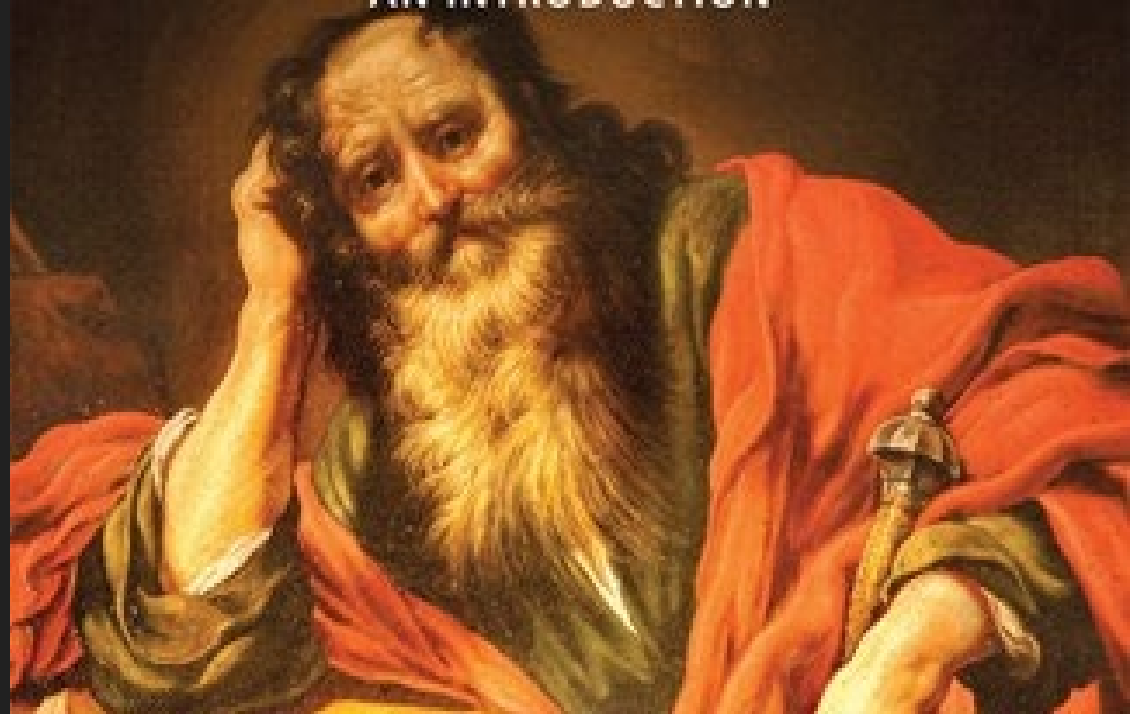


Paul's letters to the early Church (and us)



What are we to make of them?

Steve Thomason
Saint Mark's Cathedral
January 2024

Opening Prayer: Ephesians 3

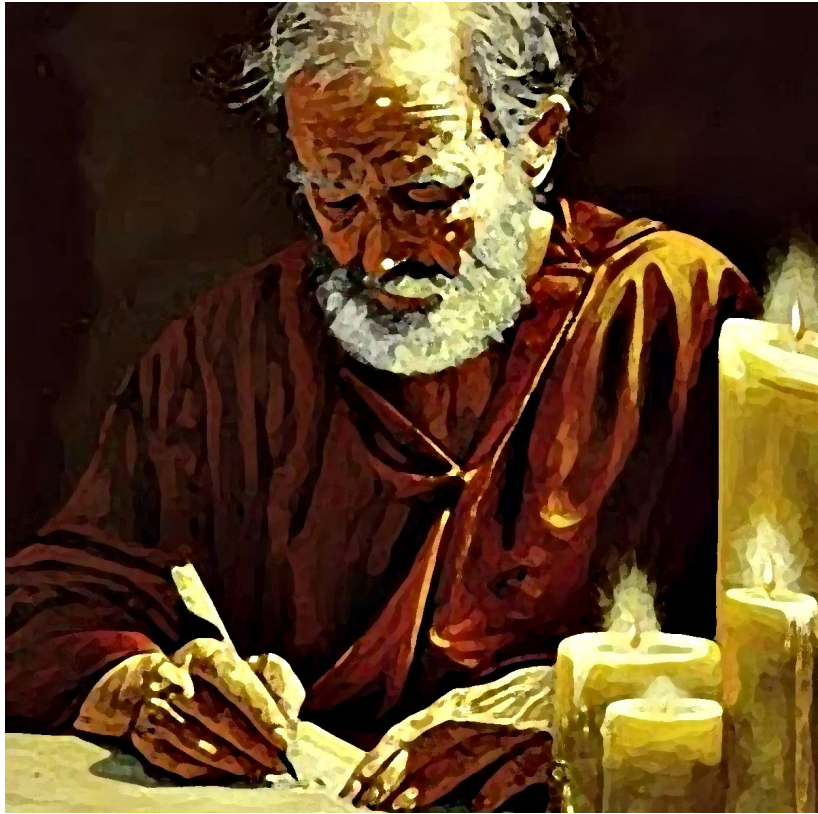
- ¹⁶ I pray that, according to the riches of God's glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit ¹⁷ and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. ¹⁸ I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.
- ²⁰ Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine: Glory to him from generation to generation in the Church, and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever. Amen.



