

“This book promises ‘an introduction to the study of Paul and . . . an entryway to more advanced study.’ It does not disappoint. The authors capably navigate complicated fields of research covering Paul’s life, writings, and theology. They clarify without oversimplifying and offer fair judgments on controversial debates. They interact with great names in past scholarship but are attuned to the current state of discussion. Both beginning and advanced readers will love this substantial study and teaching tool for the succinct orientation it provides.”

—Robert W. Yarbrough,  
Professor of New Testament, Covenant Theological Seminary

“Echevarría and Laird have given us a concise and useful introduction to Paul’s life, letters, and theology. They are fair, balanced, and irenic, and introduce readers to current scholarly debates in the matters discussed. Both students and professors will find it to be a very helpful resource.”

—Thomas R. Schreiner,  
James Buchanan Harrison Professor of New Testament Interpretation,  
Professor of Biblical Theology,  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Miguel Echevarría and Benjamin Laird have written a helpful introduction to Paul’s life, writings, and theology. They explore a wide range of topics concisely and carefully, while interacting evenhandedly with contemporary scholarship. *40 Questions About the Apostle Paul* provides an excellent starting point for readers who want to explore any of those questions at greater length.”

—John D. Harvey,  
Professor of New Testament, PhD Program Director,  
Columbia Biblical Seminary of Columbia International University

“No one can read Paul’s letters without numerous questions arising about their author. In this volume, Laird and Echevarría address forty such questions, on some of which scholars provide clear answers, whereas on others scholars either disagree among themselves or acknowledge the limitations of our knowledge. Readers are certain to appreciate the authors’ informed, balanced, and accessible treatments of what we can, or think we can, or wish we could know about the apostle.”

—Stephen Westerholm,  
Professor Emeritus, McMaster University

“Professors Echevarría and Laird have succeeded in packing a lot of succinct information about the cultural context, biography, missionary work, and theology of the apostle Paul, including an evaluation of Paul’s older and recent interpreters, into a very accessible volume. Their focus on the text of Paul’s letters and Luke’s Acts is consistent, their assessments of scholarly debates are fair, and their prose is lucid even when describing exegetical conundrums. Students and general readers are in their debt.”

—Eckhard J. Schnabel,  
Mary F. Rockefeller Distinguished Professor of New Testament,  
Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

“Sometimes when you read Paul’s letters, it can seem as if you are trying to put together a puzzle without having the box. This helpful volume takes the pieces and gives a comprehensive picture of Paul’s life, writings, and theology so you can understand how things fit together. In addition, each essay is short and accessible, so you get the main idea without getting lost in the details.”

—Ben C. Blackwell,  
Professor of Early Christianity, Houston Theological Seminary

“Drs. Miguel Echevarría and Benjamin P. Laird have written a helpful book asking and answering forty important questions about the apostle Paul. Even when readers disagree with either their questions or answers, they will still learn important things about Paul, his theology, and his letters.”

—Jarvis J. Williams,  
Associate Professor of New Testament Interpretation,  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“In three well-conceived sections covering forty key questions, Echevarría and Laird have produced an important and sure-footed guide to the apostle Paul. I enthusiastically recommend this volume for anyone—both the novice and the veteran alike—who wants to gain or regain their ‘sea legs’ as they engage Paul, his writings, and his theology. It will repay rich dividends. Kudos to Echevarría and Laird for this superb work.”

—Jay E. Smith,  
Department Chair and Professor of New Testament Studies,  
Dallas Theological Seminary

“Anyone who has read Paul’s letters comes away with a lot of questions. Where did Paul come from? How was Paul transformed? Why did he write so many letters? What is his central teaching? Thankfully, Miguel Echevarría and Benjamin Laird have gathered the most important of these questions and provided balanced, readable, and genuinely insightful answers. This little volume represents a concise compendium of scholarship on a wide variety of issues—historical, theological, and pastoral—and is packed with charitable, judicious evaluation. This is a must-read primer on the apostle to the Gentiles!”

