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"I FOUGHT WITH BEASTS AT EPHESUS"

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Ἐὶ κατὰ ἀνθρώπων ἐδυναμάχησα ἐν Ἐφέσῳ
τί μοι τὸ βέλους; I Cor. 15. 32.

IN the long list of New Testament *crucis interpretum* these words have had a prominent place almost from the time when they were written. At least they were divergently understood as early as the second century. We know that practically as soon as the Pauline letters came into general circulation among the churches, honest readers like the writer of II Peter found in them "some things hard to be understood." Nor have modern exegetes removed all difficulties. The phrase before us, besides minor points, raises at least three questions of prime importance for its interpretation. What is meant by *κατὰ ἀνθρώπων*, "after the manner of men," or rather, "of man"? Did the apostle *really* fight with beasts at Ephesus, or is the phrase a figure? Why does he write: this thing happened *at Ephesus*, when according to external evidence and internal evidence alike, he is writing I Corinthians *from* Ephesus? The first two of these questions engage most of the commentators. The third is seen as a problem by only a few, yet it is a real problem. Suffice it here to say that it has led some, notably J. Weiss and H. Lisco, to separate this 32nd verse, with more or less of its context, from the original text of I Corinthians altogether.¹ As to the first question, let us render *κατὰ ἀνθρώπων* quite literally, *man-wise*, and let it go at that.

¹ J. Weiss, in his edition of I Cor. in Meyer's Commentary, *ad loc.*, and in *Das Urchristentum*, 1914, pp. 244f. H. Lisco, *Vincula Sanctorum*, 1900, pp. 113f., 136—140.

The second question may, however, engage us a little longer. The majority of modern commentators take the reference as figurative; Paul means: if I have had to meet the opposition of malignant enemies, like beasts in human form. The reasons given for this exegesis are familiar. Paul did not, as a matter of fact, fight with beasts at Ephesus. There is no record of such an event; Acts says nothing of it; Paul himself says nothing of it in his sorrowful letter to Corinth, where he recounts (II Cor. 11 23-29) his hardships and sufferings for the gospel, or in the hardly less moving, if more general, statements of the reconciliation letter (II Cor. 6 4-10). Further, Paul could not have been condemned to the beasts, because he was a Roman citizen; and if, in exceptional fashion, he had been, it would have meant the loss of his citizenship, of which, however, he makes use later in his appeal to Caesar. In any case, if he had been forced to fight with beasts, he would not have survived to tell the tale. And then, of course, Ignatius uses the same language in the familiar passage (Rom. 5 1) which no commentator fails to quote as disposing finally of any literal understanding of Paul's words to the Corinthians. Ignatius writes: 'Από Συρίας μέχρι Ρώμης θηριομαχῶ διὰ γῆς καὶ θαλάσσης, νυκτὸς καὶ ἡμέρας, δεδεμένος δέκα λεοπάρδοις, ὃ ἐστὶν στρατιωτικὸν τάγμα. "All the way from Syria to Rome I am fighting with beasts, by land and sea, by night and day, bound to ten leopards, namely, a detachment of soldiers." In this sense Paul meant the word, of struggles with the most violent and dangerous of his enemies during the Ephesian period, assumed Tertullian (*De Res. Carn.*, 48). So, among the moderns, have thought Meyer and Hausrath and Heinrici, Krenkel, B. Weiss, Schmiedel, Lietzmann and other Germans, with Goudge, Lias, Massie, Findlay, Beet, Stanley, Vincent, Edwards, Robertson and Plummer, Ramsay, Percy Gardner, David Smith and many more of our own speech.

