God's Sure Foundation:
“Paul’s” Use of Scripture in 2 Timothy

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The purpose of this exercise is to evaluate the author’s use of Scripture in the document known to us as 2 Timothy, whose author I will refer to as Paul, as the letter itself does, even though I am aware that not all in this seminar may be comfortable with this. Moreover, using the big four (1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, and Romans) as the primary criterion for Pauline usage, as biased as such a criterion is, I begin with the observation that the author’s use of Scripture in this document reflects Pauline usage far more than any other letter in the earlier (Thessalonians) or later corpus (Philippians/Colossians).

Nonetheless, although note will inevitably be made regarding it, this presentation is ultimately not about authorship one way or the other. Rather I intend, first, to present the various data which are available to the reader of this letter, and second, to focus especially on the “how” and “why” of the usage of the Scripture in the citations in 2 Timothy 2:19, all of which are brought to bear on the twosided reality the author brings forward to set true believers in sharp contrast to the gangrenous teachings of Hymenaeus and Philetus. These men, Paul says, “have departed from the truth by declaring that the resurrection [of believers, apparently] has already taken place.”

Finally, another important introductory word is in order here, having to do with the “grace” with which the letter concludes. In typically Pauline fashion, the author signs off with the standard “grace,” but which in this case ends up being quite unlike anything else in the corpus. In most cases, including the previous two (so-called) Pastoral letters, Paul here signs off with the plural “grace be with you all,” a phenomenon that occurs at some point in the entire preserved corpus. What is noticeably unique to this letter is the twofold “grace,” the first of which appears in the singular and thus to Timothy (“the Lord be with your spirit”), which is then followed by the typical “grace be with you all.” The (seemingly) obvious implication of all this is that the Paul of
this letter still expected this much more personal letter to be communicated to the entire believing community, a reality that the interpreter should probably keep in mind throughout any discussion of the letter.

I. The Several “Lesser” Passages

Before turning to the usage of a brief series of Scripture in 2:19, I begin this discussion by bringing forward a few other instances where, typical of the authentic Paul, the author reflects considerable knowledge of the language of his Greek Bible, which emerges simply because he is so at home with it—much the same way my grandparents regularly used words and phrases from the King James Version without actually trying to cite the Bible. Since most of this paper will be devoted to the former passage, I begin by making note of these several other “echoes” that occur throughout the letter, taking them in their canonical order as they occur in 2 Timothy:

(i) 2 Timothy 2:7 ἐξώπισαν γάρ σοι ὁ κύριος σίνεσαι ἐν πάσαιν ὁ κύριος δίδωσιν σοφίαν

Proverbs 2:6

Whereas this is most likely an incidental usage of similar language to express a similar thought, and therefore may be purely coincidental, nonetheless the “echo” is of a kind found throughout the authentic Paul, where he employs biblical language without necessarily attempting to do so. In such cases it reflects the fact that he tends to “breathe” the language of Scripture, even in everyday kinds of matters. Nonetheless the language of “the Lord” (always referring to Christ in the Pauline corpus) as “giving” wisdom or understanding is very likely an “absorption” of biblical language into the present author’s sentence, whether intentional or otherwise.

(ii) 2 Timothy 3:11 καὶ ἐκ πάντων με ἐγρύπνησι τὸ κύριος

Ps 33:19[4] καὶ ἐκ πάντων αὐτῶν ἐγρύπνησαν αὐτῶις

This seems to be a more certain echo of the Septuagint, whether intentional or not. That is, this language is just rare enough to make one think that “Paul,” reflecting on his past persecutions, saw his deliverance as in keeping with that of the “David” of this Psalm. This seems all the more
likely in light of the shift of tense in the verb, where the Psalmist is expressing his trust in Yahweh for whatever the future might bring, whereas “Paul” is using the Psalmist’s language to reflect on any number of past deliverances.

