

Paul & his Interpreters: an open course introduction

Week 2

“Almost everything we thought we knew about Paul is wrong. Come discover what’s new.”

Dr Matthew R Anderson

Dio's "Online Open Enrollment Courses"

– not your
typical classes!

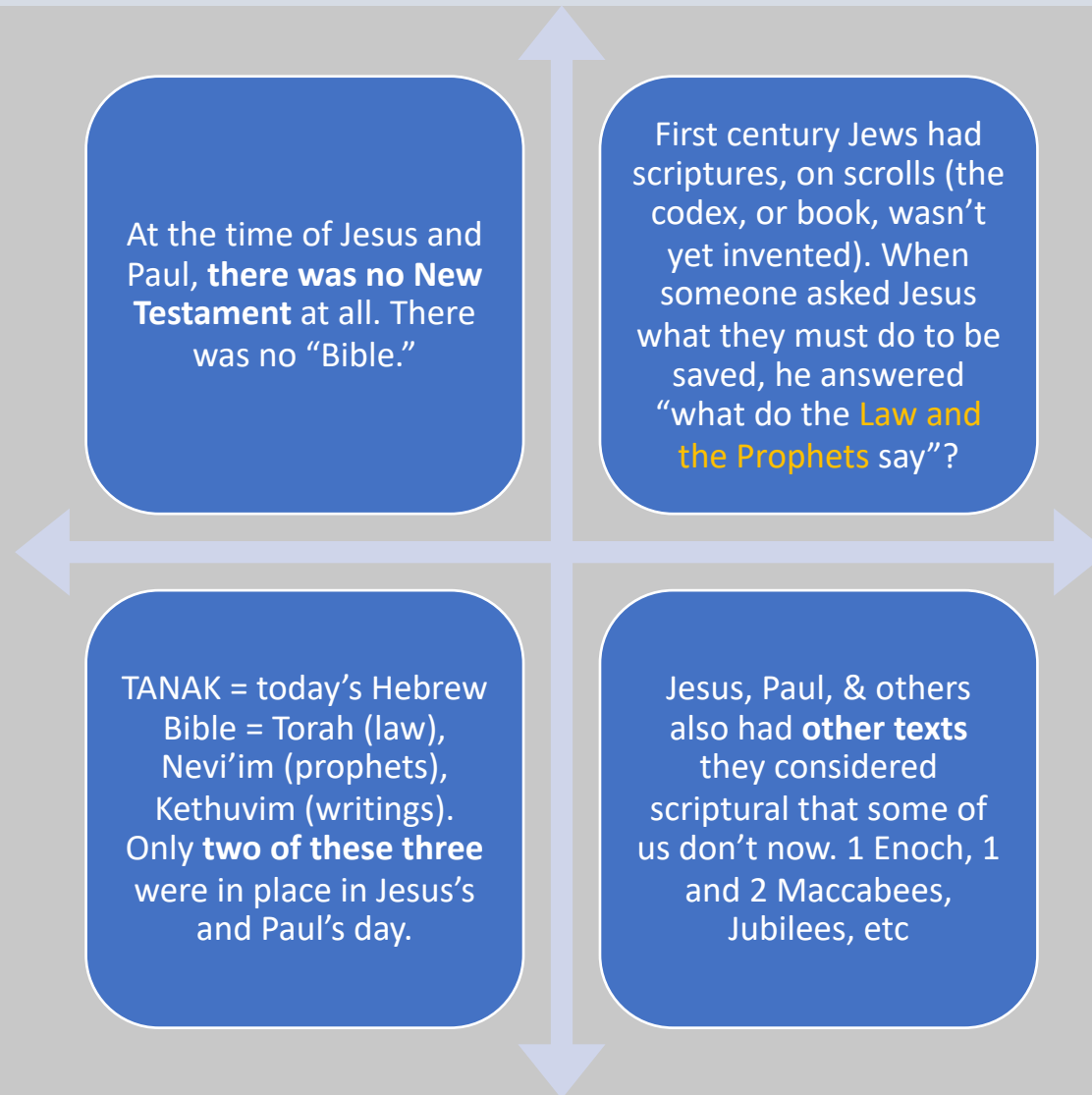


Questions from last week:

What's the difference between the terms you're using: scriptures / bible / sources?

