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Paul as Master-builder

Professor Derrett continues his valuable work of casting light on difficult passages in the New Testament from his extensive knowledge of the ancient world.

Introduction

Alongside literary scholarship elucidating obscure biblical passages work continues to trawl archaeological material, ethnographical reports, and the general anthropology of the Mediterranean area, work which, though the practitioners are few,¹ queries the anxiety of those who suspect any information 'extra' to the text. Here I wish to explain a metaphor, not a representation of a scene—a metaphor used by Paul, blender of metaphors and allusions. It may be granted that 2 Cor. 10:13–16, of which the multitude of translations confuse us (a literal one is frankly gibberish), would profit from the rediscovery of what Paul meant by the difficult and versatile word *kanōn*, while the key can be traced in better known and more easily translated passages.

1 Cor. 3:10–13

There is an unexpected aspect to 1 Cor. 3:10–13 which escapes commentators. Paul is speaking of the Corinthians as God's building, the holy temple of God (3:9, 16–17; cf. Eph. 2:22), a metaphor which was no more novel when Paul used it than his motif of foundation-laying.² According to the REB the passage runs as follows:

God gave me the privilege of laying the foundation like a skilled

¹ See Philip F. Esler (ed.) *Modelling Early Christianity. Social-scientific Studies of the New Testament in its Context* (London & New York, 1995).

² Cf. 1QS V.5 (members as 'true foundation'). VIII.5 (the Council, a corner stone, has stable foundations); 1QSa I.12 (the officials are the foundation of the congregation).

master builder; others put up (*rather*: 'someone else is putting up' NEB) the building. Let each take care³ how he builds. There can be no other foundation than the one already laid: I mean Jesus Christ himself.⁴ If anyone builds on that foundation with gold, silver, and precious stones, or with wood, hay, and straw, the work will at last be brought to light . . .

If the image is to be taken seriously, when Paul has laid the foundation (of a church) by laying (i.e. preaching) Jesus Christ, there should be no fear that what is subsequently laid upon it will fall, or, should it be tested by fire (as often happened), any harm would come to God (the patron of the building) or to those who built on that foundation, whatever the ostensible value of their contributions to flooring, walls, roofs, etc. If the building could be jeopardized so easily the foundation-laying would be a trap. But that is hardly what Paul seeks to imply. No one doubts, in the context, but that Paul is using foundation-laying not only as a metaphor (as at 1 Cor. 14:4) for the commencement of a religious community (used by Jesus himself at Mt. 16:18),⁵ but also the better-known metaphor of introductory teaching, a 'foundation-course'.⁶ Philo talks of an introductory exegesis upon which one can raise a structure by means of allegory as a master-builder's work,⁷ and such metaphors are acceptable.

To find our way we should bear in mind the role in which Paul understands himself to have been cast. The master-builder is a distinct character throughout history. In the ancient world he was the architect and of rare value, far superior to the tradesmen,⁸ including masons, carpenters, engravers, mosaicists, etc. The age before there were architects must have been indeed barbarous.⁹ The architect took responsibility for the design of the building, for costing it, for the preparation of the materials, for marshalling and deploying the builders, and needless to say

³ This use of *blepō* ('beware') appertains to the first century. Cf. 1 Cor. 10:12.

⁴ Cf. Barn. 6:2 citing Is. 28:16 (where see Qumran reading *mṣsd*, LXX, and Rashi's agreement with the targum that the Messiah is indicated); 1 Pet. 2:6, 8; Hermas, *sim.* 9.14.6. The corner stone is over the gateway, etc. (Jeremias). Test. Sal. 22:7.

⁵ Derrett, *Studies in the New Testament*, vol. vi (Leiden, 1995), 6–15. At Eph. 2:20 is the foundation the apostles, etc., or is it laid by them? The corner-stone with its biblical background is a parallel idea.

⁶ 1 Cor. 3:10; Heb. 6:1; Philo, *Cher.* 101–105 (it ornaments the soul); *Gig.* 30; *Mut. nom.* 211; Plutarch, *Fort. Rom.* 320B.

