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Crucifixion as Wisdom: Exploring the Ideology of a Disreputable Social Movement

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The title of this volume—*The Wisdom and the Foolishness of God*—is drawn from the paradoxical maxim that Paul enunciates in 1 Cor. 1:25: "for the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength" (translations from the New Testament my own). Paul's arresting expression borders on blasphemy: to speak of the foolishness and the weakness of God is to contradict standard assumptions about the divine, assumptions necessary to maintain God's status as God. The way Paul's maxim has reverberated down the centuries, spawning one form of radical theology after another, is one of the central threads of this volume.[1] In this essay I aim to place this expression in the *literary* context of the opening chapters of 1 Corinthians, and in the *historical* context of the Greco-Roman world. I will focus on the way Paul associates this wisdom/folly polarity with the *crucifixion* of Jesus, and on the multiple ironic effects of this association. In particular, I will argue that we should hear "wisdom" and "folly" not merely in intellectual terms, as rationality or illogic, but as umbrella labels for the presence or absence of "civilized" values. Paul's declarations about the "folly" of the crucifixion correspond, I will suggest, to the social experience of the early Christians, a disreputable movement whose subversive stance toward Greco-Roman culture was founded on, and given deep ideological support by, the Pauline message of "Christ crucified."

Wisdom, Foolishness and Webs of Association in 1 Corinthians 1–4

Paul's statement that "the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom" (1 Cor. 1:25) forms the conclusion to his description of the content of his preaching: "we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1:23–24). For Paul the foolishness of God is evidenced very specifically in an *event*, the event that formed the core of his "good news": the crucifixion of Jesus. What is folly to Gentiles but wisdom to those who are called is not in this context an abstract doctrine about God, nor a general analysis of divine activity in the world, but a highly particular event which is also the highly particular source of salvation: it is "the word of the cross" which is "folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1:18; cf. 2:1–2, 6–8). As these citations make clear, running alongside the polarity of wisdom and folly is another polarity, one of power and weakness: folly is closely associated with weakness, wisdom is linked to power. The two polarities are entwined, and they are shortly joined by a third, a contrast between the noble and the ignoble, or the honorable and the shameful. These latter terms appear alongside wise/foolish and powerful/weak as descriptors of the people who receive and embody the message of Christ crucified, both in 1:26–28 (regarding the Corinthian believers) and in 4:10 (regarding Paul). Thus, in the verses that immediately follow our paradoxical maxim (1:25), Paul urges the Corinthians to consider their own "calling": "not many of you were wise in human terms, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth" (1:26). God chose what is foolish in the world, what is weak, what is ignoble or despicable, even the nothings or nobodies (1:27–28). This expansion and elaboration of categories alerts us to the fact that all these terms have *social* connotations: wisdom, power, and honor are overlapping characteristics that reach their acme among the elite, whose education, influence, and status give them the authority and the means to shape social norms.

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[1] The essays show, however, that it has not always been read as culturally subversive. For reflection from the Lutheran perspective, see Vitor Westhelle, *The Scandalous God: The Use and Abuse of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006).

The "wisdom," which is the target of Paul's ironic critique, is associated with a variety of representatives. At one point these are labeled "Greeks" ("Jews seek signs, and Greeks seek wisdom," 1:22, but "Greeks" seem practically interchangeable with the Gentiles (or "nations," ἔθνη), to whom the message of Christ crucified is folly (1:23). But in the majority of cases wisdom is associated in even more general terms with "the world" (ὁ κόσμος) or "this age" (ὁ αἰών οὗτος): "Has not God rendered foolish the wisdom of the world?" (1:20; cf. 1:21; 3:20); "Where is the wise man, where is the scribe, where is the dialectical debater of this age?" (1:20; cf. 2:6, 8). As has often been noted, such denigrating references to "the world" or "this age" are characteristic of apocalyptic, with its dualistic configurations and its totalizing tendency to negative depictions of the world.[2] Paul regularly uses such language (cf. Gal. 1:4), but here its reference is primarily to the *people* who make up "the world": the wisdom of "this world" is the wisdom of "human beings" (ἄνθρωποι, 1:25), whose tendency to celebrate themselves is part of Paul's target throughout (1:29; 3:19). Thus, even if wisdom can be associated particularly with "Greeks," it is not confined to them. What is at stake is something endemic to humanity.