Another way to put this: why don't I use the word bible all the time?

Scriptures: open ended; writing still going on
Bible: canonized and closed. A collection





Review: who
was Paul?

Paul can be studied many different ways

Paul and Politics (what was Paul's attitude toward the Roman Empire, toward justice, toward war?)

Paul and Philosophy (was Paul a Stoic? Was he influenced by the popular movements of his day?)

Paul and Gender (did Paul's faith make him express his masculinity in different ways than others? How did Paul see, and treat, women?)

Paul and urbanization (what difference does it make that Paul lived and worked in cities – and Jesus did not?)

Paul and Jesus (what similarities and differences can we perhaps find?)

Paul and – or within – Judaism (what were Paul's attitudes toward his fellow Jews? Toward non-Jews? Toward Torah?)

Paul and Society (what were Paul's attitudes toward slavery? Did the shape of ancient Roman households and of labour make a difference to his message?)



We focus mostly on two:

- Paul within Judaism
- Paul and gender

Putting Paul back into the first century (as much as we can) reveals:

- a **Jew** traveling through a Roman imperial world crowded with gods, with sacrifices, with cultic obligations, and marked by severe hierarchy of patron-client power relations
- A Jew **saying that society was soon coming to an end** and that the fine balance between separated cults (Jew and non-Jew) must be ended. This was a dangerous message since ancient Roman gods did not like being spurned
- A Jew saying many social contracts were also breaking down and that **women who followed Jesus might NOT have to submit to marriage** (and to the Roman family). Also trouble.



An important lens for us: *Paul within* Judaism

- **Why?**

- Because of antisemitism
- Because of the misunderstandings of Paul that have historically informed Christian teaching and preaching
- Because of supersessionism

- **What does this mean?**

- It means “making Paul strange again” (a term Matthew Thiessen uses in his new book on Paul).
- It means trying to put Paul in his own place and time, not ours
- We will learn MORE about Paul for our preaching and teaching by trying to look at him from more than one angle.

Paul DID follow Jesus, after all. He influenced Christianity forever. So why focus on his Judaism?

- Imagine a biography of Leonard Cohen that focused on his relations with women, his songs, his addictions, his time as a Buddhist monk...**but never examined his Judaism.** You would miss so much about not only him, but also about his lyrics.
- **In your groups, come up with three things that Paul's *Judaism* made unique about his message.**



Paul within Judaism makes it easier to preach and teach Paul

- The Paul within Judaism approach helps us finally make sense of **the confusing things Paul says about Law**. In some places he praises it. In other places he denigrates it. He seems to make no sense. (Even 2 Peter notices this).
- Why does Paul say such conflicting things about Torah? The Paul within Judaism approach says that **he praises Torah when talking about its role for Jews, and condemns Torah as a way to God for non-Jews (gentiles)**
- So he is consistent. What changes is his **audience**.
- We forget that in Paul's day the situation was upside down compared to today
- Christian Jews (an oxymoron in our day) were the *usual and most numerous* followers of Jesus. Non-Jewish followers were a minority. Many people wondered if you could even be non-Jewish and follow Jesus!
- **What Paul did NOT want is for non-Jews to be obliged to follow Torah.**



We preach and teach passages from Paul as *theological, universal, and enduring*

- ***But what if many of them were meant to be practical, specific, and temporary?***
- For instance, what if they were meant to help Jesus-following Gentiles at Rome understand and not condemn their Jesus-following Jewish brothers and sisters?

Romans 3:19–31 New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised

¹⁹ Now we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. ²⁰ For 'no human being will be justified in his sight' by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin.

Righteousness through Faith

²¹ But now, irrespective of law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, ²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ^[a] for all who believe. For there is no distinction, ²³ since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; ²⁴ they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement^[b] by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; ²⁶ it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.^[c]

²⁷ Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faith. ²⁸ For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law. ²⁹ Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, ³⁰ since God is one; and he will justify the circumcised on the ground of faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith. ³¹ Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.

