

LETTER WRITING AND ORAL COMMUNICATION IN ANTIQUITY:

Suggested implications for the interpretation of Paul's letter to the Galatians

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Abstract

This paper aims at locating Pauline letter writing within the context of ancient communication in order to make the constraints of an orally based culture relevant to the understanding of his letters. The limited literacy prevailing in Greco-Roman times, letter writing in a scribal culture and the importance of oral performance are discussed. Paul's letter to the Galatians is briefly discussed with reference to how the letter establishes authority and verbal presence within an oral environment.

1. Introduction

Stowers, after providing a longish list of things people could do with letters in antiquity, remarks:

The study of early Christian letters has suffered because the letters have too often been forced into an interpretive mold formed by two questions: What theology does it contain, and what ideas was the author trying to defend or attack? The foregoing list suggests the vast multiplicity of things people did by means of letters. The list also illustrates that ancient letters will be difficult to understand on their own terms unless we also understand something about the contexts of Greco-Roman society in which the actions were performed and had their meanings (Stowers 1986:16).

This equivocal attitude towards contextualising can easily be illustrated by noting the influence of Deissmann's distinction between 'epistles' (carefully composed literary productions for general publication) and 'letters' (genuine correspondence addressed to specific persons and situations - Deissmann 1909:1-59; 1927:148-149, 230-245). Though Deissmann's influence led to a valid recognition of the situational character of Paul's letters, it, at the same time, drew attention away from questions about the form, structure and style of the letters. Deissmann himself saw a direct correlation between Paul's social situation and the form and style of his letters

(1927:240-241). The effect of seeing Paul's letters as non-literary was that they were 'conceived as salutation, thanksgiving, and closing, with virtually anything in any order in between' (Funk 1966a:252). But once the picture of Paul as a more sophisticated apologist took hold, the conviction grew that Paul composed his letters with self-conscious and subconscious concern with the conventions of Greco-Roman rhetoric and epistolography. Formal, structural and stylistic questions no longer seem inappropriate, and definitely not unimportant (witness the extensive range of literature dealing with these aspects of the Pauline letters). Yet, the context of ancient communication still remains peripheral to these studies.

Various scholars have pointed out the importance of attention to the overall function and structure of the letter as it existed in Paul's day; the necessity 'to compare and contrast the Christian epistle with its Hellenistic counterpart' (Funk 1966a:254; Vielhauer 1975:58-70; Stirewalt 1977; Bahr 1966, 1968; Bandstra 1968; Doty 1973; White 1983, 1984, 1986; Malherbe 1977; Stowers 1986). This investigation has been aided by excellent surveys from scholars outside the New Testament guild (such as Ussher 1988; Koskenniemi 1956) and has yielded some outstanding studies. A cautionary note or two is, however, in order. Despite the recent blossoming of interest, an immense amount of material has not yet been fully studied - and our ignorance remains, *volens nolens*, quite considerable. Furthermore, the tendency to study historical facets in isolation is amazingly strong. Valid interpretation is about relations, about context and contextualising. The recent growth of interest in sociological and cultural-anthropological research with regard to early Christianity is a healthy development, and hopefully more than a mere fad.

This study is a modest contribution to contextualising Paul's letter to the Galatians. It aims at explicating an often noted, but poorly developed, facet of Paul's letter writing. In literature discussing the letters of Paul, references to an oral context abound. So, for example, Malherbe, after pointing out that early Christian writings that have been preserved were not originally speeches, continues that, nevertheless, 'they were dictated (cf Rm 16:22) and intended to be read aloud to congregations (cf 1 Th 5:27; Rv 1:3), thus functioning like speeches or sermons, [meaning] that the writers were conscious of oral style' (Malherbe 1986:68).

2. Orality and scribality in Paul's world

The very first step needed for a responsible interpretation of ancient communication is clearing our minds of tacit assumptions. We must replace our misleading, modern literate view of ancient writing activities with a more responsible view that takes into account their historical, religious, intellectual and psychological situation.

In modern society, people are considered literate if they can read and write with minimal skill. A person is considered educated when one is a particularly proficient reader/writer. In Greco-Roman societies one could be educated without having the ability to read and write. In fact, being literate (proficient with texts) was not even necessarily connected to writing and reading oneself. Modern literacy is measured by minimum and utilitarian standards; ancient literacy was measured by maximum

and seemingly impractical standards. Literacy was at the time not a social factor in the marketplace.

