

The Press toward the Authentic-Letter Perspective

[S]pecial circumstances created their own medium, with the result that a Pauline letter is generally much longer than the majority of papyrus letters, can at times approximate to the solemn court style of the royal missive, can open with a variegated form of thanksgiving as an overture in which the main themes of the letter are introduced, and can include in its main part the scriptural argumentation of a rabbi, the style of the hellenistic diatribe, the elevated language of prophecy, the formulations already traditional in the Church – all this without ever ceasing in the process to be a real letter.

C.F. Evans, “The New Testament in the Making”

At present, that Paul authored seven letters and had them delivered as genuine correspondence – Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, 1 Thessalonians, Philippians, and Philemon – is widely assumed and rarely questioned. Despite significant differences between the form and style of Pauline and other ancient Greco-Roman letters, the authentic-letter perspective endures. As I indicate in this chapter, seven Pauline letters came to be recognized, rationalized, and then normalized as authentic and genuine through various dubious methodologies. Indeed, the allowance of “special circumstances” – a term used by Evans in this chapter’s epigraph – is a recurring rationale coursing through scholarship that enables the letters’ status to remain authentic, in part historically reliable, and as genuine correspondence.

Over the long history of Pauline letter interpretations, the authentic-letter perspective is a relatively recent phenomenon. It has roots in the Enlightenment, in which the letters attributed to Paul were valued and then mined for their potential historical reliability, as evidence of early

Christianity. In modern scholarship, a dominant and highly influential promoter of this view was the nineteenth-century scholar F.C. Baur. The letters' status as genuine correspondence took hold in the early-twentieth century, as influenced by the extensive scholarship of Adolf Deissmann. The earliest witnesses of the letters, however, valued them as scripture-like authoritative writings, mining them for their theological content and import. Pauline teachings were the source of debates among the earliest witnesses. In what follows, I provide an abbreviated *status quaestionis* of Pauline letters along three classifications: authoritative scripture-like,¹ authentically Pauline and historically reliable, and genuine correspondence.

PAULINE LETTERS (AND PAUL) RECOGNIZED AS AUTHORITATIVE

Early "Christian" authors such as Irenaeus (c. 130–202 CE), Tertullian (c. 160–220 CE), and the Valentinian teacher Ptolemy (fl. c. 180 CE) considered the Pauline letters authoritative, scripture-like writings, no different in kind and equal in weight to other biblical-like sources, such as the book of Acts and the Gospels. They relied heavily on Pauline letters to support their theological/philosophical positions. Indeed, Paul and the Pauline letters were of such authority and importance that these authors (and others) argued over "Paul's" beliefs, the details of the teachings, and their interpretation.

Characterized as the "first great theologian,"² Irenaeus³ relied upon the entire Pauline corpus (thirteen letters, exclusive of Hebrews)⁴ for his

¹ Blackwell notes that "scripture" in a canonical sense is not appropriate for this time. The word "authoritative" gets closer to the correct term given the context. See Ben C. Blackwell, "Paul and Irenaeus," in *Paul and the Second Century*, ed. Michael F. Bird and Joseph R. Dodson (New York: T & T Clark International, 2011), 193.

For his part, Irenaeus refers to Paul's letters as γραφή (*Haer.* 3.12.12; 2.35.4). A common and general definition for γραφή is "writing."

² See Blackwell, "Paul and Irenaeus," 191.

³ Two of Irenaeus' writings are extant, *Adversus haereses* (*Against Heresies*) and *Epideixis tou apostolikou kerygmatis* (*The Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*). For a list of the various editions of these works and a rather extensive bibliography of modern scholarship devoted to him, see ODCC 847.

⁴ See Richard A. Norris, "Irenaeus' Use of Paul in His Polemic Against the Gnostics," in *Paul and the Legacies of Paul*, ed. William S. Babcock (Dallas, TX: Southern Methodist University Press, 1990), 80. Thirty percent of Irenaeus' scriptural citations are from the Pauline corpus, with the majority from Romans and 1 Corinthians. See also Richard I. Pervo, *The Making of Paul: Constructions of the Apostle in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 223.

theology. Whereas his opponents,⁵ Valentinus⁶ and Marcion,⁷ maintained a two-god philosophy – a creator god exemplified in the Hebrew scriptures and a good/true redeeming god of Greek scriptures – Irenaeus argued that one god was both creator and redeemer and that this one god was in evidence within the later Greek scriptures.⁸ To make his case for only one god, he turned to 1 Cor 8:6 and Eph 4:6 (*Haer.* 3.6.5; 4.33.3, 7; 2.2.5; 5.18.2).⁹ By way of Gal 4:8–9, 2 Thess 2:4, and 1 Cor 8:4–6, he contended that only one in scripture is called “god,” who is also called the “father god” (*Haer.* 3.6.5). Elsewhere, in reliance again on Pauline letters (Gal 3:24; Rom 13:10; 1 Cor 10:11; Rom 3:23), Irenaeus asserted against Valentinus and Marcion that the same god who sent his son was likewise responsible for the Mosaic law.¹⁰ In the following passage, Irenaeus contends that the Apostle Paul himself witnesses to only one god:

⁵ In scholarship, these opponents Valentinus and Marcion are often categorized as “gnostics.” Gnosticism has been understood as a “dualistic, acosmic religion of salvation communicated by a heavenly redeemer, whose message is to inform all that they contain within themselves a spark of the divine.” See Pervo, *Making of Paul*, 208. Gnosticism was also thought to include a “distinctive myth of origins,” a literary creation that includes, 1) the “expansion of a solitary first principle (god) into a full nonphysical (spiritual) universe”; 2) “Creation of the material universe, including stars, planets, earth, and hell”; 3) “Creation of Adam, Eve, and their children”; 4) “subsequent history of the human race.” On this, see Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, trans. Bentley Layton (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1987), 9–13.

Recently, the category “Gnosticism” has been challenged, with scholars finding it unhelpful and without validity, as no coherent belief system is apparent within extant and especially Nag Hammadi sources. On this latter point, see especially Michael A. Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Karen L. King, *What is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003).

⁶ Valentinus (c. 100–75 CE) is thought to have founded philosophical schools and has been described as “one of the most brilliant and creative Christian theologians of the second century.” He relied on much of the Pauline corpus, except for the Pastorals, to argue his position. See Pervo, *Making of Paul*, 210–11.

Irenaeus derided Valentinus and his followers as “esoteric and absurd, practitioners of sorcery, [and] given to debauchery.” See Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, 271–72. For more on Irenaeus and his polemics, see especially King, *What is Gnosticism?*

⁷ For biography on Marcion, see Judith M. Lieu, *Marcion and the Making of a Heretic: God and Scripture in the Second Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Markus Vinzent, “Marcion the Jew,” *Judaïsme Ancien* 1 (2013): 159–201; Markus Vinzent, *Marcion and the Dating of the Synoptic Gospels* (Leuven and Paris: Peeters, 2014); Jason D. BeDuhn, *The First New Testament: Marcion’s Scriptural Canon* (Salem, OR: Polebridge Press, 2013), 11–23.

⁸ See Norris, “Irenaeus’ Use of Paul,” 87; Blackwell, “Paul and Irenaeus,” 197.

⁹ On this, see Blackwell, “Paul and Irenaeus,” 199.

¹⁰ See Norris, “Irenaeus’ Use of Paul,” 86.

Let Paul himself refute those who assert that he alone had knowledge of the truth, inasmuch as the mystery was manifested to him by revelation. For he said that one and same God who worked through Peter for the mission to the circumcised worked also through himself for the Gentiles [Gal 2:7–8]. Hence, Peter was the apostle of the same God as Paul; the very God and the Son of God, whom Peter announced to those in circumcision. Him Paul announced among the Gentiles. Surely, the Lord did not come to save only Paul, nor is God so poor that He would have only one apostle who would know the economy of His Son.¹¹ (*Haer.* 3.13.1)

The above passage likewise reveals something about Irenaeus' understanding of the status of Paul: He is considered authoritative and made so on account of the scriptural-like status of Galatians, to which this passage refers. Paul, like Peter, is an apostle and biblical worthy.

Tertullian¹² also draws extensively from the Pauline corpus¹³ in support of his theology and to oppose alternate perspectives held by his opponents,¹⁴ those who likewise rely on the authority of Pauline letters.¹⁵ Tertullian subscribes to Irenaeus' understanding of one god and the unity of god throughout Hebrew scriptures and "Christian" scripture-like writings. In addition, he maintains that Jewish law derives from the one god and that by rejecting the law, the Apostle Paul was not thereby denying the unity of God.¹⁶ Tertullian draws alternately and freely from

¹¹ Translation is by Dominic J. Unger in Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies, Book 3*, trans. Dominic J. Unger O.F.M. Cap., Ancient Christian Writers (New York: The Newman Press, 2012), 71.

¹² Tertullian was a prolific writer, with over thirty compositions extant. For editions of his works and a list of modern studies, see ODCC 1591–92.

¹³ Tertullian refers to the entirety of the Pauline corpus in his *De resurrectione carnis*. In *De carne Christi*, he refers to Philippians, 1 Corinthians, Galatians, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Romans. He makes use of 1 Timothy, Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, 1 Corinthians, Colossians, and Philippians in *Adversus Praxean*. His most extensive engagement with Pauline letters occurs in *Adversus Marcionem*, Book 5, in which he engages in detail with 1 Corinthians and Galatians. See Andrew M. Bain, "Tertullian: Paul as Teacher of the Gentile Churches," in *Paul and the Second Century*, ed. Michael F. Bird and Joseph R. Dodson (New York: T & T Clark International, 2011), 209, 211.

¹⁴ See ODCC 1591–92.

¹⁵ As I discuss in Chapter 4, Irenaeus, Tertullian, and other Proto-orthodox writers relied on a Pauline collection that differed in various aspects from the one used by Marcion, their primary opponent. Whereas Marcion published and relied on a ten-letter collection of the Pauline letters, these Proto-orthodox authors worked from a slightly larger collection that included passages absent from Marcion's collection and additional letters, such as the Pastorals.

¹⁶ See Bain, "Tertullian: Paul as Teacher of the Gentile Churches," 212. Tertullian remarks that by separating the law and Christ, assigning one to the one god and the other to another, one effectively separates the "shadow from the body of which it is the shadow" (*Marc.* 5.19). Translation is by Ernest Evans in Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem*, trans. Ernest Evans, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 635.

Acts and Pauline letters, providing evidence that he considers both literatures similar in kind (scripture-like) and equally authoritative.¹⁷

Tertullian likewise argues against Marcion's understanding that the Apostle Paul held a unique status. In the estimation of Irenaeus and Tertullian, Marcion privileged Paul to the exclusion of any of the other apostles. In distinction from these proto-orthodox authors, Marcion – as Tertullian reports – considered that Paul derived from the same god as Christ, a god separate from the creator god. Against this view, Tertullian writes as though to Marcion,

So then accept the apostle on my evidence, as you do Christ: he is my apostle, as also Christ is mine. Here too our contest shall take place on the same front: my challenge shall be issued from the same stance, of a case already proven: which is, that an apostle whom you deny to be the Creator's, whom in fact you represent as hostile to the Creator, has no right to teach anything, to think anything, to intend anything, which accords with the Creator, but must from the outset proclaim his other god with no less confidence than that with which he has broken loose from the Creator's law.¹⁸ (*Marc.* 5.2.1)

Tertullian objects to Marcion's understanding that the Apostle Paul belongs exclusively to Christ, a Christ who is distinct from the creator god. In Tertullian's view (shared by Irenaeus), Paul is one among many apostles and proclaims a Christ associated with the one god. The passage indicates that Tertullian and Marcion are in a contest over Paul's beliefs. Both authors want to claim Paul as their own, and to do so, they assess his beliefs differently. For Tertullian and his opponent Marcion, Paul is first and foremost an *apostle* associated with a divine figure. He is among a core group of scriptural authoritative figures. Paul's earthly existence or that he authored actual sent correspondence is not at issue nor of concern.

In his philosophical letter, *Epistula ad Floram*,¹⁹ the Valentinian Ptolemy deploys Pauline letters to argue for a theological position different from these two proto-orthodox authors. Addressed to a likely fictitious female student named Flora, the literary letter²⁰ consists of an

¹⁷ *Marc.* 5.3.5–6 is an example of the portrayal of Paul's activities taken from Acts and Pauline letters.

¹⁸ Translation is by Ernest Evans in Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem*, 2.513.

¹⁹ The text is known only in Ephiphanius' fourth-century *Panarion* (*Adversus haereses*) at *Pan.* 33.3.1–33.7.10. The original text likely dates to the mid- to late-second century. See Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, 307. Pervo characterizes the work as an "exoteric philosophical letter." Pervo, *Making of Paul*, 213.

²⁰ As Layton remarks, this type of philosophical epistle was popular among academic writers of the time, used by Valentinus and here by his pupil Ptolemy. See Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, 307.

assessment of Torah regulations. In contrast to Irenaeus and Tertullian, Ptolemy argues that there are multiple gods, a perfect and non-engendered god and an intermediate god (*Flor.* 33.6.6).²¹ For evidence of multiple gods, Ptolemy turns to legislation within his sources. According to him, there are three different types of laws:²² spiritual laws (such as circumcision) that replace literal ceremonial rulings (Rom 2:29); laws that pertain to justice, such as the *lex talionis* (eye for an eye), which are abolished (Eph 2:15); and holy laws that are fulfilled by Christ (Rom 7:12). The different law-types provide evidence, according to Ptolemy, that the one perfect god (above all other gods) could not have established this variety of laws. Rather, an intermediary god (not the perfect god) authored them (*Flor.* 33.7.3–4).