—Moyer Hubbard,  
Chair and Professor of New Testament Language and Literature,  
Talbot School of Theology, Biola University

“These forty questions and the superb discussion that follows are not focused on tangential matters, but lay an essential foundation for interpreting and understanding Paul and his letters. Where there are major interpretive issues (e.g., the role of women in the home and the church, the continuation of spiritual gifts, and more), the authors provide a fair and balanced discussion. Their discussion of each question is well-written and the Q&A format makes this a delight to read. This volume would make an excellent textbook for a course on Paul or the basis for a Bible study series on the apostle and his letters.”

—Clinton E. Arnold,  
Research Professor of New Testament,  
Talbot School of Theology, Biola University

**40** QUESTIONS ABOUT  
The Apostle Paul

**Miguel G. Echevarría  
Benjamin P. Laird**

Benjamin L. Merkle, Series Editor



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*For our students*



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# Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
BBR	<i>Bulletin for Biblical Research</i>
BDAG	Frederick W. Danker, <i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> , 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
BETS	<i>Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
BNTC	Black's New Testament Commentaries
BSac	<i>Bibliotheca Sacra</i>
BTNT	Biblical Theology of the New Testament
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
ConcC	Concordia Commentary
DPL	<i>Dictionary of Paul and His Letters</i>
IBC	Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching
ICC	International Critical Commentary
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JETS	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
JGRChJ	<i>Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism</i>
JSNT	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series
JSPL	<i>Journal for the Study of Paul and His Letters</i>
JTS	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
LBS	Linguistic Biblical Studies
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LEC	Library of Early Christianity
LNTS	Library of New Testament Studies
NACSBT	NAC Studies in Bible & Theology
NDBT	<i>New Dictionary of Biblical Theology</i>
NICNT	The New International Commentary on the New Testament

NIDNTTE	<i>New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis</i>
NIGTC	The New International Greek Testament Commentary
NPNF	Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers
NSBT	New Studies in Biblical Theology
NTS	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
OECS	Oxford Early Christian Studies
PAST	Pauline Studies
PNTC	The Pillar New Testament Commentary
SBJT	<i>Southern Baptist Journal of Theology</i>
SBR	Studies of the Bible and Its Reception
SSEJC	Studies in Scripture in Early Judaism and Christianity
TDNT	Theological Dictionary of the New Testament
TNTC	Tyndale New Testament Commentaries
<i>TynBul</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
WAWSup	Writings from the Ancient World Supplement Series
WGRW	Writings from the Greco-Roman World
WJT	<i>Westminster Journal of Theology</i>
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
ZCINT	Zondervan Critical Introductions to the New Testament
ZECNT	Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
ZNW	<i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche</i>

# Introduction

The author of Ecclesiastes once said: “Of the making of many books there is no end.” We would be hard-pressed to disagree with this conclusion, especially when we consider the current state of Pauline studies. The sheer number of works on topics such as the authenticity of Paul’s epistles, Paul’s use of the Old Testament, the New Perspective on Paul, the interpretation of *pistis Christou*, and the role of faith and works in salvation can be overwhelming for the average professor—let alone for a student or layperson. We can only imagine what the author of Ecclesiastes might think about the number of volumes on Paul. Perhaps he would be so overwhelmed (as many of us are) that he would qualify his observation: “Of the making of many books ‘about Paul’ there is no end!” And who would dare disagree with him?

All this begs the question: Why write *another* book on the apostle Paul? Is there really anything else to say or anything new to explore? We would argue that the question itself speaks to the need for the present volume. For many, it is unrealistic to wade through the large number of books, articles, and monographs about Paul that continue to be published on an annual basis. We can certainly sympathize with college and seminary students who may feel intimidated by the ever-expanding body of literature devoted to one aspect or another of Paul’s life, writings, and theology. The number of publications devoted to the study of Paul is nothing short of staggering. In fact, it is safe to say that a well-rounded bibliography on Paul would well exceed a hundred pages. One could spend an entire lifetime devoted to the study of only a portion of Paul’s writings or a single element of his teaching, let alone the entire body of his writings or the sum of his teaching.

