



EARLY  
CHRISTIAN  
READER

*Introduction*

***The Letters of Paul***

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*Letters Attributed to Paul*

*Letters Associated with Peter*

*Biography, Anecdote, and History*

*Writings Attributed to John*

*Other Early Writings*

*Appendixes*



## THE LETTERS OF PAUL

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PAUL'S LETTERS ARE THE EARLIEST known Christian writings. He was a leading missionary for the fledgling church from about 35 to 60 C.E. His letters are mainly addressed to the new Christian groups he established in the major cities of the eastern Mediterranean. Because they are the only documents that certainly come from the first Christian generation, his letters are of paramount importance for the study of Christian beginnings. It is especially fortunate for historians that he wrote letters and not essays, for their conversational nature illuminates not only Paul's thinking but also the viewpoints of the *other* first-generation Christians with whom Paul was in dialogue. Only in the last two centuries, however, have scholars really begun to read the letters in this way.

For most of their two-thousand-year history, Paul's writings were interpreted by virtue of their honored place in the Christian canon. Like other biblical documents, they were read as data for systematic theology, so that every statement became a timeless truth. Augustine, for example, took *Rom.* 5:12–21 as a basis for his doctrine of “original sin” without noticing that Paul never invokes such a doctrine elsewhere in his letters; this idea was arguably not even part of Paul's characteristic preaching. Or again, Augustine and Calvin drew an elaborate doctrine of “predestination” from *Romans* 9–11 without worrying much about the situation in which Paul wrote these paragraphs, how they functioned in the overall argument of *Romans*, or whether *Romans* itself was typical of Paul's preaching. That Paul's writings were real letters, written for particular situations in the first-generation church, was largely forgotten. Scholars entered the nineteenth century absorbed primarily with the content (or “what?”) of Paul's letters as theological statements. It took the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to raise the equally important questions: Who really wrote the letters? When? Why? How? Five modern developments since that time are especially noteworthy.

### The Unity of First-Generation Christianity

First came the work of Ferdinand Christian Baur, who began to teach at Tübingen, Germany, in the 1830s. Because he accepted the view of history

formulated by G. W. F. Hegel, Baur was extremely sensitive to apparent conflicts among the NT writings; these antitheses, he thought, were the means by which history progressed. For Baur's interpretation of Paul, two conflicts were crucial. First, he found evidence that the traditional view of a harmonious early church, in which the leaders essentially agreed on the significance of Christ, was mistaken. He argued that Paul's letters revealed serious disagreements with those apostles (especially Peter and James) who wanted Christianity to remain Jewish. This contentious issue of the church's relationship to Judaism, Baur contended, preoccupied earliest Christianity. Another sort of conflict that he noticed was within the group of thirteen letters traditionally ascribed to Paul. The German critic's keen (perhaps overly intuitive) eye found irreconcilable differences of outlook among these letters. Accordingly, he declared only *Romans*, *1* and *2 Corinthians*, and *Galatians* to be genuinely Pauline. The others, he claimed, were written in Paul's name by his admirers.

It is a tribute to Baur's insight that, although his Hegelian view of history has few supporters today, and most scholars now accept at least seven of the thirteen letters as authentic, the issues he raised have remained alive. Specialists are still disputing the degree and the possible causes of tension between Peter, Paul, and James. They generally consider *1 Timothy*, *2 Timothy*, and *Titus* as non-Pauline, and they continue to debate the authenticity of *Colossians*, *2 Thessalonians*, and *Ephesians* (see the introduction to LETTERS ATTRIBUTED TO PAUL).

### What's in a Letter?

Still another of Baur's contributions was to focus attention on the occasion and purpose of each letter. Adolf Deissmann pursued this problem more thoroughly toward the end of the nineteenth century. One of the great discoveries of Deissmann's day was a cache of thousands of Greek letters, dating from 300 B.C.E. to 300 C.E., which had been preserved in the dry air of Oxyrhynchus in Egypt. These letters were generally brief, some written on broken pieces of pottery or wood, and they concerned everyday affairs—bills, receipts, friendly notes, and business arrangements. Deissmann's great contribution was to compare Paul's letters with this everyday correspondence. He reached three important conclusions.

