

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



*Buy me a coffee*

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



**PATREON**

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

**PayPal**

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

PAULINE AND OTHER  
STUDIES

IN EARLY CHRISTIAN HISTORY

BY

W. M. RAMSAY, HON. D.C.L., ETC.

PROFESSOR OF HUMANITY IN THE UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

HODDER AND STOUGHTON

LONDON MCMVI

II

THE CHARM OF PAUL

## II

### THE CHARM OF PAUL

THE life and the nature of one who has influenced human history so profoundly as St. Paul must be studied afresh by every successive age. His character is far too wide and all-embracing to be comprehended by the age in which he lives and on which he exercised his immediate influence. He is at once outside and inside it: he works on it both from without and from within. He has caught in some degree the eternal principles which sweep through all time, and express themselves in momentary, passing form in each successive age. Thus he transcends the limits of time and speaks to all ages; and his words will be differently understood in different ages, for every age finds that they respond to its peculiar questions. Hence every age must write afresh for itself—one might almost say, every man must write for himself—the life of St. Paul; and the words in which he strove to make his thoughts comprehensible to the raw converts, who needed to be trained in power of thinking as well as in the elementary principles of morality and conduct, must be rendered into the form which will be more easily understood in present circumstances. The attempts to do this must always be imperfect and inadequate, and yet they may make it easier to penetrate to the heart which beats in all his writings. But the aim of the

---

historian should always be to induce the reader to study for himself the writings and work of St. Paul.

In venturing to lay before the readers a study of that character, it is not necessary to claim, in justification of the attempt, peculiar qualifications or insight: it is a sufficient excuse, if one can claim to be putting the same questions that others are putting, and to be one among many students animated by a similar spirit and the same needs.

In the case of St. Paul most readers are already familiar with the events of his life, with the original authorities on which every biographer and student must depend, and with some modern presentation of the facts. But opinion has varied much in recent years as regards the bearing of these facts, and the estimate which should be set on them as indications of the character and aims of the Apostle. Hence, in the present state of the subject, the most important feature of a new study of his career consists in the general interpretation which is to be placed on the facts, and in the spirit with which the work is undertaken; and it is advisable for the writer in the outset to make clear his general attitude towards the critical points on which the difference in opinion turns.

The fascination of St. Paul's personality lies in his humanity. He is the most human of all the Apostles.

That he was in many ways the ablest and the greatest, the most creative mind, the boldest originator, the most skilful organiser and administrator, the most impressive and outstanding personage in the whole Apostolic circle—that will be admitted by most readers. That he was the most clever and the most brilliant of the Apostles every one must feel. But all that might be granted, without bringing us any nearer an explanation of the undying

interest and charm he possesses for us. Those are not the qualities which make a man really interesting, which catch the heart of the world as Paul has caught it. The clever man is, on the whole, rather repellent to the mass of mankind, though he will find his own circle of friends who can at once admire his ability and penetrate to the real nature underneath his cleverness. But St. Paul lies closer to the heart of the great mass of readers than any other of the Apostles ; and the reason is that he impresses us as the most intensely human of them all.

The career of St. Paul can easily and truthfully be described as a series of brilliant achievements and marvellous successes. But it is not through his achievements and his success that he has seized and possessed the hearts of men. It is because behind the achievements we can see the trials and the failures. To others his life might seem like the triumphal progress of a conqueror. But we can look through his eyes and watch the toil and the stress ; we can see him always on the point of failure, always guarding against the ceaseless dangers that threatened him, *pressed on every side, yet not straitened, perplexed but not in despair, persecuted but not forsaken, cast down, but not destroyed.*

We follow his fortunes with the keenest interest, because we feel that he was thoroughly representative of the eager, strenuous, toiling man, and his career was full of situations and difficulties such as the ordinary man has to face in the world. The life of St. Paul, as it stands before us in his letters and his biography, was one constant struggle against difficult circumstances. He was always suspected, always misunderstood, by some ; and he always found a friend to stand by him in his difficulties, to believe in him in spite of appearances, and to be his champion and guarantee.

