

Letter from Phoebe to Paul (61 CE)

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TEXT

1. ¹ Phoebe, a deaconess of the church in Cenchreae and a servant of Christ Jesus, through whom God had redeemed us from the futile ways of the present life and provided us with hope for eternal life. ² To Paul, an apostle of God and a prisoner for our Lord Christ Jesus. Grace to you and peace.

³ I give thanks to God our Father, with whom we rejoice in the time of peace and with whom we are consoled when we face tribulation knowing that, though evil people may even destroy our bodies, they will never be able to destroy our souls that became the very possessions of the only true God, whom we serve and in whom we trust. Amen.

⁴ While in Cenchreae, it appeared to me that the will of God is such that I should visit the church of believers in Christ our Lord in Puteoli, since a word came to us that they are in need. ⁵ I sailed from Cenchreae and reached Rhegium on the second day without any difficulties. Having stayed there for one day, I sailed from Rhegium and finally reached Puteoli the same day, where the brothers there welcomed me greatly. ⁶ Though, my joy did not last long insofar as I learned from them about the great commotions that had recently occurred amongst our brethren in Rome, and to let you know about these commotions is the reason I am writing this letter to you, dear brother in Christ.

2. ¹ I was told, in the church of Rome, a certain Jew named Simeon bar Eleazar persuades many that he himself witnessed how on the day of Pentecost the Twelve received the Holy Spirit, spoke in other tongues, and performed miracles. ² He also claims to be one of the very founders of the church in Rome. I have yet to investigate whether all of this is true once I arrive there. ³

Nevertheless, the brethren in Rome believe him as does my cousin Prisca about whom I was telling you during your time in Corinth. The believers in Puteoli, on the other hand, are very much in doubt about whether they should listen to him. ⁴ But I now know this: Simeon bar Eleazar claims that what you wrote in the first letter to the church of Corinth, namely, ⁵ that if you speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, have prophetic powers, understand all mysteries and all knowledge and even all faith as to remove mountains, but do not have love, you are nothing; ⁶ all of this, according to Simeon, is a poor excuse for you because, according to him, you do not in fact have any of these pneumatic powers, whereas he himself declares to possess these powers and not only these, but even greater ones!

3. ¹ All this is truly disturbing because he says your teachings on God's grace are but a deception for the gullible. For Simeon became truly outraged when he heard what you wrote in the epistle to the churches in Galatia that I brought with me to the brethren in Rome. ² I was told that he once tried to rebuke you saying: "Who is this Paul of Tarsus that he dares declaring that some fell away from Christ because they justified themselves by our sacred Law?! ³ Weren't our great forefathers justified before the Most High through obedience to the Law?! Truly, this man is an apostate, a false apostle!" ⁴ Apparently, some among our Jewish brethren tried to oppose Simeon saying that it was the faithfulness of their forefather Abraham to our Lord that was reckoned to him as righteousness, but he would not listen to them.

4. ¹ Simeon persuades many that you have no apostolic appointment, because had you been an apostle, you would have demonstrated the great powers like the ones that the Twelve once demonstrated on the day of Pentecost, and which you, according to Simeon, never had. ² I am very distressed, dear brother, because many in Rome (Prisca, my cousin, included) now begin spreading the message that you must strictly follow the Law, thus neglecting the Grace of God,

and I fear that, as already happened to some in Galatia, Christ will become of no benefit to them.

³ I plead with you, Paul, please do write a new letter to the church in Rome in order to rebuke all who oppose the true doctrine of God, and pray that the brethren would turn from their wrongness and start following Christ our Lord again. ⁴ God willing, I will soon come to visit you and collect the letter in order to deliver it to the brethren in Rome. ⁵ Asyncritus and Patrobas, who are with me here, in Puteoli, send you their greetings. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you. Amen.

COMMENTARY

Note: The above letter is a work of historical fiction, based on the Pauline correspondence, other Christian scriptures and critical scholarship on the New Testament.

1:1 *“the church in Cenchreae”*: see Rom 16:1. The term “church” here is the Greek term ἐκκλησί-α, ἡ, which can signify “an assembly,” “meeting,” “assembly duly summoned,” and be rendered as “the Jewish congregation” (in LXX) or “the Church, as a body of Christians” (in NT).¹ In this letter, by the term ἐκκλησί-α I mean an assembly of believers in Jesus Christ, a Christian group, and the reason why I employ the term “church” is that it is usually rendered so in the NRSV 1989 translation of the New Testament.

1:1 *“had redeemed us from the futile ways of the present life”*: see 1 Pet 1:18. Much of what Phoebe says in this letter echoes or even quotes from other NT writings, such as 1 Pet, Mt, Acts, etc. This does not mean that Phoebe read them or knows about them, unless otherwise stated; but it is meant to demonstrate the overall themes and concerns within the widespread Christian movement of the time in which Phoebe lived.

