Which letters did Paul write?: study guide

Module 12: The Pauline Corpus and Ancient Pseudepigraphy.

Rereading and highlighting feel productive but build little memory; testing yourself does. Cover each answer, try to recall it, then check, and come back on the days in the tracker.

Review schedule: tick each box when you have done it

- [ ] First study and self-test (today)
- [ ] Review 1 (one day later)
- [ ] Review 2 (one week later)
- [ ] Review 3 (one month later)

Warm-up

1. From the canon lesson: how many letters of Paul were in Marcion's collection?
2. What does the label "Most scholars agree" mean on this site?
3. Which are the earliest Christian writings that survive?

Key terms

The letters

- Undisputed letters: The seven letters nearly all scholars accept as Paul's: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians and Philemon, written between about 50 and 63 CE.

Why it matters: Why do scholars use these seven as the fixed point for judging the others?

- Disputed letters: The six letters in Paul's name whose authorship scholars debate: 2 Thessalonians, Colossians, Ephesians, 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus.

Why it matters: Why is "disputed" a statement about modern scholarship, not about whether the early church accepted them?

- Pastoral letters: 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy and Titus, letters about teaching and running churches, which scholars usually study as a group.

Why it matters: What follows when scholars judge these three letters together?

Writing in another's name

- Pseudonymous: Written under the name of someone other than the actual author. The site uses it when, in scholars' judgment, the named author did not write the letter.

Why it matters: Why does the site report how widely each position is held instead of judging the practice?

- Pseudepigrapha: Writings that bear the name of someone who did not write them. Whether any New Testament book is one is debated book by book.

Why it matters: Why does "book by book" matter for the letters in Paul's name?

- Secretary: A person who wrote down a letter as the author dictated it. Tertius, who wrote down Romans, names himself in Romans 16:22.

Why it matters: How could a secretary make style a weaker test of authorship?

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The evidence

- Evidence inside a letter: Vocabulary, style, ideas, dependence on another letter, and how well the letter fits what is known of Paul's career. Example: between a third and a half of the verses of Ephesians parallel Colossians.

Why it matters: Why is this evidence compared with the undisputed letters?

- Evidence outside a letter: Quotations by early writers, such as Polycarp and Irenaeus, and ancient lists of books, such as Marcion's and the Muratorian Fragment. Example: Polycarp (110 to 140 CE) echoes 1 Timothy 6:7 and 6:10 without naming it.

Why it matters: What can a quotation show about a letter, and what can it not show?

Timeline

- 32 to 36 CE: Paul's conversion to the Jesus movement (Most scholars agree). Dated between 32 and 36 CE, the date most scholars give.
- 50 to 52 CE: 1 Thessalonians (Most scholars agree). Written between 50 and 52 CE, the date most scholars give.
- 51 to 52 CE: Paul before Gallio in Corinth (Acts 18:12) (Most scholars agree). Dated between 51 and 52 CE, the date most scholars give.
- 54 to 55 CE: Galatians (Most scholars agree). Written between 54 and 55 CE, the date most scholars give.
- 54 to 63 CE: Philippians (Most scholars agree). Written between 54 and 63 CE, the date most scholars give.
- 56 to 57 CE: 1 Corinthians (Most scholars agree). Written between 56 and 57 CE, the date most scholars give.
- 57 to 58 CE: Romans (Most scholars agree). Written between 57 and 58 CE, the date most scholars give.
- 64 to 67 CE: Death of Paul in Rome (Most scholars agree). Dated between 64 and 67 CE, the date most scholars give. The date and manner rest on early tradition (1 Clement 5).
- 80 to 90 CE: Colossians (Scholars are split).
- 80 to 100 CE: 2 Thessalonians (Scholars are split).
- 80 to 100 CE: Ephesians (Most scholars agree). Written between 80 and 100 CE, the date most scholars give.
- 80 to 100 CE: 1 Timothy (Most scholars agree). Written between 80 and 100 CE, the date most scholars give.
- 95 to 120 CE: 1 Clement (Most scholars agree). Written about 95 or 96 CE on the usual dating, and not later than about 120. A few scholars date it as early as about 70.
- 105 to 115 CE: Ignatius (Most scholars agree). Dated between 105 and 115 CE, the date most scholars give.
- 140 to 144 CE: Marcion's canon (Nearly all scholars agree). This list of accepted books dates between 140 and 144 CE, a date scholars broadly accept.
- 170 to 200 CE: Muratorian fragment (Scholars are split). Gallagher and Meade (2017) say the debate continues, with a significant following for each date; Metzger (1987) holds the late second century, McDonald (2007) and Robbins (1992) favor the fourth.

