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The Problem of the False Apostles



Arguably the most important problem reported by **Titus** to **Paul** after the delivery of the severe letter (**7:8-12**) relates to the newly arrived **false apostles** who claimed apostolic authority in **Corinth**. Closely linked is the question whether or not **the false apostles (11:11-13)** and **the super apostles (11:5 and 12:11)** are the same group or not. The view taken for my commentary is that the difference between the two is arbitrary. So, I will be using the term **the false apostles** throughout this commentary.

Their identity: Who, then, were these **false apostles**? It is evident that they were a group (**many** in **2:17, 11:18, 10:12**) of **men** (probably) who had **come** to **Corinth (11:4-5)** from outside (**letters of commendation** in **3:1**) and who had infiltrated **Paul's field** of ministry (**10:5-6**), where **they** and **their** ministry had been **received (11:4 and 20)**. Like **Paul**, these **men** were **Hebrews** and **Israelites**, physical descendants of **Abraham (11:22-23a)**. **They** were **Jews**. That **they** had come to Greco-Roman metropolis **Corinth** makes it almost certain that **they** were Greek-speaking **Jews**, very well versed in Greek, with polished rhetorical skills.

But what of **their** interest in pagan ecstasy, visions, and revelations on which **they** depended, in part at least, for **their** acceptance in **Corinth**? Were those things compatible with **Jews** from Judea? Judea in the period from 44-66 AD was embroiled in political disintegration, revolutionary activism, and apocalyptic fervor expressed in prophetic inspiration and miraculous signs (**see Josephus, Jewish Wars 2.258-59**). It is quite possible that Judea at this time represented the kind of religious environment from which these **false apostles**, with their visions and revelations supposedly from **God**. **Paul himself**

had pointed out earlier that **Jews ask for signs and Greeks try to find wisdom (First Corinthians 1:22)**. Therefore, we must conclude that these were Greek speaking Judaizers.

Their origin: The false apostles were from Jerusalem and most likely spoke Greek well enough to lead the sophisticated **Corinthians** to believe in **another Gospel** (see the commentary on **Galatians, to see link click Aj - No Other Gospel**). It is now understood that Judea was Hellenized to such a degree that those **false apostles** may well have been capable of displaying the polished rhetorical skills of boasting and comparison that are mirrored by **Paul's** rebuttals in **10:12**. **Paul** would not concede inferiority to those **men** in the fundamentals of apostleship, but **he** does so in rhetorical skills (**11:5-6**).

Their mission: **Paul** referred to **them** as **false apostles** who claimed apostolic authority, **telling lies about their work and masquerading as servants of righteousness, ministers of the Adversary, and apostles of the Messiah (11:13-15)**. As Judaizers, **they** claimed to follow **Messiah**, but still teaching that a Gentile had to be circumcised and follow the 613 commandments of the Torah in order to be saved; and that all believers, **Jew** and **Gentile** alike, had to continue to follow those 613 commandments in order to maintain their relationship with **ADONAI**. **Their** teaching not only corrupted **the Gospel**, but also the teaching of the Torah, in which a right standing before **ADONAI** had always been only by obedient **faith**. At no time in history has anyone been saved by their own merit. Both before and during the Dispensation of Torah, people were saved by **faith** alone. Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Rahab, the godly judges, kings, prophets, and all the righteous of the TaNaKh were saved only on the basis of **faith**. All of these people, whether man or woman, **Jew** or **Gentile**, **pleased God because of their faith** (see the commentary on **Hebrews Cl - The Hall of Faith**).

They also proclaimed that circumcision and Torah observance were required for a right standing before **God**. **They** perverted the simplicity of **the Gospel** by adding requirements to it (**Revelation 22:18**). **Judaizers** were therefore not teaching godly doctrine, but the **lie from** the pit of sh'ol, that a people, by their own goodness and works, can gain favor with **YHVH**. This is why **Paul** referred to **the Judaizers as dogs . . . evil workers . . . the false circumcision (Philippians 3:2 NASB)**. **False circumcision** translates the Greek word *katatome*, which is used there in the B'rit Chadashah and refers to pagan sexual mutilation.

