



Firstfruits and Death's Defeat: Metaphor in Paul's Rhetorical Strategy in 1 Cor 15:20-28

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TWO THOUSAND YEARS AFTER DEATH WREAKED ITS HAVOC ON JESUS OF NAZARETH on the cross, and in spite of his resurrection, it continues its apparently triumphant march showing no signs of weakening. At times it unleashes its destructive powers slowly, as it did two years ago when it came in the form of undetected ovarian cancer and wrecked the body of my thirty-year-old friend, an associate pastor and young mother. At other times it attacks suddenly and unexpectedly, as it did the week before Easter when a small plane came out of nowhere and crashed on top of a car just outside Boston, mangling and killing a twenty-three-year-old mother and her three-year-old daughter. The absurdity of such things can call into question the various narratives we use to make sense of our world. In spite of the fact that the actual moment of death may bring relief from the

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Paul's audience in Corinth includes "some" who are denying a future resurrection even though they believe in the resurrection of Christ. Paul, therefore, must rhetorically construct a compelling connection between Christ's resurrection and a future embodied resurrection.

destructive powers it unleashes, Paul's metaphor in 1 Corinthians 15 of death as the last *enemy* to be destroyed rings true to our experience. To many in the church, however, the controlling metaphor of the whole chapter—"Christ is the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep"¹—seems disconnected with their experience and belief structure. This is evident in that many in the church have trouble speaking about a future resurrection as though they really believe such a thing. Like "some" in Paul's audience in 1 Corinthians 15, some in our congregations need to be persuaded once again of the truthfulness of Paul's controlling metaphor. In this respect we share a similar "rhetorical situation" with Paul's implied audience in 1 Corinthians 15.

I. THE RHETORICAL SITUATION IN 1 CORINTHIANS 15

Efforts to reconstruct the original community situation behind 1 Corinthians 15 using various types of historical data are legion. Although it cannot adequately be understood without reference to general historical data, 1 Corinthians 15 can be understood without describing the specific situation *behind* the text using large history-of-religions constructs (such as speculation about Gnosticism/realized eschatology or Hellenistic wisdom traditions). Not only may such large constructs be challenged on historical grounds, but requiring contemporary audiences to understand and accept such detailed constructs *behind* the text may hamper the chapter's hermeneutical fruitfulness. If one's interpretive interest is primarily in what the text has to say to our present-day communities, a better approach is to concentrate on the world projected *in front of the text* via Paul's rhetoric, asking questions about the past insofar as they help explicate that world. In what follows I will offer a historically plausible sketch of what Paul implies is the "rhetorical situation" he believes he is addressing in 1 Corinthians 15, based on the rhetoric he uses to construct his argument.

"Rhetorical situation" has become a technical term among rhetorical specialists and those attempting to apply it to New Testament documents.² As I use the term it consists of two main parts: (1) the implied rhetorical occasion to which 1 Corinthians 15 can be understood as a "fitting" response; and (2) the rhetorical problem Paul has to overcome.³ The implied rhetorical occasion is that there are "some" in the implied audience who are denying that there will be a future resurrection of the dead, even though they do confess a belief in the resurrection of Christ (vv. 1, 3, 4, 11). Although the precise nature of it is left ambiguous in the text,

¹All translations of scripture are my own.

²For a useful summary and assessment of the more influential attempts of NT scholars (i.e., Kennedy, Fiorenza, and Wuellner) to formulate an understanding of rhetorical situation that is useful for interpreting NT texts, see Dennis Stamps, "Rethinking the Rhetorical Situation: The Entextualization of the Situation in New Testament Epistles," in *Rhetoric and the New Testament: Essays from the 1992 Heidelberg Conference*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Thomas H. Olbricht (Sheffield: JSOT, 1993) 194-98.

