

PAUL THE SPIRITUAL GUIDE  
A SOCIAL IDENTITY PERSPECTIVE ON PAUL'S  
APOSTOLIC SELF-IDENTITY<sup>1</sup>

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Paul frequently referred to himself as an apostle of Jesus Christ (e.g., 1 Cor. 1:1; 2 Cor. 1:1). This title was central to his self-identity as a servant of God (Rom. 1:1; Gal. 1:1, cf. 1 Cor. 4:9; 9:1, 2, 5; 15:9; 2 Cor. 12:12; Gal. 1:17). He regards his apostolic identity as one he 'acquired' from Jesus Christ (Rom. 1:5; cf. Gal. 1:15), and one to which he was 'called' (Rom. 1:1; 1 Cor. 1:1; cf. 2 Cor. 1:1; Gal. 1:1, 15) 'by the will of God' (1 Cor. 1:1; 2 Cor. 1:1) when God revealed his Son in him (Gal. 1:15). Paul's readers were/are then faced with a basic interpretive question: What did Paul mean when he identified himself as an apostle? How did Paul portray his apostolic self-identity? Who did Paul think he was?

Scholarly understanding of Paul's self-conception in his use of the title 'apostle' has remained minimal throughout the history of biblical scholarship. Few have ventured to describe Paul's understanding of his apostolic self-identity beyond the basic notion of his being 'sent'. Not surprisingly, then, the view of Paul as 'missionary' has prevailed, especially since the modern missionary movement, and Paul's travels have become popularly known as 'missionary journeys.'<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, until recently European and American biblical scholars have been less interested in Paul's apostolic role and more interested in Paul as a thinker engaging other thinkers and the resultant image of Paul as 'theologian' has dominated the academy.<sup>3</sup> When modern exegetes do consider Paul's understanding of his apostolic self-identity, they

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<sup>1</sup> This article summarizes my Ph.D. thesis of the same title accepted at the University of St Andrews in March 2004, written under the supervision of Professor Philip F. Esler and examined by Dr. Bruce Longenecker (St Andrews) and Professor Halvor Moxnes (Oslo).

<sup>2</sup> See now L. J. Lietaert Peerbolte, *Paul the Missionary* (Leuven: Peeters, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Robert Jewett, *Paul the Apostle to America* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994) offers a trenchant analysis of the European tendency to find a systematic thinker in Paul.

usually move in one of two directions, that Paul perceived himself to be either a prophet or a philosopher. Although these suggestions have an initial appeal, after careful consideration they must be regarded as dubious, because they emerge from hermeneutical methods that are unable to discern how self-identity is constructed in literary discourse. Scholarly understanding of Paul's apostolic self-conception can proceed forward when readers approach Pauline texts with some awareness of how writers reveal self-identity in discourse. The purpose of this study is to develop a method appropriate to the task and seek better to understand Paul's self-conception in his use of the title apostle.<sup>4</sup>

The study is in four parts. Part One introduces the question, asking 'who did Paul think he was?' (Chapter One) and surveys ancient usage of the term 'apostle' (Chapter Two), demonstrating that it was used in a variegated manner, even among early Christian leaders. More importantly, Chapter Two shows that Paul himself used the category inconsistently, at times including Timothy with himself as 'apostles' (1 Thess. 2:7) and later differentiating between himself as 'apostle' and Timothy as a 'brother' (2 Cor. 1:1). Is it possible, then, to discern Paul's self-conception in his use of the term in his letters?

Part Two considers the two most relevant suggestions offered by modern scholars. Chapter Three considers claims that Paul's apostolic identity was primarily informed by his role as a prophet. The primary evidence comes from allusions to Old Testament prophets. Galatians 1:15-16 is perhaps the most well known example. M. Eugene Boring believes that this passage 'is replete with prophetic allusions and shows that he understands himself in the succession of the prophets.'<sup>5</sup> There are significant problems with this claim, however, not the least of which is that it places Paul within a well-populated and undifferentiated mass of early Christian leaders, which hardly gives further clarity to his apostolic self-identity. Furthermore, although it is clear that Paul functioned as a prophet, the prophet in the early church lacked the definitive authority that Paul claimed. Whereas Paul taught that prophets and their prophetic utterance should be evaluated

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<sup>4</sup> I am not attempting to discern Paul's understanding of the term 'apostle' generically, but only his understanding of his own specific apostolic role.

<sup>5</sup> Boring, *The Continuing Voice of Jesus: Christian Prophecy and the Gospel Tradition* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991): 61.

(1 Thess. 5:20-21), he claimed that his own revelations were beyond the need for testing because of his unique call (Gal. 1:11-17). It is shown that Paul's allusion to Old Testament prophets in Galatians 1 actually serves to differentiate Paul from the early Christian prophets because it highlights that he has been 'called' to a specific identity (like the Old Testament prophets) whereas they act on the basis of occasional inspiration without the authority of a call. Chapter Four considers a view that has become popular in recent years: Paul as philosopher. Largely due to a clearer vision of the role of philosophy in the first century Mediterranean world as 'a way of life' with an emphasis on 'spiritual exercises' rather than theoretical thought focused on abstract ideas,<sup>6</sup> biblical scholars during the past decade have identified Paul with Epicureans (Clarence Glad), Cynics (F. Gerald Downing), Stoics (Troels Engberg-Pedersen), and moral philosophers in general (Abraham Malherbe).<sup>7</sup> Although there are indeed practical similarities between Paul and the philosophers, there are also important features of the philosophers' appearance and location that serve to distinguish them from Paul. When these are taken into account it becomes highly unlikely that anyone would have taken Paul for a philosopher. The dress, hair, beard, and staff of a philosopher function as identity markers, distinguishing him from all others. Thus, Paul's appearance would have immediately identified him with or distinguished him from the philosophers. Although our first full physical description of Paul is too late to be of value (*Acts of Paul and Thecla*), there is no suggestion in Paul's letters that his physical deportment was intended to suggest the philosophical life. There we are reminded of Paul's unimpressive appearance and demeanor (2 Cor. 11). Furthermore, Paul's location in the workshop (1 Thess. 2:9) distances him from the majority of the philosophers, whose wealth and status kept them free of such stigmata.<sup>8</sup> Only a few Cynics, who cared nothing about wealth and status, are known to have worked in manual

