

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

ST. PAUL'S CONCEPTION OF CHRISTIANITY.

XIV. THE FLESH AS A HINDRANCE TO HOLINESS.

THE title of this article indicates correctly the point of view from which the flesh is regarded in the Pauline Epistles. It is not with an abstract doctrine or theory of the flesh that we have to do, but with an unhappy, untoward fact of Christian experience—a stubborn resistance offered by a power residing in the flesh to the attainment of that entire holiness after which every sincere Christian earnestly aspires. The point of view is clearly indicated in this exhortation to the Galatian Church: “Walk in the Spirit, and do not fulfil the lusts of the flesh. For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: for these are contrary to each other, so that ye may not do the things that ye would.”¹ That the flesh is an obstructive in the way of holiness could not be more distinctly stated. And yet in the Epistle to the Romans the same truth is proclaimed, if not with greater plainness, at least with more marked emphasis. “Therefore, brethren,” writes the apostle, “we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live after the flesh. For if ye live after the flesh, ye must die: but if by the Spirit ye mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live.”² Here to fight with the flesh is represented as a positive duty. We are “debtors” to this intent. And the fight is urgent, a matter of life and death. The state of the case is that we must kill the flesh, or it will kill us.

We, *Christians*, have to wage this war as we value our salvation. In the seventh chapter of *Romans* mention is made of a tragic struggle with the flesh which might on fair exegetical grounds be relegated to the pre-regenerate or pre-Christian state. But the fight is not over when one has

¹ *Gal.* v. 16, 17.

² *Rom.* viii. 12, 13.

become a believing man and has begun effectively to walk in the Spirit. Thenceforth it is carried on with better hope of success, that is all the difference. It is to believing men, Christians, regenerate persons, that the apostle addresses himself in the above cited texts. And he speaks to them in so serious a tone because he knows the formidable nature of the foe from *present, chronic, personal experience*. This we know from that extremely significant autobiographical hint in 1 *Corinthians*: "I buffet my body, and bring it into bondage; lest by any means, after having preached to others, I myself should become a rejected one."¹ Depend upon it this buffeting or bruising of the body was for St. Paul a serious business. He found it necessary for spiritual safety to be in effect an ascetic, not in any superstitious sense, or on a rigid system, but in the plain, practical sense of taking special pains to prevent the body with its clamorous passions from getting the upper hand.

One thing we may note here by the way. Comparing these three texts one with another, we gather that *body* and *flesh*, so far as obstructing holiness is concerned, are for the apostle synonymous terms. It is against the *flesh* he warns fellow Christians; the *body* is the foe he himself fears. Those who are familiar with the recent literature of Paulinism will understand the bearing of this remark. Some writers will have it that the two terms bear widely different senses in the Pauline letters. Σάρξ, they say, is a *Substanzbegriff*, and σῶμα a *Formbegriff*: the word "flesh" points to the material of which the body consists; the word "body" to the form of our material organism. The distinction is made in the interest of a theory to the effect that St. Paul shared the Greek view of flesh and of all matter—that it is inherently evil. This theory will come up for consideration at a later stage. Meantime, we have to remark that so far as we have gone we have found no reason

¹ 1 *Cor.* ix. 27.

to suppose that the conceptions of "flesh" and "body" lay so far apart in the Pauline system of thought as is alleged.

It may surprise some that so good and saintly a man as the Apostle Paul should have found in the body or the flesh so much of a hindrance to the spiritual life. Surprising or not, we may take it for certain that such was the fact. In spite of his passion for holiness, the flesh was constantly and obstinately obstructive. Nay, may we not say that it was obstructive not merely in spite, but in consequence of his passion for holiness? None knows better than the saint what mischief the flesh can work. Let the tragedies which have been enacted in the cells of holy monks bear witness. There is a mysterious, subtle, psychological connection between spiritual and sensual excitements, which some of the noblest men have detected and confessed. Hence it comes to pass, paradoxical as it may seem, that most earnest and successful endeavours to walk in the Spirit, or even to fly under His buoyant inspiration, may develop, by way of reaction, powerful temptations to fulfil the grossest lusts of the flesh. Eloquent preachers, brilliant authors, know that this is no libel. Times of widespread religious enthusiasm make their contribution to the illustration of this same law. Powerful breezes of the Spirit are followed by outbreaks of epidemic sin, in which the works of the flesh are deplorably manifest.

