

## Acts 9. 1-19. Adamsdown. 17 January 2012.

His name – at least, one of his name's - was Saul.<sup>1</sup>

Saul was a relatively 'young man', quite possibly now about 30 years of age.

He had spent the early years of his life in the city of Tarsus, a place which he later claimed, most accurately, to be 'no mean city'. For Tarsus was a great trading centre. It was the chief city of the Roman province of Cilicia, and it was a seat of Greek learning<sup>2</sup> – being one of the most prestigious university cities of the day. No doubt, in part at least, Saul owed the ease and proficiency with which he spoke, wrote and thought in Greek to the years he had spent at Tarsus. And it is more than likely that there Saul became versed in the works of many of the great Greek philosophers and writers – quotations from whom surface both in his later preaching and in his epistles.<sup>3</sup>

Yet 'Saul' was not a Greek name, unlike that of the original addressee of Luke's two volumes. Saul's name was Jewish. And it is likely that Saul's parents graced him with his name on account of perhaps the most illustrious member of the tribe from which Saul came, a man who had lived over 1,000 years before – namely Saul, the first king of Israel.<sup>4</sup>

And I note that we owe to Saul of Tarsus himself, in one of his later letters, that he did come from the same Israelite tribe as had his famous namesake – namely, the tribe of Benjamin.<sup>5</sup> And I suppose it is fair to see this detail as an example of what we might call the 'Undesigned Coincidences' of Holy Scripture. For Luke, who records Saul's Jewish name over 20 times says nothing of his tribal origin, whereas he, Saul, who tells us of his tribal origin, never mentions – not even once – his Hebrew name in any of his many letters which we now possess.

But if, in one sense, he owed his Jewish name to an ancient king from the same tribe as himself, he owed his sectarian loyalties entirely to his father – for Saul followed in the steps of his father in that he became a Pharisee<sup>6</sup> – the Pharisees being the very strictest of the various Jewish parties.<sup>7</sup>

But Saul owed another debt to his father ... for he owed to him also his possession of full Roman citizenship<sup>8</sup> – a privilege highly prized throughout the Empire<sup>9</sup> – and something which was to prove extremely useful to Saul on more than one occasion later.<sup>10</sup>

Whereas Saul's early days spent at Tarsus doubtless contributed much to his character and preparation for the future, the major influence which determined the course of his still relatively young life must be sought elsewhere. For, when the time came for him to pursue his higher education studies, he had not been enrolled at the university of Tarsus, but had been sent to Jerusalem to study 'at the feet' (as the expression is) of one Rabban Gamaliel<sup>11</sup> – 'Rabban' being a more honourable title than 'Rabbi'. Rabban Gamaliel was the most respected Pharisee of his day, one of Israel's most distinguished and gifted teachers – a man highly esteemed by reason of his learning and his character, not to say his being the grandson of the famous Hillel.

It was from Rabban Gamaliel no doubt that Saul acquired much of his in-depth knowledge of the Old Testament, of current rabbinical methods of biblical interpretation and of the traditions of the elders. And in all such subjects Saul had excelled. 'I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation', he later wrote, 'being far more zealous for the traditions of my fathers'.<sup>12</sup> Clearly, Saul had been one of Gamaliel's star pupils.<sup>13</sup>

But, though at Gamaliel's feet Saul acquired much of the great man's piety and learning, alas, he imbibed precious little of Gamaliel's gentleness, tolerance and wisdom – qualities of Gamaliel which we learn, not only from his one recorded speech in Acts 5,<sup>14</sup> but from Jewish sources. Indeed, I guess that the word 'tolerance' didn't even exist in Saul's vocabulary.

To this extent, Saul (with his fiery zeal and intolerance) and his teacher were like chalk and cheese.

With his passionate commitment to his Jewish faith and to his convictions as a Pharisee, it was inevitable that, sooner or later, Saul was going to find himself on a collision course with the followers of Jesus of Nazareth<sup>15</sup> – followers who already numbered many thousands. As Luke reported back at the beginning of chapter 6, 'the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith'.<sup>16</sup>

And such a collision course was made all the more inevitable by the fact that the leaders of this new movement spoke openly and boldly in the Temple as elsewhere. For this movement – labelled by the Jews as 'the sect of the Nazarenes'<sup>17</sup> – was not disposed to hide itself away in some corner.<sup>18</sup>

And it was inevitable that such a man as Saul would be enraged by the claims made by the preachers that this – in his eyes – accursed Jesus, rightly and properly executed by the Roman authorities at the insistence of the nation's ruling council ... that this 'deceiver'<sup>19</sup> had been raised from the dead and was now blasphemously declared to be Israel's long awaited Messiah. And though (as a good Pharisee) never doubting that God could, and would one day, raise the dead,<sup>20</sup> enraged Saul most certainly was!

