

# Introduction

This commentary on the seven letters traditionally attributed to Paul is based on an understanding of modern scholarship relative to the historical writers (authors) of these letters.

The letters in question—2 Thessalonians, Ephesians, Colossians, Hebrews, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus—are often called the Deutero-Pauline letters, meaning secondary letters, or *pseudo*-Pauline, meaning false letters of Paul. For various reasons, the letters could not have been written by Paul: for example, the contents point to a period after Paul's death; the interpretation of Jesus is not Paul's; the concern for non-Israelites mirrors a situation after Paul; etc. In other words, these seven letters clearly attest to a Pauline tradition, to persons writing during a second and third generation *after* Paul.

Paul himself was a second-generation Jesus-group member. Members of this second generation for the most part did not actually know Jesus personally, did not interact with him, did not actually hear him when he was alive on earth. Second-generation interest was focused, rather, on what the God of Israel did, what the God of Israel did to Jesus of Nazareth in his death and resurrection, and on the fact that this act of God confirmed Jesus' proclamation of a forthcoming kingdom of the God of Israel. As Paul witnessed, the second-generation Jesus-groups were to be found in Palestine as well as among Israelites resident outside of Palestine. In Palestine, second-generation Jesus-groups, like the first-generation groups, had political-religious interests (see Acts 1–9). They in fact formed a political-religious party in Israel, like other parties: the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes. Jesus-groups believed that the kingdom of heaven, an Israelite theocracy, was coming, and they firmly believed that this would be ushered in with Jesus as Israel's Messiah. Very definitely this would happen soon. Jesus-groups outside of Palestine shared identical beliefs in the forthcoming kingdom of God in Israel. While they nurtured this Israelite political-religious ideology, they were in fact resident in locations with their own political-religious institutions and their own citizenry. As resident aliens, their favored social structure followed kinship lines; they formed fictive kin groups of brothers and sisters meeting in domestic space, whether tenements or houses.

After a period, Paul began to seek out Israelites in non-Israelite cities. His goal was to disseminate the innovation of what the God of Israel had done to Jesus, raising him from the dead as Israel's Messiah and cosmic Lord, with a view to a forthcoming theocracy for Israel. Paul believed that his task to inform his fellow Israelites of this innovation was God-given, hence God-driven and directed to regions where Israelites were a minority, that is, among non-Israelite majorities (called "the [other] peoples" and often translated as "Gentiles"). Paul focused his work in the western Israelite Diaspora.

[A] language divide and two systems of communication have brought [*sic*] to a serious gap between the western Jewish Diaspora and the eastern one. Thus the western Greek-speaking Jews lost touch with the Halakhah and the Rabbis, a condition that had far-reaching consequences on Jewish history thereafter. The Rabbis paid a high price for keeping their Halakhah in oral form, losing in consequence half of their constituency. An oral law did not develop in the western diaspora, whereas the existing eastern one was not translated into Greek. Hence it is not surprising that western Jews contributed nothing to the development of the oral law in the east. The Jewish communities that were isolated from the Rabbinic network served as a receptive basis for the development of an alternative Christian network by Paul and the apostles, which enabled it to spread throughout the Mediterranean basin. The Jews that remained "biblical" surfaced in Europe in the Middle Ages. (Edrei and Mendels 2007:91; see also 114 and 130 for further explanation)

The letters we study in this commentary witness to the Pauline tradition as it developed, after the apostle's death, in this western Diaspora.

We think all would agree that if Paul's letters attest to anything, they indicate his concern to spread what he called the gospel of God. But these later letters discussed in this volume are concerned not about spreading the gospel, but with maintaining concord or harmony in Jesus-groups that were not founded by Paul. Concord was a chief value among Romans.

For Paul, the population of the world had consisted of two peoples: Israel and the rest of humankind, that is, the other peoples (NRSV: "Gentiles"). For all practical purposes, the other peoples formed an undifferentiated mass, all equal, all the same, all non-Israelites. For Paul, on the other hand, Israel

had differentiation and gradated distinctions of clean and unclean, sacred and profane. This is typically ethnocentric. **Gentiles.**

Paul's clients were Jesus-group Israelites. But there were other types of Jesus-group Israelites seeking clients of their own. These were the traveling "Judaizers" who sought to have Paul's clients adopt one of their Judean versions of the gospel of God. Their goal was not to convert Paul's clients to some uniform, basic Judaism but to direct them away from Paul's gospel of God, adapted as it was to Israelites living among majority non-Israelite populations.

