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Paul's Dispute with Philippi:

Understanding Paul's Argument in Phil 1–2 from his Thanks in 4.10–20

1. Reflections on Paul Sampley's Pauline Partnership in Christ (1980) and 'legality' in the Pauline congregations

The density of commercial terminology in Phil 4.10–20, a passage in which Paul acknowledges his receipt from the Philippian congregation of their financial support for his labours in preaching the Gospel, which has been brought to him by Epaphroditus (2.25–30), has long puzzled interpreters. Paul Sampley has argued in his *Pauline Partnership in Christ*¹ that this language and other phrases prominent in the epistle evidence a formal contract for Paul's financial support, in type a Roman contract of consensual *societas*, between Paul and the church which he founded at Philippi. Paul and the Philippians contracted together in a joint project for preaching the Gospel. The Philippians were to pay, Paul was to preach; in 4.10–20 Paul formally acknowledges the receipt of his due support.

Sampley's thesis of a contractual arrangement between Paul and the Philippians, the evidence for which is reviewed below, has not received extensive support from scholars.² The obvious difficulty with the thesis is that it is not plausible that Paul would have condoned recourse to pagan

¹ Philadelphia 1980. Sampley first presented his thesis in 'Societas Christi. Roman Law and Paul's Conception of Christian Community', *God's Christ and His People*, FS N. A. Dahl, ed. W. A. Meeks and J. Jervell, Oslo 1977, 158–174.

² Cf. especially the reviews of D. M. Sweetland, *CBQ* 44(1982) 689–690 and A. C. Wire, *JBL* 101(1982) 468–469.

courts to settle a dispute over a broken contract between Christians. He specifically forbids members of the Corinthian congregation to turn to the pagan law-courts to settle their disputes (1 Cor 6.1–8). We cannot therefore allow that the contractual language which Sampley elucidates has ‘legal’ weight in the sense that either party envisaged prosecution before a Roman court if the agreement were breached. The thought is indeed absurd. Must the interpreter not rather conclude that, while conceding Sampley’s evidence for the employment of legal, contractual language is impressive, he has uncovered merely a metaphorical schema, a *façon de parler*? While Paul speaks in the terms of contract, he intends only to portray the Philippians’ relations with him as in his view a sincere undertaking which should not lightly be neglected. Should we not rather classify the scheme alongside the metaphorical language of warfare so freely used by Paul? What value is there in talk of a ‘legal’ contract at all?

This objection to Sampley’s case, however, achieves its force by proposing a simplistic alternative. Between the alternatives posed of a contract seen as enforceable through the pagan courts, and an evocative use of metaphor, lies the third possibility that Paul saw the contract as significant *intra muros* of his own relations with the Philippians and the circle of churches which acknowledged his apostleship, and which wished to maintain good standing with him, and perhaps even within the sphere of all Christian congregations. We need not assume that the possibility of recourse to the pagan law-courts is the only condition under which proposal of a ‘contractual’ arrangement between Paul and Philippi may be regarded as meaningful in more than a metaphorical sense for the parties concerned. The agreement may be regarded by Paul, rather, as a firm and binding condition of further good relations between himself as apostle and the Philippian congregation, and which had been undertaken by the Philippians with this implicit understanding. No supracongregational court existed apart from the apostle’s judgement itself to exercise sanction if the agreement were broken. Nonetheless, it is plausible to assume that Paul would regard the Philippian congregation as disobedient to his apostolic authority if it failed to carry out the obligations implied in a solemn agreement taken in a form which was actually legally binding in the outside world.

Concerning 1 Cor 5–6, we may observe that the principle of the firm, juridical regulation of Christian congregations is there strongly established. In these chapters Paul rejects the view that matters of dispute between Christians may properly be left to divine Providence; to the contrary, he insists that God’s judgement concerns those ‘outside’ the church, but the church is to judge those ‘inside’ its ranks to ensure the constant purity of the community

(1 Cor 5.12–13). In the case in question in 1 Cor 5, sanctions are enjoined against the misdemeanant by the congregation on the basis of established principles of Jewish morality, with their foundation in the law of the Pentateuch. Paul insists that Christians, who will ‘judge angels’ are competent to settle the trivial disputes which are wrongly being taken before pagan courts (6.1–6). In the light of this position, his preference that Christians should willingly suffer wrong rather than bring the shame of action before the pagan courts on the congregation (6.7–8) may be assumed only to apply in the circumstance that the church is not operating in a juridical function to settle disputes between Christians. Paul’s points are made implicitly in the course of his rhetoric: ‘are you incompetent to try trivial cases?’ (6.2); the Corinthians are upbraided for laying their disputes before pagans who are ‘least esteemed by the church’ (6.4), implying that to settle a dispute through the court of the assembled congregation is the appropriate response. His concrete requirement is therefore the operation of a juridical system within the local congregation.

However, Paul not only envisages the firm self-regulation of the local congregation that, but also that through the exercise of judgement in the court of the local congregation his own apostolic judgement, as the commanding apostle, is applied: ‘I have already passed judgement in the name of the Lord on the man who has done such a thing. When you are assembled, and my spirit is present with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver...’ Paul wills a system of church-court execution of his own judgement of a serious case. The local Christian congregation is to operate, in effect, a degree of internally acknowledged justice potentially analogous to the autonomous operation of the Jewish synagogue *politeuma* in the diaspora. Paul’s views potentially link, ‘legally’, the congregations in his charge via his own apostolic judgement which is binding in each local situation.

Given this exposition of the juridical material of 1 Cor 5–6, it is plausible that an agreement such as Sampley envisages between Paul and the Philippians was for Paul binding upon the Philippians so far as their to right remain in good standing with their founding apostle was concerned. The court of his own judgement was absolutely binding for the congregation, as at 1 Cor 5.3–5. Unless reconciliation was achieved, Paul and the Philippians would remain in dispute and the congregation would not remain in good standing with him. The contract which Sampley finds may be said to have ‘legal’ force in the sense that just as the instructions to the Corinthian church to assemble in courtlike fashion to execute judgement were a condition of Paul’s further approval of the congregation, so also Paul’s judgement on contract of consensual *societas* which Sampley sees reflected in Phil was

binding upon the Philippian congregation. Both represent, in effect, *nascent canon law, grounded in the binding authority of Paul's apostleship*. If Sampley is correct about Phil, Paul's government of one of his churches had already absorbed, at one point at least, a particular feature of that law of the overlord power of Rome which was later so strongly to shape Christian canon law. Given Paul's binding, linking authority over his congregations, it is also plausible that he saw the Philippians' compliance with the terms of a solemn arrangement between themselves and their apostle as a condition also of their continued good standing with other congregations who acknowledged his apostolic authority. The question of the significance of such arrangements even outside the Pauline congregations may not have remained merely theoretical, since Paul continually links his own apostleship with the authorising call of Christ.

