

CHAPTER

34 Paul and Feminism

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Abstract

Paul and feminism are an uneasy pair, but feminist interpretation has played a pioneering role in demonstrating the social location and cultural embeddedness of Paul and the Pauline literature. Feminist interpretations of Pauline texts can broadly be categorized as ‘thematic’ or ‘structural’. Thematic interpretations focus specifically on women’s issues and intend to uncover women’s hidden voices and unveil arguments and strategies by which women are kept silent, rendered invisible, or marginalized by dominating hierarchical power structures. In addition, Paul’s social location as a member of a marginalized people, the Jews, is here considered important in assessing the significance of his theologizing in light of feminist issues. Structural approaches investigate the rhetorical drive, the power dynamics, the terminology and metaphors in Pauline argumentation. The divergent images of Paul emerging from such diverse feminist approaches indicate that no one ‘true’ Pauline voice concerning the role of women or way of doing theology can be found, but a plurality of feminist interpretations has emerged.

Keywords: [gender](#), [feminism](#), [women](#), [mutuality](#), [power](#), [empire](#), [hierarchy](#), [domination](#), [empowerment](#), [social location](#)

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1. Introduction

PAUL and feminism seem to be an uneasy pair. The fact that only a few monograph-length studies of Pauline literature from a feminist perspective have been published since the emergence of feminist biblical interpretation may have numerous reasons, but a general uneasiness of feminist interpreters towards Paul’s letters is arguably one of them. Other reasons may include the increasingly multidisciplinary character of biblical interpretation, which renders it difficult to label publications with precision, and also inter-feminist discussions about what actually constitutes a feminist approach. While there is no room here to discuss in detail the debates concerning definitions of feminist approaches, we can speak of certain shared trajectories that indicate key aspects relevant to the interpretation of Pauline texts. In this essay, feminism is recognized for its pioneering role in demonstrating the social location and embeddedness of all approaches—not just women’s approaches—to biblical texts, hence challenging the notion of detached objectivity in academic discourse.

Consideration of hermeneutical presuppositions in interpretation is one of the core features shared by various feminist approaches, even if their theoretical underpinnings and applications may otherwise differ significantly. Feminist interpreters have contributed decisively to transforming biblical studies over the past forty years, emphasizing that interpretation is always from somewhere, for a purpose, in a specific context. The context of women’s experience and their advocacy for gender equality are cornerstones of all

feminist approaches, which emerged from the struggles of women for liberation and empowerment (Ehrensperger 2004: 92–120). From early feminist biblical interpretation—with its focus on the search for women’s agency, the recovering of women’s voices, and the uncovering of their oppression in biblical texts—to the current interdisciplinary focus on structural aspects of discourse, a range of diverse approaches has sought to engage with Paul on feminist and gender issues.

p. 623 The recognition that the context of Paul’s letters was androcentric and patriarchal—and that his letters are permeated with such a perspective—is a truism, but one that poses a significant problem for feminist interpreters. There are different ways of dealing with this recognition. It leads some feminists to consider these texts as so permeated with patriarchal structures that they cannot but hinder any emancipatory agenda of gender equality. This was the approach taken already by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and her collaborators who published *The Women’s Bible* in 1895, a Bible free from (what the editors classified as) misogynist texts. But whether or not this particular stance is adopted, feminist New Testament scholars continue to study the Pauline letters as sources for the history of the earliest Christ groups, the history of the later church, and contemporary debates about gender equality.

2. Thematic Feminist Interpretations

Feminist interpretations of Pauline texts can broadly be categorized as either ‘thematic’ or ‘structural’. Thematic interpretations focus specifically on women’s issues and intend to uncover women’s hidden voices and unveil arguments and strategies by which women are kept silent, rendered invisible, or marginalized. Structural approaches, by contrast, investigate the rhetorical drive, the power dynamics, the terminology and metaphors in Pauline argumentation.

Firstly: thematic approaches. After a first wave of feminist approaches to the New Testament which uncovered the women around Jesus and depicted Jesus and his message as liberating for women, an image of Paul began to emerge which attributed to him the reintroduction of ‘traditional’ gender patterns and hence saw Paul as distorting the liberating message of Jesus (Ehrensperger 2004: 40). Since these early feminist approaches to Paul, more nuanced interpretations have been proposed; prominent among these is Antoinette Clark Wire’s *The Corinthian Women Prophets* (Wire 1990). Wire argues that hidden in Paul’s rhetoric, through which he attempts to impose his message upon the Corinthian Christ group, are the voices of the people Paul opposes, whom Wire identifies as Corinthian women prophets. They understand the message of the gospel as freeing them from patriarchal constraints and enabling them to speak and play an active role in the leadership of the Christ movement. Paul’s stance in 1 Corinthians is conservative, trying to maintain patriarchal gender structures with reference to the order of creation, among other things.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s work has had a decisive influence on feminist interpretation of Paul. Although an early focus on women per se can be found in her work, from the beginning this emphasis was set in the context of a wider kyriarchal–critical hermeneutics of suspicion. For instance, in her analysis of Romans 16, she writes:

p. 624 Those passages that directly mention women cannot be taken as providing all the information about women in early Christianity. The letter of recommendation 4 concluding now Paul’s Epistle to the Romans mentions women’s early Christian leadership only in passing, but still mentions it. Its references to early Christian women therefore should be read as the “tip of an iceberg,” indicating what is submerged in grammatically masculine language and how much historical information is lost to us forever. These references, however, must not be fitted into an androcentric model of historical reconstruction but must be appropriated with an understanding of early Christian beginnings that allows for the leadership not only of men but also for that of women.

(Schüssler Fiorenza 1986: 423)

This caution is fleshed out in Schüssler Fiorenza’s later work as, for example, in her analysis of Gal 3:28, which she considers a pre-Pauline baptismal formula that ‘rejects all structures of domination’ (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999: 155). This formula captures the vision of the ‘ekklesia of wo/men’, which Paul, however, attempts to control by framing the formula in androcentric and kyriocentric language (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999: 156). Thus the baptismal formula is used here by Paul to marginalize or submerge an egalitarian

theology shaped by wo/men and to reintroduce kyriarchal dominance into the movement. Schüssler Fiorenza intends neither to defend nor to condemn Paul, but to see him as part of a community in conversation, with parties drawing on the same traditions but understanding them differently. The task of feminist interpretation is to give a voice to those who have been silenced in these conversations, rather than focusing on Paul as a lonely hero or an absolute authority. Schüssler Fiorenza is one of a number of scholars who emphasize the wider communal discourse within which Paul's letters are located and who insist that it is not just women's issues that are relevant for feminist interpretation of the letters (Schottroff 1996; Sutter Rehmann 2000). Those feminist approaches that focused on uncovering hidden voices emerged in parallel with second-wave feminist theories that insisted on rendering women seen and heard in the academic scene and beyond (Ehrensperger 2004: 92–96).

3. Structural Feminist Interpretations

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Secondly: structural approaches. In conversation with current developments in feminist theory, recent feminist exegesis has tended to focus more specifically on structural aspects of the Pauline letters. Feminist theory has highlighted that giving women a voice and making them visible is not sufficient to overcome structural patterns of hierarchy and power imbalance in gender relations. Demonstrating how patriarchal structures permeate all aspects of life, research on issues of class, race, economics, psychoanalysis, sociology, philosophy, linguistics, and theology has explored these hidden dimensions and the impact of gendered power relations upon them all. Informed by such discourses, feminist interpreters have engaged with other strands of research in Pauline studies, yielding studies in which various multidisciplinary aspects are central. Themes such as embodiment, space, imperialism, postcolonialism, ethnicity, racism, gender, and queerness are theorized in relation to analyses of specific texts in the letters of Paul. Because some of these themes are not as prominent in feminist discourses as they are elsewhere in the field, feminist approaches now engage with other strands of Pauline studies including the empire-critical, postcolonial, New Perspective, and Paul-within-Judaism schools (Zetterholm 2009).

A common thread in these feminist approaches engaging with other discourses is the recognition that there is no sphere—whether in antiquity or in the present—which is not permeated by the dimension of gender. There is no gender-free perspective. And feminist approaches have been at the forefront of bringing this gender dimension to the centre of research in all disciplines. Importantly, this emphasis is not a reversion to a gender essentialism or dualism; in most feminist theories, gender is regarded as culturally constructed rather than biologically fixed. Although even this distinction itself is a cultural construct, it is fair to say that gender essentialism is not a feature of most current feminist discourses. This does not imply, however, that gender constructions are free-floating and susceptible to easy conscious change. On the contrary, culturally transmitted political, social, and psychological patterns of interaction can be deeply ingrained in societies (Bourdieu 1990: 53–55), as, for instance, in the early Roman Empire. Some recent feminist approaches focus on the gender-hierarchical structure of Paul's own discourse and analyse how this structure manifests in Paul's rhetoric—his way of arguing—in relation to specific issues. The work of Jorunn Økland and Joseph Marchal illustrates this kind of approach.

