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The "Exceptional Case" of Cornelius.

THE reception of Cornelius and his friends into the Christian Church was possibly the most important event in its history after it had once started on its career of world-conquest. This may seem a strong statement ; and certain references in the writings of recent Commentators may seem to contradict such a view. So Professor Ramsay writes twice as follows :—" The main question was not yet definitely settled ; only *an exceptional case* was condoned and accepted " ; and (with reference to Titus, whose circumstances are compared to those of Cornelius) " once more they seem to have acquiesced in *an exceptional case*, as they did in that of Cornelius."¹ Similarly Professor Knowling—" The case of Cornelius had been acquiesced in, *but it was exceptional.*"²

It is important to note that such references, especially in their context (which we have not space to quote), do not of necessity imply that these learned expositors believe the case of Cornelius was actually a mere exception. It is quite possible that they may only be speaking of the attitude of the circumcision party towards it—of the Judaistic claim which was in all probability made, that it was an exception and not a precedent. If so, one may indeed be permitted to wish that they had made their meaning less open to doubt ; but for reasons presently to be stated, it would seem difficult to believe they would maintain such a Jewish claim to be valid. A passage from an older Commentary may exactly supply the link we need. The late Dean Plumptre suggested that to the objectors " it may have seemed *the exception that proved the rule.*" They may have felt that signs and wonders were evidence that God had in such cases dispensed with His own law, or that while it was right to receive men to baptism under such conditions, circumcision must follow, as being an " everlasting covenant."³

Some such position is quite likely to have been adopted by the Judaistic party. There is nothing whatever to be said from

¹ " St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen," Sixth Edition, pp. 44, 58. The italics in this and the succeeding quotations are of course ours.

² " Expositor's Greek Testament," on Acts xv. 1.

³ Dean Plumptre in Bishop Ellicott's " Commentary for English Readers," on Acts xv. 1.

Scripture, however, for the view that Cornelius could be regarded as an exceptional case, even without its possible Jewish additions on the lines suggested just above. And as it is a matter which does not merely concern a long dead controversy, but is vital to the whole Christian position, it is well worth our attention. The following grounds are suggested as indicating that the case of Cornelius was not merely not exceptional, but was positively pivotal to the whole course of Church History.

1. St. Luke framed the Acts upon an obvious system. Certain events are selected for record to the exclusion of all others. And they are selected upon a principle. No one has shown more conclusively than Professor Ramsay how acute is Luke's historical sense, and how skilful (if one may use the word of an inspired writing) is his selection of such events. Generally they are typical of other events that must continually have occurred in many places; and always they have some bearing on the development of the Divine plan for world-evangelization. And St. Luke is never prolix. Where he is unexpectedly lengthy, as, e.g., in the record of Stephen's speech, everything is found on examination to be exactly adapted for its purpose. And when so much has to be omitted, he certainly has no room for needless repetitions.

Now consider the account of Cornelius. It is unique in the whole book in these respects. Not only does it, with its sequel, occupy more than a chapter and a half, or sixty-six verses in all, but the decisive vision in the matter of clean and unclean is positively twice told in full, besides an allusion in x. 28. There are only two instances (unless we add the case of Stephen, another great crisis, just mentioned) which really compare with this. The account of St. Paul's trials and journeyings occupies much more space: but after all they formed a long series of events and occupied a considerable time, whereas the case of Cornelius was a single occurrence; though we are not going to under-estimate the significance of xxi. 17—xxviii. 31. The conversion of St. Paul, again, is thrice told, as against the double account of St. Peter's vision: and that conversion was another great turning-point. It is perhaps difficult to say whether the conversion of St. Paul or of Cornelius was the more important, because each was of supreme importance in its own sphere, and because they belong to different sides of the same great development. Acts ix. brings on the scene the Apostle of

the Gentiles: Acts x. shows us their first-fruits. At all events St. Luke, with his careful historic sense, may fairly be said to assign to Cornelius a position of unique prominence.

2. Nor does his conversion stand in isolation: it is related to a chain of events. We might, indeed, make that chain a long one, by including all the closely woven events of the whole book. But we will take five links now, of which Cornelius is the second. Before him comes the Ethiopian, and afterwards the converts at the greater Antioch, the Roman governor at Paphos, and the separation from the Jews at Antioch in Pisidia. It seems at first tempting to take the first three alone, as marking respectively the baptism of the first full proselyte connected with a heathen country,¹ the first of the class known as *σεβόμενοι*, and the first downright heathen (reading "*Ἑλληνας* with R.V. in xi. 20). But it is by no means certain that the reading in the last case should not be *Ἑλληνιστὰς* after all: Professor Knowling makes out a strong case for it in his critical note. And even if *Ἑλληνας* be right, it need not mean representatives of the outer circle of heathendom. Such converts might well be of the "God-fearing" class like Cornelius. And, in fact, this seems to be the general view. If we were to argue that the narrative implies a new stage of progress, and therefore makes it probable they were heathen of the outer circle, it would not be sufficient. For it may have been intended merely to describe the constitution of the Church of Antioch in view of its importance in future developments.² There is also a difficulty about the Ethiopian. While Ramsay seems sure he was a regular proselyte, Lightfoot and Knowling (quoting also apparently Hort) think he belonged to the same class as Cornelius, and they support their conclusion by reasoning which appears at least to demand recognition.³ So that it is quite possible that all three of the first links we have mentioned relate to *σεβόμενοι*, and that the first convert from the outer heathen world was Sergius Paulus in Cyprus. In

¹ In any event Nicolas had been received before (vi. 5); and perhaps a full proselyte was not so widely separated from a born Jew as to demand special recognition of the class. See, however, Schürer, "History of Jewish People," ii. ii. 326, as to the gulf between them. And the baptism of a proselyte from distant heathenism might be considered to possess a significance not attaching to that of a proselyte connected with the Church at Jerusalem, like Nicolas.