2. *Proposals concerning the argument of Phil 1–2*

Below we review the impressive linguistic evidence which Sampley amasses to support his case, and conclude that it is too extensive to be viewed as merely metaphorical. Thereafter, additional support is provided for Sampley's thesis, understood in the terms just outlined, by arguing that the thesis of a binding arrangement of the Philippians to support Paul's mission can be implemented to further illuminate the circumstances behind the issue of Paul's 'receipt' in Phil 4.10–20 and, in particular, to explain the sequence of the argument, which arose under these circumstances, of Phil 1 and 2. The following points are argued:

- i. Paul issues a quite formal receipt for the Philippian's support because the Philippians have recently sent the support to which they were contractually obliged (after Sampley).
- ii. Prior to the recent arrival of funds from Philippi, Paul had been in dispute with the church at Philippi.
- iii. *The cause of this dispute had been Paul's present imprisonment.*
- iv. Paul's imprisonment had led to a breach with the Philippian congregation since it meant that he was in breach of his contract (Sampely) to preach the Gospel with the Philippians' support. Since his travelling ministry had ceased, and, quite to the contrary, Paul had allowed his mission to be severely curtailed through his arrest by the Roman authorities, the Philippians withheld his support.
- v. Paul had by the time of the issuing his 'receipt' (4.10–20) negotiated a settlement of the dispute with the Philippians, who began sending support again.
- vi. Paul remained, however, on the offensive, and in Phil 1–2 proceeded with a connected argument based on the Philippians' view that his imprisonment represented a breach of his undertaking to use the Philippians' support for the preaching of the Gospel:

- (a) Paul opens with special reference to the officers at Philippi who have responsibility for arranging his financial support, the 'bishops and deacons' (1.1),
- (b) for which contracted financial support, the Philippians' 'fellowship in the Gospel', he specifically makes thanks in 1.5 (also after Sampley).
- (c) Paul begins his argument by urging that his imprisonment actually serves the Gospel (1.12–14), rather than indicating a breach of his contract to preach, but that
- (d) he will nonetheless condescend to keep to the Philippians' view of his contract and resume a travelling ministry on the Philippians' behalf, thus coming again to Philippi (1.19–26).
- (e) He then urges reciprocal faithfulness in exhorting the Philippians to hold to another item of their mutual contractual arrangement, the maintenance of a 'home front' preaching of the Gospel in Macedonia by the church at Philippi itself (1.17–30).
- (f) He furthermore sees a dangerous rejection of the 'way of the cross' in the Philippians' view that his imprisonment has meant a failure to serve Christ; hence, having already stressed that the aim of his own death would be to serve Christ (1.20–21), he continues his argument with an exhortation that the Philippians too should imitate (2.1–5) the humility of Christ in his death on the cross, expressed in the famous 'hymn' on Christ's humility (2.6–11).
- (g) Hence the Philippians should desist from their rebellious attitude of grumbling and questioning *towards Paul* (2.12–15) and instead
- (h) rejoice that Paul's death might be the libation poured out on their sacrificial offering (of financial support, 2.17, cf. 4.18), thus
 - (i) coming to one mind with Paul on the matter of his arrest and possible death (2.18). Here the argument proper, the principle of organisation of the material in Phil up to this point, concludes, and Paul merely proceeds
 - (j) to mention the personalities involved in the traffic between himself and Philippi, Timothy (2.19–24) and especially Epaphroditus (2.25–30) who has sacrificially served both parties in ensuring the transmission of the Philippians' support (2.21).

3. The 'Philippian receipt' (Phil 4.10–20)

It is worth outlining, first of all, the case for the technical nature of the language of Paul's 'receipt'. In 1895 Adolf Deissmann deduced, from the fresh bulk of non-literary papyri retrieved from the sands of Egypt, that the verb *ἀπέχω* in the passage, at 4.18, was a technical term from the sphere of commerce. On the basis of the verb's 'constant occurrence in receipts in the Papyri' it must be allowed the technical sense of 'to sign a receipt'³: when Paul writes 'I have received full payment' (RSV), he is acknowledging receipt of the Philippians' financial support with a commercial formula.⁴

The usage seems to imply that the sum Paul acknowledged was not merely a gift but a debt, in that Paul confirms its receipt as would a vendor the sum

³ A. Deissmann, *Neue Bibelstudien*, Marburg 1897, 56.

⁴ Cf. in the combination of *apechō* and *panta* in e.g. *Ancient Inscriptions in the British Museum*, Oxford 1874–1916, II, No. 158 1. 34, *apechi panta*, cited by Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, London 1927, 111, see also 112 n. 1.

received for the thing sold, or – and the case is suggestive – as a workman might confirm the receipt of his wages. Deissmann reflected on this implicit sense of obligation, and in a later work added the explanation that Paul's allusion was probably 'gently humorous'.⁵ Perhaps the most significant contribution to research on Phil 4.10–20 was a short study by H. A. A. Kennedy in 1900.⁶ Kennedy first pointed out that commercial language had been noted in the passage long before Deissmann; in the fourth century John Chrysostom, in his Homilies on Philippians, had sensed that Paul's language was that of the marketplace, since he wrote 'He (Paul) showed that the thing was a debt, for that is the significance of ἀπέχω'. Kennedy concluded that Paul's phrase may be translated 'I give you a receipt for all you owed me'. Chrysostom's significance in the matter was, of course, that as a later speaker of *koine* Greek his opinion on such a nuance, if it drew his attention, was to be regarded.

