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Gäckle, Volker

Die Starken und die Schwachen in Korinth und in Rom: Zu Herkunft und Funktion der Antithese in 1Kor 8,1–11,1 und in Röm 14,1–15,13

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The exegesis of Paul's letters is often a tricky matter, not only because of Paul's profound theological thoughts, but even more because these letters are just (at best) one half of a more complex communication between the apostle and "his" communities. Paul often writes about people whom his original addressees could easily identify but whose identity only puzzles modern scholars. One such puzzle is the identity of the adversaries with whom Paul engages in his letters. Another puzzle are those designated "weak" and "strong" in 1 Cor 8:1–11:1 and Rom 14:1–15:13, the subject of Volker Gäckle's dissertation, which was accepted in 2004/2005 by the Faculty of Protestant Theology at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität in Munich.

The study consists of five main chapters, followed by a summary (ch. 6 [509–18]), an extensive and structured bibliography (519–65), and indexes (567–636). Chapter 1 (3–35) is the classic beginning of a dissertation: a survey of previous research on the topic. There have indeed been many publications on specific questions in 1 Cor 8–10 and in Rom 14–15, but, as Gäckle shows, the last study on *both* passages dates back as far as 1923. What makes Gäckle's study unique is indeed not only the careful study of both texts but particularly the equally careful comparison of what can be said about the respective

situations and problems. Given this, it might have been a good idea to present the synopsis of 1 Cor 8:1–11:1 and Rom 14:1–15:13 in a more prominent position at the beginning, not, almost *en passant*, at the end of chapter 4 (438–40). But this is not really a point of criticism; Gäckle’s approach is to study both passages first and foremost as texts in their own right, and, as the results show, he is very right in doing so.

But Gäckle does not jump right into exegetical work on his texts. In chapter 2 (36–109) he gives a very detailed study on the semantics of the root ἄσθεν- in roughly contemporary Greek literature, particularly in philosophical writings. As he explains at the beginning (36–51), ἄσθενεῖς was most presumably a label actually used by the “strong ones” in Corinth, since it is hardly a self-designation, and Paul would not do himself a favor by applying this designation to those he wants to support. On this basis, he analyzes possible meanings of ἄσθεν-: physical weakness, sickness, paucity in a quantitative sense, technical inability, military inferiority, political powerlessness, anthropological limitations, fallibility/sinfulness, poor eloquence, weakness of character, intellectual incapacity, lack of education, emotional instability. This grid is then applied to the occurrences of ἄσθεν- in the LXX, in Jewish-Hellenistic writers (Philo, Josephus, 4 Maccabees), in the New Testament, and in Hellenistic and Roman (philosophical) writers—accompanied by an excursus on Stoic psychology. The result is the working hypothesis that probably some Corinthian Christians labeled their fellow-Christians as “weak” because they believed to discover in them a lack of knowledge and a limited discernment that resulted in emotional instability and that required practical, “psychagogical” exercises in Christian freedom.

On this basis Gäckle proceeds to chapter 3, about the conflict between the strong and the weak in Corinth (110–291). However, the first step is an impressive historical study of what this conflict was about (110–82). He gives a detailed survey of the most important pagan cults in Corinth (wisely without claiming to identify the precise setting of a conflict; 130), followed by a systematic approach to sacrifices and cultic meals in antiquity. This leads to a distinction: in 1 Cor 10:14–22 Paul absolutely forbids participation in the sacrificial rite proper, which included the eating of the *τραπεζῶματα*, that is, of the animal’s entrails, and which used to involve only a small group. With regard to private invitations and society meetings as alluded to in 1 Cor 8:10; 10:25, however, the decisive factor is not the avoidance of idolatry but respect for the conscience of the “weak” fellow-Christian. The second step is a theological and sociological analysis of the two groups labeled “weak” and “strong” (183–218). For the “strong” Christians, the slogans cited by Paul are somewhat revealing, and Gäckle identifies their commitment to “building up” the “weak” ones (8:10) as psychagogical efforts in the Stoic tradition. In sociological terms, he sees them mostly, but not exclusively, as members of the upper class, who could more probably be invited to participate in the sacrificial rite proper. In terms of the Corinthian “parties,” they presumably belonged to the Apollos-group (1:12).