There is a similar breadth to the connotations of the term *wisdom*.[3] At times it is closely linked with speech (1:17; 2:1–5), but it hardly limited to the spoken realm of culture. Wisdom is also a form of perception or an epistemological stance: "by the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom" (1:21; cf. 2:6–10). It is also associated with canons of evaluation. The wisdom that Paul speaks among the mature (2:6) is able to evaluate (ἀνακρίνομαι) all things by the Spirit (2:15); it was in their misperception and erroneous evaluation that "the rulers of this age" crucified the one who was actually "the Lord of glory" (2:8). Criteria for evaluation and celebration are, in fact, the presenting issue that evokes this whole discussion of wisdom and folly. Disputes within the Corinthian church have evolved around the differential evaluation of various leaders (1:10–17), an issue to which Paul keeps returning (3:1–4, 18–23), especially in relation to himself and Apollos (3:4—4:6).[4] If the antidote to these disputes is not to "boast in human beings" (3:21), and if that is made possible only by abandoning "the wisdom of this world" (3:18–20), it is clear that this "wisdom" entails a matrix of normative judgments concerning value or worth which Paul sees as still operative, and destructive, in the Corinthian church.

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[2] E.g., Alexandra R. Brown, *The Cross and Human Transformation: Paul's Apocalyptic Word in 1 Corinthians* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

[3] For discussion, see Duane Litfin, *St Paul's Theology of Proclamation: 1 Corinthians 1-4 and Graeco-Roman Rhetoric* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

[4] For the background to these party groupings, see L. L. Welborn, "On the Discord in Corinth: 1 Corinthians 1-4 and Ancient Politics," *JBL* 106 (1987): 85–111.

The rhetorical force of these chapters lies in the fact that they do not just *contrast* two forms of wisdom, God's wisdom and the wisdom of the world; they announce a divine intention to *overturn or destroy* the wisdom that is not God's own. Citing and adapting Isaiah 29, Paul declares early on God's aggressive intent: "I will *destroy* the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will *thwart*" (1:19).[5] "Has not God *rendered foolish* the wisdom of the world?" (1:20). The wisdom of the cross is not just an alternative wisdom but an anti-wisdom, refuting or subverting what would normally be taken for granted. When he draws out the correlation of this message with the status of its recipients, Paul insists that God's election does not simply bypass the wise and powerful: it shames them by an act that confounds the normal ranking of status or honor (1:27–28). According to the third and climactic colon of this statement, "God has chosen what is ignoble in the world, and despicable, what is non-existent, *in order that he might render inoperative what exists*, so that no one should boast before God" (1:28–29).[6] The theme recurs elsewhere (e.g., 3:18–20), notably in connection with scriptural citations. To align oneself with the message of Christ crucified is not just to sidestep the wisdom framework of the world, but to disturb its claims and to confront its hegemony: "if anyone thinks he is wise in this age, *let him become a fool,* in order that he may be wise" (3:18).

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[5] Paul appears to have adapted the Greek version of this text, so that the last verb reads not "hide" but "thwart": the negative divine intent is thereby strengthened.

[6] The verb καταργέω means to render inactive or inoperative (cf. 2:6; 15:24), not necessarily to destroy.

