



“Goulder, Baur, and the Corinthian Correspondence”

A Review Essay of *Paul and the Competing Mission in Corinth*. By Michael D. Goulder, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001. xiv + 303 pp. ISBN: 1565633792

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In 1994, Michael Goulder published a short volume entitled *A Tale of Two Missions* (republished in the United States as *St. Paul versus St. Peter*). Goulder’s *Paul and the Competing Mission in Corinth* (2001) applies this fundamental Pauline-Petrine conflict to the Achaian city through the lens of the Corinthian correspondence. Goulder readily acknowledges that his paradigm is not original: “So I am happy to have the ghost of Ferdinand Baur to preside over my studies” (15). Goulder concedes that Baur’s theory has faced sharp criticism over the last century, a “heavy weight of prejudice” (vii, 1). But *Paul and the Competing Mission in Corinth* “is an attempt to restate his <Baur’s> central hypothesis on a somewhat different basis” (2).

Goulder helpfully summarizes his “scenario” of the interactions of the Pauline and Petrine missions at Corinth in chapter 16. Such a “scenario” falls short of a full historical reconstruction but is “a web of possibilities that can be argued to be likely” (222). After Paul left Corinth in A.D. 51, Apollos came through town. Through the ministry of Priscilla and Aquilla, Apollos “had been turned into a thoroughgoing Pauline” (226-227). “But sweetness and light were not to continue long” (227). In the spring of 52, the Jerusalem leadership sent emissaries to Corinth “who could reclaim the distant community for the one apostolic metropolitan church” (227). They did not immediately alienate their audience with an insistence upon painful circumcision, but they did emphasize the leadership of Cephas. Paul wrote 1 Corinthians in response to tensions arising from this Petrine mission. When the Corinthian assembly refused to excommunicate the man living with his stepmother (1 Cor. 5), Paul paid his daughter church a fatherly visit in 54. He then “went back to Ephesus to lick his wounds and to write one of his most eloquent and effective letters, the tearful letter . . . which the shamed recipients wisely destroyed in toto” (232). By the spring of 55, the Corinthian assembly had ousted the incestuous man.

Meanwhile, the Jerusalem church mounted a countermission on a grand scale, attacking on four Pauline fronts (Galatia, Asia, Macedonia, Achaia). The Jerusalem forces zealously infiltrated Galatia and completely won over Asia, but gained little ground in Macedonia (233-234). This second Achaian mission was “much more formidable” than the former one (44), and the emissaries were “more aggressive and more confident” (176). The missionaries who arrived in Corinth “came with authorizing letters from Jerusalem and styled themselves apostles” (44). In a state of great affliction

and despair, Paul penned 2 Corinthians (1:8-9). “They would not see his face again, and his hopes of reconciliation would turn to ashes. What awaited him was betrayal, riot, prison, false justice, chains, and execution. But thus was done the will of the Lord, and the blood of the martyr was the seed of the Great Church,” states our Baur *redivivus* with a Tertullianist flair.

Goulder recognizes that “attacks” on Baur’s general thesis have concentrated on the Corinthian correspondence. Although Peter is rarely mentioned (and always in connection with others) in 1 Corinthians (1:12; 3:22; 9:5; 15:5) and never in 2 Corinthians, Goulder seeks to expose a powerful Petrine opposition. 1 Corinthians 1:12 relates that church members were asserting, “I am of Paul,” “I am of Apollos,” “I am of Peter,” or “I am of Christ.” According to Goulder, Paul’s mention of an Apollos slogan is simply “a smoke screen to prevent the letter becoming a confrontation between Paul and the Petrines” (89). Much of Goulder’s argument hangs upon his insistence that *metasxēmatizein* be translated as “transformed” in 1 Corinthians 4:6 (23-28), rather than “applied” as found in “theory-serving versions” (26). According to Goulder, Paul “smoothes over” the *real* Pauline-Petrine conflict by “‘transforming’ it on to himself and Apollos” (208). Goulder observes that Paul and Apollos “were in regular and intimate contact” (1 Cor. 16:12), and “Paul had every confidence that their gospel was the same” (26). So Goulder concludes, “Paul and Apollos were colleagues, and their converts were basically one” (16). But does the cordiality of the leaders necessarily insure the unity of their followers?

