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Paul's Use of Familial Metaphors in 1 Thessalonians 2

Alisha Paddock

It has long been argued that the Apostle Paul's writing style was influenced by elements of Greco-Roman rhetoric. Aristotle (384–322 BCE) defined rhetoric “as the faculty of discovering the possible means of persuasion in reference to any subject whatever.”¹ Though there is debate as to how much rhetorical education Paul received, it is clear he used Greco-Roman rhetorical conventions in his writings to persuade his audiences to stay strong in their faith and not be swayed by those that preached something other than the true gospel message. First Thessalonians is no different.

After being forced to quit Thessalonica suddenly, Paul tried to return in order to continue his ministry but was prevented by Satan (1 Thess 2.18). After growing impatient, Paul sent Timothy to strengthen and encourage the new believers and wrote 1 Thessalonians, in part, as a response to Timothy's positive report. Paul uses his first letter to the Thessalonians to reconnect with the believing community, wanting to pick up from a distance where his physically-present ministry left off. Chapters 1–3 of 1 Thessalonians function as a *narratio*, a retelling of the history between Paul and the Thessalonians. He reminds them of his *eisodos* (entrance; acceptance), after having been insulted and maltreated in Philippi, and he shares how emotionally strained his *exodus* (departure) was. It is within this *inclusio* that Paul uses familial imagery to describe how he ministered to, and felt toward, the Thessalonians.² It is Paul's use of these images that will be the focus of this paper.

Aristotle, in his *Rhetorica*, explains that there are three types of artistic proofs that an orator can use to be persuasive: “[t]he first depends upon the moral character of the speaker, the second upon putting the hearer into a certain frame of mind, the third upon the speech itself, in so far as it proves or seems to prove.”³ This second type of proof is *pathos*, when the orator influences his audience because they have been “roused to emotion by his speech.”⁴ Quintilian (ca 35–ca 100 CE) maintains that “the power of eloquence is greatest in emotional appeals.”⁵ Aristotle elucidates that “emotions are all those affections which cause men to change their opinion in regard to their judgments, and are accompanied by pleasure and pain.”⁶ Love is one such emotion.

“Let loving, then, be defined as wishing for anyone the things which we believe to be good, for his sake but not for our own . . . a friend is one who loves and is loved in return.”⁷ Aristotle goes on to say that “companionship, intimacy, kinship and similar relationships are species of friendship.”⁸ Paul was harshly separated from the believing community in Thessalonica and wanted to assure them that he was not one of

1. Aristotle, *Rhet.* 1.2.1 (Freese, LCL).

2. Abraham Malherbe, *Paul and the Popular Philosophers* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 53; Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Our Mother Saint Paul* (Louisville: Westminster, 2007), 17.

3. *Rhet.* 1.2.3.

4. *Rhet.* 1.2.5.

5. Quintilian, *Inst.* 4.5.6 (Butler, LCL).

6. *Rhet.* 2.1.8.

7. *Rhet.* 2.4.2.

8. *Rhet.* 2.4.28.

those philosophers who, as described by Dio Chrysostom, “merely utter a phrase or two, and then, after berating rather than enlightening . . . make a hurried exit.”⁹ Instead, Paul viewed the Thessalonians as family. Not only does Paul state he and his coworkers became infants (2.7a) among the believers, but he describes his feelings toward them like those a nurse would have cherishing her own children (2.7b) and how a father would treat his own children: encouraging, comforting and urging them (2.11). To complete the circle, Paul describes his abrupt departure from Thessalonica as having been orphaned (2.17) from the believing community.

Paul chose these metaphors because of the emotions they would rekindle in the Thessalonians’ minds and hearts. He knew, from Timothy’s report, that the Thessalonians had “good remembrances” of Paul and his coworkers (1 Thess 3.6), but the function of the *narratio* is paraenetical “in order that, being reminded of (things past), the hearers will may take better counsel about the future.”¹⁰ Paul’s persuasiveness hinged, in part, on the Thessalonians’ willingness to hear Paul’s letter and put it into practice. Paul wanted to reestablish his relationship with them not only because he loved them, but also because he did not want his teachings in chapters 4 and 5 to fall on deaf (and angry) ears. Family metaphors would help him achieve this goal.

