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PAULINE AND OTHER
STUDIES

IN EARLY CHRISTIAN HISTORY

BY

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VII

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

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THE question with regard to the historical trustworthiness and the date of composition of the Acts of the Apostles is at present in a somewhat delicate and wavering position. A marked change has taken place during the last ten years in the attitude of the school which we must call by the misleading epithet of the "critical" party toward the question. Twenty or fifteen years ago there was a large body of learned opinion in Europe which regarded the question as practically decided and ended, with the result that the Acts was a work composed somewhere toward the middle of the second century after Christ, by an author who held strong views about the disputes taking place in his own time, and who wrote a biased and coloured history of the early stages in Christian history with the intention of influencing contemporary controversies. The opinion was widely held in Europe that no scholar who possessed both honesty and freedom of mind could possibly dispute this result.

Such extreme opinions are now held chiefly by the less educated enthusiasts, who catch up the views of the great scholars and exaggerate them with intense but ill-informed fervour, seeing only one side of the case and both careless and ignorant of the opposite side. Setting aside a small school in Holland, it would be difficult to find in Europe

any scholar of acknowledged standing who would not at once admit that criticism has failed to establish that extreme view, and that an earlier date and greater trustworthiness can reasonably be claimed for the book. But when we go beyond this general admission, we find that critical and scholarly opinion is now wavering and far from self-consistent; it has not attained complete and thorough consciousness of its own position, and it tries to unite prejudices and feelings of the earlier narrow and confident critical period with the freer and less dogmatically positive attitude of the most recent scholarship.

While we are glad at the decisive defeat of the hard-and-fast confidence expressed by the older criticism, we desire to acknowledge fully the service that its bold and acute spirit has rendered to New Testament study. We believe that, while its results are to a very great degree mistaken, and its books may safely be relegated to the remotest shelves of libraries, its spirit was in many respects admirable, and it formed a necessary stage in the slow progress towards truth. We honour many of those whose views we treat as so mistaken more highly than we do some whose opinions seem to us to approximate practically much more closely to the truth, but whose spirit showed little of the enthusiastic devotion to historical method which characterised the great critical scholars.

But if their spirit was so admirable and their learning so great, why were their results so far from the truth? That question must rise to the lips of every reader. Apart from psychological reasons, such as the too strong reaction and revolt from the tyranny of an assumed and unverified standard of orthodox opinion, the great cause of error lay in misapprehension as to Roman Imperial history. The history

PLATE VII.

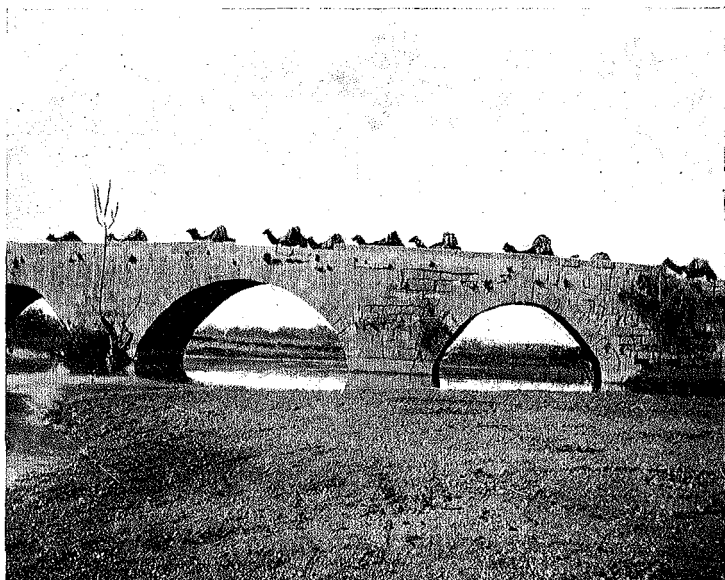


FIG. 12.—The Bridge over the Cydnus on the East of Tarsus
(Mrs. Christie of Tarsus).

To face p. 192.

See p. 274.

of the Empire has been recreated in the last quarter of a century. The main facts indeed remain unmodified, but the spirit, the tone, the point of view are entirely changed. The Roman Empire has now become known to us in an entirely different way. The ancient historians recorded striking events and the biographies of leading personages. They were almost wholly silent as to the way in which the Empire was organised and administered, the relation of the parts to each other, the development of the provinces, and, in short, almost everything which the modern historian regards as really important. The mad freaks of Caligula, the vices of Nero, were recorded in minute detail; but we look vainly in the old historians for any account of the method whereby the first six years of Nero's reign were made one of the best and happiest periods in the history of the world.

The truth is that the machinery of government was so ably put together that it was to a considerable degree independent of the personal character of the Emperor, whose vices and crimes might run riot in the capital and keep his immediate surroundings in a state of continuous panic without doing much harm to the general administration of the Empire. The city of Rome was no longer the heart and brain and seat of life for the Empire. The provinces were growing every year in importance; and the pre-eminence of Rome was becoming in some degree a superstition and an antiquarian survival. But the old historians did not see the truth; they still thought that it was beneath the dignity of Rome to regard the provinces as more than ornamental appendages and embellishments of her dignity.

