

## THE TESTING BY FIRE OF THE BUILDERS' WORKS: 1 CORINTHIANS 3.10-15\*

HARM W. HOLLANDER

(University of Leiden, Theological Institute, POBox 9515,  
NL-2300 RA Leiden, The Netherlands)

One of the most interesting passages to deal with the apostle Paul's thoughts on the Last Day and the final Judgment is found in 1 Cor 3.10-15. Far from being an excursus, a digression or an insertion, having almost nothing to do with its context,<sup>1</sup> the verses are an important element in Paul's arguments on the diversity in the Christian community in Corinth in chapters 1-4. It runs partly parallel with vv. 5-9, illustrating the same point along more or less similar lines: people responsible for the growth of the Christian communities are just servants of God and will be recompensed according to their labours at the end of time.

Though the general function of the passage seems to be clear, the details are not. In particular, the judgment imagery seems to be 'somewhat inconsistent',<sup>2</sup> due to Paul's supposed use of several fire motifs in vv. 13-15.<sup>3</sup> Related to these questions there is the issue of origin. Do we find here traditional *topoi* introduced by Paul for the sake of argument<sup>4</sup> or rather is the description of final divine judgment 'unique in its emphasis on the disclosure and testing of individual works'?<sup>5</sup>

\* I wish to thank Prof. Dr J. C. O'Neill for his remarks and the improvement of the author's English style.

<sup>1</sup> So e.g. R. Bultmann, *Der Stil der paulinischen Predigt und die kynisch-stoische Diatribe* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1910) 98; V. P. Branick, 'Source and Redaction Analysis of 1 Corinthians 1-3', *JBL* 101 (1982) 262-3.

<sup>2</sup> D. W. Kuck, *Judgment and Community Conflict. Paul's Use of Apocalyptic Judgment Language in 1 Corinthians 3:5-4:5* (Suppl. NT 66; Leiden/New York/København/Köln: Brill, 1992) 185.

<sup>3</sup> According to J. Weiss, for instance, there are 'hier also eigentlich 3 Bilder in einander geflochten' (*Der Erste Korintherbrief* [KEK 5; 9th ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1910] 82); F. Lang speaks of 'vier geläufige Vorstellungen' brought together by the apostle 'in lose Verbindung', viz., '... 1. das Motiv vom brennenden Haus . . . , 2. die Erwartung, dass der kommende Herr mit Feuer erscheint . . . , 3. die Vorstellung der eschatologischen Feuerprobe . . . und 4. die sprichwörtliche Redewendung vom Gerettetwerden durchs Feuer' (*ThWNT* 6.944); and W. Radl even distinguishes 'mindestens vier Feuer-Motiven' (*Ankunft des Herrn. Zur Bedeutung und Funktion der Parusieaussagen bei Paulus* [BET 15; Frankfurt a.M./Bern/Cirencester: Lang, 1981] 105).

<sup>4</sup> So e.g. W. Radl, *Ankunft*, 101.

<sup>5</sup> D. W. Kuck, *Judgment*, 181.

Through a detailed analysis of the passage with the help of *Traditionsgeschichte* and *Religionsgeschichte* I will try to give some new answers to these questions.

#### PARTIES AND HEROES: 1 COR 1-4

In 1 Cor 1-4 the apostle Paul responds to reports from the people of Chloe about a totally divided Christian community in Corinth. There were several groups or parties, one claiming to belong to Paul, another to Apollos, another to Cephas (Peter), and – presumably – another to Jesus Christ (1.11-12).<sup>6</sup> It seems likely that Christians in Corinth put their faith in 'heroes', men who were thought to play an indispensable part in their salvation. And if there was a Christ party, its members did not confess Jesus Christ as the unique Saviour of all mankind, but only as their private saviour. The Christians in Corinth admired Paul, Peter, Apollos (and Christ), while the adherents of each group regarded themselves as superior to all the others.

As was to be expected, the apostle rebukes the addressees for being so divided. He even calls them 'infants in Christ' and people who are still '(all too) human'. Slogans like 'I belong to Paul' or 'I follow Apollos' do not go well with a Christian way of life (3.1-4).

#### MISSIONARIES WILL BE RECOMPENSED AT THE END OF TIME: 1 COR 3

In the third chapter Paul argues that he himself, Apollos and Cephas are 'nothing' and that adhering to them is not a cause for pride (3.5, 7, 21-2). He refers to the example of two of them, himself and Apollos; Apollos, according to Acts 18.24-19.1 had worked as a missionary among the people of Corinth after Paul had left the city. Men who proclaim the Gospel all over the world are in Paul's opinion simply God's agents. They do their jobs according to the tasks which God has allotted to each of them. So Paul was charged with the foundation of the Christian community

<sup>6</sup> On these parties, see esp. C. K. Barrett, 'Cephas and Corinth', *Abraham unser Vater. Festschrift für Otto Michel* (Leiden/Köln: Brill, 1963) 1-12; W. O. Fitch, 'Paul, Apollos, Cephas, Christ', *Theology* 74 (1971) 18-24; Ph. Vielhauer, 'Paulus und die Kephaspartei in Korinth', *NTS* 21 (1974-5) 341-52; G. Sellin, 'Das "Geheimnis" der Weisheit und das Rätsel der "Christus-partei" (zu 1 Kor 1-4)', *ZNW* 73 (1982) 69-96; R. Baumann, *Mitte und Norm des Christlichen. Eine Auslegung von 1 Korinther 1,1-3,4* (2nd ed.; Münster: Aschendorff, 1986) 49-55.

in Corinth whereas Apollos was responsible for the building up of the local church.

In 3.6-9 Paul first compares the Christian community with a garden, a field. The Christians in Corinth are God's field. Paul is the one who planted and Apollos the one who watered. Both worked closely together but - and this is essential in Paul's view - it is God who gives the growth. Without God's activity there would not have been any Christians in Corinth. Paul and Apollos have been appointed to be his servants, his assistants, in his plan of salvation. They had to answer his call, and they had to perform their tasks well. For, as the apostle continues, each of them, that is Paul himself and Apollos and of course everyone engaged in missionary activities, 'will receive his wages according to his labour' (v. 8).

