

CHAPTER 21



HOW RICH WAS PAUL? ... AND WHY IT MATTERS

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Working with Kent Brown on several New Testament projects has been an extraordinary honor and a joy in my life. Knowing especially of his spiritual and rigorous affinities to the gospel of Luke, and through Luke to Luke's likely traveling companion Paul, I offer the following musings about Paul's extraordinary backgrounds. Above all, Paul was a totally dedicated and consecrated disciple of Jesus Christ. Whatever time, talents, and resources he possessed—and it certainly appears that in all respects Paul was copiously endowed and equipped to carry out the extremely challenging calling that was given to him and to all the apostles of Jesus Christ—Paul placed them fully and gladly on the altar of spiritual sacrifice. These are virtues that Kent Brown has always deeply admired and, in so emulating these early Christian examples, has become both a wonderful follower and articulate leader, like Paul himself to all those around him.

Some Questions

Reading the writings of the apostle Paul is a daunting task, and the difficulties are only exacerbated because little is known about this extremely influential and complex man. He seems to come

almost out of nowhere. Tarsus may have been as unknown to the Jewish Galileans as it is to modern readers: they knew the name of this city, to be sure, but possibly not much more. Throughout his life Paul proceeds to go just about everywhere. Nowhere was beyond his desired reach; Caesar's Rome was just a doorway that he hoped would help him achieve his goal of converting the entire known world to Jesus Christ. What kind of man was this *doulos*, this servant (or slave) of his spiritual Master? Had he himself grown up as the son of a common laborer? Or perhaps did he herald from the privileged aristocracy? And what difference might the answer make in how we read Paul today? Responses to these questions have gravitated in various directions.

In 1985, Jerome Murphy-O'Connor published in *Bible Review* a charming article on Paul's missionary travels, entitled "On the Road and on the Sea with St. Paul,"¹ concerned mainly with the means and manner by which Paul got around. Using detailed sources from the world of the New Testament, Murphy-O'Connor paints a vivid picture of the perils, hardships, and discomforts (including the bed-bugs) that faced travelers in the eastern Mediterranean during the first century, and he creates a material context in which readers can begin to reconstruct various social, cultural, and economic aspects of Paul's travels.

Murphy-O'Connor's particular portrait of Paul, however, is largely based on the assumption that Paul was not a man of means. "Paul was not a rich man," we are flatly told:

The impression he gives in his letters is that he had no significant personal financial resources. He seems to have had nothing beyond what he could earn and the sporadic gifts sent to him by various churches (2 Corinthians 11:8-9; Philippians 4:14). As an itinerant artisan, a tent-maker (Acts

1. Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, "On the Road and on the Sea with St. Paul," *Bible Review* 1/2 (1985): 38-47. This view was nuanced somewhat in 2004 by Murphy-O'Connor; see text accompanying notes 12-13 below.

18:3), he was far better off than an unskilled worker of the laboring class, but no artisan became rich. It would have been as much as Paul could do to earn his daily bread, even if he had enjoyed a stable situation with a regular clientele.²

The question of Paul's financial status, however, is critical not only to understanding his energetic ability to get around by land or by sea, but also to assessing the metaphors, ideologies, and paradigms within which this enigmatic man spoke, taught, and wrote. How should modern readers socially and economically situate Paul's comments about masters and slaves? Or about family relations and prevailing urban society? Or about making donations to Jerusalem or paying taxes to Rome? How do we position his stance toward the pervasive culture of honor and shame or the prevailing patron-client institution of his day? How do we understand his socially laden comments on being "no more strangers and foreigners" but becoming "fellowcitizens" (Ephesians 2:19) and inheriting even as sons? How do we see his personal standing in relation to the social values that he promotes, such as charity (1 Corinthians 13), obedience (Ephesians 6:5-9; 1 Timothy 6:1-2), unity (Ephesians 4:1-16), being rich in good works (Philippians 2:12-18; 1 Timothy 6:17-21), and avoiding hypocrisy (Romans 2:17-24)? Several theses—many of them more religiously or theologically important than the rather mundane conclusion that Paul traveled principally on foot precisely because he was poor—depend on assumptions about Paul's personal economic, social, and political status. Divergence among scholars on these views invites a renewed look at this interesting subject.

Previous Opinions

Murphy-O'Connor's view that Paul was a poor craftsman is reminiscent of the writings of the work of Gustav A. Deissmann on early Christian society. As Deissmann asserted, Paul was "a simple

2. Murphy-O'Connor, "On the Road and on the Sea with St. Paul," 39.

man,” whose economic base was a relatively humble trade.³ He oddly assigned Paul to the lower or middle class based on his literacy and language usage;⁴ in reaching this conclusion he followed the arguments of early church fathers, such as John Chrysostom, who also saw Paul as a common man who had come from an undistinguished family.⁵

Deissmann’s view, though perhaps widely shared among Bible readers, finds less support among scholars today, who typically hold the opposite view, although with considerable variations on this theme. Several hold that Paul was wealthy throughout his lifetime. For example, A. N. Wilson, the prolific biographer of such figures as Tolstoy, C. S. Lewis, Milton, and Jesus, sees Paul’s trumpeted self-sufficiency and his successful trial at Jerusalem as proof that he was independently wealthy clear to the end of his life.⁶ For other scholars, including the well-known Martin Hengel and Joseph Fitzmyer, Paul’s Roman citizenship and his educational background necessarily presuppose significant monetary resources of his family.⁷ Several other writers support the idea that Paul came from a family with wealth and high social standing, but they question his own status and means during the time of his apostolic ministry. F. J. Foakes-Jackson, for example, describes Paul’s independent financial position as being attributable to the wealth of his family, who may well have held a good deal of social prestige and lived in “easy circumstances,” but nevertheless he notes that Paul felt the pinch of poverty at times

3. Gustav A. Deissmann, *Paul: A Study in Social and Religious History*, trans. William E. Wilson (New York: Hodder and Stoughton, 1957), 48.