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> Clarence Glad, *Paul and Philodemus. Adaptability in Epicurean and Early Christian Psychagogy*. *Novum Testamentum Supplement* 81. (Leiden: Brill, 1995). F. Gerald Downing, *Cynics, Paul and the Pauline Churches*. (London: Routledge, 1998). Troels Engberg-Pedersen, *Paul and the Stoics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000). Abraham Malherbe, *Paul and the Popular Philosophers* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989).

<sup>8</sup> See Ronald Hock, *The Social Context of Paul's Ministry: Tentmaking and Apostleship* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) and Stanley K. Stowers, 'Social Status, Public Speaking and Private Teaching: The Circumstances of Paul's Preaching Activity', *Novum Testamentum* 26 (1984): 59-82.

labour. The basic problem with both of these suggestions is that the hermeneutical methods used to discern allusions (to prophets and prophecy) and similarities (to philosophers) do not offer means of discerning discursive identity. They do not bridge the gap between similarity and identity.

Part Three offers an alternative hermeneutic, one that is specifically intended to reveal an author's construction of identity categories. Chapter Five introduces the social identity perspective, an aspect of modern social psychology that attends to the social construction of identity, with specific elements focused on the discursive construction and revelation of self-identity. This model reveals how persons attempt to overcome negative images and self-conceptions through the construction of positive images and identities in speech and behaviour. It is suggested that this model may be helpful in discerning Paul's discursive construction and revelation of his self-identity as an apostle. Certain objections are immediately apparent, however, and are considered in detail in the next two chapters. Since the social identity perspective was developed through observation, analysis, and description of the speech and behaviour of modern Western persons, it is appropriate to question its usefulness for understanding ancient Mediterranean persons. Chapter Six demonstrates that it is possible to overcome problems of anachronism and ethnocentrism if the etic model is commensurate with the emic data and if the model and data are then correlated in a mutually informative hermeneutical dialectic. Chapter Seven demonstrates that the etic model derived from the social identity perspective is commensurate with ancient Mediterranean persons. It is shown that ancient persons were concerned to overcome negative images and pursued various strategies to construct a positive self-identity. The social identity perspective awakens the reader to elements of identity construction and reformation in ancient texts.

Part Four applies that perspective to 1 Thessalonians and 1 and 2 Corinthians. In the process it becomes evident that the best comparative model for understanding Paul's apostolic self-identity is the ancient spiritual guide. Not only does Paul function like a spiritual guide, but he also constructs identity categories and shapes his own positive identity using the category of the spiritual guide. It is here that one finds the decisive difference between attempts to describe Paul's identity as either a philosopher or prophet. Paul never discursively crafts identity categories of prophet or philosopher in order to reveal

his own positive identity, whereas his discursive shaping of the spiritual guide category is intended to do just that. The spiritual guide in the ancient Mediterranean served as a mediator between God and humans, guiding or directing humans along a path that ultimately led them into the presence of God. Some spiritual guides worked only in the heavenly realms, leading the souls of the dead to their appointed destinations, others worked in the earthly realm. Paul's letters reveal that he identified himself with these earthly guides, directing the spiritual journeys of followers of Jesus until the day he (Jesus) returned for them. Chapter Eight considers 1 Thessalonians. This letter portrays a rhetorical situation of ongoing spiritual battle in Thessalonica, which requires that the believers see Paul as a spiritual guide sent to them and given authority by God to lead them faithfully through the battle until the day Jesus returns. The defining self portrait is found in chapter two where Paul describes both his authority ('approved by God' [2:4-6]) and capacity ('you are witnesses how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you' [2:7-12]) to serve as spiritual guide, concluding with his description of the Thessalonian believers as 'our hope, joy, and crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ when he comes' (2:19). Chapter Nine considers 1 and 2 Corinthians. In Corinth rival apostles threatened to undermine Paul's authority to guide and Paul was forced to defend his identity as the spiritual guide whom the Lord had sent to lead the Corinthians until the return of Christ. Paul explains, 'I feel a divine jealousy for you, for I promised you in marriage to one husband, to present you as a chaste virgin to Christ' (2 Cor. 11:2). Again Paul's focus is on guiding the Corinthians so that he might present them as blameless when Christ returns (1 Cor. 1:8; 3:10-15).

An epilogue summarizes the argument and concludes the study. This study is suggestive of future work in the Pauline letters and elsewhere. I plan to continue this work with more studies in other Pauline letters. It is hoped that others will make use of the heuristic potency of the social identity perspective when reading other ancient texts, not only in the Old and New Testaments, but also in classical texts.