VIII Paul as *homo humilis*

1. Paul: The humble letter-writer

Within the epistolary correspondence between Seneca and Paul, from the 4th century CE, the attributes of humbleness and humility play a major role. It seems to be significant, though, that *humility* as such is only applied to Paul: As Alfons Fürst has argued, it is Paul in particular who appears as a humble person in that he, in a formal sense, mentions the addressee before himself as the letter-writer: *Annaeo Senecae Paulus salute.* The literary portrait of Paul, shaped by the anonymous writer, shall in general differ significantly from his fictitious partner of epistolary correspondence, Seneca. "Seneca erscheint als Heide, der sich an die paganen Gepflogenheiten hält, Paulus als Christ, der aus Bescheidenheit und Demut seinen Namen erst hinter dem des Adressaten nennt." It is specifically in Letter X of the correspondence that the phenomenon of epistolary humility is even discussed explicitly by the fictitious letter-writer "Paul": “Paul” expresses his wish of putting himself in an inferior position which would – as he sees it – match the requirements of his religion (*sectae meae*).

Thus, in several ways, Paul is continuously molded as a humble person and letter-writer. Albrecht Dihle has described the ancient literary modes of showing (epistolary) courtesy and modesty. In this context, Dihle points out, that the actual concept of Christian "humility" cannot be traced back to notions of modesty that exist in the Greco-Roman "Vulgärethik." The point of departure for the Christian concept of (epistolary) humility has to be found elsewhere: It is, as this contribution argues, to be traced back to Paul’s letter-writing, more particularly, to his letter to the Philippians, which is probably Paul’s latest writing. In this letter, addressed to the community in Philippi, Paul shows himself more than in any other writing as a *homo humilis.* In a comprehensive way Paul molds himself as a humble person who presents Christ-oriented humility (Phil 2:1-18) to be the ultimate ethical guideline of community life. By imitating

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1 Jerome’s notion of and reference to the epistolary correspondence (*Vir ill 12*) is to be seen as the *terminus ante quem*, cf. A. Fürst, “Einführung,” 3-22.
2 Cf., e.g., *Ep Paul Sen II*.
Paul and practicing *mimesis*, the community will finally learn about humility example-wise.7

Paul’s comprising conceptualization of “Christian humility” must have had a huge impact not only on Christian theology, but also on Christian literary history: If we move further on in the history of early Christianity and even beyond the field of epistolography, we can see that it was Paul as a literary author who stimulated a specific Christian writing culture,8 particularly among monastic authors of the Byzantine era like Cyril of Scythopolis (ca. 525-560 CE). Those authors make use of an “image of Christian authorship” which is “attentive to the function of self-consciousness through which the ascetic imagined and formed himself anew ... In such a context ... claims of inadequacy are ascetic performances, expressions of piety achieved through rhetoric. Rather than a rhetoric of false modesty, it might be more accurate to speak of a rhetoric of longed-for humility.”9 However, as Derek Krueger also points out, humility “posed the greatest problem for authors of texts” in the sense that the claim of humility actually contradicts the literary ambitions of an author, especially when he is acting as hagiographer.10 “Paradoxically, the performance of humility demands the renunciation of agency in one’s own asceticism,” and the “denigration of style.”11 How then did the image of a humble Christian author develop – how does it emerge, how does it work in Paul? Why did it inspire Christian theology as much as literary history for such a long time? Even Martin Luther, who in general criticizes the contemporary cultural and ecclesial attitude of humility, does not spare with expressing his humility when writing his letter to the emperor Charles V: In this letter, dating from April 1521, Luther uses many expressions of humility and humbleness in order to show his subservience to the monarch. So, where does the phenomenon of Christian (epistolary) humility originate?

We have to go back to Paul’s letter to the Philippians, but we cannot only study how Paul as a letter-writer refers to his personal humility. Rather, in this letter we find Paul’s *epistolary concept of humilitas* presented in a most extensive sense: In Philippians we come across various rhetorical techniques, semantics, metaphorical language as well as argumentative strategies by which Paul makes humility to be the *key concept* not only to his ethical teaching (Phil 2:3) but also

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8 In what follows, we will focus on the literary image, rather than on the theological and ethical implications of the Christian concept of humility – to the latter, cf., e.g.: J. J. Schuld, *Foucault and Augustine*; D. Konstan, *Before Forgiveness*, 125-145. A classical contribution to biblical anthropology still is: L. Adler, *The Biblical View of Man*, 49-53.