Paul's Letters are...

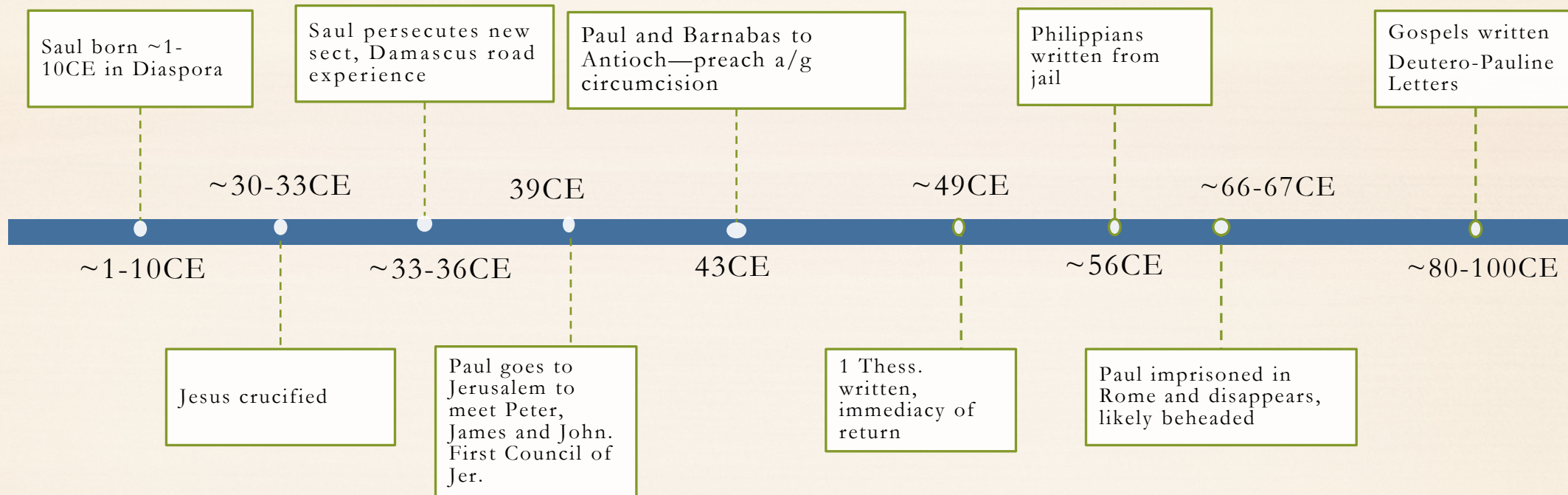
- *probative and problematic,*
- *extensive and in need of editing,*
- *deeply mystical and at times misogynistic*
- *give rise to exquisite Christ hymns*
- *foundational for our orthodox faith*

What is your experience
of Paul's Letters?



