Introduction

My Argument from Silence

For some time Pauline studies have been a bit of a parlor game for New Testament scholars seeking to establish their reputations or to further various political views. It has its rules for play, its experts, its pet theories, and a host of gamesmanship in between. Evangelicals stand as apologists for tradition and divine guidance. Pauline New Perspective scholars contextualize Paul as a misunderstood Jew, and the imperial cult cohort set their targets on Paul as the herald of a kingdom of God, who planned to bring down the Roman Empire.

All have well-informed proselytizers and advocates, all have their strategies to defend their positions, and each has a point. Yet in the end, all scholars are working with the same fragments—Paul's seven consensus letters, written from approximately AD 50 to AD 60. A majority of scholars agree that Paul was their author and that he wrote to a world that existed soon after the death of Jesus. These fragments alone are insufficient to establish a worldview, theology, or even philosophy without the help of a framework for understanding just as words without syntax (rules) would have no meaning. So, any attempt to piece these fragments together in order to create a coherent worldview is in part an argument from silence.

Even the early Christian writers, to varying degrees, were reconstructing their sources within their own narrative worldviews, which meant using various (and at times limited) sources and facts to fashion stories that offered greater meanings or purposes. For example, Luke, the supposed author of Acts of the Apostles, organized the history he had available to

him into an epic tale of Christendom that was much like the *Aeneid*, with great fires, shipwrecks, and voyages to Rome.[1]

Paul too was writing from his own narrative worldview. But his framework is more difficult to discern because what we have in his own words is not an intentionally constructed narrative intended for future generations, only a loose collection of letters or epistles written to the audiences of his time. Also, unlike the story or Gospel-style constructions shaped by later writers, in Acts and the Gospels, written some fifty to one hundred years later, Paul did not move along an agenda but addressed real issues on the ground.[2] Some have described his letters as one-sided telephone calls or diary notes.[3] As a result we have to work a little harder to understand the narrative that informed his teaching.[4] It is our challenge to reconstruct that story to understand best his historical biography.

For Paul, as for all of us, biography is theology. Thoughts—even divinely inspired—do not exist outside human experience, in the everyday lives in which they are lived. These thoughts change and adapt as we do. No one concept is etched into the human brain and unsusceptible to the adaptations that come with life experiences. It is our duty as historians, storytellers, and editors to depict the scenes and circumstances that explain the context of Paul and his letters and his motive for writing them. The same goes for James, Peter, John, or even Jesus.

What obscures this rather obvious fact is when sacred tradition fixes these contingent realities, when institutions form around them, and when holy people or professional theologians are hired to defend them as an elite professional class. When it reaches a level of mass that renders it unable to allow new facts to challenge the old, change must arise from outside its walls.[5]

1. For a discussion of history as it relates to the Acts of the Apostles, see Goodenough, "The Perspective of Acts," 51–59.

2. Akenson, *Saint Saul*, 11. As Akenson explains, Paul (Saul) was "deeply committed to action," which resulted in his not receiving "the chronicling he deserved." Akenson also cites Furnish, "On Putting Paul in His Place," 7, in which Furnish states that Paul's "place in the church was won at the cost of his place in history."

3. Paul's letters were dictated to a scribe, sent by courier, and read aloud in churches. See Keck, *Paul and His Letters*, 20.

4. Longenecker, "Narrative Interest in the Study of Paul," 3–16, provides background on narrative Pauline analysis.

5. See Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, 19, for a chess analogy with regard to Pauline study.

We need an outside or "both/and"[6] point of reference to revisit the same stodgy old facts. As a storywriter, consultant, and communications specialist for twenty years, it has been my responsibility to help individuals or organizations find suitable story forms in their own message fragments, ideas, writings, and aspirations—forms that will make sense of the whole, harness the core message, and reach others, all trademarks of classic literature. As an independent New Testament scholar, I find myself in the unique position of combining skills as a story analyst with a critical[7] knowledge of Scripture. Such an approach requires a move away from Paul's theology in order to take a more critical look at his story and how it served his first-century identity and his role in the kingdom of God. It also requires approaching the text with a modern perspective, one that allows for self-deception even in our holy men and self-serving interests or beliefs that allow personal ego in the quest for material gain. And yes, this means at times viewing Paul as a politician and even a panderer. Bringing together these worlds—story and critical study of Scripture—provides new insight from Paul's letters and greater understanding of the story he fashioned for himself and his audience.