1:1 *“hope for eternal life”*: see Tit 1:2.

1:2 *“To Paul”*: Phoebe, who is characterised by the apostle as a patron (“benefactor,” NRSV, Rom 16:2), writes him a letter from Puteoli (see the commentary on **1:4**, **1:5**, and **1:6** below) in c. 61 CE, during Paul’s Roman Imprisonment, regarding a critical issue, which arose within the Roman community of believers in Christ Jesus.

1:3 *“though evil people may even destroy our bodies, they will never be able to destroy our souls”*: see Mt 10:28, Lk 12:4-5. There exists evidence that some of the Jesus’s tradition was circulating in the churches of the Mediterranean even before the canonical Gospels were composed in the written form; for example, Lk 22:20 is rendered virtually word-for-word in

¹ H. G. Liddel and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, rev. 9th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 509.

1 Cor 11:25.²

1:3 “*that became the very possessions of the only true God*”: see 1 Pet 4:19.

1:4 “*the church of believers in Christ our Lord in Puteoli*”: it is known that “Pre-Pauline Christians are attested for...*Puteoli*.”³ In addition to the testimony in the book of Acts (28:13 ff.), Lampe writes: “The information ‘Christians in Puteoli’ is pre-Lukan: (a) v. 14 illustrates brilliantly the Lukan key word ἀκωλύτως, from the end of the book, but the mention of pre-Pauline Christians in Puteoli is superfluous for the Lukan concept: Luke describes Paul's unhindered presence on Malta (28:1-10) without mentioning Christians there. Also, the stops in Myra (27:5-6), Syracuse (28:12), Regium (28:13), the Forum of Appius and Three Taverns (28:15) are narrated without a reception by Christians who resided there, (b) Luke focuses on Paul's missionary activity, with Paul in Rome being the crowning conclusion of world mission (28:22ff., 30-31). That already before Paul there were Christians in Italy and without apostolic mediation is not generated out of this Lukan interest.”⁴

1:5 “*I sailed from Cenchreae and reached Rhegium on the second day without any difficulties. Having stayed there for one day, I sailed from Rhegium and finally reached Puteoli the same day, where the brothers there welcomed me greatly*”: cf. Acts 28:13-14.

1:6 “*as I learned from them about the great commotions that had recently occurred amongst our brethren in Rome*”: the church in Puteoli was presumably connected with the Church of Rome.⁵

2:1 “*he himself witnessed how on the day of Pentecost the Twelve received the Holy Spirit, spoke in other tongues, and performed miracles*”: see Acts 2:4. Of course, this is not to say that Phoebe and the church of Rome read the Book of Acts; but it is not improbable that certain traditions underlying the book of Acts (in this case, some of the traditions constituting chapter 2 in particular) were circulating among the churches of the Mediterranean, especially taking into account the fact that Simeon claimed to be an eyewitness of these events (see the commentary on **2:2** below).

2:2 “*He also claims to be one of the very founders of the church in Rome*”: it is implied that Simeon bar Eleazar was one of the “visitors from Rome” to Jerusalem (Acts 2:10), who, having believed in Jesus Christ, later founded the Messianic community of believers in Rome long before Paul made it there. According to Lampe, “Many Jews traveled extensively between Rome and the east.”⁶ They provide extensive Rabbinic literature in

² Gerd G. Theissen, and Anna Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 54-55.

³ Peter Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries*, trans. Michael Steinhauser (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003 [German original 1989]), 7.

⁴ Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus*, 7n.1.

⁵ “Puteoli,” in W. R. F. Browning, *A Dictionary of the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press., 2009), Date accessed 1 Dec. 2016. <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199543984.001.0001/acref-9780199543984>

⁶ Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus*, 158.

support of this claim.⁷

2:3 “*about whom I was telling you during your time in Corinth*”: according to the chronology of Paul’s ministry and his imprisonments as suggested by S. E. Porter, during his third missionary journey, “Paul stayed three months in Greece, almost certainly in Corinth,” where he would presumably meet with Phoebe in order to hand over the letter to Romans to her.⁸ See also the commentary on **2:4** below.

2:4 “*Simeon bar Eleazar claims that what you wrote in the first letter to the church of Corinth*”: 2 Pet 3:16 suggests that Pauline letters very rapidly gained canonical or at least extremely authoritative status in early Christian groups. What could provoke such a rapid formation of at least a number of letters attributed to Paul? There exist six prominent theories with regard to the canonization of some Pauline letters, or indeed all the thirteen attributed to him. The theories, in turn, may provide some critical insights regarding a possibility of Phoebe’s and Roman Christians’ familiarity with 1-2 Corinthians and Galatians; thus, it is worth briefly mentioning them here.⁹

