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Author(s): Victor Paul Furnish

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ON PUTTING PAUL IN HIS PLACE*

VICTOR PAUL FURNISH

Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, TX 75275

Paul is easily the most accessible figure in first-century Christianity, arguably the most important; and, of course, he has been the subject of countless scholarly studies. Yet he remains, in many respects, an enigmatic figure. He seems to have been a puzzle even to his contemporaries, perhaps no less to many of his fellow believers in the church than to most of his former colleagues in the synagogue. And over time, also his letters became a problem, as attested by that oft-quoted remark in 2 Peter, “there are some things in them hard to understand” (3:16).

The history of the attempts to understand this enigmatic apostle and his letters reads like a history of attempts to put him in his place. Until at least the sixteenth century, the chief concern was to put him in his place, and to keep him there, for the church. Those efforts yielded a *churchly Paul*.¹ But since the advent of historical-critical procedures, and especially in the last century and a half, the overriding concern has been to situate the apostle in his first-century place, and to keep him there — as a *historical Paul*. Each, in its own way, is a phantom figure, a pure construct. One has been fashioned in, by, and for the church; the other has been put together out of the findings and hypotheses of scholarly research. One is therefore prompted to ask, paraphrasing Job, “Where shall we go to find Paul? And where is his place, that we may understand him?”

In order to bring these questions and the underlying issues into sharper focus, one needs to consider two especially important periods in the history of interpretation. It will be helpful, first, to recall how Paul’s very earliest interpreters went about putting him in his place in the church and, second, to take stock of how his modern interpreters have gone about putting him in his place in history. Then, finally, we can return to the question, “Where is Paul’s place, that we may understand him?”

*The presidential address delivered 20 November 1993 at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in Washington, D.C.

¹ Cf. J. Christiaan Beker’s references to “the catholic Paul,” in *Heirs of Paul: Paul’s Legacy in the New Testament and in the Church Today* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) esp. 33–34, 94.

I. The Churchly Paul

The interpretation of Paul, in the most general sense, began during his own lifetime. Both his supporters and his detractors were faced with the task of trying to understand him and come to terms with him. For different reasons and in different ways, both his supporters and his detractors were trying to put him in his place. Strangely, as little as we know about what his opponents thought of him, we know even less about how his friends viewed him. One may suppose, however, that those who understood him best would have been rather less confident about putting him in his place than either his opponents or his strongest partisans. Both the opponents and the partisans of complicated people like Paul tend to deal with them by flattening them out, reducing them to one-dimensional figures. It is in fact easier to deal with a one-dimensional Paul, easier to put him in his place and to keep him there, under control.

Even after Paul's death, the church was obliged to try to find a place for him, because there could be no ignoring of his legacy. The congregations that he had founded, the letters that he had written, the controversies that he had stirred up, especially by carrying his gospel to the Gentiles—all of these remained. Yet the church after Paul, like the apostle's contemporaries, encountered difficulties when it tried to define his place. A fundamental problem, as Nils Dahl has keenly pointed out, was the particularity of Paul's letters.² Each of them had been shaped by his own situation and concerns as he wrote, and also by the situation and needs that he believed to obtain among those whom he addressed. This particularity of the letters only exacerbated a second difficulty, which was the intrinsic complexity of Paul's thought as it came to expression within them. And then once it was possible to read his letters side by side, as constituent parts of a Pauline corpus, the apparent inconsistencies of his thought presented yet another problem. It is therefore not surprising that after his death Paul's letters became almost as controversial as he himself had been while he lived (e.g., 2 Pet 3:15–16).

Given these difficulties, it was probably inevitable that the early church, in attempting to put Paul into place, would be inclined to view him and to read his letters apart from the historical contexts in which he had labored. This is exactly what one sees happening among the earliest interpreters of Paul to whom we have direct access, beginning with those who took up the pen to write under his name.³

² Nils A. Dahl, "The Particularity of the Pauline Epistles as a Problem in the Ancient Church," in *Neotestamentica et Patristica: Eine Freundesgabe, Herrn Professor Dr. Oscar Cullmann zu seinem 60. Geburtstag überreicht* (NovTSup 6; Leiden: Brill, 1962) 261–71. See also Beker, *Heirs of Paul*, esp. chap. 2.

³ Recent, comprehensive studies of the reception and interpretation of Paul in the early church include Ernst Dassmann, *Der Stachel im Fleisch: Paulus in der frühchristlichen Literatur bis Irenäus* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1979); Andreas Lindemann, *Paulus im ältesten Christentum: Das Bild des Apostels und die Rezeption der paulinischen Theologie in der frühchristlichen Literatur bis Marcion*

In Colossians, perhaps the earliest of the pseudo-Paulines, Paul's authority is invoked in an effort to combat teachings that are regarded as contrary to his gospel. This writer does not attempt to present or interpret the apostle's thought in any comprehensive way, only to reiterate and adapt for his present purposes selected theologumena from Paul's letters. At the same time, a certain *Paulusbild* emerges from Colossians, which likely reflects the place that this author himself assumes the apostle to have in the church. He is portrayed as an apostle in chains (Col 4:18; cf. 4:10), and as an apostle even for those believers who have not seen his face (Col 1:25; 2:1), because he is a missionary to "every creature under heaven" (Col 1:23). Most striking of all, Paul's sufferings are said to have completed Christ's afflictions, and to have been, like Christ's own, on behalf of the whole church (Col 1:24).⁴

