

## Chapter One

### RETURN OF THE RUNAWAY?

#### 1. A World of Difference

##### (i) Pliny and Paul

Roughly seventy years after the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, a Roman senator, mindful of his own importance and seniority, wrote to a friend about a third man, a social inferior who had got himself in trouble:

You told me you had been angry with a freedman of yours, and now he's come to see me! He threw himself at my feet and clung on to me as though I were you. He wept a lot, he asked for a lot, though he kept quiet about a lot too. To sum it up, he made me believe that he was genuinely sorry. I think he is a changed character, because he really does feel that he did wrong.

Yes, I know you are angry; and I know, too, that you have a right to be angry. But mercy earns most praise when anger is fully justified. Once you loved this fellow, and I hope you will love him again; for the moment, it's enough if you let yourself be placated. You can always be angry again if he deserves it, and you'll have all the more reason if you've been placated now. He's young, he's in tears, and you have a kind heart – make all that count. Don't torture him, and don't torture yourself either; anger is always torture for a soft heart like yours.

I am afraid it will look as though I'm putting pressure on you, not simply making a request, if I join my prayers to his. But I'm going to do it anyway, and all the more fully and thoroughly because I've given him a sharp and severe talking-to, and I've warned him clearly that I won't make such a request again. (This was because he needed a good fright, and I said it to him rather than to you, because it's just possible that I *shall* make another request, and receive it too – always supposing it's an appropriate thing for me to ask and for you to grant.)

Yours sincerely ...

The writer was Pliny: Pliny the Younger, nephew of the great naturalist whose death (at the eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79) he memorably described in another letter.<sup>1</sup> This younger Pliny was a barrister, a senator, a public official who held a priesthood and other civil service appointments. He was elected to the Consulship for the autumn of AD 100; the office was, by then, nowhere near as important as it had been under the Republic, but it was still the highest civic honour available. After further work in the courts, the Senate and the civil service, he was sent by the emperor Trajan as his personal representative to Bithynia and Pontus, in today's northern Turkey. There, it seems, he died; but not before writing a couple of puzzled letters

<sup>1</sup> Pliny *Ep.* 9.21; his account of his uncle's death is at 6.16, 20.

back home to his master on what to do about those strange people called 'Christians'. That was where we met him in an earlier volume.<sup>2</sup>

The present letter is remarkable in several ways. We know nothing more about the friend in question, one Sabinianus, except that he granted the request and earned himself a further letter from the great man, congratulating him on 'accepting my authority – or, if you like, indulging my prayers', and urging him to be ready for further acts of mercy even if there is nobody to make the case.<sup>3</sup> But we know enough to see what's going on. The freedman (in other words, a slave whom Sabinianus has freed but who is still clearly dependent on him) has got himself into trouble. Knowing Pliny to be a friend of his master, he has gone to him for help.

There then ensues a nice little comedy of manners, worthy almost of Jane Austen though without the dry humour. All three dancers retain their places in the implicit social hierarchy, with each making the moves appropriate to those places.

Pliny is at the top of the social pile, giving lordly instructions and emphasizing the fact by saying he's only making a request. Sabinianus is in the middle, obviously in command of the freedman but presumably a little in awe of the great Pliny, and eager to maintain friendship with such a man.<sup>4</sup> The freedman, who remains unnamed, is no longer a slave, but is nevertheless socially near the bottom of the pile, at the mercy of those above him. Pliny does what a man in his position might be expected to do, dispensing the philosophical and even psychological wisdom of the day: 'Mercy looks even better when you've a right to be angry, but being angry is such torture for a gentle-hearted chap like you!' He makes it clear that the freedman deserves anger, and that he himself has given him a good, menacing talking-to. The appeal is based on the man's genuine repentance; but, despite the protestations that this appears genuine, Pliny's subsequent warning indicates that he suspects it may not last. In saying one thing to the unfortunate freedman and another to Sabinianus he shows himself again the lofty master of the situation, playing the two others like a pair of (albeit very different) musical instruments.

Sabinianus, for his part, complies with Pliny's command/request, which involves no social change. He is subservient to Pliny, but his forgiveness, conditional as it is upon the man's present penitence and future good behaviour, leaves him even more obviously superior to the freedman than before. 'He has not demeaned himself by pardoning an inferior (his freedman), because his action represents his fitting submission to a superior (Pliny).'<sup>5</sup>

The freedman himself, tearful and apparently penitent, and now further frightened by Pliny's warnings, is, we may suppose, deeply grateful to them

<sup>2</sup> 10.96; cf. *NTPG* 348–50.

<sup>3</sup> 9.24.

<sup>4</sup> On the dynamics of 'friendship' in that world, cf. e.g. Aristotle *Nic. Eth.* 8; Cicero *Amic.*; and e.g. Herman 1987.

<sup>5</sup> Barclay 2004 [1997], 106. The whole discussion is illuminating.

both. He is determined, at least until further notice or provocation, to know his place and to play the part of a well-behaved social inferior.

In terms of the customs of the time, the unnamed freedman was quite lucky. He was at least free, not a slave, even though the net result of that change may not have been very significant in real terms (he was presumably technically at liberty to leave Sabinianus and seek his fortune elsewhere, but many ex-slaves remained without the means to do such a thing).<sup>6</sup> His master could have made life very unpleasant for him. He would not have faced the extreme danger of the runaway slave, but punishments and deprivations of many kinds might have awaited his projected return. All the more reason for him to go back with his tail between his legs and learn to lie low.

We move from Pliny's world of carefully calibrated social distinctions into a very different universe. Roughly half way in time between the resurrection of Jesus and Pliny's letter, we have another letter whose surface similarities mask a deep, disturbing dissimilarity. Here is its central core:

I have considerable boldness in the Messiah to command you to do the right thing, but I prefer to appeal on the basis of love, seeing as I am Paul, an elder and now also a prisoner of the Messiah, Jesus. I appeal to you about my child, whose father I have become in my imprisonment: Onesimus! Once he was useless to you, but now he is useful to you and to me. I'm sending him to you – sending the one who is my very heart. Actually, I would have liked to keep him here beside me, so that he could work for me on your behalf in my imprisonment for the royal announcement, but I didn't want to do anything without your approval, so that your good deed wouldn't be done, as it were, under compulsion, but willingly.

Perhaps this is why he was separated from you for a while, so that you could have him back for ever, no longer as a slave but as more than a slave, a beloved brother – especially to me, but how much more to you, but in human terms and in the lord.

So: if you count me as your partner, receive him as you would me. If he has wronged you or owes you anything, put it down on my account. I, Paul, will repay: I'm writing this with my own hand! (Not to mention the fact that you owe me your own very self . . .) Yes, brother, let me have some benefit from you in the lord! Refresh my heart in the Messiah.

I'm writing this fully confident of your obedience, and knowing that you will do more than I say. At the same time, get a guest room ready for me. I'm hoping, you see, that through your prayers I will be given to you as a gift . . .

Paul's letter to Philemon, of which this extract forms verses 8–22, has some interesting similarities to that of Pliny to Sabinianus. The most obvious is the standard rhetorical ploy: Far be it from me to force your hand – I wouldn't tell you what to do, now would I? No, no, of course not, think Sabinianus and Philemon with a wry smile; you merely put me in an impossible position! The frequent references to friendship, at various levels, is a standard theme right across the world of ancient letter-writing.<sup>7</sup> Then again Paul, like Pliny, speaks simply of 'obedience'. He is in fact (or so it seems) appealing,

<sup>6</sup> cp. Epict. *Disc.* 4.1.33–40 on the troubles faced by ex-slaves, and how they might wish to return to their former state – though Epictetus, admittedly, sees even membership of the Senate as a form of 'slavery', albeit of the most shiny (*liparōtatē*) sort. See e.g. Rapske 1991, 198 n. 63: 'the conditions of contract between freedmen and their former masters – and now patrons – often left them in a state scarcely better than slavery', citing *Digest* 38.1–5. Cf. too de Vos 2001.

<sup>7</sup> See Herman 1987; Kumitz 2004; and most commentators.

still more explicitly than Pliny, to his possession of a status which places him in a position to give orders, should he wish to do so (which of course, he insists, he doesn't!). Here, however, is the first rather shocking dissimilarity: Paul is in prison, a fact he mentions not as though it decreases his social standing (which it naturally did) but as though it gives him a higher status rather than a lower one.

But the main impression, once we study the two letters side by side, is that they breathe a different air. They are a world apart. Indeed – and this is part of the point of beginning the present book at this somewhat unlikely spot – this letter, the shortest of all Paul's writings that we possess, gives us a clear, sharp little window onto a phenomenon that demands a historical explanation, which in turn, as we shall see, demands a *theological* explication. It is stretching the point only a little to suggest that, if we had no other first-century evidence for the movement that came to be called Christianity, this letter ought to make us think: Something is going on here. Something is different. People don't say this sort of thing. That isn't how the world works. A new way of life is being attempted – by no means entirely discontinuous with what was there already, but looking at things in a new way, trying out a new path. There is, after all, a world of difference between saying, 'Now, my good fellow, let me tell you what to do with your stupid freedman and then we'll all be safely back in our proper positions' and 'Now, my brother and partner, let me tell you about my newborn child, and let me ask you to think of him, and yourself, and me, as partners and brothers.' This new way of life, and the new patterns of thinking which sustain it, are what the present book is about. I choose to begin here, with this sharp little vignette, one snapshot from Paul's copious album. Sometimes it is better to get your hands dirty at once rather than approach a topic with lofty generalizations.

But – a new way of life? One can already hear in the background, at the very suggestion of such a difference between Pliny and Paul, a whirring of cogs in the postmodern imagination. Yes, yes, think many readers, this simply reveals Paul as a master of manipulation. The hermeneutic of suspicion casts its usual wet blanket over all possibilities other than the reinscribing of narratives of money, sex and particularly power, and it is power that people often see at work here.<sup>8</sup> Sometimes this proposal is part of the contemporary drive to make Paul simply yet one more hellenistic thinker and writer. He can't, people think, be as different as all that! It *must* 'really' be all about social manipulation . . .

To this the only real answer is, How might we tell? and the answer is 'through a more thorough study, not only of the history and theology, but of the entire worldview which here comes to the surface'. Such study must be both as broad as an entire worldview always is, and as deeply rooted as we can make it in an actual close reading of the text. And when we read this Pauline text closely, it compels us to focus on two features not sufficiently remarked upon: the actual request Paul makes, which is clear and sharp

<sup>8</sup> cf. e.g. Polaski 1999, in a line which includes Shaw 1983 and goes back, at least, to Nietzsche (Polaski 1999, 21). See the recent discussions in e.g. Punt 2010; Botha 2010.

despite what people have often said, and the supporting argument he offers, which is likewise clear and sharp, and which opens up a window on the heart of Paul's beliefs and aims, which are the central focus of this book.

(ii) The Runaway Slave?

Recent scholarship has gone round and round in circles in debating the question of what Paul was actually asking for. The letter to Philemon is sometimes hailed as a crystal-clear example of the 'real Paul', an out-and-out abolitionist, demanding of his convert Philemon that he give another convert, Onesimus, his freedom.<sup>9</sup> But the implicit narrative of this letter is more complex than that. And implicit narratives – the 'referential sequence' which explains what was going on, as opposed to the 'poetic sequence' which consists of the flow of thought in the text itself – are vital if we are to understand any text, whether a poem of Catullus, a treatise of Plato, a novel of Jane Austen, or a letter of Paul.<sup>10</sup> Once we come to grips with that, the real heart of the letter stands out – not simply the request itself, but also the way Paul makes it.<sup>11</sup>

But this is already to run somewhat ahead of the argument. Was Onesimus even a runaway slave? That, to be sure, has been the majority opinion, at least since Chrysostom. According to this view, Philemon was a householder (probably in Colosse) who had been converted under Paul's ministry, probably in Ephesus. Paul had not been to Colosse himself, but many from that town would find their way the eighty miles or so down the Lycus valley to Ephesus, the great metropolis and seaport of the region. Onesimus, one of Philemon's slaves, had run away, as slaves often did, perhaps helping himself to some money, again as runaway slaves often did. In this hypothetical narrative, Onesimus made his way to Paul in prison, presumably deliberately and seeking help. This is not as problematic as some have suggested, and is considerably more likely than his happening to run into Paul by some extraordinary coincidence, let alone his finding himself imprisoned by chance alongside him. Granted, he was taking a big risk by going to Paul. Remember Pliny. But he had already risked everything in running away in the first place.

Before looking at the other options, I should stress that I side with the majority of contemporary scholars, who think that the place where Paul was imprisoned at that stage was Ephesus. The fact that such an Ephesian

<sup>9</sup> e.g. Borg and Crossan 2009, ch. 2. They then play off this crystal-clear abolitionist against the 'Paul' of some other letters; see below.

<sup>10</sup> On the distinction between 'poetic sequence' and 'referential sequence', see Petersen 1985, esp. ch. 1 (discussed recently by Wendland 2010). Petersen gives a full and thorough discussion of Philemon itself with which I am in broad agreement, though I think he, like most, ultimately misses the most important point.

<sup>11</sup> This combination, in case anyone should ask a question as old as Chrysostom and Jerome, explains why this letter is part of the Christian canon of scripture; on which see e.g. Lohse 1971, 188; Kumitz 2004, 214f. n. 953.

imprisonment is mentioned neither in Acts nor by Paul himself in his letters is no bar to this very likely hypothesis. The matter is clinched, for me, by Paul's proposal of a visit to Philemon in the near future (verse 22). From Ephesus, that would be easy and natural. When he was in prison in Caesarea he was planning to go to Rome, and a visit to Colosse would not be part of such a journey. When under house arrest in Rome, he was still hoping to go on to Spain.<sup>12</sup> To place this letter in Ephesus, in the middle of Paul's ministry (before his final visit to Corinth), is easy and natural, and would date it in the early or middle 50s.<sup>13</sup>

This already undercuts some of the objections to the 'runaway slave' hypothesis. We do not have to imagine Onesimus undertaking the long and complicated journey to Rome and then, by a wonderful coincidence, meeting up with the apostle through whom his master had been converted. People went to and fro up and down the Lycus valley all the time. Philemon might have had a town house in Ephesus. Onesimus might have grown up in Ephesus in the first place. There was no such thing as private life in the ancient world, except for the very rich, and then only with deaf-mute slaves. There is nothing improbable about Onesimus knowing, or discovering, where he would find Paul.

But had he run away? The historical options have frequently been rehearsed. Some have suggested that Philemon had sent him on an errand to Paul, and that Paul was merely asking to be allowed to keep him as a fellow-worker.<sup>14</sup> One writer has even suggested that Philemon and Onesimus were not master and slave, but actual brothers who had fallen out; but this, too, has not found support.<sup>15</sup> A more likely alternative, favoured now by several, is that Onesimus had come to Paul, much as the unnamed freedman had come to Pliny, not because he had run away but because some trouble had occurred between him and his master, and he needed to appeal for help to someone he knew to be a friend of his master.<sup>16</sup> This can be combined with the theory that he had been given to absconding

<sup>12</sup> Rom. 15.23f.

<sup>13</sup> On all this see now Reinmuth 2006, 15–18. Reinmuth points out, with plenty of classical material to hand, that Ephesus was a well-known place of sanctuary, not least for fugitive slaves, because of the Temple of Artemis (so also Wilson 2005, 318): Onesimus, he says, had a choice of sanctuary, and he chose Paul. Barclay 1991, 163 speaks of a 'current consensus' in favour of Ephesus (similarly, Arzt-Grabner 2010, 134f; Bird 2009b, 12–15; Müller 2012, 81; see too Fitzmyer 2000, 10; Osiek 2000, 126; Wilson 2005, 318f; Ryan 2005, 179–81, with helpful detail; Wolter 2010, 174). Against: e.g. Nordling 2004, 7; Moo 2008, 363f.

<sup>14</sup> For the variations on this theme, propounded by Knox 1935 in one way and Winter 1987 in another, see the summaries (and refutations) in e.g. Fitzmyer 2000, 17–19; Wilson 2005, 322–5.

<sup>15</sup> Callahan 1993; see Fitzmyer 2000, 18f; Moo 2008, 366.

<sup>16</sup> See e.g. Lampe 1985 (favouring the idea that Onesimus was appealing to Paul as an *amicus domini*, 'friend of the master'); Rapske 1991; Fitzmyer 2000, 20–3, setting out the legal basis (a legal opinion of a first-century jurist, Proculus, cited by the sixth-century Justinian: *Digesta* 21.1.17.4–5 and 21.1.43.1); Bird 2009b, 27–9; Cousar 2009, 98; Harrill 1999; 2009a; 2009b. A response to Harrill is provided by Nicklas 2008. Barclay 2004 [1997], 101f, has come round to this view. Perhaps the most helpful recent discussion of the background issues is that of Llewelyn 1998, 1–46.

in the past, and on this occasion found his way to Paul.<sup>17</sup> This would make him a ‘wandering slave’, not exactly a runaway as such.

There are problems with this view. It is sometimes suggested that had Onesimus been a runaway, in serious trouble, we should have expected Paul to explain that he was now sorry. But that, on the analogy of Pliny’s letter, is precisely what we should expect, not in a letter about a runaway slave (an apology, however sincere, might well not be enough to allay a master’s proper, and socially demanded, legal redress), but in a letter from an *amicus domini* intervening in a dispute. The absence of apology counts, not in favour of the *amicus domini* theory, but against. And – more importantly – for Paul to convey a profound apology from Onesimus *would merely serve to reinscribe the existing relationships*, as Pliny’s letter did with Sabinianus; and Paul is attempting something radically different.<sup>18</sup> That is why, when Paul does refer in verse 18 to Onesimus’s wronging Philemon, or owing him something – a point Paul would hardly have raised had there been no such question – he does so having already set up the categories within which this potential time-bomb can be defused.

That is why, finally, he does not refer to Onesimus as a ‘fugitive’. That is not the category in which he wants Philemon to see his former slave, even for a moment. No: he is *Paul’s beloved son* and therefore *Philemon’s beloved brother*. Those who have read this letter without seeing the profound, and profoundly revolutionary, theology it contains should ponder the social and cultural earthquake which Paul is attempting to precipitate – or rather, which he believes has already been precipitated by God’s action in the Messiah. As he explains in the second letter to Corinth, written most likely a matter of weeks or months after this one, his own self-definition is focused on the claim that the one God, who ‘was reconciling the world to himself in the Messiah’, has ‘entrusted him with the message of reconciliation’.<sup>19</sup> This letter brings that vocation itself into sharp and personal focus.

Nor will it do to suggest that verse 15 (‘Maybe this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you could have him back for ever’) might be a hint that Onesimus had come to Paul with the intention of sorting matters out and then returning to Philemon in perpetuity.<sup>20</sup> If Paul had been writing to say, of a slave who had come to ask him to intervene in a domestic dispute, that ‘actually, he came to me in order to be able to go back to you for ever’, he would certainly not have said ‘maybe’ (*tacha*). That would at once cast doubt on the sincerity of Onesimus’s position (see below). That one word points securely to the more traditional understanding of the verse, that it expresses Paul’s hope that a providential purpose might

<sup>17</sup> So Arzt-Grabner 2001; 2003, 157–9; 2004; 2010.

<sup>18</sup> I thus disagree with Llewelyn 1998, 42, who suggests that ‘it seems almost essential to the genre to include some overt expression of or allusion to remorse.’ If this is so, Paul is subverting the genre – not because remorse does not matter but because he has his eye on a bigger prize than merely restoring a *status quo*.

<sup>19</sup> 2 Cor. 5.19.

<sup>20</sup> So e.g. Arzt-Grabner 2010, 124.

be at work in the whole scenario. In any case, I shall shortly suggest a very different interpretation of the phrase ‘for ever’, which points to a quite different underlying narrative in Paul’s mind at least.

One must in any case question whether the niceties of a legal distinction articulated by a jurist sitting in his study in Rome, as reported by a legal theorist half a millennium later, is sufficient to mark a distinction that would actually obtain in the back streets of Ephesus or the lanes of the Lycus valley. The only legal distinction between a runaway slave and one who had gone without permission to seek out an *amicus domini* was the private ‘intention’ of the slave in question.<sup>21</sup> The outward circumstances would look the same either way. No doubt many actual runaways, if caught, might say, ‘I was only going for help.’ Who could tell? Who would believe them? As John Barclay remarks, ‘it is a moot point how much Roman law has to do with the realities of social prejudice.’<sup>22</sup> There is a sense, of course, in which Paul was indeed an *amicus domini* in this particular case, but the letter does not reflect that perspective – which, as I said, would leave the social categories firmly intact. Paul is after a bigger and more costly prize altogether.

### (iii) The Request

So what is Paul asking for? Onesimus has come to him, has been converted, and is now being sent back to his master. What is Paul’s request?

Despite those who have suggested that Paul is unclear at the crucial point, I see his central request as straightforward and unambiguous. It comes at verse 17, which should be seen as effectively the start of a new paragraph: ‘So, anyway, if you reckon me a partner in your work, receive him as though he was me.’<sup>23</sup> The main thing Paul is asking for is that, when Onesimus returns home, Philemon will regard him as if he were Paul himself: ‘if you regard me as a *koinōnos*, accept him (*proslabou auton*) as if he were me.’ That will follow directly from Philemon’s being prepared to see him as a brother in Christ (verse 16). It will have the effect, at the very least, in his not condemning Onesimus to any of the punishments which might have been expected – up to and including death by crucifixion. But Paul wants more than that. He wants Philemon to see him as a beloved brother.

The two key words here are *koinōnos* and *proslabou* (‘receive’ or ‘welcome’). The whole letter is both an expression of, and an exhortation to, the central Pauline theme of *koinōnia*, ‘fellowship’ or ‘partnership’ – a word with multiple resonances both in the commercial world, where it might describe a business partnership, and in many personal or familial settings

<sup>21</sup> See Llewelyn 1998, 41–3.

<sup>22</sup> Barclay 2004 [1997], 102.

<sup>23</sup> The Gk. of the opening phrase is *ei oun*. The only other occurrence of this phrase in Paul (Col. 3.1) is likewise the obvious beginning of a new section, summing up what has gone before and drawing practical conclusions. Cf. e.g. Arzt-Grabner 2003, 275, who describes v. 17 as ‘Das eigentliche Zentrum des Briefes’, the essential centre of the letter; Nordling 2004, 260.



(and of course in Paul's world many businesses would be family concerns). It also resonated powerfully with what we might call a 'religious' sense, where a worshipper shares *koinōnia* with the divinity. Paul can use it in all of these senses, drawing together the deeply personal and theological experience of 'sharing' the very life of the Messiah with the deeply practical project of 'sharing' resources, especially money, among the Messiah's people.<sup>24</sup> Here in Philemon there is an umbilical link between the central opening statement of Paul's prayer in verse 6, where the active force is the *koinōnia tēs pisteōs sou*, 'the partnership of your faith', and verse 17, where Paul appeals to the fact that Philemon regards him as a *koinōnos*, 'partner'. This is the central thrust of the letter – as it is, indeed, of much of Paul's understanding of what it meant to be the Messiah's people. Here, as elsewhere, the short letter to Philemon provides an accurate signpost forwards to the wider Pauline concerns we shall explore throughout the present book.

