J. H. Roberts: The eschatological transitions to the Pauline letter body.

ABSTRACT

Current research on transitions leading into the Pauline letter body discerned various techniques applied to this purpose. Amongst others, the eschatological climax, which appears in 1 Cor. 1:7-8; Phlp. 1:10; 1 Th. 1:10; 2 Th. 1:6-10.

After briefly referring to the place occupied by the various techniques in the Pauline letters and discussing the state of research on the eschatological climaxes, attention was paid to each of the above-mentioned occurrences and their contexts. In all four cases it was found that the eschatological reference had a significant rhetorical function, presaging important eschatological pronouncements within the body of the various letters.

In a previous article on the Pauline transitions to the letter body (Roberts 1986a) I maintained that seven transitional techniques, grouped under five main headings could be discerned. Three techniques can be grouped under the first main heading: Expressions of a personal nature. These are: first, a desire dealing with knowledge (e.g. Rm. 1:13-15); second, a feeling or statement regarding the author’s situation (e.g. 2 Cor. 1:6-7); and third, used once only, a desire to visit the recipients (Rm. 1:11-12). The other techniques were: fourth, credal statements (e.g. 1 Cor. 1:8-9); fifth, doxologies or doxological expressions (e.g. Phlp. 1:11); sixth, the statement of a request (e.g. Phlm. 8-10); and seventh, eschatological climaxes or references (1 Cor. 1:7-8; Phlp. 1:10; 1 Th. 1:10; 2 Th. 1:6-10).

A brief remark should be made on the place where these techniques occur. Since the work of Schubert (1939a:4-9), it has become fashionable to speak of that section of the letter in between the opening greetings and the body as the thanksgiving, and so, when transitions are brought into scope, to speak of these as transitions from the opening thanksgiving to the body (cf. Sanders 1962). I have found the case to be more complicated. Paul’s prayer-like passages at the beginning of his letters show at least four possibilities. Sometimes a simple thanksgiving precedes the body opening (e.g. 1 Cor. 1:4-7); sometimes a combined form containing both thanksgiving and prayer (intercession) occurs (e.g. Phlm. 4-6); in some cases two separate periods occur with two distinct sections, the one a thanksgiving, the other a prayer or intercession (e.g. Rm. 1:8-9; 1:9-10). (Colossians has a combined thanksgiving/prayer section followed by a prayer section: Col. 1:3-8; 1:9-12.) The second epistolary element in 2 Corinthians and Ephesians is not in the form of a thanksgiving at all but in that of a berakah (eulogy). In view of the above it should be clear that transitions to the body could occur in any of the above-mentioned sections. Indeed, in most cases the transitional material can be found in a discrete period in between those sections and the body, and mostly also in combination rather than singly. Clearly these facts will have to be taken into account when we now turn our attention to those transitions that have come to be known as eschatological climaxes, and by which are meant those eschatological references at the end of thanksgivings and prayer sections that by their very nature leave one with the impression that a climax has been reached.

It is possible to discern eschatological references in the opening passages of some letters
other than the four mentioned above, for instance the references to an inheritance in Colossians 1:12 and Ephesians 1:18, but in these specific cases the focal point is not the future but the present experience. I will therefore concentrate my attention on the four clear cases of eschatological climax as indicated above.

Before, however, going on to this one would like to survey the state of research into these eschatological elements. My impression on this score is that no real advances have been made since the phenomenon was signalled by Schubert in 1939, his results being more or less accepted by all who laboured the subject. However, Schubert (1939a:24) does not like the term transition in this connection. He rather stresses the fact that the thanksgivings tend to terminate in a climax which is then abruptly followed by the letter body (1939a:30-1). The climax as such is understood to be mostly of an eschatological nature. Since the thanksgiving is fully functional as part of the letter and can thus be defined as having an epistolary function, it can perform the duty of an introduction to subsequent material. This view should not, however, lead to minimizing its own intrinsic value within the letter. It may even be the main part of a letter and contain its real content, for instance 1 Thessalonians (1939a:24-39). Although he stresses the importance of the eschatological elements, Schubert does not, as far as I can see, elaborate their specific relationship to the rest of the letters in which they occur (cf. also 1939a:183, n.1), which is what I would like to do in this paper.

In the thanksgiving of 1 Corinthians the eschatological climax contains both a subjective and an objective element. On the one hand there is the believers’ expectation of Jesus’ revelation, a clear reference to his parousia (1:7). On the other hand there is a reference to his vindicating them on the Day of the Lord (1:8). The first of these describes the spiritual situation of the recipients according to the view of the author; in the second he gives them an assurance as to their future security on account of the salvific work of the Lord. The credal statement of verse 9 is directly linked to this assurance. God is trustworthy and can be trusted with their future.

In view of these observations it should be clear that the statements contained in these eschatological pronouncements render them, and indeed the whole thanksgiving section, functional in their own right, as had already been maintained by Schubert (1939a:24-5). These statements do not have the character of mere formal conventions, but are meaningfully functional in that they prepare the readers for the admonishments that are to follow. The rhetorical significance of this fact is clear. The Lord is going to confirm their future. They themselves are expecting Jesus to come again and reveal himself as the Lord of all. Whatever follows in this letter will be read against the backdrop of these facts: the Lord is coming and they are expecting him; He will effect their vindication. As this kind of people they will adhere to the exhortations of the author.