That is the daily lot of the men who work, of all who try to do anything good or great, of all men who strive towards an ideal of any kind, in patriotism, or in loyalty, or in honour, or in religion; and it is only such men who are interested in the life of Paul. They must be prepared to face misconception, suspicion, blame greater than they deserve; and they may hope to find in every case some friend such as Paul always found.

The description of his first entry into the Christian world of Jerusalem is typical. *When he was come to Jerusalem, he assayed to join himself to the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, and believed not that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the Apostles, and declared unto them how he had seen the Lord in the way. . . . And he was with them coming and going out of Jerusalem. . . . And he disputed against the Hellenist Jews; but they went about to slay him.* All the rest of his career is similar to that. His past life, with its passions and its struggles, its attempts and its failures, always impeded him in every new enterprise. No one could *deliver him from this body of death.*

We see, too, that—as is the case with all men—his difficulties and his failures almost always were the result of his own nature. It was his own faults and errors that caused the misconceptions and suspicions, by which he was continually pressed and perplexed. In the intense enthusiasm of his nature he often failed to recognise the proper limitations, and erred in the way of overstraining the present emotion. He was carried too far in act and in word; and at a later moment he became conscious that he had been over-enthusiastic, and had not been sufficiently mindful of all the complex conditions.

When we say that he failed to recognise the proper limitations, we feel that the phrase is unsatisfactory; and we must try to express what we aim at in another way. Let us compare him with the greatest of his contemporaries, the Apostles John and Peter. When we are in contact with them, at least in their later life, we are impressed always with the completeness of statement and the perfectness of vision that are implied in everything recorded of them. They had lived in company with Him who, in a sense far truer than Matthew Arnold meant,

saw life steadily and saw it whole;

and they had caught from Him something of that faculty of calm steady completeness of vision.

In all the words of Jesus the reader is impressed with that completeness of statement: the truth stands there whole and entire. You never require to look at the language from some special point of view, to make allowances for the circumstances and the intention of the speaker, before you recognise the truth of the words. You do not feel that there are other justifiable points of view which are left out of account, and that from those points the saying must be considered inadequate. The word is never one-sided.

Take any one of the sayings, such as, *Render unto Cæsar the things that are Cæsar's, and unto God the things that are God's*, or *Wisdom is justified of all her children*, or *The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath*. Each of them is a complete and rounded whole, perfect from every point of view. There is nothing more to be said. The true commentator may expound laboriously from various points of view the truth of those matchless expressions,



---

and thereby render a real service to the reader. You must look at each saying first in one light, then in another, analyse it, explain it, and you will better appreciate all that lies in it; but you cannot add to it, or make it more complete than it is. It stands there once for all. It is the final statement.

Something of that perfection of vision and of expression—that calm serene insight into the essential truth beneath the flow and change of things—that power of contemplating the world upon the plane of eternity—had passed into the mind of John and of Peter. Their acts and their words alike are on that plane of perfectness and finality. Their words were so, because their life and minds were so. *We cannot but speak the things which we saw and heard.* They had looked on the Truth: they had lived with the Truth. Never again could they live on the plane of ordinary humanity or see things exactly as men see them, for they had gazed upon eternity, and the glory was always in their eyes.

Something too of the same steadiness and completeness of vision belongs, and must belong, to the great prophets of the world. They were prophets because they had come into relations with the Divine nature and had seen the Truth. They too could not but speak the things which they had seen and heard.

Let us try another illustration—a modern one, drawn from Hegel's brief essay, entitled *Who is the abstract thinker?* in which he distinguishes the analytic method of scientific and abstract reasoning from the direct contemplation of the concrete truth of the eternal world. The great German philosopher in a few sentences hits off the various points of view from which a murderer on the

scaffold is regarded by different persons.<sup>1</sup> The sociologists trace the conditions of society and education that led him to his crime: the moralists or the priests make him the text of a sermon on the corruption of the class to which he belongs. They see the murderer: they have no eyes for the man as part of the eternal world, as an item in the Divine plan. Sentimental ladies, as they look on, are struck with his handsome and interesting figure: they see another side, and there they are content: if they do not perhaps carry their words of admiration into action by throwing flowers to him on the scaffold. But one person, a poor old woman in the crowd, beheld the scene as a whole, as an act in the drama of eternity: *The severed head was laid on the scaffold; and there was sunshine. "But how beautifully," said she, "does God's sun of grace lighten up his head!" The most contemptuous word we can use in anger is, "You are not worth the sun shining on you". The woman saw the sun shining on the murderer's head, and knew that he was still worth something in the eye of God.* She uttered in a flash of intuition a whole concrete truth, while the learned, the educated, and the fashionable world saw only one side or another, abstract and incomplete.

