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The Origin of Paul's Religion

Introduction (Part 5)

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It would be out of place in the present connection to dis-cuss the question of the genuineness of the Pastorals. That question is indeed enormously important. It is important for the view which is to be held concerning the New Testament canon; it is important for any estimate of Christian tradition; it is important even for a complete estimate of the work of Paul. But it is not directly important for the question as to the origin of Paulinism; for all the essential features of Paul-inism, certainly all those features which make Paulinism, upon naturalistic principles, most difficult of explanation, appear plainly in the accepted epistles.

The question of the Book of Acts, on the other hand, is of vital importance even for the present investigation. Even that question, however, must here be dismissed with a word, though it is hoped that light may be shed upon it by the whole of the following discussion.

Literary evidence of peculiar strength may be adduced in favor of the view that the Book of Acts was really written, as tradition affirms, by a companion of Paul. This evidence is based primarily upon the presence in the book of certain sections where the narrative is carried on in the first person instead of the third. It is generally or even universally ad-mitted that these "we-sections" are the work of an eyewitness, an actual traveling companion of Paul. But according to the common-sense view-according to the first impression made upon every ordinary reader—the author of the we-sections was also the author of the whole book, who when he came in his narrative to those parts of the missionary journeys of Paul where he had actually been present with the apostolic company naturally dropped into the use of the first person instead of the third. If this common-sense view be incorrect, then a later author who produced the completed book has in the we-sections simply made use of an eyewitness source. But this hypothesis is fraught with the most serious difficulty. If the author of the completed book, writing at a time long after the time of Paul, was in the we-sections using the work of a companion of Paul, why did he not either say that he was quoting or else change the "we" of the source to "they." The first-person plural, used without explanation by a writer of, say, 100 A.D. in a narrative of the journeys of Paul, would be preposterous. What could be the explanation of so extraordinary a procedure?

Only two explanations are possible. In the first place, the author may have retained the "we" with deceitful intent, with the intent of producing the false impression that he himself was a companion of Paul. This hypothesis is fraught with insuperable difficulty and is generally rejected. In the second place, the author may have retained the "we" because he was a mere compiler, copying out his sources with mechanical accuracy, and so unable to make the simple editorial change of "we" to "they." This hypothesis is excluded by the striking similarity of language and style between the we-sections and the rest of Luke-Acts, which shows that if the author of the completed double work is in the we-sections making use of a source written by someone else, he has revised the source so as to make it conform to his own style. But if he revised the source, he was no mere compiler and therefore could not have retained the first-person plural which in the completed book produced nonsense. The whole hypothesis therefore breaks down.

Such considerations have led a number of recent scholars—even of those who are unable to accept the supernaturalistic account which the Book of Acts gives of the origin of Christianity-to return to the traditional view that the book was actually written by Luke the physician, a companion of Paul. The argument for Lucan authorship has been developed with great acumen especially by Von Harnack.[1] And on the basis of purely literary criticism the argument is certainly irrefutable. It can be refuted, if at all, only through a consideration of the historical contents of the book. Such attempts at refutation have not been lacking; the Lucan authorship of Acts is still rejected by the great majority of those who maintain the naturalistic view of the origin of Christianity. The objections may be subsumed under two main heads. The Book of Acts, it is said, is not the kind of book that could have been written by a companion of Paul, in the first place because it contains an account of miracles, and in the second place, because it contradicts the Pauline Epistles, particularly in the account which it gives of the relations between Paul and the Jerusalem Church.

The former objection is entirely valid on the basis of any naturalistic account of the origin of Christianity. Efforts have indeed been made by Von Harnack, C. C. Torrey, and others, to overcome the objection. Belief in miracles, said, was very general in the ancient world; a miraculous interpretation could therefore be placed upon happenings for which the modern man would have no difficulty in discovering a natural cause. Luke was a child of his time; even in the we-sections, Von Harnack insists, where the work of an eyewitness is universally recognized, a supernaturalistic interpretation is placed upon natural events—as, for example, when Paul excites the wonder of his companions by shaking off into the fire a viper that was no doubt perfectly harmless. Why, then, should the

