

THE CONVERSION OF A PHARISEE

St Paul was one of many Pharisees who joined the new sect which was given the nickname of "Christians" at Antioch, and as we read the *Acts of the Apostles* and the Pauline Epistles we can get some idea of the mental anguish through which he and his fellow Pharisee converts had to pass before emerging into the light of the Faith. In some respects the agony of decision was intensified for the young man Saul; he was brought up in a well-to-do home in Tarsus, and Greek was his mother tongue, in which he learnt his school lessons as a boy. This early education apparently included some classics, for he quoted from them in his sermon on the Areopagus at Athens in later years. The political life he grew up in was that of the Roman Empire, for which he seems to have had a profound respect. Then as a young man he "goes up to the university", to study under Gamaliel at Jerusalem, where he becomes an enthusiastic Pharisee. The books of *Wisdom* and *Maccabees* would form part of his reading, and it is only in these later Jewish writings that anything like a lively faith in the reality of a future life is to be found—a dogma which the Pharisees taught clearly. So it is that St Paul in his own person unites those Hebrew, Greek, and Latin contributions to human culture which in the course of the centuries were to be the mark of Christendom in Western Europe. "I am debtor", he tells us, "both to the Greeks and to the barbarians (i.e. non-Greeks)".

This Greek element in his education, which would have been somewhat of a scandal in Maccabean circles a hundred years before, made it even more difficult for the young Pharisee to accept the notion of a crucified Messiah; he may have been thinking of his own conversion when he wrote of the Cross as a stumbling-block to the Jew and a laughing-stock to the Greek. On the other hand, that same humanist outlook gave him a point of intellectual contact with St Stephen, who was probably a Grecian-Jew or Hellenist; the young Pharisee from Tarsus might well have asked himself how such a man could possibly join himself to this new sect. One has to remember that Saul was an exceptionally able scholar; the Jerusalem Pharisees must have congratulated themselves that such a man was available in their fight against the new "heresy", and he for his part was willing enough to do his share. Now, that meant a careful study of what these Christians believed, just as today a Catholic Evidence speaker in Hyde Park must know something of Marxism. This study was the beginning of his undoing, for their Christian explanations of the Old Testament prophecies threw a new light on what he had known and studied so

thoroughly under Gamaliel. The question must eventually have cropped up whether, after all, there might not be something in such wild claims. The trial of St Stephen increased his forebodings ; here again were those new lights on the sort of Messiah the Scriptures foretold. Saul tries not to think ; he flings himself into action and is present at the stoning of the martyr, "consenting unto his death" : but in the depths of his soul Saul is struggling with his conscience, and in after years he will refer to this scene, for the impression it made on him was indelible.

The words of Our Lord to him on the Damascus road compelled him to face the facts—"It is hard to kick against the goad". No man likes to look a fool, nor did that young Pharisee Saul, with a successful career opening before him in the capital. The scholarly Anglican archdeacon Manning, suddenly seeing the light as he preached his last Anglican sermon in defence of his Anglican faith, must have felt his whole world falling about his ears as he made his way to the presbytery door. "A fool for Christ's sake" is the way St Paul himself describes his own feelings, and so would a modern Orangeman who in spite of all his upbringing had gradually come to see the hated Catholic Church from new angles and at last to accept as the Bride of Christ what he had imagined and believed to be the Scarlet Woman of the Apocalypse. What the stunned and sightless Saul suffered as he was led into Damascus we have to discover from those poignant passages scattered through his writings in which he reveals his undying love for the Jewry he was abandoning. After that vision of the risen Lord there could be for St Paul no half-way house of a Judaistic form of Christianity, such as was to be his bane on his missionary journeys when Judaisers dogged his steps to corrupt his converts.

Before the new convert was sent by the Church on his thirty years of missionary labours there was a three-years novitiate, which he spent partly in Arabia—one wonders where he stayed in that country of deserts—but mostly in Damascus. There was at least one visit to Jerusalem to meet St Peter ; how much we should like to have an account of those talks ! For St Paul there was the amazing story of his vision of the risen Lord, the turning point of his life, but for St Peter there was not only the account of the Public Ministry, but more—the sight of Jesus Christ at the Transfiguration as well as those appearances after the Resurrection. Finally, it would seem, St Paul goes back home to Tarsus, and one wonders what sort of a reception this young converted Pharisee, looked upon by his fellow Jews as a renegade, was likely to receive. However, here it was that Barnabas found him and put an end to this long novitiate by taking him into Christian circles at Antioch, where he was given his first commission—

to accompany Barnabas to Jerusalem with offerings for the distressed poor Christians there.