Kennedy went on to point out (after Wettstein) that in Paul's phrase at 4.15 concerning the Philippians' sharing with him Paul 'in a *matter* (AV) of giving and receiving', *λόγος* properly denotes an *account*; he translates 'No church communicated with me so as to have *an account of giving and receiving* (debit and credit)' (Kennedy's emphasis). On Paul's phrase 'I seek the fruit that multiplies to your account' (4.17), Chrysostom's comment had been «δικαιοποίησεν τίκτεται»; since «τόκος was the regular Greek word for 'interest'», *τίκτειν* must have had associations with finance, and thus Chrysostom must have 'understood Paul's words as having the flavour of the exchange'. Kennedy thus translated Paul's phrase '*interest* accumulating to your account'.⁷

Deissmann had drawn attention to the technical use of the preposition *εἰς* in the Papyri, 'to specify the various purposes of the items of an account', relating this to Paul's 'collection *for* the saints' in 1Cor 16.1, as also in 2Cor 8.4, 9.1, 13, and Romans 15.26.⁸ Kennedy observed that in Phil 4.16 the same 'semi-technical' sense was present when Paul writes that even in Thessalonica (barely after his departure from Philippi) the Philippians had sent repeatedly 'to account of (*εἰς*) his need'. More recent commentators have

⁵ A. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, 122, also 331–332, 'St. Paul...had playfully given the Philippians a sort of receipt'. Cf. also e.g. F. W. Beare, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Philippians*, London 1959, 155 (Paul attempts 'a touch of the whimsical').

⁶ 'The Financial Colouring of Phil. 4.15–18', *ExpT* 12(1900–1901) 43–44.

⁷ *Eis logon* means 'to account of' in POxy II 275. 19, 21; both *karpeia* and *karpizomai* are used with reference to profits, cf. Moulton-Milligan, *Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament*, London 1952, 321 and 379.

⁸ *Bible Studies*, Edinburgh 1901, 117–118, also: *Neue Bibelstudien*, 23.

suspected that the catalogue of commercial terminology in the passage should be further expanded; δόμα in 4.17 seems to be 'payment' rather than 'gift' (RSV)⁹; Paul's 'I seek the gift' is perhaps *terminus technicus* for 'to demand payment'¹⁰, a demand which Paul says he refused to make of the Philippians.

Despite this abundance of technical commercial terminology, Kennedy echoed, however, Deissmann's suspicion that its cause was merely rhetorical; a 'playful tone' was detectable in Paul's voice, giving his thanks 'a singular grace and happiness of touch'. In his subsequent commentary on Phil in the Expositor's Greek Testament Kennedy commented again on Paul's ἀπέχω: 'The use of this verb adds much force to the thought, when we bear in mind that it was the regular expression... to denote *the receipt of what was due*' (his emphasis); yet he offered the same explanation.¹¹

This 'rhetorical' explanation, however, seems really to offer us little help with the most enigmatic feature of the passage, Paul's statement that 'in the beginning of the Gospel, when I left Macedonia, *no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving except you only*' (4.15, RSV); or, to follow Kennedy, 'No church shared with me so as to open an account of debit and credit but you alone'. It is this phrase which most of all demands the illumination of insight from some technical background. If we follow Kennedy's lead and check what Chrysostom makes of the phrase, we find that this early writer¹² goes so far as to pose the question why Paul in this verse did not write that no church 'gave' (ἔδωκεν) to him apart from the Philippians, but instead chose to say that no church 'shared' (ἔκοινώνησεν) with him in the account of giving and receiving. He offered this explanation:

'...as they who sell and buy share with each other, by mutually giving what they have (and this is to share), so too is it here. For there is not anything more profitable than this trade and traffic. It is performed on the earth, but it is completed in heaven. They who buy are on earth, but they buy and agree about heavenly things, whilst they lay down an earthly price.'

Chrysostom, who in this passage again reveals his sense for the commercial flavour of Paul's language, satisfied himself with the thought that a kind of spiritual bargain was going on between Paul and the Philippians, and we certainly find the argument that material benefactions are the just return for

⁹ Cf. Liddell-Scott, art. *doma*, likewise Moulton-Milligan, 168; both works cite PPe-tri. 42 C 1.4 (255 BC) dealing with the payment of some quarrymen.

¹⁰ *Epizētein* can denote a legal 'demand', cf. Moulton-Milligan, 238–239. Further J. Gnilka, *Der Philipperbrief*, Freiburg 1968, 179.

¹¹ The Expositor's Greek Testament III, London 1917, 472.

¹² Translation after W. C. Cotton, in: *The Homilies of St. John Chrysostom*, Oxford 1853.

spiritual benefits in Paul, in 1 Cor 9.11, Rom 15.27, and probably 2 Cor 9.12–14. Modern commentators are satisfied, virtually without exception, that no more hides behind Paul's enigmatic language in Phil 4.15.¹³

One notable exception is, however, Paul Sampley in his *Pauline Partnership in Christ* (1980), whose research 'rounds off' the observations of Deissmann and Kennedy. Sampley's thesis is that Paul's relations with the Philippian church must be viewed within the context of Roman law of contract; indeed, Sampley sees the relationship which obligates the Philippians to Paul as only one aspect of a form of contractual agreement employed also when Paul and the Jerusalem 'pillars' in Acts 15 expressed mutual acknowledgement of the legitimacy of each party's apostolic ministries and of the respective spheres in which their authority applied.¹⁴

If Paul did enter into a legal contract with the Philippians, which involved their obligation to support financially his apostolic mission, this would most likely be the explanation for the formal, technical character of the 'Philippian receipt', and especially the enigmatic description of 4.15. I believe that Sampley's thesis deserves definite approval, and that it indeed provides us with something of an exegetical key for understanding the occasion and purpose of much of the epistle. As regards the integrity of Phil, for my purpose it is only necessary to view chapters 1–2 along with 4.10–20 as two closely related pieces of correspondence, if not as two parts of a single letter which provided the framework for our present letter. It is the occasion and purpose of these sections with which the present argument is concerned. The polemical third chapter and the section 4.1–9, often regarded as interpolations, do not figure in the analysis.

