

THE BLACKWELL COMPANION TO

PAUL



EDITED BY

Stephen Westerholm

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The Blackwell Companion to Paul

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For Martin and Jenna

μειζοτέραν τούτων οὐκ ἔχω χαράν,
ἵνα ἀκούω τὰ ἐμὰ τέκνα ἐν τῇ ἀληθείᾳ περιπατοῦντα

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Acknowledgments

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Introduction

Stephen Westerholm

Paul's primary readership is not scholarly, but among scholars he is read primarily by students of the New Testament and early Christianity, on the one hand, and of Christian theology, on the other. *The Blackwell Companion to Paul* is designed to address the interests of both and to facilitate their mutual conversation.

That students of the New Testament and of Christian theology are talking to each other is something of a recent development.¹ Any suggestion that they should do so would have made no sense in the premodern era and been programmatically opposed in the centuries that followed.² In the earlier period, Paul's writings were characteristically read as a vehicle of divine communication to humankind. Those who sought answers to life's most fundamental questions turned to Paul (and to the other writers of Scripture) to find them, and those who read Paul's letters (and the other writings of Scripture) did so assured that what they encountered there was true and foundational. Theology (in other words) *meant* interpreting Scripture, and Scripture was interpreted theologically. Not until the tasks were conceived of as distinct enterprises, assigned to different practitioners, could "mutual conversation" even be contemplated.

The very conditions that made such conversation possible were such as to make it unpalatable. In many ways, Spinoza set the agenda for the modern academic study of the Bible (Spinoza 1951; Latin original 1670). To read the Bible properly (it is held), one must approach the text without any of the biases of faith: to assume that its contents were divinely revealed, and hence coherent and true, is to prejudice one's understanding of the text from the outset (Spinoza 1951, 8, 99–100). The goal of biblical interpretation must be to determine the meaning rather than the truth of the text (Spinoza 1951, 101; the distinction was unthinkable earlier) as well as the (natural, not supernatural) processes that led to its composition. In short, the Bible should be

read “like any other book” (Jowett 1860, 377) and studied, not for what it reveals about God, but for what it can tell us about ancient Israelite history and religion, or the history of the early followers of Jesus (Gilkey 1961). The retelling of these histories, like that of any other history, involves tracing the sequences of events to their (natural, not supernatural) causes: ancient Israelite religion had its home and origin among the many religions in the ancient Near East; early Christianity was (and must be studied as) one of many religious movements in the Greco-Roman world (Troeltsch 1991; German original 1898).

Such an approach eliminates the quest for (and, indeed, the possibility of finding) contemporary relevance in the biblical texts; but this (it is held) is hardly to be lamented, since a concern for relevance is liable to distort one’s interpretation of ancient texts and reconstruction of ancient history. Their task so construed, students of the Bible have had little interest in conversation with theologians; the latter, for their part, have been wont to dismiss the modern practice of biblical studies as a trivializing antiquarianism.³

There is no doubt that the biblical writings, and the history of early Christianity, continue (and will continue) to be studied by many who think it important to exclude religious convictions from their work – indeed, by many in whose work *anti*-religious sentiments are very much in evidence. The attention that such readers give to hitherto overlooked aspects of the texts, and the fresh questions they raise, have led to insights that have become the common property of all interpreters of the Bible. Many of the issues much debated within this academic field are treated in the first part of this book: questions of Pauline chronology; of the apostle’s continuing relations with the communities of believers that he founded; of the social stratification of those communities, and of the roles played by women within them; of Paul’s stance toward the imperial powers of his day, on the one hand, and toward his Jewish heritage, on the other; of the use he made of rhetoric in his letters, and of how those letters have been transmitted over the centuries. Even topics sounding more theological – Paul’s understanding of the gospel, of Scripture and (specifically) the Mosaic law, of Christology – are recognized by historians with no interest in theology to have played a crucial role in the shaping of early Christian thought and identity. In short, Part I of this book addresses topics that have always lain within the scope of biblical scholarship.