This universal dimension of Paul's apostolate is still more prominent in Ephesians, where he is now "*the prisoner*" for Christ (Eph 3:1; 4:1) and one of the "*holy apostles*" (3:5)—among whom, however, he seems to have no real equal. As in Colossians, he is portrayed as an apostle for the Gentiles, as both a missionary to them and, especially, a mystagogue for them. Thus the Paul of Ephesians leads his Gentile readers into the profoundest mystery of the gospel: that, in accordance with God's eternal plan, they have become "fellow heirs" with the Jews of the promises that are fulfilled in Christ (Eph 3:1–13; cf. 1:4–14; 2:11–22).⁵

In Acts, even though the apostolic circle, in the strictest sense, has been limited to the Twelve, the role that Paul has been assigned is in no way diminished. He is presented here as the Lord's "chosen instrument," both to proclaim the Lord's name "before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel" (Acts 9:15–16) and to suffer for his Lord. In Acts, Paul goes on from strength to strength (e.g., Acts 9:22), boldly, yet humbly, proclaiming the gospel even at the risk of his life (e.g., Acts 9:23–29; 20:19). Then finally, through the leading of God, he is empowered to preach God's kingdom and the Lord

(BHT 58; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1979). See also Martinus C. de Boer, "Images of Paul in the Post-Apostolic Period," *CBQ* 42 (1980) 359–80; Karl Kertelge, ed., *Paulus in den neutestamentlichen Spätschriften* (QD 89; Freiburg/Basel/Vienna: Herder, 1981); William S. Babcock, ed., *Paul and the Legacy of Paul* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1990); my essay "Paul the ΜΑΡΤΥΣ," in *Witness and Existence: Essays in Honor of Schubert M. Ogden* (ed. Philip E. Devenish and George L. Goodwin; Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1989) 73–88; Beker, *Heirs of Paul*, esp. chaps. 3 and 4.

⁴ In addition to Dassmann, Lindemann, and Beker (see n. 3), Joachim Gnilka, "Das Paulusbild im Kolosser- und Epheserbrief," in *In Kontinuität und Einheit: Für Franz Mussner* (ed. P.-G. Müller and W. Stenger; Freiburg/Basel/Vienna: Herder, 1981) 179–93; Helmut Merklein, "Paulinische Theologie in der Rezeption des Kolosser- und Epheserbriefes," in *Paulus in den neutestamentlichen Spätschriften*, ed. Kertelge, 25–69; Charles M. Nielsen, "The Status of Paul and His Letters in Colossians," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 12 (1985) 103–22; my article on Colossians in *ABD* 1. 1090–96.

⁵ See Dassmann, Lindemann, and Beker (above, n. 3); Gnilka and Merklein (above, n. 4); also my article on Ephesians in *ABD* 2. 535–42.

Jesus Christ in Caesar's own city (28:30–31). One might say that in Acts Paul's place is on the road and on the seas, on the move spreading the gospel throughout the world. Yet the author of Acts has portrayed these missionary labors of Paul on a far larger canvas than ordinary history provides. They, and therefore Paul himself, are seen as having a critical place within the awesome panorama of salvation history.⁶

A corresponding *Paulusbild* emerges from *1 Clement*, written about the same time as Acts. It is true that Peter and Paul are named together as the two apostolic pillars of the church (*1 Clem.* 5.2–3), yet pride of place has been given to Paul. He is the one singled out as “the greatest example of endurance.” Despite opposition, imprisonments, and persecution, he preached “in the east and in the west,” and he “taught righteous living (δικαιοσύνη) to all the world.” Finally, in Rome he testified even “before the rulers,” whereupon he passed from this worldly scene, a righteous martyr “taken up into a holy place” (*1 Clem.* 5.5–7).

The author of the Pastoral Epistles accords to Paul a rather similar “holy place.” Once more, the hallmark of his apostleship is faithful endurance (2 Tim 2:10; 3:10), and for his righteous life he is deemed worthy of the martyr's crown (2 Tim 4:8). Here Paul is held up as a moral example for all Christians (esp. 1 Tim 1:12–16; 2 Tim 3:10–14), who are themselves called to the brave endurance (1 Tim 6:11; 2 Tim 2:12; Titus 2:2) and righteous living (again, δικαιοσύνη, 1 Tim 6:11; 2 Tim 2:22; cf. Titus 2:12) that befits their salvation (2 Tim 1:8–9; 2:10–13). How great the distance, here, from Paul's own letters, where he only commends himself as an example (esp. 1 Cor 4:14–17; 10:31–11:1; Phil 3:17; 4:9) within the context of his proclamation of the cross (1 Cor 1:18–2:16; Phil 3:7–16, 18); and where following Paul's example does not mean aspiring to his allegedly righteous life and conduct, but allowing one's own life and conduct to be conformed to the cross, informed by the mind of the crucified Christ, and thus wholly transformed in the Spirit (1 Cor 1:18–2:16; cf. Rom 12:1–2). In the Pastorals, where this Pauline gospel is being reduced to appeals for “sound doctrine” (1 Tim 1:10–11 etc.) and “godliness” (εὐσέβεια, 1 Tim 6:3 etc.), Paul is himself being reduced to the guarantor of apostolic