The Judaizers recognized **Yeshua** as **the Messiah** intellectually. But **they** had not crossed over the line from knowledge to **faith** (see **Hebrews Al - How Shall We Escape If We Ignore So Great a Salvation**). Therefore, because **their** view of **the Messiah** was corrupt, so was **their** view of **Yeshua**. **They** did not look at **Messiah** as **the Lamb of God** who

would **take away their sin**, because **they** didn't believe **they** had **sin** that demanded such a sacrifice in order to be forgiven. As circumcised, ceremonial **Jews**, **they** were convinced **they** already had the full favor of **ADONAI** and were spiritually and morally acceptable to **Him** as **they** were. That common **Jewish** view is reflected in the argument in the book of **Hebrews**, in which the writer goes to great lengths to persuade his **Jewish** readers that **the Messiah** is superior to the prophets, to the angels, and to Moshe (**Hebrews 1:1 to 3:6**). **Jesus** was not simply another great **Jewish** teacher. **He** was completely different than anyone else who had ever lived, the very **Son of God** and **Savior** of the world, whose saving sacrifice was necessary for anyone to be right with **the Father**.⁵

Being **crafty**, like **their** father **the serpent (Genesis 3:1)**, **they** did not go so far as to deny **Paul's apostleship**. Rather, it was that **they** claimed apostolic authority (**11:12**); but even more so, that **their** supposed "apostleship" was **superior** to that of **Paul's (10:12 to 12:13)**.

Their attack on Paul: On arrival in **Corinth**, **the false apostles** attacked **Paul's** teaching to **the Corinthians** on a number of matters, especially the truth of **the Gospel (First Corinthians 15:3-4)**. **The newcomers** argued that **Moshe's** undiminished glory (**Exodus 34:29-35**), as it was popularly believed to be among unbelieving **Jews**, was a sign of the continuation of the 613 commandments of **Moses** for salvation (for which it was never intended). In **their** view, **Paul's** teaching that the Dispensation of Torah had been fulfilled (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Dg - The Completion of the Torah**), was quite unacceptable to **them**. Moreover, **Paul's** focus on **Yeshua** as a crucified **Messiah** effectively **veiling** (see **Aw - Veiling and Unveiling**) **the Gospel** from **Jewish** audiences, was likewise unimaginable to **them** (see **The Life of Christ Er - That Same Day He Spoke to Them In Parables**).

Their alliances and method: **The false apostles** were pleasantly surprised that when **they** arrived **Paul** was being much maligned by many of **the Corinthians**. Since they were **Jews (11:22)**, it is almost certain that **they** stayed with other **Jewish** members of the congregation, possibly **those** who said: **I am of Cephas (First Corinthians 1:12)**. Then the Hellenistic **Jews** living in **Corinth** would have been able to brief their **guests** both about the shortcomings of **Paul** and gush over the great rhetorical skills of their new found **idols**. **The newcomers** exploited to **their** advantage the low opinion of **Paul** at that time:

First, as **men** who accepted financial support (**11:20**) **they** appear to have forged an alliance against **Paul** with those **Corinthians** who criticized **him** for not accepting payment. But **Paul** would continue to reject **the Corinthians'** financial assistance because

by doing so **he** would remove the claim of **those** who then sought to preach in **Corinth**, that **they** did so on the same basis as **Paul**. It appears that **the false apostles** received support from **the Corinthians**, thus creating pressure on **Paul** to do likewise. But **Paul's** determination to offer **the Gospel** "free of charge" was fundamental to **his** ministry as **the apostle to the Gentiles (10:15-16)**.

Second, **the false apostles** also presented **themselves** as superior in public speaking and **appearance**, capitalizing on **Paul's** perceived inferiority in those areas (**First Corinthians 2:1-5; Second Corinthians 5:12, 10:10 and 11:5**). Again, **their** mystic/ecstatic **visions and revelations (12:1-4)** may probably resonate with the ecstatic utterances of most of **the Corinthians** (see the commentary on **First Corinthians Dn - Pagan Gibberish is Unproductive**).

One thing was perfectly clear. For **their** part, **the false apostles** tried to discredit **Paul** by boasting of **their** supposed "achievements," and by contrasting **their** "strengths" with **his** perceived "weaknesses." **They** had **letters of commendation** from Jerusalem; whereas **Paul** had none. **They** were self-sufficient and triumphant figures; whereas **Paul** was an inadequate, sorry figure who limped from place to place in defeat (**2:1 to 3:5, 4:1 and 16**). **They** were **men** of divine power, who were **caught up to Paradise, heard inexpressible things, where they saw visions and heard revelations that man is not permitted to tell (12:1-5 and 5:13)**; whereas **he** was mundane, **an apostle** without any power, worldly and weak (**10:3-6, 1:12 and 17, 5:12-13**). **They** carried out **the marks** of an apostle, performing **signs, wonders and miracles (12:12)**; whereas **Paul** wasn't even able to **heal himself (12:7-9)**. **They** were powerful in speech and wisdom (**11:5-6**); whereas **he** was "unskilled" in speech and in general, **a fool (11:1 to 12:13)**. In all things **they** were "supposedly" **superior**; whereas **Paul** was "supposedly" **inferior**.⁶