



Summary :

The Hebrew Saul had been a persecutor of Christians before he became the most important representative and apostle of the new religion under the name Paul. As a missionary he travelled for a long time in the eastern Mediterranean and particularly in Asia Minor, where he founded a large number of new churches. His preaching is included, among other texts, in 14 epistles preserved in the New Testament.

Date and Place of Birth

Early 1st c. AD, Tarsus, Cilicia

Date and Place of Death

64 or 67 AD, Rome

Main Role

Missionary

1. Sources

As it happens with most figures of early Christianity, there is little information about Apostle Paul. All knowledge is drawn mainly from the texts of the New Testament, particularly the Acts of the Apostles, which were allegedly written by Luke the Evangelist. Another valuable source is the 14 epistles of Paul to local early churches or to church representatives.¹ Only the repeated reading of these texts in combination with the deep knowledge of the specific historical period can provide a clear picture of the early teachers of Christianity, who in other respects are enshrouded in myths later fabricated by spiritual leaders of the new religion.

2. Biography

Saul or Paul was born in [Tarsus](#) of [Cilicia](#) between 5 and 15 AD and must have died in Rome between 64 and 67. Three things are certain about Paul's descent: he was born into a Jewish family originating from the Tribe of Benjamin,² the family was settled in Tarsus,³ and its members enjoyed the civil rights of this Cilician city, while Paul was also granted the *tria nomina* and the Roman citizenship, which was probably a privilege of the family. Paul's family must have had full political rights in Tarsus, which made researchers put forward the theory that they had possibly settled there when the city was re-founded as Antioch by [Antiochus IV](#) (175-164 BC), following a migration policy very common to the [Seleucids](#). As evidenced by the Acts, Paul laid particular emphasis on his Hebrew identity, which affected his personality and choices when he shaped and taught his Christian views.⁴ However, he was very proud of his Tarsian origin, while he also declared his Roman citizenship in order to receive help during his trips or defend himself, if necessary, against his persecutors.

As for the financial condition of his family, it has often been written that it was prosperous. Moreover, tradition wants it that in his youth he went to Jerusalem to study under the famous rabbi Gamaliel.⁵ It is very likely that he also received a Greek education, as he had deep knowledge of the culture and literature of the pagan world. It is obvious from the context of the *Acts of the Apostles* and his epistles that Paul actually enjoyed wealth and titles, which he refused for the sake of his mission. Indeed, while being a missionary Paul worked as a tentmaker, and his missions were financially supported by the local Christian communities.⁶ A possible explanation bridging this contradictory facts is that after his conversion Paul broke his relations with his family, which belonged to the class of the Pharisees,⁷ and renounced the family property either voluntarily or by force. However, not all members of his family turned their backs to him, for the *Acts of the Apostles* report that his sister's son, who must have had access to the Judaist elite, tried to save him from a conspiracy in Jerusalem.⁸

3. From Saul to Paul



At a very early age, Saul was instilled with the Pharisaic ideology, since he is reported to have been a persecutor of Christians.⁹ According to one of the most famous excerpts of the Christian literature,¹⁰ his conversion took place in 34 AD, while he was riding to Damascus in order to arrest the Christianized Jews of the city. A dazzling light surrounded him and the booming voice of Jesus asked him: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Saul fell senseless to the ground and when he regained his senses he realized that he was blind.¹¹ Frightened by the metaphysical incident, the men of his escort took him to the city. Saul remained blind and had no food for three days. Then Ananias, one of the new converts to Christianity, who had been warned by Jesus in a vision, visited him and after making him promise that he would never persecute Christians again, he healed him.

Saul was baptized under the name Paul. However, his conversion provoked fury among the Hebrews of Damascus, who launched a man-hunt against him. His friends helped him escape by lowering him down in a basket outside the city walls during the night. Then Paul made for Jerusalem, where he came under the protection of Barnabas, the subsequent apostle, and started teaching against the Hellenist or heathen Hebrews (Gentiles), thus triggering their anger. Therefore, it was necessary that he leave and went to Tarsus, where he stayed for approximately eight years, teaching and shaping his personal outlook on Christian teachings. In that period he must have also changed his views on the recipients of his preaching, and included in his future believers not only Hebrews of any origin and ideology, but also non-circumcised Hebrews, whom the apostles had at first classified into a separate class, the "pious" or "godfearers" or converts.¹²

