THE LIFE OF ST PAUL

The Acts of the Apostles

For our knowledge of Paul's life and teaching we are entirely dependent upon the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles of Paul. From the former we learn nearly all we know about his life, from the latter nearly all we know about his teaching. The title given to the Acts is somewhat misleading, at least if we allow it to suggest to us that it contains an account of the doings of the Twelve, or even of several of them. As a matter of fact, we find the names of only three of the original Twelve; we hear of the death of James the son of Zebedee; his brother John is just mentioned; about Peter we hear a good deal, but about the others, nothing. Peter is the central figure in the first part of the book (cc. i–v); then follow two chapters about Stephen and one about Philip, and from c. ix onwards the central figure is Paul.

The opening words of the Acts inform us that its author had already composed a work 'concerning all that Jesus began both to do and teach, until the day in which he was taken up'. That work was the Gospel of Luke, and it was written for the benefit of the same man, Theophilus, to whom the Acts was addressed. It may be safely assumed that the author of both these works was Luke, and the same man to whom Paul refers as 'the beloved physician' (Col. iv. 14), who sends greetings to Philemon (Phm. 24) and who is mentioned in 2 Tim.

iv. 11 as the only one of Paul's friends who was still with him. The companionship thus acknowledged by Paul is confirmed on the part of Luke by the 'We-passages' in the Acts, those namely in which he uses the first person plural in his narrative. These passages are found in Acts xvi. 10–17; xx. 5–15; xxi. 1–8 and xxvii. 1–xxviii. 16, and show that Luke was Paul's companion from Troas to Philippi on his second Journey, from Philippi to Miletus and from Miletus to Jerusalem on the third Journey and from Caesarea to Rome on the final Journey. But these indications of the presence of Luke as an eyewitness extend the value of this testimony beyond the verses in which the word 'We' actually occurs, so as to cover considerable blocks of the narrative. We know also from the Epistle to Philemon that Luke had access to Paul during his imprisonment, probably at Ephesus (Phm. 24). Apart from this, it is clear that Luke had abundant opportunity of learning more about Paul's life from other members of that circle of friends of the Apostle, with whom he was from time to time in contact.

There can be no doubt therefore that Luke had plenty of material. The difficulty is to discover the method he followed in using his material, and behind that the motive by which he was led to write the book at all. It is historical, but not a history, biographical but not a biography. There are considerable gaps in it. Events which must have covered months or years are several times summarised in a couple of verses. The clue to Luke's method and motive is beyond our reach. Possibly it lies in the personality or the official position

of the 'most excellent Theophilus' to whom the book is addressed.

If we might think of him as a Roman official of importance, who had somehow power to influence the fortunes of Paul, we might conceive that Luke was moved by a desire to describe the relations between Jews and Christians in general, and then between the Jews and Paul at various stages in his career, the reason for their hostility to him, the malicious attacks which they organised against him in one city after another, and on the other hand the courage and dignity with which Paul had conducted himself on many different occasions, and the tolerance and even respect which had from time to time been shown to him by Roman authorities. The picture he draws is that of Paul the honourable and courageous Roman citizen, who has been the victim of racial pride and religious fanaticism.

Date. As to the date which may be assigned for the writing of Acts opinion is much divided. There are good authorities who place it in the 'nineties, in the 'seventies and in the 'sixties of the first century. The preponderance of opinion has for a long time been in favour of the latest date, chiefly on the ground that (1) the writer in v. 36, 37 shows traces of acquaintance with a work of Josephus published in A.D. 93, and (2) that Luke's Gospel itself belongs to the last decade of the century. Neither of these arguments has now the weight it was once supposed to have. The greater part of Luke's Gospel is confidently dated before A.D. 64, and that leaves us free to give full weight to certain general considerations which point emphatically to an early date for