⁷ Philo, *Somn.* 2, 8.

⁸ Plato, *Amat.* (Lovers), 135C (early 4th cent., BC). A city would be hard put to buy one. Cf. Is. 3:3. Bengt Holmberg, *Paul and Power* (Lund, 1978), 68.

⁹ Seneca, *Ep.* 90, 8–10 is a bit of nonsense.

disciplining the 'lodge'. Even in great ages of building (such as Herod the Great's) work became available for each craft unpredictably, craftsmen were peripatetic, and the procedures of recruitment and employment, procurement and treatment of materials, were governed by custom. Innovation and invention ran side by side with conservative practices. The patron selected an architect of good reputation (whose walls still stood) and whose designs he approved, contracted with him for the estimated costs, and left the details to him.

When the scheme was clear in his head, the architect had two major tasks, the first of which was to establish measures. Since standard yards and even cubits did not exist, and even the slightest variation would be fatal to building, apparatus, and last but not least life (people were always falling off scaffolding), it was customary for the architect to nominate and cut the basic measure (to be seen on his medieval tombstone), which he would carry about with him. It was not out of the way for his own height, cubit and foot to be adopted as measures. The set-squares, moulding-patterns, plumb-lines, axes and planes of the masonic craft were well-known, but would be useless unless standard measures had been set at the beginning. One hears of the 'Lesbian rule': this is a leaden rule needed for prescribing mouldings, and of course for no other purpose. The architect *knew* many trades, and perhaps one craft well; but he never practised any of them: he went about with his rod,¹⁰ which had to do duty for a measure and a standard. It was a badge of his, and the tradesmen's specifications.

The second important task (Pr. 24:3) was to lay the foundations. This was a matter of the utmost concern at every stage of the building. Workmen were not going to do wonders eighty feet above doubtful foundations. Since towers and bridges did collapse (cf. Lk. 13:4), and since it was not always possible to discover a rational cause, various civilizations have slaughtered human beings and buried them in the foundations: their spirits would protect the building, apparently.¹¹ Superstitious aspects attach to laying foundations. But the choice of site, a matter between the patron and his architect, taking into account the whole art of surveying, includes the questions what foundation-course will be man enough to take the weight of the structure

¹⁰ Plato, *Pol.* (Statesman), 259E, 260A, referred to by Barrett (*First Epistle*, 2nd. edn., 1973).

¹¹ Cf. Jos. 6:26; 1 Ki. 16:34.

(therefore not liable to crumbling),¹² and also what trench is deep enough to place it upon a secure base. A territory liable to earthquakes made especial demands. On his 'critical path' the foundation-laying takes priority.

We pass to the blue-print stage, with its designed walls, pillars, porticos, etc., and with detailed drawings showing the size and mouldings of the stonework and woodwork. What if the architect dies, or the patron(s) change his/their minds, funds run out, the building is completed by stages,¹³ or an existing building is demolished to enlarge and/or modernize? The patron is confronted with foundations not designed to take the proposed weight, or otherwise unsuitable. This happened with Herod's temple. Josephus, insinuating superstitious reasons for events, tells how the king disregarded previous foundations, dug new ones, and began his grandiose structure with what seemed to be adequate foundations. But they sank, the architect's nightmare.¹⁴ One must take care how one builds on another man's foundations—one (if one trusts him) must keep to his blue-print even if his style has become obsolete, as has happened.¹⁵ Only what his foundation will bear may be put on it—one does not pretend that another two courses can make little difference, the mistake Herod's fabulously-paid architects made. We have a medieval charter or code of regulations, derived from custom, explaining that where foundations are duly laid no one else may disturb them, or begin again, without the approval of experts in the craft and the consent of the patrons: obviously to avoid expense and shame.¹⁶ The latter is a risk in building schemes, not merely on the patron's part but also on the architect's.

