

Saint Paul by Leo Rosten

¹SOMETIME BETWEEN 31 AND 35 AD, a God-fearing young Jew named Saul left Jerusalem for Damascus, a week's journey away. He had asked the high priest for authority to bring back any followers of one Yeshu'a, recently executed by the Roman procurator. These believers in Yeshu'a (Greeks were to call him "Iesous," Romans, "Jesus," and we, "Jesus") were all Jews. They venerated Yeshu'a, often in synagogues, as the Messiah promised by the Hebrew prophets.

²Saul came from Tarsus, in Asia Minor, where a fantastic brew of oriental religions and mystery sects seethed: pagan rites to the gods of Greece, to Egypt's Isis and Osiris, to the divinities of Persia, Assyria, India. Throughout the Roman Empire, the orgies of the Aphrodite cult vied with the worship of Mithras, the Sun God, whose numberless followers celebrated December 25, conferred "divinity" on a bull—whom they slaughtered, then drank the blood of. In a thousand marketplaces and bazaars, self-appointed holy men and diviners, sorcerers and soothsayers plied their half-mad crafts.

³Saul was appalled by the idol worship around him. He had persecuted the Jews who followed Jesus, for blasphemy; he had witnessed the stoning of their first martyr, Stephen. As Saul now neared Damascus, "suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven and he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutes thou me? And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus, whom thou persecutes..." (*Acts of the Apostles*, written by Luke, 40 to 60 years later.) Saul "was three days without sight, and neither did eat nor drink," then Ananias laid hands on him and "scales" fell from his eyes. He was baptized in the Jewish manner, as Jesus had been, and went into the synagogue to proclaim Jesus not only the Messiah, but also the Son of God.

⁴So began the astonishing career of the greatest missionary-preacher-church organizer the world has ever known. Fiery, dogmatic, intense, Paul (his Roman name) complained of "a bitter physical affliction—either epilepsy or malaria. He claimed that his mission came not from the apostles in Jerusalem, who opposed him, nor even from Jesus, whom he had never known, but directly from God. He seemed oddly uninterested in Jesus's life on earth; he did not cite a single parable or sermon of the gentle Nazarene. He talked not of Jesus the man, but of *Christos*—Greek for "the Anointed One." He replaced Moses with a God-Man who, he said, had been crucified to atone for men's sins and had risen from the dead. He announced that Judgment Day would come at any moment, and all the faithful would be resurrected for life eternal. He promised amnesty to harlots and evildoers alike, if they but had living faith in the Savior-Redeemer. He talked of Satan, of an anti-Christ, of dark "principalities and powers." He ranted against "sinful flesh," saying death had come into the world because of Adam's original sin. He counseled men to avoid marriage (he never married) and women to be subject to men. He told those who contested him to "castrate themselves." He preached love in lyrical language—and broke into angry maledictions: "If any man preach any other gospel [than mine]...let him be accursed."

⁵In all this, he was strikingly different from Jesus, who had, preached a sublime, simple gospel of kindness and love of one another; Paul insisted that men could be saved only in the mystical body of Christ. The very title he gave Jesus, *Kyrios* (Lord), offended many: Greeks used *Kyrios* for Dionysus, who would atone for *their* sins through his death. "Had Jesus [attended] a church service in Corinth in 54 AD, he would have been astounded," says Prof. Morton

Scott Enslin,"and might well have asked himself in amazement: Is this the result of my work in Galilee?"

⁶The apostles of Jesus had considered themselves a strictly Jewish sect, like the Pharisees or Sadducees; but Paul, who proudly called himself "a Hebrew of Hebrews," realized that many Romans, Greeks, Arabs resisted conversion because of the Mosaic laws about food-and because they would have to be circumcised. Paul fought the apostles, including that James whom many scholars identify as Jesus's brother, and prevailed: He made himself apostle to the Gentiles, waived the dietary laws-and the requirement of circumcision.

⁷He made at least three remarkable journeys, preaching in synagogues all around Asia Minor, then carried "my gospel" to Europe, establishing congregations in Antioch, Corinth, Salonica. In Athens, he shrewdly took as his text the "unknown god" to whom the Greeks had set up an altar among their other deities. Preaching about an anointed King was treasonable to Caesar, and Paul caused political uproars wherever he went; but to the dismay of those fighting Rome's tyranny, he proclaimed, "The powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God; and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation." Those who sought freedom plotted to kill him. He started riots in some cities, was stoned, chased out, flogged, put in chains. The Romans thought him mad—with learning, said Festus. In one letter, Paul cries, "I am talking like a madman."

⁸Nothing could stop this passionate, indomitable, humorless man. He survived an earthquake, a shipwreck, four separate imprisonments. Arrested in Jerusalem for provoking a riot, he insisted on his rights as a Roman citizen, was shipped to Rome, acquitted. Arrested a second time, he fell cat's paw to the unspeakable Nero, who blamed the Jews for espousing freedom and the Christians for burning Rome. Tradition

has it that Paul and Peter were executed the same day, in 67 AD—Paul, beheaded on the Ostian Way.

⁹Paul's letters are the first great writings of Christian literature. Not one original, unfortunately, has come down to us. Experts date the earliest copies 200-250 AD and accept only four of the 13 letters as indisputably his. He wrote these epistles about finances, feuds, rumors, no less than faith. They are magnificent, if stormy, prose; they exhort, inspire, harangue, threaten—for the disagreements among converts were many, and the interpretations of Jesus's teachings varied greatly. Not until Shakespeare did any man coin or popularize such phrases: "old wives' fables...filthy lucre...labour of love...thorn in the flesh...The wages of sin is death... Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die."

¹⁰Paul's influence on mankind can hardly be overestimated. He welded Hebrew monotheism to Greek mysticism to form a truly new theology. He extended to non-Jews the Judaic idea that religion cannot be separated from *morals*, a revolutionary concept. He was virtually forgotten after his death. His image was rarely seen in sculpture, a church seldom raised in his honor. But Martin Luther took his doctrine of faith from the *Letter to the Romans*, and made it the key to the Reformation. For centuries, theologians have debated Pauline doctrine. Some tried to replace Jesus with Paul. Some "regard Paul as the perverter of the simple moral teachings of Jesus" (Columbia Encyclopedia). "Either Jesus or Paul; it cannot be both," say others. His triumphant words are his best obituary: "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" —LEO ROSTEN

FROM *LOOK* MAGAZINE, "THEY MADE OUR WORLD," 31 DECEMBER 1963.