

**Part I**

*Paul, Letters and Communities*

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Excerpt  
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## I What Do We Find in Paul's Letters?

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Whatever else he might have been, the apostle Paul was resolute, daring, and audacious. By comparison with many others of his day, he lived his life at breakneck speed – always digging deeper, moving forward, adding more to the agenda. Throughout the short span of time that he is viewable on the screen of world history, Paul passionately advocated a configuration of devotion that was new to the Roman world – the worship of the God of Israel through the one Paul called “our Lord Jesus Christ.” That passion, captured in the letters he wrote to struggling young Jesus-groups, resulted in an impressive amalgam that combined the spirited novelty of Jesus-devotion with the robust resources of Paul's Jewish heritage – with different mixtures of the two at any given time, and often with an eye on the socio-religious structures that animated the Roman world.

Writing letters was Paul's way of guiding fledgling communities of Jesus-followers – communities that he had founded (usually) that lay dotted around the eastern Mediterranean basin. In those early days when many aspects of Jesus-devotion were in their infancy and in some state of flux, Paul had a mixed reputation because he advocated views and practices that were controversial. Sometimes members of early Jesus-groups held Paul in high esteem, supporting his cause to the extent of sponsoring it financially from their own limited resources. But some people in communities he had founded (and beyond them as well) began to wonder whether Paul might be something of a charlatan, extracting money from those on whom he preyed; or a dangerous maverick, striking out on his own while devising theological discourse that was ethically defective and theologically problematic; or unreliable, given to changing his mind about plans he had already devised.<sup>1</sup> Some

<sup>1</sup> For discussion of Paul's critics, see Patrick Gray, *Paul as a Problem in History and Culture: The Apostle and His Critics through the Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016).

thought there was an imbalance in his self-presentation, with his letters being powerful but his personality being weak and unimpressive.<sup>2</sup> Even someone who admired Paul nonetheless admitted that some things in his letters are “hard to understand” (2 Pet 3:16).

As hard as they might be to understand, Paul’s letters have been formative in the shaping of history, especially ecclesial history – contributing much to defining the contours of Christian discourse and identity for two millennia. In theological debates strewn throughout Christian history, it is only a slight overstatement to say that all parties have wanted to conscript Paul as an advocate for their cause, to legitimate their respective viewpoints. Even in the early twenty-first century, a leading philosopher (in the process of abandoning the atheism he had long advocated) gave Paul a ringing endorsement of high honor, describing him as “a first class intellectual” who “had a brilliant philosophical mind.”<sup>3</sup>

This description of Paul’s intellectual credentials might come as some surprise to those who imagine that Paul advocated a simple view that faith is all that’s needed to enable the Christian soul to enter through the heavenly gates at the point of death. There are many reasons why this simplistic impression of Paul has taken hold in popular form, and many reasons why it is a truncated and unsatisfactory understanding of the letters from which we derive our knowledge of his life and theological discourse. Whatever we might think of Paul, his message was anything but simple. Paul was an expert at what we might call “thick description” – that is, he was able to see deeply into a situation, constructing its terms of engagement and assessing what he deemed to be the contours of its deepest theological significance. He interpreted the past, the future, the present; he interpreted the lives of individuals, of communities, of cultures. In all these ways, he was a dynamic lifelong learner, “constantly learning from, and deploying, a variety of sources and strategies in a complex, shifting, and challenging environment” of the Roman world.<sup>4</sup>

#### WHY DID PAUL WRITE LETTERS?

Paul’s letters are the earliest Christian documents in existence. Although timelines for his life and letters are inevitably open to

<sup>2</sup> These questions about Paul derive largely from Paul’s self-defense in 2 Cor 10–13.

<sup>3</sup> Anthony Flew (or his ghost writer), *There Is a God: How the World’s Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2007), 157, 186.

<sup>4</sup> Paul M. Robertson, *Paul’s Letters and Contemporary Greco-Roman Literature: Theorizing a New Taxonomy* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 219.

discussion and debate, most scholars place his letters generally within the 50s – with some scholars placing a few texts into the 60s. By comparison, the canonical gospels began to circulate a few decades later: Mark's Gospel in the early 70s; Matthew's Gospel and Luke's Gospel in the 80s or 90s; John's Gospel in the 90s – all these dates being rough estimates. When Paul founded groups of Jesus-followers in urban centers of the Roman world, those groups had few of the resources to support a robust corporate life as devotees of Jesus Christ. It is hard to imagine that these groups would have known much more than the outline of Paul's story about Jesus's death and resurrection and, perhaps, some of Jesus's sayings (although even that is open to question).<sup>5</sup> Having access only to some oral traditions, young Jesus-groups could not draw on an established tradition of theological reflections embodied within Christian canonical texts. When Paul left one city in order to bring his "good news" (or "gospel") elsewhere, the groups he left behind were outfitted with very few traditional resources. If he was confident that those fledgling communities would survive without his direct oversight, this was probably because he believed that the Spirit of God was enlivening all aspects of their corporate life (e.g., 1 Thess 5:12–22).

Paul's letters were not exercises in "systematic theology," sorting out theological intricacies for successive Christian generations. We don't find in them a theological system packaged in a precisely ordered, well-defined, immaculately structured presentation of "doctrinal truths." Paul would not even have seen the need to set out an exhaustive systematic articulation of Christian doctrine to enhance the theological discourse of the Christian church for generations to come; such a thing would have been unnecessary. Paul's letters often give the impression that the culmination of all time would soon be dawning on this world, perhaps within his own lifetime or in the not-too-distant future (e.g., 1 Thess 4:16–17; 1 Cor 7:26, 29–31; 15:51).

Written in Greek to Jesus-followers in specific first-century situations, Paul's letters were meant to guide particular Jesus-followers who, in his view, needed theological fine-tuning – or, at times, a more radical overhaul. Sending letters was his way of assisting struggling communities, trying to get them through to the next stage of their development, seeking to ensure that their devotion to Jesus Christ would stay focused within certain

<sup>5</sup> On the sayings of Jesus in Jesus-groups established by Paul, see Heinz Hiesterermann, *Paul and the Synoptic Jesus Tradition* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2017); Michael B. Thompson, *Clothed with Christ: The Example and Teaching of Jesus in Romans 12:1–15:13* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011).

theological parameters before the imminent coming of their Lord. As such, Paul's letters generally engaged in issues that, in his mind, were on the near horizon for Jesus-groups and for his own ministry.

Not a systematic theologian, Paul was more like a pastoral theologian, teaching Jesus-followers to think theologically about who they were – how their story was animated by the story of God's engagement with the world, how they were developing in their devotion to Jesus Christ, how they differed from the "pagan" environment all around them, and how they were to engage with each other and with others beyond their corporate gatherings. Doing theology "on the move," Paul was a master of pastoral "theologizing" in an effort to help communities of Jesus-followers shape their identities in relation to a worldview of what God has already done in Christ and would bring to completion through Christ.<sup>6</sup>

#### WHAT LETTERS DID PAUL WRITE?

When we study Paul's letters, we are, in one sense, studying a collection of diverse texts that early communities of Jesus-followers kept, copied, and circulated among themselves (and with others) – evidently finding those letters to be important for their self-understanding. When later Christian leaders compiled lists of the standard texts that were expected to edify Christian faith and practices (i.e., the "canon"), many letters with Paul's name on them were placed within that diverse library.<sup>7</sup> But not all of Paul's letters have survived; some letters seem to have fallen out of circulation (one of which is referenced in 1 Cor 5:9; see also 1 Cor 16:1; Col 4:16).<sup>8</sup> By contrast, some texts were written in Paul's name after his death – such as the second-century texts known as *The Letter to the Laodiceans* and *3 Corinthians*.<sup>9</sup> These are instances in which

<sup>6</sup> On Paul's theological discourse in relation to situations, see (for instance) J. C. Beker, *Paul the Apostle* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1980), 23–108; Calvin Roetzel, *The Letters of Paul: Conversations in Context*, 5th ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> Those letters were usually ordered from longest to shortest, first in relation to letters sent to communities (Romans through 2 Thessalonians, with only Ephesians being out of order in terms of length) and then in relation to letters sent to individuals (1 Timothy through Philemon).

<sup>8</sup> The same thing may have been the case for writings by other New Testament authors, as illustrated by 3 John 9: "I [previously] wrote to the church" – a comment that seems to reference a letter that has not survived.

<sup>9</sup> On the theological discourse of the *Letter to the Laodiceans*, see Bruce W. Longenecker and Scott C. Ryan, "Presenting the Pauline Voice: An Appreciation of the Letter to the Laodiceans," *New Testament Studies* 62 (2016): 136–148.

later authors used Paul's name to authenticate certain theological convictions that they thought could be attributable to Paul, at least by extension – even doing so “out of love for Paul,” as one such writer from the late second century seems to have professed.<sup>10</sup> In the process, various texts were written that expanded the narrative of what Paul stood for.<sup>11</sup> As a consequence, Paul came to be memorialized across a spectrum of views, placed as an apostolic fountainhead for diverse trajectories of Christian identity.<sup>12</sup>

Many scholars think this same process of extending the Pauline voice (or, in a sense, writing “speech in character”) applies to some texts contained within the New Testament itself. Of the thirteen New Testament texts that have Paul's name on them, seven are “undisputed,” being recognized as authored by Paul. In canonical order, these are: Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon. The other six are “disputed” in terms of their authorship: 2 Thessalonians, Colossians, Ephesians, 2 Timothy, 1 Timothy, and Titus (listed in impressionistic order from most likely to least likely to have been authored by Paul).<sup>13</sup> Scholars will differ as to whether any or all of these six are to be included in attempts to discern the theologizing of Paul himself.<sup>14</sup> The practice of “allonymity” or

<sup>10</sup> Tertullian says that this motivation was declared by the person who wrote the popular second-century story of Paul and Thecla in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*; see Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 17.

<sup>11</sup> Laura Salah Nasrallah (*Archaeology and the Letters of Paul* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019], 253–254) proposes that “we should not define as forgeries or deceptions writings in Paul's name but not from Paul's pen. Rather, we should understand them as part of a larger literary tendency in antiquity, that of producing an ‘epistolary narrative’ to flesh out the life of a great man . . . . The afterlives of Paul make sense as early Christian improvisations of history rooted in the growing sainthood of this man.”

<sup>12</sup> See, for instance, Richard I. Pervo, *The Making of Paul: Constructions of the Apostle in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010); Benjamin L. White, *Remembering Paul: Ancient and Modern Contests over the Image of the Apostle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Jens Schröter, Simon Buttica, and Andreas Dettwiler, eds., *Receptions of Paul in Early Christianity: The Person of Paul and His Writings through the Eyes of His Early Interpreters* (Berlin: deGruyter, 2018); Isaac Oliver and Gabriele Boccaccini, eds., *The Early Reception of Paul the Second Temple Jew: Text, Narrative, and Reception History* (New York: T&T Clark, 2018).

<sup>13</sup> In the early centuries of Christian history, the Epistle to the Hebrews was occasionally thought to have been written by Paul, although many other authors were also proposed. While the letter may have been influenced somewhat by Pauline thought, there is nothing to suggest that Paul himself was involved in authoring it.

<sup>14</sup> Making decisions on these matters is more of an art than a science, but neither is it without some controls. Decisions take into account certain aspects of the texts, such as the linguistic style, the way ideas are expressed, the theological content, and the

“allegigraphy” (writing in the voice of another; usually referred to as “pseudonymity” or “pseudepigraphy”) means that any or all of these six texts need to be used with some caution when reconstructing Paul’s own theological discourse.<sup>15</sup> Several scenarios illustrate the point.

- (1) Should we use both the undisputed 1 Thessalonians and the disputed 2 Thessalonians to reconstruct the Thessalonian situation and Paul’s response to it, or only 1 Thessalonians?
- (2) Was Colossians authored by Paul, with an earnest disciple refreshing Paul’s letter by writing a similar letter (Ephesians, which reuses about two-thirds of Colossians) in order to bring together a number of strands of Paul’s thought and represent them?<sup>16</sup> Or were both letters written by Paul himself? Or were they both allonymous?
- (3) Should we link Colossians and Philemon to the same historical situation, or are the two letters only artificially related, one being authored by Paul (Philemon) and the other by an earnest disciple seeking to extend Paul’s voice into a new day and a new context (Colossians)?<sup>17</sup>

It is not necessary to lay out all the permutations of how the six disputed letters might be analyzed in relation to the seven undisputed letters of Paul. These are simply three scenarios illustrating that reconstructing the theology of Paul is not a simple task, even with regard to the sources available to us for that task.

#### DID OTHER PEOPLE CONTRIBUTE TO PAUL’S LETTERS?

A number of letters in the Pauline corpus suggest that they were sent under the authority of Paul together with other people. In canonical order, the Pauline letters that list more than one sender include:

manner in which the author engages with opposition. The case of 1 Timothy is especially interesting, since it seems to be cognizant of the Lukan Gospel (with 1 Tim 5:18 and Luke 10:7 sharing a saying word-for-word; cf. Matt 10:10) – a gospel that most scholars would date in the 80s or 90s.

<sup>15</sup> On the issue of allonymity or allegigraphy (both from the Greek “*allos*,” meaning “other”), see especially I. Howard Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 79–92.

<sup>16</sup> On this reading of Ephesians, see Carey Newman, “Narrative Cross, Apocalyptic Resurrection: Ephesians and Reading Paul,” in *One God, One People, One Future*, eds. John Anthony Dunne and Eric Lewellen (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2018), 493–512.

<sup>17</sup> The first of these approaches appears in Douglas Campbell’s essay in this book. For an earlier version of the same approach, see Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, *Paul: His Story* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 147–157.



- 1 Corinthians, sent by Paul and Sosthenes (1 Cor 1:1)
- 2 Corinthians, sent by Paul and Timothy (2 Cor 1:1)
- Galatians, sent by Paul "and all the members of God's family who are with me" (Gal 1:1–2)
- Philippians, sent by Paul and Timothy (Phil 1:1)
- Colossians, sent by Paul and Timothy (Col 1:1)
- 1 Thessalonians, sent by Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy (1 Thess 1:1)
- 2 Thessalonians, sent by Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy (2 Thess 1:1)
- Philemon, sent by Paul and Timothy (Phlm 1:1)

How are we to interpret these lists of senders at the start of these letters? Were the letters written jointly, with Paul sharing authorial rights equally with the others? Were the letters the "product of a complex exchange of ideas of which Paul was a key contributor, but not the only one whose ideas were reflected in the final product"?<sup>18</sup> Was Paul the leader of a small group of associates, some of whom served as Paul's assistants in preparing his letters?<sup>19</sup> Or was this co-author/co-sender convention merely a formality – nothing more than a kindly inclusive gesture, perhaps, or more likely, a rhetorical device used simply to bolster the authority of the letter (by enlarging the authorial voices)? Was Paul always the main author of these letters, even if there were co-senders at times?<sup>20</sup>

One recent study has suggested that the most likely situation was something like this: A scribal secretary (perhaps someone like Tertius, who introduces himself in Rom 16:22 as "the writer of this letter") would have taken notes while listening to Paul and any others who might have contributed ideas regarding what should be included in the letter. From these preliminary notes, the secretary would have prepared a rough draft of a letter, which was read to Paul and his team, who collectively would make corrections and additions along the way. This editing process would have continued until Paul and the others were

<sup>18</sup> See Richard S. Ascough, *1 & 2 Thessalonians: Encountering the Christ Group at Thessalonike* (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 22. Relatedly, Murphy-O'Connor (*Paul: His Story*, 165–166) hypothesizes that, when we consider factors why Paul's relationship with the Corinthians derailed after the writing of 1 Corinthians, one factor might be that Sosthenes had given him bad advice about the "unChristian" approach Paul should take when writing 1 Corinthians.

<sup>19</sup> For this view, see E. Randolph Richards, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing: Secretaries, Composition, and Collection* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 155, where Paul's letters are called "team letters."

<sup>20</sup> For this view, see Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians* (London: A & C Black, 1998), 86.

satisfied with a final product. For some of the longer letters (such as Romans and the Corinthian letters), the process might have taken about two weeks to complete.<sup>21</sup> Then the letter would have been sent with a letter carrier to its intended audience.<sup>22</sup>

Paul's letters give different impressions about their authorship. In a letter like 1 Thessalonians, for instance, there is little indication that Paul took the lead as the primary authorial voice. That letter includes numerous references to its three senders through the use of first-person plural referents ("we," "our," "us"), while first-person singular referents that highlight Paul appear only rarely throughout the five chapters (2:18; 3:5; 5:27). It might be that Paul's was, in fact, the primary authorial voice of that letter, but that impression does not emerge as clearly as we might otherwise expect. On the other hand, in a letter like Galatians, there is very little sense that all those whom Paul refers to as co-senders ("all the members of God's family who are with me") contributed much to the letter. In that letter, virtually everything seems to be flowing from the mind of Paul, with first-person singular referents appearing throughout its six chapters. (First-person pronouns appear approximately 40 times in Galatians, and there are also first-person singular verbal forms to add to that number.)<sup>23</sup>

The influence of other people may be evident in some of the Pauline letters in another manner as well. Some letters have features that leave them vulnerable to theories of textual compilation. It is sometimes suspected that some letters are not in the same form now as they were when originally composed; instead, two or more of Paul's letters may have been joined together to form the unified text that we now have. The people who combined the letters are usually thought to have been

<sup>21</sup> Richards, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing*, 93. In Richards's view (see 164–165), even copying the finished version of Romans would have taken nearly twelve hours (likely a three day process in itself); before that, the secretary's preparation of the various drafts of a letter like Romans might have taken twelve days, excluding the note-taking sessions and the final composition. As Richards notes, we should refrain from thinking "that Paul easily dashed off a letter over the weekend" (165).

<sup>22</sup> A common view of Paul's letter to the Romans, for instance, is that Phoebe, "the benefactor of many" (Rom 16:2), carried the letter from Corinth to Rome – probably even being involved in reading and explaining the letter to Jesus-groups in Rome. On the role of Phoebe (and her probable slave Tertius), see, for instance, Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 22.

<sup>23</sup> Compare the early Christian document called 1 Clement (c. 80–110). It purports to have been written by the collective members of the church in Rome, but its writing style gives no evidence of multiple authors; instead, it seems to have been composed by one person, who was later identified as Clement (rightly or wrongly).