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- 175 to 185 CE: Irenaeus (Nearly all scholars agree). Dated between 175 and 185 CE, a date scholars broadly accept.
- about 200 or earlier: Papyrus 46 (Chester Beatty Papyrus II) (Most scholars agree). Usually dated about 200.

Explain it

In your own words: why can an early quotation show when a letter existed but not who wrote it?

Worked example: Ephesians

Four steps a historian takes in weighing whether Paul wrote a letter that bears his name.

1. Note the letter's claim and the tradition: Ephesians names Paul as its writer. The church accepted that claim from Irenaeus on; the site labels it "Church tradition".
2. Compare it with the undisputed letters: Between a third and a half of its verses parallel Colossians in order and content: Ephesians 6:21-22 and Colossians 4:7-8 are almost word for word the same. Its style differs from the seven undisputed letters, and it describes the church as one universal body.
3. Weigh the outside evidence: Polycarp probably used Ephesians (110 to 140 CE), and Marcion's collection included it (140 to 144 CE). This shows the letter was read early; it does not decide who wrote it.
4. Reach a qualified judgment: Brown estimates that 70 to 80 percent of critical scholars think a later follower wrote it, in 80 to 100 CE ("Most scholars agree"). A minority of 20 to 30 percent, among them Carson, Moo and Morris, hold that Paul wrote it in the early 60s ("Some scholars hold"); if so, Brown notes, Paul could have drawn on his own earlier letters. Give both views, each with how widely it is held.

Your turn: 2 Thessalonians

Now decide whether Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians. Steps 1 and 2 are filled in; write steps 3 and 4 before you open the answer.

1. Note the letter's claim and the tradition: 2 Thessalonians names Paul, and church tradition accepted the claim. Polycarp probably used it (110 to 140 CE), and Marcion's collection included it (140 to 144 CE).
2. Compare it with the undisputed letters: It follows the shape of 1 Thessalonians closely and repeats some of its wording, but where 1 Thessalonians 5:2 says the day of the Lord comes like a thief, 2 Thessalonians 2:1-3 says signs must come first. It warns against letters "as if from us" and ends with a greeting in Paul's own hand, "the sign in every letter" (3:17).

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3. Weigh both readings: How can the same evidence be read two ways?

4. Reach a qualified judgment: What would you conclude, and how sure can you be?

Common misconceptions

For any document whose author is disputed, historians weigh its own claim about its author against its style, its content and when it first appears.

- Some readers take it for granted that if a letter names Paul as its writer, all scholars accept it as his. The site's data shows the answer differs letter by letter. All thirteen letters name Paul. Nearly all scholars accept seven of them; on 2 Thessalonians, Brown finds scholars about evenly divided; and for Colossians, Ephesians and the Pastoral letters, most critical scholars think a follower or later author wrote them. A letter's own claim is one piece of evidence, weighed with the others.
- A common claim is that the disputed letters were rejected or left out by the early church. The early sources the site records do not show this: it records all thirteen as accepted in both East and West by 170 to 200 CE. Marcion's collection (140 to 144 CE) left out 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, though Tertullian later claimed that Marcion knew them and rejected them. But the Muratorian Fragment (170 to 200 CE, by most scholars' dating) includes the three, and Irenaeus quotes Titus as Paul's (180 to 185 CE). Modern doubts are scholars' judgments about who wrote the letters, not about whether the early church read them.
- Some readers assume that an early quotation of a letter, or a count of its unusual words, settles who wrote it. A quotation shows only that a letter existed and was read by then, and a word count means little until it is compared with letters Paul surely wrote. Polycarp (110 to 140 CE) probably used 1 Timothy, which most critical scholars, by Brown's account, date to 80 to 100 CE and assign to a later author, while 1 Thessalonians, which nearly all scholars accept as Paul's, has only very uncertain echoes in the earliest writers. Likewise Colossians has 87 words not found in the undisputed letters, but Philippians, which no one doubts, has 79.