4. Deissmann, *Paul*, 51.

5. John Chrysostom, *Hom. de laud. S. Pauli* 3 (PG 50:491). In expressing this opinion, perhaps Chrysostom was projecting his own ascetic values back onto the apostle.

6. A. N. Wilson, *Paul: The Mind of the Apostle* (New York: Norton, 1997), 52.

7. Martin Hengel, *The Pre-Christian Paul* (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1991), 1-39; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 144-45; see also Sherman E. Johnson, *Paul the Apostle and His Cities* (Wilmington, DE: Glazier, 1987), 31-33.

because of the sacrifices and inconveniences that clearly accompanied his ministry.⁸ A century ago, W. M. Ramsay asserted that Paul, though formerly acquainted with wealth and status, was only the destitute nephew or relative of his rich extended family during his ministry.⁹ More recently, N. A. Dahl has opined that Paul came from a family of wealth but “probably knew want more often than plenty” during his time as a preacher, surviving by the work of his own hands, possibly because he had been disinherited by his family for his conversion to Christianity.¹⁰ Ronald Hock has even argued that Paul, who came “from a relatively high social class,”¹¹ willingly accepted a life of significant poverty, knowing that affluence would have eluded him as he plied “his trade in a social world that was highly hostile toward” his missionary work.¹² In 2004, Father Murphy-O’Connor argued once again in his very fine book, *Paul: His Story* (a much-expanded version of his 1985 article, introduced above), that Paul likely lived primarily off of almsgiving, although here Murphy-O’Connor allows that it was “not impossible that he was funded by his family,” for his parents might have remained “prosperous into a ripe old age.”¹³ He dismisses the idea, however, that Paul earned money from his family’s tentmaking trade because his “total dedication” to his religious endeavors would have left “little or no time to earn a living,”¹⁴ and

8. F. J. Foakes-Jackson, *The Life of St. Paul: The Man and the Apostle* (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1926), 63-64.

9. William M. Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveler and Roman Citizen* (New York: Putnam, 1904), 34-35.

10. N. A. Dahl, *Studies in Paul* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977), 35-36.

11. Ronald F. Hock, “Paul’s Tentmaking and the Problems of His Social Class,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 97 (1978): 564. For latest reflections, see Ronald F. Hock, “The Problem of Paul’s Social Class: Further Reflections,” in *Paul’s World*, ed. Stanley E. Porter (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 7-18.

12. Ronald F. Hock, *The Social Context of Paul’s Ministry: Tentmaking and Apostleship* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 35.

13. Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, *Paul: His Story* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 14.

14. Murphy-O’Connor, *Paul: His Story*, 13.

thus, all the more, it would appear that his upbringing was highly privileged and his resources were ample.

This sample of opinions about Paul's wealth illustrates the breadth of possibilities that still remain to be explored. Effectual conclusions may always elude us, especially because the surviving evidence, coming almost exclusively from the New Testament, is not only scarce but also often inconsistent or inconclusive. At times, Paul seems to have the means and education of an upper-class Roman citizen; in other situations, he seems to be as destitute as an unrefined lowly laborer. Thus, the question of Paul's wealth must be approached, not as a single question, but rather as a series of inquiries regarding various aspects of Paul's life. Examined in this way, it seems that on every count Paul was quite rich throughout his life, and perhaps even very rich indeed.

Paul's Background, Education, and Acquired Legal Acumen

Despite the lack of information about Paul's background, most scholars accept the idea that his family was most likely one of considerable means and status. Paul was born during the Hellenistic diaspora into the home of a Pharisee who was also a Roman citizen. As a virtual citizen of three worlds, Paul acquired an education that was culturally rich, and his background was probably privileged and affluent.

Paul introduces himself in Jerusalem as both a Jew and a native of Tarsus in the province of Cilicia (Acts 21:39; 22:3). Tarsus was the capital of Cilicia, with a reputation among Greeks in the Hellenistic world as a center of Greek philosophical and literary education. One must assume that he studied to some extent in the local gymnasium or, if that would have been too Greek for a Pharisaic Jew, that he had tutors who taught him well. His Greek vocabulary is large and distinctive: by my computer count, 55 percent of the vocabulary words used in the Greek New Testament are used by him alone. Teachers of Greek, and apparently of Hebrew and Latin

as well, would probably have been easily available in Tarsus, especially to a person of means.

As a sizeable trading city built upon the highway that connected the Syrian city of Antioch with the wealthy Roman province of Asia in eastern Turkey, Tarsus attracted many people of diverse origins, languages, and cultures, including a population of Hellenized Jews.¹⁵ In this cosmopolitan setting, Paul probably witnessed early on the ways of the business world and became familiar with people from Greece, Asia, Galatia, Cyprus, Damascus, and beyond. Growing up in the provincial capital would also have exposed Paul to men of influence and power. Even as a boy, the son of a Roman citizen would have conversed occasionally with a wide spectrum of important officials in the marketplace, under the columned porches, and around the seats of government—places that he would frequent later in Philippi, Athens, Corinth, and Ephesus.

But more than that, Paul went on to receive his highest formal education in Jerusalem under the tutelage of Gamaliel, a scholar of Jewish law and a rabbi of great repute and influence among the Jewish people (Acts 5:34; 22:3). How would an ordinary Jewish boy from Tarsus ever manage to get admitted into the educational care of such an instructor? How would such a youth travel all the way to Jerusalem? Not by walking, one may assume. Since no scholarship funds gave equal opportunity to the poor or common folk in these days, one can only assume that Paul's family had significant financial resources to make this educational experience possible. Speaking of Paul's extraordinarily privileged educational background, "both religious and secular," Murphy-O'Connor concludes, "This was an expensive privilege, and was not available to the vast majority of Jews. Someone, presumably his parents, had to pay for it. . . . Paul clearly did not have to go to work either as a child or as a young man."¹⁶

15. Arthur Darby Nock, *St. Paul* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1938), 22-23.

16. Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul: His Story*, 4.

