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Paul's Dispersion Background

We call him the apostle Paul. His mission takes up at least half of Acts, and his epistles dominate our New Testament. If we are to understand him, we must look into his background in order to form as complete a picture as we can of the kind of person he was and of the various influences that shaped him.

We first meet Paul in Acts 7:58 as the "young man" at whose feet those who stoned Stephen laid their coats. One way to characterize him is as a Dispersion Jew. In the time of Jesus and Paul there were millions of Jews who lived in various places throughout the Roman Empire. Of a world Jewish population estimated at from 3 to 8 million, "The consensus seems to be that about two thirds of the Jews lived outside of Palestine."[1] These were significantly affected by cultural influences that were not as strong in Palestine. Paul was born into such a family and had been partly reared in the Dispersion ("the Diaspora").

This characterization of Paul as a Dispersion Jew serves as a convenient means of organizing our study of his background. In this chapter we will explore those influences on Paul that arose especially out of the fact that he was born in and affected by the non-Jewish culture of his world. In the next chapter we will consider those aspects of Paul's background that reflect his Jewish heritage.

We have no authentic biography of Paul. The New Testament gives no account of his life before he appears as a fully mature man at the scene of Stephen's martyrdom. But there is a surprising number

of references, in Acts especially, to Paul's background. These provide considerable insight into Paul's experiences between his birth and his conversion.

Two passages in particular, Acts 21:37–22:3 and 22:25–29, provide helpful information regarding the time and place of Paul's birth and rearing, his language, and his standing in the non-Jewish world.

PAUL'S BIRTHPLACE: THE INFLUENCE OF TARSUS

Paul said, "I am a Jew of Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no insignificant city" (Acts 21:39). "No insignificant city" designates Tarsus as no average, or ordinary, city, a city not to be looked down on. He also said that he was born there (Acts 22:3). Paul apparently had a sense of pride about the city of his birth. He regarded it as a city to be taken note of, an important city; he knew that those to whom he spoke would not disagree.

There are at least four reasons Tarsus would have been reckoned important. First was its size. In Paul's time Tarsus probably boasted a population of half a million, packed a little tightly into an area of some eight to ten square miles. Not many cities in the Mediterranean world would have been any larger.

Second was its trade. Tarsus was one of the busy and competitive centers of the Mediterranean's bustling commerce. A little time spent with a map (see the beginning of chap. 4) will show that its location was ideal. Tarsus was positioned on the southern side of that peninsula we call Asia Minor (now the land of Turkey), along the coastal plain of the province of Cilicia. It was a port city, a natural and well-protected harbor, a dozen miles upriver from where the Cydnus emptied into the Mediterranean. About twenty-five miles to the north of Tarsus were the Taurus Mountains, rich in the minerals and timber that made trade with Tarsus so desirable. By way of illustrating their zeal for trade, the Tarsians could proudly point to the Cilician gates. They had built that road across one of the passes in the Taurus Mountains earlier in their history; it was reckoned a mighty feat indeed.[2]

In addition to the mountains' resources, the Tarsians also traded in leather goods and *cilicium* (from the name of the province), a cloth woven from the hair of the black goats that populated the slopes of the Taurus range. "The black tents of Tarsus were used by caravans, nomads, and armies all over Asia Minor and Syria."[3]

A third reason for the importance of Tarsus was its political standing. A city so well situated could hardly fail to be a center of power, and Tarsus had been such a center for nearly a thousand years when Paul was born. In the earlier times of the empires of Assyria, Babylonia, and Medo-Persia, Tarsus was a leading city in Asia Minor. When Alexander's Greek empire was divided after his death, Tarsus was part of the territory controlled by the Seleucids. The famous Antiochus Epiphanes took special interest in Tarsus. He gave it his own name, Antiocheia, and made it self-governing (in 171/170 BC). It thus had the standing of a Greek city-state and was one of the most important in all of Antiochus's empire.

