

AN INTRODUCTORY EXPLORATION OF PAULINE EPISTLES

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Abstract

In Christian theology, Pauline epistles play a vital role in the doctrine of the New Testament. His community letters are composed in a certain linguistic pattern and embraces central theological thoughts. This paper is designed to analyze his rhetorical theory and central thoughts, conducting an introductory exploration of his language and theology. Hopefully, this article can lead the readers into a deeper and further reading and experience of the doctrines of these letters.

Key words: Pauline letters, rhetorical theory, the Spirit, pneumatology

i. introduction

This paper aims to provide the readers with an introductory exploration of Pauline epistles in terms of language analysis and theological thoughts. Apostle Paul's community letters consist of certain linguistic and rhetorical features, and his central theological thoughts lie in Pneumatology, that is, the Spirit, which is the general consensus of theologians for generations.

II. the rhetorical theory of Pauline epistles

If Paul probably had no knowledge of rhetorical theory, nor was directly influenced by the more specific methods of school rhetoric, what is the point of

an analysis of his letters from this perspective?

In the first place, it is particularly important to set Paul's writings off against the background of the Graeco-Roman culture in which he live and worked. Oratory was of fundamental importance in the Graeco-Roman world, not only in the courts, but ever increasingly as a form of entertainment, especially in connection with official functions. This importance is mirrored in the significant place given to rhetorical theory in advanced education. If rhetoric was so dominant in Graeco-Roman culture, then it is important for us to understand, as best as we can, the relationship between rhetorical theory and Paul. Even a

negative result is important, and has consequences for both our view of Paul as well as the question as to the reception of his writings in the ancient world.

But is the result only negative? Not really. Even if Paul himself did not consciously think or write in rhetorical categories, his letters may still, with profit, be analyzed in terms of relevant aspect of rhetorical theory. In this way, albeit in a limited respect, rhetorical theory can still inform our exegesis. After all, the rules and effects described in rhetorical theory often embody the general feelings and expectations in terms of language usage of the contemporary society, or at least an important segment of that society. Ancient literary criticism inevitably moved in rhetorical circles. In this way we are enabled to gain, at least partially, more of a feeling for the contemporary effects of various forms of argumentation and style. We are provided with a complex canon of rules and advice against which contemporary writings may be compared and contrasted. (Anderson, 290)

Community letters were a familiar feature of Jewish life. It was necessary for the national leaders to keep the Diaspora communities informed about the calendar each year, and innovations and ad hoc decisions would require such

communication. Luke believed that Paul himself carried such letters to Damascus (Acts 9:2). We have two examples in 2 Maccabees 1:1-9 and 1:10-2:18, in which the Jerusalem authorities urge the Egyptian Jews to adopt the new feast of Dedication. These letters are prefaces to an account of the Maccabean War, after which the new festival was instituted. They give us an idea of the six-part model from which Paul could have developed his own epistolary style:

1. Salutation: "The brethren, the Jews that are in Jerusalem...send greetings to the Jews throughout Egypt, good peace" (2 Macc. 1: 1; cf. v.10)
2. Thanksgiving: "Blessed be our God in all things" (1: 11-17)
3. Prayer for the recipients' well-being (with covert sermonizing): "May God do good to you" (1: 2-6)
4. Account of the situation (1: 7-8, 11-16 with the thanksgiving)
5. Encouragement/command to follow the senders' wishes: "and now see that ye keep the days of the feast...of the month of Kislev" (1:9, 1: 18-2;16)
6. Pious conclusion: "Now God..." (2: 17-18) In Acts 15:23-29 Luke represents the apostolic council as sending out an encyclical letter consisting of features 1, 4, and 5.

First Thessalonians conforms to such a model: (1) “Paul and Silvanus, and Timotheus, unto the church of the Thessalonians...Grace be unto you, and peace” (1:1).”Paul and Silvanus, and Timotheus, unto the church of the Thessalonians...Grace be unto you, and peace” (1:1) There follow (2-3) thanksgiving with prayer (1:2-10) for their conversion and perseverance, extended in 2: 1-16; (4) an account of the situation—Paul’s waiting, anxiety, and joy at the news of their steadfastness (2:17-3:13); (5) some instruction on Christian sanctity (4: 1-5:22); and (6) a pious conclusion: “And the very God of peace...” (5:23-28). The whole letter shines with Paul’s warmhearted concern for them, his affectionate anxiety for their perfection, and his triumphant joy at their faithfulness.