Paul introduces in v. 8 a formula that is frequently found in Jewish and early Christian literature in the context of God's judgment of the righteous and sinners on the Last Day. The idea is found for example in Pseudo-Philo *LAB* 3.10, 'But when the years appointed for the world have been fulfilled . . . I will bring the dead to life . . . so that I may render to each according to his works and according to the fruits of his own devices . . .' (tr. D. J. Harrington in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. J. H. Charlesworth = *OTPseud*); and in Rev 22.12, ' . . . I am coming soon, bringing my recompense, to repay every one for what he has done (ὁ μισθός μου μετ' ἐμοῦ ἀποδοῦναι ἐκάστῳ ὡς τὸ ἔργον ἐστὶν αὐτοῦ) . . .' (RSV).<sup>7</sup>

Everybody will be recompensed by God at the end of time according to the things he has done. In 1 Cor 3.8 Paul applies this principle to God's judgment of his agents. They will be judged by what each of them has done for the growth of Christianity.<sup>8</sup> The apostle does not go into the subject of the kinds of rewards to be received by the missionaries.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> See also 1En 100.7; 2En 44.5; QuesEzra B 14; Matt 16.27; Rom 2.6; 2 Cor 11.15; 2 Tim 4.14; 1 Pet 1.17; Rev 2.23; 20.12-13; 1Clem 34.3; 2Clem 17.4, etc. The thought that everybody is rewarded according to his works is already found in the LXX (see Ps 62.13; Prov 24.12; Isa 40.10; 62.11; Jer 17.10; Sir 16.12-14), but its application to God's final judgment in the eschaton is a later development. See R. Heiligenthal, *Werke als Zeichen. Untersuchungen zur Bedeutung der menschlichen Taten im Frühjudentum, Neuen Testament und Frühchristentum* (WUNT 2. Reihe 9; Tübingen: Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1983) esp. 143-64; 171-82; 234-64.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. W. Radl, *Ankunft*, 99-100. There is no difference of meaning between κόπος and ἔργον which is more usual in this context (see also v. 13). Κόπος and ἔργον are found together in e.g. 1 Thess 1.3; 3.5; Rev 2.2; 14.13. Cf. in particular Wis 10.17, ἀπέδωκεν ὁσίοις μισθὸν κόπων αὐτῶν. Cf. also R. Heiligenthal, *Werke*, 210 n. 176. See also n. 26.

<sup>9</sup> By using the word ὄσιος in v. 8b twice, Paul wants to underline once more that God is absolutely impartial and righteous, carefully weighing as it were one's deeds and will

In 3.10–15 Paul uses another metaphor to make the same point. It is prepared for in the last words of v. 9, 'you are God's building'. The planting image of the previous section is left behind in favour of a new image. Now the church in Corinth is compared with a building,<sup>10</sup> and Paul himself laid as it were its foundation when, during his stay in Corinth, he founded a small Christian community. He did so 'according to the grace of God given to him'<sup>11</sup> and he did it well, 'as a skilled master builder' (v. 10),<sup>12</sup> for the foundation he laid was Jesus Christ (v. 11).<sup>13</sup> Other missionaries have been called 'to build upon it':<sup>14</sup> they were responsible for the deepening of the Christians' faith and for the growth of the small Christian community. From the terminology (ἄλλος and ἕκαστος in v. 10) it is clear that Paul, again, does not only have Apollos in mind but all those who were involved in the building up of the Christian church in Corinth, in short all the 'heroes'.<sup>15</sup> But this time he excludes himself. Verses 12–15 deal exclusively with the builders or, in the words of the apostle in the previous section, with those who watered, not with the one who planted.

recompense each individual missionary according to his individual achievements within the context of his specific task. He does not speak here about a general reward for all those who are called to the service of the Lord. Cf. L. Mattern, *Das Verständnis des Gerichtes bei Paulus* (ATANT 47; Zürich/Stuttgart: Zwingli, 1966) 170; R. Heiligenthal, *Werke*, 209–10.

<sup>10</sup> The association of the two images is common: see e.g. Jer 1.10 (Jeremiah's call); 18.9; 24.6; Sir 49.7; Philo *Leg. all.* 1.48; *OdesSol* 38.16–22. See also Ph. Vielhauer, *Oikodome* (München: Kaiser, 1979) 7–8; 37–8; 40–2; 74 n. 4.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. 15.10; Rom 1.5; 12.3; 15.15; Gal 2.9; Eph 3.7–8. Paul refers here to his apostolic commission. Or, in the words of W.-H. Ollrog, *Paulus und seine Mitarbeiter. Untersuchungen zu Theorie und Praxis des paulinischen Mission* (WMANT 50; Neukirchen/Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1979): 'Fundamentsetzer ist er als Apostel. Ebenso gilt aber zugleich das Umgekehrte: Als Apostel ist er Fundamentsetzer' (176).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Isa 3.3, and also Plutarch *Alex.* 26 (679F).

<sup>13</sup> That is, 'the word of the cross' (1.18), the knowledge of 'Jesus Christ and Him crucified' (2.2). Cf. also K. Maly, *Mündige Gemeinde. Untersuchungen zur pastoralen Führung des Apostels Paulus im I. Korintherbrief* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1967) 67; W.-H. Ollrog, *Paulus und seine Mitarbeiter*, 167–9.

<sup>14</sup> For the same imagery, see also Rom 15.20 and Eph 2.20. Its background is (Jewish) Hellenistic: see e.g. Epictetus *Diss.* 2.15.8; Philo *Cher.* 101; *Conf.* 5, 87; *Gig.* 30; *Mut. nom.* 211; *Quis heres* 116; *Somn.* 2.8; *Vita contempl.* 34. On the use of οἰκοδομεῖν, see Ph. Vielhauer, *Oikodome*, esp. 75–81; I. Kitzberger, *Bau der Gemeinde. Das paulinische Wortfeld οἰκοδομή/(ἐπ)οικοδομεῖν* (Würzburg: Echter, 1986) esp. 64–72; and D. W. Kuck, *Judgment*, 173–4.