Jorunn Økland presents an analysis of 1 Corinthians 11–14 which initially appears to recover the theme of women in the vein of earlier feminist approaches. Økland's focus, however, is not the specific women in the Corinthian assemblies but rather the recognition that gender hierarchy (especially in relation to cosmology) is at the centre of Paul's discourse. She is informed by Luce Irigaray's deconstruction of the notion of sexual difference, which emphasizes that there is no discourse free from 'phallogocentric perspectives' and thus that 'woman has not yet taken place' (Irigaray quoted in Økland 2004: 15). Økland therefore maintains that the term 'gyne' here is not referring to actual women but rather is an empty "place" in and by itself (Økland 2004: 20). Thus women as such are not the issue in this section of 1 Corinthians, but the concept of 'woman' is used by Paul to index particularity, sex, and gender, whilst men are depicted as 'representing the universal humanity and non-gender' (Økland 2004: 21). In Økland's reading, Paul's key concern in 1 Corinthians 11–14 is the construction of the *ekklesia* as sanctuary and hence public space, in distinction from private household space. Since this sacred space carries a male name, Christ, the *ekklesia* is seen as a male body, which is evident in Paul's use of male terms such as sons (of God) and brothers when addressing the members of this body. Emphasizing the dichotomy of public-versus-private space in the first century CE, Økland argues that, due to the pervasive gender hierarchy of the period, the *ekklesia* is constructed as a male space. Women, although they are at the bottom of the cosmological hierarchy, can participate in this male

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space 'undercover', but the space replicates the dominating gender hierarchy of imperial ideology. However, because women are not excluded from the *ekklesia*, and because in it 'men and women constituted a ritual unity' (Økland 2004: 234), a space was in fact created which undermined the cosmological gender hierarchy and functioned 'as a place for female subversion' (Økland 2004: 222). Despite Paul's androcentric construction of the *ekklesia*, some 'women's space' is nevertheless constructed. On Økland's account, the Pauline discourse is seen as neither simply subversive of gender structures nor as simply reinforcing male domination.

In his analysis of the Letter to the Philippians, Joseph Marchal presents a structural analysis at the intersection of imperialism, racism, and sexism. In a programmatic article (Marchal 2011), he conceptualizes this intersection specifically in relation to postcolonial studies. Informed by Musa Dube's rationale for evaluating ancient texts based on rhetorical-literary and postcolonial presuppositions, Marchal analyses Philippians asking whether 'the text encourages travel to distant and inhabited lands', 'how the text constructs difference' either in 'dialogue or liberating interdependence, or condemnation of all that is foreign', and whether the text uses 'gender and divine representations to construct relationships of subordination and domination' (Marchal 2011: 152).

Paul's claim that his own travels are for the benefit of his addressees is interpreted by Marchal as an echo of the paternalistic, colonizing rationales of empires. Paul travels, and so does his thinking, which is thereby imposed upon distant colonized places. In presenting himself as the model to imitate, Paul approximates the 'colonizing practice of mimicry' (Marchal 2011: 154). The mission to the Gentiles is a justification for imperial travelling. The rhetoric of Paul's argument, far from encouraging dialogue, is violently opposed to those outside the community; and it requires from the addressees obedience and subordination to Paul's authority as the only way of attaining unity and salvation. By appealing to divine authority in support of his arguments, Paul calls for subordination to himself as the only way to attain benefits from God. He thereby establishes a hierarchy after the model of the imperial order, with the God of Israel at the top of a pyramid of subjugation, and Paul as a mediator analogous to a colonial administrator. On Marchal's account, Paul portrays the Gentile Christ-assembly as female, subjected to conquest by the male figures of God, Christ, and the apostle (Marchal 2006: 158), thus effectively replicating rather than challenging the imperialism and androcentrism of his time.

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Both Økland and Marchal see Paul as structurally embedded and as actually reinscribing hierarchical patterns of domination into the early Christ movement. Unlike some earlier feminist interpreters, they do not presuppose a decline from a supposedly 'pure' gender-balanced origin with Jesus to a supposedly 'contaminated' situation of domination with Paul and his successors. Both Økland and Marchal assert that, to some extent, it would have been impossible for the early Christ movement to step outside the ubiquitous system of hierarchical gender relations. Økland sees Paul as struggling with this hierarchical system, on the one hand affirming it in its structural dimension, but on the other hand also creating a niche within the system where women could have space and a voice. Marchal, by contrast, sees Paul as simply replicating the imperial order of domination and subjugation. In this respect, Marchal directly challenges those interpreters who see *anti-imperial* tendencies in Paul. For this latter group, the apostle is a champion of subversion and liberation, while for Marchal, he is a champion of empire, subjugation, and male domination. Although Marchal is very careful not to formulate it in this way, there is a risk here of a kind of ideological anti-Judaism, with Paul the (Jewish) kyriarch lording it over his conquered (Gentile) communities. These differences notwithstanding, both Økland's and Marchal's structural approaches share some characteristic features: They only fleetingly refer to Paul's Judaism and the possible significance of the content of his message for an evaluation of his stance. They assert the permeation of the Pauline discourse with the gender hierarchical structure of contemporary Graeco-Roman society. In short, these approaches render visible the problematic implications of this structural dimension for women and minorities in the history of biblical interpretation and in church and society in general.