Paul's Narrative

We know that Hebrew Scriptures shaped Paul's narrative world. Abraham and Moses were certainly on his mind when he exhorted his followers regarding circumcision or the law. So too the ideas of the promised Messiah and his coming kingdom of God, intertwined as they were with the destiny of Jews, were the grand narratives informing his sense of justice or history in his letter to the Romans.[8] Just as Christians today ask, "What would Jesus do?" Paul used models from the Hebrew Scriptures. He was following an ancient process known as midrash, which allowed rabbis to reinterpret Hebrew stories for new purposes, and Paul was quite good at it. In fact his skill at reinterpretation might well have been the core reason for his success.[9]

6. Johnson and Kurz, *Future of Catholic Biblical Scholarship*, 21.

7. Ibid., 271, defines "critical" as "the practice of close, sustained, careful, attentive, disciplined reading that is characterized above all by the posing of hard questions rather than the harvesting of obvious and easy answers."

8. Achtemeier, *Romans*, 3.

9. See Hays, *Echoes of Scripture*. Also see Fredriksen, *Sin: The Early History of an Idea*, 50–51, for further discussion of how Paul's Greek background enabled him to reinterpret Hebrew biblical traditions. Also see Freeman, *Closing of the Western Mind*, 124–25, for

Yes, the Hebrew Scriptures loomed large in Paul's narrative world, but one person's story was never mentioned: Jesus's. Paul did share a few simple facts and made reference to possible older "sayings" in his letters, but overall—aside from the practical details required to keep his followers faithful—his writings were theological forays into the symbolic meaning of the mind of Christ or into the death and resurrection of Jesus ushering in the new age of apocalypse and the coming kingdom. This is the strongest connecting theme between Jesus and the Pauline mission.[10]

Jesus did not meet the messianic job description found in the Hebrew Scriptures, a résumé that usually included the conquering of foreign rulers—in his case, Rome. So Paul, who encountered Jesus in a vision, was left to explain why not, an effort that would inspire the greatest religious improvisations the world has ever known. In his letters Paul would embellish, extract, and create new meaning from the mysteries of Jesus's actual life experience, including a failed kingdom. Paul too was largely employing an argument from silence.[11]

Just as Paul had Hebrew Scripture to draw on, we have his seven letters written at different times and for different reasons and audiences. And although we can locate some repeating themes, most of this theological work had specific meaning. We know so little about his timeline, we must resort to speculation save for one instance where the exile of the Jews from Rome in AD 49 seems to correspond to a passage in Corinthians, which in turn corresponds with Acts. Scholars have used this correlation as an historical peg to date Paul's letter and expand the conversation for the dating and placement of other epistles.[12]

Even then they are educated guesses at best.

So, in light of these limitations, the question remains as to what interpretive tool we will use to organize the fragments into a coherent story. For

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the historical significance of the Letter to the Romans.

10. See Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet*, 141–62, for the apocalyptic teachings of Jesus; and see Beker, *Paul the Apostle*, 181, for the apocalypse as the center of Paul's thoughts. "The belief in the resurrection is itself a Jewish apocalyptic belief" (see Martin, *The Corinthian Body*, 133). See Barrett, "Paul: Councils and Controversies," 70, for what Jesus would have been without Paul. See Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 2, for a comparison of the relationship of Jesus and Paul to that of Marx and Lenin.

11. See Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament?*, 142, for Paul's improvisation of the apocalypse. Also, "Unless we accept Paul's view of how he became a follower of Christ, it is impossible to understand him" (Johnson, *History of Christianity*, 36).

12. Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul: A Critical Life*.

two thousand years, we have used Luke's *Aeneid*-style agenda from the first century to tell an epic tale of Christendom. Then there was Augustine's Platonic Paul and Aquinas's reasoning Aristotle Paul from the medieval period. There was the Paul of the birth of individual humanism in the Renaissance via Erasmus, and later Luther's reformed Paul. Then came Barth's Heideggerian Paul followed by the modern interpretations of the New Perspective, the Imperial cult, or postmodernism. Paul seems to become the age he is interpreted to be,[13] so how can this book be any different? In truth it can't.

We are who we are, and the collective lens of any generation will dictate perception. Our generation's lens is heavily influenced by Einstein and our relativity.[14] Our conclusions are subjective, determined by our points of view. What seems best to help us escape this slanted vantage point, however, is story—or, to use a technical term, narrative—for no other reason than it allows the reader to observe how the writer uses the form in its particular genre as a tool of dramatic structure to emphasize or deemphasize various truths. Aristotle's seminal work, *Poetics*, has been explored throughout the ages to explain how these patterns work as genres such as tragedy, comedy, or (epic) history. Though over the centuries contingent details change, story as a mode of communication does not. It always plays by its own fixed rules in how it mirrors the basic developments of human nature as it faces our very common obstacles. At the heart of all story is the hero's journey, which we can use to explore Paul's character arc.

The Narrative Method

At its heart the hero's journey is the seminal story structure based on our common conflicts around self-realization or maturity. "Carl Jung has utilized this framework in his famous work on archetypes. The hero is one of several archetypes, characterized by the specific struggles. The struggle

13. See Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, 11, for how scholars "puzzle" over Paul. See Zetterholm, *Approaches to Paul*, 127–64, for views on Paul from "beyond the New Perspective."

14. Johnson made a case for the Einstein theory of relativity that resulted in our "relative" perspective; see *Modern Times*, 1–5, 11. Also see the opening discussion on the "self-centeredness" of the individual in viewing history. See Toynbee, *An Historian's Approach to Religion*, 1–17. Also see Adam's chapter on deconstruction and Scripture in *What Is Postmodern Biblical Criticism?*, 27–44; and Esler, *Galatians* 23, for discussion of the postmodernist challenge to history. See Johnson and Kurz, *Catholic Biblical Scholarship*, for human influence making the concept of "original and pure good news" an impossibility.

against oneself (psychological), against society, against nature, or in Paul's case against one's own culture, etc."[15] Others have gone so far as to suggest that from a psychological perspective, there are a limited number of potential conflicts rooted in our familial origins that require growth, or catharsis, in the human journey toward adulthood and self-actualization. Therefore genres represent the lines of struggle as narrative frames that externalize the conflict with action and allow us to gauge how one's goals are reflected in one's journey. Beyond the temporal genre specifics, there remains a recognizable pattern of five stages that gives coherence to all story forms. Christian Booker describes all stories as moving from an initial mood of anticipation through a dream stage, when all seems to be going unbelievably well, to a frustration stage when things begin to go mysteriously wrong, to a nightmare phase where everything goes horrendously wrong, and ending in the final moment of death and destruction.[16]

We can use these parts that comprise a structure for a fictional life or biography (hero's journey) as tools to understand a real historical life, and we can recognize the patterns to reveal inner conflict, search for identity, and, most importantly, help organize information into a sequence or plot. In other words if Jung is correct that the story forms are archetypes, or psychological mappings of actual human journeys, we can use them as frameworks or templates to construct a narrative from the fragments of Paul's life as revealed by his letters. With a trustworthy timeline, we are able to sequence Paul's central conflict with his brethren in Jerusalem over the role of Gentiles in the new kingdom and the collection that staved off a total split in the early church. This approach has two clear advantages. First, it allows us a new way to organize his life as literary critics without the limitations of preconceived theological "either-or" arguments for or against a particular tradition; and second, it finds the coherent arguments

15. Jung wrote of Christ as an archetype whose "symbolic statements [about Christ] are those which reveal the attributes of the hero's life: improbable origin, divine father, hazardous birth, rescue in the nick of time, precocious development, conquest of the mother and death, miraculous deeds, a tragic, early end, symbolically significant manner of death, postmortem effects (reappearances, signs, and marvels, etc.)." See Stein, *Jung on Christianity*, 108–11. For the usage of Jung as a tool for biblical interpretation, see Kille, *Psychological Biblical Criticism*, 81–107. For a discussion of how mythological stories can provide insight into history, see Roetzel, *The Letters of Paul*, 119. Mack, *Who Wrote*, 13, discusses the difficulties of reconciling history and myth within Christianity.

