JBL 130, no. 3 (2011): 543–549

Peddling Scents: Merchandise and Meaning in 2 Corinthians 2:14–17

TZVI NOVICK
novick.3@nd.edu
University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN 46556

Scholars have long puzzled over the diction and imagery that Paul employs in 2 Cor 2:14–17, where, from an attempt to account for his prior travels, he shifts abruptly into a prayer of thanksgiving.

> [14]But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumph, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. [15]For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, [16]to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? [17]For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word; but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ.[1]

Most exegetes concentrate their attention on the word θριαμβεύοντι in 2:14, rendered above as "leads . . . in triumph," and on the relationship, if any, between this word and the odor imagery that pervades vv. 15–16. Comparatively little attention has been lavished on the peddlers (καπηλεύοντες) of v. 17, and almost none on what role the image of the peddler might play in connection with the scene detailed in the preceding verses.[2]

I thank Michael Cover and Michael Peppard for their comments on an earlier draft of this note.

[1] All quotations from the NT in this essay follow the RSV.

[2] Roger David Aus is more explicit than most, but otherwise representative, when he observes at the outset of his book on this passage (*Imagery of Triumph and Rebellion in 2 Corinthians 2:14–17 and Elsewhere in the Epistle: An Example of the Combination of Greco-Roman and Judaic Traditions in the Apostle Paul* [Studies in Judaism; Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2005], ix n. 2), "My analysis does not deal as extensively with v 17, yet it belongs to this unit." Aus's explanation of the other parts of the passage is ingenious but speculative.

Harold W. Attridge's article on the passage offers both a generally persuasive explanation of 2:14–16 and a rare if very cursory attempt to integrate v. 17.[3] According to Attridge, building especially on the work of Paul Brooks Duff, v. 14 references not the military triumph but religious processions partly modeled on the triumph and undertaken in veneration of the likes of Isis and Dionysius.[4] Incense and unguents figured importantly in such processions as means of honoring or making manifest the deity. Paul thus imagines himself as "a slave to the triumphing deity, but a slave in his ongoing service, heralding the deity's approach" by strewing incense, or possibly even as "the vessel in which the fragrant ointment is contained."[5] And what of the peddlers? In the article's final footnote, Attridge ventures that Paul means to underline that "he is part of the procession itself, not on the sidelines working, as a κάπελος [*sic*], for gain."[6]

While not discounting the latter possibility, I argue in this note for a different understanding of the relationship between 2:14-16 and 2:17. Paul's reference to peddlers in v. 17 depends, I suggest, on the prominence of spices in the inventory of goods furnished by peddlers. To illustrate their prominence, I draw on evidence from rabbinic literature, which paints a vivid portrait of small-scale commerce that is, to all appearances, typical of the Mediterranean world in which Paul operated.

Greek κάπηλος enters into rabbinic literature as the קפילי, a shopkeeper or tavern keeper.[7] But it and the related verbal form καπηλεύοντες cover a wide range of mercantile activities, indeed, most anything short of wholesale trade. The itinerant peddler falls within this range.[8] Thus, nothing precludes us from supposing

[3] Attridge, "Making Scents of Paul: The Background and Sense of 2 Cor 2:14–17," in *Early Christianity and Classical Culture: Comparative Studies in Honor of Abraham J. Malherbe* (ed. John T. Fitzgerald; NovTSup 110; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 71–88. Susan Ashbrook Harvey's definitive study of olfaction in early Christianity (*Scenting Salvation: Ancient Christianity and the Olfactory Imagination* [Transformation of the Classical Heritage 42; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006], 247 n. 39) cites Attridge's analysis with approval.

[4] See Duff, "Metaphor, Motif, and Meaning: The Rhetorical Strategy behind the Image 'Led in Triumph' in 2 Corinthians 2:14," *CBQ* 53 (1991): 79–92.

[5] Attridge, "Making Scents," 83.

[6] Ibid., 88 n. 63.

