

Perfection of God’s Good Work: The Literary and Pastoral Function of the Theme of ‘Work’ in Philippians

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Abstract

One of the reasons for the demise of the partition theory of Philippians is the identification of several integrating themes running through the letter. It is thus surprising that the repeated occurrence of lexemes and morphemes allied to the concept of ἔργον (work) that is initially broached at the letter’s beginning has not received the deserved attention. This article contributes to the current state of scholarship in three ways. Firstly, it demonstrates that Paul’s expression of confidence as part of his thanksgiving-prayer report, that God who began ἔργον ἀγαθὸν (a good work) in and among the Philippians (1:6) will perfect it by the day of Christ, commences a consistent theme on ‘work’ that spans the letter, and thus further buries the partition theory. Secondly, it argues that this theme integrates four theological ideas, namely, (a) God’s gracious ongoing inner transformation of

¹ The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

the believers, (b) its practical moral and social outworking in the unity of the fellowship, (c) their steadfast rejection of the false teachers who perverted the Gospel and (d) their continued missional partnership with Paul. The article concludes that in this way, the theme of 'work' directly engages the situational context behind Philippians and so plays a fundamental pastoral function in the letter.

1. Introduction

1.1. The Problem

The scholarly debate over the literary integrity, or contrarily stated, the partition of Paul's letter to the Philippians, appears now to be all but settled in favour of integrity. Apparently originating with Le Moyne (1685)², those who preferred the partition theory based their notion on a number of difficulties posed by the text in its current canonical form. Firstly, they argued that Paul's travel plans in 2:19–30 appear uncharacteristically early in the letter, and so generate the possibility that the travelogue section belonged to a separate communication. Secondly the apostle's use of Τὸ λοιπὸν in 3:1 (traditionally translated as 'finally' in KJV, ESV, ASV, NRSV among others), gives the impression that Paul was at that point about to bring his letter to a close, something which fails to materialize for a couple more chapters. Thirdly, there is a discernible change in tone, from an effusive

² This attribution to Le Moyne is itself hotly disputed, dismissed by some as legendary (Cook 1981:138–142), by others as mythological (Smith 2005:38) and yet by others as a misunderstanding of Le Moyne's argument (Koperski 1993:599–603). Alternatively, Heinrichs (1803:38–87) has been put forward as the theory's original initiator in 1803. All the same, Le Moyne at least identified the difficult transitions in the letter as a problem.

‘eirenic calm’ (Houlden 1970:41) in 3:1 to a severe language in 3:2 in which Paul berates his opponents, leading some scholars to postulate two different contexts for 3:1 and 3:2. Fourthly, it is claimed that the differences in Paul’s strident depiction of his opponents in Philippians 3, in comparison to those described less harshly in Philippians 1, suggest that these sections may well have been written under different circumstances. Finally, it has been argued that there is an apparent break in the flow of the apostle’s argument between 4:9 and 4:10, from where Paul begins to specifically express thanksgiving for the gift from the Philippians.

Taken together, these difficulties persuaded some scholars to theorise that the present canonical form of Philippians is a combination of a number of separate notes written under different circumstances which have been pieced together either by Paul himself or posthumously, by one of his disciples (Bauer, 1920; Gnilka, 1968; Murphy-O’Connor, 1997; Schenk, 1984; Schmithals, 1972; Reumann, 2008; Vincent, 1902).

Various methodological approaches have been adopted by scholars who believe in the letter’s literary integrity to address these challenges.³ Furthermore, the specific difficulties related to the translation and interpretation of 3:1 and 4:10 have also received convincing exegetical (Thrall 1962:28), rhetorical (Heil 2010; Watson 1988) and socio-theological (Asumang 2012a:1–50; Still 2012:53–66; Stowers 1991)

³ These approaches include Dalton’s verbal and thematic analyses (1979:97–102), Watson’s rhetorical analysis (1988:57–88), Alexander’s formal epistolary analysis (1989:87–101), Wick’s structural analysis (1994), Black’s text-linguistic discourse analysis (1995:16–49), and Holloway’s genre analysis (2001). While some methods have proved more successful than others, the cumulative force of their findings has been the general weakening of the attractions of the partition theory (cf., Bockmuehl, 1998:23; Garland, 1985:141–173; Witherington, 2011).

explanations, thus strengthening the argument in favour of integrity. The remaining vestige of the problem is establishing the literary and conceptual coherence of the letter as specifically aimed at addressing a putative socio-historical pastoral situation. The present article contributes to the efforts at addressing this outstanding question.

1.2. Current developments towards a solution

Two major developments in contemporary scholarship have synergised to generate a relatively high degree of consensus in addressing this vestigial problem. These developments are, namely, (a) the historical-critical construction of a plausible situational context or *sitz im leben* which accounts for the variegated features of Philippians, and (b) the identification of coherent literary-theological themes⁴ spanning the sections of the letter, and which directly address this situational context. Given their fundamental importance to the present enquiry, a brief summary of these developments is in order.

1.2.1. The situational context behind Philippians

With regards to the situational context behind Philippians, most interpreters are in agreement that the immediate trigger for the writing of the letter was Paul's receipt through Epaphroditus of the Philippians' generous gift in support of his missionary activities. Paul, who was imprisoned, most likely in Rome⁵ uses the opportunity of Epaphro-

⁴ For the purposes of this article, I adopt Vang's (2011:173:n.2) definition of a theme as 'a main idea in a literary work, which shows up in recurrent verbal elements. These components may be phrases, words, or metaphorical terms'. I also follow the literary procedures suggested by Ryan and Bernard (2003:85–109) for identifying themes in literary works.

⁵ A minority favours Ephesus or Caesarea (cf. Hellerman 2015:3; Reiher 2012:213–233).

ditus' return to Macedonia after the latter's recovery from a near fatal illness, to pen this letter of friendship and thanksgiving in which he also updates his partners about his situation.

Paul also uses the letter to address a number of urgent socio-pastoral problems within the congregation. Some elements of the socio-pastoral problems at the time and their causes are still debated by interpreters, even if their outline is discernible in the letter. It certainly included moderate levels of unseemly internal rivalries between influential personalities within the fellowship, which threatened to divert their focus from the gospel. This situation also appears to have been aggravated by, or perhaps incited by, persecution of the believers in the community. Paul's continued imprisonment may also not have helped matters in Philippi and perhaps played a role in nurturing the interpersonal angst in the Church. Despite his ebullient tone, the apostle himself was anxious about a potentially imminent arrival of false teachers in the region, prompting him to issue warnings about the intentions, methods and theological commitments of these opponents (cf., Asumang 2012a:1–3; Ascough 2003; Briones 2011:47–69; Hansen 2009; Ogereau 2014b; Peterman 1991:261–270; Smith 2005).

Some interpreters may quibble with one or two aspects of the minutiae of this narrative of the context behind Philippians. Marshall (1993:357–374) for example, posits that Paul appears not to be deeply conversant with the details of the situation in Philippi, and thus this neat account, while plausible, may not reflect the exact situation. Marshall's objection is, however, difficult to sustain, if it is granted that Paul had received the Philippians' gift through their emissary prior to writing. In any case, Marshall's protest is largely marginal, as most commentators subscribe to the general outline set out above as adequately explaining the letter's variegated features (cf. Fee 1995:28–34; Fowl 2005; Hull Jr 2016:3–7;

O'Brien 1991:35–37; Peterlin 1994:207–210; Silva 2005; Witherington 2011).

1.2.2. Integrative themes in Philippians

With regard to the second major scholarly development, several interpreters have pointed to a number of coherent integrative themes running throughout the letter and which address this situational context, thus jettisoning the partition theory. An obvious example of this phenomenon is the consistent occurrence of terminologies related to χαίρω (rejoice, be glad) and its cognates in all sections of the letter (1:4, 16, 18, 25; 2:2, 16–18, 28–29; 3:1, 3, 18; 4:1, 4, 10).⁶ This feature has led many interpreters (e.g. Alexander 1989:95; Bickel & Jantz 2004; Holloway 2001; Hooker 2000; Smith 2005:44) to argue that Paul sought to employ this linguistic strategy to reassure and encourage the Philippians in their difficult situation. As Bloomquist (1993:138) asserts, Philippians is 'primarily an authoritative letter of comfort in which Paul reassures the Philippian believers of the gospel's advance in the light of Paul's imprisonment'. While not all interpreters agree with this explanation of how Paul addressed the complex socio-pastoral situation, most agree that there certainly is this consistent literary theme of 'joy' within the epistle, thus calling into question the validity of the partition theory.

Another example of this integrating literary phenomenon is the consistent use of terminologies allied to φρονέω (think, reflect, understand) on as many as ten occasions, and in all sections of the letter

⁶ Nouns and verbs related to joy, as Witherington (2011:2; cf., Fowl 2005:13; Heil 2010:1–4) rightly points out, is 'the singularly most frequent word group in Philippians' and spans all its sections. Moreover, the whole letter is suffused with a joyful tone, even in the brief section of 3:2–3 in which Paul scolds his opponents.

(1:7, 12–26; 2:2, 5, 3:15–19; 4.2, 10; cf., Jewett 1970b:51). So Fee (1995:184), for example, notes: the φρονέω word group ‘dominates the imperatival moments of the letter’. This feature is further heightened by the five occasions that the similar word group, ήγέομαι (consider; 2:3, 6; 3:7-8), occurs in the letter (Pollard 1966:65). Fowl (2005:27) thus postulates that given the prominence of this theme, Philippians could be considered as Paul’s theological reflections on his own imprisonment and its ramifications for the Philippians. Meeks (2002:333; cf., Rooms, 2015:81–94) extends this view by also arguing that Philippians was aimed at ‘the shaping of Christian *phronesis*, a practical moral reasoning that is conformed to [Christ’s] death in hope of his resurrection’.

