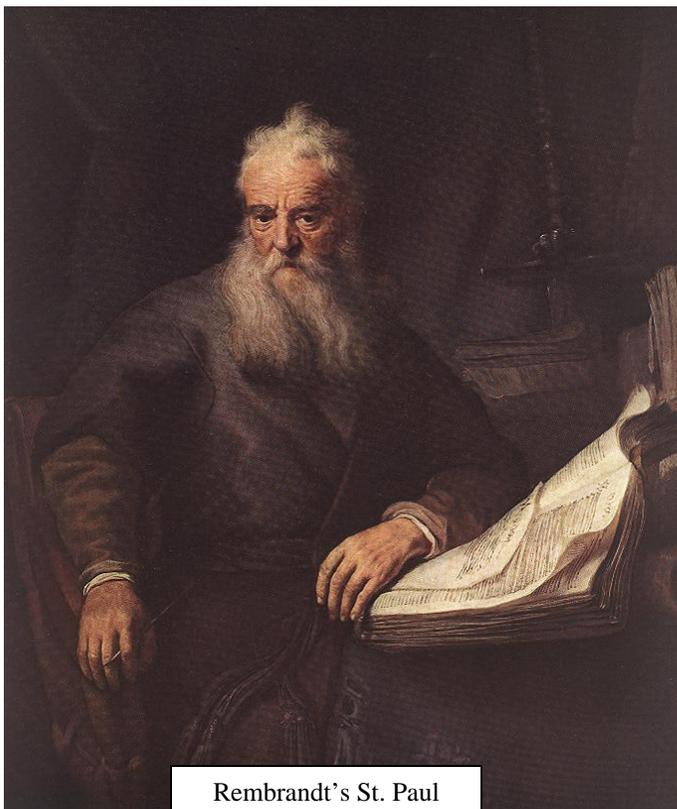


INTRODUCING THE HISTORICAL PAUL

'A poetic and mystical genius capable of construing a multifarious, impressive and exciting theological complex...the most imaginative and creative writer among the authors of the New Testament...a brilliantly gifted organizer without whose contribution Christianity would not exist or would be something totally different' (Geza Vermes, The Changing Faces of Jesus, Penguin, 2001)

Pope Benedict has announced a Jubilee Year celebrating the life of St.Paul, from the end of June 2008 to the end of June 2009. It is a good time to look at some new insights into Paul, and into the Christian life of resurrection as he came to understand it.



Rembrandt's St. Paul

'I was born of the race of Israel and of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrew parents, and I was circumcised when I was eight days old. As for the Law, I was a Pharisee; as for working for religion, I was a persecutor of the church; as far as the Law can make you perfect, I was faultless. But because of Christ, I have come to consider all these advantages to be disadvantages. Not only that, but I believe nothing can happen that will outweigh the supreme advantage of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For him I have accepted the loss of everything, and I look on everything as so much rubbish, if only I can have Christ and be given a place in him...All I want is to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and to share

his sufferings by reproducing the pattern of his death. That is the way I can hope to take my place in the resurrection of the dead.' Phil 3, 5-11

BACKGROUND

Only about 10% of the population of the ancient Greek-Roman world was **literate**. [It was much less in Palestine.] That 10% naturally made up the socially and educationally elite people of that time. They usually lived in the cities.

The leaders of the early Churches, like Paul, belonged to this group.

Early Christianity was not led by a bunch of bucolic charismatics, but by people of **some real education**, such as former synagogue leaders (like Gaius), city treasurers (like Erastus), and successful businesswomen (like Lydia).

One result, is that early Christianity had lots of documents. The leaders were **writers**. Eventually, after 70 ce, the four gospel writers were literateurs of high quality. Earlier, there were people of similar ability, like Apollos, and Silas. Earlier still, there was **Paul**. Without him, the rest would not have been: the New Testament as we have it would not have existed, and the church as we know it would not have been. Half of the books of the New Testament are linked with Paul. Half or more of the Acts of the Apostles (17 chapters) is devoted to Paul. He is the first Christian author. We can read his real letters to real people. Paul's is the earliest achieved public position on the meaning of Christianity: every other position, and there were and still are many, is considered basically in relation to that of Paul. [There is no undisputed source for pre-Pauline Christianity. We have to reconstruct its positions through the filters of Paul's relationship with it.]

We **know quite a lot about him**. We know more about him than we know about Jesus. Jesus never wrote anything. He traveled very little. He lived half as long as Paul. He was dead forty years before anyone wrote up his life. [Recent studies have shown us more clearly that Jesus was a human being, a Jew, a Galilean, a poor man, uneducated in formal schools. Each gospel writer has his own take on Jesus: we try then to get underneath these pictures to capture the 'historical Jesus'.] But Paul is different. We do know much about him, and what he left us. Paul is the best known person of the first Christian generation.

WHICH PAUL?

