

## I. Paul and the Roman World

- A. Although the Roman Empire controlled the land of Israel, the prevalence of the Hellenistic worldview therein was dependent upon its location (urban vs. remote) and the people's willingness to either reject or adopt it. Outside of the land, the Greco-Roman milieu propagated values, ideals and a socio-religious ideology that was antithetical to Judaism and the Gospel. Paul the Apostle wrote, ministered, and traveled across this ancient world and those who accepted the Good News of the Gospel now had the challenge of living as those in Christ and not of this world (Eph. 2:4-7). The subversive message of the Gospel to the Graeco-Roman/Hellenistic worldview created many socio-economic problems for the early Christian community, but it was also the context in which the message of salvation in Christ alone flourished.
- B. Within the confines of Graeco-Roman societal norms, the core of the Christian message was hostile to the propagandistic ideals of Roman imperialism. Phrases like "Son of God," "Christ," and "salvation in Jesus" were titles and attributes ascribed only to the emperor. The foundation of Roman society was built on the worship of the gods and the emperor—the *divi filius*, "son of a god."<sup>1</sup> From Augustus forward, each of the living emperors were worshipped as such through the imperial cult, which "was in a certain sense the most important cult of the Roman Empire before the triumph of Christianity. The other divinities of the Greek and Roman pantheon were exchangeable at the pleasure of the individual. Local cults in the provinces were normally limited to only one town, one clan, or even one sanctuary; and the mystery cults attracted only small and particular groups of the population. In the cult of their emperor, however, practically everybody was involved."<sup>2</sup> It was by burning incense to the sitting emperor and their predecessors that one gave thanks and praise to the one from whom all the divine idealistic Roman virtues flow into the natural realm.
- C. To this end, the message carried by Paul, his letters, and other Jesus followers put their entire lives in jeopardy (i.e., Nero [64 A.D.] and Domitian [90–96 A.D.]). Rome needed religious conformity as a sign of political conformity. If one burned a pinch of incense to Caesar, he/she could go home and worship any deity they pleased. The contrasting nature of Roman religion (mechanical, external, ritualistic, with its multitude of altars, idols, and processions) and the Christian faith (invisible deity, internal, spiritual) led the state to regard this new religion as atheistic. The early church's private and frequent gatherings and their increasing organizational structure created suspicions of conspiracy and treasonous activities.
- D. Within the Roman social strata, Christianity appealed to the lower classes of society, especially slaves, who were infuriated with the more elite, out of touch, aristocratic leaders. The Christian belief in the moral equality of all men violated the hierarchical caste system of Roman life. The second century philosopher Celsus, is quoted as saying that Christians were "worthless and contemptible people, idiots, slaves, poor women and children."<sup>3</sup> Others have noted that much persecution came against Christianity in the form of mobs:

the "Nobodies of the Roman rabble could feel like somebodies by identifying other underdogs and kicking them. Christians provided a convenient target in the struggle for self-respect."<sup>4</sup> However, Christianity was a revolutionary movement that could not be stopped. It is documented that in 250 A.D. there were 30,000 attendees of the Church of Rome alone (3% of the population).

## II. Introducing Paul

- A. Outside of Jesus, the most famous Christian messenger of the first century was Paul. This is majorly due to two factors: (1) his authorship of thirteen letters in the NT and (2) the central role he plays in Luke's Acts of the Apostles. It would be hard to overstate the impact he made on the ancient Mediterranean world through his teachings and writings. He completed at least three missionary journeys across the Roman Empire, a period that spanned about twenty years. Although it can be difficult to date some of Paul's letters, the following is a general timeline of his missionary journeys and writings.<sup>5</sup>
1. First Missionary Journey 46–47 A.D. (Acts 13–14; Cyprus & Galatia)
    - a. Epistle to the Galatians (?)
  2. Second Missionary Journey 49–52 A.D. (Acts 15–18; Galatia, Thessalonica, Philippi, Athens, Corinth [Autumn 49 A.D. – Summer 51 A.D.])
    - a. Epistles to the churches of Galatia (?) and Thessalonica
  3. Third Missionary Journey 52–57 A.D. (Acts 18–21; Ephesus [52–55 A.D.] and Colossae)
    - a. Epistles to the churches of Corinth, Philippi (?), Galatia (?), and Rome
  4. First Imprisonment – Caesarea 57–59 A.D.
  5. Second Imprisonment – Rome 60–62 A.D.
    - a. Epistles to Timothy and the churches of Ephesus, Philippi (?), Colossae, and Philemon
  6. Release and Third Imprisonment – Rome 62–64/65 A.D.
    - a. Epistles to Timothy and Titus
- B. What we can gather from the NT concerning Paul is the following: (1) born in Cilicia/Tarsus (Acts 22:3); brought up in Jerusalem (Acts 22:3); educated in Jerusalem (Acts 22:3); a persecutor of the church (Acts 8:1; 9:1–2; Gal. 1:13–14; Phil. 3:6); converted on the Damascus road (c. 34 A.D.; Acts 9:1–19; Gal. 1:15–16); preaching in Damascus and Arabia (Gal. 1:17); in Damascus and escaped (2 Cor. 11:32–35); first Jerusalem visit (c. 36 A.D.; Acts 9:26–29; Gal. 1:18–19); stayed in Syria and Cilicia (c. 36–45 A.D.; cf. Acts 9:30; Gal. 1:21); ministered in Antioch (c. 45–46 A.D.; Acts 11:25–26); second Jerusalem visit (c. 46 A.D.; Acts 11:27–30; Gal. 2:1–10 ["famine relief"]); first missionary journey (c. 46–47 A.D.; Acts 13:1–14:26); stayed in Antioch (c. 47–48 A.D.; Acts 14:27–28; Gal. 2:11–14); Jerusalem council (c. 48 A.D.; Acts 15:1–29); stayed in Antioch (Acts 15:35); second missionary journey (c. 49–52 A.D.; Acts 15:36–18:22); third missionary journey (c. 52–57 A.D.;

