

LIARS, BRUTES, AND GLUTTONS

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# LIARS, BRUTES, AND GLUTTONS

A Relevance-Theory Solution for Titus 1:12

Isaiah Allen

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Dedicated to  
Gilbert and Irma Allen,  
loving parents, with gratitude

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With gratitude and love,  
Isaiah Allen  
Fall 2023  
Winnipeg, Manitoba

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## Abbreviations

|                  |   |
|------------------|---|
| 1739             | minuscule, Great Lavra monastery, Athos, Greece   |
| AB               | Anchor Bible  |
| ABD              | Freedman, David Noel, ed. <i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> . 6 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1992.   |
| ACCS             | Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture   |
| <i>Aem.</i>      | Plutarch, <i>Aemilius Paullus</i>   |
| AEQ              | <i>Anthropology and Education Quarterly</i>   |
| ALH              | <i>Acta Linguistica Hungarica</i>   |
| <i>An.</i>       | Tertullian, <i>De anima</i>   |
| <i>Ant.</i>      | Josephus, <i>Jewish Antiquities</i>   |
| <i>Ant. rom.</i> | Dionysius of Halicarnassus, <i>Antiquitates romanae</i>   |
| ANTC             | Abingdon New Testament Commentaries   |
| ASHUJS           | <i>Annals of Spiru Haret University, Journalism Studies</i>   |
| ASTHLS           | Amsterdam Studies in the Theory and History of Linguistic Science IV—Current Issues in Linguistic Theory  |
| <i>Ath. pol.</i> | Aristotle, <i>Athēnain politeia</i>   |
| BBC              | Blackwell Bible Commentaries  |
| BBR              | <i>Bulletin of Biblical Research</i>  |
| BBRSup           | Bulletin for Biblical Research Supplement   |
| BDAG             | Danker, Frederick W., Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, eds. <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> . 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. |
| BHGNT            | Baylor Handbook on the Greek New Testament  |
| <i>BibInt</i>    | <i>Biblical Interpretation</i>  |
| BJRL             | <i>Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester</i>  |
| BP               | The Bible and Postcolonialism   |
| BT               | <i>The Bible Translator</i>   |
| BTB              | <i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>   |

|                    |   |
|--------------------|---|
| BTCB               | Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible   |
| BrazosTCB          | Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible  |
| BZNW               | Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft   |
| CBQ                | <i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>  |
| CC                 | <i>Cross Currents</i>   |
| CCSS               | Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture   |
| <i>Cels.</i>       | Origen, <i>Contra Celsum</i>  |
| <i>Cho.</i>        | Aeschylus, <i>Choephoroi</i>  |
| CILT               | Current Issues in Linguistic Theory   |
| CJAL               | <i>Canadian Journal of Applied Linguistics</i>  |
| <i>Strom.</i>      | Clement of Alexandria, <i>Stromateis</i>  |
| <i>Comm. Gal.</i>  | Jerome, <i>Commentariorum in Epistulam ad Galatas libri III</i>   |
| <i>Comm. Tit.</i>  | Jerome, <i>Commentariorum in Epistulam ad Titum liber</i>   |
| CornBC             | Cornerstone Biblical Commentary   |
| CSL                | Cambridge Studies in Linguistics  |
| CTL                | Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics  |
| CTR                | <i>Criswell Theological Review</i>  |
| CTSR               | <i>Chicago Theological Seminary Register</i>  |
| D                  | Codex Claromontanus. National Library, Paris  |
| <i>Div.</i>        | Cicero, <i>De divinatione</i>   |
| DNTB               | Evans, Craig A., and Stanley E. Porter, eds. <i>Dictionary of New Testament Background</i> . Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000. |
| <i>Doctr. chr.</i> | Augustine, <i>De doctrina christiana</i>  |
| EBib               | <i>Études bibliques</i>   |
| EC                 | <i>Early Christianity</i>   |
| ECL                | Early Christianity and Its Literature   |
| EFTE               | Éditions de la Faculté de Théologie Évangélique   |
| ESEC               | Emory Studies in Early Christianity   |
| ESV                | English Standard Version  |
| F                  | Codex Augiensis. Trinity College, Cambridge   |
| FC                 | Fathers of the Church   |
| G                  | Codex Boernerianus. Saxon State and University Library<br>Dresden, Dresden  |
| <i>Geogr.</i>      | Strabo, <i>Geographica</i>  |
| <i>Haer.</i>       | Irenaeus, <i>Adversus haereses (Elenchos)</i>   |
| HBT                | <i>Horizons in Biblical Theology</i>  |
| HCS                | Hellenistic Culture and Society   |

