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Apostolic folly: Pauline foolishness discourse in socio-historical context[1]

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Abstract

Foolishness discourse is prominent in the Pauline letters, not only because of its statistical prevalence but also because of its centrality to the argumentation in the letters. Paul's arguments on wisdom and foolishness are mostly done in close proximity to the associated notions of strength and weakness, and together reverberate within the context of the all-pervasive, all-powerful Roman Empire, as both the reflection and distillate of it, as well as the fabricator and promotor of similar notions and values. The focus of this contribution is to understand the importance of Paul's self-portrayal as fool for the discourse he constructs in 1 Corinthians 1–4, and in particular, for his apostolic self-understanding and the portrayal and presentation of his message within this foolishness discourse.

Keywords

Pauline foolishness; socio-historical context; foolishness discourse; Paulin letters; 1 Corinthians

1. Contrasting foolishness claims

In the NT, Paul can accuse his addressees or opponents in certain settings of being stupid (ἀνόητοι Gal 3:1, 3; see also ἑτέρως φρονεῖτε think different Phil 3:15),[2] but in another context, he made foolishness into a virtue (1 Cor

1 This contribution is in honour of Johann Cilliers, an excellent scholar, dedicated practical theologian, and good friend, who explored the significance of a rhetoric of folly as a characteristic of the Gospel, to be emulated also today by Christian preachers and in Christian communities of faith (see Campbell and Cilliers 2012).

2 For such notions in the Deutero-Pauline letters, see e g cf ἀνοήτους (ἐπιθυμίας) foolish (desires) 1 Tm 6:9; ἀνόητοι foolish Ti 3:3; also μωρολογία silly talk Eph 5:4; ἄφρονες foolish Eph 5:17; and, τὰς δὲ μωρὰς (καὶ ἀπαιδεύτους ζητήσεις) stupid (and senseless controversies) 2 Tm 2:23; μωρὰς (ζητήσεις) stupid (controversies) Ti 3:9.

1–4), with no apparent sense of contradiction. In fact, not only did Paul present foolishness as a virtue, he even claimed it for himself (1 Cor 4:10; cf 3:18). While these claims are made in different letters, the oppositions are jarring, and the logic of Paul's overarching approach can appear to be under pressure. Through repetitive listening, modern-day church congregations may have lost their sensitivity to observing these contrasts, although these very disparities appear to be of critical importance in Pauline rhetoric.[3] Using the first-century context to make sense of these and other claims in Paul's letters not only adds further relief to such claims, but appropriately situates the very claims and their significance. Apposite attention to socio-historical settings of course does not resolve all problems. While vilifying opponents as unwise and stupid was not uncommon at all in the first-century, the contrasting claims directed at the self, already on face value may have sounded jarring and requires more investigation.

Interpreting positive claims on foolishness in their first-century contexts does, however, provide the proper setting for making sense of Pauline claims and guard against the tyranny of the present. To some extent, the dissonance generated by those claims would have been greater in the first-century context where people prized wisdom and generally wanted to avoid association with mental disorder or mere stupidity, both of which were used to disparage others and often were the brunt of contemporary crude jokes. And given the gendered nature of life in the first century and the association of women with foolishness, Paul's assumption of foolishness threatened not only his identity but also his very masculinity. Was Paul merely oblivious to or even frivolous about the stakes involved, was he perhaps guilty of contradicting himself, or was it simply a matter that, when apostles fool around, different rules are at play? Were audiences, also in the past, perhaps just much more forgiving of (ostensible) contradictions that were present in the claims of their leadership? Or were these disparate and inconsistent claims part of Paul's foolishness rhetoric, feeding into a more comprehensive and sustained discourse?

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3 In Rom 1:14–15, one of the fundamental distinctions Paul made, on par with the distinction between Greeks and "barbarians" or others, is between the wise and the foolish (14 Ἕλλησίν τε καὶ βαρβάροις, σοφοῖς τε καὶ ἀνοήτοις ὀφειλέτης εἰμί, 15 οὕτως τὸ κατ' ἐμὲ πρόθυμον καὶ ὑμῖν τοῖς ἐν Ῥώμῃ εὐαγγελίσασθαι.)