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[1] *Lukas der Arzt*, 1906 (English Translation, *Luke the Physician*, 1907): *Die Apostelgeschichte*, 1908 (English Translation. *The Acts of the Apostles*, 1909); *Neue Untersuchungen zur Apostelgeschichte und zur Abfassungszeit der synoptischen Evangelien,* 1911 (English Translation, *The Date of the Acts and of the Synoptic Gospels*, 1911).

presence of the supernatural in the rest of the book be used to refute the hypothesis of the Lucan authorship, if it is not so used in the we-sections?[2]

This method of refuting the objection drawn from the presence of the supernatural in Luke-Acts has sometimes led to a curious return to the rationalizing method of interpretation which was prevalent one hundred years ago. By that method of interpretation even the details of the New Testament miracles were accepted as historical, but it was thought that the writers were wrong in regarding those details as miraculous. Great ingenuity was displayed by such rationalists as Paulus and many others in exhibiting the true natural causes of details which to the first observers seemed to be supernatural. Such rationalizing has usually been thought to have received its death-blow at the hands of Strauss, who showed that the New Testament narratives were either to be accepted as a whole miracles and all—or else regarded as myths, that is, as the clothing of religious ideas in historical forms. But now, under the impulsion of literary criticism, which has led away from the position of Baur and Strauss and back to the traditional view of the authorship and date of the New Testament books, the expedients of the rationalizers have in some cases been revived.

The entire effort of Von Harnack is, however, quite hope-less. The objection to the Lucan authorship of Acts which is drawn from the supernatural element in the narrative is irrefutable on the basis of any naturalistic view of the origin of Christianity. The trouble is that the supernatural element in Acts does not concern merely details; it lies, rather, at the root of the whole representation. The origin of the Church, according to the modern naturalistic reconstruction, was due to the belief of the early disciples in the resurrection of Jesus; that belief in turn was founded upon certain hallucinations in which they thought they saw Jesus alive after His passion. In such experiences, the optic nerve is affected not by an external object but by the condition of the subject himself. But there are limitations to what is possible in experiences of that sort, especially where numbers of persons are affected and at different times. It cannot be supposed, therefore, that the disciples of Jesus thought they had any extended intercourse with Him after His passion; momentary appearances, with possibly a few spoken words, were all that they could have experienced. This view of the origin of the Church is thought to be in accord with the all-important testimony of Paul, especially in 1 Cor. xv. 3-8 where he is reproducing a primitive tradition. Thus desperate efforts are made to show that the reference by Paul to the burial of Jesus does not by any means confirm the accounts given in the Gospels of events connected with the empty tomb. Sometimes, indeed, in recent criticism, the fact of the empty tomb is accepted, and then explained in some naturalistic way. But at any rate, the cardinal feature of the modern reconstruction is that the early Church, including Paul, had a spiritual rather than a physical conception of the risen body of Jesus; there was no extended intercourse, it is supposed; Jesus appeared to His disciples momentarily, in heavenly glory.

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[2] Harnack, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, 1908, pp. 111-130 (English Translation. *The Acts of the Apostles*, 1909, pp. 133-161).

But this entire representation is diametrically opposed to the representation in the Gospel of Luke and in the Book of Acts. If there is any one writer who emphasizes the plain, physical character of the contact between the disciples and their risen Lord, it is the author of Luke-Acts. In proof, it is only necessary to point to Acts x. 41, where it is said that the risen Jesus held table-companionship with His disciples after He was risen from the dead! But that is only one detail. The author of Acts is firmly convinced that the contact of the risen Jesus with His disciples, though not devoid of mysterious features, involved the absence of the body of Jesus from the tomb and an intercourse (intermittent, it is true, but including physical proofs of the most definite kind) extending over a period of forty days. Nothing could possibly be more directly contrary to what the current critical view regards as the real account given in the primitive Jerusalem Church and by the apostle Paul.

