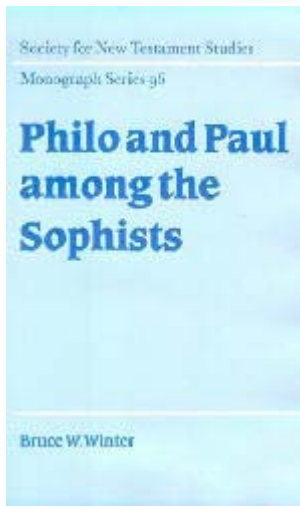


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Winter, Bruce W.

Philo and Paul among the Sophists

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In 1952, Johannes Munck argued that the tensions within the church addressed by 1 and 2 Corinthians were not due to theological divisions but to the influence of the sophistic movement. Munck's argument did not win the day because it lacked two important pieces. The first was a convincing identification of rhetorical conventions within the Corinthian letters themselves. That has been supplied recently by several excellent studies of the rhetoric of 1 and 2 Corinthians. The second was a clear demonstration that the Second Sophistic had begun by the middle of the first century. This study by Winter supplies that demonstration.

In this revised and updated version of his 1988 dissertation, Winter focuses his study of first-century sophistry on two cities: Alexandria and Corinth. His examination of primary witnesses is thorough and carefully done. Concerning sophists in Alexandria, Winter draws on Dio Chrysostom and the letter of the student Neilus (P. Oxy. 2190, which is helpfully included as an appendix with both Greek text and English translation). For evidence concerning sophists in Corinth, Winter again calls on Dio, along with Favorinus, Herodes Atticus, Plutarch, and Epictetus. From these sources Winter shows that the figures and practices known from the later Second Sophistic were active and recognized in the first century. These witnesses are at least twenty years later than Paul's dealings with Corinth. Yet Winter demonstrates that there is great continuity between their testimony and the remarks of both Philo and Paul concerning their own rhetorically

powerful opponents. Winter insists that Philo and Paul must be considered important and neglected witnesses to a blossoming Second Sophistic in the early and middle years of the first century.

Winter shows that in both these cities there existed a professional guild of “virtuoso orators” (p. 58) who attracted large public followings and who were drawn from wealthy families. They were influential leaders with high social status who were courted by officials, students, and whole communities (p. 55). In his description of these sophists, Winter includes three aspects that are particularly helpful for understanding the context of Paul’s ministry and letters to the Corinthians. The first is the great importance society placed upon a speaker’s physical attributes. The actual public appearance and performance was the measure of the man. Thus the criticism that Paul’s bodily presence was “weak” (2 Cor 10:10) was no minor point. The church at Corinth preferred other speakers over Paul because their physical presentation was more pleasing. Second, Winter shows that there were conventions that governed a sophist’s entry into a city. If the sophist hoped to gain a following there, the giving of a public demonstration of the sophist’s rhetorical prowess was expected and necessary. “In reality the sophist was on trial, for the citizens who heard him determined his success or failure in that city” (p. 151). Thus when Paul explains in 1 Cor 2:1-5 how he came to Corinth, he is explaining why his entry was so different from that expected of a great speaker. “He needed no topic to be suggested by a critical audience on which to declaim in order to gain the Corinthians’ approval . . . for the ‘topic’ had been determined long before his arrival. . . . [H]e had come not to establish his own reputation but to declare Jesus, the crucified Messiah” (p. 157). Third, Winter shows how the practice of declamation had begun to dominate public rhetoric. Accordingly, there was a strong preference for oral and extempore speeches over written statements. Thus Paul’s opponents hope to strike a major blow by pointing out that while Paul’s letters are strong, his actual speech is “contemptible” (2 Cor 10:10).

Against this social background, Winter sketches the interaction between Paul and the Corinthian church. Paul had entered Corinth with a deliberately anti-sophistic approach. But the members of the church treated Paul and other church leaders just as students would treat their various sophistic teachers, leading to strife and jealousy in the community (1 Cor 1:11; 3:3). In 1 Corinthians 1-4 Paul criticizes the adoption of this model. The Corinthians, however, remained unconvinced; when their favorite teacher Apollos refused to return, they welcomed and hired sophistic Christian teachers who then turned Paul’s previous criticisms of sophistry against himself. These are the charges that Paul answers in 2 Corinthians 10-13, and he does so with considerable rhetorical skill. Winter argues that Paul’s practice of rhetoric was not abandoned but transformed by the cross. It was the “deceit which all too often accompanied [rhetoric’s] spoken manifestation” (p. 217) which Paul rejected. He would not bow to the conventions of declamation or to its use of the “grand style” (p. 217 nn. 68, 240).

The author points out that Philo and Paul share a great deal in their responses to the sophistic movement. Both are determined to warn their community about the dangers of adopting sophistic ways. Both turn to the Scriptures of Israel as the standard by which the sophists are judged. Philo takes as a model the critiques lodged against sophists by Plato, though Philo reads these criticisms through the Books of Moses. For Philo, the sophists must be rejected because they do not express in their lives the virtue that God demands. Paul also turns to the Scriptures, but for him these are read in the light of the cross and resurrection of Jesus. Thus the self-promotion and boasting of the sophists, along with their appeal to wealth, status, power, and beauty must be rejected because of God's power at work through the weakness and humiliation of the cross.

This is a remarkable and valuable study. Winter has done a great service by filling a gap in our understanding of the social history of the first-century Mediterranean world. His sketch of first-century sophistry gives us a clearer picture of Paul's rhetorically adept opponents and provides further important historical context for the growing body of rhetorical studies of Paul's letters.