Despite pioneering challenges to the prevailing focus on Paul as an individual (Schottroff 1990, 1996; Schüssler Fiorenza 1999), this focus continues to dominate feminist interpretation of the letters. Meanwhile, another development that is changing Pauline interpretation quite decisively is the recognition of Paul's thoroughgoing embeddedness within first-century Judaism, as current approaches move beyond the so-called New Perspective of the 1980s and 1990s. This development has yielded new interpretations by Jewish feminist scholars and gender-critical approaches which take this aspect seriously and combine it with a postcolonial stance.

4. The Social Location of the Pauline Discourse

Whereas early feminist approaches often based their critiques of Paul on traditional interpretations, unwittingly replicating traditional patterns of anti-Judaism (Ehrensperger 2004), more recently, constructive debates between Jewish and Christian feminist scholars have led to new avenues of research, in particular from Jewish perspectives. Some Jewish feminist scholars have engaged with Paul by interrogating modern perceptions of Christian origins in relation to Judaism. In her important book *Paul Was Not a Christian* (Eisenbaum 2009), Pamela Eisenbaum argues that Paul was and perceived himself to be Jewish not only before but also after his apostolic call. On her reading of Galatians 3:28, Paul is not expressing a radical egalitarianism or universalism, but rather arguing that the Christ event is decisive for social relations between people who are different, including gender difference (Eisenbaum 2001).

p. 628 Whereas Eisenbaum portrays Paul as firmly embedded in Judaism, Amy-Jill Levine focuses on points of difference between first-century Judaism and Paul's own stance. Challenging certain commonplaces in feminist Pauline interpretation, Levine draws attention to anachronisms in their assumptions about Jewish practice in the first century CE. She shows that claims about misogyny in Paul's supposed rabbinic training are utterly unhistorical and anachronistic (Levine 2006: 178). So, too, the oft-repeated ↪ claim that Paul abolished the male initiation rite of circumcision so as to enable women full access to membership in the movement, implying that women were not considered full members of first-century Judaism (Levine 2006: 73). These points are well made, but Levine's treatment of Paul—part of a book whose main subject is Jesus—sometimes presupposes quite traditional readings of Paul's letters, and with them strong theological and social distinctions between first-century Judaism and the early Christ movement (against which see Zetterholm 2009).

Feminist historian Tal Ilan has made a valuable contribution to the discussion of Paul in Jewish perspective (Ilan 2003). Her work focuses on the agency of women in history, even if they have been rendered almost invisible in historiography (Ilan 2003: 83). Drawing on her own research on Pharisaic Judaism, Ilan takes seriously Paul's self-designation as a Pharisee, and investigates whether traces of Pharisaic ideas and practices can be found in Paul's way of arguing, particularly in regard to women. She argues that 'If the table fellowship of the Pharisee (Palestinian!) *havura* loomed large in Paul's vision ... his "rhetoric of equality" is actually carried over from that environment' (Ilan 2003: 98). Paul's positive stance in 1 Corinthians 7 on intermarriage between Christ followers and outsiders is seen as perfectly understandable in light of the Pharisaic stance on similar cases of 'Pharisee men and women being married to members of the *am-haaretz*' (Ilan 2003: 94). Paul's vision of the Christ assemblies as mixed in terms of gender is seen as the legacy of his Pharisaism with its inclusive table fellowship. Ilan sees Paul as firmly embedded in Judaism. Over against some feminist approaches which emphasize the supposed Christian distinctiveness of Paul or place Paul's Jewish influences only in the Hellenistic diaspora, she shows that Paul is not especially or exclusively Christian or Hellenistic. Thanks to the work of Ilan and others, there is now consensus that a hard distinction between Palestinian Judaism and diaspora Judaism is historically inaccurate, and thus cannot serve as a paradigm for the interpretation of Paul.

While Levine offers a Jewish feminist critique of some Christian feminist claims in Pauline interpretation, showing that common claims about misogyny in the Judaism of Paul's day are unhistorical, but otherwise representing Paul as quite distinct from first-century Judaism, Eisenbaum and Ilan represent Paul as firmly embedded within his ancestral tradition. This embeddedness informs Paul's practice and rhetoric in relation to women, suggesting if not an egalitarian stance then at least certain aspects of gender inclusiveness, albeit in a patriarchal context. It is interesting to note that none of these Jewish feminist interpreters considers the impact of empire on the Pauline discourse, which we have seen is a prominent theme in the feminist approaches discussed above, and is prominent in some other strands of contemporary Pauline interpretation which also take Paul's embeddedness in Judaism seriously (e.g., Elliott 2008).