When Paul was born, Tarsus had passed into Roman control, and still its standing was recognized. The Romans designated many districts as *provinces* (see further, below), and Tarsus was the capital city of the province of Cilicia.[4] It was also awarded, by the Roman senate, the privileged standing of *libera civitas.*[5] These Latin words (Latin was the language of the Romans) mean "free city." Such a standing gave the city the right to govern itself apart from the provincial government as well as freedom from major Roman taxes, including duty on trade. It would also have been garrisoned by its own soldiers.[6]

One more reason for the importance of Tarsus should be mentioned briefly. Tarsus was a university city, surpassing even Athens and Alexandria in the general learning of its natives.[7] John Pollock mentions two of the more famous students of Tarsus, Athenodorus (a tutor of Augustus) and Nestor. In old age both of those men returned to the city from illustrious careers in Rome. They would have been alive during Paul's boyhood.[8] However, Paul himself, being the son of a strict Jewish Pharisee, would not have been exposed to the pagan education of those schools.

So Tarsus was a city of recognized significance. One does not have to be very imaginative to sense the kind of awareness Paul would have had if he spent the first years of his life there. He would have become familiar with the sea and with the ships that unloaded cargo at the docks of Tarsus from all over the Mediterranean. He would have heard the strange native tongues of the ships' crews and conversed with them in Greek, the most common language of the empire. He would have observed many travelers from Rome; Tarsus was a favorite vacation spot for highborn Romans. Many people mixed in Tarsus, and Paul could not have avoided being exposed to them and their ways. He would have obtained considerable understanding of the shape and culture of the Roman world and of the heterogeneous peoples that populated it.

In recent years some scholars have cast doubt on these possibilities, arguing that Paul, though born in Tarsus, did not spend any of his formative years there. W. C. van Unnik's little book *Tarsus or Jerusalem* may be considered the bellwether of this viewpoint. Van Unnik contends that Paul's family moved to Jerusalem when he was but an infant. His argument rests entirely on the meaning of one word (and the punctuation) in Acts 22:3: "brought up." It is beyond the scope of this text to respond to that view except to say that I remain unconvinced. What we know of Paul fits better with the view that he spent a considerable part of his boyhood in Tarsus. In the final analysis van Unnik is forced to account for Paul's "Hellenistic" (*Hellen* is the Greek word for Greece) awareness as a result of later years in Tarsus (following his conversion), and so the end result is not very different after all. Furthermore, if Paul's parents lived in Tarsus for some period before his birth (as will be seen below), then the subtle influences of Tarsus would have been felt in the home even if the family did move to Jerusalem during his infancy. Regardless, the next chapter will show that Paul's *primary* background was certainly Jewish; in that respect, at least, van Unnik is right.

When we evaluate the influence of Tarsus on Paul, we have to deal with more than his birth and boyhood there. Paul was a "citizen" of Tarsus (Acts 21:39). Just living there would not automatically

make him a citizen. Only the privileged were named citizens of a city; the general population, including most of the working and poorer classes, did not have that standing.

The citizens of a city were responsible for its government, and that was especially important in a city that was *libera civitas* like Tarsus. Those named citizens were the ones who would assemble to conduct the affairs of the city and make the decisions that affected its corporate life.[9]

Being a citizen of the city, by the way, was *not* the same as being a Roman citizen. Paul was that, too, as will be discussed below. Certainly the two often went together, but they were two distinct privileges. In the eastern provinces of the empire, being a citizen of a city was often of more practical advantage than Roman citizenship. Paul "thinks of himself first and foremost as a citizen of Tarsus, and only refers to his latent Roman status when it is expedient to do so."[10]

A person who was a citizen of a city was therefore automatically a person of influence. Conversely, the standing of citizenship was usually awarded to those who were more influential. Inasmuch as Paul spent no more than his boyhood in Tarsus, we can be confident that he became a citizen of that city in the same way he got his citizenship from Rome, namely, because his father was already a citizen (Acts 22:25–29). This has some fairly strong implications for our understanding of Paul's background. For one thing, it suggests that Paul was from a family of some influence and probably wealth. One thing required for inclusion in the roll of citizens was that one had to own property of certain worth.[11]

For another thing, we can safely assume that Paul's family had lived in Tarsus for a significant length of time before his birth; otherwise it is difficult to explain how this orthodox, Pharisaic, Jewish man (Paul's father, Acts 23:6) had gained Tarsian (and Roman) citizenship.