A first theory is referred to as “gradual collection,” or is sometimes called “snowball” theory. According to it, the letters were collected progressively as their worth and value were recognized in early Christian groups. The theory’s originators are Theodor Zahn and Adolf Harnack. The general idea behind it is that the letters were first circulating in the areas to which they were addressed; later they would be exchanged among Christian communities from other areas and then, in the course of time, the corpus of thirteen letters attributed to Paul would have been solidified, perhaps sometime in the second century. Some of the most prominent proponents of this theory suggest very different dates for the collection of the letters: Zahn and Harnack do not hesitate to assign it the date around 100 CE. Others, e.g. Kirsopp Lake and B. H. Streeter, however, posit longer time periods: the latter goes so far as to propose that the basic core of Romans, 1 Corinthians, Ephesians and, perhaps, Philippians was collected by 96 CE (because they are known by *1 Clement*); then, the ten letters by 140 CE (due to Marcion’s familiarity with them); then, the thirteen letters by 200 CE (due to the attestation of the Muratorian Canon); finally, the fourteen letters including Hebrews around 350 CE.¹⁰

A second theory is sometimes called “lapsed interest” and is connected with Edgar Goodspeed and John Knox. It proposes that Pauline letter collection would be completed around 90 CE after there would have been a lapse of interest in acquiring Pauline letters due to recent publication of the book of Acts, which portrays him as a leading and arguably very successful apostle spreading the Christian faith around the cities of the Mediterranean.

Third, “composite antignostic” theory. The originator of this theory—Walter Schmithals—hypothesizes that the Pauline corpus was formed as a response to prevalent gnostic groups that supposedly represented a menace to the orthodox Christianity at the time. In addition, this theory views the Pauline letters as consisting of multiple independent

⁷ Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus*, 158, n. 15.

⁸ Stanley E. Porter, *The Apostle Paul: his Life, Thought, and Letters* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 57.

⁹ The following summaries are adopted from “The Pauline Letter Collection and Canon” in Porter, *The Apostle Paul*, 169-178; and “When and How Was the Pauline Canon Compiled? An Assessment of Theories,” in Stanley E. Porter, *The Pauline Canon* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 95-128, wherein the author provides references to the primary and secondary sources.

¹⁰ Porter, “When and How Was the Pauline Canon Compiled?”, 100-1.

letters that were later gathered and embedded into more organized and structured canonical epistles. Thus, according to the originator of this theory, there supposedly were six Corinthian correspondences, four Thessalonian, three Philippian, two Roman, and one Galatian letter. In addition, this theory holds that original short letters were written during Paul's third missionary trip and later compiled by another person, probably in the 80s, and probably in Corinth.

“Personal involvement” is a fourth theory. It suggests that one particular person or a number of persons were involved in collecting and compiling of Pauline letters. There exist three major views regarding who exactly was in charge of it. Some suggest it was Luke, some—Timothy, still others think it was a group of people, which possibly included both Luke and Timothy as well as other followers of Paul.

A fifth theory is referred to as “Pauline involvement” and is formulated among others by David Trobisch, who argues that Paul instigated, if not was responsible for, collection of at least some of his letters, including Romans, 1-2 Corinthians, and Galatians. Likewise, the complete corpus was compiled in three stages. The first would include compilation of the abovementioned Romans to Galatians. Second would be responsible for Ephesians to 2 Thessalonians. Last—Pastorals and Philemon. An argument for such a division stems from an observation that the traditional list of Pauline epistles is not given in a strict order of letters' decreasing length, as it is seen from the fact that Ephesians is actually longer than Galatians. A strict lengthwise order is reflected by the papyrus g, which places Ephesians before Galatians. Thus, such disjunctions suggested to Trobisch that they represent literary seams resulted from the original assembling of the corpus. Other scholars, e.g. Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, support this theory, or at least some version of it, based on similar arguments appealing to the somewhat peculiar order of traditional listing of the epistles.

Finally, a sixth theory is mostly argued by Stanley E. Porter himself, who opines that Paul was involved in the collection of all the thirteen letters attributed to him. This obviously hinges on the authenticity of all the letters and, according to Porter, “a good case can be made for Paul's authorship of all them.”¹¹ Leaving the arguments for the authenticity of all the letters aside,¹² it is important to list three major arguments that serve as foundation for this particular theory. First, because the geographical distribution is not very wide (roughly 1,770-km expanse stretching from Galatia to Rome), and that it did not take long for letters to disseminate,¹³ it is thus entirely possible that one person was involved in the collection of all the letters. Second, and more importantly, there actually exists substantial evidence that the ancients, when writing letters, usually retained a copy for themselves, especially if the correspondence was deemed important. There is a substantive number of ancient papyri testifying to this practice.¹⁴ Porter infers, “[i]t is highly likely, then, that Paul kept at least a copy of each of the letters that he wrote to the various churches, especially if he knew the letters were going to be used in instructing and teaching members of the budding Christian movement.”¹⁵ Third, the relatively fixed order of Pauline letters in most collections suggests that it should go back to one individual who compiled the letters in the order they usually

¹¹ Porter, *The Apostle Paul*, 175.

