

# Introduction: Who was Paul?

In this commentary I interpret Paul's First Letter to the Congregation in Corinth from a sociohistorical-theological perspective.<sup>11</sup> I would like to present briefly, in five steps, my view of Paul, which developed and gained precision as I worked on the commentary. As I do that, I point in each case to the passages in 1 Corinthians where further material on the issue can be found in the commentary.

## 1. Paul the Jew

Paul was born a Jew and lived and worked as a Jew until he died. At the beginning of his work on behalf of the liberating gospel stands his call by God. His call was so important to Paul that he often refers to it in his letters, including in 1 Corinthians (1:1; 15:8–10; 9:1, 16–27 and more often). Through the **call** he received the divine commission to make the message known, especially among the oppressed nations of the Roman Empire, the *ethnē* (see on 1:22–24), that the God of Israel has raised Jesus from the dead. Jesus was a Jewish man who was executed by the Romans less than twenty years earlier (see on 1:17–18; 2:6–8). That God has raised this executed one means, according to Paul's proclamation, that the world is no longer subject to the powers that oppose life. God has fenced in the structures of death. Thereby, God has freed the people of Israel and the nations (*ethnē*) from slavery (15:20–22). Paul describes this slavery as the power of death (3:22; 15:22, 26, 56), as the **power of sin** (15:56) and of the world (*kosmos* 3:22). These powers force people to become accomplices in their injustice and to practice it in their lives, that is, to fail to observe the Torah (6:9–11; 5:10–11). Political analysis and mythical concepts of demonic powers ruling the world flow together here.

With the concept of call, as well as with that of the power of sin, Paul is operating within the traditions of Judaism. Despair over the world-power sin, which enslaves everyone, is, for example, the theme of 4 Ezra (on sin, see the basic informa-

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11 The translation printed in this volume is based on my translation for the *Bibel in gerechter Sprache* (the 4<sup>th</sup> expanded and improved ed. Gütersloh 2011), which during the work on the commentary was developed further. [*Bibel in gerechter Sprache*, henceforth *BigS*, means the »Bible in fitting/apt language.« A helpful introduction to this translation and its context can be found in Claudia Janssen's section on Feminist Exegesis in her Forward to the Second Edition at the beginning of this volume. The English Bible texts try to be as close as possible to Luise Schotttroff's German text. Trans.].

tion at 9:20). For the tradition in which his call is found, Paul points to the prophetic books (see on 1:1). Only under the influence of the separation of Christianity from Judaism beginning in the second century was this call understood as the beginning of a Christian life freed from the law, that is, as a »conversion.« However, compared with the concept Paul himself uses, this one is not appropriate. Paul did not through his call become a Christian but a divine messenger, who spreads the liberating message of Jesus' resurrection.

Paul proclaimed liberation from acting unjustly under the power of sin, not liberation from the Torah and the fulfilling of its instructions. So the issue is **liberation to the Torah**, not from the Torah (see on 7:19–20).

Paul's First Letter to Corinth as a whole is to be understood as an interpretation of the Torah for people from the nations who have embraced the God of Israel and God's Messiah. They do not understand themselves as Jewish. From the Jewish side, they are seen as people from the nations (*ethnē*) and classified among the broad spectrum of non-Jewish people who live in a Jewish manner. However, in Roman-Hellenistic society, and from the perspective of Roman authorities, they were generally treated Jews. The letter is part of the history of the Jewish interpretation of Scripture that unfolds its meaning for the present (halakah; see, for example at 10:1–13; 5:1–11) in the first century.

It was often asked whether Paul, with his concept of the significance of the **Messiah Jesus**, had already sprung the boundaries of Judaism. Although this is widely assumed, even in his »Christology« Paul remains within the boundaries of Jewish concepts of his time. Decisive for him is the *Shema Israel*/Hear, O Israel; Israel's God is one (see 8:5–6). For him, God's Messiah, with his body and with his whole life, embodies divine action in the world of the people of Israel and of the nations. In his writings there are no attempts to deify the Messiah in any way (see on 8:5–6). »Messiah« is portrayed as an embodied activity on God's part rather than as an individual person who is distinguished from other people (see on 10:4). The assumption that the word »Messiah,« in its translation into Greek as *Christos*/anointed one, is in Paul already on its way to becoming a proper name, does not accord with his use of the word. For him it is not a name; when Paul says Christ/Messiah, he is speaking of God's presence, which frees people from enslavement by the structures of death.

