THE MEANING OF 1 COR. 15 32

C. P. COFFIN
CHICAGO

THAT this passage has proved a difficult one is evidenced by the numerous and rather widely differing views of commentators and translators as to its meaning. The words taken separately seem to be plain enough, but one should be steeped with the thought, the argument, the method of the author, to be able to understand what he is saying here, and to coördinate it in some reasonable way with what he is saying in the context.

The Greek, as given by Westcott and Hort is: *εἰ κατὰ ἄνθρωπον ἐθηριομάχησα ἐν Ἐφέσῳ, τί μοι τὸ ὄφελος; εἰ νεκροὶ οὐκ ἐγείρονται, φάγωμεν καὶ πίωμεν, αὔριον γὰρ ἀποθνήσκομεν.*

The matter of punctuation may fairly be considered settled as above, nor can it be doubted that our familiar English versions do give a possible meaning to each of the Greek words translated. But our question is, what does the passage mean as a whole?

Aside from the broad disagreement as to whether the verb *ἐθηριομάχησα* is to be understood literally or figuratively, differences of interpretation have centered around the words *κατὰ ἄνθρωπον*. "After the manner of men" is vague, and attempts have been made to give more definiteness to the thought by interpreting, "as men say," or "as is commonly reported"—, or "in a manly or courageous way," or even "from the human point of view," or "with only human aims." But none of these attempts is adequate or satisfactory. Nor will it do to translate "manwise," and let it go at that. Let us analyze.

We have here the familiar device of the hypothetical question: If so and so, what is the advantage to me? No answer is given,

but the only answer to a question put in that way is, not a qualitative or quantitative valuation of a profit or advantage, but rather the simple affirmation that there is no profit at all.

But does it seem probable that St. Paul, who "had fought the good fight," who had not beaten the air, could have said, "As is commonly reported, I have fought with beasts at Ephesus, but with no profit to myself"? Or could he possibly have said, "I fought courageously with beasts at Ephesus, my eyes fixed on spiritual things far higher than any purely human aims, yet without any advantage to myself"? Surely, if he fought with wild animals and came off with his life, he had that much advantage at least, and would not be the last to recognize it. In fact, would he not have gloried in it, as in other trials from which he had come off more than conqueror?

Besides, St. Paul knew whether or not he had fought with beasts, in an arena or elsewhere. Why then should he raise the question, to befog his meaning in the minds of his readers from that day to this? No, the contingency of the conditional *if*,—and we ought not to forget that the *if* is an integral part of the text—does not belong with the verb element in the sentence. And to couple it with κατὰ ἄνθρωπον, in any such sense as we have so far found assigned to these words, leads only to absurdity. Nor is St. Paul saying "If *I* fought," nor "If I fought *at Ephesus*."

But is he not saying "If I have been contending *with beasts*"? This question may well hold the key to the correct understanding of the whole passage. For, having tried to point out what St. Paul did not and could not mean, it is time to state affirmatively a conclusion as to what he did mean. This, then, is offered as a translation, "If I have been contending with beasts in human form (here) in Ephesus, what profit is there to me? If the dead do not rise, 'let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die'."

If this be the meaning, the passage has been misunderstood, in one way or another, perhaps from the beginning. And such misunderstanding has no doubt arisen, first, from the use of a comparatively unusual compound verb; second, from the employment of κατά in a secondary sense; third, from an awkward construction.

