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A. H. McNeile

Excerpt

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## PART I

### THE LIFE OF ST PAUL

#### CHAPTER I

##### ST PAUL'S CHARACTER AND PERSON

I. **PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS.** No attempt is made in the *Acts* to *describe* the apostle<sup>1</sup>. But his letters help us, to a wonderful extent, to see him as he really was. His was a great soul which won a life-long triumph over his body. His physical disabilities were made the most of by his opponents (2 Cor. x. 10), but they were, in fact, an acute trial to him. On one occasion his ill health forced him to stay in Galatia, when he would otherwise have travelled further (Gal. iv. 13). The exact form of his complaint is unknown, but he describes it as 'a stake in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me' (2 Cor. xii. 7). It seems to have attacked him at intervals, and to have begun after he became a Christian. On the occasion of the first three attacks he 'besought the Lord that it might stay away from him,' but God helped him to realise that it was His will, and that His strength would support him (*vv.* 8, 9). It was of so distressing a nature that it was very trying to those who saw him. But he thankfully acknowledges that the Galatians did not on that account despise or reject him in disgust (Gal. iv. 14). 'Luke the beloved physician' (Col. iv. 14) during the periods of his ministry when he accompanied him no

<sup>1</sup> In the *Acts of Paul and Thekla* he is described as 'short, bald, bandy-legged, strongly built, with meeting eyebrows, with a rather large nose, full of grace, for at times he looked like a man, and at times he had the face of an angel.'

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doubt did all that he could to give him relief when the attacks came on. Some have suggested that it was a weakness of eyesight, and that this would explain his need of an amanuensis to write his letters, and the 'large characters' in which he wrote with his own hand his closing words to the Galatians (vi. 11); also the account in Acts xxiii. 1-9 of his trial before the Sanhedrin, at which he 'looked intently' at the council (*v.* 1), and did not realise that one of his judges who commanded him to be struck on the mouth was the high priest (*v.* 5). But even if these are to be explained as due to weakness of eyesight, that alone would not be enough to force him to postpone a journey and stay with the Galatians, or account for his language about their welcome treatment of him. Ramsay suggests malarial fever. A more probable conjecture is that it was some form of epilepsy. The weakness which occasioned the attacks may possibly also have affected his eyes. It seems also at times to have caused him to suffer from depression.

2. TEMPERAMENT. But nothing could subdue his unconquerable courage, which carried him through physical hardships under which many men would have succumbed. His letters contain many indications that he had a tensely strung nervous temperament, which though often a personal trial to him contributed to his extraordinary force of character. It was as though he were charged with a spiritual electricity which drew men like a magnet, but which also repelled. It gave him an eager, fiery energy—he calls it 'zeal'—which made him persecute Christians (Phil. iii. 6) before his conversion, but love them and yearn for them afterwards (2 Cor. xi. 2). He felt tortured when his converts lapsed into sin or mistakes, and was flooded with thankful joy

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when they repented, or took his advice, or did him a kindness. And this same zeal kept him moving restlessly in his missionary work over Palestine, a large part of Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Greece; it made him anxious to visit Rome (Acts xix. 21, Rom. i. 15), and even Spain (see p. 256 f.).

And beside fitting him to work for others, his temperament enabled him to see visions, and to fall into mystic raptures. Instances of the former are related in the *Acts* (ix. 3-6, xvi. 9, xviii. 9 f., xxiii. 11, xxvii. 23; and cf. xvi. 6 f., xx. 22 f.). The latter he describes himself in 2 Cor. xii. 1-4, adding that the 'stake in the flesh' was sent to him to prevent him from being over-elated by the greatness of the revelation. He also claims in an unusual degree the power, possessed by many of the early Christians, of speaking with 'tongues' (1 Cor. xiv. 18); and, though he does not actually say so, he no doubt possessed the gift, which he ranked higher than tongues, of ecstatic 'prophecy' (see 1 Cor. xiii. 2, Acts xiii. 1). Apart from these particular instances, his 'zeal' can be felt in his letters, notably in 1, 2 *Corinthians* and *Galatians*, and seen in his literary style,—rebuke, tender or stern, white-hot indignation, irony, pathos, a love which he compares with that of a father, a mother, a nurse, a tact which shrinks from wounding, and yet a strength which is willing, when need be, to wound in order to heal.