² See Knowling, "Expos. G.T." *in loc.*

³ Ramsay, "St. Paul," p. 377 (cp. 375); Lightfoot "Ep. to Gal." pp. 300-1; Knowling, "Expos. G.T." Acts viii. 27.

fact, the prominence given to this event confirms the probability that the converts at Antioch were of the "God-fearing" class. At the same time no great controversy would be stirred, perhaps, by a single convert, even though a distinguished one, in Cyprus: and the real climax probably comes in our fifth link (xiii. 46), when at Pisidian Antioch St. Paul boldly declares to the opposing Jews, "Lo, we turn^s to the Gentiles" (τὰ ἔθνη).

These conclusions, to which we seem to have been driven, may appear to affect adversely any inference as to the prominence of Cornelius in the chain of events. If we could be sure that he and his company were the first of the *σεβόμενοι* to be received into the Church, it would make their baptism more obviously significant; for, as uncircumcised, they would stand in relation to the covenant in the same position as the outer heathen themselves. But in any event their case would be the first one likely to stir controversy. The Ethiopian, if he belonged to the same class, was far away—perhaps sowing the seed of the Church in distant Africa.¹ And if the climax did not come till later—whether at Antioch (where it certainly came to a head in xv. 1, 2, if it did not first arise in xi. 20), or in Cyprus, or in Pisidia—the Rubicon was crossed with the admission of uncircumcised persons. If one might argue *a priori*, the fitness of things might seem to require that Cornelius and his friends were actually the first of these. But if we are forced to conclude that the Ethiopian preceded them—which perhaps after all we are not—then the special emphasis laid on Cornelius must signify that this at any rate marked *the real crisis*.

3. Certain isolated expressions confirm this. "They that were of the circumcision" criticized Peter, who convinced them by relating exactly what had happened at Cæsarea. And what were their words on that occasion? "They held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then hath God *also to the Gentiles* granted repentance unto life" (xi. 18). τοῖς ἔθνεσιν—not τοῖς σεβομένοις τὸν θεόν: and the καὶ intensifies the surprise expressed. Plainly they at first accepted—and to all appearances joyfully and thankfully accepted—the position as we have represented it. And this may seem, at first sight, to contradict the theory that even the Judaizers could argue that it was an exceptional case. But we must re-

¹ See Knowling, "Expos. G.T." Acts xi. 3, for other reasons which may have distinguished Cornelius from the Ethiopian.

member that *οἱ ἐκ περιτομῆς* in Acts xi. 2 may not involve quite the same sinister meaning as it bears in Gal. ii. 12.¹ Moreover, others may have refused to accept their verdict; or they themselves may subsequently have been argued out of it; or as we saw before, they may have supposed circumcision would follow. At any rate the first Jewish opinion was that the marvellous fact had been duly certified in this notable case—salvation for *the Gentiles*, the word being general and inclusive, even if it was tacitly assumed there would be more or less observance of the law. That is to say, Cornelius was regarded as *the critical Gentile precedent*.

Again, at the Jerusalem Council St. Peter clearly had Cornelius in mind, as a crucial case; and apparently St. James alluded to it in that light in his decisive address (xv. 7-8, 14). And both of them, like the Jews in chap. xi., employ the word *ἔθνη*.²

The only apparent difficulty is the extraordinary behaviour of Peter at Antioch after all the convincing evidence of the vision at Joppa and the "second Pentecost" at Cæsarea. All that need be said, however, is that such conduct was all too typical of Peter! As we have his fellow-apostle's strong condemnation of his action, it serves in reality yet further to confirm the main conclusion.

And, as we have ventured to use the term "second Pentecost" with reference to the great events at Cæsarea, it may be said in conclusion that, while there is no direct Scriptural sanction for such a term, the phrase "as on us at the beginning" (xi. 15; cp. 17) is strongly suggestive. Pentecost, of course, was a supreme event which in one sense was incapable of repetition; but it may well have been the Divine purpose to manifest before unimpeachable witnesses (and especially before the leading apostle of the circumcision) that the Holy Ghost had now been given to Gentiles as before to Jews, and that they were intended to understand this as the beginning of a new stage in the Divine plan, for which the chief instrument was by Divine providence, yet unknown to them, forthcoming in the converted Saul.

¹ See Knowing's note, "Expos. G.T.," Acts xi. 2.

² It seems incredible, partly for this very reason, that Peter laid it down in x. 35 (as Ramsay says in "St. Paul," p. 43) that Cornelius was accepted because he was one of the *φοβούμενοι* or *σεβόμενοι τὸν θεόν*. It is true that he had not then had the final evidence of the gift of the Holy Ghost; but he was speaking as the inspired messenger of God's will. At any rate the more general word used in Acts xv. without any limitation at a time of such crisis shows what his mature view of the case was.

Whether, therefore, the circumcision party tried to argue that Cornelius was an exception or not, nothing is plainer than that Scripture is framed with the very purpose of making that view untenable. And this, as we noted, is no mere matter of dry-as-dust controversy. It vitally concerns us all. For the reception of the Holy Ghost by that little company at Caesarea long ago is the charter for all ages of Christian liberty as against the fetters of ceremonial bondage.

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