<sup>15</sup> It is doubtful if we should see in 3.10–15 'a reference to the work of all believers' (D. W. Kuck, *Judgment*, 174; see also I. Kitzberger, *Bau der Gemeinde*, 66 and 70). It is true that in 1 Corinthians there are references to the individual responsibility for the upbuilding of the Christian community (see e.g. 12.7; 14.3–5, 12, 26). But in view of the direct context, esp. 3.4–5 and 3.21–2, it is more plausible that Paul is referring to those people who were appointed to be missionaries and teachers.



IMPERISHABLE AND PERISHABLE BUILDING MATERIALS/  
EXCELLENT AND LESS QUALIFIED MISSIONARIES

In 3.12-15 Paul works out the statement he made at the end of v. 10, viz. that every builder 'must take care'<sup>16</sup> how he builds upon the foundation laid by the apostle. All depends, in Paul's view, on the materials used by the builders. He mentions six of them: 'gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw' (v. 12). It is certainly not a scale of descending value,<sup>17</sup> for in that case Paul would have mentioned stone or clay as well.<sup>18</sup> His concern is not with the individual value or scarceness of the materials. Rather, he classifies the materials used by the church-builders in two groups: some materials endure fire and are imperishable, while others are consumed by fire and are perishable. Gold, silver and precious stones belong to the first group, wood, hay and straw to the second. It does not seem wise to ask whether Paul meant something in particular by gold, silver, precious stones, wood hay and straw. Nor is it appropriate to ask whether all these materials were really in use as building materials at that time, or whether Paul had some fabulous building in mind or was perhaps thinking of Solomon's temple with its gold, silver and precious stones.<sup>19</sup> All that seems completely irrelevant here.<sup>20</sup> The apostle just wants to stress that there are excellent

<sup>16</sup> For the parenetic function of the imperative of *βλεπέτω* in the context of judgment, see also Mark 4.24; 13.9; 1 Cor 10.12, etc. See also R. Heiligenthal, *Werke*, 211 n. 179.

<sup>17</sup> As is the case in e.g. 4 Ezra 7.52-61.

<sup>18</sup> So rightly H. Lietzmann-W. G. Kümmel, *An die Korinther I/II* (HbNT 9; 5th ed.; Tübingen: Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1969) 16; cf. also W. Schrage, *Der Erste Brief an die Korinther (1 Kor 1,1-6,11)* (EKK 7/1; Zürich/Braunschweig: Benziger/Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1991) 299.

<sup>19</sup> So, with reference to 1 Chron 22.14-16; 29.2; 2 Chron 3.6, e.g. B. Gärtner, *The Temple and the Community in Qumran and the New Testament* (Cambridge: University, 1965) 56-60; K. Maly, *Mündige Gemeinde*, 68; G. D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 140-1. Cf. W.-H. Ollrog, *Paulus und seine Mitarbeiter*, 170 n. 40; D. W. Kuck, *Judgment, 177*. The fact that the Christian community is called 'the temple of God' in vv. 16-17 cannot be used as an argument in favour of the assumption that the apostle had Solomon's temple in mind when he wrote vv. 10-12. Perhaps rather the reverse: the thought of the community as a building may have led to the introduction of the temple imagery in vv. 16-17 (cf. 2 Cor 6.16; Eph 2.21). Neither is it plausible that Paul has developed the theme while thinking of the Feast of Tabernacles and the building of *sukkoth* in vv. 10-12 (as J. Massyngberde Ford, 'You are God's "Sukkah" (1 Cor III.10-17)', *NTS* 21 [1974-5] 139-42, suggests) or some kind of apocalyptic building (cf. Ph. Vielhauer, *Oikodome*, 75 n. 5; W. Schrage, *Korinther*, 300).

<sup>20</sup> See also J. Weiss, *Korintherbrief*, 80; A. Robertson-A. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians* (ICC 7; 2nd ed.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1914) 62; W.-H. Ollrog, *Paulus und seine Mitarbeiter*, 170; W. Schrage, *Korinther*, 299-300.

builders, who stimulate the Christian community and work hard for the promotion of the Gospel of Jesus Christ (those who use the best materials: gold, silver and precious stones) and that there are less qualified, less stimulating people (those who use inferior materials: wood, hay and straw).

As to the first cluster of materials, it was a matter of common knowledge that gold and silver are imperishable materials which are not consumed by fire but are instead refined.<sup>21</sup> This process of refining, which is in Greek usually expressed by the verbs *πυρρύν*, *δοκιμάζειν* or *καθαρίζειν*, is referred to in numerous OT and NT passages as well as in other Jewish and Christian sources, often in the form of a simile or metaphor (Prov 10.20, 'The tongue of the righteous is choice silver [LXX, ἄργυρος πεπυρωμένος] [RSV]; Sir 2.5, 'For gold is proved in the fire [έν πυρὶ δοκιμάζεται χρυσός]; Philo *Sacrif.* 80, '... let the fresh ripeness of the soul be "roasted", that is tested by the might of reason, as gold is tested by the furnace. The sign that it has been tested and approved is its solidity [ὡς πυρὶ χρυσός . . . δεδοκιμάσθαι] [tr. F. H. Colson—G. H. Whitaker, ed. Loeb]).<sup>22</sup>

By mentioning these two precious metals Paul certainly has this topic in mind. That he adds a third element, that of precious stones, which of course is somewhat different from gold and silver in its reaction to fire, is due to the fact that the three form a regular cluster<sup>23</sup> (2 Chron 32.27; Prov 8.10–11, 19 LXX; Dan 11.38 Th; Rev 18.12; *ApocPsMeth* 11.14). Obviously, Paul took up this triplet with an eye to their imperishableness which was traditionally connected with two of them (gold and silver).

The last three materials mentioned by the apostle in v. 12, wood, hay and straw, also belong closely together. They were known as

<sup>21</sup> It will not do to make a sharp distinction between a fire that 'refines' (in the case of gold and silver) and one that 'burns' (in the case of wood, hay and straw), as e.g. Ph. Vielhauer, *Oikodome*, 77–8 does. Paul just wants to underline that gold and silver are not consumed by fire, but 'remain' in one way or another, over against wood, hay and straw. Cf. *Hermas Vis.* 4.3.4 (see n. 33).