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Self-test: the answer, then the reason

1. Which of these letters do nearly all scholars accept as written by Paul?

A. Colossians

B. Philemon

C. 2 Thessalonians

Reason: Why do scholars treat letters like it as a fixed point?

A. Because the early church accepted it, unlike the disputed letters.

B. Because it is the oldest of Paul's letters that survives.

C. Because its authorship is not seriously disputed, so other letters in his name can be compared with it.

2. How does the site label the view that a later author wrote 1 Timothy?

A. Nearly all scholars agree

B. Scholars are split

C. Most scholars agree

Reason: What does that label leave room for?

A. A real minority, 10 to 20 percent of critical scholars by Brown's estimate, who hold that Paul wrote it.

B. Nothing: the label means the view has been proved true.

C. An even division among critical scholars.

3. Which of these is evidence from inside a letter?

A. Between a third and a half of the verses of Ephesians parallel Colossians.

B. Polycarp probably used Ephesians (110 to 140 CE).

C. Marcion's collection included Ephesians (140 to 144 CE).

Reason: Why does this kind of evidence matter?

A. It shows which churches read the letter first.

B. It compares the letter's own text with other letters in Paul's name.

C. It proves on its own that Paul did not write the letter.

4. Polycarp (110 to 140 CE) probably echoes 1 Timothy 6:7 and 6:10 without naming it. What does this show?

A. Paul wrote 1 Timothy, since Polycarp lived soon after the apostles.

B. 1 Timothy existed and was read by then.

C. 1 Timothy was written in Polycarp's own time, 110 to 140 CE.

Reason: Which principle does this use?

A. A letter is as old as its first quotation, and no older.

B. An early quotation sets a latest date for a letter, not its author.

C. Early writers always named the author of a letter they used.

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5. Which letters in Paul's name were missing from Marcion's collection (140 to 144 CE)?

A. Colossians and Ephesians

B. 2 Thessalonians and Philemon

C. 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus

Reason: What does Tertullian later claim about Marcion and these letters?

A. That Marcion had never heard of them.

B. That no church read them before 200 CE.

C. That Marcion knew them and rejected them.

6. In Romans 16:22, Tertius says he wrote down the letter. What does this show?

A. Paul dictated at least some of his letters.

B. Tertius, not Paul, is the author of Romans.

C. Romans is one of the disputed letters.

Reason: Why does this matter in the debate over Colossians?

A. It shows that Colossians was written after Paul's death.

B. It proves that every letter in Paul's name is his.

C. A secretary given some freedom could explain differences in style.

7. How does Brown describe scholars on whether Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians?

A. Most think a later follower wrote it

B. About evenly divided

C. Nearly all accept Paul

Reason: What evidence supports the view that an imitator wrote it?

A. It follows the shape and some wording of 1 Thessalonians, yet says signs must come before the day of the Lord.

B. It is missing from Marcion's collection.

C. No early writer used it.

8. How do Ehrman and Méndez describe a letter written in Paul's name by someone else?

A. As a forgery: a false claim to be Paul, which ancient readers would have called deceptive

B. As a disciple's open continuation of Paul's teaching, with fraud set aside

C. As something no early Christian is known to have done

Reason: Which work cited here argues instead that the church rejected letters it knew to be in another's name?

A. Brown, who says most picture a disciple of Paul's school writing what Paul would say

B. Carson, Moo and Morris, citing Tertullian on the presbyter who wrote the Acts of Paul

C. Ehrman and Méndez, who say ancient readers accepted such letters as literary fictions

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Flashcards

Fold the page along the dashed line, or cover the right column, and say each answer before you look.