Such was the tumultuous complexity of the man whose life-work we are to study. It was the Spirit of God that made him what he became; but, as always, He used the man's natural human temperament for His divine purposes; His strength was perfected in what might otherwise have been weakness.

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3. TRAINING AND ENVIRONMENT. But St Paul was complex not only on the emotional but also on the intellectual side of his nature. Circumstances printed their mark upon him 'in letters of Hebrew and Greek and Latin.' Each of these must be noted.

(a) *Hebrew*. He was first and foremost 'a Hebrew sprung from Hebrews' (Phil. iii. 5); he was glad to claim descent from Abraham, through Israel (i.e. Jacob), and through the tribe of Benjamin in particular (*ib.*, 2 Cor. xi. 22). Possibly his name Saul (*Shā'ūl*) was given him by his parents in memory of the first king of Israel, the Benjamite warrior chief. Although he was a Jew of the Dispersion, having been born at Tarsus in Cilicia, and spoke Greek, he was not immersed in non-Jewish thoughts and interests. He preserved, until his conversion, the strictly orthodox, intolerant attitude of a Pharisee (Phil. iii. 5; cf. Acts xxiii. 6, xxvi. 5); he writes 'I advanced in Judaism [i.e. the Jewish religion and rules of life] beyond many of mine own age in my race, being an exceedingly zealous follower of my ancestral traditions' (Gal. i. 14). Further facts, on which his letters are silent, are reported in the *Acts*. He declared to the angry mob in Jerusalem, speaking to them in 'Hebrew,' i.e. their native Aramaic, that he had been 'brought up in this city at the feet<sup>1</sup> of Gamaliel' (Acts xxii. 3). How long he was under the instruction of this well-known rabbi is not stated; 'brought up' implies that he spent most of his youth, perhaps since his 13th year, in Jerusalem. But whether his stay in the capital was long or short, it only carried on and deepened the

<sup>1</sup> The scene recalls Lk. ii. 46. Cf. Taylor, *Sayings of the Jewish Fathers*, p. 14, on Aboth i. 4, 'Let thy house be a meeting-house for the wise, and powder thyself in the dust of their feet.'

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impressions which he must have received from his home training; from infancy he must have breathed a Jewish atmosphere, first in his father's house, and then in the synagogue at Tarsus where he received the more systematic instruction in the Scriptures, especially the Law, which was given to every Jewish child<sup>1</sup>. And he declared to the same mob (Acts xxii. 4 f.) and to Agrippa (xxvi. 10-12) that his persecutions of the Christians were waged from Jerusalem with the authority of the Sanhedrin.

Thus his Jewish training, acting upon his highly strung temperament, produced in him instincts and a cast of mind that were Jewish with a peculiar intensity. And these could not suddenly disappear when he became a follower of Jesus. His energies were turned in a new direction by the driving power of a new motive, but the inborn Jewish elements were never obliterated or swamped<sup>2</sup>. This can be seen in his continued love for, and pride in, his race (Rom. ix. 1-5, x. 1 f., xi. 1 f., 12, 15, 24, 28, 2 Cor. xi. 22, Phil. iii. 5), in his use of Jewish *haggada*, i.e. imaginative or legendary stories about Old Testament characters and events<sup>3</sup>, and in certain aspects of his beliefs and doctrines (see pp. 268-275).

(b) *Greek*. But born where he was he could not entirely escape the influence of Greek thought, literature, and life given to Cilicia by the victories of Alexander and the rule of his successors the Seleucids<sup>4</sup>. Long before

<sup>1</sup> See art. 'Synagogue' in Hastings' *DB*. iv. 642. Schürer, *Hist. of the Jewish People*, II. ii. 44-89.

<sup>2</sup> See Sanday and Headlam, *Romans*, Preface, pp. vi, vii.

<sup>3</sup> See Thackeray, *The Relation of St Paul to Contemporary Jewish Thought*.

