

HISTORICAL APPROACHES:

Which Past? Whose Past?

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The present changes our past. How is that possible? How can new developments today change the past? The answer is simple and you may have already guessed it. What happened in the past is only available to us through history, through the stories, charts, images, and objects that describe and represent the past.

Imagine telling about your day today in one story. Which moments will you tell about and which will you skip over? How do you decide what is worth telling about your day? Which objects that you used or touched should be associated with you and with this day? In the future, your story of this day might be changed because of things that happen. If you become a leading historian, someone might find this book filled with your marginal notes and argue that your love of history began when you read a book about Paul. What if society in the future is concerned about different realities than you are concerned about now? Your version of the day's story probably does not mention that people picked up your garbage on the curb today. But if in the future your city is overrun by waste or a sanitation workers' strike, your town might implicate you in its history of wasteful self-destruction or in its habit of paying low wages to essential but unskilled labor. With these kinds of changes, your future self might no longer recognize your own story, or you may now remember your past differently.

This chapter explores changes in the discipline of biblical studies that have altered the history we tell about the letters of Paul. Because the story of the past is constantly being rewritten in new times and from different perspectives, you too can enter the critical discussion about the history of Pauline communities and why it might matter to tell it differently.

THE BROAD CONTEXT

For much of the twentieth century, virtually the sole approach to the academic study of the Bible in Europe and the U.S. was *historical criticism*, which privileges interpreting biblical texts “in their historical contexts, in light of the literary and cultural conventions of their time.”¹ This approach emerged in the European Enlightenment largely among Protestant theologian-scholars seeking religious and intellectual freedom from Church authorities. It was thus part of a shifting approach to knowledge: “where medieval culture had celebrated belief as a virtue and regarded doubt as a sin, the modern critical mentality regards doubt as a necessary step in the testing of knowledge.”² This introduced a separation between the history *in* the text and the history *of* and *around* the text. For example, historical-critical scholars began to distinguish among a scholarly history of the figure of Jesus, the story of Jesus in the Gospels, and the history of the writing of the Gospels. Phenomena like Jesus’ miracles began to be doubted as historical because they violate the laws of nature and reason. Although biblical critics in this period still largely viewed the book of Acts as presenting the history of Paul’s travels, there was significant effort to *prove* that it is historical, a project which presupposes that Acts might not be historical. Influential studies of Paul that explained his life and thought in terms of the religion and culture of the first century also emerged with this approach.

Although some people still find it unsettling, asking historical questions has become the standard scholarly approach to the Bible. Most of the reference works in the field, from dictionaries and commentaries to introductory textbooks and websites, have been produced with the historical-critical toolbox, which contains such tools as textual, source, form, and redaction criticisms, archaeology, epigraphy, and historically-focused versions of literary and sociological analysis.

However, in the past forty years, the landscape of biblical interpretation has begun to change. With the rise of diverse social movements claiming rights and recognition for groups of people traditionally excluded from the power structures of society, white women and various minority men and women in Europe and the U.S. began to enter the academy. On a global scale, nationalist and liberationist movements redrew the global map. From the 1970s on, the presence of and attention to diverse perspectives have multiplied, and new methods—that take seriously the way knowledge and meaning is always produced in cultural contexts—have proliferated in the field of biblical studies. Many of these approaches are represented in this volume.

Both the history of western colonialism and the social movements of the twentieth century have had an impact on Western thinking regarding the modernist approach to knowledge and authority. The broadest term one might use to describe the shift is postmodernism.³ Generally speaking, a postmodern way of thinking

questions a modern privileging of traditional order, scientific rationality, and scholarly objectivity. A postmodern worldview highlights the way that knowledge—and even reality itself—is much more varied and contested than in a modernist view. The diversification of voices and shifting ideas about the nature of language and the politics of scholarship has produced an exciting intellectual context in biblical studies characterized by multiplicity and possibility. The next section introduces three basic principles that reflect these changes and that reorient how we might approach history in relation to the letters of Paul.

THREE BASIC PRINCIPLES FOR A CRITICAL PRACTICE OF HISTORY

1. Language Shapes Reality

One of the most far-reaching ways to generate new historical questions is to constantly remind ourselves that language does not describe or reflect reality, it creates and shapes reality. From a traditional historian's point of view, Paul's letters are evidence of what happened in Corinth or Philippi or Galatia. But words do not refer to external realities in any simple way; rather, they participate in constituting that reality. Taking this distinction seriously is commonly called *history after the linguistic turn*, because it recognizes that our understanding of the past is always mediated by and as texts, both ancient and modern. Even material remains from the past must be interpreted as and by texts.

Consider a simple example of this principle: when Paul exclaims "O foolish Galatians!" (Gal. 3:1a), it is hardly a straightforward *fact* that the Galatians are fools. We should ask: how and why did Paul try to shape how the Galatians saw themselves? Do we know that any of them understood themselves as fools? How does Paul's language shape how *we* understand them? You would be surprised how many interpreters of Galatians subtly assume that Paul is right and the letter's audience is religiously or intellectually deficient. They do not see that they are taking Paul's evaluations at face value. Many descriptions of the situation Paul addressed in the Galatian community replicate his negative evaluation of his audience. Paul is speaking rhetorically, that is, he is seeking to *persuade* his audience (see the "Rhetorical Approaches" chapter). Classifying his language within the types of ancient rhetoric helps our understanding, but it does not give us access to how the Galatians understood themselves, nor does it expose that Paul is making a power play that may or may not have succeeded.⁴

The one-sided nature of Paul's letters presents a challenge to historians because texts can only succeed in producing reality if the readers grant authority to the text.

