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

Margaret M. Mitchell

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PAUL, THE CORINTHIANS
AND THE BIRTH OF
CHRISTIAN HERMENEUTICS

In a series of exchanges with the Corinthians in the mid-50s AD, Paul continually sought to define the meaning of his message, his body and his letters, at times insisting upon a literal understanding, at others urging the reader to move beyond the words to a deeper sense within. Proposing a fresh approach to early Christian exegesis, Margaret M. Mitchell shows how in the Corinthian letters Paul was fashioning the very principles that later authors would use to interpret all scripture. Originally delivered as the Speaker's Lectures in Biblical Studies at Oxford University, this volume re-creates the dynamism of the Pauline letters, in their immediate historical context and beyond it in their later use by patristic exegetes. An engagingly written, insightful demonstration of the hermeneutical impact of Paul's Corinthian correspondence on early Christian exegetes, it also illustrates a new way to think about the history of reception of biblical texts.

MARGARET M. MITCHELL is Dean and Professor of New Testament and Early Christian Literature at the University of Chicago Divinity School. She is the author of *The heavenly trumpet: John Chrysostom and the art of Pauline interpretation* (2002) and the co-editor (with Frances M. Young) of *The Cambridge history of Christianity, vol. 1: Origins to Constantine* (Cambridge, 2006).

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Jean McGowan MacDonald, *in memoriam*

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Preface

The present volume contains the text of the Speaker's Lectures in Biblical Studies, which I gave at the University of Oxford in Trinity Term of 2008. The six spoken talks appear here largely as they were delivered on that occasion. They are meant to be read as lectures, and as a series. The approach I take here, of "reading Paul backwards and forwards," is both in service of a particular historical argument about the hermeneutical impact of Paul's Corinthian letters on early Christian exegesis, and in illustration of another way to think about and represent the "history of reception" or *Wirkungsgeschichte* ("history of effects") of biblical texts. In particular what I seek to re-create in these lectures is a sense of the dynamism of the Pauline letters, both in their own immediate historical contexts and in their later role as active sacred scriptures for the late antique Christian movement. It is this interactive nature of Paul's epistles that some of the customary modes of explication, and in particular the commentary and its revived modern *catenae* of early Christian exegesis, have such a difficult time re-creating for the reader, as the multi-dimensional quality of that interaction becomes flattened to the linear dimensions of the written page. That method of collection and arrangement (important as it is) is also overly determined by the conceptualization of the enterprise as an examination of how early Christian interpreters *commented on* a given text, rather than how they *commented with* it. In these lectures I propose a new way of thinking about early Christian exegesis that takes the strategic and rhetorical quality of this interpretive work more seriously. The "agonistic paradigm of interpretation" that I propose both grounds early Christian exegesis in its native historical context (that of Greco-Roman rhetorical education) and offers a medial path between the rhetorical labels of "literal" and "allegorical" exegesis which are used as forms of self-identification and self-defense by early Christian authors, and all too often given a credulous acceptance and replication in contemporary accounts of ancient exegesis.

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In an attempt to trace a history of Christian hermeneutics forward and backward I also seek to explore other native categories (beyond the “literal”/“allegorical” divide) that were operative from very early on, such as the tension between the clear and the unclear, the testimonial and the mysterious, as already inaugurated by Paul in the remarkable series of letters he wrote to Corinth in the mid-50s. The story of Paul’s attempt to clarify the meaning of his letters to the Corinthians becomes, as we shall see, an inner-biblical process that fashioned a storehouse of hermeneutical principles from which his devoted followers in years to come would justify their own interpretive feats. The man who called himself “all things to all people” (1 Cor 9:22), that quintessential claim of strategic adaptability, was to become the patron and exemplar of an early Christian exegesis (extending throughout the Mediterranean landscape of late antiquity) that would emulate his interpretive variability. My argument takes to its logical conclusion the insistence in some earlier and much more recent scholarship on the rhetorical underpinnings of early Christian exegesis. This requires less of a systematic approach than is customarily the case (it does not separate out the Alexandrines from the Antiochenes), but it allows us also to appreciate the “live radio” quality of early Christian exegesis, and its quick-witted employment of biblical evidence for the case at hand. Proper understanding of the rhetorical techniques involved in ancient exegesis counsels appropriate caution about prematurely systematizing from any single moment of interpretation and the rationale given there. This is because such an understanding complicates in a useful and necessary way the dichotomy between theory and practice, since when we attend to ancient rhetorical “theory” in those “practical” handbooks of instruction, we see that literate people were taught to invoke the right “theory” at the right time in support of a particular interpretation, appealing either to the letter of the text or to its deeper intent. A common complaint against “allegory” (in antiquity as well as now) is that it is “arbitrary.” To the contrary, I seek to show that this is in fact the last thing figural exegesis is. But this is no less true for “literal” readings. All early Christian exegesis is strategic and adaptable, and all the elite authors knew what commonplaces to appeal to for readings that aligned with either side of the rhetorically constructed divide between readings that appealed “to the letter” and those that appealed “to the spirit.” The goal of ancient biblical interpretation was utility to the purpose at hand, however contextually defined. And this began with Paul.