On the other hand, the *Περιοδοὶ Παύλου* of the second century seems almost certainly to have contained an account of a real fighting of Paul with real beasts at Ephesus. An allusion to the story is found in Hippolytus' commentary on Daniel (earliest years of the third century), in these words: "If we believe that when Paul was condemned to the wild beasts, the

lion that was loosed upon him lay down at his feet and licked him" etc.; and it is retold at length by the fourteenth century church historian Nicephorus Callisti.² This account would seem to have been based on Paul's words, "I fought with beasts at Ephesus." And a long line of commentators have contended that the words are thus literally meant. We may mention the Ambrosiaster (ca. 370), Theodoret of Cyrus (ca. 450), Cajetan, Erasmus, Luther, Calvin, Cornelius a Lapide (1614), Holsten, Godet (very strongly), J. Weiss, Paul Feine, Weizsäcker and McGiffert (those two best historians of the apostolic age), Lightfoot "the prince of commentators," Oskar Holtzmann, Maurenbrecher, Albertz, Drummond, McNeile—these out of many. Some of those who think the expression figurative yet feel that the language is intelligible only as a reference to some specific incident, perhaps some experience of danger from brutal foes in the actual arena, such as might have been the sequel of the Demetrius riot described in Acts 19. So, for example, Hausrath and Krenkel. And some of those who insist that the words can have only a literal meaning do not believe that a fight of Paul with wild beasts actually took place. So, for example, Johannes Weiss (*loc. cit.*), who, after arguing very persuasively that the expression must be literal, yet cannot bring himself actually to throw Paul to the beasts, and proposes to translate: "If I had fought with beasts at Ephesus [as it looked at one time as if I would have to, though fortunately in the end it did not come to that] what good would it have done me?" *Wenn ich zu Ephesus den Tierkampf erduldet hätte, was hätte es mir genützt?* Weiss concedes that an uninformed reader would not get this meaning from the text, but believes that the Corinthians would, because they already knew the facts of the tragic episode, which Weiss also associates with the Demetrius riot. A. H. McNeile (*St. Paul*, 1920, pp. 85, 231 f.) is inclined to the same exegesis. The present writer would not believe himself less tender-hearted than these

² For the Hippolytus reference, cf. Bonwetsch's edition (in *Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller*), Leipzig, 1897, p. 176. For Nicephorus, cf. his Church History II, 25 ap. Migne: *P. G.* Vol. 145, cols. 821-824, or Carl Schmidt: *Acta Pauli*, 1904, pp. 111 f., and (in Eng. transl.) B. Pick: *Apocryphal Acts*, 1909, pp. 2 f.

scholars, but he cannot rescue Paul from the lions in this fashion. If this is what Paul meant, he would surely have said it otherwise, even to people who knew the facts. "If I had *fought with beasts*" is not quite the same as "if I had been thrown to the beasts and so met my death." The very expression *fought* (ἐθηρομαχῆσα) itself, without further addition, naturally suggests "went through the fight and came out alive."

As a Greek sentence, apart from considerations of historical probability, it is difficult to take the words in any but their obvious and literal sense. If there be figure, neither text nor context betrays it. As for the usual reasons, listed above, against the literal interpretation, while it may not be possible to deprive them of all force, something in return may at least be said. Acts says nothing of the event, to be sure, but Acts says nothing of many of the most important events of Paul's career, touches scarcely a single one of the serious occasions that drew out his letters, never mentions his great collection for the Jerusalem church which brought his great career to its disastrous close, never mentions those three shipwrecks which antedated the famous one on the journey to Rome, after one of which he drifted a day and a night in the deep before rescue came, never hints at that fearful ὀλιψίς that befell him in Asia, wherein he despaired of his life, with the sentence of death written within, or at that occasion when for his life Aquila and Priscilla laid down their own necks and thus rescued him from death, never tells of those many imprisonments, one of which was shared by his kinsmen and fellow-apostles Andronicus and Junias. No, the silence of Acts proves nothing except the paucity of its sources, among which Paul's letters were not included.

