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"THE STIGMATA OF JESUS" IN PAUL'S BODY. AN EXAMINATION OF GAL 6:17

The *Epistle to the Galatians*, written most probably between the late 40s and early 50s, is unanimously recognized by scholars as originally Pauline. The Apostle is primarily concerned with the controversy over whether gentile Christians should observe the Law of Moses, particularly circumcision. Paul is of the opinion that they should not: they are called to live in the freedom of the grace of Christ. At the end of the epistle, Paul writes: "From now on, let no one make trouble for me; for I carry in my body [ἐν τῷ σώματί μου βαστάζω] the marks of Jesus [τὰ στίγματα τοῦ Ἰησοῦ]" (Gal 6:17)¹. Immediately after this the Apostle says farewell to his addressees². Among the scholars there prevails the opinion that ἐν τῷ σώματί μου βαστάζω refers to physical scars on Paul's body that resulted from the injuries he

1 My own translation. Unless otherwise stated, the Bible translations quoted in this article are from the *New Revised Standard Version*.

2 "May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters. Amen" (Gal 6:18).

suffered during his apostolic activity³. As for the meaning of τὰ στίγματα τοῦ Ἰησοῦ, the *status quaestionis* is still well summarized by H. D. Betz's words: "That Paul emphasizes the physical nature of the marks is shown by the phrase 'on my body,' but he does not indicate what the marks really were" (Betz, 1979, p. 325). Especially popular is the interpretation according to which Paul had referred here either to a tattoo or to a burn mark, which slaves bore in the ancient world. Paul would then have presented himself as a slave of Jesus⁴. Some scholars have suggested that Paul saw himself here as a soldier of Christ (*miles Christi*)⁵. Some saw here an allusion to Jesus's crucifixion⁶. Ultimately, however, no scholar, as it seems, has put forward decisive arguments (if any) in favor of one or another interpretation.

This article aims to demonstrate, by way of a philological and contextual analysis of Gal 6:17, that Paul by τὰ στίγματα τοῦ Ἰησοῦ is metaphorically referring to the wounds inflicted by crucifixion and that the expression ἐν τῷ σώματί μου βαστάζω should not be understood literally⁷.

3 "Five times I have received (ἔλαβον) from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods (ἔρραβδίσθη). Once I received a stoning (ἐλιθάσθη). Three times I was shipwrecked (ἐνανάγησα); for a night and a day I was adrift (πεποιήκα) at sea" (2Cor 11:24-25; cf. 2Cor 6:5; Acts 14:19; 16:22-24). E.g. "The brands of which the Apostle speaks were doubtless the permanent marks which he bore of persecution undergone in the service of Christ" (Lightfoot, 1870, p. 305); "by τὰ στίγματα Paul undoubtedly refers to the effects of this suffering as an apostle (cf. 2Cor. 6,4-6; 11,23ff), and as the ἐν τῷ σώματί μου shows, the physical effects, perhaps actual scars" (de Witt Burton, 1921, pp. 360-361); "Paul refers to his troubles of all sorts stemming from his 'suffering with Christ' during his missionary campaigns" (Betz, 1979, p. 324); "what Paul had in mind by his use of τὰ στίγματα here were the scars and disfigurements as the effects of his sufferings as an apostle (2Cor 6:4-6; 11,23-30; perhaps also Gal 4:13-14)" (Longenecker, 1990, p. 300); "[*scil.* scars] from Gentile stones and from Jewish whips (2Cor 11:24-25)" (Martyn, 1997, p. 568); "Paul refers to the marks (*stigmata*) he bore on his body as a result of the hostility he experienced as an apostle of Christ (cf. 2Cor 11:23-30)" (Barton, Muddiman, 2001, p. 1165); "Martyn shares the widely held view that Paul's *stigmata* are literal scars 'from Gentile stones and from Jewish whips (2Cor 11:24-25)'" (Glancy, 2010, p. 24); "a common conclusion is that those marks are the result of various beatings that Paul endured 'from Gentile stones and from Jewish whips (2Cor 11:24-25)'" (Gabrielson, 2014, p. 100).

