

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-04637-5 - Corinthian Wisdom, Stoic Philosophy, and the Ancient Economy

Tomothy A. Brookins

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1

INTRODUCTION

In at least one respect, the subject of this book is one on which scholars have shared practically universal agreement: “wisdom” (σοφία), as it was understood by some in the Corinthian church, was critical to the problem of division that threatened to topple that fledgling church into ruin (1 Corinthians 1–4).¹

But over the last 200 years, this subject has also made cause for great disagreement, as scholarly assessments of this wisdom have varied widely. (1) In 1831, F. C. Baur published his programmatic essay arguing that the church’s four putative “parties” (1 Cor 1:10–12) could be reduced to two: Paul’s Hellenistic-Jewish faction, which extolled grace, and Peter’s Palestinian Jewish faction, which extolled the Law and human wisdom.² (2) From the early to mid-twentieth century, wisdom came to be understood in terms of Greek Gnosticism, whereby certain ones in the church were thought to have demeaned the material realm and to have

¹ This has been the common judgment from one generation of interpreters to the next: e.g., A. T. Robertson and A. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, ICC (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1914), 15; F. Grosheide, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 42; J. C. Hurd, *The Origin of 1 Corinthians* (New York: Seabury, 1965), 76, 77; R. Funk, “Word and Word in 1 Cor 2:6–16,” in *Language, Hermeneutic, and Word of God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 277; C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1971), 275–6; G. Fee, *1 Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 64; S. M. Pogoloff, *Logos and Sophia: The Rhetorical Situation of 1 Corinthians*, SBLDS 134 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1992), 105; R. E. Ciampa and B. S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, Pillar (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 120; cf. 20–1; M. T. Finney, *Honour and Conflict in the Ancient World*, LINTS 460 (London: T & T Clark, 2011), 80. Otherwise, M. V. P. Branick (“Source and Redaction Analysis of 1 Corinthians 1–3,” *JBL* 101 [1982]: 251–69) has stood alone in finding no connection between wisdom and the divisions.

² F. C. Baur, “Die Christuspartei in der korinthischen Gemeinde, der Gegensatz des paulinischen und petrinischen Christentums in der ältesten Kirche, der Apostel Petrus in Rom,” *Tübinger Zeitschrift für Theologie* 4 (1831): 61–206; followed by “The Epistles to the Corinthians,” in *Paulus, der Apostle Jesu Christi* (Stuttgart: Becker & Muller, 1866), 268–320.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-04637-5 - Corinthian Wisdom, Stoic Philosophy, and the Ancient Economy

Tomothy A. Brookins

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 Introduction

boasted in the spiritual salvation ostensibly achieved through baptism.³ (3) Beginning in the final third of the twentieth century, scholars began to liken Corinthian wisdom to either “over-realized eschatology” or the wisdom of Hellenistic Judaism, both of which could be described, if not in terms of Gnosticism, at least in terms of incipient or “proto-gnosticism.”⁴ (4) Also gaining traction during this period – though still continuing as the dominant perspective today – were social-historical theories that connected the Corinthians’ wisdom with elite, and especially rhetorical, education.⁵

³ First, W. Lütgert, *Freiheitspredigt und Schwarmgeister in Korinth* (Göttingen: C. Bertelsman, 1908); followed by a few others, but famously revived by W. Schmithals, *Die Gnosis in Korinth: Eine Untersuchung zu den Korintherbriefen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1969); ET, *Gnosticism in Corinth: An Investigation of the Letters to the Corinthians* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971).