Whatever surprise or disappointment it may awaken in us that the flesh should give trouble to such an one as St. Paul, we are quite prepared to discover in his writings traces of a subtle insight into the nature and varied manifestations of its evil influence. Such insight formed an essential feature of his spiritual vitality. It was what was to be expected from one who, even before he became a Christian, and in spite of a Pharisaic training, which taught him to regard the outward act as alone important, made the

great discovery that *coveting* was a sin. It would be only an extension of that discovery if Paul the Christian and the apostle found in himself much of the evil working of the flesh when there was nothing in his outward conduct on which the most unfriendly critic could fasten. "Thou shalt not commit adultery," that is a commandment forbidding a definite outward act. But Jesus, on the Mount, had said, "Whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her, hath committed adultery with her already in his heart,"¹ and Paul's Christian conscience endorsed the sentiment as, however severe and searching, nothing but the truth. And who can tell what painful inner experiences this saintly man passed through in this direction? That the flesh meant for him very specially, though not exclusively, sexual impulse, may be inferred from the prominent position given to sins of impurity in his catalogues of the works of the flesh.² A voluntary abstainer from marriage relations that he might the better perform the duties of his apostolic calling, a veritable "eunuch for the kingdom of heaven's sake,"³ he rightly appears to the spectator of his great career a devoted, saintly, heroic man. But what, just because of the loftiness of his moral ideal, and the keenness of his insight, may he sometimes have appeared to himself? Less than the least of all saints; nay, no saint at all, but a poor, vile, self-humiliated sinner, actually within measurable distance of being a "castaway." Does this language shock pious readers? It certainly costs this writer an effort to put such words on paper. But he forces himself to do so because he believes that it is along this road we shall most readily arrive at an understanding of what St. Paul means by his many strong words concerning the flesh, rather than through learned lucubrations concerning the meaning of the Hebrew word for flesh in the Old Testament Scriptures, or as to the probability of the apostle having got his doctrine

¹ Matt. v. 28.² Gal. v. 19.³ Matt. xix. 12.

of the *σάρξ* from Philo or some other representative of Hellenistic philosophy. That one statement, "I buffet my body," is of more value to me as a guide to his thought than all the monographs on the subject. It tells me that *Saint Paul*, while a true saint, was also a man of like passions with ourselves, that he had his desperate struggles with the flesh under very common forms of temptation, and that his sanctity was a victory achieved in that fell war by one who was prepared to sacrifice an offending member that the whole body might not be cast into hell. For the comfort of those who are manfully, though, as it appears to themselves, with very indifferent success, fighting the same battle, it is well to make this plain.

In the foregoing remarks I have virtually forestalled the question, What is meant by the flesh in the Pauline letters, and on what ground is it there represented as the very seat of sin? An unsophisticated reader, confining his attention to these Epistles, would probably gather from them an answer to this question somewhat to the following effect. The flesh means of course primarily the material substance of the body, and its ethical significance in the Pauline Epistles, as representing the sinful element in general, is due to the fact of its being the seat of appetites and passions of a very obtrusive character, which, though neither in themselves nor in their effects the whole of human sin, yet constitute its most prominent part, especially in the case of a Christian. Take the case of St. Paul himself once more as our example. He is conscious that with his mind and heart he approves, loves, and pursues the good; that he is a devoted follower of the Lord Jesus Christ, and a single-minded servant of the kingdom of God. But he is conscious of distractions, temptations, hindrances, and on reflection these appear to him to arise out of his body. He sees still, as of old, a law in his members warring against the law of his mind. This body of death, therefore, this