The difference in theology between Israelites and non-Israelites is that Israel worshiped one and only one God in monarchy, while non-Israelites worshiped many gods in hierarchy. Greeks, that is, who were understood by Paul and his contemporaries to be civilized people, had no difficulty in identifying the God of Israel with Zeus or Jupiter, thus identifying the God of Israel with the most high god of their own systems. Israelites, on the other hand, while denying the reality of other gods in the forms of statues, nonetheless believed in entities with all the features of lesser deities, whom they called "archangels" and "angels." In other words, apart from different labels, we have the same sort of entities functioning in the world in the first-century Eastern Mediterranean world, regardless of cultural context—Greek or Israelite or other. While fights about labels might be significant, in practice, as Paul says, "there are many lords and many gods" (1 Cor. 8:5). This is *henotheism*, that is, a belief in one among many gods. The command "I am the Lord *your* God . . . you shall have no other gods *before me*" implies the existence of other gods (Deut. 5:6-7). In the Hellenistic context, the earlier Israelite adherence to a monarchical, exclusive tribal god evolved. Some Israelites had recourse to angels and archangels (whom non-Israelites might have called lesser deities) for specialized purposes.

When colonial Israelites, meaning Israelites living as minority populations in Greek and Roman cities, encountered other, lesser deities with Greek and Roman names, their participation in the civic life of those cities sometimes involved offering ceremonial honors to those deities, even if Israelites themselves did not build altars to them or worship them in their own homes. (See Rev. 2:12-17, condemning the behavior of Jesus-group members who "ate food offered to idols" at the altar of Zeus in Pergamum; and Rev. 2:20. If these were Israelites, it would appear that their participation in such ceremonial aspects of civic life was regarded by the author of Revelation as idolatry. See further Malina and Pilch 2000:56; 2006:376-78.)

The obvious addressees of the Deutero-Pauline letters were largely Israelites of the western Diaspora. The question here is, who were these first-century Israelites resident among non-Israelite majorities?

Shaye J. D. Cohen notes that often Israelites and non-Israelites “were corporeally, visually, linguistically, and socially indistinguishable” (Cohen 1999:37). And if Israelites in the first-century Mediterranean world “looked like everyone else, spoke like everyone else, were named like everyone else, and supported themselves like everyone else,” then how would one know an Israelite when one saw one? (*ibid.*, 53). Many modern readers of New Testament documents presume that the characteristic identity markers prescribed in the fifth-century c.e. Talmud were universally observed among Israelites in antiquity and that, for example, the main infallible and usable marker distinguishing an Israelite from a non-Israelite was circumcision. But, as Cohen further notes, outside of the Greek gymnasias, public nudity was rare, so one would usually not know whether a particular male was circumcised or not. (Nevertheless, by the first century c.e., outsiders in Rome “began to associate circumcision with Judaism in the diaspora” (*ibid.*, 40). Behavior is what mattered, and different Israelites apparently participated to different extents in the ceremonial life of the Hellenistic city.

Cultural boundaries between Israelites and non-Israelites were often quite blurred, indicating far more diversity than is generally imagined. In their enclaves in Greco-Roman cities, Israelites often carried out religious customs that would have seemed familiar enough to their non-Israelite neighbors. For example, they often inscribed their funerary monuments with the polytheistic *DM* (*diis manibus*, i.e., to the divine shades or spirits) to Roman ancestral deities, or at other times to the spirit gods, the Junonian spirits. We know of Israelite slaves sold to Apollo and of an Israelite who sold his slaves to Apollo. Israelites signed oaths to Jupiter, Gaia (Earth), Helios (Sun), as well as to the Highest God (presumably the God of Israel). One Israelite from Boeotia, upon being manumitted, set up an altar to the Greek gods Amphiarus and Hygeia, after being commanded to do so in a dream. In Upper Egypt, Israelite inscriptions are found in a temple dedicated to the god Pan, while another speaks of Moira (divine fate), and of crossing the underworld river Lethe, with Hades as the final destination of the dead—aspects of Greek mythology. In typical Hellenistic, and Judean, fashion (also characteristic of non-Judeans), the inscriptions speak of tears, grief, laments, and the swiftness of death. In Italy, graves were imbued with divine power and were the subjects of propitiation; graves were even considered sacrificial altars, places for funerary meals. (That similar practices were current in ancient Israel is evident from Jer. 16:7; Ps. 106:28; Tobit 4:17:

“place your bread on the grave of the righteous, but give none to sinners.”) Graves were shrines for the dead, a place to worship the dead, a habitation of the dead. Those who tampered with graves would have to answer to God or the gods, and they and their families would be cursed (see Kennedy 1987:227–36).

