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# ‘As a Miscarriage’. The Meaning and Function of the Metaphor in 1 Cor 15:1-11 in Light of Num 12:12 (LXX)

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**SUMMARY:** On the basis of the Greek text of Num 12:12 and of the use which Philo makes of it in the first book of his *Allegories of the Laws* (176) the present article proposes a new understanding of the metaphor of miscarriage (ἔκτρωμα): a being not only born dead and/or incapable of living, but also deadly. In this double meaning the term utilized by Paul in 1 Cor 15:8 describes the pre-Christian past of the Apostle as both lacking life (as being without Christ) and lethal (as a persecutor of the church of God). The metaphor at the same time, constitutes the starting point of the transformation which occurred in Paul thanks to the apparition of the Risen One: from being dead to alive, and from deadly to being a bearer of life (vv. 9-10). Such a metamorphosis is tangible proof of the power of the Risen One, who even now transforms the lives of his own, and *eo ipso* also the guarantee of final resurrection, when the good work already begun will be brought to its completion (cf. Phil 1:6).

**KEYWORDS:** New Testament, Paul, 1 Corinthians, metaphor, miscarriage

**SŁOWA KLUCZE:** Nowy Testament, św. Paweł, 1. List do Koryntian, metafora, poronienie

In the history of exegesis the confession of the Apostle of the Gentiles in 1 Cor 15:8: ἔσχατον δὲ πάντων ὡσπερὶ τῷ ἐκτρώματι ὄφθη κάμοί, is commonly considered a *crux interpretum*, above all because of its metaphorical use of a rare term, ἔκτρωμα, whose precise sense continues to elude scholars. In recent decades this verse, and the term itself, have become the object of numerous studies. And yet, even today, the concluding words of the article by G.W.E. Nickelsburg<sup>1</sup> in 1986, repeated ten years later by H.W. Hollander and G.E. Van der Hout, at the end of their *status quaestionis*, “No single interpretation has commanded a consensus”<sup>2</sup>, remain true.

1 “An Ektroma, Though Appointed from the Womb: Paul’s Apostolic Self-Description in 1 Corinthians 15 and Galatians 1”, *HThR* 71 (1986), 200.

2 “The Apostle Paul Calling Himself an Abortion: 1 Cor. 15:8 within the Context of 1 Cor. 15:8-10”, *NT* 38 (1996), 229.

The diversity of the translations of ἔκτρομα found in the commentaries and in modern editions of the Bible does not depend so much on the ambiguity or on the rich semantics of the term itself, but rather reflects the profound lack of certainty on the part of scholars regarding the meaning and connotations which should be attributed to the term as it is used by the Apostle. Indeed, the major difficulty with the text seems to consist in the hiatus which exists between the principal lexical meanings of ἔκτρομα and that which the term seems to assume in the Pauline text. The present study will propose a new understanding of ἔκτρομα based on the Greek version of Num 12:12 and on the figurative use the word had assumed at the time of the Apostle, and, in light of this discovery, it will offer a reading of Paul's confession in 1 Cor 15:8 which seems more consonant with its immediate context.

## I. Ἐκτρομα in Num 12:12 (LXX)

The text of the verse in question, in its Greek version, is as follows:

γένηται μὴ ὡσεὶ ἴσον θανάτῳ ὡσεὶ ἔκτρομα ἐκπορευόμενον ἐκ μήτρας μητρὸς καὶ κατεσθίει τὸ ἥμισυ τῶν σαρκῶν αὐτῆς.

In the *Biblia Hebraica* it belongs to a collection of eighteen cases of *tiqqune sofrim* which, for some ideological reasons, propose the following reading, slightly different from the original<sup>3</sup>:

אל־נָא תְהִי כְמֹת אִשָּׁר בְּצֵאתוֹ מִרְחֹם אִמּוֹ וַיֹּאכֶל חֲצִי בְשָׂרוֹ

Even a rapid glance reveals that the Greek text is notably longer (by a third) and that it differs from the Hebrew in not a few points.<sup>4</sup> Let us look at these differences a little more closely.

### I.1. The text and its different translations

With respect to the Masoretic text, the Greek Bible attenuates כְּמֹת with ὡσεὶ ἴσον θανάτῳ, thus excluding a *tout court* identification of Mary with a corpse. Nevertheless, ἴσον θανάτῳ, unlike מֹת of the Hebrew text, does

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion about the character of the corrections of the scribes (whether an emanation was carried out, or rather a return to the original) cf. I. Yeivin, *Introduction to the Tiberian Masorah* (Sheffield 1980), 49-52.