As indicated, these early authors viewed Pauline letters as authoritative, as “scripturally true,”²³ and comparable in value and status to other scripture-like sources. They mined the letters to validate their theological positions. These authors likewise interpreted the letters strategically and creatively.²⁴ They deemed them important not because they were historically reliable or actual sent correspondence, but because they were recognized as being theologically authoritative and thereby credible. Aptly, Blackwell says of Irenaeus – but which can be applied to these other early authors – that he viewed the authority of the law, the prophets, the Gospels and the apostles together, as speaking the same “reality.”²⁵ In that these authors are only at a slight remove, likely only several decades, from those responsible for the Pauline letters (see Chapter 4), it is reasonable to assume that their assessment of them as scriptural is how they were first envisioned to be.

²¹ Ptolemy provided an indication of the diversity of views on the origin of the law circulating at that time. One view is that the one god is also the legislator, the view espoused by Irenaeus and Tertullian. Another view, not adopted by Ptolemy or by the proto-orthodox, is that the legislator is not god but the devil (*Flor.* 33.3.2, 33.3.5–6).

²² There are indications that Irenaeus is familiar with Ptolemy’s three-part distinction of laws. In agreement with Ptolemy, Irenaeus argues that the literal ceremonial laws are types and that Christ fulfilled the essential or holy laws, such as those of the decalogue. However, in contrast to Ptolemy, Irenaeus maintained that the one god is responsible for all the laws. See Norris, “Irenaeus’ Use of Paul,” 86–87.

²³ Pervo remarks that these authors deployed the Pauline letters as witnesses to “Christian truth.” See Pervo, *Making of Paul*, 349, n. 1.

²⁴ See Robert D. Sider, “Literary Artifice and the Figure of Paul in the Writings of Tertullian,” in *Paul and the Legacies of Paul*, ed. William S. Babcock (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1990), 100.

²⁵ See Blackwell, “Paul and Irenaeus,” 193.

PAULINE LETTERS AS AUTHENTIC AND
HISTORICALLY RELIABLE

A significant shift in the assessment of Pauline letters occurred in the Enlightenment when influential thinkers such as Hugo Grotius (1583–1645) and philosophers Baruch de Spinoza (1632–77) and John Locke (1632–1704)²⁶ advanced an alternate historical method of biblical interpretation. Spinoza advanced a “universal rule” of scriptural interpretation: “to accept nothing as an authoritative Scriptural statement which we do not perceive very clearly when we examine it in the light of its history.”²⁷ As Johnson-Debaufre correctly notes, Enlightenment scholars offered a new and revised understanding of history. Rather than history as contained within the texts (i.e., Homeric history or Luke’s history [Acts]), history came to mean verifiability by elements surrounding a given text and conformity to the laws of nature and reason. As Johnson-Debaufre explains, the Enlightenment introduced a distinction between “the history *in* the text and the history *of* and *around* the text.”²⁸ Texts were crosschecked and compared against each other for verifiability and confirmation. According to Spinoza, “‘history’ of a scriptural statement comprised (i) the nature of the language in which it was written, (ii) an analysis of the book and its arrangement, and (iii) an account of the environment of the book: the author, the occasion, and the reception of the book.”²⁹ Importantly, the text’s *value* comes to be determined by these criteria. The shift in interpretational method ultimately concerns the location of and claims about the truth.

In the Enlightenment period, the designation of Pauline authenticity or authorship (Spinoza’s criterion iii) became one of the indicators of a letter’s authoritative status. While earlier – and atypically of his time – Origen (c. 184–235 CE) had questioned Pauline authorship of the Letter to the Hebrews,³⁰ concerted interest in and emphasis on authorship

²⁶ See J.C. O’Neill, *The Recovery of Paul’s Letter to the Galatians* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1972), 1.

²⁷ Cited in O’Neill, *The Recovery of Paul’s Letter to the Galatians*, 1.

²⁸ Melanie Johnson-Debaufre, “Historical Approaches: Which Past? Whose Past?,” in *Studying Paul’s Letters: Contemporary Perspectives and Methods*, ed. Joseph A. Marchal (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012), 14. Emphasis original.

²⁹ As cited in O’Neill, *The Recovery of Paul’s Letter to the Galatians*, 1.

³⁰ Eusebius comments that in his *Homiliae in epistolam ad Hebraeos* (*Homilies on the Letter to the Hebrews*), extant only in fragments, Origen assessed that Hebrews indicated a more refined style than the other letters attributed to Paul and was likely the work of a follower of Paul (*Hist. eccl.* 6.25.11–14). See also the discussion of Origen’s

resurfaced in the mid-seventeenth century, and continued with regularity into the later centuries. Scholars Hugo Grotius, Richard Simon (1638–1712), and Johann Salomo Semler (1725–91) reprised the argument against Pauline authorship of Hebrews.³¹

Edward Evanson

Edward Evanson (1731–1805) was among the first modern scholars to deny authenticity of multiple letters of the Pauline corpus.³² In his *The Dissonance of the Four Generally Received Evangelists, and the Evidence of their Respective Authenticity Examined* (1792),³³ Evanson rejected as authentically Pauline Hebrews, Romans, Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians, Titus, and Philemon.³⁴ He likewise established criteria of authenticity and historical reliability, which included ancient church acceptance; consistency with Acts (deemed historically reliable); logical coherence, including a lack of historical anachronisms; consistency of expression across letters; and an indication of divine authority.³⁵ According to him, the letters that satisfied all of these criteria – and

understanding of Pauline authorship of Hebrews in Matthew J. Thomas, “Origen on Paul’s Authorship of Hebrews,” *New Testament Studies* 65 (2019): 598–609.

For a brief history of the status of Hebrews, see Hans-Josef Klauck, *Ancient Letters and the New Testament: A Guide to Context and Exegesis*, trans. Daniel P. Bailey (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006), 334–37. According to Klauck, the letter can be characterized as an oration “developed in writing” (ibid., 336). Its style is the most sophisticated among NT compositions (ibid., 335).

³¹ William Baird, *History of New Testament Research*, vol. 1: *From Deism to Tübingen* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 10, 21. The reason for their negative judgment on Hebrews echoes that of Origen, namely, they noticed a difference in its style.

Not all scholars, however, were of the same opinion. Semler’s contemporary Johann Michaelis (1717–91), while he raised questions of Pauline authorship, accepted Paul as the author of all NT letters attributed to him, including Hebrews and the Pastorals. See Baird, *From Deism to Tübingen*, 135–36. Michaelis’ arguments are found in his two-volume introduction to the NT (*Einleitung in die göttlichen Schriften des Neuen Bundes*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1788; ET: *Introduction to the New Testament*, Cambridge: J. & J. Merrill, 1793–1801).

³² See O’Neill, *The Recovery of Paul’s Letter to the Galatians*, 2. Questions of Pauline authorship gain in prominence at the start of the nineteenth century. According to O’Neill, this emphasis is apparent in the works of J.E.C. Schmidt, Schleiermacher, and Eichhorn who doubted Pauline authorship of the Pastorals. See ibid., 3.

³³ See Edward Evanson, *The Dissonance of the Four Generally Received Evangelists, and the Evidence of Their Respective Authenticity Examined*, 2nd ed. (Gloucester: D. Walker, 1805).

³⁴ Ibid., 306–26. ³⁵ Ibid., 306–36.

thereby deemed authentically Pauline – were 1 and 2 Corinthians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Galatians, and 1 and 2 Timothy.³⁶

To establish historical reliability, Evanson chose comparanda that could confirm details within Pauline letters. He distinguished the Gospel of Luke from among the four synoptic Gospels as the only Gospel he considered historically reliable. The Gospel of Luke could be trusted because its author claimed to be a companion of Paul.³⁷ Irreconcilable differences in the details between Pauline letters and the Gospels of Matthew,³⁸ Mark,³⁹ and John⁴⁰ meant, according to Evanson, that these three were “spurious fictions,”⁴¹ and products of the second century.⁴²

Evanson likewise privileges Acts, making it serve as a central basis for the determination of the historical reliability of Pauline letters. As indicated, consistency with Acts was one criterion of authenticity and historical reliability. Thus, in that they posit situations that contradict events and chronologies found in the book of Acts, Evanson deemed Romans, Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians, and Philemon inauthentic. Romans details events pertaining to Paul during the reign of Claudius, while Acts relates that Paul arrived in Rome for the first time at a later period, during the reign of Nero.⁴³ Ephesians cannot be accepted as Pauline, because, like Romans, it assumes an existent church in Ephesus prior to Paul’s presence there (Eph 1:15–16), and contradicts the chronology of Paul’s activities in Ephesus as given in Acts (18–20).⁴⁴ Similarly, in Acts 16:6 and 18:23 Paul preaches in the cities of Phrygia, a region inclusive of Colossae, while in the Letter to the Colossians, Epaphras is said to have first carried out that task there (Col 1:7).⁴⁵ Philippians mentions events regarding the conversion to Christianity of many among Emperor Nero’s court (Phil 4:22), a fact unattested elsewhere by Luke.⁴⁶ Philemon cannot be genuinely Pauline because Paul speaks of his fellow

³⁶ Ibid., 336. ³⁷ Ibid., 39–41. ³⁸ Ibid., 145–255. ³⁹ Ibid., 256–66.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 267–304. ⁴¹ Ibid., 305.

⁴² Matthew, Mark, and John were corrupted by the Church Fathers and the Orthodox, those steeped in the teachings of the philosophical schools. See Evanson, *Dissonance of the Four Generally Received Evangelists*, 35.

⁴³ Ibid., 307–8. In Romans, Paul writes to an already existent church he has never visited (Rom 1:13–15), yet as apostle to the gentiles, Paul would have been the one to found a church in Rome, not some other person or party (ibid., 308–10). For a brief review of Evanson’s reasons for rejecting Romans as authentic, see also Albert Schweitzer, *Paul and His Interpreters: A Critical History*, trans. W. Montgomery (New York: Schocken, 1964), 121, n. 1.

⁴⁴ See Evanson, *Dissonance of the Four Generally Received Evangelists*, 312–13.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 313–14. ⁴⁶ Ibid., 315.

prisoner (Phlm 23), while in Acts (25:14) Paul is seemingly in prison alone.⁴⁷ To deploy agreement with Acts as a determinant of historical reliability does not comport with current scholarship that deems the book of Acts as a work of literary fiction.⁴⁸

Furthermore, according to Evanson, 1 and 2 Corinthians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Galatians, and 1 and 2 Timothy are historically reliable because they contain “a spirit of prophecy.”⁴⁹ To confirm authenticity on the criterion of style, Evanson simply relied on his own list of predetermined authentically Pauline letters and compared them to each other, a method that was not only arbitrary but also lacking in necessary external control. Thus, the Apostle’s self-characterization “servant of God” in Titus (1:1) was inconsistent with the characterization of the faithful as “children of God” (Gal 4:6–7), disqualifying Titus as authentic.⁵⁰ Similarly, Evanson deemed the unique expression “beware of dogs and of the concision” (Βλέπετε τοὺς κύνας . . . βλέπετε τὴν κατατομήν; Phil 3:2) as non-Pauline, further disqualifying Philippians as authentic.

Wilhelm M.L. de Wette

The issue of the environment of the letter, another component of Spinoza’s criterion iii above, is prominent in the work of the German biblical scholar Wilhelm M.L. de Wette (1780–1849).⁵¹ In his early-nineteenth-century NT introductory textbook, *Lehrbuch der historisch-kritischen Einleitung in die kanonischen Bücher des Neuen Testaments* (ET: *An Historico-Critical Introduction to the Canonical Books of the New Testament*, 1858) de Wette privileges geographic, social, and political issues over the letter’s contents. Adopting a patterned sectional design for his discussions, de Wette starts with details pertaining to a socio-political history of the region designated by the letter, and then with the aid of Acts simply places Paul into the specified region. Details of letter

⁴⁷ Ibid., 320.

⁴⁸ See especially Joseph B. Tyson who defines Acts as a “charter myth.” Dennis E. Smith and Joseph B. Tyson, eds., *Acts and Christian Beginnings: The Acts Seminar Report* (Salem, OR: Polebridge Press, 2013), 15–18.

⁴⁹ See Evanson, *Dissonance of the Four Generally Received Evangelists*, 336.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 318.

⁵¹ Julius Wellhausen referred to de Wette as an “epoch-making founder of Old Testament Criticism.” As cited in Anders Gerdmar, *Roots of Theological Anti-Semitism: German Biblical Interpretation and the Jews, from Herder and Semler to Kittel and Bultmann* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 77.

contents are only found in summary and outline form. De Wette's orientation on elements of the environment external to the letters indicates a distinct and observable shift compared to that of their earliest interpreters (Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Ptolemy). It likewise serves to give the impression – without adequate evidence – of the realia of Paul, his communities, and the letters as genuine correspondence.

Regional discussions foreground treatments of all Pauline letters. Thus, with an opening section titled “Founding of the Church at Thessalonica,” de Wette sets the stage for his review of 1 and 2 Thessalonians:

Thessalonica (Θεσσαλονίκη) formerly Thermæ, situated on the Bay of Thermæ, newly built by Cassander and named in honor of his wife Thessalonica, daughter of Philip the Elder, in the time of the Romans capital of the second district of Macedonia, and a very populous commercial city, was visited by Paul in company with Silas, on his second missionary journey. He soon gained adherents there, especially among the Proselytes, but was compelled in a short time to leave the city on account of a tumult raised by the Jews. (Acts xvii. 1–9)⁵²

With aid from the book of Acts, de Wette handily slides Paul into a known ancient region. The geographic and sociopolitical details orient readers to the realia of place, who are thereby primed to imagine persons and communities in the specified locales.