⁶ In addition to Dassmann, Lindemann, and Beker (see n. 3), see Martin Dibelius, “Paul in the Acts of the Apostles,” in *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles* (ed. Heinrich Greeven; London: SCM, 1956) 207–14; Jürgen Roloff, “Die Paulus-Darstellung des Lukas: Ihre geschichtlichen Voraussetzungen und ihr theologisches Ziel,” *EvT* 39 (1979) 510–31; Karl Löning, “Paulinismus in der Apostelgeschichte,” in *Paulus in den neutestamentlichen Spätschriften*, ed. Kertelge, 202–34; Paul Gerhard-Müller, “Der ‘Paulinismus’ in der Apostelgeschichte: Ein forschungsgeschichtlicher Überblick,” *ibid.*, 157–201; Jacob Jervell, *The Unknown Paul: Essays on Luke-Acts and Early Christian History* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984); Daniel R. Schwartz, “The End of the Line: Paul in the Canonical Book of Acts,” in *Paul and the Legacy of Paul*, ed. Babcock, 3–24; John C. Lentz, Jr., *Luke's Portrait of Paul* (SNTSMS 77; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

doctrine (1 Tim 1:11; Titus 1:3) and the prototypical Christian man (e.g., Titus 1:1).⁷

Then for Ignatius of Antioch, Paul is specifically the prototypical Christian martyr. Alluding to the apostle's somber valedictory in Acts 20:18–35, and anticipating his own impending martyrdom, Ignatius hails Paul as one who was “slain for God,” as one who is “sanctified, approved, worthy of blessing,” and as one “in whose steps” Ignatius himself hopes to be found when he reaches God (Ign. *Eph.* 12.2).⁸ Also for Polycarp of Smyrna, Paul's place is with the martyrs. His apostolic teaching and labors among the Philippians are not forgotten (Polyc. *Phil.* 3.2; 11.3), and his letters are commended for study (3.2). Yet there is no doubt that Polycarp calls him “the blessed and glorious Paul” (3.2; cf. 11.3, “blessed Paul”) for one particular reason, because he had sacrificed his life for the gospel.⁹ Paul and the other martyrs—including “the other apostles,” although Polycarp leaves them nameless (9.1)—all loved Christ more than life in this world, and are now, says Polycarp, with their Lord “in the place they are due” (9.2, alluding to *1 Clem.* 5.4).

These observations about the apostle's earliest interpreters could be much extended, of course. There is the author of 2 Peter, for whom Paul is Peter's “beloved brother” and one of the authors of scripture (2 Pet 3:15–16). There are, as well, the anti-Pauline texts of Jewish Christianity, where Paul is put in a very different place, and the strange portrayals of the apostle that are offered in various apocryphal and Gnostic texts. And quite beyond the matter of how Paul was being portrayed, there is the larger question of how his thought was being received and interpreted, and of how, in the process, something like a Pauline theological tradition was coming into being.

But my present concern is to establish just one preliminary point. Perhaps it will not transgress the bounds of tolerable oversimplification if I express it this way: Paul's place in the church was won at the cost of his place in history. The more firmly he was put in place as apostle for the entire church—as the prototypical convert, the exemplary Christian, the model martyr—the more he was being isolated from his own historical place: from his cultural and religious heritage, from his social world, and even from the church of his own day, including the congregations that he himself had founded.

⁷ In addition to Dassmann, Lindemann, and Beker (see n. 3), see Raymond F. Collins, “The Image of Paul in the Pastorals,” *LTP* 31 (1975) 147–73; Gerhard Lohfink, “Paulinische Theologie in der Rezeption der Pastoralbriefe,” in *Paulus in den neutestamentlichen Spätschriften*, ed. Kertelge, 70–121; Peter Trummer, “Corpus Paulinum—Corpus Pastorale: Zur Ortung der Paulustradition in den Pastoralbriefen,” *ibid.*, 122–45.

⁸ See William R. Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch: A Commentary on the Seven Letters of Ignatius* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 72–73 (whose translation has been followed here).

⁹ See William R. Schoedel, *Polycarp, Martyrdom of Polycarp, Fragments of Papias* (The Apostolic Fathers 5; London/Camden/Toronto: Nelson, 1967) 14 (*ad* 3.2).

II. The Historical Paul

With the application of historical-critical procedures to the study of the biblical writings, it became possible, at least in theory, to re-place Paul in history, thereby restoring to him his individuality and allowing him again to be a figure of his own time. Indeed, by the end of the nineteenth century it seemed to many that recovering the historical Paul was a prerequisite for understanding Christian origins, and thus for understanding what Harnack called, as a new century opened, “the essence of Christianity.”¹⁰

The agenda for Pauline studies that prevailed at the beginning of the twentieth century had already been shaped in the nineteenth, largely in response to the investigations and claims of the Tübingen critics. That agenda was therefore written primarily in German, and it was the property almost exclusively of Protestant Christian scholars. Looking back, one can identify four principal questions with which Pauline scholarship was concerned, all of them related to the apostle’s place in history.¹¹ What place did he occupy within first-century Judaism? Where was he to be placed in relation to Jesus? What was his place within the early church, especially in relation to the so-called “pre-Pauline” communities in Jerusalem and Antioch? And what about his place in Hellenistic culture, especially in relation to Hellenistic religions? These four historical questions, variously reconceived and reformulated, have remained on the Pauline research agenda throughout most of this century.¹²

The scholarly attention that has been given to these matters has not been without result. Paul’s historical place has come into sharper focus, thanks to the availability of important new sources, the development of new critical methods and procedures, the more discerning and rigorous application of these to the relevant sources, both Christian and non-Christian; and thanks, also,

¹⁰ Adolf von Harnack, *Das Wesen des Christentums: Sechzehn Vorlesungen vor Studierenden aller Fakultäten im Wintersemester 1899/1900 an der Universität Berlin gehalten* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1900); published in English as *What Is Christianity?* (New York: Putnam’s, 1901; repr. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986).