And Paul's upper-class education paid off. His talents and training evidently brought him rapid success, bringing him respect and uncommon opportunities. As a young man he was already known and trusted by the Sanhedrin, whose leaders entrusted him with the official responsibility of arresting Christians in Damascus and returning them to Jerusalem to stand trial for blasphemy. This would have been an important commission. Perhaps this charge was entrusted to him precisely because he was the son of an influential father and, as a Roman citizen, could have commanded respect before Roman officials in the Roman province of Syria. Otherwise, this stewardship seems a bit out of the league of a young "college student," even assuming that he had received a high recommendation from his mentor, Gamaliel, or others. Moreover, on the road to Damascus, Paul was traveling with a group of men who appeared to be his subordinates. Even as a relatively young man he seemed to be fully in charge of them, and they seemed obligated, either as underlings or servants, to take care of him after he was temporarily blinded.

In addition, Paul's writings reflect the deep influence of both the Greek and Jewish cultures on his education. Paul's letters are illustrative of a man who enjoyed an education similar to that of other wealthy, upper-class men of his day. Many of the metaphors that he so richly employs throughout his letters are drawn from the domains of law, business, politics, and leisure,¹⁷ and they would have been naturally on the lips of men of means. He seems conversant with several philosophies of his day.¹⁸ His writings reflect the Greek oratory tradition as well as "Hellenistic anthropology, [and] Stoic methods of argumentation."¹⁹ He uses Greek philosophical

17. David J. Williams, *Paul's Metaphors: Their Context and Character* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), esp. chaps. 6-12.

18. See, for example, Troels Engberg-Pedersen, *Paul and the Stoics* (Edinburgh: Clark, 2000); Bruce W. Winter, *Paul and the Sophists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

19. Calvin J. Roetzel, *Paul: The Man and the Myth* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), 22-23.

terminology in his letters to Corinth and Colossae. Indeed, the Hellenistic elements of Paul's education make it difficult for Peter and the other apostles to understand him at times (2 Peter 3:16). The structure of his letters imitates the refined models of the ancient rhetoricians, such as Quintilian, although the ethical content is Jewish in nature.²⁰ With great skill, Paul utilizes Greek rhetorical forms and philosophical ideas to further his own arguments, as has been especially observed in regard to his defense in the letter to the Galatians or before the Areopagus in Athens.²¹ At the same time, he readily quotes and expounds on the meanings of scripture in both the Hebrew and Greek versions and modes of interpretation. He knows the Greek Septuagint translation of the Jewish scriptures intimately and quotes from it profusely.

His phenomenal ease and success within Jewish, Greek, and Roman courts of law particularly suggest that his training in the law was superb as well. Virtually everywhere Paul went, he wound up in court, and he loved being thrown into those legal briar patches. Every time, he wiggled out of the problem or won outright, sometimes winning big, either by serving the Sanhedrin; impressing the Roman proconsul Sergius Paulus on Cyprus; escaping from Jewish prosecutors in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra; asserting his rights in Philippi; settling a case in Thessalonica; obtaining a stay of action from the high court of Athens; winning a major victory over Sosthenes before Gallio, the proconsul in Corinth; exposing illegal magicians in Ephesus; or defending himself upon arrest, initially before the temple guards in Jerusalem and subsequently before Roman governors in Caesarea. In each case he acquitted himself masterfully.

It is difficult to imagine that Paul's multifaceted, religious, literary, and philosophical education could have been open to anyone

20. Johnson, *Paul the Apostle and His Cities*, 33.

21. See, for example, Hans Dieter Betz, "Galatians," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2:873.

but the most privileged and prosperous members of society. Most likely, the exceptional wealth and status of Paul's family made this all possible. His extensive knowledge, huge vocabulary, and impressive command of literary techniques are attributes possessed by members of the upper class, those with enough money to buy instruction and with the leisure time (*scholia*, from which the English word *school* derives) in which to study.

The Business of Tentmaking

Luke records that Paul stayed and worked with Aquila and Priscilla in Corinth because they, like he, were tentmakers (*skēnopoioi*) by trade (Acts 18:3). Deissmann, considering this reference to Paul's trade, concludes that Paul, as a tentmaker, could not possibly be conceived of as a well-educated and literate person, but at best a simple laborer of the lower classes who wrote clumsily with "a workman's hand deformed by toil."²² However, this view is now rejected.²³

Deissmann's main error lay in his failure to consider the craft within the context of Paul's world. Tentmaking was no small-scale profession in ancient times. Because inns were filthy or nonexistent, tents were luxury items for wealthy travelers and, more importantly, they were standard equipment for Roman legions, especially during the winter. Tents were large and expensive, measuring ten Roman square feet inside and housing eight men.²⁴ In addition to tents, a tentmaker would likely have been responsible for the manufacture of other military gear and clothing, leather products, and perhaps also *cilcium*, a thick material made from goat hair, for which Tarsus was famous.²⁵

Moreover, tentmakers probably worked in leathers, canvas, and heavy fabrics for many commercial applications. In addition to making tents, members of Paul's business community would have

22. Deissmann, *Paul*, 48-49.

23. Hock, "Paul's Tentmaking," 556-57.

24. Wilson, *Paul*, 29.

25. Hengel, *Pre-Christian Paul*, 17.

made sacks for grain, awnings for shops, sails for ships, and very large coverings for public spaces. Tentmaking was an important business in the world of the New Testament.

We do not know the profession of Paul's father or how Paul became involved in this trade. Hock believes that Paul learned tentmaking from his father, and indeed Pharisees had a duty to teach their sons a skill: "Eduard Meyer even assumed that 'his father had a factory in which tents were made.'"²⁶ Be that as it may, if Paul's family was wealthy and had been involved with any large degree of volume production of tents or other products, slaves must have been part of the family work force. No business of any significance could be conducted in Paul's day without the labor of people who were indentured to the master or in servitude of one kind or another. In that case, Paul probably grew up with domestic servants (slaves) in the home.

In Corinth or elsewhere, items produced by tentmakers were in high demand, and the tools of this trade were readily portable. Therefore, Paul's business probably suited his itinerant lifestyle and was potentially quite lucrative. He lived and worked in "downtown" Corinth with Aquila and then moved in with Justus, whose house was right next door to the Jewish synagogue (Acts 18:7), probably in a good location close to the agora and civic center of this capital city of the Roman province of Achaia.