<sup>4</sup> The dynasty of the family of Seleucus, one of Alexander's three great generals.

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the age of 13 his pagan surroundings must have exercised some effect upon his child-consciousness, however strict and careful his home training might be. Tarsus, the capital of Cilicia, was an important centre of commerce, and the seat of a celebrated university, hardly inferior to those of Athens and Alexandria. In Acts xxi. 39 it is related that in speaking (in Greek) to the chiliarch who rescued him from the mob he claimed to be 'a Jew, a Tarsian of Cilicia, a citizen of a distinguished city<sup>1</sup>.' Ramsay takes this to mean that he had received the honour of full citizenship, and no doubt his father and perhaps his grandfather before him; they were more than merely inhabitants of Tarsus. If this is the meaning of the expression, they may have received this distinction from one of the Seleucid rulers who shewed considerable favour to the Jewish colonists<sup>2</sup>. The Greek which he wrote was such as a Hellenist could learn by hearing the language spoken around him, and by constant study of the Greek Old Testament. That he was a student at the Tarsus university is quite improbable; not only would his strict Jewish parents be very unlikely to allow it, but his Greek style would have been less Hebraic if he had attended lectures on Greek rhetoric and composition, though some think that the style and complexion of his exposition and arguments shew traces of Greek method<sup>3</sup>. But if he did not formally receive a Greek education, he could not escape the more subtle, but none the less penetrating, influence of Greek atmosphere, and that not only in Cilicia but

<sup>1</sup> R.V. 'A Jew of Tarsus' is not a strict rendering.

<sup>2</sup> See Schürer, *op. cit.* II. ii. 270-6.

<sup>3</sup> See Canon E. L. Hicks (now Bishop of Lincoln), *Studia Biblica*, iv. 1-14.

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even in Judaea<sup>1</sup>. His knowledge of Greek thought was gained 'partly by assimilation of the knowledge which floated on the surface of a more or less educated society and became insensibly the property of all its members<sup>2</sup>.' He made use in his metaphors of the life of Greek cities, the stadium, the market-place, the temples. He was probably acquainted with Alexandrian Jewish thought in Philo and the book of *Wisdom*. He knew how fascinating, and yet how unsatisfying, Greek 'wisdom' was (1 Cor. i. 21-25, ii. 1-8, iii. 18 f., 2 Cor. i. 12, Col. ii. 23). He knew something of the angel-worshipping asceticism affected by Jews in Colossae and the neighbourhood (see p. 206); and he had seen with his own eyes the terrible sins of paganism and the degradations of idolatry (Rom. i. 18-32). Lastly he was acquainted with the aspirations and methods of the Mysteries, some of the vocabulary of which he adopted, and adapted to Christian use (see pp. 305-7).

(c) *Roman*. The rule of Alexander and the Seleucids was followed by the rule of Rome, with its great provincial system controlled by the central authority in Rome itself. A Jew by birth and training, and a Hellenist by environment, St Paul was also a Roman citizen (Acts xvi. 37, xxii. 25, 28). In *v.* 28 he declares that he was 'born' with this privilege, which implies that his father had already received it. He bore the Roman name Paulus, as well as the Hebrew name Saul. It was in virtue of this coveted distinction, which the chiliarch in Jerusalem had gained only by a large payment (*v.* 27), that he could appeal to Caesar (xxv. 11). It gave him a standing and prestige wherever he went, so that when

<sup>1</sup> Conybeare in Hastings' *DB.* ii. 262.

<sup>2</sup> Ramsay in Hastings' *DB.* Extra Vol. 150.

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he came into contact with Roman officials—occasions which seem to be noticed with special attention by St Luke—he usually received friendly treatment. And it may well have exercised, together with his Tarsian citizenship, an influence upon his mind, which, in spite of his zealous Pharisaism, was moulding his ideas, and making it easier for him, when the crisis of his conversion came, to open his arms to Gentiles, and to fight with all his energy for their inclusion in the Christian Church. Further, his conception of the Church must have owed something to his citizenship (Phil. iii. 20); the splendid unity of the Empire under the sway of Caesar doubtless contributed to his picture of the one Church, united under Christ its Head, each member of the Body performing its functions for the good of the whole (Rom. xii. 4 f., 1 Cor. xii. 12–27, Col. i. 18, ii. 19, Eph. i. 22 f., iv. 12, 15, v. 30).