|                    |  |
|--------------------|--|
| <i>HeyJ</i>        | <i>Heythrop Journal</i>  |
| <i>Hist.</i>       | Thucydides, <i>Historiae</i> ; Polybius, <i>Historiae</i>  |
| <i>Hist. eccl.</i> | Socrates of Constantinople, <i>Historia ecclesiastica</i>  |
| HPH                | Handbook of Pragmatic Highlights   |
| HThKNT             | Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament  |
| HUT                | Hermeneutische Untersuchungen zur Theologie  |
| <i>Hymn.</i>       | Callimachus, <i>Hymni</i>  |
| I                  | Codex Freerianus. Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC  |
| ICC                | International Critical Commentary  |
| <i>IJST</i>        | <i>International Journal of Systematic Theology</i>  |
| <i>Inim. util.</i> | Plutarch, <i>De capienda ex inimicis utilitate</i>   |
| <i>IRP</i>         | <i>International Review of Pragmatics</i>  |
| IVPNTC             | IVP New Testament Commentary   |
| <i>JBL</i>         | <i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>  |
| <i>JETS</i>        | <i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>  |
| <i>JFSR</i>        | <i>Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion</i>   |
| <i>JGL</i>         | <i>Journal of Greek Linguistics</i>  |
| <i>JPrag</i>       | <i>Journal of Pragmatics</i>   |
| JSNTSup            | Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series   |
| <i>JTI</i>         | <i>Journal for Theological Interpretation</i>  |
| <i>JTS</i>         | <i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>  |
| <i>J.W.</i>        | Josephus, <i>Jewish War</i>  |
| <i>LangSci.</i>    | <i>Language Sciences</i>   |
| <i>LB</i>          | <i>Linguistica Biblica</i>   |
| LBRS               | Lexham Bible Reference Series  |
| LBS                | Linguistic Biblical Studies  |
| LCL                | Loeb Classical Library   |
| LEC                | Library of Early Christianity  |
| <i>Leg.</i>        | Plato, <i>Leges</i> ; Athenagoras, <i>Legatio pro Christianis</i>  |
| <i>Legat.</i>      | Philo, <i>Legatio ad Gaium</i>   |
| <i>Life</i>        | Josephus, <i>The Life</i>  |
| <i>LL</i>          | <i>Language &amp; Literature</i>   |
| L&N                | Louw, Johannes P., and Eugene A. Nida, eds. <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains</i> . 2nd ed. New York: United Bible Societies, 1989. |
| LPS                | Library of Pauline Studies   |
| LXX                | Septuagint   |
| <i>M&amp;L</i>     | <i>Mind &amp; Language</i>   |

|                   |   |
|-------------------|---|
| MM                | Moulton, James H., and George Milligan. <i>The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament</i> . London, 1930. Reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997. |
| NA <sup>28</sup>  | <i>Novum Testamentum Graece</i> . Nestle-Aland, 28th ed.  |
| NAC               | New American Commentary   |
| <i>Nat.</i>       | Pliny the Elder, <i>Naturalis historia</i>  |
| NCB               | New Century Bible   |
| NCBNT             | New Clarendon Bible: New Testament  |
| NCCS              | New Covenant Commentary Series  |
| NEB               | New English Bible   |
| NICNT             | New International Commentary on the New Testament   |
| NIGTC             | New International Greek Testament Commentary  |
| NIV               | New International Version   |
| NLT               | New Living Translation  |
| <i>NovT</i>       | <i>Novum Testamentum</i>  |
| NRSV              | New Revised Standard Version  |
| NTC               | The New Testament in Context  |
| NTG               | New Testament Guides  |
| <i>NTS</i>        | <i>New Testament Studies</i>  |
| NTT               | New Testament Theology  |
| OCD               | Hornblower, Simon, and Antony Spawforth, eds. <i>Oxford Classical Dictionary</i> . 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.             |
| OHO               | Oxford Handbooks Online   |
| <i>Or. Graec.</i> | Tatian, <i>Oratio ad Graecos (Pros Hellēnas)</i>  |
| P&B               | Pragmatics & Beyond   |
| <i>PB</i>         | <i>Psychological Bulletin</i>   |
| PCC               | Paul in Critical Contexts   |
| <i>Philops.</i>   | Lucian, <i>Philopseudes</i>   |
| <i>Pol.</i>       | Aristotle, <i>Politica</i>  |
| <i>Post.</i>      | Quintus Smyrnaeus, <i>Posthomerica</i>  |
| <i>PP</i>         | <i>Philosophical Psychology</i>   |
| <i>Protr.</i>     | Clement of Alexandria, <i>Protrepticus</i>  |
| <i>R&amp;T</i>    | <i>Religion and Theology</i>  |
| RBL               | <i>Review of Biblical Literature</i>  |
| <i>Rep.</i>       | Cicero, <i>De republica</i>   |
| <i>RevExp</i>     | <i>Review and Expositor</i>   |
| <i>Rhet.</i>      | Aristotle, <i>Rhetorica</i>   |
| RNT               | Regensburger Neues Testament  |

