Ἐὰν μή in Galatians 2:16:
A Look at Greek Literature

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Abstract
The meaning of ἐὰν μή in Gal. 2:16 went unquestioned until James Dunn challenged the traditional understanding of 2:16a, that justification is by faith, not by works of the law. If ἐὰν μή can only indicate an exception to an entire statement as Dunn assumes, then Gal. 2:16a must say that people can be justified by works of the law as long as they have faith, a statement Paul reverses in the latter part of the verse. This essay seeks to supply what has been missing in the argument for the traditional position: the grammatical proof that ἐὰν μή does not have to take exception to an entire statement.

Keywords
ἐὰν μή, Pauline epistle, Greek conjunctions, Greek prepositions

Ἐὰν μή in Gal. 2:16 sat on the sidelines of debates in Pauline studies until James Dunn challenged the traditional understanding of 2:16a, that justification is by faith, not by works of the law. Some scholars, following Dunn’s lead, now interpret the first part of the verse to mean that one could be justified by works of the law as long as these works are accompanied by faith in Christ. The difference in interpretation hinges on ἐὰν μή. The verse reads, εἰδότες [δὲ] ὅτι οὐ δικαιοῦται ἄνθρωπος ἐξ ἔργων νόμου ἐὰν μὴ διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, καὶ ἡμεῖς εἰς Χριστὸν Ἰησοῦν ἐπιστεύσαμεν, ἵνα δικαίωθωμεν εἰς πίστεως Χριστοῦ καὶ οὐκ ἐὰν ἔργων νόμου, ὦτι ἐὰν ἔργων νόμου οὐ δικαίωθηται πᾶσα σάρξ.

The two traditional views are that ἐὰν μή is adversative or that it is exceptive only of the principal part of the statement, namely, οὐ δικαιοῦται ἄνθρωπος. If ἐὰν μή is adversative in Gal. 2:16, it sets ἔργα νόμου and πίστις Χριστοῦ in antithesis. The idea then is that one is not justified through works of the law but only through faith in Jesus Christ. On the other hand, if ἐὰν μή is exceptive only of the main point, Paul says that one is not justified at all except by faith. The two views differ more in emphasis than essence, and both are consistent with 2:16b.

1. The Problem of ἐὰν μή

Dunn, however, reads ἐὰν μή as exceptive of the entire preceding statement, οὐ δικαιοῦται ἄνθρωπος ἐξ ἔργων νόμου, so that justification is not by works of the law unless faith in Christ attends the works. Dunn’s view has the advantage that ἐὰν μή is normally exceptive of the entire statement preceding (or, in some cases, following) it. The most obvious problem with this understanding in Gal. 2:16, however, is that it contradicts the rest of the verse. Verse 16 would first say that the law justifies so long as there is faith and then reverse itself to say that faith justifies and works of law do not. To handle this problem, Dunn proposes that the difference is purposeful because Paul is recording the changes his understanding of justification underwent as he spoke to Peter. As a result, justification by faith in Christ and justification through works of the law “[which] were initially juxtaposed as complementary [in 2:16a], are now posed as straight alternatives [in

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