At the same time, there has always been something strange about an understanding of biblical studies that requires it to end where (as one observer put it) the history of the Bible begins (Levenson 1993, 107): are not the understandings of Paul that guided the thinking of such giants of history as Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and the Wesleys at least as important as the most recently proposed reconstruction of what the apostle *really* thought by an associate professor at a local university? Does not the insistence that Paul’s writings be studied simply for what they reveal about one religious movement among many in the first-century Greco-Roman world ring hollow given that, in much of the world of the twenty-first century, one is never more than a few miles from churches in which the letters of Paul continue to find a place in lectionaries and sermons, and from private homes in which small groups, made up neither of scholars nor of clergy, meet each week to study them? That Paul’s letters have been the subject of continuous and intense study for two thousand years surely merits the attention of

students of the apostle. The recent explosion of interest in the history of interpretation⁴ seems therefore very much in order, and it is by no means confined to scholars with theological concerns – though, to be sure, it marks a natural bridge between the disciplines of biblical studies and theology.⁵ A distinctive feature of *The Blackwell Companion to Paul* is the prominence given in Part II to Paul's impact on (an inevitably select group⁶ of) his interpreters.

And on certain *communities* of readers. Though only a very small sampling of such communities could be included here, their presence ought nonetheless to serve as a reminder that Paul's letters are not the preserve of the ivory tower. Of special interest, given Paul's own wrestlings with his Jewish heritage, is the way in which Jews have read his writings. It is hoped that the horizons of many readers will be expanded by an introduction to Orthodox and African readings of the apostle as well.

Part III is devoted, more broadly, to Paul's legacy. His impact on art and literature is often neglected; it is expertly introduced here. Of the many areas in which Paul's writings have shaped Christian thinking, four have been selected for inclusion. In each case, the distinctiveness and profound influence of Paul's thought are indisputable: sin and the "fall," the Spirit of God, ethics, and the church. Contributors to this section of the *Companion* were asked to say something about how Paul set the agenda for, and determined the boundaries of, Christian thinking on their topic. Their stimulating and illuminating responses make a unique contribution to this volume.

But (to repeat) Paul's primary readership is not scholarly. To fail to account for this truism is to fall short of grasping Paul's significance. In a well-known treatise, and in his own inimitable way, Søren Kierkegaard insisted that a distinction be drawn between a genius and an apostle (Kierkegaard 1962; Danish original 1847). Geniuses, however extraordinary their gifts, remain within the realm of the humanly possible, and they speak without authority. Paul was no genius: he was, after all, hardly remarkable as a literary stylist, of unknown competence as a tent-maker, and, when it comes to profundity, not to be compared with a Plato or a Shakespeare. But even to consider him in these terms, no matter how complimentary our assessment of his gifts, is to rob him of his true importance. Paul was an apostle who spoke with authority the divine message he was commissioned to deliver. As such, he commands a hearing.

Not all students of Paul will allow the reality of Kierkegaard's distinction, but it captures well Paul's own self-understanding and the point of his endeavors, and it explains why his hold on two millennia of readers exceeds that of Plato and Shakespeare. Further specification, however, is needed. An "apostle," as someone (by definition) *sent* on a mission, requires a *sender*: Paul's "calling" was that of an apostle (he could also say "servant" or "slave") of *Christ Jesus* (1 Cor 1:1; cf. Rom 1:1). It originated when (as Paul put it) "God was pleased to reveal his Son to me" (Gal 1:15–16); thereafter, both his life and his proclamation could be summed up in the single word "Christ" (Phil 1:18, 21; cf. 1 Cor 1:23; 2:2; 2 Cor 4:5), who was to be "magnified" in all he did (Phil 1:20). To be sure, Paul did not derive his idiom from Jesus: the theological abstractions and argumentation of the epistles are uniquely his own, as is the head-scratching provoked by *his* parables (Rom 7:2–3; 11:17–24). On the other hand, Paul learned from his Lord of faith that moves mountains and banishes anxiety (Matt 17:20 and 1 Cor 13:2; Matt 6:25–34 and Phil 4:6–7); of the permanence of marriage and the (secondary, but real)

