

Mission as Drama: *A New Proposal for Pauline Theology*

A PAPER PRESENTED TO THE WESTERN FELLOWSHIP OF
PROFESSORS AND SCHOLARS

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Introduction

Who *is* Paul the Apostle? Or, more germane to this paper, who does *Paul* say he is? The simple answer of course is that Paul is an apostle *to the Gentiles* (Rom. 1:1-5; 15:14-21; 1 Cor. 1:1-3; 2 Cor. 1:1-2; Gal. 1:1-5; Titus 1:1-3). But what does that mean? E.P. Sanders' answer is on target: "Who was (Paul)? He was the one who would fulfill the expectations of the prophets and perhaps Jesus Himself; he would bring the Gentiles to worship the God of Israel."¹ However, Sanders' work unfortunately leaves this insight almost wholly undeveloped as he fixates upon the apparent inconsistencies of Paul's thought particularly as it relates to the law and justification. While Paul's example as a missionary has never lacked admiration by missionaries and mission organizations alike, the significance of how his unique missionary vocation directly impacted his *theology* has not yet been fully appreciated by New Testament scholarship.² This is curious, especially given the consensus among Pauline scholars that Paul did not set out to write systematic treatises but was an *occasional* theologian whose letters sought to undergird and promote his missionary work. Even Romans, arguably Paul's most "systematic" letter, was governed largely by the circumstances of the Aegean mission.³

If indeed Paul's letters are "occasional" in that they are literary responses to the circumstantial needs of the churches, is it not appropriate to ask how those circumstances informed his theology and vice versa? Put another way, what does Paul's theology have to do

¹ Sanders, E.P. *Paul: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, UK: Oxford Press 1991), p. 2. Sanders correctly asserts this as the fundamental starting point for engaging Paul's theology.

² An example of this neglect is some of the major works that have appeared this century on Paul's theology, none of which address the topic of mission directly: Whitely, D.E.H. *The Theology of St. Paul* (Oxford: Blackwell 1964); Bruce, F.F. *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1977); Ridderbos, Herman *Paul: An Outline of his Theology* trans. John Richard De Witt (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1975); Dunn, James *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1998); Schnelle, Udo *Apostle Paul: His Life and Theology* trans. Eugene Boring (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker 2003). One exception to this trend is Thomas Schreiner's *Paul: Apostle of God's Glory in Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press 2001). Schreiner acknowledges this neglect in New Testament scholarship and devotes an entire chapter to the impact that Paul's missionary vocation had on his theology (pp. 37-72).

³ See discussion in Longenecker, Richard *Introducing Romans: Critical Issues in Paul's most Famous Letter* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2011), pp. 92-168.

with his work as a missionary? In the 1990's New Testament scholar W.P. Bowers challenged future Pauline scholars to address this lacuna and bridge the divide between "Paul the theologian" and "Paul the missionary" by arguing:

"No adequate understanding of Pauline theology will be achieved until his perspective on mission has been integrated into the larger interpretation of his theology, showing the place and relationships of the Gentile mission within his theological reflection. Without such an achievement, we will not have an adequate understanding either of Paul's mission or of his theology."⁴

This paper seeks to take up Bower's challenge by offering a new paradigm for engaging the Pauline corpus. Proposals for a thematic "center" in the Pauline corpus, though wide and diverse, deal almost exclusively with Paul as a "thinker".⁵ This flawed enterprise only serves to further the dichotomy between Paul's reflection and missionary vocation. As an alternative, we suggest that the real "center" of Paul's theology is rooted in his own self-perception as *an apostle for the Gentiles on behalf of Christ*. In other words, at the heart of Paul's theology is not a set of *abstract principles*, but rather a network of "practices" which shape his apostolate. Two illustrations, the *graphic* and the *dramatic*, will serve as metaphors that will establish our thesis that the interplay between Paul's thought and praxis is the nexus of his theology.

First, the *graphic*: Imagine Paul's life as a graph of continuous intersection between vertical and horizontal lines. The *vertical* lines delineate his union with Jesus Christ, through whom he in turn ministers *horizontally* to Jews and Gentiles with the express purpose of gathering them into renewed communities of worship. Paul's life then is "centered" within this vertical/horizontal axiom in which his theology and praxis inform one another. Second, Paul's

⁴ Bowers, W.P. "Mission" in *The Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* Gerald Hawthorne, Ralph Martin, Daniel Reid ed. (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press 1993), p. 613.

⁵ See the summary in Plevnik, Joseph "The Center of Pauline Theology," *CBQ* 51 (1989) 461-78. See also the review of literature since Plevnik in Porter, Stanley "Is There a Center to Paul's Theology? An Introduction to the Study of Paul and his Theology" in *Paul and His Theology* Stanley E. Porter (ed) (Lieden, UK: Brill 2006), pp. 1-21.

life can also be framed in *dramatic* terms, namely, Pauline theology is, *by its very nature*, a “missiological performance”⁶ consisting of the tri-fold praxis of *proclamation* (preaching the gospel of the reign of God through Jesus by offering forgiveness of sins in His name), *incorporation* (the response of those who trust and believe the saving message of Jesus consisting of repentance, baptism and being enfolded into the community of God’s people), and *ecclesial formation* (the ongoing nurture, networking and planting of new congregations).