## 2. Paul and the Messiah

The Messiah has been raised by God, as the world power Rome had crucified him. As Paul was called by God for the **gospel to the nations**, he began his way as God's representative, as an apostle (see on 1:1). He understands his commission to be part of a worldwide event (see 16:5–9), as part of the work in a network to which more and more people belong. His concern is not to establish a church or a religion, but to help spread liberation from enslavement to death and to sin in the world of his time. For him, this spread occurs where people come together and investigate with one another what their way to God's righteous can look like. The concept

»mission« can be used only when it is kept separate from the claim that it helps an institution or a teaching to come to power.

By the **resurrection of the crucified Jesus** God has put an end to death and violence. This message is the foundation of the gospel Paul brings to the Mediterranean world. The Roman Empire enforced its rule through open and subtle violence. This violence includes crucifixions as a means of political intimidation but also »games,« that is, events for the masses in many cities, in which people were tortured and killed (see 4:9). The crowds were supposed to have an apparent role in the great decisions over death and life and to cheer about the violence in the arenas. Whoever didn't participate in this approval of the violence was in danger of being persecuted by Rome. This anxiety over persecution, therefore, had even brought people who already belonged to the communities of the God of Israel (*ekklēsiai theou*) to deny the crucifixion of their Liberator, that is, to suppress the word of the cross (see 1:17, 18), and also the resurrection of the Messiah as well. Already before the appearance of the Jew Jesus, who was seen by many people as God's Liberator/Messiah, Rome had persecuted messianic movements (see the basic information before 15:1). Paul battles to see that God's congregations remain unambiguous about their adherence to a crucified one who was made the Messiah by God. For he understands the assembly or congregation of God as the **body of the Messiah** in this world. The concept of a collective body, with which God is active in the world, is not to be understood metaphorically (see on 12:12, 27). The congregation, with all its members, embodies the Messiah and acts messianically, with one another and toward those on the outside. It openly identifies violence by name and builds a community in which justice becomes a reality. Justice liberates sexuality from its use as a form of coercion (see 6:12–20; 7:1–40); it gives the poor equal rights and puts an end to privileges the rich enjoy at other people's expense (1:26–31; 11:17–34). Women are accorded the same level of dignity as men (see 11:2–16). The ethnic diversity, the many native languages spoken by members of the congregation, should not be suppressed for the sake of the lingua franca. There is contention over a form of this speech that can be heard openly in the congregation alongside of prophecy (spoken in the common language; basic information about this is available at 14:1).

The body of the Messiah, Jesus' body, and people's individual bodies are where God is present (11:23; 12:12, 27; 6:19). In the Lord's Supper, these diverse dimensions of the concept »body of Christ« (*sōma christou*) are inseparably connected. The Lord's Supper is the place where the bodily presence of God and of the Messiah is constantly being actualized anew.

### 3. Paul among his Brothers and Sisters

Paul understands himself as an interpreter of the Torah in community. Even the people from the nations quickly became very competent in knowing and interpreting the Torah for their life in the body of Christ. Paul participated in these **inter-**

**pretative communities.** But he is not accorded a place of privilege (see 5:3–5) when the gathering reaches decisions based on the Torah.

Paul was not the only messenger God sent to proclaim the liberating gospel. Most of his letters were written together with others (see 1:1), and they contain a great deal that emanates from the language of the congregations, their prayers and discussions. Paul did not »have **co-workers**,« whom he directed, but worked together with other brothers and sisters on behalf of the gospel (16:1–24). In the body of Christ there are to be no top-down relationships. In the history of interpretation, Paul is frequently understood as a figure who has authority over others, one who authoritatively renders a verdict about doctrinal differences and »admonishes« the congregation (see 1:10). This interpretation of Paul has made a lasting impression on his image, even by means of the words chosen in translations of the Bible. In this way he became the role model for leaders who claimed authority in the church. At the same time, however, this Paul also spread fear and abhorrence among those who suffered under hierarchies and worked for just relationships in the church.

