

Who Was Paul and What Did He Do?



Fig. Int. 1 Early third-century fresco of the apostle Paul, from the catacomb of St. Domitilla, Rome.

Why Study Paul?

Positive and Negative Evaluations of Paul

Think of a well-known but controversial public figure from the present or the past: Barack Obama, Hillary Rodham Clinton, Lady Gaga, Eleanor Roosevelt, Ronald Reagan. Each person has passionate supporters—and equally ardent opponents. Paul, an early Christ-believing missionary, **apostle** (or “messenger,” see chapter 3), theologian, and author, has elicited the same kind of sharply opposed reactions. Over the centuries, he has been appreciated as the most important apostle and vilified as virtually the Antichrist.

For Christian thinkers like Augustine (354–430) and Martin Luther (1483–1546), Paul and his thought are at the very heart of the Christian theological enterprise. Thus, Luther wrote that Paul’s letter to believers in Rome “is in truth the most important document in the New Testament, the gospel in its purest expression. . . . It is the soul’s daily bread, and can never be read too often, or studied too much. . . . It is a brilliant light, almost enough to illumine the whole Bible.”¹ John Wesley (1703–1791), the founder of Methodism, at a crucial point in his development felt his “heart strangely warmed” when he heard Luther’s words about Paul read. Throughout his career, Wesley repeatedly returned to Romans in his sermons and writings. In the twentieth century, Karl Barth (1886–1968) and Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976) acknowledged the importance of Paul for ongoing Christian witness. For such thinkers, Paul’s radical analysis of human nature and sin, coupled with his profound emphasis on God’s unmerited love given to humanity in the

cross of Jesus, provided clear answers to questions about the meaning of life in general and the God-human relationship in particular.

For others, however, the view of Paul has been quite different. In his own lifetime, Paul not only was opposed by Judeans who did not believe in Jesus—which might seem natural—but also was fiercely opposed by other Christ-believing missionaries (see the chapters on Galatians, Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Philippians). After his death, some ancient Judean-Christ-believing communities denounced him as the “enemy” or the “messenger of Satan,” apparently because he relaxed the requirements of the Law of Moses (see chapter 13 on “The Apostate Paul”). In the nineteenth century, many scholars saw Paul as the corruptor of the simple ethical system of Jesus. For Paul de Lagarde, for instance, Paul was the one who burdened Christianity with Israel’s Bible.² Even thinkers with no claims to being biblical scholars have had their opinions about Paul. The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche wrote of Paul as the “dys-evangelist,” that is, the negative evangelist, the proclaimer of *bad* news. The playwright George Bernard Shaw wrote in 1913 a section on “The Monstrous Imposition upon Jesus” as part of his preface to *Androcles and the Lion*. The “monstrous imposition” is Paul’s theology.³

For opponents of slavery in the American South, Paul seemed a fickle resource: in tandem with ringing endorsements of freedom and equality (Gal

A Note on Terms

Israel's Bible instead of Old Testament

The term *Old Testament* is frequently used to designate the portion of the Christian Bible that includes the documents from Genesis to Malachi (in the Protestant Bible). Paul, of course, did not have the Christian Bible, and the documents that were available to him were not known as the “Old Testament,” since there was as yet no “New Testament.” Generally, he used the Greek translation of Israel’s authoritative scriptures, but he also had knowledge of the Hebrew. It is therefore misleading to refer to Paul’s use of the Old Testament, the Greek Old Testament (over against the Hebrew Bible), or the Hebrew Bible (over against the Greek translation). For those reasons, this study will use the terms *Israel's Scriptures*, *Israel's Bible*, *Judean Scriptures*, and *Judean Bible* to refer to this body of writings. Paul ordinarily called them simply *hai graphai*, “the writings” or “the scriptures,” or *hē graphē*, “the writing” or “the scripture.”

Judean instead of Jew

For many years, English-speaking people have translated the Greek word *lou-daios* as *Jew*. Recently, scholars have questioned that decision, arguing that the term *Jew* ought not to be used to translate first-century documents like the New Testament. Philip Esler is an articulate representative of that approach.⁴ His basic argument is that ancient Greeks named ethnic groups in relationship to the territory in which they or their ancestors originated—whether or not they still resided

there, or even if they had never resided there. Romans, too, almost always identified ethnic groups in the same way, as did the people of Israel.⁵

The Greek student will recognize in the word *loudaios* the geographical place name *loudaia*, or *Judea*. *loudaioi* (Judeans) are people from *loudaia* (Judea)—because either they or their ancestors were born there. (Compare in the United States people who proudly bear their ancestral home in their preferred designations as Irish Americans, Chinese Americans, or Americans of African descent.) In the case of Judeans who lived outside Judea, many ties continued to bind them to Judea: they paid the temple tax to the temple in the Judean capital city of Jerusalem, they often celebrated feasts when Jerusalem celebrated them, and they prayed facing Jerusalem.

