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.¹ Some

¹ 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.\(^2\) 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.”\(^3\)

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.\(^4\)

**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

\(^2\) These questions about Paul derive largely from Paul’s self-defense in 2 Cor 10–13.

\(^3\) 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.

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]. 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

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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.⁶

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.⁷ 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).⁸ 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.⁹ These are instances in which

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⁷ 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).

⁸ 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.

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.\(^\text{10}\) In the process, various texts were written that expanded the narrative of what Paul stood for.\(^\text{11}\) As a consequence, Paul came to be memorialized across a spectrum of views, placed as an apostolic fountainhead for diverse trajectories of Christian identity.\(^\text{12}\)

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).\(^\text{13}\) 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.\(^\text{14}\) The practice of “allonymity” or

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\(^{10}\) 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.

\(^{11}\) 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.”


\(^{13}\) 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.

\(^{14}\) 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
“allepigraphy” [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.\(^\text{15}\) 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?\(^\text{16}\) 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]?\(^\text{17}\)

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:

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

\[\text{15 On the issue of allonymity or allepigraphy [both from the Greek “allos,” meaning “other”], see especially I. Howard Marshall, The Pastoral Epistles (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 79–92.}\]

\[\text{16 On this reading of Ephesians, see Carey Newman, “Narrative Cross, Apocalyptic Resurrection: Ephesians and Reading Paul,” in One God, One People, One Future, eds. John Anthony Dunne and Eric Lewellen (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2018), 493–512.}\]

\[\text{17 The first of these approaches appears in Douglas Campbell’s essay in this book. For an earlier version of the same approach, see Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, Paul: His Story (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 147–157.}\]
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”?\(^\text{18}\) Was Paul the leader of a small group of associates, some of whom served as Paul’s assistants in preparing his letters?\(^\text{19}\) 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?\(^\text{20}\)

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

\(^{18}\) 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.

\(^{19}\) For this view, see E. Randolf 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.”

\(^{20}\) 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. Then the letter would have been sent with a letter carrier to its intended audience.

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.)

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

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21 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].

22 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.

23 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].
some of Paul’s co-workers, editing his work after his death. The letter that is most likely to be a compilation is 2 Corinthians (which is sometimes thought to be an amalgamation of between two and five separate letters). Occasionally, Philippians is said to be a composite text as well.\textsuperscript{24} There is little agreement among scholars on these matters (although probably more scholars imagine Philippians to be a single text than a composite).

Relatedly, in the earliest extant manuscripts of Romans (from the third century and beyond), the contents of Romans 15–16 are structured with enough variation to show that the letter survived in different arrangements in those chapters. Explanations as to why this might have been include (1) the possibility that the letter’s contents were abridged in some manuscripts because of the influence of popular “Marcionite” movements in the second century (which may not have appreciated the way Paul’s good news was linked to the God of the Judeans, as in Rom 15:7–13), (2) the possibility that the letter’s final chapter was removed from the letter originally sent to the assemblies in Rome since it seemed too personal to be included in the final canon of Paul’s letters, or (alternatively), (3) the possibility that the letter’s final chapter of personal greetings was added to a single copy of the letter that was sent to Jesus-followers in Ephesus (where Paul had spent roughly three years, presumably knowing more people there than he knew in the Jesus-groups of Rome), and made its way into the textual history of the letter through that route. Even if the order of Romans as presented in Bibles today is representative of the ordering of the letter that Paul originally sent to Jesus-followers in Rome (as seems likely), the textual tradition nonetheless makes it clear that, on occasion, people after Paul handled his letters in ways that sometimes shaped them this way or that way.

