

Article

Beyond the Greco-Roman or Jewish Monocle: Reading Philippians and Paul ‘Kaleidoscopically’

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Abstract: Typically, scholars view/read the enigmatic apostle Paul monolithically—that is, through either a Greco-Roman or Jewish socio-cultural lens. The traditional Lutheran (Greco-Roman/Western) lens was criticized in the mid-/late-twentieth century by scholars highlighting Paul’s Jewishness—resulting in the so-called “New Perspective on Paul” and “Paul within Judaism” movements. This paradigmatic post-Shoah shift of Pauline interpretation begs the questions, “Should we abandon Greco-Roman readings of Paul?” and “Should we continue to read Philippians and Paul through a singular (Jewish) lens?” Building upon the work of Markus Bockmuehl, Abraham Malherbe et al., I argue for an “eclectic and pragmatic” approach. I explain how “monocular” (Greco-Roman or Jewish) and even “binocular” (Greco-Roman and Jewish) approaches flatten Paul’s complex thought world and *Sitz im Leben* as an in-Christ church-planting missionary. The purpose of this study is to read Philippians and Paul “kaleidoscopically”—considering the distinct *Romanitas*, juxtaposed and colliding cultures, worldviews, and religions that Paul likely encountered in the cosmopolitan *colonia* of first-century Philippi. This article transcends the Greco-Roman/Jewish debate surrounding Paul—highlighting the literary and archaeological evidence of competing pagan, Jewish, and Pauline Christ cults in first-century Philippi—and thus encouraging scholars to read Philippians and Paul through a “kaleidoscopic” rather than a monolithic lens.

Keywords: Philippians; Paul within Judaism; New Perspective on Paul; Pauline theology; hermeneutics; New Testament Greco-Roman backgrounds; Egypt; Isis-Regina; pagan cults; ancient Philippi



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1. Introduction: The Problem of Reading Paul “Monolithically”

World War II was the largest and deadliest conflict in human history—including some seventy countries fighting in four major global theaters and leaving about fifty-five million casualties and countless others scarred physically and psychologically in its wake (Overy 2015, pp. 1–6). Imagine if such a global war were only discussed from a singular point of view—merely from an American, German, Japanese, or British perspective. Such a monolithic presentation of history would certainly color the way the war is interpreted—for better or worse. At its best, such a shallow reading of history would offer a mere skewed, surface-level understanding of the major events and figures (as interpreted and presented by the respective authors). Seminal figures from the opposing side may be left out altogether or presented in an unbalanced, pejorative way. Lesser-known but equally important heroines and heroes of the conflict—such as the ethnically diverse groups of female and male code breakers who helped crack the Enigma machine or those courageous victims and survivors of the Shoah—would possibly be forgotten and their stories left untold. Such a scenario has vital implications for world history but also for Pauline studies: no reader could ever hope to gain a fulsome understanding from such a narrow, selective reading of historical data—whether the topic is the D-Day invasion or Paul’s conflicts in first-century Philippi.

Paul did not fight this battle alone, however. He depicted Epaphroditus, his Philippian “brother” and “co-worker,”¹ as his “fellow-soldier” (συστρατιώτης; Phil 2:25) and

exhorted the in-Christ Philippian saints to be incessantly “striving together side-by-side”—as if they were in a military formation (*phalanx*)—“for the faith of the gospel” (1:27).² Paul presents the exigences in Philippians in rhetorically vivid (*ekphrastic*) terms, which elucidate the concrete physical realities of conflicts, persecution, imprisonment, suffering, and potential death/martyrdom, as well as the spiritual nature of this missional warfare.³ A priori assumptions regarding Philippians—pervasively parroted in the commentary tradition—often obfuscate Paul’s rhetorical moves and intent. When Paul and his letters—especially those written to Christ communities in highly diverse, cosmopolitan settings like Philippians—are read monolithically (typically, from either a Greco-Roman or Jewish perspective), an imbalanced presentation (at best) or misunderstanding of the imprisoned apostle and his epistle to the first converts in Europe emerges.

Despite the risk of such imbalance, scholars have typically read Philippians and Paul through a monolithic lens. While it could be argued that any reading or discussion of Philippians is inherently “monolithic,” given that we only have the first-century *verba/vox Pauli* and not the thoughts or responses of his audience or opponents, this misses my main point in this article and the point abundantly made by scholars such as J. M. G. Barclay et al. (see ensuing discussion below): that despite our inability to decipher the minds of Paul and his hearers/readers, research should be performed by scholars apprising themselves of all available data—as far as their capabilities allow—and honestly assessing and allowing the evidence to inform, shape, and transform their understanding of Paul and Philippians. This is not rearing the “essential and extremely problematic” old horse of “mirror-reading” (for a discussion of the issues involved, see Barclay 1987, pp. 73–93), as it were, in trying to read into Philippians’ text connections, theories, and issues that may or may not be present. At its worst, mirror-reading is plagued with pitfalls such as over-reliance upon selective evidence and lexical analyses, as well as the issue of over-interpretation (1987, pp. 79–83). However, in order to better understand the *Sitze im Leben* surrounding Paul, the Philippians, and the opponents against which Paul warns in texts such as Phil 3:2, 18–19, a fulsome grasp of the socio-cultural milieu from which canonical Philippians emerges is necessary. Furthermore, we will not begin to understand the “real import” of Paul’s words in Philippians “until we have critically reconstructed,” as much as possible, the available background data (1987, pp. 73–74). K. J. Vanhoozer and D. J. Treier (2015, p. 114) add, “No single glance [or lens aimed] at . . . Scripture sees all that is there”—which is precisely why a kaleidoscopic lens is needed. Whence the monolithic view?

Since the Protestant Reformation and up to the mid-twentieth century, Pauline scholars primarily viewed Paul through a Greco-Roman lens—that is, from what some have termed the “old,” “traditional,” or “Lutheran” perspective on Paul (see, e.g., the title/subtitle of Westerholm 2004). This Western trajectory began to shift post-Shoah, and especially in 1963, with K. Stendahl’s seminal essay in the *Harvard Theological Review* (Stendahl 1963, pp. 199–215)—which called into question anachronistic, “westernized” readings of Paul and the New Testament (NT). Stendahl’s study—though not necessarily informed or colored by the Shoah itself—built upon W. D. Davies’s pioneering monograph (Davies 1948) and was given much credence in the enormous, encyclopedic presentation of evidence within Hengel’s two-volume work (Hengel 1974), which highlights Hellenism’s impact on Judaism at a much earlier date than previously thought—“at least a century before the Maccabean revolt in 168 B.C.E.” (Feldman 1977, p. 371). E. P. Sanders (1977) et al. furthered Stendahl’s work in a movement that J. D. G. Dunn would later coin the “New Perspective on Paul” (NPP) in 1982—highlighting the Jewishness of Paul and the NT.⁴ More recently, scholars subscribing to the tenets of the Paul within Judaism (PWJ) movement, such as Paula Fredriksen (2017) and Mark Nanos (2017) et al., argue that Paul never abandoned his Jewish roots, never “converted” to Christianity, and remained a Torah-observant Pharisee throughout his life and ministry.⁵ Such a paradigmatic, post-Shoah shift of Pauline interpretation begs the questions: “Should we abandon Greco-Roman readings of Paul?” and “Should we continue to read Philippians and Paul through a singular (Jewish) lens?”

However, what if the supposed Greco-Roman and Jewish debate is a false dichotomy? Numerous scholars such as Joseph Hellerman (2005), Joseph Dodson (Dodson et al. 2017; Dodson and Briones 2017; Dodson and Briones 2019), Richard Cassidy (2020), Ryan Collman (2021), and even others within this special Philippians journal edition continue to fruitfully read Philippians and Paul through a Greco-Roman lens while simultaneously acknowledging Paul's Jewishness. Moreover, Nanos (2017, pp. 111–85) has widened his lens to include potential Greco-Roman, Egyptian, and Assyrian-Babylonian influences in Philippi in his reading of Philippians within Judaism.⁶

While other essays in this volume feature specific, often technical discussions within the text of Philippians itself, my essay will be more general—focusing on methodological and hermeneutical considerations and implications in reading Philippians and Paul. I suggest there is an inherent danger in reading Philippians and Paul monolithically of predetermining our conclusions and superfluously—or worse still, intentionally—ignoring evidence that may suggest otherwise. I argue for an “eclectic and pragmatic,” approach or “lens” through which to read Philippians and Paul that resembles more of a “kaleidoscope” than a “monocle” or pair of “binoculars.” In the remainder of this essay, I will discuss pathways forward in moving beyond this implied “impasse” of the Greco-Roman and Jewish debate, investigate the complex, cosmopolitan nature of ancient Philippi and how a “kaleidoscopic” reading of Philippians and Paul may illuminate hotly debated passages such as the *Carmen Christi* (2:5–11), “the dogs, evil workers, and mutilation” (3:2), and the “enemies of the cross” (3:18–19), as well as inform debates surrounding Philippians' structural integrity. I conclude that a “monocular” (Greco-Roman or Jewish) or even a “binocular” (Greco-Roman and Jewish) approach flattens Paul's complex thought world and *Sitz im Leben* as an in-Christ, church-planting missionary.

2. Beyond the Greco-Roman and Jewish Debate

The battle to “pigeonhole” Paul—firmly “anchoring” him in either Greco-Roman or Jewish soil—was brought to the fore by Troels Engberg-Pedersen et al. at the turn of the millennium in an edited anthology titled *Paul beyond the Jewish/Hellenism Divide* (Engberg-Pedersen 2001). Engberg-Pedersen's collection of essays was birthed from two conferences (*Paul on His Hellenistic Background* [1991]⁷ and *Paul between Judaism and Hellenism* [1997]), which highlighted the problematic language, assumptions, and tendencies within biblical studies to see Paul as *sui generis*—uniquely positioned outside of Judaism and Hellenism—rather than seeing Paul as “a coplayer within a shared [first-century Mediterranean] context” (2001, pp. 1–3). The 1991 conference elucidated the need to make the methodological, ideological, and hermeneutical shift in nomenclature from “background” to “context.” Engberg-Pedersen explains, “Participants perceived that Paul should not be seen against a ‘background’ from which he would stand out in splendid isolation. Such a picture would not do justice to the many and complex ways in which he interacted directly with his cultural contemporaries” (2001, p. 1). In comparative analyses of Paul, “the observer must in principle look with equal attention and interest at each individual item that is brought into the comparison,” according to Engberg-Pedersen (2001, p. 2).

