

# **THE ANTITHETICAL IDENTITY OF THE PHILIPPIAN OPPONENTS AND PAUL'S SHAPING OF ESCHATOLOGICAL IDENTITY**

**Rob A. Fringer**

This article has been peer reviewed

*This article argues that Paul inserts oppositional references into his letter to the Philippians in order to provide an antithetical identity to that of the proposed eschatological identity he is seeking to bolster within the Philippian community. This antithetical identity presupposes a group of opponents who were very familiar to Paul's audience, namely, fellow Greeks and Romans, who were unbelievers and who lived alongside the Philippian Christians in Philippi rather than Jewish or Jewish Christian opponents. Explanations identifying Jewish opponents have proven inadequate because they do not fit convincingly into the overall flow of Paul's argument. Since the opponents' concrete identity is only important for establishing a familiar antithesis it is argued that seeking to identify them precisely has little value. Instead focus should shift to the eschatological identity of believers and how this new identity moves them toward transformation and unification, even in the midst of a difficult external situation.*

---

The letter to the Philippians has multiple references to Pauline (1:15a, 17; 2:21; 3:2[?]) and Philippian (1:28; 2:15; 3:2[?], 18-19) opposition. Nevertheless, the tone of the letter remains extremely amicable and only once is there the possibility of a real warning (3:2). Thus, many scholars have judiciously noted that this letter is 'fundamentally a progress-oriented, not a problem-solving discourse.'<sup>1</sup> In other words, Paul is not addressing a problem of disunity in the Philippian community,<sup>2</sup> nor is he addressing an immediate threat to the gospel message. If the former, we would expect a response similar to 1 Corinthians (e.g. 1 Cor 1:10-13; 3:1-9; 11:1-22), if the latter, a response similar to Galatians (e.g. Gal 1:6-9;

---

<sup>1</sup> Ben Witherington, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 25; Cf. Dean Flemming, *Philippians: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (NBBC; Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2009), 29-30; similarly, Loveday Alexander, 'Hellenistic Letter-Forms and the Structure of Philippians,' *JSNT* 37 (1989): 93-95.

<sup>2</sup> Davorin Peterlin, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians in the Light of Disunity in the Church* (NovTSup 79; Leiden: Brill, 1995).

5:7-12; cf. Phil 1:18). However, the question remains why Paul mentions opposition so regularly in this short epistle. It will be argued that Paul inserts these oppositional references into his argument to provide an antithetical identity to that of the proposed eschatological identity he is seeking to bolster within the Philippian community.

## I. In-Group and Out-Group Identities

It is common for a social group to mark the bounds of its identity in contrast to another similar yet rival group (cf. Deut 18:9-14; Esth 3:8). This is especially important when one has transitioned from a now rival group and continues to live in close proximity to them. The risk of re-assimilation is high since previous social pressures persist and many previous social norms remain part of one's new identity. When a person who has entered a new social group continues to live among their old group, they must have a clear understanding of what makes them unique or the requisite for separation will become untenable.<sup>3</sup> The difficulty increases when there is no clear physical distinction (e.g. colour, dress, markings). The Philippians found themselves in just such a situation. Therefore, Paul needed not only to make clear the boundary markers of their new identity but also to show clear distinction from their previous identity.

Jutta Jokiranta, evaluating social identity in the Qumran movement, explores the importance of a prototypical representative to evidence the uniquenesses of the group, especially over and against their opponents who are often represented by stereotypical classifications such as 'liar' or 'wicked priests' (cf. 2:15; 3:2, 18-19).<sup>4</sup> Jokiranta argues that within *pesharim* material, the 'teacher of righteousness' plays this role. The prototype 'maximizes the out-group differences and minimizes the in-group differences.'<sup>5</sup> Since the prototype is merely a human representative of the whole community, that person should not be overly elevated. It is not so much about the individual but about what they represent. The

---

<sup>3</sup> Rupert Brown, *Group Processes: Dynamics Within and Between Groups* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 315-321.