This same phenomenon may come into play with regard to a closely related issue – that is, the possibility that “interpolations” were inserted into Paul’s letters at a later time. Some letters lend themselves to the view that small sections have been added at some point after the letters were sent out. Two of the more important passages that are sometimes thought to be post-authorial interpolations include 1 Cor 14:34–36 (about women needing to be silent, in contrast to Paul’s own affirmation of head-covered women praying and prophesying in the gathered community, as in 1 Cor 11:1–16) and 1 Thess 2:14–16 (about God’s wrath falling upon “the Jews who killed both the Lord Jesus and the

\textsuperscript{24} Paul writes “finally” in 3:1, as if the letter is coming to an end, although there are two more chapters to follow (3:2–4:23).
prophets"). The way these two passages are adjudicated will influence our view of Paul one way or another. Other possible interpretations have been proposed over the years, but usually with less significant impact on how we view Paul and his theology.

To What Extent Is Paul’s Theological Discourse Stable?
Because Paul always wrote into situations, and because situations always differ, Paul’s theologizing took on different contours in each of his letters. One example of this pertains to Paul’s pronouncements about “the law” (or God’s instructions to the people of Israel). In Galatians, Paul’s statements about the law carry an overwhelmingly negative force. This kind of forceful rhetoric was, in his view, required by the situation, since some gentile Jesus-followers in Galatian Jesus-groups were under the impression that they needed to incorporate “law observance” within their devotion to Jesus Christ. In order to counter that perception, Paul’s discourse in Galatians followed lines that give a largely unfavorable impression about the law. In Romans, however, when the pressure of the Galatian situation had dissipated somewhat and when other factors were in play, Paul was more nuanced in his pronouncements, adding a more favorable strand to his discourse about the law. In that context, Paul felt able to pronounce the law to be “holy” and “spiritual” (Rom 7:12, 14), while “the commandment” is said to be “holy, righteous, and good” (Rom 7:12). The tone and content of Paul’s discourse differ somewhat in these two letters, emerging from two different situations. Is there a stable theological construct that unites these moments of theologizing? Does Galatians represent “raw Paulinism,” while Romans represents “refined Paulinism”? Might Romans be “one of the earliest interpretations of Galatians,” as one interpreter has suggested? How are these things to be negotiated?

Embedded within this example is a thorny question that arises in relation to a number of issues in Paul’s letters – whether Paul’s

theologizing developed in some fashion over the years, and whether presentational development is evident within his letters. Perhaps Paul adjusted some theological components within his worldview at various points, articulating new layers of theological content as a result of his engagement with fresh situations or thinking things through in further ways as time went on. Or perhaps he simply adjusted his theological discourse to do better justice to his theological worldview, refracting his discourse through new forms of expression in order to give greater clarity to the theological content of his thought. Of course, these two forms of development ("theological change" versus "presentational variation") could easily go hand in hand. In this regard, we might listen to a master of Pauline interpretation, E. P. Sanders, who offered this assessment of the issue of development in Paul's letters:

Of course Paul's thought developed. How could it not? He was an intelligent and reactive human .... Only a dullard would repeat time after time what he had previously thought or refuse to think back through some of his opinions as issues and objections arose during his ministry. Adaptation must have been his watchword .... As problems shifted, and as his understanding of them advanced, he made adjustments.⁴⁸

Here again, though, the issue is complicated by different determinations regarding the extent of the Pauline letter collection. The notion of "development in Paul" would look one way if only the undisputed letters are taken into account, while looking much different if all thirteen letters are placed in the mix. And since scholars often disagree on the sequential ordering of the letters they deem to be relevant, the issue is open to a number of different interpretations of the data.

Take, for example, statements about widows in the Pauline letter corpus. In 1 Corinthians, the advice to all widows is that it is best if they "remain unmarried" so that they can dedicate themselves fully to the work of their Lord without being distracted once again by the obligations of household management (7:8, 39–40). In 1 Timothy, however, the advice is for younger widows to "marry, bear children, and manage their households" (5:14). Part of the difference behind these two pronouncements may well have to do with the perception of time that is informing them. In 1 Corinthians, there is cognizance of "the impending crisis" (7:26, referring to the return of the Lord Jesus Christ);
in view of that imminent event, getting distracted by household duties would impede the urgent need to spread the good news. In 1 Timothy, however, there is less of a sense of the imminent return and more of a sense of the need to embed Christian devotion in the life of Christian households of the Roman world. It is possible to see the distinct pronouncements in 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy as both being embedded in missional concerns while illustrating a difference in their missional strategies. If we imagine both texts to have been written by Paul, this would be an example of development in his theologizing; if, however, these two texts have different authors, they would illustrate development within the Pauline trajectory, with different forms of instruction being given in different contexts by different authors.

