

CHAPTER 13.
A SYNOPSIS OF GALATIANS AND
ROMANS: ITS RELEVANCE FOR THE
INTERPRETATION OF THE SYNOPTIC
PARALLELS BETWEEN 1 AND 2
THESSALONIANS AND BETWEEN
COLOSSIANS AND EPHESIANS¹

ARMIN D. BAUM

FREIE THEOLOGISCHE HOCHSCHULE GIESSEN

1. METHODOLOGICAL PROLEGOMENA

In 2006, the systematic theologian Friedrich Beisser (1934–2019) published an essay on the authenticity of the Letter to the Ephesians. At the beginning of his reflections, he made the following observation:

Among our interpreters of the New Testament there are basic dogmas which no one who wants to be taken seriously as a

¹ This essay is dedicated to my colleague Martin Webber, with whom I have had the privilege of working together in the PhD program of the Evangelische Theologische Faculteit Leuven since 2006. With his high academic standards and scholarly integrity, he has been a constant example for me.

critical scholar may call into question. One of them is the conviction that the Letter to the Ephesians could not have been written by Paul at any rate, that it rather originates from a much later time.²

Beisser's assessment is probably an exaggeration, for who would dispute that internationally respected biblical scholars such as Bruce Metzger (1914–2007)³ and Harold Hoehner (1935–2009)⁴ or, more recently, Luke Timothy Johnson (b. 1943)⁵ and Stanley Porter (b. 1956)⁶ are serious exegetes and historians?

Still, Beisser's point cannot be completely dismissed out of hand, especially when it comes to German theology. It is hard to imagine a doctoral or post-doctoral student at a German-speaking theological faculty daring to treat the Letter to the Ephesians as an authentic letter using the arguments of Hoehner or Johnson.

In this article I am not concerned with the question of whether the Letter to the Ephesians is authentic or not. Nor do I want to reflect on presumed dogmas of NT scholarship. Rather I am interested in the critical method by which one can distinguish between authentic and inauthentic texts of antiquity and of the NT.

1.1 The Need for Consistent Criteria in Historical Criticism

Whoever investigates the literary authenticity of the NT Pauline letters should respect a basic methodological rule: all 13 letters must be analyzed according to the same criteria. In other words: the same standards must be applied to all 13 letters. Two biblical scholars have recently reminded us of this critical principle.

² Friedrich Beisser, "Wann und von wem könnte der Epheserbrief verfasst sein?," *KD* 52 (2006): 151–64, 151. My translation.

³ Bruce M. Metzger, *The New Testament: Its Background, Growth and Content* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 270–72.

⁴ Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians* (Grand Rapid: Baker, 2002), 2–61.

⁵ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Constructing Paul*, vol. 1 of *The Canonical Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 81–85, 249–58.

⁶ Stanley E. Porter, *The Apostle Paul: His Life, Thought, and Letters* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 384–404.

In an illuminating essay on critical method, the German NT scholar Klaus Haacker expressed his conviction that “literary criticism needs to distance itself from criteria that are informed less by the sources than by the history of reception.”⁷ According to Haacker, the historical critique of the NT letters is still too strongly influenced by Martin Luther’s preference for the Letters to the Galatians and to the Romans as well as by F. C. Baur’s preference for an anti-Jewish Paul, who could only have written the four so-called main letters (*Hauptbriefe*). The historical predilection for certain letters in the 16th and 19th century should no longer mislead scholars into analyzing them less strictly than the other nine Pauline letters or into applying standards to the other Paulines that one does not apply to the four (or six or seven) preferred letters.

The American NT scholar Harold Hoehner has made the same point. While working on his great commentary on Ephesians, he realized that this letter is not always measured with the same yardstick as Galatians, which is about the same length: “It is a strange phenomenon that virtually no one ever questions the authorship of Galatians.”⁸ To make his methodological discomfort as clear as possible, Hoehner examined the Letter to the Galatians on the basis of the same criteria which are regularly applied to the Letter to the Ephesians. This led him to the satirical conclusion that Paul could not possibly have written the Letter to the Galatians. But Hoehner was quite serious in his plea to apply the same critical standards of authenticity to all 13 Pauline letters.

