2 COR. 5:11-21 AND THE ORIGIN OF PAUL’S CONCEPT OF “RECONCILIATION”*

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In my doctoral dissertation, one of the theses I put forward was that “reconciliation,” the unique Pauline metaphor for God’s saving act in Christ, originated from Paul’s personal experience of God’s reconciliation of him to himself on the Damascus road. The thesis was developed mainly from an exegesis of 2 Cor. 5:11-21. Subsequently, I came to know that some earlier commentators had hinted at that probability, and also that a couple of more recent writers came close to affirming it.

Commentators regularly note 1) that the κοτολλάσσενν-terminology is unique with Paul in the NT, 2) that its usage in Paul is quite different from that in Hellenistic or Hellenistic Jewish literature, and 3) that Paul’s Damascus experience of conversion/call is reflected in several points in 2 Cor. 5:11-21, one of the two passages in the Pauline Hauptbriefe (the other being Rom. 5:1-10) where “reconciliation” is a key term. Then, is it not naturally suggested that these three points should be considered in a mutual connection? It is, therefore, rather strange that in scholarship Paul’s doctrine of “reconciliation” has not been discussed more often in connection with his Damascus experience of divine “reconciliation” and call.

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3 E.g. O. Hofius, “Erwägungen zur Gestalt und Herkunft des paulinischen Versöhnungsgedankens,” originally in ᾲThK 77 (1980), now reprinted in his Paulusstudium (Tübingen:
I. Linguistic Background

Recently, in his thorough study of the linguistic background of the καταλλάσσειν-terminology, C. Breytenbach points out that in the Hellenistic literature the terminology for "reconciliation" in interpersonal relationships is used most prominently for peace-treaty processes in the politico-military context, but not for the relationship between God and human beings or in a religious context. Noting the parallelism between the Hellenistic conception of the "ambassadors" (πρέσβεις) who are sent to "petition" (δέομαι) or "appeal" (παρακαλεῖν) to warring parties for reconciliation, and the same set of vocabulary in 2 Cor. 5:20, Breytenbach explains this Hellenistic usage of the καταλλάσσειν-terminology in the diplomatic context to be the background of Paul’s concept of "reconciliation."

However, I.H. Marshall points to some passages in 2 Macc., where the καταλλαγή-terminology is used for God being reconciled to his people. When their apostasy has aroused the wrath of God, the people may pray to God "to be reconciled with his servants" (καταλλαγῆ γὰρ τοῖς αὐτῶν δούλοις) (2 Macc. 8:29; similarly 1:5). Or, when God has vented his wrath upon them or their representatives, God will be reconciled with his people (2 Macc. 5:20; 7:32-33).

Breytenbach himself points out that, like 2 Macc., both Philo (VitMos. 2.166; Jos. 11.18) and Josephus (Bell. 5.415; Ant. 7.153) also apply, though not frequently, the originally diplomatic terminology of καταλλάσσειν to the relationship between God and human beings: God’s being "reconciled" to Israel or David at their repentance or prayer. However, impressed by the difference between the Hellenistic Jewish usage of the terminology (God is reconciled to human beings) and Pauline usage (God reconciles human beings to himself) as much as by the close parallelism between the profane Hellenistic diplomatic usage and Pauline usage in 2 Cor. 5:18-20, Breytenbach insists that only the profane Hellenistic usage is the background of Paul’s usage.


1 C. Breytenbach, Versöhnung (Neukirchen: Neukirchener, 1989), 40-83; cf. now also S.E. Porter, Katallasso in Ancient Greek Literature, with Reference to the Pauline Writings (Cordoba: Ediciones El Almendro, 1994), 39-76.

2 For references to the literature where these words appear, see Breytenbach, Versöhnung, esp. 64ff.


4 Breytenbach, Versöhnung, 70-81.