Less well known than *koinōnia*, but no less significant, is the way Paul expresses the obligation which he understands to obtain between two or more members of the messianic family. They must 'welcome' (*proslambanesthai*) one another. This comes to particular expression in the lengthy section on mutual welcome in Romans 14 and 15: 'Welcome someone who is weak in the faith, but not in order to have disputes ... because God has welcomed them'; 'Welcome one another, therefore, as the Messiah has welcomed you, to God's glory.'<sup>25</sup> Whatever precise reconstruction we offer of the situation Paul envisages in Rome, the point is clear: at the heart of his work is the yearning and striving for *messianic unity across traditional boundaries*, whether it be the unity of Jew and Gentile in the Messiah (the main point of Galatians), the unity of the church under the lordship of the Messiah in a pagan and imperial context (part of the main point of Philipians, coming to memorable expression in 2.1–4), or, as here in Philemon, the unity of master and slave, expressing again what it means to be *en Christō*. 'So, if you reckon me a *koinōnos*, a partner, *proslabou auton*, welcome him as you would welcome me.'<sup>26</sup> Or, as he puts it in Galatians, 'There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no "male and female"; you are all one in the Messiah, Jesus.'<sup>27</sup> That unity, as we shall argue in Part II of the present book, was for Paul the central symbol of the Christian worldview. And, as we shall argue in Part III, it could only be

<sup>24</sup> Most of the NT occurrences of the *koinōnia* root are in Paul, though cf. too Ac. 2.42 where it refers to the community of goods in the early church. Apart from our present letter, Paul can speak of *koinōnia* in or with the Messiah (1 Cor. 1.9; 10.16; Phil. 3.10) or the spirit (2 Cor. 13.13; Phil. 2.1; cf. 2 Cor. 6.14) or the gospel (Phil. 1.5; cf. Gal. 2.9), or, frequently, with regard to the collection of money (Rom. 15.16; 2 Cor. 8.4; 9.13, with the cognate verb being used in the same sense in Rom. 12.13; 15.27; Gal. 6.6; Phil. 4.15); and he uses the cognate noun *koinōnos*, 'partner', in a similar range of meaning (1 Cor. 10.18, 20; 2 Cor. 1.7; 8.23). For discussion see e.g. the summary by O'Brien 1993, with bibliography.

<sup>25</sup> Rom. 14.1, 3; 15.7.

<sup>26</sup> Philem. 17; some MSS have the word already in v. 12, anticipating the climactic appeal of v. 17; see Metzger 1994 [1971], 589; Wilson 2005, 351. For the idea of welcoming or receiving one person as if they were another, cf. e.g. Gal. 4.14 (and behind that Mt. 10.40, etc.).

<sup>27</sup> Gal. 3.28.

attained, and indeed maintained, through freshly worked theology, rooted in Jesus the Messiah and activated through the spirit.

Verse 17 thus constitutes not only Paul's central request but the point at which we can see clearly how Philemon maps on to Paul's wider (and perhaps better known) themes. That wider reference in turn explains, even if it does not excuse to all readers today, the fact that for Paul the *reconciliation* and *mutual welcome* of all those 'in the Messiah' took precedence over everything else. Including requesting Philemon to set Onesimus free. I take seriously the point advanced by John Barclay, that there were good reasons why Paul could not and would not simply say 'Please set him free' – however frustrating that may be to us post-Enlightenment moralists, for whom the issue of slavery has become something of a moral touchstone, not least due to the great abolitionist movements of the nineteenth century and the link of the slavery then abolished with colonialism and racism, neither of which had anything to do with slavery in Paul's world.<sup>28</sup> For Paul, much as he valued freedom, the mutual reconciliation of those who belonged to the Messiah mattered more than anything else. For Philemon to have responded angrily to Paul's letter by giving Onesimus his freedom but declaring that he never wanted to set eyes on him again would have meant defeat for Paul. Reconciliation was what mattered. That is why Paul wrote this letter.

The apostle was, after all, quite capable of being very, very clear and direct when he wanted to be. When he appears unclear to us it may well be both that he is saying something different from what we expect him to say, and that he is aware of sensitivities which generate a roundabout style in order to conform, not only to local rhetorical expectations, but also to the actual situation.<sup>29</sup> Most of those who either congratulate Paul on asking for Onesimus's freedom, or castigate him for not doing so, assume, shall we say, a black-and-white world in which the only thing a first-century moralist ought to say about slaves was 'Free them all!' The actual situation was somewhat different. As many have pointed out, freed slaves were by no means always better off. Those who deal daily with pastoral and political realities often find it irritating to be told by academics what they should do, or what pastors like Paul should obviously have done. As we shall now see, I do indeed think he is hinting at Onesimus's manumission – almost in a throw-away line at the end of verse 21 – but I do not think that that is the letter's main thrust.

<sup>28</sup> See Barclay 1991, esp. 176f., 183, stressing the way in which slavery was woven into every aspect of the social fabric. Anyone, from any nation, race or social class, could become a slave in Paul's world, and many slaves could and did attain freedom and independence. See too Byron 2003 and 2004. On American views of slavery see now esp. Atkins 2010; on the relevance of the American scene for interpreting the NT, see Meeks 1996. A recent collection of essays which reads Philemon mostly through the lens of contemporary American questions is that of Johnson, Noel and Williams 2012. These are important questions but, despite many interesting angles of vision, I am not persuaded that they shed very much historical light on the text.

<sup>29</sup> On the 'Asiatic' style of this letter, along with Ephesians and Colossians, see Witherington 2007.

Focusing attention on verse 17 as the clear, and thoroughly Pauline, central appeal of the letter allows the two other implicit requests to have their proper, if subordinate, place. It is at these, I think, that Paul is hinting in the cryptic language of verses 14 ('I didn't want to do anything without your permission'), 20 ('give me some benefit, refresh my heart') and particularly 21 ('I know you'll do more than I say'). What are these two concerns?

It is held by some to be quite obvious that Paul is requesting that Onesimus be sent back to him again, so that he can work for Paul in the ministry of the 'royal announcement' (verse 13).<sup>30</sup> That is clearly a possibility, though sometimes obscured by the second suggestion: Paul is asking, or at least hinting, that Philemon should give Onesimus his freedom. The two can of course be combined: verses 12 and 14 suggest that Onesimus be sent back, and verse 21 that he be sent back as a free man.

I think the majority are more or less correct: Paul did indeed want Onesimus back as a co-worker, and was hinting at emancipation.<sup>31</sup> But I am inclined to think, in addition, that something else is going on which, like the emphasis on mutual reconciliation, points beyond the small horizons of this letter to the larger worldview upon which Paul draws elsewhere.

The cryptic reference to Philemon 'having him back for ever' (verse 15) may be a deliberate allusion to the pentateuchal law which allowed a slave to decide to forego the manumission which was legally available in the seventh year, and to stay 'for ever' with the family.<sup>32</sup> We remind ourselves that Israel's scriptures were as familiar to Paul, and as readily available in his well-stocked mind, as Beethoven's sonatas to a concert pianist. Paul, faced with a dilemma concerning a slave and a master, would naturally reach, not for our post-Enlightenment narratives of liberation, but for the material on this very subject within his own scriptures, which after all told their own large-scale narrative of the freeing of an entire nation of slaves. That was the way his mind most naturally worked – especially because he believed, and taught repeatedly, that the ultimate 'exodus' had now occurred in and through Jesus.<sup>33</sup>

No doubt some will insist that to detect an allusion like this is out of order; that only those biblical echoes may be allowed which we can be sure

<sup>30</sup> e.g. Marshall 1993, 188.

<sup>31</sup> See e.g. Nordling 1991. Barclay 1991, 172 says it is 'tolerably clear' that the letter was requesting Onesimus's return.

<sup>32</sup> Ex. 21.6; Dt. 15.17 (granted, this law referred to a native Israelite slave in an Israelite family). Cf. too Lev. 25.39–41 for the 'jubilee' legislation, with a different 'exception' clause (25.46) about foreign slaves who may be held *eis ton aiōna*. I referred to this possibility in my commentary (Wright 1986b, 192) but did not develop it at all there (similarly Wilson 2005, 355). Cp. e.g. Harris 1991, 266, following Sasse in *TDNT* 1.209, who points out that the 'secular' meaning of the Greek phrase was 'for ever' in a this-worldly sense. This both 'biblical' and 'secular' meaning (according to the division of the *TDNT* article), together with parallels such as 1 Cor. 8.13, make it very unlikely that Paul means 'for eternity' in the sense of 'after death' (contra e.g. Fitzmyer 2000, 113 and many others; see the list in Moo 2008, 420 n. 89). The key phrase in Ex. and Dt. was well enough known for a direct echo in Job 40.28 LXX (= EVV 41.4), where God asks Job whether Leviathan will make a covenant with him, so that he can have him as *doulon aiōnion*, 'a slave for ever'. We may doubt whether either Job or God thought of Job enslaving Leviathan in the world to come.

<sup>33</sup> See below, 1499–56, and the essay on Paul and scripture in *Perspectives*, ch. 32.

Paul's intended audience would certainly have recognized.<sup>34</sup> But that is (to be frank) not how most writers write, and we may be confident that it is not how Paul thought. Take that route, and there will be nothing left remarkable beneath the visiting moon. Take, though, the risk of assuming that the texts' footfalls echo in the memory of one familiar with them from boyhood; assume that there are indeed times when one can find the mind's construction in the phrase; and the reward may be not only an insight into the way Paul's mind worked but also a sudden clarity about what he was really saying in this particular instance.<sup>35</sup> This, in verses 15 and 16, is the platform upon which Paul can then make his central appeal in verse 17. Before he gets to questions of sending Onesimus back, let alone giving him his freedom, he places the whole situation within the closest available scriptural background.

But does that not subvert the larger appeal before it is even made? Might it not (supposing Philemon picked up the biblical reference, or had it explained to him) simply reinforce the social situation, that Onesimus is Philemon's slave and evermore shall be so? It might indeed, if that was where Paul left the matter. But he does not. He proceeds step by step. To see how this works we have to envisage the actual situation of Onesimus going back to Colosse (in the company of Tychicus, assuming this to be the same journey as that described in Colossians 4.7–9). To envisage this moment is to highlight the subtlety of what Paul is doing.

He is not sending Onesimus back with a glint in his eye and a swagger in his step which says cheerfully, or even cheekily, to Philemon, 'Paul is telling you to set me free.' Paul is sending him back into a dangerous and difficult situation, in which he will express a proper sorrow for anything he had done wrong, and a basic request: please allow me back without punishment, and I will serve you 'for ever'. Echoes of the law in Exodus 21.2–6 and Deuteronomy 15.12–18 indicate that the first thing to aim at is a willing and happy reconciliation. Other echoes may come to our minds, too: 'treat me as one of your hired servants.' Paul would be hoping that Onesimus would act, from his heart, the part of the penitent prodigal, and that Philemon would play the part of the forgiving father.<sup>36</sup>

Paul would know that Philemon's decision would be quasi-judicial. This is already implied by the verb he uses in verse 12 (*anapempō*), which does not

<sup>34</sup> See e.g. Stanley 2004, discussed in ch. 15 below.

<sup>35</sup> On the possibility that Paul might have written many things which his first audiences did not understand, see of course 2 Pet. 3.15f., and cf. Hays 2005, 30. On the absolute necessity of exuberant exegesis of exuberant writing (boring exegesis *must* be wrong when the texts are so obviously full of life) see Wright 2005 [*Fresh Perspectives*], 17f., 45f.; and Martyn 1997, 120 n. 100, speaking of 'the temptation to be too modest, limiting ourselves to points which can be scientifically demonstrated beyond doubt'; Hays 2002 [1983], xxxiv.

<sup>36</sup> Lk. 15.19. To chase this down in terms of Paul's implicit knowledge of stories like this would be fascinating, but lies beyond our present purpose. We note that, whereas Pliny tells Sabinianus how penitent his freedman is, Paul will not speak for Onesimus on this subject, but expects him to demonstrate it. Wall 1993, 210f. points out that Chrysostom observes a parallel between Onesimus and the Joseph of the Genesis stories.

simply mean ‘send back’ but ‘send “up” for trial’.<sup>37</sup> Paul is probably, though, hinting at the request which seems to be implied in verses 13 and 14, that once reconciliation has happened (the central point, as I have said), Onesimus might be sent back again to the apostle in order to resume working alongside him.

If that is so, then the further hint in verse 21 (‘perhaps you’ll do more than I say’) would indeed refer most naturally to manumission. We note again that the larger narrative context of both Exodus 21 and Deuteronomy 15 is precisely that of God’s freeing of his slave-people at the exodus, and that Deuteronomy refers back to that as the motivating principle: ‘Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and YHWH your God redeemed you; for this reason I lay this command upon you today’ (15.15). Paradoxically, then, the very passages which Paul is echoing to support his first and main request, that Onesimus be accepted back as a beloved family member (albeit still a slave), point beyond, to what I suggest is Paul’s third, and deeply cryptic, request: ‘perhaps you will do more than I say ...’

The threefold request to Philemon then looks like this. First, accept Onesimus back, in principle, as a humble but reconciled brother in Christ (though still as a slave); do not punish him. Second, please send him back to me as an assistant. Third, perhaps, in doing so, you will also give him his freedom. The double-effect biblical allusion says, on the one hand, ‘perhaps you will have him back for ever’ (the first of the requests), but, on the other, ‘perhaps you will do more than I say’ (the third). If I am right, Paul is teaching Philemon, and indeed Onesimus (as according to Richard Hays Paul had to teach the Corinthian church), to *think within the biblical narrative*, to see themselves as actors within the ongoing scriptural drama: to allow their erstwhile pagan thought-forms to be transformed by a biblically based renewal of the mind.<sup>38</sup> Here we see one of the most fundamental differences between Pliny and Paul. Pliny’s appeal, we remind ourselves, reinscribed the social dynamics already present. Paul’s subverted them.

These further proposals, about the implied second and third requests, cannot be set in stone. Paul’s studied reticence (reminding us of his unwillingness to use the word ‘money’ throughout 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, the two chapters about the ‘collection’) may not allow for such a thing. But it seems a plausible reading of the letter. And, if a young man called Onesimus were indeed to return to Ephesus to work alongside Paul in the mid-50s, it is not entirely impossible that he is the same person referred to sixty years later by Ignatius as the bishop of Ephesus, though since the name was common this, too, must remain quite uncertain.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup> So, rightly, Moule 1957, 145; Derrett 1988, 87, a clear point in an article full of characteristic and confusing rhetorical fireworks. BDAG 70, offering ‘send back’ here and Lk. 23.11, 15, seems to ignore the clearly legal setting of the latter passage. LSJ cite this ref. under ‘remit, refer to higher authority’. This sense thus forms a nice, and no doubt deliberate, rhetorical tension with Paul’s own claim to authority in vv. 8, 14, 20f.

<sup>38</sup> See Hays 1997, *passim*; and Hays 2005, 1–24, esp 23.

<sup>39</sup> See Ign. *Eph.* 1.3; 2.1; 6.2. On the frequency of the name see e.g. Fitzmyer 2000, 107.

## (iv) The Central Argument

These discussions about the actual situation and the request Paul made have tended, as I said, to make exegetes overlook the point which is just as important in its way as the question of *what* Paul was asking for, namely the argument he uses to back up this central appeal. In order to make his triple (and increasingly cautious) request, Paul adopts a strategy so striking in its social and cultural implications, so powerful in its rhetorical appeal, and so obviously theologically grounded, that despite the chorus of dismissive voices ancient and modern the letter can hold up its head, like Reepicheep the Mouse beside the talking bears and elephants, alongside its senior but not theologically superior cousins, Romans, Galatians and the rest.<sup>40</sup>

Paul's strategy is the outflowing of the theme which he himself highlights in the dense but ultimately (I believe) clear statement of the letter's appeal in verse 6. As was his custom, the opening greeting and prayer contain the seed from which the letter will grow to full flower. The heart of it all, as already suggested, is *koinōnia*, a 'partnership' or 'fellowship' which is not static, but which enables the community of those who believe to grow together into a unity across the traditional divisions of the human race.<sup>41</sup> This is a unity which is nothing other than the unity of Jesus Christ and his people – the unity, indeed, which Jesus Christ has won for his people precisely by his identifying with them and so, through his death and resurrection, effecting reconciliation between them and God. This is what Paul prays for in verse 6, and this is what he appeals for, dramatically and christologically, in verses 17–20, which form the letter's climax.

He works towards the prayer of verse 6 by thanking God (verses 4 and 5) for Philemon's 'love and faith towards the lord Jesus and to all his holy people'. This, it is normally assumed, is a careful chiasmic (ABBA) structure, 'love ... to the people' enclosing 'faith towards the lord Jesus'. The stylistic device is not merely decorative. Faith towards Jesus is the energizing heart of the community's life of love. This then leads directly into verse 6, the main subject of the prayer Paul has mentioned in verse 4. He is praying, he says,

that the partnership which goes with your faith may have its powerful effect, in realizing every good thing that is [at work] in us [to lead us] into the Messiah.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Harrill 2009a, 499 is typical of many who miss what is going on here: 'the letter contains no general theology, doctrine, or gospel message ...'. Barclay 1991, 175, 183, followed by e.g. Cousar 2009, 104 suggests that Paul didn't know what to recommend, and could 'do little more than offer a variety of different suggestions'; I think this, too, misses the heart of the matter. Contrast e.g. Wolter 2010. Those unfamiliar with Reepicheep the Mouse should consult the Narnia novels of C. S. Lewis, particularly *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (Lewis 1952).

<sup>41</sup> See Nicklas 2008, 210 on the centrality of *koinōnia tēs pisteōs*.

<sup>42</sup> 'At work' is my gloss, based on *energēs* seven words earlier, to bring out the force of 'every good thing which is in us into Christ'; 'to lead us' slackens the force of Paul's terse phrase but explains what 'into Christ' actually means: see the discussion below. Several good MSS read 'in you' for 'in us'; nothing vital hinges on this, but see below n. 50.

This, unfortunately, is so dense, and demands a familiarity with some less well known Pauline themes, that many, including translators as well as commentators, have pulled it out of shape in various directions. Once Paul's central point is grasped, the verse is not in fact unclear or imprecise, as is often suggested.<sup>43</sup> For the moment we may simply summarize the key points.

First, 'the partnership which goes with your faith': literally, 'the partnership of your faith'. This *koinōnia* denotes the fellowship or partnership which is generated and defined by the faith which Philemon holds (that is the point of the singular 'your') in company with all other Christians. And this *koinōnia* is not a static fact. It is an energizing principle. It is meant to produce the full reality of which it speaks.

Paul's prayer is that it will become powerfully active . . . *into Messiah (eis Christon)*. We should not flatten this out, as most translations do, into something about 'our relationship to Christ'. As we shall see later, when Paul uses the word *Messiah* he evokes a world in which the Messiah, the king of Israel, sums up his people and their story in himself. Two thousand years of history, from the call of Abraham to the time of Jesus, are collected up like light in a prism and focused onto the royal representative in whom their meaning and purpose is fulfilled. 'All God's promises,' wrote Paul in a letter penned shortly after this one, 'find their Yes in him.'<sup>44</sup> Thus Paul can speak, here and in several other key passages (which are often misunderstood when this point is missed), of *Messiah* as a kind of collective noun: *Messiah-and-his-people*. The force of this, frequently, is that because of the Messiah, and particularly because of his death and resurrection and the 'faith/faithfulness' which that both enacted and evokes, people of all sorts (Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female) are brought into a single family. *Messiah-family*.<sup>45</sup>

Paul's prayer, then, is that the active *koinōnia* which goes with Philemon's faith 'may have its powerful effect', will be energetic, in bringing about *Christos*, *Messiah-family*, in Colosse. In particular, of course, Paul wants to highlight the 'slave-and-free' element of this new single people. But his vision at this point is broader: this is what he would pray, in principle, for many churches and many situations.

The closest parallel to this remarkable use (which was for Paul, we suggest, neither vague nor generalized but very precise) is found in Ephesians 4.

<sup>43</sup> e.g. Weima 2010, 41 n. 37.

<sup>44</sup> 2 Cor. 1.20. The linkage of date obviously depends on an Ephesians locale for the writing of Philemon.

<sup>45</sup> The *eis Christon* here is a traditional puzzle for commentators; see e.g. Riesenfeld 1982, 257; Wilson 2005, 342 (quoting Moule 1957, 142 as suggesting 'bringing us into (closer) relation to Christ', and also offering the NRSV's 'all the good that we may do for Christ' and the NEB footnote, 'that bring us to Christ'). Moo 2008, 394 opts for 'for the sake of Christ'; Bird 2009b, 135 is only marginally better ('the values embodied by the Messiah are upheld and honored in the benevolence of Christians towards their brothers and sisters in the faith'). Still 2011, 169 suggests that the phrase is vague, referring possibly 'both to what believers have received in Christ as well as to what they are to do for Christ.' See also recently, confessing puzzlement, Tilling 2012, 113. For the whole theme of 'corporate Messiahship' see below, 825–35.

There, in a wide-ranging appeal for unity, he declares that the wide variety of gifts given to different church members are designed to build up the Messiah's body, so that all may reach 'the stature of the mature Man', measured by the Messiah's fullness.<sup>46</sup> Thus, he says, 'we must speak the truth in love, and so grow up in everything into him – that is, into the Messiah, who is the head.'<sup>47</sup> Here the key phrase is *eis auton*, 'into him', with the 'him' further defined as 'the Messiah'. The whole train of thought reads, in fact, like a greatly enlarged and reapplied version of what Paul has written briefly and densely in Philemon verse 6. The Messiah, for Paul, is the one 'into whom' people are baptized, so that the whole company of his people may be spoken of, summed up in him, with the one word *Christos*.<sup>48</sup> Where there is division among the Messiah's people, their task, and Paul's longing, is that they may grow up 'into him' in terms of a powerful, loving unity. That is his prayer for Philemon and Onesimus.

The way this 'fellowship of faith' will have such a powerful effect, with this eventual goal, is 'through the knowledge of every good thing which is in us', or perhaps 'among us' (*en hēmin*). Perhaps the closest analogy to this way of putting it is Philippians 1.6, also in an opening greeting, thanksgiving and prayer to do with *koinōnia*: 'the one who began a good work in you will bring it to completion unto the day of Messiah, Jesus.'<sup>49</sup> The 'good work' in Philippians, and the 'every good thing' in Philemon, are generalized references to the transformation of character brought about by the spirit. This always has a forward look, ultimately to the day of the Messiah, but also to intermediate goals, anticipations of that ultimate future. Paul does not want his communities to sit back, fold their arms, and wait for the final day, but to work in the present time at the *koinōnia* which will be complete in the future.<sup>50</sup> God has already accomplished a work of transforming grace, by his spirit, in the hearts and lives of his people. As Philemon comes to full practical knowledge of this,<sup>51</sup> so the *koinōnia* will work powerfully towards the full unity in Christ which is the goal of that character-transforming work.

All this points us back to verse 17, which as we saw forms the rhetorical climax and main appeal of the letter. This is where verse 6 produces its own full effect. Here is the main request, neither vague nor unclear: 'accept him as you would accept me.' What we must now examine is how Paul arrives at this climax and then supports it. Along with the echo of Exodus and

<sup>46</sup> Eph. 4.12f.

<sup>47</sup> Eph. 4.15.

<sup>48</sup> e.g. 1 Cor. 1.13; Gal. 3.16 (on which see below, 868f.).

<sup>49</sup> *ho enarxamenos en hymin ergon agathon epitelesei achri hēmeras Christou Iēsou*. If Philippians was also written from Ephesus, as I think likely, then it too is close in date to Philemon, though I think the thought expressed in these two passages reflects a theme which was central to Paul throughout his work.

<sup>50</sup> The 'in us' in Philemon 6 is thus exactly parallel to the 'in you' in Philippians 1.6 (identical, if the variant is correct); see the discussions in e.g. Harris 1991, 252; Metzger 1994 [1971], 588; Nordling 2004, 214 n. 140; Kumitz 2004, 132f. n. 611. Kumitz and others are surely right to see 'in us' as *lectio difficilior*.

<sup>51</sup> The English word 'realization' carries the double sense both of 'coming to know' and of 'bringing into effect'. This may strain the Greek slightly too far, but it brings out Paul's ultimate meaning.



Deuteronomy, this is what gives the letter the flavour of a different world, intersecting to be sure with that of Pliny but embodying a completely different worldview, and thus encapsulating Paul's own foundational sense both of the gospel and of his own vocation.

Paul sets up the climax by expressing in the strongest and most evocative terms his own personal unity both with Philemon and with Onesimus.<sup>52</sup> Philemon is his beloved fellow worker (verse 1), the one whose faith, love and refreshing ministry have cheered Paul in prison (verses 5–7). Onesimus, meanwhile, is Paul's child, begotten in prison (verse 10), Paul's own very heart (verse 12), and a beloved brother (verse 16). Very well: the two of them are joined, *in Paul*, and this is how the *koinōnia tēs pisteōs*, the 'partnership of faith', is to be powerfully effective.<sup>53</sup>

So: if you count me as your partner, receive him as you would me. If he has wronged you or owes you anything, put it down on my account. I, Paul, will repay: I'm writing this with my own hand! (Not to mention the fact that you owe me your own very self ...) Yes, brother, let me have some benefit from you in the lord! Refresh my heart in the Messiah.

