



Galatians 6:17 and its Reception History: Assessing the Echoes

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The essays in this collection began as a panel discussion at 2022 Canadian Society of Patristic Studies under the topic, “Trauma and *Therapeia* in Early Christian Literature”. Panelists discussed examples of Patristic interpretation of Paul’s statement in Galatians 6:17 that he bore the marks (*stigmata*) of Jesus on his own body. I estimate that Gal 6:17 (and indeed the entire letter of Galatians) should be understood within a context of violence, slavery and trauma. I was curious to see how that context was understood and interpreted by later commentators. The panel considered aspects of the Patristic reception history of Gal 6:17. The essays which follow are the fruit of that discussion.

Here is a working definition of trauma. Trauma is an emotional response that may result from experiencing a distressing event or events. That event could be physical violence, intense conflict, or emotional abuse, or a combination of these things. Often, feelings of shame, powerlessness and fear will continue for a long time after the traumatic event and may affect other areas of the person’s life².

Reception history has the potential to reveal interesting features: the original meaning(s) of a text stand in comparison to its interpretations over the centuries. Further, neither the original text nor its interpretations arise in a vacuum. Regardless of any timeless or universal features, discourse is always shaped by and expressive of then-current values and issues. Thus, we may see differences between the text in its period and its interpretations by commentators in later periods. For a review of the reception history of Galatians 6:17 in modern commentaries, see the essay by Muir.

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² Adapted from <https://www.camh.ca/en/health-info/mental-illness-and-addiction-index/trauma> (accessed: 5.05.2024).

In this Introduction, I engage with the concept of echo as it was understood at the time of Paul and his commentators. I do this to provide an evaluative framework for the various essays which follow. In reception history analysis, we observe how a text echoes through the ages. In using the concept of echo, I am not claiming that the word “echo” is voiced either in Gal 6:17 or its various interpretations. The concept itself may not have occurred to any of the writers. But we, observers of the text and its interpretive history, may see issues of echoing and analyze that process. I use issues surrounding the concept of echo as a mental exercise – to generate ideas and questions which can be addressed to the texts and interpretations of Paul’s statement.

First, we consider the Greek meaning of echo as “sound”. Here, there is emphasis on the sound *qua* sound, rather than any content or meaning³. Paul himself is acutely aware of this issue. In 1 Corinthians 13:1, he makes a memorable statement: “If I speak (*lalō*) in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love (*agapēn*), I am a noisy (*ēchōn*) gong or a clanging cymbal”. Paul makes the point that messages (either preaching or ecstatic speech) which lack a foundation of selfless love are mere noise, lacking meaningful content⁴. We see a similar statement in a notable Paulinist of the second century, Ignatius of Antioch, who contrasts meaningful communication with mere noise⁵. The statements of Ignatius are rich in rhetorical power but need some explanation, see note below⁶.

³ H.G. Liddell – R. Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, Oxford 1996, p. 780: *ēcheō*. Intransitive verb, “sound, ring, peal, noise”. Sometimes “cry, wail”; “rarely of articulate sounds” *ēcho* noun “sound, echo voice”; “the sound of words, opposite of sense” *ēchō* noun “sound, echo, cry”.

⁴ Similarly, Hebrews 12:19 differentiates the sound (*echō*) of a trumpet with a voice of words (*phōnē rēmatōn*). The association of echo with brass musical instruments is a Greek commonplace, see LS.

⁵ Ignatius Antiochenus, *Epistula ad Romanos* 2, 1: “For if you are silent concerning me, I am a word of God (*egō logos theou*), but if you love my flesh [seek to preserve my bodily existence] I shall again be only a voice/cry (*palin esomai* [...] earliest ms. have a lacuna here, could be either] *phōnē* voice or *ēchō*”. W. Bauer (*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, tr. W.F. Arndt – F.W. Gingrich, Chicago 1979, p. 349 notes that *ēchō* in this passage is a conjecture by some scholars.

⁶ To unpack Ignatius’ discourse – he seeks his martyrdom at Rome and feels it will be a powerful witness to Christianity, making or transforming him into a word or message of God. He writes to dissuade the Christians at Rome from intervening on his behalf to the authorities. A spared life would be meaningless to Ignatius – he sees his martyrdom as the culmination of his life and the fulfillment of God’s purpose in him.

So, our first issue is a broad question – how well have commentators understood Paul? Have they cut through the surface level of words and found their meaningful content? They think so, but we are entitled to ask the question. In the Muir essay, I review the work of modern commentators on Gal 6:17. I estimate that in many cases, the echoes there are an inadequate version of Paul’s statement. They fail to reproduce the original meaning.

Second, we consider the narrow connotation of echo in its familiar English sense – the repetition of a sound⁷. An echo is only derivative, never original. This point is poignantly made in one of stories about Echo, the mythic personification of the concept. According to Ovid, Echo was a talkative nymph whom Juno punished by limiting Echo’s speech to the repetition of phrases. To make matters worse, Echo then fell in love with Narcissus. Falling in love with a narcissist is never a good choice. Echo could never declare her love for Narcissus since she was reliant on his compassion and empathy, and him first stating his love for her. With a narcissist, that isn’t going to happen! Poor Echo pined away and became a mere voice⁸. Pausanias notes the haunting quality of an echo, in his description of some sanctuaries⁹.