He noted, first, that Paul used much the same style of Greek (*koinē* or "common" Greek) that was current among ordinary people in his day. Paul wrote the Greek of the street, used by merchants and businessmen throughout the Roman empire. Before Deissmann's time, Paul's letters could be compared only to the writings of upper-class composers who tended to use an old-fashioned "high" style. Scholars had concluded that NT Greek was unique; some even suggested that this was because of its inspired character. But the discovery of the "nonliterary papyri," as the ancient letters became known, enabled Deissmann to show that Paul wrote the language of the ordinary person.

Deissmann further observed that even the briefest letters discovered in Egypt followed a regular pattern, with a stylized opening, body, and closing. But the same pattern, he showed, was evident in Paul's letters. This meant that Paul's letters were genuine pieces of correspondence, not carefully planned literary productions. Although some famous writers of the ancient world, such as Cicero, did write literary epistles, designed for recital and publication as *belles lettres*, Paul's letters were not of this sort. They were conversational exchanges focused on the particular situation at hand.

Deissmann drew from this observation the consequence that readers should not expect the kind of consistency from Paul's letters that they find in theological essays. Though he had often been treated as the church's first theologian, Paul was in fact responding quickly and spontaneously to crises among his followers. The interpreter must, therefore, give full weight to the situation in which each letter was written and look for the distinctive features of each; one cannot simply lump them all together as if they were a single text.

Although scholars have since found that Deissmann overstated certain points—for example, we have not yet discovered *exact* parallels of Paul's letters in length—his legacy is a foundation of current Pauline studies. Treating Paul's writings as real letters opens our imagination to consider what was going on the other side of the letter: Who were Paul's conversation partners (friends or foes?) and what were they saying? Often, Paul leaves enough clues, sometimes even quoting his addressees (*1 Cor.* 8:1, 4), that we can reconstruct the others' positions with some confidence. And this exercise allows us to discover the views of Christians whose writings were not preserved.

### Did Paul's Thinking Change?

Deissmann's insistence on reading each letter as a response to a unique situation led to a third major development: the recognition that Paul might have changed his views over time as a result of various crises in his life. The traditional view, in treating Paul's writings as a body of revealed truth, excluded the possibility of real shifts in his thinking. Truth, after all, does not change. But is it merely coincidence that Paul's earliest letters (*1 Thessalonians* and *1 Corinthians*) seem to stress the imminence of Jesus' return, during Paul's lifetime, while his later letters (*Philippians*; *2 Corinthians*) raise the possibility of his own death? Many interpreters, from A. Sabatier in the nineteenth century to C. H. Dodd, C. H. Buck, G. Taylor, J. C. Hurd, and G. Lüdemann in recent years, have found significant lines of development in Paul's thinking. These include Paul's views on the time of Jesus' return relative to his own life, the nature of salvation in Christ, and the relationship between his gospel and Judaism. Those who find such developments insist that proper interpretation of Paul requires careful attention to the chronology of his life and letters.

## PAUL'S CAREER IN ACTS AND IN HIS LETTERS

### ACTS

#### *Preaching*

In normal fashion for Hellenistic history-writing, all the speeches reflect the author's perspective. E.g., in *Acts* 13:17–41, the first section (13:17–25) is like Stephen's earlier speech (7:1–43, a survey of Israel's history). The second part (13:26–41) is like Peter's sermons at 2:14–36 and 3:12–26. They all use the same themes and vocabulary: ignorance of the Jewish leaders in killing Jesus; Christ predestined to suffer; Christ as the "holy one"; Christ as David's descendant; citation of *Pss.* 2:7; 16:9; "forgiveness of sins" offered through Christ (see *Luke* 1:77; 3:3; 24:47; *Acts* 2:38; 5:31; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18); opening with Greek vocative "Men . . ." (1:11, 16; 2:14, 22; 3:12; 5:35; 7:2; 13:26; 15:7; 21:28; 22:1; 23:1).