|                   |   |
|-------------------|---|
| RRRMC             | Routledge Research in Religion, Media and Culture   |
| SemeiaSt          | Semeia Studies  |
| SFSL              | Studies in Functional and Structural Linguistics  |
| SHBC              | Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary   |
| SNTSMS            | Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series  |
| <i>Sol.</i>       | Plutarch, <i>Solon</i>  |
| SP                | Sacra Pagina  |
| <i>Spec.</i>      | Philo, <i>De specialibus legibus</i>  |
| SRA               | Studies of Religion in Africa   |
| SS                | Syntax and Semantics  |
| StBibLit          | Studies in Biblical Literature  |
| STI               | Studies in Theological Interpretation   |
| <i>STP</i>        | <i>Social Theory &amp; Practice</i>   |
| <i>STR</i>        | <i>Southeastern Theological Review</i>  |
| STR               | Studies in Theology and Religion  |
| <i>Theog.</i>     | Hesiod, <i>Theogonia</i>  |
| THNTC             | Two Horizons New Testament Commentary   |
| <i>ThTo</i>       | <i>Theology Today</i>   |
| <i>Tim.</i>       | Lucian, <i>Timon</i>  |
| <i>TIPS</i>       | <i>Translational Issues in Psychological Science</i>  |
| TLL               | Topics in Language and Linguistics  |
| <i>TLZ</i>        | <i>Theologische Literaturzeitung</i>  |
| TNTC              | Tyndale New Testament Commentary  |
| <i>TynBul</i>     | <i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>   |
| UBS <sup>5</sup>  | Aland, Barbara, Kurt Aland, Johannes Karavidopoulos, Carlo M. Martini, and Bruce M. Metzger, eds. <i>The Greek New Testament</i> . 5th ed. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft; United Bible Societies, 2014. |
| UBSHS             | UBS Handbook Series   |
| UBSMS             | UBS Monograph Series  |
| <i>UCLWPL</i>     | <i>UCL Working Papers in Linguistics</i>  |
| <i>Urb. cond.</i> | Livy, <i>Ab urbe condita</i>  |
| <i>Virt.</i>      | Philo, <i>De virtutibus</i>   |
| <i>Vit. phil.</i> | Diogenes Laertius, <i>Vitae philosophorum</i>   |
| WBC               | Word Biblical Commentary  |
| WGRW              | Writings from the Greco-Roman World   |
| WisC              | Wisdom Commentary   |
| WJL               | The William James Lectures  |
| WTJ               | <i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>  |

|      |  |
|------|--|
| WUNT | Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament                                       |
| ZNW  | <i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche</i> |
| Ψ    | Codex Athous Laurae. Great Lavra monastery, Athos, Greece                                  |

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## Introduction: Unresolved Issues in Titus 1:12

“Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons” (Titus 1:12b). The writer’s point is obvious: Cretans qua Cretans are ne’er-do-wells. It is one of the New Testament’s well-known quotations. *Cretan* has come to label someone as idle, wicked, untrustworthy, morally inferior, or reprobate.<sup>1</sup> This understanding of Titus 1:12 is almost irresistible.

Scholars recognize that the pejorative essence of the Cretan quotation contradicts the canonical image of Paul. The Paul we know from Romans, Galatians, and even Acts would never have written such a disparaging statement about a tender, predominantly gentile congregation. He more likely would have opposed anyone who advanced such a notion. Such uncharacteristic behavior is one of the reasons why scholars are justified to conclude that the historical Paul did not write Titus. The apostle could marshal scathing language to defend or to shame, but Paul’s missionary strategy did not seem to involve sweeping insults of an intrinsic nature.<sup>2</sup> The conclusion that the apostle Paul did not write Titus is as obvious as the

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1. William D. Mounce, for instance, explains, “This verse ... has given rise to the colloquial use of ‘Cretan’ to describe a reprobate person.” See Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, WBC 46 (Nashville: Nelson, 2000), 398. OED cites several sources in English literature where *Cretan* is used not based on its geo-ethnic reference but as an insult. See “Cretan, adj. and n.,” OED Online. *Cretan* is commonly confused with *cretin*, an English word traditionally labeling a person afflicted with hypothyroidism due to iodine deficiency. See “cretin, n.,” OED Online. The disparaging use of this word is grounded in ableism rather than ethnic bigotry.

2. Paul defends his congregations from opponents that he refers to as “the circumcision”: “I wish those who unsettle you would castrate themselves!” (Gal 5:12); “Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh” (Phil 3:2). He also defends them from greedy, presumptuous leaders: “For such boasters are false apostles, deceitful workers ... his [Satan’s] ministers” (2 Cor 11:13–15). Paul directly addresses a congregation: “You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?” (Gal 3:1). Paul expresses each of these colorful rants to target a group for its problematic behaviors but not to berate his missionary congregations or to

interpretation of this passage. But unexamined assumptions underlie this prevalent interpretation of Titus 1:12.

### A Plausible Alternative Interpretation

As this study progresses, it exposes and explains some of the problems with prevalent interpretations of Titus 1:12 on sociohistorical, exegetical, and linguistic grounds and proposes a simpler and more likely interpretation, one that coincides with the impulses of some earlier interpreters (e.g., Jerome, Theodore) but that was dismissed through the history of interpretation based on flawed assumptions.

This plausible alternative interpretation is as follows: In Titus 1:10–12, Paul described troublemakers in the Cretan church, identifying most of them as Jewish members (*μάλιστα οἱ ἐκ τῆς περιτομῆς*, 1:10).<sup>3</sup> From Paul's perspective, divisive people (*αἰρετικόν ἄνθρωπον*, 3:10) disrupted church households or congregations (*ὄλους οἴκους ἀνατρέπουσιν*, 1:11) by teaching that Cretans, as gentiles, were morally and religiously inferior. The troublemakers' interest in "genealogies," "quarrels over Torah" (*γενεαλογίας, μάχας νομικὰς*, 3:9), "Jewish myths" (*Ἰουδαϊκοῖς μύθοις*, 1:14), and other features of Jewish religious culture reinforced an attitude of superiority over any who did not exhibit status symbols or cultural aptitudes that were valid in their system, namely, gentile Cretans. When Paul framed the famous quotation (1:12), he was completing his general description of the troublemakers with a specific and characteristic example of their teaching. The speaker who concerns Paul comes from the group of troublemakers. In their eyes, not in Paul's, this bigot was a prophet (*ἐξ αὐτῶν ἴδιος αὐτῶν προφήτης*, 1:12a).