4. Paul's Missionary Activities

While Paul was in Tarsus, the other apostles were traveling all over the empire preaching the word of God to the Hebrews. At some later moment, probably around 42 AD, they gathered in [Antioch](#). Barnabas looked for Paul in Tarsus and took him to the Syrian capital. The apostles stayed there for about a year in order to strengthen the local church and, according to the *Acts of the Apostles*, it was then that they started calling themselves Christians.¹³ After a year or so, it was decided (under the light of the Holy Spirit as the Bible says) that Barnabas and Paul should leave and preach the divine word.¹⁴ This is how [Paul's first journey](#) into Asia Minor started, which was to bring him to Cyprus, [Lycaonia](#), [Pamphylia](#), [Galatia](#) and [Phrygia](#). Paul and Barnabas taught in Greek even those that did not understand the language, and managed to attract a large part of the population. But a severe famine struck the empire those days and the two apostles decided to collect material help and take it to Judaea in order to relieve their brothers. On their way there, they taught in synagogues of Phoenicia and Samaria. On fulfilling this mission, they returned to Lycaonia to complete their journey to Asia Minor.

At [Lystra](#) they were joined by Timothy, the offspring of a mixed marriage between a Hebrew mother and a Greek father. While they were in the Troad, getting ready to travel to Bithynia, a new divine vision advised them to move to Macedonia. Paul and Timothy sailed there and made their first important stop at Philippi. In 45 and 46 AD they toured the Greek mainland and reached as far as Corinth. Paul's stay and preaching in Athens should be noted: he chose to speak publicly to the Athenians at the hill of Areopagus. In his teaching he adduced the altar to the "unknown god", which stood in the city those days, in order to start unfolding his preaching. The Athenians made a mock of him and were not persuaded by his words, with the exception of two citizens, Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman called Damaris. In Corinth, Paul stayed for a year and a half with the converts [Aquila and Priscilla](#), tentmakers as well.

When Paul completed these journeys, he returned to Antioch. But a conflict with Peter and those who opposed the expansion of the Christian body after the conversion of non-circumcised Hebrews and heathens brought him once again to Asia Minor. After visiting the churches he had already founded, Paul settled in [Ephesus](#). He stayed there between 53 and 56 AD and worked as a tentmaker. Then he made another short journey to the Greek mainland before finally moving to Jerusalem, where he celebrated the Pentecost in 56 AD together with the other apostles. However, he was not so lucky this time. A conspiracy launched against him by fanatical Hebrews led to his arrest by the Roman authorities, which accused him of troublemaking. Paul was originally imprisoned in Jerusalem and was later taken to [Caesarea](#). He adduced his Roman citizenship and asked to be tried in Rome. However, because of an idle Roman commander, Paul stayed in Caesarea's prison for at least two years. The next Roman commander finally managed to send him to Rome. During this voyage to the capital of the empire, Paul never stopped preaching. He sent some epistles to the churches he had founded, trying to encourage the faithful. When the ship they sailed on sank in Malta struck by a storm, he ceased the opportunity



to convert people from this isolated Mediterranean island.¹⁵ His journey continued possibly through Sicily, which he crossed on foot. When he reached Rome, he was placed for another two years under house arrest, where he persistently taught students streaming from everywhere. His ambition was to travel to Spain. However, it remains unknown whether he finally managed it or stood a trial and was sentenced to death. The information provided in the sources about the date of his death is vague. Eusebius of Caesarea reports that Paul was executed in Rome in Nero's years. Subsequent research talks about 64 or 67 AD. According to other writers, Paul was beheaded on the same day as Apostle Peter, on June 29, the day their memory is celebrated by the Christian church.

In his journeys, Paul was frequently faced with idolaters, magicians, charlatans, philosophers and the Roman authorities. On very few occasions Paul appears to make use of magical powers or perform miracles in order to convert his enemies or those that questioned him. But his real powers were his persuasion and excellent eloquence. The use of declaratory gestures of the hands and his fixed glance, which withered his opponents, were his great weapons.

5. Writings

Paul is one of the most prolific Christian writers of the "first generation". Apart from his preaching, snatches of which are included in the *Acts of the Apostles*, Paul also wrote a set of epistles to distinguished churches in order to strengthen faith or provide solutions to various issues. The epistles attributed to Paul (although the parentage of some of them is questioned) are: *Epistle to Romans*, two *Epistles to Corinthians*, *Epistle to Galatians*, *Epistle to Ephesians*, *Epistle to Philippians*, *Epistle to Colossians*, two *Epistles to Thessalonians* and the *Epistle to Hebrews* as well as some epistles to select students and apostles, such as the *Epistles to Timothy*, the *Epistle to Titus* and the *Epistle to Philemon*. The epistles reveal the ideas he instilled into Jesus' preaching, thus shaping the Christian practices of life. In this way he formulated the description of the Church as the "body of Christ",¹⁶ the union of two creatures in one body through marriage,¹⁷ the renunciation of personal freedom for the sake of love and kindness to fellow beings,¹⁸ the supremacy of love against hope and faith,¹⁹ as well as a radical view supporting equality among Christians, which referred to devotion and to the leadership of Christian communities.²⁰ The main problem the early Christian communities had to deal with was the coexistence of Hellenist and Orthodox Hebrews. With his strenuous efforts, Paul managed to relieve the Hellenists of the duty to obey to the practices of the Hebraic Law. The Holy Communion, an established practice which later became one of the seven mysteries of the Church, was possibly a *modus vivendi* and a new way of coexistence. Due to their importance, Paul's epistles were included in the sacred canon and cover a considerable part of the New Testament.