<sup>22</sup> See further e.g. Num 31.22–3; Job 22.25; Ps 12.7; 66.10; Ezek 22.18–22; Zech 13.9; Mal 3.2–3; Wis 3.4–6; Philo *Decal.* 48; 1 Pet 1.7; 4.12; Rev 3.18; *Didache* 16.5; *Hermas Vis.* 4.3.4; *Mart. Polyc.* 15.2.

<sup>23</sup> Αἰθῶς τιμίους certainly do not refer to some kind of costly building stones like marble (so, e.g., A. Deissmann, *Paulus. Eine kultur- und religionsgeschichtliche Skizze* [2nd ed.; Tübingen: Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1925] 243–7; J. Jeremias, *ThWNT* 4.272 n. 5). See also above.

materials that are easily consumed by fire. See, e.g., Diod. Sic. 20.65.1, 'for, since the huts were made of reeds and straw (ἐκ καλάμου καὶ χόρτου) and the fire (τοῦ πυρός) was forcibly fanned by the breeze, the aid brought by the soldiers came too late' (tr. R. M. Geer, ed. Loeb).<sup>24</sup> The weakness or perishableness of the three materials comes to the fore particularly when used in metaphors and similes, as found in OT and NT texts and in related literature (Exod 15.7, '... thou sendest forth thy fury, it consumes them like stubble [LXX, ὡς καλάμην]' [RSV]; Zech 12.6, '... I will make the clans of Judah like a blazing pot in the midst of wood, like a flaming torch among sheaves [LXX, ὡς δαλὸν πυρὸς ἐν ξύλοις καὶ ὡς λαμπάδα πυρὸς ἐν καλάμῃ]; and they shall devour . . . ' [RSV]).<sup>25</sup> It is surely this traditional image that led Paul to introduce these three materials over against gold, silver and precious stones.

The builders, therefore, must take care how they build, because there are excellent as well as inferior materials and the choice of material has direct consequences for the building itself, the church. Paul then turns in vv. 13-15 to the theme of God's judgment. He has already pointed out before that everyone will be recompensed by God according to the things he has done (v. 8). So each builder's work,<sup>26</sup> that is whether he has built with excellent or with inferior materials, 'will become manifest (φανερὸν γενήσεται), for the Day will disclose it (ἡ γὰρ ἡμέρα δηλώσει) . . .' (v. 13). The terminology is traditional. 'The Day'<sup>27</sup> refers, of course, to the Last Day, the Day of the Lord, the Day of Judgment, expressions that have their roots in the OT.<sup>28</sup> The term was taken over by Jewish and Christian writers to denote the end of time when God would

<sup>24</sup> See further e.g. Aristotle *Meteorologica* 341 b 27 (καλάμη); Plutarch *Non posse suaviter vivi sec. Epic.* 14 (*Mor.* 1096 C) (χόρτον ἢ καλάμην); Diod. Sic. 3.29.2 (πυροῦσι τὸν . . . χόρτον); 5.21.5 (καλάμων ἢ ξύλων); 16.41.5 (χόρτον ἐνέπρησαν); Josephus *Bell.* 6.153 (ξύλειαν ἢ χόρτου συλλογήν).

<sup>25</sup> See also e.g. Job 41.19-21; Isa 5.24; Joel 2.5; Obad 18; Mal 4.1; Wis 3.7; and 6Ezra 1.23; *1En* 48.9; *ApEl* 1.4; 5.23; and cf. finally Matt 6.30.

<sup>26</sup> Here, the word ἔργον is used as the result of one's mission. There does not seem to be any difference of meaning with κόπος, which Paul uses in v. 8 (against I. Kitzberger, *Bau der Gemeinde*, 70-1). Cf. W. Pesch, 'Der Sonderlohn für die Verkündiger des Evangeliums', *Neutestamentliche Aufsätze. Festschrift für J. Schmid* (Regensburg: Pustet, 1963) 199-206, esp. 200 n. 5; W.-H. Ollrog, *Paulus und seine Mitarbeiter*, 171; D. W. Kuck, *Judgment*, 174 n. 123; and see also n. 8.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. 1 Thess 5.4; Heb 10.25; *Barnabas* 7.9; 21.3, etc.

<sup>28</sup> See e.g. Isa 10.20; 13.6, 9; Amos 9.11; Zeph 1.15, 18; 2.3; Zech 12.3-4; Mal 4.1-6.

judge all mankind. And it was believed that on that day everybody's deeds, even secret deeds and thoughts, would become manifest and would be examined and judged (4Ezra 7.35, 'And recompense shall follow, and the reward shall be manifested; righteous deeds shall awake, and unrighteous deeds shall not sleep' [tr. B. M. Metzger in *OTPseud*]; 1En 45.3; 100.10; 2En 44.5; and especially 2Bar 83.2-3, 'And he will surely judge those who are in his world, and will truly inquire into everything with regard to all their works . . . He will certainly investigate the secret thoughts . . . And he will make them manifest . . .' [tr. A. F. J. Klijn in *OTPseud*]; 2 Cor 5.10; 2Clem 16.3, 'But you know that the day of judgment is already approaching . . . and then shall be made manifest the secret and open deeds of men [τότε φανήσεται τὰ κρύφια καὶ φανερά ἔργα τῶν ἀνθρώπων]' [tr. Kirsopp Lake, ed. Loeb]; *Hermas Sim.* 4.3, 'the fruit of the righteous will be plain . . . [τῶν δικαίων οἱ καρποὶ φανεροὶ ἔσονται]' [tr. *idem*]).

This general idea of the Last Judgment, when all people will be judged by God according to their deeds, is applied by Paul to those who are called to build the church (in Corinth) on the foundation of Jesus Christ as laid by the apostle himself. On the Last Day their deeds done openly or secretly will be brought to light, will be disclosed,<sup>29</sup> and they will be judged by God according to what each of them has done for the building up of the Christian community.

