

LAURI THURÉN

# Derhetorizing Paul

*Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen  
zum Neuen Testament*

124

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**Mohr Siebeck**

Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen  
zum Neuen Testament

Herausgegeben von  
Martin Hengel und Otfried Hofius

124





Lauri Thurén

# Derhetorizing Paul

A Dynamic Perspective on Pauline Theology  
and the Law

Mohr Siebeck

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## Preface

After several years of developing and applying modern approaches to First Peter and other 'Catholic' epistles, and after seeing what interesting views such perspectives can provide, it seemed natural to turn to Paul. This study arose from a certain dissatisfaction with current Pauline scholarship. Fresh winds blow us away from the old exegetics, which read Paul's letters as dogmatic treatises. But my impression was that this new trend failed to follow through.

The title of this book may be provocative and easily misunderstood. The aim is not to nullify the oratory of the Apostle, nor will it label difficult passages as 'mere rhetoric'. On the contrary, in some cases it will demonstrate how misleading such attempts have been. 'Derhetorization' means identifying the persuasive devices in the text in order to filter out their effect on the theological ideas expressed.

Many modern scholars would agree, that instead of simply trying to describe his theology in his letters, Paul was persuading his addressees. But what does this mean? Persuasion *per definitionem* does not exclude theology, yet it greatly affects the way in which the author presents his thoughts. If Paul's art of persuasion is not understood and deciphered, the view of his thinking will be distorted. Therefore I see a derhetorization of Paul's letters as an important challenge for the Biblical scholarship of the dawning new Millennium.

In other words, Biblical scholarship should not be concerned only with *trivial* issues, but nor should these be disregarded. These basic "three ways" used to include grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric. Each of them is necessary for studying theology, even today.

My gratitude is due to Professors Martin Hengel, Hans Hübner, Heikki Räisänen, and Ed Sanders, who during their visits to Turku convinced me of the fascination of Paul's world of thought, and to Professor Lars Hartman, whose call for realistic ways of reading a text inspired, hopefully also affected, this study.

This volume is dedicated to my Orthodox students at Joensuu University, Finland, and to my Ingrian students at Keltto Lutheran Seminary, Russia. Like the addressees of Paul they all know what it means to live in a religious minority.

Lauri Thurén



# Contents

Preface .....	V
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## *Part I* *The Dynamics of Paul's Writings*

1. Towards a Sensible Interpretation of Paul .....	1
2. Was Paul a Theologian? .....	5
A. The Dogmatic Interpretation .....	5
B. The "Contextual" Alternative .....	8
C. Back to Theology .....	13
D. New Approaches to Pauline Theology .....	18
3. From a Static to a Dynamic View of Paul's Text .....	23
A. Two Perspectives .....	23
B. Some Approaches to Textual Dynamics .....	27
C. The Dynamic Nature of Paul's Writing .....	29
4. Was Paul Sincere? .....	36
A. Questioning Paul's <i>Ethos</i> .....	36
B. Attempts to Save Paul's Reputation .....	38
C. Adapting a General Pattern .....	41
D. Against the Wind .....	43
E. Sincerity Behind the Rhetoric? .....	44



*Part II*  
*The Law in Paul's Theology*

1. Solutions with Problems .....	53
2. The Law in Galatians .....	58
A. Galatians as Persuasion .....	59
a. Was Paul too Angry? .....	59
b. Coerced by the Villains? .....	64
c. The Antagonists' Theology Defined? .....	68
d. Galatians as Dramatization .....	70
α) Labelling the Opponents .....	70
β) Mighty Expressions .....	70
γ) Absolute Theology .....	71
δ) Conclusion .....	72
B. Theology behind Rhetoric? .....	73
a. Semantic Observations .....	73
b. The Law and God – is Paul Blasphemous? .....	80
α) The Exigency of Gal 3,15–29 .....	80
β) The Origins of the Law .....	81
γ) The Purpose of the Law .....	83
δ) Conclusions .....	84
c. The Law as Moral Guidance .....	85
α) The New Moses? .....	86
β) Enabling Exhortation? .....	87
γ) The Exigency of Gal 5,13–6,10 .....	88
C. Conclusions .....	92
3. The Law Strikes Back: Romans and 1 Cor .....	95
A. Conditions for Communication .....	96
a. Romans .....	96
b. 1 Cor and Other Pauline Epistles .....	101
B. Semantic Observations .....	106
C. The Functions of the Law .....	110
a. Producing Life .....	112
b. Explaining the Death of Christians .....	114
α) 1 Cor 15,56 – the Mother of All Contradictions? .....	115
β) Rom 7,14–25 Revisited .....	117

c. Identifying and Provoking Sin .....	127
d. Conclusion .....	130
D. Law and <i>Paraenesis</i> .....	131
a. Should the Commands of the Law still be Obeyed? .....	132
b. Has the Paraenesis Inherited the Negative Qualities of the Law? .....	135
4. What Was Wrong With the Law? .....	138
A. Theology Must not be Disregarded .....	139
B. Jewish Theology or Pauline Exaggeration? .....	143
C. Tensions within the Old Testament .....	148
a. Introduction .....	148
b. Contradicting the Promise? .....	152
c. Counteracting Monotheism? .....	155
α) Persistence of the Social Difference .....	155
β) Tension within Judaism .....	157
D. Law and Boasting – a General Element of Paul’s Solution .....	165
a. Introduction .....	165
b. Phil 3 and Rom 4 .....	168
c. 1 Cor 1 .....	171
d. Gal 6 .....	174
e. Conclusion: Boasting, Judaism, and Paul .....	176

*Part III*  
*Paul Derhetorized?*

1. Summary .....	181
2. Concluding Remarks on the Dynamic Perspective .....	184
Literature .....	187
Indices .....	198
Sources .....	199
Modern Authors .....	207
Subjects .....	211



Part I  
The Dynamics of Paul's Writing



## Chapter 1

# Towards a Sensible Interpretation of Paul

At the beginning of his literary career Paul wrote to the Thessalonians:

“From you the word of the Lord has rung out not only in Macedonia and in Achaia, but in every place your faith toward God has gone forth, so that we have no need to speak a word.” (1 Thess 1,8)<sup>1</sup>

Then why bother to preach the Gospel, if it is already known everywhere? Of course the apostle did not mean what he said. We all know that the expression is an *hyperbole*.<sup>2</sup> “Taken at its face value, the statement is untrue. But not even the most literal-minded reader of the Bible is going to defend the truth of this statement because he or she, like all of us, knows the author to be saying that...”<sup>3</sup> We can even conceive why Paul wrote in such terms: At the beginning of a letter it is good to flatter the recipients a little. But what about his statement to Corinthians:

“For I decided not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified.” (1 Cor 2,2)<sup>4</sup>

Of course he knew many other things, too; this comment does not refer to agnosticism.<sup>5</sup> Conzelmann explains that the word ‘know’ refers to theological knowledge only,<sup>6</sup> and Grosheide translates εἰδέναι here as “to accept as true for oneself and consequently to bring to others”.<sup>7</sup> But even this cannot be true! We

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<sup>1</sup> Similarly Paul claims in Rom 1,8 that the Gospel is known in the whole world (cf. also Col 1,6).

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Marshall (1983, 56) sees here “a pardonable touch of exaggeration”. For the figure, see Bühlmann and Scherer 1973, 78.

<sup>3</sup> Thus Gabel and Wheeler (1990, 22) on the hyperbole in 1 Kings 1,40, where the earth is said to have split because of the great rejoicing.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. also Rom 15,18.

<sup>5</sup> Conzelmann 1975, 54, n.17.

<sup>6</sup> Conzelmann 1975, 54.

