Difficult Texts: 1 Corinthians 5.5, "Hand this man over to Satan..."

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Abstract: First Corinthians 5.5 is "difficult" in two ways, in terms both of understanding its meaning and of its morally questionable instruction. The crucial phrase about handing the offender "over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh" is best seen, following recent research, as a curse, akin to other ancient curse formulae found in Corinth and elsewhere, consigning a person into the hands of a divine being for punishment and death. This makes Paul's instruction morally difficult and objectionable, but does not prevent us finding other fruitful points of reflection in this text, specifically concerning the way in which the Church, like Paul's assembly, might locate itself in relation to its wider culture and the norms of that culture.

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In the context of a journal like *Theology*, a text may be seen as "difficult" in two main ways. First, it may be difficult to understand, because of linguistic, textual, or exegetical problems. Second, it may be difficult in the sense that it appears to say something morally or theologically objectionable. First Corinthians 5.5 is difficult in both of these senses.

The broad outlines of the passage in which this verse appears (1 Cor 5.1-13) are clear enough. A member of the Corinthian assembly is in a sexual relationship with his step-mother (v. 1), something that Paul (who on this point shares the moral position of his time) regards as immoral and unacceptable. He is concerned not only with the particular offender, whose condemnation he expresses in vv. 3-5, but also with the wider community. He is critical of what he sees as their inflated sense of themselves (*pephusiōmenoi este,* v. 2) – perhaps their pride or complacency – and stresses the risk that the presence of such an immoral person in their midst will have an effect like that of infection in dough, spreading to the community as a whole (vv. 6-8). Paul is well aware that he and his converts live in a world full of immoral people (vv. 9-11); his concern is that the community should not contain such people. Paul's final instruction, then, quoting Deut 17.7 LXX, is that the evildoer (*ho ponēros,* v. 13) should be removed from among them.

Beyond broad outlines, however, there are plenty of points of exegetical debate and uncertainty here. For example, should the phrase "in the name of the Lord Jesus" (v. 4) be taken to qualify the words "when you are assembled together" (*sunachthentōn*

humōn), or the whole of what follows in v. 4[1] – or perhaps (though less likely) linked with "the one who has done this" in v. 3, implying some sense of freedom in Christ to go beyond even this legal and moral convention?[2] Despite such uncertainties it is clear enough that Paul, with a sense of apostolic authority and in the face of what he sees as a lack of Corinthian concern, declares that he himself has already passed judgment as if he were present (*hōs parōn*): despite the fact that he is physically away from the Corinthians he is with them in spirit (*en pneumati*, v. 3). Protestant commentators have long been wary of the notion that the power of judgment and expulsion lies in the hands of Paul alone,[3] but it is hard to deny that the declaration and instruction come emphatically from Paul himself ("*I* have already judged", *ego... ēdē kekrika*, v. 3). Moreover, while he evidently hopes that the Corinthians will collectively affirm and execute his judgment when they assemble together, he also stresses that his "spirit" (*pneuma*) will be there "with the power (*dunamis*) of our Lord Jesus" (v. 4).

One major uncertainty concerns the question of what exactly Paul hopes the Corinthians will do, when they assemble in the name of Jesus and with Paul's presence and authority looming over them. What does it mean "to hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, in order that the spirit (most translations specify "his spirit") might be saved in the day of the Lord" (v. 5)? Scholars have long discussed what this handing over to Satan might imply.[4] Is it, in effect, a death sentence, as Ernst Käsemann long ago insisted, or is it an exclusion from the community of the church, as James South has argued?[5] Recent research on this phrase has developed the idea earlier proposed by Adolf Deissmann, that the formula here is a kind of "curse", like other ancient curses which we find recorded on curse tablets (*defixiones*), of which many hundreds of examples have been found.[6] Uncomfortable though it may be to modern readers, Paul is not only well aware of the practice of cursing (1 Cor 12.3) but also willing to employ it himself, pronouncing a curse (*anathema*) on "anyone who does not

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[1] On these and other options, see Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2000), 393-94.