1.2 The Relevance of Consistent Criteria for the Analysis of the Pauline Parallels

The rule that all 13 Pauline letters must be analyzed according to the same criteria is also relevant for the critical examination of the synoptic parallels between the Pauline letters. Not infrequent-

⁷ Klaus Haacker, “Rezeptionsgeschichte und Literarkritik: Anfragen an die *communis opinio* zum Corpus Paulinum,” *TZ* 65 (2009): 209–28, 217.

⁸ Harold W. Hoehner, “Did Paul Write Galatians?” in *History and Exegesis*, ed. S.-W. Son (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 150–69, 150.

ly, scholarly research has focused exclusively on the parallels between the disputed Paulines, leaving out of consideration the parallels between the undisputed Pauline letters. While it is generally known that Galatians and Romans are closely related and have many synoptic parallels, in important studies on the parallels between 1 and 2 Thessalonians and between Colossians and Ephesians they have hardly or not at all been considered. Because of this methodological shortcoming, conclusions have been drawn from the parallels between 1 and 2 Thessalonians or between Colossians and Ephesians that would not have been possible if the researchers had looked at the parallels between all Pauline letters. This can be illustrated by some of the most seminal research contributions on synoptic parallels in the Pauline corpus.

2. HISTORY OF RESEARCH

2.1 Previous Historical Criticism of the Parallels between the Deutero-Paulines

The most influential study to date on the synoptic parallels between 1 and 2 Thessalonians was written in 1903 by William Wrede. He considered the parallels between the two letters as the main argument which after a period of vacillation led him to the conviction that 2 Thessalonians could not be authentic.⁹ His cross-check with the parallels between Paul's letters to the Galatians and to the Romans was limited to a few general sentences (see below). Obviously, Wrede did not consider it necessary to conduct a more thorough comparison with the correspondences between Galatians and Romans.

To this day the most thorough analysis of the synoptic parallels between Colossians and Ephesians is that of Leslie Mitton, published in 1951. In his view, these two letters could not have been written by the same author because "the similarities

⁹ William Wrede, *The Authenticity of the Second Letter to the Thessalonians*, trans. Robert Rhea (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017), 2; confirmed by Wolfgang Trilling, *Untersuchungen zum 2. Thessalonicherbrief*, ETS 27 (Leipzig: St. Benno, 1972), 157.

As this comparison of Galatians and Romans demonstrates, Paul was rather flexible in his use of words and phrases and in his syntax. Such variations do not constitute evidence that one of the letters in question cannot be the work of Paul but should more probably be read as the work of an imitator.

9. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Surprisingly in the critical analysis of the synoptic parallels between 1 and 2 Thessalonians and between Colossians and Ephesians, the synoptic parallels between Galatians and Romans have rarely been considered. This is an unfortunate shortcoming since according to an undisputed methodological rule (at least in theory) all 13 Pauline letters must be measured against the same critical standards. The undisputed letters of Paul must not be left out of consideration or examined less strictly than the disputed ones. Double standards are not acceptable.

As my simple Greek synopsis of Galatians and Romans reveals, the arguments against the authenticity of 2 Thessalonians and Ephesians, which are based on their synoptic parallels with 1 Thessalonians and Colossians respectively apply as well to the synoptic parallels between Galatians and Romans. While scholars have often interpreted substantial repetition, a considerable amount of verbal agreement, confluences of two or more passages, repeated borrowings from the same passages, and the reuse of words and phrases with a different meaning as clear indications of inauthenticity, in his Letter to the Romans Paul used all these literary strategies.

It follows that if according to these criteria 2 Thessalonians and Ephesians must be regarded as unauthentic, for the same reasons Romans cannot be the work of Paul. Or vice versa, if these criteria cannot be applied to test and disprove the authenticity of Romans, then neither may they be used to test and disprove the authenticity of 2 Thessalonians and Ephesians. Frankly, for obvious reasons, I prefer the second option.

As a matter of course, the observations in this article do not settle the question whether 2 Thessalonians and Ephesians are authentic or not, but they imply that for methodological reasons the arguments from the synoptic parallels between the disputed

Pauline letters which have been developed and applied by William Wrede, Leslie Mitton, E. P. Sanders, and many others must be abandoned. They simply are not reliable critical instruments.

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