flesh, becomes to him the symbol of sin generally; he speaks of it as if it were the one fountain of sin, tracing to its evil influence not merely sensual sins, properly so called, though these are generally placed first in enumerations, but sins of the spirit likewise, such as pride, envy, hatred. This *primâ facie* answer is, I believe, not far from the truth. But it raises other questions not to be disposed of so easily. How does it come to pass that the *flesh* causes the saint so much trouble? why does it lag so far behind the *mind* in the path of sanctification? We know what Philo and the author of the Book of Wisdom, and the Greeks from whom they drew their inspiration thought on that subject. They deemed matter generally, and especially the fleshly part of human nature, to be inherently and incurably evil. The animated matter which we call our bodies was in their view necessarily, inevitably, universally a source of evil impulse, the problem of the spirit being to trample its unworthy companion under foot, and its hope to get finally rid of it by death.

Was this St Paul's view? Many modern theologians think that it was, and that on this important subject he was a disciple of the Alexandrian or Judæo-Greek philosophy. On this question it is needful to speak with care and discrimination. St Paul might hold the Greek view without getting it from the Greeks or from any external source. Again, he might go a considerable way with the Greeks in his thoughts concerning the flesh, without having any cut and dried theory regarding it such as speculative minds loved to elaborate. As a matter of fact I believe the latter supposition to be pretty nearly correct. A reader of the Pauline Epistles gets the impression that the writer thought as badly of the flesh, that is, of the material part of man, as did Philo, who beyond doubt was in entire sympathy with the Greek view of matter. And I apprehend that Paul and Philo thought so badly of the flesh for very

much the same reason—not to begin with at least on *a priori* grounds of theory, but, on practical grounds of experience. Philo's writings, just like those of St Paul, are full of allusions to the temptations which assail the saint or sage arising out of the appetites and passions that have their seat in the flesh. But the difference between the two men lay here. Philo with his leaning towards Greek philosophy theorised on the subject of the flesh and its evil proclivities, to the effect already indicated. St Paul, on the other hand, did not theorise. He contented himself with stating facts as they presented themselves to him in experience. Whether the Greek theory was known to him is quite uncertain; the probability is that it was not. But even if it had been, it is not at all likely that it would have had any attractions for him, as his interest in the matter involved was no wise speculative but wholly ethical and religious. Nay, the probability is that on ethical and religious grounds he would have regarded the theory with aversion and disfavour. Some solid reasons can be given for this statement.

1. The theory that matter or flesh is essentially evil is decidedly *un-Hebrew*. The dualistic conception of man as composed of two natures, flesh and spirit, standing in necessary and permanent antagonism to each other, is not to be found in the Old Testament Scriptures. It is true indeed that between the close of the Hebrew canon and the New Testament era the leaven of Hellenistic philosophy was at work in Hebrew thought, producing in course of time a considerable modification in Jewish ideas on various subjects; and it is a perfectly fair and legitimate hypothesis, that traces of such influence are recognisable in the Pauline doctrine of the *σάρξ*. But the presumption is certainly not in favour of this hypothesis. It is rather all the other way; for throughout his writings St Paul appears a Hebrew of the Hebrews. His intellectual and

spiritual affinities are with the Psalmists and Prophets, not with Alexandrian philosophers; and if there be any new leaven in his culture it is Rabbinical rather than Hellenistic.

