

Reader clues in the text of Galatians*

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Summary

The article argues that the Epistle to the Galatians offers clues to its readers on various levels of the text. After some general methodological remarks, the rhetorical situation of the letter is analysed. Paul finds himself in a totally disadvantaged position with regard both to the Jerusalem leaders and to the Galatians believers. He meets this challenge by employing rhetorical devices on at least four levels. *Firstly*, on the syntacto-rhetorical level he uses pronomina to increase or decrease textual space between him and his readers. A skilful use of rhetorical questions enables him to retain the upper hand in the argument while he avoids the problems posed by the phenomenon of the double reader. *Secondly*, on the level of cultural codes, he uses the common presuppositions shared by his readers to turn their arguments concerning the priority of the law around and to present irrefutable evidence for his viewpoint. *Thirdly*, on the level of the semantic universe of the text, the author creates a new set of social values and interrelations with which his readers can identify and which make a shift in perspective possible. *Fourthly*, the text of Galatians offers examples of how gaps are created, which invite the participation of the reader and which represent a shift from a casuistic to a participatory style of ethics.

Opsomming

Die doel van die artikel is om aan te toon hoe die brief aan die Galasiërs op verskillende vlakke in die teks leseraanduiding vir die ontvanger bied. Na metodologiese opmerkinge van algemene aard word die retoriese situasie van die brief geanaliseer. Paulus bevind hom in 'n baie lastige posisie sowel teenoor die leiers in Jerusalem as teenoor die gemeentelede in Galasië. Hy hanteer hierdie probleem deur van retoriese tegnieke gebruik te maak wat op ten minste vier vlakke van die teks funksioneer. *Eerstens*, op die sintakties-retoriese vlak, maak hy gebruik van pronomina om die tekstuele afstand tussen hom en sy lesers te vergroot of te vernou. 'n Behendige hantering van retoriese vrae stel hom in staat om weer eens die inisiatief in die argument te herwin, terwyl hy daarin slaag om die probleme wat die verskynsel van die dubbele leser aan hom stel te oorkom. *Tweedens*, op die vlak van kulturele kodes, steun hy op die gedeelde voorveronderstellings met sy lesers om hul argument oor die prioriteit van die wet om te draai en dit as getuienes in sy guns aan te voer. *Derdens*, op die vlak van die "wêreld" van die teks, open die skrywer 'n nuwe perspektief op die werklikheid deur 'n nuwe waardestelsel en onderlinge verhoudingspatroon voor te stel waarmee sy lesers hulle kan vereenselwig. *Vierdens* bied die teks van Galasiërs treffende voorbeelde van gapings wat in die teks geskep word wat die deelname van die leser stimuleer en sodoende die oorgang van 'n kasuïstiese na 'n deelnemende etiese styl moontlik maak.

Introduction

The aim of this article is to show how the text of Galatians offers clues of a wide variety to its readers. Using the terms "text" and "reader" in this context, of course, opens up a whole world of controversy in literary theory.

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It seems necessary, therefore, to be more precise about the approach which will be followed here, and about the status of statements about readers in and of biblical material, before moving to some observations about the text as such.

When talking about texts, the problem of shifting epistemologies should be kept constantly in mind – as Ryan (1985) has clearly shown. The matter is compounded when the focus is on one specific biblical text, which forms part of a wider Pauline corpus, which, in turn, is embedded in the New Testament and which forms only a very small segment of Christian literature.

The interaction between literary studies and biblical interpretation has a long history which provides some fascinating reading. In many ways it reflects a love-hate relationship. Because of the inherent literary character of so much of the biblical material, there was a continual *debordement* between the two disciplines – sometimes with happier and sometimes with less fortunate results. Often it was literary scholars who took an interest in biblical material (Frye, Alter, Sternberg, Kennedy, Gräbe), but exegetes, on their part, have also ventured across the border (e.g. Richter, Petersen, McKnight, Crossan). Especially in the circles of the Society of Biblical Literature, the past decade has witnessed nothing less than a renaissance of interest in literary studies. In this country, at least as far as New Testament research is concerned, for a long time the focus was more on linguistics. In the last few years, there has been a marked progression towards the literary aspects of the text, for which the linguistic interest provided a firm foundation (Vorster, Van Aarde, Maartens, Pelsler, Du Plessis). It is very encouraging to see how the interdisciplinary approach is growing and if literary critics have any doubts about the usefulness and viability of their particular discipline, they should take heart in what is happening amongst the exegetes. They might not like the way in which literary insights are applied to biblical material and certainly a lot of problems remain unsolved, but it is fair to say that exegetes are discovering that they can ignore the literary dimensions of their material only to their own methodological disadvantage.