Long ago Sir William Ramsay offered a theory that would account for this family's privileged standing. Antiochus Epiphanes, a Seleucid ruler, took special interest in Tarsus, renaming it Antiocheia and settling a large colony of Jews there in 171/170 BC. Under such circumstances, that colony of Jews would have been given the large

measure of responsibility for the affairs of the city.[12] Such families would have established themselves as being of influence and power in the city, a standing that would continue to be recognized even under later administrations, including the Roman structure. Ramsay suggested that Paul was born into one of these "original" families of Tarsus. If so, then Paul's family had been there for four generations or so when he was born.

Whether or not that is the case, there were probably, as Ramsay suggested, many Jewish citizens in the city. The reason for drawing this inference is that membership in the citizenship assembly carried with it social as well as political implications. The citizens were generally organized into one or more "tribes"[13] that made provision for social and even religious activities together. We cannot imagine an orthodox Jewish family participating in such activities unless there were enough Jewish citizens to have a tribe of their own.

While we are considering Paul's birth*place*, a word is in order about the *date* of his birth. As already noted, we meet him first in Acts 7:58 as a young man. The trouble is that this Greek word (*neanias*) could refer to a person anywhere in the twenty to forty age bracket. All this tells us, then, is that Paul was somewhere between twenty and forty at the time of Stephen's martyrdom in about the year AD 33, and even that date may be off two or three years, depending on one's view of the date of Jesus' crucifixion.

There is also the fact that, when writing to Philemon in approximately AD 60 (see chap. 7), Paul called himself "the aged" (Greek, *presbytes*), a word not usually used until a person had reached sixty or so.

One other consideration is that Paul was certainly old enough to be given a leadership role among the Jews by the time of Stephen's death. And leadership was not generally accorded truly young men in our modern sense of that word. Some think that at the time of or immediately after Stephen's stoning Paul was a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin, a question we will examine in the next chapter. If so, according to rules expressed later but probably in force then, he was at least thirty-five.

We can be no more specific. Paul's age at Stephen's stoning was about the same as the date we attach to that year. He was born then about the time we change the dating to the Christian era (AD), probably a few years after the birth of Christ.[14] There is a traditional supposition (based on an inference in a sermon attributed to Chrysostom) that he died in the year 66 at the age of sixty-eight; thus he was born in 2 BC. F. F. Bruce suggests that he was born "probably in the first decade of the Christian era."[15]

PAUL'S ROMAN CITIZENSHIP

As already noted, Paul was partly reared as a Jew in the Dispersion. The world he was part of is now known as the Greco-Roman world: Greek in language and culture, Roman in government.

When Alexander the Great conquered that world for the Greeks, in the period leading up to 323 BC, he deliberately tried to establish Greek culture in the lands conquered. The Greeks believed that their language and culture were superior to all others, and it was part of their mission to "civilize" the world. Even after the Greek Empire was divided, following Alexander's death, the process of enforced Hellenization went on in many places.

Then along came the Romans and conquered that world again. But the Romans did not desire to challenge the established Greek culture. What they wanted was to rule by their legions and collect the taxes. Indeed, the Romans themselves were strongly influenced by the culture of the Greeks in art, philosophy, dress, athletics, and religion. They made Latin the official language of the empire and expected Roman citizens everywhere to have an adequate knowledge of it, but in fact many did not, and Greek was by far the more common language, especially in the eastern provinces. Indeed, "Greek was an official language of the public administration in Syria and Palestine, Latin being normally confined to the internal organization of the army, and to documents affecting Roman citizens."[16] That accounts for the significant differences in the western and eastern parts of the empire in the time of Paul. In the western provinces, Roman culture was stronger; whole communities were granted the status of Roman

citizenship. In the eastern provinces, the dominant Hellenistic culture made the process of Romanization much slower.[17]

ROMAN EMPERORS DURING PAUL'S LIFETIME

Paul lived under five Roman emperors. All are sometimes indiscriminately referred to as Caesar.