Helpful framework

- Context.
 - Paul was writing personal letters to friends
- Person
 - Paul was a dedicated Jew seeking spiritual fulfillment
 - He discovered the messiah but never knew Christianity
 - Charisma (Jung: One who has a great light casts a great shadow)
 - Mystic?
- Liturgical
 - We read snippets on Sundays, often glaze over



Timeline

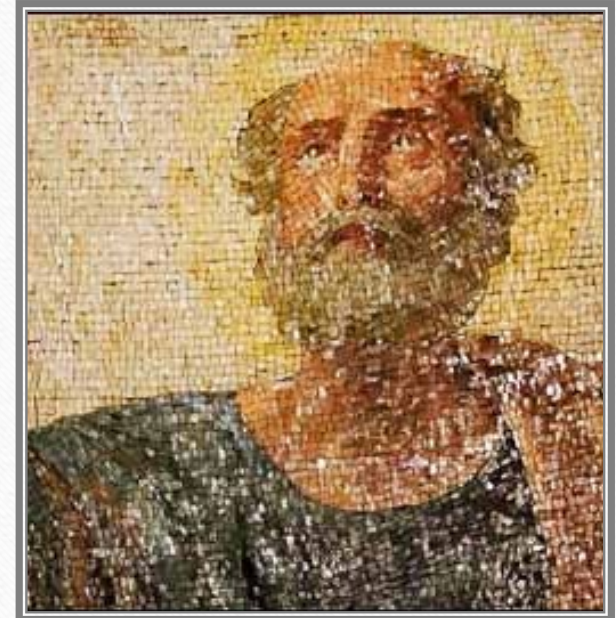


Theology of Conversion

- Mystical (not moral)
- Experiential (never vicarious)
- No longer look at reality, but from reality (ontological change)
- Participatory in God's plan (chosen, used by God)
- Not about doing right, not dualistic
- Unitive consciousness

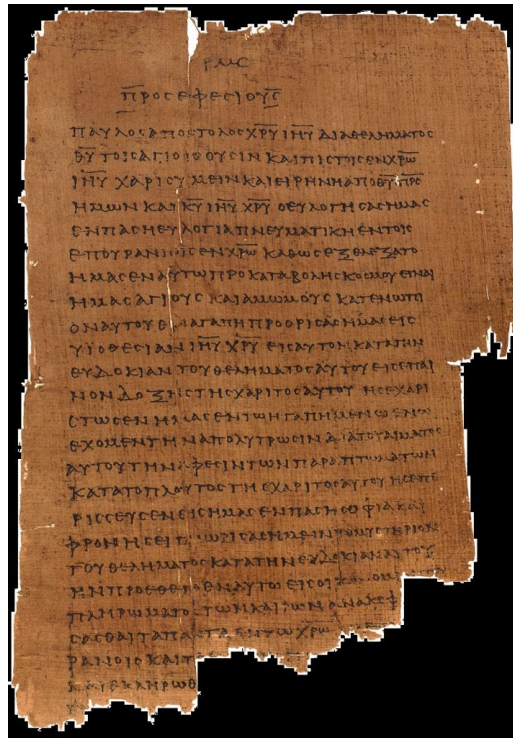
Paul's Authority based on:

- Experience (not ordination)
- Personal call (not institutional call)
- Suffering in Christ (Paschal mystery)
- Transformative experience of “becoming a new creation”
- Claims to be apostle b/c he saw the Risen Christ, “as one untimely born...”



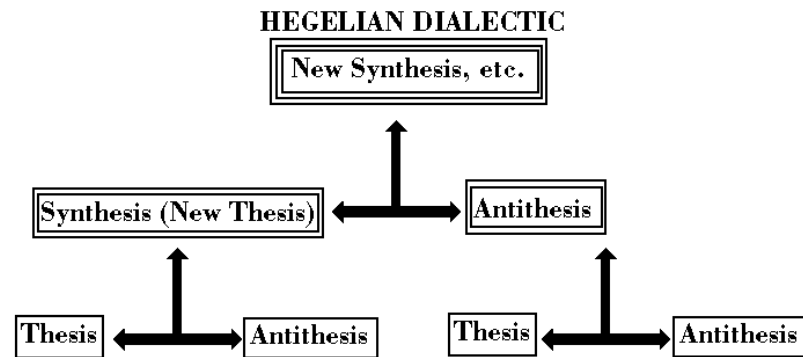


Letters—Pauline and Deutero-Pauline



- 1 Thes. (47-52 CE)—Jesus coming back now, be ready)
- Time passes, letters become more eucharistic
 - Philippians—hymn of joy written while in jail
 - Corinthian letters
 - Galatians—anti-law manifesto
 - Romans—theol. Letter
 - Philemon—personal letter
 - Colossians—cosmic vision of Christ
 - Ephesians—manifesto of faith
 - 2 Timothy—very personal, father/son relationship
- Did not write 1 Tim, 2 Thes, Titus, Hebrews