Yet on the basis of that modern critical view, Von Harnack and others have maintained that the book in which so false an account is given of the origin of the Church was actually the work of a man of the apostolic age. It is no wonder that Von Harnack's conclusions have evoked an emphatic protest from other naturalistic historians. Luke was a close associate of Paul. Could he possibly have given an account of things absolutely fundamental in Paul's gospel (1 Cor. xv. 1-8) which was so diametrically opposed to what Paul taught? He was in Jerusalem in 58 A.D. or earlier, and during years of his life was in close touch with Palestinian disciples. Could he possibly have given an account of the origin of the Jerusalem Church so totally at variance with the account which that church itself maintained? These questions constitute a complete refutation of Von Harnack's view, when that view is taken as a whole. But they do not at all constitute a refutation of the conclusions of Von Harnack in the sphere of literary criticism. On the contrary, by showing how inconsistent those conclusions are with other elements in the thinking of the investigator, they make only the more impressive the strength of the argument which has overcome such obstacles. The objection points out the antinomy which exists between the literary criticism of Von Harnack and his naturalistic account of the origin of Christianity. What that antinomy means is merely that the testimony of Acts to the supernatural origin of Christianity, far from being removed by literary criticism, is strongly supported by it. A companion of Paul could not have been egregiously mistaken about the origin of the Church; but literary criticism establishes Luke-Acts as the work of a companion of Paul. Hence there is some reason for supposing ing that the account given in this book is essentially correct, and that the naturalistic reconstruction of the origin of Christianity must be abandoned.

The second objection to the Lucan authorship of Acts is based upon the contradiction which is thought to exist between the Book of Acts and the Epistles

of Paul.[3] The way to test the value of a historical work, it is said, is to compare it with some recognized authority. With regard to most of the narrative in Acts, no such comparison is possible, since there is no account parallel to Acts by which it may be tested. But in certain places the Book of Acts provides an account of events which are also narrated in the isolated biographical parts of the Pauline Epistles— notably in the first two chapters of Galatians. Here at last is found the long-sought opportunity for comparison. And the comparison, it is said, results unfavorably to the Book of Acts, which is found to contradict the Epistle to the Galatians, not merely in details, but in the whole account which it gives of the relation between Paul and the Jerusalem Church. But if the Book of Acts fails to approve itself in the one place where it can be tested by comparison with a recognized authority, the presumption is that it may be wrong elsewhere as well; in particular, it is quite impossible that a book which so completely misrepresents what happened at a most important crisis of Paul's life could have been written by a close friend of the apostle.

This argument was developed particularly by Baur and Zeller and their associates in the "Tübingen School." According to Baur, the major epistles of Paul constitute the primary source of information about the apostolic age; they should therefore be interpreted without reference to any other source. When they are so interpreted, they show that the fundamental fact of apostolic history was a conflict between Paul on one side and the original apostles on the other. The conflict, Baur maintained further, is particularly plain in the Epistles to the Galatians and Corinthians, which emphasize the complete independence of Paul with reference to the pillars of the Jerusalem Church, and his continued opposition to the efforts of Jewish Christians to bring the Gentiles into subjection to the Jewish Law-efforts which must have been supported to some extent by the attitude of the original apostles. This conflict, Baur supposed further, continued up to the middle of the second century; there was a Gentile Christian party appealing to Paul and a Jewish Christian party appealing to Peter. Finally however, Baur continued, a compromise was effected; the Pauline party gave up what was really most distinctive in the Pauline doctrine of justification, while the Petrine party relinquished the demand of circumcision. The New Testament documents, according to Baur, are to be dated in accordance with the position that they assume in the conflict; those documents which take sides-which are strongly anti-Pauline or strongly anti-Petrine are to be placed early, while those which display a tendency toward compromise are to be placed late, at the time when the conflict was being settled. Such was the "tendency-criticism" of Baur. By that criticism the Book of Acts was dated well on in the second century, because it was thought to display a tendency toward compromise an "irenic tendency." This tendency, Baur supposed, manifested itself in the Book of Acts in a deliberate falsification of history; in order to bring about peace between the Petrine and the Pauline parties in the Church, the author of Acts attempted to