In other words: all builders, all authorities in the Christian community, are servants of God, whose works cannot be approved or disapproved by the members of the church. The Christians in Corinth are not in a position to judge apostles and missionaries. It is God who, at the Final Judgment, will disclose their work and will administer justice to each of them individually.<sup>30</sup>

#### FIRE AS A MEANS OF TESTING AT THE END OF TIME

How the builders' works will be disclosed at the end of time, that is, how it will be noticed which one worked with superior building materials and who with inferior materials, is indicated by Paul in

<sup>29</sup> Δηλοῦν means in this context the disclosure of secrets, of things hidden so far (in this case: of the deeds of the church-builders). Cf. Ps 50.8 LXX, τὰ ἀδύλα καὶ τὰ κρύφια τῆς σοφίας σου ἐδήλωσάς μοι. See also R. Baltmann, *ThWNT* 2.61; W. Schrage, *Korinther*, 301; D. W. Kuck, *Judgment*, 179.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. R. Heiligenthal, *Werke*, 210; 214.

the second part of v. 13: *fire* reveals one's work,<sup>31</sup> *fire* will test<sup>32</sup> what sort of work each one has done. And this statement is elaborated in vv. 14-15. First, positively: 'If the work which any man has built survives,<sup>33</sup> he will receive a reward.'<sup>34</sup> Next, negatively: 'If any man's work is burned up, he will be fined,<sup>35</sup> but he himself will be saved,<sup>36</sup> but only as through fire.'

<sup>31</sup> Most commentators are of the opinion that 'the Day' (ἡ ἡμέρα) is the intended subject of ἀποκαλύπτεται; so e.g. J. Weiss, *Korintherbrief*, 81; A. Robertson-A. Plummer, *Corinthians*, 63; H. Lietzmann-W. G. Kümmel, *Korinther*, 16; H. Conzelmann, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther* (KEK 5; 12th ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1981) 96 n. 18; G. D. Fee, *Corinthians*, 142; W. Radl, *Ankunft*, 103; D. W. Kuck, *Judgment*, 179. They refer to passages like Dan 7.9; Joel 2.3, 30; Mal 4.1 and 2 Thess 1.7 where this Day is associated with fire. But nowhere it is said that the Last Day 'will be revealed'. The passive of the verb ἀποκαλύπτειν does not seem to go with 'the Day' (ἡ ἡμέρα . . .) in Greek. Consequently, it is more likely that τὸ ἔργον is the intended subject; so e.g. Ph. Bachmann, *Der erste Brief des Paulus an die Korinther* (3rd ed.; Leipzig/Erlangen: Deichertsche, 1921) 164; R. St John Parry, *The First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians* (Cambridge: University, 1916) 66 (but see 67!); Ph. Vielhauer, *Oikodome*, 77. First, because it fits the context where 'the disclosure of each one's works' is mentioned; second, because it goes well with the item that even secret deeds and thoughts will become manifest on the Day of Judgment (see above; for ἀποκαλύπτειν associated with 'secrets', cf. Sir 1.30, ἀποκαλύψει κύριος τὰ κρυπτά σου; Luke 12.2); thirdly, because ἀποκαλύπτειν does go with ἔργον; see e.g. Sir 11.27, ἐν συντελείᾳ ἀνθρώπου ἀποκάλυψις ἔργων αὐτοῦ; and finally, since redundancy is not foreign to Paul's style (see e.g. Rom 7.14-25; Gal 2.16), a supposed tautology in v. 13, an argument often put forward by the advocates of 'the Day' as subject, is certainly not a decisive point against ἔργον as subject. Quite the contrary!

<sup>32</sup> For δοκιμάζειν in this context, see above (and n. 22).

<sup>33</sup> That is, 'remains as it was', 'stands', over against 'is burned up' in v. 15. Cf. *Hermas* Vis. 4.3.4, 'The golden part is you, who have fled from this world, for even as gold is tried in the fire and becomes valuable, so also you who live among them, are being tried. Those then who remain (μένοντες) and pass through the flames shall be purified by them . . .' (tr. Kirsopp Lake, ed. Loeb); and *Didache* 16.5.

<sup>34</sup> Μισθὸν λήμψεται (cf. v. 8), which is here, of course, meant in a strictly positive sense: the church-builder, whose work survives, will be rewarded. The nature of the reward(s), which is obviously not eternal salvation as such, is not made explicit, but it seems clear that Paul anticipates some special joy for faithful missionaries. Cf. also W. Pesch, *Sonderlohn, passim*; D. W. Kuck, *Judgment*, 182.

<sup>35</sup> Ζημιωθήσεται, which means either 'he will suffer loss', that is, he will lose the reward, whatever that will be, or 'he will be fined', he will pay the penalty. Both interpretations have their pros and cons, but the latter is, in my opinion, to be preferred, as it is more suitable to the immediate context. For this rendering is the exact opposite of μισθὸν λήμψεται, 'will be rewarded'. Besides, ' . . . will be fined', which of course does not refer to a loss of salvation, but nevertheless sounds quite threatening, fits in very well with the following 'but he himself will be saved, but only as through fire'. And finally, the statement 'is in complete harmony with the payment policy found in many of the secular contracts relating to temple construction', as J. Shanor pointed out in the article 'Paul as Master Builder. Construction Terms in First Corinthians', *NTS* 34 (1988) 461-71, esp. 470. That Paul did not elaborate upon the nature of the fine(s) is not strange: neither did he in the case of the nature of the reward(s). For a discussion on the meaning of ζημιῶν, see also W.-H. Ollrog, *Paulus und seine Mitarbeiter*, 172 n. 53; D. W. Kuck, *Judgment*, 182-3; W. Schrage, *Korinther*, 303.

<sup>36</sup> Σωθήσεται. Since Paul is referring to God's judgment on the Last Day, the verb must be understood soteriologically. Paul speaks of the final salvation and not just of a narrow escape.

One of the most striking elements in the passage is the role of fire. Traditionally, fire is an agent of God's judgment on the Last Day, destroying all those who have turned against God.<sup>37</sup> In 1 Cor 3.13-15, however, fire is not depicted as the agent of God's punitive wrath, but as a means of *testing* the quality of the builders' works.<sup>38</sup> What 'remains' is good; what 'is burned up' not. And consequently, some builders will be rewarded and others fined.

