

# The Early Years Of Saul Of Tarsus



*The remains of a Roman roadway in Tarsus of Cilicia*

**"I am indeed a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up  
in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, taught according to the  
strictness of our fathers' law..." (Acts 22:3)**

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## Introduction

- I. On the great day of Pentecost, Jews from throughout the Greco-Roman world traveled to Jerusalem to worship God (Acts 2:5–12).
  - A. By the first century A.D., Jews had settled in almost every country of the civilized world.
  - B. “Strabo, speaking of the time of Sulla, says (about 85 B.C.), that the Jewish people had already come into every city, and that it was not easy to find a place in the world which had not received this race, and was not occupied by them” (Schurer, *A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Christ*, Second Division, Vol. II, pp. 221–222).
  - C. The list of nations Luke gives was not based on language, but rather on geography and illustrates how widespread the Dispersion (*Diaspora*) of the Jews was in the first century.
  - D. “The list includes both ancient kingdoms and current political entities, moving generally from east to west and in its middle section naming first the northern and then the southern lands” (Barker and Kohlenberger, *Zondervan NIV Bible Commentary*).
- II. There were four main geographic divisions present on Pentecost (Acts 2:9–11).
  - A. The Eastern or Babylonian, representing portions of the Persian Empire.
    1. These were the lands of the earliest dispersion of the Jews, as the Assyrians and Chaldeans carried away exiles from the 10 northern tribes.
    2. Later, Nebuchadnezzar carried many Jews away to Babylon.
    3. Even when the Persians gave a royal decree that allowed the Jews to go back to their homeland, many of them decided to stay.
    4. In the first century A.D., the number of Jews in this region ran well into the millions.
    5. *Parthians* were the inhabitants of the territory from the Tigris River to India; the nation of Iran now occupies most of this area.
    6. *Medes* were the inhabitants of Media, a country northwest of Persia and south-southwest of the Caspian Sea.
    7. *Elamites* were from Elam, situated north of the Persian Gulf, and south of the Caspian Sea.
    8. *Mesopotamia* means “between the rivers,” which is the region between the Euphrates River and Tigris River; Iraq now occupies most of this area.
  - B. The Syrian.
    1. *Galileans* (Acts 2:7) were proverbially ignorant, rude, and uncivilized (John 1:46), and used a peculiar dialect, which distinguished them from the inhabitants of Judea (Mark 14:70).
    2. *Judea* is a reference is to Eretz Israel (“the promised land”) that was held to stretch from the Euphrates to the Egyptian border.
    3. *Cappadocia* was a region of Asia Minor, and was bounded on the east by Armenia, on the north by Pontus, west by Lycaonia, and south by Cilicia.
    4. *Pontus* was another province of Asia Minor, originally a part of Cappadocia.
    5. *Asia* is used here to denote the regions or provinces to the west that are not specifically named (cf. Acts 6:9; 16:6; 20:16).

6. *Phrygia* was surrounded by Galatia, Cappadocia, and Pisidia.
    - a) Antiochus III had deported 2,000 Jewish families to this region in the second century B.C. (Josephus, *Antiquities*, 12.3.4).
    - b) Paul had traveled through this region (Acts 16:6).
  7. *Pamphylia* was on the Mediterranean, and was bounded north by Pisidia; Paul had preached here during this first evangelistic journey (Acts 13:13).
  8. There were large Jewish populations in “Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia,” and the middle part of the book of Acts centers on Paul’s evangelistic missions in this area (Acts 13–19).
- C. The Egyptian.
1. *Egypt*—in the first century A.D. two-fifths of the population of Alexandria were said to have been Jews.
    - a) “...before the Babylonian Captivity, an Egyptian king set up a military colony of Judaeian mercenary soldiers at Elephantine, on the upper Nile near modern Aswan, to keep out the Kushites. It would seem that these Israelites continued to practice a Yahvism of the old, polytheistic form, unaffected by the monotheistic reforms that the priests and prophets put into practice before and during the Captivity.” (de Camp, *Great Cities of the Ancient World*, p. 51).
    - b) In the time of the prophet Jeremiah, a large number of Jews went to Egypt for fear of the king of Babylon and in opposition to the words of the prophet himself (Jer. 42:13–17).
    - c) Philo of Alexandria, a Hellenized Jew, claimed that over a million Jews lived in Egypt (c. 38 A.D.).
    - d) It was in Alexandria that the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation of the Old Testament, had been translated from Hebrew to Greek between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> centuries B.C.
  2. *Libya* was the area west of Egypt and Ethiopia, and among the Greeks it was a general name for Africa.
  3. *Cyrene* was the capital of the North African Roman province of Cyrenaica (modern Libya) was populated by a great number of Jews.
    - a) It had been settled by Greeks in the 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C.
    - b) It came under Roman control in 96 B.C.
- D. The Roman.
1. *Jews*—either native-born Jews or descendants of Jewish families.
  2. *Proselytes* were those Gentiles who had been converted to Judaism.
  3. Many of the Jews who had been brought to Rome in 62 B.C. as a part of Pompey’s triumph were later set free, and many resided in Rome.
  4. There were at least seven Jewish synagogues in ancient Rome.
- E. Added to this list you will find Cretans and Arabs.
1. *Crete* is an island to itself in the Mediterranean.
  2. *Arabia* in the New Testament refers to the kingdom of the Nabataean Arabs, who live east of Syria and Palestine; their capital was Petra.
  3. Though not mentioned by Luke, there were also Jews in Greece and “in almost all of the islands of the Grecian Archipelago and the Mediterranean Sea, and in some of these in large numbers” (Schurer, *A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Christ*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Div., Vol. II, p. 232).