<sup>7</sup> Grosheide 1953, 59. One may wonder, however, which dictionary did he consult.

know for sure that Paul's proclamation was not so limited even in Corinth; his theology included many other themes than Christology.

Is the apostle deceiving his addressees? By no means. The expression emphasizes the point on which Paul wants to concentrate. The use of the rhetorical device is so obvious that the commentators need not even mention it. In fact, the whole section (1 Cor 1,10–2,16) is so heavily loaded with rhetorical devices<sup>8</sup> and technical terminology,<sup>9</sup> as to indicate that Paul was well acquainted with this art and used it, too. But why does he explicitly claim to have rejected the use of rhetoric (1 Cor 2,1)? Is this also rhetorical?

There seem to be many self-evident rhetorical devices in the Pauline letters, on which scholars rarely dwell. But the very expression "of course" in the interpretation should alarm us. Rhetoric was – and still is – a vast discipline encompassing many different conventions. It comprises not only small technical devices such as those presented above, but compositional and contentual strategies as well. Not all of these devices are so familiar to us.

We can smile at a call to stop missionary activity, based on 1 Thess 1,8, or at the claim that since 1 Cor 2,2 does not fit with the rest of the letter, Paul was an inconsistent, vague thinker, or that, for the same reason, his theology developed further after his arrival in Corinth, or that the sentence belongs only to the contingent part of his preaching.

It is possible, however, that Paul and his original addressees would smile at us for the very same reason, were they aware of many of the problems of modern Pauline scholarship. Expressions and thoughts, which were never meant to be taken at their face value, may have prompted sophisticated but wholly erroneous theological and historical reflections. This is due not only to the scholars' ignorance of ancient rhetorical and epistolary conventions, but also to their attitude to the text itself.

The objective of this study is to participate in the new wave of Pauline studies aimed at a more realistic understanding of the apostle and his thought. In recent decades there have been clear signs of a growing discontent with traditional Pauline scholarship. Theological analyses, supported by narrow historical clarifications, seem far removed from the real Paul, his life and his writings.

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<sup>8</sup> A. Eriksson (1994, 58–62) enumerates as examples *anaphor* (1,12.20.26), *parallelism* (1,.22.25), *asyndeton* (1,13.14.20), *gradatio* (1,12.22.25.27–28), *accumulatio* (1,20.26.30; 2,3.7.9), *apostrophe* (1.10,26; 2.1), *auctoritas* (1.19,31; 2.9), *homoioteleuton* (1.18,20,22, 29,30; 2.6.12.27–28), *paronomasia* (1,12.30), *hyperbole* (1,13), *interrogatio* (1,13), *dubitatio* (1,20), *antithesis* (1,17.18.22–23.24.27; 2,4.6.12.13.15), *exemplum* (2,1) and refers to Weiss's analysis of the rhetorical composition in 1,26–29 (Weiss 1897, 210).

<sup>9</sup> E.g. *πειθός* (v.4), *ἀπόδειξις* (v.5, Cf. Conzelmann 1975, 55, n. 26).

Due to this dissatisfaction, the study of Paul, his letters and his theology is currently in turmoil. New perspectives and methods, such as sociological, psychological, and rhetorical, are challenging and even replacing traditional approaches to Pauline theology.<sup>10</sup> They enable the scholars more accurately to evaluate e.g. his attitude toward Judaism, and to take into better account the wide context of his texts.

Some exegetes have, however, observed that the new approaches have yielded less than they promised to a deeper understanding of the apostle's thinking.<sup>11</sup> In particular there is little discussion of the relationship between the new approaches and theology.<sup>12</sup> Despite many advantages, such as a wider perspective, they still concentrate on the historical "context", which means that the focus stays outside the texts. Hypotheses can indeed be proposed about the background and development of certain ideas, but they alone do not suffice to identify and comprehend a possible system of religious ideas in and behind the texts.<sup>13</sup>

It would be fruitful, if the new approaches merged with the old, essential questions. In other words, when new ways of reading Paul, such as literary and rhetorical criticism or epistolography, and the study of his texts in their environment can be reasonably combined with a theological or ideological interest in his texts, a more sensible view will ensue. Due to different philosophies behind the new and old perspectives, the task is, however, not a simple one.

In the following chapters of Part One, I shall first consider the adequacy of, and conditions for, studying Pauline theology. The fundamental difference between a static and a dynamic view of his texts in such studies will then be illuminated. In my opinion, only the latter provides us with a suitable perspective for Paul's thinking. I shall then determine the grade of dynamics in Paul's texts.

In Part Two, these principles will be applied to a specific issue in Pauline theology, the question of the law. In my view, this controversial question demonstrates how the new, dynamic basic view of the text may influence our understanding of Paul. I hope that the interpretation of both single passages and

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<sup>10</sup> For the rise of this line see Dunn 1983. Scroggs (1988, 18) includes among those using such approaches "most of the main line biblical scholars working [in Northern America] today".

<sup>11</sup> Scroggs 1988, 22.27; Beker 1980, 352.

<sup>12</sup> Thus Hübner 1987, 327–28.

<sup>13</sup> The question whether or not Paul had any coherent theology will be discussed throughout this book.



complex ideological issues connected to the problem will benefit from the approach. Finally, some overall conclusions will be offered.

## Chapter 2

# Was Paul a Theologian?

Major problems in current Pauline scholarship are whether there is a theology of Paul, and, if so, what is its real nature. These questions have been difficult to approach, since they have wide religious and theological implications.

On the one hand, scholars wrestling with the presentation of Paul's theology see the task as immense. On the other, as a result of the "contextual"<sup>1</sup> studies, many exegetes are increasingly persuaded that Paul was merely a situational thinker or a practical pastor, and possessed only a vague theology, if any. Therefore, a principal discussion about the possibilities and relevance of studying Paul's theology must be undertaken.

In this chapter, I shall briefly describe various traditional interpretations and the "quantum leap"<sup>2</sup> which Pauline scholarship has made in recent decades, including some new approaches to Paul's theology. The adequacy of, and possibilities of detecting, such a theology will then be treated.

### A. The Dogmatic Interpretation

Paul's writings and thoughts have traditionally constituted the foundation of Christian doctrine. The Protestant churches in particular have built their theologies from reflections upon Paul's letters. His ideas have become a "canon in a canon", on the basis of which other Biblical texts are judged.

Paul's status as the great theologian of the Early Church is partly based on the belief that his letters contain timeless, universal theology, which can easily be applied to the needs of Christianity throughout all ages.<sup>3</sup> The historical

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<sup>1</sup> Due to its popularity, I use the term in this, unfortunate, broad sense, although it has little to do with the actual *context*.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. W. Wuellner on the cover of Norman Petersen's book "Rediscovering Paul" (1985).

<sup>3</sup> Already the fact that Paul's letters have been incorporated in the Canon in such a large collection indicates, that his thoughts have been seen as central for the Christian faith and Church. The end of Colossians (4,16) is interesting in this sense: If the letter is adjudged as authentic, viz. written with Paul's authorization (Schweizer 1976, 20–27; Hartman 1985, 200–201), even Paul himself saw his letters as possessing such a value. It is even possible that

occasions of the letters have served only as catalysts, which provoked Paul to formulate this universal theology. But what if the Paul so depicted was only a reflection of e.g. Augustine's or Luther's own ideology?<sup>4</sup> Obviously the temptation to take a stand for or against the traditional Protestant interpretation of Paul will bias any attempt to approach him without prejudice.

