Introduction: Exploring Paul's Environment

Paul has been challenging readers for a long time. Already in the late first or early second century, the author of 2 Peter wrote that some things in Paul's letters were "hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction" (2 Pet 3:16). Many a contemporary reader may sympathize! When we read Paul's letters today, we face some of the same challenges that early believers faced as they heard those letters read when they came together, the first being simply to understand them.

We come to an understanding of most things we encounter by comparing them with other ideas or images in our experience. This book is therefore a window onto ideas and images that can be used to help us understand Paul. None of the documents and images presented here is offered as a claim regarding the *source* of Paul's ideas. We cannot prove what Paul had read, seen, or studied, a point we will repeat throughout the book. But we can encounter some of the ideas and images from the worlds in which Paul and his first communities lived and thus form a better picture of Paul's context.

The Appetite for Parallels: A Cautionary Note

Of course, citing relevant documents or images is not sufficient for the careful interpretation of a text ("exegesis"). It is possible to "feed" a passage from Paul's letters with too many parallels. The meaning of the text then becomes bloated in a way that is unhealthy for exegesis, rather as overfeeding a goldfish might risk the goldfish's

health.[1] If one feeds Paul's letters with parallels, the given sentence or paragraph one is reading may grow out of all proportion to its context in the letter in which it appears. In everyday conversation, none of us means by what we say all of the possible meanings of the words we use. It is better, then, not to "overfeed"—not to try to "stuff" all possible parallels into our exegesis of a text. But—to stretch the metaphor in the opposite direction—it is just as important not to use too small a fishbowl: not to restrict too narrowly the possible meanings of a text. This caution is all the more important when we are dealing with an environment as distant from us—and as expansive—as Paul's world.

> **Exegesis** is "the process of careful, analytical study of biblical passages undertaken in order to produce useful interpretations of those passages" (*ABD* 2:682).

Why is it that we readers of scripture are often tempted to import into a Pauline text more parallels than are helpful? There is, first of all, the joy of discovery. It is exhilarating to find a text that seems to be a verbal or conceptual parallel with a passage from Paul. Once the discovery is made, there is an often irresistible temptation to argue that the new parallel provides a key—even *the* key!—to understanding Paul.

With the early-twentieth-century discoveries of papyri in Egypt, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and ongoing epigraphic finds, there seems to be a steady flow of parallels as if from a spigot that cannot be turned off. Already in 1961, Samuel Sandmel cautioned biblical scholars against "parallelomania," which he defined as "that extravagance among scholars which first overdoes the supposed similarity in passages and then proceeds to describe source and derivation as if implying literary connection flowing in an inevitable or predetermined direction."[2] We take that caution seriously and understand our task here to be more modest: we seek to offer texts and images that can illuminate aspects of Paul's environment. Our selection of one or another text, or our identification of a comparison that may be relevant to one or another passage in Paul's letters, should hardly be taken as a proposal that we have found the decisive key to a passage's interpretation.

Neither, of course, should the reader assume that Paul's gospel would immediately have been perceived as the *opposite* of one or another text from Paul's environment, as if Paul's context was an unrelenting moral darkness into which he brought an otherwise unavailable light. That is the way he often wrote, of course: see, for example, Rom 13:12; 1 Cor 4:5; or 2 Cor 11:14. But before we can understand what such language would have meant to Paul's hearers, we will need as thorough a familiarity with his environment and as nuanced an appreciation of his rhetoric as we can attain.

Other Available Resources

Our introductory sample of documents and images from Paul's world is far from comprehensive. Students who wish to pursue any of the themes raised in this book may consult a number of helpful reference works, sourcebooks, and monographs identified in the notes (though there, too, we make no claim to comprehensiveness).