- III. "For these were the Jews of the Diaspora: a people scattered throughout the Roman cities in small, well-organized colonies. Commercially adroit and religiously aloof, their presence was something of an irritation to the administration, though on the whole they were tolerated and in some places even afforded certain privileges and exemptions. Their ranks, as we have said, had been strengthened by the accession of a certain number of converts, fugitives from the bewilderment of a restless age who sought consolation in the exalted monotheism of the Jewish synagogue. Their number has been estimated at approximately seven per cent of the whole population of the Empire." (Lloyd, *Ancient Turkey*, pp. 218–219).
- IV. While Jews were found in every nation throughout the Greco-Roman world, anti-Semitism flourished.
- A. Among the nations of antiquity, no nation was ever hated as much as Israel.
  - B. Cornelius Tacitus, the Roman historian, believed that if a Gentile became a proselyte to Judaism, the first thing he was taught was to despise the gods, repudiate his nationality, and to hold worthless his parents, children and friends (Tacitus, *Histories*, 5:5).
  - C. It was claimed that Jewish ceremonies began with the yearly sacrifice of a Gentile (Josephus, *Against Apion*, 2.8.10).
  - D. When Herod the Great rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem, it became one of the most splendid buildings in the world.
    - 1. No pagan could enter the Temple, for it was fenced off and a "middle wall of separation" stood between Jews and Gentiles (Eph. 2:14–16).
    - 2. Surrounding the Temple was a wall, called the *chel*, which separated the court of Israel from the court of the Gentiles.
    - 3. The wall had a sign, written in both Greek and Latin, "which forbade any foreigner to go in, on pain of death" (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 15.11.5).
    - 4. "No intruder is allowed in the courtyard and within the wall surrounding the temple. Whoever enters will invite death for himself." (Inscription from the limestone block found in Jerusalem. The original is now at the Istanbul Archaeological Museum in Istanbul, Turkey).
    - 5. In commenting on Ephesians 2:15, Albert Barnes said: "The idea is, that the ceremonial law of the Jews, on which they so much prided themselves, was the cause of the hostility existing between them. That made them different people, and laid the foundation for the alienation which existed between them. They had different laws; different institutions; a different religion. The Jews looked upon themselves as the favorites of Heaven, and as in possession of the knowledge of the only way of salvation; the Gentiles regarded their laws with contempt, and looked upon the peculiar institutions with scorn." (Barnes, *Notes on the New Testament: Ephesians*, p. 47).
- V. If Christianity were ever going to conquer the world, then someone would have to bridge the gap between Jews and Gentiles.
- A. It would be hard to find such a remarkable man.
  - B. In the providence of God, Saul of Tarsus was selected (Acts 9:15; 26:12–18).

- C. It is probable that he was called both “Saul” and “Paul” from birth.
  - 1. “Saul” was the name he was called in his Hebrew home.
  - 2. “Paul” was the name by which he was known among the Gentiles.
    - a) “*Paulus*” is a Roman name.
    - b) In his letter to the church at Rome, Paul mentions two of his relatives, Junia and Lucius, who both had Roman names (Rom. 16:7, 21).

#### Discussion

### I. True Jewish Roots (Phil. 3:4–6; 2 Cor. 11:22)

- A. “Circumcised the eighth day” (Phil. 3:5).
  - 1. This was done in strict accordance with the Law (Gen. 17:12; Lev. 12:3).
  - 2. Isaac was circumcised when he was eight days old (Gen. 21:4).
  - 3. Ishmaelites were circumcised in their thirteenth year (Josephus, *Antiquities*, 1.12.2)
  - 4. Gentile proselytes were circumcised as adults.
  - 5. Paul demonstrated that he was neither a heathen nor an Ishmaelite.
- B. “Of the stock of Israel” (Phil. 3:5; 2 Cor. 11:22).
  - 1. He was specifically a member of the covenant nation; he was not of mixed stock, like many of the Jews who dwelt in Palestine.
  - 2. He was not a proselyte, but of the original “stock.”
  - 3. To be *of the seed of Abraham* was to have absolute racial purity.
- C. “Of the tribe of Benjamin” (Phil. 3:5; Rom. 11:1).
  - 1. By the first century A.D. many Jews could not trace their genealogy, or were descended from proselytes.
  - 2. Paul was not from one of the “lost tribes” of Israel.
  - 3. The tribe of Benjamin had a unique place in the history of Israel.
  - 4. Benjamin was the son of Jacob’s beloved wife, Rachael (Gen. 35:16–18).
  - 5. Benjamin was the only one of the patriarchs who had actually been born in the land of promise.
  - 6. It was from Benjamin that the first king of Israel had come (1 Sam. 9:1).
  - 7. When the tragic split of the kingdom came, Benjamin and Judah were the only two tribes who had remained faithful (1 Kings 12:21).
  - 8. When Israel went into battle, it was the tribe of Benjamin that held the post of honor (Hos. 5:8; cf. Judg. 5:12–14).
  - 9. During the terrible days of Babylonian captivity, it was Mordecai, “a Benjamite,” who saved the nation (Est. 2:5–6; cf. Est. 8:15–17).
  - 10. The jasper stone, upon which was inscribed the name of Benjamin on the breastplate of the High Priest, was the first foundation stone in the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:19; cf. Exo. 28:17–21).
- D. “A Hebrew of the Hebrews” (Phil. 3:5; 2 Cor. 11:22).
  - 1. A *Hebrew* was a Jew who could still speak Hebrew as opposed to the Jews of the Dispersion who had forsaken their native language for the Greek of their adopted countries.
  - 2. “The expression implies characteristics of language and manners. He might be an Israelite and yet a child of Greek-speaking Jews: but his parents had retained their native tongue and customs, and he himself, while understanding and speaking Greek, also spoke in Hebrew on occasion.” (Vincent, *Vincent’s Word Studies in the New Testament*, Vol. III, p. 446).