However, Engberg-Pedersen erroneously assumes the possibility of a methodological and hermeneutical *chimera* when he states: “scholars must attempt to shed all unacknowledged, ideological, and historically unfounded presuppositions in addressing Paul in his context” (2001, p. 2). Any attempt to shed “all” presuppositional baggage and biases—irrespective of intentionality—is doomed to fail (cf. Bultmann 1960, pp. 289–96). It would be like trying to separate lint from a dryer, wrinkles from cotton sheets, or dirt from a pig—an impossible task, indeed! Bultmann explains this impossibility: “no exegesis is without presuppositions, inasmuch as the exegete is not a *tabula rasa*, but on the contrary, approaches the text with specific questions or with a specific way of raising questions and thus has a certain idea [a priori] of the subject matter with which the text is concerned” (1960, p. 289), emphasis his). Vanhoozer adds, “interpretation is always biased. The interpreter never stands in the same place as the author” (Vanhoozer 1998, p. 392). However,

Vanhoozer (1998, p. 392) suggests that it is precisely in this different stance that we can become a “friend or foe” of the text depending on our ability or inability to recognize that “faithful interpretation” takes place as a part of a communicative tradition—giving “attention” and “justice” to the text in aiming “to develop” its “full range” and “potential” by examining all available data and not just reading the text through one or two selective lenses. Thus, despite Engberg-Pedersen’s laudable shift to move from “background” to “context,” from “monocle” to a “binocular” view of Paul, and intent to eradicate the false dichotomy between “Hellenism” and “Judaism,”⁸ his project, nonetheless, falls short as it failed to move “beyond” the categories of Hellenism and Judaism—as the subtitle of his 2001 edited anthology suggests—and to consider the other cultures and shared contexts around Paul.

The critique from Engberg-Pedersen (and those before him) against “Greco-Roman” readings of Paul has chiefly led to the hybridization within descriptions of Paul and within scholarly literature—take, for example, titular descriptions of Paul as a “Hellenistic Jew” and the description of Christian origins within “Hellenistic Judaism(s)”⁹—and the recent scholarly elevation of Paul’s Jewishness above other cultural and contextual lenses.¹⁰ This risks an anachronistic, imbalanced perspective (whether to the Greco-Roman or Jewish extreme) that contradicts what Paul himself writes in Gal 3:28: “There remains neither Jew nor Greek; there remains neither slave nor freed person; there remains no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”¹¹ Paul is no *Mischwesen*, as it were—a hybrid Greco-Roman/Jewish creature, whose visage can be twisted *mutatis mutandis* into the image of scholars seeking to share their opinions regarding his letters and story.¹² Rather, Philippians and Paul should be read within their actual shared cosmopolitan historical contexts—a point that Abraham Malherbe and Markus Bockmuehl share.

Abraham Malherbe was involved in the field of comparative studies, and—prior to the volumes and conferences by Engberg-Pedersen on the topic—Malherbe argued that Paul should not be seen merely against his Jewish or Greco-Roman “background” but, rather, as part of a “shared ‘context’”—a Greco-Roman discourse in which he participated as a “Hellenistic Jew” (Malherbe 1989, pp. 67–70). Malherbe’s desire to view Paul from such a “shared ‘context’” is echoed by Markus Bockmuehl, who, in his commentary on Philippians (Bockmuehl [1998] 2013, p. 40), refuses to evaluate and present Paul in a “flattened” manner—from the monolithic lenses of “Greco-Roman Paul,” “Jewish Paul,” “rhetorical Paul,” “apocalyptic Paul,” etc. Rather, Bockmuehl suggests that an “eclectic and pragmatic perspective” is best—taking into consideration the complexity and nuance within ancient Philippi and Paul’s first-century world—which helps prevent the seeming “tunnel vision” of reading Philippians and Paul monolithically ([1998] 2013, p. 40). The concern for reading Paul in a flattened, monolithic manner is also shared by N. T. Wright (2015, p. xii), who laments that monolithic approaches to Paul have produced a myriad of “interpretative cultures,” which have arrived at differing, often antithetical conclusions about Paul and his letters. An eclectically kaleidoscopic, pragmatic, comparative approach to Philippians (specifically) and Pauline studies (generally)—as proposed in this essay—may help avoid the “worlds of difference,” which Wright suggests exists between these different interpretative schools (2015, p. xii). Like the competing interpretational cultures and schools of thought within modern Pauline studies, there was also a collision of competing cultures and ideologies in ancient Philippi.

3. The Cosmopolitan *Colonia* of First-Century Philippi¹³

In this section, I briefly explore the rich diversity and complexity of first-century Philippi from three perspectives: (1) Philippi’s history as a *colonia* within the Roman Empire; (2) the variegated religiosity of the Philippian peoples, given Philippi’s geographical location and reputation as a major trade center; and (3) the socio-/ethno-cultural diversity of its population and colliding worldviews and traditions. I shall argue that as an in-Christ missionary church planter, Paul would have likely familiarized himself—on at least some

level—with the various competing religio-cultural views of the pagan Philippians in order to effectively communicate his gospel in a winsome way.

First, Philippi was twice founded as a Roman *colonia* (Acts 16:12): first by Gaius Octavian (later Augustus Caesar) and Mark Antony in the Battle of Philippi in 42 BCE when they defeated Cassius and Brutus—and, thus, ended the Roman Republic; and second, when Octavian famously defeated Mark Antony and Cleopatra at the battle of Actium in 31 BCE, and Philippi was founded as *Colonia Iulia Augusta Philippensis* (Reumann 2008, p. 3). These battles (especially the Battle of Philippi in 42 BCE) brought much fame to Philippi (Koukouli-Chryssanthaki 1998, p. 8) and, with it, an increased population. Colonies essentially had three functions for the Roman Empire: (1) a fortified military outpost in a conquered country; (2) a means of providing for the poor in Rome due to their somewhat limited local resources; and (3) a means of a retirement settlement for Roman veterans who had served their time in the military (Vincent 1900, p. 1:529). Acts 16:12 reveals that Philippi was a highly prominent city of the region of Macedonia (Φιλίππου, ἥτις ἐστὶν πρώτη[ς] μερίδος τῆς Μακεδονίας πόλις).¹⁴ Philippi became one of the four most important Augustan colonies within the region (Porter 2016, p. 330) and was one of three colonies (including Dyrrachium and Pella) that Octavian established along the major artery of trade and military deployment in the Roman Empire, the famed *Via Egnatia* (Ἐγνατία Ὀδός), which passed through the center of Philippi—a sign of Philippi’s affluence as a mining and trade center (Lolos 2009, p. 269; cf. Strabo, Geogr. 7.34).

Second, given Philippi’s likely affluence, proximity to the *Via Egnatia*, and port at Neapolis on the Aegean Sea, there would have likely been a constant influx of travelers and traders, resulting in the Philippians’ exposure to various competing religions and worldviews, including the mystery religions of Egypt and the cult of Isis-Regina and other pagan pantheons.¹⁵ The interest in mystery cults and magic in Philippi is evidenced in the demon-possessed slave-girl of Acts 16:16, who “was bringing” her masters “much profit” through “fortune-telling” (ἐργασίαν πολλὴν παρεῖχεν τοῖς κυρίοις αὐτῆς μαντευομένη). The religious makeup of Philippi, which Paul would have encountered during the first century, was largely pagan and diverse (Porter 2016, p. 331). Numerous extant inscriptions in Philippi reveal a pervasive presence of Imperial religion and Emperor cults,¹⁶ the worship of the traditional Greco-Roman pantheon (especially Dionysus [Bacchus] and Diana¹⁷), oriental and Egyptian mystery cults, Thracian deities, at least some worshippers of the Jewish God YHWH, and a strong presence of practical henotheism (i.e., the exclusive worship of one god among the possibility of many gods).¹⁸

Third and last, the population of Philippi was rather cosmopolitan, consisting of numerous competing (Thracian, Greek, Roman, Jewish, and Egyptian) cultures, worldviews, and traditions.¹⁹ While not technically a Greek city, Philippi was thought of as a small, primarily Greek settlement due to Macedonia and Greece proper being under the common control of Philipp and his successors.²⁰ However, when Antony and Octavian defeated the murderers of Julius Caesar (Brutus and Cassius) at Philippi, retired Roman soldiers began settling there, and thus, the cultural atmosphere of Philippi took on a more distinctly Roman “flavor” after 42 BCE.²¹ Given its rather diverse background and humble beginnings, the populous of Philippi reflected “Thracian underpinnings, Hellenistic culture, but dominant *Romanitas*” (Reumann 2008, p. 3). The *Romanitas* was perhaps so entrenched in the culture of Philippi (cf. Acts 16:21) that despite Greek being the lingua franca of Philippi and its environs, eighty-five percent of the extant inscriptions discovered in Philippi thought to be contemporaneous with Paul are in Latin (Porter 2016, p. 330).

Despite the seeming Roman pride within Philippi, the majority of its inhabitants were not Roman (contra Gerald Hawthorne²²) but Thracian, Greek, and other nationalities, whereas the outspoken aristocratic minority were “emphatically Roman and Latin speaking” (Bockmuehl [1998] 2013, p. 4). The indigenous population was often displaced when Roman veterans were invited to retire in Philippi. It was mostly the rich locals who were able to keep their lands during this transition toward *Romanitas*, and such displacement would have created at least some angst between Philippi’s aboriginal groups and its Roman

colonizers. This has led some scholars to suggest (so [Witherington 2011](#), pp. 5–6) that what can be said about Philippi is that it had a thin veneer of Roman culture on top of a thick indigenous Hellenism, which continued to reveal itself over time and in various ways. This civic pride in Philippi would wane by the third century CE onward as the majority of the Philippian population progressively returned to Greek customs and culture. Thus, the hybrid term “Greco-Roman” can also obfuscate and flatten the distinctiveness of Philippi’s rich and diverse history, people groups, and religiosity.

Such is the variegated religio-cultural climate in which Paul ministered with love, joy, and tears (3:18) to the Philippians during his second missionary journey and subsequent travels. While Paul is often viewed as a “preacher,” “letter writer,” and “theologian,” he was “first and foremost a pioneer missionary” ([Burke and Rosner 2011](#), p. 1). As an in-Christ church-planting missionary and pastor to his fledgling Christ communities ([Thompson 2011](#), p. 36), Paul would have likely perceived such cultural language and concepts and used them to build bridges for his gospel and for the continued instruction and maturation of the Philippian saints (1:6–11; 2:15; 3:15).