(iii) 2 Timothy 4:14 ἀναστήσοντος αὐτοῦ ὁ κόσμος, καὶ ἀνελθεὶς ἀπὸ τοῦ κόσμου ἀπαντᾷ
Ps 61:13 [LXX] ἀναστήσοντος αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ τοῦ κόσμου ἀπαντᾷ
Prov 24:12 ὅτι ἄνελθε ἀπὸ τοῦ κόσμου ἀπαντᾷ

On first reading it may seem less likely that Paul is using biblical language here, especially since the “works” in each case are so different in kind (i.e. the Psalmist’s is positive, this author’s is negative). Nonetheless this seems like a rather typical Pauline use of biblical language, whether intentional or not, since the Paul we know from elsewhere so often uses language from his Greek Bible in precisely this way.

(iv) 2 Timothy 4:17 καὶ ἐπιφάνειαν ἐπὶ αὐτοῦ ἀπαντᾷ ἡ ἴδια ἡ ἀνάστασις καὶ ἐπιφάνεια
Ps 21:22 [LXX] ἐπιφάνειαν ἐπὶ αὐτοῦ ἀπαντᾷ ἡ ἴδια ἡ ἀνάστασις καὶ ἐπιφάνεια

Again, there can be little question that “Paul’s” use of this phrase is taken directly from the Psalter, given its unusual nature, and especially in this case, since Psalm 21, along with Psalms 78 and 80, was so frequently “cited” or “echoed” by the New Testament writers. Also again, the usage is that of someone whose spiritual life had been nurtured in the Psalter, which was certainly the case with the apostle himself. Thus apart from the usage of Scripture as part of the “argument” in 2:19, the other uses of the Greek Bible in this letter are all taken from the Psalter, Paul’s own hymnbook.

With these brief notices, I turn the rest of my attention to the considerable use of the Septuagint in the argument in 2:19, where Scripture is brought to bear on Paul’s confidence in the Gospel in contrast to the errors of Hymenaeus and Philetus.

The Use of Scripture in 2 Timothy 2:19

One of the less frequently noted realities in the entire Pauline corpus is that Paul, or an author imitating Paul, in his argumentation proper scarcely ever mentions people by name, for either good
or ill. Names are almost always reserved for the greetings at the end. In the church corpus itself, the single departure from this consistent habit appears in Philippians 4:2, where Paul actually calls out for correction two women, Pudcia and Syntyche, along with a man named Clement who is not involved in the need for correction. As many, including myself, have argued in the commentaries, this unusual moment suggests that all three of these people are in positions of leadership of some kind, and are probably named as a means of both recognizing them for their position in the community and to make sure that the needed correction is individualized and not unusually general.

Apart from this singular moment in the church corpus the only other occurrence of this phenomenon appears in 2 Timothy 2:19, where Paul names two men, Hymenaeus and Philetus, as responsible for spreading a false teaching that the resurrection has already occurred. Although one cannot be certain in this instance, the teaching is most likely related to some form of dualism in which the physical body is looked upon as inherently bad news, if not evil itself, hence who would or wants a resurrection of the body?

But typical of the Paul we meet in the church corpus, this Paul also does not pursue the individuals personally, but rather goes after their false teaching; and he does so in this case as a response to his immediately prior judgment of them that they are in the process of “destroying the faith1 of some.” This is then followed with the noticeably Pauline imagery of the church as God’s temple, or at least that would seem to be the most likely “structure” the author has in mind.2 And to make that point stick, he offers what appears to be two biblical citations (I say “appears to be” because the second one is rather a considerable collage of biblical ideas and language, in which case it is not

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1 It should be pointed out in passing how very Pauline this ambiguous use of “faith” is, where the primary referent is to the “trust” in Christ, but at the same time carries overtones regarding the “content” of what is believed. As pointed out in my commentary on Galatians, this is a recurring usage in Paul’s letters that Protestantism in the more “reformed” tradition seem to have considerable difficulty admitting to.

2 One might further point out how very Pauline is this lack of need to explain the imagery at all, but rather to assume that the recipient(s) will catch it without explanation.
immediately clear that a "citation" as such is actually intended. We begin therefore with the first, rather certain, citation.

