

‘STRONGER THAN HE?’
THE STRENGTH OF 1 CORINTHIANS 10:22b

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I. Introduction

The concluding words of Paul’s warning concerning the perils of idolatry in 1 Corinthians 10:1-22 form a rhetorical question which expects an emphatically negative response (note μή): μή ἰσχυρότεροι αὐτοῦ ἔσμεν; ‘are we stronger than he?’ G. Fee is not alone among commentators when he admits that ‘the precise intent’ of this question is ‘puzzling’.¹ What has a comparison of the strength of believers with the strength of God to do with idolatry? Is there some connection between God’s power and his jealousy? Whereas a good case has been made for the indebtedness of Paul’s teaching in 10:1-13 and 14-22a to certain Old Testament traditions, verse 22b remains somewhat inexplicable.

A number of commentators take the question as an ironic, if not sarcastic, reference to ‘the strong’ in the Corinthian church, who possessed the ‘knowledge’ (cf. 8:1) that ‘an idol is nothing in the world’ (8:4), were convinced that ‘food will not commend us to God’ (8:8) and thus felt free to attend idolatrous temple meals. For example, in 1937 R. St. John Parry found in 10:22b ‘a clear reference to οἱ ἰσχυροί, with tremendous irony’.² J. Héring, Gaston Deluz and C.K. Barrett make the same identification.³ This interpretation is, however, unlikely since Paul does not use the term ‘strong’ in 1 Corinthians to refer to a group (as he does in Romans 14)⁴ but as

¹G. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans 1987) 474.

²R.St.J. Parry, *The First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians* (Cambridge, 1937) 153.

³J. Héring, *The First Epistle of Saint Paul to the Corinthians* (London, Epworth 1962) 97; G. Deluz, *A Companion to 1 Corinthians* (London, Darton, Longman and Todd 1963) 131; C.K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (London, A. & C. Black 1968) 238.

⁴*Contra* W.M. Meeks, “‘And Rose Up to Play’; Midrash and paraenesis in 1 Corinthians 10:1-22’, *JSNT* 16 (1982) 73: ‘Paul labels the two sides of the controversy “the strong” and the “weak”.’

characteristic of the Corinthian attitude in general (cf. 4:10).⁵ If Paul gives a label to the group more likely to eat idol food in 1 Corinthians 8-10 it is to do with γνῶσις, 'knowledge'.⁶ In 1 Corinthians 8-10 the two groups are 'the weak' (in conscience) and 'the knowing'. Thus, an ironic rebuke of the adherents to the latter position would not allude to their strength but to their knowledge. To rebuke them Paul could have said: Are we more knowledgeable than he? Paul's warning in 10:22b in fact takes in more than one group in Corinth; he asks, 'are we, ἑσμεν (not 'are you,' ἑστε) stronger than he?' 10:22b is addressed to all the Corinthians.

A. Robertson and A. Plummer list several Old Testament parallels to 10:22b which they consider influenced Paul: 'Job ix.32, xxxvii.23; Ecclesiastes vi.10; Isaiah xiv.9; Ezekiel xxii.14; some of which passages may have been in the Apostle's mind.'⁷ It is true that some of these passages contain comparable sentiments to 10:22b: 'The Almighty - we cannot find Him: He is exalted in power' (Jb 37:23); 'He cannot dispute with him who is stronger than he is' (Ec. 6:10); 'Woe to the one who quarrels with his Maker' (Is. 45:9); 'Can your heart endure, or can your hands be strong, in the days that I shall deal with you? I, the LORD, have spoken and shall act' (Ezk. 22:14).

However, the fact that none of them concerns idolatry and/or the jealousy of God makes them less relevant to 1 Corinthians 10. Nonetheless, it is clear from verses 1-21 that Paul's mind was moving along Old Testament lines. The contention of this short study is that an investigation of the Scriptural background to these verses (10:1-21) suggests a likely origin for 10:22b, and also clarifies its precise intent, significance and force.

II. The Origin of 1 Corinthians 10:22b

In 10:1-22 Paul delivers an urgent warning: Christians who participate in meals alongside pagans engaged in idolatrous activity share in the worship of demons and run the risk of provoking the Lord to

⁵Cf. Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians* (Philadelphia, Fortress 1975) 174.