But let us go back a little. The fact that St Paul had been a Pharisee of the Pharisees meant that he was a theologian, and accepting Jesus as the Messiah raised many questions about the Old Testament which had to be met and answered by all Pharisees who became converts. St Paul with his outstanding intellectual endowments was just the man for the work, and we can see in his epistles, when he is treating of the Law of Moses and of his own fervent love for Israel, something of what he had been thinking over during those three years of seclusion.

Both Jew and Christian believed in and used the same Bible, the Old Testament scriptures; yet Pharisees, some of them very good men, had joined with their religious opponents, the Sadducees, in condemning Jesus for blasphemy. This must have been a real puzzle for men of good will in these early days. One partial explanation of the inability of those in authority to recognise Jesus as the Messiah was, surely, the contemporary tendency, while "soft-peddalling" in the expounding of those scriptural passages which told of a "Suffering Servant", to give prominence to the more welcome prophecies of a conquering Hero leading the Chosen People to a predominant place in the world. At first, indeed, the return from the Exile under Zorobabel seemed to promise some hope, as did the Maccabean revolt in later years, but both hopes turned out to be false dawns; and when St John the Baptist began his work the People of the Promise were still waiting for their Messiah. Certainly there was the Temple, in all the magnificence which the wealth of Herod could supply; but the Holy Land lay under the heel of Caesar, who in a few years' time was to sack the City and to demolish the Temple so thoroughly as not to leave one stone upon another—a most extraordinary thing for Rome to do, since she made a point of leaving freedom of religion to her conquered peoples. Furthermore, these convert Pharisees were more and more concerned at the worsening position of the Chosen People *vis-à-vis* the increasing Gentile element in the Church. Less and less attention seemed to be paid to the holy Law of Moses as the Faith attracted Gentiles who had never even heard of it. Well might one such convert Pharisee ask: "Has God cast off his people?" St Paul's letters (or rather treatises) to the Romans and Galatians, and especially the *Epistle to the Hebrews*, not only deny any such defeatism but convey his conviction that one day the veil shall be lifted from Jewish eyes, and in the Body of Christ they shall see their King in all his beauty, just as the psalmist had promised.

Remembering that St Paul and his fellow Pharisee converts had been doctors of the Law—theologians, as we should say today—it is obvious

that even while being scrupulous as to its minutiae they would tend to emphasise its total effect on the Jew's everyday spiritual life, and this is clear in such a psalm as Ps. CXXVIII, where the Law is regarded as the very sustenance of the pious Jew's soul. In other words, St Paul, whether in his Jewish days or later as the Apostle of the Gentiles, was interested in leading principles and ideas. Unlike the other Apostles, he probably had not known Our Lord during the Public Ministry, but even if he *had* mingled with the crowds and himself heard the Man who spake as never man before or since, those impressions of a preaching rabbi were absorbed and wellnigh forgotten after his vision of the risen Christ on the Damascus road. Henceforth it was the crucified and risen Messiah, the Church he had founded and still continued to be with and inspire, that filled St Paul's mind and fired his missionary zeal for the next thirty years. Yet throughout that long career he never forgot, but only turned to Christian usefulness, the theology he had learnt in the Jewish schools at Jerusalem. At times, lacking his background, we find his exposition of the Old Testament difficult to follow, as, for example, his use of allegory, which was quite usual in rabbinical circles and most acceptable to the Eastern mind, whereas the Western man feels that more is being argued out of the particular incident than is really there. St Paul, however, kept this allegorising well in hand, unlike Philo and some others, who drew most fantastic conclusions from Old Testament incidents, while St Paul used them rather as illustrations than as arguments. What is indeed surprising is the almost total lack in his Epistles of references to Our Lord's sayings during the Public Ministry. We know he knew them well, and he was able in his writings to the churches to take it for granted that these scattered congregations were well instructed in the Gospel story; and what is more, it was probably in his company, perhaps during the long stay in Rome, that his companion St Luke wrote his Gospel. Admittedly, most of St Paul's Epistles are in answer to questions and problems sent to him by his converts; but even so we feel he could often have driven a point home by an apt quotation from Our Lord's own words. But here again we have to remember that what St Paul is interested in is Christ living in His Church rather than in His sayings and doings in the days of His flesh; a present reality and support for Christians facing persecution and the opposition of their neighbours, and not merely a historical figure of the past. "Christ in you the hope of glory"—that is how St Paul sees it, the theology of the New Testament rather than the details of the everyday life of Jesus of Nazareth. The three Synoptic Gospels give the *facts*, but St Paul, like St John in the Fourth Gospel, is heart and soul concerned with their *significance*, for both are theologians.