A third example of this verbal phenomenon is the preponderance of lexemes and morphemes allied to military⁷ (1:7–12, 20; 2:19–24, 25–30; 3:12–15; 4:3, 10–19; cf. Mueller 2013), civic⁸ (1:27–30; 3:20–21; 4:5–8; cf., Edwards, 2013:74–93; Karyakina 2013; Ogereau 2014a: 360–378) and athletic⁹ (1:27–30; 3:12–14; 4:3 cf. Arnold 2012, pp:243–252; Arnold 2014; Sisson 2005) metaphors within the letter. Some interpreters regard these three as overlapping each other, and so

⁷ For example ἔργον (1:6; 2:30), πραιτωρίω (1:13), σωτηρίαν (1:19), κέρδος (1:21), προκοπήν (1:25), στήκετε (1:27), συναθλοῦντες (1:27), ἀντικειμένον (1:28), πτυρόμενοι (1:28), πάσχειν (1:29), ἀγῶνα (1:30), συγκαίρω (2:17), λειτουργὸν (2:25), συνεργὸν καὶ συστρατιώτην (2:25), κερδήσω (3:8), κατελήμφθην (3:12), φρονῶμεν (3:15), σκοπεῖτε (3:17), στέφανός (4:1), στήκετε (4:1), συνήθησάν (4:3), συνεργῶν (4:3), εἰρήνη (4:7), and φρουρήσει (4:7).

⁸ For example, πολιτεύεσθε (1:27), δοκιμὴν (2:22), πολίτευμα (3:20), and Καίσαρος οἰκίας (4:21).

⁹ For example, ἐπιποθῶ (1:8), συναθλοῦντες (1:27), ἀγῶνα (1:30), ἐπέχοντες (2:16), ἔδραμον (2:16), διώκω (3:12, 14), καταλάβω (3:12), κατελήμφθην (3:12), κατελιφέναι (3:13), ἐπεκτεινόμενος (3:13), σκοπὸν (3:14), and βραβεῖον (3:14).

belonging to a single motif¹⁰ spanning the letter. So Krentz (1993:265–286; cf. Krentz 2003:344–383) for instance suggests that athletic metaphors such as συναθλοῦντες (1:27) and ἀγῶνα (1:30) were consistently used by Greco-Roman writers contemporaneous with Paul for characterising military contests and thus belong to the same military *topos*.

Similarly, Geoffrion (1993:81–82; 220–222) has argued that civic terminologies in the key passage of 1:27–30 such as πολιτεύεσθε (1:27), ἀπωλείας (1:28), have military undertones and combined with other civic terms elsewhere such as πολίτευμα (3:20) and Καίσαρος οἰκίας (4:22) expand on the motif of military steadfastness in Philippians. He further asserts that the relatively common κοινωνία terminology in Philippians also had military associations. The letter, he thus suggests (1993:220), is built ‘chiefly upon a broad inclusive political/military concept of citizens/soldiers working together, working for each other, working for the advancement of the goals of their commonwealth (*politeuma*)’. Interpreters who argue for the military *topos* postulate that Paul uses it to shore up the united commitment and resolve of the

¹⁰ Even though they both identify a recurring pattern in a text, some writers make distinctions between a ‘theme’ and a ‘motif’: a theme ‘stresses more [the pattern’s] organisational function in a text while the term motif conveys more the idea of a recurring pattern’ (Aubert 2009:16). This fine distinction is, however, more technical than pragmatic, and so the two terms, together with the term ‘leitmotif’ (which technically refers to musical motifs but is often semantically used also for literary works), are employed interchangeably in this paper. A *topos* refers to a category of ‘stereotyped recurring motif’ (Brunt 1985:496) used across different genres of literature.

Philippians to continue their partnership in the Gospel despite their difficult situation (cf. Mueller 2013; Schuster 1997).¹¹

A nuanced variation to this lexical approach emphasizes the presence of thematic ideas within the letter instead of focusing on particular word groups. So, for example, some have noted that the idea of *κοινωνία* (communion, fellowship, or partnership) spans and holds the letter together (1:5, 7; 2:1; 3:10, 20; 4:14–15; cf. Bockmuehl 1998:2; Fowl 2005:8–9; Hartog 2010:478; O'Brien 1978:9–18; Swift 1984:234–254). It is further argued that Paul's use of terminologies and cognates for *εὐαγγέλιον* (gospel; 1:5, 7, 12, 14, 27ab; 2:16–17, 22; 4:3, 15) in Philippians forms part of this partnership theme. Paul's objective was thus to renew and shore up the resolve of the Philippians who co-shared this partnership in modelling and advancing the Gospel (Asumang 2012a:12).

Others have pointed to the 'Christ hymn' of Philippians 2 as providing an integrative leitmotif for the whole letter (cf. Karyakina 2013; Martin 1997; Perkins 1991; Pollard 1966:57–66). In the words of Meeks (2002:111–112), '[T]he hymn's story of Christ is the master model that underlies Paul's characterization of his career and of the mediating Epaphroditus. This model sets the terms of thinking and acting expected of the Philippians in the face of conflict inside and hostility from outside the community'. A similar argument has been made by Kurz (1985:103–126) who asserts that the hymn serves as the centrepiece of

¹¹ Not all interpreters are convinced about the merits of this particular proposal. Marchal (2006:63) for instance, questions whether Christians of non-military and lower social classes who presumably would have been in the majority in the Philippian Church, would have appreciated the nuances of the technical military language that are postulated to span the letter. However, given the fact that the city itself was historically founded for resettlement of Roman army veterans, it is most likely that this military motif would have resonated with the average Philippian.

the letter enabling Paul to employ it in his exhortations towards kenotic imitation of Christ. The message of the Christ hymn is allied to the related emphases on humility in the letter, expressed through Paul's modelling of Christ (e.g. 1:12–26; 2:17–18; 3:3–12; cf., Asumang, 2011:1–38; Garland 1985:141–173), exemplified in his co-workers whom he commends (e.g. 1:27–30; 2:19–30; 4:3) and which the recipients were exhorted to emulate (2:1–4; 4:2–3; cf. Asumang 2012a:1–50).¹²

The overall picture of the state of scholarship, then, is that Philippians contains several cords of integrative themes spanning and tying all its sections together, with each cord directly addressing aspects of the situational context. This literary feature suggests that it was a single purposely-constructed letter aimed at addressing the variegated socio-pastoral problems in Philippi at the time. This no doubt makes subscription to the partition theory untenable.

1.3. The present proposal

One more cord of integrating theme may now be added to this picture. Several interpreters have rightly pointed out that, as it does in most of the apostle's other letters, the thanksgiving-prayer report in Philippians is fundamental in shaping the overall message of the letter (Black 1995:16–49; Conzelmann 1974:412; Jewett 1970b:40–53; Schubert 1939; Swift 1984:234–254). After all, even though it is primarily directed to God, the thanksgiving nevertheless has 'a didactic function' encapsulating the apostle's pastoral purposes and writing strategy (O'Brien 2009:13–14). Some interpreters have further argued that the

¹² Not all suggested themes are persuasive. For example, Lohmeyer's (1954) suggestion that the theme of martyrdom spanned the whole letter does not convince, as it requires an unusual definition of the martyrdom terminology.

themes which are introduced in the thanksgiving-prayer report of Philippians are consistently repeated in the rest of the letter, suggesting that it somewhat serves as the letter's 'table of contents'. As Wiles (1974:206–207) puts it, 'although couched in elevated and carefully structured language, and confined by liturgical idiom and epistolary convention for the most part to generalized statement, [the thanksgiving] nevertheless functions as a prologue to a drama, setting the tone and anticipating some of the major themes that ... bind the whole letter together'.

Jewett (1970b:53) similarly opines: 'the most powerful indications of unity [of Philippians] are found in the epistolary thanksgiving which, as Paul Schubert demonstrated, is a formal device, serving to announce and introduce the topics of the letter. The epistolary thanksgiving in Philippians 1:3–11 is intimately connected with each succeeding section of the letter'. He (1970b:53) specifically identifies the 'themes of suffering (1:7), joy (1:4), and mental attitude (1:7)' as serving to bind Philippians together.

Agreeing with the view that the verses of Philippians 1:3–11 'not only introduce the central theme, but they also foreshadow all the other significant motifs that are developed in the letter', Swift (1984:236–237) proposes that 'Verse 6, when properly interpreted in relation to verse 5, provides a summary statement of the entire epistle'. Swift's precise focus, however, was on the theme of the Philippians' partnership in the Gospel, and so he does not identify how other concurrent themes in the same verse contribute to Paul's pastoral strategy. Moreover, Swift does not demonstrate exactly how Paul's explicit expression of his proposition in 1:27–30 relates to the themes he broaches in his thanksgiving-prayer report.

Though he criticizes Jewett's assertion that the thanksgiving-prayer report serves as the letter's 'table of contents', as an overstatement, and chooses rather to read Philippians as 'a letter of friendship', Fee nevertheless comes closest to the present proposal in recognizing the thematic importance of Paul's reference to ἔργον ἀγαθὸν in 1:6. He states: 'Paul is concerned throughout the letter with [the Philippians'] present behaviour as reflecting the effective work of the gospel. Here [in 1:6] he reports on his prayer for them in this regard' (1995:73). Fee does not, however, detail exactly how the theme of 'work' features in the lexical flow and pastoral-theological argument 'throughout the letter'.¹³

The fact is the ἔργον (work) word group and its synonymous cognates occur on as frequently as eighteen occasions¹⁴ in Philippians. This interesting literary feature is further buttressed by twelve other occasions¹⁵ that glosses within the semantic domain of ἔργον are used (Louw, Nida, Smith, and Munson 1989). This phenomenon of frequent repetition and wide distribution of lexemes and morphemes allied to

¹³ Interpreters who have similarly highlighted the theme of work in the thanksgiving-prayer report but have not analysed its literary and pastoral function in the whole letter include Bockmuehl (1998:62), Garland (1980:327–336), Gundry (2010), Heil (2010:42), O'Brien (1991:64), and Reumann (2008:112–115).