De Wette's summary analyses are otherwise oriented on circumstances external to the letter (Spinoza's criterion iii). For example, de Wette discusses the situation of the writing of the letter, Paul's interest in visiting those in Thessalonica, and the moral condition of the community. Following are the opening lines of a relatively short description of 1 Thessalonians:

According to the indications contained in the Epistle, Paul wrote it in the company of Silvanus (Silas) and Timothy (i. 1), while yet full of the recollection of his visit to Thessalonica (i. 9, ii. 1, ff.); he longed to see the Christians there once more (iii. 10), and was filled with anxiety about them (iii. 5). On this account he had twice purposed to revisit them (ii. 17, f.), and had sent Timothy to them (iii. 1, ff.). In their depressed condition they needed strengthening (iii. 2, f., 13; cf. ii. 14) and further improvement (iii. 10). The accounts brought by Timothy were quieting; the community was firm in faith and active in its love (iii. 6–9, iv. 10).⁵³

De Wette, however, imposes a situation with rationales and emotions of Paul onto the text. His orientation, however, on the “lived” situation of

⁵² See W.M.L. de Wette, *An Historico-Critical Introduction to the Canonical Books of the New Testament*, trans. Frederick Frothingham (Boston: Crosby, Nichols, & Co., 1858), 242–43.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 243.

“Paul” and “the Thessalonian community” serves to bring history to life. De Wette’s assessment is overconfident; he is unable to know Paul’s thoughts and feelings. Moreover, with the letter as his sole source, his interpretation is insufficiently supported.

De Wette likewise emphasizes biographical details, another aspect of Spinoza’s criterion iii. He includes a rather lengthy chronology of key events in Paul’s life,⁵⁴ including discussions of his youth, his ethnic, religious, and educational background; his missionary journeys; his imprisonment in Rome and martyrdom.⁵⁵ Evidence of Paul’s life, however, derives only from internal sources, the book of Acts and Pauline letters.⁵⁶

For his determination of a Pauline letter’s genuineness/authenticity – a section found at the end of the discussion of each letter – de Wette relies, like Evanson, on the confirmation of early “Christian” authors along with his own assessments. Regarding the authenticity of 1 and 2 Thessalonians, he comments that because Clement of Alexandria, Irenaeus, and Tertullian quote the letters, they “belong to the universally accepted writings.”⁵⁷ De Wette also engages then-current scholarly challenges to claims of authenticity,⁵⁸ and perfunctorily refutes those that do not conform to his own assessments of authenticity. For instance, regarding the critique that 1 Thess 2:14–16 could not be Pauline due to its attack on Jews or that the letter’s conclusion provides an indication that it was written after the destruction of Jerusalem, de Wette summarily responds that the critiques are subjective in nature.⁵⁹ As is the case during this period, scholars are not in universal agreement on the question of Pauline authenticity. In contrast to Evanson, de Wette reasons that 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Romans, and Colossians are authentically Pauline, while Ephesians, Hebrews, and the Pastorals (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus) are not.

The shift in orientation between the earliest witnesses of the letters and the Enlightenment scholar de Wette is stunningly dramatic. There is a

⁵⁴ Ibid., 229–30. ⁵⁵ Ibid., 231–39.

⁵⁶ For the account of Paul’s martyrdom, de Wette turns to Eusebius (*Hist. eccl.* 2.25).

⁵⁷ See de Wette, *Historico-Critical Introduction*, 246.

⁵⁸ De Wette can also cast aside church tradition when contemporaneous scholarship calls Pauline authorship into question. For instance, with regard to the Pastorals, de Wette sides with Schleiermacher, who doubted 1 Timothy. And he agrees with other contemporary scholars, such as J.G. Eichhorn, F.C. Baur, T. Mayerhoff, H. Reuter Dahl, and A. Schwegler who rejected Pauline authorship of the Pastorals. See de Wette, *Historico-Critical Introduction*, 298–303.

⁵⁹ See Baird, *From Deism to Tübingen*, 224–26.

distinct conceptual change in orientation from theological/philosophical considerations to historical and contextually social. With Spinoza's call to accept nothing as authoritatively scriptural except for what can be confirmed as historical, de Wette and others analyze Pauline letters through a nearly exclusive socio-historical lens. Yet, as indicated, de Wette constructs his own history, one which is likewise based only on NT documents and his own assumptions of the situation. While his regional descriptions bring ancient territorial issues into consideration of the letter's analysis, regional life plays virtually no role in any of the letters. Instead, regional discussions serve rhetorically to orient readers on lived realia. De Wette provides no evidence other than Acts and the letters themselves of Paul or the communities actual presence in the specified regions. The issue of Pauline authorship of the letters likewise presents as an important element of consideration for de Wette, as it was for Evanson. Yet their methods for determining authenticity lack methodological rigor. The imprint of divine authority or citations by early "Christian" authors hardly qualify as sufficient, at least, not by today's standards.

Ferdinand Christian Baur

While scholars such as Evanson and de Wette represent a shift in the understanding of the Pauline letters from authoritative teachings to that of historically relevant documents, Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792–1860) – described as “the most important NT scholar of his time”⁶⁰ and as one of “the most resolute advocates of the development of historical-critical research in the nineteenth century”⁶¹ – significantly advanced and seemingly entrenched the understanding of Pauline letters as historically reliable. Baur was highly driven to unearth the origins of the early church, having remarked that the critical and historical investigation of early Christianity is “the great problem of our time” and one that “can only arise from the deepest centre of a universal interest and

⁶⁰ Baird, *From Deism to Tübingen*, 258.

⁶¹ Martin Bauspiess, Christof Landmesser, and David Lincicum, eds., *Ferdinand Christian Baur and the History of Early Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), vii. See also Benjamin White who refers to Baur as the “first historical-critical systematician of early Christianity” in Benjamin L. White, *Remembering Paul: Ancient and Modern Contests over the Image of the Apostle* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 21.

feeling.”⁶² His work was in part so widely influential – having import into the present time⁶³ – because he combined his analysis with an overarching thesis regarding Christian origins, with the latter serving as a conceptual hook.⁶⁴ In Baur’s estimation, Christianity came into being by means of a fundamental break from Judaism.

Baur considered Paul as Christianity’s hero, remarking, “Everything which Christianity possessed or was likely to attain in respect to its essential distinction from Judaism had been first brought to historical reality by the Apostle Paul, and still entirely depended on his personal influence.”⁶⁵ As Christianity’s chief promoter, Paul worked to establish a religion shorn of the negative influence of Judaism. Baur’s high estimation of Paul helps to account for how he could interpret Pauline letters as historically reliable, even as he discounted nearly every other book of the NT from that status.

In Baur’s estimation, Paul gives voice to what he considered was a strategic rift between Judaism and Christianity, a conflict between a Pauline (non-Jewish) party and a Petrine (Jewish-Christian or Judaizer) party (1 Cor 1:11–12).⁶⁶ Zetterholm elaborates, “To Baur, it seemed

⁶² F.C. Baur, *Paul the Apostle of Jesus Christ*, trans. A. Menzies (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 1.1.

⁶³ See Gerdmar, *Roots of Theological Anti-Semitism*, 97; J.C. O’Neill, *The Bible’s Authority: A Portrait Gallery of Thinkers from Lessing to Bultmann* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), 125.

⁶⁴ Baur’s theory of Christian origins is said to have been derived from his reading of a fanciful Christian romance, the Clementine Homilies. On this see, George Salmon and Von H.J. Holtzmann, “A Historical Introduction to the Study of the Books of the New Testament,” *The Quarterly Review* 163, no. 326 (1886): 474.

⁶⁵ Baur, *Paul the Apostle of Jesus Christ*, 1.263. Elsewhere Baur writes of Paul, “The absolute importance which the person of Christ has for the apostle [Paul] is the absoluteness of the Christian principle itself; the apostle feels that in his conception of the person of Christ, he stands on a platform where he is infinitely above Judaism, where he has passed far beyond all that is merely relative, limited, and finite in the Jewish religion, and has risen to the absolute religion” (ibid., 2.126).

⁶⁶ Baur’s thesis is like that of J.S. Semler’s two-party model underlying early Christianity (*Paraphrasis epistolae ad Galatas cum Prolegomenis*, 1772). On this, see O’Neill, *The Bible’s Authority*, 122.

Baur worked out his historical reconstruction in an 1831 article, “Die Christuspartei in der korinthischen Gemeinde, der Gegensatz der petrinischen und paulinischen Christenthus in der alten Kirche, der Apostel Petrus in Rom,” (The Christ Party in the Corinthian Community, the Opposition of Pauline and Petrine Christianity in the earliest Church, and Apostle Peter in Rome).

For summations of the influence of 1 Cor 1:11–12 on Baur’s historical constructions, see Baird, *From Deism to Tübingen*, 261; Magnus Zetterholm, *Approaches to Paul* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 37–38; O’Neill, *The Bible’s Authority*, 121–23.

clear that the text revealed a basic antagonism between a Pauline, universal type of Christianity, for which the Torah had had its day, and a Jewish-oriented, particularistic type of Christianity, still bound by the Torah.”⁶⁷

Yet Baur assessed only four Pauline letters (Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians and Romans) as historically reliable, as only these four, the “chief epistles” or *Hauptbriefe*, confirmed his theory of Christian origins.⁶⁸ According to him, other Pauline letters, such as 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon, and Philippians were likely from a later period.⁶⁹ Only the *Hauptbriefe* and Revelation belonged to the earliest stratum of Christian history.⁷⁰ In Galatians, the chronologically first letter⁷¹ and foundational for Baur’s historical reconstruction,⁷² Paul first encounters his opponents and begins his struggle for Christianity against the influence of Judaism.⁷³ In 1 and 2 Corinthians, Paul defends his apostolic authority,⁷⁴ and in Romans, he advances his entire system of thought.⁷⁵ According to Baur, Paul’s chief aim in Romans is to “confute the Jewish exclusiveness so thoroughly and radically that he [Paul] fairly stands in advance of the consciousness of the time.”⁷⁶ Baur was convinced of the authenticity of the *Hauptbriefe*. He remarks, “There has never been the slightest suspicion of unauthenticity cast on these four Epistles, on the contrary, they bear, in themselves so incontestably the character of Pauline originality, that it is not possible for critical doubt to be exercised upon them with any show of reason.”⁷⁷ Baur, however, never fully defines “Pauline originality,” a criterion also used in the determination of Pauline authenticity in the scholarship that succeeds him (see the subsection “Post-Baur Scholarship”).

Baur’s analysis, however, contained a fatal methodological flaw. He deployed circular reasoning.⁷⁸ That is, “NT documents [the *Hauptbriefe*] are used to reconstruct early Christian history; the reconstruction of early Christian history provides the framework for the

⁶⁷ Zetterholm, *Approaches to Paul*, 37–38. ⁶⁸ On this, see *ibid.*, 38.

⁶⁹ See Baur, *Paul the Apostle of Jesus Christ*, 1.256. ⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 266.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 1.266–67. ⁷² *Ibid.*, 1.267.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 1.263, 1.66. In Galatians, “the Apostle perceives that he is absolutely obliged to give an account of how he was summoned to his apostolic office, and he speaks of it in such a manner as he could not have done, if he had ever before come in contact with these opponents in the same way” (*ibid.*, 1.266).

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.281, *passim*. ⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.321, *passim*. ⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.356–57.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.256.

⁷⁸ The outcome of his constructions is “entirely dependent on the fundamental assumptions upon which it is based.” See Zetterholm, *Approaches to Paul*, 39.

assessment of NT documents [the *Hauptbriefe*].”⁷⁹ Otherwise put, Baur posits a great rift between Judaism and Christianity from reading the *Hauptbriefe*, and then relies on those same letters to confirm his historical reconstruction.

Baur otherwise forced the Corinthian text to confirm his theory. As mentioned, the linchpin of Baur’s theory is 1 Cor 1:11–12:

1:11 For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters (ἀδελφοί).

1:12 What I mean is that each of you says, “I belong to Paul,” or “I belong to Apollos,” or “I belong to Cephas,” or “I belong to Christ.” (NRSV)

Verse 12, however, indicates not *two* main parties or factions as Baur envisioned them to be, but instead four (Paul, Apollos, Cephas, and Christ).⁸⁰ To obtain two factions from the four named individuals, Baur twice combines two of the named persons into a single group. As Baur saw it, there was the Pauline party (comprising Paul and Apollos) and the Petrine party (comprising Cephas and Christ). Baur remarks, “There is no doubt that the Gentile-Christian part of the church preferably joined Paul and Apollos, whereas to such people who had been true to Judaism even as Christians, the name of Peter [Cephas] was at the centre of a closer group.”⁸¹ By narrowing the factions to two, he obtains a binary opposition, two camps, which for him represent Judaism and Christianity. His reading, however, is subjective and forced.

Traditional Christian theology – itself derived from anti-Jewish readings of Pauline letters – and societal and political events of his time influenced and seemingly confirmed Baur’s analysis. Baur’s theory derives from a strongly pro-Christian bias. According to him, Christianity was a superior religious manifestation, superior specifically to Judaism. The latter was legislation-bound and thereby not free. He remarks, Christianity is an “absolute religion, the religion of the spirit and of freedom, with regard to which Judaism must be looked at from an inferior standpoint, from which it must be classed with Heathenism.”⁸²

⁷⁹ See Baird, *From Deism to Tübingen*, 262.

⁸⁰ On this, see also Gerdmar, *Roots of Theological Anti-Semitism*, 106.

⁸¹ Cited in *ibid.*, 105.

⁸² Baur, *Paul the Apostle of Jesus Christ*, 1.265. “Das Christenthum ist die absolute Religion, die Religion des Geistes und der Freiheit, welcher gegenüber auch das Judenthum nur demjenigen untergeordneten Standpunkt angehört, auf welchem es zugleich mit dem Heidenthum.” F.C. Baur, *Paulus, der Apostel Jesu Christi: Sein Leben*

Moreover, Baur's theory was not only positivistic (having unwarranted faith that narrations of the past can yield objective history),⁸³ but also highly influenced by a then-dominant Augustinian-Lutheran theology.⁸⁴ As I describe in Chapter 4, the Augustinian-Lutheran perspective recognizes a strong distinction between faith in Christ and Jewish law observance and argues that salvation is unavailable through the latter. By reading Pauline letters through a theological lens, Baur mistakes theology for history.