I need to be careful here. In reality, there are **several Pauls**. [Perhaps there are several Jesuses too.] I mean, **different kinds of literature** have created different characters. There is the Paul we read about in the **Acts of the Apostles**. Acts is what we call today a historical novel: the setting is accurate, the events possibly more true-to-type than factual. There Paul is not as prickly a character as he really was! Acts has tamed him! There is the Paul we seem to hear from in the **Pastoral Epistles** (Timothy, Titus, etc). There he is a high-level church administrator organizing the system. There is the Paul of the later **apocryphal literature** (such as the Acts of Paul and Thecla), where we meet a 'hagiographic' Saint Paul. All this writing handed on to later Christianity a domesticated, ecclesiasticized, canonized Paul. And, beneath all this, there is **the real, historical Paul**. That is the one I want to introduce to you. Obviously, in doing so, I am going to say that he is different, often in salient ways, from the Paul of Acts and the Pastorals and the Apocrypha. I am going to present to you a man who was not quite domesticated and ecclesiasticized: I may make you wonder how he could ever have been canonized! We can get to him principally through the letters he wrote, where he gives away a lot about himself. [Of course there are some historical data about Paul in the other sources, but it takes a lot of critical work to sift them through. Where it is genuine, it does not contradict what the real Paul says about himself.]

I should comment, briefly, on the 'Acts of Paul'. It contains three documents: the Acts of Paul and Thecla, 3rd Corinthians, and the Martyrdom of Paul (all apocryphal). The purpose of 'Acts of Paul' is to promote a simple, literal living of sexual continence. Thecla the virgin takes on this teaching and dismisses no less than 12 suitors. This text

describes Paul as ‘small in size, bald-headed, bandy-legged, full of grace, with the face of an angel’!

My intention is to free the historical Paul from some of the etiquette that surrounds him in such later traditions.

THE HISTORICAL PAUL

Paul (Shauoul) is a Jew, a Greek speaking Jew (as all Jews were in the diaspora), born in Tarsus (it is about 400 miles north of Galilee) - probably about 6 bce (a few years before Jesus was born, which I think was in 3 bce), and dead in Rome about 64 ce under the Emperor Nero (some 34 years after the death of Jesus, and some six years before the fall of the temple in Jerusalem). He had his three score years and ten.

Shadow covers the beginning and the end of Paul’s life. It is a pity, because, as a result, we tend to make him something of a ‘preaching machine’ coming from nowhere and finally shut down suddenly. We do not know for sure the year of his birth. Some argue from a word he uses in his letter to Philemon – where he calls himself an ‘ancient or elder’ (i.e. between 54 and 61 years), and from Luke’s word in Acts, where the death of Stephen is described – Luke there calls him a ‘young man’, i.e. between 21 and 28 years. But others would say that Paul is not speaking technically, and that we have no sure date for the writing of Philemon, while the story of Stephen in Acts may not be fully historical - it may be a literary creation based on memories of the later deaths of James the son of Zebedee and James the brother of the Lord. Paul may not have been there. Even the last years of Paul (our liturgy itself does not use those chapters of Acts) remain vague. There is no dramatic ‘passion of Paul’, just a lingering house arrest in Rome for an unknown time before his eventual death. We don’t know the year of his death for sure, but it was under Nero.

In December 2006, archaeologists unearthed a sarcophagus believed to contain the remains of Paul, buried beneath the present basilica of St.Paul’s Outside the Walls in Rome. Permission has not yet been granted to open it and examine the remains. [Such historical research stands in some contrast with devotion to various relics of St.Paul that are sometimes presented, such as an arm of St.Paul (deriving from Malta) which currently is on a world tour.]

Tarsus became the capital of the Roman province of Cilicia in 64 bce. It was a major city of the Eastern Roman Empire. It is described as being as important as Athens and Alexandria. It was on a fertile plain by the river Cydnus. It was about ten miles from the sea. Two trade routes from the east and the south met about 50 miles away, and continued as one through the city. Twenty miles to the north there is a narrow gorge known as the Cilician Gates. It is the only pass through the Taurus mountains. Tarsus then is the link between the Near East and Ephesus on the Aegean Sea. (Cleopatra, a Macedonian princess who became Queen of Egypt, honeymooned in Tarsus.) Under the Romans, Tarsus became an agricultural and manufacturing centre. There was a recognized school of philosophy at the university there in Paul’s time.

When we think of Paul, we naturally think, not of Tarsus, but of Damascus. Damascus, in Syria, is now the capital of Arab culture. Syria is the cradle of religions and cultures. Paul seems to be in the right place...

The Latin given-name 'Paulus' is interesting. It was not a frequent name at the time for Romans. For non-Romans in the Greek-speaking Eastern world, it was very rare. For Jews, there, we have no other documented instance of someone being called by that name.

