



God the Other Who Acts Otherwise: An Exegetical Essay on 1 Cor 1:26-31

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THE BEST WAY TO GAUGE SCRIPTURE'S ACTUAL CANONICITY IS TO NOTE THE EXTENT to which we understand ourselves to be accountable for the way we come to terms with it, the degree to which our questions and dilemmas drive us back to the text to discern what it says and does not say. Careful exegesis can be undertaken for other valid reasons, including sheer curiosity about the past or the nature and function of religious language. But it is the Christian community which has most at stake in the process and results of exegetical work.

1 Cor 1:26-31, together with its larger context (1:18-4:21) provides an unusually instructive instance of the foregoing generalization, because this passage illustrates what careful study of Paul's letters has come to entail: (a) reconstruction of the situation in Corinth, informed by a social as well as a religious description of the readers; (b) analysis of Paul's use of both scripture and Greco-Roman rhetoric

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Paul challenges the Corinthians' reliance on prevailing human wisdom by showing that what happened in the case of Jesus, what happens when the gospel is believed, what has happened in Paul's own apostleship are all of a piece because God who is Other consistently acted otherwise in each case.

in the formation of his argument; and (c) reflection on the ways in which the theological content is/ might be related to (a) and (b). Here, however, the focus is the latter because that is what makes the passage significant today.

Consider your own call, brothers and sisters:
 Not many of you were¹ wise by human standards,
 not many were powerful
 not many were of noble birth.
 But God chose what is foolish in the world
 to shame the wise;
 God chose what is weak in the world
 to shame the strong;
 God chose what is low and despised in the world,
 things that are not,²
 to reduce to nothing things that are,
 so that no one might boast in the presence of God.

He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus,
 who became for us wisdom from God,
 and³ righteousness and sanctification and redemption,
 in order that, as it is written,
 "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord" (NRSV).

I. ON READING THIS PASSAGE

Since data for reconstructing early Christianity are sparse, it is understandable why the first two parts of this passage received special attention from those historians who saw here evidence for its low-class proletarian status.⁴ Recent studies, however, have been more cautious,⁵ noting not only that "not many" clearly implies "at least some," but also that Erastus (the city treasurer in Rom 16:23) surely would have been a man with means and status. In addition, the social status associated with names, evidenced by inscriptions and papyri, as well as the remarkable mobility of early Christians, indicate that the early Greco-Roman Christians were not simply "proletarians" – an inappropriate label in any case.

Our passage is part of Paul's response to factions that had arisen during his absence. The rhetorical skill with which Paul composed his response recently has drawn the attention of two scholars, whose work has yielded quite different results. Relying on a thorough knowledge of ancient rhetoric, Margaret M.

¹Paul's Greek lacks a verb, but English requires it. Supplying "were" too easily implies that Paul is describing the readers' past. REB is better: "think what sort of people you are...few of you are wise..."

²The unusual length of this line appears to mar the symmetry, but this is consistent with ancient rhetorical style, as Johannes Weiss noted long ago. *Der erste Korintherbrief*. Meyer Kommentar. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1910,⁹) 35.

³Only a few mss. read "and" here; the exegetical significance of this variant, clearly secondary, is noted below.

⁴In the early years of this century, the Marxist Karl Kautsky wrote, "It is generally recognized that the Christian community originally contained proletarian elements exclusively, and was a proletarian organization." *Foundations of Christianity* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1953) 272.

⁵See especially Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), and the useful discussion by Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University, 1983), chap. 2.