And when one of their number had the effrontery, not only (as was reported of him) to speak against Moses, God, the Law and the Temple,<sup>21</sup> but to charge the supreme council – to charge the very Sanhedrin itself – with resisting the Holy Spirit in that they had both betrayed and murdered the One who he (Stephen) declared to be 'the Just One'<sup>22</sup> ... well, it was more than flesh and blood could stand. How readily had Saul then approved of the blasphemer's death,<sup>23</sup> gladly 'standing by' and 'keeping watch over' the garments of those who killed him,<sup>24</sup> happy in the knowledge that Stephen died in accordance with God's law which required that 'he that blasphemes the name of Jehovah shall certainly be put to death; all the assembly shall certainly stone him'.<sup>25</sup>

But it was not in young Saul to be content to be a caretaker of clothes!

The death of just one Christian apologist couldn't begin to satisfy the anger which boiled within. And so, when, following Stephen's death, 'a great persecution' broke out against the assembly at Jerusalem,<sup>26</sup> Saul devoted the whole of his energy ... throwing himself – body and soul – with all the intensity of his being ... into the offensive. He personally making 'havoc of the church', entering into their houses one by one, dragging off both men and women to prison.<sup>27</sup>

He 'laid waste' the church, Luke's word being used elsewhere of the ravaging of a victim's body by a wild beast – the Greek Old Testament of Psalm 80. 13, for example, speaking of Israel figuratively as the vine which God had brought out of Egypt, says that 'the boar out of the woods uproots it, and the wild beast of the field devours (ravages) it'. And Saul was like a 'wild beast' tearing apart the church until – if he had his way, nothing recognisable would have remained. And the thoroughness of his effort is underlined by the way in which he burst into the disciples' dwellings, hauling the occupants off to prison.

We noted just now words which Saul wrote much later – how he had advanced in Judaism beyond many others of his own age, being far more zealous than they for Jewish traditions.<sup>28</sup> But, if he outstripped many of his fellow students in his enthusiasm for such matters, he was clearly determined to outdo them all when it came to persecuting zeal. And he did. For, immediately before those words, he had written, 'I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it'<sup>29</sup> – or, as one scholar renders the word, 'I ... devastated it'.<sup>30</sup> And so he had, as those who later heard him preach (and who we shall meet in two weeks' time, God willing) were ready to confirm.<sup>31</sup>

Saul also later recorded how 'many of the saints I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death (by which we learn that many others soon followed Stephen into martyrdom!), I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in every synagogue and compelled them to blaspheme'.<sup>32</sup> From which we learn that Saul's crusade against the early church did not stop with imprisonment. For, when the saints then came up for trial before the Jewish authorities, Saul did everything in his power to make them apostatize by denying the Lord Jesus. And if this failed, and it therefore became a question of life or death for the prisoner, on every occasion he gave his vote against them.

And yet, no doubt to Saul's intense annoyance, he discovered – as did the Jewish council – that the strategy of harsh and unremitting persecution rather backfired on him and on them, for, as Luke noted, 'those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word'.<sup>33</sup> I suspect that Saul would have done better to heed the advice and counsel of his tutor Gamaliel to which the Sanhedrin had earlier listened!<sup>34</sup> But Saul certainly didn't see it that way.

In *his* book, that the Nazarene heresy should exist at Jerusalem was bad enough in itself; to find that it was now spreading like wildfire – and far afield – not only through Judea and Samaria,<sup>35</sup> but as far as Damascus – 140 miles to the north – was simply intolerable.

And so Saul reacted – predictably – by extending his crusade of persecution – relentlessly and fuelled by his frenzy of hate. In his own words of 35 years later, 'being exceedingly enraged against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities'.<sup>36</sup> And he persecuted them with all his might and main, utterly convinced that in doing so he was doing God's work.<sup>37</sup>

And, as part of his crusade 'into foreign cities', his eye settled on Damascus, one of the most ancient cities in the world,<sup>38</sup> now the capital of Syria, and a strategic location on the main trade route from Egypt around the Fertile Crescent to Mesopotamia. Possibly Saul regarded Damascus as an obvious escape route for the disciples

dispersed from Jerusalem into such distant lands as Babylon and Assyria. Apart from which, there were several synagogues in Damascus itself,<sup>39</sup> together with a sizeable Jewish population, numbering many tens of thousands,<sup>40</sup> from which news had filtered back to Jerusalem that among them there were many members of the – to Saul – cursed ‘sect of the Nazarenes’,<sup>41</sup> some of whom, having escaped through Saul’s net thrown wide down in Judea, now doubtless thought themselves safe beyond his murderous attentions. But, if Saul had his way, he was about to prove them wrong!

Nor, as I read the data, did Saul feel so much as one moment’s compunction or regret over any of the suffering which he inflicted on the early disciples – on, I note, the women along with the men ... for at no point was he squeamish about including women in his purge.<sup>42</sup> Saul shed no tears for his many victims. Alas for Saul, he fell into that category of which our Lord forewarned His disciples in John 16, ‘the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service’.<sup>43</sup>

But did Saul have *no* misgivings? *No* doubts about his actions? Were there not some moments when he was haunted, if not by the memory of Stephen’s message, then at least by the memory of Stephen’s face? ... if not by the memory of Stephen’s preaching then at least by the memory of his prayer? And what of the words of the glorified Lord Jesus to Saul a little later, recorded in Acts 26 verse 14, ‘It is hard for you to kick against the goads’?