The same essential structure—salutation, thanksgiving, discussion of the church’s situation, practical holiness, pious conclusion—is developed in 1 Corinthians. The thanksgiving, as before, gives glimpses of what is to come. “That in everything ye are enriched by him, in all utterance, and in all knowledge” (1:5) strikes the reader as unintentionally ironic; for at 4:8 Paul will wax sarcastic about those who think they have become

rich, and they will be told at 8:1 that “Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth.” But the apostle is without guile. In chapter 1 he intends to be friendly, but his feelings get the better of him later, and very properly too. “So that ye come behind in no gift; waiting for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1:7) foreshadows the discussion of the gifts of the Spirit in chapters 12-14—and also, more subtly, the idea that has got around at Corinth that the kingdom has already begun (4:8 again: “ye have reigned as kings without us”) And of course there is the ethical anxiety, expressed in the hope that Lord Jesus Christ will “confirm you unto the end, that ye may be blameless” (1:8) With chapter 5 he turns to ethical questions, and as in 1 Thessalonians, the first one concerns sex. He shames the church with the particularly scandalous cases of a man living with his father’s wife, and of Christians who have been whoring on the basis that “All things are lawful” (6:12) But

Paul’s pastoral tone is attractive. He uses personal, affectionate metaphors. “We were gentle among you, even as a nurse cherisheth her children” (I Thess. 2:7); “we...charged every one of you,

as a father doth his children” (I Thess. 2:11); “being bereaved of you” (I Thess. 2:17); “And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ. I have fed you with milk, and not with meat” (I Cor. 3: 1-2); “as my beloved sons I warn you. For though ye have ten thousand instructors in Christ, ye have ye not many fathers: for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel” (I Cor. 4: 14-15); “shall I come unto you with a rod?” (I Cor. 4: 21). The same parental images recur later: “I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds” (Philem. 10); “My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you” (Gal. 4:19); and in every other Epistle.

Another characteristic of Paul’s pastoral style is the taking up of catchphrases. “Grace and peace” in the greetings is an instance of this, a Christianized version of the standard Greek and Hebrew salutations. “All things are lawful unto’for me” was a slogan of Paul’s opponents (I Cor. 6: 12, 10;23), which both times with “but all things are not expedient.” “Meats for the belly and the belly for meats,” they said (I Cor. 6:13)—eat

as you please, whether or not the meat has been offered to an idol: “but God shall destroy both it and them,” he replies. We have this technique more subtly with their claims to wisdom (1: 19-2:16). At first Paul is dismissive: “the foolishness of God is wiser than men” (1:25). But then his quick mind turns to exploit the claim in just the opposite sense: “Howbeit we speak wisdom among them that are perfect: yet not the wisdom of this world...But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery” (2:6-7). Paul has wisdom, too, but it is divine wisdom. We find the same double move, first dismissal and then appropriation on a higher level, in 2 Corinthians with commendatory letters and other matters. Claims to knowledge he upstages similarly: “And if any man think that he knoweth any thing, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know. But if any man love God, the same is known of him” (1 Cor. 8: 2-3). It is not our knowledge of God that matters, but his knowing us. So again at 13:12: “then shall I know even as also I am known.”

Paul’s metaphors and images are sometimes biblical, just as in these appeals. Sex offenders must be excommunicated: “Purge out

therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us: Therefore let us keep the feast ..." (1 Cor. 5: 7-8). The standard equivalence corruption/leaven suggests the paschal image, which is then developed. Similarly an apostle's rights are argued from the priest's right in Scripture to share in the sin offering (9:13) and the ox's right to share the corn he treads (9:9; Deut. 25:4), as well as from the secular examples of soldier, plowman, farmer, shepherd, and the like (9: 7-13). The relation between Christ's resurrection and ours is fixed by the biblical relation of the firstfruits offering to the full harvests (15: 20-23). In addition, the images of sowing and harvest recur often. The Corinthian church has been planted by Paul and watered by Apollos, who are fellow laborers on God's farm (3: 6-9). "If we have sown unto you spiritual things, is it a great thing if we reap your carnal things?" (9:11). "He which soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly" (2 Cor. 9:6; cf. Gal. 6:7-9). "The fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace" (Gal. 5:22): the Spirit here has been sown in the Christian's heart, and the fruit is the harvest (cf. Phil. 1: 11, 4:

17). Paul is famous for taking his agricultural imagery too far with the grafting of wild onto cultivated olives in chapter 11 of Romans.

