

CHAPTER II

THE SOURCES

I wrestled with the faith/works contradiction for the next twenty years with growing anxiety. It was as though Jesus and James were pulling me one way while Paul and the church were pulling the other and I was near tearing in the middle. Finally, I did tear. My breakdown came in the fall of 1967. It was both the most terrible and the most wonderful experience of my life. It was terrible because for many months I was in the shadow of hell. It was wonderful because from it and through it the Lord rescued me and I was at last set free of the church, free truly to follow Jesus, free to realize the true will of God, and free to begin to see Paul's true character. Martin Luther, inspired by Paul, concluded that the Epistle of James was "an epistle of straw." I, inspired by Jesus and James, have finally concluded that Paul was an *apostle of straw*. I still acknowledge Paul's great zeal for Christ, but it was zeal for a Christ misunderstood. Paul's suffering for Christ bespeaks his great love for him, but it was love for a Christ misconceived. His preaching of Christ was among the most effective the world has ever seen, but it was of a Christ mispreached. What follows is an effort to present Paul as I have come to know him, minus his halo but yet clothed with a kind of respect that seems at times contradictory, even to me. Seeing Paul, as he really is – warts and all – does not detract from my admiration of the work he performed.

A Sampling of Views by Various Authors

Before delving into the details of how I have come to know Paul as a straw apostle, it will be helpful to show here a sampling of the views, both contrary and similar, that others have held. I show these primarily to clarify the basis of my own view and to reveal how it is the rule that scholarship, per se, is of limited value in getting at the truth about our man because the scholars tend to begin from a bias characteristic of their place in life. This dictates their ultimate conclusions without regard for their otherwise apparently open minded evaluations. These quotations suggest one of the universal defects of scholarship. It is no matter how sincere and honest one's quest of truth, or how thorough one's methods, the conclusions will be dictated by one's value system. The value system is nearly always consistent with one's social context and with what one has to gain or lose from publishing or preaching views contrary to those of one's fellows.

David Smith, writing early in the century before critical scholarship became so influential, and from the perspective of a professor in a Presbyterian Theological School, does so as one who would not understand what it means to question Paul's ministry. He simply assumed that the "Great Apostle" was all that the Christian Church has made him out to be. Speaking of the Church, he wrote,

Out of the very heart of Judaism came a man of large vision and courageous spirit who broke her (the church) fetters and led her forth on her worldwide enterprise. (The Life and Letters of Saint Paul, Harper Brothers, 1914, p. 14; this was one of my Southern Seminary textbooks).

David Wenham, of the Faculty of Theology of Oxford University, a modern Christian scholar, has been very thorough in his work of comparing Paul to Jesus and seeking to draw out a true picture of how Paul was indebted to Jesus. He writes in 1995,

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He maintained Jesus' perspective and priorities, and he could with justification claim that "we have the mind of Christ." His interpretation may justifiably be said to be a model in terms of method, and to have maintained the church in the faith of Jesus Paul saw himself as the slave of Jesus Christ, not the founder of Christianity. He was right to see himself in that way. (Paul, Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?, Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1995, P 409).

Hyam Maccoby, a leading Talmudic scholar and fellow at Leo Baeck College, London, takes an adverse view, although his scholarship appears no less thorough than that of Wenham. He writes of Paul:

Paul, not Jesus, was the founder of Christianity as a new religion which developed away from both normal Judaism and the Nazarene variety of Judaism Paul derived this religion from Hellenistic sources, chiefly by a fusion of concepts taken from Gnosticism and of concepts from the mystery religions, particularly from that of Attis. The combination of these elements with features derived from Judaism, particularly the incorporation of Jewish scriptures, re-interpreted to provide a background of sacred history for the new myth, was unique; and Paul alone was the creator of this amalgam. Jesus himself had no idea of it, and would have been amazed and shocked at the role assigned to him by Paul as the suffering deity Paul, as the personal begetter of the Christian myth, has never been given sufficient credit for his originality. The reverence paid through the centuries to the great Saint Paul has quite obscured the more colorful features of his personality. Like many evangelical leaders, he was a compound of sincerity and charlatantry. Evangelical leaders of his kind were common in the Greco-Roman world. (The Mythmaker, Paul and the Invention of Christianity, Harper & Row, 1987, Pp. 16,17)

