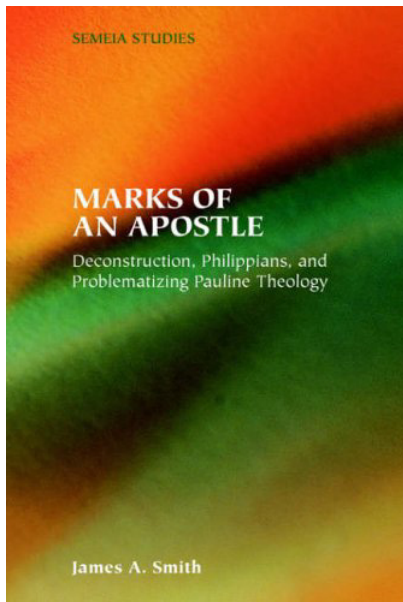


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**Smith, James A.**

***Marks of an Apostle: Deconstruction, Philippians, and Problematizing Pauline Theology***

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In an occasionally intriguing fashion James A. Smith has attempted to answer the perhaps impertinent question: Why doesn't Paul care whether a message is proclaimed in pretext or truth (Phil 1:18a)? This study goes some distance to answer this query, curving through ancient moral philosophers, Paul's imprisonment, J. L. Austin, and, most particularly, Jacques Derrida, a curious partner for Paul (at least to most Pauline scholars). In what appears to be a revision of his Sheffield dissertation (although there are no explicit acknowledgments of this within the work itself), Smith focuses on this crisis between word and deed, motive and outcome, seeking to wedge open Pauline theology for a radical, deconstructing, proclamatory Paul.

After a brief introduction, the work begins in earnest with its first and quite possibly most promising chapter ("The Marks of an Apostle: Writing about Paul" [3–35]). Here Smith profitably problematizes some of the predominant procedures of Pauline theologians, especially the focus on the so-called *Hauptbriefe* for ascertaining the "center" of Paul's thinking. This move clears the deck for beginning with the apparently minor letter of Philippians, while questioning the micro-politics of commentary writing as an act of paternal displacement. A neglect of the occasional nature and rhetorical function of these letters stresses that analysis should begin with what the text *does* before claiming what it *means* (21). Noting the performative function of a letter, then, leads smoothly into

Austin's deconstruction of the apparent constative/performative opposition, which, in turn, is deconstructively mimicked by Derrida as premised upon a serious/nonserious binary. Thus, the iterability of the sign, crucial to the argument operative in Phil 1:12–18, deconstructs the opposition of serious/original/present to nonserious/citation/absent. An analysis of Philippians, then, means a fuller engagement with precisely these dynamics.

In treating the requisite matters of historical background, the second chapter (“Historical Context of Paul, the Philippians, and the Letter” [37–70]) reads as strikingly digressive, seeming to add little to the main argument. Such a chapter is all the more curious in a work meant to engage the deconstructive philosophical or theological significance of a slender bit of Pauline reasoning, while mourning the view of “Pauline studies as one of the few real strongholds of the historical critics into which critical theorists seldom dare to go” (1). To this reviewer's sore eyes, we biblical scholars would do well to rethink this persistent feature of monographs, resilient to the changes in our field(s), no matter which particular methods seem to be the main avenue into our inquiries. Nevertheless, Smith perfunctorily treats issues of provenance, integrity, imprisonment, and conflict. In this study the intimacy and suffering on display in the letter indicates its larger purpose: reassurance, in order that the audience might take up Paul's view of a Christic *phronēsis*.

The third chapter (“The Socio-philosophical Context of Paul and His Writing” [71–100]) presents a context for Paul's writing: Greco-Roman psychagogy. As a rhetorical model for Paul, this particular feature of ancient moral philosophy precedes him and, thus, constrains the argumentative possibilities for clarifying any potential negative views about Paul's imprisonment. The language of friendly frank speech versus flattery is prominent among these thinkers and recurs in 1:12–18. Thus, Smith asserts that this section of the letter should not be overlooked as a minor historical side-note; rather, it is the main reason for writing (78).

