

## Cities of the New Testament: Tarsus

This is the eighth in a continuing *Ekklesia Then & Now* series on the cities of the New Testament. Previous installments have been [Corinth](#) (ET&N 23), [Ephesus](#) (28), [Laodicea](#) (33), [Antioch](#) (40), [Rome](#) (53), [Alexandria](#) (60), and [Lystra](#) (63). The purpose of the series is to examine the history, geography, religion, culture, and people of each city and to consider how they relate to us today. Additional installments of this series will discuss Puteoli, Caesarea, Arimathea, Colossae, Thessalonica, Philippi, Perga, and Athens. Additional cities may be added.

### Then

#### Background

When one considers the past wealth, influence, and prestige of Tarsus, it's difficult to imagine a greater fall. Once perhaps the third largest city in the Roman Empire, ancient Tarsus lays buried underneath a squalid, often unbearably sultry town of 25,000. When Paul told the Roman tribune in Jerusalem that he was "*a citizen of no obscure city*" (Acts 21:39), he was not overstating the case.

The foundation of Tarsus is lost in ancient history, but archaeological evidence suggests that the city existing in the third millennium B.C. The city was part of the Assyrian Empire from about 850 B.C. until Alexander the Great captured it in 332 B.C. The city's unhealthy climate almost changed the course of history when Alexander became ill there and nearly died. After he recovered, he defeated the Persian army under Darius on the plains of Issus, just east of Tarsus.



The Roman province of Cilicia  
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The rough coast of western Cilicia  
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It later came under the control of the Seleucid Empire until it was granted independence by Antiochus IV in 171 B.C. Rome annexed Tarsus in 67 B.C. as part of Pompey's campaign against the Cilicia pirates based on the rugged coast of western Cilicia. The defeat of the pirates, who had plagued Roman trade and grain ships, led to the relative safety of Mediterranean travel during the era of early church. Without Pompey's successful campaign, it is doubtful that Paul and other missionaries could have spread the Gospel throughout the Roman Empire so quickly.

After the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 B.C., Marc Antony assumed control of the eastern Roman Empire and made Tarsus his home city. It was from here that Antony summoned Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt, in 41 B.C. Tarsus was located perhaps ten miles from the Mediterranean but connected to the sea at the time by the River Cydnus. Thus situated between the great Mediterranean trade routes and the Cilician Gates, a narrow pass through the Tarsus Mountains, leading into the fertile central plains of Anatolia, the city grew to become a major seaport, perhaps the third largest city in the Empire. Cleopatra traveled up the Cydnus to meet Marc Antony in her opulent royal barge, an event that, according to the historical accounts, drew the city's entire population to the water's edge. Plutarch (45-125 A.D.), priest of the Delphic Oracle, later memorialized the event in his *Life of Marcus Antonius* (XXVI):



The Cilician Gates  
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"(Cleopatra took) her barge in the river of Cydnus, the poop whereof was of gold, the sails of purple, and the oars of silver, which kept stroke in rowing after the sound of the music of flutes, howboys, cithernes, viols, and such other instruments as they played upon in the barge. And now for the person of herself: she was laid under a pavilion of cloth of gold of tissue, apparelled and attired like the goddess Venus commonly drawn in picture; and hard by her, on either hand of her, pretty fair boys apparelled as painters do set forth god Cupid, with little fans in their hands, with the which they fanned wind upon her. Her ladies and gentlewomen also, the fairest of them were apparelled like the nymphs..."

The city subsequently enjoyed the favor of Antony and, later, Augustus. Antony made it an independent city, while Augustus, the first of the Roman emperors (23 BC-14 A.D.) did the unthinkable, exempting the city from imperial taxation. Consequently, Tarsus flourished over the next century as it never had before or never would since, becoming an educational and philosophical center superior even, according to the great Roman geographer Strabo, Athens and Alexandria (*Geography* 14.5.13, ca 23 A.D.). The stoic philosophers Athenodorus (Augustus' teacher), the Stoic Zeno, Antipater, and Nestor all lived in Tarsus during the first century A.D.



Emperor Augustus

Tarsus was also a major fabric center, particularly because of the extraordinary wool made from black Cilician sheep. The wool was fashioned into all manner of goods for wealthy Romans, and tents from Cilician wool were highly desirable.

Like many of the coastal Mediterranean cities like [Corinth](#) and [Ephesus](#), Tarsus became the home of a significant Jewish population of the Diaspora.