Readers consent to or resist the text and thus participate in its production of meaning. Indeed, texts need readers to internalize and reproduce their ideas in order to have meaning and an impact on the world. This insight has been invaluable to feminist biblical scholars who take a posture of *suspicion* toward the biblical texts and their interpretations because their construction of reality is male-centered and promotes hierarchical structures of power and privilege based on categories like gender, race, and class. For example, when Paul says, “I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a woman is her husband, and the head of Christ is God” (1 Cor. 11:3), in what sense do these words describe an ancient reality? Can we be sure that this is how everyone saw humans and the divine? If so, why does Paul say “I want you to understand”? Some historians might use 1 Corinthians 11:3 to demonstrate that the ancient Pauline communities were hierarchical with regard to gender. Others might use the same text to propose that the ancient Corinthian community was so fervently engaging issues that touched on women’s status that Paul (re)asserted a gendered hierarchy in response.

What You See Depends on Where You Stand

Disrupting an easy relationship between language and reality leads quickly to issues of perspective and authority. Just as the text is not automatically a description of the way things are, so the historian is not an objective describer of the past. He or she is always located. Even the concept of scientific objectivity emerged in a particular context. As discussed above, getting critical distance on the text and appealing to a scientific approach to knowledge freed biblical scholarship to pursue its questions independent of church approval. However, the impulses toward rooting authority in reason and the pursuit of objective Truth emerged at the same time as modern Western racism and colonialism, which often vilified or romanticized the “Other”—that is, the non-white, non-Christian, non-Western—as irrational, inferior, and uncivilized (and thus in need of civilizing). This claim to objectivity thus also served to authorize Western imperialism and racism, presenting Western ways of knowing and being as if they were and should be universal (see, for instance, the “African American Approaches” and “Postcolonial Approaches” chapters).

Reminding ourselves that *what we see depends on where we stand* interrupts any illusions of objectivity and raises the question of alternative and multiple ways of thinking. There are many handbooks, dictionaries, and textbooks that describe the history of the Pauline communities in impartial tones and as a set of relatively stable facts. It is quite easy to forget that these resources present the composite results of a series of scholarly arguments, interpretive decisions, and even unseen prejudices and assumptions. How often do we examine *how* these resources tell history and from what perspective?

For example, it is very common for New Testament scholarship to miss its Christian bias. The pro-Christian perspective of histories of the first century is often (but not always) quite apparent to non-Christians. Some members of minority groups and people from postcolonial contexts likewise have seen the way the Mediterranean past has been claimed as the history of white and western peoples.⁵ Recognizing that all history writing is selective and perspectival raises political and ethical questions that can be asked by anyone: Whose history has been told? Who has benefitted from this telling of the past? How has this telling been blind and/or harmful? How does your own context shape your view of Christian beginnings? These are questions you can ask in your study of both the letters and the history of interpretation of Paul.

History Is an Interpretation of the Past, Not the Past Itself

If you were to write a history of the Pauline communities, you would need to make some basic decisions. What materials will you use? Will you use all thirteen letters attributed to Paul? Or, will you accept the arguments of previous scholars and use only the seven letters understood to be “authentic” Pauline letters? How will you use the book of Acts? For other literature of the period, will you look at mostly Jewish sources—since Paul was Jewish—or at Greek and Roman literature since Paul wrote in Greek and presents himself as an apostle to the many peoples (Gentiles) of the Roman Empire? What about archaeological remains and other material artifacts? Which scholarly histories will you consult? According to what criteria will you select them?

Thinking about these basic questions reminds us that the past is lost to us except through some texts and material remains and the decisions we make about them. Whatever we say we know about the past is always a narration or a text of the past and not the past itself. If all our histories are particular interpretations of the past, then alternative narrations are always possible; not only ones that might arguably aim to be more accurate than the alternatives but also ones that might be *as* accurate but narrate history from a different point of view or with a different goal. Taking a critical approach to history means examining the interests and assumptions of the histories that we have received from previous generations. It draws our attention not only to a history’s content but also its infrastructures, such as its large-scale models, terminology and categories, periodization, selection of relevant events and texts, choice of analogies, and theories of cause and effect.

One model of history that has been very influential in modernist historical criticism is the privileging of origins as the place to find the true essence of Christianity. The modern roots of this model are in the Reformation. Martin Luther championed (his interpretation of) the Pauline churches as the place where true Christianity

emerged as a religion of freedom and faith defined over and against laws and works. From this view, the Judaism that came before Paul is often characterized as anemic and legalistic, and the Catholic Christianity that came after is seen as both legalistic and also as polluted with pagan ideas, such as that the divine needs demonstrations of piety. Many historical narratives of the Pauline churches still replicate the notion that an ideal Pauline Christianity fixed and replaced Judaism and/or eventually declined into Roman Catholicism.