Acts 18:23–21:6); returned to Judea (c. Spring 57 A.D.); imprisoned in Judea (c. 57–59 A.D.; Acts 21:27–26:32); shipwrecked (c. Fall 59 – Spring 60 A.D.; Acts 27:1–28:14); first Roman imprisonment (c. 60–62 A.D.; Acts 28:15–31); ministry (?) (c. 62–64 A.D.); second Roman imprisonment (c. 64 A.D.; cf. 2 Tim. 1:8); death (c. 64/65 A.D.).

- C. The earliest description we have concerning Paul comes from the apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla (c. 150 A.D.), which states “a certain man named Onesiphorus... saw Paul coming, a man of little stature, thin-haired upon the head, crooked in the legs, of good state of body, with eyebrows joining, and nose somewhat hooked, full of grace: for sometimes he appeared like a man, and sometimes he had the face of an angel” (2.3).<sup>6</sup>

### III. Pauline Epistles

- A. What we know of Paul’s theology comes from his thirteen letters that he wrote to various churches and individuals. The genre of these letters falls into ancient category of epistolography—i.e., letters writing. Nevertheless, it should be noted that Paul pushes the boundaries in this category as the longest examples we have come from Cicero (2,530 words) and Seneca (4,134 words), both of which come far short of Paul’s 7,101 words in his Roman epistle.<sup>7</sup> In the most straightforward sense, the ancient epistle (ἐπιστολή, “epistle/letter”) consisted of an *opening*, a *thanksgiving* or *blessings*, the *body*, and then *closing*.<sup>8</sup>
- B. At the heart of Paul’s theology is the proclamation of the “gospel,” of which there is only one (e.g., Gal. 1:6–9; Rom. 1:1; 15:16, 19 1 Cor. 9:12; 1 Thess. 2:9; 2 Thess. 1:8). And it is only by recognizing the truth of salvation in Jesus alone that one may become a part of God’s grand plan of redemption. In his view, this Man from the town of Nazareth was the Son of God, Messiah, and Lord—thus, He alone was able deliver humanity from the path of eternal damnation. Thus, “*Christology*,” as one scholar emphasizes, “*forms the center of Pauline theology*.”<sup>9</sup> Pauline Christology centers the journey of the believer as they walk out the synergistic tension of salvation—i.e., I have been, am being, and will be saved. With that said, it will be at this point that we will briefly attempt to discern the theological objective of Paul’s letters.
- C. **Galatians** - In my view, Galatians is the earliest letter Paul wrote (c. 48/49 A.D.).<sup>10</sup> His occasion for writing was due to the teaching of an unidentified Jewish group who emphasized the need for circumcision and the observance of a religious calendar for salvation (1:7; 4:10; 5:10; 6:12). Paul combats this through three stages: (1) he establishes his credentials (i.e., his relationship to the Jerusalem Apostles) and uses personal experience to convey the relationship between “the truth of the Gospel” and the law of Moses (1:11–2:21); (2) he appeals to Scripture and the personal experience of the Galatians to argue that salvation has nothing to do with Torah observance (3:1–5:12); and (3) he shows that works of righteousness and fruit of God’s Spirit are arise from the same place as salvation—from faith, not the Law.
- D. **1 Thessalonians** - Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians is famous for its teaching about eschatology. There was concern among the Thessalonians for brothers and sisters who have died, which sparks Paul’s important description of the coming of Christ and events associated with it (4:13–5:11). Be that as it may, “this letter also offers important insights into the nature and antecedents of conversion, as Paul celebrates the new life that God’s word, faithfully proclaimed by Paul and his coworkers, has awakened in these Thessalonian gentiles.”<sup>11</sup>
- E. **2 Thessalonians** - Like 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians centers upon the subject of Jesus’s return. The societal situation for the Thessalonian church was one of suffering and persecution. Paul’s purpose, then, is to give instruction concerning the hope Christians possess in both life and death because of Christ. For, the just God “will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled” (1:6–7a); “the Lord Jesus will overthrow [the lawless one] with the breath of his mouth and destroy [him] by the splendor of his coming” (2:8b).<sup>12</sup>