¹² See, for example, *ibid.*, 356-364, 387-394, 413-431 for Porter's arguments for the Pauline authorship of all of the epistles.

¹³ “Dated correspondence shows that letters and documents traveled quickly, sometimes hundreds of miles in two or three weeks.” Craig Evans, “How Long Were Late Antique Books in Use? Possible Implications for New Testament Textual Criticism,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 25.1 (2015): 25.

¹⁴ For the evidence see Porter, “The Pauline Letter Collection and Canon,” 176.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 177.

appear. Writes Porter:

...if one does not rely only upon counting characters, but uses other evident ancient forms of measurement, such as the indicated stichoi, *the fluctuation in placement of Hebrews is the only real variable*—there is otherwise *virtual fixity to the manuscript ordering, at least in the early stages*. The placement of Colossians before Philipians is understandable, as they are within 200 characters of each other, and have similar stichoi in some traditions. In any event, this transposition only occurs in D 06 Codex Claromontanus and a fourteenth-century minuscule (5). The placement of Ephesians before Galatians only occurs in g, but this ordering does reflect actual length, with Ephesians 700–900 letters longer, depending upon whose count is followed. This may in fact be the original ordering. In other words, the evidence seems to point towards consistency in the composition and ordering of the entire Pauline corpus (whether one accepts g or not), not just within three groups of letters. If one removes Hebrews from the Pauline canon, *there is a clearly established Pauline corpus* that essentially follows the principle of decreasing size from Romans to 2 Thessalonians, what might be called the church letters, and then begins again with an ordering in decreasing size from 1 Timothy to Philemon, what might be called the personal letters.¹⁶

I myself find the last three theories most compelling because, unlike the first three, there actually exists physical evidence testifying to the validity of the hypotheses they introduce, such as the abundant number of ancient secular letters that showcase that the ancients did indeed practice retaining an extra copy for themselves when writing one, especially if they were thought to be valuable. For example, various papyri “contain copies of another person’s letter (P.Zenon 10, 43) or refer to copies of letters being made (P.Mich. inv. 855; 8.498).” Likewise, there exists evidence that points to the fact that letters written to and by Cicero were also copied (*Brutus* 1.16.1; *Epistulae ad Atticum* 1.17; 3.9; 13.6.3; *Epistulae ad familiars* 3.3.2; 7.25.1; 9.12.2; 9.26.1; 10.12.2; 10.32.5; 10.33.2; *Epistulae ad Quintum fratrem* 2.12.4), “as well as reference being made to the general practice of copying (*Epistulae ad familiars* 7.18.2; cf. Plutarch, *Eumenes* 2.2-3).”¹⁷ Similarly, Craig A. Evans notes that “[m]ultiple copies of documents are dispatched ‘in triplicate’ (P. Oxy. 1278 [214 CE, Dec 6]) or ‘in quadruplicate’ (P. Lond. 978 [331 CE, Dec 7]).”¹⁸

Also, in my opinion, we have every reason to assume that Paul thought of his letters as very important and valuable not only for the group he was writing to but also for the rest of the Christian groups he was connected with. That he thought of his letters to be important, authoritative, and valuable can be seen from some of the letters themselves: for example, Gal 1:1, 11-12; 1 Thes 2:12; 1 Cor 14:37-8; 2 Thes 3:6, 14. These crucial passages, in turn, demonstrate three distinct aspects: first, Paul repeatedly claims to speak on behalf of the authority of Jesus Christ; second, the apostolic authority that he claims does not only apply to the oral tradition that he transmitted to various churches, but it also applies to the very letters he is writing; finally, it is indicated that should one reject Paul’s commands and

¹⁶ Stanley Porter, “Paul and the Process of Canonization” in Craig A. Evans and Emanuel Tov, eds., *Exploring the Origins of the Bible: Canon Formation in Historical, Literary, and Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2008), 199-200; italics added.

¹⁷ Porter, *The Apostle Paul*, 176.

¹⁸ Craig Evans, “How Long Were Late Antique Books in Use?,” 33n.37.

teachings—both in oral and written form—he or she would reject the very commands of Jesus Christ and, therefore, be subject to *anathema*—“prophetic condemnation and excommunication.”¹⁹ If a person claims such a unique authority for his or her oral and written teachings and commands, and Paul seems to do just that in his letters, surely, that person would think of his or her letters as very important, valuable and likewise authoritative. Thus, in my opinion, we *do* have reasons to think that Paul deemed his own letters considerably authoritative and important; at least important enough to retain copies of them. The practice of retaining copies of letters can explain other problems in the study of Paul and his letters, and thus may have a wider explanatory scope: for example, having extra copies of their letters allowed authors to refer to, and build on, them when writing new ones, something that may quite well explain the verbal similarities between 1 and 2 Thessalonians as well as Ephesians and Colossians.²⁰