Misgivings? Doubts? Haunting memories?<sup>44</sup> I think not. Frankly, all the evidence – both in the Book of Acts and in Saul’s later writings – points in the very opposite direction.

And personally I understand our Lord’s words concerning kicking against the goads to be His declaration to Saul that all of Saul’s violent opposition to Him, His cause and His followers was doomed to failure ... that it would result only in hurt to himself ... that it was as futile for him to continue persecuting Him (the living Lord) and His people, as it was for the ox to kick back against the goads.<sup>45</sup>

We have Saul’s own word for the fact that, throughout all he did, his conscience was clear. ‘Paul’, Luke records at the beginning of Acts 23, ‘looking earnestly at the council, said, “Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day”’.<sup>46</sup> I detect no hint of any troubled conscience or any misgivings about his earlier actions there! At all points, Saul had been scrupulously conscientious. ‘I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth’ were his words to King Agrippa.<sup>47</sup> And towards the close of his life, when looking back on those very days, he still maintained that, though he had been ‘formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man’, as he said, ‘I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief’.<sup>48</sup>

I have come across a passage from the pen of a writer of Greek tragedies back in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC which brings out well the force of the word-picture which our Lord painted to Saul a little later. One character in the tragedy speaks to another of that second character’s attitude to Bromius, the god of noise, ‘I would rather do him sacrifice than in a fury kick against the goads; you are a mortal, he is a god’.<sup>49</sup> As you see, there is no suggestion there of stifling any niggling doubts or haunting memories!

You cannot fight, the character in the play is saying, against someone who is a god with any hope of success. It was a great pity that Saul had not paid more attention to the wise words of his former teacher, Gamaliel. ‘if this plan or this enterprise is of men, it will come to nothing; but if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it—lest you even be found to fight against God’.<sup>50</sup>

And so Saul, fiercely determined to do all in his power to devastate and destroy the early church, continued on his relentless crusade into ‘foreign cities’.<sup>51</sup>

And now, having done our best to think our way into Saul’s situation (and, to some extent, into his frame of mind at the time), we ask Doctor Luke to take up the story.

*But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.*

*Now as he went, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.*

*And he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"*

*And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And He said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting; but rise and enter the city, and it shall be told you what you must do".*

*And the men who travelled with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one.*

*And Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing; and leading him by the hand they brought him into Damascus. And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.*

And who can doubt that the conversion of Saul ranks as the most important event which has taken place in the history of the Christian faith since Pentecost. Certainly it ranked of first importance in the mind of Luke – as witness the fact that he has included no less than three detailed accounts of it in his book ... namely his own telling of the story here in chapter 9, and then two further accounts from the lips of Saul (or Paul) himself, one before the hostile crowd at Jerusalem in chapter 22, and the other before King Agrippa at Caesarea in chapter 26. This three-fold description matches, of course, the three-fold description of the conversion of Cornelius which Luke sets out for us in chapters 10, 11 and 15.

And in many respects these two conversions – that of Saul and that of Cornelius – form a most important section in Luke's record of the spread of the Christian gospel from Jerusalem to Rome. For both these conversions, in different ways, play a central role in the future reaching out of the gospel to the Gentiles ... that of Saul in that he was, as we read elsewhere, God's chosen vessel to bear the name of the Lord Jesus 'before the Gentiles'<sup>52</sup> – that he was the 'apostle of the Gentiles'<sup>53</sup> – and the 'minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles'<sup>54</sup> ... and that of Cornelius in that he and his household were, in effect, the first-fruits of the gospel harvest among the Gentiles.

Previously, the gospel had stretched out from Jerusalem to Judea and to Samaria.<sup>55</sup> But the time had now come for the gospel, in accordance with the Lord's own stated programme, to be taken beyond Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, 'to the end of the earth'.<sup>56</sup>

And so to verse 1.

Saul was 'still' – by which word Luke is picking up on his previous reference to Saul 'making havoc of the church'<sup>57</sup> – he was 'still breathing threats and murder' ... not, please, 'breathing out' ... but 'threats and murder', were, so to speak, the very element and atmosphere in which Saul then lived – the very air he breathed.

And Saul, we note, took the initiative. It was not in Saul to wait and see whether he was invited to the task. And he – not the High Priest, nor the Sanhedrin, was very much in the driving seat of the swoop on Damascus.<sup>58</sup>

And who I ask was this 'High Priest' to whom Saul submitted his request? Well, we cannot be absolutely sure, but if, as seems quite likely, the events of which we are reading took place in 35 A.D., then – low and behold – it would have been none other than Joseph Caiaphas ... yes the same High Priest who had presided at our Lord's trial. For Caiaphas had enjoyed a remarkably long innings (18 years), before receiving 'the Order of the Boot' from the Romans in 36 A.D.<sup>59</sup>

Here then lies no small irony. For it had been Caiaphas, of course who had, without realising it, once prophesied 'that Jesus would die for the nation, and not *for that nation only*, but also that He would gather together in one the children of God who were scattered abroad'.<sup>60</sup> Little did he imagine when he armed the young man Saul with the letters for which he asked that that young man's consequent journey to Damascus would lead to his dramatic conversion, and to him (Saul) subsequently carrying the Christian gospel to the Gentiles of whom he (Caiaphas) had prophesied!

