paul says his guilty actions flowed out of ignorance. What does he mean?

If you had asked Saul of Tarsus, before the meeting on the road to Damascus, where Israel’s story and God’s story came together, the two natural answers would have been Temple... and Torah... The Temple indicated that Israel’s God desired to live in the midst of his people; the Torah, that he would address his people with his life-transforming word. Saul now came to see that both these answers pointed beyond themselves to Jesus and of course to the Spirit. (Wright)
- Put another way: Prior to meeting Jesus, Saul believed that heaven and earth came together in the Temple and the Law. When he met Jesus, he realized that heaven and earth met in Him.
- Prior to meeting Jesus, the Law was the axis of Paul’s day-to-day existence. But after he met Jesus, “allegiance to a person had displaced devotion to a code,” (Bruce).
- When Paul met Jesus, his Jewish faith did not stop. Rather, his Jewish faith was *fulfilled*:

Israel’s story and God’s story, had, shockingly, merged together... Both narratives were fulfilled in Jesus. Jesus was Israel personified; but he was also Israel’s God in person. The great biblical stories of creation and new creation, Exodus and new Exodus, Temple and new Temple all came rushing together at the same point. This was not a new religion. This was a new world—and it was the new world that the One God had always promised. (Wright)

Journey into Arabia

- Acts 9.20-28 give us the next main *public* steps of Paul’s ministry: he preaches in Damascus, has a harrowing escape, then travels to Jerusalem – where many at first mistrusted him.
- However, from Paul’s letters, we know that there was an important *private* step along the way. Before he ever visited Jerusalem, Paul “went away into Arabia”: Galatians 1.13-18.
- The term ‘Arabia’ covered a wide area: “Roman Arabia included much of what is modern Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and southern Syria. Therefore, while Paul may not have traveled far from Damascus here, he can also speak of distant Mount Sinai as being in Arabia,” (*ESV Study Bible*).
- Because of this, biblical scholars disagree on where exactly Paul went:
 - Some think he went to the nearby Nabataean kingdom and began preaching.
 - Others, noting that the only other NT reference to ‘Arabia’ refers to the region of Mount Sinai (Gal. 4.25), believe Paul made a pilgrimage to Mount Sinai: “Sinai was where Elijah had gone when it all went horribly wrong. Sinai was where Saul of Tarsus went – for the same reason,” (Wright). It is notable that Paul’s self-description as “extremely zealous” (Gal. 1.14) echoes Elijah’s self-description at Sinai as “very jealous for the LORD,” (1 Ki. 19.10, 14).
- After this, he returned to Damascus (Gal. 1.17-18) and later went to Jerusalem: Acts 9.23-30.

The Silent Decade

- When Paul first arrives in Jerusalem, he naturally encounters significant mistrust (Acts 9.26). How many Christians there had family or friends whom he had harmed? Only after Barnabas became his advocate was Paul finally welcomed by Jerusalem Christians (Act 9.27-28).
- When his preaching in Jerusalem stirred up conflict and threats, the believers “brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus,” (Acts 9.30-31). At this point, the narrative of Acts shifts to Peter (Acts 9.32-11.18), and we don’t hear of Saul again until “Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch,” (Acts 11.25-26).
- What’s important to note is that this gap covers roughly ten years (c. AD 36-46)! For a decade or so, we have no substantial record of Paul’s life. What was he doing in that time? Wright suggests that he spent these years thinking, praying, and working:

He thought his way backward from the “new fact,” as he saw it, of a crucified and risen Messiah, back into the world of Israel’s scriptures and traditions, back into the long, dark, and often twisted narrative of Israel that had been groping its way forward to that point without glimpsing its true goal. He reread Genesis. He reread Exodus. He reread the whole Torah, and the prophets, especially Isaiah, and he went on praying the Psalms. With hindsight... he saw Jesus all over the place... the infinite point where the parallel lines of Israel’s long narrative would eventually meet.

We glimpse, then, Saul at the workbench; Saul praying and thinking; and, third, Saul listening to the ideas all around him, in the philosophical and political as well as religious cultures of cosmopolitan Tarsus.... putting together in his mind a larger picture of the One God and his truth that would take on the world and outflank it. If Jesus was the fulfillment of the ancient scriptural stories, that conclusion was inevitable.

Copastoring in Antioch

- Following this “silent decade,” Barnabas brings Saul to Antioch to help pastor the mixed Jewish-Gentile congregation that was emerging in that city: Acts 11.19-26.
- After their 1st year of ministry in Antioch, “Barnabas and Saul” are sent to carry famine relief to the Jerusalem church: Acts 11.27-30. This 2nd visit occurred 11-14 years after the 1st (Gal. 2.1).
- During this visit, Paul conferred with James and Peter and John, who recognized Barnabas and Saul as having an apostolic calling to the Gentiles: Galatians 2.1-10.
- After this, Barnabas and Saul return to Antioch: Acts 12.25-13.1.