4. *Consensual societas in Roman Law*

In Roman law binding contracts could be created by four specific instruments¹⁵:

- i. The object of a contract could be *physically transferred* to the party which thus incurred dept (*res*);
- ii. A solemn declaration (*verba*) could create a contract (such as marriage);

¹³ Cf. e.g. Beare, *op. cit.*, 155.

¹⁴ Sampley, *Partnership*, 21–50.

¹⁵ Cf. e.g. H. F. Jolowicz, *Historical Introduction to Roman Law*, Cambridge 1965, 279–304.

- iii. A written entry in a creditor's account-book (*litterae*);
- iv. Consent alone (*consensus*).

Sampley draws attention to one particular type or kind of contract within the group of consensual contracts: the consensual *societas*, a contract of 'association' or 'copartnership'¹⁶ created by mutual consent. This was a contract made by verbal agreement between parties for the achievement of a common goal, in which each party made contribution of skill, labour, capital, or status alone. The partnership was legally binding, though neither witnesses, documents, nor notification of authorities were required. Court tests and public sanction might be applied if the contract was broken.¹⁷

5. Jean Fleury and Paul Sampley on Consensual *Societas* in *Philippians*

Jean Fleury, Professor at the Lausanne Law faculty, also connected consensual *societas* with the 'Philippian receipt'¹⁸ Fleury expressed the opinion that Phil 4.10–20 evidences a *societas* contract used, in a business context, to create a partnership for profit between Paul and Lydia and partners, sellers of purple-dyed garments, Philippi (see Acts 16.20–40). Since they have already split up the profits from some entrepreneurial undertaking (had not Paul received sums repeatedly in Thessalonica, 4.16), Paul protests that with the last shipment of cash he has received more than his fair share; he has 'received full payment, and more', indeed, he '*abounds*'. He therefore terminates the partnership with the issue of the technical receipt: 'I have received full payment' (4.18).

Fleury's thesis is fanciful, yet it illustrates a historian of Roman Law attempting to come to grips with the unusual language of Phil 4.10–20. He does offer an explanation for the most difficult language employed by Paul in this passage, when he enigmatically writes that 'no church *entered into partnership with me in an account of giving and receiving except you only*' (4.15). The 'sharing' of the Philippians with Paul as to an account of debit and credit does seem to indicate the creation of a consensual *societas*, some

¹⁶ Cf. Lewis-Short, A Latin Dictionary, art. *societas*.

¹⁷ Cf. Sampley, Partnership, 11–20. On the *societas* contract see especially A. Watson, The Law of Obligations in the Later Roman Republic, Oxford 1965, 125–146.

¹⁸ «Une Société de fait dans l'Église Apostolique Phil. 4:10 a 22», in: Mélanges Philippe Meylan II, Lausanne 1963, 41–59. P. Sampley developed his own thesis independently of Fleury, cf. Sampley, Partnership, 74 n. 24.

partnership aimed at the achievement of a common goal. Yet Fleury can hardly be correct that 4.10–20 is a stray piece of correspondence about business between Paul and Lydia, since this would make Paul praise the Philippians that they like ‘no other church’ (4.15) had offered him a joint business scheme for profit – an idea which is quite implausible.

Sampley views the ‘sharing’, the *societas*, as an agreement that Paul should be ‘the evangelistic messenger’ of the Philippians ‘to the world that lay beyond their border’. Paul is ‘their representative’¹⁹. A special partnership existed between Paul and the Philippians for the furtherance of the Gospel. The Philippians saw with Paul that the widescale preaching of his Gospel was imperative and had joined hands with him to achieve it.²⁰

For the achievement of this common, earnestly-desired goal, the ‘preaching of the Gospel’ itself, Paul and the Philippians came to an agreement as to how it could best be achieved. The Philippians – and such as Lydia the purple-seller at least were not poor – felt that they could contribute capital. Paul, as accomplished evangelist and church-founder, obviously had the missionary skills required. So they agreed together to combine their different resources in the scheme which would best publish the Gospel. This does sound like the attitude of loyal enthusiasm of the converted God-fearer Lydia; of her the valuable *we*-source in Acts records that, after her baptism ‘she besought us, saying, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay”. And she prevailed upon us’ (16.15).

Sampley offers three categories of evidence to support his view of a *societas* contract between Paul and the Philippians. He points first to the excellent ground of the commercial language of 4.10–20, which we have investigated above. Secondly, he argues that the *koinonia* language of Philippians has the technical sense of *societas*; in the following we shall look at some particular instances. Thirdly, Sampley sees prominent use in Phil of other terminology usually associated with the contract of consensual *societas*. Here hard evidence is definitely to hand. The contract of consensual *societas* was of its nature a matter of agreement. In the execution of the

¹⁹ Sampley, *Partnership*, 71.

²⁰ We should, however, take care to avoid language which implies a subordination of Paul to the Philippians.

common project, any partner could veto an administrative proposal with which he did not agree. The contract was broken if the wishes of any partner were overridden by the others. There then remained no *societas* proper, but the disgruntled partner could sue the others for reparation.²⁰ Thus the constant maintenance of common consent was of the essence of the success of the partnership. The Jurist Gaius in the second century AD thus wrote 'A *societas* lasts as long as the parties remain of the same mind (*in eodem sensu*)'.²¹

Paul clearly has it unusually much on his heart in Phil that he and the church at Philippi remain in agreement on all matters. At 2.1–2 Paul earnestly exhorts the Philippians 'So if there is any incentive of love, any participation in the spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind (τὸ αὐτὸ φρονήτε), having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind (τὸ ἐν φρονοῦντες)' (RSV). Paul goes on to exhort the Philippians to the humility Christ showed in his suffering and death. Sampley's insight that this language belongs to a contract of consensual *societas* seems correct; but it leads on to an important exegetical question: Why should the development of an attitude of humility like to that of Christ in his humiliation be essential for the maintenance of the partnership of financial support which the Philippians have extended to Paul? We return to this key question below.