Paul makes sense. He who builds on foundations laid ceremonially by another must keep to the blue-print or he will be tested (by time or catastrophe), to his own shame (as incompetent) and his patron's grief (as a frustrated investor).¹⁷ God, being the supposed patron of Paul's building, has an interest in Paul's laying the foundation perfectly; and therefore, in Paul's absence, remaining superstructures, raised according to the basic

¹² Cf. Epictetus, *Diss.* 2.15, 8 (only sound decisions found a structure of resolve). Bad qualities are built upon the fleshly nature: Philo, *Gig.* 30.

¹³ Dion. Hal. III.69; cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 11.93. Cf. J. Shanor, *NTS* 34 (1988), 461-71.

¹⁴ Josephus, *Ant.* 15.391; cf. *B.J.* 5.36.

¹⁵ G.G. Coulton, *Art and the Reformation* (Oxford, 1928), 175; cf. 435-6.

¹⁶ F. Janner, *Die Bauhütten des deutschen Mittelalters* (Leipzig, 1876), guild regulations of Regensburg, 1459, §6, cited by Coulton, *op. cit.*, 175.

¹⁷ Lk. 14:28-30. Derrett, *Studies*, vol. iii, 85-98. Cf. Heb. 3:3-4 [*Zc.* 6:13]

conception of the building, will alone meet God's requirements. The architect is in a position to warn all subsequent builders. The customs of masonry are relevant. Those who build on his foundation—subsequent preachers of Christian doctrine—must no exceed the limits, or introduce confusions which would change the character of the building, so as to threaten its eventual collapse.

Rom. 15:20

The above background explains Rom. 15:20–21, which the REB renders as follows:

But I have always made a point¹⁸ of taking the gospel to places where the name of Christ has not been heard, not wanting to build on another man's foundation, as scripture says, 'Those who had no news of him shall see, and those who never heard of him shall understand'.

Therefore he has been prevented from coming to the Romans. He claims (v.23) to have no further scope in the region where he was. In v.20 we have the word *oikodomō* instead of the technical *epoikodomō*,¹⁹ but that is accounted for by the *epi* in *ep' allotrion themelion*. There could hardly be any intrinsic objection to Paul's proceeding beyond the 'foundation course' in Christianity, laying further courses, indeed from completing the churches which he 'founded'. It can hardly have been tedious for him to see by experiment whether (as at Corinth) the collaboration of subsequent and 'inferior' 'builders' (the congregation themselves were builders in this context) disturbed the structure and threatened collapse. Why should he not have completed at least one church? The text he cites (Is. 52:15), standing as it does at the commencement of the Suffering Servant material familiar in Is. 53, does, according to its targum, speak of the incredible success of the Messiah amongst the gentiles, *surprising* unprepared 'rulers'; and such surprise could hardly be achieved if earlier missionaries had already spread the Christian message. But it is not certain that Paul searched scripture and took his instructions

¹⁸ In Greek of this period *philotimoumenon* means 'being zealous, not excluding the idea of personal reputation'. Cf. 1 Thes. 4:11; 2 Cor. 5:9; Plutarch, *Caesar* 54.1; id., *Mor.* 268B-C; Polybius, 1.4, 2; Diodorus Siculus 1.1, 3. F. Field, *Notes on the (RV) Translation of the New Testament* (Cambridge, 1899; repr. Peabody, 1994), 165. At 165–6 Field notes that *allotrion* suggests *some lack of honour*.

¹⁹ Philo, *Somn.* 2,8; Plutarch, *Fort. Rom.* 320B.

for a missionary campaign from a particular verse. It is plausible that he followed the architect's custom and, by being a formidable elementary preacher, placed all his successors in the inferior position of 'building on his foundations', while he himself accepted no subordination to others' blue-prints, refusing to 'build on another man's foundations', had that been possible. The image is of many master-builders making trips to various points of the compass, each avoiding duplicating the work of his colleague, and in particular evading the confusing experience described at Acts 18:25, 19:1-7. Paul would not accept the constraints of developing a church within the conception published by anyone else, however well qualified the latter might be to teach the messianity of Jesus as such.