Jerome says that Paul was a child refugee, originally from Gischala in Galilee, but taken to family slavery in Tarsus. I know of very little evidence of a Galilean origin of Paul, or his family of origin, and wonder, if it were so, why Galilee gets literally no mention in any writing of Paul. I would ask for more support than the word of Jerome.

It is difficult to draw a **picture** of the man. There are early drawings, but how much they were influenced by (or themselves influenced) apocryphal writings is impossible to say. Many of those who describe him, say that he was short (Paulus in Latin means short). Some have said that he changed his name from Saul to Paul after his so-called 'conversion': I don't think so. I think 'Paulus' ('Shorty?') was always his nickname – one that became his real name. It just stuck in less Jewish environments. Visitors to the Vatican file past a giant sculpture of Paul (by Tadolini) on their way to St. Peter's basilica. He was not like that at all!

A scroll and accompanying rock drawing have been found in Turkey in 2006. The scroll belonged to a poor farmer who kept a sporadic journal. This farmer went to Ephesus to see the great speaker, Paul. Paul turned out to be no taller than a child. He climbed on to a table and began to speak. The farmer depicted his size on a rock. He was a midget. Perhaps this is the 'affliction' Paul mentions in 2Cor. He was the 'least' of the apostles. He may have come up to Peter's waist. We can now check this, perhaps, against the remains in the sarcophagus found in Rome.

From early paintings we see that he was tubby. He was balding. He was clean shaven. He had what seems to be recurrent skin and eye herpes, and perhaps suffered from malaria from time to time. At the same time he was vigorous, often impetuous, quick to speak, quick to interrupt others.

Jerome Murphy-O'Connor is not short of some good phrases about him. He says that Paul had tantrums. He had mean asides. He often acted like a glad-handing politician. He was resentful. He was a devious control freak. Paul's sarcasm about the Corinthian community was often quite un-Christian (and ungentlemanly). But he would never have been able to maintain his point, without having been into the give-and-take of it all. I don't think he came through as the nice, genteel person ('saint'?) we tend to imagine him.

Paul was a determined person. 'I don't jog around taking my eye off the ball, nor do I pounce about shadow-boxing. Instead, I put my body through a punishing training schedule, so that I don't become one of those who tell others what to do, but themselves collapse first'. (D. Chaplin, paraphrase of 1 Cor 9, 24-27)

Cardinal Newman wrote of his 'awful rashness and blindness, his self-confident, headstrong, cruel rage'.

He was always on the go. He was always the late-comer, catching up. He was always off to an unknown place, and he always felt – sometimes wrongly - he would never be there again. He was an adventurer – in the empire, in the world. He said, in Acts 20,23, 'I place no value on my own life'.

He was certainly an exceptional man, with passionate ardor, and his personal superiority imposed itself on everyone. It also seems to have given a certain ‘objectivity’ to a body of ‘stories’ about him that grew in the memory of the early churches. Great men create credibility for legends. The legends then acquire the status of fact.

He had more than a good **education** into the Jewish scriptures, but it was in their Greek translation called the LXX. He shows no evidence of having read those scriptures, extensively, in Hebrew. He was influenced by the Greek culture around him. He attended theatre. He went to contests in the arena. He listened often to visiting Greek philosophers when they came to Tarsus. He was a devout Jew, but no average one. He calls himself a Pharisee, but I think he perhaps means that he was ‘pharisaical’ and literal in his attitude to Jewish law and practice – there were no known real Pharisees outside Palestine at that time. There is very little data about the Pharisees, especially in the Diaspora, in the period prior to Paul. I don’t think there is hard evidence that he had a formal rabbinic education, such as he might have received in Jerusalem under great teachers like Gamaliel – that is the Paul of Acts! If he was so trained in the Hebrew texts, it is surprising that he always quotes scripture in Greek from the Septuagint. If he was trained by Gamaliel, a pupil of Hillel, it is strange that he nowhere adopts the irenic attitudes of Hillel to Torah discussions. In fact, his manner is almost exactly the opposite. Acts says he was skilled enough to give a lecture in Greek in the hall of Tyrannus in Ephesus (perhaps, but I have doubts). Like all educated people at the time, he had learnt a trade and lived by using it. He was, again according to Acts, a tradesman in leather goods (like tents).

Murphy O’Connor thinks that Paul did become a Pharisee in Jerusalem, and was a pupil of Gamaliel 1st and ‘advanced in Judaism beyond his peers’ (Gal 1,14), and that – like such students - he was married and had children. [The illustrious Gamaliel 1st was a pupil of the even more illustrious Hillel – if it is true, Paul was formed in the traditions of Hillel rather than those of Shammai.] He would have been in Jerusalem from 15-33 ce. He would have been there when Jesus was crucified but had no contact. I would like a lot more evidence for these views, beyond the texts of Acts on which some of them depend. In the last analysis, we really don’t know for sure.

Paul was **a traveler, a community founder and carer, a fundraiser, a writer, and finally a martyr**. It is in this context that I want to introduce Paul, but mainly as a writer.