In recent years the continuous study of the details of administration has resulted in bringing them together in

such numbers that some conception can be gained of the real character of Roman Imperial history. Mommsen has been the organiser of the study. He has had many coadjutors. Scholars of many nations have worked under his direction, formally or informally; but it is he that has mapped out the work and indicated the proper method; and he beyond all others has been able to take a comprehensive survey of the whole field. But, unfortunately, he has never written the history of the Empire. He has published a survey of the provinces of the Empire, lucid and able, but so brief in its treatment of each separate country that it is more valuable as teaching general principles than as a record of the actual facts in each province.

Thus the results of the new methods of Imperial history have not been fully applied to the study of early Christian history. They have been little known to the theologians, and have certainly never been thoroughly appreciated by them. Now Christianity was the fullest expression of the new spirit in the Roman Empire, the refusal of the provinces to accept tamely the tone of Rome. In Christianity the provinces conquered Rome and recreated the Empire. To study Christianity from the proper historical point of view, it is therefore peculiarly necessary to stand on the level of the new Roman history. There lies the defect in the theological criticism of the New Testament on its historical side; it has missed the vital factor in the history, and with many wise and able suggestions it has erred seriously in the general view. On the whole, German criticism of early Christian history has been, and still is, in the pre-Mommsenian stage as regards its historical spirit.

Let us take an example. For many years critic after critic discussed the question of Imperial persecution of the

Christians, examined the documents, rejected many indubitably genuine documents as spurious, and misinterpreted others, with the result that with quite extraordinary unanimity the first idea of State persecution of Christians was found in Trajan's famous "Rescript," written about A.D. 112 in answer to a report by the younger Pliny. Now observe the result. If there never was any idea of State persecution before that year, then all documents which allude to or imply the existence of State persecution must belong to a period later than 112. At a stroke the whole traditional chronology of the early Christian books is demolished, for even those which are not directly touched by that inference are indirectly affected by it. The tradition lost all value, and had to be set aside as hopelessly vitiated.

But now it is universally admitted, as the fundamental fact in the case, that Pliny and Trajan treat State persecution of the Christians as the standing procedure. Pliny suggests, in a respectful, hesitating, tentative way, reasons why the procedure should be reconsidered. Trajan reconsiders it and affirms again the general principle; but in its practical application he introduces a very decided amelioration. The only marvel is that any one could read the two documents and not see how obvious the meaning is. Yet a long series of critics misunderstood the documents, and rested their theory of early Christian history on this extraordinary blunder. Beginning with this false theory of dating and character, they worked it out with magnificent and inexorable logic to conclusions which twenty years ago the present writer, like many others, regarded as unimpeachable, but which are now seen to be a tissue of groundless fancies.

This change of view as regards the attitude of the Roman state toward the Christian Church, while it affects the whole

New Testament, has been the turning-point in the tide of opinion regarding the Acts. That book is the history of early Christianity in the Roman Empire; there were indubitably some attempts to propagate Christianity toward the east and south, beyond the limits of the Empire, but the author of the Acts regarded these efforts as unimportant and omits them entirely from his view. The idea that Acts was composed about the middle of the second century was based on the false conception of the relation between Christianity and the state, and the new views have driven the current of educated opinion toward a first-century date. There is a widespread consensus that, so far as the time of composition is concerned, there is no reason why the Acts might not have been written by the friend and companion of Paul, the beloved physician Luke.

But that conclusion as to authorship is vehemently denied by most of the European "critical" scholars (to use again that most objectionable and misleading epithet, which has become so fixed in the language that it can hardly be avoided). They find other reasons which seem to them to prove that this book, written during the probable lifetime of Luke, could not possibly be the work of an associate of Paul. It seems to them too full of inaccuracies and even of blunders as to facts. Two causes, especially, conspire to produce this opinion (which we think erroneous).

In the first place, the minute dissection and scrutiny of details made by the older critics still exercise a great influence even on those who unhesitatingly reject the general result. Forgetful that a scrutiny made under a false prepossession and with a false method cannot be trustworthy, they approach each detail with the stern "critical" judgment still ringing in their ears and biasing their minds

unconsciously. Thus there is manifest in their work much wavering and uncertainty of view. At one moment they condemn the old judgment; but on another page the earlier criticism rises as fresh and strong as ever, and opinions and principles are assumed which have no defence except in the older critical view, and which are mere assumptions unjustifiable on the more modern view. Accordingly, what is urgently required at the present time in early Christian history is a completely new start, free from all assumptions whether on the "critical" or on the "traditional" side. We have to begin by stripping ourselves of all our inherited views and all the views put into us by teachers (often justly revered and almost idolised teachers), and test every suggestion and every opinion before we begin to utilise them in rebuilding the fabric of our knowledge. Such is the method in which the Acts of the Apostles should now be studied.