Without going into the perennial problem of the difference between sacred and secular texts (cf. Detweiler, 1985), only one aspect need to be mentioned here, namely the so-called pragmatic nature of biblical texts – a characteristic which they share with legal texts, but which is usually not prominent in literary texts. This is partly the reason for the growing interest of exegetes in speech act theory and the attempts to develop a “hermeneutics of action” (Lundin, Thiselton & Walhout, 1985). It is an expression of the consciousness that these texts form part of a wider communication process which do not have aesthetic enjoyment as its goal in the first place, but a certain course of action. When using theories devised for texts in an unpragmatic setting, great care should be taken not to make category mistakes. While literary critics may doubt whether the 301st reading of *King Lear* will make any difference to their trade, theologians like to *think* it will, while lawyers (and their clients) *know* it does.

Whether in a pragmatic or unpragmatic context, the assumption still holds that the text does provide certain clues for its reader. What the reader does

with these, is another matter. It is, therefore, methodologically clarifying to use Groeben's distinction between *Verstehen I* and *Verstehen II* (cf. De Jong, 1983: 49). But although useful, one should be careful not to misuse this distinction in an effort to rescue the concept of determinacy by securing the latter in the text as a stable structure and by relegating indeterminacy to the reader's appropriation of the text. It must be emphasized that *Verstehen I* already is a construct for which we should give reasons. We shall have to live with this tension between the direct literary experiencing of the text and the explanation of and reflection on this experience – what Fowler (1985) calls the dialectic between *reader* and *critic*. This appears to be an occupational hazard in all text-related fields.

It might well be that the difficulties surrounding indeterminacy have misled us to make an ontological or epistemological issue out of something which is really a *functional* problem. The dynamic movement which is an essential feature of the reading process has wrongly been associated with instability and unreliability. In areas where unambiguity and precision of meaning is in high demand – like the need for security of justice in legal circles or for definitive statements in theology – many attempts were made to tie down the slipperiness of the text. This was done for example by “protecting” the text with fundamentalistic precepts or by ensconcing it in dogmatic statements. In this respect it is important to heed again the old reformation dictum concerning the freedom of exegesis. Although compliance with, and obedience to the credal formulations – once they were established – was expected as a matter of course in protestant tradition, no restrictions were placed on the actual reading of the text. In fact, the exegete has the obligation to listen to the text *de novo* and to review critically what has been formulated as dogma. Dogmatic statements, therefore, are *secondary* formulations which attempt to articulate what is experienced in the *primary* reading situation. While the former represent an attempt at closure, the latter is by definition an open and creative process.

Our reading of the text of Galatians thus starts from two premises. Firstly, the acceptance that, despite all reservations about the possibility of an adequate methodological grasp of the reading process, reading in some form or another *does* take place. Secondly, the acceptance of the risk of reading, which is another way of expressing confidence in the communicative potential of the text.

Communication strategies and levels of implementation in argumentative texts

As far as biblical material is concerned, most work from a reader perspective has been done on narrative texts. Fowler's study of Mark (1981) and Culpepper's analysis of John (1983) give an idea of how this technique has been applied. Two recent examples in the South African context are those of Du Plessis (1985) and Vorster (1986). Wilhelm Wuellner (1978) has spearheaded the use of rhetorical criticism in non-narrative texts and provided an important stimulus for this work. Galatians was chosen with the specific purpose in

mind to see to what extent reader theories can be useful in the analysis of non-narrative material.

We are dealing in Galatians with an argumentative text – its main purpose is to persuade, to convince, to move the reader from one position to the other. Kennedy (1984) in his recent study was surprised by the extent to which forms of logical argument are used in the New Testament. This phenomenon does not mean that faith is rational, but that matters of faith can be presented in an argumentative mode in order to convince the reader or the listener. To understand more clearly the pragmatic implications of this type of language usage in the case of Galatians, it is necessary to say something more about the wider argumentative context of the letter.

