

“To submit to the Judgement of the Saints”

by D. W. B. ROBINSON¹

IT IS THE PURPOSE of this article to put forward some suggestions about the exegesis and interpretation of 1 Corinthians 6:1-8. In particular it will be suggested that 'the saints' in this passage refers, not to all believers, but to Jewish believers in their role as the holy remnant of Israel (Rom. 11:5, 16) and the instrument of God's revelation to the Gentiles. (This brief discussion is part of a wider study the author is making of the relationship between Israel and the Gentiles within the New Testament picture of salvation.)

The Corinthian correspondence provides us with our most extensive insight into Paul's relationship with one of his Gentile churches. It shows us, among other things, some of the severe tensions which that relationship involved. A modern ecclesiastic might wonder that Paul did not 'resign'. But that course was not open to the ἔθνῶν ἀπόστολος. He may be an earthen vessel, but the vessel is in the hand of God Himself. Paul, like Jeremiah and like the Servant of the Lord of Isa. 49, was called from the womb to be a light to Gentiles (Gal. 1:15, 16). Further, although Paul has a unique distinction in this ministry, he is not alone in it. Other Jews, such as Cephas, Apollos and Sosthenes, are likewise 'stewards of the mysteries of God' to the Corinthians (4:1). The Corinthians appear to have recognized that the gospel came to them by the hand of Jews, members of the elect nation, the holy people. One might say 'I am of Apollos', another 'I am of Paul', another 'I am of Cephas', and another 'I am of Christ' (1:12); but it is not accidental that there was no Gentile name among these teachers to whom allegiance was boasted. The dependence of the Gentile church on the Jews is again seen in the collection for the Jerusalem

¹ The Rev. D. W. B. Robinson, Vice-Principal of Moore College, Sydney, recently spent several months doing research at Tyndale House. While there he spared us the time to write this article for the Bulletin. Not all will agree with his conclusions but we are grateful to him for stimulating our thought in this matter.

church. Despite the extreme delicacy and even embarrassment of the situation, Paul regarded it as essential to secure the voluntary participation of the Corinthians in that collection. The explanation is given in Rom. 15: 27: 'Yea, it hath been their good pleasure; and their debtors they are. For if the Gentiles have been made partakers of their spiritual things, they owe it to them also to minister unto them in carnal things'. What were the 'spiritual things' here mentioned, and how did the Gentile Corinthians become partakers of them? The 'spiritual things' were the 'oracles of God' (Rom. 3:2), that is, the gospel itself, interpreted and made known 'according to the scriptures' (1 Cor. 15: 1ff., cf. Rom. 1:2-4, 16:25, 26). This was the peculiar treasure of the primitive Jewish church. A Jew of the dispersion might, of course, receive and understand the gospel no less truly than a Jew of Jerusalem, but the Jerusalem church was, in a unique way, the *representative community* of 'the people' (Luke 2:10 R.V.) to whom the gospel came, and through whom it was to be made available to the Gentiles. It was not, as a matter of fact, emissaries of the Jerusalem church as such who brought the gospel to Corinth. Paul was not from Jerusalem, nor Sosthenes, nor Timothy, nor Apollos. *But they were Jews*, and the 'spiritual things' were theirs no less than if they had actually been members of the church at Jerusalem. In this context we can appreciate the manner in which Paul designates the Jewish believers at Jerusalem as 'the saints' in those passages where he speaks of the collection. Indeed, in the majority of instances when Paul uses 'the saints' without further qualification, it is with reference, not to all believers, but to Jewish believers, members of the *Urgemeinde*; and in such passages these Jewish believers are so designated to draw attention to their God-given role in the plan of salvation (e.g. Rom. 15:25-31, 1 Cor. 14:33, 34, 16:1, 15, 2 Cor. 8:4, 9:1, 12, Eph. 2:19, Col. 1:26. Cf. Acts 9:13, 32, 41, 26:10, Jude 3). Gentile believers are certainly entitled to the epithet ἅγιοι, and the expression navies of πάντες οἱ ἅγιοι occurs frequently in connection with the membership of particular Gentile churches, especially in greetings; but there is a sufficient preponderance of instances where οἱ ἅγιοι, without qualification, certainly or possibly means Jewish believers to make us examine the possibility of the same meaning in the passage we are now considering.