With these practical concerns in mind, we have condensed into one volume a wide-ranging discussion about Paul’s life, writings, and theology. In writing this book, our aim was not to be comprehensive in scope or exhaustive in our treatment of a particular subject. There are several additional subjects that could have easily been added. In fact, it would have not been a stretch to write a volume titled *One Hundred Questions About the Apostle Paul*. Rather than covering all possible subjects related to Paul’s life and teaching or offering the most robust treatment possible of specific topics, our aim has been to provide readers with concise and accessible responses to a variety of questions that are foundational to our understanding of Paul. We encourage

readers to use our book as both an introduction to the study of Paul and as an entryway to more advanced study.

As readers make their way through the volume, they will become acquainted with the background of Paul's life and letters, his teaching on a number of issues, subjects at the center of contemporary debate, and the viewpoints of a number of Pauline scholars. Throughout the process, readers will become familiar with contemporary scholars such as N. T. Wright, Morna Hooker, Thomas Schreiner, and Douglas Moo, notable figures from previous generations such as F. C. Baur, Albert Schweizer, and Rudolf Bultmann, and even how certain perspectives may be traced back to leading figures of the Protestant Reformation such as Martin Luther and John Calvin.

Before delving into our study of Paul, it will be helpful to briefly outline the layout of the volume. The book is divided into three major units. Part 1 addresses subjects related to Paul's background. In these initial chapters we consider a variety of questions related to Paul's early life, education, his opposition to Christianity prior to his conversion, his missionary activities, the final years of his life, and what we know about his death. Our treatment of these subjects relies primarily on Acts and the relevant information contained in Paul's writings. References to noncanonical sources are also made when appropriate.

Part 2 answers questions about Paul's writings, such as the historical context in which Paul penned each of his letters, how they were composed and delivered, how a single canonical collection of his writings was likely assembled, what may have happened to his lost letters (an exact location is not provided!), arguments both for and against the authenticity of the canonical works attributed to him, his possible role in the composition of Hebrews, whether he regarded his letters as authoritative Scripture, and the sources that he may have consulted. As many readers are well aware, historical subjects related to the background of Paul's letters present modern interpreters with several confounding questions. These chapters will enable readers to become conversant with the various perspectives on these matters and to become more familiar with Paul as a writer.

Part 3 addresses questions related to Paul's theology such as his view of the atonement, the nature of Christ, the relationship between law and gospel, the role of faith and works in salvation, miraculous gifts, church ordinances, slavery and racial division, eschatology, and several additional theological subjects. We will also consider matters of contemporary debate such as the New Perspective on Paul. The responses in this section deal with some of the most heated debates in Pauline studies—some that go back centuries, and some that have only recently become a matter of debate and controversy.

### **Words of Thanks**

There are many people we would like to thank for helping us bring this book to completion. We want to thank Benjamin Merkle, the series editor, for

accepting this book into the 40 Questions series and for his insightful comments and keen editorial eye. We are also grateful for all our friends at Kregel who were involved in the acquisition and publication of this book.

I (Miguel) would like to thank my former administrative assistant at Southeastern Seminary, Owen Kelly, who read an early version of the work and provided feedback. His careful, theological eye sharpened my arguments. I would also like to thank my coauthor, Ben Laird, for his substantive feedback on the manuscript. My work is stronger because of his comments. My current administrative assistant at Southeastern, Hayden Fleming, provided helpful advice on the New Perspective section. Last but not least, I would like to thank my family for their love and support. Not that I have arrived (as I am sure Paul would agree), but my work on Paul is far more gracious, and I take myself far less seriously, because of the influence of my wife Hollie and my four daughters Miriam, Esther, Eunice, and Lilias.