## Saul of Tarsus



Paul (c1420s),  
Andrei Rublev  
[Larger image](#)

Some time probably between 5 and 10 A.D., a Jew named Saul was born in the city of Tarsus. All of these facts about the ancient city seem to combine to contribute to his upbringing and characteristics, including:

- The Stoic undertones of his life and teaching
- His tentmaking vocation
- His understanding of strategic locations
- His Roman citizenship (even Jews were so afforded in this favored city)

We know little of Saul's time in Tarsus, but we know that he relocated to Jerusalem in his youth because Paul testifies that he was "*brought up in this city (Jerusalem)*," so it was there that he acquired his strict interpretations of Jewish law and traditions under the Pharisee Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). (Saul's entire family, in fact, may have relocated, since it was his sister's son who warned him about the plot by the Jews after they had charged him with desecrating the temple in 57 A.D.) Saul almost certainly heard Gamaliel's caution to the council to the Sanhedrin about the new Christian sect: "*...keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!*" (Acts 5:38-39), but the student could not follow the teacher's advice. He began persecuting the church and, perhaps frustrated by inaction with the Pharisees, even conspired with the High Priest, a rival Sadducee, to carry his actions outside Judea to Damascus.

What followed is well-known, of course. En route to Damascus, Saul has a vision of the risen Jesus, who in perhaps the most unlikely turn in history, appoints him apostle to the Gentiles. He preaches for a short time in Damascus before having to flee under the threat of death. He went into Arabia for a time, then returns to Damascus (Galatians 1:1). Three years later, he finally attempts to meet with Jesus' disciples, who are still congregated in Judea. Not surprisingly, given Saul's prior record, the disciples are more than a little hesitant, but he somehow wins the confidence of Barnabas and gains an introduction (Acts 9:26-27). Since Barnabas testifies to Saul's bold evangelism in Damascus, it is reasonable to assume that Barnabas and Saul first met there. Accepted by the church, Saul begins to preach in Jerusalem, but when his life is again threatened the disciples sent him back to Tarsus (Acts 9:28-30).

Tradition holds that Saul lived in obscurity for the next seven years, but Paul's own testimony suggests that he continued his powerful evangelism: "I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia" (Galatians 1:21). Understanding his direct commission from Christ and his sometimes obstinate natural personality, it is impossible to imagine Saul remaining silent for seven days, much less seven years. Scripture tells us nothing of a church in Tarsus, so it seems likely that those Saul convinced formed an unorganized group of believers, but the historical record testifies to the church in Tarsus, undoubtedly Saul's students, at the beginning of the second century.

While the first recorded evangelism of a Gentile involved Peter and the Roman centurion Cornelius (Acts 10), it is clear that the church remained overwhelmingly Jewish for the first fifteen years after the crucifixion. Then, in about 46 A.D., word of massive Gentile conversions in Syrian Antioch reached Jerusalem. Barnabas is sent to investigate the reports (Acts 11:20-22). Witnessing the enthusiasm of the Antioch

church, Barnabas must have thought about Saul. He traveled to Tarsus, found Saul, and brought him back to Antioch, where the two preached together for the next year (Acts 11:23-26).

Barnabas' trip to Tarsus is the last mention of the city in the New Testament, but Paul (he adopted his Roman name during his first mission) may have returned there during his second missionary journey, accompanied by Silas, since we are told that "he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches" (Acts 15:41). It is virtually certain that Paul, given even the slightest opportunity, would have spent some time with believers in his home city, particularly considering the strategic location of the city and the influence it exerted on the interior of Asia Minor.

Two other brief mentions of the province of Cilicia follow the second journey. When Paul returns to Jerusalem in about 57 A.D., the Jewish leaders plot to kill him under a thumped-up charge that he violated the Law by bringing Trophimus, a Gentile believer from Ephesus, into the Temple (presumably the Court of the Jews, since the Court of the Gentiles was permissible). Seized by Roman authorities to avoid a riot, Paul is then transported to Caesarea to face Governor Felix, who asks Paul where he is from. "(W)hen he learned that he was from Cilicia," Luke tells us, the governor granted him a hearing (Acts 23:34-35). I suspect that if Paul had been a Judean, Felix probably would have denied the hearing, being tired of Jewish squabbles during his tenure.

The last brief mention of Cilicia comes at Acts 27:5, where Luke, accompanying Paul en route to Rome to appeal to Caesar, says that "we...sailed across the open sea along the coast of Cilicia and Pamphylia." As the ship passed, we can imagine Paul gazing wistfully at the shore, wishing he could share his hope one last time with the brethren in the city of his birth.