3. "In an age when 85% of the Jews in the world were living in the Diaspora, being a Hebrew-speaker would confer higher status as a Jew" (Stearn, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, p. 600).
  4. "It is true that the tradition of the language of the Jews had been broken, as the continuity of their political life had been rudely interrupted. The Hebrew of the time of Christ was not the oldest Hebrew of the Israelites; but it was a kindred dialect; and old enough to command a reverent affection. Though not the language of Moses and David, it was that of Ezra and Nehemiah." (Conybeare and Howson, *The Life and Epistles of St. Paul*, p. 30).
  5. Paul's accurate knowledge of the Hebrew language was probably acquired from sitting "at the feet of Gamaliel" (Acts 22:3).
  6. However, Paul must have been familiar with the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures) from an early age, for when he quotes from the Old Testament in his epistles he uses the Septuagint.
- E. If you searched the world over, you could not find a purer Jew than Paul!

## II. Born In Tarsus Of Cilicia

- A. Paul himself described Tarsus as "no mean city" (Acts 21:39).
1. The city has been in existence since before 4,000 B.C.
  2. In the second millennium B.C. it was an important Hittite town.
  3. In 860 B.C. Shalmaneser of Assyria listed Tarsus among his conquests.
  4. The city was captured and sacked by Sennacherib of Assyria in 696 B.C.
  5. In 333 B.C. Alexander the Great bathed in the icy waters of the Cydnus River and caught a cold that nearly killed him.
  6. After the death of Alexander the Great, the Egyptians conquered Tarsus.
  7. The Hellenic city of Tarsus was founded in 171 B.C.
  8. In 67 B.C. Pompey the Great occupied Tarsus during his campaign against the pirates in the Mediterranean.
  9. In 66 B.C. the government of Cilicia, including its capital, Tarsus, passed into the control of Rome.
    - a) Mark Antony made it a city free of taxes.
    - b) Tarsus witnessed one of Cleopatra's most famous exploits.
    - c) Mark Antony was in Tarsus preparing for war against the distant Parthians on the far eastern borders of the Roman Republic.
    - d) He suspected Cleopatra of plotting against him with his opponent Cassius, and he summoned her to appear before him.

- e) "She received several letters both from Antony and his friends to summon her, but she took no account of these orders; but at last, as if in mockery of them, she came sailing up the River Cydnus in a barge with gilded stern and outstretched sails of purple, while oars of silver beat time to the music of flutes and fifes and harps. She herself lay all along under a canopy of gold, dressed as Venus in a picture, and beautiful young boys, like painted Cupids, stood on each side to fan her. Her maids were dressed like sea nymphs and graces, some steering at the rudder, some working at the ropes. The perfumes diffused themselves from the vessel to the shore which was covered with multitudes... The marketplace was quite emptied and Antony at last was left alone sitting upon the tribunal, while word went through all the multitude that Venus was come to feast with Bacchus for the common good of Asia." (Plutarch, *Antony*, translated by John Dryden, <<http://classics.mit.edu/Plutarch/antony.html>>).
  - (1) Venus a Roman goddess associated with love, beauty and fertility—the equivalent of the Greek goddess Aphrodite.
  - (2) Bacchus was the Roman god of wine and intoxication, the equivalent of the Greek god Dionysus.
10. In the first century A.D. Tarsus had a large Jewish population.
- B. Tarsus was the capital in the province of Cilicia, and was one of the great centers at which the trade of the Mediterranean and of the hinterland of Asia Minor converged.
  1. It was famous for the manufacture of goats' hair felt, out of which tent-cloth, blankets, clothing, belts and saddles were made.
    - a) In addition to his religious instruction, every Jewish boy was also taught a manual trade.
    - b) Young Saul of Tarsus was taught the tent-making trade (Acts 18:3).
  2. The Cydnus River, 200 feet wide, ran through the center Tarsus.
    - a) However, Tarsus was ten miles inland from the mouth of the river.
    - b) Halfway between Tarsus and the Mediterranean Sea the river broadened out into a lagoon called Lake Rhegma.
    - c) It was to this lake that Cleopatra came.
    - d) The Tarsians had lined three sides of that lake with harbors and docks, and the ships of the Mediterranean sailed fully loaded into, and out of, that harbor.
    - e) In those days when piracy was unbridled, a sheltered and easily defended harbor was a precious possession.
- C. Thirty miles inland from Tarsus stand the massive Taurus Mountains—some peaks rise 10,000–12,000 feet above sea level—and there were few or no roads across it.
  1. Tarsus controlled the world-famous Cilician Gates, the strategic pass through the mountains.
  2. Sometime in the distant past men from Tarsus had chiseled out a pathway in a narrow gorge, and on that road the rich trade of Asia Minor and Syria passed through.
  3. Through the Cilician Gates passed some of the most famous men in world history, such as Xerxes, Darius, Cyrus the Younger, Alexander the Great, and the crusaders.