The quest to use extrabiblical evidence in order to understand scripture began in the Renaissance. In the eighteenth century, J. J. Wettstein published a New Testament with references to Greco-Roman and Jewish literature in the margins. A modern edition of his book is still available today, and those who read German can find in the volumes of the *Neuer Wettstein* series the actual texts of some of the relevant parallels.[3]

In the twentieth century, the prototype of a book like this one, Adolf Deissmann's *Light from the Ancient East*, appeared in 1908.[4] Paul Fiebig's concise volume *Die Umwelt des neuen Testaments* (The Environment of the New Testament) continued this trend.[5] In 1956, C. K. Barrett published what would become a best-selling English volume, *The New Testament Background*, a book that has been expanded and reprinted for decades and remains popular today.[6] A very different book with a similar title, *New Testament Backgrounds*, is a collection of learned essays on various aspects of the New Testament in light of cultural parallels. It will prove equally useful to some readers.[7] Meanwhile interest in the wider literary, philosophical, and religious Hellenistic environment of early Christian literature, including Paul's letters, has been well served by a growing number of sourcebooks.[8] Some have focused particularly on women's lives and women's religious experience.[9]

Books presenting documents to be read specifically alongside the letters of Paul have also been published since the early twentieth century, when Adolf Deissmann published a book on Paul in his historical context.[10] Beginning even earlier, scholars have established tables of verbal or thematic parallels among Paul's letters and between the letters and other biblical texts, first as supplemental material in an edition of the New Testament.[11] In 1975, Fred O. Francis and J. Paul Sampley published *Pauline Parallels*, a resource for students and scholars alike that offers tables of parallels among Paul's letters and between those letters and other New Testament texts, organized around formal elements and thematic similarities.[12] Subsequently Walter Wilson has published a collection of biblical parallels to Paul's letters that indicates explicit and possibly implicit occurrences of intertextuality between Paul's letters and the scriptures he read—that is, Israel's scriptures in Greek.[13] And as we shall see, these resources are accompanied by a veritable explosion of studies on Paul's social and cultural context.

Intertextuality refers to an author's or speaker's interaction with other texts that readers or hearers are expected to recognize. It can take the form of explicit **citation, quotation,** or **allusion.**[14]

What Difference Do "Parallels" Make in Our Reading?

Anyone embarking today on the study of the apostle Paul will quickly discover a wide and potentially bewildering array of perspectives on Paul and interpretations of his thought. Was he Christianity's first theologian or, even as an apostle of Jesus Christ, did he remain a devout Jew? Was he an enthusiastic "convert" or a renegade "apostate" from Judaism? A teacher? A missionary? A philosopher? A mystic? A socially conservative conformist or an anti-imperial agitator? All these views find defenders today.

Even among scholars who agree on the importance of avoiding anachronism and stereotype in the effort to understanding Paul in his own historical and cultural context, how one or another interpreter appeals to materials from the ancient world can frame a number of different reconstructions of that context. Would Paul have come across to his contemporaries as an educated Pharisee, steeped in Jewish lore, or as a freelance "philosopher" trading on his facility with the conventional topics of Stoic or Cynic teachers? Or would the dominant first impression that Paul made on his hearers have been that he brought a message like nothing they had encountered before?

Different interpretations of Paul arise, are developed and modified, and—depending on their inherent strength and on the theological and cultural climate in which they appear—thrive, endure, or lapse into obscurity over time. Within the discipline of historical criticism, the inherent strength of an interpretation is measured by the interpreter's ability to make convincing comparisons between Paul and aspects of the first-century environment that is being proposed as a relevant context. At the same time, which parallels are seen as convincing can depend, in some part, on how well they corroborate an accepted interpretation.

In his essay "Parallelomania," Samuel Sandmel criticized a particularly dramatic example: Hermann Strack and Paul Billerbeck's *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch* (Commentary on the New Testament from Talmud and Midrash).[15] As Sandmel noted, the sheer number of supposed parallels that this *Kommentar* provided for various New Testament texts from much later rabbinic texts convinced many European and American interpreters in the early and mid-twentieth century that they provided genuine insight into the New Testament. Sandmel identified significant problems of method in Strack and Billerbeck's approach, however.

Especially in the wake of the Shoah,[16] the pervasively negative judgments regarding Judaism that appeared in the *Kommentar* came to be seen as prejudicial. This change in perception, as much as Sandmel's pointed criticisms of the method employed in Strack and Billerbeck's *Kommentar,* led to a significant decline in scholars' estimation of the *Kommentar's* usefulness. The point is that the climate of scholarship around Paul—and, correspondingly, the perception of what is a relevant indication of "context" and what is not—can change over time.

