

Notes on Biblical Exposition

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XIII. FALSE BRETHREN AND A TRUE GOSPEL

Then after fourteen years again I went up to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking along also Titus; and I went up according to revelation; and I laid before them the gospel which I am preaching among the Gentiles, and privately before those who were of repute, lest perchance I should run in vain or should prove to have run in vain. But not even Titus who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised. But on account of the privily brought in false brethren, who came in privily to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, in order that they might bring us into bondage—to whom not even for an hour did we yield by way or subjection, in order that the truth of the gospel might remain with you (Gal. 2:1-5, in a literal translation).

The Case of Titus

THE first part of this passage has been treated in the last two articles. We noticed last month that Paul conferred with the leaders of the Jerusalem Church not because he needed to receive any commission from them or through them (since his commission came to him directly from Christ), but in order to stop the propaganda of the Judaizers, who had falsely appealed to the original apostles against Paul. The same thing will become even clearer through our present study.

"But not even Titus who was with me," says Paul, "being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised." The Judaizers at Antioch—supposing our provisional identification of the event of Gal. 2:1-10 with the Apostolic Council of Acts 15:1-29 to be correct—had demanded that *all* Gentile converts be circumcised. "But as a matter of fact," Paul says, "not even the Gentile Titus who was there with me in Jerusalem itself, the very centre of Judaism, was compelled to be circumcised. In his case at least, venturing as he did into the holy city, compromise might have

seemed to be in place. But as a matter of fact there was no compromise at all. Not even he was circumcised, to say nothing of the Gentiles who were out in the Gentile world."

What does Paul imply by the word "compelled"? Does he mean that the pillars of the Jerusalem Church demanded that Titus be circumcised, but that he (Paul) simply refused to accede to their demand? Certainly he does not mean that. If it had come thus to a breach between him and the Jerusalem leaders, the "right hand of fellowship," which he mentions in verse 9, would have been impossible. What is much more probable is that the Judaizers demanded the circumcision of Titus but the leaders agreed with Paul in refusing to do as they asked. However, we must not attempt to read too much between the lines. All that Paul clearly tells us is that his going up and laying his gospel before the leaders of the Jerusalem Church did not necessitate even the circumcision of Titus, a Gentile who was right there with him in Jerusalem itself.

False Brethren

"But," Paul continues, "on account of the privily brought in false brethren" The grammatical structure of what follows is exceedingly difficult. The words, "on account of the privily brought in false brethren," constitute a prepositional phrase. A prepositional phrase is usually adverbial; it usually modifies a verb. At any rate, it makes no sense by itself. If I meet a man on the street and say to him simply, "On account of the privily brought in false brethren," he naturally thinks that something has interrupted me, and that I was going on to tell him something that *happened* or that ought to happen on account of those false brethren.

Now the trouble is that Paul seems to use the prepositional phrase here in just such a disconnected way. It is true, a

good many words follow the propositional phrase in the rest of verse 4 and in verse 5. But these words are all of them in two relative clauses; and these relative clauses do not complete the meaning of the prepositional phrase, but are simply adjectives modifying the noun "false brethren" within the prepositional phrase. The skeleton of the verses is: "But on account of the privily brought in false brethren, who came in privily, to whom we did not yield for an hour" It will at once be seen that the sentence, provided it be regarded as beginning with verse 4, is never brought to completion. Paul does not tell, as he would have had to tell in order to complete the sentence, what happened on account of the privily brought in false brethren. There is no verb for the prepositional phrase to modify.

A Broken Sentence?

In view of this difficulty, a number of commentators say simply that verses 4 and 5 constitute an "anacoluthon"—that is, Paul begins a sentence which he breaks off before it is completed, such long and such weighty relative clauses having been brought in as modifiers of the noun in the initial prepositional phrase that that phrase is never given the verb that it was originally intended to modify. If this view of the structure be correct, opinions may differ as to what Paul was intending to say when he began the sentence. Probably he was intending to tell something of the trouble or discussion which arose in the Jerusalem Church on account of the Judaizers' contention that Titus should be circumcised. But inasmuch as he has already, in one of the relative clauses modifying the noun in the prepositional phrase, told what the upshot of the discussion was—namely that he did not yield for a moment—he does not pedantically go back to review the discussion itself. Instead, he breaks the

sentence off with a kind of impatience and goes on to something else.

An anacoluthon is not always a defect in style. Sometimes it may express very well the writer's feeling of impatience; sometimes it is more impressive, because of what it does not say, but only leaves the reader to supply, than the most regular sentence-structure would be. It is used in some passages very effectively by Paul.

But this particular anacoluthon, if anacoluthon it be, is of a rather unusual kind. It is not surprising, therefore, that many commentators have sought to avoid finding it in the passage. That can be done, if at all, only by taking the prepositional phrase, "on account of the privily brought in false brethren," with something that *precedes*, so that verse 4 would not begin a new sentence at all.