‘Dare any of you, having a matter against his neighbour, go to law before the unrighteous, and not before the saints?’ It may be thought that here all mankind is divided into two classes, corresponding to unbelievers and believers. It is an affront that anyone belonging to the latter group should go to the former to have his lawsuits settled (so R. Asting, *Die Heiligkeit im Urchristentum*, p. 185). But the legal terminology requires a more specific interpretation. Ἄδικος can certainly mean ‘unrighteous’ in a rather general way, but in the New Testament it more commonly means ‘unjust’ with reference to some specific standard of law or right. Κρίνεσθαι ἐπὶ τῶν ἀδίκων does not mean simply ‘to take one’s case to the heathen’. It means to take one’s case to judges whose judgment is unjust, i.e. whose standards are not those of the divine law. We recall that the judge ‘who feared not God and regarded not man’ was termed by Jesus ὁ κριτὴς τῆς ἀδικίας (Luke 18: 6). He was no doubt a typical Gentile judge, at any rate as Jews (who avoided litigation) thought of Gentile judges.

If of οἱ ἄδικοι are the judges of the pagan community, οἱ ἅγιοι are the judges of the Christian community. Paul is not suggesting that the entire membership of the church should sit as a court. ‘To submit to the judgement of the saints’ in this passage is not at all the same idea as the judgement by the whole church spoken of in the preceding chapter (5:4, 12, 13; cf. 2 Cor. 2:6). There, it was not a question of conducting a trial. The offence was open and notorious, and what Paul called for was really a sentence of ostracism imposed spontaneously by every member of the church acting corporately under the influence of the mind of Christ. The legal terminology in chapter 5 is, in fact, figurative. But the situation is otherwise in our passage. The case is one for arbitration. There is no question of Paul passing judgment from afar, or calling upon the church as a whole to adopt this or that attitude towards an offender. But there are, says Paul, people in your own midst who are competent to act as arbitrators, whom you pass by when you have recourse to a pagan court. These arbitrators he refers to as ‘the saints’. V. 5, ‘is it so that there cannot be found among you one wise man, who shall be able to decide between his brethren?’, confirms our impression that, whoever ‘the saints’ are, they are a section of the church, and not the whole church.

We may note, in passing, that Paul does not simply refer the matter to the elders of the church, and there an end to it. If there was a regular institution of elders in Corinth at this time, it was apparently not Paul's thought that they should necessarily deal with cases of equity among members merely in virtue of their office as elders. The qualification of possessing the 'wisdom' necessary for such arbitration was not, it would seem, inherent in the presbyteral order.

'*Or know ye not that the saints shall judge the world?*' The formula, 'know ye not . . . ?', implies some teaching already imparted, and Paul now appeals to this teaching as the ground why the disputants in Corinth should have taken their quarrel to 'the saints'. Here, then, we have a clue which may lead us to the identity of 'the saints'. Can we trace this teaching to any source known to us?

It is natural to refer to the promise of Jesus recorded in Matt. 19:28 (cf. Luke 22:28ff.) 'ye which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit on the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel'. This judgment of Israel by the Twelve may perhaps imply a larger concept than appears at first sight. For a judgment of Israel is, *a fortiori*, a judgment of the world (Jer. 25:29, I Pet. 4:17), and it may be right to see the Twelve in Christ's promise as representative of, rather than distinct from, the restored remnant of Israel which found expression in the primitive church at Jerusalem. Such an interpretation is to some extent confirmed if we suppose that the vision of Daniel 7 lies behind the saying of Jesus. For while, in Daniel 7, it is the 'ancient of days' who sits on the throne and gives judgment, and 'the saints' who are vindicated by his judgment, yet to 'the people of the saints of the Most High' is finally given 'the kingdom and the dominion, and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven' (v. 27). Moreover, the LXX of Dan. 7:22 reads καὶ τὴν κρίσιν ἔδωκεν ἁγίοις ὑψίστου, (Theodotion: καὶ τὸ κρίμα ἔδωκεν ἁγίοις ὑψίστου) and it is possible that this was interpreted as a giving of judgment *to* the saints, rather than *for* them. It may thus be considered likely that, when Jesus promised that the Twelve apostles would exercise judgment in the day of the Son of man, they