The quotation may or may not have come to Paul as a fragment of ancient Cretan literature. For the troublemakers, it justified their doctrine of ethno-religious inferiorization. Although a Cretan origin of the saying cannot be confirmed, if it did originate in Crete, then anyone who used the slur could have pointed back with a shrug and said, "Even they speak this way about their own kind!" For Paul, the quotation contradicted the transformative power of the gospel (3:3–7), but he was certain (*ἡ μαρτυρία*

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assert that they possess intractable faults. All the quotations in this footnote follow the NRSV. Unless otherwise indicated, other Scripture translations are mine.

3. Throughout this study, I use *Paul* as shorthand to refer to the writer without committing to any particular meaning for that name other than "the author of Titus," which I avoid because it is clumsy.

αὕτη ἐστὶν ἀληθής, 1:13a) that someone among the troublemakers (τις ἐξ αὐτῶν, 1:12a) was propagating it. Whoever was doing so and the community that harbored them needed to be stopped and corrected (οὐς δεῖ ἐπιστομίζειν, 1:11a; ἔλεγε αὐτοὺς ἀποτόμως, 1:13b).

Although it is quite common for readers of Titus 1:12 to assume that Paul was participating in bigotry, he seems to have been exposing and rebuking it. This study offers reasons for considering this reading and calls into question key assumptions of other interpretations.

The prevalent interpretations of the passage contradict the broad thrust of the New Testament, the personality of the purported writer, and the message of the letter in which it appears. The history of its interpretation is contentious and riddled with contradictory proposals, making it a problem passage. Interpreters need consistent hermeneutical strategies to illuminate alternative possibilities.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps a strategy that recommends itself to constituencies who approach the text from diverse starting points could help to ameliorate contention.<sup>5</sup> To develop such a strategy, I explain three key insights from a well-developed theory of utterance interpretation—relevance theory—and demonstrate their practical application on Titus 1:12 and representative interpretations. The theory provides sound rationale for questioning some conclusions in preference to others and offers a hermeneutical foundation for reexamining the issues this passage presents. Before saying more about relevance theory, I offer a critique of prevailing interpretations of this passage in Titus.

### Miso-Cretan Reading Assumptions

Many interpretations of Titus 1:12 are on offer. No single reading prevails, but most feature several basic assumptions that are described briefly

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4. Quoting Paul Kiparsky, Anne Furlong argues that literary interpretation too often depends on different interpreters accounting for a “different set of facts.” See Furlong, “Relevance Theory and Literary Interpretation” (PhD diss., University College London, 1995), 36–37. Hence the need for a consistent hermeneutic. This concern applies to biblical interpretation, especially of problem passages.

5. Tim Meadowcroft argues that relevance theory promises a “mediating category” by which to resolve some of the tensions between the critical environment of his scholarship as an Anglican and his evangelical institutional setting. He aimed to “discover a hermeneutic that makes sense of the polarities and holds them together in some way.” See Meadowcroft, “Relevance as a Mediating Category in the Reading of Biblical Texts: Venturing beyond the Hermeneutical Circle,” *JETS* 45 (2002): 613.

below and evaluated in chapter 1. To the extent that an interpretation adheres to this set of assumptions, I refer to it as a miso-Cretan reading. Although scholars in recent decades have approached this text with sensitivity and sophistication, most seem unable to escape the gravitational pull of the assumption that Paul tacitly sympathizes with the quotation's crude description of Cretans. Over the course of this study, I call this assumption into question. According to a miso-Cretan interpretation, the quotation, irrespective of other factors, was also the substance of Paul's opinion of the Cretans; furthermore, he advanced the quotation's assessment of Cretans as the view Titus should have going forward in his ministry. Titus must not think too highly of his gentile missionary congregation.<sup>6</sup> Paul asserted the intractable and thorough reprobation of the Cretan people.

Whatever merits this letter might otherwise have, surely the presence of a truly bigoted remark would be a blemish on it, perhaps even an affront to the canonical Paul, the "apostle to the nations" (Rom 11:13) who would "become all things to all people in order to save some" (1 Cor 9:22). Furthermore, Titus would have the tough luck of leading a community of incorrigible reprobates. Jerome Quinn is representative of this reading:

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6. I use the term *missionary* as shorthand for a basic reality that obtained in the first-century church: a Christian community, only a few generations old, planted by geographic and ethnic nonnatives, and still largely influenced by these founders. For an examination of mission in the Pastoral Epistles, see Chiao Ek Ho, "Mission in the Pastoral Epistles," in *Entrusted with the Gospel: Paul's Theology in the Pastoral Epistles*, edited by Andreas J. Köstenberger and Terry L. Wilder (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010), 241–67. See also Ho's dissertation on the same subject, "Do the Work of an Evangelist: The Missionary Outlook of the Pastoral Epistles" (PhD diss., University of Aberdeen, 2000); and Andreas J. Köstenberger, "An Investigation of the Mission Motif in the Letters to Timothy and Titus with Implications for the Pauline Authorship of the Pastoral Epistles," *BRR* 29 (2019): 49–64. T. Christopher Hoklotubbe's argument that the author aimed to make his Christian communities seem more winnable and honorable to their Roman neighbors and less prone to ostracism and persecution yields a kind of missionary outlook for the Pastoral Epistles though from a different perspective. See Hoklotubbe, *Civilized Piety: The Rhetoric of Pietas in the Pastoral Epistles and the Roman Empire* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017). Pace Jouette M. Bassler, who argues that missionary implications are less relevant: "Since the letter is pseudonymous and the Cretan setting is probably artificial, one does not need to speculate on the impact of such an attitude on Titus's missionary activity in Crete." See Bassler, *1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus*, ANTC (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 190.

With deadly seriousness the author of Titus has Paul vouch for the truth of the cruel ancient jibe, thus solemnly joining the witness of an apostle to the oracle of the prophet-poet. The latter [Epimenides] is cited as “a prophet” not only because the Hellenistic world so conceived him but also with an irony pointed at the Jewish-Christian troublemakers.<sup>7</sup>

Later I provide several reasons why Paul’s metonym for the speaker, *prophet*, does not reflect the assessment of “the Hellenistic world” but rather Paul’s sarcastic assessment of the speaker’s standing among the troublemakers. Quinn links his interpretation to a specific attribution despite the evidence he presents that the quotation could not be reliably traced to Epimenides or any other Cretan writer and that it was a narrow group of troublemakers who deserved rebuke, not the Cretan populace.<sup>8</sup>

Given the influence of miso-Cretan readings, it is not surprising that Annette Bourland Huizenga fiercely critiques the consequences of that conventional interpretation and charts a reading strategy *against* the text. She explains the problem incisively: “What I ... find especially troubling is that the negative assessments of Jews, Jewish traditions, and the ethnic Cretans seem to have influenced several modern commentators to adopt a similar prejudice, which then leads to a tendency to read the rest of the letter as if it were written to a culturally and morally backward community.”<sup>9</sup>

The five features that characterize what I am calling a miso-Cretan interpretation are: (1) Paul’s authorial sympathy with the quotation’s propositional claims, (2) ancient literary or archaeological corroboration of the veracity of the quotation, (3) contextual discontinuity between the thrust of the quotation and the surrounding material, (4) conflation of the troublemakers and the general Cretan church populace, and (5) dubious attribution of the quotation to Epimenides of Crete. Interpretations align with this miso-Cretan categorization to the extent that they depend on or emphasize some or all of these points. I will now briefly describe each of the five assumptions that pertain to miso-Cretan readings. In subsequent

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7. Jerome D. Quinn, *The Letter to Titus: A New Translation and Commentary and an Introduction to Titus, I and II Timothy, the Pastoral Epistles*, AB 35 (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 109.

8. Quinn, *Letter to Titus*, 109.

9. Annette Bourland Huizenga, *1–2 Timothy, Titus*, WisC 53 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2016), 141.

chapters, I offer a more substantial critique in dialogue with scholars who maintain such readings.

### 1. Authorial Sympathy

First, miso-Cretan interpretations commonly assume the author's sympathetic attitude toward the contents of the statement as linguistically encoded. The question of authorial attitude is pivotal. According to many, Paul approved of and endorsed the statement, "Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons" (Titus 1:12). Relevance theory illuminates the need and process for interpreters to assess when an author is writing *descriptively* or *interpretively*—when their words represent their own opinions or those of others.<sup>10</sup>

### 2. Ancient Corroboration

Second, many scholarly adherents to a miso-Cretan reading assume that ancient literary or archaeological evidence objectively and unambiguously demonstrates that the Cretan people actually were or were purported to be just as the quotation describes. Several commentators search, find, and present evidence that appears to corroborate the disparaging claims of the quotation. In this case, Paul joined a host of critics and echoed the verdict of history: Cretans are innately delinquent.

### 3. Contextual Discontinuity

Third, the miso-Cretan reading requires an abrupt change in topic within the paragraph (1:10–16). Rather than the quotation functioning within a continuous argument against troublemakers in the Cretan church, Paul supposedly begins railing against ethnic Cretans mid-paragraph and returns to address insolent leaders after this brief, non sequitur interruption. Whether or not commentators discuss the discontinuity between addressing inappropriate leadership and insulting the Cretan populace, this maneuver is assumed in most interpretations.

### 4. Target Conflation

Fourth, several prominent interpreters conflate all targets of the letter's critical rhetoric so that their interpretations do not maintain the categori-

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10. As I explain later, relevance theory adds technical precision to these concepts.

zations established in the discourse itself.<sup>11</sup> They tend to read the negative judgments surrounding the Cretan quotation as leveled against all of these groups and do not distinguish between concerns with troublemakers versus ordinary church members. In other words, Paul was a bigot in general rather than taking issue with particular groups for specific reasons. Tracking the corrective logic of Titus requires more careful attention to exactly who is targeted.

