

Foolish rhetoric in 1 Cor 1-4 (1:18-31).

Paul's discourse of power as mimicry¹

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Abstract

South Africa is a young democracy but with colonial and Apartheid legacies fresh in the minds of many, and with the lasting impact and consequences of hegemony still tangible and measurable amidst a new, democratic political dispensation with its own problems and concerns. This is the context within which Paul's appeal for a different understanding of wisdom and appearance to insist on breaking through the conventions of the day (1 Cor 1:18-31) is considered. On the one hand, since Empire largely defined wisdom in the first century, Paul's rhetoric of foolishness can be interpreted as a critique of the imperial discourse of wisdom and power. But Paul simultaneously invoked a new discourse of power through his rhetoric which inter alia depended on scriptural appeal for endorsement or authority. Finally, a postcolonial optic enables one to see Paul's discourse as mimicry, negotiating power as much with discursive Romans colonialism as with the recipients of his letters, and also with the Scriptures of Israel. Such use of discursive power and ambiguity resonates in interesting ways in the South African context.

1. Introduction: A contextualising reading

During the run-up to the most recent (18 May 2011) local government elections in South Africa, the president, Mr Jacob Zuma, made headlines after a speech at a political rally at Mthatha in the Eastern Cape, when he claimed that membership of the ruling African National Congress (ANC) was tantamount to eternal salvation.² On the one hand, such strong, religion-invoking sentiments simply can be put down to political opportunism neither peculiar to any country in particular, nor unheard off in South Africa when political elections are in the air. On the other hand, in a context of impending local government elections, the remarks were made in a rural part of the country where traditionalism reigns and people have little access to other sources of information and contrary positions not to mention opposition political views. Soon afterwards, other ANC party officials joined in along these tracks, proceeding to suggest analogies between president Zuma and Jesus, as well as between ANC governance and biblical, messianic times.

Maybe equally unsurprising than the claims made by Mr Zuma, was the strong reaction of the official opposition party, the Democratic Alliance (DA), and the subsequent furore in the news media in a country where up to 80% of its people claim some form of Christian religious affiliation. Significant, though, was the ready

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² "When you vote for the ANC, you are also choosing to go to heaven. When you don't vote for the ANC you should know that you are choosing that man who carries a fork...who cooks people", and "When you are carrying an ANC membership card, you are blessed. When you get up there, there are different cards used but when you have an ANC card, you will be let through to go to heaven" (Zuma quoted in News24 2011a; 2011b).

ability and evident choice to employ religious sentiments in political rhetoric. These events are all testimony to the currency of religious claims, the interlinking of religion and politics, and the importance of religion in political rhetoric in South Africa. In a strong sense, these events were also about contemporary contestation of “wisdom” and “foolishness”, and its rhetoric. While what counts as wisdom and foolishness in South Africa today is neither uniform nor politically uncontested, and while the invocation (operationalization) of a religious framework does not necessarily imply accompanying faith commitments, the rhetorical force of religious wisdom can hardly be denied. Questions regarding the presence and use of religious sentiments in political speeches for the sake of validation and legitimation, not to say intimidation, for many (believers) in South Africa the relation between the wisdom or foolishness of the Gospel in relation to governance, politics and power were again highlighted.

In a context and time vastly different from political-rhetorical skirmishes in a contemporary young democracy, the first four chapters of the first Corinthians letter is marked by a rhetoric of wisdom and foolishness.³ In fact, Paul used a discourse of power which was informed by a double rhetoric, a rhetoric of power and weakness as well as a rhetoric of wisdom and foolishness (1 Cor 1-4;⁴ cf also e.g. Phil 2:5-11; 2 Cor 10-13). Both rhetorical strategies were employed in a context where imperial discourse was virulent, and prominently availed itself of claims to power and wisdom. While 1 Cor 1-4 can be read in tandem with and as implicit challenge to an imperial discourse of power and wisdom, Paul’s further purpose of securing his own precarious position cannot be divorced from an anti-imperialist slant. Exploiting the angle of anti-imperialism which has traditionally received little attention in the analysis of the letter, my contribution explores aspects of Paul’s rhetoric of wisdom/foolishness in 1 Cor 1-4 (1:18-31) with socio-political concerns and their impact in mind.⁵ With interactive hermeneutical flows in mind, the text is read from and in relation to the contemporary South African context as social location.

³ Shortly after Paul left Corinth around 51 CE, he probably established himself in Ephesus which he used as his pastoral and missional basis from 52-54 CE, and from where he visited churches in Galatia, Antioch and elsewhere. Receiving disturbing news about the Corinthian followers of Jesus in 53 or early 54 CE, he wrote the first letter to the Corinthian church (cf 1 Cor 5:9). When Chloe’s people (1 Cor 7:11) shortly thereafter reported to Paul about tensions in Corinth, and Paul received a letter with questions from the community (1 Cor 7:1), he wrote what is today known to us as the first letter to the Corinthians.

⁴ 1 Cor 1-4 forms a rhetorical unit – some scholars identify the hortatory periods in 1:10 (παρακαλῶ δὲ ὑμᾶς) and 4:16 (παρακαλῶ οὖν ὑμᾶς) as rhetorical markers of the 4 chapter unit (e.g. Welborn 2005:13).

⁵ As will soon become clear, my approach leans more towards a postcolonial than anti-imperial reading, and the differences between the two are often telling (cf Punt). Suffice it to point here to how Paul is implicated in the mechanics of power while employing a discourse of foolishness.