Johan Cilliers, working jointly with Chuck Campbell, supported the position that Paul deliberately played the fool. Leaning on the exegetical spadework of mainly Welborn and Marcus and using the theological insights of Brown, Campbell and Cilliers (2012) fleshed out the importance of Paul's folly discourse in 1 Corinthians for homiletics, and beyond. In this contribution I want to engage with and expand elements within their discussion, particularly on the manner and nature in which Paul implicated himself and his message in the mechanics of power by constructing a discourse of foolishness (Punt 2013:107–28). This pursues my earlier work, where I argued for the significance of understanding Paul's wisdom-foolishness binary in connection with the strength-weakness binary, but also for the importance of situating such binaries within and in relation to the imperial context and values of the first century CE. Given the central importance of Paul's discourse of foolishness in 1 Corinthians 1–4, my focus here shifts to the discourse's significance for his self-understanding and his understanding of his message.[4] But first, a brief consideration of specific explanations for Paul's use of the foolishness rhetoric, in 1 Corinthians and elsewhere, and identifying some important socio-historical markers, are in order.

2. Wisening up a foolish NT apostle

The centuries-long interpretive tradition of Pauline reception, but for the exception here or there such as Räisänen (1992) who described Paul's argumentation as incoherent, found innovative ways to defend Paul against his own claims.[5] Typically, Paul's claims about his own foolishness would be argued or theologised away, in an attempt to wisen up the foolish apostle as is often found in traditional biblical commentaries on his letters. A theological appropriation of Paul, complete in categories reminiscent of more recent systematic theological reflection, and often of

4 In this way, I of course take up and expand on the important and very useful discussion of 1 Cor 1:17–25 and 4:9–10 found in Campbell and Cilliers (2012, 17–38).

5 Contemporary interpreting communities constantly have to choose the moment in which to interpret texts, choosing whether to align themselves with an authoritarian role claimed by Paul or that of dependency required of the communities addressed, and also whether the particularly attitude accompanying the role is appropriate today (Polaski 2005:80–81).

a decidedly Reformed bent, has been for many decades – and in certain instances, still is – the dominant interpretive pattern for making sense of the Pauline materials.[6] Notwithstanding increasing acknowledgements that "Paul's argument is launched in a very specific rhetorical situation, and is not meant to be a broad philosophical pronouncement or the foundation for a systematic theology" (Nasrallah 2003:93), scholars in general and theologians in particular tend to still drift precisely towards a systemising approach of the Pauline materials. If the specificity required by occasional letters is not enough to augur against imposing a monolithic and predictable interpretive framework on Paul's writings, his explicit choice for foolishness or stupidity and the unwise, ironically, should caution against systematising impositions on his letters.

Of late, the comic-philosophical tradition which foregrounded the wise fool in the ironic, vulgar and counter-cultural format of mime, has been suggested as the proper social location for Paul's emphasis on the cross and the overturning of the established understandings of wisdom.[7] Making use of the theatrical tradition and providing a vast and wide range of contemporary authors and scenarios as illustration, Welborn shows how the comic mimic of the coarse, vulgar fool with its entertainment value for the crowds – amidst the vulgarity of the performance – harboured an important, if at times subtle, anti-establishment element as well.[8] However, some of the most important aspects related to foolishness, even when they

6 Even if the briefest of investigations already show up vast differences between, say, the work of Ridderbos (1975), the study by Dunn (1998), and the recent publication by Wright (2013), but the theological and Reformed emphasis is clear in all three studies.

7 Most recently, Welborn has forcefully propounded the theory, that "Paul was governed by a social constraint in his discourse about the cross and in his account of the sufferings of the apostles of Christ" … "employs the language and imagery of mime" … "theatrical metaphor becomes explicit in 1 Cor 4:9–10 (theatre-act θεάτρον)", and "accepts the role of fool of Christ, but only after a thorough theological analysis, in the course of which he redefines the terms 'wisdom' and 'foolishness' in a paradoxical sense" (Welborn 2005:3, 253, see also 2002).