Now with Paul we feel ourselves in contact with a more simply human character than when we study the great Apostles John and Peter. It is not that he never moves and thinks and speaks on the plane of eternity. He often stands, or almost stands upon it, and sees accordingly. But he does not live on it. He only strives towards it.

<sup>1</sup> *Vermischte Schriften*, ii., p. 403 (*Werke*, vol. xvii.). A fine page in the late Prof. Wallace's *Logic of Hegel* (Proleg. lxxix.) directed my attention to it in undergraduate days, and fixed it in my mind for ever.

He is the typical, the representative man, who attains in moments of higher vision and inspiration to behold the truth, to commune with the Divine nature. He has, too, far more of such visions than other men. They are the greatest glory of his life, in which he might reasonably take pride.

But one feels that with Paul the vision lasted no long time. It was present with him only for a moment; and then he was once more on the level of humanity.

Yet that, after all, is why Paul is so close to us. We too can sometimes attain to a momentary glimpse of Truth when the veil seems for an instant to be withdrawn from her face;

I will go forward, sayest thou,  
I shall not fail to find her now;  
Look up, the fold is on her brow.

Throughout his life, we have to study Paul in this spirit. He sees like a man. He sees one side at a time. He emphasises that—not indeed more than it deserves—but in a way that is open to misconception, because he expresses the side of the case which he has in view, and expects the audience to catch his enthusiasm, to sympathise with his point of view, to supply for themselves the qualifications and the conditions and the reservations which are necessary in the concrete facts of actual life.

Alike in his acts and his words we notice the same tendency. When, after the agreement with the Judaic party in the Church, he went out on his second journey, he was ready, in his unhesitating and hearty acceptance of the arrangement, to do a very great deal in compliance with the Jew's natural and not unjustifiable prejudices. He even made the half-Jew Timothy comply with the Jewish

law. No act of his whole life is more difficult to sympathise with : none cost him dearer. It was misunderstood by his own Galatian converts, as Bishop Lightfoot well explains ; and the Epistle which he afterwards addressed to them was intended to bring home to them the whole truth respecting their position in the Church. But, as his act had given dangerous emphasis to one side of the case, the Epistle can restore the equilibrium and give concreteness and wholeness to the truth only by emphasising the other side.

We on our part have to keep the two sides in mind in estimating the historical situation ; and we must both take into consideration the later words when we judge the act as an indication of Paul's mind, and remember the earlier act when we estimate the meaning of certain very strong statements in the Epistle, such as *if ye receive circumcision, Christ will profit you nothing, or ye are severed from Christ, ye who would be justified by the Law*. Those words are one-sided, and not the whole many-sided truth. They are over-strained ; and it needs much sympathy, and much allowance for the unexpressed but necessary conditions, in order to read in them the Pauline gospel.

Similarly, time after time, we find in the Epistles that Paul has laid himself open to misconstruction in the minds of his converts by emphasising one side of the case, and has to give completeness to his teaching by stating another aspect. For example, he had written to the Corinthians, forbidding them in too general terms to come into social relations with immoral persons ; but he feels afterwards that this, taken literally, would be equivalent to an order to go out of the world and to cut themselves off absolutely from the city in which they lived, inasmuch as all pagan society was maintained on an immoral basis ; and therefore

---

conditions and qualifications and explanations have to be added in 1 Cor. v. 9-13. The first message was not a complete and perfect truth: it was a law that needed a supplement and a restriction.

Again the second letter to the people of Thessalonica is to a great extent an attempt to guard against a misconception of his teaching; and the misconception was evidently due to the strong emphasis which he had laid on such ideas as the coming of the Kingdom.