A TRAVELER

Travel was something that happened a lot for people in the eastern Mediterranean during the lifetime of Paul. There was a certain return to prosperity in a large region long marked by war and its aftermath. There had been a half-century of foreign invaders, pirates and brigands. It was followed by the Roman civil war. The countryside was ravaged, and funds dried up. But since the battle of Actium in 31 bce, and the victory of Octavian, there had been peace – the Pax Romana. For the first time in history, the ensemble of the Mediterranean was under a single control. Roads were rebuilt, new ships were constructed. It was a world that was at once one and multiple: one in government, at least double in language (Greek and Latin), and manifold in indigenous local cultures. The oil that kept it all moving was the Greek idea of the polis, the city. It was then a largely urbanized world. It lived by Greek values, of competition and recognition (honors for leaders and winners) – largely between cities. You could travel throughout the span

of these cities and see the same monuments, the same kind of public buildings, the same décor, the same paintings, sculptures, and temples. There was cult of the emperor, but with it there were the religions of the ancestral gods of each particular region or city. Foreign cults had invaded various areas, and they were focused on salvation for eternity rather than civic belonging in the present. It was an interesting world to travel in, and many people did travel.... Paul seems to have come along at a good moment.

Paul was a **traveler**. His journey on foot from Jerusalem to Antioch, a distance of 600 km (360 miles), would have taken between 2 and 4 weeks. The journey from Antioch in Syria to Galatia would have been 1069 km (641 miles), averaging 25 km (15 miles) a day, which would have been when Paul was starting off in early spring, fresh after a winter's rest. The journey from Galatia to the coast would have been 771 km (463 miles) and would have taken six weeks, averaging 18kms (11 miles) per day in the brutal heat of an Anatolian summer. He went from Ephesus to Corinth by boat, but returned overland via Thessalonika and Philippi 736 km (460 miles) to Neapolis, across the sea to Troas and then another 350 km(210 miles) from Troas to Ephesus, averaging 32 km (20 miles) a day. This would have taken 5 weeks.

Such travels were not easy. There was no police force. Robbers, etc. were plentiful and were allowed freedom on the roads!

A COMMUNITY BUILDER

Paul was not just a traveler. He **set up Christian communities**, and traveled to set up more and more of them, and to revisit those he had set up. He traveled on foot (never a horse!) and by sea (when he could pick up a lift on a good ship in the (summer) sailing season...) I think he usually traveled in summer, or at least not in winter or the wet season, and stayed somewhere (like Ephesus or Corinth) in winter and did his writing there...

Paul traveled to found communities of his special kind. I don't think he initially intended to keep coming back to see them. He had to do so, given the difficulties they got into.

He insisted he had a right to be supported financially in his ministry, but he never used that right – except after he had left a community. He knew it would compromise his pastoral relationship with them. Afterwards he let some people in the community he had left, the Philippians for example, if they wished, help finance his next operation somewhere else.

Paul referred to himself as the 'mother' of these communities. He said he was like a nurse caring for her own children. He was 'in labor again'. I am not quite willing to call him 'Our Mother Saint Paul' (as Beverly Roberts Gaventa does) but there is a quality of relationship between Paul and his churches that we need to keep in mind.

A WRITER

Above all, Paul was a **letter writer**. Please allow me a moment to spell out what it meant to **write a letter** in those days. [Letter writing was frequent. We have 8 books of letters written by Cicero, and 121 letters of Pliny, some time after Paul, to the Roman administration. At the same time, Paul could be said to have been the best remembered letter writer, who gave that medium a pastoral value.]

Paul did not sit down at a desk and write his own letters. [He did write his ‘signature’ on a few of them, in large letters, not typical of the cursive script of a regular amanuensis.] He worked away making tents, and talked out the content of the letters. He needed a **secretary** to write a rough copy of what he said, revise it, and then produce two clean copies – one to send, one to keep (in his ‘archives’). This was not done at a table, but seated somewhere. For the rough copy and the revision, the secretary needed not pen and papyrus but a metal stylus and a wax tablet. Papyrus was needed for the two clean copies, and, say for 1 Cor, would have cost 10 drachmas. Secretaries could do 85 lines per hour. They had to be paid. Then a **runner** was needed to carry the letter to its destination. – Titus carried 2 Cor 1-9, Phoebe took Romans to Rome, Onesimus, the freed slave, became the guide in the Lycus Valley for Tychicus, the carrier of Philemon. The runner had to read out the letter, aloud, on arrival, for the benefit of the (many) non-literate members of the community.

It is hard to give a general rule about **how long it took** to write a letter. For 2 Cor 1-9, and Romans, Paul took around 6 months – largely because of the winter season, when traveling was not advisable.