Octavian, better known as *Augustus* (31 BC–AD 14), became the unchallenged ruler after defeating Mark Antony's forces at the battle of Actium, which produced the suicides of both Antony and Cleopatra. He reorganized the Roman government, renouncing dictatorial powers and restoring many of the functions of the senate with himself as *princeps* (first citizen). The emperor directly supervised imperial provinces, where the largest military contingents were stationed, like Egypt, Gaul, Syria, and Spain. The senate controlled the other provinces, ruled by civil rather than military governments. In practical effect, the emperor was sovereign.

During Augustus's reign, many thought the "golden age" had come. He put down insurrections in various areas, conquered new territories, and consolidated governments: additions included Egypt, Illyricum, Galatia, and others.

Tiberius (AD 14–37) was Augustus's stepson. Early in his reign he faced unrest in eastern provinces, including Cappadocia and Cilicia, and more serious problems in Armenia involving the never vanquished Parthians. Most problems he settled with firm diplomacy, but some disturbances (as in Africa, in AD 20) required the use of the army. At death, he left perhaps three billion *sesterce* (150 million dollars) in the treasury.

Gaius, nicknamed *Caligula* (AD 37–41), was the son of Germanicus (an adopted son, and nephew, of Tiberius). A weak and unstable ruler, he wasted the financial reserves left

by Tiberius, raised taxes, acted the monarch, and took seriously his "divinity" as an emperor.

Claudius (AD 41–54), the brother of Germanicus, thus another nephew of Tiberius and uncle of Gaius, attempted to undo Gaius's errors and restore the principles of Augustus, often replacing incompetent aristocrats as senators with more capable persons of lower social/political rank. He was poisoned by his (fourth) wife (who was his niece), the mother of Nero.

Nero (AD 54–68), son of Claudius, began ruling at age seventeen, though he was more interested in pleasures than politics. His military tacticians succeeded in crushing rebellion in Britain and regaining Armenia from the Parthians. His second wife, Poppaea, may have been a Jewish proselyte. Nero alienated the populace. He blamed Christians for the famous fire of 64 and persecuted them as a result, which action may have included the execution of both Paul and Peter. This ruler committed suicide in 68, which brought rejoicing in Rome.

There has probably never been a greater empire than the Roman Empire, and Paul lived when it was in its glory. The extent of the empire varied from one time to another, but its basic dimensions were settled by about 27 BC under Augustus. In Paul's day the Roman dominion extended across Europe westward into Spain and Great Britain and eastward through Asia Minor, Syria, and Palestine. All of North Africa was included, from Egypt across to the Atlantic. There was no land bordering the Mediterranean not under Roman control. "Except for the Parthian Empire on the eastern frontier and the turbulent tribes of northern Europe east of the Rhine, there was no serious threat to Roman domination."[18]

The "peace of Rome" (*pax Romana* was the official Latin expression) was therefore a peace that had to be enforced by military power. Roman legions, a professional army, were stationed at strategic points. The basic unit of the army was the *contubernium* ("sharing one tent") of eight men; ten *contubernia* formed a *century* (originally, a hundred), under a *centurion*; six centuries made a *cohort*; and ten cohorts (the first being double size) were in a *legion*, with an additional one hundred-twenty cavalry. At full strength, then, a legion included nearly six thousand troops. When Augustus died (AD 14), there were twenty-five legions, four of them stationed in Syria (which in the broadest sense included Palestine under its jurisdiction). Legionaries were Roman citizens. They served for twenty years and often became wealthy. Officially they were not permitted to marry. (There was also a standing "auxiliary" army made up of noncitizens who would become citizens on retirement. Lesser paid, they were used for secondary missions. The size of this army probably matched that of the legions.) Retired soldiers and their families were often settled in colonies at strategic places.[19] "The army was . . . the force that established and maintained the peace which made the spread of Christianity possible."[20] Paul often used the Roman soldier as a metaphor or illustration in his writing (as in Eph. 6:13–17; 2 Tim. 2:3–4).