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[3] For what follows, compare "Jesus and Paul," in *Biblical and Theological Studies* by the Members of the Faculty of Princeton Theological Seminary, 1912, pp. 553f.; "Recent Criticism of the Book of Acts,' in *Princeton Theological Review*, xvii, 1919, pp. 593-597.

show by a new account of the apostolic age that Peter and Paul really were in perfect agreement. To that end, in the Book of Acts, Paul is Petrinized, and Peter is Paulinized; the sturdy independence of Paul, which actually kept him long away from Jerusalem after his conversion, gives place, in Acts, to a desire of contact with the Jerusalem Church, which brought him early to Jerusalem and finally led him even to accept for his Gentile converts, at the "Apostolic Council," a portion of the ceremonial law. Peter, on the other hand, is represented in Acts as giving expression at the Apostolic Council to Pauline sentiments about the Law; and all through the book there is an elaborate and unhistorical parallelism between Peter and Paul. The theory of Baur did not long maintain itself in its entirety. It received a searching criticism particularly from A. Ritschl. The conflict of the apostolic age, Ritschl pointed out, was not a conflict between Paul and the original apostles, but between all the apostles (including both Paul and Peter) on the one side, and an extreme Judaizing party on the other; that conflict did not continue throughout the second century; on the contrary, specifically Jewish Christianity soon ceased to be influential, and the legalistic character of the Old Catholic Church of the end of the second century, in which Christianity was conceived of as a new law, was due not to any compromise with the legalism of the Judaizers but to a natural process of degeneration from Paulinism on purely Gentile Christian ground.

The Tübingen dating of the New Testament documents, moreover, has been abandoned under a more thorough investigation of early Christian literature. A study of patristics soon rendered it impossible to string out the New Testament books anywhere throughout the second century in the interest of a plausible theory of development. External evidence has led to a much earlier dating of most of the books than Baur's theory required. The Tübingen estimate of the Book of Acts, in particular, has for the most part been modified; the book is dated much earlier, and it is no longer thought to be a party document written in the interests of a deliberate falsification of history.

Nevertheless, the criticism of Baur and Zeller, though no longer accepted as a whole, is still influential; the comparison of Acts and Galatians, particularly in that which concerns the Apostolic Council of Acts xv, is still often thought to result unfavorably to the Book of Acts. Even at this point, however, a more favorable estimate of Acts has been gaining ground. The cardinal principle of Baur, to the effect that the major epistles of Paul should be interpreted entirely without reference to the Book of Acts, is being called in question.

Such a method of interpretation, it may well be urged, is likely to result in one-sidedness. If the Book of Acts commends itself at all as containing trustworthy information, it should be allowed to cast light upon the Epistles. The account which Paul gives in Galatians is not so complete as to render superfluous any assistance which may be derived from an independent narrative. And as a matter of fact, no matter what principles of interpretation are held, the Book of Acts simply must be used in interpreting the Epistles; without the outline given in Acts

the Epistles would be unintelligible.[4] Perhaps it may turn out, therefore, that Baur produced his imposing reconstruction of the apostolic age by neglecting all sources except Galatians and the Corinthian Epistles-and then by misinterpreting these.

The comparison of Acts and the Pauline Epistles will be reserved for the chapters that deal with the outline of Paul's life. It will there be necessary to deal with the vexed question of the Apostolic Council. The question is vital for the present discussion; for if it can really be shown that Paul was in fundamental disagreement with the intimate friends of Jesus of Nazareth, then the way is opened for supposing that he was in disagreement with Jesus Himself. The question raised by Baur with regard to the Book of Acts has a most important bearing upon the question of the origin of Paulinism.

All that can now be done, however, is to point out that the tendency at the present time is toward a higher and higher estimate of the Book of Acts. A more careful study of the Pauline Epistles themselves is exhibiting elements in Paul's thinking which justify more and more clearly the account which the Book of Acts gives of the relations of Paul to Judaism and to Jewish Christianity.

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[4] J. Weiss, *Urchristentum*, 1914, p. 107: "It is simply impossible for us to erase it [the Book of Acts] so completely from our memory as to read the Epistle to the Galatians as though we had never known Acts; without the Book of Acts we should simply not be able to understand Galatians at all."