16. See the chapter on rebirth as a basic plot in Booker, *Seven Basic Plots*, 193–213. Also see Theissen, *Psychological Aspects*, 3, for related material concerning how stories can serve to objectify experiences.

Paul makes not in his ideas alone but also in the specific actions he takes as manifestations of that internal identity.[17]

From the *Iliad* and the Bible to modern Hollywood films, narrative has endured when utilized by these guidelines (as outlined by the five stages above), and we are able to construct or deconstruct them to understand the strategies used to communicate a main premise. Again, Luke's Acts is a good example. When we look at Acts as a narrative, we can understand the themes constructed by epic form and in this sense understand Luke's intentions and goals. Luke set out to organize Paul's life geographically as the spearhead of the great Christian movement that began with a divinely inspired group converting the known world and in the end replacing Rome just as Aeneas did in his imperial conquest.[18]

Rather than Luke's geographical, epic narrative, I have employed a classical study of narrative that utilizes the form of the hero's journey, or what we now recognize as self-story, to further explore these elusive Pauline fragments. How did Paul find meaning in his life? How did he define his role? How did others respond to his proclamation of self (or divine) discovery? Who did he identify as his enemies and why? And, in the end, what is the empirical evidence for his experiences being valid?

The Human Paul, Not the Sacred Paul

Paul claimed that Jesus appeared to him, and we assume it is true in spite of his contradiction of the Jewish understanding of general resurrection, in spite of the fact that Jesus's closest followers, which included his brother James, Jude, and others, were never forewarned of such an appearance or

17. Though Paul's narrative is incomplete in how we read it from his letters and at times seems to contradict the version of his story in Acts, we are forced to seek out a unity or direction to his larger motives and goals not only as written or spoken but as acted upon. The act—which, according to Aristotle, is a revealer of character in a drama—defines the "thoughts, the emotions, the decisions of the will, the external events being inextricably interwoven" (see Butcher, *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*, 284). For insight into how other scholars have chosen to address the dichotomy between Paul's story and the story Luke wrote in Acts, see Crossan and Reed, *In Search of Paul*, 162. Also, using Paul's letters to construct his relationship and conflict with the Judaizers allows for "a more rational reconstruction" (Knox, *Chapters in a Life of Paul*, 73).

18. For thoughts on the effects of imposing structure upon mythological stories, see Meggitt, "Popular Mythology in the Early Empire and the Multiplicity of Jesus Traditions," 72–75. For the definition and uses of narrative criticism, see Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 25–26. For thoughts on story as scripture and the benefits of narrative criticism, see Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?*, 85–91.

never believed it was entirely true. To those within the context of Paul's first-century world[19] and the cosmological assumptions that went with it, visions of the dead and accompanying divine messages were not unusual or surprising at all. Actually the common first-century response when hearing about such events might not have been disbelief but instead a simple question: What did they say?

Almost two thousand years later, we stand in awe of Paul's vision as a sacred moment. Yet his contemporaries had their reasons to challenge, question, and even malign his potentially commonplace experience, and we have our reasons to do the same. Our perception of the world has changed. Our new understandings of cosmology, biology, and other fields would cause most of us to hesitate if we heard such a story today. So, why do we hold Paul's accounts to a different standard? Merely because they have passed the test of time? Or because the church considers them to be sacred? We would never apply standards such as these to any other field of scientific study, yet when looking at the canon of Scripture we still hold tightly to the entire paradigm as if all the parts were equally true. Doing so clouds our judgments about Paul the man and impedes our ability to construct his journey in light of all its human intention.

