

# Scripture **from** Scratch

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*A popular guide to understanding the Bible*

## Paul: Letters From a Traveling Theologian

by Elizabeth McNamer

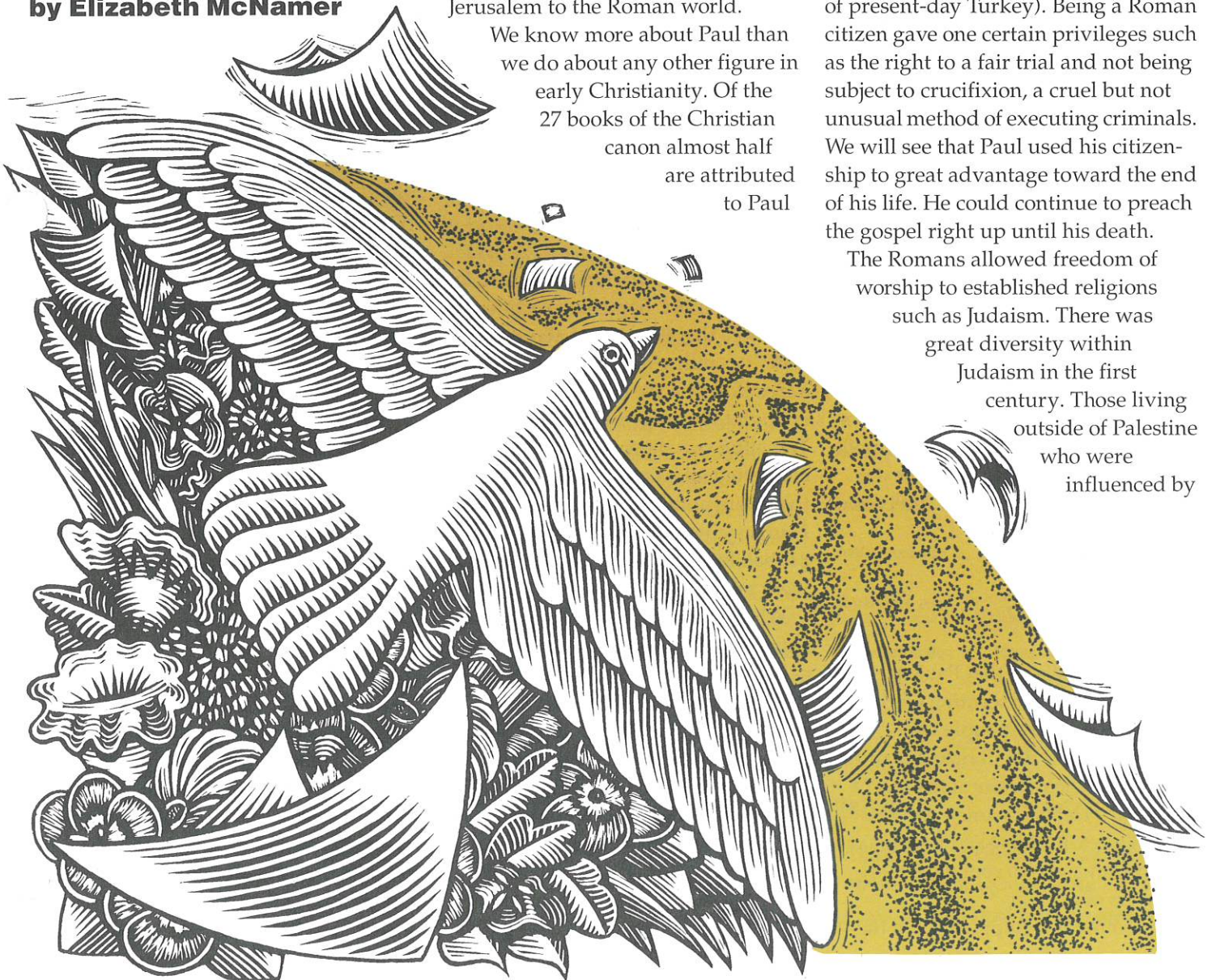
**W**ho is more important—Jesus or Paul? When biblical scholars raise this question, they are only half serious. Of course Jesus is the center of the Christian message, but without Paul, how far would the message have spread? Paul was the one who carried the gospel out beyond Jerusalem to the Roman world.