¹⁴ These are ἔργον (1:6; 1:22; 2:30), κατεργάζεσθε (2:12), ἐνεργῶν (2:13a), ἐνεργεῖν (2:13b), ποιεῖτε (2:14), ἐκοπίασα (2:16), λειτουργία (2:17), συναεργὸν (2:25a), λειτουργὸν (2:25b), ἐργάτας (3:2), λατρεύοντες (3:3), σύζηγε (4:3a), συναεργῶν (4:3b), πράσσετε (4:9), ἰσχύω (4:13a), and ἐνδυναμοῦντί (4:13b).

¹⁵ These include δοῦλοι (1:1a—slaves), διακόνους (1:1b—deacons), ἐπιχορηγίας (1:19—inner support), συνέχομαι (1:23—hard pressed), συναθλοῦντες (1:27—striving together), ἀγῶνα (1:30—wrestle or struggle), δούλου (2:7—slave), ἐδούλευσεν (2:22—slaved), διώκω (3:12—vigorously pursue), κατελήμφθην (3:12—apprehended, captured), ἐπεκτεινόμενος (3:13—stretching forward), συνήθλησάν (4:3—struggled together). Unless otherwise stated all translations are from the NRSV.

ἔργον together with their detailed applications in the argument of successive pericopae indicate the importance of the concept of work to Paul's overall pastoral strategy. It suggests a consistent literary theme spanning the letter and relating to the epistolary purpose and strategy. I therefore hypothesize that Paul's expression of confidence in Philippians 1:6 that God will perfect ἔργον ἀγαθὸν (a good work) he began in and among the Philippians by the day of Christ, commences a consistent literary and pastoral theme throughout the letter acting as a cord holding its sections together.

For the sake of precision, it is worth stating that the theme of work is only one of several thematic cords through Philippians and so does not, on its own, constitute the letter's 'uniting theme'. All the same, the concept of the perfection of God's good work through God's ongoing transformation of the believers, particularly evidenced in their adoption of appropriate actions and attitudes towards achieving unity and steadfastness in the face of persecution, and in their resistance of false teachers, and their continued gospel partnership with Paul, plays a fundamental role in addressing the socio-pastoral problems in Philippi. It certainly adds another nail in the coffin of the partition theory of Philippians. In what follows, I shall examine how the theme unveils itself in the various sections of the letter with particular emphasis on how it relates to the situational context.

2. Paul's Thanksgiving-Prayer Report (Phil 1:3–11)

As is common with many of his letters,¹⁶ Paul begins Philippians by expressing thanks to God followed by a report of his prayers on behalf

¹⁶ The exceptions are Galatians, 1 Timothy and Titus. The thanksgiving is replaced by specialised *berakah* in 2 Corinthians and Ephesians (cf. O'Brien 2009; Silva 2005:37).

of the congregation (1:3-11). The thanksgiving is offered for three specific items, namely, (a) the memory of the Philippians – 1:3–4, (b) their partnership in the gospel ministry—1:5, and (c) Paul's confidence in God's perfection of his good work in and among them—1:6. As I now explain, these three items are arranged in a progressively graded fashion from the most specific to the most general. This feature makes the reference to ἔργον ἀγαθὸν in the third item pivotal to Paul's overall pastoral strategy in the letter.

2.1. The memory of the Philippians (1:3-4)

With regard to the first item of thanksgiving in 1:3–4, interpreters are evenly divided as to its specificity, since the phrase ἐπὶ πάσῃ τῇ μνήμῃ ὑμῶν (1:3b; literally—on all the memory you) is quite ambiguous. On the one hand, it could be taken as temporally referring to the frequent occasions of Paul's memory or remembrance of the Philippians, as Paul similarly states in passages such as Romans 1:9, Ephesians 1:16, 1 Thessalonians 1:2, and Philemon 4. The NRSV, in tandem with all the major translations, indeed renders 1:3ab as 'I thank my God every time I remember you' (so also, Fee 1995:77; Hansen 2009:45; Heil 2010:39; Silva 2005:42).

On the other hand, and on perhaps more explicit grammatical grounds, the second person pronoun, which is plural, is better taken as a subjective genitive and the ἐπὶ also taken as causal, as it plainly does in its apparently formulaic repetition in 1:5. Moreover, though Paul's six other uses of μνήμῃ elsewhere in his letters are all objective to himself, that is, they refer to Paul's memory, the peculiar linguistic features of the phrase in Philemon 1:3 makes μνήμῃ here different from its other Pauline uses and better taken as subjective. These grammatical considerations render the phrase in 1:3ab as referring rather to the Philippians' memory of Paul as one cause for the apostle's thanksgiving

– ‘I thank my God for all your memory’ (so also, Garland 1980:329; Hawthorne and Barker 1983:16; Martin 1976:63–64; O’Brien 2009:22–23; Peng 2003:415–419; Peterman 1997; Witherington 2011:36).

This preferred causal rendering of 1:3ab also makes more contextual sense, as it underlines Paul’s thanksgiving as first and foremost specifically related to the gift he had recently received. Paul gives thanks to God because the Philippians had not forgotten him and in fact expressed their memory of him in sending the gift. That is why later in 4:10, Paul commends the Philippians that they have ‘now at last’ revived their φρονεῖν (concern or thoughts), that is, revived their memory towards him. As Hansen (2009:45; cf. Peterman 1991:261–270) puts it, ‘This thanksgiving [in 1:3] is directly related to the close of the letter where Paul writes what reads like a formal receipt’. Indeed, there are several other verbal parallels between this opening thanksgiving and the thank you note in 4:10–20,¹⁷ indicating that Paul’s expression of appreciation for their gift comes far earlier than is assumed by some interpreters.

2.2. The Philippians’ partnership 1:5

The second item of the thanksgiving is in relation to the Philippians’ partnership with the apostle in the gospel ministry. This κοινωνία ὑμῶν εἰς τὸ εὐαγγέλιον (partnership or communion in the gospel) refers to their participation in the ministry ‘through their prayers, their friendship, and their provision of material support’ (Asumang 2012a:21), and no doubt therefore includes their recent gift. It refers to

¹⁷ θεῶ μου (1:3), χαρᾶς (1:4), κοινωνία (1:5a), εὐαγγέλιον ἀπὸ τῆς πρώτης ἡμέρας ἄχρι τοῦ νῦν (1:5b), φρονεῖν (1:7a), and συγκοινωνούς (1:7b), respectively correspond with θεός μου (4:19), Ἐχάρην (4:10a), συγκοινωνήσαντές (4:14), ἀρχῆ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου (4:15), φρονεῖν (4:10b), and συγκοινωνήσαντές (4:14).

'their participation in spreading the gospel in every possible way, which includes their recent partnership in the gospel in sending him a gift while he is imprisoned for the defense of the gospel' (Fee 1995:84; cf. Fowl 2005:22). That this second item expands on the first is also indicated by Paul's extension of the time scale – that is, from their recent occasion of remembering him in the first item in 1:3, to their partnership 'from the first day until now' (1:5) in the second item. Paul is grateful to God for both.

2.3. Perfection of God's ἔργον ἀγαθὸν in Philippi 1:6

The reference to the partnership is followed by thanksgiving for a third item which further extends the period covered, stretching now from the inauguration of Paul's mission in Philippi to the 'day of Christ' (1:6). Paul is grateful because he is πεποιθὸς (persuaded or confident) that God who had begun ἔργον ἀγαθὸν in and among them will ἐπιτελέσει (thoroughly perfect or complete) it by the day of Christ.

Interpreters have made different suggestions on the exact referent for ἔργον ἀγαθὸν. So, for example, finding parallels between Philippians 1:6 and Genesis 2:2 LXX, Martin (1976:65) and Janzen (1996:27–54) have suggested that ἔργον ἀγαθὸν refers to God's work of creation which will become eschatologically consummated with Christ's second coming. Yet, while the theological tenet of this interpretation is undoubtedly correct, it is nevertheless too general and in any case, rather remote from the immediate context of the verse, and so, at best, constitutes a strained reading.

At the other extreme end are those interpreters (e.g. Hansen 2009:49–50; Heil 2010:42; Murray 1998:316–326; Ware 2005:210) who narrowly restrict the meaning of ἔργον ἀγαθὸν to equate it to the specific partnership in the Gospel ministry which the Philippians shared

with Paul. For Hansen (2009:50) for instance, ‘the good work that God began was the formation of a corporate entity: the partnership (*koinōnia*) in the gospel’. Similarly, in the view of Heil (2010:42), ἔργον ἀγαθὸν is ‘believing in and committing themselves to the gospel within the fellowship they shared with Paul and one another’. Ware (2005:210) similarly asserts: “Ἐργον and its cognates are frequently used by Paul with reference to the work of spreading the gospel. Already in the thanksgiving period Paul has referred to the Philippians’ partnership with him for the gospel as an ἔργον ἀγαθὸν (1:6)’. Interpreters who take this second view of ἔργον ἀγαθὸν thus regard the third item of the thanksgiving as seeking to underline the eschatological time frame of the partnership and not stating another item that instigated Paul’s gratitude.

Admittedly, this restricted interpretation of ἔργον ἀγαθὸν rests on a reasonably wide definition of Paul’s partnership with the Philippians as encompassing ‘all aspects of [Paul’s] relations with the Philippians’ (Fowl 2005:22). And indeed something may be said in favour of the attractiveness of this second option over the former general view, as it is more specific and better fits the flow of the two verses. Even so, and given the manner in which Paul uses the ἔργον terminology in the rest of the letter, this second option appears to overly restrict the meaning of ἔργον ἀγαθὸν. Since Paul stresses the theocentric and Christotelic nature of this ἔργον ἀγαθὸν, that it is God who commenced it and will finish it at the day of Christ, it is more likely that at ἔργον ἀγαθὸν Paul had a much broader concept in mind than his partnership with the Philippians. Thus O’Brien’s (1991:64) distinction is apt: ‘[The Philippians’] eager participation in Paul’s gospel ministry was not the good work itself, but clear evidence of this work of salvation’. Put another way, the partnership was a manifestation of God’s ἔργον ἀγαθὸν, but the two are not to be equated.