Because we view sacred Scripture as inspired by the divine, we forget about the humanity of its figures.[20] We forget that Paul still had to choose his day-to-day priorities, arrange to lease a ship to cross the Mediterranean, survive wild dogs and thieves on the roads, and even raise funds to eat and drink. When the divine is mentioned, we are expected to abandon human motives, assume holiness, and suspend our critical judgment. This emphasis on a superhuman Paul comes from the church's habit of using him as an authority for proper church doctrine. After all, how can we question the source of authority himself?

This understanding of Christian origins as divine revelation from God to man is no longer the only method of interpretation. In fact since the Reformation, the methods of interpretation have been as diverse as those using them. As critical scholarship mounts along with new archeological finds and extra-biblical studies, the older understanding of Christian origins no longer has a stranglehold on biblical scholarship. But how was it able to

19. For background on the geographical and political world Paul inhabited, see Deissmann, *Paul: A Study*, 29–51.

20. We "picture Paul more as a theological monument than as a human being" (see Jervell, "The Letter to Jerusalem," 54).

hold its ground for two thousand years? One answer is the use of story. Unlike hard science that asks us to use analytical skills alone, story lures the reader in because it moves the point of contact from the head to the heart as the reader identifies with the hero—precisely what Luke did in the Acts of the Apostles. If a creator can fashion a coherent and consistent plot, we are more likely to assume the story is true. Given these strategies the next question we should ask is whether the story has roots in real history or not.

Even though we can question the hard data that comprises the New Testament, comparing one passage with another, it can still be difficult to understand the design of a story and the agendas associated with it. To understand Paul's story, we need to understand his life. He began as a Pharisee who, somewhere along the way, converted to a missionary for the Gentiles to usher in the kingdom of God. At one point he was a zealot purifying the Jewish faith from contamination by Gentiles, and later he was accused of being one of the greatest contaminators. This was a drastic change for the apostle, and while it stemmed from Paul's certain divine assumptions about the world, it also came as the result of a change in self-identity and the role he would play in God's divine plan.

So, as an alternative to arguing for or against the past, I have organized the Pauline fragments along universal notions of story form and not the later religious agendas of his ecclesiastical reinterpreters. This is a method that demands a consistency of theme, motives for characters, and plausibility of plot.[21] For instance when we read that Paul cast out devils or raised a boy from the dead after the boy fell from a window, we must hold our ground and say it makes no sense unless we impose a mythological (divine) meaning on it.

Paul's Central Conflict

For Paul, as for us, the story framework does not change as a sequence of actions (plot) that shape our ideas and form our worldviews, which we then use as a basis for action. When our views change in times of crisis or conversion, we witness the resetting of these experienced facts with the overall perspective. The word *conflict* means "striking together" as in the collision of two ideas. Conflict is the spark that ignites the fire of human growth, creates desire for change, and results in a new course, like Paul's vision that

21. See Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?*, 40, for a discussion of causation as related to plot.

caused him to take his message to the Gentiles. It also results in our leaving one worldview behind in order to realize our deeper selves. Conflict transforms us. In Romans Paul directed his readers, "[B]e renewed by the transforming of your minds" (Rom 12:1). And in return the conflict reveals those real or perceived obstacles to our goals. For Paul these obstacles were James and the other apostles, the sources of his main conflict.

Paul's decisions, as described in his letters, offer us a window into his motivations and his story and can therefore help us reconstruct this central conflict. In response to this conflict, his choices expose intent and a hierarchy of values, and with the help of narrative construct they reveal a thematic framework—one that shows the primary human purpose behind the theological argument, something the church is still hesitant to explore fully. Through the retrospective lens of church doctrine, we conclude that Paul saw a vision on the road to Damascus in order to carry out a divine plan when in fact it might very well have been a subjective experience that originated in his imagination. After all, though he was quite capable of boasting and, in the eyes of his peers, needed to justify his authority, he never mentioned the event—an imagining, an incident Paul believed would lead to his destiny as a great prophet in the last days and a pillar in the kingdom to come.

Many scholars will argue that it is so difficult to understand history from two thousand years ago, we can never quite understand the life of this first-century Jew, but employing the tool of narrative challenges this notion. Do we not have enough common experience to understand Alexander, Cleopatra, or Caesar? If we limit the goals to a single action through line (plot) such as the apostle Paul, the collection, and his relationship to the mother church, we can reach some certitude with our objective study.