⁶Peter J. Tomson, *Paul and the Jewish Law: Halakha in the Letters of the Apostle to the Gentiles* (Minneapolis, Fortress 1990) 193.

⁷A. Robertson and A. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians* (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark 1914) 218. We could add Is. 10:15 to this list.

jealousy.⁸ Verses 1-13 make the point that even the most ideal environment does not supply certain protection from the temptations and perils of idolatry with reference to a number of Exodus events (recorded in Exodus and Numbers).⁹ Verses 14-22 expressly forbid attendance at pagan temple feasts by insisting that in such a sacred meal, as in the Lord's Supper, the participants share in the worship of the deity, and by declaring that such worship is offered to demons. Paul's words in verses 20 and 22a recall Deuteronomy 32:17 and 32:21 respectively. These points of contact have led A.T. Hanson to conclude that '1 Corinthians 10:14-21 is a Christian midrash on Deuteronomy 32:17-21', by which he means that when Paul wrote 10:14-21 he was reflecting upon the contemporary relevance of the Deuteronomy passage.¹⁰ The Old Testament passages which inform both 10:1-13 and 10:14-21 contain elements which could have given rise to Paul's question in 10:22b.

⁸Whether 8:1-13 also concerns pagan temple worship (Fee's view) or, along with 10:23-11:1, addresses the broader issue of market-place idol meat (the majority of commentators) should not detain us here. For a full discussion see Bruce N. Fisk, 'Eating Meat Offered to Idols: Corinthian Behavior and Pauline Response in 1 Corinthians 8-10 (A Response to Gordon Fee)', *TrinJ* 10 (1989) 49-70.

⁹The section, as Fee, *op. cit.*, 442 observes, is very similar to Ps. 78, Ne. 9:5-37 and Dt. 32:1-43, which also employ God's rejected mercies in Israel's early history to warn a present generation. The pervasive presence of OT traditions in vv. 1-11 has led some to argue that they had prior existence as a Christian or Jewish midrash (or homily), see e.g., W.A. Meeks, *op. cit.*, 64-78; cf. E.E. Ellis, *Prophecy and Hermeneutic in Early Christianity: New Testament Essays* (Tübingen, J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck] 1978) 156, n.36. However, the section's perfect fit in the present context and the lack of an extant piece that parallels 10:1-11 in more than a few respects indicates that Paul composed it himself.

¹⁰A.T. Hanson, *Studies in Paul's Technique and Theology* (London, SPCK 1974) 115, 167. Hanson, 115 also believes that Dt. 32:14 ('with the finest of the wheat and of the blood of the grape you drank wine') would have pointed Paul to the Christian sacred meal mentioned in 1 Cor. 10:16-17,21. Cf. Meeks, *op. cit.*, 72: Paul 'did find in Deuteronomy 32 phrases that were suggestive for his admonition to the Corinthian Christians'. P.D. Gardner, *The Gifts of God and the Authentication of a Christian: An Exegetical Study of 1 Corinthians 8:1-11:1* (PhD Thesis Cambridge University 1989) 186, points out that when Paul uses παραχλωσ in 1 Cor. 10:22 and Rom. 10:19 'Deuteronomy 32:21 was his source'.

Numbers 14 is a passage that forms part of the background to 10:1-13 (with 14:22-23, 28-30 cf. 1 Cor. 10:5, 9-10) which refers to the strength of God. In chapter 14 the people of Israel accept the majority report of the spies who had investigated the Promised Land and rebel against the Lord by grumbling and refusing to take possession of the land (14:1-10). The Lord proposes to destroy the nation and start afresh with Moses and his descendants (14:11-12). In 14:13-19 Moses successfully persuades God to relent, referring to his power in the exodus and in forgiveness and judgment:

Then the Egyptians will hear of it, for by your strength (LXX: τῆ ἰσχύι σου) you brought up this people from their midst; But now, I pray, may your power (ἡ ἰσχὺς σου) O Lord, be great, just as you have declared: the Lord is slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but he will by no means clear the guilty (cf. Ex. 34:6-9).

According to these verses the Lord's power is shown in forgiveness (Israel escapes total annihilation) and also in judgment (14:21ff; the generation of rebels die in the desert). Thus Numbers 14 establishes a connection between God's strength (ἰσχὺς) and his destruction of the rebellious among his people, a link which is implicit in 1 Corinthians 10:22b.