Nineteenth-century sociopolitical⁸⁵ anti-Judaism⁸⁶ coupled with German idealism⁸⁷ likewise played large roles in Baur's construction of early Christianity. German greatness/nationalism was in the political wind during Baur's time, one that was likewise understood as a form of universalism.⁸⁸ Judaism – recognized as representative of particularism – was considered a social and political threat to German greatness.⁸⁹ Added to these influences, Hegelian philosophy⁹⁰ played a role in Baur's understanding of history. Hegel viewed history as an ongoing process of higher and higher stages of progress.⁹¹ As Gerdmar explains, "History consists

und Wirken, seine Briefe und seine Lehre, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (Leipzig: Fues's Verlag, 1866), 285.

⁸³ Benjamin White similarly locates Baur's historiographical method in nineteenth-century positivism. See White, *Remembering Paul*, 25.

⁸⁴ That Baur found Paul to espouse the Lutheran notion of justification by faith, see Baird, *From Deism to Tübingen*, 265. For an explanation of the Augustinian-Lutheran perspective, see Zetterholm, *Approaches to Paul*, 58–63.

⁸⁵ Baur supported the then-radical constitution of Württemberg, which was founded on national liberalism and opposed to "existing particularism." See Gerdmar, *Roots of Theological Anti-Semitism*, 114–15.

⁸⁶ As O'Neill notes, Baur's thesis aligned well with the anti-Jewish sentiments of his era. See O'Neill, *The Bible's Authority*, 125.

⁸⁷ See Zetterholm, *Approaches to Paul*, 63.

⁸⁸ After the rule of Emperor Franz II, the united Germany of 1806 broke into independent states. Universalism during Baur's time meant German unification into one political nation. Baur, like de Wette, was a supporter of the unification model for Germany. See Gerdmar, *Roots of Theological Anti-Semitism*, 114–15.

⁸⁹ Gerdmar remarks, "German Jews as a particularistic entity, paralleled by postexilic Judaism, threatened to disturb the universalistic-nationalistic project, the search for national unity and cultural cohesion, with which the liberals identified themselves." See Gerdmar, *Roots of Theological Anti-Semitism*, 115.

⁹⁰ For Hegel's influence on Baur, see also Zetterholm, *Approaches to Paul*, 40. According to Zetterholm, Baur understood Judaism as an earlier inferior world form, an antithesis. For the widespread acceptance of Hegelian philosophy at the time of Baur, resulting in the initial acceptance of Baur's thesis, see Richard John Knowling, *The Witness of the Epistles* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1892), 135; Zetterholm, *Approaches to Paul*, 33–35.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 34.

of antipodes and intermediaries, and the interplay or antagonism between these adds momentum.”⁹² Baur assessed Judaism as the primary antipode of Christianity; it represented superstition out of which sprang a new and higher form.⁹³

Baur’s strong and exclusive preference for the *Hauptbriefe* as historically reliable⁹⁴ had ramifications for later interpretations of the book of Acts. He comments, “The comparison of both these sources [the book of Acts and the *Hauptbriefe*] must lead to the conclusion that, considering the great difference between the two . . . , historical truth can only belong to one of them.”⁹⁵ Because Acts minimized the conflict of central significance between Peter and Paul that lay at the heart of Baur’s thesis, and reduced Paul’s dominance over Peter, Baur opted to consider the *Hauptbriefe* as historically reliable, and not Acts.⁹⁶ Baur’s assessment of Acts has played a role in its subsequent determination as being historically unreliable.⁹⁷ Indeed, since Baur,

⁹² Gerdmar, *Roots of Theological Anti-Semitism*, III. ⁹³ Ibid., III–12.

⁹⁴ Baur comments, “For the history of the Apostolic Age the Pauline Epistles take precedence over all the other New Testament writings, as an authentic source.” Baur, *Paul the Apostle of Jesus Christ*, I.5.

⁹⁵ Ibid. Baur returns to this issue throughout his book on Paul. He likewise begins his book with this issue, see *ibid.*, I.1–14.

Baur was not the only scholar to see the discrepancies between the Pauline letters and the book of Acts. Schleiermacher, for example, had problems reconciling Acts with Galatians. See Baird, *From Deism to Tübingen*, 213.

⁹⁶ Baur notes that Acts depicts Paul participating in Jewish practices and taking second place to Peter. Acts fails to discuss the highly significant episode of Paul’s rebuke of Peter at Antioch (Gal 2:11–14). See Baur, *Paul the Apostle of Jesus Christ*, I.6–7. According to Baur, Acts has unmistakable apologetic aims (*ibid.*, I.8, *passim*).

Yet Baur’s negative estimation of the historical reliability of Acts does not prevent him from deploying Acts for Pauline chronology. Baur details Paul’s various life events, including his before-conversion status (Acts 3:5); the impact of Stephen (Acts 6–7); his conversion (Acts 9, 22, 26); his first missionary journey (Acts 13–14); his interactions with apostles in Jerusalem (Acts 15, Galatians 2); his second missionary journey (Acts 16); his travels to Athens, Corinth, and Ephesus (Acts 18–20); his arrest in Jerusalem (Acts 21); and his journey to Rome (Acts 27–28). See Baur, *Paul the Apostle of Jesus Christ*, vii–viii, I.15–252.

⁹⁷ Yet some nineteenth-century scholars disagreed with the negative estimation of the book of Acts. R. Steck, for example, argued that while not entirely reliable, Acts was nevertheless more trustworthy than the *Hauptbriefe*. See his 1888 study of Galatians (*Der Galaterbrief*). Yet recent scholarship follows on Baur’s estimation. See especially Smith and Tyson, *Acts and Christian Beginnings*; Richard I. Pervo, *Dating Acts: Between the Evangelists and the Apologists* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 2006).

Pauline chronologies⁹⁸ are drawn nearly exclusively from the seven “authentic” Pauline letters, without reference to Acts.

Post-Baur Scholarship

Baur’s thesis that only four Pauline letters were authentic and historically reliable was met with significant scholarly backlash.⁹⁹ Post-Baur scholars felt that more Pauline letters than the *Hauptbriefe* should be deemed authentic and historically reliable. Describing the situation as a perceived problem, Richard Knowling comments that the reduction in the number of reliable sources to only four letters was insufficient for a historical rendering of early Christianity:

Every student of Apologetic Theology in England is aware how much stress has been recently laid upon what is called “the argument from the Pauline Epistles” for the historical basis of the life of Jesus. This argument has been confined, for the most part, to those four Epistles [the *Hauptbriefe*] which are regarded as practically undisputed, but the course of modern criticism increasingly justifies us in adding to the number at least three others, 1 Thessalonians, Philippians, and Philemon, and, in part, the Epistle to the Colossians.¹⁰⁰

While post-Baur scholars evaluated additional Pauline letters as authentic and historically reliable, with overall assessments that differed from one another, their criteria and methods of analysis were no more critical or rigorous than Baur’s. Indeed, in many cases they relied on Baur’s poorly substantiated and inadequately derived thesis concerning Paul’s opposition to Judaism to justify the inclusion of additional letters as historically reliable.

To set the stage, scholars who weighed in on the authenticity of Pauline letters had a very high regard for Paul. Their high esteem for him clearly influenced their acceptance of additional letters as authentic and historically reliable. Accepting the *Hauptbriefe* along with 1 and 2 Thessalonians,

⁹⁸ See John Knox, *Chapters in the Life of Paul* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1950); Joseph B. Tyson, “Paul’s Opponents in Galatia,” *Novem Testamentum* 10 (1968): 243; Robert Jewett, *A Chronology of Paul’s Life* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979); Douglas A. Campbell, “An Anchor for Pauline Chronology: Paul’s Flight from ‘The Ethnarch of King Aretas’” (2 Corinthians 11:32–33),” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 121, no. 2 (2002): 279–302.

⁹⁹ For a good survey of post-Baur assessments of Pauline letters, see Knowling, *The Witness of the Epistles*. For a broad overview of some of their underlying theses, see Salmon and Holtzmann, “Historical Introduction,” 477–82.

¹⁰⁰ Knowling, *The Witness of the Epistles*, 6.

Philippians, and Philemon (eight letters in all) as authentic and historically reliable,¹⁰¹ the nineteenth-century scholar Georg H. Ewald considered that Paul reigned above other authors in his ability to communicate truth with such clarity and certainty (*solcher klarheit und sicherheit*).¹⁰² According to Ewald, Paul had a unique spirit (*einzigartigen geistes*);¹⁰³ and his letters “radiate confidence, grace, and beauty” (*zuversicht ja anmuth und schönheit zu strah len*).¹⁰⁴ He comments that never before have epistles emerged from a time of great tribulation, from an author’s deep pain and suffering, and yet contain “such health, cheerfulness, and strength” (*eine solche gesundheit heiterkeit und kraft*).¹⁰⁵ Similar sentiments regarding Paul and the Pauline letters are found in the work of Bernhard Weiss, who accepted thirteen Pauline letters (exclusive of Hebrews) as authentic.¹⁰⁶ According to Weiss, a “lively warmth” (*lebensvolle Wärme*) “pulsates in all his [Paul’s] letters” (*in allen seinen Briefen pulsirt*); the letters are themselves “gripping” (*ergreift*).¹⁰⁷ Eduard Reuss – who deemed the *Hauptbriefe* plus 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Philippians, Colossians, Ephesians, and Philemon as authentic – remarks of Philemon that it reflects “the expression of a beautiful understanding of Christian duty and a witty and amiable sense of humor.”¹⁰⁸ Carl Weizsäcker – who in 1861 acquired Baur’s chair in church history at Tübingen – notes that it was only possible for Paul to express himself in “full vitality of his inner life and to give of his whole person at every moment.”¹⁰⁹ Their high estimation of Paul clearly prejudices their acceptance of letters as authentic and historically reliable.

One factor these scholars considered to determine authenticity and historical reliability was a letter’s ability to either confirm or not entirely conflict with Baur’s theory of Christian origins. Thus, Adolf

¹⁰¹ See Knowling, *The Witness of the Epistles*, 7, n. 3.

¹⁰² Georg Heinrich Ewald, *Die Sendschreiben des Apostels Paulus* (Göttingen: Dieterichschen Buchhandlung, 1857), 1.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 2, 4. ¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 1. ¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁰⁶ See D. Bernhard Weiss, *Lehrbuch der Einleitung in das Neue Testament* (Berlin: Verlag von Wilhelm Hertz, 1897), 150.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 153.

¹⁰⁸ “Ausdruck eines schönen Verständnisses der christlichen Pflicht und eines geistreichen und lebenswürdigen Humors.” Eduard Reuss, *Die Geschichte der heiligen Schriften Neuen Testaments* (Braunschweig: C.A. Schwetschke und Sohn, 1874), 116.

¹⁰⁹ “Der vollen Lebendigkeit seines Innern auszusprechen, und in jedem Augenblicke seine ganze Person zu geben.” von Carl Heinrich Weizsäcker, *Das Apostolische Zeitalter der christlichen Kirche* (Freiburg: Mohr [P. Siebeck], 1892), 190. Weizsäcker assessed that the *Hauptbriefe* plus 1 Thessalonians, Philippians, and Philemon were authentically Pauline and historically reliable (*ibid.*, 185).

Hilgenfeld¹¹⁰ – whose analysis resulted in the current consensus of seven authentic Pauline letters – comments that the contrast between “legal Jewish-Christianity and a law-free Paulinism will prove to be the historical background of the most important epistles of Paul.”¹¹¹ In a comment that echoes the sentiments of Baur, Hilgenfeld remarks that Paul wrote from an “inner struggle” and fought against an “intolerant Jewish Christianity” (*unduldsames Judenchristenthum*).¹¹² He considered Philippians authentic, as it, like the *Hauptbriefe*, indicates Paul’s struggle with Jewish Christianity.¹¹³ To accept letters in which Baur’s theory of opposition was not readily apparent, scholars made allowances, arguing that Paul’s principal theology emerged over time. Thus, Weiss remarks that Paul only gradually came to the view of freedom from the law for Gentile-Christian congregations. According to him, it is a great error to assess only the *Hauptbriefe* as authentic, letters like 1 Thessalonians and Philippians show that the main principle is there but developing.¹¹⁴ Similarly, James Martineau – who accepts the *Hauptbriefe* as well as 1 Thessalonians and Philippians – assesses that the six letters should be taken together as authentic, as they indicate a strong “personal unity” and a “growing mind.”¹¹⁵

A second factor they considered to determine authenticity and historical reliability was Pauline style. Yet this category was not at all well defined and was greatly influenced by their high regard for Paul. Thus, Auguste Sabatier assessed that a sign of the letters’ authenticity was their “indelible imprint” (*empreinte ineffaçable*) of Paul, a highly imprecise description of Pauline style but one that well characterizes the analysis of many other post-Baur scholars who weighed this question.¹¹⁶ Equally imprecise and meaningless was Hilgenfeld’s notion of Pauline style. Regarding 1 Thessalonians, he remarks that the whole of it reflects

¹¹⁰ Hilgenfeld (1823–1907) was characterized as “the brightest star in the Tübingen galaxy.” See Baird, *From Deism to Tübingen*, 273. For a similar estimation, see Knowling, *The Witness of the Epistles*, 5. While Hilgenfeld never set foot in Tübingen, he was very much taken with the perspectives of the school.

¹¹¹ “Dieser Gegensatz eines mehr oder weniger gesetzlichen Judenchristenthums und des gesetzessfreien Paulinismus wird sich als der geschichtliche Hintergrund der bedeutendsten Briefe des Paulus.” Adolf Hilgenfeld, *Historisch-kritische Einleitung in das Neue Testament* (Leipzig: L.F. Fues, 1875), 213.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 214.

¹¹³ See Hilgenfeld, *Historisch-kritische Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, 334.