One can go one step further and ask whether these eschatological elements do not also play a more direct repetitive role. Since the answer to this must indeed be positive, it should be clear that the introductory role of the thanksgiving as such with respect to the content of the letter, holds good also for the eschatological pronouncements of this section. It is a characteristic of this letter that it continually reverts to the distinction between this age and the coming age, that it continually reminds the readers of the Day of the Lord and his coming, of the judgment on this day, and of the totally changed situation of the readers on that day. In view of this the transitional nature of these statements should be
understood. They introduce the readers to one of the basic tenets of the letter, which was going to be applied time and again, to convince them, to coerce them towards obedience in following the author's exhortations.

The recipients formed a community that was beset by problems. To these problems the letter addressed itself, dealing with them in large blocks. The first section warns against schisms among the people of God (1:10-4:21); the second addresses a number of irregularities in their midst (5-6); the third contains a response to various questions posed by the recipients (7:1-11:1); the fourth tackles problems related to worship and the gifts of the Spirit (11:2-14:40); the last deals with the resurrection of Christ and the resurrection of the faithful (15; cf. Lategan 1985:74). Now, it is important to note that eschatological pronouncements play a vitally important role in each of these sections, in this way picking up again and re-transmitting the eschatological signal emitted by the thanksgiving.

These pronouncements all pose or presuppose the distinction between this age and the next (cf 3:22; 7:29, 31; 13:8-13). They speak of the Day of the Lord, the Χριστός when the Χριστός will come to judge and save (4:5; 5:5, 13) and when the Χριστός will sit with him in judgment upon the world (6:2). It is the time of salvation when God's people will inherit the βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ — something which will not hold true for the Χριστός (6:9). The experience of these end-time events is on hand: “The appointed time has grown very short” (7:29; Goodspeed 1923). In the appropriate contexts these eschatological references fulfil the important rhetorical function of urging the readers toward accepting Paul's argument and adhering to his exhortations.

In 4:1-5 Paul's relationship with the readers is at stake. The fact that the Lord will come in judgment is used to forestall their prejudging of Paul and his condemnation by them. In 5:1-5 the disciplining of a grievous sinner is motivated by the fact that the Day of the Lord is at hand to bring either condemnation or salvation. Their disciplining of the sinner should result in his ultimate salvation, thus providing a strong incentive towards their present action against such a sinner. The other examples within this category speak for themselves and need not be further discussed.

Let us conclude the discussion of 1 Corinthians by pointing out that the expectation of the Lord's coming mentioned in the thanksgiving, finds its epistolary fulfilment in the theology of the resurrection of the body. In 6:14 this again has the definite rhetorical function of precluding sinful sexual relationships, whilst in chapter 15 the importance of Christ's resurrection for faith is coupled to an exposition of the believers' expectation of their own bodily resurrection — thus once more emphasizing the introductory, preparatory nature of the thanksgiving.

In the case of Philippians we have a thanksgiving followed by a discrete prayer section. The eschatological element appears in both, objectively in verse 6, stating that God, on the Day of Christ, will fulfil the work he had started, and subjectively in verse 10, where the blamelessness of the recipients on the Day of Christ is emphasized.

The reference to Paul's co-workers whose names are in the book of life (4:3, in the section on unanimity) reiterates the introductory reference to the Day of Christ and serves as a reminder of their common heritage, thus strengthening the call to unanimity in conduct among those who serve the gospel. In the same way the reference to all men acknowledging Christ as Lord calls to mind the introductory references to the coming Day of Christ in the Christ hymn (2:11; cf. 2:6-11) and where the context admonishes the recipients to model their conduct on that of Christ (2:1-5).
Of even more significance is the passage on Paul's striving toward the higher goal (3:12-16) and his mentioning the expectation of attaining resurrection from the dead in verse 11. The passage (3:4b-11) in which Paul explains that he puts his trust in Christ and not in externals leads up to the eschatological climax of verse 11: his trust in Christ brings about the right relationship with God (v. 9) so that he now desires to know him, to know the power of his resurrection, and to share in his sufferings (v. 10), because he has the full expectation of also attaining resurrection from the dead (v. 11).

The section 3:11-16 pursues this eschatological theme of bodily resurrection as a future reality with definite implications for the present reality of the faithful. For Paul at least it means striving toward, reaching out to, the higher goal of that future resurrection as if it can already by grasped. That in turn means living this life according to the high standards of that life, that is according to norms regulated by the expectation of the future resurrection (cf. 3:16 and also 3:17ff.). It is indeed this kind of life and this kind of expectation that was presaged in the prayer of 1:9-11. It is with a view to the coming Day of Christ that Paul wants them to have insight into that which really matters in life, so as to live accordingly.

