
Few contemporary approaches in Pauline studies wrestle with how power relations and the social embeddedness of interpretation shape hermeneutical agendas in any socio-historical context. Philippians, for example, enjoys relative scholarly consensus as ideologically “harmless.” When constructs of violence and manipulation are identified in contexts and texts, can pronouncements of harmlessness still hold? Given evidence for ancient women’s participation in cultic life, why are they still routinely written out of biblical interpretation? What is at stake in exegetical formulations that reinscribe injustice? Joseph A. Marchal’s Hierarchy, Unity, and Imitation: A Feminist Rhetorical Analysis of Power Dynamics in Paul’s Letter to the Philippians fearlessly tackles these questions. This monograph is Marchal’s revised doctoral dissertation, submitted to the Graduate Theological Union in 2004. The book is handsomely produced and includes a thorough bibliography and multiple indices for ease of use.

Chapter One offers a summary and explanation of approaches. Marchal displays genealogical indebtedness to the kyriarchical-critical framework developed by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, whose “dance of interpretation” (re-)places social location at the hermeneutical enterprise’s center, encouraging readers to analyze patterns of domination in texts, interpretative histories, and accepted “malestream” exegetical models. Marchal explicitly uses a hermeneutics of suspicion, which “does not seek to unveil some hidden truth, rather it is a way to learn how to read against the grain of texts and interpretations which have produced the marginalization of women and other oppressed groups” (15). This perspective guides a recurring theme: studies of Philippians have obscured and perpetuated patterns of marginalization within Paul’s rhetoric and its scriptural afterlives.

Chapter Two, “Critical Overview of Scholarship on Prominent Images in Philippians” provides a tour of recent Forschungsbericht, highlighting scholarship on friendship and military images. Marchal assesses how research on Philippians’ social context downplays hierarchy and marginalization among friends, soldiers, and imperial subjects. Ancient friendship and military institutions, Marchal contends, are inextricably bound up with unequal power relationships and, contrary to what research implies, are intimately related in a complex kyriarchical web. Intersectional feminist analysis endeavors to understand how friendship and military images betray and construct situations of violence and exploitation of the majority of people in Paul’s (and our) world.

Contemporary scholarship supplies ample opportunity for redress. Chapter Three, “Situating the Rhetorics of Philippians” makes laudable progress toward that end. Marchal draws on studies by Lilian Portefaix and Valerie Abrahamsen that re-place women at the center of investigation regarding Greco-Roman cultic activity and Jesus movement participation. Philippi’s material texture suggests that women were fairly prominent in the city, indicating representation in Paul’s community. Marchal
proposes a more complex economic, social, and political context through examining Philippi's colonial and military status and unity rhetorics in civic speeches, identifying Paul's possible recipients as ethnically-mixed, mostly lower-class, and colonized. This alone necessitates reappraisals of how ancient friendship and military images function in Philippians, since both were of utility primarily to elite (at Paul's time, Roman) men and are imbued with hierarchical power dynamics.

Marchal devotes the book's second part to detailed rhetorical labor on Philippians. Chapter Four, “Evolving Rhetoric: The Interaction of Arguments As They Develop,” appraises Paul's letter, utilizing feminist tools and principles of New Rhetoric as outlined by Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca and Chaim Perelman. Marchal suggests that Paul argument develops through attempts at constructing and maintaining his own authority in a situation where power was tenuous; moreover, Paul constructs his authority through appeals for imitation.

Chapter Five, “Prevailing Rhetoric: The Major Arguments,” identifies four rhetorical thrusts of Philippians, focusing on communal identity, unity, and dislocation, that aid in comprehending the letter's structural power dynamics. Rhetoric of communality, obedience, and sameness as well as authority-building through differentiation mark Philippians as far from ideologically neutral. Feminist rhetorical reading illuminates the “triangulation” between Paul, addressees, and co-workers. Philippians emerges as a document reflective of kyriarchical structures, and Paul attempts to rhetorically implement similar structures between himself and his recipients.

The concluding chapter outlines an alternative reading of Philippians. Marchal does not settle for simple answers to theoretical questions. Rather, his feminist-rhetorical strategy intervenes into scholarly debates, allowing for the development of justice-oriented inquiries and different methodological conversations (e.g. with womanist, mujerista, and minjung theologies, as well as with queer and postcolonial theories). This outlook sets an agenda for fruitful interchange in Pauline studies emphasizing liberation. This thoroughgoing—rhetorically masterful!—appeal for methodological consciousness and critical reflection on communities of accountability, ancient and modern, is a challenging, yet abiding, contribution to the field. Interested readers will find much with which to converse.

While multilayered approaches that take seriously power configurations along with dynamics of race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, colonial status, and professional location are underrepresented in Pauline studies—and this is where Marchal clearly has devoted methodological energy and passion—a few issues raised in Hierarchy, Unity, and Imitation warrant further conversation. Chief among these is Marchal's claim that Paul's rhetorical constructions of authority, combined with maleness, imply an accommodation with Roman imperial order (211). Even as Paul may employ kyriarchically-inclined rhetoric, immediate alignment with Roman order lacks nuance according to the same multilayered approach Marchal advocates. Critical attention to ancient sources generally ignored by Pauline studies shows that rhetorical strategies of Roman maleness—bound up with friendship and military imagery—emphasize impenetrability, dominance over “the (female) other” through violence, and racial