8 An important matter that Welborn barely addresses (Welborn 2005:e.g. 5, 7) is the parity between Paul and the authors he quotes, as well as the accompanying social locations. Seneca, Pliny, Horace and others not only belonged to but also addressed an elite or elite-oriented audience, unlike in the case of Paul. The arguments that 1 Corinthians is focused on the few members in the congregation from elite stock, or that the foolishness argument is intended to subvert aspirations to elite-status, do not succeed in fully addressing the problem of incongruent social locations.

are recognised, are not always sufficiently accounted for among scholars. The argument that "it is not 'wisdom' (σοφία) that is the counterpoint to 'foolishness' (μωρία) in the thesis statement in 1:18, but the 'power of God' (δύναμις θεοῦ)", is important for Welborn's (2005:19) argument. But in the subsequent analysis, unfortunately little further attention is devoted to the issue of "power",[9] even though wisdom and foolishness in 1 Corinthians 1–4 can hardly be understood outside of the reigning discourse of power (see also Punt 2013).

Then also, the comic-theatre was but one tradition situated in a wider ancient context, where foolishness was not celebrated but at best avoided, and at worst, demeaned. "The ancient usage of the word 'fool' describes a person who is cognitively impaired and cannot make sense and cannot function with normal thoughtful reflection, and so behaves unwisely, lacking the ability to know better or do better" (Kellenberger 2013:450).[10] Apart from the person playing the fool or being the clown, and notwithstanding modern reluctance to engage the topic, being mentally challenged was recognised as a reality in ancient times. Although hardly a coveted position or status, matters were more ambiguous, since mental disorder or madness in ancient times were seldom seen as *singularly* bad or negative. "The basic element of the popular view of mental abnormality was the belief that it resulted from the action of a supernatural power which had either entered the body or produced its effects by action from outside. When madness was linked to demonic possession in this way it is not surprising to find that the mentally disturbed could be treated with some awe" (Toner 2009:85).[11] Ambiguously, those in society who were stigmatised and vilified for

9 The neglect of power and its relationship to wisdom and foolishness is twofold, in the sense in which Paul's argument on power is invoked here: both the importance of wisdom for the imperial constellation of power (as referred to above), but also in terms of Paul's own exercising of power. The claim that "the adoption of the role of fool was a strategy practiced by a number of intellectuals in Greek and Roman antiquity" (Welborn 2005:112) should at least allow for the consideration of Paul's invocation of power in his wisdom and foolishness argument.

10 The Roman imperial context was harsh, especially for those not fitting the mould. "Mental health problems for most Romans, though, did not involve costly treatment by such medical doctors. The severely affected were left to wander, abandoned by their families" (Toner 2009:74–75). See also Laes (2018:37–79).

11 "Roman society was a strongly somatic culture at the dominant level, whereas the popular placed more emphasis on the demonic as an explanatory agent" (Toner 2009:91)

mentally not conforming, were often regarded in ways that exceeded their lifestyles and social standing. Moreover, given the nature of first-century life, it is not too difficult to understand the presence of mental disabilities and disorders in society.

The nature of life in the ancient world of the Roman Empire, meant that the non-elite were confronted persistently with potent social stressors. The intensity of the stressors increased down the hierarchy, impacting particularly on the large component of slaves of different categories. These conditions would have had a detrimental impact on the non-elite's psychological well-being, and in all likelihood led to poor mental health levels (Toner 2009:74). Ancient society had mechanisms with which some of the social stress was regularly relieved. Such measures hardly functioned in the sense of envisioning a different dispensation and more often served rather to entrench the existing social order.[12] Nevertheless, it is not difficult to understand, that events such as the annual Saturnalia festivities which focussed on equality as much as inversion, also celebrated the fool.[13] "The fool summed up this spirit of mockery, being free to make public what was normally private, and to tease the powerful about their weaknesses and indiscretions. He was frank, unofficial and rude" (Toner 2009:95). The fool epitomised the inversion that characterised a festival like Saturnalia, poking fun at the conventional, and showing up the taken-for-granted establishment and its deeply held concerns. In ancient times, then, people invoked foolishness discourse across a broad spectrum, often in diverse but intense ways, and always in relation to societal power writ large or small.

As is already evident from his letters but supported also by broad ranging perceptions of the time, the Pauline foolishness discourse involved more than people's personal lives and beliefs and would have impacted their lives also along what today would be called socio-political spheres of life. Paul's appeal for a different understanding of wisdom and appearance was

12 Such festivals were no real threat to the social fabric of society: "It is possible to see carnivals as mere safety-valves that allowed the people to let off a bit of steam without harbouring any pretence of bringing real change. Inversion without subversion" (Toner 2009:95).