One aspect of Paul’s theological discourse, however, seems to have been consistently articulated without much sense of development or adjustment. For Paul, the Christological pattern of self-giving was to serve as the moral compass for all Jesus-groups. This is one of the threads that runs most consistently throughout the majority of the Pauline letters in one way or another. It was almost the bedrock of his pastoral theologizing, something he returned to again and again, no matter the form of theological discourse he happened to be employing at any given point.

HOW MUCH DO WE KNOW ABOUT PAUL’S LIFE?

Much of Paul’s life lies in murky darkness. At one end of things, we don’t know when he was born and the situation of his early years; at the other end, we can’t be sure when or how he died – other than the likelihood that he died as a martyr in Rome at some point in the sixties (a likelihood admittedly based primarily on ecclesiastical tradition).

In between those murky points, we know a few points of detail about Paul’s life, but not much. In the early years, Paul dug deeply into the ancestral traditions of Judaism, or “Judeanism” as some are preferring to call it these days (since in Paul’s day the term “Judaism” did not refer so much to a “religion” but to a posture of committing oneself to preserving the ancestral traditions of the Judean people with intentional zealous fervor, over against any perceived threats to Judean identity).29

29 In this, the young Saul may have idealized Phinehas, a hero of Judean history who was remembered for his “zeal” (1 Macc 2:54; cf. Gal 1:14) when he ran a spear through the bodies of a mixed-race couple when a Hebrew man took a woman from a foreign race into his household (Num 25:6–13) – an act that preserved Israel
Identifying with the Pharisaic branch of Judeanism (Phil 3:5), Paul probably never encountered Jesus of Nazareth during the years that the Nazarene was active in Galilee and Judea. At some point in the early 30s, however, he had an experience of encountering the one he would thereafter proclaim as the risen Lord (1 Cor 15:8; Gal 1:15–16; Phil 3:6). As part of that experience, he felt himself called to be an apostle for the risen one, whose assemblies he had previously persecuted (1 Cor 15:9; Gal 1:13–14). In fact, instead of expending his energies in efforts to preserve the integrity of Judean identity and practice, Paul’s life now became redirected toward those beyond the boundaries of Judeanism – the gentiles, or “the nations” (ta ethnē). The good news needed to go out to them; the God of all creation had acted definitively in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and all the world needed to hear the message and to see its transforming power at work.

In the early stage of his mission to spread the good news, Paul was part of a missionary team in which he was closely associated with a man named Barnabas (Gal 2:1–10). That team had success in various places, including a few groups of Jesus-followers who resided in Galatia. At some point, that partnership broke up (probably as a result of tensions arising from a highly-charged incident at Antioch, described in Gal 2:11–14). Paul now (probably from the late 40s onwards) struck out to places further afield, without Barnabas but with a team of close associates who seem to pop in and out of our picture – including Timothy, Titus, and Silvanus (or Silas). In this phase of his mission, Jesus-groups (perhaps comprising some three dozen members, roughly speaking) were founded in cities dotted around the Mediterranean basin of the Roman world – such as Galatia, Philippi, Thessalonica, Corinth, and Ephesus. It was in this phase of Paul’s mission (probably throughout much of the 50s) that a substantial body of his letters were written. And we know from several of those letters that Paul’s gospel was looked upon with some suspicion, perhaps even antagonism – as some influential Jesus-followers found his good news to be plagued with certain

and was “reckoned to him as righteousness from generation to generation forever” (Ps 106:31).

30 In When Paul Met Jesus: How an Idea Got Lost in History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), Stanley E. Porter revives the old theory that Paul did, in fact, encounter Jesus.