³I have borrowed and modified this language from Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's "Rhetorical Situation and Historical Reconstruction in 1 Corinthians," *New Testament Studies* 33 (July 1987) 386-403.

they have some type of belief in life after death (vv. 19, 29).⁴ However, they see no necessary connection between the resurrection of Christ and any future embodied resurrection of believers. One of the biggest stumbling blocks for them in adhering to the future resurrection of the dead is the “how” of such a thing, and in particular how long-dead and decomposed human bodies can be raised to life (vv. 35-49).⁵ This occasion has an urgency about it because, if not dealt with effectively, it has the potential of having a detrimental effect on Christian practice in the present (v. 58).

Even though the narrative world⁶ of the “some” and his own overlap in various significant ways, in Paul’s narrative world there is a necessary connection between Christ’s resurrection and a future embodied resurrection of the dead. Since from a strictly logical standpoint one cannot infer from the resurrection of one person the future resurrection of others, the rhetorical problem Paul faces is constructing the middle term between Christ’s resurrection and a future embodied resurrection that will compel the “some” to transfer the adherence they grant to the thesis that Christ is raised to the conclusion that there will be a future bodily resurrection. In other words, he must reconstruct what is, at present, reality for them by offering the “some” a bridge between their narrative world and his own. This rhetorical problem and the rhetorical occasion sketched in the last paragraph together constitute the implied or inscribed rhetorical situation of 1 Corinthians 15.

II. PERSUASION IN 1 COR 15:20-28

Prior to vv. 20-28, Paul has set forth what he takes to be the assumptions that both he and his audience hold in common as the basis upon which he can go on to make his argument (vv. 1-11). These common assumptions are found particularly

⁴This statement is based primarily on the fact that the rhetoric in vv. 12-19 would only be effective if Paul assumes his audience would be alarmed by the possible consequence that Christ might not have been raised and especially by the final consequence of v. 19, that our hope in Christ would be for this life only. In my view vicarious baptism for the dead (the dominant interpretation of v. 29) still seems to indicate some form of hope for life after death in the implied audience in spite of the recent treatment of it offered by Richard E. DeMarris, in which he argues that it was a social ritual marking the transition from life to death, and as such says nothing about what lies beyond death for Paul’s historical audience. “Corinthian Religion and Baptism for the Dead (1 Corinthians 15:29): Insights from Archaeology and Anthropology,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 114 (1995) 679.

⁵Construing the “some” as being influenced by popular philosophy in the Greco-Roman world which tended to deprecate the human body of flesh is quite historically plausible, even probable. On this point I am in agreement with Dale Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University, 1995) 120-23. Construing the “some” in the audience in this way is also likely to be hermeneutically fruitful, since this very issue is still problematic for contemporary church communities. Paul’s answer to the “how” question in vv. 35-49 is beyond the scope of this article, except to note that he uses persuasive imagery there that converges nicely with his imagery in vv. 20-28.

⁶By “narrative world” I mean that there is an underlying narrative substructure presupposed by Paul’s discourse which gives a narrative shape to reality as he understands it. Only portions of it emerge explicitly in 1 Corinthians 15, e.g., in the narration of Christ’s activities in vv. 3-8, in the reference to Adam in vv. 22 and 45, and in the narration of final things in vv. 23-28 and 51-55. This fragmentarily expressed underlying “narrative world” shapes the logic of his discourse significantly. For a sustained attempt to interpret all of Paul’s context-specific discourse in terms of a narrative based framework, see Ben Witherington III, *Paul’s Narrative Thought World: The Tapestry of Tragedy and Triumph* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994).

in the kerygmatic formula of vv. 3b-5 and represent "the gospel" in which all the audience is currently standing, although Paul leaves open for them the "impossible possibility" that in spite of their having come to faith and continuing to hold fast the gospel, it all may be "in vain" (v. 2). This gospel is constituted by, among other things, a belief that Christ has been raised according to the scriptures (v. 4), an assumption shared in common by Paul and his audience.⁷ The connection of the events in vv. 3-4 with the scriptures makes it clear that the "gospel" in which the audience is currently standing is characterized by a view that scripture makes promises and keeps them. Hence, Paul assumes that his audience shares his conviction that scripture has a promissory character and its promises can be cited as reliable support for assertions about the future.