Women in the congregations had equal worth for Paul as **workers for the gospel**. But when the issue is women and their sexuality and their relationships to the opposite sex, his ambivalence toward them becomes apparent. He certainly doesn't want messianic men to go to prostitutes. But in this context, the prostitutes themselves remain for him practically invisible. And it remains invisible that a relevant portion of the congregations is made up of women who had to earn their living, entirely or in part, through prostitution. For the reception of Paul in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a rediscovery of Paul the brother should be accompanied by the open discussion about his ambivalence on particular issues. Paul also spread ideas that in the history of the church, and in the societies influenced by the church, have oppressed and tormented women and men. That is true especially of those who live as homosexuals (6:9) and for women in patriarchal marriages (7:10, 36). Paul's oppressive side has been strengthened even more through the history of interpretation. Criticism of Paul should be discussed in twentieth-century congregations, even during the worship services.

## 4. Everyday Life in the Cities of the Roman Empire

Paul speaks relatively often about the conditions under which he lives. He must work hard to support himself. Above all, he is exposed to dangers (4:12; 16:5–9) as he travels on foot through the expanses of the lands north of the Mediterranean Sea. He is, moreover, constantly in political danger. As a foreigner, he needs protection in the cities. Roman authorities in the cities, in part their inhabitants as well, are quite ready to persecute, beat, imprison and threaten with death (4:11–13) proclaimers of God's peace, which is fundamentally different from the peace offered by the *pax Romana*.

The **living conditions of most of the people** in the cities become incredibly clear through many details in this letter. Paul speaks of poverty and a lack of

education (1:26–31). He criticizes the rhetoric used in public gatherings (2:1–5) and probably the thrashing of children in the schools (4:21). He speaks knowledgeably about architecture (3:9–17), about the competence of the courts and about the linguistic diversity of the cities and their problems (14). Many aspects of city life in antiquity can be found in this letter. Shocking in all this is the role violence plays in daily life, above all the role it plays in mass gatherings (4:9–13) and in the lives of slaves (7:21–24).

This letter is written to give the brothers and sisters courage—through an interpretation of the Torah that applies it to their daily lives and through praise for the God of Israel. The first chapters of the letter show how difficult it is for members of the congregation to extricate themselves from their own complicities and embroilments, from competitive behavior and well-worn patterns of subordination under diverse masters and from the non-exceptionality of violence in sexual relationships. Even at the Lord's Supper some still try to take advantage of the privileges to which they have grown accustomed. The balancing act between the city's official cults that chapters 8–10 bring to light is striking. Then, from chapter 12 on, Paul speaks less often about the difficulties in daily life, but above all about the riches with which Israel's God has gifted the oppressed nations in this situation. They should be assured that God has put an end to the structures of death by raising Jesus from the dead. They can enjoy new gifts, the competence to interpret the Torah, the ability to heal the sick and to speak in the assembly. All of these are gifts that God's Spirit awakens and cultivates.

## 5. Paul the Mystic

God's Spirit, **the holy Spirit**, dwells in the bodies of those who belong to God (6:19). Paul speaks in the plural when he speaks of experiences with God's Spirit: »We« all, the whole congregation, are able to put into words wisdom that God reveals, indeed, even to speak of it publicly (2:6–10). But »we,« the congregation, also speak the language of angels (13:1; 2:6–16) and search out the hidden depths of God. The language with which Paul speaks about the divine Spirit is boundless (»all,« 13:7, for example) and enthusiastic. Paul describes in a similar way his own experiences of God (15:8–10; 2 Cor 12:2–5). But he does not restrict these ecstatic experiences of God, which change one's whole life, to himself or to a small group of people. Pauline mysticism is a democratic mysticism (13:1–13).