The case for the integrity of Philippians was strongly and adequately argued by Jewett (1970). One of his arguments lay in accepting Schubert's demonstration of the way in which the "thanksgiving" served "to announce and introduce the topics of the letter" (1970:53). In this respect one may not agree with all aspects of the argument, such as understanding all the remembrances in 1:3 as referring to the gift of 4:10-20. On the other hand one may add to the arguments presented, the recurring eschatological motif of the thanksgiving and prayer sections which highlights various sections of the letter.

The second element of 1 Thessalonians is a combined thanksgivings/prayer section (1:2-10) which ends with an eschatological climax in 1:10.

The length of (what was termed) the thanksgiving of 1 Thessalonians has been strongly debated. Schubert (1939a:7, 16-27) took the thanksgiving to extend through chapters 1-3, ending in the eschatological climax contained in 3:13. The second and third thanksgivings (2:13-16; 3:9-13) are understood to be repetitive extensions of the first. In this case the thanksgiving is indeed the letter itself and the exhortations of chapter 4 the letter ending. Over against this point of view Boers (1975/76:150-2) concurs with Sanders (1962:356), Funk (1966:269), and White (1975:114-8) that the introductory thanksgiving is contained in 1:2-10 and the body (apostolic apology) in 2:1-12. The second thanksgiving (2:13-16) he understands to be an interpolation, the third as part of the apostolic parousia (2:17-3:13; 1975/76:151-2, 158). Although these questions can not be elaborated upon within the scope of this paper, it should be stated that the view of Schubert ignores the fact that both thanksgivings and prayers are often interspersed in between other sections of the Pauline letter (e.g. Rm.7:25; 15:5, 6, 30-33; 2 Cor.2:14-16; 9:10-11; 13:7, 9; Eph.1:15-21, 3:14-19), that 1:10 forms a perfect eschatological climax to the introductory "thanksgiving" as second element of this letter, and that the material in 2:1-12 and 2:17-3:8 can in no conceivable way be understood as elements of a thanksgiving. Clearly 2:1-12 forms a typical transitory "readers (should) know" passage. This is followed by the second thanksgiving dealing with the way in which they had received Paul's message (2:13-16). The letter body is then contained in 2:17ff. in which Paul explains his longing for them, his sending of Timothy, and the good tidings received on his return (2:17-3:8). This again quite naturally
leads into the third thanksgiving passage and a prayer that God may lead him back to
them, culminating in another eschatological climax (3:11-13). The (eschatological) exhorta-
tions of chapters 4 and 5 set the pattern for the typical Pauline paraenetic sections. Even
from this brief overview it should be apparent that a close link exists between the transi-
tory eschatological climax and the rest of the letter.

As was the case in the other two instances the eschatological climax exhibits a subjective
and an objective element. On the one hand it stresses their expecting God's Son from
heaven; on the other, the salvation by Jesus from the coming wrath.

If, as I have argued, it is correct to state that the letter body of 1 Thessalonians is to be
found in 2:17ff., the main purpose of this letter was to follow up to the good tidings
received through Timothy by encouraging them once again with the message he brought.
They should not be upset by suffering that may occur but remain steadfast in their faith
(3:2-3). It is exactly at this central focal point of the letter that the function of the
eschatological climax becomes clear. The idea that they were saved from the coming wrath
of God (the objective element, 1:10) and its contrapuntal accompaniment, namely that
God's wrath stays forever on those responsible for their suffering (2:16), form the
backdrop against which the implicit exhortation to remain steadfast amidst all suffering
(3:8) receives the strongest possible motivation. On the other hand the subjective element
— their expecting God's Son from heaven — finds its complement in Paul's conviction that
they were to be his prize at the return of Christ (2:19-20). His coming will occur with the
suddenness of a thief striking at night (5:1ff.). For them it means salvation, not wrathful
judgment (5:9), demanding of them the purity of life with which to meet the Lord
(3:11-13) and encouraging them with regard to those who have passed away but will join
them in the ultimate encounter (4:13-18).

In the case of 2 Thessalonians the second element in the letter structure is a thanksgivings
section (1:3-10). It is followed by a prayer section (1:11-12), with the letter body then being
introduced by means of a request (2:1). The eschatological climax of the thanksgivings is
complicated, running through verses 6-10, and containing three elements of importance to
us: a) the parousia of Jesus (1:7, 8, 10); b) judgment on the day of his coming upon those
disobedient to the gospel (1:6, 8, 9); c) release from suffering for the believers on that day
(1:7,10).

Since the request which opens the letter body contains the reason for writing, and since
this deals with a false rumour or teaching that the parousia had already occurred, it is at
once clear that the eschatological references in the thanksgivings fulfil a major function in
preparing the reader for what is to come. Indeed, in setting out the request and in painting
its background, all three important aspects touched upon in the eschatological climax, are
again reviewed — the parousia, at length in 2:1-8, the judgment upon the unbelievers, in
2:8-12, and the vindication of the faithful in a renewed thanksgiving, in 2:13-14. An ex-
hortation to remain steadfast (2:15) and a prayer that Jesus and the Father grant them
steadfastness (2:16-17) conclude this main body section, being followed only by a series of
more or less unrelated admonishments (3:1-15).

WORKS CONSULTED

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