We know more about Paul than we do about any other figure in early Christianity. Of the 27 books of the Christian canon almost half are attributed to Paul

or his followers. He tells us much about himself in his letters, which were all written between the years 50 and 63 C.E. (Common Era). The Acts of the Apostles, written by Luke about 30 years after Paul's death, give us many details that the letters omit.

Paul was a Jew, born a Roman citizen in Tarsus in Cilicia (on the south coast of present-day Turkey). Being a Roman citizen gave one certain privileges such as the right to a fair trial and not being subject to crucifixion, a cruel but not unusual method of executing criminals. We will see that Paul used his citizenship to great advantage toward the end of his life. He could continue to preach the gospel right up until his death.

The Romans allowed freedom of worship to established religions such as Judaism. There was great diversity within Judaism in the first century. Those living outside of Palestine who were influenced by

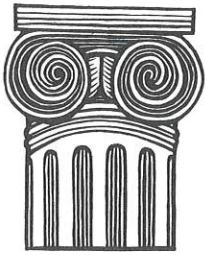


Illustrations by Nancy Hopkins



## Praying With Scripture

■ **Read 1 Corinthians 13:4-13 substituting your own name every time “love” is mentioned. This is a good measure of the Christian life. How do you measure up?**



**Paul used his Roman citizenship to great advantage in spreading the gospel throughout the known world.**

Greek culture were called Hellenistic Jews. They observed the practices mandated by the Torah, but they presumably interacted with the Gentiles. This often brought them into conflict with the Law—and with Palestinian Jews, who kept themselves apart from the Gentiles. We see signs of this conflict in Paul’s letters.

Paul probably received his early education in Tarsus, a city known for its learning. He would have been exposed to Greek thought and culture.

He received his later education in Jerusalem where he had a married sister. He studied the Law with Gamaliel, the great teacher of the day. Then he was all ready for his career as a promising young lawyer.

### *On the Road to Damascus*

**A**cts tells us that Paul started out by persecuting Christians. The people who stoned the Christian deacon Stephen laid their cloaks at the feet of Saul (Paul’s Hebrew name). After Stephen’s death Saul asked permission to go to Damascus to round up more “followers of the way.”

Then something happened. On the Damascus road, he had an overwhelming experience that changed

everything, not just for him but for the world. Artists through the centuries have portrayed this experience as a bolt of lightning or a flash of light knocking Paul off his horse, but Acts never mentions a horse. Nonetheless, the revelation certainly shook up everything he believed to be true. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul tells us that in this moment, God revealed Jesus to him.

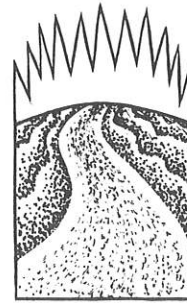
It took him three years to come to terms with what had happened, but when he did, he set out to spread the message of Jesus with panache.

### *The Traveling Preacher*

**P**aul’s preaching took him far afield. Some have estimated that he covered about 10,000 miles (not quite enough to get a free ticket on the airlines, but maybe enough to be upped to first class!). Traveling was dangerous work. Roads connected all parts of the Empire, but they were nothing to write home about. Paul may have used a donkey, but in all probability he walked. Sometimes he went by ship.

When Paul refers to his conversion experience in Galatians, he says he was called to be a prophet to the Gentiles. Prophets pay a high price for their calling, and he would undergo much suffering. Acts 14:19-20 tells us that he was flogged within an inch of his life, left for dead at Lystra, imprisoned several times, put in maximum security at Philippi. Paul himself tells us of his many ordeals in 2 Corinthians 11:24-27.