2. Discourse, power and Empire – and Paul

Socio-political readings of Paul's letters have of late become somewhat more prevalent, even if they do not amount to a consensus opinion.⁶ Some interpreters insist that the letters call for a commitment to change “the structures in society which are the instruments of oppression” (cf Murphy-O'Connor 1989:10; cf also e.g. Horsley and Silberman 2002; Jones 1944). Paul's legacy then is aimed at, continuously and patiently, working to right the wrongs of this world, without succumbing to bitter cynicism or passive fatalism when people's best efforts frequently come to naught (Bosch 1989:16). Seeing Paul as a vital source of inspiration, it is insisted that “[t]he successors of Paul today are the theologian-activists, Christian thinkers-and-doers who call the affluent church to live truly in the service of the crucified, who is present in the persons of the struggling poor, the marginalized and oppressed, the sinned against and erased from history, nonpersons (1 Cor 1:28-29)” (Cook 1981:495).

Even without supporting a position that insists on Paul's supposed social activism, an anti-imperial tendency or urge in his letters can be inferred from his apocalyptic, theological perspective, as in the end it is the structures of this world which are illusory (1 Cor 7:31; cf 1:28). It would of course be unrealistic to either expect explicit and detailed schedule of subversion or plan of action from an individual, regardless of how immersed in and representative he was of the communities he interacted with, but the implications of such writings nevertheless have to be accounted for. And while the first century setting did not allow the contemplation of regime change,⁷ subversion, protest, and rebellion – in various forms – were not unheard of,⁸ not to mention the “hidden transcripts” (Scott 1990) always and ominously present in imperialist contexts.

⁶ Unlike a letter like Romans, the Corinthian correspondence was at first glance not directed at a community in the heart of the Empire. 1 Cor is traditionally seen as primarily pastoral in nature; and, 2 Cor, a composite letter, may be an even less obvious choice for arguing the case of postcolonial analysis.

⁷ Although, at a cosmic level, regime change is of course the logical consequence of apocalyptic thinking. The apocalyptic-eschatological strain as found for example in 1 Cor is not simply about reigning in the overly enthusiastic Corinthian followers of Christ; the apocalyptic tradition is essentially anti-empire (cf Rieger 2007:48-49), and in contemporary parlance anticipated “regime-change”. Cf also Georgi (1991).

⁸ Furthermore, is it not as naïve as erstwhile narrow dogmatic-theological interpretations – theologically (cf Horsley 1995), epistemologically (Elliott 1994) and generally (Schüssler Fiorenza 2000:40-57) – to make the explicit presentation or even pursuance of some overt, comprehensive and meticulous plan of insurrection the only and final determinative factor for identifying a counter-cultural, or social activist, or anti-imperial tendency in Paul?

However, whereas such anti-imperial readings of Paul have been fruitful in pointing to the bearing of the apostle's letters on socio-political matters,⁹ showing upon some possible implications of Paul's words, the apostle's own agenda and social location are not always adequately explored.¹⁰ The argument in support of possible counter-cultural, or social activist, or anti-imperial tendencies in Paul, should not mutate into an attempts that obscure either the complexities of empire, or the first-century apostle's agenda in its broadest and polyvalent sense, an agenda informed by own aspirations, or the demands of the time, or the wishes of his supporters and compatriots, or whatever combination of these and other elements. Such obscuration of the person or group tends to cloud the complex, negotiated nature of the construct that is called empire. While some postcolonial sentiments characterise the argument here, in the final section a specific notion (mimicry) will be introduced as helpful analytical construct that assist to account more adequately for a discourse such as 1 Cor 1:18-31.

3. Analysis of the text: Overall presentation of 1 Corinthians

Corinth owed its importance to various commercial and political factors, since its location on the Corinthian isthmus made it a strategic city for military, as well as trade and economic reasons.¹¹ After Corinth became involved in the political issues of Sparta and Rome, the city was destroyed in 146 BCE by the Romans, but was re-established in 44 BCE as Roman colony *Colonia Laus Julia Corinthiensis*, in honour of Julius Caesar who was murdered in the same year. The rebuilt city was inhabited initially by retired Roman soldiers, but Roman freedmen and -women, and slaves, traders and business people from elsewhere were soon to be found in Corinth. With its cosmopolitan, international makeup and firm Roman control, access to crucial trade routes, and natural resources for manufacturing and a blooming business culture, Corinth quickly became an important, first century city. Competition,

⁹ Various contributions by Elliott (1994; 1997; 2004); Horsley (1995; 1997; 2000); Zerbe (2003) and others are important in this context.

¹⁰ The political systems and mechanisms of Empire were ably assisted by various social constructs, underwritten by tradition, custom and convention, carrying social buy-in, tacit support and even overt promotion, and functioning in subtle and sublime, public and confrontational ways to sustain uneven power relationships across the spectrum of first-century life. Since all was affected, as part of the small imperial elite or its collaborators, proponents or associates, or as part of the general populace, and regardless of anyone's opinion, stance and level of participation, in one way or another all first-century people were negotiating, had to negotiate, Empire.

¹¹ With two harbours, Lechaemum to the northwest of the Gulf of Corinth and Cenchræe in the Saronic Gulf of the Aegean Sea, Corinth was a true port city and a vital connection point between North-South and East-West trade routes.

patronage¹² and what today would be called a consumerist culture and a focus on success in various ways, were important elements of life in the city.

The primary socio-historical setting that Paul's first letter to the Corinthians addressed has remained a matter of dispute. The traditional (theologically-informed) position holds that Paul challenged the realised eschatological framework that prevailed in the Corinthian church and which gave rise to worldly contentment. More recently, a consensus has been forming that tensions in the community was less theological (in the narrow sense) and more sociological in origin; in fact, was due to problems arising from socio-economic divisions (e.g. Martin 1995; Welborn 2005). Paul's challenge to an ideology of privilege in 1 Cor countered the tensions between the more numerous but lower-status "charter members" and the more recent converts, fewer in numbers but whose wealth, power and status appear to have unsettled standards and expectations in the community (Elliott 1994:204-214; also e.g. Meeks 1983:117-118; Theissen 1983:106-110). In his letter Paul, then, addressed problems most likely brought about by the community's social stratification.