1. 2 Timothy 2:19 and Numbers 16:5

Whatever view of authorship one brings to the reading of this passage, this "Paul" begins in a way that must be viewed as typically Pauline, since the first word up is not an imperative but an indicative on which the imperative is dependent. That is, just as the Paul of Galatians and Romans is especially concerned with the kind of "right living" that issues from "right believing," so also with the Paul who wrote this letter.

Thus in immediate response to the fact that Hymenaeus and Alexander "have departed from the truth" regarding the future resurrection of believers, the author affirms that God has established a "sure foundation," and that it has in fact been "sealed" by God the Father (as identified in 1:2). At this point Paul is basing his affirmation on language from Numbers 16:5, where it the Hebrew rebellion Moses affirms that "in the morning the LORD will show who belongs to him and who is holy." Of special interest here is the fact that Paul's citation reflects the Hebrew text, which has YHWH, rather than the Greek text that has come down to us in the Septuagint. Thus:

Paul: εἰς τὴν ἡμέραν τῆς ἡμέρας τῆς ἀμήνας
LXX: εἰς τὴν ἡμέραν τῆς ἡμέρας τῆς ἁγίας

Here again this writer, if not Paul himself, has absorbed the Apostle in such a way as to reflect Paul's consistent theological perspective: that at the end of the day everything depends on the divine initiative, not on the human response. Thus despite the failings of some (apparently) in positions of leadership, both Timothy himself (especially) and the churches where Timothy now has a measure of responsibility are here being reminded that in the Christian gospel the divine initiative is always the first thing up.

Here, then, both as an encouragement to Timothy and in direct response to those who have "departed from the truth" and are involved in "godless chatter," Paul reassures his younger coworker that, even though appearances may sometimes be to the contrary, he can rest assured that
be himself—and those in Asia to whom he has been sent (or left with)—belong to God. They are therefore in the biblical sense “known” by God, thus “owned” by God and under God’s care. Thus in typical fashion this is the “first” word in both senses of that term: the most important thing to be said and thus the one that appears at the beginning.

One feels compelled again to point out how thoroughly Pauline this is, since the Apostle himself regularly speaks of God’s people “knowing God,” but also regularly puts that into his own theological perspective, so as not to lead either to arrogance or ownership on the part of the “knowers.” The most significant of these, of course, is to be found in the affirmation followed by the immediate corrective in Galatians 4:9, where Paul assures his Gentile readers, who formerly “did not know God,” that they do now indeed “know God,” but which affirmation is followed immediately by the corrective that this is true only because they rather “are known by God.” Thus in the present biblical affirmation to Timothy, and (significantly) bringing forward the passage from Numbers, Paul assures his younger colleague that at both the beginning and the end, everything rests ultimately on the “saints” and himself being reminded that “God knows those who are his.” And as elsewhere throughout the Pauline corpus, “knowing” here has to do with relationships, not with data (it is, after all, the primary biblical idiom for sexual relationships).

2. 2 Timothy 2:19 and ? (Sirach 17:26 + Isaiah 26:13?)

Whereas the preceding citation is both easily identified and easily understood within its two biblical contexts (that is, that the Pauline context resonates clearly with the Mosaic context), the same is not true of the (apparently combined) citation that immediately follows. Moreover, it involves one of the features of this letter that has been used to call apostolic authorship into question. But here especially such argumentation seems rather futile, because on the other side one might (legitimately) argue that a "forger" would ordinarily try to be a bit more circumspect! Indeed, and standing in considerable contrast to the preceding citation, this second one is particularly difficult to pin down at all. Thus historically the only way one could even come close to anything resembling a known source has been to see this as the author’s using language from
more than one source and thus creating a text that exists only here in Jewish and Christian sacred literature.\(^3\)