## 5. Dubious Attribution

Fifth, most commentators who discuss attribution assume that a fifth- or sixth-century (BCE) Cretan poet, Epimenides, originated the quotation, but this is far from certain. The quotation has no reliable attribution. Modern writers invoke his name overconfidently, but ancient authors painted a vague and contradictory picture of his era, occupation, and characteristics. They hardly provide the kind of evidence to support strong assertions that Paul borrowed authority from a well-known Cretan to lend credibility to an insult he wished to level against Cretans.

The five tendencies described above constitute the quintessential array of assumptions that lead to miso-Cretan readings. Most interpretations of Titus 1:12 rely on some or all of them. Each assumption is carefully detailed and critiqued in chapter 1.

### Why Titus 1:12?

Like many Christians, I encountered Titus first as the Scripture of the church, part of the Christian canon, the sacred library of a community of faith. Outside such ecclesial connections, this literature interests readers historically, aesthetically, spiritually, and so forth, but the coherence of interpreting any part of the collection in light of the others or of ascribing more authority to it than to other literature primarily holds within the scope of Christian hermeneutics. As Walter Moberly asserts, “The

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11. The block quotation from Huizenga at the beginning of this section exemplifies this tendency. According to Huizenga, Paul vocalizes animus toward several categories of people and practices at once. Overlapping targets include reference to features of Jewish religious culture (“circumcision,” 1:10; “commandments,” 1:14, “genealogies,” 3:9), troublemakers in the church (1:10–11), and—through the quotation—native Cretans (see Huizenga, *1–2 Timothy, Titus*, 141).

authority of the [Pastoral] letters is secured not by their authorship as such, but by their canonical status, historic reception and historic fruitfulness.... Literary theory makes it possible to take the first-person voice of the letters with full imaginative seriousness."<sup>12</sup>

Yet like many Christians, I rarely heard Titus read during the liturgy.<sup>13</sup> Modern lectionary plans do not typically set out to cover the entire canon, but a fundamental question of canon for the patristic church was which texts to read aloud in the gathered community.<sup>14</sup> For a text to be so neglected seems to diminish long-held canonical status. This neglect may derive from a general queasiness modern liturgists have about reading authoritatively from a book that their validity criteria tell them to hold in suspicion. Although they may not have examined the particular issues rigorously themselves, pastors sense the shadow cast over the trustworthiness of Titus's self-presentation as a letter from the apostle Paul.

The reasons are several and serious, and Moberly expresses well the dilemma pastors are in as tradents in canonical Scripture for particular Christian communities.<sup>15</sup> Normally, modern readers encounter Titus 1, which never appears in the *Revised Common Lectionary*, in contexts such as individual devotional reading, scholarship, or small group study. It is not possible to track interpretations from such diverse and private occasions, but undoubtedly miso-Cretan readings are represented among them. I was never personally satisfied with the coherence of a miso-Cretan reading, and the alternative I summarized above seems natural to me. I want to understand how readers could come to such different interpreta-

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12. R. Walter L. Moberly, "Biblical Hermeneutics and Ecclesial Responsibility," in *The Future of Biblical Interpretation: Responsible Plurality in Biblical Hermeneutics*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Matthew R. Malcolm (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 156.

13. Portions of Titus are only listed in the *Revised Common Lectionary* as readings for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day (Titus 2:11–14, 3:4–7). See *The Revised Common Lectionary: Consultation on Common Texts; Includes Complete List of Lectio-ns for Years A, B and C* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992). Congregations I was part of did not always follow the lectionary or hold Christmas Eve and Christmas Day worship services.

14. Consider, e.g., the Muratorian Fragment, which distinguishes between books for reading in the gathered community and for reading in private. See Daniel J. Theron, "Muratorian Fragment," in *Evidence of Tradition*, ed. and trans. Theron (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 112–13.

15. Moberly, "Biblical Hermeneutics," esp. 133–34.



tions. I lacked a theoretical explanation for why I sensed intuitively that miso-Cretan readings were mistaken.

Insofar as the bigotry of Paul in the letter to Titus and suspicion about the authenticity of Jew-gentile relations in Titus's Cretan church are reasons to doubt Pauline authorship, exposing flawed assumptions may allow criticism of Titus to proceed on sounder footing. I perceive deep and nuanced theological teaching in Titus and even an understanding of the logic of the gospel attributable to Paul. So, I come to Titus 1:12 from deep personal interest in what I see as a *crux interpretum*.

I perceive that Titus 1:12 calls for an extended treatment due to the extent of the issues that interpretations of this verse have precipitated and due to the promise of relevance theory for helping interpreters be more conscious of the ways language works. Therefore, I devote much to explaining details of relevance theory and its implications for understanding language and the literature of the Bible, and I work with the text of Titus at a detailed level.