- D. Tarsus was also a “university town.”
1. The university of Tarsus was not as distinguished as the universities of some of the older cities.
  2. However, Strabo, the Greek historian, geographer and philosopher, described Tarsus as having surpassed “Athens, Alexandria, or any other place that can be named where there have been schools and lectures of philosophers” (Strabo, *Geography*, 14.5.13).
  3. Strabo “praises highly the zeal for philosophy and the whole range of education which characterized the people of Tarsus in his time. In this respect they surpassed Athens and Alexandria and every other seat of learning, for they not merely formed the entire audience in their own University (to which no students ever came from outside), but also sought to complete their education by resorting to foreign Universities; and those who educated themselves in that way were glad to remain abroad and few of them returned home.” (Ramsay, *The Cities of St. Paul*, p. 232).
    - a) Tarsus was famous for philosophers, and especially for those of the Stoic school.
    - b) Strabo names five famous Stoics who were born in Tarsus: Antipater, Archedemus, Nestor, Athenodorus Cordylion, and Athenodorus, the son of Sandon.
      - (1) Athenodorus Cordylion was head of the university when Paul was a child.
      - (2) Athenodorus Cordylion had also been a friend and an adviser to the Emperor Augustus.
    - c) Chrysippus and Aratus, two of the greatest of all the Stoic philosophers, were born in the nearby town of Soli.
  4. Although brought up in a strict Jewish home, Paul had the wealth of Greek literature and philosophy before him.
    - a) In his sermon to the philosophers at Mars’ Hill, Paul quoted the Greek poet Aratus of Soli, who was from Paul’s own province in Cilicia (c. 270 B.C.), “We are also his offspring” (Acts 17:28).
    - b) In Titus 1:12, he quotes from Epimenides, a Cretan poet, “Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.”
    - c) Paul’s statement in 1 Corinthians 15:33 that “evil company corrupts good habits,” was a well-known Greek proverb from a line of poetry in Menander’s comedy, *Thais*.
    - d) “J. Rendel Harris claims that he finds allusions in Paul’s Epistles to Pindar, Aristophanes, and other Greek writers. There is no reason in the world why Paul should not have acquaintance with Greek literature, though one need not strain a point to prove it.” (Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, Vol. III, p. 289).



- E. As far as civil government was concerned, Tarsus had the status of a *civitas libera*, a free city, self-governing and independent.
1. "We have good reason to believe that at the period of the Apostle's birth the Jews were unmolested at Tarsus, where his father lived and enjoyed the rights of a Roman citizen. It is a mistake to suppose that this citizenship was a privilege which belonged to the members of the family, as being natives of this city. Tarsus was not a *municipium*, nor was it a *colonia*, like Philippi in Macedonia, or Antioch in Pisidia; but it was a 'free city' (*urbs libera*), like the Syrian Antioch and its neighbor-city, Seleucia on the sea. Such a city had the privilege of being governed by its own magistrates, and was exempted from the occupation of a Roman garrison, but its citizens did not necessarily possess the *civitas* of Rome. Tarsus had received great benefits both from Julius Caesar and from Augustus, but the father of St. Paul was not on that account a Roman citizen. This privilege had been granted to him, or had descended to him, as an individual right; he might have purchased it for a 'large sum' of money; but it is more probable that it came to him as a reward of services rendered, during the civil wars, to some influential Roman." (Conybeare and Howson, *The Life and Epistles of St. Paul*, p. 38).
  2. Paul took advantage of his Roman citizenship (Acts 22:25–28).
  3. "To be a Roman citizen was no small honor. In A.D. 47 the Emperor Claudius had a census taken of the whole empire. The officials recorded that there were just under 6,000,000 citizens out of a total population of something like 80,000,000. Quite apart from the privilege of the vote, citizenship also guaranteed that the holder could not be flogged without a fair trial. He was also protected by Roman law and, in the event of a grave charge being brought against him, he might take his appeal to the highest court of all—the judgment of the emperor. The dignity and majesty of Roman law were the foundations upon which the whole fabric of the empire rested, and it was unique in the ancient world." (Bradford, *Paul the Traveller*, p. 12).
- F. "Tarsus was a meeting place between East and West. Politically it had been part of the Persian Empire and was an eastern port. Later under the Seleucids it was associated with Syria and that mixture of oriental and Hellenistic cultures. As an important commercial center and seaport, Tarsus's entire history was one of mixing East and West. With this blend of cultural environment, it is no wonder that Paul was able to bring together Jew and Gentile into one church and know the strengths and weaknesses of both." (Blake and Edmonds, *Biblical Sites in Turkey*, p. 74).
- G. "It was a city so cosmopolitan that none could walk the streets without coming into contact with the ends of the earth. It was a city with such a history that none could live in it without some sense of greatness. It was a city with such a desire for knowledge, such a respect for scholarship, and such an intellectual ferment of thought that no thinking young man could entirely escape the contagion of the thronging ideas which crowded the air. If a man was destined to be a missionary to the world at large, there was no better place in all the east for him to grow to manhood than in Tarsus." (Barclay, *The Mind of St. Paul*, pp. 25–26).