Expenses were not light. All up, it is calculated that 1 Cor cost USD \$1520, Romans \$1680, Philemon \$74. In his 2 and a bit year stay in Ephesus, Paul wrote at least 4 letters (Gal, Phil, Philemon, 1 Cor). All up that would have cost \$3354. He worked as a tentmaker, for \$80 a day, but he did not work full time, due to pastoral needs. Timothy, Prisca, Aquila, Titus are assumed to have worked either as tentmakers or in some other trade and made about the same amount of money as Paul, which they would have contributed. You have to add the costs of board and lodging, and food. All up, it would seem that they did have resources adequate to the cost of the letter writing. Note that Paul never accepted money from anyone in the community where he was actually living and working, so that he would be free of obligations to any of them. He only accepted money after he had left, to help with the next place. The Philippi community subsidized Paul at Corinth, and sent money to him at Ephesus. [Paul did take up a famous collection, but it was for the poor Jews of Jerusalem.]

I have to tell you that **14 letters** are attributed to Paul, from early times, and still in most of our bibles. It is interesting that the order of the letters in our bibles goes – strangely - from the longest to the shortest, without any interest in chronology or thematics. But most – almost all – scholars today think he wrote – for sure - **only 7** of them. They are: **1 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, Philemon, and Romans.** [Usually each scholar then takes an educated guess that maybe perhaps another one, or other, that that scholar likes, is also written by Paul!] All the authentic letters of Paul were written in just a fifteen year span (at most) of his mature life.] The other letters were written by later people who were well versed in Paul’s kind of thinking and living...but not by Paul. They are called deuterio-Pauline. They are **Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, the Pastoral Epistles (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus).** Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon are called ‘captivity’ epistles – there is reference to the writer being in prison. 1 and 2 Tim and Titus are called pastoral epistles, since they give advice to pastors about their role in community. My own guess is that there was an authentic letter to the Laodiceans, which survives in part in Colossians and Ephesians. **Hebrews** was said sometimes to be a letter of Paul, but biblical scholars now, almost unanimously, do not think so. The writer of Hebrews does not think like Paul, or any of the Pauline-type writers...Hebrews is not a letter, is not written to Hebrews, and is not from Paul. (A phrase of Cardinal Albert Vanhoye, s.j., formerly of the Biblicum in Rome.) Hebrews is clearly written after the destruction of the temple, and so well after the death of Paul. These writings are canonical scripture, but not historically Paul. The collection of Paul’s letters stimulated the collection of others, wrongly or indirectly attributed to significant figures like Peter, James, Jude, John.... [Paul is the central

person in the second half of Acts, and we can say that one third of the New Testament is about Paul.]

It is perhaps not quite correct to classify Paul as a ‘letter-writer’. He – in his oral output to his scribe(s) – does not use the proprieties of either oral or written rhetoric. It is functional language, ‘off the top of his head’. We make a mistake if we spend too long in detailed analysis of a phrase or word. He even suggests that he is playing around with language. He is known as a tent-maker, or leather tradesman, but the Greek word for that (*skenopoios*) also means a stagehand, or set-designer, or lower-importance ‘extra’ or incidental figure on stage. Paul calls himself a ‘fool’ (for Christ): and ‘fool’ means, in lower class comedy, a stage buffoon who is miming the lead characters. Such a figure could well (by design) speak in a befuddled order, and indulge in self-parody. He is actually a bit of a clown. Even to speak of the ‘foolishness of the cross’ is gallows humor. [There was in fact a minor ‘tradition’ of this, in Greek culture – both Socrates and Aesop could fit the model, and contributed to it. (So L.Welborn, 2005)] He said himself that he was ‘rude in speech’ – that is, failing to exercise proper caution in expressing himself. In a more literal understanding of ‘tent-maker’, we might wonder if he also worked in wool. Tarsus at the time was famous for its wool. We might also wonder if Paul made tents for the Roman Army as well – who cares who the customer is if he pays?

It is worth reflecting that no one – not even Paul – initially thought these letters would be ‘scripture’, or included in a ‘new testament’. They were occasional letters. Unlike the authors of the gospels, Paul never hid his name as the author of these documents. I don’t think he ever entertained the thought that his letters would survive him.

It is also useful to recall that large sections of Paul’s letters are responses to questions, put to him in letters from his communities. We don’t have those letters to Paul.... Note too that Paul’s letters were meant to be read aloud to the community to which he sent them, by the messenger who carried them there: many there would not have been able to read...

Paul’s letters are unlike any letters that have come down to us from this period, unlike any correspondence unearthed from Egyptian rubbish heaps. There is nothing quite like them. The letters of Ignatius of Antioch come closest.