Oddly enough, the critical exegesis until recently supported this basic view. The scholars have assumed that although each letter has a context, its effect can be eliminated by historical and idea-historical explanations. A proper understanding of Paul required only a thorough historical study of the situation of each letter, combined with a systematic perspective. When the circumstances of the addressees and antagonists were recognized, and the situation of the apostle was identified, the scholars considered it possible to arrive at a better characterization of the deeper content and structure of Paul's thoughts. Such structures were worth seeking, since Paul was assessed as an eminent thinker and theologian.<sup>5</sup> However, exegetes have rarely been unanimous about the content of this theology.

The theology (or theologies) found in Paul's texts made him an authority in the eyes of the Church. In separate issues it was, of course, feasible to consider, whether the apostle was a child of his time,<sup>6</sup> but such exceptions only confirmed the rule. A scholar's critical attitude toward the apostle on minor points only made the central Pauline theology, as described by the same scholar, more valid for all ages.

Simultaneously, the emphasis on Paul's theology meant an unacceptable exaggeration of his historical position in Early Christianity. A glance at some important isagogical handbooks shows, that exegetes of this century have mostly seen the thoughts of Paul as the theological, and even historical, centre of the New Testament.<sup>7</sup> Other texts are commonly related to his writings; they

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the apostle participated in the editing of the *Corpus Paulinum* (Trobisch 1989, 119–36 and Hartman 1986). At least soon afterwards some people thought so (Beker 1980, 356, referring to the "sound doctrine" of 1 Tim 1,10 and 2 Tim 4,13).

<sup>4</sup> A hallmark article in this discussion was Stendahl 1976 (first version published 1960).

<sup>5</sup> Räsänen (1987, 1–2) enumerates some amusing credits given by modern scholars to the apostle's philosophy and theology. On the other hand he, however, states that Paul is no longer regarded as a systematic thinker (1987, xi).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. e.g. the explanations in different commentaries on his rule on female preachers in 1 Cor 14,33b–36: Despite often contradictory arguments the hermeneutical result is always the same.

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. Köster 1980, 698–735.

are assessed as the post- or pseudopaulinic aftermath of the thinking of the apostle.<sup>8</sup> The works dealing directly with Pauline theology have the same tone.

The great studies of Paul also show what kind of religious, philosophical and ethical structures have been perceived in his letters. To mention but a few famous scholars, Albert Schweitzer<sup>9</sup> reads Paul as a mystic, Rudolf Bultmann searches for actualizing and normative theology in Pauline texts,<sup>10</sup> and Hans Conzelmann seeks a theological interpretation far beyond what the apostle actually says.<sup>11</sup> The borderline with hermeneutics is often blurred in such studies: Paul's ideas easily transcend the historical circumstances and thereby become important and binding even on "us". Bultmann rightly states that a scholar can never be without his own hermeneutical preoccupation: "In Wahrheit gibt es *keine neutrale Exegese*."<sup>12</sup> But his solution is to make the unavoidable bias a virtue and an integral part of the scholarship.<sup>13</sup>

When reading these great exegetical thinkers one can hardly avoid the question: Whence do their theologies actually emerge? It may be naive to ask, whether the apostle himself would have approved of the theological and philosophical reflections which the scholars present as Pauline. Maybe this was not their task, perhaps they excavated unconscious theological principles? Schlier acknowledges the problem and therefore seeks to write not the theology of Paul, but only a Pauline theology.<sup>14</sup> We can, however, inquire, what is the relationship of these thoughts to documents produced by Paul, and whether they promote our understanding of their original purposes.

The answer is often negative. The "theologies of Paul" may well be religiously valuable, relevant, or poignant. But their connection to the Pauline texts is indistinct. Francis Watson has fittingly stated that, although it is

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<sup>8</sup> The Pauline orientation of New Testament exegesis is evident especially in the way people read non-Pauline texts therein. In his respectable commentary on 1 Peter L. Goppelt (1978) represents this ideology (for more on the Paulinistic fate of 1 Peter, see Elliott 1976, 243 and Thurén 1995b, 20, n. 23). 2 Peter is attacked more aggressively by Käsemann. His theological criticism (1964) is based on the notion that the letter falls short of the Pauline standards! The fate of the letter of James in the Western Churches and even in modern exegetics (see Thurén 1995a) is also enlightening. See the bitter comments by Donelson on the fate of the Pastorals, too (1986, 1–2.68).

<sup>9</sup> Schweitzer 1930.

<sup>10</sup> Bultmann 1951–52.

<sup>11</sup> Conzelmann 1969.

<sup>12</sup> Bultmann 1975, 258, his emphasis.

<sup>13</sup> Bultmann 1975, 257–61.

<sup>14</sup> Schlier 1981, 9–23.

legitimate to look for theology in the New Testament texts, the search can be shown in practice often to have led to misunderstanding.<sup>15</sup>

It would seem that the scholars only modified some traditional religious interpretations of the apostle or constructed alternatives to them. In the background, however, there is a similar view of Paul as *the* thinker of Christianity. His message has been conveyed in slightly different ways; it has served as a source of various religious principles. Exegetics has thereby been used as a tool to create different Paul-based, nobler forms of Christianity. Seen from afar, Käsemann, Bultmann, and Schweitzer represent the same tradition as Luther, Augustine, and Marcion.

## B. The “Contextual” Alternative

In recent decades there has been a new turn in Pauline scholarship.<sup>16</sup> American and South African exegetes in particular have been disappointed by traditional theological studies, and the scholarship has resorted to new methods. The focus has shifted from theology to the context of Paul, which however is seen in a much broader sense than earlier.

These scholars have emphasized that Paul wrote each of his letters for a specific purpose and a specific audience. He did not formulate his thoughts like Seneca for a broad audience among the upcoming generations.<sup>17</sup> It seems reasonable, that the occasion for writing was usually a practical exigency rather than theological or philosophical contemplation. The theology in the texts may simply reflect the occasional circumstances characterized by non-religious factors. On the other hand, in case of obviously religious matters, it has been emphasized that it is misleading to rationalize the intuitions of Paul, viz. make theology of them.<sup>18</sup> Scholars have therefore turned their attention to areas long neglected.

As a result of this new “contextual” preoccupation, it has become increasingly difficult to discern any timeless, general, or even coherent theology in the Pauline texts. The more we perceive the external and internal thrusts, which provoked the formulation of each letter and the thoughts therein, the harder it becomes to see those thoughts as universal or harmonious. Moreover, tensions

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<sup>15</sup> Watson 1986, 180.

<sup>16</sup> See e.g. Dunn 1983; Beker 1980, 352–53 and Seifrid 1992, 2–3.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Deissmann 1926; Beker 1980, 352–53.

<sup>18</sup> Thus already Andrews 1934, 37.

between and within the letters have gradually demolished the picture of Paul as a great theologian.

The interpretation of Romans illustrates this turn in Pauline scholarship. Whereas the earlier scholars assessed Romans as the testament or dogmatics of Paul,<sup>19</sup> and thereby as a sort of hermeneutical key-text of the New Testament, it is currently fashionable to speak of the liberation from a “Lutheran captivity” of the letter.<sup>20</sup> Exegetes are increasingly aware of the dynamic nature of the text: The apostle did not write to the Romans only in order to inform the addressees about his theology or dogmatics, but had a practical purpose. Whether this purpose was to prepare a mission to Hispania, to rehearse for negotiations in Jerusalem, to reunite the Jewish and Gentile Christian groups in Rome, or only to amend his poor reputation,<sup>21</sup> or a combination thereof, the contents and the theology expressed in the letter plausibly serve the goal.<sup>22</sup>

This new approach to Paul is not based on new historical information about the apostle. Instead, a change in the goals of the scholarship can be discerned. Moreover a new focus in the study of history yields these results.