- H. If you visit Tarsus today, there are several sites worthy of exploring.
1. The Roman gate on the road to Mersin (Cleopatra's Gate, St. Paul's Gate).
    - a) This gate has no historical connection to either Cleopatra or Paul.
    - b) It is probably a 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. gate to the harbor.
  2. North of the Roman gate is "Saint Paul's Well."
    - a) Tradition claims that it is located where Paul's house once stood.
    - b) While this tradition is of dubious origin, the well does date back to Roman times, and is surrounded by Roman paving stones.
  3. North of the city is the Mosque of Makam (Makam Cami).
    - a) Islamic legend claims that near this mosque is the burial spot of the Old Testament prophet Daniel.
    - b) A funerary monument on the east side of the mosque is supposedly Daniel's tomb.
  4. Near the Mosque of Makam is a brick Roman bath.
  5. About 500 feet from St. Paul's Well you can see the remains of an ancient street, likely built during the Seleucid period (2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.).
    - a) This street was uncovered in 1993.
    - b) This east-west street is 23 feet wide and was built of black basalt.
    - c) A sewer system ran under the street.
    - d) In several places you can see the well-worn ruts made by wagon and chariot wheels.
  6. Ten to twelve miles north of Tarsus, near the village of Saglikli, is a section of a paved Roman road ("Roma Yolu") that led from Tarsus to the Cilician Gates.
    - a) The road is about 1.5 miles long, and runs through a hilly and very barren landscape.
    - b) An arch from the time of Septimius Severus (193–211 A.D.) still spans the nearly ten-foot-wide road.

### III. A Pharisee, The Son Of A Pharisee

- A. Paul was not only a devout Jew—he was a Pharisee, one of the "separated ones" (Acts 23:6; 26:5; Phil. 3:5).
1. The Four Gospels frequently mention two of the main groups among the Jews: the Sadducees and the Pharisees.
  2. The Sadducees were of the priestly family and lived in Jerusalem.
  3. The Pharisees were scattered all over the earth and were usually the teachers in the synagogues.
  4. The Sanhedrin, the Jewish equivalent of the Supreme Court, was composed of both Pharisees and Sadducees.
  5. The president of the Sanhedrin, until after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., was usually a Sadducee, not a Pharisee.
  6. After the destruction of Jerusalem the Sadducees and priests quickly lost their power and influence.
- B. About 600 years before Christ, Nebuchadnezzar deported practically all of the inhabitants of Judah over a fifteen-year period.
1. The Babylonians stripped the gold from the palace and sacked the Temple and all of the treasures.
  2. They destroyed the city walls, the houses and the Temple.

3. Only a few lower-class people were left in Israel, and the destruction of the Jews seemed to be final.
  4. This could have marked the end of the Jewish nation—they had no Temple, no leadership, and their kings were either dead or imprisoned.
  5. Godly men such as Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, Azariah and numerous others were committed to the faith of their forefathers—they were determined that their identity as a nation would not be erased by the Babylonians (Dan. 1:3–8).
  6. It was during these trying times that some Jews kept the hope of the return to their homeland in mind (cf. Isa. 14:3–4).
  7. The work of seven decades paid off in 538 B.C. when Cyrus, the king of Persia, released the Jews and allowed them to return home.
  8. Not all Jews chose to return—the land was poor and undeveloped and many had found a new life-style and a new religion (cf. Isa. 46).
- C. The Pharisees claimed their history went back to the time of Ezra.
1. Ezra spoke of those who “separated themselves” from “the filthiness of the heathen of the land, to seek the Lord God” (Ezra 6:21; 10:1–4).
  2. Nehemiah spoke of those of “the seed of Israel” who “separated themselves from all strangers, and stood and confessed their sins, and the iniquities of their fathers” (Neh 9:2).
  3. These men “entered into a curse and an oath to walk in God’s Law” (Neh. 10:28–31).
  4. How did Pharisees treat non-Pharisees? The following is abridged from Alfred Edersheim’s book, *Sketches of Jewish Social Life* (p. 236):
    - a) He could not buy from, nor to sell to a non-Pharisee.
    - b) He could not eat at a non-Pharisee’s table (as he might partake of what had not been tithed).
    - c) He could not admit a non-Pharisee to his table, unless he had put on the garments of a Pharisee (as his own old ones might else have carried defilement).
    - d) He could not give tithes to any priest who was not a member of the fraternity, or do anything in presence of a non-Pharisee.
- D. Around 168 B.C. Syrian King Antiochus IV Epiphanes (c. 215–164 B.C.) sacked Jerusalem and killed thousands of its citizens.
1. He garrisoned his troops there and attempted to Hellenize Judea by compelling Jews to adopt Greek culture and religion.
  2. He sacrificed a pig to the Olympian Zeus on the altar in Jerusalem—an act of utter blasphemy to the Jews.