⁴ Over-realized eschatology: A. C. Thiselton, “Realized Eschatology at Corinth,” *NTS* 24 (1978): 510–26; reaffirmed but qualified in *ibid.*, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), esp. 40. Hellenistic-Judaism: Richard Horsley, “Pneumatikos vs. Psychikos: Distinctions of Spiritual Status among the Corinthians,” *HTR* 69 (1976): 269–88; “Wisdom of Words and Words of Wisdom in Corinth,” *CBQ* 39 (1977): 224–39; “How Can Some of You Say That There Is No Resurrection of the Dead? Spiritual Elitism in Corinth,” *NovT* 20 (1978): 203–31; “Consciousness and Freedom among the Corinthians (1 Cor 8–10),” *CBQ* 40 (1978): 574–89; “Gnosis in Corinth: 1 Cor 8:1–6,” *NTS* 27 (1981): 32–51; as well as his commentary, *1 Corinthians*, 33–36; and his collection of essays, *Wisdom and Spiritual Transcendence at Corinth: Studies in First Corinthians* (Eugene: Cascade, 2008); also B. A. Pearson, “Hellenistic-Jewish Wisdom Speculation and Paul,” in R. L. Wilken (ed.), *Aspects of Wisdom in Judaism and Early Christianity* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1975), 43–66; and J. A. Davis, *Wisdom and Spirit: An Investigation of 1 Cor 1:18–3:20 against the Background of Jewish Sapiential Traditions in the Greco-Roman Period* (New York: University Press of America, 1984). Jerome Murphy-O’Connor demonstrates just how closely the “over-realized eschatology” and Hellenistic-Jewish theses relate in labeling the wise Corinthians “Spirit people”: *Paul: A Critical Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 275ff; and *Paul: His Story* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 163–5.

⁵ J. Munck was a harbinger: “Menigheden uden Partier,” *Dansk Teologisk Tidsskrift* 15 (1952): 215–33; ET, “The Church without Factions,” in *Paul and the Salvation of Mankind* (London: SCM, 1959), 135–67; but the thesis was more fully developed beginning with B. Winter, “Philo and Paul among the Sophists: A Hellenistic Jewish and a Christian Response,” PhD dissertation, Macquarie University (1988); published in *Paul and Philo among the Sophists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); 2d edn. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); others taking the rhetorical line have included: Pogoloff, *Logos and Sophia*; A. Clarke, *Secular and Christian Leadership in Corinth: A Socio-Historical and Exegetical Study of 1 Corinthians 1-6* (New York: Brill, 1993), 102–7; D. Litfin, *St. Paul’s Theology of Proclamation: 1 Corinthians 1-4 and Greco-Roman Rhetoric*, SNTSMS 79 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); and L. L. Welborn, *Politics and Rhetoric in the Corinthian Epistles* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997). D. Martin (*Corinthian Body* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995]) sees the Corinthians as having knowledge of “popular philosophy” bordering on elite-level education (pp. 61–68), but he also finds in them an obsession with the high status associated with rhetoric (pp. 47–66). Studies focusing on social conventions more generally include: P. Marshall, *Enmity in*

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-04637-5 - Corinthian Wisdom, Stoic Philosophy, and the Ancient Economy

Tomothy A. Brookins

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

3

Of these trends, the first two have been effectively demolished.⁶ Baur's thesis has long been regarded as reductive, if at all accurate. Gnosticism, as was shown in the 1970s, apparently did not exist before the early or mid-second century, much less in Paul's day.⁷ Moreover, interpretations of the third sort have been blackened by association. In their recent review of Corinthians scholarship, Edward Adams and David Horrell subsume under one heading theses based on "religious and philosophical parallels," which include not only the Gnostic thesis but also theses related to Hellenistic Judaism, Greco-Roman philosophy, and popular philosophical thought.⁸ The difficulty they find with such theories reflects a common sentiment at present: "When parallels are found in Gnosticism, Hellenistic Judaism, Stoicism, Cynicism, Epicureanism, and so on, we are bound at least to ask whether the Corinthians can ever be clearly located in relation to one movement or another."⁹ This objection, sensible as it seems, has generally led in either of two directions. Many scholars, bracketing the question of the Corinthians' wisdom, have now shifted focus from the putative background *behind* the letter to the task of examining Paul's own side of the conversation – what *his* theology of wisdom was, what kind of rhetoric he used in treating the exigencies, and so on. The second solution has been to address the Corinthians' wisdom, but with the understanding that it cannot be characterized by any single system of thought: it is rather the wisdom acquired from elite education and therefore must pertain to *rhetorical* eloquence or sophistry, not any readily definable set of religious or philosophical beliefs. Both of these

Corinth: Social Conventions in Paul's Relations with the Corinthians, WUNT 2:23 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1987); and J. K. Chow, *Patronage and Power: A Study of Social Networks in Corinth*, JSNTSup 75 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1992).

