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978-0-521-19795-3 - Paul, the Corinthians and the Birth of Christian Hermeneutics

Margaret M. Mitchell

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

*The Corinthian diolkos: passageway to early
Christian biblical interpretation*

Sometime in the last quarter of the fourth century, at the request of Olympias, deaconess at Constantinople, Gregory of Nyssa penned an opening to his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*. In the very first sentences of the Prologue he sets his work within an exegetical *agôn*, a conflict or trial, between two current approaches to biblical interpretation, the “literal” and the “allegorical”:

Since some ecclesiastics deem it right to stand always by the literal meaning (*lexis*)¹ of the holy scripture and do not agree that anything in it was said through enigmas and allegories (*ainigmata kai hyponoiai*) for our benefit (*ôpheleia*), I consider it necessary first to speak in defense (*apologeisthai*) of these things to those who bring such accusations against us, because in our view there is nothing unreasonable in our seriously studying all possible means of tracking down the benefit (*ôphelimon*) to be had from the divinely inspired scripture.

Casting himself as the defender of allegory against its accusers, Gregory’s first step is to invoke the standard rhetorical appeal to *ôpheleia/utilitas* as the measure of a sound and salutary interpretation. He develops the point into a rule, as follows:

Therefore, if indeed the literal meaning (*lexis*), understood as it is spoken (*hôs eirêtai nooumenê*), should offer some benefit, we will have readily at hand what we need to make the object of our attention. But if something that is said in a hidden fashion (*meta epikrypsêôs*), with certain allegories and enigmas (*hyponoiai kai ainigmata*), should yield nothing of benefit according to the readily apparent sense (*to procheiron noêma*), we will turn such words as these over and over in our mind. This is just how the Logos that teaches us in Proverbs² has instructed us to understand what is said as either a parable (*parabolê*) or a dark saying (*skoteinos logos*) or a word of the wise (*rhêsis sophôn*), or as one of the enigmas (*ainigmata*) (Prov 1:6). When it comes to the insightful reading (*theôria*) of such passages that comes via the elevated sense (*anagogê*), we shall not beg to differ at all about its name – whether one wishes to call it *tropologia*, *allêgoria*, or anything else – but only about whether it contains meanings that are beneficial (*ta epôphelê noêmata*).

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Thus far the Cappadocian has given his own clear statement of principle, disregarding terminological borderlines and urging the quest for the useful reading above all,³ whether it can be found in the “literal” reading or must be delved for in the figurative. The Logos itself attests a predisposition for generic diversity (as the Proverbs passage shows), but Gregory is speaking not so much about compositional allegory as about interpretive allegory.⁴ So how will he be able to justify from the exegete’s side the insistence on the supra-literal sense as more than a personal preference or whim? Like many a trial lawyer before and since, Gregory brings forward precedent, pre-eminent precedent:

For indeed the great apostle (*ho megas apostolos*), when he said the law was “spiritual” (Rom 7:14), and encompassed in the word “law” also the historical narratives (*ta historika diëgēmata*) . . .⁵ employed his exegesis in accordance with what suited him, with an eye to what would be beneficial (*kechrêtai men tê exêgêsei kata to areskon autô pros to ôphelimon blepôn*). But he was not concerned with the name (*onoma*) by which he necessarily had to dub the form of interpretation [he used]. Rather, in one instance (*nun men*) he said he “altered his voice”⁶ (Gal 4:20), when he was going to translate the narrative into a proof (*metagein tèn historian eis endeixin*) of the divine plan about the covenants. But then, after mentioning the two children of Abraham – those born from the slave girl and from the free – he named the *theôria* reading about them an “allegory” (*allêgoria*) (Gal 4:24).