The messianic community in Corinth consists predominately of a few who are educated, of those whose work is hard and of people damaged by violence. What a contrast between this superabundant trust in God and their everyday reality! Their experience of God, the certainty that God's Spirit dwells within them, was their source of strength. Paul didn't bring them a new »teaching.« He and other men and women taught them to search for God in the Torah and in their lives and to draw strength from this source.

The First Letter to Corinth is an arduous read if it is undertaken in search of opponents, strife and doctrinal controversies. The letter looks very different if one

listens to, and takes seriously from the start, the language of delight and happiness over their great riches. 1:4–9 is not a stereotypical thanksgiving one finds at this place in letters, but a prayer of praise transformed into an address to the brothers and sisters. You are not lacking in any gift! (1:7). Is that polite exaggeration, a linguistic tactic? It would be a shame to read in this way, for the riches would remain undiscovered. Already this first section of the letter is pervaded by words that express fullness, indeed boundlessness: you are rich—in every respect (1:5), in everything. This language permeates the letter. It is worthwhile to undertake your own search for traces of the mystic Paul, of the women and men mystics in Corinth, of a messianic group in this harbor city in Greece in the middle of the first century.

# Commentary

## The Date of the Letter and the City of Corinth

### The Date of the Letter

The chronology of Paul's journeys and letters is based on estimates. They have a relatively reliable basis through Acts 18:11–12. There it is said that 18 months after the beginning of Paul's time in Corinth a conflict between Paul and Jewish men in Corinth is brought before Gallio, the proconsul of the Roman province of Achaia. Gallio's time in office can be dated with a certain degree of reliability from the middle of 51 to the middle of 52.<sup>12</sup> At the time the letter is written, Paul is in Ephesus (16:8). This stay is presumably identical with his time in Ephesus that Acts 19:1–20:1 describes. The date of composition is assessed diversely in the research tradition.<sup>13</sup> These assessments are based on the plausible assumption that, because of what is said in 1 Cor 15:32, Paul has already been in Ephesus for some time when he writes the letter. So, his stay in Corinth already lies some years (two to four) in the past. Nevertheless, there are contacts between him and the congregation through letters (see 5:9) and travelers (see only 16:10, 12, 17). There is an »animated exchange.«<sup>14</sup>

### The Congregation's Location: Corinth

Strabo (about 64 BCE–19 CE), a geographer and historian, describes Corinth's location: Corinth is called »wealthy« because of its commerce, since it is situated on the Isthmus and is master of two harbors, of which the one leads straight to Asia, and the other to Italy; ... it was a welcome alternative, for the merchants both from Italy and from Asia, to avoid the voyage to Maleae [the southern tip of the Peloponnese] and to land their cargoes here. ...<sup>15</sup> The harbor to the West is Lechaion, the one to the East is Cenchrea (mentioned in Acts 18:18 and Rom 16:1).

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12 Schrage 1991, vol. 1, 34.

13 For example, Schrage 1991, vol. 1, 34: spring 54 or 55; Lindemann 2000, 17: between 54 and 56; Koester, 1980, 554: winter 53/54.

14 M, Crüsemann 2010, 108.

15 Strabo, *Geogr.*, trans. J. R. S. Sterrett, Loeb (1927), 8.6.20.

By Paul's time Corinth's history had already been determined by Rome for a long period. Rome had destroyed the ancient Greek city in 146 BCE in a punitive action. »Corinth remained a long time deserted, till at length it was restored [in 44 BCE] on account of its natural advantages by divus Cæsar, who sent colonists thither, who consisted, for the most part, of the descendants of free-men.«<sup>16</sup> In 27 BCE Corinth became the capital of the Roman province of Achaia, in which the proconsul resided and held court. Acts 18:12 mentions the *bēma*, the judicial bench on which the proconsul conducted public hearings.<sup>17</sup> The city, like every large Roman city, was a place for business and worship, with shops and markets, artisans' workshops, temples, theaters and baths. The travel writer Pausanias reports in 173 CE about Roman Corinth and its magnificent buildings.<sup>18</sup> According to Plutarch, Corinth was a center for banking and finance.<sup>19</sup>