One would think these matters are obvious - especially in view of the technological changes separating our societies from theirs - but vagueness and neglect of historical realia mark references to ancient literacy. We are misled by our prejudice towards the (*infinitesimal*) elite section of antiquity. This, in part, is the natural result of our choice of witnesses:

the ones most conveniently got at are those represented by their writings, or quoted or addressed in formal literature. They belong, then, to an elite who think in some respects like ourselves: Apuleius, for example, or Plutarch. They are distinguished by at least some years of education beyond the ABC's, therefore they had possessed at some point money sufficient to free themselves from the necessity of full-time labour. It was not out of the question for a man (never a woman) to earn the necessary money and leisure out of a working-class background, or something not much better: Lucian did it and so did Saint Paul. But it was unusual to want to (MacMullen 1984:10-11).

Lewis (1983:82), in his study on Roman Egypt refers to the 'prevailing aura ... of illiteracy: the cultured few lived surrounded by the illiterate many'; an observation certainly of importance to the rest of the Empire (see also the studies of Youtie 1971a, 1975a, 1975b; and the more general survey of Achtemeier 1990). Consequently, a few remarks in this regard are necessary.

2.1 Orality

When discussing ancient communication we are in the uncomfortable situation where we must generalise about what cannot be disentangled from specific historical situations. Our fragmentary evidence on the one hand, and some misguided historical research on the other left us in the dark. When it comes to literacy in the Greco-Roman world, as to how, who and when people used written communications and how the inability to do so determined the character of Greco-Roman society, 'much investigation is waiting to be done' (Harris 1983:87). Furthermore, by not critically defining our concepts we can easily fall into the trap of facile oversimplification. You need not agree with me, or, accept the implications I am drawing, but at least refer to the evidence and argue historically.

A favourite argument in this regard is reference to the so-called widespread influence of Hellenistic schools. But many statements on Greek elementary schools are vague, incomplete and without proper methodological concerns, making an argument against orality in Greco-Roman culture problematic. Two pointers must suffice. On the one hand, 'the rarity of the records and the lack of any detailed descriptions ... suggest that public interest in elementary education was not very widely diffused and nowhere intense: in the majority of cities the first stage of education was left to private enterprise and was not even subject to public control' (Jones 1966:223). In fact, elementary teaching was an occupation with little prestige

(Harris 1983:98). Greco-Roman society was quite the opposite from ours, with an interest and concern about *paideia* as a passport to certain kinds of careers for upper classes, and extremely little consideration for basic schooling in literature.

Secondly, for an average family to send a child to school meant not only paying fees but partly dispensing with the child's labour (Harris 1983:99), a not unimportant consideration since 'it took three to four years to learn to read, thanks to the mechanical technique' (Marrou 1984:188).

More theoretically, one must also ask, with regard to known research, what economic, social and cultural conditions create extensive literacy. In other words, we must apply the rules of historical probability. We dare not ignore the extensive historical scholarship suggesting that literacy never comes into being on a large scale except as a result of certain identifiable positive factors (cf Street 1984). In his study on the growth of literacy in England, for instance, Stone examined various factors, such as education, the invention and use of printing, widespread urbanisation, incipient industrialisation, and religion, specifically Protestantism (Stone 1969:70-98). He notes that, despite the drive for popular education, the upper levels of education (skills beyond the first level of bare literacy) remained extraordinary elitist in scale and character (Stone 1969:137).

If we relate these insights to the Greco-Roman world, we must note not only the absence of modern communication technology, but the fact that they had a manuscript technology (on which see Troll 1990:99-106; Petzer 1990:12-17; Chaytor 1950). This situation can create an almost magical awe of books (cf Clanchy 1979:126-130 and the suspicion voiced by Doty 1973:44n56), but does not facilitate reading and writing as natural communicative options. Also, the Roman empire was a rural, agrarian society (Saldarini 1989:35-38; Stambaugh & Balch 1986:65-69) and lacked industrialisation. Even more to the point is that those who controlled the labour force, whether slaves or free men, had only limited needs for literate slaves or employees. Finally, with regard to possible impetus from religious activities, 'there were no sacred texts which the population at large felt any obligation to read' (Harris 1983:92).

Against this we need to balance the situation in Jewish circles, in which it is generally believed that education and literacy was higher than in Hellenistic circles. Aside from general and vague statements, I know of little proper investigation. The function of scrolls/manuscripts can be related to many others beside reading, especially in ancient societies.

