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WAS ST. PAUL MARRIED?

It is admitted that this question is a matter of small importance. Whether St. Paul was married or unmarried does not alter our opinion of his character, detract from his self-denying labours, or affect the nature of his writings, though it may be affirmed that if St. Paul was married he could hardly have surmounted those obstacles which he encountered in his apostolic career, or have made such toilsome and dangerous journeys by sea and by land. But although the importance of the question is confessedly small, yet it is not devoid of interest. Everything that relates to the life of the greatest of the apostles must be interesting, and surely a point of such moment as to whether he ever entered upon the married state is deserving of consideration. The only possible doctrinal importance that can be attached to it is that it may possibly affect the question regarding the celibacy of the clergy, and more particularly the question whether missionaries, set apart to carry the Gospel of Christ into heathen countries, and especially those who must lead a wandering life, might not better remain unmarried, that question being one of prudence, not of obligation. If the celibacy of St. Paul be proved, the Roman Catholic Church might have used the fact as an argument in favour of their peculiar views regarding the celibacy of the clergy, were it not that such an argument would be far more than counterbalanced by the universally acknowledged fact that St. Peter, on whose confession their church was built, and whose successors the Roman pontiffs affirm themselves to be, was a married man.

Different opinions regarding this question have been entertained in the Christian Church. The affirmative answer that St. Paul was married has been adopted by several theologians, though it must be admitted that they

who do so are in a small minority. Among the Fathers, so far as I am aware, Clemens Alexandrinus stands alone in maintaining St. Paul's married condition. Luther, from his genial disposition and love of domestic life, cannot conceive of St. Paul otherwise than as a married man, exhibiting all the virtues of a family life. Ewald, a theologian of high distinction, but one of the most fanciful German critics, adopts the same opinion. "Perhaps," he observes, "St. Paul was then (at the martyrdom of Stephen) some thirty years of age, and was probably at that time already married, or was already a widower after an early marriage; for we may infer from plain induction that he had married in early life, but that when he had entered upon his high vocation as an apostle, he remained a widower." What these *plain indications* are Ewald does not mention, but refers to his *Sendschreiber des Apostels Paulus*; and, in turning to that book, we find that he draws the inference that St. Paul was a widower from the statements made in 1 Corinthians vii.

But the great advocate of St. Paul's married state is Dean Farrar. With Ewald he thinks that St. Paul before the martyrdom of Stephen was a married man, but that he had become a widower before he entered upon his great apostolic career. He assigns several reasons for this opinion. There are, he thinks, several statements pervading his Epistles which indicate that St. Paul must have been a married man. His loving spirit, his intense sympathy, his remarks on marriage, lead us to infer that he knew from experience the tenderness of human love, which can only be fully experienced in the married state. "The deep and fine insight of Luther," he observes, "had drawn the conclusion that Paul knew by experience what marriage was, from the wisdom and tenderness which characterize his remarks respecting it. One who had never been married could hardly have written on the subject as he

has done, nor could he have shown the same profound sympathy with the needs of all and received from all the same ready confidence." Certainly many commentators draw precisely the opposite conclusion: that St. Paul rather deprecates marriage, and in certain circumstances commends celibacy. Dean Farrar also dwells on the high importance assigned to marriage among the Jews: that they regarded it almost as a moral obligation, and greatly favoured early marriages; so that the extreme probability is that St. Paul, who in early life was a strict observer of the customs of the Jews, would also embrace their views on this subject. But it is very evident that all these statements are precarious reasons, and that no argument can be based on them. The importance of marriage among the Jews has been exaggerated; and it is generally agreed that among the twelve apostles St. John at least remained unmarried.

But the great argument which Dean Farrar adduces in favour of the married state of St. Paul is derived from the fact that according to him it is plainly intimated, if not asserted, that St. Paul was a member of the Jewish Sanhedrim, taken in connexion with the assumption that it was essential that every one who was so should be married. The passage on which this statement is founded is Acts xxvi. 10, where we read: "I both shut up many of the saints in prison, having received authority from the chief priests, and when they were put to death I gave my vote against them." The words *κατήνεγκα ψῆφον*, rendered in the Authorised Version "I gave my voice against them," and more correctly in the Revised Version "I gave my vote against them," denote, it is asserted, the vote of a judge. "*Κατήνεγκα ψῆφον* can hardly," says Alford, "be taken *figuratively*, as many commentators, trying to escape the inference that the *veavias* Saul was a member of the Sanhedrim; but must be understood as testifying to *this*

very fact, however strange it may seem. He can hardly have been *less than* thirty when sent on his errand of persecution to Damascus." The same interpretation of this verse has been adopted by Bishop Wordsworth, Dean Plumptre, and Dean Spence, all of them affirming that the most natural meaning of these words is that St. Paul was a member of the Sanhedrim, and that in this capacity he gave his vote for the death of Stephen and the other Christian martyrs. "It would seem," says Bishop Wordsworth, "that Saul himself had been a member of the Sanhedrim, and took part in its judicial proceedings by hearing cases and voting upon them." Dean Plumptre observes: "The words show that St. Paul, though a young man, must have been a member of the Sanhedrim itself or of some tribunal with delegated authority." And, as also Dean Spence remarks, "'I gave my vote against them': Not, as Meyer and others take it, 'I assented to it at the moment of their being killed,' equivalent to *συνευδοκῶν* of chapter xxii. 20; but rather, 'when the Christians were being punished with death I was one of those who in the Sanhedrim voted for their death.'"