It is clear, from Saul's later reference to the assignment he was given, both that the authority and commission came 'from the chief priests' (that is, with their full backing),<sup>61</sup> and that this simply repeated the procedure which he (Saul) had followed earlier at Jerusalem.<sup>62</sup>

In accordance with decrees passed by Julius Caesar and Augustus long before, the High Priest and the Sanhedrin exercised jurisdiction over all Jews living abroad. And, given that many of the disciples at Damascus were likely to have fled there from Jerusalem, the High Priest had therefore the authority to demand their extradition.

It is worth noting that scholars assure us that, in fulfilling his mission, Saul would have been known as 'an apostle' of the Sanhedrin, and that 'his carrying of letters from those who commissioned him is fully in line with the custom' of giving such letters to those sent as 'apostles'.<sup>63</sup>

The following life-changing event took place, Luke notes, when Saul and his party had almost completed their journey – a journey which would have taken them about a week. Given that the outcome of Saul's encounter with the glorified Jesus would be the need for him (Saul) to be led, unseeing, into Damascus, it was kind indeed for the Saviour to time and to stage His meeting with Saul as He did.

'Suddenly a light from heaven flashed (the word Luke used here being closely related to the Greek word for lightning) ... flashed round about him' ... and not him only. For, as Saul himself reported later, 'At midday, O king, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining round me *and those who journeyed with me*'.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, I note that the expression used there (in chapter 26) is identical to that which Luke had used to describe the 'glory of the Lord' which 'shone round' the shepherds of Bethlehem on the momentous night of our Lord's birth!<sup>65</sup> But on this occasion, it was no mere 'angel of the Lord' who put in an appearance!

And we can hardly miss the significance of the words of Acts 26 that the 'light from heaven' outshone the sun 'at midday', when the glare of the Eastern sun was at its brightest and most dazzling. But the glory of a heaven-sent light surpassed even that.

No doubt the fact that Saul was driving his party on at such an unlikely hour is an indication of just how zealous and determined a man he was.

'And he fell to the ground'. Because the journey covered about 140 miles over roads which were both rough and steep at places, many have supposed that Saul and his companions rode horses or mules. But I have to say that, if this was so, there is no hint of it in any of the accounts we possess. Indeed, to me such phrases as 'stood speechless' and 'led him by the hand' seem rather to point to them all having travelled on foot.

'And heard a voice'. Saul later reported, 'When we all had fallen to the ground, I *heard a voice* speaking to me and saying *in the Hebrew language*, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"'<sup>66</sup> And I was fascinated to learn that, in all three accounts of the vision, the Greek text of Saul's name is a transliteration of the Hebrew name ('Saoul') – whereas, apart from verse 17 (which records the words of Ananias, a Jew), in every other occurrence of the name Saul – almost 20 times – Luke uses the normal Greek form of the name. Clearly, Luke was most careful to stick very closely to exactly what the Lord Jesus said.<sup>67</sup>

The repetition of the name of a person whom God addresses is quite common in scripture, usually – if not always – to give special emphasis to what is about to be said.<sup>68</sup>

But I have to say that I have been struck in particular with the clear parallel between our Lord's words here and those He had spoken several years before from His cross.<sup>69</sup> If we follow strictly the order of the words He used on both occasions, we hear Him begin with a double address ... in the first instance, 'My God, my God', and in the second, 'Saul, Saul' ... and then ask ... in the first instance, 'why me did you forsake?', and in the second, 'why me are you persecuting?'

Interestingly, the first was spoken by our Lord when on earth to Someone in heaven, and the second by our Lord when in heaven to someone on earth. But there was another fairly obvious difference. When speaking from the cross, our Lord took His words from the Old Testament.<sup>70</sup> Whereas, when speaking on the Damascus Road, the words were exclusively His own.

And how much his words to the arch-persecutor reveal! 'Why are you persecuting *me*?' Telling us of the wonderful and intimate spiritual union which binds Him, the living Head of His church, to His people ... and them to Him. And this was a revelation which Saul himself would later expound in some of his epistles. 'As the body (the human body, that is) is one', he later taught the Corinthians, 'and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ'.<sup>71</sup> For here, in our Lord's word 'me' on the Damascus Road, lies the germ of the truth that the church – that His church – is one with Himself.

Ever since His ascension to heaven in chapter 1, the Lord had been out of His disciples' sight. But they had not been out of His – not for one single moment! Truly, to Him, the man who touched *them* touched 'the apple of his eye'.<sup>72</sup>

But I note that, although the glorified Lord will now take the great persecutor to task for the suffering which he was causing to members of His (the Lord's) *spiritual* body, He said nothing to any of those who inflicted the cruellest and most excruciating of tortures on His *physical* body. He then endured the pain and agony in silence. What a wonderful Saviour we have.