<sup>4</sup> Jutta Jokiranta, *Social Identity and Sectarianism in the Qumran Movement* (STDJ 105; Leiden: Brill, 2013), 177; cf. Philip Esler, *Conflict and Identity in Romans: The Social Setting of Paul's Letter* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 21-22; Brown, *Group Processes*, 290-308.

<sup>5</sup> Jokiranta, *Social Identity*, 176.

prototype may have some special privileges, for instance revelation from God concerning the end times (1QpHab 7:3-5), however, '[t]he group shares this privilege simply by being on the side which has taken the message for the end times seriously and itself now disclosing the message.'<sup>6</sup>

This may explain why Paul mentions his personal opposition and suffering (1:12-26, 30) and why he stresses unity between himself, Timothy (2:19-24) and especially Epaphroditus (2:25-30). Paul's own opposition and suffering minimises the in-group differences, showing greater continuity between himself and the Philippian Christians, who are themselves suffering (cf. 1:29-30), and greater incongruity between them and any opponents. Timothy, who contrasts with those who seek their own interests (2:21), and Epaphroditus, who 'came close to death for the work of Christ' (2:30), serve this same purpose and are themselves elevated toward representative status. The unity between Paul and these men as well as their response to opposition and suffering provide an example for the Philippians to emulate and in so doing, strengthen their in-group identity. Christ is put forth as the ultimate prototype, mentioned thirty-seven times in this short epistle and providing the climactic example of suffering, unity and mission in the Christological hymn of 2:6-11. However, Christ is clearly presented as a divine figure and therefore moves beyond prototype to archetype and in so doing becomes not merely an example but the origin and foundation of the believers' new in-group identity, an identity shaped by a new eschatological reality rather than by the present evil age (i.e. an 'eschatological identity'). Additionally, Paul's extended autobiography in 3:4-14 provides the Philippians with an example of how to successfully transition from a previous identity to an eschatological identity, which is grounded in Christ and his mission.

## **II. The Opponents in 1:28 and 2:15**

Before addressing the oppositional references, it is necessary to point out their strategic location. As indicated above, the Christological hymn (2:6-11) and Pauline autobiography (3:4-11) form the heart of Paul's argument and of the epistle as a whole. It is therefore no accident that Paul frames these two pericopae with the

---

<sup>6</sup> Jokiranta, *Social Identity*, 180.

four references to Philippian opposition (1:28; 2:15; 3:2, 18-19). In this way, he is able to show a marked difference between the Philippians' new eschatological identity and their opponents. While various Philippian opponents have been suggested for each of the four references, the greatest majority of scholars see at least two distinct opponents with 1:28 and 2:15 referring to one group and 3:2 and 3:18-19 referring to another group. For this reason, I will group my analysis into these corresponding sections.

The context of 1:28 and 2:15 gives some clues for unlocking the identity of this particular group of opponents.<sup>7</sup> All of the signs point to a group that lived in close proximity to those in the church; it was a group that was regularly able to witness the Philippians' lack of intimidation (1:28a) and their shining like stars (2:15). Additionally, Paul's reference to the Philippians having 'the same struggle,' which they saw he had and hear he still has (1:30), likely reflects some physical suffering on the part of the Philippians, including the possibility of imprisonment,<sup>8</sup> which correspond with Paul's current situation (1:12-20). Since such penalties would require local governmental involvement, it is most feasible to conclude that the opposition consists of 'an external threat from the surrounding civic community.'<sup>9</sup> The possibility for such action is strengthened by Luke's account of Paul and Silas in Philippi where they were scourged and imprisoned by local citizens and the city's magistrates (Acts 16:19-24; cf. 2 Cor 11:23-27). This hypothesis may also find credence in Paul's use of πολιτεύεσθε (1:27) and πολιτευμα (3:20),<sup>10</sup> which would have had great significance to the Greeks and Romans in Philippi, and which Paul appears to repurpose as part of the

---

<sup>7</sup> The connection between 1:28 and 2:15 is evidenced by their contextual placement as part of the larger unit of 1:27-2:18. The context also reveals that in both cases, Paul is referring to unbelievers living in close proximity. Cf. G. Walter Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 98-101, 182-83.