Sampley also points to Paul's exhortation that Euodia and Syntyche 'think the same thing' or 'agree' (τὸ αὐτὸ φρονεῖν) 'in the Lord' (4.2). Paul's employment of what sounds like the language of consensual *societas* implies that the *societas* bond extends to relationships on quite a broad scale within the congregation at Philippi. This is a bold thesis; yet Sampley does seem to be on secure ground in the matter of the *phronein* language in Phil. As he points out, it is unusually frequent. The Pastorals aside (one occurrence) the

²¹ See F. de Zulueta, *The Institutes of Gaius* 2, Oxford 1953, 179 (also cited by Sampley, Partnership, 15).

verb appears twenty-two times in the letters attributed to Paul; of these ten describe the 'common mind' theme of Phil.²²

We turn now to exegetical observations which offer supplementary support for Sampley's thesis.

6. 'The beginning of the Gospel' in Phil 4.15

Paul uses the phrase '*in the beginning of the Gospel*', in a shorthand fashion which perplexes commentators in the key verse, 4.15. How can Paul locate 'the beginning of the Gospel' *at the point where he left Macedonia* on his second missionary journey? Many commentators argue that Paul's phrase must refer to 'the beginning of the Gospel so far as the Philippians were concerned', that is, Paul came to preach in Philippi.²³ But his words locate the beginning of the Gospel on his *departure* from Macedonia (in

²² The verb appears in Paul's reference to the resumption of his support from Philippi at 4.10. W. Schenk, *Die Philipperbriefe des Paulus*, Stuttgart 1984, 63–65, notes that in the closely parallel text 2 Macc 14.8, which also uses *phronein* with *hyper* and the genitive, the phrase designates the technical obligation of the Jewish leader (in this case Alcimus) who became or claimed to be (court-) 'friend' (*philos*) to the Syrian monarch to 'care (genuinely) for the things which concern the king', *hyper tōn anekontōn tōi basilei gnēsiōs phronōn*. Alcimus held that Nicanor's friendship (*eunoia*) with Judas Maccabaeus conversely constituted conspiracy against the king, *elegen ton Nikanōr allotria phronein tōn pragmatōn*, 14.26. Similarly, the letter designating Jonathan 'friend' of Alexander Balas (1 Macc 10,18–20; *hēmōn philos*, 19) stipulates that it is Jonathan's duty (as an ally) to care for Alexander's interests and maintain 'friendship', *phronein ta hēmōn kai syntērein philian pros hēmas*. In the Greek additions to Esther, *hoi ta hēmetera phronountes* seems a fixed designation for those who held the title 'friend of the king'. Cf. G. Bertram, TDNT IX, 226 and 229, where Bertram notes that *phroneō ta tou...* 'relates to disposition and attitude, especially of political supporters and followers' in Josephus, Ant. 7.28, 11.273; 12.392, 399; 14.268. Thus Paul's phrase at 4.10 evidences a usage of *phronein* which describes the obligations which arise from a mutual contract (here that of the alliance between the *philos* and the political leader); this supports Sampley's deduction that it is used in Philippians as the Greek translation for the Latin *consensus* between *societas* partners. Sampley cites an epitaph of the second century BC from Deissmann, *Bible Studies*, 256, and P. Oxy 282.9 and P. Bon 21.8 of *phronein* used to indicate agreement in the marriage contract, *Partnership*, 75 and 77.

²³ Cf. e.g. R. P. Martin, *Philippians*, 1976, 165.

which Philippi lay), not on his arrival there.²⁴ This seems clearly his intended sense, since he adds that the Philippians showed their special devotion by sending help even when after his departure he had not yet reached the border with Achaia, but was still in Macedonia, 'even in Thessalonica' (4.16).

It seems that Paul had agreed with the Philippians to carry the Gospel beyond Macedonia with their support. This event seems to be circumscribed as the 'beginning of the Gospel', meaning 'the beginning of our project for the furtherance of the Gospel'. Something must have happened between Paul and the church at Philippi which was of such a formative and constitutive character for his subsequent ministry that Paul could refer to it in shorthand fashion as 'the Gospel' itself. Sampley's thesis, I think, offers the only explanation possible: if the two parties had definitely and solemnly bound themselves in a consensual *societas* for the furtherance of the Gospel, Paul would thereafter always have carried on his preaching ministry in intimate connection with the church at Philippi, and ultimately his departure from Philippi could be circumscribed as 'the beginning of the Gospel' in his correspondence with the Philippian congregation.

I suggest that the Philippians also agreed, on their part as the church Paul left behind, not only to support Paul's mission beyond Macedonia but to be diligent themselves to ensure the continued preaching of the Gospel within their home province. Paul commends them for supporting him even when he was preaching in Thessalonica because this was their home territory. The terms of the agreement sound analogous to the distribution of missionary territory of agreed between Paul and the Jerusalem church (Gal 2.6–10, where in verse 9 *koinonia* language also appears). Since disagreement and lack of cooperation within the church at Philippi must obviously hinder the preaching of the Gospel on the 'home front', it breaks the terms of the division of labour in the copartnership to further the Gospel. Paul can demand from Philippian Christians like Euodia and Syntyche that they too keep to the 'one mind' of the contract. To the agreed division of labour Paul refers in 1.27, where he wishes 'whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you stand firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side

²⁴ Note especially the discussion of Beare, op.cit. 154, who resists the view that Paul 'is thinking of history from the reader's point of view', cf. M. Dibelius, *Thessalonicher I-II*. Philipper, Tübingen HNT 1925, 74. Beare opposes amongst other interpretations that which sees Paul as 'so under the spell of Greek civilisation that he thinks of the victorious march of the gospel as getting seriously under way only when the Greek peninsula itself was invaded' (cf. E. Meyer, *Ursprung und Anfänge des Christentums III*, Stuttgart/Berlin 1923, 80; Gnilka, op.cit., 177) and remains dissatisfied 'with any of the explanations offered'.

by side for the faith of the Gospel'. The language of united action reflects the copartnership.