- F. **1 Corinthians** - Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians is much more explicit in its focus on particular issues than his other letters. It is these problems that structure his letter (e.g., attitudes toward the less esteemed (6:1–11), eating meat sacrificed to idols (8:1–11:1), problems in worship services (11:2–14:40), etc.). It’s theological objective is summarized well by Anthony C. Thiselton: it is a “reproclamation of the different value systems of grace, gifts, the cross, and the resurrection as divine verdict, criterion, and status bestowal within the new framework of respect and love for the less esteemed ‘other.’ Glorifying in the Lord and receiving status derived from identification with the crucified Christ (1:30–31) leads to a new value system demonstrable in a wide array of issues.”<sup>13</sup>
- G. **2 Corinthians** - It would seem a lot changed between the writing of Paul’s first and second letters to Corinth. The way that Paul’s authority governs the letter from start to finish shows that his role as an Apostle is being questioned in the church.<sup>14</sup> These circumstances Paul reflecting on the nature and implications of his own apostolic ministry. The result is Paul providing more information about his own ministry, and ministry in general, than any of his other epistles. Several key theological issues get drawn into his reflections on his apostleship—the relationship between old covenant and new (3:1–4:18), the “life in the midst of death” character of this in-between period of salvation history (2:12–17; 6:1–11:33), the central message of reconciliation (5:1–21).
- H. **Romans** - Romans is the first Pauline letter that springs to mind for many when they think of the Apostles theology. The seventeenth-century Puritan Thomas Draxe called Romans “the quintessence and perfection of saving doctrine.”<sup>15</sup> While Martin Luther referred to it as “the purest gospel.”<sup>16</sup> No biblical book has had a greater impact on the church’s theology. It had a formative influence on theologians from Augustine to John Calvin to Karl Barth. For, “Romans,” as C. Kavin Rowe comments, is where Paul says what “Christianity is most basically about.”<sup>17</sup> The far-reaching

influence of Romans is not surprising. The context in which Paul wrote led him to write a letter that covered a significant number of basic theological issues (e.g., the Law, the Spirit, faith vs. works-righteousness, salvation, Adam, suffering, etc.)—the chief of which is that God has not abandoned Israel thus He will not abandon us (9–11)!

- I. **Colossians** - Although comparatively brief, Paul's letter to the Colossians has had a strong impact on Christian theology and practice. One thinks immediately of its teaching about Jesus's role in creation and His preeminence over the church (1:9–29; 2:1–9)—teaching that has strongly influenced the development

of Christological doctrine. Colossians, along with Ephesians, its close relative, develops the notion of the church as “the body,” with Christ as its head (2:9–10). From a more practical perspective, Paul's rebuke of false teachers who tie spiritual growth to rule following (2:16–23) reminds us that true growth comes only by remaining firmly tied to Christ. Paul's exhortations in 3:1–4:6, again, though brief, summarize and illustrate the basic ethical principles that have provided significant guidance for believers seeking to translate their commitment to the Lord Jesus into practice.<sup>18</sup>

**1** Augustus, the first of his kind, set the stage for this by taking the title “son of god” but it was only because he was the adopted son of Julius Caesar, who was immortalized and worshipped by the Roman imperial cult after his assassination and given the Latin title *divus Iulius*, meaning, “Divine Julius.” It came to denote a god who was previously a man (cf. Adela Yarbro Collins, “Mark and His Readers: The Son of God Among Greeks and Romans.” *Harvard Theological Review*. [2000]: 94). It was after his death that Augustus began to refer to himself as *divi filius*, meaning “God's son” or “Son of god.” Secondly, in official Greek documents from 27 B.C. to 3 A.D. the name of Augustus was inscribed as, “Emperor Caesar Augustus son of god” (cf. W H Buckler, “Auguste, Zeus Patroos,” *Revue de Philologie* 9 (1935) 177–88, esp. 179, in Collins, “Mark and His Readers,” 95). He came to be known as the “Savior” of the empire, bringing “peace” and “salvation.” He was called the “lord” and was worshipped as god on earth. Roman citizens were commanded to pray to him and make sacrifices to him. Temples and shrines were built in his name all over the empire. His birth was called “good news” and was celebrated with a twelve-day holiday called “advent.” He was savior and his kingdom was salvation according to imperial gospel.