Mitchell has analyzed the entire letter, showing that it is a comprehensive, coherent argument for the unity of the church.⁶ Concerning the slogans, "I am of Paul, I am of Apollos," etc. (1:12) she notes that since no comparable party slogan has yet been found in antiquity, they are Paul's own caricatures which use "the language of slave ownership and childish dependence."⁷ Moreover, she demonstrates Paul's massive use of well-known political language and argument for addressing dissension in civic life.⁸ The wisdom of the world that Paul opposes is not to be sought in religious speculations, such as some form of gnosticism, but in the "values and norms which divide persons of higher and lower status into separate groups, a wisdom which prefers dissension to unity, superiority to cooperation."⁹ The task of historical reconstruction remains, but she insists that the starting point is reading the letter on Paul's terms.¹⁰

Reconstructing the Corinthian situation is precisely what Antoinette Clark Wire undertakes.¹¹ By analyzing Paul's rhetoric, not primarily in terms of ancient practice and theory, but in terms of the logic of his appeal, she probes the text for hints of the role that women prophets played in the Corinthian dilemma. This unabashed "mirror reading" ("their ears are shaping his mouth throughout"¹²) produces a portrayal in which the outlook of the women prophets collides with that of Paul (and other men): whereas in becoming a Christian, Paul experienced status loss, the women (and slaves) gained it by becoming wise, powerful, and honored. As a result, "Paul thinks they are subverting God's transvaluation of all values for their own social advantage. They think Paul is subverting God's transformation of social reality to legitimate his own losses."¹³ They emphasize the risen Lord speaking in them; he insists on the cross, which he emulates in his self-discipline and "loss."¹⁴ Wire grants that the women prophets were not the only factor in the Corinthian turmoil, but by seeing them at the heart of every issue, which in turn is construed as a part of a coherent, religiously-driven social dynamic, she has produced an integrated reading of the whole letter, one that pits Paul against the results of his own labor so deeply that he must now prevail against them. As one ponders such a reconstruction it begins to sag under its own weight, then collapses, bringing down its sound elements with it.

Heeding Mitchell's insistence that one must read the letter on Paul's terms implies that we see him urging concord, not by becoming an opponent of the

⁶Margaret M. Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation: An Exegetical Investigation of the Language and Composition of 1 Corinthians* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991).

⁷Ibid., 83.

⁸L. L. Welborn argues the same in "On the Discord in Corinth: 1 Corinthians 1-4 and Ancient Politics," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 106 (1987) 85-111.

⁹Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation*, 211.

¹⁰Ibid., 302.

¹¹Antoinette Clark Wire, *The Corinthian Women Prophets: A Reconstruction through Paul's Rhetoric* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

¹²Ibid., 55.

¹³Ibid., 61.

¹⁴Ibid., 188.

Apollos faction but of factionalism itself, by holding the whole community accountable to what God has actually done, in Christ, in Paul, and in them. To see this, we look closely at the text at hand.

II. SOME EXEGETICAL OBSERVATIONS

Before Paul disallows boasting “about human leaders” (3:21) he dissolves the basis on which it has arisen by pointing out that God’s action among the Corinthians precludes anyone boasting (1:29), but then goes on to suggest in v. 31 that boasting is legitimate so long as it is “in the Lord,” for this accords with scripture—namely, a paraphrase of Jer 9:24 (LXX: 23).¹⁵ Boasting as such is not the issue; the basis on which one does so is—their own experience of God’s strange ways.

It is noteworthy that Paul begins our paragraph by addressing the whole community (“brothers and sisters,” as in 1:10), asking them to look at (“consider” renders the force of βλέπετε) their “call”—the divine act which brought each of them to faith. In other words, “Look at the facts about who your brothers and sisters really are.” Then he tells them what they will see: while a few (“not many”) do enjoy honorable status “by human standards” (= “according to the flesh,” for Paul a negative criterion), God also chose (many) who do not have it—the foolish, the weak, the lowly-born. Paul does not continue by congratulating the readers for their diversity, just as he does not urge them to be more open and affirming toward each other because God has called all of them (as he urges in Rom 15:7). Instead, his sentence takes an unexpected turn by stating only God’s negative purpose in calling precisely this community: that in God’s presence “no one might boast” (literally, “that all flesh might not boast,” a clear allusion to his previous use of “flesh”). Implicitly, but nonetheless clearly, Paul finds in God’s strange ways the aim of dissolving *all* fleshly boasting before God—that of the foolish, weak, and humbly-born no less than that of the wise, mighty, and nobly born.