Question	Answer
Which seven letters do nearly all scholars accept as written by Paul?	Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians and Philemon.
Which three letters are the Pastoral letters?	1 Timothy, 2 Timothy and Titus.
What does pseudonymous mean?	Written under the name of someone other than the actual author.
How does Brown describe scholars on 2 Thessalonians?	About evenly divided.
How do 1 Thessalonians 5:2 and 2 Thessalonians 2:1-3 differ about the day of the Lord?	The first says it comes like a thief, without warning; the second says signs must come first.
By Brown's estimate, what share of critical scholars think a follower of Paul wrote Colossians?	About 60 percent.
Which letter does Ephesians lean on closely, and where can you see it?	Colossians: compare Ephesians 6:21-22 with Colossians 4:7-8.
By Brown's estimate, what share of critical scholars think a later author wrote the Pastoral letters?	80 to 90 percent.
Who names himself in Romans 16:22?	Tertius, the secretary who wrote the letter down.
How many letters of Paul did Marcion's collection hold, and which were missing?	Ten; 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus were missing.
What is the earliest list to include the Pastoral letters?	The Muratorian Fragment (170 to 200 CE, by most scholars' dating).
What is Papyrus 46, and why can it not tell us whether its collection held the Pastoral letters?	A book of Paul's letters copied about 200 or earlier; its last leaves are lost.
What does an early quotation of a letter show?	That the letter existed and was read by then, not who wrote it.
How does Brown picture the writer of a letter in Paul's name?	A disciple of Paul's school writing what Paul would say; he says the suggestion of fraud has largely left the discussion.

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Question	Answer
What do Ehrman and Méndez call letters that falsely claim an author?	Forgeries: common in antiquity but almost universally condemned.
What case do Carson, Moo and Morris cite to show the church rejected letters it knew were falsely named?	Tertullian's report of the presbyter in Asia who wrote the Acts of Paul "from love of Paul" and was removed from his office.

Answers

Warm-up

1. Ten.
2. A view is widely held, but a real minority disagrees.
3. Paul's letters; 1 Thessalonians (50 to 52 CE) is usually considered the earliest.

Why it matters

- Undisputed letters: Because their authorship is not seriously disputed, they show how Paul wrote: his words, style and ideas. A letter in his name can only be judged "like Paul" or "unlike Paul" by comparison with them. Philemon, for example, is accepted even by scholars who doubt Colossians.
- Disputed letters: The site records all thirteen letters as accepted in both East and West by 170 to 200 CE, and church tradition (the usual term for what early Christian writers reported) named Paul as their writer. The dispute is among modern scholars, who weigh the letters' style and contents.
- Pastoral letters: Most critical scholars see one later author behind all three (80 to 90 percent, by Brown's estimate), so the evidence for one bears on the others. Brown still notes that 2 Timothy has the best claim of the three to come from Paul.
- Pseudonymous: Scholars judge the practice differently. Brown says most picture a disciple continuing Paul's teaching, with fraud largely set aside; Ehrman and Méndez call such letters forgeries, common in antiquity but almost universally condemned; Carson, Moo and Morris say the church rejected letters it knew to be in another's name. The site's part is to report the evidence and how widely each view is held; it does not rule on the practice.
- Pseudepigrapha: Because the answer differs for each letter: nearly all scholars accept seven, scholars are split on 2 Thessalonians, and most see a follower behind Colossians, Ephesians and the Pastorals.
- Secretary: If Paul left a secretary some freedom in wording, the style of a letter could differ from his other letters even though the ideas were his. Brown notes that we do not know how closely Paul's secretaries followed his words.
- Evidence inside a letter: A feature only counts as unusual if Paul's accepted letters lack it. Brown shows why: Colossians has 87 words not found in the undisputed letters, but Philippians, which no one doubts, has 79, so the count alone settles little.
- Evidence outside a letter: A quotation shows that the letter existed and was read by the writer's time, so it sets a latest date. It cannot show who wrote the letter: Polycarp's echo of 1 Timothy fits both a date in the 60s and one in 80 to 100 CE.