¹¹ Albert Schweitzer’s study *Paul and His Interpreters: A Critical History* (London: Black; New York: Macmillan, 1912 [1st German ed., 1911]) remains an important source for determining the contents of the agenda, as do the bibliographic surveys in *TRu* by Paul W. Schmiedel (7 [1904] 21–28, 62–75), Eberhard Vischer (8 [1905] 129–43, 173–88, 470–81, 512–32; 11 [1908] 301–13; 13 [1910] 439–53, 462–81; 16 [1913] 247–62, 294–307; 18 [1915] 151–59), and Rudolf Knopf (9 [1906] 62–65; 16 [1913] 22–32); cf. Knopf’s more general *Probleme der Paulusforschung* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1913). Rudolf Bultmann’s later review of the course of Pauline studies since F. C. Baur (*TRu* n.s. 1 [1929] 26–59) is especially important.

¹² Some important developments in Pauline studies since the surveys cited in n. 11 are assessed in three subsequent *TRu* articles, two of these by Rudolf Bultmann (6 [1934] 229–46; 8 [1936] 1–22), and a recent one by Otto Merk, “Paulus-Forschung 1936–1985” (53 [1988] 1–81, with comments on other surveys, 11–16). See also Hans Hübner, “Paulusforschung seit 1945: Ein kritischer Literaturbericht,” *ANRW* 2.25.4 (1987) 2649–2840, and my essay on developments since 1945, “Pauline Studies,” in *The New Testament and Its Modern Interpreters* (SBLBMT 3; ed. Eldon Jay Epp and George W. MacRae; Philadelphia: Fortress; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989) 321–50.

to a better understanding of the Greco-Roman world in general. But one cannot speak of “assured results.” Pauline scholarship has not been exempt from that immutable law of all historical inquiry, that the more one learns, the more one discovers how much there is yet to learn, and how tentative all historical results must remain. A few examples will have to suffice.

First, it has become clear that the options for putting Paul in his place as a Jew are not, as earlier scholarship presumed, simply “diaspora,” meaning Hellenistic, and “Palestinian,” meaning rabbinic. Palestinian Judaism, too, was Hellenistic in important respects; later rabbinic texts are precarious sources for determining anything about Judaism in the first century, including Paul’s Jewishness; one must reckon with a wide variety of Jewish sectarian groups and currents in his day; and the apostle’s comments about his past life as a Pharisee disclose less than scholars once believed, since less is known about Pharisaism than scholars once supposed they knew.¹³ In short, the more that historical research has been able to uncover about the varieties and complexities of first-century Judaism, the more difficult it has become to put Paul in his place as a Jew!¹⁴

Scholarly advances have also shown how difficult it is, if it is possible at all, to situate Paul in relation to the so-called historical Jesus.¹⁵ There is, first of all, the fundamental problem of what can be known about Jesus’ own ministry and message. Even those who persist in a quest for the historical Jesus must acknowledge how complex that task is, and how problematic any results will be. The church’s traditions about Jesus provide only indirect, fragmentary, and uncertain access to the historical person who stands behind them. Equally

¹³ On the influence of Hellenism, see, e.g., Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in their Encounter in Palestine during the Early Hellenistic Period* (2 vols.; trans. from the 2d German ed. of 1973; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974). For rabbinic texts, see, e.g., Jacob Neusner, *Formative Judaism: Religious, Historical, and Literary Studies*, 5th series, *Revisioning the Written Records of a Nascent Religion* (BJS 91; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1986). On varieties of Judaism, see, e.g., J. Andrew Overman and William Scott Green, “Judaism in the Greco-Roman Period,” *ABD* 3. 1037–54; Steven D. Fraade, “Palestinian Judaism,” *ibid.*, 1054–61. On the Pharisees, see, e.g., Jacob Neusner, *The Rabbinic Traditions about the Pharisees Before 70* (3 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 1971); *idem*, *Eliezer ben Hyrcanus: The Tradition and the Man* (2 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 1973); Anthony J. Saldarini, *Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees in Palestinian Society: A Sociological Approach* (Wilmington, DE: Glazier, 1988).

¹⁴ See, e.g., E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977); Martin Hengel and Ulrich Heckel, eds., *Paulus und das antike Judentum* (WUNT 58; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1991).

¹⁵ On the history of research, see my essay “The Jesus-Paul Debate: From Baur to Bultmann,” reprinted (with corrections) in *Paul and Jesus: Collected Essays* (ed. A. J. M. Wedderburn; JSNTSup 37; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989) 17–50; Friedemann Regner, *Paulus und Jesus im neunzehnten Jahrhundert: Beiträge zur Geschichte des Themas Paulus und Jesus in der neutestamentlichen Theologie* (Studien zur Theologie und Geistesgeschichte des Neunzehnten Jahrhunderts 30; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977); Stanley G. Wilson, “From Jesus to Paul: The Contours and Consequences of a Debate,” in *From Jesus to Paul: Studies in Honour of Francis Wright Beare* (ed. P. Richardson and J. C. Hurd; Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1984) 1–21.

important, research has shown that what Paul knew about Jesus had to have come to him primarily, if not entirely, through these same church traditions. Thus the old question about Paul's relationship to Jesus has had to be substantially reconceived. It is inseparable from the larger question about Paul's relationship to the earliest church.¹⁶