In vv. 12-19 he confronts the "some" not with a logical contradiction in their position, but with an incompatibility. That is, he asserts that there is some sort of incompatibility between their assertion that there is not going to be a future resurrection of the dead and the thesis to which they currently adhere, that Christ is raised (vv. 13, 16). While he does not give the "some" a warrant for this assertion in these verses, he details the consequences that will follow if he is correct, consequences Paul's rhetoric assumes the audience would find disturbing.

Verses 20-28 are not an irrelevant digression with little connection to vv. 12-19 or to the rhetorical situation as a whole. On the contrary, they provide a warrant for his assertion of incompatibility in v. 13. In them he offers the "some" rhetorical vehicles or warrants which act as the middle term between Christ's resurrection and a future resurrection of the dead. Verses 20-28 represent the heart of Paul's argument. Here he begins to reconstruct reality for the "some" in order to compel them to transfer the adherence they have to the thesis that Christ is raised to the conclusion that there is going to be a future resurrection of the dead.

He begins this process with the following statement: "But now Christ is raised from the dead and is the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep." There is an inherent analogy here, that the risen Christ is to those who have died as firstfruits is to the potential crops yet to be harvested, but saying this does not exhaust the meaning of this new metaphor nor does it adequately explain the way it works in terms of its persuasive power. Paul is not just dressing up his speech in decorative garb, but is allowing the audience to discover something new for themselves so that they become active participants in the process of rhetorically constructing the middle term between Christ's resurrection and a future resurrection of the dead. "In such [metaphorical] talk, a certain reality is expressed through possibilities in such a way that this possibility leads forcefully to the discovery of a new dimension of reality."⁸ In Paul Ricoeur's terms, the new thing that is taking

⁷It cannot be stressed strongly enough that the issue in this chapter (especially in vv. 12-19) is not whether or not Christ has been raised but whether there will be a future resurrection of the dead. For a more detailed defense of the assertions made in the text and the translation upon which they are based see the relevant comments regarding the verses referred to in my "Resurrection Rhetoric: A Rhetorical Analysis of 1 Corinthians 15" (Th.D. diss., Luther Seminary, 1994).

⁸Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 291.

place in Paul's use of this metaphor is nothing less than a new semantic event which has the power to redescribe reality for the audience.⁹ The use of metaphor as a tool of argumentation may be the best way of reconstructing reality, one that allows certain connections to be made that are not logically necessary in the audience's present view of reality. But how does it work in this context?

The firstfruits metaphor does not prove the existence of a future resurrection, but by forging a correspondence between the already known (the phenomenon of firstfruits) and the unknown (the connection between Christ's resurrection and the future resurrection of the dead), it creates for the audience a possible way of viewing the world as they had not viewed it before this speech event. The correspondence here is not one that draws logically precise lines between the known and the unknown.¹⁰ But even so, Paul's use of "firstfruits" to predicate something about Christ is especially suited to opening the audience up to the possibility of imagining their own narrative world as one where the resurrection of Christ is connected to the future resurrection of the dead. This is because the term "firstfruits" itself has a narrative structure similar to the story of Christ that Paul has already narrated. That is, when he uses Christ as one term of the metaphor of v. 20, there is something about the other term, "firstfruits," that presumes the story about Christ already adhered to by the audience, i.e., he died, was buried, and was raised (vv. 3-4). The latter term implies a roughly similar narrative in that for "firstfruits" to have been produced, a seed must have "died," have been sown (buried), and then raised up as a crop.¹¹

With this metaphor, Paul takes a part of the narrative world he shares with all his audience (the story of Christ) and a part of the narrative world that the "some" do not share (a future resurrection of the dead) and coalesces them in a single word,¹² "firstfruits." With the one word he offers the "some" a new lens through which to view part of the narrative world they share in common with him. Since it fits the structure of Christ's story as already narrated by Paul and adhered to by the audience, it initially offers the "some" what appears to be a natural and compelling imaginative bridge into Paul's narrative world. If Paul is able to persuade them to view Christ's story through the lens created by the new metaphor of firstfruits, reality will be restructured for the audience in such a way that Christ's resurrection makes them expect a future resurrection as a matter of course. He attempts to persuade them of this very thing in the verses that follow.