[7] See Michael Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic of the Byzantine Period* (2nd ed.; Dictionaries of Talmud, Midrash, and Targum 2; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press; Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2002), 500, s.v. קפילי. On the storekeeper, see Ben-Zion Rosenfeld and Joseph Menirav, *Markets and Marketing in Roman Palestine* (trans. Chava Cassel; JSJSup 99; Leiden: Brill, 2005), 74-88. According to the online Historical Dictionary of the Hebrew Language (Maagarim) (accessed 3.8.2011), the word is attested only once in tannaitic literature, in *t. B. Meṣi'a* 11:30, and then only in MS Erfurt, which often reflects the influence of post-tannaitic literature.

[8] See, e.g., Plato, *Pol.* 289e–290a (trans. Fowler, LCL): "How about those free men who put themselves voluntarily in the position of servants of those whom we mentioned before? I mean the men who carry about and distribute among one another the productions of husbandry and the other arts, whether in the domestic marketplaces or by travelling from city to city by land or

that Paul has in mind specifically the peddler. The positive evidence for this possibility lies in the close connection between the peddler (רוכל) and aromatics in rabbinic literature.[9] Let us consider two illustrative texts, in both of which aromatics serve, as in 2 Cor 2:14–17, as a metaphor for knowledge. The first comes from *Abot R. Nat.* A, ch. 18 (ed. Schechter, 34a).

> [R. Judah the Patriarch] called R. Eleazar b. Azarya a peddler's bundle. And to what was R. Eleazar comparable? To a peddler who took up his bundle and entered a town, and the people of the town came and said to him: Have you fine oil? Have you spikenard oil [פולייטין]?[10] Have you balsam [אפרסמון]? And they found everything on him. So was R. Eleazar b. Azarya. When the students of the sages would enter beside him, one would ask him about Scripture and he would tell him, about mishnah and he would tell him, about midrash and he would tell him, about legal traditions and he would tell him, about homiletics and he would tell him. Thus when he left him, he would be full of blessed good.[11]

---

sea, exchanging money for wares or money for money, the men whom we call brokers, merchants, shipmasters, and peddlers [καπήλους]; do they lay any claim to statesmanship?"; idem, *Prot.* 313c–d (trans. Lamb, LCL): "And we must take care, my good friend, that the sophist, in commending his wares, does not deceive us, as both merchant and dealer [κάπηλος] do in the case of our bodily food. . . . [T]hose who take their doctrines the round of our cities, hawking [καπηλεύοντες] them about to any odd purchaser who desires them, commend everything that they sell." The latter text is regularly invoked by proponents of the view that Paul means to characterize his opponents as sophists. For a recent articulation of this position, on which the current note incidentally bears, see George H. van Kooten, "Why Did Paul Include an Exegesis of Moses' Shining Face (Exod 34) in 2 Cor 3? Moses' Strength, Well-Being, and (Transitory) Glory, According to Philo, Josephus, Paul, and the Corinthian Sophists," in *The Significance of Sinai: Traditions about Sinai and Divine Revelation in Judaism and Christianity* (ed. George J. Brooke et al.; Themes in Biblical Narrative 12; Leiden: Brill, 2008), 149–81, esp. 154–55.

[9] If, alternatively, there is sufficient evidence for the salience of spices in commercial inventory even outside the context of the peddler, then the general approach of this essay can be adopted without so circumscribing the intended reference of καπηλεύοντες. I am not confident that such evidence exists, but see, e.g., Persius, *Sat.* 1.41–43: "Is there anyone who would disown the desire to earn the praise of the people—or, when he's produced compositions good enough for cedar oil, to leave behind him poetry which has nothing to fear from mackerels and incense?" The translation is from *Juvenal and Persius* (trans. Susanna Morton Braund; LCL 91), 53. As the editor notes, Persius refers to the practice of preserving worthy books with cedar oil and relegating bad poetry to the shop for use in wrapping purchases, in this case, fish and incense. Persius thus imagines incense as a characteristic product of the shopkeeper.

[10] *Mishnah Šabb.* 6:3 takes up the case of women who bear plates with spikenard oil when they walk in the public domain. From *t. Soṭah* 15:9 it appears that brides would customarily perfume themselves with such oil.