Likewise, that the letters were supposed to be disseminated, read aloud in assemblies and circulating among the Christian groups from the very beginning can be seen from the following texts: Acts 15:23 records that the letter is sent to the gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia; second, 2 Cor 1:1 is supposed to be addressed not just to the Corinthians, but to “all the saints throughout Achaia;” third, Galatians is directed to [a multitude of] the *ekklēsias* in the province of Galatia (Gal 1:2); last, Colossians and Laodiceans were commanded to exchange the letters among each other (Col 4:16).²¹

In addition, actual physical manuscripts with the Pauline letters appearing in a relatively fixed order also happen to be more convincing than the first three theories lacking any physical evidence for their support. Moreover, the scenario in which Paul would conceive of a collection of his letters is not at all unlikely, insofar as we have examples from antiquity, where letter writers likewise were concerned about gathering their letters into one collection (e.g. Cicero *Epistulae ad Atticum* 13, 16.5.5). “Paul is widely regarded in classical studies as one of the great letter writers of the ancient world. If that is true—and his corpus of letters argues that it is—*then it is logical to think that Paul followed the conventions of ancient letter writing,*” which may have included producing a collection of one’s letters.²² Finally, it is likely that Paul was travelling with a literary “team,” who facilitated him the scribal procedures.²³

Thus, regardless of which of the second three theories is more probable, it is quite possible that Phoebe, who was “*likely the bearer of [Paul’s] letter to [Romans]*”²⁴ transmitted not only the letter to Romans but also at least 1-2 Corinthians and Galatians, since they most likely had been written before Paul met Phoebe in Corinth and handed over the letter to her and since, as I hope to have demonstrated above, Paul was concerned about disseminating his letters among the different *ekklēsias* of the Mediterranean, including the church in Rome.

¹⁹ “The Authors of Canon. Were the New Testament Authors Unaware of Their Own Authority?” in Michael Kruger, *The Question of Canon: Challenging the Status Quo in the New Testament Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 119-154, 130.

²⁰ Porter, “Paul and the Process of Canonization,” 195.

²¹ Luke T. Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 527.

²² Porter, “Paul and the Process of Canonization,” 195; italics added.

²³ *Ibid.*, 196.

²⁴ Jeffrey A. D. Weima, “Sincerely, Paul: The Significance of the Pauline Letter Closings.” in Stanley E. Porter and Sean A. Adams, *Paul and the Ancient Letter Form* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 307-346, 335.

- 2:5** “that if you speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, have prophetic powers, understand all mysteries and all knowledge and even all faith as to remove mountains, but do not have love, you are nothing”: see 1 Cor 13:1-2.
- 2:6** “all of this, according to Simeon, is a poor excuse for you because, according to him, you do not in fact have any of these pneumatic powers”: there are reasons to think that Paul’s apostolic appointment was questioned in Rome; for example, he begins his letter by strongly affirming or even establishing his apostolic authority in Rom 1:1 and especially 1:5 and 15:29, (cf. Gal 1:1, where he similarly begins by affirming his apostolic authority due to the fact that the Galatians were turning to “another gospel,” so such a strong introduction seemed necessary). If Paul’s authority had been clear and undisputable, would he have needed such an introduction? Hardly so.²⁵ Moreover, some of the most prominent grounds on which Paul’s authority was questioned were exactly questions regarding charismatic experience in Rom 1:11-12.²⁶
- 2:6** “because, according to him, you do not in fact have any of these pneumatic powers, whereas he himself declares to possess these powers and not only these, but even greater ones!”: in this situation, Simeon bar Eleazar undermines the apostolic authority of Paul based on the supposed *absence* of pneumatic powers in the latter. On the other hand, however, Simeon at the same time establishes his own authority in the *ekklēsia* of Rome based on the *presence* of these same (and even greater) pneumatic powers in himself. It is evident that pneumatic powers function to construct the authority.

Pneumatic powers serve as a tool to establish one’s authority in the lives of several historical figures, for example, Jesus of Nazareth and Paul of Tarsus. Pneumatic powers, or demonstration thereof, serve as a method to convince one’s audience that one possesses unique divine authority, because, it is presumed, only God can grant individuals extraordinary pneumatic gifts, something that is available to no ordinary person.

There are a number of occasions in which Jesus exemplifies pneumatic powers. Suffice to mention two of them: first, in Mk 2:1-12, Jesus heals a paralyzed man. Second, in Mt 21:18-24 Jesus curses the fig tree and it withers away. Both passages record Jesus exemplifying supernatural powers: on the one hand, he demonstrates that he is superior to earthly natural deceases—something that no ordinary person can be; and, on the other hand, he transcends the natural laws that operate in the realm of the biological kingdom Plantae, which, again, no ordinary person is able to demonstrate.