A. N. Wilson, British journalist, has his own unique view of Paul that gives to him the prime credit for the founding of Christianity:

One is not saying that Paul crudely invented a new religion, but that he was able to draw out of the mythological implications of an old religion, and the death of a particular practitioner of that religion, and to construct therefrom a myth with reverberations much wider than the confines of Palestinian Judaism. . . . And though this book has shown, there were many individuals involved in the evolution of Christianity, the aspects which distinguish it from Judaism, and indeed make it incompatible with Judaism, are Paul's unique contribution. It is for this reason that we can say that Paul, and not Jesus, was -- if any one was -- the "Founder of Christianity". (Paul, The Mind of the Apostle, W.W. Norton & Co., 1997, pp 72, 258)

Scholarship is indeed of value as a means of discovering and organizing facts, but fails when it begins to evaluate and interpret them, which it must inevitably do. The subconscious censor is always there, permitting or forbidding ideas according to their potential consequences. Thus, a professional Jewish scholar, Maccoby, must come down hard on Paul as the founder of an institution that has been party to a long history of anti-Semitism, culminating in the Holocaust, whereas a professional Christian scholar, Wenham, from the same knowledge base, honors and exalts him as the "slave of Christ." Wilson, with no ax to grind, takes a view somewhere between these. One should, therefore, give the greater heed to the views of scholars or other intellectuals who are not affiliated with partisan points of view, but these are in short supply because non-partisans seldom have enough interest in a subject to pursue it wholeheartedly. One therefore wonders how authentic a base the non-partisan has for his positions. The following quotations would seem to be of such nature:

The British playwright, G. B. Shaw wrote in the preface to *Androcles and the Lion*, in 1913: There has never been a more monstrous imposition perpetrated than the imposition of the limitations of Paul's soul upon the soul of Jesus (The Writings of St. Paul

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(WSP), Edited by Wayne Meeks, W, W, Norton & Co., 1972, P.300).

And Friedrich Nietzsche (1880) wrote in *The First Christian*:

But who, apart from a few learned men – know that it (the Bible) likewise records the history of one of the most ambitious and importunate souls that ever existed, of a mind full of superstition and cunning: the history of the Apostle Paul? That the ship of Christianity threw overboard no inconsiderable part of its Jewish ballast, that it was able to sail into the waters of the heathen and actually did do so: this is due to the history of one single man, this apostle who was so greatly troubled in mind and so worthy of pity; but who was also very disagreeable to himself and to others. (WSP, Pp. 288,289)

Yet what was the base for the assertions of Shaw and the (also much to be pitied) Nietzsche? Did they spend long hours, weeks, months, and years in the library, searching and pondering, investigating and evaluating, before arriving at their conclusions? Did they earnestly pray for divine guidance as they pondered what to write? I doubt it. These intellectuals had a beef with the church, which they recognized as the offspring of Paul and this bias undoubtedly inspired their negative opinions.

Where to Turn?

Where, then, must we turn for guidance? If the reader has read Book I of this volume, or is familiar with my earlier book, *Jesus: the Rock of Offense*, you will know that I believe the only true base is to be sought and found in the utterances of Jesus as recorded in the four gospels. It was by a comparison with this Jesus that Maccoby and Wenham reached their very diverse conclusions concerning Paul; but they each had a problem in that neither perceived the true nature of Jesus' message. Neither has a clue as to what he was about. Knowing *this* Jesus, as I do, gives me a favored position from which to evaluate Paul and his work, as the reader should realize who has read Book I of this volume, which is a relatively brief treatment of the message of Jesus. And, since I discovered Jesus with some little help and much obstruction from the scholars, I am encouraged to undertake a similar study of Paul. That is, by examining Paul's words, to draw out of them a reasonable portrait of the man, his character, and the true significance of his work. Was he really the slave of Christ, as David Wenham makes him and he himself asserted, or was he the charlatan-mythmaker of Hyam Maccoby? The monstrous imposition of Shaw, or the ambitious and importunate soul of Nietzsche? Or is the truth of the man yet to be discovered? Since the man's words, and a brief history, The Acts of the Apostles, written by one of his disciples, Luke, are the only sources of information about him, it would seem to be necessary to find him somewhere in there.