6. Evaluation

Paul the Apostle is certainly the most influential figure of early Christianity. In fact, as several historians of religion believe today, it was Paul that turned Christianity into a religion. Thanks to his Pharisaic descent he received a better theoretical education and was more experienced in political matters in comparison with the other apostles. He spoke Greek and Hebrew fluently, which gave him the chance to speak to both Jews and Hellenist Hebrews, but also to heathens, and even talk with philosophers in Athens. Despite his early disbelief and adherence to Hebrew customs, such as the circumcision, which aimed to prove the superiority of the Hebrew people, he was the first among the apostles to envisage a Christian community including not only Hebrews, but all the people, even women, as it becomes obvious from the conversion of a woman from Philippi of Lydia, who worked as a purple dye seller. This shows that he was the first apostle that offered an ecumenical dimension to the Christian preaching. For this reason he was persecuted by his compatriots on several occasions, as it happened in Damascus, Jerusalem and Thessaloniki.

At times the converts adopted an arrogant attitude towards their fellow citizens, which triggered the fury of the Roman authorities (as it happened in Philippi and Corinth, when Paul was summoned to apologise before the proconsul of Achaëa, Gallio). On the whole, the period when Paul taught, in the mid-1st c. AD, was very difficult for the followers of the new religion. Their difference from the followers of other mystic cults was obvious due to their denial to participate in other mysteries, particularly those requiring the consumption of sacred slaughtered animals and mainly the worship of the emperor. Both Claudius and Nero were reserved, if not openly hostile, towards Christians, while on several occasions they sent instructions to the Roman governors on persecuting the new religion. The difficult position of the early Christians aroused serious doubts among the Hebrews that had not been converted yet, as the coming of the Messiah, which the apostles preached, amounted to salvation from political and earthly bonds in their mind. Paul



found difficulty in persuading some of them of the eschatological nature of this salvation, which would be granted after a life devoted to love and self-denial. The inclusion of non-circumcised Hebrews into the circle of the faithful signaled the permanent break of relations between the fanatical Hebrews with Pharisaic deviations and those, mainly among the Hellenists, who accepted the new order taught by Paul.

Moreover, Paul managed to found a large number of churches along central commercial and road axes of the empire, particularly in Asia Minor, but also on the Greek mainland, clearly demonstrating the necessity for hierarchy in Christian communities. This would prevent them from dissolution and would help them enter the social and political framework of the Roman Empire. In this way and with his guidance, Paul was finally able to turn Christianity from a Hebrew heresy into an ecumenical religion of the empire.

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1. Although modern scholars doubt whether Paul was the writer of all 14 epistles, he is considered the indisputable writer of the following: *Epistula ad Romanos*, *Epistula ad Galatas*, *Epistula ad Philippenses*, *Epistula I ad Corinthios*, *Epistula II ad Corinthios*, *Epistula I ad Thessalonicenses* and *Epistula ad Philemonem*.
 2. See *Phil.*, 3.5.
 3. *Acts*, 21.39, 22.3.
 4. *Phil.*, 3.5.6; *Acts*, 23.6.
 5. See *Gal.*, 1.14; *Acts*, 22.3, 26.4. However, because the epistle to the Galileans is not considered an original text written by Paul, it contradicts another point, where he states that it was easy for him to be in Jerusalem as he was a stranger there, while the information concerning the period he spent by Gamaliel is questioned. In any case, the structure of his speech and the deep knowledge he had of Judaist theology prove that even if he had not studied by Gamaliel, he must have sat under another rabbi, who offered Paul a solid Judaist education.
 6. This is what Paul often reports in his epistles; see *Phil.*, 4.15, *2 Cor.*, 11.9, *2 Thess.*, 9.
 7. The Pharisees remained loyal to the strict Judaist line and never accepted the coming of the Messiah.
 8. *Acts*, 23.16.
 9. *Phil.*, 3.3-4; *Gal.*, 1.13-24.
 10. *Acts*, 9.1-20.
 11. *Acts*, 9.1-29, 22.3-21, 26.9-21.
 12. The exact meaning of the term, the people it included and the preconditions of the inclusion is a question still open for research; see Williams, M.H., "The Jews and godfearers inscription from Aphrodisias. A case of patriarchal interference in early 3rd century Caria?", *Historia* 41 (1992), pp. 297-310, and Reynolds, J.M. – Tannenbaum, R., *Jews and god-fearers at Aphrodisias. Greek inscriptions with commentary* (Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society, Supplement 12, Cambridge 1987).
 13. *Acts*, 11.26.
 14. *Acts*, 13, 14.
 15. The Catholic Church has proclaimed Paul the patron saint of Malta.



