

PSYCHOBIOGRAPHY: ANALYSING THE MIND OF APOSTLE PAUL IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

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ABSTRACT

Psychobiography is recently a fascinating field which combines both psychology and biography. This study is usually applied by the researchers to trace the psychological motives behind a historically significant individual. In this thesis considering Apostle Paul, not only as a religious man but in the perspective of historically significant personality who had played a major role in the foundation of early Christian churches brings new backdrops and also helps us in reconstructing many hidden truths. Psychological Study on Paul is done by many researchers around the globe, but psycho biographical study on Apostle Paul is merely a new approach. This research article aims in presenting the psychobiographical life of Apostle Paul.

Keywords: Psychobiography, personality, motives, truths, backdrops.

William McKinley Runyan's Psychobiography on Jesus was one of the impressive works in which the gospels of Mathew, Mark, Luke and John were taken as a primary source for research not in a scriptural perspective but as a text dealing with the biography of Jesus Christ. Similarly, Paul's various letters to early churches and his comrades included in the Bible are taken as the primary sources for this thesis. Harold Ellens and Wayne Rollins have also written four volumes packed with essays on psychology and biblical studies which helps in looking Bible in a psychological perspective.

The first question which always arises in the minds of every reader is that. Can a good psychobiography on Apostle Paul be written with the available text? And how can psychological methods make a contribution to the study of the historical Paul and the early churches he established? And another important question is “If at all a serious study on Apostle Paul is made with the available books he had written in the Bible, and a new perspective is opened up, will it be considered blasphemous? Or accepted?” The answer for the first two questions will be discussed throughout this thesis, but the third question is important that it needs an immediate answer. In this postmodern era, researchers theoretically approach various texts and bring new innovative perspectives with their final derivative, turning out with no conclusion or no single meaning. These theories though unsettled are accepted in all fields of research. Christian studies are also no exception to these recent developing phenomena, it accepts various innovative ideas of the biblical scholars over the past decades and thereby establishes new theological doctrines.

Rollins also studied the unconscious motives behind a person’s behavior and postulated it as an autonomous factor in the human personality. He calls the historical events connected with a person’s life as ‘psychic events’ “... which lies as the base of any outburst such as religious movements and texts ...” (Rollins 111). Thus, the task becomes two-dimensional when looking for the character of the person as it leads to those original events that gave rise to the text. To focus more on biblical perspective, psychological theories are also important to be considered. “Why Apostle Paul?” is the next question which arises. Paul’s life had been the subject of interest for many scholars, for decades. However, there is no evidence of a psychobiographical study conducted on Paul’s personality development, motivations and psychosocial underpinnings as a religiously important individual yet.

Mc Adams commented that “Psychobiographical studies aim at transforming an individual’s life into a coherent and illuminating story by using psychological theory in a

systematic way” (Howe 199). The selection of a particular personality for psychobiographical research is primarily based on the intended individual’s significance or interest in this person. It is advised that psychobiographical researchers let the subject choose them, and not the other way around (Elms 94). Apostle Paul was chosen on the basis of his unique and charismatic personality, as well as on various mysterious aspects of his life that the researcher had come to know about prior to the investigation. The main aim of this study was to explore and describe the psychodynamic life of Apostle Paul, with a particular focus on his psychosocial personality development.

If *The Holy Bible* is taken as the only source of studying the life of Apostle Paul, then the biography of the Apostle can be compiled from two sources; his own Epistles, and the narrative in the Acts of the Apostles. The former provides much subsidiary information about his missionary labors while the latter sketches his early history and his chronology of missionary visits. As a biographer it is essential to comprehend the influences under which he grew up. “The position of a Jewish family in Tarsus, the kind of education which the son of such a family would receive as a boy in his Hebrew home, or in the schools of his native city, and in his riper youth” at the feet of Gamaliel in Jerusalem shows the psychological brought up of a child being trained as an expounder of the Law.

A clear view of the state of the Roman Empire at his time, and especially of its system in the provinces in which the Jews felt diasporic is an important area to be considered. The Epistles he wrote during the reign of first Roman emperors also introduces the conflicts between the Jews, the Greeks and the Romans.

PAUL’S BIRTH

The city of Tarsus where Paul was born incorporated both Greek population and Roman Empire. The birth or native place of Saul was spent in the shelter of a Hebrew home

not in name only but in spirit. Neither the Roman power nor the Greek ideas haunt his childhood or infancy. Saul grew up an Israelitish boy, nurtured in those histories of the chosen people which he was destined so often to repeat in the synagogues, with the new and wonderful commentary supplied by the life and resurrection of a crucified Messiah. “From a child he knew the Scriptures,” which ultimately made him “wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus,” as he says of Timothy (2 Tim. 3:15)

Acts 22:3 clearly brings out the pictures of Paul’s birth that he was a Jew.

I am verily a man which am a Jew, born in Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, yet brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, and taught according to the perfect manner of the law of the fathers, and was zealous toward God, as ye all are this day.