There is information about the population of Corinth in the Roman imperial period in ancient literary sources. A graphic text by Alciphron (middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE) speaks of many who were without work and hungry alongside of great riches.<sup>20</sup> This description agrees with the general sociohistorical estimate for the city population in the Roman Empire.<sup>21</sup> 90 percent of the population lived at or below the minimum subsistence level. Paul's First Letter to Corinth is itself an additional document subject to sociohistorical analysis, and it shows the social and economic differences in the population and the significance of slavery for the economy.<sup>22</sup>

There was a larger Jewish share of the population in the city. Philo (30 BCE–45 CE)<sup>23</sup> mentions a Jewish colony in Corinth (c. 41 CE). Additional witnesses to this Jewish colony in Corinth are 1 Corinthians (7:18, for example) and Acts 18:1–18. An inscription: [syna]gogē 'Ebr[aiōn]<sup>24</sup> comes from a later period (probably the 4<sup>th</sup> century).

For an understanding of the letter, it is important to keep in mind the social and cultural dislocation of many people in this city. This was conditioned both by Roman settlement policy (see the testimony of Strabo above) and the economic situation: two harbors, transit of goods, people and even ships that were dragged over the isthmus. The Roman imperial cult since the time of Augustus tried to integrate the people and coerce them into loyalty toward Rome.<sup>25</sup>

16 Strabo, *Geogr.*, trans. J. R. S. Sterrett, Loeb (1927), 8.6.23.

17 On the *bēma* see Elliger 1987, 225–227; Murphy-O'Connor 2002, 26, 28.

18 There is a collection of texts and commentary in Murphy-O'Connor 2002, 109–110.

19 Text: Plutarch, *Vit. aere al.* 7.831a; text and commentary in Murphy-O'Connor 2002, 109–110.

20 Text and commentary in Murphy-O'Connor 2002, 135–136. On the economic condition of liberated slaves see Lanci 2005a.

21 Stegemann/Stegemann 1995, 58–94; Pickett 2007, 133–160.

22 See on 1:26; 7:17–24; 11:17–34 and Friesen 2004. On the economic situation of the city's population see especially Engels 1990; Williams II 1993; Friesen et al. 2014

23 *Legat.* 281.

24 See Murphy-O'Connor 2002, 79.

25 Pickett 2007, 138–139; Horsley 1998, 27; 1 Cor 8:4–7 and more frequently.



## 1:1–9

1 Paul, according to the will of God called as an apostle by the Messiah Jesus, and Sosthenes the brother, 2 to the congregation of God in Corinth, to the people sanctified through the Messiah Jesus, who were called to live holy lives—and likewise to all people everywhere who call on the name of Jesus Christ. He is your and our Liberator. 3 May there dwell among you grace and peace from God our Origin and from our Liberator Jesus Christ.

4 On your behalf I am offering prayers of thanksgiving to my God, because in the Messiah Jesus God's favor has been given to you. 5 For in Christ you have become rich in every way, gifted with all speech and all knowledge. 6 You are bearing witness to the Messiah, and you are demonstrating growing strength therein. 7 Therefore, you lack no God-given ability, while you await the revelation of our Liberator, Jesus, the Messiah. 8 He will strengthen you to the end, so that you do not face any accusation on the day of our Liberator Jesus Christ.

9 God is faithful. Through God you have been called into the community of God's son, Jesus the Messiah, our Liberator.

## 1:1–2

This letter is the earliest Pauline letter in the New Testament.<sup>26</sup> In his introduction to the letter Paul characterizes the senders only briefly, the addressees more extensively: the messianic assembly in Corinth.

