

# "ACTS AND THE PAULINE EPISTLES"

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by  
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The agreement depicted in Ac. between Paul on the one hand and Peter and James on the other on the basic principles of the Gospel was regarded by the Tübingen school of critics of last century<sup>1</sup> as a sure mark of the late and unhistorical character of the book. Reading the four Pauline epistles whose genuineness they admitted (Gal., Rom., 1 and 2 Cor.) in the light of the Hegelian dialectic interpretation of history, with its pattern of thesis, antithesis and synthesis, they recognized in Ac. the synthesis, the latest stage, belonging to the latter half of the second century. The thesis and antithesis were represented by Peter and Paul, who violently opposed one another, Paul advocating complete liberty from the Jewish law, Peter insisting on its continued observance by Gentile believers as well as Jews. Obviously, if this interpretation of history were true, Ac. must be unhistorical, but in truth the picture of events in these four Pauline epistles must be equally unhistorical. While in Gal. Paul insists that he received the Gospel and his commission to preach it direct from God, and through no human mediation, in 1 Cor. xv. 11 he equally insists that the Gospel he preached was essentially the same as that preached by the original Apostles. This is implied even in Gal., the epistle which seemed to those critics to lend most colour to their theory; when Peter, John and James gave Paul and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship (Gal. ii. 9), there was no hint of any difference in the substance of the preaching, the only difference in question relating to the respective mission-fields which each group was to serve. Paul pronounces a solemn and repeated anathema on any who should preach a different Gospel from that which he preached (Gal. i. 8 f.), but he says nothing to imply that the Jerusalem Apostles were liable to his anathema.

The picture of Peter in Gal. accords well with the one we find in Ac., and both differ from the fictitious Peter of Tübingen imagination. According to Gal. ii. 11 ff., Peter's personal conviction, like Paul's, was that no distinction should be made, even socially, between Jewish and Gentile believers. In Antioch, 'before certain people came from James, he ate with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself—not because he had changed his convictions, but 'fearing those of the circumcision'.

But what had happened previously to convince Peter, orthodox Jew, that there was nothing wrong in eating with Gentiles? We find the explanation in Ac. x., where we read how he had learned not to call common what God had cleansed. Peter's action at Antioch was a lapse, and it is evident that Paul's rebuke had its effect, for we find him maintaining true Christian liberty in Ac. xv.

Besides maintaining that the writer of Ac. made Peter too Pauline, the Tübingen critics also insisted that he made Paul too Petrine, in his attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable. The Paul who in Ac. accepts the decisions of the Apostolic Council, circumcises Timothy, and undertakes to perform a rite in the Temple to calm those who were alarmed at rumours of his rejection of all ritual obligations—this Paul was, to them, far removed from the uncompromising controversialist of Gal. Is the Paul of Ac. really the Paul of the Epistles? In Gal. we must remember that Paul was dealing in white-hot urgency

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1 E. g. F. C. Baur, A. Schweigler, E. Zeller.

with a situation which threatened the very foundations of the Gospel. For the Paul of the Epistles, outward acts in themselves were neither good nor bad, except as the intention made them so. The truly emancipated man is not in bondage to his liberty. If he wishes for certain proper purposes to perform a ritual act not sinful in itself he will do so, not as under an obligation, but freely. If meat offered to idols is set before him, and there is no risk of causing offence to others by eating it, he will eat it and give God thanks; to him an idol is nothing in the world. If expediency demands that a half-Jew be circumcised for his greater usefulness in the Gospel, Paul will circumcise him; in such a case circumcision is simply a minor surgical operation performed for a practical purpose. But the more narrow type of mind will never grasp the difference between doing such things freely and doing them as religious obligations with a view to securing divine favour. To them Paul's behaviour appears as rank inconsistency. So it appeared to his Judaizing and other opponents in his own day; so it has appeared to many Biblical critics in more recent times, and they have therefore dubbed Ac. unhistorical. An apostle must not be inconsistent! But the consistency which some expect from Paul is that 'foolish consistency' which Emerson called 'the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines';<sup>2</sup> for such a consistency little minds will search the life of Paul in vain, for his was pre-eminently a great mind. On the great basic principles of Christianity he was uncompromising; where these were not affected he was the most adaptable of men. He circumcised Timothy, but solemnly warned the Galatian Christians against the practice. Why? Because *they* were being taught to regard it as necessary to complete their salvation, and such an attitude would bring them into bondage to rites and ceremonies, away from the liberty with which Christ had made them free.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, one who ate meat offered to idols with consciousness of the idol might violate his conscience in so doing; let him therefore refrain. But one to whom the meat was just a piece of meat like any other and to whom the idol meant nothing at all might eat freely; though the grace of Christ would lead him to refrain if another's conscience might be injured by his eating. Paul himself endeavoured to be in Jerusalem for various festivals, and associated himself with purificatory rites; yet he challenges the Galatians: 'You observe days and months and seasons and years' (Gal. iv. 10). The difference lay in the intention; they were acting in such a way as to lose the very liberty of which Paul availed himself. Paul's real attitude to such matters is given in Rom. xiv. 5 f.:

'One man regards one day above another; another judges every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind. He who regards the day, regards it unto the Lord; and he who eats, eats unto the Lord, for he thanks God; and he who does not eat, unto the Lord he does not eat, and thanks God.'

In his attitude to the Jews, the Paul of Ac. is also the Paul of the Epistles. It is the Paul who repeats in Rom., 'To the Jew, first, and also to the Greek', who in Ac. visits the synagogues first in city after city, and who in Pisidian Antioch declares to the envious Jews: 'It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first'. It is the Paul who suffers so much from Jewish hostility in Ac. who can speak of the Jews in 1 Th. ii. 15 f. as those 'who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and have

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- 2 'Essay on Self-Reliance', *Works* (Bohn), i, 24. Cf. the remarks of Foakes Jackson: 'This charge of lack of consistency is a delight to men of limited intelligence, who desire some one whom they can understand, and will always say exactly what they expect of him. As they cannot find such a man in Paul, his utterances often appear to them to be illogical. But this is not because he is really inconsistent, for no one held to great principles more consistently, but because of his exceptional breadth of view, and his power of seeing that there is more than one side to every question' (*Life of St. Paul*, p. 15).
- 3 But even in Gal., he insists that circumcision in itself is immaterial (v. 6); only when performed as a religious act does it carry with it the obligation to do the whole law. Cf. 1 Cor. vii. 18 f., *μη ἐπισπάσθω*, which evidently means that converted Jews, like Paul himself, need not cease to observe ancestral customs (cf. Ac. xxi. 21, 24).

persecuted us, and do not please God, and are contrary to all men, forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles, that they should be saved'. It is also the Paul who in Ac. refuses to stop offering the Gospel to his brethren according to the flesh in spite of all his bitter experiences at their hands, who in Rom. ix. 2f. tells of his great sorrow and unceasing anguish of heart at their refusal to receive the Gospel, and is willing himself to be accursed, if only his heart's desire and prayer to God for their salvation be accomplished.

The Paul who in Ac. labours with his hands in Corinth and Ephesus, and bids the Ephesian elders learn a lesson from him in this respect, is the Paul who in the Epistles shows the same example and teaches the same lesson to the Thessalonians and Corinthians.<sup>4</sup>

The Paul who in Ac. can adapt himself so readily to Jew and Gentile, learned and unlearned, Areopagus and Sanhedrin, synagogue audience and city mob, Roman governor and King Agrippa, is the Paul who speaks in 1 Cor. ix. 19 ff.:

'For though I am free from all, I have made myself the slave of all, that I might win the more. To the Jews I was as a Jew, that I might win the Jews; to those under the law, as under the law (not being myself under the law), that I might win those under law; to those without law, as without law (not being without law towards God, but under the law of Christ), that I might win those without law; to the weak I was weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, that by all means I might save some.'

The Paul who in Ac. is God's 'chosen vessel' to bear His Name before the Gentiles claims in the Epistles to have been divinely set apart, even from birth, for this very purpose (Ac. ix. 15; Gal. i. 15 f.; Rom. i. 1 ff.).

It is plain that the narrative of Ac. is in no way dependent on what can be gleaned from the Epistles about the course of events during the 30 years it covers. Luke may have seen Paul's letters, but if he did, he has successfully concealed all knowledge of them. An author writing in later years, when the Epistles were in more general circulation among the churches, would almost certainly have availed himself of such first class evidence.