The first difference involves the scholars’ attitude to their material: they attempt to be more neutral. The goal is not so much as earlier to produce direct raw material for hermeneutics or to operate as godfathers of the Church, supporting or tearing down a religious system of dogmas. Instead, scholarship seeks to be descriptive and analytical. Traditional hermeneutical needs have been set aside. Thus, according to one position, we need no longer look to Paul for answers to, or even inspiration for solving, the central problems of humanity.<sup>23</sup> According to another opinion, Paul’s thoughts could be utilized in the political and social discussion without a specific religious context.<sup>24</sup> Paul is then seen as a thinker, but not primarily a theologian.

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<sup>19</sup> See Donfried 1991, xli. As recently as 1971, Kuss still held this view (1971, 163.202–203).

<sup>20</sup> Stendahl 1976; cf. also Stowers 1982, Watson 1986, 179–181; Elliott 1990, 292.

<sup>21</sup> Different explanations are presented in e.g. Elliott 1990, 21ff; Jervis 1991; Wedderburn 1991. See also Donfried (ed) 1991a and below, section II 3Aa.

<sup>22</sup> According to Boers, the letter is “as direct, and as hard-hitting, a moral confrontation as is Galatians” (1982, 194–95).

<sup>23</sup> Watson (1986, 181) poses a radical question: Should Paul’s thoughts continue to serve as a major source of modern theological discussion? Most scholars however, dare not go this far, since they would thereby foul their own nest.

<sup>24</sup> Petzke 1975. E. Schüssler-Fiorenza (1988, 16–17) prefers to focus on the problems raised by liberation theology. Some modern South African scholars involve exegetics in the political discourse; see Botha 1994 and articles in Olbricht and Porter (eds.) 1996.

The second change involves the way of studying history, and thereby the context of Paul's writings. As in general historical studies, some scholars concentrate on circumstances, conventions, norms, and normal life, on sociological and psychological regularities, instead of on separate events and the history of ideas. The significance of such dimensions for Paul's thinking has been increasingly emphasized.

A typical new approach is sociological. Pauline theology is examined over against his social frame of reference, taking account of common social regularities.<sup>25</sup> It is characteristic to see Christianity as a typical Jewish reform movement, which gradually developed into a sect. Paul's thoughts were generated to meet the needs of this transformation.

This is claimed by e.g. F. Watson, who postulates that Paul's poor progress in the Jewish mission forced him to move to the Gentile mission. However, in order to succeed, he had to modify his product and make it more attractive. Therefore he changed his theology concerning the Torah. This, in turn, caused difficulties with the traditional theology. The development followed a typical pattern of how a sect is created.<sup>26</sup> One can only conclude that it was not based on ingenious theological thinking.

Watson does not thereby deny the existence of Pauline theology.<sup>27</sup> He claims only that theology was but a secondary phenomenon, tailored to meet practical needs. First there was a social demand, then Paul had to devise a theoretical, theological explanation as if to legitimize a solution, which he would propose in any case. E. P. Sanders arrives at a more psychological result, which however in this sense resembles that of Watson: First there was a solution (Christ is the saviour), then a plight was produced (the need for salvation by Christ).<sup>28</sup> This model also enables us to explain the inconsistencies in Paul's theological statements: since the social requirements for the message varied in different cities, so did the theology.

Most of the contextual approaches are sound and reasonable *per se*. But serious questions can be raised: Do they really help us to understand Paul? Do they provide us with an alternative to the older theological studies? Are they even in principle capable of so doing?

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<sup>25</sup> Holmberg (1990) offers a good overview of sociological research into the New Testament.

<sup>26</sup> Watson 1986, 28–40.177–78.

<sup>27</sup> Watson 1986, 180–81.

<sup>28</sup> Sanders 1977, 474–511.

## Sources

### Old Testament

<b>Genesis</b>	79	<b>Psalms</b>	
1,14	78	2	157
2,16–17	113	18,44–48	157
3	128	72,8–11	157
3	151	89,26	157
3,16	107		
3,22	113	<b>Proverbs</b>	
12,2	157	13,24	111
15	170		
17,1–7	157	<b>Isaiah</b>	158
22	170	1,10–17	76
22,17f	157	2,2f	157
		14,1	157
<b>Exodus</b>	75	43	150
		45,21b–23	159
<b>Leviticus</b>		45,25	159
18,5	113	49	139
19,27	102	49,4–6	139
<b>Deuteronomy</b>		<b>Jeremiah</b>	
6,4	158	1,15	157
10,16	76	3,12–22	150
21,18–21	150	4,4	76
21,23	141	6,19–21	76
22,22	150	9,22f	177
30,6	76	9,23–24	177
		9,24	171
<b>2 Samuel</b>		10,10	162
19,6	111	17,5	153,154
		31	151
<b>1 Kings</b>		31,31–34	151
1,40	1	31,33	151
8,60	157		
		<b>Ezekiel</b>	
<b>Ezra</b>		11,19–20	151
4,1–5	140	36,25–27	151
4,2–3	140	36,37	151
9–10	140		



<b>Hosea</b>			<b>Acts</b>	
2,4	150		7	48
6,6	76		13,46-47	139
11,1	150		17,16	160
14	150		17,22-29	160
			23	48
<b>Amos</b>			23,6-9	48
5,21-27	76			
<b>Micha</b>			<b>Romans</b>	9,20,21,24,54, 55,58,60,95- 101,104-106, 109,111,112, 117,119,120, 125,126,130, 134,137, 142-144, 146, 155, 162, 176
6,6-8	76		1-2	129
<b>Zephaniah</b>			1-3	129, 150
3,9	157		1, 1-7	97, 162
<b>Zechariah</b>			1, 3-4	16
9,9-10	157, 158		1, 5	162
14,9	158, 159, 162, 163		1, 8	1
14,16-19	158		1, 9	46
<b>Malachi</b>			1, 9-10	33
1,10	76		1, 11-12	120
2,13	76		1, 11-13	100
<b>1 Maccabees</b>			1, 12	121
2,50-52	170		1, 14	32
			1, 18ff	162
<b>New Testament</b>			1, 18-24	171
			2	144
<b>Matthew</b>			2-3	127
3,8-9	109		2, 12-16	128
5,17-18	150		2, 13-29	108
7,3-5	34, 144		2, 14-15	108
10,32	47		2, 15	76
21,28-31	109		2, 17	169
			2, 19	110
<b>Luke</b>			2, 19-3, 20	144
12,8	47		2, 20	56
14,26	111		2, 21-22	144
16,19-31	26		2, 21-23	34
			2, 23	169, 171
<b>John</b>	82		2, 25-29	76, 133
11,26	126		2, 27	145
			2, 26-27	108

3	144, 145, 152, 155	6, 15–22 7	136 82, 120, 113, 117–124, 129, 132, 182
3, 1–2	155		
3, 4	144		
3, 8	100	7–8	123, 124, 126
3, 9	163	7, 1	123
3, 10–18	107	7, 1–6	110
3, 19	76	7, 4	85, 123
3, 19–20	130	7, 5	137
3, 19–25	144	7, 6	56, 123, 145
3, 20	127, 145, 163, 171	7, 7	56, 111, 163
		7, 7–8	117, 128
3, 21	56, 107	7, 7–9	113
3, 21–30	162	7, 7–11	113, 127, 128, 137
3, 22	163		
3, 23	77	7, 7–13	121
3, 23–24	112	7, 7–25	117–119
3, 27	107, 131, 169	7, 7–8, 3	113
3, 27–30	169	7, 9	123
3, 27–4, 7 170		7, 10	56, 112–114
3, 28	145	7, 12	38, 56, 95, 111
3, 29	155, 161	7, 13	127
3, 29–30	160, 161	7, 14	56, 136
3, 31	95, 107, 114	7, 14f	121
3, 31b	79	7, 14–25	117, 122
4	107, 145, 146, 152, 169	7, 15	123
		7, 18	123
4, 1–5	153, 169	7, 19	123
4, 2	145, 170	7, 20–25	107
4, 4	145, 170	7, 22	124
4, 4–5	170	7, 23	119
4, 5	146	7, 25a	122
4, 13–14	170	7, 25b	124
4, 14	145	8	126, 137
5	129	8, 1–3	123
5, 1–7, 6	120	8, 1–10	124
5, 12–14	128	8, 2	107, 132
5, 12–19	128	8, 3	113, 114
5, 13	127, 128	8, 4	75, 95, 107, 108, 114, 132, 133
5, 13–14	127, 128		
5, 19	127		
5, 20	56, 82, 127	8, 5–6	123
6	90, 136	8, 6	123
6–8	117, 137	8, 7	123
6, 3–4	31, 125	8, 8	123
6, 3–14	136	8, 10	136
6, 14	136, 153	8, 13	123