The first observation – and this is a hypothesis based entirely on textual evidence, as we know almost nothing about the situation apart from what we read here – is that Paul is facing a formidable challenge from both the Galatian churches and certain representatives from Jerusalem. He finds himself in a totally disadvantaged position. His erstwhile followers have been persuaded by recent envoys from Jerusalem to accept a different interpretation of the gospel. Their argument to the Galatians probably runs as follows: “Belief in Christ is fine – we subscribe to that ourselves – but strengthen the base of your spiritual life by becoming part of a much wider group and a much longer religious tradition. Accept the Jewish way of life, which has stood the test of time, which knows how to handle persecution and which has a practical moral system ideally suited to people coming in from a Hellenistic background and having no guidelines how to structure their lives as Christians.” What adds force to this argument is the fact that these people work with the approval and blessing of Jerusalem, the centre of authority of the young developing church. Thus, their offer to the Galatians becomes too good to refuse. In the meantime, they make the Galatians dependent on their interpretation of the law and rob them of their freedom.

My second hypothesis is that Paul meets this challenge in two ways. Firstly, he defends the proposition that the gospel is *not* dependent on human authority nor on human consent (1:11). It is not dependent on Jerusalem, nor on Paul’s special qualities. (The biographical section in chapter 1 and 2 is often misunderstood as Paul’s personal irritability because he is not recognized or because of his arrogance.)

Secondly, in order to move his readers to accept his central proposition, Paul uses all the pragmatic techniques at his disposal. This makes Galatians a complex and very concentrated text. All strategies on all levels are mobilized to strengthen the central theme. But, in doing so, he has to start where his readers are, take their *Erwartungshorizonte* into consideration, and work within their codes. It also means that the shifting of positions is not achieved in one stroke, but by a *gradual* process in which a series of intermediate positions is spelled out.

In the following section a few examples will be discussed very briefly to illustrate how the argument is developed on various levels. Again, it must be stressed that references to Paul do not in the first place have the historical

person in mind, but the author, in so far as he can be known from the text – and intertextually, from the other letters ascribed to him or to his school.

The syntacto-rhetorical level

On this level, a wide range of techniques is at the author's disposal. To give some idea of the field, we shall concentrate on three rather arbitrarily chosen aspects, namely the use of pronouns to demarcate textual space, rhetorical questions and their audiences, and the phenomenon of the double reader.

Pronomina and textual space

Pronomina can be used very effectively to demarcate textual space and to enable the author to manoeuvre within the room thus created. Paul is not the first to mark positions in the text by means of pronomina and to attach a certain value to each of these positions in their relationship to one another. Already Dionysos Thrax (2nd century BC) in his *Ars Grammatica* (par 13.20) discusses the three forms of personal pronouns and defines them as follows: The first person is the one *from* whom the word comes, the second the one *to* whom the word is directed and the third person is the one *about* whom the utterance is made. In terms of textual space, it is clear that the first and second person are closer to each other than the second and third, or the first and the third. The third is a step further removed from the direct interaction presupposed between the first and second pronomina. Furthermore, textual distance can become associated with specific values – or rather, certain positions are marked as being more preferable to others. Preference is usually expressed in terms of proximity. An increase in distance between narratee and addressee serves as a negative sign, while a decrease marks a preferred position – culminating in solidarity or identification. In contrast to most other religious codes where the accent is on transcendence, biblical texts are characterised by emphasizing solidarity between God and human beings. In fact, fundamental change becomes possible only by the divine willingness to identify with human existence, as exemplified by incarnation.

In Galatians, Paul uses textual distance and proximity as part of his persuasive strategy. Throughout the letter, the second person pronoun *you* vacillates between two positions – it can either be grouped with Paul's opponents (5:1 "You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?") or with the apostle's own group (4:12 "I plead with you, brothers ..."). The middle position of the second person pronoun is perhaps best seen in an example like 1:8:

But even if *we* or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one *we* preached to *you*, let *him* be eternally condemned!