⁹"Metaphor is the rhetorical process by which discourse unleashes the power that certain fictions have to redescribe reality" (Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language* [Toronto: University of Toronto, 1977] 7).

¹⁰Ricoeur draws attention to the tension that remains between the two terms of a metaphorical statement, i.e., to the logical distance preserved in metaphorical proximity (ibid., 247-56).

¹¹Paul implies this process in vv. 36-38, although it is not clear whether the "dying" happens before or after the seed is sown. The way the imagery functions in this chapter argues for the latter. In any case I am only arguing for a similarity between the narrative presumed by the term firstfruits and the story of Christ that Paul has narrated earlier. I am not arguing for logically precise parallels.

¹²This is similar to how Jüngel speaks about metaphor's ability to "coalesce the narrative in a single word" (289).

In vv. 23-28 he supports the appropriateness of this metaphor by: (1) highlighting overlapping portions of his and his audience's narrative world, in particular those portions that relate to "the beginning" and "the end" and (2) creating another metaphor from scriptural implications (of Pss 110 and 8) that not only makes sense of their current communal experience, but in light of that experience also makes sense of "the end."

In vv. 21-22 Paul argues for viewing the story of Christ through the lens of the firstfruits metaphor by appealing to what amounts to "the beginning" in both his narrative world and that of his audience. He appeals to his audience's adherence to the interpretation of the story in Genesis 2-3 that death somehow came through a man,¹³ in order to open them up to the possibility of imagining Christ's story in a symmetrical but inverse way. He is pointing out to the "some" that in their own understanding of "the beginning" they already have the narrative logic in place that would accommodate their viewing Christ as the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. Since they already imagine the story of the first man, Adam, as death's point of entry into the world, a similar narrative logic would allow them to imagine the story of the first man who experienced a resurrection of the dead, Christ, as the entry point of the resurrection of the dead into the world.

One of the rhetorical effects of structuring the argument in vv. 21-22 as Paul has done is to make the terms of 21a and 22a (death/are continuing to die) parallel and the terms of 21b and 22b (resurrection of the dead/will be made alive) parallel. In addition, he sets up the two sets of terms as reciprocal. In both sets of terms the former is the noun which implies the specific action of the verb in the latter term.

In vv. 23-28 Paul deftly moves from highlighting "the beginning" to highlighting another point at which his narrative world overlaps to some degree with that of his audience: "the end." The way Paul uses language related to the eschaton in other places in 1 Corinthians, not arguing for it but assuming his mentioning of it carries some type of persuasive weight, shows that he construes his audience as one that believes there will be an "end" (1:7-8; 10:11) on the "day of the Lord," when Christ returns accompanied by judgment (1:7-8; 3:13; 5:5) and the reign of God (6:9-10; 15:50).¹⁴ After saying in 22b that all will be made alive, Paul uses v. 23 as a transition statement to connect the metaphor of Christ as firstfruits to "the end." But before repeating the metaphor he begins the verse with a phrase that modifies ζωοποιηθήσονται ("will be made alive" v. 22b): "All will be made alive," Paul says, "but each in his/her own τάγμα (order)." Used in the New Testament

¹³By opening v. 21a with the clause "For since death came through a man," Paul assumes it to have some persuasive weight with his audience, providing some type of support for his conclusion in v. 21b, "the resurrection of the dead also comes through a man." Hence, Paul assumes his audience's knowledge of (note his use of the name Adam in v. 22 with no explanation of who he is), and adherence to, this interpretation of Genesis 2-3. Although the logic of these verses could be explained on the basis of some large pre-formed myth or construct associated with "Adamic Christology," such a reading is not only historically open to challenge but is not needed to make sense of Paul's argument here.