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Explain it

A writer can only quote a letter that already exists, so a quotation shows the letter was written and read by then. But the writer may not say who wrote it (Polycarp does not even name 1 Timothy), and a letter written by a follower in 80 to 100 CE could be quoted in 110 to 140 CE just as easily as one written by Paul. So the quotation fits either answer about the author.

Your turn: 2 Thessalonians

3. Weigh both readings: A later follower imitating 1 Thessalonians would explain the shared wording, and the different expectation about the end, and the mark "in every letter", fit a late-first-century setting (80 to 100 CE). But Paul writing again soon after, about 51 or 52 CE, as English-speaking scholars such as Bruce, Marshall and Morris have held (Brown), would also explain the shared wording, and the letter itself says some readers had been told the day had already come (2:2); and Brown notes that the signed greeting is very personal.
4. Reach a qualified judgment: Brown judges scholars about evenly divided, and the site labels the question "Scholars are split". The answer should set out both views and leave the question open.

Self-test

1. Answer B, reason C. Philemon is among the least disputed of Paul's letters, so scholars compare other letters in his name with it and the other undisputed letters. By Brown's estimate most critical scholars see a follower behind Colossians, and scholars are split on 2 Thessalonians. The early church accepted all thirteen letters, so that is not what sets the seven apart, and the earliest surviving letter is usually considered to be 1 Thessalonians, not Philemon.
2. Answer C, reason A. Brown estimates that 80 to 90 percent of critical scholars think a later author wrote 1 Timothy; a minority, among them Carson, Moo and Morris, hold that Paul wrote it in the mid-60s. The label measures how widely a view is held; it is not a proof. And "Scholars are split" is the label for 2 Thessalonians, where Brown finds an even division.
3. Answer A, reason B. Evidence inside a letter, such as its wording, style and dependence on another letter, is compared with other letters. Polycarp's use and Marcion's list are outside evidence: they show when and where the letter was read. And no single piece settles the question: a minority, among them Carson, Moo and Morris, hold that Paul wrote Ephesians, and Brown notes that Paul could have drawn on his own earlier letters.
4. Answer B, reason B. Most critical scholars, by Brown's estimate, date 1 Timothy to 80 to 100 CE, before Polycarp, and assign it to a later author; the minority date it to about 62 to 67 and assign it to Paul. Polycarp's echo fits both views, and he does not even name the letter he echoes.
5. Answer C, reason C. Brown notes Tertullian's claim that Marcion knew the three letters and rejected them, so the silence of Marcion's list does not by itself say why they are missing, and it is not proof of authorship either way. Other churches read the Pastoral letters: the Muratorian Fragment (170 to 200 CE, by most scholars' dating) includes them, and Irenaeus quotes Titus as Paul's (180 to 185 CE). Marcion's collection did include Colossians, Ephesians, 2 Thessalonians and Philemon.
6. Answer A, reason C. Brown notes that we do not know how closely Paul's secretaries followed his words, and some scholars who accept Colossians allow for a secretary. A secretary weakens style as a test; it neither proves nor disproves authorship. Nearly all scholars accept Romans as Paul's.

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7. Answer B, reason A. The case for an imitator rests on the letter's own text. Marcion's collection included 2 Thessalonians, and Polycarp probably used it. On the other side, Brown notes that English-speaking scholars such as Bruce, Marshall and Morris have tended to defend writing by Paul; if he wrote it, Brown dates it soon after the first letter, about 51 or 52 CE.
8. Answer A, reason B. Ehrman and Méndez call such letters forgeries, common in antiquity but almost universally condemned, and say they use the word without derogation. Brown's view is the disciple writing what Paul would say, with fraud largely set aside. Carson, Moo and Morris answer that the church rejected letters it knew to be falsely named: Tertullian reports that the presbyter who wrote the Acts of Paul from love of Paul was removed from office. Ehrman and Méndez reject the idea that such letters were seen through and accepted as literary fictions.

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