The route to early Christian defense of non-literal reading (by whatever name), it seems, goes straight through the *corpus Paulinum*.⁷ What the “great apostle” exemplifies for Gregory⁸ is strategic hermeneutical and terminological adaptability, as focused always on a single purpose: the utility for the hearer. If Paul forms the centerpiece of the defense of interpretive adaptability, it is the continuation of the above passage that points to where the center of Paul’s own hermeneutical circulatory system is to be found:

But on still another occasion (*palin de*), after Paul narrated some events of a story, he said, “these things happened to them *tyrikôs* (‘by way of example’), but were written for our admonition” (1 Cor 10:11). And again, after saying that the plowing ox should not be muzzled (Deut 25:4, quoted in 1 Cor 9:9), he added to it, “God does not care about the oxen,” but that “for our sakes entirely this was written” (1 Cor 9:9–10).¹⁰ And in another place he calls less distinct perception (*amydrotera katanoësis*) and knowledge that is partial (*ek merous gnôsis*) a mirrored reflection and enigma (*esopteron . . . kai ainigma*) (1 Cor 13:12). And still again he calls the process of shifting away from material matters and toward spiritual matters a “turning to the Lord” and “taking away of a veil” (paraphrase of 2 Cor 3:16, citing Exod 34:34). In all these different tropes (*tropoi*) and terms for the *theôria*-meaning (*hê kata ton noun theôria*),¹¹ Paul instructs us in a single form of teaching (*ben didaskalias eidos*): it is not necessary always to remain in the letter (*paramenein tô*

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grammati), on the grounds that the immediately apparent meaning of the things said (*tês procheirou tôn legomenôn emphaseôs*) in many instances causes us harm in the pursuit of the life of virtue. But (in that case) it is necessary to pass over to the incorporeal and spiritually intelligible reading with insight (*hê aiûlos te kai noêtê theôria*), with the result that the more corporeal meanings (*sômatikôtêrai ennoiai*) are converted to an intellectual sense and meaning (*nous kai dianoia*), in the same way that the dust of the more fleshly significance¹² (*sarkôdestera emphasis*) of what is said is “shaken off” (Matt 10:14). This is why Paul says, “the letter kills, but the spirit gives life” (*to gramma apokteinei, to de pneuma zôopoiei*) (2 Cor 3:6), since oftentimes with biblical narrative (*historia*), it will not provide us with examples (*hypodeigmata*) of a good life if we stop short at the simple events (*pragmata*).¹³

Gregory’s invocation of Pauline example offers one *men* and five *de* examples,¹⁴ thereby qualifying one phrase in Gal 4:24 with five passages from the Corinthian correspondence.¹⁵ The infamous Galatians participle *allégoroumena* is cited by Gregory as just one of many terms the apostle used for his readings, and indeed, he presents it as outweighed and, most importantly, *both interpreted and exemplified by the Corinthian passages*.¹⁶ Obviously it is *allégoria* that is the problematic word in his context, because of its association with “pagan,” i.e. Stoic and Platonic, exegesis, and with Origen, whom Gregory will name explicitly only later, at the close of the Prologue. But it is also the question of license and authority. To paraphrase another New Testament query: “by what authority do you do these things?”¹⁷ stands as the standard accusation against allegorical exegesis that Gregory attempts here to refute. This string of Pauline quotations, adduced as proof in his own *apologia* for *allégoria*, gives Gregory strong ammunition for a tradition of early Christian figural reading in the example of the “great apostle” – not because he was a single-minded “allegorist,”¹⁸ but because he was a tactically and pastorally variable interpreter. If benefit can be found in the apparent sense, then it is all right to rest there; but when that is not the case, the interpreter must use other methods, variously denominated, to turn the phrases over in his mind. The main proposition of Gregory’s argument can be simply put: Paul engaged in argumentation with scripture that was rhetorical, i.e. geared toward proving the argument at hand with an eye to what was expedient in that context (*pros to ôphelimon blepôn*). And that is of course precisely what Gregory himself is doing here, as a rhetorical interpreter of a rhetorical apostle, both united in a common quest *to make use of the exegesis in accordance with what suits them as they look to what would be beneficial for the moment and for their audience*.

The core of this proof in defense of non-literal readings is a cascade of five passages in a row from the Corinthian letters. Ronald Heine, in

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a fine article, has pointed out that in this argument Gregory is heavily dependent upon Origen, citing six of the eight passages that Origen also drew upon consistently, throughout his writings, to defend non-literal reading of scripture: Rom 7:14; 1 Cor 2:10; 2:16 and 12; 9:9–10; 10:11; 2 Cor 3:6; 3:15–16; and Gal 4:24.¹⁹ What he does not note or seek to explain is the striking fact that *six of the eight passages come from Paul's Corinthian correspondence*.