31 The extent to which Paul himself continued to observe the ancestral practices of Judean devotion is currently a highly contested issue. What is clear is that gentile Jesus-followers themselves were to become more Judean in their convictions and practices (e.g., monotheism and morality) than in their previous “pagan” identities.
theological deficiencies. Paul’s letters are frequently marked by attempts to bolster the legitimacy of his own apostleship, as well as attempts to bring theological clarity to situations on the ground. Throughout this period, Paul seems to have been tireless in his efforts, many of which are beyond our field of vision. For instance, when writing to Jesus-followers in Rome (perhaps in 57 or so), Paul mentions having completed a mission that we otherwise know nothing about – a mission to Illyricum (Rom 15:19; Croatia and Bosnia today, roughly speaking).

It was in his letter to Jesus-followers in Rome that Paul makes an intriguing comment, claiming that there was “no further place for me [to carry out my mission] in these regions” from Jerusalem to Illyricum (Rom 15:23). This declaration seems undergirded by the view that Paul sought to establish groups of Jesus-followers in main centers of the Roman world, from which the good news would spread further, as ripples spread outward. But with “no further place” to preach the “good news,” Paul was now setting his sights on preaching in what he called “Spain,” or the regions to the west of Italy (Rom 15:24–28). Prior to that, however, he committed himself to taking a collection of money to “the poor among the saints at Jerusalem” (Rom 15:26) – a collection he oversaw for a few years throughout the mid-50s, ensuring that communities founded among the gentiles were seen to support communities of Judean Jesus-followers (so, 1 Cor 16:1–4; 2 Cor 8–9; Rom 15:14–33).

At this point the trail starts to go cold, depending on how one estimates the dates of certain letters and how one judges the extent of the Pauline corpus.32 One way or another, however, Paul died prior to the destruction of the city of Jerusalem by Roman forces in 70 CE – his death preceding that event by almost a decade in one reconstruction of his life or by three or so years in another reconstruction. And depending on one’s reconstruction of the final years of his life, Paul may have lived long enough to see the “governing authorities” of Rome undertake a pogrom of slaughtering Jesus-followers in Rome (starting in 64 CE). These were the same Jesus-followers to whom Paul had said that the ruling authorities had been “instituted by God” and were acting as “the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer” (Rom 13:1, 4). We may wonder how that text was heard in the light of the martyrdom of many to whom this text was originally sent.

32 For surveys of the possible endings of Paul’s life, see the essays in The Last Years of Paul, eds., Armand Puig i Tàrrech, John M. G. Barclay, and Jörg Frey (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015).
TO WHAT EXTENT CAN WE MAKE USE OF THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES?

The very brief reconstruction of Paul’s life undertaken in the previous section has not been informed by data from the Acts of the Apostles – a text that dedicates roughly half of its narrative to events in the life of Paul (who is especially prominent throughout Acts 13–28, with cameo appearances prior to that). But the presentation of Paul’s life that we find in Acts is somewhat problematic. Sometimes data about Paul’s life gleaned from the Pauline letters diverges from data about Paul’s life gleaned from Acts. For instance, in Galatians Paul testifies that after encountering the risen Lord, he did not go to Jerusalem to see “those who were already apostles before me”; instead, he went directly “into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus” (Gal 1:17). Without any mention of Jerusalem in his account, Paul can say that later in his ministry he “was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea [i.e., Jerusalem]” (1:22). The narrative of Acts is quite different, however. After encountering the risen Lord, Acts depicts Paul returning to Jerusalem and trying “to join the disciples” (9:26); in fact, Barnabas “took him and brought him to the apostles,” so that Paul “stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord” (9:27–29).

For many interpreters, divergences in detail of this kind require us to give precedence to Paul’s first-person accounts, and to see the Acts narrative as informed by the interests of the author who narrated events through particular filters. For instance, the author of Acts does not concentrate much on disputes that arose within the Jesus-movement, preferring to show that movement as fairly unified in its focus and mission. Instead, there are several ways in which the Paul of Acts is sometimes thought to diverge from the Paul of the undisputed letters in order to merge with the ecclesiastical interests of the author of Acts. Three examples illustrate the point.