MacMullen has noted that we should not overestimate the impact and influence of writings, even (or especially) when it comes to apologetic literature, apparently offered from within to an audience beyond the church, but in reality serving chiefly for internal consumption. 'And there was little enough reading of any sort, anyway. Three quarters or more of the population were illiterate. Points of contact and media of communication that we take for granted in our world simply did not exist in antiquity' (MacMullen 1984:21). It is important to bear in mind that even the literates were literate in an illiterate culture. Orality (in a cultural-anthropological

sense) and the social effects of illiteracy permeate even their 'literate' communication (Botha 1990:36-43, 1991).

What I am after is not to claim exclusive validity for my viewpoint, but to convince you to think about ancient communication as ancient communication. Though from a time much later than the first century CE the case of Aurelius Ammonios, the Christian lector (Ἰσχυρὸς) from the Egyptian village of Chysis in 304 who did not know how to write (POxy 33.2673; on which see Clarke 1984), nicely illustrates the point that we are dealing with a different culture, a world that must be dealt with in its own right. MacMullen made a highly relevant remark (though in the context of ancient religiosity, but the point remains valid):

Here is a warning to anyone who attempts a historical reconstruction ... The explicit record at important points fits badly with what are, to ourselves, entirely natural expectations (MacMullen 1984:42).

2.2 Scribes/scribal culture

An important aspect of the oral environment of Greco-Roman times is the role of scribes. To describe the Hellenistic age as an oral world does not mean that the people were not familiar with writing and did not employ writing during their lives. Clearly they did; but they did so through the use of others' writing skills.

Instead of assuming that the scribes valued writing because it expanded both their knowledge and their intellect, we now know that they valued writing as a craft and a form of income and status/power. If they read, what they read only reiterated what they heard; if they composed, they primarily wrote what they heard. Writing was a product and a commodity to be sold, not an intellectual process (cf Troll 1990:115). Lewis provides us with a handy description:

The educational level of the scribes varied with the individual, but most leave the impression of being merely literate rather than highly educated. They wrote mostly in formulas and clichés, a fact which shows up in the various contracts they penned and most strikingly (to us) in the private letters, many of which are little more than the most impersonally worded collections of greetings and conventional good wishes (Lewis 1983:82).

It is therefore valid to assume widespread orality, also in the Pauline communities. The dependence on orality was natural. Whatever we make of ancient letters, orality was part and parcel of the whole process.

Now, '(i)n an age of computers and word processors, one easily forgets that conceiving and writing a text like Galatians or Romans was a long and wearisome procedure' (Hartman 1986:138), and consequently we tend to underestimate the considerable effort that must have gone into the composition of Paul's letter. These letters were also written by rather sophisticated scribes (men like Timothy, Silas). The major point about Paul's letters does not lie in them having been written. The point to see is that they are texts that originated as and were designed for oral presentations.

3. Letter writing and letter carriers

3.1 Co-authorship

Most students of the *corpus paulinum* operate with a very inadequate model of authorship. Betz (1979:313, 1) quite appropriately states that 'given the employment of an amanuensis and the common practices in letter writing in Paul's time, the problem of authorship may be more complicated than we have previously imagined'. Paul usually identifies not only himself but also some other persons as author(s) of his epistles. In fact, he writes in his own name only in Romans, Ephesians and the Pastoral Epistles. We have such a regard for Paul that we simply miss the salient fact that it is Paul and Sosthenes' letter to the Corinthians, or Paul and Timothy's follow-up letter to the Corinthians. Or that the letters to the Thessalonians are actually the Paul-Silvanus-Timothy corpus!

Paul is not unique in this (Bahr 1966:476; Prior 1989:38), though it seems as if explicit mention of co-authors is not common in the extant Greco-Roman letters.

Galatians (1:1) refers only to unspecified authors, and there are no other indications. Galatians is a strongly personal statement, with copious use of the first person singular and there is the vaguest of hinting at 'those' who preached in the Galatian area with Paul (Silas and Timothy if one can use Acts 16 in this regard). Prior surmises that it was Paul's personal authority that was at stake in the letter, and that is why all references to co-authors are suppressed (1989:41, 43).

Concerning co-authorship various options present themselves. The authors may have considered the substance of the letter individually, and then gone over the general plan of what they were to compose, or perhaps suggested the style and expression which they had separately chosen while thinking about the message before collaborating towards an agreed content and form. The Younger Pliny, when he had enough leisure, liked to work out parts of his text in his head and then dictate the work in stages to his secretary (Letters 9.36).