### Why Relevance Theory?

Escaping the gravitational pull of a miso-Cretan reading requires a strategy that can disentangle texts qua utterances from the assumptions imposed on them by their history of interpretation—a strategy illuminated by but not tethered to historic, traditional, or conventional readings. So, as David Bauer and Robert Traina argue concerning biblical hermeneutics in general, the strategy must be inductive, evidence based, and radically open to the results of inquiry.<sup>16</sup> While being radically open, the strategy cannot be amorphous or incoherent; it must aid interpreters in the careful process of reconstructing meaning faithful to the original context. The strategy needs to appreciate the kind of object Titus is: a written specimen of *ostensive inferential communication* from which readers seek to discern an authorial aim.<sup>17</sup>

The miso-Cretan assumptions summarized above are problems with *reading* Titus, so I sought an approach for critiquing readings—in other

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16. David R. Bauer and Robert A. Traina, *Inductive Bible Study: A Comprehensive Guide to the Practice of Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 23–25.

17. The meaning of “ostensive inferential communication” is explained below. For more detail, see Billy Clark, *Relevance Theory, CTL* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 112–19.

words, a way of discerning how readers inferred meaning and discerning how those processes succeeded or failed in understanding the text according to its author's communicative intent. What makes relevance theory so appropriate to my inquiry is that it pursues an understanding of language by asking how hearers reach conclusions and not by asking what semantic forms (words, syntax, etc.) mean in themselves. It may be original to put it this way, but relevance theory reverse-engineers language to discern how audiences arrive at their interpretations from semantically underdeterminative inputs.

Relevance theory begins with the success of human language as a premise and asks philosophically and empirically how hearers are able to comprehend speakers when it is clear that natural language is inherently underdeterminative. According to relevance theory, speech triggers a customary response in hearers that sets them on a quest for the relevance of the spoken input to concerns in their mind. This is a quest for *cognitive effects*. In order to achieve these cognitive effects, the hearer must infer the speaker's intention to his satisfaction.<sup>18</sup> This inferential process is rapid and intuitive, even though it involves encyclopedic recall, dialectic weighing of possible meanings, and enrichment of vague inputs. Relevance theory aims to explain the processes of ostensive inferential communication with the understanding that communication is successful when hearers are successful, and therefore it primarily examines the hearer's role in communication. In this sense, relevance theory is a promising solution to the problem of sorting out competing readings because it helps us discern *how* humans come to their interpretations.

The assumptions of relevance theory include (1) that speakers ostensibly intend outcomes by their utterances—hearers ascribe meaning to them because utterances themselves trigger this assumption; (2) that communication is an *inferential* process from incomplete semantic input—that is, it is not simply a matter of decoding the meaning of a speaker's words; (3) that hearers will combine speaker input with encyclopedic and environmental information as well as fundamental reasoning to arrive at their inferences; and (4) that hearers will reject meanings that violate their assumptions or conflict with their reasoning but that they will stop processing and accept a conclusion once they are (subconsciously) satisfied

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18. The convention in almost all relevance-theoretical literature is to refer to a generic speaker using feminine pronouns and a generic hearer using masculine pronouns for simple differentiation.

that it meets the criterion of relevance and results in adequate cognitive effects. On this very spare account of relevance theory, one can already see that distance (cultural, linguistic, temporal, etc.) between original audiences and modern audiences can complicate the processes that modern readers intuitively go through and yield divergent interpretations.

So, is relevance theory an appropriate theory to apply to texts such as Titus? In short, relevance theory is about communication, and written speech is a species of communication. Specific issues that raise the question of appropriateness include the fact that texts are heard or read asynchronously, that the environmental factors of live speech (e.g., tone, gesture, relationship, location) are not available through text, and that the Bible in particular is an ancient text, far removed from its modern readers. I address each of these concerns later but summarize here. First, relevance theory assumes that all communication involves underdeterminacy; therefore, the impact of missing environmental or other inputs is merely quantitative rather than qualitative. It does not preclude the ability of readers from another time and place to understand texts that supply sufficient other data to fund reasonable inferences. Second, texts allow some contextual benefits that the environments of live speech do not. For instance, the speaker and the hearer can slow the process down, be more deliberate, explicit, or precise. Third, asynchronicity does not present a problem, because relevance theory has been fruitfully applied to many literary studies and to the Bible.<sup>19</sup> The insights of relevance theory are particularly

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19. Among the best examples of such are Kevin G. Smith, "Bible Translation and Relevance Theory: The Translation of Titus" (DLitt diss., University of Stellenbosch, 2000); Stephen W. Pattemore, *Souls under the Altar: Relevance Theory and the Discourse Structure of Revelation*, UBSMS 9 (New York: United Bible Societies, 2003); Pattemore, *The People of God in the Apocalypse: Discourse, Structure, and Exegesis*, SNTSMS 128 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Philip W. Goodwin, *Translating the English Bible: From Relevance to Deconstruction* (Cambridge: Clarke, 2013); and Sarah H. Casson, *Textual Signposts in the Argument of Romans: A Relevance-Theory Approach*, ECL 25 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2019). Although every work has its shortcomings, several pieces written at this juncture of disciplines—relevance theory and biblical studies—are particularly weak, confused, or misleading. Gene L. Green provides probably the most accurate general presentation of relevance theory for biblical-studies audiences. See, e.g., Green, "Lexical Pragmatics and the Lexicon," *BBR* 22 (2012): 315–33; Green, "Relevance Theory and Biblical Interpretation," in *Oxford Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Steven L. McKenzie (London: Oxford University Press, 2013), 2:266–73.

helpful for interpreting utterances for which the intuitive, organic, rapid, and complex processes that original audiences employed to discern meaning are no longer available, as is the case for Bible readers.

