

## 20. Enter Paul

Galatians 1:13-24

*We now take up the best-known of those who opposed the new Jesus sect, Saul of Tarsus, who had the public (Latin) name Paul.*

*What makes Paul so important? Why has he been called the second founder of Christianity? Why do his letters make up so large a portion of the New Testament? He says of himself in 1 Corinthians 9:22, "I am become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some." By his own testimony, then, everything Paul says is said for purposes of conviction; none of it is merely documentary. So his own evidence needs scrutiny. But his account of his own beginnings may be pretty accurate, and we may start there. That account was given in a letter reproaching his Galatian converts for so soon abandoning the Gospel he had earlier taught them. He passes over his conversion as simply a revelation from God (his own description of it, in another letter, differs greatly from the Road to Damascus story in Acts). But of his early opposition to the Alpha Christians, there can be no doubt. Here is what he says:*

For ye have heard of my manner of life in the Jews' religion, how that beyond measure I persecuted the church of God, and made havoc of it, and I advanced in the Jews' religion beyond many of mine own age among my countrymen, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers.

But when it was the good pleasure of God, who separated me, even from my mother's womb, and called me through his grace, to reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the Gentiles; straightway I conferred not with flesh and blood, neither went I up to Jerusalem to them that were apostles before me; but I went away into Arabia, and again I returned to Damascus.

Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas.<sup>1</sup> But other of the apostles saw I none; save Jacob the Lord's brother. Now touching the things which I write unto you, behold, before God, I lie not.

Then I came into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. And I was still unknown by face unto the churches of Judaea which were in Christ; they only heard say, He that persecuted us now preacheth the faith of which he once made havoc; and they glorified God in me.

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<sup>1</sup>"Cephas" is the Aramaic form of the name Peter; both mean "rock," implying a person steadfast under pressure. Paul always refers to Peter by his Aramaic name.

*Reflections*

Many of the people in the New Testament are just names to us. Not so Paul. He is not only up front about himself, he is *insistently* up front about himself. His concern for his Apostolic credentials is understandable when we realize that he had never known Jesus, and was not among the Twelve who acquired administrative authority in Jerusalem, not long after Jesus' death. Paul admits that he was not among them; he insists that he never got anything from them. His commission as an Apostle came straight from God. And more than that, God had identified him as an Apostle even before he was born.

That is, he outranks them in the hierarchy of the Apostles. Or so he says.

Not the least of our problems in getting Paul straight is that Luke (in Acts) also tells us a lot about Paul, little of which matches what Paul himself says. Our problems increase: there are now two people whose word we must suspect (one of them swears, before God, that he is not lying; a most suspicious touch). Both of them seem to have some purpose of their own, in what they tell us.

Of one thing we may be sure: Paul was a Jew. Not just a Jew but a Pharisee, and thus committed to the rules of ritual which Jesus had opposed as subverting the true intent of the Law. Not only committed, but *more so than anybody else*. He stood out as zealous for those traditions. Probably this is what explains his violent opposition to the Jesus movement, when he first encountered it.

But at least one detail from Luke may be accepted: Paul was from Tarsus, the capital of Cilicia, on the southern coast of what we call Asia Minor, and the Romans called simply Asia. The Galatians to whom he was writing are the southern Galatians, near his home in Cilicia.

So Paul was a Jew of the Diaspora. He was exposed to local religions of which the Jews of Palestine knew nothing. His Judaism was zealous, but his cultural background *outside* Judaism was different. As a Christian, he has the fierce determination that is often seen among outsiders in an insider movement.

When was his conversion? The regular Apostles claimed to have seen visions of the risen Jesus soon after his death. Contentious Paul may well claim a vision in that same year, and count his years in the movement from that conversion. So when he went to Jerusalem to confer with Cephas, it will have been "three years" after Jesus' death, the year 33. His conversion may be dated to that year or shortly earlier. We will not be far wrong if we take it as 32.

So what made Paul change from zealous persecutor to zealous promoter? Paul himself suggests a possibility. But that possibility has a background, and we will first need to consider how Jesus was divinized by his later followers. How Jesus became a God.