Maccoby gives great credence to one other source, the opinion of Paul expressed by the Ebionite Christians as preserved in Epiphanius. According to this source, Paul was not only a citizen of Tarsus, as he himself admits and does not deny, but also of Greek origin, basing this on a passage in which Paul candidly says,

I am a Tarsan, a citizen of no mean city' (Acts 21:39). Then they declare that he was a Greek, child of a Greek mother and a Greek father. He went up to Jerusalem, they say, and when he had spent some time there, he was seized with a passion to marry a daughter of the priest. For this reason he became a proselyte and was circumcised. Then, after he failed to get the girl, he flew into a rage and wrote against circumcision and against Sabbath and Law (WSP, p. 177, 178).

Little can be said with confidence about these Ebionites, since none of their written works survive as such (unless we ascribe to them the *New Testament Epistle of James*), and we would not know of them apart from references such as those found in Epiphanius. It appears that they were Jewish disciples of Jesus who continued the practices of the law, including circumcision, which

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places them in the same tradition as the first disciples in the Jerusalem congregation of Christian Jews. These include Peter, James, and the original apostles with whom Paul struggled over questions of doctrine. Their core beliefs may be encapsulated in the Epistle of James, purportedly written by the brother of Jesus.

For this reason some have made them the successors and inheritors of the early ministry centered in Jerusalem about the apostles and James, the brother of Jesus, as distinct from the branch of Christianity that sprang from the work of Paul and his associates and which evolved to the Christianity of the modern world, but this cannot be substantiated. They maintained their testimony for several hundred years, then finally disappeared from the scene. In that their voices were long ago silenced and the only record of them comes from accounts of their detractors, writers such as Epiphanius, I will not, like Maccoby, accept the above depiction of Paul as basic to my views of him. I would be less than honest, though, if I failed to acknowledge that it might have some influence in my thinking.

It is surely significant that there existed, for hundreds of years after the early Christian experience in Jerusalem and among the Jews, a fellowship of disciples of Jesus who considered Paul an impostor and a false prophet. As to such details as his origin and his infatuation with the daughter of a priest, I am in no position to judge. Maccoby sees himself as qualified to make such judgments, and perhaps he is, but I nevertheless doubt that the evidence is adequate to serve as a base for firm conclusions. I will conclude, below, that Paul was a false prophet, but on the grounds of evidence in the New Testament and not on the grounds of the Ebionite testimony.

A Summary of Sources of Information

The sources of reliable information about Paul are therefore limited. They are the New Testament and statements in the surviving writings of early Christians such as the Epiphanius, Clement of Rome and Eusebius.

David Smith, whom I quoted above, early in the Twentieth Century in his *The Life and Letters of St. Paul*, makes a relatively modern contribution by surveying all the available sources and using the results to weave a life of Paul together with a chronology that seems reasonable. In particular he has made a good case for Paul having made two journeys to Rome, not one as the New Testament record indicates by breaking off its history of Paul's journeys in the Acts with his imprisonment in Rome following his appeal to Caesar. Thereafter, perhaps some five years later and after a long delayed missionary journey to Spain, he may have returned once more to Rome where he was martyred late in the year 67. There is, however, no historical foundation for this tradition, and it is just as likely that Paul lived out his years preaching his Gospel and founding his churches.

In this chapter I will rely on the New Testament record as being the only source of information up to the time of the first Roman imprisonment. I shall accept the later evidence for a second imprisonment and martyrdom in Rome as the only additional source, since Acts obviously breaks off before completing the story. This exception seems justified because it provides for Paul having written the pastoral letters whereas his authorship has been questioned due to the difficulty of fitting them into the events in Paul's career as recounted in *The Acts*.