8, 17ff	137	1	171
9, 1-3	45	1, 4	33
9, 3	156	1, 5	33
9, 4	109, 170	1, 7	33
9, 4-5	156	1, 10	101
9, 30-10, 4	145	1, 10-13	33, 172
9, 31-32	145	1, 10-2, 16	2
9-11	19, 33, 99, 129, 144, 155	1, 17	40
10, 2	153	1, 18-25	40
10, 3	145	1, 20-23	173
10, 4	110	1, 21	173
10, 4-11	131	1, 23	173
10, 5	113, 114	1, 27	171
10, 5f	153	1, 27-29	171
10, 12-13		1, 29	165, 173
11, 17	158	1, 31	171, 177
11, 17-24	176	2, 1	2, 40, 43
11, 32	129, 149	2, 1-12	39
11, 36	171	2, 2	2
13	143	2, 4	40, 43
13, 8	131	2, 3	33
13, 8-10	75, 107, 108, 114, 132, 133	4, 1-4	32
13, 9	109, 133	4, 8-13	34
13, 9-10	90	4, 16	120
14	30	5-16	101
15, 6	162	5, 6-8	173
15, 7-13	162	5, 9	173
15, 9-12	163	5, 9-13	31, 103
15, 14-16	100, 163	5, 18	115
15, 14-32	97	6	37
15, 14-33	162	6, 12	33, 104
15, 18	1, 34, 163	7	37
15, 22-24 100		7, 10-11	134
15, 24	96	7, 19	131, 133
15, 27	151	7, 29-31	154
15, 28	96, 100	7, 40	172
15, 32	100	8	103, 160, 168
16, 26	153	8, 4	168
1 Corinthians	26, 31, 93, 95, 96, 101, 102, 105, 106, 112, 116, 124-126, 130-132, 134, 172, 173, 182	8, 5-6	168
		8, 6	160
		8, 7ff	168
		9, 1f	169
		9, 8	105, 133
		9, 8-9	104, 133
		9, 16	32
		9, 17	32
		9, 19-23	29, 41

9, 20	104	1, 23	46
9, 20–21	44	2, 3–9	39
9, 21	105, 107	2, 17	40
9, 22	32, 37	3, 6	145
9, 24–26	29	3, 6–7	113–114
10	30	3, 13–15	152
10, 15–33	30	5, 14–21	163
10, 17	161	5, 16	33
10, 19–22	160, 168	5, 19	161
10, 23	104	7, 8–12	30
10, 25–28	30	7, 8–13	39
10, 33	30	10, 9–11	30
11	104	10, 10	32, 40
11, 1	120	10, 13–18	169
11, 2	33	10, 17	177
11, 18	33	10–11	39
11, 22	33	10–13	48
12–14	103	11	167
12, 3	47	11–12	169
14, 16–17	31	11, 2	141
14, 21	104, 107	11, 6	40, 118
14, 33b–36	6	11, 10	46, 167
14, 34	104, 105, 107, 114, 133	11, 20	34
14, 36–37	172	11, 16–12, 10	34
15	102, 103, 116, 118, 121, 124	11, 23–12, 10	121
15, 9	32	11, 29	141
15, 10	32, 169	11, 31	46
15, 10b	170	12	167
15, 12	125	12, 2–7	45, 47
15, 18	115	12, 6	46
15, 36–49	115		
15, 50	115, 124	<b>Galatians</b>	9, 20, 21, 24, 30, 37, 38, 43, 44, 54, 55, 58–64, 70–74, 77, 86, 95, 96, 100–102, 104–106, 109–112, 114, 117–118, 124, 126–127, 130–132, 134–138, 140, 142–146, 150, 152, 156, 164, 170, 173, 176, 178
15, 50–57	115, 137		
15, 51–57	124		
15, 52–54	115		
15, 54	115		
15, 56	16, 104, 115–117, 122, 124, 125, 128, 163, 173, 182		
15, 57	123		
<b>2 Corinthians</b>	29, 32, 168		
1, 13	40		
1, 13–18	32		

1	49	3, 15-18	82, 152
1, 1	141	3, 15-20	81
1, 1-5	65	3, 15-21	71
1, 6	43, 61, 65	3, 15-29	80, 83, 84
1, 6-9	64, 176	3, 16	82
1, 7	66, 67	3, 17	68, 82, 152
1, 8	46, 47, 111	3, 18	68152
1, 8-9	61, 66, 71	3, 19	38, 56, 60, 81-84, 119, 149, 163
1, 9	43		
1, 10	32, 39, 43, 61		
1, 12ff	71	3, 19-20	80, 83
1, 13-14	71, 153	3, 19-4, 6	85
1, 14	141, 150	3, 19-4, 7	82
1, 15-17	32	3, 20	82, 83
1, 16-22	70	3, 21	81, 82, 111-112, 114, 152
1, 20	46		
2	175		
2, 4	55, 66, 67	3, 21b	73
2, 5	71	3, 21f	68, 152
2, 6	68	3, 22	82, 149
2, 7-10	32	3, 22-25	84
2, 11	71	3, 23	76, 82
2, 11-14	29	3, 23-25	77
2, 12	67	3, 23-29	77
2, 13	66, 143	3, 24	163
2, 16	152	3, 25	56, 82, 110
2, 19	81, 85, 219	3, 26	161
2, 20-21	175	3, 26-27	77
2, 21	68, 146, 152, 175	3, 26-29	175
		3, 28	156
3	80, 91, 152, 175	3, 28f	161
		4	77, 78
3-4	76	4, 1	34
3, 1	39, 66	4, 1-5	78
3, 1-5	62	4, 4-5	163
3, 2	34, 103, 152	4, 5	78
3, 2-5	68	4, 6	77
3, 6	68	4, 7-8	39
3, 6-18	81	4, 8-11	78
3, 10	87	4, 9	56
3, 11	68	4, 10	78
3, 11f	152	4, 12-20	62
3, 12	56, 68, 71, 113, 114, 152	4, 14	47
		4, 17	70
3, 13	79, 110, 141	4, 20	30
3, 13-14	76	4, 21	107
3, 14	76	4, 21b	79, 80, 92

