

Literary Restraint
An Argument for Bible Inspiration

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It is almost in the genetic nature of biographers and popular journalists to string together miles of words in the depiction of significant historical events. This particularly is true when tragedy is involved. The word flow is extrapolated even more when terribly brutal conduct is under consideration. Man's inhumanity to his fellows has stained millions of pages of literature—both ancient and modern. A single example should suffice to illustrate the point.

President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas at 12:30 p.m. CST on Friday, November 22, 1963. This incident, of but a few seconds, has been called a defining moment in history. Tons of paper was utilized in newspaper accounts, magazine articles, and books describing the details of this day of horror in American history.

Baffling Brevity

In his monumental work, *Evidences of Christianity*, completed in 1886, J.W. McGarvey, who served as Professor of Sacred History at Kentucky University, contended that one of the "confirmatory" evidences of the credibility of the New Testament is the brevity that characterizes the records. He focused especially upon the four Gospel Accounts.

In this article, our point of emphasis will be a small section from Second Corinthians. The approximate time between Paul's conversion, and the penning of Second Corinthians, was about 20 years. This period begins with Acts 9:1, and concludes at 20:1, with Paul's arrival in Macedonia (cf. 2 Corinthians 2:13b; 7:5). The segment embraces a total of 411 verses that span the two decades.

When one considers that a considerable portion of this material involves single events (cf., for example, the incidents relating to Cornelius – 10:1-11:18—66 verses; and the Judaizing problem in chapter 15–29 verses), it is startling to contemplate how much historical information in this span has been *excluded* from Luke's narrative.

Paul's Defense

In Second Corinthians 10:1 through 13:10, Paul defends his apostleship against certain critics who claimed superiority over him. As a portion his argument, he was willing to lay his credentials of dedication down beside the credits of his agitators!

“Are they ministers of Christ? (I speak as one beside himself) I more; in labors more abundantly, in prisons more abundantly, in stripes above measure, in deaths often. Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day have I been in the deep; in travels often, in perils of rivers, in perils of robbers, in perils from my countrymen, in perils from the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in labor and travail, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness” (11:23-27).

In these four verses (which constitute only 78 words in the Greek text), there is far more *not said*, than *is said*.

Prisons

Paul declares that he was “in prisons more abundantly” than his opponents. Note the plural form, “prisons.” The term rendered “more abundantly” signifies greater in *number* and *intensity*.

In the life of Paul up to this point, however, there is only *one* recorded imprisonment—that in Philippi (Acts 16:23ff). When and where, then, were these other imprisonments? How long were they? What were the horrors connected with them? The Spirit of God chose not to detail them, though we might long to know.

Stripes

Stripes are marks or wounds left by blows (cf. Acts 16:23). These could be implemented by “rods” or by the lash. With reference to the latter, some authorities suggest that the offender was laid on the ground and beaten in the presence of a judge (McClintock, 789). At a later period the Jewish Mishnah provides another picture:

“The minister of the synagogue was to stand on a raised stone inflicting the blows ‘with all his might,’ using a redoubled calf strap, to which two other straps were attached. Thirteen blows were delivered to the chest and twenty-six to the back. The severity of this beating can be inferred from the provisions made in the event the offender defecated, urinated, or even died as a result of their blows” (Barnett, 542).

Paul declares he had received “stripes above measure.” He then is more specific: “Of the Jews five times I received forty stripes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods.” The expression “in deaths often,” in addition to many harrowing episodes, probably denotes how close to death he came during these beatings.

Here is the point: on not a *single page* of the New Testament is there mention of Paul’s five floggings by the Jews (a total of 195 stripes). In this connection we should mention that the Jews did not always require the full complement of forty stripes. Nonetheless, in each case, Paul received the full measure—a commentary on the intensity of Jewish hatred for this man of God.

He mentions that three times he was beaten with rods. This was the Roman method of punishment, and it was not limited to a prescribed number of stripes. The incident at Philippi (Acts 16) accounts for one of these episodes, but what of the other two? When were they inflicted, and for what reason? The record is completely silent—an exceedingly *strange* circumstance—from a biographer’s viewpoint.

How could Luke possibly restrain himself in providing some of the details of these bloody occasions? Did Christian brothers rush in to retrieve the unconscious warrior? Did gentle sisters minister to his emaciated frame? Was Luke, the beloved physician (Colossians 4:14), present at any of these beatings—aside from the time at Philippi (cf. the use of first person pronouns, beginning at Acts 16:10)? We clamor for the facts but the Spirit was mute! How very unlikely this would be if the narrative is solely human in composition.

Shipwrecks

As the apostle continues his list of hardships, he briefly mentions that once he was “stoned.” Doubtless this alludes to the incident at Lystra (Acts 14:19 - recorded with only 22 words). But in this letter to Corinth he provides no details whatever. The next reference is even stranger.

“Three times I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day in the deep.” We know of the shipwreck that occurred when the apostle was en route to Rome, appealing his legal case to Caesar (Acts 27:1-28:16), but this came several years later.

As observed earlier, these three incidents had to have occurred between the time of his conversion (Acts 9), and the writing of Second Corinthians from Macedonia (Acts 20:1-2). One can easily trace Paul’s known sea travels by consulting maps of the apostle’s three missionary journeys, involving the Mediterranean and Aegean seas. But in the book of Acts there is not a trace of these calamities. It is as if the sea itself consigned the terrifying

events into the depths of oblivion.

What historian, left to his personal passions, would have omitted these dramatic incidents? And what of that “night and day in the deep;” How could one possibly fail to set forth the circumstances of that life-threatening danger? Were there other survivors? Were any of the apostle’s companions with him? How was he rescued?

Our souls agonize for the details! Why were they not provided? The answer is a simple one—the minute details of these incidents *were not essential to the glorious plan of human redemption being revealed!*

If one cannot see the restraint that shrouded the sacred narratives, and acknowledge the calm hand of the Spirit of God in the composition of the New Testament documents, he lacks considerable perception—both of the common feverish impulses of journalists, and of the nature of sacred literature.

The inspiration of the Bible is established in many marvelous ways!

Sources;

Barnett, Paul (1997), *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans).

McClintock, John & Strong, James (1970 edition), *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature* (Grand Rapids: Baker), Vol. VIII.