There is evidence as well that Israelites took part in Greek athletics and were spectators at Greek athletic events. These events were intimately bound up with rituals directed to various deities. A menorah incised on the wall of the gymnasium at Priene, a Hellenistic city on the Maeander River southeast of Ephesus and a few miles downstream from Tralles, suggests Israelite presence. The Alexandrian Israelite Philo was familiar with the intimate details of athletic events and must frequently have been a spectator himself (Philo *On Agriculture* 11.1–17). This is not very surprising, since even in Palestine, literary evidence suggests that many young Israelite men participated in Greek athletics in Jerusalem when it was under the control of Antiochus Epiphanes, 175–163 b.c.e. (2 Macc. 4:7–20; Josephus *Antiquities* 12.241; 19.335–37). Greek games, held in specially constructed amphitheaters, hippodromes, and stadiums, are attested in Caesarea Maritima (Josephus *War* 1.415; *Antiquities* 15.341) and Jerusalem (*Antiquities* 15.268–73). Athletic buildings are also attested for Tiberias (*War* 2.618–19; 3.539; *Life* 92) and Tarichaeae, both on the shore of the Sea of Galilee (*War* 2.599; *Life* 132). Stadiums (which had to be two hundred yards long) were outfitted with seating that typically accommodated ten thousand spectators. Since the population of Sepphoris and Tiberias was predominantly Israelite, the spectators at such events must have included a number of Israelites (Harris 1972).

Guilds in Greco-Roman cities were generally under the patronage of deities and local supporters. Israelites had guilds of purple dyers and carpet weavers (Hierapolis, Phrygia), goldsmiths (Corycus, Cilicia), and fishermen (Joppa, Palestine). They also worked as merchants and traders of spices, perfume, wine, linen, cloth, and silk. Others were bakers, boot makers, physicians, and bankers. Several of the nearly one hundred inscriptions (three in Hebrew, the rest in Greek) discovered in connection with the excavation of the Sardis synagogue reveal that eight synagogue members were also members of the municipal council, which would routinely have involved oaths and prayers to the local protective gods. Such provincial councilors (*decuriones*) were hereditary positions held by people of wealth. Other elite members of Sardis included Aurelius Basileides, a former procurator, and Paulus, a *comes* (i.e., a “count”). Other wealthy donors were citizens of Sardis, for example, Hippasios the Second.

Israelites also served in the Roman army: we know of an Israelite commander and officer mentioned in Egypt and a centurion in Palestine and soldiers in the Roman army are mentioned in Italy. There was even a Judean military unit, and one Israelite unit in the Roman navy. Of course, all these military persons had to take an oath to their officers and a vow to the Roman deities. Other Israelites who paid homage to local deities included some among the city councilmen of Sardis, Acmonia (Phrygia), Corycus (Cilicia), Cyrene, and El Hamman (Palestine). Even Philo calls the Israelite God “the Supreme father of the gods,” implying that Israelites recognized the existence of other deities. . . .” (*Special Laws* 2.165). Israelite associations (*collegia*, synagogues) were often modeled on Greco-Roman patterns of club organizations (*collegia*), with a set of offices bearing Greco-Roman names. In sum, all this suggests that Israelites both in Palestine and in Israelite colonies were far more enmeshed in Hellenistic culture than had been previously thought possible. (For more information, see Aune 1997: passim; Kant 1987:617–713.)

A fundamental cultural presupposition of the area was the ingroup/outgroup perspective. Ingroup feelings are rooted in the perception of similarity with others, specifically with one’s gender, family, extended family, neighborhood, town or city section, and ethnic group (see Esler 1998:29–57). Ingroup members are treated with loyalty, openness, solidarity, and support. Those falling outside the ingroup boundaries are the outgroup. With the outgroup, almost “anything goes.” There were different rules on how members of the outgroup might be treated, including limits on interactions with ingroup members. Dealings with outgroup persons are indifferent, even hostile. For practical purposes members of the outgroup are, again, a different species of being. Ingroup and outgroup lines were not entirely fixed. To an outsider they seem constantly shifting.