Paul's Roman Citizenship

The greatest potential evidence for the wealth and status of Paul and his family, however, is the Roman citizenship that Paul claimed to have held from birth (Acts 22:25-28). His family's economic standing was probably consistent with the rare procurement and maintenance of Roman citizenship, and that privilege probably translated into further economic advantages, especially for the pre-Christian Paul.

26. Hengel, *Pre-Christian Paul*, 15.

Roman citizenship was undoubtedly the most highly coveted symbol of wealth and status in the Roman world at this time; especially in the eastern Mediterranean where one can estimate that only 1 percent of males were citizens. It is unknown how Paul's father became a Roman citizen, but Paul claims that he acquired his citizenship by birth. It would seem more plausible that Paul's father or grandfather was given citizenship as an honor bestowed in recognition of some extraordinary act of service—perhaps in supplying a Roman general with tents or sails—than that the family's citizenship had been obtained by purchase. Indeed, Paul's Latin name Paulus may be a family name of the Roman patron through whom his citizenship derived. In any event, very few Jews in the first half of the first century held Roman citizenship. This was an extraordinary and powerful social privilege. Obtaining such status either came at great cost or was due to high-profile connections. It could be bestowed as a reward for a large-scale act of civil service or through the intercession of a wealthy and influential patron. Only a family of great importance in a prominent eastern city would have had means and influence enough to gain such a distinction.

But can we be sure that Paul truly was a Roman citizen? Although scholars such as Ramsay, Hengel, and A. N. Sherwin-White have accepted Paul's allegation at face value, the matter of his citizenship has recently been the subject of much skepticism and is worth addressing.

One of the most recent of these skeptical studies appeared in 1998. In *Paul: The Man and the Myth*, Calvin J. Roetzel summarizes the four main arguments that have been advanced against Paul's Roman citizenship by such distinguished scholars as W. W. Tarn, E. R. Goodenough, and Victor Tcherikover. First, it was rare for Jews to be granted citizenship in the East, and even then it was reserved for wealthy, influential people who were "profoundly attracted to Hellenistic and Roman culture." This would not seem to describe a Pharisee such as Paul's father. Second, since citizens were required

to participate in the civic cult and to offer sacrifices to the state gods, the deep religious commitment of Paul's family would have conflicted with the obligations associated with citizenship. Third, it is puzzling why Paul did not save himself from imprisonment and arrest by asserting his citizenship earlier in Philippi and Jerusalem (one must assume that for some strange reason Paul was not wearing the toga on these occasions, which he would have been entitled to wear, but only as a Roman citizen). Finally, one may be suspicious of Paul's claim of citizenship because it serves Luke's theological interests in legitimizing the Christian movement. Based upon these four objections, Roetzel concludes that the evidence weighs against the historicity of Paul's citizenship.²⁷

This conclusion, however, seems a bit hasty. Just because citizenship was rare among Jews in the East does not disprove the legitimacy of Paul's claim. One percent of the general population in the eastern Mediterranean would have held Roman citizenship at this time. Acts correctly presents Paul's citizenship as an unusual and unexpected status for a person in Paul's world. Moreover, Roetzel bases his assertion on the assumption that Paul's family could not possibly have been among the wealthy and influential members of society, but that only begs the crucial question.

The conditions of Roman citizenship to which Roetzel refers do not actually conflict with Paul's strict piety. Participation in the civic cult, the making of offerings to local gods, and participation in religious festivals were not obligatory for all Roman citizens in Paul's time. During this period Philo of Alexandria, whose family was extremely wealthy, remained avidly Jewish while participating actively in the social and political world of Roman Egypt and attending banquets, theater, and sporting events.²⁸ If a person stayed out of court where oaths and sacrifices were required of litigants and witnesses (as Paul advises in 1 Corinthians 6) and stayed

27. Roetzel, *Paul*, 20-21.

28. Peder Borgen, "Philo of Alexandria," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 5:334.

out of major trouble with the public law demanding oaths of loyalty to the emperor (as occurred in the case of the Sicarii at Masada and in Egypt), people could simply avoid the need to participate in Roman religious cultic activities. There was no punishment for remaining uninvolved.

Paul's silence about his citizenship prior to his arrest on the Temple Mount in Acts 21 does raise a very interesting question. Likewise, one may well wonder why he did not use his citizenship preemptively on other occasions to avoid treatment terrible enough that he feared he might not escape it alive (2 Corinthians 1:8). Why does he not mention his personal status in his epistles as a metaphor or in contrast to his citizenship in God's kingdom? Perhaps the mind of Paul in these instances can be understood by exploring possible reasons for such silence. Might it have been more expedient for Paul *not* to declare his citizenship too saliently? Since Roman citizenship was so rare, a diplomatic Paul may have been reluctant to boast of his elite status for fear of alienating himself from the general population to which he was preaching. Furthermore, it seems that Paul thought of himself more as a citizen of Tarsus than of Rome, and as Sherwin-White explains, Paul viewed his Roman citizenship as "a personal privilege to be invoked if and when necessary."²⁹ Perhaps he did not try to save himself too quickly by invoking his personal privileges as a Roman citizen, knowing that his companions would then be left without a similar defense. Roman citizenship in the East was not a way of life but more of an honorary title. Hellenistic Romans considered citizenships similar to honorary titles and often collected them as such.³⁰ Eastern citizens could not vote without traveling to Rome and very rarely made use of this status to enter the Roman army or provincial politics.³¹ Perhaps Paul did not dwell on his citizenship in his writings because

29. A. N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 180.

30. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law*, 178.

31. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law*, 176-77.

its privileges seemed so distant from and irrelevant to the normal life of himself or those around him. Then again, perhaps he does actually say more than that about citizenship when he promises his converts that they are now no longer foreigners and aliens but full citizens in the kingdom of God (Ephesians 2:19).