4. Analysis of the text: Commentary on selected themes

As part of the Corinthian correspondence with its many interesting angles, Paul launched a robust defence of his ministry and apostleship in 1 Cor 1-4 (and in 2 Cor 10-13, cf. Punt 2008), and it is also here where Paul's anti-imperial, marginal hermeneutics¹³ and discourse of power can be observed in action. In the past, the rhetorical pitch of the Corinthian letters was often identified as pastoral, aimed at promoting ethical options against the background of a reaffirmation of the *parousia* and (future) eschatology in general.¹⁴ Increasingly, however, recognition is recorded for the strong subversive or anti-imperial language of 1 Cor 1:22-25; 1 Cor 11:3; and, 1 Cor 15:24-25 in particular, certainly when the texts are read in relation to the

¹² Patronage was vital in the first-century society, with the Emperor as ultimate patron who devolved his power to other patrons, each with circle of influence as well as group of underling-patrons, continuing in a never-ending extension of the patronage system (cf. Chow 1997). "Far from trying to eradicate traditional patronage relationships, emperors encouraged their continuation, in part because they were the main mechanism for recruitment of new members of the imperial elite" (Garnsey and Saller 1987:201). Not without importance for our discussion, space does not allow further consideration of patronage.

¹³ There are six explicit scriptural citations in 1 Cor 1-4: Isa 29:14 in 1:19; Jer 9:22-23 in 1:31; Isa 64:3 (52:15) in 2:9; Isa 40:13 in 2:16; Job 5:12-13 in 3:19; and Ps 93:11 in 3:20 (Koch 1986:31, 36-37, 42, 71-72; Welborn 2005:25 n2).

¹⁴ If one follows the suggestions of Wright (2000:161-162) that Paul's high ecclesiology saw the establishment of churches as "colonial outposts of the empire that is to be" and that rather as a missionary in religious garb Paul acted as "an ambassador of a king-in-waiting" setting up and organising groups of loyal followers whose lives were based on the reality created by his story, the connection between pastoral and political is emphasised. Horsley (1997:242-252) claims that in 1 Cor Paul formulated strategies for how the Corinthians were to establish itself as "a community of a new society alternative to the dominant imperial society".

ominous presence of the Roman imperium (cf e.g. Reiger 2007:23; 36-37). Paul's discourse on wisdom, interlaced with power, is a vital element in Paul's strategy in the letter and can be interpreted as counter-conventional and counter-imperial, with destabilising impact, serving also to secure Paul's own position (cf 1 Cor 4:16).

4.1 First-century wisdom and foolishness considered

4.1.1 *Socio-historical context: Power and foolishness redefined*

Various suggestions were made in the past to explain Paul's long argument on wisdom and foolishness in 1 Cor 1-4, which stands in the broader Greco-Roman tradition of reflecting upon the use and abuse of reason (cf Stowers 1990:253-286).¹⁵

Paul's reversal of the established notions of wisdom and foolishness is often explained with reference to the philosophical traditions of the time. It was for example suggested that a misunderstanding of wisdom amongst church leaders was at the basis of the dissensions in the Corinthian congregation, eliciting a redefinition of wisdom (and foolishness) by Paul. Identifying 1 Cor 2:1-5 as the locus of Paul's theology of proclamation, any employment of worldly wisdom in his proclamation of the cross would have been rejected for theological reasons, disallowing himself or other leaders to be drawn into this game of personality cult and honour enhancement.¹⁶ It is then concluded that Paul's theology of the cross is diametrically opposed to the practice of rhetoric, sophistic rhetoric to be precise¹⁷ (Mihaila 2009).

Recently, even the comic-philosophic tradition which foregrounded the wise fool in the ironic, vulgar and counter-cultural format of mime has been suggested as the proper social location for Paul emphasis on the cross and the overturning of the established understandings of wisdom¹⁸ (Welborn 2005). Making use of the theatrical

¹⁵ Unfortunately, space does not allow further elaboration here on other first-century authors and their views on wisdom, its nature, attempts to defend, redefine and also challenge it, and its relationship to foolishness. Attention to views found among Cynics and Epicureans may prove especially interesting.

¹⁶ Such conclusions raise the question of the role played by the reference to Apollos' name in Paul's argument against dissensions. Mihaila reviews several possible views, and based primarily on exegetical grounds and refusing to engage in hermeneutical speculations conclude that Paul had a congenial relationship with Apollos. Possible distinctions that were drawn between the two would have to be ascribed to the Corinthians, who viewed their preachers in competitive rather than complementary terms (Mihaila 2009). For a contrary position, cf Welborn (2005:102-110): "the possibility cannot be excluded that it was Apollos himself who originally applied the term 'fool' (μωρός) to Paul" (109).

¹⁷ Cf also Given (2010:175-200) on Paul self-proclamation as σοφός (rather than sophist) in 1 Cor 3:10 (2010:193).