Footnotes

a. Romans 3:22 Or *through the faith of Jesus Christ*

b. Romans 3:25 Or *a place of atonement*

c. Romans 3:26 Or *who has the faith of Jesus*

Romans 3:19-31 **Make Scripture Weird Again version**

¹⁹ Now we know that whatever **the Torah** says, it speaks to those who are under Torah, so that every mouth may be silenced, and the whole world may be held accountable to the God of the Jews. ²⁰ For 'no human being will be justified in his sight' by deeds prescribed by Torah, for through Torah, [for Gentiles] comes the knowledge of sin.

Righteousness through Faith

²¹ But now, outside of Torah, the righteousness of the God of Israel has been disclosed [to all peoples], and is attested by "the Law and the prophets" (the Hebrew scriptures) , ²² the righteousness of God through dedication to Jesus the Messiah for all [gentiles] who believe. For there is no distinction *between Jews and others*, ²³ since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of the God of Israel; ²⁴ they *not we, but they Gentiles* are now justified by his gracefulness, as a gift, through the redemption that is in the Messiah Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement^[a] by his blood, effective through faith. The God of Israel did this to show his *integrity*, because in his divine patience he had passed over the sins previously committed [by the gentiles]; ²⁶ it was to prove at the present time that God himself is righteous and that the God of Israel *puts into proper relation* the one who is *dedicated* to Jesus.^[a]

²⁷ Then what becomes of *your non-Jewish* boasting? It is excluded. By what Torah? By that of works? No, but by the Torah of faith. ²⁸ For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the Torah [for Jews]. ²⁹ Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, ³⁰ since God is one; and God will justify the circumcised on the ground of faith and the *foreskinned* through that same faith. ³¹ Do we then overthrow the Torah by this faith *that is, the preaching that Gentiles are welcome as well* ? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the Torah.

Footnotes

a. Romans 3:22 Or *through the faith of Jesus Christ*

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c. Romans 3:26 Or *who has the faith of Jesus*

Putting on our
biblical
detective caps



1 Thessalonians 1 NRSV

- Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,
- To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.
- ² We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly ³ remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.
- ⁴ For we know, brothers and sisters^[a] beloved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵ because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of people we proved to be among you for your sake.
- And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, ⁷ so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. ⁸ For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place where your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it.
- ⁹ For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, ¹⁰ and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.
- **Spend a few minutes in your group with your biblical detective hats on. Come up with a few things that this passage tells us about Paul and about the Thessalonian followers of Jesus in the first century.**

1 Thessalonians 1 New Revised Standard Version

- Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,
- To the church **(assembly)** of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.
- ² We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly ³ remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.
- ⁴ For **we know**, brothers and sisters^[a] beloved by God, that he has chosen **you**, ⁵ because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as **you know** what kind of people **we** proved to be among you for your sake. **[Ethos = argument from character]**
- And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for **in spite of persecution** you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, ⁷ so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. ⁸ For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place where your faith in God has become known, **so that we have no need to speak about it.**
- ⁹ For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and **how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, ¹⁰ and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.**

Breaking down Paul's initial preaching

- **how you turned to God from idols,** (new thing: “turning of gentiles”)
 - **to serve a living and true God,** (God of the Jews, as opposed to idols)
 - **to wait for his Son from heaven,** (the Parousia, coming of Messiah)
 - **whom he raised from the dead** (beginning of bodily resurrections)
 - **—Jesus,** (the messiah confirmed as Jesus, the crucified prophet)
 - **who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.** (there will be a coming judgement)
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- All these themes we think of as Christian - **the second coming, the resurrection, the coming judgement** – were already in Jewish scriptures and in texts considered scripture by 1st-century Jews like Paul and Jesus.
 - Paul is not inventing something new here. He is putting together already-existing scriptural themes in new ways, as teachers of Torah had always done. It's likely he was not the first, nor the only, Jewish follower of Jesus to interpret the Jewish texts in this way.