The object of Paul's plea is to move the Galatians from a position of exclusion (allied with his opponents) to one of inclusion (allied with himself). He does this by subtly diminishing the textual distance and by suggesting how this

mediation can take place: "I plead with you, brothers, become like me for I became like you" (4:12). By combining the possessive with the personal pronoun, the gravitational force of the own group is increased: "My dear children . . . how I wish I could be with *you* now . . ." (4:19). At the same time the kinship connection (children) and the explicit expression of solidarity reinforces the argument. The final stage of inclusion is reached when the second person pronoun is subsumed under the first and any textual distance between the apostle and his followers is eliminated: "Therefore *brothers*, we are not *children* of the slave woman, but of the free woman" (4:31). Little doubt is left to the reader as to the position which Paul expects him to assume.

Rhetorical questions and their audiences

Recent studies in this field have stressed the important role of rhetorical questions in the dynamics of argumentation (cf. Wuellner, 1985). At the same time, it is important to distinguish more carefully between the different audiences for whom these questions are intended. Perelman (1982) has made it clear how important the role of the audience is in determining the effect of a rhetorical strategy. With biblical material the tendency is to think almost exclusively in terms of historical, real audiences, while there are also clear instances of questions addressed to a universal audience or to a single interlocutor (the "you" of many biblical passages - cf. for example Mt 5:23: "If *you* are bringing your gift to the altar . . ."; Mt. 5:25, 29, 40, 6:2 and many similar statements). Another variation is the author as self-deliberating - examples are the famous "I" passages in Romans 7 or the "we" references where Paul identifies himself with his readers in general or with the consciousness of the whole Christian community (Wuellner, 1985: note 55).

For our purposes, the most important aspect of rhetorical questions is the way in which they can be used to structure reality. These questions rest on social values or norms, which can be either challenged or confirmed by such procedures. Their main function is to concentrate attention on one point and to effect crucial changes in the flow of the discourse. Often rhetorical questions are used to sum up the argument, to state a conclusion and to move to the next issue. A good example is Galatians 1:10. Here Paul has to get himself out of a difficult corner. His opponents have used a main theme of his preaching (the abandonment of the Jewish torah) to cast doubts upon his intentions. Their argument runs more or less as follows: Paul rejects the law - therefore, he attempts to make life easier for his followers - therefore, he wants to be popular - therefore, he is uncertain of himself - therefore, he should not be trusted - therefore, his preaching should be rejected - therefore, the Galatians should accept the message of Paul's opponents and adopt their position.

It is very difficult to avoid this conclusion once the premise is accepted that Paul wants to be popular. The only way to break the flow of the argument is by means of a drastic intervention. Paul does this by uttering a curse: "Let him who preaches a different gospel be damned!" (1:8 - cf. the quotation above). By deliberately repeating the curse in 1:9, Paul emphasizes that it is

not a slip of the tongue, but intentional. Such a shocking statement can be interpreted in different ways, but Paul now uses a rhetorical question to draw out the right conclusion for his purpose: someone who is prepared to curse outright anybody who differs from him, is certainly not trying to curry favour with his audience:

Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant to Christ (1:10)

By combining the effect of the curse with the interpretation of the rhetorical question, Paul is able to turn the argument around to reach a different conclusion in the minds of his audience: Paul obviously does not try to be popular – therefore, he is not uncertain of himself – therefore, he is not dependent on the favour of men – therefore, he may be right.

Rhetorical questions are powerful tools with which to choose the battleground, to identify the issues (that is, to select some and repress others, thereby narrowing the focus down to preselected targets), to anticipate and neutralize objections (cf. 2:17 and 3:21) and to frame the issue in such a way that only one response is possible – as illustrated almost daily by the politician and seasoned interviewer.

When rhetorical questions are combined in a sequence, it can become like a bombardment, which is aimed at demolishing all resistance. A powerful example is the series of six questions which Paul fires in quick succession in Galatians 3:1–5:

Are you people in Galatia mad? Has someone put a spell on you; in spite of the plain explanation you have had of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ? Let me ask you one question: was it because you practised the Law that you received the Spirit, or because you believed what was preached to you? Are you foolish enough to end in outward observances what you began in the Spirit? Have all the favours you received been wasted? And if this were so, they would most certainly have been wasted. Does God give you the Spirit so freely and work miracles among you, because you practise the Law, or because you believed what was preached to you? (3:1–5)

The answer in every case is emphatically no! It is almost impossible to escape the force of the argument once Paul's initial premise is accepted. Here we have an example where the reader is not so much given a clue, but rather overwhelmed by the discourse. However, in due course we shall see that the author does not always have the upper hand and that the reader can also have a strong influence on the shaping of the argument.