By way of comparison with the Judean focus on the ingroup status of others within Israel, consider what elite Romans thought about their own relations with ingroup members and with other peoples, the outgroups (see Malina 1992). Plutarch, for example, advised:

When differences arise against brothers, we must be careful especially at such times to associate familiarly [*plesiazein*] with our brothers’ friends, but avoid and shun all intimacy with their enemies, imitating at this point, at least, the practice of Cretans, who, though they often quarrelled with and warred against each other, made up their differences and united when outside enemies attacked; and this

it was which they called “syncretism” [*sygkretismos*]. (*On Brotherly Love* 19.490B; LCL)

Being of similar genealogical and geographical origin meant harboring ingroup feelings, especially when away from one’s place of origin, even when long departed from it. For it was the place of origin that endowed group members with particular characteristics. Pliny, for example, considered Europe the significant part of the world, and Italy as the center of Europe. Rome, of course, was the center of Italy:

To begin then with Europe, nurse of the race that has conquered all the nations, and by far the loveliest portion of the earth, which most authorities not without reason have reckoned to be not a third part, but a half of the world, dividing the whole circle into two portions by a line drawn from the river Don (Tanaus) to the Straits of Gibraltar (Gadatinum). (Pliny *Natural History* 3.1.5 LCL)

And further on:

I am well aware that I may with justice be considered ungrateful and lazy if I describe in this casual and cursory manner a land (Italia) which is at once the nursling and the mother of all other lands, chosen by the providence of the gods to make heaven itself more glorious, to unite scattered empires, to make manners gentle, to draw together in converse by community of language the jarring and uncouth tongues of so many nations, to give mankind civilization, and in a word to become throughout the world the single fatherland of all the races. But what am I to do? The great fame of all its places—who could touch upon them all? And the great renown of the various things and peoples in it give me pause. . . . The Greeks, themselves a people most prone to gushing self-praise, have pronounced sentence on the land by conferring on but a very small part of it the name of Great Greece! (Pliny *Natural History* 3.5.39–42 LCL)

For Pliny, “The one race [*gens*] of outstanding eminence in virtue among all the races in the whole world is undoubtedly the Roman” (*Natural History* 7.40.130). This was not difficult to prove. In his view, “there is a countless series of Roman examples (of men of intellectual excellence), if one chose to pursue them, since

a single race [*gens*] has produced more men of distinction in every branch whatever than the whole of the other lands [*terrae*]" (*Natural History* 7.30.116).

Two generations earlier, Cicero, too, noted that Rome's preeminence was due basically to the moral virtue of its inhabitants:

However good be our conceit of ourselves, conscript fathers, we have excelled neither Spain in population, nor Gaul in force [*robor*], nor Carthage in cleverness [*calliditas*], nor Greece in technology [*ars*], nor indeed Italy and Latium itself in the innate sensibility [*sensus*] characteristic of this land and its peoples; but in piety, in devotion to religion [*pietas et religio*], and in that special wisdom which consists in the recognition of the truth that the world is swayed and directed by the disposal of the gods, we have excelled every race and every nation. (Cicero *De haruspicum responsis* 9.19 LCL)

Romans, like the other empire builders of antiquity, considered their empire to be the only "state" in the world. There simply was no civilized, humanized world apart from Rome. Thus, in their eyes, people did not come under Roman rule or Roman oppression. Rather, to be "Romanized" was to be civilized, which is the same as to become "Greek" (to be Hellenized), immersed in worldwide values and behaviors. The normative set of civilizing qualities derived from Hellenic civilization. As Paul Veyne has observed:

The words "Roman," "Latin," or "Pilgrim" indicate a status, not an ethnic origin: and no difference was made among Roman citizens of Italic origin and those of provincial origin. Ethnic differences counted so little for Romans that at the end of antiquity, they felt no repugnance in recruiting their soldiers and generals from among the Germani. . . . Republican Rome, that people who had had as its culture that of another people, the Greeks, did not feel this culture as strange, but simply as civilization. Likewise, in the Empire and outside its frontiers, Greco-Roman civilization was civilization itself; one did not Romanize or Hellenize, one civilized. (Veyne 1989:410–11)

The innovation that Jesus proclaimed, on the other hand, was a forthcoming Israelite theocracy or the kingdom of heaven/God. The innovation that Paul proclaimed was that the God of Israel raised Jesus from the dead, thus revealing



Jesus to be Israel's Messiah (Christ) and cosmic Lord, with a view to the forthcoming Israelite theocracy (1 Thessalonians and frequently). According to these New Testament witnesses, then, the founder or change agency of Jesus-groups and their ideology is God, the God of Israel. God's directly authorized change agents were individuals, such as John the Baptist, Jesus, or/and Paul. All functioned for the same change agency, the God of Israel (Pilch 2011a).