1. The description of Paul going to Jerusalem immediately after his encounter with the risen Lord (as noted above) links Paul and the Jerusalem apostles at the earliest possible opportunity. In this way, it fits well with the narrative’s portrait of general harmony among the leadership of the early Jesus-movement, even though that aspect of Acts seems to run in the opposite direction to Paul’s own testimony in Galatians 1.

2. The split between Paul and Barnabas was probably acrimonious and related to a key theological difference between them (probably
rooted in the divisive event recounted in Gal 2:11–14). In Acts, however, that split seems to be sanitized, being presented simply as a difference in opinion over the personality of a potential co-worker (Acts 15:36–41).

(3) Paul’s theological interests in Acts seem to be more in accordance with Peter’s theological discourse in Acts than the theological discourse of the undisputed Pauline letters.33

We might conclude, then, that evidence from Acts is not to be used in a reconstruction of the life, letters, and theology of Paul, since it would just get in the way of reliable historical reconstruction. For most, however, it is not prudent to completely write off Acts as a resource for historical reconstruction, even if it needs to be used cautiously for historical purposes. For instance, the general details that Acts gives when recounting Paul’s move from Macedonia to Achaia corresponds relatively well to the data of Paul’s letters, so that the general outline of Paul’s movements from Thessalonica to Athens and then Corinth is fairly consistent in each.34 Most scholars, then, find the historical presentation of Acts to be conflicted to some degree – useable at times, perhaps, but only with discretion. Even then, however, some scholars prefer to use that presentation only when it corroborates other data from Paul’s letters, while other scholars use that presentation to fill in extra details or to add to our understanding of Paul’s letters, as long as the presentation in Acts does not run contrary to the data of the letters themselves.35 Often, decisions will be made on a case by case basis.


34 Compare Acts 17:1, 17:15, and 18:1 with 1 Thess 2:2, 3:1, Phil 4:15–16, and 2 Cor 11:7–9. But even then there are differences, with Acts depicting Timothy as staying in Thessalonica while Paul moved south (Acts 17:14), whereas 1 Thessalonians depicts Timothy as having left Thessalonica and accompanying Paul south, only going back to Thessalonica (being sent by Paul) after arriving in Athens (1 Thess 3:1–2).

35 For instance, Acts alone tells us that Barnabas had strong connections with the Jerusalem community (Acts 4:36–37; 9:27; 11:22). If this is right, it would seem to add further contours to the shape of Paul’s ministry; that is, once Paul and Barnabas broke their association in the late 40s, Paul could more easily be depicted by those antagonistic to him as something of a maverick after that break, since Paul’s links to the “mother church” in Jerusalem were less obvious than had previously been the case.
WHAT WILL YOU FIND IN THIS BOOK?

Much more could be said in order to give an orientation to the study of Paul and his letters, but enough has been said to introduce a few general issues and to lay some foundations that will be elaborated and enhanced in the essays that follow in this book. It remains only to explain something about the character and contents of this book.

The first thing to note is that this book is primarily meant to service introductory explorations of the theological discourse of Paul’s letters. Accordingly, the *New Cambridge Companion to St. Paul* is intentionally compact in its coverage rather than expansive. There is no intention to cover every possible topic in the study of Paul; if this book provokes interest to study Paul further, with other books servicing those expanding interests, that is to be welcomed. But for the purposes of this book, the essays that follow are not research essays, even if they are informed by the latest currents in Pauline studies. Instead, these essays are intended to capture a sense of Paul’s theological vision in its complexity, its challenge, perhaps its contestability, and at times even its genius.

Second, like all *Cambridge Companions*, this is a multi-authored volume. Fifteen scholars have written fresh essays on topics selected for this introductory volume. Their task was not to coordinate their understanding of Paul at some point in the collective middle, so that they all end up saying roughly the same thing. If that had been the task, none of them would have accepted the invitation to write for this book. Instead, their assignment was to write stimulating essays that spur readers to think about major issues in ways that are deemed to be most beneficial, according to their own judgment regarding coverage and presentation. As a consequence, there is at times some diversity in the views expressed. That diversity simply reflects some of the state of play within current academic discussion and debate. But even when differences of opinion might be evident within the covers of this book, no view contained in this book falls beyond the diverse bounds of responsible discussion in contemporary academic contexts.