Paul’s gospel and missional concerns in Philippians are underscored by Paul’s pervasive use of lexemes and concepts related to “the gospel, mission, and preaching” ([Ware 2011](#), p. 165). For instance, Paul employs εὐαγγέλιον (“gospel”) more often here (9x), despite Philippians’ brevity (104 verses), than anywhere else within the *Corpus Paulinum* ([Ware 2011](#), pp. 165–66), save Romans (also 9x). Paul’s focus on his gospel mission was so important, Mark [Keown](#) (2008, p. 1) argues, that “essential to Paul’s understanding of evangelistic proclamatory mission, was his desire that the church continue this work in their own towns and regions.” Paul expected “an active participation of the [Philippian] congregation, their involvement in the gospel, [and] their cooperation in the preaching of the gospel” ([Schnabel 2004](#), p. 1460). The saints’ participation in Paul’s gospel mission is clarified at the beginning of Philippians (1:5), where Paul thanks God in his prayers for their “partnership in the gospel from the first day until now” (τῆ κοινωνίᾳ ὑμῶν εἰς τὸ εὐαγγέλιον ἀπὸ τῆς πρώτης ἡμέρας ἄχρι τοῦ νῦν). In Philippians and elsewhere in Paul’s corpus, Paul explains his gospel mission in terms of a cooperative effort at the “behest of God” (1 Cor 3:5–16), which requires cooperative effort amongst Paul’s Christ assemblies ([Schnabel 2022](#), p. 57). Eckhard Schnabel further suggests that unlike the ostentatious displays of later medieval missionaries, who entered pagan cities with Christian crosses, relics, and “supplicatory processions,” Paul “made an effort to adopt traditional and accepted practices of pagan religiosity to make it easier for Gentiles to accept faith in the crucified and risen Jesus Christ” ([Schnabel 2008](#), p. 341; Acts 17:16–34).

This is not to say, as it were, that Paul promoted the syncretistic incorporation of Christ into existing pagan pantheons or that the Philippians should continue the pagan customs, lifestyles, and worship praxes of their ancestors—points which texts like Rom 1:18–32 and Phil 2:15; 3:18–20 forebodingly elucidate. Indeed, for Schnabel, the only steps Paul made to cross the “unbridgeable contrast” between paganism and Christ’s gospel were cognitive and linguistic in shape (2008, p. 341).

As a result of Paul’s strong gospel and missional foci in Philippians, he would have likely been familiar with the influential literary traditions driving the worldviews of the first-century pagan and Jewish cultures as his putative quotations of the Greco-Roman writers illustrate (see, e.g., the use of the sixth-century BCE Cretan philosopher Epimenides [Κρητικὰ] in Titus 1:12; cf. Callimachus, *Hymn. Jov.* 8 and Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 1.14). While some may balk at citing the Pastoral Epistles or Acts (see below) as valid sources informing Paul’s missional praxis, a kaleidoscopic reading examines all available evidence under the rubric of plausibility. In sketching his seven-fold criteria for reading Galatians polemically, [Barclay](#) (1987, pp. 84–86) realizes that his rubric is hedged throughout in the caveats of “‘mays’ and ‘mights,’” which highlight the necessity for scholarly pause, reflection, “cautious handling,” and “all due sensitivity” to the textual and non-textual evidence under consideration. In examining such a wide-ranging set of data, what is needed, according to [Barclay](#) (1987, pp. 85–89), is a range of controlling categories—which

Barclay sets from “Certain or Virtually Certain” at one end of the spectrum to “Incredible” on the other extreme—that evaluates Pauline lenses in terms of plausibility. In this vein, J. Louis Martyn (1985, p. 313; cited in Barclay 1987, p. 85) implores biblical scholars “to employ both ‘scientific control’ and ‘poetic fantasy’”—though, I would replace “poetic fantasy” with “flexibility” in reading NT texts like Philippians. Thus, when reading Paul and Philippians kaleidoscopically, controlling categories should be in place to honestly assess the viability and plausibility of the lenses and evidence we include as well as our resulting hypotheses generated from the data. The controlling categories in a kaleidoscopic reading of Philippians could be simplified to a fourfold rubric ranging from (1) Certain; (2) Probable; (3) Plausible; to (4) Inconceivable. Returning to the citation of Epimenides in Titus 1:12, if Paul were, on at least some level, familiar with Epimenides’s Κρητικά—a point which is not inconceivable—then it logically follows that Paul was probably an exegete of the cultures around him as a church-planting apostle and missionary.

One possible example of Paul’s “exegesis of culture” is found in Acts 17:22–31, in which the Paul of Acts engages the surrounding pagan cultures around the Areopagus (i.e., “the hill of Ares,” the Greek god of war), the intellectual center of Athens, with Christ’s gospel. Here, Paul’s purported missional strategy is threefold: (1) Paul observes the pagan culture around him and their objects of worship (διερχόμενος γὰρ καὶ ἀναθεωρῶν τὰ σεβάσματα); (2) Paul sees, analyzes, and deconstructs the pagan beliefs in an inscription “to the unknown god” (Ἀγνώστῳ θεῷ); and (3) Paul transcends this erroneous “agnostic” theology to show the superiority of Christ and to reorient their pagan understanding to a Christocentric one (17:31). The mixed pagan reaction to Christ’s resurrection (17:32) is a plausible window of illumination into Paul’s missiology and the complexity of the cultures in which Paul served, as well as the opposition which Paul perceived (cf. Phil 3:2, 18–19) and was actively engaged against in his gospel mission (cf. Phil 1:5–7, 12, 16; 4:3 *et passim*). Thus, rather than asking the question of whether or not Acts and the Pastorals are “permissible” as sources informing our reading of Paul and Philippians, we should ask the question, “Is their data *plausible*?” That is, is it *plausible* that Paul was at least somewhat familiar with ancient pagan literature and writers such as Epimenides or Callimachus? Indeed, it is, since Paul, arguably (Strecker and Horn 2000, p. 51; cf. Traill 2001, p. 287, esp. n. 11), cites the popular,²³ fourth-century BCE work of Menander (*Thais*) in 1 Cor 15:33: φθέρουσιν ἤθη χρηστὰ ὁμιλία κακῶν—a passage within Paul’s undisputed, seven-letter corpus. Any astute first-century observer and student of culture, as Paul seemingly was, would have likely been cognizant of popular poets such as Epimenides and Menander much in the same way that contemporary culture is aware of its own leading voices within the musical, literary, and visual arts.

In viewing Paul kaleidoscopically and deciphering the data obtained from Philippians and passages such as Acts 17 describing “Paul’s” apparent *modus operandi* for missional engagement, Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of “answerability” may be helpful here in shedding insight into the nature and rationale behind Paul’s missional praxis. In his brief essay (Bakhtin 1990, p. 1), Bakhtin suggests that there are three spheres of culture in a flourishing society: “science, art, and life.” Human flourishing intersects all three of these spheres, and, for Paul in Philippians, flourishing in the ultimate, eternal sense could only be had “in Christ [Jesus]” (ἐν χριστῷ [Ἰησοῦ]²⁴) as heavenly citizens (1:21, 27; 2:5–11; 3:8, 20). Paul faced “answerability” to God (vertically) and to others (horizontally) for his response to any competing forms of flourishing in the Christ communities he planted—whether such traditions were primarily oral (“liquid” and malleable stories), visual (physical temples, art, and iconography), or textual (literature) in nature.

For Bakhtin, answerability is the ethical vehicle that gives these spheres of culture integration and unity (1990, p. 1). Without answerability, these domains of culture remain “mechanical,” “external,” bifurcated, broken, and “alien” to one another (Bakhtin 1990, pp. 1–2). “Answerability” creates and fosters a dialogical process of engagement in which Paul deconstructs what he experiences in competing forms of flourishing to show the supremacy of Christ in every aspect of life and the human experience. The parts of a culture

(like Philippi's) are "contiguous and touch each other, but in themselves remain alien to each other" apart from answerability (Bakhtin 1990, p. 1). Each must answer with their own lives what they have experienced and understood in these spheres so that these spheres do not remain alien and ineffectual, in hopes that flourishing may ensue in terms of life within the *missio Dei*. In other words, answerability demands an active response: that one does not remain a passive spectator of the world. If the poet, as Bakhtin argues, must remember that it is their "poetry which bears the guilt for the vulgar prose of life" and the common man's "willingness to be unexact and to the unseriousness of the concerns in his life" bears the blame for the "fruitlessness of art," then how much more is Paul answerable to God for his response (or lack thereof) to competing forms of flourishing in the communities which he engages (1990, p. 2)?

Paul's religious zeal was once placed primarily in Torah-keeping (Gal 1:13–14, 23; Phil 3:5–6) and removing anything or anyone serving as a stumbling block to that end—including assemblies/proponents of the nascent Jesus movement. However, in Philippians, Paul's post-Damascus zeal is aimed against all competing influences (Phil 3:2–14, 18–19)—be they Thracian, Greek, Assyrian-Babylonian, Egyptian, Roman, Jewish, or a syncretistic combination of any/all—prohibiting Christ-worship and the spread of his gospel. In consideration of Paul's missional approach in Acts 17:22–31, had Paul failed in his answerability to God for the pagan inscriptions "to the unknown god" and, in Paul's mind, the erroneous modes of worship he encountered, then some would not have invited him back to hear more about Paul's gospel and to believe it (17:33–34). As a result, the Pauline Christ assemblies became "new communities" called ἐκκλησίαι, a term with primarily political (not religious) roots/connotations (Koester 2007, p. 12; cf. Phil 3:6; 4:15). Paul did not envisage this new, in-Christ community in Philippians to become a "new religion" per se but a "functioning [utopian] social and political entity in its own right, distinct from such organizations as the Roman society and its [self-serving] imperial hierarchy" (Koester 2007, p. 12). Paul reminds the Philippian saints that their "citizenship exists in [the] heavens" (τὸ πολίτευμα ἐν οὐρανοῖς ὑπάρχει; Phil 3:20), and their in-Christ, "superordinate identity" trumps their former personas as mere citizens, commoners, foreigners, or slaves within the Roman Empire.²⁵ These in-Christ saints are to be a people who bend their knees not to "Lord Caesar" (κύριος καίσαρ²⁶ but to the "Lord Jesus Christ" (κύριος Ἰησοῦς χριστός; 2:10–11).²⁷

