

Saul of Tarsus

I met Saul of Tarsus on the day we both tried to get in the door of the Pharisaic School at the same time. I had just celebrated my Bar Mitzvah and was determined to become a Pharisee and a scholar. My father put me to work in his shop in



the bazaar in the mornings, but he had promised that if I worked hard there, he would release me in the afternoons to go and sit at the feet of the finest teacher in Jerusalem and study Torah. That day was my first day. Saul had arrived in Jerusalem a few months earlier, and was older than I by several years. He had already sat in the University in his home city of Tarsus in Cilicia, but he told me that he had always wanted to study at the feet of Rabbi Gamaliel in Jerusalem, whose renown as a teacher had spread even to the other side of the Mediterranean.

Saul did not make friends easily among his fellow pupils. He was very clever and fierce in debate. He was always determined to win his arguments and force us, through his arguments, to accept his point of view. He didn't seem to care if his words wounded his opponents. Many times The Master would gently put him in his place, and would remind us all that it was not the conclusion of the argument which revealed God to us, but the debate itself. On one occasion I saw Saul looking strangely at The Master, as if he couldn't quite believe what he was hearing. I thought that he argued as he did, and for the points he did, because he passionately believed in them, and thought that we all should as well.

I would sometimes go with Saul to the Temple, to listen to the Priests chanting the ritual psalms. Saul always seemed awestruck by the size and beauty of the Temple. I had been brought up in its very shadow, and so took it for granted. It took seeing it through his eyes to fully appreciate the strength and size of its white walls glistening in the sunlight, guarding the Holy of Holies in the centre of the universe, here in our sacred city of Jerusalem.

There was one great sadness for Saul. It did not matter that we were Jews, people of the Book, he knew that he would never be able to enter the holiest places of the Temple. That was reserved for the Sadducees and the Temple Priests; the nobility and the elite of our land. Saul was a Jew by birth, his mother was a Jew. His family had

long lived in Tarsus, a city on the shores of the Mediterranean, which had been taken over by the Emperor Pompey to become a regional capital. In gratitude for not forcing Pompey to fight for the city, so Saul informed me, all its citizens had been given Roman citizenship, including Saul's family. So Saul was also a Roman Citizen, but neither his birth, nor Roman Citizenship, nor his scholarship nor his desire, was ever going to get him into the Holy of Holies. He was not born of the right family.

If there was one thing that Saul and I never disagreed on, it was that all Jews have the right to learn the law of the Lord and to live by it without being forced to come to the Temple and pay taxes to it. We should not be forced to pay taxes to out of touch Priests and the ruling Sadducee elite who kept giving us more rules to live by, to keep us hemmed in. My father and I were shop keepers. Saul had been apprenticed to a tent maker, and had left Tarsus as soon as he had finished his apprenticeship. He had used his skills to work his way to Jerusalem and to his goal. He could have lived all his life without ever seeing Jerusalem, and still been a good Jew, but he wanted to experience the beauty and brutality of the city that is the centre of the Jewish faith.

I knew no one more ready to fight for the right to listen, learn and live as a Pharisee. I heard him once after he had come back from listening to the Rabbi Jesus of Nazareth arguing with some of the Sadducees in the Temple. He had admired his debating skills, but complained that he was completely wrong to allow his followers to refer to him as the Son of God. As Pharisees we believe that a Messiah is coming to us, but Saul could not believe that this Jesus was the chosen Messiah. He was not at all sorry when he heard that Jesus had been put to death. A few days after Jesus' death, we heard that the Sanhedrin had condemned one of Jesus' followers to death for telling everyone that Jesus had come back from the dead and had been resurrected.

Saul and I hurried to the place of the skull, where executions take place. Unlike the rabbi, Stephen was to be stoned to death. Saul and I were just standing there, watching what was happening. Saul, I think, was hoping Stephen would say something that he could take offence at. Some of the Priests of the Sanhedrin led Stephen out. Noticing us standing there, they threw their coats at our feet, and ordered us to watch them, while they carried out the execution. Then they began to pick up large rocks from the ground and lob them at Stephen. As the stones began to hit him, standing there tethered like a goat for the slaughter, he toppled over, and landed on his knees in an attempt to save himself. As he reached his knees he lifted his face to heaven and began to pray, asking God to forgive those throwing the stones. This made them all the angrier. Just before one large stone finally knocked him unconscious, he commended his soul to God's care. The Priests surrounded him and finished off the job with one final very large rock which it took two of them to lift. Saul watched all of this impassively. I knew that the stoning had changed something in him.

The following day he was not sitting at the feet of The Master. I heard that he had gone to the Sanhedrin and had offered to go and find all the followers of Rabbi Jesus,

and present evidence to the Sanhedrin against them. They found him fierce in his condemnations, and subtle in finding those who followed the Rabbi. People began to fear his name, and the prisons were full of those he had condemned. I was not surprised when I heard that he had set off on a journey to Damascus to find more followers there.

It was a long time before I heard any more news about him, and what I heard shook me to the core. The story was that he had had some sort of experience of God, just as the prophets did of old, and was now a follower of the dead Rabbi Jesus. As the years passed by, I heard snippets of stories about voyages he had been on, and the fierce debating that had taken place in several Jewish communities around the known world. I heard that he had been put in prison, and had used his citizenship to request a transfer to Rome to plead his case before the Emperor.

I always wished that he would come to visit me, on the few occasions when he returned to Jerusalem, but he was probably too busy working with the members of the Messianic Sect. There were two things which I wanted to debate with him. I had heard him argue many times that Torah shows us that Yahweh will send us a Messiah. What was it about Rabbi Jesus which made him believe that he was the chosen Messiah? Rabbi Jesus died on a cross, executed as a traitor at the behest of the High Priest and the Sanhedrin. How could someone who died on a cross be the Messiah? He had always believed that the Messiah would come at the head of an army to release his people. Rabbi Jesus had died rather than cause a single death in battle.

The other question I wanted to ask him was if he believed Rabbi Jesus was the Messiah, the chosen one of Israel, why was he preaching and converting gentiles across the known world, and aggravating the local Jewish communities in the places where he stopped to teach and preach. He and I had always believed that as a Jew we were of a race singled out by Yahweh, chosen by him. Yahweh had made a covenant with our ancestor Abraham. If we would make him our God and worship him only, he would give us land, this land, the promised land. We have fallen short of Yahweh's ideals, and are at the moment a conquered people living oppressed in our own land, but we are different, we are special. Why has he changed his mind about this? And he has changed his mind to the extent that he no longer believes that the laws that he and I used to debate so fiercely are the only way to Yahweh. He has allowed Gentiles to become part of the Messianic Sect without being circumcised and without keeping the ritual dietary laws, without which no Jew, no matter of which sect, will live. He has written letters, which I have seen, where he states that gentiles need only to believe in Rabbi Jesus to have eternal salvation, for in his death we are all forgiven, and can by grace, rather than by any works we do, come to faith.

I will never get a chance to ask him now, as the news has come today on a ship from Rome, that he has been beheaded. His body has been spirited away by his Messianic followers, and buried where the Roman authorities are not going to find it. I have read many of his letters over the years, for I have friends among the Messianic Sect,

but in the end I cannot get over the fact that I am a Jew, as my ancestors were Jews,
and in that I will trust when I come before my God.