<sup>4</sup> A summary presentation of the differences is to be found in the notes of G. Dorival in *La Bible d'Alexandrie. Les Nombres* (Paris 1994), 86 and 304-305.

not simply say “similar to a dead person” or “similar to a corpse”, a version which would require in the Greek something like ἴσον νεκρῶ, or ἴσον τεθνηκότι, but rather “similar to death” (ἴσον θανάτῳ), a translation which at the very least could mean “similar to a corpse”<sup>5</sup>. This nonetheless, remains open to another, much more dramatic, understanding: “similar to that which constitutes mortal danger”, “similar to that which causes death”<sup>6</sup>. The phrase which follows, if understood in the sense of “miscarriage which consumes half of the flesh of its mother”, surely strengthens the second possibility.

The addition of ὡσεὶ ἔκτρομα clarifies, in fact, what type of (danger of) death we are dealing with: a detail formally absent from the Hebrew text<sup>7</sup>, and yet implicitly present; because the immediate context, in which the מֵת coming out of the mother’s womb is spoken of, makes the noun assume the connotation of a baby born dead<sup>8</sup>. This fact becomes explicit in many modern translations which, in place of “a dead person”, speak of “one stillborn” (NRS); “I’avorton” (FJB); “some monster” (NJB); “l’enfant mort-né” (TOB); “ein Totgeborenes” (LUT); “eine Totgeburt” (EIN); “il bambino nato morto” (CEI 2008). A clear mention of a dead baby, or one which dies at the moment of birth, is found, instead, in the Palestinian Targum. The Fragmentary Targum speaks, indeed, of “Miriam our leprous sister, impure in her tent, as if dead (כַּמֵּיִתָּה), like the baby (וּלְדָא) which has been in the bowels of its mother for nine months but, when the time comes to come out of its mother’s womb, half of its flesh is eaten away”. Even more distressing for the crudeness of its details is the paraphrase offered by Pseudo-Jonathan: “May Miriam our sister not be leprous, impure in her tent, as if dead (כַּמֵּיִתָּה) which is like the baby (לְוִלְדָא) which is made complete in the bowels of its mother in nine months, but when the time comes to come into the world then half of its flesh is eaten away ... and the baby dies while the midwife

5 Such a (rare) meaning of the noun is found, for example, in *Anthologia Palatina*, 9.439 (Crinagoras Epigrammaticus, I a. C./1 d.C.) and (probably) in the Roman tomb inscriptions and in the lists of dead soldiers. For more details cf. J.H. Moulton and G. Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament Illustrated from the Papyri and Other Non-Literary Sources* (Grand Rapids, MI 1985), 283.

6 Cf. the entry “θάνατος” in *BDAG*, 443 (1c and 3) and W. Schmithals, “θάνατος”, *NIDNTT*, I, 430-441, in particular 430: “Thanatos means the act of dying or the state of death. But it is also used of mortal danger, the manner of death, and the death penalty”. It is noteworthy that the only other occurrence of the expression ἴσον θανάτῳ in the Bible of the LXX (Prov 25:10) presupposes exactly this meaning: “lest your friend reproach you and your quarrel and enmity will not end but will be tantamount to death.”

7 This also happens in the Aramaic paraphrase of the Targum of Onkelos, which speaks only of “this dead flesh of hers” (בְּסֵרָא מֵיִתָּה הָרִין דְּבֵהָ).

8 Cf. B.A. Levine, *Numbers 1-20* (AncB 4; New Haven – London 1993), 332.

makes it come out after having ripped it to pieces”. The version of Neofiti, on the other hand, is more sober: “When the time arrives to give birth the baby is dead in her womb”.

In the Hebrew text the half-devoured body is qualified by the masculine pronoun (הַצֵּי בְּשָׂרוֹ) and therefore, without a doubt, refers to the body of an abortion. The same observation is also true for the paraphrases of Pseudo-Jonathan and the Fragmentary Targum, where “the flesh half-eaten away” is that of a baby born dead. In the Greek translation of the LXX we find, instead, the expression τὸ ἥμισυ τῶν σαρκῶν αὐτῆς, in which the feminine pronoun necessarily requires a feminine noun as its referent and therefore cannot refer to ἔκτρομα. The Greek text also leaves open the question of the subject of the verb κατεσθίει<sup>9</sup>: although, from the syntactic point of view, the most natural subject would seem to be ἔκτρομα, this is not, however, the only possible solution and, in fact, in exegetical research others have been proposed, to which we will return shortly.

It is useful, moreover, to note that the above-mentioned divergences between the Masoretic text and that of the LXX correspond, in some way, to the syntactical and ideological difficulties of the Hebrew text, already noted in antiquity, as indicated in the two *tiqqune sof<sup>r</sup>rim* of the verse, which present אָמְנוּ and בְּשָׂרוֹ as the preferable reading in place of the original אִמְנוּ and בְּשָׂרָהּ. The ancient scribes, changing the suffixes of the first person plural to those of the third singular, tried to avoid what could be considered a blasphemy against Moses and his family. Indeed, the corrected text refers no longer to Iochebed, mother of Aaron, Moses and Mary, but to the mother and to the family of any dead person<sup>10</sup>. What the *sof<sup>r</sup>rim* achieved, thanks to the substitution of the pronouns, was obtained in the ancient Greek translation by suppressing the pronoun in the first case (ἐκ μήτρας μητρὸς without αὐτῆς) and changing it to the third person singular feminine in the second (τῶν σαρκῶν αὐτῆς). The absence of the possessive in the expression “from the womb of a mother”, indeed, generalizes the meaning in such a way that it no longer refers to the mother of Moses and Miriam, but rather to any mother. The same can be said of the expression τῶν σαρκῶν αὐτῆς which receives its general meaning thanks to the possessive pronoun, which not only does not refer to the mother of Moses and Miriam, but also cannot refer to Miriam