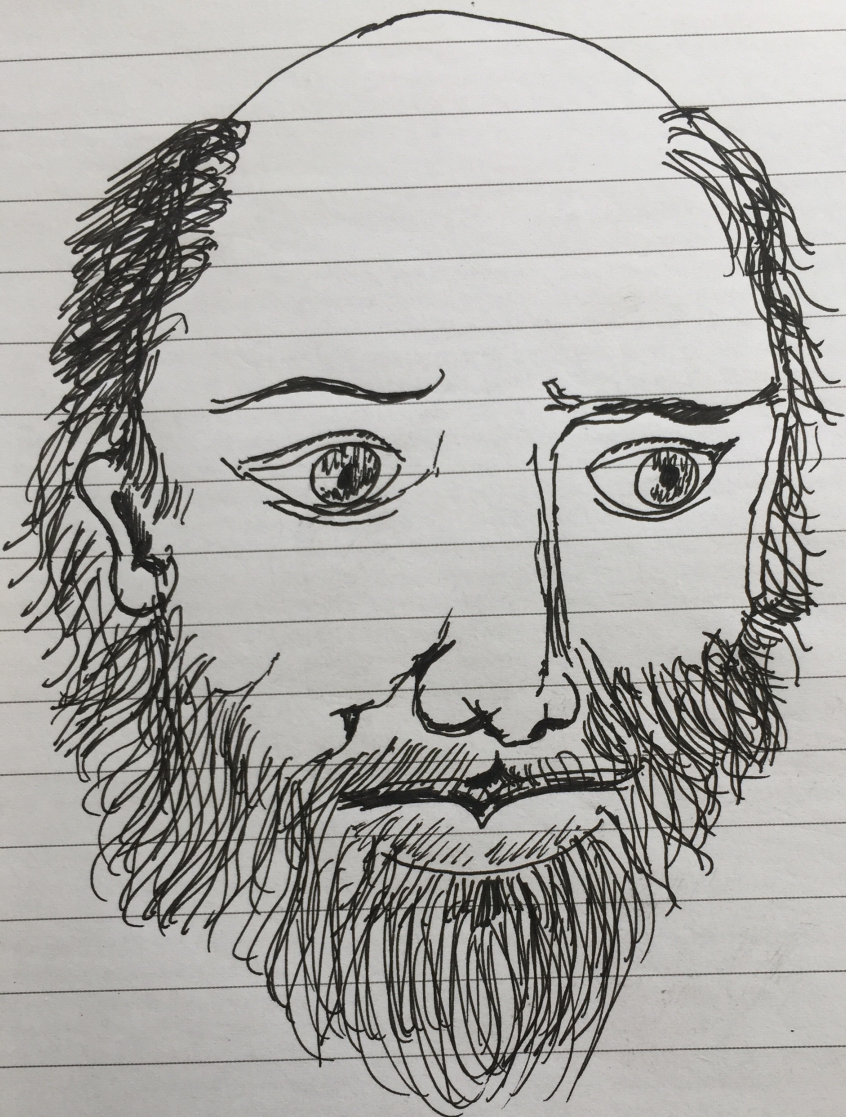
RHYMES WITH ORANGE

HILARY PRICE



What to say to
folks who might
insist: “this is all
just political
correctness, or
‘wokeness’”

- It is true, that to “discover” that Paul was essentially, and always, a Jew, even while following Christ, fits well within the temper of our post-Holocaust times.
- This could mean two things:
 1. **We are inventing evidence that’s not there.** (I don’t believe this for a second. Just reading his letters shows how much Paul emphasizes Torah, Abraham, Messiah, the God of the Jews, resurrection of the body, and many other Jewish concepts)
 2. **We are finally opening our eyes to evidence that has been there all along.** (last week I used the example of seeing our adult children as adults for the first time. It’s an example of seeing something that has been there a while!)



For when I am weak,
then I am strong -

People are complex.