The non-mention of the incident by Paul himself in the later letters to Corinth is more serious. But these letters are written to the same church as are the words we are considering, to people, moreover, who already had knowledge of the affair. Since they already knew, and since he had explicitly mentioned it in I Corinthians, it is not so surprising that he should not recount it again a third time or a fourth time to these same people. But does he avoid allusion to it altogether? Look again at II Cor.

11 23 ff. The language is all general, citing, indeed, no specific cases (if we except the Damascus incident of verses 32f.) of the types of hardships listed. But these general terms include "prisons, stripes, deaths." Among these *θάρατοι* would not the Corinthians at once think of the exposure to the beasts, granting that they knew of such? "In perils from the Gentiles, in perils in the city." These *κίνδυνοι* belong, in part at least, to the city from which he writes, Ephesus; would not his readers recall at once that signal peril from the Gentiles there? Or in the reconciliation letter is the tragic experience forgotten? What mean words like these (II Cor. 6 9), "As dying, and lo we live! As stricken, and not killed!" How significant would such words be to readers who knew that Paul had escaped alive from what seemed like inevitable death in the arena! Much language of this part of II Corinthians besides is illuminated if we suppose that such an experience lies behind. "Smitten down, yet not destroyed, always bearing about in the body the putting to death of Jesus, always delivered unto death for Jesus' sake" (4 9-11), and much more of the sort. He does not describe in detail what is already familiar, but he does make allusions which every reader at once understands.

As for Paul's Roman citizenship, though it is mentioned only in Acts, there is no excuse for the skepticism of critics like Renan and Hausrath, who refuse to accept it. None the less we know too little about it, I believe, to base conclusions upon it with absolute certainty. Precisely what were the privileges of citizenship for a wandering Jew like Paul? There seem to have been grades of citizenship, a higher and a lower; it is not clear that Paul belonged to the higher, or that the lower rank was necessarily exempt from punishment in the arena. We find in the Roman juristic sources certain prerogatives of the citizen, but we must not suppose that in actual practice every citizen automatically enjoyed these exemptions in every case without exception. As we have all been learning, that which is prohibited by the fundamental law of the land does yet occur. Paul, as a citizen, *could not* be sentenced to the beasts, it is urged. Yes, and he *could not* be beaten with rods, either; but he was, three times over. Could not be sentenced to the beasts? Why

then the law: "Hi vero, qui ad ferrum aut ad bestias aut in metallum damnantur libertatem perdunt," or, as elsewhere phrased, "statim et civitatem et libertatem perdunt?"³ They could not lose what they did not possess. And as a matter of fact, there is clear record of such condemnations. A letter of Asinius Pollio to Cicero tells how the quaestor Balbus in Spain "bestiis vero cives Romanos, in iis . . . notissimum hominem Hispali . . . objecit." Another striking and familiar instance is found in the account of the martyrs at Vienne and Lyons (Euseb. V, 1, 44 and 50). Attalus, a person of distinction, was loudly called for by the populace and led around the amphitheatre with a placard, "This is Attalus the Christian." But before he could be put to the torment, the governor was apprised that he was a Roman citizen and remanded him to the prison. A few days later, however, the governor yielded to the insistence of the mob and ordered him again into the arena to face the wild beasts.⁴ If this could happen in Spain and in Gaul, it could happen in Asia.

And a further question intrudes itself. How could a wandering Jew like Paul establish his citizenship in a given case, far from his home? Did he carry a kind of passport in his pocket? A mob or a provincial governor or a tyrannous magistrate can do anything. The action first, the inquiry later. So it was at Philippi, when Paul and Silas were scourged and thrown into jail; only in the sober light of next morning do the magistrates consider that they have overstepped the laws. How often must just this situation have arisen! How nearly it arose when Claudius Lysias in Jerusalem was about to scourge Paul (Acts 22 25). Would every official, especially one with an initial animosity to this pestilent Jewish upsetter of the world, have taken Paul's bare word as to his citizenship as readily as this kindly captain

³ "Those sentenced to the sword or to the beasts or to the mines lose their freedom" or "at once lose both citizenship and freedom." Cited by P. Feine, *Die Abfassung des Philipperbriefes in Ephesus*, 1916, p. 108, note 2. Feine's whole treatment here (pp. 101—108) is very valuable, with full citation of the Roman laws.

