

The life of a great apostle

John Nicholls

Paul—The Apostle by Grace.

John Mitchell.

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IT IS GOOD to be able once again to review a new book by our Brother John Mitchell. Though well past retirement age, he continues to write and give us the benefit of his understanding of Scripture and long experience.

The book under review is timely, for it is the first biography of the Apostle Paul to be produced in the Brotherhood for nearly 100 years (with the exception of a book by Brother Allan Spiers entitled *Paul—The Prisoner of Jesus Christ*, published by the Shield in Australia in 1991). Brother W. H. Boulton's book *Paul the Apostle* appeared in its first form in the 1920s, and is a succinct introduction to the apostle's life. Brother Mitchell's book is a much deeper study, written in the beautiful style that we associate with his writings. As always, he sticks closely to the Scripture record, and in the course of writing he has consulted many works on Paul, resulting overall in a balanced and well-judged biography. The book comprises some thirty-nine chapters of about five pages each, and includes footnotes. The reviewer found it helpful to have a Bible atlas handy while reading. Brother Mitchell explains in his preface that he has left out specific dates because of the lack of agreement amongst scholars.

Early years

An introductory chapter is followed by one entitled "Student and Man", and here the author discusses Paul's training as a Pharisee:

"Knowing and loving the converted Saul as a man of the highest integrity whose overwhelming desire was to please God, we shy away from including him in the strictures our Lord placed upon the Pharisees as a whole . . . Though his outlook must have been tempered by the liberality of his revered tutor [Gamaliel], he appears nevertheless to have harboured an excessive zeal in the principles

he stood for, and as a result there was but a small step for him to take to form an unreasonable hatred towards others who differed from him" (p. 6).

A fine chapter on Stephen follows, and there is in it the observation: "[Saul] believed himself to be defending his God, and the fierce emotion excited by the words of Stephen inflamed his anger all the more, because it confirmed the testimony of his conscience".

The chapter covering Saul's journey to Damascus to persecute the Nazarenes is excellent, and the author says, "It is almost incredible that a man such as Saul, who later revealed himself so sensitive to his own failings, should have been capable of such ruthless cruelty. The only possible explanation is the depths to which human nature can descend when conviction concerning a 'righteous cause' drives out all pity towards those who differ" (p. 13). He beautifully enlarges on how the 150-mile journey would have provided time and opportunity for doubts to cross his mind about what he was doing.

Saul's meeting with Ananias, and his subsequent baptism and then his three-year sojourn in Arabia, are perceptively dealt with in the chapter entitled "Damascus". The same is true for the next chapter, "Jerusalem", the place where Saul, accompanied by Barnabas, has the critically important meeting with Simon Peter of the Jerusalem ecclesia. Chapter 7, "Hidden Years", commences, "If the question be asked, 'Why did Saul's mission to the Gentiles take so long to get under way?' the answer must assuredly be that, in the purpose of God, the Jews in the Ecclesia of Christ, both Hebrew and Hellenist, needed time to come to terms with the revolutionary idea that the Gentiles could be accepted into spiritual Israel" (p. 28). But the years in Tarsus were not wasted. Maybe some of the hardships in 2 Corinthians were experienced then, or he received the revelations mentioned in the same letter; and certainly he would have had time with his family if they were still there.

The great work begins

Chapters 8 and 9, "Barnabas's Part" and "Saul becomes Paul", deal with the time when Paul's faith had been sufficiently tested for the great work of

preaching to begin. A year working with Barnabas in the Antioch ecclesia in amicable communion with the Jerusalem ecclesia was followed by the Spirit-guided injunction that the pair should move on to do God's work, first in Cyprus and then in Asia Minor. The perils they faced as they travelled to Antioch in Pisidia are graphically described. It was here that they encountered opposition from the Jews, and applied the wonderful words of Isaiah to their mission (Acts 13:46,47; Isa. 49:6). The chapter "Once was I stoned" relates how Paul was set upon by the crowd at Lystra "in a horrible reminder of Stephen's demise". Timothy's mother and grandmother may have succoured Paul overnight after the stoning, for "a close bond was created between Paul and the women and Timothy".

The news of the success of Paul's first missionary journey had now reached the Jerusalem ecclesia, and, after Barnabas and Paul had returned to Antioch in Syria, a deputation from Jerusalem came and insisted that the new Gentile converts should be circumcised before being accepted into Christ. In the chapter "The Battle Begins" the author relates the ensuing 'Jerusalem Conference', with all the inter-ecclesial tensions and the agreement that was reached, as recorded in Acts 15: "Paul and Barnabas had won a great battle for freedom, but, though officially confirmed, it did not end there. The war between Paul and the Judaisers, within and without the wider Ecclesia, went on for the rest of his life" (pp. 43,44).