But Paul's relationship to the earliest church has also come to be seen in its multifaceted complexity. Why, where, and under what circumstances had Paul the Pharisee sought to "destroy" the church (Gal 1:13)? To what degree and in what respects were Paul's views and apostolic goals influenced by his early association with the church in Antioch (Gal 1:21; 2:11–14; cf. Acts 11:19–26; 13:1–3)? Was he therefore indebted primarily to a *Gentile* form of Christianity?¹⁷ Or must the church in Antioch be described as Hellenistic-*Jewish* rather than "Hellenistic"?¹⁸ What explains the obviously complicated relationship between Paul and the "pillar apostles" in Jerusalem, especially Cephas (Gal 2:1–10, 11–14; cf. Acts 15, etc.)? Was any of the opposition that Paul encountered in the course of his missionary labors (e.g., in Galatia and Corinth) supported, or perhaps even sponsored by the Jerusalem church? And why was he so anxious about his collection for Jerusalem (1 Cor 16:1–4; 2 Corinthians 8; 9), even when he had successfully completed it (Rom 15:25–32)? There is no widespread consensus on any of these long-disputed questions. As research has taught us more about the diversity and complexity of nascent Christianity, it has become harder to put Paul in his place within it.¹⁹

The same is true of attempts to situate Paul more generally within the Hellenistic world. It is no longer necessary, or even plausible, to attribute the Hellenistic characteristics of Paul's letters and thought to his direct and

¹⁶ In addition to essays by various contributors in *Paul and Jesus* and *From Jesus to Paul* (see n. 15), see Josef Blank, *Paulus und Jesus: Eine theologische Grundlegung* (SANT 18; Munich: Kösel, 1968), and my discussion in *Jesus According to Paul* (Understanding Jesus Today; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) chaps. 1–4.

¹⁷ See, e.g., Wilhelm Heitmüller, "Zum Problem Paulus und Jesus," *ZNW* 13 (1912) 320–37; Wilhelm Bousset, *Kyrios Christos: A History of the Belief in Christ from the Beginnings of Christianity to Irenaeus* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970 [1st German ed., 1913]); Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 1 (New York: Scribner, 1951 [1st German ed., 1948]) esp. 187–89.

¹⁸ E.g., Martin Hengel, "Christology and New Testament Chronology: A Problem in the History of Earliest Christianity," in *Between Jesus and Paul: Studies in the Earliest History of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 30–47.

¹⁹ Pertinent studies include Jürgen Becker, ed., *Christian Beginnings: Word and Community from Jesus to Post-Apostolic Times* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993); Dieter Georgi, *The Opponents of Paul in 2 Corinthians: A Study of Religious Propaganda in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985); idem, *Remembering the Poor: The History of Paul's Collection for Jerusalem* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992); Martin Hengel, *The Pre-Christian Paul* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991); idem, *Between Jesus and Paul* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983); Craig C. Hill, *Hellenists and Hebrews: Reappraising Division within the Earliest Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992); Bengt Holmberg, *Paul and Power: The Structure of Authority in the Primitive Church as Reflected in the Pauline Epistles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978); Gerd Luedemann, *Opposition to Paul in Jewish Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989).

deliberate borrowing from the philosophical schools and mystery religions.²⁰ Research has shown that one must first reckon with his background in Hellenistic Judaism, and also with the time that he spent in the mixed community of Antioch. Precisely as a Jew, and subsequently as a Jewish Christian, he was also very much a man of the Hellenistic age: apparently trained in the subjects that constituted the lower and middle levels of Hellenistic education, clearly at home among the socially elite of urban society, both willing and able to engage the religious and intellectual concerns of the non-Jewish world.²¹ It is specifically this matter, locating Paul within Hellenistic culture and society, that has prompted Edwin Judge to write, “The trouble with Paul has always been to put him in his place.”²²

Considering all of this, must one conclude that the historical Paul is still on the loose, successfully evading every effort to put him in his place in history? In fact, as this century opened, the prospects for succeeding did not seem especially good. Albert Schweitzer, writing in 1911, concluded that Pauline scholarship up until then had “nothing very brilliant to show for itself in the way of scientific achievement.”²³ And two years later, the Basel New Testament scholar Eberhard Vischer seemed equally discouraged. As he concluded a long, critical review of some strikingly contradictory studies—including books

²⁰ It was frequently held that Paul borrowed only the terminology needed to make his gospel intelligible to Gentiles, and that his thought itself had not been hellenized to any significant degree; thus, e.g., Otto Pflleiderer, *Primitive Christianity: Its Writings and Teachings in Their Historical Connections* (2 vols.; New York: Putnam; London: Williams & Norgate, 1906–1911 [2d German ed., 1902]) 1. 40–63; idem, *Christian Origins* (London: Unwin; New York: Huebsch, 1906 [1st German ed., 1905]) 170, 177; C. F. G. Heinrici, *Hellenismus und Christentum* (Biblische Zeit- und Streitfragen 5/8; Berlin: Runge, 1909) 29–30, 44–45; H. J. Holtzmann, *Lehrbuch der neutestamentlichen Theologie* (2d ed.; 2 vols.; ed. A. Jülicher and W. Bauer; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1911) 2. 2–3, 242–45, 260–61. However, in his *Hellenistic Mystery-Religions: Their Basic Ideas and Significance* (PTMS 15; Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1978 [3d German ed., 1927]), Richard Reitzenstein went farther, arguing that the apostle had also taken over the concepts by which he was able to make “his inner experience” comprehensible (ibid., 78–81, 88–89, 426–500, 533–43). According to Reitzenstein, Paul had become a gnostic, and was perhaps even “the greatest of all the gnostics” (ibid., 84).