The Cross as Weakness and Foolishness

As a death penalty, crucifixion was designed to cause the maximum degradation of the body and the psyche over the longest possible period of time.[7] In the Roman era it was used freely and frequently in the execution of slaves, to the extent that it was known simply as the "slave punishment" (*servile supplicium*; e.g., Tacitus, *Hist.* 4.11). Slaves, who had no legal rights, could be put to death in any way one wanted, but the special semiotics of crucifixion—the ironic elevation of the tortured victim in the public gaze—provided a perfect deterrent to slaves who were liable to become insubordinate or "uppity." The Romans also used crucifixion extensively for anyone, free or slave, who was perceived to challenge their authority in the provinces: as an instrument of torture and terror it was regularly used to quell revolts. Ever conscious of the "body language" of different forms of capital punishment, the Romans used crucifixion to inflict the greatest possible dehumanization.[8] Victims were brutally flogged, verbally abused, and psychologically humiliated; they were stripped naked, pinned to wood in various positions, and then hoisted high in a publicly visible spot; they were left to a long and excruciatingly slow death with the gradual loss of bodily control, until they died by suffocation; their corpses were then normally left for some time on the cross to be eaten by vultures, and thus denied the final moment of dignity, a burial by family or friends.

It is easy to see why Paul would consider "Christ crucified" the epitome of weakness. Victims were deliberately rendered powerless, as a punishment for usurping the power of their owners or political masters: they were pinned to wood, unable to cover their nakedness, and taunted in their helplessness. Josephus talks of Roman soldiers nailing their victims up in various positions "by way of jest" (*War* 5.451), and recounts a case when the victims were required to watch their wives and children being slaughtered before their eyes, powerless to come to their defense (*War* 1.97–98; *Ant.* 13.380–83). In a world where physical integrity and strength were essential components of honor, it is hard to imagine any more exposed form of humiliating weakness: the crucified victim is as vulnerable and powerless as it is possible to imagine a living human individual to be.

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[7] The classic work remains Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion* (London: SCM Press, 1977).

[8] On the body language used in punishments, see Maud W. Gleason, "Mutilated Messengers: Body Language in Josephus," in Simon Goldhill, ed., *Being Greek Under Rome: Cultural Identity, the Second Sophistic and the Development of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 50–85.

It is less easy to see why Paul should also associate the crucified Christ with the motif of "folly" (μωρία). It has been common to interpret this at the intellectual level and to speak of the senselessness of imagining that divine salvation could be effected through so gruesome a death and so powerless a victim: the cross is folly inasmuch as it makes no sense within the rational structures of ancient theology.[9] However, recent research by Larry Welborn has opened up a new and more convincing approach.[10] In a detailed investigation of the figure of the fool (μωρός in Greek, *stultus* in Latin), especially as depicted in ancient mimes (the popular entertainment of the ancient world), Welborn has clarified the ancient associations of the terms *fool* and *folly*. The "fool" is the object of ridicule and contempt in at least four interconnected respects. Physically, the fool is depicted as deformed and grotesque: with a bald head, squinting eyes, a large nose, or a humped back, the fool is quintessentially ugly. This is just the sort of person one subjects to physical and verbal abuse, and the mime-actor who plays the "fool" on stage can expect to be beaten with canes, punched, buffeted about the head, shaved, and spat upon—all signs of the disdain and derision that mark their victims' inferior status. Intellectually, the "fool" is of course uneducated and stupid, what Americans might call "dumb": his speech is expected to be confused, uncontrolled, and amusingly self-contradictory, his thought processes slow, befuddled, and witless. This mental weakness accompanies obvious psychological or moral incapacities: superstitious and moody, the fool is by turns anxious and rash, fatuous in his self-inflated opinion, and prone to vulgar, obscene, and sacrilegious speech. Finally, all this is accompanied by, and symbolic of, a low social and economic status: the fool is poor, ill-clad, a vagabond and parasite, on a level with pimps, prostitutes, and thieves, the kind of human "scum" too low on the social scale to be noticed by the elite, or, if noticed, useful only as the epitome of everything that is opposite to the sophistication which culture and civilization are designed to create.

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[9] So Justin, *Apol.* 1.13.4, who takes the folly to mean μανία, that is, a form of madness.

[10] L. L. Welborn, *Paul, the Fool of Christ. A Study of 1 Corinthians 1–4 in the Comic-Philosophic Tradition* (London: T&T Clark, 2005).