Third, this book is divided into three parts, with each part serving different purposes. The three essays of the first part of the book help to set the scene – with this brief introduction to the study of Paul and his letters being followed by an interpretation of what Paul stood for (“Who Was Paul?” by Paula Fredriksen in Chapter 2) and an overview of the world in which Paul’s communities lived (“What Kind of World Did Paul’s Communities Live in?” by Richard S. Ascough in Chapter 3).
The second part of the book contains five essays that discuss the thirteen letters within the Pauline corpus. The authors in this second part have been asked to write about two or more letters within their essays, in an effort to help the reader learn through comparison and contrast.

- The first of these essays discusses the texts that, through their commonalities and differences, illustrate various ways in which early forms of Jesus-devotion were relating to their contexts within the Roman world and how Paul addressed particular issues that arose within those communities (“The Thessalonian and Corinthian Letters” by Margaret Y. MacDonald in Chapter 4).
- The two letters that have generated the most theological discourse over the centuries [not least with reference to justification, faith, the law, and sin] are dealt with next (“Galatians and Romans” by Peter Oakes in Chapter 5).
- Two letters written from prison are then given consideration, each being linked further by the fact that they are two of the most personal and autobiographical letters in the Pauline corpus (“Philippians and Philemon” by Douglas A. Campbell in Chapter 6).
- Attention then turns to two letters whose content overlaps significantly in linking both big-picture theology to the practicalities of everyday life in the Roman world (“Colossians and Ephesians” by Sylvia C. Keesmaat in Chapter 7).
- The final chapter of the second part of this book explores the three pastoral letters that give instruction about Christian leadership in the Roman world (“The Pastoral Epistles” by James W. Aageson in Chapter 8).

The eight essays in the third part consider some of the big questions pertaining to Paul’s theological discourse – its contours, commitments, and contributions (including its contributions beyond the first-century world).

- The first essay of this section captures Paul’s vision of the problems that plague God’s world (“What Did Paul Think Is Wrong in God’s World?” by Bruce W. Longenecker in Chapter 9).
- The next essay collects a variety of theological threads from Paul’s letters to reconstruct the matrix of his theological discourse about God’s initiative in Christ (“What Did Paul Think God Is Doing about What’s Wrong?” by Michael J. Gorman in Chapter 10).
- Discussing God’s initiative in Christ involves further consideration of God’s initiatives within communities of Jesus-followers – the
focus of an essay inevitably paired with the previous one ("What Did Paul Think God Is Doing in Christian Communities?" by Susan Grove Eastman in Chapter 11).

- The extent to which Paul’s theological discourse was shaped by an engagement with scripture (the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament) is given attention in the subsequent essay ("How Did Paul Read Scripture?" by David Lincicum in Chapter 12).

- A related topic is then treated, examining the complexities of Paul’s relationship to his ancestral traditions ("Did Paul Abandon either Judaism or Monotheism?" by Matthew V. Novenson in Chapter 13).

- If Paul’s message was “a stumbling block” to some and “foolishness” to others (1 Cor 1:23), the next essay asks what attraction Paul’s message might have had for some of his contemporaries in the Roman world ("Why Were People Attracted to Paul’s Good News?" by David G. Horrell in Chapter 14).

- Consideration is then given to the recasting of Paul in early Christian literature, noting the different ways in which Paul was remembered and rebranded by others after his death ("How Was the Reception of Paul Shaped in the Early Church?" by Margaret M. Mitchell in Chapter 15).


* * *

Over the centuries, many people have admired Paul, many people have found him problematic, many have done both. The chapters of this book have been written for people who want to assess his contributions afresh, exploring the complexities of his letters and deliberating the intricacies of his vision.

**Further Reading**