²¹ On Paul and Hellenistic education, see, e.g., Edwin A. Judge, “The Early Christians as a Scholastic Community: Part II,” *JRH* 1 (1960–61) 125–37; idem, “St Paul and Classical Society,” *JAC* 15 (1972) 19–36; idem, “St. Paul and Socrates,” *Interchange* 14 (1973) 106–16. On Paul and Hellenistic rhetoric, see, e.g., Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979); Margaret M. Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation: An Exegetical Investigation of the Language and Composition of 1 Corinthians* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993). On Paul and the Hellenistic cities, see, e.g., Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1979). On Paul and Hellenistic philosophy, see, e.g., Abraham J. Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians: The Philosophic Tradition of Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987); idem, *Paul and the Popular Philosophers* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989).

²² Judge, “St Paul and Classical Society,” 19.

²³ Schweitzer, *Paul and His Interpreters*, 237.

by Deissmann, Reitzenstein, and Schweitzer himself²⁴—Vischer made a weary confession and posed a worried question:

It is not without some pessimism that I lay down my pen, having reported on seventeen publications, larger and smaller, which have striven for an understanding of the apostle Paul and his thought. So much effort and conscientious work, and what is now the result?²⁵

Vischer's question, which he left unanswered, is even more worrisome today. Has all of the scholarly study of a century and half succeeded only in showing the futility of historical investigation? Has one learned only that the historical Paul is beyond recovering, ever the enigmatic apostle? Must both the churchly Paul and the historical Paul simply be given up? Is there, after all, no place to go to find Paul, that we may understand him?

III. A Place for Understanding

There is, of course, a place for understanding Paul, however much or little he can be understood. It is in his letters, read critically and in context. Every scholarly hypothesis and reconstruction, every churchly claim about him, has finally to be tested with reference to his own writings. Apart from encountering Paul in these—and this means, if one may be pardoned for using an old-fashioned term, *exegetically*—there is no way to put him in his place, either within history or for the church. In order for this encounter to occur, two tasks are fundamental, the historical and the theological. Moreover, each of these tasks demands the other, and neither can be carried out successfully in isolation from the other. There is no understanding the historical Paul apart from engaging his thought, as he expressed that in his letters. And there is no engaging Paul's thought apart from understanding both him and his letters historically.

A *historical* approach is mandated, most fundamentally, because we are dealing with an identifiable figure of the remote past, and are dependent upon sources that were occasioned by very particular circumstances and addressed to very particular situations. Historical inquiry is also required because of the substantial cultural distance, as well as the chronological, that separates Paul's world from ours; and further, because the responsibility for which of his letters have been handed down, and in what forms, rests with one specific "community of interpretation," the church.²⁶ If these historical realities are not taken into

²⁴ Eberhard Vischer, "Paulus," *TRu* 16 (1913) 247–62, 294–307.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 306.

²⁶ The concept of a "community of interpretation" derives from Josiah Royce, *The Problem of Christianity* (ed. John E. Smith; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968 [original ed. 1913]) esp. 314–19, 401–5; see Robert S. Corrington, *The Community of Interpreters: On the Hermeneutics of Nature and the Bible in the American Philosophical Tradition* (Studies in American Biblical Hermeneutics 3; Macon: Mercer University Press, 1987) 1–29, 69–84.

account, if the texts are not encountered in all of their historicity, then there is no understanding, either of the texts as texts or of the apostle from whom they have come. What Isaac Stern once said about playing a Bach violin concerto also applies to understanding Paul and his letters. Various interpretations, he said, can be called “right”; but equally, many interpretations have to be called “wrong.” No reading of a text, whether from Bach or from Paul, that neglects its historicity—that is heedless of its origins, genre, form, structure, and intentions, however imperfectly these may be discerned—can be credibly called an *interpretation* of that text. Whenever engagement with the text and a concern to understand its claims are subordinated to an interest, say, in “the effects of reading” it, or whenever the text is simply taken over for one’s own purposes, whether theological, aesthetic, or political, then the text is not being interpreted but confiscated. An interpreter must be, first of all, an advocate for the text.²⁷

Of course, it is no less a confiscation of the Pauline texts when they are approached only as artifacts to be catalogued, described, explained, and then put in their place on the shelf. No reading of Paul’s letters is genuinely historical unless the interpreter is in dialogue with the texts, attentive to their claims on their terms, whether or not those are judged to be acceptable. This is especially clear in the case of Paul, who through his letters sought to command the hearing that he hoped he would have if present in person (e.g., 1 Cor 5:3–4; 2 Cor 13:2; Phil 1:27; 2:12; cf. 2 Cor 10:10–11; Gal 4:20). Perhaps the musical analogy can be pushed a bit farther. A musicologist can describe and explain a Bach concerto, and catalog it, and might be able to help a violinist understand some of the interpretive options. But until that concerto is actually performed, the score and its composer remain uninterpreted and unheard. I am not suggesting, and I do not believe, that Paul’s letters have to be “preached” in order to be heard; a sermon has moved beyond interpretation to appropriation and application. But I am suggesting that real interpretation is itself, already and always, a performative act. Interpretation requires engagement and dialogue with the texts, not just description and explanation. It is important that Paul’s interpreters, like biblical scholars in general, move beyond the naïve historicism that has driven so many nineteenth- and twentieth-century studies in our field.