Both interpretations of the past—a model of progress and/or decline—are grand fictions. They organize events in a particular way, minimize any contradicting evidence or perspectives, and valorize particular versions of Christianity. In the post-modern context discussed above, suspicion of such grand narratives has come from many fronts. Such totalizing stories miss the ways that we use history to organize a past that is much messier, mundane, and multidirectional. We often organize the past in order to say something to and about our own present contexts. What is at stake in how you explain Christian beginnings? What debates and ideas today might revise and revitalize how we narrate the past? The next section introduces three trends in historical approaches to Paul that represent larger scale shifts away from the traditional narrations of early Christian history.

THREE TRENDS IN PAULINE HISTORIOGRAPHY

De-Christianizing Paul

In an introduction to the Bible course that I used to teach at an undergraduate institution, I would regularly give an introductory lecture on Paul entitled, “Paul was not a Christian.” I made the case that Paul lived and died a Jew simply by reviewing Paul’s self-description, the absence of the term “Christian” from the Pauline letters, and the preponderance of Jewish traditions and questions discussed in the letters. This lecture always caused a commotion among the students. Many of us instinctively assume that mid-first-century people who understood Jesus as the Christ are basically the same as those who later called themselves Christians, and that Christianity is the result of specifically Christian ways of thinking put forth by certain notable people, such as the Apostle Paul. We assume that without such thinkers there would be no Christianity. Because Paul has long been a figure in Christian history, he has been effectively converted into a Christian despite the ways these are plain anachronisms.

A significant corrective trend in the historical study of the letters of Paul can be broadly characterized as an effort to de-Christianize Paul by re-Judaizing him. Revising this picture of Paul has required deeper and more detailed knowledge of

first-century Judaism, re-thinking Paul's major concepts as fully within the range of Jewish thought in his time, and even re-translating words and phrases that have been heavily Christianized by centuries of Christian interpretation. Although scholars do not agree on all the details, the results of this trend—often called the “New Perspective on Paul”—represent a significant new historical picture of Paul as a fully Jewish thinker engaging Gentile audiences.⁶ The traditional Paul introduces religious innovations to Judaism and is seen as radically breaking with Judaism. This view of Paul is built on and perpetuates a prejudicial Christian caricature of Jews and Judaism as legalistic and ethnocentric. By contrast, the New Paul is not a Christian critiquing Judaism. Rather, he addresses issues of social, ethnic, and cultural difference and group identity and solidarity from his Jewish perspective, which is also an ethnic-cultural identity in antiquity.

In this frame, Paul's thinking about faith, the Law, Gentile salvation, and Christology has its home in Jewish thought (see the “Jewish Perspectives” chapter). The conflicts and authority struggles so apparent in Paul's letters prove that there was a lively debate within the Christ communities about the relationship of the peoples of the nations (*Gentiles/ethnoi*) to the God of the Judeans, the Judean people and their traditions, and the rest of the people of the nations and their gods and traditions. Although many scholars still view Paul as a religious or cultural hero—recall the foolish Galatians example—taking this new approach helps us see that there was not one Jewish or “Christian” or Gentile position in the Christ communities on these issues. The valorization and magnification of Paul's view as *the* Christian view is the result of the interpretive process of history, not a fact of history. As you study Paul's letters and read scholarship interpreting them, pay close attention to how much your (or their) view of Paul resembles later Christian theology and Christian attitudes toward Jews and Judaism.

Why is this important? One reason is because we might be able to produce new historical narratives that are arguably more accurate, that is, they can make better sense of the texts of the past than the narratives of previous generations. Another is because the telling of history is not only about the past, it is also about the present. After one of my “Paul Was Not a Christian” lectures, my co-teacher overheard a student ask another student: “Is she Jewish?” Why would an academic lecture about the historical Paul being Jewish result in someone speculating about my own religious affiliation? Apparently, the student needed to make sense of why I would tell history in this way. Indeed, the student's instinct that something in the present must be motivating me was correct in general if not in the specifics. Teaching at a church-related college, I felt that it was my responsibility as an educator to encourage critical thinking about the Christian tradition and its complicity in such social violence as anti-Semitism. Telling history differently exposes the way that Christians have made Paul a spokesperson for Christian prejudice against Jews. In this way, the needs of the present inform the way we re-think the past. Indeed, the New

Perspective on Paul emerged in response to the Holocaust among Western Christian biblical scholars investigating the roots of Christian anti-Semitism and among historians seeking to understand Paul's Jewish context on its own terms rather than in the service of progressive narratives of Christian supersession of Judaism. These two goals—better history and more responsible history—are echoed in the words of John Gager, a historical-critical scholar who has proposed one of the more radical reinventions of the Jewish Paul: “My argument is that the dominant view of Paul across nearly two thousand years is both bad, in that it has proved harmful, and wrong, in that it can no longer be defended historically.”⁷

Politicizing Paul

If you take a college course on Paul, who is more likely to teach it: a religion professor or someone in a department like political science, classics, literature, or history? Although your professor might have a literary or historical focus, most academic classes on Paul are religion courses (of course, this is also true by default in seminary classes). Being part of the Christian canon, the letters of Paul are usually viewed as religious texts that need to be studied theologically and/or within the history of religions. This creates at least two problems. First, it predetermines that when we read Paul's letters, we expect to find religion and to ask questions about religion. Second, it splits off religion as a category of human experience somehow separate from the other aspects of culture. Is it your experience that people's religion today can be easily separated from their politics, economics, social habits, or even their taste in art and literature? Although the historical-critical method requires attention to the social-political context of the New Testament, this historical work often serves as background in which to find the religious meanings of the text and in which to set a narrative of the emergence of the Christian religion.