Paul’s first journey was made with Barnabas and Mark. Barnabas probably set the itinerary since their first stop



**Paul’s conversion changed everything, not just for him but for the world.**

was Cyprus, his home place. On his later journeys, Paul seems to have deliberately chosen major cities, such as Corinth and Ephesus, from which he could branch out. Paul was at ease with urban social life and in most of his letters he sends greetings from his traveling companions or the people with whom he stayed.

When Paul arrived in a city he first took the message to the Jews, reading the Scriptures at the synagogue and then commenting on them. He usually told the congregation that Jesus was the fulfillment

of their expectations. Sometimes he was invited back. At Thessalonica he preached for three Sabbaths in a row. Then he declared, “This Jesus I am telling you about is the Messiah.” That’s when they started picking up stones and rioting.

He usually met with violence and abuse. But he made converts, perhaps among the “God fearers.” Many in the Roman Empire were attracted to the high ethical standards, and the monotheism of Judaism. Josephus, a first-century Jewish historian, tells us that these “God fearers” regularly attended the synagogue service. Paul may have found a willing ear among them.

### *Dear Paul: What Should We Do?*

**P**aul established many of the congregations to whom he later wrote the letters that we now find in the New Testament. He stayed there for a time teaching, preaching and working with the people. He stayed in Corinth for a year and a half and at Ephesus for three years. We surmise that when he departed he left someone in charge. Prob-

lems emerged, a community leader wrote for Paul's advice and Paul responded.

Scholars tell us that many of the Pauline letters were written by his followers. This should not disturb us. It happens frequently in New Testament writings. It was common practice to put the name of an authority at the end of a document. Scholars generally agree that Philippians, Philemon and 1 Thessalonians were written by Paul, as well as the four great letters: 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians and Romans. Ephesians, Colossians and 2 Thessalonians were probably written by followers of Paul. The style and word use are different. The pastoral letters (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus) were written at the end of the century when the hierarchy was being set up.

All the letters dealt with needs as they arose. We can see many of the issues that surfaced by reading the letters themselves. For example, in Thessalonica people were concerned about their friends who had died missing the parousia or the second coming of Christ. (Expectations of the second coming were strong in the early Church, and we should be aware of this when reading all of Paul's letters.) The Corinthians were having difficulty with many things: a man sleeping with his stepmother; whether they could eat food sacrificed to idols; problems with the celebration of the Eucharist; problems with how to pray; and concern for the behavior of women.

Paul answered these questions in his letters, and as he did so he was formulating theology. Like all theologians, he brought his own personality, beliefs and background to his theology. He is not always consistent. He seems to address questions in the context in which they arise. And his answers are given according to the circumstances behind the question asked. There is no doubt, however, that at the heart of all his theology is the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Paul's letters to the people of Corinth are infamous for his strong words on marriage and sexual morality. But he

also gives a theology of the Eucharist that remains with us to this day. The people in Corinth were apparently dividing up into cliques of rich and poor for the eucharistic celebration. Social norms of the time required that wealthy people and slaves not mix. Paul reminded them that they were all one, that the one loaf symbolized that. He tells the Corinthians that their gifts are not for one's own use but for the good of all. And his lyrical reflection on love in chapter 13 is a wonderful summation of the Christian life.

Often people see Paul as a misogynist, a woman-hater. But there were lots of women in Paul's life: Lydia at Philippi, Chloe at Corinth, Nympha at Colossae, Priscilla and numerous others mentioned at the end of his letter to the Romans. His admonitions to the women in Corinth must be seen in context. For example, when he says they should wear hats to keep their hair covered, he's referring to the fact that prostitutes at the time had loose, flowing hair and did not wear hats. Paul did not want anyone mistaking his Christian women for naughty ladies.

### *Circumcision: The Painful Debate*

**T**he Galatians had a serious question: the relationship of Gentile Christians to the practices of Judaism. Was it necessary for them to be circumcised and observe the Mosaic Law?