Why, I wish to ask, would the road to early Christian hermeneutics run through Corinth? Why, to switch metaphors, is the hermeneutical heart of the literary corpus of the early church's "great apostle" in this particular set of letters? Having taken our start from about 340 years out (a kind of Google Earth, or perhaps Google ecclesiastical, view), let us go back and tell the story from the other direction, forward from the very beginning . . .

The greatest wordsmith in the first Christian generation probably approached the city of Corinth from the east, from Cenchreae on a day sometime in the final years of the reign of Claudius, early in the 50s. This Roman-rebuilt city on the isthmus between the Saronic and Corinthian gulfs was famous for its *diolkos*. As Strabo tells it: "Corinth is said to be wealthy on account of commerce, since the city is situated on the isthmus, and is master of two harbors – one being near to Asia, and the other to Italy . . . and it makes exchanges of cargo from one direction to the other easy for partners who stand so far apart."²⁰ Corinth was the conduit between east and west; here cargo of all sorts (human, animal, organic and manufactured, commercial and cultural) was dragged on a worn pathway, the *diolkos*, allowing transit from the Aegean to the Adriatic, from Asia to Italy. What a perfect place for the Christian Hermes (as Luke will later name him in a telling jest²¹) to set up shop.

Later our wordsmith would recast his initial visit using the customary rhetor's *topos*: no real wizard with words, indeed (like Demosthenes) trembling in his sandals, and out of his natural element, he delivered a message that stood not on logical or rhetorical proof, but on the demonstration of the spirit and of power (1 Cor 2:1–5). And yet, despite the anti-rhetorical rhetoric, it was inescapably a verbal proclamation, a *logos* and a *kêrygma*, that he brought, a one-man verbal, visual and biographical re-presentation of Jesus Christ crucified. The proximate result was apparently what he had hoped: some heard, put their trust in his account, and joined the self-styled apostle and his lord in baptism – enough to be called (if perhaps somewhat grandiosely) an *ekklêsia*, "assembly." The long-range result was even more astounding; as Averil Cameron put it in her masterful book, *Christianity*

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and the Rhetoric of Empire: “Paul, who had never seen Jesus and whose writings are earlier than the first of the Gospels, *established the precedent that Christianity was to be a matter of articulation and interpretation.*”²² This precedent, I believe, was most firmly established in the Corinthian correspondence.

Though he denies his power as wordsmith, Paul does later from a distance claim metaphorical distinction as a “wise master-builder” (*sophos architekton*). Without the self-effacement he had used earlier, in ch. 3, when comparing himself with Apollos (and perhaps Cephas), Paul is adamant that he was their founder; he was the one who, like a wise master-builder, laid the foundation – the only foundation that could be laid: Jesus Christ crucified. And yet as the letter proceeds we learn that the foundation itself is set in words; it lies on a scriptural subfloor without which Jesus Christ crucified would be an unmarked grave under an undeveloped plot. Paul was the first Christian lexicographer, crafting a language for these Gentile Jesus-spirit-infused people around the Mediterranean basin of the first century. But he worked also to move those terms into sentences and paragraphs. He was the first Christian grammarian and rhetorician, as he styled himself, the teacher who moved children to adulthood (1 Cor 3:1–4); as master-builder he *crafted exegetical arguments* to support the astonishing narrative of how Jesus Christ was crucified and raised according to the will of God. The diction gravitates between longhand and shorthand, the rhetoric between appeals of dazzling clarity and tantalizing obscurity. In uncommonly long, personal, semi-public letters to the assemblies he founded Paul expounded and re-expounded the gospel and the story of its reception, a history being created in the very moment of its telling; at other times – indeed, near the end of the tortured interchanges with Corinth – Paul would compress the whole involved message into the smallest imaginable proportions – a three-letter, monosyllabic Greek word, *NAI!* Jesus, Paul said, as known through *his logos*, was God’s cosmic “YES” (2 Cor 1:19–20). No more words are needed, Paul says, in hermeneutical fatigue, but a divine cosmic monosyllable, to which the fit human response (as Paul’s libretto scores it) is equally concise: “Amen!”

