

A Defense of Paul's Roman Citizenship by "Epiphanius"

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At critical moments in the narrative of Acts, the apostle Paul invokes Roman citizenship as a means of escaping punishment and, eventually, of appealing his case to the emperor. Interpreters of the text have long wondered how this "Hebrew of Hebrews" from the tribe of Benjamin could have become a "citizen of no obscure city." Various explanations have been proposed, including denying the historicity of Paul's citizenship. According to an obscure Syriac fragment from the Mingana Collection in Birmingham University Library, Epiphanius provided a solution. The text recounts a curious tale of Paul's mixed lineage and accounts for his dual identity, for he was the son of a Hebrew woman and a Roman soldier in the army of Vespasian(!). In this paper I will first present the story, with all its peculiarities and historical difficulties. I will then propose two ways of contextualizing the text, either as a positive defense of Paul's citizenship or as a polemical assault on the apostle's pedigree. I will argue for the former reading and will suggest why such an account, which I take to be pseudepigraphic, came to be associated with Epiphanius.