

**THE ROLE OF THE READER AND OTHER
LITERARY CATEGORIES IN PHILIPPIANS**

H J B Combrink
Department of New Testament
Faculty of Theology
University of Stellenbosch
Stellenbosch

Abstract

The role of the reader and other literary categories in the letter of Paul to the Philippians, are discussed here specifically in the light of the recent commentary of W Schenk (1984) on Philippians.

Various points of agreement with the approach of Schenk can be pointed out. It is also significant that the context of Philippians is illuminated from the intertextual level. There can also be no doubt about the fact that this commentary, taking its point of departure from the linguistic and literary point of view is really breaking new ground.

Nevertheless, this commentary displays some similarities with 'traditional' contemporary approaches which can be questioned in the light of its point of departure. Although attention is given to the implications of different linguistic

signs in the text with a view to the readers, this article states that the role of the reader, especially the different categories of textual and extratextual readers of Philippians, is not dealt with adequately by Schenk. The implications of these factors for the reception and polyvalence of the text, are to receive more attention.

The recent commentary of W Schenk on the letter to the Philippians (1984) has to be welcomed and commended for its comprehensive approach and consistent effort to supplement traditional exegetical approaches by implementing recent linguistic and literary research. As the author promises, this entails not only commenting on the text, but also numerous discussions on meta-exegetical problems.

1. POINTS OF AGREEMENT WITH THE APPROACH OF SCHENK

Here numerous things could be pointed out. There is basic agreement with Schenk's approach to take as point of departure that a sign only functions as a sign in a code; his acceptance of syntax, semantics and pragmatics as the basics of semiotics; and his emphasis on semantics as basically text-semantics: that is, sentences only have meaning within the TEXT. One could also point to his distinction between the reader and the researcher / critic, though the actual working out of this in his commentary could probably also be something to be discussed further.

There are furthermore numerous valuable insights to be gained from Schenk's sharp analysis and reading of the text. Here one could for example point to his conclusions from the use of imperatives and vocatives with a view to the role of the readers, although one is tempted to ask: which reader? (See below). One could also point to his discussion of the concentric nature of the text in chapter 3,

marked by the circular occurrence of you / we (254ff). His remarks on the role of the first person with a view to the reader, is also challenging and significant. It actually presupposes a correlation between the role of the corresponding textual factors on the rhetorical axis of the communication model (eg narrator / narratee, addressor / addressee).

While we shall be returning to this later, Schenk's use of material from the intertextual level (eg Sirach) to elucidate the context of Philippians, is stimulating and very valuable. From the point of view of methodology this is also significant, especially as there is a real danger in literary orientated exegesis to get trapped in a text-immanent exegesis. However, there remain questions in this respect too.

2. SOME QUESTIONS WITH REFERENCE TO SCHENK'S APPROACH

2.1 A first question would be whether Schenk, who professes to work with a linguistic and literary method from the perspective of a model of communications, really breaks new ground. To my mind there could be no doubt as to the answer to this question.

Yet, one cannot escape the impression that in certain respects his work shows a remarkable similarity with "traditional" contemporary critical approaches. One could point here to the traditional theory of three letter fragments in Philippians. It may further be interesting to recall that Holub also points to the fact that even reception theory in a sense remains quite conventional when compared with post-structuralist models (1984:154). And even when full justice is done to the role of the reader in the text, the following remark of Holub (1984:157) remains illuminating: "Trying to circumvent the text by displacing the critical focus onto another agency only amounts to a postponement of the confrontation with determinacy".

2.2 A next question - or rather statement - would be that Schenk does not really adequately deal with the role of the reader in the text of Philippians. This must be seen against the important distinction of the physically objective text and the mentally subjective work (Petersen 1984:42).

It would be fair to say that Schenk deals extensively with the objective text, the cultural and linguistic codes known to the reader, yet the work as the result of the interaction of these factors with the personal experience of the reader could have benefited from more explicit attention to the reader.

2.3 Another fundamental question would be whether Schenk allows for the polyvalence of a text, or at least for the multi-functionality of literary signs? It seems as if he assumes a text-immanent authorial reception.

"Der grundlegende Methodische Charakter der sorgfältigen und gewissenhaften Befragung des Gegenstands entnimmt die wissenschaftliche Befragung der Beliebigkeit und zielt auf Verbindlichkeit und Allgemeingültigkeit der so erfragten Antworten und Aussagen" (1984:21).

