

An extract from *The Thirteenth Apostle: the Story of Paul of Tarsus and an introduction*

John Leonard

My novel *The Thirteenth Apostle* is a double tribute to Graves. In the first place it adopts many of his ideas about the origins of Christianity from his *The Nazerene Gospel Restored* and *Jesus in Rome*. Secondly it adopts the Gravesian narrative device of narrator whose cultural background is removed from our own, and who therefore distances the story that is related from the obvious interpretation we might be tempted to give it. I think that this is a device which has been very little utilised by writers since Graves; it still, it seems, offends people that the narrative voice they are being asked to read is not that of someone they can automatically and lazily identify with. (I have written more about this aspect of Graves' fiction in an academic article "At What Vantage-Point": Cultural Relativism and the Novels of Robert Graves' *AUMLA* 85, May 1996). In this novel I give an exposition of the origins of Christianity and of the career of Paul of Tarsus from the point of view of a Roman secret service officer. The Roman point of view is of course much further from ours than is the Pauline one, but in presenting a figure whom we might otherwise unthinkingly sympathise with from an unsympathetic point of view, my purpose is to attempt to distance the reader from Paul's thought and practice, and, by implication, our own.

In this extract Calpurnius Fronto, the narrator, having just been recruited to the secret service is taken to a Christian meeting by his superior Lollius Tubero.

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That evening I returned to the palace, having borrowed some suitable clothing from one of my servants. Lollius was there waiting for me, also clad in old and dirty clothing. He explained that the plain-clothes police had gone on ahead, and would already be in position by the time we arrived. We left the palace and walked on through the darkening streets. As we went Lollius told me about the house that Paul had taken when he arrived in Rome. It was a tall tenement-block in the suburbs on the Osaa road; it stood below the level of the street, so that the ground floor was in fact a sort of semi-basement. This was the

floor that the Christians used for their services and meetings, as it was more discreet than the use of a conventional ground floor would have been. The floors above were used by Paul and his followers as their own lodgings.

'I thought,' I said, 'that this fellow was under some sort of house-arrest? What's the story, I haven't got up to that bit in the files.'

'He's accused of a breach of the peace, a very serious one, some three or four years ago, at Jerusalem. He appealed to the Governor of Judah, and then to the Emperor, so his case was transferred here. But of course the Jews aren't happy with our justice system in Judah, much less here, so there'll never send any representation to Rome, even though it was on their complaint that Paul was arrested in the first place. So Paul will never come to trial. And you the truth I don't think anyone in Rome gives a damn what happens in Jerusalem anyway, so long as it doesn't involve some sort of general Jewish revolt.'

'But isn't he still under house arrest?'

'Technically, but it isn't really any more binding than the warning I gave to that old Rabbi yesterday. But the odd thing is that Paul really hasn't been outside his house since he moved in anyway. Queer, we've been watching him round the clock, but no.'

By now we had come to the district where Paul's house was located, and soon we entered the street. It was a dark, poor street, though the house to which we were heading was well-enough lit, and as we drew closer I noticed groups of people also moving that way. At the steps down to the front entrance there was a positive crush, and it took us a few minutes to get level with the doors. At the doors stood two burly doorkeepers, arranging people in two orderly queues, male and female. Just as we got inside someone had done the most obnoxious fart, and we had to walk through this miasma, and when we emerged the other side it was into an equally thick atmosphere generated by sweat and unwashed, greasy bodies pressed into an airless, hot room. Just inside the door stood a young Greek with a piece of paper on a board taking names. I didn't hear what Lollius gave as his name, but I said boldly:

'Milo, servant of Calpurnius Fronto, Knight,' in Greek and with as thick an accent as I could manage.