But that is the way of mankind. If we would do anything we must strive and struggle along the difficult path of the world, making mistakes often, over-emphasising often the side which we see, afterwards correcting our errors, completing our deficiencies; and worn out at last and spent with the heat and dust and fatigue of the toilsome road, we may need a friendly voice to tell us that we have not worked in vain, while we are ourselves too conscious of the failures to have any sense of the actual measure of achievement. In the life of Paul we read the life of man; and thus his story never grows old and never loses its fascination.

But the human character alone, even in conjunction with his great achievements, is not sufficient to explain the fascination that St. Paul exerts on us. I should not reckon even his power of sympathising with and understanding the nature and needs of his followers in so many different lands as furnishing the full explanation. The reason seems to lie in that combination of qualities which made him representative of human nature at its best: intensely human in his undeniable faults, he shows a real nobility and loftiness of spirit in which every man recognises his own best self.

The part which he had to play in Christian society was a difficult one. He came into it much junior in standing and inferior in influence to all the great men of the company. Yet he was conscious that in insight, in practical sense, in power of directing the development of their young society, he was superior to them. He saw what they did not at first recognise, the true line of development for their cause. He carried them with him, as their *de facto* leader. He had on one occasion to rebuke for his wavering and inconsistent conduct the one who at first had been the most enterprising and directing spirit among them. Moreover, he was of higher rank among his own people, sprung from an influential family which could not be ignored even in Jerusalem, marked out from youth as a person of consequence by his education and ability and energy, taking a prominent part among the leaders of his people from the day that he entered on public life. Finally, he was in all probability older than several, perhaps even than many of the Apostles.

All these causes conspired to render the position of Paul among the Christians of Jerusalem a very delicate one. Only the most perfect courtesy and respect for the rights and feelings of others, founded on the truest self-respect, could have carried him safely through the difficulties of the situation. He dared not yield to them, or sink his own personality in respect for their well-deserved authority, for he was strong in the mandate of revelation. Yet he would forfeit our love and respect if he ever obtruded his policy and his claims on them, or failed in the respect and reverence which was due from a neophyte to those whose eyes and minds were quickened with the glory of long communion with Jesus.

In that difficult situation the world of readers and thinkers has decided that Paul never seriously erred. He never failed in reverence to the great men, and he never failed in the courage and self-reliance needed to press his policy on their joint councils. That is why we are still under his fascination, just as much as those who beheld his face and listened to his words and thought it was an angel that spoke. He stands before us not merely as a representative of simple human nature, but also as typical of the highest and best in human nature. We never understand him rightly, unless we conceive his action on the highest plane that mere humanity is capable of occupying.

It must be acknowledged that this description of St. Paul's relations to the older Apostles is very different from that which is commonly given by modern scholars. In the pages of most of them we find the picture of Paul as a man actuated always by jealousy of the great Apostles, continually trying to undermine their authority and to set himself in their place, driven on by the feeling that he could prove his own position only by picking faults in and criticising his seniors, and that he could rise in the Church only by getting them turned out of their place. They set him before us as ambitious, envious, almost selfish, a carping critic of others, yet not himself always very scrupulous in his methods, the least lovable and the most unlovely character in early Christian history. This picture is most characteristic of what is wrongly called the "critical" school, but is far from being confined to it, for the most extreme example is found in a Study of St. Paul, which takes the most "orthodox" view in all matters of criticism (Art. XIII).

The view which we take, then, is open to the charge of being old-fashioned, because it was held by the men and

women of an older time ; and there is a prejudice against a view which, like this, is most characteristic of an older generation and has been rejected by many learned and highly respected scholars in more recent times, a view which is distinctly less fashionable among those of the younger generation who most pride themselves on their open-mindedness and freedom from prejudice.