¹¹⁴ See Weiss, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, 154.

¹¹⁵ James Martineau, *The Seat of Authority in Religion* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1891), 180.

¹¹⁶ See Auguste Sabatier, *L’Apôtre Paul: Esquisse d’une Historire de sa Pensée* (Paris: G. Fischbacher, 1881), 203.

Pauline language.¹¹⁷ According to Ernest Renan, the style of 1 and 2 Thessalonians and Philippians “possess[es] a character of authenticity which overcomes every other consideration.”¹¹⁸ Pauline style was also thought to contain a tone of sincerity. Of Colossians, Renan remarks, “[F]or few pages have a tone of such decided sincerity; Paul alone, as far as it appears, was able to write this little masterpiece.”¹¹⁹ In a similar regard, Hilgenfeld comments that the entirety of Philemon “bears the stamp of simple truth.”¹²⁰ Hilgenfeld assessed Philemon (vv. 11, 20) authentic on account of its puns (*Wortspielen*).¹²¹ And, according to him, Philippians was Pauline because in it one finds his swan song (*Schwanengesang*).¹²² As is indicated in the examples, scholars assessed Pauline style subjectively, according to what they thought it was and according to their particular preferences. Their determinations are likewise drawn only by reference to the letters themselves. Whether or not statements were sincere is, of course, a matter of authorial intent, something that is unknown to later readers. Moreover, similarities of style and language across letters do not provide evidence of the Apostle Paul as author.

A third factor scholars turned to for their determination of Pauline authenticity and historical reliability was a letter’s external testimony in early “Christian” authors. Clement of Rome’s knowledge of 1 Corinthians provides Martineau sufficient evidence to deem six Pauline letters authentic. He comments that Clement’s testimony “permits us to expect, and, being unopposed, suffices to assure us, that, in the first group of writings, we are really in contact with the primitive expression of the new faith.”¹²³ Yet these later citations, as mentioned, do not provide evidence of authenticity or historical reliability.

¹¹⁷ “In dem ganzen Briefe erkennt man die Sprache des Paulus. Es ist kein Grund vorhanden, denselben dem Paulus abzusprechen.” (Paul’s language can be seen throughout the letter. There is no reason to deny the same [Pauline authenticity].) In justifying his assessment, Hilgenfeld remarks that 1 Thessalonians is “ein liebenswürdiges Denkmal väterlicher Fürsorge des Apostels für eine junge Christengemeinde.” (The letter is a loving monument of the apostle’s fatherly care for a young Christian community.) See Hilgenfeld, *Historisch-kritische Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, 246–47.

¹¹⁸ Ernest Renan, *Saint Paul*, trans. Ingersoll Lockwood (New York: G.W. Carleton, Publisher, 1888), 13.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹²⁰ “Der ganze Brief trägt das Gepräge der einfachen Wahrheit.” Hilgenfeld, *Historisch-kritische Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, 331.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² “Die Aechtheit des Philipperbriefs ist also nicht wirklich widerlegt worden. In diesem Briefe haben wir den Schwanengesang des Paulus.” (The authenticity of Philippians has not really been refuted. In this letter we have Paul’s swan song.) *Ibid.*, 347.

¹²³ Martineau, *The Seat of Authority in Religion*, 180.

A fourth factor these scholars adopted to determine Pauline authenticity and historical reliability was – like Evanson and de Wette – agreement with Acts. Even as Baur rejected the historical reliability of Acts, post-Baur scholars returned to it to corroborate “facts” in Pauline letters. Thus, Hilgenfeld assessed 1 Thessalonians and Philippians historically reliable due to confirmation of Paul’s journeys into those regions as found in Acts.¹²⁴ For his part, Renan argued that the Pastorals cannot be Pauline as they posit a chronology of the life of Paul that differs from Acts.¹²⁵ Hilgenfeld and Weizsäcker concluded that the *Hauptbriefe* along with 1 Thessalonians, Philippians, and Philemon (seven letters in all) were authentic and historically reliable. Their assessments brought the field to its modern-day consensus.

In sum, the Enlightenment brought an important difference in the determination of the *value* of Pauline letters. Being scripturally authoritative alone no longer qualified as valuable: for biblical literature to be credible and worthy, it needed to be historically reliable. Again, Spinoza’s adage was “to accept nothing as an authoritative Scriptural statement which we do not perceive very clearly when we examine it in the light of its history.”¹²⁶ Yet, as already indicated, the determination of historical reliability was forced: discussions of place/regions are insufficient as evidence of a letter’s historicity; Paul’s discussions and activities drawn exclusively from the letters and/or Acts do not in themselves indicate historical reliability; and enchantment with Pauline turns of phrase and particular dictums are not guarantees of Pauline authorship.

De Wette rendered his analyses of Pauline letters using a fixed pattern prefigured to emphasize social and geohistorical details. He began with the assumption of a letter’s authenticity and historical reliability and then simply placed the Apostle in the region specified by the letter. With the aid of Acts, he described Paul’s movements and behaviors vis-à-vis the targeted community within the specified region. By emphasizing social and geographic events over theological-ideological content, he rendered – but without the needed and critical verification – a view of Paul, his community, and by association the letter itself, as historical and genuine.

As indicated, Baur’s determination of the *Hauptbriefe* as authentic and historically reliable, lacked methodological rigor at every turn. Deploying circular reasoning, he simply made the *Hauptbriefe* support his predetermined assessment of early Christian history. To increase the number of

¹²⁴ See Hilgenfeld, *Historisch-kritische Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, 236–37, 332.

¹²⁵ Renan, *Saint Paul*, 21–29.

¹²⁶ Cited in O’Neill, *The Recovery of Paul’s Letter to the Galatians*, 1.

authentic letters beyond the *Hauptbriefe*, post-Baur scholars adopted methodologies no more rigorous than their predecessor. Their high regard for Paul and his letters underlies their determinations of authenticity. They likewise advanced Baur's uncritically developed theory of Christian origins, applying it as a criterion of authenticity for additional letters. While they cite style as a determining factor of authenticity, they posit no credible definition of it.

PAULINE LETTERS AS GENUINE CORRESPONDENCE

In addition to the Enlightenment injunction and subsequent scholarly impetus to interpret biblical texts as historical sources, there was another and near-concurrent movement to confirm Pauline letters as genuine correspondence. The highly prolific¹²⁷ German theologian and philologist Gustav Adolf Deissmann (1866–1937)¹²⁸ was in large measure responsible for initiating this orientation to Pauline letters. Following on Deissmann – and working under the assumption that the “authentic” Pauline letters were genuine correspondence – post-Deissmann scholars advanced the genuine-correspondence perspective through their studies of letter form, style, function, and type. Many of these studies sought to align Pauline letters with contemporaneous and seen-as-actual Greco-Roman correspondence.

In his 1895 *Bibelstudien* (*Bible Studies*)¹²⁹ and 1908 *Licht vom Osten* (*Light from the Ancient East*, ET: 1927),¹³⁰ Deissmann undertook extensive comparative and philological studies in support of his perspective that Pauline letters were “real” letters, namely, genuine correspondence, and not “literary.” Like F.C. Baur, Deissmann's evaluation of Pauline letters was greatly influenced by his understanding of earliest Christianity, and he interpreted the letters to reflect his reading of that history. Even as

¹²⁷ For an extensive review of Deissmann's large body of work, his various theories, and an extensive bibliography of his writings, see Albrecht Gerber, *Deissmann the Philologist* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010).

¹²⁸ A non-exhaustive list of his publications comprises approximately 175 entries. For details on these publications, see *ibid.*, 591–98.

¹²⁹ See Adolf Deissmann, *Bibelstudien. Beiträge, zumeist aus den Papyri und Inschriften, zur Geschichte der Sprache, des Schrifttums und der Religion des hellenistischen Judentums und der Urchristentums* (Marburg: N.G. Elwert, 1895).

¹³⁰ See Adolf Deissmann, *Licht vom Osten: Das Neue Testament und die neuentdeckten Texte der hellenistisch-römischen Welt* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1908); Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East: the New Testament Illustrated by Recently Discovered Texts of the Graeco-Roman World*, trans. Lionel R.M. Strachan (New York: George H. Doran, 1927).

subsequent scholarship soundly refuted all the primary arguments Deissmann employed to support his evaluation of Pauline letters, finding flaws in his methodology,¹³¹ current NT scholarship nonetheless continues to hold to his overall assessment that at least some letters, namely, the seven, are Paul's genuine correspondence.¹³²

Deissmann held to what can be called the "Big Bang" or miraculous conception of Christian origins: Christianity began with the spirit, not with writing.¹³³ In the beginning "there was only the "living word, – the gospel, but no gospels."¹³⁴ According to him, earliest Christianity, "Primitive Christianity" (*Urchristentum*), was shorn of doctrine and a product of the unlearned;¹³⁵ it was a lower-class development in opposition to high culture.¹³⁶

¹³¹ Summary analyses of Deissmann's understanding of NT letters are found in Stanley K. Stowers, *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1986), 17–20; Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 11–20; John L. White, *The Apostle of God: Paul and the Promise of Abraham* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), 73; Patricia A. Rosenmeyer, *Ancient Epistolary Fictions: The Letter in Greek Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 5–7; Paul M. Robertson, *Paul's Letters and Contemporary Greco-Roman Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 31–32.

¹³² For the ongoing influence of Deissmann, see Stowers, *Letter Writing*, 18. Paul Robertson notes that Deissmann's influence continues and is wider than scholars acknowledge. See Robertson, *Paul's Letters and Contemporary Greco-Roman Literature*, 31, n. 50.

¹³³ "Christianity... does not begin as a literary movement. Its creative period is non-literary." Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East: The New Testament Illustrated by Recently Discovered Texts of the Graeco-Roman World*, trans. Lionel R. M. Strachan (New York: George H. Doran, 1927), 245. He comments that "The age of the spirit had not passed away before the apostle Paul was at work" (*ibid.*, 250–51). Elsewhere, he remarks that the New Testament was "a product of the force that came unimpaired, and strengthened by the Divine Presence" (*ibid.*, 144).

¹³⁴ Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, 250. "Am Anfang war nicht das geschriebene Buch, sondern das lebendige Wort, waren nicht die Evangelien, sondern das Evangelium." Adolf Deissmann, *Licht vom Osten*, 212.

¹³⁵ "Wir versetzen das Neue Testament damit aus dem abendländischen Exil zurück in seine anatolische Heimat, und aus dem Bereich unserer modernen Kultur, die Hunderte von Lehrstühlen zur wissenschaftlichen Erklärung des kleinen Buches errichtet hat, zurück in die Schicht der Ungelehrten. Hören wir nun, was die Selbstzeugnisse der Heimat des Neuen Testaments seinen gelehrten Erforschern zu sagen haben" (*ibid.*, 47). "The New Testament is an exile here in the West, and we do well to restore it to its home in Anatolia. It is right to set it once more in the company of the unlearned, after it has made so long a stay amid the surroundings of modern culture. We have had hundreds of University chairs for the exact, scientific interpretation of the little Book – let us now listen while the homeland of the New Testament yields up its own authentic witness to the inquiring scholar." Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, 61.

¹³⁶ "Zur antiken Hochkultur stand das Urchristentum in einem natürlichen Gegensatz, niche erst als Christentum, sondern schon als Bewegung der Unterschichten."

To reiterate, Deissmann's interpretation of Pauline letters (*Briefe*) parallels his understanding of earliest Christianity. According to him, the Pauline letters are documents/writings, but just barely so. Creating a pun on the German for "document" (*Urkunde*), Deissmann hyphenates the word as "*Ur-Kunde*," altering its sense to "original tidings" or "pristine knowledge."¹³⁷ New Testament *Briefe* in their "nonliterary" form indicate an originating spirit,¹³⁸ a spontaneity and even naturalness¹³⁹ that lay at Christianity's origin.

Deissmann was not the first scholar to distinguish earliest Christianity by its compositional forms. Earlier, Franz Overbeck (1837–1905) argued that at its origin and until the mid-second century CE, Christianity produced *Urliteratur* (preliterature). By *Urliteratur* Overbeck meant a total correspondence between literary form and content and an immediacy and mutual recognition between writer and reader. With regard to *Urliteratur* Overbeck commented, "Here the written word, without intending as such to signify anything, is nothing but a completely artless and accidental surrogate for the spoken word."¹⁴⁰ It was because these early writings were considered as natural, without contrivances, that they could serve as factual and historical. Overbeck believed that *Urliteratur* developed out of *Urgeschichte* (prehistory), an era typified by "originality and intensity of religious experience."¹⁴¹ Once Christianity turned to literature – to the use of standard forms (c. mid-second century) – it became a literary movement that self-consciously exploited existing forms to interest its readers, and as a result became no longer reliable as

Deissmann, *Licht vom Osten*, 7. "Primitive Christianity stood in natural opposition to the high culture of the ancient world, not so much because it was Christianity, but because it was a movement of the lower classes." Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, 9.

"Die soziale Struktur des Urchristentums weist uns durchaus in die unteren und in die mittleren Schichten." Deissmann, *Licht vom Osten*, 6. "By its social structure Primitive Christianity points unequivocally to the lower and middle classes." Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, 7. According to Deissmann, earliest Christianity as a lower- and middle-class movement could easily be the theme of his entire book (*ibid.*, n. 1).

¹³⁷ Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, 241. "Die Paulusbriefe sind wirklich Ur-Kunde." Deissmann, *Licht vom Osten*, 205.

¹³⁸ The earliest compositions are "reflexes of souls" (*Reflexe von Seelen*). Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, 290.

¹³⁹ "What is natural is also beautiful, and does not cease to be beautiful until artificiality and pretence step in." Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, 72. According to Gerdmar, in contemporary nineteenth-century philosophy, the "original and natural" were highly regarded. See Gerdmar, *Roots of Theological Anti-Semitism*, 86.

¹⁴⁰ Cited in Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church*, 12.