<sup>9</sup> In the Hebrew text, on the contrary, the passive form אִכְלָהּ (‘‘has been devoured’’) clearly refers to the half-body of the fetus.

<sup>10</sup> On the subject of corrections made by the scribes in general and to those found in Num 12:12 cf. S. Levin, ‘‘An Unattested ‘Scribal Correction’ in Numbers 26,59’’, *Bib* 71/1 (1990), 25-33, in particular 26-27.

herself, who would otherwise have had to be devouring herself<sup>11</sup>. The only possible reference of the pronoun remains, in fact, any μήτηρ whatever, (from the expression ἐκ μήτρας μητρὸς), which, in the immediate context, represents additionally the feminine noun nearest to the pronoun.

## 1.2. Ambiguity in the Greek text?

The uncertainty about the subject of the verb κατεσθίει, of which we have spoken above, is only the tip of the iceberg of the problems raised by the modern translations of the Septuagint version of the text of Num 12:12. Independently of the fact that it strays considerably from the Hebrew original, the Greek text is, according to the authors, also intrinsically ambiguous and, accordingly, can be understood in a different manner. Such a diversity of interpretations arises principally from the different subjects attributed to the verbs γένηται and κατεσθίει.

In theory, the initial verb γένηται could have as a subject ὡσεὶ ἴσον θανάτῳ ὡσεὶ ἔκτρομα; and thus the meaning of the sentence would be the following: "May there not be [for Miriam] anything like death, like a miscarriage". One could also suppose that the subject is sin, of which the preceding verse speaks. The text would then say: "May [sin (ἁμαρτία)] not be for her anything equal to death, like a miscarriage". Finally, it could also be asserted that the subject of the verb is Miriam herself; a decision shared by many modern translations<sup>12</sup>, and even more plausible in view of its conforming to the original Hebrew, corresponding moreover to the more ancient translations and interpretations (all the Targumim, Philo and Origen<sup>13</sup>).

As far as the subject of κατεσθίει is concerned, on the other hand, the choice oscillates among sin (as Origen proposes in his homilies on Numbers), leprosy (for example in the English translation of Brenton<sup>14</sup> and the French of G. Dorival) and, finally, miscarriage itself. Faced with these possibilities, it is worth noting that only the latter solution interprets the text in its entirety. Regarding the other two, the first is forced to bring in the supposed subject from the preceding sentence, yet ἁμαρτία does not appear there in the

<sup>11</sup> Pace G. Dorival (*Les Nombres*, 305), according to whom the feminine possessive of the second expression regards Miriam (inasmuch as at the level of the comparison, she would be an abortion), but not the family of Moses.

<sup>12</sup> Thus the translation by, for example, A. Pietersma and B.G. Wright, eds., *A New English Translation of the Septuagint and the Other Greek Translations Traditionally Included under that Title* (New York – Oxford 2007), 121; Dorival, *Les Nombres*, 304-305.

<sup>13</sup> *Homiliae in Numeros*, 7,3 (PG XII, coll. 614-615).

<sup>14</sup> *The Septuagint with Apocrypha. Greek and English* (Peabody, MA 1998 [1851]), 191.

nominative. The second, on the contrary, must supply the subject *ad sensum*. In fact, in this context leprosy is not mentioned, but only Miriam “having become leprous (λεπρῶσα) as the snow” (v. 10). Besides not requiring any addition to the text to make it understandable, the third solution also has the advantage of being the only one known and used by Philo in his *Legum allegoriarum* (1:76).

We can also note that, in such a case, the fact that the miscarriage “devours half of the flesh of the mother” constitutes one of its principal and constant characteristics. Indeed, not only is κατεσθίει the only finite verb of the sentence, which, as such, moves the participle ἐκπορευόμενον ἐκ μήτρας μητρός into the background, but it also must be noted that the second part of the verse begins with an adverbial καί, which attributes notable emphasis to that which follows (and that can be rendered as “and even devours...”). The fact that we are dealing with a permanent effect is shown by the use of the present, which in the case of Num 12:12 has all of the characteristics of the genomic and proverbial present<sup>15</sup>.