4, 22	79	<b>Philippians</b>	58
5-6	88, 90, 91	1, 4	33
5, 1	77	1, 8	45
5, 1-12	89	2, 1-11	4
5, 1-13	75	2, 6-11	42, 160
5, 2-3	71	3	117, 168
5, 2-4	111	3, 3	76, 173
5, 3	85, 87	3, 3-8	168
5, 4	68, 152	3, 4-6	79, 141, 168,
5, 6	133, 146		169
5, 7	39	3, 5-6	183
5, 9	68, 71, 173	3, 5-9	104
5, 10	66	3, 6	145, 150, 153
5, 12	66	3, 7-8a	168
5, 13-14	76, 89, 132	3, 8	33
5, 13-6, 10	88, 89	3, 9	146
5, 14	56, 74, 75, 86,	3, 17	120
	87, 107-108,	4, 9	120
	133, 137		
5, 14ff	88	<b>Colossians</b>	135
5, 14-18	93	1, 6	1
5, 15-29	89	1, 15-20	160
5, 16	76, 88, 92	2, 11	76
5, 16-25	136	2, 12	31, 125
5, 17	123, 126	4, 16	5
5, 18	92, 115, 131		
5, 20	82	<b>1 Thessalonians</b>	32, 142
5, 21	123	1, 2-3	33
5, 22-23		1, 6	120
5, 23	79	1, 8	1, 2, 26, 32
6	174-175	2	39
6, 2	56, 79, 80, 86,	2, 3	45
	87, 92, 93	2, 3-5	40
6, 4	171, 174-175	2, 5	45
6, 9-10	91-92	2, 8	34
6, 11-18	64	2, 9	33
6, 12-13	66, 68	2, 10	45
6, 13	55, 66	3, 10	33
6, 13-14	174		
6, 14	174-175	<b>2 Thessalonians</b>	
6, 15	71, 76, 91-92,	2	32
	133, 175	3, 1	32
6, 16	156		
		<b>1 Timothy</b>	
<b>Ephesians</b>		1, 10	6
2, 6	125		

2 Timothy		643.647-48.665.	
2, 7	46	672-73	178
4, 13	6	668-69	85,178
Philemon		Exodus Rabbah	
12	33	29,4	162
Hebrews	68	Josephus	
James	7, 57, 136, 146	De Bello 1.595	45
2, 14-26	35, 90	Nilus of Ancyra	
2, 20-24	170	Epist. I,152-153	119
1 Peter	7, 12, 28,	Philo	102
1, 6	91-92	All. III, 77-78. 83	42, 148, 170
2, 19-20	136	83	170
3, 17	170	T. Levi	
4, 13	136	19,3	45
2 Peter	7, 24, 46, 53,		
2, 11	70		
3, 16	67		
	34-35, 53		
Jude	4		67

### Other Ancient Sources

IV Ezra	147,148
4Q225	170
4QMMT C	148
Aristotle	
Rhetorica II 7,1385a	170
Caesar	
De Bello Gallico	48
Chrysostom	
Galatians	
PG 61,615.628-31.	

## Modern Authors

- Althaus, P. 107  
Andrews, M.E. 8  
Arichea, D. 170  
Austin, J.L. 24  
Ave Marie, F. 147
- Bamberger, B. 157  
Barclay, J.M.G. 11, 65  
Barth, K. 110, 165  
Bauckham, R. 34  
Becker, J. 14, 20, 37, 38, 55, 85, 132, 134, 159  
Beker, J.C. 3, 6, 8, 14, 15, 19, 20, 54, 55, 58, 115, 116, 121, 122  
Berger, K. 29, 170  
Betz, H.D. 26, 29, 32, 34, 39, 40, 43-44, 46, 47, 59-63, 65, 67, 69, 71, 78, 89, 113, 141, 156, 167, 174
- Bibelen* 15  
Billerbeck, P. 45  
Bitzer, L.F. 98  
Boers, H. 9, 11, 19  
Botha, J. 9, 29, 143  
Bradley, J.D. 89  
Braun, H. 118  
Breuer, D. 24  
Brinsmead, B.H. 59  
Brooten, B.J. 86, 91, 133  
Bruce, F.F. 32, 33, 40  
Büchsel, F. 76  
Bullmore, M.A. 105  
Bultmann, R. 7, 8, 23, 40, 46, 117, 126, 128, 139, 165-168  
Byrskog, S. 162
- Carracc, A. 27  
Chadwick, H. 32, 37, 40, 43  
Combrink, H.J. 24  
Conzelmann, H. 1, 2, 7, 30, 33, 34, 46, 104
- Cranfield, C.E.B. 58, 60, 145  
Cronje, J. 118
- Dahl, N.A. 15, 107, 158, 159, 161  
Dalman, G. 47  
Daube, D. 41  
Deines, R. 147, 177  
Deissmann, G.A. 8  
Dibelius, M. 46  
Donelson, L.R. 7  
Donfried, K.P. 9, 96, 99, 119  
Doty, W.G. 11  
Drane, J.W. 54, 94, 104, 105  
Du Toit, A. 24, 26, 66, 67, 69, 72, 167  
Dunn, J.D.G. 3, 8, 21, 29, 34, 45, 46, 53, 54, 59, 85, 96, 100, 107, 111-114, 116, 117, 121, 123, 127-129, 133, 139-141, 146, 147, 150, 151, 155-157, 162, 163, 169, 170
- Eckstein, H.-J. 82, 93  
Eco, U. 17  
Elliott, J.H. 7  
Elliott, N. 9, 97  
Eriksson, A. 2, 102-105, 109, 114, 125  
Eskola, T. 16, 53, 109, 129, 140, 147-150, 167, 168, 171  
Evans, C.F. 68
- Fascher, E. 172  
Fee, G. 31, 101, 102, 104, 114, 115, 117, 125, 172  
Feldman, L.H. 158  
Fitzmyer, J. 110, 111, 121, 124, 163  
Forbes, C. 40, 46  
Fung, R.Y.K. 59, 62, 64, 65, 71
- Gabel, J. 1  
Gardner, P. 57, 74  
Garlington, D.B. 147



- Gärtner, B. 160  
 Glad, C. 41, 42  
 Goppelt, L. 7  
 Goulder, M. 55  
 Grässer, E. 159-162  
 Grimm, H. 12  
 Grosheide, F.W. 1, 33  
*Gute Nachricht* 15  
 Guthrie, D. 32, 44, 62, 65, 73
- Hall, R. 59  
 Hartman, L. V, 5, 6, 16, 23, 76-79, 83,  
 151, 156  
 Hauser, A.J. 27, 58, 101  
 Hawthorne, G.F. 33, 45, 168  
 Hays, R.B. 29, 87, 140, 152, 162  
 Heckel, U. 48, 167, 177  
 Hengel, M. V, 20, 93, 141, 153, 154,  
 157, 158  
 Hester, J. 59  
 Hofius, O. 150, 151  
 Holland, G. 120, 121  
 Holmberg, B. 10, 12  
 Holtz, T. 40  
 Hong, I.-G. 54, 56, 58, 59, 67, 73, 75,  
 76, 79, 82-87, 89, 91, 94  
 Howard, G. 69  
 Hübner, H. V, 3, 19, 20, 54, 75, 76, 80,  
 86, 94, 95, 107, 117, 174, 176  
 Hurd, J.C. 29, 103
- Illman, K.-J. 55, 143  
 Iser, W. 16
- Janik, A. 13  
 Jervell, J. 96  
 Jervis, L.A. 9, 97  
 Jewett, R. 69  
 Johnson, L.T. 66
- Kaiser, W.C. 54  
 Käsemann, E. 7, 8, 107, 132, 161  
 Kelly, J.N.D. 34  
 Kennedy, G. 59  
 Knox, W.L. 36  
 Koskenniemi, H. 61  
 Köster, H. 6
- Kraftchick, S.J. 60, 63, 88, 90  
 Kümmel, W.G. 117, 118, 121, 123  
 Kuss, O. 9  
 Kuula, K. 33, 53, 55, 58, 64
- Laato, A. 139, 157  
 Laato, T. 53, 113, 115, 117, 118, 121,  
 123, 146, 147, 169  
 Lang, F. 30, 33, 40  
 Lategan, B.C. 88  
 Lausberg, H. 30, 46, 61, 63, 79  
 Leeste, T. 115, 118, 119  
 Lichtenberger, H. 147  
 Liddell, H.G. 116, 127, 170  
 Litfin, D. 105  
 Longenecker, B.W. 11, 148,  
 Longenecker, R. 32, 34, 44, 46, 54,  
 59-62, 64-67, 71, 79, 81, 84, 86,  
 87, 89, 97, 103, 156  
 Lorrain, C. 27  
 Louw, J. 118  
 Lütgert, W. 66, 89  
 Luther, M. 8, 63, 117, 126, 139, 165
- Maier, G. 147  
 Malherbe, A. 41  
 Marshall, I.H. 1  
 Marshall, P. 29, 41  
 Martin, D. 41  
 Martin, J. 30, 32, 34, 42, 45, 60, 61, 63,  
 77, 80, 81, 89, 175  
 Martin, R.P. 46, 48, 118, 167  
 Marxsen, W. 65  
 Michel, O. 45, 108, 111, 118, 141, 163  
 Mitchell, M. 29, 41, 42, 101, 105, 171,  
 172  
 Mitternacht, D. 33, 58  
 Moo, D.J. 53  
 Morris, L. 40, 126  
 Mullins, T.Y. 61  
 Munck, J. 67  
 Mussner, F. 61, 62, 65, 71, 78, 82
- Neusner, J. 140, 155, 156  
 Nissen, A. 74, 157  
 Nolland, J. 111