#### A WELL-KNOWN PARALLEL: TAB 13

As a parallel to this particular idea, TAB 13 (Rec. A) has been mentioned.<sup>39</sup> In this passage, the archangel Michael explains to Abraham, during his heavenly journey, a judgment scene which the patriarch has just witnessed. It is not the final judgment by God that is described here, but the judgment of men immediately after death. The judge turns out to be Abel, the brother of Cain. Two angels, one on the right and one on the left, record sins and righteous deeds. Another angel, called Dokiël, holds a balance in his hand and weighs the righteous deeds and sins of each soul. A fourth angel, Purouel, holds the fire in his hand . . .

and he tests the work of men through fire (δοκιμάζει τὰ τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἔργα διὰ πυρός). And if the fire burns up the work of anyone (καὶ εἴ τις τὸ ἔργον κατακάσει τὸ πῦρ), immediately the angel of judgment takes him and carries him away to the place of sinners, a most bitter place of punishment. But if the fire tests the work of anyone and does not touch it (εἴ τις δὲ τὸ ἔργον τὸ πῦρ δοκιμάσει καὶ μὴ ἀψεται αὐτοῦ), this person is justified and the angel of righteousness takes him and carries him up to be saved (εἰς τὸ σόζεσθαι) in the lot of the righteous. And thus, most righteous Abraham, all things in all people are tested by fire and balance (ἐν πυρὶ καὶ ζυγῷ δοκιμάζονται) (vv. 11-14; tr. E. P. Sanders in *OTPseud*).

<sup>37</sup> Cf. e.g. Isa 66.15-16; *Jub* 9.15; *SibOr* 3.72-4; Matt 3.10. See further esp. D. W. Kuck, *Judgment*, 180 n. 155.

<sup>38</sup> Since v. 13c does not speak of fire as an instrument of God's punishing judgment, there is not a shift from theophany in v. 13c to testing in vv. 13d-15a (see also above and n. 31). Neither does Paul speak of the purging fire of purgatory or the fire of hell, which were opinions advocated by a number of early Christian and mediaeval church Fathers and theologians; cf. J. Gnllka, *Ist 1 Kor 3,10-15 ein Schriftzeugnis für das Fegfeuer? Eine exegetisch-historische Untersuchung* (Düsseldorf: Tritsch, 1955); D. W. Kuck, *Judgment*, 180-1 n. 157-8.

<sup>39</sup> See esp. C. W. Fishburne, '1 Corinthians III. 10-15 and the Testament of Abraham', *NTS* 17 (1969-70) 109-15. He was not the first to mention this parallel in connection with 1 Cor 3. In note 2 on p. 109 he refers to J. Héring who brought up the TAB passage in his *The First Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians* (1962). Earlier, however, J. Weiss did the same in his *Korintherbrief*.

The similarities between both passages are indeed striking. In both texts it is told how *works* are *tested by fire* on a *Day of Judgment*, and also the language is quite similar. But it does not necessarily imply a dependence of one text upon the other.<sup>40</sup> The differences between both texts are a serious obstacle to the assumption of such a dependence. In *TAb* 13, for instance, there is a judgment of men, righteous and sinners, by Abel immediately after death, whereas Paul speaks about God's judgment of good and unskilled church-builders at the end of time. In the *Testament of Abraham* the fire in the angel's hand is not the only means of testing men's work: it is also weighed in a balance which is held by the second angel. Moreover, the sequence of the words and sentences is in both texts not exactly the same, as is also the case with the terminology. Finally, the reference to perishable and imperishable materials as we find in 1 Cor 3.12 is completely absent in *TAb* 13.

#### A MORE OR LESS FIXED TRADITION

Since the differences between 1 Cor 3.13-15 and *TAb* 13 are a real obstacle to the assumption of a dependence of one text upon the other, one should take into account the possibility that both authors were familiar with a more or less fixed tradition about fire as a means of testing men or their work in the context of God's judgment of the righteous and sinners.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>40</sup> C. W. Fishburne thinks it does and he tries to prove Paul's dependence on *TAb*. His argumentation, however, is far from convincing, apart from the fact that it is quite unlikely 'that *T. Abraham* was written and circulated early enough to have been known by Paul' (D. W. Kuck, *Judgment*, 91). One example may suffice here. On p. 112 he assumes that in 1 Cor 2.9 Paul 'is quoting rather freely from the Isaianic passages mentioned (i.e. Isa 64.4 and 65.17)'. As to the words τοῖς ἀγαπῶσιν αὐτόν, which are not found in the Isaianic passages (τοῖς ὑπομένουσιν αὐτόν), he believes that Paul was dependent on *TAb* 3.3, 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God, who is summoning him (Abraham) to those who love him (τοῖς ἀγαπῶσιν αὐτόν)'. It is, however, far more probable that Paul did not quote freely from Isaiah, but joined an apocalyptic tradition found in a number of Jewish and Christian writings, a more or less fixed unity that could be altered, shortened or amplified according to the literary needs of each individual author. Cf. also K. Berger, 'Zur Diskussion über die Herkunft von I Kor. II. 9', *NTS* 24 (1977-8) 270-83. D. W. Kuck wants to explain the close verbal resemblances between vv. 13-15 and *TAb* 13.11-13 by 'the activity of Christian scribes who reworked the text of the *Testament of Abraham* under the influence of their familiarity with 1 Cor 3' (*Judgment*, 184; cf. 9; and cf. E. P. Sanders, *OTPseud*, 889). But such an influence on a scribe of *TAb* remains, though possible, highly speculative.

<sup>41</sup> W. Radl, *Ankunft*, 101-2, thinks that both texts present the same traditional *topoi*. He is of the opinion that Paul and the unknown author of *TAb* were familiar with an existing scheme ('ein vorgegebenes Schema') that ran something like:

ἐκάστου τὸ ἔργον τὸ πῦρ δοκιμάσει.  
εἴ τις τὸ ἔργον μενεῖ, μισθὸν λήμψεται.  
εἴ τις τὸ ἔργον κατακαίησεται, ζημιωθήσεται.

(cont.)