obligation to pay taxes (Matt 19:3–9 and 1 Cor 7:10–11; Matt 22:21 and Rom 13:6–7); of the primacy of love, even for enemies, whose evil is to be met – and overcome – with good (Matt 22:34–40 and Rom 13:8–10 [cf. 1 Cor 13]; Matt 5:43–48 and Rom 12:14–21); of the virtues of meekness and lowliness, marking a life of servanthood (Matt 5:5; 11:29 and 2 Cor 10:1; Gal 5:23; Phil 2:3; Matt 20:25–28 and 2 Cor 4:5; Gal 5:13); of a discipleship of dying in order to live (Matt 16:24–25 and 2 Cor 4:7–18). From Jesus, too, came the “good news” that, *with* Jesus, the promised day of God’s salvation had dawned (Matt 4:17; 12:28; 13:16–17; cf. 2 Cor 6:2), and that the outpouring of God’s love embraced “sinners” (Matt 9:10–13; Luke 15:1–32; cf. Rom 4:5; 5:8). The new age had begun, and its consummation was imminent (Matt 24:44; 1 Thess 4:13–18). In these and other ways, the life and teaching of Jesus were important to Paul.⁷

Even more foundational were Christ’s death and resurrection – as, indeed, they are the climax, not merely the conclusion, of his activities in the gospels. Paul shared the common conviction of the early church that Christ “died *for our sins*” (1 Cor 15:3). But it was Paul who found peculiar significance in his death *by crucifixion*: so excruciating and shameful a death marked both the extent of Christ’s humility and obedience (Phil 2:8) and the divine overturning of all human values (1 Cor 1:18–31). It was, for Paul, the ultimate proof of divine love for the weak, the sinful, the enemies of God, and it effected their reconciliation to God (Rom 5:6–10). In Christ’s *resurrection*, God had decisively overcome the powers of evil and inaugurated a new age and a new creation; with Christ’s resurrection came the promise of resurrection for all who are found “in Christ” (Rom 8; 1 Cor 15).

In the end, the story of Paul is the story of the power of Paul’s message to create communities of faith and to transform the lives and thinking of their members. Its staying power, by any standards, has been remarkable. It invites the study of biblical scholars and the reflection of theologians, while it continues to command a hearing from those who are neither, but who find themselves addressed by the letters of Paul, the apostle of Jesus Christ.

Notes

- 1 Among the many forums in which this conversation is currently taking place may be mentioned the *Journal of Theological Interpretation*, the Brazos Theological Commentary series, and the Two Horizons Commentary series (Eerdmans). See also Vanhoozer (2005); O’Day and Petersen (2009).
- 2 See Rowe and Hays (2007).
- 3 Both positions were never more in evidence, or more passionately argued, than in the storm provoked by the appearance of Karl Barth’s commentary on Romans. See chapter 27 of this volume.
- 4 It will be sufficient to mention here the launching, from the 1990s and later, of three commentary series in English devoted to the history of interpretation: the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (InterVarsity Press), the Blackwell Bible Commentaries, and The Church’s Bible (Eerdmans).
- 5 Another important bridge has been the canonical approach to scriptural texts advocated by Brevard Childs.

- 6 The choice of each interpreter included is easily justified. That the inclusion of others would have been equally justifiable is not denied.
- 7 See the articles in Still (2007).

