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Paul's Affliction in Asia:

2 Corinthians 1:8

by Roy Yates

'For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself.' Mr. Yates has already made several contributions on problems of New Testament exegesis to our pages, and now offers this helpful study of a problem text in 2 Corinthians.

During the period of his Ephesian ministry (Act 19:1-20:1) St. Paul suffered several traumatic experiences, including personal dangers and possible imprisonments. The Acts of the Apostles mentions only the riot caused by Demetrius the silversmith (Acts:19:23-41), but there are a number of references in the Epistles which lead us to suppose that the troubles Paul experienced at Ephesus were more serious and more numerous than Luke would have us believe. The opposition reached such a pitch that Paul refers to it as 'fighting with wild beasts' (1 Cor. 15:32). He also uses the language of the spectacle in the arena to describe the ignominy to which he had been subject in his work as an apostle (1 Cor. 4:9). At a later date he was in such serious trouble that he considered death to be the inevitable outcome of his afflictions (2 Cor. 1:8-10), and his escape as a divine deliverance. He gives a lengthy catalogue of sufferings and hardships endured for the sake of the Gospel (2 Cor. 11:23-9), some of which must have happened to him during his stay at Ephesus. He tells of Prisca and Aquila who risked their necks for him (Rom. 16:4); warns Timothy of his adversary Alexander the coppersmith who had done him great harm (2 Tim. 4:14-17); and describes his work in Ephesus in terms of 'an open door . . . and many adversaries' (1 Cor. 16:9).

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Paul's troubles in Ephesus came to a head in the experience referred to in 2 Cor. 1:8-10. He had come so close to a terrible death that he had given himself up as lost. When deliverance came it was greeted as a miracle of resurrection, and as the action of God in response to prayer. The nature of the crisis is not specified in the epistle, but the Corinthians knew well what he was referring to, for they are meant to take comfort and hope from Paul's suffering and deliverance (2 Cor. 1:3-7). He is eager to open up his heart to them on the matter and tell them of the joy and the sorrow which are inseparably and paradoxically joined together in the preaching of the Gospel. The weakness and suffering of the Apostle only serves to make him rely even more on the power of God, who works through him, and not on himself (2 Cor. 4:7-5:10).

What then happened to St. Paul in Ephesus that caused him to despair of life itself, and which left a permanent mark on his life and theology? A number of suggestions have been made:—

(1). *The Demetrius riot.* As Luke tells the story in Acts 19:23-41 he is

concerned to give the impression that law and order were maintained and that the Christian missionaries could rely on the impartial justice of the civic and legal authorities to aid the spread of the Gospel. One of the apologetic motives of Acts is to show that Christianity is not in opposition to the state. There is little hint here of the crushing defeat of 2 Cor. 1:8, although there are some clues in the mention of Alexander the Jew (Acts 19:33) and Paul's swift departure from Ephesus (Acts 20:1).

(2). *'Fighting with wild beasts'* (1 Cor. 15:32). Was Paul ever condemned to face the lions in the arena?¹ It was not possible for a Roman citizen to be condemned to the lions without losing his Roman citizenship,² which Paul still held at his trial in Caesarea (Acts 22:25-9, 23:27, 25:11f). It is more likely that he is using figurative language,³ as the phrase 'humanly speaking' shows, and that Paul means that he was near to being torn to pieces by infuriated men. The preaching of the Gospel carried risk to his life and limb, but apart from the Christian hope of resurrection it is all to no avail. This is a different experience from the Demetrius riot, and earlier than the deadly peril of 2 Cor. 1:8 where Paul is referring to a comparatively recent experience. But it represents a presage of that later and more terrible trouble that nearly ended Paul's life and work in Ephesus.

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(3). *Trial in a State Court.* This fits in well with the theory of an Ephesian imprisonment, and Paul's reference to numerous imprisonments in 2 Cor. 11:23. F. F. Bruce⁴ suggests that the silence of Acts on this question could have to do with events surrounding the poisoning of Silanus, Proconsul of Asia, and the consequent disfavour that surrounded his family and associates. The Jewish community in Ephesus would be quick to exploit the situation to bring a charge against Paul. A successful litigation, followed by conviction, could have led to the deadly peril.

(4). *Flogging in a Jewish Court.* G. S. Duncan⁵ suggests that, failing to get Paul convicted in a State court, the Jews of Asia took the law into their own hands, and in a purely Jewish ecclesiastical court, administered the thirty-nine lashes (2 Cor. 11:23). This brought him to the verge of death. Duncan places this event in Laodicea.

(5). *Illness.* It is possible that this peril was an illness which nearly

¹ See the apocryphal *Acts of Paul*.

² *Digesta Iustiniani* 28.1.8.4. 'Those, however, who are condemned to the sword or to the beasts or to the mines, lose civil rights.'

³ Cf. Ignatius *Rom* 5:1.

⁴ *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*. (London, Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 3rd. Edn. 1962) p.393 n.29, 401 n.70; *Paul: Apostle of the Free Spirit*. (Exeter, Paternoster, 1977), 295f.

⁵ 'Paul's Ministry in Asia — The Last Phase'. *NTS* 3(1956-57) 215.

proved fatal (*cf* 2 Cor. 12:7-10). C. H. Dodd⁶ associates this illness with a second conversion or psychological watershed in the experience of Paul, following the bitter humiliation of the 'painful visit' (2 Cor. 2:1). In the depth of humiliation and in the weakness of the flesh he found firm ground. On recovery from his illness Paul approaches the Corinthian problem and his ministry in general with a changed mood (2 Cor. 12:10). When he accepted his limitations he was liberated afresh. This is supported by the quiet self-abandonment of 2 Cor. 4-5, and the change of temper in the later Epistles.