For Jews, the Law was the center of their religion, a response to the covenant relationship with Yahweh. Observance of the Law made one righteous or

justified (in a good relationship with God). It offered security in an insecure world. Paul's training as a Pharisee had steeped him in strict observance of the Law. To accomplish his mission to the Gentiles, he had to alter his attitude toward the Law.

Circumcision was a sign of the Hebrew covenant with God. The operation was performed on all male Jews at the age of eight days. It made them members of the Jewish community, identified them as men of the covenant and required them to keep the whole Law of Moses.

Gentiles coming into the Church were grown men. In these days before antibiotics, it has been estimated that a quarter of those adults undergoing the circumcision operation died of infection. Understandably, Paul's converts were concerned about whether this was necessary for them.

Paul took their concerns to the Christian leaders in Jerusalem, who determined after much debate at the Council of Jerusalem (49 C.E.) that circumcision was not necessary for Gentile converts. This didn't settle the conflict entirely. Paul's communities would always have trouble with Judaizers, Christians who felt that strict observance of



**At the heart of Paul's theology is the death and resurrection of Jesus and what that involved for Gentiles and Jews alike.**



## **Living the Scriptures**

■ **Often asking for help from others can be the greatest compliment you can pay them. Think of someone with whom you are on the "outs." Call that person and ask for a favor.**

Jewish Law was still essential, but the official leaders had spoken.

The relationship of Gentiles to Judaism was a subject that would engage Paul throughout his life. Christianity was a sect within Judaism during all of Paul's life; one person has called this conflict "a family dispute." Paul did not abandon his Jewishness, but he came to see faith in Jesus Christ, rather than the Law, as central. We see this especially in his letters to the Galatians and the Romans. He emphasizes Baptism rather than circumcision, as the sign of the covenant. Through Baptism, Christians participate in the death and resurrection of Christ, dying to their evil nature and rising to eternal life.

### Paul's Legacy

**W**hat makes Paul such an outstanding figure in the early Church? He was clever, well educated, energetic. He had been raised in the Jewish religion in a Greek milieu. For years, scholars bandied about the idea

that Paul combined Greek philosophy with Jewish theology, though they have now abandoned this. Paul in fact knew very little philosophy. He would possibly have gotten a D in it at school. But what shines forth from all of his words and actions is his overwhelming faith in and love of Jesus and his determination to spread the good news about him to others.

He paid for it with his life. Tradition suggests that he was put to death by beheading. One morning, after he had been imprisoned in Rome for two years, he was taken out on the Appian way to a wood just off the highway. There he was tied to a tree and the executioner, not always skilled at his task, chopped away at his neck. Later a church was built over the site. It is called St. Paul's Outside the Walls. Unfortunately Paul has always been a bit of an outsider. He was controversial in his own day and he remains controversial in ours.

Nonetheless, Paul is the one who established Christian communities in the Gentile world and he formulated the theology that allowed Christianity to

emerge from Judaism. Christianity would in time become the official religion of the Roman Empire. As the Empire declined, Christianity filled in the gap and became the impetus for the development of what we call Western civilization. Thus Paul is not only the second most important person in Christianity, but one of the most important figures in history. ■

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**Next: Mapping the Biblical Journey (by Virginia Smith)**



### Talking About Scripture

- **Circumstances may alter cases. When you are asked to make decisions do you consider the circumstances behind the question as Paul did?**
- **Paul mentions his own weakness but God's strength. What do you see as your greatest weakness? Do you call on God's grace in dealing with it? Do you see this weakness as a positive thing?**
- **Paul says that God can make all things work together for good, even our faults. Do you ever think of your faults as a way to salvation?**



### Reading About Scripture

- **Harrington, Daniel. *Paul on the Mystery of Israel*. Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1992.**
- **Fitzmyer, Joseph. *Paul and His Theology*. New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1989.**
- **Meeks, Wayne. *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*. New York: Yale University Press, 1984.**
- **Ziegler, John. *Pauline Christianity*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1983.**