This interplay between theology and praxis, we contend, is what gives Paul’s thought its unique texture and dynamic. To properly engage Paul requires an understanding of the vertical/horizontal axiom of his relationships within the larger “performance” he was scripted to give under the “directorship” of Christ in God’s redemptive drama. The “script” which guides Paul is a renewed understanding of Israel’s scripture read in light of God’s redemptive work through Christ, most notably the prophet Isaiah’s vision of a new priesthood who shall declare God’s glory to the Gentile nations (cf. Is. 66:21).

Our thesis will be tested following a three point line of inquiry: first, we will develop current insights from the fields of missiology and theological hermeneutics which help provide a robust framework for integrating Paul’s theology and praxis using the *graphic* and *dramatic* metaphors described above. To demonstrate this we will draw from two scholars in particular whose works have provided a theologically-informed approach to mission: Paul Hiebert and

⁶ As will be noted further down in this essay, though the terminology is my own, I am heavily indebted to Kevin Vanhoozer’s “theo-drama” model for my reading of Paul. While Vanhoozer himself does not work in Paul specifically, it is interesting to note that in a recent work on hermeneutics he makes mention of the natural bridge between his own hermeneutical project and the concerns of missiologists. “It strikes me as odd that a volume devoted to going beyond the sacred page lacks the *perspective of the missiologist*. After all, the first people to take the bible beyond its original context were the early missionaries, and generations of missionaries have been going beyond ever since. Surely biblical scholars and theologians can learn something from those who have written on *contextualization from the standpoint of Christian missions*.” See Meadors, Gary T. and Gundry, Stanley N. (ed.) *Moving beyond the Bible to Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan 2009), p. 267, emphasis mine. This insightful comment, often missed by New Testament scholars, provides an opportunity for a fresh appraisal of how “mission” as a scriptural meta-narrative informed the thought and praxis of Paul.

Kevin Vanhoozer; second, we will test our thesis by offering a fresh reading of Rom. 15:14-21 which, in our estimation, most clearly illuminates the *graphic* and *dramatic* make up Paul's identity; finally, we draw these insights together into a synthesis which demonstrates that the texture of Paul's theology is *personal*, not abstract; *practical*, not theoretical; *active*, not passive. Our hope is to engender a fresh discussion for how Pauline theology can be more faithfully engaged by taking more seriously how Paul's thought and praxis mutually inform and shape one another.

Paul Hiebert: *Defining Missiology*

Paul Hiebert, who served both as a missionary and professor, argues that *missiology* is the “integrative discipline” which brings together a wide spectrum of disciplines such as theology, anthropology, and church history into mutually constructive dialogue for the “express purpose of gospel advancement.”⁷ More specifically, Hiebert argues that *missiology* is best defined by asking “how can the gospel of Jesus Christ be incarnated into human contexts so people understand and believe, societies are transformed, and the kingdom of God is made manifest on earth as it is in heaven?”⁸ He then breaks this statement down into four key questions:

1. What is the relationship of human missions to God's mission?
2. What is the nature of the gospel in a particular human context?
3. How can the gospel be effectively communicated so that people believe?
4. How does the gospel transform societies?⁹

Hiebert's schema for missiology provides a helpful manner by which to intersect the vertical/horizontal axiom of Paul's thought as described above. The vertical axiom *connects* the

⁷ Hiebert, Paul G. *The Gospel in Human Contexts: Anthropological Explorations for Contemporary Missions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker 2009), p. 32.

⁸ *ibid*, p. 33

⁹ *ibid*, p. 33

human activity of the missionary and the divine activity of God (*divine/missionary*) while the horizontal axiom *defines* the connection between the *activity* of the missionary and the *human context* in which the missionary works (*missionary/human*). The nature of missiology then, Hiebert suggests, “seeks to build the bridge between *biblical revelation* and *human contexts*. It seeks to remove the gap between orthodoxy and orthopraxy, between truth, love and holiness.”¹⁰ *Missiology* as vertical/horizontal axiom provides us an agenda for the study of Paul that takes seriously both the vertical nature of Paul’s thought (i.e. what Paul thought about God, Christ, the church, etc.) while at the same time accounting for his horizontal praxis of *proclamation, incorporation* and *ecclesial formation*.

Kevin Vanhoozer: *Paul’s theology as a “Missiological Performance”*

However, we are still in need of a framework within which the vertical/horizontal axioms of Paul’s life can take into full account the “dramatic” role he fulfills in salvation history. It is here that Kevin Vanhoozer’s recent work in theological hermeneutics, *The Drama of Doctrine*, is exceedingly helpful. Vanhoozer’s contention is that “the Christian way is fundamentally *dramatic*, involving speech and action on behalf of Jesus’ truth and life. It concerns the way of living truthfully, and its claim to truth cannot be isolated from the way of life with which it is associated.”¹¹

Using the idea of the Christian life as a theatrical drama (“theo-drama”) in which all of God’s people are called to participate God’s mission, the church is to live in accordance with God’s “script” (Scripture) as directed by the Holy Spirit. Vanhoozer suggests that “thinking of doctrine in *dramatic* rather than *theoretical* terms provides a wonderfully engaging and integrative model for understanding what it means to follow – with all our mind, heart, soul and

¹⁰ *ibid*, p. 45 (emphasis mine)

¹¹ Vanhoozer, Kevin *Doctrine as Drama: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press 2005), p. 15 (emphasis mine).

strength – the way, truth and life embodied and enacted in Jesus Christ.”¹² Through combining recent proposals from speech-act theory in conjunction with the functionality of Scripture to provide, Vanhoozer calls deploys a “canonical-linguistic” hermeneutic to scripture.