<sup>8</sup> See Gregory L. Bloomquist, *The Function of Suffering in Philippians* (JSNTSup 78; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 158; Mikael Tellbe, *Paul Between Synagogue and State: Christians, Jews and Civic Authorities in 1 Thessalonians, Romans, and Philippians* (ConBNT 34; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2001), 226-28; Contra G.W. Peterman, *Paul's Gift from Philippi: Conventions of Gift-Exchange and Christian Giving* (SNTSMS 92; Cambridge: Cambridge, 1997), 146-49; Peter Oakes, *Philippians: From People to Letter* (SNTSMS 110; Cambridge: Cambridge, 2001), 89-99.

<sup>9</sup> Tellbe, *Between Synagogue and State*, 233, emphasis his.

<sup>10</sup> Tellbe, *Between Synagogue and State*, 233, 239-243; see also Oakes, *Philippians*, 89; Craig de Vos, *Church and Community Conflicts: The Relationship of the Thessalonian, Corinthian, and Philippian Churches with Their Wider Civic Communities* (SBLDS 168; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999), 262-265.

church's new eschatological identity. Those scholars emphasising the rather limited Jewish usage<sup>11</sup> of πολιτεύομαι and its cognates tend to ignore the copious secular references as well as the social milieu of Paul's audience.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, suggestions of Jewish,<sup>13</sup> or Jewish Christian,<sup>14</sup> opponents for 1:28 have proven indefensible,<sup>15</sup> especially in light of the lack of historical and archaeological evidence of any significant Jewish presence in Philippi during this period (cf. Acts 16:13-14).<sup>16</sup>

When we transition to 2:15, Paul refers to these same opponents as 'a crooked and perverse generation.' This is an echo of Deuteronomy 32:5 (LXX), which includes the words οὐκ αὐτῷ τέκνον (cf. τέκνα θεοῦ in reference to the Philippians). Markus Bockmuehl is correct that we cannot take this phrase to mean that Paul believes God has rejected the Jews, especially since Paul is not currently addressing Jewish opponents.<sup>17</sup> The contrast is rather between the Philippian believers and their local opponents. They are 'blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish' and their oppressors are 'crooked and perverse' (2:15). Paul's imperative for the Philippians to, 'Do all things without murmuring and arguing' (2:14), besides having possible correlation to Israel's desert murmurings (LXX Exod 15:24; 16:2, 7, 8; Num 14:2, 36; Deut 1:27; cf. 1 Cor 10:10), could be a reference to the opponents who may have regularly murmured against the gods. Paul Holloway gives several examples of contemporary Roman and Greek injunctions

<sup>11</sup> E.g. Philo, *Decal.* 98; *Spec.* 1.60, 63; *Mos.* 2.211; Josephus, *Ap.* 2.260-61; 2 Macc 6:1; 11:25; 3 Macc 3:4.

<sup>12</sup> James Ware, *Paul and the Mission of the Church: Philippians in Ancient Jewish Context* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 135-37, 218; E.C. Miller, "Πολιτεύεσθε' in Philippians 1:27: Some Philological and Thematic Observations," *JSNT* 15 (1982): 86-96. Even if Ware and Miller are correct that Jewish usage forms the background of Paul's language here and in 3:20, this does not mean the opponents are Jewish, as Miller argues, nor that the Philippians would have perceived or understood this background.

<sup>13</sup> Gerald Hawthorne, *Philippians* (WBC 43; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1983), xlv-xlvii, 58.

<sup>14</sup> Miller, 'Πολιτεύεσθε,' *passim*; Jean-François Collange, *The Epistle of Saint Paul to the Philippians* (trans. A.W. Heathcote; London: Epworth, 1979), 71-75; Chris Mearns, 'The Identity of Paul's Opponents at Philippi,' *NTS* 33.2 (1987): 194-204.