*7. The copartnership from the beginning for the furtherance of the Gospel,
Phil 1.5*

Paul's meaning in Phil 1.5 is disputed. He is thankful to God for the Philippians' 'partnership' (RSV: or 'fellowship') in the gospel from the first day until now'; the sense of *κοινωνία* in this phrase is debated. Is it passive: 'your participation in the Gospel', which seems to mean little more than 'your being Christians'? Or is it active, meaning something like 'your involvement with me, your sharing with me in the Gospel'?²⁵ The active seems preferable, and, for example, Lightfoot chose to include all forms of cooperation (sympathy, suffering, labour) in the meaning of the term but believed that it refers in particular to 'their almsgiving', which was 'a signal instance of this cooperation'.²⁶

Yet this involves seeing the succeeding 'in the Gospel' as a kind of shorthand phrase meaning 'for the furtherance of the Gospel'. Is Paul saying 'I am thankful for your co-partnership with me, a co-partnership which has as its aim the furtherance of the Gospel, and which has been in operation from the beginning (i.e. of our association) up to the present'? This is surely his intended sense, but it can only be read from the text if 'partnership in the Gospel' denotes a quite definite project such as that which Sampley suggests. If such a project existed, the significance of the albeit brief phrase would be evident to all concerned; the circumscription would be permissible. This partnership is that referred to as happening at the 'beginning of the Gospel' in 4.15; the 'beginning of the Gospel' in 4.15 therefore explains the 'partnership for the furtherance of the Gospel' of 1.5, and the two verses taken in combination offer strong support for Sampley's thesis.

If Paul as early as 1.5 is making specific reference to the sending of financial support, it is reasonable to assume that the difficult reference to the 'bishops and deacons' in the opening greeting (1.1) is also related to the matter of financial support. Only in Phil does Paul mention in his opening greeting the ministers of the church to which his missal is addressed. The suggestion that the bishops and deacons at Philippi are specifically addressed

²⁵ Cf. Martin, *op.cit.*, 64–65.

²⁶ J. B. Lightfoot, *Philippians*, London 1890, 83.

in Paul's greeting because they administered the support which had been sent to Paul goes back to Chrysostom.²⁷

8. Paul's 'thankless thanks': Phil 4.10

One of the most difficult points of interpretation in Phil has been the tameness of Paul's 'thanks' for his financial support from the Philippians at 4.10. He writes 'I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me' (RSV).²⁸ Paul's tone is virtually condescending, where his gratitude should overflow. Dibelius summed it up memorably as Paul's '...danklose Dank'.²⁹ Various explanations have been offered. Had the Philippians disobeyed Paul's orders that the churches should not support him (cf. 1 Cor 9.15–18)?³⁰ Had his boasts about self-sufficiency upset the Philippians?³¹ Did Paul suffer from a 'certain embarrassment'³² about money matters? While these suggestions do not carry conviction, Sampley's thesis furnishes a plausible explanation. If the Philippians had contracted to support Paul, it is evident from this verse that they have for a while not been doing what they had agreed to do.

It seems a rift had set in, which has now been healed: the Philippians are sending funds again. From Paul's point of view it was an obligation on which they had no right to renege. Thus we would not expect him to thank the church at Philippi too profusely since this would impugn his own dignity and rights in the matter, implying that the Philippians had the right to withhold or remit as they desired. Paul simply thanks God that things are back to how they should be again, and stresses with his 'receipt' his full satisfaction with his payment, thus emphasising that he and the church at Philippi are now fully reconciled. He praises the Philippians where he can genuinely commend them – for uniquely entering such a contract of their own volition at

²⁷ Homily I (1), cf. Cotton, *op.cit.*, 8: 'Here one might reasonably enquire how it is that though he nowhere else writes to the clergy... but in general to *all the saints*, or believers, or *beloved*, yet here he writes to the Clergy? It was because they sent, and bare fruit, and were those who dispatched Epaphroditus to him.'

²⁸ Or, if *anethalete* is intransitive, 'that you have revived to think of me', with the variant *tou...phronein* of F and G.

²⁹ *Op.cit.*, 73–74.

³⁰ C. O. Buchanan, *EQ* 36(1964) 161ff.

³¹ J. H. Michael, *ExpT* 34(1922–23) 106–109.

³² R. P. Martin, *op.cit.*, 161. References to Buchanan and Michael from Martin.

the beginning, and for even going beyond the agreement by supporting him when he was in Thessalonica.³³

9. *A breach between Paul and Philippi over his imprisonment?*

I suggest that we find the cause for disagreement between Paul and the Philippians referred to at 1.12. Paul is speaking of his imprisonment. The RSV renders: 'I want you to know, brethren, that what has happened to me has *really* (μᾶλλον, or 'rather') served to advance the Gospel.' Lightfoot paraphrased: 'Lest you should be misinformed, I would have you know, that

³³ Paul's continuation that the Philippians had lacked *opportunity* to send him aid might be seen as a difficulty for my case that the Philippians had intentionally stopped sending support. Yet the coolness of Paul's thanks is itself difficult to reconcile with the phrase if it truly refers to some 'morally neutral' impediment as to ability to support Paul. If practical considerations such as the poverty of the church at Philippi (by the time of these events) and their strenuous efforts for the collection for 'the poor' at Jerusalem (2 Cor 8.1–5) lie behind Paul's phrase, we should expect overflowing praise for the Philippians' support for Paul. I would suggest that Paul is by the phrase partly aiming to lessen the severity of his apparent ingratitude, and partly referring to the inability of the church as a whole to send support because its *leadership* has been in dispute with Paul, perhaps itself part of a larger conflict involving the opponents of 1.15–18 which affected the traffic between Philippi and Paul. A special discontent with the leadership at Philippi is perhaps observable in the greeting of the church officers responsible for the collection and despatch of money to Paul, the 'bishops and deacons', *after* the greeting to the congregation, the 'saints', in Phil 1.1. E. Best argues that the verse is specifically aimed at a 'demotion' of haughty officials at Philippi, at whom the lengthy exhortation to humility of Phil 2.1–11 is also directed, *Studia Evangelica IV* (ed. F.L. Cross, Berlin, 1968) 971–976. Best's study is consistent with and can be called to support my thesis about the argument of Phil 1–2. If dissatisfaction with Paul's attitude to his contract with Philippi gives us the thread of his thought, then Paul's rebuffs must cut most sharply with and indeed be aimed primarily at the leadership at Philippi, who bore responsibility for the church's collective attitude and action. Whoever the *episkopoi* are, the closest parallel to the Christian office, the *Mebaqqer* of the Qumran scrolls, cf. e.g. Gnilka, *Der Philipperbrief* 31980, 36, is sufficient to confirm their authority in matters of finance. After the completion of this paper the author heard with interest a paper of Mr. G. Peterman at the Social Background Seminar of the British New Testament conference, Sheffield, September 1991, on conventions of thanksgiving in the papyri and Paul's 'thankless thanks' in Phil 4.10–20. Mr. Peterman argues that verbal gratitude is inappropriate between those who are intimate, the social expectation being material gratitude. He points especially to P. Mert 12, 8 'for it is to those who are not friends that we must give thanks in words'. His results are clearly relevant to this section of my paper and I look forward to their publication. However, the extreme coolness of 4.10 suggests that the social convention to which Mr. Peterman points will not provide a complete explanation of Paul's 'thankless thanks', and is to be augmented with the material of the present treatment.