¹⁴¹ Cited in William Baird, *History of New Testament Research*, vol. 2: *From Jonathan Edwards to Rudolf Bultmann* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 142.

history.¹⁴² Deissmann adopted Overbeck's romanticized and insufficiently theorized understanding of literature and of early Christianity and deployed it as a lens for interpreting Pauline letters.¹⁴³

Best known for his classification of NT letters into two distinct types, Deissmann, like Baur, organized the available data to make it conform to and confirm his historical reconstruction of early Christianity. According to him, a "real" (*wirklichen*) letter (*Brief*) was artless, personal, genuine, and historically reliable, while a "literary" letter (*Epistel*)¹⁴⁴ was carefully crafted, a work of art, and destined for a public audience. He remarks that an *Epistel*

is an artistic literary form [*literarische Kunstform*], a species of literature, just like the dialogue, the oration, or the drama. It has nothing in common with the letter except its form; apart from that one might venture the paradox that the epistle is the opposite of a real letter. The contents of an epistle are intended for publicity – they aim at interesting 'the public' [*Publikum*].¹⁴⁵

By contrast, a *Brief*

is something *non-literary* [*Unliterarisches*], a means of communication between persons who are separated from each other. Confidential [*intim*] and personal [*persönlich*]¹⁴⁶ in its nature, it is intended only for the person or persons to whom it is addressed, and not at all for the public [*Öffentlichkeit*] or any kind of publicity. A letter is *non-literary*, just as much as a lease or a will. There is no essential difference between a letter and an oral dialogue; it might be described as an anticipation of the modern conversation by telephone, and it has been not unfairly called a conversation halved [*halbierte Zwiesprache*].¹⁴⁷

¹⁴² See Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church*, 12–13; Baird, *From Jonathan Edwards to Rudolf Bultmann*, 142–43.

¹⁴³ Overbeck wrote the highly influential article, "Über die Anfänge der patristischen Literatur," *Historische Zeitschrift* 48 (1882): 417–72. Deissmann cites Overbeck favorably, referring to this article. See Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, 147.

¹⁴⁴ There is definitional merit in Deissmann's terminology. According to the Merriam-Webster, an epistle is "*especially* : a formal or elegant letter" (italics in original). Secondarily, it is "a composition in the form of a letter." www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/epistle

¹⁴⁵ Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, 229.

¹⁴⁶ Writing at about the same time as Deissmann, George Misch makes a similar comment with regard to Cicero's letters: "[W]e have before us a sort of intimate diary in which a famous man, a historic personality of the highest order, gives us a direct revelation of himself, free from all artificiality – an unusual thing in any man of antiquity." Georg Misch, *A History of Autobiography in Antiquity*, trans. Ernest Walter Dickes, 2 vols. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1950), 2.360. Yet we know that Cicero aimed to publish his letters. Misch's observation of a lack of artificiality in Cicero's letters simply does not hold.

¹⁴⁷ Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, 228; Deissmann, *Licht vom Osten*, 194. Emphasis added.

As nonliterary *Briefe*, Pauline letters were also historically reliable. Each Pauline letter was “a piece of life” (*Stück Leben*).¹⁴⁸ He comments,

the non-literary characteristics as letters are a guarantee of reliability, their positive documentary value for the history of the apostolic period of our religion, particularly the history of St Paul himself and his great vision.¹⁴⁹

By contrast, literary records are “insufficient to give him [the Christian historian] a reliable picture.”¹⁵⁰ Deissmann’s list of Pauline *Briefe* went beyond the “authentic seven” and comprised thirteen letters: Philemon (least in doubt as being an actual letter), Ephesians, Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Galatians, Colossians, Philippians,¹⁵¹ and the three Pastorals.¹⁵² By contrast, NT letters such as James, Peter, Jude, and Hebrews were literary epistles (*Episteln*),¹⁵³ and postdate earliest Christianity.

Deissmann set out to prove his theory of the naturalness and genuineness of the letters he deemed “real” and representative of *Urchristentum* in two related ways. In his *Bibelstudien* and elsewhere, he conducted detailed philological work¹⁵⁴ to refute the notion that biblical words were unique and thereby distinct from the then-common secular vocabulary, as

¹⁴⁸ Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, 230. Deissmann, *Licht vom Osten*, 195.

¹⁴⁹ Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, 241. “Die unliterarische Brieflichkeit garantiert uns ihre volle Zuverlässigkeit, ja ihren geradezu urkundlichen Charakter für die Geschichte des apostolischen Zeitalters unserer Religion, insbesondere für die Geschichte des Apostels Paulus selbst und seiner großen Mission.” Deissmann, *Licht vom Osten*, 205.

¹⁵⁰ Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, 283. ¹⁵¹ Ibid., 234–40.

¹⁵² Deissmann does not dwell on the Pastorals in *Licht*. He assumes that they are actual letters, remarking the “Ephesian theory” (that Paul wrote Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians, and Philippians from prison in Ephesus) opens possibilities for understanding the Pastorals as actual letters and as Pauline. See Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, 238. In his 1929 Haskell lectures he discusses the difficulties regarding Pauline authorship of the Pastorals, yet finds that they contain a significant amount of genuine Pauline material. On this, see Gerber, *Deissmann the Philologist*, 55, n. 200.

¹⁵³ Deissmann classifies them as epistles because they lack designated addressees and because the author recedes into the background. See Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, 242–43; Deissmann, *Licht vom Osten*, 206–7.

¹⁵⁴ According to Gerber, Deissmann “never aspired to be a classical philologist,” but managed to bridge the gap between philology and theology and become internationally recognized as “a pioneer in postclassical Greek philology.” Gerber, *Deissmann the Philologist*, 123.

In *Bibelstudien*, the second of two such studies, Deissmann investigates seventy-five words found in the Septuagint. See *ibid.*, 23–26.

Deissmann was not the first to take up this type of philological study. The first modern scholar to use inscriptions to elucidate parts of the NT was the German classicist and paleontologist Johann Ernst Immanuel Walch (1725–78), as detailed in his *Observationes in Matthaeum ex graecis inscriptionibus*. After Walch, two other scholars conducted philological studies, a Danish bishop, Friedrich Münter (1761–1830), and Joseph Barber Lightfoot (1828–89). See *ibid.*, 28.

found in “nonliterary” sources.¹⁵⁵ His assumption was that common language indicated a common or ordinary origination. And in *Licht vom Osten*, he extensively analyzed a recently discovered cache of Ancient Near Eastern largely everyday letters to argue that these ancient artefacts compared favorably in form, style, and language to Pauline letters.

The breadth of Deissmann’s philological study is impressive. He locates instances of many otherwise biblical- or ecclesiastical-only words among small papyri samples and inscriptions.¹⁵⁶ His study contributed to the notion that biblical language is not unique.¹⁵⁷

Yet Deissmann’s philological studies did little to advance his theory of Christianity’s pristine and primitive beginnings. For instance, he locates the Thayer classified biblical-only word βροχή (rain or moistening) in a lease among the Oxyrhynchus Papyri (n. 280,) dated to 88–89 CE,¹⁵⁸ and another biblical-only classified word πληροφωρέω (to fulfill) in several first- and second-century CE papyri.¹⁵⁹ Instances of these words in the papyri letters, however helpful for disabusing of the notion that biblical language is unique, do not in themselves indicate influence on NT compositions, nor do they of necessity suggest a low- or common-class social context for NT letters.

Deissmann likewise located several biblical-only words in upper-class contexts, in those he would otherwise classify as “literary” texts. Such findings compromise his thesis of a lower-class nonliterary setting for early Christianity. For example, he locates ἀλλογενής (of another race, a stranger, foreigner), found only in Luke 17:18, in a limestone block inscription from Herod’s temple in Jerusalem.¹⁶⁰ Its provenance and physical characteristics hardly indicate a common, lower-class milieu; the stone inscription itself is carefully crafted.¹⁶¹ Take also Deissmann’s investigation of ἐπισυναγωγή (a gathering), found in 2 Macc 2:7; 2 Thess

¹⁵⁵ Deissmann notes, “A supposed Biblical word can be traced in the Imperial period from one stage to another through the countries bordering on the Mediterranean: from Pergamum, Sardis, Ephesus, Hierapolis, by way of Oenoanda, Lycia, and Cilicia (St Paul), to Antioch, the Hauran, and the little country towns of Egypt.” Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, 91.

¹⁵⁶ For his philological study, he relied on wordlists in J.H. Thayer’s, *A Greek-English Lexicon to the New Testament* (1896), Hermann Cremer’s *Biblisch-theologisches Wörterbuch der Neutestamentlichen Gräcität* (1902), and Carl L. W. Grimm’s edition of Wilke’s *Clavis Novi Testamenti* (1879).

¹⁵⁷ Gerber remarks that Deissmann “dealt a major blow to the traditional argument that the Bible was written in some kind of special language.” Gerber, *Deissmann the Philologist*, 32.

¹⁵⁸ See Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, 81–82. ¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 86–87.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 79–80.

¹⁶¹ Translated by Strachan as follows, “Let no foreigner (ἀλλογενῆ) enter within the screen and enclosure surrounding the sanctuary. Whosoever is taken so doing will be the cause that death overtaketh him.” Ibid., 80.

2:1, and Heb 10:25, a word whose root συναγωγή (transliterated as “synagogue”) has considerable significance in NT studies. Deissmann locates an instance of this word in a Decree of Honor stele inscription (second century BCE),¹⁶² again, not among the lower-class nonliterary papyri of the ancient world.

In *Licht vom Osten* Deissmann looked at ancient letters written on papyri, ostraca, and stone of seemingly lower-class origination, examining them against Pauline letters for their comparability.¹⁶³ Yet here, too, these ancient artefacts made for poor comparanda against Pauline letters. In general, the ancient cache consisted of legal documents, “leases, bills and receipts, marriage-contracts, bills of divorce, wills, decrees issued by authority, denunciations, suings for the punishment of wrong-doers, minutes of judicial proceedings, and tax-papers.”¹⁶⁴ Their content was hardly comparable to Pauline letters. The letters range in date from the fourth century BCE to the seventh century CE, with provenances in Fayûm, Athens, Alexandria, Palestine, Thebes, and elsewhere. Some letters are clearly not from the lower classes and several date well beyond the second century,¹⁶⁵ such that they may have been influenced by Pauline letters, rather than the reverse.

An exemplar from Deissmann’s study is the oldest known extant Greek letter. From an Athenian to his housemates, the fourth century BCE *Letter from Mnesiergus* is inscribed on a lead tablet. The addressee is listed on the outside of the tablet and reads as follows:

Φέρειν ἰς τὸν κέραμ-	To be taken to the potter’s
ον τοῦ Χυτρίκον	working-house;
ἀποδόναι δὲ Ναυσίαί	to be delivered to Nausias
ἢ Θπασκυκλῆι ἢ θ’ ὕϊῶι.	or to Thrasycles or to his son. ¹⁶⁶

¹⁶² Ibid., 103–4.

¹⁶³ According to Deissmann, the value of these nonliterary texts is threefold: 1) they “teach us to put a right estimate *philologically* upon the New Testament and, with it, Primitive Christianity”; 2) “They point to the right *literary* appreciation of the New Testament”; 3) “They give us important information on points in the history of *religion* and *culture*, helping us to understand both the contact and contrast between Primitive Christianity and the ancient world.” Ibid., 10. Emphasis in translation.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 36.

¹⁶⁵ For example, he cites two Coptic ostrakon letters, one from three Egyptian candidates for the diaconate to their Bishop, and another from a Bishop in Egypt to his clergy, both dated to 600 CE. Ibid., 221–27.

¹⁶⁶ Translation is by Lionel R. M. Strachan; *ibid.*, 151.

On the inside resides the sender-name, greetings, and letter body.

Μνησίεργος	Mnesiergus
ἐπέστελε τοῖς οἴκοι	sendeth to them that are at his house
Χαίρειν καὶ ὑγιαίνειν	greeting and health
καὶ αὐτὸς οὕτως ἔφασκε [ἐ] [ἔχεν].	and he saith it is so with him.
στέγασμα εἴ τι Βόλεσσε	If ye be willing, send me some covering,
ἀποπέμψαι ἢ ὡς ἢ διφθέρας	either sheepskins or goatskins,
ὡς εὐτελεστά<τα>ς καὶ μὴ	as plain as ye have, and not broidered
σισυρωτάς	with fur,
καὶ κατύματα· τυχὸν ἀποδώσω.	and shoe-soles: upon occasion I will return them. ¹⁶⁷

From this sample ancient letter, Deissmann claims, without citing other supporting evidence, that letters originally had their addressee listed on the outside. Regarding the letter's content, Deissmann remarks that the request for a covering (στέγασμα) resonates with Paul's request for a cloak (φαιλόνην) in 2 Tim 4:13. Yet not only is the Greek word for cloak different, but the content, tone, and style of the fourth-century letter are not at all comparable to 2 Timothy or to any other Pauline letter.

Deissmann likewise assesses that a papyrus letter of consolation from Oxyrhynchus dated to the second century CE, in which an Egyptian upper-class woman named Irene writes to a family in mourning, compares favorably to Pauline letters on stylistic grounds. It reads,

Εἰρήνη Ταοννώφρει καὶ Φίλωνι εὐψυχεῖν.	Irene to Taonnophris and Philo,
οὕτως ἔλυπτήθην [καί] ἔκλαυσα ἐπὶ	good comfort.
[τῷ] εὐμοίρῳ,	I am so sorry and weep over
ὡς ἐπὶ Διδυμάτος ἔκλαυσα.	the departed one
καὶ πάντα ὅσα ἦν καθήκοντα	as I wept for Didymas.
ἐποίησα καὶ πάντες οἱ ἐμοί,	And all things, whatsoever were fitting,
Ἐπαφρόδειτος καὶ Θερμούθιον καὶ Φίλιον	I have done, and all mine,
καὶ Ἀπολλώνιος καὶ Πλαντᾶς.	Epaphroditus and Thermuthion
ἀλλ' ὅμως οὐδὲν δύναται τις πρὸς τὰ	and Philion
τοιαῦτα.	and Apollonius and Plantas.
παρηγορεῖτε οὖν ἑαυτοὺς.	But, nevertheless, against such things
εὖ πράττετε. Ἀθὺρ ἄ. ¹⁶⁸	one can do nothing.
	Therefore, comfort ye one another.
	Fare ye well. Athyr I. ¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁷ Ibid. ¹⁶⁸ In modern equivalence, the date is October 28. Ibid., 176.

