

# How Can We Study Paul?

If we had posed thirty years ago the lead question of this chapter, “How can we study Paul?” the answer would have been that we can do it by using history, with theology not far behind. In the twenty-first century, we have those options plus several others. While the larger number of interpretative options complicates the task of studying Paul, proper use of them opens the letters of Paul to new insights and points of application.

## Historical Study

Modern scientific historical study is the systematic study of the past. Historians set clear boundaries when working according to the rules of historical study. They are able to deal only with that part of the past that is accessible to them. If there is no text, no monument, no coins, no archaeological artifacts, there is no history. Take the question of whether Paul ever married. From a historian’s perspective, we do not know. And the reason we do not know is that the data available to us do not tell us. In 1 Cor 7:1-7, Paul talks about marriage. Although he permits marriage and says some beautiful things about it, he still indicates, “I wish that all were as I myself am” (1 Cor 7:7). Well, how was he? Virtually all scholars agree that Paul was unmarried when he wrote 1 Corinthians. But had he ever been married? Was he perhaps divorced? Or widowed? No historical source, including his own letters, tells us. People have speculated that since he was a **Pharisee** (a member of a particular Judean sect, Phil 3:5) and since Pharisees usually were married, Paul must at some point himself have been married. That could be true. But as historians, we

do not know, since we have no historically verifiable data. All we can say is that when he wrote 1 Corinthians, Paul was unmarried.

Just as historical study is the systematic study of the past in general, so historical study of the Bible is the systematic study of the specific past evidenced in the Bible. Historical study tries to explain all references in the text to events and persons and in general seeks to determine the date and place of writing for the document under study, its author, the author's purpose, the identity of the recipients, the recipients' circumstances, and the religious, historical, social, and political factors that encouraged the author to write the document. Historical study pays much attention to the meaning of individual words and their relationships with each other, and therefore it pays constant attention to the context of statements within the literary context of the document. Ideally, it involves studying the text in its original language (for Paul, Greek); for experts, that linguistic ability is mandatory. Such concern with details from the past can emphasize the distance between the contemporary reader and the ancient text. As a result, according to Carl Holladay, interpretation requires the reader to "bridge this gap" by "becoming acquainted with the earlier historical period, its languages, customs, and political and social history."<sup>1</sup>

Consider an example. In Rom 1:1, Paul begins his letter, "Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ" (NRSV).<sup>2</sup> The reader of the New Revised Standard Version text will notice a footnote sign attached to the word *servant*. The note reads, "Gk *slave*," which means that in the Greek-language original, the primary meaning of the word is *slave*. The person who has studied Greek will remember that the Greek word for *slave* is *doulos*. While *servant* is a possible translation, *servant* signals to the North American ear someone who chooses to be in a position of service to others, such as a butler, maid, or public servant. That, historical study suggests, is *not* what Paul means when he calls himself a *doulos*. He wants to indicate that in relationship to Jesus Christ, he is a slave. Moreover, the whole phrase clearly signals that Jesus Christ is his master. Once that is determined, Bible students are able to ask what the text means now.

There are two chief potential limits to historical study. First, in its classical form, historical study of the Bible claims scientific objectivity for its observations and conclusions—in much the same way laboratory chemists claim scientific objectivity for their work. One of the contributions of feminist study has been to question the validity of that claim to objectivity. All scholars see things from their own perspective.<sup>3</sup> A second potential limit is that the scholar, having amassed a wealth of historical data about a given word or person, applies all of that knowledge to each occurrence of the concept being studied, without thinking through the particular context of this specific usage.<sup>4</sup> In a sense, a potential limit of historical study, then, is becoming so caught up in the interesting historical data gathered that one overwhelms the text with it.

While the student of Paul needs to be aware of these limitations, historical study provides access to the author, original recipients, and documents in ways foundational to most contemporary methods of Bible study. Leander Keck and

Victor Paul Furnish are on target when they write that historical study of the Bible “has been an astounding success, for repeatedly, the biblical text has been understood more accurately than before.”<sup>5</sup> Historical study will be the basis for our study of Paul—albeit not the only method to be used.