A second significant trend in a historical approach to the Pauline letters has been to re-politicize Paul, that is, to consider the ways that Paul's letters can be read as instruments of political and economic organizing and ideology rather than as theological treatises.⁸ One increasingly common way of taking this approach to Paul entails significant attention to the context of the power relations and propaganda of the Roman Empire, as well as an understanding that ancient religion was thoroughly a part of ancient social, political, and economic life. This does not mean ancient religion is somehow false religion, that is, simply politics masking as religion. We can only make this value judgment if we have a presupposition that true religion is somehow *not politics*. In the ancient world these separate categories: “politics” and “religion”—or “state” and “church,” or “secular” and “religious”—simply did not exist.

A now classic example of religious language resonating with social-political meaning and values is 1 Thessalonians 4:13—5:11. This passage has traditionally been read (1) as Paul's pastoral care for grieving Thessalonians, assuring them of life after death, and (2) as Paul's Jewish apocalyptic (thus religious) announcement of the second coming of Christ, promising the rescue (or rapture) of faithful Christians before God's judgment of a sinful world. Both themes emphasize the personal and spiritual over the social and political. However, much of Paul's imagery and vocabulary here echoes royal pageantry and military readiness. Death and grief are addressed at the same time that proclamations of "peace and security" (5:3), common themes in Augustan imperial self-promotion, are exposed as empty promises (see the "Postcolonial Approaches" chapter). In this context, Paul's apocalyptic future takes on very present political implications. Is the coming Lord an alternative to the reigning Caesar? In what ways did the letters of Paul re-orient their audience to prevailing systems of justice, patronage, and political loyalty? What if Paul's letters attest not to a new religious movement but to the formation of alternative communities of resistance and solidarity against the false advertising of the Roman peace?

If we told the history of early Christianity primarily as political history rather than religious history, then the growth of Western Christianity defined as individual beliefs concerning spiritual—not political—matters would also have to be seen as having a political impact. Postcolonial biblical scholars have made this point in relation to the efforts to re-politicize Paul. Although we might convincingly reconstruct the Pauline assemblies as communities of colonized people responding to the Roman Empire, we also have to tell the history of Paul's letters being used to authorize Western projects to missionize, and, therefore, aid in the colonization of Africa, Asia, and the imperial ambitions of the West. In this sense, even the religious readings of Paul have always been political.

Changing the Subject: People's History and De-Centering Paul

You have probably heard the expression, "History is written by the winners." History is also written *about* the winners, about great men and their public deeds, such as their political or military accomplishments. Since the 1970s, historians and other academics have pointed out the way that this kind of history focuses on the elites of a past society and usually serves the elites of the present society. In this sense, history is also written *for* the winners. A familiar case in the United States is the way that school history books have treated the presence and lives of people of African descent in North America. Telling history in a way that treats slavery as a problem overcome by leaders of the past with little attention to its ongoing social, political, or economic effects can subtly relieve contemporary people, particularly those who

benefit from white privilege, from examining the structural aspects of racism in the present day. National programs such as Black History Month (or Women's History Month) attempt to fill in the common omissions in U.S. history, even while their existence proves that certain people have populated our narratives of the past much more than others. Some projects attend more to class than to gender or ethnicity and race, tracing a "People's History" that focuses on the lives of everyday people—rather than the "great men"—as well as the struggles of the working class in the face of the rise of industrialization and capitalism. The ideological critique of history and the efforts to restore a range of people to history together represent a wide-ranging effort to *change the subjects* of history, that is, to reconsider who benefits from the telling of history and to revise whose past we tell.

These larger trends appear in the study of Paul's letters in a few ways. Feminist scholars made early and influential contributions both to the history of women in the Pauline communities and to methodologies that expose and counter the male-centeredness (or androcentrism) of both the biblical texts and the traditions of interpretation (see the "Feminist Approaches" chapter). Using social scientific methods and the study of visual and popular culture, some scholars have turned from an interest in the history of Christianity to the history of Christians, in which everyday Christians become the subjects of history and are considered social, political, and economic actors in their societies.⁹ Given that the vast majority of the textual remains and the most visible material remains of the ancient world are products of elite culture, this effort to tell a history of everyday people is difficult. Some scholars of the New Testament have suggested that Paul's letters represent a rare opportunity to glimpse everyday ancient people because they were produced in and for communities of non-elite people.

Changing the subjects of history means taking marginalized perspectives seriously as well as resisting the powerful tendency to focus on great men. This can be difficult because Paul's letters present only his point of view. Our eyes are drawn to Paul because of the canonization of his letters, the hero stories in Acts, and the Christian tradition's own tendency to tell its history in terms of great men and their victories. Changing the subject means making some effort, for example, to think about the impact of Paul's teaching on slave members of the communities or about how slaves might have re- or even mis-interpreted his words.

Another way to think about changing the subject of history is to consider de-centering Paul from the stories we tell.¹⁰ How can we approach the letters of Paul as attesting to connections and debates among different people and communities rather than as repositories of one person's vision? The history of social movements is often told as the history of great visionaries. These histories do not tell the stories of the myriad of people that come together to make common cause, deal with their disagreements, and often unwittingly and over time produce new ways of thinking and living. If we interpret Paul as part of the communities of Christ rather than

as their creator and sole spokesperson, he does not have to always be right or the hero of the story. Because the writing of history is never only about the past, this de-centering of Paul makes room for contemporary people to engage the questions of the communities of Christ as they resonate in new but equally diverse social contexts rather than to focus on what Paul alone thought or did.