3. "And after Antiochus had ravaged Egypt in the hundred and forty-third year, he returned and went up against Israel. And he went up to Jerusalem with a great multitude. And he proudly entered into the sanctuary, and took away the golden altar, and the candlestick of light, and all the vessels thereof, and the table of proposition, and the pouring vessels, and the vials, and the little mortars of gold, and the veil, and the crowns, and the golden ornament that was before the temple: and he broke them all in pieces. And he took the silver and gold, and the precious vessels: and he took the hidden treasures which he found: and when he had taken all away he departed into his own country. And he made a great slaughter of men, and spoke very proudly. And there was great mourning in Israel, and in every place where they were."  
(1 Maccabees 1:21–26).
  - a) A Jewish author wrote 1 Maccabees around 100 B.C., after the restoration of an independent Jewish kingdom.
  - b) "Our *First Book of Maccabees* itself gives a connected, minute and graphic narrative of the events that led to the Maccabaeen rising, then of the course of the rising itself, particularly of the exploits and fortunes of Judas Maccabaeus. It then proceeds to give the further history of the patriotic enterprises of the Jews, under the leadership of Jonathan, the brother of Judas, and of the institution of the Hasmonaeen high priesthood and the founding of Jewish independence by the former. Then lastly we have an account of Simon, Jonathan's brother and successor who, by establishing the combined office of priest and prince and making it hereditary in the family of the Hasmonaeans on the one hand, and by the complete emancipation of the Jewish people from Syrian supremacy on the other, completed on both its sides the work undertaken by Jonathan. The narrative is brought down to the death of Simon, so that altogether it embraces a period of forty years (175–135 B.C.)." (Schurer, *A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Christ*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Div., Vol. III, p. 7).
  - c) The book of 1 Maccabees, along with the other "Deuterocanonical books," have been included in the Catholic Bible since the Council of Trent (1545–1563 A.D.).
  - d) Most protestants and Jews regard this book as generally historically reliable, but not a part of inspired Scripture.
  - e) Josephus, a first century Jewish historian, completely rejected this book as being a part of the canon of the Bible.
4. Antiochus Epiphanes prohibited worship in the Temple, forbade circumcision on pain of death, sold thousands of Jewish families into slavery, destroyed all copies of Scripture that could be found, and slaughtered everyone discovered in possession of such copies, and tortured Jews to force them to renounce their faith.
  - a) He ordered that sacrifices to pagan gods were to be made in every Judean town.
  - b) Every month Seleucid soldiers searched Jewish homes to discover whether or not any Jews possessed a copy of the Torah or had circumcised their children.

5. Eventually the Maccabean revolt, with the help of the Romans, forced the Syrians out of Palestine.
  - a) Though outnumbered six to one, in 165 B.C. the Jews, under the leadership of Judas Maccabeus, regained their freedom.
  - b) Judas Maccabeus selected faithful priests, destroyed the altar of the Olympian Zeus and built a new one, and renovated the Temple.
  - c) On December 14, 164 B.C. (Chislev 25), exactly three years after its desecration, the Temple with its altar was rededicated and the daily sacrifices commenced.
  - d) This was the beginning of Hanukkah, the Jewish Feast of Dedication or Lights, an eight-day festival celebrating this event.
- E. During the time of Christ there were 25,000 to 30,000 inhabitants in the city of Jerusalem.
  1. In the first century there were about 6,000 Pharisees in the vicinity of Jerusalem (Josephus, *Antiquities*, 17.4.2).
  2. Those who did not belong to the fraternity still admired them.
  3. The Pharisees were able to spread their philosophy in the 480 synagogues scattered throughout the countryside around Jerusalem.
  4. The great majority of Pharisees were carpenters, fishermen and storekeepers—average men of the day.
- F. "In Jesus' day there were two rival schools within the sect of the Pharisees—the school of Hillel and the school of Shammai. The school of Hillel upheld the honor of tradition as even superior to the Law of Moses. The school of Shammai despised tradition when it clashed with Moses. The antagonism between these rival schools was so great that it was said that even 'Elijah the Tishbite would never be able to reconcile the disciples of Hillel and Shammai.' Of these two schools, that of Hillel was by far the more influential in its day; and its decisions have been held authoritative by the greater number of Rabbis." (Reese, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Acts*, p. xi).
- G. The Pharisees had so much respect for the Scriptures and wanted to protect them so much that they started adding to them.
  1. Their "helpful suggestions" soon were regarded as sacred law.
  2. To keep men from violating Torah law, the Pharisees put a "hedge" (*seyagim*, literally: *fences*) around it to keep a safe distance between a man and the laws of God.
  3. God prohibited "work" on the Sabbath—the Pharisees said you couldn't even pick grain (just to play it safe)—and don't heal on the Sabbath because that might be a borderline case.