A Test Case

Some, for example, have supposed that the prepositional phrase modifies a verb "was circumcised," to be supplied from the preceding sentence. "Not even Titus," these expositors would make the passage mean, "was *compelled* to be circumcised; but it happened—that is, Titus was circumcised—on account of the privily brought in false brethren."

This interpretation must certainly be rejected. Paul could hardly have circumcised the Gentile Titus at Jerusalem; for that would have been a desertion of his great principle. It would have been totally different from the circumcision of the half-Jew Timothy at Lystra (Acts 16:1-3). Titus presented a test case; and to have yielded with regard to him would certainly seem to involve betrayal of the cause. Moreover, if Paul *had* yielded, surely he would have been obliged to explain his action in far clearer terms than would then be found in Gal. 2:3-5; he could hardly have said simply: "Not even for an hour did we yield by way of subjection."

A far more likely suggestion is that which regards not the circumcision of Titus, but the non-circumcision of him, as the thing which is explained by the prepositional phrase at the beginning of verse 4—the thing which took place "on account of the privily brought in false brethren." "Not even Titus," Paul would say in accordance with this interpretation, "was compelled to be circum-

cised; and that—namely, the non-circumcision of Titus—was on account of the privily brought in false brethren." In other words, if the false brethren had not been there, Titus might have been circumcised; but their general contention about the Gentile converts made the question about Titus a test case, so that yielding even in that case became impossible.

This interpretation also must be pronounced improbable. In the first place, it may well be doubted whether Paul would ever have agreed to the circumcision of Titus even if the Judaizers had not been there; and, in the second place, the supplying of the idea of non-circumcision with the prepositional phrase is very unnatural and very unlikely to occur to any ordinary reader.

An Explanatory Phrase?

Much more worthy of consideration than either of these two interpretations is that which regards the prepositional phrase, "on account of the privily brought in false brethren," as "epexegetical"—we trust that the readers of CHRISTIANITY TODAY will pardon us for the use of a grammatical term occasionally if we promise not to do it too often—as epexegetical, we say, of the words "compelled to be circumcised" in the preceding verse. The connection would then be: "Not even Titus . . . was compelled to be circumcised—compelled to be circumcised, I mean, on account of the privily brought in false brethren." The prepositional phrase at the beginning of verse 4 would thus merely define a little more closely the kind of compulsion which is being denied in verse 3, the kind of compulsion which the Judaizers desired but which as a matter of fact was not carried out.

This interpretation gives an excellent sense, and possibly it is correct. The only question is whether the prepositional phrase can be understood as epexegetical of a word or phrase in what precedes without some clearer indication than Paul actually gives us in the text. The repetition of the word or phrase of which the added phrase is epexegetical—in this case the words "compelled to be circumcised"—is perhaps as much required in Greek as it is in English. We were obliged to repeat the words "compelled to be circumcised"

in order to make the meaning clear in English. Would not Paul have been obliged to repeat them if that was the meaning that he had intended in the Greek?

An Unusual Interpretation

These difficulties in the interpretations so far considered lead us to consider another interpretation, which, it must be confessed, has met with scarcely any favor from the commentators. According to this interpretation, the prepositional phrase, "on account of the privily brought in false brethren," modifies not any word or phrase in what immediately precedes but the verbs in verses 1 and 2; and what Paul is explaining by the prepositional phrase is the thing that most required explanation—namely, his going up to Jerusalem and laying his gospel before the leaders of the Jerusalem Church. "I went up to Jerusalem," Paul would be saying if this interpretation is right, "and laid my gospel before the leaders: That might look like subordination on my part. But as a matter of fact it involved no subordination or compromise at all. So little did it involve compromise that not even Titus who was right there with me in Jerusalem had to be circumcised. On the contrary, it really happened—that is I went up to Jerusalem and laid my gospel before the leaders—not on my account, as though I needed endorsement from anyone, but on account of the privily brought in false brethren, whose propaganda needed to be stopped by a word from the very leaders to whom they themselves appealed."

This interpretation is for the most part rejected with scant consideration by modern commentators, on the ground that the verbs with which it connects the prepositional phrase lie too far back to be in the mind of the reader when the prepositional phrase is read. But the force of this argument is weakened when one sees that those verbs in verses 1 and 2 express the main point of the passage, and the point which was most open to misunderstanding. By denying the circumcision of Titus in verse 3, Paul has stated what his going up to Jerusalem and laying his gospel did *not* involve; it is therefore quite in order for him to tell, as he does according to the proposed interpretation of verses 4 and 5, what those actions *did* involve.