13 It is nevertheless fairly ironical that a social stress-relieving event could valorise those figures, who at least to some extent owed their very status if not existence to the stress-inducing nature of the contemporary society.

part of his larger discourse and can be read as an attempt to engage with and confront the conventions of his day (1 Cor 1:18–31). Since the Roman Empire at the time largely defined wisdom in the first century, Paul's rhetoric of foolishness can be viewed as criticism of the imperial discourse of wisdom and power. A postcolonial optic, in particular, enables one to see Paul's discourse as mimicry, negotiating power as much with discursive Roman colonialism as with the recipients of his letters, especially when viewed from the perspective of Paul's use of the scriptures of Israel.[14] Paul's arguments on wisdom and foolishness and the associated notions of strength and weakness, reverberated within the context of the all-pervasive, all-powerful Roman Empire, as both the reflection and distillate of it, as well as the fabricator and promotor of similar notions and values. The imperial context was the underlying ideological setting for Paul's self-portrayal as fool in 1 Corinthians 1–4, both for his apostolic self-understanding and for portraying his message as a discourse of foolishness.

3. Foolishness discourse: Paul the Apostle

The Pauline letters with its foolishness discourse would have conjured up a spectrum of these power-related, contra-conventional and inversionist notions among their first-century readers recipients, in particular about Paul and his message. The stakes remained high in foolishness discourse of the time, not only because of the ambiguous but also because of the gendered nature of foolishness. The first-century world, in particular and explicitly, ascribed intelligence to men and foolishness to women, which was a tricky situation in a world where being biological male did not simply translate into masculinity taken for granted. Men had to live up to expectations and to prove their masculinity, most often in competition with other men.[15] "[A]ncient masculinity was constituted more by the shape of one's life than by the shape of one's body" (Conway 2008:16). Like the body, gender, at

14 For more elaboration on these interrelated notions, and how they play out in Paul's arguments, see for example Punt (2013:107–28).

15 "One might be born a male (Greek *arsēn*; Latin *mas*) or a human (*anthrōpos, homo*) and still not be a man (anēr, vir); one could only become a vir by energetically seeking honour, which was seen as a moral quality, denoting virtue and courage" (Osiek and Pouya 2010:45–46; see Smit 2012).

the time, also existed on a single spectrum and was therefore inherently unstable.[16] Maleness was valued while effeminacy had to be avoided, and therefore being a woman was the last thing first-century men aspired to (Osiek and Pouya 2010:46). And the point was that masculinity was not derived, it was acquired and therefore continuously under threat. Maleness may have been informed by biology, but maleness was not determined by a body: "Manliness was not a birth right. It was something that had to be won" (Gleason 1995:159). Since masculinity required actions that would inscribe it (Swancutt 2004:55), first-century males avoided gender slippage through accepting these culturally determined gender behaviour and roles. So too, in 1 Corinthians 11:23–25, Paul's boasting of his beatings (Glancy 2004:99–135) is ambiguous on many different levels: boasting about suffering, which can perhaps be explained with reference to Hebrew Bible traditions; masculine infringement that would have conjured up untypical, vulnerable male images; and, differently constituted claims on power, to a name a few. For the ancients, real men were not only those who could assert themselves, or who could do exercise restraint, but also those who could do any of these intelligently and who avoided foolishness (see also Punt 2016:1–9). Exactly that which Paul as a man would not have wanted was to attract the label of foolishness, as it impinged on men's status, their masculinity and their very identity. So, when Paul invoked the fool and created his foolishness discourse, was Paul fooling around or was he playing the fool?

Paul's use of notions like ἄφρων (foolish), ἀνόητοι (fools) and μωρία (foolishness)[17] formed part of a larger discourse of foolishness, in which he positioned himself securely but carefully. Paul's arguments, also on foolishness, were imbued with much rhetorical force and power, regardless

16 As much as masculinity has always been an indication on a broader human gender or sex spectrum, its first-century form did not allow for exhibiting what may have been perceived as femininity. Avoiding a feminine or effeminate appearance meant that discipline, self-control, military skill, good looks, modesty in dress and behaviour, intellectual growth, justified anger, and being seen as "active" were promoted among men in favour of a masculine form. "Masculinity and femininity were located on two different poles of a spectrum, which inscribes the interrelation of masculinity or femininity as superior/inferior, societal status as more/less powerful, and sex role as penetrator/penetrated" (Osiek and Pouya 2010:45).