¹⁸ "Paul was governed by a social constraint in his discourse about the cross and in his account of the sufferings of the apostles of Christ" ... "employs the language and imagery of mime" ... "theatrical metaphor becomes explicit in 1 Cor 4:9-10 (theatre-act θεάτρον)", and "accepts the role of fool of Christ, but only after a thorough theological analysis, in the course of which he redefines the terms 'wisdom' and 'foolishness' in a paradoxical sense" (Welborn 2005:3, 253).

tradition and providing a vast and wide range of contemporary authors and scenarios as illustration, Welborn shows how the comic mimic of the coarse vulgar fool with its entertainment value for the crowds – amidst the vulgarity of the performance – harboured an important if at times subtle anti-establishment element as well.¹⁹

In the end, however, some of the most important aspects related to foolishness, even when they are recognised, are not always sufficiently accounted for among scholars. The argument that “it is not ‘wisdom’ (σοφία) that is the counterpoint to ‘foolishness’ (μωρία) in the thesis statement in 1:18, but the ‘power of God’ (δύναμις θεοῦ)” (Welborn 2005:19), is important. But in the subsequent analysis, unfortunately little further attention is devoted to the issue of “power”,²⁰ while wisdom and foolishness in 1 Cor 1-4 can only be understood in their connection to the discourse of power of the day.

4.1.2 Foolishness as a complex concept embedded in power relations

The direct connection that Paul established between “the word of the cross” (ὁ λόγος ... τοῦ σταυροῦ) and “foolishness” (μωρία) in 1 Cor 1:18, already signals an important connection in the ensuing discourse of power. The cross stood for a “sadistically cruel” and “utterly shameful death” (O’Collins 1992:1208), as the Roman Empire’s way to uphold authority, preserve law and order, and instil fear among rebels, criminals but especially slaves.²¹ In fact, at the time crucifixion was known as the slave’s punishment (*supplicum servile*; Punt 1999:446-462; Welborn 2005:20-23).²² In addition, slaves were also stereotyped, among others, as foolish and stupid in a society characterised by relationships defined and determined by power. “[T]he master-slave relationship cannot be divorced from the distribution of power throughout the wider society in which both master and slave find themselves” (Patterson 1982:35). Through institutionalised slavery, characters and habits were

¹⁹ An important matter that Welborn barely addresses (2005: e.g. 5, 7) is the parity between Paul and the authors he quotes, as well as the accompanying social locations. Seneca, Pliny, Horace and others not only belongs to but also addressed an elite or elite-oriented audience, unlike in the case of Paul. The arguments that 1 Corinthians is focused on the few members in the congregation from elite stock (2005:), or that the foolishness argument is intended to subvert aspirations to elite-status (2005:), do not address this problem of incongruent social locations fully.

²⁰ The neglect of power and its relationship to wisdom and foolishness is twofold, in the sense in which Paul’s argument on power is invoked here: both the importance of wisdom for the imperial constellation of power (as referred to above), but also in terms of Paul’s own exercising of power. The claim that “the adoption of the role of fool was a strategy practiced by a number of intellectuals in Greek and Roman antiquity” (Welborn 2005:112) should at least allow for the consideration of Paul’s invocation of power in his wisdom and foolishness argument.

²¹ In the Jewish context, crucifixion was of course also a constant reminder to the Jewish people of their enslavement to the foreign power of Rome. However, apart from the imperialist setting in 1 Corinthians, there is not much to suggest that Jewish nationalistic sentiments are at work in 1 Cor 1-4.

²² Cf Cicero (*Verr* 2.5.169); Tacitus referred to crucifixion as *servile modum* (a slave-type) punishment (*Hist* 2.72.1-2) Cf Hengel 1977:51-63; Scaer (2005:1).

moulded by command and obedience through generations, becoming habituated to power. These inevitably also constituted the context of the early Jesus follower-communities and their emerging structures, worldviews and self-understandings.²³

While power, enslavement and foolishness formed intersecting lines, related gender considerations also connect into Paul's argument on wisdom and foolishness in a twofold way. On the one hand, slaves were effeminised as human chattels for use by men and the powerful in particular. On the other hand, in the first century social context, foolishness was marked as a "feminine" characteristic (Polaski 2005:5,19-20,62,76; cf also Wire 1990). The contemplation and assumption of foolishness in the patriarchal, hierarchical first-century would have meant being aligned with one of the stock traits ascribed to women.²⁴ Such gender implications underscore the socio-political implications of Paul's language, which have to be factored into any context or framework for understanding his rhetoric of foolishness, clouded as it was in ambiguity, and given its potential to turn the social codes upside down.

Paul's comments on wisdom (and strength) and foolishness (and weakness) reverberate within the context of the all-pervasive, all-powerful Roman Empire, which did not create the social environment of the first century, but certainly had great interest in its perpetuation. Interpreting the texts within, that is with reference to and according to, a Jewish or Hellenistic heuristic framework – or a specific sub-milieu of these – should not neglect the real-life world of the first century CE. The Roman Empire both constituted and determined, directly and more often implicitly, the lives of people. In fact, it has even been suggested that the Empire in the form of the imperial cult was Paul's primary opponent in the Corinthian correspondence (so Saunders 2005:227-238). More importantly, compared to an Empire that defined itself through its ability to exercise power, violently when required, defined through its claims to world conquest as exhibited in freedom and wisdom in particular,²⁵ and built

²³ The impact of a slaveholding society is evident among New Testament authors, who both presupposed the presence of slavery and its moral acceptability (e.g. Col 3:22-25; Eph 6:5-9; 1 Pt 2:18-21; cf Glancy 2006:145).

²⁴ Paul did not hesitate to level the accusation of foolishness (Gal 3:1, 3) against the men of the Galatian community and which in that situation clearly amounted to a gendered insult incurring (sociologically speaking) downward slippage (Bassler 2007:45).

²⁵ The 1st century tactician Onasander (1.1) listed intelligence, self-control, sobriety, frugality, used to hardship, thoughtful, indifference to money, neither too youthful or too old, and preferable the father of children, eloquence and a good reputation as required characteristics of a good Roman general; no mention is made of military training or experience, knowledge of geography or military tactics and strategy, knowledge of the enemy or even bravery (Mattern 1999:19-20).

on patriarchal machismo,²⁶ Paul's approach to wisdom through foolishness presented an oppositional substitute, a subversive alternative.