PAUL’S FORMATIVE EXPERIENCES

Paul was originally **a Jew**. Paul was **always** a Jew. A Hebrew of Hebrews. He never converted to any other religion. He was never a Catholic (“Catholicism” didn’t exist that early!). He could be called a Christian, as long as you translate that word, as ‘Messianist’ – that term was first used of believers in Jesus at Antioch, and Antioch was one of Paul’s main early bases. [‘Messianist’ actually is a larger term that covers other Jewish groups than those who believed in Jesus, as well as those who did. I think Paul was always a Jewish Messianist. When he persecuted some Jewish groups, it was because they believed in a crucified Messiah. He thought that was a dangerous, subversive superstition. Later he would discover it to be the core of his own faith and his own life.] Paul did have his problems with the community leaders in Antioch, and eventually dissociated himself and his work from them. In fact, he redefined Messianism. He was not ‘christian’ in the sense others were, and he was ‘christian’ in a way he had created.

Paul **never met Jesus** in Jesus’ earthly life. He had never seen him. He had only heard about him. He had **heard** – mostly from Peter - that Jesus had died, that he had risen, and would come again,

very soon, probably within Paul's lifetime. Paul understood that the Jesus people meant that literally. He knew that their community-life was based on remembering Jesus, and waiting for him to come again. They looked on Jesus' whole life as a paradigm for understanding humanity and what it could become. Jesus was the 'new Adam', 'the real Human'. They had a sense of a kind of mystical union with Jesus, who was strangely present to them now. They were initiated into this chiefly by two rituals, Baptism, and Eucharist. Paul's information about all this was actually second-hand. Initially, he didn't like it at all! The emphases in his writing were eventually very different from theirs.

It is a moot point, how much Paul learnt from such contacts and how much he 'received' in direct revelations – the experience on the road to Damascus was one of them, but, on Paul's own word, not the only one.

Did the followers of Jesus accept Paul? In Mark, we read of an 'incident' in the life of Jesus in which some people were exorcising and healing in the name and style of Jesus, even miraculously. The core disciples wanted to close them down. Jesus objected and said let them be, if they do good things in this good way there can't be much wrong with them. I think Mark is using this scene to make a comment on matters nearer to his own time and place. He is writing in Rome just after 70. I think the ministers doing well, but not accepted by the key disciples, are Paul and his (men and women) companions. They had no authorization from the pillars in Jerusalem (Peter, James, John), and yet they (Paul, Silas, Phoebe, Chloe, Prisca etc) were doing good things not only in Achaia but also in Rome itself for the Roman community. Mark is saying, leave them alone, they do a Jesus thing. But Mark may not represent all groups in nascent Christianity. The remark about 'certain things (in Paul's letters) hard to be understood which the uneducated and unstable wrest to their destruction' in 2 Peter 3,16 is from an anonymous late writer, not Peter himself.

Paul had a **life-changing experience** when the risen Jesus met him on the road to Damascus. He then went to Arabia (Nabatea, southeast of Damascus) for two or three years, seemingly to make the Damascus Road experience his own. He was torn between what he had always believed as a Jew, what he had heard about Jesus from others, and what he had now seen. He seems to have returned to Damascus for a few years and shared with believers there what he had come to understand about Jesus and his resurrection. After that, he went to Jerusalem for 15 days and met the key leaders of the Jerusalem Jesus people and heard more about Jesus. He then went to Antioch and became part of the **Antioch ('Christian') community**. Under their auspices, he became a missionary for a dozen years and more, in Syria, in Cilicia (part of Turkey as we know it), and worked mostly with people who had not become Jews, but who believed in Jesus and the Jewish God of Jesus. It is at this time that he seems to have worked in Galatia, perhaps for a couple of years, but without much success. Meantime the Jerusalem Jesus-community had spread to many places, such as Lydda, Joppa, Caesarea, Sidon. He had eventually to go to Jerusalem, to **a major conference** of Church leaders, to discuss the situation of the Gentile converts, and he sought agreement there that these people need not be circumcised. Should they be forced to become Jews before they could become Christians? Many thought, yes, and they should be circumcised, and obliged to Torah rules about kosher food. Paul said, definitely no. **Paul won the argument**. It could be said that he bought the agreement of the Jerusalem leaders, as happens in the Middle East, by agreeing to bring to Jerusalem with him the results of a collection he made for the poor there from his various diaspora communities. It would be ungracious for the leaders to receive that gift without reciprocating with the gift of their agreement with Paul! But soon some of the leaders, including Peter and James, reneged on their consent to Paul's policy about this, especially in the Antioch community. [You have to realize that in the Ancient Near East, as perhaps still in the Middle East, you never win – or lose - anything outright...the 'losers' get

something back on you afterwards even if you seem to win!] [You could say that the whole early church was like a covered kettle ready to boil over. It did, and when it did, there were many streams (and jets of hot air?) in different directions.] As a result, **Paul separated from them**, and from Barnabas (who had been his companion in earlier missionary work). He went out on his own, as an **independent missionary, claiming authorization directly from the risen Jesus**.