## Political Study

Political study is basically a subcategory of historical study and an obvious method, it would seem, for twenty-first-century readers, who are attuned to the political meaning of everything from commercials to newspaper editorials to blogs. But because of the religious nature of the New Testament and because of the North American mind-set that church and state ought to be separated (and thus religious texts ought to have nothing to do with politics), biblical interpreters have often been very slow to read the New Testament as in any way political. The theological movement called liberation theology has challenged the separation of the New Testament from its potential political implications, as have many historical and social-scientific students of the Bible.

Returning to Rom 1:1, for example, what are the potential political implications when Paul says that he is “a slave of Jesus Christ”? Paul is writing to people who are living in Rome, the capital city of the empire. Does Paul mean to flaunt that he is a slave of Jesus Christ, thank you—and not a slave of the emperor? If so, his statement carries significant political weight, especially when we recall that separation of church and state, or religion and politics, was essentially unknown in antiquity.

The potential dangers of political study are reading political meanings into texts that do not have them and reading modern political agendas into ancient texts. Attention to solid historical study mitigates those tendencies, and appropriate use of political study helps place New Testament texts within the world in which they were produced.<sup>6</sup>

## Social-Scientific Study

Social-scientific study of the Bible investigates the Bible using models and tools developed in the social sciences. It understands the text as part of its social and cultural world. Three basic social-scientific approaches will be utilized in this study:

1. **Social history** refers to the historical work that describes and analyzes the social matrix of ancient literature, history, and archaeology. Such historical work describes the sort of endeavor that dominated New Testament studies in the nineteenth and most of the twentieth centuries. To use the example of slavery again, people using social history explore texts, artwork, and inscriptions to understand better the roles and functions of slaves in antiquity, as well as how people became slaves and what the “careers” of various kinds of slaves would normally involve.<sup>7</sup>

2. **Sociological study** (or sociological exegesis) refers more narrowly to the utilization of sociological theory in the study of a text. Which modern sociological theories of power and leadership, for example, might help us to grasp more fully how Paul's self-identification as a slave of Jesus Christ was heard by first-century Romans? Or how might theories of social class help us in evaluating the social level implied by the use of the term *slave*?<sup>8</sup>
3. **Cultural anthropology** is the social-scientific study of human culture. It is particularly interested in the values of a given culture. At the same time, it has "an overlapping concern . . . with the study of regularities in observed social organization and the ideas held by a society about such organization—how the domestic and public activities of social groups are organized and the consequences of this organization for such concerns as social inequality, gender relations, and political authority."<sup>9</sup> One of the core values of ancient Mediterranean cultures, say proponents of cultural-anthropological study, is honor and shame: "'Honor' is a claim to worth (on the part of an individual, family, or group) accompanied by the public acknowledgment of, and respect for, that worth."<sup>10</sup> Honor, therefore, has two parts, one internal and one external: "Honor is the value of a person in his or her own eyes (that is, one's claim to worth) *plus* that person's value in the eyes of his or her social group."<sup>11</sup> Shame is the loss of honor and thus the loss of status. Cultural-anthropology students will want to investigate the honor and shame dynamics of Paul's self-designation as a slave (even though, to our knowledge, he had never legally been a slave), and they may notice other examples of honor and shame language that could be illuminated by cultural anthropology, such as "I am not ashamed of the gospel" (Rom 1:16), and "hope does not disappoint us" (literally, "put us to shame"; Rom 5:5). Readers who do not understand Paul's cultural assumptions when he uses such language will be unable to understand him and will unconsciously recast him to fit their own culture.