Is this possible? Shouldn't it be said that we are irrevocably nonauthorial readers who cannot get out of the box of the text? We are not participants in the text's communicative and interpretive context and limited in our competence.

"That is to say, because non-authorial readers cannot get out of the textual box, they can only know about the communication what the intratextual actors disclose to them. They cannot know, apart from what is in the box, what the extratextual actors intend in or construe from the communication" (Petersen 1984:40).

This would surely not imply that one may not use intertextual information, as Schenk so often does when referring to Sirach, etc.

That he does this repeatedly, is in accordance with the necessity for continuous switching between the various levels of a text, specifically between the intentional and extensional levels (Eco 1979:14). This could also be taken to be the realization of a repertorium of extra-textual factors.

2.4 Something should also be said in connection with the different categories of readers proposed, without going into all the detail. If one takes as point of departure the basic differentiation by Link (1976:25) as well as a proposal by Petersen (1984:39f) it is necessary to differentiate between actual (extratextual) and textual readers.

2.4.1 Actual readers

2.4.1.1 One could differentiate here between various kinds of readers (Grimm 1977:38-9), but relevant to our discussion is the intended reader as extra-textual category (= real reader), but with a textual residue (in that sense part of 2.4.2). Is this what Schenk had in mind when he pointed to the way in which e.g. the keywords of the opponents function in the text?

2.4.1.2 The authorial reader (Petersen 1984:40) should be able to recognize themselves in the text, whereas other real readers in different situations and times are prone to decode the text wrongly.

2.4.2 Textual readers

2.4.2.1 The implied or abstract reader has to be seen as a textual category which actually aims at the active participation of the reader in the reading process. According to Iser (1978:xii)

"This term incorporates both the prestructuring of the potential meaning by the text and the reader's actualization of this potential through the reading process. It refers to the active nature of this process - which will vary historically from one age to another - and not to a typology of possible readers."

Schenk does not really discuss this aspect of the role of the reader, although one could perhaps say that it is implied, for example in his discussion of the role of the first person or the appealing function of the present tense.

2.4.2.2. The explicit reader (= encoded reader of Petersen 1984:39?) is linguistically present in the text by means of the first and second personal pronouns. On this level Schenk extensively outlined the implications of the imperative, vocative, etc, while at the same time linking this to the intended reader.

2.5 One of the most fundamental questions is concerning Schenk's views with reference to the composite nature of the text of Philippians (335). He remarks that 2:19-30 points to the closing of letter starting with 1:1 (334), and that there are valid grounds for posing various letter fragments. He then classifies Phlp 3 as of the form: *genus judiciale*, and closely related to Gl and 2 Cor 10-13. He is of the opinion that his arguments are textpragmatic, and not only intuitively pragmatic (335). This has to be questioned from at least two perspectives.

2.5.1. The first is the perspective of the symbolic and narrative world of a letter (cf Petersen 1985:17ff). Even though a common rhetorical model may be posited for different letters, this would not imply that they all represent the same symbolic universe. Though the notion of the autonomy of the text can be overemphasized, Petersen underlines that a textually intrinsic sociological analysis can take us further than we have gotten without it (1985:20f, 30f). I think that it would also be accepted that in a literary approach, even if a composite origin of a letter may be accepted, the role of the reader would definitely be to actualize the work from the text as a whole before him. And from this work, the symbolic world in which the authorial and non-authorial readers find themselves, has to be surmised.

2.5.2 The second perspective is that of letters as stories. From this point of view one could say that it is very important to be aware of

the fact that a letter not only contains a message, but that in the letter, the story is in the message.

"Letters have stories, and it is from these stories that we construct the narrative worlds of both the letters and the stories" (Petersen 1985:43).

It is therefore important to realize that the poetic sequence of the letter as a whole has to be compared with the referential sequence of the letter as a whole in order to fully understand the impact of the poetic reordering of actions in this "story". As a positive contribution to the discussion in this respect, the poetic sequence of action could be outlined, followed by the referential sequence of actions construed from the first series. The implications of the differences between the two sequences could then be drawn out. When this is being kept in mind, it will also have implications for the question whether it is valid - when approaching a letter such as Philippians from a literary and communication point of view - to divide such a letter into various fragments. But this will have to be another story!

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