<sup>15</sup> See esp. Oakes, *Philippians*, 84-89.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Ascough, *Paul's Macedonian Association* (WUNT 2.161; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 191-212.

<sup>17</sup> Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.; BNTC; London: A&C Black, 1997), 156-57; *Contra*, Collange, *Philippians*, 112; Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 102; cf. Peter T. O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 294.

prohibiting complaint against the gods, thus suggesting it was a normal occurrence.<sup>18</sup> Whereas the opponents grumble against their gods/rulers when they face suffering, the Philippians are called to 'hold fast to the word of life' (2:16) in the midst of their suffering. Here, Paul takes the one difference for which they are acutely aware, their suffering, and turns it upside down. Persecution can move a group toward withdrawal and isolation,<sup>19</sup> or victimisation and paralysation.<sup>20</sup> Paul seeks to redirect them away from any understanding of identity not grounded in Christ. Their suffering is a privilege graciously granted by God; it is part of their eschatological calling (1:29; 2:12b-13), just as it is part of Paul's (1:30; 2:17). In this way, suffering becomes part of their in-group identity, and is able to draw the group together rather than tear them apart. It is no longer a mark of shame but a badge of honour, which is proof of their salvation and of their opponents' destruction (1:28).

Here, the antithetical identity of the opponents comes to the forefront. Paul's caricaturing of their faults over and against the Philippians' positive actions and attributes helps to solidify in-group identity and unity by weakening the attraction of the oppositional group.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, it provides additional information and affirmation about the in-group identity. Not only *are* they those who 'stand firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel,' and 'children of God without blemish' who 'shine like stars in the world...holding fast to the word of life,' they are simultaneously *not* those set for destruction, *not* those who murmur and argue, and *not* a 'crooked and perverse generation.' In this way, the oppositional references serve to shape the Philippian's identity and the concrete identity of the opponent becomes almost superfluous.

---

<sup>18</sup> Paul A. Holloway, *Consolation in Philippians: Philosophical Sources and Rhetorical Strategy* (SNTSMS 112; Cambridge: Cambridge, 2001), 125.

<sup>19</sup> Jeremiah Cataldo, 'Remembering Esther: Anti-Semitism and the Conflict of Identity,' *The Bible and Critical Theory* 8.1 (2012): 22.

<sup>20</sup> Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Princeton: Princeton, 2011), 57.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Helmut Koester, 'The Purpose of the Polemic of a Pauline Fragment (Philippians III),' *NTS* 8 (1961/2): 319-20: comes to a similar conclusion saying the aim 'is not to describe the opponents, but to insult them.' See also: Anthony J. Saldarini, 'Delegitimation of Leaders in Mathew 23,' *CBQ* 54 (1992): 659-680.

### III. The Opponents in 3:2 and 3:18-19

There is near unanimous acceptance among scholars that 3:2—'Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh!'—is a reference to either Jews or Jewish Christ-followers who desired to see Gentiles judaized.<sup>22</sup> Yet, this hypothesis creates more problems than it solves. As noted, the epistle shows no evidence of an outside (non-Philippian/Roman) group of opponents<sup>23</sup> and the historical and archaeological data show little evidence of a Jewish presence in Philippi (cf. Acts 16:13-14).<sup>24</sup> For this reason, most scholars further postulate that Paul is giving a warning,<sup>25</sup> or holding up these opponents as a negative example,<sup>26</sup> rather than speaking about a current or imminent threat.<sup>27</sup>

Still another difficulty with a 'Jewish opponent view' (JOV) is discerning whether the 'enemies of the cross' mentioned in 3:18-19 are a continued reference to the proposed Jewish group mentioned in 3:2,<sup>28</sup> whether Paul has returned to the Gentile opponents referenced in 1:28 and 2:15,<sup>29</sup> or possibly Gentile apostates from the Philippian church.<sup>30</sup> While the scholarly scales are still tipped

---

<sup>22</sup> For an overview of the argument see: Wolfgang Schenk, *Die Philipperbriefe des Paulus. Kommentar* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1987), 294-99.

<sup>23</sup> Oakes, *Philippians*, 58-59, 89.