Much of the empire was subdivided into provinces of two kinds. Senatorial provinces were governed by *proconsuls* appointed by the Roman senate. Most of these had only small military forces, not legions, at their disposal. Imperial provinces had governors appointed by the emperor. The more important of these were *legates*, with legions at their disposal. Syria (with Cilicia) was an imperial province governed by a legate. Lesser governors were *prefects* or *procurators*; Judea, when dealt with as a province (see insert in chap. 2), was governed thus.[21] In addition to provinces, there were *client kingdoms*, ethnic districts that were permitted to remain semi-independent under their own native "kings." Even these had to have Roman approval and could exist and exercise self-government only as Rome chose to allow. Some of the time, Judea was dealt with in this fashion (again, see insert in chap. 2).[22]

The empire was therefore generally stable, even though force was often required to quell uprisings in various areas, and a sense of unity was fostered. Contributing to that was a remarkable network of roads built to promote travel, especially the movement of troops, over important routes. The Roman roads still win admiration as an outstanding achievement of administrative and engineering skill. They were hard roads (something like our macadam roads), well maintained, with mile markers. (See the insert on page 79 for a description.) The Mediterranean was also kept busy with sailing vessels following well-established sea lanes and carrying cargo from one port to another.

Both the roads and the ships, therefore, greatly promoted trade and travel, and there was freedom of movement throughout the empire. It was a busy, bustling world, unified under one military power and one political administration. The coinage of Rome, Roman troops, and the Roman-approved officials who judged civil matters all testified to this identity. Add to that the freedom of travel and communication between all parts of the empire and one can understand the influences that were at work to "develop wider horizons, a more cosmopolitan spirit, and a continuous interchange of intellectual and spiritual treasures."[23]

But Paul was not just born and reared in such a world; he was a Roman citizen. Once again, that must not be taken for granted. Most people who lived in the Roman Empire in Paul's time were not Roman citizens.

Paul was one of the privileged ones, as seen in Acts 22:25–29. He had been seized by a mob in Jerusalem, then rescued by the Roman troops stationed there. The commander of the troops gave orders that Paul be beaten so the truth could be learned, but when Paul made known that he was a Roman, the beating was immediately canceled. The discussion between the two of them is revealing. Captain Lysias was a Roman citizen, too, and had purchased his citizenship "with a large sum of money." Paul, on the other hand, was "actually born a citizen," meaning that his father was a citizen before him, and he inherited the status. This Roman citizenship is in view whenever

the word *Roman* appears in Acts (see 16:21, 37, 38; 23:27; 25:16).

Roman citizenship, originally limited to freeborn natives of Rome, came to be granted under various circumstances to large numbers at once or to individuals. Sometimes colonies of citizens were settled in various places in the empire both to reduce the population in Rome and to contribute to the maintaining of order. (Such colonies usually included heavy contingents of military veterans.) Philippi in Macedonia was such a colony (Acts 16:12, 21), as were Corinth, Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Troas, other cities of importance in Paul's ministry.

In a few instances other cities were granted the standing that made all free residents citizens. In some cases, people in an area loyal to the emperor during a time of civil rebellion might be granted citizenship. Such practices brought about the rise in number of citizens from 400,000 to 4,000,000 during the civil wars of the first century BC.[24] There were also freedmen, former slaves granted freedom by the emperor or other residents, who were made citizens. Soldiers of the auxiliary army received the citizenship at retirement.

