

Giving to the Church:

An Exegesis of Paul's Old Testament Quotations in 2 Corinthians 8 – 9

Mako A. Nagasawa

Last modified: August 10, 2012

Paul's collection for the famine victims in Jerusalem is a case study in what some have regarded as simple redistribution of wealth within the church. Indeed, Paul in 2 Corinthians 8 – 9 raises the desire to see a rough level of 'equality' across the church worldwide, and rightly so, in our opinion. Second Corinthians 8 – 9 suggests answers to at least a few important questions: Can we argue for a redistribution of wealth within the church? If so, how? How are we to use the Law and the Prophets, especially when we are desirous of stimulating financial sharing and redistribution of wealth?

Observing Paul's Old Testament quotations, Richard B. Hays suggests that Paul exercises hermeneutical freedom using an ecclesiocentric lens with very few constraints. Hays believes Paul does not wrestle seriously with the contexts from which he pulls these Old Testament fragments. He goes on to encourage Christians to make the same use of the Old Testament. We cannot go into great depth here, but we believe Hays – a New Testament scholar writing in 1987 with very few Old Testament literary scholars listed in his bibliography – was not attentive to the emerging findings of Old Testament biblical scholars concerning biblical narrative and intertextuality. We believe Paul's work evidences more deliberation than Hays attributes to him, and that Hays overstates Paul's hermeneutical freedom. In 2 Corinthians 8 – 9, where the redistribution of wealth is discussed on the occasion of the fundraising effort for the Jerusalem poor, which of Israel's traditions are quoted? Interestingly enough, Paul does not take Israel's historic condition of being oppressed in Egypt and use it in favor of the Jerusalem believers and against the Corinthians, which might have been appropriate given the fact that the Roman Empire was oppressing Israel. Paul does not quote passages from the Exodus deliverance event such as, 'You will not go empty-handed' or 'The LORD had given the people favor.' (Ex.3:21; 12:36) Nor does Paul quote from Moses' confrontation with Pharaoh as if he were in the role of Moses, the Greek Christians were in the role of Pharaoh, and the Jewish Christians in the role of Israel in Egypt. He does not use the convenient sociological hermeneutics of much liberation theology, and I say that despite my personal sympathies with what liberation theology is trying to accomplish. Nor does he, perhaps even more surprisingly, use Israel's land traditions as a model for economic equality within the worldwide church community. He does not quote, 'So that the needy of your people may eat' or, 'There shall be no poor among you.' (Ex.23:11; Dt.15:4) Instead, Paul quotes from the wilderness manna episode. 'He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little had no lack' (Ex.16:18 quoted in 2 Cor.8:15). Why?

Obviously the two situations are not perfectly equivalent, but quoting the wilderness manna episode serves several pastoral purposes Paul conceivably had. Hays notes some of them. The quote depicts the church's life in the world as an echo of Israel's wilderness wandering episode, preventing the Corinthians from adopting a settler mentality (cf. 1 Cor.10). It reinforces the church's unity as a people sojourning together, warning them against a schism. It highlights the church's dependence on God by echoing Israel's dependence on God's supernatural provision. To these reasons we may add that this quotation strategically critiques the Corinthians' materialism and their temptation to hoard for the future. In the wilderness, when the Israelite men went out to gather manna for their own households, they discovered that if they tried to gather a large amount, their portion mysteriously shrank to suit their household for that day. Extra manna spoiled. Is Paul suggesting that the Corinthians' excess, if they try to hoard it for themselves, will be wasted from a divine perspective? Probably. Is Paul suggesting that God acts, and invites the church to act, in ways to meet the basic needs of its members as it sojourns in the world? Probably. We cannot be absolutely sure which echoes Paul intended and which he didn't, but as Hays rightly says, the lingering literary echoes that fill the air are fascinating.

The other quotation Paul uses in 2 Corinthians 8 – 9 is at least Psalm 112:9 and possibly another Old Testament text which is probably Psalm 147:16. If we assume once again that these quotations are meant to evoke these Psalms in their entirety, as Hays and other literary scholars suggest, they serve Paul well in his immediate purpose. Psalm 112 holds up the creational/Israelite ideal of the one blessed by God and having seed or descendants being mighty on the earth by holding it up as God's promised future for His true humanity. Mention of evil and enemies (v.7, 8, 10) in the present makes the Psalmist expectantly turn to the future when God will vindicate the righteous with secure permanence and abundant wealth (v.1 – 3a). Hence this Psalm describes Israel's 'waiting for restoration from exile' period. The most frequently repeated refrain – the righteous will endure or be remembered forever – occurs three times (v.3b, 6, 9). And how is that righteousness described? That righteousness which will be vindicated in the future is demonstrated by financial generosity in the present. The upright one is gracious, compassionate, and upright (v.4), lends money (v.5), is steadfast in this cause even in the face of evil tidings and

uncertainty (v.6 – 8), and gives freely to the poor (v.9). It is this portrait of the waiting righteous that Paul uses to describe the Corinthians. Those who are truly righteous do such things, by definition.

The phrase ‘He scattered abroad’ might come from Psalm 147:16, which is a celebration of YHWH regathering His worshipers in Jerusalem, summoning the outcasts, healing the brokenhearted, binding their wounds, and supporting the afflicted (v.1 – 6). As in the natural world, where God provides rain, makes grass grow, and gives food to beasts independently of humanity and their plow-mates, the horses (v.7 – 11), so within Jerusalem, where God strengthens His people with wheat and scattered frost which turns to melted ice water (v.12 – 20). Praise consequently flows to God (v.12, 20). This Psalm is thus a ‘being regathered from exile’ text. This is a beautiful image to apply to the church, which is described elsewhere as the new Temple and the citizens of the much-anticipated New Jerusalem. The church is the people who are being regathered from exile. And it suits the pastoral situation with the Corinthians, where Paul reminds them not only that God can meet their needs (2 Cor.9:8 – 12) but that because of their bountiful gift (v.5 – 6), cheerful giving (v.7), good deeds (v.8), and generous liberality (v.11, 13) in helping the poor, thanksgiving to God is and will be overflowing (v.11 – 13). God is being praised. The unbelieving world is noticing. The Corinthians’ actions are, in some way, enacting the major themes of this Psalm from a fresh perspective redrawn around Jesus and his people.

