

Foreword

EDWARD GIBBON DERIDED THE zeal of the ancient church theologians who were ready to split Christianity open for one small Greek letter, one *iota*: the *iota* by which the two words used for Jesus Christ's relationship to God the Father differ, *homoousios*, "of the same substance," and *homoiousios*, "of a similar substance." The sarcastic historian did not realize that this *iota* represented the distance of which the greater cannot be conceived, the distance between Creator and mere creature.

Antoine Fritz focussed his Master's dissertation (Maîtrise en théologie) not on one but on three Greek letters: on the second *nyn*, "now," which the prestigious *Sinaiticus* and *Vaticanus* manuscripts of the New Testament (but not most others) include in Romans 11:31: Israelites now refuse to obey the faith, while Gentiles believe in the gospel, in order that they, the Israelites, may receive mercy *now*! The small word may significantly influence the interpretation of the whole chapter, and one's vision of Israel's future. Does the Apostle only envision, under the figure of the grafting back of cut off branches into the Olive-Tree (the Israel of God), *only* the coming to faith in Jesus/*Yēšúa'* of individual Jews in every generation, or also a *massive* turning to the Messiah and Lord, a final *tēšūvā* of the people before the glorious Advent? If original (Antoine Fritz concluded the other way), the *nyn* rather favours the former reading . . .

His doctoral research has led Antoine Fritz to scrutinize again a single word in the Epistle to the Romans, a six-letter word in Romans 1:16 (twice as long as the previous one, what a progress!). The word *prōton*, "first," confers a priority to Jews, compared to Greeks (representing Gentiles): the gospel is the power of salvation to the Jew *first*. What does the inspired Apostle to the Gentiles mean? What is the import of the statement? Antoine Fritz attentively surveys the history of its interpretation and gathers exegetical considerations with manifest scholarly competence, as may be expected from a good doctoral dissertation (I admired the way it was supervised).

The burden of his work, however, which falls into the province of “mis-siology,” is the critical examination of the *missional* interpretation of the *prōton*. Antoine Fritz thus labels an interpretation and use of the phrase “to the Jew first” that surfaced in 1809, when the London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews was founded (he did not find an earlier occurrence in available records). His typology distinguishes three main views. The first understanding of the phrase is trite, merely *historical*: the Jews heard the gospel first. The second one, which Antoine Fritz calls *historico-covenantal*, adds theological sense and value to the factual and chronological sequence: the Jews were heirs to the promises, they were the “natural” branches of the Olive-Tree, it was *fitting* that they should be evangelized first. The *missional* one draws consequences for mission even today. In every age of the church, in ours too, the witness of the gospel should target Jews *first*. The strategy is not left to human devising: God decided on it, and reveals it in Romans 1:16.

Stakes are not negligible. Though much ambiguity remains (must all evangelists start with Jews? When are they allowed to turn to Gentiles? What of countries where there are practically no Jews?), the missional understanding of the priority has been used as a goad to awaken and arouse interest in various forms of testimony to the Jewish people, as a lever to raise support for mission agencies, as a proposed criterion in the allocation of funds, of manpower, of prayer energy. The dynamic mission *Jews for Jesus*, with which Antoine Fritz happily ministered for several years in Paris, has given it front-line visibility. And one may give thanks for evident fruits.

I did not perceive the shadow of prejudice. Antoine Fritz welcomes, and sifts, and weighs, the arguments in favor of the “missional” interpretation. He generously quotes from representative spokesmen of Jews for Jesus, who also encouraged him in his research project, whose orientation was not hidden to their eyes. In the end, however, he must draw from the evidence a rather negative conclusion: he cannot retain, at least as far as Romans 1:16 is concerned, the rule of a priority imposed on the present church’s evangelistic practice (and no other serious argument is found elsewhere).

What strikes me most is the combination: Antoine Fritz’ love for the mission among Jews, his affectionate solidarity with the missionaries of Jews for Jesus, and, *yet*, his choice and defence of an interpretation that will not (I presume!) please his friends. This teaches us all a fine lesson: honor God’s Word first! The priority of priorities! It has been a temptation of evangelical biblicism to let pragmatic considerations unduly bend the reading of Scripture! Antoine Fritz’ concentration on a single word of the God-breathed text, and his effort to discern exactly its meaning, is a fine confession that we are not called to “please men,” even well-intentioned, zealous, brothers

and sisters. Our ardent desire for a new wave of blessing does not excuse sloppy exegesis—the kind of “help” Uzzah thought he should give to the Lord’s sacred ark (2 Sam 6:6–7)! Thank you, Antoine, for this model attitude towards God’s Word.

It is not only a matter of obedience, but of *faith* (one cannot separate). In the long run honoring the truth better serves the cause one cherishes. God’s Word wields the greater efficacy. The historico-covenantal understanding of the Romans 1:16 *prōton* opens the way for a remarkable development, which Antoine Fritz sketches before our eyes. Using the parabolic material of the Gospels (and this is rather new to me), he relates to his theme the Lord’s saying: “The first shall be last.” The priority of the Jews may be linked, in the symmetry of God’s design, to the great revival among them, *at last*. That perspective quickens our hope that those who were first, and were (partially) hardened, will be the last to join in numbers, as numberless multitudes, the Body of the Messiah, just before he comes! Let this hope, with the signs that it may *soon* happen, energise our witness, both to Jews and Gentiles, now!

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