2. A second consideration bearing on the question at issue is that, whereas according to the Greek view the flesh ought to be *unsanctifiable*, it is not so regarded in the Pauline Epistles. Sometimes, indeed, it might seem as if the apostle did look on the flesh, or the body, as incurably evil; as when in a text already quoted he speaks of killing the deeds of the body,¹ or when he employs such a phrase as "the body of this death,"² or represents the body as "dead on account of sin."³ But in other places the body is represented as the subject of sanctification not less than the soul or spirit. Not to mention 1 *Thess.* v. 13, where the apostle prays that the whole spirit, soul and body of his brethren may be preserved blameless unto the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, there is the important text in 1 *Cor.* vi. 19, 20, where the body is represented as the temple of the Holy Ghost, and it is set forth as a duty arising directly out of the consciousness of redemption to glorify God in the body,⁴ in the special sense of keeping clear of sexual impurity. Another very important text in this connection is 2 *Cor.* vii. 1, where it is inculcated as a Christian duty to cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit; of the flesh as well as the spirit, of the flesh not more than the spirit, there being the same possibility and the same need of sanctification in both. It is true indeed that the genuineness of this text has been called in question by Holsten, one of the strongest advocates of the Hellenistic character and source of the Pauline idea of the flesh.⁵ One can very well understand

¹ *Rom.* viii. 14.

² *Rom.* vii. 24.

³ *Rom.* viii. 10.

⁴ The point of the exhortation is very much blunted by the addition in T.R. καὶ ἐν τῷ πνεύματι.

⁵ *Zum Evangelium des Petrus und des Paulus*, p. 387.

why upholders of this view should desire to get the text in question out of the way. It teaches too plainly what their theory of necessity negatives, the sanctifiableness of the flesh. They have no objection to the sanctification of the *body* taught in 1 *Cor.* vi. 19, because "body" is a mere *Formbegriff*; but sanctification of the *flesh*—impossible, if, with the Greeks, St Paul held the flesh, like all matter, to be inherently evil. And so, as that is held to be demonstrable, there is nothing for it but to pronounce 2 *Cor.* vi. 14–vii. 1, a spurious insertion. It is a violent critical procedure, but it serves the one good purpose of amounting to a frank admission that the exhortation to purify the flesh is not compatible with the theory advocated by the critic.

Before passing on to another point it may be well here to reflect for a moment on the unsatisfactoriness of the distinction taken between "body" and "flesh" in reference to the topic of sanctification. The body, we are told, is sanctifiable because it is an affair of form; the flesh, on the contrary, is unsanctifiable because it is an affair of substance. We are to conceive of St Paul solemnly exhorting the churches to which he wrote to this effect: By all means take pains to sanctify the organic form called the body, but, as for the flesh wherein lies the seat and power of sin, it must be given up as past sanctifying. Can we imagine an earnest man like the apostle trifling with his readers in so serious a matter, by giving them an advice at once frivolous and absurd? Sanctify what does not need sanctifying; hope not to sanctify what most urgently [needs sanctification! There is nothing wrong with the bodily form; it is graceful and beautiful; what is wanted is power to curb the fleshly desire which its beauty awakens, or the carnal wish to use that beauty as a stimulus to concupiscence.¹

¹ *Vide* on this point Wendt, *Die Begriffe Fleisch und Geist*, p. 108. Wendt professes his inability to conceive how a man can begin to make his bodily form

3. A doctrine teaching a dualistic opposition between flesh and spirit, and implying that flesh as distinct from spirit is essentially evil, ought to be accompanied by a Pagan *eschatology*, that is to say, by the doctrine that the life after death will be a purely disembodied one. If all sin spring from the body, or if nothing but evil can spring from it, then the sooner we get rid of it the better, and once rid of it let us be rid for ever, such riddance being a necessary condition of our felicity. Not such however, was the outlook of the apostle. The object of his hope for the future was not the immortality of the naked, unclothed soul,¹ but the immortal life of *man*, body, and soul. The fulfilment of his hope demanded the resurrection of the body: only when that event had taken place would the redemption of man in his view be complete.² To one holding this view a theory involving that the soul in the future state should be unclothed could not fail to be repulsive. It is true indeed that the body of the eternal state, as the apostle conceives it, is not the corruptible, mortal, gross body of the present state, but a "spiritual body" endowed with incorruptibility, and apparently resembling the heavenly bodies radiant with light rather than this "muddy vesture of decay."³ The point to be emphasized, however, is that the apostle demands that there shall be a body of some sort in the eternal state, even though conscious of the difficulty of satisfying all the conditions of the problem. You may say if you please that the problem is insoluble, and that the expression "spiritual body" is simply a combination of words which cancel each other. It is enough to remark, by way of reply, that that was not

apart from the matter of the body the object of an ethical and religious sanctification, and protests against ascribing to the apostle a counsel amounting to nothing more than empty words.