p. 629 Davina Lopez, with her monograph *Apostle to the Conquered* (Lopez 2008), fills this gap, at least in part, in regard to the Letter to the Galatians. Lopez does not have Paul's stance towards women specifically in view. At the centre of her approach is the recognition that the concept of 'Gentiles' has been read over against Judaism, especially in theological terms. Gentiles are perceived as whatever Jews are not: the other, outsider, ↪ excluded. Even in empire-critical approaches such as Neil Elliott's, Gentiles are mainly seen as one uniform category, either politically in an imperialist dominating form or theologically as idolaters from a Jewish perspective. What is missing, according to Lopez, is a differentiated perception of the *ethne* in the

context of Roman imperial ideology. Lopez sees the Pauline use of the term *ethne* as resonating with Roman ideology, where it refers predominantly to the nations conquered by Rome. In her thorough analysis of Roman visualization of this ideology, she shows how these conquered nations are normally presented as subjugated women. The nations that Paul refers to, therefore, are not just any nations, but specifically these feminized, colonized peoples under the Roman domination. In this respect, Jews are included in the category because they share with other colonized peoples the experience of Roman oppression.

For Lopez, Paul himself undergoes a conversion from modelling himself after the 'Roman imperial gender construct of impenetrable masculinity' (Lopez 2008: 133), when he previously attempted to exercise violent control over the Christ groups (Gal 1:13–14), reproducing the imperial power structure of Rome. Paul's divine call was thus a call to change from male dominator to female dominated, in this sense (Lopez 2008: 137). After his call, Paul sees the relation between Israel and the conquered nations as different but interconnected through a shared genealogy linking them to the God of Israel (Lopez 2011: 153). This Jewish vision rooted in the Torah and the prophets is the basis for Paul's message of reconciliation for all conquered peoples, including Israel. Contrary to Roman ideology, which advocated division among the subjugated peoples, Paul maintains that in Christ, solidarity and mutual understanding among different peoples have been initiated. Paul is no leader modelled on the Roman ideal of dominating masculinity. Rather, he places himself at the bottom, in solidarity with the colonized, 'on the underside of a worldwide power structure' (Lopez 2008: 139). Paul's body is beaten and broken, and rather than acting as a traditional father, exercising dominion over wives, children, and slaves, he figures himself as a mother in birth pangs, a feminized apostle. Paul's rhetoric in Galatians is thus seen as a voice from the bottom, a Jewish voice rooted in a Jewish sacred narrative, advocating an alternative to the 'dehumanizing hierarchical pattern of slavery represented by Roman imperialism' (Lopez 2008: 172). The dichotomy between Jews and Gentiles is overcome, and Paul 'is relentless about making sure the nations, including the Jews, treat each other not as other, but as brother' (Lopez 2008: 172).

Lopez represents a cross-disciplinary approach combining both gender criticism and empire criticism with the presupposition that Paul remained embedded in Judaism. All three aspects are taken seriously in making sense of Paul's argument in Galatians; in this way, Lopez demonstrates a deep difference between the Roman imperial meta-narrative and the narrative of Israel. Her approach focuses on Paul's own voice and his role in relation to his communities. Thus Paul's mission, rather than the agency of the communities, takes centre stage in her work (contrast the emphasis of Schüssler Fiorenza, noted above). Moreover, Lopez's Paul is not depicted in the traditional male leadership role but rather as someone who inverts it. This inversion is a feminization of the apostle.

p. 630 It is striking to note what different evaluations of Paul arise from the several feminist approaches surveyed here, depending on the central emphasis of each respective approach. Those approaches that focus on the structural dimension of Paul's rhetoric, leaving aside wider contextual and content aspects of the Pauline discourse, tend to present an image of Paul as reinscribing gender hierarchies not only in texts expressly about women but right through his letters, mimicking the dominating ideology of empire (see Økland and especially Marchal). Those approaches that are more content-centred and take Paul's embeddedness in Judaism seriously tend to arrive at a very different image of the apostle. They only partly focus on texts that have women's issues expressly in view. They emphasize, rather, the Jewish dimension of Paul's message and the fact that this social location places Paul in a particular relation to the dominating power of Rome. An image of Paul as an advocate for diversity (Eisenbaum), inclusion (Ilan), or reconciliation of nations (Lopez) emerges, an image not of a champion of feminism, to be sure, but at any rate a conversation partner to be taken seriously in the project of feminist interpretation.