There is also the question of whether Paul in Philippians continued to think of his mission as being valid within Judaism—albeit a Judaism that was long hybridized by Greco-Roman and Egyptian influences. What Paul denounces in his intra-Jewish, rhetorical *reductio ad absurdum* argument is not Judaism per se (3:3–14)—indeed, Paul's "gospel arises from within Judaism, and the Christ community is itself a form of Judaism (Zoccali 2017, p. 63, emphasis his)—but a fleshly confidence in an erroneous self-made "righteousness" that is not Christocentric or spiritual in nature. In other words, as Zoccali has argued, Paul appears here to be denouncing "the prospect of gentiles in Christ taking on normative [ethnic] Jewish identity" (2017, p. 64; cf. Gal 1:13). In contrast, Paul seemingly echoes what he has previously said in passages such as Rom 2:28–29 (cf. Deut 30:6; Jer 4:4; 31:33), which reimagine "circumcision" from being merely an outward, fleshly human symbol of ethnicity and religiosity to an inward, spiritual reality and divine transformation of identity and being (ἡμεῖς γὰρ ἔσμεν ἡ περιτομή; Phil 3:3). Thus, the ambiguities surrounding gender and membership within YHWH's covenant community are removed (and not just *male* foreskins!): "the Christ community is the covenant people of God" (Zoccali 2017, p. 23, emphasis his). YHWH himself circumcises the hearts of his children, who love him supremely (Deut 30:6). In this sense, Paul invites his Jewish friends to follow his own example and the examples of others (Phil 3:17) in becoming "the circumcision" (ἡ περιτομή)—living lives worthily of the gospel of Christ and aspiring toward the resurrection from the dead and heavenly citizenship (1:27, 3:20). Moreover, Paul's missionary activity to Jewish and gentile communities was not delimited merely to himself or to a select few "elite" missionary companions but, rather, is traceably visible throughout the extant evidence to have been a

shared, collaborative missional effort amongst the Christ communities Paul founded (Ware 2011, p. 8; cf. Rom 15:19).

While Adolf von Harnack's opening lines "*Das Christentum auf der Balkanhalbinsel (Illyrische Diözese) ist uns für die ersten Jahrhunderte schlecht bekannt*" from his magisterial study *Die Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten* betray his skepticism toward the ability to witness the organized, missional effort in ancient Philippi and its environs during Christianity's first three centuries (1924, p. 786; cf. Ogereau 2023, p. 1), the data reveal that von Harnack's century-old assessment is patently false. Macedonian Christianity had not spread in some haphazard, "heterogeneous, if not ad hoc, fashion" (Ogereau 2023, p. 1; cf. von Harnack 1924, p. 787), as nearly "five hundred Christian inscriptions have come to light" since von Harnack's study, which paint a much different picture (Ogereau 2023, p. 3). Julien Ogereau explains, "we can reasonably assume that the apostle Paul and his companions sowed the first seeds of the Christian faith in the late AD 40s or the early AD 50s, even though we lack reliable sources that describe the process in detail and allow us to appreciate fully the impact of their ministry at Philippi, Thessalonica, and Beroea. . . . His subsequent letters to the churches he founded at Philippi and Thessalonica, and his allusions to Macedonian believers in his letters to the Romans and Corinthians, nonetheless attest that his initial efforts had not been in vain, and that these small clusters of believers had progressively grown in size and importance despite inner conflicts and fierce local opposition" (2023, p. 328). Paul's gospel and missionary ambit did not statically remain in the cities (such as Philippi) he visited and where they initially took root but rapidly spread along the *Via Egnatia* throughout Macedonia and beyond via the conduit of the churches he planted (2023, p. 329). To account for the gospel's rapid progress throughout Europe, lines of communication, relatability, and familiarity with the surrounding cultures would have been formed by Paul and the earliest Christ-followers. Hence, a kaleidoscopic reading of Philippians and Paul helps to account for this cultural and missional complexity.

4. Toward a "Kaleidoscopic" Reading of Philippians and Paul

Given the diverse religio-cultural milieu of first-century Philippi and the numerous problems associated with monolithic readings of Philippians and Paul as outlined above, it would seem that scholars would readily adopt a kaleidoscopic approach. However, there are three main problems thwarting attempts to read Paul "kaleidoscopically": (1) the problem of misunderstanding Samuel Sandmel's (1962, pp. 1–13) concept of "parallelomania" and the subsequent downplaying of comparative analysis; (2) the problem of scholarly "guilds" and "gatekeepers" within Pauline/biblical studies establishing and perpetuating what they feel is the one "right" reading of Philippians and Paul (Rowe 2016, p. 183), and their establishing exclusive lists of texts and traditions that are and are not (e.g., Acts and the Pastorals) permissible in performing "acceptable" historical-critical Pauline research; and, lastly, (3) the problem of the hard work involved in learning new information and skill sets beyond our current specializations. This is why multidisciplinary endeavors are so potentially fruitful and helpful. Biblical studies should not be a "solo enterprise" but a collaborative chorus of diverse, blended, and harmonious voices in which each voice matters and contributes to this "scholarly symphony."²⁸

First, Sandmel's observations of what he coined "parallelomania," resulted from the shallow, superficial comparative analyses performed by scholars within the so-called "*Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*" and were perpetuated well into the twentieth century. These comparative studies tended to focus merely on similarities between the pagan sources and biblical texts with little to no regard for the differences between the two. The a priori assumptions driving the conclusions of these comparisons were that the biblical writers were using the pagan material as genealogical sources in their scriptural writings, which post-dated the borrowed pagan literature. Sandmel's concerns were threefold: (1) the extravagant exaggeration/overstatement of alleged literary parallels, similarities, and allusions between biblical and non-biblical sources; (2) the description of literary

connection in terms of “source and derivation;” and (3) the “predetermined direction” of literary dependence flowing from the pagan source to the biblical literature (and not vice versa) (1962, p. 1). In this sense, Sandmel’s description of “parallelomania” is equally as applicable to exaggerations of Paul’s alleged parallels and allusions to Scripture as it is to overstated claims of pagan literary influence. Yet, some focus only on this latter assumption and reduce Sandmel’s concerns to being leveled only against the direct literary dependence of biblical texts upon pagan documents as genealogical sources—as if Paul had pagan papyri in one hand while copying their contents in his letters with the other.²⁹ Such confusion of Sandmel’s concerns has, perhaps, stymied much of the fruitful comparative work in biblical studies that Sandmel sought to encourage in his famous essay (1962, p. 1).

Second, C. Kavin Rowe probes the problems of scholarly “guilds” and “gatekeeping” in biblical studies when he writes, “[I]n the same way that an apprentice learns from a teacher how to acquire the skills needed to practice a craft well, a participant in a tradition requires a teacher of the craft of inquiry. . . . [N]ot only does a teacher ‘help actualize’ such potential in a particular direction we would not necessarily find ourselves, a teacher is also the concrete authority on what we need to learn” (2016, p. 183; cf. MacIntyre 1990, pp. 64–65). Such “traditionalists” become a part of a “guild” requiring the mentorship of qualified “teachers” and docents informing their students of the acceptable and non-acceptable standards of practice as members of said guild. Thus, in terms of Philippians and Pauline studies, the teachers, leaders, and respected voices of these traditions of inquiry (or “guilds”) effectively become the “gatekeepers” controlling who is “in” and who is “out,” as well as the parameters of what is considered “acceptable” and “unacceptable” when reading and writing about Philippians and Paul. The effects of scholarly “guilds” and “gatekeeping” can be seen in the monolithic readings of Paul and his letters within study groups and program units in various professional academic societies.

Third, a kaleidoscopic approach forces scholars to move beyond what is “comfortable” into the difficult realm of learning new skills and languages and the value of scholarly networking and collaboration. There is an encouraging rise in academic groups, Ph.D. programs, and publications that showcase the fruit of multidisciplinary approaches within biblical studies.³⁰ While there has traditionally been an inherent tendency in doctoral programs toward laser-like precision and (often myopic) specialization that breeds “staying within your scholarly lane,” Pauline and other biblical studies scholars should learn to “play well with others” who have expertise outside of our respective niche fields, as we can accomplish more together than we could ever do on our own.

Is reading Philippians and Paul kaleidoscopically worth the effort? Indeed, it is. While I will not cite (as do so many) Phil 4:13 in a manner shorn from its context to support my proposal, perhaps the inspirational words attributed to Paul in exhorting his “son in the faith,” Timothy, are apropos: “Make every effort to present yourself approved by God—[as an] unashamed worker—interpreting correctly the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15). Below, I succinctly highlight three debated passages in Philippians in an attempt to show how a kaleidoscopic reading can offer windows of illumination for their interpretation: the *Carmen Christi* (2:5–11); “the dogs, evil workers, and mutilation” (3:2); and the “enemies of the cross” (3:18–19). I will also explain how a kaleidoscopic approach informs the debates surrounding Philippians’ structural integrity.

4.1. Philippians 2:5–11

The *Carmen Christi*, or “Christ Hymn” as it is commonly known, is the most discussed portion of Philippians within and without academic circles, with debates often centering on matters of authorship, Christology, eschatology, and anti-Imperial readings of Philippians. It is these latter two points (eschatology and anti-Imperial nomenclature) that are of interest here. In 2:9–11, Paul writes of Christ’s exaltation and lordship, “God, therefore, also exalted him [Christ] to the loftiest height and gave to him the name above every name, in order that at the name of ‘Jesus’ every knee should bend—of those in the heavens and of those upon earth and of those under the earth and every tongue should confess that, ‘Jesus

Christ [is] Lord [ὅτι κύριος Ἰησοῦς χριστός]! unto [the] glory of God the Father.” While anti-Imperialist readings of Philippians keenly observe the descriptor κύριος (“Lord”) in relation to Jesus (2:11)—thus emphasizing Paul’s supposed κύριος Χριστός vis-à-vis κύριος Καίσαρ contrast³¹—many fail to notice the previous clause πᾶν γόνυ κάμψη ἐπουρανίων καὶ ἐπιγείων καὶ καταχθονίων in 2:10: “every knee should bend—of those in the heavens and of those upon earth and of those under the earth.” This is a loose citation of the apocalyptic Greek text of LXX-Isa 45:23, and the parenthetical phrase describing the cosmic sphere and totality of Christ’s supremely powerful lordship and reign—ἐπουρανίων καὶ ἐπιγείων καὶ καταχθονίων—is absent from Isaiah’s text but has been curiously added to Phil 2:10.