"Brethren divided", the title of chapter 13, describes a condition all too common amongst Christadelphians. Paul had to oppose Simon Peter to his face, and then Paul and Barnabas had a sharp disagreement over John Mark. The author notes, however, that these divisions were healed later on, surely an example for our present Brotherhood to try to emulate. Silas from Jerusalem now accompanied Paul on what has become known as the second missionary journey, and in the next chapter the story is told of how Paul again visited Lystra, the home of Timothy. After circumcising Timothy as a preparation for the young man's accompanying Paul and Silas, they set off to journey through Asia Minor. The author notes:

"For Paul himself the acceptance of Timothy by his side had an intensely personal appeal. Unlike Peter and other Apostles he had no wife to comfort and console him in his many trials and tribulations, nor any siblings in whom he could confide. For the sake of the Lord he had

suffered the loss of all things. Now he had in Timothy one whom God had provided, whom he came to regard as his own son in the faith, and who proved worthy of that regard to the end of Paul's days. Truly, 'God sets the lonely in families!'" (p. 49).

Extending the preaching

It was at Troas, where Paul saw the vision of the man of Macedonia asking them to "come over . . . and help us", that Luke joined the party. Some have argued that Luke might have been that man. In the next five chapters there is a gripping account of how the Truth was first preached in what we now know as Europe. For a year and a half Paul stayed in Corinth, writing the letters to the Thessalonians while he was there. He developed a special bond with the Corinthian ecclesia.

After a brief visit to Jerusalem via Ephesus, Paul again visited the Galatian ecclesias and instituted a collection for the Jewish brethren and sisters in Judea who were suffering hardships. He went on to Ephesus, where there were disciples who had been baptized with John's baptism. Brother Mitchell comments on the second baptism of these into Christ, after instruction, "Thus did Paul lay down for the benefit of posterity the treatment of believers who for a variety of reasons seek fellowship with those of the true faith, having only a partial understanding of the things concerning the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ" (p. 74).

Paul spent three years in Ephesus, and his departure was hastened by the 'protest meeting' organised by the tradesmen of Ephesus, who were losing money because of declining sales of silver shrines of the goddess Artemis (Diana). The lives of Paul and his disciples were saved by the 'City Recorder', and Brother Mitchell concludes chapter 22 of his book with these words: "Whereupon this capable man, the answer to the prayers of Paul and his disciples for the safety of Gaius and Aristarchus, dismissed the assembly, and the crowds went quietly away" (p. 78).

While Paul was still at Ephesus he had been in communication with the Corinth ecclesia, and chapter 23, "Difficulties with Corinth", puts the first letter to that ecclesia into its context of Paul's travels and visits. The same can be said of the next chapter, "Fightings, Fears and Forgiveness", in regard to the background of the second letter to Corinth. Eventually Titus met up with Paul in Philippi, bearing welcome news about the Corinth ecclesia, which Paul comments on in his second

letter. Judaisers continued to be a problem in this ecclesia and others (Rome and those of Galatia), and Paul wrote further letters at this time, and visited Corinth again, covered by chapters 25 and 26 of the book.

Collections had been made by the ecclesias in Asia Minor, Macedonia and Achaia for the poor saints in Jerusalem, and Paul and seven ecclesial representatives were taking the money there. On their way they visited Troas, and it was here that Paul raised from the dead Eutychus, the young man who fell out of the window from the third floor. Although Paul's companions travelled by sea for the next stage of their journey, Paul walked twenty miles overland. The author comments, "Possibly the best explanation of Paul's decision to do this is that, after the nervous exhaustion of the previous night he wanted solitude; a time for prayer and communion with his Lord such as a walk through the Springtime oaks for which the area was famous would provide" (p. 96) From Assos the party sailed to Miletus, some distance from Ephesus. The elders of the ecclesia at Ephesus came to Miletus, and there Paul made the famous speech recorded in Acts 20.

Imprisonments

We read in Acts nothing of the response of the Jerusalem ecclesia to the generosity of their Gentile brethren and sisters, although the record says that "the brethren received us gladly" (21:17), but we read of the request that Paul should purify himself along with some Jews who had made Nazarite vows, and pay for all the expenses, in order to placate the feelings of the "many thousands of Jews there are which believe . . . all zealous of the law" (vv. 20-26). Brother Mitchell calls the chapter covering this "A Risky Request", and the request of the Jerusalem elders did indeed put the apostle's life at risk. The author's treatment of this matter is excellent, and shows the research he has carried out.

The exciting story continues in the next four chapters of the book: "A Commander Confounded", "A Way to Escape", "Ananias Foiled Again" and "Appeal to Caesar". During Paul's benign imprisonment in Caesarea, the author suggests that Luke researched and wrote the Gospel that bears his name.

Paul's shipwreck on the way to Rome, recorded in Acts 27, is well known to us, but the author entitles his chapter covering that voyage, "A Prayer to Save". That title captures the most important point about the shipwreck, that the great apostle,

like his Lord, felt keenly for those he was with and sought their welfare: "Paul had been praying for the safety not only of himself but of every other soul that was in the vessel with him" (p. 122). Brother Mitchell writes perceptively of the centurion Julius, who was escorting Paul to Rome: "He was . . . a considerate man . . . and belonged to the Imperial Regiment". He allowed Paul, Luke and Aristarchus to spend a week with the brethren from Puteoli, "for it is impossible to imagine he kept Paul manacled to a soldier while staying with the brethren and sisters there" (p. 127).