THE TRIBE OF BENJAMIN

Saul was circumcised and named on the eighth day as per the Jewish custom. Another interesting phenomenon is that Jewish children in general take their father’s name as it was a common practice, in all ages of Jewish History, even without a prophetic intimation, to adopt a name expressive of religious feelings. When the infant at Tarsus receive the name of Saul, it might be “after the name of his father” and it was a name of traditional celebrity in the tribe of Benjamin, for it was that of the first king anointed by Samuel

Philippians 3:5 emphasize that he was from the tribe of Benjamin.

Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews

PAUL’S EDUCATION

The educational maxim of any Jew at that period was: “At five years of age, let children begin the Scripture; at ten, the Mishnah; at thirteen, let them be subjects of the Law” which is something like a Christian confirmation ceremony. The boy was then called a “Child of the Law” and the father declared in the presence of the Jews that his son fully understood the Law and was fully responsible for his sins.

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PAUL’S STUDENT LIFE AND EARLY MANHOOD

Saul was passing through the busy years of his student life, nursing his religious enthusiasm and growing in self-righteousness. Saul was growing more and more familiar with the outward observances of the Law, and gaining that experience of the “spirit of bondage” which should enable him to understand himself, and to teach to others, the blessings of the “spirit of adoption.” The struggles of this period of his life he has himself described in the seventh chapter of Romans. The first martyrdom in Christianity has the deepest interest for the researcher since it is the first occasion when Saul comes in his early manhood. Where had he been during these years which are rapidly passed over in a few lines, the years in which the foundations of Christianity were laid? And it can’t be assumed that he had remained continuously in Jerusalem.

Many years had elapsed since he came as a boy from his home in Tarsus. He must have attained the age of twenty-five or thirty years when our Lord’s public ministry began. His education was completed, and it is a conjecture, with much probability, that he returned

to Tarsus. When he says, in the first letter to the Corinthians (9:1), “Have I not seen the Lord?” and when he speaks in the second (5:16) of having “known Christ after the flesh,” he seems only to allude, in the first case, to his vision on the road to Damascus, and in the second to his carnal opinions concerning the Messiah. It is hardly conceivable that if he had been at Jerusalem during Jesus’ public ministration there, he should never allude to the fact. In this case he would surely have been among the persecutors of Jesus and have referred to this as the ground of his remorse, instead of expressing his repentance for his opposition merely to the Savior’s followers.

In the absence of more information it is difficult to write with confidence concerning this part of Apostle Paul’s life. Benson thinks he was a young student during our Lord’s ministry, and places a considerable interval between the Ascension of Christ and the persecution of Stephen. Lardner thinks that the restraint and retirement of a student might have kept him in ignorance of what was going on in the world. After the long gap, Paul’s presence is revealed with a personality of a mature knowledge of the Law, a stricter life, a more fervent zeal. His association with the schools of Tarsus might have helped him to get acquainted with that Greek literature, about Philo and Hellenistic Jews which he reveals in his writings.

PHARISEES VIEWS ON PAUL

The Pharisees had been the companions of Apostle Paul’s younger days. Death had made many changes in the course of fifteen years; but some must have been there who had studied with him at the feet of Gamaliel. Their opposition was doubtless embittered by remembering what he had been before his conversion. These were not the enemies whom Apostle Paul came to resist. The time was past when the Jews, unassisted by the Roman power, could exercise a cruel tyranny over the church. Its safety was no longer dependent on

the wisdom or caution of Gamaliel. The great debates at Jerusalem are no longer between Jews and Christians in the Hellenistic synagogues, but between the Judaizing and spiritual parties of the Christians themselves.

Many of the Pharisees, after the example of Apostle Paul, had believed that Jesus was Christ (Acts 15:5). But they had not followed the example of their school companion in the surrender of Jewish bigotry. The battle, therefore, which had once been fought without was now to be renewed within, the church. It seems that, at the very first reception of Paul and Barnabas in Jerusalem, some of these Pharisaic Christians rose up, and insisted that the observance of Judaism was necessary to salvation. They said that it was absolutely “needful to circumcise” the new converts, and to “command them to keep the Law of Moses.” The whole course of Apostle Paul’s procedure among the Gentiles was here openly attacked. Barnabas was involved in the same suspicion and reproach; and with regard to Titus, who was with them as the representative of the Gentile church, it was asserted that, without circumcision, he could not hope to be partaker of the blessings of the Gospel.

But far more was involved than any mere opposition, however factious, to individual missionaries, or than the severity of any conditions imposed on individual converts. The question of liberty or bondage for all future ages was to be decided; and a convention of the whole church at Jerusalem was evidently called for. In the meantime, before “the Apostles and elders came together to consider this matter” (Acts 15:6) Apostle Paul had private conferences with the more influential members of the Christian community (Gal. 1:2), and especially with James, Peter, and John (Gal. 2:9), the great apostles and pillars of the church. Extreme caution and management were required, in consequence of the intrigues of the false brethren, both in Jerusalem and Antioch. He was, moreover, himself the great object of suspicion; and it was his duty to use every effort to remove the growing prejudice. Thus, though conscious of his own inspiration, and tenaciously holding the truth which he knew to

be essential, he yet acted with that prudence which was characteristic of his whole life, and which he honestly avows in the Epistle to the Galatians.