Goulder further contends that “I am of Christ” is a Petrine slogan which arises from their low Christology. The Petrines taught that Jesus was a miracle-working

prophet whom the anointing “Christ” came upon and possessed at baptism. The Petrines were scandalized by the Paulines’ blasphemous high Christology (157). Using chains of succession that might cause a third-century heresiologist to blush, Goulder muses that apparently “Montanism was an Asian development of the Petrine form of Christianity that we find mirrored in 1 Corinthians” (150), and there is “a straight line through from Peter and James to Cerinthus and the Ebionites” (221). By merging the “I am of Apollos” slogan with the “I am of Paul” party, and by collapsing the “I am of Christ” slogan into the “I am of Peter” party, Goulder succinctly reduces the rival groups to two. Goulder concludes that “there were fundamentally only two parties at Corinth” (16), and “it is evident that there are two real factions in the church” (27).

Although the matter appears to have been resolved in a nice and tidy fashion, it seems to me that Ockham’s razor has sliced beyond reasonable warrant. Uncovering Jewish “Petrines” under every unturned stone in the Corinthian correspondence is no mean feat. At least in a *prima facie* reading, the Corinthian epistles do not seem to emphasize issues such as the law and circumcision. But Goulder responds that the dividing lines between the Jacobites/Petrines and Paulines involved matters far beyond the Torah and circumcision. “They extended to many practices in everyday life, such as attitudes about sex, work, money, idol food, and the behavior of women, and to major doctrinal issues such as the incarnation, the atonement, the resurrection, and the Parousia” (viii). Jews request a sign, and the Gentiles seek after wisdom, but the Petrines require both (54-63). Somehow, Goulder attempts to keep the many heads of a sophia-loving, gnosis-boasting, incest-allowing, asceticism-insisting, resurrection-denying, idolatrous food-eating Hydra all attached to the same Petrine body, while attaching

Ebionite Christology and a quasi-magical view of the sacraments to boot. One senses that the label “Petrine” must be applied to all Corinthian rivals no matter how monstrous the creature may become. The Petrine gate has been opened so wide that any and all may enter, as long as they oppose the Apostle Paul. Even under Goulder’s deft hand, one senses that his Petrine party has been sculpted in a rather “un-Petrine” fashion.

Goulder explains some of the new appendages through the introduction of local visionary approaches into Petrine thought. The Petrine party included conservative and nomistic teachers but also innovative and mystical visionaries (102). The ascetic impulse came from a Jewish tradition (similar to *merkabah* mysticism) that promoted abstinence in preparation for mystical contact with God (141). “The opposition are Petrines, as throughout the letters, with their roots in Jewish spirituality. But it is an apocalyptic, mystical spirituality, aspiring to the vision of God and to possession by his Spirit, such as Moses experienced on Sinai” (142-143). This new Petrine “knowledge” manifested itself in two main areas, sex and idolatry, “the two central bogies of orthodox Jews” (111). The visionaries allowed eating meat sacrificed to idols, since only one true God actually exists. And these ascetics excused an incestuous man, “no doubt because the man was an important member of the church” (114, 123). The Corinthian Petrines were also pneumatics who denied a future bodily resurrection and believed they were already glorified and reigning with Christ in the kingdom of God (74, 121, 125, 177, 184). But the elasticity of a term like “Petrines” surely has its limits, even if a *visio Dei* is summoned as some *deus ex machina*.

One should not doubt that conflicts could and did arise between Paul and Peter (and other early Christian leaders). Galatians 2 is sufficient evidence of such principled

confrontation. Nor does this reviewer question the presence of rival partisans in the Corinthian church, including those members whose mantra “I am of Peter” rang annoyingly in Paul’s ears. But I must agree with Vielhauer’s sentiment, “The various tensions in 1 Corinthians cannot all be ascribed to two parties” (17). In his attempt to explain all events with two opposing missions, Goulder appears to pay only lip-service to the variations within Jewish Christianity (3). He theorizes that the Galatian circumcisers took a harder line than James, who in turn took a harder line than Peter (3). He believes that we must not identify the Jerusalem apostles and the Judaizers (6). But yet he emphasizes, “When the chips were down, the apostles and the ‘sham emissaries’ were on one side of the fence, and Paul on the other” (8). The Galatian conflict thus transforms itself into “Paul versus the followers of (James and) Peter” (15). Having granted variation with one hand, Goulder has quickly retrieved it with the other. Paul’s harshest words, “Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh” are thus directed toward the Petrines (4). By pages 233-234, it is the Jerusalem apostles themselves who are the dogs and the enemies of Christ. Although Goulder cautions that we must not identify the Jerusalem apostles with the Galatian Judaizers (6-7), Goulder effectually does so himself.