EXPLORING LARGE SHIFTS WITH A SMALL TEXT: 1 THESSALONIANS 2:14-16

Thinking with Basic Principles

Let's turn to a Pauline text to see how thinking with these basic principles and larger trends might spur our historical imagination and critical thinking. Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians has a small section comparing the suffering of the community to that of the Christ communities in Judea. Spend some time comparing a few translations of 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16. What differences do you see? What questions do you have? Even if you do not know Greek, examining small differences among translations can immediately remind us that texts do not reflect reality in a straightforward way.

1 Thessalonians is often seen as evidence for and interpreted with two historical generalizations: that the early Christians faced opposition from Jews and that they were persecuted for their faith. Applying the basic principle that *language shapes reality*, however, paints a much less clear picture. For example, the assertion in 2:15 that "Jews" "oppose everyone" (NRSV) is not a neutral description but a negative generalization. Why does Paul describe Jews in this way? Did his view resonate with his audience?

Many commentaries and textbooks on 1 Thessalonians say that the community was experiencing persecution. But the letter does not give any details of this suffering. If we take Paul's words in 2:14 literally, we still have to fill in the gaps: what kind of suffering? How much? From whom or what? Often we depend upon those very commentaries and textbooks to fill in these gaps. But, they do not have more direct evidence of this particular community than you and I have, that is, 1 Thessalonians itself. Paul is choosing (consciously or unconsciously, it really does not matter) to describe the community in this way. Thus, our verses are not automatically evidence that the Thessalonians *have suffered*, rather they are evidence of the community *being interpreted as sufferers* and being invited to see themselves in that way. This language may shape how the audience and later readers view their experiences. It may also influence how they and we view Paul. In this sense the text does not even have a direct relationship to the real Paul of the past; what we think we

know about Paul is also shaped by Paul's language and the texts—the biblical ones and our own.

At minimum, we can say that 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16 proves that some Christ followers (or at least one) in the mid-first century expressed very negative generalizations about (some) Jews and interpreted their own experiences through the deaths of Jesus and some unnamed prophets. Traditional historians will make some attempt to say—judiciously—what actually happened. Historians after the linguistic turn are more likely to remain agnostic about just how much we can know about the Thessalonian community or the mind of Paul and rather explore the predecessors, relatives, and after effects of this kind of rhetoric (see further below). One can also explore the ways that polemical language against Jews and viewing the representation of the Christian as a sufferer became common ways for ancient Christians to interpret their world.

In the last 40 years, many interpreters of this passage have been preoccupied with a particular historical question: was Paul anti-Semitic? The appearance of this question in scholarship, where it did not appear before, demonstrates the principle that *what you see depends on where you stand*. While previous generations had not been particularly troubled by what was taken as a declaration of God's judgment on Jews, the violence of the Holocaust jolted many Western theologians and historians into examining the Christian past for the roots of modern anti-Semitism. Because 1 Thessalonians has been viewed by scholars as the earliest surviving "Christian" text, these few verses raise the question whether anti-Semitism has infused Christian thought from the very beginnings. It was not scholars' evolving objectivity that produced and compelled new questions. It was precisely their self-reflective subjectivity—their experience of shame and responsibility in the face of the horrors of the Holocaust—that changed the way they thought about the past.

The principle that all perspectives are located opens up new ways to think about familiar texts, but it also resists the idea that the corrected perspective is now somehow fully objective or simply factual. For example, examining the text with the question of anti-Semitism in mind, this passage begins to stick out as odd.¹¹ This is the only place in the authentic letters where Paul says that "the Jews" killed Jesus and where Paul seems to pronounce God's wrathful judgment on the Jews as a people. The text also seems to contradict Paul's climactic statement in Romans 11:26 that "all Israel will be saved" (see Rom. 9:3-5; 11:17-31). Some scholars have thus argued that part or all of 1 Thessalonians 2:13-16 is an interpolation, that is, an addition by a later scribe. However, given the Western tendency to locate ideal Christianity at its origins, it seems convenient that this theory locates 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16 within the history of Christian anti-Semitism but not with Paul or in the 50s CE. This seeming bias does not make the thesis automatically wrong, but it does remind us to continually turn the analytical eye on the desires, choices, and assumptions of particular versions of history. A critical approach to history reframes scholarship as

a deliberation on the plausibility and effectiveness of our interpretations of the past rather than as a scientific and objective quest for the past itself.

History is always an argument about the past, a selection and interpretation of events. This applies to history within the text as well. These few verses interpret the past from a theological perspective. The suffering of the Christ communities are located within a chain of violence beginning with the death of Jesus and the prophets, continuing to Paul's being opposed and driven out of Judea, and culminating in God's wrath coming upon the perpetrators. The Judean past is thus presented as a general story of violence. Are there other stories that could have been told? In what sense is it a plausible historical statement to say that "the Jews," as a whole people, killed Jesus? There had been thousands of crucifixions of other Jews in the years before and after the death of Jesus. Why does Paul describe the Jewish story as one of killing and opposition rather than as one of suffering? Why does he interpret the present of "the Jews who killed Jesus and the prophets" as receiving God's well-deserved wrath? Is there something about Paul's rhetorical interests that relies on this interpretation of the Jews' past as one of violence and retribution? A common answer to this question is that Paul is locked in a battle with Jews who disagree with his mission to the nations. Criticizing what he perceives as sinful obstruction of God's mission to the Gentiles, Paul characterizes the story of the Jews as a sweeping and polemical story of violence and opposition. As the footnote on verses 14-16 in the RSV suggests: "the severe language reflects the strenuous struggle between Paul and the Jews (Acts 14.2,5,19; 17.5,13; 21.21; 25:2,7)."

By now, however, these cross-references to Acts should also raise questions. Acts has been very influential in framing the grand narrative of Christian history; thus, we must scrutinize its role in our interpretations. Indeed, the historicizing narrative in Acts often simply becomes the historian's description of what actually happened in the city before the writing of the letter.¹² But, there is nothing in 1 Thessalonians to corroborate the idea that Paul began his preaching in the synagogue or that some jealous Jews in the city were causing problems for him. And Acts repeatedly describes Paul's missionary strategy and the opposition he faces in the same way: beginning with the synagogues and drawing violent Jewish opposition. Why would this be? One explanation is that Paul and mobs of Jews were very consistent from city to city. Another more likely explanation takes seriously that the entire narrative of Luke-Acts structures its story of the Way as beginning among the Jews and, because of negative responses of jealous and violent Jews, moving out to the nations where it is received positively. Acts does not record history; it invents history in order to shape its readers' view of the past. When we use Acts as history, we often unconsciously replicate its interpretation of the past, that is, we repeat its early version of the grand narrative of the progress of Christian truth beyond the confines of Judaism and its triumph among the nations despite the violent opposition of the Jews.¹³

This analysis suggests that we know much less about the events preceding the writing of 1 Thessalonians than we think we know. Accepting this lack of knowledge of the past is one way to resist the ideological force of the grand narratives that shape modernity and that undergird Christian anti-Semitism and triumphalism. However, by putting 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16 and Acts 17:1-10 alongside each other, we can also produce alternative knowledge. Both texts demonstrate that interpreting the Jewish past was an important piece of the emergence of Christian identity and self-understanding by the end of the first century. 1 Thessalonians shows how a particular construal of the death of Jesus, that is, that the Jews killed Jesus, served as a lens with which to cast negative light on one's opponents' past/present/future. Acts 17:1-10 shows how a story-like narration of the experiences of Paul created a Christian version of the Jewish past that made the triumph of the Way of Christ appear self-evident and inevitable.

Thinking with Trends in Pauline Historiography

So far in our discussion of 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16, we have spoken largely in terms of "Christians" and "Jews," with some mention of "Gentiles." However, the word "Christian" does not appear here or in any of Paul's letters. This raises the challenge of thinking historically about Paul as Jewish and not Christian. While this passage has been seen as distinctly un-Pauline, in certain ways it fits within Paul's regular rhetorical practices and theological assumptions: the use of Hebrew scripture to interpret events, a view of the divine as the final arbiter and enactor of justice, and an expectation that the God of Israel will bring salvation to the nations. All of these are rooted deeply in Jewish tradition. If Paul shares a great deal with other Jews, why is he so polemical? The answer may be linked to his passion for the mission to the Gentiles. A key principle of the New Perspective understands Paul as speaking to Gentiles about Gentile issues. In the case of 1 Thessalonians, the negative portrayal of Paul's opponents primarily bolsters his own relationship with the community by urging his audience to view those who oppose him in the same way he does. In other words, this depiction of a history of violence creates insiders—the audience and Paul and his co-workers—by condemning outsiders.

Outsiders to what? Insiders to what? Is Paul somehow now Christian because he has criticized other Jews as violent and wrong? No. Indeed, the antecedents and relatives of this kind of polemic locate the text fully *within* the Jewish tradition. Announcing God's judgment on Israel for killing its own prophets appears in the Hebrew scriptures (e.g., Neh. 9:26; Jer. 2:30; 2 Chr. 36:16) as well as in Jewish writings from before the time of Paul (*Jub* 1.12; *T. Levi* 16.2). This idea of Jewish suffering being a result of Jewish rejection of God's prophets also appears in the traditions of Jesus (Q 11:49-51) as well as in the book of Acts (7:51-53), both in relation to the

Jewish war and the destruction of Jerusalem.¹⁴ While the gospels and Acts use the tradition in a way that begins to *make a difference* among “the Jews” and Christ followers (“the Way” in Acts), Paul’s use of this Jewish interpretation of suffering and violence does not map onto a division between “Jews” and “Gentiles” let alone “Jews” and “Christians.”

A close look at the text supports this point. Verse 14 compares communities in different geographic regions. What makes the Thessalonians like the communities of God in Christ Jesus in Judea is that they *both suffer at the hands of their own people*. The logic of the comparison depends on the Christ communities *sharing* a social identity with those who are being accused of violence. Thus the opponents of the Thessalonians are other Gentiles and the opponents of the Christ-identified Judeans are other Judeans. Indeed, in Greek, the word Judea and the word translated “Jews” are two versions of the same noun: *Ioudaia/Ioudaioi*. The first refers to the geographic region of Judea and the second to the people associated with that geographic region and their traditions. Would your understanding of the text change if it was translated this way?

For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you suffered the same things from your own people [in Thessalonikē] as they did from the Judeans who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out.