In answer to his natural question, 'Who are you, Lord?'<sup>73</sup> in stunned amazement, Saul heard the answer, 'I am Jesus' – 'I am Jesus of Nazareth'.<sup>74</sup> 'Jesus of Nazareth', Saul knew that name well. Up to this very moment, as we noted earlier, Saul had been convinced that he should do all in his power to wipe out that very name.<sup>75</sup> 'Jesus' was the very last person Saul could ever have imagined to be 'Lord'!

In terms of a dramatic moment, the nearest biblical event I can think of is that recorded in Genesis 45 when the all-powerful Governor of all Egypt, who then had Jacob's sons entirely at his mercy, announced to them privately, 'I am Joseph'.<sup>76</sup> And yet, huge bombshell though that undoubtedly was, it was as nothing compared to this.

Sometime before Saul had heard a man claim to see Jesus at the right hand of God.<sup>77</sup> Now he sees Jesus for himself on the Damascus Road. He had heard Stephen speak of the appearance, long before, of 'the God of glory' to Abraham. And now 'the Lord of glory'<sup>78</sup> appears to him.<sup>79</sup>

'The men who were travelling with him stood speechless', Luke says, (struck dumb, no doubt, with terror) '*hearing the voice but seeing no one*'. On a later date, to the Jews of Jerusalem, Saul later reported that 'those who were with me indeed *beheld the light*, but they *did not hear the voice of Him who spoke to me*'.<sup>80</sup>

Clearly then, Saul's travelling companions were fully aware of both the exceedingly bright light<sup>81</sup> and the sound of a voice speaking. But, although they 'beheld the light', they did not, as Saul, see the Lord Jesus.<sup>82</sup> Although they heard a voice-like sound, only Saul understood the words.<sup>83</sup>

It seems also that, having, as Saul, fallen to the ground when first enveloped by the light,<sup>84</sup> his companions had risen to their feet when the Lord was speaking to Saul.

But, if Saul's fellow travellers saw 'no one' when the Lord appeared to Saul,<sup>85</sup> Saul himself saw 'nothing' after the Lord disappeared.<sup>86</sup>

And what thoughts must have passed through Saul's mind during those three sightless days! For, if Jesus of Nazareth truly was 'both Lord and Christ', then for some long time now, he had been doing just that which his esteemed teacher had once counselled should never be done – he had been fighting against God!

No doubt, different readers are struck by different details in our passage. One commentator who I consulted wrote, 'I think when I get to heaven I shall want to know what became of the High Priest's letters'.<sup>87</sup> Personally, I can think of far more important details than that! And so too can Jacob Koshy.

Who, you may well wonder, is Jacob Koshy? Let me tell you a little of his story.

Jacob Koshy grew up in Singapore with one driving ambition: to be wealthy. That led him into the world of drugs and gambling, and eventually he became the head of an international smuggling network. In 1980, he was arrested and placed in a government drug rehabilitation prison in Singapore.

Jacob rolled smuggled tobacco in the pages of a Gideon Bible he found in his cell. One day he fell asleep while smoking. He awoke to find the cigarette had burned out, and that all that remained was a scrap of charred paper. Jacob unrolled it and read the words: 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?'

Jacob asked for another Bible, and read the full story of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. Jacob suddenly realized that if God could reach someone like Saul, God could reach him too. There in his cell he knelt and prayed, asking the Lord to come into his life and change him. Jacob started sharing his story with the other prisoners, and as soon as he was released became involved in a local church. He met a Christian lady, married, and went as a missionary to the Far East.<sup>88</sup>

And I guess that Acts 9 verse 4 will always rank highly among Jacob Koshi's favourite Bible texts. I am reminded of Saul's testimony, written towards the close of his earthly life, which has been well paraphrased, 'since I was worse than anyone else, God had mercy on me and let me be an example of the endless patience of Christ Jesus. He did this so that others would put their faith in Christ and have eternal life'.<sup>89</sup> I guess Jacob Koshi would say a loud 'Amen' to that.

No doubt, Saul took many things into account when he first set out for Damascus – not least the length of the journey (about that from Cardiff to Holyhead) – but he had not reckoned on the fact that he would be meeting 'Jesus of Nazareth' before he reached there.<sup>90</sup>

Nor that he, determined as he was to 'apprehend' – to 'arrest' as many followers of Christ at Damascus as he could, would himself be 'apprehended' – 'arrested' – by the living Lord before he ever reached the city gates. I say 'arrested by the Living Lord' deliberately, because, in one of his own letters, he (Saul) spoke about this very occasion as the time when 'Christ Jesus ... laid hold of me' – when he 'apprehended', when he 'arrested' me.<sup>91</sup>