This is not to diminish Paul's contribution, but to put his communication in proper perspective. What I am after is awareness that Paul's letter was not written by him as an individual, sitting at a desk and dropping a note to some friends. We must become aware of a much more complex event: some persons combined their efforts to deliberate and 'perform' a letter; there was someone involved in the creation and transportation of it, finally 'recreating' for others a presentation/performance of the 'message' intended for sharing.

3.2 Amanuenses

How strong our projection of individual values really is becomes clear with a perusal of research concerning Paul's use of *amanuenses*. That he did so cannot be doubted (see, *inter alia*, Longenecker 1974). But what to make of that fact still remains a problem for New Testament scholars. At all cost it is usually argued that the use of a secretary does not affect the inspiration of scripture, nor the authority of Paul and

especially not the extent of Paul's contribution. The concern with Paul, as an individual leader/thinker/apostle, and his specific role is abundantly clear.

The true import of the issue about the use of an *amanuensis* is neither the authenticity of the epistle, nor the possible mixture of styles (nor even the orality involved). It is that communication was not experienced as a message from one mind to another. It was a communal event, much like a visit in our experience, a process, involving various persons and involving them all extensively.

An interesting side issue is the very strong probability that Paul was *ŃcrammatoY*. Strictly speaking, Paul probably relied on scribes because he could not write Greek. A perusal of comments on Galatians 6:11 bears out that though the similarity to the illiteracy formula is well known, no-one wants to accept the implication of this similarity!

Youtie has discussed the phenomenon of persons copying a model sentence or repeating it from memory in order to pass themselves off as literate (1971b). Persons used a formula that they could write at the end of letters on their behalf as 'an effective shield for barely literate writers' (Youtie 1971b:246). Such a formula or subscription could be written in 'upright capitals' or appear as 'very clumsily' written (1971b:246); 'stiff, awkward, uneven, kept on the line with obvious effort' (1971b:240). But illiteracy carried no stigma in itself (cf Youtie 1975b:200). Youtie's evidence and arguments concern primarily Greco-Roman Egypt, but his research is obviously pertinent to understanding Greco-Roman literacy in general.

Although it comes naturally, we must be cautious not to let our concepts intrude in our interpretation. Paul did not sign his letters (writing one's name like we do). As Bahr (1968:28-33) has shown, what Paul did was add a subscription: a summary that can be used as legal proof and to confirm authority.

The possibility that Paul could not write himself should be seen within the context of Greco-Roman literacy. It is therefore neither demeaning nor reflecting on his intellectual skills. But it does warn us to beware of making his letter writing conform to our expectations.

3.3 Delivery of letters

Getting private letters delivered was not easy, and was often extremely difficult, subject to many uncertainties, delays, and, at times, almost insuperable difficulties (cf McGuire 1960:185, 199; White 1986:214-215; Badian 1970). The imperial government maintained a postal service of some sorts, the *cursus publicus*, but made no provision whatever for the carrying of private letters. Of course, personal influence or friendships could make the transmission of private letters by public post possible (as with Ambrose and Basil in the 4th century). But, certainly not in the case of Paul. Private letters had to be sent by private means. Wealthy people had their own letter carriers (*tabellarii*), selected from household slaves. *Tabellarii* were usually briefed on the contents of the letters entrusted to them and often made supplementary reports on matters that were not set down in writing.

A good letter carrier had to be physically qualified as well as loyal and intelligent. The carelessness and untrustworthiness of casual or coincidental letter bearers became proverbial. Destinations far from the main roads created special problems, and during winter months, there usually was no letter carrying. None is immune to illness, and all letter carriers were vulnerable to the dangers of shipwreck and/or robbery on land. Disclosure of the contents and forgery were important realities, and various methods were used to cope with these problems.

Doty suggests that because of political intrigue and the vulnerability of the postal system, the letter writer was careful to entrust the real message of the letter to the carrier, not merely the text of the letter itself. He senses that

Paul, who made such a point of indicating his trust in those carriers (co-workers), did not think of his written letters as exhausting what he wished to communicate. He thought of his associates, especially those commissioned to carry his letter, as able to extend his own teachings (Doty 1973:289).

Therefore, in view of the *realia* of Greco-Roman epistolography, it is clear that the choice of a letter bearer was sometimes as crucial as the content of the letter. The confidential role played by letter carriers is illustrated by Pseudo-Demetrius' example of a typical letter of recommendation:

So-and-so, who is conveying this letter to you, has been tested by us and is loved on account of his trustworthiness. You will do well if you deem him worthy of hospitality both for my sake and his ... For you will not be sorry if you entrust to him, in any manner you wish, either words or deeds of a confidential nature ... (in Malherbe 1977:31).

