CHAPTER I

THE PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE APOSTLE AND THE PHILOSOPHER

In order to arrive at an estimation of the relationship between Paul and Seneca it would be of the greatest value if it were known with certainty — as some scholars quite adamantly maintain — whether they ever met each other personally. Indeed it might almost be expected that they did, or at all events that they were at least aware of each other’s existence. Paul was, after all, one of the most outstanding figures in the early Christian Church, the rise of which did not remain a secret in the ancient world. He travelled throughout a great part of the then known world and was most certainly in Rome for a while. Seneca was for a time a very influential man in the Roman empire, both on account of his prominent position in the state and society, and on account of his writings which are among the most important documents for this particular period of Stoic philosophy.

Paul and Seneca lived at approximately the same time. Seneca was born at Corduba in Spain in 4 or 5 B.C., his suicide as a consequence of the conspiracy of Piso took place in A.D. 65. The dates of Paul’s birth and death are not known with accuracy, but are bound to have been at about the same time. It is for instance striking that Tacitus records the torturing of the Christians under Nero in Ann. 15. 44, and begins 15. 48 with an account of the conspiracy of Piso, to which Seneca whose death is then described in 15. 60 ff. fell victim. Even if Paul were not killed during the persecution, it certainly seems most improbable that Seneca would not have known of the existence of the Christians in general, and of Paul in particular.

They both lived in the same world of the Roman empire. When reading Seneca’s writings anyone at home in the epistles of Paul and Acts constantly encounters names also familiar from the New Testament, names which are of course mentioned in passing and in a completely different connection, but which by their presence go to show that both men were living under the same empire at the same time.

A few examples are sufficient to illustrate this. In one of his letters to Lucilius Seneca contemplates, as he does so often, the numerous
ways in which man’s life is threatened. On earthquakes he writes: ‘How often have cities in Asia, how often in Achaia, been laid low by a single shock of earthquake! How many towns in Syria, how many in Macedonia, have been swallowed up! How often has this kind of devastation laid Cyprus in ruins! How often has Paphos collapsed.’ 1 With this we are in the world of Paul, not only of Acts but also of his epistles: Asia Rom. 16 : 5; 1 Cor. 16 : 19; 2 Cor. 1 : 8; Achaia Rom. 15 : 26; 1 Cor. 16 : 15; 2 Cor. 1 : 1; 9 : 2; 11 : 10; 1 Thess. 1 : 7, 8; Syria Gal. 1 : 21; Macedonia Rom. 15 : 26; 1 Cor. 16 : 5; 2 Cor. 1 : 16; 2 : 13; 7 : 5; 8 : 1; 11 : 9; Phil. 4 : 15; 1 Thess. 1 : 7, 8; 4 : 10; 1 Tim. 1 : 3; Cyprus absent in the epistles but frequently mentioned in Acts: Acts 11 : 19; 13 : 4; 15 : 39; 21 : 3; 27 : 4; Paphos Acts 13 : 6, 13, the earthquake at Philippi in Macedonia Acts 16 : 26 ff. Hence names are frequently encountered in Seneca, which are more or less familiar to us from the Pauline epistles or Acts. 2

In another letter Seneca gives a lively description of the arrival of an Alexandrian ship at Puteoli. All the townspeople of Puteoli go down to the docks and know exactly which fleet is entering the harbour. Seneca records, not without Stoic complacency, how, while others were hurrying to the water-front, he basked in his own indolence, and although he had important business interests in Egypt, he made absolutely no haste to find out from his agents how his affairs were progressing. 3 That Alexandrian ship which Seneca was watching might well have been the one on which Paul went to Italy, and from which he disembarked at Puteoli (Acts 28 : 11, 13).

Or to take an example from quite a different sphere: both Seneca and Paul were apparently quite familiar with the concept of the paedagogus, who was such a well known figure in the Roman world of their time. 4

Consequently it is evident that Paul and Seneca lived at the same time in the same world. One of the most striking proofs of this is the

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1 Ep. 91. 9.
2 E.g. N.Q. iii. 25. 4: Macedonia, Galatia, Cappadocia; ib. 25. 5: Sicily, Syria; ib. 25. 11: Lycia; ib. vi. 26. 4: Paphos, Nicopolis, Cyprus, Tyrus; ib. vii. 28. 3: Achaia, Macedonia; Apocolocyntosis 1: Appia via.
3 Ep. 77. 1-3.
4 Seneca: Ep. 11. 8-10; 25. 6; 27. 5; 60. 1; 89. 13; 94. 9; Ira ii. 21. 6, 9; Paul: 1 Cor. 4 : 15; Gal. 3 : 24, 25; cf. R. Boulogne, De plaats van de paedagogus in de Romeinse cultuur, 1951. Boulogne frequently mentions Seneca, but never Paul H. J. Marrou, Histoire de l'éducation dans l'antiquité, p. 202, 207, 355, 351.