It has further been assumed that according to the statements of the Rabbins the members of the Sanhedrim must be married men, because such were supposed to be less inclined to cruelty, and more influenced by merciful feelings. But although this is strongly insisted upon by Dean Farrar, yet those divines above mentioned, who admit that St. Paul was a member of the Sanhedrim, do not assert that they presuppose that he must have been a married man. Thus Alford, in expounding 1 Corinthians vii. 8, asserts, "There can be no doubt from this that St. Paul never was married." The assumption that it was an essential qualification of a member of the Sanhedrim that he must be married is doubtful, and is only mentioned by the later Rabbins, and even those rabbinical writers who are

quoted insist not so much on the married state of the member of the Sanhedrim as that he should have a family; and we may confidently affirm that this did not apply to the Apostle Paul.

The negative answer, that Paul never was married, is the opinion adopted by the large majority of those who have studied the subject. The Fathers are practically unanimous on this point. Tertullian, Jerome, Epiphanius, and Chrysostom assert that Paul was unmarried. The only dissentient view is Clemens Alexandrinus in a passage quoted by Eusebius. "Clement," he observes, "gives a statement of those apostles who had wives. . . . Paul does not hesitate, in one of his Epistles, to mention his own wife, whom he did not take about with him, in order to expedite the ministry the better" (*Hist. Crit.*, iii. 20); see also Clem. Alex., *Strom.*, iii. 6. But this statement of Clement rests on a false interpretation of the words of St. Paul. The passage to which he refers is generally supposed to be Philippians iv. 3, "I beseech thee also, true yokefellow, help those women, for they have laboured with me in the gospel." The idea that by "true yoke-fellow" (*συνήσιε σύζυγε*) St. Paul addresses his own wife is extravagant. The word is masculine; it is uncertain who is alluded to, but it is a man, and not a woman.

The words *κατήνεγκα ψήφον* do not, we think, assert or indicate that St. Paul was a member of the Sanhedrim, and that as a judge he gave his vote, but are to be taken metaphorically, which means that St. Paul approved of the death of the Christians, acquiesced in their death as an individual. At that time he was filled with such bitter hatred against the Christians that he fully coincided with the views of those who put them to death. The words denote merely approbation, not real participation. They are equivalent to *συνευδοκῶν τῇ ἀναίρεσει αὐτοῦ*, consenting to his death (*Acts* xxii. 20). "*ψήφον καταφέρειν*," observes Lechler, "literally

to lay down the voting stone, is, as little as the German word 'beistimmen,' originally signifying the same thing, to be understood literally of a vote given by a judge as lawful assessor of the court, but expresses only moral assent and approval."

It is impossible to suppose that St. Paul could be a member of such an august body as the Sanhedrim, which numbered among its members the most influential men in Jerusalem—the chief among the Jews—taken both from the sect of the Pharisees and from the sect of the Sadducees. The Sanhedrim was composed of Jewish aristocrats; it was a purely aristocratic body. Besides, at the death of Stephen St. Paul is stated to have been a young man (Acts vii. 58); he could hardly have been thirty; and the members of the Sanhedrim were men of mature years. Nor was St. Paul a stated resident in Jerusalem. It is true that he studied under Gamaliel, but he must have left the city after his educational course was finished, for it is almost certain that he was not there during the ministry of our Lord, and that he had never seen Christ in the flesh. It is extravagant to suppose that Paul, not a Hebrew, but a Hellenist by birth, a Jew of Tarsus, a comparative stranger in Jerusalem, and who does not appear to have belonged to any distinguished Jewish family, should at an early age take his seat among the high priests and principal men—the nobles of Judæa. It would be somewhat similar to an obscure foreigner, one who had lately come to London, being a member of the House of Lords. If, then, Paul was not, nor could have been, a member of the Jewish Sanhedrim, the chief reason insisted upon by Dean Farrar and others for affirming that Paul was married falls to the ground.

But especially, and what appears to decide the question, we have Paul's own declaration that he was unmarried. This statement occurs twice in the seventh chapter of First Corinthians—"I would that all men were even as myself,"

that is evidently unmarried. "But I say to the unmarried (τοῖς ἀγάμοις), it is good for them to abide even as I" (ὡς κἀγώ), unmarried (1 Cor. vii. 7, 8). These words appear to be plain and positive statements on the part of St. Paul that he was unmarried. Indeed, almost all admit that he had no wife when he wrote those words.

Dean Farrar, however, following Ewald, finds an argument even from these words of the apostle in favour of his marriage. He asserts that St. Paul here classes himself, not among those who had never married, but among widowers. His words are: "1 Corinthians vii. 8 seems a distinct inference that he classed himself among *widowers*, for he says, 'I say, therefore, to the *unmarried* and widows, it is good for them if they abide (μείνωσιν) even as I.' That by the 'unmarried' he here means 'widowers'—for which there is no special Greek word—seems clear, because he has been already speaking, in the first seven verses of the chapter, to those who have never been married." But this is a forced interpretation. *Ἀγάμοις* denotes the unmarried generally of both sexes, whether man or woman, without distinction: not simply widowers, as is evident from the contrasted term *γεγαμηκόσιν*. The additional clause *καὶ ταῖς χήραις* does not justify a restrictive rendering; it merely signifies that he gives this advice not merely to the unmarried, but also to those who once were married; and the advice is that in present circumstances they should remain even as he, that is, unmarried. There is not the slightest intimation, either in the history of the Acts or in the Epistles, leading us to infer that St. Paul was a widower. Thus, then, taking all the circumstances into account, and giving the most natural interpretation to the words of Scripture, we come to the definite conclusion, without much, if any dubiety, that the Apostle Paul was never married,—that he was a celibate.