Obviously such privileges are often given as personal favors. Money may even change hands, as seen in the case of Claudius Lysias above. Although we know that Paul inherited the status from his father (Acts 22:28), we do not know how Paul's father or earlier ancestor obtained the citizenship. But we have already seen that Paul was most likely born in a prominent Jewish family, part of a Jewish community influential in Tarsus. We have also seen that his family were citizens of Tarsus. And we have seen that Tarsus was frequented as a popular vacation spot by highborn Romans. With all this, it is not hard to imagine any number of circumstances that might have led to some father or grandfather of Paul's having the kind of relationship with some Roman nobleman that resulted in citizenship being granted on an individual basis.[25] As A. N. Sherwin-White puts it, speculation is "a fruitless task, though lack of evidence has not deterred the ingenious."[26]

Being a Roman citizen did not mean participation in government like United States citizenship means for us. The empire was

governed primarily by the emperor and the Roman senate. But the citizenship status was a coveted privilege, carrying with it certain legal rights and confirmed by local registers of Roman citizens in each community. "Each legitimately born child of a Roman citizen had to be registered within (it appears) thirty days of his birth."[27] Written proof could be obtained, if needed; if challenged, the testimony of seven witnesses was required.[28] Under Claudius those who falsely claimed the citizenship were executed.[29]

A Roman citizen, for example, could not be condemned or punished without a fair hearing, a right ordinary people did not possess. That is why the Philippian authorities were frightened about the beating that had been administered to Paul and Silas in Acts 16:35–39. He could not be scourged, which is the reason Paul escaped the beating in Acts 22:25–29. A Roman citizen could also appeal his case to the emperor if he felt he was not being treated fairly. That is what is involved in Acts 25:10–12, with Paul's appeal to Caesar and the transfer of his case from procurator Festus in Caesarea to emperor Nero at the imperial court in Rome. The citizen was also exempt from the poll tax but not the land tax.[30]

We understand Paul much better, then, if we remember that he was a citizen, born to a citizen, of the Roman Empire. His outlook and attitudes toward the world could not possibly have been unaffected by that relationship. He had a sense of identity with a heterogeneous world community, of being part of a united arid far-flung empire, and of enjoying a certain standing in the established political structure.

PAUL AND THE HELLENISTIC CULTURE

Paul's world, as already noted, was a Greco-Roman world, with the Greek influence culturally dominant. Being "civilized," in that time, meant being Hellenistic. Emil Schürer summarizes:

> It was the grandiose plan of Alexander the Great to found a world empire that would be held together, not only by unity of government, but also by a unity of language, customs, and culture.[31]

In Acts 21:37 we learn both that Paul spoke Greek and that the Roman military tribune Lysias (referred to above) was surprised that he did. That reflects the fact that Jews reared in Palestine tended to be more provincial than those reared in the Dispersion, and were less likely to speak Greek. Ever since the intertestamental days of the Maccabees, there had been considerable resistance to Hellenization among the stricter Jews in their homeland.[32]

Had Lysias known of Paul's rearing in Tarsus, he would not have been surprised at his fluency in Greek. Even today we call that period in the history of the Greek language the *Koine* period (a Greek word that means "common"). The Greeks called other languages barbarian, an onomatopoeic word they coined because speech in another language sounded to them like so much "bar-bar-bar," and the word came to have the underlying connotation of uncivilized (e.g., Acts 28:2).

Given his use of the Greek language and even more his boyhood background as a member of an influential Jewish family in Tarsus, we cannot doubt that Paul was a Hellenistic Jew. Still there were degrees of Hellenization. When people of one nationality live in another country, the culture of that country may affect them to a greater or lesser degree, depending on various factors.

One of those factors is the length of time a family has lived in a different country. In light of what has already been said about the citizenship status of Paul's father, both of Tarsus and of Rome, it seems probable that Paul's family had lived in Tarsus for more than one generation. If Ramsay's theory discussed above is true, then the family had been there for several generations.

Another factor that affects the extent of cultural conditioning is religion, and that has always been a key consideration for Jews living among other peoples. Even in twenty-first-century America, many Jews whose families have been here for generations maintain distinctive Jewishness, whereas others do not, and their religious concerns play a large role in making the difference. The same was true then, and so we may say that *Paul's family was Hellenistic*, *but they were not Hellenizers.*

This distinction, sometimes drawn,[33] is more or less artificial, but

it is a convenient one for making an important point. The evidence is that they were Hellenistic in the sense that they were culturally influenced; they were not Hellenizing, in that they maintained the purity of their orthodox Jewish faith, free from modifications under the influence of Greek philosophy.