¹⁴Hence, while it might be possible to describe the audience implied by Paul's rhetoric in terms of the phrase, "overheated spirituality," I do not believe that it is accurate to attribute to them some form of "realized eschatology."

only here, τάγμα is usually translated into English as “order” or “rank.” This is correct as far as it goes, but Paul is doing more here rhetorically than simply communicating information about the order in which all will be made alive.

Paul’s use of the word τάγμα in the context of vv. 23-28 connotes more than simply “order” or “rank.” In literature roughly contemporaneous with Paul – although it is not unusual to find it referring to a general order, rank, or arrangement – by far the most common usage of τάγμα is to refer to an organized body of soldiers in a military context such as a Roman legion.¹⁵ This not to argue that Paul is explicitly using τάγμα in its most common usage to refer to a body of soldiers. Words take their primary meaning from their context, not from the way they are used in the majority of cases in other literature. And in this case, the ordering language of the immediate context – “Christ is *firstfruits*, *then...*” – clearly indicates that τάγμα denotes, and should be translated, “order” or “rank.” However, the fact that it is used so commonly in military contexts allows it to have a polyvalent character here with military connotations. This is because Paul paints the narrative of “the end” in vv. 23-28 with the imagery of warfare. Destruction of every rule, authority, and power, placing enemies under one’s feet, destruction and subjection of enemies, and the voluntary subjection of one’s self to the command of another can all be military imagery. None of these words or phrases necessarily carry a military connotation. But when used in conjunction with one another and in the context of action against an enemy or enemies, they give the context of vv. 23-28 a definite military/warfare coloring. Thus, when τάγμα appears in the context colored by this complex of terms, its polyvalent character allows some of its own military connotations to be generated.

As vv. 23-28 unfold with Paul highlighting the warfare aspect of the end, his initial use of τάγμα begins to create the imagery that Christ, by virtue of the action of being made alive in the form of a bodily resurrection, is the first wave or τάγμα on the front line of military action, anticipating a corresponding action for those who have fallen asleep in him when they come marching forth in a second wave or τάγμα. By using the word τάγμα in v. 23 to describe the order of the action that is inherent in the firstfruits metaphor (namely, “being made alive”), Paul brings about an interaction, or more specifically, a convergence, between the firstfruits metaphor and the end as seen through the lens of warfare. In v. 23, then, Paul is not simply communicating information, but rhetorically creating a connection between the firstfruits metaphor and another portion of the audience’s narrative world, namely that portion they identify as “the end.” This begins to give his overall argument a certain coherence augmenting its persuasive power.

But if Paul is going to establish the firstfruits metaphor as the lens through which they should view Christ’s story and their own, his arguments must not only cohere but must ring true in light of his audience’s current communal experience. To facilitate this, Paul creates another metaphor in v. 26, this time drawing it from

¹⁵H. G. Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1940) 1752. For specific examples of both usages, see my “Resurrection Rhetoric,” 141, notes 76 and 77.

what he takes to be the scriptural implications of two well-known Psalms (110 and 8), namely, "Death is the last enemy that is going to be destroyed." To an audience that holds to the conviction that scripture makes promises and keeps them, sandwiching this declaration between two clauses from these psalms not only makes Paul's portrayal of "the end" as warfare seem natural; it also works to give the metaphor itself a promissory character based on scriptural support. But does the metaphor ring true in light of the audience's concrete experience within their community? Elsewhere in 1 Corinthians, Paul has already given clues as to how he construes his audience's view of death. In general they view death with some anxiety and in a negative light, and as a community are continuing to experience its ravaging effects and the destructive powers it unleashes (11:30).¹⁶ Even with their belief in existence after death in some form, he expects the metaphor of death as an enemy yet to be destroyed to ring true to the audience's experience. Hence, for the "some" already expecting the coming of Christ at "the end" but not expecting a future resurrection, this metaphor creates a possible new way of viewing the future that has an anchor in the way they already experience their present. It forges a correspondence between the already known (their present experience of the powerful, ravaging effects of death) and what to the "some" is an unknown (its status as a power yet to be destroyed along with others at the end).