Though there is no explicit reference in Galatians to the letter bearer it would be foolish to think that he would have played no part in the communication. In view of typical practice, the fact that so much was invested in the letter, and the import attached to the letter, one must reckon with the letter as having been prepared for a careful performance, and that eventually the letter was delivered like a proper speech.

Receiving a letter meant hearing both a message conveyed on behalf of the sender and a written document. Letters were read aloud (McGuire 1960:150; Marrou 1984:196; Saenger 1982:370-373). In the case of Paul's letter we have a fully briefed reader with the letter itself.

We gain a sense of the importance of his emissaries or letter carriers: they receive authority to convey the letters to expand upon them, and to continue Paul's work (Doty 1973:37).

It has often been remarked that letters bore a kinship with oral messages (e.g. White 1984:1731). Considering the oral environment of antiquity, this insight must be taken seriously. Oral, in this sense refers to more than mere spoken language. Orality, as analytic concept, involves a mindset; a whole attitude towards reality and experience.

3.4 'Reading' a letter and oral performance

In an oral environment (culture) bodily incarnation of the word is of the utmost importance. Facial expressions, impressive rhetoric, convincing verbal art are essential to communication in orally based cultures.

All commentators refer to the 'readers' of Paul's letter, identifying the Galatian Christians, the recipients of the letter. How should this be pictured historically? Not as a little book passing from member to member! Even reference to 'reading in the assembly' or 'in worship' is not spelt out. Was it read like a modern pastor engaging in scripture reading before the sermon, in an even, sonorous and respectful tone? There is abundant evidence that reading in antiquity was related to performance. Reading in antiquity, especially when it was not private reading, was similar to recitals or to oral delivery.

This is nicely illustrated in a charming little letter written by (senator!) Pliny to Suetonius, asking advice about his poor reading skills:

I am told that I read badly - I mean when I read verse, for I can manage speeches, though this seems to make my verse reading all the worse! So, as I am planning to give an informal reading to my personal friends, I am thinking of making use of one of my freedmen. This is certainly treating them informally, as the man I have chosen is not really a good reader, but I think he will do better than I can as long as he is not nervous ... Now, I don't know what I am to do myself while he is reading, whether I am to sit still and silent like a mere spectator, or do as some people and accompany his words with lips, eye, and gesture. (Letters 9.34)

For interpreting Paul's letters to the Galatians, I am thus, in effect, arguing for the exact opposite of what Betz claims the situation to have been:

Since it is simply a lifeless piece of paper, it eliminates one of the most important weapons of the rhetorician, the oral delivery. The actual delivery of speech includes a whole range of weapons relating to modulation of voice and to gestures, all of which a letter makes impossible. In his remarks Paul is fully aware of these disadvantages, as shown in 4:18-20 (Betz 1979:24).

4. Aesthetics of performance

Both the importance and the essence of emphasising ancient communication as performative communication (performed literature) can be seen once we become aware of how one-sided we think about rhetoric.

Aristotle understands the whole point of rhetoric (the *telos* of each kind of rhetoric) to be that the audience (*kroatai*) either as judge (*kritai*) or as critic of the orator's ability (*perit tyn dusemexai haxrai*) should be enabled to arrive at a judgment (Rhetorica 1.3.1-1.3.3). They are viewed as nonspeaking partners actively engaged in the exchange taking place between speaker and auditor; passive listening would make speaking an exercise in the irrational. Consequently he spends a whole chapter (the second book of the Rhetorica) on emotions. The importance of the speaker and

the auditors as persons, and the contribution each makes toward establishing communication is continually and explicitly recognised by ancient theorists. Demosthenes, in his *On the Embassy* (*De falsa legatione* 339-340), tells us that the ability of an orator can be paralysed by the recalcitrance of the audience. Cicero calls the popular ear (*populi aures*) a kind of instrument for the orator (Brutus 51.191-192; see also Cicero Orator 8.24, *De Inventione* 1.16.22, *De Oratore* 2.79.321; *Quintilian Institutio Oratoria* 11.1.1-11.3.184; and *Rhetorica ad Herennium* 1.4.7-8).

While many scholars have turned to Greco-Roman rhetoric for help in interpreting Paul's letter (with worthwhile results), the oral, performative aspect of ancient communication, and specifically ancient rhetoric have been neglected. Kennedy (1984:14), in his (useful) introduction to rhetorical criticism states explicitly:

Discussion of memory and delivery is often omitted in the handbooks and will be omitted here, for they relate to oral presentation, about which we know little.