Ben would like to thank Miguel Echevarría for, as Paul might say, serving as a valuable *synergos*, a fellow worker, throughout the process of writing and editing this volume. While we share the same enthusiasm for the study of Paul, our specific interests and areas of expertise have complemented each other very well and have enabled us to cover a wide spectrum of subjects that would have been much more difficult to cover alone. I (Ben) would also like to thank my wife Margaret and our children Meredith, Jonathan, Lydia, Nora, and Charles for their support and encouragement throughout the process.

Above all, we would like to thank the Lord Jesus Christ for calling the apostle Paul to testify to the saving work of God to the ends of the earth. Paul's testimony has spurred many to preach the Lord Jesus in places where many have never heard—from indigenous communities in the jungles of Brazil to the inner cities of North America, from nomad communities in the Middle East to the streets of London. Wherever Jesus is preached, we have the example of Paul as the forerunner of generations of missionaries, evangelists, and pastors. May this book lead to a better understanding of the apostle Paul's cosmic vision of salvation, resulting in many going to those who have never heard of the redemption God has accomplished through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.



**PART 1**

# Questions About Paul's Life

SECTION A

**Paul's Pre-Christian Life**

## QUESTION 1

# Where Was Paul Born and Raised?

Readers of this book may be tempted to skip chapters related to the background of Paul in order to begin with questions about his writings and his treatment of various theological subjects. We agree that it is rewarding to read Paul's discussions about topics such as the righteousness of God, the atonement, and Jesus's second coming. That Paul writes with a warmth and exhilaration not found in other New Testament authors makes skipping ahead in this book especially tempting.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, to fairly treat questions about Paul's letters and writings, it is necessary to first consider a number of historical questions related to his life and background. The more acquainted we become with his Jewish upbringing, his earliest influences, his education, and his former life as a persecutor of the church, the better prepared we will be to address matters related to his writings and his treatment of various theological subjects. In this first section, then, we will address several questions related to Paul's life.

The primary sources for Paul's life are Acts and his extant letters. Of the two, Acts provides the majority of the information about the historical Paul. Yet, neither was intended to serve as a biographical work on the apostle. We must therefore take extra care to piece together an accurate portrayal of his life. While relevant sources outside the Bible, such as those of Strabo and Jerome, are useful, we will mainly rely on the historical facts that can be derived from Acts and his surviving writings. We will depend on sources outside the Bible only in places where Scripture is silent.

Answering questions related to the apostle Paul's life will hopefully acquaint us with the man whose writings have been so profitable for Christians

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1. F. F. Bruce captures this sentiment: "Of all the New Testament authors, Paul is the one who has stamped his own personality most unmistakably in his writings" (*Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977], 15).

throughout the centuries. We will start by answering the important question about where the apostle Paul was born and raised.

### Born in Tarsus

Luke records that Paul was from Tarsus (Acts 9:30; 11:25; 21:39; 22:3), where he was likely born in the first decade CE.<sup>2</sup> Sources from antiquity describe Tarsus as a flourishing city. Some might even call it a metropolis. Paul's description squares with what we find in contemporary literature—that it was “an important city” (Acts 21:39). Tarsus's reputation was largely centered around its economy and devotion to philosophy.

The city's economic repute dates back to the fourth century BCE. Xenophon notes that Tarsus was a “large and prosperous city.”<sup>3</sup> One of the main reasons for Tarsus's favorable economy was the Cydnus River, which flowed through the city. Merchants so frequently traveled along the river that it was considered “one of the great trade routes of the ancient world; the easiest and most frequented land route from Syria and the east to Asia Minor and the Aegean crossed the Amanus by the Syrian Gates, and the Taurus by the Cilician Gates.”<sup>4</sup> Tarsus also benefited from being the first stop on a major business route that connected the Mediterranean with the Black Sea.<sup>5</sup> The city was thus a center of trade and business, making it a major commercial center.