From the observations just made it is easy to become aware that the presumed intrinsic ambiguity of the Greek text of Num 12:12 does not arise from its complicated syntax or from its semantics, but rather from the attempts that various readers have made to give the whole text a different sense from the immediate one, one which is at least not unusual or closer to the original Hebrew. However, the fact that Philo, in his rendering of the verse, does not seem to share the concerns of both modern and ancient translators and does not turn to modifications or importations to make it comprehensible, should make us cautious when faced with similar manipulations. How, then, does the Alexandrian philosopher understand our verse?

### 1.3. Num 12:12 (LXX) in the usage of Philo

The Greek text of Num 12:12 is cited by Philo in the first book of the *Allegories of the Laws*, in his symbolic exposition of the five rivers irrigating Eden (Gen 2:10-14). The name of the first, Pison (= “the changing nature of the mouth”), offers the Alexandrian the opportunity to explain that true wisdom concerns not the speaking but the acting, and involves deeds and good actions. The significance of the name of the region through which the river runs (Evila = “she who has labor pains”) presents, on the contrary,

<sup>15</sup> On this subject see B.M. Fanning, *Verbal Aspects in New Testament Greek* (Oxford 1990), 208-217.

a starting point for reflecting on the foolishness which, coming to grips with impossible loves (riches, fame, pleasure), lives on in labor pains and yet never gives birth. Indeed:

The soul of the worthless man is not calculated by nature to bring anything to perfection which is likely to live (οὐ γὰρ πέφυκε γόνιμον οὐδὲν τελεσφορεῖν). But everything which it appears to bring forth is found to be abortive and premature children (ἀμβλωθρίδια εὗρίσκειται καὶ ἔκτρώματα), eating up the half of its flesh, and being like a death of the soul (ἴσα θανάτῳ ψυχικῷ). On which account that holy word Aaron entreats the pious Moses, who was beloved by God, to heal the leprosy of Miriam, in order that her soul might not be occupied in the labor of bringing forth evil things. And in consequence he says: “Let her not become like unto death, as an abortion proceeding out of the womb of her mother, and devouring the half of her flesh (μὴ γένηται ὡς ἴσον θανάτῳ, ὡς ἔκτρωμα ἐκπορευόμενον ἐκ μήτρας μητρός, καὶ κατεσθίει τὸ ἥμισυ τῶν σαρκῶν αὐτῆς)”<sup>16</sup>.

Philo not only cites *verbatim* the text of Num 12:12 in the concluding section of his commentary, but also brings into the body of his own text, paraphrasing, the individual elements of the Biblical verse. These paraphrases are precisely what allows us to discover how Num 12:12 was interpreted by the great Alexandrian. Let us look at them in greater detail.

First of all, in place of the ἔκτρωμα of Num 12:12 we find the expression ἀμβλωθρίδια καὶ ἔκτρώματα, a pair which our translation renders as “miscarriages and premature children”, supported by two other places where Philo speaks of spiritual childbirths, placing next to ἀμβλωθρίδια the noun ἡλιτόμηνα, of which the aspect of prematurity is already present in the form of the word itself (ἡλιτον, μήν = which has missed the proper month)<sup>17</sup>. The substitution of the usual ἡλιτόμηνα with ἔκτρωμα in the case of LA 1:76 is justified by Philo’s intention of using the Biblical citation’s own vocabulary, and represents a clear indication that, from the very beginning, the reasoning of the philosopher is informed not only by the primary text of reference (Gen 2:10-14), but also, and especially, by the secondary one (Num 12:12).

In all Philo’s three texts the common meaning of the second nouns (ἡλιτόμηνα and ἔκτρωμα) is that of a pregnancy that does not come to term. This does not exclude, however – in fact it requires – that it be a question of a baby incapable of living, i. e. already deprived of life in the womb of the mother, or dead at the moment of birth<sup>18</sup>. The death of the fetus, in

<sup>16</sup> The Greek text of the works of Philo according to the edition of F. H. Colson and G. H. Whitaker, eds., *Philo*, 12 vols. (LCL; London 1929-1953). The English translation of C.D. Yonge, *The Works of Philo*. Complete and Unabridged (Hendrickson; Peabody, MA 1993).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. *Deus*, 14 (ἡλιτόμηνα καὶ ἀμβλωθρίδια τὰ πλεῖστα) e *Migrat.*, 33 (τὰ πολλὰ ἀμβλωθρίδια, ἡλιτόμηνα).

<sup>18</sup> Cf. the definition of ἔκτρωμα given by Hesychius: παιδίον νεκρὸν ἄωρον ἐκβολὴ γυναικός.

fact, is presupposed in all the occurrences of ἔκτρομα in the LXX<sup>19</sup> and in the Jewish revisions of the same<sup>20</sup>. The idea of the lack of life is equally required by the contexts in which Philo uses the terms. The soul in labor pains in *LA* 1:76 is, in reality, incapable of generating offspring and only gives the impression of doing so; in *Migrat.*, 34 it has “the uterus closed by God”, while in *Deus*, 14, after all attempts it “gives in, lets its arms fall in weakness and abandons the fight”.