Yet Ac. and the Epistles throw considerable light on each other. We can read several of the Epistles with greater understanding because Ac. gives us some account of the founding and progress of the churches to which they were written. We understand the references to Apollos in 1 Cor. the better for our introduction to him in Ac. We are better informed about the Gentile collection for the Jerusalem believers by combining the information of Ac. and the Epistles than we should be if we had only one or the other of these sources of information; as it is, the references in the one throw light upon those in the other.

When comparing the historical information which we can gather from the Epistles with the narrative of Ac. we meet several difficulties—not, however, insuperable. If we compare the account of Paul's conversion and its sequel in Ac. ix. with Paul's own narrative in Gal. i., we find that Luke gives in greater detail what Paul passes over briefly (the actual conversion), whereas the events of the following three years and the first Jerusalem visit are given with much more explicitness by Paul. Luke mentions no visit to Arabia, nor does he explain that the only apostles whom Paul saw in Jerusalem were Peter and James the Lord's brother. These details were important for Paul's argument in Gal.; Luke passes

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4 Cf. Ac. xx. 33-35, with notes *ad loc.* For the agreement between the Pauline epistles and the Pauline speeches in Ac. see further pp. 20 f. and the Commentary *passim*.

over them in general terms—*ἡμέρας τινάς* (Ac. ix. 19), *ἡμέραι ἰκαναί* (ix. 23), *τοῖς μαθηταῖς* (ix.26), *τοὺς ἀποστόλους* (ix. 27). The escape in the basket is related by Paul in 2 Cor. xi. 32 f., where he represents the danger as coming from the ethnarch of Aretas; Luke says it came from the Jews. Judging from later experiences, we need not be surprised if Paul's Jewish opponents enlisted the co-operation of non-Jews against him.

The correspondence of the Jerusalem visits of Ac. and Gal. is a vexed question. The view taken in this Commentary is that the visit of Gal. ii. 1 ff. is the visit of Ac. xi. 30. The purpose of the visit—famine-relief—is hinted at in Gal. ii. 10; Paul's statement (Gal. ii. 2) that he went up by revelation is explained by the prophecy of Agabus in Ac. xi. 28. The third visit (Ac. xv.) is not mentioned in Gal., and this can best be explained if this visit had not been paid at the time when Gal. was written. Otherwise, it is amazing that Paul should make no mention of the Apostolic Decree, which would have afforded the most convincing support to his argument. It follows that Gal. must have been addressed to South Galatian churches, and is the earliest of Paul's extant epistles. This view is that adopted by Ramsay,<sup>5</sup> F. C. Burkitt,<sup>6</sup> C. W. Emmet,<sup>7</sup> G. S. Duncan,<sup>8</sup> A. W. F. Blunt,<sup>9</sup> and at one time by K. Lake.<sup>10</sup> Prof. Lake, however, in his later works,<sup>11</sup> has adopted the view first expounded by J. Wellhausen<sup>12</sup> and E. Schwartz,<sup>13</sup> that the visits of Ac. xi. and xv. are really one and the same. Schwartz argued further that the missionary journeys following each of these visits were also one and the same, Luke having found in different sources two variant traditions of the same series of events and failed to realize that they referred to the same events. This view is unnecessarily complicated, to say nothing of its unflattering implications for Luke's intelligence.<sup>14</sup> Apart from this consideration, we prefer the correspondence mentioned above, and accept the Apostolic Council as historical.<sup>15</sup> The situation in which it met is outlined on pages 287 ff.

For the movements of Paul and his companions during the second missionary journey, we have some first-hand information from 1 Th. iii. 1-6. This agrees substantially with what we find in Ac. xvii. 14-xviii. 5; such differences as there are arise from the omission and addition of different details by the two authors. For the sequence of events, which we can reconstruct from a comparison of both sources, see on xvii. 14.

From the Corinthian epistles we can derive much information (though not so much as we should like) about the period xviii. 18-xx. 3, which is passed over rapidly by Luke. It is clear from these epistles that Paul's relations with the church at Corinth during his stay at Ephesus were marred by trouble of various

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5 *SPT*, pp. xxii, xxxi, 54 ff.; *The Teaching of Paul*, pp. 372 ff.

6 *Christian Beginnings*, pp. 116 ff.

7 Commentary on Gal. in Reader's Commentary series; *BC* ii, pp. 265 ff.

8 Commentary on Gal. in Moffatt Commentary series.

9 Commentaries on Ac. and Gal. in Clarendon Bible series.

10 *EEP*, pp. 297 ff.