- Odeberg, H. 147  
 Oepke, A. 83  
 Olbricht, T.H. 9  
 Olsson, B. 12  
 O'Banion, J.D. 65  
 O'Brien, P.T. 33  
 O'Neill, 88
- Patte, D. 15, 18, 19  
 Perelmann, C. 13, 19, 120  
 Pesch, R. 160  
 Petzke, G. 9  
 Piper, J. 90  
 Pogoloff, S.M. 105  
 Porter, S.E. 9, 27, 28, 58, 59, 101, 105,  
 118, 119  
 Poussin, N. 27  
*Pyhä Raamattu* 15
- Räsänen, H. V. 6, 20, 21, 23, 27, 34,  
 53-55, 58, 60, 68, 74-80, 82-88,  
 95, 106-108, 110-113, 122, 127,  
 129, 132, 134, 135, 140, 150-152,  
 168-171, 174
- Reicke, B. 34  
 Rhyne, C.T. 107  
 Richardson, P. 29  
 Ridderbos, H.N. 32, 59, 61, 62, 64, 65  
 Rieke, R. 13  
 Rohde, J. 59, 61, 65, 71  
 Rosenbloom, J. 157, 158  
 Rossholm Lagerlöf, M. 27
- Sandelin, K.-G. 105  
 Sanders, E.P. V, 10, 53, 55, 86, 93, 112,  
 143, 145-149, 169  
 Schelkle, K.H. 119  
 Schimanowski, G. 147  
 Schlier, H. 7, 11, 62  
 Schmidt, H.W. 107  
 Schmithals, W. 65  
 Schnabel, E. 147  
 Schrage, W. 29, 30, 33, 34, 39, 40, 103,  
 172, 173  
 Schreiner, T.R. 54  
 Schüssler-Fiorenza, E. 9  
 Schweitzer, A. 7, 8, 80, 111
- Schweizer, E. 5, 26  
 Schwemer, A.-M. 20, 153, 154, 157, 158  
 Scott, R. 116, 127, 170  
 Scroggs, R. 3, 11, 14, 16, 19, 23, 27  
 Seeley, D. 21  
 Seid, T. 68  
 Seifrid, M. 8, 15, 21, 147  
 Siegert, F. 19  
 Smit, J. 59  
 Snyman, A. 118  
 Stamps, D. 98  
 Stanton, G. 85, 86  
 Stendahl, K. 6, 9  
 Stowers, S. 9, 118-120
- Theissen, G. 102  
 Thielman, F. 53-55, 58, 60, 75, 85, 86,  
 93, 147, 149, 150  
 Thieselton, A. 125  
 Thurén, L. 7, 19, 24, 28, 35, 38, 41, 43,  
 44, 46, 55, 57, 59, 65, 66, 70, 71,  
 85, 90-92, 97-99, 117, 122, 136,  
 162, 178  
 Thurén, J. 75, 76, 78, 79, 83-85, 89, 107,  
 108, 123, 128, 129, 134, 137,  
 152-154, 159  
 Tomson, P. 11, 90, 147  
 Toulmin, S. 13  
 Trobisch, D. 6, 15  
 Tuckett, C.M. 102, 125
- Van Spanje, T. 74  
 Vollenweider, S. 41  
 Vorster, J. 97, 98  
 Vouga, F. 59
- Warning, R. 24  
 Watson, F. 7-10, 12, 24, 37, 139, 169  
 Watson, D.F. 27, 58, 101  
 Wedderburn, A.J.M. 9, 96, 98-100, 125  
 Weiss, J. 2, 115  
 Westerholm, S. 53-55, 73, 75, 82-85, 87,  
 107, 115, 117, 118, 129, 137,  
 140-142, 145, 147, 149-151, 154,  
 168, 169  
 Wheeler, C. 1  
 White, J.L. 72, 162

Wilckens, U. 54, 108, 161

Willis, W. 29

Wilson, J.H. 125

Winnige, M. 147, 171

Witherington, B. W. III 12, 102, 105,  
125

Wolff, C. 117

Wright, N.T. 14, 15, 18, 21, 24, 58, 85,  
110, 117, 131, 159, 160

Wuellner, W. 5, 24, 62, 99

Zmijewski, J. 167

## Index of Subjects

- Abraham 77-79, 83, 107, 145, 152, 156,  
162, 169, 170  
ad hoc 115, 126, 173  
Adam 113, 121, 122, 127-129, 137, 149  
Akedah 170  
anomia 105  
antagonist 145  
antinomism 93, 105  
Apartheid 143  
Aqiba 74  
argumentation 13, 19, 27, 28, 39, 57, 62,  
82, 86, 87, 90, 100, 117, 122, 132,  
172  
Augustine 8, 139, 165  
  
baptism 31, 110, 124, 125, 130, 156, 182  
blasphemy 46, 47, 80, 81, 85, 86  
boasting 46, 47, 69, 96, 121, 147,  
165-178, 183  
  
Caesar 48  
Calvin 165  
captatio benevolentiae 33, 44  
caricature 68, 69, 88, 143, 146  
Chrysostom 42, 178  
Church Fathers 41, 42, 119, 121  
Cicero 28  
Clement 41  
communication 23-25, 27, 28, 30, 32, 41,  
42, 48, 49, 53, 56, 58, 66, 77, 79,  
83, 96, 110, 114, 182, 184, 185  
contextualist 11  
contradiction 6, 21, 30, 39, 48, 49, 64,  
71, 75, 81, 82, 95, 101, 112, 114,  
117, 150, 158, 164, 177, 181  
cultic 30, 74, 75, 78, 91, 105, 109, 133,  
135, 137  
Cyrus 140  
  
death 26, 31, 104, 110-112, 114-116,  
121-128, 130, 136, 137, 146, 150,  
155, 182  
Decalogue 75, 90, 109, 133  
derhetorization 28, 29, 57, 101  
development 3, 10, 13, 14, 20, 37, 49,  
54, 95, 113, 117, 134, 142, 154,  
157, 168, 176  
dogmatics 9, 13, 108, 112, 185  
dramatization 44, 67, 70, 72, 73  
dubitatio 2, 63  
dynamic 3, 9, 22, 23, 25-29, 32, 35, 36,  
38, 40, 42, 48, 49, 56, 57, 95, 111,  
112, 130, 160, 166, 181, 184, 185  
  
e silentio 73, 94, 142, 174  
ego 119-123  
Eleazar 74  
emotion 61, 92  
enable 3, 17, 72, 106, 114, 166  
epideictic 59, 102, 168, 171, 177, 183  
Erasmus 107  
eschatological 66, 75, 91, 92, 102, 125,  
151, 154, 158, 159, 162-164  
ethics 11, 68, 89, 90, 105, 114, 126, 136,  
184, 185  
ethos 29, 36, 38, 41, 43, 48, 49, 63, 66,  
77, 81, 84, 90, 99, 102, 120, 135,  
172, 174, 177  
exaggeration 6, 13, 32-34, 41, 57, 136,  
143-145  
exemplificatio 169  
exhortatio 89, 175  
exordium 31, 34, 61, 65, 97, 100  
  
flesh 17, 89, 115, 122-125, 130, 132,  
137, 141, 154, 156, 167, 173, 182  
fulfilling the law 75, 76, 78, 79, 86, 87,  
91, 92, 93, 107-109, 113-114,  
130-133, 137, 144, 150, 181  
  