4.2 Wisdom, foolishness and Empire in 1 Corinthians

While many commentators have noted Paul's concern with power in 1 Corinthians,²⁷ the ways in which power and foolishness were evidently interlinked for Paul have not attracted much attention, even though the connection is quite clear in his argument. The nature of the connection between power (and weakness) and wisdom (and foolishness), as well as the accompanying consequences, also deserve investigation. Contrary to the conclusion that in 1 Cor 1-4, "Paul accepts the role of the fool of Christ" (Welborn 2005:253), Paul's point is not that he has given up on wisdom, but rather that in and through association with God, that which qualifies as wisdom is given new meaning, through the anti-logic of the cross. Paul in fact redefined wisdom and foolishness, twisting the current norms and values of society around, in order to reclaim wisdom. Paul is not divorcing himself of power, but reclaiming power in the name and as the choice of God (1 Cor 1:27-29), in a new guise (1 Cor 1:18), and for a specific purpose (1 Cor 4:16) with divine sanction (1 Cor 4:21).

Already at the beginning of a long letter Paul made his intention clear to challenge the conventions of the time, not only in his critique of conventional wisdom (1 Cor 1:18-31), but also in what would have amounted to a challenge to the imperial rulers (1 Cor 2:6; cf 8:5-6), and arguably to the implicit threat of regime change (1 Cor 2:6).²⁸ The connection between wisdom and rulers is not incidental, and Paul's claims regarding the overturning of wisdom and folly resonates in a context where the emperors generally set great stock by learning, as well as more practically in the sense that the emperor constituted the ultimate and final bestower of justice (cf Millar 1977:3-14). "In short, from the very beginning of empire, there was a demand that the

²⁶ The status and security of the Roman emperors and powerful elite largely depended on their *perceived ability* to inflict violence. Unlike what would have been expected, the Roman emperors and elite was less focused on protecting the boundaries of their realm, and more given to compulsive reaction regarding what they considered to constitute an insult, not bothering to consider possible risks in relation to potential advantages, and often oblivious to expertise (Mattern 1999).

²⁷ E.g. the important studies by Wanamaker (2003:115-137) which shows 1 Cor 1-4 as Paul's attempt to re-establish his authority as *paterfamilias* over the Corinthian community; and by Castelli (1991) showing upon Paul's use of mimesis as mechanism through which he stabilized his own discourse of power.

²⁸ It has been argued that throughout 1 Cor, Paul challenged the discourse of empire, implicitly and explicitly: cf also more broadly 1 Cor 1:18-2:5; 2:6-3:4; 15:24-28. E.g. Horsley argues that even 1 Cor 10:14-22 on the Lord's Supper is characterised by "societal or 'political' realism" aimed at rejecting the emperor cult as demonic (re being "partners with demons", κοινωνοὺς τῶν δαιμονίων, 1 Cor 10:20; references to "the cup and table of demons", ποτήριον δαιμονίων...τραπέζης δαιμονίων, 1 Cor 10:21) (Horsley 1997:248); or invoking one of the more classical meanings of δαιμόνιον, mocking the emperor cult as being about inferior divinities or deities.

emperor should behave as a *basileus* who heard the petitions of his subjects and answered them with verbal or written pronouncements which were themselves effective and legal acts” (Millar 1977:11). The imperial focus on authoritative verbal and written documents therefore provides another angle also to Paul’s use of Scriptures to support his argument, serving both the purpose of quoting certain content (which may hold sway over other purposes) as well as to demonstrate his ability to elicit support from ancient powers and ultimate authority. In the following sections, the inversions of Paul’s theological argument is briefly investigated, considering also scriptural quotes in his argument, and finally how the notion of mimicry can assist in explaining not only Paul’s argument but also his social location and aspirations.

4.2.1 God, Power and Foolishness: Theological Ambiguities

Paul argument in 1 Cor 1-4 (and 1:18-31 in particular) is a theological argument. It portrays God in a twofold way, with the divine perceived as a God of order and holiness (Neyrey 2004:162-179) while on the other hand stressing also how God acts as a God of disorder and reversal (Neyrey 2004:179-187). God’s order derives from his holiness, the creator God of an orderly world with integrated social maps of persons, places, things and times, and aligns with God’s judgement as ultimate lawmaker. However when Paul introduced God in 1 Cor 1:18-25, it is a message of foolishness uttered by a self-acclaimed weak person.²⁹

With God’s wisdom as superior but also as the form of wisdom that exclusively counts, its contention with and hostility to earthly wisdom is the basis of Paul’s argument, first in a more abstract sense (1:18-20), and then more specifically applied to the Corinthian context (1:21-24). And in 1:22-24 God’s criticism of earthly wisdom finds concrete expression in the evaluation of the cross of Jesus Christ.³⁰ The logic and order of locating wisdom and power in the crucified Christ appears warped, and to make sense of Paul’s claims, requires acknowledgement that God often turns the world upside down and reverses statuses (1 Cor 1:25). Two immediate conclusions flow from this divine reversal of general social values in Christ: after Jesus’

²⁹ The craft and persuasiveness of Paul’s argument in 1 Cor 1:18-25 and elsewhere in 1 Cor has been noted by various scholars (e.g. Neyrey 2004:180). Cf Barré (1975:510-512) on ἀσθείνειν (to be weak) as reference to suffering; so also Keesmaat (2007:142) for the use of τῆ ἀσθενείᾳ in Rom 8:26.