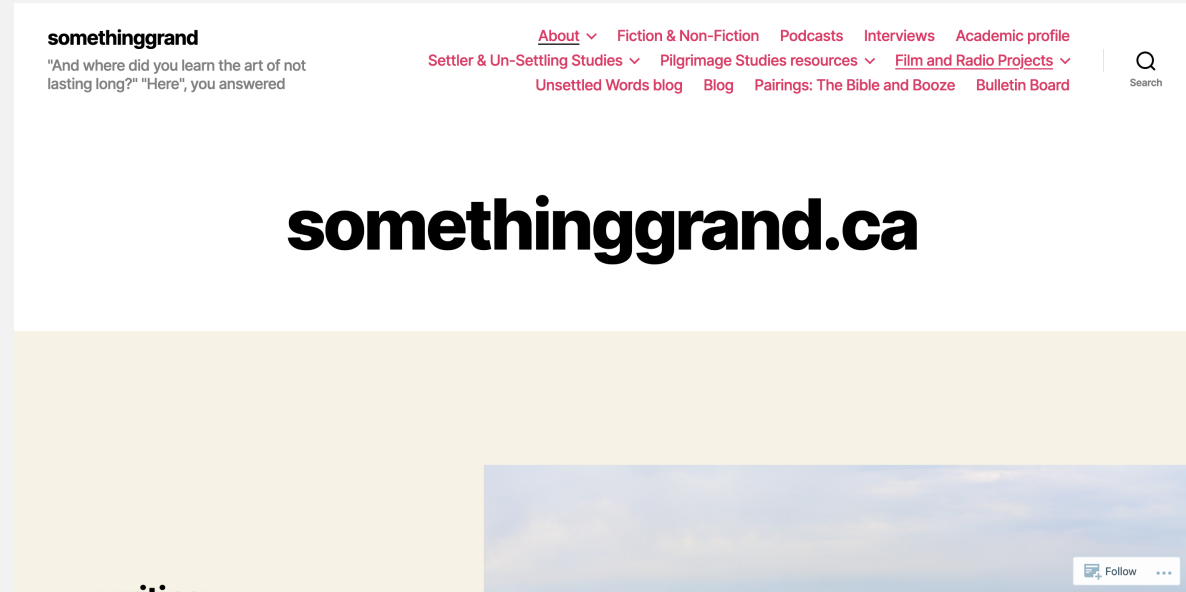
So was Paul.

- **Letter writer** (if it hadn't been for his letters, we'd never know him)
- **Martyr** (what he was mostly famous for, in the first couple centuries)
- **Preacher** (even though we have none of his sermons; letters are him "putting out fires")
- **Traveller** / Pilgrim (thousands of miles at a time when fewer people travelled)
- Depended on **women mentors & patrons**, he took pains to mention them when it helped him
- Depended on the **Roman Empire's** roads and security even while forecasting its end
- **Sexual ascetic** who prided himself on his self-discipline, but didn't want all his followers to follow him completely on this
- Either a natural or a trained **rhetorical speaker** who used "all the tricks of the trade" in his letters
- **Mystic** who had had multiple visions of the risen Christ and of heaven
- **Urban city dweller** used to soldiers, athletes, enslaved people, tradespeople
- **Apocalyptic Prophet** (who used the language of Jeremiah's prophetic call to describe himself)
- A Jew **OBSESSED with non-Jews** (and good thing for us!)



Next week: Paul & women
(which also means: Paul & men)

If you want
to review
or see my
slides:



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- <https://somethinggrand.ca/bulletin-board/>

- (Make sure to click on “Bulletin Board” if you’re on the main page of my website)



Rev. Dr. Ray
Aldred will be
in Montreal,
preaching at
St Andrew &
St Paul
Presbyterian,
Sunday March
19th

Some great places to learn more about Paul

- Bible Odyssey. A wonderful resource for getting into almost any topic about the Bible. For Paul, start here: <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/people/main-articles/paul/>
- Even though it's now a bit older, PBS's two-part series "From Jesus to Christ" is still a wonderful introduction to learning about the earliest Jesus followers, including Paul: <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/documentary/showsreligion/>
- I have some podcasts on Paul here: <https://soundcloud.com/user-441868857/sets/introduction-to-pauls-letters-at-the-undergraduate-level>
- I have quite a number of videos on Paul here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZpoHBUt59kw&list=PLWhnl_rNMO7InPNqRKKju_mykX73sDdE