#### IV. Trained At The Feet Of Gamaliel

- A. "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city and trained at the feet of *Gamli'el* in every detail of the *Torah* of our forefathers. I was a zealot for God, as all of you are today." (Acts 22:3, CJB).
1. Paul probably lived in Tarsus until he was eleven or twelve years of age, since most Jewish parents put their sons in training at the age of twelve.
  2. "The educational maxim of the Jews, at a later period, was as follows: — 'At five years of age, let children begin the Scripture; at ten, the Mishna; at thirteen, let them be subjects of the Law.'" (Conybeare and Howson, *The Life and Epistles of St. Paul*, p. 42).
  3. "At the age of 6, the Jewish boys took up the study of the Pentateuch, writing, and arithmetic. At the age of 10, the Mishna was added to the curriculum. The Mishna was in oral form in Paul's day, and the teacher would recite the lesson to the pupil; and then the pupil was to recite the lesson back to the teacher verbatim ... At the age of 15, *Gemara* was added. The *Gemara* was a still later and more extensive development of the Midrash which was a part of the Mishna: the *Gemara* contained the discussion of the rabbis down through the centuries." (Reese, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Acts*, pp. 345–356).
- B. Gamaliel was the grandson of Hillel, the founder of the more liberal of the two rabbinical schools in Jerusalem (the other was the austere and strictly orthodox school of Shammai).
1. Gamaliel is usually referred to as Gamaliel the Elder.
    - a) He was the first of six Gamaliels.
    - b) "His son Simon also enjoyed extraordinary fame as a scribe" (Schurer, *A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Christ*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Div., Vol. I, p. 365).
    - c) Gamaliel the Elder had a grandson named Gamaliel II.
  2. Gamaliel was president of the Sanhedrin (the Jewish council) after the death of his own father, Rabban Simeon.
  3. Lightfoot claims he was the 35<sup>th</sup> "receiver of the traditions" (Lightfoot, *A Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Hebraica*, Vol. IV, p. 52).
  4. "Gamaliel may have been one of the doctors in the midst of whom the boy Jesus had sat, hearing and asking questions (Lu. 2:47)." (Furneaux, *The Acts*, p. 79).
  5. "*Gamaliel I*, also known as Gamaliel Ha-Zaken (the Elder), who was the grandson of Hillel and the first to bear the title *Rabban* (master-teacher). He was held in high esteem and is mentioned with reverence in the New Testament. He was the author of many reforms 'for the improvement of society,' especially regulations designed to protect the rights of women." (David Bridger, *The New Jewish Encyclopedia*, p. 159).
  6. "...he was certainly one of the most influential men of his day, as well as one of the finest intellects. There were about 1,000 students in the House of interpretation, or rabbinical college, during the period that Paul was studying." (Bradford, *Paul the Traveller*, p. 35).

- C. Paul was taught “at the feet of Gamaliel” (Acts 22:3).
  - 1. Some think this refers to the Jewish custom of the pupils sitting on benches or on the floor, while the rabbi taught from an elevated platform.
  - 2. “*The rabbis taught*: From the days of Moses until Rabban Gamaliel, they did not study Torah [in any posture] other than standing. After Rabban Gamaliel died, an infirmity descended into the world, and they used to study Torah sitting. *And that is as is taught*: After Rabban Gamaliel died, the honor of Torah was lost.” (*Babylonian Talmud*, Megillah 3:4).
- D. Gamaliel was a true scholar who not only knew Greek literature, but advised his students to study it as well.
  - 1. Gamaliel rose above the prejudices of his party.
  - 2. Luke describes him as “a teacher of the law held in respect by all the people” (Acts 5:34).
  - 3. Most Pharisees taught that reading Greek literature was just as “sinful” as reading Egyptian mysticism!
  - 4. He taught that the Jews should greet the heathen with “Peace be with you,” even on a heathen feast day.
  - 5. He also taught that poor Gentiles should have the same right to glean the harvest fields as poor Jews.
- E. Gamaliel was one of only seven Rabbis in history to be called “Rabban.”
  - 1. “He was one of the seven Rabbis to whom the Jews gave the highest title *Rabban* (our Rabbi). *Rabbi* (my teacher) was next, the lowest being *Rab* (teacher).” (Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, Vol. III, p. 387).
  - 2. It is not an understatement to say he was the most distinguished and revered living rabbi during the early days of the New Testament church!
  - 3. Gamaliel died in 52 A.D., just 18 years before the destruction of Jerusalem.
  - 4. His son, Simeon, perished in the destruction of Jerusalem.
- F. The teachings of Rabban Gamaliel are still held in high regard.
  - 1. He championed the cause of wives against unprincipled husbands and of widows against greedy children.
  - 2. The Talmud is a summary of Jewish oral law (traditions) that evolved after centuries of scholarly effort by sages who lived in Palestine and Babylonia until the beginning of the Middle Ages.
  - 3. The Talmud has two main components: the *Mishnah*, a book of law and the rabbinical commentary on the Mishnah, known as the *Gemara*.
  - 4. “Rabban Gamaliel used to say: Whosoever has not said [the verses concerning] these three things at Passover has not fulfilled his obligation. And these are they: Passover, unleavened bread, and bitter herbs: ‘Passover’—because God passed over the house of our fathers in Egypt; ‘unleavened bread’—because our fathers were redeemed from Egypt; ‘bitter herbs’—because the Egyptians embittered the lives of our fathers in Egypt.” (*The Mishnah*, Pesahim 10:5).
  - 5. “When Rabban Gamaliel the Elder died, the glory of the Law ceased and purity and abstinence died” (*The Mishnah*, Sotah 9:15).
  - 6. The name of “Gamaliel” is found 2,065 times in the *Babylonian Talmud* (not all of these are in reference to Gamaliel the Elder).



