Paul and Senecan on the Cross: The Metaphor of Crucifixion in Galatians and De Vita Beata

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1 Introduction

Despite the widespread practice of crucifixion in the Greco-Roman world, most first-century authors were reluctant to mention the cross and frowned upon those who did. Cicero even forbade people to utter crux, the shameful four-letter word. “The very word ‘cross,’” he said, “should be far removed, not only from the person of the Roman citizen, but from his thoughts, his eyes and his ears” (LCL, Hodge). Nevertheless, two contemporaneous writers – Paul the Christian apostle and Seneca the Stoic senator – not only mention the cross but also depict themselves as having been crucified. In an apology to and counterstrike against respective retractors, both authors employ the scandalous metaphor of the cross.

While scholars have often found great value in comparing Pauline concepts with Stoicism in general and the thoughts of Seneca in particular, most have tended to neglect this shared metaphor. Consequently, Pauline scholars seem to conclude along the lines of James Dunn: that the use of crucifixion as a

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1 This essay represents a modified version of a paper delivered to the Intertextuality in the New Testament session at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in Chicago, IL in 2012. I would like to express my appreciation for the audience’s critiques and comments, especially those from Troels Engberg-Pedersen and David E. Briones.


3 Its Greek equivalent would have evoked the same disgust; see F.F. Bruce, The Epistle to the Galatians (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 271.

4 Cicero, Pro Rabirio 5.16. All translations of classical works in this essay will be from LCL. With respect to Seneca’s works, unless otherwise noted, quotations are taken from Lucius Annaeus Seneca, Epistulae Morales (trans. Richard M. Gummere; 3 vols; LCL; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1917-2004); and idem, Moral Essays (trans. John W. Basore; 3 vols; LCL; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1928-35).
metaphor outside of the New Testament was unheard of during the first century. As a result, scholars have had no significant foil by which to compare Paul's use of the figure – until now. As will be shown below, this comparison is especially ripe for the picking since both authors, writing around 50 C.E., use the figure of the cross in the context of an apology and in relation to fleshly passions.

Therefore, this essay seeks to examine Seneca’s metaphor of the cross in De Vita Beata and Paul’s use of it in Galatians. I will first survey the apparent accusations Seneca faced and how he takes up the cross to silence his foes. In the summary of this section, I will discuss how Seneca’s metaphor fits within his overall understanding of moral progression. Next, I will review what the apostle has to say about the troublemakers in Galatia and reconstruct the charges they made against him. Here I will also analyze the passages where Paul appeals to the cross in defense of his apostleship.

In the third section, I will compare the similarities and differences between the authors’ treatments by placing them in an imaginary dialogue. Then in the conclusion, I will go beyond recording parallels to discussing what the

5 James D.G. Dunn, The Epistle to the Galatians (BNTC; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 314. Dunn cites Philo, Som. 2.213 as the nearest example.
6 Hengel mentions it in passing and does not compare it to Paul’s use of the cross in Galatians (Crucifixion, 67). Hengel cites other examples from Latin writers employing the cross as a metaphor, but none of them are nearly as apt as this one. Most of his examples use the cross as a simile for suffering from which one can only be liberated by death so that the soul is delivered from the body to which it is tied (88). To my knowledge, classicists have also tended to overlook this comparison as well.
7 Both works were likely written between 49-58 C.E. For more on the dating of these works, see Fritz-Heiner Mutschler, “De Vita Beata,” in Brill’s Companion to Seneca (ed. Gregor Damschen and Andreas Heil; Leiden: Brill, 2014), 141-46; and Martinus C. DeBoer, Galatians (NTL; Louisville, KY: WJK, 2011), 5-11.
8 Due to the abuse of such enterprises in the past, it needs to be stated that the goal of this comparison is not to make apologetic assertions regarding the uniqueness or superiority of Paul’s theology or to argue for dependency of one author upon the other. There is also no intention to imply that Paul derived this metaphor from Seneca and changed it for his own ends. See Jonathan Z. Smith, Drudgery Divine (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 47, 118; and Carl R. Holladay, John T. Fitzgerald, Gregory E. Sterling, and James W. Thompson, eds., Light from the Gentiles: Hellenistic Philosophy and Early Christianity. Collected Essays, 1959-2012 by Abraham J. Malherbe (SNT 150/2; Leiden: Brill, 2014), 687-88.
9 J.Z. Smith reminds scholars that a comparison always involves a third term, even if it is unstated. The third party of this comparison that, due to the limits of space, will remain predominately in the background is the diversity of thought on moral progression in the first century. Admittedly, this investigation will be limited since it is unable to include such