As a change agent authorized by the God of Israel, Paul had to appoint some persons to take his place after his death. It was these change agent successors—or others writing in their names—whom we encounter in the post-Pauline documents under study here. Their audience was fellow Jesus-group members, that is, Israelites recruited from Israelite groups in majority non-Israelite cities throughout the northeastern Mediterranean. These Israelite groups were to be found largely in Israelite enclaves in Greco-Roman cities. The Israelite innovation communicated by Paul to Israelite groups located in non-Israelite majority cities of the Eastern Mediterranean was a piece of radically new political-religious news of relevance to Israelites. For Paul, this was the gospel; for his successors, this was a mystery.

First-century Mediterraneans were collectivistic persons. That means that group integrity was far more important than individual self-reliance. When collectivistic persons and their communities adopt an innovation, research indicates that adopting the innovation (the decision to accept an innovation) is far less significant than actually putting the innovation to use, that is, implementation. And this is largely what we find in these letters. What was required now was for those who accepted Paul's message to behave in a way that would conform to the implications of the proclamation, specifically by forming a support group (a local "church") and expressing their trust in the God of Israel by proper behavior toward one another and toward God. Thus, a new moral posture and worship form indicated implementation, putting the innovation to use. The emphases on a new moral posture surfaces in these letters.

As change agent successors focused on Israelites living among non-Israelites, Paul's assistants continued to proclaim the mystery that the God of Israel was about to bring redemption or restoration of honor to Israel. The message was a solution to an Israelite problem. The problem was Israel's situation outside Judea (and in Judea). Paul was one of those who believed that God's raising Jesus signaled Israel's forthcoming redemption. Hence, the people Paul approached were an Israelite minority living in Hellenistic societies. And his message to his fellow Israelites was that God's redemption of Israel has dawned by means of Israel's Messiah raised by God. Further, his Jesus has been

exalted by God. In these post-Pauline letters, this Jesus is now cosmic Lord. The Israelites who found this message a solution to their problem of being Israelites in the first century would fit this information into their traditional ancestral kinship religion.

If conversion meant transfer from one group to another, already existing group, then Paul was not converting Israelites. Rather he announced a new stage in Israel's corporate history, a new development in Israel launched by the God of Israel. He was communicating an innovation. The adoption of an innovation by an existing group is not exactly what people mean by conversion. The problem with conversion studies applied to the New Testament, apart from the fact that they are anachronistically psychological (see Pilch 1997), is that they presume conversion similar to the modern experience associated with that label. There were no Jesus-groups when Paul went to proclaim the innovation that the God of Israel had wrought in Israel. Social conversion is an either/or choice between this group and that one. In contrast, the innovation Paul presented was a choice to adopt or not to adopt a change within the same group, a yes or no, not an either/or choice of this group or that group, since there was no other group to choose.

These post-Pauline letters focus on the exchange relationship that the letters were meant to maintain with a view to group stability. To focus on Paul's "theology" rather than on the social interrelationship between the change agent and his clients is to miss the thrust of his letters.

Two types of material are provided in this book. First, by way of clarification, we offer short **Textual Notes** commenting on each letter, presented in the sequence in which they are presented in the New Testament. This is the so-called canonical sequence printed in Bibles. These notes draw the reader's attention to dimensions of the social system expressed in the language of each letter and provide a small-scale social-science commentary that supplements the traditional, more theologically oriented studies available on the Pauline (or Deutero-Pauline) documents.

Second, we provide a collection of **Reading Scenarios** drawn from anthropological studies of the Mediterranean social system. This is the social system encoded in the language of the letters in ways that are not always obvious to modern readers. Since most of the reading scenarios apply throughout the post-Pauline letters, however, we have duly referenced them in the commentary for the convenience of the reader. Together with the **Textual Notes**, the **Reading Scenarios** offer clues for filling in the unspoken or implicit elements of the writing as a Mediterranean reader would certainly have done. The **Notes** and **Reading Scenarios** help the modern reader develop

a considerate posture toward the ancient author and prevent imposing on that author's work interpretations that would be culturally incompatible. An outline of each of the letters and an index of **Reading Scenarios** are also provided at the close of the book.

On general introductory questions as well as questions concerning the dating and sequence of these writings, we have followed Dennis C. Duling's *The New Testament: History, Literature and Social Context* (4th ed.; Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth/Thomson, 2003).

We ask the reader to understand that the **Scenarios** evoke a time and place that for all of us remain foreign territory. The setting is unlike anything we are likely to imagine from our experience in the modern West. It is a world we invite you to enter as a thoughtful and considerate reader.

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