Yet he continues by noting that what was taught 'applied both to oral speech and written composition'. If it is worthwhile to use ancient rhetorical principles in order to understand New Testament documents better, at least we should use it as it was intended. Speech and rhetoric cannot be separated as Hellenistic culture basically was an oral culture. Their rhetorical principles aimed specifically at delivery of speech, at oral performance, and, consequently, also at creating successful communication through bodily presence.

Quintilian, for instance, has many, many references to the role of the body whilst speaking. The face, and particularly the eyes would 'reveal the passion of the mind (*animus eminet*)', even without movement (*Inst Orat* 11.3.75-79). To the audience, the performer's charm and good character must be obvious; 'no man can be an orator unless he is a good man' (*Inst Orat* 12.1.1-3). Quintilian insists on an integration between voice and movement: 'if gesture and the expression of the face is out of harmony with the speech...words will not only lack weight, but will fail to carry conviction' (11.3.67). Sound and movement are keys to the emotional and intellectual content of the presentation.

For example, the hands, 'since they are almost as expressive as words', and speaking the universal language (*omnium hominum communis sermo*, 11.3.85-87), are powerful instruments for the orator. Gestures are discussed in detail; which are suitable for the *exordium* and the statement of facts, and which not (e.g. 11.3.92-92); what is appropriate to 'continuous flowing passages' and how to express qualities of restraint and timidity, and so forth.

The orator studies in order to deliver an effective performance: to stimulate the audience by the animation of his presentation, and to kindle the imagination, not through ambitious imagery, but by bringing the audience into actual touch with the things themselves (cf *Inst Orat* 10.1.16). Quintilian focuses on forensic disputes, the perils of the forum (10.1.36), but persuasive oratory so permeated Greco-Roman culture that Quintilian's discussions most certainly are relevant to understanding the public reading of texts. We gather a distinct sense of how thoroughly a reader must

have been acquainted with his text, and must have worked to internalise its performative values.

Very much to the point is the role of memory and memorising. Extensive memorisation, which was the dominant characteristic of Greco-Roman education, is fundamental to an oral-text oriented culture. It is well-known that the dissemination of texts in antiquity relied on recitals and oral performances. It is in this context that Quintilian calls memory the treasure-chest of eloquence (*thesaurus eloquentiae, Inst Orat* 9.2.1).

Although much too cursorily discussed, the point that the oral reader was the instrument for embodying the contents of the text being performed, has become clear. Through the skillful use of voice and gesture, the presentation of felt emotional values, and the thorough knowledge of the style and images of a given manuscript, the oral reciter in Greco-Roman culture was able to give powerful renditions of texts.

Paul's dictation of his letter was, in all probability, also a coaching of the letter carrier. The length, sophistication and style of Paul's letters, coupled with the very smallness of the group making up the core of the Pauline movement, show us that Paul's letters originated from a very small circle of friends; working together to communicate to their followers, with one (or more) of them transporting the letter and 'delivering' it; putting up a special show of verbal rhetoric.

5. The letter to the Galatians

Given that oral performance was intrinsic to the Greco-Roman world, I think the argument thus far is pressing us towards asking how 'bodily presence' and 'speech' are issues in Paul's 'conflict' with the Galatians caught up in *æteron eüaccálon*. Of course, we will never finally know what mode of communication with its various complexities was at stake here. But there are some things we can consider. We have a letter, we know some things about letter writing and exchange of meaning in antiquity, as well as something about presenting speeches, and we can make (careful) use of communication research, such as orality studies, performance studies and so forth, so that we can have an experiential understanding of what happens within the matrix of text, reciter and audience.

What were the criteria at stake which led to Paul being considered insufficient or unauthoritative (or ineffective as leader) in Galatia?

5.1 Authority and verbal presence

There is a widespread consensus that Paul's letters show evidence of what has come to be called apostolic *parousia* (see the seminal study of Funk 1982, first published in 1967). In the words of Kee (1980:131-132),

Paul employs the letter as an instrument of his own apostolic authority. He cannot be in all his churches at once, but his spirit can be and, in his view, is

there (1 Cor. 5:4). ... There is exact correspondence between his apostolic presence in the flesh and in his letters.

Reflection on this aspect must surely make one aware of the physical role of the reader of the letter, of his performance of the message.

