FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF ST. PAUL*

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The history of the religious changes that slowly transformed classical civilisation during the Hellenistic and Roman eras is a subject of baffling complexity. The evidence is as mixed as the pattern of beliefs and practices itself seems to have been. Most of it comes to us piece-meal, and can only present a static, localised picture. But in the Acts of the Apostles and St. Paul’s epistles we possess a set of data that documents coherently, yet in a variety of ramifications, the initiation of what was no doubt the most basic change of all.

Certainly there is no other case in which we can still observe in detail the progress of new ideas both in the course of their own earliest development and in their first impact on successive individuals and groups. In the case of St. Paul we are witnessing an enterprise that may well have been unique in its being so deliberately calculated and provocatively carried through. Paul was intensely aware of the cultural hurdles he confronted; he faced acute choices in his own career; and he foresaw that the consequences would be large. His own writings, and the presentation of his preaching in the Acts, must therefore always attract the close attention of the historian.

At the same time they provide an incidental record of other people’s first impressions of St Paul that is illuminating in several ways. How people reacted to the messianic preaching, once it was carried beyond the pale of familiarity with that hope, helps to clarify its effective character at a most critical point in history. It may also supply some clue to the massive antipathy within which the new religion is already confined by the time it is first noted in classical writers. Again, it will provide a simple cross-section of existing belief and practice in a region and a period of time that is as important as it is poorly documented, namely the Greek cities of the first century.

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We may begin with the public cults, the most familiar feature of classical religious life. Although in form and attitude marking the assimilation of innumerable local deities to the model of the Olympian pantheon, in function the cults remain the supreme manifestation of local patriotism. Their object is to secure the well-being of a community by magnifying its particular patrons; their effectiveness depends upon the maintenance of the ceremonies proper to the god concerned. Although such gods might also appeal to personal devotion, their attraction was basically social. The priesthoods afforded honours to the great, and the festivals, holidays for all. Belief and behaviour were largely matters of indifference, for theology and ethics belonged to a different sphere of interest altogether.

With the migration of peoples there was a certain tendency for national cults to go with them, but syncretism and polytheism alike made transition easy. The Jews, however, conspicuously did not transplant or duplicate their cult: all looked back to the home temple at Jerusalem. At the same time, the study and practice of the law, as promoted by the synagogues, was to prove a remarkable alternative vehicle for national hopes after the destruction of the temple. The Greek cities, conspicuously prompted by the Romans, learned to accommodate the synagogues as a legitimate enclave within their community life. Many Greeks were attracted to the Jewish way of life, no doubt for the very reason that it provided for some of the things that their own cults did not. Actual proselytism, however, was another matter.

It was specifically to this class of people that St. Paul turned after the formal breach with the synagogue which he regularly provoked. He could offer them in the gospel access to all that they had admired from outside the dividing wall of the law without the cost of cultural alienation from their own society which actual synagogue membership would have entailed. The new assemblies were often convened in well-to-do houses, led by men (and, noticeably, by women) who might be prominent in their communities.

What links then remained between such meetings and the system of public cults? So long as, in the public view, they lay under the umbrella of the synagogues, their position was comprehensible. The proconsul Gallio ruled that their disputes were no business of his, but fell within the internal discipline of the Jewish law (Acts 18.12-16). But once the breach was clear, the new churches found themselves in no man's land, and highly vulnerable, as they were soon to discover.
at Rome itself. It was no longer clear that they served any public good by their religion. There was no temple, no cult, no ritual to be maintained, not even the ancestral law of the Jews. Paul’s letters allude to meetings for mutual encouragement and instruction, activities which were certainly later to be built into the rituals of a public religion. But apart from singing hymns to a quasi-god, there was nothing that the classical world would have recognised as worship. Pliny, the earliest extant investigator, could discover no more.

Yet conversion meant a complete rejection of the existing cults, which were denounced as a false substitute for the knowledge of God the apostles alone could provide (1 Cor.12.2; Acts 17.16, 23-31). Paul reacted as strongly to the suggestion that he was promoting ‘foreign divinities’ (Acts 17.18) as he had to the attempt to link his activities with the cult of Zeus (Acts 14.13), though he knew how to turn the ideology of the public religion to his advantage (Acts 14.17; 17.23). Both Acts (19.24-7) and Pliny (Ep.X 9) attest the collapse of support for the public cults as a result of the preaching, and Paul argues for withdrawal even from the social occasions they provided (1 Cor.8.10).