The phrase’s last lexeme (καταχθονίων) is interesting, as it is a scriptural *hapax legomenon* and would have possibly invoked connotations of the monstrous and divine to pagans and former pagans in Philippi since καταχθόνιος (*katachthonios*) comprises in a generalized, cosmological, and theological sense the subterranean monsters, gods/goddesses (Chthonic/χθόνιοι θεοί: Euripides, *Hec.* 75–79), and netherworld realm within the pagan pantheons and appears in the pagan literature (and implicitly in art) as early as the Homeric epics (ca. eighth century BCE).³² The native Thracian populace of Philippi worshipped Chthonic deities as reflected in the enigmatic mystery cult of the Κάβειροι and the cult of Dionysus (Zagreus), whose worship is attested in Philippi.³³ Moreover, the “Great” Thracian goddess, Bendis,³⁴ had Chthonic associations as a versatile, multifaceted lunar deity identified with Persephone and Hekate (West 1995, pp. 21–25). The worship of the Chthonic goddess Hekate is also evinced in ancient Philippi (Guthrie 2023, p. 9; Fowler 2013, p. 33). Additionally, Philippians’ citation of LXX-Isa 45:23, “one of the most anti-pagan gods texts in all of Scripture” (Long and Giffin 2018, p. 276), in its wider context invokes YHWH’s supremacy over all pagan deities. In Isa 46:1–2, the gods Bel and Nebo (a Babylonian Chthonic deity) “‘kneel down’ and ‘bend the knee’ . . . before Yahweh’s ability to save his people; the gods have themselves been defeated and taken captive” in a type of cosmic “military victory” by God (Long and Giffin 2018, p. 277, esp. n. 116 and p. 23). Fletcher-Louis (2023, p. 10 n. 18) adds, regarding Christ’s victory over the Chthonic gods, “It is fitting that Isa 45:23 should be filled out in Phil 2:10 with a specification that those who humbly bow the knee are the heavenly, earthly, and chthonic gods.” The ancient Egyptians conceived of a flourishing afterlife as gaining entry into the glorious Chthonic kingdom of Isis and Osiris, who were also worshipped in ancient Philippi (Jennings 2017, pp. 88–89 n. 63). Revelation 5:3 echoes the cosmic victory of Christ in Phil 2:10–11 as “the heavenly, earthly, and subterranean gods” were deemed unworthy and unable to open the scroll as only the slain, leonine Lamb, Christ, was able (5:6; Long and Giffin 2018, p. 277). Christ is later enthroned (5:7–14; 7:17) and praised by the cosmos (5:13).

Hence, a kaleidoscopic reading of the *Carmen Christi* reveals not merely an “anti-Imperial” stance to Phil 2:5–11 but Paul’s desire to showcase Christ as the omnipotent, cosmic Lord over all other gods, goddesses, divine and semi-divine beings, creatures, and monstrous *Mischwesen* in every conceivable cosmological realm and sphere of existence—including the deities and *daimonia* of the skies, the earth, and the underworld (Long and Giffin 2018, pp. 276–77). In this sense, the *Carmen Christi* seemingly anticipates the later (ca. 160 CE) hopeless dilemma imagined by Apuleius, the pagan Platonist, who writes,

“What then . . . am I to do . . . if humans are wholly driven far away from the immortal gods and banished, accordingly—relegated to this underworld of earth—where each one should be refused communion before the heavenly gods, and not any out of the heavenly host [acts] as a shepherd, groom, or cowherd [who] would secretly look after this bleating, neighing, and bellowing flock; who would allow the violent to be calmed, might heal the sick, or should help the poor? No god, you say, intervenes in human events. To whom then will I address [my] prayers? To whom shall I offer a vow? . . . Whom shall I call on to help the downcast, champion the good; whom will I go to as an opponent of the wicked in all of life? And lastly, whom, to which one will I turn to witness an oath, the most frequent need of all?”³⁵

Paul's answer in Phil 2:5–11:³⁶ we should bend the knee and confess Jesus Christ is the supreme, matchless Lord (2:9–11). It is Christ who left his heavenly comforts to visit and rescue humanity in its suffering and despair as its supreme Slave (2:6–7)—intervening in human history in the most beneficial way imaginable via his substitutionary self-sacrifice on a Roman cross (2:8). Consequently, Christ communes with the saints as they are “in Christ,” and eternally indwelt by his Spirit. Christ beckons humanity to follow his divine mindset³⁷ and selfless example in service to one another for the present betterment and eternal flourishing of humanity and the cosmos (2:5).

Regarding the rubric of plausibility that we established above (see Section 3), let us ask the following four questions of “Paul’s Master Story” Phil 2:5–11 (Gorman 2001, p. 88): (1) *What is certain?* Philippians 2:5–11 highlights the humiliation (ἐταπείνωσεν; 2:8), crucifixion (θανάτου δὲ σταυρου; 2:8), divine “superexaltation” (ὁ θεὸς αὐτὸν ὑπερύψωσεν; 2:9), and victorious supremacy of Christ over all created beings (κύριος Ἰησοῦς χριστός; 2:11). More specifically, 2:10–11 proffers a “loose citation” of LXX-Isa 45:23 that highlights the spatial/cosmological totality of Christ’s dominion (ἐπουρανίων καὶ ἐπιγείων καὶ καταχθονίων; 2:10).

(2) *What is probable?* It is probable that Paul had both the Imperial Cult and pagan pantheons in view with the additions to LXX-Isa 45:23 that he included in Phil 2:10–11.

(3) *What is plausible?* It is plausible, given the evidence and wider context of LXX-Isaiah 45–46, Revelation 5, and ancient Philippi’s pagan religiosity, to see Phil 2:10–11 as an ode to Christ’s cosmic “military” victory over all pagan pantheons, including the Chthonic deities.

(4) *What is inconceivable?* Given the data, it is inconceivable that the *Carmen Christi* is merely reflecting Paul’s anti-Imperial stance. See Long and Giffin’s discussion (2018, p. 241; cf. Fletcher-Louis 2023, p. 413ff) and conclusion: “the [Christ] hymn subverts ‘imperial paganism’ that encouraged the worship of the gods to maintain the *pax deorum*.” Interpreters should consider a kaleidoscopic reading of 2:5–11 in considering the ways in which Paul might contextualize a “Jewish Jesus” to a largely pagan audience “in quite diverse settings” (Long and Giffin 2018, p. 279).

4.2. Philippians 3:2

Philippians 3:2 is another hotly debated passage, with scholars voicing wide-ranging opinions regarding the identities of Paul’s/Christ’s opponents. Given the previous discussion of kaleidoscopic readings of 3:2 by PWJ proponents above and the similar discussion of Phil 3:18–19 below, comments here will be brief, and the rubric of plausibility will combine the discussion of both passages. Paul writes, “Beware the dogs! Beware the evil workers! Beware the mutilation!” The commentary tradition has largely identified these opponents as being Jewish or Judaizers.³⁸ However, this assumption of Jewish/Judaizing opponents in 3:2 has been recently called into question. Scholars such as Kathy Ehrensperger (2017) and Nanos (2017, pp. 111–85) have suggested that pagan opponents make more sense of the extant evidence than do Jewish/Judaizing ones. Indeed, a kaleidoscopic reading of the data yields a wide swath of potential Greco-Roman, Egyptian, and Assyrian-Babylonian pagan cult candidates regarding the opponents in 3:2.³⁹ So much so that the a priori assumption of Jewish or Judaizing opponents by Pauline scholars commenting on 3:2 can no longer be “dogmatically” assumed. What of the opponents in 3:18–19?

4.3. Philippians 3:18–19

The identity of those whom Paul describes as “enemies of Christ’s cross” (3:18–19) is also a highly discussed issue in Philippians scholarship. Paul laments, “For many are walking as enemies of the cross of Christ, which I was telling you all many times, but now I also tell [you] crying, whose end [is] destruction; whose god [is] the belly [κοιλία]; and glory in their shame; those setting their minds [on] earthly things.” While Holloway (2017, p. 179) sees the opponents here as Judaizers—“Torah-observant Christ-believers” focusing on “the ‘flesh’ rather than ‘Christ,’” and Osiek (2000, pp. 102–3) argues for their identity being “the circumcision party” previously mentioned in 3:2, Cassidy (2020, pp. 121–26)

sees this indictment as a “hidden transcript” against “Nero and his confederates at Rome,” who worship, “their god, their sexual organ”—as κοιλία can also connote sexual organs euphemistically in the LXX (see, e.g., 2 Sam 7:12; 16:11; Ps 131:11; Sir 23:6). [Hellerman \(2005, pp. 218–21\)](#) echoes Cassidy’s view for gentile opponents in 3:18–19 and suggests these “enemies of the cross of Christ” represent “a libertine party,” who “gratify the lusts of the flesh”—whether gluttony, sexual desire, or a mixture of both. Paul has previously rebuked those who are slaves to such appetites (Rom 16:18). Seneca (*Ben.* 7.26) likewise refers to those he considers to be “slaves of their bellies” ([Hellerman 2015, p. 218](#)). Euripides (*Cycl.* 335), one of the most influential tragedians of the ancient world whose works—along with Menander’s—were highly regarded as foundational to “civic *paideia*” ([Connolly 2001, p. 364](#)), also describes those whom he considers belly-worshippers, when he refers to Cyclops as saying, “I offer sacrifice . . . to this belly [γαστήρ] of mine, the greatest of deities” ([Reumann 2008, p. 571](#), translation his). However, [Bockmuehl \(\[1998\] 2013, pp. 231–32\)](#)—in his eclectic and rhetorical reading of Philippians—laments the “wide range of contradictory interpretations” regarding the opponent identification of Paul’s enemies in Philippians 3. Thus, the recognition of the impossibility of making a clear identification might be a valid scholarly outcome—however lamentable.

Given the seeming impasse regarding opponent identification in 3:2, 18–19, a more fruitful approach appears to be in Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Animal Studies, which highlight Paul’s use of dehumanizing insider/outsider boundary marker language and concepts in Philippians.⁴⁰ A kaleidoscopic reading of Philippians allows the flexibility of cross-disciplinary approaches—such as those of the social and animal sciences—in order to gain a more fulsome understanding of the data. When all we have is Paul’s account and the scholarly (human) desire to know “more”—that is, to “know” the identity(ies) of the opponents to whom Paul refers—the inherent problems of “mirror-reading” in overstating hypothetical assumptions abound. All that can currently be done—until more and better evidence arises—is to recognize the variety of possible opponents and proceed with much scholarly pause, reflection, and caution. Here, Paul’s point seems not to be the identification of these opponents but their threat and potential danger to the Philippian saints.

