

The Origin of Paul's Religion

The Triumph of Gentile Freedom (Part 1)

By John Gresham Machen

After the conversion, according to the Book of Acts, Paul received the ministrations of Ananias and was baptized.¹ These details are not excluded by the Epistle to the Galatians. In the Epistle, Paul says that after God had revealed His son in him he did not confer with flesh and blood;² but the conference with flesh and blood which he was concerned to deny was a conference with the original apostles at Jerusalem about the principles of the gospel, not a conference with humble disciples at Damascus. An over-interpretation of Galatians would here lead almost to absurdity. Is it to be supposed that after the conversion Paul refused to have anything whatever to do with those who were now his brethren?

In particular, is it to be supposed that he who afterwards placed baptism as a matter of course at the beginning of the new life for every Christian should himself not have been baptized? The Epistle to the Galatians does not mention his baptism, but that omission merely illustrates the incompleteness of the account. And if the baptism of Paul, which certainly must have taken place, is omitted from Galatians, other omissions must not be regarded as any more significant. The first two chapters of Galatians are not intended to furnish complete biography. Only those details are mentioned which were important for Paul's argument or had been misrepresented by his Judaizing opponents.

After God had revealed His son in him, Paul says, he went away into Arabia. Apparently this journey to Arabia is to be put very soon after the revelation, though the construction of the word "immediately" in Gal. i. 16 is not perfectly clear. If that word goes merely with the negative part of the sentence, then nothing is said about the time of the journey to Arabia; Paul would say merely that in the period just after the revelation of God's Son he did not go up to Jerusalem. There would then be no difficulty in the assertion of Acts which seems to put a stay in Damascus with preaching activity in the synagogues immediately after the baptism. This interpretation is adopted by a number of modern commentators, not only by B. Weiss and Zahn, who might be suspected of a bias in favor of the Book of Acts, but also by Sieffert and Lipsius and Bousset. Perhaps more naturally, however, the word "immediately" in Galatians is to be taken grammatically with the positive part of the sentence or with the

¹ Acts' ix. 10-19; xxii. 12-16.

² Gal. i. 16.

whole sentence; the sentence would then mean, "Immediately, instead of conferring with flesh and blood or going up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, I went away into Arabia and again I returned to Damascus." Even so, however, there is no real contradiction with Acts. When Paul tells what happened "immediately" after the revelation he is thinking in terms not of days but of journeys. The very first journey after the conversion—and it took place soon— was not to Jerusalem but to Arabia. When taken in the context the sentence does not exclude a brief preaching activity in Damascus before the journey to Arabia. Grammatically the word "immediately" may go with the positive part of the sentence, but in essential import it goes rather with the negative part. What Paul is really concerned about is to deny that he went up to Jerusalem soon after his conversion.

The Book of Acts does not mention the journey to Arabia and does not make clear where it may be inserted. Sometimes it is placed in the middle of Acts ix. 19, before the words, "And he was with the disciples in Damascus some days." In that case the discussion about the word "immediately" in Gal. i. 16 would be unnecessary; that word could be taken strictly with the positive part of the sentence without contradicting the Book of Acts; the journey to Arabia would have preceded the preaching activity in Damascus. Or the journey may be placed before Acts ix. 22; it would then be the cause of the greater vigor of Paul's preaching. Finally, it may be placed simply within the "many days" of Acts ix. 23. The phrase, "many days," in Acts apparently is used to indicate fairly long periods of time. It must be remembered that the author of Acts is not concerned here about chronology; perhaps he did not trouble himself to investigate the exact period of time that elapsed before the journey to Jerusalem. content merely to record the fact that before Paul went to Jerusalem he engaged for a considerable time in preaching in the Damascus synagogues. Certainly he must here be acquitted of any attempt at subserving the interests of harmony in the Church by a falsification of history. It is generally recognized now, against the Tübingen contentions, that if the author of Acts contradicts Galatians, his contradiction is naïve rather than deliberate; the contradiction or apparent contradiction at least shows the complete independence of his account. He is not deliberately shortening up the time before Paul's first conference with Peter in the interests of a compromise between a Pauline and a Petrine party in the Church; if he had had the "three years" of Paul before him as he wrote he would have had no objection to using the detail in his history.

But investigation of the chronology did not here seem to be important. The detail of the three years was vastly important for Paul's argument in Galatians, where he is showing that for a considerable period after the conversion he did not even meet those from whom he was said to have received his gospel, but it was not at all important in a general history of the progress of the Church.