were to be considered as representatives of 'the saints' of Daniel's vision, i.e. pious, believing Jews. (In Wisdom 3:8, it is the righteous Jewish martyrs who 'shall judge nations and have dominion over peoples', and in the post-apostolic church attention came to be almost exclusively concentrated on the idea that the prerogative of judgment would be confined to Christian martyrs. According to Charles' reconstruction of the text of Rev. 20:4-10, it is the resurrected martyrs who sat on the thrones and were given judgment, though in the text as it stands no judges are named at all. There are 'thrones, and they sat upon them', but, whoever they are, they do not include either the martyrs or 'the rest of the dead' that 'lived not until the thousand years were finished'.)

'And if the world is judged by you, are ye unworthy to judge the smallest matters?' This is the rendering of the R.V. 'By you' renders ἐν ὑμῖν, and 'unworthy to judge the smallest matters' renders ἀνάξιτοι κριτηρίων ἐλαχίστων. This rendering, however, rests on three doubtful suppositions. First, that Paul suddenly changes from rebuking the disputants to rebuking those who, in his opinion, should have been judges in the case; whereas there is no evidence that the Corinthians had proved unable or unwilling to arbitrate—they apparently had not been consulted. Secondly, that Paul changes his construction with κρίνεσθαι, from ἐπί with the genitive to ἐν with the dative. Thirdly, that ἀνάξιτοι κριτηρίων means 'unworthy to judge' rather than 'unworthy to be judged'.

If, on the other hand, we take it that 'the saints' are the Jewish members of the Corinthian church, none of the above difficulties arises. Ἐν ὑμῖν will have its normal sense of 'among you', 'in your presence', and will, indeed, be exactly parallel to ἐν τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ. of v. 4 and ἐν ὑμῖν of v. 5. The judges of the world are there, in the Corinthian church, in the very midst of the disputants, as fellow members of the body of Christ. 'Are you unworthy of the least tribunals?' will not mean 'unworthy to judge', but 'unworthy to be judged' or 'unworthy to submit your case to the least tribunals'. Your Jewish brethren will judge the world before your eyes; are you ineligible to take your minor disputes to their courts of petty sessions? (Ἀνάξιτος appears only here in the N.T. Outside the N.T. there is some

evidence that ἀξιόω occasionally bears a semi-legal sense, to make a claim, or a petition, of which examples are given in Moulton and Milligan. Is it possible that ἀνάξιος κριτηρίων might mean, in legal jargon, 'ineligible to enter a suit at (certain) tribunals'?)

'Know ye not that we shall judge angels? How much more things that pertain to this life?' The most striking feature here is the first person plural, the only such number in this chapter. It is entirely explicable if 'the saints' are Jewish believers, for Paul is himself among them, and here identifies himself with them. The standard of judgment by which 'the saints' will judge the world is nothing other than the law of God, and this law, the peculiar glory of the Jew, was a lamp to the feet and a light to the path no less in 'things that pertain to this life' (cf. 1 Cor. 14: 33b, 34).