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CHAPTER 1

Pauline Chronology

Rainer Riesner

Methodological Questions

A decisive factor in any reconstruction of Pauline chronology is the evaluation of the available sources. With regard to the letters in the name of the apostle, methodological caution dictates that we begin with those letters that scholarship generally considers to be genuine: Romans, 1–2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon. Even here, evaluation of the letters may be influenced by the assumption that the letters to the Corinthians and Philippians, in particular, were assembled from various writings, implying that the correspondence was conducted over a protracted period of time. In the following analysis, the unity of all the letters is assumed since we lack text-critical evidence, literary parallels, and any indication in post-New Testament literature that would support breaking up the letters (cf. Carson and Moo 2005, 429–444, 509–510).

On the historical value of the Acts of the Apostles for the chronology of Paul, three positions have been taken.

(1) For historical purposes, the Acts of the Apostles is all but worthless, and a chronological reconstruction should be based exclusively on the genuine letters of Paul (Buck and Taylor 1969; Hyldahl 1986; Knox 1987). This position is problematic, however, since no statement in Paul's letters allows a clear connection to a concrete date from contemporary history, rendering the establishment of an absolute chronology effectively impossible. For this reason, reference is often made to Acts in spite of the desired methodological rigor. The isolated chronological indicators in Paul's letters leave much room for interpretation. Hence, reconstructions differ greatly from one another, and no consensus seems possible along these lines (Riesner 1998, 10–28).

(2) Others, while assigning the letters basic priority, nonetheless include individual traditions deemed reliable from Acts. These traditions, however, must be tested critically before they can be added to information derived from Paul. If greater confidence is placed in Acts because, for example, the “we”-narratives (Acts 16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–18; 27:1–28:16) are thought to be based on the travel diary of one of Paul’s companions, then the course of events for longer narrative sequences may be judged trustworthy (Jewett 1979; Donfried 1992). If, on the other hand, all that is thought credible are a few fragments of tradition, then their arrangement becomes much more a matter of subjective judgment (Suhl 1975; Lüdemann 1984).

(3) Finally, many see in the Acts of the Apostles the work of Luke, an occasional companion of Paul (Hemer 1990; Hengel and Schwemer 1997, 6–11), and as such at least in part a primary source (Riesner 1998; Porter 2000a, 205). This does not mean, however, that the reports of Acts can be used uncritically. It is remarkable how chronological indicators appear with differing frequency and degrees of specificity in the various parts of Acts. Such indications are most striking in the “we”-narratives and segments closely related to them. On the whole, the first main section (Acts 1–15) offers only very general chronological pointers. This allows an inference to be drawn about Luke’s approach: where he possessed neither personal knowledge nor traditions with specific chronological details, he clearly refused to invent them in order to lend greater authenticity to his presentation. Conversely, this increases our confidence in information that he might plausibly have acquired from first-hand experience or later inquiry. Details from the Pauline letters also require critical assessment whether, for example, they present events in a compressed fashion for rhetorical reasons. Wherever possible, the information of both sources should be further tested by correlating it with profane historical or patristic sources.

The reconstruction of a Pauline chronology should involve three steps. (1) An attempt must be made to ascertain individual chronological details by combining information from a plurality of sources. The goal of this step is to obtain as many absolute dates as possible. (2) The letters of Paul offer a few relative dates and also allow a few chains of events to be recognized. (3) Finally, the attempt is made to establish an overall picture that is as coherent as possible, combining the individual chronological details, the chains of events derived from Paul’s letters, and temporal and sequential information discernible in Acts.

Individual Chronological Dates

The crucifixion of Jesus

The crucifixion of Jesus is a chronological fixed point (*terminus post quem*) after which the call of the Pharisee Saul to become the Christian apostle Paul necessarily occurred. Pontius Pilate was prefect of the “special” Roman territory of Judea from 26 to 36 (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 18.89–95, 122–126; see Riesner 1998, 35–36), and was for this reason Jesus’s judge in Jerusalem (Mark 15:1–15). John the Baptist appeared as a public figure “in the fifteenth year of the reign [*hēgemonia*] of Emperor Tiberius”