

PAUL'S LETTERS

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

When was the letter written?

Paul's 1st letter to the Thessalonians is believed to be the oldest document in the Christian Scriptures, c. 41-47 CE.

Thessaloniki

The city of Thessalonica was founded in 315 BCE, and is today's Thessaloniki in Greece. It has been the primary city in the Macedonia region of Greece since the Roman Empire. It is considered one of the oldest Christian communities in the Gentile area

Edict of Thessalonica

In 380 CE, The Edict of Thessalonica prioritized the decisions out of the Council of Nicaea (325 CE) as the true faith of the wider Christian community, and denounced heresies such as Arianism, which still had subscribers even after it had been dismissed in Nicaea.



Paul's first letter

The order of letters in the Christian Scriptures are by length, which places the 1st letter to the Thessalonians later in the larger codex, but it is the first composed by Paul and shared widely enough that we still have it today.

Paul was encouraging the Thessalonians in this letter, telling them to stick with what they have been taught, trust God and love everyone.

Of all of the authentic letters of Paul, 1st Thessalonians is perhaps the most gentle and least correcting. This speaks to how early the letter was written in Paul's travels, and how his own theology was still a work in progress.

Was Paul Antisemitic

One of the challenges while reading Paul is to understand his message of compare-and-contrast in context, and without the lens of anti-semitism which would arise later in history. Paul was

Paul's caution against Fornication

There are many words that have come down through history having changed meaning, and the modern reader is often lost when encountering those words while trying to know their original context. 'Fornication' is one of those words that conjures up sexually questionable acts, and that is certainly how the historic church has used it. However in Paul's day, the word 'fornication' had a very specific meaning.

It originates from the Latin word Fornix, which meant arch under a building. Specific buildings with arches were considered brothels. To fornicate was to go to these buildings and indulge in the use of prostitution.

It wasn't until the 14th century that the term fornication came to mean questionable sexual practices. The word was known but not used frequently until the late 1950's, when the term started to be used with greater regularity.

In the first century when Paul was working, prostitution was a major part of the Greek economy employing women and young men, and mostly patronized by adult men. Temple prostitution was also practiced, where priests and servants offered both homage and worship to the gods/goddesses, and sexual service to temple visitors.

When Paul talks negatively about sex it is exploitative sex.

Greek and Hebrew educated, meaning he understood the laws and expectations as a Hebrew man, but he learned the rhetorical styles of Greek philosophy. Most of the arguments we see in Paul's letters show his use of these rhetorical styles of arguments, making Paul one of the very first Christian Apologists.

The other reason we have to be careful seeing Paul as antisemitic is because at that time in history various religious practices were seen as sects or philosophies. The intellectual concept of 'religion' had not yet been developed, nor did the organized versions of 'Christianity' or 'Judaism' exist. While the early lines of division were evident, both still worked under the banner of the Hebraic tradition.

What is 'Interpolation'

An additional challenge when studying the books of the Bible is to figure out if the entire book was original in its composition or if later generations of scribes and interpreters added bits or changed what had been there when it was first written. This process is called 'interpolation', and scholars of all ancient documents have to keep that in mind when translating and interpreting.

1st Thessalonians 2:13-16 contains writing that is very much anti-Hebrew (again mistranslation has the term "Jews" used when historically this group did not yet exist). Verse 16 specifically mentions these Hebrews "God's wrath" overtaking them in the end. In a day and age when everyone, Hebrew and Gentile, believe gods played with people like pawns on a chessboard, everything was attributed to God's acceptance or punishment.



Interpolation cont'd

Most scholars agree that the 'wrath' of God was a reference to the destruction of the temple in 70 CE and the subsequent forced leaving of Jerusalem by the Hebrew people (The Diaspora).

If that is the case, then Paul writing in the 40's could not have referenced the activities in the 70's, thus someone else inserted this section after the destruction of the Second Temple.

Though the passages could not have been written by Paul, they did represent the tensions between the two sects in the first century, tensions Paul contributed to before his conversion, and tensions that escalated to violence between the groups in the late 1st and into the 2nd century CE.

Paul's letter to the Galatians

The second letter of Paul was written to the Galatians. Locating this community is difficult, however, because unlike the other letters of Paul, Galatia was a region, not a city. Dating the letter is a related challenge. Scholars disagree whether the letter was for those in Northern Galatia or Southern Galatia.

The argument comes down to this: Paul was addressing communities he had just visited. The Council of Jerusalem c. 48-50 CE established that Gentile converts to the newly emerging 'Christian' tradition did not have to be circumcised nor follow the Hebrew food or purity laws, essentially they did not have to become full Hebrews before becoming full converts to the teachings of Christ. This was a major part of Paul's letter to the Galatians. If this letter was written to the southern Galatian communities, then Paul would have been en route to Jerusalem and had his argument prepared, dating the letter somewhere 47-48 CE and written for

Southern Galatia. However, if Paul had already attended the council and was writing to the Northern Galatian communities as he travelled elsewhere, it would seem reasonable for him to include a reference to the decisions of the Council of Jerusalem with regards to Gentile converts (which it does not), and place the dating of this letter c. 49-51 CE.