11 *BC*; *Introduction to the New Testament*

12 *Nachrichten d. kgl. Gesellschaft d. Wissenschaften zu Göttingen*, 1907 pp. 1 ff.

13 *Ib.* pp. 263 ff.

14 R. Eisler combines acceptance of the Wellhausen-Schwartz reconstruction with vindication of Luke's accuracy by supposing a subsequent dislocation of the text of Ac. The original order he supposes to have been: xi. 25 f.; xiii. 1-xv. 2; xi. 27-30; xv. 3-33; xv. 34; xii. 25; xii. 1-24; xv. 35-41 (*Enigma of the Fourth Gospel* [1938], p. 80). This re-arrangement will probably meet with as much approval as most of Dr. Eisler's theories.

15 See also W. L. Knox, *The Acts of the Apostles* (1948), pp. 40 ff., where much the same conclusion is reached.

kinds, of which Ac. gives no hint. Timothy's visit to Macedonia in Ac. xix. 22 is possibly referred to in 1 Cor. iv. 17; xvi. 10, but belongs more probably to a somewhat later period. Paul expresses his intention of following him in 1 Cor. xvi. 5 f. His intention of wintering in Corinth may have been fulfilled in his three months' stay there (Ac. xx. 3). But we gather from 2 Cor. xii. 14; xiii. 1 f., that the visit of Ac. xx. 2 f. was at least Paul's third visit to Corinth. He must therefore have paid a second visit some time previously in the course of his Ephesian ministry, probably after the writing of 1 Cor., the sorrowful visit implied in 2 Cor. ii. 1.<sup>16</sup>

There are various indications in the Corinthian epistles that Paul's life was in peculiar danger at times during his residence in Ephesus (cf. 1 Cor. xv. 30-32; 2 Cor. i. 8 ff.). The only hint of danger given by Luke is the story of the riot in the theatre (Ac. xix. 23 ff.), but Paul's words seem to imply greater peril than was apparently involved in the riot. Some scholars whose names carry weight<sup>17</sup> have argued for an Ephesian imprisonment (or more than one), during which the 'Captivity Epistles' may have been written. It is not unlikely that Phil. was written at this time;<sup>18</sup> in that case Phil. ii. 19 must be linked with Ac. xix. 22; Phil. ii. 24 with Ac. xx. 1. As for Col., Phm. and Eph., they are more probably to be assigned to the Roman captivity. Luke's scanty account of the Ephesian ministry seems to indicate that he was not with Paul during those years; we know, however, that he went to Rome with Paul, and was with him when Col. and Phm. were written.

Paul's statement in Ac. xxiv. 17 that he came to bring alms and offerings to his nation is illuminated by the references to the Gentile collection for the Jerusalem believers (1 Cor. xvi. 1 ff.; 2 Cor. viii. 1-ix. 15; Rom. xv. 25 ff.). These references also explain why so many representatives of Gentile churches accompanied Paul on his last visit to Jerusalem; we may reasonably infer that they went as delegates bearing the contributions of their respective churches. In this as in several other respects the Epistles and Ac. supplement and explain each other.<sup>19</sup>

In short, after a comparison of this nature our verdict on Ac. may be pronounced in the words of F. C. Burkitt:

'But when we come to test it by the Letters of Paul we find it to be historical, not fabulous; it is a real guide to us, even for the earliest period' (*Christian Beginnings*, p. 144).

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16 For this period see W. Sanday's art. on 'Corinthians' in *Enc. Bib.*; J. H. Kennedy, *The Second and Third Epistles to the Corinthians*; K. Lake, *EEP*, pp. 117 ff.; G. S. Duncan, *SPEM*, pp. 165 ff.; T. W. Manson, 'St. Paul in Ephesus', in *BJRL*, xxiii (1939), pp. 182 ff.; xxiv (1940), pp. 59 ff., xxvi (1941-2), pp. 101 ff., 327 ff.

17 Especially A. Deissmann in *Anatolian Studies presented to Sir W. M. Ramsay* (1932), pp. 121 ff.; W. Michaelis, *Die Gefangenschaft des Paulus in Ephesus* (1925); G. S. Duncan, *SPEM*.

18 See J. H. Michael's commentary on Phil. in the Moffatt Commentary series.

19 On the subject of 'undesigned coincidences' between Ac. and the Epistles, W. Paley's *Horæ Paulinae*, first published in 1790, may still be consulted with profit.