The first stage in the development of this tradition, the general presupposition behind it, may be the motif that fire cannot touch righteous men, since God stands by them. A well-known passage in this context is Dan 3, where it is told how Daniel's three friends Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were cast into the burning fiery furnace but remained unhurt: . . . οὐχ ἤψατο αὐτῶν καθόλου τὸ πῦρ . . . οὐχ ἤψατο τὸ πῦρ τοῦ σώματος αὐτῶν, καὶ αἱ τρίχες αὐτῶν οὐ κατεκάρησαν . . . (3.50, 94 LXX). The men who had cast Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego into the furnace, however, were caught by the fire and died.<sup>42</sup>

Similar stories are found in Pseudo-Philo's *LAB* 6.16–18 and 38.3–4. In the first passage, we read how Abram was thrown by Joktan and his men into a fiery furnace:

But God caused a great earthquake, and the fire gushing out of the furnace leaped forth in flames and sparks of flame. And it burned all those standing around in sight of the furnace. And all those who were burned in that day were 83,500. But there was not the least injury to Abram from the burning of the fire (*Abrahe autem non est nec modica facta lesura, in concrematione ignis*).

The second passage tells the story of seven pious men who were not willing to sacrifice to Baal and were taken by the servants of Jair to burn them in the fire:

And when they had put them in the fire, Nathaniel, the angel who was in charge of fire, came forth and extinguished the fire and burned the servants of Jair. But he let the seven men escape . . . (*extinxit ignem, et incendit pueros Iair. Viris autem septem fugam dedit*) . . . (translations D. J. Harrington in *OTPseud*)

(n. 41 cont.)

But the verbal similarities between both texts do not necessarily point to a common (written) scheme, nor do the two εἰ τις (τινος) phrases, which are regular 'Sätze heiligen Rechts' (cf. E. Käsemann, 'Sätze heiligen Rechtes im Neuen Testament', *NTS* 1 [1954–5] 248–60; K. Berger, 'Zu den sogenannten Sätzen heiligen Rechts', *NTS* 17 [1970–1] 10–40; *idem*, 'Die sog. "Sätze heiligen Rechts" im N.T.', *Theol. Zeitschrift* 28 [1972] 305–30). R. Heiligenthal, *Werke*, 260–2, assumes an originally Persian tradition adopted by Paul and the author of *TAb*. The assumption is, however, based on no more than one piece of literature, viz., the Oracle of Hystaspes as found in Lactantius, *Inst. Div.* 7.21 (on this text, see below). Unfortunately, Heiligenthal has not examined the tradition behind 1 Cor and *TAb* more thoroughly.

<sup>42</sup> On this story, see esp. E. Haag, 'Die drei Männer im Feuer nach Dan 3:1–30', *Die Entstehung der Jüdischen Martyrologie*, ed. J. W. van Henten together with B. A. G. M. Dehandschutter and H. J. W. van der Klaauw (Leiden/New York/København/Köln: Brill, 1989) 20–50; and U. Kellermann, 'Das Danielbuch und die Märtyrertheologie der Auf-erstehung', *ibidem*, 54–7.

The same motif is also formulated as a more or less general principle: sinners cannot escape God's wrath, neither on earth nor in the underworld, but God will have mercy on the righteous. Even fire will not harm a righteous man: φλόξ πυρός καὶ ὄργη ἀδίκων οὐχ ἄνεται αὐτοῦ (*PssSol* 15.4).<sup>43</sup>

In a following stage, this general rule was linked up with the motif of God's judgment of men, either immediately after death or on the Last Day. Fire was not only mentioned as a means of punishment but was also introduced as an instrument of testing men: all will have to go 'through the fire', the righteous will remain unhurt, sinners will be burned. See, e.g., *SibOr* 2.252-5:

And then all will pass through the blazing river and the unquenchable flame (διὰ αἰθομένου ποταμοῦ καὶ φλογὸς ἀσβέστου). All the righteous will be saved (σωθήσονται), but the impious will then be destroyed for all ages . . . (tr. J. J. Collins in *OTPseud*)

and *VisEzra* 3-10:

And he saw fiery gates, and at these gates he saw two lions lying there from whose mouth and nostrils and eyes proceeded the most powerful flames. The most powerful men were entering and passing through the fire, and it did not touch them (*transiebant flammam, et non tangebant eos*). And Ezra said, 'Who are they, who advance so safely?' The angels said to him, 'They are the just whose repute has ascended to heaven . . .' And others were entering that they might pass through the gates, and dogs were ripping them apart and fire was consuming them (*ignis comburebat*). And Ezra said, 'Who are they?' The angels said, 'They denied the Lord . . .' (tr. J. R. Mueller and G. A. Robbins in *OTPseud*)

and *TI* 5.21-5:

Then he brought me to a river of fire . . . And that river had wisdom in its fire: It would not harm the righteous, but only the sinners by burning them . . . (tr. W. F. Stinespring in *OTPseud*)

<sup>43</sup> Cf. *PssSol* 13.6, ὅτι δευρὴ ἡ καταστροφὴ τοῦ ἀμαρτωλοῦ, καὶ οὐχ ἄνεται δικαίου οὐδὲν ἐκ πάντων τούτων. These texts, particularly Dan 3.50, 94 LXX, explain the use of ἄπτειν in *Tab* 13.13. Cf. also *Mart. Polyc.* 15-16: when Polycarp has been condemned to the stake and the men in charge of the fire start to light it, 'those of us to whom it was given to see beheld a miracle . . . For the flames, bellying out like a ship's sail in the wind, formed into the shape of a vault and thus surrounded the martyr's body as with a wall. And he was within it not as burning flesh but rather as bread being baked, or like gold and silver being purified in a smelting-furnace . . . At last when these vicious men realized that his body could not be consumed by the fire (μὴ δυνάμενον αὐτοῦ τὸ σῶμα ὑπὸ τοῦ πυρός διαπανηθῆναι) . . .' (tr. H. Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1972]); and *Mart. Pionii* 22; *The Legend of Paese and Thekla*, in W. Till, *Koptische Heiligen- und Martyrrellegenden* (2 vols.; Roma: Pont. Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1935-6) 1.77-80 (text), 89-90 (tr.). On the influence of Dan 3 on martyrdom literature see U. Kellermann, *Danielbuch*, 51-9.