In other words, the apostle's means of exercising power and influence in a community was dependent on his establishing apostolic *parousia* in that community. This 'presence' refers to the apostle's social visibility and authority. When a personal visit was not possible (for whatever reasons), Paul would send someone to represent him to the particular group of early Christians. This chosen delegate (often) carried a letter from Paul which recommended that emissary as an authoritative 'substitute' for the apostle.

Sending an emissary to read a letter aloud was probably one of the most effective ways of demonstrating *parousia* in distant communities.

The personal representative or messenger, the visitor or traveller, were almost the sole means of communication between ... individuals (McGuire 1960:148).

In Paul's case the carrier would not only have been briefed on the contents of the letter; he (she? - possible, cf Rm 16:2) would have been part of its creation.

5.2 The 'situation'

Besides theological content and doctrinal differences, if there was a conflict on the authority of Paul, it must have revolved (in part admittedly, but an important part) around the (oral) presentation of one's story/teaching/propaganda. In other words, the 'opponents' were more successful in presenting their views. Logic, authority and persuasion are tightly connected to social and cultural conventions, and the performance of a story contributed extensively to the acceptability and credibility of an argument.

To understand the dilemma that the Galatians found themselves in, we should probably turn to the context of the apologetic or missionary movement of *diaspora* Judaism. Schoeps (1961:220-229) has drawn attention to the success of the propaganda of *diaspora* Judaism. As this missionary activity had no central organisation, it must have been the synagogue and synagogue activities that created such 'annexed bodies of Gentiles' (Schoeps 1961:225). The new converts to the Jesus-movement clearly must have been in contact with the apologetic movement of the synagogue, or would now have become ideal targets for the synagogue movement. The central feature of religious events in the synagogue was the oral reading and exegesis of scripture. Performance of sacred stories and oral interpretations of the traditions made the faith of Judaism accessible to outsiders and helped to assimilate them into the communities of worship.

In fact, the synagogue ceremony, with its focus on the oral reading and interpretation of scripture was the occasion for highly theatrical activity, quite possibly 'the worship service was supposed to be a performance for an audience' in

which 'the immediacy of oral expression was probably preferred' (Georgi 1986:113-114). The so-called 'Judaizers' that Paul did battle with can plausibly be related to the context of the synagogue apologetic movement, and probably even more specifically among the oral interpreters travelling about and offering performances in Jewish communities.

I would suggest that Paul was in danger of losing his following among and/or his status in the Galatian community to these other missionaries. They had made his ineffective speech and inadequate exposition of tradition cause for the Galatians' concern. Paul's problem was how to establish a presence in the Galatians' community that would recapture their attention and loyalty. This is where the recitation of Paul's letter plays a significant part in the 'dialogue' and politics of the early church. In part, Paul needed to re-establish his authority with a performance that was more convincing than that of his opponents.

The challenge for the 'faithful Paulinists' was exactly this: by means of an effective counter-performance, they must demonstrate their ability to be 'present' in the same vigorous and authoritative way as Paul's opponents. This is a scenario quite to be expected in an orally based culture.

To situate such a scene historically one would like to be on more certain ground concerning the activities of early Christian house churches.

That scripture texts were read and homilies were based on them seems very credible indeed, but details are quite uncertain (Meeks 1983:146).

If we bring the exposition of scripture and telling and re-telling of Jesus-stories amongst the Christians in relation to the very plausible picture of oral performances characterising synagogue worship as drawn by Georgi (1986:89-117), we do have a probable setting for Paul's letter.

5.3 Persuading the Galatians

The 'opponents' clearly had impressive claims to authority, and in view of the dynamics of an oral culture, could make their authority manifest in powerful speech. For Paul, and his loyal friends, to counteract this a powerful attempt at persuading the Galatian Christians had to be made. So we have the reader of the letter frightening those whose preaching differed from Paul's (1:8-9). Then follows a narration, a story in which Paul is the hero (1:12-2:14), in order to have the listeners identify with Paul. Identifying with Paul forces one into choosing like Paul, imitating him, which is nothing but accepting his authority. Galatians 3 and 4 are characterised by rhetorical questions and emotional appeals: the letter makes the reproach that the audience would be acting foolishly and harming themselves if they change their behaviour (i.e. accept Jewish customs). The letter to the Galatians is quite like a deliberative speech (noted by Kennedy 1984:145), and is putting honour and shame at stake. Paul reformulates the rules for shame:

... there is no difference between Jews and Gentiles, between slaves and free men, between men and women; you are all one in Christ Jesus (3:28).