But much lay in between the teeth-chattering timidity of the initial, putatively non-verbal gospel proclamation and its condensation into almost pre- (or post-)verbal grunts and nods perhaps two years later, *and all of it – and this is my key point – was occasioned and spurred on by conflict and misunderstanding.*²³

The first extant letter, which we know as “1 Corinthians,” is itself a response to a previous one by Paul that was in his view at least partly

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misapprehended (5:9–10), as well as to a letter in turn from some of the Corinthians that contained questions and perhaps queries about what Paul's prior written instructions might mean (7:1). In reply, Paul wrote this very long epistle (1 Corinthians), for which there is no proportional precedent among the extant earlier letters.²⁴ Apparently Paul had learned from his experience with the Thessalonians²⁵ both that he could be effective in the epistolary medium, and, perhaps the hard way, that his letters could also generate confusion and even alienation (attested even in 1 Thess 3:1–10). This prior experience, in conjunction with the complexity of the situation at Corinth (of which he had learned from various parties), may explain the extraordinary length of what is today a 16-chapter letter that Paul sent from Ephesus either by the hand of Timothy or timed to coincide with his visit there (1 Cor 16:8–10). Perhaps Paul learned from the Thessalonians, for instance, that three long and tortured sentences on marriage and sex (1 Thess 4:3–8) could cause more problems than they would solve (hence his extended chs. 6 and 7 in 1 Corinthians, and his avoidance of the term *skeuos!*).²⁶ Length itself may be an overt bid at clarity, at comprehensiveness, though even this huge letter says there are things it will not cover for now (11:34: "as for the other matters, I shall give instructions when I come"). And the more one says, the more one risks even more ambiguity and obfuscation.²⁷ Words get in the way, but they were, after all, the stock in trade of the missionary with a message to communicate. Deficient and tricky instruments, but still as indispensable as the ropes tugging the cargo across the Corinthian *diolkos*.

The Corinthian correspondence is a kind of epistolary novel; packaged as a pair of canonical letters, it is consequently an epistolary puzzle that requires reconstruction of the plot line and component parts. Such contextualization is necessary for all epistolary analysis, but acutely so in the case of this archive that has come down to us. What is most remarkable of all is the number of references to Paul's own prior letters and prior visits – the evidence with which all scholars work. In my judgment 1 Corinthians is a single unified letter, but the second canonical epistle is made up of what were originally five separate letters. I would like to acknowledge at the outset that many readers may not accept this partition, or any partition, of 2 Corinthians, and that is fine, because my main point in this book holds nonetheless: that Paul is in this correspondence (even if it is only two extant letters) responding to *some* earlier letters, even if we no longer have them. I would argue that a benefit of my proposal is that it better replicates the *genuine dynamism* involved in this vivid and heated exchange of letters, face-to-face encounters and divergent memories, and appreciates

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more fully the role the letters themselves played in the escalation of the conflict. But that is the case, or should be the case, I would insist, no matter what textual disposition (*hypothesis* or *oikonomia*²⁸) one adopts for reading this correspondence.

As I reconstruct the exchange of letters (on both literary and historical grounds),²⁹ after Paul had sent and they received 1 Corinthians, and presumably after some reactions to it reached him while likely in Macedonia, Paul wrote a letter now contained in 2 Corinthians 8 which fanned the flames of suspicion and irritation about Paul's having pushed forward the collection effort he now calls a *diakonia*, and usurped their prerogative by himself selecting and attesting the envoys who would carry the precious funds out of their hands and to Jerusalem. Indeed, some apparently noted the problem: that Paul had sent an authorizing letter for Titus and the brother – Paul, who had no such letters for himself! The next letter (now contained in 2 Corinthians 2:14–7:4)³⁰ responds to this umbrage with an impassioned self-defense of his diakonal dignity, with a keenly attuned and rhetorically risky argument that he did not need a text to authorize him (i.e. an *epistolê systatikê*, “letter of recommendation”), for the Spirit did that, as well as his own deficient body, which serves as proof that he is an “apostle,” since the one who sees him (apostle = envoy) sees the crucified Christ who sent him.

