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Sumney, Jerry L.

'Servants of Satan', 'False Brothers' and Other Opponents of Paul

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Jerry Sumney addresses a critical issue for the interpreter of Paul's letters: any interpreter will suppose or articulate a hypothesis identifying "the opposition Paul and his successors faced." However, to date insufficient attention has been paid to employment of "methods that conform to accepted canons of critical historical research and that conform to the genre of the documents involved" (p. 13). Interpreters have generally begun with findings that are only appropriate as conclusions; otherwise such *presuppositions* influence the findings beyond what is appropriate to the historical enterprise.

Sumney seeks to challenge the common presupposition that there was an anti-Pauline movement that purposefully sought to undermine Paul's authority and supplant his teachings, such as is found, for example, in the work of F. C. Baur, W. Schmithals, and G. Lüdemann. He also questions those identifications dependent upon set theological categories, such as Christology or soteriology, as well as those composed around heresy/orthodoxy or heteropraxy/orthopraxy schemes. The historical controversies were not so one-dimensional; social life seldom is. Labeling the opposition as heretics may skew the matter, so that they are not considered apart from the author's polemical context. In addition, many interpreters have an investment in emphasizing the distance of these opponents from Paul's views and practices, privileging Paul's perspective, because it is their own, and thus risking the exaggeration of differences. Yet it may be that any difference's importance is greater to Paul than to these opponents, who emphasize perhaps more agreement with Paul than is readily apparent. This is just how social conflict has been shown to work by certain sociological theorists, which can be observed in historical analogies: the importance placed on difference is heightened with respect to the other who is significantly similar, while the radically different "other" is more easily dismissed.

The extremely useful methodology Sumney sets out to apply to the letters of the Pauline corpus (including those disputed as pseudo-Pauline) specifically for the purpose of identifying opponents (except Romans, Ephesians, and Philemon, where Sumney finds no opponents) is primarily a restatement of what he develops in earlier work, *Identifying Paul's Opponents* (JSNTSup. 40; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990). Rather than list the details of the various methods or attempt a survey of every chapter, I will discuss some of the results of Sumney's method and its employment in his chapter on Galatians, entitled: "Paul Makes Some Enemies." Be advised, however, that while this approach offers a window into the details of one of his many engaging discussions, it is inadequate to communicate the scope of this monograph, which addresses the issue of opponents throughout the entire Pauline corpus.

Sumney recognizes that any decision on the rhetorical genre of Galatians as forensic or deliberative must not be made until at least the "*explicit* statements about *opponents*" have been examined (pp. 134-35), an important point too often overlooked in the current debate about such classification. However, at least three presuppositions are already recognizable in Sumney's statement of the case: 1) whether the assignment of any one or combination of such formal rhetorical classifications is an appropriate goal, as though it is certain that this text represents any such case; 2) if pursued, the ostensible exclusion of consideration of epideictic classification (presupposed because it has few advocates in the current debate?); 3) the prejudicing of the investigation by the labeling of the "others" in view as "opponents" prior to demonstrating that s/he or they "oppose" Paul (cf. p. 136: "in a letter written to combat opponents"). I will return to the last point below. After discussing such introductory matters, as is the case in the examination of each letter, Sumney examines first the "explicit statements" in Galatians (following his order): 6:12-13; 1:6-7; 4:17; 5:7-10, 12; 3:1; then the "allusions" 5:2-6; 4:8-10; 4:21; 5:11; 3:2-5; 1:8-10; 2:2-9; 3:10; followed by the "affirmations" 2:17-18; 3:17-18; 2:11-14. A very detailed approach to the text is taken; I will seek to review it on its own terms, in the space allowed, by discussion of the first two explicit statements Sumney sets out, as he concludes far less about these "opponents" from the other explicit statements on this list.

Paul's explicit oppositional statements in 6:12-13 are characterized as polemical, seeking to arouse hostility toward the "opponents," thus any attribution of motives, or evaluation of their relative practice of the Law cannot be here discerned. Well said. Sumney draws two conclusions from 6:12-13 and its context: 1) "that circumcision was a central issue"; 2) that "the opponents are from outside the Galatian congregation, because Paul distinguishes between the Galatians and the opponents" (p. 137). While admirably seeking to minimize presuppositions, and helpfully addressing the usual mistaken notions that Paul's rhetoric provides objective knowledge about the motives or the level of Law-observance among those whose supposed influence Paul opposes, there are at least two problems with Sumney's second point. First, why "congregation" in the singular, since Paul explicitly addresses more than one group (1:2). Should not the power of Paul's (stereotyping?) rhetoric to create the impression of a singular exigence in Galatia, which