There were Dispersion Jews who did make serious adjustments in their theology for the sake of lessening tensions with Greek thought. Philo of Alexandria can be cited as a good example. There was a large Jewish population in Alexandria in Egypt. Having been there for hundreds of years, they were well established and influential. Alexandrian thinking was looked to by many Dispersion Jews, especially those interested in doing as much as possible to adapt to the ways of their neighbors whose thinking was Greek. It was characteristic of the Jewish community in Alexandria to set the pace in this; the translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek[34] had been made there in about 280 BC.

Philo was one of the influential Jewish thinkers in Alexandria. His life (c. 20 BC–AD 42) overlapped that of Paul. He was deeply influenced by Greek philosophers, especially Plato and the Stoics. Though he remained strictly monotheistic, he conceived of God as less knowable and personal, more like the pure Being of Greek philosophy than the God of the Old Testament. He accepted the Greek dualistic distinction between spirit and matter, with the material world being less real than the ideal world, partly created by angelic intermediaries, with the *Logos* (Greek for pure "reason") at their head. And in typical Alexandrian style, he interpreted the Jewish Scriptures in a strictly allegorical manner so that the stories could represent any philosophical notions he wanted to read into them.

The result was a synthesis between Old Testament theology and Greek philosophy, a serious departure from traditional Jewish orthodoxy. And many Jews out in the Greco-Roman world welcomed that kind of compromise. But many others, truer to the faith of their fathers, rejected such Hellenization of their thinking, even though they were clearly influenced by Hellenistic culture in less serious ways.

Paul's strictness as "a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees" (Acts 23:6)

and "a Hebrew of Hebrews" (Phil. 3:5) testifies that his family was among these latter. The Pharisees were the strictest sect of Judaism, and "Hebrew" here refers to the language spoken at home and probably in their synagogue. Both expressions refer to Paul's father as well as himself, and therefore Paul was raised in a thoroughly orthodox atmosphere. (The next chapter will deal with these matters.) In religious matters Paul's family apparently looked more to Antioch in Syria (next door to Cilicia) than to Alexandria. The Jewish community in Antioch represented much more conservative thinking.

Still, the main point should not be forgotten. Although not Hellenizing in religion, even as a Jew, Paul's background was in a Hellenistic world. As a Greek-speaking native citizen of busy Tarsus and mighty Rome, his outlook could not help being affected.

There is clear evidence of that effect in the picture of Paul we get in Acts and in his writings. He knew and quoted Greek poets (Acts 17:28; Titus 1:12). He obviously enjoyed the Greco-Roman athletic games and used them often as illustrations in his letters,[35] even though many less tolerant Jews regarded these games as reprehensible.[36] Throughout his writings he displayed understanding of the customs of his world.

All one has to do to appreciate this is to contrast Paul's general outlook with that of an equally famous apostle, Simon Peter. Peter was not a Dispersion Jew; he was reared in provincial Palestine, in "the isolated district of Galilee."[37] He fished on Galilee, where no ships from lands afar ever docked. His acquaintance with the peoples and customs of the great Roman Empire would not have been as wide as Paul's. Greek was not nearly so common a language in his hometown. Roman citizens were not numerous even in Judea. Even as a Spirit-filled Christian, he found it difficult to reach out to the Gentiles, as the incidents in Acts 10 and Galatians 2:11–14 show.

Paul had no such problems. He could already identify with the world. He was truly cosmopolitan, a citizen of the world. No wonder then he was God's chosen vessel to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15), whereas Peter's responsibility was primarily to the Jews (Gal. 2:7–8).

Someone may object that Paul's love for the Gentiles was the

result of his conversion and not of his background. Surely God could have miraculously changed a narrow, provincial outlook to a broad, cosmopolitan one. But we must not forget that God works His will in the circumstances of a person's background, too. He prepares the vessels of His service to be usable even before they know Him. Thus it was with Paul. God's hand had been at work from his birth (Gal. 1:15) to make him the man He could use. And one of the main ingredients of that preparation is found in his Dispersion background as Tarsian, Roman, and Greek.