"Cretans are always liars . . .": Paul and Epimenides

Three New Testament passages contain citations from Greek pagan literature: Acts 17:28, 1 Corinthians 15:33, and Titus 1:12. Perhaps the most striking quotation occurs in Paul's letter to Titus and the young congregation on the island Crete. There we read, “Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.” I would like to discuss the source of the quotation and Paul's reason for including it in his letter. At first sight this expression seems to be a racist slur; a careful reading of the Letter to Titus will show that Paul employs the saying not to degrade the Cretan race but to emphasize his desire that the members of the church on Crete remain steadfast and true in refuting the false teachers and opposing the rebellious among them.

In his commentary on Titus 1:12 Jerome states that Paul is citing the Oracles (Chresmoi) of the Greek poet Epimenides. The "church father" Socrates (not to be confused with the philosopher of the same name) follows Jerome, and, judging from the footnote in the Greek edition of the New Testament, it seems that this reference is generally accepted. The RSV reports simply “Epimenides,” and this note is probably the most sound. For very little of Epimenides' writings survives, and what should be assigned to his authorship is debated.¹

In fact, we know very little about Epimenides at all. He was a semi-legendary figure who lived on Crete between the 7th and 5th centuries before Christ. He is traditionally described as a religious wonder-worker whose predictions came true with surprising accuracy. Legend had it that Epimenides lived to an extremely old age, and that he once slept for 57 years. This and other such tales show that, though there may have been an historical person by the name of Epimenides, he was “mythologized” soon after his death. Furthermore, countless proverbs were assigned to his hand. Thus it is extremely difficult to reconstruct the writings of the real Epimenides, and to distinguish him from pseudo-Epimenides. The Theogony, Cretica, Katharmoi, and other mystical writings are generally said to have been written by him.²

Though it is uncertain whether the saying in Titus 1:12 should be assigned to the historical Epimenides or some impostor and whether it is to be placed in the Oracles or the Theogony, the Greek text of Titus 1:12 allows us to make some observations. The line is written in dactylic hexameter, and therefore must come from a poem and not a prose work as the Cretica. The verse is clearly modelled on a line in the Theogony (26) of the early poet Hesiod, though Cretans are not mentioned there. More important, the line was well-known in antiquity, for the Hellenistic poet Callimachus cites the first half in his Hymn to Zeus (8): "Cretans are always liars..." And an epigram in the Greek Anthology (7. 275, 5-6) alludes to this saying.³ Thus it seems that the expression became a proverb before Paul's time. At any rate the Cretan people were reputed to be liars and swindlers, for the lexicographer Hesychius reports a Greek verb "to Cretanize," which means "to lie and cheat." It would not be rash to conclude that the verse quoted by Paul was familiar to his readers, since the sentiment and the saying were common to the Greeks.

The text also shows that the apostle Paul knows he is citing Epimenides, though he does not mention the poet by name. We read in verse 12, "one of themselves." Hereby Paul refers to an inhabitant of Crete, and suggests that the author of the saying is from among the natives of that island. The phrase, "a prophet of their own" (12) makes it even more likely that Paul knew whom he was quoting. For Epimenides was held in high regard by the Cretans and even, according to Plutarch, considered one of the seven wise men. His accurate predictions and religious writings led people to call him "prophet." By writing "a prophet of their own" the apostle alludes to Epimenides, whoever he may have been.
Paul cites the expression for a good reason, as the context makes clear. One of the main themes of the Letter to Titus is the antithesis of truth and lies. Especially the first chapter deals with this opposition, and it seems that what concerned Paul about the members of the congregation of Crete was the possibility that the recent converts might lapse, telling and believing lies and denying the truth of the gospel. In his salutation the apostle writes of the "knowledge of the truth" (1:1); it is an expression he likes to use (cf. 1 Timothy 2:4, 2 Timothy 2:25), but it gains added meaning in this letter to the Cretans. And the phrase "God, who never lies" (1:2) stands out as one which underscores the truthfulness of God and His Word. In his instructions to Titus regarding the appointment of elders, Paul stresses the ability of the prospective office-bearer "to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to confute those who contradict it" (1:9). Paul takes pains to spell out the qualities needed in an elder because "there are many insubordinate men, empty talkers and deceivers... " (1:10). The members of the young congregation must be rebuked, says Paul, so that they may be sound in faith, "instead of giving heed to Jewish myths or to commands of men who reject the truth" (1:14). These passages show that one of Paul's reasons for writing the Letter to Titus is to reveal the danger that the Cretan Christians might reject the truth of the gospel in favour of lies and falsehoods, especially the myths of the circumcision party. Thus we see that Paul quotes the Cretan "prophet" to point out the lying nature of the island's people and that the church members also might have this character.