The Source Problem

But there is a problem. The New Testament sources include only the Book of Acts, the letters of Paul, and one brief reference in II Peter. Luke, who also authored the gospel that bears his name, wrote Acts. It contains our only narrative of Paul's life and ministry. Now, this Luke was a protégé of Paul, probably one of his converts as I will suggest again below, and an almost constant companion during the last years.

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If David Smith's suggestion is correct, Luke was a Greek of Psidian Antioch who was converted there during Paul's first missionary journey. Paul encountered him again during his second journey, when Luke joined the missionary team and was henceforth Paul's close companion (D. Smith, p. 125), except when left behind to strengthen newly established churches, such as the one at Philippi. Paul characterized Luke as the beloved physician (Colossians 4:14), suggesting that the latter traveled with him and ministered to him during his many illnesses. Luke assisted him again during his third journey and, as we glean from Luke's first person references in Acts, he also journeyed with him to Rome where he remained with him during his first Roman imprisonment. Then, based on Paul's Second Letter to Timothy, (possibly written during a later and second Roman imprisonment), Luke was again with him as he contemplated his imminent martyrdom. It seems that, of all Paul's helpers and disciples, only Luke remained, which we learn from Paul's plaintive statement, "Luke alone is with me." (II Timothy 4:11)

Therefore the problem mentioned above arises from the fact that almost all the information we have about Paul may have Paul as its source. This includes that recorded by Luke, who would certainly not have been unbiased when it came to relating the deeds, character and doctrines of his beloved mentor. Furthermore, the details of Paul's activities, given in Acts by Luke and which Luke did not personally witness, may also have been relayed to him by Paul. Of what did they speak during the period(s) of imprisonment in Rome, or during the long hours spent in their travels together, such as the ill fated ship journey to Rome prior to the first Roman imprisonment? It would be hard to over emphasize the closeness of the bond between these two. We must ever keep this in mind in evaluating Paul as Acts depicts him. It cannot be an unbiased story.

What of the brief reference in II Peter? This, again, is subject to doubts as to its authenticity and may have been inserted by someone who wanted to present Paul as being fully accepted in the fellowship of the Apostles. The reference reads, in full:

So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given to him, speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction as they do the other scriptures (II Peter 3:15,16).

This, standing alone outside the works of Paul/Luke, seems specifically designed to give Paul an honored place that he may not in fact have enjoyed. He is categorized as beloved brother, a man of wisdom, consistent in all his letters. Indeed, a man whose understanding is deep, hard even for the great apostle, Peter, to understand. If there are problems arising in the churches due to Paul's writings, they are caused by the ignorant and unstable who misunderstand them and twist them to their own destruction. But perhaps most tellingly, the letters of Paul are here categorized as scripture. This is the only time within the New Testament that the writings of the New Testament authors were so characterized and seemingly placed on a par with Moses and the Prophets who authored the ancient Hebrew texts of the Old Testament. It is very unlikely that any of the early disciples thought of their own writings as scripture, with the possible exception of Paul. I will explain this possible exception below. And would Peter have been one who characterized Paul's letters as scripture? Hardly! (This assumes that Peter authored the Petrine epistles, which many doubt. I have no problem with Peter's authorship, provided we allow for redactions such as this.)

We Learn About Paul From What He Has Written.

Luke, and Paul himself, are therefore almost our only sources of information about Paul. This fact prompts us to be wary of bias, but does not preclude acceptance of the valid information contained in their writings, if only we can determine what is valid. Furthermore I believe we can learn much about the character of a man by examining what he has written. If, for example, one knew for a fact that what was written was untrue, then one must conclude that the writer was

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either mistaken or a liar. If one continued to read untruth from the same author, one might be justified in giving the heaviest weight to the liar option. Conversely, if one found everything to be confirmed in fact, one would be justified in concluding the author was both truthful and careful to avoid mistakes. These are the kind of conclusions we can glean about the character of Paul. We can profitably attend to three different and inter-related facets of Pauline studies: his office, his character, and his gospel. The latter will be evaluated by comparison with the teachings of Jesus that are recorded in the canonical gospels.