We do not possess enough data to understand the antics at Antioch. It is not impossible to read it as an ‘apostasy’ on the part of James and Peter from the accepted vision of Christianity that Paul had come to, and given to all. It is also not impossible to read it less as an attempt to ‘re-Judaize’ early Christianity than as an attempt to protect it from the Empire, and give it the status in the Empire that was accorded there to Jews. Was it a case of Imperial conformism?

Paul was a change agent for resurrectional freedom. He was a revolutionary defender of the free, responsible human person. He not only recreated the vision of human community, he set it up and kept it going. Paul also changed over time: in the years immediately after Damascus, and after his first contacts with the mainstream Jesus groups, he seems to have attempted to integrate his experience with their positions. He seems to me to have had an ability to explore the inner meanings of things while going along with inherited practices that were not really congruent with those inner meanings. Later, he took a very different stance, and integrated some (not all) of their positions with his own dominant experience. [Some ask a fascinating but unanswerable question, if had had a son, would he have circumcised him?]

PAUL’S OWN FIELD OF OPERATION

With the risen Jesus as his (only) authorization, Paul moved largely away from the near-eastern world, and **concentrated on Europe**. He is a long way from the sunlit shores of Galilee, where the lilies of the field put Solomon to shame. This was a momentous thing not just for Christianity, but for the history of Europe as such. In many ways we could say that Paul gave Europe a sense of freedom it had never known, even in the great days of Greece. It was a sense of freedom it would never let go. We pray it never will.

He went initially into Macedonia, into Thessaloniki and Philippi. He then went into the more important southern Greek cities of Achaia (Athens and Corinth) and that means that he went to the heartland of (*Romanized*) *Greek culture*. The sojourn in the western Roman province of Asia (Ephesos) means that he placed himself in the *largest growing city of the Middle East* at the time. He is a city person. He goes to *cities that are on major roads (east-west) or at major seaports*, where there are trade centers and centers of migration. He considered he had ‘done it all’ in the eastern half of the Empire, and turned his attention to the west of the Empire, Spain. [He never got to Spain.] He has thus been in **major centres of the influence of Imperial Rome on European-Greek culture, politics, and economy**.

Paul settled – if that is the right word – particularly in **Corinth**, in **Ephesus**, and eventually as a house-prisoner in **Rome**. [He had quite a police and prison record over the years!] He was 2-3 years in Corinth, another 2-3 years in Ephesus, and perhaps some 3-4 years in Rome. In other places he made shorter visits, some of them as short as a few weeks at a time.

Paul wanted to go to Spain. I don’t think he ever got there. I am not even sure that even the idea holds up. He would not have been able to speak Greek there. There was no Jewish synagogue

there. There was no identifiable group of God-fearers, the people with whom he had most success elsewhere.... [Some scholars (such as Rainer Reisner) defend Paul's presence in Spain, in particular at Tarragona. Their case rests on the Acts of Martyrdom of St.Fruittuoso (of Tarragona), and possible references in the first letter of Clement. They think that Paul may have been exiled to Spain, and may have lost the rights of Roman citizenship thereby. He would have returned to Rome. He certainly had a longer period of presence in Rome than is typical of his residence anywhere else in his active life.]

We know hardly anything historically of the death of Paul. There is no mention of it in Acts. Tradition and legend say he was decapitated at Tre Fontane, outside Rome, and that his head bounced three times, with a fountain springing up in the three places. No other place in Rome claims to be the site of his martyrdom. His body, it is said, was then taken by the Via Ostiense nearby to the site of the present basilica of St.Paul outside the walls. Monks have been at Tre Fontane since the end of the 6th century. In the 12th century it was given to the monks of St.Bernard, who said mass there, in ecstasy. It is private place, with gum trees and olives. It has become an ecumenical center.

ESTABLISHING A CHRONOLOGY

The chronological order of the [letters](#) of Paul naturally differs from the chronological order of his [travels](#). Usually he wrote back, later, to a community he had established and visited (perhaps more than once). Almost all the letters are written from Corinth or Ephesus, presumably when he was wintering there. [In our bibles, the order of the letters is not helpful: it simply gives the longest letter (Romans) first, and goes on in order of decreasing size to the shortest! This has nothing to do with chronology or the themes treated.]

A usually (but not universally) accepted chronological order of the letters, which I will follow in these reflections, is:

1 Thessalonians

Philippians

1 and 2 Corinthians

Galatians

Romans

[Philemon... any place in the order: Paul says he was a 'presbutes' when he wrote it: an 'elderly person' between 49-56 years of age]

Cf. Gregory Tatum, o.p., *New Chapters in the Life of Paul: the Relative Chronology of his Career*. 2007

All of these letters seem to be written in the broad first half of the fifties....The exact order is not greatly important to the purpose of these reflections. The letters are occasional pieces, roughly around the same time, and the underflow of Paul's thought is discernible no matter in what exact order they are studied. More nuances could surely be obtained if we could decide on definite order between the letters, and their exact dates.