¹ *Vide* 2 *Cor.* v. 4.

² *Rom.* viii. 23.

³ 1 *Cor.* xv. 44-50.

St Paul's view, and the fact sufficiently proves that he lived in a different thought-world from that of the Greeks.

While I say this, I am perfectly aware that the Pauline anthropology is by no means free from difficulties and obscurities. The phrase "a spiritual body" is of itself sufficient to show the contrary. The two words "spiritual" and "body" seem to point in opposite directions, and to imply incompatible speculative presuppositions. A similar lack of theoretic coherence seems to confront us in other utterances on the same topic. Thus in 1 *Corinthians* xv. the resurrection body is represented as differing not only from our present mortal body but even from that of the first man. "The first man is of the earth earthy."¹ These words not unnaturally suggest the view that Adam's flesh and our flesh are in all respects the same, both alike unfit for the kingdom of God and the eternal state, both alike mortal, corruptible, and even sinful. This accordingly is the construction put upon the words by the advocates of the theory now under discussion. But on the other hand it is not difficult to cite texts from the Pauline literature which seem to imply that mortality and sinfulness were not natural and original attributes of human nature, but accidents befalling it in consequence of Adam's transgression. *Romans* v. 12 seems to point in this direction; so also does *Romans* viii. 21-23, where the corruptibility of the creation generally is called a bondage, and the body of man is represented as sharing in the general bondage and looking forward to redemption from it. The whole train of thought in this passage seems to imply that the present condition of things is something abnormal, something not belonging to the original state of creation, something therefore which it belongs to Christ as the Redeemer to remove. The same idea is suggested even by the statement in *Romans* vii. 14, one of the texts on which chief

¹ v. 47.

reliance is placed for proof of the thesis that the Pauline anthropology is based on Greek dualism. "I am made of flesh (*σάρκινος*), sold under sin." Assuming that the writer speaks here not merely for himself, but as the spokesman of the race, we get from these words the doctrine that wherever there is human flesh there is sin, which seems to be the very doctrine imputed to the apostle by such theologians as Holsten and Baur. Yet the very terms in which he expresses the fact of universal human sinfulness suggests another theory as to its source. "Sold under sin." The words convey the notion that the sinful proclivity of man, while universal, is accidental, a departure from the normal and original state of things, therefore not irremediable. Were it a matter of natural necessity it were vain to cry, "Who shall deliver me?" No man or angel could deliver. Only death, dissolving the unhappy union between *νοῦς* and *σάρξ*, could come to the rescue.

On these grounds it may be confidently affirmed that the metaphysical dualism of the Greeks could not possibly have commended itself to the mind of St. Paul. An ethical dualism he does teach, but he never goes beyond that. It is of course open to any one to say that the metaphysical dualism really lies behind the ethical one, though St. Paul himself was not conscious of the fact, and that therefore radical disciples like Marcion were only following out his principles to their final consequences when they set spirit and matter, God and the world over against each other as hostile kingdoms. But even those who take up this position are forced in candour to admit that such gnostic or Manichæan doctrine was not in all the apostle's thoughts.¹

An *ethical* dualism, however, of a decided character St. Paul does teach. If we cannot agree with those who impute to him Greek metaphysics, as little can we sympathise

¹ Vide Hausrath, *Neu-testamentliche Zeitgeschichte*, ii. 408.