Esler offers several supporting arguments:

- *Judean* retains by its very name the connection with the temple and the ceremonies practiced there.
- *Jew*, in contrast, signals an identity based not on the temple and its sacrificial system, which were still very much alive during Paul's lifetime, but a later form of Judaism in which identity centered around the *Torah* (Law).
- Also, the term *Jew* carries for modern readers many later connotations, such as the persecution of Jews in medieval Europe and, above all, the twentieth-century Holocaust under the Nazis, that were not part of the experience of first-century *loudaioi*.

In Esler's model, *Jew* can be used as the translation of *loudaios* only for texts written after any realistic hope of rebuilding the temple had been abandoned—so 135 at the earliest and certainly by 200. In this book, *Judean* is the preferred translation.⁶

Nations? Gentiles?

The word *ethnē* (nations or Gentiles) also presents challenges to the translator. It can refer to all people in general, that is, the *nations* of the world. It can refer to those who are not part of a given speaker's or writer's group of people who share common culture, traditions, and kinship; those outside that group are the *nations*. And it can refer more specifically to people who do not belong to the people of Israel, in which case the term is usually translated *Gentiles*. Paul uses the first and third meanings. The word means *Gentiles* when he writes about non-Judeans in contrast to Judeans (Rom 2:14; 3:29; 1 Cor 1:23; Gal 2:12, 14-15). At other places he uses it to refer in a collective way to the *nations* of the world (Rom 4:17; 15:18; Gal 3:8b). Context is the key in determining which translation to use.

Christ-Believer instead of Christian

The word *Christ* itself is originally a title. It is the Greek term for the Hebrew concept of **Messiah**, which refers to a promised descendant of King David of Israel. Some Judeans believed he would restore the people of Israel to their previous glory, while others looked forward to a powerful spokesperson for God. By the time of Paul, the term *Christ* also functioned as a name for Jesus of Nazareth, with special reference to his cross and resurrection as the way through which God had restored people to a positive relationship with God.

Paul, however, never uses the terms *Christian* or *Christianity*. The first recorded uses of *Christian* (and the only ones in the New Testament) are in Acts 11:26; 26:28; and 1 Pet 4:16. In Acts, the term comes from outsiders and is not meant as a compliment. The usage in 1 Peter is almost certainly negative, also.⁷ The term *Christianity* was first used by Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch in Syria, who wrote between 110 and 117 (Ign. *Magn.* 10:1, 3; Ign. *Rom.* 3:3; Ign. *Phld.* 6:1). He may well have invented the word. In any event, the terms do not belong to the way first-century believers in Christ identified themselves.

The words *Christian* and *Christianity* also encourage the reader to envision first-century believers in Christ as understanding and organizing themselves just as Christians do today. But this can be misleading. During Paul's ministry, many churches continued to have ties to Judaism, for example, while others never had close ties with Judaism or had moved away from them. There was no united, centralized movement that sprang up on Easter Monday with a fully developed theology, mission, and organization. That is one reason Paul's work was so important to the Christian church that emerged in part because of him: he offered a clear understanding of what belief in Jesus as the Christ meant, he outlined a strategy for mission, and he took initial steps in organizing groups of believers. In this textbook, we will use terms such as *Christ-believer*, *Christ-follower*, and the *Christ movement* instead of *Christian* and *Christianity*.⁸

3:28; 5:1) went his positive use of the slave image (Rom 1:1; 6:15–23), his direction to a runaway slave to return to his master (Philemon), and his apparent lack of opposition to the whole system of Roman slavery. Although Paul's views on women and thus his larger theological system are “redeemable” for some feminist theologians when read in new ways,⁹ others see Paul's thought as so hopelessly opposed to the leadership of women in the church that Paul and indeed the Bible in general must be rejected.¹⁰

Perhaps Paul still suffers from a strange malady identified by Robin Scroggs: “The trouble with Paul is that he has too many friends and too many enemies. The one thing that the friends and enemies tend to have in common is that they do not really know what Paul is all about. At least the Paul I hear defended and the Paul I hear attacked is not the Paul that I have come to know and appreciate.”¹¹

Why Study Paul?

Such diametrically opposed evaluations of the same person indicate either that some people have totally misunderstood him or that he was a complex and perhaps at times inconsistent author—or both. In either case, the sheer diversity of opinion points to a figure well worth studying. Further, Paul's thought was (and remains!) seminal. The variety of evaluations and the Christian theologians and other believers who over the centuries have been inspired and challenged by Paul point to a creative source who generated idea after idea as he sought to be faithful

to what he had experienced in Jesus. And, of course, what he wrote is considered by many Christians to be God's revealed word.