17 Like similar words in other ancient languages, for "the majority of cases, these terms designate intelligent people with cognitive dysfunction" (Kellenberger 2013:450)

of its effect and whether people were fully persuaded. Foolishness was a counter-claim to the imperial-focused emphasis, typical of philosophies of the time, on wisdom as practical lifestyle rather than (only) intellectual knowledge in the head *and* an apocalyptic informed reformatted wisdom. [18] Similar to postcolonial mimicry where mockery is never too far removed from mimicry, Paul's foolishness was strategic. If it is agreed that Paul's rhetoric is best characterised by ambiguity, cunning and deception (Given 2001), his discourse of foolishness entailed much more than merely playing the fool. Paul is not simply the stock figure of popular philosophical mockery, not simply the "village idiot" stereotype (but see Grau 2014:143–45), or the effeminate weakling, but, in the reigning binaries of the time, simultaneously more and less than the stereotype. In the Roman theatre the fool is a lower-class clown, in contemporary society the mentally challenged was often a social outcast, people who identified with the poor and marginalised, and engages in behaviour that was contrary to established norms and convention. Moreover, like prostitutes and gladiators, stage actors and social outcasts were among the most marginalised of society, deemed to be without honour. Paul, however, did not fit this picture altogether, but rather that of the fool somewhat differently conceptualised, namely the fool as social hermeneut, as the trickster figure.[19]

Marion Grau (2014) argues, along the lines of Gadamer, that hermeneutics is operative when something is not immediately intelligible. It is of course a particularly intricate hermeneutical problem to make sense of the divine, of the experiences of God and the sacred. The attempt to make sense of, to translate or interpret the unintelligible, or the infinitely untranslatable, and not to admit to its impossibility, remains the ultimate challenge. This challenge Paul encountered in particularly trying circumstances, as the Johnny-come-lately apostle in socio-cultural hybrid communities in the fast-changing first century world. While Grau explains these notions for other contexts, Paul also shows aspects of the figures of Hermes, trickster,

18 Crucial for making sense of Paul, is his apocalyptic theological orientation, in other words, politics writ large, with God and the powers engaged in a cosmic battle, replicated on another level in the human history of earthly realities and power struggles. See in this regard especially the work of Beker (1982, 1990), Keck (1984, 2015, 1993) and Martyn (1985, 2000).

19 For Paul's appropriation of the role of the fool in 1 Corinthians 1–4, see Welborn (Welborn 2002:420–35).

and fool tied together in his own self-presentation. Simulating these figures to some extent, Paul too revealed, performed, and challenged the status quo of his society and its structures of power, knowledge and belief. Paul encouraged but also modelled, particularly through the image of the fool, the interaction between humility and courage in reinterpreting the divine through mythos and logos for and in the recently formed communities of Jesus followers. "The holy fool can be a diagnostic tool, a test for the level of madness of the system, which often turns out to be greater than the madness of the holy fool" (Grau 2014, 148). Without giving up on the notoriously multivalent nature of hermeneutical acts, Paul reinterpreted God and his received traditions, and Jesus and his impact on the world, from the vantage point of the trickster-fool.[20]

Paul's deployment of the foolishness discourse also served another, important purpose in his apostolic role. In a recent contribution, Horner (2018:42) provides a thicker description of Paul's rhetoric, and concludes on Paul's invocation of foolishness: "Paul shamed the pseudo-apostles through the Fool's Speech. In so doing, he incarnates his assertion in 1 Corinthians that God has chosen the foolish to shame the wise". Horner argues that Paul's opponents opened themselves up for his sardonic yet rhetorically powerful riposte when they presented themselves as being superior to Paul. Paul presented their portrayal of him as socially completely despicable according to Greco-Roman standards as deriving from his openness to public punishment but also from his foolishness in his public speech. In the context of Corinth in particular, with its aspirations of sophistication, his opponents in all likelihood presented Paul as the ultimate fool. Paul's rhetorical retort masterfully struck at those very claims which his opponents levelled at him, laying claim himself to the reigning foolishness discourse. Availing himself of the social inversion which foolishness introduces, taking up possible physical shortcomings and verbal deficits, Paul played the fool with his opponents and showed them up as pseudo-apostles. Playing the fool, Paul put not only his person, but also his message

20 Also, more generally and noted briefly earlier, Toner too acknowledges that mental challenges were not uniformly or consistently negatively experienced. "Mental disorder had always acted in some guises as a positive social force. Possession and exorcism acquired the power to change the individual and then reintegrate him or her into society in a new form of dependency with certain divinely blessed healers" (Toner 2009:90).

