

Sources for Studying Paul's Life and Thought

We have four sources for reconstructing Paul's life and thought:

- *seven undisputed letters*, acknowledged to have been written by Paul (Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, Philemon)
- *six disputed letters*, believed by some but not by all to have been written by Paul (Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus)
- *the book of Acts*, much of which was written about Paul a couple of decades after his death
- *traditions* from church history

The Primary Source

The undisputed letters are the most important of our sources, for in them we have what everyone agrees to be Paul's own statements about his life and thought. Still, since these letters are directed to specific occasions, we read only about topics that needed to be addressed. If the Corinthian church had not experienced problems with

regard to its celebration of the Lord's Supper (which Paul deals with in 1 Cor. 11), we would not know that Paul believed in that ritual or had any opinions about it one way or the other. Are we ignorant of other matters simply because no crises arose prompting Paul to comment on them?

Secondary Sources

The disputed letters can be an additional source for learning about Paul, but they are used sparingly in academic scholarship for the simple reason that whatever claims are made on the basis of what is said in these letters may not be accepted by those scholars who regard the works as pseudographic. A similar caution holds for use of the book of Acts, since many scholars think that Luke's presentation of Paul in that book is colored by his own priorities and concerns. Church traditions regarding Paul are evaluated on an individual basis: some are taken seriously as preserving probable facts, while others are dismissed as conveying unverifiable legends.