This letter went to Corinth while Paul himself journeyed from Macedonia toward Corinth; when he arrived he apparently received, at least at the hands of some, a humiliating reception, a disastrous and foreshortened visit which, in concert with the letter of self-defense for the maligned messenger, served to reinforce the incongruity between his “weighty” letters and “woefully weak” bodily presence (2 Cor 10:10). Apparently the Christian Hermes, unlike his pagan predecessor, was better on paper than in person. Since the body and living voice were unable to accomplish what the text also had not, Paul has no choice but to resort to language again, this time the self-styled “fighting words” in 2 Corinthians 10–13. Insisting that he had written the previous letter not in order to “tear them down” but rather to “build them up” (dressing himself once again in Jeremiah's words),³¹ Paul crafts a bitter and intensely clever argument that is meant to provide proof that he is indeed an apostle, as attested by both the requisite signs and necessary witnesses. Paul would later recall that, while waiting for this letter to be delivered by his trusty envoy, Titus, he paced to and fro, fretting about what effect his words would have. When Titus did not arrive in that city on the northwestern coast of Asia Minor, Paul, in a state of lover's distress, could not contain his anxiety, and sailed across to

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Macedonia (probably Thessaloniki, perhaps Neapolis) and there received both Titus and his report, a good news/bad news tale. On the one hand, Titus was able to tell Paul that his words to the Corinthians had had a very concrete result – repentance; on the other hand, the cost of that repentance was high – pain and grief that Paul had been so severe with those he was supposed to love (7:5–16), indeed, those whom he had himself called to be united in love in his second letter (the canonical 1 Corinthians). The remedy of harsh words had an additional sting yet again of disingenuousness and self-contradiction.

Now it was up to Paul to pick up the stylus one more time – the instrument that he had wielded as a weapon earlier was the only tool he had to assuage the grief he had caused. Only this time he writes a letter (now contained in 2 Cor 1:1–2:13; 7:5–16; 13:11–13) to confirm the restoration of the relationship, and offer an author’s grief commensurate to that of his readers – as proof that he did not willingly cause them harm. The very last piece of the correspondence is preserved in what is now 2 Corinthians 9, a final request to the Corinthians and indeed the whole Roman province of Achaia to seal their bond with him and with the Macedonians (whose example Paul had invoked to their anger and regional jealousy back in the early stages [2 Corinthians 8]) by joining in the collection effort for the saints in Jerusalem. Deliriously happy at this hard-fought outcome, Paul wraps up the whole correspondence with a benediction that can sit as a suitable caption under the whole for him: “Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift” (*anekdiêgêtos dôrea*). Now words completely fail to describe both the gift from the Corinthians (of money and of loyalty) and the gift from the deity of a joyous outcome. A communicative series that purportedly began with Paul tongue-tied perhaps suitably ends the same way – in oxymoronic apophatic expressionism.³² Back and forth over these six (surviving) letters, in the course of his sometimes tortured correspondence with the Corinthians, Paul negotiated and renegotiated the meanings of his prior utterances. As he did so, Paul was, as it turns out, not only honing arguments for later use in Galatians and Romans and beyond,³³ but was in effect fashioning the building blocks of Christian hermeneutics.

And yet he himself was working with existing materials. Paul’s message of Christ crucified (the *logos tou staurou*, “word of the cross”) was a claim that came with proof – scriptural proof. The four-episode version of Paul’s gospel narrative twice includes the refrain *kata tas graphas*, “according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor 15:3–4). The great wordsmith, therefore, was not only a writer but also a reader, an interpreter, of the scriptures of Israel.