[11] This and the other translations from rabbinic literature in this essay are my own. "Blessed good" (טוב וברכה, which I take to be a hendiadys) recurs in a similar curricular context earlier in the same chapter, and in *Abot R. Nat.* A ch. 8 (ed. Schechter, 18a–b). See the discussion of this passage in Deborah A. Green, *The Aroma of Righteousness: Scent and Seduction in Rabbinic Life and Literature* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011), 34–36.

The merchandise that the townspeople seek from the peddler is exclusively aromatic. Of course, insofar as the peddler's wares stand for the various corpora of the rabbinic curriculum, the parable naturally highlights the more attractive of his bundle's contents. Nevertheless, we may reasonably suppose that the scene that the parable imagines was plausible, even commonplace, to its audience. That peddlers would have favored perfumes and related aromatics indeed stands to reason: "As the peddler's load was relatively heavy, we can deduce that most of the products he carried around with him were expensive, but light in weight—mainly perfumes, cosmetics for women, sewing and weaving implements, or expensive cloth."[12]

A portrait of the רוכל that is particularly relevant for our passage occurs in *Lev. Rab.* 16:2 (ed. Margulies, 349–51).[13]

> A story: A peddler was circulating among the villages on the outskirts of Sephoris, calling out: One who wishes to purchase an elixir of life [סם חיים], let him come and take. He entered Akbara, and approached near the house of R. Yannai. The latter was sitting and expounding in his dining room, and heard him calling out: One who wishes to purchase an elixir of life, etc. R. Yannai looked out upon him and said to him: Come up here and sell it to me. He said to him: You have no need of it, neither you nor your kind. But he pestered him about it, so he came up to him and took out a book of Psalms and showed him the verse: "Who is the person who desires life, who wishes to see days of good?" (Ps 34:13). And what is written after it? "Guard your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking treachery. Turn from evil and do good. Seek peace, and pursue it" (Ps 34:14). Said R. Yannai: All my days I have read this passage, but did not know how to expound it, until this peddler came and made it known.

This brief but rich story sets the peddler, hawking popular piety, against R. Yannai, a representative of the rabbinic world ("your kind"). These two circles share a text, but each employs it differently. For the peddler, Scripture, like Proverbs' wisdom, is a guide for successful living, whereas R. Yannai, expounding in his home, approaches it as a set of textual knots to be solved. The story teaches that the distance between these two perspectives is smaller than some—perhaps some in the rabbinic world specifically—might think. The peddler's exegesis, though of the simplest, moralizing sort—or rather, precisely because it is of this sort—had eluded R. Yannai. There is a subtle humor, too, in the content of the peddler's lesson. He warns against speaking evil, or what rabbinic literature elsewhere, on the basis of Ps 34:14 itself, characterizes as לשון הרע, "the evil tongue." But the figure elsewhere

[12] Rosenfeld and Menirav, *Markets and Marketing*, 118–19. While biblical literature (Song 3:6) itself associates the רוכל with spices, there is no basis for supposing that the same association in the rabbinic context is an artificial reflection of the influence of the biblical verse rather than a window onto the economy of Roman Palestine (and the Mediterranean economy more broadly).

[13] A rough parallel occurs in *b. ʿAbod. Zar.* 19b.

employed as a symbol of this vice is precisely the peddler, as in the following source (*y. Peʾah* 1:1 [16a]).

> Said R. Ishmael: "You shall not deal basely [רכיל] among your people." This is slander [רכילות] of the evil tongue. Taught R. Neḥemiah: [the verse instructs] that one should not be like the peddler [רוכל], bearing this one's words to that one, and that one's words to this one.