Paul was imprisoned in Rome for two years, chained by the wrist to a Roman soldier, while waiting for his appeal to be heard before the Emperor Nero. He had several visitors, including Aristarchus, Timothy, John Mark, Tychicus, Epaphras, Epaphroditus and Onesimus, and he wrote several letters at this time: "So all in all, the time Paul spent under guard in Rome, a prisoner yet free to preach, write letters and extend his care to all the Ecclesias was not wasted. Only God could have arranged such a paradox of circumstances to crown the endeavours of the Apostle to the Gentiles" (p. 132).

Chapter 38 is entitled, "Acquitted to Serve Again"; and, whilst there is no Scriptural record that he was acquitted on appeal, there are references in Philemon (v. 22) and Philippians (2:24) that show that Paul was expecting to be released. There is also a strong tradition in the early Christian church that he was set free. He may have then gone to Spain, and was in Macedonia when he wrote the first letter to Timothy and the letter to Titus. How Paul was arrested again is a mystery, and the only letter he wrote during his final imprisonment was the second letter to Timothy. In this letter it is clear that Paul saw his death approaching: "He expected to be condemned to death, and the other great leader of Christianity, Simon Peter, is reported to have been similarly condemned around the same time. Their despatch however differed in that Peter in conformity with our Lord's prophecy was crucified whereas Paul was able to use the privilege of his Roman citizenship for the last time and be executed by the sword" (p. 147).

Final thoughts

The author ends his book with "An Appreciation". It is a gem of a chapter, full of wise and good observations about our beloved Brother Paul. Two short quotations from this last chapter are all that there is room for in this review:

“There is no doubt that had it not been, in the providence of God, for the labours of Paul in the face of Judaistic antagonisms, Christianity would have been strangled at birth” (p. 148);

“And here again, in human terms, can be seen the greatness of the Apostle Paul in that, while his own race were persecuting him, he was able to say, ‘I could wish myself accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh . . . who are Israelites . . . And of

whom, as concerning the flesh Christ came’, but who, in judging themselves unworthy of everlasting life, were making him turn all the more to the Gentiles”.

Brother Mitchell is to be thanked for his faithful labours. His book is highly recommended to all who wish to be able to say, like the Apostle Paul, “I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith”, because they love the appearing of their Lord, the righteous judge (2 Tim. 4:7,8).

“Go to the ant . . . consider her ways”!

David Burges

THE WAYS of the creatures of the insect kingdom are an endless source of fascination and wonder, long ago noticed by that proficient naturalist, Solomon.¹ His words of exhortation concerning the ant anticipate in a remarkable way modern scientific understanding of ants’ behaviour and social organisation:

“Go to the ant, you sluggard!
Consider her ways and be wise,
Which, having no captain,
Overseer or ruler,
Provides her supplies in the summer,
And gathers her food in the harvest”
(Prov. 6:6-8, NKJV).

The fungus gardeners

One fascinating group of these creatures is the leafcutter ants, which are social insects found in the tropical forests of Central and South America and the southern states of the USA. They live in huge underground colonies made up of hundreds of different chambers. Each colony is generated by a single queen and may contain as many as eight million ants. Recent research has revealed some of the extraordinary and complex behaviours the ants use to cultivate their food, a unique fungus, and to protect it from disease and moulds.²

The worker ants travel in long lines far into the forest in search of leaves, leaving a scent trail so they can find their way back to the nest. They use their sharp mandibles to cut half-moon-shaped sections of leaves from plants, and then carry them over their backs. A leafcutter ant can carry almost ten times its own weight, an extraordinary feat of strength. The ants consume up to a fifth of

all forest vegetation in the areas where they are found, and can be a serious pest.

The leaf pieces are carried back to the underground nests, where the leaves are chewed into a pulp. The ants do not eat the leaves; instead they make compost heaps in order to grow a particular type of fungus, which is unique to leafcutter ant nests. The ants then eat the fungus, and feed it to their young. The fungus is grown in football-sized chambers inside the nest. There can be 300 or more of these chambers within the nest, and all of the earthworks to build them might involve the removal of several tons of earth during the lifetime of the nest.

A complex society

There are several different types of leafcutter ants within the colony, each of which has a specialised role in its successful operation. Solomon noted that the ants are female (“Consider *her* ways”³), and indeed, all of the worker ants which grow and maintain the gardens are sterile females. The much smaller numbers of winged males and queens swarm in summer in order to mate, and the fertilised queens seek sites to found new colonies.

1. “He [Solomon] described plant life, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of walls. He also taught about animals and birds, reptiles and fish” (1 Kgs. 4:33, NIV).
2. “Why ants make great gardeners”, BBC On-line News, 18 Mar. 2004; <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/3499842.stm>.
3. The Hebrew noun *nemalah*, ‘ant’, is feminine in gender.