It is as important to note what Paul does not say as to grasp what he does. Throughout 1:18-4:21, he never suggests that he regrets that the church includes those who by fleshly standards are wise, influential, or aristocratic (and who, presumably, therefore had wealth appropriate to their status in Corinth); nor does he regret that the majority are without status in the city. Nor does he encourage the latter to think that God, in calling *them*, conferred on them a status which the world would now salute. Rather, each believer’s standing before God and in the church is a gift (as 4: 17 insists), and so is neither a reward for prior social privilege nor a compensatory entitlement now actualized by the formerly deprived. From Paul’s angle, the groups that appealed to particular leaders were not simply expressing enthusiastic preference (like fan clubs), but were engaged in struggles to maintain or assert status, thereby showing that they had not yet grasped the logic of what God had done in calling each of them, of whatever status, to faith. That is why he wrote v. 30 with care.

¹⁵See Gail R. O’Day, “Jeremiah 9:22-23 and 1 Corinthians 1:26 -31: A Study in Intertextuality,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 109 (1990) 259-67.

To begin with, he tied v. 30 more tightly to the foregoing statement about God than current English versions show. Instead of simply juxtaposing “He is the source of your life in Christ” (RSV, NRSV), he begins ἐξ αὐτοῦ δὲ ὑμεῖς ἐστε ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ, best rendered by the older Moffatt translation: “this is the God to whom you owe your being in Christ.” Since “in Christ” anticipates “in the Lord” (v. 31), it is unfortunate that the recently published Contemporary English Version replaces it with “you are God’s children,” for this different idea severs the thread of thought – the intrinsic connection between God’s choosing and God’s bringing about existence “in Christ,” which the Corinthians did not question and so could be used in Paul’s argument. Since their being “in Christ,” like the diversity of those called, results from God’s act, both are discontinuous from the world’s wisdom. Were this not the case, they could have known God, and have formed homogeneous groups, through their own wisdom – which Paul explicitly denied in 1:26. Decisive for the whole train of thought are the coherent consequences of God’s radical otherness, as the following words about Christ reinforce.

What Paul says about Christ succinctly exhibits what will become constitutive of classical christology – the coherence of Christ’s relation to God and of Christ’s relation to humans.¹⁶ That is, Christ’s identity (or Person) is the basis of his soteriological significance (his Work). In this light, here too it is important to note what Paul does *not* say – namely, who Christ *is* – but what he became (or “was made,” by God), best rendered by NJB: “who for us was made Wisdom from God.” This interprets the terse expression in 1:24: “Christ the power of God and Christ the wisdom of God,” not the reverse. That is, Paul does not say that Christ is Wisdom/Sophia, but that he became (or was made) wisdom from God for us. Since the unusual concentration of wisdom-talk in 1 Corinthians 1-4 suggests that Paul is responding to the readers’ fascination with wisdom (special knowledge of God, not mere prudence), basic to their boasting “of human leaders,” we may infer that Paul insists that Christ is wisdom for us as the result of an event, namely the cross, not because of his preexistent identity as Wisdom/Sophia. Christ functions soteriologically (“for us”) as wisdom because God chose to use the foolishness of the cross-kerygma to save those who believe it. Here too CEV is unsatisfactory, for while retaining the action of God (“He sent Christ to save us”), it replaces “wisdom for us” with “and made us wise”! In Wire’s reading, this is what Paul’s Corinthian opponents would have claimed.

Especially important is the syntactical relation of “righteousness and sanctification and redemption” to “wisdom of God.”¹⁷ Are all four nouns items in a series (as if “wisdom... from God and [see note 3] righteousness and sanctification,” etc.)?

¹⁶The logic of christological discourse calls for statements about Jesus’ relation to God (the theological correlate) and Jesus’ relation to humans (the anthropological/soteriological correlate), as I outlined in my “Toward the Renewal of New Testament Christology,” *New Testament Studies* 32 (1986) 362-77.