Planting and building are an Old Testament pair, and in 1 Corinthians 3: 9-17 Paul elaborates the building image: "ye are God's building...as a wise masterbuilder, I have laid the foundation, and another man buildeth thereon." Paul's foundation stone is Jesus Christ, and the full building is the Church, God's temple, indwelt by his Spirit. He exploits the image to good edifying effect. Solomon's temple had been built of precious stones with gold and silver. Paul draws on this to warn his successors at Corinth to build similar materials on his foundation (v.12), not wood, hay, and straw, which will be burnt to nothing in the fire of Judgment Day; they will be punished for their poor job, and they will be destroyed if they destroy his structure. Building (=edifying) is a favorite metaphor: "edify one another" (1 Thess. 5: 11); "knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth" (1 Cor. 8:1); "all things edify not" (10: 23).

A similarly invalid argument is adduced from the image of the body of Christ. In 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12: 5 the Church is the body,

the idea being suggested no doubt by the presence therein of the Spirit; each “member” is then a Christian, including the head (1 Cor. 12: 21b). Paul uses the metaphor to stress the interdependence of Christians, the value of all the gifts the Spirit gives. In Colossians Christ is “the head of the body, the church” (1:18), and the other missionaries do not hold “the Head, from which all the body by joints and bands supported, and knit together, increaseth” (2:19). But then Colossians was written to oppose the doctrine that Christ was one of a number of heavenly powers (1:15-20), and the author, whether Paul or not, wants to stress that he is the beginning and the head in every sense. So the Christians are now all the other parts except the head, and there may be some muddle over the increase stemming from the head. But it is no argument against Pauline authorship that the body metaphor is now developed for a different purpose, with the identity of the head changed.

The fight over the validity of the Law leads Paul into a new field of metaphor, the law court, which plays a negligible part in the earlier letters but exercises a primary influence in Galatians and Romans, and on through Luther into Christian history.

“Man is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ” (2:16); “Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law” (5:4). In discussing salvation here Paul uses the analogy of a Roman court of law: the countermissionaries taught that if you kept God’s Law you would be held innocent before his judgment seat, and Paul is disputing this. At its full exposition, in Romans 8: 31-38, God is the judge, Christ is our counsel “who also maketh intercession for us.”

Passionate feelings sometimes stir the apostle to disputatiousness, but sometimes also sublimity, and 2 Corinthians perhaps contains more that is sublime than any other letter. His tenseness expresses itself in frequent rhetorical repetition: “what carefulness wrought in you, yea, what clearing of yourselves, yea, what indignation, yea, what fear, yea, what vehement desire, yea, what zeal, yea, what revenge!” (7:11) This is not the vacuous rhetoric of the politician seeking time to find the next cliché: every non means something, and there is movement from the first self-justification to the final punishment of the offender, each spurring the reader to mark a stage in the movement, from the

more self-regarding indignation and fear to the more outgoing desire and zeal, and the final action.

A further problem is the Cross. Paul has taught that “Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3), and he thought the Cross was central; but in 1 Corinthians 1-2 he does no more than revel in the paradox. Galatians 3 makes a first attempt to offer a theology. God had set a curse on anyone who did not keep the Law (Deut. 27:26), and Christ redeemed us from this curse by becoming a curse for us on the “tree” (Deut. 21: 23). Second Corinthians offers an improvement on this idea: God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself—him who knew no sin he made sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in him. Now almost the entire 2 Corinthians 5 passage is restated in Romans 5-8: reconciliation by Christ’s death, living to him who died for us, no condemnation/ a new creation if anyone is in Christ. But the mysterious abstracts, “becoming a curse,” “made sin,” are now interpreted by sacrificial imagery: God sent his own Son as a sin offering (8:3), God set Christ forth as an expiation (3:25). Even so, Paul feels ill at ease with the whole

line of argument and never uses these terms again, just as he uses the Passover sacrifice image only once (1 Cor. 5:7) and the term “blood” rarely; the burnt offering is implied at Ephesians 5:2, and the peace offering at Ephesians 2:14. Nor is he much happier with the notion of the Cross as a victory over the powers: God “condemned Sin in the flesh” (Rom. 8:3), but this idea is not amplified until Colossians 2:15: “having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a shew of them openly, triumphing over them in it [the Cross].” The real thrust of the appeal to the Cross in Romans is that it “righteous” us; that is, primarily, it wins our acquittal in the Last Judgment; and it does this because God listens to advocacy of his suffering Son—what Paul can do for Onesimus before Philemon, pleading his love given in a life of apostolic tribulation, Christ has done for mankind before God (Rom. 8: 31-39). The sacrificial imagery comes more easily to Paul of his own life: “God...maketh manifest the savour of his knowledge by us in every place. For we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ” (2 Cor. 2: 14-15); “that my service which I have for Jerusalem may be accepted of holy, acceptable unto God, which

