

PAUL'S LETTERS

1st Thessalonians, Galatians, 1st & 2nd Corinthians, Philemon, Philippians, and Romans

Paul's early life

Born c. 5 CE, in the city of Tarsus (now south-central Turkey). Paul twice refers to himself coming from the "Tribe of Benjamin" (Rom 11:1; Phil 3:5), which was probably a convention rather than a genealogical identity. Claiming to be from the smallest tribe of Hebrews fit Paul's self-description as insignificant yet still called to be an apostle.

Paul's conversion

Paul does not describe his conversion, simply that it happened. In 1 Cor 15:5-8, Paul lists the order of those who witnessed a resurrected Jesus, naming himself last. In Gal 1:16-17, Paul speaks about God's revelation of Jesus, and how he then went to Arabia, and then headed for Damascus.

Paul's name

Paul wrote in Greek and used his Roman name "Paul". He also had a Hebrew name "Saul". The name 'Paul' was not a name he chose to use after conversion.



A word to begin...

Tradition has told us that Moses wrote the first five books in the Bible, David wrote the Psalms, Paul wrote most of the letters, and that the Gospels were written by men named Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. These traditions have existed since the beginning of Biblical interpretation, at a time when historical verification as we now understand it, was not the concern.

As a result of these assumptions, the persons of Moses, David, Paul, etc. have been elevated or mired by the words of scripture that probably had no connection to them in life. Scholars have taken years to separate the books in the Bible from these assumed authors, and by doing so have opened up completely new avenues of interpretation.

Our Lenten study will focus on the seven letters of Paul that scholars agree were composed or dictated by the Apostle Paul, and the early Christian communities he helped support.



What does 'Deutero-Pauline' mean

Simply meaning the 'second', Deutero-Pauline letters are those scholars think might have been written by someone else and ascribed to Paul. This was very common practice in ancient history, and was seen as both a showing of honour to the person as well as taking on the authority of that person. Ancient cultures did not have the authenticity concerns that modern audiences have.

In this case the author might have been Paul, but was more likely someone else. Scholars don't agree on that point.

The Deutero-Pauline (sometimes called Pseudo-Pauline because they assume the writer identity of Paul) letters are: 2 Thessalonians, Colossians and Ephesians.

1 Timothy, 2 Timothy and Titus are also assigned to Paul, but are considered Pastoral Letters.

This study will not spend time with these six letters.

Paul in Acts vs. Paul in his letters

One of the things we have to do as we begin to look at Paul's authentic letters, is separate Paul in his letters from Paul in the Books of Acts, and again separate Paul's authentic letters from the Deutero-Pauline letters and Pastoral Letters.

Paul gives us very little information about himself, and he has a tendency to name-drop without further explanation. Much of what we consider Paul's story comes from the Book of Acts, which was written by the same authors of Luke, c. 100 CE, roughly four decades after Paul's death.

Many scholars have pointed out the differences between Paul's letters and Paul in Acts, but that doesn't necessarily mean those difference prove one is false. Paul often wrote that he did not consider himself to be very important, and yet he made sure his letters were copied and shared broadly, which is why we now have such a large work of Paul's letters dominating the second half of the Christian Scriptures, while little else from others in the earliest Christian communities.

By the time the author of Acts was writing, the legend of Paul had had almost half a century to develop, and much of what we now identify as the three voyages of Paul, is based on the story accounts in Acts rather than Paul's letters.



Paul went to work with the people he knew, the multicultural cities in Asia Minor and Greece. His letters were primarily responses to problems in churches he had set up. His contribution were points of correction and theology, with nods to community connection, not a history of his travels.

Paul and Women

One of the area most discussed by feminist scholars about Paul is his attitude to women. Paul is sometimes dismissed as that “person who said women had to be quiet in church”, others try to point out all the women, especially in Romans 16, who he listed as helping him in his work, so he had to have some respect for them.

The most basic truth of the matter is Paul was born and raised into a society that was primarily patriarchal with very specific roles for men and women. Just like our patriarchal society today, words and attitudes in writing might not reflect the words and actions in daily lives. There have been many men throughout history who have written quite negatively about women, yet have highlighted women they work with and recognize their contributions. A great example of this is Aristotle (c. 360 BCE) who had very negative opinions about women and wrote about their deception and unworthiness, and yet he credits his wife, Pythias, a biologist and embryologist in her own right, as his greatest collaborator.

Another element often overlooked by those who just want to concentrate on the words in the letters Paul wrote rather than their context, is that women were very active in worship and organizational leadership of synagogues at the time of Paul. It was quite usual to see women reading scripture or fundings the work of the synagogue, or being in charge of the synagogues with the title Archisynagogos. In fact, women in cultic leadership was common throughout the Mediterranean, and could be seen in Roman and Greek cultures as well. Women in worship, teaching and Hebraic leadership in the first centuries with Jesus and Paul would not have been strange to see.