5. The Pauline Discourse as a Fragmentary Communal Discourse

There is one dimension of the Pauline discourse emphasized by feminist scholars which has not been specifically addressed in the approaches we have discussed so far: the communal character of the Pauline letters. The approaches discussed above focus on Paul as an individual—a legacy, perhaps, of a long-standing tradition of New Testament research on Paul as the 'founder of Christianity' or the lonely hero of the apostolic period. The feminist approaches discussed above either invert this traditional heroization of Paul, exposing its problematic assumptions, or highlight alternative dimensions of his leadership.

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Although the importance of the communal dimension of the Pauline discourse was noted early on by some pioneering feminist scholars (e.g., Schüssler Fiorenza 1999), only a few—most significantly Wire 1990—have devoted whole monographs to analysing the active agency of the addressees of Paul’s letters. The image of Paul the lonely hero persists even in feminist approaches, possibly due the fact that the letters preserve only one side of what were complicated dialogues. Moreover, the fact that Paul’s letters have been transmitted as part of Christian scripture grants them an authoritative status they likely did not have when they were first written. In this connection, Melanie Johnson-DeBaufre and Laura Nasrallah (2011) have called for a move ‘beyond the heroic Paul’. They argue that Paul’s letters are not ‘articulations of one individual’s vision and heroic community-building efforts’ but rather ‘sites of debate, contestation, and resistance’, evidence of a network of communities of women and men exercising their own agency whilst living under Roman domination (Johnson-DeBaufre and Nasrallah 2011: 162–163). ↵ Paul should be seen as part of this network, his letters evidence of ongoing negotiation amongst the various parties involved in the upstart Christ movement. This attention to the communal dimension of the Pauline letters highlights the agency of those parties whose own words have not been preserved for us but of whom we catch glimpses in the letters, especially parties whom Paul opposes or scolds: the Corinthian women prophets, the Galatian agitators, Euodia and Syntyche at Philippi, and others. These people may have had their own grievances with Paul; in the letters we only hear him pressing his case.

Our discussion to this point has not been a comprehensive account of feminist approaches to the Pauline letters, only a survey of some key aspects of current approaches. The divergent images of Paul emerging from these approaches are based on different hermeneutical presuppositions through which specific texts or whole letters are analysed. A focus on the gendered hierarchical structure of the Pauline discourse aims at uncovering its inherent potential for domination. Irrespective of authorial intent—which is, strictly speaking, inaccessible—the reception history of the Pauline discourse, at any rate, supplies ample evidence of this potential for domination. It is, from the perspective of a feminist agenda of liberation and empowerment, one long cautionary tale. But this is only one aspect of the Pauline discourse. Other feminist approaches, whilst acknowledging the patriarchal context, focus instead on trajectories of empowerment in the letters—not so much in order to ‘rescue’ Paul as to recognize that such trajectories are another dimension of the reception history of the letters. The specific context and content of the letters are decisive for uncovering whatever empowering potential there may be in the discourse. In particular, the embeddedness of Paul’s letters within Judaism under the Roman Empire plays a significant part in these approaches.

6. The Pauline Discourse in Light of Feminist Theories of Power

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My own research belongs to this latter group. Presupposing the permeation of first-century society with gender hierarchy, my focus is on the traces of a discourse of empowerment in the Pauline letters. Informed by feminist theories of power, I have proposed to read the Pauline letters as a fragmentary discourse of communal conversations (Ehrensperger 2009: 3). This discourse is fully embedded within the Judaism of the first century CE, albeit in the peculiar context of ethnically mixed messianic assemblies. The context of the Roman Empire, with its dominating power discourse, impacts significantly on the interaction and communication of the members of these assemblies. I concur with Davina Lopez that the Pauline discourse is located at the bottom of the imperial hierarchy of domination and that this social location is significant for our reading of Paul’s rhetoric. According to some recent feminist theories of power, if power is defined narrowly in the Weberian sense of ‘power-over’—that is, the domination of ↵ one actor by another against the former’s will—then there is no space left for a positive account of *empowerment*. These theories are not naïve to the all-pervasiveness of power in social relations, but they challenge the assumption that this state of affairs makes domination inevitable.

Taking a cue from Hannah Arendt’s argument that power emerges ‘out of decisions and promises by people through which they mutually commit themselves to act in concert’ (Ehrensperger 2009: 24), feminist scholars can theorize power as all-pervasive in social relations but not inherently dominating. Informed by research into asymmetrical social relationships in the spheres of parenting, education, and psychoanalysis, feminist theory can draw and has drawn a distinction between power asymmetry and domination. To be sure, the abuse of power in asymmetrical relationships is always a grave risk, but it is not *essential to* relationships such as parent/child, teacher/student, or therapist/client. In addition, it has been cogently argued that the problematic side of hierarchical relationships is not hierarchy per se but rather its

stabilization. When asymmetrical power relations become fixed, they stabilize hierarchy and create space for domination (see Ehrensperger 2009: 31–33). Thus a key feature of the asymmetrical relations cited by feminist theories (e.g., parent/child, teacher/student, therapist/client) is that they are temporary arrangements, aimed at rendering themselves obsolete. The purpose of the hierarchical relationship is to contribute to the empowering of the weaker agent in the relationship.

