CHAPTER 28

A Reexamination of Paul’s Opponents in Colossians

David L. Mathewson

1 Introduction

Though Stanley E. Porter is perhaps best known for his scholarly contributions to the field of Greek grammar and linguistics,¹ he has also made important and ground-breaking contributions to other areas of NT studies. One such area is the study of Paul’s opponents. Porter himself edited and contributed to a volume devoted to Paul’s opponents,² and he included an insightful essay in a recent volume on linguistic analysis of NT Greek where he advances methodologically the question of how we talk about opponents in Paul’s letters.³ It is the purpose of this essay to consider further this important, though often neglected, area of research. In particular, I will revisit the issue of the identity of the opponents in the letter to the Colossians.

There have probably been more proposals for identifying Paul’s opponents in Colossians than for any of his other letters. The amount and diversity of evidence in Colossians, as well as the different methodologies (or lack of) employed by scholars, account for the plethora of proposals.⁴ In fact, the discussion seems to have reached a stalemate. This essay will not provide a survey of all the problems and various proposals, as this has been done elsewhere.⁵ Instead, I will consider one particular proposal for the identity of the opponents, while attempting to keep in mind some of the recent methodological developments by Porter and Jerry L. Sumney.⁶

¹ Porter, Verbal Aspect, and more recently, Linguistic Analysis.
² Porter, Paul and His Opponents.
³ Porter, Linguistic Analysis, ch. 17.
⁴ Ibid., 334.
⁶ Ibid., ch. 17; Sumney, Servants of Satan, ch. 6.
Methodological Developments

While there has been much discussion on Paul's opponents in Colossae, there has been comparatively little discussion of methodological issues. The stark exception to this is the work of Jerry Sumney. In his work, Sumney argues that we cannot assume the letters of Paul all had the same opponents in view. He has also proposed that we avoid simply focusing on verbal parallels with other letters or outside sources, since words can be used in different ways by different authors. As he says, “[E]ach letter must be allowed to speak for itself as clearly as possible without imposing opponents from outside.” Therefore, the evidence for the opponents must come from the letters themselves. There is always the danger of the reconstruction of the situation becoming the object of exegesis rather than the text itself. Further, Sumney develops a classification for evidence for false teachers found in the letters. Evidence from the text can be ranked according to (1) how certain we can be that a statement refers to opponents; (2) how fairly the statement represents the opponents. Sumney wisely suggests that not all statements in a letter are about opponents. For the first means of ranking, Sumney proposes three categories: explicit statements about the opponents, allusions to the opponents, and affirmations that seem to address the opponents. Explicit statements provide the clearest evidence, followed by allusions, when they address an issue found in explicit statements. Affirmations are of the least value, according to Sumney. The second means of ranking is according to how reliable the statement is, or whether it fairly represents the opponents. Statements addressing the opponents can be divided according to four types of contexts in which they appear in the letter: polemical, apologetic, didactic, and conversational (epistolary periods, such as Thanksgivings, greetings, etc.) contexts. Sumney finds statements in polemical and apologetic contexts more problematic and less reliable, since the author is likely to make exaggerated claims about the opponents. Didactic contexts are the most reliable since the author is trying to teach rather than attack the opponents. Within the last category (conversational) Sumney thinks that statements in the Thanksgiving section are most reliable.

Sumney has certainly provided a most thorough methodology for analyzing ostensible statements about the opponents in Paul's letters, and we would do

---

7 Sumney, Identifying Paul’s Opponents; Sumney, Servants of Satan; Sumney, “Studying Paul’s Opponents.”
8 Sumney, Servants of Satan, 22.
9 Ibid., 23.
10 Ibid., 23–24.