The force (and efficacy) of these words, like the 'bewitchment' language of 3:1, the 'hearing of faith/the law' (3:2,5; 4:21) and the curses and blessings throughout the letter must be understood within the setting of the 'magical power of words' characterising orally based cultures (see the cultural-anthropological discussion by Tambiah 1985).

We think of Paul's exposition of scripture in terms of its doctrine, its theological content, whilst part of the issue is simply establishing authority by proving skill at the exposition of scripture. It is one of the ways of achieving honour and shaming others.

The letter provides abundant evidence of emotional considerations. Galatians 4:12-20 is an appeal to pity, imploring the audience in humble and submissive language to have mercy, to realise the extent of Paul's care and love for the audience (see especially 4:19-20). With 5:7-12 the listeners are incited to hatred of the people provoking dissent (*oæ Ñnastato^{ante}Y*).

Finally we have Paul writing a sentence learned by rote to authenticate the letter; and, with the help of others, or maybe clumsily copying himself from what someone else wrote for him, adding a reiteration of what the letter is about: a sharp antithesis between 'those others' and Paul (6:11-18). Paul is the courageous one, they are cowards and half-hearted, fearing persecution. Paul advocates himself and his 'way': that is how the greatest value, dignity and glory can be achieved. Heady stuff, but an effective means of recommending and dissuading.

What emerges in the performance of the letter is the presence of Paul: a potent and powerful voice which attempts to disrupt and subvert the social structure proposed and created by the oral presentations of Paul's opponents.

6. Summary

Various scholars have pointed out that there is an oral aspect to Paul's letter writing. This paper takes that insight as a starting point and attempts to situate Pauline epistolography within the context of ancient communicative practices.

To do this attention is firstly directed to the oral environment of the Greco-Roman world. It is argued that, not only did limited literacy exist, but that the literacy of the time must be understood within the context of first century historical reality: a scribal culture. Some implications for the writing and reading of letters are discussed: the issue of 'multi'-authorship, the communal experience of letters, the oral, performative aspect of letter reading.

A very brief discussion of Galatians concludes the paper. Paul, 'writer' of letters, appears to be unlike a modern scholar, who is likely to be found turning his notes into a theological treatise. Rather, we discover a small group of early Christians struggling to maintain their identity and defending their views by means of oral presentations.

Though very introductory, and mostly exploratory (which must be emphasised), the paper is about historical interpretation: to describe some of the activities, and something of the world, of those early Christians.

ENDNOTES

1. Examples can be multiplied; e.g. Lategan 1988:416; White 1986:19; Vielhauer 1975:59; Doty 1973:75-76. Kelber (1983:140-177) has attempted to interpret Paul's theology as orally constituted. Kelber misrepresents orality in Greco-Roman antiquity, underplays the complexities of oral-literacy interaction as anthropological phenomena and consequently separates Paul's (oral) preaching from his (written) letters. It remains an important study, nevertheless. Earlier studies with valuable contributions to this discussion are Schniewind 1910 and Funk 1966b. However, attempts at analysis properly informed by orality research has only been started (cf Botha 1990a:44-45). One should add that many studies on Greco-Roman society also suffer from improper assumptions concerning literacy and education in antiquity.
2. Schweizer (1976:26) has recently proposed that the joint authorship of Philemon, Philippians, 2 Corinthians and Colossians be taken seriously; and that Colossians be seen as neither simply Pauline nor post-Pauline (1976:25). Similarly Bruce (1984:30) in connection with Colossians. I still think that the true import of and context for this phenomenon seems to be missed by these scholars, however.
3. Lategan (1986:115): 'nie soseer op Paulus se onhandigheid of ongeoevendheid met die pen nie, maar meer waarskynlik op die belang van wat hy ten slotte weer wil onderstreep'. Similarly Betz (1979:314). Deissmann was of the opinion that Paul preferred to dictate his letters 'no doubt because writing was not an easy thing to his workman's hand' (1927:166n7). Paul's reference to his large letters was his way of making merry about this, 'half jesting and half earnest' (1927:172). Typical of how Paul's 'dictation' is handled can be seen in the approach of Stowers: discussing a letter from one Claudius Agathas Daimon to Sarapion he notes that the letter 'was written by a secretary except for the closing prayer and farewell, which are in another hand, almost certainly that of Claudius himself. This practice was like adding a signature to a typed letter'. He continues that 'Paul does the same at the close of some letters in order to provide a personal touch' (Stowers 1986:61).
4. Johannes (Vossie) Vorster and Pieter Craffert not only encouraged my research, but made some really helpful criticisms.

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