Tarsus also benefited from being the capital of the Roman province of Cilicia. Dio Chrysostom (40–115 CE) attributes the economic station of Tarsus to both its great river and its status as a capital city: “The fact is . . . your home is in a great city and you occupy a fertile land, because you find the needs of life supplied for you in greatest abundance and profusion, because you have this river flowing through the heart of your city, and because, moreover, Tarsus is the capital of all the people of Cilicia.”<sup>6</sup> During the reign of Mark Antony, in 42 BCE, Tarsus was declared a free city and released from paying taxes to Rome—benefits that continued well beyond Paul's lifetime.<sup>7</sup>

The success of the economy allowed the study of philosophy to thrive. Tarsus was a well-known center of Stoic philosophy where famous philosophers

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2. We can only approximate a date for Paul's birth. In Philemon 9, Paul calls himself “an elderly man.” Paul's first-century contemporaries considered a man around the age of sixty to be “elderly.” If Philemon was written during Paul's first Roman imprisonment in the early sixties, Paul would have likely been born sometime in the first decade CE. See Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul: A Critical Life* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 2–4.

3. Xenophon, *Anabasis* 1.2.23 (Brownson, LCL 90).

4. A. H. M. Jones, *Cities of the Eastern Roman Provinces*, 2nd. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971), 191. Cited in Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul*, 33.

5. Udo Schnelle, *Apostle Paul: His Life and Theology*, trans. M. Eugene Boring (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 58.

6. Dio Chrysostom, *Tarsic Discourse* 1.17 (Cahoon, LCL 358).

7. Appian, *History* 5.1.7.

such as Antipatrus of Tarsus (140 BCE) were based.<sup>8</sup> In the early part of the first century CE, Strabo observes: “The people at Tarsus have devoted themselves so eagerly, not only to philosophy, but also to the whole round of education in general, that they have surpassed Athens, Alexandria, or any other place that can be named where there have been schools and lectures of philosophers.”<sup>9</sup> Strabo acknowledges that it was mainly the natives of Tarsus who studied in its schools, and that its citizens often began their learning in the city and then went elsewhere to complete their education.<sup>10</sup> From this observation we gather that though the city was known for its devotion to philosophy, its schools did not have an international reputation, and that its students often finished their education at more prestigious centers of learning.

The city of Tarsus, then, into which Paul was born, was a thriving and prosperous city known for its economy and its pursuit of philosophy. This background would have proved helpful when Paul stood before Stoics and Epicureans at the Areopagus and quoted the philosopher Aratus: “We are indeed his offspring” (Acts 17:28). The Stoics would have recognized Aratus as one of their own. From our brief look at Tarsus, we assume that the philosophical air at Tarsus would have blown Aratus’s treatises in Paul’s direction—knowledge he would later use to call those who were “listening to the latest ideas” to repent and worship the true God (Acts 17:16–34).<sup>11</sup>

### Raised a Jew

The biblical record clearly indicates that Paul was raised in Tarsus as a Jew (Acts 21:39). The apostle identifies himself as a “Hebrew of Hebrews” from “the tribe of Benjamin” (Phil. 3:5; cf. Rom. 11:1). According to Jerome (347–420 CE), Paul’s family likely relocated to Tarsus from Gischala (modern Jish) in Galilee.<sup>12</sup> How they got there is debated. Once again Jerome may provide some insight—for he indicates that Paul’s parents arrived as prisoners of war.<sup>13</sup> Regardless of the circumstances surrounding their relocation, they would have joined the Jewish community in Tarsus and continued worshipping in their ancestral religion of Judaism. The religious freedom that the Jews of Tarsus enjoyed may be attributed to Julius Caesar, who exempted Jews in the Roman Empire from practices that contradicted the requirements of their