(as will be illustrated in the next section), beyond reproach, mimicking the person and cross of Jesus, and issue an invitation and challenge to his recipients to likewise emulate Jesus Christ in their own lives – to the glory of God.

For Paul, then, invoking foolishness became a coping mechanism. In the harsh first-century environment, for those people at the lowest rungs of the social order, even mental disorder could have been used as a survival strategy. In a largely hostile environment, aggressive, antisocial behaviour was one more coping mechanism that contributed to the creation of a protective layer. "Individuals were able to play on perceptions of mental disorder to find relief in aggression or even complete social withdrawal" (Toner 2009:87). It therefore comes as no surprise that in 2 Corinthians 12:11, Paul accuses his addressees right back: Γέγονα ἄφρων, ὑμεῖς με ἠναγκάσατε. Paul's foolishness which is the twin of weakness, both of which in a counter-indication of masculinity, he places before the door of his community, not even the detractors. "Fools are hermeneutical artists, able to speak about things in circumlocutionary ways, to deliver points others dare not make for fear of displeasing the recipient of the message, and get away with telling the truth because they told it in ways that were socially sanctioned and provided a venue for a version of free speech in otherwise highly ritualized and guarded settings" (Grau 2014:150). So too, not only Paul's person, but also (or especially even) Paul's message emulated the discourse of foolishness, even if he did not fully escape the accompanying ambiguities.

4. Foolishness discourse: Paul's message

Paul's foolish message is impossible to separate from the folly of the cross, as he himself attested in 1 Corinthians 2:5. For some scholars, the Pauline discourse of foolishness incorporates the deliberate parody situated in the cross, since with crucifixion Empire aimed to show the uppity ones what happens when they do not know their hierarchical place, lifting them up in an altogether different but deadly way (Marcus 2006:73–87).[21] For Paul, the

21 "The writer of Colossians has grasped the connection between the parody of the triumphal entry and the parody of the cross. In a thoroughly ironic passage, the writer holds together both images in proclaiming Christ's work. On the cross Jesus 'disarmed

parody, of course, runs deeper, and Paul exploited the parodic elements in his insistence on the larger divine inversion in Christ: ὅτι τὸ μωρὸν τοῦ θεοῦ σοφώτερον τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἐστὶν καὶ τὸ ἀσθενὲς τοῦ θεοῦ ἰσχυρότερον τῶν ἀνθρώπων (God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength, 1 Cor 1:25). It is therefore valid and important to argue that "For Paul, too, the cross is an interruption. The cross is an apocalyptic interruption or invasion of the old age – the old myths and conventions and rationalities of the world – by the new" (Campbell and Cilliers 2012:21). Pauline apostleship never strayed too far from Paul's apostolic convictions, in the sense that his being apostle also carried the message, and vice versa.

For Paul, cruciform foolishness established a new, radical and apocalyptic-grounded reality. As Nasrallah (2003:93) puts it, "Paul's championing of divine folly and his downgrading of human wisdom are part of a discourse of madness and rationality, deployed in a context of struggle". It is tempting to see Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians as praise of rationality, over against the emotional approach of the opponents in Corinth. However, such a reading fails to understand that Paul's focus is not on reason per se, but is directed rather at issues that can be called foundational or epistemological (Stowers 1990:253). For Paul, the God of order can also be the God of disorder, especially when it comes to human social frameworks. And in the end, God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, God's weakness more capable than human power.[22] Paul did not argue for rationality but sided instead with folly in his challenge of human pretensions to wisdom. Unlike the long scholarly tradition which holds that Paul introduced the dichotomy of "subdued versus frenzied or conscious versus unconscious", he appears rather to juxtapose and consider what was conventionally understood to qualify as folly and wisdom or knowledge (Nasrallah 2003:93).

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the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it' (Col 2:15)" (Campbell and Cilliers 2012:26).