4 E.g. Lightfoot, 1870, p. 305 (see note 3); "it is the idea of himself as a slave of Jesus, marked as such by the scars of his sufferings, that underlies the language of the Apostle" (de Witt Burton, 1921, p. 361); "With the expression 'the marks of Jesus' the Apostle transforms a slave's tattoo or brand into a metaphor of his sufferings on behalf of the gospel [...] thus reminding his hearers that he is a slave of Christ" (Williams, 1997, pp. 167-168); "in the ancient world slaves were often 'branded' with the identifying marks known as *stigmata*, of their owner. Paul understands himself and his suffering in the light of this practice" (Gorman, 2001, p. 147); cf. Betz, 1979, p. 324; cf. Mußner, 1981, p. 418.

5 E.g. "Soldier sent to the front trenches of God's redemptive and liberating war" (Martyn, 1997, p. 568); "these are insignia he wears as a soldier of Christ" (Levy, 2011, p. 183). Gabrielson calls this interpretation a "common conclusion" (2014, p. 100).

6 E.g. Güttgemanns, 1966, pp. 132-135; Borse, 1984, pp. 224-225; "Die στίγματα τοῦ Ἰησοῦ, die der Apostel an seinem Leib 'trägt', machen diesen gewissermaßen zur Epiphanie und Präsenz des leidenden und gekreuzigten Christus" (Mußner, 1981, p. 420); "his scars are nothing else than the present epiphany of the crucifixion of Jesus" (Martyn, 1997, p. 569).

7 While some scholars interpreted "τὰ στίγματα τοῦ Ἰησοῦ" as referring to the wounds of Jesus' crucifixion (see note 6), I have not observed this interpretation to occur simultaneously with the interpretation, according to which ἐν τῷ σώματί μου βαστάζω should be interpreted metaphorically. As far as I know, no one quoted Luke 24:39-40 and John 20:24-27 (see below) as an argument in favor of the hypothesis that τὰ στίγματα τοῦ Ἰησοῦ refers metaphorically to wounds of crucifixion.

THE WORD ΣΤΙΓΜΑΤΑ

The noun στίγματα is a plural form of στίγμα, which stems from the verb στίζω⁸, built on the Indo-European root *(s)teig-, meaning “to prick, sting” (Beekes, 2010, p. 1405), and is related to such words as, for example, the English *sting*, German *Stich* or Latin *in-stigare* (Beekes, 2010, 1405–1406). If in the first instance στίζω etymologically means “to prick”⁹, then στίγμα originally means a mark left on a surface by the action of a pointed object or something that resembles it¹⁰. And so, the closest to its original meaning, στίγματα, occurs in Aristotle’s *Historia animalium*, in which one reads about an insect which enters the fruits of the fig διὰ στιγμάτων (557b). The Greek language uses the word στίγματα for spots which cover the skin of such animals as a leopard¹¹ or fawn¹². The oldest witnessed use of the word στίγματα (sixth century BC) in the Greek literature refers to enigmatic spots covering the skin of a dragon or a serpent¹³. This word is also used in the Greek language to describe marks on the human skin¹⁴, particularly those formed artificially, either by applying a heated iron to the skin or by letting in dye under it. This last meaning of στίγματα also became the most popular one¹⁵. The word στίγματα is a *hapax legomenon* in the *Septuagint*. In the *Song of Songs*, we read: “We will make you ornaments of gold, studded with silver” (Cant 1:11), where חֲבֵטֵי כֶסֶף וְזָהָב (“studded with silver”) was translated as μετὰ στιγμάτων τοῦ ἀργυρίου. To sum up, the word στίγμα originally means a mark made with a sharp tool and then also something that resembles such a mark.

Τὰ στίγματα τοῦ Ἰησοῦ IN THE *GOSPEL OF LUKE* AND IN THE *GOSPEL OF JOHN*

In the *Gospel of Luke*, the resurrected Jesus addresses the disciples with the words:

“Look at my hands and my feet [τὰς χεῖράς μου καὶ τοὺς πόδας μου]; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh

8 ἀπὸ δὲ τοῦ στίζειν στίγματα (Pollux, *Onom.* 8.73).

