

2. SAUL'S ORIGINS

The evangelist Luke and Paul himself assure us that the Apostle was a pure-blooded Jew, who was very proud of his origins and who was faithful to his religious beliefs to the point of martyrdom. This very fidelity caused him to persecute the Christians, whom he believed were dangerous enemies of the Jewish faith. His socio-religious roots are confirmed by important testimonies:



- a) "I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of an important city" (Acts 21:39).
- b) "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, educated strictly according to our ancestral law, being zealous for God, just as all of you are today" (Acts 3:3).
- c) [I was] circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church" (Phil. 3:5).

Tarsus, Paul's Hometown



Tarsus, Turkey

At the time of Paul, Tarsus had about 200,000 inhabitants and was the seat of many different business activities and schools of philosophy. As Paul said, it really was an important city. Saul was born here around 5 A.D. (in Acts 7:58, Luke reminds us that Saul was still a youth at the time Stephen was stoned). After leaving Jerusalem, Saul's ancestors settled in Cilicia along with other faithful Jews, becoming part of the Jewish diaspora (dispersion) (Acts 22:25-29). The Jewish community held their religious gatherings in the synagogue.

There, every Saturday, they reverently listened to a reading of the Scriptures, followed by a commentary on them. Saul came from a prosperous family because the Roman soldiers paid well for the tents his father made. Like good Jews, Saul's parents sent him to Jerusalem while he was still a boy to learn the Law from the best teachers of the time. In Saul's case, this teacher was Gamaliel.

Youth in Jerusalem

We can speculate that Saul arrived in Jerusalem when he was between 15-20 years old. In the school of the great teacher Gamaliel, he began to study the Scriptures, which he considered the greatest treasure of his life. He also learned to apply the Law to various situations. He became a Pharisee and scrupulously observed and defended the Law. We don't know if he met Jesus while he was in Jerusalem or merely heard people speak about him. The testimonies that have come down to us present Saul as clashing with the Christian community that sprang to life after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Saul was not interested in persecuting Jesus because he believed that he was dead, but he wanted to crush his followers, who were proclaiming that he was alive and who were putting his teachings into practice—teachings that were often in conflict with the Jewish Law in minor matters. Paul wrote to the Christians of Galatia (located in what is today Turkey), saying: "You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it" (Ga. 1:13). Saul was a practicing Jew and he ardently defended the faith on which he had based his life: faith in the God of his fathers (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and the prophets). He expressed this faith by passionately praying the Psalms. He considered the Torah (the Law of God

contained in the Pentateuch) the sure way to express his love and fidelity to God. Thus he dedicated his entire being to observing the Torah, to the point that he could say: "My life is the Law."

It was precisely in Jerusalem, the heart of the Jewish faith, that the followers of Jesus of Nazareth declared that all the promises of God had been fulfilled in Jesus, whom the Jewish teachers had judged to be a false prophet and who had had him crucified because of this. The followers of Jesus even went so far as to claim that he had risen from the dead! Saul approved the decision of the Jewish leaders to exterminate the Christians so that they could no longer blaspheme the name of God. In fact, he wanted to play an active role in wiping out this dangerous sect. The reaction of the Jewish leaders against this new group reached its culmination in the stoning of Stephen, the first martyr for the sake of Christ. Saul stood on the sidelines and encouraged those who had received permission to stone the young man. In the hope that this new sect would not put down roots in Jerusalem, he asked for the authorization of the Jewish elders to destroy the Christians.

All this information tells us that Saul spent his boyhood in the Hellenistic world of Tarsus and his teen years in the Jewish environment of Jerusalem, where he frequently visited the Temple and also became familiar with the Roman mentality, since that was the dominant culture. Because of this, Paul is known as "a man of three cultures."

For Deeper Reflection

Paul and the Cultural Milieu of Tarsus

We do not know whether or not Saul was a student of one of the important philosophers of Tarsus. His letters, without a doubt, witness to the fact that he readily uses the diatribe style of discussion commonly taught at that time, as well as examples and allegories drawn from the Greek masters (cf. the allegory of the body in 1 Co. 12:13-37). Paul's literary style reveals that he was a debtor to Greek thought, which he was familiar with since infancy. This cultural wealth allowed him to proclaim the Christian Faith in terms his listeners could understand. Thus we can conclude that Paul was an educated person who readily engaged in public debates and dialogue, and who reflected on things from a Christian perspective. However his principal book of reference remained the Bible, which, for him, meant the Old Testament.

Athenodorus, a noted Stoic philosopher who lived and died in Tarsus and who was the teacher of the Emperor Augustus, gave his illustrious student the following advice: "When you are angry, Caesar, don't say anything and don't do anything until you have mentally recited the entire alphabet over and over again" (Seneca, *Letters to Lucilius*, 1 X, 5).

This advice reminds us of Paul's words to the Ephesians: "Even if you are angry, do not sin: never let the sun set on your anger or else you will give the devil a foothold. No foul word should ever cross your lips; let your words be for the improvement of others, as occasion offers, and do good to your listeners" (Eph. 4:27, 29).

Sr Filippa Castronovo, fsp