“Though it has much in common with its cultural-linguistic cousin... the canonical-linguistic approach maintains that the normative use is ultimately not that of ecclesial *culture* but of the biblical *canon*... a canonical-linguistic theology attends both to the drama in the text – what God is doing in the world through Christ – and to the drama that continues in the church as God uses Scripture to address, edify, and confront readers.”¹³

Similar to Hiebert, Vanhoozer suggests that the key elements of the “theo-drama” best come together under the rubric of *mission*. “The theo-drama is essentially *missional*, the enactment of God’s several overtures to the world.”¹⁴ In Trinitarian terms, Vanhoozer suggests God’s purpose is to rule over and regulate the drama with the Son and the Spirit enacting the Father’s redemptive purpose. Scripture then becomes the primary vehicle by which the sanctifying and transforming work of the Son and Spirit are conveyed.¹⁵ Interestingly enough, Vanhoozer uses Paul as model example of how human beings participate in the drama of God’s redemption:

“The Apostle Paul stands as the epitome of the Christian missionary... Paul is keenly aware of his commission by Christ (Gal. 1:15-16). Moreover, he has a sense of Christ’s participation in his ministry (Rom. 15:18)... here too is the *analogia missio*: the Spirit, the apostle Paul, and the church are all ministers of the word, charged with the mission of transmitting the gospel to others... *preaching, teaching, and evangelism are the means by which the gospel becomes that all encompassing framework that allows us to think and experience truth, goodness and beauty in light of the history of Jesus Christ.*”¹⁶

While there is much more we could say concerning both Hiebert and Vanhoozer’s proposals, let us briefly summarize the key ideas which we will employ in our reading of Paul.

First, *missiology* provides an integrative method for bridging the gap between Paul’s theology

¹² *ibid*, p. 16 (emphasis mine)

¹³ *ibid*, p. 16-17

¹⁴ *ibid*, p. 69

¹⁵ *ibid*, p. 71

¹⁶ *ibid*, p. 72 (emphasis mine)

and praxis by his “graphing” the center of his life *vertical* to Jesus Christ and *horizontally* to the Gentile mission; second, Paul’s gives a “missiological performance” in accordance with his role in the “theo-drama” of redemption. Paul’s scripted role then is to communicate the gospel (*proclamation*) to Gentiles who are then integrated into worshipping communities (*incorporation*) whose presence expands (*ecclesial formation*) throughout the world in anticipation of the closing scene (Christ’s return).

Having now set the hermeneutical stage for Paul’s “missiological performance” we turn to Rom. 15:14-21¹⁷ to test our thesis. Rom. 15:14-21 often receives scant attention in terms of making any major contribution to Paul’s overall theological paradigm especially compared with the more weighty sections of 1:16-15:13.¹⁸ To the contrary, we will suggest that this text most aptly displays the “missiological performance” by defining the vertical-horizontal axiom of Paul’s life in *Levitical* terms as he serves through Christ the Priest, for the purpose of gathering the eschatological community.¹⁹

¹⁷ Though our essay will focus on Romans, the themes of apostleship, praxis and the Gentile mission permeate almost the entire corpus. Galatians is taken up with the theme of how Paul can justify his missional praxis of not circumcising Gentiles while both the Corinthian and Thessalonian correspondences spend major sections (if not entire letters) explaining and defending the Pauline mission. This theme also comes up in sections of the Captivity Epistles (Eph. 3:1-13; Phil. 1:12-26; 2:12-18; Col. 1:24-5) and the Pastoral Epistles (1 Tim. 1:12-20; 2 Tim. 3:10-17; Titus 1:1-4). Philemon, while not dealing with issues of Paul’s mission to Gentiles, does deal with how Paul understands the nature of the authority God has given him as an apostle.

¹⁸ The post-Reformation tradition, particularly in Germany, has tended to emphasize the “Lutheran” side of Paul with Rom. 1-8 being of central importance. However, with the advent of the New Perspective there is a growing number of scholars calling for a renewed emphasis on the Jew/Gentile relations detailed in 9-11 and 14-15:13. For a helpful survey of the secondary literature surrounding the “Lutheran-New Perspective” divide, see Westerholm, Stephen *Perspectives on Paul* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2004). However, 15:14-21 is still relatively neglected as evidence by the concern of Hahn, F. in *Mission in the New Testament*, trans. F. Clark (London: SCM, 1965), p. 7.

¹⁹ D. Chae rightly suggests that we should “begin with locating a passage *which Paul himself indicates why and how he has written the letter*...we find the best possible indication 15:14-21.” See *Paul as Apostle to the Gentiles: His Apostolic Self-Awareness and its Influence on the Soteriological Argument in Romans* (Cumbria, UK: Paternoster 1997), p. 18.