Most interpreters regard the meaning of ἔργον ἀγαθὸν as fitting somewhere between the two extreme views, as referring to 'God's specific work of salvation' (Fee 1995:87; cf. Bockmuehl 1998:62; O'Brien 2009:64; Silva 2005:45). And this should be taken as the correct interpretation of ἔργον ἀγαθὸν, so long as the term 'salvation' is not restricted to the redemptive justification of individuals but to God's miracle of new creation of individuals and the community of believers as a whole within their social Philippian context. In other words, by ἔργον ἀγαθὸν Paul had in mind God's all-encompassing project of their Christian existence in Philippi, that is, their salvation as broadly conceived in terms of their spiritual rebirth, growth, sanctification, maturation, corporate witness in Philippi and eventual transformation into Christ's image at the eschaton.

Five sets of arguments may be offered here in support of the superiority of this definition of ἔργον ἀγαθὸν. Firstly, the use of ἐπιτελέσει (perfected) in 1:6 indicates that ἔργον ἀγαθὸν refers to the all-encompassing nature of their Christian existence. For Paul's other use of the τελειόω terminology in Philippians 3:12, is also in direct relation to the completion of God's transformation of the apostle at the eschaton. There in 3:12, Paul avows that he does not regard himself to have been τετελείωμαι (perfected) and so he presses and strains forward to reach that eventual goal of his salvation. Paul is thus evidently thinking of the final end of all aspects of his Christian existence. In the words of Silva (2005:175), 'to be perfected consists of attaining the last and ultimate goal, blameless at the day of Christ'. Paul indeed repeats the same wish for the Philippians' perfection in his prayer in 1:10b, 'that on the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless'. Given this wide-ranging significance of ἐπιτελέσει in 1:6, ἔργον ἀγαθὸν should also refer to

every aspect of the transformative work of God towards that ultimate end.¹⁸

Secondly, the qualifying locative for the ἔργον ἀγαθόν, that is, ἐν ὑμῖν, indicates that Paul also had the social ramifications of God's transformative work in Philippi in mind, and not just the salvation of individuals. The plural ἐν ὑμῖν more frequently meant 'among you, in your midst' (Martin 1976:65), and thus cannot be taken to restrictively refer to the salvation of individuals, even though the πάντων ὑμῶν (all of you) of 1:7 shows that the thought of the salvation of individuals is definitely assumed as an integral part of God's ἔργον ἀγαθόν. Accordingly, the NRSV's 'among you' is a better rendering of ἐν ὑμῖν than 'in you' (NIV, ASV, ESV, GNT, KJV, NASB) even though the more explicit rendering, 'in and among you', does better justice to the thought and is to be preferred. Certainly, the locative in 1:6 indicates that God's ἔργον ἀγαθόν includes the social communal consequences of His miracle of transformation of the believers.

Thirdly, and as will shortly be explicated, Paul's use of the ἔργον terminology in the rest of Philippians (e.g. 2:12–13; 2:25; 3:2–3) consistently refers to their Christian existence, both in the sense of God's spiritual transformation of the believers, as well as its consequential individual ethical and social communal manifestations. So for example, in 2:12–13, the Philippians are urged to κατεργάζεσθε (work out) their salvation on the basis of the fact that God is ἐνεργῶν (at work) in them to enable them to both will and ἐνεργεῖν (to work) for his good pleasure. The word ἔργον after all mostly described the outward practical manifestation of active energy (BDAG 390) and was

¹⁸ See Jewett (1970a:362–390) for a proposal arguing that some Philippian believers were claiming to have already been perfected and that Paul aimed to correct such a view.

thus unlikely to describe just inner spiritual transformation of the believers without reference also to its tangible outward consequences.

Fourthly, Paul's prayer report in 1:7–11 which follows the thanksgiving underlines the same concerns for the Philippians to manifest the tangible consequences of God's transformative work in and among them. For instance, Paul prays that their salvation will bear ethical fruit (*καρπὸν δικαιοσύνης* 1:11; fruit of righteous conduct), specifically, in their love for one another, and in their increased knowledge and discernment, which would enable their progressive holiness to be completed 'on the day of Christ' (1:10). In other words, the prayer of 1:7–11 is another way of expressing his confidence in God's perfection of *ἔργον ἀγαθὸν*. Certainly, the correspondences between the prayer and the confidence expressed in 1:6 indicate that *ἔργον ἀγαθὸν* inextricably manifests itself in the ethical and social conduct of the Philippians.

The whole thanksgiving-prayer report itself is symmetrically arranged so that Paul moves from a focus on the Philippians' 'good work' (1:3–5), to God's 'good work' (1:6–8), and back to the Philippians' 'good work' (1:9–11). This mutual interplay between the Philippians' actions and God's work is a constant feature of the letter and demonstrates that while *ἔργον ἀγαθὸν* in 1:6 no doubt refers to God's miraculous work in and among the Philippians, Paul did not view it in exclusively spiritual terms, but also in its ethical and communal manifestations in the Philippians actions and attitudes. For Paul, no action of the Philippians in relation to their Christian existence fell outside God's work (cf. Wagner 2009:257–274; Witherington 2011:61).

Finally, by identifying the time of the perfection of the *ἔργον ἀγαθὸν* at the *ἡμέρας Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ*, (day of Jesus Christ), Paul was indicating the all-encompassing eschatological significance of the *ἔργον ἀγαθὸν*. It

could only be concluded when all of God's plans and activities to that end were completed. Thus with ἔργον ἀγαθὸν, Paul underscores the massive consequences of the planting of the gospel in Philippi, covering its spiritual, social and ethical manifestations. Indeed, it is in this broad sense that Paul would assert in 1:28 that even the Philippians' suffering and their steadfast resistance of their opponents' intimidation were evidence of God's activity among them. The eschatological context of 1:6 thus defines the ἔργον ἀγαθὸν as not just inner spiritual transformation, and not just outer ethical relational conduct, but also included the social dimensions of the work of God. It is in this broad sense that ἔργον ἀγαθὸν represents God's project of Christian existence in Philippi.

In a summary then, Philippians 1:3–11 identifies three key pastoral concerns of Paul as items for thanksgiving which would also serve to shape his didactic and pastoral agenda in the rest of the letter. These items are stated in a progressively graded fashion, so that the final item, ἔργον ἀγαθὸν, subsumes all three. Paul is grateful to God that he has given him the assurance that God's ongoing project of Christian existence in Philippi, in its spiritual, ethical and social manifestations, will be perfected at the day of Christ. And this ongoing project was demonstrated in the specific instance of the Philippians' monetary gift, and more generally in their gospel partnership from the beginning. These exemplify the theme of work in the thanksgiving, and, as I next demonstrate, Paul returns to it in the rest of the letter and exhorts the Philippians to adopt the requisite attitudes and actions as manifestation of the progress towards its perfection.

3. Theme of Work in the Rest of Philippians

3.1. δούλοι Χριστοῦ in Paul's salutation (Phil 1:1–2)

One of the two peculiar features of the salutation of Philippians (1:1–2)¹⁹ has significance for the theme of 'work' in the letter. As commentators have routinely stressed, of all Paul's letters, it is only in the salutation of Philippians that Paul designates *both* himself and his co-writer Timothy as δούλοι Χριστοῦ. This designation may have been intended in an honorific, or alternatively, in functional terms (Fee 1995:63; Hansen 2009:38). Even though the two connotations are not mutually exclusive, there are good reasons to take the view that in Philippians 1:1, Paul uses δούλοι Χριστοῦ as describing himself and Timothy as 'slave workers' of Christ Jesus, that is, in the humble functional sense (Asumang 2011:14–15; Fowl 2005:16–17; Heil 2010:33; Silva 2005:39–40).

One key reason for this conclusion is that in 2:22, Paul characterizes his and Timothy's ministry in a similar fashion, as εδούλευσεν εἰς τὸ εὐαγγέλιον (slaved with me in the gospel). The functional designation of Paul and Timothy as δούλοι Χριστοῦ in 1:1 moreover pre-empts the theme of slavery in the letter, which by semantic association, relates to the theme of 'work'. In Garland's words (2006:189; cf. Fee 1995:62), 'Introducing himself and Timothy as Christ's slaves at the outset must be intended to highlight lowly service and humility, an emphasis that echoes throughout the letter'. Δούλοι Χριστοῦ certainly sets the tone

¹⁹ It may also be argued, albeit weakly, that the other peculiar feature of the salutation, that is, Paul's explicit call out of the ἐπισκόποις καὶ διακόνους (overseers and servants) is intended to drive home his expectation for the leaders to take responsibility for participating in the good work of God by adopting the requisite humble attitude (Fee 1995:67–70; Selby 2012:79–94).

for the apostle's later exhortation to the Philippians to adopt the requisite slavery associated attitudes and actions pertaining to their relationships and so participate in the perfection of God's good work among them (2:1–13).

3.2. *μοι καρπὸς ἔργου* in Paul's missionary report (Phil 1:12-26)

The missionary report in Philippians is a detailed account of the apostle's current circumstances, and by its rather early placement, is somewhat also unique among Paul's letters.²⁰ With its insistence that the overall result of Paul's circumstances was 'that Christ is proclaimed in every way' (1:18), the missionary report is designed to reassure the Philippians. However, it is additionally also intended to paranetically address the situation in Philippi. Essentially, Paul reports that his imprisonment has in no way hindered the work of God, but, 'actually helped to spread the gospel' (1:12). Paul thus implies that his circumstances illustrated how God was perfecting *ἔργον ἀγαθὸν* in his context. The Philippians were therefore to take a cue and emulate his attitude of joyful surrender to God (1:18), and actions of courageous proclamation of the gospel (1:19; cf. Fee 1995:63; Heil 2010:67; Ware 2005:212).