22 The ambiguity of God entails God's apparent contradictory nature when it comes to order and disorder: not only did God make "the various maps of persons, places, times, and things that organize and structure the world and the life of the church", but God also "turns the world upside down and creates new maps" (Neyrey 2004:144–90, esp 187). See Neyrey (2004:179–87) for Paul on God's weakness and foolishness.

It is important, therefore, not to romanticise or, to use another word, theologise the notion of foolishness in Paul, and to stay alert about the consequences that such tendencies have had on the interpretation of the Pauline letters over a long period. As Nasralla (2003) recently demonstrated, early Jesus follower communities accused each other's prophets of madness and of making false claims to divine knowledge. The early Christians were not primarily interested in defining true prophecy or madness and rationality, but rather used this discourse in order to control knowledge, to establish their own authority, and to define Christian identity. Jesus followers launched these arguments in the context of the Greek and Roman world, where prophecy, visions, ecstasy, and dreams – all considered part of the same phenomenon – were the subject of innovative philosophical, medical, and even political debates.[23] In a situation where σοφία was related more to the imitation of praxis as was the case in Hellenistic philosophies, wisdom and foolishness concerned more than theoretical contents.

Treating 1 Corinthians as probably the earliest written treatise on Christian prophecy, Paul's argument is not primarily aimed to debunk the rationality of prophecy. Using the foolishness discourse, his ultimate aim evidently was to contrast the ostensible wisdom of the world with the foolishness of God. Although one aspect of this argument is to persuade the Corinthian recipients of his letter to reconsider their claim that they are spiritual people, Paul's focus remains divine knowledge. He concedes that the Corinthians can legitimately insist that they possess various spiritual gifts including prophecy and tongues, but that these are limited in their ability to reproduce the wisdom of God. Therefore, rather than *pneumatikoi* as they claimed, the Corinthians are really *psychikoi*, or maybe even *sarkikoi*. Paul contrasts God's supposed foolishness with the wisdom of the world, stressing the all-surpassing superiority of the former, and in this way he removed the basis of the Corinthians' haughtiness and reaffirmed divine

23 Arguing that a model of struggle informed by feminist theory and postcolonial criticism provides a better framework for understanding early Christian texts, Nasralla (2003) clarifies how early Christian arguments about rationality, madness, and the role of spiritual gifts in history are attempts to negotiate authority and to define religious identity in the midst of many competing forms of Christianity. Early Christian prophecy has usually been interpreted according to a model which explains that at its origins, Christianity was characterized by vibrant spiritual gifts which declined as church order and institutions developed.

knowledge (Nasrallah 2003). Through the discourse of foolishness, Paul not only devalued the Corinthians' ecstatic experience as marker for wisdom, but he also confirmed the non-world-conforming nature of God's wisdom, as exemplified in the cross of Jesus.

5. Conclusion

Paul's foolishness discourse resonates in interesting ways in South Africa. Historically, the history of the fool remained socially significant if ambiguous until the end of the middle ages, when it entered a time of transition and conflict in the sixteenth century. "Folly, whether sacred or secular, real or feigned, had now to contend with a new, strident and essentially hostile worldly wisdom" (Saward 1980, 99). In South Africa today, foolishness is considered best avoided in the young democracy with colonial legacies uppermost in the minds of many, and the lasting impact of hegemony still tangible in the democratic dispensation with its own problems and concerns (Punt 2013). Pauline foolishness discourse today, and in South Africa too, sounds meaningless and useless. Moving away from the systematising, theologising tendencies so typical of Pauline interpretation, and coming to terms with the social locations of these letters, allows for more accountable and meaningful exegesis. For Paul, aware of the import and consequence of his foolishness discourse, his rhetoric of the fool was calculated and focused. Paul's rhetoric did not entail that he fooled around, nor that he was anybody's fool. To the contrary, Paul's foolishness was marked by wisdom, and as Christ's fool, he aspired not to be the stock-type of first-century society, which becomes evident when the ancient context and its ambiguities are recognised. How is a foolish apostle propounding a foolishness discourse appropriated today? Some have suggested reaffirming Paul's notions, albeit in new terms, that "(e)specially in a post-Christendom era, the symbol of the foolish, clowning God may make new sense" (Grau 2014:144). In the end, Paul's preference for the foolish should not be turned against foolishness or himself, so as to domesticate the unruly, or to impose another all-consuming regimen.

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