is your reasonable service” (Rom. 12:1); “Yea, and if I be poured forth upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I joy” (Phil. 2:17). In the last case his life is a wine offering poured over his converts’ sacrificial lives. (Alter, 479-502)

III. the central theological thoughts of Pauline epistles

The eschatological presence of God’s salvation in Jesus Christ is the basis and center of Pauline thought. Paul was overwhelmed by the experience and insight that in the crucified and risen Jesus Christ, who was soon to return from heaven, God had put into effect his ultimate purpose for the salvation of the whole world. God himself brought about the turn of the ages; God brought a new reality into being, in which the world and the situation of human beings in the world appear in different light. A completely unexpected, singular event fundamentally changed Paul’s thinking and his life. Paul was set before the task of interpreting afresh, from the perspective of the Christ event, the history of the world and God’s saving activity within it—God’s acts in the past, present, and future and his own role in God’s plan. Pauline theology is thus equally an appropriation of the new and an interpretation of the past. Paul drafted an eschatological scenario: its foundation is God’s saving will, its

decisive act is the resurrection parousia of Jesus Christ, its determining power is the Holy Spirit, its present goal is transformation into spiritual existence with God. (Schnelle, 389)

The surpassing importance of pneumatology in Paul’s thought results from its internal connective role interrelating theology proper (the doctrine of God), Christology, soteriology, anthropology, ethics, and eschatology. The integrative power of pneumatology is what first makes it possible for Paul to impart a systematic quality to his interpretation of the Jesus-Christ-history.

The reality of God in the world is the reality of the Spirit. By the spirit/breath, which is always primarily the Spirit that proceeds from God, the life-giving power of the Creator is manifest. The Spirit of God not only affected the resurrection of Jesus but is at the same time the new mode of being and working of the risen one himself, his dynamic and effective presence. Through the working of the Spirit of God, believers are freed from the powers of sin and death. The Spirit that Christians have received has its origin in God. The new universal working of the Spirit of God is for Paul the foundation of his whole theology, for the act of God’s Spirit in Jesus Christ and in

the believers is the sign of the present time of salvation. Nonetheless, the Spirit, as the powerful gift of God, in all its manifestations is no independent force but remains united with its origin. In all Paul's statement about the Spirit, the Spirit of God is the irreversible beginning point, so that theology proper, that is, his doctrine of God is always the basis for his pneumatology. (Schnelle, 487)

Apostle of the Crucified Lord

For Paul the outpouring of God's Spirit promised by the prophets for the last days, which would renew Israel and bringing the nation to Zion, has occurred. He especially sees the Gentiles' experience of the Spirit as proof that new age has begun and as promise that it will be consummated in the near future. All believers possess, and are to be guided by, the Spirit.

J. Christian Becker has offered an incisive proposal. He has displayed the genius of Pauline thought by classifying its two poles and their interaction: 'the contingent particularity of his hermeneutic and his sure grasp of the coherent center of the gospel. Becker in fact argues that the 'coherence-contingency method' is via media between the extremes of a purely sociological analysis and a dogmatic imposition of a specific center on Paul's thought. Becker presents Paul as the

'interpreter', his originality and creativity lying in his hermeneutic not in his 'doctrinal system.' In a complex relationship of 'human mediation' and 'pneumatic immediacy' Paul brings the gospel to bear on specific issues and situations. His hermeneutic consists in the constant interaction between the coherent center of the Gospel and its contingent interpretation. Becker goes on to show how this may be 'the most striking aspect of Paul's thought', as he is able to allow for a 'wide diversity of interpretation without sacrificing its coherent center. (Munzinger, 78)

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, Pauline letters are composed of certain linguistic features as illustrated before. The structure of the composition, the figure of speech, the affectionate pastoral tone, the usage of images and metaphors are really remarkable, emerging as the theological legacy. And his central theological thoughts repeatedly stress the tremendous importance of the outpouring and hermeneutical experience of the Spirit, which have made a significant and profound impact on the church practice and Christian daily life.

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