Paul is a dialectic thinker/writer (not linear)



- Premise: if thesis/antithesis held together, then more likely to arrive at synthesis (i.e., union, unitive conscious)

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- Premise: if thesis/antithesis held together, then more likely to arrive at synthesis (i.e., union, unitive conscious)
- Problem #1: Paul no longer dualistic after conversion, but dwells on thesis/antithesis, so we can get trapped in that.
- Problem #2: Paul is often addressing questions sent to him, but there are no quotation marks in Greek (taken out of context or misconstrued)
- Problem #3: Paul has radical ability to critique the tradition, but not antisemitic—he's talking about personal risk of making religion idolatrous (same risk for Christianity)
- Problem #4: Paul is a rhetorician (lost art?)—he uses words with great intention (flesh, sin, suffering, etc.)

Several
Points of
Controversy

Flesh/Spirit

Sexuality

Gender

Slavery/Obedience to
Authority

Flesh and Spirit

- Paul's anthropology is threefold: body, soul, spirit (Plato's is twofold, dualistic)
- Not the body that has to die (but falsehood, sinful self-interest which is often translated as "flesh")—e.g. Gal 5:16-18
- Choice between *true self* (abundant, nonreactive) and *false self* (insecure, narcissistic, fragile)
- Uses **sarx** (flesh), not **soma** (body)
- Paul: You are already spirit—i.e., **in Christ** (flesh-self is an illusion)

Soma is more positive

the believer's "body" as "a temple of the Holy Spirit" ([1 Cor 6:19](#)).

He calls on Christians to offer our "bodies" to God as an act of worship ([Rom 12:1](#)).

He insists that our future resurrection state—imperishable, immortal, untouched by sin and death—will still involve a *sōma*, a "body" ([1 Cor 15:35-44](#)).

Sin and Spirit

- Rom 7: “flesh” is where sin has greatest freedom to hinder life (spirit)
- Sin is not individual acts, but state of contradiction to true self, the experience of being cut-off, entrapped
- Soma (body) is the locus of transformation guided by three forces:
 - Acknowledgment of our **weakness** (we cannot get out of “sin” by ourselves)
 - **Crucified** existence—coming to realize the illusion must die
 - **New creation** in Christ

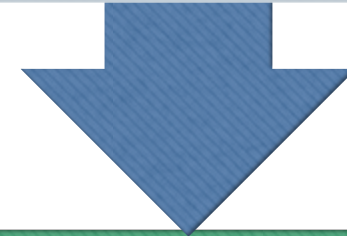
New
Creation
(in Christ)

Rom 8: “there is therefore no
condemnation *in Christ*”

No self hatred, no
shame

Trust opens up so that
flesh is fulfilled by
spirit

The whole person
bears fruit



The Spirit of God has made a home in
YOU (temple)

Indwelling of the spirit
enables us to pray, to
give thanks, to see
good, to be grateful

Fruits of the spirit
emanate from life in
Christ

The Body of Christ
dignifies, is able to bear
the “weight of glory”



Breakout Groups

- What is your experience with Paul's Letters?
- Did you know that some are "deutero-Pauline" written decades later?
- What strikes you about his approach to flesh/spirit?

Plenary Conversation

Next Week...

- Recap
- Some difficult passages:
 - 1 Cor. 14:34: Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says.
 - Rom. 13:1: Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.
 - Rom 1: 26-27: Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. ²⁷ In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.

Resources to Consider

- Richard Rohr. *Great Themes of Paul: Life as Participation*
- Beth Allison Barr. *The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth.*
- Richard Rohr. *In the Footsteps of St. Paul (Audible series)*
- NT Wright. *Paul: A Biography*
- Charles Cousar. *The Letters of Paul: Interpreting Biblical Text Series*

Closing Prayer/Exhortation

- 1 Thes. 5:16-28
- Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil. May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.
- Beloved, pray for us. Greet all the brothers and sisters with a holy kiss. I solemnly command you by the Lord that this letter be read to all of them.
- The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.