



From Atheist to Theist (Part 29)

Challenging the Apostle Paul

By

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I have recently looked at discovered Greek manuscripts that date to the 2nd century AD, quotes from early Christian writers that date from the late 1st century to early 2nd century, and at translations of New Testament texts into other languages that date to the 2nd century.

We move now to evidence for the Pauline epistles that were written in the middle of the 1st century AD.

Just a reminder that I'm only revealing the evidence available for investigation in early 1971 when I was an atheist. A future series will look at evidence that has been discovered since that time.

The New Testament includes 27 writings, and the Apostle Paul is credited with writing almost half of them. Much of the doctrine and practice of the Christian Church is based on Paul's writings. Did he write what bears his name?

1. Romans
2. 1 Corinthians
3. 2 Corinthians
4. Galatians
5. Ephesians
6. Philippians
7. Colossians
8. 1st Thessalonians
9. 2nd Thessalonians
10. 1st Timothy
11. 2nd Timothy
12. Titus
13. Philemon

[Some Christians believe Paul also wrote Hebrews.]

I might also note that more than half of the Book of Acts is about the life, conversion, and ministry of Paul (aka: Saul of Tarsus).

Did Paul really write all those letters (known as the Pauline corpus) to 1st century Christians and churches? What's the evidence that he did?



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What Paul Wrote and When

Scholars who study such things seem to be in basic agreement that Paul did write Romans, 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, Philemon, and 1 Thessalonians (known as Proto-Pauline letters).

Some liberal scholars are divided about Paul's authorship of Colossians and 2 Thessalonians. Many liberal scholars do not believe Paul wrote Ephesians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, or Titus.

Ephesians, Colossians, and 2 Thessalonians are sometimes referred to as Deutero-Pauline Epistles, meaning they lack scholarly consensus about authenticity. Some scholars believe Paul was the author, some believe he might have been the author, others doubt Paul was the author.

1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus are often referred to as pseudographs, meaning that other people may have written the letters and claimed Paul's name as the author. Some scholars believe Paul was the author, but others doubt Paul was the author.

Determining Ancient Authorship

How do scholars determine the authorship of ancient writings? Good question!

- Internal evidence – what we find in the letter itself .. claim of authorship, historical information, geographical information, biographical information.
- Language and style – comparing writing style of other letters believed to have been written by the same author (e.g. vocabulary, sentence structure, grammar, idioms).
- Content – comparing the content with other letters believed to have been written by the same author (e.g. theology, historical data).
- External evidence – ancient writers supporting claim of authorship, ancient writers quoting from writings in question.

Generally Accepted Letters

Let's begin with the seven letters that have little scholarly pushback about Pauline authorship.

I began my investigation believing that nothing in the New Testament was legitimate. I believed Christians made up the writings of the New Testament some time after Constantine I made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire in the early part of the 4th century AD. I didn't believe Jesus and His apostles ever existed (including Paul), so you might imagine my surprise when I discovered evidence that Paul did exist and that some of the letters he wrote were from the middle of the 1st century AD. That didn't fit with my narrative that Jesus and His apostles were made up and that Christians faked the New Testament 300 years after the 'supposed' beginning of Christianity.

Though some atheists of the mid-20th century talked about Jesus of Nazareth as a mythical character (never existed or didn't exist in the way presented in the New Testament), I didn't find the same perspective about Saul of Tarsus (Apostle Paul). Scholarship of that time accepted Saul/Paul as a real person who wrote letters that impacted the 1st century Christian movement. Even well-known Jesus mythicist Richard Carrier has written in favor of the historicity of Paul ([The Historicity of Paul the Apostle](#), Richard Carrier, June 6, 2015).

Internal Evidence

The seven letters generally accepted as legitimate include a greeting from the Apostle Paul:

- Romans – “Paul, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated to the gospel of God ... To all who are in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ”.
- 1 Corinthians – “Paul, called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother, To the church of God which is at Corinth.”
- 2 Corinthians – “Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the church of God which is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in all Achaia.”
- Galatians – “Paul, an apostle (not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised Him from the dead), and all the brethren who are with me, To the churches of Galatia.”

- Philippians – “Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Jesus Christ, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons.”
- Philemon – “Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved friend and fellow laborer, to the beloved Apphia, Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house.”
- 1 Thessalonians – “Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Scholars compared Pauline epistles to secular letters from the 1st century AD and found that Paul followed the standard letter outline form from that time period:

- Opening (including prescript and prooimion)
- Body (including open, middle, and end)
- Closing (including epilogue)
- Postscript (including greetings, wishes)

Content of Letters

Was Paul consistent in his writings? Do people and locations match? Do timelines match? What about Theology and Christology? Do they match from letter to letter or are there contradictions?