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Did the apostles then present themselves to the community as promoters of a private cult? Here again there was a familiar pattern. The mysteries that had once, in agricultural communities, celebrated the renewal of the seasons, now provided for the hope of personal renewal. The promise of this was secured in the initiate’s response to the mystery drama, as the rising of the god was staged before his eyes. Because of certain obvious similarities it is necessary to recognise the important ways in which this differs from what St. Paul was saying. Although he held that the resurrection of Christ was the model for the resurrection of believers, the effective relation was different from that in a mystery cult. The assurance of resurrection was not evoked through a sensual response to the re-enactment of the prototype, but through persuading the audience that it had actually happened. The mysteries relied upon atmosphere and feeling, the gospel upon evidence and argument.

Most important of all, for our purpose, the mysteries preserved their secrets for those who sought initiation, while the gospel confronted anyone who would listen to its propositions. When converts subsequently joined the churches it was essentially for club purposes, for study and discipline, rather than for such ‘religious’ activities as
the private cults provided. Even if the churches did subsequently assimilate themselves in certain respects to the mystery pattern, there is no hint that such a parallel suggested itself to any of the earliest observers. Because the mysteries were not primarily concerned with ideas or behaviour, but with procedures, they are clearly the private counterpart of the public cults with which they readily co-existed. The place of the gospel preaching must be found elsewhere.

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It was in the philosophical schools that full provision was made for the study of questions about the nature of the world and man's place in it. If viewed simply in terms of its formal area of interest, there would be a strong case for saying that this is where St. Paul's enterprise belongs rather than with the classical religion. His letters are largely devoted to theological and ethical argument, and his career is the centre of intense debate with critics both within and without his own following: an atmosphere far removed from the order and decorum that would have been thought necessary to religious activities. In this St. Paul is heir of course to the rabbinic tradition of disputation. Josephus presented the Jewish sects as schools of philosophy, and a later fashion was to represent the apologists for the new religion as philosophers.

Yet St. Paul was surely not likely to be taken for a philosopher. In spite of the famous encounter with Stoics and Epicureans at Athens, he was not moving in similar circles. Certainly Cynic philosophers sometimes followed an ostentatious public career that has suggested parallels with Paul's, but philosophy must normally have been the preserve of a scholarly élite. One simply associated with the great masters of the day, or otherwise pursued it through personal study. Well-placed as many of Paul's converts were, they do not seem to have been of this type at all, nor could anyone have mistaken the enthusiastic ministries of the believers for the dialogues and discourses of a philosophical session. Paul's own training was almost certainly not in philosophy, and the whole basis and tone of his arguments, in spite of their general subject-field, disassociates him from that enterprise. It would be interesting, all the same, to know the nature of the 'dialogi'ps' he held regularly for the two years at Ephesus in the school of Tyrannus (Acts 19.9).

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Paul's sole use of the term philosophia is pejorative, and made with reference to gnosticism. It is hardly possible, therefore, that the term was favourably in use in his circle for philosophy in any stricter
sense. In gnosticism the resources of speculation were exploited to satisfy the hope of personal resurrection. What the mystery cults achieved through the dramatic presentation of a myth, gnosticism pursued through doctrines which revealed the structure of cosmos and the dual nature of man as matter and spirit. Redemption lay in the freeing of the spirit from its material prison, so that it could fly up to its appointed station in the heavens. In spite of the tangled questions concerning the origins of gnosticism, it has become increasingly clear that the frequent incidence of gnostic terminology in St. Paul marks his struggle against its influence over his followers. It is safe to assume that such theories confronted Paul in the circles of hellenised Jews and judaising Greeks amongst whom he formed his churches. But there is no hint that gnosticism provided a point of contact for the preaching with the public mind. Although we do not know how it was itself promoted, of all religious movements of the times it is surely by its own terms the most withdrawn from public view.