Paul’s “Missiological Performance”: A Missional-Hermeneutical reading of Rom. 15:14-21

Romans 15:16a - The case for a Levitical reading of λειτουργὸν

Having closed his appeal to the Jewish and Gentile factions to unite under his gospel (cf. Rom. 15:7-13), Paul picks up the earlier theme of 1:8-15 concerning his motive for writing the epistle in vv. 14-15. As referenced in other letters, Paul considers himself a recipient of “grace” (χάρις; cf. Gal. 1:15; Eph. 3:2; Col. 1:25; 1 Tim. 1:14; 2 Tim. 1:9). However, the terminology of the purpose clause of 15:16 is unlike any other within his corpus:

εἰς τὸ εἶναί με λειτουργὸν Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ εἰς τὰ ἔθνη, ἱεουργοῦντα τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τοῦ θεοῦ, ἵνα γένηται ἡ προσφορὰ τῶν ἐθνῶν εὐπρόσδεκτος, ἡγιασμένη ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ.

“to be a **minister of Christ Jesus** to the Gentiles in the **priestly service** of the gospel of God, so that the **offering of the Gentiles** may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit” (ESV)

The common designation Paul uses for himself in other parts of his corpus is that of a διάκονος (minister), yet here he uniquely employs a more cultic term: λειτουργός. While λειτουργός can be translated in a similar fashion as διάκονος (“minister” or “servant”), Paul clearly has a more specific *nuance* in mind.²⁰ Most commentators suggest that the term references Paul’s work in explicitly *priestly* terms. This notion stems from the following clause in which Paul claims to be “performing a priestly work” (ἱεουργοῦντα) on behalf of the Gentiles by making them an “offering to acceptable” (ἡ προσφορὰ τῶν ἐθνῶν εὐπρόσδεκτος) to God.

²⁰ Cf. Neh. 10:39; Is. 61:6; Sir. 7:30; Heb. 8:2. Paul additionally uses this term in 13:6 in reference to civil government, whom he claims are actually working for God and therefore deserve proper reverence in areas that do not violate their obedience to God (cf. Acts 5:29) and in Phil. 2:17; 22 in reference to the work he and Epaphroditus performed on behalf of the Philippians.

However, this approach is problematic on a variety of levels. First, Paul nowhere else refers to himself as a λειτουργός in his letters. The term itself can refer to *service* in general (in the LXX cf., e.g., Josh 1:1; 2 Sam. 13:18; 1 King. 10:5) and *priestly* work in particular (e.g., in the LXX: Neh. 10:40; 2 Esdr. 20:40; Is. 61:6; Sir. 7:30; also Heb. 8:2; 1 Clem. 41:2). Almost all commentators agree that Paul has the latter in mind here. Therefore λειτουργὸν Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ is often read as an objective genitive implying that *Jesus* is the one to whom the Gentile offering is being made by *Paul*. Yet in both Testaments God is *always* the object to whom the sacrificial service is being performed (cf. Lev. 1:7; 1 Cor. 15; Rev.7:9-11) as evidenced by the fact that commentators who argue for the Paul-as-Priest and Christ-as-recipient still concede that God remains the ultimate object of the Gentile offerings.²¹

Additionally, Scripture elsewhere testifies that it is *Christ* who functions as the “priestly mediator” who bears the ultimate responsibility for bringing the *redeemed people* to God as an offering (cf. John 10:16; 12:32; 17:6-19; 1 Cor. 1:30; 15:24; 2 Cor. 7:16-18; Gal. 3:14; Eph. 2:14-16; Phil. 1:9-11; Col. 1:15-20; 1 Thess. 1:10; Heb. 2:17; 5:1-9; 7:26-28; 1 Peter 2:4-5; Jude 24-25). Is Paul claiming for himself a role that should belong to Christ only? James Dunn argues that, along with most commentators, “there can be no question of cultic imagery here” in terms of Paul referencing his work *to that of a priest*.²² However, Dunn quickly qualifies this assertion by saying that Paul “does not (think of himself as standing) as a mediator between the community and God...and his priestly ministry neither diminishes nor renders unnecessary the

²¹ Note Moo’s comments: “Paul therefore pictures himself as a priest, using the gospel as the means by which he offers his Gentile converts as a sacrifice acceptable *to God*.”²¹ Interestingly though he immediately follows this sentence up with a revealing footnote: “Though not explicit, the sacrificial imagery makes it clear that the one before whom the sacrifice is εὐπρόσδεκτος *is God*.” Moo, *Romans*, p. 890 (emphasis mine). We of course concur with Moo’s assertion, for God is indeed the rightful object to whom any offering is to be made but this simply underscores the difficulty of Paul alone acting in a priestly role.

²² Dunn, *Romans* p. 860 (emphasis mine)

priestly ministry of all believers (cf. Rom. 12:1).”²³ Yet one cannot escape the simple fact that he clearly seems to be casting himself in the role of a *mediator* with *Christ* as the object of the offerings.

Most commentators work themselves out of this conundrum by suggesting Paul’s priestly references are simply *metaphoric* statements that, while having eschatological significance, are not intended to convey anything more a word-picture of apostolic work.²⁴ However, in our estimation, this is too easily dismissing one of Paul’s most troubling theological statements: *the claim to be performing a duty that the rest of the New Testament attributes to only Jesus Christ*. Is there perhaps a more theologically satisfying way to make sense of Paul’s claim to be a λειτουργὸν Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ?