Finally, should one doubt the reality of Paul's citizenship because it appears to serve Luke's theological agenda? If one gives any credence whatever to the main events reported in the last part of the book of Acts, there can be little doubt about the authenticity of Luke's claim. After Paul's arrest in Jerusalem, he was given legal protections that would have been extended only to a Roman citizen. He was sent from Jerusalem under guard to the Roman governor Felix at Caesarea. When Felix learned that Paul was from the Roman province of Cilicia, he agreed to hear him (Acts 23:35). After remaining at Caesarea in Felix's custody for two years, Paul rebutted the right of the Jews to try him and invoked his right as a Roman citizen to have his case tried before Caesar (Acts 25:10-11). He then traveled under light Roman guard to Rome, where he remained for two years (Acts 28:30). None of this high-level privileged treatment would have been possible without the diplomatic passport of Roman citizenship.

Under Roman law, the penalty for laying false claim to Roman citizenship was death, at least potentially. As such, one would think that the crime of forging Roman citizenship was rarely committed and then only quite foolishly. It is not unlikely that Paul would have been required to prove his claim of citizenship at several points, either by producing documents in his possession or by obtaining an examination of records in Rome. Paul's actions do not portray any lack of confidence that such a perjurer might feel as he waited two years in Caesarea for the transfer of his trial to Rome. Too many of Luke's own readers in Ephesus, Corinth, or Rome would have personally known Paul and his status for Luke to have risked fabricating a blatant hoax of Roman citizenship.

The arguments against the veracity of Paul's statement being questionable, there seems to be little reason to reject his claim that he was a citizen by birth and as such was fully entitled to the legal rights of a Roman citizen. This rare honor would have been available to his family only at great cost and would have conferred extraordinary privileges; thus Paul's Roman citizenship supports the assertion that his family was one of very significant means and status.

Paul's Financial Resources during the Time of His Ministry

Even if Paul came from a privileged family in Tarsus, his economic condition during the time of his ministry raises yet another question. Could he have started out rich but then become poor?

Much evidence in the New Testament suggests that Paul possessed significant personal means throughout his ministry. Above all, he could afford to travel extensively with companions throughout his life. Travel in Paul's world was not cheap. Travelers typically traveled in a company, taking with them food, clothing, and supplies, as well as feed for their livestock. Wagons were costly, at least those that would not break down.³² Paul surely walked on many journeys, as he did from Troas to Assos in Acts 20:13-14; but on that occasion he could have stayed with his companions who preferred to go by sea. Perhaps Paul wanted to visit friends or preach in a few public places along the way.

All through his ministry, Paul was apparently able to afford parchment and ink. Paul had access to books and written materials and had the means to hire a scribe by which he wrote lengthy letters. His habitual writing is characteristic of a man of means.

Paul went straight to the capital cities of the provinces of Asia, Macedonia, and Achaia. He was not intimidated in these circumstances. He maintained himself in the impressive urban center of Corinth for a year and a half, and in the metropolis of Ephesus for a

32. Murphy-O'Connor, "On the Road and on the Sea with St. Paul," 39.

significant period of time (Acts 18:11; 19:10). He knew how to handle and transmit international transfers of money, and he was able to organize and direct several branches of the church. Paul even converted wealthy people such as Erastus, a major benefactor of public works in Corinth (Romans 16:23), and he “had wealthy and powerful friends at Ephesus.”³³ Paul seemed fully at ease in such upper-class roles and environments.

He boldly returned to Jerusalem and, with one of his gentile converts, entered the temple filled with Pharisees. He knew what he was getting into and acted with confidence, returning to the domain of his former coreligionists, who were in control of the all-important and extremely wealthy temple complex in Jerusalem.

Paul was held in special custody by Felix and Festus in Caesarea for a lengthy period of time (Acts 24:27). It seems unlikely that these governors would have accommodated Paul as a “house-guest” for such a long time, even if under house arrest, if he had not been a man of great influence and social stature. Under Roman law, according to Justinian, the proconsul determined “whether someone is to be lodged in prison, handed over to the military, entrusted to sureties, or even on his own recognizances. . . . He normally does this by reference to the nature of the charge brought, the honorable status, or the great wealth, or the harmlessness, or the rank of the accused.”³⁴ In asserting his rights as a Roman citizen to have his case heard by the Emperor himself, Paul no doubt hoped that his legal success in Rome would be even more stunning than it had been before the Proconsul Gallio in Corinth, for an empire-wide verdict in his favor would set a favorable precedent protecting Christians throughout the empire from Jewish arrest and prosecution. Thus, Paul wanted to stay “in chains,” or in custody; his status as a famous defendant in fact opened to him doors of publicity in high forums before King Agrippa and presumably also in Rome. Felix and Festus

33. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law*, 90.

34. Justinian, *Digest* 48.3.1.

no doubt would have preferred to dispose of this case more quickly; but more than that, they would not want to offend their superiors in Rome by mishandling the case of an influential Roman citizen from a neighboring province.

Acts also says that Felix “had hopes of a bribe from Paul; and for this reason sent for him often and talked with him” (Acts 24:26 NEB). Obviously, Felix must have believed that Paul had the financial means to afford such a payment or this strategy would have made no sense.

In Rome, Paul was able to rent a large house, an *insula* (Acts 28:30), where he lived for two years and received “all that came in to him,” evidently a fair number of people. How did he afford this property if he did not have considerable wealth at his disposal? Nor could Paul have assured Philemon that he would pay any debts incurred by the slave Onesimus if Paul were without resources (Philemon 1:18).