- G. Paul was a trained Rabbi who knew the Old Testament as a Rabbi knew it.
  - 1. He knew the special “traditions” (oral law) of the Rabbis.
  - 2. He said that the Law was given through angels (Gal. 3:19; Heb. 2:2).
    - a) In the Old Testament itself there is no mention of angels in regard to the Law; in the Exodus account God gave the Law directly to Moses.
    - b) Rabbinic tradition claimed that the Law came to men from God through the mediation of angels.
    - c) Paul knew that rabbinic tradition and sanctions it by inspiration.
  - 3. Paul claimed that the Law was given 430 years after Abraham (Gal. 3:17).
    - a) That again is a rabbinic addition to the Old Testament story.
    - b) Again, by inspiration Paul sanctions the rabbinic tradition.
  - 4. Paul spoke of “the rock that followed them” (1 Cor. 10:4).
    - a) According to the traditions of the Rabbis the rock from which the children of Israel received water in the wilderness actually followed them throughout their journey ever after.
    - b) That story was is not part of the Old Testament narrative.
    - c) Again, Paul sanctions the rabbinic tradition by inspiration.
  - 5. If ever there was a Jew who was steeped in Judaism, that Jew was Paul.
  - 6. No one could say that Paul had abandoned Judaism because he did not understand it, or did not fully realize what it was.
- H. Some have suggested that Paul, the brilliant and jealous Rabbi, would have been the logical successor to Gamaliel.
- I. “What did Gamaliel think of his brilliant pupil? One would like to have a word from him. But the position of leadership to which he will soon attain shows that the master’s approval rested on Saul. Perhaps the old teacher looked proudly on the young man from Tarsus as a possible successor. When Saul left Jerusalem he was to all intents and purposes the one young Jew in all the world who had most in prospect before him. He had been educated as a rabbi and the career of a rabbi lay before him. But that was not all. Many a young rabbi lived in comparative obscurity. This young rabbi had great friends at Jerusalem who could help him to the highest places if he proved worthy. We may imagine the joy of his parents as he returned home full of honor, the hope of Gamaliel and the pride of his home.” (Robertson, *Epochs in the Life of Paul*, pp. 20–21).

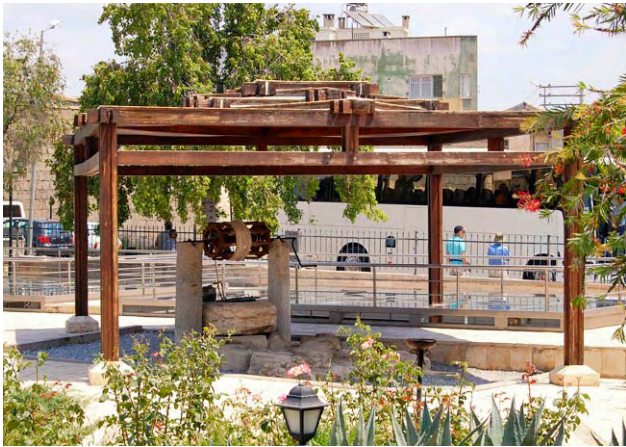
#### *Conclusion*

- I. There was a time when Saul of Tarsus, the brilliant student of Rabban Gamaliel the Elder, tried to destroy the religion of Jesus of Nazareth (Acts 26:9–11).
  - A. He had a part in putting Christians to death!
  - B. He could never forgive himself for his terrible deeds (1 Cor. 15:9).
  - C. In time he could honestly say, “But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ” (Phil. 3:7).
- II. Paul’s only consolation was that he “did it ignorantly in unbelief” (1 Tim. 1:13).
  - A. He considered himself the chief of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15).
  - B. If such a one as Paul could find mercy from the Lord, you can too!

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*"Saint Paul's Well" in Tarsus*



*"Cleopatra's Gate" in Tarsus*



*Cyndus River Waterfall in Tarsus*



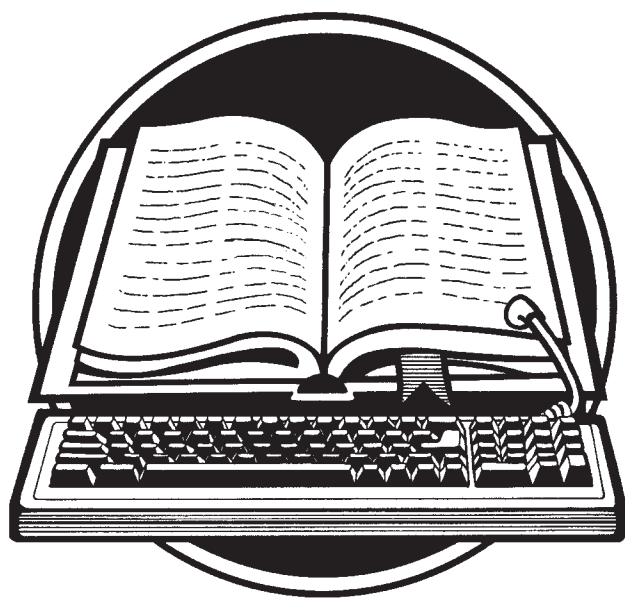
*Remains of the Roman baths in Tarsus*



*Mosque of Makam in Tarsus*



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