It has become customary in the last decades of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first for scholars to speak of "paradigm shifts" in our understanding of Paul. Such shifts have been occasioned, in no small part, by the landmark works of Rosemary Radford Ruether, Krister Stendahl, and E. P. Sanders in the 1970s.[17] One result is that the sort of generalization that Günther Bornkamm

could make about Paul in the mid-twentieth century—that in all of his letters "Paul's opponent is not this or that section in a particular church, but the Jews and their understanding of salvation"[18]—is rather rare today.

Instead, the so-called New Perspective, announced by James D. G. Dunn more than twenty-five years ago, has now become something of an established view that is itself the object of continuing examination, modification, and critique.[19] Its popularity among scholars who nevertheless present a rather diverse range of interpretations under its aegis has led to questions of definition: just what *is* the "New Perspective"? The points of broadest consensus center on the inadequacy of an earlier reading of Paul, sometimes dubbed the "Protestant" or even the "Lutheran" reading, which construed the apostle's theology as a doctrine of justification by faith fundamentally opposed to a characteristically Jewish doctrine of justification by works of law. Sanders's critique rendered that old opposition (and the prejudicial view of Judaism on which it depended) historically untenable and morally repugnant in the eyes of many. The obvious next question, as Sanders put it, is "what, in Paul's view, was wrong with Judaism?" (see chapter 4).

But if Sanders's critique of older answers has proven widely compelling, his own constructive answer to that question has not been universally accepted. (Nor, to be fair, have the subsequent proposals of any other interpreter!) The result is a complicated and messy landscape that, in the words of Daniel Marguerat, "resembles a city devastated by an earthquake. People scurry about in every direction, some assessing the damage, others verifying what still stands. Everyone takes the measure of the changes to come but no one dares to build again, out of fear of a new shock."[20] No one, Marguerat ventures, can hope to comprehend all of the post-Sanders terrain—though some have ventured to map out distinctive "schools," most recently, Magnus Zetterholm in his survey *Approaches to Paul*.[21]

Recent decades have seen an explosion of studies exploring various aspects of Paul's context in the Hellenistic world, often published in collections of essays.[22] One of the most thorough is *Paul in the Greco-Roman World: A Handbook*, edited by J. Paul Sampley, in which scholars offer essays placing Paul and his rhetorical practices in their wider Hellenistic setting. Each essay provides references to a wealth of comparative material.[23] Owing to the abundance of that material, however, it is still necessarily left up to the reader in most cases to track down the helpful references in order to find the original sources. More recently, John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L. Reed offer a number of photographs and citations from ancient literature in the course of their anti-imperial portrait of Paul.[24] None of these books provides full citations of all the literature they cite: indeed, to do so would require a small library! That sort of comprehensiveness is not our purpose either. Rather, we intend to provide readers a firsthand encounter with some materials that represent the larger world to which all these earlier studies point.

Crossan and Reed illustrate another recent development: increased attention to Paul's political context, and especially to aspects of the early Roman Empire, represented, for example, by the work of the Paul and Politics Group of the Society of Biblical Literature.[25] Since Paul and his congregations lived simultaneously amid

the currents of Jewish tradition, Greek culture, and Roman government, it seems increasingly appropriate today to refer to Paul's "three worlds"—though of course Paul lived in but one world, in which he, like his contemporaries, navigated different claims on his allegiance and identity. Speaking of multiple "worlds" may help us to organize different sets of data but is finally artificial.

> We seek to avoid referring to **"Paul's churches"** or **"Pauline Christianity"** for several reasons. First, it is clear from the New Testament that Paul joined a movement already in progress. Even when he helped to found a congregation (as in Corinth: 1 Cor 3:6, 10), he did not work alone. Further, Paul often faced disagreement or opposition within even those congregations he had helped to found. It is therefore not clear in what sense we should call the congregations "his."
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> Finally, the word *church* can evoke anachronistic assumptions of established congregations, meeting in large, dedicated buildings, led by professional clergy, organized into national denominations, enjoying public recognition (in the United States, First Amendment protection and the property tax exemption as well as employer recognition of the "weekend"), and dedicated to "religious" concerns. **The Greek word *ekklēsia*** was used in Paul's day especially for a civic assembly of townspeople or citizens and had civic or political connotations that other, more purely "religious" terms (like *thiasos*) did not. We will use "congregation" or "assembly" to translate the word here.