Viewed from this angle, the wisdom/folly polarity in Paul's discourse embraces not just the spectrum of intellectual capacity or rationality, nor just eloquent or stumbling speech, but the whole composite polarity between the values of "civilization" and its vulgar, worthless opposite. The σοφός is the sophisticated person, endowed with the very opposite of the deficiencies of the fool. The term σοφία evokes not just intellectual training, investment in knowledge and rhetoric, and the confident control of speech and thought that were the essence of Greek παιδεία. It also evokes the equally significant acquisition of bodily control and beauty, the poise, gait, and physical toning that marked the superior classes, their inviolability from physical punishment and from the degrading blows that characterize inferior people and slaves. The whole point of education and its associated "wisdom" is to attain balance and control—physically, emotionally, and morally—so that, in distinction from the fool, the sophisticated individual has his emotions well under control, is refined in tastes, maintains a respectable demeanor, and is, as far as possible, both socially and financially independent. The σοφός is the καλοκάγαθος, the beautiful/noble and good, with a mix of physical, moral, and social virtues as intertwined characteristics of culture. Not everyone pursued wisdom to the degree or in the ways that the philosophical schools argued were its ultimate forms, but it could be generally agreed that the purpose of wisdom was the development and perfection of the human self. It is wisdom that elevates the human above the bestial and the mean, to rise as far as possible toward the divine, of which the human has, by nature, a share.

We can now appreciate why Paul would associate crucifixion not only with weakness but also with folly. The crucified victim is the degraded human, the subhuman, an object of ridicule and contempt at the moment when he is ejected from the company of humans. Physically tortured and deformed, he is stripped of every last remnant of human dignity, debased to a condition in which all rational speech and thought are rendered impossible, and all emotions and bodily functions out of control. If the Romans, like the Greeks, enjoyed images of the barbarian "other" being killed in battle, humiliated by divinely favored victors, they also loved their entertainments in which criminals, whose life was unworthy of living, were put to death in exquisitely choreographed forms.[11] Crucifixion was, Josephus says, the most "pitiable" of deaths (*War* 7.202), but it was rare for anyone actually to pity the victims, because by being pinned on the cross they had crossed the line from humanity to scum: unless there were strong reasons still to identify with them, they had simply become disposable to the human race. Cicero talks of the "horror" which the very thought of crucifixion raises among Roman citizens, meaning not that they are horrified that so cruel a punishment should be inflicted on others, but that they shiver at the unthinkable thought that that could ever be them (*Pro Rabirio* 16). There are, indeed, very rare moments when such a horror takes place, and Cicero makes much of the notorious case of Gavius, a Roman citizen who was convicted of treason and crucified by Verres, the governor of Sicily (Cicero, *In Verrem* 5.165-70). Verres presumably thought that Gavius had forfeited his rights and that he deserved exactly what he got. From Cicero's point of view, that a man with the rights and dignities of Roman citizenship should be submitted to the utter degradation of crucifixion was an outrage: that Gavius should hang there, "suffering the worst extreme of the tortures inflicted upon slaves," was an assault on all the values of decency by which Roman civilization was preserved.

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[11] Carlin A. Barton, *The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans: The Gladiator and the Monster* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

To hail Jesus the crucified as the Christ, the Son of God, was even more an outrage. If he was executed as a criminal by legitimate authorities, he was rightly degraded to the rank of human trash, and could not possibly be honored, still less associated with the divine. If he *was* properly to be honored as divine, then one of two conclusions had to be drawn. *Either* his death was the most monstrous miscarriage of justice—though, for the Gospel writers, one for which Rome was not entirely to blame—*or* the whole system of values that made crucifixion a symbol and enactment of abject worthlessness was itself completely worthless, mistaken to the core. Paul takes the latter course. He makes no attempt to exonerate the executioners of Jesus, nor to pass off his crucifixion as a temporary error in the otherwise sound practice of Roman justice. At the same time, he does not finger Rome as a peculiarly corrupt or oppressive empire. The "rulers of this age" who are here said to have crucified Jesus (2:6, 8) are given no ethnic characterization: what matters about them is that they belong to "this age" and as such are being rendered inoperative and outdated by a new reality given in Christ (2:6).[12] They simply did