Nor, when he set out, had Saul dreamt that, before ever he reached Damascus, he, then an 'apostle' of the Sanhedrin, would already have been told that, in effect, he was to be an apostle of Christ Jesus.<sup>92</sup>

Nor, when he set out, had he expected that he, who then already enjoyed dual-citizenship (in that he was a citizen<sup>93</sup> both of Tarsus<sup>94</sup> and of Rome<sup>95</sup>), would have added yet another – and a far grander – citizenship to his credit before he entered Damascus. I refer, of course, to his citizenship in heaven!<sup>96</sup>

Nor when he set out to inflict suffering on all who loved the name of Jesus at Damascus,<sup>97</sup> had he any idea that he was soon to be shown that he himself would suffer ‘many things’ on behalf of that very name<sup>98</sup> ... sufferings which few, if any, would ever be called on to match.<sup>99</sup>

Nor when he set out did he imagine that, following his encounter with Jesus, he would come to count as ‘loss’ and ‘dross’ all those things which he then counted ‘gain’ to him.<sup>100</sup>

Nor when he set out for Damascus as the High Priest’s respected representative and envoy did he expect, now humbled, to be guided as a blind man to the house of his host, as helpless as a child. And that, instead of leading others out of the city as his captives, he should be led in – as the captive of Jesus Christ ... that, now, under the light yoke of Christ,<sup>101</sup> he would have neither need nor wish ever to kick against the goads, for he would have found rest for his soul.<sup>102</sup>

Perhaps, when he set out on his historic journey, he could still recall a few of the charges levelled against Stephen – namely, that he (Stephen) didn’t ‘cease to speak blasphemous words against’ the Temple ‘and the law’.<sup>103</sup> If so, Saul would never have dreamt that, some 25 years later, the very same charges would be laid at his own door<sup>104</sup> ... that the day would come when he, then a major driving force in the persecution of the early church, would himself be branded as ‘a ringleader’ of that very movement.<sup>105</sup>

But of these things, of course, Saul as yet understood little – if anything.

Apart from the fact that he had *some* kind of ministry appointed to him among the Gentiles,<sup>106</sup> all he knew for sure was that, at some point he would be told what he was to do.<sup>107</sup> And so, for three days as it turned out,<sup>108</sup> all he could do, in his physical darkness (occasioned by ‘the glory of the light’ he had seen on the road<sup>109</sup>), all he could do was to pray, and, now ‘under new management’ to await further instructions. So he waited ... which is just what we shall have to do for the next fourteen days, until Tuesday the 31st, when, God willing, we shall find out what those instructions were, and what happened next.

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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> A fact which (within the compass of the inspired writings) we know only from Luke's second volume – known commonly as 'The Acts of the Apostles'.

<sup>2</sup> 'They of Tarsus are much addicted to the study of philosophy, and excel Athens and Alexandria, and every other place where there are schools of philosophy ... Rome is best able to inform us what number of learned men this city has produced, for it is filled with persons from Tarsus and Alexandria', Strabo, 'Geography', 14. 5, 12-15.

<sup>3</sup> Acts 17. 28; 1 Cor. 15. 32-33; Titus 1. 12.

<sup>4</sup> 1 Sam. 9. 1-2.

<sup>5</sup> Phil. 3. 5.

<sup>6</sup> Acts 23. 6.

<sup>7</sup> Acts 26. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Acts 22. 28.

<sup>9</sup> Acts 16. 21.

<sup>10</sup> Acts 16. 37-39; 22. 25-29.

<sup>11</sup> Acts 22. 3.

<sup>12</sup> Gal. 1. 14.

<sup>13</sup> Acts 5. 34.

<sup>14</sup> Acts 5. 35-39.

<sup>15</sup> Acts 26. 9.

<sup>16</sup> Acts 6. 7.

<sup>17</sup> Acts 24. 5; cf. Acts 28. 22.

<sup>18</sup> Acts 26. 26.

<sup>19</sup> Matt. 27. 63.

<sup>20</sup> Acts 23. 6-8.

<sup>21</sup> Acts 6. 11, 13.

<sup>22</sup> Acts 7. 51-52.

<sup>23</sup> Acts 8. 1.

<sup>24</sup> Acts 22. 20. Acts 7. 58 ... 'In the latest issue of Expository Times (vol 123, 2012, pp. 113-18), Brice Jones offers an intriguing (and to my mind fully plausible) proposal for the meaning of the curious action of the crowd involved in the martyrdom of Stephen in Acts 7:58 ...Noting the difficulties in interpreting this action acknowledged by commentators, Jones points to several instances in other ancient literature where people take off their cloaks before engaging in a fight or some other violent action. As he puts it, the message of the action in these texts seems to be: "The coats are off; it's about to get messy!" More specifically, Jones offers two proposals. First, the depiction of the crowd in Acts 7:58 laying down their cloaks at Saul's feet probably means that Saul is depicted as "the ring leader of the mob," the one who prompted the stoning by the crowd. Secondly, Brice judges that the motif of removing the cloak here and elsewhere should be understood as an ancient gesture indicating impending actions of a combative or violent nature. I find his case persuasive, except on one point: It's not quite accurate to describe the crowd as a "mob". In an important (but often overlooked) study, Torrey Seland traced references in ancient literature to the "Phinehas" episode (Numbers 25:6-13) and the succeeding tradition of "Phinehas zeal", which involved situations in which devout Jews were entitled (indeed, directed) to take violent action against fellow Jews who openly flouted Torah in some major way: Establishment Violence in Philo and Luke: A Study of Non-Conformity to the Torah and Jewish Vigilante Reactions, Biblical Interpretation, no. 15 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995). Seland proposes that in Acts 7 we have, not a lynch mob, but an instance of this kind of semi-judicial ("vigilante") action. This actually chimes nicely with Jones's proposal that Saul is presented as instigating and in some sense authorizing the stoning of Stephen in this scene.