In the healing of the paralytic, Jesus explicitly lays out the purpose of healing: “‘But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins’—he said to the paralytic — ‘I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.’ And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them;”—in other words, it is the demonstration that Jesus has unique authority that is the primary purpose of the healing. What kind of authority?—Special divine authority to forgive sins, insofar as God alone is

²⁵ See Gerd Lüdemann, and M E. Boring, *Opposition to Paul in Jewish Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989). Also, Stanley E. Porter, “Did Paul Have Opponents in Rome and What Were They Opposing?” in Stanley E. Porter (ed.), *Paul and His Opponents* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 145-168, 166.

²⁶ Porter, “Did Paul Have Opponents in Rome and What Were They Opposing?”, 158-160.

capable of forgiving sins of humanity.²⁷ The fact that only God could forgive sins is even acknowledged by Jesus's opponents, as seen from the passage. It is thus one thing to claim authority and it is another to substantiate and prove your claim of having authority by supernatural pneumatic powers: in Mk 2:1-12, Jesus does both.

Similarly, in Mt 21:18-24 after the fig tree withers away, the question that is posed to Jesus by the Jews is: "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" (v. 23). It is imperative to note that the question itself presupposes that Jesus had some kind of authority and that it is caused, in turn, by the inexplicability of these things. What are *these things*?—supernatural deeds, e.g. the cursing of the fig tree.

It is clear that should one happen to claim unique authority but fail to prove and substantiate the claim, it would simply signify that the claim is false. One may see, however, that both passages—Mk 2:1-12 and Mt 21:18-24—narrate how Jesus demonstrates extraordinary supernatural pneumatic powers, which were available to no ordinary people, as the evidence of, and for the purpose of establishing, the unique authority that he received from God. This is also supported by the explicit statements that Jesus makes in Jn 10:37-8, in which he claims that the works that he does testify that God the Father is in him and that he himself is in God the Father.

The principle underlying Paul's historical figure is arguably the same, albeit with some slight variations. We see that on many occasions Paul ascribes to himself a multitude of pneumatic powers. He knows that he has the gift of tongues (1 Cor 14:18, 2 Cor 5:13), the gift of performing healing miracles (2 Cor 12:12, Gal 3:5, Rom 15:19), the gift of prophecy (1 Thess 3:4, 1 Cor 15:51, Rom 11:25-6, Gal 5:21). He also claims to have experienced being "caught up into Paradise" (2 Cor 12:2-5).²⁸ Concerning being "caught up into Paradise," however, it is possible that Paul's "person in Christ" can be anyone else, though it is presumably Paul himself. There are several reasons for thinking that Paul writes about himself in this case: first, Luke also mentions that Paul experienced multiple visions (e.g. Acts 9:12, 16:9), many of which involve the Lord himself (9:3-6, 18:9, 22:17); second, as Craig S. Keener notes, "Paul would hardly need a thorn to compensate for excessive revelations (12:7) if he had no significant ones."; third, a person could speak of himself or herself as "that person" and several groups referred to their founder in a similar language; fourth, "[s]ome suggest that Jewish apocalyptists sometimes transferred their own visionary experiences to the pseudonymous characters in whose names they wrote; apart from Philo (and perhaps 4Q491), the Jewish reports before Paul's time are pseudonymous."; Last, a number of Greek writers on occasions described one's experience as someone else's if he or she was ashamed or embarrassed to speak of it openly. "Most relevantly, one could reduce the offense of boasting by attributing the claim to another (while transparently speaking of oneself...)." ²⁹ Thus, we have a number of good reasons to ascribe the vision in 2 Cor 12:2-5 to Paul and not to someone else. Moreover, Paul thinks of himself as a spiritual man (1 Cor 7:40), and claims to "interpret spiritual things to those who are spiritual" (1 Cor 2:13). "And no doubt"—notes Holmberg—"a person who with the congregation can deliver a Christian brother to Satan to the destruction of his flesh and can threaten 'to come with a rod' to test

²⁷ See especially Daniel Johansson, "'Who Can Forgive Sins but God Alone?' Human and Angelic Agents, and Divine Forgiveness in Early Judaism," *JSNT* 33 (2011): 351-74.

²⁸ See Bengt Holmberg, *Paul and Power: The Structure of Authority in the Primitive Church As Reflected in the Pauline Epistles* (Lund: LiberLäromedel/Gleerup, 1978), 77.