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He reminds the Corinthians of that in this letter, doing so in shorthand fashion,³⁴ such that we can only speculate which passages in the Septuagint he called down as proof for the fact that “Christ died on behalf of our sins” or that “he has been raised on the third day” (1 Cor 15:3–4). Although the scriptural proofs that confirm the *euangelion* remain occluded behind his shorthand, Paul was not reticent, throughout the long argument that is 1 Corinthians or the series of shorter letters in 2 Corinthians, to draw continually on the scriptural record for justification of other arguments he sought to make, whether by inspiration, for ornamentation or for exemplification:³⁵ Isaiah’s dark warning against the wisdom of the wise (29:14, quoted in 1 Cor 1:19); Jeremiah’s counsel that boasting should be “in the Lord” (1 Cor 1:31, to reappear in 2 Cor 10:17); instructions for feeding oxen turned to the question of apostolic life-support (Deut 25:4; 1 Cor 9:9–10); the wilderness generation of Exodus and Numbers, who, baptized into Moses, grumbled and perished and presented, as Paul tells it, an admonitory allegory (*typoi*) for the Corinthians (Numbers 11, 16; 1 Cor 10:1–13); the argument that Christ is a new Adam, the heavenly man to match the earthly, by appeal to Gen 2:7 (1 Cor 15:45); the precedent of manna from heaven (Exod 16:18) to justify the requirement of divine distributive justice that calls forth Corinthian contributions to the collection for the saints in Jerusalem in 2 Cor 8:14–15; the cryptic statement in Ps 115:1, “I believed, therefore I spoke,” which supports Pauline spirit-propelled *parrêsia*³⁶ in 2 Cor 4:13; the judicial requirement for two or three witnesses to make an accusation stick, cited from Deut 19:15 in 2 Cor 13:1. The list goes on. These are just the tip of the iceberg of statements in 1 and 2 Corinthians where Paul interprets or invokes scripture that were to provide both exegetical terminology and exegetical precedent for early Christian biblical interpretation (of both “Old” and “New” Testaments) and set it on its own spiraling path of unending and complicated hermeneutical debates and disputes. The Corinthian correspondence is the *diolkos* carrying the cargo of hermeneutical tools from one end of the empire to another, from the first through the fourth centuries, and well beyond.

But Paul as we watch him at work in these letters was not only an interpreter of the sacred scriptures (*hai graphai*); indeed, many of his hermeneutical statements in the Corinthian correspondence, including perhaps the most famous (“the letter kills, but the spirit gives life” [*to gar gramma apoktennei, to de pneuma zôopoiei*], 2 Cor 3:6), have as their preliminary referent and purpose the defense of his own body, his gospel, and his *diakonia* against counter-statement, counter-evidence and willful or innocent misinterpretation. This was because for Paul both the scriptural text

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and his own body and life were epiphanic media,³⁷ subject to both direct and correct, or occluded and misperceived interpretation. The hermeneutical potency and legacy of the Corinthian correspondence, I would like to insist, is due to disputes over Paul's own self-interpretation and self-claims. We can see, therefore, that the history of Pauline interpretation begins with Paul himself, though it could never end there, since he *did not* and *does not* have complete control over his words and their meanings. Given the changing and changeable rhetorical circumstances that developed between Paul and the Corinthians, no single interpretive method would suffice for the task.

The apostle was "all things to all people" (1 Cor 9:23), not only in adapting his arguments to particular audiences (his *synkatabasis* or *oikonomia*),³⁸ but also in his tactical employment of a range of hermeneutical justifications for the proofs and evidence he summoned in support of particular points he wished to make in this succession of missives. *Paul's correspondence course in interpretation with the Corinthians was not an indoctrination into any single interpretive method (allegory or any other), but amounted to a set of carefully crafted and strategically delivered arguments by which they volleyed back and forth the meaning of words, episodes and relationships.* The most remarkable thing about the Corinthian correspondence is that, because we have a series of exchanges, we can see Paul interpret his own letters (and glimpse other readings by his addressees, which he disputes). I have argued previously, in a 2003 article entitled "The Corinthian Correspondence and the Birth of Pauline Hermeneutics," that modern scholars have been slow to accept what the Corinthian letters demonstrate: that Paul's letters do not and never did have a single, unambiguous meaning. Even in his own lifetime, Paul's letters – that most dynamic of genres – were disputed, his meaning contested and negotiated in the history of the ongoing relationship within which the letters were situated. In the process of negotiating his own meaning³⁹ – of prior letters, oral statements, idiosyncratic and potentially self-contradictory behaviors – Paul made recourse to rhetorical *topoi*⁴⁰ that justify the movement from text to sense, from the surface to the depths, from the visible to the invisible. This is why the Corinthian correspondence is in a real sense the birth of Pauline hermeneutics – because only here in the extant remains of Paul's letters can we see the process of writing, reading, rewriting, renegotiating words and reality unfold before our very eyes. It surely happened in other places, too, but only in Corinth⁴¹ can we trace the process in greater, if not full, detail.⁴² And, once these letters were enshrined in the *corpus Paulinum*, their hermeneutical proclivities were available for continual reappropriation.