16. *I Cor.*, 12.27.

17. *I Cor.*, 7.1-40.

18. *I Cor.*, 9.

19. *I Cor.*, 13.

20. *I Cor.*, 12-14.

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	Ephesians http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Bible_%28King_James%29/Ephesians
	The Life and Epistles of St. (Apostle) Paul - Table of Book Contents http://www.biblestudy.org/apostlepaul/life-epistles-of-apostle-paul/contents.html



The Prayer of the Apostle Paul -- The Nag Hammadi Library

<http://www.webcom.com/gnosis/naghamm/prayp.html>

Glossary :

tria nomina

Three characteristic names that completed the naming of Roman citizens. It consisted of the praenomen (first name), the nomen gentilicium (the name of family or tribe to which he belonged) and cognomen (name of the branch of his family) or agnomen (a typical personal name which was due to some kind of attribute, that is a kind of nickname).

Sources

Paul the Apostle, *Epistula ad Philippenses*, 3.3-4, 3.5.6, 4.15

Paul the Apostle, *Epistula I ad Corinthios*, 1.9, 1.13, 2.11.9, 7.1-40, 12-14

Paul the Apostle, *Epistula ad Galatas*, 1.13-24

Paul the Apostle, *Epistula I ad Thessalonicenses*, 2.9

Acts of the Apostles 9.1-20, 21.39, 22.3, 23.6, 23.16, 26.4

Quotations

The Conversion of Saul (in Greek)

3. Και καθώς πορευόταν, πλησίαζε στη Δαμασκό, και ξαφνικά άστραψε γύρω του φως από τον ουρανό·

4. και πέφτοντας κάτω στη γη, άκουσε μια φωνή να του λέει: «Σαούλ, Σαούλ, γιατί με καταδιώκεις;».

5. Και είπε: «Ποιος είσαι, Κύριε;». Και ο Κύριος είπε: «Εγώ είμαι ο Ιησούς, τον οποίο εσύ καταδιώκεις»·

6. Εκείνος δε τρέμοντας, και ενώ έμεινε έκθαμβος, είπε: «Κύριε, τι θέλεις να κάνω;». Και ο Κύριος του είπε: «Σήκω, και μπες μέσα στην πόλη, και θα σου λαληθεί τι πρέπει να κάνεις».

[...]

8. Και ο Σαύλος σηκώθηκε από τη γη· και είχε ανοιχτά τα μάτια του, όμως δεν έβλεπε κανέναν· και χειραγωγώντας τον, τον έφεραν μέσα στη Δαμασκό.

[...]

10. Υπήρχε δε κάποιος μαθητής στη Δαμασκό που ονομαζόταν Ανανίας [...]

[...]

13. Και ο Ανανίας αποκρίθηκε: «Κύριε, από πολλούς άκουσα γι' αυτόν τον άνδρα, όσα κακά έκανε στους αγίους σου στην Ιερουσαλήμ»·

14. »κι εδώ έχει εξουσία από τους αρχιερείς να δέσει όλους όσους επικαλούνται το όνομά σου».



15. Και ο Κύριος του είπε: «Πήγαινε, δεδομένου ότι αυτός είναι ένα εκλεκτό σκεύος σε μένα, για να βαστάξει το όνομά μου μπροστά σε έθνη και βασιλιάδες, και τους γιους του Ισραήλ»·

[...]

17. Και ο Ανανίας πήγε και μπήκε μέσα στο σπίτι· και αφού έβαλε επάνω του τα χέρια, είπε: «Σαούλ, αδελφέ, ο Κύριος, ο Ιησούς, που φάνηκε σε σένα στο δρόμο στον οποίο ερχόσουν, με απέστειλε για να ξαναδείς, και να γίνεις πλήρης Πνεύματος Αγίου»·

18. Κι αμέσως έπεσαν από τα μάτια του κάτι σαν λέπια, και ξαναείδε αμέσως· και καθώς σηκώθηκε, βαπτίστηκε.

(Acts 9.3-18)