Narrative looks beyond the sacred-profane distinction. It integrates arguments about faith or life or death into larger story forms, and at its heart it seeks to understand humans by their conflicts. If nothing else Paul's life was, as he admitted (2 Cor 6:4–11), a series of conflicts with moments of divine respite thanks to his belief in Christ, whom he originally met in a vision. If we are willing to take Paul at his word, this we can know for certain.[22]

22. For insights into Paul's personality, see Deissmann, *Paul: A Study*, 55–81, which is a detailed record of the many contradictions and conflicts that were inherent in Paul's character and life; also see Klausner, *From Jesus to Paul,* 422–32, esp. 423, for a description of Paul as "a man of polarity."

The question is how to understand the nature of the vision in light of his conflicts and the forces that opposed him. Who or what was his thorn in the flesh or messenger of Satan? Was it of the body, like disease or old age? Was it psychological, like self-doubt or a low sense of worth? Or even natural or supernatural, as Acts would have us believe, with snakes and shipwrecks, scourges, and famine? All these theories play their roles, but none strikes a chord as clearly as Paul's battle with his sense of legitimacy as an apostle and as a missionary to the Gentiles—a battle at the heart of his greatest points of conflict.[23]

Most if not all of his letters were defenses of this central conflict and exposed his innermost thoughts about his mission and himself. The short autobiography Paul gave us in the second chapter of Galatians also reflected these doubts and his effort to win approval and even footing with Jesus's original apostles. His moments of doubt revealed his strongest reactions and caused his most dramatic decisions. They haunted him, and the reader is forced to ask why. What was the source of his misgivings?

Paul's doubts arose mainly from his ongoing conflicts with his Jewish-Christian brethren in Jerusalem—conflicts that cast such a shadow on his mission that he was driven to earn his way to support through a collection. One could argue Paul had to buy his apostleship. The collection offers us a tangible plot to map the conflicts we have described above. We know it had a beginning, a middle, and an end, and we know its acceptance or rejection was a clear manifestation of the status of Paul's relationship with Jesus's first followers, namely his brother, James. We also know that this single event dominated the last ten years of Paul's life and eventually compelled him to leave the mission field and return to Jerusalem, in the face of grave danger, with his collection, which Luke never mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles.

Paul's return to Jerusalem, when tracked as the spine of his biography, reveals new insights about the early church—insights that alone could deconstruct our preconceptions of the traditional story. Paul was a man enraptured by a vision of no other than Jesus himself, with possible audio-visual proof. Yet Jesus's closest confidants, including his brother, required a bargain (bribe) of gold to accept Paul's vision. Might the origins of this vision be of a different source? Perhaps Paul's own mind or his prophetic

23. For a discussion of the nature of Paul's controversies, see Barrett, "Paul: Councils and Controversies," 42–59. For Paul's attempts to solve the problem of his lack of authority as an apostle, see Freeman, *The Closing*, 113. Also see Aquinas, *Commentary*, 5.

ambitions? Or were the other apostles too blind to realize what God was doing in Paul?

The apostles' accepted bribe is Paul's attempt not only to ensure his Gentile mission would continue but to persuade the Jerusalem apostles to accept the message itself, the essence of the gospel. No one else seemed to share Paul's message, so even if it were truly divinely inspired, he would have had to be comfortable challenging the entire establishment in order to implement it.

In the end his ministry was allowed in large part because of the money he provided the mother church—the bribe. And while no one will argue this was not without a symbolic meaning of Gentile-Jewish unity, it still showed a hesitancy or even unwillingness on the part of his brethren. Soon after, they completely rejected him again, and so we now know the agreement to the Gentile mission was short lived.

And as the book of Acts and tradition would have us believe, in his final days Paul was left alone to die. How could this have happened? How did a man of such promise become such a tragic figure? This book is an attempt to reconstruct Paul's story, or gospel if you will, from his letters, using Acts in support, to demonstrate how a vision of promise would lead to a hopeless prison cell and then, remarkably, a new religion.