The application of a theory developed in one discipline and applied to another runs the danger of overwhelming the new data (in our case the New Testament) with an interpretative framework that is alien to it. Use of the social sciences to interpret the New Testament has in particular been labeled as reductionistic; that is, these methods of study can be understood inappropriately to explain everything in the text. While such reductionistic tendencies could be present during the first years of social-scientific study, few today would claim that sociological or cultural-anthropological models explain everything. In our study of Paul, social-scientific study—especially cultural anthropology—will be important in placing our author and his documents and concerns more firmly within the realities of their first-century world and in understanding the dynamics of the texts themselves. Use of the social sciences also reminds us that Paul and his first readers were always parts of social systems both within the church and in the larger society. Although historical study and social-scientific study can be conceived as enemies, our study will emphasize the ways in which they work profitably with each other.<sup>12</sup>

## Rhetorical Study

Rhetorical study is closely related to the methods already outlined. It seeks to understand how authors structure the presentation of their thoughts in order to instruct, entertain, or persuade a given group of listeners/readers at a specific point in time and within a given cultural setting.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, as Luke Timothy Johnson has written, “A major breakthrough in the study of New Testament epistolary literature . . . has been the recovery of an appreciation for ancient rhetoric not simply as a matter of style or ornamentation, but above all as a form of argumentation and persuasion.”<sup>14</sup> As with the social sciences, so with rhetorical study the work of modern theoreticians of rhetoric can be applied to ancient texts.<sup>15</sup> But in addition, there were theoreticians of rhetoric in antiquity whose works and views were widely known by those trained in speaking and writing. Thus, Aristotle, Anaximenes, Cicero, and Quintilian produced major resources.<sup>16</sup> Already in the century prior to the birth of Jesus, “the practice of rhetoric had been thoroughly enculturated, the system of techniques fully explored, the logic rationalized, and the pedagogy refined. Rhetoric permeated both the system of education and the manner of public discourse that marked the culture of Hellenism on the eve of the Roman age.”<sup>17</sup>

Given that reality, students of rhetoric might ask how Paul’s self-title of slave functions rhetorically within Romans. Does it create an identification between Paul and any slaves in the congregation (including possibly imperial slaves who worked in the bureaucracy centered in Rome)? Does it bring forth sympathy for Paul as a person and thereby increase his authority? How does his use of *slave* in Rom 1:1 function when viewed together with his uses of slave imagery in Rom 6:15–23?

The chief temptation of rhetorical study is overanalysis—that is, seeing things that may not be present. At times, that problem is manifested when scholars impose an ideal construct on a biblical text even if the construct does not fit. But when used with some restraint, rhetorical study aids us immeasurably in discerning how Paul put together his arguments and how each element functioned. The fact that rhetoric functions within a given cultural setting helps to tie rhetorical study closely to social-scientific study.

## Literary Study

Literary study of the Bible has been practiced for many decades. Much of what we have outlined so far could be viewed as literary study, namely, studying the biblical text as literature. The term *literary study* is used in most New Testament scholarship in a narrower way to refer to “a set of assumptions and approaches commonly associated with critical literary theory, especially New Criticism, but also a range of other approaches that either directly challenge the historical paradigm or provide plausible alternatives for modern biblical readers.”<sup>18</sup> Key to understanding this approach is to realize that for literary students of the Bible, what is in the forefront of interest is the text as text—not the author, historical circumstances, or cultural context. As Carl Holladay describes this focus, “The text is understood as

having its own voice, and as the words of a text are read, this textual voice speaks. What the term *literary* is intended to capture is this focal emphasis on the words of the text and the conviction that the message and meaning of a text somehow inhere within the literary texture.<sup>19</sup> The result is that many literary students view the text ahistorically, that is, nonhistorically. The text itself is autonomous, and its meaning is located within the text itself and not in a presumed world of the author, community, or society. The text is studied as a freestanding aesthetic or artistic object that is essentially timeless.