This issue gives us food for thought, and it demonstrates the value of using the concept of echo to generate ideas for our consideration of reception history. Although a commentator “echoes” the words of Paul, no one is merely repeating them. The purpose of commentary (even in the minds of commentators, and even more from our perspective) is to unpack, explain and teach the text. Commentators bring out implicit meanings or clarify obscure points. Some shed light on allegorical dimensions behind the literal or straightforward terms. Sometimes they will update a text in order to make it relevant to their current audience. But in all cases, the commentators are not simply repeating a scripture’s words,

⁷ This is among the meanings of the verb and noun forms in Greek, see Liddell – Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 780.

⁸ Ovidius, *Metamorphoses* III 458-517: “[...] unseen by any, although heard by all / for only the sound that lived in her lives on”. The myths of Echo are narrated in the Roman period. In addition to Ovid, we have the account of Longus in *Daphnis and Chloe* which has a different but similarly tragic end to Echo, noting that her remnants “[...] are still able to sing and imitate sounds of every kind” (Longus, *Daphnis et Chloe* III 23).

⁹ Pausanias, *Descriptio Graeciae* II 35, 10: “Beside this temple is another; it is of Ares, and has an image of the god, while to the right of the sanctuary of Chthonia is a portico, called by the natives the Portico of Echo. It is such that if a man speaks it reverberates at least three times”.

rather they are adding words to the expression. So here is a matter for our consideration – to what extent and in what ways are the commentators adding to what Paul said? And the reverse is also worth considering: how much are they omitting from what Paul said? Finally, at what point does the commentator’s explanation become a distinct or even new teaching, perhaps subtly or significantly different from Paul’s statement?

The third point builds on the second: we consider the issue of posterity. It is unlikely that Paul thought that his words would echo over the centuries, let alone millennia¹⁰. In some cases Paul’s statements are so universal that they transcend context-specific issues (i.e., his statement on *agape* / love in 1Cor 13:4-7). But I propose that in the case of Gal 6:17, his statement is so grounded in issues of slavery, and so situated at a time when Christian groups (or Jesus-assemblies) were small, marginal groups, that we cannot ignore or downplay those aspects. How do his statements translate centuries later, when Christianity is the state religion and Christians are in power?

The gap between the first century (the time of Paul’s writing) and the 4th-5th centuries (that of the commentators) means there has been a change in the status of Christianity. At first, Jesus-assemblies were a very small and marginal set of groups in the Roman empire. In the 60’s CE (Paul’s time) they were distinctive enough from their Judean background to attract the notice and suspicion of Roman authorities. However, by the time of Patristic commentators, these groups have largely consolidated into a reasonably unified body – the orthodox, catholic, episcopal branch of Christianity. Christianity is the state religion and has the support of political authorities. This is not news for historians, but it is worth being reminded of this fact. The intra-group conflicts between Paul’s group and Judaizing Christians seen in Galatians have gone away, as Christianity and Judaism developed into separate groups. Thus, it is worth considering here how the issues, fears and concerns of a marginal group (and Paul’s text which reflects these factors) may be lost or changed when the group itself exercises power and authority and is the dominant one in its sphere. How much is abuse and tolerated, if it is thought to be in a good cause?

Finally, echoes happen when there are reflective surfaces for the sound. The taller and more solid the surfaces, the more the echo. For

¹⁰ Since Paul thought that the Parousia was imminent (cf. 1Cor 4:5; 7:29), he might be disappointed that people were still reading his words 2000 years later and still awaiting the return of The Lord Christ.

example, writers in antiquity noted that echoes occur in mountain peaks¹¹ or in the splendid edifice of “[...] the great, high-roofed hall [...] the echoing halls of gold and amber, of silver and of ivory” of Menelaos where the sounds of a wedding feast resound¹². In examples of the reception of scripture in Christianity, the reflective surfaces are the “walls” of the institutionalized and state Church. We see not only the literal walls of buildings, but more importantly the splendid and complex wall of ideas built by Patristic commentators in later Christianity. In other words, we consider the intellectual structure of the emerging institutionalized Church. So, here we ask, to what extent do the walls (the theology) of the emerging Church reflect but also shape the interpretation of Paul? The commentators are all post-Nicene and are working with a reasonably well-established New Testament canon. This means that Paul’s writings have assumed the status of authoritative scripture for commentators. Do the commentators treat Paul and his words in an idealized or realistic way? How willing are they to wrestle with dark aspects of the text?

The papers in this collection probe the echoes of Paul’s statement in Gal 6:17 in Patristic commentators. This investigation could continue. Other Post-Nicene commentators on Gal 6:17 such as Jerome could be analyzed. An interesting further approach would be to examine themes of violence and trauma in Ante-Nicene writers. Ignatius of Antioch is an obvious example, being both a Paulinist (of sorts) and facing his own impending trauma. While not commenting directly on Gal 6:17, Ignatius’s attitude towards his own impending martyrdom appears informed by the spirit of Paul’s words in Gal 6:17.

¹¹ See *Hymni Homerici* 19, 21.

¹² Homerus, *Odyssea* IV 1-80.