**1:1** Paul says about himself that he has been **called** to be an apostle by Jesus the Messiah in accord with the will of God. He speaks of his call in 1 Cor 9:1; 15:8–10; Gal 1:1, 13–17. Acts narrates the event in a legendary manner as a vision of Christ (Acts 9:1–22; cf. 26:12–18 and 22:6–16). In the interpretive tradition the call is often construed as a »conversion,« in the sense of a renunciation of Judaism.<sup>27</sup> Paul himself understands his call as God's call to bring the gospel to the nations, that is, to the new exodus in the name of the Messiah raised by God. Thereby he turns away from his work against the messianic congregations, but he does not turn away from Judaism. Now he works for a Jewish-messianic movement to which people from the nations are added. This work happens on God's behalf, and he acts as God's representative/apostle. The view that Paul had understood his apostolic office in the sense of the later ecclesiastical offices is inappropriate. Paul understands himself to be in continuity with the prophets in Israel (see Gal 1:15; Isa 49:1).

Right in the first line of his letter Paul mentions the Messiah/Christ Jesus. *Christos* is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word *mashiach*/anointed one, and *Messiah* is the Graecized form of the Hebrew word. Paul uses the word with and without the addi-

26 That 1 Thessalonians is not the oldest letter, as is frequently assumed, is demonstrated with convincing arguments by M. Crüsemann 2010.

27 For a criticism of this interpretation see 1976, 7–23.

tional use of the proper name »Jesus« (see, for example, 1:6). Paul does not use the word *Christos* as a proper name, but it refers to the anointing, and thereby to a commissioning, by God. The anointed one embodies what God is doing to liberate the people. The word *Christos* is not a title that confers on people a super-human or divine quality that distinguishes them from all other people. The word *Christos* in Pauline usage should be translated by »anointed one« or »Messiah« and not exclusively by »Christ,« since in contemporary Christianity this word is frequently understood as an exclusive title and proper name of this one Messiah Jesus.

The word draws on Jewish tradition.<sup>28</sup> It plays a central role for Paul, as the nine-fold use of the term in the first nine verses demonstrates right from the start. »The anointing of Jesus is an important key to understanding that in his majesty as Messiah/Christ he is part of a community that supports him.«<sup>29</sup> Paul can also say that God anoints the congregation (2 Cor 1:21). Paul clearly presupposes that God installs the Messiah as king. For Paul, the royal power of the Risen One is present and reaches into the future (see especially 15:20–28 and the discussion of 15:24). For Paul and the congregation, Jesus' messiahship attains a central significance because it is the Messiah's power that overcomes all other authorities and powers in the world (see on 8:5).

Paul mentions **Sosthenes** as a co-author. In his letters Paul consistently understands himself as an »author in the plural.«<sup>30</sup> Even though in 1:4 he mentions himself in the singular as the author, as he often does in 1 Corinthians, it is not right to understand him as the head of a »team of authors« or as an individual author. Instead, he understands himself to be part of a community of brothers and sisters. He calls Sosthenes **brother**, and, in the same way, he addresses the congregation as brothers and sisters (in 1:10, for example). This relationship as brothers and sisters is characterized by »mutual responsibility and solidarity.«<sup>31</sup> It continues the biblical and post-biblical tradition according to which the members of the people of Israel understand themselves as brothers and sisters because of their connection to Israel's one God.<sup>32</sup> This relationship as brothers and sisters connects the people of non-Jewish origin not only with one another but also with the people of Israel. It opens up for them an alternative to the patriarchal family. Relationships in the patriarchal family are as a rule asymmetrical; those in the congregation are not. Whether the authority of the men and women apostles, teachers and prophets establishes an asymmetrical relationship will need to be discussed (see on 3:11).

**1:2** The congregation in Corinth is characterized in four ways by Paul. He calls it an »**assembly/ekklesia of God**.« The word still has its secular meaning: an assem-

28 On this see Karrer 1998, 135–140; Bunting/Kamplung 2009, 380–384.

29 Butting 2009, 495.

30 Tamez 1998, 52–56; M. Crüsemann 2010, 88–90.

31 Ehrensperger, 2007, 60, 48–61; Tamez 1998, 199–201.

32 For example, Deut 3:18; 15:3, and more often; Exod 2:11, and more often; Ehrensperger 2007, 60.