

THE SOURCES OF ST. PAUL'S TEACHING.

VI. THE PREACHING OF ST. STEPHEN.

FOR a brief period of his life St. Paul must have been thrown into close contact with the first martyr of the Christian Church, not as a friend but as an opponent. That he was present at his martyrdom is asserted twice over in the Acts of the Apostles. "The witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. And they stoned Stephen. . . . And Saul was consenting (*συνευδοκῶν*) to his death" (Chap. vii. 58, 60) : and "When the blood of Stephen thy witness was shed I also was standing by, and consenting (*συνευδοκῶν*), and keeping the garments of them that slew him" (Chap. xxii. 20). From the expression *συνευδοκῶν* thus found in both accounts, together with the Apostle's words in Acts xxvi. 10, "When they were put to death I gave my vote against them," it is generally inferred that St. Paul was actually a member of the Sanhedrin, and that he was therefore present not merely at the martyrdom but also at the trial of St. Stephen, and recorded his vote against him, if indeed it is correct to speak of formal voting on that tumultuous occasion.

But even before the trial the two men must have met face to face, for if we consider the prominent position taken in this early persecution of the Christian Church by him who was afterwards the Apostle Paul, we shall feel that it is impossible to exclude him from among the number of "them of Cilicia" who "arose disputing with Stephen" (Acts vi. 9). The share which he took in the persecution is fully marked by the historian in Acts viii. 3 : "As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering into every house and haling men and women committed them to prison;" and in ix. 1, "Saul yet breathing out slaughter and threatening against the disciples," etc. It is alluded to by the

Apostle himself in no measured terms on more than one occasion (see Acts xxii. 4-6, 19, 20, xxvi. 9-11; 1 Corinthians xv. 9; Galatians i. 13, 14); and it would be strange indeed if he, who was thus "exceedingly mad," who "persecuted this way even unto the death," who went out of his way to "ask" a commission to Damascus, had not been the leading spirit and the spokesman in that disputation, when Stephen, perhaps for the first time, unfolded before the enraged Jews all that was wrapped up in the letter of the Old Testament, and taught them the full truths of the Gospel. It is impossible that the memory of this strange episode can have wholly passed away. It could not be put out of sight, like a bad dream: and the allusions made to it in after life by the Apostle himself stand as evidence that it was never forgotten. Did it, then, have no effect upon his teaching? Or was it not rather one of the chief instruments which God used in bringing to his feet him who was to "labour more abundantly" than all the rest of the Apostles? The words of our Lord spoken from heaven, when Saul of Tarsus lay prostrate on the road to Damascus, certainly seem to imply that there had already been a severe struggle against conviction. "It is hard for thee to kick against the goad" *must* signify that he was resisting and fighting against a truth which he was within but a little of seeing to be a truth. He had been worsted in argument as he disputed with Stephen, "unable to withstand the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake." As the witnesses laid their clothes at his feet, did his conscience prick him at the thought that he himself had "suborned" them (cf. vi. 11)? We cannot tell. But it has so often been seen that rage is "intensified by the unconscious rise of an irresistible conviction" that we have no hesitation in thinking that it was so in his case; and in believing that it was the dread of being persuaded, should he only calmly face the question at issue, which forced

him on into fresh bursts of fury against the Christians, and drove him forth on that journey to Damascus. And when he had yielded, and had given himself up heart and soul to the cause which he had once persecuted, there is so much of his teaching which is peculiar to him among the Apostles, and which yet reminds us of St. Stephen, that I cannot but feel that this series of papers would be incomplete without having a few pages devoted to the influence of the first martyr as one of the sources of St. Paul's teaching.

The substance of St. Stephen's preaching is nowhere related to us in the Acts. But it is easy to discover its main features from the accusation brought against him in Chapter vi. 13, as well as from the character of his apologetic speech in Chapter vii. It can hardly be accident that the charges brought against him and the Apostle Paul, with an interval of more than twenty years between them, should be precisely alike. Against St. Stephen they said, "This man ceaseth not to speak words against *this holy place, and the law.*" So, when the Jews from Asia laid hands upon the Apostle in the Temple, they cried out, "Men of Israel, help; this is the man that teacheth all men everywhere against the people, and *the law, and this place*" (Chap. xxi. 28). In each case the accusation was false, and yet founded upon a truth. The preaching of the Twelve, as shewn by St. Peter's speeches in the early Chapters of the Acts, consisted mainly of the announcement that Jesus was the Messiah. Others were looking for a Messiah still to come. According to the Twelve the Messiah *had* come. "He had suffered as was written of Him; He was to come again, as was written of Him also, to restore the kingdom to Israel, and Himself to reign over it. In the meanwhile Israelites were to repent of their sins and to love one another. This," it has been well said, "was all that the followers of Christ had as yet openly preached, and it was rather a purification than a