The double reader

A last example of a syntacto-rhetorical device that will be mentioned here, is a phenomenon which may be called the double reader. This refers to instances where Paul is talking to two different sets of readers at the same time. In the case of Galatians 2:6–7, he is dependent on the opinion of people

whose authority he does not necessarily accept. Although he emphasizes that his commission as apostle does not derive from the Jerusalem group, he must take into account that, as far as his readers are concerned, they represent the final authority. He, therefore, has to keep both the Galatians and the delegation from Jerusalem in his sights. At this stage of the argument, he cannot afford to antagonize the Galatians. He alters his strategy to argue from their premises – even those whom the Galatians accept as the highest authority did not have any difficulties with the way in which he presented the gospel. At the same time – and this is with a view to the Jerusalem delegation in Galatia – his reference to the “acknowledged leaders” should not be understood as a sign of his submission to their authority. This calls for very careful formulation of his argument. In the case of the absent reader, the situation is less complicated, because the author is talking to an absent party via a present reader. Here two different types of readers with two different sets of presuppositions must be handled at one and the same time.

The level of cultural codes

In the examples discussed so far, the power of the author in guiding his reader was very prominent. However, in the last section it became clear that the author does not wield all the power and that his argument is also influenced by the presuppositions of his audience. In the category presently under discussion, the role of the reader will receive more emphasis. The author is not merely scattering clues according to his own preferences – the type of clue he chooses and the way it is employed, is greatly influenced by the presuppositions of the reader.

Recent studies have emphasized the fact that an argument is possible on the basis of shared presuppositions or values (cf. Kennedy, 1984:17). Perleman puts it bluntly: “The speaker can choose as his points of departure only the theses accepted by those he addresses” (1982:21). The effect of these presuppositions on the argument can be quite extensive.

In the letter to the Galatians, the matter is complicated because different sets of presuppositions play a role. In the narrower sense, Paul shares – or at least, until recently has shared – a set of common beliefs and values with the Galatians which he labels as “the gospel”. But he also shares a common cultural code with his fellow Jews, which of course includes many theological precepts. In the widest sense, he shares with his contemporaries world views and values which were typical of first-century Greek-Roman culture. In each case, the common code which Paul shares with his audience will influence the shape of his argument – from elements characteristic of the Christian faith in the first case to very general concepts in the last case and which almost amount to basic common sense.

To illustrate the effect of these different sets of presuppositions, we shall concentrate on one example, namely the way in which Paul develops his argument concerning Abraham and the law. When dealing with a religious text like Galatians, it is perhaps better to talk of persuasion, rather than logical argument. The latter is usually associated with demonstrating that the

facts of the matter conform to some outside, independent criterion. However, some form of demonstration can form part of a religious text. Once it is accepted that religious language “argues” from a coherent structure of assumptions, a “set of beliefs”, then the ensuing argument can take the form of a demonstration of how the presented “facts” conform to the commonly accepted set of beliefs. This is what happens with Paul’s reference to the Abraham story.

When dealing with fellow-Jews with whom he shares both the history of Israel and some fundamental concepts of the Jewish faith, Paul finds himself in a very difficult position. According to Jewish thinking, the natural order of things plays an important role. This is especially true of the *first* in any chronological or hierarchical sequence. The importance of the first-born, the first fruits and similar examples testify to this assumption and is underlined by the surprise and upheaval caused when this order is reversed. Perhaps the best-known example is the transgression of this code when Jacob manages to secure the right of the first-born from his brother Esau. The basic assumption is that the first should be dominant and decisive for what follows – in other words, a combination of priority and dominance. Jewish history abounds with examples of this principle – the position of Abraham, of the sons of Jacob, the dominant position of the law over against the prophets and the writings as (later) additions to the Hebrew Bible. In Galatians, Paul evokes the same concept when he reminds the believers where they *began* and where they are now *ending* (3:3) – clearly implying that the beginning should be the norm for their subsequent behaviour.

