

The Historical Paul: what do we know about him?

As we have already noted, the primary source of our information about the historical Paul must be his own letters, supplemented to some extent by the additional information offered by Luke in Acts.

Paul most likely became a believer in Jesus as early as 33CE. He was probably still quite a young man in that in his outline of his life prior to his Damascus road encounter, he claims that he had already advanced in Judaism “beyond many of my own age”, (Gal.1:13-15). This claim may be read as emphasising his zeal, notwithstanding his youth. On this reckoning Paul was somewhere in his early thirties or even younger when he was called to work among the gentiles.

Other information about Paul’s earlier life as a Pharisee may be gleaned from the book of Acts. Although the information from Acts has to be read with some caution, Paul is mentioned as a persecutor of the ekklesia, and as firmly rooted in his Jewish tradition. In Luke’s narrative in Acts, Paul appears on the scene in ch.7:58, as a young man called Saul, who was present at the stoning of Stephen. Both Acts and Paul’s own letters agree on the evidence that Paul had persecuted “the church of God”, Gal.1:13,23,1 Cor.15:9, Acts 9:1f.). That Paul spoke Hebrew, and its more modern form Aramaic, received his secondary education in Jerusalem and spent his teenage years there (see Acts. 26:4) need not be disputed, even though he was born in Tarsus in the Roman province of Cilicia (Acts.22:3). Luke also claims that Paul was a free-born Roman citizen, (Acts 22:28). Whatever his geographical and linguistic background, there can be no debate concerning the fact that Paul’s self-perception and self-designation was as “a Hebrew of the Hebrews”(2 Cor. 11:22, Phil.3:5). His identity was acknowledged as that of an Israelite, even after he had joined the Christ-movement, (Rom.11:1, 2Cor.11:22).

The course of Paul’s life was changed from persecuting the Christ-movement, to becoming an enthusiastic participant following his vision of Christ on the Damascus road. He probably learnt his earliest understanding of “the way”, as the Jesus movement was first described, from the believers in Damascus. He then went away into Arabia, later returning again to Damascus (Gal.1:27).

What Paul did in the years between his call and the writing of the first letters we have from him in the New Testament, is not completely clear. The first letters can be dated from about the year 48-49CE, but Paul had been a believer in Jesus for some 15 years or so prior to this. One possibility is that Paul worked at first with the great caravan trains passing through Arabia. These would have been a very mixed group of people, the Jewish members of which would have been regarded as sinners because they would not have been able to maintain food regulations and other purity systems en route, especially in distant lands. Also Paul’s communication through letter writing to his believing communities may not have been his pattern from the first; perhaps this arose as a later development found necessary to maintain and support isolated communities.

What we do know about Paul with some degree of certainty is that two of his three visits to Jerusalem after his call took place in this early period. Some three years after his Damascus vision of Christ, he went there to meet Cephas (Peter), but James the brother of Jesus was the only other apostle he met on that visit Gal.1:18-19). Fourteen years later-whether this dates from his vision or from the first visit is unclear-he returned to Jerusalem with Titus a

valued gentile colleague who assisted him in his mission (Gal.2:1). This was a summit meeting to decide whether gentile converts should be compelled to become Jewish.

It was in fact the occasion when Paul's work and mission were publicly acknowledged by the leaders of the Christ movement. From this it is clear that by the year 48CE or thereabouts, Paul's mission had been in process for a sufficient period for its outcomes and effects to be well known within the Christ-following communities. It was also sufficiently influential as to require a summit meeting concerning its relation to the work of the other apostles, especially that of Peter.

We also learn from Romans 15:25-26 that Paul planned a third visit to Jerusalem with representatives and money from his gentile communities. According to Acts 21-28, Paul got into trouble in Jerusalem, eventually appealed to the Roman authorities and came after some time as a prisoner in Caesarea to be tried in Rome. He was a prisoner there for two years or more. It is likely that he was put to death there somewhere between 62 -64 CE.