In Scotland, particularly, many of us remember the light in which Paul was held up to us in our childhood : to our mothers Paul was not a mere name in a book, but a real man held up before us as a model to imitate. He, more than any other character in the New Testament, was considered as the embodiment in actual life of the qualities that made the true "gentleman" (to use the old-fashioned term in the old-fashioned sense)—loftiness of motive, the abnegation of self under the influence of nobler considerations, the tendency to look at all things in life from a generous point of view, the frankness to speak out straight and emphatically against wrong doing and wrong thinking, combined with that courtesy, that delicate consideration for the feelings of others, that instinctive and inevitable respect for others which rise from true respect for self.

It may be considered by some that the greater space which St. Paul fills in the pages of the New Testament explains the reason why he bulked so much more largely in the estimation of our parents ; but this is a superficial way of judging. Paul occupies this space in the original authorities because of his personal qualities and historical importance ; and the older generation, which thought so highly of him, had a very sound and healthy appreciation of the character and personality of the various figures whose action is set before us in the New Testament.



That old-fashioned view was held in an old-fashioned way. There were scenes and events in Paul's life which were acknowledged to be difficult to understand ; but then the difficulty was met by a plain confession of inability to fully comprehend the situation and the reason why Paul acted as he did. It was in such cases considered sufficient to say, that the position of affairs was obscure, and the motives involved were complex and difficult to understand fully, but that Paul could not fall below the standard of his own nature : " once a gentleman, always a gentleman : " and that there must be an explanation of his motives and conduct which was true to his character, and no explanation that was not could be correct.

But, as is natural and right, men cannot remain contented to set aside in that way parts of the life of Paul as too difficult to understand. The robust and simple faith that there must be an explanation which conforms to that lofty conception of his character is not sufficient for the historian and the biographer : it is their duty to understand and to explain.

The idea was a natural one, deserving of careful examination, that the difficulty in regard to those parts and incidents in the life of St. Paul arose from the incorrectness of the general estimate put upon his character. It is quite true that it is the difficulties which are most instructive ; and that on them the attention of the investigator must especially be concentrated. Thus arose the theory, that the standard of judgment must be taken from the great, yet as it seemed difficult, scene in which St. Paul was brought into direct relations with the older Apostles ; that scene was universally understood to be described by St. Paul himself in writing to the Galatians, chap. ii., and also by the historian in the

Acts, chap. xv.: the obvious and undeniable differences between the two accounts, as regards both facts and still more, spirit, were accounted for by the theory that there was something to conceal, and that each account omitted something that the other recounted, and that the full story could only be got by uniting the two narratives.

The innuendo here lies in the idea that there was something to conceal ; and this was worked out in a remorseless and rigorous train of inference throughout not only that scene, but the whole of St. Paul's later life. The thought in the investigator's mind at every point was of this supposed concealment : his aim at every point was to disclose the latent facts which the narrator had been ashamed to make public. This was a canker that vitiated the whole investigation. The conclusion was imported by the investigator at the outset ; and was therefore easily established at every point, as the method was simply to insert the lacking element, which had been omitted by the narrator.

That method of writing history is a seductive, though a dangerous one. It gives infinite scope for ingenuity, brilliant suggestion and feats of skill. The reader is dazzled by the blaze of artificial fire, with which each scene is illumined, and by which the strongest and deepest shadows are thrown on the facts, in picturesque but distorting effects. But life is lived, and history should be studied, not in lime-light but in the light of day.

The application of that method to the New Testament was at first mainly the work of the Tübingen school of critics ; and from that school there has sprung a whole class of theories differing in many details, but agreeing in the general principle that the books of the New Testament were mostly or entirely forgeries of a later age, composed not

with a view to set forth the simple truth but with the intention of inculcating certain views and doctrinal opinions held by the writers in common with the particular party or section of the Christian Church to which each belonged.

The Tübingen school did not confine their demonstration of their method to New Testament history. They used it elsewhere, as, *e.g.*, in Schwegler's *History of Rome*; and the issue is manifest. Not merely has it been rejected by other scholars on the ground of being merely theoretical and imaginative, it has been disproved, root and branch, in idea and in method and in results, by the progress of discovery.

The reply to the Tübingen theories for a long time took the form of denying that any discrepancies existed between the accounts in Gal. ii. and Acts xv.; and many laboured demonstrations of that kind were published. The ordinary student could not rest satisfied with this: he felt the discrepancies. We know now that Gal. ii. and Acts xv. describe two different events, and that discrepancies are natural.