Another important reason to study Paul is that he was the first theological author of early Christianity. Most if not all of Paul's literary activity that has survived was generated in the 50s of the first century. The Gospel of Mark—the other New Testament writing with a widely acknowledged claim to early dating—was written in the late 60s or early 70s. The other gospels, and indeed all other documents in the New Testament, came later. Thus, Paul, even though he did not write a life of Jesus and probably did not know the earthly Jesus, stood nearer to the beginning of the Christ movement than any other Christ-believing author whose writings have survived from antiquity.¹² Paul therefore gives us a window into the early decades of the Christ movement. In doing so, he is a key figure in the development of a new religious movement that had deep roots in an ancient religion (Judaism) and that at the same time sought to interact with and witness to a surrounding society that was substantially different from it. We also know more about Paul than about any other New Testament author, so that we are able much better to see the interplay between what Paul wrote and who he was.

Nor should we fail to note that much of the New Testament is connected to Paul. Of the twenty-seven documents that constitute the New Testament, thirteen claim to be by him. A fourteenth book, Hebrews, was included in the New Testament in large part because people thought Paul had written it—even though the document makes no such claim. The book of Acts, which outlines the growth of the early church, makes Paul the central character—and for good reason. Paul was an absolutely key figure in the spread of belief in Christ from a small Palestinian Judean sect into a religion that, by the time of Paul's death, had spread into Syria, Turkey, Greece, Italy, and many places in between. Part of the reason for the rapid spread of Christianity was the major theological move Paul made in crossing the ethnic barrier between Judean and Gentile. By arguing that Gentiles could believe in Jesus as the Christ and could become part of the community of believers without first becoming Judean converts, Paul made the salvation won by Jesus available to all people. He broke previously existing paradigms in ways just as innovative as paradigm shifters in technology, such as Bill Gates and Steve Jobs. And in an interesting development, early twenty-first-century European philosophers including Giorgio Agamben and Alain Badiou have been stimulated by Paul's vision, even when they do not share all of his faith commitments.¹³

Part of Paul's way of doing theology was to think in apocalyptic terms, that is, focusing on the coming end of the world. A glance at the daily newspaper or online news indicates how current such interests are, even if Paul had a perspective different from that of most contemporary American apocalyptic thinkers. Paul wrote at a time of great intellectual, religious, and social ferment. The Mediterranean world was dominated by the Roman Empire and its *Pax Romana* (peace of Rome). For many people, it was a relatively good time, but for others, the prosperity of

the empire merely highlighted what they did *not* have, in terms of both material possessions and basic rights. So, for example, women were oppressed yet in some cases were able to explore new freedoms. Different ethnic and linguistic groups could live at times in harmony but could also be in great tension with each other. Local religions and philosophies found new competitors in teachings that crossed previous boundaries. In the midst of such realities, it was Paul's ability to think through the issues of the emerging faith in Christ and to issue relatively clear-cut formulations that helped keep the church on track in a syncretistic age. Seeing how Paul navigated such complex issues may give readers models of how to do the same in their own time.

A final reason to study Paul is that for twenty centuries, he has been one of the premier Christian theologians. His letters are still being read, still being debated, still being preached. He must have had intriguing things to say! And his insights may well tell us something about ourselves and our relationships with God, self, and others. As Calvin Roetzel remarks in relationship to the New Testament letters that Paul certainly wrote, "No other seven letters have had such an impact on human history."¹⁴

How to Use This Book

The goal of this book is to introduce readers to the life, struggles, letters, and thought of the first-century apostle Paul. The book is designed to encourage students to read the letters of Paul and to set them within the cultures and societies of which Paul and the letters' recipients were part—and not just read *about* the letters. By reading this book, a person should be better able to enter Paul's worlds, learn from Paul's letters, and appreciate Paul's innovative and challenging contributions to Christian life and thought. Each letter of Paul's will be explored in some detail and will function, in addition, as a case study for selected major Pauline themes. Thus, Paul's theology will arise from study of his writings, rather than being imposed on them.

Each chapter includes "Study Questions" designed to encourage reflection and discussion, as well as "Suggested Reading" for students who want to explore a topic more fully. A glossary of terms is available in the back of the book; terms defined in the glossary are printed in boldface when they first appear in a chapter.

This textbook has many endnotes. They are designed to give references but also to provide further examples as well as bibliography for those who want to do more research on a given topic. Crucial information is not placed in the notes, so the reader can read the text without constantly referring to the notes or worrying that a key explanation or insight will be missed.

Suggested Reading

Meeks, Wayne A., and John T. Fitzgerald, eds. *The Writings of St. Paul*. 2nd ed. Norton Critical Edition. New York: Norton, 2007. Presents differing views of Paul over the centuries. Also prints NIV annotated text of Paul's letters and letters written in his name.



Fig. 1.1 Roman slaves being led by iron collars. Marble relief from Smyrna, about 200 CE. Original in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.