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2017

Adjectival ΦΑΥΛΟΣ in James 3:16

Keith L. Yoder, *University of Massachusetts*



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Adjectival φαῦλος in James 3:16

Keith L Yoder

University of Massachusetts at Amherst

(26 Aug 2010)

Might there be a word play on “Paul” in the final phrase of James 3:16?

πᾶν φαῦλον πρᾶγμα “every evil thing”

πᾶν Παῦλον πρᾶγμα “every Paulish thing”

If the name Παῦλος “Paul” appeared close to Ja 3:16, a word play would be apparent. Obviously, that is not the case. But if Ja 2:14-26 is reacting against a text or teachings of Paul, then whatever the status of this section in the formation history of James, later readers might well sense a resonance between the two.

Phonetics. Because of alliteration, the initial “ph” of φαῦλον in the written text would be naturally attracted to a “p” pronunciation to match the initial “p” sound of the preceding and following words. Further, the first syllables of all three words contain the same “ah” vowel sound (using the historical Koine pronunciation), which would further encourage the attraction to initial “p.” See the last three words of Ja 1:2, πειρασμοῖς περιπέσητε ποικίλοις (“you fall into various trials”), for a similar alliterative triplet using initial “p” and other consonance/assonance features; it is often noted that James uses many rhythmic and alliterative word doublets and triplets.

Usage. φαῦλος occurs 10 times in the Septuagint, 9 times in Proverbs, Job, and Sirach, mostly in the mild sense “worthless.” The classical sense of φαῦλον πρᾶγμα is milder still, and is usually translated “trifling matter, light task, small thing, unimportant business” (Aristophanes *Lysistrata* 14, Isocrates *Evangelos* 59, Plato *Republic* 2:374e, *Phaedo* 95e, *Symposium* 213c, Xenophon *Anabasis* 6:6). But in its 5 NT usages, φαῦλος is stronger: 2 Cor 5:10 (“evil,” in contrast to ἀγαθὸν “good”), Rom 9:11 (“evil,” in contrast to ἀγαθὸν “good”), Tit 2:8 (“[having nothing] evil [to say of us]”), Jn 3:20 (“evil things”), Jn 5:29 (“evil things,” in contrast to ἀγαθὰ “good things”). None of these is in a noun phrase with πρᾶγμα “practices,” though both John instances coordinate φαῦλος with a form of the cognate verb πράσσω “practice, do.” There are no other NT combinations of φαῦλος and πρᾶγμα.

Comment

Glenn S Holland

I wonder if your argument is at all bolstered by the Latin equivalent *paulus* “small,” which might flash into the minds of any audience members at all familiar with Latin (it is one of the 1,000 commonest words in Latin). At the least, we would expect that some audience members would hear the phrase as “every Paulish thing,” whether or not the author intended them to, and the effect on the audience (or the insightful part of the audience) is important, quite apart from any authorial intention. This is one reason why the Jesus movement and the Church acknowledged the role of the Spirit.