If we bring this feminist theory of power to our reading of Paul's letters, and recall with Lopez the apostle's embeddedness in Judaism at the bottom of the Roman imperial hierarchy, we can see that the Pauline discourse is neither simply egalitarian nor simply dominating. The conversation of which we have traces in the letters was not one among equals, but neither was it one in which the apostle simply dominated all other parties. Paul was no lone hero, nor were the members of 'his' Christ assemblies altogether dependent on him. Every undisputed 'letter of Paul' excepting Romans actually has multiple senders (and even Romans may not be a real exception), and arguments to the effect that only Paul *really* wrote them are unconvincing (Ehrensperger 2009: 46–51). These are letters of groups to other groups, in a process which most likely involved conversations at both ends, among the senders as well as among the recipients, and sometimes back and forth between senders and recipients (as in the Corinthian correspondence). The conversational character of the discourse is signalled at the opening of each letter in the references to groups of senders (Paul and Timothy in 2 Cor 1:1; Phil 1:1; Phlm 1; Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy in 1 Thess 1:1; Paul and Sosthenes in 1 Cor 1:1; Paul and all the brothers with him in Gal 1:1–2). These, as well as the mentions of visits to the assemblies by leaders other than Paul and visits of assembly members to Paul and his companions all indicate that the letters are part of an ongoing communication process among various groups of Christ followers. For such communication to take place at all, there must be a shared interest in maintaining established relationships, relationships not based on coercion or violence but initiated voluntarily. The primary function of this fragmentary conversation in the letters is not to initiate relationship (except perhaps in Romans) or to establish authority but rather to maintain relationship. Other functions may also be in play, but even the establishment of apostolic authority happens in a context where there are no means of enforcement, only trust and mutual recognition. Or, as may be, lack of trust and recognition. Because the reception of the letters is unknown (except partly in the case of 1–2 Corinthians), we do not know whether the aim of maintaining relationship was actually achieved, or the apostolic guidance followed—whether fully, partially, or not at all. In this connection, we must consider whether Paul realistically could have maintained credibility with his audience if the tone of his message were too far out of step with the content.

The embeddedness of the Pauline discourse in Judaism actually contributes to an understanding of such credibility. Taking seriously the Jewishness of the Pauline discourse is relevant not only to its location among the conquered nations (thus rightly Lopez) but also to its content: that it represents an alternative to the dominating ideology of empire (Ehrensperger 2015). Tessa Rajak has argued that the patterns of translation in the Septuagint—specific Jewish uses of the Greek language which foreignized aspects of the latter—show how Jews living under ancient empires developed ways of simultaneously relating to and distancing themselves from dominating ideologies (Rajak 2009). If we consider the Pauline discourse as part of this tradition, we can see how it would have been already embedded in an alternative if not subversive discourse. By interpreting the Christ event in light of this scriptural tradition, Paul makes this alternative discourse relevant also for people from among the nations. Lopez has highlighted the implications of this move for the relationships among the diverse peoples under Roman domination, explicating Paul's message that in Christ, solidarity among the nations in their diversity rather than competition for favours from Rome becomes the driving force (Lopez 2008: 172).

If we imagine the perception of asymmetrical power relations within this movement, surely the paradigm prevalent in Jewish scripture, together with the example of Christ, will have had a decisive influence. None of the leading characters of the Jewish scriptural narratives corresponds to the strong, blameless ideal of Graeco-Roman masculinity. Leaders in Jewish scriptural tradition are ambiguous, vulnerable, deceitful, failing human beings. Moses—the paradigmatic leader in the Torah—is a case in point. He is neither able nor willing to act on his own; he fails on numerous occasions, and in the end does not accomplish his mission, but must accept the limitations of his leadership for the sake of the people whom he guides. No surprise, then, that in conjunction with the depiction of a conquered nation as a female body (e.g., in the *Judaea capta* coins), such an 'unmanly' tradition is coded as 'feminine' in the eyes of the dominating power. In the same way, the leaders of the Pauline circle—including Paul himself—do not conform to the dominant image of a male leader in Graeco-Roman tradition. They do not fit the mould of the noble, educated, wealthy, dominating leaders who won their positions in contests over others. Indeed, Paul expressly

concedes his weakness vis-à-vis this ideal (2 Cor 11:20–21, 30). The Pauline leadership paradigm is modelled, first, after the scriptural tradition and, second, after Christ, a crucified victim of Roman imperialism. Significantly, and in tune with the scriptural tradition, there is no move at this stage in the Christ movement to establish a static hierarchy under a single leader. There is no one representative of the movement; rather, all the *ekklēsiai* as a corporate body mirror the divine dimension. If any one thing was non-negotiable amongst these newly formed communities in Christ, it was the limits upon the exercise of ‘power-over’ in light of the gospel.