We suggest that Charles Cranfield’s approach, though not widely accepted by many scholars, provides a clearer (and more significant) picture of what Paul was actually saying. Following K. Barth, Cranfield argues that λειτουργός is intended to actually reference the work of a *Levite*, not a priest. He points to the high number of Levitical references employing λειτουργός and its verbal cognates throughout the LXX (Ex. 38:21[LXX 37:19]; Num. 1:50; 3:6, 31; 4:3, 9, 12, 14, 23f, 26-28, 30, 33, 35, 37, 39, 41, 43; 7:5, 7f; 8:22; 16:9; 18:2, 4, 6, 21, 23; 1 Chr. 6:32 [LXX: 17]; 15:2; 16:4, 37; 23:28; 2 Chr. 23:6; Ezek. 45:5).²⁵ Cranfield further argues that λειτουργὸν, when taken with the genitive in its special priestly manner “would be naturally understood to denote the *one to whom* the λειτουργός offered sacrifice.”²⁶ In other words, if Paul

²³ *ibid*, p. 860

²⁴ Moo writes: “The language of ‘priest’ and ‘sacrifice’ here is, of course, metaphorical; Paul makes no claim to be a ‘priest’ or to be offering a sacrifice in any literal sense” (*Romans*, p. 890). If this is so, why does Paul even bother making the statement if it does not have any ring of truth to it?

²⁵ Cranfield, C.E.B *Romans 9-11* (London, UK: T & T Clark 1979), p. 755.

²⁶ *ibid*, p. 755

were acting as a priestly minister on behalf of the Gentiles the focus should be on bringing the offering *to God* (τοῦ θεοῦ).

“If λειτουργῶν here really did have the sense of a priestly minister, one would expect τοῦ θεοῦ either expressed or understood. On the assumption that the thought of ministry intended by λειτουργῶν here is of the Levite’s ministry, the dependent genitive which we have here is fully understandable; *for the idea conveyed is that Paul fulfills a ministry subordinate and auxiliary to that of Christ the Priest.*”²⁷

Compare this construction with Num. 3:6 and 18:2 from the LXX:

Numbers 3:6 - λαβὲ τὴν φυλὴν Λευι καὶ στήσεις αὐτοὺς ἐναντίον Ααρων τοῦ ἱερέως καὶ λειτουργήσουσιν αὐτῷ

Numbers 18:2 - καὶ τοὺς ἀδελφούς σου φυλὴν Λευι δῆμον τοῦ πατρός σου προσαγάγου πρὸς σεαυτὸν καὶ προστεθήτωσάν σοι καὶ λειτουργείτωσάν σοι καὶ σὺ καὶ οἱ υἱοί σου μετὰ σοῦ ἀπέναντι τῆς σκηνῆς τοῦ μαρτυρίου

In both cases, the focus of the Levite’s λειτουργέω is towards the *priest*. Following Cranfield we suggest that Paul is adopting a similar posture toward *Christ* in his missionary work. If this interpretation is on target, then the Priest/Levite relationship becomes an intriguing way to define the vertical/horizontal intersection of Paul’s mission theology described above.

Rom. 15:16b – Paul’s Levitical service as “priestly”

However, the Priest/Levite axiom interpretation does raise an immediate question: why does Paul use the priestly term ἱεουργοῦντα if he never intended to cast himself in that role?²⁸ Cranfield suggests that this verb does not always denote *priestly* activity and should therefore be rendered “serve with a holy service.”²⁹ That Paul intended to downplay the force of the verb is unlikely and has been rightly rejected by most commentators. Yet the problem remains: how can Paul be a *Levite* and at the same time claim to be doing “priestly work”? The answer lies in how

²⁷ *ibid*, p. 755 (emphasis mine)

²⁸ The verb ἱεουργοῦντα does not occur in the LXX or elsewhere in the New Testament but is common in Philo and Josephus, always referring to the work of a priest (G. Shrenk, TDNT III, 252).

²⁹ Cranfield, *Romans*, p. 756

to best understand the work of a Levite as related to the *eschatological* setting in which Paul now performs his ministry.

According to Numbers, the task of a Levite is to assist the priests in three key ways: 1) keep guard over the cultic activities of the community (Nu. 3:7-10); 2) appropriately carry utensils necessary for worship (Nu. 4:4ff); and 3) collect tithes from the community and in doing so offer a tithe from the tithe (Nu. 18:21-32). However, as the nation of Israel grew to face more and unique challenges, the role of the Levites also expanded. Take for example 2 Chronicles 29, where King Hezekiah is faced with the challenge of restoring proper Temple worship after generations of apostasy. He calls upon the Levites to “consecrate the house of the Lord, the God of your fathers, and carry out the filth of this place” (2 Chr. 29:5 ESV). Additionally, Hezekiah tells the Levites that God has chosen them to “stand in His presence, to minister (λειτουργεῖν) to Him and to be His ministers (εἶναι αὐτῷ λειτουργοῦντας) and make offerings to Him” (2 Chr. 29:11 ESV). Hezekiah further calls upon the Levites to provide instrumental music for worship (2 Chr. 29:25-30; cf. 1 Chr. 23:5; 25:1). Due to the shortage of available priests, Hezekiah had the Levites fill in their role (cf. 2 Chr. 29:34). Also, when Hezekiah was able to fully restore the priesthood, the Levites were still an integral part of the cultic process (2 Chr. 31:2).