Let us now turn to the fourfold rubric of plausibility in considering 3:2, 18–19: (1) *What is certain?* We can speak with certitude regarding the complexity of the issues involved, which have resulted in a plethora of often antithetical hypotheses regarding the identity of Paul’s/Christ’s opponents. We can certainly echo the conclusion of [Nanos \(2017, pp. 111–14\)](#) et al., who have convincingly shown that the assumption of Jewish/Judaizing opponents within the commentary tradition is largely overstated and often parroted without having performed adequate research.

(2) *What is probable?* It is probable that unless more compelling evidence is discovered and set forth, there will not be a definitive answer that “proves” beyond doubt the identity of these opponents. Thus, scholars should, in the meantime, not speak “dogmatically” regarding their identity.

(3) *What is plausible?* It is plausible that Paul is here denouncing gentile opponents, who, in Paul’s purview, pose an urgent, dangerous threat given his dehumanizing and *ekphrastic* repeated warning (βλέπετε τοὺς κύνας, βλέπετε τοὺς κακοὺς ἐργάτας, βλέπετε τὴν κατατομήν). While these opponents may have been associated at some level with the inside group,⁴¹ it is plausible that such proximity was not ideological but geographical, religio-political, and/or familial in nature. That is, Paul’s audience in Philippians comprised former pagans, who once stood as enemies of Christ—as did Paul (3:6)—and the pressures of persecution by pagan authorities and kin for those saints failing to bend the knee to Caesar or the patron deities of the Philippian guilds could lead to syncretism or (worse still) apostasy within Philippi’s Christ communities.

(4) *What is inconceivable?* Given the evidence, it is inconceivable that Paul is here encouraging a supersessionist reading that—beyond all possible doubts—refers to Jewish/Judaizing opponents. Similarly, one cannot speak with certitude regarding gentile opponents. A kaleidoscopic reading of the evidence shows the possibility of both groups

(even opponents from the Egyptian cults within first-century Philippi) and highlights the value of SIT and Animal Studies as possible ways forward in understanding Paul's rhetoric in Philippians 3 *et passim*.

4.4. The Literary Integrity of Philippians

Lastly, scholars remain divided regarding the literary integrity of Philippians, yet a kaleidoscopic reading of Philippians informs this discussion on both sides of the debate. Scholars arguing for the literary integrity of Philippians typically appeal to the unity of the epistle via epistolary approaches—hence, Paul Holloway's (2001, p. 1; 2017, pp. 1–10, 31–35) “letter of consolation” thesis—or by noting Paul's sophisticated rhetorical moves throughout (see, e.g., Watson 1988, pp. 57–88; Black 1995, pp. 16–49; Osiek 2000, pp. 18–19), and, especially, in explaining the sudden shifts at 3:2 and 4:10–20 (Paul's so-called *danklose Dank* or “thankless thanks”). Such an appeal assumes at least Paul's familiarity with and, possibly, genius in what Aristotle (*Rhet.* 1354a1–3), Dionysius of Halicarnassus (*Rhet.* 1.1.255–57), and others (*Rhet. Her.* 4.10) called “the art of rhetoric.” Moreover, a kaleidoscopic reading of Philippians pushes readers beyond Paul's supposed knowledge and familiarity with Greco-Roman rhetoric in contemplating how non-elites, Jews, and other foreigners within Philippi would have understood Paul's complex literary artistry in Philippians or whether Paul was writing strictly to the in-Christ insiders within Philippi with no concern for outside groups hearing, reading, or understanding his letter(s).

Scholars arguing for a multiplicity of letters stitched together by a later redactor can also benefit from a kaleidoscopic approach in noting the external evidence of a double-listing of Philippians in the *Catalogus Sinaiticus*, the medieval Byzantine historian Georgius Syncellus's reference to a “first epistle to the Philippians,” Polycarp's mention of Paul having written multiple letters to the Philippians (ἔγραψε ἐπιστολάς) in *Pol. Phil.* 3.2, and, as Philip Sellew (1994, pp. 17–28) argues, that the pseudepigraphal *Epistle to the Laodiceans*—drawing upon Philippians in its contents and literary structure—omits Phil 3:2–4:3, 7–20, which are key points for the partition theory of Philippians (Holloway 2017, pp. 11–12). Internal evidence for the partition hypothesis also benefits from the study of Greco-Roman letter forms and editorial tendencies by later letter collectors/redactors—arguing that the Pauline itinerary (Phil 2:19–30) typically marks the end of a letter (Holloway 2017, pp. 13–14). Indeed, much exegetical and historical “sweat” is generated in performing the hard work of a kaleidoscopic reading of Philippians and Paul—investigating Philippians through the lenses of Greco-Roman rhetoric, epistolary genre, forms, and editing/redaction, textual criticism, and reception history—but such efforts can also bear much fruit.

What can be deduced from the plausibility rubric? (1) *What is certain?* We can speak with certainty that there is valid evidence on both sides of the debate that problematizes the discussion. Scholars can certainly agree that, according to Polycarp above, Paul wrote other “epistles” that may or may not have been lost over the centuries and included in the NT canon.

(2) *What is probable?* As with 3:2, 18–19, it is probable that further research and evidence should be gathered before speaking definitively on this issue. However, current trends in scholarship (rhetorical readings of Philippians, especially) seem to favor the case for literary unity. However, it may be the case that sufficient evidence to “prove” either debate regarding the literary integrity of Philippians never becomes available, and that remains, as it does currently, a satisfactory scholarly outcome.

(3) *What is plausible?* It is plausible that Paul had at least some civic *paideia* as a Roman citizen from Tarsus—perhaps more so than has typically been “allowable” by scholars⁴²—in Greco-Roman writing and rhetoric. Canonical Philippians betrays at least some knowledge on Paul's behalf of rhetorical complexity and sophistication.

(4) *What is inconceivable?* Given the evidence, it is inconceivable to forcefully assert that Philippians consists of multiple, fragmented letters, as do some scholars within the commentary tradition.⁴³ Likewise, it is inconceivable for scholars accepting the literary

integrity of Philippians to offer a mere “cavalier dismissal” to the arguments surrounding the partition theory of Philippians without giving an adequate defense of their position.

5. Conclusions

The fruit of reading Philippians and Paul kaleidoscopically can be seen in the variety of proposed essays contributing to this present volume: readings of Paul through the lenses of “self-praise” (*periautology*), priestly cultic imagery, rhetoric, “ethical kerygma,” citizenship, philosophy, and so on. Each of these approaches offers a distinct yet harmonious voice in the discussion of Philippians and Pauline scholarship.

Like Paul’s seemingly incessant battles with his/Christ’s opponents in ancient Philippi and beyond, a “war” has also been waging within Pauline studies regarding the myth of “one, right way” to read Philippians and Paul. I have attempted above to show the deficiencies in reading Paul “monolithically”—through a singular, primary lens (typically, either Greco-Roman or Jewish)—and even “binocularly” from a combined Greco-Roman and Jewish perspective. Within “binocular” approaches to Philippians and Paul, a “bifocal” view often emerges with a dominant (Greco-Roman or Jewish) lens being “near” and in sharper focus, while the other, secondary lens remains “far” and more blurred in the background.

In Peter Oakes’s essay, “The Use of Social Models in Biblical Studies,” he writes of the dangers of monolithic presentations of selective historiography: “[There are] a range of issues that are left invisible if we unreflectively treat the audience as an undifferentiated mass” (2020, p. 208). Despite the massive number of scholarly publications on Paul and his letters—most of which cast a monocular or binocular vision of the apostle and his works—such a kaleidoscopic reading of Philippians (and other Pauline texts) as has been proposed in this essay “can shed still more light” on Philippians and the *Corpus Paulinum* (Oakes 2020, p. 208).

To sum up, a kaleidoscopic reading of Paul and Philippians requires the humble admission that our presumptions on Philippians, Paul, and a host of other topics may be wrong and need correcting. In some cases, this requires a willingness to hold loosely our scholarly convictions and be willing to abandon erroneous assumptions that need to be rejected. Many of the most profound truths are discovered in the unlikeliest of places—beyond our scholarly “comfort zones.” Moreover, a kaleidoscopic reading of Philippians and Paul requires the realization of the impossibility of uncovering every “stone,” as new research is constantly being published, and we are finite beings. Our finitude necessitates scholarly participation and collaboration across a variety of fields and disciplines—leveraging time, resources, and knowledge across a wide swath of other researchers/truth-seekers/voices within this scholarly “symphony.”

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Notes

¹ (Koester 1998, pp. 54–55) notes that Epaphroditus was likely a Philippian citizen playing a key role in Philippi’s Christ assemblies and in Paul’s mission in Macedonia and Europe.

² Representative of scholars highlighting Paul’s military topos in Philippians is (Krentz 1993, pp. 105–27).

³ “*Ekphrasis*” denotes a vivid, rhetorical effect—giving the audience the visceral impression of experiencing what the author describes—e.g., τὴν κατατομήν in Phil 3:2. Theon’s *Progymnasmata* contains the earliest extant usage of *ekphrasis*/ἐκφρασις—defined as: “descriptive language, bringing what is portrayed clearly before the sight.” Aelius Theon, *Progymnasmata* 7.118/Spengel 11.118. Greek text derives from (Heinsius 1626). Cf. (Webb 2009, p. 39).