I would like to thank Professor John Barton and the Speaker’s Lecture-ship committee of the University of Oxford for the invitation to deliver

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these lectures, and my host, Professor Christopher Rowland, for a most generous welcome, and memorable conversation on an array of topics, including the unthinkable hope that the junior senator from Illinois just might have a chance for the Presidency of the United States. A particular pleasure of the two weeks was the time for delightful renewed conversation about hermeneutics and New Testament theology with Professor Robert Morgan. Thanks are due also to Professors Christopher Tuckett, Markus Bockmuehl and John Muddiman, and the cohort of New Testament students for their hospitality and engagement with the lectures during my two weeks in residence. It was a special honor that my friend and colleague Professor Frances M. Young was in attendance at these lectures. Her enormous influence on my thinking, particularly from her own magnificent Speaker's Lectures of 1992/3, will I am sure be evident to the reader, even though we do part company on some essential issues.

I have been the beneficiary of careful reading of the manuscript, and stimulating conversation on the ideas in play here, by generous and keen scholarly friends, including Professors Hans Dieter Betz, Paul Brooks Duff, Robert M. Grant, Wayne A. Meeks, David P. Moessner, Ilaria Ramelli, Calvin Roetzel, Richard A. Rosengarten and Kathryn Tanner. In the interim between the delivery of the lectures and now I have had the pleasure to meet and engage in conversation with Professor Kathy Eden of Columbia University, whose work, as these pages show, has been very important in crystallizing my thinking here about the rhetorical underpinnings of early Christian exegesis. I would also like to thank the students in my seminar on Early Christian Biblical Interpretation at the University of Chicago in the winter of 2008, where I tested some of the ideas of these lectures through close reading of some of the key patristic sources, for their constructive and careful dialogue on the texts and ideas. My research assistant, Scott Bowie, gave me the benefit of his astute eye on proofreading, and on the Bibliography and reference checking, for which he deserves thanks.

I am grateful to my editor at Cambridge University Press, Laura Morris, for warm encouragement and able assistance throughout the publication process, and to Timothy Bartel for expert work in the copy-editing of this manuscript.

Special thanks are due to my husband, Rick Rosengarten, and our daughters Nora and Katie, for enduring my two-week absence while giving the lectures at Oxford and the many weeks more that I was lost in thought preparing them. Their love and patience are remarkable and enrich my life beyond measure.

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Individuals can change lives. Jean McGowan MacDonald, the college professor who first introduced me to the academic study of religion, and to biblical studies in particular, altered mine forever by her dazzling teaching and honesty in the quest for knowledge. She died on December 16, 2007. I have dedicated these lectures to Jean's memory, with love, admiration and continuing gratitude.

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Note on style

The emphasis in these lectures is on the primary sources, which I have translated in order to draw direct connections in the arguments and the terminology they use (all translations are my own, except as indicated). I have kept the Greek in transliterated form¹ so that readers, even those without skills in Greek, can both follow the direct allusions to scriptural passages by Greek patristic commentators and see how early Christian exegetical vocabulary is developed both from the existing literary-rhetorical culture and from biblical terminology (Pauline and other). The notes clarify some translation decisions, and also direct readers to the critical editions of the Greek text used. References to secondary literature are, in keeping with the lecture format, quite restricted. To a large degree these lectures represent a coming together of various strands of my own previous research in the Corinthian correspondence and in patristic exegesis of Paul, as the notes reflect. My indebtedness to and differences from a host of conversation partners, past and present, will nonetheless, I hope, be readily apparent.

¹ With this object in view, I shall as far as possible cite key terms (nouns) in the nominative case and verbs in the infinitive (but in other instances I render the full phrases in their inflected or conjugated form as they stand in the text).

Abbreviations

Full publication information may be found in the Bibliography.

BDAG	Bauer, Danker, Arndt and Gingrich (eds.), <i>A Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> , 3rd edn. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000)
BETL	Bibliotheca ephemeridum theologiarum lovaniensium
CCSG	Corpus christianorum, series graeca (Turnhout: Brepols, 1977–)
GCS	Die griechische christliche Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte (Berlin: Akademie Verlag)
GNO	<i>Gregorii Nysseni opera</i> , ed. Werner Jaeger (Leiden: Brill, 1952–)
LCL	Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press)
LPGL	Lampe, <i>A Patristic Greek Lexicon</i> (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961)
LSJ	Liddell, Scott and Jones, <i>A Greek–English Lexicon</i> , 9th edn. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940, suppl. 1968)
PG	<i>Patrologia graeca</i> , ed. J. P. Migne (Paris: Migne, 1844–64)
RGG	<i>Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart</i> , 4th edn. (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr/Paul Siebeck, 1998–2007)
SC	Sources chrétiennes (Paris: Éditions du Cerf)
VCSup	Supplements to <i>Vigiliae Christianae</i> (Leiden/Boston: Brill)
WGRW	Writings from the Greco-Roman World (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature)