

## CHAPTER I

*Theology and its context*

## INTRODUCTION

Theology is always earthed in a context. Over the centuries, Christian theologians have tried to construct theological systems which they have believed to be eternal, but in practice the statement of theological truths has to be constantly revised, because human language, human cultures, human philosophies, etc. are all subject to change, and in the end theology has to be articulated for human beings in human concepts.

This is not to pre-judge the issue of the source of revelation.<sup>1</sup> If the Christian claim that God has revealed the divine self has any validity, then God has accommodated that revelation to human circumstances, using human language, coming in human form. One of the key claims of the Christian tradition is that God has been concerned with the particularities of human existence. Christian theology therefore has to take seriously the particular historical context of those documents which are believed to be God's Word, and also the particular context in which those documents are being interpreted.

If that is true for the New Testament in general, it is especially acute for the interpreter of the so-called Pastoral epistles.<sup>2</sup> This title is used for the three little letters which

<sup>1</sup> Two recent discussions may be recommended: my own book, *The Art of Performance* (London, 1990); and Sandra Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (San Francisco, 1991). See further chapter 7.

<sup>2</sup> This designation seems to have originated with P. Anton in 1726. It is generally held to describe their character as address to 'pastors' concerning the shepherding of their churches.

appear to be written by the Apostle Paul to his helpers, Timothy and Titus. However, it seems these letters were slower than others coming into use in the second century, and their contents strongly suggest that to accept that attribution is to misread the setting and purpose of these texts. So there are problems with discerning the particular historical context of these documents. There are also problems for the context of the modern Christian reader. To a fair extent the teaching in these epistles seems very culture-specific, concerned as they are with the practical outworking of Christian living at the time and in the social environment in which they were written. Unquestionably, women readers have found much here that has tended to marginalise them in the structures of churches which believe their organisation to be based on scripture in general and the Pastorals in particular. The problems related to both contexts, that of writer and reader, will have to be addressed.

But there is another problem of New Testament Theology which is particularly acute in the case of the Pastorals. These documents are not theological treatises, and the theology is often implicit rather than explicit. It has even been seriously suggested that the Pastorals have very little theology, and that would seem to make the project of this book impossible. However, any attempt to read these letters soon runs up against the fact that they come from a particular social context in which there is an encompassing theological perspective which colours all the material which at first sight appears to be ethical or practical rather than theological in its principal thrust. To discuss the theology of the Pastorals is therefore to engage in a reconstruction not only of their context but of their tradition. Explicitly there is a lack of theological concern, but their fundamentally theological character may be seen in the way they map out life lived under God.

The problem with reconstructing context and tradition is that the evidence for embarking on this consists largely of the texts themselves. Of course a certain amount can be gained by comparison with other texts, whether from the immediate period, or texts which we know would have been influential, such as the Jewish scriptures. These can provide access to the

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kind of culture, inbuilt assumptions and linguistic community which is likely to have formed the mind of the author and the original readers. In the case of the Pastorals such comparison is particularly important, especially comparison with other early Christian literature, not least the letters of Paul, for the relationship between these three brief letters and the other evidence we have about early Christianity can alone help to determine their date, background and tradition. Yet we cannot entirely escape from the problem that reconstructing context and tradition depends on reading the very texts that we wish to elucidate through that reconstruction. This creates a problem of method. It is all too easy to set up an interpretative framework in advance which then determines how the texts are read.

But there is a sense in which providing an outline of the theology of these epistles implies that conclusions have been reached on the basis of reading and re-reading the texts, taking account of the circularity involved. That circularity I would prefer to regard as spiralling, in the sense that each attempt at reconstruction is provisional and subject to revision as a result of re-reading, and each re-reading is illuminated by the cumulative process of piecing together the clues. So in accordance with the shape of other studies in this series, this opening chapter will attempt to show how and why these epistles are placed in a certain historical context. The subsequent chapters will relate both the explicit and the implicit theological content of the epistles to that context, in the process both illuminating and to some extent confirming the hypothetical reconstruction. It is not intended, however, simply to read these epistles as historical documents; so the final chapters consider their reception within the Christian tradition, and how there can be an appropriate reading of them as scripture in the different socio-cultural environment of present-day readers.

## THE ORIGINAL READERS

The texts invite us to suppose that the recipients of these letters were Timothy and Titus, one being addressed to the latter, two to the former. Quite quickly, however, we are left a little

puzzled. What we find in 1 Timothy and Titus (2 Timothy is somewhat different) is a collection of instructions about ordering the belief and life of the church which, on the one hand, seem to be adapted ‘household codes’, and on the other hand, anticipate later church orders and collections of canons. These later collections of church instructions, like the *Didachē*, the *Didascalía Apostolorum* and the *Apostolic Constitutions*,<sup>3</sup> invariably attribute their origins to Apostles, but clearly all developed over time as community manuals. The texts with which we are concerned, namely the Pastorals, also appear to have a community in view rather than an individual, to be public not private communications, presented as having the apostolic authority of Paul.<sup>4</sup>

But the community’s tradition is in this case cast in a form that also presents Timothy and Titus as its authoritative mediators from Paul. Yet they are characterized as in the authentic Pauline letters or the narrative of Acts, despite the supposed situation being new and different, probably later. So where Timothy the individual is addressed, sometimes he is

<sup>3</sup> The *Didachē* (*The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*) was regarded by some in the third century as part of the canon of scripture, but was later lost. It was rediscovered in 1883. Many think that it has a ‘primitive’ character and belongs to the first century; others regard its primitiveness as ‘contrived’ and place it in the second. Whatever the date of its compilation, it certainly contains material from earlier times and probably of various dates. It was put together as a compendium of what we might call ‘church conventions’ and is usually described as ‘a rudimentary manual of church order’ (Simon Tugwell, *The Apostolic Fathers* (London 1989)). It is easily accessible in the Penguin translation, *Early Christian Writings*, by Maxwell Staniforth and Andrew Louth (revised, London, 1987). Its content was incorporated into later collections of canons, such as the *Didascalía Apostolorum* and the *Apostolic Constitutions*. The *Didascalía* (*The Catholic Teaching of the Twelve Apostles and Holy Disciples of our Saviour*) probably comes from Syria and was compiled in the early third century; the original Greek is lost but it survives complete in Syriac and other versions: see R. H. Connolly, *Didascalía Apostolorum: The Syriac Version Translated and Accompanied by the Verona Latin Fragments* (Oxford, 1929). The *Apostolic Constitutions* (ET in the Ante-Nicene Christian Library, vol. xvii (Edinburgh, 1870)) is the largest collection of legislative and liturgical material, the first six books being an edited and expanded version of the material in the *Didascalía*, the seventh an enlargement of the *Didachē*, and the eighth using as its source another earlier work known as *The Apostolic Tradition* of (Ps.-) Hippolytus. The collection probably dates from the late fourth century. These examples are the most important instances of what was clearly a developing and expanding collection of ‘canonical traditions’.

<sup>4</sup> Norbert Brox, *Die Pastoralbriefe*, Regensburger Neues Testament 7.2 (Regensburg, 1969), pp. 11–12, emphasises the official character of these documents. They are concerned with discipline, and present exemplary, authoritative, apostolic instruction.

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treated as the bearer of a tradition with considerable authority to root out false teaching (e.g. 1.3ff.; 4.6ff.), sometimes as the youngster assistant who needs to have his authority enhanced, is singularly ignorant of fairly elementary matters and even has to be told rather well-known things about his master, Paul (e.g. 4.12; 6.11ff.; 1.12ff. and 2 Tim.). Titus is less well characterised, but also seems to need surprising reminders if he really held the position attributed to him.

Thus the implied readership, as distinct from the stated readership, seems to be a Christian community or communities somewhere, sometime in the first (or possibly early second) century, for which Paul's authority is important and believed to have been transmitted through his close personal assistants, Timothy and Titus. The implication that these texts carry is that the original 'seniors' (presbyters) and leaders of the community received appointment from Paul's envoys.

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One only has to read the opening verses of the body of the first letter to Timothy to realise that at the time when these texts were produced there was grave concern about 'false teaching'. The nature of that false teaching is hinted at, but remains somewhat elusive because, unlike Paul, in Galatians for example, the texts do not address the issues or confute them by argument; rather the falsity of the opposing teachings is simply asserted, and particular practices enjoined upon any community which intends to remain faithful to the approved tradition. That may in itself provide some clues, but the reconstruction of the context is not absolutely straightforward. We must consider the possibilities and the grounds on which a particular reconstruction may be recommended.

Let us begin by noting what these three letters actually say about the false teaching:

*1 Timothy 1.1-7*

The false teachers apparently devote themselves to interminable myths and genealogies, regarded by this text as simply

generating speculation. They go astray into a wilderness of words. They set out to be teachers of the law, though they do not understand the words they use or the subjects about which they are so dogmatic.

*1 Timothy 1.19–20*

Assuming these verses refer to the same people, two are named as Hymenaeus and Alexander; they are said to have made shipwreck of their faith, and it is implied that ‘Paul’ regarded their teaching as blasphemous. Probably the same Hymenaeus appears in 2 Timothy 2.17, though there his name is coupled with a certain Philetus.

*1 Timothy 4.1–7*

It is clearly believed that the Spirit foretold that some would forsake the faith and surrender their minds to subversive spirits and demon-inspired doctrines. This suggests that the false teaching is recognised to be a perversion of the truth, rather than totally alien to it. The falsehoods sound only too plausible because they are close to what the tradition has taught. We are now told that the false teachers forbid marriage and insist on abstinence from foods which God created to be enjoyed with thanksgiving. A strong ascetic bent is implied. Again warning is offered against superstitious myths and old wives’ tales. It is not altogether clear whether there is any connection between such old-wives’ tales and the gossiping of younger unmarried widows mentioned in 5.11–13, though some connection may be hinted at in the fact that there the young widows are unmarried and here the condemnation of marriage is forbidden.

*1 Timothy 6.3ff. and 20*

Again those who teach and preach other than sound precepts are described as having a morbid enthusiasm for mere speculations and quibbles. They are charged with causing jealousy, slander, suspicion and division in the community, and with

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expecting that religion should yield dividends, the implication being that it provides some kind of profit, for the next verses speak of the love of money and the proper use of riches.<sup>5</sup> Finally ‘Timothy’ is advised to turn a deaf ear to empty and irreligious chatter, and the contradictions of ‘knowledge falsely so-called’.

*2 Timothy 2.14ff.*

People are to be charged not to dispute about mere words. ‘Timothy’ is to avoid empty and irreligious chatter. False teaching is like an infection, spreading like gangrene. Hymenaeus appears again, this time with Philetus. So far we seem justified in assuming that the same group is in view. Now we learn something new: these people are associated with the view that the resurrection has happened already. ‘Timothy’ is to have nothing to do with foolish and wild speculations because they generate battles.

*2 Timothy 3*

As we move into the next chapter, we seem to find all this associated with the final eschatological turmoil as the end of the world approaches. Emphasis is placed on love of self and money, on pride and self-importance, scandalmongering and hatred, loving pleasures more than God. These people preserve the outward form of religion, but are a denial of its power. But are they the false teachers? Their ‘lack of control’ seems somewhat incompatible with the asceticism we found earlier (the Greek *akrateis* is the opposite of ‘enkratite’, a word used later for extreme ascetics). Yet the love of money, the pride and the divisiveness seem recognisable, and as we go on we find that they insinuate themselves into private houses and lead astray

<sup>5</sup> This range of charges may reflect standard motifs of vilification; see Robert J. Karris, ‘The Background and Significance of the Polemic of the Pastoral Epistles’, *JBL* 92 (1973), 549–64. The view of Dibelius–Conzelmann is substantiated with detailed evidence, though Karris usefully distinguishes features of the opponents from the predominantly ‘stock’ descriptions.

gullible women. Does this perhaps imply the same situation as was implied in 1 Tim. 4.7 and 5.13?

These people are compared with Jannes and Jambres, the legendary opponents of Moses. Their names do not appear in the Jewish scriptures, but are found in many Jewish texts of the Hellenistic period.<sup>6</sup> Since they were two of Pharaoh's magicians, the comparison may imply charges of sorcery, but the explicit point made is that they oppose the truth. Their minds are warped and their foolishness will eventually be exposed. Perhaps the false teachers are also in view when it is suggested that while persecution will come to every true believer, evil doers and charlatans will progress from bad to worse, deceiving and deceived.

Those criticised would seem to bear comparison with the false teachers in 1 Timothy despite the curious differences noted.

#### *2 Timothy 4.3–4.*

The context is again the Final Judgment and end-time, and the time is predicted when people will not stand sound teaching but will all follow their own whim and gather a crowd of teachers to tickle their fancy, stopping their ears to the truth and turning to fables. These verses seem to confirm that 2 Timothy has the same opponents in view as 1 Timothy (e.g. 4.1–7).<sup>7</sup>

#### *Titus 1.10ff*

These verses follow an injunction to 'sound teaching', and contrast certain Jewish converts who are undisciplined, talk wildly and lead others astray. Such people have to be silenced. It is suggested that they do it for gain, which is a point already noted in the letters to Timothy.

<sup>6</sup> Exod 7.8ff. and 9.11 refer to Pharaoh's magicians but do not name them. For witnesses to this unwritten Jewish tradition, see Dibelius–Conzelmann, *The Pastoral Epistles* (ET Philadelphia, 1972), p. 117.

<sup>7</sup> See above, p. 6.



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Curiously it is then implied that the false teachers are Cretans, for the universally known proverb, 'All Cretans are liars' is used against them.<sup>8</sup> This letter purports to be addressed to Titus in Crete, so geographically this suits, though it may not immediately seem compatible with the statement that they are Jews, or with their similarity to the false teachers of the letters to Timothy who is supposed to be in Ephesus. If the false teachers represent a widespread movement, however, the geography may present no problems, and we should not forget that Acts presents Jews from the Diaspora on pilgrimage to Jerusalem calling themselves Parthians, Medes, Elamites ... Cretans and Arabs (2.9–11).

Anyway, these presumably local disrupters are to be rebuked and restored to a sound faith, instead of paying heed to Jewish myths and 'human commandments', presumably a less than respectful reference to the Jewish law. These comments marry well with the opening description in 1 Timothy which associates teaching the law with interest in myths, though many scholars have found this association problematic when it comes to identifying the false teachers.

*Titus 3.9–11*

An injunction to avoid foolish speculations, genealogies, quarrels and controversies over the law again reminds us of the first letter to Timothy (1 Tim. 1.1–7; 6.3ff.), as does the warning against those who are contentious, and the reference to having a distorted mind.

Surveying this material, we note two points which have produced a certain puzzlement: firstly, the association of concern with the law, or 'human commandments' in the writer's view, with myths, speculations and genealogies, and the association of the latter with Jews; secondly, the apparent contradiction

<sup>8</sup> The proverb was attributed to Epimenides of Knossos in Crete, one of the 'seven wise men' of Greek antiquity (sixth century BC), described as a prophet by Plato, Aristotle and Cicero. The saying was so well known that *krêtizein* (to Cretise) was a slang word for lying or cheating, and a famous logical puzzle was: if a Cretan says all Cretans are liars, how can it be true?

between the charges concerned with money-grubbing and pleasures and the implication that the false teachers encouraged a radical asceticism in both diet and sexual relations. Each of these requires consideration.

(1) The phrase ‘*gnōsis* falsely so-called’ (1 Tim. 6.20) came to be used by the church Fathers as a description of that family of heresies modern scholarship has named ‘gnosticism’,<sup>9</sup> and the myths and genealogies have therefore been widely interpreted as referring to cosmological schemata such as are found in the gnostic systems of the second century, the ‘families of descending emanations, or aeons, by which they [i.e. the gnostics like Valentinus] bridged the gulf between the unknowable supreme God and the material order’.<sup>10</sup> Such systems, it used to be thought,<sup>11</sup> arose from the ‘radical Hellenization’ of Christianity. So the phrase ‘Jewish myths’ (Titus 1.14) and the association with ‘Jewish converts’ seemed on the face of it somewhat problematic. Even more curious was the apparent interest in the Jewish law.

This apparent discrepancy led some scholars to challenge the notion that gnosticism was in view. The genealogies, it was suggested,<sup>12</sup> are to do with Jewish Haggadic interest in the genealogies of the scriptures, the sort of thing found in the book of Jubilees, and so they concluded that the problems were

<sup>9</sup> The most comprehensive recent survey of what is one of the most debated subjects in modern scholarship is provided by Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis* (ET Edinburgh, 1983). An alternative perspective is provided by Simone Pétrement, *A Separate God: The Christian Origins of Gnosticism* (ET London, 1991). Earlier useful works include R. McL. Wilson, *The Gnostic Problem* (London, 1958); R. M. Grant, *Gnosticism and Early Christianity* (London 1959); E. M. Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism* (London, 1973).

<sup>10</sup> Quoted from J. N. D. Kelly, *The Pastoral Epistles*, Black’s New Testament Commentaries (London, 1963), p. 44.

<sup>11</sup> Harnack’s much-quoted description, in his *History of Dogma* at the turn of the century, was ‘the acute Hellenization of Christianity’.

<sup>12</sup> E.g. E. F. Scott, *The Pastoral Epistles*, The Moffatt New Testament Commentary (London, 1936), pp. 8ff.; of other English commentators, Kelly is sympathetic, but the idea is contested by C. K. Barrett, *The Pastoral Epistles*, New Clarendon Bible (Oxford, 1963), and A. T. Hanson, *The Pastoral Epistles*, The New Century Bible Commentary (London, 1982). Dibelius–Conzelmann also reject the theory, referring to German discussions. The Book of Jubilees can be found in J. H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments*, vol. II (London, 1983).