In terms of their common Jewish background, Paul’s opponents are virtually in an unassailable position. Paul’s insistence that the observance of the law is not a prerequisite for salvation, can only be understood as a deviation from the original Jewish position. In their eyes, Paul is a Johnny-come-lately, he is not even one of the original group of Jerusalem apostles and he clearly represents an aberration of the traditional faith.

One should appreciate Paul’s dilemma. How can one be prior to the first? How can he do anything to alter the chronological dominance of his opponents? Elsewhere Paul is struggling with the same problem in the famous Adam/Christ-parallels (Rom. 5 and 1 Cor. 15). How can Christ be the beginning of a new mankind if Adam was first and, therefore, the dominating representative of all mankind?

In Galatians Paul’s opponents occupy the higher ground and argue from the priority of Abraham. He is the original and dominant representative of the covenant, of circumcision, of the law. All this, they argue, is denied by Paul’s interpretation of the gospel.

In facing up to this formidable argument, Paul begins by accepting the premise of his opponents without reservation. In fact, he presses them to take it even more seriously: “If you are concerned about the priority of Abraham, let us take your argument to its full consequences and look at Abraham as he *really* was at the beginning. You depict him as the father of the covenant, of the circumcision and the law. But if we look closely, we see that he started out from Ur of the Chaldees without the law, without circumcision, without the

security of a country or home (Gen. 12). The law was given only much later at Sinai (Gal. 3:17). So, if you want the original Abraham, you must take him as he was – an uncircumcised heathen without law, who put his trust in God alone.”

To his opponents this must have sounded blasphemous. Nonetheless, it is an accurate description, not only of the original situation of Abraham, but also of the heathen Galatians. By doing so, he could link the latter directly to Abraham and declare them to be heirs to his promise (3:15–18). In this way Paul is able to overcome the obstacle of priority. But the fact that he has to take such drastic measures to achieve his end, shows with what force the presuppositions of his audience have on shaping his argument. He is not able to do away with the argument of priority – he can make his point only by a radical application of this principle.

The sociology of Paul's semantic universe

The author, so it appears from the previous section, does not always have things his own way. On certain levels of the text, the reader often wields considerable influence on the shaping of the discourse. In this section, we shall look briefly at a level where it is again the author who has more free play to guide his reader. Insights from the sociology of knowledge have recently influenced both literary and theological studies. A clearer understanding of the “world of the text” has developed, in so far as every text creates a semantic universe of its own which can be analysed and described in terms of its own “sociology” and internal relations. As far as biblical material is concerned, pioneering work has been done by Norman Petersen in his study of Philemon. In analysing the social relations created by the text of this short letter, he gives the following resumé of the story:

Once upon a time there was a slave named Onesimus who became a brother to his master and a servant to his father, who was also his brother (as well as a prisoner and ambassador or old man). Onesimus's father, Paul, on the other hand, was both a free man who was nevertheless a slave to a master, Jesus, who had himself been a slave, and a father to and partner with his child Onesimus's master, Philemon, who like Onesimus, was also Paul's brother. Now one day the father/brother/slave/prisoner/ambassador/partner decided to send Onesimus, his child/brother/servant, back to his master/brother Philemon, who was, it will be recalled, the father's child/brother/partner. It seems, however, that the father/brother/slave/prisoner/ambassador/partner was concerned that the child/brother/master/partner might not properly welcome the return of his slave/brother, for before becoming Paul's child and his master's brother the slave had run away from the master, and possibly with the family jewels or the like. So it was, then, that the father/brother/slave/prisoner/ambassador/partner wrote a letter to his child/brother/partner on behalf of the slave/child/brother/servant in the names of their common master, the slave/son Jesus Christ, and of their common father, God, a slave/brother/son of nobody, appealing to him to receive his slave/brother as he would receive Paul himself, asking him to prepare a room for him because he would soon be coming to visit. (Petersen, 1985:2–3)