This translation emphasizes the shared ethnic-geographic identity of the groups in *Thessalonikē* and Judea. In addition, removing the comma after the word “Judeans” means that verse 15 describes—if you know your grammar—*those particular Judeans* (the ones who killed and have driven out) not all Judeans. There are now “Judeans,” or Jews, as we translate it today, on both sides, exactly as it is in the Jewish tradition about the death of the prophets.

This suggests that interpreting (and punctuating) verse 15 as a condemnation of “the Jews” represents a misreading or, better, an *overwriting* of the text (and not a neutral or innocent one). Revising it in the way above brings into view a much messier picture than Christians versus Jews. Indeed, our text now attests to the lack of a coherent “Christian” identity within and among the Pauline communities. This disrupts any easy claim to the inevitability of the emergence of Christianity over and against Judaism as it comes to be defined later. The first ancient readers’ response to this text (which is lost to us), the later canonization of it by Christians, and even the punctuation and the translation of *Ioudaioi* as Jews (instead of Judeans) are all part of the process of inventing a Christianity separate from Judaism. But thinking about the past is always bound up with the present. Thus our revision of historical narratives of first-century Jewish-Christian identities as a fluid and complex interplay of ethnic, geographical, and religious identities both draws

on and can further expose the ways that religious identities today are never pure or unrelated to racial-ethnic or geographic differences.

And what if the differences being set up by our text are not primarily religious differences? In many ways, the focus on anti-Semitism and the relationships among Christians and Jews, or Gentiles and Jews, perpetuates an interpretation of the letter in distinctly religious terms. Although the events that Paul interprets as suffering are unknown to us, do we still assume that they are related to religion? Why? If the religious aspects of ancient life cannot be separated from the social, political, and economic, then the struggles of the Thessalonians may have been experienced in social, political, or economic terms. Some scholars have shifted the terms of analysis in just this way, interpreting the ancient audience of 1 Thessalonians as poor artisans who gathered together to remedy poverty with economic mutuality, to counter social invisibility with in-group respect and status, and to survive imperial violence and disinformation by dreaming of the arrival of a just, true, and peaceful ruler. Changing our interpretation of the past in this way can shift how we think about religious change over time; perhaps religious differences, in this case practices and ideas identifiable as distinctly Christian, are the *result* of social, economic, and political forces and differences rather than the cause of them.

From this perspective Paul's construction of common struggle across geography and ethnicity in 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16 takes on a distinctly political flavor. The Pauline letters may represent efforts to build networks of social-political solidarity across ethnic-religious lines, such as among Judeans and the various peoples and cities of the Roman Empire. This interpretation leads to a different explanation of Paul's condemnation of Judean violence as a "political critique of local accommodationist practices."¹⁵ Placing the text on a trans-local map of resistance that includes Judean resistance to Rome, 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16 becomes "neither an interpolation nor an anti-Jewish statement but Paul's critique of pro-Roman forces in Thessalonika through an analogous critique of pro-Roman forces in Judea."¹⁶ Thus Paul condemns some Judeans who killed Jesus and the prophets and some Gentiles who oppress the Thessalonians because they perpetrated injustice. However, Paul's blaming of some Judeans for the death of Jesus also points to the power of empire to proliferate divisiveness among subject peoples (particularly considering how only Roman authorities can order the crucifixion of people in their empire).

Rethinking the Pauline communities as responding to and shaping people's social, economic, and political lives as much as cultivating a religious identity draws our attention to a wider range of people than are usually the subjects of history. For example, imagining the suffering of the Thessalonian community as the everyday struggles of the non-elite for survival and recognition resonates with the letter's discussion of manual labor and a concern for the opinions of outsiders. In this light, 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16 uses the Judean prophetic tradition to make sense of senseless social violence. However, if we think about telling the history of Christians

rather than Christianity, we still have to contend with the way that this non-elite theological thinking, when canonized and naturalized, became a site for ongoing violence against Jews.

Attempting to change the subjects of history as we approach 1 Thessalonians also brings to our attention the considerable difficulty of doing so with Paul's letters. We have no idea whether there were women or slaves in the community who might have had significantly different experiences of daily struggle and suffering than Paul knows about or has in mind. In what ways does the text's free-male-centered language and kyriarchal imagery participate in the erasure of some people from history even as it can be effectively used to change the subjects of history away from religious or elite histories? Do we reinscribe a "great man" approach to history when we focus solely on the perspective of Paul? How can we approach the letters of Paul as products of community issues and relationships?

CONCLUSION

With the three basic principles and some sense of the major trends in Pauline historiography, you can analyze the historical narratives and assumptions that you encounter in the standard scholarly resources as well as in popular knowledge. You can also ask historical questions of your own about the letters of Paul. Taking a critical approach to history requires a considerable amount of imagination, persistence, and comfort with not knowing. Indeed, some newer approaches in biblical studies have set aside historical questions altogether, as some of the following chapters might do. A historical approach does tend to restrict the text's meaning to the past and one geographic region when it actually has been and continues to be signified in various communities. However, even these new approaches can unwittingly perpetuate dominant assumptions about the past and problematic habits of narrating Christian history. Thus, it is important to continue to ask critical questions about history, although they may not be the same as the questions of the past.

FURTHER READING

Within the Discipline of History

Iggers, George G. *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2005. Overview of the changes in the philosophy of history in the twentieth century.