¹⁷Wilhelm Bender’s contention that “who was made for us wisdom from God” is a parenthesis, so that the main thought is: “on the basis of him [God] you are in Christ Jesus the righteousness and the sanctification and the redemption” is not convincing. “Bemerkungen zur Übersetzung von 1 Korinther 1:30,” *Zeitschrift für neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 21 (1980) 263-68.

Or are the three salvation words an appositional phrase amplifying what “wisdom for us” actually means, as NIV makes clear: “that is, our righteousness, holiness, and redemption”? Although commentators are divided, NIV is probably correct. Nor is it obvious what “righteousness” means here. But since *ἀγιασμός* (sanctification), like *ἀπολύτρωσις* (redemption), can refer to the process or the result, or both, it is possible that *δικαιοσύνη* also includes the sense of *δικαίωσις*, the act of making right as well as the result, rectitude. In any case, these three terms point to the radical change that is entailed in accepting the wisdom that happened for us according to the cross-kerygma.

It is not clear, nor is it important, whether the three nouns simply formulate three ways of understanding Christ’s significance “for us,” or whether the sequence is deliberate, reflecting an early Christian *ordo salutis*. (The threefold salvation formulation in 6:11 does not reflect such a rationale.) Nor does it matter if the phrase is derived from a fragment of tradition, as has been suggested,¹⁸ for Paul is responsible for its use and meaning here: the content of these words is defined by an event, the crucified proclaimed in the kerygma. Moreover, by adding the appositional phrase, Paul clarifies the “for us” aspect of the wisdom from God that Christ became/was made: neither a sage whose wisdom improves our thinking, nor a principle by which *we* interpret reality, but an event that changes our relation to the right, the holy, and the free — i.e., to the God from whom this wisdom came. It is because Christ is this sort of wisdom of God that he is also the power of God. If the Corinthians understand that, they will cease boasting of human leaders and instead boast in the Lord.

III. CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

Paul’s assertions and their rationale are ad hoc expressions of convictions and assumptions “beneath” the text; therefore, bringing three of these to the surface will enhance our understanding of what he says.

First, Paul could not write this paragraph, and those surrounding it, if he were not convinced that God is free to be the Other who acts otherwise from prevailing wisdom. Although the Corinthian situation prompted Paul to focus this on cross, kerygma, and calling, this understanding of God was not coined when he composed this letter. Surely many factors and considerations converged to form this powerful conviction, including reflection on his own call in light of scripture. Even if he did not quote Isa 55:8-9 (“for my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways,” says the Lord), his understanding of God is consistent with Isaiah, and indeed with scripture as a whole.

Likewise, Paul could not have written what he did about the cross if he were not convinced that God had raised Jesus from the realm of the dead — even though he never mentions Jesus’ resurrection in the whole section 1:18-4:21 (perhaps for the reason Wire proposes). Moreover, Paul assumes that Jesus’ resurrection is an

¹⁸See Wolfgang Schrage, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther*, 2 vols. (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1991) 1:204.

eschatological event, not a mere miracle on Jesus' corpse; as such it signals the irruption of the age to come into this age, thereby rupturing the wisdom of this age/this world while simultaneously implying its own wisdom. If one forgets or ignores this web of meanings associated with resurrection, what Paul says about the "otherwise" acts of God – especially with respect to prevailing human wisdom (see 1:19; 3:19-20) – comes through as a display of power that is arbitrary and vindictive.

Nor, finally, could Paul have urged the Corinthians to look carefully at their call had he not been convinced that in the Christ-event, announced in the kerygma and made effective in the call of the Corinthians, God shows decisively the sort of reality "God" truly is. What happened in the case of Jesus, what happens when the gospel is believed, what reshapes the style of the apostle, are all of a piece because the God who is Other consistently acted otherwise in each case.

Paul's understanding of God was not derived from something Jesus might have said about God, though consistent with it. Rather, the apostle's convictions, though tutored by scripture, are anchored in unexpected and unconventional events, above all the resurrection of Jesus, executed shamefully by crucifixion. Paul was the first, so far as we know, to think through what it means for the understanding of God that such an event actually occurred. Paul teaches his readers – today's included – how to think theologically about the significance of Jesus. ⊕