⁶ Even if their specters still show themselves from time to time. Baur's thesis has been revived and further elaborated in recent years by Michael Goulder in "σοφία in Corinthians," *NIS* 37 (1991): 516–34; and *Paul and the Competing Mission in Corinth* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2001). One still finds mention of "Gnosticism" as well: e.g., M. Taiwo, *Paul's Rhetoric in 1 Corinthians 10:29b-30* (Saarbrücken: Müller, 2008), 54; and G. Theissen, "Social Conflicts in the Corinthian Correspondence: Further Remarks on J. J. Meggitt, *Paul, Poverty and Survival*," *JSNT* (2003): 389–90; cf. T. E. Klutz, "Re-Reading 1 Corinthians after *Rethinking 'Gnosticism'*," *JSNT* 26 (2003): 193–216.

⁷ Credited with the exposé is Edwin M. Yamauchi, in *Pre-Christian Gnosticism* (Grand Rapids; London: Eerdmans, 1973); and "Pre-Christian Gnosticism Reconsidered a Decade Later," in *Pre-Christian Gnosticism: A Survey of the Proposed Evidences* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 187–249.

⁸ E. Adams and D. Horrell, *Christianity at Corinth: The Quest for the Pauline Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 16–23. Studies to note here include the following – on Epicurean philosophy: G. Tomlin, "Christians and Epicureans in 1 Corinthians," *JSNT* 68 (1997): 51–72 – on Cynic philosophy: F. G. Downing, *Cynics, Paul, and the Pauline Churches* (London: Routledge, 1998) – on Stoic philosophy, see later in the book.

⁹ Adams and Horrell, *Christianity at Corinth*, 22.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-04637-5 - Corinthian Wisdom, Stoic Philosophy, and the Ancient Economy

Tomothy A. Brookins

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 Introduction

approaches have reinforced the recent trend of widening investigation to examination of the broader social milieu and consideration of the *general* secular attitudes that the Corinthians might have imbibed from it. Accordingly, most would now consider attempts to locate the Corinthians' wisdom in relation to particular systems of thought to be beyond the pale of what is currently acceptable.

Few, if any, would deny that these trends have marked a significant advance from the ideas of Baur and proponents of the Gnostic thesis. Yet, it should be asked whether the flow of present scholarship is one simply to be *entered into*, or whether – as at any juncture in the history of interpretation – it too may be in need of some redirection. To be sure, social-historical approaches to the text will remain indispensable for a full appreciation of what is taking place in 1 Corinthians. But such approaches, I hope to show, need not lead us to the conclusion that the Corinthians' wisdom cannot be understood primarily in terms of particular systems of thought (controversial as that may sound), nor to the now dominant perspective that the Corinthians' wisdom is best understood in terms of Greco-Roman rhetoric or sophistry.

In the light of present circumstances, the thesis proposed on the following pages, in many respects, appears to buck the trend. Nonetheless it is a thesis that, at least in inchoate form, has precedent as old as any and, once an opportunity has been given for the full breadth of evidence to be assessed, I hope, will be recognized among the most cogent proposals to be forwarded to date, accounting as it does for both a broader range of the internal evidence of 1 Corinthians on the one hand and the social situation of first-century Corinth and its church community on the other. Without denying the role played by social stratification and other secular social forces, I argue that the divisive “wisdom” of the Corinthians, *qua* wisdom, can be accounted for as a *Christian development of Stoic philosophy*, arguably without remainder.¹⁰ Conspicuous in