When Philemon meets Onesimus, he will be meeting Paul himself, and must receive the slave as if he were the apostle in person.<sup>54</sup> That is already striking enough, but what follows is even more so: any wrongs Onesimus has done, and anything he owes Philemon (I think we can take it that there were such wrongs, and such debts, otherwise Paul would hardly have introduced them here), are to be charged to Paul's account. The word for 'charged' is *elloga*, 'reckoned', the same root from which Paul's more famous account of 'reckoning righteous' and 'reckoning yourself dead to sin' is derived.<sup>55</sup> We might muse that since one possible punishment for a badly behaved or runaway slave was crucifixion itself, Paul may even be alluding to that: if he deserves the cross, then I'll take it for him! Then, just in case Philemon might think to himself, 'Well, in that case, Paul, you owe me rather a lot', Paul adds the vital parenthesis, with the gentle rhetorical line 'of course I'm not going to mention it, but': 'By the way, Philemon, remember you already owe me your own very self.'<sup>56</sup> Paul, in other words, has already invested in Philemon, and now wants a return on that investment: 'let *me* have some benefit from *you*.'

Here is the heart of the letter's argument, clear as a bell despite the deliberate unclarity of Paul's further hints. This is what it means for *koinōnia* to become 'active and energetic to bring us "into Messiah"'. Here, too, is the

<sup>52</sup> Many commentators bring this out well: see e.g. Gorman 2004, 460f. On Paul and Onesimus see further Horrell 2005, 127. On the *topos* of *parrēsia* and *philia* see Malherbe 1989b, 47f.

<sup>53</sup> This adds further weight to Morna Hooker's important insights on 'interchange in Christ'; indeed, it is perhaps surprising that Philemon is not mentioned in Hooker 1990.

<sup>54</sup> There is of course an echo of this in Pliny's account of the unfortunate freedman, who 'clung on to me as though I were you'. But Paul's request, based as it is on a different view of reality and personal identity, goes far deeper.

<sup>55</sup> Rom. 4.3–12; 6.11.

<sup>56</sup> Wall 1993, 216 suggests that Paul is hinting that Onesimus, by serving Paul in Philemon's place (v. 13), has already paid off Philemon's own debt. I do not find this convincing.

most outstanding contrast between Pliny's worldview and Paul's. Paul is not only urging and requesting but actually *embodying* what he elsewhere calls 'the ministry of reconciliation'. God was in the Messiah, reconciling the world to himself, he says in 2 Corinthians 5.19; now, we dare to say, God was in Paul reconciling Onesimus and Philemon. Paul doubtless learned a great deal from the rhetorical schools and practices of his day. But the heart of his technique of persuasion was a theological belief learned from the Messiah himself, whose identification with his people meant that their sins were 'reckoned' to him, and his death and resurrection 'reckoned' to them.<sup>57</sup> Paul does not say, as Pliny does, 'He seems genuinely penitent, so you'd better let him off.' He says, 'Put it down on my account.'

Here we have, in fact, the concrete outworking of Paul's theology of the cross – reflecting the same theme in 2 Corinthians 5 itself, written probably not long after Philemon. There are other close parallels, too, not least Galatians 2.15–21, to which we shall return many times in the present book. But it is instructive to read through the final paragraph of 2 Corinthians 5 and imagine Paul writing it after having been released from prison in Ephesus and, we must suppose, paying his visit to Philemon in Colosse. 'From this moment on,' he writes in 5.16, 'we don't regard anybody from a merely human point of view'; that is what Pliny and Sabinianus were doing, but Paul has an entirely different perspective. 'If anyone is in the Messiah, there is a new creation!' (5.17). Yes, indeed: Philemon himself is part of that new creation, and so is Onesimus, so the question of their social status is radically outflanked. How has this happened? Through the Messiah's cross: 'God was reconciling the world to himself in the Messiah,' (5.19) 'not counting their trespasses against them' (just as Paul was asking Philemon not to count Onesimus's trespasses against him), 'and entrusting us with the message of reconciliation.' There we have it. That is the ministry Paul has been exercising in the short letter. And, if I am right in my reading of 5.21, we have Paul's own statement, rich and theologically dense once more, of what it was that he was riskily attempting in writing using the argument he did. 'God made [the Messiah] to be sin on our behalf, so that in him we might embody God's faithfulness to the covenant.' Paul's apostolic ministry reaches one of its high points as he stands there with arms outstretched, embracing Philemon with one and Onesimus with the other. That is what the ministry of reconciliation looks like. The cross itself, though not mentioned explicitly in Philemon, emerges here, embodied in the ministry of the imprisoned apostle, as the theological substructure of the pastoral appeal. This is what gives energy and colour to the personal aims and rhetorical strategy of the entire short composition.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>57</sup> The whole of 2 Cor. 5.11–21 is about the 'ministry of reconciliation', climaxing in the 'reckoning' of sins to the Messiah; on the 'reckoning' of his death and resurrection to those who are 'in him', cf. Rom. 6.6–11.

<sup>58</sup> So, rightly, Gorman 2004, 462, though Gorman does not explore the full range of what Paul has here accomplished.

This is what most clearly marks Paul's letter to Philemon as breathing a different air from Pliny's to Sabinianus. Paul's Jewish worldview, radically reshaped around the crucified Messiah, challenges the world of ancient paganism with the concrete signs of the faithfulness of God. That is a summary both of the letter to Philemon and of the entire present book.<sup>59</sup>

Paul's rhetorical strategy includes an often-remarked set of puns, which make their subsidiary point. The apostle was adept at rhetorical tricks, but he never, I think, indulged in them for their own sake, using them rather to embody and highlight the larger point he was making. The name 'Onesimus' means, basically, 'useful'. (We note already a difference between Paul and Pliny: Paul names the subject of his letter, but Pliny never does.) Many slaves in the ancient world were given names that reflected their assumed functions or abilities. Philemon has clearly regarded this particular slave as badly named: he's supposed to be 'useful', but is actually 'useless'.<sup>60</sup> But the words Paul chooses in order to say 'once he was useless to you, but now he is useful to you and to me' are *achrēston* and *euchrēston*, alternative ways of saying the same thing, but also strongly echoing *Christos* (normally, it is assumed, pronounced with a long 'i').<sup>61</sup> Onesimus was useless but now is useful; he was formerly non-Christian but now is fully Christian. This is not wordplay for the sake of it. This is rhetoric in service of the underlying theology: Onesimus is in Christ, Christ by his spirit is in Onesimus, and that is foundational to the appeal Paul makes to Philemon.<sup>62</sup> There is a further echo of Onesimus's name in verse 20: Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you as well, *egō sou onaimēn*: if he is now in fact 'useful', perhaps you had better be 'useful' to me as well.

All this brings us to the heart of the 'world of difference' we have observed between Pliny's letter and Paul's: the presence of a fourth party in the drama. Paul, Philemon and Onesimus are not the only players on the stage. The fourth is the figure designated as *Christos*, 'Messiah' or 'King'. The authority which Paul has is precisely because he is 'a prisoner of the Messiah, Jesus' (verses 1, 9), giving him 'boldness in the Messiah' (verse 8), and it is the Messiah's people, bringing together Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, that are designated corporately as *Christos*, as I shall

<sup>59</sup> I want thus to press on beyond the helpful proposals of Wolter 2010 to see, not far behind the surface of this letter, a substantial and significant theological substructure: not simply 'justification by faith', important though that is, not least in its corollary of '*koinōnia* by faith', but the larger revision of Jewish categories and their deployment in the service of the worldwide mission.

<sup>60</sup> On slaves' names see e.g. Lightfoot 1876, 310f.; Fitzmyer 2000, 107.

<sup>61</sup> *Chrēstus* is itself a slave's name, and many suppose that this is reflected in the famous text of Suetonius where riots among the Roman Jews happened 'at the instigation of Chrestus', *impulsore Chresto*: Suet. *Claud.* 25.4. Cf. *NTPG* 355. The pun was noticed early: Lohse 1971, 200f. cites Justin (*Apol.* 1.4.1, 5) and Tertullian (*Apol.* 3.5). On the papyrological evidence see Arzt-Grabner 2003, 206–8. Fitzmyer 2000, 109 declares that the apparent pun is 'far-fetched' and says that the proper word for 'non-Christian' would have been *achristianos*. Here, not for the first time, I think Fitzmyer is putting the telescope to his blind eye. See too Wilson 2005, 323. On *Christos/Chrēstos* see BAGD 1091, and cf. the variant reading (the first hand in **⋈**) in 1 Pet. 4.15. *Chrēstos* is used as an adjective for God himself in 2 Macc. 1.24.

<sup>62</sup> Similarly, Gorman 2004, 457.

argue more fully later on. The only way to explain and understand the rhetorical strategy Paul deploys is by thinking through what we find about this Messiah elsewhere in Paul, particularly his death and the meaning which Paul sees within it. The major difference between Pliny and Paul is that the heart of Paul's argument is both a gently implicit Jewish story, the story of the exodus which we know from elsewhere to have been central in his thinking, and, still more importantly, the story of the Messiah who came to reconcile humans and God, Jews and gentiles and now slaves and masters.<sup>63</sup> Paul's worldview, and his theology, have been rethought around this centre. Hence the world of difference.

To understand why *Christos* still means 'Messiah' and, equally important, what 'Messiah' itself meant for Paul, we will have to look further afield in due course. But for the moment we note an interesting theme emerging, like a cloud no bigger than a man's hand: at the heart of this difference between Pliny and Paul is a difference of *master*. Two roads have here diverged. Something has happened, at the heart of Rome's empire, that has made all the difference, not only to the social world but also to the world of power within which that society lived.<sup>64</sup> Paul the Jew, whose controlling story had always included the narrative whereby the living God overthrew the tyrant of Egypt and freed his slave-people, had come to believe that this great story had reached its God-ordained climax in the arrival of Israel's Messiah, who according to multiple ancient traditions would be the true Lord of the entire world. In being faithful to his people, God had been faithful to the whole creation. Paul lived under the authority of this 'lord', this 'Messiah', and devoted himself to making that authority effective in the lives of the communities that had come to share that same faith. Because, however, this 'Messiah' and 'lord' was the crucified and risen Jesus, this 'authority' itself had been radically redefined. Because of Jesus, Paul understood everything differently – God, the world, God's people, God's future, and in and through it all God's faithfulness. It is that world of difference, intersecting with the world of Pliny but radically transforming it, that the present book now aims to explore.

## 2. Philemon and the Study of Paul

### (i) Introduction

This brief study of the small masterpiece we call the letter to Philemon has introduced us, in an actual example, to most of the topics we face as we

<sup>63</sup> This does *not* mean – to anticipate an obvious objection – that I am voting for a return to a simplistic 'Jewish' explanation of everything in Paul over against any reference to the wider hellenistic world. See chs. 2–5. All Judaism is already by Paul's day a matter of varieties within 'hellenistic Judaism'; but that does not mean there are no Jewish distinctives, and I suggest that is what we can see here.

<sup>64</sup> For this whole theme in relation to Acts, cf. Rowe 2009, esp. ch. 5. For Seneca's views on slavery see e.g. *Ep.* 47.11; *Ben.* 3.18–24 (see Thorsteinsson 2006, 153). For Dio Chrysostom see *Or.* 14.

move towards a full-dress exposition of Paul, his worldview and his theology. One of the advantages of having a particular example in mind, and a small one at that, is that the many abstract issues we now have to lay out can be envisaged in more concrete terms by reference back to the discussion just concluded.

To begin with, though, the questions raised by the letter itself. If, as we imagined briefly at the start, Philemon was the only document we had from early Christianity, we would still know that something very different was happening, different from the way the rest of the world behaved. What, we might ask, had brought this about? Who is this *Christos* who seems so important to the writer, and whose presence works its way into the substance and even the rhetorical trickery of the letter? Is this letter just a random act of uncharacteristic kindness, or does it express and embody something deeper, a larger and more all-embracing view of persons, of the world, of the divine? What sort of a worldview is it bringing to expression? How can we give a full and balanced account of that worldview? How might we locate it historically? How does it relate to the three standard topics in ancient philosophical reflection: physics ('what there is'), ethics ('how to behave') and epistemology ('how we know things')?<sup>65</sup> How does it relate to the main topics within first-century Jewish life, the orientation of life around the Temple in Jerusalem and the study and practice of Torah? Can the present scene be expressed in terms of these without remainder, or is there something more going on?

These are the sort of questions, in fact, which would be raised, *mutatis mutandis*, by a preliminary reading of any of Paul's letters. To address them, we need to be clear on the underlying disciplines and frameworks, as well as the particular debates into which the present study seeks to make its contribution. We need, that is, to say something about history and theology, and their relation to the very different tasks of exegesis on the one hand and 'application' or 'relevance' on the other. We need to say something about worldviews and mindsets. And we need to bring those two – history/theology and worldview/mindset – into appropriate relationship with one another, all within the context of a glance at the way the questions are currently being addressed.<sup>66</sup>

I take these various topics in the order they will appear in the overall structure of the present book: first worldview/mindset (the 'mindset' being the individual's particular variation on the parent 'worldview' of the community to which he or she belongs), then theology, then history. This may seem counter-intuitive to those who are used to seeing 'history' as the kind of preliminary work, the bedrock for everything else, but all these elements

<sup>65</sup> 'Physics' in ancient philosophy includes what we call 'theology'. Physics is, classically, an account of 'nature', *physis*, which for the Stoic included everything, including the divine. See below, ch. 3.

<sup>66</sup> The proper 'introduction' to these themes, for the present book, is found in *NTPG* Part II, which was designed to form the platform for the present work as much as for volumes II and III in the series. Sadly, the guild of New Testament scholarship has not shown much interest in these questions, resulting in a continuation of many of the problems I identified in the earlier volume. What follows, then, is both necessary recapitulation and development in the specific direction of Paul.

are in any case involved in a continual hermeneutical spiral, and the particular argument I wish to advance in the book as a whole begins where a preliminary historical survey leaves off (our brief study of Philemon doing duty, synecdochically and representatively, for the larger picture) and moves forwards from there with the questions we have just raised.<sup>67</sup>

So, then, to worldviews, building on the exposition in Part II of *The New Testament and the People of God*.

(ii) Philemon among the Worldviews

One of the great gains of the last few decades of scholarship has been the emergence, as a main topic, of what I continue to call ‘worldview’, though others label it and approach it differently. It doesn’t do at this point to be too fussy about labels, since they all function in any case heuristically, as signposts to a complex and yet vital phenomenon. I am not, for that reason, too worried about the danger of the word ‘worldview’ apparently privileging the sense of sight. Once we spell out what we mean, the ‘view’ element is reduced to a metaphor which, though not dead, is not dominant, and which can be useful without being intrusive. In any case, continuing with the label ‘worldview’ has the advantage of placing such discussions within a larger and longer chain of investigations.<sup>68</sup>

The reason why it is important to study worldviews is that human life is complicated, confusingly multifaceted, and often puzzling – much like Paul’s letters, in fact. Study of Paul, as of the New Testament and much else besides, has for too long taken place in a (philosophically) idealist world, where thoughts and beliefs are passed to and fro as though between discarnate intelligences, leading of course to many perplexities, not least the then awkward transition from ‘theology’ to ‘ethics’, a transition with which Paul seems to have had no difficulty whatever but which for Reformational as well as Enlightenment-related reasons has given a good deal of grief to western interpreters. But once we move from the one-dimensional world of disembodied ideas to the three-dimensional world of ordinary, full human life, the initial confusion caused by all the new elements will be rewarded,

<sup>67</sup> See too my other studies on Paul: Wright 1991, 1997, 2005a [*Fresh Perspectives*], 2009 and, not least, the Romans commentary (2002).

<sup>68</sup> Among the basic texts are Berger and Luckman 1966; Geertz 2000 [1973]; Taylor 2007; Bourdieu 1977 [1972]; and see now also Sire 2004; J. K. A. Smith 2009 (discussed briefly below, n. 00); Brown 1999; Naugle 2002; Christian Smith 2003 and 2010; Hiebert 2008. It is puzzling that Engberg-Pedersen, for all his sophistication in other respects, seems not really to engage with this discourse in his mentions of ‘world-view’: e.g. Engberg-Pedersen 2010, 9f., where he (a) confuses ‘world-view’ – which I, like most, understand as the lenses through which one looks, not as the collection of objects at which one looks – with particular beliefs and ideas and then (b) sweeps ‘theology’ off the table with a grand secularizing gesture, replacing it with ancient philosophical texts which will help ‘to give a more precise meaning to Paul’s statements’, and declaring that, instead, we should look for ‘as many precise particulars of a concrete world-view as possible’. See the discussion in ch. 14 below.

one may hope, by clarity, nuance, perspective and even, perhaps, relevance.<sup>69</sup>

A great deal of what humans do, say and think appears to spring from deep, buried sources. Psychoanalysis is one way of exploring what all great thinkers and writers have perceived at this point (give me Shakespeare rather than Freud any day); but the inward journey on the therapist's couch needs to be matched by the outward journey into the wider world of real life, of love, sleep, shopping, sex, sickness, work, travel, politics, babies, death, music and art, mountains and oceans, food and drink, birds and animals, sunlight and moonlight. It is better to recognize this, and to make continual attempts to map the resulting mystery, rather than to imagine that all of life can be understood in the flat, obvious surface events, statements and apparent meaning. The seemingly disparate elements of human life join up in ways which are easy to experience but hard to describe, but which are perceived to be very important; hence, for a start, the irreducibly and appropriately metaphorical nature of all human discourse, and the cultural importance of novels, plays and the cinema.<sup>70</sup> To abstract certain elements from this rich and perplexing world – the most basic historical questions, for instance, such as ‘What happened?’, or the most basic theological questions, such as ‘Is there a god?’ – and to treat these questions, and others like them, as the ‘real’ objects of study while screening out all the other things which in real life go with them is of temporary and at best limited value only. Part of the reason for welcoming the much wider socio-cultural investigations of the early Christian movement that have been taking place in recent decades is because they are helping to redress the balance, reminding us that history and theology, though important, do not stand alone.<sup>71</sup>

Worldview-models of various kinds have been tried out. What counts is not some abstract theoretical sophistication – that would be heavily ironic, here of all places! – but the heuristic effect, seen quite pragmatically and indeed always provisionally: as we map the landscape, are we able to explore and understand it more effectively? My own attempts are to be located within that broader social-science enterprise, whether we call it ‘social imaginary’, ‘habitus’, ‘worldview’ or whatever. There are, no doubt, distinctions to be drawn here, but the point is to get one's hands dirty with the material, then stand back and see the effects, and then get stuck in once more. My concern is to seek for heuristic tools which clarify without simplifying, which give order without stereotypes, which shed light on what is normally buried. ‘Thick description’, in Clifford Geertz's now famous phrase, is what is required: a laying out of as much of the picture as possible, so that one

<sup>69</sup> See Watson 2007 [1986], 10, where he describes the impact of reading Berger and Luckman: ‘Previously,’ he writes, ‘I had known texts and ideas; now those texts and ideas all had to be re-thought in the light of their social dynamics.’

<sup>70</sup> See the basic work of Soskice 1985 on metaphor.

<sup>71</sup> This is where the whole movement of Pauline social history associated with Meeks 1983 and his successors makes its essential contribution, not as an alternative to ‘theology’ (though some might mistreat it so) but as its necessary framework.

may make connections and avoid generalizations.<sup>72</sup> This often has the effect of making earlier study of history and theology look somewhat one-dimensional.<sup>73</sup> It cannot be, of course, that the refined and cloistered life of the modern western academy had fooled ‘academics’ into supposing that Paul and his companions lived a life of study, teaching and writing from which those other elements were excluded. It must have been just an accident that ‘theology’ came to be isolated from these other elements . . . or perhaps not. In any case, it is time to relocate ‘theology’. Not to marginalize it, as though the study of everything else (especially sociology) is ‘real’ and theology is to be dismissed as irrelevant theory; as we shall see, that would be a disastrous mistake in relation to Paul in particular. In fact, one of the extraordinary achievements of Paul was to turn ‘theology’ into a different kind of thing from what it had been before in the world either of the Jews or of the pagans. *One of the central arguments of the present book is that this was the direct result and corollary of what had happened to Paul’s worldview. Paul effectively invented ‘Christian theology’ to meet a previously unknown need, to do a job which had not, until then, been necessary.*

If the reason for studying worldviews is the recognition that life is complex, multi-layered, and driven by often hidden energies, the method for such study must be appropriate to that quest. Those who engage in this work increasingly insist on the centrality of what may be called a ‘symbolic universe’, a world of artefacts (buildings, coins, clothes, ships) and habitual actions (what I have called ‘praxis’) in which people sense themselves at home and without which they would feel dangerously disorientated. World-view-study has also insisted, with strong support from some recent work in linguistics and its sociological, cultural and political implications, on the importance of underlying narratives, the scripts by which people order their lives, the ‘plays’ in which they assume themselves to be actors.<sup>74</sup> Within this matrix of symbol, praxis and story, worldviews can be brought to expression using the elemental questions which Rudyard Kipling referred to as his ‘six honest serving men’ who ‘taught him all he knew’: What, Why, When, How, Where and Who.<sup>75</sup> The way I have asked those questions in this project up to now (and it will be as well to stick to this for the sake of continuity) is: Who are we? Where are we? What’s wrong? What’s the solution (= ‘How?’, i.e. ‘How do we get out of this mess?’), and ‘What time is it?’ (= ‘When?’).<sup>76</sup>

<sup>72</sup> Geertz 2000 [1973] ch. 1: the whole chapter is well worth reading and re-reading for the sharp clarity of its vision about the task of describing cultures, a clarity often lacking in the study of Paul and his world. On the avoidance of generalizations, and the danger of atomization in scholarship if this is not done, see the shrewd remarks of Malherbe 1989b, 18. An excellent recent example of ‘thick description’ as applied to Paul’s world is provided by Oakes 2009.

<sup>73</sup> So, rightly, Meeks 1983, 5f.: there is a danger of theological reductionism, hence the need for ‘social description’. There is of course the danger of reverse reductionism, which not all have quite avoided.

<sup>74</sup> Meeks 1986a points out the relevance of Lindbeck’s ‘cultural-linguistic’ model for the history/theology divide.

<sup>75</sup> Kipling 1927, 585.

<sup>76</sup> I added ‘What time is it?’ in *JVG*. As we shall see, this is particularly important in the study of Paul. See particularly e.g. Martyn 1997, frequently, and below, Part II.



The one question that is missing from this list is ‘Why?’. When the question ‘Why?’ is asked, the answers can go back and back to more and more basic answers. When a child goes on asking, ‘Why?’ (in response, say, to a parental prohibition), the ultimate answer may sometimes be, ‘Because I say so.’ With grown-up questions, the ultimate answer may be something like, ‘That’s just the way things are.’ But it is at precisely that point that, in many different worldviews, a fuller answer may involve something we might call ‘theology’: some account or other of a god or gods, and particularly of their relation to the world and to humans. That is the point at which Paul found himself inventing and developing this new discipline we call, in retrospect, ‘Christian theology’. The radically new worldview in which he and his converts found themselves was bound to face the question ‘why’ at every corner, and in order to answer it, and to teach his churches to answer it for themselves, he had to speak of one particular God, and of the world, in a way nobody had done before.<sup>77</sup>

This had an important result: the life of the *mind* was itself elevated by Paul from a secondary social activity, for those with the leisure to muse and ponder life’s tricky questions, to a primary socio-cultural activity for all the Messiah’s people. The interesting question of whether one thinks oneself into a new way of acting or acts oneself into a new way of thinking will, I suspect, continue to tease those who try to answer it (not least because it is of course reflexive: should you answer it by thinking or by acting?).<sup>78</sup> For Paul, there is no question that the praxis of the Messiah-following people created a context within which it made sense to think the revolutionary thoughts he urged his converts to think. But it is equally clear that he believed that the renewal of the mind through the work of the spirit would generate and sustain new patterns of behaviour.<sup>79</sup> In elevating (and simultaneously democratizing) the life of the mind, Paul was not buying into an idealist frame of reference, something which, as we have seen, his modern followers have found it all too easy to do. Worldview creates a context for theology, but theology is necessary to sustain the worldview. Together they generate, and are either reinforced or modified by, ‘real life’ in all its rich variety.