<sup>24</sup> Ascough, *Paul's Macedonian Association*, 191-212; Oakes, *Philippians*, 58-59, 87.

<sup>25</sup> Flemming, *Philippians*, 158; O'Brien, *Philippians*, 354.

<sup>26</sup> David E. Garland, 'The Composition and Unity of Philippians: Some Neglected Literary Factors,' *NovT* 27.2 (1985): 166-67.

<sup>27</sup> Contra Tellbe, *Between Synagogue and State*, 260; Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin, *Philippians: Revised* (WBC 43; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), liii-lv, 171-78.

<sup>28</sup> D.K. Williams, *Enemies of the Cross: The Terminology of the Cross and Conflict in Philippians* (JSNTSup 223; London: Sheffield, 2002), 224; John Reumann, *Philippians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AYB 33B; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 589-90; Ben Witherington III, *Friendship and Finances in Philippi: The Letter of Paul to the Philippians* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press, 1994), 28-29, 97-98; O'Brien, *Philippians*, 454-57; Hawthorne and Martin, *Philippians*, 221.

<sup>29</sup> De Vos, *Church and Community*, 271-74; Tellbe, *Between Synagogue and State*, 269-74; cf. Mark J. Keown, *Congregational Evangelism in Philippians: The Centrality of an Appeal for Gospel Proclamation to the Fabric of Philippians* (PBM; Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008), 226-27; and Moisés Silva, *Philippians*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 61-62: who see it as a general reference to all 'enemies of the cross' whether Jew or Gentile.

<sup>30</sup> Hansen, *Philippians*, 263-67; Bockmuehl, *Philippians*, 229-32.

toward a JOV in 3:18-19, the evidence against this reading is much stronger and is well surmised by G.W. Hansen:

The difficulties faced by this interpretation, however, are the absence of any clear connection between Jewish food laws and idolatry in Paul's letters, the absence of any evidence that Paul viewed circumcision or male genitals as shameful, and the absence of Paul's dismissal of Jewish privileges as earthly things. In fact, Paul expresses his approval of observing Jewish food laws in certain circumstances (1 Cor 9:20; Rom 14:1-17), views the Jewish practice of the circumcision of *Jews* (not *Gentiles*) as a sign of faithfulness to the law (1 Cor 7:18-19; Phil 3:5-6), and lists Jewish privileges as the irrevocable gifts of God (Rom 9:4-5; 11:29).<sup>31</sup>

While Hansen's observations are perceptive, this does not prevent him from seeing 3:2 as a reference to Jewish opponents, even though this reading also presents circumcision and *Torah* observance in a negative light. Were it not for 3:2, it is doubtful many would see 3:18-19 as a reference to Jews. Yet, the presence of 3:2 and the overwhelming acceptance of a JOV have become a hermeneutical lens through which many have read not only 3:18-19 but also 3:5-9. While this is not necessarily negative, it does tend toward negative and unhelpful readings of 3:5-9. For instance, Heikki Räisänen writes:

What Paul in effect renounces in the passage is not human achievement, but the biblical covenant. Of course he cannot admit that this is what his actual position implies. Had Paul argued in Phil 3 in a straightforward way, however, he ought to have said something like this in verse 9: 'not having the righteousness connected with God's ancient *covenant with Israel*, but the righteousness connected with the *Christ event*.'<sup>32</sup>

A significant recent exception to the JOV in 3:2 is Mark Nanos,<sup>33</sup> who argues Paul's castigations, and especially the first (dogs), are

---

<sup>31</sup> Hansen, *Philippians*, 264; cf. Bockmuehl, *Philippians*, 230-32.

<sup>32</sup> Heikki Räisänen, 'Paul's Conversion and the Development of His View of the Law,' *NTS* 33 (1987): 410, italics his.