³⁰ This portrayal of Jesus Christ is consistent with other parts in the NT: Christ as someone shamed (Heb 12:1-2) and cursed (Gal 3:14) by the cross.

resurrection, he is plotted differently within the social order, turning foolishness into wisdom, weakness into power, shame into honour – and vice versa. Second, in Paul’s argument the dominant position of God emphasises that the God of order can also be the God of disorder, especially when it comes to human social frameworks.³¹ And in the end, God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, God’s weakness more capable than human power³² (Neyrey 2004:181).

Paul’s arguments in 1:18-25 proceed in 1:26-31 to an application of these sentiments to the Corinthian situation. Although the social place and status of the Corinthian followers of Jesus has not quite been settled (cf Martin 1995; Theissen 1983; Thiselton 2000), it seems reasonable to accept that the majority of people were not from the elite or honourable classes.³³ As an urban community of Jesus followers in the first century CE, the Corinthian church in all likelihood contained an urban mix with people who had little or no status, with few wise, powerful and well-born people belonging to this group. “Recent research points toward city churches that included all classes except the elite and involved active participation of women and slaves, migrant artisans, and other resident aliens” (Wire 2000:126).³⁴

In a threefold emphasis on God who have chosen (ἐξελέξατο ὁ θεός, in 1:27-28), the preference is consistently in favour of τὰ μωρὰ (the foolish), τὰ ἀσθενῆ (the weak) and τὰ ἀγενῆ τοῦ κοσμοῦ καὶ τὰ ἐξουθενήμενα (what is low and despised in this world). And, with further ambiguity, Paul did not argue that God rearranged the structures of the world, but rather those *within* the structures: the ones he had chosen, contradictorily to the norms of the day, now find themselves in God’s eyes in the positions of honour and power as τοὺς σοφοὺς (wise) and τὰ ἰσχυρὰ (strong), but also with accompanying functions and roles ἵνα τὰ ὄντα καταργήσῃ (to destroy that which exists, 1:28). It is interesting to note how in both 1:18-25 and 1:26-31 conventional roles are subverted

³¹ The ambiguity of God entails God’s apparent contradictory nature when it comes to order and disorder: not only did God make “the various maps of persons, places, times, and things that organize and structure the world and the life of the church”, but God also “turns the world upside down and creates new maps” (Neyrey 2004:144-190; esp 187).

³² Cf Neyrey (2004:179-187) on God’s weakness and foolishness.

³³ The danger of mirror-reading notwithstanding, 1 Cor 1:26 by and large may be a fair assessment of the members of the community.

³⁴ Contrary to the earlier opinion of e.g. Meeks (1983); more recently, though, it has been argued that people from an elite background with claims to noble birth, wealth and status may have included in the Corinthian congregation (Welborn 2005). Needless to say, also in contextual readings is it important that (re)constructions of texts based on modern day assumptions, be avoided.

and overturned, between wise and foolish, powerful and weak, honourable and despised. And, according to Paul God is responsible for the status reversals.

Paul's rhetoric in 1 Cor 1-4 served an immediate, twofold purpose: both polemical and apologetic (Neyrey 2004:183). Paul confronted the community members who may have accused him of not quite measuring up to the expected standards of elocution, education and power.³⁵ At the same time, Paul defends those of low status in the community against possible arrogant claims of a few elite (or aspiring elite) members, and emphasised that rather than the low-status people overthrowing the social system God acknowledged their value and worth (1:26-30).³⁶ Moreover, and while for his polemics and apologetics Paul found support in the Scriptures, his rhetoric of foolishness served as challenge to convention and in support of his position – not least also through his invocation of the Scriptures.

4.2.2 Foolishness and the Scriptures

Although Paul did not invoke the (Jewish) wisdom tradition, his rhetoric was tied to his use of the Scriptures. In 1 Cor 1:17-2:16 and again in 3:18-20 Paul contrasts wisdom and folly (foolishness), culminating in his claim in 1 Cor 3:19a, ἡ γὰρ σοφία τοῦ κόσμου τούτου μωρία παρὰ τῷ θεῷ ἐστίν (“For the wisdom of this world is foolishness for God”) – substantiated by quotes from Job 5 and Ps 93.³⁷ Claims about authentic and apparent wisdom are embedded in explicit quotations from the Scriptures, mostly introduced by fixed formulae,³⁸ but Paul's claims also invoked a much broader discussion on wisdom than that found in the Wisdom literature in particular.³⁹ His acknowledgement about the ambivalence accorded to the cross of

³⁵ Amidst the abiding danger of mirror-reading, Paul's criticism against those “who are puffed up” (4:18-19; 5:2; 8:1) may be targeting elite members in the community (cf Neyrey 2004:183). Cf recently Welborn's contention (2005:124-129) that the Corinthian congregation included a number of people from the elite.

³⁶ Paul's metaphor and arguments in 1 Cor 12 on the diversity of the body also stressed the reversal between perceived and real importance when viewed from God's perspective; not only are the traditionally valued parts such as eyes, hands and heads honoured but so also the private body parts such as genitals and buttocks. “In both 12:14-18 and 22-24, God ascribes all honor to elites and nonelites alike” (Neyrey 2004:184). For 1 Cor 11:1-12:10 and the possible social context of the “fool's speech” genre as Greek and Roman mime rather than the Jewish wisdom tradition, cf Welborn (1995:3).

³⁷ In 1 Cor 3:19b, ὁ δρασσόμενος τοὺς σοφοὺς ἐν τῇ πανουργίᾳ αὐτῶν, “He catches the wise in their craftiness” (Job 5:12), and in 3:20: κύριος γινώσκει τοὺς διαλογισμοὺς τῶν σοφῶν ὅτι εἰσὶν μάταιοι, “The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile” (LXX Ps 93:11).