Then the young student was placed in a serious dilemma, between two classes of teachers. The one class as a rule took a nobler and more generous view of Paul; but they failed to apply their theory logically and convincingly to the details; and their solution could only repel the logical mind, and therefore strengthened the position of the opposing school. One seemed always driven back to the skilful logic of the Tübingen theorists, who carried their readers on in an unerring train of inference from their first assumptions: the discrepancies were due to the attempt to conceal facts that were discreditable.

Yet those Tübingen theorists were involved in an equally

serious difficulty. When one faced the practical facts of history and life, one could find no answer to the question how that Paul whom they imagined could achieve what he did. How was he able to move the hearts of men and touch their feelings? His work is simply unintelligible unless we assume that he had a boundless power of sympathising with others and taking them to himself, such as is inconsistent with censorious, self-seeking ambition. When one sought the answer to these questions, one found that every critic was at variance with himself. In one page they recognised in Paul the qualities which in another they denied him. It was never possible to find a man in the critics' Paul. They set before their readers no unity or reality, but a many-natured bundle of qualities like Frankenstein's artificial man. While the critics praised Paul in the general view, and admired his marvellous influence, they had little but blame for him in detail; their admiration seemed only theoretical, but, whenever it came to a question of fact or action, it was only faults in him that they saw and emphasised.

But the student who has too exclusive an acquaintance with theories and too little practical experience of life does not easily realise how essentially self-contradictory and impossible that conception of Paul is: one who *lives with shadows for his company instead of men and women*, who knows books, not the facts of life or the natural development of human conduct, can easily be blind to the inconsistency, or, if dimly conscious of it, can yet keep his eyes shut. This weakness of judgment is intensified by a deep-seated vice in the modern methods of scholarship.

The student finds that there is so much to learn that he rarely has time even to begin to know. It is inexorably

required of him that he shall be familiar with the opinions of many teachers dead and living, and it is not often sufficiently impressed on him that mere ability to set forth in fluent and polished language the thoughts of others—assuming that he can acquire that power at which he aims, and towards which he struggles with all his energy—is not real “knowledge”. He does not learn that learning must be thought out afresh by him from first principles, and tested in actual experience, before it becomes really his own. In Plato’s words, he gets at college much “true opinion” (let us hope not “false opinion”), but little “knowledge”. He must *live* his opinions before they become knowledge, and he is fortunate if he is not compelled prematurely to express them too frequently and too publicly, so that they become hardened and fixed before he has had the opportunity of trying them and moulding them in real life and experience.

Yet, if one’s experiences are not too unfavourable to permit due growth, if one is not too soon hardened by premature success or any other cause into perfect self-satisfaction and contentment, one must gradually become convinced that the Paul of real life was a very different character from the theorist’s Paul; and the man who gradually takes form before one’s mind, in the vivid comprehension of his words and actions, is (as one then finds) the same Paul whom the author of Acts had in his view. Then one recognises and knows, absolutely and irresistibly and for ever, that Luke had known the man, had been his friend and confidant and coadjutor, and was not an impostor of the second century who was wholly dependent on written sources of information, which he barely understood and frequently mangled. Thus Paul and Luke stand together. If the theorist’s Paul be the true one, then the writer of

---

Acts had never known him, for he describes a different person—the generous and lovable Paul. But when you think of this other Paul, then you feel the deep, intimate, personal love and admiration that Luke entertained for him, giving life and reality to every sentence that he writes.

Thus after all one comes back to the old-fashioned view, but not in the old-fashioned way. One has acquired also the virtues of modern scholarship, the resolution to be slave to no authority, to test every opinion, and never to remain contented in the presence of any difficulty. One is resolved to understand Paul's action throughout, and not to rest content with the assumptions in which general opinion has acquiesced. Then one learns that current conceptions must be corrected in important respects, and that, when the needed corrections are made, the difficulties turn out to be due to errors in regard to the general framework and surroundings amid which Paul's work was done. In the belief that most of the difficulties are thus solved, the following Study of the practical life, the Statesmanship, of Paul is written.