my sufferings and restraints, *so far from being prejudicial to the Gospel*, have served to advance it.³⁴ Paul's 'rather' is aimed at the thought, usually taken to be unspoken, that his imprisonment could do the Gospel no good at all.

It is of course possible that Paul merely finds a good opportunity to make an edifying point, and one that he has been learning himself: in the upside-down-world of being a Christian, God brings the sublimest good from the deepest tragedy. But let us reflect on Sampley's thesis of the Philippian 'missionary fund'. Is it not possible that the Philippians, who had invested so much in Paul's mission thus far, were not actually grumbling that they had 'backed a bad horse', who, far from preaching far and wide, was tied down to the spot by the Roman authorities and unable to preach at all? I suggest that this was so, especially since Paul proceeds to make specific mention of rival preachers who were making capital of his imprisonment (1.15–18); there were those around who sought for points which might show him in a bad light. One such score made by rival preachers against Paul was, I suggest, that if he continued to draw support from Philippi while imprisoned, while not fulfilling his apostolic ministry to preach the Gospel, he was drawing funds on false pretences.

If this were the case, Paul's response would necessarily be: 'I would have you know, brethren, that this imprisonment is not a breach of my contract with you to preach the Gospel, but rather is serving it in the best possible way. Look! The Gospel is now known through the whole Praetorium, and other brethren are now fearless in their preaching.' Thus, the disaster which seemed to indicate the collapse of the common 'project for the preaching of the Gospel' has rather taken it to its greatest heights yet. This is his point in 1.12–14.

I suggest, therefore, that the reason for the interruption of the flow of support from the Philippians to Paul, evident in the 'thankless thank' of 4.10, was Paul's imprisonment itself. The Philippians had viewed this as a breach of their initial contract with Paul, and had in consequence cut the flow of funds.

10. Paul rejects death for Christ in favour of life for the Philippians

The progress of the epistle seems to confirm that the Philippians have been dissatisfied with Paul because of his imprisonment. Paul says that he is confident of release (1.19) but must point out that death would be quite the

³⁴ Op.cit., 87.

better course as far as he is personally concerned (20–23). His argument then takes an unexpected turn. It is for the sake of the *Philippians* that it is better that Paul remain in the flesh (24). In the course of the argument Paul states that to continue alive means fruitful labour in general (22), but at verse 24 Paul is surprisingly concerned not about his general, wider ministry to the church and the world, but about the *Philippians* in particular. Or, if Paul is earlier concerned about his general ministry, then he is nonetheless finally most concerned about the *Philippians*' relation to it. It is if Paul comes again to Philippi (25), that the *Philippian* Christians will have 'ample cause to glory in Christ' (RSV).

The focus on *Philippi* here seems too great to allow us to view the transition as a question of Paul moving from the general case – the value of his wider ministry – to a particular instance of this, the *Philippians*, his present readers, who will rejoice with the same rejoicing which all of his congregations will show on his release. It is not a matter of the importance of 'present company'. As elsewhere in the epistle, *Philippi* seems unexpectedly central to Paul's role as a minister of the Gospel.

Paul's point is this. If the *Philippians* are concerned about his part of the bargain as their missionary, this is a scheme of priorities to which he is unwilling to bend; of course, as far as he is concerned, life has in any case no other purpose than the Gospel, but his personal preference is death (23). What the *Philippians* threaten to view as ultimate failure, he views as most positive success. But – his rhetoric is designed to humble the *Philippians* – he will set aside his own desires and make his bold apostolic decision³⁵ not to die, but to be resurrected to further ministry *for their sakes*, in order to continue ministering as the 'missionary' of the *Philippian* church. It is in view of the bargain for his support that he finally agrees to continue with them 'all', for their 'progress and joy in the faith': he will resume his wider mission for the preaching of the Gospel, and in so doing will come again to *Philippi*, bearing news of his mission's fruitfulness, a visible witness to the *Philippians* of the blessing which God brings upon the faithfulness of their sacrificial support.

He concludes the discussion of his imprisonment on a note which demonstrates that the *Philippians* have been in dispute with him on the matter. One might think that the logic of Paul's position means that in reality the *Philippians* would have had most cause to glory in Paul if he die the martyr's death. But Paul chooses a different line for the purpose of demonstrating to the

³⁵ Paul's extraordinary presumption to be able choose his fate (1.22) perhaps arises specifically from his desire to shame the *Philippians*.

Philippians his preparedness to continue their agreement. He views death as a personal benefit for himself, yet, generously conceding to look at matters from the point of view of his *societas* with the Philippian church, he will give up his own desire and give them the cause they desire for pride in him. He will come again to Philippi, so that they may indeed have 'ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus' (26, RSV; literally 'in order that your boasting in Christ Jesus may abound on my account'). This final phrase demonstrates quite clearly that the Philippians have complained to Paul that they did *not* have cause to boast in Christ Jesus because of him; the reason was his imprisonment, which they felt broke his agreement to travel and preach the Gospel. Such was a cause for dismay, not rejoicing. Why should they support him under these circumstances?

Paul consents to live on what is in reality the lower level of the *societas* contract with the Philippians. His condescension aids him in making his next point: he turns to emphasise that they too must keep their part of the contract to further the Gospel. Whether he is to come to Philippi or not, he wishes to hear that they too are striving to keep the common covenant to preach the Gospel (1.27–30).