When we turn to Deuteronomy 32, that 'rich and vigorous poem'¹¹ to which Paul alludes in 1 Corinthians 10:14-21,¹² we find not only the strength of God, but also the strength of foreign gods and of God's people implicated in the question of divine discipline. The

¹¹P.W. Skehan, 'The Structure of the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy', *CBQ* 13 (1951) 163. In this article Skehan defends the unity and integrity of Dt. 32:1-43. This defence is supported by Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans 1976).

¹²Paul's complete familiarity and high regard for the chapter is seen further in his quotation of verse 21 in Rom. 10:19 and verse 35 in Rom. 12:19. Hanson, *op. cit.*, 115, is right to conclude that Dt. 32 is 'a passage which we know that Paul studied carefully.' The last words of Moses found in the closing chapters of Dt. exercised a wide influence in early Judaism. For example, Meeks, *op. cit.*, 66, notes that the fourth-century Samaritan midrash on sections of the Pentateuch, the *Memar Marqah*, devotes an entire book to the exposition of the song, cross-referencing verses from Ex. and Nu. (see esp. 4:4,8). Dt. 30-33 are also prominent in the biblical exposition of Philo and Josephus and in the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Song depicts Israel's future in gloomy terms: newly acquired wealth would lead the people into apostasy, eliciting severe judgment from the Lord.¹³ In verses 15-18 it is Israel's prosperity which leads her to abandon God, the source of her benefits. She 'kicks against' her master in rebellion, like a stubborn donkey. God's determination to judge his wayward people appears in verses 21ff.

A purpose of judgment will be to impress upon the nation their lack of strength and the Lord's great power. Verse 30 depicts Israel's impotence without the Lord's help: one man will chase a thousand Israelites; two will put ten thousand to flight.¹⁴ Verses 36-38 indicate that judgment will bring an end to Israel's strength, including any they may have derived from 'the gods': The Lord will desist from punishment 'when he sees their strength is gone' (NIV 32:36).¹⁵ Craigie explains:

Since Israel's defection was largely a result of the arrogance of believing in their own *strength*, that arrogance and belief in *human strength* had to be totally demolished before the people were in a position to realize their need of *God's strength*. The rhetorical question posed in vv. 37-38 is designed to create awareness that other possible sources of *strength* were also useless.¹⁶

These notions tally well with other verses in Deuteronomy. The description of God in 10:17, which serves as the basis for a proper attitude towards God (cf. 10:16) and a warning not to 'turn aside and serve other gods ... [lest] the Lord's anger be kindled against you' (11:16-17), is noteworthy: 'the Lord your God is God of God's and Lord of Lords, the great, mighty (ἰσχυρὸς) and fearful God.' Deuteronomy 8:17-20 strikes a similar note. In a warning against idolatry the nation is alerted to the sin of presumption, of thinking that her accomplishments were achieved by her own power: 'But you

¹³The brighter note that ultimately the Lord would deliver his people and take vengeance on their enemies concludes the song, but it is not relevant for our purposes here.

¹⁴For similar imagery, though with God's people and her enemies in reverse positions see 1 Sm. 18:7; Isa. 30:17.

¹⁵Paul could well have asked in 10:22b 'are they, εἰσὶν (i.e., foreign gods) stronger than he?'

¹⁶P.C. Craigie, *op. cit.*, 387, (italics added).

shall remember the Lord your God, for it is he who is giving you power (ἰσχύον) to make wealth' (8:18a).

The theme of God's strength and the strength of his people is reinforced in the Targumim of Deuteronomy 32. That Paul knew targumic traditions of interpretation of this chapter is suggested by the use he makes of the chapter in Romans 11.¹⁷ Whereas in the Masoretic Text the dominant name for God in the chapter is 'the Rock' (cf. 32:4,13,15,18,30,31,37), a unique appellation in the Pentateuch, the Targumim employ several titles which interpret 'rock' as a figure for God's strength. (The LXX translates צוֹר by θεός):¹⁸

