

The Apostle: A Life of Paul

PREFACE

One of the most frequently mentioned figures in history, whose writings are read by millions every day, is little known to this generation as a person. The name of Saint Paul the Apostle is familiar to all Christians, to most Jews and Muslims; he is quoted, argued about, attacked, and defended. Yet even those who read his words and adventures with unfailing regularity have scant idea of what he was like—as I found for myself when my publisher suggested I write a life of Paul.

Many recall only one book about him: H. V. Morton's deservedly famous *In the Steps of St. Paul*. But that was a travelogue, not a biography, and written in the very different conditions of the mid-1930s. So the man or woman of today, whether Bible reader or not, misses the fascination of knowing Paul as Luke or Timothy or the objectionable Elymas knew him.

I felt therefore that it would not be impertinent to approach Paul as I did my previous biographies. As a biographer who has enjoyed the intense satisfaction of getting closer to his subjects, I decided to accept the New Testament as I had accepted the boxes of letters and papers that had formed the source material of my other subjects, use it in the same way, and see what happened. A biographer develops a nose, a sort of instinct, and it was not long before I was struck inescapably by the credibility, the genuineness of the person who was emerging from the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles taken as a whole. A convincing character, with a completely credible if astonishingly unusual story, was taking hold of me, until

I found more and more excitement in getting nearer the heart of the man. I have been familiar with the Bible since childhood, but now I was seeing Paul as if for the first time: his motives, aims, and priorities; what mattered to him and what he was indifferent to; his attitude toward his mistakes when he recognized them. And what he was willing to die for.

I began to learn his contemporaries' view of him. There have been plenty of opinions ever since. Nietzsche called him "one of the most ambitious of men, whose superstition was only equaled by his cunning; a much tortured, much to be pitied man, an exceedingly unpleasant person both to himself and to others." Farrar, the Victorian dean, portrayed him as loftily superior, disdaining mortal weaknesses above ordinary passions, a saint in cold marble. Basil Matthews made him a muscular Christian, a boy's hero. None of these Pauls resembled the man I was getting to know, neither as I studied the New Testament and many other writings nor as I drove my Volkswagen along the roads he had walked two thousand years before.

As any writer on Paul must, I have dug into the enormous and ever-growing mass of scholarship about him and his background, but since I write for the general reader I have not burdened the narrative with the arguments that led to my conclusions. In regard to the gaps in Paul's life, I have sought to introduce nothing that cannot be deduced from the evidence and have aimed at inference rather than conjecture. There is a world of difference between inference and conjecture, and imagination must not roam at the cost of authenticity.

Paul lived about sixty-seven generations back—just twice as long ago as the Norman Conquest of Britain, or five times the

European colonization of the Americas. He has more than ever a contemporary interest. Recent radical thinkers have attracted the popular press because they are exciting; Paul is far more exciting and radical. I have tried to make him and his amazing story freshly alive to those for whom he is nothing except the man who wrote the chapter on charity and to those who read him frequently, whether Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, or the Jews for whom he had such unbreakable love.

When I had finished writing, I felt rather as when nearing the summit of a high mountain. You recognize other routes up; you realize how little you know of the terrain. Yet you get a grand view—of the mountain and of the world around.

But I have not reached the top. There are some unattainable crags just below the summit.