the Acts. These are: (1) It is very difficult to believe that if Paul were already dead when Luke wrote, he would have brought his story to a close as he does, leaving the Apostle in honourable confinement at Rome. Suggestions that Luke may have intended to write yet another work describing Paul's closing years, or that the end of Acts has been lost, have not commended themselves to scholars. (2) If, as seems probable, the book was written to support the case for Paul's release (not for his acquittal; Luke knows nothing about a trial at Rome), it follows of course that he was still living. (3) The further down the century we bring the book, the more difficult it becomes to account for its existence and its character. There can be no doubt that both Paul and Paulinism passed under a cloud towards the end of the century. We see that from the Epistle which Clement of Rome sent to Corinth in A.D. 96. His reference to 'the letter of our brother Paul' only emphasises the fact that he either did not understand Paul or was indifferent to his teaching (cp. 2 Pet. ii. 16). (4) It also points in the same direction that the controversy as to the circumcision of the Gentiles to which Luke devotes nearly a chapter ceased to be a living issue long before A.D. 90. And while episodes like the Voyage and Shipwreck, interesting as they are to us, are hardly to be looked for except in a contemporary biography, a prophecy like that of Agabus (xxi. 10, 11) to the effect that the Jews at Jerusalem would bind Paul and hand him over to the Gentiles seems hardly worthy to be recorded if Paul had already suffered a martyr's death. So far from the date of Acts being settled by the later date of Luke's

Gospel, it looks as though the internal evidence of the former lends strong support to an early date for the latter.

Saul of Tarsus

Saul of Tarsus was born into a rich and varied environment. It included the religion of the Hebrews, the civilisation of the Greeks and the political and administrative genius of the Romans. He was proud of his relation to all three of these, though the most potent of them in the formation of his character was undoubtedly the religious atmosphere in which he was nurtured.

(1) When he was already ageing, he wrote, 'I am a Hebrew sprung from Hebrews' (Phil. iii. 5; cp. 2 Cor. xi. 22). His love for the race to which he belonged continued, and became even more intense after he became a Christian, so that he was constrained to write, 'I could wish myself cut off from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh' (Ro. ix. 3). It must have been a pious Jewish home into which he was born, and such a home has at all times been the great instrument of religious education for the Jews, greater even than the school or the synagogue. For one thing, even more than among other ancient peoples, their common meals had something of a sacred character, and particularly the common meal on the evening of the Sabbath. Then the mother of the family lit the 'Sabbath lamp' upon the table, a symbol of her duty and privilege to kindle the light of religion in her children. The conversation was largely of a religious character, the father getting the sons to read passages from the Law, and

asking and answering questions. He blessed bread and then wine (that is, blessed God for giving them), and gave to each a portion. By these and the like observances, and by reverence for God and respect for the Law manifested by pious parents, the children were fortified against what insidious influences there might be in other parts of their environment.

(2) 'I am a Tarsian, a citizen of a famous city,' said Paul proudly on an important occasion (Ac. xxi. 39; cp. xxii. 3). Tarsus was a large and prosperous city in Cilicia, situated on the Cydnus near its entrance to the Mediterranean, and at the foot of the famous pass through the Taurus mountains down which came the products of Asia Minor to the sea, and up which laboured trains of camels carrying treasures of the East towards Rome. It was a centre of that Greek civilisation which is represented to us by poets like Homer and Pindar, law-givers like Solon, dramatists like Aeschylus and Sophocles, philosophers like Plato and Aristotle, historians like Herodotus and Thucydides and politicians like Pericles and Themistocles. The civilisation which had been inspired by such men as these spread like a wave in the wake of Alexander's conquests till it reached the Euphrates. And Tarsus was one of its centres. It had a university whose fame rivalled the universities of Athens and Alexandria. Not only Greek literature and the Greek spirit were cultivated there, but Greek sports found their place, the games, the gymnasium and the palaestra. Intellectually and aesthetically Tarsus was a Greek city.

How far Saul was influenced by this factor in his

environment is difficult to say. He draws illustrations from the sports; he quotes two or three times from Greek poets; he occasionally uses words specially connected with the mysteries (though there is no evidence that mysteries were cultivated in Tarsus). But there is nothing here that could not be picked up by a quick-witted boy in a Greek city. When his critics described his speech or style as contemptible, and he himself referred to it as the style of 'a plain man' (2 Cor. x. 10; xi. 6), there is probably exaggeration on both sides. But the mental ability and intellectual grasp which Paul displays were probably due not to any education which he received at Tarsus, but to the long training which he enjoyed at the 'school of Gamaliel'.

(3) In the first century, some two-thirds of which were covered by Paul's life, the Mediterranean Sea might be looked on as a Roman lake. Anyone who sailed from Palestine to the Straits of Gibraltar had the Roman Empire on his right and on his left practically all the way. Towards the south the Roman dominion did not penetrate very far. But to the north it included the whole of Asia Minor and all Europe south of the Danube and west of the Rhine. It had even reached out to cover part of Britain. Westward it was bounded by the Atlantic, eastward by the Euphrates. It covered in fact 'The World as known to the Ancients'. As the British Empire is distributed in 'dominions', 'colonies', 'protectorates' and so forth, so the Roman was organised under various forms of administration, but the Imperial decrees operated in them all, and the dignity or distinction of Roman citizenship was recognised in them all.