8. Schnelle, *Apostle Paul*, 59.

9. Strabo, *Geography* 14.5.13 (Jones, LCL 223).

10. Strabo, *Geography* 14.5.13.

11. Paul also quotes the Greek poet Meander (1 Cor. 15:33) and the Cretan philosopher Epimenides (Titus 1:12).

12. Jerome, *Commentary on Philemon*, vv. 23–24.

13. As Murphy-O’Connor notes, in his *Commentary on Philemon* (Paul, 36–37). Jerome states that Paul’s family arrived in Tarsus as prisoners of war. However, in his *De Viris Illustribus* 5, he notes that they arrived voluntarily. Of the two, Murphy-O’Connor argues for the reliability of the former (Paul, 38).

religion.<sup>14</sup> Thus, Roman law granted Paul's parents the freedom to raise their child in accordance with their ancestral faith.

We evidence his parents' devotion to Judaism in Paul's claim to have been "circumcised on the eighth day" (Phil. 3:5).<sup>15</sup> Their piety is also demonstrated by their naming of Paul after the most famous Benjamite, Saul. Charles Quarles makes the thought-provoking connection that the name could have expressed hope in the Messiah.<sup>16</sup> According to Quarles, it is possible that Paul's parents "hoped their Saul would be a forerunner to the Messiah, 'the son of David,' much like Saul was the predecessor of King David."<sup>17</sup> Like many Diaspora Jews, Paul's family may have hoped that the Messiah would return to end the exile and restore the kingdom. And how great would it have been to imagine that God might use their son to deliver his people? Of course, the New Testament records that God did use Paul in a mighty way—to announce the Messiah's arrival to the nations. Like Isaiah and Jeremiah centuries earlier, Paul became aware that God had separated him from the womb for this mission (Gal. 1:15; cf. Isa. 49:1; Jer. 1:5).

The last important fact we must mention is that Paul was a born a Roman citizen (Acts 22:28). His Roman citizenship would have granted him the same rights as other citizens of the empire, such as the right to appeal after a trial, exemption from military service, and the right to choose a local or Roman trial.<sup>18</sup> In Acts we find Paul benefiting from his Roman citizenship on several occasions: when he is released from jail in Philippi (16:37–39), when Roman soldiers protected him from an angry mob (22:25–29), and when he appealed for a trial before Caesar (25:7–12; 26:32). These benefits were first available to him in his hometown of Tarsus.

In Tarsus, then, Paul would have been raised in a Jewish community with the right to worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. By naming him Saul, his parents displayed their devotion to the God who they hoped would return to save his people from the very Gentiles in their midst. Paul's Roman citizenship granted him valuable rights and protections afforded to other residents of the empire. Later in life, Paul would exercise his citizenship privileges when gospel ministry put him in precarious situations.

14. Josephus, *Antiquities* 14.10.8 (Marcus and Wikgren, LCL 489).

15. Bruce W. Longenecker and Todd D. Still, *Thinking through Paul: A Survey of His Life, Letters, and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 25.

16. Charles L. Quarles, *Illustrated Life of Paul* (Nashville: B&H, 2014), 5.

17. Quarles, *Life of Paul*, 5.

18. Mark Reasoner, "Citizenship, Roman and Heavenly," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, eds. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 140.

**Summary**

We have begun our study of Paul's life with a discussion on where he was born and raised. We have just begun, then, to become acquainted with the historical experiences and influences that shaped the apostle whose letters and theology have had such a profound influence on Christians throughout the centuries. We know thus far that Paul was a Roman citizen born in Tarsus who was reared in his family's ancestral Jewish faith. We have also discovered that he would have been exposed early in life to the philosophical treatises which he would later use in his ministry to Gentiles.

**REFLECTION QUESTIONS**

1. What were two factors that contributed to the flourishing life Paul would have experienced in Tarsus?
2. How did the philosophical climate in Tarsus aid Paul's later ministry?
3. Who codified into law the religious freedoms the Jews experienced in the Roman Empire?
4. What biblical evidence points to the likelihood that Paul's parents were devout Jews?
5. What were some of the benefits of citizenship that Paul initially experienced in Tarsus and later exercised in his ministry?