Another example of the flexible role of the Levite occurs generations later amongst when the post-exilic community found themselves having to once again restore proper worship for the nation. Nehemiah records that the priests and the Levites *worked together* to exhort the people in accordance with God’s law (8:9-12) as well as bringing the offerings to the “house of God” (10:39; 11:44-47). Here we see a closer partnership between the Levites and priests as they build a community of worship together. Much more could be said on this topic, but our main purpose is to point out that the Levites, while given some specific duties initially during the wilderness

wanderings, ministered with varying degrees of *flexibility* throughout Israel’s history under the guidance of the priests and/or the leaders of Israel. Therefore we suggest that main role of the Levite is to *assist the priest in the formation of a worshipping community*.

If our definition of the role of the Levite is on target then we have an even stronger case for suggesting that Paul conceived of his role in God’s redemptive drama in *Levitical* terms.

Paul, like the Levites, considered himself under the guidance of and in service to God *through* Jesus Christ. This is why he claims in Rom. 1:9 that “God is my witness, whom I *serve* (λατρεύω) with my spirit in the *gospel of His Son*” (ἐν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ).³⁰ We find the same train of thought picked up again in the final clause of 15:16:

ἵνα γένηται ἡ προσφορὰ τῶν ἐθνῶν εὐπρόσδεκτος, ἡγιασμένη ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ

“So that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, *sanctified by the Holy Spirit*” (ESV – emphasis mine)

The phrase “offering of the Gentiles” (ἡ προσφορὰ τῶν ἐθνῶν) is most likely a genitive of apposition³¹ so that the offering itself is the Gentiles who are “sanctified” before God (ἡγιασμένη).³² Therefore Paul understands his cultic role as possessing unique eschatological and salvific significance, opening a whole new scene for the “theo-drama” of redemption. A possible background text for “sanctified Gentiles” and the Pauline mission in general is Is. 66:19-21. Here Isaiah proclaims that God would, in the last days, would “send survivors from

³⁰ The ἐν denotes the sphere of Paul’s service in terms of his preaching activities as an apostle. “Paul’s service consists particularly of preaching the good news about God’s Son” (Moo, *Romans* p. 58).

³¹ So Cranfield, *Romans* p. 756; Dunn, *Romans* p. 860; Moo, *Romans* p. 890; Chae, *Paul* p. 28. See also Riesner, Rainer *Paul’s Early Period: Chronology, Mission Strategy, Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1998), p. 247; Schnabel, Eckhard J. *Early Christian Mission* vol. 2 (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press 2004), p. 975. For a contrary, though unconvincing, argument for a genitive of source see Downs, David J. “The Offering of the Gentiles in Rom. 15:16” *JSNT* 29.2 (2006), pp. 173-186.

³² The idea expressed stems from the Old Testament notion of complete devotion to God and used for His purposes. This is expressed through the cultic system of Israel concerning sacrifices (Exod. 29:33, 36-37; 30:29; Lev. 8:15; Num. 18:8-9; 2 Chr. 29:33), priests (Exod. 19:22; 29:1, 21, 44; 30:30; 40:13; Lev. 8:12, 30; 21:8; 2 Chr. 26:18) and the Temple (1 Kgs 9:3; 2 Chr. 2:4; 7:16; 2:20).

the nations to declare His glory among the nations and bring all their kindred ‘from all the nations as an offering’ [LXX: ἐκ πάντων τῶν ἐθνῶν δῶρον] for the Lord.”³³ This is the one text in the Old Testament that seems to suggest that a “missionary movement” from Jerusalem to the nations which directly involves the Gentiles themselves and anticipates Paul’s unique commission to the Gentiles (cf. Acts 9; 26; Rom. 1:5). Therefore Rainer Riesner is surely on target by suggesting that “Paul read this text as being fulfilled in his own activity.”³⁴

Additionally, Is. 66:21 claims that “and some of them also I will take for priests (ἱερεῖς) and for Levites (Λευίτας), says the Lord” (ESV). Scholars are divided on whether the “priests and Levites” are referring to Jews or Gentiles or both. Space does not allow us to pursue this topic in great depth, but suffice to say that Isaiah pictured a day when there would be a mission to the Gentile nations who would respond in worship and that this epoch would be characterized by a *new priesthood*, namely that priests and Levites would partake in the ingathering of the Gentile nations by offering them to God “just as the Israelites bring their grain offering in a clean vessel to the house of the Lord” (ESV).

Could it be that Paul is one of the renewed Levites, now serving alongside Christ in a priestly manner to offer the Gentile nations to God as foretold by Isaiah? Note also the manner in which the offering of the Gentiles becomes “sanctified” (ἡγιασμένη): *through the agency of the Holy Spirit*.³⁵ Paul does not make the offering acceptable to God on his own initiative; rather it is the work of the Holy Spirit through whom *Paul is a vessel*. Given this, it is entirely plausible for Paul to refer to his missionary work in *priestly* terms (ἱερουργέω) while retaining

³³ Moo, *Romans* p. 890 n. 40

³⁴ Riesner, *Paul*, p. 246. His treatment of Is. 66:19-21 is well worth pondering but we are unable to pursue it here. See also R.D. Aus, “Paul’s Travel Plans” *NT* 21 (1979) 232-62 and for a more recent treatment see Scott, J.M *Paul and the Nations: The Old Testament and Jewish Background of Paul’s Mission to the Nations with Special Reference to the Destination of Galatians* WUNT 84. Tubingen: Mohr (Siebeck), 1995.