[2] For this last suggestion (not mentioned by Thiselton) see E.P. Sanders, *Paul* (Past Masters; Oxford: OUP, 1991), 106-107; E.P. Sanders, *Paul: The Apostle's Life, Letters, and Thought* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2015), 298-301.

[3] See, e.g., the comment of Calvin, cited by Thiselton, *First Epistle,* 396 n. 66. Thiselton also asserts that this is "not simply an individual act of Paul, but a corporate act of the whole community" (*First Epistle,* 394).

[4] See the history of research presented by David Raymond Smith, *'Hand this Man over to Satan': Curse Exclusion and Salvation in 1 Corinthians 5* (LNTS 386; London and New York: T&T Clark International, 2008), 3-56.

[5] Ernst Käsemann, *New Testament Questions of Today* (London: SCM, 1969) 71; James T. South, *Disciplinary Practices in Pauline Texts* (Lewiston: Mellen, 1992), 23-88.

[6] See G. Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1910), 303-308; Smith, *'Hand this Man over to Satan'*; Laura S. Nasrallah, "A Theology of *defixiones*? Roman Corinth, the Sanctuary of Demeter and Kore, and Christ-followers", Main Paper presented to the SNTS Annual Meeting, Marburg, Germany (July 2019, publication forthcoming). Nasrallah cites a figure of around 1,600 *defixiones* discovered to date.

love the Lord" (1 Cor 16.22) and on anyone who preaches "a different gospel" (Gal 1.8-9). Paul's curse in 1 Cor 5.5 is clearly shaped by the curse expressed in Deut 27.20 ("Cursed be anyone who lies with his father's wife") but also – as David Smith has argued – should be "understood within the context of an ancient common language of cursing, in which individuals are 'handed over' to a malevolent power to suffer harm".[7] After extended consideration of both Jewish and Greco-Roman curses, Smith concludes that Paul's first phrase, "hand this man over to Satan", conveys an implicit curse, which is then made explicit in the second phrase, "for the destruction of the flesh", a phrase that indicates the wish for the man to suffer death.[8] Laura Nasrallah has recently offered a detailed comparison with curse-tablets found in Corinth, focusing in particular on one example that consigns a "Karpime Babbia" to "the Fates who enact justice", urging them "to destroy" this woman. Nasrallah thus shows how Paul's similar exclamation fits within this popular-level discourse in which people seek what they see as "justice" and "judgment".[9] One of the uncomfortable implications of such research – beyond the broader point of reminding us how thoroughly Paul belongs in a time and place very different from our own – is to make clear how Paul here wishes suffering and death upon this errant member of the congregation, consigning him to Satan for "destruction of the flesh".

How exactly Paul envisaged this destruction would take place is unclear. It seems unlikely that he expected the congregation to enact any punishment themselves, more possible, perhaps, is that punishment might ensue from the civic courts' judgment of his illegal actions.[10] But the central idea, as with other curses, is that the man is "handed over" to his deserved fate (and at the same time excluded from the community), and that this fate is then left in the hands of the gods – Satan, in this case – for them to enact. It is of course striking that Paul also describes the ultimate purpose of this "destruction" as salvation: in the end, "on the day of the Lord", the man's spirit may be saved. But this positive end – difficult as it is to connect clearly with the curse (How does suffering and death help to ensure his salvation?) – scarcely makes the curse any less ominous: the man is handed over to suffering and death, which bring his sins to an end.[11]

Seeing Paul's somewhat enigmatic declaration as a kind of death-wish expressed in the form of an ancient curse makes it very clear, then, how and why this text is also "difficult" in the second sense noted at the outset. What are commentators or preachers to say about a text such as this? Unsurprisingly, the chosen strategies often reflect wider

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[7] Smith, *'Hand this Man over to Satan'*, 181.
[8] See Smith, *'Hand this Man over to Satan'*, 114-80.
[9] Nasrallah, "Theology of *defixiones*?"
[10] On the legal situation and possible (severe) punishments see Andrew D. Clarke, *Secular and Christian Leadership in Corinth: A Socio-Historical and Exegetical Study of 1 Corinthians 1-6*, AGAJU 18 (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 77-78.
[11] See Smith, *'Hand this Man over to Satan'*, 175-78.

