BEYOND THE ORIGINAL CONTEXT: 
RECEPTION OF THE PAULINE LETTERS 
IN THE FIRST CENTURY

Introduction: 
the Primary and Secondary Context 
of the Pauline Letters

The Pauline Letters are read today in two respects: they are treated on the one hand historically, that is, as documents from the past. But at the same time they are also accepted as a religious message which is valid beyond its original context and mutatis mutandis for all Christians.

This way of reading the Pauline Letters is not a compromise of modern historical studies and traditional Christian belief, but goes back to the Christians in the first century A.D. who copied the letters of Paul and passed them on to other churches not intended originally as their addressees. Although no papyrus fragments dating from the time of Paul or shortly after his death (ca. 60 A.D.) have been preserved, we have no reason to doubt that the Pauline letters were already being duplicated for repeated reading or for circulation in the first century. They were treated as documents to be read also in churches whose members were neither primary recipients nor necessarily faced the issues dealt with in the letters. Otherwise it would be quite difficult to explain, for example, how Clement of Rome in the 90s of the first century was accessible to the First Corinthians (cf. 1 Clem. 47:1–3).

(1) No New Testament papyrus dating from the first century is preserved today. The oldest of the Pauline letters, P52 (Chester Beatty II), is dated to ca. 200 A.D.

(2) On the date of 1 Clem., see A. Lindemann, Die Clemensbriefe (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1992) (Handbuch zum Neuen Testament, 17) 12; H. E. Lona, Der erste Clemensbrief (Göttingen: V&R, 1998) (Kommentar zu den Apostolischen Vätern, 2) 76.
Though each of the Pauline letters\(^3\) represents as its primary context the correspondence from Paul to the addressed church,\(^4\) they began to be read also with a new context, in which the validity of their content was not restricted to the original situation, but extended to other Christians and accepted as theological and ethical criterion of Pauline Christianity.

The character of this “multiple context” was one of the most important features that the Pauline letters gave to early Christian literature. In the history of early Christianity we can find, in my view, a process of the Pauline letters being read as “multiple context” documents. And in this process the emphasis was placed more and more on the secondary context.

In this paper we are dealing with the process of the reception of the Pauline letters in the first century. Here the focus is put on the way in which they came to be read more with the secondary context. But because of limited space, we have to restrict ourselves to a few of the most important points in this process.

1. Readership of the Pauline Letters

There are several ways of categorizing letters in antiquity. For example, the so-called Pseudo Demetrius (Epistolary Types: 2nd Century B.C. – 3rd century A.D.) mentions 21 types, whereas Pseudo Libanius (Epistolary Styles 2: 4th–6th centuries A.D.) gives as many as 41.\(^5\)

But for our purpose it would be sufficient, following David Trobisch,\(^6\) to accept the following three categories: (1) private letter,

\(^3\) Regarded as genuinely “Pauline” here, by the majority of scholars, are the following seven letters: Rom., 1–2 Cor., Gal., Phil., 1 Thess. and Philemon. The others, i.e. Eph., Col., 2 Thess. and the Pastoral Epistles are treated as pseudonymous and called “deutero-Pauline,” without detailed discussions about authenticity.

\(^4\) Also the Letter to Philemon is actually one of the “church-letters”, because it is addressed not only to him, but also to “Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house” (Philemon 2 [RSV, as always in this article], italics mine). But, as its reception history suggests (the Pastoral Letters, the letters of Ignatius, and the title of this letter given by the copyists of older manuscripts), it was regarded as a personal letter.


\(^6\) D. Trobisch, Die Entstehung der Paulusbriefsammlung (Freiburg [CH]: Universitätsverlag, Göttingen: V&R, 1989) (Novum testamentum et orbis antiquus, 10) 85–86.