Nevertheless, along with these evidences of Paul’s wealth, his letters also contain indications that he labored strenuously during the course of his ministry. Paul speaks of “labour and travail,” “labouring night and day” (1 Thessalonians 2:9), and “working with our own hands” (1 Corinthians 4:12). Hock cites these references, along with two others (1 Corinthians 9:19; 2 Corinthians 11:7), as evidence for Paul’s manual laboring at a trade during his missionary journeys. Paul, he argues, practiced his demeaning trade in order to avoid being an economic burden on his fledgling churches, jeopardizing their survival and risking a reduction in the number of converts. Hock ultimately argues, however, that Paul’s language about “labor” testifies to his upper-class origins, not to his impoverishment, for Paul speaks as one who is demeaned by the manual labor he must perform.³⁵

35. Hock, “Paul’s Tentmaking,” 558–60.

Paul's lack of funds on these occasions may, of course, have been a temporary problem caused by being on the road for such a long period of time. A. N. Wilson supports this view:

In the 50s he writes as if he is a man who was once much richer than he now is, indeed, as a man who has become enslaved, and humiliated by the need to undertake manual work. . . . We can assume that, having been as it were the director of the family tentmaking business, he was thrown back on the necessity to work as an actual tentmaker in other people's business enterprises.³⁶

On similar grounds, others have thought that Paul may have been disinherited by his family when he converted to Christianity; or he may have voluntarily foregone his personal wealth, sold all that he had, and devoted himself entirely to the cause of spreading the gospel.³⁷

Today scholars still struggle to reconcile the inconsistencies between the evident wealth and status of Paul's family with the picture of the apostle later laboring at a trade to support himself. But the arguments of those who question the wealth of Paul on the basis of his rhetoric concerning labor must consider several further points.

First, one cannot safely assume that Paul's words to the Corinthians and Thessalonians referred to laboring at tentmaking rather than to religious or charitable labors. The physical hardships of proselytizing were numerous; the rigors of land and sea travel alone were draining enough to sap or claim lives. Combined with long hours of walking, healing, preaching, and conversing in the scorching summer sun, these journeys alone certainly could have caused Paul to remind his converts of his stressful and burdensome work. Because Paul was in Thessalonica only a few days, it seems unlikely

36. Wilson, *Paul*, 80.

37. Johnson, *Paul the Apostle*, 31, and Dahl, *Studies in Paul*, 36.

that he set up shop and began plying much of a trade there. His work was more religious than economic.

Second, what was the nature of the work that Paul was forced to do? As previously discussed, tentmaking could easily have been a large-scale business demanding a variety of economic and business skills. Whether Paul actually worked with his hands under Aquila and Priscilla or instead served as an overseer, administrator, financial advisor, materials purchaser, or investor in their enterprise is left unsaid. The author of Acts only records that Paul remained with them and worked, but it is unclear in what capacity. Obviously, he could have been useful to them as an able administrator or in many ways other than as a menial handworker.

Finally, in considering the possibility that Paul was disinherited by his family over religious differences, one must remember that in Paul's time no sharp distinction existed between Christianity and other sects of Judaism. "Paul was simply a Jew who had an ecstatic experience; he was not a Jew becoming a Christian. The very word did not exist when he had the experience," Wilson reminds us.³⁸ Furthermore, good evidence shows that Jews often moved from one sect to another without being disinherited. Josephus himself is an example. It would, therefore, be unlikely that Paul was disinherited by his family for his religious beliefs or practices.

Reading Paul in this Light

So what difference might this view of Paul and his wealthy situation make in understanding Paul, his personality, biases, teachings, and actions? In terms of understanding Paul's personality, it is important to recognize that all people in the ancient Mediterranean did not necessarily think alike on issues such as family values, kinship, marriage, dress, appearance, honor, and shame. One's economic station in life would tend to make a major difference from one person to the next. Bruce Malina and Jerome Neyrey have led

³⁸. Wilson, *Paul*, 80.

the way,³⁹ and Ben Witherington has followed suit,⁴⁰ in trying to reconstruct the “archaeology of ancient personality” in general and to apply Malina and Neyrey’s social scientific conclusions to the case of the apostle Paul in particular. Their conclusions can be augmented by an appreciation of Paul’s associations with wealth.

Malina and Neyrey identify a number of elements that comprise an ancient person’s self-concept and personality. In terms of “pedigree,” Paul emphasizes his “honorable origins,” as an “honorable and full member of an ancient, honorable ethnic group, as well as a person rooted in noble poleis.”⁴¹ Such a boastful self-presentation bespeaks one who is of high social and economic status. From what he says about his education, accomplishments, deeds of the soul, and deeds of fortune, Malina and Neyrey conclude that Paul “presents himself as utterly dependent on group expectations and the controlling hand of forces greater than he: ancestors, groups, God. He was a typically group-oriented person.”⁴² While one may readily agree with this conclusion, it may now be asked how Paul’s wealthy background and condition would have affected his posture within the groups that comprised his circles of association. In the ancient world, for example, “although elites knew they had little if any control over their fortune, they were deemed responsible for how they dealt with events that cropped up in life.”⁴³ In this light one can see how Paul, in honorable elite fashion, responded admirably and indelibly to the callings, fortunes, and responsibilities that unexpectedly interrupted his trip to Damascus and beyond. Paul repeatedly speaks of “his afflictions at the hands of others and his shameful physical treatment,”⁴⁴ perhaps doing this especially because such hunger, homelessness, persecution, beatings, death

39. Bruce J. Malina and Jerome H. Neyrey, *Portraits of Paul: An Archaeology of Ancient Personality* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996).

40. Ben Witherington III, *The Paul Quest* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 39.

41. Malina and Neyrey, *Portraits of Paul*, 204.

42. Malina and Neyrey, *Portraits of Paul*, 217.

43. Malina and Neyrey, *Portraits of Paul*, 31.

44. Malina and Neyrey, *Portraits of Paul*, 210, 220-24.

threats, and inclement misfortunes would have been seen by himself as well as in Mediterranean societies generally as being unbecoming of a man of substantial means and good fortune.

Witherington focuses on elements of personality such as family relations, perceptions of one's body, and the dyad of honor and shame. He ignores the factor of poverty or wealth in his analysis, yet one would think that material status would have a significant impact on one's personality and self-perception. For example, the rich would not think the same as the poor on matters such as family and marriage. The poor would be lucky to marry with any dowry or financial means at all, and they would have a difficult time imagining themselves in a condition of physical and social well-being, let alone survival, without the daily support of a spouse to sustain the household, of working children to keep the farm or craft running, and of the older generation to provide the places of residence and land to cultivate from the traditional holdings of the family. Could a poor man, in such a world, glibly say to all single men and widowed women that it is good for them to remain single? (1 Corinthians 7:8). I think not. At least a poor person would have a hard time assuming that his audience would see this as an ideal state; but an aristocratic person might easily assume that a life of unconnected, unencumbered freedom was exactly the way to live, and indeed many wealthy Roman men at this time were avoiding marriage and the duties of being a husband and father, much to the chagrin of Roman imperial leaders. But the point is that such a lifestyle was the luxury of the few, never the attitudes or practices of the plebs.

