

From Saul to Paul

His transformation and our own

Rod Carmona

Note 4: Historical context of Paul's life

God placed Saul in the ideal historic moment to transmit to all the nations the blessing of the promise made to Abraham and fulfilled in Christ. There were three concurrent factors that made the missionary journeys of Paul to be particularly advantageous: 1) the Roman peace (*pax romana*), 2) the Greek language and 3) the Jewish synagogues.

a. The Roman peace (*pax romana*)

We know that Paul moved from Tarsus to Antioch after being there ten years, approximately in the time of the great famine that occurred in the days of the emperor Claudius. (See Acts 11:28; this verse helps us also to determine the historical time of the account).

Most of the known world of that time had been unified under the powerful Roman empire. The capital of that empire, where the emperor lived, was Rome, some 2,500 kilometers from Jerusalem.

The Romans had divided their empire into provinces. Each province had its own governor. Pontius Pilate, the one who condemned Jesus to be crucified, was governor of the Roman province of Palestine. Tarsus was located in the Roman province of Cilicia. And the province to which Paul traveled in his first missionary journey was Galatia. All were part of the Roman Empire.

Due to the vast size of the Roman Empire, and to keep the peace, the emperor maintained well-armed troops in each province. Thus, during his apostolic journeys, Paul enjoyed relative peace and security as he moved about on paved roads or by sea, thanks to the fact that the Roman Empire controlled the thieves and pirates that could have made these journeys quite risky in other periods.

Rome was the undisputed power in the world, and the fact that Saul was a Roman citizen constituted an essential element of survival on more than one occasion (for instance, see Acts 22:25-29). A Roman citizen could not be condemned or punished without a proper trial (Acts 16:35-39), and enjoyed the right to appeal his case before Caesar (Acts 25:10-12).

b. The Greek language

The nations of the known world were not only united by highways and ships; almost all of them spoke a common language, which was Greek, as well as their own native tongue.

Alexander the Great had conquered practically the entire known world by the year 326 B.C. The Greeks considered that their language and culture were superior to all others, and they believed they had the mission to “civilize” the world. Even following the division of the Greek empire, after the death of Alexander, the process of Hellenization continued.

When the Romans began to conquer the known world, they had no priority to challenge the Greek culture. They only sought to have military dominion and to collect taxes. In fact, their culture was strongly influenced by the Greek. Even though they established Latin as the official language of the empire (especially in matters of government and legal issues), it never displaced Greek as the universal language.

In his missionary journeys, Paul traveled through many nations. It would have been impossible to learn all those languages. However, in God’s plan, Paul was able to freely communicate with them in the Greek language. In Acts 21:37 we find Paul speaking Greek, and the Roman official surprised that he could do so, since the Jews of Jerusalem were much more cosmopolitan, and therefore less likely to speak it.

c. The Jewish synagogues

God had given to the Jews the law through Moses and he led them to the promised land after freeing them from Egypt. But time and again the people turned away toward idolatry. After many warnings from God, and almost continuous rebellion from the people, the Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom (Israel). Years later, in 604 B.C., the Babylonians conquered the southern kingdom (Judah). In both cases the people were taken captive and many were taken into exile outside the promised land.

When the Jews (of the kingdom of Judah) returned from their captivity with Zerubbabel (537 B.C.) and Ezra (458 B.C.), the culture had changed. Idolatry was never again a serious problem among the Jewish people. The nation had become a people based on God’s law. They had raised up teachers to instruct them (rabbis) that displaced the priests in their function as instructors of the people. A new role was established, that of the scribes, who were responsible to copy the law, and as a consequence they became quite knowledgeable of it. The third great impact was the creation of synagogues as places dedicated to the study and teaching of God’s law. These did not exist before the Babylonian exile, but in the time of the New Testament, they had become the centers of Jewish religious life. Every qualified person, rabbis and laymen, could teach in them. Finally, the role of priest was redirected from teaching to an activity of political relations with the non-Jewish authorities and to the rituals of the law, especially those associated with the temple.

As a consequence of the dispersion of the Jews, after being carried into captivity, only a portion of the Jewish people returned to the Promised Land, but they all adopted the system of synagogues in the cities wherever they were. In most of the great cities of the Roman Empire there was a synagogue in which the Jews gathered to study and teach the Scriptures (the Old Testament).

While it is true that Paul was sent to the Gentiles, he always went first to the synagogue of the city to preach to the Jews gathered there. These Jews knew and loved the Old Testament. Many Jews were people who feared God and expected with great longing the arrival of the Messiah (Christ), and used correctly the law of Moses. They believed in the unique and true God and not in the idols of the Romans

and other pagans. Therefore, when they were converted they began with a new base of understanding the Word of God, and could teach it to others.