

Paul of Tarsus : Greek and Roman, Jew and Christian

It is in the Acts of the Apostles that we find the most complete information about Paul's origins. It was perhaps the year 57. In troubled Jerusalem, the angry crowd of Hebrews had accused Paul of introducing Gentiles into the temple, had dragged him out of the sanctuary and seemed about to lynch him, had it not been for the intervention of the Roman soldiers (Acts . 21.27- 36). Once in safety, Paul had the opportunity to explain himself in Greek to the confused Roman tribune: that no, it was not the Egyptian who had long ago revolted⁹; «I am indeed a Jewish man (ἐγὼ ἄνθρωπος μὲν εἰμι Ἰουδαῖος), of Tarsus (Τὰρσεύς), citizen of a not obscure city in Cilicia » (Acts 21.39). Such pedigree was enough for him to be authorized to address the crowd, and this time in Aramaic¹⁰: «I am a Jewish man (ἐγὼ εἰμι ἀνὴρ Ἰουδαῖος), born in Tarsus of Cilicia (γεγεννημένος ἐν Τὰρσῳ τῆς Κιλικίας), I was educated in this city, instructed at the feet of Gamaliel , in all the rigor of the Law of our fathers and full of zeal for the things of God » (Acts 22.3). This is an authentic curriculum vitae , where personal data or qualifications are not missing: (i) ethnic/religious belonging to the Hebrew world, reinforced by the use of the personal pronoun, the present tense (ἐγὼ εἰμι) and, in the first speech, by the particle μὲν ; nothing about Gischala or northern Galilee; (ii) his birthplace was Tarsus, information reinforced by the litotes that refers to it as a «not obscure city of Cilicia » (τῆς Κιλικίας οὐκ ἀσήμου πόλεως); again, without reference, not even indirect , to Gíscala ; (iii) in Tarsus, he would enjoy the extraordinary status of citizen; (iv) his instruction was in Jerusalem, “at the feet of Gamaliel ”; finally, (v) insistence on the rigor of this instruction and the zeal he showed in complying with the Law. However, the tribune was not impressed. Paul could even be a Jew, a citizen of an important country , but there must be some reason for him to be persecuted. The yardstick would certainly be a good option to make the prisoner talk. Having made the decision, Paul then reveals new details about his identity: Ῥωμαῖον! “I’m Roman!” The tribune cannot control his admiration: he himself had bought his citizenship at a cost! Paul responds: “For I was born with this right” (Acts 22.25-28)! Having just arrived from Greece, Paul had been poorly received in Jerusalem, where there were rumors that he had denied the Law, teaching the Jews of the diaspora to exchange it for the more polite Greek customs; it was said that Greeks had been introduced into the Temple; almost lynched by Hebrews, he was saved by the Roman garrison; He had addressed this in Greek, in Aramaic to the Hebrews. About to be flagellated as a peregrinus , he confesses himself to be a Roman citizen. “I am a Jew from Tarsus” therefore functions as a kind of “two in one” that characterizes Paul well. His name is also a sign of this: Saul for the Hebrews, in the Greco-Roman world he was called Paul¹¹. Therefore, should the “ Gíscala ” hypothesis be rejected? Not yet. Jerome and Photius are not fools, they know the Acts of the Apostles and also admit Paul's relationship with Tarsus, even if there is a contradiction between the biblical text and the version transmitted by Jerome; and at least Photius tries to reconcile the two versions. The speeches in the Acts themselves are not free from problems¹², as they were not written by Paul, but by an anonymous author, already in the 17th century. If considered as Luke, companion of Paul¹³. Naturally, this evidence in itself does not discredit the narrative, otherwise we would have to reject almost all the Stories we have today. However, Luke (for convenience and tradition, I will continue to refer to him this way) attributes to Paul's origins a set of details that can be compared with more direct sources , such as the 7 letters of certain authorship that Paul himself left us¹⁴. The Letters confirm that Paul was born a Jew, as he was circumcised on the eighth day of his birth, was the son of Jews, belonged to the tribe of Benjamin, was an Israelite and spoke Aramaic (Phil. 3.4-5; Rom. 9.3b-5, Rom. 11.1, 2Cor. 11.22): now, all this does not prove, but is historically compatible with the “ Gíscala ” hypothesis. Contrary to what happens with Jerusalem (Rom. 15, 19, 25, 31, 1Cor. 16.3, Gal. 1.17, 2.1, 4.25),