Turning to the argument of the letter, the fourth chapter, “(Dis)Closure: Closely Following Philippians 1:1–18” (101–37), posits that 1:12–18 develops a particular “reading strategy” that Paul wishes his audience would adopt. If it were effective, this perspective would reframe the meaning of both proclamation and imprisonment. On Smith's reading, Paul cannily comprehends the iterable nature of language, so that it soon escapes the control of its producer (108). This, in the end, is the reason why the letter allows for the two modes of proclamation (truth or pretense in 1:18a), despite Paul's penchant for condemnatory oppositions (1:15–17) and the years of puzzled commentary that have followed this tendency.

The fifth chapter, “Failing to Close: (Re)Citation, (Re)Iteration, Comment” (139–58), details how the Paul of Philippians has much in common with Derrida, since neither

accept the difference between serious and nonserious speech. On surveying most commentary, though, Smith finds that the crisis invoked by such a stance in the face of negatively characterized preachers is typically smoothed over by prioritizing a magnanimous or “mellow” Paul who preserves the metaphysical over the earthly. Ironically, through the act of writing such s(m)oothing explanations, “commentary participates in the very thing that is shocking about Phil 1:18 by becoming the very thing it seeks to displace” (152).

The potential for a study of this sort seems immense. *Philippians* is, indeed, a criminally underexamined letter. Critical theories of interpretation have already proved to be engaging, incisive modes for reflection and assessment. Finally, “biblical theology” is well overdue for a thorough rethinking. In this regard, Smith’s work opens a vista for examining each of these issues.

However, for all of its potential (especially evident in the first full chapter), the bulk of the analysis, most particularly the textual argument, is remarkably toothless. Despite the author’s repeated claims as to the radical, dangerous, or subversive import of his work, this reader fails to see the overarching import of the study. The deconstructive wedge Smith has found in this argumentative moment in *Philippians* serves only to (re)prioritize proclamation, which again strikes this reader as hardly innovative or subversive and might just be functioning as a veiled apology for evangelism in the first and twenty-first centuries.

For all the care and the occasional suspicion Smith uses to develop this analysis, his examination of the letter frequently lapses into an unexpected and unexplained hermeneutic of trust. The argument vacillates between accepting Paul’s letter as an accurate description of key elements such as intimacy or suffering (“there is no reason to contest his sincerity” [103]) and recognizing the rhetorical nature of the letter as Paul’s very particular perspective. Instead of turning to Acts or other Pauline (and Pastoral!) letters to shore up such claims, the study would have been better served to engage the argumentative flow of the whole letter, particularly in light of the claims that 1:12–18 constitutes the main point of the letter.

If the author had taken up this task, it seems far more likely that he would have found the time to engage some of the more recent rhetorical analyses of *Philippians* (Bloomquist 1993; Kittredge 1996, 1998; D. Williams 1997, 2002) or some of the sophisticated rhetorical hermeneutical work of Wilhelm Wuellner, who also engaged many of the same theorists treated in this book’s opening. (Bloomquist would have proved particularly relevant if Smith’s analysis had kept its apparent focus on suffering.) For his marked interest in friendship rhetorics, Smith also seems unaware of John T. Fitzgerald’s key

work on this topic, even on Philippians (1996). Given the declared interest in both ancient and contemporary philosophical approaches to ambiguity in word and text, the study might also have benefited from an acquaintance with Mark Given's work (1997, 2001) or a whole host of European thinkers turning to Paul's letters (Taubes 1993, 2004; Badiou 1997, 2003; Agamben 2000, 2005; Žižek 2000, 2003). (In all fairness and suspicion of this specific speech-act, though, the insightful reader might wonder what *ethos* the reviewer performs by [re]citing these references.)

Most recently, Theodore Jennings has engaged this last group of thinkers en route to his own interwoven meditation on Derrida and Paul. Indeed, one might imagine a conversation between Smith, Jennings, and some of the aforementioned scholars to be vigorous, intriguing, and still rather fruitful. A work such as Smith's could and should provoke this and many other conversations, especially among Pauline scholars, those who describe themselves as "biblical" theologians, and anyone interested in engaging critical theory. This study presents us with some of the elements to have this conversation but ultimately does not provide as substantial a contribution as it could have.