But the real difficulty in this case, and it is a difficulty that cuts both ways regarding the issue of authorship, is the fact that the closest thing to Paul’s actual language in this instance is to be found in the Apocrypha, from which the Paul of our New Testament corpus otherwise never cites. Indeed, had the clause not begun with a citation formula, the possible connection with Sirach would probably never have been noted, since it is so sparse linguistically. Paul’s complete text reads: αὐτὸς αὐτῷ ἐδοξάσας, καὶ ὅ ἐναρκῇ τῷ δόμῳ κυρίου. Here are the data:

1 Tim 2:19a ἐδοξάσας ἐνοθήκης
Sirach 1:26 ἐδοξάσας ἐνοθήκης

The rest of the “citation” is more easily traced, in this case to Leviticus 24:16, a passage that had already been echoed in the Septuagint of Isaiah 26:13. The three texts read:

1 Tim 2:19b καὶ ὅ ἐναρκῇ τῷ δόμῳ κυρίου
Lev 24:16 ὅ ἐναρκῇ δὲ τῷ δόμῳ κυρίου
cf. Isa 26:13 τῷ δύνασθαι αὐτῷ ὅ ἐναρκῇ κυρίου

Here the anarthrous κυρίου is the further “giveaway” that the author is intending to cite from his Bible, some expression of what we know as the Septuagint.

But in searching for the apparent “source” of the citation, one should not miss the thoroughly Pauline nature of both its unusual appearance and its immediate concern. On the one hand, regarding the matter of its appearance, it is especially striking that a pseudopigrapher should be able to enter the apostle’s skin so thoroughly, as it were. Here in particular one would expect precision on such an author’s part, whereas one would scarcely ever do so with regard to Paul.

\(^3\) Not to belabor the matter of “authorship,” one should nonetheless note that what follows is typically Pauline, in the sense that he very often cares little for precision when he is “citing” his Bible (as to use modern vernacular, he rarely if ever “looks things up” when it comes to “citation”). Using enough of the language and “getting it close” seems to satisfy him on a regular basis. I personally understand this quite well, since I grew up in a preaching tradition where the preacher might use “notes” but never a scripted sermon; and often the biblical “citations” were intended more often to be “close enough” to be recognized than they were considered necessary to be precise.
himself. On the other hand, where this author has "entered his skin," is precisely what also argues for Pauline authorship, in the sense that Paul is the ultimate of this document, not an otherwise unknown "writer." This emerges in two ways.

First, regarding the citation itself, this imprecision is especially typical of Paul. Take, for only one example, the twin "citations" in 1 Corinthians 3:19 and 20. There to make his point that "the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God," and using his ordinary introductory formula, ἐγραφαί γὰρ ("for it is written"), Paul sets out two passages in support, one from Job, the other from Psalm 93 [LXX]:

1 Cor 3:19 ὃ δραμάλητος τοῖς σοφοῖς ἐν τῇ κακομορφή αὐτῶν
Job 5:12 ἀστάφνευτα βούλσας συνεμετρήσαν οἱ καταλαμβάνον σοφοί ἐν τῇ φρονήσει

1 Cor 3:20 κόροις γυναικῶν τοῖς διαλυκομορφικοῖς τοῖς σοφοῖς
Ps 93:11 κόροις γυναικῶν τοῖς διαλυκομορφικοῖς τοῖς ἐνθρώπισαν

Just as with the author of our present document, Paul in this case is far more interested in making his point than he is with the matter of precision in citation.

But, second, also significantly Pauline is the order of the two citations. At issue for our author is not simply theological error, but the kind of conduct to which such "theological understanding" leads. Thus the ultimate issue for Paul in 2 Timothy 2 has to do with the false teacher’s "turning away from wickedness," as the following analogy from vessels of useful purposes makes clear. Paul’s concern for Timothy and the church has to do with their being "instruments for noble purposes," that are "made holy" and thus "useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work."

This, in fact, sounds very much like the author of Galatians (and also Romans), in which case theological error is at issue, but who concludes by insisting that "the fruit of the Spirit" issues ultimately in their "doing good to all people" (Gal 6:10).