The extent of the journey to Arabia, both geographically and temporally, is entirely unknown. "Arabia" included not only very remote regions but also a

territory almost at the gates of Damascus; and all that may be determined about the length of the Arabian residence is that it was less than three years. Possibly Paul remained only a few weeks in Arabia. In that case the omission of the journey from the general narrative in Acts is very natural. The importance of Arabia in Paul's argument is due simply to the fact that Arabia was not Jerusalem; Paul mentions the journey to Arabia simply in contrast with a journey to Jerusalem which he is excluding in the interests of his argument. The only thing that might seem to require a considerable stay in Arabia is the narrative of Paul's first Jerusalem visit in Acts ix. 26-30; the distrust of Paul displayed by the Jerusalem Christians is more easily explicable if after his conversion he had been living for the most part in a region more remote than Damascus from Jerusalem. A similar consideration might possibly suggest that in Arabia Paul was engaged in meditation rather than in missionary activity; he had not yet become so well known as a preacher that the Christians of Jerusalem could begin to glorify God in him, as they did a little later. Possibly also there is an implied contrast in Gal. i. 16, 17 between conference with the original apostles and direct communion with Christ; possibly Paul means to say, "Instead of conferring with flesh and blood in Jerusalem, I communed with the Lord in Arabia." Despite such considerations, the matter is by no means perfectly clear; it is perfectly possible that Paul engaged in missionary work in Arabia. But at any rate, even if that view be correct, he also engaged in meditation. Paul was never a mere "practical Christian" in the modern sense; labor in his case was always based upon thought, and life upon doctrine.

The escape of Paul from Damascus just before his first visit to Jerusalem is narrated in Acts ix. 23-25 and in 2 Cor. xi. 32, 33. The mention of the ethnarch of Aretas the Nabatean king as having authority at or near Damascus causes some difficulty, and might not have passed unchallenged if it had been attested by Acts. But as a matter of fact, it is just this detail which appears, not in Acts, but in an epistle of Paul.

The first visit of Paul to Jerusalem after the conversion is described in Acts ix. 26-30; xxii. 17-21; Gal. i. 18, 19. In itself, the account in Acts bears every mark of trustworthiness. The only detail which might seem surprising is that the Jerusalem Christians would not at first believe that Paul was a disciple; must not a notable event like the conversion of so prominent a persecutor have become known at Jerusalem in the course of three years? But if Paul had spent a large part of the three years in Arabia, whence news of him could not be easily obtained, the report of his conversion might have come to seem like a remote rumor; the very fact of his withdrawal might, as has been suggested, have cast suspicion upon the reality of his conversion. Emotion, moreover, often lags behind cold reasoning; the heart is more difficult to convince than the mind. The Jerusalem Christians had known Paul only as a cruel and relentless persecutor; it was not so easy for them to receive him at once as a brother. This one detail is a pression which is made by the Lucan account of the visit as a whole. The chief objection to the account is usually found in a comparison with what Paul himself

says in Galatians. In itself, the account is natural; but does it agree with Paul's own testimony? One apparent divergence may indeed soon be dismissed. In Acts ix. 27 it is said that Paul was introduced to "the apostles," whereas in Gal. i. 19 it is said that Paul saw only James, the brother of the Lord (who was not among the Twelve), and Peter. But possibly the author of Acts is using the term "apostle" in a sense broad enough to include James, so that Paul actually saw two "apostles"—Peter and James—or else the plural is used merely in a generic sense to indicate that Paul was introduced to whatever representative or representatives of the apostolic body may have happened to be present.

Much more weight is commonly attributed to an objection drawn from the general representation of the visit. According to Acts, Paul was associated publicly with the Jerusalem disciples and engaged in an active mission among the Greek-speaking Jews; according to Galatians, it is argued, he was in strict hiding, since he did not become acquainted personally with the churches of Judea (Gal. i. 22). But the objection, as has already been observed, depends upon an over-interpretation of Gal. i. 22. Whether or no "Judæa" means the country in sharp distinction from the capital, in either case all that is necessarily meant is that Paul did not become acquainted generally with the Judæan churches. The capital may well have formed an exception. If Paul had meant in the preceding verses that he had been in hiding in Jerusalem he would have expressed himself very differently. Certainly the modern representation of the visit is in itself improbable. The picture of Paul entering Jerusalem under cover of darkness or under a disguise and being kept as a mysterious stranger somewhere in a secret chamber of Peter's house is certainly much less natural than the account which the Book of Acts gives of the earnest attempt of Paul to repair the damage which he had done to the Jerusalem Church. It is very doubtful whether concealment of Paul in Jerusalem would have been possible even if Paul had consented to it; he was too well-known in the city. Of course this last argument would be answered if, as Heitmüller and Loisy suppose, Paul had never been in Jerusalem at all, even as a persecutor. But that hypothesis is faced by absolutely decisive objections, as has already been observed.