Thus, a literary approach to Rom 1:1 and Paul's self-label as "slave of Jesus Christ" might turn to other literature over the centuries that has dealt with slavery, whether or not it is from Greco-Roman antiquity. An antislavery sermon from the nineteenth century, a pro-slavery sermon delivered to slaves in the American South, and a speech of Martin Luther King Jr. could all be used to help understand the literary dynamics of Paul's use of slave language. Such an approach works closely with the axiom that "the meaning of literature transcends the historical intentions of the author."<sup>20</sup>

Of the subcategories of literary study, the one that has borne the most fruit to date in the study of Paul is **narrative criticism**. Narrative criticism or narrative study "focuses on stories in biblical literature and attempts to read these stories with insights drawn from the secular field of modern literary criticism. The goal is to determine the effects that the stories are expected to have on their audience."<sup>21</sup> It is particularly concerned with plot, movement, characters, setting, point of view, implied author, ideal reader, and discourse.<sup>22</sup> Most readers will realize quickly that such narrative study will find the New Testament works of Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Acts to yield narrative results most readily—because they are indeed narratives. The letters of Paul are not. Nevertheless, scholars using narrative study have been able to "tease out" the implied story of a single document<sup>23</sup> and have worked at re-creating Paul's larger "narrative world."<sup>24</sup>

Since the present volume works chiefly with a historical paradigm, literary study in its broader sense will not be much used. In its most extreme form, it seems to assume that the reader has some kind of immediate access not only to the text itself but also to the era in which it was written—and thus to its cultural understandings and language. So, for example, while the same word *slave* might be used both by Paul and by a biographer of Abraham Lincoln, the cultural contexts are very different. American slavery was racially based, usually permanent, and kept virtually all slaves in menial positions. Greco-Roman slavery was militarily and economically based (people became slaves because of war, debt, or birth), often included provisions for eventual freedom, and invested training and responsibility in slaves who ran businesses, staffed much of the empire's bureaucracy, and in some cases became quite wealthy. That is not to say that slavery in Paul's time was positive. Innumerable slaves were mistreated and died in the mines or on vast farms. But it is to say that without historical and cultural study, a reader has every chance of reading past any reasonable range of meaning Paul could have had in mind when he called himself "a slave of Jesus Christ." Scholars using narrative study tend to

deal more regularly with historical questions and tend to see narrative study and historical study as supplementing each other rather than replacing each other. At appropriate points, therefore, we will use narrative study to help us understand Paul.

## **Feminist Study**

Feminist study has developed to counteract the indisputable fact that male interpreters in male-dominant societies have controlled biblical studies essentially since the beginning. A goal of feminist study of the Bible is to look at the texts from women's perspectives, asking questions that have to do with women and are particularly important to women. Feminist students of the Bible are what Carl Holladay deems "disenfranchised Bible readers."<sup>25</sup> Such readers have experienced marginalization and oppression, often based on the Bible. Feminist readers therefore look at texts from the viewpoint of those who are marginalized; in addition to other approaches, they frequently use specifically feminist theories of interpretation. Not all women scholars are feminist interpreters, and male scholars can use feminist approaches.

Feminist study is also interested in what we might call "power relations," referring to how power is distributed and how different individuals or groups relate to each other in terms of their relative degrees of power. Thus, a feminist student of the Bible would investigate whether, by calling himself "slave of Jesus Christ" in Rom 1:1, Paul was asserting power in relationship to the Romans. The feminist scholar would further want to study the power(lessness) of slaves in Rome and would want to know more about the position and roles of female as well as male slaves. A feminist student might also want to explore why Paul apparently did not oppose the oppressive system of slavery.

A potential danger for feminist study is finding in the Bible what it wants to find rather than what is in fact there (a potential danger for any approach). It can also ignore the possibility that ancient texts cannot always be read as support for contemporary concerns. But feminist study has consistently raised legitimate questions that previous students of the Bible have failed to ask.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, feminist interpretation will inform our study at a number of points because it opens up texts and provides new insights.