contradiction of the popular doctrine." ¹ It was true, but it was not the whole truth. The relation of the Old Covenant to the New, the position of the Law with regard to the Gospel, and the place to be taken by the Temple in the new economy, these were questions which pressed for solution, and to which no answers had hitherto been pointed out. And in the background, dim and undefined as yet, lay the great difficulty, destined to cause so much trouble to St. Paul hereafter, the difficulty of the relation of Jew and Gentile, and the exact position to be assigned to the latter. There is nothing to lead us to suppose that this last subject was definitely treated of by St. Stephen, but those other questions of the relation of the Law to the Gospel were resolutely faced by him. It was his attitude taken towards them, and the novelty of his teaching on these subjects, which drew upon him the hostility of the synagogue; and he stands before us as "the first who plainly set forth the transitory nature of the law and Temple as compared with the later and better covenant, thus being, in a remarkable manner the forerunner of St. Paul." ²

In view, then, of the fact that such doctrine formed a new point of departure in the history of the Church, we need not shrink from tracing its re-appearance in St. Paul's writings back to the teaching of St. Stephen as its original source. The seed soon sprang up, and the result is seen in the great argument of the Epistles to the Romans and Galatians, wherein is laid down with such wonderful power the position of the law, as a "schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ" (Gal. iii. 24), and as that from which the man who is in Christ is delivered, "in that he has died to that wherein he was held" (Rom. vii. 6). In this connexion there is no need to point to special passages as the outcome of St. Stephen's influence. It is rather *a whole line of*

¹ Simcox, "The Beginnings of the Christian Church," p. 20.
Dean Alford.

teaching, which appears to be due, in the first instance, to his exposition of the Gospel truth. Since we have no full report of his teaching, it is obvious that much must be matter of conjecture. Yet we know that the attitude taken up by the two men with regard to the legal system was regarded by their opponents as one and the same; and therefore we cannot be far wrong in the assertion that their teaching on this subject was really identical. Further, an historical connexion of some sort between the two teachers is a fact which there is no gainsaying; and, as the priority in time belongs to St. Stephen, it is making no large demands on our credulity if we are asked to believe that in this sense he was the master of St. Paul, and suggested germs of thought which in after years were to bear such rich fruits.

But there is one speech of St. Stephen of which a tolerably full report has reached us; and it is one at the delivery of which (as we have already seen) there is reason to believe that St. Paul was present. It remains, then, to compare this with the Apostle's speeches and writings. And the result of the comparison, it is believed, will be to shew that this speech sank deep into the heart of St. Paul, and that "even the very words and phrases of Stephen, to which he had listened so earnestly, appear to have been written upon his memory in letters of flame, so that he was haunted by them, involuntarily, to the last day of his life."¹

(1) The thirteenth Chapter of the Acts contains the account of St. Paul's first sermon on his earliest missionary journey, viz. that delivered in the synagogue at Antioch in Pisidia. It consists, in the main, of a concise retrospect of the national history of the Jews. It is evident that a speech of this character would be likely to win their attention, and gain for the speaker a patient hearing; and there-

¹ Lewin's "St. Paul," vol. i. p. 40.

fore too much stress must not be laid on the fact that just the same method of proceeding had been previously adopted by St. Stephen. The coincidence, however, is one which deserves notice, especially as such an historical summary is not found in any of St. Peter's speeches, in which it might have been expected, if this form had been one commonly used among the Jews, or if the speeches in the Acts were merely literary compositions due to the author of the book, and by him "put into the mouths" of the several speakers.

(2) Acts xxii. 1 as compared with vii. 2 contains a slight coincidence, in that St. Paul, in speaking at Jerusalem, before an audience somewhat similar to that which St. Stephen had addressed, claims a hearing in an introductory formula which is identical with that occurring in St. Stephen's speech. *ἄνδρες ἀδελφοὶ καὶ πατέρες, ἀκούσατε*, being the opening words in each case.

(3) Turning from the form and character to the matter of the speech, we next notice that St. Stephen lays a marked stress on the faith of Abraham, and that he dwells on God's dealings with him *before* the institution of the covenant of circumcision. A revelation to him in Mesopotamia is first mentioned, even "before he dwelt in Haran." Then his hearers are reminded that it was God who removed him from thence into the holy land, and who "promised that he would give it to him in possession, and to his seed after him, when as yet he had no child." Not till after all this are we told that "he gave him the covenant of circumcision." It is in close accordance with this that St. Paul, in his Epistle to the Romans, insists on the fact that Abraham's faith was reckoned unto him for righteousness when he was "not in circumcision, but in uncircumcision" (see the whole passage, Romans iv. 9-22, and compare Galatians iii. 7); so that his teaching on this subject is but the legitimate development of that of the protomartyr.