²⁹ Craig S. Keener, *1-2 Corinthians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 238.

the strength of the church in Corinth (1 Cor 5:5 and 4:21, respectively), *really has power*.”³⁰ All this makes Paul “fully endowed with extraordinary, pneumatic gifts.”³¹

However, unlike Jesus Christ, Paul of Tarsus always or almost always makes a sharp distinction between his own abilities and the pneumatic powers that he possesses. He takes pains to emphasize his weakness and disability. 2 Cor 12:6-10 relates that even though Paul had extraordinary revelations, he was given a “thorn in the flesh” and that he could not heal himself. On numerous occasions, he does not hesitate to affirm that he is unskilled in speaking (2 Cor 10:10, 11:6). He claims that he speaks “as a fool” (2 Cor 11:21b). Likewise, he affirms and boasts in his weakness (2 Cor 11:21a, 11:30, 2 Cor 12:9). Finally, he ‘fears that when he comes again, his God may humble him before [the Corinthians]’ (2 Cor 12:21). Some speculate that “[t]his may refer to an occasion...when he had received, with meekness, injury and insult from a rival apostle, while the Corinthians had stood by and failed to take his part.”³² Indeed, there hardly exists any example of a person from antiquity who spoke of his or her weakness as radically as Paul did.

The startling contrast between Paul’s great pneumatic powers and his debilitating weakness is explicitly and frequently repeated so that “it may be made clear that *this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us*.”—says Paul (2 Cor 4:7). Also, we have the following statement: “[n]ot that we are competent of ourselves to claim *anything as coming from us; our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life*” (2 Cor 3:5-6). This startling contrast between Paul’s extraordinary divine powers and his human weakness serves as a method to demonstrate that it is God who is at work in Paul’s ministry and who is the source of Paul’s pneumatic powers, and thus, the source of Paul’s authority. This conclusion is also reached by Holmberg, who observes that “[i]n himself Paul is so weak and disease-ridden that *nobody can believe that the mighty work he does is due to his own efforts—there is only one other available conclusion, it is God who works wrough [sic] His apostle*.”³³ Similarly, John H. Schütz argues that “[a]ll these references to power visible in Paul’s ministry *serve to authenticate his work as truly effective and originating in the power of God*.”³⁴

Jesus of Nazareth and Paul of Tarsus claimed unique divine authority via demonstration of extraordinary pneumatic powers, and it is safe to assume that similar tactics would be employed should one desire to claim similar divine authority: undoubtedly, if one wanted to assert that his or her unique authority comes straight from God in the Judeo-Christian setting, he or she would have to substantiate the claims by means of demonstrating supernatural pneumatic gifts and powers—something that is consistently seen in the lives and ministries of Jesus and Paul respectively. This phenomenon was also once observed by Max Weber, who defined the ‘charismatic authority’ as: “a certain quality of an individual personality, by virtue of which *he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities*. These are such as are *not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary*, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a

³⁰ Holmberg, *Paul and Power*, 77; italics added.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 77.

³² C. K. Barret, *A Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (London: BNTC, 1973), 329-30.

³³ Holmberg, *Paul and Power*, 78; italics added.

³⁴ John H. Schütz, *Paul and the Anatomy of Apostolic Authority* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 240.

leader.”³⁵

- 3:1** “*For Simeon became truly outraged when he heard what you wrote in the epistle to the churches in Galatia that I brought with me to the brethren in Rome*”: Simeon would have heard the content of Paul’s letters via their public reading in the assembly of the church in Rome. Such practice is well attested by the NT documents: “the New Testament has its own declarations that it should be read publicly. A number of Paul’s epistles include commands that they be read at the gathering of the church (2 Cor 10:9; Col 4:16; 1 Thess 5:27).”³⁶
- 3:2** “*that some fell away from Christ because they justified themselves by our sacred Law?!*”: see Gal 5:4.
- 3:3** “*Weren’t our great forefathers justified before the Most High through obedience to the Law?!*”: E. P. Sander’s idea of “covenantal nomism,” which he defines as “the view that one’s place in God’s plan is established on the basis of the covenant and that the covenant requires as the proper response of man his obedience to its commandments, while providing means of atonement for transgression,” does not seem to be extremely far from the truth.³⁷ However, it is also important to note that there were deviations on part of some Jewish groups to view works and obedience as the primary means of justification, not God’s grace. See, for example, Simon Gathercole, *Where Is Boasting? Early Jewish Soteriology and Paul’s Response in Rom 1-5*.³⁸ His analysis of the pre-70 C.E. Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha (including Sirach, Tobit, 1 Maccabees, Jubilees, etc.) draws a conclusion that in these texts “God is portrayed as saving his people at the *eschaton*, on the basis of their obedience, as well as on the basis of his election of them.”³⁹ Similar conclusions are made in regard to the Qumran community.⁴⁰ Thus, Simeon would likely be at home with his view on justification and strict observance of the Law in, for example, the Qumran community rather than in Pauline churches.
- 3:4** “*saying that it was the faithfulness of their forefather Abraham’s to our Lord that was reckoned to him as righteousness*”: see Rom 4:9, Gen 15:6.
- 4:1** “*Simeon persuades many that you have no apostolic appointment*”: see the discussion of “Apostolic Appointment Questioned” in S. E. Porter’s chapter, “Did Paul Have Opponents in Rome and What Were They Opposing?”⁴¹
- 4:2** “*I fear that, as already happened to some in Galatia, Christ will become of no benefit to them.*”: see Gal 5:2.

