GALATIANS 6:13: A POSSIBLE SOLUTION TO AN OLD EXEGETICAL PROBLEM

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οὐδὲ γὰρ οἱ περιτεμνόμενοι αὐτοὶ νόμον φυλάσσουσιν ἀλλὰ θέλουσιν ὑμᾶς περιτέμνεσθαι, ἵνα ἐν τῇ ὑμετέρᾳ σαρκὶ καυχῆσονται (Gl 6:13)

ABSTRACT
Paul's statement in Galatians 6:13 that the Judaizers do not keep the law is at variance with their purported enthusiasm for the law as reflected in the rest of the letter. This has led to more than one exegetical tour de force. The problem can, however, be solved when one realises that Paul, in vilifying his opponents, is using a rhetorical contrast. What he is really conveying is that boasting in the physical state of the Galatians is to the Judaizers even more important than the upholding of the demands of the law.

1 INTRODUCTORY REMARKS
Gl 6:13 is certainly one of the most problematic verses in Galatians (cf for example Longenecker 1990:292-293). Every commentator finds himself obliged to make some sense out of it. As far as I can see, none of these attempts has been really convincing. Clearly Paul is dealing here, within the immediate context, with the ritual observance of the law and not with the keeping of the law in its deep, theological sense as in Gl 2:16, 3:10-11 and later in Rm 2-3 and 7. To understand Gl 6:13 in the light of these passages would, in my opinion, be an exegetical tour de force (contra i a Schlier 1965: 281; Rohde 1989:274; Longenecker 1990:292-293).

A straightforward, literal translation of this verse would read: 'For those who are being circumcised (οἱ περιτεμνόμενοι) do not themselves keep the law (οὐδὲ αὐτοὶ νόμον φυλάσσουσιν), but (ἀλλὰ) they want you to be circumcised in order that they may boast in your flesh.'

In this translation the crucial problem is the statement that the Judaizers do not uphold the law. This clearly contradicts the drift of everything that has been said up to now about Paul's opposition in Galatia, namely that the upholding of the law was of decisive importance to them. To be sure, we do have a vilifying statement here, as in many instances in Galatians (cf Du Toit 1992), but Paul would scarcely jeopardise his own ethos by carrying his vilification too far.

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Related to this problem are two others: first, the meaning and reference of \( \text{o}i \ \text{pe}r\text{i}te\nu\text{m}\nu\text{\i}m\nu\text{\i}m\nu\text{\o}m\nu\text{\i}m\nu\text{\e}n\nu\text{\o}i \) and, secondly, the nature of the opposition signified by the adversative \( \text{\'a}l\text{l}\text{\l}\text{\l}\text{\a} \). Keeping our main problem for the last, we shall therefore have to deal with three issues:

a. The meaning and reference of \( \text{o}i \ \text{pe}r\text{i}te\nu\text{m}\nu\text{\i}m\nu\text{\i}m\nu\text{\o}m\nu\text{\i}m\nu\text{\e}n\nu\text{\o}i \).

b. The nature of the opposition indicated by \( \text{\'a}l\text{l}\text{\l}\text{\l}\text{\a} \).

c. The statement that the \( \text{o}i \ \text{pe}r\text{i}te\nu\text{m}\nu\text{\i}m\nu\text{\i}m\nu\text{\o}m\nu\text{\i}m\nu\text{\e}n\nu\text{\o}i \) do not uphold the law.

2 THE MEANING AND REFERENCE OF \( \text{pe}r\text{i}te\nu\text{m}\nu\text{\i}m\nu\text{\i}m\nu\text{\o}m\nu\text{\i}m\nu\text{\e}n\nu\text{\o}i \)

The obvious understanding of \( \text{pe}r\text{i}te\nu\text{m}\nu\text{\i}m\nu\text{\i}m\nu\text{\o}m\nu\text{\i}m\nu\text{\e}n\nu\text{\o}i \) would be that of a present passive, namely 'those being circumcised', its natural reference, within the context, being the Judaizers. A perfect passive would, however, have been more logical, referring to the Judaizers as 'those who have been circumcised'. As it happens, we have such an alternative reading, attested by an impressive number of manuscripts, spearheaded by the Chester Beatty papyrus 46 and \( \text{Vaticanus} \). This reading is, however, counter-balanced by such other 'heavyweights' as \( \text{Sinaiticus, Alexandrinus, Ephraemi, Claromontanus} \), as well as several other manuscripts. The argument is eventually decided on internal considerations, since \( \text{o}i \ \text{pe}r\text{i}te\nu\text{m}\nu\text{\i}m\nu\text{\i}m\nu\text{\o}m\nu\text{\i}m\nu\text{\e}n\nu\text{\o}i \) is clearly the more difficult reading. The perfect form would be secondary, reflecting 'scribal or editorial modification' (Metzger 1971:598).

In trying to make better sense of \( \text{o}i \ \text{pe}r\text{i}te\nu\text{m}\nu\text{\i}m\nu\text{\i}m\nu\text{\o}m\nu\text{\i}m\nu\text{\e}n\nu\text{\o}i \) a number of exegetes have resorted to a change of subjects. Burton (1948:352-353) for instance prefers to take Paul's Galatian addressees as the referent of \( \text{o}i \ \text{pe}r\text{i}te\nu\text{m}\nu\text{\i}m\nu\text{\i}m\nu\text{\o}m\nu\text{\i}m\nu\text{\e}n\nu\text{\o}i \). But all his arguments cannot explain away the awkward switch which this interpretation requires. The subject of all the verbs in the preceding verse (v12) and also of all the verbs following in the latter part of verse 13, is clearly the Judaizers. To switch in the middle of an argument to another subject and then suddenly back again, without any lexical sign to that effect, requires an impossible mental shuttling.