### **Post-Apostolic Tarsus**

Early in the second century, Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, was condemned by Emperor Trajan and transported to Rome. A series of letters attributed to Ignatius thank the churches along his route for the kindness they extended to him. It is the unanimous opinion of experts that several of these, including one to the church in Tarsus, are not genuine. The primary subject of Ignatius' Letter to the Tarsians involves the refutation of a docetic heresy that suggests Jesus only *seemed* to be born in the flesh, crucified, and died. Only one person is mentioned by name—the deacon Philo.

In an early third century document, Hippolytus, a devoted student of Irenæus, bishop of Lyons and author of the voluminous *Against Heresies*, lists Herodion and Jason, bishops of Tarsus, as being among the seventy apostles. In an early fourth century document, Lactantius, reports the gruesome death of one Daia, a persecutor of Christians.

The church remained in Tarsus. In a mid-third century letter to Cornelius, bishop of Rome, Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria, writes that Helenus, bishop of Tarsus, has invited him to a counsel at Antioch to discuss the heresies of Paul of Samosata. Additional bishops of Tarsus known from ancient writings are Lupus, who attended the council of Ancyra in 314; Theodorus, a participant in the pivotal council at Nicæa in 325; and Helladius, who appealed a condemnation to the pope in 433.

Except for one brief period, Tarsus remained under increasingly loose Roman influence until the fourteenth century, when it was swept over by the Ottoman army. Today, the modern Tarsus is a city of about a quarter million and the church is virtually nonexistent. The spirit of Paul lives on, however, in the century-old [St. Paul's Institute](#), an American mission which operates both an elementary Tarsus SEV Primary) and secondary (Tarsus American College) school, although the degree to which these institutions honor Paul in an Islamic culture is uncertain since their stated mission excludes any religious statement.

The ancient ruins of Tarsus lie under the small town of Cumhuriyet Alani. Very little has been excavated. Ancient Tarsus' former harbor, long silted over after the unfortunate decision of the sixth century Roman Emperor Justinian to divert a portion of the Cydnus for flood control. The marshes that now occupy the site of the former harbor contribute to the oppressive climate of Cumhuriyet Alani.

The lesson of Tarsus, of all of Turkey, in fact, should be profound. In the first three centuries of the church, Turkey was the hotbed of Christianity. It was also the incubator of most serious early heresies, and strong Christian leaders steadfastly defended the truth and countered Satan's attempt to infuse the church with lies and myths. Unfortunately, something of the spontaneity, equanimity, and community of the church was lost in the process, but at least the church prevailed against the gates of hell.



The Tarsus Mountains, over which Paul traveled 2000 years ago  
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America bears some relationship in this way to ancient Turkey. Attacks from within the church that seek to deny the ancient truths God revealed through Christ Jesus and His early apostles are under attack. When the *ekklesia* question the perfection of the Bible, when they question the deity of Jesus, when they mock the reality of Satan, when they allow the insidious suggestions of a work of fiction to infect their beliefs, when they allow the opinions of self-appointed scholars to add or subtract from the canon, and when they turn a blind eye to the wholesale slaughter of babies in the womb, they risk the same fate most of Turkey now experiences—a society that does not know, nor even care to know the true nature of God and the grace he offers to each human being.

America may not be likely to be overrun by Islam, but it is already well into the process of being overrun by secular humanism and commercialism. At least Islam has some semblance of God. What will America be left with if Christian leaders do not stand up, like their early counterparts, and defend the truth against attacks? The church will survive—Jesus promised that—but will America survive?

Almost two thousand years ago, Saul of Tarsus became Paul the apostle and traveled thousand of miles to tell Gentiles like most of us the wondrous truth of God's Son. What does it say that most of us don't even go next door?

## Discussion

I received no comments on the Tarsus issue (as of the date of this posting to InJesus.com, but I hope all of you found reading it as rewarding, to at least a small degree, as I found researching and writing it. In general, the Cities of the New Testament series installments have engendered few comments, but I also hope they add to your understanding of the context of the incredible story of the New Testament church.

As you read this, I am preparing to leave with a team from the Newark (DE) church of Christ for a one-week trip to New Orleans to join relief efforts led by the Tammany Oaks church in Mandeville, Louisiana. Two previous groups from Newark have made this trip, and it was their report (watch video) that prompted me to this decision. While I have Jesus firmly in my head, and He works His way to my fingers and my mouth, I have often kept Him from fully entering my heart. Please pray that God will use this experience in New Orleans to open me more fully to whole-life worship.



Unsure about or don't agree with something in Ekklesia Then & Now? First, be a Berean (Acts 17:10-11). If you still disagree, [post a message](#) so we can all share in the discussion!

## **NEXT ISSUE: New Testament Apocrypha: Acts - Gnostic**

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