The worldview-model I am using is the one I developed, with the help of Brian Walsh in particular, as an outgrowth from the work he had done with Richard Middleton. The new version was designed (a) to meet the objection that ‘worldview’ in some of its traditional uses had been too focused on ideas, and (b) to incorporate the many other foundational aspects of human

<sup>77</sup> On worldview and theology see the remarks of Furnish 1990, 25f.

<sup>78</sup> See Scroggs 1989, 142.

<sup>79</sup> See e.g. Rom. 12.1–2, discussed below, 1101; 1123f.

life that Clifford Geertz and others had studied in terms of culture, symbols and so forth.<sup>80</sup>

This, as I say, is my way of getting at those aspects of historiography which others have approached through what are called the ‘social sciences’. (I am reminded of the warning that if something has to call itself a ‘science’, it’s because it isn’t.) This has been an enormously important element in biblical studies over the last generation, and has not always made its proper way into exegesis and theology. Ultimately, ‘social science’ is simply a branch of history, a history which takes seriously the fact that its characters were fully human beings, and not simply brains on legs, or for that matter ambitions on legs. ‘Social science’ is a way, in particular, of avoiding anachronism; and that is part of what I am trying to do with worldview-analysis. To the extent that it supposes it can reach out beyond that, offering a reductive model which insinuates that ‘what was *really* going on’ was simply the play of ‘social’ forces, in relation to which the theology and spirituality that the characters seem to have thought they were dealing with were simply codes or even smokescreens, we must treat it like all reductionisms: it may sometimes have a point, but it cannot assume its shrunken world *a priori*.<sup>81</sup>

We may remind ourselves that a ‘worldview’ is not what you normally look *at*, but what you normally look *through*. (This is where the metaphor of ‘sight’ retains some use.) What we are now discussing is not the sort of thing humans habitually talk about or consciously engage in, but the sort of thing they habitually presuppose as they talk about, or consciously engage in, other subjects and activities. This is what some have called ‘prior commitments’: the basic set of beliefs which explain otherwise puzzling patterns of action.<sup>82</sup> Worldviews are like spectacles; normally you take them for granted, and you only think about them when they are broken, dirty or out of focus. What is more, though ‘view’ implies ‘looking and seeing’ (which is indeed both an important dimension and a useful and perfectly helpful metaphor), in this modification and development of the worldview-model one might equally well say ‘encounter’ or ‘experience’. This (to repeat) isn’t, then, purely about the arrangement of ideas in people’s minds. It is about the pattern and meaning of an entire life.

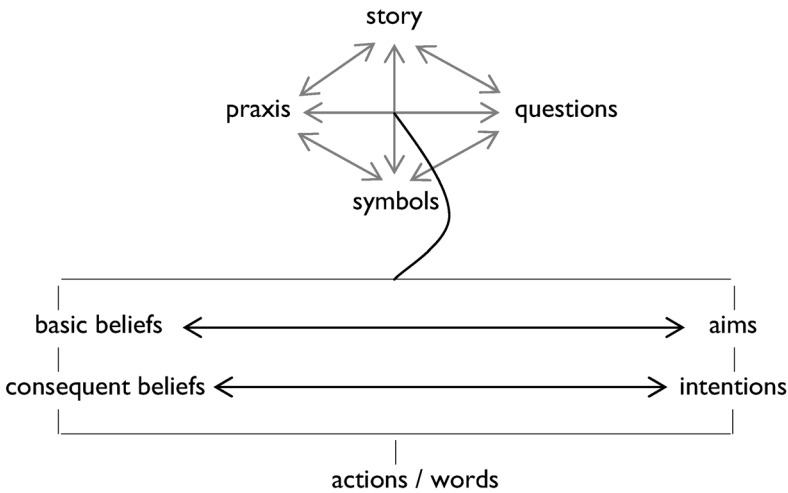
<sup>80</sup> See Walsh and Middleton 1984; Geertz 2000 [1973], 5: ‘webs of significance’; and his distinction of ‘world-view’ and ‘ethos’. Recently J. K. A. Smith 2009 has argued strongly that ‘worldview’ privileges (not just the ‘sight’ metaphor, but) the cerebral element so much that it is better to replace it (following Taylor 2007, esp. 171–6) with ‘social imaginaries’. I take the point – and particularly Smith’s welcome emphasis on ‘desire’, ‘love’ and ‘worship’ as primary categories – but have preferred to expand the notion of ‘worldview’ to incorporate these and other elements rather than abandon it and launch out with a different term. Barclay 1996, 404 complains that my worldview-analysis is incomplete, but offers no suggestions as to how it might be filled out. Adams 2000, 1–3 seems to be doing two things at once, investigating the ‘world’ or ‘worldview’ which one might ‘construct’ for oneself and speaking at the same time of what Paul meant by *kosmos* or *ktisis*. But these are hardly the same thing. What Paul meant by *kosmos* was not the sort of thing one might construct for oneself.

<sup>81</sup> See particularly Horrell 1999; and the various works by Malina (e.g. Malina 1993) and Neyrey (e.g. Neyrey and Stewart 2008). The use of social studies within serious historiography of the period has a long pedigree: see e.g. Judge 1960; 2008a.

<sup>82</sup> See White 2003, 127.

The model I have proposed has four main elements, each relating to each of the others. I have set this out in various places already but it may help to present it briefly again.<sup>83</sup> The hypothesis assumed by this model is that all human life, corporate and personal alike, includes each of these elements at (to repeat) a presuppositional level, all the more potent for being normally out of sight and out of the conscious, deliberating mind. Each element interacts in complex ways with the others, and the combination then generates and sustains what I have called ‘basic beliefs’ and ‘consequent beliefs’, on the one hand, and ‘aims’ and ‘intentions’ on the other. These are what give rise, in turn, to specific actions and words. The historian normally assumes that actions and words are not random, and the present model is a way of making more precise the normal historical task of attempting to discern beliefs and motivations, themselves rooted in worldview and mindset, underneath the deeds and words which come into the public domain.

Thus:



This is the model that will enable us to mount a ‘thick description’ of Paul in Part II of the present book, in the light of the analysis, in the remainder of Part I, of the three ‘worlds’ from which he came and in which he continued to move. What we are doing our best to track by this means is the nexus of worldview elements which will form an explanatory grid for why people did what they did in a world and culture in some ways like our own and in other ways so very different: in other words, to attempt to discern those things which people knew easily and without effort even if such ‘knowledge’ is remote for us and hard to reconstruct.<sup>84</sup> Part of the force of Part II will be to remark on the ways in which some elements in his original worldview

<sup>83</sup> cf. esp. *NTPG*, 122–6; *JVG*, 137–44.

<sup>84</sup> See Judge 2008a, Part I re Augustus’s world; and see e.g. Champlin 2003. See also e.g. Williams 1997, 15–17 on the differences between Paul’s world and ours.

appear to have been reinforced while others seem to have been abandoned. This was truly radical, which puzzled people in Paul's own day and puzzles people still. Part of the question is whether this radicalism was random and merely quirky, or whether it corresponded, in Paul's intention at least, to a thought-out transformation.

What happens, in a preliminary way, if we look at the letter to Philemon on the basis of this grid? The most important answer is that Paul's overmastering aim in this letter is what elsewhere he calls *reconciliation*. This is new. There is no sign that he is appealing to, or making use of, the symbols and praxis of his native Jewish world. Nor is he appealing to an implied world of social convention such as obtained in the world of Pliny. Nor is he drawing on any previously elaborated philosophical (in this case, ethical) schemes of thought. He has stepped out of the Jewish boat, but not onto any hidden stepping-stones offered from within the non-Jewish world. He appears to be walking on the water of a whole new worldview. Here, sharply focused within this tiny letter, we glimpse one of the large and central claims of this present book: that Paul's worldview was a radically redrawn version of the Jewish worldview he had formerly held, with some elements (the symbolic praxis) radically reduced in significance and others (the narratives) radically rethought. The new symbolic praxis which stood at the heart of his renewed worldview was *the unity of the Messiah's people*. In letter after letter he spells it out in more detail, but here in Philemon we see it up close: in this case, the unity of slave and free. Paul puts everything he has into making this unity a reality.

Why does he do this? Why would Philemon and Onesimus be motivated to go along with this costly and socially challenging plan? Answer: because of the implicit theology. Because of who God is. Because of the Messiah. Because of his death. Because of who 'we' are 'in him', or growing up together 'into him'. Because of the hope. *The study of Paul's worldview leads to a striking, dramatic conclusion: this worldview not only requires a particular 'theology' to sustain it, but also requires that 'theology' itself play a new role, integrated with the worldview itself.* Paradoxically in terms of the traditional division between social science and theology, it is by studying Paul within 'worldview' categories that we acquire a new way of seeing not only what was really important within his fully blown theology but also why theology as a whole became more important for him, and ever afterwards within the community of Jesus' followers, than it was (and still is to this day) within the worlds of either Jews or pagans. In studying Paul in a more holistic fashion, we discover the roots of the discipline known as 'Christian theology', and why – from Paul's perspective, at least! – it matters. This is the central subject of the present book.

The effect of this move is enormous. For far too long, in the western tradition at least, it has been assumed that the task and aim of 'theology' was to bring everything back in the end to a system of interlocking ideas and beliefs. The reaction against this from sociology, and materialistic view-

points of various sorts, has been understandable, but it is important that neither side retreats from this engagement into prepared and polarized positions. Rather, what I am attempting to do in this book is to show how a historical and social analysis of Paul and his communities helps to explain why he needed to develop ‘theology’, and theology of *just this sort*, with its Messiah-and-spirit-driven emphasis on the one God and on the unity of the people of this one God. This theology cannot be reduced to a system of ideas, though it has plenty of ideas to offer and affirms that they do indeed interlock in a coherent, indeed elegant, whole – just as this worldview analysis cannot be reduced to the interplay of social and cultural systems, though there are plenty of such things in evidence in Paul’s letters, and they do make sense in their own terms. Nor is it the case that Paul *simply* developed ‘theology’ because the symbolic praxis which seemed appropriate demanded it (theology simply as the handmaid of sociology). The reason Paul’s symbolic praxis seemed appropriate in the first place was because of what he believed about Jesus.

In particular, this way of approaching the matter explains why the tendency since at least medieval times in the western church to organize Paul’s concepts around his vision of ‘salvation’ in particular has distorted the larger picture, has marginalized elements which were central and vital to him, and – because this ‘salvation’ has often been understood in a dualistic, even Platonic, fashion – has encouraged a mode of study in which Paul and his soteriology is seen in splendid isolation from his historical context. Paul experienced ‘salvation’ on the road to Damascus, people suppose; his whole system of thought grew from that point; so we do not need to consider how he relates to the worlds of Israel, Greece or Rome! How very convenient. And how very untrue. If we take that route, a supposed ‘Pauline soteriology’ will swell to a distended size and, like an oversized airline traveller, end up sitting not only in its own seat but in those on either side as well. In particular, it will become dangerously self-referential: the way to be saved is by believing, but the main theological point Paul taught was soteriology, so the way to be saved is by believing in Pauline soteriology (‘justification by faith’). For Paul, that would be a *reductio ad absurdum*. The way to be saved is not by believing that one is saved. In Paul’s view, the way to be saved is by believing in Jesus as the crucified and risen lord.

This way of analyzing worldview and theology has all kinds of positive results in terms of current debates, which will emerge as we go along. Let me here just mention one. In Douglas Campbell’s already famous recent book on Paul, the main target of his sustained polemic is what he calls ‘justification theology’, which he sees as an unwarranted western imposition on Paul, who was much more concerned with ‘being in Christ’.<sup>85</sup> This extreme version of Albert Schweitzer’s thesis (Campbell makes us all look moderate) is understandable but in my view unnecessary. Once we approach things the way I am proposing, ‘justification’ can settle down and take its proper place

<sup>85</sup> Campbell 2009. See my discussion of Campbell in *Interpreters*.

within the overall scheme, which is indeed far more complex and many-sided (but still coherently so) than most western theology has imagined. We shall come back to this presently.

So how does the worldview-model work out in practice? Continuing to use the letter to Philemon as our example, let us consider how the investigation might begin. Starting with the most obvious point, slavery was, for both Philemon and Paul, simply part of the worldview. It was how things got done. It was the electricity of the ancient world; try imagining your home or your town without the ability to plug things in and switch them on, and you will realize how unthinkable it was to them that there should be no slaves. The only ancient communities that managed to live without them, so far as we can tell, were self-chosen, quasi-monastic groups who lived far away from other habitations.<sup>86</sup> For most people, slavery was simply part of the *praxis* of their worldview; for some – not least for slaves themselves! – it could also feature largely in the *story*, especially if, as was true for many slaves, they had once been free and had become slaves through being on the wrong side in a war, or even a business deal. It might then feature as part of the back story constituting an answer to the question ‘What’s wrong?’, and might also feature, in the form of liberation, as part of the answer to the question ‘What’s the solution?’ Slavery would not so often be a symbol, except in the case of a wealthy person conscious that a large quantity of slaves was itself a sign of social and financial status.

But Philemon’s mindset, his own local variation on the worldview of the average well-to-do pagan in western Turkey, would not revolve around slavery. That would be, at most, a minor detail of ‘praxis’. Rather, it would revolve around business and family, the gods and the festivals, travel (the normal guess is that he had met Paul in Ephesus) and empire (he must have known, if only through the coins in his purse, who was running the world), the seasons and the harvests, the normal human hopes and fears. We shall look a little more at the typical worldview of people like Philemon in chapter 3. What matters in reading the letter is of course that Paul could assume that Philemon’s worldview had been turned inside out and upside down by the impact of the messianic announcement about Jesus.

Onesimus’s worldview, we may assume, had been similar except for the obvious difference that his praxis was that of a slave. In consequence, as we just suggested, there will have been a very different element not only to his symbolic world (slaves might well have some kind of badge or branding), but also to his worldview-story, his personal mindset. *Once I was free*, he may have thought, *and now I’m a slave . . .* which then easily generates the further narrative, *Now I’m a slave, but one day I may be free.*<sup>87</sup> Then comes the question, the answer to ‘What’s the solution?’, or ‘How can we get out of the mess?’: I could save up money and buy my freedom; or I could just run away

<sup>86</sup> See Taylor 2010 on the ‘Therapeutae’ referred to in Philo *Vit. Cont.*

<sup>87</sup> Onesimus may very well of course have been born into slavery; I am only suggesting the possibility of his being born free to make the point about implicit narratives, which could of course be extended backwards to whenever his family had been enslaved.

and chance my luck ... And so, assuming that the normal reading of the letter is correct, the point at which he meets Paul is the point not only of a gospel-generated worldview-crisis, but also of the particular transformation of narrative: *I have tried to seek my freedom, but now I have to go back and face the possibility of being a slave for life.* It is a heavy thing that Paul is asking of Onesimus, just as it is a heavy thing that he is asking of Philemon.

What of Paul himself? That, of course, is the subject of this entire book. But we can say this: although Paul lived in a world (including his Jewish world) where slavery was a fact of life, he and his Jewish contemporaries told and celebrated a story in which their own ancestors had been slaves and their God had freed them. That, as we shall see, remained a vital controlling narrative in the mature worldview of Paul the apostle. But we may note just one other thing. What Paul elsewhere calls 'the message of reconciliation', which he saw as being rooted in the fact of Jesus' messianic crucifixion, has become so much part of him, so ingrained into him at the level of worldview, that even though the word 'reconciliation' never occurs in the letter, and even though he never mentions the cross itself, both realities come to fresh and deeply personal expression in this short text. As Paul could say of Jesus, 'he loved me and gave himself for me', so Onesimus might well say, in days to come, 'Paul loved me and gave himself for me.' Paul nearly says as much, of course, in Colossians, which many of us still stubbornly suppose to be the companion piece to Philemon.<sup>88</sup>

Story, praxis and symbol are joined by the characteristic worldview 'questions': Who are we, where are we, what's wrong, what's the solution, and what time is it? These are, to repeat, not likely to be topics of regular conversation, whether in a family or in a culture; they are the presuppositions which enable people to make sense of everything else. For the average pagan in western Turkey, the implicit answers to such questions would have to do, once more, with social status, with family and business, with the affairs of the local *polis*, possibly with a famine, plague or earthquake and its aftermath, certainly with the constant question of which gods to worship, in what way, and with what hoped-for effect. The worldview of Saul of Tarsus was different, formed as we shall see by the ancient traditions of Israel about which he was so passionate, and reformed around the Messiah. Why such a man would come to write such a letter, or why he would think that either Philemon or Onesimus would go along with his proposals and requests, is part of the larger historical question: why did Christianity begin, and why did it take the shape it did? That, too, is then part of the enquiry which occupies the whole of the present volume. The 'question of "god"' remains in constant and complex dialogue with the question of 'Christian origins'.

This, then, is how 'worldviews' work. Story, praxis and symbol generate and sustain a set of implicit answers to the five questions. People normally do not talk about these four elements of their worldview (story, praxis, symbol, questions); they only come up for discussion when something has

<sup>88</sup> Col. 1.24f. On Col. see below, 56–61.

gone wrong, when an outsider issues a challenge or a new question to which the routine answer would have been, 'That's just how things are.' You can't get on with the rest of your life if you are forever taking your spectacles off and inspecting them; indeed, one of the problems with spectacles is that if you break them you may not be able to see properly in order to mend them yourself. So it is with worldviews: when you are questioned about some or all of your worldview, and you have (as it were) to take it off and look at it in order to see what's going on, you may not be able to examine it very closely because it is itself the thing through which you normally examine everything else. The resulting sense of disorientation can be distressing. It can lead to radical change. It shakes the very foundation of persons and societies. Sometimes, it seems, it can turn persecutors into apostles . . .

Because, of course, that is exactly what happened to St Paul on the road to Damascus. Whatever we say about the precise events reported three times in the book of Acts, and alluded to briefly by Paul himself, the blindness mentioned in the story may well have come upon him at several levels simultaneously.<sup>89</sup> He was forced (so to speak) to take off his worldview altogether and examine it at the deepest level. Part of the question of this book is whether he made radical adjustments to his old worldview or whether he exchanged it for a different one altogether. But the point at the moment is this: the study of worldviews, and of the 'mindsets' of individual persons (to repeat, I use 'mindset' as the personal version of the corporate 'worldview', suggesting that there may be local and individual variations within a parent worldview), is an excellent way of getting down underneath the to-and-fro of particular texts and historical evidence and offering hypotheses about the underlying coherence which enables us, as historians, to address the question, 'Why?' Why did he behave like this? Why did they want to do that? Why did this general attack that city? and so on. The ultimate answer to 'Why?' is usually, perhaps always – perhaps almost by definition! – something to do with one or more aspects of a worldview. And, as I have suggested, when the question is pressed it is likely to generate an answer in the area we might want to call 'theology'.

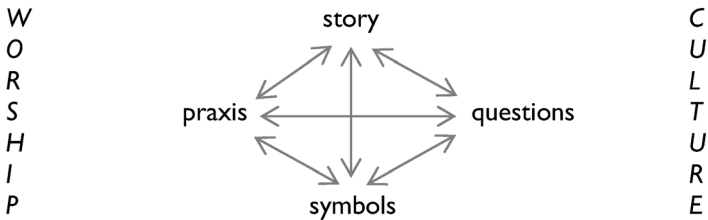
Within this worldview model, two other dimensions may be plotted in. The first is 'culture'. I take this loose but important word to denote those aspects of shared human life which draw together narrative, praxis and symbol in particular patterns, often forming new stories which reflect parts of the underlying ones (as in many plays, novels, movies, soap operas and so on), often producing artefacts which themselves become symbols of a certain way of life (the fish-knife, the credit card, the iPhone), and often producing works of art and music which live in the spaces between story, praxis and symbol and which, as though from a different dimension, give people both a sense of the overall worldview and, quite often, a sense of its own deep internal problems and difficulties. That, perhaps, is one of the most important features of culture: to bring to expression beliefs and perceptions which

<sup>89</sup> See Gal. 1.11–17; 1 Cor. 9.1; 15.8–11; 2 Cor. 4.6; Ac. 9.3–9; 22.6–11; 26.12–19. See the discussion in RSG ch. 8.



are either reinforcements of the prevailing worldview or questions and challenges from within it, in a language which is precisely not that of articulate speech. Even when words are set to music, the music normally makes them ‘say’ and ‘mean’ something much more than they say and mean by themselves, whether these words are ‘There were shepherds abiding in the field’ or ‘Can’t take my eyes off of you’. ‘Culture’ thus nests within the worldview model in another dimension which draws together story, praxis and symbol in particular.

It is not easy to represent these in a diagram, but a rough attempt might look something like this. Ideally one would need three dimensions, and that indeed is the sort of thing which ‘culture’ itself sometimes produces; but for the moment I leave that refinement to the reader’s imagination:



It would be good to know what might have corresponded to our loose word ‘culture’ in the world of Paul, Philemon and Onesimus. We do not know whether they went to the theatre to see the plays of Sophocles, or whether Philemon used to go to a rather different sort of theatre to see people fighting wild beasts. We do not know what musical instruments they played or listened to, what kind of pottery or jewellery was available in Colosse, how they decorated their houses, and so forth. (Perhaps one day we shall; there are rumours of a forthcoming excavation.<sup>90</sup>) We do not know nearly as much as we would like to know about what sort of poetry they wrote, though it is possible that some passages of Paul may provide important clues. But for the sake of completeness we must note ‘culture’ as an important, if shadowy, receptacle, and generator, of the worldview-markers of story, praxis and symbol.

What is true of ‘culture’ is also true, in a different dimension again, of ‘worship’. Post-Enlightenment culture might have said ‘religion’ at this point, but part of my aim in this book is to put back together the worlds that the Enlightenment split apart, and the word ‘religion’, as we have already seen, is problematic precisely because it is bound to be heard, in most of today’s western world at least, as implying ‘not-ordinary-life’, ‘not-culture’, and particularly ‘not-politics’. By contrast, anything that might be called ‘religion’ in the first century was very firmly bound up with ordinary life, culture and politics, and one of the most obvious and massive anachronisms we might commit would be to ignore this and try to study Paul as though his ‘religion’ was ‘really’ something apart from the rest of his life and that of his communities. For Philemon, prior to his conversion, ‘worship’

<sup>90</sup> See, recently, Cadwallader and Trainor 2011, esp. ch. 1 (9–47, with full bibliography at 41–7).

would have been a feature of everyday life, bringing the gods, both local and national and increasingly (as we shall see) transnational, into touch with all other elements of life, business, marriage, home and hearth, death and birth, travel and festival. ‘Worship’ is a specific activity in which the other elements of the worldview are caught up, colouring praxis, shaping and influencing narrative, generating symbols, and frequently offering answers to the key questions (‘What’s wrong?’ ‘We seem to have offended Apollo!’ ‘What’s the solution?’ ‘Go to his temple and offer the appropriate sacrifice’). Humans are worshipping creatures, and even when they don’t consciously or even unconsciously worship any kind of god they are all involved in the adoring pursuit of something greater than themselves. Worship transforms humans, all of us, all the time, since you become like what you worship: those who worship money, power or sex have their characters formed by those strange powers, so that little by little the money-worshipper sees and experiences the world in terms of financial opportunities or dangers, the power-hungry person sees and experiences the world and other humans in terms of chances to gain power or threats to existing power, and the sex-worshipper sees the world in terms of possible conquests (that word is interesting in itself) or rivals. Those who consciously and deliberately choose not to worship those gods still have a range of others to select from, each of which will be character-forming in various ways. And, somewhere in the middle of this range, we find the worship of a God who was believed, by some people in the middle of the first century, to have revealed himself uniquely and decisively in a man called Jesus. And, among those people, we find this man called Paul. If we are to understand his worldview we need to explore the symbolic praxis and narratives which characterized his worldview, together with the answers they generated to the worldview-questions. We should then explore the other dimensions too: the culture (insofar as we can) and the worship which went with this worldview, and which together contribute to the particular mindset of the apostle.

### (iii) From Worldview to Theology

The particular claim of the present book, then, embodied in the transition between Part II and Part III, is that when we understand the worldview of Paul the apostle we realize that a worldview such as his, granted what it does and doesn’t contain, *needs* theology in a way that (some?) other worldviews do not. It can only be sustained by constantly, thoughtfully and prayerfully clarifying the question of who the one true God actually is, what this God has done and is doing, and what this all means for the lives of the community and the particular Messiah-follower. When Paul urges his Roman hearers to be ‘transformed by the renewal of their minds’, this was not simply a piece of good advice for those who wanted to practise their faith with a bit more understanding. It was vital if the entire worldview he was advocating and inculcating was to take root and flourish.

