

# Titus

## Some Old Testament background

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*This article considers some Old Testament background to Titus. This includes Psalm 51 and Genesis 34 and 37. The importance of circumcision in the epistle is also considered.*

**T**HE EPISTLE to Titus is not usually associated with events in the Old Testament. However, as the following article shows, there are some Old Testament passages that help to shed light on the epistle. This article begins by noting the link with Psalm 51 and how it relates to the truthfulness of God and the lies of man. Next, the apparently passing reference to circumcision is shown in fact to be of crucial importance in the epistle. We then see how the behaviour of the sons of Jacob is drawn upon by the Spirit through Paul with regard to the attack upon Shechem and their behaviour towards Joseph.

### Always liars

At the beginning of his letter to Titus, Paul states that God “cannot lie” (1:2). In contrast, quoting a Cretian poet, he says that “Cretians are always liars” (v. 12). Yet, despite this, “God, That cannot lie” saw fit to have the gospel preached on that island. As such, Crete is a model of the world as a whole. All men, not just Cretians, have told a lie at sometime. As Paul wrote to the Romans in 3:4: “yea, let God be true, but every man a liar; as it is written, That Thou mightest be justified in Thy sayings, and mightest overcome when Thou art judged”. Yet “God, That cannot lie” has caused the gospel to be preached to the world, even though all men are spiritually Cretian by nature.

In Romans 3:4 Paul quoted from Psalm 51:4: “Against Thee, Thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Thy sight: that Thou mightest be justified when Thou speakest, and be clear when Thou judgest”. This verse shows that, when man acknowledges his sin, God’s righteousness is manifested in judgement.

The importance of Psalm 51 for the principles spoken of by Paul in Titus is shown where, in one sentence, Paul uses a range of words found in the psalm: “not by works of *righteousness* which we

have done, but *according to His mercy* He saved us, by the *washing* of regeneration, and *renewing* of the *Holy Spirit*” (Tit. 3:5). The phrase “according to His mercy” has the same meaning as where David says, “according to Thy lovingkindness” (Ps. 51:1). The word “washing” matches the word “wash”, which is used twice in the psalm. It is found firstly in the statement, “Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity” (v. 2), and secondly when David says, “wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow” (v. 7). The psalmist later says, “Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from Thy presence; and take not Thy holy spirit from me” (vv. 10,11). Of these words, “renew” and “holy spirit” are found in Titus 3:5. Finally, Paul mentions “righteousness”, and this occurs twice in the psalm (vv. 14,19).

### Circumcision

Paul states, “For there are many unruly and vain talkers and deceivers, specially they of the circumcision” (Tit. 1:10). This is the only mention of circumcision in the epistle, and here it is used to refer to a group of people for whom circumcision was just one aspect of their beliefs. However, as will be seen in this and the following section, circumcision is not simply mentioned in passing, it is an important part of the background to the epistle.

Crete is known as Caphtor in the Old Testament and it is associated with the Philistines, for Amos says that God had brought “the Philistines from Caphtor” (9:7). One of the defining characteristics of the Philistines in Scripture is that they were “uncircumcised”. For example, concerning Samson we read, “Then his father and his mother said unto him, Is there never a woman among the daughters of thy brethren, or among all my people, that thou goest to take a wife of the uncircumcised Philistines? And Samson said unto his father, Get her for me; for she pleaseth me well” (Judg. 14:3; cf. 15:18; 1 Sam. 14:6; 17:26,36; 31:4; 2 Sam. 1:20; 1 Chron. 10:4). Crete is the country from where the archetypal uncircumcised came.

When writing to the Galatians, Paul gives the example of Titus to show that there was no need for a believer to be circumcised: "But neither Titus, who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised" (Gal. 2:3).

Of the "unruly and vain talkers and deceivers", which included those of the circumcision, Paul commands Titus, "Wherefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith" (Tit. 1:13). The Greek word translated "sharply", according to Strong, is from a word meaning 'to cut'. In English we might say to rebuke sharply is to make a *cutting remark*.