White, Hayden. *The Fiction of Narrative: Essays on History, Literature, and Theory, 1957–2007*.

Ed. Robert Doran. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2010. Signal essays from the most influential historian of the linguistic turn.

Rethinking the Discipline of History in Biblical Studies and Early Christianity

- Castelli, Elizabeth and Hal Taussig. "Drawing Large and Startling Figures: Reimagining Christian Origins by Painting Like Picasso." In *Reimagining Christian Origins*, edited by Elizabeth Castelli and Hal Taussig, 3–20. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990. Outlines several important propositions for reimagining Christian beginnings.
- Clark, Elizabeth. *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004. Explains shifts in the philosophy of history in relation to the study of Late Antiquity.
- King, Karen. "Which Christianity?" In *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, edited by Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter, 66–86. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. Overview of the emergence of a multilocational model of diversity in early Christian studies over linear models of orthodoxy and unity.
- Schüssler Fiorenza, Elisabeth. *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999. Signal essays on the shifts in the field, the paradigms and ethics of interpretation, historiography, and power-attuned rhetorical criticism.
- Segovia, Fernando. "‘And They Began to Speak in Other Tongues’: Competing Modes of Discourse in Contemporary Biblical Criticism." In *Reading from This Place* Vol. 1, edited by Fernando Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert, 1–32. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995. An influential mapping of the methodological and political changes in the discipline.
- Vander Stichele, Caroline and Todd Penner, "Mastering the Tools or Retooling the Masters? The Legacy of Historical-Critical Discourse." In *Her Master's Tools? Feminist and Postcolonial Engagements of Historical-Critical Discourse* edited by Caolrline Vander Stichele and Todd Penner, 1–29. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005. Introduction to the interruption of the objective and universalist claims of the elite male Western view of history by a range of scholars claiming alternative experiences.

On 1 Thessalonians

- Johnson-DeBaufre, Melanie. "A Monument to Suffering: 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16, Dangerous Memory, and Christian Identity," *Journal of Christian History* (2011) forthcoming. In-depth discussion of 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16 as a site of collective Christian memory.
- . "Gazing Upon the Invisible: Archaeology, Historiography, and the Elusive Women of 1 Thessalonians." In *From Roman to Early Christian Thessalonikē*, edited by Laura Nasrallah, et al, 73–108. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010. Examines the problem of the (in)visibility of women in the Thessalonian community, the letter, Pauline scholarship, and archaeology.
- Smith, Abraham. "The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians." In *A Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings*, edited by Fernando Segovia and R. S. Sugirtharajah, 304–22. London and New York: T. & T. Clark, 2007. Interprets 1 Thessalonians and its history of interpretation using postcolonial criticism.

ENDNOTES

1. John J. Collins, *The Bible After Babel: Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 4.

2. *Ibid.*, 5.

3. For an extended treatment of the interaction of Biblical Studies with these philosophical and theoretical trends, see Bible and Culture Collective, *The Postmodern Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

4. For a discussion of politically attuned rhetorical analysis, see Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 129–48.

5. See Brian K. Blount, et al., “Introduction” in *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 1–10; R. S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial, and Postcolonial Encounters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); and Shawn Kelley, *Racializing Jesus: Race, Ideology, and the Formation of Modern Biblical Scholarship* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

6. For an overview of this scholarly trajectory, see John G. Gager, *Reinventing Paul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

7. Gager, *Reinventing Paul*, viii.

8. See the three volumes edited by Richard Horsley and published by Trinity Press International: *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (Harrisburg: Trinity International, 1997); *Paul and Politics: Ekklesia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation; Essays in Honor of Krister Stendahl* (Harrisburg: Trinity International, 2000); *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order* (Harrisburg: Trinity International, 2004); and all of the books in the Paul in Critical Context series from Fortress Press.

9. See the People’s History of Christianity series from Fortress Press, especially, Richard Horsley, ed., *Christian Origins*, Vol. 1 of A People’s History of Christianity (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005) and Virginia Burrus, ed., *Late Ancient Christianity*, Vol. 2 of A People’s History of Christianity (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010).

10. See Melanie Johnson-DeBaufre and Laura S. Nasrallah, “Beyond the Heroic Paul: Toward a Feminist and Decolonizing Approach to the Letters of Paul,” in *The Colonized Apostle: Paul Through Postcolonial Eyes*, ed. Christopher Stanley (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 161–74.

11. Even in 1 Thessalonians, chapter 2 reads quite nicely without verses 13–16, as verse 17 returns to the themes of 2:9–12. Strangely, the preceding verse seems to introduce a second thanksgiving (v. 13; see 1:2) after the body of the letter had already begun in 2:1. Also, the criticism of the Jews for the death of Jesus and the idea that God’s judgment is upon them sounds more like the gospels and other texts written after the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem in 70 CE than it does like anything in the Pauline letters.

12. For an example, see the discussion of Paul’s abrupt departure from the city (2:17) in the Harper Collins NRSV, p. 2218.

13. See Shelly Matthews, *Perfect Martyr: The Stoning of Stephen and the Construction of Christian Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

14. *Ibid.*, 71–72.

15. Abraham Smith, “The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians,” in *A Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia and R. S. Sugirtharajah (London and New York: T. & T. Clark, 2007), 304–22, 310.

16. *Ibid.*, 314.