³⁵ The preposition in the Greek text ἐν denotes the agency of the Spirit.

the secondary position as a Levite. Paul's train of thought in the following verses, we suggest, will make the interpretation quite evident.

Rom. 15:17-19a - Christ's priestly work through Paul's Levitical ministry

Here Paul continues to qualify his "priestly" work as *not* that of a mediation between God and the Gentiles; rather he refuses to speak of anything other than that which Christ has "accomplished" (κατεργάσατο)³⁶ through him to bring about the "obedience of the Gentiles" (ὑπακοήν ἐθνῶν; cf. 1:5; 16:26; see also Col. 1:26):³⁷

ἔχω οὖν [τὴν] καύχησιν ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ τὰ πρὸς τὸν θεόν· οὐ γὰρ τολμήσω τι λαλεῖν ὧν οὐ κατεργάσατο Χριστὸς δι' ἐμοῦ εἰς ὑπακοήν ἐθνῶν, λόγῳ καὶ ἔργῳ, ἐν δυνάμει σημείων καὶ τεράτων, ἐν δυνάμει πνεύματος [θεοῦ]³⁸

"In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to be proud of my work for God. For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience--by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God" (ESV)

The specific means by which Paul claims to have been used by Christ to accomplish his work (λόγῳ καὶ ἔργῳ, ἐν δυνάμει σημείων καὶ τεράτων) hints of a salvation-historical continuum in which the reenactment of the exodus from Egypt is occurring in a new manner with the ingathering of the Gentiles (cf. Ex. 7:3; 9; 11:9-10; Deut. 4:34; 6:22; 7:19; 11:3; 26:8; 29:3; 34:10; Ps. 78:43; 105:27; 135:9; see also Acts 2:43; 4:30; 5:12). "What Paul has done as the λειτουργός of Christ Jesus has not only been a *subordinate* service subsidiary to Christ's own

³⁷ Moo (*Romans*, p. 52) rightly argues that this genitive construction should be mutually interpreting: "Obedience always involves faith and faith always involves obedience." Both 1:5 and 16:26 use the same phrase ὑπακοήν πίστεως in reference to the Gentiles, providing a possible thematic bookend for the letter as a whole.

³⁸ The variant reading in the UBS 4th Edition is given a {C} with πνεύματος ἁγίου as the alternate reading. Neither reading changes the meaning much. The subjective genitive simply notes that the power is from God's Spirit working in Paul's ministry.

priestly work, it has also been something *which Christ has actually Himself affected*, working through His minister.”³⁹

Rom. 15:19b-21 – Fulfilling the Script of the Drama

The following text, however, raises two immediate questions as to how Paul understood the “scripted” role he is given. First, exactly how does Is. 52:15 legitimize Paul’s pioneer missionary policy? And second, what does Paul mean when he claims to have “fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ” (πεπληρωκέναι τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τοῦ Χριστοῦ)? The answers to these questions actually dove-tail with one another and round out for us the picture we have been attempting to draw concerning Paul’s self-understanding as a key player in God’s redemptive drama (“missiological performance”), working in a subsidiary yet vital *Levitical* role to Christ’s priestly work of preparing a “sanctified offering” (εὐπρόσδεκτος, ἡγιασμένη) of Gentile worshippers to God.

ὥστε με ἀπὸ Ἰερουσαλήμ καὶ κύκλῳ μέχρι τοῦ Ἰλλυρικοῦ πεπληρωκέναι τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τοῦ Χριστοῦ, οὕτως δὲ φιλοτιμούμενον εὐαγγελίζεσθαι οὐχ ὅπου ἄνομάσθη Χριστός, ἵνα μὴ ἐπ’ ἀλλότριον θεμέλιον οἰκοδομῶ, ἀλλὰ καθὼς γέγραπται, **Οἷς οὐκ ἀνηγγέλη περὶ αὐτοῦ ὄψονται, καὶ οἱ οὐκ ἀκηκόασιν συνήσουσιν**

“So that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ; and thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else’s foundation, but as it is written, **‘Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand.’**”(ESV)

Paul’s citation of Is. 52:15, which scholars maintain is one of the four so-called “Servant Songs” (cf. Is. 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12), provides him a rationale for the Gentile mission particularly as it pertain to what we have suggested is the tri-fold nature of his “missiological performance”: *proclamation, incorporation and ecclesial formation*. Without

³⁹ Cranfield, *Romans*, p. 758 (emphasis mine)

question Isaiah makes a major impact on Paul's theology as evidenced by the number of citations and allusions which appear throughout his corpus (quoted 18 times in Romans alone!).⁴⁰ Paul cites this text as a scriptural rationale for the unique nature of his apostolate, which focused on bringing the gospel to Gentiles who had not yet heard. In terms of defining Paul's understanding of his eschatological "servant role", Ross Wagner rightly points out that the emphasis on the prepositional phrase *περὶ αὐτοῦ* ("concerning him") is crucial for clarifying that Paul does not conceive of himself as the Servant but rather *that he serves the Servant*.

"This prepositional phrase *περὶ αὐτοῦ* then provides a critical link between Rom. 15 and Is. 52:15b. In Isaiah the antecedent of *ὁ παῖς μου* is the 'servant' introduced in 52:13. In Romans 15, the *αὐτοῦ* of the quotation clearly refers to Christ...now in Isaiah 52:15b Paul finds his own ministry 'announced beforehand.' He is the one entrusted with the message about Christ, sent to those whom the message has not yet reached."⁴¹

In its original context, the revelation of the Servant was not intended to be good but rather judgment for those who rejected Him. However, now that salvation history (i.e. the "theodrama" of redemption) has reached a new epoch through Christ's death and resurrection, the Servant (Jesus!) appears to the Gentiles as a *savior*.

