THE DISCOURSE STRUCTURE OF PHILIPPIANS:
A STUDY IN TEXTLINGUISTICS

by

DAVID ALAN BLACK
La Mirada, CA

I. Introduction

The present study is a close reading of Philippians with special sensitivity to the letter’s structure, style, and message. Specifically, I will argue that Philippians is an integral composition whose primary rhetorical function is deliberative,¹ that is, the bulk of the letter is directed toward solving the issue of disunity² arising from the exigence³ reflected most clearly in 4:2-3. “Unity for the sake of the gospel” provides the overarching framework and motif within which the other themes and concerns are introduced and elucidated. In my view, this reconstruction of the rhetorical situation is able to give the most coherent account of the explicit references in the letter that reflect various aspects of the communicative situation as well as of the functional relations between the various text-sequences in relation to the whole text.

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² A common subject of deliberative rhetoric discussed in the rhetorical handbooks was “concord” (ἡμομοιότης) within the political body. The opposite subject was “discord” or “factionalism” (στάσεις). The classic study is that of H. Kramer, “Quid valeat ἡμομοιότης in litteris Graecis” (Diss. Göttingen, 1915); cf. J. Ferguson, Moral Values in the Ancient World (London: Methuen, 1958) 118-32; A.A.R. Sheppard, “HOMONOIA in the Greek Cities of the Roman Empire,” Ancient Society 15-17 (1984-86) 229-52. For an ancient opinion, see Lys 18.17: νυνὶ δὲ πάντες δὲν ἑκατοντοστὸν ἡμομοιότητα (μὲν) μέγιστον ἄγαθον εἶναι πόλει, στάσιν δὲ πάντων κακῶν αἰτίαν.

³ L.F. Bitzer (“The Rhetorical Situation,” Philosophy and Rhetoric 1 [1968] 6) defines exigence as “an imperfection marked by urgency; it is a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing which is other than it should be.” A rhetorical exigence is specifically an exigence that can be modified through discourse (ibid.).

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I do not pretend to be the first to argue that Philippians deals primarily with the theme of unity as an essential aspect of Christian living and witness. As far as I know, however, this study is the first to have deduced this theme from the discourse structure of the letter. Unlike John’s Gospel (John 20:30-31), Paul tells the Philippians nothing about his reasons for writing. Though the letter hints at certain important topics, determining from them what purposes Paul may have had in writing often verges on pure speculation. For example, just because Paul uses joy language to a greater degree in Philippians than he does elsewhere in his writings, one is not necessarily justified in making joy the theme of the letter. It is rarely legitimate simply to make a word count and draw conclusions from it, since concepts involve far more elaborate structures than individual words. It is at this crucial point that textlinguistics performs a valuable service. By inquiring after the “whole” meanings of the text rather than just the meanings of its parts, textlinguistics offers a major interpretive key for our understanding of the letter. Unless one moves constantly between the parts and the whole, the particular and the general, what appears to be a thorough and detailed interpretation may in fact be nothing more than a systematic refusal to confront the primary questions of meaning.

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4 Recent adherents of this view include H.F. Vos, Philippians (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975) 19; F.F. Bruce, Philippians (Good News Commentary; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983) xxix. P.T. O’Brien (Commentary on Philippians [NIGNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991] 38) argues that Paul “had a number of purposes in mind as he wrote [but that he wrote] especially to urge his Christian friends to stand firm for the gospel and to be united in Christian love.” O’Brien’s outline of Philippians (39-39), however, shows little evidence that he considers unity to be the main theme of the letter.

5 Recent examples of NT letters studied from a holistic and integrative perspective include those by J.P. Louw, A Semantic Discourse Analysis of Romans (2 vols.; Pretoria: University of Pretoria, 1979); B.C. Johanson, To All the Brethren: A Textlinguistic and Rhetorical Approach to 1 Thessalonians (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell: 1987); D.L. Allen, “The Discourse Structure of Philemon: A Study in Textlinguistics,” in Scribes and Scripture: New Testament Essays in Honor of J. Harold Greenlee (ed. D.A. Black; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1992) 77-96; and R. Longacre, “Towards an Exegesis of 1 John Based on the Discourse Analysis of the Greek Text,” in Linguistics and New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Discourse Analysis (ed. D.A. Black; Nashville: Broadman, 1992) 271-86. See also Neotestamentica 26 (1992), which is devoted in its entirely to a discourse analysis of Galatians. It should be emphasized that a textlinguistic approach does not reject, but rather fully accepts, the presence of literary difficulties and/or traditions in the biblical text; the latter, however, are methodologically bracketed in favor of a view of the whole. A threefold partitioning of Philippians is assumed by many scholars; cf. H. Koester, “The Purpose of the Polemic of a Pauline Fragment (Phil. iii),” NTS