9 “piquer”; Bailly, 2000, p. 1793 (s.v. στίζω I.).

10 Ibidem.

11 E.g. Pausanias, *Descr.* 8.2.7.

12 E.g. Pollux, *Onom.* 5.76.

13 στίγματα δ’ ὡς ἐπέφαντο ἰδεῖν δεινοῖσι δράκουσι (Hesiod, *Scut.* 166).

14 E.g. Artistotle, *Gen. an.* 721b; Antigonus Carystius, *Mir.* 112a.

15 E.g. “-μα, ατος, τό, *tattoo-mark*”; *LSJ*, s.v. στιγεύς.

and bones as you see that I have”. And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet [τὰς χεῖρας καὶ τοὺς πόδας] (Luke 24:39-40),

while in the *Gospel of John* we read:

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord”. But he said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands [τὸν τύπον τῶν ἥλων], and put my finger in the mark of the nails [εἰς τὸν τύπον τῶν ἥλων] and my hand in his side, I will not believe”. A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you”. Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe” (John 20:24-27)¹⁶.

These are the only New Testament physical descriptions of the wounds inflicted upon Jesus during His passion. All of them (marks of the nails, pierced side) were caused by an activity that could be expressed by the verb στίζω (see above). We see, therefore, that τὰ στίγματα τοῦ Ἰησοῦ find in the New Testament literature an objective parallel in the reality of the wounds inflicted upon Jesus through the crucifixion. This analogy is deepened by the use of the article τὰ (!), which suggests that we are dealing here with a reality which is already known by the addressees of the letter. There is no need to introduce abstract tattoos of burn marks which find no parallel in New Testament writings.

THE “CRUCIFIED” PAUL IN THE *EPISTLE TO THE GALATIANS*

According to Paul, a Christian is one who has mystically crucified him or herself with Christ: “We know that our old self [ὁ παλαιὸς ἡμῶν ἄνθρωπος] was crucified with him [συνεσταυρώθη] so that the body of sin [τὸ σῶμα τῆς ἁμαρτίας] might be destroyed” (Rom 6:6). The *Epistle to the Galatians* is the text in which Paul speaks about this metaphor the most often. According to the Apostle, “those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh [τὴν σάρκα ἐσταύρωσαν] with its passions and desires” (Gal 5:24). First of all, however, Paul speaks about himself:

¹⁶ Moreover, in the *Epistle to the Colossians* we read that Jesus “erased the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross [προσηλώσας αὐτὸ τῷ σταυρῷ]” (Col. 2:14).

“I have been crucified with Christ [Χριστῷ συνεσταύρωμαι]” (Gal 2:19) and: “May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world [δι’ οὗ ἔμοι κόσμος ἐσταύρωται καὶ γὼ κόσμῳ]” (Gal 6:14).

If we juxtapose these two observations, i.e. that τὰ στίγματα τοῦ Ἰησοῦ, not only objectively but also in the context of the *New Testament* writings, find the closest parallel with the wounds caused by crucifixion (see above), as well as that Paul, particularly in the *Epistle to the Galatians*, interprets his existence in categories of torture of the cross, it becomes evident that Paul, when writing τὰ στίγματα τοῦ Ἰησοῦ βαστάζω, was thinking about the wounds of crucifixion. This conclusion contradicts the opinion of the majority of scholars who have claimed that Paul is speaking here metaphorically about a burned mark or a tattoo.