#### *Missionary Goals, Relation to Judaism*

Paul always begins his preaching in the Jewish synagogue (13:14; 14:1; 17:1–4, 10; 19:8). He goes to the Gentiles only by default, when rejected by Jews (18:6). He is a Pharisee and strictly obeys the law, even as a Christian (16:1–4; 21:22–26; 24:14). He wants to demonstrate to Jews that Jesus is the Messiah (13:13ff.; 17:2; 18:5; 19:8). Many Gentiles are converted through Paul's preaching, but this happens in spite of his intention, which is to preach to Jews.

#### *Apostleship*

"Apostle" is an extremely important office. There are only twelve apostles in the proper sense. Qualifications are spelled out in 1:15–26, where a replacement is sought for Judas Iscariot. They must have been with Christ from his immersion by John until his ascension into heaven. The Twelve are the central authority of the young church, and all major decisions are made by them. Paul and Barnabas are not apostles with the Twelve, but only missionaries sent out under their authority (through the elders of Antioch).

#### *Conversion and First Jerusalem Visit*

Paul is converted in Damascus (9:10–18). He begins preaching within days (9:20) but quickly runs into trouble with the Jews there, so he must escape to Jerusalem (9:23–26). In Jerusalem, he is introduced to "the apostles." He begins to travel with them, "preaching boldly" (9:29), until this public activity lands him in further trouble and he flees to Tarsus (9:30).

#### *Later Visits to Jerusalem*

Acts has Paul in Jerusalem five times: (1) soon after conversion, public visit (9:20); (2) famine visit soon thereafter (11:29; 12:25); (3) apostolic council, on Gentiles, resulting in several conditions for Gentile converts (ch. 15); (4) greeting the church (18:22); (5) final visit, with collection, leading to arrest and transfer to Rome (21; 24:17).

### THE LETTERS

Key terms include: in Christ; flesh/spirit; this present age/world; righteousness through faith; works of the law; sin (singular, as a power).

Paul connects faith in Christ with Abraham. He usually bypasses Moses and subsequent Jewish history as an aberration from the "promise."

Paul does not use the term "forgiveness of sins" in his (undisputed) letters, though it is characteristic of *Luke-Acts'* vocabulary.

Paul declares that the law of Moses had a strictly limited purpose, and was nullified with the coming of Christ (*Gal.* 3:10–21). He places his life "in Judaism" and "under the law" in the past (*Gal.* 1:13). From the beginning, Paul was chosen to be apostle to the Gentiles (*Gal.* 1:15–16). A clear division of labor was understood, in which Paul preached to Gentiles and Peter to Jews (*Gal.* 2:7–10).

Paul's self-understanding as an apostle is central to his preaching (see his letter openings). He claims full rights as an apostle, on the same level as the Twelve (*1 Corinthians* 9, 15; *2 Corinthians* 10–13) because he was granted a special resurrection appearance of the risen Jesus (*1 Cor.* 9:1; 15:8–11). His apostleship is not derivative, but was granted directly by divine revelation (*Gal.* 1:1, 12, 17). He knows, however, that many do not recognize his apostleship (*1 Cor.* 9:2; *2 Cor.* 12:12).

Paul is converted in Damascus, then immediately goes off to Arabia (*Gal.* 1:16), then back to Damascus. Only after three years does he first visit Jerusalem (*Gal.* 1:18). Even then, it is a short (two-week), private visit with Peter. He saw none of the other apostles, but did meet James (*Gal.* 1:18–19). Then he went off to Syria and Cilicia.

In *Galatians* 1–2, Paul insists that he has so far made only these visits to Jerusalem: (1) three years after conversion, private visit; (2) eleven or fourteen years after that, to settle the question of the Gentile Christians, resulting in a decision to take up an offering for Jerusalem (2:10; *1 Cor.* 16:4; *2 Corinthians* 8–9; *Rom.* 15:25–29), but no other conditions; so he expects: (3) a visit to convey the offering, which may bring trouble (*Rom.* 15:30–32).

### ***Acts* as a Source for the Chronology of Paul's Career**

The effort to reconstruct Paul's chronology has led, further, to scholarly caution in using the book known as *Acts*. Since more than half of *Acts* is devoted to telling the story of Paul's career, from his conversion (ch. 9) through his missionary preaching to his final arrest (chs. 21–28), this book was traditionally welcomed as the key to charting the apostle's career. But when commentators began to scrutinize the details that Paul himself gives about his life, it soon became clear that his account could not easily be aligned with the picture offered in *Acts*.

John Knox, in particular, has pointed out that Paul's relationship to Jerusalem, his missionary goals, and the content of his preaching appear quite differently in the two sources. Consider the chart on the facing page.

In the face of such discrepancies, Knox argued that the interpreter must concede absolute priority to Paul's letters, since they are a primary source for Paul; *Acts* is, historiographically speaking, a secondary source, written by someone else a generation after Paul's time. Although some scholars have defended the trustworthiness of *Acts*, few today would *begin* a study of Paul with that book. Everyone realizes that Paul's own letters are the key to understanding him, even if *Acts* may be cautiously used in a supplementary way.

### **The Social Context of Paul's Preaching**

Arguably the most important shift in interpreting Paul has come in the last two or three decades, with the growth of social-historical interest in Paul's world. "Social history" is an umbrella term that covers a wide range of problems related to the nitty-gritty details of human life. What did people eat? How did they study and speak and write? What were their assumptions about social roles (of males, females, children)? What sorts of groups existed among which social classes, and how were they organized? Until this time, even the most historically astute Pauline scholars had focused on the apostle's *ideas*: unwittingly assuming that his abstracted theology was the most important thing about him. In keeping with shifts in other academic disciplines, however, NT scholars have now begun to ask more about Paul's real social environment. Because words have meaning only in real-life contexts, those contexts must be recovered if we are to understand Paul.

The value of social-historical questions will be obvious. Given the standard types of social groups in antiquity—religious, professional, and burial societies, philosophical schools, ethnic-religious groups—how would outsiders view Pauline (Gentile) Christianity? Why does Paul defend himself against charges that were otherwise leveled at crooked philosophers (*1 Thess.* 2:3–12)? Was he seen, or did he present himself, as a philosopher? What were philosophers and philosophical schools like in the first century? How were Paul's followers organized socially? Who made decisions and how were policies carried out? If Paul's groups included those wealthy enough to own slaves, and to host large groups in their homes, how can we

explain Paul's emphasis on their low status? If women had significant leadership functions, how can we explain a directive that women keep silent? If Paul writes for Gentiles, why does he bother to speak disparagingly of "the Jews" (*1 Thess.* 2:14)? In general, what were the conventions of writing in Paul's day, and what would the rhetorical effect of his letters, read aloud, have been? Recovering these real events in our imagination is a different kind of analysis from studying Paul's ideas with concordances and encyclopedias. How were Jewish communities constituted in the cities of the eastern Mediterranean, and what would it mean practically for Gentile Christians to "judaize" (*Gal.* 2:14)? What were Paul's conditions when he was "in chains"? What sort of prison should we envision him in (certainly not a modern penitentiary), and how might his conditions explain the language of *Philippians* or *Philemon*? Within the pervasive ancient networks of "patrons" and "clients," how should we understand Paul's social obligations, his self-understanding as a leader, his opponents' actions within his groups, and perhaps even the language (such as "Lord") that he uses of Christ? This sort of question effectively prevents us from abstracting every statement of Paul's as a theological position, and requires us instead to understand him within the real world of antiquity.

Recognition of rhetorically and socially conditioned features in Paul's letters has both negative and positive results. Negatively, it discourages us from treating some of his statements as purely theological propositions. For example, Paul's language about "edification" of the church may be not so much ponderously considered doctrine as a passing allusion to the major construction efforts ongoing in Corinth at the time. His dismissal of rhetoric (*1 Corinthians* 1–4), rather than being taken at face value, should perhaps be seen as itself a devastating rhetorical weapon, such as other masters of the art also used. And Paul may have intended it not as a universally true position but as a particular challenge to one competing teacher—a gifted orator. A barrage of scripture citations for Paul's Gentile hearers (*Galatians* 3–4) might have been intended to create a certain *aural effect* more than to reveal Paul's *theory* of scriptural interpretation. Positively, social history requires that we understand "saint" Paul's ideas such that they have legs and feet, in a way that would have made them intelligible to real people of the first century.

### The Search for the "Center" of Paul's Thinking

What, then, was Paul all about? What was the message that he carried to the cities of the eastern Mediterranean? Answers to these questions have varied with the methods used to study Paul. For example, the canonical arrangement of Paul's letters, with *Romans* at its head, implies that this long letter is the gateway to the others, the fullest expression of Paul's thought. Consequently, many scholars take the apparently central themes of *Romans*, such as justification by faith in Christ and not by law, or union with Christ in death and resurrection, as the core of Paul's theology. The great Protestant thinkers have all had a particular fascination with

the language of “righteousness (or justification) by faith” in *Romans*, and the influence of this tradition remains strong today.

Once interpreters began to take seriously the individual situation of each letter, however, they realized that “righteousness by faith” was not a prominent concern in most of Paul’s letters: *1 Thessalonians*, *1 Corinthians*, and *Philemon* do not discuss it at all (nor do *Colossians* and *Ephesians*); in *Philippians* and *2 Corinthians* the language of righteousness is incidental. It is particularly telling, scholars noted, that righteousness language is prominent only where Paul is in dialogue with Jewish perspectives. Against a claim that righteousness involves obedience to divine law, Paul argues for a new kind of righteousness, in Christ, apart from the law (*Rom.* 3:21). So the theme of righteousness by faith was perhaps not part of his essential message to Gentiles (who were not predisposed to observe Jewish law in the first place, and so might not have understood it), but was rather a later defensive statement against the claims of some who insisted on Torah observance.

If we concede that Paul’s letters were written in different social situations, how are we to discover the center of Paul’s thought, or indeed whether it has a center? A strictly logical approach is to look for the one fundamental position on which others are based. What is the most basic premise on which Paul depends for his claims? When we adopt this logical criterion, interestingly enough, righteousness by faith appears to be a *consequence* of Paul’s thinking rather than a basis for it. Several scholars have observed that Paul grounds key arguments, rather, in the believer’s union with Christ in death and resurrection. It is this union with Christ that explains Christian baptism (*Rom.* 6:4–6), constitutes his followers as a single “body” (*1 Cor.* 12:12–13), makes one dead to the world and to the law (*2 Cor.* 5:14–15; *Gal.* 2:19–20; *Rom.* 7:1–6), assures participation in his resurrection (*1 Thess.* 4:15–16; *1 Cor.* 15:20), and prevents other unions—with prostitutes (*1 Cor.* 6:15–17) or with demons (*1 Cor.* 10:20–21). Since Paul invokes the idea of union with Christ in all his letters, to explain quite different aspects of his teaching, many experts would consider this theme the heart of his theology. Jesus’ death and resurrection mysteriously provide an opportunity for others to die to the world and rise to new life as a new creation.

Some commentators object that this account underestimates the roles of conceptual development and the particular situations in Paul’s life. If it is true that some lines of his thought evolved over time, then it becomes essential to read his letters in their proper order. On this view, the most basic features of Paul’s thinking would be those that he articulated at the beginning of his mission, before he became embroiled in intramural controversies—which might have colored the language of his later correspondence. Thus *1 Thessalonians* takes on special importance: most count it as the first of Paul’s letters, and it is the only one that does not confront serious in-house differences. Paul’s opposition is mainly external (2:1–16). In this correspondence, Paul and his followers seem preoccupied with the imminence of Jesus’ return. He has convinced them that the risen Christ is about to descend from heaven, to rescue the faithful before divine wrath explodes (1:9–10).

This short letter affords many clues that the Thessalonians were already impatient about the delay of Christ's return, so that even the death of some believers before the end is cause for alarm (4:13).

With the "apocalyptic" theology of *1 Thessalonians* as a base, one might then understand Paul's development along the following lines. First, in *1 Corinthians* he confronts an alternative understanding of Christianity that sees Jesus as bringer of spiritual wisdom and knowledge. Perhaps influenced by stories of Jesus' proclamation of the present reality of the reign of God, these Christians were not attracted by a hope for the future alone. For them, the decisive moment in Christian experience was past: thanks to the work of Christ, one was *already* filled, happy, and free (*1 Cor.* 4:8–13). Against such a position, Paul relentlessly insists that full salvation was still in the future and dependent on Jesus' return; the present is a time of restraint, suffering, and personal sacrifice. This early conflict in Corinth then yielded ground to an even greater challenge. Paul's groups were increasingly attracted by those who saw commitment to Jesus as inextricably tied to Jewish life. Whether those teachers were themselves Jews by birth or Gentile converts to Judaism, they apparently contended that following Jesus authentically required one to become Jewish: to conform one's life to the covenant observed by Jews. If this problem was still peripheral when Paul wrote *Philippians* 3, it had become quite serious by the time that he composed *2 Corinthians* 3, 10–13. When he wrote to the *Galatians* he had to pull out all the stops to try to prevent them from adopting "Judean" ways. In the course of his career, however, Paul came to accept that Jesus' return might be indefinitely delayed well beyond his own death and so, paradoxically, began to move toward his former opponents' stress on the present benefits of salvation.

A perennial issue in the effort to find Paul's central views is his relationship to Judaism. Traditional Judaism and Christianity both saw him as someone who had thoroughly repudiated his native tradition for Christianity. But the question has become enormously complicated by recent study. First, most historians of the period would say that "Judaism" was not the homogeneous entity that earlier scholars assumed. We are discovering evidence for an array of Jewish groups, some of which may have reinterpreted circumcision and other aspects of the law much as Paul did. Second, if some of Paul's statements indicate his forthright repudiation of the Mosaic Torah, others (especially in *Romans*) show him eager to be thought of as faithful to his Jewish heritage. He also quotes Jewish scripture as an authority throughout his letters, and he continues to celebrate major Jewish festivals in some way. Third, it is not clear what it would mean in social terms for Paul to abandon "Judeanism" (Gk *Ioudaismos*), since that was not merely a religion but an ethnic-social category. Would he visit the synagogue or stay in the Jewish quarter when he visited a city? In asking whether Paul remained a Jew, one must deal with the thorny issues: (a) Could he have ceased to be a Jew (= "Judean") even if he had wanted to? (b) What would he have had to do to place himself beyond the pale of a diverse Judaism? (c) Are we asking about his personal views or his appearance to

outsiders and status under law? (d) Where among the many statements in his letters do we find his *real* views about Judaism?

Debate on the center of Paul's thought continues. Interpreters must decide which letters are genuinely Pauline and, within each letter, which statements are central and which ones peripheral. Acceptance of *2 Thessalonians* as Paul's, for instance, might give more weight to an apocalyptic interpretation; acceptance of *Colossians* or *Ephesians* might support the union-with-Christ position. Or, developmentalists might place *2 Thessalonians* at the very beginning and argue that Paul's outlook moved one hundred eighty degrees from there to the irenic mysticism of *Ephesians*.

The net effect of these modern developments has been to render Paul an authentic human being. He wrote his letters in response to pressing needs in his newly founded churches. He often became angry with other Christians, sometimes denounced them with curses, even used four-letter words and crude imagery. But in the process, out of the urgency and conflict of his own life situations he managed to say some things that have resonated powerfully with many generations of Christians since his time.

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THE LETTERS OF PAUL

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