The similarity between the word רכיל (rendered here, with the NJPS translation, as "deal basely") and the word רוכל ("peddler") encourages R. Neḥemiah, and others elsewhere, to imagine the tale bearer as a peddler, circulating slander among the populace.[14] It is therefore appropriate and ironic that R. Yannai's peddler should fasten precisely on the slanderous tongue.[15]

What the peddler claims to sell is a סם חיים, an elixir or drug of life. This phrase has already entered the scholarship on 2 Cor 2:14–17 in connection with the dual character of the odor in 2 Cor 2:15–16. The aroma of Christ, at once death to the perishing and life to the saved, has been compared to Torah, characterized in various passages in rabbinic literature as a life-giving drug to some (the obedient, or Jews) and poison to others (the disobedient, or Gentiles).[16] Some object to this comparison on the ground that, while the word סם can indicate perfume, in the relevant contexts it refers to a drug.[17] While apt, this objection loses much of its force in light of the thorough imbrication of aromas and medicine in antiquity (a phenomenon to which the range of the word סם itself attests). Aromatic substances

[14] This connection may shed light on the origin of the rabbinic usage of אבק ("dust") in legal contexts in the sense of the extension of a prohibition. *Tosefta ʿAbod. Zar.* 1:10 knows of four kinds of "dust": the dust of usury, of the seventh year, of idolatry, and of the evil tongue. Thus, for example, for an Israelite to transact with a pagan on the day of the latter's festival is "the dust of idolatry," that is, indirect support of idol worship (perhaps because the pagan, pleased at the transaction, will more effusively thank his god), and hence forbidden. I tentatively venture that this metaphorical usage of dust originates in connection with the evil tongue specifically: against the background of the wordplay between רוכל and רכיל, the reference to אבקת רוכל ("the powder of the merchant") in Song 3:6 would have suggested אבקת רכילות ("the dust of slander").

[15] The peddler's suggestion that R. Yannai, expounding Scripture, has no need of the peddler's lesson, may reflect the opposition between Torah study and the evil tongue preserved in, e.g., *t. Peʾah* 1:1–2 (on which see Marc Hirshman, *The Stabilization of Rabbinic Culture, 100 C.E.–350 C.E.: Texts on Education and Their Late Antique Context* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009], 21), and in the metaphorical range of סם, on which see below. The student of Torah knows how to use his tongue for good rather than for evil.

[16] See T. W. Manson, "2 Cor 2^{14-17}: Suggestions Toward an Exegesis," in *Studia Paulina: In Honorem Johannis de Zwaan Septuagenarii* (ed. J. N. Sevenster and W. C. van Unnik; Haarlem: De Ervem F. Bohn; 1953), 155–62.

[17] See, e.g., Margaret E. Thrall, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, *Introduction and Commentary on II Corinthians I–VII* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 206 n. 126; Attridge, "Making Scents," 75 (noting that סם is "not exactly a fragrance").

figured in almost every drug recipe, and aromas themselves were understood to have a therapeutic effect. Thus, for example, Herodian explains the appeal of the town of Laurentium during a time of plague in Rome as follows.

> The doctors thought this place was safe because it was reputed to be immune from infectious diseases in the atmosphere by virtue of the redolent fragrances of the laurels and the pleasant shade of the trees. . . . Some said that if sweet-smelling scent filled the sensory passages first, it stopped them from inhaling the polluted air. If an infection were to get in, they said, the scent drove it out by its greater potency.[18]

It is no coincidence, then, that the rabbinic רוכל peddles both spices and medicines, for spices are themselves medical products.

The link between the aromas of 2 Cor 2:15–16 and the peddling of 2:17, and thus the presence of a commercial element in the entire passage, reinforces the connection between this passage and others in the first chapters of the letter.[19] In denying in 2:17 that he peddles the word of God, Paul asserts that he acts with sincerity (εἰλικρινείας). The same claim recurs in 1:12, where Paul says that he has behaved "with godly sincerity [εἰλικρινείᾳ], not by earthly [σαρκικῇ] wisdom but by the grace of God." In tandem, these two verses identify peddling with earthly or fleshly wisdom. Further along in the same context (1:17), Paul again denies that he is motivated by earthly considerations: "Was I vacillating when I wanted to do this? Do I make plans like a worldly man [κατὰ σάρκα], ready to say Yes and No at once?" There is a structural parallel between the vacillation here and the dual quality of the odor of 2:15–16. This parallel explains why Paul contrasts himself to the peddlers of God's word in 2:17: though he hawks a product that is, as it were, both Yes and