The profile of the “weak ones,” however, is less clear. All one can say is that they are (non-Jewish) Christians who were, in their conscience, more sensitive for the implications of sacrificial meat, although they might have accepted the monotheistic confession at the *cognitive* level. These considerations lead to the third step, to Paul’s lines of argumentation (218–82). This is, so to speak, the exegesis proper of 1 Cor 8:1–11:1. The fourth step, then, is a systematic summary of the results of this exegesis, Paul’s principles of argumentation in 1 Cor 8:1–11:1 (282–87): salvation of the individual, unity of the community, precedence of love, freedom out of the gospel, the example of Jesus, and the avoidance of idolatry. In a fifth step, Gäckle concludes his study of 1 Cor 8:1–11:1 with a brief glance at the reception (better: nonreception) of Paul’s position in early Christianity.

Chapter 4 is about the conflict between the “weak” and the “strong” in Rome (292–449). Again, Gäckle’s work is thorough historical and exegetical scholarship at its best. As in the previous chapter, he begins with an approach to the situation and the matters at stake, first of all with what can be known about the Christian community in Rome (293–318), then discusses the purpose of Romans (314–36), abstinence from meat and wine in antiquity (337–51), and the religious observance of certain days in ancient Rome and in Judaism (351–59), hence the two main problems of the “weak.” After this, he moves on to identifying the “weak” and the “strong” ones in Rome (361–86). He points out that, although Paul uses the same labels, the situation is quite different from that in Corinth. In Rome, the conflict is not in particular about sacrificial meat but about meat in general. Moreover, the “weak ones” have a clearer profile; they seem to belong to the Jewish-Christian part of the community. More precisely, according to Gäckle, they seem to be Jewish Christians who were expelled by Claudius’s decree (mentioned in Acts 18:2; Suetonius, *Claudius* 25.4) and returned after his death, only to learn that, meanwhile, Gentile Christians had more or less taken over the community. So, they had to struggle for their Jewish way of life to be accepted. The “strong ones” are, in their majority, Gentile Christians or former God-fearers. Gäckle observes that Paul treats them less harshly than the “strong ones” in Corinth. The third step is, again, an exegesis of Rom 14:1–15:13 in terms of Paul’s lines of argument (386–434), followed by a systematic summary of Paul’s principles of argumentation (434–37): Mutual acceptance of “strong” and “weak” ones, the example of Christ, the liberty of faith in Christ, love for the brother, the public reputation of the community, and the unity of the Jewish and Gentile Christians in the community. At the end of this chapter (437–49), Gäckle gives a synoptic comparison of 1 Cor 8:1–11:1 and Rom 14:1–15:13. This comparison shows that Paul, writing from Corinth, has addressed the conflict in Rome with the same pattern of thought that he has used before to settle the (materially different) conflict in Corinth. On this basis, it seems probable that the labels “strong” and “weak” have not been invented by the parties in

Rome but applied to them by Paul, who thus transposes their basically ethnic conflict on a different level.

After these two main parts, Gäckle goes on to integrate his findings into Paul's theological conception of weakness in chapter 5 (450–508). For this purpose he studies the other occurrences of weakness in the Corinthian correspondence: weakness in the context of the “word of the cross” in 1 Cor 1, but also Paul's own weakness and suffering (2:3; 4:9–13), as well as the brief allusion to “weaker members” in 1 Cor 12:22. Similarly, in 2 Cor 4:7–12; 6:3–10; 10–13, Paul's weakness and suffering play a central role in the argument. This shows that weakness and suffering are an integral part of Christian life and can even become a setting for the revelation of Christ's power (2 Cor 12:9). This framework gives weakness a dignity that subverts the derogatory labeling of fellow-Christians as “weak.”

On the whole, one cannot but admire this study. It is not only an excellent piece of New Testament exegesis in the proper sense: the meticulous philological study of texts. Gäckle has also acquired impressive knowledge in the fields of classics, ancient history, and archaeology—far beyond the textbook wisdom that so unpleasantly informs many exegetical writings. The large bibliography speaks for itself. Gäckle develops his topic in fair and sincere dialogue with other authors and, by his careful reasoning, makes it easy for the reader to follow his arguments. Moreover, without being obtrusive, he introduces a theological and pastoral concern behind the exegetical work: on the last few pages (515–18) he draws consequences for an evaluation of weakness as a basic constituent of human life that requires respect and acceptance, for the relationship of Christian freedom and a plurality of cultural identities, and for resolving conflicts.

Gäckle's book is not exactly easy to read. The complexity of the problem and his meticulous analyses require full concentration over more than five hundred pages. But the effort is highly rewarded. Whoever reads this book will be truly informed about the conflicts in Corinth and Rome and their most probable backgrounds. For a serious exegesis of 1 Cor 8:1–11:1 and/or Rom 14:1–15:13, this admirably learned study will prove indispensable.