2 Cor. 10:13-16

In due course at least one challenge arose to Paul's authority, and Paul's 'boasting' comes into question. Is he ambitious? The word *kanōn* ('rule') figures, not necessarily in one sense only, since the metaphorical use of 'rule' as found in Josephus²⁰ hovers in the background. We have a choice between the common use of the word in Greek of all ages, a use paralleled in the Old Testament,²¹ and a use for which lexicons can find no other citation than our own passage.²² The REB translates:

As for us, our boasting will not go beyond the proper limits; and our sphere is determined by the limit God laid down for us, which permitted us to come as far as Corinth . . . we were the first . . . And we do not boast of work done where others have laboured, work

²⁰ Josephus, *Ant.* 10.49 (Josiah adopts a rule of life); cf. *c. Ap.* 2.174. A man may be a *kanōn* (model): Epictetus, *Diss.* 3.4, 5. Lucian, *Historia* 5 (standards).

²¹ *Qāw*: Jb. 38:5 (see Aquila's version); LXX Ps. 18:5 (and Aquila); Zc. 1:16; 2 Ki. 21:13; La. 2:8; cf. Is. 34:17.

²² Liddell-Scott-Jones, *Lexicon*, s.v. *kanōn*, no.5 reveals no parallel for 'province', nor did Wetstenius or Moulton-Milligan in their *Vocabulary* (they seem apologetic about this). The meaning 'schedule' found in an inscription is late. We need L.S.J. no.3, abundantly authenticated. The best parallel is Plato, *Philebus* 56B (the *kanōn* the first of implements). For Aeschines 3.199 see H.W. Beyer, *TWNT* III (1938), 601.3-9. Add W. Dittenberger (ed.), *Sylloge Inscriptionum Graecarum* (Leipzig, 1888-1901), no. 540.18 (rod for building a temple); *Anthologia Palatina* 11.120 (Loeb edn., *Greek Anthology* iv, 128) (Callieter, 1st-2nd. cent. A.D.; cf. *Der Kleine Paulus*, s.n.). Beyer, *ubi cit.*, 603.27-604.2 powerfully rejects the 'geographical' interpretation of *kanōn* not only as unexampled but also as inconsistent with Paul's situation and history.

beyond our present sphere. Our hope is rather that, as your faith grows, we may attain a position among you greater than ever before, but still within the limits of our sphere. Then we can carry the gospel to lands that lie beyond you, never priding ourselves on work already done in anyone else's sphere.

How uncertain this is is revealed by the RSV:

But we will not boast beyond limit, but will keep to the limits God has apportioned us, to reach even to you . . . we were the first. . . . We do not boast beyond limit, in other men's labours; but our hope is that as your faith increases, our field among you may be greatly enlarged, so that we may preach the gospel in lands beyond you, without boasting of work already done in another's field.

The NJB, more coherently, reads:

. . . By contrast we do not intend to boast beyond measure, but will measure ourselves by the standard which God laid down for us, namely that of having come all the way to you . . . So we are not boasting beyond measure about other men's work; in fact we hope, as your faith increases, to grow greater and greater by this standard of ours, by preaching the gospel to regions beyond you, rather than boasting about work already done in someone else's province.

Approaching this passage from the standpoint of the architect metaphor, two technical words stand out: *kanōn* and *metron*. These obviously belong together. The *metron* (scale) was set by God. Paul could not evangelize the world by wishing and hard breathing. The *kanōn* (his mason's rule) is subject to this *metron*. He works to divine specifications. The *metron* is the standard measure by which any progress of theirs can be calibrated. Those who measure themselves by each other (v.12) lack a verifying standard. Paul has such a scale because God sent him to Corinth as the first missionary, the first of several 'builders'. The Creator, as the *Testaments of the XII Patriarchs* tells us, himself worked with weights (i.e. scales), measures, and a rule.²³ Such building will survive a test.²⁴ Paul applies a *kanōn* based on this scale (not cut to fit his own measurements). He boasts of their (building-) progress, but he is not boasting without a scale by which to measure (and applaud) other people's labours. Meanwhile he

²³ Test. Naph. 2:3.