[18] I cite from Béatrice Caseau, "εὐωδία: The Use and Meaning of Fragrances in the Ancient World and Their Christianization (100–900 AD)" (Ph.D. thesis; Princeton University, 1994), 205, which in turn draws on C. R. Whittaker's translation. Caseau devotes many pages (esp. 194–218) to the relationship between aromas and medicine and notes in her preface (p. ii) that she "chased perfumes from bedrooms to temples, from market-places to closets, in veterinarian [*sic*] treatises as well as in love poems. The lion's share, however, was given to medical works. . . . It came as a surprise to me that medicines were fragrant not because the ingredients had an odor that could not be reduced, but because their power to cure was precisely granted to their odor." The first chapter of J. Innes Miller, *The Spice Trade of the Roman Empire: 29 B.C. to A.D. 641* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969), also includes much information on the use of spices in medical practice. We may take particular note of Philo's response (*Prov.* 71 [trans. Colson, LCL]) to the charge that nature, by producing flowers, tempts to sensuality. Flowers, he contends, "were made to give health, not pleasure. For their properties are infinite; they are beneficial in themselves by their scents, impregnating all with their fragrance, and far more beneficial when used by physicians for compounding drugs." For Philo, flowers, properly used, are nothing other than medicine.

[19] The argument that follows presupposes and supports the unity of the letter's first seven chapters. On the various positions on this issue, with references to the literature, see Attridge, "Making Scents," 71 n. 1.

No, he is no worldly man. Later, in 4:2–3, Paul again returns to the phenomenon of simultaneous, contrastive effect.

> [2]We have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways; we refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. [3]And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing.

Paul, presumably fighting off the accusation that his gospel is obscure or misleading, first insists on its patency and authenticity: he neither schemes nor tampers with (δολοῦντες) God's word. In short, he does not act the merchant.[20] But then he concedes that the word of God *is* opaque, albeit only to those who are perishing. As in 2:15, Paul distinguishes between the saved and the perishing—the phrase ἐν τοῖς ἀπολλυμένοις occurs in both contexts—and insists that these groups experience the same word differently.[21] In all, Paul reflects on the motifs of dual effect and earthly commerce together in 1:17; 2:14–17; and 4:2–3.

While the odor imagery of 2 Cor 2:15–16 undoubtedly develops the reference to the triumph in 2:14, this imagery also looks forward to the peddler of 2:17. In light of this link, 2 Cor 2:14–17 emerges as an integrated unit wherein, as twice elsewhere in the first chapters of the epistle, Paul uses a figure of commerce, in this case the peddler, to reflect on the notion of simultaneous contrastive effect. He is no peddler, no worldly man, but, he concedes, there is a kind of double-dealing in his ministry: he proffers, through the same wares, clarity and life to some, obscurity and death to others.

[20] It is worth noting that, as one can tamper with or adulterate wine, one can do the same to spices. Caseau ("εὐωδία," 42–43) observes, "As in contemporary spice markets, spices were often adulterated and mixed with flour or wood dust. Numerous ways to cheat the customers are mentioned in these texts, along with the appropriate tests to check the purity of the products." See also *Sifra Ḥova* 13:1 (ed. Weiss, 28a), which includes in a list of commercial frauds not only adulteration of wine with water but also "mingling . . . ass milk in balsam, sand in beans (?), gum in myrrh, grape leaves in folium." The verb for tampering that Paul employs in 4:2 (and again in 11:13 and 12:16) occurs in Lev 19:16 LXX as the equivalent of רכיל, a word that, as noted above, rabbinic literature closely associates with the רוכל.

[21] The very first reference to the contrast between sincerity and worldliness in the letter, in 1:12 (noted above), responds to the same complaint addressed in 4:2–3 about the obscurity of the gospel. Thus Paul continues in 1:13–14: "For we write to you nothing but what you can read and understand; I hope you will understand fully, as you have understood in part." Here, too, Paul concedes that his teaching remains partially veiled, but in this case he distinguishes not between the damned and the saved, but between the present (partial understanding) and the future (full understanding).