(6). *Trouble in the Churches* (2 Cor. 11:28), whether caused by legalists, libertines, false brethren, or others. Paul was under constant pressure in his work as an apostle, especially in his relationship with the Church at Corinth, including the potential collapse of his mission field.

To our reading the evidence seems to suggest that Paul's affliction in Asia was caused by Jewish opposition. His success in Ephesus and in the Province of Asia (Acts 19:10) could be seen as a threat to the Jewish Diaspora mission, as actual and potential Jewish proselytes were attracted to Christianity. Also the collection for the Jerusalem famine relief fund (Acts 11:29f, 24:17; Gal. 2:10; 1 Cor. 16:1ff; 2 Cor. 8 and 9; Rom. 15:25ff) was open to misunderstanding, and, in so far as it detracted from the collection of the annual temple tax levied on all Jews for the maintenance of the Temple in Jerusalem, could have led to the charge of 'temple robbery'.⁷ (Acts 19:37). It is possible that the leader of the Jewish opposition in Ephesus could have been Alexander,⁸ mentioned in Acts (19:33) for his attempt to dissociate the Jewish community from Paul; and in 2 Timothy (4:14) as having done 'great harm' to him. Later on in his address to the leaders of the Church at Ephesus Paul speaks of 'trials which befell me through the plots of the Jews' (Acts 20:19); and during his last visit to Jerusalem it was 'Jews from Asia' (Acts 21:27) who incited the temple crowds to lynch Paul. These Jews would be concerned to make it clear to the authorities that the Christianity of Paul was something other than Judaism (Acts 19:33), which was a *religio licita*, and could not enjoy the same protection under Roman law. This is why the Acts of the Apostles, written a generation later, was so anxious to show that Christianity was not hostile to the state. The next step would be to bring charges against Paul, possibly taking advantage of the power vacuum following the assassination of the Proconsul Silanus to secure a verdict against him. In this situation Paul

⁶ 'The Mind of Paul: A Psychological Approach', *BJRL* 17 (1933), 91-105, espec. 80ff.

⁷ G. S. Duncan *St. Paul's Ephesian Ministry*. (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1929). 42, 233f.

⁸ Cf. the Alexander of 1 Tim. 1:20 who is an excommunicated Christian.

fully expected to die. His despair was doubly deepened by the fact that he was abandoned by his brethren to face his fate alone (2 Tim. 4:16). We can surmise that only the heroic attempts of Prisca and Aquila (Rom. 16:4) helped secure his escape, and that thereafter he had to flee the city for his life.

Paul's unhappy experience in Asia needs to be set in the context of the Law/Gospel controversy which dominated this period of his ministry, and which is reflected in the Epistles. If we accept T. W. Manson's⁹ grouping of the major epistles (Galatians, Philippians, 1 and 2 Corinthians and Romans) around Paul's Ephesian ministry a pattern of divergence from Judaism and from Jewish Christianity emerges, coming to a head in the opposition Paul encountered in Ephesus and in the deadly peril of 2 Cor. 1:8.

(a) Paul's work among the Gentiles had led him to the conviction that Christianity was something entirely different from Judaism, and also to assert that the law was not only unnecessary for the salvation of the Gentiles, but that it had been superseded by Christianity. His views became crystallised as he dealt with opposition, and achieved written form in the epistles.

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(b) The Apostle's rejection of the Law led to fierce opposition from the Jews of the Diaspora, who were themselves working for converts among the Gentiles, and who would resent Paul's policy of using their synagogues as the initial base for his mission to their communities.

(c) Jewish Christianity, based initially in Jerusalem, also regarded Paul and his version of the Gospel as somewhat of an embarrassment. They would not want their fellow Jews, among whom they were preaching the Gospel, to suppose that they too regarded the Law as having been superseded. So representatives went out from Jerusalem, equipped with letters of accreditation (2 Cor. 3:1f), to correct what they believed to be Paul's erroneous views (Gal. 2: 2 Cor. 10-13). The rift was so great that on his arrest in Jerusalem the Jewish Christians did not even speak a word on his behalf, and in all probability refused to accept his collection for the famine relief fund.¹⁰

(d) On another front Paul had to deal with libertines who carried his message of freedom in the Spirit to extremes that savoured of later Gnosticism.

Ephesus was the hub of Paul's ministry and mission among the Gen-

⁹ 'St. Paul in Ephesus' — a series of 4 papers: *BJRL* 23 (1938), 182-200; 24 (1940), 59-80; 26 (1941), 101-20; 26 (1942), 327-41. also 'St. Paul's Letter to the Romans — and Others' *BJRL* 31 (1948), 224-40.

¹⁰ J. D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*. (London, SCM, 1977) 252-7.

tiles. Despite trials and tribulations there were tremendous opportunities (1 Cor. 16:9). At the crisis of 2 Cor. 1:8 the future of the Gentile mission hung in the balance, Paul was in peril of his life, and the distinctive Pauline Gospel in danger of being swept away by persecution from the Jews and amendment by libertines and legalists. By a miracle of grace Paul survived the ordeal to consolidate his work and to realise afresh that the Gospel was effective in weakness as well as in strength.