Paul has subtly prepared his audience for this metaphor by describing the order inherent in the action of the verb in v. 22, ζωοποιηθήσονται ("will be made alive"), with the word τάγμα. Surrounded by the other military language, this naturally implies that an enemy is required in the scenario. And since Paul has already set up these two sets of terms – death/are continuing to die and resurrection of the dead/will be made alive – as reciprocal to each other, death would be the natural candidate to fill the role as the required enemy. When the warfare aspect of "the end" is highlighted, to ignore the metaphor of Christ as firstfruits would be to leave death on the battlefield wreaking its havoc. If Christ's resurrection does not represent the first τάγμα on the front line of military action against death to be followed by a second τάγμα of raised humanity, death's scripturally promised defeat will not come at the end. This means that *all* things will not be subjected to Christ which in turn means that God's reign will not come about after all (vv. 27-28). Such consequences are incompatible with the audience's views that scripture makes promises and keeps them and that "the end" includes a reign of God that can somehow be "inherited." Unless they want to live with these incompatibilities, the "some" must allow their narrative world to be restructured with the firstfruits metaphor, which allows a defeat of death as the last enemy by means of a future resurrection of the dead. They must cross the rhetorical bridge Paul has

¹⁶In 11:27f. Paul is trying to persuade his audience not to engage in a particular type of behavior at the Lord's supper and in doing so delineates such behavior's obviously negative consequences as weakness, sickness, and *death*. For his rhetoric to work, he assumes these consequences would have negative connotations in his audience's eyes. His rhetoric in 9:15 also assumes that death has negative connotations in his audience's eyes.

constructed from their narrative world to his own understanding of Christ as the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.

III. CONCLUSION

Paul's rhetorical strategy in vv. 20-28 can be summarized as follows. Since the firstfruits metaphor fits the structure of Christ's story as previously narrated by Paul (vv. 3b-5) and adhered to by the audience, it initially offers the "some" what appears to be a natural and compelling imaginative bridge into Paul's narrative world. In order to persuade them of its truthfulness, he shows them that the firstfruits metaphor converges with the way they already imagine "the beginning" in their narrative world. That is, since they imagine the story of the first man, Adam, as death's point of entry into the world, they already have the narrative logic in place that would accommodate their viewing Christ as the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. In light of their continuing experience of the present ravaging effects of death in their community, the firstfruits metaphor also makes sense of "the end" in their narrative world, particularly when its warfare aspect is highlighted. Death may have been dealt a blow in Christ's resurrection, but unless they imagine Christ's story in terms of firstfruits, it remains on the battlefield at "the end," which is incompatible with scripture's promise that *all* things will be subjected to Christ and also with their conviction that "the end" includes a reign of God. In a word, with the firstfruits metaphor, Paul has offered the "some" a compelling restructuring of reality in which God is directing this present world to an end which inevitably includes a future resurrection, an end where Christ's story is their story.¹⁷

In a world where death continues to wreak its havoc, even in many of our Christian communities there are "some" who no longer know, or are at least confused about, what our destiny is, or "what is to come of us." 1 Corinthians 15 encounters them with a world that has the power to persuade them that a future resurrection of the dead is that destiny. It has the power to sweep them up into the implied audience and into a narratable world that God is directing toward an end that will inevitably include a future resurrection. When the church lives as truly believing itself to inhabit this world, its gatherings can be events of shared apocalyptic vision where we behold our destiny and see what is to come of us.¹⁸ This is a world into which outsiders may be drawn by the Holy Spirit, where Christ's story becomes their story, a world where Christ is indeed the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. ⊕

¹⁷Note that this is one of the effects of describing the future resurrection body with seed imagery (vv. 36-38) which converges nicely with the imagery inherent in the firstfruits metaphor. Note also the imagery used in vv. 47-49.

¹⁸This language is from Robert Jenson, "How the World Lost Its Story," *First Things* 36 (October 1993) 24.