<sup>33</sup> Mark Nanos, 'Paul's Reversal of Jews Calling Gentiles 'Dogs' (Philippians 3:2): 1600 Years of an Ideological Tale Wagging an Exegetical Dog?' *BibInt* 17 (2009): 448-482; cf. Robert Brawley, 'From Reflex to Reflection?: Identity in Philippians 2:6-11 and Its Context,' in *Reading Paul in Context: Explorations in Identity Formation: Essays in Honour of William S. Campbell* (eds. K. Ehrensperger & B. Tucker; LBNTS 428; London: T&T Clark, 2010), 128-46; similarly Herbert Bateman, 'Were the Opponents at Philippi Necessarily Jewish?,' *BSac* 155 (1998): 39-61, who argues the



aimed at Gentile opponents. Nanos assesses the validity of the popular reading of Philippians 3:2, which holds ‘The Jews were in the habit of referring contemptuously to Gentiles as *κῠνας*, “dogs”,’<sup>34</sup> and thus Paul reverses and redirects this slur toward his Jewish opponents.<sup>35</sup> Nanos traces the use of ‘dogs’ in Jewish literature including the Tanakh, OT Pseudepigrapha, Dead Sea Scrolls, Philo, Josephus, New Testament, and Rabbinic writings, to see if ‘dogs’ is ever used as a derogatory term by Jews to speak of Gentiles.

Systematically working through the various uses in their context, Nanos disproves previous claims and finds only two possible cases: 1) a medieval addition of *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* 29 where, besides being very late, the reference to dogs is not present in all extant editions; and 2) Jesus’ statement to the Syrophoenician woman that ‘it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs’ (Mark 7:27; Matt 15:26). Yet, even this latter case could be interpreted in multiple ways, which lessen the negativity of this statement. Jesus may have been using this statement to test the woman or, more likely, to teach the disciples an important lesson about purity (cf. Mark 7:1-22). After all, ‘Her theologically potent assertion implies that Jesus has sufficient resources for Gentiles as well’ as Jews and Jesus’ granting of her request proves this to be the case.<sup>36</sup>

Rather than a negative label used for Gentiles, ‘dogs’ was a general slur. ‘In a very real sense, calling someone or a group a dog or dogs or referring to dog-like behavior is simply name-calling. It does not make clear precisely who is in view in other definable terms, but functions as a word of reproach, commonly understood without being spelled out.’<sup>37</sup> Before coming to possible conclusions about the identity of these opponents, the other two epithets must also be assessed.

---

opponents were local Gentiles Judaizers; similarly Kenneth Grayston, ‘The Opponents in Philippians 3,’ *ExpTim* 97.6 (1986): 170-72.

<sup>34</sup> Hawthorne and Martin, *Philippians*, 174; so also Brian Dodd, *Paul’s Paradigmatic T: Personal Example as Literary Strategy* (JSNTSup 177; Sheffield: Sheffield, 1999), 175, 181.

<sup>35</sup> O’Brien, *Philippians*, 355; Peter-Ben Smit, *Paradigms of Being in Christ: A Study of the Epistle to the Philippians* (LNTS 476; London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 73-74.

<sup>36</sup> Kent Brower, *Mark: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (NBBC; Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 2012), 203. See also J.R. Harrison, ‘Every Dog Has Its Day,’ in *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity*, Vol. 10 (ed. S.R. Llewelyn and J.R. Harrison; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 126-135.

<sup>37</sup> Nanos, ‘Paul’s Reversal?’, 460; see also Darrell Doughty, ‘Citizens of Heaven: Philippians 3:2-21,’ *NTS* 41.1 (1995): 104.

‘Evil workers’ (τοὺς κακοὺς ἐργάτας) like ‘dogs’ has by most been considered a ‘reverse insult’ toward Paul’s supposed Jewish opponents condemning either their prideful *Torah* observance,<sup>38</sup> and/or their malicious missionary activity among the Gentiles.<sup>39</sup> Concerning the former, Paul has already called the Philippians to ‘work out’ (κατεργάζεσθε) their own salvation because God was at ‘work’ (ἐνεργέω) in them enabling them to ‘work’ (ἐνεργέω) for his good pleasure (2:12-13). Similarly, Paul used συνεργός to describe Epaphroditus (2:25), Euodia, Syntyche, and Clement (4:3; cf. Rom 16:3, 9, 21; 1 Thes 3:2; Phlm 1), directly before and after chapter 3. Thus, this is not a works versus grace argument but rather a good work versus bad work argument. In other words, Paul’s use of κακοὺς ἐργάτας contrasts the Philippians’ positive actions and their opponents’ negative actions rather than referring to prideful *Torah* observance. We should beware of conflating Paul’s use of ‘works of the law’ found in Galatians and Romans with Philippians as they are very different churches and situations.<sup>40</sup>