This point was made a quarter of a century ago by Wayne Meeks in his groundbreaking study *The First Urban Christians*.<sup>91</sup> Meeks's undemonstrative style may have contributed to the fact that his highlighting of Jewish-style (but christologically rethought) monotheism in particular, as the key element which enabled Paul's worldview to be sustained, has gone undeveloped. I see the present work as picking up from that point and setting out a picture of Paul's worldview and theology which coheres with Meeks's insight but develops it in a detail and at a level that would have burst the boundaries of Meeks's own work. Meeks, however, was nevertheless emphatically bringing together Pauline sociology and theology in a way few seem to have picked up subsequently. Pauline 'theologians', I suspect, thought of his book as sociology rather than theology, while the eager sociologists who followed it up were less interested in the theology which was there all the time. I hope this present work may contribute to mutual enrichment across these fault lines.

One reason why those interested in 'Pauline theology' may have largely overlooked Meeks's proposal is that the particular theological topic he proposed as central, namely Jewish-style (but christologically redefined) monotheism, was simply not a topic of discussion at the time. It would shortly become so, not least through the controversial work of J. D. G. Dunn.<sup>92</sup> But up to the early 1980s there were hardly any studies of Paul's 'doctrine of God', let alone monotheism itself.<sup>93</sup> How times have changed – and, I believe, for the better. In line with Meeks, then, I shall propose, as the basis for Part III of the present book, that monotheism is indeed at the heart of Paul's theology, not simply as 'what he believed about God' in a sense that could be detached from what he believed about other topics (not least salvation), but rather as the integrating theme which explains and gives depth to all the others.

One could, indeed, characterize the major studies of Paul's theology over the last two hundred or more years as ways of not talking about monotheism. I have written in the parallel volume about the long and complex story of 'Pauline theology', and the way it has arrived at the set of questions that confronts the scholar, and for that matter the preacher and teacher, today. Here I simply summarize.<sup>94</sup>

Throughout much of western church history since the Reformation, it has been assumed that the main topic of Paul's theology was soteriology: that is, his precise theory about how people are saved. This has included, in particular, the questions of justification, the law, the meaning of the death of Jesus, and final judgment – each of which, in itself and in combination with the others, has generated an enormous amount of discussion between rival schools. 'Pauline theologies', as Schweitzer pointed out a century ago, have

<sup>91</sup> Meeks 1983.

<sup>92</sup> Dunn 1980 and 1982; and recently Dunn 2010.

<sup>93</sup> The main exception – and that a short article – was Dahl 1977, ch. 10.

<sup>94</sup> Engberg-Pedersen's questions (2000, 5) are pertinent but hardly complete or indeed properly formed.

generally been organized on the assumption that the categories of Reformation dogmatics could be assumed to be the most appropriate ones for analyzing the apostle to whom the Reformers appealed.<sup>95</sup> The questions which have arisen through such study have provided easily enough material for many generations to sustain lively debates, in which the ongoing struggle between Lutheran theology (with its ‘two kingdoms’ and its strong critique of the law) and Reformed theology (with its holistic worldview and its strong affirmation of the law) has been an important element, often ignored. Roman Catholic exegesis, particularly but not exclusively since Vatican II, has joined in these debates, often, predictably but helpfully, insisting on discussing Paul’s ecclesiology, which Protestants have usually marginalized. As with some of the historical questions, the letter to Philemon has played little part in these debates, though again my proposals in the first part of this chapter would indicate that the central argument of the letter relates organically to Paul’s view of Jesus’ death and its meaning, as well as to Paul’s ecclesiology, i.e. his vision of a community in which slaves and free are brothers and sisters.

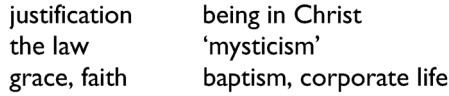
But the traditional topics of Pauline theology as seen by the mainstream Reformation traditions, focused on ‘justification’ and sometimes labelled generically in terms of *juridical* thought, have not been the only focus of serious theological study. For Albert Schweitzer, and others both before him and more recently, these questions are still important, but not central. ‘Being in Christ’ (which Schweitzer, perhaps confusingly, referred to in terms of ‘mysticism’) was the centre of Paul’s life and thought, and questions of justification and even ‘salvation’ were secondary. This has more recently been referred to in terms of *participation*, with humans ‘participating’ in that which is true of Jesus Christ. We should note – an important theme to which we shall return – that many classic protestant theologians, not least John Calvin, had already integrated ‘being in Christ’ fairly thoroughly with ‘justification by faith’, and had indeed located the latter within the larger circle of the former, as Schweitzer was to do (was Schweitzer, I wonder, aware of this?).<sup>96</sup> For neither the first nor the last time, one particular strand of scholarship, in this case the energetic and massively productive German Lutheran variety, had been able to set questions in a way which generated equal-and-opposite answers but which could have been better put in the first place, allowing for less polarized reactions. But already the basic shape of much of the debate of the last hundred years has been indicated: is Paul basically writing about justification or about being in Christ? Is his thought ‘juridical’ or ‘participatory’? Do we therefore (this has been the most obvious exegetical spin-off) privilege Romans 1–4 or Romans 5–8? If we want to say ‘both’, what account must we give of the two to show how they integrate (as clearly they do in Paul’s mind, since elsewhere in his thought, notably in Galatians 3 and 4, they are cheerfully jumbled up

<sup>95</sup> Schweitzer 1912, 2, 33f.

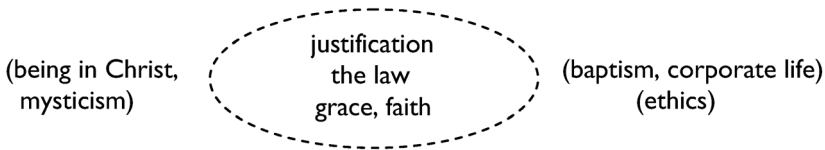
<sup>96</sup> On ‘incorporation’ and ‘justification’ see now Vanhoozer 2011.

together)? And with this goes a meta-question of considerable importance: what, in Paul, is central, and what is peripheral? What is the ‘heart’ of Paul’s thinking?<sup>97</sup>

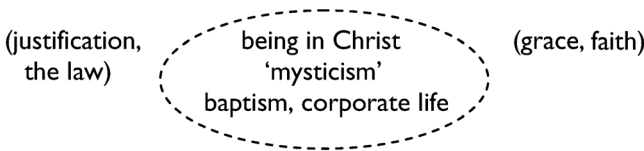
An initial diagram of these topics might, then, look like this:



which might be described from one point of view (the classic Lutheran position) thus:



and from another point of view (either a Reformed perspective, or the variants offered by Schweitzer, Sanders and others):



– with the question being: which is central, which is peripheral, how do we tell, why does it matter, and how does it all play out in terms of exegesis? This is, in fact, the older debate within which we may make some theological sense of the storms that have been raging between the so-called ‘old perspective’ on Paul and the so-called ‘new perspective’, about which I and others have written quite a lot already.<sup>98</sup>

But at this point the picture becomes more complicated. Three other concepts have been introduced into the discussion, bringing with them enormous potential both for clarification and insight and for muddle and confusion.

First, if the ‘juridical’ and ‘participationist’ schools have highlighted Romans 1–4 and 5–8 respectively, Romans 9–11 has now made a welcome comeback. ‘*Salvation history*’ is a phrase with a chequered history of its own, urgently needing clarification before it can be useful as a tool of thought in interpreting Paul. But it can serve as a general marker for an element in Paul’s thought which ought never to have been absent, and which

<sup>97</sup> Among recent works, this is obviously the continuing debate to which E. P. Sanders in his way, and Campbell in his very different way, have contributed, both firmly coming down on the ‘participationist’ side.

<sup>98</sup> See the discussion in *Interpreters*.

has now been reintroduced from several angles, raising several new questions of its own.<sup>99</sup> The previous marginalization of Romans 9—11 within much western theology, by no means only Lutheran, was an indication of what happens to exegesis when theology works with a truncated template.

Second, ‘*apocalyptic*’. Much work has been done on this complex and still difficult question.<sup>100</sup> People do from time to time throw up their hands and declare that the word means anything and nothing and should be abandoned as worse than useless. But it still denotes, at its heart, something which Paul really does seem to have made central. Some scholars have continued to press the case for seeing it (however interpreted) as the key to all his thought.<sup>101</sup>

The third term, ‘*covenant*’, has been used by myself and others as a convenient shorthand to draw attention to, and indeed to give a certain priority to, Paul’s belief that the events concerning Jesus of Nazareth were indeed the divine fulfilment of ancient covenant promises. This is sometimes criticized on the grounds that Paul seldom uses the word *diathēkē*, the regular Greek for ‘covenant’, to which the answer is (a) that he does here and there, and often in tell-tale contexts, (b) that, as Sanders pointed out about the Rabbis, sometimes when people do not repeat a word it is because it is everywhere presupposed, and (c) that Paul doesn’t say ‘juridical’ or ‘participatory’ either, or indeed ‘salvation history’, and only occasionally ‘apocalypse’ or its cognates. In other words, these are contemporary shorthands with which we are trying to discuss textual, historical and theological data which are in themselves sufficiently complex to warrant the use of summary labels. All disciplines generate shorthands, and provided we remind ourselves that that is what they are, and are prepared at a moment’s notice to cash them out in terms of a fuller, and particularly text-based, account, there should be no problem in employing them.

The relationship between the last three terms in themselves, and between them and the first two, are themselves inevitably complex, and one could plot the history of modern Pauline scholarship in terms of their often confused interaction. ‘Covenant’ and ‘salvation history’ are more obviously connected with one another than either is with ‘apocalyptic’, though ancient Jewish ‘apocalyptic’ literature was again and again both deeply covenantal and firmly salvation-historical. Debate has then sometimes collapsed back into a re-run of the primary post-Reformation discussion, with ‘apocalyptic’ joining forces with ‘justification’ on the one hand and doing collective battle with ‘participation’, ‘salvation history’, and ‘covenant’ on the other. Some, however, have joined up ‘apocalyptic’ and ‘participation’, or even ‘salvation history’, and played these off against ‘juristic’ thought.<sup>102</sup> One of the central

<sup>99</sup> Some interpreters have so screened ‘salvation history’, or indeed the idea of ‘meaning in history’, out of the picture that when they let it back in it appears as a strange, foreign body to be kept in a corner somewhere: e.g. Kee 1980 [1973], 100–14.

<sup>100</sup> cf. *NTPG* 280–99; *JVG* 95–7, 207–14, 311–6, 513–5.

<sup>101</sup> On Beker, Martyn, de Boer, Campbell and others see the discussion in *Interpreters*.

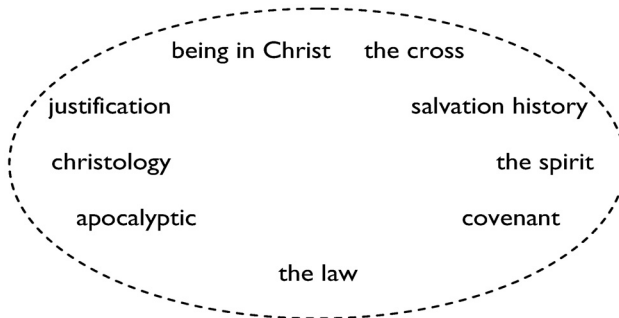
<sup>102</sup> Campbell 2009.

aims of the present project is in fact to offer an alternative account of the central matters which have been thus variously described. This may appear the more urgent in that even those who have insisted that ‘participation’ is central to Paul’s thought have expressed puzzlement as to what exactly Paul means by it.<sup>103</sup>

As we round this corner, there comes into view another joining-up question: how do all these theological analyses and proposals link up with answers, actual or implicit, to the historical questions? The combination of justification and apocalyptic has sometimes, though not always, been aligned with the historical proposal to treat Paul as, if not actually a hellenizer, at least not a particularly Jewish thinker, either because his doctrine of justification engages in a polemic against the works of the Jewish law (the classic Lutheran view) or because his ‘apocalyptic’ theology involves a clean break with a Jewish sense of a continuous saving history (Martyn, de Boer, partially following Käsemann). The combination of covenant, ‘being in Christ’ and salvation history has sometimes, though not always, been associated with the historical proposal about treating Paul as basically a Jewish thinker, for more obvious reasons (Davies, Cullmann). Sometimes, indeed, this appears quite strikingly in the failure of those who opt for the second route to articulate or even, it seems, to notice Paul’s remaining critique of his Jewish contemporaries.<sup>104</sup>

None of this positioning really begins, in my view, to do justice to any of Paul’s letters or the concepts he is articulating in them. As a matter of history, not merely of theology, the data themselves must be allowed the right of reply, the right to call time on a slogan-based theological and historical debate, and the chance to generate and explore other ways of lining up the basic problems.

The question then now looks like this:



– with the key issue being: how do all *these* relate to one another? How do we describe (or perhaps rule out) such categories in relation to one another, to particular passages in Paul’s letters, and to the larger historical questions we have hinted at? And – what about the things we have missed out? What about monotheism? What about the resurrection?

<sup>103</sup> Sanders 1977, 549 discusses this in terms of ‘religious experience’, on which see ch. 13 below.

<sup>104</sup> This was most obvious in Davies 1980 [1948]; it reappears in e.g. Harink 2003.

Part of the problem, of course, has been that much (though not all) study of Paul has been done within circles where Paul has been the hero, the great teacher of the faith. Hence, as with the historical debates, he has been assumed to teach what the tradition of that particular church has taught. Like Plato or Shakespeare, however, he is so many-sided that he can be appealed to this way or that on all kinds of issues, not only in theology and ethics but in culture and philosophy, as witness the recent upsurge of interest in Paul among post-Derrida continental philosophers and at least one post-modern Jewish thinker.<sup>105</sup>

Mention of theology and ethics, however, introduces a further split. This split has routinely been traced at least as far back as Paul himself (in the supposed division of some of his letters into 'doctrinal' and 'ethical' sections), but in its present form it owes far more to Immanuel Kant, and behind him to the sharp Reformational antithesis between 'faith' and 'works'. (The distinction between 'faith' in the Reformers' sense and 'theology' or 'doctrine' has by no means always been clear, producing as we saw the problem whereby 'justification by faith' has come to mean 'justification by believing in the proper doctrine of justification', a position which, in attempting to swallow its own tail, produces a certain type of theological and perhaps cultural indigestion.) Until comparatively recently, studies of Paul's 'ethics' were mostly relegated to the latter stages of larger works on Paul's theology, reflecting the perceived position of this topic, along with the doctrine of 'the church', within his own thought.<sup>106</sup> But more recently, in line with the turn to ethics in wider theological circles, the question not just of individual 'ethical topics' but of Paul's whole stance in terms of the way of life of his communities, and how that is to be related to the ways of life in the various worlds of late antiquity, has become a major topic of discussion, sometimes in relation particularly to his Jewish context and sometimes in relation to his non-Jewish worlds.<sup>107</sup> This explains, at last, the recent flurry of interest in Philemon in particular, researching, as it were, for lost time; though, as I have indicated, I fear lest the motivation for the recent work – a desire either to place Paul in socio-political terms as some kind of a radical social thinker, or perhaps to pull back from such a positioning – has been allowed to screen out his more central theological concerns.

One particular topic within this turn to community ethics has been the question of Paul's political stance and agenda. Over against the easy-going assumption until very recently that Paul was uninterested in 'political' questions, being content merely to say 'obey the authorities and pay your taxes' (Romans 13.1–7), it has now been widely argued that a good deal of his writing was deliberately and explicitly subversive of the imperial ideology of

<sup>105</sup> For the secular philosophers (Agamben, Badiou, Taubes, Žižek) see the discussion in *Interpreters*; for Boyarin, a postmodern Talmudist, see the discussion in *Interpreters* and *Perspectives*, ch. 8.

<sup>106</sup> The obvious example is Dunn 1998.

<sup>107</sup> Paul's ethics within a Jewish context: e.g. Tomson 1990; Bockmuehl 2000; and, from a different angle, Hays 1996 (see below, 1119f.). In the non-Jewish context: e.g. Meeks 1986b; Horrell 2005.



his day. This too has now already generated its own backlash.<sup>108</sup> The debate, it is often pointed out, needs to be located within *both* 'historical' study (where does Paul belong in relation to Roman imperial ideology – and, indeed, in relation to the various political philosophies of the time, very different as they were from our post-Enlightenment assumptions?) and 'theological' study (when he says 'Jesus is lord', does this imply 'therefore Caesar isn't'? If not, why not? If so, how does this political emphasis integrate with the regular topics of Pauline theology in which the lordship of Jesus plays such an important part?). These movements of contemporary thought thus generate further sets of questions: must we stay forever within the split worlds of 'indicative' versus 'imperative', and of 'politics' versus 'religion', or does Paul himself provide ways towards a fresh integration of belief and life? It is precisely this kind of discussion which, we may hope, the placing of 'theology' within the larger model of 'worldview' might enable us to address in a more nuanced way. In particular, it might enable us to avoid, in a way that has not always been done, the projection of late-modern or postmodern political ideas back on to Paul, just at the moment when we are trying to repent of projecting late-medieval or Reformational soteriological categories back on to him.

We thus have a much more complex scene than before. The overtly theological debates (justification, 'being in Christ', salvation-history, apocalyptic, covenant, 'old perspective' and 'new perspective') must collectively be brought into dialogue with the 'ethical' and 'political' ones: how did Paul envisage his communities living and operating? What did he say about slavery? about sex? about anger? about family life? about empire? And what role did all this play within his thought? Was it really the driving force, with 'theology' as usually conceived playing a secondary, supporting role, or was it the other way round? Or is it *all* really 'theological', *all* really 'political', and *all* really 'communitarian'? And all of these must meet up at last with the other enormous questions which have tended to have a life of their own rather than being integrated into any of the above discussions: what about christology? What account do we give of Paul's view of the identity, death and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah, and how do we integrate that account with all these other topics? What, similarly, about the spirit? Is it possible to give a fair account of *any* one of these topics without at least indicating in principle how *all* the others relate to it? Is there any kind of framework within which they cohere, make sense and find their proper individual and mutually aligned emphases?

These questions are not usually all discussed at the same time. But since they all claim to relate quite closely to central themes in Paul's writings, what really needs to happen is for them all to be jumbled up together again, like pieces of the same jigsaw puzzle that had somehow found their way onto quite separate tables. Only when they have been brought together again in a single, initially confusing, mass can they be sorted out properly

<sup>108</sup> See the discussion in ch. 12 below.

and fitted together into a more compelling, if inevitably more complex, single picture. That is, basically, what this book is about.

As part of that process, all these questions need to be brought into relation, much more explicitly than is usually done, not only to the questions of 'relevance' or 'application' (which, as we have seen, all too often drive both the historical and the theological agendas), but also to a deeper and richer form of the standard history-of-religions question. It isn't enough to say, 'Is Paul a Jewish or Greek, or (as it may be) a Roman thinker?' – and to hope that by answering that question this way or that we have solved a string of subsequent problems as well. I have written before about the importance of distinguishing the question of 'where an idea has come from' from the question of 'where it might be going to'. We must, in other words, separate out *derivation* from *confrontation*. My favourite example is Paul's use of the word *euaggelion*, usually translated 'gospel' or 'good news'. There is no doubt in my mind that when Paul uses it he is evoking the cognate verb in Isaiah 40.9 and 52.7: the 'good news' of Jesus the Messiah is the fulfilment of the 'good news' envisaged in that central prophetic passage. Paul has not 'derived' the idea from his surrounding culture. But equally there is no doubt in my mind (though there is in some others) that when Paul used it, not least in Galatians and Romans, he was conscious that for many of his hearers the 'gospel' of Caesar would be the primary resonance; and he was determined to confront the grandiose imperial claims with the far superior claims of Jesus.

To broaden this either/or just a bit: we need to enquire not just about the derivation of Paul's ideas, as an older history-of-religions project tried to do, but more specifically about Paul's *engagement with* his various worlds. 'Engagement' here is a deliberately vague term, which I take to involve some or all of the following: borrowing (in either direction); parallel thought, indicating a 'cousinly' relationship where two strands can be traced to a common ancestor though with different parentage on either side; and the rich mixture of affirmation, denial, derivation, confrontation, subversion, transformation, and a whole range of possible 'yes-but' and 'no-but', or perhaps 'yes-and' and 'no-and', relations. Serious study of Paul must put away childish antitheses and embrace the deeper, more multiplex world to which his letters actually point.<sup>109</sup>

We must, in other words, ask questions such as the following. How does Paul relate to the larger Jewish worldviews of his day, so far as we can reconstruct them, with their stories, symbols, praxis and implicit answers to worldview questions? In particular (since he seems deeply concerned with the Jewish scriptures), how did he read his Bible? Does his actual practice in *using* scripture tally with the claims he makes about Abraham, the law, and so forth? How does he relate to or engage with the hugely important Jewish markers of sacred space and time, the Temple on the one hand and the

<sup>109</sup> See the sensitive essays by Meeks 2001 and Martin 2001, even though the direction of the volume as a whole (Engberg-Pedersen 2001) seems to me still to lean in the direction of an implicit Hellenism and away from the rich world of second-Temple Judaism.

Sabbath on the other? Equally, how does he relate to the larger pagan world-views of his day, with their own stories, symbols, praxis and answers? In particular (since he seems deeply concerned with the lifestyle of his communities, in a way which sends off all kinds of resonances into their non-Jewish culture), how did he understand the moral traditions and debates of his day? How well, for instance, did he know the Stoic traditions, and other similar contemporary philosophical movements? Was he engaging with them either explicitly or implicitly, and if so how and to what extent and effect? Where did his thought and theirs lie along the same lines, and at what points did they diverge?

It isn't a matter, in other words, of deciding between two straightforward alternatives, seeing Paul *either* as a Jewish thinker, exegeting his Bible and letting the chips fall where they would into the non-Jewish world, *or* as the apostle to the gentiles, engaging with the pagan culture of his day and grabbing, almost at random, ideas and texts from his previous life in order to do so.<sup>110</sup> That old antithesis, which formed the template for so many earlier debates, is long past its sell-by date. It was always a serious misunderstanding (albeit with a distinguished pedigree) to suppose that if Paul was to make any headway in the gentile world he would have to 'translate' the early Jewish message into non-Jewish categories so his wider audience could relate to it. We must strive for a larger vision of his overall project, in which his subtle and careful use of the scriptures on the one hand, and his apparent engagement with the non-Jewish philosophical traditions on the other, can be integrated within a fresh account of his actual, Christ-and-spirit oriented, aims and objectives.

The main proposal of this book, then, which is advanced in Part III, is that there is indeed a way of analyzing and understanding Paul in which these several multi-layered dichotomies can be resolved, not indeed in a flat or simplistic way, but in that kind of harmony which often characterizes profound thinkers whose work not only touches on different topics but does so in different contexts and a variety of styles and tones of voice. This is not, then, a plea for a cheap coherence, a kind of conjurer's trick in which the audience is so bewitched by a clever piece of patter that it fails to notice the card up the sleeve or the rabbit in the hat. Nor is it simply to separate out, as J. C. Beker tried to do, the 'coherent' centre of Paul's thought as opposed to the 'contingent' expression it receives in the various letters.<sup>111</sup> It is the serious, scientific imperative to *get in all the data*, to do so *with appropriate simplicity*, and to *shed light on other areas* in addition to the primary topic.<sup>112</sup> Because the data are what they are – short but pithy documents which demand investigation from several angles all at once, many of which are still quite unfamiliar to western mindsets – the exposition cannot proceed smoothly, as it were topic by topic (God – humankind – sin – salvation

<sup>110</sup> See e.g. Schnelle 2005 [2003], 111.

<sup>111</sup> This is one of the main themes of Beker 1980. He was writing at a time when any attempt at stating a 'coherent' centre or shape in Paul's theology was widely frowned upon.

<sup>112</sup> See the account of method in *NTPG* II, esp. ch. 2.