No single aspect of these worlds can be taken as the key to understanding Paul, his congregations, and his letters. Debates over which of these "worlds" is more important for understanding one or another aspect of Paul's thought, or over how these three worlds intersected in the lives of the assemblies, will no doubt continue. These are lively questions, and they continue to command our own attention and to exercise our own imaginations as scholars.[26] Our purpose here, however, is not to argue for a particular view of Paul but to gather for the student documents and images from his world(s) that bear comparison with one or another aspect of his thought and practice.

How to Use This Book

Any selection of materials from the abundance of Paul's world of course involves choice, but we do not wish by our choices to predetermine or preclude possible

comparisons. We have deliberately sought to include materials often neglected in an earlier generation of scholarship that was preoccupied with the problematic relationship of Paul to Judaism. Furthermore, our inclusion of images is meant not only to bring to life the rich visual world through which Paul moved but also to highlight the symbolic and iconographic vocabulary that constituted the mass media of the first century and, as such, would have been better known to many of Paul's contemporaries than any of the texts that follow.

Introductions to the texts and questions for reflection at the end of each chapter are presented in order to prompt readers to see possible similarities and differences between Paul's letters and the roughly contemporaneous texts that are cited. These questions might be used before as well as after reading a chapter. Readers might also wish to write imaginative exercises in which they imagine themselves in one or another role illustrated in the texts and, perhaps, respond to an aspect of one or another of Paul's letters.

> We have used critical signs in the text as follows:
>
> Missing letters or words restored or reconstructed by a translator or editor: [square brackets]
>
> The completion of words abbreviated in a text: (parentheses)
>
> Omitted letters or words that have been supplied by a translator or editor: <angle brackets>
>
> Gaps in the original text: ellipses within brackets [. . .]
>
> Unnecessary letters in the text: {curly brackets}

In many cases, we expect that scholars and students alike may be able to think of other and better questions than ours when reading the texts and images here alongside Paul; ours are only a starting point. Similarly, we expect that our colleagues who use this book in classrooms may wish to augment our selection with additional materials to develop particular aspects of Paul's context. We invite students to pursue their curiosity by exploring further any of the avenues opened up here. Toward both ends, we have included lists of recommended readings at the end of each chapter to point readers toward additional resources; references in the endnotes address particular questions of interpretation.

The book is arranged thematically in an order that might serve as the outline of a course syllabus. The index of ancient literature lets readers quickly identify particular documents or images that bear on one or another of Paul's letters for classes taking either a chronological approach to Paul or one organized according to the order of letters in the New Testament. A map of Paul's world and a timeline are included as well for the reader's convenience (pp. viii–xi).

We hope the result is a useful and inviting resource for the study of Paul. This book will have served its goal if in the end it moves readers to take up and read Paul's letters again.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What are the potential dangers of seeking "parallels" for themes or concepts in Paul's letters?
2. In what ways do contemporary readers risk reading their own assumptions into the interpretation of Paul and his letters?

FOR FURTHER READING

Brief introductions to Paul and current scholarship:

Roetzel, Calvin J. *Paul: The Man and the Myth.* Paperback ed. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999.

Wright, N. T. *Paul: In Fresh Perspective.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005.

Zetterholm, Magnus. *Approaches to Paul: A Student's Guide to Recent Scholarship.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009.

Reference works and tools:

Francis, Fred O., and J. Paul Sampley. *Pauline Parallels*. 2nd ed. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984.

Freedman, David Noel, ed. *The Anchor Bible Dictionary.* 6 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1992. Cited throughout as *ABD*.

Hawthorne, Gerald F., Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid, eds. *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship.* Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1993.

Dunn, James D. G. *The Theology of Paul the Apostle.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998.

Sourcebooks:

Aune, David E. *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment.* Library of Early Christianity 8. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987.

Boring, M. Eugene, Klaus Berger, and Carsten Colpe, eds. *Hellenistic Commentary to the New Testament.* Nashville: Abingdon, 1995.

Sampley, J. Paul, ed. *Paul in the Greco-Roman World: A Handbook.* Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 2003.