These limits resonate with the paradigms of asymmetrical power relationships developed in the feminist theories noted above. Nurturing and empowering relationships are inherently asymmetrical. The relationships between the early Christ assemblies and the people they recognized as leaders were asymmetrical in this sense, but this asymmetry did not entail domination. Indeed, for relationships established on the basis of reciprocal trust, domination and coercion could not have come into play without destroying the relationships themselves, which were entirely voluntary in this very early period of the Christ movement. In such relationships, the decisive factor is the respect and support provided for those in the dependent position. The image of the nurturing parent, as opposed to the dominating *paterfamilias*, is the more appropriate for Paul’s and his colleagues’ function in the early Christ assemblies. They consider themselves called to give guidance to new members of the movement. This guiding, however, is not a permanent function, nor is it designed to dominate the assemblies. Rather, these itinerant leaders initiate a process which, after a period of conversation, leads to the dissolution of the hierarchical arrangement. From the evidence of the letters, it appears that Paul did in fact follow this pattern, neither staying on permanently with any of the assemblies nor installing his own local proxies. Indeed, some passages in the letters express disappointment that at least some assembly members are not taking responsibility for their own life in Christ. Long absence and fragmentary communication such as we find in the letters does not suggest a relationship of control and domination. It seems, rather, that Paul and his colleagues perceived their hierarchical relationships with the assemblies as temporary. In due course, the assemblies will be able to live their lives in Christ without the apostles. This is what Paul means, for instance, by saying at the end of Romans that his work in the east is complete and it is time for him to go west.

Reading the Pauline letters on the presupposition of their embeddedness in Jewish tradition under the conditions of Roman imperialism, and in light of recent feminist theories of power leads to an image of the Pauline discourse with a strong *empowering* dimension. In their communications with the scattered Christ assemblies, the Pauline group take responsibility for the growth and well-being of the cells they had founded. But this epistolary conversation—far from establishing domination—actually suggests the trust that Paul and his colleagues put in these assemblies to negotiate life in Christ amongst themselves. The advice given in the letters is occasional, not systematic. The struggles, debates, admonishments, and challenges reflected in these fragments show us groups of Christ followers in the process of outliving their own hierarchical relationship with the apostle. Paul contributes to their taking ownership of their lives in Christ through his eventual absence. His fragmentary presence and eventual absence suggest his use of power to the end of empowerment.

7. Conclusion

The feminist approaches discussed here present divergent if not contradictory images of Paul and the Pauline discourse. As such, they might appear to be mutually exclusive, and they raise the question of the value and relevance of feminist approaches if they result in such discrepancies of perception. This issue is obviously not confined to feminist approaches; only when there is at least some convergence in hermeneutical presuppositions can we have a reasonable expectation of arriving at a more coherent image of Paul. However, inasmuch as divergent interpretations of Paul are unavoidable given the divergent social locations of the interpreters, a unified image of Paul would be rather surprising, and in fact undesirable, in my view. The divergent images found in current feminist approaches to Paul actually attest the strength of these approaches. They all highlight important aspects of the Pauline discourse in light of key insights from current feminist debates. No one can claim to have found the one true Paul, but each voice—solidly based in sound scholarly methodology—contributes valuable, important, and legitimate insights to the interpretative conversation about the Pauline discourse. As such, the plurality of feminist discourse is to be welcomed rather than deplored; it is an example of a practice which recognizes the communality of the task of interpretation.

Suggested Reading

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza is a leading pioneer in feminist interpretation of Paul. Schüssler Fiorenza (1999) is an excellent example of her approach; the second part of this book focuses on the interplay between the interests of the interpreter and her interpretation of a text. Wire (1990) is a rhetorical analysis of the Pauline discourse recovering the voices of women who challenged Paul's authority in the Christ assembly in Corinth and so triggered Paul's self-defence in the Corinthian correspondence. Lopez (2008) considers Paul's Jewishness in relation to the gendered dimension of the imperial ideology of Rome. She reads Galatians as an inversion of the Roman ideal of masculinity and a portrayal of Paul as a feminized apostle. Stanley (2011) is a fine collection of essays engaging postcolonial theory. Several contributions focus on the interplay of colonialism, sexism, and racism, foregrounding feminist readings of the letters. Ehrensperger (2004) is an analysis of thematic parallels between feminist theory and radical New Perspective approaches to Paul. Ehrensperger challenges some feminist readings of Romans for their structural replication of traditional anti-Jewish interpretations of Paul.

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