and Lactantius *Inst. Div.* 7.21:

The same divine fire (*divinus ignis*) . . . will both burn the wicked and will form them again, and will replace as much as it shall consume of their bodies, and will supply itself with eternal nourishment . . . Thus, without any wasting of bodies, which regain their substance, it will only burn and affect them with a sense of pain. But when He shall have judged the righteous, He will also try them with fire (*sed et iustos cum iudicaverit deus, etiam igni eos examinabit*). Then they whose sins shall exceed either in weight or in number, shall be scorched by the fire and burnt (*perstringentur igni atque amburentur*): but they whom full justice and maturity of virtue has imbued will not perceive that fire (*ignem illum non sentient*); for they have something of God in themselves which repels and rejects the violence of the flame. So great is the force of innocence, that the flame shrinks from it without doing harm (*refugiat innoxius*); which has received from God this power, that it burns the wicked, and is under the command of the righteous (*impios urat, iustis temperet*) . . . (tr. W. Fletcher in *Ante-Nicene Christian Library*)<sup>44</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

It seems likely that both the author of the *Testament of Abraham* and Paul were familiar with this more or less fixed tradition about fire as a means of testing men on the Last Day and adapted it independently, each according to his specific literary needs. They introduced it, because the theme of men tested by fire and the Jewish-Christian motif of being recompensed by God at the end of time according to one's *deeds* share one fundamental item, viz. the absolute impartiality and objectivity of God's judgment.<sup>45</sup> As a consequence of the combination of these two traditions it is the *works* of men that are, as hypostasized works, tested by the fire. This change was surely facilitated by the role and function of hypostasized works in the context of God's judgment in Jewish and Christian literature.<sup>46</sup>

Remarkably, the author of the *Testament of Abraham* speaks about the testing of the *works* of men (τὰ τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἔργα) by fire, though in the judgment scene itself (TAB 12) 'the fiery angel, who held the fire' is said to test 'the souls' (τὰς ψυχὰς), as the angel with the balance in his hand 'weighed the souls' (τὰς ψυχὰς). This

<sup>44</sup> See also *SibOr* 8.411; *ApPet* 6. In *2Bar* 48.39, the fire seems to be a punishment rather than a means of testing people (sinners). The idea of a (river of) fire testing men in order to distinguish the good from the bad seems to derive from Persian belief. See on this esp. F. Lang, *ThWNT* 6.932-3 and R. Heiligenthal, *Werke*, 262.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. R. Heiligenthal, *Werke*, 248.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. e.g. *4Ezra* 7.35 (see above) and see R. Heiligenthal, *Werke*, esp. 234-48.

shift is most probably due to the fact that the scene shows two other angels recording men's sins and righteous deeds, and by the fact that it shows the *weighing of deeds*, which was quite common.<sup>47</sup>

The apostle Paul has adapted the traditional theme of the testing of men by fire in the context of God's final judgment more thoroughly. First of all he mentions two kinds of building materials: superior materials like gold, silver and precious stones, and inferior ones like wood, hay and straw. He does so with an eye to their imperishableness or perishableness when brought into contact with fire. Then he introduces the traditional image of the testing of men by fire on the Last Day in combination with the motif of being recompensed by God at the final judgment according to one's deeds. He has the works of the builders, as hypostasized works, tested by fire, that is, the sort of materials with which they have built. Since Paul does not speak of righteous men over against sinners but of two types of builders, both types being Christians, the reward seems to be something additional to salvation and the fine does not imply eternal punishment. Even the unskilled church-builder will be saved. However, he will be saved 'as through fire'.<sup>48</sup> This expression has certainly nothing to do with the concept of purgatory.<sup>49</sup> It is just a consequence of the previous statement: as the works of the unskilled church-builder are burned up on the Day of God's judgment, it is, in Paul's view, more than natural that also the agent, the one who is responsible for these works, does not fully escape the fire. Only those who 'destroy' (φθείρειν)<sup>50</sup> the church, the community of Christians, will miss salvation and will be 'destroyed' by God (1 Cor 3.16-17).

<sup>47</sup> See e.g. 4Ezra 3.34; 1En 41.1; 2En 52.15. The motif of a balance in Jewish and Christian judgment scenes - another element to underline God's impartiality and objectivity - derives from the Jewish-Christian *Umwelt*, this time from the Egyptian culture and literature: see R. Heiligenthal, *Werke*, 253-60.

<sup>48</sup> Ὡς διὰ πυρός. Cf. Amos 4.11; Zech 3.2; and 1 Pet 3.20, '... the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water (δυσώθησαν δι' ὕδατος)' (RSV) (on this text, see D. Cook, '1 Peter iii.20: An Unnecessary Problem', *JTS* n.s. 31 [1980] 72-8). Cf. also W. Schrage, *Korinther*, 304, 'Gemeint ist also: Wie ein angekohltes Holzschicht gerade noch aus dem Feuer gerissen wird, so wird mit knapper Not auch der gerettet werden, dessen Werk verbrannt. Dieser Vergleich ist durch das Bild vom Feuer nahegelegt'; W. Radl, *Ankunft*, 105, 'Es liegt vielmehr eine Redensart vor, und diese umschreibt das knappe Davonkommen'; and D. W. Kuck, *Judgment*, 183, 'the phrase pictures the unexpected and narrow escape of those whose works will not stand up to the fiery test'.

<sup>49</sup> See also n. 38.

<sup>50</sup> On the opposition of φθείρειν and οικοδομεῖν in this context, see B. Gärtner, *Temple*, 59-60 and I. Kitzberger, *Bau der Gemeinde*, 68-9.

Thus the judgment imagery in 1 Cor 3.10-15 is far from being inconsistent. Paul uses a combination of traditional motifs to make clear that missionaries and other authorities in the Christian communities cannot and should not be judged by 'ordinary' Christians. Church-builders are no 'heroes', they are simply God's agents, and none of them can be regarded as superior to the others. It is God who, at the end of time, will disclose their work and will recompense each of them individually.