¹⁰ Earlier articulations of this thesis have generally been limited to select passages within the letter. Stoic connections in 3:21, 3:22, 4:8, and 6:12 are noted as far back as J. B. Lightfoot (*Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul* [London: Macmillan, 1895], 195, 200) and J. Weiss (*Der erste Korintherbrief* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1910], 89–91, 157–9). R. Grant (“The Wisdom of the Corinthians,” in *The Joy of Study* [New York: Macmillan, 1951], 51–55) believed the Corinthians were self-styled Stoic-Cynic wise men. S. Stowers (“A ‘Debate’ over Freedom: 1 Corinthians 6:12–20,” in E. Ferguson (ed.), *Christian Teaching: Studies in Honor of Lemoine G. Lewis* [Abilene: Abilene Christian University, 1981], 59–71) says the Corinthian slogans of 6:12, 13, 18 are to be seen against the background of “a popular form of Cynic and Stoic ethics” (p. 67). M. Lahey (*Image and Glory of God: 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 as a Case Study in Bible, Gender and Hermeneutics*, LNTS 418 [London: T & T Clark, 2010], 80) assumes the presence of an underlying Stoic

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-04637-5 - Corinthian Wisdom, Stoic Philosophy, and the Ancient Economy

Tomothy A. Brookins

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

most of the problems in the letter, this perspective has been adopted among a small but influential minority in the church. While they have not committed to Stoicism slavishly, they are nonetheless deeply indebted to its discourse and superstructure for their interpretation of Paul's message.

The lack of attention this thesis has received over the years owes, I think, less to a dearth of evidence than it does to the irresistible draft of the collective scholarly agenda, which, though set by a few, sweeps nearly all into its powerful current. For some fifty years prior to the ascendancy of social-historical approaches, NT scholarship exhibited an all-time low in interest for how Greek philosophy might illuminate the text,¹¹ which meant that Stoicism received little attention in investigations of 1 Corinthians.¹² At the end of that period, when the Gnostic thesis suffered its decoronation and social-historical approaches were presented as a sort of replacement, all theses that might have been supported on the basis of comparative religious or philosophical material were collectively crushed, with scarce regard for their independent merits. This has allowed what little treatment the Stoic thesis has received in recent years to fall through the cracks: the thesis has been passed over *on principle* rather than by any sort of direct rebuttal. With "religious" and "philosophical" theses out of the picture, the "rhetorical" thesis then seemed the natural road to take. This direction seemed to be confirmed by a simultaneous shift of opinion regarding first-century Corinth, namely that it was

perspective in several Corinthian catchwords (2:6, 10; 3:1) and slogans (6:12a/10:23a; 6:13a; 8:4, 8). M. Pascuzzi (*Ethics, Ecclesiology, and Church Discipline* [Rome: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1997]) argues that the problem in 1 Corinthians 5–6 was influenced by the Stoic view that incest was "indifferent." R. Hays ("Conversion of the Imagination," *NTS* 45 [1999]: 391–412) sees the Corinthian position as a hybrid of Stoicism, Cynicism, and charismatic fervor. A. J. Malherbe ("Determinism and Free Will in Paul: The Argument of 1 Cor 8 and 9," in Troels Engberg-Pedersen (ed.), *Paul in His Hellenistic Context* [London: T & T Clark, 1995; London: Continuum, 2004], 231–55) understands the Corinthians' "knowledge" and denigration of the "weak" in Stoic terms. A. Garcilazo (*The Corinthian Dissenters and the Stoics* [New York: Peter Lang, 2007]) notes a number of texts in which Stoicism rears its head, but focuses on the denial of the resurrection in 15:12–58. T. Paige offers the closest thing to a full treatment of the letter, but his analysis is limited to a single article: "Stoicism, *Eleutheria* and Community at Corinth," in M. J. Wilkins and T. Paige (eds.), *Worship, Theology and Ministry in the Early Church* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1992), 180–93.

¹¹ See A. J. Malherbe, "Graeco-Roman Religion and Philosophy and the New Testament," in E. J. Epp and G. W. McRae (eds.), *The New Testament and Its Modern Interpreters* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 3–26; and "Hellenistic Moralists and the New Testament," *ANRW* 26.1:267–333.