- 4 Dunn coined the phrase “the new perspective on Paul” in his 1982 Manson Memorial Lecture of the same name at the University of Manchester.
- 5 See, e.g., (Fredriksen 2017, p. xii), who states, “Paul lived his life entirely within his native Judaism. Later traditions, basing themselves on his letters will displace him from this [Jewish] context. Through the retrospect of history, Paul will be transformed into a ‘convert,’ an ex- or even an anti-Jew; indeed, into the founder of gentile Christianity.”
- 6 In his assessment regarding the possible identities of Paul’s enemies in Phil 3:2, (Nanos 2017, pp. 125–32) lists the Greco-Roman cults of “Silvanus, Diana, Cerberus, Hekate, and Cybele” as options along with the Egyptian cult of Anubis and the Assyrian-Babylonian Sun-god cult of Merodach (Marduk) rather than the traditional view of Jewish/Judaizing opponents, which has pervaded the commentary tradition. See also the discussion of the issues surrounding the identification of Paul’s opponents in Phil 3:2 in (Lamb 2024, 2025).
- 7 This conference was held in Copenhagen, Denmark, in June 1991 and featured a veritable “who’s who” of American and European Pauline scholarship in 1991. The participants and resulting monograph (Engberg-Pedersen 1994) highlighted the necessary shift away from nomenclature—especially that which focused on Paul’s Hellenistic “background”—that exacerbated the dichotomy between Hellenism and Judaism in Pauline studies.
- 8 Regarding the false dichotomy between Hellenism and Judaism, Engberg-Pedersen (2001, p. 4, emphasis original) writes, “Only by going self-consciously beyond the Judaism/Hellenism divide and giving up relying on it in any form will scholars be able to see Paul in the broad cultural context to which he belonged and to use that insight fruitfully for the comparative elucidation of his own ideas and practices. . . . The problem is that the standpoint from which comparisons are made is often frightfully skewed, as if *either* the Jewish *or* the Hellenistic material is in the end the really important one.”
- 9 Representative of this hybridization is the 2013 edited anthology *Christian Origins and Hellenistic Judaism*, which features an essay by Emma Wassermann whose title puns Engberg-Pedersen’s 2001 work (Wassermann 2013). In her essay, “Paul beyond the Judaism/Hellenism Divide? The Case of Pauline Anthropology in Romans 7 and 2 Corinthians 4–5,” Wassermann investigates Paul’s complex thought world—especially his anthropology—and concludes that Paul is “a producer of a highly creative synthesis of multiple traditions” (Wassermann 2013, p. 278).
- 10 The series by Wipf & Stock/Cascade “Reading . . . within Judaism” and “Reading . . . after Supersessionism” are exemplary of studies highlighting Paul’s Jewishness. See, e.g., Christopher Zoccali’s *Reading Philippians after Supersessionism* (Zoccali 2017) and the aforementioned title by Nanos, which reads Philippians “within Judaism” (Nanos 2017). The “Paul within Judaism” program unit at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature also betrays the popularity of reading Paul and his epistles within Judaism. The NPP and PWJ movements rightly and helpfully correct anti-Semitic tendencies within biblical studies and the commentary tradition and highlight the Jewishness of Jesus, Paul, and the NT documents. However, it seems that in some of these NPP and PWJ readings, the pendulum has swung, perhaps, a bit too far in the opposite direction: to view these first-century characters and documents through an exclusively Jewish lens while ignoring other important socio-cultural influences.
- 11 Translation mine. Unless otherwise noted, English translations of the primary biblical and extrabiblical texts are my own original translations. NT translations derive from the Greek text of the twenty-eighth edition of the *Nestle-Aland Novum Testamentum Graece* (NA²⁸) (Barbara Aland et al. 2012). Wayne Meeks concurs with Paul’s assessment and writes, “Among those who have been baptized into Christ, wrote the apostle Paul, ‘there is neither Jew nor Greek’ (Gal 3:28). Modern scholars have not believed him.” (Meeks 2001, p. 17).
- 12 Such an assessment echoes the criticism leveled against much of the historical Jesus movement by scholars over the past 120 years. Among this criticism was George Tyrrell’s famous comment regarding Adolf von Harnack’s “classic liberal portrait” of Jesus: “The Christ that Harnack sees, looking back through nineteen centuries of Catholic darkness, is only the reflection of a liberal Protestant face, seen at the bottom of a deep well” (Tyrrell [1909] 1964, pp. 49–50).
- 13 Much of this section derives from Appendix 3 and Chapter 5 of my forthcoming monograph (Lamb 2024).
- 14 On the various issues surrounding the accuracy of Acts 16:12, see (Ascough 1998, pp. 93–103).
- 15 At least three Egyptian gods/goddesses were worshipped in ancient Philippi, as attested by extant inscriptions referencing Serapis (also “Sarapis”), Harpocrates (the Greek equivalent of Horus, the Egyptian god-child of Isis and Osiris/Serapis), and Isis-Regina. See (Collart 1929, pp. 87, 99–100) and (Oakes 2007, p. 14). That the Roman (Latin) writers contemporary with Paul (and perhaps well-known in Philippi) were familiar with the Egyptian pantheon is elucidated by Ovid. See Ovid, *Metam.* 9.688, 692. Nanos (2017, pp. 111–85) offers a helpful survey of the various pagan cults worshipped in ancient Philippi.
- 16 John Reumann suggests that the Imperial religion was so pervasive throughout the first-century Greco-Roman world that it accounted for “some fifty million” practitioners, with “rituals and celebrations that touched most of life” (Reumann 2008, p. 4).
- 17 See, e.g., (Hendrix 1992, vol. 5, p. 315) and (Abrahamsen 1988, pp. 48–50).
- 18 See (Porter 2016, p. 331) and (Novenson 2022, pp. 58–59). Among the most popular of the Thracian deities was the Thracian Rider (Hērōs Aulōneitēs [Ἡρώς Αὐλωνεΐτης]), who is depicted as a Horseman, “a guardian spirit” (or *Lar*) on the funerary monuments and cliffs throughout Philippi and its environs (see Montanari 2015, p. 918; Glare 2012, p. 1:1103; Koukouli-Chryssanthaki and Malamidou 2022, pp. 132–37, respectively). The Thracian Rider served as a “Hero” and “tour guide” helping the deceased navigate the afterlife and to become a deified, hybrid (ἄνθρωποδαίμων) “Hero” (Ἡρώς) or “Heroine” (Ἡρώϊσσα) themselves (Koukouli-Chryssanthaki and Malamidou 2022, p. 134; Oakes 2022, pp. 252, 257–58; and cf. Euripides, *Rhes.* 970–73) as the

- Heroikos* of Philastros explains regarding the Hero cults in the early third century CE (Maclean and Aitken 2001, pp. xlv–xlv). The adoration/veneration of Paul and other “apostles” and Christian martyrs of the past soon replaced the pagan praxis of Hero worship over subsequent centuries (Koester 2007, p. 87). The *Heroikos* was written likely to preserve the distinct Thracian and Greek identities and traditions while living amidst the amalgamated “melting pot” of cultures within the Roman Empire (Mestre and Gómez 2018, p. 107). Thus, a natural segue emerged for the Christ assemblies to reimagine this pagan practice in light of Paul and his gospel as a bridge between these two modes of worship. Such a missional “bridge” is evinced in the fact that an early Christian basilica was built upon the foundation of the pagan sanctuary to Hērōs Aulōneitēs after the sanctuary’s destruction in ca. the first half of the fifth century CE, given the numismatic evidence (Koukouli-Chryssanthaki and Malamidou 2022, p. 152–53). The fact that pagan sanctuaries and altars surrounding Philippi—including that of Hērōs Aulōneitēs and others like it—were not immediately destroyed after the persecutions against paganism from Theodosius I (ca. 379–392 CE) and the issuing of the Theodosian Law by his grandson, Theodosius II (ca. 435 CE), speaks to the “continuity” of religious worship and the reimagining and reappropriation of these sacred spaces. These sacred spaces were “purified” by the Christian symbols of the dove and the cross, which was “the victorious immortal symbol of Christ” (Koukouli-Chryssanthaki and Malamidou 2022, pp. 128–29, 131).
- 19 See (Schowalter 2022, p. 2) and especially (Brélaz 2022, p. 83–84), who argues that the inscriptions in and around Philippi reveal that this competition was not between “distinct homogeneous, exclusive groups,” and the inscriptions display religious and social syncretism as the competing groups assimilated and adopted various traits and traditions from one another. Albeit minimal, at least some Jewish presence in and around first-century Philippi is attested by Acts 16:13. Cf. (Verhoef 2005, pp. 568–69) and the inscriptional evidence (*Grabinschriften*) dating from the third century CE, which reveals the presence of a Jewish synagogue in Philippi (Koukouli-Chryssanthaki 1998, pp. 28, 34). Moreover, Philo attests the Jewish presence in Macedonia during the first century (*Legat.* 281).
- 20 See (Porter 2016, p. 330) and Strabo, *Geogr.* 7.41.
- 21 Strabo, *Geogr.* 7.41. Though, it should be noted that not all the citizens were in favor of this Roman colonization—especially the wealthy locals who would not be pushed out by the influx of Roman veterans. Though, Joseph Marchal suggests that it is perhaps better to think of Philippi as a “contact zone,” a cluster of competing cultures, peoples, religions, and groups interacting, struggling, striving, and coexisting with each other (Marchal 2008, p. 92). Cf. (Concannon 2024).
- 22 Hawthorne suggests that Philippi was inhabited “predominately by Romans, but many Macedonian Greeks and some Jews lived there as well” (Hawthorne 1993, p. 707).
- 23 On the popularity of Menander in the ancient world, see E. Fantham (2011, p. 215) who writes, “The abundant papyri of Menander and allusions to his plays in Greek authors of the early Roman Empire leave no doubt that he was more than a recognized classic: he was a favourite of the Hellenistic world, alongside Homer, Euripides, and Demosthenes. Indeed the Comparison of Aristophanes and Menander attributed to Plutarch shows that he was not only studied but performed both publicly and on private occasions.” Moreover, Traill (2001, p. 284) argues that the *Thais* was “one of Menander’s most famous plays in antiquity.”
- 24 The phrase “in Christ” permeates each chapter of Philippians—appearing explicitly ten times: 1:1, 13, 26; 2:1, 5; 3:3, 14; 4:7, 19, 21. In his commentary on Philippians, Hansen (2009, p. 32) notes that the phrase “in Christ” has a “dominating role” in Philippians, and it occurs in various forms a grand total of twenty-one times. Cf. (Marshall 1993, p. 138). In her robust study of Paul’s “in Christ” language, Teresa Morgan argues for what she calls an “encheiristic” understanding—connoting the sense of being in the hands of God through Christ and under Christ’s divine protection, which results in humanity’s trusting of God and complete dependence upon him in Christ (Morgan 2020, pp. 14–15). Cf. (Morgan 2022, pp. 64–66). Morgan’s encheiristic understanding of being in God’s/Christ’s hands in Philippians has bivalent ethical and associational implications: the Philippian saints are to live and serve together in ways commensurate with being a part of the inside group and whose primary identity and allegiance are bound together in the risen Christ (Morgan 2020, p. 77).
- 25 In Social Identity Theory (SIT), the “superordinate identity” can be described as that identifying factor uniting the insider group in shared solidarity and which supersedes all other (personal) identifiers and identity markers, which are subordinated under the supreme, superordinate identity (Baker 2012, p. 130).
- 26 The enticing temptation of emperor worship under the threat of pagan persecution among the nascent Christ communities is depicted in Mart. Pol. 8.2. In this text, Polycarp is tempted “to say: ‘Caesar [is] Lord’” (εἰπεῖν Κύριος Καῖσαρ) at the threat of martyrdom. Polycarp refuses to renounce Christ, exclaiming: “and if you pretend to not know me, who I am, you listen with plainness of speech: ‘I am [a] Christian!’” (Mart. Pol. 10.1). My translation derives from the Greek text of (Ehrman 2003, pp. 376, 380).
- 27 For the supremacy of Christ in the form of Christ’s superior, triadic title Κύριος Ἰησοῦς Χριστός in Phil 2:9–11, see (Fletcher-Louis 2023, pp. 422 n. 26, 510–16).
- 28 During an interview in 1989 with Connie Chung, Marlon Brando speaks of the power and beauty of collaboration—be it in the guild of acting or Pauline studies. Brando, who was experiencing the success of his role in The Godfather trilogy and anticipating the release of The Godfather III (1990), was asked by Chung, “Don’t you realize you’re thought of as the greatest actor ever?” Brando musingly turned to his dog, Tim, and replied, “Tim is the greatest actor ever. He pretends he loves me when he wants something to eat.” Brando then quips, “What’s the difference? See, that’s a part of the sickness in America that you have to think