ΜΕΤΑΦΟΡΙΚΗ ΕΡΜΗΝΕΥΤΙΚΗ ΤΟΥ ἘΝ Τῷ ΣΩΜΑΤΙ ΜΟΥ ΒΑΣΤΑΖΩ

But how does one understand ἔν τῷ σώματι μου βαστάζω, i.e. metaphorically or literally, as most of the scholars have? The following arguments speak in favor of the interpretation that this expression should be interpreted metaphorically and not literally:

– If we have recognized that Paul was thinking about any physical marks on his body, they would have to, in light of the analogy to the marks of crucifixion in the *Gospel of Luke* and in the *Gospel of John* (see above), correspond to the wounds carried by the later stigmatics¹⁷. In ancient Christian literature, however, we do not find the slightest piece of information that Paul had anything on his body that would have resembled the wounds carried by stigmatics. What is more, none of the injuries incurred by Paul (see note 3) fits in their physical aspect to τὰ στίγματα τοῦ Ἰησοῦ.

– ἔν τῷ σώματι μου βαστάζω need not be understood literally; on the contrary, in Gal 5:24 we read that Christians are those who “have crucified the flesh [τὴν σάρκα ἐσταύρωσαν]”, which can be understood only metaphorically. Also, in Rom 6:6 (see above), the context suggests that the implicit subject ο συνεσταυρώθη is τὸ σῶμα τῆς ἁμαρτίας (a synonym of

¹⁷ I mean here only the external aspect of the wounds, without answering the question about their nature.

ὁ παλαιὸς ἡμῶν ἄνθρωπος), which can be interpreted only metaphorically as well¹⁸.

–The main message of the *Epistle to the Galatians* is that Christians do not have to circumcise their sons because, as Paul writes, “neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything!” (Gal 6:15). Any physical marks on the body lose any significance! In this light the last words of the letter pointing in an emphatic tone to some specific marks on Paul’s body would hardly be comprehensible.

The above philological and contextual analysis shows that ἐγὼ γὰρ τὰ στίγματα τοῦ Ἰησοῦ ἐν τῷ σώματί μου βαστάζω overlaps semantically with what Paul states in Gal 2:19 (Χριστῷ συνεσταύρωμαι) and in Gal 6:14 (ἐμοὶ κόσμος ἐσταύρωται καὶ γὰρ κόσμος). The Apostle finishes his letter, reminding his readers in an emotional tone that even though he himself is circumcised, by being crucified with Christ he became a new creation, thus any physical marks have no meaning. τὰ στίγματα τοῦ Ἰησοῦ, against most New Testament scholars’ opinion, do not refer to any physical scars on Paul’s body.

18 I do not take here into account 2Cor 4:10: “always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies [πάντοτε τὴν νέκρωσιν τοῦ Ἰησοῦ ἐν τῷ σώματι περιφέροντες, ἵνα καὶ ἡ ζωὴ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ ἐν τῷ σώματι ἡμῶν φανερωθῇ],” because one cannot be sure whether ἡ νέκρωσις τοῦ Ἰησοῦ points specifically to Jesus’ crucifixion. However, even if we accepted that ἡ νέκρωσις τοῦ Ἰησοῦ refers specifically to the crucifixion, ἐν τῷ σώματι περιφέροντες still should not be interpreted as referring to a concrete physical reality, since there is a close analogy (ἵνα) between ἡ νέκρωσις τοῦ Ἰησοῦ and ἡ ζωὴ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ. If τὴν νέκρωσιν τοῦ Ἰησοῦ ἐν τῷ σώματι pointed to some special physical marks on the Apostle’s body (e.g. scars originating from events described in 2Cor 11:24-25) and not the whole body, what would be the sense of the second member of the sentence? ἡ ζωὴ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ would be made visible only in those parts of the body where Paul carried physical scars?

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SUMMARY

At the end of the *Epistle to the Galatians*, Paul writes: "From now on, let no one make trouble for me; for I carry in my body the marks (*stigmata*) of Jesus". According to most scholars, Paul refers here to scars caused by the wounds he suffered during his apostolic ministry. By calling them *the stigmata of Jesus*, according to many, Paul was metaphorically thinking about a tattoo or a burn mark – a sign of belonging to Jesus. However, a philological and contextual analysis suggests that by *the stigmata of Jesus* Paul metaphorically had in mind the wounds of crucifixion, whereas the words "I carry in my body" should not be understood literally.