¹² Of those studies noted earlier, only Robert Grant ("The Wisdom of the Corinthians") wrote during this period, and he emphasized a *pre-Christian Jewish appropriation* of the Greek philosophical categories.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-04637-5 - Corinthian Wisdom, Stoic Philosophy, and the Ancient Economy

Tomothy A. Brookins

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 Introduction

“Roman, not Greek” (again serving to shunt aside theories related to Greek religion or philosophy). With that, the new agenda for Corinthian studies was set: as we hear in the current literature, the divisions of the Corinthians were “social, not theological” in nature, their wisdom was that of “rhetoric, not philosophy,” and their city was “Roman, not Greek.” Next to such sharp dichotomies, the Stoic thesis has been a nonstarter. As it is, one either follows the consensus willingly or is dragged.

Perhaps the current consensus has also stemmed from our despair at the great diversity of meanings that σοφ- language was capable of carrying in the first century. Such difficulties are not to be denied. Yet, the corollary observation that Paul’s discussion of “wisdom” in 1 Corinthians 1–4, too, admits of a wide variety of usages,¹³ and wisdom must therefore be nonspecific, seems to involve a non sequitur. Arguably, it confuses the *occasion behind* the letter on the one hand, and Paul’s *ad hoc response to it* on the other. Indeed, much could be clarified in Corinthian studies if we would take more seriously the (widely accepted) methodological observation that *not* everything Paul says constitutes the antithesis of some opposite position held by his “opponents,” as if the text were an immaculately polished mirror. Rather, historical occasions act as *springboards* for Paul’s theologizing: he begins with a *particular* set of circumstances – and many have supposed, in 1 Corinthians, with a particular kind of wisdom – and then expatiates more broadly on “human wisdom” in all its dangerous forms. Just how this set of historical circumstances might be isolated if not through “mirror-reading,” however, will have to be considered in our present investigation.

My main aim here is to provide the first sustained treatment for the Stoic thesis, assessing 1 Corinthians from beginning to end,¹⁴ with conscientious attention to methodology, and – marking an advance from the old Gnostic thesis – *within proper social and economic context*. This requires special attention to a broad range of counter theses, most of all the new rhetorical one. As we shall see in Chapter 2, the rhetorical thesis has been taken for granted on the word of a few dominating monographs;

¹³ For the varied meanings of σοφία within this discourse and a guess at their meanings, see J. D. G. Dunn, *1 Corinthians* (Sheffield Academic, 1995; T & T Clark, 2004), 43.

¹⁴ In spite of those few earlier studies that challenged the unity of 1 Corinthians (J. Weiss, *The History of Primitive Christianity* [New York: K. W. Wilson-Enckson, 1937], 356–7; J. Hering, *The First Epistle of Saint Paul to the Corinthians* [London: Epworth, 1962], xiii–xv; and W. Schmithals, “Die Korintherbrief als Briefsammlung,” *ZNW* 64 [1973]: 87–113), the consensus since Margaret Mitchell’s *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation: An Exegetical Investigation of the Language and Composition of 1 Corinthians* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993) has been overwhelmingly in favor of the letter’s full integrity. See Finney, *Honour and Conflict in the Ancient World*, 69, for recent scholars who have taken this position.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-04637-5 - Corinthian Wisdom, Stoic Philosophy, and the Ancient Economy

Tomothy A. Brookins

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

though a closer, and fuller, look at the evidence reveals that their case finds far less support in the ancient sources than recent literature has suggested. Chapter 3 canvasses the state of the issue with regard to methodology and attempts on this basis to distill a set of methodological principles for the present pursuit. In Chapter 4, I undertake an investigation of the Corinthian social world, addressing especially questions related to the socioeconomic configuration of the Corinthian church, the religio-cultural character of their city, and potential philosophical influences within the community. Chapter 5 sets forth the Stoic thesis, with an eye not simply to 1 Corinthians 1–4 – the usual locus of attention – but rather to the *pattern* of issues found throughout the letter as a *whole*. Many observations will have been noted in previous studies,¹⁵ but it will also become apparent that past studies have left some ponderable stones unturned. Chapter 6 ties together the loose ends, attempting to answer how the present thesis lines up with insights from other studies, past and present. In the end, the composite evidence should tell a different story from that told in recent years: the “wise man” among the Corinthians is less the “sophist” than he is the “Stoic.”