¹⁶⁹ Translation is by Lionel R. M. Strachan; ibid., 176.

According to Deissmann, the writer “ponders over sentences to fill the sheet,” and that genuine feeling (*die wahre Empfindung*) is in evidence.¹⁷⁰ The letter ends with the expression, “Comfort ye one another” (παρηγορεῖτε οὖν ἑαυτοὺς), which Deissmann compares to a similar sentiment in the Pauline corpus (1 Thess 4:13, 17, 18). While 1 Thess 4:18 contains the phrase, “encourage one another” (παρακαλεῖτε ἀλλήλους), it is a poor lexical and content match to the expression Irene employed. Deissmann, too, is ill-positioned to determine the writer’s genuineness or lack thereof. And if the writer is “pondering” over sentences, she is hardly spontaneous, one of Deissmann’s criteria of a genuine letter. The letter likewise has an upper-class provenance,¹⁷¹ which makes it weak example of a letter from the lower classes. Like the *Letter from Mnesiergus*, in terms of its style and content, the *Letter of Irene* is a not a good comparison to Pauline letters.

Other examples include a letter in the form of a receipt addressed to King Ptolemy concerning the sending of animals, or a request-letter dated to 245 BCE from a wealthy Egyptian to a police official for goods and for an effeminate (τὸν μαλακὸν) musician.¹⁷² Like the *Letter of Irene*, these letters are not of lower-class provenance and their content greatly differs from Pauline letters.

Letter length is yet another factor jeopardizing favorable comparability across these ancient papyri, ostraca, and inscription letters and Pauline letters.¹⁷³ In general, Ancient Near East letters are very short. E.R. Richards notes that the average length of approximately 14,000 private ancient Greco-Roman letters is around eighty-seven words, while the average length of letters of classical authors such as Cicero and Seneca are 295 words and 995 words, respectively. The average length of the thirteen NT Pauline letters (exclusive of Hebrews) is 495 words. The shortest Pauline letter is Philemon at 335 words, with Romans the longest

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 177. ¹⁷¹ Deissmann ascertains that Irene is a landowner. Ibid., 177, n. 2.

¹⁷² Ibid., 164–66.

¹⁷³ Richards comments that length is a “poor qualifier” for comparison purposes. E. Randolph Richards, *The Secretary in the Letters of Paul* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1991), 213. That the papyri compare poorly to Paul’s letters on the criterion of length, see also C.F. Evans, “The New Testament in the Making,” in *The Cambridge History of the Bible, vol. 1: From the Beginnings to Jerome*, ed. P.R. Ackroyd and C.F. Evans (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 237. In the fourth century, Augustine observed that Pauline letters are longer than ordinary letters (*Ep.* 137.5.19).

at 7,111 words.¹⁷⁴ By the criterion of length, Pauline letters are much closer to ancient authors such as Cicero and Seneca than to the Ancient Near Eastern letters.

All Deissmann's assumptions supporting his categorization of NT letters into "real" and "literary" have been challenged and subsequently refuted.¹⁷⁵ He received swift criticism for his romantic view of the purity of lower-class society and lower-class writings,¹⁷⁶ yet this aspect remained central to his thesis and permeates his work.¹⁷⁷ His distinction between "real" and "literary" is not theoretically sound. All language has a conventional aspect to it. As Stowers comments, "All letters ... are literature in the very broadest sense."¹⁷⁸ Style, even simple style, can be and is manufactured. Moreover, language and style are not reliable indicators of either genuineness or fabrication. As Margaret M. Mitchell aptly comments, a natural style does not necessarily indicate that one encounters a real person, one can "just as easily find an author."¹⁷⁹ The assurance of genuineness requires knowledge of authorial intent (*Absicht*), something that in ancient compositions, in particular, cannot be known.¹⁸⁰

Deissmann's distinction between public and private posits another false binary and is not determinable by letter form, style, or content. Just as style is a matter of authorial intent, so too is a letter's distribution. Indeed, this was a point of which Deissmann himself was aware,

¹⁷⁴ For a chart comparing Pauline letters by number of words, letters, and *stichoi* (lines of words), see Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul the Letter-Writer: His World, His Options, His Skills* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1995), 121.

¹⁷⁵ "For every assertion about the general contents of the two main types of letters, the more occasional letters or the more public epistles, an exception lurks around the corner." Richards, *The Secretary in the Letters of Paul*, 131.

¹⁷⁶ Based on the criticism that he made too firm a distinction between ancient classes, Deissmann remarks, "The problem of class division has deeply engaged my attention and I think it is to the good of the cause if I now, in order to avoid the appearance of a mechanical separation, speak more of 'upper classes' and 'lower classes' in the plural, and expressly emphasise [*sic*] the fact that the characteristics of various social classes can be blended in an individual." Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, 7–8, n. 1.

¹⁷⁷ See Stowers, *Letter Writing*, 19.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.; Rosenmeyer, *Ancient Epistolary Fictions*, 7.

¹⁷⁹ Margaret M. Mitchell, "Le style, c'est l'homme: Aesthetics and Apologetics in the Stylistic Analysis of the New Testament," *Novem Testamentum* 51 (2009): 388.

¹⁸⁰ Gerber comments that Deissmann's distinction between actual or true writings, similar to a speech, and literary creations is a "narrow-minded thesis and heavily dependent upon a tenuous notion of intent versus spontaneity." See Gerber, *Deissmann the Philologist*, 34. According to Richards, "Discerning 'original intention' is a very dubious task." See Richards, *The Secretary in the Letters of Paul*, 213.

remarking that the publishing of a letter is “*sondern in letzter Linie nur die Absicht des Verfassers*” (in the end, only the intention of the author).¹⁸¹ In antiquity, personal and family letters – so-called private letters – were written for publication and/or later published.¹⁸² It is a well-known fact that Cicero later published family and other seemingly private letters.¹⁸³ In addition, in that they are addressed to communities, with little indication that the apostle knew every member (e.g., Romans),¹⁸⁴ the category “private” for all Pauline letters is a stretch.

Deissmann posited an understanding of early Christianity that was ahistorical, and mythical. There was no *Urchristentum* as Deissmann (and Overbeck) imagined.¹⁸⁵ Modern scholars of religion remark that rather than a concept or belief at a religion’s core, one finds instead practices.¹⁸⁶ Only later is meaning applied to those practices.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸¹ Quoted in Gerber, *Deissmann the Philologist*, 33.

¹⁸² See Stowers, *Letter Writing*, 19. Stowers cites Cicero, Ruricius, and Seneca as those who later published their so-called private letters. See also Helmut Koester, “Writings and the Spirit: Authority and Politics in Ancient Christianity,” *Harvard Theological Review* 84, no. 4 (1991): 356.

¹⁸³ Cicero was aware that his letters would be published for political purposes (*Fam.* 16.17.1; *Att.* 4.15.4).

¹⁸⁴ See Richards, *The Secretary in the Letters of Paul*, 213. D.J. Selby remarks, “[T]hese letters are not, strictly speaking, private letters. As their character clearly shows they were written to be read before the congregation to which they were addressed. The second person plural, the allusions to various persons, and the greetings and salutations make them group communications.” Cited in William G. Doty, *Letters in Primitive Christianity* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1973), 25. That Paul’s letters cannot be categorized as private, see also Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church*, 95; Koester, “Writings and the Spirit,” 357.

¹⁸⁵ In his later work on Paul (*Paulus, Eine kultur- und religionsgeschichtliche Skizze* [Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1911]), Deissmann characterizes Paul’s religion as a “Christ-mysticism,” one of personal communion with Christ. On this, see Baird, *From Jonathan Edwards to Rudolf Bultmann*, 182.

By contrast, NT scholars Todd Penner and Davina Lopez argue that “rather than talking of ‘origins’ and ‘linearity’ one should conceive of early Christian phenomena as *emergent*.” See Todd Penner and Davina C. Lopez, *De-Introducing the New Testament: Texts, Worlds, Methods, Stories* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 47. Emphasis original.

¹⁸⁶ See Brent Nongbri, “The Concept of Religion and the Study of the Apostle Paul,” *Journal of the Jesus Movement in Its Jewish Setting* 2 (2015): 20, who cites the work of William Arnal and Russell McCutcheon. According to Nongbri, religion itself is a modern notion, developed only within the last three hundred years (*ibid.*, 3). See also William E. Arnal and Russell T. McCutcheon, “On the Definition of Religion,” in *The Sacred Is the Profane: The Political Nature of ‘Religion’* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 28.

¹⁸⁷ See William E. Arnal and Russell T. McCutcheon, “The Origins of Christianity within, and without, ‘Religion’: A Case Study,” in *The Sacred Is the Profane: The Political*

To posit an originating spark only serves to reify a tradition, such as Christianity. Deissmann attempted to map letters by their form, style, and content onto a nonexistent historical reality. Yet even as Deissmann's assessments of Pauline letters as natural, spontaneous, genuine, personal, and private have been debunked in subsequent scholarship, his overall assessment of the letters as genuine correspondence nonetheless prevails in Pauline scholarship.

DEISSMANN'S INFLUENCE ON LATER EPISTOLARY STUDIES

Deissmann's assessment of Pauline letters as genuine correspondence served as a generative force for further investigations of the letter genre interpreted along the lines of actual letters (sent correspondence). Indeed, in the years following Deissmann – and influenced by his prolific writings – NT studies in ancient epistolography flourished. Scholarship includes anthologies of ancient letters,¹⁸⁸ general studies of ancient epistolography,¹⁸⁹ letter formulae,¹⁹⁰ letter form and function,¹⁹¹ letter

Nature of 'Religion' (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 143; Nongbri, "The Concept of Religion," 21; Stanley K. Stowers, "The Ontology of Religion," in *Introducing Religion: Essays in Honor of Jonathan Z. Smith*, ed. Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon (London: Equinox, 2008), 445.

¹⁸⁸ See Klauck, *Ancient Letters and the New Testament*; Lutz Doering, *Ancient Jewish Letters and the Beginnings of Christian Epistolography* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012).

¹⁸⁹ See Doty, *Letters in Primitive Christianity*; John L. White, *Light From Ancient Letters* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1986).

¹⁹⁰ See John L. White, "Introductory Formulae in the Body of the Pauline Letter," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 90, no. 1 (1971): 91–97; John L. White, "Epistolary Formulas and Cliches in Greek Papyrus Letters," *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers* 14 (1978): 289–319.

¹⁹¹ See Francis Xavier Exler, *The Form of the Ancient Greek Letter: A Study in Greek Epistolography* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1923); Paul Schubert, "Form and Function of the Pauline Letters," *Journal of Religion* 19, no. 4 (1939): 365–77; Heikki Koskeniemi, *Studien zur Idee und Phraseologie des griechischen Briefes bis 400 n. Chr.* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1956); Robert W. Funk, "The Apostolic *Parousia*: Form and Significance," in *Christian History and Interpretation: Studies Presented to John Knox*, ed. W.R. Farmer, C.F.D. Moule, and R.R. Niebuhr (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 249–68; John L. White, *The Form and Function of the Body of the Greek Letter: A Study of the Letter-Body in the Non-Literary Papyri and in Paul the Apostle* (Missoula, MT: University of Montana Press, 1972); John L. White, "The Structural Analysis of Philemon: A Point of Departure in the Formal Analysis of the Pauline Letter," in *Annual Meeting of Society of Biblical Literature* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 1971), 1–47; M. Luther Stirewalt, "The Form and Function of the Greek Letter-Essay," in *The Romans Debate*, ed. Karl P. Donfried (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1977), 175–206; Troy

types,¹⁹² and the letter compositional process.¹⁹³ This post-Deissmann scholarship sought to locate Pauline letters within a contemporaneous stream of Greco-Roman letters. It has served to reinforce and even reify Pauline letters as genuine correspondence. Yet, and as seen in this chapter, common everyday Greco-Roman correspondence is poor comparanda to Pauline letters. This later scholarship is likewise variously flawed methodologically. Moreover, to circumvent various incompatibilities between common Greco-Roman and Pauline letters, this scholarship assesses the latter as a unique type of letter.

Following Deissmann's lead, Francis Exler also extensively investigated ancient letter collections. In addition to the Fayûm cache of Ancient Near East letters, Exler examined other recently published collections, including eight volumes of Oxyrhynchus Papyri, the Rylands Papyri, a second volume of the Lille Papyri, and papyri published by the Societa Italiana. Taken together, the letters date from the third century BCE to the third century CE.¹⁹⁴ Exler discerned a consistent pattern in letter-opening and letter-closing formulae across these collections and time periods.¹⁹⁵ With only a little variation, the letters adopt a standard opening formula (prescript), which takes the form A (Sender) – to B (Recipient) – χαίρειν (hail, welcome, or greetings).¹⁹⁶ These letters likewise indicate a standard closing formula: ἔρωσο (be strong, be of

W. Martin, "Investigating the Pauline Letter Body: Issues, Methods, and Approaches," in *Paul and the Ancient Letter Form*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Sean A. Adams (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 185–212; Stanley E. Porter and Sean A. Adams, eds., *Paul and the Ancient Letter Form* (Leiden: Brill, 2010). See also the earlier studies of G.A. Gerhard, "Untersuchungen zur Geschichte des griechischen Briefes. I. Die Anfangsformel," *Philologus* 64 (1905), 27–65; O. Roller, *Das Formular der Paulinischen Briefe: Ein Beitr. zur Lehr vom antiken Briefe* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1933).

