

The Enigma in 1 Corinthians 15, A Judge's View

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I have long reflected on the enigma in 1 Corinthians 15 and attempted to identify the scriptures Paul was referring to in the second limb of this well-known passage: "For I delivered first of all... that which I also received that Christ...died...and that he was buried and that he rose again on the third day according to the Scriptures." I am not a theologian or a biblical scholar, and I cannot read Greek. I am a layman, a retired judge, who spent half a lifetime interpreting documents and drawing inferences from established facts. As an appellate judge I was accustomed to approach the meaning of a text by giving effect, if possible, to every word without any presuppositions. I naturally expected to find the relevant scriptures in the Old Testament but never could.

My annotated revised King James version lists passages in three Psalms as the "Scriptures" referred to in the second limb, but on examination they fall well short. The most relevant is Psalm 16:10 which includes: "...nor will you allow your Holy One to see corruption." This might not refer to death and resurrection, and it does not refer to burial or the third day. In Book 18, chapter 28 of the *City of God*, St. Augustine identified passages in Hosea 6:2 and Amos 9:11 as the scriptural basis. The latter states: "On that day I will raise up the tabernacle of David which has fallen down, and repair its damages, I will raise up its ruins and rebuild it as in the days of old." There is no clear reference to the Messiah, His death, burial, or resurrection on the third day. The raising up could refer to the call of God to an earthly kingship. Hosea 6:2 reads: "Come let us return to the Lord...He has stricken but He will bind us up. After two days He will revive us, on the third day He will raise us up that we may live." There is no reference to the Messiah, His death, burial, or resurrection. The Gospels do not record anything of relevance happening on the second day, and the references to "us" and "we" cannot apply to Christ.

The absence of any clear basis in the Old Testament for the second limb drove St. Augustine to select these passages in Hosea and Amos, but they cannot be "the Scriptures" referred to. Paul wrote in the first limb that "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures." There is a clear basis for this in Isaiah 53. One would expect to find an equally clear basis for the second limb. "[A]ccording to the Scriptures" should mean that every element in the second limb can be sourced to linked statements somewhere in the Old Testament. The *Oxford English Dictionary* states that "in accordance with" means "in a manner consistent with". A composite statement derived by cutting and pasting unrelated elements from different parts of the Old Testament would not be one "in accordance with the Scriptures."

Paul refers at the outset to "the gospel which I preached to you, which you also received." He surely had a clear scriptural basis for the whole of that gospel to support his preaching and impress his listeners. All the elements can be found in Mark, the earliest of the Synoptics. He records Christ's predictions of His death and resurrection on the third day and the actual events which occurred as predicted. But I understood for many years that this Gospel was written in Rome following the death of Peter in the mid 60s. That was no

help because Paul's mission to Corinth took place in or about AD 50.

I understand that the Greek words translated as "the scripture" and "the scriptures" are *graphe* (singular) and *graphias* (plural). The latter occurs as "the Scriptures" in 1 Corinthians 15. Both appear frequently in Paul's letters and have clear references in the Old Testament. The references in Romans are to Old Testament prophecy (1:2, 15:4); Abraham (4:3); Pharaoh (9:17); and Elijah (11:2). The references in Galatians are to Abraham (3:8, 3:16); Hagar (4:30); and that all are under sin (Psalms 14:53). Despite the use of *graphe* and *graphias* in Paul's letters in an Old Testament context, in particular in the first limb of 1 Corinthians 15, the natural meaning of these words is not limited to Old Testament scripture. Paul used *graphe* in 1 Timothy 5:18 when quoting as scripture passages from both Deuteronomy and Luke, and Peter used it in 2 Peter 3:16 when referring to Paul's letters as scripture.

There is an important clue in 2 Corinthians which has been dated to about AD 56, approximately one year after 1 Corinthians. In the King James translation, it refers to "the Old Testament" (3:14) and thus recognizes the existence of a New Testament known to the church in Corinth. The church was established by Paul during his eighteen-month mission around AD 50. The New Testament material must have included statements about the death and resurrection of Christ referred to by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 and elsewhere in the letter which he said was the basis of his preaching that the church received and accepted. Paul's reference to "the scriptures" in 1 Corinthians 15:4 is therefore capable of applying to relevant New Testament material in existence at the time.

I shared my concerns with Paul Barnett who referred me to the work of E. Earle Ellis in *The Making of the New Testament Documents* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2002) at pp 368-376. Ellis believed that precursors of Mark's Gospel were assembled in Caesarea Palestine in the 40s. He wrote (at page 373) that Peter left Jerusalem probably for Caesarea in AD 42 "where for some years he supervised the organisation and use of 'gospel' episodes to meet the needs of...Petrine congregations." He added (at page 375): "[Mark] composed (the first version of) his Gospel probably [in] AD 55-58 in Caesarea using existing gospel episodes.... Mark's Gospel was initially the Gospel of the Petrine mission. It had episodic antecedents that were read in Petrine congregations in Palestine from at least AD 40." Ellis did not suggest that Mark was the author of the gospel episodes although this is possible. The episodes must have recorded Christ's repeated predictions of his coming death and resurrection on the third day and their fulfilment. The predictions would confirm that his death was not a defeat but part of God's plan of salvation.

Paul was accompanied by Mark at the start of his first missionary journey in or about AD 46. He reminded the Galatians about the gospel he had preached to them on that journey which would have been the gospel he preached to the Corinthians referred to at the start of this passage in 1 Corinthians 15. His aim on his missionary journeys was to plant new churches in the cities they would visit. For this purpose, written material would be desirable if not essential. The new churches would not have the benefit of a resident apostle as a source of reliable information about the earthly ministry of Jesus. Paul must have known of the gospel episode material and would obviously have wanted to take it with him. Copies could be made in each city and left with the overseers Paul appointed.

Thus, in AD 49 when he embarked on his second missionary journey Paul would have taken with

him the gospel episodes covering the Easter events central to the Christian message. But were these episodes then regarded by the Church as Scripture? If, as I believe, Paul used this material in his preaching to the Corinthians that is some evidence that he and the Church then regarded it as Scripture. But there is more. There is the reference in 2 Corinthians 3:14 (King James) to the reading of “the Old Testament”. The reference to the Hebrew Bible as the Old Testament presupposes the existence of a New Testament. This must have included the Gospel episodes referred to by Ellis. Then, Peter treats Paul’s letters, presumably including 1 Corinthians, as scripture (e.g., 2 Peter 3:15-16). If the Church regarded such secondary material as scripture there is every reason for concluding that primary material such as these Gospel episodes would have been so regarded.

I suggest therefore that these gospel episodes, which would have contained all the relevant elements, are the basis for the reference to the scriptures in 1 Corinthians 15:4.