

Chapter 13: Philippians & Philemon

I. Rhetorical Reading: Johan S. Vos, "Philippians 1:12-26 and the Rhetoric of Success."

Various interpreters have noted Paul's use of military language in Phil. 1:27-30. Vos argues that Paul already in 1:12-26 resorts to a rhetorical strategy recommended in the classical military handbooks: proclaim success in the middle of the battle to encourage others to actually win the battle.

In his *Strategicus* [The General] 23.1, Onasander recommends that the general, if he happens to be on the right wing, should call out to his men: "Our left wing is defeating the right wing of the enemy." If he is on the left he should say that the right wing is winning, "whether this is true or not." When the leader of the enemy is some distance away, he should call out "The general of the enemy has been killed..." The effect will be that his soldiers are encouraged and doubly eager to fight, while the enemy loses heart . . . We can term this the "rhetoric of success" or perhaps even the "rhetoric of victory." The essence of this rhetoric is that the faith in the success is a decisive power in the achievement of the success.

Paul writes his letter to the Philippians in a rather difficult situation: he is in prison and the outcome of his trial could lead to his death or acquittal. Moreover, some of the Christian preachers at the place of his imprisonment are hostile towards him. In the eyes of Paul, they do not proclaim Christ sincerely, but intend to increase his suffering in his imprisonment (1:17). In this situation Paul uses the rhetorical strategy of interpreting all the negative facts in a positive way: his imprisonment was not a hindrance for his missionary work but has actually served to advance his gospel: a) Throughout the whole *Praetorium* it has become clear that his imprisonment has to do with the Gospel of Christ; through this imprisonment most of his brothers in Christ have been encouraged to speak the word of God more fearlessly. b) Even if the proclamation of some of the brethren is from false motives, the important thing and a reason for rejoicing is that Christ is preached. c) Paul knows that this situation will turn out to his deliverance: whether by life or by death, Christ will be exalted through him.

Differently from Onasander's general, Paul does not distort the facts as such, but his selection and interpretation of the facts have the same function as the military rhetoric of success: he tries to encourage those who are fighting at his side (cf. 1:27) by transforming all negative factors into positive ones. The aim of his rhetoric of success is [to strengthen them]: the Philippian church is in a situation similar to that of Paul himself is. It is threatened by persecutions and by opponents. Paul wants them to be courageous, not intimidated by the opponents and striving side by side for the faith of the gospel.

Questions:

1. What do you think about the ethics of this type of military rhetoric?

2. How might Paul's eschatological view of Christ's ultimate victory influence this rhetoric?

II. Rhetorical Reading at Work: Chiasmic Structure as Key to the Persuasive Point of Philemon

John P. Heil, "The Chiasmic Structure and Meaning of Paul's Letter to Philemon," *Biblica* 82 (2001) 178-206.

Heil proposes a new **chiasmic** (in content, A-B-C-D-E-D'-C'-B'-A') structure for Paul's letter to Philemon. The center and pivot of the chiasm, "but without your consent I resolved to do nothing, so that your good might not be as under compulsion but rather under benevolence" (v. 14), indicates the letter's purpose. Paul wants Philemon to give his former slave Onesimus back to Paul as a beloved brother and fellow worker.

Many surmise that what Paul wants of Philemon is unclear. The chiasmic structure of the letter, however, indicates not only what Paul wants from Philemon, namely, Onesimus to serve on his behalf in the work of the gospel (v. 13), but also why he wants it, namely, as a further good that Philemon can do under benevolence (v. 14) for Paul and the holy ones based on love and in response to grace.

In the A unit (vv. 1-3) of the chiasm Paul's greeting as a prisoner of Christ Jesus places the audience of the letter within a framework of God's grace. In response to this grace Paul in the B unit (vv. 4-7) thanks God in his prayers for Philemon's faithful love toward the holy ones, suggesting that as partners they can do a further 'good' for Christ. On the basis of love Paul as an old man and prisoner of Christ Jesus appeals for his 'child' Onesimus in the C unit (vv. 8-10). In the D unit (vv. 11-13) Paul indicates that he would like Onesimus, his very heart, who as a Christian has become 'useful' to both Philemon and Paul, to serve Paul on behalf of Philemon in the work of the gospel. The first half of the chiasm reaches its climax in the E unit (v. 14) with Paul's resolve that the 'good' that Philemon can do in granting him Onesimus be under benevolence.

As the center and pivotal point of the chiasm, the E unit (v. 14) serves as the dominant motivation for the development of Paul's appeal in the second half. Through inverse parallelism with the D unit, in which Paul wants to keep Onesimus for himself, the D' unit (vv. 15-17) suggests that Philemon can have Onesimus back forever by giving him back to Paul after welcoming him as a beloved brother and as a partner like Paul himself. In the C' unit (vv. 18-19) Paul himself offers to pay any debts of his 'child' for whom he appealed in the C unit, Onesimus, but reminds Philemon that he more than owes Paul his very self, thus suggesting Onesimus as payment. Paul in the B' unit (vv. 20-22) wants his 'brother' Philemon to refresh his heart (Onesimus), as he refreshed the hearts of the holy ones in the B unit; in reciprocal and complementary correspondence to Paul's prayers of thanks for grace (B unit), Paul hopes through the prayers of the assembly to be granted to them from grace as further motivation and occasion for Philemon graciously to grant Onesimus to Paul (B' unit). The greetings of grace to the entire assembly that frame the letter in the A and A' (vv. 23-25) units provide the ultimate motivation for Philemon to grant Onesimus to Paul under the benevolence of grace.