
Problem Texts

STUDIES IN THE PASTORAL EPISTLES (11)

F. F. Bruce

4. The cloak, the books, but especially the parchments (2 Tim. 4:13)

Here is another *obiter dictum*: it raises no great problems, even if it does suggest a number of questions. In his *Phases of Faith* (1850) Francis William Newman tells how, as a young man, he went to be a private tutor in the family of a distinguished member of the Irish Bar, later to become Chief Justice Pennefather. In that house he made the acquaintance of another young man, some five years older than himself, who was recuperating there from an accident which had temporarily crippled him. The year appears to have been 1827. Newman does not name the other young man, but refers to him as 'the Irish clergyman'; it is evident, however, that he was no other than John Nelson Darby. Newman and Darby discussed many important subjects together, and Newman recorded in retrospect that, for the first time in his life, he found himself 'under the dominion of a superior'. In those days Newman, like his elder brother the future Cardinal, ranked as an evangelical, but he had never met a

man so resolved as Darby was that no part of the New Testament 'should be a dead letter to him'. 'I once said: "But do you really think that no part of the New Testament may have been temporary in its object? for instance, what should we have lost, if St. Paul had never written the verse, "The cloak which I have left at Troas, bring with thee, and the books, but especially the parchments"?' He answered with the greatest promptitude: "I should certainly have lost something; for that is exactly the verse which alone saved me from selling my little library. No! every word, depend upon it, is from the Spirit, and is for eternal service." ' (pp. 29 f.).

We may be sure that the primary purpose of Paul's words was not to dissuade Timothy or any other reader from selling his 'little library', as Darby in an excess of asceticism had been tempted to do. But what then was their primary purpose? It is unusual to find Paul attaching such importance to *things*. One is never surprised to find him attaching importance to persons: when, for example, he says two verses earlier,

‘Get Mark and bring him with you; for he is very useful in serving me’ (if RSV gives the right sense), we can appreciate that, and can compose moral homilies in which, comparing *2 Tim. 4:11* with *Acts 15:38*, we show how a young man’s early failure can be redeemed. Why, however, is it so important that Timothy should be the cloak and the books, ‘but especially the parchments’?

Some readers have compared Paul’s request to one made by William Tyndale in his last surviving letter: writing from his prison cell he asks to have some of his own warmer clothing, as winter is approaching, but most of all ‘my Hebrew Bible, Hebrew grammar, and Hebrew dictionary, that I may pass my time in that study’. Tyndale, like Paul, had the right priorities among the necessities of life.

The cloak (Gk. *phailonēs*, a popular loanword from latin *paenula*) was a hooded outer garment of weather-proof material. There seems to be no good reason here for taking it in any other than its ordinary sense, although in antiquity there were some, known to Chrysostom, who took it to be a hold-all for carrying the books, and in more recent times the opinion has been voiced that it was an ecclesiastical vestment—perhaps a chasuble. The ‘books’ (*biblia*) were papyrus documents, either sheets or scrolls, and the ‘parchments’ (*membranai*) were composed of more expensive material, prepared from the skins of sheep or other animals. It is usually supposed that both the ‘books’ and the ‘parchments’ had writing on them; it is possible, indeed, that they were blank, and that Paul wanted something to write on, but Luke, who was with him at the time (*2 Tim. 4:11*) would no doubt have been able to procure writing material for him. If, as is more probable, it was written documents that Paul had in mind, the question arises what the writing was, and more particularly what was written on the parchments, which Paul was specially anxious to have. The question arises, but cannot be answered: we do not know. It has been conjectured that the parchments were copies of Old Testament scripture, or notebooks containing proof-texts or ‘testimonies’ from the Old Testament; but this sort of answer can remain at best a conjecture. For the rest, let me advise readers who have access to Spurgeon’s sermons to look at the sermon on ‘Paul—his cloke and his books’, preached in the Metropolitan Tabernacle on November 29, 1863. ‘He is inspired’, said Spurgeon, ‘and yet he wants books! He has been preaching at least for thirty years, and yet he wants books! He had seen the Lord, and yet he wants books! He . . . had been caught up into the third heaven,

and had heard things which it was unlawful for a man to utter, yet he wants books!’ And he recommended the apostle’s example warmly to his congregation, as he certainly applied it to himself.