²⁴ Cf. Hermas, *sim.* 9.5,2.

hopes, with the gradual increase²⁵ of their faith (as shown, e.g. by their monetary subventions), to be glorified or praised (cf. Phil. 1:20) as he applies that standard (*kanōn*). For he perceives a net advantage to himself,²⁶ being able to preach the gospel in further territories (i.e. his area expands), and boasting of what has already been supplied by applying to it no *kanōn* but his own.²⁷ They can put him in a position to gratify his patron. The last figure he uses returns to a point he made at v.12. A mason working freestone has his accuracy judged by the master-builder's rod or pattern, not by his own. The master-builder is proud of his subordinates' achievements. He can safely go away to set another job in motion, which would be impossible if workmen judged their own productions.²⁸

Conclusion

The well-known Jewish metaphor of teachers and scholars being 'builders' is applied along with another metaphor: the primary instruction and further consolidation of a religious community are spoken of as a *founding* followed by further education, visualized as building on existing foundations (with all the limitations that implied). *Res ipsa loquitur*. His proselytes' progress is to be established by *his* standards, not others'. The former ultimately derive from his initial commission. Paul is not willing to translate the Road-to-Damascus experience into a subordinate, instrumental preaching activity. One can accept the rationality of this, without accusing him, as sometimes happens, of vanity and self-seeking.²⁹ One may compare a professor who teaches his own course, wherever he is employed, with an instructor who is ordered exactly what to teach. No one who has anything approaching inspiration could imagine choosing the

²⁵ Cf. Eph. 2:21.

²⁶ Cf. LXX Ec. 2:13, 7:12-13, 10:10.

²⁷ In v.16 *en* is 'by the application (as standard)' analogously with Acts 17:31; 1 Cor. 6:2. For this and the *instrumental* use of *en* see G.B. Winer, *Treatise on the Grammar of the New Testament Greek* (ed., trans., W.F. Moulton), 3rd. edn. (Edinburgh, 1882), §48a (1a), 3(d), pp. 481-2, 485-487; and the less elaborate Blass-Debrunner-Funk, *Greek Grammar of the New Testament* (Cambridge & Chicago, 1961), §219.

²⁸ Horace, *Sat.* I.3, 23-24, with which cf. his *Ep.* I.7, 96-98.

²⁹ Cf. K. Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, 6th edn. (London, etc., 1968), 533.

latter role. *Kanōn* is not 'field/sphere/province' but an (architect's) rule. Neither Paul nor his rivals were allotted, by God or by history, any 'diocese'.³⁰

Abstract

At 1 Co. 3:10–13 Paul warns 'builders' to have a care what they lay on his foundations. It has been the practice (a) to build on another's foundations only according to his specifications, and (b) not to remove foundations unless proved faulty. Paul 'laid' Jesus and erections subsequent to this foundation-preaching must stand a test. Paul as architect never used others' foundations (Rom. 15:20). His successors are judged by (c) his standards (architects are superior to tradesmen). If they pass, (d) he may lay foundations elsewhere, (e) not claiming credit for others' erections. So 2 Cor. 10:13–16. The *kanōn* is a set standard for all trades. There was no 'province' (a mistranslation).

³⁰ Misunderstanding the idiom makes a subtle difference in the timbre. Whereas H. Alford (*Greek Testament*, 7th edn., vol.2, London, etc., 1877, *ad loc.*) is philologically reliable, C. Hodge (edn. of 1950) defined *kanōn* as the measuring line which God used to determine the apostle's gifts and sphere of activity, the field of labour (p.248). P.E. Hughes (1962) at 388–389 substitutes athletic metaphors, with track and field. C.K. Barrett in the *Black Commentary* (1973) at 225, 267–269 finds rivals working in another's province and spoiling his results. V.P. Furnish (*Anchor Bible*, 1984), adopts a legal metaphor with jurisdictions: rivals overstep the limits of their commissions. He cites Rom. 15:17–20 as does R.P. Marūn in the *Word Biblical Commentary* (1986), 322–325, who speaks of territory and sphere of service. But Paul never admitted that anyone was confined to delimited 'spheres of service'.