It is in this context that Paul's specific reference to *μοι καρπὸς ἔργου* (fruitful work for me) in 1:22 should also be taken as a direct echo of the theme of God's *ἔργον ἀγαθὸν* and an encouragement for the Philippians to emulate Paul in adopting the requisite attitudes and actions towards its perfection. This is explicitly so because the fruitful work is stated as dependent on *ἐπιχορηγίας* (1:19; energetic support; cf., BADG 387) of the Spirit of Christ Jesus and the Philippians' prayer,

²⁰ The only parallel is 2 Corinthians 1:8–11 but the tone, brevity and detail there is drastically different from the account in Philippians 1:12–26 (cf. Silva 2005:59–60).

thus ultimately a result of God's activity (Fee 1995:133; Silva 2005:76). God's ἔργον ἀγαθὸν (1:6; good work), yielded καρπὸν δικαιοσύνης (1:11; fruit of righteous conduct) among the Philippians, through Paul's καρπὸς ἔργου (1:22; fruitful work), the Philippians' own κοινωμία (1:5; partnership) in it, and the Spirit's ἐπιχορηγίας (1:19; energetic supply). Just as it was so for the Philippians' Christian existence, Paul's μοι καρπὸς ἔργου is thus also a product of God's ἔργον ἀγαθὸν. The missionary report accordingly exemplified to the Philippians how to partake in God's perfection of his good work in their context by emulating Paul (Fee 1995:153; Heil 2010:70; Ware 2005:214).

3.3. καὶ τοῦτο ἀπὸ θεοῦ in Paul's proposition (1:27–30)

Paul's main proposition in 1:27–30 does not explicitly use the ἔργον terminology, even though the concept of the perfection of God's work shapes how its motivation is framed. Beginning with the emphatic adverbial transition μόνον (only), Paul employs 'one long convoluted sentence' in the Greek (Fee 1995:77) to directly address the situation in Philippi, urging the believers to adopt the requisite attitudes and actions which accord with the gospel. They were to stand firm in one Spirit, strive side by side with one mind and resist the opponents of the gospel. Paul then motivates this instruction by stating that its adoption will be evidence of their salvation as well as their opponents' destruction.

Of relevance is Paul's qualification of this motivation with, καὶ τοῦτο ἀπὸ Θεοῦ (1:28c; literally, and this from God), a hanging clause which raises a number of grammatical and syntactical questions²¹ the details

²¹ Is the particle καὶ of cumulative or copulative force? What is the referent for τοῦτο? Is τοῦτο specifically identifying their σωτηρίας as from God, or also includes their suffering? What significance should be attached to the fact that the propositional

of which cannot be fully pursued here. It is, however, worth discerning three pointers which directly link this hanging clause to the theme of the perfection of God's ἔργον ἀγαθόν. Firstly, Paul indicates in 1:27 that their unity should be forged ἐν ἐνὶ πνεύματι (in the one Spirit). This means they were to envisage their actions towards unity as consequence of the activity of God's Spirit. As Fee (1994:746; cf. Edwards 2013:74–93; Heil 2010:74; Samra 2006:154–155) puts it, 'Paul's obvious concern is that their being one in Christ is the direct result of the Spirit's presence in their individual and community life'. So, having asked the Philippians to pray that he would receive the Spirit's ἐπιχορηγίας (1:19; energetic support), Paul now indicates that it is also by the same Spirit's enablement that the Philippians would be able to persevere in unity. Their unity was not to be man-made, but Spirit empowered and framed. It was, in other words, a manifestation of the work of God among them.

Secondly, the explanatory conjunction, ὅτι (since, for, or because), which begins 1:29 indicates that Paul envisaged even the intimidations the believers faced in Philippi as an integral and unavoidable part of God's activity among them—'For (ὅτι) he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well'. In other words, 1:29 clarifies 1:28c, explaining that, both their salvation and its social consequences, including the intimidation by opponents, evidenced God's grace, and thus both were part of God's work among them.

Thirdly, it is apparent, given especially the clarification of 1:29 and the conceptual flow of the passage, that the neuter τοῦτο (this) does not narrowly refer to the Philippians' eschatological salvation (contra Heil

phrase ἀπὸ θεοῦ occurs only once in the letter (1:2)? For analyses of these questions, see O'Brien, (1991:156–157) and Silva, (2005:89:90).

2010:76), even though that is the thought which immediately precedes the phrase. Instead, τοῦτο (this) refers to every aspect of their salvation including its social consequences. That is to say, τοῦτο (this) denotes everything that Paul indicates in the proposition to be 'worthy of the gospel of Christ'. In agreement with Silva (2005:83) therefore, it should be concluded that τοῦτο in 1:28c represents 'the whole complex of ideas: conflict, destruction, perseverance, and salvation. The true ground for the Philippians' encouragement was the profound conviction that nothing in their experience took place outside God's superintendence'. It is certainly on this basis of divine activity that in 1:30, Paul offers himself as a model of God's work by reminding them of his own 'struggles' (1:30) which they witnessed when the ἔργον ἀγαθὸν began (1:6).²²

Putting these pointers together, it is evident that καὶ τοῦτο ἀπὸ Θεοῦ underscores the pivotal idea that the whole of the Philippians' Christian existence was God's ἔργον ἀγαθὸν which Paul exhorts them to partake in by adopting the requisite attitudes and actions. Accordingly, the NRSV's translation of καὶ τοῦτο ἀπὸ θεοῦ as 'And this is God's *doing*' accurately captures the thought of the motivation for the proposition in Philippians 1:27–30. Paul was insisting that the Philippians' pursuance of unity, as well as their resilient perseverance against the external persecution, all form part of God's perfection of His ἔργον ἀγαθὸν which he had begun in Philippi.

²² The Trinitarian frame of the single sentenced 1:27–30 further supports the conclusion that Paul envisaged his exhortation as reflecting God's good work among the Philippians. For an analysis of the role of the doctrine of the Trinity in Philippians, see Asumang (2012b:1–55).

3.4. Christ as δούλου in Philippians 2:1–11

As most recent commentators have emphasized (e.g. Fee 1995:204; Heil 2010:87; Hellerman 2009:779–797; O'Brien 1991:210–211; Silva 2005), the Christ hymn (Phil 2:5–11), regardless of its provenance, ought to be interpreted in the first instance in its immediate literary context (2:1–11), where it motivates the apostle's exhortation for mutual submission and self-sacrifice within the Church in Philippi. While no explicit lexical reference to the ἔργον terminology occurs in the pericope, there are ample indications that the theme of the perfection of God's good work conceptually undergirds the passage. For a start, the several verbal parallels between the thanksgiving of 1:4–7 and 2:1–2²³ indicate that the concept of the perfection of God's good work which is broached in 1:6 is also assumed in the latter passage. Moreover, the exhortation to 'be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind' (2:2) amplifies Paul's earlier command in 1:27 for them to stand firm 'in one Spirit', which, as already argued, reflects the theme of God's work. Furthermore, and as will shortly be demonstrated, the exhortation of Philippians 2:12–18 which is aimed at practically applying the message of the Christ hymn explicitly employs several ἔργον terminologies to identify the imitative obedience of the Philippians as their active participation in God's ἔργον ἀγαθόν.

Above all, however, the reference to Christ's adoption of μορφῆν δούλου λαβών (having taken the form of slave) echoes the theme of

²³ Χαράς (1:4; joy), κοινωνία (1:5; partnership), φρονεῖν (1:7a; consider), and ἔχειν με ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ ὑμᾶς (1:7b; have me in your heart), respectively correspond to χαρὰν (2:2a; joy), κοινωνία (2:1a; partnership), φρονῆτε (2:2b; and φρονοῦντες—2:2e; of one mind), and εἰ τις σπλάγχνα καὶ οἰκτιρμοὶ (2:1d; bowels of affection and sympathy).

work as it specifically exemplifies²⁴ the response which Paul was urging the Philippians to adopt as their participation in the perfection of God's ἔργον ἀγαθόν. By giving up his rightful claims, obeying and humbly sacrificing himself, Jesus exemplified the attitudes and actions which Paul exhorted the Philippians to adopt in 1:27–30, the same attitudes and actions that he underlined as derived from God's activity (cf. Asumang 2011:1–38; Eastman 2010:1–22; Gupta 2010:1–16; Heil 2010:88; Silva 2005:99; Wortham 1996:269–288). The reference to μορφήν δούλου λαβών certainly furthers the theme of slavery which, as already stated, is semantically related to the theme of work in the letter.

3.5. Obedience as ἔργον and λειτουργία in Philippians 2:12–18

The exhortations of Philippians 2:12–18 take up the concept of the obedience of Christ in 2:8 and practically applies its implications to the Philippians. The argument of the passage moves in three steps and all three steps are framed by the theme of the perfection of God's good work. In the first step (2:12–14), Paul urges the Philippians to obey by κατεργάζεσθε (thoroughly working out) their salvation. He then explains with a γάρ clause in 2:13 that God, 'who is at work (ἐνεργῶν) in you, enabling you both to will and to work (ἐνεργεῖν) for his good pleasure', makes this κατεργάζεσθε (thoroughly working out) inevitable. God's work within them thus causes and necessitates human work of obedience. Phrased another way, Paul envisaged that the Philippians' obedience through their rejection of grumblings and murmurings was an active manifestation of God's ἔργον ἀγαθόν (cf.,

²⁴ For an analysis of whether the passage primarily sets Jesus out as ethical Exemplar to be imitated, or rather as the grounds for Christian ethical behaviour, see Silva (2005:92–116). For the proposal that Paul parallels the Christ hymn with his experiences during the inaugural mission when the Church was first planted in Philippi, as recorded in Acts 16, see Hellermann (2010:85–102).