- (1) 'The Strong One' - Deuteronomy 32:30 (N,V,Nur,L,O,PJ)
Deuteronomy 32:37 (N,O,PJ)
Deuteronomy 32:31 (O)
- (2) 'The Strong One whose deeds are perfect' -
Deuteronomy 32:4 (O,PJ,P,V,Nur,L)
- (3) 'The Strong One who redeemed them' -
Deuteronomy 32:15 (O,PJ)
- (4) '(The Fear of) the Strong One who created you' -
Deuteronomy 32:18 (O,PJ,N,V,Nur,L)
- (5) 'The Strong One of Israel' -
Deuteronomy 32:31,31(PJ)
- (6) 'The Strong God of Israel in whom they put their trust' -
Deuteronomy 32:37 (N,V,Nur,L)
- (7) 'The Strong One in whom they put their trust' -
Deuteronomy 32:37 (PJ)

Of the approximately 109 divine titles and epithets in the Pentateuchal targumim (see Chester's list) the above six are virtually unique to

¹⁷See Hanson, *op. cit.*, ch. 6.

¹⁸Cf. Andrew Chester, *Divine Revelation and Divine Titles in the Pentateuchal Targumim* (Tübingen, J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck] 1986) esp. the full list of titles 352ff.

Abbreviations for the Targumim:

L = MS B.H., fol. 1, of the Universitätsbibliothek, Leipzig

N = Codex Neofiti (Vatican Library)

Nur = Codex I of the Stadtbibliothek, Nuremberg

O = Targum Onqelos

P = MS 110 of the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris

PJ = Targum Pseudo-Jonathan

V = MS Ebr. 440 of the Vatican Library.

Deuteronomy 32.¹⁹ ‘Strength’ as a divine title and attribute would certainly have been well known to Paul, maintaining some currency in Jewish circles up to his day. In Greek literature examples include ἰσχυρό, Wisdom 6:8; ἰσχύς, Aristotle 192; Wisdom 12:16-18; 16:16; ἰσχύω, Wisdom 11:21.²⁰ Among synonyms for God in Rabbinic literature we may note אדיר (‘Mighty’); גבורה (‘Might’); and תוקפיהון לישראל (‘The Strength of Israel’).²¹ The New Testament uses ἰσχυρὸς to depict Christ’s superior power over various others (John the Baptist: Mk 1:7; par.; demons: Mk 3:27; par.).

The notion of strength is also inserted in other places in the Targumim of Deuteronomy 32. The Fragment Targumim (ed., M.L. Klein) explain the discipline of verse 30 in terms of Israel losing her strength:

When Israel toiled in the (study of the) Torah and fulfilled the commandments, then one of them would rout a thousand, and two of them would chase away ten thousand; but because they sinned and brought about wrath before Him, the Strong One has forsaken them.

In verse 11 O, PJ and N add ‘strength’ to the description of God’s pinions. In the explanation of Israel’s rebellion in verse 11, O notes that Israel ‘grew strong’ and in verse 13 it describes the land of Israel as containing ‘strong places’ and boasting ‘strong defences.’ PJ and O depict God when provoked to jealousy in verse 22 as sending a ‘wind as strong as fire’ (MT has simply ‘a fire’).

In Deuteronomy 32, especially in the Targumim, the question of Israel’s participation in idolatry and the Lord’s jealousy and discipline is set in terms of strength and power. Israel follows other gods when they feel strong (cf. 1 Cor. 10:12, ‘Let him who thinks he stands’) and in response, the Lord purposes to show himself strong by punishing the Israelites. It is this material which represents a likely origin for Paul’s question in 1 Corinthians 10:22b. Paul warns the Corinthians that it is not possible to provoke the Lord to jealousy with impunity: surely we are not stronger than the Strong One! Paul’s

¹⁹The only exceptions are as follows: (1) Gn. 49:24 (N,P,V,Nur); and ‘The Strong One of Isaac/Jacob’ – Gn. 31:42,53; 49:24 (N); Gn 49:24 (O).

²⁰Cf. Ralph Marcus, ‘Divine Names and Attributes in Hellenistic Jewish Literature’, *American Academy for Jewish Research: Proceedings 1931-32*, Philadelphia, 43-120, esp. 80.