**2** G. Alföldy, *Subject and Ruler: The Cult of the Ruling Power in Classical Antiquity*, *Journal of Roman Archaeology* Sup 17 (1996), 255.

**3** Origen, *Contra Celsus*, 3.59.

**4** Laurie Guy, *Introducing Early Christianity: A Topical Survey of its Life, Beliefs & Practices* (New York: IVP Academic, 2009), 73.

**5** As noted by John B. Polhill, “some scholars see Galatians as the first of Paul's extant epistles, written before the second missionary journey. Others place it late in the third mission period. Philippians is dated variously, depending on where one sees Paul as being imprisoned: Ephesus (A.D. 55–56), Caesarea (58–60), or Rome (60–62)” (Paul and His Letters [Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999], 131).

**6** A. J. Malherbe, “A Physical Description of Paul,” *HTR* 79 (1–3, 1986): 170–75, identifies the Acts of Paul and Thecla's description is not unflattering in that culture; it fits descriptions of Augustus, Heracles, and Agathon—i.e., it conveys heroic features.

**7** Cf. Larry W. Hurtado, *Destroyer of the Gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), 120. The result of such distinctiveness is that some scholars see Paul's writings as forerunning a genre—that of the “apostolic/pastoral letter” (cf. the discussion in Douglas J. Moo, *A Theology of Paul and His Letters: The Gift of the New Realm in Christ* [2021], 51). Nonetheless, as Moo there concludes, it is better to first situate them within their ancient literary world because this is how they would have understood them.

**8** Cf. Moo, *Theology of Paul*, 51. See also the discussion by J. A. D. Weima, “Letters, Greco-Roman,” where he highlights the following epistolary features: (1) the letter opening, which includes letter-writing formulas for the prescript, health wish, and thanksgiving; (2) although others can be identified, it is in the letter body that one sees the literary formulas needed to disclose (“I want you to know that...”), appeal (“I appeal to...”), instill confidence (“I am confident,” plus the reason for the writer's confidence and the direction the writer is confident the reader will take), Περὶ δὲ (a topic changing formula, “now about/concerning”; e.g., 1 Cor. 11:33), and τὸ λοιπὸν (another topic changing formula, “finally/for the rest”; e.g., 1 Cor. 11:34); and (3) the letter closing which includes the formulas for the farewell wish, health wish, secondary greetings, autograph, and illiteracy (in *Dictionary of New Testament Background* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 200], 642–44). For those interested in the primary source handbooks that discuss the subject letter writing, cf. Demetrius, *On Style* (first century A.D.); Pseudo-Demetrius, *Epistolary Types* (second century B.C.); and Pseudo-Libanius, *Epistolary Styles* (c. 4th–6th century A.D.).

**9** Peter Stuhlmacher, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 318.

**10** I believe the key to understanding when the letter was written is Paul's mention of his two visits to Jerusalem (1:18–20; 2:1–10). If we compare these with the three visits mentioned in Acts (9:26–29; 11:30; 15:1–35) we can, through the process of elimination, determine at what point it was penned. It is only before, during and immediately after Paul's first missionary journey that Barnabas is mentioned as being with Paul in the same place at the same time. It is also only in Galatians that we get any kind of detailed discussion of Paul's pre-Christian life, conversion and those events that immediately followed. Furthermore, it is only in Galatians that we learn that Paul spent time in Damascus on more than one occasion, in Antioch, and in his native region of Cilicia. This points to an early dating of the letter. Cf. Ben Witherington III, *Grace in Galatia: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 10–11.

**11** Moo, *Theology of Paul*, 88.

**12** It is worthy of note that some have seen 1 Thess. 2:13–17 as the most concise summary of Pauline theology. Cf. David Peterson, *Possessed by God: A New Testament Theology of Sanctification and Holiness*, *NSBT* 1 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 60–61.

**13** Thiselton, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, *NIGTC* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 40 (emphasis original).

**14** I.e., Paul repeatedly defends and explains his ministry in chapters 1–9 and in 10–13 he passionately takes on his “rivals.”

**15** William Haller, *The Rise of Puritanism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972), 87.

**16** From Luther's “Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans,” in *Word and Sacrament* 1 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1960), 365.

**17** C. Kevin Rowe, *One True Life: The Stoics and Early Christians as Rival Traditions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 87.

**18** Moo, *Theology of Paul*, 244.



BIBLE

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