The first familial image is that of becoming an infant. This might be surprising to some readers, since not all English versions translate the Greek in this manner.¹¹ This discrepancy comes from the famous textual variant found in 1 Thessalonians 2.7—*nēpioi* (infants) versus *ēpioi* (gentle). The manuscript evidence falls heavily on the side of *nēpioi*, with Ψ^{65} , B, F, G, I, the original reading in \aleph C, D, Ψ , 104, the corrected version of minuscule 326, the Old Latin witnesses (it), two editions of the Vulgate (vg^{cl} and vg^{ww}), and the Coptic dialects Sahidic and Bohairic choosing this reading.¹² An issue arises when one tries to make sense of what Paul is saying. The NRSV translates 1 Thessalonians 2.5–7 as follows: “As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed; nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or from others, though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children.” In this translation, *infants* sounds strange: “But we were infants among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children.” If we rework the punctuation—which was a later editorial addition—as Fowl, Gaventa, Sailors, Wiema, and Shogren (among others) have shown, we see that *infants* could fit and make sense in verse 7.¹³ Rather, if the infants imagery concludes Paul’s thoughts from verses 5 and 6, and the nurse simile begins a new thought, we see that “Paul wishes to contrast the motives behind his preaching with motives that can only be seen as deceitful and self-serving. To do this he calls himself and his companions infants.”¹⁴

However, even ending the sentence with a full stop after the *nēpioi* image, the immediate transition to another metaphor is jarring: how can Paul, in the same breath, be both an infant and a nurse? Gaventa argues that he uses “a mixed metaphor, perhaps even an inverted metaphor, but for good reason. (Paul) is struggling to identify two aspects of the apostolic role. The apostle is childlike, in contrast to the charlatan who constantly works to see how much benefit he can derive from his audience. The apostle is also the responsible adult, in the first instance the nurse who tends her charges with care and affection.”¹⁵ Helpless, innocent infants inspire emotions of compassion or pity. Paul wants to remind his audience that he and his coworkers were willing to lower their social standing in order to further the gospel.

9. Dio Chrysostom, *Alex.* 32.11 (Cohon and Lamar, LCL).

10. *Rhet.* 3.11.

11. NRSV, NASB, ESV, NKJV, GNT, NCV, CEB and AMP are just a few versions that choose the *epioi* reading.

12. The manuscript evidence that uses the *ēpioi* reading are A, the corrected editions of \aleph , C, D and Ψ , several minuscules and Θ .

13. Stephen Fowl, “A Metaphor in Distress: A Reading of NEPIOI in 1 Thessalonians 2.7,” *NTS* 36 (1990): 469–473; Timothy B. Sailors, “Wedding Textual and Rhetorical Criticism to Understand the Text of 1 Thessalonians 2.7,” *JSNT* 80 (2000): 81–98; Jeffrey A. Weima, “Infants, Nursing Mother, and Father: Paul’s Portrayal of a Pastor,” *CTJ* 37 (2002): 209–229; Gary Shogren, *1 & 2 Thessalonians* (ZECNT 13; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012).

14. Fowl, “A Metaphor in Distress,” 472.

15. Gaventa, *Our Mother Saint Paul*, 27.

This childlike imagery is short-lived as Paul launches into the nurse metaphor. The Greek word Paul uses here is *trofos* meaning “feeder, rearer.”¹⁶ Gorman explains that “[*trofos*] seems to be employed as a generic term, while [*tithē*] is generally used for ‘wet-nurse’ and [*trofos*] and [*tithēnē*] for ‘nursery-maid.’”¹⁷ It is clear from literature and inscriptions that nurses were highly thought of within the family they served. “(The nurse’s) sincere and tender affection was not only repaid during life by the master’s solicitude for her well-being; but after death her memory was frequently perpetuated by the erection of monuments. . . . The epithet [*chrēstē*] so often seen on the monuments finds place on those of nurses. . . . [*Purrichē trofos chrēstē*].”¹⁸

What makes this metaphor more impactful in 1 Thessalonians 2 is the use of the reflexive pronoun *heautēs*: the nurse is taking care of *her own* children. “Nurses in that society were cherished for the affection they showed to children, and the idea of a nurse caring for her own children intensifies that affection.”¹⁹ It is with this reflexive pronoun that the image shifts from nurse to mother.

In *De liberis educandis*, once attributed to Plutarch but now considered spurious, it is argued that the mother is the one who should nurse her infant. “Mothers ought, I should say, themselves to feed their infants and nurse them themselves. For they will feed them with a livelier affection and greater care, as loving them inwardly, and, according to the proverb, to their finger-tips.”²⁰ Paul says that since he and his coworkers longed for the Thessalonians (even to their fingertips!), they were glad to share with them not only the gospel of God but also their own lives (1 Thess 2.8).

In Greco-Roman culture, the beginning of the infant’s life would have been spent within the realm of the nurse and/or mother. Not until the child reached a certain level of maturation would the father step in and take a more prominent role in the child’s formation and education. This progression from the nurse/mother to the father is also seen in 1 Thessalonians 2. After describing himself and his coworkers as a nurse in verse 7, Paul describes the interaction he and his coworkers had with the Thessalonian believers as that of a father with his children in verses 11–12.