in terms of ‘who wins,’ ‘who loses,’ ‘who’s good,’ ‘who’s bad,’ ‘who’s best,’ ‘who’s worst.’ We always think in those terms—in extreme terms. I don’t like to think that way. Everybody has their own value in a different way, and I don’t like to think who was ‘the best’ at this or that. What’s the point of it?” The same is true in biblical studies: each scholar has a role to play and a voice to be heard—no matter how small or large—in the symphony of scholarship. In the Western urge for radical individualism and scholarly “innovation,” we risk becoming the discordant, dissonant “clanging gong” that Paul himself eschews (1 Cor 13:1).

29 Such confusion regarding Sandmel’s “parallelomania” became apparent to me in an exchange on social media with a fairly well-known Pauline scholar focusing on Paul’s Greco-Roman philosophical and rhetorical associations/influences. In the exchange, the scholar reduced Sandmel’s three concerns to the following singular point: “Sandmel decried claims of direct literary dependence of biblical authors on GR [Greco-Roman] literature.” I then reminded them that Sandmel actually had three concerns, which were not merely delimited to Greco-Roman literary dependence in Scripture. Gregory Jenks is representative of scholars seemingly downplaying the value of comparative analyses and Paul’s diverse socio-cultural influences. Jenks, in his otherwise excellent work, seems to contradict himself at times, stating, on the one hand, the importance of Paul’s being “steeped in this convergence of cultures” but later claims, “their [i.e., the Egyptian] influence on his [Paul’s] thinking or on the Jews or pagans of Asia Minor where he served was negligible” (Jenks 2015, p. 41). The extant evidence, especially regarding Jenks’s cavalier dismissal of Egyptian influence on Greco-Roman culture, proves Jenks’s claim to be demonstrably false. While Jenks is correct that Paul was not borrowing from Egyptian tradition in the genealogical sense (a superficial mode of comparison as shown above), as an in-Christ church-planting missionary in first-century Philippi, Paul would have likely encountered these Egyptian influences and temples that dotted the Philippian landscape and engaged these competing religious concepts as a part of his apostolic responsibility and answerability to Christ.

30 Exemplary of such multidisciplinary collaborations in scholarly societies are the Multidisciplinary Approaches and the Gospels research group of the Institute for Biblical Research, the Bible and Film, Bible and Popular Culture, and Bible and Visual Art program units of the Society of Biblical Literature, and the Animals and Religion program unit of the American Academy of Religion. Monograph series like SCIBS (Sheffield Centre for Interdisciplinary Biblical Studies) by Sheffield Phoenix Press and academic journals such as *JIBS* (Journal for Interdisciplinary Biblical Studies) also reveal the growing multidisciplinary nature within the field of biblical studies.

31 For a succinct discussion of the issues involved, see (Cohick 2013, pp. 166–82).

32 On the Chthonian deities of the Egyptian and Greco-Roman pantheons, see, e.g., (Armour 2016, pp. 176, 181) and (Bremmer 1999, p. 15). The dating of the earliest references of *καταχθόνιος* is based on lexical searches in the *TLG* database. See, e.g., Homer, *Il.* 9.457; and the first-century CE philosophical/theological writings of the Stoic Lucius Annaeus Cornutus *Nat. d.* 72.18 (καὶ χθονίαν ἐκάλεσαν καὶ τοῖς καταχθονίοις θεοῖς ἤρξαντο συντιμᾶν), which were contemporaneous with Paul and his Philippian audience.

33 Zagreus, son of Zeus and Persephone, is known in the Orphic tradition as the first incarnation of Dionysus (Bacchus), the “Chthonic . . . god coming forth out of the Earth, from the realm of Persephone” (Irwin 1991, p. 38).

34 Aristophanes, in his comedy *The Lennian Women* (Fragments 384), described Bendis as the *μεγάλη θεός* (Greek text derives from (Henderson 2008, p. 290); cf. Photius, *Lex.* 251.7).

35 My translation derives from the Latin text of (Jones 2017, p. 356).

36 While much debate surrounds the authorship of the *Carmen Christi*—whether it was penned by Paul or represents a pre-Pauline species of early confessional material within the nascent Jesus movement—Paul no doubt *included* the additions to LXX-Isa 45:23 in canonical Philippians to show the universal supremacy of Christ above all other gods, goddesses, titans, monsters and the monstrous, and human rulers throughout the cosmos.

37 Crispin Fletcher-Louis (2023, pp. 4–5 n. 5) refers to this mindset as “the divine heartset” of Christ, which is for Fletcher-Louis (2023, p. 2), “Christ-shaped patterns of relating in love, honor, and empathy.”

38 For a helpful discussion of the commentary tradition surrounding the identity of the opponents in Phil 3:2, see (Nanos 2017, pp. 111–16)—albeit Nanos seems to overstate his case, as (contra Nanos) there are examples in the commentary tradition (John Calvin, for example) in which commentators did not ascribe to Paul’s opponents a strictly Jewish or Judaizing identity. Furthermore, (contra Nanos) examples exist of Jews calling gentiles “dogs” in the extant Second Temple Jewish literature (see Lamb 2020a; 2020b, n.p.).

39 These data stem mostly from extant epigraphic evidence in the rock reliefs, *Grabinschriften*, and temple dedications within the archaeological record of Philippi and its environs. See, e.g., Valerie Abrahamsen (1988, pp. 46–56). An under-considered possibility in terms of opponent identification in 3:2 is the Egyptian cults that dotted the Philippian landscape during Paul’s day. On the pervasive spread of the Egyptian cults through Europe (generally), Macedonia, and Philippi (specifically), see W. H. Roscher (Roscher 1890–1894, pp. 379–92) and Paul Collart (1929, pp. 70–100), respectively. Though older, these works remain seminal important since much of their research was performed prior to the destructive effects of two world wars. The dehumanizing slur “dog” (*canis*) is utilized by the Jewish historian Josephus against his Egyptian opponent, Apion, for the Egyptians’ theriomorphic, doglike deities such as Anubis (C. Ap. 2.85). The Pharaoh, his taskmasters, and magicians would have widely been considered “evil workers” to the Jewish people of the exodus and beyond (Exod 1:10–14). The writer of the Sibylline Oracles highlights the Egyptian deification of dogs (Sib. Or. 5.279), the description of “Isis, thrice-wretched goddess,” Serapis,

and “thrice-wretched Egypt” (Sib. Or. 5.484–88). The fourth-century BCE Greek comic poet Anaxandrides jokingly contrasted the customs of the Greek and Egyptian priests, with the Greek priests being “whole” and the Egyptian priests being “mutilated” via castration (Dillon 2002, p. 74; cf. Herodotus’s reference to ancient Egyptian circumcision in *Hist.* 2.37.5). Moreover, the pervasive threat of syncretism and the religious appropriation of Egyptian deities and modes of worship during the first four centuries of the Jesus movement are evinced in the words of the anonymous writer of *Historia Augusta* (8.1–5). Here, the writer references the apparent syncretistic worship of Serapis among the Christ communities of Egypt in the fourth century: “There [Egypt], those who worship Serapis are Christians” (*illic qui Serapem colunt Christiani sunt*). Author’s translation of the Latin text of David Magie (2022, p. 388). This supposed syncretism perhaps led to the destruction of the Serapeum in Alexandria by Pope Theophilus—its ruins being soon replaced by a Christian church in what was, perhaps, a symbolic gesture of Christian supremacy and Theophilus’s having conquered the Egyptian pagan cult (cf. Jerome, *Epist.* 107.2; Socrates of Constantinople [Socrates Scholasticus], *Historia Ecclesiastica* 5.16 [PG 62:281b–c]).

- 40 See, e.g., the SIT work of Paul Trebilco (2017) and the Animal Studies work of Ingvild Gilhus (2006) for a helpful introduction to these disciplines. For a reading of Philippians 3 through the kaleidoscopic lenses of SIT, Animal Studies, and Monster Theory, see the forthcoming LNTS chapter (Lamb 2025).
- 41 For Trebilco (2017, pp. 4–5, 25), Paul’s highest, most severe boundary marker language (what he termed, “Category 3”) was reserved for those most “proximate” to the inside group—that is, former or “incognito” insiders who seek to infiltrate, corrupt, and/or destroy the Pauline Christ communities.
- 42 See such scholarly skepticism regarding Paul’s knowledge of rhetoric and rhetorical conventions in (Porter 2016, p. 16). While Porter concedes at least some basic Greco-Roman education for Paul, he further writes, “In all, the evidence of Paul progressing very far in the Greco-Roman educational system is lacking. He almost assuredly received an elementary education and may well have attended grammar school, but Paul was not trained as a rhetorician, and to examine his letters as if they are instances of ancient rhetoric is probably misguided.”
- 43 An example of such a bold assumption is found within the title of W. Schenk’s commentary (Schenk 1984), *Die Philipperbriefe des Paulus* (“The Philippian Letters of Paul”).

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