²¹See A. Marmorstein, *The Old Rabbinic Doctrine of God: I. The Names & Attributes of God* (London, Oxford University Press 1927) 64, 82 and 107 for references.

question is designed not only to underscore the impotence of believers (the view of most commentators), but also to stress the omnipotence of God. Paul sees the provocation of God's jealousy as arousing his power, a discernible theme of Deuteronomy 32. Thus we may extend Hanson's observation of the indebtedness of 1 Corinthians 10:14-21 to Deuteronomy 32 to include verse 22.²²

III. The Meaning of 1 Corinthians 10:22b

Having established that Paul's words in 10:22b arise out of a biblical milieu, a look at a couple of related biblical themes may assist in the attempt to locate their precise meaning. The belief of Paul and Deuteronomy 32 that idolatry arouses God's jealousy is, of course, a sturdy Old Testament theme with a long history. It is introduced in the second commandment (Ex. 20:5; Deut. 5:9) and in Exodus 34:14 ('Do not worship any other god, for the Lord whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God') it is the explanation of the divine name, 'Jealous.' In fact, all the Pentateuchal references to God's jealousy have to do with idol-worship (cf. also 1 Ki. 14:22 and the references below). An idol worshipped in Jerusalem in Ezekiel 8:3 is called 'the image of jealousy, which provokes to jealousy' (cf. Ezk. 16:38,42; 23:25).

Furthermore, the conviction that God's jealousy inevitably leads him to stern action is also deeply rooted in the Old Testament.²³ God's jealousy, based upon his love for those he has redeemed at great cost, motivates him to judge his people; Nahum 1:2, 'The Lord is a jealous God and avenges.' The Old Testament is replete with texts in which God's jealousy leads him to destroy the faithless among his people:

Deuteronomy 6:14-15 'Do not follow other gods . . . for the Lord your God, who is among you, is a jealous God and his anger will burn against you, and he will destroy you from the face of the land.'

Joshua 24:19-20 'He is a jealous God. . . . If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, he will turn

²²1 Cor. 10:1-22 is a choice example from start to finish of the dependence of Paul's paraenesis upon the Scriptures, which is precisely what he states in 10:6,11 (Scripture was 'written for our instruction').

²³In Pr. 27:4 ('Wrath is cruel, anger is overwhelming, but who can stand before jealousy') the power of jealousy is almost 'proverbial'.

and bring disaster on you and make an end of you.’

Psalm 78:58-64

‘They aroused his jealousy with their idols. When God heard them he was very angry; he rejected Israel completely. . . .’

Zephaniah 1:18

‘In the fire of his jealousy the whole world will be consumed.’

Read in this light 1 Corinthians 10:22b turns out to be a frightening threat of judgment upon those Corinthian Christians who provoke God to jealousy, if not upon the church in Corinth as a group on account of the behaviour of some of its members (hence Paul’s ‘are we stronger than he?’).²⁴ Paul states, not just, do not defy God (for he is supreme), but do not tempt God, he is ready to judge powerfully. Paul is convinced that the God of the Jewish Scriptures is unchanged in his attitude to idolatry.

In the context of the religious pluralism of Paul’s day 1 Corinthians 10:22b sounds a solemn note and brings the discussion in 10:1-22 to a climax.²⁵ Amidst the pressures to be open, tolerant and accommodate other faiths of the early Empire some Corinthian Christians were quite unaware of the real danger of becoming guilty of idolatry by association. Before Paul turns to the relation of the Corinthians to their neighbours (10:23ff.), he culminates his argument of their relationship with God himself with the warning that to provoke God to jealousy is to risk his punitive intervention. Thus in the teaching of 1 Corinthians, verse 22b of chapter 10 should be placed alongside 5:13b and 11:29-32, and recognised as a text which deals with the discipline of the church in the ‘strongest’ terms.²⁶

²⁴On corporate responsibility and judgment in the OT and in 1 Cor. 5 see the author’s ‘Corporate Responsibility in 1 Cor. 5’, forthcoming *NTS*.

²⁵Uncompromising and forthright comments also close the sections on unity (1:18-4:21; see 4:21) and incest (5:1-13; see 5:13b).

²⁶Gordon E. Fee, ‘Towards a Theology of 1 Corinthians’, in *SBL Seminar Papers: Annual Meeting 1989*, ed David J. Lull (Atlanta, Scholars Press 1989) 265–81; Ralph P. Martin, *Word Biblical Themes: 1, 2 Corinthians* (London, Word 1988), and Victor Paul Furnish, ‘Theology in 1 Corinthians: Initial Soundings’, in *SBL Seminar Papers: Annual Meeting 1989* 246–64, neglect this point.