5. ‘The love of money is the root of all evils’ (*1 Tim. 6:10*)

Whether this should be included among problem texts or not, it is undoubtedly one of the most frequently misquoted texts—misquoted in the form ‘Money is the root of all evil(s)’. Money is a very convenient medium of exchange; if it did not exist, it, or something like it, would have to be invented. If I gave my butcher a lecture on the speeches in Acts when I wanted him to give me a

Where the love of
money is the driving
force in a person’s
life, it may lead to all
sorts of evil;
Christians are there-
fore put on their
guard against it.

pound of beef, he might not think it a fair exchange. But if I deliver my lecture in an institution which is willing to pay for such things, and use some of the money I get for it to buy meat, my butcher will be well content. What the apostle deprecates is the *love* of money. But is the love of money really *the* root of all the evils that there are? There are some who are motivated rather by the love of pleasure or the love of power; for them, money is simply a means to gain their real ends. A distinguished ecclesiastic of my acquaintance told a younger churchman, ‘You may be a powerful priest, or you may be a wealthy priest; you can’t be both.’ His advice was to aim at power (as he himself had successfully done) rather than wealth. Whether either power or wealth is a proper aim in life for a servant of Christ is another question (both the Lord himself and his servant Paul answer it clearly more than once). The point at present is that for some people the love of power is the root of all evil; if the example of Adolf Hitler comes to mind, that is but one out of many. Many versions, including the RSV (quoted above), say that ‘the love of money is the root of all evils’, but that is not what Paul says. What he says is well expressed by J. N. D. Kelly: ‘For evils of every kind are rooted in the love of money.’ Where the love of money is the

driving force in a person’s life, it may lead to all sorts of evil; Christians are therefore put on their guard against it. ‘You cannot serve God and Mammon,’ said our Lord; he was not exaggerating when he insisted that it was hard for those who had riches to enter the kingdom of God, for he knew that is natural for those who have riches to trust in them rather than in God (*Mark 10:23–27*; *Luke 16:13*).

6. ‘Cretans are always liars’

(*Tit. 1:12*).

The point of this quotation was that the man who gave the Cretans such an unflattering characterization was himself a Cretan (why then, it might be asked, should this statement of his be believed?). The psalmist cast his net more widely and included the whole human race in the same condemnation: ‘all men are liars’, he said (*Ps. 116:11*)—but that was admittedly in his haste (AV). ‘Weel, Davvit,’ apostrophized the Scots minister, as he raised his eyes from the page after reading these words: ‘if ye had lived in this parish, ye could have said it at your *lecture!*’

The author of the words quoted is said to have been one Epimenides, who berated his fellow-Cretans because they took visitors to see the tomb of Zeus, the supreme god. We may be sure that Paul was not interested in the origin of the quotation: he was more concerned to put Titus on his guard against certain national traits with which he might have to cope as he carried out his pastoral ministry in Crete.

But the origin of the quotation is interesting for another reason. It is said to be taken from a poem which Epimenides addressed to the supreme deity; in one quatrain the poet deploras the Cretans’ folly in imagining that Zeus was dead and buried:

‘They fashioned a tomb for thee,
O holy and one!—
The Cretans, always liars, evil beasts,
idle bellies—
But thou art not dead; for ever thou art
alive and risen.
For in thee we live and move and have
our being.’

The second line of this quatrain is quoted here, in *Tit. 1:12*, but it will be quickly recognized that the fourth line is quoted in *Acts 17:28*—with the replacement of the second person singular (‘in thee’) by the third (‘in him’), since Paul is not addressing Zeus but telling the court of the Areopagus at Athens about the God of revelation, who is the creator and sustainer of all, and applying to him the language that Epimenides used of Zeus.

What conclusion should be drawn from the quotation, in texts ascribed to Paul, of two lines from the same context? With more particular refer-

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 20

ence to Paul's Athenian speech, James Hope Moulton wrote in the early years of this century: 'when we find the Lukan Paul quoting Epimenides (*Acts 17:28a*), and the Paul of the Pastorals citing the very same context (*Tit. 1:12*) . . . we may at least remark that the speech is very subtly concocted.' 'Very subtly concocted', he meant, if it was not spoken by Paul but composed by another; his own suggestion was that Luke's report of the speech was written 'from full notes, given him not long after by his master'—in other words, that Paul was acquainted with the quatrain and quoted from it himself in both places.

Questions for group study

1. Consider the contribution that books can make to an all-round Christian life.
2. Is it advisable to take a quotation from a non-Christian source and apply it in a Christian sense?
3. Am I beguiled by the love of money?