Seneca notes the differences between the parental roles: “Do you not see how fathers show their love in one way, and mothers in another? The father orders his children to be aroused from sleep in order that they may start early upon their pursuits, even on holidays he does not permit them to be idle, and he draws from them sweat and sometimes tears. [On the other hand] the mother fondles them in her lap, wishes them out of the sun, wishes them never to be unhappy, never to cry, never to toil.”²¹ Paul adopts both approaches to raising his spiritual children: on the one hand, he cherishes and comforts (*thalpō*) and on the other hand, he encourages, comforts and urges them to walk worthily of God. When the Thessalonians showed growth and maturity in their faith, Paul and his coworkers not only preached the gospel to the public or to the believing community as a whole, but became “sufficiently interested in individuals to bring it home to them one by one, evidently in private conversations” (2.11a—“as with each one of you”).²²

Although the image of “father” might summon up feelings of harshness or bitterness (Philo said fathers had the right to accuse their children, reprove them with considerable severity, to beat them, inflict personal punishment, and even imprison them²³), it would also invoke feelings of respect, since he was the manager of the household.²⁴ Paul

16. *LSJ*, “*trofos*,” 1828.

17. Sister Mary Rosaria Gorman, “The Nurse in Greek Life” (PhD diss., Catholic Sisters College of the Catholic University of America, 1917), 8.

18. Gorman, “The Nurse in Greek Life,” 45–46.

19. Abraham Smith, “The First Letter to the Thessalonians: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” (*NIB* XI; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 699.

20. Plutarch, [*Lib. Ed.*] 5 (Babbitt, LCL).

21. Seneca, *Prov.* 1.2.5 (Basore, LCL).

22. Leon Morris, *1 and 2 Thessalonians: An Introduction and Commentary* (TNTC 13, 2d ed.; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 61.

23. Philo, *Spec. Laws* 2.232 (Yonge, Works of Philo).

24. Aristotle, *Pol.* 1.1255b (Rackham, LCL).

chose to be a loving, encouraging father to the Thessalonians which would summon similar emotions to those of a favorite nurse. Paul's final familial image, though, would foster feelings of pity and heartbreak.

In 1 Thessalonians 2.17, Paul describes his separation from the believing community as having been orphaned (*aporfanisthentes*) from the Thessalonians, inverting yet another metaphor. No longer is Paul the adult in charge (e.g. a nurse or a father), but now Paul and his coworkers are experiencing “deep grief caused by the separation.”²⁵ *Aporfanizō* is not an overly common word within Greco-Roman literature, but when it is used, it refers to children having lost their parents. In Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers*, the second play of the *Oresteia*, siblings Electra and Orestes describe themselves as being “utterly orphaned” (*apōrfanismenous*) since their mother Clytemnestra murdered their father Agamemnon. They are completely distraught, describing themselves, in a prayer to Zeus, as an orphaned brood of a father eagle who perished in the meshes, gripped by the famine of hunger.²⁶ By using this term, Paul shows he too is feeling a sense of hopelessness. The power of this metaphor comes not from “parental care or authority but the helplessness and marginalization of an orphaned child.”²⁷

Paul takes his Thessalonian audience on an emotional rollercoaster ride in chapter 2, reminding them of the highs and lows that only family life can bring. He recounts how he and his coworkers were not like typical philosophers out to make a quick buck, but rather were like infants, guileless and pure. Along with this image, Paul says that he and his coworkers were like beloved nurses and fathers, taking care of their own children in affectionate ways. Though the image of being made an orphan might seem negative, Paul concludes chapter 2 on a high note: though their unexpected *exodus* made them feel like orphans, and Satan prevented them from returning to their ministry in Thessalonica, the Thessalonians are the glory and joy of Paul and his coworkers (1 Thess 2.20).

Using these highly emotive terms as a method of persuasion, Paul makes his case in 1 Thessalonians 2 that he is worthy to be heard. While he is not one of those philosophers that Dio Chrysostom so despises, Paul is part of the Thessalonian family of God, genuinely caring for the believers and their spiritual growth. Paul's familial metaphors create a *pathos* proof, persuading the Thessalonians that he loves them, wishes he could be with them, and has yet more to teach them.

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25. Smith, “The First Letter to the Thessalonians,” 707.

26. Aeschylus, *Cho.* 2.246–249 (Smyth, LCL).

27. Reidar Aasgaard, “Paul as a Child: Children and Childhood in the Letters of the Apostle,” *JBL* 126, no. 1 (2007): 143.