Baur conceded that “we can scarcely believe” that the Jerusalem apostles “approved” or gave “recognition” to the “sham emissaries” who visited Corinth (7). But Baur’s protégé can refer to these delegates as “semiofficial” on one page (75), and proclaim on the next that they “carried letters of authorization from Jerusalem” (76, cf. 5, 41). Such interpretive tensions reach the highest levels of Jewish Christianity. While Goulder insists that the terms “Jacobites” and “Petrines” can be used synonymously

(viii), “It is possible, though no more than an attractive speculation, that the rift in Jerusalem went as far as between James and Peter” (171). Of course, if the Corinthian “Petrines” endorsed eating meat sacrificed to idols, such strain seems inevitable. “It might well be that Peter thought prayers over meat to a pagan god were an irrelevance while to James they were a horrific scandal” (171). Since all the Corinthian antagonists must be Petrine “as throughout the letters,” fissures will inevitably appear. For example, “On the one hand, there was a thriving anti-Pauline minority trumpeting its loyalty to Cephas; on the other hand, the principle they were defending was the right of a leading member to sleep with his father’s wife in defiance of the repeated prohibition of the Torah” (234). The opponents in both 1 Corinthians and Galatians are Petrine, but the former definitely are not nomists (47). Nevertheless, “The opposition in Corinth is substantially the same as that in Galatia, and the issue of the law is as crucial in the Corinthian letters as elsewhere in the Paulines, *mutatis mutandis*” (90-91). Furthermore, the Petrine party condoned incestuous behavior “in the name of the Lord Jesus” (116, 124) yet emphatically denounced the Pauline belief that Jesus is Lord (157). This “plausible scenario” concludes that “Paul’s opponents are people of high principle, ascetics, who have given up sex altogether as a practice of the flesh and who are pressing others to abstain from marital relations” yet “overlook the peccadilloes of those who contribute generously to church funds or open their homes for church meetings” (123). Goulder admits that such individuals are clearly inconsistent, but such is the human paradox (124).

In many ways, Goulder paints a rather likeable portrait of Paul. The Apostle is “diplomatic, straightforward, dignified, principled, vigorous, fatherly, conciliatory,”

“clear-headed and humane”, “warmhearted,” “indeed clever as well as fair-minded” (230, 164, 175, 157). Paul comes off as a wise parent with a “tough love” approach (247). Yet Goulder’s Paul is noticeably divided in his fundamental resolve. Goulder concludes that Peter rarely appears in 1 Corinthians by name (and never in 2 Corinthians), because Paul senses that he is in “a double bind” and cannot oppose Peter explicitly (31). Paul seeks to avoid division from the Petrine (212), yet he calls for separation from them (172). Goulder claims that “Paul avoids confrontation with the Petrine” “throughout 1 Corinthians” (213), yet Paul still proclaims that the Petrine are enemies of the cross of Christ who are damnably wrong and perishing (56, 78-81). Goulder maintains that Paul’s “kids’ glove” treatment of Peter was due to the latter’s “position of unassailable prestige in the church” and the fact that “Paul and Peter normally got on very well” (10). Goulder muses, “The problem was James, a man of principle” (10). But Goulder then avows that Paul “did not see Peter as a fellow builder; on the contrary, the Cephas mission was a menace” (23). Of course, Goulder is in an uneasy position. If 1 Corinthians calls for reconciliation (as many interpreters claim), then (in Goulder’s reconstruction) Paul is seeking reconciliation with adherents of an Ebionite Christology and an anathematized gospel (cf. 37).

Goulder’s fundamental Pauline-Petrine rivalry is no victimless proposal. As in partisan politics, such strong dichotomies tend to create a “with us or against us” approach. In the process, Barnabas becomes a Petrine (3, 227), as does Silas (43, 184, 224-226, 233). In fact, Silas becomes an informant for the opposition, notifying the Jerusalem leadership “where the noxious herbs of Pauline heterodoxy were taking root” (233). 1 Peter becomes Pauline (a reappraisal not unique to Goulder). Such an

assessment seems natural enough, since the epistle's teachings definitely do not reflect Goulder's reconstructed "Petrines." The Fourth Gospel stands firmly in the Pauline camp and rebuts Jewish Christians (77, 80). The author of Revelation is sympathetic to Peter and the Jewish-Christian tradition (146), yet ironically castigates those who sanction the eating of idol meat (153). According to Goulder, the Jacobites/Petrines would have "quailed at the excesses of the Nicolaitans," (though apparently not if they hailed from Corinth!) (155). The Pharisees' request for signs in the Gospels is interpreted as "a reading back into the Gospel of demands by Jewish Christians from Paul and his followers" (60-61). One senses that the Pauline-Petrine conflict has become a global plague that cannot be quarantined. Even modern sociohistorical and rhetorical approaches to the Corinthian correspondence are largely dismissed, since they apply to the Greco-Roman context of Corinth and not the all-important Petrine factionalism (268-273).