³⁸ In 1 Cor 1:19 the quote of Is 29:14 is introduced by γέγραπται (“it is written”), as is also the case with Job 5:12 in 1 Cor 3:19a and LXX Ps 93:11 in 1 Cor 3:20. Other citations in 1 Cor 1-3 are also introduced by γέγραπται, viz Jer 9:22-23 in 1 Cor 1:31 (with καθὼς, “as”) and (without entering the debate of the more probable source) the Apocalypse of Elijah (or Is 64:3 [52:15] and 65:17) in 1 Cor 2:9. The Is 40:13 quote in 2:16 has not introductory formula.

³⁹ Without denying the central position of the scriptural quotes in his argument, Welborn (2005:25-27) concluded that Jewish Wisdom literature did not constitute the provenance for Paul's argument on wisdom in 1 Cor 1-4.

Christ, and more particularly his insistence that it is the “power of God”, leads Paul to cite Isaiah 29:14 in 1 Cor 1:19.⁴⁰

It of course makes good sense to understand Paul’s use of the Scriptures in 1 Cor along the lines of two categories that would have been familiar to him, Scriptures of reversal and of order. On the one hand, Paul can list God as being in support and defence of the cross of Jesus through a virulent attack on worldly foolishness (1:18-25), in support of which Is 29:14 is cited in 1:19 and Job 5:12-13 in 3:19. On the other hand, beyond 1 Cor 1-4, Paul also availed himself in 1 Cor of scriptural notions that emphasise God’s role in the establishment of an orderly world. “This includes a list of laws similar to the Decalogue ([Cor] 6:9-10), the command that excludes a sinner from the church: ‘Drive out the wicked person from among you’ (5:13; cf Deut 17:7; 19:19), and a psalm that describes the last stages of the world when ‘God has put all things under his feet’ (1 Cor 15:27; cf Ps 8:6)” (Neyrey 2004:190).

Nevertheless, the function within and centrality of the citations for Paul’s argument remains a question. On the one hand, an anti-imperial position that appealed to a different understanding of wisdom and an insistence to break through the conventional, Paul’s argument impacted on the discourse of empire since it was empire that largely defined wisdom, the nature and the mechanics of the world and of life itself. But on the other hand, Paul simultaneously invoked a new discourse of power and one that relied also on the Scriptures of Israel for its authentication and authority, by their direct invocation but also by echoing subtle hints and concerns from the Scriptures. The challenge to the Roman Empire in his letters was supported by and effectively built upon the results of his interpretation of the Scriptures of Israel and enlisted the scriptural framework, and specific quotations to boot, to prove the veracity of his message and apostleship. At the same time, Paul was implicated in his discourse of power, in which quotations from Scripture also served to underwrite his claims, to authorise his position and to justify his arguments and position.⁴¹

⁴⁰ 1 Cor 1:19: ἀπολώ τὴν σοφίαν τῶν σοφῶν καὶ τὴν σύνεσιν τῶν συνετῶν ἀθετήσω, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will foil” (cf Is 29:14).

⁴¹ Particularly if the Corinthian context that Paul addressed was primarily characterised by issues of authority and power (e.g. Neyrey 2004:149). Further, space does not allow for it here, but re the topic of marginalisation the (position of the) Scriptures of Israel should of course also be considered. Paul’s use of texts and themes from the Scriptures necessarily displaced these from their scriptural framework, but moreover (to some extent at least) upset the framework as a whole, as e.g. Boyarin (1994) points out when he accuses Paul of allegorising away the uniqueness of Israelite history and Jewish life. Cf Stanley (1994:28-29 regarding Meir Sternberg’s work on the displacement effect of quotations).

Paul's position was contrary to that of the Roman Empire, and in his circles subverted Empire through his own rhetorical claims, but his stance is also a position of claiming and negotiating power for which he required confirmation. In his understanding, he was thoroughly entangled with and connected to the Scriptures, so that a stance regarding Paul reflected a stance regarding the Scriptures.⁴² Indeed, since the Scriptures encapsulated the word of God, his relation with the Scriptures of Israel adds impetus for his claims on divine sanction for his mission and message. Paul's negotiation of power in the end becomes a three-way action, which interacted with the discursive colonialism of the Roman Empire, with the recipients of his letters, as well as with the Scriptures of Israel which was granted a new meaning through their inclusion or induction into Paul's hermeneutics (cf Punt 2011).

4.3 Mimicry: Foolishness and / or / as wisdom?

Certain scholars claim that Paul's argument is that he deliberately chose a position characterised by weakness and folly, to proclaim the word of God to the Corinthians. "This value strategy, then, is Paul's choice; by it he imitates the 'foolish' and 'weak' crucified Christ and he ensures that the 'wisdom' and 'power' of his Patron-God is respected" (Neyrey 2004:185; cf Welborn 2005:253).⁴³ And indeed, amidst conceptual connections or ambiguities, Paul's stated choice for the content of his preaching was a position of weakness, the cross of Jesus (1 Cor 2:2), and not one of power, the resurrection of Jesus (vs Given 2010).⁴⁴ But this does not imply that Paul's claims were against wisdom and in favour of foolishness as such; to the contrary, Paul's claims were about new understandings of wisdom and foolishness, that also and very much so amounted to power (1 Cor 1:18; cf 1:17,25). All the shame and dishonour Paul accrued and was ascribed⁴⁵ for his apostleship are also presented as marks of divine respect; even Paul's primary disqualifying mark, having persecuted Jesus himself (1 Cor 15:9; cf Gal 1:13,23; Phil 3:6), was according to him transformed by God into a sign of grace.

⁴² And since Stanley (2004:40) is probably right in arguing that the authority of the Scriptures was widely acknowledged in the early Christian church, Paul's appeals to the Scriptures greatly contributed to his powerful position in the early church.

⁴³ Neyrey does concede though, "Throughout the letter [1 Cor] Paul defends himself against a negative understanding of 'foolishness' and 'weakness'" (Neyrey 2004:185).