Our only remaining option is to take \( \text{o}i \ \text{pe}r\text{i}te\nu\text{m}\nu\text{\i}m\nu\text{\i}m\nu\text{\o}m\nu\text{\i}m\nu\text{\e}n\nu\text{\o}i \) as a reference to Paul's opposition and to understand it in a generic sense, i.e. that 'those who are being circumcised' should be understood as a reference to 'those of the circumcision', the circumcision party (Schlier 1965:281 'die Beschneidungsleute').

3 THE NATURE OF THE OPPOSITION INTRODUCED BY \( \text{\'a}l\text{l}\text{\l}\text{\l}\text{\a} \)

The adversative \( \text{\'a}l\text{l}\text{\l}\text{\l}\text{\a} \) indicates an antithesis, but its position blurs the exact nature of this antithesis.

In order to get clarity on this matter, it may be useful to start from a
parallel statement in English like:

They do not care for themselves, but toil hard so that they can provide for future generations.

This statement is perfectly analogous to our Greek example. Here too on the surface level the nature of the contrast is blurred. But the ordinary hearer/reader has no problem in re-arranging the constituents of the text to form an intelligible whole in its semantic deep structure. On the surface structure the adversative 'but' precedes the proposition 'they toil hard', but in reality the antithesis follows only later. The proposition 'they toil hard' is not part of it, but in fact the main statement. We can therefore rearrange the semantic constituents as follows:

They toil hard; their motivation is not to care for themselves, but to provide for future generations.

Similarly the semantic relationships in GI 6:13 should be rearranged as follows:

They want you to become circumcised; their motivation is not to uphold the law, but to boast in your flesh.

This implies that φυλάσσουσιν should be understood in a conative sense. As we know the present tense often expresses attempt or intention (Smyth 1963:421; Blass-Debrunner-Rehkopf 1976:214). This would certainly fit perfectly well within the context. Θέλουσιν εὑροσωπήσωσι εν σαρκί in verse 12 undeniably indicates intention ('they want to make a good outward impression'). The same is true of θέλουσιν ύμᾶς περιτέμνεσθαι in verse 13. Also ἀναγκάζουσιν ύμᾶς περιτέμνεσθαι unequivocally expresses intent: 'they want to force circumcision on you'. And likewise both the two ἵνα-sentences (v12,13) express intention. This makes it virtually certain that φυλάσσουσιν should also be understood in a conative sense. Accordingly it would be semantically correct to translate GI 6:13 provisionally: 'Those of the circumcision want to have you circumcised, not because they wish to keep the law, but in order to boast in your physical state'.

4 THE STATEMENT THAT THE ΠΕΡΙΤΕΜΝΟΜΕΝΟΙ DO NOT UPHOLD THE LAW

We have made some progress, but this still does not solve our main problem, namely the statement of the first leg of our antithesis that the Judaizers do not want to uphold/keep the law. As a matter of fact our new formulation
even aggravates the problem, since it denies them even the intention of upholding the law.

It might therefore seem that we are now even worse off than we were at the start. But that is only apparently the case. The problem is resolved when we realise that here we have an interesting example of an hyperbolical or rhetorical contrast.

In two previous articles I have dealt in some more detail with this typical stylistic feature of biblical language, which occurs also more universally (Du Toit 1986:178-186; 1992:311-317). Older grammarians were well acquainted with this interesting phenomenon, but more recently it has received scant attention (Meyer 1990:91-94 being an exception).

A hyperbolic contrast formulates an opposition in such a drastic way that on the surface level of the text its two constituents appear mutually exclusive, or at least drastically opposed. On the semantic deep level, however, only a strong comparison is envisaged. The reason is rhetorical. The speaker wishes to stress the overriding importance of A in comparison to B.

A typical example would be Jer 7:22-23:

22 For when I brought your ancestors out of the land of Egypt, I said nothing to them, gave them no orders about burnt-offerings or sacrifice. 23 But this command I gave them: 'Obey my voice, and I will be your God and you shall be my people....'

The negation in verse 22 is certainly not absolute. Such an interpretation would clash with the tenor of such promises as those in Jer 17:26 and 33:18. Jeremiah is not attacking the sacrificial system as such, but its abuse. By means of an absolutely formulated contrast the overriding importance of obedience to sacrifice is underlined (Kruse 1954:186-188; Van Selms 1972:132-133). To understand verse 22 at face value and to draw conclusions from it regarding Jeremiah's understanding of Israel's history, would definitely be a grave mistake.

Similarly it would be wrong to infer from Paul's initial statement in Gl 6:13 that he is denying that the περιτεμνόμενοι want to uphold the law. He is making a comparison and he does it in the form of a hyperbolical contrast. The acid test for such an interpretation would be whether a rhetorical contrast would make good sense within the context. The sense of such an understanding would be that boasting about the circumcised state of the Galatians was in fact much more important to the Judaizers than the keeping of the law. That the upholding of the law is in fact important to them is not denied. But this intention is minimised when compared with their ambition to boast about the physical state of their new converts. This makes excellent sense.

A sensible translation would then be: 'For those of the circumcision want to have you circumcised, not so much because they wish to uphold the law, but
rather because they would like to boast in your physical state.

WORKS CONSULTED
Meyer, B F 1990. Many (= all) are called, but few (= not all) are chosen. *NTS* 36, 89-97.

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