

Sha'ul of Tarsus & His Letters ~ Part 2

The Stoning of Stephen

Our first introduction to **Sha'ul** occurs at **The Stoning of Stephen**, beginning in Acts 6. I would encourage you to read Stephen's story. It's a fascinating revelation of his faithfulness to the **Messianic** cause. Needless to say, the **Sanhedrin** wanted to shut him up, so they contrived to stone him. At this point, **Sha'ul** comes on the scene to hold their coats.

And the witnesses laid down their coats at the feet of a young man named Sha'ul. (emphasis added.)⁵⁹ As they were stoning him, Stephen called out to God, "Lord Yeshua! Receive my spirit!"⁶⁰ Then he kneeled down and shouted out, "Lord! Don't hold this sin against them!" With that, he died; ⁸¹ and Sha'ul gave his approval to his murder.¹

Already, we don't like this guy. He is an enemy of the cause! **Stephen's** death sparked a period of great persecution for the **Messianic** community. **Sha'ul**, who had played a significant role in **Stephen's** stoning, ravaged the community (8:1–3). Except for the **Emissaries** (Apostles), the **Believers** were scattered throughout the surrounding regions, extending the **Gospel** beyond **Judea** to **Samaria**, fulfilling **Yeshua's** mandate (see Acts 1:8).

Starting with that day, there arose intense persecution against the Messianic Community in Yerushalayim; all but the emissaries were scattered throughout the regions of Y'hudah and Shomron.² Some godly men buried Stephen and mourned him deeply.³ But Sha'ul set out to destroy the Messianic Community - entering house after house, he dragged off both men and women and handed them over to be put in prison.

This verse and Acts 9:1–2, along with the background of 7:58 and 8:1, show that **Sha'ul**, in his zeal for traditional **Judaism** (Romans 10:2; Ga 1:13–14, 4:18), was a formidable persecutor of **Messianic Jews** (Philippians 3:6), possibly their worst persecutor (1 Timothy 1:13–16).

⁴ However, those who were scattered announced the Good News of the Word wherever they went.²

The Dammesek Road

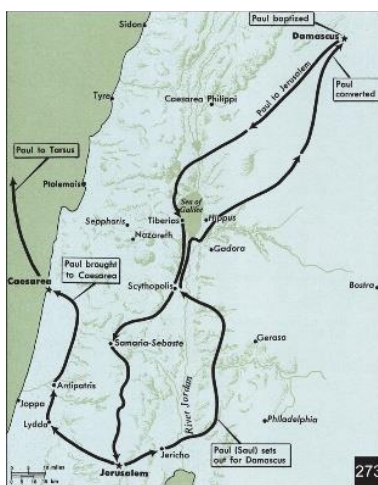


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¹ Acts 7:58b-8:1a.

² Acts 8:1b-4.

We pick up the story of **Sha'ul** as he travels to **Dammesek** to cause even more problems for the young community of **Believers**. **Sha'ul** was so incensed against the **Messianic Jews** (8:3) that he was not satisfied to conduct his inquisitions and persecutions only in **Yerushalayim**. Letters from the **Cohen HaGadol** would carry weight in the **Diaspora**. Under **Roman** rule, the **Sanhedrin** did not have temporal power; in internal **Jewish** matters, it was honored to even beyond the borders of **Isra'el**, for example, in **Dammesek** (v. 3).

¹ Meanwhile, Sha'ul, still breathing murderous threats against the Lord's talmidim, went to the Cohen HaGadol ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Dammesek, authorizing him to arrest any people he might find, whether men or women, who belonged to "the Way," and bring them back to Yerushalayim.

³ He was on the road and nearing Dammesek when suddenly a light from heaven flashed all around him. ⁴ Falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Sha'ul! Sha'ul! Why do you keep persecuting me?" ⁵ "Sir, who are you?" he asked. "I am Yeshua, and you are persecuting me. ⁶ But get up, and go into the city, and you will be told what you have to do." (Yes, more Red-Letter Words. We will see more of these as we follow Sha'ul.)

⁷ The men traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. ⁸ They helped Sha'ul get up off the ground, but when he opened his eyes, he could see nothing. So, leading him by the hand, they brought him into Dammesek. ⁹ For three days, he remained unable to see, and he neither ate nor drank. ³

While on the road to **Dammesek** to persecute **Believers**, **Sha'ul** encountered the risen **Lord** and was converted. This marks a momentous occasion in the mission of the early **Messianic** community. The principal opponent of the **Messianic** movement became the most fantastic leading role of the movement's mission, and – amazingly - he would take the **Gospel** to the "ends of the earth."⁴

In our next post, we will learn what happens to **Sha'ul** after his encounter with the **Risen Lord**.

³ Acts 9:1–9.

⁴ Andreas J. Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles, The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2016), 425. (This is a new resource in my library. In the future, I will refer to it as The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown.)