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For the man in the street, however, his place and destiny within the cosmos was still a matter of intense interest. Trapped in a maze of inconsistent assumptions about fate and fortune, he concentrated not upon explanations of how things happened in the world, but upon practical solutions to his own predicament in the face of change. He needed first of all methods of detection, so that there should be at least a little warning of what was to come, and secondly, since it was bad news that seems to have predominated, he needed means of evading the consequences.

As Tacitus was to remark, in an atmosphere of public alarm everything could be given an interpretation. People were ready to construe any oddity, whether of nature or of man, as an omen, prodigy or portent. Such observations could be systematised, as in the Roman process of augury, so that signs could be found when particularly required. The human mind also lent itself to prediction through dream, prophecy or oracle. Beyond that again lay the new super-science of astrology. The dread of astrology illustrates a curious ambivalence in attitudes to detection. In spite of the general sense of doom and craving for prior knowledge, too certain a prediction was repugnant. As Lucan protested, it was too much to have to bear the weight of the future without the hope that could still survive if the signs were ambiguous. In the case of astrology, too, another
point seems clear: the very act of predicting is regarded as somehow determining the event.

The gospel preaching must have made its first impact upon the casual hearer at this level of interest. It can be demonstrated from the Acts that it regularly turned on the report of a remarkable portent (the resurrection of Jesus), the interpretation of which (imminent personal judgement) Paul strove to establish by whatever arguments were likely to appeal to the particular audience. Of course it must quickly have become apparent that the apostles were engaged in more than the ordinary retailing of prodigies. The sustained concentration upon a single sign, and its attestation, is peculiar, even though there were often more immediate signs, such as the healings or Paul’s survival of the snake bite (Acts 28.6), which first attracted attention. The resurrection was also exceptional amongst portents in its relations to what was foreshadowed. There was normally no overt connection at all between the two (if one bothered to think about it, some doctrine of the sympathy of all things was needed to explain it), but in this case the sign was directly programmatic.

The very vigour of this argument from sign to inescapable sequel must have shocked many fatalistic people who, like Lucan, leaned upon the consolations of uncertainty, and may have contributed to the feeling of repulsion towards the believers that quickly grew up. Certainly there is evidence in Paul’s letters of a desire, even amongst his own following, to escape from its certainties. It may also be that the complaint against the apostles at Thessalonica (Acts 17.7) was based upon the imperial ruling against predictions (for various reasons, the time-honoured view, that it is an allusion to the law of treason, is untenable).

Another aspect of the apostolic mission that would have appealed to the universal appetite for detecting the future was in its frequent resort to dreams, visions and prophecies. These were not only in use amongst believers, but were invoked to lend authority before non-believers as well, as in Paul’s prediction of escape from the ship-wreck (Acts 27.22-6). There is nothing unique about this type of detection. One may compare the career of Apollonius of Tyana (which was to be compared in later antiquity with that of Jesus, though he corresponds much more closely to St. Paul), who also foresaw a shipwreck (Vita v 18).

As for the means of evading what was portended, there is much in the public religion particularly that is designed for this purpose. The whole system of vows and sacrifices has such a requirement fully
in view. The mystery cults and gnosticism provided the means of deliverance from death itself. For more detailed necessities one could turn to magic, which was widely available through specialist practitioners. Paul's activities cut severely into this business at Ephesus (Acts 18.18,19), and it is clear that his success was related to his capacity to provide alternative benefits through healings and exorcisms (Acts 18. 11-17, cf. 13.6-12).

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But if the public fascination with portents and magic provided many initial points of contact between Paul and his hearers, it will hardly explain the character of his mission in its established form. When the gospel was accepted and understood in a place, the didactic and argumentative activities of the preacher occupied the centre of the stage. Paul must then have seemed to come closest to the public lecturers, or sophists, who toured the Greek cities, offering a mixture of popular philosophy and good advice on religion and life in general. It is this type that excites Paul's most withering scorn, precisely because his own followers (notably at Corinth) expected him to conform to its standards of platform rhetoric. This is the point at which one should stop asking where the points of contact with existing practice were, and ask instead what it was about the whole enterprise that was new.