Corinth (1Cor. 1.2, 2Cor. 1.1, 23), Ephesus (1Cor. 15.32, 16.8), Damascus (2Cor. 11.32, Gal. 1.17) or Antioch (Gal. 2.11), none of the Letters mentions Tarsus even once as a city where Paul had passed through, let alone been born. Just based on the Letters, the «Tarsus» hypothesis is as credible as the «Gíscala» hypothesis: both are omitted. And this is not the only omission in the Letters: in Paul's own texts, neither his Roman citizenship nor his citizenship in Tarsus nor his education "at the feet of Gamaliel" are ever mentioned. In fact, had it not been for the Acts of the Apostles, I believe that many authors would admit, just based on the Letters, that Paul had been born in Palestine, perhaps in the north of Galilee, in Gíscala. However, the Acts exist and are explicit; in other steps, Luke also naturally assumes Paul's origin in Cilicia (Acts 9.11, 9.30, 11.25, 15.23, 15.41. Cf. Gal. 1.21). * Complaining about Tarsus, in Antiquity, was no small thing: before Paul, Strabo had stated that the citizens of this $\pi \acute{o}\lambda\iota\varsigma$ would have surpassed Athens and Alexandria in their schools and in the teaching of philosophers (Strab. 14.5.12-15); then, from Paul, Dion Chrysostom continues to list the reasons for the pride of the citizens of Tarsus in their city (Dio Chrys. 33.17, 33.28); later still, although considering that they had little interest in philosophy, Philostratus mentions the luxury of these citizens (Philostr. Apol. Tyan. 1.7)¹⁵; one inscription even claims Tarsus as "the first, largest and most beautiful metropolis" (OGIS 578.7-8). However, being a citizen of Tarsus was not something that anyone could claim to be: in no $\pi \acute{o}\lambda\iota\varsigma$ was the set of citizens equivalent to the set of male inhabitants; Being a citizen was a situation of political privilege and obvious social importance. Specifically in Tarsus, at the end of the 1st century BC, the famous Athenodorus, teacher of Augustus, had severely limited citizenship, by stipulating as a condition for its access the income of 500 drachmas (Dio Chrys. 34.21-23), which corresponded what a legionary earned for two years¹⁶. Accepting that Luke is right is therefore placing Paul not only among the political elite, but also among the economic elite of Tarsus¹⁷. Now, Luke seems to confirm this privileged economic condition: in Jerusalem, Paul would have paid for the expensive purification rituals of four Nazirites (Acts. 21.23)¹⁸; Felix would have expected a bribe from Paul (Acts 24.26), who would also have had to pay out of his own pocket for the trip to Rome and the appeal to the emperor (Acts 25.11); Once there, he would have rented a house for two years (Act. 28.30)¹⁹. Finally, the fact that Paul belonged to the tribe of Benjamin, which the name Saúl /Saulo proves, confirms his social status: as M. Hengel admits, «only a few families could clearly derive their origin from a particular tribe [...]». Here we may with justification speak of a "lay nobility by birth"²⁰. The members of this tribe had the prestige of descending from the only son of Jacob to have been born in Israel (Gen. 35.16) and of belonging to the only tribe that remained faithful to Judah; they continued to have influence afterwards: Jehuda -ha- Nāsī, for example, the redactor of the Mishnah and great-great-grandfather of Gamaliel, was a Benjaminite²¹. In Tarsus, being a Jew, a citizen and rich was not natural. It is true that J. Goldstein admits that going to the gymnasium or participating in $\pi \acute{o}\lambda\iota\varsigma$ ceremonies would be rejected by the strictest Jews²². However, AD Nock and S. Applebaum²³ also rejected the thesis that granting the citizenship of a $\pi \acute{o}\lambda\iota\varsigma$ to the Jews should force apostasy²⁴. Goldstein himself showed that there were those who allowed themselves to be attracted by Hellenistic politics and culture, without ceasing to be Jews²⁵. Reference 15:15 See also Xen. Anab. 1.2.22-33, Joseph. AJ 1.6.7, Dio Chrys. 33.49. See Ramsay, 1908, 85-116; Böhlig, 1913; Jones, 1940, 207; Jones, 1971², 192-215. (Translate to American English)

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