Regarding bodily appearance, only the rich could fuss much about their appearance; and indeed, for Roman aristocrats, exotic cosmetics and expensive clothing were all the rage in the first century. In this world, in which "it was possible to tell what sort of person someone was by close analysis of their appearance and body

characteristics,”⁴⁵ one can readily understand why Paul might have been so self-conscious and apologetic about his looks (Galatians 4:13-15). The tone of Paul’s comment here is revealing, for a poor man would not have been expected to look anything but poor and infirm, with unimpressive flesh or eyes. But a man of high station in society would have some explaining to do if his appearance were not up to the normally expected standards.

Likewise, in a world in which “every social interaction that took place outside one’s family or circle of friends was perceived as a honor challenge,”⁴⁶ matters of honor and shame were extremely important. Yet, here again, honor meant something different to people who enjoyed a superior social and economic position. Giving and accepting gifts, for example, was a matter of the honor-and-shame culture, for gift-giving was “seen as an honor challenge,” and accepting brought a loss of honor, unless one could respond with a reciprocal gift of comparable or higher value.⁴⁷ On the one hand Paul avoided the duties of accepting gifts from anyone so that he could remain a servant to all (1 Corinthians 9:19). But on the other hand, this was something that only a socially superior person could well afford to do: “For a social superior to [refuse gifts or favors] was more common than the other way around.”⁴⁸ Now however one reads Paul in these contexts, it seems inescapable that wealth and political and social status have an immense bearing on how such cultural traits manifested themselves among the people of the Roman Empire during Paul’s lifetime. While one can learn much from Witherington’s very insightful attempt to reconstruct Paul’s personality based on social scientific evidence about the social norms and character profiles that mainly comprised elements regarding family values, body language, and the *agonistic* world of honor and shame, it would be helpful to distinguish between how

45. Witherington, *Paul Quest*, 39.

46. Witherington, *Paul Quest*, 47.

47. Witherington, *Paul Quest*, 47.

48. Witherington, *Paul Quest*, 49.

these elements manifested themselves among the rich and the poor in general, let alone in Paul's life and personality in particular.

In terms of his social frame of reference, Paul's extensive use of metaphors has been wonderfully detailed by David J. Williams,⁴⁹ and in his writings one can find another way in which Paul's wealthy background and persistent worldview aid our understanding of him and his delivery. Williams classifies into a dozen categories Paul's rich and memorable linguistic and rhetorical uses of socially situated metaphors such as armor, foundations, squalor, mirrors, reaping, olive cultivation, pedagogy, adoption, inheritance, slavery, citizenship, guarantees, travel, and sporting competitions.⁵⁰ Interestingly, most of these metaphors belong decidedly to the world of the well-traveled, widely experienced, upper-class overseer of major social and economic affairs, such as urban life, the legal arena, the business worlds of marketing and banking, travel by land and by sea, military tactics and administration, and public celebrations and major civic events. Thus, Paul refers to the generosity of God as "riches" (*ploutos*, Romans 2:4), to salvation in terms of "reward" (*misthos*, Romans 4:4), and to eternal life in terms of inheritance (*klēronomos*, Romans 4:13–14). My point is not that a poor person could not use such words, but to a wage earner wages were a good thing, unbecoming the wages of sin; to a wealthy person, however, being reduced to the plight of a day laborer, who had to live from hand to mouth, was exquisitely unappealing, although I agree with Todd Sill that this does not necessarily mean that Paul loathed manual labor.⁵¹ When Paul then refers to himself as a "servant" or slave (*doulos*, Romans 1:1) of Jesus Christ, this image—coming from the lips of one who grew up with a silver spoon in his mouth—is a stunningly arresting

49. Williams, *Paul's Metaphors*.

50. These metaphors are summarized conveniently in John F. Hall and John W. Welch, *Charting the New Testament* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002), chart 15-12.

51. Todd D. Still, "Did Paul Loathe Manual Labor? Revisiting the Work of Ronald F. Hock on the Apostle's Tentmaking and Social Class," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 125/4 (2006): 781–95.

and emphatically self-effacing personal introduction. When he casts himself as an ambassador of the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:20; Ephesians 6:20), he uses a powerful term that was the proper word “in the Greek East for the emperor’s legate.”⁵²

In this regard, Philo presents an interesting comparison to Paul. Philo came from a phenomenally wealthy family and had several affinities toward Stoicism, embracing, for example, “the classic Stoic paradox that only the wise man is ‘rich.’”⁵³ Paul similarly warned that the riches of the world were less than the fulfillment of God’s purposes (Romans 11:12-13) and that God’s wisdom is clearly greater than the wisdom and wealth of the world (1 Corinthians 1:20), for those who do good works are the ones who are truly rich (1 Timothy 6:18). Such attitudes, on the parts of Paul and Philo alike, reflect “the studied indifference of Stoicism, and also with the settled social and economic position many Stoics had.”⁵⁴ Indeed, even more, “a survey of Near Eastern ethical tradition reveals this as a familiar situation: almost every source that exhibits a degree of hostility to wealth, from ancient Babylonian works to contemporary Jewish pseudepigraphical literature, shows evidence of aristocratic production.”⁵⁵ In an odd way, those who have had wealth are most likely to be dismissive of it. “Indifference to wealth comes most naturally to those who have inherited it, as Plato acutely observed (Rep. 1.330),” and certainly Philo and Paul apparently both reflect this phenomenon.⁵⁶

Speaking so comfortably, knowledgeably, and intimately on such a wide range of activities bespeaks a person who belongs to a highly sophisticated segment of that society. While some metaphors used by Paul speak of ordinary parts of family and country life, even in these categories Paul takes a rather highbrow

52. Williams, *Paul’s Metaphors*, 151.

53. David Mealand, “Philo of Alexandria’s Attitude to Riches,” *Zeitschrift der neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 69 (1978): 259.

