IS GAL. 5:11b A PARENTHESES?

A Response to T. Baarda

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The RSV translates the three lines of Gal. 5:11 quite literally as follows:

(1) But if I, brethren, still preach circumcision,
(2) why am I still persecuted?
(3) In that case (ἀρα) the stumbling block of the cross has been removed.

In 1992 T. Baarda published a brief study on the verse in this journal. His main thesis is twofold: v. 11c constitutes the apodosis of the conditional period; v. 11b is but a parenthesis. In this note I shall first summarize the argumentation of Baarda, then put forward my own understanding of the verse and end by drawing conclusions from this investigation.

The Position of T. Baarda

It would seem that the argumentation of Baarda can be condensed under three headings: the logic, the difference between v. 11b and v. 11c, and the function of v. 11b.

a) Gal. 5:11c (line 3) begins with ἀρα. Most probably this ἀρα is an inferential particle. One expects that ‘it introduces in some way or another an apodosis of the conditional phrase, in order to emphasize the fatal effect. But the effect of what? Not of the idea expressed in lines 1-2, but only of the suggestion made in line 1’. An apodosis

2 Baarda, ‘Gal. 5:11’, p. 250. Cf. p. 251: ‘... one cannot see how this inference could be drawn from lines 1-2, in which Paul emphatically denies that he is preaching circumcision. It could be only a conclusion of line 1, “if I still preach circumcision”’.
introduced by an inferential ἀρα can be found, e.g., in 2:21 and 3:29; 2 Cor. 5:14; 1 Cor. 15:14 and 17-18.

b) The last reference to 1 Corinthians is not without interest. Just as in Gal. 5:11, so also in 1 Cor. 15:17-18 ‘the particle ἀρα is found at a later stage in an argumentation’: 3

(1) If Christ has not been raised,
(2) your faith is futile,
(3) and you are still in your sins;
(4) then (ἀρα) those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished.

Yet the two passages differ. In 1 Cor. 15:17-18 ‘all the lines (2-4) after the conditional clause express, in various wordings, the same consequence . . . But this is not so in Gal. 5:11’. 4 In this last verse line 2 (persecution of Paul) and line 3 (fatal effect) ‘are of a quite different character’. 5

c) Verse 11b (line 2) functions as a proof that Paul does not preach circumcision. 6 It is but a parenthesis and not what Paul wants to underscore. By using a conditional sentence with v. 11a (line 1) as protasis and v. 11c (line 3) as apodosis Paul wishes to emphasize ‘that any preaching of circumcision as requirement for salvation nullifies the message of the gospel’. 7

To end this presentation, I may quote Baarda’s paraphrase of what ‘Paul actually says’:

But for me, brothers, in contrast with those who now embarrass you with their requirement of circumcision for the incorporation in the true Israel, if I were still preaching circumcision as such a requirement—and you know that I do not preach circumcision, why else would I still be persecuted?—then the ground for the Gospel, the scandal of the cross would have fallen away. 8

Renewed Analysis

Complete certainty about Paul’s way of organizing his thoughts in Gal. 5:11 can hardly be attained. Two factors in this verse cause difficulties in our understanding of Paul’s reasoning. The protasis (εἰ . . .

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5 Baarda, ‘Gal. 5:11’, p. 252.
6 Cf. Baarda, ‘Gal. 5:11’, e.g., p. 255: ‘Τί ἐστι διάκομι is not an inference . . ., but a sufficient proof of the fact that Paul did not preach circumcision’.