⁴ These two parallels cited by Max Krenkel, *Beiträge zur Aufhellung der Geschichte und der Briefe des Apostel Paulus*, 2nd ed., 1896, p. 131.

did? The situation in Iconium, described in the partially apocryphal, but perhaps partially historical, *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, will help us to visualize circumstances under which Paul's plea of citizenship would avail him little. As for his possession of citizenship later, we know too little of the actual conditions to make this an insurmountable obstacle. He might have been thrust into the arena to fight with beasts by sudden mob-action, to which a weak or careless official yielded, without having undergone judicial trial and condemnation within the meaning of the act. Or the circumstances of his freeing may have been such as to involve restoration of his civil status. Nor do we know that a condemnation at Ephesus, especially of a vagrant preacher, would be reported and known at Jerusalem or Caesarea. If Paul said, "I am a Roman," who was there who could say, "No, you lost your citizenship some years ago when you were condemned to the beasts at Ephesus?"

As for his surviving to tell the tale, all we can say is: men did. Sometimes the lions refused to attack them, or at least to fight them with any ferocity, or so as to inflict any very serious injury. The classic case of Androcles, which Bernard Shaw has divertingly revived, is paralleled by more than one tale from the Acts of the Martyrs. Ignatius, in that same fifth chapter of his letter to the Romans, which is thought fatal to the view that Paul really faced the beasts, alludes to such cases, and there is a considerable body of illustrative material, for which reference may conveniently be made to Ramsay's *Church in the Roman Empire* (pp. 312, 404f.). Legend had it that such was the case with Paul. The *Acta Pauli* so describe the scene at Ephesus, and so it was at Iconium with the heroine of the Acts of Paul and Thecla. Sometimes, as we know, if a man fought bravely and so won the admiration of the onlookers, or if the beasts refused to attack him, so as to suggest that he was under divine protection, his release was called for by the populace, and often granted by the presiding official. That this forms a frequent *motif* in romance does not argue against its actual occurrence. So frequently, indeed, did it occur that Nero (probably *after* Paul's mission in Ephesus) made a law forbidding the officials so to act—"Ad bestias damnatos favore populi praeses dimittere

non debet"—only the emperor retaining this right.⁴ What about II Tim. 4 17, which has every appearance of belonging to a genuinely Pauline passage, if anything in the Pastorals does? "The Lord delivered me out of the mouth of the lion!" Is that figurative too, and merely a quotation of Psalm 22 21? This fragment (granting genuine Pauline material in the Pastorals) may well belong to a letter from the same period as I Cor. 15, and refer to the same event.

Now as to Ignatius. It may be that he takes his phrase *θηριομαχῶ* from our passage in Paul (though the word was common enough). Whether he does or no, he takes very special pains to indicate that his words are a trope, and to explain the reference very explicitly, as if he feared it otherwise would be obscure to his readers. "All the way from Syria to Rome [Paul says: at Ephesus] I am fighting with beasts [Paul says: I fought, aorist of the single completed act], by land and sea, by night and day [*of course* this is not a real combat in the arena!], bound to ten leopards, *that is*, a detachment of soldiers." Because Ignatius here uses an extended, obvious, and carefully explained figure, it does not in the least follow that Paul was dealing in figures when he wrote, "Like any other man I underwent the beast-fight [for the term is thus technical] at Ephesus." It is significant that where Ignatius himself uses the word *θηριομαχεῖν* without such explanation of figurative meaning (as he does in *Eph.* 1 2, *Trall.* 10), he means quite literally the encounter with the beasts to which he looked forward in Rome. It was surely this tragic familiarity with the literal word in these days that suggested its single figurative use in *Ad Rom.* 5 1. Just so when Paul uses the term without explanation, I submit that these simple words could not have been understood otherwise than literally by the readers at Corinth.⁵ They had never compared the Ignatian parallel! It is true that ancient authors sometimes compare wild men with wild beasts, but there is no evidence (outside the words we are considering) that *θηριομαχεῖν* without explanation was ever used as such a figure. The term,