CONDEMNATION OF APOSTLE PAUL

The fact whether Timothy fulfilled these last requests of the dying Apostle is doubtful. Also, whether he reached Rome in time to receive his parting commands, and cheer his latest earthly sufferings. The only intimation which seems to throw any light on the question, is the statement in the Epistle to the Hebrews, that Timotheus had been liberated from imprisonment in Italy. If, as appears not improbable, that Epistle was written shortly after Apostle Paul's death, it would be proved not only that the disciple fearlessly obeyed his master's summons, but that he actually shared his chains, though he escaped his fate. This, also, would lead us to think that he must have arrived before the execution of Apostle Paul, for otherwise there would be no reason to account for his being himself arrested in Rome; since, had he come too late, he would naturally have returned to Asia at once, without attracting the notice of the authorities.

The hope that Paul's last earthly wish was fulfilled. Yet if Timotheus did arrive before the closing scene, there could have been but a very brief interval between his coming and his master's death. For the letter which summoned him could not have been dispatched from Rome till the end of winter, and Apostle Paul's martyrdom took place in the middle of summer. There is no record of the final stage of his trial, and cannot assume the cause of its speedy conclusion. The readers are left to believe that it may have resulted in a sentence of capital punishment.

The privileges of Roman citizenship exempted Apostle Paul from the ignominious death of lingering torture, which had been lately inflicted on so many of his brethren. He was to die by decapitation: and he was led out to execution beyond the city walls, upon the road to

Ostia, the port of Rome. As he issued forth from the gate, his eyes must have rested for a moment on that sepulchral pyramid which stood beside the road, and still stands unshattered, amid the wreck of so many centuries, upon the same spot. That spot was then only the burial-place of a single Roman; it is now the burial-place of many Britons. The mausoleum of Caius Cestius rises conspicuously amongst humbler graves, and marks the site where Papal Rome suffers her Protestant sojourners to bury their dead.

In England and in Germany, in Scandinavia and in America, there are hearts which turn to that lofty cenotaph as the Sacred Point of their whole horizon; even as the English villager turns to the gray church tower, which overlooks the grave-stones of his kindred. Among the works of man, that pyramid is the only surviving witness of the martyrdom of Apostle Paul; and thus, regard it with yet deeper interest, as a monument unconsciously erected by a pagan to the memory of a martyr. Nor let us think that they who lie beneath its shadow are resting (as degenerate Italians fancy) in unconsecrated ground. Rather let us say, that a spot where the disciples of Paul's faith now sleep in Christ, so near the soil once watered by his blood, is doubly hallowed; and that their resting-place is most fitly identified with the last earthly journey and the dying glance of their own Patron Saint, the Apostle of the Gentiles.

DEATH OF APOSTLE PAUL

As the martyr and his executioners passed on, their way was crowded with a motley multitude of goers and comers between the metropolis and its harbor, merchants hastening to superintend the unloading of their cargoes, sailors eager to squander the profits of their last voyage in the dissipations of the capital, officials of the government, charged with the administration of the Provinces, or the command of the legions on the Euphrates or the Rhine, Chaldean astrologers, Phrygian eunuchs, dancing-girls from Syria with their painted

turbans, mendicant priests from Egypt howling for Osiris, Greek adventurers, eager to coin their national cunning into Roman gold, representatives of the avarice and ambition, the fraud and lust, the superstition and intelligence, of the Imperial world. Through the dust and tumult of that busy throng, the small troop of soldiers threaded their way silently, under the bright sky of an Italian midsummer.

They were marching, though they knew it not, in a procession more truly triumphal than any they had ever followed, in the train of General or Emperor, along the Sacred Way. Their prisoner, now at last and forever delivered from his captivity, rejoiced to follow his Lord “without the gate.” The place of execution was not far distant; and there the sword of the headsman ended his long course of sufferings, and released that heroic soul from that feeble body. Weeping friends took up his corpse, and carried it for burial to those subterranean labyrinths, where, through many ages of oppression, the persecuted Church found refuge for the living, and sepulchers for the dead.

Thus, died the Apostle, the Prophet, and the Martyr; bequeathing to the Church, in her government and her discipline, the legacy of his apostolic labors; leaving his Prophetic words to be her living oracles; pouring forth his blood to be the seed of a thousand Martyrdoms. Thenceforth, among the glorious company of the Apostles, among the goodly fellowship of the Prophets, among the noble army of Martyrs, his name has stood pre-eminent. And whosoever’s the holy Church throughout the entire world doth acknowledge God, there Paul of Tarsus is revered, as the great teacher of a universal redemption and a catholic religion the herald of glad tidings to all mankind.

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