One should not think, however, that the second half of the hexameter is not relevant to Paul's argument. He employs the line in his advice to Titus about the overseers, and the "evil beasts, lazy gluttons" are a negative example for future elders. In verse 6 we read that the elders and their families should not be charged with being "profligate and insubordinate." And in verse 8 Paul writes that elders should not be "violent or greedy for gain." He denounces drunkards and immoderate profligates (chapter 1:7; 2:3, 12; 3:3). Epimenides' phrase "lazy gluttons" is probably cited with added meaning, as the apostle intends it to be taken literally and figuratively. Thus the expression refers to those who are "greedy for gain" (verse 7) and those who "teach for base gain what they have no right to teach" (verse 12) as well as to idle merry-makers.

The poet Epimenides probably had the whole race of Cretans in mind when he wrote the verse under discussion. But there is some difference of opinion regarding the objects at whom Paul directed the quotation. The apostle may have had several people in mind. For Paul mentions "those who contradict the truth" (9), and "insubordinate men, empty talkers and deceivers, especially the circumcision party" (10). Though there is some difficulty with the Greek text of verse 10, it seems that Paul further describes these insubordinate men as empty talkers and deceivers, rather than that he is writing of three different types in this verse. And Paul singles out the circumcision party as being a prime example of the ones he attacks. The "Jewish myths" (14; cf. 10, 16) probably refers to the tenets of this group. Clearly Paul is not attacking the people of Crete generally, but only those who caused difficulty in the young church which Titus was guiding. The Dutch commentator C. Bouma succinctly reports the different groups Paul deals with in verses 10-13:

"Without stating so clearly, Paul has made constant shifts in the persons concerning whom he writes in verses 10-13. In verses 10, 11 he still means the antilegontas (those who contradict sound doctrine, verse 9), in verse 12 the people of Crete generally. In verse 13a he keeps these people in mind, but he writes on the basis of his experiences with a part of that group, namely, the Cretans who were converted to Christianity; and in verse 13b he thinks again only of the Christians."

In sum we may conclude that the apostle knew whom he was citing, though the work and exact location of the hexameter in it is to us, and was perhaps to Paul, unknown. The saying of Epimenides is at the heart of Paul's advice to Titus concerning the young church at Crete. In applying Epimenides' general statement about the nature of the Cretans to the members of the newly established church there, Paul shows his pastoral concern for obedience to the truth of the Word which opposes the lies of the rebellious sheep in the fold.

A final word might be said about the significance of the quotation for numerous writers throughout church history. From Clement of Alexandria (circa 200 A.D.) to Calvin, the passage provided evidence in defending the proper use of pagan literature. Calvin, in his commentary on Titus 1:12,
states that all truth is from God, regardless of the person who states it. Referring his readers to Basil's treatise on the education of the youth, Calvin argues that it is "superstitious" of people to ignore secular literature altogether. Paul's words, "this testimony is true" (13), proved to Calvin that cautious reading of secular authors may discover some kernel of truth.6

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2 Kern (col. 176), following Diels, suggests that the historical Epimenides wrote only the Theogony.

3 In Callimachus' Hymn to Zeus and in the epigram in the Greek Anthology the line is quoted with reference to the Cretans' claim that their island contained the tomb of Zeus, a claim all Greeks would have denied.

4 The veracity of the good news opposed to the falsehood of unbelief is a theme found throughout the "pastoral letters." In Paul's first Letter to Timothy, for example, we find occurrences of this in chapter 1:4, 1:10, 2:4, 4:7, 6:5, and 6:20.


6 For further reading on this topic see R. Renehan, "Classical Greek Quotations in the New Testament" in The Heritage of the Early Church (Rome, 1973) and G.J.D. Aalders, Paulus en de Antieke Cultuurwereld (Kampen, 1951) ch. 5 "Paulus en de Literatuur."