However, moving beyond naïve historicism must not mean lapsing into naïve subjectivism. That would also render impossible any genuine engagement with the texts. Just “experiencing” the texts is not the same as engaging them. Rather, moving beyond historicism means being more self-critical in formulating and following historical procedures. It means taking account of the presuppositions that underlie those procedures and acknowledging their limitations. It means constantly testing, correcting, and enriching historical

²⁷ See Georg Eichholz, *Tradition und Interpretation: Studien zum Neuen Testament und Hermeneutik* (TBü 29; Munich: Kaiser, 1965) 9.

procedures with the aid of various interpretive models and strategies. Nonetheless, historical inquiry is not just one interpretive option among many. At least for students of Paul, it is foundational and indispensable. Understanding him involves situating him in his own time and place, as exactly as the data and the limitations of the historical-critical method will allow. The objective is not to relegate him to the past, but to allow his own voice still to be heard, as distinctly as possible, in the present.

For Paul's voice to be heard as distinctly as possible, thus fulfilling the historical task, his interpreters must be equally committed to a *theological* task. This theological task is not to delineate the apostle's theological system, because he had none. Nor is it the interpreter's place to cobble one together for him, because that would be an act of theological imperialism. But since encountering Paul requires engaging his thought, and since his thinking, as we have access to it, is mainly about his gospel—which means, about God (thus Rom 1:1; 15:16; 2 Cor 11:7; 1 Thess 2:2, 8, 9), there is no understanding him where his theological statements are not taken seriously.

A number of interpreters, however, including some recent ones, have been reluctant to take Paul's theological statements very seriously, judging his thought to be more "intuitive" than deliberate.²⁸ Accordingly, what he specifically says about his gospel has often been viewed as less important than his supposedly unique religious consciousness,²⁹ or his practical missionary and pastoral achievements.³⁰ Not uncommonly, therefore, attention has been diverted from what one can know most about, which is how Paul characterized, elucidated, and reasoned from his gospel, to matters that one can know relatively little about, like his Damascus experience or his so-called "psycho-history." Yet the theological task, no less than the historical, is mandated by the sources themselves. The old description of Paul's letters as containing simply the spontaneous outpourings of his soul can no longer be accepted.³¹ They are not the products of one who believes with such passion, that

²⁸ E.g., Pfeleiderer, who held that Paul's "enthusiastic intuition" was more like the creativity of an artist than the "cool reflection . . . and argumentation" of scientific thought, and that this accounted not only for the success of his missionary preaching but also for its "theoretic weakness," the "fragmentary form" of his doctrines, and the "many inconsistencies and obscurities" in them (*Primitive Christianity*, 2. 105–6). Essentially these same points have been made recently by Heikki Räisänen, *Paul and the Law* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 266–69.

²⁹ E.g., Adolf Deissmann, *Paul, a Study in Social and Religious History* (2d ed.; New York: Doran, 1926 [trans. from the 2d German ed., 1925]) esp. 6, 79–81; Donald Wayne Riddle, *Paul, Man of Conflict: A Modern Biographical Sketch* (Nashville: Cokesbury, 1940) esp. 146–56.

³⁰ Thus Räisänen remarks that, despite Paul's "seminal insights and thought-provoking suggestions," he was "first and foremost a missionary, a man of practical religion . . ." (*Paul and the Law*, 267). Cf. Francis Watson, *Paul, Judaism and the Gentiles: A Sociological Approach* (SNTSMS 56; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) 22.

³¹ William Wrede called Paul's letters "purely personal utterances" (*Paul* [Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1908; repr. Lexington: American Theological Library Association, 1962] 169); Deissmann referred to their "intimate character" (*Paul*, 18); and Riddle saw them as "treasures

all reason and logic are tossed to the winds. As Günther Bornkamm pointed out years ago, Paul's letters are far removed from the genre of the ancient "revelation discourse," with its hierophantic style.³² When the apostle once wrote, "I think that I too have the Spirit of God" (1 Cor 7:40), he was not claiming some extraordinary status for his instruction; in the same passage he calls it simply his own "opinion" (γνώμη, 7:25, 40). He was saying only that the Corinthians were not more privileged with the Spirit than he. And in any case, he believed that even prophetic utterances should be subjected to critical evaluation (διακρίνειν, 1 Cor 14:29–32; cf. 12:10).

A number of studies, especially in the last three or four decades, have shown that Paul composed his letters and framed his arguments with considerable care.³³ This accords with why he was writing, which was to inform, instruct, explain, and persuade. One finds him defining and seeking to clarify issues, reasoning things out, anticipating objections, and developing counter-arguments (note 2 Cor 10:4–5). As a rule he does not just make assertions; he also makes an effort to show why his assertions are warranted. He is generally not content simply to cite Scripture or some traditional formulation; he usually proceeds also to interpret these or to argue from them.³⁴ He hopes that his readers will be able to follow his reasoning; and so he writes, for example, "I am speaking as to sensible people (ὡς φρονίμοις); you yourselves judge what I say" (1 Cor 10:15; cf. 14:6–11; 2 Cor 5:13; Phil 3:15; 4:8). And again, "We write you nothing other than what you can . . . understand; and I hope that you will understand completely . . ." (2 Cor 1:13).

Above all, the apostle wants his congregations to understand the truth of the gospel. His letters are certainly not theological treatises; and none of them, including Romans, contains anything like "a theology," even *in nuce*. But in most of them, Philemon being the one exception, there are certain critical points where Paul has either extended or interrupted his argument to reflect in a deliberate and reasoned way about some particular aspects or implications of his gospel. In Romans, of course, there is extensive theological exposition. But serious theological reflection is also evident in 1 Thessalonians (notably, on the parousia, 4:13–5:9), in 1 Corinthians (e.g., on the wisdom of the cross, 1:18–2:16; the body of Christ, 12:4–13:13; and the resurrection of

of information, revealing personal characteristics of the most human quality" (*Paul, Man of Conflict*, 19).