The whole modern representation of the first visit, therefore, is based solely upon a very doubtful interpretation of one verse, and is in itself highly unnatural. Surely it is much more probable that the real reason why Paul saw only Peter and James among the leaders was that the others were out of the city, engaged in missionary work in Judæa. Their presence in the churches of Judæa would explain the mention of those churches in Gal. i. 22. Paul is indicating the meagerness of his direct contact with the original apostles. The churches of Judæa would become important in his argument if they were the scene of the apostles' labors. Against a very doubtful interpretation of the account in Galatians, which brings it into contradiction with Acts, may therefore be placed an entirely consistent interpretation which, when the account is combined with Acts, produces a thoroughly natural representation of the course of events.

Paul says nothing about what happened during his fifteen-day intercourse with Peter. But it is highly improbable, as even Holsten pointed out, that he spent the time gazing silently at Peter as though Peter were one of the sights of the city.³ Undoubtedly there was conversation between the two men, and in the conversation the subject of the life and death of Jesus could hardly be avoided. In the Epistle to the Galatians Paul denies, indeed, that he received his gospel from men. But the bare facts about Jesus did not constitute a gospel. The facts were known to some extent to friend and foe alike; Paul knew something about them even before his conversion and then increased his knowledge through intercourse with the disciples at Damascus. The fifteen days spent in company with Peter could hardly have failed to bring a further enrichment of his knowledge.

In 1 Cor. xv. 3-7, Paul gives a summary of what he had "received"-the death, burial, resurrection, and appearances of Jesus. The vast majority of modern investigators, of all shades of opinion, find in these verses a summary of the Jerusalem tradition which Paul received from Peter during the fifteen days. Undoubtedly Paul knew some if not all of these facts before he went to Jerusalem; the facts were probably common property of the disciples in Damascus as well as in Jerusalem. But it is inconceivable that he should not have tested and supplemented the tradition by what Peter, whose name stands first (1 Cor, xv. 5) in the list of the appearances, said in Jerusalem. Recently, indeed, an attempt has been made by Heitmüller to represent the tradition as being derived merely from the Christian communities in Damascus or Antioch, and at best only indirectly from Jerusalem; these communities are thus interposed as an additional link between Paul and the Jerusalem Church.⁴ But the very purpose of the passage in 1 Corinthians is to emphasize the unity of teaching, not between Paul and certain obscure Christians in Hellenistic communities, but between Paul and the "apostles." "Whether therefore," Paul says, "it be I or they, so we preach and so ye believed" (1 Cor. xv. 11). The attempt at separating the factual basis of the Pauline gospel from the primitive tradition shatters upon the rock of 1 Corinthians and Galatians. In Galatians, Paul says he was in direct intercourse with Peter, and in 1 Corinthians he emphasizes the unity of his teaching with that of Peter and the other apostles.

After leaving Jerusalem Paul went into the regions of Syria and of Cilicia; the Book of Acts, more specifically, mentions Tarsus (Cilicia) and Antioch (Syria). The period which Paul spent in Tarsus or in its vicinity is for us altogether obscure. In all probability he engaged in missionary work and included Gentiles in his mission. Certainly at the conclusion of the Cilician period Barnabas thought him suitable for the specifically Gentile work at Antioch, and it is probable that he

³ Holsten, op. cit., p. 118, Anm.: "Aber natürlich kann in dem ictopio Knä nicht liegen, Paulus sei nach Jerusalem gegangen, um den Petrus fünfzehn tage lang stumm anzuschauen. Die beiden männer werden miteinander über das evangelium Christi geredet haben."

⁴ Heitmüller, "Zum Problem Paulus und Jesus," in *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*, xiii, 1912, pp. 320-337, especially p. 331.

had already demonstrated his suitability. His apostolic consciousness, also, as attested both by the Book of Acts and by Galatians, suggests that the beginning of his life-work as apostle to the gentiles was not too long deferred.

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