These are some of the debates scholars have over dating of these documents, which is why most scholars give a range date as opposed to specific dates. Scholars are dependent on the Book of Acts for any reference to the Council of Jerusalem, making this entire argument suspect for historical accuracy.





Salvation through faith alone, not works

Paul's primary argument with the Galatians was their falling away from the inclusive belief that faith alone was the salvation for everyone. As mentioned elsewhere, one of the first arguments faced by the earliest generations of Christians is how to find converts in both the Hebrew and Gentile world, and what the process would be to secure their identity as Christ followers. Those closest to Jesus had been Hebrew, so there was no discussion with Jesus about missions into non-Hebrew territories. Although God Fearers were frequent throughout the Mediterranean, the Hebrew tradition dealt with them by having different levels of inclusion in the Hebrew religions traditions. God Fearers could attend worship and study, but were excluded from reading Torah or having leadership. Since the big hurdle was circumcision, women were accepted more fully into the Hebraic tradition, and scholars have proven that women did hold office titles in the Hebraic tradition in the centuries before and during Jesus' lifetime. Women in worship leadership was not uncommon.

However that left men on the outside. Paul's mission gave them an opportunity for full inclusion as well, without all the expectations of converting to the Hebrew tradition first. This more than anything separated the two sects and assisted the spread of the Jesus believers.

Who are the opponents to the teachings of Paul

In Galatians we get into the first chronological example of Paul responding to what he considers false and misleading teachings, how to correct those teachings and how to identify those teaching false doctrines.

This was the challenge of the first generations of Christians because they did not have standardized Gospels nor did they have agreed upon theological principles of the Christian faith that following generations enjoyed. These people were essentially creating the faith as they went along, trying to put that challenge within the framework of the loving actions of Jesus. This was no easy task, and with a number of apostles claiming they were the true teacher of Christ's message, it is understandable that someone like Paul would be angered to find 'his' congregations easily swayed by what he considered false teachings.

This became such a big issue for the earliest generations, that by the end of the first century while theology was still in its early stages of development, the early Christians already had developed written rules of order regarding missionaries, teachers and evangelists. Among other things, *The Didache* outlined how long they should stay, how much money they should accept, and how to recognize those who had authority.

Paul's anger with those in Galatia

It doesn't take long into the reading of the letter to the Galatians, to see that Paul was very annoyed that they had so easily fallen away from his teachings. This is the first time we get Paul's version of his conversion experience, and how he wasn't trained by any other apostle, but had the word from Jesus directly. Paul used this as his claim to authority, a claim the Galatians challenged when they started to listen to the spiritual direction of others. There is no mincing of words, Paul is angry. The letter is most likely a response to reports he heard about the church in Galatia rather than a request for clarification that will be seen in following letters.

Paul's problem with Peter

Tradition holds that Peter and Paul worked together while emphasizing different communities of the first generations of Christ followers, 'Jew and Gentile' respectfully. Tradition also holds that they didn't always get along. (Tradition also holds that Peter didn't get along with Mary Magdalene or respect her authority.)

Whether history can support tradition is an open question, but Galatians 2:11 does suggest tension as Paul called Peter a hypocrite for eating with Gentiles and then later stopping when others from Jerusalem joined him in Antioch.

Hospitality was a challenge in the Roman Empire, with families and friends being the primary host. The early Christians tried to minimize this burden by establishing practices around support for travelling apostles and teachers, but those came far later than Paul's travels. It's easy to see how Peter eating what was offered and then suddenly demanding food restrictions that were not familiar or common to the local people, would increase the burden to those hosting him.

Paul ultimately turns this observation of hypocrisy in Peter, into an argument against forcing Gentiles to first live according to the Hebrew tradition before a more full conversion to being Christ followers (Galatians 2:14-15), using the narrative in the letter to remind Peter that salvation was through faith, not laws or specific acts of obedience.

No longer Jew or Greek, Galatians 3:28

One of the most basic and continuous arguments in Paul's letters was the belief that there was no distinction between people in the eyes of God, that no matter your ethnic heritage, social status, or gender, all were equal in the eyes of God. Many scholars see this as the first creed, or statement of faith, in the Christian tradition. It speaks to both the radical inclusion associated with the first generations of Christians as well as the threat to those who benefited from these distinctions and discriminations in the wider society. Paul was helping to further set the stage for the later Roman Empire to accuse the new Christian church of bringing disaster like drought, poverty and warfare to their lands.