54. Mealand, “Philo,” 260.

55. T. Ewald Schmidt, “Hostility to Wealth in Philo of Alexandria,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 19 (1983): 85.

56. Mealand, “Philo,” 260.

posture, for raising olives (used elaborately in Romans 11) was not the task of unlanded peasants, and understanding the rules of such family-law matters as adoption and inheritance, as Paul's metaphors presuppose,⁵⁷ was not the domain of lowly folk. I suppose that one might argue that Paul learned all these things while in his wealthy childhood and continued to use them as lively metaphors throughout his ministry, but I think not. Paul's ongoing use of all these metaphors signals to readers that he was comfortably conversant throughout his life with the social circles that produced these upper-crust metaphors. Indeed, if he had not been, why would he have continued to use such metaphors when writing to his newest converts, many of whom must have come from the lower rungs on the social ladder?

In terms of thinking about Paul's main teachings, a perspective of wealth may well help to accentuate and inform our understanding of his key points of emphasis. For example, he portrays God as a powerful soldier with a two-edged sword (Hebrews 4:12), as the preeminent judge of the world (Romans 3:6), as having "riches both of . . . wisdom and knowledge" (Romans 11:33), and as the ultimate conqueror over all powers and principalities (Romans 8:31, 37-38). He speaks often of the "grace" of God, which can be understood as seeing God as the supreme patron in a typical *beneficium-officium* relationship between a patron and client that was so fundamental to social and political networkings in the Roman world. He describes the atonement of Jesus Christ in terms of being "reconciled" (Romans 5:10), which draws on language from the making of peace treaties between two previously warring parties.

Paul has much to say about the law in various contexts (for example, Romans 3:27-31; 7:1-13; 1 Timothy 1:8-11; Galatians 3:10-22), as one would expect from a man who was thoroughly trained in the Jewish law and familiar with Roman law. Paul knows the law,

57. See for example F. Lyall, *Slaves, Citizens, Sons: Legal Metaphors in the Epistles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984).

as only the elite part of society would have known. Under Roman law, “things had to be done in precisely the right way. Scrupulous attention was paid to form: the correct formulae had to be used, and the proper days had to be observed in bringing matters before the courts.”⁵⁸ As Paul speaks of mankind’s need for an “advocate,” because people do not know what to say in petitioning God (Romans 8:26-34), or of “justification,” meaning legal exoneration (Romans 4:25; 5:18), or of being “called” or “summoned,” Paul shows inside familiarity with the workings of the Roman legal system. Paul also knows well the public laws of citizenship, as well as the private laws concerning adoption and the differences between adopted sons and natural sons in the laws of intestate succession regarding essential real property, as David Williams shows.

In 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16, Paul not only uses the marketplace imagery of weighing on the scales, but he does so from the vantage point of the merchant or lender, not the ordinary consumer. “Paul speaks of ‘treasuring up’ [*thēsaurizeis*] in Rom 2:5, in the [technical] negative sense of adding entry to entry on the debit side of the ledger,” and in Philippians 4:17 he hopes “that the Philippians’ gift to him would be credited to their account in God’s ledger with interest accruing.”⁵⁹ In Colossians 2:13-15, he uses the financial terms for the making and the cancellation of debts that assume conversance with the world of financiers, and the conversion of a loan into a gift through forgiveness of personal indebtedness.⁶⁰ Second Corinthians opens with an impressive “cluster of metaphors from the business world,” such as the word *bebaiōn*, which is used in the Greek papyri for a legal guarantee that certain commitments will be carried out, which altogether reflects a comfortable familiarity with the high business world of guaranteeing property ownership and handling the amortization of payments against an obligation.⁶¹

58. Williams, *Paul’s Metaphors*, 141.

59. Williams, *Paul’s Metaphors*, 185.

60. Williams, *Paul’s Metaphors*, 182-83.

61. Williams, *Paul’s Metaphors*, 179-80.

Paul knows, apparently from close encounters, the social ills of the wicked upper class of society around him (2 Timothy 3:1-9; Philippians 3:1-3; Titus 1:10-16). He looks forward to the second coming of Christ as the arrival of a major visiting dignitary being received by the rulers of the city going out to meet him (1 Thessalonians 4:17).⁶² Paul's letters are laden with instructions about leadership, with firm words of correction, and with administrative directives about church policies and practices, including worship, meetings, the sacrament, making donations, purchasing meat in the marketplace, and avoiding any contact with pagan idolatry. When one hears Paul speaking of marriage, husbands, wives, incest, fornication, widows, children, slaves and masters, and many other topics, it is easier to appreciate his practical wisdom and perspectives, realizing that he speaks with the voice of managerial experience and administrative acumen that most often accompanies a life of high-level involvement in business relations and social organizations.

Conclusion

The wealth and status of the apostle Paul are widely debated topics. A preponderance of evidence, however, supports the idea that Paul came from a family of significant means. His education and background, his profession, and his status as a Roman citizen all indicate that Paul was accustomed to prosperity and unfamiliar with destitution and subsistence living, despite the long-held beliefs of some to the contrary. If this is so, I draw one overarching conclusion: Paul made enormous social and financial sacrifices in becoming a Christian. His own declaration, "I have suffered the loss of all things" (Philippians 3:8), implies that he started out with much to lose. He probably consecrated a vast amount of money to enable him to travel and correspond extensively, and he certainly exhausted his very significant social capital to win audiences among important people of wealth and status. But more than that,

62. Williams, *Paul's Metaphors*, 193 n. 2.

when we read Paul's advice on numerous topics, ranging from slavery, civil disobedience, ideal virtues, and charity to wealth itself, modern readers will want to remember where Paul was coming from—and above all understand that he had put his money where his mouth was. Since “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God” (Mark 10:25), Paul's personal sacrifices and absolute devotion become all the more impressive.

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