## **Theological Study**

The New Testament is composed of documents that are not historical documents only. They also are theological documents that interpret God, humanity, the world, and their interrelationship with each other. To interpret Paul from historical, political, social-scientific, rhetorical, literary, and feminist perspectives without attending to the theological is in fact to cut Paul off from the reason he wrote: to further the mission of God. When Paul, to resurrect for a final time our example of Rom 1:1, calls himself a slave of Jesus Christ, he is signaling a host of theological associations and questions. He is the "slave of Jesus Christ." Who then, the

reader will ask, is this Jesus Christ to whom Paul is subject? Why is he the master? (And what does Paul mean later in the passage when he calls this Jesus Christ “Lord” [Rom 1:4]?) What, for that matter, does Paul indicate when he designates Jesus as “Christ”? And what does he imply when—as opposed to passages from Israel’s Bible in which Moses, Joshua, David, and the prophets are slaves/servants of *God*—Paul writes of himself as the slave of Jesus Christ?<sup>27</sup> Answers to those questions help us understand what Paul is saying theologically.

Which of the seven methods of study shall we use? The answer is, all of them. While the fundamental approaches in this book are historical, political, social scientific, and rhetorical, one of the ultimate goals is theological interpretation, and all methods will be used in varying degrees so that a broad range of questions can be engaged.

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## Study Questions

1. Which methods of study are most attractive to you? Why?
2. Which one method seems to have the most difficulties associated with it?
3. Which methods would you like to study more?
4. What are some reasons for using a combination of methods rather than using only one?

## Suggested Reading

### Surveys of Different Ways of Reading the Bible

Green, Joel B., ed. *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010.

Holladay, Carl R. “Contemporary Methods of Reading the Bible.” *NIB* 1.125–49.

### Historical Study

Krentz, Edgar. *The Historical-Critical Method*. GBS. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975.

### Political Study

Elliott, Neil. *The Arrogance of Nations: Reading Romans in the Shadow of Empire*. Paul in Critical Contexts. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008.

Horsley, Richard A., ed. *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society*. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997.

### Social-Scientific Study

Elliott, John H. *What Is Social-Scientific Criticism?* GBS. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993.  
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### Literary Study

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- Powell, Mark Allan. *What Is Narrative Criticism?* GBS. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990.

### Feminist Study

- Levine, Amy-Jill. "Feminist Criticism." In *The Blackwell Companion to the New Testament*, ed. David E. Aune, 156–65. Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.
- Newsom, Carol A., and Sharon H. Ringe, eds. *The Women's Bible Commentary*. Expanded ed. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998.
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- Schüssler Fiorenza, Elisabeth. *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation*. Boston: Beacon, 1984.
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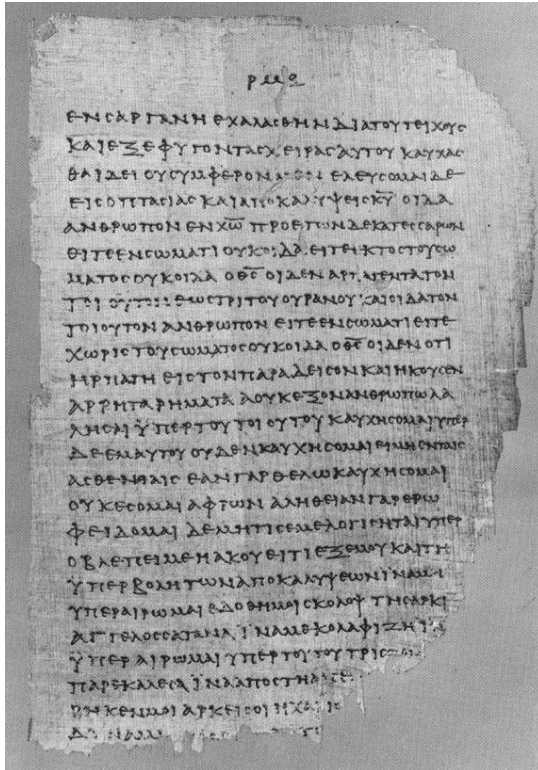


Fig. 2.1 A page from Papyrus 46 (P<sup>46</sup>), from Egypt, about 200 c.e. The earliest surviving manuscript of the letters of Paul.