<http://larryhurtado.wordpress.com/2012/02/07/cloaks-and-violence-a-new-proposal-on-acts-758/>

<sup>25</sup> Lev. 24. 16; Deut. 17. 17.

<sup>26</sup> Acts 8. 1.

<sup>27</sup> Acts 8. 3.

<sup>28</sup> Gal. 1. 14.

<sup>29</sup> Gal. 1. 13.

<sup>30</sup> J. B. Lightfoot on Galatians 1. 13.

<sup>31</sup> Acts 9. 21 (the same word as in Gal. 1. 13).

<sup>32</sup> Acts 26. 10-11.

<sup>33</sup> Acts 8. 4.

<sup>34</sup> Acts 5. 38-39.

<sup>35</sup> Acts 8. 1.

<sup>36</sup> Acts 26. 11.

<sup>37</sup> Acts 22. 1.

<sup>38</sup> Gen. 14. 15.



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<sup>39</sup> Acts 9. 20.

<sup>40</sup> As many as eighteen thousand were massacred there by the Romans in A.D. 66; see Flavius Josephus, 'Wars of the Jews', Book VII, chapter 8, paragraph 7.

<sup>41</sup> Acts 24. 5.

<sup>42</sup> Acts 8. 3; 9. 2; 22. 4.

<sup>43</sup> John 16. 2.

<sup>44</sup> 'Perhaps he recalled the fortitude and face of Stephen, attempting to smother such troublesome memories and niggling thoughts in a more intense whirl of persecuting activity'. 'It was probably in large measure to stifle this ... impression that Paul threw himself so furiously into the campaign of repression', F F Bruce, 'The New International Commentary on Acts', page 491. 'Perhaps' - but I really don't think so. And I can see not one shred of evidence in either the Book of Acts or in any of Paul's later epistles of any such attempts to smother or stifle any painful memories – or any misgivings – indeed the very contrary.

<sup>45</sup> Clearly an allusion to the action of an unbroken bullock, which, when pricked by the goad, and in ignorance of the consequences, kicks back, only to receive another wound – to experience further pain and hurt – instead of quietly submitting, as it must do at last. This was a very common saying or proverb, found in many of the ancient Greek writings. Not that I am suggesting that the glorified Lord was quoting from one of the Greek classics!

<sup>46</sup> Acts 23. 1.

<sup>47</sup> Acts 26. 9.

<sup>48</sup> 1 Tim. 1. 13.

<sup>49</sup> This passage comes from the pen of Euripides ('The Bacchantes'). Dionysus speaks to Pentheus concerning Bromius (the god of noise), 'I would rather do him sacrifice than in a fury kick against the goads; you are a mortal, he a god'. See ... <http://classics.mit.edu/Euripides/bacchan.html>

<sup>50</sup> Acts 5. 38-39.

<sup>51</sup> Acts 26. 11.

<sup>52</sup> Acts 9. 15.

<sup>53</sup> Rom. 11. 13.

<sup>54</sup> Rom. 15. 16.

<sup>55</sup> Acts 8. 1, 14.

<sup>56</sup> Acts 1. 8.

<sup>57</sup> Acts 8. 3.

<sup>58</sup> The Way ... cf. the fuller 'way of the Lord' and 'way of God', 18. 25-26. Compare 19. 9, 23; 24. 22 – and especially, before the governor Felix, 24. 14, 'this I confess to you, that according to the Way which they call a sect, so I worship the God of my fathers, believing all things which are written in the Law and in the Prophets'. Its application to Christians seems to have lasted only so long as Christianity was considered to be a form or brand of Judaism.

<sup>59</sup> See F F Bruce, 'The Acts of the Apostles', page 119. 'Caiaphas was probably still in office'. F. F. Bruce, *ibid.*, page 196.

<sup>60</sup> John 11. 52.

<sup>61</sup> Acts 26. 12. The 'chief priests' included ex-High Priests and members of the high priestly families. Authority was formally vested in the High Priest.

<sup>62</sup> Acts 26. 10.

<sup>63</sup> 'His carrying of letters from those who commissioned him is fully in line with the custom of giving (such apostles) letters of accreditation'. Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, volume 1, page 417.

<sup>64</sup> Acts 26. 13.

