

Shayla: Why did Paul go to Arabia?

Midrash:

- **Galatians 1:15-19 HCSB** But when God, who from my mother's womb set me apart and called me by His grace, was pleased (16) to reveal His Son in me, so that I could preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone. (17) I did not go up to Jerusalem to those who had become apostles before me; instead I went to Arabia and came back to Damascus. (18) Then after three years I did go up to Jerusalem to get to know Cephas, and I stayed with him 15 days. (19) But I didn't see any of the other apostles except James, the Lord's brother.

To understand the point of this autobiographical section it is necessary to return to Galatians 1:11-12.

- **Galatians 1:11-12 HCSB** Now I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel preached by me is not based on a human point of view. (12) For I did not receive it from a human source and I was not taught it, but it came by a revelation from Jesus Christ.

The requirements of being a true Apostle included being a direct witness of Jesus' ministry and resurrection.

- **Acts 1:21-22 HCSB** "Therefore, from among the men who have accompanied us during the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us-- (22) beginning from the baptism of John until the day He was taken up from us--from among these, it is necessary that one become a witness with us of His resurrection."

Paul, in defending his apostleship, says in essence "I witnessed the Lord directly. I was miraculously called by the Lord. I was taught by the Lord without human intermediaries. I am a true apostle."

In the process Paul describes his former life as being characterized by "extreme zeal for the traditions of the ancestors" leading to extreme persecution of God's church."

- **Galatians 1:13-14 HCSB** For you have heard about my former way of life in Judaism: I persecuted God's church to an extreme degree and tried to destroy it; (14) and I advanced in Judaism beyond many contemporaries among my people, because I was extremely zealous for the traditions of my ancestors.
- **Philippians 3:5-6 HCSB** circumcised the eighth day; of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; (6) as to zeal, persecuting the church; as to the righteousness that is in the law, blameless.

So we must consider your question within the context of Paul explaining his extreme zeal for the traditions of the ancestors, how he was far more advanced than his contemporaries in this and that in regards to the Law he was blameless.

There are two names that are synonymous with zeal among our people: Phinehas (Numbers 25:7-13) and Elijah (1 Kings 18). Both men were famous for killing someone out of their zeal for the Lord God; Phinehas killed a Jewish man and a Moabite woman; Elijah killed the prophets of the false god Baal. Paul obviously followed his ancestor's ideals of zeal into violent action against what he perceived to be a threat to the purity of Israel's faith.

After Elijah killed the prophets of Baal, Jezebel threatened his life (1 Kings 19:1-2) and he ran "to Horeb, the mount of God" (1 Kings 19:8). Mt. Horeb is an alternative name for Mount Sinai (Exodus 3:1-12; 17:6-7; Deuteronomy 1:19; 5:2). There he had an amazing experience of the presence of God which culminated in a still small voice that reaffirmed his calling. During the course of that calling, Elijah was told,

- [1 Kings 19:15 HCSB](#) Then the LORD said to him, "Go and return by the way you came to the Wilderness of Damascus. When you arrive, you are to anoint Hazael as king over Aram.

I believe that Paul, in his desire to advance beyond his contemporaries in zeal for the Law adopted these two figures but especially the more famous Elijah as his role model. This life-long habit would not have immediately ceased upon his conversion, especially when (though it led to the wrong conclusions) it was not inherently, biblically wrong.

As Elijah had what he perceived to be a huge spiritual victory resulting in the deaths of Judaism's enemies, was subsequently stopped by a revelation (in his case a death threat) and fled to Mt. Horeb, so Paul persecuted the church with great violence, trying to destroy it, was stopped by a revelation and fled to Arabia. Interestingly, the only two occurrences of the word "Arabia" in the New Covenant are:

- [Galatians 1:17 HCSB](#) I did not go up to Jerusalem to those who had become apostles before me; instead I went to Arabia and came back to Damascus.
- [Galatians 4:25 HCSB](#) Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children.

Clearly, since both occurrences are within the same letter, Paul considered "Arabia" and "Mt. Sinai" to be synonymous. It is my opinion that upon his conversion, Paul followed the tracks of his ancient hero Elijah and went to the mountain where Elijah had had his calling from God reconfirmed. It is also significant that the Apostle who did the most to explain to Gentiles the role of the Law within the boundaries of the New Covenant returned to the very place where the Law was originally given to Moses. While on Mt. Sinai Moses was directly taught by pre-incarnate Christ and here again we see Paul affirming that his understanding did not come from men but directly from God.