

BOOK REVIEW

L.L. Welborn, *Paul, the Fool of Christ: A Study of 1 Corinthians 1–4 in the Comic-Philosophic Tradition* (JSNTSup, 293; New York: T. & T. Clark International, 2005). xiv + 322 pp. Hdbk. US\$140.00.

In his book, *Paul, the Fool of Christ*, Welborn attempts to show that in writing 1 Corinthians 1–4, Paul drew his inspiration from the comic-philosophic tradition of the ancient world. He tries to demonstrate that Paul consciously adopted this tradition in order to communicate the gospel to the first-century Hellenistic culture. Welborn believes that through Paul's intentional association with this group, the members of the Corinthian church would have understood that he was attempting to replace the accepted 'wisdom' of the day with God's true wisdom.

Welborn introduces the book by placing Paul within the social setting that existed in Corinth during its Roman period. He discusses a number of the literary works that would have been prevalent at that time, with specific focus on the importance of satires and mimes within the ancient world.

In Chapter One, Welborn looks briefly at the history of interpretation of Paul's 'word of the cross' saying in 1 Cor. 1.18. In addition to this, there is a solid introduction and explanation regarding the use of crucifixion in the ancient world, and specific adjectives and words that are associated with the cross. This section provides an excellent back-drop for the reader to understand the horrific nature of the crucifixion and the shame that it embodied.

Chapter Two focuses on the biblical interpretation of 'fool' and 'foolish' and how these terms have been utilized. This brief chapter concludes that both the Old Testament and the New Testament provide little insight into understanding Paul's perspective expressed in 1 Corinthians and that to perceive Paul's intended message, one must look to the first-century culture.

Following this train of thought, Welborn embarks on a detailed investigation into the role of mimics and mimes in ancient plays. This interesting chapter evaluates the stigmas that were associated with these low-class workers, and outlines a number of the characteristic features that would have been associated with the ancient fool, such as grotesque features, idiotic actions and reactions, crude behavior etc. Welborn also expounds how this profession was used to insult and mock those who were in elevated social and political positions.

In Chapter Four, Welborn applies his findings in Chapter Three to the three sections of 1 Corinthians 1–4 that explicitly discuss the concepts of wisdom and foolishness. Welborn makes some strong points when he connects Paul's statement in 4.9-13, 'we are the fools of Christ' to ancient plays and culture, and develops an interesting perspective on how Paul might have come to know the theatre, specifically within Corinth. When discussing 2.1-4, Welborn connects Paul to the role of the befuddled orator, and Paul's intentional adoption of the role of the fool in his interactions with the Corinthians. He does not really develop his view on 1.18-25 very much in this section.

Welborn believes that Paul adopts the role of the befuddled orator, a typically foolish role, in order to defend himself from those who were swayed by the impressive rhetoric expressed by Apollos. It is understood that a fool is able to express dangerous truths without fear of serious repercussions and it is for this reason that Paul adopts this role. However, a couple of Welborn's claims are based on sources of questionable relevance; for instance the appearance of Paul described in *The Acts of Paul in Thecla*.

Throughout his work, and particularly in Chapter Six, Welborn attempts to show the parallels between Paul's understanding of the cross and the role of the fool in the comic-philosophic tradition. Welborn uses well-known examples from works by Aesop and Socrates and the characters in Plautus' plays as people who model the comedic idea of a lowly, often deformed, slave outwitting his master and proving to be the smarter one of the two. Welborn develops the similarities between Paul's view and the cross and the other examples, in their expression that apparent foolishness is proved to be wisdom, and that what originally appeared wise is, in fact, foolish through a comic reversal.

One of the major differences between the fool in the comic-philosophic tradition and Paul in 1 Corinthians is that the fools in

Aesop and Socrates defeat their masters through the use of their intelligence, whereas Paul embraces the cross, the lowest of all punishments, and uses that as his tool of victory. Fools in Aesop and Socrates win despite their disadvantages of looks and position. Paul, on the other hand, wins because he associates himself, at the fundamental level, with the defeat and shame of the cross, which have become victory and glory. Although both genres share the same core idea that the wisdom of the gods, or in Paul's case Jesus, is wiser than people's wisdom, they are fundamentally different in the means by which they accomplish the reversal.

Another concern is that Welborn limits his study to 1 Corinthians 1–4. Admittedly, he does express in his introduction that his fragmented view of the Corinthian correspondence does not facilitate making connections within the letter; however, it would have been beneficial to his argument to have more examples of Paul adopting the position of a fool in other sections of his letters.

In evaluating the argumentation of the book, I would say that Welborn develops a unique perspective on the relationship between Paul and the fool and I think that Welborn's study of the fool provides a viable perspective on Paul's comment in 4.10 'we are the fools of Christ'. However, I find that in other sections, Welborn's arguments are not solidly grounded and rest on speculation. When discussing 1.18–25, for example, Welborn's argument fails to take into account other factors, such as the role of Paul's Roman citizenship. Accordingly, his proposition is not totally convincing.

This is not to say that there is no viable work within this book. Welborn does a fine job of exploring ancient literature for the characteristics of a fool and his discussion on crucifixion is very good. In addition to this, there are some interesting photos of fools and other mimes from the ancient world.

Overall, Welborn's monograph *Paul, the Fool of Christ*, provides excellent background and insight into the role of fools and mimes and the nature of crucifixion within the ancient world. This book should be consulted particularly by those who are looking to understand the background to Paul's statement in 1 Cor. 4.9–13.

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