The Dangers of Originality

It is only with very great diffidence that we propose an interpretation which, while not at all original with us, has met with general rejection. The Bible has had many readers during the past nineteen hundred years; many minds have applied themselves to the interpretation of it. Where our mind differs from almost all the others, we are usually inclined to suspect that it is our mind that is wrong, and not the mind of so many wiser and more learned men. We are sometimes amazed at the sublime confidence with which modern expositors or translators put forward idiosyncrasies of their own in the interpretation of the Scriptures as though they stood as firm as Holy Writ itself. A man can sometimes apply criticism very profitably to himself before he applies it to others.

All that we can say is that the interpretation just proposed does seem to commend itself to us anew whenever we come back to a fresh reading of this much discussed passage. We are very far indeed from thinking that it is certainly correct, and have not even ventured to incorporate it in the translation at the beginning of this article.

Fortunately the three interpretations which we have designated as possible—unlike the two decisively rejected ones—are very similar in their ultimate implications. Whether (1) Paul begins at verse 4 a new sentence which he breaks off in an anacoluthon, or whether (2) he is simply defining a little more closely the kind of compulsion which might have been exerted in the case of Titus but as a matter of fact was not carried through, or whether (3) he is explaining further his action in going up to Jerusalem and laying his gospel before the leaders—an action capable of much misunderstanding—in any case, Titus was not circumcised and would not under any circumstances have been circumcised.

Having thus considered as best we can the general structure of verses 4 and 5, we turn now, very briefly, to certain details in those verses.

Plain Language

Paul here calls the Judaizers "false brethren," and the meaning of that term is clear. "Brother" in Paul's Epistles means "fellow-Christian," and thus a

"false brother" is a man who claims to be a Christian or is thought to be a Christian and yet is not, or does not show himself by his present actions to be, a Christian at all. It is not a pleasant term, but the reason why it is not a pleasant term is that the thing that it designated was not a pleasant thing. These Judaizers might have seemed to a superficial observer to be true disciples, but in their heart of hearts, Paul seems to mean, they were Pharisees rather than disciples of Jesus Christ. They were depending upon their own works for salvation, and according to the apostle Paul a man cannot possibly do that if he is to be saved. So Paul calls them false brethren. Unlike the leaders of the modern Church the apostle Paul believed in calling things by their true names.

These false brethren were "brought in secretly" and "came in secretly." The notion which we have translated by the word "privily" or "secretly" is not definitely expressed in the words which Paul uses, but it seems rather clearly to be implied. What Paul means is that these men came into a place where they did not belong.

Into what place were they "brought in" and into what did they "come in"? Our first impulse might be to say, "Into the Church in general," these words being thus merely explanatory of the term "false brethren." But it is natural to give the words a more special reference; it is natural to take them as referring to the action of the Judaizers in coming into the Church at Antioch. Certainly that action as it is described in Acts 15:1 is most aptly designated by these words of Paul. This reference of the words—at least of the word translated "came in privily"—is practically certain if our suggested interpretation of the phrase "on account of the privily brought in false brethren" be correct. In that case, the coming of the false brethren into the Antioch Church would clearly be designated as the occasion for Paul's going up from Antioch to Jerusalem.

Christian Liberty

The liberty which these Judaizers came in to spy out was particularly the liberty of the Gentile Christians, which

Paul can call "our liberty" because he shares it with them. But at bottom it was a liberty possessed by all Christians whether Jews or Gentiles. It was the liberty which a man has when he gives up the vain effort to establish his own righteousness before God and trusts only in the atonement which Christ accomplished on the cross.

That liberty was being attacked by the Judaizers when they asked the Gentile converts to keep the ceremonial law. But it is also being attacked in the modern Church when men seek by their own efforts to attain salvation by exhibiting "the spirit of Jesus" in their lives. Now as always true liberty is to be obtained only when a man depends for his salvation unreservedly upon the grace of God.

To the demands of the Judaizers, Paul says, "we yielded not even for an hour by way of subjection, in order that the truth of the gospel might remain with you."

No inferences can legitimately be drawn from these last words with regard to the time when the Galatian churches were founded. Even if they were founded after that conference with the Jerusalem leaders of which Paul is writing in our passage, still Paul's action at that conference could be said to have been taken in order that the truth of the gospel might remain with them; since that action was taken for the benefit of Gentile converts generally, not only those who had already been won but also those who might be won afterwards. Moreover, the Greek words may possibly be translated, "in order that the truth of the gospel might remain *for you*" or "unto you," rather than "with you." The phrase does not prove indeed that the Galatian churches had not been founded before the conference, but it also does not prove that they *had* been founded then. It sheds no clear light, one way or the other, either upon the question of the destination of the Epistle (to North or South Galatia) or upon the question of the identification of the conference (with the famine visit of Acts 11:30; 12:25 or with the Apostolic Council of Acts 15:1-29). Those questions will have to be decided, if they can be decided at all, on the basis of other evidence.