Wagner 2009:257–274; Ware 2005:248–249). The ‘striking verbal correspondence between 1:6 and 2:13’ (Silva 2005:120)²⁵ further makes the connection between 2:12–14 and the theme of perfection of God’s ἔργον ἀγαθὸν first introduced in 1:6 patent. As Ware (2005:249) rightly states, ‘The similarity of Philippians 2:12–13 to 1:5–6 is especially striking, in the notable way in which the activity of the Philippians and the activity of God in them are juxtaposed in each passage’.

In the second step of the argument (2:15–16a), Paul states that the ultimate goal of their obedience was that they become ἄμεμπτοι (faultless) in a sinful world, giving him grounds to boast at the ἡμέραν Χριστοῦ (day of Christ). Here, Paul does not explicitly use the ἔργον (work) or ἐπιτελέσει (perfect) terminology of 1:6. All the same, ἄμεμπτοι is semantically linked to ἐπιτελέσει (perfect) and so directly relates the thought here to God’s perfection of his work among the believers. As already indicated, in his prayer report in 1:10, Paul prayed that the perfection of which he was confident in 1:6 will be manifested in their being ἀπρόσκοποι (blameless), a word which is a semantic variant of ἄμεμπτοι (2:15; cf., BADG 52). Thus the thought of 2:15–16a directly matches the thought of the perfection of God’s good work in the thanksgiving-prayer report. The eschatological framing of ἄμεμπτοι (faultless) at the ἡμέραν Χριστοῦ (day of Christ) certainly makes this connection definite. The obedience of the Philippians was a manifestation of their participation in God’s work, the ultimate goal of which was their blamelessness or perfection at the day of Christ.

²⁵ The divine ἔργον and ἐν ὑμῖν of 1:6 correspond with the divine ἐνεργωῶν and ἐν ὑμῖν in 2:13; and the ὅτι of 1:6 corresponds with the γάρ of 2:13. Also the ἡμέρας Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ of 1:6 corresponds with ἡμέραν Χριστοῦ which later comes up in 2:16.

In the third step of the argument of the passage (2:16b–18), Paul offers a further motivation for the Philippians' obedience by appealing to his partnership with them. He indicates that he will boast at Christ's return, because the Philippians' faultlessness will indicate that his ἐκοπίασα (labour or toil to the point of exhaustion) has not been in vain. He further characterizes the partnership as a joint project of participation in an offering to God, the Philippians' contribution serving as the main sacrifice and λειτουργία τῆς πίστεως (service of their faith), and Paul's life as its accompanying libation. These verbal features directly echo the theme of God's work. As in 1:5–6, and in his proposition in 1:27–30, Paul stresses that God's good work of Christian existence in Philippi bound him and the Philippians together in an ongoing project which will only be perfected at the return of Christ (cf. Luter 1988:335–344; Ware 2005:243–244).

Two further comments regarding this third step are in order. To begin with, Paul's use of ἐκοπίασα (toil to the point of exhaustion) to describe his work is a stylistic variation of the ἔργον terminology (BADG 558). Specifically, it is most likely that Paul preferred to use κενὸν ἐκοπίασα (toil in vain) here in 2:16b, instead of employing the ἔργον terminology, because of his deliberate allusion to Isaiah 65:22–23 LXX. Isaiah 65:22–23 indicates that in the eschatological new heaven and new earth, God's people will rejoice in their τὰ ἔργα τῶν πόνων αὐτῶν παλαιώσουσιν οἱ δὲ ἐκλεκτοὶ μου οὐ κοπιήσουσιν εἰς κενὸν (their works and painful service, and will not toil in vain; cf., Isaiah 49:3–4 LXX; O'Brien, 1991:300). Paul likely alludes to this and thus opts to use ἐκοπίασα (toil in vain) rather than ἔργον terminology which pervades in the passage.

In addition, Paul's depiction of the Philippians' work as θυσία καὶ λειτουργία (sacrifice and service, or sacrificial service; so Heil

2010:101), though no doubt expressing the notion of the Philippians' participation in God's perfection of his good work, has also raised the question as to whether in this metaphor, Paul envisaged himself (so Ware 2005:271–272), or alternatively, the Philippians (so O'Brien 1991:310) as the priests officiating the sacrifice.

This question requiring a binary answer, however, misses the fundamental emphasis in 2:16b–18 on Paul's partnership with the Philippians. As he would later variously also express in 2:30, 3:3 and 4:18, Paul after all portrays the priestly service as part of their joint participation in the work of God. The question of which one of them was the officiating priest appears therefore not to have preoccupied the apostle. And given also that the term *θυσία καὶ λειτουργία* (sacrifice and service) is often employed in the LXX (e.g. Exod 28–39; Num 1–2; Ezek 40–46) to describe the priestly service, it is most likely that Paul portrays both himself and the Philippians as co-celebrant priests who together participate in the work of God. In the words of Garland (2006:227; cf. Borchert 2008:144; Miller 2010:11–23; Wendland 2010:141–147), 'The image recalls their partnership in the defence and confirmation of the gospel (1:7) and suggests that both he and they are making sacrificial offerings'.

3.6. ἔργον in Paul's Second Missionary Report in Philippians 2:19–30

The epistolary function of Philippians 2:19–30 is debated by scholars. Some regard it as resuming the missionary report of 1:12–26, this time commenting on two of Paul's immediate associates whose movements were of keen interest to the Philippians. Other scholars see the passage as a typical Pauline 'travelogue' which, for hortatory purposes, is placed at an unusual point of his letter (Culpepper 1980:349–358; Funk 1967:249–268; Silva 2005:134–135; Snyman 2005:289–307).

Regardless of the merits of the various proposed epistolary functions of the passage, one of its most prominent features is how the ἔργον terminology with its cognates pervades Paul's commendation of both Timothy and Epaphroditus. In this way, Paul presents these associates as exemplars of the attitudes and actions that he wanted the Philippians to adopt in their manifestation and partaking of God's ἔργον ἀγαθόν.

With regard to Paul's commendation of Timothy (2:19–24), the apostle asserts that in contrast to some who seek their own interest, Timothy was genuinely interested in the Philippians' welfare. In other words, Timothy exhibited the exact quality that Paul had earlier in 2:2–4 exhorted the Philippians to adopt as part of their participation in God's work (Asumang, 2012a, p. 33). Paul then affirms this commendation by vouching for Timothy's faithful service and partnership, that as a spiritual son Timothy had εδούλευσεν εἰς τὸ εὐαγγέλιον (2:22; slaved for the gospel) with Paul. As noted earlier, this description not only practicalized the designation of both Paul and Timothy as δούλοι Χριστοῦ (1:1; slaves of Christ) and underscores their modelling of Christ's example in taking the form of a slave (2:7); it also directly echoes the letter's theme on work. The verbal correspondence between πέποιθα δὲ ἐν Κυρίῳ (2:24; I am persuaded in the Lord) and πεποιθὼς αὐτὸ τοῦτο (1:6; being persuaded of the same) certainly supports the conclusion that Paul understood the service of Timothy and himself as manifestation of God's work (cf. Heil 2010:107).

In addition, the fact that Timothy slaved ὡς πατρί τέκνον σὺν ἐμοί (2:22; as father and son with me) associates Timothy's 'slavery' in the gospel with Paul's ἐκπόσιασα (2:16; toil to exhaustion) in the preceding paragraph, and similarly exemplifies the kind of attitudes and actions the Philippians were being urged to adopt as the manifestation of God's

good work among them (cf. Heil 2010:105; Holloway 2008:542–556; O'Brien 1991:325; Park 2007:128).

A similar framing of Paul's commendation of Epaphroditus with the theme of God's work follows in 2:25–30. Paul explicitly refers to Epaphroditus as συνεργὸν (2:25; co-worker) and λειτουργὸν τῆς χρείας μου (2:25; a servant of my needs). Heil (2010:108) is thus correct when he asserts that Epaphroditus 'is a partner with Paul in the fruitful "work" (ἔργου) of advancing the gospel (1:22), the same good "work" (ἔργον) God had begun in the audience (1:6)'. Like Paul, Epaphroditus was willing to be expended in unselfish service for Christ (Bockmuehl 1998:174). Indeed, Paul indicates that Epaphroditus 'came close to death for τὸ ἔργον Χριστοῦ—the work of Christ'—making up for the Philippians' λειτουργίας (services) towards the apostle (2:30).

The phrase ἔργον Χριστοῦ (work of Christ) in 2:30 is in particular interesting for it expresses the sufferings of Epaphroditus not as primarily Epaphroditus' work, but rather as part of Christ's work. In other words, 'ἔργον Χριστοῦ here in 2:30 describes in general terms the "work" of the gospel (cf. 1:5) to which the Philippians, Epaphroditus, and Paul were committed' (O'Brien 1991:342). Thus in his second missionary report, Paul uses his commendation of his co-workers as a foil for his paranaetic didactic purposes to exemplify his call upon the Philippians to pay heed to their participation in God's perfection of his ἔργον ἀγαθὸν in and among them.

3.7. κακοῦς ἐργάτας in Paul's polemics in Philippians 3:1-4:1

Philippians 3:1-4:1 engages another facet of the situational context behind the letter, namely, the dangers posed by the false teachers who threatened to derail the gospel. The passage itself raises several

contextual²⁶, textual²⁷ and literary-theological²⁸ questions, but its general outline is much more straightforward. Paul first lays a foundation for the chapter by employing rhetorically-charged polemics to denounce these false teachers who had most likely not yet arrived in Philippi, even though judging by its prominence and biting nature, Paul likely envisaged their arrival to be imminent (3:1–6). This is followed by 3:7–14 which, in contrast to the preceding passage, sets out an account of Paul's theological ambitions, beliefs, attitudes and practices, but in such a manner that it also parallels the Christ hymn of Philippians 2, counters the opponents' teaching and so presents Paul as exemplar to be emulated by the Philippians. The chapter concludes with an exhortation (3:15–4:1) applying this theology to the Philippians and evoking Paul's earlier proposition in 1:27–30 to urge them to live worthily of the gospel, looking forward to their final transformation at Christ's return. In effect then, this polemical chapter is conceptually in tandem with Paul's overall pastoral purpose for writing. The Philippians were to reject the false teachers and emulate Paul in their Christian existence - to 'stand firm in the Lord *in this way*' (4:1).