With these thoughts in our mind we are able to understand some-

thing of what was in St Paul's mind when he wrote that difficult verse "*Et si cognovimus secundum carnem Christum, sed nunc iam non novimus*", words which the Knox version renders "Even if we used to think of Christ in a human fashion we do so no longer" (II Cor., v.16). It was all the result of the revelation on the Damascus road when the Christ asked him, "Why persecutest thou Me"? It came to him in a blinding lightning-flash that Christ and the Church at Damascus, which he intended to persecute, were one and the same. From that moment St Paul had the outline for the theological statement of the Mystical Body of Christ. Peter, Paul, Barnabas, and all other Christian folk, were not only distinct and distinguishable persons, but because of the Son's triumph in His Death and Resurrection they had all been caught up into a new unity which the living Christ was there to create and to maintain. Small wonder if the Apostle thought of Christ as MAN, the God-Man, rather than as a man; yet we should be wide of the mark if we thought that St Paul never meditated on what we now know as the Joyful Mysteries of the Rosary. There would never have been any centuries-old devotion to the Joyful, Sorrowful or Glorious¹ Mysteries of the beads unless there had first been a Christian theology to explain their significance. The self-styled mystic who rejects the Rosary as milk for babes will find no backing in the Pauline Epistles, where instead he will discover that the Apostle still believes that God is One God, a personal Being and not some vague pantheistic influence. What has happened is that his meditations on Jesus Christ have most wonderfully enlarged his conception of the Godhead; again and again in his epistles he breaks out into bursts of worship and thanksgiving as his mind dwells upon the three divine Persons in the One God, with their love for one another, and for the creation which resulted from that love, and he usually finishes with some such doxology as "The grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Ghost be with you all". Paul the Apostle finds God more majestic and yet more lovable than Saul the Pharisee had ever dreamt of. Perhaps the most notable of all these outbursts of awe, faith, and gratitude is the one he wrote to the Romans: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? . . . from the love of God which comes to us in Christ Jesus our Lord?"; but the whole of this wonderful eighth chapter is one long paean of praise of the divine love.

There was only one great grief to sadden St Paul's joy in his Lord, and that was the veil covering the eyes of his beloved Jewry; though

¹ Cp., e.g., a comment on II Cor., v.16, by St Ambrose, in Lesson IV of the Fifth Sunday after Easter: "And now we no longer know Christ according to the flesh, but we behold the benefits of this flesh, in that we know Him to be the first-fruit of them that sleep, the first-born of the dead".

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even here he thought it was merely a matter of time. But that time, after all these centuries, is not yet accomplished. He would have been sadder still could he have foreseen the blood-bath which was Israel's doom as those centuries unrolled, culminating in the wholesale massacres of the second world war. Nor would he have seen much hope in the new Israeli State of today, balanced on a razor-edge between triumph and disaster, and depending for its day-to-day existence on foreign doles ; a lay state in a world of lay states, holding a mere half of the Holy City and without any suggestion even of a re-building of the Temple. Yet even St Paul's hopes for Israel, like the hopes of the later Prophets, were centred on a faithful *remnant* rather than on the whole of Israel. It was, indeed, out of this remnant that the Catholic Church arose, which was the fulfilment of the prophecy, as the Apostle well knew ; but he seems to have believed that a further fulfilment of the prophecy about the "remnant" was to be expected in the future, when other Simeons and Annas would welcome the Christ in his Temple and more and more Pharisees become obedient to the Faith. To hasten that time, the Church is sparing no pains to present the Catholic Church to Israel in such ways as a pious Jew can best understand ; and Catholic charity to Israel in her modern sufferings has done much towards the creation of a better feeling between Jew and Christian.

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