with those who in a reactionary mood go to the opposite extreme, and endeavour, as far as possible, to assign to the word *σάρξ* in his epistles the innocent sense of creaturely weakness as opposed to Divine Power, without any necessary connotation of sin. This is the view of *Wendt* as expounded in his able tractate on the notions "flesh" and "spirit." He tries to show that the Hebrew word for flesh bears this sense in all passages in the Old Testament in which the term is charged with a religious significance, and this result he brings as a key to the study of Pauline texts in hope that it will open all doors. One cannot but admire his ingenuity in the attempt, but as little can one resist the feeling that he is guilty of exaggeration not less than those whose theory it is his aim to refute. Of course he is not so blinded by bias as to be unable to see that St. Paul does frequently ascribe to the creaturely weakness of man both intellectual and moral aberration. But then he tells us that these adverse judgments on the flesh are "*synthetic*" not "*analytic*"; that is, state something concerning the flesh not involved in the notion of it. "I am of flesh, sold under sin" is a synthetic proposition which proclaims not the origin of sin out of an essentially evil flesh, but the tyrannic power, somehow acquired, of sin in an originally innocent flesh. It may be so; nevertheless we cannot but note that for the writer the synthesis seems to have become so firmly established that to say "I am *σάρκινος*" is all one with saying, "I am sold under sin." To such transformation of the synthetic into the analytic human speech is liable. Consider the original etymological meaning of the word Jesu-it(e), then reflect what a word of evil omen it is now, and what damnatory judgments no longer "*synthetic*," but grown very "*analytic*" indeed, it suggests to the average Protestant mind! "Flesh" seems to have become for the Apostle Paul a term of not less sinister import than "Jesuit" is for us. Whence this trans-

mutation of the creaturely weakness of the Old Testament into the wicked carnality of the Pauline Epistles? If Hellenism does not explain it as little does Hebrewism as interpreted by Wendt. The Pauline conception of the flesh seems to be a *tertium quid*, something intermediate between Hellenism and Hebrewism, the creation of a very intense religious experience, and of a very pronounced moral individuality.¹

Thoughts having such a genesis are not wont to be expressed in the colourless measured terms of scholastic theology; and if a certain element of exaggeration, one-sidedness, morbidity enter into the language in which they are clothed, there is no cause for surprise. Can any such element be discerned in St. Paul's statements concerning the flesh? Those who are disposed to find a tinge of pessimism in this part of his teaching might refer in proof not merely to the peculiarity of his religious history, but to the high-strung enthusiasm of his Christian life, to the artificial condition of enforced celibacy under which he prosecuted his apostolic vocation, and to his expressed preference for the single state as the best not only for himself but for all, especially in view of the near approach of the world's end.² It is certainly not easy to maintain a perfect balance of judgment in such circumstances, and perhaps at this point the great apostle falls short of the calm, tranquil wisdom of the greater Master. But it were a serious mistake to set aside his stern utterances as mere rhetorical extravagances not worthy of our earnest attention. Here, as elsewhere, his statements, however startling, are in contact with reality. It would be well for us all to lay to heart the humbling word: "in me, that is, in my

¹ Such is the view taken by Harnack of St. Paul's doctrine as to Christ's pre-existence, and it involves a similar view of the apostle's doctrine as to the "flesh." *Vide* his *Dogmengeschichte* vol. i., pp. 710-718.

² 1 Cor. vii. 29-31.

flesh, dwelleth no good thing," not by way of extracting comfort from the thought that it is only in the flesh the evil lies, but rather of realizing that the flesh is ours, and of making ourselves fully responsible for the evil to which it prompts. No man who fails to do this has any right to express an opinion on the question how far St. Paul in his doctrine of the flesh is true to fact and to right Christian feeling.

Before passing from this subject we must consider a text which has given rise to much controversy in its bearing thereon, *Romans* viii. 3. This, however, must be reserved for another article.

A. B. BRUCE.