The preference which Philo in *LA* 1:76 gives to ἔκτρομα with respect to the more frequent ἡλιτόμηνα is not explained, however, beginning with that which the two nouns have in common – namely, the idea of a fetus that has not come to term, and thus already dead. If Philo chooses ἔκτρομα, he does it because the term has a supplementary connotation which emerges thanks to the two phrases which subsequently qualify it: κατεσθίοντα τὸ ἥμισυ τῶν σαρκῶν αὐτῆς and ἴσα θανάτῳ ψυχικῷ. The syntax, in the case of the first phrase, definitively resolves the doubts concerning the subject which devours half of the flesh and the person to whom the latter belongs. The second phrase, on the other hand, explains the meaning of the whole picture.

In fact, the agreement in gender, number and case (ἐκτρόματα κατεσθίοντα) makes the miscarriage the only possible reference of κατεσθίοντα. For Philo, therefore, it is not leprosy or sin which devours the flesh, but the miscarriage itself. Furthermore, it is not a question of an isolated, sporadic action, but – as the tense of the participle indicates – of a *modus operandi* which constitutes a constant characteristic of a miscarriage. Analogously, the problem of to whom the direct object of the verb pertains is also resolved: even though it might seem bizarre, the half-devoured flesh is that of the person giving birth, that is, of the soul of the fool (ἡ τοῦ φαύλου ψυχή), which is the only feminine noun in the whole sentence that can be the point of reference of the possessive pronoun αὐτῆς.

Finally, the sense of the entire unit is also given. The last piece, that says ἴσα θανάτῳ ψυχικῷ, explains that the preceding image of the miscarriage that devours half of the flesh of its mother served to describe the death brought to the insensitive soul by the premature fruits that it sought to bring to life. The figurative use which Philo makes of the text of Num 12:12 thus takes advantage of all of the characteristics of miscarriage brought to light by the Biblical text referred to: ἔκτρομα means not only “born dead” or

<sup>19</sup> Num 12:12; Job 3:16 (“like children who have never seen the light”); Qoh 6:3.

<sup>20</sup> Ps 57(58):1 in Aquila, Theodotion and Symmachus (“as a snail which melts, as a miscarriage of a woman may they never see the sun!”); Isa 14:19 in Symmachus (“you have been thrown out of your tomb, like a despicable sapling”).

“incapable of living”, but also “that which brings death”, i. e. “something deadly”, “something lethal”. In fact, in the case of both Philo’s text and that of the Bible, the second characteristic seems to stand out even more. Indeed, in Num 12:12 (LXX) the image of the miscarriage which devours serves to illustrate in what sense Miriam has become “similar to death” (not to a dead person!), while in Philo the final phrase “like the death of the soul” explains the sense of the metaphor of the miscarriages which devour the flesh.

Coming to the end of these semantic analyses, it is useful to note that the idea of the lethal nature of miscarriage is not only a literary fact, but has a solid base in the daily experience of the ancient world. Childbirth, even without complications, was at that time, and continued to be until a few centuries ago, a very risky event. In the Mediterranean of the iron age less than half the children survived, and the danger faced by women was so real as to make the average length of their life 25 per cent less than that of men (10 years)<sup>21</sup>. Indeed, according to inscriptions on Greek and Jewish tombs, a notable percentage of female deaths was imputed precisely to childbirth<sup>22</sup>. It is not by accident, therefore, that in Greek mythology the same gods who were present at childbirth (the Moiras or Parcae, the goddesses of fate, and Ananke with Eileithyia) also led dead women to Hades. In such a context, to interpret ἐκτρώμα as “one not only born without life but also deadly” did not surprise anyone. What light does this meaning cast on the interpretation of 1 Cor 15:8?

## 2. Paul as miscarriage in 1 Cor 15:8

It is obviously not possible, nor is it necessary, to offer in this space the whole history of the exegesis of 1 Cor 15:8, also because, in recent times, excellent reconstructions of the *status quaestionis* have been proposed<sup>23</sup>. We would like to present critically here only the principal solutions put forth by the exegetical research, in order to better frame our own.

21 More detailed information and ample bibliography are found in J.R. Ebeling, *Women’s Lives in Biblical Times* (London – New York 2010), 101-105 and C.D. Bergmann, *Childbirth as a Metaphor for Crisis. Evidence from the Ancient Near East, the Hebrew Bible, and 1QH XI, 1-18* (Berlin – New York 2008), 218-222.

22 For numerous examples and for bibliographical references see G. Bertram, “ὄδῖν, ὄδῖνω”, *TDNT*, IX, 668 and notes 14, 15, 16 and 17.

23 See for example M.W. Mitchell, “Reexamining the ‘Aborted Apostle’. An Exploration of Paul’s Self-Description in 1 Corinthians 15.8”, *JSNT* 25 (2002-2003), 470-473 and Hollander and Van der Hout, “The Apostle Paul Calling Himself an Abortus”, 224-227.

