

The Opponents in Philippians

MGVH – June 2004

So who are these opponents?
Questions to keep in mind:

- Are they in Philippi or at Paul's place of imprisonment or anywhere in general?
- Jewish or Gentile?
- Christian or non-Christian?
- 'Judaizers' or libertines?
- Is Paul in competition with them? Is he sympathetic or dismissive of them?
- Is there just one group or a variety of opponents?

How are the opponents described?

- 1.15-17

Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. ... They proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but intending to increase my suffering in my imprisonment.

Where: Phil and other
Jew/Gentile: ?
Xn/non-Xn: Xn
'Jud./libertine: ?
Rel. to Paul: antagonistic rivals

How are the opponents described?

- 1.27-28

Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, ²⁸ and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation.

Where: Phil
Jew/Gentile: ?
Xn/non-Xn: non-Xn
'Jud./libertine: ?
Rel. to Paul: hostile

How are the opponents described?

- 2.20-21

I have no one like [Timothy] who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare.²¹ All of them are seeking their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.

Where: Phil and other
Jew/Gentile: ?
Xn/non-Xn: Xn
'Jud./libertine: ?
Rel. to Paul: rivals

Same as 1.15-17

How are the opponents described?

- 3.2

Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh!

Where: Phil? & other
Jew/Gentile: Jew
Xn/non-Xn: Xn?
'Jud./libertine: Jud.
Rel. to Paul: hostile!

How are the opponents described?

- 3.18-19

For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears.¹⁹ Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things.

Where: Phil? & other
Jew/Gentile: Jew?
Xn/non-Xn: non-Xn?
'Jud./libertine: Jud?
Rel. to Paul: hostile

So who are these opponents? Questions to keep in mind:

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Conclusions?

Proposals:

- Judaizers and libertines (Bruce, Martin, Beare, Lightfoot, Jewett, Fee, etc.)
- Gnostic libertines promoting circumcision (Schmithals)
- Jewish (non-Xn) missionaries (Klijn) – Matthew 23.15

Conclusions?

- Claim to be “perfect”
- Strict upholders of the law (except Schmithals)
- Are Christians (except Klijn)

Conclusions?

- Representatives of a perfectionist ideal with Gnostic features (Marxsen)
- Jewish Xn Gnostics or gnosticizing Judaizers (Bornkamm)
- Representatives of a nomistic divine man Christology (Gnilka)
- Syncretists who link circumcision with Hellenistic sacramental ideas (Fuller)
- Jewish Xn missionaries preaching law-based perfection as part of radicalized spiritualistic eschatology typical of early Xn gnosticism (Koester)
- Xn missionaries (Jew or Gentile) who preach circumcision and law observance for Gentiles (Osiek, ~O'Brien)

Conclusions - MGvH

- Claim to be Xns
- Advocate circumcision
- Stress righteousness and perfection based on observance of the Law
- >> Claim power and glory (and hence also critical of someone like Paul who suffers and is humble)

What about 3.18f?

Romans 16.17f.

I urge you, brothers and sisters, to keep an eye on those who cause dissensions and offenses, in opposition to the teaching that you have learned; avoid them. ¹⁸ For such people do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites [=belly], and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the simple-minded.

Conclusions?

How similar / different are these opponents from the opponents of Paul in Acts 15?

Now some men came down from Judea and began to teach the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." When Paul and Barnabas had a major argument and debate with them, the church appointed Paul and Barnabas and some others from among them to go up to meet with the apostles and elders in Jerusalem about this point of disagreement.

Conclusions?

Two groups:

- Xn proclaimers in competition with Paul (1.15-17; 2.20-21)
- "Enemies of the cross" (1.27-28; 3.2, 18-19)