⁴ The text of this law given by Feine, p. 104 and Krenkel, p. 184 note 2. Cf. also H. Lisco: *Vincula Sanctorum*, 1900, p. 118.

⁵ This is urged strongly by J. Weiss, *ad loc.*

let us repeat, is technical, made from the noun *θηριομάχη* (or *-μάχος*) which served as the equivalent of the Latin *bestiarium*. The verb had really no other use than the specific reference to the combats in the arena. The English phrase "I fought with beasts" might be used by a traveller who was attacked by bears or wolves as he passed through a forest; the single word *θηριομάχησα* could never suggest this to a Greek hearer, but only the bloody sport of the amphitheatre.⁷ So the Corinthians would infallibly take it. They were simple folk, who knew the arena well and understood its language, and there is nothing here to suggest that what is said is not what is meant. If it is a figure, how would its significance be clear to them? And had not Paul earlier in the same letter (4 9) written words that would irresistibly compel the literal understanding? *ὁ θεὸς ἡμᾶς τοὺς ἀποστόλους ἐσχάτους ἀπέδειξεν ὡς ἐπιθανατίους, ὅτι θέατρον ἐγενήθημεν τῷ κόσμῳ καὶ ἀγγέλοις καὶ ἀνθρώποις.* "Us the apostles did God expose as at the last extremity, as face to face with death, in that we became a theatrical spectacle before the world, before angels and men!" Surely it is a mistake to water down the definite reference to a specific combat at Ephesus into a general declaration of the kind of human opposition he met "day by day in every way" wherever he went as a missionary.

There remains one final consideration, which would seem to make anything but a literal interpretation so difficult as to be practically impossible. The context *imperatively demands* an experience in which Paul actually stood face to face with death, with absolutely no earthly hope of rescue. The whole chapter concerns itself with the resurrection from the dead, and has come to a fine climax in its direct *argumentum ad hominem* *εἰ ἄλλως νεκροὶ οὐκ ἐγείρονται*—if dead men do not rise, *why . . . ?* Why do we stand in jeopardy every hour? (*κινδυνεύομεν* here means *risk our lives*). Yes, every day I die! (*ἀποθνήσκω* I risk death). If (to take a specific outstanding case) I fought the beasts in Ephesus, what is the use, if the dead never rise? To say that the central phrase means "I struggled against bitter opponents" is to make the appeal an anti-climax and to drop

⁷ Cf. Krenkel, pp. 132, 133.

wholly out of the context. It *must* be the specific and striking illustration of Paul's hourly hazard, of his daily death. It must be an experience which placed him to all intents and purposes among the *νεκροί*, his escape from which was a veritable resurrection.

This should be decisive. Other considerations will have to be adjusted to this and room will have to be made in the glorious tale of the great apostle's career for an appearance in the arena. As we construct our picture of the heroic tent-maker who bore about in his own body the slaying of Jesus his Master, we can reduce to concrete and tragic realism one of those *θάνατοι πολλάκις* which beset him wherever he went. This may help to make all the rest real, and to estimate the meaning of his words: "Not life, not death, can separate us from the love of God!"

Yes, Paul faced the beasts. Make the struggle as brief or as bloodless as you will, save our hero in any way you can, adjust the matter of his citizenship by any conjectures available to you, you cannot, as a historian, successfully imitate certain of the Ephesian Asiarchs "who, being his friends, sent unto him and besought him not to adventure himself into the theatre."