⁴⁴ Of course, as Given (2010:193-198) is at pains to point out, Paul's claim to preach only the cross is a rhetorical device, not to be taken literally, as borne out by evidence elsewhere in his letters (e.g. 1 Th 1:9-10; 1 Cor 1-4 and 15; cf even Ac 17:22-31). In fact, not only the resurrection but also the kingdom, judgement and future reign of God feature in prominent places (cf 1 Cor 15:3-4, 24-25) in Paul's letters.

⁴⁵ Paul's claim is for both being ascribed honour by God as well as having worked for it (1 Cor 15:8-10). Cf Neyrey (2004:187).

In what may appear to be subservience, Paul echoed the importance of wisdom and aligning wisdom and power, with his subservience soon showing up as subversive too: challenging contemporary norms and values which aligned wisdom with the elite, with men and with power. But such subversive subservience which ultimately also served to establish the agency of the marginalised and self-acclaimed spokesperson constitutes what would be called mimicry⁴⁶ in postcolonial parlance. Mimicry of empire will create the impression (and may even simulate the reality) that the imperial culture has been internalised and replicated, but typical of the ambivalence of colonial or hegemonic discourse, it will be employed to an author's own advantage.⁴⁷ In short, in his discourse of power in 1 Cor 1-4, Paul mimicked empire through his rhetoric of foolishness (cf Punt 2008).

At times (e.g. 1 Cor 2:6-16 and 3:1-2) Paul defended himself quite explicitly against claims that he is not wise; not to mention that although he claims not to use educated discourse, the encomium on love in 1 Cor 13 was articulately crafted. In short, rather than Paul giving up on wisdom and assuming foolishness as a characterisation befitting him, he claims that God gave him unique wisdom (e.g. 1 Cor 2:9,10,12). Similarly, Paul refused the validity of being accused of weakness in 4:8-13 in remarks directed to elite people who claim high status on fullness of spiritual powers. Instead, he critiqued their shamefulness, while cataloguing and boasting of his own supposed weaknesses. Pitched against God's criteria for honour (1:18-25), Paul now reinterpreted the position he assumed and the maladies he endured: fools for Christ's sake; weakness; disreputability; hunger, thirst, nakedness, homelessness; reviling; persecution; and, slander (summarised in 1:13). In peculiar and hyperbolic fashion, the lower Paul's status, the higher the ranking God bestows upon him (Neyrey 2004:186) – and the stronger Paul's claim on wisdom (and power) redefined. "By comparison with Corinth's elite, Paul rates lower in every category. But the God of disorder constructs a new map of persons, the criteria for which seems to be the

⁴⁶ Mimicry is used to describe the nature of culture in a colonial, imperialist context: never "pure, prior, original, unified or self-contained; it is always infected by mimicry, self-splitting, and alterity. In a word, it is always already infected by hybridity" (Bhabha 1994:85-92). Cf Rieger (2007:20 n37) for some discussion on whether mimicry is a mere surface effect or indicative of deeper, often repressed, notions.

⁴⁷ Hybridity is moulded by mimicry, which functions as colonial domination and coercion, but hybridity goes beyond mimicry since it redefines and reconstructs the colonisers. Space does not allow further discussion here, and suffice it to note a good example of hybridity in Paul's argument about wisdom in the first few chapters of 1 Corinthians, and in two passages in particular: 1 Cor 1:17-2:16 and 3:18-20. Without claiming direct dependency or authorial links, the Jer 9:22-23 quote, which also appeared in 2 Cor 10:17 provides an important intertextual link between the arguments of 1 Cor 1-3 and 2 Cor 10-13.

opposite of earthly honor markers” (Neyrey 2004:187).⁴⁸ Moving beyond the traditionally ensconced, neutral position for Paul in socio-political matters, allows for the recognition in his rhetoric of attempts to influence and control his audiences to an extent that may reach way beyond their own convictions or persuasions.⁴⁹

5. Conclusion

Paul’s argument in 1 Cor 1-4 and 1:18-31 in particular makes sense as a plea for an alternative understanding of society; on the one hand, issuing a challenge to the prevailing order at the time, the Roman Empire in its many manifestations (cf Zerbe 2003:92; Horsley 2000), while on the other, serving to bolster Paul’s position of power and authority in the Corinthian community. And in South Africa, it is not in the end the veracity of the eternal life-claims by politicians, or the apparent inseparable bond between religion and politics that ultimately proves worrisome. Rather, recurring questions concern the rhetoric of wisdom and the power of rhetoric: the confluence of wisdom defined by the powerful, and ascribing and inscribing foolishness on the weak; a discourse (re)establishing claims to power and appeals to wisdom *over* people on *whose behalf* the powerful claim to act; and, re-invoking colonialist discourse based on demonising political opponents in a country wracked by violence.

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⁴⁸ But in the end, Neyrey does not follow through on his argument, concluding, "I understand all of these apologetic efforts by Paul as not intended to reposition himself on the map of persons, but in terms of God’s assessment of the criteria for status on the map of persons and for God’s patronage" (Neyrey 2004:185). Paul’s repositioning on the map of wisdom and power was determinative, whether God or Paul was the agent of the repositioning – in fact, if this was ascribed to God, it gave further authority to Paul’s position.

⁴⁹ "He [Paul] is often cocky, self-serving, and manipulative. These personal qualities persist even when he delivers a message of cooperation and self-sacrifice, using himself as a model. He is so certain that he is always right that he does not exercise due caution in the formulation of his statements – even though he is aware that his obtuseness and self-contradiction give rise to confusion on the part of his hearers or correspondents (e.g. 2 Cor 2:4; 7:8)" (Polaski 2005:10).

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