Together, the combination of Exodus 16, Psalm 112, and Psalm 147 invoke a cluster of motifs that reinforce Paul’s burden in writing, that of reminding the Corinthians of the financial gift that they promised. Themes echo and reverberate constructively in Paul’s petition. We hear in the foreground and the background of Paul’s writing the themes of God’s provision for His people, the honor and dignity of being the church, the pilgrim status of the church, unity among God’s people, generosity being a central aspect of righteousness, and praise resounding to God as we testify not only to His provision for us, but His provision through us to others. So Hays is correct in saying that Paul strives for an ecclesiocentric application affirming the whole church, but he does not push his analysis on hermeneutical freedom further by asking what Paul does not quote from.

If the Old Testament is a resource from which Christians can freely draw, then why does Paul, in this very significant instance where one part of the church needed help from another, not use this source in the way many today would propose? Why does Paul not quote from the Exodus deliverance event, as is so common today when the church deals with issues of inequality? We are, after all, examining a situation of the oppression of Israel by Roman power and Hellenistic culture. But perhaps the motif of conflict between Israel and Egypt would exacerbate the tensions in the church between Jew and Gentile and at least in part, jeopardize its already fragile unity, a concern ubiquitous in Paul. Or, why does Paul not quote from Israel’s land legislation? Perhaps because that would lead to mistaken attitudes about the church ‘settling’ the current creation. Attitudes of entitlement and materialism grow out of an imprecise eschatology, which Paul struggled against, as 1 Corinthians and, to a lesser extent, the Thessalonian letters show. Would those echoes be destructive to the church? By any account here, if we allow Paul any kind of thoughtful deliberation in his use of the Law and the Prophets, his selection ought to raise questions for us. Did Paul understand, as we are now rediscovering today, that stories shape people’s attitudes and ethics more than a logical exposition ever can? This is not entirely unreasonable to assume of the apostle. Likely Paul’s brain moved with the rhythms of Hebrew haggadah as much as it did in logical, rabbinical halakah. I suggest yes – Paul knew it is dangerous to invoke pieces of another story when doing so orients you in a different direction, ethically speaking, than the story you yourself are attempting to tell.

I also note that before Paul offers any of these quotes, and before he gives any ethical framework from which the Corinthians could interpret this opportunity/responsibility, he interprets the incarnation of Jesus. That is, he offers a christocentric model and storyline for Christian obedience and ethics. ‘For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, that you through his poverty might become rich’ (2 Cor.8:9). Though Paul offers this reflection on the act of Jesus’ incarnation without drawing immediate application from it, this is surely not accidental. The Corinthians were taught of Jesus, have benefited from Jesus, and are now in Jesus. By inserting this reminder into his appeal, Paul indicates that the ultimate example and motivation for Christian giving is Jesus himself. It is a response to what has been done by and in Jesus Christ. Because the heart of the Christian life is to allow the life of Christ to be expressed in and through our human lives, the responsibility of Christians to give is limitless. Sometimes a situation will call for such costly giving. How much easier is giving, then, when a situation calls for much less, when it is ‘not for the ease of others and for your affliction, but...equality’ (2 Cor.8:13).

The equality Paul has in mind is probably more than the state of everyone merely having basic needs met. While he probably does not have in view a strict condition of equality across all metrics, he does want the church worldwide to have a relative, though not absolute, sense of economic equality *and economic sharing*. This passage has profound implications for our giving practices that reinforce the sense of Christian community developed by Matthew and James. Concerning how Christians give financially to the church, Paul does not seem to think in terms of Christians giving only to their own local congregation. Instead, he glances across the wider, worldwide body of

Christ and encourages Christians to give money where it is needed most. In this case, need outweighs proximity, affinity, and personal acquaintance, since Paul is encouraging the Corinthian Christians to give generously to Jewish Christians who live far away, are culturally different, and known only through the reports of Paul and others. In this light, the contemporary practice of tithing 10% of our income to a local congregation should be re-evaluated. Such local churches might give a token amount to ministries elsewhere, but they surely spend the lion's share of the money on their own operations. This practice reinforces often vast inequalities among churches, as wealthy congregations build sparkling buildings equipped with the latest technology, while others struggle to pay one pastor. Perhaps Christians should be mindful of Paul's example here by giving our money to the church in a way that contributes to greater partnership within the worldwide body of Christ, instead of exacerbating class differences.

Finally, Paul welcomed Christians giving beyond what would have produced equality. We see this through Paul's interaction with the Philippians. Notably, Paul affirmed the Philippian believers, who were impoverished (2 Cor.8:1 – 5), for giving to the Jerusalem collection and to his own ministry (Phil.4:10 – 17). The more we reflect on Paul's encouragement to the low-income Philippian church, like the story of the poor widow in the Gospels, the more surprising it becomes. What kind of person would take money from poor people? Only someone who was convinced that giving was so important it either reflected or ushered in one's possession of the greatest of all riches, the life of Jesus Christ by the Spirit within. This, after all, was Paul's understanding. His Christ-centered motivations, 'For me to live is Christ,' and 'I want to know him and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings,' carry him beyond liberation theology and beyond a particular level of economic equality. His entire being is fixed on the personal expression of Jesus Christ in him.