## 2.1. Some previous opinions

The most ancient explanation, and the most frequent, of the sense of the miscarriage metaphor in 1 Cor 15:8 takes as its point of departure the premature birth of the fetus, applying this characteristic to the call of the Apostle which happened in the neighborhood of Damascus. Some link the image to (1) the status of the Apostle at the moment of the calling (= in contrast to the other apostles, Paul, as a matter of fact, would have been born as an apostle prematurely, without the period of gestation from which the others had benefited)<sup>24</sup>. Others, instead, link it to (2) the modality of his vocation (= being suddenly and violently ripped away from his previous life in order to be immersed in the life of Christ). The principal weakness of the second hypothesis lies in the fact that the term in question does not refer to the act of aborting, and thus contemplates not the violent and sudden character of the event, but rather the result of the process<sup>25</sup>. Both of these, on the other hand, limiting the meaning of miscarriage to premature birth, are guilty of reductionism: the prematurity is none other than the *specific difference* which allows one to distinguish miscarriage from other deaths, while being precisely deprived of life or incapable of living constitutes the *genus* of the *definiendum*. A similar criticism should also be applied to the variant of the first hypothesis which, instead of speaking of a premature birth, proposes (3) “an irregular birth” or rather “a birth outside of the proper time”, intending to refer to the fact that Saul was called belatedly, as the last one of all, beyond the maximum time<sup>26</sup>. Besides forgetting the principal characteristic of a miscarriage, i. e. the fact that it is a dead being, it also presupposes a particularity of ἔκτρωμα which finds no other confirmation in the literature of that time, namely being born *belatedly*. The clarity and the univocality of the definition of the term given by Hesychius; παιδίον νεκρὸν ἄωρον, ἐκβολή

24 This is an hypothesis particularly dear to T. Boman, “Paulus abortivus (1 Kor 15,8)”, *ST* 18 (1964), 46-50, who translates ἔκτρωμα with “embryo”. Before him, this was also held as one of the two possibilities by J. Munck, “Paulus Tanquam Abortivus (1 Kor 15:8)”, A.J.B. Higgins, ed., *New Testament Essays. Studies in Memory of Thomas Manson 1893–1958* (Manchester 1959) 180-193; recently (1986) proposed again by Nickelsburg, “An Ektroma, Though Appointed from the Womb”.

25 Thus writes, correctly, A. Fridrichsen, “Paulus abortivus. Zu 1 Kor 15,8”, A. Boëthius et al., eds., *Symbolae philologicae O. A. Danielsson octogenario dicatae* (Uppsala 1932), 82-83, with a list of abundant ancient and modern commentators who “diesen Fehler machen” (82).

26 Also J. Schneider, “ἔκτρωμα”, *TDNT*, II, 465-467 and W. Schrage, *Der Erste Brief an die Korinther* (Düsseldorf – Neukirchen 2001), IV, 99. Regarding the fact that the pre-Christian Paul was obstinately opposed to his own vocation, see also M. Schaefer, “Paulus ‘Fehlgeburt’ oder ‘unvernünftiges Kind’? Ein Interpretationsvorschlag zu 1 Kor 15,8”, *ZNW* 85/2 (1994), 207-217.

γυναικός (“a child prematurely dead, which has been expelled from the woman”), constitute insurmountable obstacle for this line of interpretation<sup>27</sup>.

Since the times of Adolf Harnack it has been proposed to understand ἔκτρομα as (4) a derogatory epithet hurled *in malam partem* against Paul by his adversaries with the explicit intention of denying him apostolic authority. He himself, on the contrary, after having astutely linked this insult to his pre-Christian past, would have turned it into evidence of the sovereign character of God's grace<sup>28</sup>. A variant of this hypothesis admits (5) the genuine use of the term by the Apostle as a devaluation of his own past and at the same time as an exaltation of the absolutely unmerited quality of God's action in regard to him: grace has been granted to one who by no right could have expected it<sup>29</sup>. Hypothesis (4) presupposes hostility in the relationship between the Corinthian community, or part of it, and Paul, that could be justified at the moment of the writing of 2 Cor, but certainly not in the situation in which he sends 1 Cor<sup>30</sup>. Both of these hypotheses also meet with notable difficulties in justifying the derogatory use of the term “miscarriage” which, it must be admitted, has such a connotation in modern languages, but which in the Bible and in Greco-Roman antiquity was always used in an “objective, factual, non-offensive” sense<sup>31</sup>.