Next another young Greek stood by a table and offered a bread-roll and an earthenware cup of wine to each person; I saw that no one refused, not even Lollius, so I seized on these too, and finally we emerged into a more open area of floor. I followed Lollius to the far wall and stood by him. We both looked around at the scene. We were towards the back of a room perhaps twenty feet wide and forty feet long, into which were crammed a press of people. Down the front of the room was a dais and around this the audience was clustered thickly, but up our end of the room there was more space, though not too much, and the free area of floor was getting smaller and smaller all the time as more and more people emerged from the vestibule. The upper end of the room was in darkness, but lights burned in wall-niches around the dais. There was a palpable air of excitement in the crowd. I looked about trying to guess at the nationalities and classes of the audience. A surprising number were women, who were evidently supposed, by the effort of the doorkeepers, to keep to the left hand side of the room, but this order seemed not to be widely understood or obeyed, for the women were mingling amongst the crowd generally. As the nationalities and classes, most of the audience looked Greek to me, though I suppose a few were Roman, and almost all were evidently of the poorest classes, slaves, labourers and so forth.

After a few minutes a tall, thin Greek appeared on the stage and called for order. Almost at once the audience fell silent, a remarkable occurrence, for I would have said that such a crowd of people would have been unruly and noisy and difficult to control, but evidently they had come to listen. After thanking the audience for coming, the Greek introduced himself as Timothy, a disciple of Paul, and he began to introduce the faith of his master to the audience. It was obviously a well-practised and carefully-conceived speech, which outlined in very general terms the doctrine of the one God and of the necessity of faith in this one God, and of the great example of Jesus and so on. This was not news to me and so, whilst pretending to listen intently I looked about secretly to gauge what the reaction of the audience was. Well, it was highly interested, not only had these people come to listen, but they had also come to be convinced, it seemed.

After Timothy had wound up his speech he promised that the next speaker would elaborate on his themes with reference to the scriptures. Sure enough a short, balding man got up and began to read out of a scroll the various passages in Jewish scripture that the Christians claim indicate the future appearance of Jesus. These went on and on, and as I had spend the best part to two days already reading these scriptures I was rather bored, as I recognised the odd passage, but the general style of the passages was such that, it seemed to me, one could, with a short acquaintance with the style, just make up the references, and no one would be any the wiser. I murmured to Lollius:

'This is boring isn't it?'

'Yes,' he replied, 'but the audience isn't complaining, they know the best bit is just coming.'

Soon the scripture reading ended and Timothy got up to thank the reader. He then announced that the recent initiates would appear, and at this a sort of half-cheer went up from the audience. I didn't know what to expect and so was interested when half a dozen nervous-looking people appeared on stage, dressed in white robes. The first one, a man, began to speak and started to tell everyone how great a sinner he had been before he joined the Christians and how this had changed his life and assured him of salvation. Each of the six spoke in turn to the same effect and I began to have to repress my amusement at what I thought was the affected tone of penitence. But more than this, the sins that the people confessed were such half-hearted ones that it hardly seemed worth confessing them; they were the sorts of petty dishonesties and thefts and evasions that I would be surprised if my servants were not guilty of. I shot a glance at Lollius, and I saw that he too was at pains not to laugh, but he put a finger to his lips and pointed towards the crowd. And this was the amazing thing, the crowd seemed positively riveted by this tawdry and unexciting ritual of confession; several of the crowd would groan when a particular misdemeanour was mentioned, or when one of the people spoke of their wretchedness before their conversion, others were rapt and wet-eyed, others covered their faces. Lollius leaned forward:

'There's a lot of emotion about tonight, so Paul himself may appear.'

Sure enough, when the last of the six had finished Timothy announced that Paul himself, as a special favour to the audience, would appear, and before he had finished a noise of approbation arose from the crowd, as a small man had appeared and made his way to the front of the stage. He was little and bandy-legged, with a balding crown and a very prominent nose. His extraordinary appearance was enhanced by the fact that his brows were also large, and his very bushy eyebrows formed one continuous line across his face. He looked stern and threatening, but suddenly, so suddenly it startled me, he looked up with a serene expression on his face and the crowd gave another noise of approbation.

'My brethren,' he began, in a well-modulated Greek with a hint of an Aramaic accent, 'It is well that we have been reminded of our sins, for there is no one amongst us without sin, and except we ask God for mercy and implore the intercession of his Son, Jesus Christ, no-one will be saved.'