What is of interest here is the way in which the social relations suggest different roles which the reader might adopt. Philemon is in actual fact a master of the slave Onesimus, but within the context of the faith community, he could just as well understand himself as Onesimus' brother and act accordingly. Ricoeur has written extensively about the "proposed world" of the text which the reader may inhabit. By suggesting a different role to the reader, a "redescription of reality" takes place, which makes it possible for him or her to transcend the present reality (cf. Lategan & Vorster 1985). "Clues" of this kind are also offered in Galatians, but an analysis of the text reveals that Paul in fact invokes images from a wide variety of "worlds". In the famous statement in 3:28, he shows that the existence in faith has direct consequences for at least three spheres of life – cultural (Jew/Greek), social (slave/free) and sexual (male/female). But the images he uses are in fact clues to a new self-understanding which he offers to his readers. In drawing from the juridical sphere (*heir*), the social sphere (*slave*), and the family sphere (*sons*), he gives the reader specific roles with which he or she can identify:

Now before we came of age we were as good as slaves to the elemental principles of this world, but when the appointed time came, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born a subject of the Law, to redeem the subjects of the Law and to enable us to be adopted as sons. The proof that you are sons is that God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts: the Spirit that cries "Abba, Father", and it is this that makes you a *son*, you are not a *slave* any more; and if God has made you son, then he has made you *heir*. (3:28–4:7).

Thinking of himself as a son in the house of the father, as a free man and as an heir, has enormous potential to transform not only the readers' self-understanding, but also the way in which they perceive reality and the way in which they will act. The focus on what they *are* to motivate his readers in what they should *do*, is typical of Pauline ethics and leads us to the last level of reader clues.

Ethics, gaps and the participation of the reader

In the previous sections, we looked at the various ways in which Paul guides and directs his reader. All of these presuppose a greater or lesser degree of participation on the part of the reader. On the ethical level, Paul perhaps takes his greatest risk by creating such a large "gap" (Iser's terminology) that nothing can be actualised of the text without the fullest participation of the reader.

Once again Paul finds himself in a dilemma because of the Jewish background he shares with his opponents. He is convinced that the effort of gaining acceptance in the eyes of God by performing good deeds and fulfilling the prescriptions of the law is futile. In fact, being under the constant pressure of complying with the minute details of a casuistic system is nothing but a form of slavery. The gospel means liberation, also on the ethical level, but at the same time calls for ethical responsibility:

Freedom is what we have – Christ has set us free! Stand, then, as free people, and do not allow yourselves to become slaves again. (5:1)

You my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature . . . (5:13)

Because of this strong stand for freedom, Paul has to suffer the strongest criticism. His opponents accuse him of being irresponsible to the young converts. Having convinced them to adopt a new existence, he leaves them without adequate moral guidelines to sustain them in this difficult transition. It is here that the law can offer a service which has stood the test of time and which can act as a practical guide in all possible situations. Let the new converts follow the instruction of the law in all its detail, and they will be safe!

But, to Paul, such a line of thought is a denial of the real nature of faith and a return to the “weak and pitiful” state where they will again become slaves of the law (4:9). He, therefore, steadfastly refuses to fall into this trap and exhorts his readers to become what they are. They should realise that they have been liberated and that they will retain their freedom only if they exercise it by accepting full responsibility for their ethical decisions. When he describes the fruit of the Spirit in chapter 5:22–26, he talks in very broad terms and studiously avoids the danger of replacing one set of casuistic rules with another. No – the reader must accept his own responsibility, give content to his freedom, and creatively shape the new lifestyle which characterizes an existence in faith. Whatever influence the author may have over his reader – Paul instinctively realises that there is a cut-off point where he no longer has control and where the reader must actualize the text by his own actions if it should have significance at all. What he receives from the author is no longer a vague hint or a mere clue – but a ball which lands squarely in his court and which he has to play.

Conclusion

The few examples drawn from the text of Galatians may give some indication of both the variety of clues offered to the reader and the different levels on which they are found. Whether these instructions will be followed by the reader, is quite a different matter, and raises a question which opens up yet another set of problems which cannot be discussed here. Whatever the persuasive power of texts, there comes a point where the author has to take the risk to set his text free and to let it lead its own life – to be enjoyed, reviled, used or abused. This is true even (or especially) of religious texts. In this sense, biblical texts do not need our “defence”, as they are quite capable of fending for themselves and of speaking in their own right – as they have done for many centuries. What they ask of the reader is not preferential treatment, but the willingness to take a risk. That means the willingness to expose him- or herself to the text.

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