Those arguing for malicious missionary activity emphasise the New Testament’s use of ἐργάτης in connection to missionary activity (Mt 9:37-38; 10:10; Lk 10:2, 7; 1 Tim 5:18; 2 Tim 2:15; cf. *Did.* 13:2); they especially underscore Paul’s use of ‘deceitful workers’ (ἐργάται δόλιοι) in 2 Corinthians 11:13.<sup>41</sup> Yet, Peter O’Brien has accurately articulated the differences between these opponents, noting especially that in 2 Corinthians the issue is apostleship and the opponents are also referred to as ‘ψευδαπόστολοι who masquerade as ἀπόστολοι Χριστοῦ, but at Philippi Paul’s apostleship was not in dispute.’<sup>42</sup> Since the Philippians are not facing an immediate Jewish threat and Paul is not facing an immediate apostolic threat, we need not force ἐργάτης to refer to missionary activity (cf. Mt 20:1, 2, 8; Acts 19:25; Jas 5:4; esp. Lk 13:27 —ἐργάται ἀδικίας). Paul uses κακοὺς ἐργάτας as a general term referring to all those who are enemies of the cross of Christ (3:18),<sup>43</sup> whether Jew or Gentile. In fact, Colossians 1:21, regardless of Pauline authorship, provides an

---

<sup>38</sup> Silva, *Philippians*, 169; Gordon D. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 295-96.

<sup>39</sup> O’Brien, *Philippians*, 355; Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 125; Bateman, *Opponents*, 55.

<sup>40</sup> Douglas Campbell, *The Deliverance of God: An Apocalyptic Rereading of Justification in Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 898-99.

<sup>41</sup> Reumann, *Philippians*, 472; F.F. Bruce, *Philippians* (NIBCNT 11; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1989), 104.

<sup>42</sup> O’Brien, *Philippians*, 356.

<sup>43</sup> Doughty, ‘Citizens,’ 104-06.

interesting parallel—'you (Gentiles)<sup>44</sup> were formerly estranged and enemies (ἐχθρούς) in disposition, as was shown by<sup>45</sup> (your) evil works (τοῖς ἔργοις τοῖς πονηροῖς).'<sup>46</sup>

Many commentators, aware of the dubious footing for postulating a JOV based on the first two epithets, place the weight of their argument upon the third (τὴν κατατομήν).<sup>47</sup> The paronomasia between κατατομή and περιτομή has led to the conclusion that the former is a sarcastic reference to the physical act of circumcision and the latter a reference to spiritual circumcision, which distinguishes 'true' followers of God from those who depend on the flesh (i.e. Jews; cf. Rom 2:28-29).<sup>48</sup> However, we know of many pagan religious practises, which involved self-mutilation of some sort (cf. 1 Kings 18:28; Isa 15:2 LXX) and we have archaeological evidence for their flourishing in Philippi.<sup>49</sup> Of special note is the cult of Cybele, whose priests practiced self-castration.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, the *synkrisis* does not automatically need to be between true and false circumcision and thus between Jew and Gentile. It could equally be between Gentile pagans who find their identity in the Roman *polis*, which likely included Imperial Cult and Philippian goddess worship,<sup>51</sup> and Gentile Christians who belong to a heavenly *polis* (3:20; cf. 1:27) and who are therefore called by Paul to identify themselves as those who have been 'cut' into the people of God (Gen 17; cf. Rom 11:17-24) as a result of the eschatological in breaking.