He continued in this vein for some time, beginning to enlarge on his own career, how he had once been a rigidly orthodox Jew in the pay of the High Priest in Jerusalem, and how he had persecuted the followers of Jesus, until he met with Jesus himself on the roadside near the city of Damascus, who had convinced him of the error of his ways, and so the story went on. I was interested in this narrative, because at that time I had not read the files about Paul, and it was interesting to get the story from his own mouth, though I couldn't help feeling that he was far too satisfied with his former sins, and instead of repenting of them, seemed to treat them as a sort to guarantee of his own importance. However, I did not have much of a chance of following up this analysis as the reaction of the audience began to engage my attention. They were utterly enthralled by Paul, not only did they follow his every word, display each emotion on cue, as Paul reached that particular part of his narrative, but they began to press forward, and respond loudly to each climax in the story, with groans and cries and suitable ejaculations. Not only this but something began to affect me too, my pulse began to pound and my vision narrowed, there was a roaring in my head, and I had to ask myself what was the matter. It wasn't that I was responding to Paul's narrative, for by now the crowd was so noisy that I could barely hear his discourse, and besides, although he was an accomplished orator, he was, after all only a reli-

gious cheap-jack, but it was something else. I turned and looked at Lollius and saw that he had been watching me with amusement; suddenly I knew what it was that was affecting me, it was the smell that the crowd gave off, a heady aroma that I had only smelled once or twice before: once on one of my infrequent visits to the Circus, at the climax of a particularly long and skilful fight between two well-matched and equally-popular gladiators, and once again, amidst the ranks of my legion, when we, one hot morning, below a green wood, waited for the onslaught of the British war-chariots.

Lollius lent forward and whispered: 'They love him, and he handles them so well; watch him calm them down again now.'

And indeed, Paul was now returning to his initial theme, and sentence by sentence the hysteria abated, so that at the conclusion to his discourse, you could have heard a pin drop. Paul ended:

'And see the mercy of God extended to us-for now even some of the men prominent in Caesar's household are with us.' And with that he pointed directly at us. Fortunately both Lollius and I had the presence of mind to turn around and look behind us, as though we thought that the men he was indicating were still further to the rear of the hall, so that few people suspected that it was us he was meaning, and besides the back of the hall was in comparative darkness. Nevertheless I got a nasty shock. After Paul had vanished I whispered to Lollius:

'Are we safe?'

'Completely, he always does that anyway, I should have warned you.'

'The doorkeepers look pretty formidable.'

'They're police.'

'Oh.'

Timothy had reappeared on stage and was organising for the audience to join in initiation-classes, which were held at various times throughout the week. Before he got up to the back some members of the audience had begun to drift away, and we followed them out into the

street. The night was cold, but the air was very refreshing after the stuffy and charged atmosphere of the hall.

'Well,' I began, 'he can certainly play them.'

'Yes, he's a master of that sort of rhetoric, wouldn't convince us of course, we've had the usual polite education and gone to the law-courts and listened to the orators who can really turn it on; but of course the people he's speaking to are a different class, as you noticed, not very sophisticated, wouldn't know they're being rhetorised, as you might say.'

'I was surprised by the crowd, I had no idea that it would be such a low class of people, otherwise I'd have borrowed the cook's clothes, never mind my valet's. But I had the impression that this was a money-making operation, but now it seems to me to be a sort of general charity organisation-none of the people there would have been worth anything.'

'Well, from what we've been able to deduce, Paul and his disciples operate on several levels; what you saw tonight was their general recruitment-these people will be combed and selected and assigned to the classes you heard them organising and those that last the course will be welcomed into their church. But Paul and the others also take care to cultivate others of higher social classes, like your Servius, and they have different meetings for them, and of course, those sort of people are expected to contribute largely.'

'So do you think that this is fundamentally a crooked outfit?'

'Well, if you're a rich convert, it probably doesn't make any difference, if you're poor then it may be a good opening and in this case the church may function as a religious club, you know, meals and charity and insurance and contacts and that sort of thing. It's people like Servius who gain nothing.'