¹⁵ In such cases, I cite the relevant literature.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-04637-5 - Corinthian Wisdom, Stoic Philosophy, and the Ancient Economy

Tomothy A. Brookins

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2

**RHETORIC VERSUS PHILOSOPHY
AND 1 CORINTHIANS**

Long before the first scholars showed us the parallels between 1 Corinthians and Philo's brand of Hellenistic-Judaism, and still before anyone sought to convince us of Gnosticism in Corinth, many interpreters were pointing to a different form of wisdom as the source of the Corinthians' troubles – the Greco-Roman rhetorical-philosophical tradition.¹ Now, nearly a century later, we are said to have come full circle. The Gnostic and Hellenistic-Jewish theses have been found either impossible or inadequate, and we have arrived back at rhetoric.

Since the new rhetorical thesis hit the presses in force in the early 1990s, few have expressed doubt as to its conclusions. In the first place, it was immediately heralded as a retrieval of the old and widely accepted "rhetorical" thesis that had circulated among scholars prior to the middle of the twentieth century, when it was temporarily – and wrongfully – eclipsed by the Gnostic and Hellenistic-Jewish arguments. Moreover, rhetorical wisdom – closely associated with high social status in Greco-Roman antiquity – has seemed to connect naturally with the insights made in the 1970s and 1980s (though still considered basically valid) by Gerd Theissen, Wayne Meeks, and others regarding social stratification in the Corinthian church. Add to this our recent rediscovery of ancient rhetorical theory and its warm reception by biblical scholars in the form of rhetorical criticism of the NT, and the rhetorical thesis appears a perfect fit for the times. Indeed, current conditions tell us that the rhetorical thesis is here to stay.²

Despite this apparent security, the rhetorical thesis has some weaknesses that have yet to be given close attention. First, while exponents have been quick to remind us that their thesis is an old one, they have also

¹ Lightfoot, *Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul*, 170; Weiss, *Der erste Korintherbrief*, 23; U. Wilckens, "Σοφία, σοφός, σοφίζω," *TDNT* 7:522, recalling the consensus of older scholarship.

² Though we have met with occasional dissenters: e.g., R. D. Anderson, *Rhetorical Theory and Paul*, CBET 18 (Leuven: Peeters, 1999), 245–76.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-04637-5 - Corinthian Wisdom, Stoic Philosophy, and the Ancient Economy

Tomothy A. Brookins

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Rhetoric versus philosophy and 1 Corinthians*

9

been suspiciously reticent as to the fact that, in the older treatments, philosophy had been given an important place alongside – or even prominence over – rhetoric. Duane Litfin, for instance, tells us that “until recent times exegetes *consistently* interpreted the phrase σοφία λόγου (1.17) with *primary reference* to Greco-Roman rhetoric.”³ Here he footnotes, among other sources, Ulrich Wilckens’s article from *TDNT*, whom he quotes as saying that “most exegetes” have held the rhetorical explanation to be the “customary interpretation.” Turning to Wilckens’s article, however, we find that Litfin’s statement does not give us an entirely accurate perspective of the issue:

Most exegetes in expounding the whole discussion in 1 C. 1:18–2:5 concentrate on the phrases σοφία λόγου in 1:17, ὑπεροχὴν λόγου ἢ σοφίας in 2:1, and ἐν πειθοῖς σοφίας λόγοις in 2:4. It thus seems that in this section the Chr. preacher is opposing *any philosophical or rhetorical presentation* of the Gospel acc. to the standards of *Gk. philosophy*.⁴