A brief history of the work of many of these scholars is found in Martin, "Investigating the Pauline Letter Body," 185–212.

¹⁹² See Stowers, *Letter Writing*.

¹⁹³ See Richards, *The Secretary in the Letters of Paul*; E. Randolph Richards, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing: Secretaries, Composition and Collection* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

¹⁹⁴ See Exler, *The Form of the Ancient Greek Letter*. Prior to Exler, Ferdinandus Ziemann explored formulas in the Greek letters in *De epistularum Graecarum formulis sollemnibus quaestiones selectae* (1912).

¹⁹⁵ See Exler, *The Form of the Ancient Greek Letter*, 60–68.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 23. The formula remains consistent with modest modifications in all categories Exler identified, familial letters, business letters, petitions and applications, and official letters (see *ibid.*, 23–68).

good health) or εὐτύχει (be prosperous), changing somewhat in the first century CE to διευτύχει (continue prosperous).¹⁹⁷

In his influential *Studien zur Idee und Phraseologie des griechischen Briefes bis 400 n. Chr.*, the Finnish papyrologist Heikki Koskenniemi studied the structural elements (opening, body, and closing) of ancient letters.¹⁹⁸ Koskenniemi argued that by virtue of their location and arrangement within the letter genre, basic structural elements could provide determinable significations to letter recipients. According to him, the constituent elements of the letter functioned like speech acts.

The basic scheme of the Greek letter: prescript, letter-body proper, and concluding formulas which remain unchanged until the fourth century C.E., can be compared in its parts with a personal encounter. The prescript corresponds to the greeting; the concluding formulas to the leave-taking. These parts frame the epistolary encounter, and the epistolary situation puts its stamp on them to a greater degree than the rest of the letter.¹⁹⁹

An early adopter of Koskenniemi's epistolary theory was the influential New Testament scholar Robert W. Funk.²⁰⁰ Funk argued that letters were unique among ancient compositions, the letter – as Koskenniemi assessed – was a conveyor of speech. Funk remarked,

the letter is a written means of keeping conversation in motion; formerly it corresponds to friends meeting, saying 'hello,' conversing, bidding each other goodbye. A letter is thus oral speech at the *threshold* of writing, i.e., the letter, as genre, is only one step removed from an actual conversation.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁷ Cited and translated by Exler, *ibid.*, 69.

¹⁹⁸ Koskenniemi, *Studien zur Idee und Phraseologie des griechischen Briefes*. For summaries of Koskenniemi's work, see Klauck, *Ancient Letters and the New Testament*, 189–94; Richards, *The Secretary in the Letters of Paul*, 130; Martin, "Investigating the Pauline Letter Body," 185–89; Doty, *Letters in Primitive Christianity*, 11–12; White, "The Structural Analysis of Philemon," 10–11; Funk, "The Apostolic Parousia," 263–64.

¹⁹⁹ Translation is by Troy Martin in Martin, "Investigating the Pauline Letter Body," 189. "Das Grundscheema des griechischen Briefes: Präskript, eigentliches Briefkorpus, Schlussklausel, das bis zum 4. Jahrhundert n.Chr. unverändert beibehalten wird, lässt sich in seinen Teilen mit einer persönlichen Begegnung vergleichen. Das Präskript entspricht der Begrüssung, die Schlussklausel dem Abschied; diese Teile umrahmen gleichsam die briefliche Begegnung, und die Briefsituation drückt ihnen natürlich in stärkerem Masse als dem übrigen Brief ihr Gepräge auf." Koskenniemi, *Studien zur Idee und Phraseologie des griechischen Briefes*, 155.

²⁰⁰ For the influence of Koskenniemi on Funk, see Funk, "The Apostolic Parousia," 263.

²⁰¹ Cited in White, "The Structural Analysis of Philemon," 11. Emphasis added. See also Robert W. Funk, *Language, Hermeneutic, and Word of God: The Problem of Language in the New Testament and Contemporary Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 248.

According to Funk, a letter was simply one short step away from speech. Implicit in this view is that, unlike written communication, oral speech was genuine, unfiltered.

Like Koskenniemi and Funk, John L. White also investigated the form and function of the ancient letter.²⁰² White posited an integral relation between the form of a letter (its structural elements) and its contents. Borrowing from the field of structural linguistics, White noted,

the epistolographer finds himself [*sic*] in a situation formally resembling that of the structural linguist. Like phonemes, [epistolary] elements are elements of meaning; they acquire meaning only if integrated into systems. [Epistolary] element systems, like phonemic systems, are built at the level of unconsciousness . . . in the case of epistolography as well as linguistics, the observable phenomena result from laws which, though general or necessary, are implicit.²⁰³

Otherwise put, and following closely on Koskenniemi, White assessed that epistolary structural elements – opening, body, and closing – convey meaning simply by virtue of their location and arrangement within a letter.

In his specialized study of Philemon – the shortest of the Pauline letters – White sought to draw comparisons between its structural elements and those of the common Greek letter. However, rather than similarities, his research uncovered numerous differences.²⁰⁴ Philemon employs a nonstandard letter prescript (opening). Rather than the customary opening salutation, “χαίρειν” (Greetings!) one finds an expanded expression χάρις ὑμῖν καὶ εἰρήνη ἀπὸ θεοῦ πατρὸς ἡμῶν καὶ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ (Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ; Phlm 3, NRSV).²⁰⁵ Rather than the conventional health wish common to ancient-letter closings (ἔρρωσο; be strong, be of good health or εὐτύχει; be prosperous), Philemon concludes with an unparalleled, Ἡ χάρις τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ μετὰ τοῦ πνεύματος ὑμῶν (The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit; Phlm 25, NRSV).²⁰⁶ Philemon’s expression of thanksgiving differs both “formally and functionally” from other common Greco-Roman letters that include this feature.²⁰⁷ White likewise observes an otherwise undocumented and “inordinately long request” in

²⁰² See White, “The Structural Analysis of Philemon,” 1–47; White, *Form and Function of the Body of the Greek Letter*; John L. White, “The Greek Documentary Letter Tradition Third Century B.C.E. to Third Century C.E.,” *Semeia* 22 (1981); White, *Light From Ancient Letters*.

²⁰³ White, “The Structural Analysis of Philemon,” 6. ²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 1–47. ²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 28. See also Doty, *Letters in Primitive Christianity*, 22. ²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

Philemon's letter body (Phlm 7–14),²⁰⁸ as well as a significant difference in the length of its letter body when compared to other common Greco-Roman letters.²⁰⁹ Rather than allow these differences to affect Philemon's status as genuine correspondence, White instead comments that the opening and closing formulae are present in Philemon but in a "*distorted form*";²¹⁰ that the unusually long request can be attributed to "Paul's own creativity, working in conjunction with conditions prevailing in his ministry";²¹¹ and that on-the-ground circumstances led Paul to create "*new formulae, appropriate to the situation.*"²¹²

In sum, influenced by Deissmann's extensive studies, post-Deissmann scholarship on ancient epistolography sought to align Pauline and Greco-Roman letters by structure, formulae, and function. In so doing, the scholarship reinforced and thereby kept alive Deissmann's perspective on Pauline letters as genuine correspondence. Yet post-Deissmann scholarship does not achieve its intended goals. Indeed, a principle of exceptionalism appears to be in play. While ancient Greco-Roman letters evince standard opening and closing formulae – as Exler's findings confirmed – none of the extant Pauline letters conform to that standard. In his careful analysis of Philemon, White consistently and continually makes special allowances (e.g., creative license or unique social circumstances) to account for the distinct differences between it and the private Greco-Roman letter. While ancient letters are recognizable by their structural form, to argue, as did Koskenniemi and others, that the standard three-part epistolary feature renders predictable significations is methodologically flawed. Here, too, Koskenniemi is arguing that there is something unique about the ancient letter genre. His theory is unattested in ancient

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 35.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 46. In his longer work, *The Form and Function of the Body of the Greek Letter*, White compares Greek private letters and the seven "authentic" Pauline letters. Once again, he uncovers various differences: Pauline letter bodies are longer than those of private Greek letters; Pauline letters employ elements not found in private Greek letters, such as "confidence formulae"; they are highly constructed around theological issues; and they regularly mention anticipated future visits. See White, *Form and Function of the Body of the Greek Letter*, 154–63.

²¹⁰ See White, "The Structural Analysis of Philemon," 33. Emphasis added.

²¹¹ Ibid., 36.

²¹² Ibid., 47. Emphasis original. See also William Doty who indicates how Pauline letters deviate from the common threefold Hellenistic form (opening, body, and closing) and expand to a five-part form that includes an opening, thanksgiving, letter body, paraenesis, and closing. Like White, Doty rationalizes the structural change stating that the "form was the result of the entire, particular set of concrete circumstances and conditions." See Doty, *Letters in Primitive Christianity*, 28.

rhetoric and epistolary theory. It diminishes the role of the letter author and presumes without warrant determinable recipient responses.²¹³ A letter is *not* a near equivalent to oral speech. As already mentioned, all writing, even the simplest of letters, involves human agency (“All letters . . . are literature in the very broadest sense”).²¹⁴

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have assessed three different classifications of Pauline letters: authoritative-scriptural, historical-documentary, and genuine correspondence. The earliest readers and interpreters of the letters – authors such as Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Ptolemy – assessed Pauline letters as authoritative and scripture-like. When interpreted as authoritative, the letters functioned handily as reputable sources in the development of their various theological positions and arguments against theological and ideological opponents. The letters were “true” because they were deemed of high value theologically. This understanding of the letters endured up to the seventeenth-century.

Enlightenment scholars reassessed the worthiness of biblical texts. Rather than being valued as scripturally and theologically authoritative, biblical texts needed to be assessed according to historical standards. Spinoza’s adage was “to accept nothing as an authoritative Scriptural statement which we do not perceive very clearly when we examine it in the light of its history.” During this period, scholars turned to Pauline letters for the purposes of making historical claims, yet deployed inadequate and insufficient methods. Evanson selectively chose the book of Acts without questioning its historical reliability or the possibility that Acts and Pauline letters could be mutually dependent on each other. To ground Paul and his communities in social-temporal realia, de Wette privileged discussions of regions and their social-political histories. The discussions afforded the sense of Pauline activity in the specified regions without providing adequate evidence of it.

The highly influential scholars F.C. Baur and Adolf Deissmann likewise assessed Pauline letters for their historical worth. Their

²¹³ For the latter, see Michael Trapp, ed. *Greek and Latin Letters: An Anthology with Translation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 39–40. Trapp comments, “A letter can be welcomed and praised as a true image of the person who sends it, faithfully expressing his character, and bringing him vividly before the mind’s eye; or it can be disparaged (in disappointment or mock modesty).” See *ibid.*, 39.

²¹⁴ Stowers, *Letter Writing*, 19; Rosenmeyer, *Ancient Epistolary Fictions*, 7.

predetermined understanding of Christian origins was the primary criterion of their evaluations of the historical reliability of Pauline letters and their status as genuine correspondence. For his part, Baur rejected as being historically unreliable all but the *Hauptbriefe* (Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Romans), as these were the only Pauline letters able to confirm his theory that Christianity emerged in opposition to a legalistic Judaism. Baur provided no credible external verification of his thesis, which scholars have convincingly argued derived from his religious convictions and the then-current German social and political environment. His method of determining the *Hauptbriefe* as historically reliable was circular, determined only from the four letters themselves. According to Deissmann, the Apostle Paul was present at the earliest, primitive, and genuine era of earliest Christian history. All Pauline letters exclusive of Hebrews reflected that naturalistic on-the-ground situation and were thereby nothing other than “real” and genuine correspondence. Deissmann positioned Pauline letters in this ahistorical setting, but his assessment of Pauline letters as “real” failed by every metric. No written document is entirely “real” or genuine, all comprise conventional aspects. The determination of a letter as private or public requires knowledge of authorial intent, information inaccessible to later readers.

Deissmann’s study spurred interest in various aspects of the letter genre. To confirm a status of Pauline letters as genuine correspondence, post-Deissmann scholarship sought to create convincing parallels between Greco-Roman and Pauline letters. Yet their analysis revealed that Pauline letters *do not conform* to common Greco-Roman letters. Their opening and closing formulae differ, their structures differ, and Pauline letters are considerably longer by comparison to common Greco-Roman letters. To indicate genuineness of Pauline letters, Koskeniemi and others posited functions of an ancient letter that made the genre unique among ancient writings. While ancient epistolographers rhetorically aimed for historical credibility and to have their letters appear speech-like, letters themselves were distinguished from speech. Furthermore, ancient and modern rhetorical theory and practice posit human agency and authorial intent behind writings of all kinds, including letters.

Hilgenfeld and Weizsäcker – those whose work helped to determine the modern consensus of seven authentic letters – and other post-Baur scholars applied nonrigorous and uncritical criteria to determine Pauline authenticity and historical reliability. In many cases, they returned to Baur’s poorly substantiated theory of Christian origins to justify the

inclusion of additional Pauline letters. The criterion of Pauline style as a determinant of authenticity derived from Pauline letters themselves and was influenced by their high regard for Paul. The scholarship likewise assumes without warrant that similarity of style and language provide evidence of *Pauline* authorship. References to Pauline letters in later “Christian” authors qualifies as a valid criterion for relative dating but not for authenticity or historical reliability. Post-Baur scholars seem simply to have resolved to agree on the now-current list of seven letters as genuinely Pauline.

In Chapter 2, I challenge several central assumptions of the authentic-letter perspective. These include the historicity of Paul, Pauline activity firmly dated to the mid-first century CE, and the historicity of Pauline communities. I likewise reassess the characterization and date of early external evidence of Pauline letters. The chapter more generally indicates a widespread lack of evidence for assumptions grounding the authentic-letter perspective.