"Paul uses the passage...to insist that hearing his message is a blessing for the Gentiles by changing the negative context into a positive one. He wants to convey the impression that his coming to preach to the Gentiles who have never heard the gospel brings joy and salvation to those who had no hope but could have expected only judgment at the awesome appearance of the Servant."⁴²

It is curious, however, that Paul more or less ignores the more significant Christological aspects of the Servant's work as found in Is. 53. Why did he not take the opportunity to expound on the significance of Christ's suffering on behalf of the nations? As we have tried to show thus far in the text, Paul's task is to provide a rationale for his apostolic work. Therefore his focus is

⁴⁰ See Ross Wagner's excellent work *Heralds of the Good News: Paul and Isaiah in Concert in the Letter of Romans* (Leiden, UK: Brill 2002).

⁴¹ Wagner, *Heralds*, p. 333

⁴² Chae, *Paul*, p. 31

not on Christology per say, but rather the vertical/horizontal dimensions of his apostolate, which emphasize *his* service to Jesus and the work which the risen Christ performs *through* him. The role which Paul has been scripted to play is to be a supporting role to Christ as the “servant of the Servant”, or, put another way *as a Levite under the power and guidance of Jesus Christ*.

What then of his claim to have “fulfilled the gospel of Christ” (πεπληρωκέναι τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τοῦ Χριστοῦ) in Aegean peninsula? In following his scripted, Isaianic/Levitical role Paul’s life is absorbed with *praxis*, namely *proclamation, incorporation and ecclesial formation*. Therefore we should not read his words as a manner of boasting that he has somehow personally evangelized every citizen of the Mediterranean, but rather through following his scripted *praxis* he fulfilled his assigned role in the “theo-drama” of redemption: *the planting of local churches in key cities throughout Asia Minor and Macedonia*. Therefore, assuming that these churches will carry on the task of evangelization into the surrounding regions, Paul considers this stage of the performance over and sets his focus on the next scene: Spain.⁴³

Conclusion

This essay has sought fill a lacuna in New Testament scholarship regarding the division between Paul’s theology and *praxis* as a missionary. We have argued that the “center” of Paul’s thought is best expressed by examining the theological import and consequence of his missional *praxis: proclamation, incorporation and ecclesial formation*. By building on key insights from the field of *missiology* (particularly from Paul Hiebert) we found that mission theology is bound up in a vertical/horizontal relationship in which the missionary mediates a dual relationship

⁴³ Plummer, Robert L. *Paul's Understanding of the Church's Mission: Did the Apostle Paul Expect the Early Christian Communities to Evangelize?* (Wipf & Stock Publishers 2006).

between God and the culture he is seeking to impact with the gospel. Missiology's vertical/horizontal dynamic, we suggested, is a helpful entry point for understanding Paul's role as Christ's emissary to the Gentile nations. Additionally, we drew upon Kevin Vanhoozer's important work in theological hermeneutics by suggesting that Paul participates in God's theodrama by giving a "missiological performance". We tested our thesis on Rom. 15:14-21, a text which Paul himself defines his relationship to Jesus Christ and to the nations in a Priest/Levite axiom.

The task Paul feels himself called to perform has been scripted by the Old Testament, particularly Isaiah, in which he enacts a fresh "performance" of this text in accordance with the "act" of God's redemptive drama for the world. Through this process we discovered that Paul's theology is primarily mediated to us through his *praxis*. In other words, Paul is a man bound to his (*vertical*) relationship with Jesus Christ and wholly absorbed in the unique (*horizontal*) role he was to perform in the drama of God's redemption, all of which has a practical, measurable outcome: "Paul's missionary vocation finds its sense of fulfillment in the presence of firmly established churches."⁴⁴

We realize that the limited scope of our study has left a number of "loose ends" which will need to be tied if our thesis is to bear scrutiny. Topics such as Paul's relationship to Israel, the exact nature of his understanding of Jesus as a priest and the role of the Mosaic Law and many others deserve their more treatment than what we provide here. However, the direction suggested here for the future of Pauline studies is, we believe, both fruitful and necessary for a genuine appropriation of Paul's life and work. At this critical juncture when the direction of Pauline studies is still being debated by proponents for and against the so-called "New

⁴⁴ Bowers, W.P. "Fulfilling the Gospel: The Scope of the Pauline Mission" *JTS* 30/2 (June 1987) 185-198

Perspective”, we contend that studies which seek to integrate Paul’s thought and praxis will provide the most fruitful lines of inquiry for future studies.

Given the challenges of secularism and religious pluralism in the modern West, coupled with the dynamic growth of Christianity in the global south, fresh appraisals of Paul’s mission theology could also provide New Testament scholars with a unique opportunity to help shape and guide the life of the church in the 21st century. Therefore it remains to be seen if others will continue to take up Bower’s initial challenge: “No adequate understanding of Pauline theology will be achieved until his perspective on mission has been integrated into the larger interpretation of his theology”.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ *ibid*, “Mission” p. 613

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