³² G. Bornkamm, "Faith and Reason in Paul," *Early Christian Experience* (New York/Evanston: Harper & Row, 1969) esp. 35–41.

³³ Contrast Wrede's judgment that "[Paul's] thought wavers and alters with heedless freedom from one letter to another, even from chapter to chapter, without the slightest regard for logical consistency in details" (*Paul*, 77)—which is echoed by recent interpreters like Räisänen (*Paul and the Law*, 266–67) and E. P. Sanders (*Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983] 199).

³⁴ Cf. Hans Hübner, *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments, 2: Die Theologie des Paulus und ihre neutestamentliche Wirkungsgeschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993) 26–29.

the dead, chap. 15), in Philippians (e.g., on knowing Christ, 3:7–16), in 2 Corinthians (e.g., on the new-covenant ministry, 3:7–4:6; cf. 5:11–20), and in Galatians (e.g., on the law, 3:6–4:7). Moreover, Paul's numerous appeals, counsels, directives, and warnings are also important expressions of his understanding of the gospel, because they are intended to show what is involved in conforming one's life to its truth. Throughout his letters, therefore, not only in the expository passages, one is in touch with the apostle's thoughtful unfolding of the gospel and its claims. To engage his thought requires coming to terms with what he understands those claims to be, and with how he argues for them and from them.

To be sure, dealing with Paul theologically is not easy.³⁵ His theological statements cannot be understood apart from the particular situations by which they were prompted and to which they were directed, yet our knowledge of these situations will have to remain incomplete. He often presents his own views, rather unsystematically, in dialogue with scripture, the church's traditions, and the views of his opponents. He trades more in images and metaphors than in concepts, seldom states his presuppositions, and shows little concern for strict consistency. It is impossible to know whether any of this would be different, had Paul been able to anticipate that his letters would eventually be circulated and read as a literary corpus. In any case, as Harris Franklin Rall so aptly put it, "He is not writing with the thought that posterity is looking over his shoulder. . . ."³⁶

Nevertheless, there was no one in the first-century church, to our knowledge, who was so deliberate as Paul about lifting the truth-claims of the gospel to the level of explicit understanding.³⁷ Apart from this achievement, to cite but one example, there could have been no effective missionary proclamation, least of all among the Gentiles. Indeed, apart from this there might have been no lasting Gentile mission at all. It was Paul's discerning articulation of the truth of the gospel, as he understood it, that provided the clearest and surest foundation for such a mission. His vision of God's impartiality, as he perceived that to be disclosed in Christ, led him to affirm that Jews and Gentiles have equal standing with God (e.g., Rom 3:29–30; cf. 15:8–12), and therefore, that a mission to the Gentiles was not simply authorized but

³⁵ Over the last decade or so, some important steps have been taken toward understanding these difficulties better and addressing them more effectively. See especially the interpretive model of contingency/coherence proposed by J. Christiaan Beker, e.g., *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) 3–131, and the various studies emanating from SBL's Pauline Theology Group, of which two volumes have been published so far (*Pauline Theology* [Minneapolis: Fortress; vol. 1 ed. by Jouette M. Bassler, 1991; vol. 2 ed. by David M. Hay, 1993]).

³⁶ H. F. Rall, *According to Paul* (New York: Scribner, 1945) 9.

³⁷ Cf. Rudolf Bultmann's comment that "Paul's theological thinking only lifts the knowledge inherent in faith itself into the clarity of conscious knowing" (*Theology of the New Testament*, 190), and Leander E. Keck's characterization of Paul's thinking as "ex post facto," because it is based on the meaning discerned in a past event ("Paul as Thinker," *Int* 47 [1993] 27–38; esp. 29–33).

obligatory (cf. 1 Cor 9:16). He saw, too, that this raised critical questions, which he sought to address, about God's election of Israel, and about the role of the law within God's saving purpose.³⁸

Whether the apostle himself ever gained sufficient conceptual clarity about questions like these may well be doubted, and will most certainly continue to be debated. But the fact remains that Paul is the first Christian theologian of record, in that he sought to explicate the truth of the gospel, and to think through the implications of the Christian understanding of God that is intrinsic to its claims.³⁹ This means that there can be no encountering him, no understanding him, without sustained attention to what he has affirmed about his gospel, how he has sought to demonstrate its truth, and how he has reasoned from it. For Paul's interpreters, whether they be inside the church or outside of it, this theological task is just as indispensable as the historical, and is indeed the fulfillment of the historical task.

If Paul commands attention still, it is not because he is or ever can be fully understood, nor because anybody can ever succeed in putting him in his place, however one wishes to construe this phrase. It is partly because his labors and letters have so profoundly shaped the history of Christianity from his day to ours. But primarily, he still commands attention because one meets him in his letters probing with extraordinary insight the altogether ordinary relationships and events of people's lives, and struggling there with fundamental questions about our human existence that are common to every age. Finally, then, understanding Paul turns out to be less a matter of trying to put him in his place than of engaging his thought, and considering how it may challenge ours and illumine the place where we are.

³⁸ Similarly, E. P. Sanders identifies Paul's "fundamental theological problem" as "how to hold together the two dispensations, one being God's election of Israel and his gift to them of the law, the other his offer of salvation to all who have faith in Christ" (*Paul* [Past Masters, Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1991] 117).

³⁹ For more extensive remarks about this, see my "Paul the Theologian," in *The Conversation Continues: Studies in Paul & John: In Honor of J. Louis Martyn* (ed. Robert T. Fortna and Beverly Roberts Gaventa; Nashville: Abingdon, 1990) 19–34.