CLEARING UP SOME IMPRESSIONS ABOUT PAUL

I have given you, as a start of our ongoing reflections for this jubilee year, some basic information about Paul. But I have not yet really shown you **who Paul really was**. Be patient, this year of Paul is young! We can't see who Paul is, until we see how the risen Jesus met him on the road to Damascus. That changed not only his life, but his character as a person.

I have given you this information largely to suggest that we need a realism in our grasp of Paul. We do need to give up a lot of imagination that has surrounded our picture of him over the years. For example, Paul is often imagined to be **anti-Semitic**. Nothing could be less true. For example, he is often imagined to be a **mysoginist**. Nothing could be less true. He wanted women to have equal rights and equal opportunity in all his communities. It would be useful to look at the women who have distinctive roles in Paul's communities, e.g. Chloe, Phoebe, Junia, Evodia, Syntyche, Appia (at Colossae), Prisc(ill)a. There are indeed a couple of texts that hang in people's memories, and they give a contrary interpretation. It may be useful to say something about them now. In one text, Paul tells women to be quiet in church, and not to teach or preach: but that text comes from one of the later writings (from part of the Pastoral Epistles), not from the historical Paul. In another text, and this one is from the authentic Paul, he tells the men in his community in Corinth not to wear their hair long, and the women there not to wear their hair short. The context needs to be appreciated. In Corinth at the time, homosexual men usually wore their hair long, and homosexual women usually wore their hair short, and in the red-light city that Corinth then was, they were not given full personal respect. Paul wanted every person in his community to give and receive that full personal respect, and that is why he gave this directive to the Christians there at that time. [Crossan and Reed, *In Search of Paul*, 2004, treat these matters very well.] In fact, this is a case of a need to avoid anachronisms: 'homosexuality' as a category is largely a 19th century creation, bound up with the medicalization of behavior.

It is perhaps not necessary to say that in Paul's lifetime, the roles of 'priest', 'bishop', and even 'pope' were not formally established. It is an anachronism to see Paul as priest or bishop. And he certainly wasn't pope! He was never a monk....

SUMMARY

Our focus in this whole series of reflections, is the Jew Saul of Tarsus, Saint Paul of the Crucified-Risen Jesus. For the moment, let's see him as **an idiosyncratic, non-Antiochene, Jesus-believing Diaspora Jew, a great traveler, community builder, and writer – who BELIEVED IN THE CRUCIFIED-RISEN JESUS.**

RESUME

Birth: probably (?) 6 bce, Tarsus – Jewish conservative family [almost a contemporary of Jesus]

Death: probably 64 ce, Rome (under Nero)

occupation: tradesman (in leather goods)

education: learned in Jewish scriptures (from synagogue) – but he always refers to them in their Greek translation (LXX); informally but well educated in Greek thought from travelling philosophers and speakers coming to Tarsus. [Probably not 'technically' a Pharisee – none outside Palestine then - Probably not educated in Jerusalem under Gamaliel; not known to Christians in Judea before 'conversion'; not a persecutor of the Jerusalem church; not present at the stoning of Stephen]

language: Greek (but not skilled in writing it), with some knowledge of Hebrew, Aramaic and Latin

appearance: short, clean-shaven (like everyone else)

A scroll and accompanying rock drawing have been found in Turkey in 2006. The scrolls belonged to a poor farmer who kept a sporadic journal. He went to Ephesus to see the great speaker, Paul. He was a man no taller than a child. He climbed on to a table and began to speak. The farmer depicted his size on a rock. He was a midget. Perhaps this is the 'affliction' Paul mentions in 2Cor. He was the 'least' of the apostles. He may have come up to Peter's waist. We can now check this, perhaps, against the remains in the sarcophagus found in Rome. See below re **place of death**.

married: probably not

vocation: apostle of Jesus Crucified-risen

authorization: by a resurrection encounter with Crucified-risen Jesus

task: to establish communities of believers in this Jesus in the wider Gentile world

'supervision': council of apostles in Jerusalem

actual areas of operation:

Eastern Mediterranean (Arabia, Syria, Cilicia);

Asia Minor (Galatia, Asia = Ephesus);

Macedonia (Philippi, Thessaloniki);

Achaia (Corinth);

Illyricum

planned area of operation: Spain (never got there)

[He may also have thought of Bithynia and Pontus, the gateway to the East (Babylon? Parthia?)]

primary means of transport: on foot, by sea

primary means of communication with communities: visits, messengers, letters (dictated)

prison record: extensive (especially Ephesus, Jerusalem, Rome)

other activities: fund raising for poor of Jerusalem from Gentile communities

health: vigorous, but chronic problem of recurrent pain

place of death: in December 2006, archaeologists unearthed a sarcophagus believed to contain the remains of Paul, buried beneath the present basilica of St.Paul's in Rome.

Cf. Nicholas King, Real letters to real people, The Tablet, June 28, 2008, the first of a series for the year of Paul.

See attached portrait of Paul, by Rembrandt