Relevance theory is grounded in decades of philosophical reasoning and detailed observation of human cognition. Although relevance theory is not a method of interpretation per se, it can enhance the critique of previous interpretations by adding precision and by grounding such critique in a sound theory of communication. On the basis of relevance theory, critics can discern the problems in previous interpreters' inferential processes and how they may be ameliorated. Over the past generation, theorists have developed and refined the discipline of relevance theory so that it is increasingly informed by empirical evidence and rigorous critical dialogue.<sup>20</sup> At this stage, the theory is mature enough to illuminate the development of a biblical reading strategy. I take Titus 1:12 as a test case for such a strategy built on and sensitive to the insights of relevance theory. By developing and demonstrating this strategy, I not only offer an alternative perspective on the Cretan quotation but also introduce an interpretive strategy that may be amenable to scholars who recognize the need for more attention to linguistic theory—not simply to discrete issues of language such as lexicon and grammar—in biblical hermeneutics.

While practicing biblical hermeneutics, few commentators articulate a philosophy of language; yet clarity, transparency, and consistency regarding language are appropriate for the Bible as written communication. In any paragraph, a commentator may assume that a lexeme is paramount; in another, it is the syntax. Elsewhere, the same interpreter will emphasize the nuance of fluid and nonliteral use and then decode meaning on the grounds of monumental history, inscriptions, a cultural artifact or practice. Another interpreter may cycle through a completely different set of considerations without a transparent or consistent guideline for weighing evidence and evaluating among possible interpretations. Few discuss in advance how they see language functioning in general, yet interpretive problems often have linguistic explanations. Concluding an article on lexical pragmatics, Gene Green notes, "Very few students of biblical

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20. Theorists have developed relevance theory from a philosophical to a cognitive discipline with increasing consonance with neurology, psychology, sociology, and other sciences. Although these later developments are interesting, they are not as pertinent to our inquiry as the theory's central principles.

studies have engaged the field of linguistics, and those who do have often not taken advantage of texts, courses, and programs based on pragmatics. This field of linguistics, and especially RT [relevance theory], is a domain ripe for rich new research and teaching.”<sup>21</sup> Working from a single principle (relevance) that is appropriate to the kind of material under examination helps expose flaws with some interpretations and draw attention to neglected evidence for understanding a passage.

Three key insights from relevance theory govern the structure of this study. I do not describe the theory in full detail, but I provide sufficient explanation for readers to grasp how the specifics that I address fit into the theory, appreciate its impact on interpretations of Titus 1:12, and discern the value of a relevance-guided biblical hermeneutic for interpreting Scripture generally.<sup>22</sup> Chapter 1 describes problems with prevailing interpretations of Titus 1:12 in more detail. Chapter 2 describes relevance theory with reference to key theorists and explains the rationale for a reading strategy. There I introduce the three key insights on which chapters 3–6 focus. Chapters 3–4 address the inferential nature of all communication. Chapter 5 explains the hearer’s role in communication. Chapter 6 discusses the nonpropositional dimensions of communication. The conclusion presents the implications of this study.

Relevance theory is suitable for four reasons. The first is *appropriateness*: Scripture is written communication and expression, subsisting in (or inhabiting) language; no discipline is more fitting for the nature of the subject. The second is *timing*: relevance theory, over the past generation, has matured as a discipline and become prominent within cognitive linguistics, although its exposure in biblical scholarship is limited. The third is *material*: Titus and its particular issues have received few thoroughgoing treatments from a relevance-theoretical viewpoint. The fourth is *promise*: after considering other methods (e.g., sociohistorical criticism, cultural hermeneutics), relevance theory seems to offer the most potential for delivering what is needed in the case of Titus 1:12, that is, a fresh look.

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21. Green, “Lexical Pragmatics and Lexicon,” 333.

22. For fuller descriptions of relevance theory and its general application to biblical interpretation, see esp. Pattemore, *Souls under the Altar*, 16–45; Green, “Relevance Theory and Biblical Interpretation”; Gene L. Green, “Relevance Theory and Biblical Interpretation,” in *The Linguist as Pedagogue: Trends in the Teaching and Linguistic Analysis of the Greek New Testament*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Matthew Brook O’Donnell (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2009), 217–40.

Relevance theory is worthy of effort and confidence, particularly because it incorporates the most eclectic sources of evidence and evaluates them by a single, economic scale—*relevance*.

### Summary

In due course, I propose an interpretation of Titus 1:12 that coincides with the evidence, namely, that Paul was rebuking bigotry in the Cretan church, not participating in it. In other words, this Paul was not himself shaming, describing, or comparing the Cretans but rather addressing those who did so as troublemakers.

It should become increasingly evident that prevalent readings of Titus 1:12 and its famous Cretan quotation are unsustainable on linguistic, literary, and historical grounds. Applying key insights from relevance theory to evaluate previous interpretations and to discern a historically and linguistically responsible reading, I will establish the plausibility of the alternative interpretation proposed above. This study demonstrates the promise of a relevance-guided biblical hermeneutic. If relevance theory can help interpreters read this problematic passage with greater clarity, it can potentially illuminate interpretive problems in other texts.

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