- Paul consistently identified himself as a Pharisaic Jew
- Paul consistently proclaimed he was a monotheist
- Paul consistently proclaimed the Trinity (One God in Three Persons)
- Paul consistently proclaimed Jesus is the Son of God and that Jesus appeared to him as he was on his way to Damascus, Syria, to persecute followers of Christ
- Paul consistently proclaimed that Jesus fulfilled prophecies in the Hebrew Scriptures
- Paul consistently proclaimed the mystery of the Church: Christ creating in Himself one new man (Christian) from two (Jew and Gentile)
- Paul consistently proclaimed Jesus is God and Man

- Paul consistently proclaimed Jesus died according to the Scriptures and rose from the dead according to the Scriptures
- Paul consistently proclaimed Jesus loves His people
- Paul consistently proclaimed Jesus would return for His people and reward them for what they did for Him during their lives
- Paul consistently proclaimed Jesus would judge the unbelieving people in the world for what they had done

External Evidence

The external evidence for the seven letters is strong. Many of the Apostolic and Church Fathers quoted from Paul's letters.

- An Apostolic Father is a Christian leader who knew one or more of Christ's Apostles personally. They were alive in the 1st century and into the 2nd century.
- An Early Church Father is a Christian leader who knew an Apostolic Father. They were alive in the 2nd century.
- Other Church Fathers were Christian leaders who lived during the 2nd and 3rd centuries and may have known Early Church Fathers.

Four of the Apostolic Fathers who quoted from Paul were Clement of Rome, Papias, Polycarp, and Ignatius of Antioch.

- Clement of Rome – Born in Rome in the early part of the 1st century AD .. he knew some of Christ's Apostles personally (e.g. Paul, Peter) .. he wrote a letter to the Corinthians in which he quoted from Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, 1 Corinthians, Philippians, Matthew and Luke.
- Polycarp of Smyrna – Born in Smyrna in the second half of the 1st century AD and reportedly discipled by John the Apostle and may have known other apostles .. he wrote a letter to the Philippians and quoted from the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, Acts, several of Paul's letters (e.g. Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy), 1 and 2 Peter, 1 John, and Jude.
- Ignatius of Antioch – Born in Syria in the early to middle part of the 1st century AD .. reportedly discipled by John the Apostle and knew Polycarp .. wrote seven letters and quoted from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke,

Acts, and several of Paul's letters (e.g. Romans, 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians).

- Papias of Hierapolis – Born in Hierapolis in the second half of the 1st century AD and reportedly knew John the Apostle and Polycarp personally .. authored five writings (An Exposition of the Lord's Oracles – only fragments exist today but other early Church leaders quoted from his writings in the 2nd and 3rd centuries) .. Papias reportedly quoted from Matthew and Mark's Gospels, and 1 John and 1 Peter.

That was strong evidence to me that at least some of Paul's letters had external support from early Church leaders who knew the apostles personally. Other 2nd century Church fathers who quoted from Paul in their letters included Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Theophilus, Melito of Sardis, and Athenagoras.

Collections of Letters

Another powerful external evidence is the collection of Paul's letters from the 2nd century AD. Paul wrote his letters in the mid-1st century, and they appeared as collections within a couple of generations.

Whereas the letters of early Church leaders quoted from Paul's letters, a collection included copies of the letters – multiple verses/chapters of Paul's writings.

Here are some of the earliest collections of Paul's letters:

Marcion – Mid-2nd Century

- Galatians
- 1 Corinthians
- 2 Corinthians
- Romans
- 1 Thessalonians
- 2 Thessalonians
- Laodiceans
- Colossians

- Philippians
- Philemon

P46 – Late 2nd Century

- Romans
- Hebrews
- 1 Corinthians
- 2 Corinthians
- Ephesians
- Galatians
- Philippians
- Colossians
- 1 Thessalonians

Muratorian – Late 2nd Century

- 1 Corinthians
- 2 Corinthians
- Ephesians
- Philippians

- Colossians
- Galatians
- 1 Thessalonians
- 2 Thessalonians
- Romans
- Titus
- 1 Timothy
- 2 Timothy
- Philemon

What About Hebrews?

Church leader Clement of Alexandria (lived during 2nd and 3rd centuries) believed that Paul wrote the letter to Hebrews. Clement spoke Greek and saw that the letter did not have the style of Paul's other writings. Clement believed Paul wrote the letter in Hebrew and that Luke translated it into Greek. Origen (lived during 2nd and 3rd centuries) believed Paul was responsible for the content in Hebrews, but that someone else composed the letter from that content.

Atheist's Conclusion

My conclusion as an atheist at the time of my investigation was that there was sufficient evidence to support the early Church (1st and 2nd centuries) viewing most, if not all, of Paul's letters as authentic. Those who knew Paul in the 1st century or knew those who knew Paul viewed Paul's letters as authentic and used them as authoritative. The evidence supported Paul writing his letters in mid-1st century AD. That did not convince me to become a theist, but my investigation continued because of the evidence.

Next Time

In the next part of my report I will look at the evidence for the authenticity of epistles written by other apostles of Christ (known as the ‘general’ epistles).

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