– church – ethics!). Something more symphonic is called for, with due apology to those who prefer their books to be more like a sequence of separate songs. We are looking, not so much for a ‘centre’ to Paul’s thought-world (and his worldview in the sense explained), as a vantage-point, a summit from which we can survey, and see the way to explore, the lesser hills and valleys, the pathways and streams, that form the complex landscape of the letters and their implicit worlds. Nor is an aerial photograph good enough. Contours are not easily visible from above. We need to find those points in the terrain from which we can walk down to inspect the lower slopes, returning to the summit ridge so that we can take fresh bearings and then investigate the next valley, climb the next rock face, and so on.

The hypothesis I offer in this book is that we can find just such a vantage-point when we begin by assuming that Paul remained a deeply Jewish theologian who had rethought and reworked every aspect of his native Jewish theology in the light of the Messiah and the spirit, resulting in his own vocational self-understanding as the apostle to the pagans. That last point is vital, but it cannot be the starting-place. Begin with Paul’s engagement with his pagan context, and (as the literature amply demonstrates!) it is impossible to do justice to the many actual arguments which depend on his deep loyalty to, and affirmation of, the ancient Jewish traditions and the God who stood behind them. That is clear from the lacunae which have appeared, for instance, when scholars have tried to read the letter to Philemon while screening out Paul’s biblical allusions and messianic focus. Start with his Jewish context, however – even though he knew that his gospel was scandalous to his fellow Jews! – and we shall find that, precisely because his Jewish theology was rooted in creational monotheism, it necessarily addressed, in a variety of ways of which the letter to Philemon is one, the wider worlds of philosophy and empire, of home and market-place, of human life in its many dimensions, of the real life of the whole cosmos. When, therefore, we allow Paul’s native Jewish world to set the theological agenda – in a way which, interestingly, has not been attempted even by those who have done their best to retrieve him as a ‘Jewish’ thinker! – we see the three major points of what might be called ‘Jewish theology’ (recognizing that Jews do not, for reasons I have already given, have a ‘theology’ in the way that Paul and all subsequent Christianity needed to have) substantially reinterpreted, reworked, around the Messiah and the spirit.

**The three categories are monotheism, election and eschatology: one God, one people of God, one future for God’s world.** The ‘reinterpretation’ or ‘reworking’ in which Paul engaged was seen by him, not as a new, quirky or daring thing to do with ancient traditions, but as the true meaning of those ancient traditions, which had either gone unnoticed or been distorted by more recent readings of Israel’s scriptures and the movements of life and culture in which those readings played a key part. Paul’s reworking of these three basic theological categories provides the shape of Part III of this present book, in which my fundamental hypothesis about Paul’s theological

thought is set out as fully as space permits. Like all hypotheses, this one must make its way by showing that it can include the material, do so with appropriate elegance, and shed light on other related areas. I shall try to show that it does these things successfully.

Part of the importance of seeing things this way round is to insist that Paul did not have to stop being a Jew, and thinking and speaking Jewishly, in order to have a message for the world. Quite the contrary. His message for the world was the message that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had done at last what he had promised, providing the world with its rightful Lord. When we put Jewish-style creational monotheism back at the centre of his thinking, a new possibility emerges, of a comprehensible and necessary overlap between his own specifically Christian thinking and the moral and cultural thinking of the wider world – which then enables us to address those issues of wider social ‘application’ in a way that is not easily available, or at least not securely grounded, when, as has usually been the case, creational monotheism is ignored. Conversely, Paul did not have to turn his back on engagement in the wider world in order to reaffirm his fundamental Jewishness. Genesis, Exodus, Isaiah and the Psalms, to look no further than some of Paul’s favourite books, already affirm that the whole world is claimed by Israel’s God and is addressed by him precisely *through* what he is doing in, through and for Israel. Now that this entire tradition had, for Paul, been summed up in Israel’s Messiah, hailed in advance by psalms and prophets as the lord of the whole world, it was not an odd step, not a piece of shoulder-shrugging pragmatism (‘Well, the Jews won’t listen, so maybe the pagans will’), but rather the natural outflowing of the deepest Jewish insights, that made Paul simultaneously loyal to Israel’s traditions and committed to bringing this Jewish message into engagement with the wider world. The proper angle from which to approach Paul’s engagement with his pagan context is precisely his deep-rooted Jewish understanding, just as the proper angle from which to examine those deep Jewish roots is his sense that now, in the messianic age, it was time to confront the world of the gentiles. Because of the Messiah and the spirit all these things came together – and, with them, the lesser dichotomies also, as scholarship has seen them, of justification and being-in-Christ, of apocalyptic and covenant, of old and new ‘perspectives’, of theology and ethics, of spirituality and politics. Once we glimpse the summit ridge on which Paul stands, with its three emerging theological peaks of monotheism, election and eschatology, freshly understood in the light of the Messiah and the spirit, it will be comparatively easy to see these false either-or distinctions for what they are: attempts to live only in *this* valley, only by *this* stream, without seeing the larger mountain which has shaped other interlocking valleys, and other contributory streams, which all belong without contradiction on the same map. Map, of course, is not territory, but territory is often puzzling without map. Those who seek to reinhabit the territory will find considerable help in a long, careful study of the map.

## (iv) Questions in Context: History, Exegesis, ‘Application’

The two questions we have now sketched – Paul’s worldview and his theology – have an unequal pedigree in scholarship. Paul’s theology has been discussed since the late first century; the attempt to plot his worldview is very recent. What about the other tasks normally undertaken when Paul is studied?

These other tasks consist of three closely related (but in principle separable) topics: history, exegesis, and ‘application’ or ‘relevance’. These each have their own inner dynamic, as well as joining up with one another, and with ‘theology’, in a variety of ways. With Philemon again as our example, they might look like this:

(1) History. The letter raises questions about the social world of the first century; about the institution of slavery; about relationships between people in prison and those outside; about the ‘social location’ of Paul. If this was the only letter of Paul we possessed, we might also puzzle over such questions as: how and why did he come to these ideas? What made him think he could appeal to someone in this way? What can we say about the spirituality we see in his reference to prayer and the apparently central concept of *koinōnia*? Does the letter help us to ‘locate’ Paul not only socially but also in terms of ‘religion’, i.e. (perhaps) in relation to the Jewish or pagan ‘religious’ world of his day? However important it is to study the ways in which people have read Paul in subsequent centuries (the notion of ‘reception history’ for which there has been a recent fashion), the historical task cannot thereby be displaced. We need to go on investigating why Paul wrote what he wrote and what he intended to convey by it – whether or not he was successful: as he knew in experience, it sometimes took more than one exposition and explanation to get a point across.<sup>113</sup>

(2) Exegesis. Exegesis is the point where history and theology come together and tackle one specific task. How does the letter hold together (the ‘poetic sequence’ of the text itself)? How do the individual sentences relate to the whole, and the individual words to the sentences? Can we tell the ‘back story’ (the ‘referential sequence’ as opposed to the ‘poetic sequence’) in such a way as to make satisfying sense of the letter itself?<sup>114</sup> How do we hold history and theology together in this analysis? Exegesis is actually where everything starts (here are the letters; what shall we make of them?) and finishes (when all is said and done, have we made sense of the text?). But there is always a danger of reductionism (‘we have explained the text’ in a minimal way), and exegesis can never therefore be separated from its three siblings, history, theology, and ‘application’ – which are themselves of course also closely related.

(3) ‘Application’ or ‘relevance’. Paul’s contemporaries took slavery for granted. In today’s western world we take its abolition for granted. Does

<sup>113</sup> Obvious examples might be 1 Cor. 5 with 2 Cor. 2.1–11; and perhaps the relationship between 1 Thess. and 2 Thess.

<sup>114</sup> On ‘poetic sequence’ and ‘referential sequence’ see e.g. Petersen, discussed above, 00.

Paul's appeal therefore simply congratulate today's world on having finally caught up? Or, if perhaps he does not appeal straightforwardly for Philemon to release Onesimus, does this mean we can or should criticize him for his failure to do so? At a deeper level, what can we learn for our own lives, personally, ecclesially, culturally, socially, from the reconciliation for which Paul is working and the fascinating way he goes about it? More broadly, when we read what Paul says about the Messiah, or about community formation, or about faith, hope and love, do we think (with most people in most churches) that we are under some kind of obligation to believe and do what he says? Or do we think (with Nietzsche and a string of distinguished nay-sayers) that we have now understood what it is that caused the corruption and decline of the western world? It is hard to be neutral in reading Paul. To pretend to a detached or disinterested stance, as one might with a minor philosopher of antiquity, might well be to declare that one had missed the point, had failed to grasp how influential Paul has been over the last two thousand years, and why.

It might appear that only the third of these questions moves beyond 'description' to some kind of 'evaluation', but to suppose that would be naive. Theology, history and exegesis are complicated. All theologians, all historians, and all exegetes come with their own agendas and presuppositions. As we shall see, this does not mean that no advances can be made. We are not bound simply to see ourselves reflected at the bottom of the well. That is the point of 'critical realism'.<sup>115</sup> But it shows that the process of 'relevance' or 'application' (whether we are inclined to say 'Paul says this, so we must believe it' or 'Paul says this, which shows how wrong he was') does not wait quietly in the wings while the other three actors speak their lines. It is already on stage, nudging them, whispering in their ears, perhaps even trying to stop their mouths. The varied tasks involved in studying Paul become blended together, and it is important that we learn to listen for the different voices within the developing harmony, or, as it may be, cacophony. Some of the most exciting work done on Paul in the last two generations has brought together theology, history, exegesis and 'relevance' in an explosive mixture, as anyone who has worked through Käsemann's commentary on Romans will know.

What then are the historical issues to which we must give attention? In terms of Philemon, we have already seen a microcosm of what the historical task might look like. The historian amasses as much evidence as possible, from whatever sources – books, coins, inscriptions, artefacts, archaeological discoveries about the layout and buildings of ancient cities, and so on – and tries to produce a picture, whether large or small, of how life was; a narrative, whether short or long, of what happened; and, particularly, some insight, whether deep or shallow, into the aims and motivations of the characters involved in the story. That is what we have had to do with Paul,

<sup>115</sup> Again, see *NTPG* Part II and esp. ch. 2.

Philemon and Onesimus as much as with Pliny, Sabinianus and the unnamed freedman.

For this task, of course, the historian needs to understand how people in that place and time normally thought, how they saw the world, how they understood themselves and those around them.<sup>116</sup> This can never remain a mere intellectual construct. ‘History of ideas’ matters, just as what has been called ‘history of religions’ matters. But it is always part of a larger ‘history’ which includes pots and pans, marriage and war, gods and demons, public life and domestic life, and a host of other matters. The historian must therefore take account of as much information as possible: back to the anthropologists’ ‘thick description’.

This kind of exercise is vital if history is indeed to be history. The historian is always on guard against the double danger of anachronism and what we might call ‘analogism’ (the equivalent in relation to *place* of what anachronism is in relation to *time*). First-century Turkey was not only unlike twentieth-century Turkey but significantly unlike first-century Jerusalem on the one hand and Rome on the other.<sup>117</sup> The reason history is fascinating is because people in other times and places are so like us. The reason history is difficult is because people in other times and places are so different from us. History is, to that extent, like marriage, and subject to some of the same balanced dangers of over-detachment and over-possessiveness. One cannot do history at a clinical distance, but nor can one insist that it produce the results that were expected or desired.

But history is possible. We are not compelled to throw up our hands, capitulate to the current postmodern mood, and suppose that all we can do is listen to the echo of our own voices, bouncing off data which appear to give us access to other times and places but really only serve as a sounding-board for our own prejudices. Yes, of course, we all come to history with our own questions. We want to know: was Paul in favour of slavery, or was he against it? That has been such a worldview-shaping question for the western world, and particularly the American world, in the last two hundred years that we cannot believe (from our great Enlightened height) that Paul could have passed over such a question without giving it, to our mind, a definite answer! We should remind ourselves that we possess a seemingly random selection of Paul’s writings, in which each letter contains some striking material not found in any of the others. Paul did not write the kind of systematic treatises in which he would have taken care to cover all possible ‘topics’. There is always at least an implicit gap between the textually limited ‘Paul’ we know from the letters and the hypothetically wider ‘Paul’ who might well have had other things to say – if only some church had sent

<sup>116</sup> I was intrigued, reading Briggs 2011, to discover (78) that historians were often chosen for the code-breaking team in Bletchley Park during the Second World War precisely because they were trained to think into the minds of people who thought very differently from themselves.

<sup>117</sup> Hence the importance of studies like Barclay 1996 and Trebilco 1991 and 2004. Koester’s *Introduction* (Koester 1982a and b), which attempts a geographical account of early Christianity, is commendable for that attempt but significantly flawed through several of the controlling assumptions.



him a letter to ask him about them. But on some points our own inherited moral sensitivities make us want to press him further. We think, for instance (in addition to slavery) of what he says about his fellow Jews. Our moral sensitivities have been so battered by the events of the twentieth century that every time we come within a few paces of such questions we fear a further bruising, and can hardly bring ourselves to speak the truth about what Paul actually said in case he be accused, even at several removes and only by implication, of complicity in appalling crimes.

Such puzzles are inevitable. But it is shallow and one-dimensional to suppose that we can never advance beyond the state of bringing wrong assumptions to texts and receiving conundrums in return. We do not have to remain naive. Our reading of texts (and I mean 'texts' in the widest possible sense, to include all data from other times and places) *ought* to puzzle us at some points. That is normal, to be expected and welcomed. The question is then, What do we do next? That is the point at which, if we are wise, we suspend our regular assumptions and look for other evidence, or unnoticed elements in the evidence we already have, which will enable us to say, 'Ah! I couldn't understand this text (or mosaic, or triumphal arch) because I thought they assumed *this*, whereas in fact they assumed *that*.' And so we study the material again, sometimes with full comprehension, more often moving on to fresh puzzles, fresh further study, and, if we are fortunate, fresh insight.

This, more or less, is what I meant in *NTPG* by 'critical realism': a self-critical epistemology which, in rejecting the naive realism which simply imagines that we are looking at the material with a God's-eye view, rejects also the narcissistic reductionism of imagining that all apparent perception is in fact projection, that everything is really going on inside our own heads. Critical realism engages determinedly in a many-sided conversation, both with the data itself and with others (including scholars) who are also engaging with it. This conversation aims, not of course at an unattainable 'objectivity', but at truth none the less, the truth in which the words we use and the stories we tell increasingly approximate to the reality of another world, in the historian's case the world of the past. We *know* that Jerusalem fell in AD 70. We *know* Jesus of Nazareth died on a Roman cross. And we *know* that someone called Paul wrote a sharp, wise little letter to a friend called Philemon, invoking their common loyalty to a figure he refers to as *Christos* as a means of persuading him to be reconciled to a slave. We must not, in our proper anxiety about projecting our own assumptions on to the past, compound the problem by imagining that we can actually know nothing much about the past because our reconstructions remain *our* reconstructions.

All this applies, in a specialized way, to what has been called 'history of religions', that highly influential branch of study which dramatically shaped the way the New Testament was read between, roughly, the middle of the nineteenth century and the middle of the twentieth. Today's discussions are

still to some extent influenced by the rhetoric at least, and sometimes also the substance, of these discussions, so it is important to be clear. The famous *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* was massively influenced by the prevailing Hegelian mood in German Protestantism, which was attempting to analyze and classify religious ideas and practices rather in the way that the scientific study of the natural world was proceeding with its data. But the ‘religions’ in question were not neutral objects lying around awaiting such classification. The central motif of the history-of-religions movement as it affected Pauline studies at least was the urgent importance of keeping Paul’s ideas well clear of two categories deemed, ahead of time, to be opposed to his all-important work: (a) Jewish beliefs, and ‘Jewish Christianity’ of the sort that (it was supposed) had flourished before Paul’s conversion and was opposing his views, as in the confrontation in Antioch; and (b) ‘early Catholicism’, that figment of F. C. Baur’s imagination which proved so convenient a way of labelling, and then pushing off the Pauline stage, any material which seemed to offer a more than merely functional view of the church, and a more than merely incidental view of God’s action in history. The implicit evaluative story of early Christianity thus ran like this: Jesus (good – not that we can know much about him, but his death and resurrection, whatever the latter means, are foundational); early Jewish Christianity (dangerous, and dogging the footsteps of Paul once he appeared); Paul (the real hero); early Catholicism (degenerate, a failure of nerve). About this whole scheme, the two most important things to say are that it has been massively influential and massively misleading. It was never the result of genuine open-ended historical enquiry. It was always an attempt – a successful attempt! – to force the evidence of the first generation of Jesus-followers into a straitjacket, to compel certain readings of key texts and to prohibit others. Even where neither its presuppositions nor its conclusions are officially held any longer, it continues to wield considerable influence in Pauline studies through the ‘consensus’ (in most cases now an unexamined prejudice) about which letters are genuine and which not (a point to which we shall return presently), and about the implicit interpretation of a great many passages and themes.

The more general legacy of the history-of-religions school is the larger question, which remains important and to which the present volume will give a precise and definite answer, as to whether Paul was basically a Jewish thinker or basically a gentile thinker – and whether, for instance, he changed from the one to the other. Paul, of course, will redefine the terms, but the question remains important not least because it is so intimately connected to the way we read his theology, and also to the way in which his ‘relevance’ or ‘applicability’ is assessed. But, above all, these questions matter because they affect the way we read every single verse of every single letter. They all come down, in other words, to exegesis.

Exegesis is a branch of history. (It is also a branch of literary study, since texts have their own internal life; but without historical anchorage our

flights of literary fancy might lose their bearings, like migrating birds affected by global warming and thus landing in the wrong place.) This is so whether we are reading Aristotle or Jane Austen, Paul or Dostoevsky. No doubt we are affected, in our own selves, by what we read in writers ancient or modern. But it always makes sense to ask, What did the writer mean by this? Lexicography itself is a branch of history. The study not only of etymology, but of the way words were actually used in real sentences by real people, demands a wide historical knowledge. I sometimes have to make this point to puzzled romantics who suppose that any scholarly study of the Bible must somehow 'come between the simple reader and the text', or that bringing non-biblical texts to the table alongside scripture will somehow skew the 'pure' results of the Canon: without lexicography, there would be no translations, and without wider historical scholarship, there would be no lexicography! We cannot (or should not) read a letter like Philemon without being prepared to ask, for instance, What exactly would someone like Paul have meant when he used a word like *Christos*? What might someone in Ephesus or Colosse in the first century have thought he meant? The assumptions which have quietly crept over western readers of the Bible during the last few centuries may well have obscured the true answers to such questions. These assumptions must be challenged. Otherwise we will be like children playing Chinese whispers: supposing ourselves to be listening to Paul's letters, we may instead be hearing the most recent in a series of increasingly distorted transcriptions.

This removal of distracting whispers, too, is in principle possible as well as desirable. We do not have to capitulate to the postmodern insistence on the death of the author. When we read words, whether they were written yesterday or two thousand years ago, the normal charitable assumption is that the words were written by writers who were doing their best to say, more or less, what they meant. The proper postmodern insistence that texts take on new lives in subsequent generations, 'meaning' different things to different people, is well (and often sadly) illustrated by the history of different readings of the biblical text itself, not least Paul. But (the critical realist move again) that doesn't mean we cannot or should not ask what the actual writer was getting at. In fact, despite the postmodern turn, most ordinary historians and most ordinary exegetes have not stopped asking such questions and working towards better answers. The postmodernist is welcome to go on insisting that the hare can never overtake the tortoise, but historians regularly watch the hare coming in first, and learn to smile at the sceptics who say it was impossible. Real advance in historical knowledge is possible. It happens all the time. An obvious example, despite the confusion and even chaos of contemporary Pauline studies, is that almost nobody now can write a serious book on Paul in ignorance of the massive work that has been done on the first century, particularly the Jewish world of that period. Look back at some of the monographs from fifty years ago; the contrast is shocking.

The criteria for ‘better answers’ and ‘real advance’ remain those I set out in detail in *NTPG*. A historical hypothesis, like a scientific hypothesis, must (a) get in the data, (b) do so with appropriate simplicity, and (c) shed light on areas outside the basic subject-matter of the inquiry.<sup>118</sup> I suggest that the reading I have proposed of Philemon in general and of verses 6 and 17–20 in particular achieves these three things. That is of course debatable, but those are the standards to which I appeal (like all historians, at least by implication), and by which we expect our hypotheses to be judged. We assume that writers intended their texts to mean something (the extreme cases of people writing nonsense actually proves the point, since the writers in question usually *intended* to write nonsense, rather like a composer deliberately producing outrageous discords) and we also assume that it is in principle possible to move towards the discovery of that intention.<sup>119</sup>

It will not do, in other words, for a particular interpretation of a particular text, whether of Aristotle, Paul, or anybody else, to be either affirmed or ruled out because that is what we want, or do not want, such a person to have said. Like most contemporary exegetes, I wish Paul could have said something much clearer about the dehumanizing practice of slavery and the need to work towards its abolition. But I cannot, as a historian, collude with the easy-going claim that that must have been what in fact he did say in this letter. Likewise, I wish that Aristotle, for whom I have a great regard, had not said what he did about women being an inferior form of humankind.<sup>120</sup> But he did, and I have to learn that life is more complicated than drawing up a list of good people, who said all the things I agree with, and bad people, who said the opposite. (It is just as easy to make Paul say something everybody will scoff at, as a way of distancing ourselves from him in other areas as well, as it is to force him to say things everybody will be pleased with, in order to gain him credit.) As Solzhenitsyn said, the line between good and evil runs through each one of us and every human community.<sup>121</sup>

One of the reasons we do history, in fact, is because it acts as a brake, a control, on our otherwise unbridled enthusiasm for our own ideas. This is a normal human failing, but one elevated to an art form within certain parts of post-Enlightenment western culture, where *our* discoveries, *our* political insights, *our* egalitarian view of marriage and the family, *our* architecture, or whatever, are assumed to be superior, and are made to form a canon, a yardstick, against which we can and must judge all other times and places. Wait a minute, says history, supported by exegesis: ancient Athenian public architecture knocks most of today’s efforts off the stage altogether, ancient

<sup>118</sup> See Käsemann 1980 [1973], 406: ‘history is the field of reconstructions, and whether these are right or not depends on how far they overcome the problems posed.’ Quite so. Dodd offered a common-sense approach which still has depth and value in his sequence of observation, analysis, hypothesis and reflection (see Matlock 1996, 166, discussing Dodd 1946) – though Dodd believed, wrongly in my view, that one could by this means attain ‘objectivity’.

<sup>119</sup> A good example of deliberate nonsense-writing might be the correspondence between Pablo Picasso and Gertrude Stein: see Madeline 2008.

<sup>120</sup> cf. Aristotle *Pol.* 1.12f.

<sup>121</sup> See Wright 2006a [*Evil*], 18f. (UK edn.); 38f. (US edn.).

Roman houses (for those who could afford them) could still teach us a thing or two, and the ancient Israelites knew more about how to write poems of praise or lament than we will ever learn. And the early Christians? Well, that is the point at issue. What history demands, and exegesis facilitates, is *suspension of judgment* in order to learn wisdom. ‘The impatient, who are concerned only about results or practical application, should leave their hands off exegesis. They are of no value for it, nor, when rightly done, is exegesis of any value for them.’ Thus the great Ernst Käsemann, writing the Preface to his commentary on Romans, nearly forty years ago.<sup>122</sup> His words apply, I repeat, just as much to those who come to Paul in order to declare how wrong he is as to those who come in the hope that he will tell them they are right in what they already suppose. The historical task remains central and non-negotiable, and is never more needed than at those points where we are just a bit too eager for the one result or the other. Where the historical subject is known principally through his or her writings, exegesis remains history’s essential tool, just as history remains the handmaid of exegesis for those whose primary aim is to understand what was said, whether or not with a view to accepting it or acting upon it.