Luke becomes the leader of the "reconciling movement" (4-5), although Goulder (unlike Bauer) does not dismiss Acts as "full of tendentious distortions" (5 n. 9; cf. 222-223). Nevertheless, one senses that comments which bolster the Baur/Goulder thesis are generously preserved (cf. 60), but evidence which does not fit the mold must be sanded away. A patent example of this selectivity is Goulder's reconstruction of a hostile Petrine takeover of Asia. Goulder appeals to 2 Timothy 1:15, "You know this, that all in Asia deserted me, including Phygelus and Hermogenes" to postulate that the province of Asia was completely won over by the Petrines. As a consequence, Luke is "transparently hiding something" when he describes Paul's hurried meeting with the Ephesian elders in Acts 20, since he conceals this conjectured Petrine triumph in Asia (44-45). Luke can be

trusted when he states that Paul and Apollos were colleagues (27), but any bridge between Paul and Peter must be burned. Goulder insinuates that Antioch was lost to the Pauline cause (3), yet it continued to serve as Paul's homebase throughout the book of Acts. With such external references duly disposed of, Goulder is free to create the Petrines largely through his mirror reading of the Corinthian correspondence (see 42, 75, 97, 106, 126, 148, 197, 218-219, 257). Goulder also relies heavily upon comparisons of "suggestive" common vocabulary (51, 35, 39, 40, 173) to establish his arguments.

Goulder employs other weak arguments in his attempt to merge the various Corinthian problems into a fundamental Pauline-Petrine conflict. He notes that the first ten verses of the letter refer to "Christ Jesus" three times and to "Jesus Christ" five times. Goulder concludes that the passage opposes an Ebionite Christology that separated the anointing Christ from the human Jesus (20; but cf. Romans 1:1-8). Goulder acknowledges that "all Christians," including the "Pauline Christians" were familiar with the Shema 6:4 (154). Yet he contends that the use of Deuteronomy 6:4 in 1 Corinthians 8:6 evidences a specifically Jewish-Christian knowledge (153, 102). If this fails to convince, he reminds us that the "weak" person is "clearly a recent convert from paganism," so this suggests that the "strong" person must be a Jewish Christian (102). Ironically, the "weak" of Romans 14 become Jewish Christians who are attached to food laws and Sabbaths (269; cf. 71-72; 156-157, 170). According to Goulder, Paul uses the "temple" imagery of the church in 1 Corinthians, but normally he would have avoided this analogy because it suggested the position of his Jerusalem opponents who called themselves "pillars" (22).

One should not conclude that Goulder's entire prescription is of no value, even if his essential argument is a hard pill to swallow. For example, Goulder's style is uncommonly lively, and one can surely appreciate his provocative and bold creativity. Beyond such matters of form, *Paul and the Competing Mission at Corinth* contains important content as well. Goulder classifies some of these matters as being more theoretical in nature, but they warrant further investigation. I refer the reader to Goulder's "informed guesswork" which merges the Chloe and Stephanas delegations (229-230), his finding of echoes from Leviticus in 1 Corinthians 15:4 (188-189), and his discussion of "gold, silver, and precious stones" in 1 Corinthians 3 (22).

Goulder the maverick bucks recent critical trends and defends the integrity of 2 Corinthians (240-248). Theories of a composite 2 Corinthians "seem unnecessary," since "there is no substantial reason to deny the integrity of the letter" (248). He also insists upon the original inclusion of 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 (131-134). With a touch of sarcasm, he prods, "We would all like Paul to be as nice as we are, but if he is politically incorrect, it is better to so say so" (135). Goulder's arguments deserve a wider hearing in these cases. By linking the repentant man in 2 Corinthians 2 with the incestuous man of 1 Corinthians 5, Goulder maintains another position largely abandoned in modern scholarship. Moreover, he attempts to reconcile Paul's views in Galatians and the stipulations of the "Jerusalem Council" in Acts 15 (165-171). Goulder insists that the visionary man of 2 Corinthians 12:1-5 is not Paul himself (106-108). Future commentaries must also interact with Goulder's exegesis of 2 Corinthians 5:14-15 (260-267) and his understanding of "not beyond what is written" in 1 Corinthians 4:6 (64-71).

Finally, Goulder has competently dismissed Hegelian dialecticism as the original impetus for Baur's thesis (10-13).

Nevertheless, this reviewer remains unconvinced of Goulder's overall argument. It seems difficult to postulate a singular Pauline-Petrine conflict that explains all of the material in the Corinthian correspondence. The "ghost of Ferdinand Baur" may appear to haunt us still, but in the end it is only a passing apparition that must be laid to rest.

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