Wilckens classically goes on to demur from “most exegetes,” suggesting that Paul’s opponents are “Gnostics” – that is, as he says, “Gnostics, not *Gk. Philosophers*” (emphasis added). Thus, far from supporting Litfin’s suggestion that exegetes have for a long time “consistently” interpreted 1:17 with “*primary reference*” to Greco-Roman rhetoric, Wilckens instead places the emphasis of “most exegetes” on the other side – that of philosophy. A look at some of the most prominent interpreters on 1 Corinthians around the dawn of the twentieth century only confirms the accuracy of this claim.⁵

If Litfin’s error owes, in part, to his unique conception of the relationship between rhetoric and philosophy in the first century (discussed later), this cannot be said of Lawrence Welborn, who claims: “The σοφία that Paul fears will undermine the community is *nothing other than rhetoric*. This interpretation,” Welborn says, “was the view of an older generation of scholars more familiar with Greek and Latin authors.”⁶ As we shall see, such simple disregard for philosophy will not be limited to Litfin and Welborn.

³ Litfin, *St. Paul’s Theology of Proclamation*, 3; emphasis added.

⁴ Wilckens, *TDNT* 7:522; emphasis added.

⁵ See, e.g., Lightfoot, *Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul*, 170; and Weiss, *Der erste Korintherbrief*, 23, 158–9.

⁶ L.L. Welborn (*Politics and Rhetoric in the Corinthian Epistles* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997), 30; emphasis added.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-04637-5 - Corinthian Wisdom, Stoic Philosophy, and the Ancient Economy

Tomothy A. Brookins

Excerpt

[More information](#)10 *Rhetoric versus philosophy and 1 Corinthians*

Tied with the disappearance of philosophy from the old thesis is the question of Paul's dominating emphasis in the discourse. That the Corinthians' divisive wisdom was merely "human" is stated plainly in the text (2:5, 13; cf. "wisdom of the world," 3:19), but whether that wisdom was more "formally" or more "substantively" problematic is left uncertain. In antiquity, the conflict between the "form" and "content" of wisdom was often framed in terms of a clash between rhetoric and philosophy – rhetoric was about the form of expression, or mere *words* (*verba/λόγος*), whereas philosophy was about the content, or real *things* (*res/πράξεις*). The separation is an artificial one, but it is one that was regularly insisted on in the ancient sources. Even among those who believed that philosophy could make *use* of rhetoric, it was maintained that "rhetoric" was its own art, reducible to its own system, and distinct from philosophy and other forms of speech. In that regard, which of these two areas – rhetoric or philosophy – could rightly lay claim to wisdom was a matter of perennial and often heated debate.

In light of the ancient dispute, NT scholars have exerted themselves in trying to discern whether Paul was concerned more with the *form* or more with the *content* of the Corinthians' σοφία – or, as the debate is usually framed, more with "rhetoric" or more with "philosophy." In this regard, three main text units have come to the fore – 1:17–31, 2:1–5, and 2:6–16. Within these units, four phrases in particular have become the center of attention:

1:17 – οὐκ ἐν σοφίᾳ λόγου – "not with eloquent wisdom" (NRSV); "not in cleverness of speech" (NAS)

2:1 – οὐ καθ' ὑπεροχὴν λόγου ἢ σοφίας – "not with lofty words or wisdom" (NRSV); "not with superiority of speech or of wisdom" (NAS)

2:4 – οὐκ ἐν πειθοῖ[ς] σοφίας [λόγοις] – "not with plausible words of wisdom" (NRSV); "not with persuasive words of wisdom" (NAS)

2:13 – οὐκ ἐν διδασκατοῖς ἀνθρωπίνης σοφίας λόγοις – "words not taught by human wisdom" (NRSV)

Conclusions regarding Paul's focus of attention have remained fairly diverse. Most studies consider 1:17 to be concerned entirely with the form of wisdom,⁷ although almost as many detect a dual concern

⁷ Robertson and Plummer, *First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, 15–16; E.-B. Allo, *Première épître aux Corinthiens* (Paris: Gabalda, 1934), 12; Funk, "Word and Word in 1 Cor 2:6–16," 281; C. Senft, *La Première Epître de Saint Paul aux Corinthiens*, CNT; 2d edn.