(4) We now come to instances of *verbal* agreement, which

are more solid than that alluded to above (No. 2). "The law," we are told by St. Paul in Galatians iii. 19, "was *ordained through angels* (*διαταγείς δι' ἀγγέλων*) by the hand of a mediator." The angels who assisted at the giving of the law are mentioned by Josephus and Philo, and are said to hold an important place in the later rabbinical speculations. The mediator also is a common title given to Moses in Jewish works.¹ But by far the closest parallels in any writing to the words of St. Paul are to be found in the speech of St. Stephen as reported by St. Luke. Acts vii. 53, "Ye who received the law as it was *ordained by angels* (*εἰς διαταγὰς ἀγγέλων*), and kept it not," and compare verse 38, where it is said of Moses that "this is he that was in the church in the wilderness with the angel which spake to him in the mount Sinai, and with our fathers: who received living oracles to give unto us." Thus in both points, (*a*) the part taken by angels, and (*b*) the position of Moses as a mediator, the Apostle is anticipated by the Deacon.

(5) Acts vii. 48 contains the following passage: "The Most High dwelleth not in houses made with hands (*οὐχ ὁ ὑψιστος ἐν χειροποιήτοις κατοικεῖ*); as saith the prophet, The heaven is my throne, and the earth the footstool of my feet: what manner of house will ye build me? saith the Lord: Or what is the place of my rest? Did not my hand make all these things?" Who can fail to recognise the fact that to these words is due the form given to St. Paul's teaching at Athens? the *matter*, as was shewn in a previous paper, had been in part suggested by the tenets of his Stoic audience. Acts xvii. 24, "The God that made the world and all things therein, he, being Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands" (*οὐκ ἐν χειροποιήτοις ναοῖς κατοικεῖ*). St. Stephen in addressing the Jews had cited in full a passage from the prophet Isaiah. This the Apostle, who has a Gentile audience before him,

¹ See Bishop Lightfoot on Galatians, p. 144.

avoids doing. But he has embodied in his speech the substance of it, and has thus preserved its main ideas, viz. (a) that God is Lord both of heaven and earth; (b) that He made all things; and, as a consequence from these, (c) that He dwelleth not in temples made with hands. The words on this last head, it will be noticed, are borrowed with scarcely an alteration from the speech of St. Stephen.

(6) Only a few verses lower down in the seventh Chapter of the Acts, stands that sudden outburst of glowing indignation with which St. Stephen turns upon his persecutors: "Ye stiff-necked, and *uncircumcised in heart and ears* (*ἀπερίτμητοι καρδίαις καὶ τοῖς ὠσίν*), ye do always resist the Holy Ghost; as your fathers did, so do ye." The words italicized remind us of Jeremiah vi. 10, ix. 26. But there is nothing like them elsewhere in the New Testament, except in two passages of St. Paul's Epistles, where the same idea is reproduced. Romans ii. 29, "Circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit and not in the letter;" and Colossians ii. 11, where St. Paul's converts are reminded that they were "circumcised with a circumcision not made with hands, in the putting off of the body of the flesh, in the circumcision of Christ." The thought thus reappearing in the Apostle's writings affords a further instance of a perhaps unconscious reminiscence of St. Stephen's language.

(7) Lastly, it has often been noticed that just as the dying Stephen interceded for his murderers (Acts vii. 60), so St. Paul, in his latest Epistle prayed on behalf of those who forsook him and failed to take his part at his "first defence" (2 Tim. iv. 16). In the Authorized Version the similarity between the two prayers is made to appear more marked than is warranted by the original, and the renderings, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge," and "I pray God that it may not be laid to their charge," serve to convey to the English reader the mistaken notion that the same phrase is used in each place. This impression may

be removed by a reference to the Revised Version which renders St. Paul's words with greater exactness, "May it not be laid to their account" (*μὴ αὐτοῖς λογισθῆῖ*). There remains, then, no verbal coincidence here, but simply the fact that both saints did pray in their last hours for those who were persecuting or deserting them. Since, however, they had the example of their Divine Master before them, and (as I have endeavoured to shew in an earlier paper) the closing chapter of St. Paul's latest Epistle contains a striking coincidence with another of our Lord's words from the cross, I cannot pretend to think it certain or even probable that in this case St. Paul was influenced by a recollection of St. Stephen's dying prayer. But as I find the passage generally noted in commentaries as a coincidence, it seemed best to mention it here, leaving the reader to estimate its value for himself.

Seven possible allusions have now been examined, and after making all necessary allowance for the weakness of some of them, I think that sufficient will remain to justify the assertion of Mr. Lewin quoted above, and to convince us that the day on which St. Stephen appeared before the Council was one which St. Paul could never forget. And if the words which he then heard were thus stamped upon his memory, it is not without reason that it has been conjectured that "we owe the preservation of the speech, as we have it in this (seventh) chapter, to St. Paul. For among the hostile audience of the martyr, who besides would be likely to treasure it up or to communicate it to the Evangelist?"¹

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¹ Humphrey on the Acts.