I Paul and “Paul”: Paul’s letter to the Philippians in light of Acts 20:18-36*


In his famous and well-known chapter on methodology (“Methodenkapitel”), the Greek historian Thucydides reflects about the function of speeches in history-writing (1.22). Here he reveals some remarkable insights into his compositional techniques as a history-writer:

As to the speeches that were made by different men it has been difficult to recall (διαμνημονεῦσαι) with strict accuracy (ἀκρίβειαν) the words actually spoken, both for me, as regards that which I myself heard, and for those who from various other sources have brought me reports (ἀπαγγέλλουσιν). Therefore the speeches are given in the language in which, as it seemed to me, the several speakers would express, on the subjects under consideration, the sentiments most befitting the occasion, though at the same time I have adhered as closely as possible to the general sense of what was actually said.1

As we learn from this short passage of the Peloponnesian War, the historian’s composition of speeches has to deal with a few technical issues and interpretive challenges because he writes partly about events he has not witnessed himself: the composition of speeches is (a) based on different types of reports and sources; (b) should reach authenticity, and (c) has to be adjusted to the overall narrative purpose. The composition of speeches thus necessarily has to go through historiographical interpretation. Particularly in and by means of speeches, the historian can and must articulate to a huge degree his particular interpretive view of history. Consequently, a reshaping of historical protagonists will take place especially when the historian frames his figures as orators.

Since Martin Dibelius (“Die Reden der Apostelgeschichte und die antike Geschichtsschreibung”) the insights on ancient methods and aims of historiographical “speech-making” have been applied consistently to Lukan studies. In the case of Acts, it is now a widely shared scholarly methodology to read the diversity of speeches inserted into the narrative as the historian’s intentional

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attempt to make his narrative sound authentic. The historian, for instance, implements a “biblicizing style” or “archaizing effect” (e.g., Acts 3:13), or points to the diversity of languages that are used by the different protagonists of his story (Acts 2:8; 21:40; 22:2; 26:14). The historian, in other words, uses the speeches as elements for further interpreting the history of events (pragmata): the elements of analepsis and prolepsis are inherent to speeches as they help arrange the narrative account into a coherent more story. In regard to the quest for Lukan sources – especially in the case of Pauline speeches (Acts 13-28) – scholarly opinions still differ: did Luke know and use Pauline letter-writing when he shaped or re-shaped the image (or “picture”) of Paul – especially as an orator – in Acts?

The quest concerning Luke’s usage of Pauline letter-writing is frequently put into a much wider interpretive frame. On the one hand, we could discuss how the image of Paul is (re)shaped in a variety of post-Pauline writings up to the end of the 2nd century CE: from Pauline pseudepigraphy up to the Acts of Paul we could explore how Paul is perceived and reproduced as an apostle – including or excluding his own letter-writing activity. Rieuwerd Buitenwerf, on the other hand has, among others, broadened the debate about Lukan sources in Acts far beyond the speech sections: he even suggests reading a re-narrating passage like Acts 9:1-25 as a “narrative history based on the letters of Paul.”

By showing how Acts 9 recalls or echoes several Pauline letters (esp. Gal, 1 and 2 Cor), Buitenwerf ultimately reaches the conclusion that Acts in general “depends” on Pauline letters (p. 85). As many other scholars before and after him (e.g., R. I. Pervo), Buitenwerf also finds it difficult to imagine “that the author of Acts ... did not have access to Paul’s letters” (p. 85). Pauline letters had been spread. They must have been known especially to an author like Luke who in general and by (self)definition was so eager to collect all kinds of available materials on the past (Lk 1:1-4). Even though we can thus presuppose a Lukan knowledge of Paul’s letters, I would make two critical remarks to Buitenwerf’s proposal:

First, I would avoid the use of the term “literary dependence” when describing Luke’s way of “using” Pauline letter-writing. As I intend to show in this paper,

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2 See C. R. Holladay, Acts, 42f.
3 To the Lukan image of Paul in general: B. Heininger, "Reception," 309-338, 328ff.
5 R. I. Pervo, Acts of Paul, 41f. shows how APl is in his image of Paul similar and different to Acts: In both cases, Paul is shown as a "wandering missionary"; however, Paul’s message in APl has a "strongly anti-establishment edge, rejecting the official forms of authority ...". See also B. L. White, Remembering Paul.
the relation between Acts and Pauline epistolography is much more complex – as the general principles of how Luke (re)shapes the image of Paul in Acts are much more diverse (s. below). Second, in contrast to how Buitenwerf in his interpretation of Acts largely repeats the long lasting prejudice that “as historiography, Acts is not very reliable” (p. 61), I would argue, instead, that – seen specifically in light of Thucydides’ methodological reflections mentioned above – Luke’s attempt to reshape rather than to record Paul by creative means has to be seen as an authenticating strategy. This is especially true when Luke presents Paul as an orator and creates speeches that cannot be verbatim reports, and thus are hardly “historically precise” – because Luke has to rely on various, manifold, and partly divergent kinds of “sources.” Luke in fact reproduces Paul. Luke himself would consider this way of (re)shaping Paul to be the most accurate depiction of the apostle’s life and mission (deeds and words). Reshaping rather than recording the “past” is how historians – especially within speech sections – claim to achieve historiographical accuracy.

In a manner similar to how Thucydides describes the principles of historiographical speech-making, therefore, Luke has to be reproductive. He has to combine, reshape and interpret what were most likely oral reports or testimonies, contemporary images of Paul, and the Pauline letter-writing in a meaningful sense. As a historian, Luke recalls and revisits Paul as a protagonist of his historiographical account, indeed adequately, and this means from his, i.e. Luke’s, interpretive point of view. By programmatically reproducing the image of Paul, Luke uses (a) eyewitness reports (“How was Paul remembered as an orator?”), (b) contemporary, evaluative images of the apostle (“From the perspective of later decades, what did Paul actually contribute to the mission and expansion of the gospel message?”) as much as (c) Paul’s own literary products (that is, his letter-writing).

Such a revising Lukan approach to “Paul” is – as I argue – in particular to be found in Acts 20:18ff. The image of Paul here must be the creative result of Luke’s consultation and reproduction of the diversity of “sources” he could examine. As I have indicated elsewhere7 Acts 20:18ff. contains a variety of motifs and literary devices that make it highly plausible to imagine an intertextual relation between Acts and Paul’s letter to the Philippians. First, the motif of Pauline humility (ταπεινοφροσύνη: Acts 20:19; see Phil 2:3), related to a concept of service (δουλεύειν: Acts 20:19; see Phil 1:1; 2:7, 22) performed amid tears (δάκρυοι: Acts 20:19; see Phil 3:18-21), presents an inventory of semantics that is typical, if not specific of Philippians – especially since the term ταπεινοφροσύνη only occurs once in the authentic Pauline letters (Phil 2:3). Also Luke’s mention of elders/