The cutting remark, however, ironically leads to the person becoming "sound" or *whole*. This contrasts with circumcision, and some words by the Lord Jesus Christ help to show the significance of this. When Christ had healed the impotent man he was persecuted by the Jews because he had healed him on the sabbath day. He answered them by saying, "If a man on the sabbath day receive circumcision, that the law of Moses should not be broken; are ye angry at me, because I have made a man every whit whole on the sabbath day?" (Jno. 7:23). They were prepared to carry out

circumcision, which led to the wounding of the flesh, even on the sabbath. By contrast, Christ had made someone whole or healthy on the sabbath.

The command to "rebuke them sharply" is an allusion to circumcision. This cutting, however, if done in a Christlike spirit, would not lead to wounding but to the person becoming sound and healthy.

### Genesis 34

As the [table](#) shows, the Epistle to Titus draws heavily on Genesis 34. This chapter concerns the revenge taken upon the inhabitants of Shechem by the sons of Jacob following the defilement of Dinah by Shechem. The parallel between the two passages centres around the deceitful insistence on circumcision. The sons of Jacob "answered Shechem and Hamor his father deceitfully" (v. 13) and said, "If ye will be as we be, that every male of you be circumcised; then will we give our daughters unto you, and we will take your daughters to us, and we will dwell with you, and we will become one people" (vv. 15,16). They deceived Shechem and Hamor into thinking that circumcision would be of use. In the same way,

Genesis 34 and the Epistle to Titus		
Genesis 34		Titus
v. 1	"went out" "at home"	2:5
v. 13	"deceitfully" "deceivers"	1:10
v. 15	"as we . . . be circumcised" "they of the circumcision"	1:10
v. 25	"came upon the city boldly, and slew all the males" "ordain elders in every city"  "boldly" (cf. Ps. 16:9, "hope") "hope"  "and slew" "no striker" "no brawlers"	1:5  1:2; 3:7  1:7 3:2
v. 29	"all their wealth . . . spoiled even all that was in the house" "subvert whole houses . . . for filthy lucre's sake"	1:11
v. 30	"to make me to stink among the inhabitants of the land" "that he that is of the contrary part may be ashamed, having no evil thing to say of you"	2:8

in Crete there were “deceivers, specially they of the circumcision”, who insisted that circumcision was necessary for salvation.

The terrible events of Genesis 34 occurred because Dinah “went out to see the daughters of the land” (v. 1). Paul says that young women ought “to be discreet, chaste, keepers at home” (Tit. 2:5). If Dinah had focused on the things needing to be done at her home she would have remained chaste and undefiled by the world.

When they had been circumcised we read, “And it came to pass on the third day, when they were sore, that two of the sons of Jacob, Simeon and Levi, Dinah’s brethren, took each man his sword, and came upon the city boldly, and slew all the males” (Gen. 34:25). The attack on the city contrasts with the way Titus had been left in Crete to “ordain elders in every city” (Tit. 1:5). Life in the ecclesia was to be ordered and peaceful. By slaying all the inhabitants of the city, the sons of Jacob had been strikers and brawlers, but the Cretians were to forsake such behaviour (1:7; 3:2).

The phrase “hope of eternal life” is peculiar to Titus and occurs twice in the epistle (1:2; 3:7). The repetition of this phrase emphasises the surety of the hope, made sure because the hope is based on promises made by “God, That cannot lie”. This link between hope and God not lying is shown in Hebrews 6:18: “that by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us”.

At first, hope might not seem to be present in Genesis 34, but in verse 25 the word translated “boldly” can have this sense. The Hebrew word is usually translated “safely” (for example, Ezekiel 38:8) but is translated “hope” once, in Psalm 16:9: “Therefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoiceth: my flesh also shall rest in hope”. That the sense of hope is correct here is shown by the inspired translation in Acts 2:26. The sons of Jacob went boldly and hopefully, but their hope was based on confidence in the flesh. In the same way, those of the circumcision in Crete based their hope on the things of the flesh.