In the second place, while part of the old misconception as to the relation between the Empire and the Christians has been cleared away, much misapprehension still remains. It is not recognised clearly enough that Paul, from a very early stage in his career, must have had a clear idea of a Christian Roman Empire. The new religion was to conquer the whole world, to recognise no bounds of nationality, and to include the barbarian and the Scythian as well as the Jew, the Greek, and the Roman. But his method of conquering the world was to begin with the Empire of which he was a citizen. Starting with the great cities of Southern Galatia, he was eager next to go to Ephesus; and though diverted from it for a time by the Divine revelation, which led him first to Macedonia and to Corinth, yet he returned to it again. There is a remarkable passage in the late Dr. Hort's *Lectures on Colossians and Ephesians*, p. 82, pointing out how

large a place the Ephesian scheme filled in Paul's plans. No one who reads that paragraph can doubt that Dr. Hort, as he described Paul's eagerness to evangelise Ephesus, had in his mind the idea that Paul conceived Ephesus as the gate of the East toward the West (which in fact it was), and as the next step in the conquest of the Roman Empire; he had already established his position in Syrian Antioch, in Tarsus, in Iconium and Pisidian Antioch. Ephesus was the intermediate step toward Corinth, which he had already occupied. After he had planted his banner in Ephesus, he had established his line of communication firmly along the great road that led to the capital of the Empire; and then he announced to his lieutenants, "I must also see Rome" (Acts xix. 21). Shortly afterward he wrote to the Romans, "I will go on by you into Spain," the great province of the West; and incidentally he mentioned to them other provinces, Illyricum, Macedonia, Achaia. That is the language, not of a mere enthusiast, but of the general and statesman who plans out the conquest of the Empire. He talks of provinces; and as he marches on his victorious course, he plants his footsteps in their capitals. See p. 77 f.

Such is the conception of Paul's statesmanlike schemes to which many recent scholars are tending. For example, Principal A. Robertson, of King's College, London, writes in *The Expositor*, January, 1899, p. 2: "With Ramsay I assume that the evangelisation of the Roman world as such was an object consciously before his mind and deliberately planned; that was the case before he wrote to the Romans".

But if that be so, then Paul's classification of his churches must have been according to the Roman system. He himself is our authority for saying that he so classified them; he speaks of the churches of Asia, of Achaia, of

Macedonia, of Galatia. The first three names indicate Roman provinces; no one questions that. The fourth also must equally indicate a Roman province. But there lies the difficulty and controversy, which must be settled before any further progress is possible. That Galatia in Paul's epistles must be regarded as the province is now very widely admitted in Britain, and, as I am told, also in America; in Germany a growing number of distinguished scholars also hold that view, *e.g.*, Zahn, Clemen, and many others, but there the majority is distinctly on the opposite side. It is unnecessary to mention here the many serious questions of early Christian history that depend on this controversy, trivial as it seems in itself; the present writer and many much abler and more learned scholars have discussed them in a series of works. This is the next point which must be agreed upon in the study of the Acts, before any serious progress can be made.

The present writer, starting with the confident assumption that the book was fabricated in the middle of the second century, and studying it to see what light it could throw on the state of society in Asia Minor, was gradually driven to the conclusion that it must have been written in the first century and with admirable knowledge. It plunges one into the atmosphere and the circumstances of the first century; it is out of harmony with the circumstances and spirit of the second century. In the first century the chief fact of Roman Imperial policy in the centre and east of Asia Minor was the gradual building up of the vast and complex province of Galatia (as the Romans, including the Roman Paul, called it), or the Galatic Territory (as the Greeks, including the Greek Luke, who composed the Acts of the Apostles, called it). That was no longer the case in the

second century; that state of things had then ceased to exist, and it was not a conception that could be restored by historical investigation; it had been a matter of spirit and tone and atmosphere, which when it ceased was never again appreciated or understood till the latest development of Roman historical study had recreated the process which we may call the Romanisation of Asia Minor.

Starting with the belief that Galatia in the New Testament was not the province, the writer found that Acts and the Epistles plunged him into the movements and forces acting in Asia Minor during the first century, when the Roman sphere of duty called Galatia was the great political fact. As he gradually and by slow steps threw off the misconceptions in which he had been trained, and realised that Paul thought as the Romans thought and spoke about the provinces of Rome, he found that, one by one, the difficulties which had been seen in the Acts disappeared, because they had their origin in misconceptions as to the period and circumstances of history. This view, that Paul wrote from the Roman standpoint, was only partially grasped in the present writer's earlier works, and has probably not yet been fully utilised by him. But already it has enabled him to appreciate the close relations and perfect harmony of view between the apostle and his disciple, the author of the Acts, and to set forth, in however imperfect fashion, the conception which both of them entertained of the growth of the early Church, as the subjugation of the Empire by the new provincial power of life and truth, the vitalising influence first for the Roman state and later for the world.