PHILIPPIANS: PHANTOM OPPONENTS AND THE REAL SOURCE OF CONFLICT

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1. Introduction: The Nature of the Opposition

Who were Paul’s “opponents” in Philippi? This much-debated question should perhaps give way to the more fundamental question: were there any opponents within the Philippian community? That there were opponents to the Christian community in Philippi is plain, for they are clearly referred to in 1:28. Since very little is said about them, except that they are heading for destruction and are causing the Philippians suffering, and since there is no hint that they are preaching the “wrong” gospel, this group must almost certainly have consisted of outsiders, who were opposed to the gospel and were persecuting the Christians in Philippi, much as Paul himself had suffered at their hands. What, then, is the evidence for opposition to Paul’s gospel within the Christian community? In 3:2 Paul issues a peremptory warning against “the dogs”, who were clearly Judaizers of some kind, but the warning serves mainly to introduce a discussion of his own renunciation of Jewish privilege, which reflects Christ’s own self-emptying. There is no evidence of any significant Jewish presence in Philippi, and no hint that these people were already at work in that city; the warning here seems to be a general one—be careful if you come across such people!—rather than referring to a specific, known danger. In 3:18–19 Paul refers to those who “live as enemies of the cross of Christ”, but, remarkably, says that he has

2 In Philippi, the opposition was almost certainly pagan.
3 Phil 1:30; Acts 16:19–24.
often told the Philippians about them—suggesting, again, that this was a danger that had not yet invaded the community. Finally, we have in 4:2–3 Paul’s plea to Euodia and Syntyche “to be of the same mind in the Lord”. Here we are clearly dealing, not with false teaching or opposition to Paul (since both have wrestled side by side with Paul “in the gospel”, together with others who are all Paul’s co-workers), but rather with some personal dispute. It is not surprising, then, that some recent commentators have concluded that the notion that the Philippian community had been invaded by opponents to Paul’s gospel is the product of scholars’ faulty “mirror-reading” of the text. There is, indeed, no evidence that there were any “false teachers” in the Philippian community.

Our concern in this paper, however, centres on a somewhat different problem, which arises from personal rivalry rather than doctrinal opposition, and involves not the Philippians, but Paul himself. In 1:12–26, Paul explains his own situation to the Philippians, declaring that his imprisonment has in fact helped to advance the gospel, both because news of the reason for his imprisonment has spread but also because many members of the Christian community in the city where he is imprisoned have been inspired by his courage and confidence in the Lord to preach the gospel. Some of them, however, do so for the wrong reasons—out of strife and rivalry, and because of their own selfish ambition. Strangely, Paul does not directly condemn these people, but concludes that, whatever their motives, Christ is nevertheless being proclaimed, and that this is all that matters.

Although commentators have sometimes identified these people as “Judaizers”, it is difficult to see how this could be the case. How

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4 It would seem that this is a different group from the “dogs” in 3:2. For a brief summary of the issues, see M.D. Hooker, “Philippians” in L.E. Keck et al. (eds.), New Interpreter’s Bible (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 2000) 11.534b–535a.


6 Rome, Caesarea and Ephesus have all been suggested as the place of Paul’s imprisonment, but Rome is by far the most likely, and the difficulties with this solution have been exaggerated. See the major commentaries for summaries of the arguments. In this essay we shall assume that the letter was written from Rome.

7 Paul in fact expresses this more modestly: it is others who have been made confident in the Lord by his bonds. Here we see the same paradoxical sharing of strength and consolation “in Christ” by those who are weak or afflicted, that we find in passages such as 2 Cor 12:8–9; 1:3–7.