The third avenue of interpretation, and perhaps the one most followed today, takes into consideration the *genus* of the definition of miscarriage, i. e. the fact that it deals with a being lacking life, a dead person. (6) Such an understanding of the metaphor applied to pre-Christian Paul presents him as a man spiritually dead, without life, and yet as one who, thanks to his encounter with the Risen Christ, has been made the beneficiary of a new life, begotten anew in Christ and, as such, constitutes a living wonder of the grace of God<sup>32</sup>. Although it might be attractive, this hypothesis has a serious

27 For other erroneous semantics of this type of solution cf. Mitchell, “Reexamining the ‘Aborted Apostle’”, 473-475.

28 “Die Verklärungsgeschichte Jesu, der Bericht des Paulus (1 Kor 15,3ff.) und die beiden Christusvisionen des Petrus” (SPAW.PH; Berlin 1922), 62-80. With its own characteristics but in the same line see Fridrichsen, “Paulus abortivus. Zu 1 Kor 15,8”, 78-85 (ἔκτρομα = an inhuman monster without real life; a diabolical creature), and G. Björck, “Nochmals Paulus abortivus”, *CNT* 3 (1938), 3-8 (= a monster; a joke of nature) and more recently G.D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI 1987), 732-734.

29 Hollander – Van der Hout, “The Apostle Paul Calling Himself an Abortus”, 236.

30 For more details, see J. Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul. A Critical Life* (Oxford – New York 1997), 273-290.

31 On this point cf. Boman, “Paulus abortivus (1 Kor 15,8)”, 47-48. The same observation is also true for the Latin “abortivus”.

32 Thus did Luther and Calvin interpret the metaphor. Recently this interpretation has found a benevolent reception in the commentaries of G. Barbaglio, *La Prima Lettera ai Corinzi* (Bologna 1995), 814-815; R. Fabris, *Prima Lettera ai Corinzi* (Milano 1999), 200-201; A.C. Thiselton,

defect: that of not knowing how to explain why, in wanting to say simply “dead”, the Apostle, instead of writing ὡςπερὶ τῷ νεκρῷ ὄφθη κἀμοί, (that is, instead of using the general term νεκρός, which has the precise meaning he needs, and which he himself frequently employs in similar contexts<sup>33</sup>), takes recourse to the specific type of death properly denoted by ἔκτρωμα. As with all the preceding hypotheses, even this solution does not overcome the gap between the lexical meanings of ἔκτρωμα and the one required by the Pauline text.

From this point of view, a proposal which appears much more promising is to understand the metaphor of 1 Cor 15:8 by taking as a *tertium comparationis* the fact that both Paul and the miscarriage “have been expelled and rejected”<sup>34</sup>. (7) Paul would have described with this term his status among the other apostles: his feeling targeted, different, eventually marginalized and forced to defend his own authority. The undoubted advantage of this proposal lies in the fact that it utilizes one of the meanings of ἔκτρωμα effectively suggested by both modern and ancient dictionaries: ἐκβολή γυναικός (Hesychius). And yet the fact that — according to 1 Cor 15:8 — Paul was ἔκτρωμα at the moment of the apparition of the Risen One, remains unexplained; he did not become so after having met the Lord, or even as a result of this encounter, as the hypothesis advanced by Mitchell would require. Further to its disfavor is the already mentioned observation that Paul’s need to defend his own status as apostle from the accusations of his opponents is typical of 2 Corinthians, while 1 Cor serenely presupposes that his status is readily accepted by the readers of the Letter<sup>35</sup>.

How do we, therefore, understand the Pauline text in light of the meaning of the term that we have found in Num 12:12 and in Philo’s *LA* 76?

## 2.2. *Paulus tamquam abortivus: dead and bringing death*

The first part of the present article has proposed that, both in the text of Num 12:12 (LXX) and in the use which Philo makes of it, ἔκτρωμα means a fetus not only deprived of life, but also deadly, one that is dead and, in addition,

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*The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI 2000), 1208-1210; J.A. Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven – London 2008), 552.

<sup>33</sup> Besides all the literary occurrences of the term in 1 Cor 15 see also its metaphorical usage in Rom 6:11, 13; 11:15 and Col 2:13.

<sup>34</sup> Mitchell, “Reexamining the ‘Aborted Apostle’”, 484.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. note 30 and the related paragraph.

is a bearer of death. Before applying such a meaning to the Pauline text, it may be useful to dissipate one possible doubt: is it indeed conceivable that Paul and his readers would be aware of Num 12:12 and/or the meaning of miscarriage present there? The response seems to us to be in the affirmative, and for good reason. First of all, in the case of Num 12:12 we are dealing with a book of the Pentateuch, with a well-known episode of the life of Moses, with the only occurrence of the term in the whole Torah and in addition with a much debated text<sup>36</sup>. Moreover, the fact that Philo alludes to the verse and cites it word for word as a confirmation of his reasoning — without worrying about indicating clearly that he is dealing with a text of the Bible — presupposes that it has a wide circulation. Finally, the lethal character of complicated childbirths being not only a literary given but a frequent fact of daily life, seems to guarantee the understanding of both distinctive marks of miscarriage (the inability to live and its deadly nature) also on the part of the readers of the Apostle<sup>37</sup>.