11. The exhortation to Christ-like humility is a consequence of the Philippians' questioning attitude to Paul's imprisonment

I wish here not to make proposals about the origins of the passage known as the 'Philippian hymn' (2.6–11), nor about its rich theological content, but to make a proposal about why it is found in this particular letter of Paul. To pre-empt one possible criticism of my suggestions concerning the passage, it may be pointed out that to find that this sublime portion of early Christology is part of an intense debate over practical relations between Paul and the Philippian congregation is in no way to trivialise its content. Rather, it is to demonstrate that New Testament theology itself assumes Christ-like humility in the service of the mundane.

The typical assessment of Paul's relations with the Philippians is that they were somehow his prize converts, his most faithful congregation, with whom his relations were unusually cordial, indeed supremely loving.³⁶ Certainly, Paul does lavish unusual praise on them, and emphasise their uniquely

³⁶ Cf. e.g. Martin, *op.cit.*, 9. That Paul boasts of the Philippians at 2 Cor 8.1–4 and eulogises them at Phil 4.1, only makes us wonder all the more at his severity here, and seek for its cause. Paul is effecting repair of the breach both by his lavish praise and by his sharp call to heel.

sacrificial attitude in sending finance. Why, then, do we also find the extraordinarily harsh sequence of exhortation in Phil 2.1–4?

So if there is any encouragement in Christ
any incentive of love
any participation in the Spirit
any affection and sympathy

(this is tantamount to writing ‘if you are Christians at all’)

complete my joy by being of the same mind
having the same love
being in full accord and of alone mind

*do nothing from selfishness or conceit
but in humility count others better than yourselves (RSV)*

This is an enormously severe demand for a selfless attitude.³⁷ Obviously, it implies there has been a disunity in Philippi which displeases Paul intensely. But I submit that it also applies to relations between Paul and the church at Philippi. My argument up to this point has been, the Philippians’ objection to Paul is that his imprisonment really broke the agreement of a joint project to preach the Gospel. If this is the case, there is an inner logic which connects Paul’s severe exhortation to Christ-like humility in chapter 2.1–11 with his points about the real success of his imprisonment and his preparedness to die for the Gospel.

Paul sees his prospective martyr’s death as only the ultimate instance of the humiliation and suffering for the sake of Christ to which he is already subject in this imprisonment. Hence, for the Philippians to have objected to his imprisonment means ultimately a rejection of the way of the cross, of the propriety of suffering for the sake of Christ. Yet believers must always be prepared to find their suffering for the sake of Christ extended even to the point of the martyr’s death. Hence, I submit, the wrangle over whether Paul’s imprisonment broke the terms of his *societas* with the Philippians called forth his lengthy exhortation to a humility which emulates even that of Christ in his suffering and death.

Both the major ‘strophic’ arrangements of the ‘hymn’ of 2.6–11 exclude the phrase ‘even the death of the cross’ (verse 8) as a Pauline addition to what is otherwise held to be a pre-Pauline composition, emphasising the

³⁷ M. Henry: Paul ‘is very importunate with them’.

special resonance of the phrase with Paul's *theologia crucis*.³⁸ The present argument suggests that the phrase is not merely a 'Pauline touch' but was very deliberately added to achieve a connection between the 'hymn' and Paul's earlier discussion of the possibility of his own martyrdom, and thus with his whole argument in Phil 1–2 against the Philippians' rejection of his imprisonment as a breach of his contract to preach the Gospel with their support.

12. Phil 2.17–18: Why would Paul's death be a libation on the sacrifice of the Philippians' faith?

That Paul returns, after his severe exhortations, to the matter of his own death at 2.17–18 demonstrates, I submit, that his purpose in these exhortations is to secure a proper attitude from the Philippians to his own death. The matter of Paul's own imprisonment is discussed both in advance (1.12–26) of the sequence of exhortations (1.27–2.18, in which the hymn on Christ's humility is set) and concluding it (2.17–18), a structural indication that it is the thread which holds the argument together.

Paul thus closes the sequence of exhortations by specifically and emphatically requesting agreement of the Philippians with his own attitude to his possible death in verses 17–18, literally, 'But if indeed I am to be poured out as a libation on the sacrifice and service of your faith, I rejoice, and rejoice with you all; in the same way you too should rejoice, and rejoice with me'. The repetition of the 'rejoice'/'corejoice' combination emphasises that Paul's concern is the achievement of a common mind with the Philippians over the matter of his suffering.

The Philippians again assume a peculiarly central in Paul's ministry; his death would be a libation on the offering of the Philippians' faith, rather than on the faith of all Christians. The only reason for singling out the Philippians can be that they alone amongst churches made a special agreement of support with Paul (4.15). It is clear that the 'sacrifice and service' of their faith (2.17) is their financial support, for which Paul also employs sacrificial imagery at 4.18 ('a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, well-pleasing to

³⁸ E. Lohmeyer, *Kyrios Jesus*, Heidelberg 1928; ²1961, Darmstadt, 6 and 44, finds six stanzas of three lines, omits the phrase, as does J. Jeremias' division into antiphonal couplets, *Studia Paulina*, Haarlem 1953, 146–154, and *NovT* 6(1963) 182–188. The other analyses also omit the phrase, cf. the surveys of Gnilka, op.cit., 133–138 and R. P. Martin, *Carmen Christi. Philippians II. 5–11*, Cambridge 1967, 24–41.

God').³⁹ Thus Paul concludes his argument, insisting that his death, far from indicating breach of contract, would only be the appropriate end to their joint project for the proclamation of the Gospel. Paul has based his plea for a common attitude to his imprisonment and withdrawal from 'active service' on his case that while imprisonment itself serves the Gospel (1.12), the sacrifice of martyrdom would constitute a yet higher service. We can note, finally, Paul's condescension in continuing to speak of the Philippians' material support as a sacrifice in the face of his preparedness to make the martyr's far greater sacrifice; since they are *societas* copartners, the contributions of each party to the work of the Gospel are equally deserving of honour. Both merit the high language of 'sacrifice'.

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³⁹ Leitourgia, 2.17, referred originally to services (involving expense) laid on rich private individuals for the public good in the city-state; cf. H. Strathmann TDNT IV, 216–217. In 2.17 the term retains a financial aspect, though it can mean merely cultic service.