<sup>65</sup> Luke 2. 9.

<sup>66</sup> Acts 26. 14.

<sup>67</sup> To his Jewish mind the light from heaven would no doubt seem to be manifestly Divine, and his first thought may have been that God was honouring him with His endorsement of his plan to exterminate the Nazarenes. It must have come to him with startling and painful surprise that the voice speaking from heaven to him should be the voice of Jesus of Nazareth.

<sup>68</sup> See, for example, Gen. 22. 11; 46. 2; Exod. 3. 4; 1 Sam. 3. 10. And compare Matt. 23. 27; Luke 10. 41; 22. 31.

<sup>69</sup> Matt. 27. 46.

<sup>70</sup> Psa. 22. 1

<sup>71</sup> 1 Cor. 12. 12.

<sup>72</sup> Zech 2. 8.

<sup>73</sup> Whatever the nuance he intended by 'Lord' in that split second – possibly little more than a title of respect – he very soon came to realise that the Jesus he instinctively addressed in that manner was Lord in the fullest and highest sense of the term. As Ananias no doubt did, v. 13, 17.

<sup>74</sup> Acts 22. 8.

<sup>75</sup> Acts 26. 9.

<sup>76</sup> Gen. 45. 4.

<sup>77</sup> Acts 7. 55-56.

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- <sup>78</sup> 1 Cor. 2. 8.
- <sup>79</sup> Acts 9. 17.
- <sup>80</sup> Acts 22. 9.
- <sup>81</sup> Acts 26. 13.
- <sup>82</sup> 1 Cor. 9. 1: 'Am I not an apostle? have I not seen Jesus our Lord?'
- <sup>83</sup> Compare John 12. 28-29, 'Then a voice came from heaven, saying, "I have both glorified it and will glorify it again." Therefore the people who stood by and heard it said that it had thundered. Others said, "An angel has spoken to Him."
- <sup>84</sup> 'When we all had fallen to the ground', Acts 26. 14.
- <sup>85</sup> Acts 9. 7.
- <sup>86</sup> Acts 9. 8.
- <sup>87</sup> G. Campbell Morgan, 'Acts', page 179.
- <sup>88</sup> I have read that he is still telling people, 'Who would have believed that I could find the truth as a result of smoking the Word of God?' The story comes from: Jacob Koshy, "From Smoking the Word to Speaking the Word" in Gideon Testimonies from International Extension Countries (Nashville: The Gideons International, 1994), 59-60 ... reproduced in Nelson's Complete Book Of Stories, Illustrations, & Quotes, by Robert J. Morgan, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000 – S. 148 – under 'Conversion'. See ...  
<http://echristian.wordpress.com/2008/01/19/cross-walk-in-step-with-jesus/>  
[http://www.sermonnotebook.org/new%20testament/Mark%205\\_1-20.htm](http://www.sermonnotebook.org/new%20testament/Mark%205_1-20.htm)
- <sup>89</sup> 1 Tim. 1. 16 (Contemporary English Version).
- <sup>90</sup> Acts 22. 8.
- <sup>91</sup> Phil. 3. 12.
- <sup>92</sup> Acts 26. 15-17 ... 'I said, 'Who are You, Lord?' And He said, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting ... I will deliver you from the Jewish people, as well as from the Gentiles, to whom I now send (*apostello*) you'. 1 Cor. 1. 1; 2 Cor. 1. 1; Eph. 1. 1; Col. 1. 1; 1 Tim. 1. 1; 2 Tim. 1. 1.
- <sup>93</sup> Also a citizen of Israel; Gentiles are 'aliens from the citizenship of Israel', Eph. 2. 12.
- <sup>94</sup> Acts 21. 39.
- <sup>95</sup> Acts 22. 27-28.
- <sup>96</sup> Phil. 3. 20.
- <sup>97</sup> Acts 26. 9.
- <sup>98</sup> Acts 9. 16.
- <sup>99</sup> 2 Cor. 11. 23-27.
- <sup>100</sup> Phil. 3. 7-8.
- <sup>101</sup> Matt. 11. 29.
- <sup>102</sup> Nor did he think that, although now he carried letters from the chief priests at Jerusalem to the synagogue at the city of Damascus, authorising him to take captive any Jewish Christians he found, the day would come when he would carry a letter (Acts 15. 30) from Christian apostles and elders at Jerusalem to the cities of Derbe, Lystra and Iconium, declaring the freedom of Gentile Christians from keeping the Law of Moses as necessary to be saved, Acts 16. 4.
- <sup>103</sup> Acts 6. 13.
- <sup>104</sup> Acts 21. 28.
- <sup>105</sup> Acts 24. 5. Nor would he have dreamt, when he stood by and witnessed the stoning of Stephen, that the day would come when he himself would be stoned – and live to tell the story, Acts 14. 19; 2 Cor. 11. 25.
- <sup>106</sup> Acts 26.17-18.
- <sup>107</sup> Acts 9. 6.
- <sup>108</sup> Acts 9. 9.
- <sup>109</sup> Acts 22. 11.