The absence of life and a deadly nature characterize, therefore, not only miscarriage, but also the pre-Christian past of Paul, evaluated as such from the point of view of his present in Christ. If, indeed, after Baptism all believers are “living after having been dead” (Rom 6:13), then Paul surely does not constitute an exception; and if the conversion of his compatriots will be no less than “life from the dead” (Rom 11:15)<sup>38</sup>, then how can it be denied that the passage from death to life has also characterized the conversion of Paul? If Christ “has become for us ... wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption” (1 Cor 1:30), and if for Paul “to live is Christ” (Phil 1:21), then neither wisdom, nor righteousness, nor sanctification, nor redemption exist unless they begin with Christ<sup>39</sup>; and without Him nothing remains except death<sup>40</sup>. It is perfectly understandable, then, that Paul would interpret the moment of his encounter with the Risen One as a passage from death

<sup>36</sup> As the two *tiqqune sofrim* of our verse indicate.

<sup>37</sup> Not to mention the possibility, in our view very plausible, that the metaphor of miscarriage might have been a part of the original evangelization of Corinth by Paul. This would also explain the article which accompanies the term in 1 Cor 15:8. In this regard, note the similarities between 1 Cor 15:8-10 and Gal 1:13, 23.

<sup>38</sup> In regards to the ambiguous character of the expression, with the preference for the spiritual meaning of “life in Christ”, cf. R. Penna, *Lettera ai Romani* (Bologna 2006), II, 355.

<sup>39</sup> On the metonymic character of the attributes of Christ in 1 Cor 1:30 and the universalizing character of substituting the concrete for the abstract, see A. Pitta, *Il paradosso della Croce. Saggi di teologia paolina* (Casale Monferrato 1998), 101-108.

<sup>40</sup> On the character of the life that Paul lives as not only earthly life oriented to Christ but also the life of faith, already received “by transfusion” from the Risen One and which will continue after death, cf. J.-N. Aletti, *Saint Paul. Épître aux Philippiens* (Paris 2005), 85-86.

to life, and that he would consider himself, before the appearance of Christ Risen, as a miscarriage, a dead fetus, lacking life and incapable of living<sup>41</sup>.

Such a state of spiritual death would not, however, constitute anything totally distinctive. The metaphor of miscarriage, interpreted only in the sense of life which is lacking, applies to every Christian and to every apostle. Why would Paul, at least apparently, reserve it then only for himself? The answer, in our view, is found in the second characteristic of ἔκτρωμα which we have found in Num 12:12 and in Philo: its lethal nature. If, before meeting the Risen Lord, the νεκροί were all the believers, it was only he, Paul who persecuted the Church of God and thereby sowed death<sup>42</sup> who, in comparison with others was hence not only dead but also deadly, and thus by both reasons similar to a miscarriage.

The metaphor employed describes the state of Paul at the moment of the apparition of the Risen One and, *eo ipso*, the starting point of a profound and radical change which happened in his life thanks to this encounter: he, who once was unable to live and was a persecutor of the church of God, was now able to work more than all the others. There was, then, a double transformation: from dead he became alive and from deadly he became a bearer of life. This double passage is tangible proof of the power of the Risen One, who already now allows those who belong to him to pass from death to life, but offers also a guarantee that a similar transition will also occur at the end of time. Verses 8-10 of chapter 15 thus do not intend simply to defend the apostolic authority of Paul, nor can they be read as eminent proof of his humility, and neither do they express a generic exaltation of the gratuitous nature of God's act.

The autobiography of the Apostle in verses 8-10 and the metaphor of the miscarriage therein, are not, therefore, found perchance at the center of the initial passage of the chapter dedicated to the resurrection. They constitute the chief part of the *semina probationum*, which is the principal function of the *narration* of 1 Cor 15:1-11 within the whole argument of 1 Cor 15. In recounting his unforeseen metamorphosis, initiated on the road to Damascus, Paul, in fact, does nothing less than plant the evidence to make plausible the final resurrection of believers. The latter will be brought to fulfillment

41 In this regard see the beautiful reflections of G. Sellin, *Der Streit um die Auferstehung der Toten. Eine religionsgeschichtliche und exegetische Untersuchung von 1 Korinther 15* (Göttingen 1986), 250.

42 Concerning the "mortal" character of this persecution see the expression of Paul himself in Gal 1:13, 24. The verb πορθέω which he uses there means "to attack and cause complete destruction", "to pillage", "to make havoc of", "to destroy", "to annihilate" (BDAG, 853) and indicates a violent way of proceeding, with "brutal use of force". For more details cf. M. Hengel, *Il Paolo precristiano* (Brescia 1992), 167-169.

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by the Lord himself, who even now realizes the transition from death to life and transforms sowers of death into bearers of life, because — to finish with one of the fundamental convictions of Paul himself — the act of God precisely “makes itself known by generosity and constancy, from the ἀρχή to the τέλος”<sup>43</sup>: “I am confident of this, that the one who began this good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Christ Jesus” (Phil 1:6).

<sup>43</sup> Aletti, *Épître aux Philippiens*, 46.