A final question arises as to the identity of the Philippian opponents. How would a predominantly Gentile church in a city with little to no Jewish presence have understood Paul's epithets?

<sup>44</sup> James Dunn, *The Epistle to the Colossians and to Philemon* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 106.

<sup>45</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*. (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 76 n. 173.

<sup>46</sup> My translation.

<sup>47</sup> See esp. Christopher Zoccali, "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with His People": Paul's Intra-Jewish Rhetoric in Philippians 3:1-9,' *CTR* 9.1 (2011): 21-31; O'Brien, *Philippians*, 354; Stephen Fowl, *Philippians* (THNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 145-46.

<sup>48</sup> The NASB and RSV translate 'we are the *true* circumcision' and the NLT and NCV translate 'the ones who are *truly* circumcised'. See also the bold comments of Silva, *Philippians*, 148.

<sup>49</sup> Brawley, 'Reflex to Reflection,' 142-46; V.A. Abrahamsen, *Women and Worship at Philippi: Diana/Artemis and Other Cults in the Early Christian Era* (Portland: Astarte Shell Press, 1995), 25-26.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Juvenal, *Sat.* 2.110-19; Suetonius, *Dom.* 7; Catullus 63; See also A.T. Fear, 'Cybele and Christ,' in *Cybele, Attis & Related Cults: Essays in Memory of M.J. Vermaseren* (ed. E.N. Lane; Leiden: Brill, 1996), 37-50.

<sup>51</sup> Brawley, 'Reflex and Reflection,' 142-43.

Stated another way, how would a people surrounded by pagan examples of dogs,<sup>52</sup> evil workers, and mutilators of the flesh have understood Paul's appellations? A reversed insult would have caused more confusion than clarity.<sup>53</sup> It is more feasible for them to have seen these harsh words directed toward a group they understood rather than a group with which they had little experience. This is especially the case if the issue at hand is one of identity. Paul's words in 3:2 and 3:18-19, like his words in 1:28 and 2:15, served to construct a recognizable antitype by which to clarify Philippian identity. Furthermore, the negative stereotypical classifications given to these opponents help to distinguish the in-group from the out-group.

Somewhat irrespective of the concrete identity of this group of opponents, these statements all serve to narrow the boundaries of correct and incorrect social identity for the Philippian church. Rather than naming this particular group, Paul's descriptors provide further identity markers for the Philippians. Not only *are* they 'the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh' (3:3), they are simultaneously *not* dogs, *not* evil workers, *not* the mutilation (3:2), and *not* enemies of the cross (3:18).

## Conclusion

This essay has endeavoured to explain the reason for Paul's many oppositional references in the midst of this amicable and 'progress-oriented' correspondence. While many scholars have postulated particular identities for the various references, these hypotheses, and especially those emphasising Jewish opponents, have proven inadequate because they have not convincingly explained the purpose of these references within the overall flow of Paul's argument. By proposing an overall theme of identity formation and evaluating the oppositional references through this same lens, I have tried to show how these references functioned to provide an antithetical identity to that of the proposed eschatological identity of the Philippian Christians. This antithetical identity presupposes a group of opponents who were very familiar to Paul's audience. Thus, against the scholarly tide, I have argued that all four oppositional

---

<sup>52</sup> See Nanos, 'Paul's Reversal?', 475-76.

<sup>53</sup> Grayston, 'Opponents,' 171.

references (1:28; 2:15; 3:2, 18-19) refer to the same opponents—namely, fellow Greeks and Romans, who were unbelievers and who lived alongside the Philippian Christians in Philippi. This also meant arguing against the near unanimous view that Paul was referring to Jewish or Jewish Christian opponents in chapter 3. Finally, since the opponents' concrete identity is only important for establishing a familiar antithesis, I have argued they are somewhat superfluous; scholars can thus spend less time arguing about who these opponents were, what they believed, and how they acted toward the Philippians. Instead, scholars might focus on the eschatological identity of believers and how this new identity moves them toward transformation and unification, even in the midst of difficult external situation.