In its linguistic details, the second and third sections of the chapter are framed much more by commercial, athletic and civic metaphors²⁹ rather than the ἔργον terminology. However, in the first foundational passage (3:1–6), the apostle significantly employs the ἔργον

²⁶ See Fredrickson (2008:22–28), Grayston (1986:170–172), Nanos (2013:47–91), O'Brien (1991:353–355) and Tellbe (1995:97–121).

²⁷ See Black (1995:16–49), DeSilva (1994:27–54), Price (1987:253–290), Reed (1996:63–90), Reumann (2008) and Watson (1988:57–88).

²⁸ See Asumang (2012b:1–55), Garland (1985:141–173), Keown (2011:28–44), Lively (2010:35–44), Snyman (2006:259–283), Standhartinger (2008:417–435) and Still (2014:139–148).

²⁹ For commercial metaphors in Philippians, see Ogereau (2014). On the athletic imagery, see Asumang (2011:1–38), Arnold (2014) and Pfitzner (1967).

terminology to counter the false teachers and thus indicates the crucial role of the theme of work in addressing the situational context behind the letter.

Here is how Paul achieves this pastoral purpose. In 3:2, he triply labels the false teachers, most likely Judaizers, as τὸς κύνας (the dogs), οὓς κακοὺς ἐργάτας (the evil workers), and τὴν κατατομήν (the mutilators). Basically, these false teachers insisted that Gentile believers should also submit to ritual Mosaic laws on circumcision, observance of special food laws and holidays. In characterizing them as τὸς κύνας (the dogs), Paul was not seeking to be ‘derogatory’ (contra Heil 2010:118) or even ‘abusive’ (contra Fee 1995:290 n. 21). Rather, he was ironically reversing the Jewish rhetoric of the time which used the term to brand Gentiles as ritually unclean. Paul in other words recognised the demands of the Judaizers as ethnically motivated and employs this reversed rhetoric to insist that the Judaizers, and not Gentile believers, were ritually unclean dogs.³⁰ A similar reversed rhetoric characterises Paul’s labelling of the Judaizers as τὴν κατατομήν (the mutilators) (cf. DeSilva 1994:34; O’Brien 1991:357).

Given this literary rhetorical style and logic, it is reasonable to assume, and a number of scholars indeed do, that in also labelling the Judaizers with the crisp but potent characterisation as κακοὺς ἐργάτας (evil workers) Paul likewise adopts this reverse rhetoric to technically ‘refute the Judaizers’ claims that they were doing the works of the law (*erga*

³⁰ According to O’Brien (1991, p. 355), “‘Dogs’ and Gentiles in some contexts were almost synonymous... As a religious term it was applied by Jews to Gentiles or lapsed Jews who were ritually unclean and thus outside the covenant. Here in Phil 3:2 the dogs’ association with impurity and their being outside the people of God are the points of the comparison. But in an amazing reversal Paul asserts that it is the Judaizers who are to be regarded as Gentiles; they are “the dogs” who stand outside the covenant blessings’.

nomou; cf. Gal 3:10; 5:3; 6:13) (Silva 2005:147). Put another way, the Judaizers who claimed to be doing works to please God were in actual fact doing evil works which God detested. Indeed, this may well be 'a deliberate pun on the opponents' claim to be doing the so-called "works of the Law"' (Bockmuehl 1998:188; cf. Fee 1995:296; Garland 1985:168).

Alternatively, and judging by the parallels between Philippians 3:2 and 2 Corinthians 11:13, κακὸς ἐργάτας could be taken to be a stylistic variant of Paul's other characterisation of the Judaizers in 2 Corinthians 11:13 as ἐργάται δόλιοι (deceitful workers). If that is correct, it could be surmised that Paul was indicating that the missionary activities of the Judaizers (not their doctrine) was κακὸς (evil). In other words, κακὸς ἐργάτας was Paul's way of warning the Philippians to beware of the evil effects of the missionary activities of the Judaizers (Grayston 1986:171; Koester 1961:317–332; Martin 1976:125; Snider 2011:204).

Whether by κακὸς ἐργάτας Paul intended to use a technical reverse rhetoric or he functionally characterised the negative consequences of the missionary activities of the Judaizers as evil, this labelling resonates with the theme of God's good work in Philippians. This is demonstrated even more so by the structure of the passage in which each of the three labels in 3:2 is directly countered by an opposite in 3:3 (Asumang 2012b:35–38; Garland 1985:168–169). This structure indicates that κακὸς ἐργάτας is directly refuted by οἱ πνεύματι Θεοῦ λατρεύοντες (we worship or serve in God's Spirit). The word λατρεύοντες which is a synonymous cognate of λειτουργία (2:17) describes 'work for pay, be in servitude, and render cultic service' (BADG 587). It is used in the LXX to denote Levitical or priestly service, and elsewhere by Paul for general service rendered to God by His covenantal people (e.g. Rom 9:4). As Hess (1986:3.550) explains, λατρεύοντες describes 'the service

of God by the whole people and by the individual, both outwardly in the cultus and inwardly in the heart’.

Strathmann (1973:4.60) further clarifies that λατρεύοντες ‘involves the demand for right disposition of the heart and the demonstration of this in the whole of religious and moral conduct’. In effect, λατρεύοντες describes the worshipper’s total existence. Snider’s (2011:206; cf. Jobes 1995:183–191) insight is thus correct: ‘The characterisation in Phil 3:3 of true believers in general as *latreuontes*, then, is consistent for Paul—serving God in the *latreuō* sense involves a commitment of the heart that characterises the whole life. As a Christian, one is a servant-worshipper of the true God.’

In that case, the contrastive matching of κακὸς ἐργάτας with οἱ πνεύματι Θεοῦ λατρεύοντες in Philippians 3:2–3 indicates that Paul intentionally designates the Judaizers as κακὸς ἐργάτας so as to specifically characterise them as opposite to the Christian existence of Paul and the Philippians. Put differently, κακὸς ἐργάτας is used as counter to God’s ἔργον ἀγαθόν. It certainly evokes Paul’s earlier characterisation of his and the Philippians’ participation in God’s good work as λειτουργία (2:17; cf. 2:25, 30) and thus their rejection of the false teachers as worshipful service. The Philippians should take the danger of the Judaizers extremely seriously and βλέπετε (beware).

Another indication that Paul’s description of Christian existence in Philippians 3:3 directly juxtaposes it with the Judaizers’ evil work is the Trinitarian framing of 3:3. True believers, Paul says, worship (or serve) in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus. This Trinitarian framing of the passage depicts the activities of the Judaizers as derived from the flesh, whereas the service of Paul and the Philippians was divinely derived and directed (Asumang 2012b:1–55). After all, the Christian existence of the Philippians was initiated by God (1:6), maintained

through the enablement of the Spirit of Christ (1:19, 27), retained through their service in the Spirit of God (3:2–3) and would be perfected by God at the day of Christ (Heil 2010:119). This was in sharp contrast with the Judaizers' evil work. It is on this basis that Paul proceeds in the rest of the chapter to explain how his own Christian existence exemplified this truth (3:7–14) and exhort the Philippians to practise it (3:15–4:1).

3.8. συνεργῶν in Philippians 4:2–20

The concluding chapter of Philippians is made up of a number of apparently discrete passages with little discernible connection between them, a feature that is not uncommon with the final sections of Paul's letters. Going by the literary markers, three sub-sections are apparent. It begins with a brief but direct exhortation of two influential leaders in the fellowship, namely, Euodia and Syntyche, to settle their differences and pursue unity (4:2–3). This is followed by a general paranaesis which urges the fellowship to rejoice and pursue God's peace through eschewing angst and anxiety (4:4–9).³¹ The letter finally concludes, rather uniquely for Paul's letters, with a 'thank-you note' in 4:10–20³²

³¹The emphatic Χαίρετε (rejoice) with which 4:4–9 begins, the passage's general paranaetic flavour, and the closer affinity of 4:2–3 with the preceding chapters, may suggest that though 4:4–9 also directly addresses the situation in Philippi, its focus is slightly different from that of 4:2–3. Alternatively, Heil (2010:142) divides the chapter into two sub-sections, namely 4:1–5 and 4:6–20.

³² There are enough verbal correspondences between 4:10–20 and the thanksgiving-prayer report of 1:3–11 to support the rejection of the theory that the former was a separate note (cf. Silva 2005:2000–202). To be precise, θεῶ μου (1:3), χαρᾶς (1:4), κοινωνία (1:5; and συγκοινωνούς μου 1:7b), and φρονεῖν (1:7) respectively correspond to θεός μου (4:19), Ἐχάρην (4:10a), συγκοινωνήσαντές μου (4:14), and φρονεῖν (4:10b). These correspondences also support the likelihood that a connection exists between the theme of work in 1:6 and 4:10–20, perhaps through lexical pointers such as ισχύω ἐν τῷ ἐνδυναμοῦντί με (4:13; I am strong in the One who empowers

in which Paul acknowledges receipt of the gift and reflects on its theological significance to their partnership in the gospel mission (cf., Briones 2011:47–69; Peterman 1991:261–270; Peterman 1997).