'If then ye have tribunals pertaining to this life, set them to judge who are of no account in the church. I say this to move you to shame.' This is the rendering of the R.V. margin, and is much preferable to the R.V. text. But it is difficult, on any interpretation of the verse, to give κριτήρια its usual sense of 'tribunals'. For the words, 'if ye have *tribunals*', could surely only be addressed to the society of the church as a whole, not to the litigants, and this would mean that, in the second half of the verse, it was a question of the *church* appointing judges. But this can hardly be the case, whether we read καθίζετε as a statement, a question or a command. It is usually taken as a question. But why should Paul attribute the action of one or two disputants to the church? It is far better to take the whole of v. 4 as addressed to the disputants (or potential disputants) and to take κριτήρια, as 'lawsuits'. V. 4 is then a direct command to rectify an unsatisfactory situation, and τοὺς ἐξουθενημένους refers to those competent judges in the church who have been ignored and despised by those whom Paul is addressing. Ἐξουθενημένους is somewhat ironic, as v.5a hints. Paul 'is not justifying their contempt of brethren', writes T. C. Edwards, 'but stating it, and in stating it, really rebukes their pride' (*Commentary on 1 Corinthians*, p. 140).

It is worth noting that Paul elsewhere speaks of certain who are 'despised' or liable to be set at nought 'in the church':

the weak brother (who is probably a Jew) (Rom. 14: 3, 10), Paul's emissary Timothy (1 Cor. 16:11), Paul himself as a speaker (2 Cor. 10:10) and as a preacher (Gal. 4:14) and prophets (1 Thess. 5:20) The very word Paul uses betrays his sensitivity to the fact that the Jew is not always appreciated as he should be in the discharge of his special ministry to his Gentile brethren.

'Is it so, that there cannot be found among you one wise man, who shall be able to decide between his brethren?' This verse shows that submit to the judgement of the saints' means to ask for a ruling from those members of the church who are σοφοί. There is no doubt an allusion here to Deut. 1:13-16, with its parallel in Ex. 18:21ff., 'So I took the heads of your tribes, wise men (σοφοί) . . . and I charged your judges at that time, saying, Hear the causes between your brethren, and judge righteously between a man and his brother'. But, more than that, Paul's words hark back to all he has himself said about σοφία in the opening chapters of this epistle. The wisdom of God, of which Paul speaks, is not a natural endowment of the Gentiles. That would be 'the wisdom of the world', which even 'unjust judges' might well possess. But God's wisdom has been revealed to those elect servants among the Jews whom He has prepared, 'his holy apostles and prophets' (Eph. 3:5), that they might speak it among the Gentiles. The heart of this wisdom is Christ Himself and the gospel concerning Him. But it is at the same time a practical, ethical wisdom, teaching 'the law of the Christ' to all disciples. And in this respect, the ethical principles of love and equity are already found in the law of the Old Testament. The education of the Jew which, without faith in Christ, brings only condemnation, comes into its true fulfilment in the body of Christ. Such a Jew (like Apollos, for instance, 'mighty in the scriptures') has a special ministry to discharge towards his Gentile brother with no such background in the 'hidden wisdom' of the Old Testament. Rom 2 :17-20 well describes that ministry.

1 Cor. 6:1ff. is more than a piece of practical exhortation on litigation. It shows Paul contending for a proper recognition of the vocation and ministry of the true Jew in the church; not for anything the Jew is of himself, but as the prepared 'witness and

keeper' of the Old Testament, which is able to make men, 'wise to salvation' when the key to its understanding is 'the faith that is in Christ Jesus'.

A Paraphrase

'Does any one of you, with a case against his fellow, have the effrontery to submit to the judgment of the unjust judges (of the world) rather than to the judgment of "the saints" (the appointed custodians of the law of God) ? Or have you forgotten the teaching that "the saints" (the faithful Jews) shall judge the world ? And if this judgment of the world (by your fellow believers) is taking place in your very midst (since you now form one body with believing Jews in Christ), are you unworthy to submit to their rulings in minor matters? Have you forgotten that we (Jews) shall sit in judgment on angels? How then could we fail to have a law by which to govern everyday matters? So then—if you must have everyday matters to come up for arbitration, have a thought for those men who (right now) are despised (by you) in the church; put *them* on the arbitrator's seat ! I speak like this to make you ashamed. Is your situation such that there is not a single wise man (i.e. instructed in the law by the Spirit of Christ) in your midst (—have you no representative of the saints—) who shall have the qualifications to arbitrate between a man and his brother?'