It gave exemption from torture and from certain forms of punishment; it gave the right of appeal to the Emperor; but it was mainly valued as a dignity, conferring a certain status in society. It could be obtained by inheritance, or by purchase (Ac. xxii. 28) or conferred for public service. Those who had it called themselves 'Romans', and it is evident from Acts xvi. 21, 38 and xxii. 25–29 in what respect they were held. This dignity was Paul's, having come to him, we must suppose, by inheritance. That means that his father too must have been a man of position, probably of some wealth.

Until very near the end of life Paul had no reason to be ashamed of his Roman citizenship or to make any general criticism of Roman administration. This accounts for his assertion that 'the powers that be [at the moment of his writing] are ordained of God,' and his advice that everyone should acknowledge their authority (Ro. xiii. 1). It accounts also for the passage in 2 Thessalonians (ii. 6, 7) where 'he that restraineth' is the Roman Emperor or Empire. Paul would have written differently if he had survived the Neronian persecution. As known to him the Roman administration of subject peoples was severe but just. From time to time these peoples suffered from the rapacity of venal governors. But the general policy of the Empire was to maintain public order at all costs. Turbulence and sedition were put down ruthlessly, but in their absence the people were allowed to maintain their own language, customs and religion. The Jewish people in particular enjoyed special favour from the Government, to which they

commended themselves by their industry and general high standard of morals.

Concerning Saul's family it may be assumed that his father was a man of good position and some wealth, and we know that he had a sister living in Jerusalem whose son, Saul's nephew, had access to army headquarters at Jerusalem (Ac. xxiii. 16).

There is no sufficient material for ascertaining the date of Saul's birth. The general opinion has been that it took place two or three years before the birth of our Lord. If, as is probably the case, the date of his birth must be pushed back to 4 or 5 B.C., the birth of Saul would occur in 7 or 8 B.C. This would make him over sixty when he wrote Philemon (and spoke of himself as an old man) and over seventy when he died. It was probably at a fairly early age, sixteen or eighteen, that he left Tarsus, and went to Jerusalem to enter the school or college of Gamaliel.

(4) 'I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees' (Ac. xxiii. 6; cf. xxvi. 5; Phil. iii. 5). The second clause suggests what is otherwise probable, that it was at his father's wish and at his father's expense that he left home for Jerusalem. He desired his son to adhere to the same type of Judaism as himself, but also that he might enjoy what he possibly lacked, thorough training in the ancestral Law (Ac. xxii. 3), according to the system of the Pharisees. Even as a Christian Paul is not ashamed of having been a Pharisee, a member of that school of thought or religious party. He had no need. We have to put away the old notion that all the Pharisees were hypocrites in the sense that we give to the word, men

who covered their badness with the cloak of religion. No doubt there were such among them, but there were not a few who were good, some who might be called noble—according to their lights. It was the 'lights' that were wrong. Hypocrites in the modern sense of the word are very rare nowadays. In Christ's sense of the word they are only too common. For by 'hypocrite' he means one who allows his punctilious observance of religious duties and ritual to make him *blind* on moral issues, *blind* to the moral demands which God makes upon him. Paul as a Christian would have been the first to admit that he had been a hypocrite in this sense.

'I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up here in Jerusalem, at the feet of Gamaliel, thoroughly trained in our ancestral Law, a devoted worshipper of God as are you all.'

When we next meet Saul (Ac. viii. 1) he is a man a little over thirty years of age 'consenting to the murder' of Stephen. That 'the witnesses' had laid their garments at his feet is an indication that they recognised him as the leader of the fanatical crowd (no doubt largely composed of Pharisees) who were guilty of this crime (cp. Ac. xxii. 20; xxvi. 10).

'The time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service' (Jo. xvi. 2). Already the disciples at Jerusalem were to learn the truth of the Master's warning. A fierce persecution broke out, and Saul was the leader of it. 'He ravaged the Church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison' (Ac. viii. 3; cp. xxii. 4; xxvi. 9–11; Gal. i. 13). When there seemed no further scope