³⁵ Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretative Sociology* (New York: Bedminster, 1968), 241; italics added.

³⁶ Kruger, *The Question of Canon*, 63.

³⁷ E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 75.

³⁸ Simon Gathercole, *Where Is Boasting? Early Jewish Soteriology and Paul’s Response in Rom 1-5* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

³⁹ Gathercole, *Where is Boasting*, 90.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁴¹ Porter, “Did Paul Have Opponents in Rome and What Were They Opposing?”, 166-67.

4:3 *“and pray that the brethren would turn from their wrongness and start following Christ our Lord again.”*: despite that it has often been stated and taught otherwise, the New Testament clearly affirms that once a sinner turns from his or her wickedness and becomes a true believer with saving faith in God, it is still possible for that believer to turn away from God, fall away from grace, and forfeit his or her salvation. Consider the following passages:

Turning away, falling away: Gal 5:2-4—Paul claims that those in Galatia who wanted to be justified by the law had cut themselves off from Christ and had fallen away from grace. Rom 11:19-23—Paul points out that branches, i.e. believers, were broken off the tree because of their unbelief. However, those who stand, stand only through faith. That it is possible for the saved believer to fall away is likewise seen from the claim “So do not become proud, but stand in awe. For if God did not spare the natural branches, perhaps He will not spare you.” Finally, God’s kindness extended to the believer so long as the latter “continues in God’s kindness.” Mk 4:17 (& Mt 13:21; Lk 8:13)—there are those who believe for a while, and in time of temptation fall away. Jn 15:6—Jesus not only teaches that in order for the believer to bear fruit, s/he must abide in Christ (since apart from Jesus the believer is not capable of producing the fruit), but also that the believer, like a branch, would eventually be thrown away, wither, be gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned, should the believer fail to abide in Christ. Heb 3:12—the author of Hebrews warns Christian believers lest they may have unbelieving heart that “turns away from the living God.” Jn 16:1—Jesus warns his disciples lest they may fall away.

The spiritual death:

Lk 15:32—the prodigal son is described as the one who had been “dead and come to life,” had been “lost and found,” even though he previously enjoyed living in the presence of his father. Occasionally, some suggest that “being lost and found” refers to the obscure physical geographical location of the prodigal son when he was away, insofar as it says that he “traveled to a distant country.” However, such reading is inadequate since he is likewise described as having been “dead and come to life,” whereas no physical death of the prodigal son is implied anywhere in the parable. Thus, the father states the prodigal son became dead spiritually after he had left his father and turned to “dissolute living.” Rom 8:13—Paul warns the believers in Rome that living according to the sinful nature (or flesh) will cause them to die (spiritually, cf. Lk 15:32 above), whereas if they put to death the deeds of the body by the Spirit, they will live (likewise, spiritually). Gal 6:8—Paul again warns the believers that if they sow to their own flesh (i.e. if they continue to live according to the sinful nature, cf. Rom 8:13 above), they will reap corruption or destruction; but if they sow to the Spirit, they will reap eternal life. Notice that here eternal life is yet to be reaped in the future.

The necessity of perseverance:

Heb 3:14—the believer becomes “partner of Christ” only on condition that s/he holds his or her “first confidence firm to the end.” 1 Cor 15:2—Paul reminds the believers in the church of Corinth that they are saved through the Gospel (or the Good News), only if they hold firmly to the message that he proclaimed to them. Otherwise, Paul states, they “have come to believe in vain.” Mt 10:22—Jesus here warns his disciples that they will be hated on account

of his name. However, “it is the one who has endured to the end who will be saved.” Those who do not endure to the end will be bereft of their salvation. Gal 6:9—Paul exhorts the believers to “not grow weary in doing good” or “not grow weary in doing what is right” so that they would be able to reap at harvest time on condition that they do not give up. What is to be reaped at harvest time?—From the preceding verse Gal 6:8, evidently, it is “eternal life” that is meant to be reaped in the future.

Consider also:

1 Tim 4:1—paying attention to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons will cause some of those who have faith, e.g. believers, to renounce it. 1 Tim 1:19,20—it is stated that “certain persons have suffered shipwreck in the faith.”

- 4:4** “*God willing, I will soon come to visit you and collect the letter in order to deliver it to the brethren in Rome*”: as it has already been mention in the comment on **2:4** above (see the last paragraph in that comment), Phoebe was “likely the bearer of [Paul’s] letter to [Romans].”⁴²
- 4:5** “*Asyncritus and Patrobas, who are with me here, in Puteoli, send you their greetings*”: see Rom 16:14.
- 4:5** “*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you. Amen*”: see 2 Cor 13:14.

⁴² Weima, “Sincerely, Paul: The Significance of the Pauline Letter Closings,” 335; see footnote 23 above.

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