θηριομαχέω must, in the nature of the case, have been at that time comparatively unfamiliar to the ears of urban Greek speaking people, though it may well have been current among country folk, farmers and hunters. Whatever this word may have come to signify later in Christian circles, familiar with this verse in 1 Corinthians; whatever technical sense it may have acquired in Rome, in connection with gladiatorial shows, or taken on in connection with religious persecutions, I have not found any indication that at the time when St. Paul was writing to the Corinthians, it had any other reference, among Greeks, than to such natural fights as hunters would run into, or to such contests as men living in sparsely settled country would inevitably have with the wild animals infesting the neighborhood of their folds and pastures. For the former, see Strabo, 131, where θηριομαχία refers to the chase. For the latter, see Diodorus Siculus, III, 43, where θηριομαχεῖν refers to fights with lions, wolves and leopards, in defense of flocks and herds. To insist that when St. Paul says ἐθηριομάχησα he must be held to have used a technical term in a literal sense seems like straining out gnats. Must he be held to equal literalness when he intimates in the preceding verse that he is in jeopardy every hour, and solemnly asseverates that he dies daily? One of these statements is exaggeration. The other is hyperbole. Our author frequently uses the imagery of militarism to characterize his essentially peaceful activities as an apostle and teacher. When these led him into difficulties with officials or populace, as they sometimes did, he could let himself down over the wall, he could escape from the midst of the rabble, or he could and did submit to arrest and imprisonment, but he did not fight. So here, when he speaks of fighting, what he had in mind was his strenuous preaching, his lecturing to and heated argument with those whom he was endeavoring to convert and instruct.

Second. κατά with the accusative has several common meanings and shades of meaning. But it also has a secondary meaning of comparison or correspondence,—answering to the description of, like, in the form of,—and our author clearly uses it in this sense, when he writes, in Eph. 4 24 κατὰ θεόν, in the image of God. κατὰ ἄνθρωπον can therefore here mean, in the

image of man, or as we would say, in human form, or even, man-shaped. And that is what it does mean. For the two concepts expressed by ἄνθρωπον and θηρίον, here placed in the closest possible juxtaposition, are thereby brought into emphatic comparison, in fact, into sharp contrast. Read over the Greek text aloud, and note that this is the effect. If we try to produce the same in English, we employ some other device, such as the use of italics and contrasting words, and might express the meaning in some such way as this:—If those with whom I have been contending, here in Ephesus, are after all only *man-shaped beasts*, what is the use?

And that being the case, what would be the use? St. Paul clearly suggests the answer to his own question,—no use whatever,—and adds by way of amplification or explanation, that if men, when they die, stay dead, we might better spend the brief span of life in enjoyment of the pleasures of the table rather than waste time in endeavoring to fit them for an impossible immortality! Because the whole of St. Paul's philosophy and religion rests ultimately on this distinction between a man and a beast, namely, that a man when he dies will rise and live again, whereas a beast when it dies perishes. For St. Paul believed in the resurrection of the dead. He preached it, he taught it, he wrote it to his friends. And that is what he is doing in his own characteristic way, in this fifteenth chapter of First Corinthians.

True it is, that right here, in the midst of his argument, he does pause momentarily to raise a question as to the validity of his own basic belief. *What if* man is not so different from other animals after all? *What if* the dead do not rise? But immediately he puts his readers on their guard against taking such questionings as in any sense an admission. Do not be misled, he tells them. Such words as he has just written or quoted he characterizes as bad, and likely to lead to incorrect conclusions. And does he not go on to tell them to open their eyes and look straight at the matter under discussion, and not to miss the point through ignorance of God's ways? And does he not say this in order to turn them back from his momentary digression to his main line of thought?

And then he plunges again into his argument for the resurrection.

Third. As remarked at the beginning of this study, our passage is a difficult one, or, in other words, there is something the matter with it. Otherwise, scholars would not have been forced to differ so radically in their conclusions as to what the apostle is trying to say. Two difficulties have been examined. A third lies in the seemingly strained construction of making a prepositional clause attach itself adjectively to the objective part, only, of the compound verb. It is awkward, but is it any more so than some other locutions of the same writer, when in his discursive, almost headlong way, he occasionally lets his thought run away with his Greek? At such times, his readers, even though they were personal friends and familiar with his style, might reasonably be excused if they should not immediately catch the full content of his idea. What the people of Corinth made out of this particular passage, we may not know, but it is plain that subsequent readers, from the fathers down, have not been able to agree that any heretofore suggested interpretation is necessarily the correct one. If there be any merit in the interpretation now suggested, it must be in the fact that to each word is assigned at least a possible sense, and to the passage as a whole a meaning that fits perfectly into the apostle's great argument for the resurrection of the dead.