History, of course, is never ‘neutral’. The myth of neutrality, still clung to by some ‘departments of religion’ in the way a drowning mariner clings to a few battered spars, was itself an Enlightenment fiction, generating the spurious belief that one might approach the New Testament through a supposedly neutral ‘history’, and then, when the ‘facts’ or at least the ‘data’ have been cleaned up historically, venture upon the further task of a ‘theological’ reading. Things were never that simple. Many ‘historical’ verdicts reached by books of ‘New Testament Introduction’ have deeply theological or even ideological roots, not least those of the history-of-religions school discussed a moment ago. In any case, I propose in the present book that, having begun with one small and sharp historical incident, the letter to Philemon and its surrounding historical narrative and context, we then reserve the historical questions about Paul’s life and work for the final section of the volume. This is actually to take the heart of the historical task very seriously, as the study not just of what people do but of why they do it. Only when we have understood Paul’s worldview do we understand why his theology is what it is, and the role it plays precisely within that worldview. Only when we understand Paul’s theology do we understand why he believed himself called to do what he did, and why he went about his tasks in the way that he did. Only then, in fact, do we really stand a chance of approaching the tasks of exegesis itself, of the sustained study of the individual letters, with any deep overall understanding – though of course, since the letters are the primary

<sup>122</sup> Käsemann 1980 [1973], viii (Preface dated 15 December 1979, thirty years before the first draft of the present book; but the sentence, even sharper in the original, is in the Preface to the third German edn. (1974) as well: ‘... Er [exegesis] taugt nicht für sie, rechtshaffen betrieben sie nicht für ihn’). Käsemann, whose great work was complete before the so-called ‘new perspective’ burst on the scene, nevertheless pointed forward to many of today’s historical and theological emphases, not least because, head and shoulders above many others, he pointed back past Bultmann to Schweitzer. On all this, see the discussion in *Interpreters*, and *Perspectives*, chs. 1, 4.

data for every stage of our investigation, it is not the case that we first draw conclusions about Paul's worldview and theology from somewhere else and only at the end look back at the letters. Rather, my proposal is that, granted the basic starting-point we have already attained in the middle of the first century, we should work our way towards an understanding of why Paul did what he did (Part IV) by means of the two large studies of worldview (Part II) and theology (Part III).

I spoke before, briefly, about the way in which certain programmes of study, particularly the history-of-religions agenda, have conditioned the way scholars have come to regard the question of the authenticity or otherwise of the letters ascribed to Paul, and also the value to be placed on the other apparent source, the book of Acts. These questions remain important, and draw together many of the things we have been talking about. I shall therefore deal with them briefly now before concluding this opening chapter with some more Philemon-related questions of history and theology.

#### (v) Sources

The first question most historians ask has to do with sources. Here we face a problem as much of scholarly fashion as of historical substance. Since the present volume is designed to challenge and reshape in quite a radical way the 'normal' ways of understanding Paul historically and theologically, and since the judgments made about 'authenticity' grow directly out of, reflect and perpetuate the views I am challenging, it seems to me absurd simply to collude with the ruling hypothesis, to concede as it were some of the prosecution's main points when in fact there is a good defence to be offered.

Hardly anybody today questions the authenticity of seven of the 'Pauline' letters: Romans, the two Corinthian letters, Galatians, Philippians, the first of the Thessalonian letters, and Philemon – though it is a salutary exercise to remember that all of them have been challenged at one stage or another, and that F. C. Baur, who launched the nineteenth-century Tübingen school, regarded only the first four of those as genuine, spreading all the others out across a lengthy chronological framework. That position died a death over a century ago, but some of Baur's assumptions linger on in other forms, as we shall see.

It is high time, in my view, to reconsider the three obvious omissions in the list, namely Ephesians, Colossians and 2 Thessalonians. Many scholars have in fact resisted the trend on one or more of these letters, more with Colossians than the other two.<sup>123</sup> Reasons of style are often cited (see below). But I have come to think that the main reason why Ephesians and Colossians have been regarded as non-Pauline (or, in the somewhat grandiose phrase, Deutero-Pauline) is because they fly in the face of the liberal

<sup>123</sup> Among recent discussions see e.g. Lincoln 1990, lix–lxxiii (Eph.); Moo 2008, 28–41 (Col.); Malherbe 2000, 349–75 (2 Thess.).

protestant paradigm for reading Paul which dominated the scholarly landscape for several generations, but which has been undermined from more or less all sides over the course of recent decades. Quite simply, Ephesians in particular, and Colossians to a considerable extent, seem to have a much stronger and higher view of the church – and, indeed, of Jesus himself – than many scholars have been prepared to allow. The real Paul, such scholars assumed, taught ‘justification by faith’, and since this was held to be radically incompatible with what was seen as a high view of the church (sometimes, too, with a high view of Jesus), Paul could not have written those letters. Indeed, these letters did not appear to teach ‘justification by faith’, except in the single verse Ephesians 2.8, and that could be explained away in terms of ‘Deutero-Paul’ nodding politely to his great exemplar. But Procrustean beds will not do. It is time to challenge such dogma-driven prejudices head on.<sup>124</sup>

But surely (someone might ask), isn’t that liberal protestant paradigm exactly what has been challenged so strongly over the last generation by the ‘new perspective’? And what about the new ‘political’ and ‘sociological’ readings of Paul? Now that they’ve highlighted Paul’s vision of Christ as sovereign over the powers, and realized that Paul was interested in forming and shaping the early communities, might that not affect a decision about sources? What, indeed, about the fashion for ‘apocalyptic’? Might that not have changed things as well?<sup>125</sup>

Well, yes, all three of these movements might well have had that effect. The ‘new perspective’ might well have noticed that the main emphasis which has emerged from its own study of Romans and Galatians is exactly what we find in Ephesians 2.11–21, and that the stress on ‘participation in Christ’ which was so important already for Albert Schweitzer, and which has re-emerged as a central theme for writers like Ed Sanders and Douglas Campbell, is massively reaffirmed there as well. So, too, the ‘political Paul’ of Horsley and others might have been thought very likely to emphasize the sovereignty of Jesus Christ over all powers and authorities, and the victory of the cross in which those powers were led as a defeated rabble behind him. There we are again: Ephesians and Colossians. But no: that move has not been taken. Ephesians and Colossians are still on the ‘dubious’ list, and sometimes even cited, astonishingly, as indicating an ‘early catholic’ social conformism, settling down into comfortable bourgeois existence. (Anything less like comfortable bourgeois existence than Ephesians it would be hard to

<sup>124</sup> The tactic of pronouncing an undesirable work ‘inauthentic’ goes back a long way. The second-century BC Stoic Posidonius deemed Plato’s *Phaedo* inauthentic because it taught the immortality of the soul; the Stoics wanted to claim Plato himself as authoritative, but only on their own terms. See the discussion in Sedley 2003, 21.

<sup>125</sup> On all these movements see the discussion in *Interpreters*.

imagine, but there we are.<sup>126</sup>) Likewise, one might have thought that an ‘apocalyptic’ reading of Paul would have done to 2 Thessalonians what Paul hoped Philemon would do to Onesimus, that is, welcomed it back into the family with open arms. The ‘apocalyptic’ enthusiasts might have noticed, as well, that the cosmic victory of the cross, and the consequent continuing cosmic warfare, brought Ephesians and Colossians, too, right in to the centre. The massive ingenuity and labour that has rehabilitated Galatians as an ‘apocalyptic’ text could, if applied to those two letters, have had much the same result with considerably less effort.<sup>127</sup>

So why hasn’t it happened? One reason, I think, is that, at the very moment when the older reasons for rejecting Ephesians and Colossians had been kicked away, quite new ones came to the fore. Paul may not have been a nineteenth-century liberal Protestant, but people very much hoped he might turn out to be a postmodern egalitarian ... and there are those awkward *Haustafeln*, the instructions to husbands and wives, to children and slaves.<sup>128</sup> Even if we’ve given up making Paul the preacher of our favourite theology, we still want him to back up our assumed ideology; and the thought of those differentiations within the household, with their threat of something we might even call ‘hierarchy’, is too much to bear. That emerges explicitly in some writers, but I suspect it is latent in many others.<sup>129</sup>

In addition – it is hard to say this, but perhaps it needs to be said – there is the matter of fashion and prejudice. Just as in Germany in the late nineteenth century you more or less *had* to be a follower of F. C. Baur, and in Oxford in the mid-twentieth century you more or less *had* to believe in the existence of Q, so tin North America today you more or less *have* to say that you will regard Ephesians and Colossians as post-Pauline – unless, like Luke Timothy Johnson, you have so massively established your scholarly credibility on other grounds that your acceptance of the letters as fully Pauline can then be regarded, not as a serious scholarly fault, but as an

<sup>126</sup> See too e.g. Dunn 1975a, 345–50, in a section entitled ‘The Vision Fades’, dealing first with Col. and Eph. – two letters one might have thought among the most visionary writings from the early church. Dunn’s ‘vision’, of a free-floating ‘charismatic’ community, embodies the standard Romantic idea of an early spontaneity followed by a kind of spiritual hardening of the arteries. I was delighted, thirty years after that book was published, to see James Dunn regularly attending worship in Durham Cathedral, with no apparent loss of vision.

<sup>127</sup> Martyn 1997; de Boer 2011.

<sup>128</sup> See Meeks 1996.

<sup>129</sup> See Borg and Crossan 2009. I recently came upon yet another spurious ‘reason’ for separating these letters out: all the undisputed Paulines mention ‘financial transactions on behalf of the Pauline mission’, but the disputed letters do not: so Downs 2006, 50 (repeated by Friesen 2009, 45; Downs cites Kiley 1986, 46f.). What does this mean? Galatians mentions neither the Collection nor Paul’s own payment (or lack thereof); 6:6–10 scarcely counts as a counter-example. Philemon does not mention money, except the possibility that Onesimus might have stolen some. Many of the really important themes in the letters occur only in one (obvious example: the eucharist in 1 Cor.). On the danger of arguments from silence see e.g. Hengel 1991, 27.



allowable eccentricity.<sup>130</sup> This has come about partly because, again with a certain irony, the question has become bound up with a quite different debate, the ‘conservative’ versus ‘liberal’ question about the Bible itself. There are, of course, ‘conservatives’ think Paul wrote everything the Bible says he wrote (though most balk at Hebrews, despite the heading in the King James Version), and a test of ‘liberal’ orthodoxy (which is of course just as fierce, and carefully policed, as any other sort) is not only how many sayings of Jesus you regard as inauthentic but how many letters of Paul you hold at bay. The irony emerges when those same ‘conservative’ readers allow Ephesians to be by Paul for reasons to do with their commitment to a particular view of scripture, but are careful not to let it affect their view of Paul lest they be forced to admit, not only a higher ecclesiology than they have usually wanted, but also the fact that Ephesians seems to offer rather a clear vindication of the ‘new perspective’ (these two points are not unrelated). The same irony in reverse emerges when the still-ruling ‘liberal’ orthodoxy embraces all kinds of political and sociologically ‘relevant’ readings of Paul, without noticing just how much help they would receive in such matters from Ephesians, Colossians and 2 Thessalonians.<sup>131</sup>

The prejudice against Ephesians and Colossians has grown so strong in some circles that it has reached the point where young scholars are warned against using them in the study of Paul lest they be thought unscholarly. This is one of those dogmas that have taken the place, within the western study of the New Testament, of the older doctrinal tests which used to characterize seminaries: instead of checking out students (or indeed would-be professors) on the Trinity or the Incarnation, interviewers now enquire cautiously whether they are sound on rejecting Pauline authorship of Ephesians! The multiple ironies of these positions should in themselves already suggest that it is time for a rethink. I am reminded of Clifford Geertz’s ironic remark, that it is almost more of a problem to get exhausted ideas out of the scholarly literature than it is to get productive ones in.<sup>132</sup> At least, as Robert Morgan

<sup>130</sup> See e.g. Johnson 1986; another example might be Gorman 2004. I well remember the shock when Dennis Nineham announced in a lecture in Oxford in the early 1970s that he still believed in the priority of Mark and the existence of Q ‘not because there were any good arguments in their favour but because he hadn’t yet seen good arguments for anything else’. I am happy to note that when I was teaching in Oxford in the late 1980s hardly any of the NT teachers believed strongly in ‘Q’, though I am informed that this has now changed once more. Fashions come and go.

<sup>131</sup> Behind all this is the usual irony: supposedly ‘liberal’ views are assumed to be less influenced by ‘presuppositions’ (e.g. those arising from theological or ecclesial commitments) and hence more ‘objective’ and likely to be true. The two background assumptions for this position — the possibility of epistemological neutrality on the one hand, and an implicit Whig view of (modern intellectual) history on the other — need to be challenged, just as do the assumptions of naive ‘conservatives’.

<sup>132</sup> Geertz 2000 [1973], 27 n. 5. Geertz goes on, in doubly ironic language that we can cheerfully transfer to our present context: ‘As the field advances one would hope that this sort of intellectual weed control would become a less prominent part of our activities. But, for the moment, it remains true that old theories tend less to die than to go into second editions.’ A recent example of a writer determined to say that Paul did not write Eph. but obviously stuck for proper arguments is Eisenbaum 2009, 16–22: eventually she gets to style and content, but her opening gambits, (a) that some MSS do not have ‘to those in Ephesus’, and that this is ‘one reason for the scholarly suspicion that Paul did not write

suggested in a different context, let us put the chess pieces back on the board from time to time and restart the game.<sup>133</sup>

Arguments from style are clearly important in principle. But they are hard to make in practice. We have such a tiny sample of Paul's writing, hardly an adequate database for a serious stylistic analysis such as would support definite conclusions about authorship. Those who have done computer analyses of Paul's style come up with more 'conservative' results than we might have expected.<sup>134</sup> In fact, if it's stylistic differences we want, the most striking are, in my opinion, the radical differences between 1 and 2 Corinthians. The second letter to Corinth is much jerkier; its sentences are dense and convoluted, bending back on themselves, twisting to and fro with language about God, Jesus Christ and Paul's ministry. The organization of material is much less crisp. There is a far greater difference between those two Corinthian letters than there is between Galatians and Romans on the one hand and Ephesians and Colossians on the other; yet nobody for that reason casts doubt on 2 Corinthians. As John A. T. Robinson pointed out from his personal experience a generation ago, a busy church leader may well write in very different styles for different occasions and audiences. The same person can be working simultaneously on a large academic project with careful, ponderous sentences and a short, snappy talk for the Sunday school. It has not been unknown for senior biblical scholars to write children's fiction.<sup>135</sup> More directly to the point, it has recently been argued strikingly that Ephesians and Colossians show evidence of a deliberate 'Asiatic' style which Paul could easily have adopted for readers in western Turkey.<sup>136</sup> I regard the possibility of significant variation in Paul's own style as much higher than the possibility that someone else, a companion or co-worker, could achieve such a measure of similarity. Other historical examples of that genre do not encourage us to suppose they would have been so successful.<sup>137</sup>

It is time, I believe, that we allow at least the possibility that Ephesians and Colossians, rather obviously companion pieces of one another and, in the case of Colossians, possessing an obvious link to Philemon, should be brought back into the fold. Since, to repeat, part of the point of this book is

Ephesians' (17) and (b) that Ephesians 'reads like a generic letter', with no reference to a specific context, and that this is 'another indicator that the letter was not written by Paul', are puzzling indeed. Even if these were relevant considerations, many would say that they cancel one another out.

<sup>133</sup> Morgan 1973, 43f.: 'after every game of theological interpretation all the pieces of tradition come back on to the board.' One does not have to agree with Morgan's account of *Sachkritik* to see the value of this point.

<sup>134</sup> cf. e.g. Kenny 1986; Neumann 1990.

<sup>135</sup> Robinson 1976, 70f., in what we may suppose to be a thinly veiled autobiographical remark: 'Paul would not be the last church leader whose style (and indeed subject-matter) in an *ad clerum* differed markedly from his already highly diverse and adaptable manner of speaking and writing for wider audiences.' Among NT scholars who have written children's fiction we might mention C. H. Dodd and R. J. Bauckham.

<sup>136</sup> Witherington 2007, 1–6, 17–19.

<sup>137</sup> In Wright 1986b, 34 I cited Süssmaier's completion of Mozart's *Requiem*. This point about the style of one's colleagues is not usually noted by those who, anxious to protect Paul from direct authorship of a particular letter but equally anxious to show that they recognize its similarity, have suggested that Timothy or some other colleague might have written on Paul's behalf.

to rethink from the ground up all kinds of previously held views about Paul, his worldview, his theology and his aims, it would be foolish to push off the table, before we begin, material which has a *prima facie* claim to come from him, on the ground that it does not fit with those other views.

The question of 2 Thessalonians is different, though related. My suspicion is that the true reason for dismissing it was that Paul wasn't supposed to be interested in the kind of 'apocalyptic' writing we find in chapter 2 in particular.<sup>138</sup> But again the prejudice has lingered on long after the scholarly mood has shifted. 'Apocalyptic' has made a come-back in New Testament studies in general and Paul in particular. What is more, 'apocalyptic' language such as we find in this letter, though no doubt difficult for us to interpret, was from at least Daniel onwards a standard way of referring to what today we would call 'political' events and personages and investing them with their supposed theological significance.<sup>139</sup> It would be ironic now, with interest running high in Paul as both an apocalypticist and a political thinker, if we continued to rule out of consideration, largely for reasons of scholarly tradition and fashion, a letter where both those themes play key roles.

The question of the Pastoral Letters is different again. My own opinion is that if the only 'Pastoral' letter we had was what we presently call 2 Timothy, the 'problem of the Pastorals' might not have occurred.<sup>140</sup> 2 Timothy is, it seems to me, much more like the 'Paul' of the other letters in style, mood and flavour than 1 Timothy. However, the variation is, again, perhaps no greater than the variation between 1 and 2 Corinthians. Titus is in a slightly different category again.

For the purposes of this book I will assume three things. First, Colossians is certainly Pauline, and to be used without excuse or apology. Second, Ephesians and 2 Thessalonians are highly likely to be Pauline, even if (a concession to the weaker siblings; I do not myself find this plausible) they were written by someone close to Paul and doing their best to imitate him. They may be used in evidence though perhaps not made to bear an entire load by themselves. However, again as a concession to troubled consciences, I shall try, in mounting arguments, to allow the normal seven letters to bear most of the weight, and bring in Ephesians and 2 Thessalonians rather as Winston Churchill said he would bring ancient languages into a modern school curriculum: he would, he said, 'let the clever ones learn Latin as an honour and Greek as a treat.'

Third, as to the Pastorals, 2 Timothy may well be by Paul, writing in a different mood and context, and may be drawn on similarly, though again with due caution. 1 Timothy and Titus come in a different category, and will be used, in the opposite way to that in which a drunkard uses a lamppost, for illumination rather than support.

<sup>138</sup> cf. e.g. Koch etc. It would be interesting to track the way rejection of 2 Thess. has gone hand in hand with the inability to see what was going on in, for instance, Rom. 8.19–26.

<sup>139</sup> See *NTPG* 280–98; and below, 175.

<sup>140</sup> On this possibility see Murphy-O'Connor 1991; Prior 1989.

A further necessary question about sources concerns the use of Acts in the study of Paul. Here again we meet with prejudice – in both directions, one might add: ‘conservative’ scholars have tended to defend the ‘historicity’ of Acts, and ‘radical’ scholars to question it. No surprises so far. But underneath this is a rather different issue. It is precisely part of the implicit worldview of the older liberal protestant ruling paradigm in New Testament studies to suggest that the writing of the four gospels in general, and of Luke in particular, represented a ‘failure of nerve’ on the part of the early church: the ‘parousia’ has not arrived on schedule, so let’s look back rather than forward!<sup>141</sup> This extended to a highly negative judgment against Luke: at a time when ‘salvation history’ was seen as just about the most wicked theological mistake one could make, Luke was seen as its primary architect, pushing the early church down the fateful road to ‘early Catholicism’.

I have argued strongly elsewhere that this entire way of looking at things rests on some fairly major mistakes.<sup>142</sup> The prejudice against Acts as a historical source is based, in part, on this strange idea that early Christian historiography was a category mistake. The received ‘wisdom’ suggests a date for Acts in the 80s, 90s, or even later, but there are actually no solid arguments for this, and such dating largely depends on prior judgments already noted and queried.<sup>143</sup> There were, in other words, *theological* and ideological reasons why Acts was pushed further away from the events it purports to record. Now that we see so many things about early Christianity so very differently, it is time to revisit the reasons behind such judgments and submit them in their turn to critical questioning.<sup>144</sup>

Similarly, the portrait of Paul in Acts is often held to be too different from that in the letters for them to be the same person. Well, it is of course likely that there will be significant differences between any book about any person and their own actual letters (or, today, emails). Compare Tacitus’s account of Augustus with the great man’s own *Res Gestae*, for a start. The letters include much that Acts doesn’t mention, and vice versa. Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians of all sorts of escapades, including shipwrecks, which do not feature in Acts; nor does Acts even hint that Paul was a regular and passionate letter-writer. Nor does Acts mention Titus, who seems in the letters to have been one of Paul’s more important companions. Our friends Philemon and Onesimus do not appear. However, things are not so straightforward, to say the least. Some of the key points which used to be trotted out as evidence of the supposed Acts/Paul distinction are the very same points at which more recent study of Paul, not least the post-‘new perspective’ re-evaluations, might cause us to see things differently. We might, perhaps, enquire whether Acts has in fact highlighted some things which really are there in the letters but which certain parts of the ‘old perspective’ had

<sup>141</sup> See particularly Conzelmann 1960 [1953].

<sup>142</sup> *NTPG* ch. 13 part 2, ch. 15 part 6. On the categories (‘early Catholicism’, etc.) see below.

<sup>143</sup> See recently Pervo 2009, arguing for a date around 115.

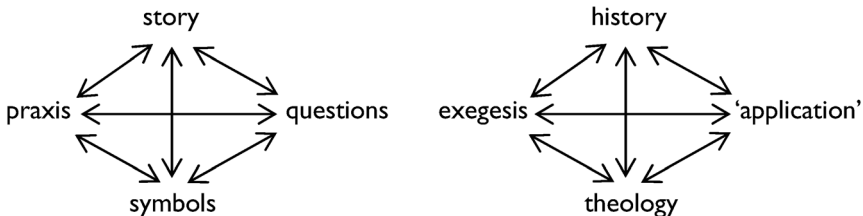
<sup>144</sup> See esp. the work of Hengel, e.g. Hengel 1979.

screened out, for reasons once more of theology or ideology.<sup>145</sup> Finally, the chronological puzzles generated when we try to fit Acts and Paul together are the sort of thing one might expect, granted again the vagaries of first-century writing and the small amount of surviving evidence. Josephus's different accounts of his own activities do not cohere easily, but we do not for that reason assume that one version or the other is straightforwardly fictitious.<sup>146</sup> In particular, the correlation between Acts and Galatians should not be regarded as settled. Fashion has dictated that Galatians 2.1–10 refers to the same visit of Paul to Jerusalem as we find in Acts 15, but that is by no means the only way to cut the cake.<sup>147</sup> Like some other fashions in biblical scholarship, it may well be that this one serves a quite different agenda, in this case the desire, as part of the discredited ideological viewpoint mentioned above, to make every effort to make Luke look tendentious or just silly, or to return to F. C. Baur's picture of an 'early Christianity' embodying a (Hegelian, of course) dialectic between 'Jewish Christianity' (Peter) and 'gentile Christianity' (Paul). Once we step back from these particular agendas, this 'assured result', along with many others, ought to be re-examined.

None of this means, of course, that Acts can be used naively as it stands as a historical source. But it means that we must hold off from dogmatic negativity and look at the actual evidence afresh. For our present purposes, we will take the line I have taken with Ephesians and 2 Thessalonians: nothing massive will rest on Acts, but it will be interesting from time to time to see what new possibilities emerge as we look at Paul from fresh angles.

(vi) Worldview, Theology and History

We have, then, a set of questions about Paul (history, theology, exegesis and 'application', each with considerable subdivisions), and a set of worldview-enquiries with which to address them (story, praxis, symbol and questions, plus 'culture' and 'worship'). How do these two line up and integrate?

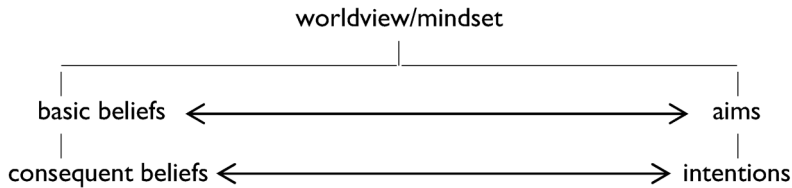


<sup>145</sup> The classic article of Vielhauer 1966 needs now to be laid quietly to rest: see the multifaceted work of Rowe 2009, and now esp. Keener 2012, 221–57.