Given that the anxiety and disquiet which 4:4–9 addresses likely derived from the same situation engaged in 4:2–3, some commentators (e.g. Silva 2005:191; Hansen 2009) reasonably divide the chapter into two sections, 4:2–9 and 4:10–20. Philippians 4:2–3 thus lays the foundation for Paul’s other exhortations in the rest of the chapter, at least its first half. It also has several linguistic and conceptual links with the body of the letter, as it specifically urges Euodia and Syntyche to adopt the same attitudes and actions which are previously urged upon the readers (2:1–5), typified by Christ (2:6–11) and exemplified in Paul and his other co-workers (2:17–30).

These features indicate that though its exhortation is briefly stated, Philippians 4:2–3 plays a crucial function in Paul’s pastoral strategy. It goes to the heart on Paul’s demand of the Philippians to adopt the requisite attitudes and actions which would ensure that God’s good work in and among them is perfected. Euodia and Syntyche were to

[B]ury their differences by adopting the ‘same mind-set’, which in this case as in the immediately preceding imperative, is qualified ‘*in the Lord.*’ Here is the evidence that we are not dealing with a personal matter, but with ‘doing the gospel’ in Philippi. Having ‘the same mind-set *in the Lord*’ has been specifically spelled out in the preceding paradigmatic narratives where Christ (2:6–11) has humbled himself by taking the ‘form of a slave’ and thus becoming obedient unto death on a cross, and Paul (3:4–14) has expressed his

me). This phrase in 4:13 certainly evokes the thought of 2:12–13 which as argued is directly related to the theme of the perfection of God’s ἔργον ἀγαθόν.

longing to know Christ, especially through participation in his sufferings so as to be conformed into the same cruciform lifestyle. The way such a 'mind-set' takes feet is humbly 'looking out for the interests of others' within the believing community (2:3–4)' (Fee 1995:392; his emphases cf. O'Brien 1991:478–480).

Given that 4:2–3 plays this crucial pastoral function in the whole letter, it is worthy of note that Paul explicitly identifies Euodia and Syntyche as among his *συνεργῶν* (co-workers). While this label is not unique in itself, it nevertheless unequivocally resonates with the theme of work in the letter. It should remind the two leaders that like Epaphroditus, Paul and Timothy, they were workers in God's project of Christian existence in Philippi and so ought to adopt the attitudes and actions commensurate with that. Indeed, they had previously done so when they *ἐν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ συνήθλησάν μοι μετὰ* (4:3; struggled with me in the gospel), a statement which appears to deliberately hark back to 1:27 where Paul urges the Philippians to strive together in the gospel, side by side in one mind. Euodia and Syntyche participated in the good work which God had begun in Philippi and are now being urged through this exhortation to resolve their differences and resume that work. The final chapter of Philippians thus engages the pastoral issue of Paul's partnership in the gospel with the Philippians as part of God's work, and impresses upon the leaders to ensure that it was not derailed through their conflict, whatever its cause.

Paul's pointed identification of a mediator in 4:3 as *γνήσιε σύζυγε* (loyal yokefellow) to help resolve the conflict buttresses this emphasis in the letter that what was at stake was God's good work in Philippi and that the resolution of the differences was an essential part of perfecting it. Several speculations have been made as to the specific identity of *γνήσιε σύζυγε* (loyal yokefellow), but that line of enquiry has rightly been deemed by recent scholarship as 'unnecessary' (O'Brien 1991, pp.

480-481). The possibility that Σύζυγε was a proper name of a Church leader within the fellowship or one nearby cannot be completely ruled out even though it would have been extremely remarkable within the literary context for Σύζυγε to represent a proper name, given the coincidence of the name and the function being commissioned for him to play. Such a ‘name’ was after all unknown (BDAG 954) and in any case, as Fee (1995:393n.44) points out, ‘the qualifier “genuine” almost totally disqualifies it as a proper noun’.

An alternative and more acceptable interpretation is that Paul may well be using a ‘nickname’ for a well-known and influential person, perhaps ‘an associate of Paul well-known within the Philippian community’ (Heil 2010:145; cf. Verhoef 1998:209–219; Carls 2001:161–182). In that case, such a moniker would have been apt indeed. The word σύζυγε was after all used to describe fellow-soldiers, gladiators, or co-slaves sharing the same burdens (BDAG 954). In this respect σύζυγε could be a variant of συνήθλησάν (4:3; co-strugglers) or συνεργῶν (4:3; co-workers). Philippians 4:2–3 thus brings together very important personalities with the gifts and responsibilities for partaking in God’s work of fostering peace in the fellowship.

Even so, and within a passage in which he deliberately ‘names, names’, Paul may well have had an additional pastoral purpose for using σύζυγε to identify the mediator. That pastoral purpose was the fact that the task being directed to γνήσιε σύζυγε (loyal yokefellow) was essentially the same task that the whole congregation was being urged to shoulder – that is, to take their share in adopting the attitudes and actions commensurate with their participation in the perfection of God’s good work. Γνήσιε σύζυγε (loyal yokefellow) thus no doubt identifies a specific mediator, but it secondarily indicates that every believer in Philippi was also being called upon to show the genuineness of their

loyalty in sharing in the work of peace. It was 'in effect Paul's way of inviting the various members of the church to prove themselves loyal partners in the work of the gospel' (Silva 2005:193). In this way the theme of the perfection of God's good work acts as a foundation for the exhortations in the final chapter of Philippians.

3.9. Summary of exegetical findings

It would be an exaggeration to claim that the concept of work acts as the uniting theme of Philippians. It does not. All the same, the above exegeses have demonstrated that lexemes and morphemes allied to that concept span the whole letter, and run in parallel with several other themes. Moreover, the theme of work is not incidental to Paul's pastoral strategy, but prominently features in Paul's direct pastoral engagement of the *sitz im leben* behind the letter. In so doing the theme of work underscores the literary integrity of Philippians.

Even though implicitly introduced through Paul's self-designation of himself and Timothy as δούλοι Χριστοῦ (1:1; slaves of Christ), the theme explicitly commences within the thanksgiving report where Paul expresses his confidence that God who began ἔργον ἀγαθὸν in and among the Philippians will perfect it by the day of Christ. That confidence and the prayer which it immediately generates indicates that by ἔργον ἀγαθὸν Paul had in mind God's all-encompassing project in the Philippians' Christian existence in Philippi, namely, their spiritual rebirth, growth, sanctification, maturation, corporate witness in Philippi and eventual transformation at Christ's return. It includes not just the inward spiritual transformation of the Philippians, but also its social consequence and the Philippians' synergistic active participation in it.

Subsequent passages explicitly use the ἔργον terminology, its cognates and other terms within its semantic domain to demonstrate this all-

encompassing nature of God's project. So, for example, the theme of the perfection of God's ἔργον ἀγαθὸν is reflected in the exhortations urging adoption of appropriate actions and attitudes towards achieving unity of fellowship and steadfastness in witness in the face of persecution (1:12–2:11). It is also evidenced in the Philippians' obedience which is stimulated and energised by God's ἔργον in them (2:12–18), and in the examples of Paul and his co-workers' sacrificial service (2:19–30).

In chapter three, the false teachers whose possibly imminent arrival in Philippi was one of the triggers for the letter, are depicted as κακοὺς ἐργάτας (evil workers), in direct contrast to ἡμεῖς (we) who οἱ πνεύματι Θεοῦ λατρεύοντες (serve by the Spirit of God). This contrast directly pits the evil work of the false teachers in opposition to the Philippians' worshipful service of God. The false teachers worked against God's ἔργον ἀγαθὸν, and so the Philippians are exhorted to regard their resistance of these teachers as their participation in God's perfection of his good work.

The final chapter similarly engages the pastoral issue of Paul's partnership in the gospel with the Philippians, underlying it as part of God's good work. He accordingly impresses upon the disputing leaders who are explicitly labelled as συνεργῶν (co-workers), and the rest of the congregation identified as γνήσιε σύζυγε (loyal yokefellow), to share in this work by adopting attitudes and actions that facilitate its perfection.

The theme of work in Philippians thus incorporates four theological ideas, namely, (a) it describes God's gracious ongoing inner transformation of the believers, (b) its practical social and moral out-working in the unity and witness of the fellowship in Philippi, even within the context of their persecution (c) their determined rejection of

the false teachers who perverted the Gospel and (d) their continued missional partnership with Paul. Together, these facets constitute God's ἔργον ἀγαθὸν which Paul was confident will be perfected by the day of Christ. Furthermore, the theme addressed the situational context behind Philippians and serves as another thematic cord which binds the letter's units together. It thus contributes to laying the partition theory to rest.

4. Conclusion

As Paul does in most of his letters, his thanksgiving-prayer report in his letter to the Philippians broaches several literary theological themes which he then employs in the rest of the letter to address the pastoral issues in the congregation. This article has demonstrated that Paul's expression of confidence that 'the one who began a good work in and among you will bring it to perfection by the day of Jesus Christ' (Phil 1:6) constitutes one of these integrative themes. In the subsequent argument of the letter, Paul stresses that the perfection of God's good work involves not only God's inner transformation of the Philippians, but also its moral and social consequences as part of the believers' Christian existence in Philippi. The Philippians are thus urged to be active participants in this good work by adopting the specific attitudes and actions that would ensure that this perfection proceeds until Christ's return.

A number of important implications naturally follow this conclusion. Literarily, it endorses the current scholarly consensus on the literary integrity of Philippians. Theologically, the theme of work in Philippians underscores the paradoxical complexities in Paul's theology of the merits of 'work'. On the one hand, Paul was convinced that 'by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast'.

Salvation in its entirety is thus the work of God. Yet on the other hand, it is also true for Paul that ‘we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them’ (Eph 2:8–10; ESV).

The two lines of logic are therefore perfectly compatible in Paul's theological reflections, even though New Testament scholars have always debated as to the exact nature of their intersection. It would appear, based on the foregoing, that one of the unique contributions of Paul's letter to the Philippians, certainly in terms of its contribution to the construction of Pauline theology, is how it demonstrates the manner in which the apostle systematically explicated and applied this paradoxically complex theology of ‘work’ to address a specific socio-pastoral problem.

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