'But the money they do cream off, I mean the money that doesn't get returned the members of the church, who gets that.'

'Well, Paul and the leaders do, I suppose. But I don't think that Paul is

as flagrant as some religious leaders, he never dresses extravagantly, never indulges in anything, but he lives quite well. I suspect that the main part of the money goes to a fund for use in emergencies, or to help him out of difficulties—for example we suspect that he used these funds to buy citizenship.

‘Goodness, how could he have afforded that? I wouldn’t have thought that someone like him could save up that sum in a thousand years.’

‘No, he probably makes less per year than a quarter of the revenue of one of your estates,’ returned Lollius with a grin. ‘Yes, he must have come by a lot of money at that point. And of course when he was travelling around more, in his missionary days, he will have spent more, you know how expensive travelling is.’

We moved on in silence, until I thought of another question: ‘I heard Paul say that Jesus was the Son of God, but they’re always going on about the one God, so how can a unique God have a Son, I don’t understand, especially as you say that this Jesus is still alive, does Paul know this?’

‘I don’t know, no doubt you’ll soon call him in to resolve these questions. Or you could ask Aristophanes tomorrow. Well, anyway, it’s very late and here’s a little wine-shop I often stop at for a nightcap, but I suspect it won’t be entirely to your tastes.’

We had stopped outside a very lurid-looking tavern that I knew was probably little better than a brothel, so I excused myself from further entertainment that evening and returned home.

The next morning I asked Aristophanes for an answer to my queries of the night before and to my relief the librarian looked tentative for the first time that I had seen. ‘The difference between the Jewish followers of Jesus and Paul’s sect,’ he began, ‘is that the Jews believe that Jesus may have been the Messiah, and that he may yet vindicate this tide, whereas Paul’s sect believe him to be a divine being, an aspect of the Godhead.’

'But we know that Jesus is still alive somewhere, or at least we don't know that he's dead. How can you believe that someone who is still alive is a part of the Godhead?'

'I don't know whether Paul does know that Jesus is still alive, or, if he does, how he justifies it, but an old Jew of our acquaintance, who is now dead unfortunately, once told me that he thinks that the identification may have been a series of metaphorical slippages concerning the term "Son of God".'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, for Jews everyone is technically a Son of God, even Romans, as the first man, Adam, so their scriptures say, was "made in God's likeness".'

'That's what the old Rabbi said, though he didn't mention Adam.'

'But this term also has a more exact sense, of "a person peculiarly favoured by God", as, for example a prophet, or a king. And Jesus was a king, so he was certainly a Son of God in that sense. *However* the apocalyptic writings, or some of them, say that in the last days God will send out an emanation from Himself, sometimes called the Ancient of Days, who will help the Messiah achieve his victories. Now there is no problem with this in orthodox Judaism, because God can send out whatever emanations he likes without compromising his singularity, and the Rabbis have various other emanations to list too, such as his Spirit, which accomplished the act of creation, if you recall...'

I nodded.

'... and Wisdom, who inspires the Rabbis. But somewhere, probably in Egypt, where religious doctrines are broken apart and bits of them are joined back together again to make new religions every day, somebody came up with the idea of one of these emanations being eternal, and co-existent with God. Then it is easy to collapse the whole chain of reasoning into the equation of Jesus = Son of God = an eternally-existing aspect of the Godhead, though it's not something that an orthodox Jew could ever have done.'

I was baffled, and after a moment said:

'Oh well, I expect that once I've got clear in my own mind the distinction between these Jewish Christians and the Pauline variety, then I'll have solved the question.'

Aristophanes' eyes twinkled:

'Oh you think so. No, once you've done that you still have to find out about the Gnostics.' And with that he began to walk away.

'Who are they?' I began.

'Ask Lollius,' the librarian returned over his shoulder, 'or ask that Egyptian priest this afternoon.' When Lollius came in later I asked him about the Gnostics, but all he did was snort angrily and leave the room. He looked a little the worse for wear after his night out, and so I decided to ask the priest when I got a chance instead.