<sup>146</sup> The standard treatment is still that of Cohen 1979. See too Mason 2001, xxvii–xli. I am grateful to Andrew Cowan for this reference.

<sup>147</sup> See Longenecker 1990, lxxiii–lxxxiii.

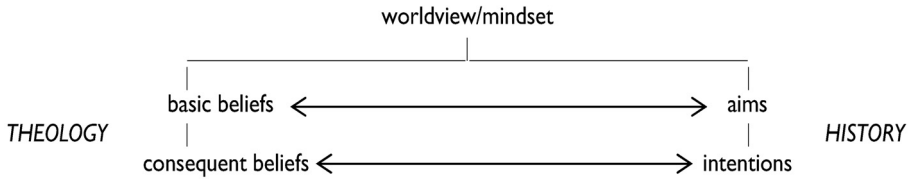
The worldview-model as I articulated it in *NTPG*, and applied it in the later parts of that volume and then, more particularly, in *JVG*, ended by proposing that worldviews relate, both in a community and in individual persons, to *beliefs* and *aims*, both of which (unlike the worldview itself) are things that the community (and the person) in question are conscious of, frequently refer to, discuss, modify and consciously work at.<sup>148</sup> I then identified a distinction on either hand. First, I proposed a distinction between *basic beliefs*, which are closer to the worldview and regarded as pretty much central and non-negotiable, and *consequent beliefs*, things which are believed to be entailed by the ‘basic beliefs’ and held as a result, though not themselves loadbearing in the same way. (It is because I believe that in the northern hemisphere the sun moves from left to right that I believe that it will shortly emerge from behind that cloud; the first belief is basic, and very important; the second is consequent and of only momentary significance, but not held with much less certainty.) Second, I proposed a distinction (not entirely unrelated to similar ones in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*) between *aims* and *intentions*, where ‘aims’, like ‘basic beliefs’, constituted a central core of goals and hopes for a society or a person, and ‘intentions’, like ‘consequent beliefs’, constituted the particular goals and aspirations which the society or the person believed contributed to those more fundamental aims. And I proposed that it was the task of the historian to work towards a description of all four of these things in relation to the society or individual one is studying:<sup>149</sup>



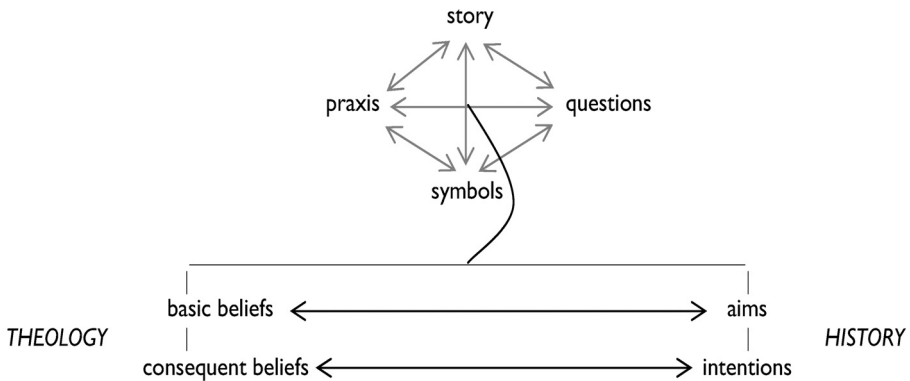
I now wish to propose, amplifying and developing the model just a little, that ‘history’ normally approaches this entire topic from the right-hand side as we look at it, and ‘theology’ from the left. Both will be aware that a full historical description will include an account of beliefs, and that a full theological description will include an account of aims and intentions. But the normal province of ‘theology’ is an account of beliefs and their mutual relationships, and the normal province of ‘history’ is an account of the often tangled motivations which generated particular historical events and movements. All this might usefully be displayed in something like the following diagram:

<sup>148</sup> This seems to be closer to what Engberg-Pedersen means by ‘world-view’: a set of foundational, but quite consciously held, beliefs.

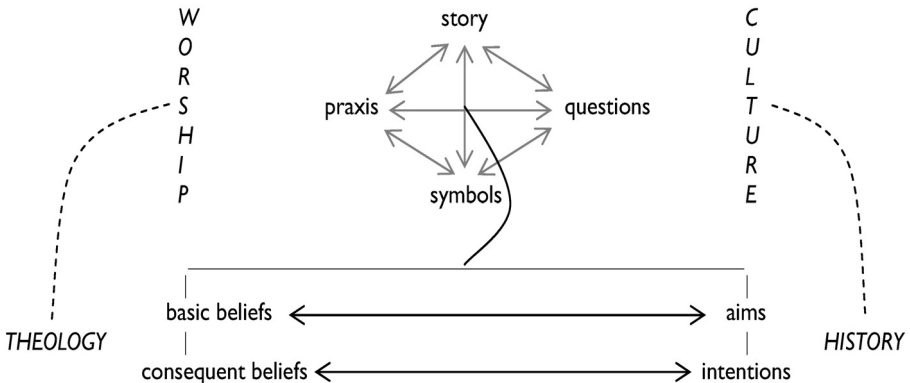
<sup>149</sup> See the original diagram in *NTPG*, 126.



Or, to put it more completely:



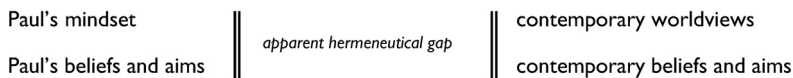
We then need to factor in 'culture' and 'worship' at the worldview level, with their presence affecting the lower levels too. Both belong, of course, to the whole picture, but 'culture' may perhaps belong more closely with 'history', and 'worship' with 'theology':



The aim, as always – the aim of *this* historian/theologian, at least! – is, once more, to *include the data* and to do so *with appropriate simplicity*, not forgetting the third task of a good hypothesis, to shed light on other cognate areas of research. The problem with so many studies of so many figures in history, not least figures in the history of Christianity, is that so much of this has been left unsaid, and so much data, in consequence, left unnoticed. The result has often been that the trio of ‘basic beliefs’, ‘consequent beliefs’ and ‘theology’ have not only assumed centre stage but have driven all the other actors into the wings, or off to the pub, or even to set up a rival theatre company in which ‘aims’, ‘intentions’ and ‘history’ have done their own thing, a kind of anti-theological ‘sociology’.<sup>150</sup> Part of the point of this book is to get them all back on stage together and let them work out how the play should really be performed.

Just when one might think it couldn’t get any more complex, we must in all fairness point out that modern scholars, too, live within a world that can be similarly described. The vocation of hermeneutics, indeed, is always to be aware of our own worlds and worldviews, insofar as we can, and to be conscious of the points where our own sets of spectacles render us blind to what is going on in other times and places.<sup>151</sup> This is of course where what I have called ‘application’ comes into play, and where our own contexts, whether it be our anxiety about social ethics (hence the weight that is borne by the question of slavery in our own day) or our concern for this or that element of Paul’s doctrinal, evangelistic and pastoral teaching (hence the fights over justification and ‘new perspectives’), lead us to highlight some parts of the overall Pauline picture and to undervalue or ignore other parts altogether.

What’s more, whether we live in the church or outside it, we cannot ignore the fact that Paul’s letters have been, and still are, enormously formative influences within western culture and, in a measure, global culture. The fact that some contemporary philosophers can discuss them along with other culturally significant texts indicates that well enough; it might be good if, from time to time, theologians and exegetes were to return the compliment. But the net result is that the two worldviews, those of Paul on the one hand and those of contemporary readers on the other, are not simply standing on either side of the hermeneutical divide looking uneasily at one another:



<sup>150</sup> See the remarkably revealing comment by Engberg-Pedersen 2010, 245: ‘One may wonder, however, whether there is any likelihood of progress until one decides to place in parentheses to begin with the whole gamut of traditional theological concepts, soteriology, Christology, justification, grace, works, etc.’ See the discussion in ch. 14 below.

<sup>151</sup> See e.g. Thiselton 1980; 1992; 2007.





important, and helpful, to show how I, or anyone else, actually fail in the historical task because of theological interests, or vice versa.) Of course, to the materialist all theology is a dangerous distraction, just as to the Platonist all history is a dangerous distortion. Part of the point of the present series is precisely to plot the way in which the New Testament, and Jesus, Paul and the gospels in particular, resist being collapsed into either the materialist or the Platonist worldview, or any of their would-be academic or ecclesial variations.

So: if theology has sometimes been the master and history the slave, and sometimes the roles have been reversed, what might happen if, instead of reading the letter to Philemon as an example of the tasks that await us, we now read it instead as an allegory?

### 3. Philemon as Allegory: Theology, History and Reconciliation

What follows now is a *jeu d'esprit*, a bit of Pauline foolishness for which the reader's indulgence and pardon is requested. It bears no weight of argument, serving more to mull over and flesh out the deeply serious questions we have been dealing with. It is more a matter of intuition than of reasoned scholarship to suppose that the massive antinomies of theology and history, frowning at each other across the table of biblical scholarship, might actually be yet another pair which seem within the modern western worldview to be irreconcilable, like heaven and earth themselves, and yet which might be open to some kind of *rapprochement*. Since the letter to Philemon is all about the reconciliation of people whose culture was trying to pull them apart, and since, as I have suggested, reconciliation and the resultant unity of God's people is pretty much central to Paul's whole project, it might make sense to ask whether the study of Paul might do, for this pair of glowering adversaries, what Paul himself was trying to do for his two friends. The fact that this poses our late-modern question to a text which was innocent of the problem is part of the foolishness.

This question is obviously cognate with the question which haunted *Jesus and the Victory of God*. Indeed, my making Philemon thematic for the present work is, as the sharp-eyed may already have spotted, a way of balancing the thematic role of the prodigal son within that earlier volume. There, too, I allowed that parable to say more than it did on the lips of Jesus (but who is to say how far a *sensus plenior* exegesis may be allowed to stretch?): I envisioned history as the prodigal, running off with half the patrimony, and then coming home to find theology, as the older brother, looking down its nose and wondering what the cat had brought in.

It doesn't take much effort to transpose this same question, the underlying question for this whole series of books, into terms of Philemon and Onesimus. Here is Philemon, representing Theological Orthodoxy: we know what's right, we will order this household accordingly, and everyone

must come into line. Here is Onesimus, representing the Enlightenment's project of historiography: we are cabined, cribbed and confined in this small and stifling theological world, and we must break out, do our own thing, ask our own questions, and run away, snatching bits and pieces of the family silver as we go. And the runaway slave, who in the case of Enlightenment historiography made a beeline for Jesus long before thinking of visiting Paul, eventually came to the apostle as well, hoping to redescribe him in historical terms and so to neutralize the scandalous gospel that the old slave-master, Theology, had used as a means of keeping History in its proper and servile place. But supposing the apostle, even in prison, has a trick or two left up his sleeve?

It will have to be a good trick. There are many Philemons out there, the self-appointed guardians of Pauline orthodoxy (of whichever sort), who will only be prepared to have the slave back in the house once he's been suitably chastised and given strict conditions of service. Do not give us this History, they say; do not tell us that in order to understand Paul we have to study his context, to learn about the Jewish world of the first century and the pre-Pauline meanings of Paul's favourite words! How will Theology be able to speak the good news if it is festooned with footnotes about Pharisees and spattered with speculation about sectarians? How can we sing the lord's song in such a strange land? Is this not an appeal away from the Text, and is not our calling (as devout scripture-believers – or perhaps simply as good, quasi-Barthian postliberals) to deal with the Text and nothing but the Text, and to keep away from everything else? Were not the years of AD 1–30 a special time, different from all others, so that all we need to know is that in that time God walked the earth, died for our sins and rose again? Or (another voice from a similar point of view) is it not the case that the great traditions of the church, with their creeds and canons, have provided a wise and authoritative reading of all scriptures, so that we should pay attention to them rather than to historical reconstructions based on the wider world of the first century? Or (yet another voice from a different wing of the same house) how can we continue to celebrate the deeply *Jewish* theological message of Paul if we have to study the Stoics, the emperor-cult, all that pagan *Religionsgeschichte* which we threw out as so much *skybala*? What (ask all these contemporary Philemons) can this slave called History have to contribute to the household, especially after he's behaved so badly? The only thing we can think of using him for – and he's pretty useless even at that – is helping us look up words in the dictionary; and since we already know what they ought to mean, because Luther and Calvin (or Aquinas and Augustine, or even the great catholic creeds) told us, we aren't too bothered by his fistful of philology, either.

The Paul of History, in his prison cell, sighs as he reflects on the Apostle of Faith, and yearns for a reintegration of his whole self. Paul was nothing if not a historical figure, and the 'foolish' argument he mounted against the snooty Corinthians (one of his most spectacular pieces of rhetoric, and all

the more so for being the climax of a letter declaring what a waste of time rhetoric was) applies here too:

Whatever anyone else dares to boast about (I'm talking nonsense, remember), I'll boast as well. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they the seed of Abraham? So am I. Are they servants of the Messiah? – I'm talking like a raving madman – I'm a better one. I've worked harder, been in prison more often, been beaten more times than I can count, and I've often been close to death. Five times I've had the Jewish beating, forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; I was adrift in the sea for a night and a day. I've been constantly travelling, facing dangers from rivers, dangers from brigands, dangers from my own people, dangers from foreigners, dangers in the town, dangers in the countryside, dangers at sea, dangers from false believers. I've toiled and laboured, I've burnt the candle at both ends, I've been hungry and thirsty, I've often gone without food altogether, I've been cold and naked.

Quite apart from all that, I have this daily pressure on me, my care for all the churches. Who is weak and I'm not weak? Who is offended without me burning with shame?

If I must boast, I will boast of my weaknesses. The God and father of the lord Jesus, who is blessed for ever, knows that I'm not lying: in Damascus, King Aretas, the local ruler, was guarding the city of Damascus so that he could capture me, but I was let down in a basket through a window and over the wall, and I escaped his clutches.<sup>152</sup>

That says it all, really: if you want to understand Paul, understand him as someone with his feet on the ground (or in the stocks) of messy reality, his shameful sufferings openly visible to the embarrassment of the high-minded, lofty Corinthians and perhaps also of their successors today. History is, after all, about *danger*: the danger of contingency, the possibility that things might have been otherwise, the prospect of being adrift night and day on a sea of unsorted data, the likelihood of being lashed, beaten and stoned by other evidence, other worldviews, determined to provide a harsh reality check by which to measure Theology and cut it down to size. How much safer Paul would have been had he founded a seminary in Tarsus or Antioch and required future church leaders to sit at his feet day by day! But how much less like the apostle whose calling was not just to speak of, but actually to embody, the covenant faithfulness of God.<sup>153</sup>

So Paul knows that he has to send History, the former naughty slave, back to Theology, the master who, in terms of his own culture, might be thought highly likely to spurn him altogether. How is he going to make the case? How will the history of the apostle, one of the most central moments in the question of Christian Origins, relate to the overall question, the Question of God?<sup>154</sup>

The argument of the present book is that when we use the worldview method I have set out above, and thus bring a larger 'thick description' of Paul and his mindset into play alongside and as a way in to a fresh analysis of his central theological concepts, we find a fresh coherence. More specifically, we find that we can understand the deep and organic links between the

<sup>152</sup> 2 Cor. 11.21b–33.

<sup>153</sup> 2 Cor. 5.21; see below, 880–5.

<sup>154</sup> See the wise remarks of Watson 2007 [1986], 350.

history of Paul, and of his letters and his churches, and the theology which he articulated in those letters. We will not need to collapse the one into the other, whether theology into history, as with some of the sociologists, allowing the slave to come back and dictate his own terms, reducing Philemon to a mere puppet in his own house, or history into theology, as with some of the preachers and guardians of orthodoxy, allowing the slave back as long as he's bound hand and foot and told to mind his manners in future. And, just as Paul's way to a reconciliation between master and servant was through a complete identification with them both, reaching out either hand to embrace them so that they were to be united *in him*, with anything owing in either direction put down to his account, so the way of reconciliation between history and theology, between Christian Origins and the Question of God, comes to rest in this volume on Paul as the announcer and embodier of God as the faithful one, faithful to creation and faithful to covenant, the God whose faithfulness came to life and walked and talked in Palestine and died on a Roman cross to reconcile God and the world. The cross, indeed, will be central to our project here, both structurally and thematically, and part of the underlying and implicit proposal will be that Paul's understanding of the meaning of Jesus' death, while having of course other and better known highlights than that which we find in Philemon, may help us wrestle too with the question of reconciliation between the two elements of our split world.

For Paul, it mattered vitally that Jesus' death and resurrection took place in real space, time and matter. If these were not historical events, our faith was futile, he writes, and we would still be in our sins.<sup>155</sup> Paul is after all a *creational* theologian, as his deep structural and thematic reliance on Genesis at key points reminds us. For Paul, it was not enough for a theological meaning to float in the air over historical events, intersecting with them for a brief moment only (Bultmann's famous '*Dass!*') and then leaving again in a hurry for fear of contamination. The slave belongs back in the house, back in the family, and only when that has been confirmed can he be set free to serve Paul in the cause of the gospel.

It is of course a risk. Onesimus must go home, like the prodigal, with real humility for the follies of the past as well as real hope for a new future. But it is a risk, too, for Philemon. Theology must be prepared to say that, for the sake of Paul, we will accept the challenge of history, even though, in a corner of our hearts, we remain wary because of what happened last time. The question is: how can that which was formerly 'useless' now be 'useful'? This book attempts to offer an answer.

But of course, in good postmodern fashion, we cannot assume that yesterday's victims are the same as today's. If for much of the pre-modern period, and still in many circles through to the present day, Theology has been the slave-master, turning up its nose at the useless runaway slave called History, there is a sense in which those roles have now been well and truly

<sup>155</sup> 1 Cor. 15.17. See RSG 332.

reversed. There has been a massive shift in the geographical and also conceptual centre of gravity of biblical studies over the course of the last generation. Whereas once the world of western scholarship was led by Germany, with Britain, France, Italy, the United States and other countries all coming in alongside, the United States now appears to be producing more biblical scholarship than the rest of the world put together. This not only generates the real danger that the English-speaking world can decide, *de facto* as it were, to marginalize material in other languages, a danger which (alas) the present work will not altogether avoid. There is also the danger that the Lutheran theological worldview (albeit often in its neo-Kantian and other later developments) which in the past provided the implicit and sometimes explicit framework for so much biblical studies, especially Pauline studies, will be replaced by an implicit and sometimes explicit secular worldview, rooted in the culture whereby American ‘departments of religion’ are obliged to show that they are not corrupted by those dangerous theological and spiritual impulses which would so skew their historical endeavours.<sup>156</sup> The study of Paul will then be taken over by the sociologists, the rhetoricians and the secular historians. The theologians, meanwhile, will now be treated as the runaway slaves, fleeing to their denominational seminaries where, it is rumoured to the historians’ horror, they even *pray* before studying their texts – as if that were not a recipe for falsifying the evidence before you start! – and snatching as they go some of the historian’s household goods, and perhaps even household gods (lexica, classical texts, and so on), to lend the appearance of validity to their essentially faith-driven and prejudice-bound projects. It is now the turn, then, of Theology to come to Paul in prison, hoping perhaps to stay with him for ever, only to be told that before that could happen there is a difficult journey to be made, a journey which will be as difficult for the new Philemon (the arrogant secularist) to accept as it will be for the new Onesimus (the now perhaps useful theologian) to make in the first place. How will Paul effect reconciliation this way round?

For a start, Paul will reassure both sides that they are full partners in his work. As we shall see when we examine his worldview, the symbols, praxis and stories which contribute to it are none of them simply about ‘ideas’ and ‘beliefs’. They are about the creator God, his world and his people – and this world and these people are creatures of space, time and matter, open by definition to historical enquiry, living life in public without shame, modelling a way of life which is precisely in and for the world, affirming the goodness of the creator’s universe and of human beings within it. Yes, says Paul to the suspicious slave-master History: I am your partner! You and I belong together!

<sup>156</sup> This entire enterprise is, of course, localized to the post-Enlightenment western world. This is much to be regretted; to look no further, we are aware of real insight and wisdom coming from Africa, south-east Asia, and Japan. Who is sufficient for these things? For the strident insistence on ‘secular’ biblical studies see recently Boer 2010.

But then he goes on, still addressing Philemon the Historian, ‘Now: I appeal to you for my child, Theology, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment; in fact, the entire discipline of “theology” as you know it may fairly be said to have begun in my historically grounded work, my preaching, my communities, my letters. Theology is what makes my heart sing; I can (and sometimes do) go on about it all night. I know you have sometimes found Theology a thorough nuisance, always wanting answers to what seem to you the wrong questions, always insisting that the only history it will accept is such as will serve what it knows in advance must be its own proclamation. Well, blame me for that if you like; but if you want to be my partner, if you want to work fruitfully with me in the future, welcome this returning slave as if he were me. And perhaps you’ll do even more ...’

Of course, things are not quite that simple. Philemon the Historian has not, of late, been quite so ‘neutral’ and ‘objective’ as heretofore. When Theology flees out of the front door, other influential voices come in at the back, in the form of secular ‘ethics’, the postmodern questions of ‘solidarity and difference’, the challenges to make Paul ‘relevant’ not so much to the church and its preaching (thank goodness, thinks the secular historian, they’ve run away; they were always pretty useless for us, anyway) but to the supposed major concerns of the western world in its present social and cultural crisis.<sup>157</sup> History does not thrive in a vacuum, and the lingering puzzles of postmodernity with their sometimes shrill new moralisms create fresh contexts within which to re-read (and perhaps misread) ancient texts and to reopen (and perhaps misunderstand) older investigations.

Pointing all this out to Philemon the Historian may not endear us to him, and certainly will not make him any the readier to have Onesimus the Theologian back in the house. But if Paul, the supposed partner in historical study, insists that to be friends with him you must be friends with Theology too, then perhaps a reconciliation needs to be effected. How might that happen?

The answer, again, is through the worldview-model, which attempts to bridge the gap (not exactly Lessing’s ugly ditch, but not so far from it either) between history as it has been done and theology as it has been done.<sup>158</sup> The attempt must be made to offer a multi-dimensional study of Paul, insofar as that can be done; how we wish we had some artefacts, some hard evidence, even the spar of the ship that he clung to for a day and a night, rather than just that tantalizing tomb in St Paul’s Without the Walls! Within that attempt, the more the probing question of history shines its searchlight to and fro, asking what precisely motivated this strange, energetic man to do

<sup>157</sup> One might draw a spectrum of writers here, from those like Horrell 2005 who are engaging deeply with the text, through the secular philosophers who are using it as it were at a distance (Badiou, Taubes, etc.; see *Interpreters*), and on to those who seem to have abandoned history and merely bounce their own concerns off the text (e.g. Seesengood 2010; and some at least of the essays in Marchal 2012).

<sup>158</sup> In this connection, I am interested in the implications of the title of the recent *Festschrift* for Richard Hays: *The Word Leaps the Gap* (Wagner, Rowe and Grieb 2008). The editors speak (xxi) of the ‘gap’ as that between the first century and our own time, but the implied rhetoric of the title may hint at other gaps as well.

what he did, the more it keeps hearing a voice which says, 'If you want to know why he did it, you'll have to understand Theology.' And the more the theologians struggle to understand how precisely 'juridical' and 'incorporative' themes belong together, how categories like 'apocalyptic', 'salvation history' and 'covenant' are all badly-formed signposts towards what is really the same thing seen from different angles, how 'religion' and 'politics' are bound up with one another, and, above all and in all, what all this has to do with Jesus the Messiah and him crucified and risen, the more they keep hearing a voice which says, 'If you want to know how it all makes sense, you'll have to understand the History.'

And so the study of Paul draws Philemon and Onesimus together once more, as the study of Christian Origins leads inexorably to the Question of God and vice versa. And if Paul were to visit, as he promised Philemon he would, he would want to talk not just about the reconciliation that has been effected, and the new freedoms that may result from that. He would want to talk about, and to make sure we went on talking about, the particular *shape* of what has happened: the shape of a figure, in this case Paul himself, but consciously understanding himself as the Messiah's man, reaching out his arms to the two warring factions, reconciling them in himself, acting as a human signpost to the event which was, for him, the moment and the means of reconciliation, the sign and the content of the faithfulness of God.