Gentiles 9, 10, 36, 54, 64, 76-79, 99,  
100, 105, 108, 109, 125, 127-129,

- 139, 144, 149-164, 166, 169, 170, 176
- genus 59, 89
- glory 15, 81, 156, 162, 171, 172, 177, 178, 183
- Gnosticism 40, 102
- grace 43, 68, 75, 86, 89, 93, 136, 138, 142, 146, 147, 152, 155, 170, 171, 175, 176
- guardian 78, 84, 110, 163
- Gustav Vasa 12
- Halakha 90, 196
- harmonize 17, 21
- Heidegger 17
- Hellenistic 27-29, 41, 42, 90, 103
- Hillel 74
- historical 2, 3, 5-7, 9, 10, 12-17, 20, 27, 28, 34, 42, 61, 64, 66, 79, 98-100, 102, 119, 139, 151, 153, 160, 165-167, 169, 173, 177
- honour 81, 94, 142, 171, 176
- hyperbole 1, 2, 34, 71
- ideology 6, 7, 11, 13, 58, 134, 165, 167, 173, 177, 182
- idols 30, 34, 78, 103, 160, 168
- immutatio 30, 63
- indignatio 174
- insinuatio 25, 40, 48
- interaction 24, 27, 28, 49, 160, 165
- irony 34, 46, 61, 78, 167
- Israel 42, 45, 82, 83, 99, 140, 141, 144, 145, 150, 151, 154-159, 162-164, 182, 183
- Jerusalem 9, 46, 48, 64, 67, 70, 96, 97, 99-101, 128, 129, 155
- Jesus 1, 14, 17, 32, 34, 36, 46, 47, 49, 79, 83, 91, 109-111, 126, 136, 148, 153, 155, 160, 163, 164, 183
- Judaism 3, 9, 10, 16, 19, 27, 34, 53, 67-69, 71, 73, 74, 78-80, 82, 83, 87, 88, 90, 93, 96, 99-101, 103, 106-109, 112, 113, 118, 129, 132, 137-150, 152-155, 157-162, 166, 167-170, 173, 176-178, 182, 183
- law 3, 29, 51, 53-58, 60, 68, 69, 73-96, 100-117, 120-171, 173-178, 181-185
- libertinism 37, 88-91, 104, 125, 131, 135
- logic 11, 15, 18, 19, 27, 53, 55, 62, 122, 163
- logos 82, 90
- Luther 8, 63, 117, 126, 139, 165
- Lutheran 12, 17, 93, 130
- Marcion 8, 165
- metaphorical 80, 86, 87, 92, 93, 106, 107, 173
- monotheism 103, 155, 159-164, 169, 183
- moral 9, 54, 66, 74, 75, 85, 92, 104, 105, 108, 109, 120, 130-135, 137
- moral guidance 85, 92, 130
- Mosaic law 73, 79, 80, 90, 92, 93, 128, 132-135, 138
- Moses 73, 76, 78, 79, 83, 86, 87, 90, 105, 128, 135, 150, 164, 183
- narratio 61, 65, 71
- Nineveh 109
- nomos 56, 73, 75, 77-80, 92, 106-109
- opponents 31, 37, 66-70, 74, 81, 89, 145, 152, 153, 177, 178
- oratory 41, 59, 62, 168
- Origen 42
- Old Testament 45, 67, 73, 75, 79, 82, 96, 107-109, 114, 132, 139, 140, 148, 150-154, 156-158, 160, 161, 163, 164, 177, 182, 183
- paradox 53, 55, 75, 150
- paraenesis 74, 80, 88-92, 97, 99, 105, 131-137, 184
- particularism 157, 158, 161, 183
- pathos 43, 60, 74, 86, 90, 104, 121
- Pentateuch 79, 92, 106, 107, 109
- peroratio 71, 97, 100, 174, 175
- persuasion 15, 25, 28, 36, 38-40, 42, 44, 50, 57, 59, 62, 64, 65, 70, 72, 73, 86, 99, 101, 109, 120, 168, 181, 182, 184
- petitio principii 118

- Pharisaism 138-141, 143, 146-148, 151-153, 158, 164, 182
- Philo 42, 102, 148, 170
- praeteritio 46, 48, 167
- promise 68, 81-85, 92, 94, 152-154, 156, 164, 183
- propositio 101, 108
- prosopopoiia 82, 118-120
- provoke 24, 36, 62, 121, 127, 129, 135, 137
- Psalms of Solomon 147
- Quintilian 28, 61, 63
- Qumran 102, 118, 147, 148
- rabbinic 147, 158, 161
- recapitulatio 174
- refutatio 81, 89
- repetitio 156
- ritual 73-75, 93, 108, 109, 137, 156
- Rome 9, 96-101, 119, 128, 155, 156, 161, 176
- salvation 10, 30, 56, 68, 69, 90, 91, 93, 131, 138, 145-149, 153, 155, 163, 164, 166, 176, 177, 183
- Scriptures 93, 107, 144, 152, 158, 163
- semantic 56, 73, 79, 80, 96, 106, 107, 109, 110, 156, 170
- Shema 158, 159
- Simlai 74
- sin 74, 84, 88, 104, 111, 113, 115-117, 120, 121, 123-125, 127-130, 135-137, 149, 151, 158, 163, 182
- sincerity 14, 32, 34, 36-38, 40, 43-49, 57, 72
- sociology 3, 10-12, 36, 37, 96, 138-142, 151, 184
- spirit 31, 45-47, 55, 86, 88, 90-92, 103-105, 107, 123, 124, 130-133, 136, 137, 151, 152, 166, 181, 185
- spiritual gift 33
- static 3, 21, 23, 25, 26, 56, 68, 144, 184
- status 5, 42, 43, 59, 64, 68, 92, 136, 155, 156, 159, 162, 168, 169, 173, 175
- stoikheia 56, 78
- style 24, 45, 46, 55, 61, 62, 70, 72, 77, 101, 121, 157, 172
- synergism 147, 149
- systematic 6, 11, 16
- Tertullian 41
- Torah 10, 12, 38, 53, 74-77, 79, 86, 91, 93, 114, 128, 129, 131, 132, 134, 135, 139-142, 148, 149, 151-153, 156, 160-164, 169, 173, 182, 183
- universalism 157, 158, 183
- Usus legis
  - elencticus 130
  - tertius 93, 130
- vilification 66, 70, 100, 125, 177
- vituperatio 65
- zelos 141, 153



# Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament

## *Alphabetical Index of the First and Second Series*

- Anderson, Paul N.*: The Christology of the Fourth Gospel. 1996. *Volume II/78*.
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