The sons of Jacob took “all their wealth, and all their little ones, and their wives took they captive, and spoiled even all that was in the house” (Gen. 34:29). Those who were of the circumcision also sought wealth and also targeted people in their homes: “whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole houses, teaching things which they ought not, for filthy lucre’s sake” (Tit. 1:11).

After the sons of Jacob had attacked the city, it is written, “And Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, Ye have troubled me to make me to stink among the inhabitants of the land, among the Canaanites and the Perizzites” (Gen. 34:30). Paul commanded the young men that all things should be done with “sound speech, that cannot be condemned; that he that is of the contrary part may be ashamed, having no evil thing to say of you” (Tit. 2:8). Paul was trying to ensure that the believers did not, to use the language of Genesis 34, cause the ecclesia “to stink among the inhabitants” of Crete.

### Genesis 37

As well as being liars, the Cretians were also known for being “evil beasts,<sup>1</sup> slow bellies” (Tit. 1:12). The first occasion where an “evil beast” is mentioned in Scripture is in Genesis 37. It concerns the lie with which the sons of Jacob planned to deceive their father following the slaying of Joseph: “Come now therefore, and let us slay him, and cast him into some pit, and we will say, Some evil beast hath devoured him: and we shall see what will become of his dreams” (v. 20). There was no actual evil beast, yet in a sense the sons of Joseph were evil beasts. This, combined with the lie they told their father, made them like the Cretians.

The Cretians were also “slow bellies” (Tit. 1:12). That is, they were idle gluttons. These words also aptly describe the brethren of Joseph. When Joseph was placed in the pit the brethren later commented that “we saw the anguish of his soul, when he besought us, and we would not hear” (Gen. 42:21). They should have come to their senses and released Joseph. Instead, “they sat down to eat bread” (37:25). Truly, they were “slow bellies”.

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1. In James 3:7 “every kind of beasts” is said to have been “tamed”. The man called Legion could not be tamed (Mk. 5:4), therefore he was worse than the most evil beast. When Christ healed him he was found “in his right mind” (v. 15). To be in one’s “right mind” is therefore opposite to being an evil beast. The Greek word translated by this phrase is translated “sober minded” in Titus 2:6. Related Greek words occur several times in Titus and are a major theme of the epistle: “sober” (1:8), “temperate” (2:2), “sober” (v. 4), “discreet” (v. 5), “soberly” (v. 12). See Carr, R. (1978), “‘Sober’ in Titus”, *Testimony*, Aug., pp. 271-4. The emphasis on being sober-minded in Titus opposes the tendency of Cretians to be “evil beasts”. (Our Australia Editor suggests readers would profit from reading Brother L. G. Sargent’s article, “A sound mind”, which provides the title for a collection of his articles published by the Christadelphian in 1971.—T.B.)

The brethren of Joseph “hated him” (v. 4) and “hated him yet the more” (v. 8). This hatred was fuelled by envy: “his brethren envied him” (v. 11). Hatred and envy were two of the things that characterised the Cretians before they were baptized: “For we ourselves also were sometimes foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving divers lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful, and hating one another” (Tit. 3:3). The example of Joseph’s brethren provided them with a warning of the type of behaviour they were to avoid.

Given the parallels with Genesis 37, the exhortation for young men is seen in a new light when applied to Joseph: “Young men likewise exhort to be sober minded. In all things shewing thyself a pattern of good works: in doctrine shewing uncorruptness, gravity, sincerity, sound speech, that cannot be condemned; that he that is of the contrary part may be ashamed, having no evil thing to say of you” (Tit. 2:6-8). It is often noted that no sin is recorded of Joseph. Truly, he is presented as “a pattern of good works” of whom there is “no evil thing to say”.