St Paul thus combining in one person Jew, Greek, and Roman, was fitted by natural endowment to be the champion of the religion which, born in Palestine, was destined to conquer the Roman empire.

## CHAPTER II

### CLASSES OF CHRISTIAN CONVERTS

St Paul's conversion and missionary activity cannot be rightly understood without a reference to the various classes of people to whom Christianity came. Six classes can be distinguished, three of them Jewish and three Gentile.

I. **ORTHODOX HEBREWS.** These would mostly be found in Palestine, especially in and near Jerusalem.



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CHRISTIAN CONVERTS

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They were Aramaic-speaking Jews who had never settled abroad, and in most cases had never travelled to a foreign country. They were under the ecclesiastical control of the priests, and the moral influence of the Scribes and Pharisees.

2. **ORTHODOX HELLENISTS.** These were Jews who had settled abroad—in many cases their families had lived in foreign countries for generations—and spoke Greek. They were often loyal and patriotic citizens of the country of their adoption, much as a modern Jew can be a loyal Englishman or American. But in religious matters they kept themselves, as for example the youthful Saul and his parents, strictly separate from the surrounding paganism. Continuous opposition and protest tended to create in them a spirit of narrowness, sometimes of moody bigotry. It was when they returned, as they often did, to Jerusalem, that they felt themselves to be in their true atmosphere, and all the more zealous for their religion for having seen what they felt to be the degrading influences of paganism.

3. **LIBERAL HELLENISTS.** Many foreign Jews did not preserve this spirit of protest. They opened their minds freely to much that was good in Greek life, its art and literature and philosophy. They did not renounce their loyalty to the God of their fathers, but they sat loosely to the rules and ordinances of the Jewish law and scribal tradition. Some of them, especially in Alexandria, went so far as to interpret the Old Testament entirely in an allegorical and spiritual sense, so that they renounced the practice of circumcision and the observance of the Jewish festivals<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Josephus, *Ant.* xx. ii. 4. Philo, *De Migr. Abrah.*, ed. Cohn-Wendl. ii. 285 ff.

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4. PROSELYTES. These were Gentiles who were converted to Judaism, and entered into membership of the Jewish Church by circumcision. They came to Jerusalem for the festivals, and were allowed to worship in the Court of the Gentiles.

5. GENTILES MORE OR LESS FAVOURABLE TO JUDAISM. In the welter of idolatry, mysteries, magic, superstitions, and philosophies of the pagan world many high-minded Gentiles were strongly attracted by the pure monotheism and moral life of the little colonies of Jews in their midst. The latter looked upon them with sympathy, and hoped to convert them into proselytes. Of late years the term 'God-fearers<sup>1</sup>,' which occurs in Acts x. 2, 22, 35, xiii. 16, 26, has been employed to designate them. But it must not be taken to imply that they formed in any sense a recognised body. Their appreciation of Judaism, either liberal or orthodox, must have varied greatly, from mere interest and enquiry to the state of mind which would lead them to become actual proselytes.

6. GENTILES WITH NO LEANINGS TO JUDAISM, many of whom 'worked all uncleanness with eagerness' (Eph. iv. 19; cf. Rom. i. 21-32, 1 Cor. vi. 9-11, Col. iii. 5-7), and worshipped 'gods many and lords many' (1 Cor. viii. 5), or none at all.

To all these six classes came the Gospel of Jesus Christ, with its message that Jesus the Galilean, who had been crucified, had risen from the dead, and was the Messiah—the Christ—expected by the Jews, and would very soon come from heaven to inaugurate the

<sup>1</sup> φοβούμενοι τὸν θεόν. Other expressions occur: σεβόμενος τὸν θεόν (xvi. 14, xviii. 7), σεβόμενοι (xiii. 50, xvii. 4, 17), σεβόμενοι προσήλυτοι (xiii. 43).