convictions about the nature of biblical authority and biblical interpretation. If scripture must always and everywhere say something positive and "good", then efforts must be made – and often are made – to soften the apparent scandal of Paul's curse. For example, Anthony Thiselton comments that "the punishment of the offender may or may not have included physical suffering" but is focused primarily on destroying the "'self-glorying or self-satisfaction' of the offender and perhaps also of the community", with a salvific hope for both the individual and the community, and the possibility that repentance will bring him back within the congregation.[12] Richard Hays suggests that "excluding the incestuous man from the community... places him outside the sphere of God's redemptive protection... Probably Paul did not expect the community to perform a ceremony explicitly cursing the man; rather, delivering him to Satan is a vivid metaphor for the *effect* of expulsion from the church." Paul's expectation and hope, then, is that "the community's discipline" will lead "somehow to the repentance and restoration of the sinner... his fleshly passions and desires will be put to death".[13]

One of the key contributions of historical research such as that of Smith and Nasrallah is to show how thoroughly Paul's discourse and practices are enmeshed in an ancient cultural context that is foreign – and in some ways morally objectionable – today. (His view that sickness and death may be consequences of misconduct at the Lord's supper would constitute another such example, see 1 Cor 11.28-31).[14] A different approach to a "difficult" text such as this, then, would be to acknowledge openly, even forcefully, its ancient character and its moral problems. This can form part of a wider strategy the main aim of which is to demonstrate how problematic the Bible is, in terms of the attitudes and practices it promotes; but it can equally well go alongside – and form part of – attempts to find in the Bible fruitful and constructive material for contemporary theological and ethical reflection.

For example, as I have argued in more detail elsewhere, one of the striking things about this wider passage is that Paul's judgment is predicated upon his sharing the moral consensus of his time: both Jewish and Roman sources make clear that a relationship between a man and his step-mother was regarded as illicit ("not tolerated even among the gentiles", v. 1 [ESV, alt.]).[15] So even where, as in this passage, Paul strongly emphasises the distinctive holiness of the Christian assembly he does so on the basis of a moral value that is shared with his wider society; Paul is outraged by something that his contemporaries, both Jewish and non-Jewish, agree in finding intolerable. In effect, he

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[12] Thiselton, *First Epistle,* 396-97, citing his earlier article, "The Meaning of Σάρξ in 1 Cor 5:5: A Fresh Approach in the Light of Logical and Semantic Factors", *SJT* 26 (1973) 204-28.

[13] Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians* (Interpretation; Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1997), 85-86.

[14] On other NT depictions (including 1 Cor 11:17-34) of the ways in which sin can lead to physical destruction and death, see Smith, *'Hand this Man over to Satan'*, 161-74.

[15] See David G. Horrell, *The Making of Christian Morality: Reading Paul in Ancient and Modern Contexts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2019), 99-115.

wants the congregation to be better at meeting such moral expectations than the world in general might be (cf. vv. 9-11). That does not remove the difficulty of his pronouncing a "death-wish" curse on the man and calling for his expulsion from the community – though as we have seen, in doing so he is again joining in common cultural practice of the time – but it does at least provoke us to think about how a sense of Christian holiness might also assume and affirm a wider social consensus on moral norms. Might this in turn help us think about a major social challenge for contemporary plural, diverse societies: how to find and affirm points of shared moral consensus while at the same time enabling the preservation of groups and traditions with a distinct sense of identity? Paul's discourse is distinctively focused on an assembly that meets "in the name of the Lord Jesus" (v. 4) and draws a strong distinction between those who are "inside" and "outside" the community (vv. 12-13), but the provocation for his ominous curse is a practice which those outside as well as inside agree is socially unacceptable. Probing this problematic and difficult text might suggest a model of the church that is not supposedly "outside" or even "against" its wider culture, but rather – to employ one of Paul's own images – "leaven" within a wider community whose culture, norms and moral standards it largely shares and affirms.

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