has been assumed in the interpretative tradition to date, invite evaluation? Second, since when does “distinguishing between” provide knowledge that the ones being distinguished from those being addressed are so distinguished because they are from *outside*? Sumney has already gotten ahead of the text, signaling conclusions that betray mere presuppositions, namely, that those whose influence Paul supposes and herein seeks to undermine have arrived from outside of Galatia, as a singular group. In an investigation like this the presence of such presuppositions and their ability to determine the possible conclusions should not be overlooked. The social recognition of ingroup and outgroup is shaped by one’s point of view, and may be seen differently by anyone or everyone else. Paul’s writing of a letter to Galatia from the perspective shared with his addressees as “us,” even when bringing accusations against the influence of “them,” implies nothing about their province as outsiders or insiders to Galatia, or the local communities in which the addressees’ groups exist. It provides a view of Paul’s perspective on ingroup and outgroup standing for his addressees, and how that identity ought to be established and maintained. Might not this extant rhetorical evidence represent Paul’s weighing in on a difference of opinion about the importance placed on competing membership and reference group norms among various local Galatian groups, perhaps even subgroups?

The second explicit statement examined is 1:6-7. Sumney identifies this within the functional scope of 1:6-11(12) as the *exordium*, “which states the cause of the speech and makes the audience receptive to the speaking of oneself and one’s adversaries” (p. 137). He accepts the characterization of the letter as one of rebuke, with this *exordium* stating the letter’s occasion, and setting the polemical tone. Although I am in substantial agreement with these observations, since they are the subject of current scholarly debate, I wonder if making such choices at the start does not prejudice the interpretation of the evidence in a way that Sumney proposes to avoid. Sumney notes that the other message is “altogether different” from Paul’s, “and not a gospel at all.” Yet he immediately dismisses the possibility that this message might not include Christ, since its evaluation as “not a gospel” is Paul’s polemical characterization of it, and moreover, because it is stated ironically. Indeed, Paul’s polemicising of this other message and its messengers is delivered ironically, but why does recognition of this rhetorical characteristic of Paul’s approach determine that the other message cannot be about something other than Christ, as Sumney claims? Or if messianic (christ-oriented), that it cannot be about someone other than Jesus? Since the addressees have been ostensibly (according to Paul’s rhetoric) willing to consider it alongside of their faith in Jesus Christ, I do not see any force to Sumney’s objection. The message and its messengers apparently offer the opportunity to gain something that the addressees have not gained to date by way of their faith in Jesus Christ; it is Paul who now delivers the (perhaps unanticipated) message that pursuit of this course would render superfluous the death of Jesus Christ for themselves, the presumed value of which Paul does not in this letter argue, but anticipates as shared. Finally, Sumney builds here on his observation from 6:12-13, that, “because Paul once again distinguishes them from the Galatians,” this indicates “that the opponents are from outside Galatia” (p. 138). Once again, this reviewer is baffled by such deductions, if that

is what they should be called. Not surprisingly, their identity as “outsiders” is one of the unambiguous conclusions he will reach (cf. p. 140), although no further support for this result is deduced from any other passages in Galatians, whether explicit statements, allusions, or affirmations. When Sumney brings together the results of his various independent chapters, the implications of this decision bear important consequences for his conclusions about Paul’s opposition being “travelling preachers” from outside of Galatia; moreover, these results are then extended to signal a possible movement, drawing upon the potential for correspondence with the “opponents” of Philippians (cf. pp. 307-9).

Sumney has done the field a great service; yet (obviously) I wish he would push the methodological insights farther in application to this text, and not import so many of the prevailing presuppositions. As noted, from the start Sumney accepts in general the assumption that Paul faced opposition, and that these opponents directly opposed Paul (from p. 13). What we have evidence of, however, is Paul’s rhetoric, by which we know rather of Paul’s oppositional reaction to whom and what he perceives to be taking place, or threatening to develop. It should not be presupposed that those people whom Paul in his letters opposes have first opposed Paul. Things appear to be different to Paul than what he believes they should be or become; what they are, and why, are matters to be concluded, not presupposed. Sumney at points recognizes this complicating factor in terms of Galatians, even that they “did not understand themselves as opponents of Paul before Galatians” (p. 159; cf. pp. 18-19, 146, 157-60, 307-9). So it is perplexing and the implications of his work are compromised when he continues to label those influencing Paul’s addressees as “opponents,” that is, according to identifying interests and activities that are themselves historically questionable apart from Paul’s rhetorical interests and activities in the letter that we have, which provides us with only one perspective on a multi-faceted situation and its various players. The inconsistency is illustrated strikingly when Sumney states that “Galatians yields no evidence that Paul’s authority or apostleship are under attack. Rather these opponents claim to agree with Paul” (p. 307)! The label “opponents” is a relic of prior views, not Sumney’s own; maintaining that taxonomy obscures his otherwise useful observations, and mitigates in part their force.

Those who attempt to refine the historical-critical process or to contribute to the interpretation of Paul’s letters offer, at best, incremental gains. I want Jerry Sumney and the reader to note, in view of the conflict theory to which he appeals and consistent with the critical style in which he proceeds, the respect to which the detailed criticism undertaken here attests. Interpreters of Paul aware of the importance of improving the enterprise will appreciate the significant contribution made by this book.